ART BÉBÉ™

CHOCKY'S COME HOME

Frank Weissenborn
+ Guy Browning

Do adults recreate their childhood? What sense can we make of the past? Can we ever be free of it?

Chocky's Come Home explores these themes and others: alienation, despair, life without vision. But the story of William Gordon, who reaches adolescence in a small mid-western town where hopelessness is endemic, reminds one that the mind of a child is different. They see things adults do not. They go places adults do not. They retain a sense of wonder and love of life. Their visions are unique. And when William meets Spiro, unique visions become reality.

Frank Weissenborn has written a story that touches realities other than those we meet every day. But where the spirit of humanity still shines through.

Clare Coney

Chocky's Come Home

Written by
Frank Weissenborn

with fine art by
Guy Browning

ART BÉBÉ™

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ONE

JEFFERSON

With his car half within a roadside trench, King climbed from its side, and upon the macadam, stared out. The road unerringly followed an unbroken fence line; snow lay everywhere in light drifts over acres of field, and against an expanse of grey sky a lone crow beat a forlorn cry. King frowned, but saw that at least the service station was not far.

It looked new, stood sharp to the ancient plain. White iron girders, topped by a zigzag of white Vs, roofed the gas pumps. Perspex, in the red and yellow of the Incosoll Petroleum Company, rimmed the flat roof of the station shop, diner and garage. He wished he were somewhere else, felt as if he stood in a void. He hunched forward, tucked the ends of his scarf within his old, black leather jacket, and then with hands thrust deep into his jeans pockets, walked along the road feeling the burn of frozen air in his lungs.

Fifty or so yards from the station, he kicked at a loose stone that a car had flicked onto the road. It bounced away in jagged leaps, landed in a pool of slush. The lights were on in the diner and station shop, but he couldn't see anyone through their glass fronts. He wondered if they would be open this early, then reminded himself: of course they would be, there was always someone on the road. A shadow moved in the station. Someone had seen him. King drew his hands from his pockets, rubbed them together. He wanted to appear casual, at ease, to avoid any unnecessary questions. He huffed into the air, bent forward and took a few jogging steps.

It was a boy. On his head he wore a yellow company cap, tilted slightly to one side. As the shop door slid open, King stopped jogging, slapped his hands together. Behind the counter, the boy swallowed and stepped back.

"Can I help you?"

King coughed into his hand. "My car broke down, short distance up the highway. Do you think maybe someone could take a look?"

The boy bent awkwardly towards a microphone and clicked a switch. "Jason, we got a drifter up here." He looked back up then added, "Reckons you ought to look at his car."

King tugged down the brim of his grey Fedora and stared around the shop. Fluorescent tubes lit a white ceiling and were reflected off mirror and chrome. Between banks of shelving, advertising placards suspended from nylon line showed the faces of smiling, clean-faced youths in yellow company insignia caps and shirts.

Jason appeared through a door at the back of the shop. Tall, wiry, with sandy hair parted to the side, he took a bite from a jam doughnut and pped his head at King.

"Car broke down, hey?"

King drew in his breath. "That's right."

"Any idea what the problem is?"

"Wheel bearing, maybe?"

Jason swallowed the last of the doughnut, threw the wrapper into a chrome waste tray beside the foot of the counter and then rubbed sugar-coated hands on blue, grease-stained overalls.

"Unusual. Old car?"

"Ford Mustang."

"Phew!" Jason wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "What yah doin' with one of those?"

King stared, without answer.

Jason shook his head and started forward. "We better have a look then." As he passed the counter, the boy grabbed him by the arm, but Jason smiled and shook off the grip. "It's okay, Mike, I trust him." He waved King towards the door. Outside, Jason fished inside the top pocket of his overalls and held a mobile tracer up to the window. A red L.E.D flashed on and off. "We get held up about once a month out here. You soon learn not to trust anyone."

King saw Mike studying a panel and waited as Jason turned into the garage. Towards the highway, a break in the grey clouds revealed a haze of white. Against the sky a green Dodge Strada pulled up by a gas pump, and a balding, fat man in a blue checked suit stepped out and stretched his arms up. King turned back to the garage to see a red Chevrolet pick-up roll to a stop beside him. In the cabin Jason held a steaming foil cup and nodded to indicate the passenger seat. King climbed in.

"Would you like some coffee?"

King reached out his hand and took a sip. He shuddered as the bitter liquid slid down his throat. Jason asked, "Sorry, I don't know your name?"

"King."

"Is that some kind of nickname?"

King drew his shoulders in tight, shook his head.

Jason grinned. "You come up through Harris?"

King handed back the cup and stared through the windshield. By the pumps the fat man stood wiping gas spill from the Strada's fuel cap. A car eased past, turned off and stones pinged sharply under its fender. "No. Walker."

TWO

WALKER

It was a fall Sunday – the air was glassy with cold, the sun barely upon the earth. I held a beam of wood, just light enough for my ten-year-old shoulders, and waited for Dad.

The aviary was coming together, ready now for the birds I was soon to buy from Mr Symons. He was selling up, had become too old for the running of a pet store when no one but me had a reason to buy from it. He would retire to his house, and with Mrs Symons, watch from his back porch the wood rot and cancer of our town.

Dad sawed at a beam, his knee upon it where it lay across two trestles. I shrugged my shoulders to relieve their ache and stepped closer. Dad wore his green-checked wool coat open at his chest and his breath misted as his arm drew back and forth. He rested for a moment, then moved his free hand to the cut to stop it splintering. It broke with a final slow stroke and I brought up the beam I held.

Our house was a white, single-storey timber-frame with a front and back porch and garage. The garage extended past the rear of the house, and onto it Dad had built a shed, running almost the full length of the back yard, where he worked as a carpenter. The yard lay piled with salvaged wood – all neatly stacked and covered with oiled tarp pegged into the lawn – but much was only good for firewood. The best wood Dad kept in the shed. Carpentry didn't pay. Nothing did anymore, but at least it was cheap to use second-hand timber from the derelict buildings around town.

I laid the beam across the trestles. Dad flipped it over and pulled out two bent, rusted nails and then measured it against the other beam. The aviary had become something of a major project. Built up against the rear fence, it had eighteen feet of flight area and a corrugated tin shelter at one end with a concrete floor, where we planned to hang some nesting boxes. We had only to build these two beams into the roof and stretch across the hex chicken wire to finish. Dad picked up the saw. He placed his thumb down over the far side of the pencil line, pressed the saw up against his nail, and with an upward stroke made the guiding cut. I stepped back.

Suddenly I heard a yell from behind the fence at the back of the shed. Dad didn't look up; as he later said, he didn't hear, but I turned and, curious, strained my ears. The yell came again, an excited scream. I ran over, snatching up a crate to stand on, and peered along the lane. There was a kid in baggy, grey trousers, white shirt and a long, blue felt coat with a high collar. His hair was black and stuck up at all angles, and he was doing something with a tin can, holding it to the ground. I yelled and he straightened bolt upright, then ran shrieking down the lane. I looked back to Dad, who was staring at me, and jumped from the crate. Dad shouted as I passed him, but didn't follow.

I stood in the entry to the lane, momentarily confused. The kid was nowhere and I wasn't sure about going down. I stepped carefully forward.

The lane had long been a home to gang kids. It smelled of piss and was littered with syringes and rubbers, buried in weeds or in cracks in the pavement. Poignantly, at its end, a dero had hammered together a shed with timber and tin salvaged from parts of the fence that had fallen. I made my way along, listening, until there was a scuffle from the wrecked Buick by our neighbour's fence. I jumped, startled, then ran forward. The kid was underneath, with his arms crossed over his head. Mud covered his coat sleeves and he trembled. I told him everything was okay and I wouldn't hurt him, but he squirmed further back.

I knew I'd have to crawl in and drag him by his arms. The Buick was rusted through, its doors were missing, and I didn't trust the way its axles sat on blocks, but I bent and squeezed under. I reached him soon enough, even with him moving back all the time, and got hold of one of his arms. He shrieked and thrashed so hard that it took an effort to keep hold. I retreated from under the car, then quickly span onto my backside, braced both my legs against the car body and pulled. He fell onto me with a shriek, scrambled up, and I thought that I had lost him again until I grabbed his coat. With a big holler he tripped and I quickly pinned him against the car.

Tears began to run from huge eyes down his face. He shook and kicked with his legs and it took me a long while to convince him that I wasn't going to hurt him. When he finally stilled, I asked his name and what he'd been doing with the tin can. It seemed to do the trick, as he sniffed and wiped under his nose.

He spoke in one of the oddest voices I had ever heard, a high-pitched stutter as if he wasn't used to talking. He said his name was Spiro, that he was new in town, and he was exploring. The can, he said, helped him to listen to the voices of the lane. The more he talked of the can, the more excited he became. He took the can from the pocket where he'd shoved it. It was open at one end and had what looked like a small diaphragm and transistor down the other end next to a pin-sized hole.

I held the open end to my ear, but heard nothing. Spiro went through his pockets and gave me a soft, blue plastic plug for my other ear. When this didn't help, he took the can back and said the voices were tiny whispers, like someone calling from a hidden place. On Hudson Street, he said, the can talked fast and knew more about what was going on. There was no way I could respond, so I asked him where he lived. When he said the old house on Grey Street, I let myself fall back on my heels.

The Grey Street house was a big timber-frame mansion, much overgrown with vines, and with a willow at the front that hid it from the street. It had been derelict longer than any other house in Walker, and

at school we told ghost stories about it. Naturally I wanted to ask Spiro about the house, but he suddenly sprang up and ran to the end of the lane. Close to where the dero had his shed, he put the can to a knothole in the fence and took a small fan from a side pocket. I caught up with him and watched as he moved the fan in a circle around the hole. The fan went crazy. It spun first one way in a blur, then back the other way.

Spiro's eyes grew big as space, he broke into a huge smile and flapped his arms about. Before I could move, he ran back up the lane and disappeared around the corner.

I chased after him, but couldn't see him anywhere down the road. Back with Dad, red-faced and puffing, I saw him kick a plank of wood and heard Emily, my mom, yell from the kitchen window. I knew then why Dad hadn't come after me. I knew it best not to say anything.

Yes, I have a story to tell. Yet – though I said earlier that when I heard the noise behind the fence, events began – have I begun right? Here, quickly, a little of the past.

Of my mom, while growing up in Salt Lake City with her epileptic and religious zealot father, John Baxter, she'd run from home several times, missed a lot of school, and lived occasionally on the street. Emily knew nothing of her mother, having been told by John that she'd run off after giving birth. As best as I understood it, John was a crazy. He would wake Emily in the middle of the night, ranting, and climb into bed with her; if she were to hide, he'd strap her arms to the bedposts on finding her. Most of his time he spent in a dark room with a large portrait of the Church for Paid Revelation's founder, Ecumenical Bob, and there wrote commentaries with fury and worked passages of Scripture with his own revelations. He did rise in the church, but because of his epilepsy – which resulted in falling frequently in seizures on the doorsteps of people's houses – he came to be an embarrassment to those higher in the church and had to quit Utah. When he left, he abandoned Emily to the street at the age of seventeen, and one year later she drifted into Walker.

Mom had no intention of staying in Walker, but was attracted to Tom (well-muscled and tanned then, with short, curly blond hair) while he was repairing the stair landing of Mrs Phillip's boarding house where she was staying. She kept walking up and down the stairs, brushing past him and excusing herself. They were married within a year. Twelve months later, I was born, along with my twin sister Molly. Mom was not happy pregnant. She rebelled after our birth, leaving Dad to care for us, while she modelled herself on people pictured in magazines, who in the flux of the break-down, liked to drift in stage light and haute imagery. When we were four she separated from Dad, intending to leave Walker. During the next two years she did move, but with the increased violence and riots of the big cities, she was scared and returned when Molly and I were six.

Memories milk. I am back in the alley. Feet scamper, a high-pitched voice squeals, a tin can whispers. The Buick's spiderwebbed undercarriage presses against my back, my head bumps rust and grease, my arms prise and pull a strange, wild-eyed, spiked-haired boy out of hiding. That night, Mom and Dad's yelling followed periods of silence the length of the hallway, and I shifted on my bed from side to side with hurt and hunger. Earlier Dad had prepared dinner and brought it to my room, but I could not eat, and left it cold beneath my bed.

The previous day, Dad's old Ford Savage had broken down while Mom was driving into town. The Savage was a sleek, red sports model Dad had bought cheap from a wrecker in Harris on first getting his licence. He repaired it by shipping in parts from Detroit (hard even then to get) and drove it everywhere through the state that allowed travel. When he married Mom he gave her the car, since by then he owned the pick-up.

Mom had phoned after the car had stopped in the middle of the street not far from downtown, and when Dad arrived he found her sitting in the open door with her arms folded, face puffy with tears. The Savage had run out of gas, and with a fury of fists she beat Dad and told him

that he should always make sure there was gas in it. Dad left her standing in the street, and Mom, on making it home that night, crashed the car into the garage door, smashing the bumper and grille.

When Dad came out of the house, they had begun rowing immediately and fought late into the night. As Dad and I worked on the aviary that afternoon things remained quiet, until Mom woke while I was down the lane.

My stomach pained again and I turned to the window. Night breathed its dark breath. Outside the two beams still rested across the pair of trestles and I could not let go of my disappointment. Instead of waking to the flight of Birdy in the aviary, I would stand beneath its wireless roof, and then have to face school. It would be a whole week before we could work on it again. I wiped my eyes and drew my knees up beneath their blankets. Moonbeams traced from the window across the room and I followed the dancing shafts over my desk and wardrobe. From the corner of my computer monitor Abby the Albatross enlarged, and with slow graceful wings flew off the far edge only to reappear in the corner. I slept and dreamed of play with a crazy kid that pulled gadgets from his pockets.

In the morning I met Dad in the hall, already dressed in his bib and brace overalls, wool jumper and jacket. His eyes searched me wearily and I knew Mom must have kept him up all night. At the breakfast table he stirred his cup and stared into its black. I sat, the ankles of my feet wound around the chair-legs, glaring at my toast. The kitchen was warm with steam and smelt of bread, strawberry jelly and coffee. Eggs boiled in a pot on the stove and I heard the pop of one of the shells. We ate silently; any sounds were from the clink of knives against plates, the shift of chair-legs against lino, the metal-on-glass screw of the jelly lid. Molly was first to rise, and with Dad tidied the plates into the sink and wiped the table clean.

In the hallway I waited for Molly, who had quickly run to her room.

The floorboards creaked here, and the weight of my schoolbooks was enough that I had to hold the strap of the bag in both hands and rest it across my knees. Dad was already outside, on the landing near the porch steps, his hands in his overall pockets, his Stetson low over his eyes. Molly stamped along the bedroom hallway and Dad shifted to the first of the steps. Above him, the sky washed its grey against the grey of the street.

Although most schools across the country had closed over the past few years in all but the richest neighbourhoods, Sheriff Peterson had been able to maintain attendance in Walker against gang pressure because of the town's small remaining population. Out of Walker Primary's twelve rooms – built in a U shape and ringed with a verandah -- only four remained in use. Molly and I were in the same class – a combined Years Five and Six, with Mrs Fischer. The drives to school built for me my earliest memories of Walker. How scenery, rolling past, lulls us into reflection. Molly pushed past, and in the open screen door yelled for me to hurry. I ran up to see Dad kick his feet free of mud against the pick-up tyres, and in the cabin, wedged my bag between my feet and pressed myself to the passenger door to give Molly room.

The pick-up started on the third try. Dad reversed and bumped down the drive. With my chin upon my hand, face against the window, I watched the dew break on the glass and traced the drops with my other hand as they ran and hit the window seal. Sparse, flat front yards, picket fences, red roofs slid by, each caught in a frame of water. Dad swerved round a pothole and I tipped back slightly. Would Spiro be at school?

I still wanted to say something to Dad about what happened in the lane, but knew I wouldn't have his attention. I had excitedly told Molly, though in a way she had shrugged Spiro off as just a crazed kid from a family of loons. The window dried of dewdrops. I rested back against the seat to see Mr Jackson's peeling clapboard; in the driveway, his Olympic still on its wheel rims, the tyres stripped long ago to replace the ones

on Sheriff Peterson's prowl car. Dad turned into Lincoln and there was Walker Primary. All of morning class I spent in a daydream.

By Friday, I had given up hope of seeing Spiro again. My friends couldn't help. They didn't know of any new kid in town. Once, James and I had been to the old mansion on Grey Street, but it looked as quiet as we'd always known it.

Then, at recess, everything changed. Ambling, hands in trouser pockets, I kicked along by the side of the kinder classroom, and there, in the shadowed cranny where Bob, the janitor, had his shed, saw Spiro. On his knees, he was pulling gadgets and pieces of junk from his pockets. I wanted to run up to him, but hung back. He kept fiddling with something, frantically winding its dial while two diode lights flashed red and green. Then suddenly it exploded with a big flash of sparks and smoke and he jumped up, shrieked and shot around the corner of the shed. By the time I reached the corner he was nearly halfway down the side of the school and I knew I could never catch him.

Back in class, I stared constantly out of the window. Lunch break couldn't come fast enough. When the bell sounded, without saying anything to Molly, I ran to the janitor's shed. No one there. Desperately I searched, asked everywhere about a new kid, and learnt that someone had been put in fourth grade with Miss Harvey. I waited most of the rest of lunch outside her class, until a disturbance broke out near the library.

A group of kids there were jostling each other. Some were on hands and knees, trying to get beneath the boards of the library's verandah. It had to be Spiro. I ran over and saw that they had dragged him out. He stood shaking, covered in dirt, his hands over his face. One of the kids was Steve, from my class. He pulled at Spiro's hair and yanked at his coat. I yelled. Steve turned and yelled back, asking if I knew Spiro. Scared of what he might think, I said I didn't, then stood with my head down, not knowing what to do. Suddenly, after a uniform burst of "Hey he's getting away," came a high-pitched squeal, and I looked up to see that Spiro had made off.

All weekend I thought of nothing but him. Dad and I worked on the aviary on Saturday, but I kept forgetting what he had told me to do, and in the end he really finished the aviary himself. Birdy was still in his cage by my bed on Sunday when it became dark, as I had searched all day around town for Spiro on my bike. Once I went to the mansion, but being too scared to knock, remained by the gate until the cold forced me to move.

On Monday, Spiro wasn't at school and I began to think that something bad had happened; then on Tuesday, at recess, the news came that Miss Harvey had been found outside her class in tears. A bang, like a car back-firing, had exploded under Spiro's chair, and he'd jumped onto his desk, then quickly sprung to the ground, done a back-flip and sat himself flat on his backside with a big melon grin on his face. Miss Harvey had run from class with her hands over her face. Spiro had been taken to the Principal, Mr Davis (to whom Miss Harvey complained that Spiro never listened to anything he was being taught), given an aptitude test and sent home. That night I eventually slept only after a long time staring up at the ceiling.

First thing Wednesday, Spiro was brought into my class.

I could hardly keep the smile from my face when Mrs Fischer stood him before everybody and announced she wouldn't stand for any impertinence the way Miss Harvey had done. She sat him in the front row not far from me – he showed no sign of recognition – and, barely able to sit still, I watched him throughout the period. He never looked at anything Mrs Fischer wrote on the whiteboard, or opened his textbooks, but whenever Mrs Fischer looked his way he'd sit erect as a post. Just before morning recess, she wrote up an unfinished maths equation and Spiro shot his hand straight up. With a stern nod, she let him go to the board. He started at one end, and by the time he finished the whole board was covered with symbols and strange signs.

Mrs Fischer's neck was rigid beneath her tight bun. She wiped everything, completed the equation, and yelled that he would spend the rest of that day writing it out correctly. At his desk, Spiro sat seemingly in confusion and by recess had not lifted his pen. When the bell sounded, Mrs Fischer quickly approached. However, before she had a chance to speak, I sprang up and said that he didn't mean anything bad, that he was new in town. She looked over her glasses, asked if I knew him, to which I replied yes, and she suggested then that I stay with him over break. I didn't have to be told twice. I almost ran over with my chair.

After Mrs Fischer left, Spiro was silent for a while, then quietly he said that he did recognize me, looked left and right, hunched forward and passed me something under the desk. It was a smoky-grey glass cube, about hand size. I turned it. Colored pictures that changed all the time showed in its sides, all of Walker's streets and buildings. I gasped and he said he'd been meaning to give it to me after that time in the lane. There was a silence, with me in a daze, the equation before us both. Suddenly I realized the break was nearly over, and so grabbed the paper and quickly wrote the equation out several times. I thought Spiro would be happy with this, but when I looked at him I saw a slight twitch at the edge of his mouth – the kind when one wants to speak, but decides not to.

Molly was the first in the door. She stopped just within the frame, eyes on me. I worried, thinking what she had said about Spiro being from a loon family, but she passed by the table and said nothing.

