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THE PRIDE OF PETROVAR

A Novel

by Alan H. Gael

About 67,000 words

Chapter One

The Pride of Petrovar

*Well, Eileen Orr, oh, that's me darlin's name is
O'er the Barony her features they were famous
—Traditional*

Sean Orr came out of County Galway in the spring of 1922, and he came the way the poor have always come, with very little in his hands and a great deal in his head. What he had in his hands were a trunk of tools and seven American dollars. What he had in his head were the songs.

He did not come straight to Kansas. No one does. He went first to the cities, as the Irish did then — New York, and then Chicago, and then a winter in St. Louis — and the cities used him hard, and taught him what he may already have known: that he was not a man for crowded places. A man raised within the sound of the Atlantic, in a country that comes up out of the sea into stone, does not take easily to a life lived indoors and at the bidding of a bell, and Sean Orr served his years of it as a man serves a sentence, putting by what he could and saying little, and learning, in the saying little, the patience the rest of his life would ask of him. He did not write home that the streets were not paved with gold or anything else, because the people at home had troubles enough of their own and no use for his; and this, too, was a kind of schooling, and he took it.

In the autumn of 1928, he rode west on the back of a grain truck and came down at last into the country that would be his.

It is a particular country. It is flat the way water is flat — not the trodden flatness of a yard but a great level reaching from under a man's boots to the rim of the world, so that a man set down in the middle of it feels, the first day, that he has been stood on a table under the whole of the sky. The sky is the principal fact of it. Weather comes out of the west with nothing to break it for two hundred miles; wheat stubble runs gold to pewter to a far blue nothing; the elevators stand every eight or ten miles like the steeples of a country whose religion is wheat. A man learns that country slowly or he does not learn it at all. The ones who learn it come to a love of it that people of softer places find hard to credit: a love not for prettiness, but for size, honesty, and the way it will not pretend to be anything other than precisely what it is.

Sean Orr got down off the grain truck onto the one main street of Petrovar, in Haskell County, on a bright cold Tuesday morning in October, and stood with his trunk at his feet and looked a long while at all that level shining distance. He had crossed an ocean and the better part of a continent, and had seen in the crossing a great many places that wanted him to admire them. This one did not care whether he admired it or not, and that, he found, he could trust. He picked up his trunk. He had decided, as a man sometimes decides such things without knowing he has decided them, that he had come far enough.

The town he had come to was not much to set against that sky, and did not try to be. It was a grain elevator and a Methodist church and two short blocks of brick and false-fronted stores, with frame houses behind them under whatever trees their owners had managed to coax up and keep alive. Two hundred and some people lived in it, and several hundred more lived on the land about it and counted it their town – the place they came for flour and nails and mail and salvation and society. There was Edna's, where a man could get his dinner and the temper of the county in one sitting. There was the bank, the feed store, Holt's hardware, and the cooperative, which was the elevator, and was, in the way that mattered, the heart of the place, since through it wheat became money and money became another year.

He bought eighty worn acres from a widow named Halverson, who was glad to be quit of them, and he set about the long argument with that ground which would take up the rest of his days; for the ground in that country is never given to a man, only lent to him, on terms, against the weather, and a man spends his life paying the interest on it and counts himself well off if at the end the principal has not been called in. The first years were the hard ones, as the first years are. He learned the wheat, and the wind, and the particular griefs the country keeps for the over-hopeful – the hail that takes a year's work in eleven minutes, the dry spring that will not break, the wet harvest that sprouts the grain standing in the shock – and he learned them in the only school that teaches them, which collects its whole fee in advance and gives no marks for effort.

And within the year he had married Ruth Connell, whom he met at the Methodist church on his second Sunday in the county. She had been asked to show the new man where the hymnals were kept. They stood among the back pews and fell to talking of how the sound carried in the building, and the talk ran on past its natural end, the way talk does only two or three times in a life; and before they parted, he had asked her to supper and she had said yes. It surprised her to hear herself say it. She was not a girl who said yes to strangers. But there was that in Sean Orr which made the word stranger sit wrong on him, even then – a way he had of closing the distance between himself and another person a little faster than the other person had meant to allow. They were married before the snow fell, in the church where she had shown him the hymnals, and she came out to the eighty acres and took up her share of the long argument with the ground; and for nearly twenty-seven years thereafter the two of them carried the place between them the way two people carry a thing that is heavy but not too heavy, each knowing without looking exactly how much of it the other had in hand.

It was the singing the county remembered him by.

He had brought the songs across with him out of Galway the way another man brings a strongbox or a watch, and they proved, in the event, the most valuable thing he owned, though it would have been hard to say in what coin. On the summer evenings, when the day's work was done and the heat began to go up out of the worked ground in long shimmering exhalations, and the light came down the wheat in that last gold the country keeps back for the

end of its hot days, he would carry a chair out onto the porch of the house on the eighty acres and sit, and after a while he would sing.

He had a tenor that had been schooled by nothing but use and the Atlantic, high and clear and far-carrying, and in that flat still air it went the better part of a mile. He sang the songs his own people had sung, which were songs about Ireland, and the sea, and leaving, and love that did not come right, and the particular laughter the Irish keep that walks arm in arm with grief because the two of them have nowhere else to go and have long since given over pretending otherwise. He sang in English, and he sang in the old language, which no one else in Haskell County had ever spoken nor ever would; and in the old language the songs did not sound, to the people who heard them, like the relics of a country none of them would ever see. They sounded like news. They sounded like a thing the listeners had always known and never been told, and had been waiting, without knowing they waited, to hear said aloud.

The neighbors learned the evenings. On still nights the work in the nearer fields would slow, and then stop, and men would find some reason to be standing where the sound reached them, mending what did not greatly want mending until it was over. Tom Callahan farmed the next hundred and sixty acres, a man of perhaps sixty words in a day; on those evenings he would set down whatever he had in his hands and stand with his face turned a little toward the Orr place until the singing was done. The singing was no performance. Sean Orr did not sing in order to be

heard. He sang because it was in him and there was nothing to be done about it. By the time his children were grown the evening singing had become, without a soul having decided it, one of the few true ceremonies the county owned.

His daughter Eileen was born in 1935, the youngest of his three children and the only girl, into a house where music and food and argument and affection were all kept in the large open quantities of people who have known the want of all four and have resolved never to know it again. She had two brothers older than herself, Sean's two sons, who took the fields for their birthright and their burden together, the way farm sons do; and Eileen grew up among the fields and the kitchen and the porch, and took something from each of the three that she never afterward set down.

