

Sing unto Me Your Dissonant Song

Diamond-faceted plastic panels covered the fluorescent tubes that hummed and glowed impersonally overhead, diffusing the light to cast a lifeless blue-white pall across Madie's time-worn face. Her confused eyes stared upward, squinting, and the thickening cataracts transformed the fluorescing gemstone lights into a fragmented vision of a storefront display in some long-closed shop. The relict memory found a young Madie jostling with other children for a chance to see the miniature train circling cotton-flocked trees, wending its way between a dozen gaily dressed porcelain dolls. Those images belonged to another world, a different life—one faded and pressed beneath the weight of distant years.

Slowly, she lowered her deep-set eyes to stare at the confusing activity around her—white-clad nurses walked by, their stainless steel carts rattling and squeaking down the hall, carrying pleated paper cups filled with quivering pills; a smiling face would occasionally look down at her—its lips moving incomprehensibly—the first word forgotten long before the last was spoken.

Strange sounds—beeps and hisses, gasps and sighs—forced their way into the long hall from behind partially closed doors, and noxious, personal odors lingered on the thick air as an ancient memory flitted across Madie's mind. It entered, nothing more than a vague feeling, then coalesced to form the image of a light blue picket fence—a gathering of forms and shadows began to move on the other side,

accompanied by the sound of happy voices, laughter, and music. Then it was gone, spirited away as a feeling once more, and forgotten.

But there had once been a time, long ago, when things fit into place, when they seemed ordered—that much she sensed. There had been trees, flowers, and green, freshly-cut grass—those things were a part of it. And the smell of gasoline on some vacation, a ribbon of blacktop coiled around granite mountains, snowcapped.

Random fragments of fractured memories interwove with one another to form tenuous new connections. And the faces, always the faces—her mind groped for names to attach to the familiar strangers assembled around a wooden table in a room somewhere—back when things were clear.

Her wheelchair glided effortlessly down the long, uniformly lit hall—it seemed to move of its own accord. It carried her beneath the rows of diamond lights and past the neverending doors with their groaning secrets.

A nurse appeared from one of the rooms and looked in her direction, calling, “Randall, would you come here for a minute?”

Madie’s steady journey was interrupted as a man in his mid-forties, with sandy, curly hair, wearing wire-framed glasses, stepped out from behind her and walked into the room. She was vaguely aware of some connection between the sensation of stopping in the hall and the appearance of the man at her side, but she couldn’t quite understand what had happened. She was also aware of one other thing—an obscured and almost undetectable feeling, something for which she had lost the word to describe—it would have been called dread, and Madie felt it as a slight queasiness which caused her to stir uncomfortably in her wheelchair.

The worried confusion that etched itself upon her forehead deepened and she began to shuffle her feet—old, blue-veined legs strained against the polished linoleum as the wheelchair began to creep along. Her veering course took her to the left and carried her, by chance, to the door where Randall—the sandy-haired man—and the nurse had disappeared. It ended abruptly when Randall stepped out of the room, then bent down and did a certain thing to the wheels he sometimes did. Madie's frail body continued to press against her restraining harness and her feet shuffled against the floor, but the wheelchair refused to move any farther—her journey had ended as mysteriously as it had begun.

She watched through the door as the sandy-haired man and the nurse lifted an old man from the floor. A third nurse held a thick, folded bandage against the old man's forehead as a glistening, crimson streak flowed from beneath it to form a temporary pool against a sunken eye before continuing along its languid path down the side of his face. White-crueted lips fluttered around the rim of his toothless mouth to form a labored moan as he was gently lowered to the bed and one of the nurses rushed past Madie as the sandy-haired man stepped out of the room and again did something to the wheels before disappearing behind her—once more Madie began to move down the hall.

All of these things continued to unfold for Madie as they had for as long as she could remember—one event blending seamlessly into another, all of them melted together and poured into the uniform mold of an arbitrary day. Yesterday's lunch could be combined with today's bingo game and tomorrow's medication and it would make no difference. Everything had become distilled to an essence, an

almost subliminal montage of shapes, faces, and emotions—the big room with long tables and rows of people eating; the sign that read, “TODAY IS TUESDAY”... or “THURSDAY”... or “SUNDAY”; Randall and the stirrings of dread that Madie for some reason felt whenever she saw him; the nurses in their white uniforms, carrying small cups of brightly colored pills; two coughs and a clearing of the throat; an empty feeling that was soon forgotten; a line of children from some other place filing into the room and singing; a gurney with a flawlessly smooth white sheet.

Finally, she found herself back in her room, sitting beside her bed, strapped into the wheelchair. Her eyes wandered briefly to the moving images that played across a silent, wall-mounted television, then settled on the silhouette of her roommate—a large, Mexican woman who was kept alive by an apparatus that clicked and hissed at regular intervals as it released little puffs of life-prolonging oxygen— “CLICK, *hiss*,” then a pause, then “CLICK, *hiss*.”

Every so often, two nurses would come in to turn the big woman. Sometimes they would bring her food, asking, “Ready to eat, Mrs. Hernandez?” Other times they would take her away for a while—she had never protested any of it. In fact, Madie had never heard the woman say a word—at least not as far as she could remember.

—A shaft of late afternoon sunlight found its way into the room from between the drawn curtains, falling across Mrs. Hernandez face.

CLICK, *hiss*.

—Her blue-brown eyelids fluttered; her eyes fixed on some point beyond the ceiling.

CLICK, *hiss*s.

—The shaft of sunlight was gone; Mrs. Hernandez eyes were closed.

CLICK, *hiss*s.

“Time for your bath, Mrs. Transom.”

