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"GRANDPA" AND OTHER STORIES

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By

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These sketches and stories are the result of moods, day-dreams, and experiences. The collection progresses from those intimate stories controlled by personal experience to the last two works which try to crystallize a mood or experience in a medium without the device of first person. "Grandpa," "Great-Grandpa," and "Weedgod" are sketches which describe the boundary between what things are and what things seem to be. "Aunt Mary," "Hospital," and "Eggy Cooter" are short stories presenting situations in which the reader can determine this boundary line himself.

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Grandpa

The print shop is rather small. It occupies a space between two buildings, which in turn occupy spaces next to other buildings and so on, into the noisy bustle of cars, people, and perpetual shade. The inside of the front part of the shop is illuminated by two large windows set in wooden frames. The bottom halves are painted over with the sign "McIntyre-Tubb Printing." This small front part with its huge massive desk, ancient typewriter, and old safe is separated from the rest of the interior with a short wall about six feet high. Through a doorway shielded with a bamboo curtain is the rest of the shop set back in a cool air-conditioned cavern with little light bulbs hanging from the high ceiling. These stars hang over type cases, presses, cutting machines, and other tools stretching back into the shop. Such is the shop, and, with some modifications, such has it been for years.

It is a summer day, and I take the bus downtown from my parents' home. My wife and daughter are under the vigilant custodianship of my mother. There is a break between the spring semester of school and my summer job, so we are visiting Big D for about a week. As it lurches and bumps along, I shiver in the overly-cooled bus and look out of the windows at all the changes that have taken place along the route in the last two years.

Near Titches' I step off the bus into the hot air of noise and metal. The parts of the street open to sunlight reflect it back in all its heated glory into eyes, armpits, and into shoes. The humidity is high, and I am just one more sweltering cork in molasses bobbling along in slow motion. My feet sweat and ache. I arrive at my grandfather's print shop, open the door, and step into darkness.

My grandmother is sitting at the big desk talking to someone on the phone. Although she and my parents live only thirty miles from us, and all of them come to our house at least monthly, I rarely make it into town to see them. She smiles and waves me into a seat with her eyes as she finishes her business on the phone. She holds up two fingers to signal the amount of time she will allow herself to be tied up on the phone. As I peer through the part in the bamboo curtain, I can see my grandfather bent over a press and probing into its innards, trying to provoke the maximum amount of noise out of them. The light reflects off the green visor on his head. The shop roars with clacking and banging and grandmother's mouth keeps moving but makes audible words only intermittently.

Grandpa looks up from his work for a moment, notices me, and motions to me to come on back. As Grandma is still tied up on the phone, I go through the doorway and into the oscillating noise. Grandpa smiles and manages to ask me through the noise how I am doing. Not wishing to try to combat the noise, and his hearing loss, I hold up my finger and thumb in

a circular OK. I go over to the refrigerator between some typecases and the offset press and remove a can of the ever-present soda pop kept handy for visiting dignitaries. The President of the U.S., if he should happen to step through the door, would receive the same complimentary can.

I wander around the shop for a few minutes busily inspecting the presses and other mechanical contrivances. Stepping to the very rear of the shop, I observe the old hole-cutting machine. I have no idea what its proper name is, but its function is to cut different types of holes in paper. One time, years ago, our entire family gathered at the shop to assist Grandpa with the State Fair job. He printed many things for them that year, but one particularly comes to mind. There were many large sheets of paper, each being a copy of the others, divided into vertical columns. Each column bore the exact same statement, something concerning an entry in the agricultural portion of the Fair. Anyway, each vertical column was to be cut in the paper cutter, converting them into little strips of paper about an inch and a half in width. Contestants were to wear these buttoned to their shirts. But first, a button hole was needed.

My job, and I must not have been more than nine or ten years old, was to punch the holes. I would sit at the machine and feed into it half-inch thick piles of paper. After they were all lined up exactly right, I had to stomp with almost all my weight onto a pedal connected to the machine under the

desk top. The results were four little bell-shaped holes running across the top of each pile, one to each column. The exertion of such labor was neutralized for some hours by the venting of destructive boyhood urges. Towards the afternoon, however, the piles of paper grew thinner and thinner until my destructive urges ran dry and the process actually became work.

I lift my eyes to look at the shop again. Unwittingly, I sit at the machine, holding my face in my right hand, right foot poised on the rusty pedal. As my eyes run around the shop, I see Grandpa's back as he bends over the machine. Smoke rises through the little light bulb stars as he performs his mechanical magic. Old cigar bits and spit are scattered over the floor. I notice the odd carvings in the scroll work near the ceiling and the old brown walls that have gazed on relatives and friends now dead. Somewhere, I realize that Grandpa gave up cigars and pipes ten years ago, but that so-called fact cannot elbow into my musings. I smell the smoke from Grandpa's direction--King Edward cigars.

The lights are higher up now, out of reach. The entire shop is one machine, and it runs smoothly under the quick and responsive hands of a real craftsman. Why, he's had no stroke. The hands quickly flip paper out of the paper trays. He grabs a cigar off a counter and pokes it back in his face. Grandpa turns to me again, smiles, and puffs a few perfectly round smoke rings in my direction. I laugh and try to put my finger

through them. His smiles are perfectly curved and not even a little bit lopsided.

He turns to Grandmother, who has come back into the press area to leave a telephone message. He asks her if Mr. Smart has called. They have a tentative date to go fishing this weekend, and Grandpa wants to know if he is supposed to pick up Mr. Smart or vice versa. Grandmother picks the message back up off the table and holds it in front of his eyes. The message, obvious to me, holds all the necessary information. He pretends to give it serious study as he cleans his hands on a rag soaked in gasoline. Finally he nods. Grandma gives a self-satisfied smile (or a "shit-eatin' grin," as Grandpa would put it, if Mom would ever let him say anything like that in front of her children) and starts to turn away. Grandpa flashes a grin at me, then turns again to the retreating back of Grandma.

"Hey, Dolores! Ain't ya gonna tell me if Smart called or not?" he bellows. Grandma starts to stop and give him a quiz-zical look, accomplishes about half the maneuver, changes her mind and continues her course, very carefully so as not to let either of us see the smile which we both know to be there.

He laughs and walks back through the hanging stars to the old press and begins to tinker with it again, making the noise ever so loud. The little stars sway back and forth on their wires as if the noise were moving them in its wash. Old people, mostly men, come back into the shop, nod a grin at me, and make

motions with their mouths at Grandpa through the waves of sound. Men with baggy pants, wrinkled shirts with ties; men full of life and its tracings. They talk fish, birds, dogs, guns, cars, lakes, and sometimes money. Their smoke blends in with their leather shoes, belts, and shiny coats. Grandchildren and their antics sprinkle their conversation. I listen and feel all this with the utmost intensity. This is a high I have never felt before. Their dirty jokes sail over my head in their complexity, but they wink at me as if I understand. I laugh. These men never talk about God, women, or going to hell, and they never scare me. They were once wild and still are to a certain extent. The Indian tells Grandpa how he got drunk the other night and pulled out an aching tooth with a pair of pliers. Grandpa pays him some money. He took Grandpa's Nash completely apart in the back yard, found and repaired the trouble, and put it all back together again in a few days. All for the price of some liquor and some spending money. Their geniuses live from day to day.

I get up and glide under the swinging stars until I am head even with them again. Grandpa, alone, is still leaning over the machine. I watch the smoke curiously. He slowly turns around cigarless, and points a crooked finger into the bowels of the smoking press. Some oil has spilled on a hot part of the engine. In the noise, he doesn't have to try to mouth the words like he does at home. Here I can understand him. The wise eyes glint under the dangling lamps and reflect

old thoughts. Everything is just the way it was, only crusted over with life a little. He will be a 1950's grandfather until one of us dies. He will always be the advertisements in old Esquire magazines.

I make idle chat with my Grandparents for awhile, finish my soda, and exit into the heat and traffic.

Great-Grandpa

Grandma never talked much about her father. She talked more about his absence since that was more familiar to her. He ran away shortly after she was born, leaving her mother that night's dirty bedsheet and a rickety house on the outskirts of the little town. That was all she ever knew about him or wanted to know. It was a mixture of hatred for him and the help of one of her mother's brothers that got them through the difficult years.

Our family tree is a bit lopsided on Mom's side of the family as far as Great-Grandpa is concerned.

Mom said he showed up once when she was little, but Grandma did not want him to see his grandchild. By then he was a white-haired old man with a long beard. She chased him off with a pistol down the dirt road behind the chicken coop. He would have died if her glasses had been handy. There were two fried chickens that night for dinner, and Grandpa repaired the coop the next morning before going to work.

I grew up thinking what a despicable old man he was for running away like he did. I never knew what he did for a living, then or ever. He just left, and a mother worked herself to an early grave trying to survive on a weed-infested field littered with rocks and a typing job at the local telegraph office.

That was all I knew about the old man until I found the trunk. Now I'm not sure what to think of him.

I found it under Grandma and Grandpa's house, in the basement, while I was placing rat traps for them. It was in the back where the dirt floor and the house taper down to a height of about four feet. I wouldn't have found it if I hadn't stumbled on it in the dark. It looked like a grey block of concrete under the wavery light of the weak flashlight, and I would have passed it by, but I noticed a leather strap on the side of it. I gave a pull and the trunk parted its face from the wall. The front was only a sheet of brown rust, because that wall was wet and lichen covered. A blow from the butt of the flashlight cracked what remained of the lock, and the whole lid came off in my hands.

There weren't jewels or old bank certificates inside, nothing but bundles of old yellow papers tied with ribbons and strings. The top layer of papers was covered with mold and stank horribly, but the rest of them weren't beyond use. They must be love letters, I remembered thinking, because all were written in long, old fashioned, cursive script. It was too dark to try to read them, so I stuffed a few bundles in my pants' pockets for later examination.

