

Stories of

The Yee-Haw Nation

By Eric Bergstrom

A new generation of misfits reinvents old-time traditions as they resettle a ghost-town community. Humorous action-adventure meets the search for meaning, in ten adult fables drifting through time like smoke around a campfire — always getting in the eyes of the same circle of unforgettable characters. These are people we know, in a place we dream, wearing the scars and laugh-lines of our own lives.

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Chapter 1

Clementine's Garden

Clementine's brother disappeared, but nobody hardly noticed except for down at the Drink Now Tavern, where a few folks missed his monstrous pickup truck, the Beast.

Roland was a scrounger and the Beast was his monument to impoverished improvisation. The engine had been taken from a wrecked semi-truck one dark night — a tight fit turned backwards in the bed of that rough old pickup. It sat high above huge Dirty Mudder tires on a heavy chassis that'd come up missing from a military surplus depot over in Bigg City. The combination rattled and smoked and thundered and shook the ground. Every red-blooded male in the little community of Simple secretly coveted the Beast.

No one coveted Clementine though. She'd been only three when her mother died, and had never been quite right since. Roland was much older and had left home as soon as he could. Their father had no time for the addled girl, beyond the burden of maintaining order. He preferred the company down at the tavern, where they understood the misery of frustrated potential. Clementine grew up alone, playing with her toy tea set. It was the last thing her mother had given her.

Then she was seventeen, gazing distantly at where the tea set sat on a shelf, when her father came home to a dinner that hadn't turned out right. A decent meal was little enough to expect, and he threw the tea set to the floor and knocked her into the corner. She'd learned to protect her eyes, but couldn't stop looking at the floor and all the broken pieces, until he wore himself out.

Folks knew it was hard for her father, and for years had expected him to run off. No one was surprised when he finally did disappear, but they were surprised when Clementine's brother took her in. Just like their father, Roland weathered his misfortune with companions of sullen empathy. They'd nod their heads and marvel at his patience as he explained how his stupid sister was hardly capable of fetching water or splitting firewood.

When Clementine was nineteen she was cleaning the two-room shack she and Roland called home, and she discovered a picture of their parents. She set it on a shelf to study, before going to the mirror to search for traces of her mother. When Roland saw the picture setting out in plain memory, he cursed and threw it into the glowing woodstove that heated the shack. As the flame fed on itself he almost reached to save it, but it was too late. His fingers knotted into fists and he turned on Clementine for what she'd made him do. She tried to protect her eyes, but couldn't stop looking at the stove and all the charred remains, until he wore himself out.

But now Roland had disappeared, and Clementine's bruises had barely faded by the time the notorious landlord Buford Jaster came to inquire about the late rent. He brought Bully Earl with him as encouragement for when folks didn't quite feel up to their obligations.

Bully Earl beat on the door of the shack, hollering for Roland. "I know you're in there, you low-down mangy cur of a deadbeat — the Beast is right here in the driveway." Earl worked himself into a frenzy at the silent door until he finally kicked it clear out of its frame.

There were two screams. One came from Buford, who'd looked up from cleaning his fingernails with his pocketknife just in time to witness the destruction of his property. The other scream came from Clementine, where she trembled in the front room of the shack.

She regained her composure though, and spoke to the red-faced Earl, who'd fallen in on top of the broken door as it gave way easier than expected. "Won't you have a seat? I'll make tea."

Buford Jaster stomped in and snarled at Clementine, "You gotta get out. That no-account brother of yours ain't paid his rent and I ain't runnin' no charity. Go wake him up and both of you git."

Clementine started crying and said she hadn't seen her brother in a month and didn't know what to do. It had once been said that if the light was just right she wasn't particularly hard to look at, but she was still just crazy Clementine and both men were only disgusted with her tears.

Buford said, "That ain't none of my problem, unless you got the rent on you."

Between sobs Clementine said she didn't have no such thing; all she had was the title to the Beast, seeing as how Roland had put it in her name for some legal particular.

It occurred to Buford that perhaps he'd been a bit harsh, and in fact they might be able to come to some equitable understanding. With a smile as cold and bright as winter moonlight, he said, "Of course you need to pay somehow, but I've always liked you and I can see you're havin' hard times." He gestured at the empty shelves around the room. "So I'll take the title to the Beast for what you owe, and give you clear until tomorrow to move out."

Clementine started crying again, and Bully Earl said, "Now wait a minute; I've always admired the Beast myself. I believe I might could make you a better deal." Earl wasn't quite as stupid as he looked and he shouldn't have been surprised when Buford backhanded him across the face to shut him up, but that's the affect the Beast had on men.

Buford took a few calming breaths through clenched teeth before saying, " Now Clementine, we'll be back tomorrow, and you know I'm making you a fair deal, so you hunt up that title and get your things together. We can drop you off out at the highway." He kicked the fallen door with the heel of one of his snake-skin boots and stomped out.

Clementine heard him cussing Earl even after they were inside the car and driving away.

#

Lamont Peabody was only of passing interest to anyone. He'd inherited the family plumbing business, but somehow it had dwindled down to his beat-up old Rootermobile van, some tools, and himself. He still knew plumbing though, and when an emergency that nobody would admit to being the cause of arose down at the Drink Now Tavern, they called Lamont. After business was tended to, Sam handed him a mug and offered a toast.

Lamont had never understood the entertainment value of such places, but he eased up to the only opening at the bar, right in the middle of a lively exchange between Bully Earl and that crusty old one-eyed junk-man, Simple Jack. Earl was taunting Jack with news that his loan-shark boss was about to foreclose on Jack's property.

Earl sneered his displeasure at Lamont's interruption, but consoled himself with the knowledge that the wimpy plumber had his own loan with Buford. When it was time, he'd lose everything too. Earl would see to that, just as he had with Simple Jack. He smiled at how easy it'd been to scare away all of the old scrounger's business. Bully Earl set to reminding both Jack and Lamont of his importance, by loudly bragging about his day.

Talk of the missing drunk, Roland James, or of the crooked loan shark, Buford Jaster, held no interest for Lamont, but a hard elbow in the ribs from the suddenly grinning Simple Jack served notice that ownership of the Beast was of considerable interest. Jack knew that Lamont's rusted old Rootermobile was likely on its last retreats. The Beast could be a timely replacement — perhaps even a bold signboard to resurrect the once proud business of Peabody and Son Plumbing.

Lamont was the son in Peabody and Son. He didn't figure to ever have anyone to carry on the company name, but it'd be silly to change it now. He finished his drink and Earl mentioned that somebody's toilet might need fixing elsewhere. As Lamont stepped outside with a renewed sense of ambition, Simple Jack was still grinning over the grace of opportune miracles.

Lamont rose early the next morning and performed the usual start-up ritual on the Rootermobile: a spray of starter fluid, whack the battery, pump the throttle, hit the starter, jump out and extinguish the fire. It worked every time, just not always right away. This time it only took two attempts. All night long he'd dreamed of the Beast and had decided to go early to see Clementine before Buford Jaster could get there. No one locked horns with Buford lightly, but Lamont felt this could be a turning point in his life. Any other such intersections had passed unnoticed, and he wasn't getting anywhere.

Arriving at the rental shack just as the sun rose over the ridge, Lamont got out and gazed in wonder at the Beast. His arrival woke Clementine. She wandered barefooted out into the

yard, in a sheer nightgown that left her form clearly visible against the rising sun.

She recognized Lamont and said, "Won't you come in and have a seat? I'll make tea."

Lamont was staring lustfully, muttering quietly to himself, but her voice finally pulled his attention from the Beast and he turned to deal with the girl. "Miss Clementine, my name is Lamont Peabody. I'm sorry to bother you so early, but I have a proposition for you."

She smiled and accepted the introduction without saying she'd seen him around Simple on the occasions she'd been allowed to go into town. She had in fact spent some time admiring the cut of Lamont's overalls. She shivered in the morning chill, and he finally noticed she wasn't wearing hardly anything. Lamont was plenty warm in his heavy wool shirt and jacket. She smiled again as he gallantly removed the outer garment. Opening the door of the Rootermobile, he threw the jacket in on the seat as he said, "I've come to see about purchasing the Beast. Maybe I could look it over while you go get dressed."

She shuffled back into the shack as his attention turned back to the Beast. There wasn't anything to look at that he didn't already know, but he was stalling — trying to think of the best way to make his meager funds sound like a fortune. Never having been devious, he finally settled on honesty. He was beginning to have doubts as he walked to the shack.

He noticed she'd recently started a small garden by the porch. The young plants were doing well even though it was the shaded north side of the house. He'd heard how she had taken up gardening right after her father's disappearance a few years ago, tending and talking to the plants in some sort of lonely distraction. Now her brother was gone too, and the poor girl must have started this new garden to fill the void after he disappeared. The therapy must have been a success; he could hear her inside, singing some old child's lullaby. It was a soft warmth in the cool morning, stirring vague memories of home long ago. He knocked on the splintered frame of the vacant door.

She stopped singing and said, "Won't you come in and have a seat? I'll make tea."

By now Lamont was feeling hopelessly out of place, almost ready to give up the idea, but the least he could do would be to

humor her and set to tea. It was as cold in the room as it had been outside, but she was still barefooted, though now she wore a dress. It occurred to him that in a plain and ordinary way, she wasn't an awful-looking woman. He pulled a chair up to the table and sat down, watching her move about the side of the room that served as kitchen. She brought the tin cups and iron teapot and seated herself across from Lamont. To ease into conversation he mentioned her garden and asked, "Wouldn't it do better in a sunnier spot?"

She got a far-off look and said, "That's all right. It's a nice view from there."

Just a matter of priorities, he guessed. He nodded towards the door leaning up against the wall. "Reckon I could fix that for you. It wouldn't be any trouble."

She smiled. "Oh, don't bother on my account. I have to move out today anyway."

He couldn't think of anything else to say, so he moved on to business. "I'd like to buy the Beast, but I guess I don't got much money." He looked up and caught her watching him as she bit her lower lip with an expression that somehow made him uncomfortable. She seemed about to say something, but stopped. They could hear a vehicle coming up the driveway.

It was Buford in his rusted old luxury car. Earl was driving and Buford sat in the back seat, where he ran the "Simple Credit and Trust" out of the heavy safe welded into the floor. That safe held enough leverage to tilt the landscape, but Buford always bemoaned the abuse of his easy nature. That crabby Ina Coulter was always around to nod her head in affirmation whenever he'd say, "There'd be a lot less friction if people would only cooperate."

Lamont thought of his loan with Buford, and uneasily realized he wasn't cooperating.

Earle got out of the car and opened the door for Buford, who saw the Rootermobile and exploded into a tantrum. He knew something was going on — the shack didn't even have any plumbing. If the door hadn't already been broken he would have kicked it down himself. He stormed into the shack and yelled at Clementine, "I don't know what you're trying to pull, but I told you how it's gonna be. What's this stupid plumber doing here?"

Clementine was momentarily too scared to answer. Finally she squeaked, "Won't you have a seat? I'll make tea."

Lamont was nervous, in over his head, but he managed a shaky voice. "Now just relax, Buford. I came on my own, about business. The girl didn't have nothin' to do with it." He stood to leave, saying, "Well, I guess I'll be on my way."

Buford wasn't satisfied. "What business? Re-plumbing gravity in the outhouse?"

Clementine proudly held her chin up and said, "Lamont is buying the Beast."

Earl had come into the shack too, and all three men stared at Clementine in disbelief. Buford exploded, "You owe me back rent and that title is mine!"

Lamont wasn't happy with the way things were shaping up, but if he could get the Beast it'd be worth it. "Actually, you had a contract with her brother. She doesn't owe you anything."

Icy cold now, Buford looked at Earl and nodded. Earl grinned and started for Lamont. As he passed Clementine, she grabbed up the heavy iron teapot and hit him hard in the back of his head. It made a solid *thunk*, and Earl fell to the floor, face down and out cold.

Clementine carefully set the teapot back on a plate in the center of the table. She was quietly talking to herself — something about enjoying tea.

Lamont was impressed by the sudden, but calm, expertise with which Clementine had wielded the half-full pot. She hadn't even spilled much of its contents.

Buford shook his head as he looked at the useless Earl. "This ain't over, Clementine. I'll be back tomorrow and you better be off my property." He continued ranting as Lamont grabbed Earl by the feet and drug him out to Buford's car, a task that would have been more dignified had he turned him face up. Lamont got the bigger man loaded into the back seat just before Buford's tirade wore out. Buford got in his car and spun out, leaving a cloud of dust that slowly faded to a loud silence.

Clementine joined Lamont in the yard. He said, "Well, I'll be proud to take you up on that deal, me buying the Beast, but like I said, I can't pay much. I don't know what you're gonna do." He was already climbing up on the huge truck, getting possessive.

She seemed to be studying her bare toes wiggling in the dirt. "I could go with you."

Lamont pretended not to hear until he could get his thoughts in order. Finally he asked, "Don't you got nobody else?"

She just shook her head.

He said, "I guess for a while. You sure can't stay here."

She smiled — a pretty smile.

It felt good to make her happy so he said, "It'll be just like having a sister." The smile disappeared and he wondered, *Women: who could ever figure them out?*

Lamont thought it'd be best to square up for the Beast right away. Clementine made a surprisingly hard bargain: all of his money, plus the Rootermobile, plus driving lessons. That last worked out all right for Lamont though, since he needed a way to get both vehicles to his place. They made a few practice runs together in the Rootermobile until Lamont's frazzled nerves decided Clementine's driving skill had developed to a perfectly acceptable level. He helped load her few things in the old van, then climbed up in the Beast to lead the way.

The multiple shift levers in the monstrous truck were a puzzle, due to the huge engine sitting in the bed and the transmission turned backwards. When Lamont finally got it rolling forward, it became apparent that the Beast had been designed by a drunk, because if you were sober it was hard to make it go straight. He flattened a fencepost as he turned out onto the road, but after a few miles he started to get it figured out.

Clementine actually had less trouble driving than Lamont did. When they finally parked in his driveway she seemed prouder of the Rootermobile than he was of the Beast. She rushed over and hugged him. He'd totally forgotten her on the trip home, but they'd made a deal, and hey, she sure had brightened up right pretty.

They went in the house and while he figured out the arrangements, he showed her around. To avoid any misunderstandings, he showed her there were two bedrooms, and which one was hers. She was most interested in the kitchen and bathroom though, running faucets and flushing the toilet several times just to watch the swirl. Lamont made it clear that she could do for herself and he'd always done for himself and that he'd see her around. He went out to look at the Beast.

The next morning Lamont left for work early. He'd been installing the plumbing in a new house being built on the other side

of the valley. It was quite a distance, but he needed the work. He was anxious to finish the job and get paid, and he was looking forward to driving the Beast again. Mostly though, he just wanted to get away from Clementine. She was always right there wherever he turned. And the way she looked at him all soft-eyed made him nervous. She seemed happy and it somehow made her attractive. And that made him feel guilty, thinking about the poor girl that way, although she didn't really seem slow. Maybe it just took being nice. He'd known her father and brother, and wondered if anyone had ever been nice to Clementine.

Lamont's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a siren. He always hated when things went good, because that meant they'd eventually get worse. He knew by the image of a state trooper in his mirror that he'd reached that point. It finally occurred to him that there wasn't much of anything street-legal about the Beast. No one ever worried over such things back in the un-patrolled community of Simple. He pulled over and waited as the car eased in behind him. When the trooper walked up beside the cab his head was barely even with the bottom of the door, so he had Lamont get down and come back to his car.

That same morning, Buford and Earl had gone to visit Lamont. They'd already been to the abandoned shack and seen the flattened fence. They knew where the trail led. Buford intended to use whatever leverage was necessary to move Lamont to understanding. Earl drove, his head still aching from the thumping with the teapot, and his nose scraped up from being dragged face-down through the dirt. He was stewing over the previous morning's encounter, swearing he'd kill that Lamont.

Earl stopped the car in Lamont's driveway. Buford got out and started for the house, but Earl saw that the Beast was gone. Diesel smoke still hung in the air though, and Lamont couldn't be too far ahead. Earl drove off like a hound on the scent, leaving Buford standing there cussing the stupid bully. But help to fit Earl's unique job description was hard to find.

Turning back to the house, Buford saw Clementine peeking through a window. She ducked out of sight and he started yelling at her. "You better not have let that stupid plumber have the Beast. You owe me back rent and damages, and you're gonna pay. Now you let me in before things get worse." There was no answer and Buford said, "You know, I hold a note on this place. That

stupid plumber ruined his parents' business, and now he's gonna lose their house."

The door opened and she said, "Won't you come in and have a seat? I'll make tea."

Earl caught up to the Beast just as Lamont and the officer had convened at the police car to debate the proper compromise between order and freedom. Earl went on by and parked off in the brush, then snuck back to the Beast. He climbed up in the cab to look for some way to exact his vengeance, but the trooper saw him and shouted. Earl slammed the Beast into gear and floored the throttle, but the big transmission had reverse where he thought first gear should be.

Lamont and the trooper jumped out of the way as one side of the Beast backed over the police-car. The truck tipped up on two wheels and drove a small circle before falling on its side. It took the lawman several attempts to speak, as his face froze colder every time he looked at his flattened car.

It was discovered that Earl had quite a few warrants out on him for various acts of assault and menacing. One particular document written by a rather perplexed officer of the court simply stated, "For miscellaneous mayhem and deviant behavior." Evidently Earl had been branching out, conducting widespread raids and returning to Simple to lay low. Earl went to jail.

The Beast was hauled to Simple Jack's scrap-yard and the trooper made Lamont watch as it was flattened, but the crusher could only smash the body. Jack was rubbing his hands together as he woefully explained that he'd have to find some other way to dispose of all that massive power-train.

Lamont walked home. He wondered if he could make some sort of deal with Clementine for the Rootermobile. He couldn't think of anything he had left to give.

The sun was going down when he reached his driveway. He saw that Clementine had already dug up another garden spot. Well, at least she'd had a productive day.

She met him at the door and smiled, saying, "I'm so glad you're home. Won't you come in and have a seat? I'll make tea."

He wondered at how right she made that sound — Home. They stayed outside for a moment though, and watched the sun slide into unseen horizons. He wondered how it could be that no one had ever noticed how beautiful she was.

#

Of course, this all happened years ago. Buford Jaster disappeared, and it was widely assumed that he'd fled the jurisdiction before Bully Earl could trade incriminating information for a lighter sentence. Simple Jack was hired to tow Buford's car from where Bully Earl had left it, but on the way to the impound it somehow started on fire. Jack said it burned so unusually hot it was almost as if someone had poured extra gasoline on it. The Simple Credit and Trust safe and all of Buford's leverage melted away.

Lamont and Clementine Peabody have welcomed a son into Peabody and Son Plumbing. They fixed up the Rootermobile and the business is doing fine. Clementine serves tea and grows some of the nicest flowers in the county. If you ask about her gardening success, she gets that old far-off look and says, "You have to start at the bottom and work up, but if you care enough, any life can flower."

Chapter 2

Simple Things

There's a place you can't get to until you pull some weeds. The fashion of the beaten path races by, but if you can cut through the going to the being, the local junk-man known as Simple Jack might help salvage your purpose.

The nick-name "Simple" matches the expression Jack wears below the scar around his eye-patch, but the title actually derives from the place behind those weeds. Long ago, the first settler told his son to go mark the trail, and the boy puzzled over what they should call the town. The father proudly thought of their last name, Jackson, and said, "Just think of our posterity son — it's simple." The confused boy went to make the sign, and the town of Simple was born.

Simple boomed then drifted away, but a sparse community of stubborn souls and misfit dreams took root in the dusty remains. Nowadays those children skirmishing barefoot through the aimless dirt streets don't know where all of this high culture came from, but Simple Jack has given tactful guidance for more than a generation. He's easing into retirement now, and his junkyard has become less of a profit seeking enterprise than a self sustained laboratory for scientific research. His rough exterior keeps troublesome women away while he pursues the perfection of technology by studying the flight trajectories of catapulted pumpkins. He remains unfettered by feminine wiles, but to fill in the gaps he routinely journeys down the road to visit Mable's place.

Like Jack, Mable maintains her business less for profit than to sustain her hobby — such in her case being feminine wiles. She's only recently retired from a personal entertainment career

over in Bigg City, where she sold momentary escape from the inconvenience of life, until her daydreams and nightmares drifted together and the colors faded away. She's come back home to build a shelter for better choices, and her "Finishing School for Wayward Women" mocks the gray of escape and celebrates the inconvenient colors of life.

The women that meet at crabby Ina Coulter's place to commiserate and empathize in misery know that Mable is up to something, they just don't know what. Ina's "Proud Daughters of the Anguished Soul" (as Jack calls them), believe men need to leave behind any foolish expectations of respect or faith from women, to bear up under the blame they so rightly deserve. They wouldn't hate Mable so much if she was still only selling escape, instead of guiding her girls to responsibility and building life.

The finishing school receives guests from seven to ten p.m. Mable polishes her coarse herd of misfits until they lure enough benefactors into her parlor to keep the creditors at bay. Visitors shine up their cracked hands and skinned knuckles, shake the sawdust out of their hair and scrape the cow manure off their boots; then come stand with their backs against a wall, or dance, or talk philosophy and high aspirations with fine ladies in fancy gowns. Propositions are carefully sifted for lasting consequence, and turnover is high as the students recklessly gamble their lives on frustrated offers of matrimony. Those who visit in the misguided hope of immediate gratification complain it's no proper industry, and say it's just Mable's vicarious meddling in what she never had, but she wears a smile that becomes more natural every day.

Mable herself is the one Jack comes to visit, perhaps in the patient pursuit of some day seeing her legendary tattoo that says "MOM," strategically placed high on the back of one leg such that from another perspective it says "WOW." But that was another time, and Jack and Mable sit and argue for hours over the best course of action to nurture their mutually beloved Simple — a contest to see if he can storm out in anger before she throws him out in disgust.

Jack and Mable both knew Simple back when it was a thriving timber town. The mill ran three shifts and there was a railroad spur from the main line and on into the foothills. Signs of commerce lined Main Street and every afternoon school bells

released a swarm of life to ravage the self-importance of stuffy adults.