She learned the fields from her brothers, which is to say she learned them by following where she was not always wanted and making herself useful enough, soon enough, that the not wanting fell away. She could drive a team before she could rightly reach the lines, and pull a calf, and tell from the feel of the air at four in the afternoon what the sky meant to do by dark. She learned the kitchen from her mother, who ran it as her husband ran the eighty acres, as a thing that did not forgive carelessness and paid back attention; so that Eileen came to her womanhood already knowing the exact unspoken arithmetic by which a farm wife turns weather and work and not quite enough money into three meals a day and a clean house and a family that does not learn, until it is grown, how close the figuring sometimes

ran. And she learned the porch from her father. By the time she was a girl half grown she could sing every song Sean knew, and most of them in the old language; and when the two of them sang together on the summer evenings the people who had been stopping to listen for twenty years stopped a little longer, because the thing the father had carried over the ocean had plainly not died on the passage. It had taken, in the daughter, and put down a root, and come up again the same and changed, which is the only kind of inheritance worth the having and the rarest kind there is.

By the time Eileen was seventeen she was, by the plain agreement of the whole county, its most remarkable person — though if you had said so to her she would have laughed at you, which was itself a part of it. She was not tall. She had her father's dark red hair, which she wore in a braid through the working week and pinned up on Sundays, and her father's fair Irish skin, which the Kansas sun used unkindly and which she met with hats and a cheerful acceptance of her freckles; and she had eyes a little too large and too green for the rest of her face, which was not a flaw but the place where one's attention came at last to rest. What people remembered, though, was not how she looked. It was that she gave you the whole of her attention, as though your concerns were the only concerns then before the world — a thing rarer and more useful than beauty, and harder to forget. The old people of the county, who did not hand out such judgments lightly, having a lifetime's stock of disappointed ones to go on, said of her the thing they said of very few: that she

was the kind that comes to a place once, if the place is fortunate, and that Petrovar had best know what it had while it had it. They were righter than they knew, and in a way they had not meant.

She was not, for all her sweetness, a girl who could be put where she did not wish to go. The church auxiliary set her at the jams-and-jellies table three fairs running, and the third year she went to old Mrs. Halverson and said, pleasantly enough but with no apology in it, that she would rather chair the scholarship fund, which had not sent a single child to a college in two years, and that she believed she understood why. Mrs. Halverson looked at her a long moment, and moved her. In one year the fund was sound again. Eileen found the thing that wanted doing and did it, and was not greatly interested in being thanked.

That same evening, after the auxiliary meeting, Eileen stayed in the church kitchen with Ruth while the last of the coffee was poured down the sink and the hymnals were stacked in their proper piles. Ruth asked why she had wanted the scholarship fund and not the table everyone had expected her to sit behind. Eileen dried a cup and set it away. "Because the table was where they had put me," she said. "The fund was where something was broken." Ruth looked at her daughter a moment, hearing more than the words. "And is that all?" Eileen smiled, not quite happily. "No. I think I am tired of being the girl everyone has already decided on. I'd like to do a thing before they can tell me what kind of thing it is." Ruth took the towel from her, folded it

once, and handed it back. "Then do the thing," she said. "But know the cost of doing it." Eileen said she did, though she was not certain yet what the cost would be; and that uncertainty, more than any boy in the county, was what kept her awake that night.

In the summer of 1955 there were five men in the county in love with Eileen Orr. Four of them she knew about. The county knew about all five, in the way a small place knows such things, without anyone having said a word. She had known them all, all of her life.

There was Tommy Briggs, who was twenty-one and worked his father's feed store, and who had loved her since the eighth grade without ever finding the moment to say so. He brought feed to the Orr place at cost, and mended their fences when he saw a post gone, and came with his truck whenever there was hauling to be done, and was in every particular but the one a man could have wished for her — except that Eileen had known him all her days, and was fond of him as one is fond of weather and Sundays, and there was no strangeness left between them out of which the other thing might have grown. Tommy understood this. He went on bringing the feed.

There was Pete Halverson, twenty-two, grandson of the same widow who had sold Sean his eighty acres, a solid quiet young man with a farmer's long patience for things that ripen in their own time. He kept a sensible distance, and was her friend in the practical undemanding way of people who share the one set of cares a farming county allows, and he did not press, because he

knew, the way he knew his own ground, that pressing would yield him nothing he wished to harvest.

There was Bobby Crane, twenty, who meant to get to the university at Lawrence and away, and who wrote her poems he had the good sense never to show her. He had done what the bookish do with a feeling they cannot act upon: he had turned it into understanding. He saw her more clearly, perhaps, than any of them, his life already pointing off the edge of the county and both of them knowing it; and they were friends with the particular ease of two people who have silently agreed not to reach for a thing neither will give up enough to hold.

There was Larry Dolan, twenty-three, Danny Callahan's cousin, lately home from the Navy and eighteen months of looking at the Pacific from one island and another, and ready as such men are to love something rooted and near. He was the only one of them direct about it. Eileen told him, honestly and without unkindness, that she did not love him in the way he wished, and he thanked her for telling him plainly, being that sort of man, and they stayed friends — which is harder than it sounds, and says a good deal about the both of them.

And there was Danny.

Daniel Callahan had grown up on the farm that lay against the Orrs', a hundred and sixty acres his father had worked since 1924, in a family that had been on that ground long enough to have its dead in the Petrovar churchyard under their own stones, which in that county was the only patent of nobility anyone recognized. He had worked the place at his father's shoulder

since he was old enough to be of use, and he knew it as intimately as the house he was born in, in the dark, by the feel of the floor. He was Eileen's own age to the year, the two of them born in 1935 within a few weeks of each other, and he had loved her since he was eleven years old. He could have told you the very afternoon. She had come to the Callahan kitchen to bring back a wrench her father had borrowed, and she had stood in the doorway with her braid over her shoulder and said, with the grave courtesy she had even then, "Mrs. Callahan, my father sends his thanks for the loan of the wrench." He was eleven, and she was eleven, and it was finished. He had not known then what it was. He did not know, nine years on, that he could have said it any better; he only knew it, the way one knows from the soles of one's feet which way a field is sloping before one has thought to look.

He had understood, by the time he was fifteen, what he was to her: the fence line, the near field, the country so familiar to the eye that the eye no longer troubles to see it. Others would come to her with the appetite of not yet knowing. He had been there always. He had taken this as his father's people took a dry year: not with anger, which changes nothing, but by planning around it and hoping, without much expecting, for rain. He stayed her nearest friend through all of it, which cost him more than he let anyone see.

He had been admitted to the university at Lawrence in 1953 and had not gone. His father's heart was uncertain that year and the farm wanted him, and he had stayed, and did not call it a

sacrifice, because the land was his and he had always known it would be, and a thing one has always known is not a thing one grieves. He was twenty that summer, working the ground he would work the whole of his life, in love with a woman he had no reasonable hope of marrying. The wheat was coming on dry. The price was wrong, and had been wrong two years, and not yet one man in the county had said aloud the thing that several of them had begun, in the privacy of their own arithmetic, to suspect.