The sandy-haired man stood in front of Madie Transom’s wheelchair with a towel draped over his shoulder. She looked blankly at his gaunt, awkward features and lanky frame, and that slight stirring of queasiness once again arose from somewhere deep inside her. His white uniform clung uncomfortably to his body—large, bony elbows appearing below short sleeves, followed by depressingly long forearms and thin fingers.

He stepped behind Madie, did something to the wheels, and pushed her into the bathroom, then bent to fill the shallow tub, careful to adjust the water to a comfortable temperature.

“We’ll get this just right for you, Mrs. Transom.”

His sticky, fetid breath spilled the words across nicotine-stained teeth, as he gently stirred the water with his finger.

After helping Madie onto the toilet to empty her bowels and wiping her clean, he eased her gently into the warm water and began to wash her. He dipped the sponge, then lifted it and squeezed—the warm water trickled gently across her skin, over her bony shoulders and down her back.

Old memories stirred—phantom images and emotions—the touch of a mother and then a husband—warmth, embrace, caring. The faces were dimmed in her mind but even the vague and fleeting shadows that managed to remain fostered a nostalgic longing for those other times.

Then Randall began to wash her shoulders with a slow circular motion, and the familiar unease began to grow within her. Across her neck and jutting collarbones the sponge released its warm invasive rivulets of incipient dread—curling serpentine down her body and dripping back into the tub—an endless, suffocating cycle. His hands followed the sunken, bony contours of her chest as he washed her withered breasts—began caressing them gently—cupping the flaccid flesh in his hands. His fingers flirted with the drooping, brown nipples and the giddy stirring began to gather itself into a desperate knot in the pit of her stomach—for some reason that Madie couldn't recall, this was not right. An ancient memory told her that his lingering hands simply shouldn't be there—not like that, certainly not for so long in one place. She shifted to one side and then to the other, but Randall's hands moved with her.

The sponge floated in the water between her legs. He began to wash her stomach with his hand. Soaping and rinsing, soaping and rinsing, his fingers circled Madie's navel in an ever-enlarging spiral, each pass moving closer, dangerously closer. Randall worked his way behind her, to the end of the tub, out of sight.

Slowly, fastidiously, his left hand slipped down between her legs; his right hand disappeared from sight and Madie heard the metallic rasp of a zipper. Rhythmically, he washed her and the familiar, panicked nausea gripped Madie as he

put his finger inside her. She began to breathe more heavily and fidget about restlessly. “Nooo,” she pleaded.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Transom,” he reassured, “I’m right here behind you—I can just reach you better from here. I’ve gotta get you really clean so you won’t get sick.”

He kept on washing her, inside her, and on and on, his finger moving in and out—she felt waves of nausea. The washing grew quick and jerky as his breathing became quick and shallow—she felt the helplessness, hot and close, envelop her.

“Nooo, nooo,” Madie moaned, trying to pull herself away, her hands and feet slipping against the slickness of the tub.

Randall’s hand was locked between her legs and she was trapped. With a gasp and a moan, he pressed his hand hard against her old pudendum, then slid it along the inside of her thigh. His fingers grasped the sponge and he squeezed it with an orgasmic rhythm. Water shook convulsively from between his fingers as he gasped in unison, finally dropping the sponge back into the tub, drawing back with a shuddering sigh.

Madie stared at the sponge bobbing in the water between her legs and felt a great emptiness. Randall sat behind her, regaining his breath.

“There you go—all cleaned up and ready for bed,” he cooed in her ear as he rinsed the semen from his hand and helped her from the tub.

—CLICK, *hiss*s. Mrs. Hernandez rested in the bed next to Madie’s. Madie began to drift away, floating on a cool, crisp breeze far away from the tiny

room in the house of strangers. The air was lighter and cleaner; there was no smell of antiseptic and decay. CLICK...

The Nail

..HISSSSSS, thwop, thwop, thwop, thwop, thwop—the punctured tire slapped against the road, pulling to the right, as Azel Transom instinctively countered to keep the old car under control. Little Madie stiffened in surprise as gravel peppered the undercarriage and they ground to a halt at the side of the road.

With a surprised whistle of relief, Azel looked over at Madie, then stepped out of the car and walked around to the passenger side, looking down toward the front fender.

“Well, we’ve got a flat, Madie. Might as well get out and stretch your legs.”

He reached into the back seat and retrieved a fraying work coat that smelled faintly of gasoline, in which he had formed a long relationship with the engine of his aging Model T. Almost every Saturday it carried him and Madie, and sometimes one of her little sisters or brothers, into town while Madie’s mother usually stayed at home to take care of the neverending work that the family provided.

They had left at seven o’clock that morning, traveling down narrow dirt roads for the first nine miles before reaching the asphalt highway that led into town for the last ten minutes of the drive. They had just passed the Key cotton gin which was located about four miles outside of Carlson, and Madie could see the town’s freshly painted water tower rising above the flat cotton fields like a silver church spire.

A northerly West Texas breeze—the first cool front of autumn—greeted her from across the farmland as she stepped from the car; it carried with it the dried earthiness of an abundant cotton harvest. The crop had been good this year, and Harvey Key, the owner of the gin, had already taken on several more hands to help unload the surplus of wagons.

“Looks like we picked up a nail, Madie,” said Azel, pointing to its shiny head poking a little way out of the tire. “Must’ve come from the gin—all those trailers coming and going.”

While her dad worked with the tire, Madie started walking alongside the road, rustling through the drying weeds in her black leather shoes. The farmland expanded to the horizon in all directions—row after row of brown and white, dry leaves and open cotton bowls shuffling restlessly in the wind. Her feet led her away from the road and she walked slowly between the even rows, the cotton forming a convergence of white corridors which led to an old, abandoned farmhouse in the middle of the field.