There's a place in Mable's memory of before the jobs dried up and her family moved away, of going to that school and playing in that life. The school has long since burned down and these days most of the life is bussed clear out to Chehappwa to be processed, but occasionally children escape and she glows in their light with born-again innocence.

Mable knew when she returned to Simple that she couldn't build her shelter alone, but she remembered a story about stone soup, and bought that old boarded-up hotel in the middle of Main Street. Most folks were too occupied with hope to actually build anything, but a few incorrigible spirits helped fix up enough space to get her started. It was Jack that first spread the word. That skinny old junk-man with both knees poking through his overalls knew about Mable's plans before anyone else. He sold her the hotel.

Jack traded an eye for his ugly scar forty years ago, as the youngest member of a timber-falling crew working the last thick stand up on Turkey Ridge. He dropped a tree through a narrow avenue, avoiding broken limbs thrown from a hundred feet overhead as the trees swept against each other. He was focused on dodging the falling debris as the trunk slammed down in front of him just like it should, and a pitch-hardened root popped and whipped back from under the soft duff.

He woke up in the infirmary with a broken shoulder and a hard-hat imprint in the side of his scalp. He got used to one-eyed depth perception, but the view from the other direction was difficult even for old friends. When the timber thinned out and the town moved on, Jack looked in a mirror and stayed behind.

He took to salvaging the debris of industry's hasty departure, envisioning himself as a hero performing rescues. He eventually worked and traded his way up to the old abandoned hotel, intending to scrap it out, but all those empty rooms and grand old space got him to remembering the way it'd been. The county would tax him for the value as long as he didn't tear it down, but he paid the penalty, and dreamed of life where people are.

Salvage grew scarce and Jack fell behind, but by the grace of opportune miracles, he held on to that hotel. By the time Mable

came back to Simple and hunted him up with a story of shame and her own dreams of salvaging life, he was so far behind that the county was about to foreclose. When she looked him straight in his one eye without flinching, he knew she'd turned from shame to pride, and he sold thirty-five years of dreams for the back taxes.

This evening, like so many others lately, finds Jack and Mable arguing over the re-peopling of a ghost town. Life may be where people are, but people must first be where life is, and Mable's parlor weeds out the tourists. Folks here are measured from a deeper dimension (some pronounce that 'dementia'), where depth of character defines horizons.

Jack just came in from his own horizon out on Dark Hollow Road. That perverse dirt trail out past his junkyard twists along the river as it seeks the path of least resistance to destinations of the most sufferance. Dark Hollow Road is the root of Jack's answer to all philosophical debate: "The path never ends; it just gets harder to follow." The high ground is preferable to the smoother low ground in the mud, but there's no escape during dust season. This has been a particularly long one — late October and just this evening the first rain.

It's cold, but Mable has the windows open to the new air. Provocative life is pouring down, and reserves are being spent in giddy extravagance. Mable rides herd on youthful abandon, turning strays back to the straight and narrow, but she feels the relief in the air too and says, "I guess we can allow a bit of leeway for an occasional end-of-misery celebration."

But at that, Jack snorts and coughs and lets loose a stream of expletives to get limbered up, then sets the record straight. "Misery — ? Shoot, that were jist fresh country air. I 'member that one year, you had to cut a hole in the crust over the river jist to go fishin', an' the air was so thick with dust you had to get a run at it. When it settled, everythin' were the same gray with no edges to pick out shapes, an' the holes in the road become dust puddles. Had to navigate by the feel of bumps. I 'member them Selkirks turned up missin' an' no one knew if they'd gave up and left, or if they's new bumps." Jack snorts again in disgust at the trivial worries of soft civilization, then launches into an extended coughing fit to stifle any further debate.

But Mable's having none of it. "You crazy ol' coot, that's a pathetic excuse fer a memory, just pathetic. Shoot, I's five when

we first come here. Moved in up there off Old Woman Road, where the company had just put that row of old trailer homes fer rentals. Bedrock still showed where they'd scraped down fer footings. Those days the log trucks'd come down outa there in a stream, draggin' a cloud of earth behind. Now I ain't sayin' it was dusty, but time I was six that bedrock was covered and we had some fine deep soil. I member 'cause waterin' the garden was my first real chore."

Mable closes her eyes and follows the smell of new rain back to wet dirt in the sunshine. "Just had a trickle fer to water with. I'd ditch it into a row and wait forever fer it to get t'other end so's to change it again. I got awful heavy waitin' in the sun though. That dust felt like sleep droppin' outa the sky. I'd get a row started and go lay in the other end so's the water'd come wake me up to change it again."

Mable drifts down tracks of muddy bare feet and daydreams before she remembers herself and slams into Jack again. "You crazy old coot! You let me rattle on like some empty-headed muddle-brain. That's pathetic. Just pathetic."

Jack grins, and they survey the parlor. As many women as men have taken to showing up, following the Friday night confluence of eligible bachelors. A few folks well beyond such foolishness still come to support it. The Peabodys are here: Clementine took to the idea of a refuge for young women early on, and always drags Lamont along to offer free handyman assistance. Even Buster showed up tonight — the girls are throwing a kids' Halloween party and Jack asked him to come help scare the whilikers out of the children.

Buster was the first of those incorrigible spirits Jack recruited to help remodel the hotel. Going against the grain was pay enough for the hard-headed Buster to stay on the job until it was done, but he hasn't been back since. He's only here to answer Jack's call for help. The kids love his stories, and he's waiting until they finish trick-or-treating through the halls of that mostly unoccupied hotel-turned-haunted-house.

Mable has plans for all of that extra space, for a local school to give roots to these children before the weeds take hold. But earning faith of that measure takes time, and part of a fragile beginning is the success of these parties. She's watching the unpredictable Buster with trepidation.

Mable's girls have been reduced from sinister Halloween hags down to silly costumed ladies, and the kids now set their sights on Buster, surrounding him as he glares about with blood-curdling adventure. He starts telling the one about them witches out at Dark Hollow, in a brutally direct assault that knocks the wiggles right out of them kids.

Jack's confidence in the proceedings gives Mable little comfort, and she unconsciously takes his arm as she fishes for reassurance. "This here Buster's been a big help, but I ain't ever heard nothin' civilized 'bout him."

Jack grimaces at the thought of interrupting the show with some flowery speech, and pulls her by her own grip clear across the room before answering. "Sure, Buster's all barb-wire, but you'll find folks on either side. I s'pect since the one side don't waste no worry over anyone else's opinions means you can trust their character. Buster likes a good story, but I ain't ever seen him stretch the truth to his own advantage, or tell a joke on anyone but hisself."

Mable shakes her head. "That's pathetic. I wasn't askin' could he put in an honest day sinkin' postholes." She shakes her head again. "Just pathetic."

Jack thoughtfully rubs the scar that snakes across his forehead before he says, "A good posthole runs deep. I reckon you couldn't hurt Buster's feelin's with a rock, but I happen to know he pines away fer some girl long gone, and I also happen to know he was once a kid his own self. Used to come about the junkyard so much that I wore myself out chasin' him off. Finally had to put him to work scrappin' cars. His hands'd be bleedin' on one side from knuckle-busters and burned on t'other from the blowtorch, but they always come back holdin' what I sent him after. Best of all, bein's he was only frog-high; he didn't know to get paid."

Across the room, Buster's to the point in his story where he and Billy Newsome are preparing to sneak out of that crooked foster home and slip off to Dark Hollow, to see if the rumors are true about them Porter women running naked under the October moon — "Of course I's just a nipper at the time, more scared than anything, but Billy was older; his voice had already changed and he had hisself a higher level of interest in crazy females. He up and dared me to come along and so which of course I had no choice."

There's a white outline around Mable's grip on Jack's arm,

as she watches the wide-eyed kids and worries for the future of her school. Jack searches his memory for a soothing diversion, and starts his own story: "I Reckon your family took outa' here before the state funneled up the river with that new bridge, but that's when it started floodin' up the valley ever' spring. Folks down on the flat below Dark Hollow Road took to buildin' up on mounds or even piers, but come floods they still gots to leave their vehicles out on the road.

"Now Buster here, he'd got a taste for grease an' such and fancied hisself a mechanic. All them beat up rigs settin' out there waitin' fer their owners to drift back to shore was plumb irresistible. Folks was always gonna pound him to mush, but the boy jist couldn't help hisself — always fixin' on somethin'. Done a bang-up job too. Shoot, even with all my junkin' I'd never guessed the front axle from a '51 Ford could come that close to pounding into shape under a '59 Chevy. I never could see why ol' Selkirk was so upset."

Mable still looks like she's witnessing an accident as Buster terrorizes the kids. Jack's arm is going numb below her grip, and he anxiously persists in attempted diversion: "Buster got tired of scootin' 'round under them vehicles in the cold mud though. Got to eyeballin' that pit I got out at the scrap-yard for standin' up under cars all efficient-like. Asked to borrow my ol' chainsaw. Shoot, the boy was barely big enough to heft it, so I couldn't see no harm.

"Now you know even durin' floods, Turkey Crick never runs all that deep under that wooden bridge out there. Somehow Buster got that ol' saw started and cut a hole in the bridge, so's he could get in under an' reach up through."

Jack spies a tight smile forcing its way across Mable's apprehension, and brings his testimony up to full force — "Little Buster was mighty proud, so I hitched up an' drug Selkirks' truck astraddle that hole so's the boy'd have somethin' to bang around under. Figgered it'd fill their hearts with joy to share in poor Buster's education. See, them Selkirks was hippie commonists, always on us rich folk to share up with their poor ways. Which they always made aplenty fer ever'one, usin' that truck to run a blade over the road ever' spring so's to push off all the rock an' smooth out an easy minute. Come winter they'd plow the ditches so full of snow that the only drainage was the road. Washed down worse ever' year, but they'd jist smooth the canyon out deeper

next time. They asked fer donations to help with expenses, but I's always savin' fer somethin' more important. 'Twas a shame little Buster couldn't get their truck back together that last time."

Mable finally surrenders to faith, and releases her grip on Jack's arm. They move back across the room and Jack chooses a spot to lean against the wall. They watch the little wide-eyed faces as Buster recalls the moonlit shadows of Dark Hollow:

"... so we hid out in a likely spot and it wasn't long 'fore sure enough, here come them Porter women all dancin' about, howlin' and shriekin' like nothin' I ever wanta hear again. Bone chillin'. They's quite a crop, which folks was always wonderin' bout the abundance, bein's no one ever seen no Porter man. Anyways, I just wanted gone, but Billy said to set tight, and took hisself to creepin' up closer."

Buster's voice is just a whisper now, his eyes are frantic and he's trembling — six years old, sitting tight in the shadows. "I's watchin' fer Billy, didn't even see that ol' woman come up behind me. She stroked back of my neck with a finger so cold, it burned a hole through me clean to the ground. I just locked up all froze. Only thing I could move was my eyes, watchin' as she done several circles around me with her face all orange in the moonlight, lookin' at me such as to this day I wish't I could forget."

Shuddering, Buster tries to pull his head down into his shoulders and closes his rolling eyes as if to block out the memory. There's a whimper from one of the kids seated on the floor around him, and still shaking, he opens his eyes again, but they've rolled back to a dead white. He jolts up from his fear so sudden that the children spasm over backwards, but they bounce up again as he blinks his eyes back to a semblance of life and continues.

"Finally that old woman stopped circlin', and all disgusted-like, pointed back towards out of the woods. I 'bout bounced off the trees runnin' out of there, but kept gettin' turned around. The things I seen that night . . ."

Buster has to stop and shake his head again, but recovers. "Didn't make my way out until next mornin'. Ever'one was mad as a snake you jist tied in a knot, wonderin' where was Billy. He never turned up. I tried to lead 'em back in there, but seemed like all them little draws that run off Dark Hollow like fingers, they jist closed into a fist all knotted up. Even growed men kep' gettin'

turned around. Couldn't get the dogs to even go in there. That's when ever'one decided Billy was old enough to likely make it on his own."

Buster slowly turns to solemnly look into each little face. "But I'll tell you this: Ever' time I see a jack-o-lantern, I feel that orange-headed woman's finger on the back of my neck and my wits drain down in the ground where I can't entirely vouch fer the rest of that night . . ."

Simple Jack stands a bit straighter against the wall as Buster casts him a furtive wink before continuing, ". . . but it still haunts me: runnin' all about tryin' to find my way outa there fer what seemed hours, and finally comin' right up on that Porter house with a row of jack-o-lanterns on the porch, and settin' there, that same old woman, only such as you can't imagine. Seems them Porters took their punkin carvin' mighty serious, gettin' all frenzied up with them knives. That old orange-headed woman'd somehow got in the way an' there'd been some awful accident — but they'd went ahead an' hollowed her out and set her up there with the pumpkins, all lit-up from inside with candles."

Before doubt can set in, the lights flicker and seemingly from out of nowhere a hollow pumpkin with an orange wig explodes on the floor in front of Buster. It's only the detonator, followed by the greater explosion of the circle of kids shrapneling throughout the parlor.

Before the screaming ricochets can even begin, Jack drops his coat back over a miniature catapult and leans back against the wall by the light-switch.

The children are still vibrating as their happy parents tow them home.

Mable asks Buster to stay for the rest of the regularly scheduled finishing-school visitation, but he's putting on his beat-up old cowboy hat and vacantly staring down the front of her dress as he answers, "Naw, the rain'll stir up the fishin'. Reckon I'll catch up ol' Ralph down by the bridge tonight." Mable smiles and nods, remembering stories of that huge bass from when she was a little girl. It must be long gone by now. Buster slips out into the night.

The rain has passed and the air sparkles with life. Warm voices from the parlor's open windows fill in the edges, framing the night. The "Last Chance" sign flickers out down at the gas

station — eight o' clock. Way on out at the tavern, the "Drink Now" sign reflects purple light in the puddles of an empty parking lot. Buster's truck, Ol' Blue, waits faithfully and they head out of town. As the lights sweep around the corner at the General Store, they pass across Bill Potter sitting out front in a dilapidated chair, taking in the energy.

Bill and Betty Potter started that little store thirty years ago, back when Buster could barely see over their counter and the price of a root beer always coincided with the value of some chore needing done. Betty tended the store while Bill supported it with a meager freight business and crops of rough hay coaxed up through the brush back by the river.

In hardly twenty years, the store supported itself and Bill was able to spend more time helping Betty. In only another decade, they've progressed to an easy retirement of ten-hour workdays. They never had a vacation or a car less than twenty years old, and still live in that same little trailer. All the clever people shake their heads at the luck it must've taken for such boring folks to stumble onto success. As Ol' Blue rolls past the store, Buster salutes.

Less than a quarter-mile past Potters', a little trail through the willows falls off of the highway and finds its way back below the bridge. It's hard to spot in the dark, but Buster and Ol' Blue drop into the tracks by faith. They back up to within casting distance of the river, and Buster pulls the seat off its broken mounts and sets it up on Ol' Blue's flatbed. They settle in and watch the tip of the fishing pole that sits neatly in one of Ol' Blue's stake pockets. Buster's breath floats in the cold air as he sorts through time and tries to recall if he baited the hook.

At the finishing school, circles are drifting closer to the warmth of the fireplace. The windows are finally closed and a row of cooling pies fills the room with the smell of memories, spun to confusion by ballroom gowns. Mable has more gowns than girls, and Halloween costumes have given way to elegant lace and finery. Constant changes add to the show, born-again ladies performing life in all its colors — acceptance to fear and back again in the blink of an eye.

Mable passed through that in-between for thirty years, overgrown by nightmares. She ensures that her parlor is a place where dreams grow roots, by pulling weeds with the ritual

sacrifice. It's time, and Mable always knows where the weeds are.

No guests have displayed behavior warranting elimination under the adopted articles of acceptable humanity. The girls have been reasonably well behaved, though now they're working the room for entries into a limbo contest. It's ridiculous in those gowns, certain censure for lack of planning in easier times, but there's a more egregious matter to attend to.

Mable rings the bell and the room is instantly quiet. She steps to the painted circle on the floor where the boards are still discolored from the last sacrifice, and intones the ritual: "It's not vengeance, but vigilance — a price to pay." Folks duck for cover as she looks around the room, and she notes each guilty expression for future scrutiny. "Tonight the payment is me, for self-importance, doubting the depth of others. We all know the sentence — banishment, or torture." She steps into the circle, and two ashen-faced girls lay a row of towels around her and ready the mop and bucket.

There's a moment's fearful hesitation from the usually violent mob, until Jack takes one of the cups from the ceremonial table, and shouting, "SHAME!" throws the cold water in her face. At that, everyone gets into the spirit, and soon Mable resembles a wet cat in shivering disgrace. After everyone's latent aggression is exhausted, she mops up until forgiveness, then retreats to a warm towel and a dry gown.

Absence is taken as permission, and by the time she returns, the limbo contest has inched down to waist height while becoming a battle for the honor of honor. Two champions remain, and sides have been firmly drawn. Tyler strains under the bar with commendable agility as the men cheer him on. Eyebrows rise as Tamaryn, Mable's future school-teacher in training, lowers the bar to knee level, biting her lower lip to suppress an immodest grin.

Shy little can't-do-anything-right Tamaryn: The women cheer as she shuffles on the balls of her bare feet with her heels turned forward in seemingly impossible pronation; her hair snaking along the floor behind her with each tiny step, her gown bunched in a knot at her side, and her petticoats blooming. She slips under the bar and rises with a smile no modesty can hide. Tyler bows in defeat, and Tamaryn forgets for a moment to be awkward or invisible. Maybe the girls had a plan after all.

Mable retires to her favorite armchair and closes her eyes.

Those bright colors lead to real places, like the glowing windows dotting the darkness outside — picture-frames as life passes through time, around the corner, and into the night.

Down by the bridge, fog rises off the river until Buster's dreams become a picture without a frame. He puts his fishing gear away, sets the seat back in Ol' Blue, and heads home.

It's finally starting to clear out back at Mable's parlor. She's fallen victim to a dusting of sleep after a hard day of life. Jack stands guard, but he needn't bother.

Mable doesn't have nightmares anymore.

Chapter 3

Holler Breaks Out

Howard was exhausted. Years of trying to introduce the students in his philosophy section to the value of their own judgment had worn him down. He believed the journey to higher meaning followed a unique path for each spirit, but the faculty was antagonistic to disruptive notions of individuality, and the students were trained in years of convenient templates and equations that devalued their own perspectives.

In the desperation of a losing battle, Howard developed a force of delivery that shook entire auditoriums. His lectures were attended in electric anticipation, but the irony of shouting out acceptance left him further from himself each day. Howard's energy collapsed around him until finally in a world where good men are hard to find, he disappeared. His consciousness stepped inside to rest for awhile, and by the time it returned he'd been discreetly retired — an academic embarrassment.

The episode was an embarrassment to his family too, but the kids were grown and it occurred to him that shame might be the best thing he'd ever given them. He'd always cared too much to give them everything, but they'd got it from their mother anyway. A look at where it came from might help ease the shock of reality later.

Howard started over. His wife got the mooching kids and the pension and the house and the car and the friends and her shoe collection. Howard got the peaceful glow of a devout follower of his own judgment, though the less peaceful intensity of his voice had long since become natural.

He loaded up the few things that still meant anything to him and set out to tour the country in his old hippie van. He didn't call it that anymore, but he'd played the part once, joining protests from the fashionable heights of nonconformist anarchy. He'd finally looked at his mob of peers and realized the hip were

by definition the real conformists, pandering to their own self importance. They went on to build angry islands of equations while Howard went on to build bridges of perspective, but by then there was no firm ground to attach the ends to.

Now he was driving the back roads in a smoking old van with a "Kill the Appeasers" bumper-sticker plastered over the flowers on the back, and it felt like firm ground. He wandered through a maze of detours in observational mode, searching for some passage to a clearly defined new beginning. One afternoon he crossed a small bridge and looked down to see a couple of old pickups parked above a slow meandering river. He just naturally turned onto the next little willow-lined trail that led back that way.

It wasn't anything fancy, just a place to park, a perfect place for someone in search of quiet introspection to spend the night. Those kids diving from the bridge would likely give up and leave soon — it was only mid spring and that water had to be cold. He settled in, but it was their turf and he waited for them to leave before spreading out.

As it happened though, it actually started crowding up as more rigs pulled in and several fire pits were fueled and lit off. It was the middle of the week and Howard could tell it wasn't any special event, just someone else's ordinary life, with him right in the center of it all.

By the time he thought of retreating, the random parking blocked the way. Resigned to wait it out, he set to studying alien behavior in its natural habitat and quickly recognized universal patterns. One rooster of a fellow seemed to have a need to get in front of folks who kept turning away. He finally found some fool who listened and nodded his head in empty affirmation, if only to escape. It was all perfectly predictable, and the rooster strutted over to beat on the door of the camper-van and yell in a sneering tone, "Hey, what are you — a tourist?" It was a vile accusation, leaving no room for excuses.

Howard thought he'd better do some quick assimilation, so he stepped out and shouted as loud as he could in that booming voice that'd terrorized the farthest reaches of quivering auditoriums. "YAAAAA-HOOO!" He'd meant to blend in, but nervousness contributed to a sonic explosion that blew the dust off the bushes. The bully was knocked down by the blast, but as

the echoes faded to a shocked silence he got up and mumbled away, searching for someone to agree that he'd been unfairly caught by surprise. Perhaps the most surprised was Howard, but something had come unlocked and it felt so good he shouted again, "HOOOO-EEEE!"

This time he was invited over to the fires, and folks were patting him on the back like an old friend and calling him Holler. He took his new acceptance as an opportunity to explore his own philosophy from a different perspective.

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Buster was driving across the bridge when he saw old Doc Watkins down there in the crowd. The doctor was looking for differential gears for his old truck, and Buster happened to have a homemade trailer with an axle that should be a perfect donor. He could just cut the flanges off the shafts to cap the hubs, and sell Watkins the gears. The trailer would still work fine.