With everyone seated, Mrs Fischer nodded at me and I knew to move back to my desk. The stare of my classmates followed, and as I sat I saw Molly avert her eyes. I waited, bent forward, the class silent, wondering what would happen, then suddenly Mrs Fischer walked up to Spiro's desk, looked down at the paper and with a humph snatched it up and began the second period.

You will understand when I say that school was never the same.

THREE

JEFFERSON

The pick-up rolled onto the highway. Within, King sat with his eyes focused ahead. To either side of the road the fence posts, angled and spindly, tugged at sagging wire. He edged towards the door, let his head fall against the window. It was strange he should be here. Either one journeyed on a predetermined fate or one followed no fate at all, it didn't seem to matter. Jason offered a Marlboro from a packet. King straightened, picked one, lit and puffed. Ahead a glint reflected from a windshield. Jason slowed.

"Is that it?"

King nodded. The Mustang sat with its front passenger-side wheel in the trench, the driver-side wheel pressed hard up under the fender. Skid marks led from the white dividing line into the soft gravel of the run-off. Jason whistled.

"That's a fair skid. You could've rolled her if you'd got the rear wheel caught in the trench."

King looked, said nothing.

"It's gotta be a wheel bearing like you say. Must have been squeaking though, maybe even running a bit rough." Jason craned his neck over the steering wheel. "Anyway, you couldn't stick anything more than a tussock out here." He smiled, pulled on the handbrake, waited a moment to give one more whistle, then stepped out and circled the car.

The Mustang gleamed black. A tri-coloured gold strip stretched from

the front spoiler, up over the bumper, hood, roof to the rear spoiler. Cobra decals showed on the hood scoop, rear grille and front fenders. COBRA II was written in large block letters low on the doors. Jason heaved himself out of the trench and stamped on the road.

"Never thought I'd see one of these out here. You'd have to be an enthusiast to keep one going."

King jumped from the Chev, ground his cigarette butt into the road. "I bought it off a friend. I heard he died the last time I passed through town."

Jason peered through its window. "He did a good job on her. It looks mostly stock. It'd fetch a bit." He smiled back at King and bent to the front wheel. "You'll need a tow. The front's got to be jacked up so I can't do it in the pick-up. If you want I can call for a truck."

King dug at the butt with his toe. "Can you fix it?"

"Depends on parts, really. I'll have to see what I've got in stock." He gripped either side of the tyre and shook it. "Uriah runs the towing business. The town's only a mile from the servo. He should be right out."

King looked at white-haloed grey clouds shifting on the horizon. The service station was just visible, its roof flat above the plain. Further down was Jefferson. Jason suddenly yelled, "I got Uriah on the phone. He should be about ten minutes."

Jason was standing at the open door of the pick-up, a cellular pressed to his ear. A good-looking boy – clean-shaven, square-jawed, all-American. A boy you wanted to clap on the shoulder and shake his hand.

He folded the cover of the phone, shook his head. "I don't know what you'll think of Uriah. He's been too long lone on the prairie." He hurried back to the Mustang. "Anyway," he bent once more to the wheel, "I'm sure as hell going to enjoy working on your car, Mister."

King crossed his arms and buried his hands beneath his armpits. He tried to smile.The speck on the road slowly grew and the angled hoist

of a tow truck became visible against the sky. Fifty feet past King and Jason, it stopped and reversed. Shoes crunched on the road, and a tall, broad-shouldered, emaciated preacher with a pock-marked face in a black clerical suit and black, wide-brimmed hat appeared. He halted before the Mustang.

Jason quickly approached. "This is Mr King, Uriah."

Uriah turned sunken eyes on King. "Behold thou how the angels descend with fiery vengeance to cast Apollyon to flight. Come thou to repent?"

Jason shifted. "We better hurry, Uriah, if you want to get back to that sermon."

Uriah took a deep breath, so that already sunken cheeks sank further. King turned, walked a few paces away. The Bible Belt. He felt Jason's touch on his shoulder. "We may need a hand. We'll have to steady the car as she lifts."

King saw Jason wipe his nose. Where Uriah had been, a sharp gust of wind blew and lifted wet slush into the air. King's jacket flapped tight against his back as a car sped past.

A winch motor sounded. Uriah dragged heavy chains towards the Mustang, bent beneath it and attached them with U-bolts to the axles. Back at the truck, he yelled, "Be you ready?"

King and Jason stepped into the trench. King's hands spread against the rear fender. By the front door, Jason nodded towards him. "The car might slip a bit. Watch your feet."

The front of the Mustang began to lift. King braced, felt the cold wet slop of mud fall against his shins. Jason quickly moved one hand under the front fender and the other against the windshield edge. The Cobra jolted, rolled onto the road to crunch gravel and snow under its wheels. Jason jumped from the trench, brushed his hands together.

"We'll follow."

King slumped back in the pick-up's passenger seat, rubbed his face and pulled out a packet of Lucky Strikes. Jason looked over.

"I'm sorry about Uriah, Mr King. He's really the town preacher. His brother, Jonah, used to run the towing business. He died when a car rolled back on him. Uriah only keeps the business going on the want of his mother."

King nodded. "Is there a motel in Jefferson?"

"There's the Swan motel." Jason started the engine. "Then there's Darcy's. I'd go for Darcy's."

"You mind telling me where that is?"

"Sure. I'll show you on a map when we get back to the garage."

The pick-up moved forward. King puffed smoke against the windshield. Ahead, the Cobra rolled along on its back wheels, swayed and jagged at its chains over bumps. The servo quickly approached – still beneath white-haloed grey clouds. Uriah drove around the gas pumps towards the garage.

No cars moved on the highway. Beneath the shelter, a sheet drawn from a paper towel dispenser snapped and flapped in circles. King, out of the pick-up, drew his scarf to his neck, folded his arms and heard steps behind him. He turned to see Jason with a rag bunched between his hands.

"It could be that the brake calliper is welded to the disc. We may need a hand pushing her in."

King nodded and followed him. Jason indicated the far rear of the car while he bent himself to the near end. In the open door, Uriah held the wheel. The Cobra resisted at first, then freed up and rolled stiffly in. King straightened to see Uriah.

"Though thou refuse this world, blind thy eyes, thou shall yet know the riches of the Lord's Kingdom." The parched skin of the preacher's cheeks sank and extended. He turned suddenly and hurried to the tow

truck. It started with a jerk, revved and disapppeared without change of speed onto the highway.

Jason shrugged. "Forget about him, Mr King. You can't spit as far as he is crazy." He leaned back against the door of the Mustang. "I'll try and get the job done inside of a week. Detroit's not far off old times these days. However, I can't promise about the bearings. Also, the brake disc might need some machining and you may have bent something going into that ditch."

King tugged at the brim of his Fedora. "How about that motel?"

"I can show you now, but if you don't want to wait in Jefferson, there's a bus which comes through tomorrow morning. It'll take you to Harris. You could spend your time there. The town's had five years of aid all up now. It's better than here. Cleaner. You could rest up."

"And about getting back?"

"Same bus. It comes back on Wednesday."

King turned to the highway. By the first row of pumps, a rabbit sat. It hopped, squatted and folded back large ears. A young boy ran forward with outstretched hands, but stopped as his mother called.

"If you want to stay, my sister should be able to take you to Darcy's." Jason rounded his shoulders, thrust his hands into his overall pockets. "You'll like her, I think. She's never busy around here. She only comes up because there's even less to do in town."

A car door slammed. King span to see the young boy's face pressed to the passenger window, the flat of his hands beating the glass. He swallowed, eyes to the car, followed it to the highway.

Jason was gone.

King waited, with an occasional whoosh of a car on the highway, then walked to where a blue, oil-splashed 44-gallon drum with an equally oil-stained yellow funnel in its drain plug stood by the side of the garage. Nearby, a beer bottle top was stuck hard into the tarmac. Hands in his

pockets, he brushed the toe of his boot across it, tried for a moment to dig it out, left it, heard behind him, "I found her, Mr King. She was at the back of the shop."

She stood in tight blue denims and a rawhide jacket with tasselled sleeves and back. Long, tossed blonde hair framed a delicate, high cheek-boned face.

"She says she'll be glad to take you into town and show you to a motel."

King quickly reached for his Lucky Strikes. He was out. Hazel eyes lifted towards him.

"Why don't you have one of mine." She extended a packet of Camels. "By the way … my name's Anna."

King slowly lifted a cigarette. He flicked his lighter, but did not light till he felt the flame burn his thumb. Anna traced the tip of a white, stitched cowboy boot across the tarmac.

"I've got a Ford Defender. Have you been in one?"

Past the lighter flame, King saw Jason move towards the Mustang. "You want this bag, Mr King?"

King saw that his bag had slipped to the far corner of the rear seat, collected it, and removed a bound typescript of well-thumbed papers from the glove compartment.

"Something interesting?"

She stood close enough so that King felt her breasts brush his arm. He squeezed past, with his back to her, made no reply.

Jason approached with a wheel brace. "Why not give me a call in the afternoon, Mr King. By then I'll have done a reference search on those bearings."

In the frame of the doorway, Anna smiled, lowered her eyes. "I'll get my coat." She smiled again, turned, and stepped with long legs towards the diner. Beside the Defender, King shifted from one foot to another, hugged and slapped his arms. Stillness bit the air, but brought an

occasional sound – the bark of a dog, the slam of a door, the clank of a can against tarmac. He couldn't lose his impression of Anna. She didn't belong out here. No one like her did. He stared past the service station. In this nothingness, it wouldn't take much to feel like you didn't belong. Emptiness couldn't be defined.

Anna stood on the diner's concrete skirting. She'd wrapped herself in a hooded fur and looked towards him. "The door's open."

He tried the latch and the door fell towards him. Anna bent and slipped into the purple interior. "It's not far into town."

King ducked his head as he sat.

"I had the car sent back and the upholstery re-done. It's leather. The stock colour was tan."

King faced her but she flicked her eyes away. "You can program the car to do everything but steer." She punched a series of buttons on the drive panel with polished, red nails. "But I prefer control. It's more exciting."

The panel showed a green street grid, and small monitor windows to the side read out the car status, weather and traffic conditions. King felt only a faint pulsing as Anna started the engine. The Defender glided, more than rolled, onto the highway.

Anna kept her eyes ahead. "Do you have another name, King?"

King saw, tangled in the barbwire fence, a scarecrow made of broom-handle legs and arms wrapped in straw. He kept his eyes on it, screwed them tight. "John."

Anna drove without comment. A sign read JEFFERSON. Scattered houses appeared and the drive display beeped as a red traffic light approached. On the green, Anna steered left. "Jefferson's picked up some, but we've still got a long way to go. The traffic lights we just came through are new, and, as you would have guessed, so is the service station. Jason was quick to get a franchise." They drove past some vacant lots. "This area has just been cleared for new houses."

She turned a corner and approached a large, two-post sign of yellow painted tin. On it Darcy's was written in sloped longhand and beneath, The motel for you. The motel itself, a rectangle of prefabricated pale green sheeting, sat rigidly amidst pebbled flowerbeds. Anna halted under the reception roof, and as she opened the door said, "Let me go in alone first."

She came back after a minute, nodded at him. King followed to find a brunette in a floral print dress and violet eyeshadow flicking through a magazine behind the counter. She straightened, so her breasts stretched tightly against the fabric of her dress. She chewed widely on some gum.

"Yah brought a man?"

"His car broke down on the highway, Irene." Anna stepped up. "Jason's got it back at the servo. He'll be needing a room for about a week."

"Yah don't say."

"His name is King. Jason and I will vouch for him."

Irene pressed a key on her computer. "Does he talk or does he only look good?"

Anna flicked back her hood. "He's just tired, Irene ... Can we have a room?"

She hit more buttons. "Yah can have any room you want. The motel's empty. How about 14?"

King gave Irene his ID from his wallet; she scanned it through a slot in the register.

"Unemployed, no fixed address, three convictions. Currently wanted in Illinois for breaking and entering." She flicked the card onto the counter. "Get outta here."

Anna quickly swung forward. "We'll pay one week in advance. If there's any trouble, you can call Dave."

Irene pinched the gum from her mouth, stood hand on hip, then

threw the gum sharply into a bin at her feet. "Yah knew Fred wouldn't take him in, Anna. That's why yah came in alone at first. I'll let him stay, but as yah say, any trouble and I'll call Dave." She slid King's ID back. "That'll be 245 dollars, plus 10 on the key. The room is around the back."

Anna passed over a transaction card. Irene put it through the register and handed over the keys. Outside, King waited with his hand on the latch of the car door. "I could have paid."

Anna stared at him, her lips tightly drawn, and opened her door. At the back of the motel, the corrugated tin of a collapsed carport roof lay piled with snow. Nearby, in the one standing carport, an old Dodge stood with deflated tyres. She parked outside no. 14.

A kitchen counter with an overhead cupboard divided the room. Teak laminate walls were hung with prints of farm scenes. Anna remained by the door as King moved past and placed his bag on the bed.

"There were plenty of deserted houses on the way in that weren't in bad shape. I could have stayed in one of them."

"Is that what you're used to, John?"

King turned to her.

Anna swung her hair from her face. "Don't presume anything, John. I do what I want."

"You should be grateful that you can."

"Why? Aren't you doing what you want?"

"That's a matter of opinion."

"Opinion?"

"Nothing is planned, Anna."

She stood, breathing heavily, her face working. "Do you want me to go?"

"I don't know."

Snow blew in the open door and melted against brown, nylon carpet. Anna gripped the edges of her coat.

"Despite the fact that I'm very proud of Jason, I mean with the franchise, I don't do much around the station. Do you know what boredom does to you?"

"It kills you in a way."

"Then you understand."

"No … No I don't. I don't understand anything anymore."

"Is that why you're running away?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps? Meaning maybe you are?"

"I don't like people."

"I drove you here."

She tossed her head, only to look back.

"And paid for your room. Are you going to hate me for that?"

"No."

She held silent for a moment, then hooked her hands to her hips.

"You're a fucked-up shit, John."

"So who isn't?"

She looked at the floor. King hurried to close the door, then removed his hat and threw it on the bed.

"I've given myself up to a sort of pessimism, Anna. Let's not talk about what's to blame. You can stay if you want. Perhaps we can talk; perhaps we can't."

It was too late. Anna drew her coat tight.

"I'm surprised women don't fall at your feet, John."

She reached towards the doorknob. "I'll tell Jason to hurry. Obviously there's nothing to keep you here."

She swung the door wide, stepped out, slammed it behind her.

FOUR

WALKER

There is a wind which blows across the Loess plains; not the winter wind with its icy howl, but the summer wind. It sweeps the earth, unfertile, without pregnancy. As Walker emptied of folk, it blew, dusted the streets with fine red powder, increasingly lay unmarred by footprints. Dad stood against this wind. Hat held to his head, trouser leg and jacket billowing, he hammered his steel nails deep, drove iron-spiked roots, the Gordon blood, back into the town.

Tom descended from Samuel Gordon, a pioneer on the Oregon Trail, who had come a century or so ago to look for land. Since the government had declared the area Indian country, he had to manage for a time as a scout for the army, till he received a thousand acres ten miles from Walker, under the Free Homestead Act. The land had remained in the family until Dad was twenty-five, when the Brandon Bio-tech Company bought out Jacob and Ruth, my grandparents.

It was in the shadow of the Brandon Bio-tech Company that Walker died. Its genetic technology came to run farming without the farmers, and when there was no more need for a town to support its farming community, folk drifted out. Enough folk, however, remained to enable the town to survive. These folk had reasons to stay. Either they preferred the certainty of a known past to what little they saw in the future, or – as it was for Jacob, Ruth and Tom – they stayed out of loyalty, loyalty to a place that had for so long been a way of life. Jacob and Ruth bought

two houses in town with the money from the sale of the farm, one for themselves and one for Dad.

Walker came, then, to know only its own weary energy; in most parts, seldom did it stir beyond the narcotic drift of a stooped lone figure. But one area held out -- the main thoroughfare, named Arthur. There the Brandon Co. financed new businesses, created something of a one-street city for its workers. The street thumped and blinked day and night with bars, nightclubs, gambling parlours, game and V/R lounges – something in an otherwise dying mid-west town. Arthur Street was where Dad came to be employed, renovating old buildings, extending existing premises.

Since Jacob had first shown Dad as a boy how to whittle little boats that they floated on the reservoir at the back of the property, Dad had been honing his skill as a carpenter. On settling in town he advertized, was quickly contracted by Brandons to work on its recreational street. Irony or defeat for Dad? I believe neither. We can at the end of reason only learn to live with the pain of not understanding. Perhaps the sense of things matters less than the numbing of ourselves.

Dad came then to hammer his planks with will rather than reason.

The day after the math equation excitement, I was alone with Molly in class after the final bell. Spiro had not shown that morning and I had spent the day hoping he might still come. Molly, holding my arm, knelt beside me.

There are moments of understanding between people, when words need not be spoken, the look of eyes can be enough. Until we were eight, Molly and I shared a double bunk, me on the upper, then agreed we did not mind separate rooms. What we understood about each other came not only from those years together – often clutched together late at night as Mom raged against Dad – but from being twins. In the stillness of the classroom she said that Spiro was probably just scared, reminded me that there were other days when he had not shown.

We had spent the previous evening talking about him, and at one point I had shown her the cube. She had realized then that there was something special about Spiro, that he was not simply crazy. Monday, she was right about Spiro being back at school. He showed.

How can I describe all the times in class? That day alone was an adventure. Firstly, Spiro got caught reading from a Senior textbook during history and Mrs Fischer made him stand the whole morning in the front corner with a conical hat on his head on which was written "Wisenhimmer". Secondly, I got into a fight.

It happened at lunch. As soon as the class was outside, Mat, a big sixth-grader, grabbed Spiro, pushed him to the ground, stole his shoes and threw them on the school roof, where they rolled into the gutter. Mat was not really tough, just had no sense, and straight away I pushed him back. Kids ran from everywhere, formed around us and cheered. By the time Mrs Fischer found Mr Wilson, the third- and fourth-grade teacher, I bled from the nose, was dusted head to toe, but had Mat on the ground. In Mr Wilson's grip I was unable to think of anything else other than where Spiro was and shouted for him. He was clinging, shaking, stuck halfway up the verandah pole near where his shoes were. Only Bob with his ladder was able to get him down.

The fight brought Spiro once more before Principal Davis, and this brought my first meeting with Jessica.

In the office reception, I sat with Mat on the wooden bench that directly overlooked Principal Davis's door. Mrs Stevens, the school secretary, had her head down over her computer keyboard and tapped with two fingers. I wasn't nervous, only uncertain about how I would be punished, but knew that Mat would be scared about getting suspended again. Spiro was behind the door and I sensed he would be shaking. After Bob had got him down from the pole and helped put his shoes back on, he wouldn't move, just sat rigid on the verandah edge. Mr Wilson and Mrs Fischer couldn't decide what to do, then thought to ask me to

talk to him. Even so the walk to the office took a long time because Spiro moved like he was in some kind of trance. But about Jessica.

A woman came into the room. At first appearance, quite ordinary – slim, medium height, clothed in navy blue parka and blue denims over cowboy boots, hair, long, blonde and full, but not only did Mrs Stevens stop typing, she sat, struck still, and myself, I went cold. For some reason, your gaze was drawn to her. I tried to think why, but apart from the glass cold stare of her eyes, could not, only later. Her clothes were more modelled than worn, her hair, in its prepared fullness, more like a store dummy's than real. Mat sat as pale as I. There came a yell of "Hey" from behind the Principal's door, it swung open, Spiro shot out, rushed behind the woman and there clung, like he had to the pole, hair up like a cat's, to her leg.

I must now take you back to an earlier event.

Early one morning, near the end of the summer term before I met Spiro, a black Lincoln sedan with tinted windows and D.C. plates had driven slowly along Arthur Street and had parked outside the school gate. A man with square jaw, pock-marked face, slicked-back black hair, dressed in a black suit, white shirt, black tie and aviator sunglasses, stepped out. Feet apart, staring out over the school, he took a brown paper bag of peanuts from his suit pocket, lit a cigarette, smoked and ate.

The next day, the current principal, Mr Murdoch, left town without a word. Dad had known him since his time. He had no family; just packed one suitcase and drove into the night. When questioned, Sheriff Peterson simply shook his head and said the matter was with other authorities. He then announced the appointment of Principal Davis – the man in the Lincoln – to the school.

Principal Davis was in the doorway when I looked away from Spiro, just as I have described, aviator sunglasses, black suit. Immediately Spiro jumped to Jessica's other leg and buried his head into the back of her knee. Today, it is still not clear to me whether Principal Davis actually

called Jessica, or whether she just came because somehow she knew she had to, but either way, he held his arm out to her. She gently unlocked Spiro's arms from her leg, said something quietly to him, then stepped into the office.

