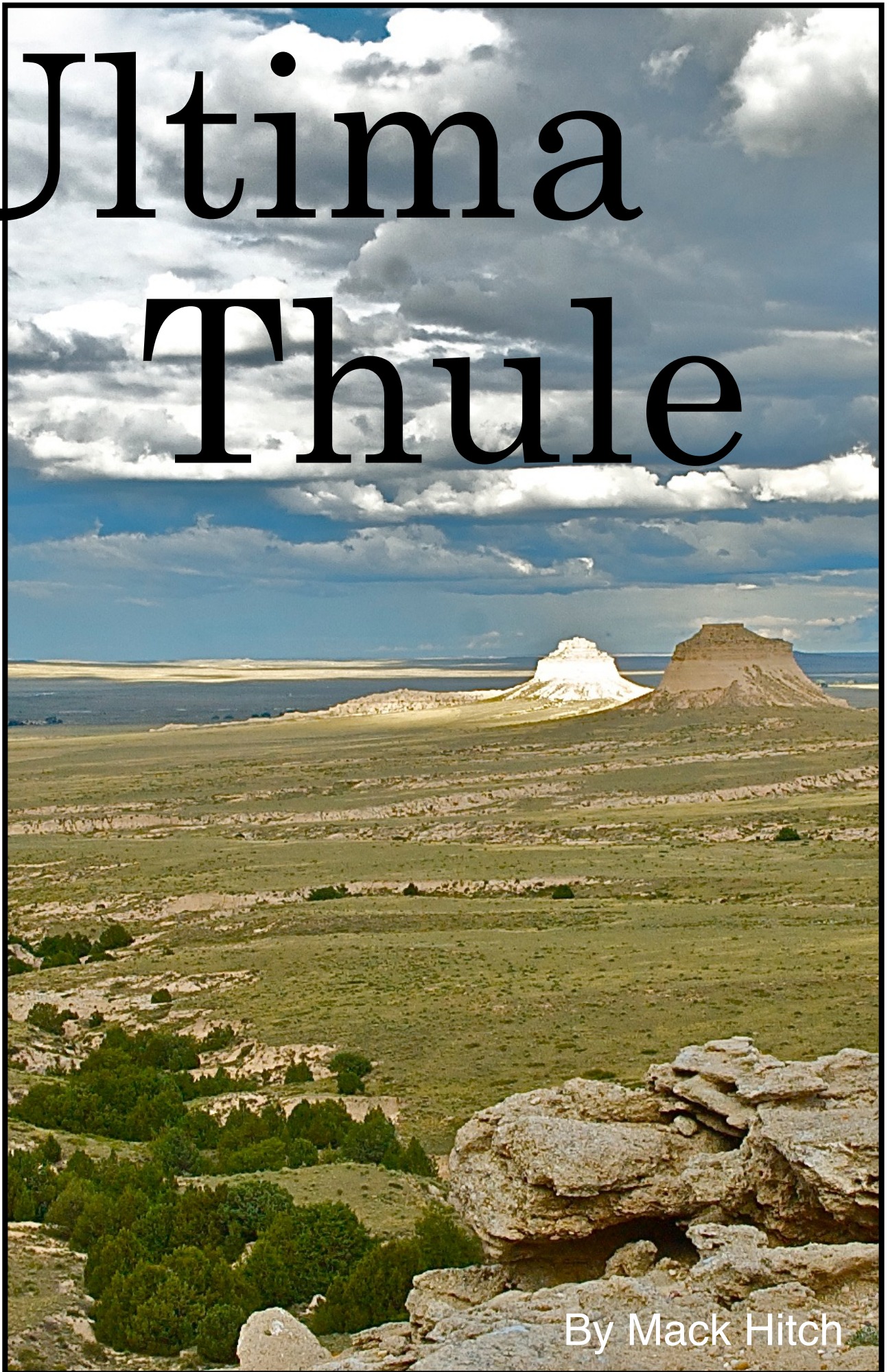


# Ultima Thule



By Mack Hitch

Novel

82,200 words

# Ultima Thule

(The Charlie Waggles' Saga Continues)

Another Great Rolling Bitch of a Novel by:

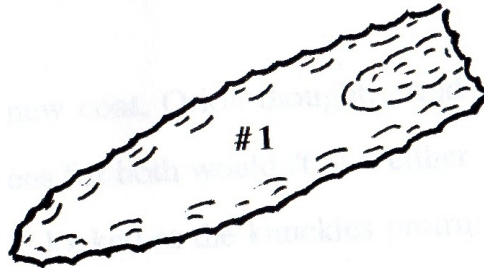
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*To, yet again, my own Herculean tenacity.*





*. . .Those without imagination, those who have stolen our land and our story and misunderstood it, say we--now they--came to this land from a hole in the earth. Others of their breeding say it was not a hole but a hollow log. How simple. How convenient. That is a history of a people who want life given to them. A people for whom procreation passes for creation.*

*Instead of a hole in the earth, imagine an epic journey, a search, a vision realized. Imagine ice, leather boats, sea beasts, towering ice cliffs and then, finally, glaciers and the cerulean waters sliding from them. Follow those waters through canyons of ice, past lichen covered boulders, orange and black with life as tenacious as our own. Witness the first stunted pines, the sloughs of sucking decay sprinkled with islands of green-gray mosses. See the glaciers shrink as you trek south, and finally, lift your weary head from your heaving chest. Look beyond the gate of diminishing ice to the spreading, inviting savannas of the New World, un-peopled--you are the first of your kind--but denized by fauna of Brobdingnagian proportions.*

*Conquest was not in our vocabulary. We journeyed because we are storytellers. We have always sought the unknown, to sound it with words, to order it with tales.*

*A hole in the ground indeed.*

*Our history stolen,--turned into a childish creation myth--our land stolen, our people killed, yet we prevail. We are among you, unknown, unnamed, but masters. . . .*

## Day 1: Late

Orion Farrago's jaw clinched as if his tongue had just found an errant kernel of wheat from the past summer's harvest. What he saw to the west was that ghostly, unsettled horizon he had been waiting for: a narrow strip of blue light that spit and crackled as it fought to stay the cold, gray vault of clouds from riveting fast to the barren, winter landscape. He had seen that mystic blue before. It blinked and buzzed from one of the neonic rainbows that surrounded the speakers on the old Wurlitzer jukebox in the New Raymer cafe.

Had it been summer the crackle might have passed for heat lightning, but the coldness in Orion's fingers as they wrapped around the pitch fork told him that the flashes portended something, but it wasn't rain.

"Orion," his mother called from the back steps of the house, "better check the eggs again. It looks like cold is coming and we don't want to lose any."

He looked at her over his right shoulder and nodded that he would. Then he watched as she first pulled the screen door shut and then pushed the weather door closed, still clutching the faded cloth coat to her throat. What warmth emanated from the kitchen was scarcely more comforting than the chill outside, but she hurried the closings anyway to preserve what little there was.

She could use a new coat, Orion thought. And so could his sister. And shoes and hats and mittens for both wouldn't hurt either. And he could use a new pair of work gloves. He looked at the knuckles protruding from the cloth as his fingers tightened their grip around the pitch fork. A new heater and a house with insulation would be a blessing also.

Orion turned away from the house, but the view to the south of the barn was no less bleak. There his dad continued to labor over the tractor where it had broken down in the field, its task not even half completed. Orion would have forgotten about that battle except that now and then the cold clank of metal against metal reminded him. They had first thought of pulling the tractor to the barn, but the clutch on the family pickup wouldn't have permitted it. The silhouette of his dad and the tractor remained static as Orion watched. They were as frozen in place as the country scene etched into the glass of the living room wall clock behind which the pendulum used to swing.

It wasn't for want of trying that life for the Farragos was a constant struggle. A chicken couldn't scratch a living from this land and the hens his mother had just asked him to check on were proof. Far from being free range and self-sufficient, feed had to be hauled to them by the hundred-pound bag just to keep them laying with any semblance of regularity.

Orion checked the horizon again, but this time the electric blue spectered hauntingly from his own eyes, and, if he wasn't about to smile, he definitely appeared ready to bite with relish into that wheat seed his tongue had seemed to find earlier.

When he walked back toward the barn to finish throwing hay down for the cows, he paused to look up at the roof where it peaked out over the beaten yard. Projecting just below the peak was the end of the rail that extended back into the barn loft. By using this rail and its pulley system, he could latch on to hay bales from a wagon parked below and hoist them to the loft above. Once there, he could run them along the rail to any point in the loft. At least that was one mechanical contrivance about the farm that was still dependable.

When supper came it was a cold affair. Orion sat on his side of the white, wooden kitchen table and watched his parents and sister, still wearing their coats, as they ate silently, ignoring for the moment the snow that had begun to fall quietly outside. The meal was potato soup and steam rose visibly from it like mist from a morning pond. One cow was still wet and that, along with the spuds from the root cellar, made for what--had it been a first course--would have been a tasty broth, the chunks of potato being few. An occasional bit of bacon floating about would have been welcome, but, compensating as did his father, Orion made liberal use of the black pepper and extended the meal with several slices of home baked bread. "Make any headway with the tractor?" he asked his dad across the table. The only response he got was a half grunt and a weary twist of the old man's wrist, causing the slice of bread it held to tilt.

The meal over, the long night's wait for morning began in the living room. His mother and sister sat, still in their winter coats, at adjoining sides of the card table and played a child's game that involved rolling dice and sticking plastic spider legs onto a plastic, arachnid body. Orion had amused his sister on prior evenings by playing the game with her, but lately he had become distant and "no fun." As a result, she recruited her mother into the game but the mother seemed just as preoccupied. While the child's short legs swung excitedly beneath the folding chair as she contemplated her next move, the mother stared absently at the white curtained window before her. The gaze would have seemed appropriate if she had been watching the snow as it piled about the yard, but--to conserve the heat--the blinds in the room had been pulled completely to the sills.

In fact, when Orion leaned from his thinly stuffed chair to check on the accumulation of snow, he had to take his finger and part the shade from the window frame in order to see the yard. Four or five inches of quiet snow had



fallen straight down. It glowed blue from the yard light he himself had attached to the barn just to the right of the loft doors. He had placed the light far enough to the side so that it wouldn't interfere with loads being lifted, yet close enough that he could lean out and replace the bulb when needed.

The snowflakes, no longer the size and configuration of Victorian doilies, were now tiny and crystalline and reminded Orion of the shower of scales that remained in the water after a larger fish had devoured a minnow. Soon the snow would end and the morning sun would shine on a landscape of purity and innocence, a picture that belied the harshness of life on the prairie.

Orion let the shade snap back and looked at his father in his easy chair across the room. As he had done nightly since that yard sale in Sligo, he stared at an old *Saturday Evening Post* magazine spread across his lap. It was one of twenty he had taken away from the sale. *Bought* wouldn't have been the correct word. The man running the sale wanted a dollar for the twine bound stack, but his father had offered a quarter. At first the man had been annoyed, but when he looked closely and realized who the man offering the quarter was, and how much a quarter meant to him, he had said "Why don't you just do me a favor and haul 'em out of here. Be glad to have 'em out of my basement."

Even if their television set hadn't broken months back, his dad would still have appreciated the magazines. He had gone through them, one a night, in the order in which they had been stacked, and when he reached the bottom he had started over again. Orion was sure his father was nostalgic about the magazines, a nostalgia easily evoked by the flat colors of the old advertisements and illustrations and by the smell of the pages.

A few of the covers had been painted by Normal Rockwell, a name his father might have recognized. Each issue contained exactly four short stories and Orion

was sure his father knew none of the authors, though he read the stories word for word and would occasionally pause to read his wife a line or to tell those in the room something he had just learned.

Orion had also scanned the magazines, careful to replace them back into the stack from the position they had come. He recognized two of the names of the short story writers. One was a Robert Towne whom he suspected was the fellow who had written the movie *Chinatown* and several others. The other was an author he was sure he knew. It was Kurt Vonnegut, although the name had a *Jr.* attached to it.

Music had left the house when the old transistor had stopped working and refused to respond to a good dunking in hot water, a trick that had revived it twice before. The only other radio on the property wasn't for house use: it kept the cattle company in the barn.

When his father licked a finger preparatory to turning another page, Orion checked the window again and found that the snow, as he had predicted, had stopped falling. That crackling blue horizon hadn't failed him.

"Darn," he said suddenly and sat up straight as if ready to leave. "I forgot to check on the eggs."

"They'll freeze," his mother scolded.

"Don't worry. I'll go get them now. Maybe the hens are still sitting on them." "You shouldn't be messing with eggs after dark," his father said, but Orion either didn't hear or ignored him.

As he left for the kitchen his mother turned from the card table and looked after him. "There might be as many as two or three." The chickens were hers and she knew about how many eggs to expect daily. "Don't forget the bucket, now."

He obviously had forgotten it because she heard the kitchen door reclose quickly followed by the opening of the closet door to the left of the sink. The bucket banged about as he pulled it free.

"Put a dish towel in it so they won't roll about."

The silence from the kitchen reassured her that he was doing just as she asked. When the kitchen door opened and closed again followed by the slap of the screen door, she grew contented and returned to the game before her.

"What do two ones mean?" the sister asked, looking at the dice she had just clunked onto the cardboard table.

"It means snake eyes."

"But what does that mean?"

"It means you have to take a leg off."

The sister sighed but complied. The game wouldn't end before her bed time unless they decided to shorten the contest to six legs tonight instead of eight. The father turned another page and smoothed it so that the harsh light from the bulb to his right didn't reflect into his eyes. The illustration he was interested in depicted a rough woman piloting a tugboat in crowded waters. What interested the father was the old automobile tires hanging from the sides of her boat. All of the tires looked better than the ones on their farm wagon.

"No!" The cry was from outside.

"What," the mother turned to the father, "was that all about?" She still held the dice in her hand.

He shrugged and closed the magazine on his lap.

"Help," the cry sounded this time. "Help. Help. They've got me. They've got me."

The mother placed the dice on the table. "Who's got who?"

With more haste than he'd shown in months, the father tossed the magazine aside and strode into the kitchen where the mother and sister heard him open the back door. He must have just stood there with the door open because they could feel the cold flow into the card table where they sat.

"What is it, Adrian?" she asked.

At first her husband didn't answer, but when he did his voice was quiet but resolute. "Call Waggles," was all he said.

"Call Sheriff Waggles?" she questioned and got up from the table to go into the kitchen and stand behind her husband. By the time the daughter squeezed between them for a look, the mother understood the need for help.

The snow was pristine and virgin except for where her son's shoes had punched holes into its whiteness. The tracks stood out under the yard light like dots on dominoes. Though confused while they were still on the back steps, the tracks strode purposefully across the yard toward the spot beyond the barn where the chicken coop leaned. But, at a point midway between the front of the barn and the old cottonwood tree, the tracks stopped. There wasn't a confusion of steps. Not even a pause where his feet had come together as if he had stopped to wonder at something. Instead, though measured and steady, the tracks simply stopped. It was as if Orion had disappeared in mid stride.

Just as haunting was the bucket Orion had carried. It had fallen to the ground, not from a great height, but as if the bail had simply slipped from his frightened fingers. It had sunk to the depth of the snow and listed slightly toward the barn. An edge of the dish towel flowed like a calf's tongue over the bucket rim and licked the side.

Adrian Farrago pushed his wife and daughter gently back from the door and closed it. Had there been a lock he would have deployed it. "Call Waggles," he

told his wife again. His voice was calm but he pointed commandingly to the telephone in the living room.

As she scurried to the task, leaving her daughter to look questioningly from first one to the other, her husband took a chair from the kitchen table and propped it beneath the knob of the back door. The arm chair Orion had occupied in the living room already blocked what was the front door, but it hadn't been used for years, not even ceremoniously.

"Who's got him, Mommy?" the sister asked, but neither parent answered her. When she tiptoed to the kitchen door and tried to peek out the window, her father pulled her back and pushed her protectively behind him.

"Who?" she asked again, but it sounded like a tired owl who would rather sleep than wonder.

## Day 2: Early

When the call came for *young* Charlie Waggles, grandson of the legendary Weld County sheriff of the same name, Charlie--young only when compared to his long dead grandfather--was just receiving the results of his physical exam from his favorite doctor, the understanding one who didn't preach, not Dr. Nim Gimmer, his old nemesis who always railed on about moral turpitude.

"This doesn't look good, Charlie," the doctor tsked, shaking his head. Waggles, still sitting on the examination table where the white butcher paper beneath him crackled with each squirm of his buttocks, straightened his back to receive the bad news. "It's my heart isn't it? Too much liquor isn't it? I'll try to cut down a bit, I promise." When the doctor didn't respond, but continued to shake his head at the figures on the blood work-up, Charlie said "It's my liver. I just knew it."

"None of those," the doctor said. "It's your cholesterol count."

"I knew it," Charlie slumped, the leather vest he wore over his Big Mac work shirt so buckling that it nearly hid the silver star of office his grandfather had worn. "The numbers are through the roof, aren't they?"

The doctor raised his eyebrows. "Just the opposite," he said. "The numbers are much lower than I'd like to see them."

"Is there something I can take for that? Maybe a pill? I could remember to do that."

"I'm afraid it's not that simple, Charlie. This is something only a special diet can remedy. I'm going to recommend a rather restrictive culinary regime and I expect you to adhere to it."

At that moment the telephone in the examination room rang softly, the kind of ring that was not obtrusive but which could wear.

The doctor ignored it. "Deep fats," he confided to Charlie, nodding seriously. "Deep fats and plenty of them."

"You mean I should eat my chicken fried?"

"Not only do I mean that, I'm telling you to avoid the original recipes. Choose the extra-crispy kind. Extra skin if you can get it."

The telephone continued to ring.



"How about breakfast burros?"

"Certainly, especially if the hamburger is greasy enough and the tortillas are soaked in grease. You should be able to see the grease bead on the plate."

"Gravy?"

"On everything. A bowl of gravy on the side wouldn't hurt at all no matter what the meal. Ladle it over your eggs, or pancakes even. Pork gravy would be perfect."

The telephone was still ringing and it was beginning to bother Charlie though the doctor didn't seem to notice it. He had that institutional deafness to cries of pain.

"Pie?"

"Almost the very specific for what ails you, Charlie. Any time you see one of those road signs that advertises deep dish apple pie, I want you to turn in. No, I don't *want* you to turn in. I *order* you to turn in."

"With ice cream?"

"Preposterous to even ask. Of course, three scoops if you can talk them into it, and if you can't, pay for the extra scoops yourself. No expense is too great. This is your health we're talking about. A slice of cheese wouldn't be a bad idea either."

Charlie almost reached over to lift the receiver off the telephone just to get it to shut up.

"Say, Charlie, do you know those ice cream sandwiches, the ones they call Fat Boys?"

Charlie nodded that he had a passing familiarity with them.

"Don't bother buying them by the singles. Buy them by the carton, by the case if you can get it. Keep twenty or so next to you in your pickup. Dry ice in a chest should do the trick."

The telephone was now so annoying that he scooted along the examination table toward the incessant ring, the butcher paper tearing and sliding along with him.

"What about Snicker bars?" he yelled as he lifted the receiver.

"Oh, that goes without saying. By all means. It's like mother's milk."

"Hello," Charlie yelled into the receiver and fell out of bed.

The fall was so sudden and the swath of blankets and the sleeping bag over them so suffocating that at first he thought a plane had hit the doctor's office and brought the roof down. When the freezing linoleum of the floor finally bit into his cheek, followed by an inquisitive licking from his dog, Charlie realized that he wasn't in his doctor's office at all. He was in his trailer atop Cemetery Hill six miles south of Sligo. And the bales of straw stacked around his trailer to the height of the roof were only feebly successful in holding the cold at bay.

The telephone that now rang wasn't the muted one of his dreams. It was the brassy, irritating one that sat on the counter to the right of the sink. Who, he wondered, could be calling on this winter's night? Or was it morning? The view to the outside between the just parted curtains told him little.

"Okay," he answered the telephone without actually picking it up but rolling toward it, the mass of blankets and sleeping bag sloughing from his body as he rolled. When close enough, he lifted his hand to the counter, searched about clumsily, found the receiver and pulled it down to the floor where he was busily re-cocooning himself in the blankets.

"Sheriff Waggles," he answered.

The receiver didn't answer back, but he could hear a radio in the background. Someone had called--he didn't know how long the phone had been ringing--and then set the receiver down to wait.

"Waggles here," he yelled.

"I heard you the first time," a faint voice came from what must have been a room away. "I knew you had to be home. Even you wouldn't go far when a storm is obviously on its way." The voice was still not near the receiver but was none the less growing louder. "I knew if I let it ring half a thousand times you'd crawl out of whatever cave you'd buried yourself in and finally answer."

The voice was Kandi's, the half a thousand pound radio operator at the Ault sub-station of the Weld County Sheriff's department. From the sound of the vibrating floor Charlie knew she wasn't at the sub-station. Probably at home.

"Is that you, Charlie?" the voice finally answered. It was a voice whose cords had been noduled by yelling over clicking pool balls and loud music in cheap, smoky country bars.

"Just got in," he lied. "Been pulling motorists out of ditches all night."

"Then why didn't you answer your pickup radio? Greeley's been after you for hours. Finally had to catch me at home to put me on your trail."

"You know I don't turn the truck radio on. Anyone out here can find me who wants to. Either here or at the cafe in Sligo."

"Or the bars in Kimball or Scottsbluff or Pine Bluffs or Hereford or ..."

"When I'm needed, I'm there," Charlie broke in to stop her unchained melody.

"Well the Farragos need you. Seems their boy is missing."

"Missing how? He's big enough to keep care of himself. Been cat fishing alone all night on rivers and reservoir inlets in three states since he was seven or eight."

"Any thing I heard is second hand, Charlie. All I know is that Alice Farrago told the night desk in Greeley that a flying saucer lifted her boy right out of the yard. Orion, I believe, is his name." She pronounced the name as if it were the constellation, accenting the middle syllable.

"The family doesn't say it that way," Charlie said. "They hit the first syllable heavy. **Or**-e-un, the same way Mark Twain's brother pronounced his name."

"That sounds odd."

"Not half as odd," he sighed, trying to bunch the covers up around his neck, "as the story you just told me."

"You're gonna check on it aren't you?"

"I'll be right on it," he said and tossed the receiver to the kitchen floor where it disappeared into the darkness. When it began to bleep at him for having been left off the hook too long, Charlie relented and tossed the covers aside.

The unhooked receiver had long been his personal snooze alarm, one extra service the phone company hadn't yet tried to charge him for.

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With the remainder of the Farrago family behind him, Charlie studied the tracks, hollows of darkness beneath the yard light. "Singular," was all he said.

"*They've got me*," Alice Farrago told Charlie. "That's what he yelled."

"He yelled *Help*, too," the little girl volunteered. The father stood farthest behind Charlie, almost to the back porch steps. He was the most rattled, yet the most embarrassed of the family. None of them had left the chair-blocked back door until Charlie's Jeep had pulled into the yard.

"Did any of you see something or hear something besides that?" He had already heard the entire story over suspiciously weak coffee in their kitchen, but he was sure something was missing. "Had you seen any lights around earlier in the

evening?" When they shook their heads to the contrary he asked, "Had he been acting peculiar in any way?"

"He has been sullen of late," the father spoke suddenly from the back.

"Now, Adrian, he is getting to *that* age. He's been wanting to get out on his own for some time now, but you know he couldn't leave us--considering the times." The husband nodded and she turned to Charlie. "He's not one to leave us like this, Sheriff," she confided to Charlie, who saw the worry behind the gloved hand she brushed across the tip of her nose.

The little girl beat her arms across her coated chest to get Charlie's attention and to keep warm. "And," she pulled at the hem of the Sheriff's fur-lined demin coat, "he couldn't play *Cootie* any more."

Charlie was old enough to remember the horror of cooties. "Cooties?"

"He couldn't play it any more. He was always looking off at the wall and not at the parts or the dice." She cocked her little head to one side to look up at Charlie to see if he understood.

He didn't answer her directly but said, "Let's have a closer look." Leaving the family who, unasked, held back, Charlie walked parallel to the tracks Orion had left in the snow. After walking casually for four paces, he paused and studied first his tracks and then Orion's. Satisfied or dissatisfied with what he saw, he continued to walk until he was directly under the naked cottonwood and beside the pail containing the dish towel.

"Adrian," he called, "mind if I have a look in the barn?" The father looked at the virgin snow and hesitated. "Don't worry about the tracks," Charlie said. "I've seen all I need to."

When Adrian caught up, Charlie handed him the bucket and together they pushed one of the barn doors back, sliding it on its rail. The rail and rollers,

Charlie noted, had recently been oiled to facilitate movement and to minimize noise.

Once inside, Charlie found the barn to be what he had expected. In spite of the cold, it was probably the most comfortable building on the place. It seemed friendly and close, and though winter--verdant. The hidden radio that entertained the cattle through the night sounded as if it was tuned to a PBS station, *Haydn in the Dark* perhaps. Most of the animals stood as if sleeping, smoke lifting from their warm backs. A few of the animals chewed their cuds while resting on the straw cushioned earth.

"Hay in the loft?" Charlie lifted his thumb to the ceiling.

Adrian nodded. "What there is left of it."

"Mind if I have a look?"

Adrian shrugged as if to say *why not?*

To free his arms, Charlie unbuttoned his denim coat and stretched to reach the wooden rungs of the ladder. His legs splaying to the sides like a frog, he finally pulled himself high enough to stick his head into the loft. Unlike the floor on which the animals dwelt, the loft floor was wooden and well swept. When he had climbed far enough to step onto the floor, he noticed that Adrian's head was right at his heels.

"Why don't you throw open the east door," the father pointed. "It's starting to get light out there. It might help a little."

Even though Charlie had already found the bulb hanging from the roof and pulled the chain to ignite it, he complied. The loft door opened out and swung to the right, away from the yard light on the left. Below him the mother and daughter still stood where he had left them.



"It won't hurt none," he spoke down to them. "You can come on in the barn if you like." When they moved, their footprints paralleled those left by their son and brother hours ago. That made five parallel tracks and as far as Charlie could see the strides and depressions looked the same, except that one set disappeared in mid stride.

To pull himself back into the loft after pushing the door aside, Charlie grabbed a hold of the metal rail that led from the barn peak back into the loft. The metal was strangely cold, and when Charlie inspected his hand he discovered oil. The family may be poor, he reasoned, but they kept their machinery lubricated. Not surprising. One of the oldest sayings on a farm was "Lubrication is cheaper than repair."

Following the rail, he walked back into the loft, almost to the far end of the barn. Resting on the floor to the right of the rail was a stack of baled hay. They were the small bales, the size that a single man could buck about, not the huge squares or rolls that were so popular now, the kind that required special machinery to move and that killed an average of eleven men a year because of their 700 to 1,000 pound weight.

For some reason, one of the small bales still hung from the rail and its pulley system, the hay tongs slicing into its sides. Charlie pushed it forward and pulled it back toward him, testing the ease of movement. Maybe, he reasoned, the bale had been lifted from the nearby stack to be ready to feed the cattle. It would be moved to the drop shut, settled to the loft floor, kicked into its butter-pat shaped flakes, and tossed to the feed trough below.

Maybe.

Looking back to the small stack of bales, Charlie saw the spot from which it had been taken. He lifted the bale with his knee, loosened the tongs, and bucked it

back to its former home. The effort had tested his muscles, but it felt good to do a little work, even if Adrian would have to reverse the operation in a couple of hours.

"Takes me back," Charlie confided to Adrian.

"Working on a farm?" he asked.

"No. Goofing off in a barn loft. I suspect the most memorable times in a boy's life were lived in a loft." Charlie shoved his hand into a space between two bales and found it surprisingly empty. "If you know what I mean," he added.

"It was a silo for me," Adrian said.

"Yes," Charlie agreed. "The sweet smell of silage is a strong aphrodisiac."

"Maybe," Adrian ventured, wondering about Charlie, but not much, "we're talking about different things."

Charlie smiled and stuffed his other hand into a crack in the bales behind him. "Same O, Same O," he said. "It hasn't changed. I was always wanting to play doctor while the rest of the world was still wanting to play cowboys and indigenous peoples."

"Sheriff?" The call came from below. It was the little girl.

"What is it, honey?"

"Can I let your dog out of the pickup?"

"Why don't you do that, honey. I reckon he'd appreciate it. His name is Dog. Or at least that's what I call him in the absence of a name."

The sound of her eager feet scampering across the barn floor and then through the snow was cheerful. The cheer increased when she opened the pickup door and the patter back toward the barn was increased by the eagerness of four paws. Charlie pushed free of the bales and walked over to the hole from which the ladder ascended. When he looked down he saw the little girl and Dog looking up at him.

"Do me a favor," Charlie asked the little girl. "Why don't you and Dog check on those eggs your mother was telling me about. And don't worry about Dog. Just say *No* if he tries to get out of line. But I think he understands eggs and chickens, though Inez--the waitress and cook in Sligo--is mixed in there somewhere in his memories."

Leaving the pair to their adventure, he walked to the other end of the loft and opened that door. The view was wonderful to the west--a view that included the white prairie and a range of mountains just resolving into solidity as if created by the first light. No farm home Charlie had ever visited had the view from its living room window that was available from the poorest angle of its barn loft.

For as far as he could see the snow was level and--virgin, a word that sullied the purity and wonder of such perfection. But there was an imperfection. Something protruded from the snow. Something out of place. Something red. Charlie, as if it were summer, tried to shade his eyes to bring the mysterious object into focus. Taking off his winter cloth cowboy hat and using its brim didn't help either.

Below him, the little girl and Dog had returned from their hunt in the chicken coop. He could hear the girl dancing about and the frozen rolling of eggs in a cold bucket.

Charlie went to the ladder hole and looked down at the upturned face. "Found a couple I see."

"Yes," she looked at him while Dog poked his nose into the bucket, "but they're cracked."

"We'll have them for breakfast," said a voice, followed by the appearance of Mrs. Farrago's face in the hole. "They'll be just fine."

Charlie looked at the mother. She seemed oddly out of place. She wasn't of the prairie. She had appeared about twenty years ago, latched onto Adrian, and married in a white heat. Farrago was *her* last name, not her husband's.

Remembering the history of her husband's surname, he wasn't surprised that they had opted for hers. "Never met a bad egg," Charlie told her upturned face, but refocused on the little girl. "Honey," he said, "would you run to my truck again and get the pair of binoculars out of my glove box?"

The little girl scampered off on the new errand, eager to please this rare visitor to their farm.

"What is it?" Adrian asked. He continued to stand on the side of the loft that would have held hay if he had had any. He was tired and hadn't bothered to look at the spot of red that had interested Charlie. He hadn't slept, and the day's work was about to begin.

The little girl was so eager for the mission that she climbed up the ladder and extended the binoculars to Charlie. Dog, no less eager, waited at the bottom of the ladder and whined. He would have given a pair of serviceable paws for a couple of hands.

"Thank you, little lady," he said, and took the binoculars. Then he walked to the far loft door, the wife below following the sound of his steps with her face, and put the lenses to his eyes. He had to push back the brim of his hat to position them just right.

"When was the last time your were out in the back pasture?" he asked Adrian.

"Can't say. Haven't used it for grazing for some time. Nothing but nubs of grass out there," he said, coming to stand beside Charlie. "Maybe this snow'll help some."

Charlie checked the snow but couldn't find a single impression in it. No one had been out there. Not even an animal. Not even a rabbit.

"What say we go for a walk?" He indicated the pasture.

The little girl and Dog were excited to see the rears of the two men descend the ladder and leave the barn. Since they were not instructed to do otherwise, they followed the men into the pasture and walked far out into it. Charlie led, followed by Adrian. The little girl and Dog knew their places though Dog insisted upon zigzagging to investigate interesting odors.

When Charlie finally stopped, everyone knew why. The single horn of a cow's skull protruded from the snow. Something was written on it in red.

"Now let me get this straight again," Charlie began. "Orion didn't leave the house until *after* the snow had stopped falling."

"That's about the size of it," Adrian agreed.

"And you'll agree with me that this skull was here *before* the snow fell?"

Adrian looked at it. Only a single horn protruded from the snow. A supporting skull had to rest beneath. "I'd have to agree."

With that, Charlie leaned over, grabbed the horn, and pulled the entire skull from the snow. Where snow remained, he brushed it free. The words across the horns, in red, were obvious to all.

"I don't understand," Adrian said. The little girl and Dog also gathered around. "This had to be written *before* Orion was taken."

"Ain't no doubt about that," Charlie agreed. He turned the skull over to check its back. When he righted it, even the little girl could read the words written across the horns.

"*Help me, Charlie,*" the left horn read. "*They are coming,*" read the right. Adrian took the skull from Charlie. "Orion couldn't have written this."

"I'm quite sure he didn't," Charlie said, retrieving the skull. "Let me have this and I'll put it with the others."

"Others?"

Charlie had to nod to the truth. "Such things have been turning up for the last four months or so. First complete skull, however. Usually it's a femur or a part of a hip. But it's always a bone."

Adrian tried to ask a question, but he didn't know what to ask. Instead he sputtered. His little girl did no better, cocking her head at Charlie again.

"In the old days it was called the Prairie Telegraph," he explained. "When the wagon trains were going through, some people would leave messages along the trail by writing on the bones of animals that had died along the way. Bones being more plentiful than paper. And more durable."

"You said there were others," Adrian asked. "What'd they say?"

"About the same as this. I've got a sink full of them. Some of them in the back of the truck as well."

"But how does this connect with Orion?"

"Doesn't," Charlie said simply and began to walk back across the field to his pickup.

"Then what do the bones mean?"

"Haven't got the faintest," Charlie said as he set the skull into the bed of his truck. "And what bothers me is the other name for the Prairie Telegraph."

Adrian waited and then asked, "Yes?"

"The *Liars'* Telegraph," he said. "It wasn't to be trusted. Too many jokers out along the Platte River Road in those days, and I'm afraid there's too many jokers out and about the prairie today. Though, for the life of me, I can't figure out why they'd resort to doing this."



Charlie picked Dog up and placed him into the pickup, using the passenger door. As he walked around to his door, Adrian moved to the front of the vehicle, as if to block its progress.

"But what about Orion?"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about him," Charlie said, getting into his pickup. "He'll come home when he gets hungry."

Adrian didn't know how to answer.

\*\*\*\*

As Charlie's Jeep tacked through the pelagic light, the tires slipping and churning to throw up a ghostly wake of snow, his was not the only vehicle on the road that morning. The other, being pushed, had but a single wheel, braced by two wooden legs when it was at rest. Charlie didn't see it because it was on a parallel course to his, a mile to the south.

Used to the cold. Used to the loneliness but self-sufficient, and fearing the very fence posts on either side of the road down which he made a single rut, the man pushing the single-wheeled vehicle stopped and blew his smokey breath into the growing light. Looking about into the barrenness and whiteness--a stillness in which he heard voices, whispered threats--he knew the time to begin had arrived. Taking a three-legged stool from atop his conveyance, he placed it in the middle of the road and sat down, first throwing the tails of his great coat behind him so that the stool completely disappeared. He seemed to be sitting on nothing, a frozen man in a frozen waste, a stoop shouldered Thinker too exhausted to brace his head on a curled fist.

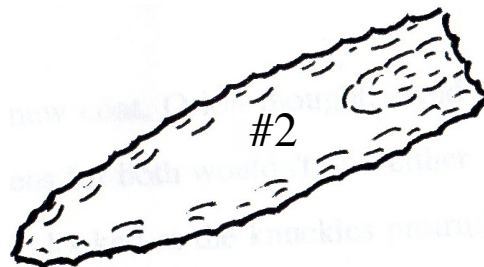
A magpie, crying just to test the silence, awakened the man to action, and he reached into his great coat with gloved hands and withdrew a spiral-bound notebook, the pencil secured within the spiral. He withdrew the pencil, pushed the

coat from his knee, where he then rested the opened notebook, and began to write, clumsily.

"*We are what we are*," he wrote, but immediately scribbled it out, knowing it would be the line to end with. It wasn't a beginning. That was much longer ago. Much longer ago...

The hands were too cold to continue writing. He rose from the stool, replaced it on the vehicle, grabbed the handles and pushed toward his destination, only a pick and a shovel indicating where that might be.

And a bone.



*. . . You are somewhat correct in your histories, calling us The Clovis--a name based solely on the fluted projectile point first found near present day Clovis, New Mexico. That was we. But long before that small husbanding party we were an East Coast people, having established our permanent base there millennia before.*

*But the East was our base only, not our soul. It was the West, the inland that beckoned and had beckoned long before we were worthy of it. That openness, that unknown, that wonder had drawn us from a secure home and crowded us into small leather boats for an epic journey. And it was that questing which midwifed*

*the new continent from our dreams like a distant shoreline resolving itself from a fog.*

*Even from the first our scouts explored the far north regions of this continent, paralleling the edges of the glaciers where the streams were swift and clear, but fordable. From this vantage, scouts ventured south, eventually covering all of the continent except that west of the Sierras.*

*And it was a teeming pastoral: moose with antlers eight feet or more in length, sloth the size of elephants, beaver as large as bears; bison and caribou and musk ox and camels, and peccaries and jack rabbits were there for the taking--but that was not our way; dire wolves and saber-toothed cats followed the giant buffalo.*

*And it was a verdant Eden: roots and berries for the picking; currents and gooseberries and service berries galore; buffalo berries, chokecherries, plums, papaws, and persimmons, grasses and grains.*

*We ate, we cared for, we husbanded, we preserved.*

*The fourteen-foot Imperial mammoths and their reddish-haired cousins to the south, the woolly mammoths, we domesticated in a little more than a millennium simply by harvesting the more rambunctious of the young males. That alone provided most of the necessary meat. Culling provided the remainder.*

*As a people we prospered. We grew. We invented. Fluting the projectile point to facilitate hafting to a spear was an obvious need, though your archaeologists pretend it was a quantum leap forward. A pity none of our wheels survived to amaze them. If one had, we would be giants to them instead of a people to be shunted aside and ignored in their politically correct search for the First Americans.*

*If we had only remained east of the Sierras. But like the curious pronghorn who climbs the slope simply to see what is on the other side, like we ourselves who simply had to know, we scaled the mountains guarding that western sea.*

*If only we could have known what the race we found there would bring. We were ignorant of viruses, microbes and the analogies that they can teach. Even in hindsight it is difficult to believe how a people whose lives were ugly, nasty, brutish and short, could wipe all record of our existence from this continent, save that Clovis point. . . .*

## Day 112: When he gets hungry. . .

When the rancher quits carrying a sledge hammer to smash the ice on the stock tanks each morning, it's as sure a harbinger of spring as is that first cold lark bunting clinging to a strand of icy barbed wire. The bunting, the state bird, chooses to winter where the rich people winter. Along with the hammer, the rancher also hangs his leather and chain puller in the barn to await next year's calving season. The accompanying bloody leather gloves find a home on a nearby nail.

Charlie's method for discovering the true vernal equinox for that latitude is simpler and has worked for several years, though the delicate instrument for this measurement has to be replaced occasionally. It is a full can of beer. As long as it rattles and bangs back and forth across the bed of his pickup as he turns corners and bounces over hills, he knows it is still winter, that the liquid inside is frozen. When the ricocheting about the truck bed turns sluggish, and when the ring of the instrument against the side walls becomes less than bell-like, Charlie knows that the liquid inside has melted and that it is indeed spring.

This is the occasion for Charlie to switch from his winter hat to his summer straw, a fine cowboy hat made by the American Hat Company in Dallas, Texas, and purchased at the Drovers' Restaurant in Brush, Colorado. The Drovers occasionally runs an all-you-can eat special on butterfly steaks, not an occasion to be missed if you are within seventy-five or so miles.

Charlie shoved his winter hat into the cupboard above the sink in his trailer, but he stuck the fleece-lined denim coat behind the seat in his pickup. It could--and probably would--strike cold again several times before summer arrived officially in June although it didn't really feel like summer until after wheat harvest, usually the second week in July.

Gloves? A real man doesn't wear gloves.

When Charlie pulled into his accustomed spot before the Quonset Grocery and Cafe in Sligo--side-by-side quonsets joined by walk-throughs--the only other vehicles were pickups. His spot, as usual, and as expected, was open. It was his by right, by custom, and by threat. Actually, all that had ever happened to an intruder was that he had parked behind the offending truck and its driver couldn't exit until Charlie had finished his breakfast, usually about the time it takes to get a calf's attention with a pail of grain.

"Just in time, Charlie," Harley Tidley called from the lunch counter, pointing at the television attached to the wall above the right end of the counter. "The morning show is doin' its usual thing on the Farragos and their missing boy."

The tape had been shown over a hundred times. All that changed was the number superimposed over the action. How they had done it, Charlie didn't know, but the network had re-created the very scene he saw the morning he was called to the Farrago place. Only one set of footprints led from the back steps toward the barn, where they disappeared. They must have used artificial snow because no snow of that depth had fallen since.

The scene faded and the fresh face of the new kid on the morning show appeared. "He'll come home when he gets hungry: Day 112," he said distractedly. He had said it so often he could no longer fake exasperation. Out on the New York sidewalk, surrounded by sillily dressed, sign carrying spectators who couldn't have found something better to do even if they had been given suggestions, was the weatherperson, a man.

"Well," his eyes rolled from the crowd to the camera lens, "He ought to be getting awfully hungry by *n-o-ow-wah*."

Banner Tidley, the dreidel-brained dervish of the plains--and Harley's brother--nearly fell off his stool next to Harley from laughing as did Wiley Wentworth who sat on the other side of Harley. Together, they were known as The Boys. Though Wiley had a pot gut and wore suspenders, Harley coveralls with many zippers, and Banner anything that was polyester and in primary colors, most people didn't bother to distinguish among them. If a farmer met a rancher at the post office and said "I saw one of The Boys standing in a ditch," the rancher wouldn't bother to ask which one because, for anyone who knew them, it was immaterial.



Wiley, probably the one with the most initiative, had been waiting for Charlie.

"I got a bone to pick with you, Sheriff."

Charlie had already seated himself at his usual table and was looking out the window to the newly mown vacant lot across the street. That he sat with his back to The Boys and to the TV, and had done so for years, was no accident. "What's the bone," he turned around, and wished he had been quicker.

"This one." Wiley held up the right thigh bone of a cow and most of the customers in the cafe laughed only politely because such jokes were getting old. Even the fact that the *Help me, Charlie* was painted on it in circus Gothic script didn't make it special.

"You like that one, I can get you plenty more." The offer came from Inez, the manager, cook, and most times waitress. She had always been there for the hungry and was as faithful in her way as the old dog that crawls from under the porch to greet its returning master, even in the rain. She could also snap at the heels of those who peeved her. Charlie hadn't ordered yet, but she, like that dog with the easy smile and ready tongue, had long anticipated his arrival and shoved his breakfast in front of him anyway.

"What's this?" It looked good to him, but Charlie wasn't about to admit it.

"Creamed chipped beef over toast. I know there isn't much of it, but more's coming, so save your usual uproar."

"You mean S.O.S."

"No, it isn't *you know what* on a shingle. This isn't the Navy."

"S.O.S.," Charlie complained to The Boys, turning to accept their sympathy.

"Every morning since I come home from the Navy."

Wiley reached over and replaced the bone on the shelf along the east wall. It, along with several other bones farmers and ranchers had brought in, was for sale. "You're lucky if it's S.O.S., Charlie. Mine looked more like creamed foreskins." Much quicker than Charlie, Inez shot back, "That's why you got a bagel with yours. And when you leave today, why don't you take some of those bones with you and throw them back into the barrow ditches they came from. Give the rodents and porcupines something to chew on."

"If they ain't moving', Inez," Charlie offered, "then why don't you wholesale 'em to Pointe Ruffner out at Pleistocene Park. He can't keep 'em in stock. The tourists are buying them like--" There had to be a comparison that fit accurately. "--pet rocks." He was so proud of himself that he handed Inez the empty plate. "Couple more slices. Heavy on the foreskins. And what'd you do with my coffee, anyway?"

"Pointe's moving the bones, is he?"

"All he can get. 'Course his are different from yours, being *Pleistocene* bones and all. Most of his are from tapirs and rhinos and mammoths and such, he says, though I think I could build a pretty convincing cow out of them if he'd give me the time and the wire."

While he was talking, Gloria, the postmistress, entered quietly and waited for him to finish. "Here's another one," she said warily, raising her eyebrows as she handed him a manila, 9 1/2 inch by four and 1/4 inch envelope. It was addressed neatly as if by a laser printer or an electric typewriter and said simply: **The Sheriff/Sligo, Colorado**. No Zip Code was necessary when sending a letter to Charlie. Like the others envelopes he had received, it displayed a large stamp picturing a mammoth and a smaller one-cent stamp. "You said you wanted these as soon as they arrived."

"True," he opened it, "and I also told you to throw all that other trash away."  
"I been stacking it out front of the Post Office with the bones you've been getting. You could throw them all away with one arm full if you'd ever take the twenty-five or so steps to get there. The trash barrel's right beside the flag pole where it's been since the building was built."

He ignored her and read the letter, characterized only by the clean efficiency of a good printer and the image of a projectile point at the top. The point, or arrowhead as the less learned would probably call it, was numbered and the numeral corresponded to the letters he had received.

"Just what are they about, Charlie?" Gloria asked with an un-postmistress-like curiosity. Behind her the eyes of Inez and The Boys didn't blink.

Charlie read the short letter quickly, folded it neatly back into its envelope, and placed it into the shirt pocket under his leather vest. "Let's just say I've been learning about early Americans, ice ages, and Folsom and Clovis spear points. At least of late I have."

Arrowheads, Gloria knew, but the names of the early inhabitants of this continent eluded her. "Also," she said, "Superintendent Hall told me to tell you if I saw you today that he'd like you to check on a fellow who has been camping out behind the school."

Puzzled. "Behind the school?"

"Well, almost. He's along that sort of road two blocks over and one back where some people pitch tents during the rodeo. No houses around."

"So he's camping out. What's Hall's complaint?"

"The man--really he's just a boy--acts strangely sometimes. The superintendent says he talks to himself and is always writing and then tearing up

what he writes and letting it blow down the street. Then he runs after the pieces, snatches them up, and burns them."

Charlie leaned back in his chair to see what Inez had to offer in the matter.

"He comes in about once a day." She gave an overhand shake to her dish rag as if the boy was of no consequence. "From what I see in here on a regular basis, I'd say he's several notches above dull normal. Fact, he's a pleasure by comparison."

She didn't have to incline her head in The Boys' direction to make her point.

Charlie patted the letter beneath his leather vest. "Well, I'll worry about him later. Right now I think I hear Beethoven's Fifth callin'. . ."

"The symphony?" Gloria asked, puzzled.

"The movement," Charlie explained and headed for the bathroom at the far end of the cafe.

No sooner had Charlie settled to his task--the door open for the view, of course--than Lauren Ewell appeared in the opening, hat in hand like a supplicant seeking help from a strange preacher. Not to seem impolite or overly interested in Charlie's business, he stood well back, almost to the opposite wall.

"It's a strange thing, Charlie."

Usually when Lauren sought out Charlie's help it was strange indeed. The last time he had come calling, hat in hand, his young bull had been found in a neighboring field, bloodless, and missing an ear, its tongue, its anus, and its distinguishing sexual equipment.

Charlie, leaning forward on the stool, a roll of toilet paper held between his naked, spindly knees, looked up from the Big Mac work khakis resting around his ankles. "Tell me it's not another bull," he said.

"No, it's that old school house...or what's left of it...on my lease property."

"Yes?" Charlie strained, wrapping paper around his right hand from the roll he held in his left. "What about it?"

"Well, I was out there last evening...checking, checking to see if I might be able to store some grain in it for a while later this summer. I could actually get a little wheat this year," he laughed nervously, "but the price. . .you know, less than half what it was during the first big war. Anyway, I thought I might hang onto it a while. . .the wheat. Maybe the price might go better than three dollars. There's a chance it could." He seemed eager for Charlie to agree to the possibility.