Buster stopped in and made his deal, but it took too long. His truck, Ol' Blue, was blocked in by late arrivals eagerly coming to help the others swat mosquitoes. He shrugged. The day was shot anyway — the sun had set, and red dusk was fading away.

He got his fishing gear out of Ol' Blue and headed down to the river. Buster could fish from the back window of his home just a few miles upstream, but he always favored that deep hole dug out by floods tumbling from between the restrictive bridge columns every spring. The natural occurrence of kids diving from the bridge was no lasting bother to the fishing, and there'd been a recent sighting of Ralph, the monster bass. Buster tried his luck for a while before deciding he needed to change his lure. It was too dark to tie the nearly invisible line now, so he walked over and found a space in the crowd around a fire to share the light.

While Buster tied the line, his head got to hurting from the noise emanating from some stranger postulating on the failures of Western Civilization. By the time the speaker got to talking about some fellow looking into an abyss until it looked back at him, everybody was somberly nodding their heads. Buster was disgusted. It was just why he didn't join the crowd much — everyone seeing their own reflection, and whining about the view. He said, "My Daddy always said you can stare at a cow-pie until you think it's staring back, but you ain't gonna grow nothin' till you plow it under." He had his lure changed now so he turned and walked

away, saying, "I swear, the less some people do, the more they think they know."

Everybody else knew Buster and his abrasive opinions, and they tried to smooth it over for the newcomer, saying, "Dang, Holler, you sure can talk. You oughta be one of them professors."

Buster eagerly returned to his spot on the riverbank. The timing was right and the conditions were perfect. After thirty years of chasing Ralph, he could sense this was it. He whipped the line several times to the right length and let the plug, not much heavier than a fly, settle to the surface. The slight current washed through that deep hole and produced an eddy, holding the lure in place and jiggling it slightly as the slack in the line was taken up. All he had to do was wait.

In the interest of tracking down all possible leads to wisdom, Howard (a.k.a. Holler) had followed Buster and enthusiastically boomed out, "IT CERTAINLY IS A PLEASANT NIGHT FOR FISHING."

Buster's minor flinch at the loud intrusion was magnified by the rod, and the lure flicked back and landed at his feet. Just then, the water boiled as Ralph realized he'd been tricked, but couldn't stop his momentum towards where the lure had been. He made a tight turn just at the surface. His passage sucked some of the air down and the water bubbled for a moment.

Holler was excited. "MY GOODNESS, YOU BARELY MISSED THAT ONE. IT WAS A BEHEMOTH! "

Buster watched the turbulence of what was probably a once-in-a-lifetime chance settle back to a smooth, almost stagnant calm. He decided he needed a minute before trusting his judgment. A few deep breaths might suppress a sudden urge towards violent behavior. He finally said, "Say there, stranger, what's your name?" Buster normally didn't care about names, but he wanted to check into the man's background to see if anyone would miss him.

The intruder finally settled into a more conversational tone. "Well, they are calling me Holler, and as I am in search of a new life, I find the new name suits me."

Buster smiled. "A new life huh? I reckon you'd have to cut all your old ties?"

"Oh most certainly. I don't believe in half measures. If it is worth doing, it is worth doing correctly."

Buster found himself admiring the man. It'd be a shame, but honor must be satisfied. He said, "Yup, my daddy always said somethin' similar." He eyed old Doc Watkins' twelve-footer tied under the bridge and said, "Say, this bank fishin's fer sissies. Maybe we could borrow us a boat. Might even talk philosophy."

Holler smiled and gave a slight bow. "I believe I would enjoy that immensely."

Buster grinned. "I'll be right back."

It only took asking to get permission to borrow the boat. Watkins knew Buster well enough to see he was on one of his missions. He knew better than to stand between a man and the greater glory of the unknown. Besides, Buster's forays into that territory were greatly valued, though not always in the interest of science, by the entertainment-starved community.

Buster stopped by Ol' Blue on the way back to Holler and got the fifth of "Medicine" from under the seat. It had been there three months unopened, waiting for emergency. As he returned to Holler he said they'd best slip away quickly, on account of it was a small boat and wouldn't support too many more eager adventurers. The sound of the motor starting was a worrisome invitation to witnesses, but it was full dark now and they escaped unseen, going under the bridge and upriver away from the fires.

The folks there heard the motor, but Watkins explained, "Aw that's just Buster borrowing my boat. He's got some fool notion 'bout Ralph. I dunno know why he bothers. If he ever did catch that monster he'd just turn him loose."

Buster and Holler were well upriver by the time the moon came up over Turkey Ridge, casting long shadows in the cool night. It was mostly pasture beside them now — the wide flood plain of the river. It was frustratingly peaceful and Buster had a hard time remembering his mission. A couple of insomniac cows standing in the shallows were deathly terrified as the boat motored by, but then they returned to the sublime meditation of water swirling around their feet. Buster envied their tranquil attention span, but consoled himself with the thought that self-determination was its own reward. Holler was talking about the kids at the university and how he couldn't break through their anger.

Buster said, "I don't guess I know the exact route to acceptance, but I'm sure you won't find it at either end of preachin'. Might be it's like work or truth: them what does it don't

brag on it. The rest try to impress everybody when it don't count, then find somethin' to trip over an' blame when it does."

Holler settled in for a lively debate. "Ah, but that 'preaching', as you call it, is guidance, that's how civilization advances. It's easy to criticize without offering a solution.

Buster sadly shook his head. "Your solutions *are* the problem. I don't want to solve life, I want to live it. And I don't want to advance civilization, I want to give it roots. You want to know why you can't teach truth to sheltered kids what's never scabbled in the dirt for food or dug under snow to try to get out of the wind? Sheesh, you need to accept truth for yourself. You gots a whole cult of the self-chosen, usin' all their elite pomposity to bully decent people away from their own common-sense, then you wonder why folks can't attach to life. Sheesh, if you're sellin' snake-oil you gots to keep movin'."

Holler's eyes narrowed. It was obvious Buster had his own philosophy, and it didn't concern popular compromise. Holler had already accepted the disappointment of his career path, but the blunt comparison to a huckster stung. He said, "You seem to have an opinion or two. Maybe you need to get out more."

Buster sagely nodded his head. "Maybe so, but most folks needs to get in more, else 'fore you know it they'll be rushing to fall down over whichever hoax comes along that's the best at blamin'. Sheesh, I'll admit to not knowin' ever'thing, but I don't fill the vacuum with excuses, and I ain't likely to buy any shortcut to character. That's about as useful as askin' someone if they're honest. You want to find truth, go find character."

Holler had already traveled the same lines of thought, but he took up the counterpoints out of habit. "It might be that the science of formal education could stand an overhaul, but I wouldn't throw away the entirety just yet. They have the best books and information and an expertly designed curriculum to connect each piece."

Buster puffed his chest up with argument. "Sheesh, there ain't no pieces to connect, it's all one. Science don't advance without freedom to follow inspiration or courage to accept truth, an' they's just differ'nt sides of the same coin no one wants to earn. You gotta dig down to your own judgment with blood and sweat. Now, I could tell back at that fire you was playin' to the party, but this is just ol' Buster here. You gotta cut through the

mud and get to some hard bottom."

Holler liked the analogy. He'd been trying to build from the middle when solid ground was the only thing that mattered. He answered, "Well, I guess I'm still searching."

Buster snorted in disgust. "Sheesh, there ain't nothin' to find. You knew who you was by the time you's ten years old; you jist gotta fill in your space. If I had some felt need to know you, I'd give you some opening to see what you fill space with; but you need to know your own self, so we gots to have stronger license. That's why I brung the medicine. My daddy always said the best way to a man's true character is through a bottle of whiskey — just make sure it's somewhere you want to go." He opened the bottle and handed it to Holler, saying, "I ain't afraid."

Holler couldn't see any harm in the challenge and took an impressive swallow before handing the bottle back, saying, "Perhaps you need to know your own self. You obviously put some thought into things, but then you speak of wisdom as being blood and sweat as if it were all physical. It doesn't ring true. I believe you're just rationalizing not having done more with your life."

Buster took a mouthful of whiskey and grimaced. He wasn't a very good drinker, but he always put his best into any endeavor. He handed the bottle back, saying cryptically, "As far as I know, MY life ain't over. And maybe by civilized reckoning I ain't much, but at least I'm my own. I's part of all that mob once though, throwin' ugliness at any difference just to be the most same. I's teenaged 'fore it finally got throwed back where I could see it. I'd never ask forgiveness; don't deserve it, but unlike all your perpetually adolescent academics, I don't need to act out shame neither, 'cause I grewed up."

Holler's tone was mildly sarcastic. "It must be nice to have shed all of your impurities."

Buster grinned. "Well, I likely gots more hid away, but I ain't runnin' — I'm huntin'. Besides, if I was to drop all my burdens I might just float away."

They passed their 80-proof philosophy back and forth, each having enough respect to be aggressive. Buster eventually decided he might not kill Holler after all; he liked him too much. Maybe just a little thumping would be enough to satisfy honor. When it was his turn again he said, "What you need is a little pain in your life to help you see things clear."

Holler sighed. "Again with the physical. You need to try a new perspective."

Buster sadly shook his head. "I keep tellin' you it's all one: physical ain't separ't. You can posture and pertend all the nonsense you want, but if I reach over and pop you in the nose, you might come to agree the world ain't someone's theory, and there ain't but only one reality."

Holler was sitting in the front of the boat facing back, watching the moonlit future unfold as it came up from behind him. Their wake intersected a smaller one from some un-known source, and he wondered at the meaning until a muskrat resurfaced far behind the boat. It'd still be there rippling the water long after their own wake was gone. He was enjoying a conversation with someone who lived with enough care to actually believe something.

Meanwhile, Buster was enjoying a conversation with someone who had the courage to actually think something. It was the most he could remember ever talking about anything, but it felt almost normal. They'd gone about four miles against the lazy current up the long "S" turns of the river, barely two miles up the valley from the bridge. Buster was dismayed to realize he was drunk, while Holler seemed to still have his balance. Buster figured he might have to put off delivering the thumping until they again reached equilibrium. Holler was saying something, but it was all out of focus. Buster had lost the train of thought so he started a new one.

"Iss like this river here. Right now she's 'bout perfeck, riding high, but mosty inside her banks. She gets shlow and lazy in summer. Winter she goes to shleep. But then early spring she'll bust loose all wild and free, shpillin' all over everwheres. My place is right up ahead there, so I seen it all. Speakin' of whish, maybe we bes' hole up there fer the night."

They were moving along at a good pace. Buster turned the boat towards a slight opening in the willows lining the bank. "Thass it straight ahead there." He switched the motor off and tipped it up out of the water. "Grab that rope and jump off the front to tie ush off . . ." He paused to catch his breath, and the rest of the sentence, ". . . when we hit the bank," trailed off as Holler, perhaps more besotten than Buster had realized, grabbed the rope and enthusiastically jumped off of the bow without even looking.

They were still coasting in on momentum, and Buster's drunken awareness made sure to note the experience for future reference and somber reflection: The splash, then bumping and scraping noises emanating from beneath the boat, starting at the front and working rearward. He sat staring at the whiskey bottle in his hand and started crying. "Oh my Gagh, whass 'ave I done? My own true frien' — gone."

Holler hung on to the rope and surfaced behind the boat. He was towed in to the shallows as it nosed in and gently grounded against the bank. He too had taken full note of the experience, albeit from a different perspective. On his third attempt he managed to stand, and he waded up to the back of the boat, where Buster sat howling in forlorn grief. Holler's head hurt from the banging under the hull, and the dunking had momentarily sobered him up. He wondered at Buster's extreme emotion and touched him on the shoulder with a cold wet hand.

Buster was nearly scared out of his skin. He tried to lunge forward, but the little boat was lighter than he was and the effect was a study in physics as it shot backwards under him. He tumbled over the bow and into the shallows with his mouth wide open in a silent scream. The water was shoulder deep — considering that he went in face-first.

Fortunately the tiny craft's reverse acceleration lifted the stern as it started its second excursion over Holler. When he eventually resurfaced there were only minor additions to his previously acquired collection of bumps and scrapes. Still, he felt disinclined to render assistance as Buster, nearly choking, sputtered the river bottom from his mouth. They both sat belly-deep and wide-eyed in the edge of the cold river and watched the boat float away.

Holler said, "I'm sure you're used to all of this, but I believe I need a break before any further immersions into the one-ness of your reality."

Chapter 4

The Parade

Gwen and Philip found each other at the edge of the crowd and stayed there together, searching for a place to belong. She took orders at the pizzeria while he worked at the building supply, loading trucks with other people's dreams. Weekends they walked around and pretended to be visiting from the country, looking at the sights.

They were admiring the row of new pickup trucks at Honest Eddie's New and Used Car Lot, like any good country folk would do, when Eddie spied them and came over to invite them in for coffee. It turned out that by amazing coincidence their savings amounted to the exact down payment required to drive away just the model they'd been looking at — and after only five years of ridiculously low payments, it could be all theirs.

Gwen was trying to pull Philip away, but neither of them had ever owned anything new, and he could picture her sitting in it next to him. Besides, country folks had trucks. As they walked out to their new pickup, Gwen cried. Philip's jaw clenched and he silently cursed himself for signing away five years of their future.

They started taking their weekends driving into the country. Neither of them had ever been out of the city, barely even out of their own neighborhood, and it was a grand adventure. That's how they arrived in Simple. It was a fine summer morning and they were on their way to anywhere else when their brand new truck broke down. They coasted to a stop in front of Potter's general store, where Bill always says, "If we ain't got it, you don't need it."

Philip sat staring at the bleak surroundings, waiting for some form of "I told you so," from Gwen. It was Saturday morning and their weekend was ruined. Gwen looked at the two big dogs in front of the store. She knew it was a store because of the barely legible hand-painted lettering above the door that read, "Store." She eyed the carcass of some poor dead creature lying in front of the dogs, and said, "Honey, why don't you go borrow their phone to call Honest Eddie?"

Philip looked at the dogs that were now snarling at each other over the carrion, and then he looked at Gwen. He got out and walked towards the dogs.

Betty was out somewhere tending to civic duties, so Bill was running the store by himself. He was swapping lies with Buster when Philip burst in all wild-eyed, and quickly shut the door on the barking dogs. Bill looked up and squinted at the stranger for a while as Buster continued, ". . . that's why I've still got Ol' Blue out there. After '63, Detroit lost their soul."

Bill was convinced that tragic event hadn't occurred until well after the '65 model year, which just happened to be when his old cargo-van had rolled off the line. While Philip waited for a pause in the debate, he looked around the place. It seemed like it had a little of everything — snacks, canned goods, dry goods, and buckets of slightly used hardware, all competing for space with an odd assortment of unmarked refrigerators and unopened boxes. Bill made a particularly good point on the soul timeline, then turned to Philip before Buster could offer any further argument. "Yes sir. Can I help you?"

Philip raised his attention from a dusty box that held a magneto ignition overhaul kit for a tractor that hadn't been produced in sixty-five years. He'd enjoyed the softly rolling landscape of their conversation as the two called each other idiots: "No offense." — "None taken."

"Yes. Could I borrow your phone to call for a tow?" Bill and Buster looked out the window to see the stranger's truck sitting in the road. It hadn't quite had enough momentum to make it into the parking lot. The two just sat and waited, hoping for a good story. Philip explained how he and his wife dreamed of a home and raising a family in the country, and how they were looking around, and how brand new trucks weren't supposed to break down.

Buster looked the young man up and down. "Well shoot, I gots a chain with me. I can give you a pull. Anyways, a tow truck wouldn't get here before the parade, and you're right smack in the way."

Bill said, "Pull him around back by the shop. Just leave room to get to the hay shed; Jensen's coming in for some alfalfa."

Buster snorted. "I don't know why he bothers with them goats."

In his business, Bill had learned to be diplomatic. "Aw now, you know the twins can't drink cow's milk. They're allergic."

Buster just snorted again.

Philip started to protest, "Now wait a minute —"

Before he could finish, Buster interrupted, "Yup, you're right. We got to get you moved before the parade." He nudged Philip out the door.

The dogs had settled down, but there was still a frantically cautious nature to Philip's pace as he passed back through their turf. They watched him out of the corners of their eyes, waiting until he let his guard down before they jumped up to bark and snarl about what they'd do if he ever came back. As Buster walked by and patted them on their heads they innocently watched a bird fly, before turning to glare at Philip again.

Philip decided it might be best to join Gwen in the truck and wait for Buster there. As he got in, he told her he'd call for help later, but right now they had to get out of the way of the parade. Dubiously, she looked around at the apparent ghost town, then back at him. The place seemed abandoned except for down at the Last Chance gas station, where it looked pretty busy. They waited for Buster, who had engaged a new arrival to the tiny store in some earnest conversation. Buster pointed to where they sat waiting — well, at least he hadn't forgotten them.

#

The annual Simple Parade and Barbecue always centered around Independence Day, or as close as they could come on a Saturday. This year's honorary chairman was Zeno Pruitt. Zeno didn't have anyone of his own, so he claimed all of Simple as his family, and for the most part they claimed him. He'd had to move in with the Wilsons now; on account of he couldn't take care of himself out at the old homestead anymore. Everyone figured if he was ever to get a chance as chairman, it had better be soon.

Zeno had buried his Jola thirty years ago. He'd tended her grave out behind the apple orchard every day since then. Staying with the Wilsons now, he worried for her, but he put that aside to concentrate on his role as parade chairman — keeper of the unofficial rules.

The first unofficial rule was that all of the year's new babies rode with their moms in a new vehicle in front of the parade. But as the procession assembled down by the Last Chance gas station it was discovered that no one in all of Simple had purchased a new vehicle, not even a tractor, in the past year. It wasn't the first time that had happened, and exceptions to custom had been made, but Zeno Pruitt was a stickler for custom. So three new mothers stood holding their babies at the front of a line of all that was fancy or old or good in Simple. Everyone waited for a solution or a compromise, but the old man wouldn't budge, asserting that if traditions aren't kept society collapses into anarchy.

Word of the standoff reached Potters' in the form of crabby Ina Coulter, Simple's perpetual sourpuss. She couldn't resist telling the bad news to the first person she saw, which was Buster as he was fixing to go pull Gwen and Philip in off the road. He pointed to their stranded new pickup, but she said, "No, those folks don't live around here. I've never seen them before in my life." Everyone knew the Simple Parade was for residents only.

Buster was still pointing at the new pickup as he saw Gwen for the first time, and he stared for a while as if seeing a ghost. He excused himself by saying, "Well, that sure is bad news about the parade."

Ina smiled.

Buster backed his old truck around in front of Gwen and Philip's shiny new one. He got out a chain that looked big enough to pull a mountain, and hooked a loop around the hitch on the back of Ol' Blue. He turned to blatantly examine Gwen through their windshield for a minute, before nodding to some inner decision and reaching under their front bumper to hook the chain to something.

Philip wondered what that something might be, and leaned out of the open window to ask Buster, "Say, are you sure that will —" but Buster was already getting in Ol' Blue and taking up the slack, saying something about the parade. Philip was worried about pulling the innards out of their new truck, along with the warranty,

and having to make five years of ridiculously low payments on five thousand pounds of scrap metal. So he released the brake and let it roll. He tried to project an air of calm as Buster took them past Potters' parking lot without even slowing down. "We have to go around back," he said, as they picked up speed. Gwen nodded without expression. Obviously they were headed for some dark place to be hacked to bits.

By this time, the parade committee and Zeno Pruitt had almost come to blows. The new mothers and babies had retired to the bench by the soda machine. Buster got to the gas station and swung a quick U-turn. His trailer momentarily went on by, then in "crack the whip" fashion made a big sliding turn in the gravel lot, stopping right in front of the parade column.

As the dust cleared, everyone cheered the arrival of a new vehicle to lead the parade. The three new moms climbed up in the back, lifting their babies high for all to see. Gwen and Philip looked back at their new cargo, then at each other. Their mouths opened, but there wasn't really anything to say. It was plain they were dealing with powers beyond their control.

Buster left Ol' Blue and joined Zeno where he was glaring at the interlopers — obviously tourists, ineligible for participation. When Zeno focused on Gwen, his knees weakened and Buster helped support him for a minute. As he and Buster spoke, Zeno's expression softened, becoming lighter than anyone had seen since back when he'd had to give up staying at his own home. He stiffly made his way to where the newcomers still sat in their pickup, prisoners of events greater than themselves.

Zeno looked at Gwen from somewhere long ago, then from where his aching bones remembered the years, he looked into Philip's eyes as if making some tangible measurement, before speaking to them both. "I hear you're looking to settle in the country. I'll sell you my place: 80 acres, an apple orchard, and a fine big house. How much money you got?"

Philip said, "We were hoping we had enough to buy lunch."

Zeno nodded. "Good enough, but you gots to put me up for a spell, just 'till I get all the way back home."

The young couple looked at the old man uncertainly.

Buster said, "Don't worry 'bout Zeno: he needs a bit of help gettin' around nowadays, but he still knows where he's going."

They were still hesitant, and Zeno said, "Couple of kids

like you still got all your life's work to spread down the road. You'd just as well put it here and start building something to pass along."

Gwen and Philip looked at each other and shrugged. They gave Zeno all the money they had, and Buster witnessed as they both shook hands with the old man.

Zeno turned to the crowd and spoke as loud as he could in a wavering voice. "I'd like you all to welcome Simple's newest residents. Let's get this parade moving."

If anyone made the observation that technically Ol' Blue was leading, they didn't mention it. More likely nobody noticed, since pulled, or pulling, was a common mode of transport in Simple. Buster got in Ol' Blue and started his float rolling. Because most of Simple entered the parade, there were few spectators. So as was custom, after a few minutes Buster pulled over so they could watch the parade go by, then joined back in behind.

Each consecutive leader did likewise: the kids on tricycles, a fancy horse buggy, a girl with a trained pig, numerous tractors, and a two man marching band. Old Earl was almost blind now, but he followed the oom-pah-pahs of Wilford's tuba with his heavy bass drum — a bone-rattling symphony that filled in with volume for what it lacked in rhythm. A carload of frustrated tourists finally made its way to the front and hurried off towards somewhere important. Little children looked back through the rear window until they were out of sight.