On a Friday toward the end of May the two of them sat on the line fence between the farms, where they had sat since they were children, for whom a fence is not a boundary but a place to be. The evening was coming down long and gold, the elevator catching the last of the light away to the north, the turned fields giving back the day's heat and beginning, at their edges, to cool.

"Danny," she said, "do you think there's anybody left in the world who is actually surprising?"

He said he hoped there was.

She looked off at the rim of the land. "I should like to know someone who doesn't already know everything I'm going to say before I've said it. Who hasn't a history with me to fill in the blank before I reach it." She stopped. "Does that sound ungrateful?"

"For what?"

"For the people who know me. For you." She turned the green eyes on him, which were never anything but honest when she turned them on you so. "I am grateful, Danny. I do mean it. But I think sometimes what I want is somebody who hasn't found me yet. Who

has to come to know me. Instead of remembering me. I'm not looking for a conclusion — I'm looking for a beginning."

He knew what she meant. He knew, too, that she was describing him — he wasn't a beginning, and that her saying it to him — to the very one she meant — was a kind of trust, and a gift, and the plainest possible account of what he was to her.

"There are surprising people everywhere," he said. "Dodge City. Liberal. You could go up to Wichita and find fifty before noon."

She gave him the smile he did not want — warm, and fond, the smile of one who finds a person genuinely dear and genuinely not enough. "I don't want fifty," she said. "I want just one."

She got down from the fence and went back across the field toward her house, the braid over her shoulder and the last light behind her. He sat where he was and watched her go, and turned over in his mind the difference between being known and being seen, between being a conclusion and being a beginning.

He got in his pickup truck and drove the short distance home through the long spring dusk with three things in his mind that would not lie down quietly together — the fair that was coming, the price of the grain, and Eileen on the fence asking about surprising people — and he could not have told you what they had to do with one another, only that they had a weight, the particular weight a man feels when several things are moving toward the same place and he cannot yet see the place.

The price had been wrong two years running. His father had spoken of it at supper the evening before, in the contained way of a man who names a hard thing so that it can be handled and not left to work in the dark. The cooperative had paid too little at the last two harvests — below the ten-year average, below what the figures would bear — and there were families now borrowing against the next crop to carry the year: the Boyles down the south road, the Benders, old Ray Kreider, whose credit at the Sublette bank was stretched to a length that made men uneasy, and which Ray himself would not discuss, Ray not being a man to speak of his own discomfort, so that the silence itself told you how large it had grown.

"The cooperative ought to do better by us at the harvest," his father had said. "Dub Meacham keeps saying the market is the market, and there's nothing to be done. But the market is in Chicago. What we are paid here is what the board decides to pay. And the board is Dub." He had looked at his plate a moment. "There is something not right in those books. I can't tell you what. But when a man tells you there's nothing he can do, and the figures won't support him, the question to ask is what it is he is choosing not to do."

Danny's mother poured the coffee. Beyond the window the elevator stood at the foot of Main Street, the lettering on its flank — PETROVAR — gone pale with the patient work of thirty Kansas summers.

"Mind your contracts," his father had said. "Don't let any man talk you into being paid in advance, whatever he offers for

it. Whoever holds *when* you are paid holds *what* you are paid. Remember that." And Danny had remembered it.

The fair was four weeks off.

His father was on the porch when he got home, reading the sky as he had read it forty years, which with Tom Callahan was no figure of speech. Danny sat down on the step. They were quiet together a while, that being the way they were most at ease with one another.

"How is Eileen?" his father asked.

"Well enough. The same."

His father nodded. He was a man who spent perhaps sixty words in a day, and laid them out with care. He considered the sky a little longer. "You could tell her. What it is you feel."

"I know it."

"But you won't."

"No."

"All right," his father said. "That's a choice a man can make." And he went in, not being one to go back over a thing once it was set down.

Danny stayed on the step a while in the dark. The frogs had started somewhere down toward the Orr place, and a screen door went somewhere, and a dog tried two notes at something and thought better of it, and under all of it lay the enormous country quiet that a man raised in it stops hearing until a night like this one hands it back to him. He looked at the elevator, dull white now in the last of the light, that had stood there the whole of his life and had never once looked back at him, which

was among the things he valued in it; and after a while he went in too.

Dubois Meacham — Dub, to the county — had been mayor of Petrovar twelve years. He was fifty-two that summer, a third-generation Kansan come home from the university with a law degree and a wife, Loretta, out of one of the old county families; and he held in Petrovar the place that is hard to describe to anyone who has not lived where everyone is known — the man who runs things, not by any office but by twelve years' knowledge of who owes what to whom, and who is wanting what. He was clever, and easy to like, and unfailingly pleasant. He coached the church's summer ball team. He wrote a few lines in his own hand when a family lost someone. He never forgot a birthday, and had done it so long and so faithfully that it had stopped seeming a kindness and come to seem simply the kind of man he was.

That he had been, for four years, quietly taking from the farmers of the cooperative what was theirs, no one in Petrovar had yet found the way to say, because no one had yet seen it; and it is the nature of that kind of harm that it is not seen until the season it comes due. None of it showed in June. What showed in June was a well-liked man running a well-run town through the ordinary business of a summer, and the elevator standing where it had always stood, and the fair coming on at the end of the month as it always came.

The fair was the hinge the county's year turned on, and had been for forty years. It ran three days, that year the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday at the end of June, and the whole of the

spring leaned toward it the way the whole of a Sunday in that county leaned toward church — not because the event itself was so very much, but because it was the place the county went to look at itself and find itself still there. It drew people in from the farms and from Sublette and from as far as Liberal. There were the auxiliary's tables, and the jams judged, and the quilts hung along a rope in the church tent where the women stood before them saying less than they thought; the livestock judged in the heat by local farmers, some of whom had been judging it for thirty years.

Companies like Caterpillar, John Deere, and Allis-Chalmers showed their new products. They shone under canvas with company men standing beside them, handing out color brochures. They were not pushing, only standing and smiling, the way a man stands by a thing that will sell itself to whoever can afford it, and not mind talking to whoever cannot.

At the north end of the grounds there was the horse trading, carried on in the unhurried way of men who understood both horses and patience, and where every year there were new animals and new traders and faces the county had not seen before, come in off the long roads with strings of stock and whatever else they had brought with them that did not show. Petrovar's fair came before the county fair at Sublette in late July, and the town considered it the finer of the two, and held to that distinction with the gravity small places keep for the small things by which they know themselves to be places at all.