Of course you must know that as soon as the door closed, I wanted to run to Spiro. But I didn't. I was fixed with events. Spiro stood head down, limp, and if there was more to this picture I didn't see it until I heard Mrs Stevens' chair kick back on its wheels and I saw her hurry past Spiro to the far wall to fetch a chair for him. After this, an uncertain length of time past in which my eyes pulled continuously around the room, first taking in every corner and object sharply, then with blurred focus. Mat, the few times I noticed him, stared, pale, vacant, questions all over his face. Mrs Stevens had again begun to type, but hit the keys in short bursts with lengthy intervals in between. More time passed, and I was conscious that I had begun to shiver.

The door opened with a 'whoosh' that snapped my head towards it, and there were Jessica and Principal Davis.

Now an odd thing happened, and you will probably laugh because so much already was odd. A glint, like the wink of a star, flashed from one of Jessica's eyes. Spiro, out of his seat, held still. Principal Davis couldn't have seen it, but behind Jessica his eyes narrowed. Silence held, then abruptly there was a snap, a flash – not of light, somehow of air. Still looking like he knew something was up, but couldn't reason it, Principal Davis circled Jessica. He stared at Spiro, then Jessica hurried over and took Spiro's hand. The scene held for a moment, then Principal Davis shrugged his head and nodded at Mat and me. My heart sank, for it was our turn in the office, and I was certain that when Mat and I came out Spiro and Jessica would be gone. But I didn't have long to feel sorry for myself.

Inside the office, Principal Davis sat us in front of his desk, while he

settled behind it. Immediately he reached for a brown bag of peanuts in his desk drawer, leant back in his chair and ate them, as he stared at us through his sunglasses; then suddenly bent again to the drawer, withdrew a plain glass jar with a gold screwlid and placed this on the desk. Something like a miniature Eiffel Tower sat stuck on the jar bottom. This, he said, sent out radio waves. After that, he said no more, just rested his forearms across the desk and locked his fingers.

Mat's expression must have been identical to mine. We had to sit that out until Principal Davis stood, moved to the window, and there looked out, hands in trouser pockets, for what had to be five minutes. When he finally turned, he moved straight to the door and held it open for us to leave.

Do we as adults cease to wonder? What allows magic and enchantment? Innocence? Belief through want of belief? I am not afraid of questions, not afraid to think about what I don't understand. Questions provide life's paths.

Term had ended and tomorrow, the first Monday of summer break, I would bring Spiro over to see my birds and to meet Dad. I lay on my bed with the lights off and picked up the ball Spiro had given me. It was made of a soft red-brown rubber, dimpled like a golf ball, and made catch fun. You could bounce it against a wall without it making any sound, and stranger still, it never bounced directly back, but could return whistling from any direction, even behind. I threw it. It flew at me from the right. I ducked, had it whiz past, then come at me from above. Finally, after I missed catching it again and again, it landed with a slap against the blanket in my lap. How was I to explain?

Picture. A breeze blows and lifts a branch. Leaf shadows, in dance, dapple the earth. In the mystic light of our first spring together, after school and on weekends, Spiro and I explored town. He'd skip, jump, run before me, always dressed the same, baggy trousers, white shirt, suspenders, and long blue felt coat a-dangle with wires, circuit boards,

gadgets, both in and out of his pockets. At night, if we got caught out, he might, beneath the haze of a fluoro street lamp, his hair stuck up like he'd caught it in barbed wire, do these little jigs, tap away and mutter to himself, his gadgets, a whirr, a beep, a flash.

We explored mainly the fringe areas of town. In these more deserted parts, Spiro said voices were clearer, and to any building wall, road or fence that he thought might hold voices, he'd hold the tin can. The gizmos somehow helped. Nearly all had a circular or rectangular grid upon which a pulse or cross-hair moved beneath a tiny tracking dish. Whenever Spiro got most excited, this dish would move quickly from side to side, the pulse or cross-hair would hold still and the gadget would beep frantically.

I picked up the ball, squeezed it. Nightly, Molly and I discussed these adventures. I guess we both hoped that somehow an explanation would occur for Spiro, but the days past and none came. What would happen tomorrow? Dad still didn't know anything. Abby the Albatross grew out of the dark, flapped graceful wings, and at some point, I drifted into sleep.

About mid-morning Spiro and I stood before the aviary. Molly was shopping in town with Dad, and Mom had left to live with her boyfriend, Juergan Anuss – chief production manager in the Brandon Biotech's sorghum division – for the term break. She always did this, not wanting to be in the house when Molly and I were at home every day.

Birdy was my first pet. One Saturday about a year ago, in town with Dad, I had seen him in the window of Mr Symons's pet store. He was a male cockatiel, a parrot, grey with white-shouldered wings, yellow crest and throat and an orange patch over the ears. I fell in love. He warbled, whilst bobbing his head, a queel-queel sound. I rushed in and would not leave Dad alone until I had him in a cage in my hand. Since that day, I had dreamt of a large aviary for him to fly in, the one Dad and I had built. Mr Symons had now sold me all his birds. I had a pair of

South American red-capped parrots, four pairs of budgerigars, seven yellow canaries, three diamond doves and a pair of king quails. For the quails I had strewn the bottom of the aviary with hay. They loved running in and out and the previous weekend, while I was raking the floor, I found a nest of eggs in the hay. Excited, it was these that I thought to show Spiro, and during the following week had planned with Molly to bring Spiro over.

In the yard, as we approached the aviary, he stared unbelievingly at the cage. It was something that I couldn't explain to him, that the birds were wild and that I had to keep them caged to stop them flying away. Spiro squeezed the hex-wire of the cage front with his fingers, and then all the craziness began. By this I mean the craziness of that day.

The birds started to fly madly about. They squawked, squealed and crashed into the wire on all sides of the cage, occasionally settled, then started up again. I didn't know what to do. Scared of them being hurt, I wanted to drag Spiro away, but he kept yanking at my arm and asking if he could go inside. In the end, I had no choice. I let him in, me behind. Curiously, the behaviour of the birds now changed. They started to walk quickly back and forth on their perches, screeching and calling and flapping their wings. After a short while, Spiro reached into one of his pockets and took out a small triangular frame with a handle; in the handle a piece of glass shimmered and shone like a prism. He held this above him and the birds became even more excited. They flew from their perches and darted through the air, till suddenly the male red-crowned parrot dipped and flew straight through the frame. When he came out, he called loudly and looped through the air until every bird had followed him through. Birdy sang like I've never heard him sing, and then abruptly they all settled peacefully on perches. I stood with my mouth open.

What has happened to the boy I once was? Can I recapture how once I simply allowed myself to believe? I completely forget about the quail

eggs until I heard the male call in his high-pitched whistle. I showed Spiro the eggs, hidden in the hay in the sheltered corner opposite the door. There were five light brown eggs, covered with black-brown spots. Spiro picked up each one carefully and held it to his ear. Each time he smiled, except once. Three weeks later, four chicks were born.

Spiro virtually skipped the distance from the aviary to the back door of the house. He seemed, as he often did, to be somewhere else. How do we explain our decisions, our actions, our mistakes? Had Molly and I not thought things through? She and Dad were unpacking in the kitchen when we came in. She saw us first. With her hand in a carry bag, she turned quickly to Dad, who, standing on a chair with his back to us, was packing the pantry shelf. If I did sense that anything was wrong, it was too late. Dad turned and glared. Spiro, rocking on his heels beside me, face fixed with a big grin, gave a shriek and went rigid. Dad jumped down, yanked me by the collar, and the next thing I knew I was out in the hall.

I shivered, hunched on a doorstep, in an alley between shops. Light shone on the rough red brick of the opposite wall, and against it rain fell, travelled in thundering spits, hitting the wall, striking silver dashes. I had run from home. Dad had told me I was never to see Spiro again, and the following Monday morning, before the day woke, I splashed through rain, my school bag – filled with a change of clothes, a packet of biscuits, an apple and an orange -- clutched to my chest. I had no idea where I would stay; beneath a sky leaden and black, lit with the white crack of lightning, knew only that anywhere would be better than home.

Our tears hold a sad reflection, our dying, our time spent living. I cried tears as heavy as the rain. Dark fingers crept either side me. I buried myself tight to my knees and squeezed my eyes shut. Before the Monday, Dad and I had circled each other within the house as if the simple meeting of our eyes would brand our pain anew. Meal times, I

Chocky's Come Home

ate silently and hurriedly, wanting only to be alone in my room. Molly had done her best to comfort me, but the pain grew so that I could think of nothing but what had happened. Could I do anything other than run? No, a child runs. When Dad led me back into the kitchen, my face all hot with tears, Spiro still stood like someone charged stiff. Molly, holding one of his arms, had not got him to move.

Dad said it would be all right for me to walk him home and all the way Spiro darted looks left and right. By his gate, some sort of understanding must have come to him. He walked slowly down the path, turned halfway and waved in that slow incomplete motion that speaks a final goodbye.

Water traced down my back. I shivered. My feet slipped on the concrete step and one foot splashed into a puddle. Down the alley, a door crashed and slammed on its hinges. Wind knocked a trash can lid, to clatter and spin against the wall. I could not stay where I was. I rose, feeling hot and dizzy. On Arthur Street's footpath, dawn, upon the summer storm clouds, had brought only a slight lightening to the dark, and in this dark, beat my heart.

I came to lie in the thick walled warmth of a baker's oven in a closed bakery on Miller Street. In the unending rain, I had remembered the shop and made my way along. The window was smashed and I had only to break some of the bottom shards to get inside. There were two ovens, one cleaner of ash, and I crawled in. Feverish and shivering, my mind raced, the events of the term playing over and over. Much had fallen apart.

It was usual for Jacob and Ruth to visit on the last Sunday of every month. Mom would deliberately be away and it was always a special time for Molly and me. Ruth, her hair white and gossamer wispy, face sunned and spiderwebbed with deep lines, would beam from the door on seeing me, clap her hands as if to say "My," then I would run from her and have her chase me. Jacob always caught me and tumbled me to

the floor while he secretly shoved a little something in my pocket. Dad then would get us all to sit together, on the back porch if the weather was good. This was the saddest thing for me, seeing Dad sit with his parents, knowing that the love he held for them meant it pained him to have them see the life he now lived.

Jacob had lived a live Dad had only touched upon shortly. Dad's eyes would stare in memory, misted and distant, his voice whisper soft, rising if he came upon the touch of a special time – a golden sun sinking to red over a golden field, a field first made dark with shadow, then golden as wind waved stalks of grain. It was land that held the solitude of the heart. Unbroken. Now all Dad held was a quarter acre, and how often he stared across the sparse buffalo grass of our yard, its two cottonwoods, over the fence and into the distance. It seemed that a death came to him each time Jacob and Ruth visited, and increasingly they came to stare at chipped paint both within and outside our house, and on a lawn that knew only tall weeds and grass that survived in scattered clumps. For them, the house was like walking land gone fallow.

The weight of years makes us tired, the pain of years that defeats. I have much to reflect upon. A life has been lived that has borne out its natural conclusion, if not yet its final end. But what has been learnt? So much escapes reason, only one thing am I sure of, that our life bleeds from our dreams. A life is no more than a series of days of collected hopes. For Dad, this, which we call reality, that lies between wishes and action, was a part of his everyday. It had to weaken him.

He was moving slower and sitting more on his own. There had been times past three in the morning when, unable to sleep, I'd come into the living room and found him with his head in his hands. On many days if you were to ask him something, he'd seem not to hear, or if he did answer, speak with a shrug. For certain the time we used to spend buddying around together – playing catch in the backyard or going to Webster Park to see the Walker Giants – were gone.

And Mom? I had learnt, if I knew she was home, to use the back door when coming in. The only times I ever dared to let her see me was when she would stare as if seeing nothing. Strange men came over more and more. Late at night there could be a telephone call, soon after a car would pull up in the drive, Mom would run out, scramble into the back seat, be driven off, or there'd be a quick exchange and she'd hurry back inside.

My body was increasingly wracked with shivering. My shoes grated and scraped against the ash-darkened bricks of the oven floor with the involuntary kick of my legs. Thoughts kaleidoscoped, in the frenzied heat of fever, to find a reason for Dad's fear of Spiro. Dad knew the streets, both from his carpentry work around town and from picking up Mom on nights when she would phone home not knowing what she was doing. Gangs of kids ruled most streets. One of the bigger gangs, the Homers, dressed in baseball uniforms and carried spiked bats and baseballs that swung on chains. Sadly, life tears at our understanding of others' differences. To Dad, Spiro could only look like a gang kid. I cried, called for Dad, lay all day in a storm that whipped over a town that seemed, then, so dry of pity.

Through delirium and sweat, the crunch of feet on crumbled brick. Hands beneath my body. A voice, familiar, soft, relieved. On a cold vinyl seat, different hands. Another familiar voice, tearful. Squeezing arms. Acceleration of an engine, spin of tyres, jolts forward and back. The squeeze of arms, harder. Rain on a windshield. Wiper blades, swish, swish, swish. Blurred street lights. Blackness, lesser blackness, blackness. A night of dreams. I wake in sheets, to lit curtains, warmth through window glass. Eyes, slowly a-blink, bring to picture awareness of time and place, trace and follow, run the length of objects well known, to be re-learnt – a wardrobe, a chair, desk, edge of a framed picture. I, a cocoon in blankets and solar warmth serenity. Molly had told Dad that Spiro was a very special kid and in need of friends, that Dad had only

to talk to him to realize this. Dad could only acquiesce. Starry night. No wind, but nevertheless a brush to the air, a warm caress, enveloping. Through wispy cloud, somewhere a moon, not full, though enough to lend an outline to the aviary, a glint to the wire and a shine to the tin. I walked the yard, feet in unlaced runners, naked. Excited and nervous, I had come from my room, unable to sleep after talking to Molly. We had agreed that tomorrow I would look for Spiro. There had been two days of visits from her and Dad, quiet talks, quiet explanations. I made my way over the lawn to the aviary, leaned against the doorpost and hooked the fingers of one hand into the wire mesh. The birds sat on their perches in the far corner, puffed up, necks curled back, beaks tucked into shoulder feathers. Just over a week ago they had flown squawking and calling through a triangular frame, then looped in the air with delight. Time brings change; with change a feeling of loss. I squeezed the wire and turned to Dad's shed. The light was on. I had heard him go out earlier while Molly and I were talking. He often worked late summer nights, usually well past midnight. Why had I come outside? Quite suddenly I just wanted it to be tomorrow, the wait before I saw Spiro to be over. Feet sticky in my runners, I walked to the far window of the shed and peered in.

Through the quarter window pane, yellow light cast dusty rays from a white-shielded globe, wood curls and wood dust lay on every surface, and in the air, the ever-present dustmote constellation of a carpenter's shed -- a drift, a dance -- and in this kinetic nebula, Dad planed a beam of wood gripped in a bench vice. We define philosophies, and here, certainly not consciously visible to the eyes of a ten-year-old child, was a moment of truth – this labour of the hands – for a man whose life had come to mean so much less than he had hoped. I watched, not with visible tears that I remember, but still with tears, this window to my father. Back in my room, it was a long time before I was able to sleep.

The house – white-planked, vine-clothed behind the wispy, ethereal

wave of its willow. A boy by the gate – hands in pockets, hands out of pockets, feet jumping the squares of a concrete footpath -- anxious for the moment a wild-haired, kooky kid in a gadget-heavy coat would appear. In the beginning heat of the day, I had run almost all the way to the house in the hope of catching Spiro before he left. I still had not been inside. During the term, when we had to part at the end of the day, he would only let me walk as far as the gate and there I would have to say goodbye. That he wouldn't let me come inside wasn't something I worried much about; it seemed right in its way. My watch flicked liquid crystal past seven o'clock, then past eight o'clock. How many times did I think about knocking on the door? Then there was Spiro, halfway down the path, frozen in his big shoes. For a moment we both stared at each other, then I burst into tears, covered my face with my hands. Only with the slow, eventual, creaking open of the gate did the summer holidays really begin.

Mrs Schumacher had lost her husband twenty years ago when he fell from his horse on their farm. Settling in town, she took to baking tarts and pies for Mr Krantz – in whose bakery I had hidden – until he closed. With its arrow-straight, white-washed picket fence, its immaculate flower garden, her house stood with Eden grace amongst the dereliction of the street, something from an earlier time. On an otherwise ordinary day, during an evening warm-grey at dusk, Spiro and I made our way past.

I was ahead – thinking about the alley where we'd found a rusted bicycle wheel Spiro had taken – when I heard him break into a laugh. On turning, he was on the ground, rolling on his back, chuckling,

"Chocky ran

Chocky jumped

Landed splat

In the middle of Porcupine's hat."

Then Spiro was over the fence. There was a basketball in a bed of violets and he jumped on it. Mrs Schumacher ran from the house, screaming, her arms up, waving a straw broom. The violets were soon all crushed with Spiro's tumbling and throwing himself upon the ball and bouncing off it. Mrs Schumacher kept yelling, "Lummel, verruckter Lummel," until she managed to snatch the ball, run with it into the house and lock the door. Spiro, having chased her, jumped up and down on her porch and flapped his arms about, all the time with this big grin on his face.

It was some time before I was able to drag him to the footpath, but I could not get him to settle. Soon he broke free and took off down the path. Not until he was at his house and shot through the gate did I realize what was about to happen. On the porch, he squealed in his high-pitched voice and waved me up. Before I knew it, I was in the hallway.

I walked with uncertain steps, dazed more than anything. Dust swept along the creaking boards, and in the corners of the corridor's high support arches were cobwebs. I stared everywhere but ahead. Not until I was nearly at the end of the corridor did I see Jessica. Dressed in a green cardigan and blue denims, she stood beneath a wall-mounted buffalo head. I froze, was only able to move eventually because of Spiro. He took my hand, tugged me past her and into the kitchen. Again I stared numbly and forgot about Jessica while my eyes grew big. The kitchen was full of junk. There was a door-less fridge that was completely frosted over, several microwaves that turned, beeped and shone with bands of coloured light, and everywhere there were boxes, one on top of another right up to the ceiling. Many were split, and through the tears I could see toasters, blenders, electric knives, every sort of kitchen utensil, all with wires hanging out.

Still within the door frame, I looked for Spiro. At some point – I hadn't noticed – Jessica had gone past me. She now stood with Spiro at the end of the kitchen table. His smile was bigger than ever. Jessica bent to his

ear, whispered something and immediately he was around the table and again had hold of my hand. The stairs to the second floor creaked worse than the entrance passage-way. On the landing I stood before a room door, and what was inside capped everything I had so far seen.

It was dark, but my eyes soon adjusted and I saw the room was filled with equipment that looked like it had come from a physics lab or high-tech research centre. There were plotting screens, scopes, banks of instruments with knobs, dials, gauges, but most of all, everywhere, there were cables. They ran along ducts in the ceiling, up and down and through the room's walls, and nearly all connected to a small satellite dish, to headphones or earpieces. I specially noticed one thick fibre optic line that ran to a long narrow tube. I had a hundred questions, but couldn't speak. Before the tube, Spiro jumped up and down, squealed over and over "Chocky, Chocky."

The walk home is not something I remember.

FIVE

JEFFERSON

It was near dark when King woke and left the room. The wind had picked up and snow now lay in powdery drifts along the motel's walkway. One other light showed in a room. Outside its door, a Chrysler Roadliner stood parked with a thin covering of snow on its long hood. King made his way to reception and rang the bell on the counter. Irene came through a side door with a cigarette dangling between lips that had been freshly glossed red.

"It's you." She rested her hand on her hip. "What can I do yah for?"

King cupped his hand to his mouth, made to cough. "Is there a way for me to get into town?"

She stepped closer, hand still on hip, drew on the cigarette and blew a stream of smoke upward. "Only if I drive yah."

"Can I walk?"

"Yeah, but – "

He didn't let her finish. "I need a packet of Lucky Strikes."

"Sure." She let out a curt laugh. "You got money this time?"

King reached inside his jacket, slapped a transaction card on the counter. Irene handed it back with the cigarettes. "Now yah sure yah don't want that lift?"

"I'd like to see the town."

"In the dark?" She stabbed out the cigarette. "That should be interesting."

King was already at the door.

"See yah when yah get back."

It was cold enough to need more clothing. He returned to his room, picked up scarf and gloves and, outside again, thought for a moment. Finally, on the road beside the motel, he looked for directions. There were none, only a few lights glowing in the distance. He drew his gloves tight against his fingers and followed the road past dark-windowed houses.