The decrepit shell of a house had been home to various families of migrant farmworkers, most of them from Old Mexico, until a strong wind—some people had said it was a tornado—had carried off part of its roof about two years before. Madie remembered passing by the house one day, about three summers ago, on the way to town and seeing the field hands sitting on the front porch to get some relief from the scorching noontime sun. They had waved as she and her dad rumbled past and she had tried to imagine what it would be like to be a Mexican and speak

another language. It must have been like living in a country within a country—a tiny island in the middle of an endless expanse of Texas farmland.

Nearing the abandoned house, she was stirred from her reverie by the arrival of a foul odor, pungent and acrid. Despite its repulsiveness, her curiosity drew her onward—toward the loose boards of the neglected porch, and the front door which stood partially open against the darkness inside. The smell was intolerable, and Madie covered her nose with her coat sleeve.

The sun was beginning to warm the day despite the cool autumn air, and Azel wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his coat. He looked up to see Madie stepping up on the porch.

“Be careful, Madie,” he called. “You be mindful of snakes, now.”

She turned and waved. It struck him as peculiar that she covered her face, but then, one could never guess the games that children were playing.

He pitched the flat tire into the trunk and stood in the refreshing breeze, looking into the distance. Except for the town of Carlson and a few isolated farms, the horizon was uninterrupted flatness. Directly in front of him the town’s trees formed a mound of green that appeared smaller and more distant than he had realized, and it occurred to him that the arrival of the automobile had worked to reduce the scale of things and that it had been a long time since he had simply stood quietly and considered a sense of place. He felt the northerly breeze on his face—coolness against the radiance of the sun. He listened—birds were chirping in the fields, but he had not heard them until now. The sound of cotton stirring.

He could have stayed there all morning, but he had things to do in town. Brushing off his trousers and picking up his jacket, he turned toward the house to call Madie, just in time to see her burst from the door.

“Daddy! Come here! Hurry!”

She stumbled on one of the loose boards of the front porch and fell headlong into the front yard, then sprang up, still running.

“Daddy! Come here!”

Azel dropped his jacket and started running toward her. He watched her fall from the porch—slow-motion—saw her jump up and run toward him—felt a thick knotted fear force its way through his heart as his feet sank into the loose dirt of the cultivated field with every stride. Its yielding softness gave him the sensation of running through a waking nightmare—running toward a receding destination.

Finally reaching his daughter, he knelt down to catch her in his arms as she buried her face in his chest.

“Madie! What is it?! Are you alright?!” he asked, not giving her a chance to answer, holding her away from him so he could see if she was hurt.

“There’s a dead boy in there!” she choked, her eyes wide with horror.

“What?” he asked, looking toward the house and suddenly becoming aware of the smell.

“Go back and wait in the car, Madie,” he said, tightening his jaws as he realized the significance of the odor.

“No Daddy! There’s a dead boy inside!” Madie pleaded.

“Madie, I have to go in there and see. You can wait by the porch—I’ll be right back.”

“I don’t want to be out here by myself...”

“I’ll keep talking to you the whole time I’m inside—but I have to go in there.”

Azel said gently.

He hoped that the “boy” would turn out to be a figment of a child’s imagination—maybe a dog or cat—but he doubted it. Whatever she had seen had frightened her terribly.

Azel and Madie walked back toward the house and the smell of death became stronger with every step. Madie followed close behind him, and when they reached the porch, the odor finally forced Azel to reach into his pocket for a handkerchief.

“You wait out here, Madie. I’ll keep talking to you.”

When he stepped up on the porch, the lumber bowed beneath his weight, forcing him to place each footstep above an underlying joist to keep from falling through. He crossed the threshold to find the floor of the front room in almost the same condition—had he known, he would have told Madie to stay out. Carefully testing each step, he made his way toward the kitchen as he noted the toll of two years of abandonment and neglect.

A threadbare rug, its original color obscured by a uniform layer of dust and ashes, was piled against the wall near the fireplace. A lantern, only shards of its globe remaining, was hanging from a nail. Desiccated rodent bones were scattered against the opposite wall, partially hidden beneath brown and gray feathers.

When he reached the door to the kitchen, he looked over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of Madie peering through the front window. As he entered he became aware of a humming sound coming through a doorway at the opposite end of the room—he could picture the flies engaged in their grisly work and dreaded what awaited him. The smell was overwhelming.

“I’m in the kitchen now, Madie—I’m heading into the back room,” Azel called out, hoping to ease her fear.

Early autumn sunlight entered the paneless kitchen windows, falling across the peeling wallpaper. The neglected cabinets sagged beneath the burden of accumulated dust and the wooden floor was buckled from its exposure to the elements. The old house must have been in shambles long before it had been abandoned.

Bracing himself, Azel walked into the swarming back room, but nothing could have prepared him for that sight—the crawling, quarreling flies and the squirming maggots giving an obscene, wriggling life to the corpse, the bloated stench, and, most of all, the small size of the body, naked from the waste down, feet bound with rope.

Azel heaved, then breathed in more of the noxious air before he could return the handkerchief to his face—he heaved again.

“Daddy!” Madie screamed.

Azel coughed his way back into the kitchen, wheezing, “I’m fine, Madie, I’m fine,” as he hurried, bending at the waist and stepping with less caution, back into the front room and out of the house.

On his way to see the sheriff, Azel stopped at the home of Mrs. Hurd, Madie's Sunday school teacher. He told her what had happened that morning, omitting the more gruesome details, and asked if Madie could stay there while he talked to Sheriff Bennett. Mrs. Hurd had taken Madie into her arms and insisted that she stay as long as necessary.

So, Madie had spent the morning with Mrs. Hurd, reading from the Bible, praying, and singing hymns. But all Madie could think about was the smell of rotting flesh. God had not seen what had happened to that boy—He would not have allowed it. Yet, He must have seen it—He was supposed to see everything.