Chapter Two

The Horse Trader

Well, it was Friday at the fair at Ballintubber

Eileen met McGraw, the old horse trader

—Traditional

The Petrovar Town Fair had run forty years without altering in any way that mattered, and that was the whole of its worth. What it offered was not entertainment, of which it had little — a ring-toss, a pie judged, a quilt hung — but continuance: the town's yearly insistence that the world still held this particular shape, that Petrovar was still itself and still here, that the things that had been done in June were done in June again.

Willis Stroud drove up from Sublette on the Thursday, as his father had before him, with the copper candy-apple kettle that had been his father's and was older than Willis, and set it down on the southeast corner of the grounds where his father had set it down; for a man did not move from the corner his father had held any more than he would have moved his father's stone in the churchyard. The kettle had a history in the county the way a few objects do. It had boiled its sugar through the dry years and the wet ones, through two wars and the influenza autumn, and the char baked into the deep of it was, in a manner of speaking, a record of the county's summers that no one had thought to keep on paper.

Willis was past seventy now and did the work slower than once he had, but he did it the same; and the smell that came up off the kettle on the Friday morning – the hot copper and the brown sugar and, under them, the darker smell, the faint char of the boiling stage – had got so far into Danny Callahan's idea of what summer was that he could catch it from the gate and feel something in him settle without his having told it to, the way a man settles coming into a place he has been coming to all his life. Children who were grown now and farming had learned the taste of late June at that kettle, and their children were learning it this year, and Willis tracked the whole procession of them going by with the mild proprietary attention of a man who had been feeding the county one corner of itself for forty years and did not consider the work yet finished.

Mabel Prentiss took the pie an eleventh year running with a sour cherry the judges called perfect, and which was, Mabel having spent eleven years making it more perfect and still counting the work unfinished, as the people who are good at a thing always do. The auxiliary had its long table by the entrance with the jams in their Mason jars with waxed seals and the quilts hung along a rope behind it; the women stood before the quilts the way they always stood before them, saying less than they thought, because a quilt in that county was a year of a woman's evenings and there was a courtesy owed it that had nothing to do with whether you would have chosen the pattern for yourself.

Eileen Orr's scholarship raffle had its own place at the end of the table this year, set to rights that spring, and was

drawing three times its old custom; and the women noted that too, in the way the county noted everything, without saying much about it.

At the livestock ring the farmers went over one another's animals with the close technical attention of men to whom the difference between a good beast and a great one was a matter of real money, and a matter they cared about for its own sake the way other men care about a hand of cards. Some of them had been looking at that ring since their own fathers held them up to see over the rail, and would hold their own children up over it before the day was out; and the sameness of that — the same fence, the same heat, the same arguments carried on in the same words — was a good part of what the fair was for, though no one would have said so or thought it needed saying. You could read the county's two hard years in how the men stood at the fence: the appraisals more careful than they had been, the talk of price gone a little quiet, a holding-back in men who in better seasons would have bid one another up on a good heifer for the pleasure of the thing. For three days a year the fairground was a town being exactly what it meant to be, and knowing it; and a man who had grown up in it could no more have told you what it meant to him than he could have told you what his own name meant to him, the two being known in the same way, which is to say not examined.

Danny was carrying the last of Tommy Briggs's mother's vegetable crates across to the church tent — the third trip, the morning already hot, the dust of the grounds rising where the

feet had passed and hanging in the still air – when he saw the trailers come in along the far end of the corral fence. A blue three-quarter-ton pickup with a two-horse trailer, and behind it a small semi, came in slowly through the gate past the people who stood aside for it. A man got down and unloaded a gray mare from the smaller trailer first, by himself, and tied her to a ring on its side, and went back to help with the rest; and within a few minutes there were six horses down off the semi and strung together in the dust. Danny set his crate down in it and stood and watched, and did not pick the crate up again for some time.

It was the sound that held him first, before he had fairly looked at them: the even, collected footfall of a string of horses walking, which is to a single horse what a chord is to a note. There is a thing in that sound, when the horses are right, that tells a man who knows horses everything before he has looked at anything – a regularity in it, each foot set down with the same weight and taken up with the same ease, that does not happen by accident and cannot be put on for a crowd. It told him these feet had been shaped by a farrier who knew his work, and this motion built up over years by a man who understood the thing the men who do not understand it never learn: that good movement in a horse is not trained into the animal but grown in it, the way a crop is grown, by attention paid steadily over time and not to be had any faster for wanting it faster.

A strawberry roan led the string, good in the bone and clean in the leg, with a level unanxious eye that took in the fairground crowd and found in it nothing that called for an

answer. She walked the way a sound animal walks that has never been given cause to walk otherwise, and a man could have built a working string around her and known she would never be the trouble in it. Behind her came two bays and a sorrel mare, all of them muscled and conditioned the slow honest way that does not show until a man knows to look for it; the sorrel carried her head at the angle of a mare that knew she was well made and saw no reason to pretend she was not. A paint and a young black filly came toward the back, the paint's eye quick and going over the crowd without finding alarm in it, the filly moving with the careful correctness of a horse that has been started right and has not yet had occasion to be made anything else.

And at the back, the gray. She was older than the rest by some years, the color of iron in the morning light, and she came into the corral with the mild, unsurprised attention of a creature that had been a great many places and concluded, on consideration, that they had all been worth the going. She had scars on her hindquarters that she carried the way she carried everything, which was without comment. There is a thing that happens to an animal that has seen enough: it either breaks under the weight of what it has seen or it is enlarged by it, and there is no telling in advance which it will be; and this mare had plainly, over a long time, been enlarged. She looked at the fair the way an old traveler looks at one more town — with interest, because interest was her nature, and without expectation, because expectation had long since been worn down in her to something better than itself. They were none of them showy. They were shod

and muscled and clean, the tack plain and sound and rightly fitted, not costly and not made to draw an eye, only right; and the whole string, standing there in the dust at the north end of the Petrovar fairground, told a man who could read it everything he needed to know of the man who had put it together, without his having to ask that man one word.

Then Danny saw the man himself. He was about thirty, though the weather had done something to his face that made the figure beside the point, the way it does with men who have spent their lives out under it. He was a big man, built to his size and easy inside it, carrying the weight of himself with the loose unconsidered ease of someone who had been this big a long time and no longer thought about it — the kind of ease that made smaller men along the fence rail straighten a little without deciding to. At the corner of his mouth was the small habitual upturn of a man who found the world, on the whole, more amusing than not and did not trouble to hide the opinion. He was, by any honest reckoning, a good-looking man, though not in the barbered, accounted-for way of men who know it; in the way the outdoors makes certain men when it has been given good material and years enough to work it.