The town's main street was a wide road with a paved median strip and road-a-bouts at frequent intervals. Unlit stores lined both sides. King made towards a bar on the far side of the street. He noticed most shop fronts were nailed over, with graffitied boards. A few, empty of goods, had smashed windows. He stopped at a guttered shoe shop and tried the door. It opened after a hard shove and grated harshly over crumbled masonry, boards and bricks. In the back room, a hole in the roof showed the swirling of snow and a faint moon. King rested his hands in his jacket pockets. Silence bled death. He shivered.

A back door led to a litter-strewn alley where he walked beside sooted, red-brick walls till he came to the back of the bar he had seen earlier. Beyond, where a section of a wooden fence had fallen, there was the movement of shadow, then torchlight swung over his face.

"I've gotta gun, mister. Don't try anythin' foolish."

King shielded his eyes with his hands and blinked.

"That's it, sonny. Keep them hands up and move towards the kitchen." There followed an excited muttering.

Past the light of the torch, King made out the grey of dustbins and the latticework of stacked crates. He shifted sideways and kept his hands up.

"Getting' so that you can't even take a piss in peace around here. This town's gone to the pack, that's what it is."

In the light from a window, King now saw an old man hunched in a thick sheepskin, and with sagging grey trousers. The man squinted from beneath scraggy, white brows.

"Keep 'em up. This gun's gotta short fuse."

King again raised his hands.

"Ain't yah going to say anythin'? Ain't yah scared?" The old man shuffled closer.

"I'm new in town."

The gun kicked up and the firing hammer clicked. "Then why come round the back?"

"I got lost."

The old man dropped the gun a little, and some of his excitement seemed to bleed from his cheeks. "What's yah name?"

"King."

"Is that some kinda nickname?"

King held silent.

"Okay." The old man bit at his lower lip and shook his head. "What yah doin' in town?"

"Taking a walk."

"A walk!"

"That's right."

The squealing noise of a tap being turned sounded. A gruff voice cursed, and then there was a rush of water. The old man turned to the doorway. "Is that you, Josh?"

There was a moment's hesitation as the tap was turned off, then behind the torn wire-screen of a back door the large silhouette of a man appeared. "Henry?"

Henry stepped back. "Got myself a man out here. Says his name is King."

A towel was flung over heavy shoulders and the door opened. "This him?"

Henry nodded and grinned. "Caught him comin' through the fence. Claims he got lost."

Joshua slammed the door, which did not shut, but creaked back and forth on its hinges.In two strides he had hold of the gun, swung it towards King, then to the door. "Step inside, mister."

King moved slowly up.

"And easy when you get in."

The corridor was narrow, packed with cardboard boxes and crates of empty bottles. From behind King, Joshua yelled sharply. "Keep going slow. To the right and into the kitchen."

In the kitchen was the smell of steam. Two aluminium pots boiled with clapping lids on a gas stove stained brown and black. Water dripped from a steam-blistered ceiling, ran in streaks down grease-smeared walls. King halted before a fridge.

"Turn around."

Joshua held the gun at King's chest. His biceps strained against a white T-shirt. "What were yah doin' out tha back?"

King looked down, then back, to avoid the question. Abruptly, he was grabbed by the scruff of his jacket and yanked forward. "Well?"

"He don't like to talk much. He's one of those silent types." Henry hurried over.

"Well he'll talk to me." King was yanked forward again, lifted and thrown against the centre bench. Pots and pans crashed around him.

"Do yah you want me to call Dave, Josh?"

"Dave." Joshua spat on the floor. "What's he gonna do? Preach one of his lectures." He kicked King's feet from under him. King fell, met with another kick, this time to his ribs, and doubled to the floor.

"Get up … I said get up."

King turned his face up and swallowed. Joshua kicked three more

times. With a groan, King slid back and held his arms to ribs. Again he was lifted and thrown against the bench. "Yah gonna talk now?"

King breathed in gasps and tried to lift himself. "I … I explained everything to the old man."

Joshua screwed his eyes towards Henry. "Is that right?"

"He said he was walkin' round." Henry hitched up his trousers. "What kinda excuse is that?"

Joshua swung back towards King. "Walkin' around, hey. Walkin' around doing what?" He twisted the leather of King's jacket with thick fingers. "Well?"

King gasped. Joshua twisted the jacket harder. "You're a no-good drifter, ain't yah?" He slammed his hand hard across King's mouth. "Piece of shit."

King, with hung head, felt the warm drip of blood down his chin. Henry shuffled over to a wall phone. "I'll call Dave, Josh. Reckon he may talk then."

"Don't be a fool." Joshua quickly jumped to the phone and slammed his hand on the hook.

For King, the room blurred and went black as he slid from the bench.

Something hard pressed against his back. Waking slowly, King focused his eyes upward and traced a line of light to a ceiling corner. Gradually the shape of a room emerged. Above him, a steel mesh window filtered in moonlight, and to his right a barred door threw ribbed shadows against the floor. He sat up, feeling the pressure of the stiff bedsprings and mattress upon which he lay.

He tried to order his thoughts. He remembered the bull face of a man kneeling towards him and then nothing. How long had he been unconscious? He broke into a cold sweat, straightened, felt a pain stab his chest. Carefully he unzipped his jacket, unbuttoned his shirt, felt down his ribs and saw there the dark blotches of bruises. He pulled in

his stomach to tuck the shirt back. It hurt, and he stood to relieve the pressure.

Only the front of the cell was barred. The remaining walls were of brick. Hand to his chest, he moved stiffly forward, pressed his face between the bars. He could make out the front of another cell to his left, beyond that, a door. Above the door a surveillance camera pivoted and stared with its glass eye. He returned to the cot and lay back.

All life drifted to the same point. There was a finality about everything. Escape was inconclusive. He rolled onto his side, pulled over a blanket and slept. He woke to hear the corridor door open, then the hard heel–toe of boots against concrete. Light cut across the ceiling and the shadow of a man fell over the floor.

"You awake in there, mister? The sheriff wants to see yah."

King sat up.

"It's about time." The cell lock clicked open. "Beginnin' to think there was something wrong with yah."

The man, gangly limbed and slim, approached and reached out handcuffs. "My name's Glen. I'm the deputy." He motioned King upwards with his hand. "I know you've had a beatin'. Josh Taggert's head of the town vigilantes. You really know how to pick yah company, don't yah."

King remained on the bed.

"Hey, you're in a bad way, ain't yah? We called the doc but couldn't get hold of him."

King tried to focus.

"Here, let me help yah." The deputy gripped King firmly by the upper arm and eased him up. "I have to warn yah. Don't try and put anythin' by Dave. He's got more smarts than's good for a man." He smiled lightly and locked the cuffs to King's wrists.

In the corridor, Glen punched in a code at the door and it snapped open. He led King past two more cells, through a door to his right,

down another short corridor and into a carpeted office. Sheriff Dave Jolson sat behind his desk. He stood as Glen entered.

"I found him awake, Dave. Made use of that blanket to. The heatin's not workin' properly again."

Jolson nodded and sat back down. "Thanks, Glen. Bring in another chair. I want you to stay as well."

Glen rolled in a chair from outside and sat in a corner. The sheriff indicated a seat in front of his desk. "Sit down, John."

King eased into the chair and felt it sink on a hydraulic spring. Jolson shifted a pad and pen across his desk, leaned forward on his elbows. "We were worried about you. You've been out a long time. We had the paramedics in after we picked you up from Jesse's Bar, but they said they could find nothing wrong without further tests." He stared momentarily down at the pad, then looked up again. His eyes pierced above high, chiselled cheekbones. He pursed his lips, and in doing so, bunched the hairs of a thin, neat moustache. "They suggested taking you into Harris, but with medical expenses … we figured it may not be in your best interests." His lean, lined face broke into a quick smile. "You had this kind of beating before?"

King swallowed, looked down. Jolson leaned back. "Well, anyway, we put you up in the cell for the night. Glen's been looking in on you every half-hour or so." He picked up the pen. "We owe you an apology at least. Joshua Taggert's been trouble to this town ever since I've known him. He's decided to take things in his own hands around here. Kinda appointed himself the right-hand strong man to the town's civic affairs committee. The truth is, he's just a bully who enjoys beating people up. You're not the first drifter I've had in here." He paused. When King gave no response, he continued. "I've made some inquires. Jason and Anna Summers have been here. They've explained you're just passing through, that your car broke down. Irene Darcy verified the fact that you were just going for a walk, though she couldn't explain why. What I don't

understand about all this is why you didn't bother to defend yourself, at least explain a little bit more to Josh about what you were doing at the back of the bar."

King's eyes clouded and he stared away. "I don't know."

Jolson threw down the pen. "That's not very helpful, John." He ran his hand across his chin and opened the folder. "This was found in your jacket pocket." He unfolded a yellow, creased newspaper clipping. "Is this why you've been to Walker?"

King gripped the arm of the chair.

"I thought so." Jolson reached across and laid the clipping on the edge of the table near King. "Do you want to explain?"

A photo in the clipping showed two boys; one, a thin, dark-haired boy, was held between two county deputies, the other, an unusual looking kid standing beside a smashed telephone booth. The boy by the booth wore a long coat with jutting pockets, and jammed under his arm was a telephone, its shattered receiver dangling towards the ground. Something like a football helmet rested on his head. It had antennae near both ears, and bulges around the edge of the rim that looked like lights or diodes. His body cringed to one side, and his eyes stared upward, as if the helmet had been shoved on his head for the purpose of the photo.

"Feel like saying anything?"

King sat slowly back, having straightened to look. "It used to mean something. It doesn't any more."

Jolson smiled. "That report by Robert McNeal of the Harris Gazette is dated 27 years ago, John. No-one carries a clipping around that long."

King shrugged. "Like I said, it used to mean something."

"You know I really should be handing you over to the Illinois authorities." He lifted a sheet from the folder. "The computer gave me a print-out of your record. An interesting case. Street kid. No record of parents or birth. Been arrested fourteen times, mostly on vagrancy and

civil disturbance charges. Three charges have stuck. One for stolen goods, two for grand theft auto. You've spent a total of six years in jail, each time getting released after two years on good behaviour." He put down the sheet and reached for the clipping. "Smartly, you made good use of your time. Read, wrote some. I'm prepared to back the last warden's report stating that you're intelligent enough, just someone caught offside. Why not give me some straight answers?"

King remained still.

Jolson frowned. "All right, John, I'll let it go for now. There's something else I want to put to you, though." He nodded towards his deputy. "Can you get us some coffee, Glen, and make up some sandwiches." He raised his eyebrows at King. "Any preferences?"

King looked towards the deputy, who stood halfway to the desk, hat in hand. King shook his head.

"And your coffee?" Jolson asked.

"Any way it comes."

The sheriff shrugged, rose and walked to Glen. Hand on his shoulder, he led him to the door and whispered a few words. Back at his desk, he pulled at his trousers and sat down.

"He's a good kid. Loves his family, but I worry about him in this job." He opened a drawer, took out a bottle of Jack Daniel's and two tumblers, poured both and stood one before King. He held up his glass. "I keep this bottle here for times such as this. There's no reason why we should make our company inhospitable."

King stared at his tumbler.

"Go on. Take it."

King drained it quickly.

Jolson smiled, sipped and folded his hands over the glass. "Our lives are caught in flux, John. These days it's hard to hold onto anything, not our way of life, not our desires, not our morals." He refilled both tumblers.

"But that being said, this town's got a chance now, especially with these new reforms." Jolson paused to take another sip, then continued. "So as long as I'm sheriff here I intend to do my job, and I intend to do it any way I can. It's just a matter of weighing up the benefits to all concerned." He drained his glass. "Now … the way I see it, you've got two choices. I can either have you shipped back to Illinois or you can help me nail Taggert."

Glen came in and placed a tray of percolated coffee, three cups and sandwiches on the table. "I'm not playing you for anyone stupid, John. I want Taggert in jail," Jolson continued. "His kind of red-neck behaviour isn't going to help us here, especially when I'm trying to get new people to move in. So how about it?"

King rubbed beneath his jacket. "What makes you think I can be of use?"

"Believe me, you can."

King locked his eyes to the sheriff. Jolson slammed his hand on the desktop. "Understand this, I can have you back in Illinois quicker than a twister through Kansas. Don't expect me to commiserate you on your suffering. I don't have the time." He bent to King's face. "Your type circles the world like a wary dog, John, suspicious of everyone and everything. I don't think there is anything you believe in, least of all yourself."

King jumped up, quickly clutched at his chest. Jolson held his palm up to Glen. "That's it, John." The corner of Jolson's mouth lifted in a smile. "You haven't passed that point yet … that point where malaise takes over from pity."

King stood, breathing heavily. He gritted his jaw and felt backwards with his hand for the chair. Glen hurried forward, though Jolson waved him away. "Leave him Glen. I don't think he'll appreciate your help." Jolson laced his fingers before him. "Listen, John, I've seen every type through here. There's nothing new you can surprise me with.

Why create problems when you don't have to?"

King made no move.

"All right, Glen." Jolson rose. "Take him back … though leave the food. He's obviously got other things to digest."

SIX

WALKER

To lie in the resignation of night, drift in its harbour, in the slow shutting of senses rouse from anchor the sleepy ships of imagination …

Sadly, the end of summer break had come, and I lay in bed as I had done at the end of the school year, thinking of what was ahead. What was I to understand? Today, so much has gone that I must find again. Over the streets of Walker, questions, like long oars, sweep, paddle years in their curve, and in this churning, what?

On the Monday of the final week of semester, Principal Davis had come into class, peanut bag in hand, a bulge under his suit jacket. After quickly speaking to Mrs Fischer, he walked up to Spiro's desk, reached beneath the jacket, drew forth a car hubcap (one with a deep dish), placed it on Spiro's desk, curved side down, leaned forward and pressed his face to Spiro's. He said nothing, just stared for a minute through the black of his sunglasses, then walked back outside, came in again with an old hessian feed sack and clattered a whole pile of hubcaps at the foot of Mrs Fischer's desk. A united rush of gasps turned heads in unison towards Spiro, then forward again, but Principal Davis had gone.

Mrs Fischer wasted no time collecting the hubcaps. Shielding her eyes with one hand for some reason, she piled them on a table at the side of the room. Neither I nor Spiro was allowed to go near them until the end of the day, when Spiro was told to take them home. I helped place

them back in the sack and then realized what had worried Mrs Fischer: each was polished so brightly inside that the glare burned and stung your eyes.

My room was luminous with summer warmth. I sat up against my pillow, turned down the blanket, welcomed the breeze from the window. The next day, immediately after the class returned from morning break, Mrs Fischer had been called to Principal Davis's office. She left us with some reading and was gone for about an hour. When she returned, she summoned Spiro to her desk and spoke with him. Molly and I looked towards each other and together tracked Spiro's step back to his desk where, his legs swinging away beneath his chair, he immediately took one of his gizmos from his coat and began to play with its knobs and dials – something Mrs Fischer never allowed. Molly's face was as surprised as mine. Where in the world the child? Can we, as children, ever know or suspect?

At lunch, Molly and I surrounded Spiro with questions. He just skipped from us and beamed.

In the twilight of half sleep, the grey evening to night's darker journey, I lay, a boy in search of understanding. Somewhere in the house, in the tranquillity of summer night, a door slammed and a voice screamed. I must have heard it. My legs kicked, scissored and twisted my blanket. In the morning, from the kitchen window I saw the Ford Savage parked askew in the driveway, one wheel on the lawn. Mom had come home.

Molly jumped from the pick-up cabin, and I, quickly following, chased her through the school gate, down the path towards the quadrangle. It was the end of the third week of term and so far the days, in and out of class, had passed without special incident. The first week, Mrs Fischer – the grey bun of her hair seemingly tighter, her eyes narrower – had, laid out the plan for the year, then immediately taught as if the first Friday would bring final exams. From then I remember only late nights staring at textbooks and the tap of my fingers on my computer keyboard.

Expecting this day to be no different, Molly and I ran. We were late, Dad having been held up in an argument with Mom. In the afternoon, though, the class was dismissed early. Mrs Fischer took sick with a migraine and the class was out the door before she had even gone halfway down the verandah. This left Spiro, Molly and me – Spiro at his desk, Molly on her feet, me sitting facing them. Giving a shrug of her shoulders, Molly decided to go home and help Dad with housework. And I? Well, Spiro sprang from behind his desk -- his eyes as big as all space -- and I knew we would be up to something special.

I waited outside his house as he came down the path pushing a supermarket shopping cart – one from Uncle Charley's Super Discount Market, now long closed. The trolley was loaded with poles (which I later identified as aerials) and two hammers. We took turns wheeling the trolley, and in the warm breezy afternoon made our way to the eastern side of town with Spiro explaining that he was looking for sites called 'parallels.' The eastern side had always been the poorer side of town. Immediately visible after driving in off the interstate, it was a grassy paddock area, long home to shanties, the waste dump, utility stations and railway yard. Today, empty of everyone – even drifters and hobos when they could move further into town – the wind ghosted a melancholy, lamenting song, whipped and dusted the faces of two boys made brave with purpose.

The aerials had a compacted length of one yard and telescoped to two yards when you released a locking screw near the lower end. Below the screw there was a flange either side of a spiked tip which enabled the aerial to be hammered into the ground. Spiro explored before him with something that looked like a Frisbee attached to a wooden broom handle and, where he indicated, I hammered the aerials. There appeared to be no pattern to where we put them. I hammered one into the ground near some brush by an electrical tower, another through the holed floor of an abandoned freight car. We finished at the approach of dusk, pushed the

supermarket cart to Dempsey Street – midway between my house and Spiro's – and said goodbye.

Before Spiro left he handed me headphones that had a pair of tiny antennae and a pair of equally tiny spoked wheels attached to each earpiece. He said I might want to help monitor the signals coming in. This produced an excited skip from me all the way home, though really I didn't expect anything more than the dead silence I heard every time Spiro handed me his can.

Near midnight, headphones on, I sat in the chair beside my bed, my legs drawn up to my chin, the lights off. I was falling asleep, having not heard anything for the two hours I'd been sitting there. Something woke me. Suddenly I realized that there was a sound, a slow pulsing beep in my left ear that had probably been going for some time. The beeping slowly increased, grew in intensity and frequency until it was followed by a beep in my right ear, softer, one beat behind. Then another tandem set sounded, followed by another and another and another. Soon there were so many, all growing in pitch and frequency, that I could not keep track. Wonder-struck, out of breath, I leaned to see my reflection in the cupboard mirror at the end of my bed. The antennae were sparking like fizz sticks, the wheels spinning. I hurried to the bed end, sat there. The wheels span faster and faster, with the frequency of the beeps almost fell off their spindles. Scared, mesmerized, I wanted to rush out and get Molly and Dad, but found that I couldn't. Then everything stopped and there was silence.

The next day we took all the poles down. One pole, though, was missing.

Thirty miles from town, a tin sign hangs from one of its corners high upon a twelve-foot wire fence. Beyond the fence are the cylindrical bellies of once lordly silos, empty now over love-spent fields. The sign, in large plain green type, reads THE BRANDON BIO-TECH COMPANY. Just as Walker died in the shadow of the Brandon Bio-tech Company, the Brandon Bio-tech Company died in the shadow of the world.

On certain days I feel I must make the journey there, through the windshield watch the red orb of the sun bleed, casting the silos in black. The cancer endemic to man continues to sweep.

Until his death from the cumulative effects of continuous inhalation of cleaning agent and polish fumes, Sheriff Peterson guarded over our town. As the cancer riddled society's bones, Peterson stood against the breakdown with rigidity and belief, zealous in his fervour that only law could stand against the entropy. To him, law held a cleansing purity. Whether the day was overcast or sunny, he shone with it. His prowl car gleamed, his standard issue Colt All-American gleamed, his badge dissolved fingerprints. Polished precision drove the law, and the polished precision that was Peterson's prowl car drove one night up our drive, had Mom stumble from its door after being picked up on Arthur. She had gotten into a fight with Juergan in the Cattle Bar of the Rodeo Ranch nightclub, had smashed an empty bottle of tequila into the mirror plate behind the bar. In tight mini, she staggered up the drive. One staccato high heel caught in the edge between lawn and concrete, broke, and the shoe was thrown against the prowl car bonnet, clattering down and finally coming to lie in the beam of its headlights. I saw all this from behind the living-room curtain.

Mom had left this morning. She had raged for three nights, smashing to the floor everything she came near, tearing pictures from walls, turning over furniture. Each of these nights she'd fallen asleep on the living-room couch, wetting it, so that soaked through with urine, Dad had to burn it out the back. The house also smelled of disinfectant and bleach from where today Molly and I had cleaned, removing vomit. Now Mom was back.

There came the sound of a key scraping. Quickly, I ran to hide near the front door, there peered around the corner. A grip explored my hand. Startled, I turned to see Molly in her dressing gown. She whispered that she couldn't sleep, gripped tighter and held still. The scratch came again.