"I'm aware of the times, Lauren. Now what's this about that old school?"

Just then Inez breezed past on her way to the store room and slammed the bathroom door shut. "This is a restaurant, Charlie. Not some army camp latrine. Polite folks don't share their private business."

Lauren watched her disappear into the back and then looked at the closed door. "It's full of rocks," he yelled at it.

The bathroom door eased open a crack and Lauren positioned himself so that he could see in.

"Rocks? Uncommon odd."

"Not river rocks or stones, but just rocks. It looks like it could be limestone. Chunks of it. None of them really bigger than the size of your head."

"How full?"

"Plum. I'd boarded up the windows and the door long ago...thinking I might get some wheat. At first I tried the door and then thought better of it. Then I tried the top boards on the windows, but I could see the rocks were even higher than them. Finally I climbed clean on to the roof and looked down the chimney. . ."

"Full?" Charlie interrupted.

"Right up to the top run of bricks."

Charlie pulled the door to him and closed it. A few moments later the toilet flushed and he appeared, tucking in his shirt and tightening his belt. "Before we start worrying about who did it or why," he started, rescuing his leather vest from the hook inside the bathroom, "I'd like to know what kind of equipment it would take to fill it clear to the brim. Any indications that heavy equipment had been about. Maybe an auger or a conveyor belt. See any tracks like that?"

Lauren shook his head. "The school's maybe two football fields away from the county road and there is sort of the remainder of an old path, but no signs of heavy equipment at all."

"No signs at all, huh?"

"Oh, something was using that path all right. It wore a trench as if a Texas sized herd of cattle had passed by single file."

"Not a wheeled vehicle, you're sayin'?"

"Oh, it was wheeled for sure. You can still see the marks where it passed on its last trip. But there was only one wheel."

"One wheel? What kind of foolishness are you talking about, Lauren?"

"I'm talking about a wheelbarrow, Charlie."

"A wheelbarrow? Why it'd take a fool to do something like that--filling up a good sized old school house that way. No," he corrected himself, looking at The Boys who, oblivious, were still watching the morning television, "it would take someone who was insan--" Distracted by what he almost said, Charlie walked back to his table, Lauren following. He patted his shirt pocket to make sure the letter Gloria had just given him was still there.

"I'll get back to you on this, Lauren," he said, retrieving his hat from the chair beside the one in which he had sat for breakfast. "Just at the moment I have to visit with a fellow camping out near the high school. See just how strange he really is."

He heard the telephone ringing as he headed for the door but hoped he could beat it.

"Charlie," Inez yelled. She had that look that said she knew Charlie would be displeased but that she was pleased at his displeasure. The receiver of the phone was pressed against her aproned stomach. "Fellow from the Associated Press wants to know if you have anything new or any comment about the missing Farrago boy."

"Tell him what I've been tellin' them all along. The whole thing's just a family matter and it's best that we leave them well enough alone. Why embarrass people when there's no call for it?"

\*\*\*\*

When Hobb saw Charlie coming he began scribbling impressions into his ever present notebook:

Just as they said--built like a wedge, though they might have said a wedge of pie and been more accurate. He tapers so sharply from just below his chest that he seems to defy gravity--gravity alone would pound his lower half into the earth like a sledge striking a railroad spike. He looks that solid, too. The hat and leather vest might as well belong to John Wayne (not the poet) because the sidling gate and arm swing sure do. The weapon on his hip has to have been stolen from Marshal Dillon, and Dillon--other than Popeye's Bluto--are surely his only match, especially since both give the impression of being all shoulder. The khaki work shirt and pants and the serviceable work shoes would diminish a lesser man, but on Sheriff Waggles they look tailored. Without trying, he reeks authority, control. I can see why people come to him. But he seems amiable enough. So does the dog with him. I don't think they make that Jeep pickup anymore. Too bad. And look at all those antennas and KC lights and spot lights and chrome running boards.

Now that's a man's mount.

As *he* approached, Charlie also made mental note:

Dome tent, two stick type. Curly hair, sallow face. Gonna have some doozie of bags under his eyes when he gets older. Prominent ears. Small hands, short fingers. Carpenter's hands. Christ's hands. Right handed. Might go 170 pounds. Probably avoids red meat. Looks brighter than he probably is. Probably try to play word games with me. Looks like he's been expecting me. Looks like he intends to enjoy it. All in all, like Inez said, pretty normal. Probably having a good time pretending to be whatever it is he's pretending to be. Nice car. What is it? A '68 El Camino. Nice shape. A shell and the whole works. He could live out of that. Nice vehicle.

But not a real man's vehicle. Good one, though.

Dog was the first to introduce himself because Hobb remained seated before his orange and gray tent and extended his hand for Dog to smell.

"Name's Waggles. You might call me Charlie."

Hobb didn't rise but gestured for Charlie to find a spot on the ground. "I think *Sheriff* will be good enough for me. I like titles. Besides, you look like a sheriff."

"Been called worse," Charlie groaned, painfully lowering himself to a spot of grass. Dog came over to inspect the noises in Charlie's knees.

"My name's deHoy. Hobb deHoy."

"Is *Hobb* one of your granddaddy's last names or something?"

"I wish. Actually my full first name is Hobbie. I don't have a middle name."

"Hobbie? Who'd ho. . . Who'd shackle a kid with a name like that?"

"That's the *least* that life has dealt me," he sighed, deep into a pit of melancholia that he seemed to be enjoying.



"What," and Charlie waved to the trees and the tenting area, "are you doing here abouts?"

"A pilgrimage of sorts. Kind of a farewell tour to honor the memory of the God That Died."

"I haven't been keeping up with the papers of late. Which one was that?"

"The God of Literature. His was a horrible death. Imagine, if you can, the detestable putrefaction resulting in a plummet from the very pinnacle of the Illuminated Manuscript to the pratfall of today's lyrical, female sublimations."

"Doesn't sound so much like a death as it does a transmogrification."

Hobble nodded. "A pulping. A papping." He continued to enjoy mucking around in his slough of despondency. "Why, why, why did such a God create me, give me hopes and aspirations only to abandon me in a morass of self-replicating, formulaic drivel. Had God been kind, I might have been a salamander...should have been a salamander, buried somewhere in the mud at the bottom of a pond. I could have been happy as a salamander. I wouldn't have needed much. A little warm sun now and then. A dragon fly larvae or two to swallow. And each spring a snotty mass of eggs for me to squirt my milk on. That would have sufficed."

The kid was at least a relief from the sameness of the usual prairie folk. "You could take this natural despondency to its logical extreme," Charlie offered his help, "and drive *that* wooden stake clean through your heart."

Hobble was intrigued. "Continue, Sheriff. I'm all ears in spite of what my mother did with tape when I was a baby."

"I was alluding to marriage. That complete end of hope. The beginning of a life not only of deception but of self-deception as well. Or so one British writer tells me at least."

Hobble rose from in front of his tent and found a more comfortable perch on the open tailgate of his El Camino. "Yes," he almost sang to himself in a sigh as he began typing something into a Macintosh PowerBook that, judging from the long cord attached to it, was plugged into the cigarette lighter in the cab. "I am aware of that antidote to aspiration, Sheriff," he said and turned from his typing. "But fortunately or unfortunately I've been spared from knowing that entangling web. You see, all the ladies I've had long-term relationships with have come down with the most galloping cases of *Pernicious Ennui* and were forced to distance themselves from me permanently, and in a few cases in manners most cruel."

Charlie looked him up and down. "Your health doesn't appear all that compromised."

"Fortunately I don't even understand the meaning of the words *Pernicious Ennui*, but as for the disease itself, I, myself, show no symptoms. I am apparently, however, a carrier."

"The reason I'm here"--Charlie had the feeling Hobble could continue the banter indefinitely--"is that some of your neighbors were a little concerned by your actions. I mean yelling. Talking to yourself. Chasing papers up and down this little alley here. And burning them. That's pretty much the gist of their concern. They thought you might be . . ."

"If you're searching for a word, Sheriff, I prefer *demonstrative* or *animated* to *crazy*." Then he did something almost crazy. He gave Charlie sort of a half salute--quickly, he didn't repeat it. When this elicited no response from Charlie, he withdrew his keys from his pocket and began, ceremoniously, to fiddle with them.

The movement was so unexpected that Charlie fixed his gaze on the chain and its three or four keys. But the keys were of little interest. It was what Hobble held

between his thumb and forefinger that drew Charlie's eyes. It was an elk's tooth, a hole drilled into the root end to attach it to the chain.

Not knowing what else to do, Charlie pulled out his own collection of keys and made the same pass before his face. But instead of an elk's incisor for a handle, he held the small P-38 can opener he always carried, the opener dispensed to soldiers to open their rations with.

"Obviously you are not of the Masons," Hobble said and returned the keys to his pocket. Whatever had been the point of his exercise was now past. "No, Sheriff, I'm in control of my faculties. My problem is the disease of writing, the compulsion to tell stories...or in my case to write. Tossing my manuscripts to the wind is the closest I will ever come to dissemination . . . publication."

"Then why do you run after the sheets, tear them up, and burn them?"

"I don't want them sullied by the eyes of today's readers."

Charlie thought about the chance of one of The Boys picking up a page and understood. "What was the one about that the superintendent saw you chase after today, or was it yesterday?"

Hobble beamed in response to the interest and before Charlie and Dog could find more comfortable positions he began:

It was a tale about a generation of teenagers--strikingly like every generation of teenagers that has ever been. Though bored and listless, though uninvolved and indifferent, though ignorant and uncurious, they felt themselves superior to all previous generations, particularly to that of their parents. "If we, with our power and intelligence and vision, could just be freed, unshackled from the restraints of this suffocating civilization," they seemed to say, "we could create a perfect world, a Utopia."

"That's it?" Charlie asked.

"Pretty much. The twist is that in this case they got their wish."

"And?" Dog also seemed interested, a point Hobble noted.

"As I said, they got their wish. When they awoke the next morning they were bereft of everything civilization had created and handed to them. Free from their parents. Free from history and its obligations. Free to do as they wished. Free to soar."

"Then that's it? They had a crackin' good time?"

"I couldn't say," Hobble admitted. "But then they couldn't either."

"How's that?"

"They had nothing. Millions of teenagers sitting about the earth, sitting naked upon the unkempt earth. No cars. Not television or musical boxes. No Walkmans. No homes. No clothes. No food. No streets."

"Pretty P.Oed about it I expect."

"I couldn't say about that either," Hobble said again, "for they were also without language--that being the greatest gift history had given them and they had never used it but to bitch about the imaginary crosses they had to bear."

"What about their parents and the people who didn't think they were superior? Did you kill them off?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about that."

"Seems to me you got a little hitch in that story of yours that needs fixin'."

"Al right, I'll put the good people in a parallel universe. The only reason they'll miss the teenagers is because they'll wonder why everything is so pleasant."

"That the kind of stuff you write, is it?"

"Usually, I'm not quite so hopeful. That one, unlike most of what I write, at least has a positive ending."

"I take it then that you were never a teenager."

"Briefly, and very reluctantly." In mid-sigh his eyes rose from Charlie to the pickup that had just pulled into the seldom used lane along which he camped. "I haven't seen this truck before," he said, curious.

Charlie pivoted on his bottom for a better look. It was Lauren. He must have remained in the cafe for a store-bought breakfast after complaining about his rock-filled school house. He was careful not to raise dust as he idled down the lane until the truck's breaks squealed and he stopped.

"A call came for you in the cafe after you left," he called down after stopping and sliding over to the passenger side. "Inez said you'd probably be here and asked me to deliver the message."

Charlie nodded up to him, waiting.

"She said the call was from the town marshal up in Hyannis. Said he thinks he's located your boy. The one the flying saucer got."

"Hyannis?" Charlie challenged, doubting Lauren's grasp of the message.

"That's up in Nebraska, darn near into the sand hills."

"I know," Lauren said. "I've been there. They got a windmill right in the middle of their main street."

"But this makes even less than a little sense," Charlie continued to protest. "Hyannis ain't much bigger than Sligo here, and they don't have a marshal up there anyway. It's all they can do to keep the boards from weathering off the closed store fronts as it is. That town's so dead even the post office flag won't come to life in a stiff breeze."

"The man who called figured you might balk, I guess. At least he said that if you were reluctant you might think about sparing yourself another *day*. I suppose he was referring to the count the television and newspapers are keeping. The one about *He'll come home--*"

"I hardly need the remindin', Lauren."

Hobb remained silent while the two men spoke, but his eyes slid from one face to the other. "Can I go with you, Sheriff?" He seemed so eager that Charlie stopped looking at Lauren and swiveled his head to study the young writer.

"The problem's with my life," Hobb tried to explain quickly. "It's so boring I have to tag along with others or I'd never have anything to write about."

"So you're more of a borrower of others' lives than you're a writer?"

Chastened, Hobb inclined his head to one side in a lazy shrug and said: "I prefer to think of myself as a scribe, a Boswell."

"The answer's **no**."

"You're not going to Hyannis?" Lauren asked.

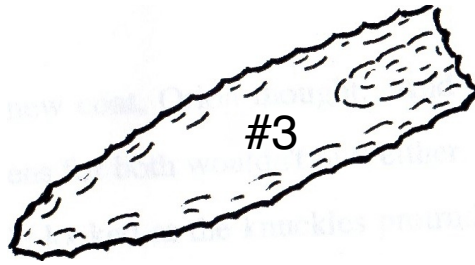
"I was talking to the boy," Charlie looked back up to the pickup. "I figure I can handle a trip up to Hyannis."

"Inez said you might see your way clear to the drive. Particularly if it was around noon and your breakfast was wearing off."

"Am I all that transparent?" Charlie smiled.

Lauren didn't reply. Instead, he slid over beneath the wheel and backed slowly from the grassy, but dusty, lane.

How had Inez known about that particular weakness of his, Charlie wondered. True, she knew most of his favorite restaurants, cafes and bar and grills, but he didn't remember telling her about that particular cafe in Hyannis, about the *Hippophagy*.



*. . In an effort to improve the amity between our two cultures, one of our own was sent to learn and to study their language as a possible insight into their thinking. What had once been a single language, he reported, was rapidly devolving into dialects that would soon become languages indistinguishable from one another. He ascribed this as the result of both fashion and indifference, not surprising as they had never been known to sharpen any tool but were always game to tie yet another feather to it.*

*Figurative and symbolic words were few: something either was or it wasn't. Synonyms were almost unheard of except in the case of manly: there were seventeen of them and new ones being coined almost daily, each with a nuance so subtle that our scholar was incapable of discovering any shadings whatsoever. There were no words for diligence or perseverance or industry or initiative or fidelity or responsibility. There was a word for honesty, however, but it was also the word they used for mask.*

*Humor for them came from homophones, words with the same sound but with different meanings. Any word in their language that denoted something of beauty also denoted an obscene body part. If a foreigner were to rhapsodize over a sunset using their vocabulary, they would roll on the earth with laughter until they were covered with sand and snot.*

*They had no word for today, but they had a word for tomorrow and another for some time in the vague, indefinable future.*

*The active voice construction was absent from their language except in the imperative utterances of the men to their women. The imperative structure was never reflexive, however, and wouldn't have been understood even if it had accidentally been uttered.*

*This inactive voice extended even to their fishing, if it can be so described. The men, manfully, positioned themselves on the rocks in the bay and extended their spears into the water, but by no exhortations or imprecations could our visiting scholar convince them that by thrusting the point at the fish they would be more effective than by waiting patiently for a negligent fish to swim by and carelessly impale itself upon the weapon. . . .*

## Day 112: Hippophagy Fare

The existence of Hyannis, Nebraska, made excellent sense--when choo-choo trains had to stop every twelve or so miles to refill their water tanks. That it wasn't now completely deserted like half a thousand settlements of its ilk was because the rail tracks that passed it were still in operation and because Nebraska 2, which skirted its north edge, was paved. Glassy-eyed travelers along the highway, hurrying to somewhere in the West from nowhere in the East, would have forgotten the desiccated blow-out on the south side of the road if not for the community's windmill.



Main Street ran straight up the impressive pile of sand for two blocks, an incline that afforded a view of the chains of sand hills to the north when one reached the summit. But in the winter, after a snowstorm, it was a deathtrap to those trying to get home. One block up the hill was the town's only intersection and in that intersection worked the windmill. Well, it would have worked if someone had bothered to fill its oil reservoir. It was a *Monitor* from the Baker Manufacturing Company and its gears were not sealed. It required periodic maintenance. Except for the occasional lost bird trying frantically to find a tree with a leaf on it, the windmill, when someone remembered to engage it and to oil it, was the only sign of life in the town.

Charlie and Dog were more fortunate when they turned onto the main street of Hyannis, for in addition to the windmill they spotted an old man who might have fallen down if the wind he was tottering into hadn't helped him to maintain a Pisa Tower list. Dog came over under Charlie's arm and looked out the window at the man

"I would have left these hills years ago," the man whistled dryly to Charlie and Dog and then paused to curse the wind, futilely spitting out the grit that coated his teeth. "Would have, too, if I could have ever found a *good* day to go on." When Charlie and Dog drove on, the old man was attempting to clean his tongue with leathery fingers.

Charlie had heard the man's complaint half a thousand times before, mostly from prairie dwellers on the windy eastern plains of Wyoming. The line was old and probably shared its nativity and ubiquity--and veracity--with such utterances as "Things'll get better in the Spring" or "Next time it's bound to work."

Many had apparently found a *good* day, for the sand hills was one of the few sections of America to have lost population in the past thirty years. At the last

census Hyannis had recorded a population of 210, and that was on a Memorial Day weekend when all the kids had returned from the cities, driven by a sense of obligation, an obligation further spurred by a check for gasoline from the parents or grandparents. Even at 210, Hyannis was the largest gathering of people in Grant county and was, in fact, the county seat.

Small as it was, the city fathers had scrounged up enough materials and shamed the few men they could find into constructing a sign with the community's name on it out on Nebraska 2, the highway that paralleled the rail road tracks towards Alliance and served as the runway for every blizzard--and any snowstorm near Hyannis was a blizzard because the flakes never fell straight down but passed through town vertically, much as the lighted windows on the nighttime Amtrak passenger train. The sign, welcoming tourists--or anyone thirsty enough or desperate enough to pull off at a sandpile--advertised itself as the Gateway to the Sand Hills, a place to get lost in and a place to lose your life in as a result, and carried the names of the two churches in town, one of which congregated only monthly. Spaces were left for the shields of such civic clubs as the Rotary and Kiwanis and Odd Fellows but those spaces remained blank and would remain so, though one of the standing buildings in Hyannis did carry the name Odd Fellows, but that was a reminder of the thirties when liquor came in jars and farm boys came to town of a weekend to sport after teenaged girls who had, unbeknownst to their parents, rouged their cheeks, advertising that first blush of nubility.

Charlie spotted the now vandalized community sign as he slowed to make the turn but didn't smile. He had seen the sign before and fully understood the humor behind the prank. Some wild wag of a wit had spray painted his message onto a blank portion of the sign: **Hyannis--The Mullen of Grant County**. Any traveler along Highway 2 who had blinked or yawned twenty-nine miles back would have

no chance at understanding the humor. Mullen was the seat of Hooker County to the east and was all of *twice* as big as Hyannis. It was one of those bits of humor that one had not only to have been there for, but to have been there for the past thirty years. Sometimes a good joke is a slow joke, even if only three or four people get it and are too weary to even chuckle.

Hyannis, of course, had its own wild wag of a wit. Every community large enough to call itself such has one. It's a requirement, just as a town drunk is a requirement or town busybody or town profligate is a requirement. The list can be lengthy. Of course a Jezebel or a devilish rake of a man isn't a requirement, though having either makes the afternoon coffee sweeter.

Charlie long knew that small town people seemed peculiar to outsiders because they were forced to wear several hats to keep the sense of community alive. A typical combination was the town drunk slash wit, but there were others. One example was Windle Straw, owner of Hyannis' number one establishment, excepting the gas station slash convenience store that provided fuel for most of the county. Straw not only ran the only restaurant of its kind west of France, the *Hippophagy*, but he served as the county historian and information center. In fact, the place mats on the tables listed the names, addresses, and phone numbers of every resident in the county and still there was plenty of space left for doodling. The idea for the restaurant came to Straw's father in the thirties after a carnival train wrecked just to the west of town and the owners decided to cut and run but not before selling most of the broken rides, most of which proved to have been only rented. Straw's dad picked up the pieces of a once fine carousel and hit upon the idea of opening a theme restaurant, the same business operating today and the only continuous business in town from the thirties excepting the Post Office, and

that had been built in 1915, or at least the Masonic Temple in which it was housed had been built then.

The carousel's painted ponies had been placed at the lunch counter, their heads facing out and their rears fitted with stool seats. Patrons who sat on these stools faced the paintings and mirrors that had once graced the center portion of the carousel. Spare ponies and unicorns and a llama hung from the ceiling or were affixed to the walls. The booths of the carousel, those used by the older sports who wished to ride in circles without going up and down, or by mothers and grandmothers carrying small children, were the actual booths of the restaurant and lined the windows looking out onto the street and to the Post Office and the Eagles Eerie #3980 beyond. When Windle was in the mood, he cranked up the plinkity-plinkity hurdy-gurdy that had been the carousel's heart. His mood was best when the wind wasn't blowing.

"What losers you got on the menu today?" Charlie asked Windle the instant he walked through the door and took off his hat. Windle didn't answer but glowered a reply instead. If his mug wasn't sufficient message, all Charlie had to do was to look at the rippling rag of a flag hanging from the Post Office across the street to know that Windle wouldn't be firing up the hurdy-gurdy anytime soon.

"What brings you this far north, Charlie? McDonald's start serving beef again?"

"No, I'm here to see your town marshal."

"Marshal," he scoffed. "I'm the closest this town has to a marshal and I don't even own a gun, except for the sidearms the waitresses carry. Where'd you hear we had a marshal? Sure you aren't looking for the sheriff? His place is out back across the alley."

"Someone called the cafe in Sligo and said the *marshal* here thought he might have that boy I've been looking for."

Windle twisted the dangling tails of the bandana at his neck to the side and looked questioningly at Charlie. "You talking about that kid the flying saucer got, aren't you?"

"Whatever. If it wasn't the marshal, you have any idea who it might have been?"

"I might. Why don't you have a seat while I do some calling around. See what I can turn up. I'll check and see if the sheriff has heard anything first." He picked up a place mat and studied it while walking to the phone behind the counter.

"Today's special is Black Beauty on a Kaiser roll. Comes with horse radish, of course, and a barely broth."

Charlie wasn't alone in the cafe. Three men occupied the booth to the far right of the door as he came in, but none of them waved to Charlie, a non-gesture he found odd. He was out of his territory by a hundred and thirty miles or more, but almost everyone in the three or four state area he rambled around in offered at least a friendly nod of recognition. And that included those who considered him to be an oaf. Ignoring Charlie Waggles was as unlikely as braking for a black-tailed jack rabbit. Not only did they not wave or nod, they avoided his eyes when he caught them looking into the convex mirror above their booth, the mirror that afforded the hired help an overall view of the room.

Charlie picked the row of booths on the other side of the door from them and sat heavily into the middle of the three, his back to the men. He pushed his hat to the other side of the table. The menu was attached to the napkin dispenser so Charlie pulled it from its holder so as to make his selection before the waitress arrived with his little pail of water and trough of crackers. It all looked good, but

Charlie decided to pass up the special of the day and to go with his old standby, the *Ol' Dobbin*. It was a sometimes indifferent stew, but Charlie knew it came with delicious dumplings the size of road apples.

Even before she came through the saloon door leading in from the kitchen, Charlie was aware of her musk. It wasn't a smell: it was the presence of an *unseen* presence, the knowledge a child has in a large, still summer barn that he is not alone in the building, that he is accompanied by a power that could destroy or befriend. Charlie's prescience, a foreknowledge that caused the hair to stand on his arms, was that of the cat that disappears before an earthquake or of the dog that crawls behind the kitchen stove twelve hours before the lightning storm. What was approaching wasn't just coming through the door; it was coming into his life, coming with the insistence and purpose of a bull snake into a hen house.

Her actual entrance was almost anticlimactic.

At first he saw only the white, cloth cowgirl hat set back on the crown of her head, its brim haloing the face. Slight crow's feet and a demeanor of worry and dissipation only further vested her dark eyes with the entangling promise of a future. The eyes told Charlie that she had been there and seen it and had suffered. But in spite of this, her eyes retained a sparkle that said youth and innocence still resided in her hopes.

Her stride was determined and made more authoritative by the revolver strapped to her hips, a leather thong securing the tip of the holster to a full thigh. In the Fifties she would have been called a Lucky Strike girl--so round, so firm, so fully packed. Even at his most cock sure confidence, Charlie had always been weak around such a body. It did for his soul what a Snickers bar did for his sweet tooth. Only by tearing the wrapper off and biting into it could he stop the gnawing agony.

"Are you the man," she accused, setting the silver pail of water and trough of crackers on the table in front of him, "who ate the whole pony. That's what the cook says anyway."

"Misty of Chincoteague I think was its name," he confessed. The joke was old. "They were all out of Flica fingers that day and the Man-O-War cutlets were a little too dear for my wallet." He expected her to at least chuckle politely, but when he looked into her eyes he saw worry. She had just lowered them from the convex mirror above the table where the three men sat. "Are you okay?" he asked. "You look as if you're worn out."

She forced a little smile and said: "I'll make it," while pulling the receipt booklet from her conchoed belt and taking a pencil from the breast pocket of her red paisley western shirt. When she, just as Windle had, tugged the blue kerchief at her throat aside, Charlie saw a moistness in the corner of one of her eyes. She was more than worried; she was frightened. Her eyes kept shifting from the tablet to the three men as she wrote.

When she disappeared into the kitchen, Charlie found a copy of a weekly newspaper the other side of the napkin dispenser and tried to entertain himself with it. It wasn't the Hyannis weekly: the entire county couldn't have supported even a monthly. It was from Mullen, that town twenty-nine miles to the east, that *Athens of the Sand Hills*, as its wag called it. Judging from the local news section, Hooker County was a hot bed for socializing. If they weren't dinnering all over the county they were driving into Alliance to shop and see a movie or weekendng down in Ogallala to fish the reservoir. Of more interest than the events were the names. Where, he wondered, did they get such Christian names as Arla, Ardith, Zelma, Phlete, Leta, Wilamene, Ona, Muriel, Mignon--yes, Mignon--, Gus and Cell. He wondered if *Cell* could be a typo but forgot to wonder after pursuing the surnames.

Ewoldt, Cooley, Betel, Miriam, Marymee (He hoped they at least had pretty or handsome children.), Buchfinck, Snosneider, Pester, Ginkens, Kehrs, Chinese, Labore (He hoped this person didn't suffer the misfortune of being a teacher as well.), Abegg, Yearn, Schristz, Haubensak, and Figaro. After reading those names, Charlie knew why they were such hangers-on in Sand Hill Country. With names like those there wasn't a whole lot of places in America they'd be welcome. When Windle returned from making his calls, Charlie returned the paper to its slot on the other side of the napkin dispenser.

"Well," he said, studying the notes he had taken on the place mat, "I got some suspicious lights in the sky at night. I got a dead cow that we wonder about. One family is positive black helicopters have been buzzing their house at night."

"Hear 'em?"

"No. The 'copters don't make noises. They say they can just see shadows circling the house that are blacker than the rest of the night. I wouldn't worry much about this, though," he shook his head and searched out another note with the tip of his thumb. "Those people would dream up most anything just for the company. Oh," he found what he was looking for, "one rancher caught a tourist stealing gas from a tank near his barn. Ended up paying for it though, so that's nothing of note."

"What about Orion Farrago?"

"The flying saucer boy? Nothing. Who'd you say called again?"

"I wish I knew. Got the message second hand." As he spoke the waitress reentered with a large tureen on a platter that was his meal.

Windle carried the place mat behind the counter and stuck it beneath a stack of others. "If I hear anything more on the boy I'll give a call down your way,



Charlie." He left out the back door to check the highway for road kill. At least that is what his regulars always accused him of doing.

The waitress, returning with the condiments some people dumped over the stew, heard Windle use Charlie's name. "You're Charlie Waggles? The sheriff down in Colorado?"

Charlie was surprised she didn't know. "That's what some folks call me," he tried to appear modest. "I'm really just a deputy, though."

She glanced quickly at the corner mirror and then slid into the seat opposite Charlie, lifting the revolver strapped to her leg so as not to bang against the finish. "I thought you were a Nebraska sheriff when you came in. I guess I didn't read your shoulder patch right."

Charlie rotated each massive shoulder toward her so that she could see that he wore no patch, just the leather vest his grandfather had once worn and the star shaped badge of office given to him by that same grandfather. She seemed confused so Charlie told her, "I kind of make my own uniform. Mostly Big Mac shirts and pants, and any good work shoe."

"I was wondering," she asked nervously and pushed his hat toward the window, "if you were heading back to Colorado today?"

"I'd intended on it."

"Do you have room for a passenger?" As she said this she leaned toward him and lowered her voice. Charlie could feel her whispered breath. It did for him what a chinook does for a snowbank.

"Always room for a *lady*," he confided in turn, knowing his passenger seat had seen much less. "But I'd intended to light out pretty quick."

"Any chance of a refill around here?" The voice, followed by the sound of a coffee cup slamming onto the counter, came from one of the men in the corner. He

had left his booth and walked far enough down the counter to see the waitress and Charlie before causing the commotion.

Startled and skitterish, the waitress left Charlie and scooted toward the coffee pot. "Sorry," she tried, but the eyes of the man followed her accusingly. When she returned with the carafe he continued to stare at her, daring her to raise her eyes to his.

He lifted the freshly filled cup to his lips and took a careful sip. "Sorry doesn't cut it, lady," he said, still staring at her. "And we could use some more water."

Charlie rose and as he did the room went into tableau. The man held the coffee cup to his lips, the waitress, who had shifted her eyes from the man's shirt pockets, stared at the mirror in the corner, and the men in the corner--Charlie knew without glancing in that direction--studied his reflection.

"I haven't touched my water," he said congenially, lifting the silver pail by its bail. "You can have mine."

Still holding the cup to his bottom lip, the man spoke neatly, clearly. "No, thank you."

"How about you fellas?" he called to the two remaining in the corner. Their heads in the mirror shook back and forth. The height of the booth's back hid their actual bodies. Maybe it was the way Charlie held the pail. One hand's fingers curled under the wire bail, the other hand lifted from the bottom. It was impossible to tell if Charlie intended to set the bucket down gently or to throw its contents.

"We're fine," the man holding the coffee cup said. "Just giving the little lady a little trouble."

"Do you fellas know this--" Charlie looked at the waitress.

"Yoni," she nodded. When Charlie paused, she said, "It's my first name. Yoni."

Having just read the *Hooker County Tribune*, Charlie could believe it. "Do you know Yoni?" he asked the man.

The man holding the coffee wasn't big. He wasn't strong. But he seemed to be on a mission. "Maybe I do and maybe I don't," he said. The tone implied no threat but the syntax crackled.

It was then that Charlie noticed what was dangling from his wrist watch. It was an elk's tooth, attached at the junction of the watch and its wristband by a silver chain. The clasp holding the polished tooth was elaborate, possibly gold. When the man saw that Charlie had seen the tooth, he turned and walked back to his booth, but not before shifting the coffee cup to his right hand.

The man was right handed, Charlie realized, but he had held the cup in his left hand, the hand toward him, so that he could see the tooth. This would have seemed peculiar any day, but it became doubly so because it was the second such tooth Charlie had seen that day, an ornament he probably hadn't seen in ten or more years. He knew what it was because his grandfather had given one to play with when he was a boy. He had kept it in a cigar box with other such treasures. The other tooth he had seen that day was on Hobb's key chain, and he, too, seemed to have been displaying it--not as an invitation or an insignia, but as a question.

Yoni had seen the tooth also but lowered her eyes to the carafe when Charlie turned to her. "I could use a spot of that," he nodded to the carafe. "I'm going to need it if I'm going to get back to Sligo before the cafe closes. I'd like to find out from Inez just who it was that sent me on this goose chase."

"Inez?" Yoni asked.

Charlie looked closely at the waitress. Like Hobble, she seemed oddly curious, possessive even. "The lady who runs the cafe," he explained. "It was she who got the call. Maybe she knows more."

Yoni retrieved a cup for Charlie and brought it to his booth along with the coffee. After filling his cup she slid back onto the bench opposite him, more familiarly this time. "I've got to get out of town," she said. "Now."

Charlie could never handle dark brown eyes. He fell into them the way a spelunker falls into a new hole, but, unlike the spelunker, he never had the foresight to take along a rope. "What's your problem?"

"My husband. He's going to kill me."

"Been threatening you, has he?"

"No," she said. She still had her fingers around his coffee cup, forgetting to remove them after filling it. "It's more subtle than that. Quieter. I live wondering every day if when he walks into the living room from the kitchen he's going to be holding a knife. He doesn't want me, but he's still possessive."

"Running going to help?"

"Only if it's far and fast. I've got nothing to hold me here."

"I can't leave until I've finished my coffee." When she questioned the mundanity of his reply, he nodded to the cup she still held. "You've got to let it go first. But after a couple of swallows I'll be ready. Where would you like me to pick you up?"

"No, no. I'm suspicious of those guys." She raised her eyebrows to indicate the men in the far booth. "I don't know who they are but I suspect they are watching me for my husband. They're probably some of his buddies I haven't met. He's secret about a lot of things."

"They don't look like the type who would find work in this county," Charlie wondered. "Kind of soft lookin', but mean, if you get what I'm hintin' at. The kind who have never really hit an honest lick."

"My husband spends a lot of time in Alliance or Ogallala. Maybe he met them there."

"Ogallala has that reputation, or at least did. What's your husband do for a living?"

"Pardon?" She had been distracted by looking into the mirror at the foreshortened bodies of the men. What she saw were mostly large heads, rounded backs, and distorted hands. The lines of their bodies flowed like figures in a Thomas Hart Benton painting. "Oh, --my husband? I don't know."

"Doesn't sound likely." Charlie had to be honest.

"We haven't been married long and he has always been secretive. Living here is almost like being a prisoner. I've been trapped in that little house. Linoleum floors. Cabinets and doors that have been painted so many times there's more paint than wood. And wallpaper, wallpaper, wallpaper. Sepia colored flowers, or at least long faded. Nothing bright. Nothing real. And silence. Except for the wind. There's more life in dry rot than in this town."

Charlie took a second look at her, trying to ignore the honest to goodness earthy lust she evoked, a lust that transcended the mere physical, the kind of lust that resulted in poisons and daggers and sudden deaths and heroes falling onto their own swords. A lust that could accomplish more than any love. What he saw was a girl--woman--who could have sprung from this region. The face had seen weather but had been protected. The hands and arms and shoulders looked as if they had seen work but had also been cared for. The muscles of her square back invited caressing fingers. And he was just observing what shown above the table top.

"If I can't pick you up," Charlie asked, "how are we going to hook up?"

"Pretend you're going to the bathroom. It's through the kitchen," she pointed. "I'll meet you at the back door and we can run to your pickup from there. We've got to get out of town without those guys seeing us go. We've at least got to get a head start."

"Going to be tough 'cause they can see my truck from where they're sitting. Especially the one facing this direction."

"We've got to chance it."

Charlie looked at Yoni again but this time he was looking through her. "Tell you what. We'll start out your way and then play it by ear. You got alleys in this town. Maybe we can use them to our advantage."

"I'm going to take your plate back to the kitchen now." She reached out to touch the hand he had just removed from the now empty coffee cup. "I'll be waiting."

He gave her three minutes and then stood. "Hey," he yelled to the window where the cook's head appeared occasionally, "where's your out house?" The cook framed his face in the window and jabbed a thumb toward the kitchen door. As Charlie picked up his hat, he looked toward the mirror and saw the three men watching him.

"If you see that waitress before I get back," he told them, "tell her I could use a refill." They didn't acknowledge his request.

Once through the swinging doors Charlie saw Yoni standing at the open back door, a suitcase in each hand. She had removed the revolver and holster. Her shoulders drooped more from the feeling of vulnerability than the weight of the suitcases. Charlie pulled a small wad of bills from his pocket and placed a ten spot

on the table beside the weapon. "For the meal," he told the cook who was watching the scene with mild interest.

"Please don't tell those guys out there," Yoni asked him.

The cook leaned back against the grill and crossed his arms. "Which end of the horse do you take me for?" Then he tried to fake a frown, but it was no more convincing than his apron was clean.

Charlie pushed Yoni through the open door and backed her against the brick wall of the building. They were in a little alcove that led back to the alley. "We'll have a better chance if we don't both run for the Jeep. I'll get in it and drive as if I'm headed for the highway, but before they can get outside I'll take a right instead of the left they probably think I'll take. Then I'll work my way back through the alley. Meet you behind the Sheriff's station. Okay?"

"Okay." What could she say? She was in his hands now, and she looked at them as he gestured while he spoke.

\* \* \*

Dog was happy to see his master returning to the vehicle, though he might have wondered why Charlie was almost hunkering, keeping a low profile instead of striding manfully as usual. "Scoot on over," Charlie told Dog and tossed his hat after him as he obeyed. His keys were already in the ignition so the engine was soon started and he was backing into the street before the men in the Hippophagy noticed. When he sped away, the three heads turned to the unexpected motion in the street and then rotated to question each other's face in turn. Charlie knew it would provide the delay he needed to make the corner less than a block away.

As he made the right, he kept his eye on the door of the restaurant and it hadn't opened before he completed the turn. A half block up was the alley he had

expected and he turned right into it, drove far enough to keep from being seen from the highway, and turned into the first driveway off the alley.

Turning the engine off, he stepped from the truck and walked a few paces back down the alley, just far enough to see the main street where it intersected the highway. He didn't remember un-holstering it, but he held his revolver, its barrel resting atop the post of a hog wire fence. Hollyhocks lined the wire fence, a welcome spot of color and cool.

As he had expected, the car carrying the men careened from the main street and onto the highway without stopping or even looking. Also as expected, the engine roared and the car hurtled east down the highway toward Mullen, the Athens of the Sand Hills. It would have made more sense to have headed west toward Alliance, but in Grant county the selection of roads was so slim that any choice wasn't bad.

Charlie re-holstered his revolver and was about to turn when he spotted a small cowboy hat beneath him on the other side of the fence. "How's it goin', pardner?" he spoke down to the diminutive cowboy.

The child, not more than five years old, continued to stare slack jawed up at Charlie. His hands hung limply at his sides. They didn't even have the presence of mind to go for the cap pistol on his own hip. Only his feet worked, and when Charlie retraced his steps to his pickup, the child followed and nosed into the fence next to the truck.

When Charlie backed out, he paused in the alley to cock his thumb and fire a finger at the child. "Ker-bang," Charlie snapped. Still the child didn't move. His hands still hung limply at the ends of his arms. His mouth waited for flies. Only after the Jeep disappeared down the alley did the boy turn to scamper into the house and tell his napping mother another of his whoppers.



Being a town that had been laid out properly, Hyannis had alleys and Charlie continued down the one he was in to the back of the restaurant.

"Throw your suitcases in the back," he said.

When Yoni tried the passenger door, she discovered competition from Dog. Seeing the problem, Charlie placed a hand under the dog and picked him up.

"You'd better ride in back," he told Dog as Yoni took his seat. "Protect the suitcases for us."

Dog wasn't that dense, but what was he to do?

Figuring the men would head east until deciding that Charlie had gone the opposite direction and then turning around to head toward Alliance, Charlie decided to go neither east nor west, but south. Two miles west of town he turned south and followed a single-lane ranch road for sixty miles through Swede Valley--most of the mail boxes reading *Olson*--until he hit Oshkosh. From there he dropped down until he met U.S. 30 and more familiar territory. He thought briefly of stopping off at the Corner Bar in Kimball to show off Yoni to some of his drinking buddies, since they had been denigrating his taste in women of late, but a quick glance at her face showed that she needed some cheering.

"Repeat after me," he instructed her.

She questioned his words.

"Go on now. Say what I say. Say 'What's past is past.'"

"What's past is past," she repeated.

"Good. Now take a deep breath and let it out." When she did he said, "Now say 'Whatever is coming will be an adventure I will welcome.'"

She hesitated, but did.

"Say 'I'm going to have a good time.'"

"I'm going to have a good time."

"I'll never drive and use a cell phone at the same time."

"I'll never dr. . ." she got out before breaking into a laughing, crying jag.

That broke the spell and eased the worry lines on her face.

They hadn't traveled five more miles--with Dog glowering at Yoni the whole time from the back window--before she smiled and began what would prove an endless, and enlightening conversation, albeit mostly one sided. "You were up here hunting for that flying saucer boy, weren't you? That Orion Farrago?"

Charlie grunted that he was, most of his attention on the narrow, indifferently paved black-topped road before him. He was impressed, almost suspicious, that she knew Orion's name. "You been following it in the papers and on television?"

"Some," she said, sliding closer to him and bringing her knees onto the bench seat so that she could more easily face him. "Most of it I find on the internet."

"Internet?"

"Sure, you're on there. The best site is Fatboy--dot--com, but there are others."

"It's the name of my favorite ice cream sandwich."

"What is?"

"Fatboy. That site was started by a friend of mine, Pointe Ruffner. He uses it to sell trinkets and whatnots out of that roadside attraction of his, Pleistocene Park. I didn't give him the name for the web site, though. That was someone else's doings."

"Maybe that's why I like it better than the others. They're pretty vicious. Some of the names they call you, I declare."

The *I declare* sounded foreign and tacked on as if for effect. It made Charlie wonder about her accent--hard to place but not quite foreign. Not, after he thought

about it, that unusual for his neck of the woods. Most any dialect sounded honest on the prairie. Even his.

"I forget what day this is since he was taken," she continued, not acknowledging Charlie's silence. "One of the web sites thinks you are in cahoots with the boy. You're in it for the money the family is getting for the story," she explained, and used the earnest expression on her face to inch closer along the seat. "If there's been any money, his folks have gotten it. Lord knows they can use it." "The sites say you aren't pushing your investigation very hard."

"Hard? I'm more than a hundred miles out of my territory as it is on a wild goose chase," he nearly erupted but relaxed when he felt a finger slide through the hair just above his right ear. "Anyway," he sighed, "it's hard trailing a body that went straight up. Not a whole lot of tracks."

"And you're just one person."

"Surely you don't expect the county to come up with any extra help. They know it's an impossible case. When the sheriff thinks the wave of sentiment is sufficiently against me, he'll try to get me fired--or worse."

"What's the *worse*?"

"Oh, they might come after me. . . saying something about age or some such excuse. They're afraid to come right out and fire me."

"Age? A virile buck like you? A man in the prime of his life?"

His sentiments exactly, but they sounded a whole lot better coming from her. "You know a lot about me but I don't know nothing 'bout you but your first name--Yoni."

"It's Yoni Windigo."

"Windigo?" That was another strange one.

"Don't worry. I'm only dangerous at night." As she spoke her fingers moved more familiarly through his hair. Her intentions were obvious.

"I don't know what's on your mind," he lied, "but I'm not so cruel as to link my decay with such a blooming young lady as yourself."

She sighed. "I'm not all that young. Thirty-seven."

Quietly, the sensuality he saw in her from the first became more approachable, touchable. "What do you have in the way of a family. I mean other than the husband we're running from?"

"A brother. I have a brother somewhere. We haven't communicated in years. No parents."

"Children?"

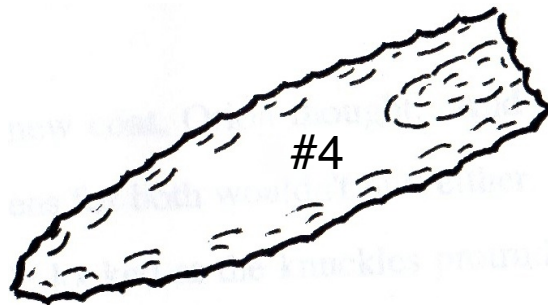
Again she sighed. "I'm what's called a barren woman. I positively can't have them."

Careful about keeping to the narrow road, Charlie touched her chin with his right hand and turned her face slightly away from him. "You know," he said, "in this light you're positively attractive."

"Maybe I could stay around Sligo and help you hunt for the Farrago boy. Another set of eyes, another set of ears," she suggested.

Another fabulous body, Charlie thought. He couldn't believe this was happening. Something wasn't right. She was too. . . *motion picture*. If he and the boys at the Corner Bar in Kimball or the Buffalo Bar in Pine Bluffs, Wyoming, had seen the same scene--the one that had just happened to him--played out on the television set above the bar, all of the men along the bar would have been yelling--"Yeah, right. Happens all the time. That's just like women. I have to carry a stick just to keep 'em from getting in the truck with me when I stop at an intersection."

Charlie knew something wasn't right, but he found it difficult to care. Even so, he did feel just a bit like that lazy bass nosing a worm suspiciously suspended in mid-water. Was he like that fish? Was he ignoring a bobber floating somewhere on the surface above?



*. . . Those who call themselves the first, the true native Americans--the aboriginals of this continent--, know they are not. As they did millennia ago, they continue their campaign to efface us from this continent, to wipe us from history as cleanly as a meteor shower did the dinosaurs or as effectively as the Japanese did their own bearded, aboriginal peoples, the Ainu. In the past they resorted to attacks--so long as the odds were in their favor, say fifty to one. Their weapons were those we had given them, not the sticks and bones they held when first we encountered them. Foolishly, we had provided those tools so that they might be able to provide for themselves. In our naivete we did not know that there were peoples who preferred to bring others down than to prosper and elevate themselves.*

*Their weapon today is the American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. With it, they take the disinterred bones of our ancestors, pulverize them, and scatter them where they can't be found. Even the thousands of years' old bones of my ancestors terrify them because of the tales they can tell, because of the DNA, the mitochondria they might contain.*

*Using this well-intended law, they take possession of any ancient bones, claiming them as the sacred remains of their ancestors, though the bones be 10,000 years old and their tribe having have a history of no more than a thousand.*

*And it is for good reason that they fear those bones. Of the ten most ancient skulls found in North America, eight show little or no kinship to either modern Asians or to American Indians. These skulls lack the broad faces and prominent cheek bones of the Indian. The skulls are long, not rounded, the faces are narrow. They are European.*

*Those who call themselves the Native Americans want those bones, if they have not already gotten them and destroyed them. They want Spirit Cave Man. His 9,400 year old skull knows too much. They want the two Minnesota Skulls, one 7,900 years old and the other 8,700. Both skulls look--quite simply: European. They already got and buried--pulverized and hid--the 10,600 year-old Buhl, Idaho, Woman. She was unearthed by strangers and reburied by villains, by the ancestors of those who may have killed her because of their envy based hatred.*

*Kennewick Man is dead 10,300 years but they covet his old bones also. And again for good reason. When he was discovered along the banks of the Columbia River he was quickly and, almost, accurately identified as a European, probably the remains of a 19th century trapper. Only when anthropologists x-rayed the bones did they discover the remains of an ancient spear point embedded in his leg.*

*The wound was healing but probably led to his death. Scientists can only wonder who threw the spear that ripped the flesh of Kennewick Man's leg.*

*But we don't have to wonder, and we probably know who he was. If our historians are correct, he was one of ours, though his father was an Ainu, another early immigrant to this continent who "mysteriously" disappeared. . . .*

## Day 112 : Chakra Stones

Charlie turned onto Highway 71 at Kimball and headed down into Colorado, not even considering taking Yoni to the Corner Bar to be ogled by the boys. For an instant back about Sidney he had thought of pulling into the No-tel Motel in Kimball, but that notion had been prompted by a scientific experiment he would liked to have tried: was it preferable to wake in the morning and look up into the ceiling mirrors at his own bloated and naked body, or was it more elevating to wake up and look at a firm, youngish woman lying next to him.

Science had always intrigued Charlie.