It was his hands that said the most, and said something the rest of him did not. They were big hands, scarred across the backs and the knuckles in the pattern that rope and iron and twelve-hundred-pound animals leave on a man over time. A thin white line ran from the base of the right thumb to the wrist, the kind a sharp edge and a half-second's inattention will give a man

and that he carries the rest of his life as a reminder he did not ask for and cannot be rid of. The left forefinger had a bend at the middle joint that had healed a little off-true, which is how a bone heals when it is set by the man it belongs to, with the one hand, because there is no one near enough to do it properly and the work will not wait on a doctor two counties off. They were hands that had been somewhere, and had not come back unmarked, and did not appear to hold it against anyone.

He was not acting, and that was the thing those who watched him that week would tell you of him afterward, and the thing that kept them at the rail. Most men with thirty people watching them become, in some part of themselves, men who are being watched. McGraw's awareness of the crowd showed in one thing only – a single unhurried sweep of the corral and the faces along it when he first came in, the look of a man counting the doors in a room he has not been in before – and then it was gone, and the crowd was no more to him than the weather, an ambient fact of the place he was working in.

He went through the string in order, from the roan to the gray, and he did it the way a man does a thing he has done ten thousand times and still will not do carelessly, because the day he does it carelessly is the day it costs him. He ran his palms down each leg before he ever asked the horse for the foot, slow, knee to fetlock on the front legs and hock to pastern on the hinds, reading with the flats of his hands for the heat a horse hides low down where it has learned a man will not trouble to look. Where he found something – a small warmth in the sorrel's

near front, a thing he had felt before and would feel again – he stopped, and worked it from two sides with his thumb, pressing and reading the horse's answer in the small shiftings of its weight, and stood and made a note in a leather-covered book he kept in his breast pocket, and then went on. He spoke to each horse as he came to it. Not the murmured tenderesses of a man performing gentleness for a fence rail of strangers, but a few low plain words telling the animal what was about to happen to it, because a horse that is not surprised by your hands is a horse that trusts them, and a horse that trusts your hands will give you honest word with its body, and honest word was the thing he was there to get.

When he turned his back on the gray mare to reach for his rasp, she put her nose into his coat pocket and drew out a folded cotton bandana with the neat practiced delicacy of a creature that had done it many times and meant to go on doing it as long as it continued to be allowed. He heard it go. He set down the rasp, and took the bandana back out of the mare's mouth with the patience of a man who had long ago granted that animals hold their own views on the ownership of property and are not to be argued out of them, and shook it out, and folded it again along its old creases, and put it back in the pocket. "One of these days," he told her, pitched exactly for the horse and not a foot farther, "you and I are going to have a real conversation about this." The mare received the news with the bland innocence of a bystander who had seen nothing. He scratched her once behind the ear – not as a reward, there being nothing to reward, but the way

a man acknowledges the latest move in a long joke that has been running between two parties for years and will outlast the argument — and picked the rasp back up. Down the fence a few men laughed, the easy laugh of men who have just been shown a thing they will be telling their wives at supper, and McGraw glanced up at them with the grin still at the corner of his mouth, and went back to the work.

Dub Meacham came along the fence at half past ten, moving through the crowd the way he moved through any gathering in the county, touching an elbow here and meeting an eye there, paying out the small coin of being known with the smooth economy of long practice — shaking this hand, recalling that name, turning the whole of his attention on each man for the few seconds it took to make him feel seen, and then moving on with the account satisfied. He stopped at the rail nearest the horses and looked the string over the way he looked over the cooperative's quarterly figures: not admiring it, pricing it — reckoning what a thing was worth, and to whom. He put his hand across the top rail. "Dub Meacham," he said. "Mayor of Petrovar. Fine animals."

McGraw came up off the paint's fetlock to his full height before he took the hand, and Dub Meacham, who was five foot nine and had spent his public life being the man a room turned toward, felt that through his shoulder and into his stance before he understood that he had felt it. The shake was brief and even and began nothing and finished nothing. Meacham brought a card up out of his breast pocket — he kept them there the way another man keeps a knife, always to hand, always offered — and held it

across the rail with the ease of a man who had offered a thousand of them and had every one taken with thanks. "Anything you need while you're with us, you say the word. We like our visitors looked after."

McGraw took the card without looking at it and had it in his back pocket in the same motion. "Appreciate it," he said, and went back down to the paint. Meacham stood at the rail a moment — there was the briefest pause in him, the small recalculation of a man who had not got back quite what he had put out — and then he was on down the fence with his hand already going out to the next man and his face giving away nothing it had not been told to give. Danny watched him go, and set the moment beside the other things his father had said about the books, not yet knowing what he was building of them, only that they were being handed to him to keep.

McGraw had been reading towns for eleven years, and Petrovar read like a town with something particular to lose. He had marked the elevator first, as he always did, because the elevator told you what a place lived on and what it was afraid of, and this one was kept up and freshly painted, which said the town still believed in what it stood for and had not yet begun, in the way places do at the end, to let the paint go. The men he had passed coming in had the careful look he knew — not beaten, not desperate, only careful, the carefulness that comes of two years of prices that did not cover what they should have, and of arithmetic done at the kitchen table in the evening that comes out, every time, manageable and frightening at once. He had seen

that look in eastern Kansas when he was a boy, across his own father's table, and in the dried-up range country of New Mexico, and in Colorado the year the cattle went to nothing. It was the look of people still standing who had felt the ground go soft under them and were not yet certain how soft. The mayor he had also seen before, in other counties under other names: the man who ran the small economy and understood leverage the way a carpenter understands a level, who offered help warmly and meant the warmth and would, in his own time and his own way, want the help back. McGraw had taken the card because to have refused it would have been to say something, and he was not a man who said things he did not need to say.

He was working the paint's cannon bone between his hands, feeling along it for the honest hardness that meant the bone was sound, when the girl came to the fence.

He did not look up. He marked her arrival the way he marked anything that changed the feel of a place — the men along the rail attending differently, the low talk going quiet, the hum of the fairground settling itself a little around a new center — and he finished what his hands were doing, and in the natural course of straightening and moving to the next horse he had, without appearing to look for anything at all, seen what there was to see. Dark red hair, thick and clean. Green eyes turned on him with the frank attention of a person who has decided a thing is worth taking in and has not troubled to disguise that she is taking it in. It was not the attention he was used to being given, which always had in it some quality of being shown a

picture of himself; this was a person considering something, and the something was him. She stood at her father's elbow – he knew without being told it was her father, the two of them holding between them the same unhurried stillness, the same way of taking stock – and she was looking at him the way a person looks at a thing that has surprised her and that she means to understand before she is finished with it.

He went back to the paint. He was aware of it as a choice, which was itself the unusual thing, the most of his choosing having long since gone down below the place where a man has to think about it; this one he felt, and made anyway. He had seven horses to settle and six to sell and three days to do it in, and the first morning set the note for all the rest, and the note he needed was that the work was the thing.