After half an hour the traps were all laid out with little pieces of dog food on the trigger pans. I shoved the trunk back up against the wall after rearranging the contents back to their original positions, or as close as possible anyway.

Upstairs, Grandma had a cold beer ready for me. After watching the television for a while I went home.

Grandma never told us about her father, because she didn't know him. She didn't know, because her mother never knew him either. They must never have looked at those papers in the trunk, because that's where he was. Everything about him was in those papers: his feelings, his desires, and the way he looked at things. They weren't exactly love letters, those papers. They were poems.

The papers were tied in very tight bundles. When the strings were snipped, the little piles rose and expanded as if they were breathing for the first time in a long time, then crumbled along their creases. Some were completely ruined, illegible because of brown stains or mildew. All of them had to be pieced back together. Most were small, yellow sheets about the size of a hand, and they were folded twice but came apart into four little squares. I joined the squares together with scotch tape, paying particular attention to the way the script was divided so they would match.

The handwriting was some of the most beautiful I had ever seen. It flowed with a carefree stroke slanting slightly to the right. The characters were large. Capital "W's" began with a wide stroke on the left, tapered thin through the right angles inside the letter, and ended with a thin, trailing stroke to the right. All the small letters tapered and widened too, each exactly as tall as the others. The paper was unlined,

but the lines of writing were straight and true, never crooked or hilly. The words were spread openly and plainly across the paper with no flourishes or ornamentation, guiding the eyes to the right as if with lettered magnets. The ink was faded in places, for some of the papers had dates in the 1870's, but the thoughts designed by the grey lines were easy and direct.

If I were to tell somebody about the poems, I would have to include the scenes telling of small cantinas roasting in sunbaked, little oases where trails met, their thick walls protecting frail chairs and tables brought in from Mexico; the Mexican bartender who spoke only Spanish and German; the relief that the dark interiors gave to reddened eyes punished by sandy glare; and the quiet girl who cleaned the tables and spread clean sand on the floor. The poems spoke of sitting in the doorways of these cantinas, slightly drunk from warm whisky, and soaking in the cool breezes from the plains after sundown, and trying to tell some girl who spoke no English how much prettier she was than the moon (or than the last time you saw her, or than the girls back home).

Turn the page and you're riding a freight train through the woody marshes of East Texas, where even the sunlight is dark green, and the air smells so sweet that you can't stand it; you roll and light a cigarette to make things smell more natural, and drop the butt into the river below you when the train thunders across a bridge, to watch the little whiteness

roll and flit downward towards the dark, green water, and to see if it hits the water before you roll out of sight. Seven bridges and you're out of tobacco. And the whole time you're really thinking of a girl in New Orleans.

The poems yell of getting drunk on tequila with your friends in the morning; of taking all day to scrape and bloody your way to a tall West Texas mesa; of being too drunk and tired to climb down again and almost shaking to death in the cold night air without blankets to sleep under.

They say nothing of the infant you leave, because your feet start to itch and you feel tied down; nothing of feeling guilty when you come home drunk after being gone for a week and your woman loves you so badly she doesn't mention it.

They don't say anything about how you're not happy after you leave them; or how you felt like you used to be chasing something before her time, and how you feel like something's chasing you after her time.

Nor how you feel when your daughter tries to shoot you.

Or the child's face you saw in the window as you ran.

Or how you feel when you put the poems under your bed and think about them as you lie in bed beside your sleeping wife.

Aunt Mary

The car bumped along the narrow highway to Mercerville. Grandmother was driving. She talked to Mom beside her in the front seat, their voices audible but barely intelligible against the background of road noise. The windows of the car were partly open, tunneling the heated wind into the back seat where I sat dressed in my Sunday best. The wind did not alleviate the suffering caused by the tight necktie and the sport coat I was forced to wear on such occasions as this. We were on our way to visit Aunt Mary, though I did not recognize such a reason as being worth the unnatural ceremony of dress clothes and Vitalised hair on a Wednesday. These rituals were usually practiced only on Sundays, at funerals, or at weddings.

I would have felt uncomfortable anyway. Grandmother and Mom were old ladies going to meet another lady older than the both of them put together, and my young manhood was insulted. Every time I was with old ladies, like the time Grandmother, Mom, and some other old lady went to the State Fair Music Hall and I had to be their little gentleman and purchase the tickets, I was rooked into some sort of embarrassing situation. Would I have to be the little gentleman on this trip and "pay" for the gas? Good God, what if the car broke down, and we had to hike to a gas station in front of everybody? I wondered if

this embarrassment was some of that false pride the preacher talked about. People go to hell for that.

Aunt Mary was just a name to me--one of those relatives who lived in a picture on the wall surrounded with pink paper flowers. Her identity always got lost in Grandmother's genealogical explanations:

"Oh, Aunt Mary? Well, let's see. Now Aunt Sophie was one of my mother's cousins, one of my grandmother's sister's children, I believe. Now Aunt Sophie's mother was one of grandmother's half-sisters, you see, so I don't think she's a real blood relative. Great-grandmother, on my mother's side now, married this watch repairman from Memphis who had two children, one of them from a previous marriage in Tennessee somewhere. Well anyway, Aunt Sophie's mother, Mildred, the half-sister to my grandmother, was married to a carpenter, John, who had a brother called Carl, I believe. Now he had two daughters, and one of them was Aunt Mary. Now do you see?"

I did know she had to be very old. She was in an old ladies' home, because she could no longer take care of herself. People in old folk's homes had to have been born before the 1890's, because my Grandpa was born in 1898, and he could sure take care of himself. I have always been very polite around him, because he said if I wasn't, he'd spit tobacco in my eye. I don't ever feel easy around him.

During the ride, my eyes wandered over the passing landscape of short brush and wild grasses interrupted with flat

farm fields. I wondered if it had changed much in appearance since Aunt Mary was born. There probably wasn't anything then but open prairie broken by low, flat hills. Cowboys could have crosstrailed freely through this land and camped out alone at night under skies so clear and dark that starlight by itself could cast shadows. Neighbors were counties apart, struggling for existence on the black dirt and living rugged lives. Aunt Mary's parents, to me historically synonymous with cave men, lived on land like this. I wondered what they had done in case of bandits or storms. Did they have gun battles, storm cellars, hangings? Maybe Aunt Mary's father fought for the Confederacy. She might have personally known men who had fought Mexicans, Indians, and Yankees. Old kerosene lamps burned in glassless windows while they ate their suppers in the imaginary backrooms of my mind. The dull afternoon came alive, for Aunt Mary would probably talk about all this. I sat back, closed my eyes, and imagined that the car was on a mysterious road, each mile clicking off years of time.

The jolt caused by the transition from concrete highway to the gravel streets of Mercerville woke me. With the directions given by a filling station attendant, we found our way past the shabby façade of businesses and stores into the residential district and finally to the old ladies' home, one of those run-down leftovers of Victorian-styled construction. Greeting us at the front door was the manager, a stocky, grey-haired woman with a musky odor.

"Good afternoon folks," the manager said to us. She turned to Grandmother. "Been expecting you since your phone call. Mary's all set to visit with you all, so I'll just take you up to her room straight away."

Grandmother and Mom thanked her, and we fell into line behind the manager as she led us up the narrow, creaky staircase. At the top of the staircase, we turned right into a long hall with chairs along the walls. A couple of old ladies sat crooked over at angles; their eyes closely squinted at knitting crumpled in pale, withered hands. They didn't appear to notice us as we passed, but Grandmother stopped to bestow a soft greeting upon them:

"Hello, dear," she said to one who sat in a wicker rocking chair. "How are you feeling today?"

Her body didn't move, but she turned her head slightly to better see Grandmother. "Yes?" she rasped. "Gwendolyn?"

Grandmother placed her hand on the old one's shoulder, slowly massaging it with her fingers. Grandmother tried to say something, but her voice caught in her throat. The lady turned her head back to her knitting, painfully trying to finish what looked like a sock. Grandmother gently patted her, and we continued down the hall behind the manager. The boards made noises under our feet.

Grandmother once told me that Aunt Mary was considered a very beautiful young lady in her day, and she was the object

of tender emotions from quite a few young men. One time, two men had even fought over her.

"Four days later," Grandmother went on to say, "she married the man who took the combatants to the hoosegow." I kept this thought fixed in my mind as we neared her room. I wanted to be sure to see if I could notice any remaining signs of that beauty.

The manager led us to a door near a window at the end of the hallway. She knocked, opened the door for us, and then left. We entered the room. The first thing visible was a tall window, opposite the door, latticed with white curtains with little different-colored flowers on them. The window was open about one-third of the way, and a breeze moved the patches of flowers in and out. A clay water pitcher stood on a night stand under the window. On either side of the pitcher were small, self-standing picture frames made out of golden-colored metal which contained old-fashioned pictures of men with high collars and thick coats; women, dressed in long-sleeved, fancy dresses and their hair piled up and around plain faces, stood behind the seated men with their hands on the men's shoulders. Then I saw Aunt Mary.

She looked old, old, old. A skull with hair matted on top of it lay silhouetted against a white pillow. She wore glasses, and they magnified her eyes to a dark haziness. Sheets and blankets were piled up to her throat and obscured the frail body under their folds. I was very scared, because she didn't

move. I had never seen a dead body before, and I was afraid that I was seeing one now. Men had fought over her, I kept thinking; men had fought over her and gone to jail.

After Grandmother and Mom sat down, and the room became quiet enough, the breath wheezing in and out of her mouth became audible. Her stare was affixed to the wall between Grandmother and me. Her breathing was so weak that the blankets did not move a bit.