He knew the reaction he got from looking at the not so young and firmish. Those glimpses had so haunted him that he started frequenting the motel across from the park out east, the one where the ice machine outside his door always kicked in just as he was about to drop off. The owner rented that room exclusively to Charlie and other single males, or to couples of questionable legality who wouldn't dare complain about the running toilet.

By this time, Yoni had moved all the way over and was sitting next to Charlie, thigh to thigh. From the back bumper they probably looked like high school sweethearts on prom night. She even wore his straw cowboy hat as a token of affection.

"This Farrago case has you worried, doesn't it?"

"No more than usual," he spoke easily, confidently, driving by rote in this part of his world. He figured she had started the subject as an excuse to touch his face. "But it's showing on you. Look at the wrinkles on each side of your eyes. Look at the dark circles below them." Her finger tip traced each as she spoke.

Charlie tried to catch a glimpse in the rearview mirror but all he saw was Dog's muzzle glowering at him. Dog wasn't used to the wind and Charlie wasn't at all certain that he would respect the two suitcases beside him.

"I'd better pull over and give Dog his rest stop. It's been a long spell for him in the back. And for me, too, now that I think about it."

"What about little girls?"

"Women folk to the right. Men folk to the left."

He pulled to the side of the road and helped Dog out of the back while Yoni disappeared behind the front, right fender. A girl used to the out of doors, Charlie noted and then checked the black top in both directions before watering the white dividing line. Dog waited until Charlie was watching to squirt the left, rear tire on the Jeep.

"You know better than that, Dog." Dog scraped imaginary dirt backward as if to say *that's the point*.

Yoni was already seated inside when Charlie opened his door.

"Try these, Charlie," she said before he could slide in.



He looked at the seven colored stones in her open palm. "What the hey are those?"

"Chakra stones." She had dumped them into her palm from a drawstring bag that looked as if it had been imported from Peru, at least the pink and blue and green Indian designs were foreign to him.

"Chakra which?"

"Chakras. They respond to specific aspects of human consciousness and to specific organs."

"I don't know. They're pretty large."

"Large?" she questioned and poked at the red and green stones with her jeweled little finger. "Oh, no, Charlie. You don't have to swallow them."

"Well, I *was* wondering."

"You only have to *keep* them with you. To hold them while you meditate."

"Take them into the toilet with me every morning, is that it? Won't they get in the way of some necessary hygienic activities?"

"Look." She was finished bantering with him. "Put these in your pocket. If at any time during the day you happen to think about your health, these'll help. They're good for physical, mental, and emotional states."

He would have been reluctant to take them, but she leaned across the seat and stuffed them into his right pocket, stuffing them down deeper than was necessary. Maybe she was right, he thought. He was starting to feel better already.

"Now you have a citrine, an orange and a green aventurine, a red jasper, a turquoise, an amethyst, and a blue quartz crystal. Use them in good health."

"Does this mean I don't get the bag?"

She hit him with it. "I was going to give you a snowflake obsidian to help you deal with your negativity, but now you'll have to earn that."

The way she said *earn* didn't make Charlie think of actual work.

\* \* \*

They were well down the road and turning toward Pawnee Buttes before she grew serious again. "I do have something I want you to wear, however. For the time being, anyway."

"Wear?" He was beginning to wonder just how far this New Age silliness could go.

"It's a pendant. A crystal bear pendant." She pulled it out by the chain and it proved pretty, a blue crystal in the classic Indian bear design: a near circle flattened at the bottom for feet and bitten into the lower side to bring the bear's head into silhouette.

"But I don't wear jewelry. Never wore jewelry."

"This is not jewelry. It's protection, a *power* animal. Wear it for protection on your journeys," she said, slipping the necklace over his protesting head. "This will help keep you on the Path."

"I had a St. Christopher's medal wunst when I was a kid."

"And?"

"Fell off my bike and onto my head."

"Shut up and wear it. Wear it for me." She pushed the bear down into his chest hairs and straightened his Big Mac work shirt. "If you keep your shirt buttoned no one will ever know."

His last protestation was feeble. "Dog'll smell it."

Charlie wasn't unused to such women--bubble heads he called them. He had seen a plenty. This one had a saving grace, however. The bubble head came with a bubble butt.

\* \* \*

In spite of the occasional refreshment breaks and the rest stop for Dog, they had made good time and pulled into Sligo well before the Quonset Grocery and Cafe was to close. Just as Charlie braked on the gravel to pull into his reserved spot in front of the cafe window, he was distracted by a white El Camino, vintage model, sliding into the intersection beyond, righting itself, fishtailing, and peeling into the west. Two blocks down it executed a similar maneuver as it skidded left in the direction of the rodeo grounds and the community dump beyond.

"I'd best see what's bothering our resident writer," Charlie sighed, backing into the street.

"Writer?" Yoni asked. "This little town has a writer?"

"Not until recently. He's camped in a line of trees back of the school."

Yoni leaned forward in the cab, excited by the chase, even though Charlie didn't urge the Jeep much beyond fifteen miles an hour. She had slid back to her side and placed one hand on the door handle. It was then that she noticed Dog. Also responding to the chase, he stood with his front paws on the top of the pickup bed and held his head into the wind just beside Yoni. He was momentarily oblivious to her, but not forgiving.

Five blocks later Charlie nosed the Jeep up to the grill of the El Camino. Hobb had backed his gentleman's pickup to the dump's edge and was frantically throwing boxes and free sheets of paper down into the pit.

Charlie opened his door and stood on the running board, resting his left arm on the top of the door frame and his right on the cab. "What in tarnation are you up to now?"

Hobb held a box large enough to contain an entire manuscript in his right hand and yelled back at Charlie. "I'm publishing. Can't you see that. I have more

hope of publication by tossing my stories into a dump than by sending them to some publishing house.

Yoni, imitating Charlie, stood on the running board on the passenger side and looked at the boy. Her gaze revealed interest, but when Charlie looked over he also saw the look of disappointment. Who had she been expecting? he wondered.

"Well the next time you get the urge to publish," Charlie tried to admonish him--it was hard, the kid was such a pathetic but likable character, "would you drive a little more slowly? Most of the folks around here aren't as quick as you: they can't scamper out of the way, not with their aluminum walkers they can't."

Hobb, finished with his task, walked sheepishly up from the dump toward Charlie but stopped short at his passenger door. He hadn't noticed the woman before, or Dog, who was dancing among the lights on top of the cab.

"Oh," Charlie said, turning first to Yoni, "this here is Hobb, our local writer, not counting all the old women around here who self-publish. Yoni, Hobb. Hobb, Yoni."

"Hobb?" Yoni asked.

"It's short for Hobbie," Charlie explained. "His whole moniker is Hobbie deHoy."

Yoni almost smiled, as if she had just understood a dirty joke she didn't want to admit to. "Interesting name," she nearly laughed.

"Yoni itself raises questions," Hobbie quipped.

"Her last name's Windigo," Charlie said, thrusting himself back into what was becoming a one-sided conversation.

Hobb acted as if he couldn't believe it. "Windigo?" he asked. "You call yourself *Windigo*?"

"We don't all get to choose our names," she smiled back at him, almost daring him.

"My name's Waggles," Charlie tried again to exert his presence. "Some people find humor in that."

Hobb, his eyes locked on Yoni's, was preparing to leave and ceremoniously retrieved his keys from his pocket. Slowly, for all to see, he rejected first one key and then another, rotating a polished elk's tooth over to the discard side before selecting the ignition key. Still holding the key, he waited for Yoni to make a move. But she didn't. She did, however, stare at him with all the interest of an owl watching a lost baby chick.

\* \* \*

If Charlie felt left out at the dump, he felt *persona non grata* when he walked into the Quonset Cafe, trailing Yoni.

"Inez?" he called. She was cleaning up. "What kind of a wild picnic did you send me on, anyway?"

Inez eyed the girl behind Charlie and went on with her cleaning, turning her back. "Don't know what you're going on about."

"I'm going on about that goose chase you sent me on up to Hyannis."

"Can't catch a goose this time of year you better hang it up, Charlie. They're molting and can't fly or didn't you notice."

"Not a real goose chase. You're the one who took the call about the missin' Farrago boy. You're the one who said the town marshal called."

"Course we could clip what primary feathers they do have and give you a long stick. That might be of some service to you." She continued to ignore Charlie by extending her goose metaphor.

Charlie placed his hands impotently on his hips and looked back at Yoni. He raised his eyes to indicate that something was out of kilter. Being a woman, Yoni had known *that* the instant she walked through the tunnel from the grocery quonset and into the cafe quonset.

"You did take the call?"

"Maybe if we tied their feet together and gave you a 10-gauge scatter gun you could bring home some meat." Her extended metaphor was extending itself into a conceit and becoming really irritating.

"Inez!"

"No, I didn't take your call," she turned finally and tossed her rag aside en route to the refrigerator. "One of the boys took it, Wiley I think--yes, it was Wiley. Some of us have a little work to do occasionally."

"You don't call traipsing all the way to Hyannis work?"

"If *that's* what you call work." For the first time she acknowledged Yoni.

"Oh, Yoni this is Inez. Inez? Yoni." They nodded, each with a different expression on her face.

"It was Wiley took the call," Inez relented. "He got it as right as he could. I heard him questioning the caller. Didn't believe Hyannis had a town marshal and said so. Repeated everything back so I heard it. Didn't miss a beat when he told the story to Lauren who said he'd take it to you."

"Thanks," said Charlie.

"You know, you could hang around and answer a few of your own calls. Might even check in with Kandi at the Ault substation from time to time."

"She been callin'?"

"Only about the same thing she's been calling about. Only about the talk that's been going on in here the last couple of days."

Charlie waited for her to spit it out.

"It's about the man with the wheelbarrow."

"What man with a wheelbarrow. First I heard about it."

"I'm hardly surprised," she went back to her cleaning, but not before casting Yoni a glance. "What with your other interests and all."

"Are you talkin' about a man who might have filled Lauren's old school house with rocks?"

"I heard something about the school house and the rocks before. First I've heard about the man and the wheelbarrow. If you'd hang around here a while, you might be able to keep up on all the gossip."

"A tall man? Looks like he could use a good meal?"

The voice came from behind him and Charlie looked back at Yoni. "Where'd you get a hungry, tall man from?"

"No where. Just made it up. I'm trying to help you, Charlie. I told you it'd be fun to try and find the Farrago boy."

When they grew silent, Inez volunteered what she knew: "From what the customers say he is tallish. But that's not what's striking about him."

When she lapsed into silence, Charlie had to prod. "Okay, he's a tall man with a wheelbarrow. What else?"

"It's a wooden wheelbarrow with a wooden wheel. The tire is iron, of course."

"Of course it's iron," Charlie tried to be encouraging. "Wouldn't last long out here otherwise."

"The wheelbarrow's one thing. The other is where they find him." She didn't wait for Charlie's encouragement. "It's usually dead dark and he's sitting right in the middle of the road. Sitting on a three-legged milking stool."

"So what? Lots of animals like to sit on open roads at night. Coyotes for instance. What's so special about this man being there."

"They say he's writing," Inez sighed, giving up her anger now that it had vented itself.

"You did say writing?" Yoni asked.

"From what the men could see with their headlights, he was writing in a spiral notebook. Using what appeared to be a carpenter's pencil."

"Pretty good eyes to see that," Charlie challenged.

"One of the men who saw him said he had to wait in the middle of the road while the man finished sharpening the pencil. And apparently, finish the sentence he was on."

"Sounds driven."

The voice again was Yoni's. When Charlie looked for her he found her by his side. "Driven?" he asked her. "Sounds a whole lot like that fool Hobbie deHoy we just left."

Yoni, diminutive by comparison, looked up into Charlie's eyes. "Exactly." Her eyes glistened with pleasure. The hunt was fun.

"Did any of the men who saw him try to talk to him?"

"Some tried," Inez said, repeating what she had heard through the every day process of serving the men their meals. "One said he got out of his pickup and tried to talk to him, but the man picked up and moved on."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean he plopped his three-legged stool upside down on top of what he was carrying in the wheelbarrow and moved off down the road."

"Didn't they follow?"

"Bode said he did."



"Bode Road? I might have known. What did Bode say happened?"

"When he got close the man turned the barrow into the ditch and cut the bottom strand on the fence and worked the barrow under."

"Did he follow?"

"Bode? Even Bode's got more sense than to take out across a nighttime prairie after a man pushing a wheelbarrow."

Yoni was now in front of Charlie. "Did anyone see where he went? A direction?"

"Oh, they been talking about that around here all day. Seems he takes off in a different direction every time. Almost on purpose. Seems like he wants to be caught, or at least noticed. Why else would he sit in the middle of the road at night, especially when you can see headlights coming for five miles?"

"Seems to me," Charlie said, "that if he wants to get noticed he could accomplish that by just walking into town."

"Could be," Inez nodded. "And he might be doing just that."

Charlie glowered at her. "What are you talking about, Inez?"

"Gloria was in here after you left. You remember Gloria, the post mistress. The one who has to hand deliver your mail to you in here because you can't be troubled like the rest of us by walking a few steps to the west. Anyway, she heard the talk. She said it sounded a little like a man who has been getting mail general delivery."

"You mean it sounded like this Hobb deHoy fella?"

"No, not Hobb. He's a good boy. Has manners, if you know what I mean. Anyway, Gloria doesn't say there is anything wrong with the man who comes into the post office every week or two. It's just that he is tall and wears a long coat, even when it isn't particularly cold."

"Has the man done anything wrong?" Charlie wanted to know.

"Not that we know of."

"Then why should I be worried about a man with a wheelbarrow who does little more than rest in the middle of the road and cause a vehicle to swerve to the side every hour or so?"

"But, Charlie," Yoni tugged at his sleeve. "This man could be the *prima mobilia*."

"He can be the *what*?" Inez wanted to know, too.

"The machine that given motion to others. You remember. In the Ptolemaic system."

"The *bull* gear you mean."

"I suppose, Charlie. Wheels within wheels spinning other wheels. This man with the wheelbarrow could just be the key you need to find Orion Farrago."

"I don't see the connection."

"Me neither," Yoni admitted. "But what else did you have on for tomorrow?"

Charlie hadn't thought beyond the night.

"And you still have that mystery of the bones," Inez reminded.

"Bones?" Yoni and Inez were beginning to realize it would take their combined weights to get the great boulder named Charlie to rolling.

"Look along the wall there," Inez pointed. "Bones like those, with messages on them, have been appearing ever since that kid came up missing."

"Even before," Charlie amended.

Yoni looked at the bones and their red messages. Almost to herself she said: "Prairie telegraph."

"Hey," Charlie broke the spell. "Gettin' late and we haven't eaten yet. Don't suppose you could rustle us up something, could you, Inez?"

"You don't suppose correctly." She went back to her closing activities but turned to have a last word with Yoni. "You have any trouble with that big *honyock* there, let me know."

Inez immediately realized that Yoni didn't know the word. "One of *his* words," she pointed to the largest figure in the room. "I don't know what it means, but it isn't good."

"When wasn't Charlie ever good?"

"When was he ever?"

\* \* \*

While heading south out of Sligo on the county highway, known to tourists and map-readers as gravel 390 or as the Pawnee Pioneer Trails Scenic & Historic Byway, Charlie decided that Dog would sleep under the trailer.

"Don't expect much," he told Yoni. "It's just a trailer next to a cemetery. Bachelor pad enough for me, but it might be lacking in feminine comfort."

"It does have a toilet and a shower?"

"It's got both, not that I could tell you from recent experience if either of them is working."

"A bed?"

"Covered with books."

"Then where do you sleep?"

"On the couch in the living room."

"A couch? How big is it?"

"It's always been big enough for me and Dog."

"Well Dog is going to have to find other lodging tonight."

"I'll speak to him about it." Not knowing he was being talked about, Dog sat contentedly atop one of the suitcases, happy to see familiar territory, knowing he

would soon be home where all the coyotes, foxes, badgers, and skunks were old acquaintances.

Yoni had her fingers in his hair again.

"Wow. This is a pronounced bump." She was feeling in front of the upper part of the ear.

"You're a phrenologist now? Give up being a medicine man?"

"It's your alimentiveness bump."

"Feels like where Jimmie Dole or Jerry Lindgreen hit me with a clod when I was little."

"No, no. This isn't an injury. This is your alimentiveness bump. It represents appetite."

"And?"

"I'd say you have a good one. But it's not just food. It's an appetite for life as well."

They were just cresting the hill and she could have seen his trailer, encased in insulating straw bales, if she hadn't been so interested in his head. "We're almost here. There's the Sligo Cemetery."

"I don't believe this." She was now feeling the back of his head on the level of the lower part of the ear. "This is the largest one I've ever encountered."

"If memory serves that bump came from the Buffalo Bar in Pine Bluffs. Something to do with an uncalled eight ball shot."

"No, silly. This is your amateness bump."

Charlie pulled into the semi-circle drive in front of his trailer and stopped before the door. Without being cajoled, Dog leapt from the back and found the parted bales that allowed him entrance under the trailer. He wouldn't spend a night under the same roof with that woman.

"What's my amateness bump?" he asked, getting out of the pickup and reaching for the suitcases.

"It represents sexual love. Passion. Attractiveness to the opposite sex."

"Figures," he said.

"How?"

"Parts to parts," he explained evasively. "Large amateness bump, large other things. Boots for instance."

"Your shoes are small for your size," she noted, teasingly.

"I was speaking metaphorically." He had the trailer door open, it was never locked, and placed the suitcases inside.

"Are you trying to tell me," she attempted to be coy, "that you are--gifted?"

"Well, I haven't gotten the Nobel Prize for it yet, but there is talk."

"Then I take it you have had it appraised."

"I did take it to an authority in Scottsbluff--her name's Genevieve." He was now inside his trailer and preparing to close the door behind her.

"And her appraisal?"

"She said it was *parlor* sized. You know, good enough to take out for company but not a museum piece by any means."

"Tell you what, Charlie," she said, encircling just above his waist with her arms, her fingers almost meeting at the back. "I'd like to make an appraisal of my own."

"Be with you in a second," he said, distracted by the curtains above the couch. They were parted about an inch and he reached over to draw them closed.

Charlie couldn't abide a voyeur--actual or literary.



*. . . But forget those skulls, even though the cranium retains its inherited features while less important bones bend to disease and famine. Forget that the fleshed-out skull of Kennewick Man bears more resemblance to a modern day Brit commanding a Star Ship than to a noble savage shuffling along an ancient beach. Look to the human DNA for the truth.*

*More specifically, look to the mitochondrial DNA. Passed from mother to mother, the mitochondrial change little and when they do change they change like clockwork. Find the first source of the DNA. Measure it against the new sample. Note the change and you learn the years of separation. You now know when the First Americans really arrived.*

*The American Indians, almost all of them, carry one of four distinct DNA lineages in their mitochondrion. Scientists, searching for the original stock of these mitochondrion have found them, all four of them, in peoples of northern Asia. Interestingly--really suspiciously--three percent of these "Native Americans" carry a genetic trait that occurs only in a few places in Europe.*

*Curious. But it could happen. Travelers from Europe could have gone east and met the Asians before they migrated in small bands to the New World. It could have happened that way. But it didn't.*

*The story is in the Fifth Mitochondrial Group the scientists found. They couldn't find its source. So mysterious was it that they called it Mitochondrial X. They could find its ancestors no where in northern Asia. Not surprising. They were looking in the wrong place. They still held to the myth that the First Americans crossed a thousand-mile wide land bridge that connected Asia and North America during the Ice Age when the ocean levels were 300 feet lower than today.*

*Those scientists, like all humans living today, assume they are smarter than their ancestors--even their ancestors of 20,000 years ago. Maybe they are, but they are not half so clever or venturous. Few or no Americans today would set out from Europe in boats of skin on a years' long trip to a New World, sliding past non-calving cliffs of ice and living off sea mammals, avoiding scurvy by eating the organs and the biles of those animals.*

*No. We wouldn't do it, so the scientists assumed our ancestors wouldn't have either. But the scientists, honest seekers that they are, were again wrong. Our ancestors were a wonderful, spirited, hopeful, questing lot. They were the kind who seek, then build and then perfect.*

*Finally--accidentally--the scientists looked in the correct place and found the mother source of Mitochondrial X--Western Europe. And what did their ticking mitochondrial clock tell them? Try 20,000 years. Not the puny twelve or fifteen thousand years accorded to those Asian mothers.*

*But what culture , if any, existed in Western Europe 20,000 years ago? Try the Solutreans who lived there 24,000 to 16,500 years ago.*

*But that's for later. That's for the Clovis--those of the distinctive spear point long called, and correctly so, the First Americans. . . .*

## Day 113: The Sin Eater

For some reason, Dog elected to remain at home the next morning and breakfast alone.

In deference to Inez, Charlie took Yoni to Hereford for breakfast instead of Sligo, even though he knew the Hereford Bowl had completely lost its character. At one time it was possible to eat a giant chili size, drink beer, and watch people bowl at the same time. The new owner--that is to say the fifteenth new owner since the original had built the bowling alley--had torn out the lanes and replaced them with picnic tables and cheap chairs, items that were easily and inexpensively replaced when broken. Considering the country music crowd this bar drew, it was a given that most of the furnishings looked brand new. And they were. Anyone who cared to push the crash bar on the rear door could see the previous week's furnishings piled out back. It looked like kindling for the winter.

Because it was the only business in this community of twenty-five or so, Charlie took great interest in it. Any time a live band was scheduled, he made it a solemn point to be in Wyoming or Nebraska. Let cracked heads roll where they may was his solution to the ineluctable rowdiness. He figured it might turn the feet of some patrons along more civilized paths if they were permitted to see the world their ilk would create--when left unshepherded.



"Are we going to start with the postmistress?" Yoni asked, pushing scrambled eggs with her fork. She was referring to their search for the man and his wheelbarrow.

Charlie laid his own fork aside--he had not been holding it overhand to impress Yoni--and ruminated over her question while chewing. He'd already decided to start with Gloria, but what had him puzzled, and what still occupied his mind, was the night before. To him it had been special; to her it seemed a birthright.

He looked at the spot on his left wrist where a watch might have rested. "Good as place as any. Why don't we get going, she'll be opening in fifteen minutes or so."

He still wondered about the night before. Maybe if he had bought some fireworks on his last trip into Wyoming. They might have made things a little more special for her, though their placement would have been critical.

\* \* \*

Charlie drove into Sligo from the west and was slowing for the post office when he saw Bode Road and Phyllis, the librarian, in stiff conversation. Phyllis' arms were crossed beneath her breasts and Bode had his thumbs defiantly in his back pockets. That they stood on neutral ground near the fireplug told Charlie that something was wrong.

"Phyllis? Bode?" Charlie leaned toward Yoni's open window. "Got something for me?"

"It's Bode's rabbits," Phyllis came over to the passenger window to complain. "He won't keep them caged up and they come into my garden at night and wreak havoc."

Bode joined her at the window. "The problem's not mine," he said and looked at her defiantly. "The law's on my side."

"Are you keeping rabbits in Gladys' chicken coop again?" asked Charlie.

"Nothing says I can't."

Phyllis huffed. "Nothing says you can't fix the fence either, but you can't be bothered with that. Important things to do elsewhere, I suppose." She, and the whole community, knew Bode was very adept at avoiding regular labor.

"The law here in Colorado says I'm not responsible for fencing *in*. You're responsible for fencing *out*."

Phyllis looked to Charlie for confirmation.

"It's still on the books, Phyllis. A fella named Iliff saw to that a hundred years back. But of course, Bode, most ranchers today keep their fences up to be neighborly if not to protect their stock."

"Mine are doing just fine, thank you. *I* don't need a fence." He didn't need to look at Phyllis, but he did.

"Well," Charlie winked at Phyllis, "suit yourself, Bode. I've got other problems. This sounds like something the two of you'll have to haggle out. Keep it clean. Blunt instruments only."

As he drove on toward the post office the two combatants were looking not at Charlie, but at Yoni. Their argument had overridden their curiosity and they were beginning to regret it.

Yoni looked critically at Charlie. "Is that what being a sheriff is all about?"

"That's the majority of it."

"But you solved nothing."

"The law's with Bode."

"But you solved nothing," she repeated. "That could get ugly."

"I didn't say I was finished with the problem. I just said Bode is right according to the law. It'll work out. I'll come up with something. Just give me time to work on it."

"Work on it how?" She couldn't imagine.

"I'll let you know if and when I hit on the correct notion."

\*\*\*\*

Inside the post office Gloria leaned across the counter, a 9 1/2 by 4 inch manila envelope proffered between her index and middle finger. "I pulled it out of your box for you. Seems you've forgotten the combination."

Before Yoni could examine it, Charlie stuffed it into the pocket beneath his leather vest. "Gloria, have you seen any peculiar-type men around here lately? By peculiar I mean out of the usual."

She ignored the question and looked at Yoni who leaned on the counter next to Charlie.

"Oh, this is Yoni. Gloria, Yoni. Yoni, Gloria." They exchanged smiles that would have curdled cream on sidings for forty miles in either direction if the trains had still been running.

Obviously Gloria had already spoken to Inez and her lowered eyebrows made plain where her allegiance lay.

Charlie interposed his hat between the two ladies to get her attention. "Cut the nonsense, Gloria. I'm looking for a man. A somewhat peculiar man."

"This is *Sligo*, Charlie. *Peculiar* is its other name. Peculiar, Colorado. Here it's the common and ordinary that stand out. I mean The Boys and Wiley can pass for dull normal around here. What's that leave for *peculiar* to be?"

"Man with a wheelbarrow."

"He fits right in, if you ask me."

"Then you know him?"

"Could be, though I've seen no wheelbarrow. He could leave it elsewhere, I suppose, but he's always on foot when I see him."

"Then what makes you think it's the man people have been seeing on the roads at night?"

"He just looks that way. I mean he is tall and thin. Stoops a little as if to accommodate short folks. And he's a writer. They're always strange."

"You sure you aren't talkin' about the fella camping out back of the school, Hobble deHoy?"

"Hardly. He's a bright spot around his town. Quality conversation, if you know what I mean, and I suspect you don't. We chat while he's waiting for the mail to come in. In his case that's rejection slips."

"He hasn't been here that long. How's to come he gets mail here so soon?"

"Near as I can figure it he's known he was going to be here for a long time. Letters began arriving here, general delivery, a month before he showed up to claim them."

"And this other fella. He gets mail general delivery?"

"No law against it. I'd say he's been receiving mail here off and on for seven or more months. I think before that he was getting mail general delivery in Briggsdale, though that man was described as not so slim or stooped."

"What's off and on mean?"

"Means I might see him twice in two days or not at all for six weeks. Sometimes the mail stacks up. Some of it's manuscript size. Some of it's rejection letter size. He smiles at both. Not all that unpleasant."

"What direction does he come from? And why haven't I seen him in town?"

"You both keep odd hours, so I'm not surprised your trails haven't crossed. Then again, maybe he's staying shy on purpose."

"The direction?" Yoni asked for Charlie.

Gloria scowled at Yoni before giving Charlie a questioning look, wondering who was in charge. "He comes from any direction. I've been curious about that myself. When I've had the time, I've stepped out back and tried to take a peek. He goes different directions every time. Sometimes he heads down Cibola toward Trudy's, and sometimes he heads back of the library and the school, and other times he appears to disappear through the rodeo grounds. Once he went in the direction of Hereford, or maybe to Crow Creek. I couldn't tell which."

Not covered by the postmistress, Yoni asked another question. "Did this man have a narrow nose, maybe like mine?"

Gloria looked at the nose and envied Yoni's relative youth and looks. "It is similar," she agreed. "A little longer and its angles are more pronounced."

"Graying temples? Lank hair?"

"That's the fellow. Know him?"

"No," Yoni scoffed, looking to Charlie to see if he saw that she was amused. "I'm just trying to paint a picture of the man."

Gloria wasn't sure that was the absolute truth but offered: "You might not have to paint a picture of the man if you hurry and get into Briggsdale. You can take his photo."

Charlie was wondering about Yoni's questions until he heard this. "What are you talking about, Gloria?"

"I'm talking about the Sin Eater."

"You're talking about the which, Gloria? A Sin Eater. What in the Old World foolishness are you talking about?"

"Well, you put a piece of bread or something on the deceased's chest--"

"I know," Charlie said. "There's even a pretty fair book called *The Sin Eater*. What I want to know is--"

It was Yoni's turn to interrupt. "But *I* don't know what a Sin Eater is."

The obvious honesty stopped Charlie and Gloria in mid utterance. "A Sin Eater," Charlie explained patiently, "is someone who symbolically takes the sins of a dead person as his own, thus ensuring that person's passage to Heaven. At least it's done symbolically, the eating of the bread off the chest. The bread has absorbed, or represents, or I don't know what. But the Sin Eater eats the bread and everyone feels better about it."

"You're joking." Yoni looked at first Charlie and then to Gloria to see if they were.

Gloria, seeing the openness--and apparent innocence--softened. "It's Old World, as Charlie says. But people out here are a little bit tinctured with the superstitious, or what I prefer to call *shortcuts*. They'll try anything. They were putting magnets on each side of their fuel line to improve mileage long before it caught on nationally. Now they wear the magnets around their ankles or back. Anybody who comes through Sligo with a load of snake oil will leave with a pocket full of money. Half the women here are witches and the other half are reformed witches. People don't just have nightmares out here. Oh no, they're abducted by aliens. Boys don't run away from poverty: flying saucers get 'em. It's just such nonsense that keeps Charlie busy out here. And it's a good thing for him, too. If left to his own devices he'd have died long ago of boredom or drink."

"If what you're telling me is true, it's strange," Yoni said, "--about the Sin Eater, I mean. The other foolishness is popular everywhere. But what does the man with the wheelbarrow have to do with the Sin Eater?"

Charlie fielded this question. "The Sin Eater is someone who is ostracized by the community, or a stranger, or--best of all--some holy hermit. It's my guess that if what Gloria says is true, some one met him on the road, saw what he looked like and asked him if he'd like to earn a couple of bucks."

"This is a profession?"

"I suppose in the Old World it was a meaningful supplementary income, but out here the funerals are gettin' fewer 'cause most everyone has already died off. Pin money at best now. I suspect whoever they've hired is just being friendly, or maybe curious."

"*Weird*"ll do nicely," Gloria corrected. "I *said* he was a writer."

"There are one or two writers who don't go about in trench coats exposing themselves," Charlie scolded jocularly.

Gloria shook her head. "Not that I've met."

They were on their way out when Gloria called them to a halt. "Sure you don't want to know his name?"

"I suppose that would help," Charlie replied sheepishly.

"Manemann. Harry Manemann. The *mane* is like the lion's mane."

"Harry Manemann," Charlie cried. "Brother have I been running into some strange names of late. Hobble deHoy for one." He looked at Yoni, Yoni Windigo, but said nothing. "And now Manemann."

\* \* \*

Gloria had gotten her information from the postmistress in Briggsdale, so Charlie and Yoni drove the twenty-six miles and stopped at the general store to learn which of the two churches in town was having a funeral, and additionally why Charlie hadn't heard about the death.

The *deceased*, as newspapers preferred to call them though they were as dead as the word itself, was an out-of-towner or nearly so. The family, long departed, fleeing with the Depression's first drought, still owned a few plots in the Briggsdale Cemetery and decided to fill them up, the price being right.

The couple in the general store didn't name the church where the funeral was to be held. They just told Charlie on which corner it sat, the name no longer being important as it had been a Catholic church before the twenties and the KKK, and then a Lutheran, a Methodist, a Baptist, a Congregational, and finally a Non-denominational protestant, that is when a circuit riding minister could be cajoled into climbing down from his saddle and staying a spell. They usually attracted the attention of such a rider by flashing the sunlight off an over-sized collection plate.

"Is this ceremony going to be preceded by a Sin Eater?" Charlie asked the couple.

The woman spoke. "That's come to be popular lately," she said softly. "I wouldn't be at all surprised." She looked exactly as one would expect the owner of a dying business in a dying, nearly nonexistent prairie town to look.

"Would you have any idea who the Sin Eater might be if there is one?" asked Charlie.

"I don't know his name," she said shyly, nervously pulling her gray sweater closer to her neck though the weather didn't call for it. "Probably the same one they've been using of late."

"Man with a wheelbarrow?"

"Then you know him?"

"No. But I'm trying to meet him. Does he stop in here often?"

"Not all that regular."

"Does he buy?"



"Quite a lot when he does come," the woman said. "That's why he brings the wheelbarrow, I suppose."

The woman's husband explained. "She means he buys in bulk. By the case." When Charlie showed his surprise, the man admitted the truth of the situation.

"He's nearly our only customer, except for the kids from the school around lunch time and when they get thirsty." They were long past retirement age and anyone who walked through the door was welcome company whether they purchased or not. In fact, one of the store's rooms had been turned into the community's quilting center and one was stretched across the frame when Charlie looked in.

"He doesn't by any chance pay by check, does he? Anything with a name on it?"

"Everything he gives us has a name on it," the wife said. Charlie saw the twinkle in her suddenly mischievous eye and didn't bother to ask, but Yoni did. "Oh," the woman said, "there's Jackson. And there's Washington. And the occasional Franklin."

"Then do you know where he lives?"

It was too much to hope for. The best Charlie could get was that the man usually pushed his barrow toward the east when he left and that the funeral services almost always began at 2 p.m. The minister was coming from Greeley. Because of the Sin Eater, the mourners didn't meet at the church first. They congregated in the foyer of the new rural high school, using the school's parking lot, and then walked from there to the church. The Sin Eater, out of sight and unseen by all, was to perform his services between 1:30 and 2:00.

The old couple didn't think he brought his wheelbarrow on such occasions.

\* \* \*

Charlie and Yoni probably had an hour and fifteen minutes to waste before any chance of the Sin Eater showing up at the church. Confirming this, the hearse with the body was just arriving from Greeley as Charlie pulled onto Weld County 392 and headed north toward the Crow Creek Campground.

The campground, operated by the Forest Service--go figure--was the one location on the prairie where one could count on finding a mosquito. Many mosquitoes. Big mosquitoes. When they selected that site, Charlie had figured that they did so because mosquitoes was a requirement.

But they weren't going there for the mosquitoes. They were going there for the flies, that endangered species that found its only refuge in campground privies, flushless privies. Yoni had insisted upon a civilized, *sit-down* facility and this was the only public one within thirty miles Charlie could think of. He didn't want to bother Pointe Ruffner at Pleistocene Park, the attraction up the road, largely because Pointe sold Charlie Waggles memorabilia, coffee cups, ash trays, actions figures, and such, and Charlie didn't care to make an entrance. The flashes from tourist cameras was embarrassing.

While Yoni went inside and closed the door, Charlie found a patch of open ground, a fresh breeze, and the accompaniment of brown thrushes in the bushes. "A little potassium for the petunias; a little nitrogen for the nasturtiums," he said, as he always did when relieving himself out of doors. Still waiting on Yoni, he ambled down to the rudimentary seep of the ephemeral creek and started to work on one of the fist full of Snickers Bars he had purchased from the old couple by way of thanks for their information. He purposely didn't check the *best-before* date on the bar he was chewing, but he was suspicious.

When Yoni returned, they walked the trails in the campground, watching birds and swatting mosquitoes. She accepted one of Charlie's candy bars, not that she wanted one but that it would at least prove a distraction from the insects.

"What are you going to do?" she asked once she freed her teeth from the stale nougat.

"I'm going to go to church, early service. You're gonna stay with the truck behind the general store. He might see my Jeep and get spooked."

"Wouldn't it be better if I went. He wouldn't know who I was."

Charlie couldn't figure her interest. "No Nancy Drew. I'm the law out here. Leave it to me. I don't expect anything rough at all. Just a few friendly answers to a few friendly questions. It isn't as if he's done anything wrong. No law against pushing a wheelbarrow and living in parts unknown. Nor for that matter using a dead body for a picnic table. The whole thing just invites interest. That's all."

"What if this Manemann won't talk to you, or runs?"

"He's got the right. Might make me all the more curious, however. But if he does run at least we'll be able to get a sense of the direction he's headed. Follow him maybe."

\* \* \*

On the way to the church, Charlie paused at the exit from the campground to give her a long look at the second most photographed tourist attraction in Colorado, the billboard of himself. His torso, from the leather vest pockets up, rose above the rectangular billboard and was silhouetted against the sky. His arms were folded, his look was grim, and his hat topped off at fifty feet above the ground. The sign itself read: *You're in Charlie Waggles Country. Watch Out!!!* The Pawnee Buttes also rose above the rectangle of the sign but were much smaller than Charlie's figure.

"It used to sit about where 392 is now, but when they took the dog leg out of the county highway where it meets Colorado 14 and ran it straight, they had to move the sign back. The three exclamation marks are a bit much, don't you think?"

Yoni, trying to remain unimpressed, looked at it. "Is that a bullet hole or *is* your ear pierced?"

"As my mom always said, the Waggles had enough holes in their heads already. Course she wasn't a Waggles by blood, more by bad luck than breeding."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I've already said more than I should have. Let's get to town."

He retraced the route he had taken to the campground and pulled the Jeep in behind the general store. "Okay, I've got at least ten minutes to get to the church. I guess I can walk in the front door. You wait here until I get back."

"What are you going to do there?"

"Hid in the cloak room. Its door opens right into the sanctuary. I can keep it cracked and watch anyone who comes in. When the Sin Eater gets there, I'll wait until he finishes his duties and then I'll clear my throat or something. We can get out the back way before the mourners come."

Charlie left the truck and pushed its door closed gently even though he was three blocks from the white clapboard church, a church whose steeple had been progressively shortened by successive storms and which now didn't even house a loud speaker bell.

When he got there the double doors at the top of the concrete steps were wide open and latched back to the walls on each side. The open casket was straight ahead, at the end of the aisle but just in front of the raised platform that held a podium, a wooden chair, and three metal folding chairs. Drapery hid the general condition of the walls.

He looked both ways as he entered, but he was alone. The straight backed pews he remembered well, even though his visits had been brief and rare. To make sure that a Sin Eater was part of the program, he tiptoed down the aisle and looked into the casket.

Dour. From the dead's expression Charlie suspected that the man had been wealthy and his will hadn't been read yet. That could account for the number of mourners he saw parked at the school. On his chest, just above the folded hands was a small desert plate and on the plate a cream pie, banana Charlie hoped. With the pie was a silver plated fork, four tined. Charlie was impressed.

"Apparently the scarcity in Sin Eaters allows them to name their own terms." He whispered this to the down turned mouth just before tiptoeing to the cloak room.

It was only a moment before he heard a scurrying on the steps outside and some panting in the vestibule. Charlie lessened the crack in the door and as a result saw only a blur as something raced up the aisle toward the casket. Inching the opening a little wider, Charlie was just in time to see a yellow dog, a puppy of only six to eight months really, rise on its hind legs to investigate what was inside the box. Afraid the dog would go for the pie, Charlie issued a sharp whistle and pulled the door nearly closed.

At first the pup turned its head and looked about for the source of the whistle. Finding none, it dropped to all fours and looked beneath the pews. Finally, it let out a frightened yelp and scratched and slid itself back down the aisle until it was outside.

Even dogs find empty churches spooky.

Charlie remained in the closet longer than he had intended. Such episodes caused him to curse his dislike of wristwatches. They were so much like jewelry,

especially as men now wore them. His idea of a watch was one with a chain and fob, one pocketed snugly in the appropriate pocket on a pair of bib overalls and not into that dainty little slot on fancy vests. Still, it would be nice to know just how close to 2 p.m. it was.

Outside he could hear voices and the shuffle of old feet scattering gravel. Leaving the closet, he hurried to the open front door and peeked toward the school parking lot. The congregation was moving toward the church as one flock, though in this case the shepherd was leading. Looking from the door to the casket, he realized the pie hadn't been eaten. If it was still uneaten by the time they arrived, many of them might become uneasy and some of them distressed.

Never had the call to duty caused such salivation. Knowing he had but three or four minutes, he scooted down the aisle to the casket. The pie was still there. When he lifted the plate and reached for the fork, he saw two one-hundred-dollar bills lying on the dead man's chest where the plate had been.

The fork when he grabbed it was clumsy in his hand and proved the inappropriate tool for the moment. Time was of an essence, so he placed the fork on the unopened portion of the coffin lid and lifted the pie from the plate with his right hand. In one coordinated movement he shoved the pie into his mouth and placed the plate next to the fork. The funeral party was coming up the church steps when he slid the two bills down into the coffin, out of casual sight, and hurried for the side door.

Lemon.

He waited behind the lilac bushes east of the church until all the mourners were inside, the wheelchairs had to be lifted up the stairs. When the coughing stopped and the illy-tuned piano began to complain, he headed back down the alley to his pickup.

Once out of the alley, he saw the old couple standing in front of their store and pointing north.

"That way, Charlie," the man said, taking charge now that something important and urgent had to be said.

"That way what?"

"She took off that way, running," he urged, motioning for Charlie to follow her.

The man's wife, still pulling the sweater close to her neck imitated her husband's gesture. "She scooted after him as if she was on fire."

"Him who?"

"That fellow you said you were looking for, Charlie. The wheelbarrow man."

"North, you say," he said and sprinted as much as he was able to toward his pickup. Of all the time for Dog's nose to get bent out of shape. He couldn't bring a man down and hold him, but he could sure get in the way of running feet.

When he reached the Jeep he pulled from the alley and back onto the main street. "How long would you say she's been gone?" he called to the couple. "Maybe fifteen minutes," the man said. "Now get going."

Back on Weld 392 he had to wait for a cattle truck to pull from the stop sign before he could cross Colorado 14 and head north. The first thing he saw were the tourists at his sign. Instead of standing in front of it to have their pictures taken, they were looking out onto the open prairie and pointing.

Farther out on the prairie than any tourists stood Yoni, ranting with her arms and stomping her feet. She was missing one shoe and one jean leg was in strips. Obviously she had encountered difficulty getting through the barbed wire fence along Colorado 14. As much as he hated to, Charlie reached for his loud speaker mike. He always hated to use it because it made him seem to rely too heavily on

technology. A Luddite he wasn't, but the way his grandfather had done things was modern enough.

"Meet you at the graveyard he yelled into the mike and then stood on the running board to point for Yoni's benefit.

Hearing the amplified voice and suddenly realizing it was the very man whose billboard they were photographing, the tourists began running toward the Jeep. Now he was sure he had made the correct decision in going to the restrooms in the campground.

"Later," he waved to them, not to appear unfriendly, and goosed the Jeep toward the cemetery. The chain that usually blocked the entrance arch was down, and Charlie was able to drive clear to the fence at the far side where an exhausted Yoni stumbled to the fence and then leaned on it, too weary to get through.

Charlie got out of the pickup and reached for two wires, pulling one up and forcing the other down. All down the fence the wire groaned and squeaked through the staples holding it to the posts. As a result, the gap between the two wires would have accommodated Charlie himself. Yoni fell through, got up and stumbled gamely to her seat on the passenger side.

Charlie had intended to wait until she caught her breath and brushed nettles from her bare foot, but the tourists continued to march toward the graveyard as purposeful as a swarm of Mormon crickets. Quickly he reversed the Jeep, backed between two gravestones, and drove out the entrance, passing a freshly opened and empty grave on the right.

"He got away," she breathed remorsefully.

"Not yet," Charlie said. "We got a chance to cut him off if I can get this thing out onto the prairie." He turned north back toward Sligo. "How'd you happen to go after him, anyway?"



"I was waiting in the truck as you said when I saw him, or what I suspected to be him, walk across the entrance to the alley and turn toward the church. I got out and went to the edge of the store and watched as he approached the church. I couldn't see him once he rounded to the front, so I assumed he went inside. But he apparently didn't. He hadn't disappeared more than thirty seconds before he came running back followed by a dog."

"A yellow dog?"

"How'd you know?"

"Never mind."

"Anyway, I thought you'd be right behind them, but you weren't. I waited too long before I started out after him and he was way out onto the prairie before I even got to the highway."

"Up ahead's our only hope," Charlie pointed. "Seven Cross Ranch. It has a dam and a road across Crow Creek. We can use it to get out onto the prairie. If nothing else we can find a high hill for a look see."

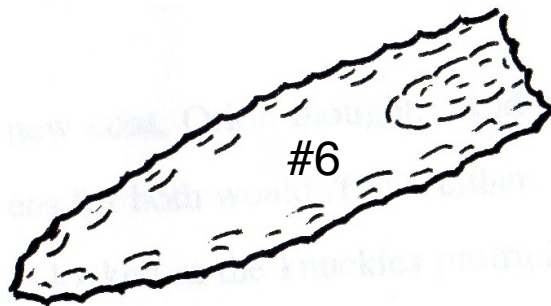
He pulled into the long drive and drove past the ancient two-story house without asking permission to be on their land. He figured that if they looked out their window they would recognize him and think little of it. He had used this route before.

As he reached the row of cottonwoods that was the river and the long berm that was the dam, he stopped and pounded the steering wheel.

"I plum forgot. That last rain washed out their dam and the road over it. He looked at the sluggishly flowing water he would have to ford with his Jeep and shook his head. There was the very real chance that he wouldn't make it if he tried, but that wasn't the real reason the chase was over.

He simply refused to treat his truck the way four wheelers were treated in the television ads.

He had more respect for his mount than that, although that respect never included a good washing.



*. . . Imagine archaeologists of the future digging up the wheel of a Conestoga wagon at one site and at another site finding the wire-spoke wheel from a Cadillac El Dorado. If they were the archaeologists currently looking for the ancestors of the pre-Clovis peoples, they would say the wagon wheel and the Cadillac wheel represented different cultures. Yes, but different only in time, not in people.*

*They ignore the obvious precursors because they are ignoring them and looking in the wrong place. Why, they wonder, are almost no Clovis points found in the far northwest? Why, when they look there do they find only bone tools and simple, uni-faced chert flakes, little more than crude knives and scrapers?*

*The answer is that the Clovis came from the East. The vast majority of Clovis points have been found along the eastern shores. Those found at kill sites farther west were the result of our groups of young men who followed the mammoths and*

*mastodons, furthering those animals' domestication. While attending to that task they learned tool making and survival techniques. It was our cultural Walkabout for the young, manhood rites if you must, though we saw it as a necessary learning to maintain and further our culture. Incidentally, some of the kill sites that have been found were the result of those West Coasters using our technology and our atlatls. (Another of our grave errors was teaching them to heat chert and flint in sand baths to facilitate chipping. Besides reducing the incidence of fracture, the baths lent the stones a nice greasy luster that was much more pleasing than that of the original dry, flat stone.)*

*Yes, the classic Clovis point, long and fluted to facilitate hafting, is a work of art, but it was not our first projectile point. There were precursors. Unfortunately, most of those are now under water. We were an east coast people remember. When the glaciers melted the Atlantic rose nearly three hundred feet covering much of what we had built before the West Coasters turned on us and attempted to wipe us from the earth--after, of course, following the trails we had blazed back to the East and discovering they had even more reason to be envious. When they found our habitations, now flooded, they must have exhibited the awe Sitting Bull felt when walking the streets of New York or London for the first time, the sole difference being that Sitting Bull was clothed and his people at least knew of hygiene.*

*Archaeologist may ignore many of what were our early way stations en route to the West, such as the Meadowcroft Rockshelter near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but they can't ignore the projectile points recently found near Richmond, Virginia. Obvious precursors to the Clovis point, they date to fifteen thousand years. No, they don't have the distinctive fluting of the Classic Clovis Point, but the techniques used to create them, the flaking methods, are identical. And remember: the Conestoga came before the Cadillac.*

*And something more. They look much like--nearly identical to--artifacts found in the Old World. They so closely resemble points crafted by the Solutreans who lived in western Europe from 24,000 to 16,500 years ago that they are Solutrean points. The Clovis are Solutreans who left that continent in skin boats and found the passage followed by Leif Erikson millennia later.*

*Further proofs are other traits shared by the Clovis and the Solutreans: pebble-decorating artistry; the shared technique for shaping bone tools; and the mysterious incidence of burying stone tools in caches filled with red ochre, a practice that had to be stopped because of the heathens from the West. But that's another letter. . . .*

## Day 114: A Little Amontillado, Sir?

After a second night on the couch in the trailer--the curtains well closed--Charlie decided to find new lodgings for Yoni and deposited her in the Killdeer Inn, a local bed and breakfast just west of the Old Opera House and an easy two blocks to the cafe and grocery. No way could he afford to keep her there at the going rate, so the proprietor found her a small single room in the back and promised to give her only weak tea and dry toast instead of the sumptuous breakfast.