Sean Orr had worked his way along the rail to the section nearest the roan, Eileen and Danny coming after, and when McGraw finished with the sorrel and came to that side of the fence the two men fell into the talk that horsemen fall into when they have the one language between them and need waste no time building it – quick, particular, the pleasantries gone past almost before they were begun, because the pleasantries were beside the point and both men knew it.

"That left hind," Sean said. He had been eight minutes at the roan and had come to a conclusion. "She's been stressed there."

"She has," McGraw said. "Nothing in the structure. Old stress, from being worked too young – started at two by the man

before me. Sound three years now, but a tendon keeps its memory, and a farrier who knows what he's after will find it."

"How long has she been yours?"

"Two winters. I had her off a man in Tucumcari who'd worked her too hard and knew it. She'd had a year of light work and grass before she ever came to me, and she's been right since. I'd not sell her otherwise." He said it without weight, the way a man says a thing that is only true and needs no help being believed.

Sean was quiet a little. He was not a man who hurried his arithmetic, and the roan stood in the afternoon light through all of it with the self-possessed patience of an animal that knew it was being appraised and had no objection to the process. "What do you want for her?"

McGraw said what he wanted, and said it the way he said everything: plainly, and without the air that most sellers leave around a price for the bargaining to breathe in.

"That's what she's worth," Sean said.

"It is," McGraw said.

"I'll be back this afternoon."

They shook on the understanding, and Ed Halverson was at Sean's shoulder almost before the hands were down, with cooperative business that could not wait, as cooperative business never could; and Sean went off with him, and McGraw went back to his horses. More than once while the two men talked his eyes had gone to Sean's face, the way a man's eyes go to the face of the man he is dealing with; and twice, in the going, they had passed over Eileen — not avoiding her, only passing, the way the eye

passes over what is behind the thing it is looking at — and Danny, watching, saw that this was a thing for which she had nowhere ready to put it.

She turned from the fence with the level walk of a woman who had decided that what she felt would not be let into the way she moved, and Danny went along beside her.

"Good horses," he said.

"Very good." Her voice was even.

"Your pa's taken with the roan."

"He'll buy her." She said it with the mild certainty of one who had watched the ritual many times. "He always buys the one he tells Mama he can't afford. He'll come home tonight saying the man wanted too much, and tomorrow he'll talk about her bone the whole day with more and more warmth, and then he'll go back and buy her. Mama knows the pattern. She'll be clearing a space in the paddock by supper." They walked a few steps. "Who is he?"

Danny told her what he had — the name, the circuit twice a year through this part of Kansas, the name for straight dealing that had come ahead of the man the way that kind of name travels, quietly, by the people who have dealt with him telling the people they trust. She listened the way she listened to a thing she meant to use.

"He didn't look at you," Danny said.

He had decided to say it. He was not entirely sure why; only that something in him had judged that the honest thing was to name it even if the foolish thing was also to name it, and that he would rather be honest and foolish than careful and quiet, at

least this once; and he knew, saying it, that it was also a kind of claim, a making-visible of a thing he had no right to make visible, and he said it anyway.

She stopped. She looked at him a long moment from the green eyes, and there was in the look something that calculated and something that gave up calculating and something, past his expecting, that was warm – the warmth a person has for someone who knows them well enough to have heard the thing they were not going to say, and to have said it. Then she smiled, a smile he had not seen on her before, rueful and private and turned a little against herself, the smile of a person caught at something who has decided that owning it is the better dignity. "Go away, Danny," she said. Not unkindly.

He went, and kept the smile, and it was the first thing that summer he could not account for out of everything he already knew of Eileen Orr.

They walked the fairground again in the afternoon, the circuit two people walk who have been walking the same one since they were children and do not need to say they are doing it. They stopped at the auxiliary table, where Eileen spent five minutes with Mrs. Halverson over two small changes to the raffle and one word about the ticket pricing that Mrs. Halverson took with the face of a woman in the act of recognizing good advice and deciding not to mind that it was good. They stopped at Willis Stroud's kettle and Danny bought two candy apples, and they ate them standing up and not minding the sugar, and Willis tracked the two of them with the satisfaction of a man who had been

feeding this county forty years and meant to go on. Then she stopped. They were near the corral again. Twenty feet off McGraw had his head down over a buckle on the paint's breast collar, a fitting that would not sit flush, working it with a knife and a small punch out of the kit he kept in his saddlebag, gone so far into the work that he seemed to have forgotten he was in a public place. He had not looked up when they stopped.

"Why doesn't he look up?" she said, not quite to Danny — more to the air, the way you say a thing you are still working out.

"He's working."

"He knows we're here."

He did know it. Danny was as sure of that as of most things he could not prove.

"Maybe he's not interested," Danny said.

"He's interested," she said, with a certainty Danny found instructive and hard to hear at once. And then, after a moment: "That's interesting."

He understood her.

McGraw ate at Edna's that evening, on the third stool from the left of the U-shaped counter, where he had the door and the window and the street. He would have chosen it in any diner in any town for the same reasons; eleven years of going where he knew no one and no one knew him had long since made such things habits rather than decisions, as a man who has slept rough learns to put his back to a wall without deciding to. Edna's was, after the elevator and the church, the third of the places the county

was held together at, and the least official of the three and not therefore the least important; it was where a man learned what had happened and what was thought about it, and where Edna, who had stood behind that counter twenty-one years, had formed and revised more accurate judgments of more people than the bank had, and kept them to herself, which was why they went on being accurate.

He had the meatloaf because Edna said it was what was good, and ate it like a big man who had done a day's work and saw no cause to apologize for the work or the appetite; and when she came back with the pot he set down his fork. "Ma'am, that's about the best meatloaf I've had in a thousand miles." He said it as a thing worth saying, plainly, the way he said the price of a horse, and Edna took it with a nod and a small change about the eyes and a second cup poured a quarter inch higher than the first, and did not try to talk to him, which was the right call and which he marked as the right call, and he thanked her for the coffee with a courtesy that had no campaign in it. She studied him from behind the counter with the assessing attention she gave everyone and arrived, for the present, at no conclusion, which was itself a kind of conclusion: McGraw was not the passing-through kind, nor the lost kind, nor the looking-for-something kind, but a fourth kind that wanted longer watching, and Edna was content to watch.

Carl Purvey was at the far end of the counter on the stool he had sat three evenings a week for twenty years, working through his coffee with the meditative thoroughness of a man for

whom the cup was not the point of the sitting but the occasion of it. Carl gave a newcomer the nod when the newcomer had been in three evenings running, which was not unfriendliness but the Petrovar way of not hurrying to a conclusion a man might have to walk back; the county had learned, the hard way and more than once, what came of taking to a stranger fast. Danny came in at eight and took a stool two down from McGraw, not done turning the day over and not ready to be done, Edna's being where a man went when he needed a thing to sit a while not being quite alone with it. He ordered coffee. After a while, in the incremental way of men at a counter who are in no hurry and have agreed without saying so to be in no hurry, they talked.