Mrs. Hurd's voice rose to the strains of "How Great Thou Art," and Madie sang along with absent reverence.

Missing Persons

Sheriff Bennett was sipping a cup of coffee when Azel arrived at his home. Mrs. Bennett had greeted him at the door and led him into the study, where the sheriff was seated behind a large desk, reading the morning paper. The settled tranquility of the scene was irreconcilable with what Azel had seen on the weary floor of the old farmhouse, and he felt hesitant to violate its structured decency with the despair and decay of that other world.

"Well, hello!" the sheriff said warmly, setting down his cup. "Haven't seen you for awhile, Azel—how've you been?"

"Hello, Bill—I'm alright," hesitating. "Listen, I'm afraid I've got some bad news—something to report."

Bennett leaned forward in his chair—he could see the distress in Azel’s face.

“What is it, Azel?” concern in his eyes.

“There’s a body in the old Tucker farmhouse—it looks like a little boy.”

The sheriff slowly stood up, momentarily immersed in thought.

“It’s been there awhile,” Azel added.

“Why don’t you tell me about it while we drive out there. Can you go?”

He didn’t want to, but Bill was a friend. Azel nodded.

On the way to the farmhouse, Azel recounted the morning’s events to the sheriff. The viscid smell of decay and the buzz of the flies were still fresh in his mind and his upper lip curled as he described what he had seen. After he had given his grim account, he turned toward the window and looked out across the fields, watching the evenly spaced rows of cotton blink past with oppressing regularity.

Ten...

Seventy-nine...

Two hundred three...

“I think the body might be one of the Winley boys,” the sheriff said, breaking the silence.

Azel looked toward him, raising his eyebrows slightly.

“Why’s that, Bill?”

“Ernest Winley came by my house Tuesday night to report them missing,” he began.

The sheriff had answered his door at seven o’clock that evening to find Winley standing on the front porch, glowering, his eyes partially masked in the

shadow of his sweat-stained hat. He stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of his filthy overalls and his shoulders humped forward, an uneasy mix of hatred and uncertainty.

“Zeb and Jake have run off,” he had stated flatly through a mouthful of chewing tobacco, little rivulets of brown juice staining the corners of his mouth and disappearing beneath a stubble of gray and brown beard.

“Oh? How long have they been gone?”

Bennett tried to read Winley’s emotions, but he was inscrutable.

“Three days. Got to start picking the Barlow’s cotton tomorrow—if you find ‘em, send ‘em home.”

“You should’ve reported it sooner, Mr. Winley. If they’ve run off, they’ve had a lot of time to travel.”

“Them goddamn boys ain’t good for nothin’—lazy sonuvabitches,” he had muttered, “If you find ‘em, I’d be much obliged if you’d send ‘em home.”

And with that, he had turned, walked back to his old mule-drawn wagon, and ridden off. The sheriff hadn’t seen him since.

On Wednesday morning, Bennett had made the customary phone calls to surrounding towns and checked at the railroad station, but nobody had seen Zeb and Jake, and Sheriff Bennett figured that they had simply gotten tired of living on the farm with what was most likely one mean bastard of a father. It was difficult to feel much sympathy for Ernest Winley, but you had to pity the boys.

The Winleys

The Winley family had moved to Carlson about four years earlier, after buying the Johnson farm, a fifty acre tract of land which had been abandoned ever since Ned Johnson died about six months before. No one knew where Ernest Winley came from or how he had found out about the old Johnson place—he had simply shown up one day at the county clerk's office carrying the abstract and a bill of sale signed by Ned Johnson's only survivor, a son living in St. Louis. There had, at first, been hope that Winley would put the land to use again, but, as the years had passed with the fields left untilled, the only things that found root on the neglected farm had been weeds and rumors.

Despite the initial hope, it hadn't taken long for the people of Carlson to suspect that the Winleys would not be a pleasant addition to the community. Their first inkling had arrived when the family made their first trip into town, the Saturday following Ernest Winley's appearance at the county clerk's office.

They rode into Carlson on a creaking wagon that was pulled by a sickly, swaybacked mule and followed by a limping wreck of a hound—an obscene, mange-covered pull-toy, its rope tied to one of the splintered sideboards. Winley's wife, Bertie, a large woman with thinning, matted hair, remained in the wagon seat, staring straight ahead through a mask of controlled bitterness, as Ernest went into the hardware store. The two boys, Zeb and Jake, also waited in the wagon, their raucous play and humorless scuffling breaching the peace of an otherwise quiet morning.

Zeb, the eldest at ten years of age, stood in the back, attacking the bed of the wagon with a broken broom handle. Yelling with each smack, he pummeled the cracking wood, while the dog, its tail between its legs, cowered nervously at the end of its rope, flinching and whining.

The younger boy, Jake, an afflicted child who at six years of age still had the mind of a two-year-old, was interested solely in rocking the wagon from side to side. Holding tightly to the sideboards, he threw his body back and forth, peering dully from beneath the brim of a dirty red and green baseball cap upon which the name “Jake” was stitched in fraying yellow thread.

For the entire time that Ernest was inside the hardware store, Bertie had sat stoically, steadfastly ignoring the curious expressions and annoyed frowns on the faces of the townspeople as they passed hurriedly by. She sat with a fixed gaze, immune to the opinions of others, as the wagon shook beneath the onslaught of her sons, providing some movement to her otherwise motionless form. After half an hour, Ernest Winley emerged from the hardware store to take his place on the wagon seat. He slapped the reins and the wagon turned as the mule slowly lumbered out of town.