Grandmother leaned close to her ear and whispered something. Aunt Mary showed no sign that she had heard. Grandmother sat back and informed us in a loud whisper that we might have to wait a while for Aunt Mary to come around.

We sat there in the stagnant heat and listened to Aunt Mary's breathing and the flies buzzing around in the corners of the ceiling. Outside, through the window, I stared at the heat waves wobbling up from the street below and distorting the windows of the houses across the street. Sometimes a butterfly flittered through the trees, and I watched each one until it disappeared from sight. The stillness was broken now and then by footsteps or a groan from somewhere in the house. I could also hear the ticking of Grandmother's wristwatch. Mom stared at a point on the floor; seemingly lost in thought; a smile would flicker across her lips and then fade. We sat like this listening to every quarter hour being clanged out by a church bell somewhere in the town.

The afternoon sun formed a tiny copy of itself on the curve in the handle of the water pitcher. Perhaps Aunt Mary was too ill or too old to answer any of the questions I wanted to ask her. Such questions seemed rather foolish, now. Old people have many things to think upon, being so close to death. I felt cold; I hoped that I wouldn't have to get that old, but the preacher said that no one could avoid dying. But no matter how good you were, chances were that God would condemn you to a punishment of everlasting torment. Aunt Mary was at the threshold, almost ready to step over the line and meet her Maker. I secretly hoped that she hadn't heard the same preacher I had heard.

* * *

The sun was halfway down the pitcher handle when Aunt Mary began to move. She spoke, and her voice had the deep, croaky quality of an old man.

"It's hot here . . . very hot."

Grandmother removed the two blankets covering Aunt Mary, but she left the white sheet alone. She leaned towards Aunt Mary's face.

"It's me, Aunt Mary, Julia," Grandmother said. "Can you see me, Aunt Mary?"

The big, blurry pupils behind the thick lenses moved. "Yes," she said.

"Do you remember Karen?" Grandmother pointed at Mom.

"Yes. I remember." Aunt Mary was gathering strength; she had enough energy to sit up a little. Grandmother and Mom

helped her. They pulled the sheet down, and I could see her thin arms. They looked ugly, like the chicken wings in the grocery store.

"I want you to meet someone," Grandmother said.

The fuzzy eyes quivered a little, seeming to search the room for this new guest. The eyes swept by without noticing me, because I was standing too far away. Grandmother motioned for me to come to the bedside. I came over and looked down into the pinched and ghost-pale face.

"This is Paul," Grandmother said to Aunt Mary, "and he's Karen's son--my grandson. Paul, this is Aunt Mary."

Her eyes wavered in my direction. What was I supposed to do, to say? I couldn't very well have shaken her hand; I was afraid it would break. All the questions I had practiced and placed in reserve disappeared from my mind. I nodded to her and mumbled a how-do-you-do. I quickly regained my seat.

"How do you like it here?" Mom asked.

Aunt Mary's face turned in the direction of Mom's voice and answered that the place was very nice. "I've made friends here. They visit me when they can," she said. She wanted to know how the rest of the family were getting along.

"Oh, they're doing fine," Grandmother replied. "John's back at work again, and he'll be okay if he'll just keep taking his medicine. George and Nancy moved off to Mississippi where he's got some job working on aircraft motors. He said he was tired of flying, and it was about time for him to settle down.

Let's see, who else? Oh, yes! Frieda went down to Galveston this last weekend to visit Mr. and Mrs. DeCamp, and . . ."

Grandmother's voice droned on and on, rehashing the events of the past six months since her last visit to Aunt Mary. Mom interjected bits and pieces of information, and so the minutes ticked by, measuring off the events in our family sphere. I began to get a little sick at my stomach. It must be terrible to have to live in a bed, hoping for someone to come visit you and pump some life into your mind. I looked at the old head, the mouth hanging open, the little whiskers of fine hair sprouting from the chin. Her hands were folded across her chest, and they never moved from that position.

Grandmother noticed me very quietly sitting in the corner. She came over and asked if anything was wrong.

"Nothing's wrong," I lied. "I was just looking forward to asking her some questions about the old days . . . and things like that."

"The old days?"

"Yes ma'am. You know . . . when she was growing up and all that."

Actually, my curiosity about the past of Aunt Mary was rapidly waning, but I was afraid to hurt Grandmother's feelings. I couldn't think about anything except getting out of that place and into the back seat of the car. It was so hot in the room that I desperately wanted to feel even the hot wind from the road. At least in the car the air was moving and the scenery changed.

"Well, c'mon over to the bed, honey, and ask her," Grandmother urged. She smiled. "I'm sure Aunt Mary would be very pleased to tell you about the 'old days.'"

I felt as if I was moving through molasses as I approached the bed. I wasn't sure if I could look at that withered visage again.

"Aunt Mary," Grandmother said. "Aunt Mary."

Those glasses with the magnified blurs turned toward me again. The lenses looked like those of a lighthouse I had seen in a National Geographic.

"Aunt Mary, Paul wants to ask you a question."

I edged up to within a foot of that head. I tried to look at the edge of the pillow instead of her face, and I asked the first question that surfaced in quiet panic.

"Aunt Mary, did your father fight for the Confederacy?" The question seemed so absurd; the word "Confederacy" almost died on my lips, and my face flushed in embarrassment.

Aunt Mary's expression never changed. "Fight? My father . . . a fight? . . . I don't remember any fight." She paused for many long seconds, marked off by the ticking of my Grandmother's watch. "Edwin . . . Edwin?"

Grandmother placed a comforting hand on the hand of Aunt Mary. I returned to my seat as quietly as possible; I wished to become one with the wall and fade from sight entirely.

* * *

The sun's reflection in the pitcher handle was enshrouded by a shadow from the window ledge advancing upwards in the opposite direction. The growling of my stomach joined in unison with the louder sounds, filtering in from the yards below, of crickets and birds. The conversation between the women weaved through these noises for a long time. I dozed, waking with a start whenever a bead of perspiration seeped into my eye. The heat boxed in the room, and the curtains became still.

There was a soft knock at the door; it opened, and an incredibly wrinkled remnant of the past came in. Drool hung in strands from her mouth. At first, she didn't appear aware of our presence, for she shuffled directly toward Aunt Mary's bed and reached for her hand. She grasped it. After exchanging their greetings, Aunt Mary introduced us to Irma Gladdet, her best friend. Irma nodded to us, and Grandmother helped her to a seat beside the bed.

Irma reached a boney hand to a cloth purse attached to her waist and pulled out a string of photographs encased in plastic sleeves.

"These are my grandchildren, and here . . . on this end . . . are my children." The spittle fell from her lips and dripped across her hands; some fell to form a little pool in her lap. "And these here, on this side . . . these are my great grandchildren." Her cheeks moved in and out with each breath

drawn and exhaled. "One of my sons lives in Dallas. Charles . . . he's an engineer . . . and he lives in Dallas."

She continued to tell us about each and every relative she had, where each was born, what he or she did for a living, the frequency of each of their visits to the home--her memory was phenomenal. I think she was blind, though, for even when she was showing the photographs, her head was tilted toward the floor in front of her.

There was another knock at the door, and the manager stepped in. "Folks, it's just about supper time," she said to everyone. Grandmother thanked her, and the manager smiled and stepped back outside.

"Aunt Mary, we're going to go home now," Grandmother said. She bent closer and kissed her on the cheek. "Now you take good care of yourself, and let us hear from you. We're going to come back and visit with you real soon, honeylove."

Mom kissed Aunt Mary, too. I stood up but kept the back of my legs in touch with the chair. Aunt Mary said goodbye, and Grandmother leaned across the bed so Aunt Mary could plant a peck on her cheek.

The manager stepped back inside the room. "Mary, I'm going to walk your guests back to their car."

"Okay," Aunt Mary said.

The fresh, cool air of evening felt so nice as we stepped through the front door of the house. Lightning bugs were beginning to pop out of the hedges, and the sun was going down

behind a bank of cloudy haze on the horizon. The manager, true to her word, walked us back to our car.

"Now you folks come back and visit soon. You just don't know how Mary looks forward to your visits," she said.

It was already dark by the time we got to the highway. As the car sped along, I looked at lights far away in the night. They twinkled like stars and had different colors. Some were in groups, and some were by themselves. The air felt chilly as it gusted against my cheeks, and I enjoyed the night smells, including the faint aroma of skunk scent that wafted into the car every time we crossed a bridge. The countryside looked so black and empty. I felt very safe back inside the car.

Hospital

The recreation room was large because it had to be. There was nowhere else in the entire ward to comfortably carry on conversations, and, besides, the rec room housed our only form of entertainment--the pool table. If you were not playing pool, which was likely because there was only one table, you were seated in one of the chairs surrounding it, either talking or aimlessly smoking a cigarette and gazing out one of the large windows overlooking the scattered buildings on the hospital grounds.

Everybody circulated through the rec room at some point during the day or evening and stayed for varying lengths of time. The room was a pumping station through which we refreshed ourselves with human contact and the afternoon sun. Mr. Lloyd lived there; at least, from observation, he appeared to.

Old man Lloyd chain-smoked and otherwise occupied his time with staring at the floor between his feet. His chair was the threadbare one in the shady corner, and, according to rumor, God help you if you ever dared to sit in his chair. Because I never saw him when he was not in his chair, except for meal-times, my curiosity over this popular hypothesis was never satisfied. He sat there always, drawing nicotine relief through countless cigarettes nestled between two blackened fingers.

His large, gaunt frame, wadded up in his corner like a piece of discarded tissue paper, inspired legends that covered him like barnacles on an aged whale. Some were mystical and awe-inspiring and others not so complimentary; whether or not these legends disturbed him was another enigma which, in turn, probably engendered future tales in the backs of the minds of other patients.