"But I want to travel with you," she protested as Charlie handed her a couple of twenties.

"Got some important work I got to do today that requires I be alone," he lied.

"Meantime, it might be best if you get your eats at Trudy's and avoid the Quonset Cafe for a while, if you know what I mean."

She did. "But what if I have to get in touch with you? Something about the missing boy case or the man with the wheelbarrow."

"Let Inez know at the Quonset. She'll know what to do. But *call* her," he said as an afterthought.

Grumbling on the narrow bed and opening a paperback book she had borrowed from the piles under Charlie's couch--refusing, even, to open the door into the bedroom that was all books--, Yoni leaned back and suffered for his benefit. "I'll miss you," she pouted.

"Me too, Kiddo," he said, as close as an endearment as he could ever muster. And he would miss her. He'd think about her at every turn of his day, but he desperately needed distance. Smoke from a campfire has a wonderful smell at first, but if it stays too long it can suffocate. It was something like that for Charlie: he just needed to be upwind for a day or two. He'd pick her up when his head cleared. Across the street when Charlie walked out of the Inn was Phyllis. She was shooing rabbits from her garden back toward Bode's chicken wire enclosure. He avoided her eyes and got into his truck to drive the two blocks to the Quonset Grocery and Cafe.

Inside the grocery he was surprised to spot Mrs. Farrago pushing a loaded cart up an aisle toward him. The Farragos had shopped at the Quonset Grocery in the past, but when the new owners took over and stopped giving credit they had gone elsewhere. He noticed that when she paused to pay at the check-out counter she

proffered a hundred dollar bill, a new one with the big face, not one that was old and crumpled. The money from the sale of the story of their missing son to the networks and tabloids must have been sizable.

"Don't get away from me, Charlie," she commanded with unusual confidence while waiting for her goods to be boxed and for her change. "Something I must tell you."

Charlie waited for the new owner's boy to complete the bagging and to receive instructions to put the bags into the back of the new, red Dodge Ram diesel dualie out front.

"What come of the old pickup you had?" he wondered.

"Oh, it's out in the field between the old car and the old tractor."

That was how farm folk disposed of spent vehicles and farm implements. They lined them up along a fence somewhere and city folk drove past slowly, thinking it was some form of rural museum. If the family lived on the farm for several generations, that row of implements and vehicles did come to serve such a purpose.

"Would you step outside for a moment, Charlie?" She didn't wait for a reply. Instead she stepped out the door onto the sidewalk and waited for the grocery boy to make his way back inside. "When you find Orion," she almost whispered needlessly, "tell him he must see me as soon as possible."

"Why?" It was an obvious and honest question, but Charlie saw immediately that he wasn't going to get an answer.

"There's something about who he is that he must know," Mrs. Farrago spoke earnestly into Charlie's face. No sense of that old, washed-out, timid woman remained. But there was concern for her son.

"You mean he's *not* Adrian's boy?" Charlie wasn't sure he should have asked.

She smiled tolerantly. "I think you remember me when I showed up out here. Do you think anyone but Adrian would have turned his head to me? No. It's nothing like that, but it's something he must learn soon. It'll answer a lot of questions his mind is probably asking."

Charlie looked closely. "You're not trying to tell me this is some kind of hoax you're in on, are you?"

"Charlie, I'm not sure this whole thing isn't still truly real. I was dead convinced it was that night you showed up, and I only began to wonder when you more or less scoffed at the whole idea. You still don't think it's real, do you?"

He shook his head to the negative. "Something else is going on that I don't quite understand. It's like two pigs running in opposite directions while I'm trying to tie a knot with their tails. I just can't get one idea close enough to the other to find sense in either."

"You know there's talk that the man on the roads at night with the wheelbarrow is Orion?"

"Haven't heard that one," Charlie admitted. "If it is him, he's grown about a foot since he disappeared."

She went to her pickup and with great effort pulled herself about four feet off the ground to the running board. "There's things I wish I could tell you, Charlie, that might help. But it wouldn't be right, --I don't think." Her eyes searched Charlie's face. He could feel the wonder and suspicion in them. It was the same scrutiny he had gotten first from Hobbie and then from Yoni, and maybe from the three men in the *Hippophagy* as well.

The noise when she started the engine was deafening. But that was diesel, and as for its length it went from Hell to breakfast. Charlie watched her back out and then pull to a stop as she headed east. Her window slid smoothly down.

"Who are you, Charlie? I mean really."

The question was odd, but what out on the prairie wasn't.

"Just a lad of the prairie," Charlie smiled bemusedly. "Just an innocent child."

"If you're who I think you are, I could tell you things. Things that might get those two pigs of yours to stand side by side. Even then I think the tails'd be a little short."

Without explanation, the diesel dualie rattled toward its new home.

\* \* \*

The restaurant quonset was nearly packed, odd for that time of day. Almost the only seat available was the one unofficially marked as his, marked by scent or reputation. Either seemed to work.

When Inez brought him a cup of coffee, he asked: "What's with the crowd."

Her mind was elsewhere. "Not into housework, is she, I take it?" Her phone must have rung already. Any number of her lady friends had probably seen Charlie deliver Yoni to the Killdeer.

Ignoring all the implications, Charlie replied in as off handed a manner as he could. "She's puttin' up at the Killdeer Inn," he said absently and turned in his chair to look at the gathering of older women in the back. They were all talking at once to an aged hippie with a blue bandana covering his head so as to hide the receding hairline but not to hide the long pony tail.

Giving up, Inez answered his first question. "The Abroghast sisters are at it again. This time it looks like they're going to succeed."

"No!"

"Yep, they're going to Bra the Buttes. Rid the prairie of its shame."

"Is that Christo back there with them?"



"No," Inez said with regret. "It's one of his advance men. He just told them that the project has been approved by the Forest Service and now they're trying to determine what it should look like."

Leaving his hat on the table, Charlie walked back far enough to hear their conversation. He wondered just how or why someone would permit the covering those two mammaries that jutted proudly from the prairie twenty miles east of Sligo. After all, the buttes were the centerpiece of the Pawnee National Grasslands. They were a mainstay in any picture book of Colorado. They had been beacons to travelers long before the arrival of Europeans, and the Texas Trail drovers had aimed their cattle between them as they trekked toward the railhead in Pine Bluffs, Wyoming. The ladies were not the first to notice their resemblance to breasts. Not by thousands of years. They were, however, the first who wished to introduce them to modesty.

"I think it should be the color of all those umbrellas Christo placed along that ridge in California," one said.

"I prefer the nondescript color of the curtain he hung over the Gunnison River here in Colorado," another offered. "More realistic."

A third countered: "The pink he covered those islands with off Florida was *very* lovely."

"We haven't even determined the style of the brassier yet," the first pointed out seriously. "I think a simple halter would be best. You know, the serviceable garment one might wear while working."

"Just bulldoze them down and fill in some of that erosion out there." This was the advice from Miss Teller, Charlie's one time teacher and still the terror of anyone on the prairie who had ever had to sit ramrod straight through her classes.

He'd let them worry about it without offering his input. As he sat down in front of his hat, he asked rhetorically of the others at the table: "I wonder if anyone has ever translated the *Grand Tetons* for them?"

The laughter was polite. A few of them might have known. One who had laughed the loudest pushed a business card across the table to Charlie, who picked it up and read it. Otto Latl was the man's name, apparently. Charlie had been seeing a lot of names he hadn't seen before. The card listed his services as: Investigation (private, insurance, corporate); Mediation (family, business); Discrete Liaison.

The *Discrete Liaison* was circled in pen.

He was a small man in a neat gray suit, a suit with a vest. He looked like a man who might collect dolls as a hobby. "I've been hired by a group of men who desire to meet you, *privately*," he said, taking the business card from Charlie's fingers.

"Privately? What's it about?"

"My business *is* discretion, Mister Waggles," he spoke, trying not to be heard by the customers on either side of him. "They have, however, authorized me to give you some information." He paused and squirmed prissily in his chair before whispering too loudly. "It pertains to Orion Farrago."

"They know where he is?" Charlie asked. All the men at the table had stopped eating or talking and were now listening. "What say we take our business outside," Charlie said. He tossed off the remainder of coffee in his cup and slapped his hat on his head as he exited the door.

Outside, when the man had finally appeared--he had stopped to pay Inez his bill--Charlie accosted him again. "These friends of yours, they say where Orion was?"

"They are not friends, Mister Waggles. They are clients." He was even smaller than Charlie had guessed. He was a toy of a man, nothing more than a giant action figure and the neatness and plastic sheen of his suit did nothing to lessen the impression.

"When are they going to get here?"

"You, Mister Waggles, are going to them." And that seemed final. Charlie had misjudged him. He was small, yes, but all steel and cactus spine beneath the effeminate cut of the suite.

With Dog's water and food dishes filled and Yoni deposited at the Killdeer Inn, Charlie *was* at loose ends. Kandi hadn't called the cafe from the Ault sub-station either with any assignments.

"Where do I meet them?"

"It's not quite that easy, Mister Waggles--"

"Try *Charlie*."

"Mister Charlie, then." The man was genetically indisposed to familiarity.

"My directions are to take you to Denver. Actually I had hoped to *follow* you, thus avoiding the necessity of yet another round trip."

"But why Denver. I hardly ever go there. Not even when the circus is in town."

"I asked the same question, Mister Charlie. But they were insistent. We are to go to the bar in the Brown Palace Hotel and await further instructions."

"Sounds like you're dropping off a ransom instead of delivering me."

"I was suspicious myself, Mister Charlie. But I didn't ask. I find discretion so much easier when I simply *don't* know."

"Well, is it *discrete* to tell me what they look like at least. And how many of them there are?"

"I have only communicated with them by telephone. I did hear voices in the background, but I can't say how many."

"You've been paid?"

"A draft on a bank delivered by a courier."

"This sounds interesting," Charlie said and watched a pickup drive by. He waved.

"I thought so myself, Mister Charlie. Just like a television drama."

"Let's hope not Mister--" Charlie tried to remember. "Otto La--"

"Otto Latl. Just call me Ott. Ott Latl."

"Can I have your card?"

"Oh, didn't I give you one?"

"You did, but you took it back."

Ott handed Charlie the same card as before, the one with *Discrete Liaison* circled, he perhaps had no others, and Charlie took it back inside the grocery.

"Marvell," he called to the checker, "keep an eye on this card," he said, tacking it to the cork board just inside the door. "I'm leaving to Denver with this guy should anyone need to know."

"Whatever, Charlie." Maybe she had heard.

"Can we make it to downtown Denver in, say, two and one half hours?" the little man asked, consulting a fine wrist piece.

"If we go by 85 and avoid Interstate 25 we can," Charlie said, and knew by painful experience. "To get clear downtown to the Palace might be cutting it short."

"Well let's start. I'll try to keep up with you. No, no I won't," he reconsidered. "Let us just meet at the Brown Palace in the lobby. No, let's make that in the Ship's Tavern, the bar. If," he looked at Charlie's attire, "they'll let you in."

"They let me in wearing this same getup when I knocked back a few with Van Cliburn. They let me in with what's her name from the Psychic Faire and even let me park my rig in the lobby beneath the big flag. It's CJ Floyd they won't let in."

"Who?"

"My sentiments exactly."

*(Editor's note: Some years back a writer attempted to interest Mysterious Press in one episode of Charlie's life. An editor rejected the manuscript saying it was "too close to our CJ Floyd series." Interested, Charlie attempted to visit this fellow so similar to himself. This so similar fellow turned out not only to be a black bail bondsman in ghetto Denver, but a FICTION.)*

\* \* \*

The closest Charlie tried to park to the Brown Palace was east of the old native stone Trinity Church, the church from which its six-foot-six former pastor, John Chivington, led troops to Glorieta Pass to stop the Confederate invasion of the West, and also the same man who led a contingent of drunks to Sand Creek in southern Colorado to kill Cheyenne women and children and the occasional male they could find. The young Indians who had raised the ire of the state's citizens, and whose renegade actions hadn't been censured by the Indian elders--that not being the Indian way--were away from the encampment and up to further devilment, so they missed the excitement they had caused.

Only the Trinity Church and the Brown Palace, the old section of it that is, lent any character to downtown Denver, the remainder of the buildings interchangeable with those in a double score of cities across the nation.

A horn honked at Charlie as he jaywalked across Broadway to get on the west side of the street. "Find that boy yet," the cabby yelled and gave a thumb's up. Charlie just smiled and waved.

Before he could get to the Palace he had been offered to exchange high fives with a dozen pedestrians of various means and shades. Where possible, he turned their offer into a polite, quick handshake or a low five, which he found less demeaning and far more civilized.

Inside the Palace it was somewhat better in that the hero worship turned more sycophantic and the admirers were better dressed and much more refined. Though he carried an aura about with him, Charlie's light defied the natural law that insisted it must diminish in intensity by the square of the distance from its source. To the contrary, his reputation increased by the square of his distance from Sligo. There, they knew the man; here they knew the myth, or, more often than not, confused him with his grandfather who had tamed much of the territory from Denver to the Kansas border. But that information is readily available in the history books.

"Sheriff Waggles," came the happy cry from a man leaving his station behind the reception counter to extend his hand to Charlie. "Will you be staying with us?"

"'Fraid not pardner. I'm here to meet a man in your bar."

"Excellent," he exclaimed. "Gerald?" he called, snapping a finger. "Would you escort the sheriff into the Ship's Tavern and see that he is properly taken care of?" The questions, civilly put but more than the inquiries they seemed to be, brought an erect young man who Charlie thought might salute him.

As he was led away across the lobby floor where his Jeep once sat, a velvet rope holding the spectators back, Charlie looked up at the many tiers and balconies of the atrium. Each level was lined with ladies and gentlemen looking down at

him but pretending not to do so. One bejeweled grand dame about three floors up did wave a gloved hand. He waved back and suddenly everyone on as many levels up as he could see waved as if he had been looking at them only.

He had been seated and given a complimentary drink before his eyes completely adjusted to the dim light. When they did, he saw a table of men across the way waving, as if acknowledging his presence in the big city. One of them came over and shook Charlie's hand. He spoke briefly to no point and was leaving just as Ott Latl came into the bar.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"Just the Governor," Charlie said. "Must be some people at his table he wants to make points with. Normally he'd look right through me." Ott found this hard to believe. "On occasion we've differed on how things should be run," Charlie explained. "Now where's these fellas who want to meet me?"

"My instructions were to wait here for further directions." He smiled sweetly at the fetchingly yet tastefully dressed lady who delivered him a complimentary drink because he was with Charlie.

Two drinks later, beers in Charlie's case--which they paid for instead of running a tab--an instrument in Ott's jacket pocket began vibrating. "Excuse me," he said, and hurried to the lobby to answer the call on his cell phone. When he returned he sat and offered nothing at first. Then he said: "We are to await printed instructions." He seemed content to wait.

After his third beer the same bell hop who had ushered Charlie into the bar returned with a large manila envelope. "A fax for you, Sheriff," he said too loudly, and importantly. The Governor and his table appeared upstaged, and hurt.

Sliding the single sheet from the envelope, Charlie looked at it and handed it to Ott Latl. "It says to give the sheet to you. I guess they sent it to me because the staff knows me."

Ott took it, studied it, and folded it into fours so that it slid nicely into his jacket pocket. "We are to go to the elevator, find the second basement, and then the laundry room."

"Now those are singular directions. Is that where they are, the men?"

"There's more," Ott promised.

\* \* \*

Next to the elevator was an announcement board, the letters arranged to tell conventioners that the *Pleistocene Flora and Fauna Seminars* were to be held in the second floor banquet room. Charlie wondered if Pointe Ruffner, who had a zoo of such animals out on Highway 14 near Briggsdale, would be there. Those attending the seminar would certainly be interested in the baby Imperial Mammoth he claimed to have cloned.

Charlie smiled at the thought and to the hotel's guests waiting to go up as the elevator doors closed on him. They must have wondered why he was descending to the workers' depths, but he enjoyed the ride, imagining the surface of the earth rise above him and feeling the dank coolness envelop him when they bumped to a stop and the doors slid open.

"Basements all look the same, don't they?" he asked Otto, who didn't reply. He was checking his printed instructions by the light in the hallway.

"To the right, second door on the left. It should read **Maintenance**."

The door was there as advertised. When Charlie stepped in, he recognized the heavy laboring of big machines. He didn't know whether they were pumping water



or sewerage or what, but they were working. Whatever was happening, the hotel would be in deep something if they stopped.

"We go clear to the back, straight from the door we came in, and then another right," Ott read. The light sources were getting progressively dimmer as if those who labored underground had adapted to life in a cavern and would be blinded by a hundred-watt bulb.

"I'm becoming leery, Mister Charlie. This is too strange. I think it would be better if we called this off and just went back up. If they wish to meet you, it should be in less. . . *Koontzian* surroundings."

"I'm with you on that, but I've got the media on my tail--not to mention a certain Weld County Sheriff who would love to see me come up empty on this case."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. You can stand behind me if it starts gettin' rough."

"Well," Ott sighed, "you know your own mind." He held the sheet of paper up to the light again. "We should find a door that reads **Engineering Only: Keep Out. Authorized Employees of the Brown Palace Hotel Only. All Others Will be Fired Summarily.**"

"Couldn't they just put a lock on it?"

The door, just as the directions read, was on the far side of the laboring machines. The machines reminded Charlie of pulses, something alive. Ott tried the door, but it appeared jammed.

"Let me at it," Charlie said and nearly pulled it off its hinges. Inside was a closet with a sink, a bucket, a very clean mop and a row of long white lab coats with the word *Engineering* stitched onto the backs. Charlie felt the texture of one.

"They're as long as those old riding coats when cars were called horseless carriages."

"We are supposed to put them on." Charlie looked at Ott to make sure, but the little man held the paper up for him to read. Not having his reading glasses handy, Charlie took his word.

The removal of the coats from their hooks on the wall revealed a second door, half the size of the one they had entered by.

"Are you sure, Mister Charlie? This is becoming very extreme."

"Give me the sheet of direction if you want and go on home. This is suddenly becoming the most fun I've had since--" He considered several incidents but felt they might be a little too prosaic for Ott Latl. "*Elitches'*," he settled for, naming the local amusement park. "I'm in up to the hilt so long as it doesn't include a bottle that says *Drink me*."

Surprisingly, the little man had already opened the hidden door and stepped through. "A tunnel. I know what this is now."

Charlie crouched painfully and stuck his head into the unknown space. It was a tunnel, beautifully constructed of the same reddish-brown sandstone that had given the Brown Palace its name. One small bulb, caged to prevent its being broken by a negligent head or a misdirected tool, was the only light. Ten feet from Charlie's eyes the tunnel became darker and darker, then black.

"I always heard there were tunnels under Denver," Charlie said, and his voice echoed down the tunnel and became small. "Ho!" he snorted. This, too, the tunnel swallowed. "Seems to be a long one, don't it?"

"It's the tunnel that connected the Palace to the Navarre across the street," Ott said. "I remember now. The Navarre specialized in gambling and prostitution."

This way important clients of the hotel could sample the pleasures without being seen crossing the street and entering the building."

"It's just office space over there now, isn't it?"

"If you believe the signs," Ott said, "but our directions seem to go beyond the building. Far beyond."

"Well, I'm not gonna walk from here to Timbuktu. Just how far is it?"

"Not to worry, if the instructions are correct."

"What are these here for?" Charlie lifted one of four Coleman lanterns he found to the right of the small door.

"You're to take one. I'm to take one. And the remaining two are to be placed in slots on the front of the car."

"The car?"

"Says here it's just down the tunnel. Don't worry. I'm supposed to push you."

Trying to make sense of the directions, Charlie looked at the floor of the tunnel and saw tracks about the size of those that used to carry ore cars in the mines.

They lit the lanterns, their hiss making the tunnel even more eerie, and stooped forward. About twenty feet down Charlie saw the glow of the rear of the car, not an ore car, but a recently constructed wooden one. He placed a lantern up front, took a second from Ott and placed it there as well, and then climbed into the car. It didn't contain a seat, so when he sat down he felt like a child in a coaster car, his knees almost to his chin.

"Before we start, I need a drink." Oddly, this came from Ott. He found a flask from inside his jacket and took a neat sip. "Charlie?"

"Couldn't hurt," he said.

Charlie declined to return the flask on the grounds that it might get in the way of Ott's pushing, so Ott lowered his shoulders, placed his hands on the back of the car, and shoved. It moved so easily that he could almost rest against the back of the car as it rolled along the rails.

Navigating, Charlie held one hand to shield his eyes from the glow of the lanterns and watched as the light bore ahead and opened the tunnel before his eyes. "Are we there when we get to the end?"

Ott breathed behind him. "After about two hundred yards," he gasped and then paused, "we're supposed to find a switch and take the tracks to the right."

"Everything to the right. And doesn't that sound a long way if this tunnel was just supposed to go across the street?"

"I'll recheck the direction when we get to the junction."

"Whoa," Charlie yelled and turned in the car. "There it just was." The switch had passed by on his right. "Back up a tad and let me grip it. We're headin' left right now. Let me shift us to the right track." He had to rise to his knees in the car and reach forward to accomplish it, the long coat making the maneuver even more difficult. He had often switched tracks on bigger systems back when the train used to run through Sligo. "There now."

When he sat back the car jerked to the right and rolled down the new tunnel.

"Charlie, I can't hold it."

"Hold what?" When he realized the tunnel walls were flying by, he understood.

"Noooooooo!" His yell was long and dopplered behind him. When Charlie turned he saw the light of a lantern and the silhouette of a man on all fours.

"Oh, Lord," he prayed and at the same time felt an exhilaration. "This is *way* better than Elitches'. This has Six Flags beat all hollow."

The incline was gradual but Charlie's weight enabled the little car to take advantage of the gentlest of slopes. Clack, clack, clack the wheels rang in an increasingly upbeat tempo. Small caged light bulbs appeared anew. At first they winked by at five second intervals, but as he increased speed they shot past like fire balls from a Roman candle.

Suddenly the car dipped and rose, slamming Charlie to the floor. Then it crested a rise and fell, tossing Charlie into the air just as the car crashed into the barricade at the end of the line.

Charlie regained his senses on the damp earth in near darkness, the closest caged light around a corner ahead of him. His lanterns had been extinguished by the impact and he feared their fragile mantles had been torn from their moorings and would not work again. The car, lifted off its carriage, lay splintered between him and the direction from which he had been thrown.

As odd occurrences often happen in mishaps, such as pieces of straw being driven through tree trunks during tornadoes, Charlie found that he was still holding Ott's flask and took a drink. Then he felt his way back until he found the crash barrier and worked himself to his knees so that he could rest on it with his elbows. He heard footsteps. Not running, but hurrying. Ott, braver than Charlie had given him credit for, was following. Charlie could see the glow of the lantern he carried growing brighter.

"Mister Charlie? Mister Charlie?"

"Save your breath, Ott. You'll scare the ghosts." On second thought he decided there weren't even rats down there. The sandstone reinforcing that had made the earlier portions of the tunnel attractive had given way to characterless stone, and badly employed at that. He wouldn't be surprised if much of the tunnel

ahead lacked support. Nothing but yards of dirt to keep the city skyscrapers from sinking down on him.

"Mister Charlie, are you there?"

Ott leaned across the crash barrier Charlie had vacated and raised his light to illuminate as much as possible. "Where do we go from here? Charlie asked.

Ott searched his pockets. "I'm afraid, Mister Charlie, that I lost the instructions when I fell. I'll retrace my steps and see if I can find them."

"Save your strength. We were about to the end of the directions anyway, weren't we? I mean we almost *have* to be there." The new walls absorbed what he said. No longer was there a ringing or an echo. Just a dampness, a mustiness, the smell of nitre.

"Mister Charlie, maybe we'd better go back. This is an inappropriate location for a meeting."

Charlie finished the contents of the flask and handed it back to Ott. "We've come this far. Might as well see it through."

"Where are the other lanterns?" Ott asked. He came around the crash barrier holding his lantern as high as the ceiling permitted for maximum illumination.

"Scattered. I'm afraid they're useless unless you brought a lighter. Left mine in the truck."

"I don't smoke," Ott said, but I'm sure that somewhere on us we can find a scrap of paper and twist it to make a spill. Surely we can raise the globe on one of your lanterns and get it relit."

Ott's use of the word *spill* came as a surprise. It betrayed a knowledge of history Charlie wouldn't have suspected. Still, he seemed bright and might be a reader.

In searching their pockets, Ott was the first to find a piece of notebook paper--ignoring Charlie's suggestion to pull out another of his business cards. Together they managed to light one of Charlie's lanterns without extinguishing the one Ott had carried and began searching the tunnel in the direction of the faint light bulb. When they reached the weakly glowing bulb, it proved to be the last. From then on the darkness, the dankness, and the mustiness increased. In some places, Charlie had to bend nearly double to get through. For Ott it was only a slight inconvenience.

"What about here," Charlie stopped and scrunched his head around in the cramped quarters. "There's a side tunnel here. Remember anything about that on the directions?"

Ott shook his head which gave Charlie an odd dual profile, the light and dark features reminding him of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* before it was cleaned. When in doubt, Charlie always looked at the ground for help. "I can't see a sign of any disturbance on the floor. Not even rats." He called it *floor* but it was only dirt. If there was a stone floor beneath, it had long been covered by the soil and moisture leaking from above.

"It's a rather small tunnel," Ott said. "Maybe you should let me explore it a ways." The suggestion was sound, so Charlie backed farther into the tunnel they were already in and allowed Ott to squeeze through the smaller opening.

He hadn't ventured far, his lantern still shone brightly, when he called back.

"This isn't so much of a tunnel as it is a storage room."

"What's in it?"

"I'm not sure. Wooden crates mostly, smallish crates. They have the name Colorado Historical Society stenciled on them."

"They've been complaining they could use more space, but this is ridiculous."

"No, Mister Charlie. These are very old boxes." He stopped talking, but Charlie could hear him shifting some of them. "Now this is most interesting he said."

"What you got?"

"Just a moment. I'll have to show it to you." The little fellow left his lantern behind and Charlie could see his silhouette hunkering and laboring toward him. When he thrust the contents of his hands forward, Charlie nearly lost his balance. Staring at him from a large, dusty specimen jar was an eye.

"Land O'Goshen," he said, and moved his lantern to its best advantage.

"What have we here?" He lifted his club-like index finger and brushed more of the dust off. An entire head floated into murky view, the alcohol of the jar either ambered by the light Charlie held or by tannic acid.

From the other side of the jar, Ott spoke. "Its twin is back there in another jar."

"Who are they?"

"A label glued on the back of this one appears to say Esp-- Espin--"

"Espinoza?"

"That's got to be it."

"Ah, yes." Charlie vaguely remembered stories from his grandfather and later reminders in newspapers and magazines. "Heads of a couple of Mexican renegades killed in the San Luis Valley back in the *before* '60s, the 1860's. The heads were given to Governor Evans at the time, but I'm a little murky on what's supposed to have happened to them after."

"Placed into jars and hidden down here, I would guess. Looks as if they've been lost, on purpose or otherwise."



"Don't suppose there's a whole lot of traffic down here, now that you admit it--most folks having *some* common sense."

Since there wasn't sufficient room to turn around while carrying the jar, Ott backed noisily into the distant room and replaced the head next to its brother. When he reappeared, nearly blinding Charlie with his lantern, Charlie said: "I'll have to try and remember this hole. Could prove of interest to a couple of the historians that drop by and Quonset back in Sligo now and then."

That's what Charlie said, anyway. He was really just keeping his mouth going while he was thinking. *Two* things had startled him when Ott extended the jar from the dark tunnel and into the glow of Charlie's lantern. The first was the eye. The second was what dangled from the charm bracelet on Ott's right hand. That such a man would wear a charm bracelet wasn't shocking. What was startling was the ornament hanging from it--a polished elk's tooth.

As he backed away from the tunnel to give Ott room, Charlie felt two hands grab his free left wrist from behind. Almost simultaneously, two more grabbed his right wrist--the one holding the lantern--and caused him to slowly lower it to the floor. A voice, more distant in the cavern behind him than the men holding him captive, said:

"Welcome, gentlemen. At last we meet."

Ott settled his lantern to the floor and looked at the faces Charlie couldn't see. "Well, you certainly took your sweet times about it. I'm nearly exhausted. And look at my clothing."

Realizing he was had, Charlie relaxed his muscles against the hands restraining his arms to his sides.

"Couldn't we have conducted this meeting in a bakery somewhere?" he asked.



*. . . Anecdotal evidence about anything has never been truly reliable. It often contains germs of truths, trends to watch for or clues to possibilities, but what truths remain are muddled and as difficult to spot as placer gold in the muddy Missouri. But still. . .*

*The very first white man to penetrate to the beaver country along the upper Missouri, a French speaker known only as "Long Beard" to the Indians who discovered him and to his friends once he returned back into Canada, had not been a total surprise to the Indian children who discovered him at one of their ponds. They knew of white man, but "Long Bears" was not the man of their legends. He was one of the northern white men with thunder sticks.*

*"Long Beard" returned to his French settlement chagrined. Though being quite bold, he had not been the first European to enter that territory.*

*Father Marquette, said to be the first white man to discover the Mississippi, also heard tales of villages farther west where white men lived. The Indians, now quite civilized by this time as compared to millennia ago, neglected to reveal that they would annihilate those villages if they found them.*

*Before Farther Marquette's visit (He would have named the Mississippi the Rio Conception to honor his god's mother.) the Sioux Indians--who now wish to be called the Lakota and who then lived east of the Mississippi (not yet having been run out by other Indians for the renegades that they were)--raided west across the river about 1653 or 54 and brought back a bearded captive they said lived in a large wooden house with many others.*

*This man could have been one of ours, but not likely. He was probably an unfortunate Spanish soldier, especially since he was described as having a long sword. Our own smelting and crafting--being always on the run as we were--was no match for the Spanish artistry, though we did occasionally acquire such weapons. Such acquisitions were tricky at best as the Spaniards, at that date, objected to anyone being in their territory and were as potentially lethal as most of the Indians. I say most because we got along quite well with what became the Mandan. A pity they didn't acquire our resistance to small pox. But then we were not inter-breeders. Such unions were seldom by mutual consent and as far as our records indicate, neither gene pool benefited: In fact, it seemed the opposite--the worst qualities of both were combined. And intelligence plummeted. Such offspring, even when grown, were such children, born to mimic clothing and hair styles but never to originate.*

*Later, from The Journal of La Verendrye (Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Verendrye), comes a more interesting account, largely because it comes from an area where some of the Clovis were hiding about that time, 1732 or 33. While seeking a passage to the Pacific he was told of a group of people who lived in eight fortified villages on The River of the West. The Indians called them the Ouachipovennes. They were reputed to have fields of corn, melons, pumpkins and beans. They also had horses (thanks again to the Spanish--The Indians you call*

*Plano had already killed off the horses that were here.), goats (really pronghorns) and poultry (yes, grouse and prairie chickens can be domesticated.) The report that we had cats was unfortunately untrue. The dwellings were said to be of wood and earth (accurate). These people, the journal accurately stated, never warred but would defend themselves vigorously.*

*La Verendrye said three of these children had been captured by the Assiniboin and were taken to Montreal. They were said to neigh like horses as they played. (Quite probably those stiff-necked Black Robes had never heard laughter.)*

*To conclude, La Verendrye said these people had light hair, red hair, and black hair. And, of course, beards.*

*And they worked iron. (Crudely. And we missed the copper we used to find along the shores of the great lakes.)*

*When in 1803 Lewis and Clark reached the Mandans and spent the winter with them on the shores of the Missouri, most Indians had seen many white men, usually French or English. Still, they remembered those whites of long ago. (We had already begun assimilating ourselves among the Europeans more than a hundred years before this.) York, the large, black manservant of Lewis, was a favorite of the Indians--they hadn't seen a black before--and they told him tales of that white tribe of long ago.*

*Back in St. Louis three years later, York repeated these tales at any bar where he was welcome. And, whether because of his own story-telling ability or because of liquor, he embellished them considerably.*

*As I was saying about anecdotal evidence. . . .*

## Day 114: The Three Little Beers

Charlie might have put up a fight, but in such close quarters he didn't feel he would be effective. At his best he could employ little more than a giant hay maker and hope that his target didn't take advantage of the three or four seconds that it took to land to step aside. Wrestling might have been more his forte, but such close quarters with a man, any man, he found distasteful. He had been fooled by a drag queen once, but only until he saw the fingernails. Even then he had insisted that the bartender take the drink back. It had, after all, been obtained through false advertising.

"Pull him back into the hole," the voice that had spoken from farther back in the tunnel directed the two holding his arms. He knew there were at least two. Four hands at any rate.

After backing a dozen small steps, one of the men clamped a metal cuff around Charlie's right wrist. When that man said: "Okay, I got this one," Charlie felt a cuff encircle the left wrist and heard it snap shut as well.

"Now push him in there."

Charlie tried to look over his shoulder to see what he was in for, but the swinging shadows caused by the lanterns made it impossible. The two men holding their ends of the cuffs were now in front of him, pushing. Their faces, as well as that of the third man, were hidden by the glare of a lantern held so closely to Charlie's face that he could feel the heat.

"Now sit."

To let his knees buckle and to lower his rear into he knew not what seemed less inviting to him than reaching down through the hole of a full outhouse to retrieve a dropped wallet. One he had done; the other he was about to do, and did with the aid of two hands on his chest pushing him backward.

The drop was only a foot and a half. Looking down to inspect his seat, he discovered that it was composed of old, worked stone, quarried rock, textured on one side. Expensive materials by today's standard, so Charlie figured they were left over from when the better portions of the tunnel were built. The bench he sat on was at the back of a small recess, a grotto almost. Since it had been finished inside, Charlie figured it had been a recess for people to get out of the way when something large was moving through the tunnel. If it was for storage, it was small.

While he assessed his new home, the men with the cuffs pulled his arms up and attached the other ends to rings projecting from the wall. Without attracting too much attention, he tested the rings' strength by pulling on them. They seemed solid, but with time he thought they might give. Meanwhile, there was only enough length to allow him to lower his hands to shoulder height.

"Now the waist." The two men responded by pulling a chain from one side of him to the other and snapping it to a ring. Charlie was effectively pinioned to the wall like a prisoner in a dungeon. No, this was worse than a dungeon. Dungeons often had lofty windows designed to let in the weakest, most tantalizing light. When all seemed lost, Charlie recognized the small head of Otto Latl as he stuck it past the man holding the lantern and into the grotto. "Your hat," he said simply, and plopped it onto the bench to his right. Charlie felt better. He wondered what had happened to it in the scuffle.

"Sheriff," the man whose face still remained behind the lantern asked, "have you ever heard of a man named Captain Green and what happened at Dearborn Bastion in December of 1817?"

"I've known some Greens but never a captain, and I haven't been much in Michigan."

"It wasn't a question anyway and it wasn't Michigan. It was Massachusetts. We just want you to know what happened to Captain Green when he displeased his betters."

"I don't suppose it's expecting too much that they gave him a Fat Boy ice cream sandwich."

"Like I told you, Pent, he's a smart one. Let's get to work now so we can get out of here quick as we can." This was the first time either of the other two had spoken.

"Shut up and bring me those two lanterns. I'm tired of holding this one." The lanterns were produced and Charlie watched as one was moved to the bench on his left and the other to his right, beyond his hat. The third, the one the spokesman was holding, was placed at Charlie's feet. As it was being lowered, Charlie saw the man's wrist. Encircling it was the same watch he had seen in the Hippophagy in Hyannis, Nebraska

If he ever got out of the tunnel he was going to request a few answers from Hobble.

"I'd wondered what kept you boys," Charlie tried to say evenly. "I drove fifty-five all the way from Hyannis waitin' for you to catch up." With the lanterns in their new positions, Charlie could see all the participants. The one who had been called Pent stood in the doorway, his henchmen on either side. Jockeying for an advantageous viewing position behind them was Otto's head.

"Getting back to the topic," Pent restarted, "Captain Green displeased some of the boys on Castle Island in Boston Harbor. Killed a Virginian named Lieutenant Robert F. Massie, he did. Upset Massie's friends. This Captain Green disappeared and wasn't discovered until 1905--that is his bones, shackled to the floor of a basement that had been sealed up were found."

"Still doesn't ring a bell."

"Okay, don't think of Boston Harbor. Think of a castle in Italy. Think of a pipe of wine."

"I'm suddenly hoping that wasn't a pipe of Amontillado," Charlie said.

"Or it could have been a lesser Medoc. Difficult to say considering it was the Carnival season and that the misfortunate Fortunato never got to test his superior taste buds. You see, he had displeased the good Montessor. And, Waggles, you may call me Montessor."

Another name, but at least one he could make sense of. While Pent spoke, Charlie tried to commit the three men's names to memory. And it wasn't easy even though they were printed right before him. The men were attending the Pleistocene Flora and Fauna convention in the Brown Palace, or at least using that as a cover, and they still wore their name tags. The one who did all the talking was Pent Lustrum--almost a name, but Charlie wondered. The man crouching to Pent's right, and the only one besides Pent who had spoken, was Opie Deldock. Again, almost a name, but who had ever heard of a Deldock. The man on Pent's left, crouching like a medieval gargoyle, was named Whyner Puling.

"Puling?" Charlie questioned the little gargoyle.

"Up here, Waggles," Pent called, and reached in to lift Charlie's chin. When he had Charlie's attention, he cocked his head askance, as if trying to remember something, and said: "There never yet was any person named Charlie who was not



an open, manly, honest, good-natured, and frank-hearted fellow, with a rich, clear voice...."

Charlie was sure Pent was quoting something but was surprised that he was so dead on with the description. "Is that still Poe?"

Pent's face twisted into a crooked smile and he threw his hand up in a singular gesture. The two men at his side repeated it. It was the same sign Hobble had used that first day and had also used when he was introduced to Yoni. When Charlie sat dumbfounded, Otto Latl came to his defense. "I don't think he knows, Pent. I've tested him in several way and if he is he doesn't know it."

"If you wouldn't mind tellin' me what is is, I might be of some help," Charlie offered.

Opie turned back to Otto. "And just how many people don't know?" he scolded.

"A growing number," the little man said, standing his ground. "And you know why. People like Ashley Trophet."

"I'm aware of her and her minions," Opie shot back. But just as suddenly he cooled. "What can she do, anyway?" he asked as if Ashley Trophet was little more than a nuisance.

"She's hardly alone. She has others out there on the prairie with her right now. And how many others there are, I don't know. You might even be one of her plants."

"Enough." That was all Pent had to say. "We're not here to discuss clan politics. Now, Charlie," he returned to the more urgent subject, "we're not bad men. Just"--and he looked to Opie and Whyner--"eager men. Anxious men. Men deprived of our heritage, and we'd like a little of it back. Now to that end, there are two ways we can do it: the Easy Way or the Hard Way."

Charlie had seen many such men lately. The television generation whose entire vocabularies were cliches. There was no Easy Way or Hard Way as far as he was concerned. There was just their way: the Dumb Way. "Then let's get it over with so we can both get out of here. This damp isn't good on old bones."

"Excellent," Pent straightened his back and looked hopeful. "If you want out of here you only have to answer one question, and, of course, give us time to determine if you have answered it correctly."

"Shoot."

"Where is the Ultima Thule?"

Charlie had taken two-by-fours to the head that had caused less confusion.

"The Ultima Which-a-me?"

"The Thule, Charlie. The Thule. You can quit pretending you don't know."

"The only Ultima Thule I know of is the Greek one. Or maybe it was the Romans, I can't remember which. The Ultima Thule was the last inhabitable place in the far north. I think it was mythical."

Pent placed his hands on his hips and shook his head wearily at Charlie. Removing one hand, he motioned behind him. "Start bringing the masonry over here, boys."

The boys disappeared and were soon back with stones identical to the ones on which Charlie sat. Pent took one step back and they built a single run across the base of the opening. It was about six inches high.

Charlie waited until the run of stones was completed. "You can wall me all the way in, if that's what you're after," Charlie said, "because I don't know a thing about what you're askin'." To himself he wondered how many feet of rock and earth were above his head. He wondered how often people explored this tunnel.

He wondered if anyone but the four now in the tunnel knew anything about this section of it. The dusty jars with the heads in them suggested not.

"Now you seem a nice guy, Charlie," Pent struck another tact. "Everyone we've talked to says you're a right guy. And I already told you what Edgar Poe said about men named Charlie."

Everyone, Charlie thought, said Edgar Allan Poe. Everyone except those people who actually knew something about Poe. "This has something to do with Poe memorabilia, doesn't it?"

"He's coming around," Opie said and tapped Pent's leg. Opie had resumed his crouched position beside Pent, imitating Whyner on the other side. A matched set of gargoyles, their faces, lit by the lanterns, grinning at his predicament. "I told you he was one of us all along. Living out there on the prairie like he does and keeping care of all those people like they was his own flock of sheep. His actions alone tell. I told you so when he came to Hyannis. Only one of the clan would come to Hyannis. Hell, it's way out of his territory. No way he didn't know what he was doing."

"The Ultima Thule, Charlie. Where is it? Tell us or give it to us and we'll all get out of here. We don't mean no harm with it either. We'll just do what's right for all of us."

"If you're going to continue with this Ultima palaver you might as well seal me in and save us all a heap of trouble. You've got the wrong fella here."

Opie tugged at Pent's pant leg. "It's just possible he doesn't know," he said through his clinched teeth, though they could all hear him clearly. "Why tell him about what we don't want him to know if he doesn't already know?"

Charlie began to wonder who was the leader. Opie was making sense.

"Forget the Thule," he still hissed through his teeth, "and just find out where he's hidden Farrago."

"Farrago?" Charlie shot back. "I was under the impression you had Farrago or knew where he was. That's why I came."

"You came because you were curious, Waggles," Pent said. "You just wanted to know who was asking. Same reason you came to Hyannis. You've got him hidden and just wanted to size up the competition. Well, we're on the same side, Charlie. What we're after we're willing to share. Why we'd have to share. There's no other way we could accomplish it. Probably have to go to the Supreme Court as it is. Now just tell us where Farrago is and what you two have cooked up and we'll settle this matter amicably."

"Cooked up? I hardly knew the boy. Exchanged maybe half a hundred words with him."

"What are you talking about? A boy? What's this nonsense, now?"

"Farrago. He's just a messed up kid. Who do you think I'm talkin' about?"

"Okay," Pent agreed, "let's stop calling him Farrago and call him Manemann."

"Manemann? That's another person entirely."

"Charlie, Charlie, Charlie," Pent gave up and crouched. "We know. You can stop pretending. It was getting too hot for Manemann on the prairie so you dreamed up this little abduction to make us think he'd disappeared. Nice try, Charlie,--good story telling, actually--but we're on to you. We're one of you, don't you see?" He pointed his finger back and forth from his own chest to Charlie's as he spoke.

"Look," Charlie said--he tried to gesture with his hands but they were confined--"if I was trying to make you think Manemann had been abducted, why would I call him Farrago?"

"Because if you had said it was Manemann, it would have been too obvious what you were doing. Using the name Farrago was a nice try, but, Charlie, it's a little too obvious. A real tipoff. But choosing the name Orion. Now I'll admit that was a touch of class."

Charlie had no idea what they were talking about. How could they confuse Manemann--whoever he was--with the boy Farrago? And why would they think he would do anything to deceive them. He had never seen them before Hyannis. And above all, why did they think he was one of them?

"Throw in another race, boys." Pent indicated the stones and Opie and Whyner were quick to comply. "Look, Charlie, the name is immaterial and you know it. You know it in your bones. Just tell us where to find Manemann or Farrago or whatever it is you wish to call him. We won't hurt him. Lord knows he's in a world of hurt now as it is. Already he probably can't take sunlight. Any odor must be oppressive. He's probably wearing gloves by now. Am I right, Charlie? Is he already wearing gloves?"

The entire episode was so crazy, yet interesting, that Charlie almost regretted seeing another race of stones going up. "I've never met Manemann," he said simply.

"Charlie," Pent tsked, and motioned for the boys to keep working. "You can trust us. We won't hurt him. We'll be kind. You can depend on that."

Charlie jiggled his wrists in the cuffs. "I'm already depended upon the kindness of such strangers. I can just guess what you'd do to this poor Manemann if you found him."

Otto had scrupulously taken no part in the interrogation or the walling in. "I'm not going to stand around for any more of this," he told Pent. "I'm going back."

"Well go back the way you came. I don't want you messing up our exit. You'd probably lock the doors on us."

"I wouldn't do that," he said. "I don't approve of how you're going about it, but I've no intention of getting in your way. I don't know who's in the right in this mess, but I'm beginning to think Ashley Trophet and her group make better sense. At least they don't go around bullying people."

"Speaking of Ashley, if you run into her, tell me where she is. I'd like a word or two with her. Thinks she has so much integrity. I heard she called me a pig."

"Last time I saw her she was in Sligo," Opie said and looked at Charlie.

The wall was growing higher, but Charlie could easily see Opie's eyes. "Who's this Ashley Trophet?"

Opie remained silent, but Pent just harrumphed and motioned for another run of stone.

"Are you the guys that have been sending me the letters? Tell me that at least." If he could connect the men to the strange letters, he would at least have a chain of nonsense. As it was he had only separate handfuls of nonsense, not enough to make a good pie of and to throw back in their faces.

"We live our tales, Charlie," Pent said, and motioned for another layer. "Wait a minute," he said to one of the men. "Let me get the lanterns." He leaned gingerly over the growing wall of stone and one-by-one removed the three lanterns.

It was suddenly very dark in his grotto, all the light and life glistening outside the hole.

"Before you close, let me do this." It was a voice Charlie hadn't heard before. It had to be Whyner's. When he leaned into the hole, standing on his tiptoes to do

so, he extended his arm to its full length and clamped something into Charlie's hair.

It was a little girl's barrette, adorned with bells.

Charlie shook his head and sounded like a sleigh in winter. "I wondered what your part in this was. You're the Tinker Bell of this group, aren't you?"

Whyner responded by inserting the last stone in the run Opie had been working on. The work was going slower because the men had to walk farther to pick up the stones. Pent had even started helping them. When the task was nearly completed, Pent stuck a lantern and his arm through the gap at the top. So little space remained that his eyes were barely visible to Charlie because of the angle.

"We're not joking, Charlie. This is your last chance. Either tell us where the Ultima Thule is or where we can find Farrago or, as you insist, Manemann."

"If you guys were half as bright as you think you are, you'd know I don't know nothing. Have you even checked the Farragos out. They're a real family. I don't have the time or the energy to make up such a hoax as you're pinning on me."

"Remember Captain Green, Charlie?" Pent had his eye to the remaining hole in the wall where the entrance had been. "They found his bones eighty-eight years after he was walled in alive. Alive, Charlie. Poe was a sergeant stationed on Castle Island, Charlie. That's where he got the plot for 'Cask', Charlie? What do you have to say to that?"

Pent couldn't see, so Charlie rattled his chains dramatically. "What do I say? I say today I wear these chains. Tomorrow I shall be fetter-less." The only thing he wondered was--where?

The Tinker Bell, Whyner, placed another stone in the opening and stood on his toes to growl through the opening. Charlie growled back--a real growl, and the poor comparison caused Whyner to rant. He groaned and squealed and roared and

threw himself at the wall. Enjoying his agony, Charlie bellowed at the little fool, his voice carrying farther in the tunnel than at any other time, in spite of the wall.