I listened for Dad, wondered if he had yet risen from his lounge chair where we'd been talking.

The latch clicked, the door swung open, bounced hard against the door stop. Mom fell through the frame, with one hand to the wall stumbled towards the living room, in its doorway swayed a lolling head upwards, slid to her knees. It was always a shock to see her. Clothes that were once tight hung now on bone. Little of the woman Dad had married remained.

Molly tugged on my pyjamas shirt, crying, tried to call me away. I half turned, in the corner of my eye, just caught sight of Mom as she crumpled to the floor. Then came the hurried pounding of Dad's footsteps.

Sheriff Peterson returned next morning. Dad and I were in the open garage, I sweeping sawdust. Peterson braked with a squeal in the drive, and as I leaned on the broom handle, hearing the crunch of its bristles, he hooked one leg out of the car. He stood six foot two inches tall, pike-lean, broad-shouldered and he sparkled. He did not wear the khaki of a county sheriff, but the black of city police. Glint blinded my eyes upwards from shoes, the plastic ends of the shoelaces, his belt buckle, handcuffs, shirt buttons, mirrorshades. Dad had to shield his eyes with his hand as he stepped out the door and said good morning.

Peterson removed his hat, ran a comb through crew-cut hair, followed this through with the flat of his hand, and before Dad could say anything more, moved around the car door to the bonnet, leaned his shirt-sleeved forearm to the spot where Mom had thrown the shoe, rubbed in a circular motion, huffed onto the spot and rubbed again. Dad stepped forward then, I think to apologize, but Peterson straightened, hooked his thumbs into his belt and broke the air with a smile. Each tooth flashed white and brilliant. Then he was gone, the smile remaining all the time as he bent into his prowl car, reversed, drove off.

We know distance; little in life is near to us. In a world so long empty of pity, what did I ever come to understand of love? Perhaps more than

most? Perhaps less than I could have? What I do know is that certain moments of time and place hold something around which the universe centres, these moments I wish to return to – times with Spiro, Molly and Dad.

Dad took to playing often with one of Spiro's toys, a hand-sized box with a clear plastic top and bottom. On its right side there were five little crank-like handles that turned thin brass rods lined with different coloured diodes on the inside. It worked best at night. Dad would sit for hours on the porch, turning the handles, watching the diodes light up in different patterns of red, green, yellow, purple, orange and blue. Always, not far above the porch rail, this pattern of dancing light would repeat itself, something like a map of twinkling stars.

During fall semester, Spiro began to visit frequently – however, only when it was certain that Mom would be spending the night with Juergan. From his coat pockets, with Christmas eyes, he'd spill his toys and gadgets onto the living-room carpet or my bedcover, have Dad, Molly and I gather around. He always wanted to explain them, but as he did you couldn't get him to be still. He'd jump around, bounce on the bed, make off around a corner, come back again, put down what ever he was holding, grab something else, be off again, all this in a squeaky voice. For each of us, it was like seeing a magic show, not feeling cheated, just allowing oneself to delight in what we were seeing. With Dad, noticeably, it seemed that some life came back. Spiro edged the grief from him, made it easier for him to accept a life seemingly without good. So the fall semester moved along quickly, brought us many fun times. Was it that I missed something?

Spiro and I began to spend a lot of time around Joe's, an old-timer who scavenged all sorts of junk from derelict buildings around town, till he'd formed himself a kind of junk yard. At the side of a chook pen behind his house was a wooden shed mostly full of computer hardware. One Sunday, Spiro began work on an old 786 that sat hidden towards the

back of a shelf. He laid in a circuit board that he'd gotten from home, booted it up, and on the monitor came all sorts of writing like Egyptian hieroglyphics. I thought something was wrong, but Spiro, bouncing up and down on the chair, said it was just lickety-split stuff, beamed, and was soon out the door with the 786 under his arm. I thought no more of it, at least not until hurrying over his house on Wednesday after he'd not shown at school.

As I knocked, the front door swung open with a creak. Down the hall I neither saw nor heard Jessica; on the landing of the stairs leading to Spiro's room saw that his door was edged open. Inside, on his workbench, the 786 was hooked up to large satellite dishes on tripods either side. The dishes swivelled like crazed heads, the monitor raced with symbols. Spiro was nowhere. Knowing he would not normally leave his gadgets going crazy, I panicked. I had to find him. I raced down the stairs, jumped on my bike, pedalled everywhere we'd ever been, all the time my stomach so hollow it seemed to fall through me. Not until well after dark did I find him, in the lane behind Col's Gaming Parlor. He was crawling on all fours.

I dropped my bike on the ground, its front wheel spinning, and slowly approached with my heart beating to burst. He looked very alien. Light from behind the fence threw the lane into a sulphur haze, lit his hair in spikes, reflected dazzling points off the gadgets on his coat. I swallowed, and on seeing me he choked back tears and blurted that Chocky was trying to get home, only they wouldn't let him. He then dug his fingers into the dirt, pounded, howled and pressed an ear to the ground.

Shaking, I reached my hand gingerly to him, but suddenly there was a loud clattering behind me. I snatched my hand back, saw a Pepsi can spinning on its edge and, silhouetted in a line across the lane, the Homers. Their leader, Ricky, stepped forward. He held a spiked baseball attached to the end of a chain, and swinging it, asked what was with Spiro. Before I could reply his best friend Schemer pushed past, nudged

Spiro with his boot and commented that Spiro was more in orbit than John Glenn.

I jumped to stand over Spiro, tried to get him up by hooking my hands under his arms, but couldn't. Ricky grinned, bent forward, his long oily hair falling along the side of his face. He said that it was 'bout time my loon friend started in on detox, that Jamie got picked up last week OD'n' on flyers while makin' like he was a loot vigilante, rollin' in the dirt and shootin' off a gun he'd rifled from his old man.

Spiro suddenly began to squirm and kick out. I slipped, fell back, and as I did, he broke free and scrambled on his hands and knees to where some cobbles had come loose. Ricky jumped back, turned on hearing a sound. Around the corner came the whirr of a siren and the flash of blue light. A loudspeaker crackled. The Homers cursed, pushed at each, tried to get around me. Schemer slipped and fell to one knee, with the others already over the back fence, scampered up and sprinted. Sheriff Peterson quickly signalled deputies Brown and Dawes forward, and in the slant of light across the alley, I saw with horror the tips of shotguns being lifted. Spiro was flat, with his ear to the ground. I ran to pull hard on his arm, but he let out a high-pitched scream, began to kick wildly in spasms. I burst into tears.

Dad, Spiro and I were sitting on the bench in the annexe of the sheriff's station when Jessica came. As always, she seemed to know when she was needed. It had taken both deputies to hold Spiro quiet in the prowl car. He had now calmed, but not spoken. Next to me, he sat with his knees up and his coat drawn over his head. Jessica, on entering, stood motionless in front of the swing glass doors, eyes on Spiro, head stiff, no flinch or movement in her face. Again I felt that sense of cold sweep over me as I always did with her. She moved up, knelt on one knee and tried to part Spiro's coat from his face, but he shrugged back vigorously.

Deputy Brown was at the counter. He hitched up his trousers, nodded to Dawes behind him, who left to walk down the corridor. Brown

flicked open a folder as Jessica came up. He said there weren't any charges, that no one had made out a complaint and that Spiro could go. He then leaned forward, spread his hands along the counter and explained that they had been obligated to search Spiro, that Spiro had a lot of stuff in his pockets that looked mostly like junk, but that they'd had to confiscate it anyway until they'd checked it all out. He then took a form from the pile of papers in the folder and asked Jessica to sign.

All this time Spiro had remained beneath his coat, parting it only once. When Jessica moved away from the counter, I saw Sheriff Peterson. He stood in the counter break, thumbs hooked in his belt. His trouser legs and shoes had been splashed with mud in the lane, both were clean now. Spiro stood. Jessica took hold of his hand, led him to the door, and I hurriedly followed. The night was dark and still, without any moon or stars, and there, just in the shadow of Jessica's dark blue Ford Equus, was Principal Davis, peanut bag in hand. Spiro's gadgets were not returned.

The days began to increasingly chill, the fall of leaves to settle. One morning in bed, already awake, I heard the kick and low heavy rumble of the pick-up engine as it started. A little frightened, I ran out the front to see the pick-up's tail-lights quickly lose their glow up the street. I hugged my arms against the cold that came through my cotton pyjamas. Dad never left early for work. On the kitchen table was a note: "Molly, Will, have gone to Harris for supplies. Take day off school. I will phone admin. Permission okay." I met Molly in the bedroom hall. Neither of us could return to sleep. We prepared breakfast, spent nervous hours in front of the TV.

Late afternoon, Molly and I were both in our rooms. I heard the pick-up, ran from my computer to the front porch, and there was Dad, a blanket hanging over something in his hand. He broke into a smile and bent to one knee. A noise came from underneath the blanket and immediately the blood rushed to my face. It was the flap of wings. Dad lifted the blanket. A large white cockatoo with yellow crest feathers clung to

the side of a cage. It screeched and again flapped its wings. I ran into Dad's arms. You will know that it didn't take me long to get to the aviary. The cocky was tame, and soon as I was outside the back door of the house it screamed, "Been bad bird, been bad bird, no cookie for Charlie, no cookie for Charlie."

I spent the next hour in the aviary. Charlie liked to be rolled onto his back, be scratched on the belly, screech, pretend to fight claw and beak. Birdy flew back and forth above my head -- jealous. I laughed, but knew that he would always be my favourite. At dinner, Dad explained that he'd seen an ad in the Harris Gazette, knew even before he'd finished reading that he had to drive there. When dinner finished, I immediately ran back outside and into the aviary. Dad and Molly came out not long after. Dad sat on a chair before the wire, Molly on his knee, and together we stayed laughing and talking until the sun went down.

In school, it was now possible for Spiro to do want he wanted. Each morning he'd bring in a box piled with wires, circuit boards, bits and pieces of anything electronic, and spend the day putting together a new gadget or working bits into an old one. He permanently kept a small satellite mounted on a foot-high tripod on a corner of his desk. Its dish was a kitchen plate that had a small hole in its centre, over which he'd put a chip, and over the whole plate there stretched a fine wire gauze. If ever the dish turned, he studied a green-lit screen with a square grid pattern that gave out a signal like radar. Mrs Fischer did her best not to let herself get distracted by all this, but she'd frequently be at her desk turning a pencil over and over, and at the end of each week she filed a report. Also, Spiro's absences from school began to increase, Jessica often phoning with an apology, or at some point during the day he'd be sent home with a headache – headaches which he'd never had before.

He never talked about that day in the lane, but something did happen: he started up about Chocky more and more, and to get around town quicker he built a motorized bike. It did bring some fun back.

He hooked an old two-stroke outboard motor that he'd found up to a rack at the back of the bike and ran the shaft directly to the rear wheel, which span off the propeller. Spiro never had to pedal except initially to kick it over. It averaged about 20 mph. To carry me, he built a pillion seat in front of the handlebars, from the forks, extending metal roots as foot rests. It was a cheer going for rides. The seat, a cut-down plastic milk crate, bounced on springs, and Spiro would speed along with his coat snapping behind him and me flapping my arms as if I was a bird. During the day, we didn't gather much attention other than laughs, but at night it wasn't long before we got into trouble.

Two angled poles stretched out behind the motor, and between them, a three-foot dish within a gimbal pivot. At opposite ends of the rim, two rods arced electricity between them. It scared people. At night, the electricity sparked so that Spiro could be seen a long way off surrounded by a buzz of blue light. Power failures occurred. Houses on either side would suddenly darken as we passed and there might be a big rupture of sparks from a roof antenna. Even TV sets blew, showering glass from their screens. Sheriff Peterson's phone never stopped ringing. One night, at the end of Thomas Street –the most affluent in town, with every house occupied – a patrol car waited, deputies Brown and Dawes before it. Seeing us coming – blue light, sparks from roof antennae down the street, Spiro's coat flapping, me howling – they laughed so much that when we braked hard to a halt they were doubled over, slapping the patrol car in turn and they couldn't keep their hysteria from bubbling through on the radio.

On the bench in the station, Spiro again shook beneath his coat. And Peterson? He stood behind the counter, the chrome mirror of his sunglasses reflecting his two deputies. Dawes was speaking quietly, but I heard him say that he would make out a report in the morning stating it was over, and that the bike was loaded and ready to go.

The Tuesday of the last week of term, I walked back and forth outside

of class while I waited for Molly, pain still deep inside me. That night, before bed, Dad had sat beside me, Molly in a corner chair. It was close to midnight, and I could not stop crying. Spiro had been found during morning recess, behind a bush at the side of the library, legs kicking spasmodically, mouth thick with spittle. Jessica was called to take him home, and I did not know what was going to happen. Dad hugged me, managed in time to tuck me into bed, and – in my universe away from Spiro – he and Molly stayed in my room till I slept.

I stopped, held still. We were earlier than normal for school. I lifted my toes, felt the wetness of my socks within the shoes, from having cut across the playing field rather than making our way around by the path. I had wanted to. After Dad had dropped us off, seeing the silver-frosted field, I couldn't resist crunching across, feeling the break of the grass, so to later see the trudge of our footprints, our indented, fossilised progress.

A chill wind blew the length of the verandah. I moved again, slapped my arms. Where the first of the classrooms lay boarded up, the sun had crept onto the verandah. I halted in its ray and stared across the concrete assembly court, past the flagpole, at the new addition of spirals of barbed wire atop the perimeter fence. It wouldn't stop gang kids raiding. Nothing really helped anymore. I moved back up the verandah, the sun hitting between my shoulder blades like the melt of butter. Molly had gone to talk with her friend Rebbecca, and had disappeared around the corner by the drink fountain, at the end of the verandah. Spiro had not yet come.

The tips of my shoes were stuck with grass. I knocked each shoe twice against the verandah pole and then balanced myself at the edge by digging the ridges of my soles into the plank ends. Everything would be different by the end of the following spring semester. I was already worried. The class had dropped to ten, but probably only Spiro, Molly, James and I would go on to Harris High. Only the four of us had passed the end-of-semester exams.

Molly came around the corner. I sprang back, and in the sudden blow of wind, hunched and crossed my arms to my chest. Molly had her head down. She looked up, held still, sniffed back a tear. What I perhaps could not understand as a child, only feel, I see now. In another's pain lies our own. I saw myself, our family. Crossing the field, Molly had walked silently behind me. Driving us to school, Dad had sat silent behind the wheel. We are of the same humanity. I remained with my arms crossed, suddenly no longer cold, my stare captured. Molly had grown beautiful. Short black hair, cropped to a bob brushed her face, her delicate cheeks glistened, her eyes promised angels. Rebbecca would be leaving with her family after Christmas.

When Christmas morning came that year, Dad found Mom unconscious in the kitchen. She had suffered respiratory failure from an OD. The doctor at Harris General let her home three days later and for weeks on end she stayed locked in her bedroom.

Life is lived dying, but there is more.

The sun broke once more on my back, hit the length of the verandah in yellow oblong shafts, and there was Spiro behind Molly, all a-flicker and a-blink with the sun glinting and flashing off the ensemble of gizmos hanging from his coat.


24A
3 1 8

SEVEN

JEFFERSON

I've brought you breakfast." Holding an aluminium tray, Anna stood with her legs together before the bars. Glen, a little behind her, fingered through his keys.

"I'll bet yah hungry by now, Mr King." He stepped up, unlocked the door and swung it wide. "Sorry about Dave takin' those sandwiches, but he can be mean like that when he wants his way."

Knees drawn to his chest, King sat on the bed with his back to the wall.

Anna walked in. "Can't you find a table and chair, Glen? Whatever happened to small town hospitality?"

The deputy flushed. "Sorry, Miss Summers. We haven't had anyone in this cell for a while. I'll see what I can do." He hurried out. "You all right if I leave you alone?"

"I'll scream if I have to."

Glen locked the door and made off down the corridor.

Anna wore a pale blue turtleneck sweater, black denims and Brando jacket. Her hair, tousled, unbrushed, fell from an uneven centre part to her shoulders. She smiled at King. "I came in last night. I'm not sure if Dave told you. You were still unconscious."

King remained silent on the bed.

"What happened, John?"

He stood slowly, just as slowly moved around her, and with back to her, kneaded his palms. "It was a couple of rednecks."

"And you just stood there?"

"I couldn't get myself to care."

Glen was at the door with a small wooden table. He put it down, unlocked the door to place it by the bed. He followed this with two wooden chairs. "Dave said you've got half an hour, Miss Summers."

Anna nodded. She waited for Glen to leave, then put the tray down on the table. "You like to say a lot, don't you? Well, I see I'll have to be quick to get a word in." She clasped her hands behind her back and paced before the bars. "I was born twenty-eight years ago. My mother's name is Marilyn and my father's Alan. I had an uneventful childhood, being shy at school. Both my parents are very religious, Presbyterian, but I've never gone along with their thinking. It's been a source of unhappiness, so maybe I'm naturally rebellious. My brother, Jason … well, you've met him. He grew up, pride of the herd. The good son, whereas I'm the –" She stopped. "Am I boring you? No? Good." She unclasped her hands.

"It's funny how things turn out, isn't it? You can never quite predict. I would always have thought that I'd grow up like my parents, happy here in town, content to live out my life, staring flat to the horizon. But … well, what can I say? Life throws you a curve ball. The car, the Defender, Dad bought me that, perhaps because he loves me, perhaps for other reasons. He's got plenty of money, some inherited, some from the old farm. He doesn't work now, mostly reads the paper in front of the fire. Mum, she just cooks and washes up. Has some interest though in cultivating roses. Me, I don't know what I want. Maybe some sort of life in a big city. You know, now that things are on the improve." She turned and faced King. "Well, any questions?"

After a moment's silence, King replied, "I think you've covered everything."

Anna smiled weakly. "You don't allow people to get close to you do you, John?"

King moved back to the bed and sat. "We bear our abandonment. We possess only ourselves."

"What about Walker?" Anna leaned against the bars of the door. "What were you doing there?"

"I know a few people who've chosen to stay."

"Oh … and?"

"To remember something."

"About yourself? … Why didn't you explain that to Dave?"

"You learn that you can come to deny almost anything, that nothing can be defined. I didn't see the point in talking about something I can't make sense of."

"And by that you mean?"

"I mean that there are questions."

Anna was silent momentarily, looked down, then up. "You know I always thought that you could reduce life to a very simple thing, that of the love between man and woman."

The cell door ground open. Glen dug his hands into his trouser pockets. "I'm sorry, Miss Summers, time's up. Dave wants to see the prisoner now."

Anna stared, hardfaced, at King, shook her head in frustration and hurried out.

Glen cuffed King and led him forward. Jolson was in his office, talking into a cordless hand set. He waved them in.

"It's clear, Wallace, but I'm not backing down." He moved a chair in front of his desk, pointed King into it and signalled Glen and Anna to a brown leather couch against the wall. "Taggert's sold himself to a three-year stretch on this one. I've got a case here." He sat down and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm giving you a fair chance. I suggest you tell your councillors to dust off their pants' seats and give me some support here." He slammed the phone down and quickly sipped at some coffee.

"That was the major. He's got himself in a sweat over you, John. Seems Joshua's putting pressure on to have you out of town."

King felt a stabbing pain in his ribs. Jolson continued. "I've decided to let you go. I know you're not going anywhere. But I want to ask you about that matter we discussed earlier. I suspect you've been thinking about it?"

King waited, looked slightly to the side of Jolson. "I need more time."

"I can understand that." Jolson laced his fingers together and leaned on the desk. "And I'll give you time, at least until the end of the week." He stood up. "Remember, I can turn you over to the Illinois authorities any time. Don't make me do something both you and I will regret. I've asked Anna to drive you back to your motel. I suggest you stay there and get some more rest."

They all rose. Jolson smiled, extended a firm grip towards King. "No hard feelings, okay? I'm just doing my job."

King took the hand weakly. The cropped line of Jolson's moustache pinched up against his nose as his smile extended. He led the way down the corridor past wood panelling and frosted glass, turned left and entered an office with grey filing cabinets. He turned to his deputy. "You can take him from here Glen. Scott's got the release forms ready.

"Nice to see you again Anna. Give my best to Alan and Marilyn. Tell them I'll take them up on that invitation to dinner. I can always do with a good meal."

Anna smiled and nodded.

At the sergeant's desk, King signed a clipped sheet and was handed his hat, wallet and watch. Glen turned briefly to Anna before leaving them both at the entrance. On the first step down, King hunched his shoulders and folded his arms to his chest against the wind. Across the road, the white clock on the town hall spire showed the time to be approaching ten. A few cars moved along, spraying the dirty slush into the air. King felt Anna grip his arm.

"My car's just around the corner."