Just past crabby Ina's place the parade turned around in that wide spot where Lawson Ranch Road angles off, then they headed back through town. They continued working new leaders to the front until the last entry, which was the Jensen family and their usual goat float. They'd finally got to Potter's and loaded up their old flatbed with hay. The kids, human and goat, rode on top.

After each entrant had a chance to watch the parade go by and Ol' Blue was in front again, any pretense of order melted away. Everyone made as much noise as they could, honking horns and shouting until the babies cried and the mothers glared. They'd ended up clear out past the Drink Now Tavern, and Sam dashed inside to open up early. Some of the walkers rested in the grass by the side of the road, lazy in the sun before heading back for the barbecue.

Buster wasn't through with Gwen and Philip yet. He pulled them back to town and when he had them as promised, by the shop

in back of Potter's, he finally unhooked the chain. Bill and the dogs had joined the parade and hadn't returned yet, but on the door was a note that said, "Gone. Take what you need. Pay when you can."

They all went inside and Buster pulled some sodas from an unmarked refrigerator. He said, "Don't waste no worry 'bout your truck. Bill's a top-notch mechanic. He'll fix you right up. Zeno should be here soon and I'll take you all out to your new place."

Gwen and Philip looked at him and wondered. They sat on a bench and listened to the clock tick while Buster studied a checkerboard that sat on a stack of unopened cartons. His game with Bill was a lost cause, but he'd hold out as long as honor allowed. An old pickup rattled into the parking lot, with Zeno sitting in the back next to some kids. They helped him down and thundered in, grabbing snacks and sodas and carefully counting change onto the counter.

Zeno nodded to Buster and said, "Time's wastin'." They all went out and crowded into the front of Ol' Blue.

#

Sometimes memories get buried before they're gone. As Buster drove, he and Zeno sifted through common ground while Gwen and Philip rode it out between them in silence. Zeno said, "I was gonna leave it to you."

Buster's expression didn't change as he drove across a bridge and turned onto a rough dirt road. He finally said, "You taught me patience for growin' things — attaching to something. Likely saved me, one way or t'other. But you know my roots are set now, and anyways that place needs a family."

He paused to look sideways at Gwen and Philip, as they both stared wide-eyed at a huge, rapidly-approaching rock in the middle of the road. Buster steered around the rock without looking as he said, "Seems like most folks are 'fraid to attach to anything, even their own lives. Give 'em somethin', they'll thrash around 'til they tear up any burdensome potential. But Philip here makes me think he could be where he is, and Gwen takes me back to your kitchen table years ago, with the smell of apples and spice."

Zeno nodded. "I been seein' ghosts myself. Jola had the courage to attach to me and fit around me: surrounded me with joy then 'pologized for not givin' me kids. Particular sorry since she'd give one up for adoption once in a differ'nt life. Came from

hard times, but she never put it on anyone else — just gave off light. I still don't believe it went out. It has to be somewhere."

Buster turned onto a long driveway that was actually smoother than the main road. He said, "You 'member that time you caught me stealin' apples? I couldn't of been more'n six. All the older kids got away. Shoot, I thought you'd hang me up to dry."

Zeno smiled. "You foster kids were scallywags with a pirate's code. It was them left you to hang. But you'd of got away too, if you'd let them apples go. That bag must've weighed as much as you."

Buster nodded. "You drug me up to your house an' I thought I was a goner, but Ma Jola made a fuss over me and set me in front of a whole apple pie. I guess she was sick even then, but for a while I reckon I's there hidin' in a fold of her skirt most ever' day. Always sorry I never came around after. Seems ever'thing was hard then. Took to goin' over to Jack's. Seemed to belong there at the scrap yard."

Gwen and Philip sat quiet, oddly at ease inside someone else's trust. Whenever Buster or Zeno mentioned Jola, they'd look at Gwen, and she was surprised to find it didn't bother her. They seemed to have it all aired out, and Gwen spoke, her voice barely audible over Ol' Blue's rattling — "Mama was adopted."

As Buster drove through an open gate he said, "You folks'll like it here."

Now they could see the run-down two story house, the overgrown apple orchard, and the pasture growing up in weeds. The fence was down in places where the posts had rotted off. The orchard looked like a jungle. The house was badly in need of paint and one side of the porch had dropped to ground level.

It was a dream come true.

Gwen held Philip's hand as she said, "I don't know why we believed, but we did. It even looks familiar."

Zeno looked at her and said, "I don't know if belief is where we've been or where we're goin', but I don't guess I need to know." He turned his gaze to Philip, and then off towards the back of the orchard. "There's a picture in the house you two should see, but first I'd like to take a walk if you'd help me. I know Jola would like it if you'd all come say hello."

#

Bill Potter fixed Gwen and Philip's shiny new pickup. It was

just a loose wire. He traded his time for a basket of apples. Jensen was making a better profit from his goats' milk than anyone had figured, and he worked out a swap too. He took over four and a half years of ridiculously low payments on their new truck, and they took over the care of his old '62 flatbed. As Philip points out: "That's the last good year Detroit had, after that they lost their soul."

Zeno was again able to visit Jola every day. He told her about the young couple. Philip put his best into everything he did, but it was difficult to see how anyone could have grown up so ignorant about trees. Gwen didn't seem to have any sense of direction without streets to navigate by, and her cooking — well, it was a good thing for love. Which by the way, it looked like she'd be riding in front of next year's parade. It wasn't going to be easy, but their goodness was from toughness and they'd be fine.

The next spring Zeno got all the way home, but the parade goes on.

Chapter 5

The Revolution

Buster grabs hold of anger hard enough to yank it up by the roots, but even in good moods he takes a hands-on approach. He managed a miraculously total escape from formal schooling, so he just took up what he wondered and left the rest be, saying, "Can't nobody learn without wonder." When Buster's face lights up with wonder, folks who know him tend to stand back.

Holler McDonald is one of the few educated folks who actually look up to Buster. Holler noticed how the most refinement is usually worn by the least character, and had begun to worry over the roots of his own proper demeanor. He settled in the backwards little community of Simple and took to boldly shouting out his freedom wherever he went, but it was like the scream of an eagle with a crow caught in its throat.

One time Buster's countenance had a particular glow, and Holler asked him about it. Buster discreetly looked around for spies, then laid it out. "The Guvment's done got too big fer their britches. They got the sheeple all flocked up so tight they don't even notice that the shepherd's eatin' mutton. I reckon it's time to set things aright."

Holler saw such a futile pursuit as the perfect opportunity to shed some propriety and free his natural spirit. He said, "That sounds like perfect madness. Maybe I could help."

Buster eyed him for a second before answering. "So long as you know we may get killed."

Holler let that ferment for a minute, but finally nodded and said, "That'll be fine, as long as it doesn't conflict with any prior engagements."

It was Buster's idea so he was president, but he

appointed Holler as chief advisor on high matters of state. They decided upon a pro-active approach: They'd just start a revolution and the rest would follow in due course.

It was decided they should travel that course in an official vehicle befitting the stature of their lofty ambitions. Holler's old hippie-van had recently died of natural causes. Privately, Buster thought it should be buried and never spoken of again, but he knew he'd be called upon to assist in the next resurrection. His truck, "Ol' Blue," was a heavy old work horse — a support vehicle not suited for the role of command. There were no likely prospects until they found a notice for an upcoming government auction. To give the Devil its due, the government had been around for quite a chronic spell, and ought to have lots of official vehicles.

Bill Potter was making a supply run for the *General Store*, so Buster and Holler rode to Bigg City with him and attended the sale. Everything seemed a bit pricey until at the very end, when the auction moved to a nice little four-wheel-drive. It came complete with an orange light on top and an official looking insignia on the side. They'd arrived too late to conduct an actual inspection, but obviously this was perfect. Buster opened with a token bid to get things started.

Someone must have told a good joke right then because there was a lot of laughter that seemed to distract from any further bidding. After much unsuccessful coaxing, the auctioneer finally shouted "Sold," and Buster and Holler could hardly believe their good fortune — sure sign that providence smiled upon the revolution.

It turned out that their new purchase had a distinctive feature. On the vehicle's last mission before retirement, the Welfare Department had followed a snowplow and de-icer truck to gain winter access and bring monetary relief to the wretchedly impoverished Josiah Jenkins and his family of twelve dependents. Josiah had been sorry to report that all of the family, except his wife and two oldest sons, were out singing Christmas carols to the neighbors.

The agent shook his head at the long odds of always missing them youngsters, and expressed his regret, but reminded Josiah that his colossal family and their multitude of entitlements were in the thoughts of his entire office. The notorious moon-

shiner counted out his usual return Christmas tidings in gallon jugs, and the ensuing reports were somehow forgotten. Anyway, that's when the car was retired, with its last mission unrecorded, and no one knew to hose off the salt de-icer from the underside. The car sat in storage for two years while the salt quietly went about its work.

Holler opened a door to look in, and saw the ground. The floor was rusted away and the seats were balanced on boards lying fore and aft on the frame's cross-members. Holler had been educated beyond the acceptance of certain variables and understandably saw this as a problem.

Buster didn't have to carry the weight of all that indoctrination. He got in and spit down through the frame and shook his head in wonder at the missing floor, asking, "What'll they think of next?" The front of the boards that held the seats were jammed up under the firewall and served to place their feet on. The car started right up and they headed home.

They turned off of the freeway onto Old Woman Road, the rough dirt shortcut that terminates right behind Last Chance Gas, in downtown Simple. But by the time they got to Thompson's ranch they needed relief from the dust boiling up through the floor. They figured they'd stop and visit the widow Effie.

After Clarence died, Effie Thompson had put on boots and spurs and took over. She was replacing a rotten fence post in the sorting corral when they drove in. Buster and Holler knew they wouldn't leave without liquid refreshment because above all else Effie was a true lady with fine country manners. She didn't recognize the two dust covered figures inside the car until she reached her head in through the open window and saw Buster's eyes looking back. She peered down through the missing floor and said, "Shoot, y'all must be parched. Come on up to the house."

They all sat down to some of Effie's homebrew 80-proof lemonade and invested an hour in discussing the merits of juniper fence posts versus mountain mahogany. They finally itemized their arguments and settled on juniper: "That 'hogany's too dang crooked. And hard? Sheesh, you cain't even drive a staple in it."

Eventually Buster got up to stretch and take a walk. He asked Effie where she kept her tin-snips, and she answered without hardly looking up. By the time she and Holler thought to wonder at the nature of Buster's question, he'd already cut the

top out of the car to let the dust blow out. He left just enough at the front to hold the orange flashing light. Holler got some black tape to cover the sharp edges, and they had a perfect sunroof. Effie gave them a mason jar of special lemonade to take along, and they headed for Simple.

The modification to the roof created a suction that actually increased the amount of dust coming off of the road, but it was drawn into a column between the seats and pulled neatly out the top. Holler said something about "vortex control and balanced laminar-flow aerodynamics."

Buster squinted at him out of the corner of an eye and said, "Yup, just like I figgered." From a distance, the vehicle looked like a small tornado traveling down the road.

In the best of conditions the Old Woman Road shortcut took as much time as the long way around, on account of the many bumps and dips and rocks and trees and washouts. Now, whenever they hit turbulence one seat or the other would bounce off of its board and hang from where it'd been tied to the shoulder strap on the doorpost. To add excitement, its occupant would pretend to be terrified, screaming and lifting up to evade the spinning driveline and miss the many rocks passing underneath, until the seat could be resituated. If that occupant happened to be the driver, the entertainment value quickly compounded as control was lost and turbulence increased. To maintain calm and decorum, the two revolutionaries dipped far into that jar of 80-proof lemonade.

Of course, Buster never could handle his lemonade, so Holler was driving by the time they finally reached Simple. It was full dark by then and the headlights didn't work; more victims of the corrosion. Holler was navigating by the strobe of the flashing orange light on top of the car. Buster figured there was no time like the present to inform the populace that they were now subjects of the Revolution, so he stood up to wave through the roof to the admiring throng. Momentarily blinded by the flashing light, he had Holler pass up his mirrored sunglasses so he could properly observe the occasion.

The glaring light made the car nearly invisible below the black tape around the top. The flashing orange glow illuminated Buster in a freeze frame, stroboscopic fashion, as he wobbled about on the precarious seat, his arms raised to get the attention of the crowd.

But it was late and the only one to see was crabby Ina Coulter, out on her front porch getting some fresh air when they passed. It scared the bejabbers out of her. She went inside and phoned old Doc Watkins, waking him up with a story about invading aliens with big dark eyes, able to materialize and dematerialize at will, "Horrible orange creatures with no legs, floating by their arms, right down Main Street Simple."

The next day, Buster and Holler decided the Revolution needed to establish a broad base of support, so a well organized campaign was in order. Buster was no politician and left public relations to Holler. Buster's philosophy was, "Anyone who needs to have the character of freedom explained don't believe in character anyhow, and is just gonna throw hate at the messenger."

Holler was more of a diplomat. When free speech ran up against free misdirection he'd just say, "Well, it's sure a good thing we all leave tracks to show where we're pointed." Anyway, Holler wrote out a nifty notice of revolution with the bold heading, "Us against Them" without any pointless attempts at steering assumptions of who either one was. Then they drove down to Potter's store to put it on the bulletin board.

They slowly eased into the dirt parking lot, so as to avoid starting any tornados. Bill Potter was standing on the porch, leaning against a post as he looked across the road at crabby Ina's place. Doc Watkins was tugging Ina towards the ambulance parked in her driveway, as she beat him about his head and shoulders with her purse. The three men watched for a moment, but no one ventured any comment, just a subtle but unanimous nodding of heads.

Holler's notice received grudging placement on the bulletin board. Bill had established a strict policy of neutrality about politics, to accommodate a wide array of customer preference. Whether you simply wanted the government out of your life, or you were hoarding weapons and food and wanted them dead, there was room for all reasonable positions at Potter's.

With his interest in the events across the street, Bill hadn't noticed their official car. He finally did, and snorted in disgust. Buster clarified that they weren't working for the government, they'd just purchased the vehicle, having paid a mere fraction of its worth to the fools.

Thus assured, Bill smiled. "Idiots" he said.

Buster nodded in agreement, but Holler wasn't sure who Bill was referring to and made a mental note. They needed to paint the car.

The three men sat down on the bench by the door and watched the battle still waging across the street. Ina seemed to have taken the upper hand, having got hold of old Doc Watkins' walking cane. In the excitement, Holler forgot himself for a moment, saying, "If we wish to sow the seeds of change, we need to demonstrate to the recipients of institutionalized charity that they are merely pawns of down-trodden expectations, empowering a hierarchy that depresses their spirit."

Buster and Bill squinted quizzically at Holler for a second before Buster spit and said, "Yup, that's just what I been sayin' all along. Hey Bill, did you get any more of them big pepperoni sticks yesterday? I sure do enjoy them."

Bill was noncommittal to an offer to become base of operations for the upcoming Simple Revolution, but he did supply provisions in the form of pepperoni sticks, and he offered enthusiastic support: "I'm sure I'll be hearing 'bout y'all real soon."

Thus bolstered, the two heroes set out to spread the word to the far reaches of the county. They figured if they started at the edges and worked their way in, then no one could wander off unenlightened. So it was that they came to the driveway of the surly Josiah Jenkins. Holler was shouting and hooting and carrying on, still trying to shed the last vestiges of his wasted academic past, when they turned from the pavement onto the rough path that served as the moon-shiner's driveway. On the dirt trail the car once again began throwing a column of dust high in the air.

Josiah Jenkins was sitting in his rocker on the porch, when he heard the yelling and looked up to see the dust cloud. Then he got a glimpse of an official-looking car through the trees. With that much dust and shouting, there had to be at least a full battalion closing in on him. He'd finally worn out his welcome. Josiah's chair fell over backwards as he yelled, "Revenuers!" He scrambled up and shouted for the boys to hold them off, while their ma threw what belongings she could on the truck. Then they'd slip out the back way and on out to the highway. They'd find another place, they always had. Josiah ran for the still to save what he could.

Jacob and Joshua Jenkins were still just boys, but for years already had done their daddy proud with their marksmanship, poaching deer and selling the meat to fancy restaurants over in Bigg City. There were a few openings in the trees lining the long driveway and the boys were ready. They'd been taught to shoot for the heart, so when a vehicle showed for a second they both aimed right above and behind the front tire. They fired almost in unison, but the target dodged, and one bullet pierced the fuel tank — the other provided the spark.

Buster was driving, and his seat had just bounced off of the board. The car veered to the side as he hung from the steering wheel, and they heard something slam into the car. When Buster got the seat back on the board, he wondered out loud what that sound might have been. Holler hypothesized it might have something to do with the vortex of fire roaring up between them. They'd learned that the swirling column became tighter as they went faster, leaving more elbow room. Buster's shirtsleeve was smoking and he decided he needed more elbow room right then. He picked up the pace, and the speed kept the flame under control, shooting it harmlessly way up in the air.

Once again though, as speed increased, so did turbulence. The next time Buster's seat fell off of the board, the shoulder strap attached to its mounts broke away. The seat fell to the ground, skidding and bouncing until it was sucked away with a thump, taking the board with it. Buster hung from the steering wheel with both feet firmly planted on the throttle pedal. The car kept accelerating, the ride got rougher, and the flame went higher. Buster held onto the wheel, barely able to keep his head high enough to see the next obstacle and barely able to steer when he did. He shouted over the roaring flame, "You know, Holler, I been thinkin' — I'm not so sure this revolution business is what I want to do with my life."

The Jenkins brothers had figured to disable the lead vehicle of the attack. On the narrow driveway, that would delay any advance long enough to allow for an orderly retreat. Not only had they failed, but it appeared the aggressors had brought a huge flame thrower and were charging in a headlong rush. Jacob turned to tell Joshua they'd better go warn Pa, but Joshua was already gone.

Josiah had barely got started at the still. He figured to

save enough moonshine for sales along the road, to keep them going until they could start over. He heard the boys shouting and came running with a full jug in each hand. He was cussing them for abandoning their posts, until he saw the advancing column of fire. He dropped the jugs, ran for the escape truck, and took off. Ma and the boys barely caught up in time to jump in the back, and the Jenkins clan disappeared over the ridge. They heard a huge explosion behind them, and Josiah knew they could never return.

Buster and Holler were immersed in earnest debate over the merits of many and various methods of passing into the great beyond. As usual, Buster preferred a direct approach, shouting, "I reckon we're doomed. Maybe I should just hit the next big tree."

Holler, on the other hand, had recently become conscious of the value of suffering to position one's spiritual being to greatest advantage. He shouted, "No, hang on! If we can just get past the trees we might be able to bail out."

They were going about 80 miles per hour down the rocky twisty narrow tree-lined driveway, shooting fire a quarter-mile in the air. Buster was bouncing around like a sunfish flopping on a riverbank. There was no way he'd be able to open the door and jump, and the vortex of fire precluded any help from Holler. Buster tried to get his feet off of the throttle, but in the attempt he swayed too close to the middle of the car and his shirtsleeve caught fire. He thought, "Well sheesh, I'm on fire," as he saw ahead through a narrow opening by the trail, a glimpse of water on the Jenkins' pasture. Hanging on the steering wheel by both hands, he could only move it about a quarter turn, but the car made it through the opening, taking bark off the trees on both sides. Down off the driveway, then up over the berm at the edge of the smooth flood-irrigated pasture, and airborne for an instant.

When the car went up, Buster stayed down, dropping through the bottom and sliding along in the wet grass. The car landed right in front of him. Holler jumped out of his side and bounced and rolled a few times before he got flattened out. They slid along leaving wakes of mist behind as the car raced ahead, still shooting fire in the air. It roared across the pasture, over a little hill, and out of sight — where it ran smack into Josiah Jenkins' still and his storage barrels of almost pure alcohol moonshine. The ground shook and there was a huge mushroom cloud. Buster and Holler were still sliding through the grass

towards the explosion, but they came to a stop right where Josiah had dropped the two jugs.

The excursion across the pasture had not been painless, and the medicine proved quite soothing. Fortunately, the two adventurers were incoherent by the time the Simple Volunteer Fire Department arrived to survey the smoking crater at the edge of the pasture.

Nobody would've believed them anyway.

Chapter 6

Destiny of the Yee-Haw

Leroy suffered the madness of love. He longed for the stylish Hope to fill an empty space in his heart, but she just saw him as something not to step in. He needed a title to gain her trendy attention, so he did the only logical thing and changed his last name from White to White-Bear, claiming to be the last surviving member of the Yee-Haw Tribe.

Who knows how such things happen, but word got around and a big eastern museum sent an anthropologist to record and preserve Leroy's history. A government specialist was assigned to apologize, and Chief White-Bear's name and tribe were added to the Federal Registry of Indigenous Peoples. Leroy became his own nation, and Hope loved him with all her fashion.

The spring wedding was a grand affair. Leroy and Hope claimed a home site down where Turkey Crick slips out to the river. They built an authentic Yee-Haw tee-pee with a second-story balcony and galvanized steel siding.

The next winter Hope had a child, a difficult birth that left no chance for others. Little Destiny White-Bear inherited the entire future of the Yee-Haw tribe, and Chief Leroy stayed busy inventing ancient traditions to guide her. When Destiny was three, he gave her a necklace with a little pouch to put her visions in. She collected pebbles that held her dreams and wore them smooth from wishing. It wasn't long before Leroy caught her making a bigger bag to hold more dreams. He said the weight of so many would hold her down, and she'd have to use the pouch he'd given her. She made a purse of the larger bag though, for keeping feminine essentials — such as a growing collection of frogs.

The summer Destiny was ten years old she had to choose one dream to be her totem for life. Hope and Leroy witnessed as

Destiny poured the pebbles out on the moonlit bank of Turkey Crick. She chased away a spoiled raccoon that came looking for treats, then she cast all but one of the pebbles into the stream, where the ripples of childhood washed away in the flowing water. The spirit she chose would become her middle name: Willow. A kangaroo rat peeked from the hip pocket of her overalls as she said she would be a spiritual shelter.