"Don't go crazy, you little fool," Pent snarled and pulled Whyner back. He tried to fit the final stone, but it was too large. Acting as a mason, he took one stone and struck it with another until the smaller stone fit. "Goodbye, Charlie," he said, and filled the gap.

The three outside listened to the man inside. They could hear nothing but the bells in Charlie's hair. Keeping as quiet as possible, Pent motioned for the others to pick up the lanterns. He took the extra from Opie and led the men in the direction from which they had come. Not the direction from which Ott and Charlie had arrived.

Only once before had Charlie witnessed such darkness. It was during a guided tour of Carlesbad Caverns in New Mexico. The guide had made everyone grab the rail or place a hand on the wall before he turned out the light. When the lights were extinguished, Charlie had felt panic and became unsteady on his feet. Fortunately, one of the other tourists was wearing a wristwatch and its dial glowed. Charlie had focused on that until the ranger, enjoying the others' misery, turned the lights back on.

It was that dark in Charlie's grotto. And he wore no watch. Forget the light it might have emitted: he would have enjoyed its ticking. Felt it comforting. It was so silent in the grotto that he could hear his head turn, hear one vertebrae roll over the other. His lungs sounded like bellows.

The world outside his prison was large and bright. It contained many things Charlie could have wished for, but at the moment there was only one thing he really wished:

He wished he hadn't drunk those three beers in the Brown Palace.





*. . . These people of the Western Ocean were hardy in that they could withstand cold that would send us shivering to our fires. It wasn't that they didn't know how to make fires, for they did, but the making involved toil--something they found repugnant. Chiefly they found warmth in cold weather only when they burned down something belonging to one of their neighbors or to one of us. Their reasoning was that if they personally were too lazy to build it--say a lean-to--then their neighbor had no right to such a structure. They were, however, only too eager to share that neighbor's structure so long as they did not have to share in its construction.*

*This willingness to do labor so long as it is destructive persists to this day. Check any public restroom. Numberless are the individuals who will go out of their way to smear their own excrement on the walls, but just how many phantom sink cleaners do you find? In the World of Give and Take, they are the Takers. And like the poor, as the Bible assures us, they will always be with us--because we permit it.*

*Nothing quite so pleased these people--these Western Ocean people--as much as a found cave or a handout of food, especially if they could roast it over someone else's fire, or, better yet, have someone roast it for them. They were willing to do the eating themselves.*

*But the subject is fire.*

*Their method of making fire was with the bow and spindle. They were proficient at it, but they needlessly prolonged the process, probably because they enjoyed the ungodly squealing that the spindle made as it bore into the wooden base. Interestingly, this noise--save for the expellation of gasses from various orifices--was the closest they came to music. The incessant racket they could make with a stick against a rock or a piece of wood might have been music to the pounder but not to anyone with a notion of a scale. The quality of their pounding was judged by its loudness. (They would have worshipped a massive speaker mounted in the trunk of a modern car.)*

*To save the ears of our people whenever these Western Ocean folks encroached upon our settlements to glean our leavings, that is anything left unattended for a nano-second, one of our teachers took it upon himself to show them our preferred method of starting a fire--striking a piece of chert or flint against a piece of iron pyrite.*

*As usual, they proved quite adept mimics. It wasn't a day before mysterious fires started breaking out all over our camp and continued breaking out until the visitors and their crusty nakedness were shooed from the compound. These fires, which they claimed were supernatural, mysteriously abandoned our encampment but could be seen ghosting to life at night in the Western Ocean people's digs like swamp gas over the Okefenokee.*

*Fortunately for us their fascination with the flint and iron pyrite burned itself out. Actually it rolled itself out. It seems that when these people became enraged--crossing one's shadow was an offense to manhood--they would immediately pick up and hurl the nearest conveniently sized, heavy object. As a result, when it came time for a fire the stones were not readily at hand without first searching the surrounding prairie for where they might have stopped rolling. . . .*

## Day 116?: The Oblong Box

Eighty-eight years later, or perhaps it was only eighty-eight days or hours or minutes, Charlie unclosed his eyes for the umpteenth time and tried to determine if he was dreaming again or if he was really awake. With no light, coupled with the dankness of his prison, he was never positive if his eyelids were open or closed. To make sure, he would turn his head to one side and feel with the fingers of his dangling hand--provided that hand wasn't so asleep and tingling that it couldn't feel.

Probably the twentieth time he tried it, he wondered if he wasn't simply dreaming that he was feeling his raised lids and moist eyeballs. As a check, he poked the corner of his eye to stimulate the optic nerve and to create a false flash of light. Then he wondered if he was simply dreaming that also.

He yelled. He yelled loud enough to wake anyone. Then he wondered if he had only dreamed that he yelled. It was that dark.

One sign that he really was awake came from the stones on which he sat. They still seemed a little damp, though the dampness might still be coming from his white boxer shorts or his khaki Big Mac work pants. The culprit had been those three beers he drank in the Ship's Tavern of the Brown Palace. Long ago they had found their way in a warm course to the growing pool in which he sat. He had marked time by the evaporation of that pool and now he was sure he was almost dry. As he moved, his pants crinkled stiffly, so he *was* awake.

Or was he dreaming that detail as well.

It was so dark he couldn't be sure. How did blind people cope, he wondered. Worse, how did blind and deaf people cope. He started to wonder how blind and deaf people who wore gloves coped when he remembered the odd comment Pent had made. "He's probably wearing gloves by now," he had said of Manemann, whom they thought was Farrago for some reason.

Charlie didn't know how long he had been imprisoned, but he did know he had reviewed the interrogation following his kidnapping a dozen times and could still make no sense of it. Was Manemann the boy Orion Farrago? Preposterous. Charlie knew Orion. Had seen him around school and in the cafe. If Farrago and the Sin Eater were one in the same, one of them had to be able to shape shift because in no way were they similar physically.

How could those men be so wrong? There had to be a connection between the two he didn't see. Or, as he suspected, was it just a confusion of names--or a confusion caused by their own silly names and the strangeness of Manemann's and Farrago's names?

And where did Hyannis, Nebraska, fit into this? It seemed important to the men who had imprisoned him. They thought it was important to Charlie, too. True, there was the *Hippophagy*, but nothing more. The windmill *was* singular, but even so. . .

And what in tarnation was the *Ultima Thule*? And why was he getting those letters in the identical Manila envelopes? Each of the envelopes was addressed either by an electric typewriter or a laser printer, and instead of a return address, each envelope simply read *Sunshine News, Inc.* The post marks, when they could be read or understood, were varied.

What time was it above? Charlie wished he had a wrist watch, one with a luminous dial. He'd get one as soon as he got out. Just as soon, he told himself. Just as soon. Later he changed it to *when*. Later he wondered if the adverb should be *if*.

Then he thought of dying and wondered if he hadn't already passed over. When he was little he had been told by his mother that when he died--she called it *passed over*--all his puppies that had died before him would be in Heaven waiting for him. This had at first seemed charming until he wondered how he was going to feed them. Finally, he hit upon the idea of feeding them the cats waiting for his sister. It would be Heaven after all.

Right now, if he was alive and if it was daylight out, the area above him would be crowded with people, people who walked blissfully and ignorantly over the head of the High Sheriff of Weld County, as he liked to call himself. It separated him from the real sheriff who sat in an office in Greeley and who-- Charlie was positive--spent the bulk of his days figuring how to get Charlie off the force.

Idly, he tried to picture just what was above him. A building? A street? Grass maybe. He tried to count the steps they had taken into the tunnel. That was fairly easy. Where he became confused was how far the car had rolled before it hit the crash barrier. He judged the speed and the time and tried to convert that into feet. It helped pass the time. At length he decided he was directly below the Civic Center, that large expanse of grass and sculpture that fronted the classic architecture of the City and County Building. He liked this decision because he could picture the patterned flower beds directly above him. He didn't want to believe that he was below the ornamental Greek columns. He didn't like the idea of sitting under all that concrete.

If, he decided, he were free and could dig straight up, he would surface in one of the flower gardens, an azalea tickling his cheek, the smell of fragrant earth in his nostrils. If he was pointing west when his head popped out, he would see the City and County Building. If he were facing east, he would see--across Broadway--the golden dome of the state capitol. A bronze marker on one of its steps marked a mile in altitude.

But even at a mile high, how deep was he beneath the surface? How deep did the basements and bedrocked supports of the buildings between the Brown Palace and the Civic Center go? He could be very deep.

He didn't know how deep the tunnel went, but he knew who had built it. A bunch of crazies. This was an ambitious project and sane folks didn't expend such energy or money. To get from the hotel to the cathouse across the street was one thing. But this was an elaborate and a costly tunnel. Its construction had to be associated with the Ku Klux Klan that openly controlled the state--and the Capitol Building--in the twenties or with influential hoodlums during prohibition, or perhaps with both.

At some point during his mental ramblings he must have accidentally brushed an eye with one of his hands because he experienced one of those sudden false flashes of light. But this one didn't explode and then disappear. And it wasn't as bright as the others had been. This one was dim, very dim, but it *remained*. Charlie wearied his eyes by staring at it, and the light slowly faded. He shook his head in disgust at the false hope but noticed that the light reappeared with each sweep of his head.

Then he knew what had happened. Night blindness, fatigued receptors. By looking at the spot with the sides of his eyes rather than looking straight on, he could see that it was still there, and that it was increasing in luminescence. And with its growing brightness came a noise, a whistling. The same whistling Charlie employed as a boy when he walked alone by corn fields at night. Even as an adult he had found occasion for its use, though he didn't talk about those times. This would have been one of those times if he could find the energy and the spit to pucker.

As the whistling increased in volume, the light increased in intensity. Finally, Charlie could see every seam in the rock wall in front of him. He could even tell when the lantern that was being carried was placed on the floor. He heard someone tap the stone with a knuckle, as if testing to see if it was a solid or false wall, one with a hidden cavity. After fussing around for what seemed like minutes, the last stone to be inserted was removed and light flooded the grotto.

A hand reached in, felt around, and then withdrew to remove another stone and then another. At last the silhouette of a head obtruded itself between the light and his prison. "Is that you, Charlie?"

"Of course it's me. Just how many bodies have you stashed down in this catacomb anyway?" Charlie had recognized Hobble's voice. Hence, the

peevishness. His sigh of relief was less audible. Real men, he knew, took death or rescue equably.

"I'll have you out of there in a minute. Thought you might be hungry, so I brought you a Snickers Bar."

"Just the one?"

"And a bottle of beer."

"I'm off beer for the duration. Too much volume. It's squeezin's straight up for me from now on. Sans even the rocks."

Removing and tossing the stones aside was short work compared to the construction. Hobble handed Charlie the candy bar as soon as he entered, and Charlie began eating it, wrapper and all, even before both his hands had been unchained, which would have allowed him to remove the paper. He didn't notice at first that Hobble had the key to the handcuffs.

When he was finally able to stand, Charlie turned and sought support from the eye bolts sticking from the wall. Now that he could shake them from this angle, he realized why they hadn't loosened earlier. They hadn't been driven into the wall. They had been built into it, probably anchored from the back side. Suspecting who had built the tunnel, he felt certain the bolts had been intended for such purposes all along.

"What day is this?" he asked Hobb.

"Uh, Tuesday, I think. I'm not much good at days anymore, since I've been camping out. And the papers that get to Sligo are always at least a day old. What day did you come down here?"

Charlie considered the question. "Don't press me on such triviality as the day of the week. Just tell me how many days I've been in here?"



"They didn't say. They just gave me the keys and directions on how to get down here and the turns to take."

Charlie turned around and reached down for the lantern. He lifted it to Hobble's face, who turned from the glare. "You mean to tell me you know the guys who buried me here?"

"We've crossed paths a time or two. Picnics and such."  
"Picnics and such?" Charlie would have been beside himself if there had been room in the tunnel. "You socialize with people who tried to kill me?"

"No, no, Charlie. Not kill. I'm sure they would have come back after you. In time. At least to see if you had changed your mind."

"Then you know the nonsense they were asking me? You're one of them, you and that elk's tooth."

"It's possible to be a member of a large family, Charlie, and not be in favor of some of the distant relatives. All families have trash."

"You mean a family diverse enough to have writers and killers and--if I can believe those guys--glove wearing, sin eating crazies?"

Hobble, his head still turned, nodded his agreement. "This country thrives on diversity," he swallowed nervously. "Haven't you heard the propaganda?"  
"Well just *when* were you going to tell me about your family? The third or fourth time you disinterred me?"

"Spare me the sarcasm, Charlie. We've got to move before the library closes."  
"The library? Are we going to check out books?" Hobble's words seemed as incongruous as those of the men who had buried him. "Now wait a minute. Where'd you say you meet these men to get the keys to the cuffs?"

Hobble took the lantern from Charlie and turned down the tunnel. "I met them at your trailer," he said and motioned for Charlie to follow.

"That's the wrong way."

"The way I came in," Hobble shrugged. "The way we go out."

"But when are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"First things first, Charlie. Besides, I've got to think about it a bit first."

"*Think* about it?"

"Charlie, patience--"

"Patience, you want? I've just been buried alive. It felt like I was in one of Poe's Oblong Boxes."

"That's just where you've been. He, *Poe*, is your problem, but at least he's not the curse to you that he is to me."

"Poe? A dead man? He is dead, isn't he. Give me that at least."

"I don't know what I can give you. It's not that simple. Not straight line simple, at any rate. Meanwhile, let's get out of here. I don't like it any better than you do down here. Maybe then I can tell you about Poe and his insanity. And mine."

"You're driving *me* insane," Charlie's bewildered voice sounded in the chamber. "On second thought, after what I've been through, you wouldn't have to *drive* me. You wouldn't even have to *back* clean out of the driveway."

Hobble ignored the rantings behind him and led in the direction that was foreign to Charlie.

"Want to hear about the story I wrote while you were gone?" He needed a subject change and the story was all he could think of, typically.

No answer, just the scuffing of shoes on the dirt behind him.

"You see, there was this man who railed against over-population in the world, since it destroyed everything while everyone, politicians and religionists in particular, pretended it didn't. He tried to run for political office, but he was

defeated because he had to come out against babies. He couldn't hold a job because he was always ranting against the day-care facilities. He claimed they encouraged birth by facilitating it. He lost a job in advertising because he refused to push products by featuring goo-gooing babies. He was against immigration because all the immigrants were from countries where over-population was the problem, but when they got here--instead of reducing their fecundity--they had more children. It's the feed-a-rat-and-it'll-have-more-babies phenomenon."

"I've got the picture," the voice came from behind Hobble. At least Charlie had temporarily forgotten his other problems.

"So, the point is, this man wins the lottery. And instead of spending the money on his earthly pleasures, he decided to construct a huge monolith that would last a thousand years. And on this monolith, he inscribed words to the effect that humans are such egotistical, gonadal, chromosomally driven creatures that they will breed and worship birth and copious motherhood until there is no longer a civilization--the point being that he is right and that fifty or a hundred or a thousand years after his death they, or maybe just some *one*, will finally see that he is right and wish that their forefathers had listened and done something about it when it was doable."

"I'm waiting."

"Well, it almost happens. The scene shifts to two hundred years in the future. The earth is teeming with naked bodies. Humans have not just bred, they have pullulated. Babies are everywhere in clusters like masses of frogs' eggs in a spring swamp. Every woman has four or five males hanging from her. The males are all smaller than the females. If there is a government, there is no indication of it. If there are schools or hospitals or museums or stadiums or. . ."

"I get the picture."

"But one group does seem to be organized. They are clambering over one another, all their bodies naked, trying to topple a large stone. It's the monolith the man erected hoping that at least someone in the future would acknowledge the veracity of his centuries' before observations and warnings. But the naked bodies grunting against the stone can't read. They aren't able to distinguish the difference between simple weathering and cracking from that of the chiseled-in message. Finally, the stone topples and crushes about a thousand bodies on the other side. They don't seem to notice. What they were after was a relatively flat surface on which to make their sacrifices."

"What sacrifices?"

"To their gods of fertility."

Charlie shuffled behind Hobble for a full minute before daring to ask. "What was the point? There seems to be a hitch in this one as well. It's gotta have a point."

"The point? Isn't it obvious. People are idiots. Left to themselves, that is the world they will create. They don't just need guidance; they need--" He searched for a word Charlie would tolerate and couldn't find one.

After another pause Charlie spoke. "Neutering is the only thing that might work," he suggested, "but that's too reasonable." After a few more steps and as much considering, he added: "Remember what I found you doing the other day with your stories?"

"Throwing them in the dump, you mean?"

"That's the ticket."

"Throw this story away?"

"That's the ticket." And then after still another pause and another fifty yards, he asked: "Why do you write them?"

"It's the disease."

\*\*\*\*

Access to the building above was gained by a spiral staircase. When they were both on the good side of the steel door, Hobble closed and locked it. Charlie, even though they were inside, put his hat on for the first time in he didn't know how long. He was feeling better.

"Where'd you say this is?"

"The library."

"The *new* library?" The breeze was air conditioned and felt wonderful. At least it wasn't dank and moldy, or alternately nitric. One problem with the breeze was that it cooled the seat of his khakis and reminded him of the "accident" that had occurred, and reoccurred. "Before I go out in public I have to get to a restroom.

Hobble understood, or thought he did. "Down the hall," he said, and Charlie followed. Instead of going in, Hobble stood guard outside. He had used the facility before descending into the tunnels.

After what he thought had been more than sufficient time, Hobble opened the door to check on Charlie's progress. He wasn't in one of the stalls or at the urinal. He was standing, naked from the shirt down, and washing his pants and underwear in the sink. How he had gotten his pants off without removing the work shoes and white stockings, he didn't ask. In fact, he didn't say anything. He just pulled the door closed and continued his guarding.

Coming down the hall was a librarian, hurrying. He was carrying a small stack of books, but it was obvious that his haste wasn't for their delivery but that he needed to use the restroom as well. Hobble let him open it, but the man didn't enter. "When oh when," he uttered in honest exasperation, "will the Supreme

Court of this so called nation give us the right to rid our libraries and public institutions of such sacrileges?"

Hobble smiled sadly at the man. He was aware of the transient problem, of smelly men coming in from off the streets just to get out of the weather and to use the restrooms. It would continue to be a problem so long as cities continued to pretend that people did not urinate and defecate and refused to provide ample public restrooms. Of course, feces would be smeared on those walls. The First Amendment, he thought, required it.

Recognizing he had a sympathetic face before him, the librarian nodded. "At least this one has a rudimentary sense of hygiene." Then he hurried, with increased urgency, to the next lavatory.

Hobble pulled the door open again. "About ready, Charlie."

"Gettin' there." The khaki pants, apparently well wrung, judging by the twist marks on them, hung over the adjacent sink. His white boxer shorts were still getting a scrubbing that would have done a washer woman proud, if he had just had a washboard.

Hobble started to let the door reclose, but Charlie stopped him. "What were you doin' at my trailer?"

"An interested party wanted me to check on you. She was concerned."

"Where did you meet this *interested party*?"

Hobble could hear the shorts being wrung out. "At Trudy's Cafe. Inez at the Quonset Cafe hasn't been in such a good mood since she made breakfast for you that first morning and you didn't show up. You've got some explaining to do as far as she's concerned."

Charlie ignored the anticipated problems with Inez. "So you went to my trailer?"

"Well, we hadn't seen your Jeep and no one knew where you were until the cashier in the grocery stuck her head in and wondered what all the talk was about. When Inez told her, she came back in with a business card."

"And you recognized the name and knew it was trouble?"

"Charlie," Hobble pulled the door full open to watch the deputy, leaning against a sink, try to pull his wet shorts over his high-topped work shoes, "anyone should have recognized the name. Seen it was trouble."

"What are you goin' on about?"

"Otto Latl? Give me a break, Charlie. *Ot* Latl? Maybe you'd recognize it in a simpler form--*atlatl* for instance."

Charlie played with the word on his tongue. "Oh, an *atlatl*," he realized. "That primitive throwing stick."

"That's the one, Charlie. It's *atlatl* on this continent only. Everywhere else it is called a throwing stick by anthropologists. You had to recognize that the name as a phony."

"Before you go off gettin' so cocky about names, I'd like to show you a paper out of Mullen, Nebraska." He didn't explain. "Now who did you say was at my trailer."

"I didn't, but there were three of them."

"And you knew them?"

"I knew their kind. Forget the names or the faces. They're all parts of one team."

"Well, go on, what were they doing in my trailer?"

"Looking for something. But don't worry. I made them stack the books back on the bed and shove the others under the couch."

Charlie had one pant leg over one shoe and was about to succeed with the second. "If you tell me they were looking for an *Ultima Thule*, I just might have to wring your neck. *Pent* up emotion from a time before," he said, "if you get my drift."

Hobble did, and the word play as well. It was a benefit of his disease.

"There's only one *Ultima Thule*, Charlie. And you can stop worrying about it. I convinced them that you don't know where it is any more than the rest of us."

Charlie had finished dressing and washing his face and arms. He stood in front of the mirror and ran wet fingers back through his hair. That was about all he ever did and he decided it looked fine.

"It was interesting--humorous, actually--at your trailer, Charlie. Want to hear what happened?"

Charlie made the final adjustments, flicking one lock behind his ear. "I have the distinct feeling I'm not going to have a choice, am I?"

Hobble didn't hear or answer. As soon as Charlie emerged, wet but clean, he began his tale. "After they had finished ransacking your place. . ."

"Where was Dog?"

"Oh, don't worry about him. He was there--welcomed them I believe. But as I say, don't worry. I fed him. But after the men were finished, one of them looked at the phone and decided that he might discover some useful information if he pressed the re-dial on your phone, you know, so he could find out who the last person you called was."

Charlie was interested.

"It turned out to be a restaurant in the Amana colonies in Iowa."

Charlie remembered the call fondly, but he remembered the hurried trip to Iowa and the meal even more fondly.



"After that, one of the other men suggested they try your quick dial. He figured that if they pressed the #1 button on the quick dial they would discover who might have the *Ultima Thule*."

"And?"

"That same restaurant in Iowa."

Charlie was getting very hungry. "So I'm shut of them for a while?"

"For a while," Hobble nodded. "I think they went to Iowa." He smiled regretfully at Charlie. "They're not from the brighter side of the clan, I'm afraid, but they'll be back. Eventually. And they'll probably find company when they get back. Things are coming to a head out there."

Charlie had finally had his tail twisted too much. He put a finger, a giant index finger from Hobble's perspective, in the young man's face. "You're gonna follow me back to Sligo. You're gonna park your vehicle next to your tent. I'm going to let the air out of all four tires. And you're going to give me your little computer, your laptop."

Hobble had accepted his grounding until the last. "My PowerBook?"

"Yes, your PowerBook, and you won't get it back until I'm satisfied you've told me everything. Crazy as you are, that computer is the only thing that'll guarantee you'll hang around. If I had a chain, I'd try to pull your truck just so you could fill me in on this Manemann thing on the way back. But crazy as it sounds, some things just might come first."

Hobble suspected those things would be eats and Yoni.

\* \* \*

Getting out of the library wasn't as easy as it might have been. People got up from their reading tables to shake his hand and the head librarian--on a rare foray from his office--all but insisted that Charlie come up to the fifth floor and see the

computerized photo array the library had on him and his grandfather. Charlie had seen some of the photos before and wondered why a slanting *Denver Public Library Denver Public Library Denver Public Library* was printed across some of his better smiles, but he didn't ask. He promised a quick return visit and left. None of the library patrons questioned his still very wet pants. They just assumed he had come from saving the city from an as yet unnamed subterranean Creature from the Black Lagoon. They would watch the papers for it in the morning. Television was known to these library patrons, but just.

His truck was still parked where he had left it, but the windshield was filled with parking tickets. At least they looked like tickets until Charlie took them off and read them. The local constabulary, not wishing to fine one of their own, were merely wishing him a quick recovery from the hangover he was without a doubt working on. Charlie threw the papers onto the floor of his Jeep and vowed to return the kindness should they venture into his territory.

\* \* \*

Never one to settle for one bird when he could bring down two with the same stone, Charlie took a slight detour and stopped in a quarter of Denver that used to be called Derby. Hobble parked behind Charlie's pickup in the clapboard neighborhood and waited while he walked down the sidewalk to a house.

The hours or days or whatever they had been down in the tunnel had not gone completely to waste. Charlie had solved at least one problem while pinioned to the wall.

"Connie," Charlie yelled when the old, heavy woman opened the door, "I'm lookin' for a raptor that is about ready for release but that might need a little extra care for a week or two." Connie was licensed by the state to care for injured birds of prey.

She considered the problem for only a moment. "Come on in," she opened the screen door wider, "I may have just what you're looking for."

When Charlie emerged from the house, Hobble opened his El Camino door to investigate. "What is that?"

"I'm surprised you don't recognize a great horned owl when you see one, Hobble." The owl, gripping tightly the piece of leather Charlie had draped over his forearm, blinked and then looked away from both men to a dog it saw running across the street in the distance.

"But why an owl?"

"More than one way to skin a cat." That was all Charlie would explain. In his free hand he held a gunny sack. "Open this up and pull it over the head, would you Hobb?"

Hobble tried. Charlie had him roll the top edge so that the sack would remain open long enough to loop it over the bird's head. When the task was completed, Charlie smoothed the sack around his arm, grabbed the bird's legs through the sack, and pulled it free. It hung upside down just as Charlie had held many a chicken.

"Now, put a knot in the end of the sack." Hobble was mostly thumbs but managed, a task he could easily have done if Charlie had not been watching. "Now let's skedaddle. It's liable to be dark before we get back."

\* \* \*

If skedaddle meant a hurried stop at the Farmer's Inn in La Salle for a Mexican hamburger, then skedaddle they did. If it meant another stop at the Lucky Star for more Snickers Bars before they turned east at Lucerne and headed toward Sligo along Weld Road 392, then it was indeed a skedaddle.

In Sligo Charlie drove directly to Hobble's tent and waited for the young man to park his truck well out of the way before flattening the tires. Hobble was so

defeated that he helped Charlie. He wasn't as helpful with the computer. Charlie knew the writer wouldn't willingly relinquish it, so he checked the truck until he found it in the cubby hole behind the driver's seat.

"Don't drop it," Hobble cautioned. "Don't even set it down hard. I haven't backed everything up yet."

"What?" Charlie asked. "You mean to tell me that dumping of manuscripts was just a ceremony? That you've had them on the hard drive of this thing all along?"

Hobble was helpless. His actions couldn't be explained--to the rational. Charlie left Hobble sitting in his tent, a vacant grin still on his face. "First thing in the morning," he threatened him with a finger as he drove off. "The full story. No more of your little teasers."

From there he drove to Phyllis' home and got out. She had a fair sized pine tree in her side yard, unusually large for the prairie, though a pine tree, if given a start, will grow there. Charlie picked the sack containing the owl from the back of his truck and walked toward the tree, eyeing it for advantageous branches. Finding one, he untied Hobble's knot and pushed the sack down until he discovered the bird's dangerous feet. Avoiding them, he placed his hands on each side of the bird, pinioning its wings, and lifted it toward the branch.

Once the owl felt the limb, it clung. Charlie righted the animal, and, when it was steady, slowly lifted the sack from its body. Unaffected by the travel, the bird blinked its eyes and looked complacently about at its new home.

Charlie backed quietly away. "Happy hunting," he whispered. He didn't think Phyllis had seen him. That was good. He always liked his gifts to be anonymous.

Finished with that problem, he drove a block north and parked in front of the Killdeer Inn. "Which room is Yoni in?" he asked when the owner responded to his loud call in the quiet foyer.

"Why, Charlie, I thought you knew. She left the morning after you dropped her off here."

"Left?" It didn't make sense. "Left where? She doesn't have a car. And she's hiding out at that."

"She left with a woman and a man in a car. I didn't get a real look at them. She simply walked past me," she indicated the adjacent sitting room, "and said good-bye."

"Can I use your phone? I'll make good on the call." He didn't wait for a reply. Instead, he picked up the phone in the sitting room and dialed for the operator. "Get me the number for the *Hippophagy* in Hyannis," he ordered. "No, not Massachusetts. I don't want the Port. I want the Hyannis in Nebraska." He waited. And waited. "Hello, Windle? . . .Then where is he? . . .And the number? . . .What do you mean you don't know the number. Pick up a place mat for crimanetly's sake. . . .That's better."

Charlie pressed the button down on the phone and dialed again. "Windle. . .? Windle," he yelled with relief. "Just callin' to check on if you know the whereabouts of that waitress of yours. . . .The one that waited on me last time I was in. . . .Yoni, you remember."

Windle Straw was silent at his end of the conversation. "Charlie," he said finally. "I had never seen her before. She came running in the cafe just ahead of you and asked if she could pretend to be your waitress. Said the two of you were old friends. Said it was a joke or something."

"Then she doesn't live in town? Doesn't have an abusive husband?"

"Like I said, Charlie. Never saw her before."

"Are you sure we're talking about the same woman? About Yoni?"

"Yoni," Windle questioned. "I don't think that's the name she gave me. It was more like. . . Ashley. Yes, I'm sure it was Ashley."

"Ashley Trophet?" The name echoed in his mind as it had in the tunnel when his captors used it.

"Don't recall she gave me a last name."

\* \* \*

Home wasn't the draw that it might have been for others; it was hardly a habit with Charlie. But Dog was there, and he certainly needed food and water, though if hungry he could dig something up--a rabbit or a vole. Water was more of a problem, but the rancher west of the trailer did have a cattle tank east of his house and Dog knew it. Really, Dog was as self-sufficient as his master.

Still, home was a half habit, so Charlie let his pickup take him there. The effort on his part wasn't conscious, which made him the equal of all other drivers on the road, driving having long ago become as unconscious an activity as typing. It was when a driver thought about the process that he got into trouble, just as when a typist tried to type by thinking where each key was--a process guaranteed to produce typos.

As he drove up the hill to the Sligo Cemetery, he noticed a soft glow at the crest. It was the glow of a firefly or of phosphorescent paint. He wasn't disturbed because it wasn't distant enough to be coming from his trailer, but he was surprised to discover that its source was in the cemetery itself.

He pulled up to the gate of the cemetery, which was just seventy yards or so from his own drive, and got out. Far from being threatening, the glow was easily identifiable to Charlie. *Why* it was there was his concern. When he walked over to

it he was disappointed to learn that it was adjacent to the burial plot of Mack Ball, a months' old infant who had died of any of several diseases that were equally fatal to youngsters back in the early teens.

The new grave was surrounded by religious votives, most of them burning in glass jars decorated with resting lambs or with Virgin Marys. That the Virgin Marys were often surrounded by a cloak of golden spikes and that their skin was a little dark, told Charlie more than he needed to know.

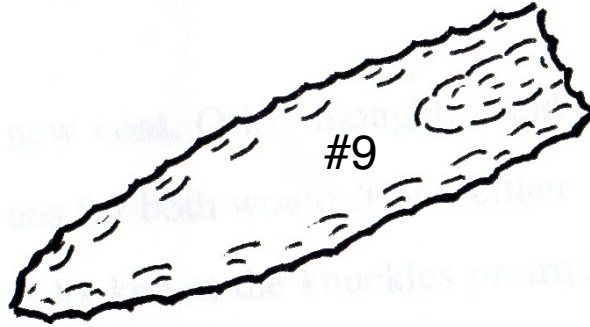
He hardly had to look at the garish, plastic flowers and plaster casts of praying hands. Or to read the name on the stake shoved into the ground like a toothpick in a club sandwich.

In no way did the grave fit the demeanor of the rest of the cemetery: quiet; plain; as severe in structure as had been the lives of the dead; decorated by prairie plants the wind had blown in; colored only by the seasons, not by plastic commerce.

The grave of young Mack Ball was an example. His name, the death date, and his age in months was all the marker held. That information had been carved into a rounded piece of wood, now very weathered and gray. Reinforcing the edges was a hand forged piece of iron, bent to shape, and then screwed to the wood.

And Charlie knew that it was the second marker to be placed on the grave. It was identical to the original which had splintered and split with time. Who had made the replacement and why was not know.

The benefactor had never come forward.



*. . . The older of the West Coasters were really quite nice, easy to talk to, and surprisingly civil, usually. But as parents they were utter failures. Spare the rod was their motto. Young men, between the ages of five and thirty-five, were never to be headed. It was feared that any impediment to their capricious notions might soften the temper of their manhood.*

*(These young men, incidentally, spent most of their daylight hours envying the bifurcation of the lowly horned toad.)*

*At night they ranged over the prairie, never singularly or in pairs, but always in packs, packs of identically garbed, identically spoken, identically strutting, identically posturing, and identically non-thinking individuals. There couldn't have been five genes' worth of variety in the lot. Yet they pushed and shoved each other, challenged each other, called each other out, and puffed their chests at each other like the lizards they so envied.*

*Woe be it to anyone or anything that crossed their path. Insanely, maniacally, even ceremonially, they protected their turf from the interloper, providing, of course, that it was a single interloper and not three or four. That would have necessitated a huffing, puffing, posturing retreat. Should they discover no threats*



*to their own territory, they would range into neighboring lands in hopes of encountering innocent parties, traveling singularly, of course.*

*They lived to puff, to prance, to posture, and to hurt.*

*Occasionally, and increasingly as time went on, our people accidentally stumbled into them and died. And, increasingly, they died because they were sought out by the posturing hordes. They didn't know the word preemptive or they might have taken refuge behind it. When we took our concerns to their adults, those elders only muttered behind their hands, unable to understand how we could possibly expect that their precious progeny should be restrained in any way.*

*Eventually, these elders averred that we disliked them because they were different, that they were darker than we. Had they know the word prejudice to bandy about, they would have bandied it. After all, it is the magic word that negates the need for personal responsibility.*

*We were simply unable, over several millennia, to convince them that we were not displeased because of the degree of melanin in their skin. After all, being an outdoor people ourselves, we were scarcely lighter than they. They just wouldn't accept that what displeased us was their behavior, an un-civil behavior detrimental to both our cultures--or at least to one culture and to one collection of animated, conscious-less protoplasm that had evolved the ability to mimic sentence.*

## Day 117: Revelation? Or Another Story

Disgustingly early the next morning Hobble was awakened by the sound of air under pressure flowing into a tire. At the same time a wet nose investigated the mosquito netting that was the door of his tent. The light was still insufficient to determine what lay behind the nose, but its insistence and eagerness told him it was a small dog and not the skunk he had at first feared.

Again air sang into an empty tire and increased its pitch as the pressure grew. His El Camino next to the tent rose slowly, the rear elevating. The sound ceased and Hobble saw a large shadow, lugging something, slouch toward the front tire where the same music ensued.

"Is that you already, Charlie?"

A sputter of air sounded as the filling nipple sprang from the valve stem.

"You just now gettin' up? *Real* men have been out and about for hours, tendin' stock and such. Workin' up an appetite."

Charlie was dropping his G's, which Hobble was learning meant he was just marking time, saying nothing until he finally got around to the subject. "How much sleep did you get anyway, Charlie?"

"Sleep? Don't remember gettin' any. Dog and I have been out scouring the county for that Manemann fella of yours. Hoped to catch him on the road somewheres. Even took a turn up Hyannis way."

"Looking for Yoni, Charlie?"

Charlie was now on the far side of the car filling the last tire. "Well, if you know so much," he stood, "just where is she then?"

"How would I know? I can't remember what the special at the cafe is this noon, let alone keep track of all the characters out here."

"And you're tellin' me you don't know Yoni?" His voice was accusatory.

"I never even heard the name before you introduced us," he protested. "You act as if everyone out here is trying to use or abuse you."

"Used and Abused," Charlie repeated the words. "Now I know what I want on my tombstone. My *real* one I mean, not that one up in the Sligo Cemetery the tourists are always photographing. *Used and Abused*." He liked the sound and its poignancy. That's all he wanted: those words and the pertinent dates. Let the future tourists scour public archives to learn its veracity.

Hobble watched Charlie's dark figure walk to his own truck and place the air tank in the bed. "Who used and who abused?" he wanted to know, meaning Yoni and Pent.

It was getting lighter and Hobble could see patches of Charlie's khaki against the dark as he walked toward his pickup door. "Can't say for sure," Charlie said, "but I can tell you which I *preferred*."

Hobble was growing more awake and began pulling on his clothes inside the tent. He would have loved to shake the dampness out of them. "I know what you mean, Charlie" he called, thinking of what Yoni and then Pent had done to him. "It *was* nice and cool down there."

That was how men commiserated. And the end of it.

"Let's go," Charlie opened his door. "I got something I want you to read. Then you're gonna talk. A lot of talk."

"What if I don't know the answers you want."

"Oh, you'll know or I'll drown you."

Hobble unzipped his tent flap and crawled out to be greeted by Dog's tongue. He had, after all, fed the pup the day before. "There's not enough water around here to get the job done."

"Not around here," Charlie agreed, "but I'll find some."

\* \* \*

The water he found was at his favorite bathing hole, the large concrete stock tank about five miles west of Sligo on County Road 120.

After they reached the stock tank, Hobble sat on the hood of the jeep with Dog and read the many letters Charlie had received. Charlie, clean clothes awaiting him, swam in the tank and bobbed contentedly, listening to Hobb's laughs, cries of delight, and downright envy.

"I love this voice," the want-to-be novelist squealed. "What sarcasm. What wit. What *vitriol*. The guy's almost insane with rage."

Charlie spouted water from his lips like a whale breaching. "Some might find those letters a *little* anti-Indian. Not the noble savage we're taught to picture."

"Let them carp," Hobble snapped. "If a target is vulnerable like that, arrows are just begging to fly. Besides, Charlie, this history," he said, holding up the letter he was reading, "isn't about the Indians of today or even their ancestors. Today's Indians are late comers, relatively speaking. These letters here are describing the Indians that are migrating back into the United States from the south, the Mexican Indians. One of the letters here talks about the West Oceaners staying on the coast until the trails were well blazed. The Indians this guy is talking about are the ones that are now following the Food Stamp and the Welfare Trails."

"You mean Mexicans?"

"Look at them, Charlie. They're Indians. Even if they can grow mustaches. Everything these letters are talking about is true--I mean the distant past he speaks of is true. But he's using that history to make a point about the *present*. His view of the present. It's the analogy that's important to him."

"I wish you were larger," Charlie said, his body otherwise motionless on the water.

"Why?"

"So that I'd have something to hide behind when the bullets start flyin'."

"These letters are to *you*, Charlie. They aren't for publication."

"Well, why am I gettin' them?"

"Obviously, someone thinks you are a descendent of the original peoples, the ones that archaeologists call the Clovis, the first recognized culture on this continent. This someone also suspects you aren't aware of your personal history and that you should be. Maybe he thinks you could do something about the current immigration problems."

"Me a Clovis? That's nuts. Nuts!"

"Maybe so, but it's logic. You're known, nationally. And you fit the general model. The husbandry part."

"The what part?"

"You take care of things--people out here in this case--for no apparent reason or gain. Your grandfather did the same. It fits the pattern. Our people are preservers, coordinators, facilitators. We don't think about it or question it. It comes to us as naturally as herding comes to an Australian sheep dog. It's in the blood."

"How do you come to figure that?"

"Because at one time, and even in rare cases today, husbandry was valued. Women *mated* with those who provided, those who organized and insured a future. Not with the other kind as is the vogue today, the heroine sheik set for instance. Eventually this desire to protect and preserve was in the blood, like temperament in a breed of dog or the homing instinct in some pigeons. We're not talking *choice* here, Charlie."

"You're just talkin' culture, Hobble. It's just an ethnicity thing, that's all."

"Unfortunately you're correct, Charlie. The problem is that culture--ethnicity, if you wish--*becomes* blood. And the real problem is that most cultures--and here, again, we're using the word loosely--are pathetic. They are little more than a silliness based on a vaguely remembered insult--all passion and bravado and posturing over nothing. You recognize these cultures easily, anyone does. They are the ones with people who demonstrate passionately about battles fought six and seven hundred years before. They are the ones that celebrate meaningless victories in ancient battles while ignoring the obvious fact that the war was *lost*. They are so blinded by these imagined past injuries or inflated victories that they are blind to their present, pathetic condition. They're the ones you see prancing around and spouting about how *proud* they are to be such and such. Proud? How can people be proud of an ancestry they *inherited*? They had nothing to do with it or its history. They can be happy about it, yes. Thankful, yes. Resigned, even. But *Proud*? Talk about empty vanity. It's like a baby reaching for the mobile above its crib and thinking it is the universe and that's all the higher it need ever reach."

Startled by both the story and Hobble's passion, Charlie had ceased floating and was treading water. "And you Clovis," he started but amended his words when Hobbled glowered at him, "okay, we Clovis are so much better?"

"At least the burden we have inherited is of some value. For that I am grateful."

"What's the burden?"

"Making the Earth work," he said simply. "Making it work and taking no credit for it."

"Now just how are you--we--doing that?"

"You, in your way," Hobble pointed to Charlie, "and others performing more complicated, specialized tasks. Surely, Charlie, you've looked around and wondered how this complex society continues to work so smoothly when you can't find anyone who even vaguely knows what he is doing, let alone know how his task fits into a thousand other seemingly disparate tasks."

"Well, point out one of these wonder workers. I'd like to pat him on the back."

Hobble shook his head. "Not the Clovis way. We dissolve into and make what *is* work better. To come out, to advertise ourselves, would be--to us--an overt admission of inferiority. It would be like saying we are *Proud* to be Clovis. Surely you understand, Charlie, that all appeals to ethnicity are appeals for preferential treatment, for special favors, cries to have their playing field leveled while their competitor's is elevated."

Hobble could see that Charlie was interested but not readily gullible. "Our history is written down for public consumption *nowhere*, Charlie. But some authors have approached the history obliquely. Cyril Kornbluth, for instance, is one. You might try his short story 'The Marching Morons.' That would give you an insight into the Clovis burden."

"Kornbluth," Charlie muttered. He had heard of him but in conjunction with another author. The book title *Gravy Planet* was in there somewhere.

"And if you want a metaphoric history of what happened to the early Clovis, why as a culture in the distant past it didn't survive into the present, try W. H. Hudson's *The Green Mansion*. And, too, his children's book *Little Boy Lost* is a good depiction of that wanderlust that brought the Clovis across the Greenlandic ice shelf to America."

"I thought Hudson was born in Argentina and went to England. How could he be Clovis?"

Hobble indulged Charlie with a smile. "I didn't say he was. We don't say. Ideally, we don't even know. We just recognize and admire--and facilitate--certain habits, traits. And by the by, for your general information, Hudson's parents *were* Americans."

The water in the tank was cold despite the season. Nights on the prairie were brisk and the water held that chill. "What I want to know," Charlie puffed, lifting himself to the side of the tank with his arms, "is how your people disappeared into the culture so easily. The letters are vague on that at best."

"That was another Hudson," Hobble said. "John Hudson. Son of Henry Hudson, the English explorer who sometimes was in the employ of the Dutch. Now this is history," Hobble nodded, "written down history, not legend recorded at a later date--after we learned writing, thanks to John Hudson."

"But how does he come into this? Was he Clovis?"

"Hardly. He was a captive. Some of our people traded for him. I think they traded some melon seeds to the Indians who had him. He was all that remained of the nine or so men put adrift in Hudson's Bay after a mutiny on the *Discovery* in 1611. The others, some of whom had been sick when put overboard, had died or were killed by the Indians."

"Why would the Indians kill them?"



Hobble looked at Charlie as if he had read the novel *Dances With Wolves* too many times. "Why do you think that for thousands of years they had attempted to exterminate the Clovis? It wasn't because we were competing with them. It was because they outnumbered us and could kill us. It was because we were different. What other reason has any culture ever needed? In short, the Indians probably killed the sailors because they thought they were Clovis. Even though the current Indians weren't true descendants of the West Oceaners, they continued the tradition--tradition and revealed knowledge being all to them."

Charlie turned on the concrete rim of the tank and his naked, pale legs now dangled above the ground. "Let's get back to this Hudson fella, Charlie shivered, uncomfortable with the talk. "What was so important about him?"

"More important than learning English from him, we learned writing--a much more efficient form than the primitive hieroglyphics we had. We also learned others of our kind still lived in the Old World. That's when we started to consider blending in with those people as a way of survival. And when they did come in numbers, we were ready. In fact, some of our men--posing as stranded sailors--had found passage to England on fishing vessels working the cod off the New England coasts. So, we were quite ready to blend, but slowly, when the time came."

Charlie stood on the tank edge now, balancing as he pulled first one pant leg and then the other over his still wet thighs. "If they blended, what's so special about Hyannis, Nebraska?"

"It was near there that the final decision was made to disburse, for all of us to finally infiltrate, so that village holds a kind of symbolic, sentimental place in our minds. Our touchstone to the past. The world that might have been had we been left unmolested."

"A Utopia."

"Hardly, especially if you judge by the various factions that now exist. That's where you come in, the *Ultima Thule*."

"There's that infernal thing again. Now git to it."

"It's just a picture, Charlie. A Daguerreotype, actually, of Poe. It was taken November 9, 1848, just months before he died, at a horrible moment in his life. Four days before the sitting he had attempted suicide by overdosing on laudanum, he had broken up with his fiancée Sarah Helen Whitman, and he had just stumbled out of his hotel in Providence, Rhode Island after an all night bender. Then he had to sit perfectly still for thirty or more seconds for the exposure, without blinking. I'm sure that accounts for some of the wildness in his eyes. It's one of the more famous literary portraits. He'd taken to drink after Mrs. Whitman rejected his proposal of marriage--which she later accepted, but Poe died soon after. When she was shown the Daguerreotype, she said he looked as if he had been to the uncharted regions of the world, the *Ultima Thule* as she described it, and back again. She even quoted a couple of lines from Poe's poem 'Dreamland':

*I have reached these lands but newly*

*From an ultimate dim Thule--"*

Charlie had finished dressing, hopped off the tank, and stood directly before Hubble. His right foot rested on the power wench of the pickup and his left hand stroked Dog's head. "It's a picture they want, is it? What's so all-fired important about a picture? And I think I've seen the one you're talkin' about."

"Most people have seen it, Charlie. But they have only seen a copy taken of the original. The original was in the window of the photo shop in Rhode Island but disappeared. It hasn't been seen since."

"Well if it's lost, where do I come in on it?"

"Lost to the public, I should have said. It's still available to fewer eyes, I hope. That's where I come in. Why I'm here at all. That's the other side of the Clovis coin."

"This Clovis coin of yours isn't going to come up standin' on edge is it? I mean it only has two sides? There isn't going to be something more to spring on me later on."

Hobble seemed almost offended. "I'm doing the best I can. This is a complicated story."

"Well, then, git on with it."

"The other side of the Clovis coin, the obverse of husbandry, was storytelling. You can imagine how important that would have been in primitive cultures. And, as with husbandry, it developed a blood line of its own. I'm sure the comparison to movie stars of today wouldn't be inappropriate. The great storytellers had their pick of the--lovelies. But the down side was that the blood lines grew narrow as the family custom and later the family trait and finally the family genes were passed on."

"The Barrymores," Charlie said.

Hobble's eyes questioned Charlie. "Drew?" he asked.

"The Fondas then." Charlie realized he was reaching too far back into movie history for Hobble.

Still not convinced, Hobble said, "If you insist. But I had something more along the lines of hemophilia in mind."

"Hemophilia?"

"Yes, with the gift went a curse, and the curse grew with the generations--sometimes skipping a generation or two only to blast the next. At first it was little more than a tic, a Tourettic inappropriateness, but it grew with passing generations

and finally became debilitating. That was Poe's problem in the end, not alcoholism. He hardly drank, in fact. It was the disease, this strange curse of a dementia, that dropped him into that gutter in Baltimore. He was helpless from it. It had given him the poetry and the visions, but it had driven him insane, withered his mind. Why else do you think his last words in that Baltimore hospital were: "Lord, help my poor soul.' Before he calmed and was able to say that, it had taken three nurses to hold his delirious, feverish body on the bed"

"This is too many for me, Hobble. I can't connect the dots."