Her black denims hugged her slim hips and the delicate, rounded fall of her bottom. King closed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw she had turned toward him, the curve of a hesitant smile on her lips.

Night enveloped. King rested in the passenger seat of the Defender as it slid through falling snow. To both sides of the road, unlit clapboard houses stared from between shifting shadows, while in the beam of the car lights an occasional stunted willow tree reached forth grey fingers. Anna, her face lit in the red, green and yellow light of the console, leaned her elbow on the window, rested her forehead in her palm. The radio crackled momentarily, went silent. When it came to life again, the D.J. murmured an apology and announced a Roy Anderson tune. King listened for a while, but his eyes drifted again to the road. The houses had grown fewer.

The Defender slowed, turned a corner and tunnelled into black. King closed his eyes. The radio shifted across the dial, sprayed static, was silent. A driveway bump. Anna pulled into a self-opening garage and turned towards him.

"This was the first area of town to die – the fringe. It's strange, isn't it, how things find death. It starts from the outside. Gradually all that is left is a small pocket of warmth, then that too grows cold."

King looked over. She sat staring forward, the tips of her eyelashes and the fine hairs on the curve of her nose dipped in light. He reached for the door latch, but as he did so, she grabbed his arm. "What happened 30 years ago with the breakdown still frightens me, John. The economics of greed, self interest. Maybe we deserved it in a way. That's what happens when you lose the capacity to give, to really care. It's the heart of the people that matters." She sat silent. "I try to get up to the service station every day, to help out. I want to, for Jason, for the town, but I think for me it's too late. I've become what I hate. I just want to get out." Against the garage wall the Defender's lights burned brightly, bit a sharp

contrast to where night angled into the corners. She let go of his arm. "Is that so bad? Do you find it vile? Repulsive?"

King faced her slowly, did not hear her leave the garage. He followed her up the path and knocked the snow from his boots against the porch boards, then trailed her as she made her way from room to room and turned on the lights. In the living room, she came up to him.

"Can I get you anything?"

He shook his head.

She paused in the open door leading to the kitchen. By the bookshelf, King looked along a row of titles, but could not take them in. When Anna passed behind him, he turned to her. She placed a mug on a hardwood coffee table and sat on the blue upholstered couch. As he approached she looked up, then bent quickly to her mug. It was evident that in the kitchen she had been holding back tears.

"I'm sorry, John, about in the garage." She sniffed, gripped the mug across its top and turned it. "I guess I've been presuming a lot. I mean, that you could ever like me. Sometimes we hope too much over something and that blinds us to unreal expectations."

King stood beside an armchair.

She picked up the mug and smiled. "You weren't expecting me to return to your motel and invite you to dinner, were you? I mean, not after I dropped you off this morning."

He removed his hat and turned it by its brim. "No."

"I could love you, John."

He gave no response.

Anna laughed somewhat resolutely, wiped her hand under one eye. "It's funny, isn't it: you try not to become selfish when you live on your own, but you end up that way, don't you? Out of necessity." She leaned back. "I've had a few men, never anyone serious. Always it's been a way of coping. A hug, an embrace in bed to remind you what touch is like,

but love – you almost convince yourself that it's only for other people." She bent to her mug. "You arrive, someone different. I honestly thought I would get over what I first felt, but the feelings have hung on. I can't say why. There are never reasons for love, are there? You kinda make up the reasons I think? Out of need." She raised her eyes towards King. "Dave showed me your file."

King paled.

"It's a small town, John."

He stared straight at her. "What do you know?"

"It doesn't say much. You're a complete enigma."

"And you're offering pity?"

"No, John, nothing. Only what any decent human being would offer."

"Tell it to someone else."

She sprang up. "I've just admitted what I could feel for you. Try and understand."

King paced to the bookshelf. He lit a cigarette, pulled on it strongly. "You're wasting your time."

She stared with drawn lips, ran her hand through her hair. "What about that clipping? Where did you get that from?"

"From a barber shop in Sacramento, between the pages of a magazine."

"I don't believe you."

"That's your choice."

She rested her hand on her hip, stood for a moment. Shook her head. "I think it's time I fixed that dinner I used as a sorry excuse to invite you here."

King stared after her as she made her way through the door. The bang of cupboards opening and closing sounded in the kitchen. There was a pause, then came the sharp beep of button controls. He finished the cigarette, lit another, and paced.

EIGHT

WALKER

The church stood on Clay Street, a simple, raised, white clapboard with a front and rear porch and a small wooden cross upon its gabled front. Spiro and I had hammered ten six-foot poles of one-inch galvanized piping at intervals along its sides. He said they were conductor poles. Two nights after we planted them, we came down together on my bike, Spiro on the carrier frame at the back. It was the second month of spring, the days warming again, but still the night held a crystal cold and we both shivered a little in our coats. We sat, backs to a cottonwood, on the grass at the side of the church, Spiro with his knees drawn up and something like a stethoscope to his ears. We did not have to wait long.

Slowly, the conductor poles began to glow with a blue light. A few fired sparks, and then a droning, a low humming begun. I looked at Spiro. He had the 'stethoscope' end to the ground. Thunder cracked. My eyes jumped to the church, saw the sky lit with lightning and blue light arcing over the roof from the poles. With wind tearing around us, my eyes covered with my hands, this lasted long enough for me to begin to get scared. But it did stop.

The poles, when we crept over to them, lay bent, melted, in curves to the ground. Spiro said Chocky had jumped.

Adventures were never far away. Two weeks later on a Wednesday came the incident with the TV. Dad had suggested that I invite Spiro for dinner. Spiro agreed, happy as always to see Dad. At about six o'clock,

Jessica dropped him off. We ate at the kitchen table – or, in Spiro's and my case, played more than actually ate – then gathered in the living room. It was to be a time with Mom, and again, a mirror to a sad journey.

Dad leant back on the new couch he had made and upholstered with cloth bought in Harris. I had long ago shown him the vidi-cube Spiro had given me that first day in class, and he was turning it intently, not saying anything, happy to just puzzle. On the carpet, next to the TV, Molly and I knelt either side of Spiro, he fiddling a screwdriver through a small hole between two rotatable toggles in a small black box. A crackle: I looked up to see the TV screen flick into life, though we hadn't touched any controls. I wondered what would be on. Television didn't offer much any more unless it was news, sports or game shows. To see a film or an old TV program you had to hire a video.

On the screen was a long, white-bearded Old Testament prophet juggling small globes of the earth into the air. I nudged Molly in surprise, realized that it was film from the New Future Circus, a travelling evangelical show that was a congregation-gathering arm of the Church of the New Future. I checked behind me to see Dad still intent on the cube, one hand to his forehead. Molly suddenly bumped into me. She had sprung up and was jumping up and down clapping. There was the juggler, six foot tall and right outside the TV. I howled in surprise. Dad leapt from the couch and was quickly next to us. Spiro was just smiling his melon grin and jiggling the controls of the box. I looked carefully. A type of halo surrounded the juggler. Dad walked around, approached with his hand out, stole closer, until his hand went through the man's body. We sank back and kept watching.

The globes flew high, spun in blue-white blurs, descended again and again in arcs to the hands -- the orbit of the world in the hands of a manic prophet. Spiro stood, jigged his feet, laughed double, sprang with Christmas delight. Molly, Dad and I were no different.

The living-room door burst open and there was Mom. Her blouse was

ripped and lipstick was smudged over her face. Her glazed eyes tried to focus, horrified. The prophet–juggler started to fumble, miss the globes, which fell on him, burst and splashed him with water. Mom shrieked, as wild as I've ever seen her. Spiro's eyes widened. He dropped the box, in less than a second ran into the kitchen with Mom chasing him. I looked to Dad, fear ripping me, but he was already after her. There was a crash and a scream. With Molly behind me, I froze in the doorway, to see Mom sprawled on the kitchen floor and a kitchen chair over on its side.

Spiro was not there, but I guessed there was only one place he would be – in my room. Quickly there, I slammed and locked the door, leaned against it and in the dark tried to make him out. I couldn't see him, but then I heard a muffled shuffling. I found him hunched and shaking in the corner of my closet, buried in clothes, head between his knees.

An hour later, when everything was quiet and Mom asleep – having been dragged by Dad from my door where she had kept banging and yelling – I snuck Spiro out of the house.

Classes in the final semester of seventh grade practically became private tutoring. Only Spiro, Molly, James and I returned after the Christmas break. I do not want to say that classes became relaxed, but with Mrs Fischer's concentration only on the four of us, and with us happy to learn, exams and assignments became easy to pass.

Spiro's licence to do as he wanted continued, but so did Mrs Fischer's weekly reports to Principal Davis. These, I am convinced, she came to enjoy less and less, and I do believe now that she actually wrote very little in them. Spiro, as always, tinkered away on something and read book after book at such a speed that we could only joke that the pages were blank.

One thing, though, we could not joke about was the upcoming school year, the first of Junior High in Harris. This was much discussed. Harris was the largest town in the Southern region of the state. To a degree its size kept it alive, but the breakdown ate at its fringes, moved ever more inward, as it

did everywhere. Harris existed, the few times that I had seen it with Dad, as a gangland war zone: its streets, buildings, holed, guttered by the continued caustic blow of wind and sagebrush. Harris Junior and Senior High, rumour had it, were not taken seriously by anyone. Certainly, Major Stanton saw the school as nothing more than a daycare centre, a place for kids to be other than on the street. Mrs Fischer could only wish us luck, advised that we should really leave for the capital of the State.

The days passed, to summer.

I am in the living room. It is evening. From where I lie upon my stomach on the carpet, school papers spread before me, I stare dreamily towards Charlie. He is on the couch back, behind Dad, waddles back and forth, his clawed feet crisscrossing, his tail feathers -- fanned out -- swishing side to side. Birdy sleeps on the TV antenna, head tucked into his back.

It is a little warmer than usual for the time of the year, and Dad, in singlet and overalls, drinks a lemonade, eyes on the television.

The toe claw of one of Charlie's feet catches in the fabric of the couch. He tugs at it, screeches, flaps his wings, so Dad is forced to duck his head. I laugh, quickly sit to my knees. Charlie frees himself, flies with the loud slap of heavy wing beats to where I am, lands in the middle of my papers, scatters them, flips onto his back and wants to be scratched.

It is a small moment in the middle of the week that I remember, because by the weekend, on the Saturday night following a day in which Spiro had continually complained of a headache, the darkest of hands was dealt.

We approached Dean's. It stood between the boarded-up fronts of a convenience store and a telecommunications shop, its window refracting bursts of vidi game lights within. A group of kids with turned-up shirt collars and long rider coats crouched against the convenience shop's wall.

White faces lolling, eyes sunken, they sniffed from creased paper bags that billowed and collapsed.

Spiro and I stepped from the road onto the walkway boards, stamped our boots free of mud from where we'd made our way across the opposite vacant lot. Twin glass doors opened with a sliding whoosh, closed slowly behind us, and in the shifting dark, lights whirled and flashed, noises whizzed, popped, and kids everywhere, jerky and punchy, knocked the air. We'd walked all the way from Spiro's house, Spiro continually clutching at his head.

Once he had stopped, cringed to the ground. With my arm over his shoulder I suggested we turn back, but he took from an inner coat pocket a grid-marked screen from which two wires with alligator clips hung, one red, one black, and in a thin, strained voice had bleated, "Chocky."

A kid in front of us on a V/R couch rolled from side to side, his hands high and swaying. Spiro, head down, slid his way past staring kids and went from one vidi to the next. In a back corner stood an old game. Dust covered the curve of its cockpit roof, and within no lights showed. Spiro stopped, brought out the grid-marked screen, placed it on the cockpit floor, and from another pocket yanked out the dinner plate and tripod that he kept on his school desk. Quickly within the pilot's seat, he slid three silver discs that I did not recognize as coins or tokens into the slot. The screen shot up with the fleck of grey static and lines.

I checked behind me to see kids already beginning to gather, and a little afraid, leaned my shoulder to the roof. The screen blanked, flicked into a single horizontal line, then filled with a heavy, square-jowled face with cropped black hair, bushy brows and bulging blue eyes. It mouthed commands in a drawling voice, and against an orange-red nebula galaxy, triangular space fighters showed circling a larger ship.

Spiro hurriedly hooked the plate to the tripod, sat the tripod upon the cockpit dash. With a screwdriver from his tool kit, he prised the joystick open beneath its firing buttons, attached the alligator clips to two wires

that he had crimped of their plastic. The box gave a long beep and its screen lit with a green cross hair that shifted, pulse-like, from place to place. At once the dinner plate started to turn from side to side. Kids began to push my back.

Spiro was working fast. His hand swung the joystick about and quickly the game moved through its levels of play. Spiro's face, which occasionally caught in the cockpit lights, ran with beads of sweat and his eyes were strained wide open. A single fighter plane suddenly showed on the screen. It abruptly fell into a back flip, then wheeled over and over until it looped so fast that it became a blur. Spiro jolted back and sat still, his hand just off the joystick. I waited, knowing something was about to happen. Then it happened. The fighter plane shot off the edge of the screen. My face drained. Chocky.

With rapid staccato movements, the cross hair shot all over the grid and the plate turned so rapidly that the tripod nearly toppled over. Spiro clutched at his head and twisted in the chair. At the edge of the screen, where the fighter had gone, there came a burst of white flame, and with a wail, Spiro collapsed to the floor. There he squirmed, legs kicking out, body jerking. I stared, panicked. I did not know what to do. Kids bumped, jostled, yelled, pointed. I tried to control Spiro's jerking, tried to say things that would help, but quickly knew that I could do nothing.

Then Jessica came.

Again, I cannot say how she knew. All of a sudden she was just there. I watched as she gently gathered Spiro's arms to his sides and lifted him, with his legs still thrashing and his head twisting from side to side. She narrowed her eyes threateningly and the gamers fell back, but she then gave me a quick glance and nod. Outside the sniffers lay collapsed against the wall – arms out, heads tipped back or forward to their chest. Jessica's car idled with its rear door already open. She laid Spiro inside while I stood on the walkway with a heart so heavy it seemed to sink through me. Spiro coughed and doubled up in a spasm. And then

Jessica was gone, driving with a quick change of gears up the road.

In the morning, Jessica drove Spiro to Harris General. X-rays were taken of his head, a CAT scan done, a MIR performed. The doctors found nothing wrong and he came home again.

Life became increasingly uncertain.

Telephones began to disappear all over town. Talk was that people were losing cellulars and that telephones were disappearing from homes. When telephone booths began to get smashed – the phones ripped from their mounts – folk called for Sheriff Peterson to do something. I did suspect Spiro, but was not sure until two weeks into these events, when he asked me at school if that night I could meet him on Jamieson Street.

After a dinner which Dad and Molly prepared, I cycled there – a little late – as fast as I could. A once-affluent street that ran parallel to Arthur, no lights now shone from the houses, the only illumination from street lamps. On both sides of the street thick, leafy elms stood, the light through their branches glistening and sparking. Midway along the road I saw Spiro crouched down, arms crossed over the top his head.

I hurriedly pedalled the bike onto the path and leaned it against the nearest elm. Spiro immediately jumped up, squealed, "Chocky phone, Chocky phone." On his head he wore this crazy helmet. It looked like aluminium, had twin aerials near his ears, and around the rim diodes intermittently flashed red, amber and green. Before I could say anything he reached into a pocket of his coat, drew out a cellular phone which he pointed to again and again. The phone had two wires running from its base which plugged into the back of a small monitor screen. The screen was fuzzy and crackled with grey and white static.

He repeated his squealing, "Chocky phone, Chocky phone," unplugged the monitor, smashed the phone to the ground and jumped on top of it. Then we were off on the bike, I pedalling as fast as I could, he on the carrier frame behind me.

We turned down street after street, Spiro clapping me on the back to point out the way. Most were deserted; occasionally, though, there was the odd lit house, and I wondered what exactly it was that Spiro was looking for. Quite suddenly, almost missing it in the dark, we came by a telephone booth. Spiro thumped my back. I braked and he was off before I had time to dismount.

With a satellite dish raised in one hand, a wire from it running into his coat, he circled the booth. The dish quite suddenly flared up in a shower of sparks, caused me to duck my head and turn away. When I looked back he was in the booth, a crowbar in his hand. In shock, I froze as he hooked the bar behind the phone and yanked at the mount till it broke away and clattered to his feet.

There wasn't anything else to do but get the bike as quickly as I could, grab Spiro and make a run for it. I barely had the bike off the ground before there came the whoop and whirr of a siren behind me. I paled to see Deputies Brown and Dawes simultaneously slam their doors. Spiro was gone, already halfway down the block with the phone under his arm.

How he was caught I don't know. By the time I was able to clear the blur of tears from my eyes, he was in front of me, hands cuffed behind his back, Dawes by his side. As for me, Deputy Brown had been holding my elbow for a long while as he shouted in my ear, words which I hadn't heard.

You will know that the sheriff's office was very familiar to us by then. I was not allowed to call Dad. Spiro sat trembling, would not say a word when questioned by Peterson's mirrored sunglasses. Little fuss however was made over his muteness. After being quickly shown a search warrant we were back in the deputies' patrol car and driven to Spiro's house.

Jessica did not greet us as we entered – in fact did not appear at any time throughout the search. The deputies seemed to know where to look. After first asking Spiro, to no avail, about each room, they only made a cursory search of most of the house – excepting the kitchen, where at least some attempt was made to check the boxes stacked up

to the ceiling. Upstairs, the pattern was the same, but curiously Spiro's room was left till last.

Peterson, Dawes and Brown gave little reaction to Spiro's gadgetry and scopes. The phones were found under his bed. There were thirty-five, in two cardboard boxes. All but one were smashed, this an old phone with a finger dial. It was on its own, protected in a clear perspex case with a hinged lid. Dawes opened the lid, but did not dare touch the phone. It vibrated and hummed, the dial spinning so fast that it was a blur.

This was the only phone taken back to the station. Spiro was left, without a word, in his room, and I was driven home, to spend much of the remaining night explaining things to Dad and Molly. In the morning, Dawes and Brown came by again to pick me up. Spiro was already in the patrol car, and together we were driven back to the phone booth where Sheriff Peterson, together with a reporter and a photographer from the Harris Gazette, waited.

Once out of the car, Spiro and I were made to stand by the booth, its unhinged phone was shoved under the crook of his arm, the helmet pushed onto his head. I was held between Dawes and Brown, and a photograph was taken.

That day Spiro somehow changed. His third time in the sheriff's office must have broken something within him. When the helmet was lifted from his head, he stood with no more life than a slumped marionette. I somehow knew that gone forever was the Spiro I had known since the day when I had pulled him from beneath the wrecked Pontiac -- the kid whose face would light up like the moon, who'd jig and dance, be as a child in whose eyes wonder had struck.

You always saw it somewhere, a gliding black and chrome shadow, aerials both sides of its bonnet, tinted windows – Principal Davis's Lincoln. Folk did more than talk. In a town that for most was devoid of humour and entertainment (excepting of course Arthur Street) 'Davis sightings' became a game, a matter of speculation, betting and opinion.

He could be seen anywhere: perched in a tree, upon a roof, behind a curtain, in a doorway, always with his bag of peanuts that he regularly dipped into, and always in a freshly laundered black suit, aviator sunglasses and with a spiral notebook. A weekly competition was held every Wednesday night at the Walker Bridge and Bingo Club, which met in the town hall. Jacob and Ruth attended regularly, and never failed to report to us the argument and conjecture before members entered their guesses on the forthcoming week's times and sightings of Principal Davis on specially columned entry forms.

Entries were scrutinized the following Wednesday, and the one that matched most closely the number of sightings and approximate times, won. The prize? The winner's name was typed on a card and displayed in front of a caricature bust of Davis complete with sunglasses. It had been carved by Dad and was kept in a glass showcase at the end of the hall together with other perpetual trophies, such as the annual Bridge Tournament cup. If Principal Davis knew this he did not show it.

It was once reported that he was seen in the bell keep of the Presbyterian church one Sunday morning, hands over his ears, the bell pealing for service, and that later a smashed brown paper bag of peanuts was found by the bell rope, having apparently fallen from high. That week's competition was won by Mr and Mrs Honigsbaum, who had guessed he might be found on the Saturday evening within the church, crouched, for some reason or other, behind the pulpit.

Here, I must pause, say to those who will accuse me of being in love with memory and melancholy, to think on this:

It is night. I, upon macadam road, steer the car into the dirt of the run off. In the beam of the car's headlights, a leaning and broken fence line guards frozen, farrowed earth; to the fore, shiny and luminous, the white centre line of the road bores into blackness. It is what is ahead. Somewhere, at some time, a bridge was crossed, which led to the darker recesses of life and light.