It was about a week later that a few of the ladies from the First Baptist Church decided to go and visit the town’s newest residents. Christ himself, they had noted, had reached out to the poor and downtrodden, the wretched and despised, and it was up to them, as Christians, to follow His example. So, when they stepped up on the front porch of the Winley place to be greeted by the sight and smell of the accumulated “dog mess” from the hound roped to the railing, they looked at one

another, exchanging a silent admonition to aspire to a higher calling, and knocked on the front door.

They were greeted through the screen by Ernest Winley's chewing tobacco-stained chin and a deep scowl which let them know that they were intruding into a place where they were not welcome.

"What do you want?" Ernest challenged, his voice defiant and suspicious.

"Hello, Mr. Winley," started Mrs. Wallace, the preacher's wife, maintaining an amicable tone, "we're from the First Baptist Church and we just wanted to let you know that we..."

"You Christians?" Winley interrupted.

"Why, yes, Mr..." still smiling.

"You believe God answers your prayers?" he continued.

"Yes, He does," replied Mrs. Wallace, with a slight edge of impatience on her voice, offended by Ernest Winley's irreverent tone.

"Then you pray for my boy, Jake, and when he starts talkin' I'll come sit in your church with you."

Mrs. Wallace's two companions gasped indignantly, almost inaudibly, as they exchanged incredulous glances.

"Just maybe, Mr. Winley, if you had a little more respect for God, he wouldn't have seen fit to let the Devil afflict your little boy," Mrs. Wallace answered angrily.

Winley opened the screen and stepped outside, backing the ladies off the porch as he advanced, his face growing redder as his rage built.

“You women come up here without no invitation,” he began slowly, venomously, his voice low.

“You come up her talkin’ all that prayer talk, all holier than thou, lookin’ down your nose at my family,” his voice growing louder and his face crimson.

“And then you try to tell me it’s my fault about my little boy!” yelling, “Get out—GET OUT!”

Flecks of brown saliva peppered the air behind the retreating women as they hurried back to their car.

The ladies of the First Baptist Church soon decided that prayer, instead of visitation, would be the best course of action in the case of the Winley family. And pray they did, sincerely, for the souls of the Winleys and the souls of all the afflicted and sick at heart.

Aside from those skewed encounters, little was known about the Winleys, but there was no reason to believe that a closer acquaintance would change any opinions of them. They were the town outcasts—sometimes a subject of gossip but most often ignored. Their place was the unavoidable consequence of their actions, whether they acted through ignorance or through a will to alienation.

About a year later, Sheriff Bennett had been to the Winley place on official business. At that time it had been eight months since anyone had seen Bertie Winley—the absence of her bulk on the seat of the old wagon during their weekend excursions into town had gotten everyone’s attention much more readily than her presence—and several people had suggested that the sheriff drive to the farm to make sure that no ill fate had befallen her. Though he suspected they were

motivated more by curiosity than concern, the sheriff decided that the matter warranted a casual investigation and drove to the Winley place to ask a few questions.

He arrived in the middle of a mild summer afternoon to find Ernest Winley sitting on the front porch of his neglected house, the broken windows and weather-beaten wood looking the same as they had when it was abandoned. His feet were propped up on the remains of the porch railing and he was leaning back on two legs of a rickety chair which leaned precariously to one side. The boys were at the side of the house, Jake watching blankly as Zeb chopped at the ground with a hoe.

When Bennett stepped from his car, Zeb let the hoe fall to the ground and the two boys disappeared beneath the porch, quickly crawling between the few remaining boards that still skirted it. Winley leaned forward in his chair and propped his elbows on his knees.

“Hello, Mr. Winley,” said Bennett as he approached the porch, casually looking at the old house and its surrounding refuse—bottles, cans, a matted growth of weeds.

“Sheriff,” he muttered.

Winley stood up in his dirt-and-grease-caked overalls and warily offered a damp handshake—a shiny hand with a lattice of accumulated black cracks. It was obvious from his demeanor that he would have preferred his isolation and was being courteous for no other reason than the office Bennett held.

“Mr. Winley, I’ll come right to the point,” he began as he shook Winley’s hand, “several people have mentioned that your wife hasn’t come into town for a long time—and we wanted to let you know if she’s sick or anything and we can...”

“She’s dead—died four months ago.”

Winley didn’t change expression.

“Oh—I’m sorry to hear that—I had no idea.”

“Much obliged for you askin’,” he replied tersely.

“Where did you have her buried, Mr. Winley? I’m surprised I didn’t hear anything about it.”

“She’s buried yonder, under that elm tree.”

Bennett took a long moment to look in the direction of the big tree, then slowly turned back toward Winley.

“You really shouldn’t have done that Mr. Winley. There’s supposed to be a death certificate, certain legalities should be abided.”

The sheriff watched the expression on Winley’s face. Winley didn’t say anything—he just stared at the elm tree where he and the boys had buried his wife and their mother. The sheriff wasn’t sure whether or not his words had even registered with Winley, and he didn’t pursue it any further.

...and Rumors of Winleys

As often happens with the misfits and dullards of a small town, rumors concerning the Winleys had been quick to arise among the people of Carlson. Within months of the Winley’s arrival, almost everyone in town had heard at least

one oblique reference to violence within the family. No one had ever actually seen Ernest Winley raise his hand against his family, but the bruises that appeared on Bertie and the boys, with alarming regularity, were undeniable and plain for all to see. The family's isolation and apparent hostility to outsiders prevented any lawful investigation of the suspicious circumstances and served to fuel extravagant speculation regarding the nature and extent of the abuse.

One story claimed that a friend of Ned Johnson's son in St. Louis knew for a fact that Ernest and Bertie Winley were brother and sister. No one ever contacted Ned Johnson's son or mentioned the name of this friend, but, given the peculiarity of the Winleys and the fact that Jake was so obviously an afflicted child, inbreeding seemed to be a plausible explanation. These things provided more than enough justification for the perpetuation of the story.