"Well, since then, kind of as a token of our sympathy and support, the individual--and it seems to surface only in the male--who becomes the next storyteller of the clan is given the original of the *Ultima Thule* to keep until the time comes to pass it on. It's something like being poet laureate."

"How do they decide who's next?"

"No one does, really. It's linear, or nearly so. The current possessor of the *Ultima Thule* has no heir, childless. There is a near parallel bloodline, however, that has some claim. The disease, the compulsion to write, remains in that bloodline, but not the disability--at least not to the degree of the pure Poe line."

Charlie pushed Dog back and lifted a haunch onto the fender of the Jeep. "You've got a hole in your story, Hobb. Poe never had any children. Good chance he was a celibate. His line couldn't have gone on."

"True," Hobble narrowed his eyes as if aiming a point at Charlie, "and his older brother died childless at age twenty-four, and his sister--really just a half sister, no Poe about her at all--died childless as well at an advanced age."

"Then the line ends."

"Charlie," Hobble tsked, "and just what were Poe's parents, their profession?"

"Actors, I believe," Charlie replied innocently and then lifted his head in understanding. "Oh, I see."

"A disreputable lot," Hobble tsked again. "Actors doing what actors do best. Our friend Edgar Poe had at least one half brother who went west. And why not? The draw of the prairie: it called many of the Clovis back. Why do you think some of the early Beaver Men stood head and shoulders above the others? They knew instinctively what others had to learn. Just who were these scouts who came out of the woods to lead the explorers and early troopers. Do you think Kit Carson just happened or that Jim Bridger was just lucky to discover the Great Salt Lake and probably Yellowstone Park as well? That the South Pass of Oregon Trail fame was just stumbled upon? The very existence of those places was family lore. The Poes that went didn't even always change their names. Why a Poe was one of the men who rescued "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick when he was waylaid by the Crow Indians while on his way to the Pierre's Hole Rendezvous in 1833. Another Poe, John, was prominent in buffalo hunting in Kansas and Oklahoma a couple of decades later. Not exactly stellar examples of husbandry, but they were back on what to them was the home range."

"And you're tellin' me that the Daguerreotype of Poe went with them."

"I am, or it was at least kept by near relatives. At any rate it was kept safe."

"Why haven't I heard of these other Poes if they are such grand storytellers?"

"Alas," Hobble sighed, "the compulsion to tell or to write is seldom accompanied by the genius. Case in point, I'm afraid." He pointed to himself. "Why couldn't I have been driven to be a basketball player or a race car driver or a mass murderer? Something *this* culture admires and nourishes in numbers."

"This is all very interesting, too interesting to be real, but what's so important about a picture? Even given its history."

"The boys you met aren't as interested in husbandry and storytelling as most of the clan. Like the rest of modernity, they are motivated by greed."

"What's this *Ultima Thule* worth?"

"Couldn't say," Hobble shrugged. "An auction would have to determine that. Private collectors, for reasons of their own, would probably out bid any auction if it could be kept truly quiet. For instance, a copy of *Tamerlane*, his first collection of poetry, went for two hundred thousand. The Daguerreotype would probably go for more."

"Still, two or three hundred thousand dollar, say, it doesn't make sense. There's too many people involved in this thing. Divide it as many ways as there are Yahoos out here and it comes to nothing."

Hobble shook his head tolerantly. "We're not all here for the money, Charlie. Some of us are here to protect Manemann and to see that the photo is safely passed."

"You're one of the *good* soldiers?"

Again a tolerant smile, becoming almost beatific. "I just may be the next recipient of the *Ultima Thule*."

"Saints preserve us."

\* \* \*

Clean, and now in crisp Big Mac khakis, Charlie ushered Hobble and Dog into the Jeep for the drive back to Sligo and a belated breakfast.

"Just who were these honyocks that shackled me down in that tunnel. I mean what was this about their names. And what about yours while we're at it."

"Games," Hobble smiled as they drove along. "Things we do to identify ourselves. You don't have to know all the ways, the layers upon layers of ways we identify each other, but if you run into someone wearing an elk's tooth or who has

an odd name, begin to wonder. Wonder especially if they have an odd name *and* an elk's tooth. But be careful. Even the two can be simply coincidence."

"I had an elk's tooth once," Charlie confessed. "My granddaddy gave it to me."

"With us the names are parlor conundrums. They are best if based on something in Poe's writing. Second best is history--*Ott Latl* would be an example there."

"What about this Pent fella, Pent Lustrum?"

"*Lustrum* is one of those Poe words. Hardly anyone else uses it. It means five. So Pent--which also means five--was simply telling you his age. *Pent* times *Lustrum* equals twenty-five." Hobble jiggled his hand as the Italians do to suggest that the name was simply so-so, or, since he was holding it out the window, maybe he was just playing with the wind.

"What about Opie Deldock?"

"A little better. It is taken from Poe's short story 'Thingum Bob, Esq.' which, as you can hear from its title, was the origin of the name game. *Oppodeldoc* was a patent medicine made from soap, alcohol, camphor, and oils. It was mentioned in 'Thingum.'"

"And Whyner Puling, that little gargoye?"

"The guy is probably not even a high school graduate. *Puling*? Nothing more than crying, like. . . 'the baby is puling.' And *Whyner*? Give us a break, the genes are becoming diluted. Whine, make noise like a baby."

"You're leavin' out yourself?"

"A gem, if I might modestly confess. Hobble deHoy. Put it all together as one word, no capitals, and you have *hobbledehoy*, an awkward, gawky youth. Me to a T, but there have been other good names. I had a buddy once who signed his

name Rex Talgia. *Rectalgia* is a pain in the rectum. He was at least honest.

Another good one was Younger Dryas."

"Sounds about like a name."

"But it isn't. That's why it's good. *Younger Dryas*--and *with* the capitals--simply means the end of the last ice age. Wish I'd thought of it. The only girl of my clan I ever had any luck with went by the name of Demi Monde. She pronounced her first name like the actress, not as if it meant *half*."

Having known a Demi Monde or two himself, Charlie figured Hobble was making a joke at his own expense. "You're avoiding Orion Farrago. What about that name makes your people so suspicious? He's just a kid as far as I can see."

Hobble agreed. "I'm beginning to think along those lines myself. Still, the name is almost suspect. It's right on the cusp. Just enough to make us want to take a second look. Does he carry an elk's tooth, for instance. Does he exhibit one of the several other signs. *Farrago* is what sets us off. I mean the word itself means a medley, a jumble, or a hodgepodge of something. I haven't seen it used as a *real* name before."

"Could be the Americanization of some real tongue twister of a foreign name," Charlie suggested.

"That," Hobble nodded to Charlie and then reached down to stroke Dog's head, "is a distinct possibility. It has caused trouble before. Still, when you couple it with *Orion*, one wonders."

"What's wrong with *Orion*? Name of a perfectly good and useful constellation."

"And," Hobble emphasized, "it is the name of a mythical character who disappeared from the earth, either by falling into a hole or by disappearing into the sky."



Charlie saw the point. "So they, the bad guys, think they have *Manemann* tracked to this area and suddenly a human by the name of *Orion Farrago* disappears aboard a flying saucer."

"In a nut shell," Hobble nodded. "Just a little too neat. Sounds as if someone is saying 'Ah, ha, you caught me but I'm taking off out of here.' It's just a little too pat, a little too clever. Not believable. They think it is all just a smokescreen and that Manemann-slash-Farrago is still here."

"But how can they think Orion and Manemann are one in the same? All they've got to do is check the public records. Ask the teachers if such a student was enrolled."

Hobble shook his head. "Not that simple. The protection team--the group protecting Manemann--would have built enough of a cover to handle such questions. Those who are after the *Ultima Thule* wouldn't buy the story if you came up with a birth certificate with Orion's footprint on it. No. Orion and Harry Manemann are one in the same. You can't convince them otherwise."

"But how did they narrow Manemann's location down to here if he didn't want to be found?"

"The disease." Hobble turned his head from Charlie and watched the prairie out his window. "It's like alcoholism, but it doesn't affect the liver; it fevers the brain."

"Say," Charlie interrupted. "Didn't that Thomas Wolfe fella, you know the one of *You Can't Go Home Again*? Didn't he die of a brain fever?"

"I do believe it was a fever," Hobble said without admitting or suggesting a thing. "And this fever is going to keep growing in Manemann. If we find him, we can pack his head in ice but it will still consume him."

"You still haven't gotten to the question. How did they track him to here."

"The protection team would, of course, know where he was, the area anyway. They'd keep in communication--writing most likely, and once they started to notice a decline in his mental health they would begin encircling him, waiting."

"What might they notice?"

"Read Poe. Almost anything his characters suffer are signs of the onset of the final stages of the disease. Maybe the team would notice touches of paranoia in his letters, comments that he was being followed, for instance, and had to move only at night. Maybe he reported hearing voices coming from far across the prairie but he was unable to discover their source. Anything like that. Whatever it was, the team notified me."

"You? You a member of the team, too?"

"No," Hobble said. "As the heir apparent, I'm to be on hand for the passing of the *Ultima Thule*. The team will remove him from wherever he is once the time comes. A nursing home, probably. It isn't quite Alzheimers, but it's similar. More horrible and frightening. Ultimately he will become insane. If he's lucky the fever will do its job and he won't linger."

"And this is going to happen to you? That's the future you have to look forward to."

Hobble shrugged. "I hope not. It's not likely. Manemann is the last of the true line and he has produced no children, writers being second class citizens and not all that high on the mating list. Right up there with nerds and dweebs and dorks. He does have a sister, though, but she hasn't reproduced either and seems disinclined to do so. As near as the protection team can discover, I am the next closest male relative, although there is rumor of one or more who could possibly be closer--that is if a missing female cousin has produced a male heir, but she

disappeared years ago and is presumed dead. Otherwise, she would have reported in. I mean she knew she was of special blood."

"Then you're saying there's a leak somewhere in the protection team and that's how Pent and his buddies learned Manemann was somewhere out here on the prairie?"

"The team doesn't leak," Hobble said. "What happened is even more cruel than that. The hunters used the disease to find Manemann--that insane drive to tell his story. They threw bait out for him as confidently as a commercial fisherman chums the sea. They knew they'd find him even if he were on the moon. He ended up writing and telling *them* where he was."

"He what?" This was so preposterous Charlie wouldn't believe it, or drive, and nearly pulled to the side of the road.

"Oh, yes. He wrote and said I'm right here. Come and get me."

"Now this is way too many for me."

"It was easy, Charlie. The hunters bought ads in several magazines that cater to would-be writers. The ads promised serious reads of all materials and said they would agent it if it proved adequate. Manemann suckered, sent in one or more of his manuscripts, no doubt from the Sligo Post Office, and the hunters recognized the material or the name--he probably used Harry Manemann, a near dead giveaway. Way too cute. His mind was possibly already going. At any rate, now they're looking for him here." He pointed to the road as it passed beneath them.

Charlie didn't understand the disease or the hoops would-be writers were required to jump through if they didn't know someone who was connected. He had a vague idea, however. He knew of one "writer" who had become an Oval Office Fellater, which she parlayed into several millions and much notoriety. "But what

did these hunters do with all the writing they received from writers *other* than Manemann?"

Hobble smirked at Charlie's innocence. "They did with them what all such advertisers do; they took the \$100 check that was enclosed, cashed it, and threw away the manuscript. No, correction. They threw away the manuscript first."

"When did all this happen?"

"When did you find the first bone out on the prairie asking for your help?"

"That long ago, huh?" Charlie remembered that the first discovery had been long before he found the skull on the Farrago farm. "Why didn't he just come to me on the sly for help or seek out that group that's supposed to be protecting him?"

"You've never lacked confidence, have you, Charlie? You've never had even a touch of paranoia. Try to imagine the world Manemann must see. Listen to the voices he must hear. He trusts no one, Charlie. No one and no thing, but with rare odd moments of sanity interspersed."

"I think I see what you mean. It was a dog that spooked him at the church. How anyone got close enough to him to hire him though, I can't imagine."

"When you were chasing him, or Yoni I mean, was he wearing gloves?"

Charlie looked over at Hobble. "Funny you should ask. Pent said something like that. Said he heard Manemann was already wearing gloves. But no, no I didn't see any. He was way out ahead of me anyway."

"How about sunglasses"

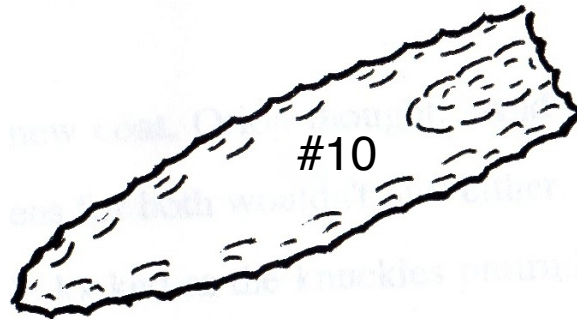
"No. What you gettin' at anyway?"

"Roderick in 'The Fall of the House of Usher.' Poe didn't make up that picture of degeneration, that dissolution, that *acute morbidity* of the senses. It was the future he knew he had inherited."

Charlie had seen much on the prairie--calves falling from the sky, men kidnapped by flying saucers, the discovery of ancient Druidic artifacts near his trailer, a cheerleader dying of the bends where there was no water, but here his credulity was being stretched.

"This all isn't just another one of your stories, is it?"

Hobble didn't bother to look over. He just stared at the gravel ahead. "I wish," he said. "Oh, how I wish."



*. . . Perhaps our greatest mistake, aside from befriending them in the first place, was teaching them the use of the atlatl, or throwing stick. Our intention had been to enable them to supply themselves with sufficient protein--something besides the dead fish and rotting flesh they found at the extent of tides' reach. This softness in our character has continued to the present. It can still be seen in the oft disproved bromide: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to fish and he can feed himself always.*

*Had we known what our humanity would do for the mammoth, we would have left those West Coasters to dine on green fish entrails and bloated seals.*

*Long domesticated, at least as domesticated as the present day Lapland reindeer, the mammoths and mastodons were unprepared for the appetites of these newly armed people. Before learning the use of the atlatl, they had stood back and gazed at the mega fauna as their descendants had stared slack-jawed at the first Iron Horse belching black smoke in the distance.*

*But with the atlatl they could now stand safely back and hurl their spears with relative impunity. True, we had harvested these large mammals for millennia, but the mammoths, mastodons, and the other mega fauna of the prairies were unprepared for what was to come. It was wholesale slaughter. They speared and then chased the dying beasts with the insane glee exhibited by ruffians setting a dog's tail afire just to see it run and suffer.*

*And it wasn't for food. It was for manliness, or what passed for manliness in their culture, that is to say their absence of culture in that a true culture must have at least one redeeming attribute. What they sought, and all they generally took, was the tail. At first they would strike each other with their newly gotten prize, just as inmates of locker rooms world wide snap each other with wet towels. This is a ritual that must have had some survival benefit though those with the red welts wonder what.*

*But, being the sissies that they really were, they wished to keep as much distance as possible between themselves and the person being whipped with the tail. Hence, the stick. They tied the tail, and eventually as many tails as they had the strength to wield, to the end of the stick. He with the biggest stick and the most tails was unquestionably the most manly. And it was their only measure of man, though anyone who could have mimicked the bifurcation of the horned lizard would have been worshipped.*

*In a horribly short time the mammoths and mastodons were gone--slow breeders that they were--so these brave West Coasters turned their attention to the bison. First they annihilated the *Bison antiquus*--those that stood six feet at the shoulder. To exterminate these beasts the longer Clovis point was not necessary. Instead, they stole and used the smaller points that came later in our history--the Folsom Point. One advantage to the *Bison antiquus* was that many, many more tails could be bound to the ends of their sticks, so these animals disappeared more quickly than did the mammoths and mastodons. The smaller *Bison occidentalis* was almost too small to bother killing one by one, so they resorted to stampeding them over cliffs. The scramble for tails looked like a rugby scrum.*

*Admittedly some of the flesh of these animals was actually eaten as it had to be cut anyway to get to the tails buried at the bottom of the pile of dead beasts. Eventually, these bison also disappeared, and, as their killers had it, they had disappeared into the ground from which they would return as soon as we, the Clovis, were rubbed from the earth. We were the bad medicine that had caused the bison's vanishing. What remained, the *Bison bison* of today, was hardly a good chase, stupid as they were. And their tails were useless even for fly swatters. In the end all that our heroes were left with was the stick . . .*

## Day 117: Foyd's Place

Since he was accompanied by Hobble and not Yoni, Inez Botts was almost on speaking terms with Charlie when he entered the Quonset Cafe to break his fast. Almost. In anticipation she had already prepared his breakfast burritos and slapped the platter onto the table in front of him before asking if he wanted only a cup of coffee or if she should bring the whole carafe. Before the coming of the Windingo woman, Inez had always hovered about Charlie at his window seat making sure his cup was never empty or cold, though he habitually claimed that it was either or both.

Hobble tried to catch her eye but the fumes still emanating from her nose occluded her vision. "I'll have a short stack and coffee," he finally interjected, parting the fog and permitting her face to square on him and acknowledge his existence.

"When I get the time."

The whip of her voice cracked so that the boys at the counter turned to see if the frayed end of her words had brought blood. Aside from the Tidley brothers and Wiley Wentworth, another man occupied one of the stools, his back to Charlie's table.

Apparently unscathed, Hobble leaned close to Charlie. "Just as soon as you return my PowerBook I'm going to write a bang up story I thought up last night. It's about this future America see--"



Charlie pretended to listen but his thoughts were elsewhere. At least one thing was going right in his world. As they drove past the Regional Library in the Old Opera House en route to the cafe, he had glanced across the street and seen Bode Road. He was inspecting a ball of rabbit fur he had just picked up from the grass outside the chicken pen where he housed his rabbits. Things would work out where Phyllis and her garden were concerned, he decided. It just took time, and nature.

"--an America in which the influence of Henry David Thoreau has triumphed. Simplicity, Simplicity is everyone's motto. Don't count your needs with a computer. The fingers on one hand are more than enough. So, everyone is pulling in: getting to know their neighbors; planting gardens and not going to the grocery stores; walking and biking--but not driving. It's a perfect world. Everyone is happy, everyone but the businessmen. It's no longer possible to amass a fortune by catering to the wants created by advertisers. And the advertisers have stopped supporting television because no one is going to buy the food stuffs and designer fashions anyway. Nike has gone belly up because the country has learned that the bare foot is a pretty fair instrument.

"So, as I said, everyone is ecstatically happy except for the would be millionaires who can't get the public to buy what it doesn't need. I mean times are so bad for the former rich that they have had to settle for rowboats."

Charlie was listening enough to like that picture. "A Kennedy in a row boat. Now that I'd like to see."

"The gross national product is falling, but the only ones concerned are those who have had to cut back on their number of homes. Some have even had to learn to fly their own jets."

Charlie showed his disapproval. "Now you've gone too far. The rowboat is enough. Get on with your point."

"The point is that the former rich use what money they have left to buy up congressmen who pass the Take-It-With-You Bill." Hobble forestalled Charlie's grunt by explaining. "In the past everyone said 'You can't take it with you,' meaning none of your possessions went with you when you died. But with the passage of the new bill not only could you take it with you, you had to take it with you."

This caused Charlie to lower his fork and actually stop eating.

"Yes," Hobble nodded. "You had to build a structure that was large enough to hold everything you owned, your house included. So, when you died, you and everything you possessed was stuffed inside and burned. No such thing as an estate sale or recycling or inheritance. That wouldn't stimulate the economy, you see. It's the same principle that the number of housing starts is good, or increasing population is good. Grow. Grow. Grow. You remember, you either grow or you die. That's what they always used to say although the new America had disproved that."

"What," Charlie said, wiping up the last bit of burrito grease with a piece of bread, "did the rich folks do, I mean those who wanted to be rich so bad? How did they amass fortunes if they couldn't pass it along, if they had to burn their jets and row boats and such? Doesn't sound to me as if they got a very good grade of congressman for their money. Should have bought a president instead."

"There's a hitch or two in the plot," Hobble conceded, "but I'll work it out. An afterthought sentence inserted somewhere might work."

The man at the counter with the Tidley brothers and Wiley had been listening to the tale and waited until it petered out, long before it finished.

"I got a similar problem, Charlie," the man said, addressing Charlie. "As near as I can figure, some fellow is wishing to take his rocks with him."

Already interested by the intrusion of the new voice, Charlie had turned to listen to the speaker, Brent Hadley. "Not that I'm afraid I don't already know, Brent, but what's this about rocks?"

"Got a silo full of 'em."

"Rocks huh? Those goin' as a commodity now? Their futures up, are they?"

Brent smiled dryly. "If they were, I'd sell," he said and turned on his stool until he faced Charlie squarely. Charlie had only half turned, his right elbow still on the table. "Looks like I might get some wheat this year, so I went over to take a look at that old silo on my place, the brick one--"

"--and it was filled plumb to the top with rocks. No tracks in or out except what might have been made by a wheelbarrow."

"You've already been out there, haven't you?"

"No," Charlie said and turned back to his plate as if he had lost interest.

"Same thing happened to Lauren Ewell, only it was his old school house. You haven't seen a tall man in your neighborhood pushing a wheelbarrow have you?"

"No," Brent considered the picture for an instant, "but I did scare up a man sitting in the middle of the road early one morning just after first light. Sitting on a three-legged milking stool. Writing, I think he was. Sitting there with his big knees poking up in front of him like an architect's table."

"What'd he do?"

"About as I'd expected. Got up finally, picked up the stool, and crossed over the fence into the field. It was almost dark, as I said, and it wasn't long before he disappeared."

"No wheelbarrow?"

"If there was one, it was out of sight. Even if there had of been, I might have missed it considering the other things."

During the conversation Hobble had shown more interest than Charlie. "It was gloves, wasn't it?"

"Not just gloves, heavy gloves. More like furry mittens. And he was writing with what looked like a carpenter's pencil."

"I thought you said it was darn near dark," Charlie questioned. "How could you possible tell it was a carpenter's pencil?"

"The way he was looking at it," Brent said simply, as if that explained it. When the men didn't respond, he explained. "I mean he was looking at it as if it was a new born baby, and I mean his first--not the third or fourth. He was looking at it as if it was the first time he had ever seen anything like it. Fascinated with it. Enthralled by it. Mesmerized by it."

"What you're tryin' to say is that he was taken with it."

"That's it, taken."

"That's him," Hobble said, meaning Manemann. "He's developing the disease Poe first mentioned in his short story 'Berenice.' The narrator became obsessed with minutia. He could sit for hours and study the movement of a shadow or the crease in a dog-eared page. Sometimes he'd smell a flower and seem to drift to sleep. Other times he'd repeat a word until it ceased to have meaning."

Brent listened to the entire story. "That could explain why I was able to drive right up to him before he moved. But there was something besides the carpenter's pencil and the gloves."

"Glasses," Hobble snapped his fingers. "He's wearing glasses already. It's getting late."

Again Brent waited for Hobble to finish. "It was glasses. Small, round, rose-colored glasses. Not quite sunglasses, though they may have served the purpose. They reminded me of the glasses that musician fellow who was killed in front of that hotel in New York City wore. More fashion than function, if you get my meaning. Peculiar glasses. Not of much real use out here."

Hobble turned to Charlie and grabbed his massive biceps as if to move him. "Time's getting short, Charlie. We've got to find him soon."

"Or what?" Charlie asked.

"Or I don't know. Same thing that happened to Poe, I guess. Unconscious in a gutter. Only out here no one is apt to find him. Just buzzards. . . and later only bones."

"Long as they don't have no writing on them, it suits me."

Brent, having said his piece got up to pay Inez for his breakfast.

"Before you get out of here, Brent, I'd like a word."

Brent finished his transaction with Inez and delayed his departure just long enough to fish a toothpick out of the jar beside the register. "What you need, Charlie?" he asked on his way back by.

"You're on the cemetery maintenance committee aren't you?"

"Chairman this year, though that don't account for much. We rotate the duty."

"When was the last burial up there?"

"Jeez," he thought and worked the toothpick. "It was before last winter, if I recall right. Wasn't that about the time Ol' Abner went?"

The information agreed with what Charlie thought he remembered. "In that case," he said, "you'd better go there and have a look. I think we've just had a drive-by burial."

"Jeez," Brent almost cursed. "And if we dig it up and move it, we'll be the criminals." He left to look for a shovel and help.

Charlie looked at his plate for something else to shove into his mouth. He had cleaned it with his last slice of bread and Inez hadn't been by to dish out the seconds. He was about to cite her for neglect when the phone on the wall rang and she had to stop what she was doing to answer it.

"Charlie," she yelled over the din in the room. "Kandi at the sub-station says for you to get out to Foyd Splinter's place. He says he's caught in a crossfire."

Charlie stood. "Whose shooting at him?" he asked, but Inez made motions that if he wanted to know to come to the phone himself. "If I get on the horn with Kandi," he whispered dramatically, "she won't let my ear go."

Finally melting at Charlie's helpless look, Inez relented and asked Kandi. Then she listened patiently to the more than ample answer. "No one's shooting at him," she called, first placing a hand over the mouthpiece. "He says they're shooting at each other. He's just in the middle and wants you to come out there and make them go elsewhere. He doesn't care who kills who as long as they don't do it on his property and don't use his hat as a mark when they're testing for windage."

Charlie reached down for his hat and inspected the inside of his empty coffee cup while he was at it. "Looks like we're goin' to have to put off looking for Manemann for the rest of the morning at least. You want to come along while I check this out."

"Any chance that it's connected?"

Charlie seemed glum. "Any chance that it isn't?"

\* \* \*

Nailed to a post where a stretch of barbed wire might have closed off access to Foyd Splinter's place was a sign which, Charlie felt, pretty much said it all about Foyd:

#### 4-Sail

#### Rotweiller Puppys

The sign was old, faded, and Charlie knew not to be afraid of the dogs. There weren't any. Anything about the Splinter place that had two or four feet plus a brain had long since skedaddled. That left Foyd, his wife, and their boy. At least the last census had listed him as a boy, a young male, though any description of him as a farm implement would have served. He had the requisite two legs of a boy, but the fact that he was nearly twenty-five and still hanging around the place spoke for itself.

Foyd and his wife had had two daughters but they were long gone. They each had two legs but, like the rest of the Splinters, they lacked brains. They were lookers when they were still jailbait and had something better than brains, as far as the local boys were concerned. Brains would have been an encumbrance to the girls, a hindrance to their prospects.

As he drove along the path toward the Splinter place, not a road so much as a windmill maintenance trail--the Splinters not getting out much--Charlie heard the occasional snap of a rifle. The reports came from small calibers, target guns not designed to bring down men, the kind with a caliber capable of doing little more than punching holes in paper targets.

"I don't think we're up against professionals here," he offered an aside to Hobbie who had his palms braced against the dash as the truck fishtailed in the sand and slid down into the broad wash that Foyd had picked for his home site.

Hobble lifted one hand to point ahead. "I thought they had called for protection."

His puzzlement was justified because Foyd and the boy were in the middle of the bare yard, bare except for a short windmill, a galvanized cattle tank, and the rickety post and rail corral that the tank fed. No stock appeared in the corral though a pipe from the larger tank fed a smaller tank inside the corral. The ground around that tank was torn up to an extent that might have suggested hogs.

"Yonder," Charlie lifted a single finger to point to the pair, "is what might be called Simple and Simon, Simon being the older fella. Simple is the one with the two-by-four."

Simple, the younger Splinter, was up to his waist in the cattle tank pushing the piece of lumber before him and having a struggle because of the resistance of the water. He looked as if he might be trying to squash a mouse with the end of the board, but that didn't make sense. Occasional shots were still being fired from the bluffs around the yard, but the pair of Splinters seemed oblivious. Their minds were consumed by what they were after in the tank. Forget the occasional bullet flying overhead, they weren't even aware of Charlie's Jeep when it rolled along side the tank.

"Dang you, Simp, is that the best you can do? You're like an old woman with that stick. Now get behind it and herd it over this way." Simp's thighs thrust against the water, creating waves and causing Foyd to lose sight of his quarry. "No, no. Not so fast. Now I can't see him. You've gone and stirred up the muck again."

"Have you tried worms?" Charlie yelled above the commotion and caused Foyd to flinch, dropping the object he had been stirring the water with.



After recovering from his shock, Foyd reached into the tank to the full extent of his arm, turning his head sideways and getting his ear wet, before closing his fingers about it and bringing a dip net to the surface. "Didn't hear you come up, Charlie. Simp and me was trying to catch our dinner."

"And we would of, too, if he'd a flattened the net on one side like I told him to. It keeps gettin' by when I herd it over. What it's gonna take is a flat bottom, not that round thing." He pointed to the dip net.

Hobble, like Charlie, had left the cab of the Jeep and was peering into the murky water, his hands braced on the side of the tank. Dog stood on two legs beside him. "What you got in here?"

Simp stirred his two-by-four in the water as if trying to clear it and said, "Dinner." He hadn't bothered to remove his jeans when he slid into the tank and Hobble suspected a pair of shoes was also sucking about the muck in the bottom. Charlie tried to explain. "Foyd keeps his cats in here after he catches them. They taste a little better after swimming around in here for a week or two. Washes some of that muskiness out of them they get from the inlet up in Nebraska."

The ring of a bullet ricocheting off the bluff to the north reminded Charlie of why he was there. "What's this shootin' about anyway?"

Foyd curled the net around the aluminum frame and rested it across the trusses on the windmill. "Can't say for sure, but this group over here," and he pointed north, "is taking pot shots at that bunch over there," and he pointed to the opposite bluff.

"But not at you?" Charlie asked. "They're not shooting at you?"

"Never said they was. I just called you out here to get them to stop. It's getting annoysome. Upset my hogs and they run off."

Charlie looked to the north bluff, shading his eyes. A head rose cautiously, then turned its eyes toward him or his truck. When a hand rose cautiously to the side of the head and waved, he knew the eyes were looking at him. Just then a puff of sand burst from the side of the bluff, followed by the puny report of a rifle from the other side of the draw.

"Not really trying to hit anyone, are they?" Charlie said.

Foyd agreed. "Doesn't appear so. Least wise if they were shooting at me, I wouldn't mind them going at it all day long. Might keep the flies away. But with them trying to not hit each other I'm a little worried just where the lead might skip about."

"So they're just trying to keep each other at bay, is that what it looks like?"

"I'd have to agree," Foyd said.

"Well why did they pick this spot to try and not shoot each other?"

Foyd didn't answer right off. He motioned for Simp to climb out of the tank. When he lifted his foot over the side to place it on the ground, Hobble saw that his suspicion had been justified. "Near as I can figure, I think they both want my rocks."

"Rocks?"

"Yep," Foyd pointed to a tumbled down out building. "Started appearing in there one morning. I, of course, put them to good use. Haven't found much that can't be put to some use."

Charlie made note of the shell of an old car some chickens were pecking about or nesting in. Chickens without brains. Still, the shell was some protection against coyotes and skunks.

"At first," Foyd continued, "the rocks only appeared in the shed, but once I started putting Simp to building a fence the piles started showing up there." This

time he pointed to a line of stones piled outside the fence on the opposite side of the corral from where they stood. Two or three wheel barrow loads had been dumped there so as to be handy to Simp's reach. "Once the rock wall is up Simp can pull down the rails for firewood."

"Who," Hobble was nearly afraid to ask, "is delivering these rocks for you?"

Foyd shook his head. "Can't rightly say. I heard him out there in the shed that first night but had better sense than to go have a look. Morning would be soon enough. After that, I could care less who's bringing them so long as they keep a comin'."

A head poked up above the horizon on the south side of Foyd's place but bobbed back down as soon as the report sounded from the opposite bank.

"That dirt flew mighty peculiar," Charlie commented to himself and looked back over his shoulder to the way he had come in. "Almost as if it came from that direction."

"There's three parties," Foyd nodded. "This group here," he pointed north, "shoots at that group over there," he pointed south. "And that group shoots at those fellows over there," he pointed back north. "But this bunch over here," he turned and pointed where Charlie had been looking, "shoots at both."

"But I had to have driven right past them."

"Ain't interested in us," Foyd said. "We're either out of season or don't taste good." Hoping, he peered back into the cattle tank.

While Charlie questioned Foyd, Hobble and Dog walked around the rail and post corral and inspected Simp's construction project. Dog used his nose mostly, but Hobble used his eyes. That's how he discovered the cause of the shooting. To make sure, he kicked through the sand to the out building where the stones had first appeared and then did a half circle of the house. It was the kind of house that when

the Splinters finally vacated, the cattle would move in. Either it had been trashed before the Splinters moved in or they had done the trashing--or possibly, the place was just a pulled-in conglomeration of already trashed structures that Foyd had shoved together and then nailed, having first directed Simp to straightened the nails.

"I've got it figured, Charlie," he said when he completed the circle back to the cattle tank. "Wheelbarrow tracks."

"Of course there's wheelbarrow tracks. You don't think Manemann carried the rocks in here piece by piece, do you?"

Hobble swallowed and waited, knowing Charlie's impatience was caused by his diminished ration of coffee that morning and by the Splinters themselves who seemed only mildly interested in the matter. "It's not just wheelbarrow tracks, Charlie. It's the number and where they come from."

"How do you mean?" Charlie's demeanor showed that he realized he had been short.

"They come from three directions." Hobble pointed in the same three directions Foyd had. "Those three groups are all looking for Manemann. They've followed separate tracks and have arrived here at about the same time, at least soon enough to start shooting at each other if they try to come to near the house."

Charlie was warming to the idea. "What's so special about the house?"

"They think Manemann is in there."

"Is anybody," Charlie turned to Foyd, "in your house."

"Just the misses."

"Mind if we take a look?"

"It might be a little messy," Foyd apologized in advance, "what with our not knowing you were coming and all. But no Waggles has ever been refused entrance by any member of my family or by my wife's."

Charlie knew that for a fact, although some of those visits and invites had required a search warrant, neither Foyd nor his wife's families ever having earned an honest buck while one could be picked up off someone else's floor or out of someone else's drawer.

Foyd and his boy shuffled toward the house, but Charlie held up a finger for silence and stillness. He was still standing beside the cattle tank and was now looking down into the depths. The finger he had held in the air slowly lowered to the surface of the water until it was wet. Then the unbuttoned cuff became soaked as he slowly lowered his arm into the tank. When his shoulder was wet, he lowered his eyes until they were beneath the surface of the water. For an instant he remained poised. When he moved, the motion was short and brief, almost as if he hadn't moved at all, only the viewer having blinked instead.

His face bobbed into the water to his ears and then rose slowly until his nose was clear. He held that position for a moment, the water streaming briefly from his nose and hair. Then he righted himself slowly and brought up his entire arm, at the end of which was a large catfish, a five or six pounder. He was holding it with his thumb and forefinger either side and in front of the sharp lateral fins. The remainder of the hand encircled the fish.

"A channel cat," he said, holding it at eye level and inspecting its notched tail. "Catch this at McConaughy?"

"The boy did," Foyd called back. "Bring it on in and I'll get the misses to look after it."

En route to the house, Hobble sidled up to Charlie. "Is the name Simp short for what I think?"

"He's named after his wife's family," Charlie explained. "They were the Simpsons. His name is Simpson Splinter. Of course, Simpson and *simpleton* have been synonyms in these parts for some time."

The inside of the house was what was expected, in spite of Simp holding the door open for them like a doorman. What had been wood was still wood, unadorned by anything to hide its third and dunnage-grade quality. Some of the lumber, the better quality, was salvaged from freighting pallets. The furniture had been refused by the Salvation Army truck and dumped by the side of a convenient road where the Splinters rescued it. The rats nesting inside were a plus. They provided brief--if fleeting--meals for the cats that used to haunt the out buildings and the house before the King arrived.

The King, Simba as Foyd called him but Big Simba as Simp corrected, reigned over all he surveyed from the back of the divan. What he surveyed was the strip of sand that led up the draw and out onto the prairie beyond. Had he wished, he could have glanced sideways at two of the three combatants outside, but he deigned otherwise. He refused, even, to acknowledge Dog's present as he sniffed suspiciously at the couch that was Simba's throne.

"In there, Charlie," Foyd instructed and pointed to the kitchen sink which was dwarfed by the hand pump towering over it. Foyd watched Charlie lay the fish into the sink before calling to his wife. "Sable," he yelled. "Charlie just put that catfish in the sink. You get right at it, now."

"I will shortly," she called from one of the boxes tacked onto Simba's throne room. "How you doin', Charlie?"

Charlie was busy pumping water over the fish but paused in his effort to call back into her room. "Doin' just fine, Sable. You don't need to hurry yourself now. I just pumped some water over it so it'll stay fresh a good while now."

He didn't want her to come out. He didn't even want her to try. He wasn't altogether sure asking her to clean the fish wasn't just a ruse to make Charlie believe she could still walk. The last time Charlie had been out to the Splinter place was to pull her up out of the floor. She had busted the scantlings clean in two and was wedged between the floor joists, if bowed two-by-fours could be called joists just because they were used as such. The rescue crew had used block and tackle to hoist her out and had to brace the rafters they used at that. It was a sight that would have made Richard Simmons cry but which would have fascinated a basic engineering class.

Outside, the occasional rifle report sounded. Even those bursts seemed bored by the effort.

Hobble inched up to Charlie while Foyd pretended to tidy up with a bristleless broom. "He's not in here," he whispered, meaning Manemann.

"And you thought he was?"

"Just had to make sure." Hobble motioned for Charlie to lower his voice. "I peeked into all of the rooms on the off chance that he might be. I mean the men outside might have been following something other than tracks." Before he spoke again, he paused to make sure that Foyd, or his son who was standing in the back doorway watching his father's efforts, couldn't hear. "Have you seen the size of that woman?"

Charlie picked at his teeth with a big finger. "That in there's nothing. You should have seen her mother. Now there was a big woman."

"But how does she get to the bathroom?" he asked. And then he asked, "Where is the bathroom?"

"You tell me. You walked past it on your inspection earlier."

"But how does she--"

"Who says she does."

Suddenly the smell of fish wasn't the only assault to Hobble's nostrils.

"Now if you're lookin' for a good story, Hobble, why don't you just hang around with these folks and watch them for a while. Could be interesting the way they choose to solve problems, problems like going to the bathroom when you can't even fit through a bedroom doorway. You might even want to watch Simp wash his mama. Go on, now. Find yourself a place there on the couch and sit a spell. I'll come back later and pick you up."

Hobble quickly lost interest in the project. Every item in the house suddenly became suspect. What were the stacks of old newspapers for? These people didn't seem the type to read. And the metal pail outside her room. What was that meant to hold? And the doily on the arm of the couch. How, he wondered, had he even been able to recognize it as a doily? It looked as if it had been wrapped around a pipe and used to unplug the grease trap in a house that actually had a plumbing system. And then, after its use, it had been plopped onto the arm of the couch. That portion of the arm was relatively unworn, but who in any state of mind would rest an arm on that doily? Maybe it wasn't a doily at all. Maybe it was something the cat had heaved up.

Hobble shook his head to clear the train of thought. He was obsessing, not a good sign in someone in line to receive the Ultima Thule.

"Simp? Get in here and take this cat away with you. I've got some cleaning to do." Foyd threatened the cat with the bristleless broom to no effect.



Simp shuffled into the room, but before he could get to the cat its demeanor changed entirely. Instead of lounging royally, oblivious to everything save its own needs and whims, it suddenly stiffened and its eyes grew intent on a moving speck out on the prairie. His tail rose and slapped, rose and slapped, rose and slapped, rose. . . . Suddenly the four-legged monarch sprang for the curtain rod above just as a missile exploded through the window, scattering glass and curtain and rod and curtain rod nails and cat and doily before exiting the back screen door that Simp had recently vacated. The boy was now flattened against the hallway wall and if his shirt had held any buttons before the sudden intrusion, it didn't after.

Foyd was the first to the back door to watch whatever it was disappear down the draw and off onto the prairie in that direction. All three of the warring faction on the bluffs above took advantage of the opportunity to practice their marksmanship on whatever the object had been.

Foyd watched until he couldn't see the traveling object any longer. "That was somewhat out of the usual," he observed.

"More than uncommon odd," Charlie agreed.

"But," Hobble insisted on knowing, "was it?"

"If I'm not mistaken," Charlie told him, "you've just seen the phantom wheel, tire and wheel actually. It's fabled in these parts."

"A wheel?"

"Most children in these parts wouldn't go to bed on time or do their chores if it wasn't for that phantom wheel and the threat that it'll crash through their window and get them, or maybe run them down on the prairie. They're afraid to go down to the road alone to check the mail box in broad daylight."

"A phantom wheel?"

"Off a '52 Jeepster If I remember the story correctly."

"This. . ." Hobble tried to spit it out, ". . . is one of your tall tales. Right?"

"Hard to tell if it's as you say or if it's something that's real. I can't always tell when I open my mouth. Yours ain't the only family in these parts with a touch of the odd."

Foyd, who wouldn't know odd if it bit him, couldn't be bothered with the story. "Simp? Get out there to the shed and see if you can find enough scrap lumber to cover up that window hole for a spell. There's a coffee can of rusted nails out there somewhere you can use. Some of them are pretty straight. Those that ain't you can fix."

Charlie knew that when Foyd said for a spell it was a spell that wouldn't be broken even by the crack of doom. If the King Simba was lucky, Simp would leave him a sliver of space through which to view his kingdom, if he could squint that narrow.

Charlie motioned to Hobble. "Let's get out of here. These men have work to do." He trod back to his pickup, but instead of getting in, as Hobble had expected, he reached to the lower dash and brought back a microphone on a curly cord. "Talk into this."

"Me?" Hobble pointed to his own chest. He was sure Charlie had to be addressing someone standing behind him.

"Those that won't believe me might just believe you. Tell 'em."

"Tell them what?"

"That Manemann's not here. What'd you think I wanted, for you to tell them the price of catfish?"

Suddenly not trusting Charlie, Hobble inched around the engine of the Jeep and took the mic from his hand. "Guys," he said, and his voice issued from the speakers behind the grill, "Manemann isn't here. I checked every room. These

people haven't even seen him. Don't know what he looks like or where he comes from. Okay? So stop shooting at each other?"

Groups of heads popped up on both sides of the wash. Two of the groups nodded and acted as if they were going to disappear back onto the prairie as the wheel had done. The third, however, balked. "How do we know you're not lying, Hobble?"

Charlie relieved Hobble of the mic. "Because," he turned to the renegade heads, "if he had been in there I would have hauled his skinny ass out of there and thrown him into jail and been done with this whole nonsense. Now you get out of there and back to where ever you came from or I'll come up there and do some persuadin'."

They grumbled, but complied. It was easy to tell when Charlie was telling the truth. Even dogs stood at attention and saluted his veracity with their tails. Dog, the single exception, sat placidly on the Jeep's hood.

Charlie replaced the mic in its holder, but instead of crawling behind the wheel, he circled back in front of the engine and walked over to the cattle tank. Wondering if he was going to catch another catfish, Hobble walked over and stood beside him.

In one motion, Charlie grabbed Hobble's belt with one hand and his shoulder with the other, lifted him off the ground and thrust him, too paralyzed to struggle, into the tank and held him under the water. He held him there for fifteen seconds. Methodically, Charlie raised Hobble, ignored his yelling, and plunged him under a second time. On the third cycle Charlie advised him to, "Open your mouth to breathe. Stop trying to talk. I'll give you ample opportunity once I've washed the lies out of you." After the fifth dunking, and sure that Hobble had swallowed at

least a little water, Charlie returned him to his feet beside the cattle tank, but Hobble's legs wobbled and he sat back on the tank's edge.

"About that two-sided Clovis coin," Charlie began, "I asked you at the time if it was going to end up standing on its edge and you assured me to the contrary."

"What are you talking about?" Hobble breathed heavily, but he was poised, expectant. He pushed his wet hair back and blew the water dripping from his upper lip into space.

"I'm talking about the third party of sharpshooters up here." He pointed to one of the bluffs. "You said one group wants the Ultima Thule and the other is bent on protecting it and passing it along to the next victim."

"So?"

Charlie reached for Hobble's belt and shoulder again, but he sprang back.

"Okay, okay. I'll tell you. It's just a little more complicated, that's all. The other group wants the Ultima Thule, too."

"Then why ain't they sided with the other group against the first group. Looked to me like they were shootin' at both."

"They want it because of what may be engraved into the back of the Daguerreotype, into the copper."

"They don't want to sell the picture?"

"Not really, though they might after they got the information off the back." Hobble looked at the bluffs as if he were afraid some the renegades might be listening.

"Go on."

"Some people think that the location of the Clovis archives is etched into the back. A map. With it they could raid the archives--the sacred archives, if you wish, and make the history of our people public."

"What the devil could it contain that they'd want?"

Hobble was growing weaker from his experience and from his confession. Before his legs started to shake too noticeably, he left the edge of the cattle tank and sat on the running board of the Jeep. "Once our people learned to write," he began, "really write, they recorded all the oral history our people could remember. Everything. And I mean everything. Husbandry implies--requires--meticulousness, if you get my drift. It's all there, a complete history--our version at least--of the past fifteen to twenty thousand years."

"Where'd you say this place was?"

"I didn't, but tradition has that it is a cave, a concealed cave somewhere east of the Mississippi. Its whereabouts is known only to a very few and I mean a very secret few. Besides maintaining it, they take an oath to die rather than to reveal its whereabouts."

"Then why not go after one of these guys or follow him around until he leads you to the cave?"

"It's a secret society, so secret that no one knows who's in it. Maybe it doesn't even exist. Maybe everything I've just told you is nothing but baseless legend. Remember, storytelling is one of our weaknesses."

Charlie pushed his hat back, folded his arms, and leaned back against the tank. "If it's so secret then, why go and carve a map into the back of the Ultima Thule?"

Hobble agreed. "It doesn't make good sense. Maybe it's just another Lost Dutchman Mine map. Wishful thinking. But the rumor has been persistent. Only recently has anyone been more than passingly interested in the cave. I mean, yes, they would like to know the history--at least our version of it, but then we have that desire to blend in. Survival is only possible through assimilation, you remember."

". . .but," Charlie encouraged. "You're trying to work up to something. Spit it out."

"Indian gaming."

"The word is gambling," Charlie corrected. "But what's that got to do about anything?"

Hobble looked up with a half laugh on his face. He wished he could be as innocent of events as Charlie. "Charlie, if our history was disclosed, and believed, where do you think that would place the American Indian and his gambling? How could the government allow gambling to flourish in one spot and not another--especially when the other group, the Clovis, has prior claim to the land. And the very land the reservations themselves are on were taken from the Clovis.

"And if you remember, Charlie, the Canadian government is allowing oral history--really just folklore--from its Indians to stand in court, what they call revealed truths, or as we prefer, convenient memories. Land is being given for oral tradition. Can you imagine what clout the Clovis could have with a complete history. Not just a few silly, childish legends--no births from hollow logs or transmogrifications from buffalo or bear to children. No lightning brothers or corn gods, but real, solid, believable history. Details of living, herding, growing, conquests and failures--a linear history that stretches in hundred-year periods for twenty-thousand years. Word-for-word passed down narratives whose lengths made memorization of the Odyssey seem puny by comparison."

"I'd have to agree it'd be a site more engrossing than any of those tales you've told me, but could you be a little more to the point?"

"That third group wants to expose the Clovis in order to gain title to vast tracks of land--massive, continent-wide tracts. Acreage enough to make all of the Indian reservations combined seem tiny. How can the government give--or

allocate through intimidation and misplaced guilt--to one group and not to the other, especially when the other was here first and persecuted by the present title holders. And here's the kicker, I don't think the group that wants to expose the Clovis really cares much about acquiring the vast tracts of land. I think they would be satisfied with a few acres and gambling rights."

Charlie took his hat off and dipped his head in the tank. Both his head and the temperature of the air were rising. When he had finished soaking it well, he turned and shook his head before replacing the hat. "I always knew Indian Gambling would bring no good." Then he was silent, thinking. "You know," he said finally, "if I was those fellas wanting to expose the Clovis, I think I'd settle for the royalties on the history and forget about dispossessing the Indians and whoever else's land they could lay claim to."