He was once a wealthy man, according to one such rumor, and his relatives discovered grounds for committing him to the hospital. These grounds were left characteristically vague and tinged with the usual bitterness found in such stories: maybe they got tired of him; he was too long-lived for a rich man; people get committed nowadays as easily and frequently as medieval witches were burned. At any rate, I did not doubt that now he was very effectively ensnared, and, although he could be as sane as any oddball on the streets would care to define it, his chances of release were very dim. We knew a smattering of the legal obstacles involved in such a case: someone committed by another agency, person, court of law, or what-have-you stood much less of a chance for release than one who committed himself. And if he is in a mental hospital, then, of course, he is incompetent--much too incompetent--to handle an estate valued by many an authority in our midst as worth millions.

Not daring to inquire into any more of the purported eccentric qualities of the silent, old man, I did approach him

once and asked him why he was committed. He took a long draw on his cigarette, never averting his eyes from that space between his shoes. The afternoon sun grasped the smoke as it drifted from the shaded corner and stretched it out into a thin layer of wraithlike clouds. Our combined smoke settled around my shoulders. I squinted my eyes against the afternoon sun and peered through this cloud layer at the dark, enshrouded figure.

His voice finally croaked up from this valley below the smoke:

"I don't know."

"I mean, what were the legal grounds? Or medical grounds?"

A pause.

"I don't know."

His daughter did send him two cartons of specially made cigarettes every week. They arrived in the mail punctually every Thursday.

* * *

Two orderlies usher me into a small, white room and tell me to lie down on the cot, the sole piece of furniture there. I lie down, and the orderlies gently close the door after them. I stare for several minutes at the fluorescent tubes above me.

Two nurses and a man come through the door, wheeling with them a small cart. On top of the cart is a grey box covered with dials and switches; thick wires run hither and yon over its surface. One nurse plugs in the machine and turns a dial;

the other woman rolls up my sleeve and places a white cloth on the cot beside me. Onto the cloth she places two hypodermic needles taken from a tray below the box and then rubs my temples with an oily fluid.

The man tells me to relax and asks me how I feel. I say okay. He straps a rubber tube around my upper arm and tightens it. One hypodermic needle is inserted into the new bulging vein in the crook of my elbow. He releases the band and the room begins to darken, and the top of my head feels as if it is slowly coming off. The man quickly inserts the other needle, and suddenly I feel totally limp--I cannot breathe. I try to strain, to say something, to gasp for some air, but my body lies there as if already dead, leaving that spark of consciousness crowded into the corner of a darkening skull to silently scream until it too falls.

I awaken on the same bed, but it is in another room. The afternoon has already passed, and it is time for dinner. My chest hurts, but I do not care.

* * *

There was a man called George who spent most of his time wandering the halls, alone. He was lightly built, and, with his relatively large skull-like head perched atop his thin shoulders, he resembled a shriveled baby bird. His most extraordinary feature was a hole in the upper part of his forehead. I suppose it was a hole; it was a depressed area about the size of a quarter and grotesquely deep--about a quarter of an inch.

The area pulsed constantly as if a smaller bird were rhythmically pecking its way out of his head but frustrated by the tough membrane of flesh.

George had a bitter temper that was evenly matched with his hideous appearance. To one and all he had a ready curse. No civil remark could be addressed to him, and a conversation was impossible. His entire vocabulary appeared to consist of only a few stock lines of abuse, never more than five words each, and repeated in consecutive order. If not for Wednesday evenings, I would have considered him a mental wreck, unaware of his surroundings and totally unaware of what he said and what others said to him.

Wednesday evening was social night for the ward. Women patients appeared from whatever secret lair they inhabited on the hospital grounds and came to dance, drink Coca Cola, and talk to us. Attendance was mandatory. We were chased from the pool table or our rooms and conveyed to the lunchroom, now converted into a dance hall. We stood practically at attention as the women walked, limped, and hobbled in. The record player was turned on by one of the many nurses and orderlies in attendance, and someone clicked on a microphone to order us to have a good time.

Some were too old or infirm to dance; they sat in chairs and swayed in time to the music. Some stood, facing corners and dancing slowly with the products of their own imaginations, often without music as well as with. The younger patients

danced excitedly to the rock music selections under the careful scrutiny of nurses whose job it was to discern the genuine dancers from those who had simply gone into convulsions of some kind.

George, remarkably enough, was the star of the evening. His eye would roam the room and pick out some middle-aged woman close enough in years to his own. George would saunter over, glibly persuade the lady to dance, and then do routines I have not seen outside of a Fred Astaire movie. He exhausted woman after woman; chattering throughout the dance, his eye was constantly on the move for another prospective partner, his hole pulsating in double time.

One Wednesday evening, as we watched George gliding through a waltz, I approached an orderly and remarked on George's skill.

"Yeah, I know," he replied. "He's been here going on forty years. My daddy worked here and used to tell us kids about him."

* * *

My days blended together into a haze of existence with short peaks of events that protruded here and there almost at random. One cause, of course, was the shock therapy: that barbaric practice which finally burned away most of my childhood and the events immediately preceding what I call my incarceration. The other cause was the medication: a euphemistic term for heavy drug treatment.

Most of us lined up outside the nurses' station three times a day for our dosage of pills and liquids. We swallowed and gulped the chemicals under the watchful eyes of nurses. Nothing was so embarrassing to a hospital as to have some patient store the pills in his cheeks or under his tongue, and take them all at once some days later. Such deaths were hard to hush up, though the forced cheerfulness of the staff at such times usually was adequate to tip off the more perceptive patients. The emotional liaison between the staff and patients --this morbid symbiotic dependence of the patients on the exasperation of the hospital crew--would provide an interesting topic for some doctoral student's dissertation. He could explore why the patients' morale occupied a level in inverse proportion to that of the staff.

My waking hours were bounded by a beige pill and a blue one. Because of the chemicals, staying awake would require herculean effort under normal circumstances, but the atmosphere of the hospital helped to defeat whatever motivation remained to fight drowsiness. Existence was limited to thirteen-hour gasps for life, the thirteen-hour stretch required by hospital rules. Otherwise, existence would have shriveled to eight-hour moans or, perhaps, four-hour glimpses of life.

* * *

The barber had just put the finishing touches on my regulation hospital haircut when a commotion broke loose in

the hall outside the room. Within seconds, two orderlies marched into the room roughly pushing Tim ahead of them. He made one last futile attempt to escape, but the orderlies blocked the door; one of them wrestled him to the floor.

During the scuffle, I had jumped from the chair and moved to a corner of the room where I stood shaking and ill. The orderlies roughly picked Tim up and threw him into the chair I had just vacated. My illness at the violence was increased two-fold, for they were not just giving a rebellious teenager a haircut. They were committing rape.

Tim was very young, about sixteen. His long, brown hair fell to his shoulder blades, and it was his pride and joy. Most of the day he stayed in the rec room, absently staring at the pool table and brushing his hair. His lips would move, silently singing the lyrics of some song and keeping time with one foot. Like many of the younger patients, he was here because of some kind of drug problem.

The barber was imported from outside the hospital, but he reacted to the situation as calmly as if it happened every day in his regular practice. With a poker expression he worked his shoulders between those of the orderlies, and, as the orderlies grasped Tim around the throat and shoulders, he drew from his pocket a pair of scissors and methodically began cutting the long locks. The hair, wet from perspiration and tears, fell quickly to the floor in bunches. Tim no longer struggled, but his captors still had to hold his shoulders in

an attempt to keep under control the great heaves that wracked his frame. The barber's controlled expression began to slide from his face during the operation, and little gleeful curls of mirth popped occasionally through the professional demeanor.

Twenty minutes later, the barber finished the ordeal with a quick buzz of his clippers, applying the coup de grace of white sidewalls, a more severe haircut than anyone else received. The barber stepped back with a wide grin and dusted Tim off with talcum powder. Tim's face had now assumed the poker expression. With a flourish, the barber stripped off the great towel from Tim's neck and held up a mirror, asking Tim how he liked his haircut. With a trembling hand, Tim gently took the heavy handmirror from the barber and studied himself silently for several minutes. He forced an artificial smile to his lips to detract attention from the tear starting a trail through the talcum powder on his cheek. The barber jokingly remarked that that would be two fifty please. Tim slowly stood, stretching to his full five-and-a-half foot height. He turned to the barber, drew his arm back, and smacked the mirror straight into his smirk, knocking him through the doorway of the room and into the hall.

* * *

Maynard, otherwise known as Houdini to the patients and staff, was a gangling and worldly-wise eighteen-year-old. Short but wild hair framed a countenance that was a cross between Cochise and Dillinger. His grey eyes squinted

continually as if always exposed to a bright light, tightly drawing the skin over his protruding cheekbones. A gangster's mouth ceaselessly told stories of juvenile delinquency, couched in a gutter medium--his personal dialect. Unlike George, his obscene language struggled to cut a path to an understanding of sorts, if the listener were not too intent on listening to the ornaments of his verbal style rather than the meaning behind his onslaughts. He addressed everyone with his "listen, stud" and signed off with his "later." He leveled his audiences as much with his ignorance of position or culture as with his manner of speaking.

He earned the name of Houdini because of his remarkable ability to escape and later evade retribution. Some of his tricks were quite simple, like bolting from the lunch line.

When those patients privileged enough to eat in the general lunchroom assembled outside the ward, Houdini placed himself in the middle of the line. This point was the farthest from the two orderlies located at either end of the line. About halfway to the lunchroom one day, Houdini made an abrupt turn and dashed away. His swastika-covered tennis shoes cleared the fence before the orderlies knew what was happening. Houdini was fast, and it was useless to pursue. The orderlies and the patients watched Houdini run across a field, disappear for an instant, reappear by the freeway, cross it, and scramble into the woods.