They fashioned a totem from clay they dug back behind their spring. Hope declined working with the sticky mud, but Destiny and Leroy both surprised themselves with an affinity for the art, shaping the clay by faith. They melted a few experiments in glowing mahogany coals before perfecting the firing process. The final result was a likeness of a willow tree with its branches woven around a hollow, where the pebble of her vision was secured by a necklace-thong passing through the top. As Leroy placed the finished symbol around Destiny's neck, a lizard escaped from the chest pocket of her overalls.

The totem presentation preceded a spirit-trial; the night-time discipline of courage, endurance, and setting things right. The tradition had always been a male-only event, but that was by female choice — Hope had little care for unseen disciplines.

Destiny still filled the unseen with magic, and said since she was a ten-years-old nearly-grown adult, she'd join Chief Leroy to start her new spirit out right. The warriors painted their faces in patterns of soot and berry juice, and headed into the night.

The raids had lately focused on the Lawson ranch. Lawson was notorious for letting his cattle run free; only rounding them up after they'd harvested every shrub and fouled every water hole for miles around. Charitable neighbors helped with fence repairs until realizing their efforts were destroyed overnight by ingenious cows that'd somehow learned the use of wire-cutters. The ravenous herd plundered its way across the valley, and most recently the Yee-Haw kitchen garden had fallen, with entire columns mowed down and any survivors pounded into the dirt.

Leroy and Destiny made their way through the moonlight until they found the cattle. It took hours to apply all of the oil-based paint from Chief Leroy's backpack. Destiny collected the cows one by one, soothing them until she could hold their heads while Chief Leroy brushed the rancher's name in large red letters centered across the aperture below their tails.

As the war-party made its way back home, Leroy said, "Lots of folks build good life runnin' cows, but a man like Lawson don't build, he just takes. People like that can't live in their own neighborhoods, but they can use our light to cast big shadows. The only power we got is to shine clear through. Anyhow, this was as much for us as for him. Call it artistic expression."

Destiny was almost asleep on her feet, and Leroy swung her up to his shoulders. She said, "I'm glad we live in our own light, but shining all night makes me tired. I just want to get home."

Leroy considered his role as sage of an entire civilization before answering. "We are home. Standing up for what we believe is the structure that warms our lives. Reaching beyond yourself is the only way to happiness, but without belief, it just falls apart. I s'pect Lawson lives in a cold house."

She did her best to absorb that, but she was yawning as she said, "Sometimes you talk funny Chief, but I guess maybe you know stuff."

Her resistance was obviously worn down, and he tried to make the most of the opportunity. "You've got to find the edge of your ignorance to get your bearings. I've barely got located. Knowing stuff don't come from books or words or even time. Those are just directions passing by. Knowing stuff comes from choosing your own direction and reaching past the obstacles. When you fall down and bust your heart open, you can begin."

Destiny's head was bobbing heavily as she said, "When did you ever fall?"

It made him smile, like the warmth of tiny trusting hands, but there was always a time to let go. "I fall down every day. Reaching too far is the only way to know I've reached as far as I can. Getting back up is what matters. But I was like Lawson once too, only a shadow from other folks' light. Weren't no personal failure, just communal blame — livin' in the minute takin' all I could, blustered up from shame, always afraid of bein' found out. It leads to hate. Now I shine my own light and fall down every day, but I know love."

Destiny was slumped over Leroy's head, snoring.

In the following years Leroy and Destiny became quite skilled at their specialized artistry. Their paintings grew ever more articulate through numerous phases; from impressionist to abstract, and from murals to word puzzles forming random

sentences of particular interest as the cattle milled about.

The vagrant billboards wandering through Lawson's delusions of high society finally took their toll and the herds were pulled back across the valley. Chief Leroy was the hero of Dark Hollow Road, though he claimed to not know the identity of the artist. Lawson knew though, and it didn't take much research to find his avenue of revenge: Leroy had built that ramshackle tin tee-pee inside the National Forest boundary, and it was Lawson's patriotic duty to inform the authorities of the trespass.

The Forest Service was predictably resentful at notice of unlicensed humanity within its jurisdiction, but Leroy claimed ancestral native rights, so forceful eviction was fraught with political hazard. Instead, the agency instituted a tactful program of habitat restoration. To limit human interaction with the frail ecosystem, huge scars of boulders and trenches were plowed around the area to prevent any vehicular access.

Leroy improved on their boundary with rocks and logs, then used his canoe to haul necessities up and down the river.

A frustrated press conference was called, where a dour-faced official told of the dire threat posed by the rebellion out at the fortified Yee-Haw compound. He said it was unknown how many women and children the cult might abuse, but his office was searching for some way to peacefully resolve the situation before too many innocent citizens disappeared.

As soon as the gossip started, Hope was ready to leave. Leroy hadn't given her the life she'd expected and she'd been wanting to get Destiny out of the area anyway. Destiny was twelve now, already running around with them throw-away kids from over at Shaw's foster home, and Leroy didn't even seem to care, saying Destiny's totem would always guide her home.

That totem had been just the beginning of a ceramics inventory that now threatened to take over their home. Destiny and Leroy had both continued the art while maintaining the original primitive style, but Leroy had lately turned that same distinctive form to wood carving. He spent his days whittling trinkets from pieces of an old log that'd been uncovered when the river changed course in a flood. It was hundreds of years old by all evidence, but preserved by submersion.

Leroy dug that log up out of the bottom and split it open to dry, claiming the Great Spirit had brought the ancient wood to

him for a purpose. He etched meticulous patterns in strange tools and devices, but then rubbed them with dirt or burned them to a worn appearance. He still went on spirit-trials, slipping off into the night with a heavy backpack. Hope threw her hands up in exasperation as Leroy seemed oblivious to the outside world.

After the gossip circling around the little tribe had been adjusted to the best convenience, an army of heavy machinery was assembled across the meadow below the White-Bear home. Armed agents with bulletproof shields bravely patrolled as the line inched forward, but there were no hostilities.

Indian summer was fading to impending reality when the invasion came within view of where Destiny and Leroy lay on their backs in the dry grass, imagining cloud shapes from a clear blue sky. As a pair of skunks searched for crumbs in Destiny's overall pockets, her vision was all dark clouds. A tear traced her cheek and she abruptly asked, "Do you still love mom?"

He considered her view for a minute before answering. "Yes, but I don't see her much anymore."

The skunks shuffled away chewing pieces of biscuit, and Destiny spoke soft as a whisper. "I don't think she sees me ever."

Leroy searched the sky for a minute before answering. "Seeing takes perspective — the courage to be yourself. I remember a time: 'twas the first warm day of spring, you was barely two years old. She was playing with you in the early grass, both of you naked in the sun, laughing and rolling, happy to be outside. She weren't just watching you, but with you, all natural-like. I'd been gone — she didn't know I'd got back. I left again so she wouldn't. She was there for herself."

Destiny's eyes sparkled wistfully. "Maybe you should do that. Take her clothes and play in the sun and the grass, I mean."

Leroy sat up and watched Turkey Crick carry momentary importance away to the river, as birds in the willow brush flitted through sparse remaining leaves. Their season was almost over. His shoulders rose as he filled his lungs with new resolve.

"We all wear layers. They start as places to hide, but build until we're lost. It's not your mother's fault: it's mine. I tried to make a soft place to rest good hearts, but it can't be done. Good hearts aren't soft. Each spirit must have its own warrior."

He looked across the meadow at the line of bulldozers. They'd be at his door in another day. "Yesterday you fit in the

crook of my arm in a perfect world, but I made it all up. We only believed it into being. Tomorrow you and your mother will go, and I will be where I am."

Destiny smiled as she thought of a world existing by belief, but her mother didn't shape clay by faith — they would leave. Destiny wanted to fix things, but there was nothing to do, only acceptance. A fish jumped in the creek, and as the ripples washed away it reminded her of when she'd set her childhood free. Some things were lost forever.

That night Chief White-Bear told Hope the true history of their name, and it was the open door she'd been looking for. Thirteen years of impoverished dreams and frustration, and he wasn't even important. There was nothing else to say and she started packing to take Destiny away.

Leroy pretended not to notice as Destiny painted her face in the custom of the spirit-trials and slipped out into the moonlight. She detoured around the bulldozers and joined the other local victims of adolescence, down where they met by the river below Pruitt's orchard.

It was a parting, and all but one detached right away, foster kids accustomed to cutting losses clean, but it hurt. Twelve-year-old Destiny sat on the grass in her Yee-Haw war-paint, scandalously alone with a seventeen-year-old boy as they searched the reflection of the moon on the river for an easier good-bye. She said, "I wonder where life goes."

He touched her hand, but drew back, and she knew: She was just a kid. His voice broke a bit as he said, "It's all one. You'll go somewhere — ever'body does."

He frowned at his own awkwardness, and after a moment he continued, "Life does, like rollin' off Turkey Ridge in a ol' truck tire. Wouldn't only do it on a dare, thrown all around outa control, world spinnin' crazy, breath slammed away with ever' bump; but the harder you hit, the further you fly, 'til you sail through a summer of moonlit nights."

He turned away to surreptitiously wipe his cheek with the back of his hand, and she pictured him sailing across the full moon in his tire, frozen in time. But the moon was a phase that'd pass, and they'd all be orphaned again. She made her own detachment then, carefully packing the night in her memories and putting on layers, as she walked back to the end of her world.

Destiny and Hope left the next morning. On their way out of the community, Hope blamed Leroy to anybody who'd listen. Crabby Ina Coulter was one of the first to hear of the Yee-Haw tribe's questionable validity, but the gossip traveled faster than even she could relay it. The invasion paused while agents were sent to prove Leroy's fraudulent significance.

The investigators confidently invited news media to observe as they faced Leroy with harsh incriminations. Leroy only shrugged as he sat on a bench he'd carved from part of that centuries-dead log he'd drug from the river-bottom, then he drew a map to the location of some unique sites he knew to be in the woods thereabouts. In their excitement at seeing an actual treasure map, the reporters momentarily forgot to produce the intended story and set out through the forest to look for news.

Many ceramic and carved artifacts of distinctive style were unearthed, and skeptical testing proved the wood of the carved pieces was indeed old enough to indicate a Yee-Haw presence in the area hundreds of years before. The reporters eagerly conducted as various high officials wiped tears from their eyes with perfect timing, saying they could feel the pain of poor Chief Leroy and his forgotten tribe.

A reservation was granted from National Forest land around the tiny homestead. As the dozers retreated from Leroy's yard, they made a nice new driveway out to Dark Hollow Road. The museum that had years ago first discovered the little tribe wasn't to be outdone, and they proudly donated funds for the development of a cultural center to preserve the ancient ways.

The world would never be the same.

But then, it never was.

Chapter 7

The Trail Drive

Simple is a small community and folks know each other, but like anywhere there are differing levels — all of them higher than average. The ranchers meet and stop in the middle of the road, leaning out of their pickup windows to postulate about the weather, the market conditions, and has anyone seen Lawson's cows lately? He shouldn't let them roam free like he does, but he's an important man and doesn't have time to worry about the damage they cause. Eventually someone else will be coming down the road, and the meeting attendees look at the condition of the vehicle and sadly shake their heads. They grudgingly clear the way for some wretched resident of one of the subdivisions that scar the land.

The wretched residents meet down by the bridge. They sit around a fire and postulate about the weather, the hunting conditions, and has anyone eaten any of Lawson's cows lately? The Herefords don't barbecue like the Angus, but either way they'll devour anything remotely edible, and trample anything else into dust. A hush falls over the wretched congregation as a fancy pickup rolls across the bridge, and they sadly shake their heads. Who'd want a rig like that anyway? Hardly twenty years old — pound out the dents and it'd be just like new. You couldn't even use it for fear of messing it up. Resentment runs deep as the other ranchers defend Lawson, even if they don't hold with his loose fences and tight ways.

There once was a time that Effie Stewart was the pride of the wretched side — charming and graceful, and how'd she ever

come from them scraggly folks out on Dark Hollow Road? But she had, and they placed big dreams on Effie's future. When Tom Lawson started coming around, everyone stepped back and waited for nature to take hold. They all knew Tom was no good — even more arrogant than the rest of his family, but he stood to inherit an empire, so the other boys just got out of the way.

All except one. Clarence Thompson was quiet and hard working, and never quite fit into the crowd. It was mostly agreed he wouldn't fit anywhere, but when he asked Effie would it be all right if he up and married her, she knew where he belonged, and said, "Yup." They worked and saved like no one they knew, but they had a dream and built a place together. Nothing like the big outfits; they knew their limits and built fences — one on the boundary with Lawson.

Tom never got over it. Though certainly not marriage material, Effie would've been entertaining. Tom Lawson had considerable influence and invested it in making things as hard as possible for his new neighbors.

Then suddenly Effie looked up and it was thirty years later. Clarence had worked himself to death with a heart attack six years ago, and all she had was a shoestring ranch with a scrawny herd that'd barely make the land payment. But barely was enough, and just in time: The last payment.

Lawson was controlling partner at the land bank now. If he had his way Effie'd lose everything, but the beef market was riding high and looked like it'd hold up through this week's auction in Bigg City. She started calling the local truckers that could give her credit for the usual transport into town. Then any truckers she could think of. Then anybody with any kind of stock trailer at all. Lawson had contracted everything for top dollar to start shipping to his winter range, though it was only early September. He wasn't one to put up hay and feed cows; he'd rent pasture in some low-lying valley and keep the fences loose enough that the grass never ran out. Anyway, he told everyone he had to get 'em moved early. He'd pay twice the usual rate, but they had to contract ahead. There were no freighters left available for the entire week.

It was late afternoon the day before the auction, and Effie sat on the front porch looking at the view she and Clarence had put their lives into. The streaks of a few silent tears were all

that was left. The kids were gone — a blessing of memories, but they'd made their lives elsewhere and she wouldn't trouble them. There was a dust cloud rising over the treetops out by Old Woman Road. She counted the seconds and did the math as it filled between two landmark snags: *Seventeen miles per hour. That'll be Buster in Ol' Blue, and this time of day he ain't goin' nowhere else but right here. Might even have Howard along.* She touched her hair thoughtfully, but then laughed and shook her head. She wandered down to the gate.

After Clarence died, Buster had helped her out, as he said, "Just for something to do." It was probably as much to anger Lawson as anything else — Buster had maintained his own feud with the rancher for years. But even after Effie adjusted to her loss, Buster still stopped by out of habit. She'd had the gate open long enough to forget why she was standing there, when Ol' Blue rattled up the driveway and she remembered herself.

Howard "Holler" McDonald was indeed with Buster, and Effie inspected the shadow her figure cast in the driveway, then laughed at herself again. She was the only one to ever call him by his real name, and it always reddened his ears a bit, but it was just silliness. She'd had the romance of her life and it was too late to start another. Those times were gone. And now these last few days she'd been disconnecting; shock she supposed — a natural kindness to ease being eaten alive by the lion. But between Howard's eloquence and Buster's enthusiasm, she was sure they could give Lawson a good cussing and she was glad to see them. Howard sure did have a vocabulary. Buster liked saying, "Holler gots hisself a degree in edification. He could teach anyone how to count to three, in ten easy steps."

Eventually they were all seated on the porch with some of Effie's special 80-proof lemonade. Holler helped Effie cuss Lawson in many satisfyingly original ways, but Buster just sat quiet. They were giving him occasional apprehensive glances, waiting for the explosion. Buster's ego was indifferent to any amount of pushing when it didn't matter, but this did, and they meant to keep him from murder if they could. The explosion surprised them by being not so much a venting of anger, as excitement over upcoming adventure.

"We'll herd them there! They used to do it all the time."

Holler pointed out that there'd used to be about a zillion

less people and freeways and airports and urban sprawl between the rangelands and the stockyards, but that just revved Buster up even more. He tried to put his enthusiasm into Holler's literate vernacular. "Shoot, Perfessor, them ain't periods, they's commas. It'll be a cinch."

Effie started towards her horse saying, "That's 'bout the craziest thing I ever heard. Let's get at it."

As for Holler, he'd learned from Buster not to worry about looking stupid trying the impossible. After all, anyone else trying that would look stupid too.

Buster took Ol' Blue up to the shed and Holler helped him load some hay and all of the horse grain, while Effie saddled Frosty and rode her out to find Fireball. He'd been Clarence's horse, retired long ago, but Effie had the notion Fireball could still live up to his name. She led him up to the house just as Buster and Holler arrived with the hay. Holler looked at Fireball and dubiously cocked his head sideways, trying to find a more favorable perspective. Effie smiled. "Had to sell the saddle for him Howard, but he'll set you fine, he's a good'n."

Holler figured she was seeing through a fog of nostalgia, but didn't say anything. He'd never been on a horse before, but Effie said Fireball knew what to do. Holler only had to sit up there and make a commotion when the horse needed re-enforcement. They loaded up the front of Ol' Blue with provisions, headed down to the corral, and opened the gate. Effie had already cut out sixty yearlings and twelve old cows for the sale, and penned them by the loading dock. The auction didn't start 'till noon. They had eighteen hours, but the yard was on the other side of town and they planned to get there before traffic picked up in the morning, about twelve hours — three miles per hour. Buster said, "It oughta be a cinch."

The idea was for Ol' Blue to lead off with the hay, and the cattle would follow, but Effie and Holler had a tough time keeping the well-fed herd interested. Buster noted their slow progress through Ol' Blue's mirrors and adjusted the pace accordingly, but he momentarily forgot about them when he came up on a buzzard sitting in the trail. It'd just finished off an entire long-dead, half-fermented, jackrabbit, and gone well over its recommended maximum gross vulture weight. It took a few running flapping steps and lifted off as best it could. Instead of retreating to the

side, the fool thing took straight down the trail, and Buster couldn't resist pursuit. He floored the throttle and hooted to Ol' Blue, "We're gonna catch us a buzzard!"

The engorged bird couldn't lift free of its shadow by more than a few feet. Ol' Blue's hood came right up under the huge wingspan, with the windshield brushing tail feathers. Buster was delighting in the once-in-a-lifetime dream of flight, until the buzzard did what buzzards do and regurgitated its entire load, to escape skyward.

Buster stopped and pulled up some tufts of dried grass to wipe away some of the damage to Ol' Blue's pride, but what had spewed down to cook on the radiator was a foregone conclusion. Buster was gasping and he couldn't get his eyes to stop watering. He abandoned Ol' Blue and walked back to seek wise counsel with good friends.

Holler and Effie offered wisdom until the laughter shook Effie clear out of the saddle. Buster could always be counted on to take the first dent. Someone else might smack their finger with a hammer, but Buster would nail his thumb to the wall.

As the stench of putrid rabbit cooking in buzzard bile wafted back, the cattle rolled their eyes and began to bunch up. Before they could organize a retreat, Buster ran back to Ol' Blue. Gagging and wiping tears from his eyes, he drove a wide detour off the trail and came up behind the terrified herd. Holler and Effie gave direction and they headed down the trail with new ambition. Night came on and they settled into a steady pace, tunneling through darkness in the shadowy light cast from their foul pursuer.

Behind them, Buster went several shades of green. For medicinal purposes, he started dipping into the mason jar of Effie's 80-proof lemonade, brought along as routine essentials, but always handy in emergency. It was near first light when they got to where Old Woman Road comes down off the hill and runs along that little crick before turning up to the Interstate. They pushed the herd down into the tiny stream for a drink, and hauled up water to give Ol' Blue's radiator a good scrubbing.

They'd have never been able to push through the night without Ol' Blue's heroic sacrifice or Buster's brave sufferance, but now Buster was displaying symptoms from both the disease of nausea, and the cure of high-octane lemonade. Ol' Blue had been

darting about and behaving erratically, taking advantage of the loose reins.

Holler was having troubles of his own, pertaining to an incompatibility between Fireball's bare back and his own middle aged bones being set in their ways. Buster and Holler did a pretty fair job of scrubbing away all historical record of the buzzard's contribution, then they swapped mounts.

Buster and Effie headed the herd right down the crick, towards the storm tunnel that passed under both sides of the freeway. The other end of the tunnel was lit by the brightening sky. The leaders hesitated, but still feared the pursuit, and headed on through.

Holler drove Ol' Blue up and around the other side of the freeway and parked off to the side, above the tunnel's exit. As Effie and Buster came out, he shouted down that from his vantage point he could see the crick pass under bridges clear off to the south of Bigg City. It looked like it might be worth going under traffic as much as possible.

Holler dropped down some hay and a bag of grain. Effie broke a bale open and spread grain over it for an energizing appetizer, while Buster made a sled of willow limbs to pull the rest of the hay with a makeshift hitch to Frosty. Effie led Frosty, and the herd followed breakfast down the crick. Fireball and Buster brought up the drag, hoo-raing the stragglers.

Holler took Ol' Blue on ahead to find a likely route to bust out for a final run through the south end of town. Effie's parting words echoed through his mind: "I know you can do it, Howard." Dang a faithful woman. It was far too late to think of beating traffic. In fact, they'd be lucky to have them penned by the noon deadline. Shoot, they'd be lucky not to spread the whole herd through the streets of Bigg City and end up in jail. He figured it must be easy being Buster — *It oughta be a cinch*. Indeed.

The smell of the previous night still permeated Buster's whole body. As he breathed it out, it brought new waves of nausea, over-riding the lemonade medicine. He was twirling a short rope around to keep the stragglers on edge, when he toppled from Fireball for what seemed the hundredth time. He lay there awaiting salvation on the softly inviting gravel of the crick-bed. A slight trickle of late summer's cool morning water washed away the passage of time. It was a perfect place to die, and Buster told

Fireball to go on without him, and gently closed his eyes.

It was more of a throw than a kick, as Fireball's two rear hooves caught Buster in the side and he landed with a profound "Oof," against the brushy bank. There was work to do. Buster climbed up to where he could swing onto Fireball again, as the horse came alongside and offered the reins Effie had looped into an old halter. She'd wisely left out the bit — Fireball knew more than any of them and didn't need it, but he knew Buster had his moments too, and might prove useful yet again.