The idea sounded good to Hobble.

After further thought, Charlie tried to put the problem into a nutshell. "Okay, we have three groups. One wants to protect the Ultima Thule, keep the Clovis history quiet, and protect the next storyteller. The other group doesn't want to out the Clovis but wants the picture for the money it could bring, immediate profits. The last group wants the whole shebang."

Hobble nodded.

"And where do you fit into the three?"

"Obviously with the first. I've no sympathy with the second. But the third appeals to the rebel in me. I mean it would be a good story. And I, too, would like to see the history. All any of us has ever seen is a very short summary, kind of on a need to know basis. No one seems to know where these histories originate, but they make it from family to family with remarkable speed. The letters you've been getting are a perversion of the history."

While Charlie leaned against the tank, trying to figure out what to do next, one of Foyd's missing hogs returned and began rooting in the mud and spill at the edge of the tank. Only when it put its dirty snout on Charlie's pant leg did he kick it, causing it to squeal like a contra-tenor and scoot for what might eventually be its stone pen.

Dog gave one yip just to make sure it kept moving.

"Well, it seems clear at last. . . if it hasn't always been," Charlie mused for Hobbie to hear. "If I'm going to keep your people from accidentally shooting each other, I'm going to have to find this Manemann fella, or whatever his name is, and get him out of the country or at least into the hands of the right groups."

"I thought that was what we'd been trying to do all along."

Charlie motioned for Hobbie to get off the running board so he could open his door. "It was. But now I'll have to put a little more effort into it. Be what the city fellas call proactive--although I had always thought that it was just a description of a prostitute walking her beat."

"You've failed thus far. What are you going to do now that's different?"

"I'm going to take your advice and follow the tracks."

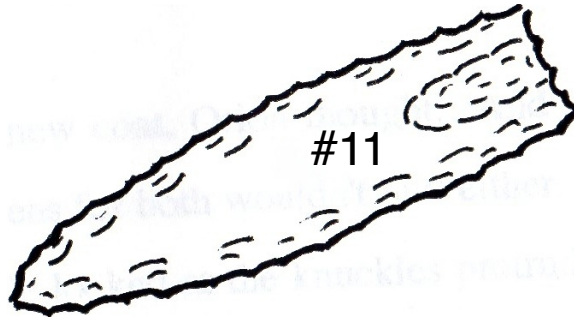
"What tracks?"

"The wheelbarrow's, of course. You were bright enough to figure that's how the three groups homed in on the Splinter place. I've know it all along but just been puttin' it off."

"Why would you put it off when you knew it was important, that it was probably the only way to find him?"

"That's easy to answer. I don't cotton much to flyin'."





*. . . It was amazing how quickly they became habituated to the little they gleaned from us, and expected to keep gleaning. Picking a stray bone from our refuse pile was okay, but eventually they moved into our cooking areas and squatted just outside the ring of heat, sniffing like wolves testing the winds. Whoever was the first to actually toss a scrap in their direction is not know, but it would have taken a Christ to feed the multitudes that morsel attracted. Not only did they insist that we should continue feeding them, they began hounding our medicine men as well and developed the irritating habit of peering into our abodes as if looking for a vacant spot to lie down on.*

*We fled from them, but. . .*

*No matter where we fled, it became necessary to establish a perimeter to keep them out. Using what scraps they could find, they would pile up shelters along the border--often using one of our walls as the only solid portion of their structure. Where they chose to live, and appeared contented, we would have thought inadequate for our stock. One thing amazing about these homes was that they seemed unable to build a structure so small that only one family would live in it.*

*Some might have described this clustering as an extended family, but in reality the attraction was that of the ship's hull for the barnacle.*

*It was about this time that we noted their birthrate. Whereas our women, could produce a child only every third year at best--the two-year nursing period apparently acting as a contraceptive--their women seemingly had a child every nine months and nine minutes. In a very short time their hovels covered an area much larger than our own village and housed many more.*

*What was coming was obvious. Soon, our leavings and the little work we could create for them, would not be enough. They wished to live as well as we, but they didn't wish to build such a world for themselves.*

*They wanted ours. And we were in the way. . . .*

## Day 118: Fear of Acrobats

The strips of brown-gold wheat stubble, the patches of yellow oil sunflowers--their large, heavy heads now permanently nodding to the east--, the blankets of alfalfa, and the graying Tootsie roll-shaped bales of wheatgrass in the mown county road right-of-ways were not simply beautiful: They were inspirational. Spiritual even. But Charlie was not humming hymns of thanksgiving. If anything but anguish issued from between his clenched teeth it was a question to God: Why, he wanted to know, did he have to get himself up into an airplane to see such beauty. Actually it was two questions. The second question was why did Kinabe

insist on an open cockpit aircraft when the rest of the industry had gone to enclosed. Kinabe was a low level aerial applicator--crop duster for those who still spoke English.

"New plane. You likey?" Kinabe yelled his question at Charlie from the rear pilot's pit of the low-winged aircraft. Though both he and his parents had been born in Kimball, Nebraska, Kinabe spoke like a Kamikaze pilot in a World War II movie when he wanted to tease Charlie. "We be over the buttes chop chop." Sometimes he got his movie Japanese tangled up with his movie Chinese. Regardless, it did a beautiful job of irritating.

"Do we have to be up so high?"

Kinabe nosed the plane down to a corn field, the wheels of the plane slapping the tassels and sending the pollen aloft in misty, swirling clouds of yellow.

"Pull up, pull up," Charlie yelled. "The power lines."

Kinabe hopped the plane over the lines and the road they paralleled and settled inches above an alfalfa field on the other side. "I mow field for farmer, okay, Charlie?"

"The power lines," Charlie sang out again. How Charlie saw the lines had to have been by intuition, for he had sunk into his seat and all that remained for Kinabe to yell at was a straw cowboy hat with two hands holding it on.

"You sissie boy, Charlie."

Charlie felt the plane hop again but this time it didn't dip as far back toward earth. Feeling a little more secure, he rose slowly from his seat, his head and neck stretching like a turtle cautiously leaving its carapace. "Thunderation," he had just time enough to scream before ducking again. How they had missed the spinning blades of that windmill he couldn't fathom. They had been so close he could have counted the bullet holes in its vane.

"You no likey low, Chalie?"

One of Chalie's hands left his hat to point aloft. "Higher. Much higher."

"Okie dokie."

Kinabe didn't have to raise the plane; the ground fell away from it as they left the fertile uplands of Nebraska and sailed south out over the ancient sea that was now the Pawnee National Grasslands of Colorado. No imagination was required to discover the sea that had covered the area thirty and forty and fifty million years ago. The terrain below was a massive flat bottomed bowl etched by erosion until it looked like the palm of an old man's hand, a working man's hand.

A few remnants of that ancient sea bed had yet to be eroded completely away, prominent among those being the Pawnee Buttes, the geographic and spiritual center of the grasslands. They jutted imperially--or as the good ladies of Sligo insisted, obscenely--above the buffalo and grama grass prairie surrounding them. If they were the twin navels of the world, as the romantic suggested, they were outies. If they were the teepees of the gods, as others averred, they lacked smoke holes and entrance flaps and were not nearly so ornamental as their nomadic Indian models. To the grand dames of Sligo they looked like what every early cowboy and drover called them--breasts, when they were in polite company. Teats, if they were among farmers. And tetons, when they thought they were being clever. The early French trappers knew how to name geographic features, and had it not been for their christening the jutting mountains in northwestern Wyoming the Grand Tetons, the buttes themselves might have worn that title. Big Tits, as the French is properly translated, was as accurate a description as possible.

James Mitchenor, when he wrote of the same buttes in his novel *Centennial*, called them Rattlesnake Buttes. But he was seeking a different audience.

"What we look for, Chalie?"

"Wheelbarrow tracks," Charlie yelled into the dash in front of him. He was still too cautious to sit completely erect and to look over the side of the plane. "Keep to the fence lines where most of the cattle trails are. I think the man I'm looking for has been using them. It would make sense. They're good straight paths and if there are cattle still in the fields the wheelbarrow marks would be obliterated in a few days."

Charlie and Kinabe instinctively knew what most Americans didn't--that cattle, when they were headed someplace, marched in single file and as straight toward their destination as possible. The movie depictions of cattle being driven, amorphous herds milling ahead of the drovers, sullied the truth. Even the cattle on the old drives from Texas tended to travel single file, or nearly so. The trails--The Goodnight/Texas trail in the case of the buttes--was very easy to spot and to follow.

Like all such trails it looked like a dry, narrow river--no more than a gully--its banks rising four to five feet on each side. This trail instinct continued into the more domestic herds, and cattle on the grasslands tended to follow the fence lines when they were moving toward water or new pasture. From above these straight lines looked like human footpaths, laid out for exploring the prairie. If a path left a fence line and angled across the prairie, it was a safe bet that over the next rise or the one following was a water tank and a windmill. The seasoned foot passenger on the prairie followed these trails when they wished to make time, for all obstacles to travel had long ago been worn down by the cattle's hoofs.

"I have go low again, Chalie. Otherwise no see wheel track."

This brought Charlie out of his crouch. "Oh, no you don't. You stay right up here." He pulled a pair of binoculars from the pouch at his waist for Kinabe to see. "You just fly where I tell you to--and keep it high--and I'll do the looking."

"Whatever you say, Charlie." It was time to go to work, time to drop his phony syntax and his aversion to the letter R.

Charlie adjusted the binoculars to his eyes and turned as much as possible to look slightly backwards. The wing didn't allow him to look forward or straight down as he would have preferred. "The rocks at Splitters's place and in the silo and the old school house were all west of the buttes, almost an exact two-mile radius from them in fact. "I have a hunch we might spot some tracks between those spots and the buttes."

Charlie pointed to the directions of the three locations he had mentioned and instructed Kinabe to start his sweeps along those lines about two miles out and to gradually decrease the distance until they reached the buttes.

What the few ranchers they flew over thought about the plane, Charlie didn't care, but out of their houses they came and looked to the sky beneath shading palms or pulled down hat brims. Naturally sociable, Charlie waved at them and--not knowing what else to do--the ranchers, their wives, and their kids waved back.

The dogs barked.

All of them had seen crop dusting planes before: they were distinctive, being stubby with short, broad wings, and this one was painted yellow, a bright yellow like the swoosh on most of the shoes the kids wore. What they hadn't seen before was Charlie sitting in the front seat of one of those planes. He was easily recognizable to the ranchers and their families because Kinabe insisted on buzzing their barns, being sociable himself. Oddly, the friendly, waving Charlie disappeared from his front seat about the time the plane reached windmill height.

The dogs danced in delight.

Once the plane reached sufficient altitude, Charlie could tell when because the roar of the engine stopped reverberating back from the ground, he inched up from

his seat until he could just poke the binoculars over the side. What he finally discovered, once Kinabe became a help and not a hindrance, was that three paths of wheelbarrow marks did lead into the Splinter place, but from above he was able to see that--once they returned to the road--they eventually converged at the corner of a section where they disappeared onto a cow trail that paralleled a fence line. The trail pointed directly toward the buttes.

"Forget the sweep, Kinabe. Try to follow that trail below and any likely trail that seems to be angling east toward the buttes."

The trail, where it was visible, was surprisingly easy to follow, being a long ribbon with one dark edge where the sun was shadowed, but on those portions where the cattle had since trod, the trail was hopeless.

"Why move rock?" Kinabe's fake accent was a recurring infection and he didn't always know when he was employing it.

Charlie lowered his binoculars to explain. "I'm guessing he's dug a cave out here somewhere and has been trying to hide the evidence. Otherwise he'd have a big slag heap at the mouth and anyone could find it."

"Must have big wheelbarrow."

"I think it's normal sized. What isn't normal is this man's insane energy. I suspect he never walks when he can jog. If he sleeps he probably does so while standing--like a horse."

"Maybe he work in sleep."

"From what I've heard I wouldn't be surprised."

As he spoke a windmill passed beneath them. What was odd about it was its size. It was short like the windmill on the main street of Hyannis, Nebraska, but here on the Colorado prairie it was probably too short by half. Also, it was erected in a swale instead of on a rise. True, it was at the top of a cliff that rose from the

erosion around the buttes. Breezes tended to sweep up such landscapes. But even more odd was that it lacked a tank to collect the water it might draw. And the wheel was spinning, and the rod was pumping, and. . .

. . .there was no casing. At least none that he could see. No pipe for the rod to probe. Instead, the rod descended into a hole in the rock substrate that appeared, from Charlie's height, to be two or three feet in diameter.

"Bring her around, Kinabe. I want another look."

When Kinabe banked aerobatically and pulled the G-forces of the roller coaster in Denver, Charlie was too occupied to notice. He kept turning his head to get the best view.

Coming head on at the windmill, Charlie could see a clutch of cedars just below the edge of the cliff. They were on a ledge more than wide enough for a good camping spot, and the cliff face behind the trees could have supported the mouth of a good sized cave. Additionally suggestive, was a path that led from the top to the ledge.

The final proof was the small mill on the edge of the cliff that Charlie had not seen at the first pass. It's single, knife-like propeller chopped the air, spinning the gears of the generator behind it. Whoever was in the cave was using direct electric current from a wind generator.

"Take me back to Kimball," he yelled over his shoulder to Kinabe. "No, on second thought, drop me off on the county highway, you know, Weld 390."

"You no want go back to you truck in Kimball?"

"No," Charlie yelled. "I've lived this long and don't care to push my luck--or your sanity. Just put me down anywhere on the road. I'll hitch into Sligo from there."

"I put you down on main street Sligo."



Charlie pictured climbing out of the plane and striding nonchalantly to his usual seat in the Quonset Cafe, but decided not to push his luck even six or seven miles farther. "Right down there'll do fine." Hobble would drive him to Kimball to pick up his truck, he figured. After all, he was keeping Dog. That should be reward enough.

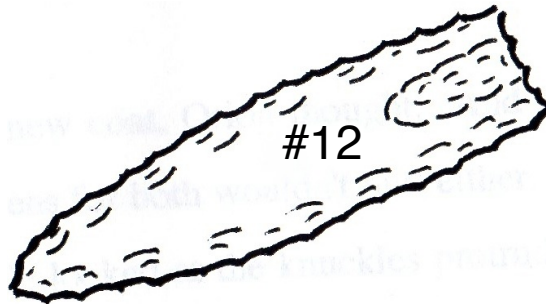
With his feet firmly on the gravel, Charlie turned his back to the hurricane of dust as Kinabe took off north for Kimball. Coming at him from the opposite direction was another hurricane, a cloud of dust and disgust for the law that could only be a dead-heading cattle truck. Charlie stood in the middle of the road and smiled as the driver threw air into the brakes and down shifted frantically, the empty trailer flopping like a fish tail behind the tractor.

Once stopped, and positive he was under arrest for any of a thousand offenses he had committed in the last fifty miles, the trucker lowered his window and started reaching for his license, registration and doctored logbook.

Charlie tried to place his shoe on the running board but couldn't reach that high and gave up. "How about a lift into Sligo," he asked, smiling as innocently as only Charlie could.

"Sure."

It was the slowest six miles of the trucker's life, except for the day he had been roped into driving a hearse in one of those parades designed to obstruct people who are actually going somewhere.



*From the Old World we had brought that which to us was both gold and god--Ocher. Medicine, message from and to the gods, a tool. What more could be wanted in something so strikingly different from the green and earthen world we inhabited. Had it not been pliable, malleable, soluble, it might have remained simply an ornament rather than that which we almost worshiped.*

*Why did we discontinue its use? Knowing the answer, I shutter.*

*Very early we made a powder of the iron ore now known as haematite--our basic ocher. Medicinally, we used it to staunch bleeding. Additionally, it proved effective in repelling insects when applied as a paste. On any wound it promoted healing. It was also the chief ingredient in our rock paintings. (Never did we permanently deface a rock. That desecration--known today at pictographs and petroglyphs--was caused by you-know-who. Though anthropologists attempt to find meaning in these rock doodlings, there was none--no more than in the post-World War II appearance of Killroy Was Here. Whenever we discovered these desecrations, all we could think was: There goes the neighborhood.)*

*And, after first cleaning the hide, the ocher was used as a tanning agent. And, once cured, it was used to adorn that hide.*

*A bowl of the dry power was present in most domiciles. Some mothers would moisten their fingers in their mouths, poke it into the dry powder, and anoint the forehead of the child who had been well behaved or who had performed an admirable service. It was a mark of distinction--never sullied. Ocher was god. No child would anoint himself, so revered was the mark.*

*We had other colors for our rock art, brother ores to the haematite. Yellow came from the goethite and brown from the limonite. Baking of any of the three could produce other colors.*

*Then a bowl of ocher (they had never before seen a pottery bowl) was given to them. It was covered by a woven hemp cloth to keep it from blowing. (They had never seen weaving and were curious as to what animal the skin had come from.) Carefully, kindly, meticulously, altruistically, they were instructed in the uses of ocher. They treasured the bowl into their nakedness and disappeared into the night.*

*Gifts should be given wisely or not at all.*

*The next morning hideous masks of their faces appeared from behind trees and rocks as they attempted to scare us. They ran about like children experiencing their first Halloween. Their faces were covered with the ocher. Far from using it sparingly and medicinally, they looked much like the black-faced Negro minstrels of the later 1800's. If one had held a pair of bones and another a tambourine, there would have been no dispute as to which was Mr. Bones and who was Mr. Tambo. They had dispensed with the white-faced Interlocutor, of course, because none of them had a clue as to an answer.*

*Had it stopped there we could have continued our use of ocher. But it didn't stop there. Knowing that we buried our dead with bowls of ocher, they disinterred*

*our graves and smeared their faces with our sacraments. And, since they had become like fleas in a dog pound, we couldn't protect our burial sites.*

*In the end, we had to abandon our god, our gold, our tool. It is the old story of killing the thing you love to keep it from the sullyng hands of the infidel. Soon, they would find another color that they favored much more than our ocher orange: It was the red of our blood. . . .*

## Day 119: The Main Man, at Last

Manemann had followed the old axiom: hide in plain sight. Even if he had been unfamiliar with the saying he had certainly read, probably memorized, Poe's "Purloined Letter," the theme of which was identical.

"But this is the road into the Pawnee Buttes," Hobble protested as Charlie turned from Road 112 onto the Forest Service road that led to the visitors' areas. "Are you telling me he's out here on public lands where everybody hikes and anyone could stumble across him?"

"He's a little cleverer than that," was all Charlie said. At the first windmill he turned left and passed the parking lot for hikers and the public hole-in-the-ground toilets that people used only if others were watching. Next along the road was the scenic overlook that presented the buttes at their mammillary best. This was the end of the line, though in pre-tourist days the road extended a half mile farther to the end of the finger of land that poked out in to the ancient sea.

Ignoring the signs prohibiting it, Charlie pulled onto the buffalo grass and followed the hiking trail to the point. Even this sanctioned trail was closed March through June to protect the nesting raptors on the cliffs below. When he reached the end of the finger, Charlie parked the Jeep directly in front of a brown-painted sign supported between two posts that read: Private Land Ahead / Respect Owner's Rights. To get to that private land, probably just leased land, hikers would have to find a way down the cliff face, a prospect that kept most of them obedient to the sign. The terrain wasn't all that unlike the fjords in Norway. The finger of land Charlie and Hobble were on was the land; the cavernous erosion on either side of it was the water.

"There you go," Charlie pointed.

Hobble looked across the dry fjord to the other finger of land. "A windmill. What of it?"

"It's a windmill perfectly on the line between public and private land. A Ranger seeing that mill would probably think it belonged to the rancher. The rancher would probably wonder what foolish notion caused the Forest Service to put a mill there. There's no fence at this point and only those flimsy plastic laths show the boundary." Charlie pointed to one of the markers, its orange strip of reflective tape near the top swaying with the breeze. The property line near the "private property" sign was easy to follow, but as the line descended the cliff face and crossed the erosion below it became less distinct and finally disappeared. Where the boundary climbed the cliff on the opposite side Charlie couldn't tell. The plastic laths had mysteriously disappeared or were impossible to spot from where he stood.

Hobble studied the opposite cliff face, really a curving ribbon of rock and sand that jutted out here and wrapped back there, providing any number of nooks

and crannies where a cave could be hidden. Some of the erosions along the face were large enough to hide vehicles or tents. A few could have swallowed football fields. The smaller ones had occasionally been used as dumps by the early settlers, but bottle hunters and other scavengers were forbidden by law to forage through them as any object that was over fifty years old on the grassland was considered an historic artifact, even the broken crockery with the blue whirligigs that used to be everywhere.

After absorbing the view, Hobble dropped his hand from his forehead. "I see the windmill," he asked, "but where's the cave?"

Charlie pointed to the windmill and then dropped his finger to the wind powered generator. "If I had to guess I'd say it's just behind that choke of cedars, to the left and below the little mill."

Most of the larger arroyos that fell from the cliffs were choked with the cedars, one of the few shelters where they could find respite from the wind and a little collected moisture as well. "Are we just going to walk in?"

"I have a suspicion he's expecting us. If the plane yesterday wasn't enough of a calling card, I'm sure our standing here and pointing towards the mouth of his cave will do. Come on," he started toward the edge of the cliff, first checking his revolver, "let's find a way down. Probably a cow trail around here somewhere. Probably one Manemann uses himself when he's not pushing the wheelbarrow. He could hike around out here and not even raise suspicion."

"But what about Dog?"

Charlie walked back to the truck and pulled the rear window open so that Dog could play in the cab or the bed, his choosing. "You guard the truck, Big Fella. Bite the bad guys. Lick the good. Roust the curious." He also poured a bit of water into an inverted hub cap. Collecting such caps, found object art he called

them, was almost Charlie's only hobby, save the usual dissipations. The hub caps he threw into a pile behind his trailer. He was going to do something with them someday.

As he suspected, one of the shallow arroyos afforded such easy access that the cattle had long ago found it. The difficult part was keeping the sand out of their shoes as the force of their weight and the downward trajectory caused their feet to explode into the fine particles. Cattle tracks were visible, looking like meteor craters in the dry sand, but Charlie spotted nothing that made him suspect human foot traffic going either down or up.

Upon reaching the bottom, they found themselves in a twisting, dry gully so deep they could see neither of the cliff faces above them. Charlie looked for tracks that led up but found none. The cattle probably stayed in the draw until it petered out on the prairie below. "Let's go up stream and try to find a way out," he indicated with his hand and then followed that motion. "I don't want to walk straight up a gully to his door. I'd rather have a look at the mills on top and then take the path down that I saw from the plane."

As they walked up drainage, the gully become shallower and they found a fairly easy way out, having to travel on all fours only occasionally. "Whew," Charlie huffed and wiped his brow and his hat band before putting the hat back on. "This is more like work than I'd bargained for. Gullies are always deeper than they look from above. "But," he twisted from his sitting position and gestured for Hobble's information, "I'm pretty sure we can reach the top from up there. Looks like the cows might have already discovered it."

Except for the sounds of a narrow-gauge steam engine coming from Charlie's mouth, the trip to the top of the cliff was without hazard. Where they topped was

in a swale to the south of their intended target. The rise between them and the hoped for cave was high enough to hide the windmill.

When their breaths returned, they journeyed on and finally crested the rise separating them from the hidden windmill. Up close it proved puny and comical, almost a toy--but functional. And it was pumping. Regardless of caution, they continued until they were upon it and Charlie raised his hand just enough that the rotating blades grazed his palm. Hobble attempted the same, but Charlie pulled his hand back.

"Takes practice," he said. "Beginners learn by losing fingers." He held up a hand with two fingers curled under.

Hobble contented himself by looking down the hole where the pump rod disappeared. He could see the reflection of water below. "Looks like he has a tank big enough to swim in down there."

Charlie placed his head beside Hobble's and agreed. "By it's size I'd say some rancher is missing a calf tank." Calf tanks are smaller, shallower tanks often set away from the regular tank, though fed by it, to enable the shorter calves to get a drink of something other than milk. "But what's that smell?"

"Wax," Hobble told him. "Must be burning candles for light."

"Hardly reasonable," Charlie said, trying to improve the air by waving his hat through it, "given that he has a wind generator." He took a shallower sniff, displeased with the paraffin in his nose, and knelt closer to the hole, using a leg of the small windmill for assistance. He looked up at Hobble. "Do you hear that?"

Hobble dropped to all fours and listened along with Charlie. "Gregorian chants," he said.

"Candles," Charlie widened his eyes in mock excitement, "monk music. A secret cave. I suspect you'll want dibs on leading the way."



"I'm more of a follower," Hobble confessed, though he hadn't known he was one until that moment. Hanging around Charlie had a way of revealing character.

"You mean you'd rather hide behind, don't you?"

"Comes to the same thing."

Regretting the moment but still consarnedly curious, Charlie pulled himself up and led Hobble to the nearly hidden path that curled around the side of the knoll and down to what had to be the cave's entrance. As soon as they were below the top of the cliff and into the cedars, Charlie stopped.

"Which is it," Charlie asked over his shoulder, "is it your maker or your future we're going to meet?"

"I've been thinking about that," Hobble whispered. "I don't think it's either. For some reason I feel as President Lincoln must have felt after ordering the body of his son exhumed so that he could gaze once again upon his face."

"You mean it may be ghastly, putrid?"

"No. I mean I'm not sure if I'm going to look upon the face of a stranger or upon my own face."

"As far as I'm concerned I can handle it so long as it's not Vincent Price's face."

It was cool in the shadow of the cliff and the cedars. And, as Charlie had known all along, the mouth of the cave stood just where it had to be. The area in front of it was flat. To the left side of the mouth was a webbed lawn chair, aluminum frame. To the right was the wheelbarrow. In it were a shovel and a three-legged stool. One of the questions Charlie had wondered about was answered by this inviting front porch.

"This has been built up," he said and waved a hand. "I'd wondered what he'd done with all the soil beneath the capstone. The stone in the school house, at

Splinter's, and in the silo was a plenty, but I knew there had to be dirt. The rock around here just isn't in layers thick enough to make a cave wholly of rock. He's shoved the dirt down the erosion here and because of the trees it can't be seen from across the way." By picking his sight line, Charlie was just able to see the opposite cliff and his Jeep on top. "Looky here," he pointed to shoe prints in the soil.

"Three hundred and twenty rod'll get you a mile he was watching us."

"Then why didn't he run?"

Charlie shrugged. "Probably figures the jig's up. Why ask me, anyway? He's yours, not mine."

Hobble stood at the mouth and looked far inside. The entry way was long and lit by votive candles set into niches carved into the walls. "I know why he didn't run. His manuscripts are in there with him. Everything he's ever written." The avidity on Hobble's face matched that of a child watching his first cotton candy being made.

"Age before. . .," Charlie said and shouldered past Hobble to enter the cave. Inside, the music increased with each step. The rising and falling voices didn't echo as they would have in a true catacomb, but Charlie checked each niche and small grotto for grinning skulls or neatly stacked femurs. Candles were placed at least every two feet, and at various heights ranging from his feet to above his head, but still the tunnel was darker than what lay ahead. It seemed as if he were on the outskirts of a nova, heading into its fissioning core, for what was beyond did burn.

"The guy must have leather lungs if he lives in this atmosphere," Charlie said and stopped. "I can hardly breathe." But he was talking to himself. Instead of being behind him, Hobble remained at the mouth of the cave.

When he saw Charlie turn he called in a hushed voice, "I'll catch up."

Charlie threw a disgusted palm in Hobble's direction. "Young people and their fears," he grumbled. Charlie's view of life was different. If what was to come was death, let's get it over with he figured. If it were entertainment--let's get it on. Charlie kept one hand raised above his head to feel the ceiling as he moved along. He didn't want to take his eyes off the growing brilliance in front of him, but he didn't want to scrape his head either. His goal, he realized was not directly in front of him, where the tunnel seemed to continue--probably in the direction of the windmill--but around a corner to the left. Not only was that from where most of the light issued, but the chanting as well.

Charlie inched to his left. He didn't want to present an easy target once he entered what was most certainly a much larger room. Removing his hand from the ceiling, he let it trail along the left wall. In one recess his fingers discovered, not another candle flickering in a glass container, but a large cow bone, a hip blade. Keeping his eyes on the room just five feet in front of him and to the left, Charlie slowly withdrew the bone from its niche and brought it in front of his eyes, rotating it so that its flat surface caught the light.

He had expected the red lettering but not the message. "Took you long enough, Chuck." No one called Charlie Chuck. He was tolerant, easy going, a man of gentleness, but the line had been crossed. Irritated, Charlie stomped into the room but froze in his tracks.

The room did blaze. Here, in what must have been a twenty-by-twenty foot room, the walls were not flat. Instead, they had been tiered, terraced like Chinese rice fields, though the terraces were no more than four inches wide. On each of the ten or so terraces burned votive candles. They sat shoulder to shoulder. No wonder the atmosphere in the room was palpable. He was positive that if he

wished to remove all the hair from his body he had only to return to the mouth of the cave, let the coating of paraffin cool, and then rip it off.

In addition to the flaming votives, a fireplace on the wall opposite Charlie also burned lowly, more ember than flame. But it wasn't the fireplace that arrested his attention. That was held by what rested on the mantle above the fireplace and by what sat in front of the embers, embers not casting their ghosts upon the floor because of the light from the candles.

It was small, so very small. Charlie had expected something grand, monumental. By It, he meant the Ultima Thule. The likeness of Poe was secured in a very small wooden folding case with a hook latch. The outside of the case, as well as the inner face that closed against the daguerreotype, was padded cloth, perhaps even silk. The closed dimensions of the case couldn't have been more than four inches by three inches. All this fuss and mayhem for such a small object, the kind of historic item that visitors passed everyday in small museums nationwide without even noticing. Charlie, recently, had seen similar daguerreotypes in the small museum up in Rushville, Nebraska. But the likeness in the small frame was haunting. Even from Charlie's distance he could see the swollen forehead and the deep, suffering, pleading eyes. The hollows above his eyes, but beneath his eyebrows, were as dark as the entrance to Manemann's cave. The man in the picture had less than a year to live and he looked as if he knew it. The extreme anger in his expression might have been at also knowing that Catterina, his cat, would survive him by two weeks.

But the eyes in the daguerreotype weren't looking at Charlie; they were staring into those of the man who sat in the wing backed chair before the fire. Charlie couldn't see the face, but the tilt of the profile suggested that its eyes were locked with Poe's.

The profile that Charlie saw possessed the receding hairline of that in the picture. The nose was aquiline--that would have been Poe's word for its beak-like curve--and the head itself, because of the length and unruliness of the hair that remained, was leonine, proud. Even majestic in its emaciation. Manemann had been a good choice for a name after all.

Manemann's forearms and relaxed hands rested on the arms of the chair, and, except for the leather gloves, the pose resembled that of Abraham Lincoln in his monument. So intent on the eyes of Poe was Manemann that his fingers remained still; his feet, paired and flat on the floor, might have been in concrete.

"A-hem," Charlie cleared his throat to no avail. Manemann's pose remained solid. "Manemann," Charlie tested the silence in the room during a momentary lull in the monks' chanting. "Are you awake?" If the man was alive, he was in a reverie that would require more than a voice to sound. "Your bone," Charlie called loudly and threw the hip bone into the fire, causing sparkles to scatter about Manemann's feet and then cool to cinders.

Slowly the chin lowered and the head turned. "Charles, you're here at last. I was hoping you would make it on time."

"For a party?"

Manemann cocked his head but finally understood. "Of a sort. In a way it is my birthday."

He did look like Vincent Price, a younger though emaciated version. At first Charlie had not seen the likeness because he was transfixed by the round, red-tinted glasses the man wore. They were like miniature tunnels, drawing in both of Charlie's eyes. The dark eyes and darker pupils behind them looked like bulls' eyes. Only when Manemann raised a hand to clumsily remove something from his ear did Charlie realize he was also wearing ear plugs.

Gloves, glasses, ear plugs, soothing music--the man was exhibiting all the symptoms of a decaying Poe character. The food he ate was probably bland. If the progress of the disease in the characters matched the symptoms in the living person, Manemann's hours were few.

Manemann raised his left arm and pointed to the Ultima Thule. "I believe that is what you are after. I have delegated to you the responsibility of seeing that it is passed to the next in line. . .if you understand what I mean."

"Hobble deHoy has told me a little about it. And I've been getting some rather peculiar letters, letters about the true First Americans."

"Letters?" Manemann's left hand drifted aimlessly in the air until the gloved fingers fell to rest on his all but blue lips. "How strange. And their authorship?" The writer's head, the gloved fingers still on his lips, turned to Charlie for the answer. But Charlie had not heard the question. Earlier he had wondered about the copper strips riveted into the palm of the glove, narrow, flexible strips that ran the length of the fingers. He had dismissed it as some fad or, perhaps, as a specialized glove until he recognized what the man was wearing for a vest.

Dynamite. The sticks were pocketed in the vest in two rows. Each stick was connected to the next by wiring and that wiring, Charlie saw, was connected to a battery in a fanny pack at the man's waist. The purpose of the copper strips on the gloves became obvious when Charlie spotted the two copper buttons on either side of the vest, just above the top row of sticks. Each button was wired to the dynamite on its side. All that was needed to complete the circuit was the gloved hand. A simple gesture would suffice. All he needed to do was to say "Oh, my," and lay his palm accusingly across his own breast. Accusations, recriminations, maladies, good times and bad would be no more.

Charlie counted twenty-four sticks on the vest. There might have been more on the back.

Unaware or unconcerned by Charlie's observations, Manemann again pointed to the Ultima Thule. "Go ahead. Pick it up. I've already entrusted it to you."

With a reverence that surprised even himself, Charlie lifted it from the mantle with both hands. It was heavier than it looked, but just. The likeness was on copper, a silver coating on copper actually, but the metal was small, thin, delicate. Hence the protective case.

"I see we have a visitor." The voice was Manemann's.

Charlie turned from the mantle in time to see Hobble enter the light. He stood stiffly, his arms at his side. Though he didn't do it, his very bearing suggested a shallow, curt bow and then a return to attention.

"Come," Manemann extended his right arm languidly from the chair. "I believe you are the heir apparent, though there may be some confusion in the lineage."

"I call myself Hobble deHoy," he said and took the two steps necessary to take Manemann's limp fingers in his own.

Manemann attempted a dry smile. "I've called myself worse." His eyes may have twinkled beneath the dark glasses. "But you'll do better, I am sure."

Hobble did bow.

"I am exceedingly happy that you have come. I was counting on it actually. Expecting it. No, depending up on it. Requiring it. Needing it."

Hobble understood. "You want to pass the manuscripts to me."

The gloved left hand with the copper strips covered Hobble's fingers, already resting in the writer's right hand. "Precisely. Just as you will require, need, beg for someone to succeed you--providing my cursed fortune ensues to you."

"Where are they?"

The copper ribbed glove patted the fingers again. "Oh, my but we are eager. How about a little tour first to see what else I have done with my time."

Charlie watched the ceremony and when it was completed asked, "Have you heard of a fella named Orion, Orion Farrago?"

Preparing to rise, Manemann had both hands around the chair's arms and his elbows aloft like a grasshopper's hind legs. "No," his head swayed between those arms. "The name is unfamiliar to me," he looked up, "though suggestive."

"Just askin'," Charlie said. The Ultima Thule was no longer where it had been on the mantle, but Charlie's hand slid from behind a large votive container, suggesting it might have been secreted there, out of Hobble's view.

Manemann succeeded in rising, but turned, still bent, to retrieve a small item from the cushion and insert it into his ear. "Excuse me gentlemen. As welcome as is your presence, I find your voices painful. If you will speak more lowly, I will perhaps still be able to hear you or at least read your lips. Actually, from this moment on I should do most of the talking." He was nearly whispering.

Becoming more sure of himself as he moved, Manemann walked around his chair to the left and disappeared for a moment into a darkened room. The monks' voices dimmed but did not disappear. "My bedroom," he indicated behind him as he re-entered the light. Modest. Serviceable. No need to begin our tour there.

"Here," he raised the gloved left hand to the ceiling, "is the main room with fireplace. It vents between some rocks above and the smoke is not visible if I take care. The room is nearly twenty-two feet square. Of course I could have made it larger--time hangs heavily when one seldom sleeps and when one's body burns with a consuming energy. But the quality of the limestone, I'm afraid, won't permit too great of a span.



"Now, if you will let me by, I would like to show you my pride and joy. My source of water. It's just this way gentlemen. Come along. Don't dwaddle."

He disappeared into the long narrow tunnel that was an extension of the entranceway. Off to the left was the pantry. He paused just long enough to show his larder, food enough to last him six months though his costume suggested he didn't plan on even six hours. Besides canned and boxed goods, books and cans of kerosene also lined the shelves. The Coleman lanterns there proved that he did not use candle light when his electrical system became drained.

"The books," he sighed. "Some I intended to read; some I intended to re-read." He looked as if he wanted to touch them. "Those boxes in the corner are what you are after, Hobble."

Hobble thrust his head between Manemann's and Charlie's bodies to inspect them. They were ancient dynamite boxes with rope handles. Charlie prayed that the dynamite around Manemann's chest didn't come from those boxes. If it had it would be crystallized and unstable and liable to explode at any jar, let alone an electrical charge.

"You, yourself, might be interested in those boxes, Charlie. Several of those books are about you." He nodded his head showing more life than he had yet exhibited. "I took several of your escapades and wrote them as they had to have happened, injecting the humor and irony and satire I know you must recognize about you daily."

"Detective stuff," Hobble glowed.

Manemann looked upon the weak limb, he must rely on. "I haven't written pulp--though I would settle for that any day. No, the genre lends itself to satire, invites it. Charlie and the people around him are the milieu of mirth. It comes naturally to them out here, not that they recognize it themselves."

"So two boxes of detective stories?"

"Just one. The other is what the critics would call more serious writings, though such works can be tossed off easily. Simply write what is on your mind at the moment. Let it flow--I believe they call it stream of consciousness--until it seems to end somewhere, though the deltas at the ends of those thought streams are usually labyrinthine and marshy. Most readers bog down long before they ever meet a sea of reason. If there ever was one. I've faked it well enough in a couple of them, though. Particularly the one about the snowstorm in December and the one about the rocking horse. I had another about a glass that melted but it seems to have become lost in my computer. Should have used the quill."

Charlie had tuned out after hearing that he was the hero of several novels. His grandfather had been so cast, but Charlie thought he would never live to see himself in a yellow-backed dime novel--or its modern equivalent.

"I hope you put me in sunglasses," Charlie said.

Manemann looked at him, at least the red lenses of his glasses squared toward him. "But you don't wear sunglasses. Ever."

"I know a real man doesn't wear such sissy attire, but if I'm in one of your books I want to look like James Bond. . .or at least Robert Mitchum. Anyone but myself."

Manemann turned until he found Hubble. "Don't listen to him. And further, if you manage to get any of these published, even vanity press, I don't want you to change a word. Don't rearrange a letter or even change a spelling."

"Me?" Hubble pretended to be offended.

"I know your blood." Manemann's dark glasses glared at the youngster. "You'd put your name on one of my books in an instant. The drive is that strong. You'd use any lever to gain a foothold in the publishing world."

"I promise. I won't."

"I mean do nothing with those manuscripts. Don't try to interject something of yours. Don't be cute. Don't try to be clever. Don't do a thing but publish. Of course you may finish the Work in Progress."

This caught Hobbie by surprise. "Pardon?"

"The Ultima Thule Affair. It is written only to the moment Charlie flew over in the crop duster yesterday. You will have to complete it."

The prospect of getting to do anything was pleasing. "I will. I promise."

The drive to publish, Charlie was realizing, must be hellishly strong, controlling. Here the man was worrying about the future of his writings while wearing a vest of dynamite.

Perhaps realizing this himself, Manemann backed off. "I think it's time you took these outside and placed them somewhere safe. Be quick about it."

Charlie, listening to Manemann, worried that the fuse of his patience and life was burning short.

"Come this way, Charlie," Manemann calmed. "This would interest you more than it would Hobbie. He's still too young to appreciate mechanics and real work."

Behind them Hobbie could be heard laboring toward the cave entrance, pulling one of the boxes by the rope handle.

When they reached the well room, Manemann said, "This is it. I didn't know what this room was going to be when I first dug it, my living room or bedroom perhaps, but then I came across an auger for digging shallow wells."

Charlie wondered where he came "across" it and if it involved the darkness of night and a wheelbarrow.

"The water I hit was so good that I wanted to brag about it, but I couldn't. I chopped the hole in the ceiling instead and erected the windmill to help bring it up in quantity."

"Hobble seems to think you use this tank here," he placed his foot on it, "for a bathtub."

"And why not?"

It was then that Charlie noticed the open drain that led along the side of the tunnel to the mouth of the cave. In case of overflow, the water would run harmlessly away and into the arroyo below. Water coming out of an arroyo into the drainage below would not be that uncommon. A cup hanging from the side of the tank invited Charlie to drink, and he placed it under the pulsing spout. "Isn't bad," he agreed. "Tastes a lot like the water that comes out of the spring that feeds Three Tanks the other side of the buttes."

Manemann nodded. "I placed a scene in one of your novels at Three Tanks." When Charlie gave a puzzled look, the writer added, "Witches."

"Not that poor Gillespie girl," Charlie complained.

"And there are others. Cows dropping from the sky. Mysterious lights at night. Mutilated cattle. Improbable artifacts--Druidic artifacts."

Charlie pictured a bonfire with the two dynamite cases of Manemann's books at the top.

"That's too much work," a voice called from the tunnel behind them. It was Hobble. "Manuscripts are heavy."

"That must have been the box of weighty matter, the serious literature. Try the box of Charlie novels. That's light reading. It'll probably float out of here. You'll have to tie a string to it to keep it from drifting away." Manemann's

gesturing arm reduced his attempt at humor to the macabre. Its movements seemed skeletal, disjointed, clumsy.

"Whatever, but I'm going back to get the wheelbarrow first."

Manemann and Charlie followed him as far as the living room and then turned off. Manemann returned to his chair; Charlie stood with his back to the still glowing fireplace.

"Have you ever wondered, Charlie, why men stand with their backs to the fireplace?"

Charlie hadn't thought about it.

"It is because they wish to warm the hole of the anatomy."

Charlie might have chuckled, but he thought he heard voices. At first he thought it came from the speakers, the monks shifting their tone, but it wasn't that. The voices were coming from the mouth of the cave. Hobble was talking to someone. A woman. Manemann didn't hear because of his ear plugs, or pretended that he didn't hear. Charlie suspected the latter because of the way he gripped the arms of his chair with the leather gloves.

What Charlie did understand was "Catch up with you in a moment, Ashley." Ashley? That was the name the men in the tunnels beneath Denver had mentioned. And, if Charlie remembered correctly, it was the name Yoni had given Windle Straw in the cafe up in Hyannis.

Maybe because Charlie was looking that way, or perhaps because he really had heard, Manemann twisted in his chair to await the arrival of the mystery woman, Ashley or Yoni or whomever.

When she reached the end of the passage and stood in the full light of the candles, Charlie wasn't at first sure who it was. The long black hair of Yoni had disappeared into a bun at the nape of her neck. Accenting what remained of the

sleek, pulled back hair was a tiara, a tiara of gold, but instead of the expected diamond encrusted peaks it was all gold filigree. Protruding from the base of the tiara and arching forward and upward was a snake of gold, rampant, its fangs in silver, the eyes diamond--or glass.

Her eyelids and the flesh encircling her eyes were mascaraed blue. At the outer edges of each eye, the blue wing design curled up onto her forehead.

Cleopatra? Charlie wondered.

His suspicion was encouraged by the necklace she wore. But it was more than a necklace; it was a gorget to match the tiara. It was metallic, fan-shaped, and its curving bottom extended below her breasts. She was definitely dressed for a part. Charlie suspected it had something to do with her name--Ashley.

Aside from the upper costume, she wore jeans and hiking boots. Practical in the end.

Charlie was the first she spoke to. "I liked the way you handled the problem with the rabbits. The man lives up to the legend."

"What's left of that man."

"Surely, Charlie, you knew you were being used. Think about it."

"Used. Abused. Chiseled already into my tombstone."

He saw that those words, as he used them, had hurt her and wondered, hoped that she was playing a part, reading the lines dealt her. Maybe she wasn't as cold as she now seemed.

"But what the hey," he softened. "It was a good ride while it lasted. Sure broke the monotony. A cowboy what can't climb back up shouldn't have tried for the stool at the bar in the first place."

"Ride 'em cowboy," Manemann interjected. "Sounds just like the Waggles I created." Then he looked at Ashley, Yoni or whatever her name was. "So your group has the upper hand now, is that it, Madeline?"

"Madeline?" Charlie asked, but they ignored him.

"It has always been a near total majority, Roderick, and you know it. You're been a part of it as were our parents."

"Roderick?" Charlie bleated out again. This time they deigned to reply.

"Think about it, Charlie." Madeline was the one to speak. "Two children born into the last of an historic line. And given our history? How could it have been otherwise."

"Brother and sister?"

Roderick sighed and winked at his sister. "The Charlie I wrote about was quicker. Granted, he stumbled around because of his basic inertia, but he always got the job done. Now," he spoke to her and not about Charlie, "the reason you've come?"

"The Ultima Thule. It is here isn't it?"

"Where else?"

They stopped talking and waited for Hobble to wheel past them, the last dynamite box of manuscripts in the barrow.

Unable to resist it, Charlie called to Hobble as he passed. "Your name is Hobble isn't it?"

Understanding the question, he smiled at Madeline and Roderick before smiling at Charlie. "It is for now," he said. Before he passed from sight he lifted one hand cautiously from a handle of the wheelbarrow and waved. "Bye, Ashley. Bye, Manemann."

They each raised languid, disinterested hands, Roderick's clothed in leather, and, now that Charlie looked, Madeline's in white cotton.

"It must be destroyed." Madeline didn't say what it was but all three remaining in the room knew it was the Ultima Thule. "The weak will use it selfishly, horribly. They will destroy the very reason for our continued existence."

Roderick was still twisted uncomfortably in his chair. "You mean, of course, our quiet guidance, the ordering, the know how, the deliverance from the inevitable chaos. What we used to call, simply and accurately, Husbandry."

"Our going public would destroy everything. It would place us on the level of all the other groups nattering for special privileges because of a history or a wrong or an imagined injustice. Historic claims are worthless. Being first is not what's important and you know it and nearly everyone in our clan knows it, but there are always those few. The only thing that really counts is what one does."

"Maybe," Roderick suggested, "we could do with these renegades what we did with the young male mammoths and mastodons that refused to be gentled."

Madeline looked at Charlie, wondering if Roderick had misspoken in front of an outsider.

Charlie saw it on her face. "I got a letter explaining it all. Part of that history I've been receiving."

Obviously Madeline didn't know what he was talking about, but she no longer had time for Charlie. "Without the Ultima Thule," she turned to Roderick, "the vault where our history is buried can't be found."

"What about the brotherhood that has been guarding it?"

"The best guess is that they did their job too well. They became so hermetic they refused to take in the needed new members and the last of the brotherhood died before passing on the location of the site."



"And you are one of those who believe the co-ordinates to the site are on the back of the Ultima Thule?"

"We can't take the chance. It jeopardizes our very credo: Live from today into the future; the past can be a guide, but it has nothing to do with you. You are what you alone become. Ethnicity, religion, history, race--they are all crutches that must be thrown away."

"Emotionally stated," Roderick said, "ignoring that our own secrecy is a selfishness." After resting and trying to look past Charlie and into the fireplace he said, "It is true that we seldom come into this world trailing clouds of glory, and that which does trail us is best snipped off--regardless of the peoples."

"You," Madeline pointed to Roderick's vest, "seem to be preparing for a snipping of your own."

He shrugged. "Why wait for the final decay and dementia."

"But the Ultima Thule, where is it?"

Roderick rose from the chair without the feebleness Charlie had seen before. "If I wished," he said, "I could lay my hand on it at this very moment." He moved the copper ribbed glove toward the copper buttons on the vest of dynamite as if to pat the Ultima Thule, secreted inside his shirt.