It came around by the edges first — the horses, the day's trade, the fair itself — and worked toward the middle as the cups were filled and the evening settled into its late-June warmth and stillness. McGraw was out of eastern Kansas to begin with, near Emporia, which surprised Danny, who had taken him for a Westerner; he had left at eighteen and gone west and kept on; he had been at horses since he was nineteen, when a Colorado rancher gave him two horses and sixty dollars to bring a string from Alamosa to Denver and he found he was good at it and that being good at it agreed with him. Eleven years now.

"You'll know these roads, then," Danny said.

"Well enough. Every back road between here and Santa Fe, about. The ones the trucks take, the ones the ranches sit on, the ones that go to water. That's the country that signifies, for a man in my line."

"You ever think of settling somewhere?"

McGraw looked into the cup a moment longer than the question wanted, which told Danny it was not a question he was hearing for the first time. "Sometimes. Then I think about it a little more and the feeling goes off."

"What does the thinking more do?"

"Makes me ask what I'd be trading for it. The road keeps you loose. Keeps you from gathering things to yourself. There's a freedom in not having much. A lightness." He took up the cup. "The question's always what the lightness costs."

"What does it cost?"

"That," he said, "depends on the year."

He paid Edna and went. Danny sat on at the counter and thought about the horses, and what they had told him of the man before the man said a word, and about Eileen on the fence in May asking whether there was anyone left in the world who was actually surprising; and Carl Purvey worked through the last of his coffee at the end of the counter and watched the door close behind the stranger and said nothing, Carl not being a man who hurried.

In the morning he sold the roan to Sean Orr as he had said he would, the price named and met, hands shaken, the little book out and the thing done in two minutes with no ceremony about any of it. He answered Sean's questions about the left hind – the tendon that wanted observing, the farrier question to be settled before she went into regular work – with the directness of a man who tells a buyer what the buyer needs because that is what the

buyer needs, and not one word arranged for effect. That afternoon he sold the two bays and the sorrel to ranchers out of the next county who had driven over on account of the string and spent three-quarters of an hour at the horses with the schooled suspicion of men who had been disappointed before and meant to earn their conclusions; he answered them without ornament and without impatience, a careful buyer being the best kind and his care a form of respect for the animal under his hand. They left with the sort of handshake that is a beginning and not an ending. That evening Carl Purvey nodded to him from the far end of the counter, which was sooner than Carl's custom, and Edna marked it and said nothing, and added it to the account she was keeping and not closing.

Sean told Danny of it at the Callahan kitchen table the next morning, over breakfast, with the satisfaction of a man given the thing he asked for and shown he had asked for the right one. "Clearest dealing I've met in twenty years of buying horses. He told me what she was worth and held to it. No bargaining. Said the mare was worth four hundred, and by God she is, and I paid it." He considered his coffee a moment. "A man who tells you what a thing is worth and holds to it is giving you more than a discount."

On the third day, the fair's last, Danny stood at the corral rail with Tommy Briggs and Larry Dolan, and Pete Halverson came to it without saying much about why, the four of them standing and making the companionable small talk of men who have been

standing at fences together since they were boys; and Eileen Orr went by the corral three times in the course of the morning.

The first time she had a box from the auxiliary table to carry to the church hall, and the corral was on the way and no pretense was needed about its being on the way. McGraw was reading the black filly's teeth, standing at her head with a hand on her nose, taking the wear off her incisors with the focused patience of a man for whom that information mattered. He did not look up. The second time she was apparently going to the livestock entries, and the corral was only a little on the way, but a little was reason enough and she did not appear to think it wanted more. He was deep in a technical matter about the paint with a farmer out of Morton County, the kind of talk that takes a man's whole attention if he means it and his whole attention if he only wishes to appear to. He did not look up. The third time he was cleaning tack, running the gray mare's bridle through a soft cloth, each piece gone over and judged and set by with the methodical care of a man who looks after his equipment because his equipment is his living. He did not look up.

She went past more slowly the third time, her pace a fraction under what it needed to be, her shoulders set with a shade more deliberation than the occasion asked. "She'll wear a groove in this dirt," Tommy said.

"Quiet," Danny said.

"He is not looking at her, Danny. That is the thing I cannot get the bottom of. I have been standing here twenty minutes trying to. It is not that he is too busy. He was cleaning a

bridle. A man can clean a bridle and look at Eileen Orr. The two things go together."

"Maybe he's a lot on his mind." It was not what Danny thought. It was a thing to say.

"Nobody has that much on their mind," Larry said, with the conviction of a man who had spent years on the subject of Eileen Orr and could not conceive of a mind with room in it for anything else.

She stopped some twenty feet past them, to look at another horse near the fence. McGraw had set down the browband and taken up the reins. He had not raised his head through any of it, nor, as far as any of the four of them could tell, listened to a word that had been said. And without lifting his head, without checking the cloth:

"I know a girl that'd knock you into fits."

He said it as plainly as a weather report — level, factual, without expectation of argument, and loud enough to be sure of being heard the twenty feet it had to go. Then he glanced up at his listeners once, with a mild grin, and went back to the reins. Nobody said anything.

Danny looked for Eileen. She had started toward them and then stopped — not the way a person stops who has remembered something, but the way one stops who has heard a thing they were not ready for. Her hands were very still at her sides. It held perhaps four or five seconds. Then she turned and went on at exactly the pace she had been going, with the composed and unhurried step of a woman who had not stopped at all.

She had spent her life being looked at, and had learned to carry her beauty as a fact about the weather rather than about herself, the way a tall woman learns to carry her height; she had never had occasion to learn how to be a thing not regarded by someone she was herself regarding. The want of the expected answer had set up a disturbance in her, and the disturbance was visible to Danny, and to Larry and Pete and Tommy, and in all likelihood to nobody else in the county.

McGraw sold the last he had to sell that afternoon to a young rancher out of Meade County, and loaded the gray mare in the late light — the ramp down, the mare led up and settled, the ramp up, the door latched — alone and without any drama in it, the whole process long since sorted in the past without the need to think about it. Sean came to say goodbye with Eileen at his elbow, and there was a last short talk about the roan's care — the farrier Sean meant to use, the month of light work, the left hind and whether it wanted liniment or only rest — and McGraw answered each thing with the directness of a man who had said it once and was not put out to say it again, meaning the buyer took it seriously, which was the only thing the asking needed to mean. Then Ed Halverson had Sean by the elbow with cooperative business that would not keep, as cooperative business never would, and for a moment there was nothing at all between Eileen and McGraw.