A few such moments occurred when their channel was crossed by fences with weighted sweeps dropping to the bottom. Buster never went anywhere without a pair of heavy pliers in his back pocket, which he used to open passage through the long-abandoned fences. He cut his hand on some of the old galvanized wire, and as the zinc residue stung, he was grateful for the distraction from the sensory overload centering around his lower anatomy. Buster, like Holler, had come to intimately understand Fireball's name.

Effie helped Frosty pull the willow sled for miles, as the hay got heavier from soaking up water. There'd been new tributaries, and the bottom of the crick was getting sticky and unpredictable as it got deeper and slower. The hungry steers had been nipping at the hay-bales. They finally managed to break one open, and it spilled everywhere. Effie spread it out so they could have equal shares, though it was little enough. She opened the other bale and spread it out too, and unhitched the sled. There were only a couple hours left and still a few miles to go. She looked back at Buster with a question in her eyes.

Buster's health had progressed from a death wish to a dull suffering that was pierced with shame by Effie's expression of doubt. Two hours. His green countenance perked up and he sat straighter on Fireball's inexplicably widening, and sharpening, bare back. It was time to get up out of the crick. Buster left Fireball protecting the drag, and climbed out to see where they were. It was an empty lot, next to what looked like some sort of prison housing units. Holler had told him that's how normal folks lived in the city, but Buster had scarcely believed it.

In what little open space that remained, huge real estate billboards stared at each other. They made mighty poor excuses for trees, but Buster climbed up on the nearest sign to look

around. Up ahead the geology had eroded down to some sort of commercial area, with huge buildings billowing smoke, surrounded by paved parking lots filled with the vehicles of what he figured was escapees from them prisons. He guessed the buildings were factories where they manufactured work, and they'd be too busy to mind a few cows passing through.

He was troubled by the highway though. It was only two lanes, but was the main traffic bypass on the south end of town. Interstate trucks competed for space with local traffic, and it looked like they were all in a hurry. Buster was about to climb down from his perch on the billboard, when way off past the factories he spotted Ol' Blue, with Holler up on top waving a feed bag. Holler was easy enough to see because he'd parked out on a narrow road built high up on solid fill — a railroad. Buster's eyes followed the track and its grassy right-of-way back towards the highway and he grinned, thinking, *It oughta be a cinch.*

Holler had gone to the auction yard first, with notice for any helpful cowboys that adventure was coming up the road. He hurt like blazes from the night on Fireball's bare back, but he made his way to the office. It was early, with only the manager there, and Holler gave him the whole story. He worried it might sound unbelievable, but the man lit up like fireworks.

"That explains it! That danged Lawson — we've never had a week this open since I've been here. Nobody can get shipping. Yours is the only sizeable bunch scheduled in. If you can get 'em here they'll go top dollar. I'll sure spread the word. Shoot, if I was a younger man I'd get out there and help you myself."

The man was younger than Holler. Holler considered that as he did a Fireball-induced elbow-flailing bow-legged duck-waddle back out to Ol' Blue. He figured one of these days he might have to stop associating with Buster. But meanwhile, Holler and Ol' Blue went back down Oak Street past that Quickie Burger that's always got the burnt-out sign, and out to the busy highway. He waited, and then took an opening to cross traffic and turn left. Just as Ol' Blue got up to speed, with a bit of spiritual assistance from a rapidly closing semi-truck, Holler saw just what they needed — the crossing where a spur from the railroad ran out to the industrial park. It was only used at night, when there was less traffic on the highway.

He considered the following truck that now overflowed

the view from Ol' Blue's mirror, and deduced that the only polite, or even prudent, maneuver onto the tracks would be to turn first and slow down later. Ol' Blue slid sideways until the smooth surface of the crossing dropped down to ties, where they were slammed straight by the rails and the hay bales on back shot off into the weeds. Holler guided Ol' Blue astraddle of one rail and next to the other so as not to fall off the ties, until they came to a shuddering stop. He patted the steering wheel saying, "Let's not tell Buster about this."

Holler saw flashing lights in the mirror and was almost relieved. Someone needed to lock him up to protect him from himself. Then he realized the lights were at the crossing gates out on the highway. Ol' Blue must have passed over the switch. The gates wiggled but didn't come down, the lights went out, and the bells quieted. Holler worked up a sweat retrieving the few hay bales that hadn't broken open, then he and Ol' Blue headed down the tracks to find the herd. It was a thumping ride along the ties until they stopped at a likely vantage, where Holler climbed up on Ol' Blue's back to search for any sign. And sure enough, there was Buster, up on a sign.

Buster memorized the turns and avenues to where Holler waved, then jumped down from his billboard and raced back to tell Effie the plan. At least that's what he envisioned, but riding Fireball without a saddle had taken its toll. He tumbled down off the sign and performed an elbow-flailing bow-legged duck-waddle back to the crick. He assured Effie it oughta be a cinch, and then raced back to where Fireball waited — at least that's what he envisioned.

Buster and Effie pushed the herd up out of the crick and across the lot and down the streets of the housing and past the factories and over to where Holler waited, and all it took was almost killing Fireball. The others did all they could, but Fireball went manic. He seemed to know how much it all meant, and was everywhere he needed to be. In fact, the Fireball team was sometimes two places at once. Fireball would deposit Buster in some strategic location to preserve a flank, then race ahead to cut off a breakaway, returning to transport Buster to the next advantageous position. By the time they got to the railroad Fireball was shuddering and gasping. Buster was just shuddering.

The herd lined out on the grassy right-of-way, and

headed for the light brunch Holler and Ol' Blue had so artfully deposited out near the highway. Effie rode Frosty along the lower side, and Buster led Fireball in the most athletic waddle he could muster, again bringing up the drag. Holler backed Ol' Blue along the tracks above them and stopped on the switch for the crossing gates. The herd found their meal and made short work of it as the bells rang and lights flashed, the gates came down, and traffic started backing up on the highway. Buster used the steep bank of the rail-bed to help his tortured body up on Fireball again, patting him on the neck, saying, "Just one more time."

They waited until traffic backed up past Oak Street, and then started pushing them again. Holler waddled over to block the open lane facing east, and Effie blocked the tracks on the other side with Frosty. The leaders gingerly angled through the crossing gates and turned up the highway, taking the vacant lane next to the solid line of cars and trucks. Conscious of the wide-eyed wonder in some of those vehicles, Buster sat tall, as Fireball pushed through the pack and up to Oak Street in time to turn them north. Effie brought up the drag while Holler went back to retrieve Ol' Blue from the crossing gate switch.

The herd headed up Oak Street, which by now had one lane backed up too, fencing off the whole left side of the trail. Effie stayed in the drag and Buster took the right flank. The steers knew Fireball now, and didn't give much trouble at the alleys and driveways. But when they were about up to the Quickie Burger, only a quarter-mile from the auction-yard gate, the honking horns and waving bystanders finally became too much, and panic started rippling through the herd.

Buster booted Fireball into a run and headed them off at the entrance to the Quickie Burger drive-through. He and Effie pushed them up the narrow fenced-in lane around the back, where a blue-haired lady in a Buick was ordering a milkshake. Holler and Ol' Blue penned them in from behind and they took a pause to settle down, while they waited for the blue-haired lady to get her order at the front window.

Effie worked Frosty to the front of the pack, to be ready to turn them as soon as they hit the street. Buster rang the bell at the back window and ordered the works from the girl at the counter, as her jaw dropped and her bubblegum bounced off the shelf and out onto the ground. The Buick pulled out, and Effie got

in position. Fireball started pushing ahead, and Buster shouted to the girl, "The guy in the blue truck will pay, and don't forget the french-fries."

Traffic had started to move, and Oak Street was a mess. But word had finally gotten out, and all of the hangers-on and prospective bidders for the upcoming auction came running to flag down traffic and close off driveways. They helped turn the herd through the yard entrance and into a pen. It was two minutes to twelve when they closed the gates and Effie signed in. The herd still looked pretty good, and Buster said it'd been a cinch. He envisioned a hearty and heroic dismount from Fireball, which culminated in falling on his head.

Holler had parked Ol' Blue in time to see the whole sorry spectacle. He said Buster was a danged embarrassment, and duck-waddled over to help him up. Holler and Effie put Frosty and Fireball in one of the many empty pens and doted on them awhile, then went back and helped Buster over to Ol' Blue, where they all enjoyed Quickie Burger mega-meals, with fries.

The auction results were very satisfactory. When Effie got the check, they all piled into Ol' Blue and headed for the bank, to get business out of the way before hunting up Honest Eddie's New and Used Car Lot. They'd heard of an old stock trailer there that would fit Ol' Blue's hitch, and Effie's new budget. At the bank, Lawson was in his office, sitting back with his feet up on the desk. Effie marched in with Holler and Buster, and set the check in front of him. A crowd gathered outside the open door as Lawson's feet thumped the floor. He sputtered in disbelief, and then turned on Buster. "You did this, you illiterate hick."

Buster shuffled around and looked down at his toes as he mumbled, "Shoot, I dunno. I takes my litter to the dump."

Lawson's eyes bulged. These inferior trash had lied and schemed their way to what was rightfully his. He handed the deed to Effie, but he'd been cheated and this wasn't over. As a vein throbbled in his forehead, the crowd eased away from the door, and someone whispered, "This is what hate comes to."

After settling up at the bank, "The poor widow Effie," as Holler sympathetically introduced her to Honest Eddie at the car lot, drove a hard bargain for the beat-up stock trailer that fit right on Ol' Blue's hitch. Effie, Holler, and Buster returned to rescue Fireball and Frosty from the pen at the auction-yard

before it closed up.

They parked off to the side, and led the horses out to the trailer. Fireball's legs had swollen and stiffened so badly that he needed help to make the short step up inside. They could all see how proud he was though, and Effie whispered, "This is what love comes to." As Effie settled the horses down, Buster and Holler brought some hay in for bedding, then all five of them just caved in while Ol' Blue kept watch outside.

They were half asleep when Effie spoke. "Howard, Buster, I know I don't need to say anything, but —" She was interrupted by loud false snoring. After a while she said, "You know, I could almost feel sorry for Tom."

Holler's voice came sleep-groggy. "I know what you mean, but he wouldn't be happy without someone to blame for something. Tom Lawson was hoisted by his own petard."

Buster winced and whistled through his teeth. "Sheesh, that's got to hurt."

Fireball snorted, and they all went to sleep.

Chapter 8

Ol' Blue The Rocket, and The Meaning Of Life

Back when Buster was a perpetual escapee from that crooked foster home, he'd hide out in the willow brush down by the river, or hole up at Simple Jack's scrap-yard.

As far as young Buster could judge from Jack's antics, the junk-man wasn't actually old, so there was no worry of his trying to be a responsible influence. Jack was more like a child with something gone bad wrong. He'd worked hard all through his growing up, so childhood blossomed late and lingered, but the aspect of a missing eye and a disfiguring scar across his face had left him a recluse. Whenever Buster happened around, Jack let him stay in an old van that was slowly rusting back into the earth.

When winter closed in, Jack let him weld up a tiny little woodstove from some rusted scrap metal, to help melt the ice off the walls. It was Buster's first real welding job, but he'd seen some of Jack's work so he knew what to do. When Jack asked him about the cracks that later opened up in some of the welds, Buster told him they provided cross-grate ventilation for better combustion. Jack nodded at this demonstration of Buster's deep understanding of the philosophy of invention. He couldn't have done better himself.

The stove kept things cozy inside, but it didn't matter much, since most of the time Buster was out in the freezing cold, hunting whatever he could find to burn. The snow piled up early and fuel got scarce. Jack had an old car hood they used for sledding parts around the junkyard, and he mentioned how Buster might need to pull it up the hill and cut some of the dead lower branches off a few junipers. Jack had indicated the hill with a simple nod of his head, but the actual trek would entail a bit more difficulty, spanning several miles and numerous snowdrifts. Buster set to figuring a better way.

He was fourteen that year and Jack had let him rescue an old pickup truck from the crusher, but Buster knew Ol' Blue's bald tires and two-wheel drive would never make the trip up Turkey Ridge in the snow. Buster had a habit of chewing problems right down to the seeds before he spit them out though, and he soon realized Ol' Blue didn't specifically need more traction so much as more thrust. He couldn't shake the idea out of his head, so he went to Jack for assistance. Buster figured a little derisive laughter would help shame him into more positive pursuits, but he should've known better. In what seemed no time at all, Jack and Buster had a rocket securely bolted in the back of Ol' Blue.

They took the oxygen tank from Jack's acetylene torch set, and a tank of kerosene with a battery powered transfer pump from an old fuel truck, and plumbed them into the thruster, which was an old ceramic-lined hot water tank with one end cut off.

Jack lit a kerosene-soaked rag and threw it in the thruster for ignition. They'd left the regulator off the oxygen tank to get more flow, so he told Buster he didn't know how far to open the valve. It'd just be trial and error. Buster was starting to get a bit nervous, but he nodded. Jack said his digestion had been bothering him, but he'd be right back, and to go ahead and try it. He took off in a sprint.

Buster got in Ol' Blue and reached back out of the driver's window to open the oxygen valve. There was a roar as the oxygen met the burning rag, but nothing too exciting. He shrugged and opened the valve all the way. The roar got louder and Ol' Blue actually did inch forward from the thrust of escaping oxygen, but it was still disappointing. Then he remembered he had to turn on the kerosene pump. He reached back and toggled the switch. The burning rag had blown out of the thruster so by the time the spray of kerosene reached it the explosion was twenty feet back. It was deafening and almost blinding, even from Buster's vantage through the small rearview mirror. He watched the flame travel forward to Ol' Blue, a journey that took less than enough time to finish the thought that maybe he should reconsider.

Jack watched from behind a stack of crushed cars, as the fireball entered the thruster and the roar changed pitch to a howl. Ol' Blue jolted forward, but the rusted old bed mounts popped loose and the back of the truck slammed into the cab. The crash of the shattering rear window was inaudible under the blast

of the rocket, as the bed slid up and aimed skyward, to shoot away with remarkable aerodynamic stability. Ol' Blue rolled to a stop and Buster's vision cleared in time to watch the bed of his genuine vintage pickup truck leave a vapor trail across the sky and disappear over Turkey Ridge.

Buster waited a minute before he stepped out of Ol' Blue, but he still had to fall flat to hold the ground down for a while. He got things smoothed out by the time Jack came up saying it'd been a good experiment and they'd sure do better next time. Buster considered for a minute before he said that if he put a heavy flatbed on Ol' Blue, the extra weight along with a good set of tire chains would give all the traction he needed. Meanwhile he needed firewood. He grabbed the tow-rope for the heavy makeshift sleigh and started tugging it up the hill.

As Jack watched Buster walk away, he scratched his head in consternation, wondering at the lack of persistence in modern youth.

Over the years, Buster refined and developed Ol' Blue and they grew into a faithful symbiotic relationship. Buster did indeed make a heavy flatbed for Ol' Blue, and it just kept getting heavier as improvements were added. He replaced the rear window after straightening up the back of the cab. He had to cut and re-weld one crease to get it smoothed out.

When Simple Jack pointed out the crack that later developed in the weld, Buster said, "Yup, just like I figured."

Jack nodded. There was no need to elaborate on the many possible uses of such a crack.

Buster added big toolboxes under the bed and finished up with a back bumper cut from a section of old railroad track Jack was salvaging. Buster had been put on the job, and he assumed the rails were no longer in use. Ol' Blue finished out with the desired rear weight bias, and in all the years thereafter, as Buster always said, there wasn't one time he got stuck before he'd first used up all of his traction.

To that point, none of Ol' Blue's evolution had cost more than scrounging or labor, but if Buster was ever to fulfill his dream of finding employment as a master mechanic he'd need to fill those toolboxes, and that'd take wealth beyond imagining. He started with the usual crescent wrench and pliers, and a couple of donated screwdrivers that had seen better days. Desperate to

increase his vocational opportunities he added a big steel bar, a salvaged axle shaft welded to a piece of pipe. He figured it'd make a good hammer or lever or something.

Buster's junkyard education had given him a glorious grasp of some basic physical realities. In spite of that, or perhaps because of that, his mechanical nature was concerned with making things the way they should be, rather than repairing them to the order some fancy-pants engineer had originally intended. But he meant well, and was always around to offer assistance whenever ideas met reality.

Someone would ask, "Say, you don't happen to have a three-quarter-inch drive, deep-well, twelve-point, one and three-eighths socket, do you?"

Buster would put on his best thoughtful expression and go to look, rattling things around in Ol' Blue's big, mostly vacant toolboxes. After a likely span of time he'd say "Nope, I guess not." Then his expression would brighten and he'd offer, "But I got a big steel bar."

So although he favored mechanical work, Buster became known for his great skill at operating gloves and calluses. Under his expert guidance there weren't too many rocks they couldn't pick up or ditches they couldn't dig. Fences came out tight and straight, brush got cleared, and years passed by. Buster got his own place and moved out of the junkyard, but he still found excuses to stop by and see Jack as life progressed.

Some of the progression in Ol' Blue's life went the way of the rocket, while other improvements were more successful. There were some rich folks in Simple who had machines for washing clothes, but Buster did his by hand. He set to thinking up a better way, and started looking at Ol' Blue. He'd never accumulated enough necessities to fill both of Ol' Blue's tool boxes, so he went back to Simple Jack's place and welded one of them up watertight. He put a lid on the top and a drain on the bottom, and had a dandy sealed-up washtub. He could dump his whole wardrobe in the big box with room left over to wash the dog if he'd had one.

He'd fill it with water, add soap, and head down the road. No factory washing machine ever did a better job of agitation than driving just a few miles of Dark Hollow Road's washboard surface. Before his next trip he'd swap the water out for the

rinse cycle. The innovative system for monitoring the progression of each phase was the amount of suds bubbling up through a cracked weld in Ol' Blue's bed. Folks marveled at Buster's genius with such comments as, "Well I'll be," or, "If that ain't the darndest," or by simply shaking their heads.

Buster would proudly say, "Yup, just like I figured."

One time he was pouring the detergent in and accidentally dropped the whole box in the water. It was ruined anyway so he didn't fish it out. He just closed the lid and drove off.

Old Doc Watkins was out making his rounds. Since he was usually paid in barter, he found it more profitable to make house calls and haul the trades home himself in his specially outfitted pickup with stock-racks. He pulled onto the road right behind Buster and Ol' Blue, just as the agitation process came to full perk, spraying foam like a berserk fire-extinguisher. The doctor was about half blind and thought he was caught in a freak August blizzard, but it was getting late and he didn't want to miss dinner. Alva was making his favorite fatback stew, so he bravely forged ahead.

Sure enough, the windshield wipers couldn't keep up and he bounced into a ditch, hard enough to throw his load of assorted livestock out into a pasture. Plastered with suds, they stormed up through Johnson's barnyard — a ghostly-white stampede. It'd been butchering day and the old couple had just settled into rockers on their porch when the haunting apparitions passed by. Cora screamed and ran inside, and Leonard fell to his knees and pledged to become a vegetarian every other Tuesday.

There were other laundry mishaps such as the winter of the great freeze up, when Buster had to go clear through snow season with just the clothes on his back. But the huge cube finally thawed, and Buster reacquainted with old friends that'd taken to keeping a distance. Mostly his new-fangled washing-machine was a great success, becoming a permanent fixture of Ol' Blue. Someone would ask, "Hey Buster, you don't have a pair of long-reach external snap-ring pliers, do you?"

He'd go rattle things around in Ol' Blue's other massive tool box for an appropriate minute, then say, "Nope, I guess not. But I got a big steel bar, and a box of fabric softener."

Over the years, one of Ol' Blue's more noteworthy jobs was when Buster took up salvage logging for Old Man Stewart.

Stewart was well known up and down Dark Hollow Road as a highly successful businessman. If you had business to be done, he was there to do it to you. He'd even sent off to Big City to have his own cards made up: "Old Man Stewart — Entrepreneur." Buster cut and hauled the logs in for Old Man's little sawmill. By only taking the much lighter dead trees and not using any big machinery, they were able to substitute simple discretion and flexible work hours for fancy permits and such.

Buster would back Ol' Blue up a steep hill until he lost traction, then keep spinning until the back end dug down for easier loading. He cut down the trees and bucked them into logs, then rolled them down the hill using his big steel bar to steer them as best he could without dying, in the general direction of Ol' Blue. After years of rolling logs slamming into Ol' Blue's headboard, it developed a rakish forward tilt. Folks would comment on the style, and Buster would say, "Yup, just like I figured."

Buster would chain a load on and head down the mountain. This method limited the length of the logs to the width of the opening, not of the road, but of the trees and fences alongside. Ol' Blue looked like an overweight airplane that couldn't lift off.

One time Buster spied a genuine treasure — a big juniper that had blown down. Actually it hadn't blown down so much as over, as junipers often do, its massive branches holding the trunk way up above the ground. Junipers were usually twisted and rotted hollow by the time they got that big, but this one looked pretty good. Buster figured to get it home somehow and make a big dugout canoe. He was working out the logistics of the project when Holler McDonald happened by and volunteered to come along for the ride.

There was no hill to help in the loading process, so they cut some branches away and backed Ol' Blue under the monster tree. They cut the rest of the limbs until finally it was only held up by four big legs, hovering like a misshapen dinosaur above Ol' Blue. The idea was to cut a little from each leg in small steps, until gravity gently came to rest. It was tricky cutting without getting the chainsaw jammed, but Buster made one beaver-notched undercut, then jumped back as the dinosaur took a crashing lunge. When the dust cleared, Buster looked at the huge log resting on the bed and said "Yup, just like I figured."

They got it chained down, but the tapered log was badly

balanced to the butt end, even though the small end extended off the other side much farther. At the first sideways bump in the trail, one of Ol' Blue's back wheels came off the ground spinning, and they were stopped. Buster said he'd finally come up with a use for the great accumulated mass of Holler's educated wisdom. He had him sit way out on the small end of the log as a counterweight. They were still leaning badly, with Holler's side bouncing and waving far above the ground, but they made it back to Buster's place. Holler hooted and shouted the whole way — a bronc rider on the neck of a dinosaur.