A week later he reappeared under the tow of two deputy sheriffs. He basked in martyred glory and related more hair-raising accomplishments than he could have done in a year. His cusséd good nature worked its wonder on the staff, and within another week he was back on lunchroom privileges.

The orderlies now marched alongside Houdini enroute to the lunchroom, but he disdained using the same trick twice. Every day he went through the dinner line and sat at a table by the main door, much to the amusement of the orderlies. That door was locked from the inside; one could come in but not exit unless the door was unlocked. Houdini claimed that his table was in the shade and much cooler.

One day, a late arrival from the cottages opened the door. Houdini, seemingly absorbed in his soup and crackers, tensed and jumped. He went straight over the table and out the door before it was even completely open. The orderlies jumped in surprise; they slipped and slid over a floor covered with chicken soup. Upon reaching the doorway, they instinctively glanced upward as if to catch a glimpse of the winged tennis shoes of Houdini.

* * *

My recollections of my admittance to the hospital are hazy at best. I can pick out no logical order of events from the collage of ambulances, long car rides, sheets, and opening doors. My memory actually begins with the sight of that deified pool

table greenly reflecting the sunlight onto me after I had painfully, inch by inch, shuffled into the rec room.

Weeks later, I was informed by patients who had been through this check-in procedure with somewhat more alert and perceptive minds that a doctor was involved. A doctor--that was the missing ingredient here. I had not seen any doctors.

"Not so," someone told me. "In all probability," he continued, "the doctor has seen you. Hospital rules. Every patient is assigned to a doctor who somehow manages to keep track of your progress. Of course, they're far too busy to actually see us. That's the doctors' building over there. You can just see it if you stand on this chair and place your head against the window."

My new-found friend demonstrated the technique he used, and, through which, he seemed to gain some profound satisfaction.

"I keep an eye on 'em," he grinned.

As time passed and with very little else to do, I would try as best I could to reconstruct the events preceding the encounter with the pool table. The very center of the mystery was my doctor. I knew his name: Dr. Speckle. That much I had learned from one of the nurses. But I wanted to know what he looked like, sounded like--what he was like as another human being. Such exercises became more and more difficult as the medication and shock treatments broke in and clouded my memory even further. I surrendered after a time, not because of despair, but rather from apathy; like a practitioner of religion,

what I could not explain through analysis and reason I explained through what seemed most apparent. At this time, to replace this void, I substituted a neatly-wrapped and packaged substance. I concluded that Dr. Speckle was a bespectacled stork with a German accent who, instead of Vlastic pickles, sold sanity, and I let it go at that.

* * *

Dr. Clarke looked so young that one would probably mistake him for one of the high-school aged patients, except for his white laboratory coat. Undoubtedly he was old enough to shave, but whiskers would have had a difficult time pushing their way through that battlefield of acne hills and pits. These facial fissures and secretions did not detract appreciably from his appearance; thick glasses which made murky aquariums of the areas on either side of a nose with flaring nostrils doomed him to ugliness, as well as fan-like elephantine ears and a thick, burly shock of greasy, black hair. Dr. Clarke lurched and wobbled his thin frame down the hallways of our ward, those blurry images of eyes seemingly focused on infinity beneath the floor in front of him. He was the only doctor we ever saw, and he was in charge of shock therapy.

Shock therapy was the common denominator among patients at the hospital. Some of us went to occupational therapy once a week where, rather than amuse ourselves, we tried to amuse the staff with our inane creations. Others enjoyed group therapy sessions, the confessional for the masses en masse.

Still more patients underwent various kinds of treatments, some more exotic than others, and some had occupied themselves for decades by staring at walls, lights, or floors. But just about everybody who was anybody went through either electroshock or, for a rare few, insulin shock therapy. It was the catchall for all imbalances, distributed like quack liquids at a wild west medicine show.

The staff attempted to stagger these mass treatments throughout the week so only about twenty per cent of the patients were knocked out on any one day. One week, however, the electroshock machine malfunctioned, and, until repairs were completed, a tremendous backlog of patients accumulated. It was up to Dr. Clarke to administer the jolts to all these patients on one day. He was dashing up and down the halls with the nurse who wheeled the little box behind him. Flanking him marched two orderlies. Everybody was already in his cot, waiting; we could hear the little cart wheels squeaking madly.

I turned to a friend of mine in the next cot. He was a former newspaper reporter who was here because he had an impulse to bathe every couple of hours, thus the nickname Bather. He simply could never feel clean and was, therefore, disturbed.

"How long are we going to lie here?" I asked him. "It's been hours."

"Who knows?" he replied. "Dr. Clarke sounds like he's having an awful time, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, but not as tough a time as I'm having," I said. "I hate these treatments. I can't stand the choking."

"Hey, you wanna know something strange?"

"Yeah."

The Bather turned slightly toward me. "This Dr. Clarke is supposed to be opposed to shock therapy," he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Really?" I was surprised. "Then why is he in charge of the whole operation?"

"I don't know. But I have it from a very reliable source that he's about the only doctor here who's opposed to it."

He winked. The Bather was always coming up with information from "very reliable sources," most of it valid.

They finally got to our room about an hour later. I felt like a lamb awaiting the knife as they put the Bather under. To get my mind off my situation, I tried to imagine how Dr. Clarke would feel at the end of the day's toil, wandering a silent hall with his eyes focused on nothing.

* * *

Psychiatry seemed to be long on methods and short on results. Several of the patients had undergone decade upon decade of treatment, and, if they were not prepared to confront society at the beginning of their terms, they certainly were not ready now. Of course, some people could argue that the treatment certain patients received had left them in a state far worse than their original condition, but both sides of the

controversy certainly had enough evidence either way to argue the point for as long as the confinement period of the most chronic case. Judging the situation from a purely subjective viewpoint, however, I could not understand how treatments like occupational therapy could ever lead to the mental rehabilitation of anyone.

Paints, brushes, hunks of clay, paper, pens, and inane busy-work kits were the tools of the trade for the occupational therapist. Several of us were weekly herded into a room equipped with tables and workbenches, and there we were expected to either create original works expressing the potentials of our souls, or, at least, to keep ourselves busy and out of the way.

The therapist was a beautiful black girl who seemed to have her mind on anything except what she was doing. She grew exasperated with those of us who rebelled against making leather moccasins or creating "beautiful flower arrangements" from coathangers and wads of crepe paper. Many of the patients had made enough moccasins to shod several reservations and had produced enough flowers to . . . well, the picture is obvious. These were the patients she liked. These were the men and women whose minds traveled along little tracks so easily, so unconcerned with the trivialities of reality. Put some project in front of them, and, no matter how many times they had done it before, their hands would automatically guide the needle and thong through the leather or fold the crepe paper,

their brows misleadingly knitted in concentration, their eyes supposedly trained only on the materials before them. The therapist called them dears and set them to their tasks as soon as they entered the room.

After I had run the gauntlet of flowers, moccasins, and little clay sculptures, I became hungry, despite my condition, for something of a more challenging nature. This desire though was soon balanced by another desire that acquired equal weight. Despite the impressive college degree the girl had tacked to her wall, I sensed that her intellectual endowments must necessarily have not been great. After all, how smart does one need to be to push kits and fingerpaints onto a bunch of crazies? Every day this beautiful creature must have felt trapped into coming in contact with such a crew. We did not present a pretty picture. Those of us whose minds were not totally destroyed behaved, for the most part, like children. We had to be handled tactfully; our nerves were raw and exposed, and, therefore, we had to be gently guided through our paces. This girl was meant for beautiful clothes and charming gentlemen, but all she could do to earn a living was essentially to engage in play with people who had been conditioned to think only of themselves, to indulge in introspection to a considerable degree. In short, I sensed that she felt shut out among us; that somehow we were privileged. She had not the capacity to unconsciously or consciously knock her mind out of

sync with the multitudes. She could realize only the contrast of her physical perfection and our mental aberrations. I felt sorry for her, for actually she was as abnormal as the rest of us. I picked up the depression she would have felt, if she could have sensed it, and I buried myself under its weight for her.

Like all the other patients, I soon began to do the same thing over and over again, more out of pity for her than anything else. Every week I came in and asked for black ink, a pen, and some paper, and she would give them to me. My picture consisted of hooded monks grouped around a dead tree on a plain background. Except for variations in the folds of the monks' habits and the branches of the trees, this was the picture I turned in at the end of the hour every week. After several weeks, I became quite good at it, adding little touches here and there, never significant, to make the drawing more realistic and mature.

This routine continued until one day the therapist took me off course by surprise. She asked me why I always drew the same picture. I was flabbergasted; I never realized she actually took the time to examine all that stuff we turned out. She took me aside and showed me some watercolors.

"Why don't you try something different?" she asked.

I took the materials and sat at my place. My mind was reeling from the shock of this change in routine. I began

to paint, but I kept looking at her out of the corner of my eye. That beautiful creature had noticed me. She had examined my drawings, and they had started some thought processes inside her. Various ideas sifted like vapors through my head and culminated in the optimum therapy of therapies that she could do to keep me occupied. The hour passed like a Christmas morning.

I cleaned and packed the brushes back inside the kit, then took what was really the first look at my painting. I had painted a group of hooded monks sitting around a dead tree--and all in black watercolor.

* * *

We called him Lil' Abner, simply because he looked very similar to the character in the comic strip. He did not wear the rags of Dogpatch but the white uniform of an orderly, those men whose sole duties appeared to consist of lighting patients' cigarettes and coralling those who became violent. The orderly possessed a nature that was opposite to ours. Whereas we were given to thoughts about ourselves, our situations, or no apparent thoughts at all, the orderly was the man of action. He thought what his superiors told him to think and acted only when the proper strings were yanked. The orderly was muscled protoplasm. Lil' Abner was all this but something more too.

Lil' Abner was our orderly most imbued with democratic principles.