Some of the more lurid rumors originated with the older boys in town. As part of a freshman initiation into high school, the seniors would occasionally cajole the underclassmen into sneaking onto the Winley place to see how close they could get to the house without arousing the attention of the dog. The element of excitement was provided by tales, probably exaggerated, of old man Winley sometimes rushing out of the house, waving his shotgun in the air and screaming incoherently, whenever he heard the dog barking.

Two of the boys once claimed that they had managed to creep up to a bedroom window of the Winley home. They said the dog, for some reason, hadn't barked that night, and that they had been lured on by a voice pleading for someone to stop something, that it hurt. They claimed to have peered through a gap in the

drawn curtains to see old man Winley moving back and forth against Zeb, who was bent over on the bed with his pants around his knees, yelping with each thrust as the old man grunted in unison. This particular story never gained the credibility of the rest, but it was a wellspring of innuendo.

These tales were told in hushed tones with a mock air of secrecy for years, long after they were alleged to have happened. They became a part of the local lore, and Madie knew all of them as clearly as if she had been there, listening to the conversations, as if she had been one of those high school boys who had crept up to the Winley's farmhouse to peek in the windows.

Ye Who Are Weary...the Burden

She had heard how it had been Sheriff Bennett's terrible burden to tell Ernest Winley that he had found the body of his youngest son. Bennett himself had recounted that story to Madie, a couple of years after she had finished high school.

He told her about his grim visit to the Winley place on that Saturday afternoon, the day she had found the body. He had been exhausted from the withering events of the morning and he had done the best he could, but, in the end, he was left with no choice but to leave the man alone in his suffering. He felt that he had been inadequate in the face of the tragedy and still wished he could go back and do things differently. It wasn't that Winley was likeable—nothing could be farther from the truth—but no one deserved to be so alone.

On that bleak afternoon, as he drove out to the Winley place, he could feel the distance between Winley and himself looming larger, even as his car brought

them nearer—there was no common ground to unite them and he had no idea what to expect. The stark autumn sun shone warmly, its brightness glinting off the hood ornament of the sheriff's car. He let the reflection lead the way along the dirt road while he mulled over the events of the past few hours. The tires rumbled over the road, slinging gravel, twigs, and rocks against the underside of the car. A thick cloud of red dust rose behind him.

Early afternoon, and already the day seemed ancient. Only that morning, Madie Transom had discovered the body, and, within the hour, he and Azel Transom had driven to the abandoned farmhouse. The scene was essentially as Azel had described, but there were other things to be found, things that had happened during that brief time since the discovery of the body, between the time that Madie had run from the house and the time the sheriff entered, things which Azel couldn't have known.

The body was lying in the back room, feet bound, as Azel had said, but it was no longer face down—someone had turned the body over. The penis was missing, severed at its base, and a red and green baseball cap, the name "Jake" sewn on the brim, was clutched between the small hands.

Under the half-fallen back porch, the sheriff found some discarded cans that had, until recently, contained food of various sorts—pears, peaches, sardines. And there was now a third set of footprints—belonging to neither Azel nor Madie, but of an intermediate size—leading from the back of the farmhouse to the main road, then disappearing.

So, it now befell the sheriff to tell Ernest Winley the news, to show him the red and green cap for identification—and to find out if he had seen his oldest son, Zeb. Bennett drove slowly through the ruts leading to the blighted place and parked in a clearing that had been beaten down in the weeds. Winley sat on the porch, looking out across the cotton sitting neglected in the neighboring field. He got up as the sheriff opened his car door and stepped off the porch to walk out and meet him.

“Did you find my boys? It’s time to pick the Barlow’s cotton.”

Bennett lowered his eyes toward the ground, wetting his lips as they tightened slightly across his teeth.

“I’ve got some bad news for you, Mr. Winley.”

Winley stopped in the middle of the yard and narrowed his eyes.

“You didn’t find ‘em? Is that what you drove out here for?” he asked haltingly, as if short of breath. He had sensed the element of tragedy in the sheriff’s words and seen it on his face.

“No, Mr. Winley—I’m sorry it isn’t. We found your youngest boy—we have a body...,” he said, holding out the red and green cap for Winley to see.

Winley looked at the cap and winced, then looked past Sheriff Bennett as the weight of the words slowly settled and penetrated.

“Your son’s dead, Mr. Winley.”

Winley blinked his eyes slowly, forcibly, as if struggling to shut out the words, to somehow pick out a different meaning. His perplexed gaze wandered between the cotton field and the red and green cap. Half closing his eyes, he tilted his head to one side.

“We found Jake’s body in an abandoned farmhouse—I’m sorry.”

Realization fell slowly across Winley’s face. He turned an ashen gray and began to tremble slightly—just a hint of trembling in his hands at first, which gradually seized his arms and legs, finally wresting control of his head, as well. He struggled against his face, tightening his lips as they too rebelled against his will, writhing an agonized trail which undulated across the tobacco-stained stubble.

He forced his clamped lips to part ever so slightly, as he managed to croak in a squeaking, pained voice, “Jake?”

Sheriff Bennett lowered his eyes and nodded slowly.

Winley fell to his knees and slowly began rocking back and forth, his mouth forcing its way open and locking in a pained, silent refusal to scream. Finally, his body shook out a convulsive moan as he raised his clenched fists toward the sky, his face turning red and his eyes rolling from side to side in their sockets as if searching the heavens for some denial of the truth.

He yelled hoarsely, “Where is Zeb? Where is Zeb?”

Nausea tightened in Sheriff Bennett’s stomach. He didn’t know what to say, but he knew the answer to his question and was relieved that he didn’t have to ask it—Winley had not seen his older son.