Was this the last day of elementary school? When it came, there was no fanfare, no games with water bombs or running amuck. Final exams had been passed by all of us, but I can't be sure of Spiro – no grades were written on his graduation report, only a clearance that he could pass on to Junior High. Mrs Fischer was only a little teary, gave a short speech of congratulations. No earlier than when we usually left school, Spiro, Molly, James and I walked from class, in the blow of a warm summer wind, heat and dust in our eyes, made our way down the path that led across the lawn, stepped through the cyclone fence gate.

NINE

JEFFERSON

He walked quickly, unaware how many blocks he had turned. He hoped to find the motel, wanted to believe that Jolson would take no further interest in him, but knew it was a desperate hope. He rounded a corner, hunched forward against a blast of wind and gripped his scarf. A house stood aglow up ahead. A sign above its roof turned and flashed JESUS SAVES intermittently in blue neon. King slowed. All the windows of the house were lit, the light spilling through drawn curtains to strike dissecting shafts across a frozen, cropped lawn. King stopped. Suddenly, and loudly, came the ascending sound of an organ, then abruptly the music ceased and on the steps of the porch, Uriah Johnson stood with a megaphone raised to his lips.

"Knock and the door shall be opened unto thee." He came down. "The weak journey and seek peace. Praise be to he who delivers us into salvation." He lowered the megaphone and extended a lank hand towards King. "I have been waiting for you, Brother King. We are allies against the tide of black Armageddon that has beset this town."

A gust of wind whipped up the path, snapping the broad brim of the preacher's black hat. King took Uriah's hand, then quickly freed himself of the grip. "I don't know what you mean."

"The Lord's way is ever mysterious, Brother King. Brother Jolson has spoken of how you are to smite the vigilante terror." He smiled. King fell back against the wind and grimaced as pain pierced his ribs. Uriah

gripped him by the shoulder. "Come."

King hesitated, looked up at the turning sign. From the porch, Uriah waved him forward. King followed up the path and stepped through the front door into a purple hallway with doorways gilded to resemble pillars. In the living room, before a mural depicting a renaissance fountain circled by a flight of beaming Botticelli angels, stood the organ King had heard, its pipes climbing into puffed cotton clouds suspended below the ceiling. Uriah closed the mahogany lid on the organ keys.

"So this is him?"

King turned to his right, to see a women bent forward in a wheelchair, her face in shadow. "He has the eyes of those who have seen beyond their years." Stiff fingers reached to a toggle, and the chair lurched and bumped forward.

"You are surprised, aren't you? Expected to see an old woman's face. I'm seventy-three, but look forty." She leaned back. "I've almost never left this house, Mr King, not in all the years I've lived. I suffer from albinism. I can't. Uriah, and before him his brother, have cared for me. They've been good sons ..." She lifted her hand and waved weakly to Uriah. "You can go now, but first bring some soup for our guest."

Quietly, Uriah left.

"My name is Judith. Please, sit down."

King looked around. By a fireplace in which a small fire burned stood the stuffed figures of a sheep, goat and donkey. Nearby, a cradle packed with straw held the swathed bundle of a Christ-child. He sat in a broad-armed chair to the side of the fire.

"Try not to judge us by what you see here, Mr King. No one would marry me in this town. After my parents moved on, leaving this house, I got married to the town preacher. An angelic vision, he used to call me. He used to preach from a pulpit surrounded by flaming oil. One day he

fell back into the flames. By the time the congregation had the fire out, there wasn't much left. You can imagine the effect it had on the boys."

King stared at her with a heavy expression.

"Jonah was the only sane one. I made Uriah keep the towing business going when he was killed. Preaching doesn't bring in much income." She smiled. "You're probably wondering why I put up with it all. There's nowhere for me outside this town."

Uriah came in with the soup. He placed it, with some bread, on a small table to the side of the chair.

"That will be all, Uriah. I'll see me Mr King out when it's time to go." She span the chair closer to the fire, drew dark glasses from a side pocket and pressed them to porcelain skin. In the light of the fire, her white hair, drawn into a bun, shone red.

"If you've heard the song 'Beautiful Nebraska' you may understand. We can come to accept almost anything, but never the death of our identity. This town is home and a way of life to many people. It's been that way a long time."

The screech of tyres sounded outside. Judith hit the toggle on the chair and moved it to the window. "Damn that cow-poke dish-hand." Uriah appeared at the door. "Get the shotgun, Uriah, and turn off the lights. King, you best get out of the way. It's Taggert."

Uriah moved to a gun rack below a portrait of a Quaker couple beside a Jersey cow, and loaded two shells into the barrels of a gun. At the window, Judith parted the curtains. "There's about five of them. We'll try and talk to Taggert first." She turned to Uriah. "Go out onto the porch. Tell them King's not here. I'll phone Dave."

King rose slowly. "You'd better hurry, John." Judith removed her glasses. "You don't know Taggert. He's got the town behind him, including the Mayor. He enjoys shootin' up our sign late at night, especially after he's had a few."

A car horn blared. "You in there, King? I hear you've turned rat for the sheriff. Might have expected it from a welfare freeloader."

King hurried to the hallway, and heard Uriah yell from the open front door, shotgun cradled across his arms. "Comest thou again, brother? Even though I have warned thee."

A shot shattered the porch light, scattering glass across floorboards. Joshua Taggert stepped from behind a battered, green pick-up and re-cocked his shotgun. "I don't need to hear any of your ravin', preacher. Save it for yah sour-mouthed congregation. Bring out the drifter."

King came past Uriah and stepped onto the porch.

Joshua spat out a slag of chewing tobacco and raised the shotgun. Quickly, a booted and blue denim-clad cowboy ran up and jerked the gun down. "Leave it for the Major, Josh."

King halted halfway down the path. "Go ahead ... shoot. It's probably easier."

Joshua scowled and edged forward, keeping the shotgun level. "Easier … meaning what?"

"Death is a form of end."

Joshua spat out more tobacco. "You're askin' for it, ain't yah? Whatcha doin' with that preacher?"

"Nothing that matters."

Joshua brought the barrel to King's throat. "What are yah? Some kinda wise-ass bum? I've heard about your kind. Educated dropouts, drifting around the country, carrying signs. Nothin' but a load of zap-heads."

The cowboy grabbed Joshua's arm. "He doesn't mean anythin', Josh."

King swallowed. "We're kind of the same, Josh, both terminally disaffected."

Joshua pulled the shotgun away, turned it, and crashed the butt against King's ear. The cowboy leapt for Joshua's shoulder. "That's unprovoked assault, Josh."

Joshua swung around, stared wildly.

The man backed down the path. "It's almost midnight, Josh. I've got kids home alone. Let's give it up for now."

Joshua levelled the shotgun at him. "You with the sheriff on this? I always thought you were two-faced. Like that sister of yours, talks like she enjoys it, but keeps her legs tight."

"That's enough, Josh."

Joshua aimed the gun. The cowboy backed further and stared, eyes uncertain, at Joshua. From behind King, Uriah spoke: "Know ye that judgement is nigh, Brother Taggert. Thou'lt best be on your way, just as Brother Jim says."

Joshua pulled around. "I've had about enough of you, you and that freak mother of yours. Damned if I don't shoot you too."

Jim ran up and grabbed at the barrel of the gun. Joshua yanked it upward and slipped on the path. The crack of a shot sounded and Jim fell back into the snow clutching his stomach. Blood ran from between his fingers and dripped to the snow. The remaining men from the pick-up pounded across the lawn. A young cowboy in a long corduroy coat lifted Jim's head from the snow and rested it against his knee. "Fuck you, Josh. You shot Jimmy." He snatched his hat from his head and whipped it against the ground. "Fuck, I don't believe it."

Blood spread in an increasing crimson circle across the snow, flowing from beneath the body, which began to twitch, the legs kicking out. The young cowboy cradled Jim's head to his stomach. Taggert sprang towards King and seized him by the jacket. "You'll pay, drifter, you'll get yours –"

The whoop of a siren sounded. Sheriff Jolson's car slid and thumped into the curb. Jolson jumped out, slammed the door. From the other side, Glen appeared, drew his gun from its holster and hurried behind Jolson. The sheriff harried the men aside. "What happened?"

The cowboy lifted his head and thrust his arm at Taggert. "It ain't the drifter's fault, sheriff. Josh shot him."

Jolson grabbed Taggert's coat collar. "Well, you finally done it." He kneed upwards between Taggert's legs. Taggert doubled forward, and as he did Jolson slammed both of Taggert's ears with the flat of his forearms. When Taggert began to straighten, he smashed his fist across Taggert's chin so that he fell back into the snow. "Call the ambulance, Glen. Let's get things cleaned up." He turned to King and grabbed his arm.

"Things have worked out in your favour. Now, when your car's fixed, I expect you to be on your way."

Blood dripped from King's ear. He wiped at it as it fell against the side of his neck and spat bloodied spit into the snow. "How long does it take to drive from the gaol?"

Jolson twisted away to the path and then span back towards King. "We could have done this a different way. Now we both got what we want. Let's leave it at that." He pushed back his hat and brushed his hand down over his face. Quickly, he swung down the path. "All right, everyone get back. Let the men do their work. I'll take statements at the station."

TEN

WALKER

How different our second summer break together was. Each day of the first week I'd been by his house, had no one answer the bell, then, on the Sunday of the second week, I heard hammering coming from the back yard. Excited, I crept past the front willow and through the vines along the side of the house. The back yard was an overgrown jungle.

I didn't see him at first, had to follow the noise of the hammering till I came around the corner of a wooden shed hidden in creepers. In the middle of a small clearing he was hammering at a 44-gallon drum, trying to dent its screw cap, which looked rusted shut. I circled around, not sure whether he had yet seen me. I could not believe my eyes. There were drums everywhere, big and small, but as well there lay all sorts of junk – all cylinders, from food cans to plastic plumbing and sewage piping. They lay amidst the overgrown grass in piles according to size and length, but there were also many odd pieces on their own, like a cudgen pin from a motor, and beneath a hickory tree was a mass of galvanized piping, all twisted and tangled. In a daze, my foot caught on something so that I tripped and fell. Only then did Spiro see me.

His forehead was sweaty from labour, and though there was that delight in his eyes whenever he saw me, there was also a shocked fear. I didn't have much time to think about this. From then on things happened in a blur. A metal chisel was in his hand. He smashed this into the screw cap, yanked it out, dropped what looked like a mass of plasticine

with an embedded plug into the hole, ran, took me in a tackle, and with us both on the ground, there was an explosion.

For a while I dared not get up – pieces of metal were burning on me. When I did look, I saw beneath drifting smoke that the top of the drum had blown off and that jagged metal edges were sticking up from the rim. Spiro was nowhere. I started to my feet, only to see him dash from the back door of the house with a large table umbrella.

At the base of the umbrella, instead of a spike or stand, was a box with a winding handle. He wound the handle madly, opened the umbrella and shoved it into the drum. It stood straight up, immediately began to spin like crazy. Spiro stood still, mouth fixed tight till the umbrella stopped, fell limply to the edge of the drum. When he turned to me, it was with a disappointed shrug.

Soon after we sat together in his room. It was alive with the whirring and beeping of his scopes, and racing left to right on the 786's monitor screen, were the words,

"Clankity clank

Chocky can't win

In all this din

Spiro now go look

In spare parts bin."

That was one week into summer break. The remaining weeks fell into a pattern. Spiro searched everywhere for cylinders. On the back of my bike we hooked a four-wheeled cart, piled this nearly every day with anything even remotely cylindrical. There was plenty to scavenge and there seemed no pattern to what Spiro would pick. Once, up on a factory roof with a hammer and iron bar, we prised loose a pipe chimney, only to have this craziness beaten a week later when Spiro remembered that inside the abandoned Clayton Street church where we'd planted the poles, he'd seen a rank of organ pipes. We stole inside, ready with hammers and crowbars.

The keyboard, wind chest and pipes were contained in a moveable unit of beautifully carved and ornate mahogany to one side of the altar. I thought immediately of Dad, looked at the tools we carried. Spiro too must have realized that we could not do it. In the end we snuck back out, returned with Dad, who carefully was able to remove the rank of pipes without any damage to the unit.

So the holidays passed. At their end, if you wanted to sit somewhere in Spiro's yard, it had to be on top of a cylinder.

The day is remembered this way.

Dad sat next to Spiro in the bus. Molly and I were across the aisle. Eric sped along on threadbare tyres, drove perhaps too fast along the ditched highway towards Harris for our first day of Junior High. With a puzzled look, Spiro stared down at his lap, studied a small aluminium box he held there. A series of whirrs and clicks sounded. He made an adjustment to a dial, stood, pulled a plastic suction cup with a sucking-pop from the window beside him, and moved it higher. A wire led from it to the box. I tried to smile, but could not. I could only think of last night.

Thirsty and unable to sleep, I'd gone to the kitchen to get some water. The previous Friday, Jacob and Ruth had visited, and had sat with Dad, Molly and me in the living room discussing whether Dad should accompany us to Harris. Neither Molly nor I'd wanted him along, fearing it would make us look weak in front of the other kids. However, Dad was insistent that he should go, and Jacob and Ruth had agreed with him. Worry about Dad coming with us kept me from sleeping, caused me to creep along the hall.

The kitchen light was on – light spilling from its open door to the plaster crack on the wall opposite – and nervous of who might be there (Mom having come home early in the afternoon) I did my best to keep on my toes. It would have been simpler to turn back, but thinking that Mom might leave the kitchen and see me creeping away, I decided I had no choice. Near the door I listened, then on hearing no sound, drew breath and peered around the corner.

Dad was sitting by the kitchen table, his elbows on his knees, head in the cup of his hands. Surprised, I quickly retreated, thought for a moment then, sure I had made no sound, looked again. Water was running from beneath the sink cupboard and there was a large puddle across the floor. The cold water tap washer had been leaking for a while and must finally have given way. Dad's head suddenly dropped, his hands clapped to his knees and he sagged against the chair back. This shocked, for I realized I was staring at a stranger. He was forty-two. His hair, once gold, with thick, tight curls, now lay flat and thin at the temples. His cheeks hung heavily to a thin beard. His eyes stared with a dead, weighted glaze. I did not understand. I saw him every day – without seeing him at all.

Deeply shaken, I wanted to run, however again had to creep down the hall. And there was another surprise. Molly. Giving a heave to her shoulders, a sniff of tears, she looked up, ran forward to hug me tight, made it obvious that she too had been by the kitchen, had seen, as I had, too much of the truth.

Breakfast had been silent. The wait at the bus stop had been silent. Nothing seemed right or just. When the bus braked to the curb, I was the last to board, stepped slowly up behind Molly and Dad. Spiro was already at the window seat, having boarded near his home. I did mange to smile at him, upon which he beamed and bounced up and down, but nevertheless, my holding back caused Dad to sit next to him, had Spiro show him the gadget with the suction cup. This left me the seat with Molly.

The bus jerked into gear, bumped along the smoothest part of the road through town, met the highway, flanked by flat, hazy sun-yellow fields, in a day already warm. The bus swayed as it took the approach off the highway into Harris. I tipped against Molly, and shaken from my reverie, saw Spiro collapse into his seat, wide-eyed bewilderment on his face. I, though, still could not look at Dad, could only stare down, clip and unclip the clasp of my satchel.

Suddenly I felt Molly nudge me. This time I had to wake. The outskirts of Harris approached – turn upon turn of guttered streets and graffiti in rainbow paint. Eric shouted something, swung hard right, hard left to avoid an overturned car. There was the school, opposite a street of vacant houses. Eric braked, and we slowly made our way off the bus to the continued shake of his head, came to stand before a high cyclone wire perimeter fence.

The school was about four hundred yards away, across black tarmac. In the tarmac centre, a two-tiered fountain crowned with a togaed scholar, a staff in one hand, a clutched scroll aloft in the other. This had surely once been a field, perhaps with a crescent drive to the school entrance. And the school? An architectural H shape, three of its wings lay eaten away – the two front wings, and the left rear wing, reduced to rubble from the roof down. Steel girders and the square grid of concrete reinforcements jutted upwards from these – bent, hammered, spidery.

No one was about. We all stared. There was a gate just to our right, open, a padlock hooked in the catch of its lock. Molly moved first. She hesitated just slightly in the gate, looked at us, then stepped quickly forward. I followed, Dad and Spiro behind me.

A dry wind lifted over the tarmac, pushed us along single file. It was a long time before Molly reached the flat-roofed portico of the entrance, stood there, looked up. Two forty-five degree poles speared at the corners of the roof. On each, stiff in the wind, was our nation's flag – laundered, it appeared, with too much starch.

A short flight of concrete steps led up. Molly took big steps to the top, halted before twin glass sliding doors which opened with staccato jerks, only to quickly bang closed again. We timed our jumps, sprang one at a time into a rubble-strewn foyer. Corridors opened either side of us. The one to the left held glass-fronted offices that appeared empty, the other had a sign on a wooden pedestal: CLASSES, CENTRE WING.

The corridor did not seem to live up to this promise. Down its length,

plaster peeled from walls, electric cables and ducting dangled from the ceiling in a profusion of knotted wires, aluminium foil and fibre padding. At intervals, trashcans stood filled to the brim, and everywhere the long sweep marks of a broom. Another sign was tacked to the wall of a stair well. Molly continued to lead up the stairs, and soon everything changed.

Here the walls had been freshly painted navy grey, there was a new green vinyl floor, and bright blue lockers were regimented at intervals to the wall between windowed classrooms. Kids were everywhere: sat on benches, stood before the lockers. It was hard to know what to do. Each kid stared at us. Closest were four seniors. They were dressed in fatigues and armed with machine pistols slung on snatch straps. I spun back to the stair well, thinking that there must be guards, but no one stood there. Something above caught my eye. In the ceiling corners, security cameras focused lenses.

Spiro stood stiffly, Dad holding his hand. I wanted to grab him and run, but when I turned to Molly she was already hurrying up the corridor. Pale, I looked at Dad. His eyes lifted to follow her, and so I did, moving as quickly as she.

Molly found a board on which sheets were pinned, studied them. Not far behind, I was conscious only of the movement of kids around me. Dad and Spiro drew up, and when Molly finished with the list, she turned but remained by the board, staring right past me. I had to look back. Two boys with long zipped leather coats, riot helmets, studded batons, stood with folded arms. The taller of the two grabbed at a gadget hanging from Spiro's belt, yanked so that Spiro stumbled forward. I was struck with horror. Then, suddenly, Dad stepped between the boy and Spiro.

How do I describe the change? An instinctive respect? Dad held in his tall, lean, muscled workman's build, a certainty of action, a definite defiance if further provoked. The boy released the gadget, seemed not to know where to look, slunk back to his friend.

We found our room, just two doors further down, and soon only a few kids were left standing about. Against their hushed talk came the whirr and click of the security cameras' motors.

Our teacher was a Mr Shephard. Although kids had streamed past us into the class, we had agreed to remain outside the door till Mr Shephard arrived. But when he did, he walked directly to his desk. Again, Molly led, spoke as he opened a briefcase. He turned a young, long-framed body to her, questioned his eyes down, and as she continued to speak, frequently peered to where Spiro and I stood, a number of times nodded. Finally, he indicated with an outstretched hand three empty seats in the third row. Only then did my shoulders ease, at least until I heard a gasp behind me. This was Spiro.

A gadget – one of his 'radar' ones with a viewing plate – hanging down the front of his coat had begun to flash and beep. He quickly smacked it, but it only increased its flash and noise. Next came a shower of sparks and smoke, like that time beside the kinder classroom, and quickly chairs scraped around the room as kids pushed back from their desks. The gadget exploded. When Spiro lifted his head, his face was sooted, his eyes stared, wide, white and blinking. Laughter broke out. Mr Shephard came up, stood hands to his hips, smiled, shook his head.

Yes, and all this was only in the first few hours of the day. But I will go on.

Despite the fact that nearly everyone was out of their seats, talking, pointing, Mr Shephard made no attempt to silence the class. Instead, once he realized Spiro was okay, he walked over to Dad, shook hands and began to talk.

Spiro held the gadget in both hands, hair completely blown back from his face, the left shoulder of his coat smoking where a spark had momentarily caught fire. He looked at us, handed me the gadget with eyes like a sad raccoon's, took his tool kit from an inner pocket, reclaimed the gadget and turned a flat-bladed screwdriver to open its backing plate.

Mr Shephard gave us a nod. I walked to the empty desks, hesitantly, watched as Molly led Spiro by the hand. All other kids were back in their seats, the class quiet. Spiro worked, head down. The backing plate fell away from the gadget and out rattled ball bearings together with a bunch of smouldering wires.

Unsure of what I should be doing, I heard something bounce at my feet. One of the larger ball bearings had rolled down. I stamped on it, felt a certain pride at my reflexes, and as I bent to pick it up, still swimming with nerves, noticed Mr Shephard talking on a telephone by the door. Dad was only a few feet away. Molly then drew my attention with a whisper, pointed over her shoulder with a jabbing finger, and there, two rows back, threading his way through the desks, was a smartly dressed senior in suit and tie.