"Where are you going?" he would ask a patient wandering the hall.

"I was going to my room," the patient would answer.

"Well, I vote we go down to the rec room. How about it, huh? Come along."

* * *

An orderly goes from room to room, taking orders for cigarettes, candy, stationery, and other things the patients want. Two days back from his last vacation, Houdini sits on a chair in the hall and watches the orderly's movements through narrowed eyes.

"What would you like from the commissary?" the orderly asks me.

"Some Camels please."

"Filter or nonfilter?"

"Nonfilter."

The orderly very carefully writes on his clipboard:

CAMLE'S - NONfiter

After he takes down all the orders, he leaves by way of the large, locked door in the hall. Houdini watches the door quietly, catlike, gently crouched in his chair, secretly coiled. He smokes a cigarette.

* * *

The orderly came into the rec room looking for me. I was informed that my parents had come for their first visit and were waiting in the main building. I followed him out the door into the noonday blast of heat.

We walked beyond the dead grass and weeds of the patient compound and into the lush lawn surrounding the administration building. Here, even outside, it was perceptibly cooler; huge islands of shady oaks, pecans, and sycamores cast deep, green shadows on the grass. The scene looked so tempting that I wanted to throw off my shoes and run through the lawn barefoot, but I did not. I was too conscious of such behavior and its possible consequences.

Breaking forth from this pastoral paradise and heaving its bulk twenty feet into the air was the ultramodern administration building. Plate glass stretched from the very grass blades into a flat, concrete shelf that served for a roof. The glass was tinted, though, so the people inside were not visible. I looked at the building as we approached it and saw only the reflection of ourselves and our sylvan backdrop. The hospital itself was not visible.

The orderly opened the door for me, and the cold air chilled the perspiration on my skin. At first it was too dark to see anything. Faintly visible were the fluorescent lights in the ceiling, and I felt rather than saw the thick carpet beneath my feet. The orderly knew the area well though, so I kept close to his white uniform until my eyes adjusted to the low light.

My parents became visible simultaneously with their surroundings. They were seated on a long, low couch next to an artificial fireplace. Not incongruently, it flickered

an artificial heat made by lights in the vault-like coolness. My parents rose to embrace me. The orderly said he would return in one hour, and left.

Conversation was practically futile. It was as if I were deep in the ground, and they were shouting questions down to me from above. Dad presented me with the pipe and tobacco I had requested in a letter. I fondled the pipe bowl nervously as our words swam back and forth in the gap between us. After we had drifted across our respective horizons, the orderly came and took me back to the ward.

* * *

Just before dinner, I could see a small gathering in the rec room. As I walked in, I heard the Bather's excited voice addressing a small crowd assembled around the pool table. There were no orderlies in sight.

". . . and they tried to hush it up, but you can see the evidence for yourself. I was there and saw it happen, but if you don't believe me, go look at the table in the nurses' station."

Idly curious, I allowed myself to be swept by the small crowd down the hall. Everybody stopped about twenty feet from the nurses' station. The Bather nodded, and the patients walked one by one past the station window. Each man looked in the window, quickly yet reverently, and proceeded slowly to the group now gathering at the other end of the hall. The whole

scene was very sober. These men might have been passing by and paying their last respects to a friend.

I approached the window when my turn came, still not knowing what I was to look for. As I glanced in, I did not see anything out of the ordinary. There were vials of medicine arranged along the walls, a desk littered with papers, a bored nurse turning the pages of a McCall's, and the whole area illuminated in the stark color cast by the fluorescent tubes. Then I noticed what the Bather must have been talking about, but the sight only confused the issue rather than lift the mystery. On a counter under the medicine cabinets were two soiled tennis shoes with multicolored swastikas arranged along the tops of the soles.

I passed quietly to the congregation.

"Hey, Bather," someone whispered. "Tell us again about the escape--when was it?"

"About two weeks ago, man," the Bather responded. "When the orderly came back from the commissary with his arms full of cigarettes and candy. He opens that hall door, but before he steps through, Houdini jumps outta nowhere and is out the door. The orderly didn't know what to do; he's got his arms full of all this shit you see. So he finally yells and takes off after Houdini, leaving a trail of goodies all over the yard. But those were all he came back with--those tennis shoes."

Somebody else gave a low whistle.

"Two weeks, huh? Then he got away for good, this time," another congregant remarked.

"Yeah. It sure looks that way," said the Bather.

We stood around for a little while longer, looking at the floor and huddled together as if for protection from some great wind felt only by us.

* * *

The cottages were small, modern houses grouped in a semi-circle around an area of dead grass. There were five cottages for patients and one for the nurses who watched over us. A curved sidewalk coursed through the decayed bushes, its concrete flush with the cottage doorsteps.

The cottages must have been designed and constructed by the same engineers and architects who build submarines, for they were models of mechanistically cramped living. Each cottage was supplied with a small living room bordered on two sides by glass walls. A color television snuggled in one corner, surrounded with ultramodern lounge couches. The other side of the living room was divided off by one large couch. On this side was an oaken game table, over which hung an ornate lamp writhing with glass mosaic curlicues. Immediately beyond the living area were the two bedrooms, each with two beds, and furnished by the same impeccable tastes that designed the living room. The temperature outside could be above one hundred degrees, but inside it was cold enough to preserve food.

Each cottage, compact yet offering all the latest in technological comfort and piped-in music, hummed like a well-oiled craft floating amid the natural debris of the sun-withered compound. Most of the residents had cyclic colds because of the shock of temperature extremes.

* * *

The old nurse beamed at me. "Don't you like the cottage? We're so proud of you. You've made so much improvement in such a short time."

I preferred the heat outside to the cold, so I sat in a folding chair by the front door of my cottage and smoked my pipe. I sat there day after day, interrupted only by meals and sparse conversation.

"How are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm progressing. And you?"

"Oh, I'm progressing too."

* * *

After dinner I sat at my post beside the front door and smoked my pipe. Between dinner and evening the compound came alive, such a change from the hot, stark sterility of the day. Girls and boys from their respective cottages came out to stroll and talk with one another. After dark, one could smell the cigarette smoke mingle with the murmur of conversation and laughter. A match or lighter flared here and there, illuminated faces, then plunged them back into darkness and anonymity. I leaned my chair against the cottage bricks and sent forth my aroma of Prince Albert.

Just before dark one of my roommates, Ron, came out for his evening "stroll." Ron was a huge boy, over six feet, with enough muscles to make him look shorter. Blond hair contrasted sharply with a tanned skin, just as his sneer contrasted with a well-proportioned face, and his needle marks and collapsed veins contrasted with a healthy body. He was fiercely independent, talked very little.

He met three girls from another cottage, and they crept into the trees on the other side of the compound, beyond a rickety barbed wire fence. When they returned, their eyes were bloodshot, if you got close enough to see, and the girls were wearing each other's blouses.

Crickets started chirping as the last faded rays of the sun disappeared behind the knoll, pulling the blanket of stars completely over the sky. Grasshoppers and a couple of scorpions scurried back and forth across the sidewalk.

* * *

The little ray of light blinks on across my thighs as I open the back door. The door shuts behind me, and I sit on the small concrete step. Though another light automatically snaps on in the nurses' cottage, nobody comes to investigate. They know it always blinks on Friday evenings about this time. It is the only time I do not sit out front.

Here I can look around me and not see the hospital, the patients, or even the freeway. I put my fingers in my ears to shut out all noises. A field of high grasses stretches

forth invitingly, gently curving towards the darkening sky. It is so easy to believe that a time warp has dragged its influence across the land, throwing everything away and leaving only things deemed worthy to stay. It is a land that has retreated back into time, withdrawn from my previous experiences with it. If Indians were to come over the rise, I would gladly die at their hands or, if they so choose, go with them. But between that field and me is a five-foot cyclone fence, and, because of it, the time warp can never take full effect.

* * *

Lil' Abner and another orderly came up to my front door post after breakfast and asked me if Ron and Tim were inside. I said they were. Lil Abner's sidekick then informed me that they had orders to remove them from the cottage and return them to the ward.

"Why don't you go in and tell them to come with us peaceably?" the sidekick suggested.

Ron, the wild one, and Tim, the haircut victim, were my only roommates. Ron shared a bedroom with me, and Tim had the other room to himself. They usually went back to sleep after breakfast, so this was going to be a rude awakening. I went into the cottage and headed for Ron first.

He lay sprawled across his bed on top of the covers; he was clad only in a pair of boxer shorts. One arm lay across his eyes to ward off what little sunlight filtered through the

curtain and small window. I jostled him on the arm until he awoke. I told him what the orderlies had told me, and he jumped out of bed and ran into Tim's room. I could hear their excited voices arguing the situation even as I returned to the living room. They came out of Tim's room, Ron still dressed in his shorts and Tim donning a Che Gueverra tee shirt, and approached the living area. Tim remembered the bed he had been strapped to for forty-eight hours after he had struck the barber. Ron would miss his nightly strolls. Both had good reasons for detesting the confinement of the ward.

Suddenly the front door burst open, and Lil' Abner with his sidekick exploded into the room, knocking chairs and furniture out of their way. Startled, I fell to one side as they descended upon Ron and Tim. Within seconds Tim lay on the floor in front of me, one ear bleeding. The sidekick was bleeding all over the front of his white uniform, his broken glasses in one hand. There was blood on the carpet. I stumbled into the bathroom and puked. I remembered Ron screaming for me to help him just before a huge fist hit him in his face. I tried to puke all the cowardice out of me.

When I finally came out of the bathroom and shuffled into the living room, everybody was already gone. The television lay in ruins like some war machine in its crater.