Madeline lowered her chin and looked at the gorget protecting her neck and chest. Her hand seemed to be thinking when she brought it up to feel, through gloved fingers, the conductive metal. "Are you aware, Roderick, that we have not hugged in a long time. I know our family has always been distant and cold, non-demonstrative. But at this moment I need a hug."

He didn't take a step forward, but he seemed ready. "I have always loathed the Oprahs and her ilk of the world, those who solve every issue with a good talk and a good hug--progesticly simplistic. But at this moment, I myself, think a good,

secure hug would do wonders for our kind and for ourselves in particular. And, for those whom we serve--the world."

Charlie had passed eighth grade science and knew what they were talking about. "Are you crazy?" he tried to scream, but his voice, masculine and unused to being raised, cracked horribly. "Do you know what is going. . ."

He knew they knew.

\* \* \*

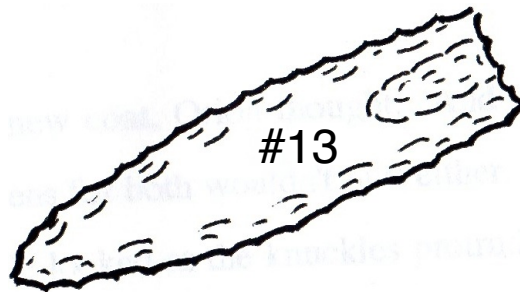
Outside the cave, Hobble was seated on one dynamite box in the wheelbarrow while the other rested in his lap. He was trying to figure how to open it. The latch looked simple, and unsecured, but it wouldn't budge. Inspecting the top of the lid, he discovered why. The lid had been nailed down. It would take a claw hammer at the least to pry it open.

As he rose from the wheelbarrow, the other box still clutched to his belly, the blast from the cave sent him, the manuscripts, and the wheelbarrow flying out into the choke of cedars down the draw. He didn't have time to reason why, but he knew he was flying and would come down. The first cedar he tried to embrace slapped past him as did the second, though it turned him so that he could no longer see where he was going.

After that it was bruises and slashings until he found himself lying in the sand almost to the arroyo far below the cave. One of the dynamite boxes, still intact, cartwheeled past him and into the drainage. The wheelbarrow, which came next, hadn't been as fortunate.

With his feet up drainage and his head resting on sand, Hobble tried to collect his wits. But it was difficult. The rock dust and debris floating above him clouded both his vision and his mind.

Hikers between the buttes heard the blast long after it occurred. When they turned to investigate, the cloud issuing from the front of the cave billowed like a dragon belching. The jet of smoke and debris from the monster's nostril--the windmill hole--mushroomed at a thousand feet.



*. . . Their enmity for us--that pre-primal hatred for what came before, for what has proven itself, if not superior, at least, more durable and sustainable, or simply more livable and enjoyable--became an orgy of rage.*

*No longer were they content with simply killing our people, destroying our artifacts, domiciles, disinterring our dead and pounding their bones to meal, in short, effacing our existence from the continent. They believed their shortest route to primacy, such as their culture was--and the word culture really describes an absence thereof--was our annihilation. To compete using anything but numbers and brute force was, to them, effeminate.*

*Our hunting and parties of discovery were no longer safe even in the most plentiful of times. If they encountered one of our parties and outnumbered it at least ten to one, they would attack and kill. But their loathing drove them to worse than mutilation. It drove them to cannibalism.*

*Not simple cannibalism, the killing and the butchering and the eating of a man or child. It was more a slow, painstaking desecration of life. If the death was swift, that was deliverance for our kind. Usually, however, if the captive was lively enough, they preferred a public butchering, a slow rendering up of the spirit that would make the European drawing and quartering appear humane by contrast.*

*They would strip the flesh from the bones, using tools we had taught them to make, and then boil the bones in large pots that were hollowed out stones. When this was completed, the bones would be broken and the cylindrical pieces passed about to see who could suck the marrow out the quickest. Globbs of it were plopped into children's mouths much as a mother bird feeds its young.*

*After the feast was completed, the bones were gathered and thrown into large holes which were later roofed and became what is today known as a kiva. There the bones were burned to a powder if fuel was sufficient. When the ashes were cooled, usually late the second day, the men in the tribe who had taken part in the killing and eating would ceremoniously squat over the ashes and defecate--returning the remainder of the flesh to the remainder of the bones.*

*Oddly, tragically--no, tellingly--this ceremony was an oblique compliment to us. They envied our talents, our knowledge, and our feats--demonstrated when we were left alone long enough to accomplish them. As they would eat the livers of bears thinking that was where courage resided, they ate us hoping to acquire our knowledge, our skills.*

*Diligence, endurance, perseverance, and work, these--they knew in their hearts--were for the loser. . . .*

## Day 132: "I knew that."

It was expecting too much of the mourners for them to come out for yet another funeral or memorial service. Even his close friends, at least those who identified themselves as such to the media, were pressed to remember the number of his previous burials.

Wiley Wentworth started counting using his little finger and got to his middle, including the present ceremony. Harley Tidley started with his thumb but did no better. Banner Tidley, who used the buttons on his red jacket got to four, but Wiley and Harley reminded him that Charlie didn't drown that time he was thrown out of the airplane and into North Sterling Reservoir, just one of the several reasons that gave Charlie an aversion to flying.

And for the third time they didn't have a body, though they thought they had one that first time, the time that resulted in the tombstone at the Sligo Cemetery, the one all the tourists stop at to ogle and have their pictures taken next to. It was probably popular, aside from being Charlie's premature burial, for the advice chiseled into it. It was something Inez remembered Charlie always having said, though he argued that fact after his resurrection. Whatever, the tourists enjoyed it and invariably uttered the last line aloud and laughed as they read: "And whatever's on the rack behind the bar."

The service for Charlie was to be held on the finger of land where Charlie had left the Jeep and Dog on that explosive day. Since they had neither corpse nor

coffin, a church wasn't required. Additionally, the site was selected because it afforded a view to the east of the Pawnee Buttes, now modestly attired in an undergarment-pink brassier, as well as the final resting place to the west of Roderick, Madeline, and Charlie. If it hadn't been for Hobble, no service would have been held at all. Charlie's sister said she had sprung for the first, and one funeral was enough for anybody. Inez and The Boys claimed authorship of the second. That left Hobble holding the bag.

The few media people who showed up were there only because it was the unveiling of the Buttes Bra, as it was called. Since they were in the neighborhood, they consented to take advantage of both photo opportunities, especially as Hobble had promised the ceremony would be brief, the obsequies being delivered by a hired preacher, one with a funeral license earned through an internet course. Charlie's first funeral had been aired live nationally and had drawn many dignitaries who wished to be seen, including the governor. The funeral cortege to the cemetery had stretched for two miles.

But that was the first time the public had thought they lost Charlie and the newness of his demise was wearing thin.

For this service the minister stood on the tailgate of Hobble's 1968 El Camino, the only vehicle the Forest Service would allow on the point, another reason the turnout was so small. Even ranchers, whose fathers had walked and horsebacked for miles, wouldn't venture out onto the prairie on foot anymore; they would go only if they were straddling an all-terrain vehicle.

If the minister hadn't thought to bring his bullhorn, he wouldn't have been heard above the wind. The internet course had advised that such an implement was required for most outdoor services. "Ladies and gentlemen, friends and relatives, the near, the dear, the loved," he began, "we are not gathered here today to mourn. .

." And it went on from there as expected. No member of the audience remembered anything he said after his introduction. They'd been to enough funerals, good ones, to know that in spite of the consoling words it all ended in a planting --usually.

Hobble, who was paying for the man, had also set his mind adrift. Why had interest in recovering the bodies flagged so quickly? Why had the county, state, and federal authorities quietly folded their tents and left. Normally interest in such an explosion would have brought in federal agents from all parts of the globe. He wondered if perhaps Charlie wasn't the only recipient of those strange letters, or that at least their content was known to more than just a few. If what the letters said was true, the Indians could lose their cachet as the First Americans and all that went with that title--entitlements mainly.

If that was the case, Hobble reasoned, a quick burial would have been expedient for those wishing to bury the story as well as Charlie. It wouldn't just be prudent and reasonable to bury the story: it would be Politically Correct. Neo-democracy at its sepulchral best, he realized.

Hobble moved his eyes from the preacher to the only memorial that remained for Charlie and the siblings Roderick and Madeline, whose presence in the cave was not known. It was the short, ludicrously short, windmill. Despite the blast it was still working, though it shouldn't have been.

The mill itself had been shut off, probably by Manemann or Charlie on that last visit, but it had been turned back on and accidentally left on by one of the early would-be rescuers. He had pushed an old wooden ladder down the hole and crawled down to access rescue possibilities from that direction. Finding it hopeless, the tunnel choked with rubble and the roof collapsed in most places, he had backed out cautiously. Finding the windmill still in operating order, he had

turned it on to wash his face and to get a drink of water. Apparently the wheel had stopped turning because of a lack of wind and he had forgotten about it, or, perhaps, he was unconcerned about it. At any rate he had crawled back out the hole without turning the pump off.

Still the preacher droned on, and the newsmen, who had been promised a snappy service, were looking at their watches. All the footage they needed had already been taken. They and half the mourners occupied their minds by watching the cloth ripple over the Buttes Bra as the wind caught it. The other half watched the windmill across the arroyo turn into a fresh breeze and wheel, the pump rod probing.

Only Hubble was now attempting to listen to the words from the bull horn: "And though he is gone from us," the preacher read, "enter decedent's name here will always remain in our hearts."

Even the preacher had lost interest and was reading mechanically from the script in his non-bullhorn hand. Hubble was sure the hired preacher hadn't realized he had failed to insert Charlie at that point instead of enter decedent's name here. Wondering if others had heard, Hubble surveyed the mourners. To a person they had shifted their eyes from the buttes or the preacher and were watching the windmill across the way. When Hubble followed their eyes, he knew why. The windmill had stopped spinning. Not just stopped spinning because of a lull in the wind: it had been shut down. The vane that had extended perpendicularly behind the wheel moments ago was now folded parallel to the wheel, locking the gear mechanism.

The windmill could only have been turned off from below ground.

\* \* \*



The preacher was losing his flock and knew it. Slowly the mourners milled across in front of him, and slowly he rotated the business end of his bullhorn toward them. "For he is the resurrection and the . . ."

It was over for him and he allowed the bullhorn to drop to his side, clicking it off to conserve the batteries. With what he saw rising from the windmill hole across the way not even Moses with revised tablets could have diverted their attention.

The tape cameras that had been resting on the ground or tripods were now on shoulders and reporters were sprinting back to their SUV's for additional tape. Hobble was terrified of who might emerge from the windmill hole, but when he saw the hat, a man's hat, poke above ground level and peer about, he rejoiced. "My god, when is he going to stay put," he yelled. Fortunately Charlie was too distant to hear.

The mourners let out a cheer that floated to and startled the dilettantes of art around the bases of the now modest buttes. Forgetting the preacher, they poured down the cliff wherever possible to greet the Resurrected One.

"He did it again," Harley thrust his flat palm at Wiley and they exchanged a high five. "Ain't a hole big enough to hold Charlie."

Wiley responded by saying, "You can't keep a Waggles down," and then they both scooted after those who had found the cattle path down.

\* \* \*

"I could have used a little brie and chablis to help me dig," Charlie opened his mouth, but not before the cameras started rolling. "But it was no more trouble than a prairie dog would have encountered if the mouth of his hole got stove in. Piece of cake, really. Would have been play to a mole." Charlie always liked to honor those two engineers of the prairie.

"You dug your way out?"

Charlie eyed the reporter suspiciously. He'd seen her and been interviewed by her before. "Last time I saw you, you were standing on a milk case for height, weren't you?"

"That was sometime back, Sheriff," the reporter, a Melinda Carmen, tried to be curt and professional, difficult for a short woman who insisted on wearing horizontal stripes. "But now that you are out of the hole, do you still think the Farrago boy will come home when he gets hungry?"

The suddenness of the question alerted Charlie to the fact that the reporters, and probably none of the mourners, knew why he was in the cave in the first place. They knew nothing of the Ultima Thule and were interested only in abductions by flying saucers. Maybe they didn't even know Madeline and Roderick had been in there with him. He didn't know what Hobble had told the reporters. There wasn't much he could say without disclosing more than was wise.

"Orion? Oh, he'll be home soon. I'd a been out lookin' for him if I hadn't gotten waylaid by this explosion. That old dynamite the kids found was a lot more fragile than I'd figured on. Luckily when I saw it fallin', I was able to dive into a nearby tunnel and miss the brunt of the blast."

Following his lead, the reporters wanted to know who had placed the dynamite there, and Charlie told them "Crazy miners lookin' for I don't know what. Rock I guess."

"But what about the windmill that doesn't seem to do anything but pump a hold in the ground?"

Again Charlie shrugged. "Anyone crazy enough to mine rock out here is liable to do most anything. I'd a had to blast the whole thing shut anyway just to

protect the kids if not for the accident. I guess I just worked a little quicker than I'd planned on."

Apparently, as far as the reporters knew, Charlie had been alone in the cave. One of them who had climbed out of the arroyo to cell phone his office shouted down to the other reporters. "It's one hundred and thirty-two days." Out of respect for the memory of Charlie, the papers had stopped running the count on the front page each day. But tomorrow would be another day.

When the reporters who had been packing up to leave looked to Charlie for comment, all he could say was "I suspect he's gettin' mighty hungry by now. Probably down right puny."

The interview had been conducted in the steep-sided gully of the drainage between the finger where the services had been held and the cave site. Charlie had been happy that it worked out that way because the city folks would get a look at just how interesting the eroded gullies on a prairie could be. The Forest Service Ranger who had been assigned to monitor the services was less pleased. His job was to keep the tourists on the path to the buttes and away from the drainages and the private lands.

To please the Ranger, Charlie told those around him who were still interested that he would be glad to meet them at the Quonset Cafe in Sligo. He promised a no holds barred question and answer period.

On the way out he had a few questions of his own for Hobble.

\* \* \*

"For cripe's sake, how long was I in there? I could have died if I hadn't had the presence of mind to dive into the pantry just as they hugged."

This brought questions from Hobble who, Charlie realized, didn't know exactly what had occurred. He had been at the mouth of the cave and missed the scene.

"I saw the vest," Hobble conceded. "But so what? We often dress up when we're playing a part. Goes with the territory."

"Like Yoni for instance?"

"Yes," he agreed, "like Ashley, though I think her given name was Madeline." Charlie was either out of breath from the climb back to the top and Hobble's car, or he was thinking about Yoni. "Just how long was I in there?" he asked finally, breathing hard. "I didn't hear diggin' to try and get me out for more than a day or two."

"Just short of two weeks."

"Two weeks? And they dug for only two days?"

Hobble told him his theory about Political Correctness and the desire of some in the government to keep the lid on any talk of the Clovis and suggestion that they were the first Americans and a minority. To have a minority that actually blended in and refused aide, who in fact saw it as an overt sign of inferiority, was a model not to be countenanced. There was no way to curry votes from such people with the usual blatant gifts and capitulations that would cost other people.

Charlie stumbled to the top and turned his back disgustedly once he saw the buttes. "I'm not surprised at these Political Correctness boys. They've already successfully turned the word patriot into xenophobist. Just a matter of time before they start using the words bigot or racist in its place."

"You didn't tell the reporters how you got out."

"They didn't ask. Too near deadline probably. They don't get the details until the second or third day anyway, after their editors tell them what to ask."

"Well?"

It was a good story--one that Hobble would no doubt steal (Charlie counted on it if the boy was to finish the novel in progress.)--so they sat on the tailgate of the young writer's El Camino, as good a place as any to start.

"Two days you say? That's all they searched for me? Of course they didn't know of the others unless you told them."

Charlie realized by Hobble's look that he hadn't.

"Two days you say?" Charlie still couldn't believe that short of time. Normally with such an explosion the federal boys would be all over the place until they knew just exactly what had happened and where the explosive had come from. They'd probably have taken the cave apart and reconstructed it in an airport hanger somewhere, he decided. "But just two days?"

After accepting the idea, Charlie told Hobble how he had seen it coming, how he had dived into the pantry, and that most of the explosion blew right past him. Most of the ceiling fell in--at least the little he could see--but the pantry had held sound. Most of the food and kerosene had fallen to the floor but that proved a boon. It gave Charlie something to do for the first couple of hours in the darkness. He tidied up the room, rearranging the shelves by feel. Once he found a Coleman lantern whose globe wasn't broken and whose mantle wick was in one piece, he lighted the lantern and felt almost right at home.

His first concern had been air, but he used the old King Solomon movie trick to learn that a current of air, a bit sluggish perhaps, was passing through the room. His guess was that it came from the windmill hole and was filtering its way through the chunks of rock and finally through a hole on top, maybe where Manemann's chimney had been. Something, anyway, was drawing it.

"The food in there wasn't bad," Charlie answered when asked. "Plenty of liquid in the canned peaches. I didn't really have to rely on the stream of water that started coming through after someone turned the mill back on. One thing I'll never forgive that crazy sapper for, though, is that he found the inspirational properties of spirituous libations to be superfluous. You don't have a snort or two around here, do you?"

Hobble didn't, though Charlie suspected he was lying about it. He had learned not to trust the Clovis kind.

"I thought of digging out several times before I actually did, but I was having such a good time in there. He had a library, you know. Found that W. H. Hudson book in there you was talkin' about, *Green Mansions*. Not a bad read." No way would Charlie tell about the tears in his eyes at the end. "That Kornbluth short story, 'Marching Morons,' was in there, too. That really tells what you're doing, if indeed you do exist." He gave Hobble a questioning look that was more drama than doubt.

Hobble ignored yet another implication that he was lying. "So how did you get out?"

"Well, when I saw the larder was runnin' low. . ."

"But there was six months worth of food in there."

". . . I started pulling the broken rocks in from the hallway and placing them behind me. That way I kind of moved my open space toward the windmill. I knew that was working. The rest of the food and the kerosene and the lantern, and my hat, I pulled along behind me as I went."

He rested from his tale and looked across the prairie to the chalk bluffs in the north. "How you been keepin' yourself busy, I mean besides these obsequies?"

"Not much. Same O Same O."

"Now that the problem that brought you here has gone up in smoke, what you gonna do with yourself?"

"Well, next week I'm flying to New York City. I'm going to allow myself to be chauffeured around and to live in a penthouse apartment at my publisher's expense."

"Publisher. You ain't even got an agent, let alone a friend or a mother who'll read your stuff."

No wonder Hobble had been acting more mature, controlled--almost human.

"It's one of those interesting stories that'll go over well on the television circuit."

"The story? What story?"

"Oh, it's about a hard working boy, moi, who loses all hope and throws his manuscripts into the dump. Little does he know that an influential New York publisher is slumming around the West, digging into old and quaint trash dumps. One day, in the tiny community of Sligo, he discovers--instead of the sun-blued antique bottles he seeks--several boxes of manuscripts. Being still a little curious, he is of course on vacation and can read what he likes instead of what he has to, he opens one of the manuscript boxes and discovers a story he must publish at once."

"Wow," Charlie said. "I always wondered where they found the material they publish. Can't say I'm all that surprised, though."

"Gets better," Hobble smiled. "I show him the manuscripts I saved from Manemann and he goes gaga."

"Gonna print those, too?"

"All of them. But he says my work is in different styles, at least three, and he suggests I publish under my name for the manuscripts he found in the dump and

pick two nom de plume for the other two types of my work, the ones Manemann called light and heavy."

"I don't suppose you'll be picking Manemann's name, or whatever it was, for one of your works?"

Hobble shook his head. "Life is for the living, Charlie. The publisher suggests that for the novels about you we pick a short punchy name. Two words, single syllables. Punch Punch, like Max Brand or Mark Twain. Western sounding. For the heavy stuff he thought one, two, or three initials followed by a polysyllabic last name would be best. Something Nietzsche or Freudian or at least Germanic sounding. I. D. for Id, maybe, and then a long name that's pronounced differently than it looks."

"Just out of curiosity, what is your real name?"

Hobble didn't want to tell, but Charlie had earned the truth. "Dwark Farquar. Can you believe it. How could my mother do that to me?"

"I haven't noticed that you Clovis kind stick to any one name for very long."

"You're right. She just probably picked the first thing that came to mind, knowing I'd be passing through several personalities during my lifetime. After all, it's the person--not the name."

The heat and lack of water drove them eventually into the car and back to Sligo where Hobble passed the cafe and drove to his campsite in the trees back of the school.

The instant they pulled up to the tent, an eager little nose poked out of the flap and smiled. It was Dog.

"How'd you keep him here and keep him from running away?"

"Easy. I found something that belonged to you and told him to guard it."

"And what was that something?"



"The hubcap you kept in the back of the Jeep and a nearly empty bottle of Four Roses I found under the front seat. They're inside the tent."

"And you trusted Dog with the bottle of hooch?"

"It's got a screw cap on it."

"Hasn't stopped him in the past."

Charlie picked dog up and ignored the licks. Instead he stooped into the tent and pulled out the bottle, opened it, and killed it. "Where is my truck, anyway?"

Hobble looked cornered. "Why do I always get stuck with the bad news." He waited for Charlie to realize the news wasn't good before saying, "Your sister donated it to a museum in Minden, Nebraska. I understand a Mister Warp was more than eager to get his hands on it."

"Any son of Harold's would be," Charlie said and shook his head, probably at his sister's altruism, not at the museum's acquisitiveness. "Guess I'll walk back to the cafe. Probably be able to find a ride to Minden from there. Don't worry. I'm not going to ask you. You got your publishin' to worry about."

He put Dog down and they started for the cafe. He hadn't cleared Hobble's Camino before stopping. "What can you tell me about Yoni? As cold as she seemed?"

"No," Hobble said. "That wasn't my picture of her at all. I always knew she was a member of the cause, the group hoping we would completely disappear. When I met her that day at the dump I was taken aback. I had always known her as Ashley Trophet. That was her way of saying Ashtophet, a goddess of love in the ancient Mediterranean. Poe made some reference to her. Sometimes she's known as Ishtar. That's why she was dressed that way in the cave, Charlie. And when you introduced her as Yoni Windigo. I couldn't believe you didn't know. I didn't say anything because she was obviously on a mission."

"I've told you about names before. They're strange up there in Nebraska where I met her."

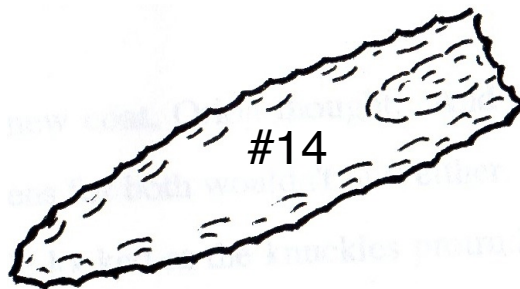
"But Yoni, Charlie. It's short for yonic. The word is the female equivalent of phallic. And Windigo. Lord, Charlie, you know that is a north woods bogey man that is supposed to eat men at night. She was practically telling you that she was going to devour you the minute she opened her mouth."

Charlie remembered that first night and the accuracy of her chosen name.

"But why didn't you tell me that the women of your clan are all such good actresses?"

This one stumped Hobble for an instant. "Charlie, it's not that Clovis women are such good actresses; it's that all women are such good actresses."

After a pause: "I knew that."



*... Be careful. Be careful. The best cultures are fragile because they are inquisitive, interested, experimental and kind. Like hopes, they disappear easily. Cultures characterized by brutishness and bravado, by cliques and clans, by garb and gab are like boulders. They roll insensately over all, leaving the good, the bad, the indifferent in their wakes--dead. Such cultures--loud and proud--confuse momentum with life.*

*Beware of color that is simply loud.*

*Beware of sound that is only noise.*

*Beware of life that is only fecundity.*

*Beware of desires that are only envy.*

*Beware of demands that spring from lethargy.*

*Beware of diversity that is really divisiveness.*

*Beware of those who would replace your history and learning with revealed wisdoms, with shallow pride.*

*Above all, be ever aware of numbers.*

*And finally, be careful, be cautious, be vigilant. If you are not, you and your ancestors will disappear from the earth. . . .*

*The swarm will prevail.*

## Day 133-135: Gone fishin'

Women--never Charlie's long suit unless he had already anteed heavily into the pot--make fine coroners and butchers. They both continue hacking and probing the body long after it is dead. To wit: Marvell, the relief checker in the adjoining grocery quonset had cornered Inez in the cafe's storeroom.

"That Hobble boy just suggested to me that there was someone else in the cave besides Charlie. I asked if it was that woman," she whispered, not saying the name Yoni, but Inez understanding, "and he didn't deny it."

Inez had suspected as much from Charlie's behavior but remained unimpressed. "I wouldn't be surprised. He's got himself into a lot tighter holes nosing around after other such foolishness."

"How can you be that way, Inez? His heart must be broken."

"Well," she muttered with seeming disinterest, but craning her head so that she could see Charlie at his usual window seat, "it may have broken his heart but it sure hasn't affected his appetite." She knew because the reason she was in the storeroom was to retrieve another can of re-fried beans. He had already finished the first she opened.

What Inez really felt was difficult to read in her face. After thirty-five years as waitress, cook, manager, and unwilling confidant to anyone who could open the door, she knew pretty much the troubles that could beset a body. As the walking bulletin board for the far-flung community, she was usually the first to hear of births, engagements, accidents--farm and road--strokes, heart attacks, broken hips, and deaths. With the increasing age of the community, she had learned the symptoms, remedies, and tragedies of nearly every affliction and could make diagnoses as accurately as most doctors. She could almost predict to the month when a farmer with a dry cough would begin pushing around a two-wheeled cart carrying a bottle of oxygen. Failure to leave a tip was not so much a slight as it was her first signal of the Alzheimer's to come. So when Marvell showed concern for Charlie's broken heart, Inez's rejoinder was completely in character.

As she returned from the storeroom, Charlie raised his empty plate as his signal for another serving. He didn't know how it was for others, but as far as he was concerned nothing sharpened an appetite like a resurrection. He had spent the mornings of the past two weeks sitting in a tiny cavern drinking peaches and beets from jagged-rimmed cans--thanks to his pocket P-36 can opener--while

remembering Inez' breakfast burritos and the attendant, and necessary, wholesome grease. The remembrance of burn-spotted tortillas soaked in that grease had been agonizing.

Behind him, Banner Tidley--the junior of The Boys--swiveled on his stool at the counter. "What you going to do when you get your truck back, Charlie?"

"Do a little trollin'."

"Oh, going to get in some fishing, huh?"

"No, you dumbcough," Wiley took his eyes from the television on the wall above him and swiveled in Charlie's direction. "When Charlie says trolling he means getting drunk under a bridge with a bunch of dwarfs."

Charlie nodded, but his prospects seemed bleak. "I'm sure I can get the alcohol and find a bridge," he said. "The hard part has always been finding the circus."

"I haven't got much on my plate," Wiley offered, meaning his work plate which hadn't seen a square meal in a decade. "I'll give you a lift to Minden, Nebraska, if you like. I haven't seen the Pioneer Museum in years."

"No, thanks, Wiley. I was thinkin' I'd flag down a cattle truck headin' east on 390 and see if I can get to Sterling. I'll wing it from there. Bus if necessary." Even hitchhiking at his age would be more welcome than riding the several hundred miles with Wiley. "I sure do miss that Prairie Dog Special."

He was referring to the try-weekly train that used to connect Sligo with Cheyenne in the north and with Sterling and points more distant in the east. The Sligo community, and all the tiny stops along the line, had always accented the try because, though the line tried to make the round trip three times a week, it seldom did. The tracks and ties had been pulled up in the 70's leaving Sligo connected to the world only by gravel roads.

On the counter in front of The Boys were the most recent issues of the Denver Post and the Denver Rocky Mountain News--a paper that had survived a century and a half without the word Denver in front of its name but which had been panicked into placing it there by the on-line mania.

"He'll come home when he gets hungry--Day 133," Harley, Banner's brother, read, not turning on his stool to face Charlie. That fact was carried in a highlighted box at the top left of the Post. Charlie was pictured standing near the tiny windmill, but much of the front page above the fold was occupied by a shot of the now modestly attired Pawnee Buttes and mug shots of Christo and his companion, Jeanne-Claude.

The Rocky cover was nearly taken up by a vertical shot of the buttes. The resurrection of Charlie, with a head shot, had a banner headline and stacked headlines in the right-hand column, including a box similar to that in the Post. The story began on page three.

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Still not completely forgiving him for that other woman, Inez packed Charlie a lunch to start him on his walk-and hitchabout to Minden. She knew he would taste her continued disapproval when he bit into that first sandwich and found it a mite short on mayonnaise. She hadn't dared to skimp on the pickles, onion, and tomato. That would have overstated her ire and ruined the perfectly good home baked buckwheat bread she had made to celebrate his return from the dead. His last resurrection had inspired peach cobbler with a heavily sugared whole cream topping. Ice cream on the side, of course. And that had just been the appetizer.

Pleased with the weight of the sack lunch she handed him, Charlie waved to the sun-darkened cafe window when he got outside, assuming that all eyes inside were watching him. Still miffed, however, Inez had placed her back to the

window, though she could see him reflected in the glass of the pie case which had been recently emptied.

Dog was waiting for him on the wooden picnic table just to the right of the grocery door. Charlie tossed him the remains of one of his burritos and Dog tossed it down nearly as quickly as Charlie had done its mates. Like the beaver men of old, Dog and Charlie chose to begin their journey without water, trusting their noses and knowledge to find a sufficient supply. Additionally, it was that time of year when side-boarded farm trucks rumbled past bouncing free a souvenir potato or onion. Nature would provide.

At the point where main street and gravel 390 intersected two blocks east of the cafe, Charlie and Dog had to wait ten minutes before a trucker pulled out of Trudy's Diner, the only competition in town to the Quonset Cafe. This ride left the pair standing along Colorado 14 in front of the Prairie School east of New Raymer. The very next vehicle heading their direction pulled over and room was made for Charlie in the front seat. Dog agreed to ride in the backseat with the kids and the wife. The family, returning from visiting relatives in the nearly disappeared railroad town of Carr, couldn't believe their luck--first the cafe in Nunn had actually been open and secondly the world renown Sheriff Waggles was riding in their car, folded between the seat back and the glove box. They and their kin would be the envy of Sterlingites for several generations.

At the J & L cafe in Sterling he was surprised at the number of faces he didn't recognize even though he was now well out of his county. He figured they were probably relatives visiting inmates at the new state prison east of town. Regardless of who they were, General Grant on his post Civil War victory tour was received with no less enthusiasm than was Charlie. The bowl of bean soup in the cafe was as he remembered it--needing pepper.

On the remainder of the trip to Minden the crowds were no less eager. Charlie and Dog were never out-of-pocket for eats or rides. When they at last reached the Pioneer Village museum where the Jeep was displayed, word of his expected arrival had flooded the town with more tourists than seen at the annual Christmas pageant.

The Jeep, washed and polished, was in the center of the park-like setting around which the village was built. The owner had intended to get as much publicity from it as possible before moving it to one of the large display buildings out back.

"Are you on the track of the missing boy?" a woman called inquisitively from the crowd. To the individual they were all astonishingly polite, or country kind as Charlie had always termed it. Seldom, except from his drinking buddies, were the tones accusatory.

"Never been off it," he called and waved as he closed the door of the pickup and idled toward the now open gate. The crowd that lined the street to wave him out of town rivaled that of the fair parade a month past.

\* \* \*

Now it was time to begin his annual driveabout, a spiritual journey into both the present and its persistent past, a journey that filled for Charlie much of the need that the walkabout filled for the Australian aborigine. The winds, the water holes, and the game would determine the journey's route, or more accurately--in Charlie's case--convenience stores, cafes, and any saloon with a long bar and a brass rail.

A true driveabout for Charlie always began or ended with a visit to an historic place and for this sojourn he had chosen to begin at Ogallala, Nebraska,--the spot where the great cattle drives from Texas met the trains heading East or where the



drovers paused along the North Platte before heading up the Bozeman Trail into Montana--Chief Red Cloud and Crazy Horse be damned--forgetting the Fetterman Massacre, that dress rehearsal for the Battle of Little Big Horn. Remembering this, the Ogallala bars played up their history, but Charlie felt that they lived down to the present, especially when it came to the price of a longneck.

After a few hours in the bars, Charlie bought a six pack of bottled Cokes and a fifth of Four Roses--they called it 750 milliliters now. For sometime a question had bothered Charlie, the answer to which had eluded him. Since the problem was near Ogallala, he was determined to try again, to force its solution. It concerned the September 1855 Battle of Ash Hollow--which actually occurred six miles to the northwest along the banks of Blue Creek and not the nearby Platte. Had it been a massacre as some claimed? Or was General Harney simply paying back that particular Sioux band for the deaths of Lieutenant Grattan and twenty-nine of his men near Fort Laramie a year earlier? That conflict was the result of a misunderstanding over a Mormon cow, a crippled cow at that--and it had already been eaten.

It was long after dark, long after the time he should have been looking for a motel, but Harney's troops had made their first moves in the dark. Charlie was looking for a turn north off State 92 that would lead onto the battle site when steam began to rise from the sides of his hood.

"What in Tar Thunder?" The exclamation was simply reflex because Charlie knew instantly what it was. One of his radiator hoses had cracked. Judging by the amount of steam, he was sure it was the top hose which led from the engine block, the really hot liquid.

Immediately, he abandoned thought of the battlefield and started looking for an opening to the left, the south. That way lay Lake McConaughy, the great

reservoir that backed up the waters of the North Platte River. He would need water, and quickly. Fortunately his headlights disclosed parallel ruts that seemed to angle from the blacktop down toward the water. He wasn't sure if he would meet the reservoir or its upstream inlet. By the lack of pavement he knew he wasn't entering one of the Nebraska State Park campgrounds or boat docks. This looked to be a pirate entrance used by those hoping to avoid the daily or seasonal users' fee.

After finding a level spot among the trees, he parked and killed the ignition. The hiss of steam from the still piping hot block drowned the noises Charlie would have preferred to hear: the crickets violining, a nighthawk booming perhaps, or maybe a northern mockingbird still regaling the darkness in search of a mate. While waiting for the steam to subside, Charlie opened a Coke and poured its head off outside his window. Then he re-filled the bottle to the top with a hefty jigger from the fifth of Four Roses.

By the time he had finished the Coke, the engine had cooled enough so that he could hear the crickets. He even heard a car door slam and the voice of a kid calling his brother. The sounds were probably well over a mile away, but they carried wonderfully over the water. Taking care not to slam his own door, Charlie got out and opened the hood on the Jeep. The tear in the hose was right on top, very easy to get at. All he would need was a little duct tape or some black insulating tape. The latter he always carried in his small toolbox behind the passenger seat, but when he looked he couldn't find the roll. Even with the aid of his flashlight, the roll remained hidden. Nothing he could find, save an old rag, could be wrapped around the hose to keep it from leaking. He might have to make a night of it right there, but he wasn't upset. It would be far from his first

impromptu camp out. And he had come prepared with a little camper's helper, the Four Roses.

He was just preparing to twist the cap off another Coke when he glimpsed a light through the trees about two hundred yards distant. It was the harsh but little penetrating light of a Coleman lantern. He had grown quite familiar with its hiss and glow and found it comforting, inviting.

That must be the inlet, Charlie thought. Some cat fisherman paying his nightly dues in hopes of landing the big one. And the big ones were always elusive, moving only on the darkest nights and willing to swallow stink bait during only the most inclement of weathers. One other time, however, was more propitious for cat fishing. That was the night when the man just had to get away from his wife, and its corollary, the night when his wife insisted upon it.

"Come on, Dog. We may have a friend down there we don't know yet." Dog still had his nose in the tool box investigating errant candy bar and chocolate covered peanut odors. "Could even be our old fishin' buddies Dave and Gerald. Even if it isn't them, I never knew a fisherman that didn't carry a roll of black tape in his tackle box."

He strode a couple of paces before stopping. "You know, Dog, I don't think I recall a cat fisherman who wouldn't appreciate a little fisherman's helper. Don't want to show up with a handful of gimme and a mouth full of much obliged." Retracing his steps to the pickup, he retrieved the pack of Cokes and the bottle of Four Roses from the bench seat. Finally, together, he and Dog began their hike through the young cottonwoods toward the light.

As they neared, the sound of the wind in the tops of the trees was gradually, imperceptibly, replaced by the sluggish flow of water into the reservoir. Even when Charlie called to the figure sitting on a tackle box before the lantern, his back

toward Charlie, the fisherman didn't hear. Only when Dog circled in between the introspective fisherman and the lantern did the man move. Even at that he didn't jump. He stiffened, not in fear, but as if he recognized Dog. When he extended his hand for Dog to lick, Charlie was sure of it. But the man wasn't large enough to be Dave or Gerald.

Feeling as if he had already been introduced by Dog, Charlie cleared his throat and entered the lantern's aura. "Care for a little fisherman's helper?" he asked, and extended the six pack in one hand and the bottle of bourbon in the other.

Without answering immediately, the fisherman's hands reached out, plucked a Coke from the pack and accepted the bourbon. Only after he had swigged off the top of his cola and replaced it with the Four Roses and then turned it upside down over his thumb to mix the two liquids did he speak. "I knew it was only a matter of time," he said quietly, barely audible above the flow of water.

Charlie ignored the man but followed his fishing line as it stretched across the ground and into the mysterious water, mysterious, but not half so spooky as the tracks in the snow the same boy had left the night of his disappearance.

"Catchin' anything, Orion?"

The boy rose from his tackle box and inched down the bank to a stake he had driven into the mud. The fish on the end of the stringer it secured were not impressive.

"Time was when that was the size you used for bait, Orion. What's the story?"

"The story is that now I have to eat them. It seems like forever ago that I used to take pictures of what I caught or haul the fish themselves into the Quonset Cafe to make The Boys jealous."

"And Inez peeved," Charlie said, looking around for a seat. Eventually he found a thin log and sat, his knees too close to his chest for comfort. "You could

go home, Orion. Your folks have more food now than they know what to do with. Gettin' a little too healthy, if you know what I mean. And that sister of yours. . . Someone is going to have to help her push away from the table if she's going to be on the cheerleader squad at the consolidated when she's old enough."

"You knew all along, didn't you, Charlie?"

"Well how could I miss. You advertised the whole thing. Next time go a little easy on the lubricant. You greased the pulley and the door hinges and anything that moved. For another thing, don't leave a bale of hay hanging from the pulley hook. It just draws attention to it, not away. And most of all, if you're going to hide in that little cave you made in the hay bales, make it at least two bales thick. I was afraid I was gonna grab your ear or somethin' every time I stuck my hand back in there just to make certain where you were hiding."

"That obvious?"

Charlie finished a swig from his just mixed drink and belched politely before replying. "You're hardly the first boy to latch hold of the rope hanging from the pulley and hoist himself up to the loft. Probably hooked the rope to your belt, if I guess right."

"But the tracks didn't end below the eaves of the barn."

"That did have me for a minute, but after I saw the length of the rope--and a new rope at that, don't know where you got the money--I figured you had hung the rope from a tree limb, then grabbed it and swung over to the barn, lifting your feet so they wouldn't make tracks."

"You make it sound easy."

"Didn't say I could do it. But you're a strong boy."

"How are the folks?"

"Rollin' in television money. Rented that section of wheat land up a mile east of your place, you know--what Forney used to farm. Pretty good for dry land wheat, so I wouldn't be surprised if your farming talents pick up some."

"And the house?"

"Can't even see it from the road anymore. Your dad bought a new double-wide and placed it between the road and the big cottonwood tree. Nice house."

"A double-wide?" He seemed disappointed.

"It's a nice one," Charlie defended the old man's taste. "Not one of the old cheap trailer-lookin' kind. Heck, you can hardly see where they pulled the two halves together."

"I saw some of the television shows about my disappearance."

"I figured that's why you lit out--knowing the entertainment shows would pay good money for your folks' story. Worked too. Wasn't six hours after the first report of your disappearance that limos started stopping at the cafe and bothering Inez to know where your folks lived. The Boys are spreading it about that your folks did better than six hundred thousand dollars for their stories. I heard from other sources that it was quite a bit less than that, though still a pretty handsome sum. More than I could count on my fingers at any rate."

Orion picked up his fishing line to feel if something might be nibbling on the bait. His luck wasn't changing, so he wrapped another loop of it around the stick between his feet. "But what am I going to do now, Charlie?"

Charlie finished his drink and pushed the empty bottle back into the pack before withdrawing another and making the carbonation palatable by diluting it with a shot of the bourbon. "You seem to be a bright boy," he told Orion and pushed the six-pack and the Four Roses over toward him with the toe of his work

shoe. "I've been tellin' the news hounds all along that you'll come home when you get hungry. At least I told them that wunst and they haven't let me forget it yet."

Finally, the boy smiled. "Wunst was more than enough for them." He had been aware of how they had ridiculed Charlie with his own words, words that sounded irresponsible and country to them, but which Orion knew were right on from the moment they left the sheriff's lips. "Thanks for not telling on me."

"No problem," Charlie almost scoffed at the very suggestion of his doing otherwise. "There are one or two things out there on the prairie that are no concern of mine and really no concern of others, though some are more than willing to pay a bundle to make it the concern of the country."

"All the same."

"As I said," Charlie reiterated, pushing his newly emptied bottle into the six-pack, "you're a bright boy. You'll figure something out. Now, if I can just borrow a roll of black tape I'll be on my way."

Orion, being a cat fisherman, had the tape and Charlie exchanged the remaining bottle of Coke and what was left in the bottle of Four Roses for it. Before he and Dog disappeared back into the darkness from which they had come, Charlie turned back to Orion. "I'll see you when you get back to Sligo. The Fighting Tiger Salamanders appear likely to have another good six-man football season. And I suspect that little girl you've been interested in will be along the sidelines shaking her pompons again. Also, I wouldn't doubt but what your dad might just make it possible for you drive to the first game in your very own brand new pickup."

"You know, Charlie," Orion smiled secretively, his voice having grown more confident with each swig, "I might just be able to buy that pickup myself."

"Times being what they are, I wouldn't be surprised," Charlie said and disappeared with Dog into the night.

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When Charlie got back to the Quonset Cafe in Sligo the next noon, the excitement among the diners was higher than it had been during the spread they were served before caravanning out to the buttes for the memorial service. Someone had suggested calling Charlie's service "A Life Remembered" instead of a funeral, but another someone had pointed out that even in summer there wasn't enough light to sustain such a service unless they killed him off at about age ten.

"Charlie. Charlie. Quick," Wiley called from the lunch counter, crushing any hopes the sheriff had of a quiet, reflective meal. "You're all over the news again. The way these news fellows are tellin' it you're the best marshal since Wild Bill Hickok."

Charlie dropped into his usual chair, exhausted from his night's sleep in the cab of his Jeep. "Don't go to comparin' me with that long-haired dandy," he said, placing his hat on the chair beside him, "at least not on an empty stomach."

"He's not kidding," Harley Tidley said. "They broke into the soap opera with a special about twenty minutes ago and there's going to be more in just a second as soon as these commercials get over." His brother Banner pointed to the television on the wall as if Charlie had never seen one before.

When the commercials finally ended, with a self-promotion featuring the news readers' sincere, smiling faces, the noon news didn't begin with the usual deceiving headlines. Instead the commercial dissolved to the already speaking Orion Farrago.



"Sheriff Waggles has to be the greatest man hunter of all time. I can't think of, I have never read of, nor have I ever seen his likes in the movies or on television. His tenacity, his perseverance, his genius are unparalleled to my mind."

As Charlie had said, and now remembered, Orion was a bright boy. He could hardly wait to learn what genius he had employed to find the well-spoken lad.

"Just how did he make the arrest," the off camera reporter asked.

"With aplomb," Orion looked confidently into the camera. "As nonchalant and as easy as a man tips his hat to a lady. I'd been hiding out all those months and was certain no one had any idea where I was. I was even in another state. There I was in the dead of night, sitting along a river bank and surrounded by trees and brush. I didn't have a vehicle and had walked up river for at least five miles that day, and what happens? As nonchalant as can be Sheriff Waggles walks out of the night with his dog, sits down, and offers me a Coke and bourbon."

"He didn't arrest you?"

"I wasn't in his jurisdiction, but I knew he had me cold. If he could find me on foot and on a dark night in another state, I figured he could find me anywhere I ran. His eventually catching me was as certain as wheat rust. That's why I turned myself in to the police chief here in Ogallala. In the end, no one out smarts or out lasts Sheriff Waggles."

"But your abduction. What about your abduction?"

"That," Orion turned squarely to the television viewers, "is another story."

Even though all the viewers in the cafe were eager for that story, Orion's features dissolved from the screen to be replaced by the noontime news readers.

"And that, I'm afraid, is all Orion Farrago would say for the moment. He is still in the police station there in Ogallala, but he seems only to be a guest at the present. When reached moments ago by telephone, the chief said he was at a loss

as to what to charge the boy with. In fact, he said he didn't believe that being abducted by a flying saucer was a crime."

"But don't despair," the male representative on the news team assured the viewers, "we may have reached a temporary impasse with this source, but we will be bringing you details of Orion Farrago's capture at both five and six this evening."

"That's right," the female representative added. "In fact, at this very instant, a Channel Four news crew is aboard Chopper Four and heading to Sligo where we hope to interview the legendary sheriff himself, Weld County Sheriff Charlie Waggles."

"Inez," Charlie yelled. "I got some more traveling to do, and in a hurry. Pack me another lunch. And this time don't be sparing with the mayonnaise."

Just the words she wanted to hear.

To show they were just folks, the news readers continued with the obligatory bantering after having consumed their hard news. "Jan, did the Farrago boy say the sheriff offered him bourbon?"

"I'm quite sure he did, Pat."

"Just how old is Orion?"

"He just graduated. I guess that would make him seventeen or eighteen."

"What's the drinking age in Nebraska?"

Pat thought a moment while looking into the camera. He wasn't sure he should answer. "I'm afraid it is twenty-one, Jan."

"Oh, oh," Jan looked at the camera also.

"Inez," Charlie yelled again. "Better make that four or five sandwiches and a couple quarts of milk. Looks like I'll be gone longer this time. Probably on one of

those vacations the real Sheriff and the district attorney request I take now and again."

Oblivious to the import of what had just been said on the television above their heads, The Boys wondered at Charlie's sudden departure after having just arrived. "What is it this time, Charlie?"

"The problem is that a man can't be the least little bit sociable in this country."

Out in the Jeep he shooed Dog to the passenger side to make room for the sandwiches they would later share. "Where won't they be lookin' for us?" he asked Dog. When Dog didn't answer, Charlie provided the answer. "You haven't seen the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone up near Williston, North Dakota, have you?"

Apparently Dog's answer was to the negative.

"Then it's the American Fur Company's Fort Union and the U.S. Army's Fort Buford here we come. Dog, I'll even show you some tombstones that say suicide on 'em. Life was almost as tough for them young soldiers up there as it's been for me of late."

They headed first east out of town and then north, but before he got to the bowling alley-slash-bar-slash-all that remained of the town of Hereford, Charlie pulled to the side of the gravel and stopped. Something in his inside left vest pocket had been poking him all morning and he reached inside to remove it.

It was a small, cloth-padded, wooden case, not more than four inches by three inches. Carefully, Charlie--with his large sausage-like fingers--released the latch and opened it wide. The reversed image on the daguerreotype pictured a man who looked as if he had indeed ventured into the uncharted regions of the mind and found his own dark, distant, and haunting Ultima Thule.

When the image's dark eyes began to pierce Charlie's mind, he closed and latched the lid and tossed the wooden case into the glove box. He'd see that it got to its rightful owner, the boy who--without setting pen to paper--had already made hundreds of thousands on one story and was about to do the same on another.

Charlie would do the right thing at the appropriate moment. Meantime, he and Dog had Old Worlds of their own to re-discover.

The End