Eric again drove too fast. I stretched my legs, rested against the seat. The afternoon sun – a hazy ball through the blue-grey window tint – made me squint, and with the sway of the bus, the gentle rock of my head against the seat cushion, I closed my eyes. The end of the school day had come. We were all safe, amazed, unable really to comment on the changes that one day could bring. I again allowed reverie, let my mind slip.

The senior student was only one desk away as Mr Shephard finished his phone call and replaced the receiver. Mr Shephard saw him, curtly shook his head, touched this with just the hint of a smile, and the student retreated to his seat.

What were my feelings? I had had only the briefest time to think. Certainly I was curious. The boy was quite out of place. His blond hair was neatly parted to the side, his face well scrubbed with a slight red gloss to the cheeks, and in his frame, there was the beginnings of a fine athletic build. Daniel Bradley Stanton, son of Walter J. Stanton – Mayor of Harris – and Shirley Beth, was to become a friend. At lunch break he introduced himself.

The reaction I had noticed between him and Mr Shephard? His family had long been friends of the Shephard family. When Mr Shephard had graduated with a Diploma in Education, Mayor Stanton had smoothed his appointment past the board of governors. Molly and I asked about the hearsay that his father had no interest in the school. Daniel laughed, said that was only to fool the citizens' committee – who believed only in feathering their fine homes – while he secretly directed funds to the maintenance of the school. At that he indicated the length of the new hallway.

The bus jolted over a bump and my eyes opened, startled to know that I had been dozing. I rubbed my hand down over my face, looked across the aisle. Spiro was again by the window, playing with the suction cup, Dad next to him. Eyes closing again, I heard Molly ask if I wanted a drink of her orange juice, felt her nudge me, but it was too late. The cinema reel of half-sleep spun its pictures.

Just after Daniel had returned to his seat a man came into class, remained within the door-way. Mr Shephard immediately clapped him on the shoulder and introduced him to Dad. The man was Nick Mitchell, the school janitor.

The sink tap leaks, drips a puddle that flows across the floor. Dad, slumped, holds his head in his hands. Mom hollers, rampages, vomits all over the living-room. Tools hang in shadows, lie idle on their hooks in the garage shed. The cinema reel in dream: there was Dad, tool kit at his waist, hammer falling in a graceful arc on the ruined corridors of Harris High, the corridors ringing with Gordon pride. Mr Shephard had offered Dad a job, he could work daily at the school assisting Mr Mitchell. Dad had started straight away.

I shook myself awake, blinked heavy eyelids. Molly was peering at me, a broad smile on her lips, cheeks quizzical. I was quite embarrassed, sat up as quickly as I could.

When class began, Mr Shephard told Spiro to put down his tools, at

least to try and pay attention. This Spiro did, as you would know, sitting ramrod stiff the rest of the day.

A night silent and warm.

Juergan Anuss was on our backyard porch, Dad with him. Juergan had rung about ten to ask if it would be okay if he dropped by as he was just finishing work. They had been out the back for about half an hour, sipping beers and talking, when I parted my bedroom curtain, curious. I saw Juergan rise, hands in his trouser pockets, go to the rail of the porch. He stayed that way for a moment, then turned to face Dad at the table. Dad was directly in my line of vision. He smiled when Juergan turned, filled his glass of beer, smiled again.

What was I to make of this?

It was the evening of a school day, another day of wonder during which Spiro had shown me a glass bottle from which the base had been cut. Ordinary enough, but if you stared down its neck you couldn't see right through. You saw only a circle of black. Even odder, when looking through from the cut end, the view up the bottle was normal. Deep in thought, I couldn't sleep.

I leant on the sill, listened – to talk about Mom – because I sensed the importance of what was being said, rather than out of immediate understanding.

Juergan stepped back to the table, positioned his chair closer to Dad, and sat. I eagerly leaned further forward, felt the lightest of breezes caress my cheeks. There followed about five minutes of talk, of which I could hear little, then Juergan stood again, Dad's eyes following him. Juergan halted by the porch steps, and all of a sudden began to sob, holding his head back at one point, then forward in his hands. I stared, wide-eyed.

Juergan always carried himself as a man apart. He wore tailored suits, either steel grey or blue, had deep-set eyes above a long aquiline nose, kept pale brown hair slickly groomed back. It implied a severity of

character, and this is what I had always believed.

Dad studied his beer, his hands wrapping the glass. When Juergan began to cry, he'd immediately looked down.

Again, where in the world the child? How much of Mom's life had passed me by? How much was there that I did not know about the web of feelings between Dad, Mom and Juergan? Molly's and my relationship with Mom was based purely upon keeping a circling distance. We did not speak to her. She did not speak to us. Dad did not speak of her to us. Mom's presence was as a door opening and closing. An entrance and exit was made, but no presence felt other – than the pain and frustration she drew from us. Yet, hers was a life lived, and hers was a life felt by others.

Juergan's tears stopped and he came further along the porch. I had to duck down. He leant one hand on the corner post. For a moment I thought he saw me – his eyes narrowed, and there followed the beginning of a grin. I hid further down, burned with the fear of being caught. Carefully I checked Dad. He had finished his beer, and after refilling his glass, motioned the bottle towards Juergan. Juergan nodded and returned to his chair.

The seed that began my friendship with Juergan was planted that night, and I say seed, because he was to leave town soon after – promoted by the Brandon Co. to New York, not to return for three years, when he was made executive director of the Walker plant.

It was then that we became friends. I needed someone other than Molly and Dad. I was in my teens, a boy very much in search of explanations for questions to which I could apply no reason. Juergan brought an ear, and it is with great fondness I remember him. And yes, here is irony, that I should become close to a man who was Mom's principal lover.

I was to learn that he was a man who strove to keep life in balance.

He laughed as often as he cried, his face very much one of shadows. His gentle interplay of emotions and tuning of thoughts were clearly visible on his face, striving, as an orchestra might, for harmony. There was not so much a right or wrong for him; rather, he accepted the incongruous and irresolute in life, and further, maintained that this belief in itself offered resolution, a kind of absolution through coming to terms with the apparently unsolvable, if not the absurd.

Despite Juergan's friendship and advice, I was to leave Walker, a young man condemned.

Each school day for a month, not long after Juergan's visit, Dad, Molly and I made the journey to Harris High on Eric's bus. We enjoyed incident-free classes. Was everything going to be all right? Mr Shephard had made it clear to the class that Spiro was a special kid, that he had permission to tinker with his gadgets and to read his books. Word filtered around. No trouble was to be directed at Spiro. And where did this authority come from? Daniel informed us: in our sixth week the old principal had been replaced by a Mr Gibbons.

There was less evidence, too, of weapons and gang attire among kids. Daniel told us Mr Shephard was reporting directly to Mayor Stanton, and Mayor Stanton, as head of the board of governors, was directing the board. Really, Mr Shephard was running the school.

Not only this brought peace that month. Spiro seemed happy for the first time since the incident with the telephones. He often smiled during class, on the bus rides to school frequently bounced up and down in his seat. How, though, near to the end life can be. It all changed in one day, Spiro's last in school.

All the way on the bus, Spiro had sat hunched and shivering, buried in his coat. Molly, Dad and I had found him like this immediately on boarding. I had, however, known that something was wrong before this; on the step up, Eric had hooked his head over his shoulder, given a concerned smile. Spiro let none of us near him. He just buried himself

deeper, shook and turned his back. Helpless, we sank into our seats, Dad directly behind him, Molly and I across the aisle.

On the drive, every bump and turn sharpened my sense of horror. When Eric parked by the school gate, our trudge across the black tarmac, past the tilted, sorry, fountain, toward the school, was slow. Spiro trembled each foot of the way; in the ruined, debris-strewn corridor of the lower storey, stumbled and tripped more than actually walked.

Class lasted only until just before morning recess. Spiro gave out a scream, fell from his chair, kicked and squirmed on the ground so that the desk was pushed back and the chair toppled. Mr Shephard, Molly, Daniel and myself were quickly to him, nearly tipping our own chairs as we jumped up. When Dad and Nick rushed in, with floor-pounding strides, having being called on the class phone, Spiro was unconscious.

No discussion was needed about calling Harris General. However, all three ambulances were already on call. Immediately, Nick volunteered his pick-up, suggested we get Spiro to the school entrance while he drove the pick-up there. Dad carried Spiro, but once there, we found Jessica's Ford already parked, her standing by its front fender, eyes like glass. She drove with Molly beside her in the front, Dad and I in the back seat, Spiro slumped between.

As with Spiro's first time at the hospital, nothing was found wrong with him. He awoke next morning, bewildered and confused, and in a high-pitched squeal pleaded to be let home.

From then, Spiro's search for cylinders increased. Often, looking for him after school, I caught glimpses of him riding unsteadily on my bike, having loaded it with all sorts of piping and tubing. Trashcans became an obsession. On many mornings, litter would be found blowing along Walker's streets from cans that had been tipped up and taken. Chaining them to posts or pegging them to the ground didn't help.

At school, I thought only of him. As the leaves fell in his backyard, I helped hold cylinders after school and at weekends while he furiously welded them into tangled shapes. Tin cans got welded to the sides of big drums, piping stuck out at all angles from paint tins, half-inch copper tubing wound around gas boiler heaters. When the days became too cold to work outside, we hauled many of the constructions upstairs to his room.

He worked on one more than any other, and for it cleared a space in the centre of the room. There it gleamed. It was one of the trash cans he'd collected – the only one made of galvanized tin that he had been able to find. He'd polished the outside corrugations to such an extent that you could see your reflection. But he must have done much more to the can than just polish it.

It was a lot like the glass bottle he'd shown me months earlier. He'd cut away the bottom, and if you looked through that end, you could see straight into the room, but, from what had been the lid end, you could see only darkness. Also, an arm put through the dark end vanished as it entered, even though it felt like it was still there. Even more curious was the fact that a broom handle poked right through never came out the other side. And at the cut end? These experiments were normal, your hand was visible, the broom handle passed right through.

To a beleaguered life came a final conclusion. Early on a Sunday morning, Dad found Mom in the bathroom, naked on the tiles, her head against the wall beneath the sink. It was an overdose. She had been dead since midnight. The funeral was held on the Thursday. A stormy day, wind blew grey clouds, spiralled dust and brown leaves amidst grey tombstones. Dad stood between Jacob and Ruth, Molly and I either side of Spiro, Juergan alone at the far end of the grave. The preacher read dry, flat words and Mom was lowered into her grave.

It is a form of desperate optimism to accept fate. We stare upon tragedy, know how little we can change it. We can only reconcile our loss. This is the knowledge of defeat. We hear only the pounding of the gavel, know already the final sentence.

Tears fell from each of us – we who had long known where Mom's journey would lead – and Spiro stepped forward, drew from beneath his coat a little black box which he placed on the ground. In the ever sad, pitying voice of a necropolis wind, lights rose, danced beneath a dark, overcast sky like red, green and gold fireflies. To Mom's lonely life, to a stark, lonely death, was at last to come beauty.

That night I couldn't sleep. Past midnight, I walked dreamily through the house, from the living-room window saw Dad outside beneath the street light in front of our house. He was holding of one of Spiro's gadgets and staring into it. I knew the gadget well. It was a plastic funnel. Inside, where the funnel ran into the spout, Spiro had placed a ring of tiny rectangular glass plates, and where the mesh filter would be, he'd built a small monitor screen. Spiro had shown Dad and I how to use it. You simply pushed a button on the outside of the rim and walked around with it. It worked best at night in open places, such as a field, or anywhere where there wasn't much around. In these places, patterns like star nebulas would swirl on the monitor. Dad was fascinated by it, and he'd once told me that one night out in a field he'd seen the screen flare, and that the funnel had become so heavy that he'd fallen to his knees trying to hold it.

Outside it must have been cold. The storm was still blowing. Dad sat on the curb, after a moment wedged the gizmo between his knees, and in the hunch and rack of his shoulders, I knew he was crying. I returned to my room, now even less able to sleep, found that I could do nothing but play the scenes of that day over and over, scenes ominous and portentous – the spiralling of dust and dead leaves to dead words, Dad's shoulders as he clutched a toy to his chest.

I knew, somehow, that a day would come, a day that evermore consumes me, evermore denies me life.

The morning, dark with cloud, icy with wind, had Molly and me pacing at the school bus stop, our shoes stamping the wet path. Eric arrived earlier than usual, told us before we were up the steps that he had seen something like a spiral dust cloud, or mini twister, either spinning down, or coming out of one of the chimneys of Spiro's house. Molly and I did not board, instead together ran to Spiro's.

Spiro lay on his side before the cut end of the polished trashcan cylinder, twitching and convulsing. His face was white, his eyes rolled back, and spittle ran from the side of his mouth. I ran to him, noticed that around the former lid end of the trashcan, tiny bells and cymbals dangled on short lengths of fishing line. They jangled, making soft tingling sounds, and oddly, those around the bottom edge of the rim stuck straight up, as if actually hanging down.

Spiro's head convulsed up and knocked back against the floorboards. I pillowed it with my hands, sobbed tears endless and heavy. Molly knelt by me, took one of Spiro's hands gently in hers. His eyes suddenly opened and he whispered brokenly, "Chocky dance, Chocky prance, Chocky's come home, Chocky's come home." Then he was still.

It was all over. Principal Davis, peanut bag in hand, stepped from a small side room that Spiro used as a storage area, and Sheriff Peterson, Deputies Brown and Dawes appeared from the landing. Davis snapped his fingers, pointed, and Spiro was bundled up in a white sheet by Dawes and carried to the door. Molly and I followed, descended the steps, descended our hearts.

By the gate was a black van, to its rear a black sedan, and at its front, another. Dawes walked down the path; at its end a man in white overalls greeted him. Men in dark suits were everywhere: over the lawn, at the sides of the house, talking on phones, signalling with sharply directed arms and clipped nods of their heads. Across the street, four other cars

and another van with a dish on its roof were also parked. Molly and I reached the gate, walked a little further on.

Down the sidewalk, street lights mirrored themselves in puddled rain, glowed feeble yellow against dark cloud. Tears chilled our cheeks, our hands searched for warmth in our armpits. The rear doors of the van were opened by the man in the white overalls, Deputy Dawes stepped in, laid Spiro on a stretcher, still wrapped in his sheet.

Molly and I had not seen Principal Davis come from the house, but he was now standing before the leading black sedan. Hands cupped to his face, he lit a cigarette, reached for a peanut bag from the inside of his jacket, drew hard on the cigarette so that his face glowed red. By his feet, on its cut-out end, was the polished cylinder. He opened the rear door of the car, blew again on the cigarette, puffed out. Choking pain took me forward, only to stop. At the far end of the seat, Jessica lay disassembled in a cardboard box. Her legs dangled down the outside, hooked by the knees, one arm stuck straight up, and her head, fixed on a short metal rod, propped up in a corner, lolled, eyes open, glazed.

It is something to do, to drive out of Walker on a clear night. In getting out of the car, you stare out over the flatness of everything, the infinite, and in the stars glimpse eternity. It is a map of life, the night made beautiful with souls. I now understand better where night leads.

Am I a seeker in want of a gloomy philosophy, and thereby a dispenser of morbid sorrows? I drift this land, in search, but always return to visit Walker. It is not a town anymore, but still I find Dad in the same routine. Monday to Friday mornings he packs the now clanking and rattling pick-up, waves goodbye to Molly on the front porch, drives on bald tyres along streets ever more rutted, unloads, sutures planks to houses with wounds centre deep. There is a pattern. Walker is dotted with houses, walls and roofs painted red, white or blue. More than a guess leads me to say that if you flew above Walker, there you would see our Union mapped in its streets.

ELEVEN

JEFFERSON

Across the road, the night etched lines of deep dark. Snow fell on a gentle wind, blew in drifts beside the grey of fence slats and beds of leafless, knotted rose stems. King stood with his hands in the pockets of his jacket, stared into the shadow between the planked walls of two houses. There lay nothing within a world of nothing.

He turned and walked across the brittle lawn of Uriah's house. Jolson had swept clean the stain of blood. So, the world offered oblivion, a solution to all. The house lay silent. On the porch he looked up at the round stained glass of the door window. A Caucasian Christ stared with large blue eyes, the head framed in yellow spears of light. King raised his hand to knock, but before he did so heard a soft voice call behind him. He turned slowly.

Anna stood in cowboy boots, her hands thrust in the pockets of her fur. "How are you, John?"

King's cheeks tightened inward, then relaxed. "I've been better."

"Jolson phoned." She came forward a step and brushed her hair from where it blew across her face. "He thought I should get you away from Uriah's house."

King shifted his gaze from her. From the living-room window, white light shone over the snow of the front lawn, glittered, reflected tiny points of light up into the air.

"Jason says your car is ready. It wasn't too hard to get the parts … I can give you a lift back to your motel … but thought maybe you'd still like that dinner."

King nodded, but remained still. She moved down the path, waited by the Defender. Behind her, wind swirled the night, shifted snow in streaks. King tugged the ends of his scarf into his jacket and stepped from the porch. On the road, the motor of the Defender tunnelled through stillness. Once parked in the garage, King followed Anna from the car, but stopped by the porch step. She looked at him only after keying open the lock. "You're William Gordon, aren't you?"

King turned away.

"When you left like that, I had Irene let me into your room." Her voice was steady. "Why did you change your name?"

King turned halfway to her. "You read the manuscript?"

"Most of it."

"You had no right."

"No right, John! What gives you the right to deny people the truth about who you are?"

He now faced fully around. "We create monuments to our pain, Anna, beneath scares, bury ourselves."

"And is that what you owe your friend?"

He did not answer.

"Come inside, John."

"I can't."

Anna stiffened. "It's three in the morning."

King backed from the steps. "You obviously know my room." He waited, but she said nothing. He quickly turned toward the road, tugged his hat low and moved down the drive. At the road he looked back. Anna was nowhere to be seen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & THANKS

To the reseach team and advisers to the author, artist

Stuart Thyer and Robert McNeal, Heather Horn, Amanda Clark, Dr Victor Nurcombe, Louise Wangerek, Christian Rantzau, Glen D'Cruz, Tiffany Cowie, Catherine Hearn, Kylie at Optus, Christine Maric, Heidi Clarris, Emma Clarris, Karyn Orzeszko, Heather Wheat, Prof. Ben Reese, Ilia Nitsos, Darren Gee, Elisa Hill, Philippe Yardin, Anna O'Brien, Andrea & John, Ann Peeters, Natalia Turianskaya, Nature Ross, Jenny Lee, Foong Ling Kong, Daniel Ruffino, Sarah Graves, Adam Gellibrand, Catherine of Merry Old England, Sue Gilchrist & Baby

For editing
Clare Cooney

As manuscript courier
Anthony Halliday

To this book's receivers of the combined Negligence and Juliette Lewis Award, for, respectively, failure to pick up a manuscript and to properly read a manuscript

Drew Browning and John Davies

For this design and layout skills
Tim Burnett

For patrongage
Assoc. Prof. S.S. Tan

For inspiration
John Wyndam for "Chocky" and other stories

For a deeply cherished friendship
Philip (Chocky) Gargano

The Lepers

Frank Weissenborn
Guy Browning

Described as a mutual, consolatory collaboration of short fiction and images between writer Frank Weissenborn and artist Guy Browning, the limited edition publication in 1995 of The Lepers, was quick to garner a cult following.

Criticized as dark and confronting, unreadable by some, Frank Weissenborn argues :

The leper moves in tombstone-like shadows, is somehow ashamed, feels humiliated and defiled, rings a bell to warn the "healthy" of his passing. The disease is classified according to symptoms and histopathology. Lack of resistance to the bacterium results in damage to the peripheral nerves, the skin, the extremities. In the end a form of numbness takes hold. One is truly weary, cares only to become, "comfortably numb." The leper is somewhat of the somnambulist, seeing everything from the end of a tunnel, is distanced from everything, most of all, self.

What then remains? How do we view life?

Between birth and death, against fate, there must be an active will, a need to love: not just for being, but for a way of being. We must be mindful of overselves, and dereliction of this should evoke regret, sahme. We may be alienated in an unsympathetic universe, but does that release us from accountability?

We must not be afraid to embrace the full spectrum of human emotion, to allow the question: is there a point where life and human expression ends? And answer, no.

This ebook edition 2019

Art Bébé
An imprint of 86 Publishing
1606/620 Collins Street
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000
Australia

ISBN 978-0-9586290-8-9

www.arbebepromotions.com

Publishing history
First PDF web edition Art Bébé Promotions Publishing 2010
ISBN 978-0-9586290-3-4

First paperback edition 86 Publishing 1998
ISBN 0958629005