* * *

My parents and I sat in the spacious, oak-paneled office of Dr. Speckle. He was quiet for several minutes, reviewing

and shuffling a folder full of papers on his desk. Finally he turned to me and asked if I would return to the hospital twice next week and the three weeks after that for shock treatments. I nodded. Then I would be able to decrease my visits to the hospital on a sliding scale until the treatments were no longer necessary, he explained. I nodded again. I was quite ready to agree to anything he said.

Dr. Speckle then pushed towards me a series of documents to sign. I signed. He then pushed the same documents, plus a few more, towards my parents who also signed them. He carefully put them back into the folder. This doctor, who had performed his miracles upon me through remote control, then stood and held out his hand to wish me good luck. I shook his hand, and we left his office. I looked behind me as my dad closed the office door and saw Dr. Speckle pull another folder from his file cabinet.

We walked from the building into the heat, and I said goodbye to the ward, Lil' Abner, the cottages, Ron, Tim, Mr. Lloyd, George, the Bather, and, despite Dr. Speckle, I said goodbye to the shock treatments and delivered myself into the waiting hands of the Indians.

Weedgod

It was a bright Saturday morning, and Mario de la Cruz awoke with a nagging pain in his temples, the result of another Friday extravaganza with Angel, José, and Pete. The sunlight coming in from the open window was felt rather than seen; it would take half an hour before his eyelids would be able to part and allow the world to manifest itself before him. Meanwhile, he allowed himself a yawn and an unsuccessful attempt to conjure up again the fleeting dreams. His wife, Leticia, rolled her sleeping bulk closer towards the edge of the bed as the advancing light from the windows crept over the blankets and sheets, spreading its heated greeting. Another weekend of being home with the wife and kids. The thought thoroughly awakened Mario, and he quietly slipped out of bed.

The shower roared onto the stall floor. Mario again closed his dry eyes and trembled under what felt like the weight of a warm Niagara Falls. He knew he had drunk a lot of beer last night, more than the Friday night before, which had been more than the Friday before that. He also knew he was spending more and more time with his friends than ever before. Besides last night, which had started at six p.m. and ended around four a.m., he had gone with Angel to pick out his new lawn mower at Sears on Thursday; on Wednesday evening he had spent the evening with Pete watching a movie on television;

and last Sunday he had gone fishing with Angel, José, Pete, and a friend of José's called Luke. Mario tried hard to think of why this was so, why he would rather be with his friends than with his family, but the reason wouldn't surface in the molasses of head pain.

As Mario stepped from the electrostatic noise of the shower, he could hear his three-year-old, Maria, chattering for breakfast over the supine body of her mother. The chatter awoke little Nydia, one year old, who began to cry from hunger. Leticia groaned a couple of times and heaved herself from the mattress. She thomped into the bathroom to relieve herself and didn't even give a sideways glance at Mario who was towel-ing himself dry. Mario could feel his stomach knotting itself for the morning conversation, and his blood-pounded head began to ache rhythmically. This was the daily conversation between his wife's stoic silence and his own guilt, which grew into a stern, silent battle that heaped all the casualties onto Mario's emotional back. On weekends it was worse, because the ritual couldn't be broken off for the 7:30 rendezvous with his bus. Even the pot which used to sustain him through the two days was beginning to lose its soothing effect. Maybe if he coupled it with sneak forays to the refrigerator for beer, things would be tolerable. The clatter of metal pans snapped him from his reverie and called him to breakfast.

Maria was already stuffing pancakes into her round, little mouth and watching cartoons on the television. Her brown eyes

never wavered from the dancing grey shapes; an arm equipped with a fork automatically lifted the syrup-sogged material to her face. Nydia sat passively on her mother's lap, staring at a window, opening her mouth as the managed fork nudged her lips. As Mario collected his plate of pancakes and a glass of milk from the kitchen, he glanced out of the window into the tissue-like bunches of bright orange flowers brushing gently against the screen. "Tish, is that a pomegranate bush outside the window?"

Leticia continued her feeding of the infant. "I don't know."

The verbal dove fell flat in the air, mingling with the leftover smoke from the frying pan. The silent war commenced, shrinking Mario's stomach to half the capacity necessary for two pancakes. The only sound was that of the cartoon characters animating in the living room. Maria was quite lost to them, her chin streaked with syrup, her plate on the floor beside her. Even Nydia was strangely quiet, contemplating the yellow bits of pancake on her palms. Mario ate in silence, then walked out into the backyard.

As his headache abated under the influx of food, Mario debated the weekend question of mowing the lawn--a debate that usually resulted in the victory of reason over desire. The yard was large enough to be an hour-and-a-half ordeal, but it took his mind off things. Those giant weeds in the back of

the lot that grew two and a half feet in seven days fell so easily under the throbbing power of the gasoline powered blade. Mario rolled a joint in the garden shed after filling the gas tank. He pushed the wicked, sharp, slinging mechanism from its pad onto the little dirt space by the door and started it. As it throated to full power, Mario inhaled deeply on the joint, making the motor lift to god-like intensity, straining under the leash of his bared arms. The noise of birds and insects bowed to the superior scream; Mario pushed the machine off the barren dirt into the lush stand of vegetation. The motor dimmed only slightly as it chugged into the green life, spewing it out of the side vent into an arc of death under the golden sunlight. The smoke of the inhaled weed mixed with the odor of flung spores; the motor lost weight under Mario's push and glided instead. Mario's head spun with power--an easy power like the dive of a Luftwaffe night attack. Mario was Genghis Khan--no--Genghis Khan's horde sweeping across the plains onto a village of innocents; he was Pancho Villa on the back of a Phantom F-111 swinging a scythe of bulleted steel in front of him, leading a squadron of the Kahn's Stukas down on the uplifted, passive, fat faces before him. The squadron circled once around a round, brown protuberance and screamed down, throwing their steel ropes down and across, making sure that none escaped to tell. One clean cut winnowed the bad from the good, the big from the small, making everything uniform, baptized in equality. The bad lay sprawled in the squinting

glare across the little shoulders of the good little grass blades who bore them away for the final humiliation of biodegradation. In the soil at the roots of the grass seethed a turmoil of rebellion--a growing mutiny ready to fruitlessly throw their weight against the hated steel wizard--the dancing wind that pushes itself. Mario laughed. He was death to those who rolled their fattened bulks over him at night, stealing his sheets. The roar of the battle pounded in his ears, and the enemy danced and waved before him, spreading their limbs in ignorant anger before the wrathful Weedgod. No chains held him ground level; he was a loveless marauder springing from the level suburban plains into an ethereal plane where his will was law. He gained his highest altitude; the sun was a yellow crystal among flashing crystals of cold white. The gravity spread its pull along his back in an even pull as he arced his soul and glittered in a smooth chromium sheen. Mario had transcended mortality and morality.

As Mario spun to port for another look at god in his mirror, something went wrong. He looked down at his knuckled instrument panel and saw ten knobs arranged in two semicircles of white glow, then haze over. Mario heatstroked out and collapsed his dreams into a tragic crater, spewing lowly earth and rocks in geysers of flashing intensity.

He awoke under the splashing garden hose held by Leticia. The silenced lawn mower sat clicking and cooling as the

reverberations of battle glory died in Mario's ears. Mario rolled his wet head to one side to see Leticia through the grass blades turning off the water. The vanquished conquistador was fallen, his war machine stilled by a force he could not understand. The woman giant turned and looked at the fallen one through the canopy of his little forest, and then lumbered away into the house.

Eggy Cooter

Eggy Cooter turned the ignition key again. The engine of the pickup would give only a faltering chug, then sigh away. It wasn't an out-of-gas chug; it was a mysterious chug, garbled in that mystic dialect used by machines to confound humans.

The pickup couldn't have picked a worse time or place to squat and bust. Evening was coming on, and the desert temperature would plummet. Eggy looked at his wife and sick child. His wife was an Indian and used to the desert. Eggy wasn't worried about her. Little Nina, though, was only five months old and very sick. Eggy felt like crying, so he got out of the pickup and walked down the road a few yards. In the moonlight he could hear his wife snoring, huddled over Nina to give her warmth. Eggy started to cry.

Eggy fiddled with the battery connections, his work lighted only by the moon now high in the desert night. He hooked the battery directly to his two way radio through the power supply wires. The connections tightly fastened, Eggy returned to the truck cab and closed the door. He carefully refolded the blanket back around the door to keep out the cold.

Lois was now awake, she and the child wrapped in another blanket. Her eyes were shut, and she gently rocked to and fro, chanting softly to little Nina. The baby's eyes were closed, her breath gently rasping in rhythm to the rocking. They formed a unit of pain.

Eggy tuned the radio. He held his wrist up to the moonlight and looked at his watch.

The battery couldn't supply enough juice to the radio. Eggy placed his ear to the speaker, but could barely make out the static. When he pushed the button on the microphone, the little transmit light glowed brightly. Maybe he had enough power to transmit a weak signal, but he wouldn't be able to hear a reply unless it came from close by. Eggy had heard of low-powered transmitters sending signals hundreds and even thousands of miles under the proper conditions. He pressed the button and brought the mike close to his mouth, chanting softly a call for help.

Lois Littlefeather Cooter moaned softly and rocked. Her black hair formed a night around her face.

The battery was dead by three a.m., after two hours of transmitting. Eggy leaned back in the seat, his neck aching from the strain of worry. Not a car had passed them; the asphalt two-laned highway was deserted. The only sounds were the chanting, gurgling, and hushed calling of the truck occupants. It was very easy to believe that they were the only living things on the desert.

Eggy fiddled with the microphone. His only hope had been the radio. If no one had heard his signal, then they might sit there for many more hours. The nearest town, Rook Haven, was over forty miles away. Eggy could only hope somebody had been playing with a radio in the middle of the night and just

happened across his signal. Or maybe some trucker miles away on another route, bored by the drive, had turned on his radio looking for companionship. There just had to be someone listening out there. It wasn't fair that his child should die because nobody happened to listen.