Winley screamed at the sky, “Where is Zeb?”

“Mr. Winley,” the sheriff began, extending his hand toward Winley’s shoulder.

But he just moaned and jerked his arm upward to bat the sheriff’s hand away, shaking his head unevenly, spasmodically.

Bennett stayed there for half an hour—leaning against the hood of his car for a while, then slowly walking the perimeter of the clearing in the weeds where he had parked, looking out at the dry cotton quivering in the wind. Winley knelt on his knees, silent, looking up at the sky, squinting into its depths. Whenever the sheriff walked toward him, he would grow agitated and start to shake and moan, so Bennett kept his distance—nothing to say, no words to bridge the chasm. Finally, he had no choice but to leave.

The cloud of dust followed the sheriff back through the fields and pastures, along the dirt road which led into town. Its dryness roiled upward and it drifted back to settle upon the frozen, tortured face of Ernest Winley.

Assembly of the Last Congregation

The following Monday, the sheriff saw Winley's wagon roll into town. He watched from the window of Zach's Cafe as the mule clattered to a stop across the street. Winley climbed down from the seat and walked hurriedly into the hardware store, head down, staring at the sidewalk, the brim of his hat pulled low.

Bennett briefly considered walking across the street to question him about Zeb, but he had already decided, before he left Winley's farm the day before, that he wouldn't trouble him again for a long time. He supposed it would be best to let him come to terms with what had happened before he tried asking about Zeb. Anyway, he knew that Winley would come to him if he found out anything that he wanted him to know.

He left the store a few minutes later with a small sack in his hand, closing the door more gently than was his custom. He took two steps onto the sidewalk and suddenly halted, motionless. During all the years that he had been coming into the town of Carlson, walking its sidewalks and crossing its streets, this was the first time he had ever been observed to just—

—stop.

He lifted his head to look around—up the street, to the west, looking at the irregular outlines of the storefronts against the pale blue sky, looking at the people engaged in their daily routine, his eyes following the movement of one car, then another, then down the street, to the east.

From his table in the cafe, Bennett could see Winley's face clearly. The morning sun etched stark shadows across its creases—some of the bitterness had been burned away and replaced by what Bennett could only imagine must be a staggering sorrow. He thought he could detect a look of puzzlement in his expression, and wondered if the man had just then, at that precise moment, recognized his isolation in the community. He felt an aching compassion for him, despite the rumors and any truth they might contain.

Finally, Winley got onto the wagon and rode away.

After that, it had been only a short time until the flies once again found reason to congregate. They would probably have come and gone unnoticed if it hadn't been for Will Thornton and Bobby Tabor, a couple of high school boys who decided to sneak out to the Winley place to find out if Zeb had come back.

It was a cool autumn night and a waning three-quarter moon faintly lit the dry creek bed as Will and Bobby strained to see their way to Ernest Winley's farm. The horse that had carried them most of the way, had grown tired and refused to walk any further under the load of their combined weight, so they had tied it to a fence about a mile away and walked the rest of the distance.

That night there was no light inside the Winley house and the only sound was the breeze blowing through the branches of the trees arching overhead. Will took the lead as he and Bobby crept out of the creek bed, toward the back yard of the dark farmhouse. About twenty yards away, they paused and crouched beside a makeshift table in the back yard—just some scraps of used lumber stretched across a couple of sawhorses, supporting an assortment of Mason jars and rusted pots and pans. Most people would have thrown the junk out long ago, but the Winleys left it there, a small contribution to the rest of the detritus of their existence that was strewn about the place.

They waited in the silence by the table, alert for even a hint of rattling from the doorknob or the most distant cracking of a twig—the slightest sound would have been enough to send them running. They looked at each other, and Will had just nodded to Bobby that it was time to move closer to the house when a possum darted out from beneath the table and ran between Bobby's legs. Bobby yelled and jumped up, bumping against the precariously stacked piles of wood, glass, and metal, to send the jars and pots and pans crashing to the ground.

They didn't wait to see what would happen next—they were well on their way down the creek bed before the last of the jars and cans had finished breaking and bouncing.

As the din died out behind them, they ran faster, expecting the sound of breaking glass to be replaced by barks and shouts from the Winley place. But, as the last piece of glass fell silent and the last can ceased its bouncing clatter, nothing happened—there was no barking, no shouted curses, no booming shotgun blasts—no sound except for their own panicked footsteps.

They slowed to a trot, then stopped and turned toward each other, then turned back toward the farmhouse—cautiously, crouching slightly, half expecting to see old Winley standing behind them, staring at them down the long barrel of his shotgun. Nothing—just a crisp breeze, rustling leaves, and restless patches of blue moonlight falling through the trees.

They stood, scarcely breathing, for several minutes before daring to move. Finally, they looked at each other, trying to read the other's expression in the moonlight, then began retracing their steps, listening intently through the sigh and murmur of the oak and mesquite limbs swaying overhead, straining for any sound of the old man hiding in the shadows. The dry sand in the creek bed shifted almost noiselessly beneath their feet as they made their way back.

About a hundred feet from the farmhouse, they crouched and peered across the back yard. The newly broken bottles and jars glimmered in the path that led to the darkened back porch—Winley could be sitting right there waiting for them and they wouldn't know anything about it until it was too late. Something knocked

gently in the breeze—maybe the screen door, but they couldn't be sure. Ten or fifteen minutes passed and not a sound was heard except for an irregular knocking—thump...thump, thump.

The only way to the house was the path they had tried before. Other than that, the perimeter of the property was littered with prickly pear cactus, bear grass, and old strands of rusted, barbed wire.