Years passed, and Ol' Blue's scars added up, but so did Buster's, and the infirmities of age canceled out unnoticed. One chilly morning Buster went out to wake his companion for the trip to the latest back-breaking job, and was surprised to see what looked like frost covering the faded paint on Ol' Blue's hood and fenders. It seemed early in the season, so he took a closer look. It wasn't frost, but just the way the early morning light was shining on the faded paint. Ol' Blue was going gray.

It's funny how things like that creep up until suddenly there they are. Ol' Blue was the same age as Buster, which as close as he could figure he was only thirty-eight. He thought about it for a minute, then took a good look at himself in Ol' Blue's side mirror. Sure enough, he spotted a gray hair. Thirty-eight. That was already older than his daddy ever got, though Buster still kept his memory alive. It was only vague shadows now, but he could always invent what he couldn't remember. Whether actual history or improvisation, such counsel was always a comfort.

But his daddy had died young and wouldn't have any advice on outliving youth. Buster and Ol' Blue didn't even go to work. They sat there all morning feeling bad, and feeling guilty about feeling bad. A more educated man might've fallen into a downward spiral or a meaningless morass, or even perhaps deep pathos of angst. Buster just felt bad.

He stood up to take a good accounting of Ol' Blue. Some of the beat-up parts didn't work quite right — but he finally got limbered up and walked a full circle. He looked at all of the dents and scrapes from both sides of the mirrors, and remembered how proud he'd been when he first rescued Ol' Blue from the crusher. He said, "I guess if I'd known we'd be together this long I'd of taken better care of both of us." He continued circling and looking

over the damage of the years, searching his mind for a better way.

Then it hit him — a bolt out of Ol' Blue. It had worked loose from the running board and snagged his shin as he passed. He did a wincing side-step for a minute, thinking he'd like to get away for once. Well, why not? He had a bit put by, and he'd never even been out of the county since he'd been dropped in Simple as a little nipper. He'd take his savings and just once he and Ol' Blue would go out and have a time. He patted Ol' Blue on the fender in thanks for the inspiration, and said, "We best get at it."

They stopped by Potter's store on the way to — well; actually Buster didn't know just where they were headed. He was thinking about it when he asked Betty if they had any car wax. She found some and dusted off the tin before she put it on the counter, asking, "What's the occasion?"

Buster said, "I'm taking Ol' Blue on a grand expedition." Then as he realized the showy extravagance of such senseless activity, he added by way of some kind of motive, "We have to go find the meaning of life."

Everyone knew Buster never went anywhere and Betty was mightily interested, but she asked as casually as she could, "Say, just where is that exactly?"

Buster thought hard. "Maybe I better get a map too."

Outside, he got in Ol' Blue, but they sat there a minute. Betty Potter was a good friend and it made him think of all he had. This was where his roots were and he didn't really want to leave anymore, but he'd ran his mouth off to Betty and that was kind of like posting notice on the bulletin board. Now he'd have to go and not return until he found the meaning of life. Buster fired up Ol' Blue and they headed down the road. He didn't make any particular choice as to direction; he was looking deeper than that. He just went along for the ride as the scenery passed behind a tangle of memories.

He kept thinking back to that girl who'd lived over by Turkey Crick long ago. She'd had the audacity to tell the truth and expect people to like her anyway. Buster had built the limits of his dreams around little Destiny White-Bear, but they were still just kids when she moved away. Ol' Blue rattled on through history, but there weren't any other dreams.

Eventually they found themselves in Bigg City. It was

getting late, and Buster looked up from the past to sort out where he was. He pulled into a big shopping mall parking lot to camp for the night and think things over. There were still a few people coming and going, but mostly the lot was clearing out. Buster climbed up and sat on Ol' Blue's cab, chewing on a pepperoni stick while he took it all in.

It was exciting, with bright lights and the noisy chatter of passing groups of oddly dressed strangers. But there was a disappointing familiarity too. It seemed he was always on the outside looking in, and he knew it'd be the same anywhere.

He started thinking of Destiny again, trying to imagine her life and where she might be, but then he shook his head at such self-indulgent nonsense. There were just a few cars left in the big lot now, and it was about time to lay out his bedroll. He'd have to get an early start in the morning if he was ever to find the meaning of life.

He was watching two girls who'd been standing by a car for quite a while, as they occasionally looked down into a storm drain grate next to the driver's door. They started arguing quietly, gesturing in his direction. Finally they walked over and asked if maybe he could help them. Buster had the face of a generic "Wanted" poster, and he knew the desperation it must've taken to approach him.

Both girls were dolled up in dresses and feminine decoration. They were nervous and the gist of their situation tumbled out in two-part harmony. Which gist was that they were sisters, Faith and Joy, eighteen and seventeen, and they were late to Faith's wedding rehearsal: which she was driving her fiancé's car and had dropped the key down the storm sewer grate, and which she didn't want him to know she was so careless, and so which of course they couldn't call anybody for help.

Buster nodded and said that happened to him all the time, and told them not to worry. The girls walked back to their car and Buster drove Ol' Blue in case they needed tools.

Children: their spirit reminded him of Destiny. In fact, these girls looked and sounded a lot like her too. Of course that was just fanciful thinking. It'd been a long time — over twenty years. He wondered if he'd ever see her again; then he laughed. Darned if the city didn't make for some silly self-important thinking.

When Buster got out to survey the situation, he saw the grate was cast into concrete and paved over with asphalt. He was pondering that when Joy said in a desperate tone, "We were thinking what we really need is a big steel bar."

Buster put on his best dubious expression. "Well, let me see what I got."

It didn't take him long using the sharp end of his bar to chisel away most of the concrete around the edge of the grate. Then he beat open one of the slots far enough to slip the bar into, and pried out the grate without even working up a sweat.

The girls had parked by the back corner of the mall, next to a light post. The big lights let them see the key lying in the muck at the bottom of the hole. Buster figured it was too deep to drop into and still be able to climb back out, and anyway, there was no telling how deep that muck was. He turned to the girls and said, "I'll have to lower one of you down." They looked at the mess at the bottom of the hole, then at their fancy clothing, and set to figuring for a while.

Which was how it came to be that Buster lowered Faith into the hole by her ankles. It could have been embarrassing, but her dress fell forward to cover her face, so modesty was preserved. Joy helped Buster lower himself until he was hanging head-down into the hole too. She sat on his legs with her feet propped against the far side, holding him around his waist as they stretched to where Faith could reach the key without ever getting dirty. It was at that moment, as Buster looked down at the situation, that he saw it — the softly rounded, perfectly symmetrical, meaning of life.

He saw that you had to get below the surface and have something to hold onto before you could find the key. It was all so simple, and he tried to register every nuance of the lesson. When Faith got hold of the key the visual data was reinforced by tactile impressions as he raised her up past him. It was a struggle, but they got it done with an acceptable pretense of dignity. When they were all standing again, both of the girls' attire was still pristine and they were smiling and happy. Buster was bruised and dirty where he'd hung over the edge of the hole and his back hurt horribly, but not enough to mention.

Faith unlocked the car and reached into a box on the back seat, searching through crumpled newspaper packing. She brought

out a tiny sculpture and said, "Mama makes ceramics and we sell them to get by. She says these totems connect us together." Faith pressed the little stylized figure of a white bear into his hand, then she and Joy got in the car to hurry on with their lives.

Chattering and laughing about clothes and silliness, they drove away, leaving a hole behind. Buster had heard how youth was wasted on the young, but he saw how wrong that was. There were no shortcuts and the journey took the endurance of a steel bar. Others might've looked at the irony of years taken to find a purpose and wondered, *is that all there is?* But Buster knew that without the pain in his back he would've missed what was right in front of him.

Faith and Joy would search the world to find what was already in their hearts, but it would find them when they were ready. And since Buster wasn't intellectual enough to suffer deep paths of angst, it was more than enough to return a smile to a face of lines that were worn to that shape anyway. Again he thought of Destiny, but the hole she'd left behind had brightened to a new perspective: Life wasn't found — it was created.

He heard a siren in the background, bringing him back to the now of the city. He'd most likely already seen all there was to see, and he couldn't think of any reason to stay. For that matter, as the siren came closer he couldn't think of any reason not to leave right away. He wondered if some witness might've misconstrued his heroic deed as vandalism. But that was only of passing interest compared to the great lessons of the day, and he shrugged it off and got in Ol' Blue. As they started around the corner of the mall, they almost ran head-on into a police car racing in the other direction. The car swerved and the driver turned to look back.

Buster heard a crash as the car drove in a hole, but the significance didn't penetrate his concentration, as he was figuring out what to tell Betty Potter about the meaning of life. Which he supposed, it was taking part in creation.

And that's just what he decided to remember his wise old daddy had always said.

Chapter 9

Broken Children

Frank took up care for the kid, but it was late fall by the time he traded homelessness for that used-up shack out past the tiny town of Simple. He foraged for useful bits to shingle the numerous holes and cover the broken windows, and worked odd jobs to buy supplies for the winter. That little boy was always underfoot like an ill-fit blessing of second-hand shoes.

Before snow fell they'd fixed the broken old hand-pump on the well, cleaned out the chimney for the little woodstove, piled up firewood, and boarded over the broken north window. For the vacant south window that faced the river and the sun, Frank salvaged a clothes-dryer door with its round glass porthole. He propped it up against the outside of the wall with some sticks and sealed around the edges with mud, while the kid studied his building techniques and made a fort in the brush down by the river.

Most of the one-room shack was occupied by the constantly rotating stock of wet firewood as it dried its way to the stove. Frank said first thing next year they'd make a woodshed and fill it to dry, but the kid worried over not having all that mess of wood inside to make stuff with. He'd never had it so good, and worried about all the poor folks who couldn't afford sticks to play with.

The snow piled up and they'd sled on an old plastic tarp, then go inside to warm up and make cowboy bread. Frank could fry up an occasional rabbit or fish, or the perpetual potatoes, but the bread was the only real recipe he knew: A cup of flour, a teaspoon of baking powder, and half a teaspoon of salt, stirred in the frying pan with enough water to mush it into dough with a somewhat clean hand, then flattened out in enough grease to keep it skidding

around after flipping it once.

Frank would check that the woodstove top was just hot enough to sizzle spit, then fry up the bread. "Golden-brown goodness," he always said, in a tone that got flatter as winter progressed, but the kid never tired of the whole process and thought Frank was a genius.

The nights were long and they'd watch the firelight from the vent in the stove and try to guess when it was hot enough to sizzle spit, while inventing games where whoever could think up the last rule was always the winner. With little else for distraction, Frank would open the stove door for more light and read out loud from a bag of magazines they'd rescued from the dump. Some were hardly appropriate, but the kid took to reading on his own with such affinity for his age that Frank realized the boy had been three years old as long as he'd known him, which was going on two years. He declared a birthday and almost ruined his frying pan trying to invent a cake from some dried berries.

Frank reached into the bottom of his old duffle-bag and pulled out a medal with a little silver star in the center and "FOR GALLANTRY IN ACTION" engraved in the back. He gave it to the kid saying, "Freedom means taking a stand."

Such matters were lately on Frank Dillard's mind. There'd been a visit by some government folks who'd come to say he and the kid were living too poor. Frank had patiently tended their assumptions until he fatigued and told them to leave, saying, "Life is something you build for yourself."

Frank's soft edges had long since worn away, but their anger over rejection proved he was right: They were only interested in control. He knew he'd scared them with the insanity of not wanting to be like them, and it was only a matter of time before they'd poke around to find an excuse to take the kid. He did all he could to get ahead of the process, but the urgent pace wore him away. Frank climbed beyond the limits of his failed health until his jagged spirit continued up the sky.

#

Time falls on Turkey Ridge, and flushes debris down to follow itself through easy erosion, but the lives less traveled each make their own way up the horizon. Some people don't believe in ghosts, some people don't even believe in people, but that kid believed, and was haunted by the trouble his being had caused. On

moonless nights he searched for a way back up Turkey Ridge and the sides of time, navigating by black horizons against gray skies.

He felt his way past branches and roots and the mazes of down trees, past rocks and holes and cliffs, through sounds of tiny animals scurrying, or the electric sense of big animals skulking. As he searched for a place where life and time merge and the vessel is insignificant, he developed a rare acceptance for the unknown that reached beyond darkness and spilled into daytime adventures. Years upon years.

He eventually bought back the home where he'd buried that Silver Star, not to dig up memories, but to define a shape to his world, like working a jigsaw puzzle from the edges in. The first thing he did was to clear the brush from around the boundaries of the property, cutting branches from a big willow tree to poke in the ground and mark the lines. Every one of those willow sticks took root and thrived. It was just more brush to cut and he shook his head in disgust, but he waited until ridiculous irony came to knowing: A spirit might rest in such a place.

Years upon years. As that living fence spread roots beyond itself, the kid fit the pieces together and became a force of life for anyone in the vicinity, and the legend of his exuberant indifference to anything outside his own spirit grew.

Everyone of convenient direction tracked his whereabouts in the weather reports on the bulletin board down at Potter's General Store. News of his current state of mind altered more plans than droughts or hail storms, but he found acceptance with a few difficult folks who kept the direction of their spirit regardless of which way the wind blew.

Such folks were strange and stubborn and true good friends. Either from knowing the other side of difficulties, or from the scars that paid the way, they showed the kid by example how to make the most of things that mattered and the least of things that didn't, and to always keep the direction of his purpose. When Chief Leroy White-Bear made him an honorary member of his tribe, the kid received the clan name of Spirit-Warrior; and he smiled as he envisioned war paint and screaming raids on haunting specters.

So he had a tribe and a few friends and that should have been enough, but he still searched the night, years upon years . . .
. . . and still searches, for a path through the darkness.

It's different tonight. Dew settles the smell and the sound, clouds shut off the sky, and the horizon disappears. His mind is alive with disconnected meanings, beyond manipulation of external senses. He strains for the feel of the night, but it fades away.

Something is there. He's not sure how he knows — whether from an unconscious sense, or from a sensory void that has to be occupied, but something is there. He searches his path until all meaning is gone, then he stops. He's never stopped before. He touches the axe that's always sheathed at his side, and waits.

He shouts his existence at the silence, and the vague persistent echo fades until he's gone. Vague, but persistent — fragments of memory fading away. He's walked the edge of knowing for years, but never found where nightmares of unseen terror hide. Now he's there, and freedom means taking a stand.

Giant ghosts of darkness tear through him and disappear in the first silhouettes of predawn, as birds wake to the chill dew and new air. Soft colors fill in the shapes, then sunrise, and grief rips the back of his throat like a part of him gone missing. It is.

He hears voices, like remnants of forgotten dreams, but then he focuses on the direction and realizes the words are actually coming from somewhere outside his own head. He perks up and looks around, exhausted but strangely alive. When he gets home maybe he'll go shake folks up a bit and spread some life around.

The clouds that so blackened the night are falling apart and the rising sun casts clear shadows and new meaning. So he isn't lost, he just doesn't know where he's gotten to. It would help in the process of choosing his path, to know where it leads. He takes a heading on where he heard those voices, and goes to ask . . .

. . . and it's the same old romantic story, told a thousand times. Their eyes lock and a world of meaning passes in a single glance — she's peeing behind a bush and shouts "Get out of here!"

He's amazed at how their thoughts are linked together, and says, "That's just why I stopped. I seem to be lost and I was wondering if you could tell me where the here is that I need to get out of. I guess I got turned around walking last night."

She needs to stand to pull up her overalls, and he isn't moving. "If you don't get out of here I'm gonna scream."

He senses her distress and asks, "Are you lost too?"

She mutters something he can't quite make out, then with great dignity stands and shoulders the straps. "I was just talkin' with my daddy a minute ago. He's still around here somewhere, and he's gonna shoot your butt off."

She's no child, and concerned, he asks, "You seem a bit old to need your Daddy. Are you addled?"

She holds her chin up. "What was you walkin' 'round in the dark for? Don't you know that's stupid?"

He turns to face the new sun. "Well, I like the shootin' stars. Besides, my daddy always said you have to walk in the darkness to see the light."

As the sunshine reaches under the brim of his dented cowboy hat, her expression brightens with recognition and it's hard to maintain anger, but she has momentum. "Firstly, that's dumb. And secondly, I know you Buster Dillard, and you never had no real actual daddy nobody knows of." She immediately regrets and anger drops away, but the words hang heavy in the air.

He looks into her eyes, lingering a moment as he realizes. "Sheesh, you're little Destiny White-Bear. My path leads to you." He wants to say more. He wants to say how a girl with sparkling eyes that saw the world through all its layers had been the beginning and end of all his dreams, but those voices had come from outside his head. There was still more to life than dreams.

Instead he says, "Well, if this is Leroy White-Bear's place, I know where I am. I reckon I'll find my own way." He turns and walks off, keeping the low morning sun behind him.

#

Destiny's thoughts follow Buster. *My path leads to you.* What a strange thing to say — but that was the Buster she remembered from a lifetime ago. He'd always been his own direction, but she'd wondered at his rooted perspective. He hadn't seemed to even know there was a whole other world out there. Now that she'd seen it though, she wondered if he might not be better off. After all, here she was back in Simple, needing her Daddy.

22 years — and Leroy White-Bear still held to the old ways and hard lines, but Destiny's life had come full circle and she knew those boundaries meant home. They were on an early morning hunt, walking separate routes to get the deer moving. She'd done this

with him many times as a child long ago. She'd hated it, crying when he made a kill.

Now it's just a part of being, and she finally understands why he brought her out here so many times, and now again. To Leroy White-Bear, meanings weren't found in plastic wrappers, and truth wasn't a lesson learned, but a discipline to maintain. Destiny was home and had maintenance to do.

She hadn't known what to expect when she saw her father again. For a long moment he'd looked at her deeper than she'd known in a long time, since back when they'd shared their own invented world. She didn't flinch or turn away as he looked into her heart until he found what he searched for, something she herself had lost. "You are here," he finally said, and hugged her close so she couldn't see his tears. He didn't ask one question.

Life takes time.

Maybe Buster needed the acceptance and boundaries of a daddy too. She regretted her clumsy words, but an apology would have been worse. Buster had always looked deeper than that. She knew the depth of searching that came to walking alone at night; trying to know the language of stars, and wondering at life behind the lights of houses forever far away. He'd asked if she was lost too. Maybe she was, but sometimes you have to leave the path to see it, walking in darkness to see the light, persisting beyond clumsiness. Buster wasn't so bad — just simple.

Destiny resumes walking the loop her father had set her on, passing through memories of her childhood playground, and acceptance of simple things. They were always the hardest, and always the best. It was all so different from the world of complicated intellectuals she'd known in Bigg City. Their understanding always stopped at the end of their convenience.

Destiny looks up to see she's sitting on a rock, daydreaming. The rock doesn't fit her the way it used to, but her whole body smiles in recognition, seven years old again. This had been a favorite place and she'd played here for hours, lost in her own world. She'd made traps of willow limbs to catch up all the squirrels she could, then quick before they chewed their way to freedom, she bopped them unconscious with a burl on the end of a stick.

It was the only way she could get the ignorant savages to hold still while she sewed on dresses and overalls made of scraps.

A few didn't wake up, and she dressed them with special care and started a small cemetery. She'd been sure the others were grateful though — it was all for their own good, fitting them in the clothing and occupations to best serve their community.

She'd seen them competing for all the same things and it didn't seem fair. Squirrels shouldn't just wander about doing as they pleased. She built them a tiny village where they could share everything, but it never caught on.

When she finally set them free she was ashamed of mistakes, but her father said, "It takes courage to let the trappings go and build your own life."

He lived the example, building a base of acceptance to commit to his own spirit. Destiny built her life in the freedom of his boundaries, until her mother took her away to a pre-made life in Bigg City.

Destiny was taken from the commitment of faith to the convenience of hope, and those sparkling eyes that saw the world through all its layers had to close for a while. She woke up one day abandoned by smiling promises — a broken child looking down at two little girls of her own, with years of rebuilding to pay and not even time to cry.

#

But time still falls on Turkey Ridge. And life still climbs the horizon. Frank Dillard became the energy of life he gave away. And Leroy White-Bear became a base to gather for leaps of faith. Broken children mend in the Great Spirit's light. After years of searching for ghosts of the past, Buster found forgiveness where Frank still walks the trails of dreams. And after years of building life in the present, Destiny found acceptance where Leroy still walks the depth of meaning. Buster and Destiny are separate ends of the same path, a base to gather for the greatest leap of all.

But life takes time.

Chapter 10

The Tree House

Is darkness the color between time and space,
do stars see the world with humanity's face,
are they dreams from which we were torn?
Does life have an essence beyond where we are,
does faith have the power to light up a star,
did we know before we were born?

— from "An Ignorant Man," the journal of Buster Dillard

If forever is only longer than living memory, then the shack by the river on Dark Hollow Road has been there forever. It's a solid landmark, but in recent history few residents venture more than an anxious passing glance. Buster lives there.

Buster Dillard is his own landmark: a fault-line in the smooth geology of civilization, a rude answer to questions nobody asked. During his tenure, the shack's exterior has slowly evolved into an amazing quilt of porcelain colors. The siding consists of sixty-four doors from old washing machines and dryers, with their little round portholes and random designer hues. The front door came complete with latch and hinges from a huge old refrigerator. Chrome car bumpers cap the corners of the walls and the peak of the roof, and ivy grows along the seams. When it reflects the sunrise through the morning fog off the river, that simulated gingerbread house looks for all the world like the end of a rainbow.

Back when Buster bought the place, he was mostly interested in that big Golden Willow that towers over the brush along the riverbank. Every spring, the sanctuary of its limbs becomes an island in the floods that annually cover everything else below the shack. As soon as Buster moved in, he started to clear the brush down there for some youthfully energetic project, but it soon overgrew visibility of any further ambition. In fact, over the years that impenetrable mass of bushy willow and wild rose has crept up the hill and enveloped the back side of his tiny dwelling. Under the canopy of that now-huge tree, the thicket is a two-acre addition extending to the river.