Eggy checked his watch again, and then reached for his insulin kit.

Eggy had been sitting on the side of the road across from the truck for over an hour. He couldn't stand listening to the sound of the baby's gasping. Eggy pulled the edges of the blanket closer around him and listened to the gentle chanting of his wife. What was she doing? Was she praying? To what god was she praying?

The truck had betrayed him. It wanted a sacrifice. It was a sporting sacrificial stone though; it had extended the aid of one of its lesser angels--one that glowed when he talked but could not respond. The machine had died, but it was now more alive than ever. Like a narcotic, Eggy thought: it lulls you into a false safety and dependency, then it pulls the rug out from under you. Through its death, the pickup took on strange powers.

The Indian woman's chants blended with the howls of a coyote.

Eggy watched his wife.

Lois curled her body like the crescent moon and protected her star. Rocking gently, she let the tides of her body match the suffering waves of the little one.

The desert wind swept the surf of tumbleweeds over the shoals of the roadside. The stars winked and blinked their eyes in gentle curves of motion. Their cold light intertwined with the earthshine from the moon, producing ancient thoughts from ancient feelings. The sky held back secrets like the deep waters of the ocean, secrets that were very old yet very fresh--like clams dripping with brine or caught fish--big fish --that jump from the night fisherman's boat back into that midnight ink of cold wave.

One should never visit the seashore at night alone, Eggy thought. He pondered feelings that were strange companions, but he couldn't help it now, sitting next to the woman he had never really known. Of course, it's all right to join with everything. It's very stabilizing to be primitive and pulse with the night and feel the beating earth, spinning slowly under star gaze, and to beat within it and the womb to beat within the body. It's just circles within circles, and everyone knows they never end or fall.

If one part of the universe slips a little, the slack is taken up somewhere else.

The little one's heart curved within the crescent of the larger beating, also curved within the beating of a larger crescent. Losing time completely, Eggy could think of the

future little hearts within the baby's crescent. But if that failed to happen, the slack would be taken up somewhere else sometime.

Eggy shook his head; he had been dozing, and the chanting had woven itself around his thoughts. That's why the sacrifices and the great night fish and the moons had filled his troubled dream like smoke filling up an expanding balloon. When the chanting had stopped, he must have jerked awake, for the silent lumps in the seat beside him cast a silver-lined silhouette from the moonglow. His eyes closed again.

Eggy was behind the wheel of an old automobile; it appeared to be one of those humpback whale sedans manufactured in the early 1950's. He saw the dashboard, with its oversized speedometer greenly glowing, and the road illuminated by the headlights. A plastic hood ornament gave off an orange glow, looking like the center mark on the sight of some large ugly gun.

At times Eggy saw the road, and at other times he saw the back of his silhouette, as if he had left his body and were sitting in the rear seat. His head wore a wide-brimmed Stetson, and his body wore khakis with a brown leather coat. His point of view switched back and forth, from the body to the back seat.

The scope of the headlights extended to the sides of the road as well. About twenty feet on either side of the road, what looked like wheat stood in walls. The car rode high enough for him to see the wheat tops shining softly under the

moon--the surface of the world seemed to be covered by the wheat. There were no houselights to be seen, just miles and miles of wheat extending to the stars on the visible horizon. Eggy felt as if the road had violated the wheatfields, had plowed right through this growth that had been standing here since the land's upheaval from seas now only dimly remembered by rocks deep in the soil.

Eggy was floating behind and just above the hat now, looking down at the instrument panel. A hand reached out of the darkness and pushed in a cigarette lighter on the dashboard. The hand retreated into the shirt pocket under the coat and fumbled around. The hand then went through the coat pockets. The body stiffened, lifting the butt of the seat, and the hand jingled through the change and keys in the trouser pockets. Eggy finally realized that the hand was looking for cigarettes; he pulled the car off to the side of the road, put it in neutral, and tried to think where the cigarettes could be.

Eggy turned around and looked at the back seat. A crumpled package of Pall Malls glinted under the dim glow of the speedometer light. He reached back, got the pack, and discovered the two cigarettes left inside. The lighter on the dashboard worked out, and Eggy lit a cigarette.

Looking out of the car window, Eggy was hypnotized by the swaying motion of the wheat, something he hadn't noticed before because of the car's speed. He floated back behind his head

and watched his head watching the wheat. The hand floated back into the dim light of the panel and turned off the motor, then the lights. The other hand loosened its grip on the steering wheel and rolled down the window. The moon was poised over the fields on the left, and a gentle swishing noise floated in a broken rhythm through the brisk air.

A movement caught Eggy's eye. He searched the wheat tops but could see nothing. Then he saw it again, out of the corner of his eye. It was to the right of the moon, in an area of the field almost beyond the limits of sight aided by such a soft light. Something appeared to be jumping over the wheat, far out in the fields. Eggy estimated the wheat to be about four feet high, so whatever it was had to be fairly strong.

Eggy was scared; scared of what, he didn't know. He was heavily perspiring, and the palms of his hands felt wet. Eggy was startled by a pain in his fingers. The cigarette had burned down. He flicked it out of the window and was conscious of it glowing on the pavement as he intently watched that corner of the field with the mysterious jumping beast. He couldn't see it clearly by staring directly at it, but when he shifted his gaze just a bit to one side he could see the fast movement of a black shape against the lighter backdrop of wheat. Eggy couldn't tell if he was seeing one rapidly moving object or several slow ones. The shape or shapes were not coming closer, but the activity did seem to be making its way toward the moon. Eggy waited, sweating.

There were two beasts, alternately springing into the air over the wheat tops. Eggy squinted, then he floated behind his head and looked out of the rear side window. They looked like fat antelope. Their bodies were swollen, floating gracefully through the air apparently propelled with four toothpick-thin legs. The only sound was that of the wheat stalks rubbing in the night breeze.

They came closer, their bodies plainly visible only when their arcs placed them directly in front of the moon. Eggy made a squealing noise in his throat. The quick glimpse that had triggered the involuntary response was confirmed as the beasts came closer: what he had thought was the head of each beast was only a large piece of skin that flipped back and forth like the crest on a drowned rooster. Eggy reached for the ignition key and turned it. The engine of the car would only give a faltering chug, then sigh away. It wasn't an out-of-gas-chug; it was a mysterious chug, garbled in that mystic dialect used by machines to confound humans.

Eggy switched in and out of his head. The beasts were still very far away, still not close enough for their movements to produce any audible noise. His panic magnified the intensity of the moon several times. Eggy banged his fists on the steering wheel and wailed; then he floated back in slow-moving, objective terror, the kind of terror one feels for a threatened hero in a film, and watched detachedly as the fists pounded and the head wobbled about in open-jawed horror. Eggy

reentered the body; the frenzy now clouded his mind, and his eyes watered. The moonlight refracted into a prism-like shatter of subdued colors, forming a horrible frame around the apparitions in the wheat. The ability to shift from the body up to this time had been involuntary; it was something quite natural to do to obtain a better perspective. Now he was unable to float away. He became shocked into a static state, a level on which motion was impossible. He froze, eyes wide open, staring at the ever-increasing intensity of the moon, its light breaking apart to attack and confuse him from every point within his sphere of vision. "Hey, what's wrong with you?"

The light had a voice?

"Hey, you okay?"

The voice faded away, as if in consultation with God.

"Something wrong with . . . Roy . . . drugs you think? . . . that flashlight there . . . get on the horn . . . Rayworth Hospital. . . ."

Eggy's eyes still perceived a moving moon, now shining with white light. It moved away, throwing into view a radio, a hand, a baby's foot, the floorboard of a truck, then back into his eyes. A pungent odor seared into Eggy's nostrils, causing him to gasp and snap into an upright posture.

"Mister, you all right?"

Eggy looked at a man with a gray hat crammed down around around his ears, a weatherbeaten face, and a black jacket with a badge on it.

"Yeah . . . yeah . . . a little stiff, that's all," Eggy replied. He looked at the empty seat beside him and jumped, almost banging his head on the roof of the cab.

"Where's my wife? . . . my wife and kid?"

"They're fine. They're sitting over there in the car. You were the one we were worried about. You a diabetic, huh?"

It was less of a question than a flat statement. Eggy looked up at the deputy.

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

He grinned. "Well, when we couldn't revive you, I smelled your breath--uh, you know--."

Eggy nodded.

"So," the deputy continued, "I noticed a sweet smell and I asked your wife if you took insulin. She nodded and showed me your needle and bottle, so I figured you must have overdosed. She said you needed sugar; I crammed a Hershey in your mouth and you choked it down. You feelin' better?"

Eggy braced himself up in the truck seat and put a hand to his forehead, then stroked his temples in an attempt to clear away some of the cobwebs that seemed to have woven themselves over his mind.

"I feel okay."

He now dimly remembered taking the insulin. His watch had stopped sometime after three a.m., and he had anxiously injected the medicine, afraid that he had waited too long.

The deputy interrupted Eggy's thoughts. "We better get you folks into town. I think you and the kid need to see a doctor. I'll lock up your truck an' you can come get it in the morning."

Eggy, still dizzy, relaxed next to his wife and child in the back seat of the police car as it glided rapidly toward the town. The intermittent squawk of the radio seemed to punctuate each rasping breath of the baby. His wife's body warmed his own, still chilled from the night's ordeal. Four years, Eggy thought. Four years it took me to learn the dialect of her people; four years before I could talk to my wife, the woman with the English name and the Wasossi tongue. Eggy spoke English only a few times a year when he went for supplies. He raised his eyes and met the gaze of his wife; the moon reflected from the dark pits of her eyes. She smiled. Then she began again her chanting, softly, so quietly that Eggy had to strain to hear it.