Will led the way, careful not to step on the shards of glass, with Bobby trailing along behind. The breeze was at their backs—maybe that was good—no wind to distract them. Or, maybe it would work to Winley's advantage—maybe he was hiding in the shadows, sniffing the air and alert to their approach, his cracked, dirty fingers twitching eagerly against the shotgun trigger. Bobby tried not to think about it.

Bobby didn't know why they had come back, but it had seemed like the thing to do after they had realized that no one was chasing them, that there was not even any barking to be heard. Anyway, since Will hadn't backed down, there was no way he could have.

As they neared the back porch, their eyes began to discern vague outlines and shadows within the blackness—an old chair, maybe a spittoon, an assortment of old garden tools, the tattered screen door gently thumping in the breeze—and no sign of Winley. They crept past the east side of the house, staying in the shadows of the trees, careful not to walk too near the windows. At the corner there was a moonlit clearing between the trees, about thirty feet wide and flanked with cactus. The only way to circle the house was to cross this exposure to the cover of the oak on the

other side. Will motioned for Bobby to stay back, took a deep breath, and ran toward the oak tree as quietly as possible, his eyes trained on the house, watching for any movement inside. He entered the security of the shadows, still running.

Then he smelled it. The odor hit him in the face and his stomach churned upward, as his foot caught on something—a metallic rattle—and he fell forward, instinctively reaching out to break his fall. Near the ground, his hand met something soft but resistant, and, as the weight of his body caught up, the softness slipped beneath his hand. As his palm met with rocks and gravel, a second wave of stench assaulted him and he knew it was the smell of rotting flesh and his stomach emptied as he caught himself inches above it.

“Bobby!” he rasped and cried and screamed in one utterance.

His feet found their way back beneath him almost instantly, and he ran back across the clearing, around the side of the house, across the litter-strewn back yard, and caught up with Bobby near the dry creek bed. There was still no barking or shouting to be heard, but this time they didn’t slow down.

The next morning, Sheriff Bennett found a note that had been slid beneath the door of his office. It read: “DEAD BODY AT WINLEY PLACE.”

On his way to the farmhouse, Bennett braced for the worst. He considered the possibility that Zeb had returned and either killed or been killed by Winley. And either way could mean that someone was still there.

He eased down the rutted lane and parked behind a thick stand of trees. The sun cast a quiet light on the old house, as the sheriff walked slowly through the mesquites and junipers, carefully circling around numerous patches of cactus. He

stopped when he neared the edge of the thicket and crouched down behind a large oak, listening. Minutes passed and there was no sound except for a gentle thumping—probably the screen door—and the sigh of tree branches moving against each other, whispering about the secret things they had seen. He checked the safety on his lever-action Winchester—off—and kept to the trees as he moved across the washed out path leading to the front of the house. The breeze brought a familiar smell, oppressing with the memory of recent tragedy—there was, indeed, something dead here.

At the end of the lane, near a clearing in the overgrown trees that circled the house, Bennett found the decomposing carcasses of the hound that lay collared at the end of its rope. It had been killed by a single shotgun blast to the head, probably three or four days before.

“Winley! This is Sheriff Bennett! Anybody home?” he yelled as he approached the house.

Only the screen door around back thumped its reply.

“Winley!”

He rounded the house to find the back yard littered with junk and broken glass. A few old tires, a harness, and some assorted sun-bleached clothes lay in a heap by the back porch. The remnants of a twisted screen door thumped gently against a rotting threshold. Tired wood creaked beneath Bennett’s weight as he stepped up on the porch, and through the broken back window, he saw a form—a human form—and he knew.

Winley's remains were slumped in a chair in the middle of the kitchen. With a shotgun blast into his mouth, he had ended his earthly tenure of misery. And the flies had gathered once more in that small town—once more a last congregation for the dead.

A Memory...

One of the things that Madie remembered most vividly about that horrible day when her dad had fixed that flat near an abandoned farmhouse—after the body, after Mrs. Hurd and “How Great Thou Art”—was how, as she and her dad were leaving the grocery store late that afternoon, a large Mexican woman had paused on the sidewalk, affectionately placing her hand on Madie's face, and, beaming, said, “Qué bonita,” as she gently pushed back Madie's hair—just as if she were her own daughter.

And that gentleness had reminded Madie of those happier times at the abandoned farmhouse where just that morning she had found the boy's body, those happier times with a friendly, Mexican family waving from the front porch of a house in the middle of a cotton field.

...CLICK

..And a Brighter Tomorrow

HISSESSSS...her Dad pulled over to the side of the road...but that was a long, long time ago... “Qué bonita...” she was such a nice lady...CLICK, hissss...

“¡Díós mío!”

Madie looked over in time to see Mrs. Hernandez raise up slightly, and clutch her chest. She had a surprised look on her face as she fell back on the bed, arched her back three times, then lay still.

The change of nurses for the afternoon shift brought a new face to Madie's door and, with it, the discovery of Mrs. Hernandez's lifeless body. The nurse left the room and returned with more nurses who felt Mrs. Hernandez's wrist and held a stethoscope to her chest. Later, other people came into the room and took the body away. And, with that, Mrs. Hernandez had left Madie's life as quietly and unobtrusively as she had dwelt in it. Madie didn't remember ever hearing her utter a single word.

Randall appeared at her door with a fresh wash cloth and towel. An incipient sense of dread began to crawl its way upward near the base of Madie's skull.

Madie looked up at the crucifix on the wall, over the bed where Mrs. Hernandez had lain, and she heard hymns from the old wooden church of her childhood as they poured from the hearts and mouths of the faithful. Mrs. Hurd's voice rose above the rest—a beautiful soprano, rising in tones of infinite and virginal purity which set it apart from the quavering voices of all the others—and Madie felt a fathomless love and an unquenchable longing. And somewhere deep within her stirred the rudiments of a hope that tomorrow things would be better.