So the shack on Dark Hollow Road abides, but at this end of forever it might appear Buster has soaked up too much of that lazy river. He disappears through his "Frost Queen" front door and only comes out to make a meager living or terrorize the faint-hearted with the awesome force of natural character, routinely flooding over civilized boundaries. This last week has been a flood. Buster has a toothache with mind-altering fever.

Folks in the little community of Simple aren't insulated enough to look down on those who can't afford perfect store-bought smiles. The gaps in their teeth show an acceptance of unembellished reality. Many keep their own special pliers, tucked away from uncomfortable notice, but always ready to ease the painful passage of time. Buster is usually oblivious to painful passages, but he suffers an inexplicable phobia regarding anyone messing about in his mouth with pliers.

He's suffering apparitions through a fevered haze, but the fellowship of the loyal friends of Buster, otherwise known as the Yee-Haw Council, knows the world will turn inside-out before anyone gets at that tooth. The council usually only meets as the beer budget allows, but they called a special emergency session to examine the problem, making sure to have Effie bring a supply of her eighty-proof lemonade to tide them over until they could replenish the treasury.

All of the Yee-Haw Council except Chief Leroy and his daughter Destiny are adopted members of Leroy's invented Yee-Haw tribe. Destiny's the only natural born Yee-Haw, but she's only recently returned from a 22-year sabbatical over in Bigg City, so was relegated to keeping the minutes. As the others voiced their

concerns, a suggestion of anesthetizing Buster by cranial blunt-force trauma was barely voted down, then when it was mentioned that he might someday review the record, the formality of documentation was dropped for the session.

Holler said Buster had told him that very morning of being out all night, killing ghosts and demons. He'd been in a seemingly cogent phase of his intermittent delirium, holding his axe while solemnly telling of slaying terrible giants and "finding fair lady in yon woods."

At that, Chief Leroy favored his daughter with a knowing look. Fair Destiny'd had her own run-in with Buster that morning. She busily studied the floor design of the Yee-Haw cultural center — an old houseboat Chief Leroy had purchased with a grant sent from some fool Eastern museum, to preserve the ancient culture of the Yee-Haw tribe. The boat sat on dry ground anchored to a tree, for safe cultural preservation even through flood season.

Like Buster, Holler had once made his own excursion into the less traveled reaches of the mind, and knew the territory well. His characteristic voice boomed out, "We must end this madness before he takes an axe to every windmill in the county. That tooth has got to come out, and I suggest a hearty tranquilizing dose of whiskey."

Jack exclaimed, "Here-here!" and did a quick-draw of his hip flask, taking the prescribed hearty dose before adding, "But as fer Buster, we've done that'n before and he'll see it coming this time."

Mable glared at Jack for having hidden the flask. She was the only woman ever to be coarse enough to find a starting point for civilizing the legendarily crude Simple Jack, but he still found his way to minor liberties. The meeting bogged down until Chief Leroy let it slip that Buster had announced intentions towards the fair Destiny, and Mable volunteered her as bait.

"Destiny can get us through his door and we'll all toast their nuptials with Effie's special lemonade. I know he done swore it off, but he can't refuse ceremonial hospitality at his own wedding, and we all know Buster can't handle his lemonade."

The plot was met with almost unanimous approval. The only dissenting voice was drowned out by the enthusiasm of the others, and the meeting was adjourned for the trek to Buster's

place. The smallish Destiny was hesitantly swept along in their midst. She was the youngest of the Yee-Haws and didn't want to be disrespectful, but still . . .

They all piled into Holler's old van for the two miles through the dust of Dark Hollow Road, to rescue Buster. Destiny had told her father of meeting Buster that morning — of how even though they hadn't seen each other since she was twelve, he'd said his path led to her. Chief Leroy had only nodded, saying, "Follow your own path." Which surprisingly, this one seemed to fit her steps, but still . . .

Effie and Mable comforted her with feminine solidarity. Effie said, "It won't be so bad. Here, have some lemonade."

Destiny caressed the totem that hung from her necklace. Chief Leroy had ceremoniously presented it to her when she was ten years old, as he'd said, "To remember what you already know." The willow image was a reminder that each branch must make its own way — only then could it grow back to the *Great Spirit*. Touching the symbol of life at her chest became a comforting habit in the following years, but as Holler parked next to Buster's truck, *Ol' Blue*, in front of that resplendent shack of many colors, Destiny was losing nerve. She said, "I don't think we'll all fit in that little place."

The others just laughed and Jack said, "Wiggle your tail girl, that tooth won't wait forever." Mable glared at him as he pushed Destiny to the front, while Holler pulled a rope that hung from a pulley under the chrome-plated eave of the shack. An impossibly far-off sounding bell rang, and the wedding party waited: the bride, the father, the witnesses, two tin cups and a jug.

When Buster finally opened the door, Chief Leroy pushed in with Destiny in front of him. Effie filled the two cups, handing one to Buster and the other to Chief Leroy, as Leroy said, "Congratulations! My daughter tells me you've pledged your troth." He clinked the tin cups together and heartily raised his to his mouth and emptied it. The startled Buster teetered on the fevered edge of madness, but always a gentleman, followed suit.

Jack took the cup from Chief Leroy, and Effie refilled both as Jack said, "Well, I've known you since you's frog high; you're 'bout like my own son. You gotcha a good'n. Bottoms up!" He drained his cup and Buster hesitated, but did the same.

Mable snatched the cup from Jack, saying, "Well that was just pathetic. You've known the boy dang near all his life and all you can say is, 'You gotcha a good'n.' I declare, men are just useless. Let me show you how it's done —"

The medicine had already removed some of Buster's fever-induced grogginess, and not yet replaced it with alcoholic fogginess. He interjected, "Hey, wait a minute —"

"BUSTER!" Mable cut back in, "Don't you interrupt your elders like that. That's pathetic. I declare, I'll take a willow switch to you. Now where was I? Oh yes; Buster, I've known you for a spell now and it's been worth my time. The light in Destiny's eyes tells me it's gonna get plumb noteworthy." Mable raised her cup and drank it empty, and Buster sheepishly followed.

The entire Yee-Haw tribe had entered the shack. Effie toasted Buster next, but Destiny barely heard them as she realized they were all standing in the center of a space that seemingly couldn't exist within its outwardly small, albeit fantastical, dimensions. In fact, they were right where the back wall should have been. The actual room extended beyond normal architectural limits into living willow, woven together until it had grown into a nearly solid extension of reality. Wild rose and ivy filled in, whimsically reaching inside to explore the older portion of the room.

Effie smoothly managed the jug to give herself only a splash to Buster's full dose. They drank to mutual friends and enemies, and then it was Holler's turn.

The living addition seemed to have no limits. A few stray tendrils hung from a ceiling that grew from the floor not in walls, but in twisted arches opening to long tunnels of green. Destiny realized one of these became a covered footbridge leading out into that huge tree back by the river. Another tunnel became a path carpeted in moss and wild strawberry, leading down to where it flooded every spring. Destiny again touched the willow totem hanging between her breasts — her symbol of life was Buster's home.

The long-winded Holler was still toasting: ". . . so that was Buster's vision quest. His revelation was: 'Destiny is the mother of Faith and Joy'. It reminds me of the time . . ."

The mention of Faith and Joy startled Destiny back to herself. Just thirty-four years old and never married, she had two

grown daughters — Faith and Joy. She'd only told her father, but Buster's vision of her secret wasn't as surprising as the feeling of acceptance it gave her. It was like an inside-out dream, with life only a backdrop to fairy-tale reality. She remembered something Buster liked to say: "It's all one."

Holler was enjoying his speech, and looked disappointed when the groom started keeling over. Jack and Chief Leroy caught Buster and set him in a chair while Mable pulled out her pliers. The offending molar was loose, but took some twisting before she plucked it away. Effie assisted, saying, "Puts me in mind of prying a fence staple out of an old juniper post."

Jack leaned Buster forward over a pan and let him bleed, while Mable searched for something to temporarily pack the tooth-hole with. Jack donated a well-used grease-rag, but she threw it back in his face, saying, "What are you, an idiot? Men are just pathetic. What, you never heard of germs?"

Blushing a bit, Effie handed Mable a fresh, daintily laced handkerchief she'd hidden in one of the pockets of her heavy jeans. Mable raised her eyebrows at the frills, but didn't say anything as she ripped off a segment and soaked it with lemonade, then Jack tipped Buster back and she tamped the tooth hole tight.

Jack grimaced, saying, "That dang Shaw. That tooth should've come out long ago."

Mable spoke the confusion they all felt. "What are you talkin' 'bout, you crazy old fool?"

Jack placed all of the disdain for her ignorance that he could muster into his tone. "Well, them Shaws what kept Buster at that foster home next to Gwen and Philip's apple orchard. 'Course it was Pruitt's orchard back then. Ol' Zeno was a genius for growin' anything, that's where Buster learnt." He turned to Leroy. "You 'member that foster home though, Chief — just 'cross the road from you, barely a mile.

"Of course Buster got here with real folks 'fore he was orphaned: I mean his ma and Frank Dillard. Frank traded the old car they was livin' in fer this place. That ol' crook Jerry Pointe was broke down and desperate, and drove that car out of here just ahead of a lynch mob. Anyhow, Buster's ma wasn't one to settle down. Next day, she stood right out there by the road and waved down the first dust-cloud to roll along. Never even looked back.

Left little Buster with Frank."

Jack looked up smugly to make sure Mable saw he had center-stage. "I gave Frank work at scrappin' cars a bit, and Zeno worked him at the orchard. Neither of us could afford it, but that Frank was a good man. I 'member that next flood, him talkin' 'bout ever'thing washin' away 'round this big willow back here like it always does. Said it floated off little Buster's fort, but the kid had lit up when they planned a tree house for him. Frank died that spring though. That's how the Shaws came by Buster. They sent him to school, but school sent him back. Said he was slow, 'cause of his momma's druggin'. Shoot, Frank had Buster readin' when he was five. More likely he was just too contrary to follow a bunch of fools tellin' him how to think."

Buster was slowly flowing out of his chair. Holler caught him under the arms and eased him down against a wall, saying, "Well, I doubt he's contrary enough to fall off of the floor."

Jack loudly cleared his throat and continued his story. "Anyhow, whenever one of them foster kids needed special care, one of them Shaws'd go get licensed to do it theirselves, so's the guvment'd pay fer their expertise. They hit the care jackpot with Buster. Shaw become a special educator. Had other skills too. Even treated Buster's broke jaw that time he's 'bout seven. 'Course it started out only a sore tooth. Reckon that's when Buster got so shy 'bout dentistry."

Jack paused and sniffed the air with a thoughtful expression before adding, "Say now, bein's it's Buster's weddin' day, maybe we oughta splash him down with some water. He smells like he's had a few hard weeks."

Effie discreetly took Destiny by the arm and led her through one of the leafy arches in the back wall, saying, "Let me show you around." But they were still within earshot as the others fell to squabbling.

"I'm not washing him; it was your idea — you wash him."

"I ain't washin' him, I's jist makin' a observation."

"As Chief I am only responsible for spiritual needs."

"Idiots! I'll do it. Just y'all git. Sheesh, men are pathetic."

Effie and Destiny followed the living tunnel until they stopped at the middle of a covered footbridge. They heard a rush of heavy steps going down a lower path. The bridge swayed to the rhythm of the tree it led to, a steady beat separated by years of

maturity from the younger branches that danced in the lightest breeze. Destiny said she could even hear a pulse of life.

Effie smiled. "Well yes, in a way." She pointed to the floor of their living tunnel. "Buster drug some abandoned old logging cables home from the woods to make the bottom of the bridge. It joins the tree such that it sways in the slightest wind, and there's a line running off the side that works the hand-pump on the well. That's the pulse you hear, it irrigates everything above the river." She pointed out some tiny waterlines hidden in the weave of branches. "See — the different willow joins here and the ivy fills in to keep it green all year."

Effie considered for a minute before continuing, "You must know that Buster amounts to more than we've seen lately. We women may be bound by nature to more earthly concerns, but for men reality's just a problem to be solved so they can float away on dreams. Look at your father — we're only here together because he dreamed it first. My Howard — he hoots and carries on so everyone calls him Holler, but he dwells on things most people don't even see. And Jack — he seems crude and practical, but he starved for years paying taxes on that old hotel when he could've made good salvage money tearing it down, and then he just gave it away so we could have a place to bring life to the community. They all dream, but they know sublime things because they do ridiculous things, and they all look up to Buster. He solves problems so well he can live a dream."

They listened to the water pumping as the bridge swayed in the filtered green light of a setting sun. The smell of the river carried earthy memories of Destiny's childhood, and she could barely discern where memory ended and Buster's dream began. She wondered out loud, "Why would anyone hide all of this?" But she knew, it was like Jack with the hotel: Ordinary people couldn't afford the taxes on this much care, nor even permission for such dreams.

Effie knew too, but as she looked at Destiny, the edge of her smile spoke a different perspective. "I think it's a matter of acceptance."

Destiny's voice grew distant. "All of those foster kids were strange. It mightn't have been their fault, but it's true. Me too. I grew up in a dream, but the values were real. I didn't fit in the city. I was just a pet minority, an orphan from another world.

I didn't value them enough to belong there, and I didn't value myself enough to come back here. And Buster — abandoned so many times, including by me, but always so complete. Why would he accept me?"

Effie touched Destiny's totem. "You see Buster as complete because you complete him."

They walked on and the swaying diminished as the bridge tunnel entered a dome of twisted limbs. The massive tree passed up through the center of a railed-off opening, where spiral stairs descended around the ring of heavy branches that held the floor. It was years of care woven together — the stairs, the railing, the floor, and the wall that dropped umbrella-like from the next ring of branches far overhead. It was all one.

The woven limbs had grown tightly together with few leaves inside, mostly of ivy reaching through the round windows. It flowered like no ivy should, from differing varieties grafted to the rope-like vines. Looking back through one of the windows, Destiny could barely see the mound of the bridge tunnel gently swaying in the rest of the green. A maze of paths wove through a meadow and under arbors of wild rose to a small beach at the river, where brush hid the entrance to a narrow canal curving back in towards the tree. By leaning out the window, Destiny could see the canal lead to a massive carved canoe protruding from one of many living arches supporting the heavy perimeter of the tree. The canoe had a mermaid figurehead — the face a haunting mirror, though the rest seemed rather optimistic.

The men were down there in a clearing, starting a fire in a ring of rocks. Effie joined Destiny at the ivy-fringed window and they watched the rosy dusk ease into darkness, and listened to the conversation of men bound less to earth than to dreams.

Holler was on a knee, using his hands to deflect soft breath under smoking twigs. Jack was fretting over Buster, saying, "It ain't so bad chewin' around a few missin' teeth as havin' them fancy folks look down on you. They's all so open-minded superior to anyone differe'n't."

The fire flared up and Holler added larger kindling before standing, popping a stiff knee loose on the way up. He looked at Jack and shook his head sadly. "They just can't accept the example of anyone caring for life on their own. They can't accept anything, so they're victims of everything, spending their entire

lives paying off governments or churches or schools or unions or any puffed-up expert or pompous organizer they can find — all for absolution from their soul's own judgment. Then you come along and slap them in their shame with the audacity to live your own life."

Jack and Leroy looked up and squinted sideways at Holler for a moment, before Jack spit and said, "Yep, my words ezactly."

Holler grinned and tried to rise from the shame of his educated vernacular. "They bully everyone with their whining and they hate you for knowing what they are, but it's like Buster always says, 'Choose your problems or you'll run out of kick before they run out of butt'."

Jack nodded, but he was looking at the first early star as he said, "Maybe so, but someone gots to care about life. Guess I's just worryin' on Buster."

Mable had come down the path just in time to renew affirmations with her beloved Jack: "Well that's just pathetic. I swear you carry on worse'n a ol' woman. Buster's doin' fine, sleepin' like a baby. Jaw gonna be swole a while though. Wish't I coulda got in there sooner."

Chief Leroy idly poked at the fire with a stick, opening up reluctant kindling as he prodded reluctant memory, knowing there was more to the story. "It was dark at that Shaw place. I tried to know them, but they'd scurry away. Those kids were quiet, almost silent — not normal when you think about it. I'm shamed I didn't. Must be over twenty years now since they left."

Jack rubbed his jaw to loosen up the memory. "That's 'bout right, but Buster — now he took to not bein' there much when he was just little. When apple pies weren't in season at Pruitt's he'd come mess around over here, flingin' things with a catapult I helped him make. Several times after the county foreclosed on this place they had it 'bout sold, but the buyers always backed out; said it was haunted, with all manner of foul stuff fallin' outa' the sky. Other times Buster'd come harass me and stay at the scrap-yard. Said I'd magic to bring throwed away things to life.

"Time he got eighteen, Buster went to Shaw to get some paper signed off; what the county said he needed to buy this place back proper, 'cause they'd stoled it fer back-taxes fair and square. Shaw laughed, said it was him had turned in Frank for not

raisin' Buster rich enough, so's to git the kid hisself fer the care money. He knew Frank Dillard didn't have no lawful papers on Buster and weren't his real daddy. Shoot, Frank was like any man — just needed to make his own way and have somethin' to build. He was makin' his way and buildin' Buster, when Shaw got the welfare to come after him."

Holler laid some larger sticks on the flaming kindling while Jack sifted out the years.

"Frank said he'd wandered all about, but never found anything until he stopped. Worked hisself to death with pneumony that spring, tryin' to get rich enough to 'dopt Buster 'fore they could take him. Lived 'fore he died though. Had a spirit wide-open, like your Destiny. Which, funny thing: she was borned just a few seasons after Frank died. Sometimes I wonder where life goes." Jack lost himself in the memories for a minute, until Mable pressed up from behind to softly ground him back to earth.

"Anyhow, when Buster went to Shaw to get his docaments they got in quite a tussle. I helped patch Buster up after; could tell it'd took some doin', but he got them papers and took a few extries fer hisself. Shaw disappeared and some figgered Buster done him under, but the guilt was writ all over them papers and he mighta just lit out. Either way, nobody cared to look fer him. His Missus boo-hooed a respectable while 'fore she took off. Them kids went ever' which way. Had some awful stories." Jack looked over at Holler with meaning. "I shoulda helped Shaw disappear long before, but like you said — I hid my soul's own judgment behind them experts. Maybe Buster's right. Maybe some problems are worth choosin'."

The fire was blazing and Chief Leroy laid some mountain mahogany on. It was dark enough now for the pungent new smoke to glow in the firelight, weaving through a spell of silence. Holler finally shook it off and said, "Well, if we're going to have a wedding I better see about getting some lights on."

Jack said, "Guess you know, anybody that wants electric out here gots to make their own. Buster runs his off Ol' Blue's extry batteries. Charges up when he drives about. Likely run 'em flat this last week, loopy like he's been."

Holler answered, "Oh, I can get it myself," but then smiled at his foolishness as he realized Jack hadn't been offering help anyway. He headed up the willow tunnel that led to the shack,

as Jack took a seat in one of those potted woven-willow chairs that Buster was always making to sell.

The mahogany burned to glowing coals. Chief Leroy dropped another piece on and stood eyes-closed directly in the smoke for a minute, then settled in across from Jack. The youngsters could take care of things.

The fire softly illuminated Destiny and Effie where they still surveyed the scene from the window above. Mable watched for the reaction as she said, "I's thinkin' 'bout those impending nuptials: Buster ain't 'actly at his best, and Destiny might have some better overalls she could throw on. We could let 'em off the hook a day or so." The negative reaction at the window was barely perceptible, as was Mable's smile.

Chief Leroy waved a hand around the scene as he said, "This is real. Destiny's mother and I had a great celebration of a wedding, but the meaning fell apart like a dream in the morning. When Hope took Destiny away, I died a little. This is real"

They all watched their thoughts in the fire as it fell to a new position, popping and sparking a bit before settling in. Buster surprised them as he emerged from the surrounding darkness, saying, "Sheesh, I juss had the mos' craziest dream."

Effie steered Destiny down to sit beside Buster, where he'd dropped to posterior level, but was still precariously balanced. She placed one of Destiny's arms around him, saying, "Best hold on tight, else he falls in that fire." Then to Buster, "Now you be good. You're getting married in a bit."

Effie joined Mable, who said, "Maybe we best set some lines out — catch up some catfish to throw in them coals."

Buster closed his eyes as he rocked his head side to side, then opened them again and looked around. He said, "Well, sheesh."

Jack and Leroy were delving into the wisdom of the ages. Leroy was saying, ". . . so the energy of freedom brings folks to the Great Spirit."

Jack considered the fire for a minute before answering. "It takes a rebel to follow spirit. Maybe creation needs the spirit of individuals as much as individuals need the energy of freedom."

Leroy smiled slowly as it came together. "Ah — the three; creation, individuals, and freedom, are the base of the Great Spirit: a tripod. In fact I remember now, the ancient Yee-Haw

wisdom says, 'A tee-pee will not stand on two legs'."

Jack nodded. "Yup, seems that's how I 'member it too."

The fire sparked as it shifted again. Destiny was leaning into Buster like she belonged there. He rubbed his sore jaw, blinked his eyes, and said, "Well, sheesh."

The lights came on — myriad tiny Christmas lights sparkling from hidden places, as wondrous for faith as for guidance. There in the acceptance between colors of light, Destiny was ten years old, her father imploring her to believe what she knew then into the rest of her life. And she was twelve, taken by disbelief to another world. And fourteen, adrift. And all the years after, building Faith and Joy and bridging her way back. Her spirit wove through her tribe in a circle of energy.

Chief Leroy performed the ceremony, as he had for Jack and Mable, and most recently for Holler and Effie, in the ancient Yee-Haw tradition. Buster stood with Destiny, rock-steady as the earth tumbled around them, and they promised the discipline of building love each day. He looked directly into her as only her father had ever done, but his swollen jaw gave him a comically leering expression as he said, "It's about time you got home." It made her laugh, and he smiled — a beautifully crooked smile.

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