She said something. Danny was forty feet off and did not hear it. He saw McGraw stop at the trailer latch — the practiced, unhurried stop of a man who has been spoken to and is giving the speaking his whole attention — and turn, and look at her. Not the

passed-over look of the past three days. A true look: direct, present, the entire attention of a man who had judged this particular moment worth it. He said something back. She said something more, her chin up and her voice, Danny could tell from forty feet, perfectly level. And then he smiled — not the small managed upturn he had worn for three days but the whole smile, warm and open and not willed — and for the four seconds it lasted Eileen Orr had the entire attention of Cole McGraw, and every soul inside forty feet could feel the difference between what he had been giving her and what he gave her now. Then he turned back to the latch.

She came back to where Danny stood with the level carriage of a woman who had settled that whatever she felt would not be shown for anyone's good. She did not look at him.

"Not a word, Danny Callahan."

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"Good. Because there's nothing to say. He's a horse trader who was passing through. He's gone now."

"He said he'd be back in November."

It was not a thing he had meant to say. It came the way a thing comes when it has been held long enough that the weight of it turns to speech without asking leave.

She was quiet a moment — long enough that Danny could hear Willis Stroud's kettle still going somewhere across the grounds, and the stock being moved off from the judging ring, and the long settling of a fair at the end of its third day. "Good for him," she said, her voice perfectly even. And she walked away, and

Danny watched her go – the straight back, the braid put up for the afternoon, the blue dress in the low last light of the fair.

Then it was over, and McGraw drove his GMC and his two-horse trailer south toward Liberal, and Petrovar went back to being what it was between fairs: two hundred and twelve souls, a grain elevator, a Methodist church, and a summer that was not done with any of them.

Danny drove home in the last of the light. The sky went from the hard blue of the day to amber and then to the deep clean color it kept for the half hour before dark, and the fields ran turned and stubbled and cooling on either side of the road, and the elevator took the last of the light as he came round the bend into the north end of Main Street, white against the dark coming up out of the east the way it had taken the last light every clear evening of his life. He was twenty years old and had no language for what he was carrying. It had come without announcement and gone down into his chest the way a stone goes down to the bottom of a well – not violently, only finally, finding the one place it was going to rest and resting there. He thought about the lightness and what it cost and the cost depending on the year. He thought about Eileen on the fence in May. He thought about his father's word on the books and the advance deals and the thing that was wrong in the cooperative's figures, and about the mayor's hand going out along the fence rail, and about the careful way the men had stood at the livestock ring; and he could not have drawn the line that joined those things, only felt that there was a line, and that it was

being drawn, somewhere out past where he could yet see, the way a man feels the weather change a long while before it shows in the sky.

He parked the pickup and sat on the garden bench a few minutes before he went in. The elevator was visible from where he sat, white against the darkening sky, patient and exactly itself, and the frogs had started down toward the Orr place, and the great country quiet lay over all of it the way it had lain over the county every night for longer than there had been a county. Then he went in. His father was at the kitchen table with the cooperative's annual report, which he had been two evenings going over with the same arithmetic that would not come right however he came at it. He looked at Danny over the top of the papers and said nothing. Danny got a glass of water and sat down across from him, and the two of them sat there in the kitchen with the evening coming in at the windows and neither of them needing to say anything, that being the way they were most at ease together; and somewhere south on the road to Liberal a horse trader drove his gray mare on through the dark toward the next stop of his circuit, working, as he drove, the old calculation of what the lightness cost — the answer to which depended, as it always had, and as he had said it did, on the year.

Chapter Three

Trouble From the East

He was big and masterful while she was looking small

—Traditional

The cars came on a Wednesday in the last week of June, and they were wrong from the first moment, the way a thing is wrong in a country a man has known all his life before he can yet say what is the matter with it; the way the air is wrong an hour before the hail, when the light goes a color the year does not otherwise use and the cattle stand and will not graze and a man straightens up in the field and looks at the west without having told himself to look.

It was not that they were costly cars, nor that they carried other states' plates. Insurance men drove good cars, and cattle buyers out of Wichita came in machines that turned a head on Main Street and raised no one's concern, and now and then a commodity man out of Kansas City drove through in something a county did not see twice in a season and was the more admired for it. It was the gathering of small things, and it took Danny Callahan's mind a few seconds to set them in a row while the rest of him already had the sum. The cars were clean. They were clean the particular way that says a thing has been on no unpaved surface lately — which said they had come straight down off the highway and turned off it for nothing, which said they had not been out to look at a

field or stand in a farmyard or do any one of the things a man with an honest agricultural reason for being in Haskell County did when he came into Haskell County. And the men who got out of them were dressed for an office, or for some club a man like Danny had never been inside of, and they came out of the cars looking at the corners of things and the distances between things, the way a man looks at a place he has been sent to take the measure of rather than a place he has come to.

There were five of them. Four were big in the way that is a man's trade and not an accident of his blood, broad through the shoulder and carrying the trained stillness that capable men come to, having learned that stillness says a thing about them more economically than motion does. The fifth was small – five feet six, slight, in a cream-colored suit cut too well for a Wednesday morning in Petrovar, and he wore it the way a man wears clothes who has never once in his life had the thought of whether his clothes suited the place he was standing in. He stood a moment in front of Edna's before he went in, and he looked up Main Street toward the grain elevator, and what was in his face was not curiosity, and was not admiration, and was not anything a stranger ought to have had in his face looking at another town's elevator. It was the look of a man confirming the presence of a thing he had been told he would find there.

Danny was across at Roy Akers's filling station, waiting on the truck, and he watched the five of them the way a man raised in a country watches anything that does not fit the country – carefully, and without letting the watching show. Roy said

nothing for a while. Then, quietly, to the nozzle in his hand:

"Illinois plates."

"I see them."

"Both cars."

"Yes."

Roy finished and hung the nozzle and wiped his hands on his rag with the unhurried thoroughness of a man taking his time over the next thing he meant to say. "Grain buyers don't dress like that," he said.

"No," Danny agreed. "They don't."

He paid for the gas and walked across the street to Edna's.

Edna Phelps had worked behind the counter since her mother opened the diner in 1934, in a building that had been a hardware store before that, and had run Edna's since it came to her in 1948; and in twenty-one years behind that counter she had formed and revised a truer reckoning of the people who came through her door than the bank had of the same people, and kept it to herself, which was why it went on being true. She could read a table from the kitchen pass before she crossed the floor with the pot — farmers in off the county road, or a salesman passing, or travelers who had taken the wrong turning off 83, or the tight-faced people in the middle of a domestic grief who wanted only to be let alone — and she read them the way a teller reads money, not the face of it, which any fool sees, but the history behind the face of it, which only comes to a person from handling a great deal of it over a long time.

What she could not read, and was working at when Danny came through the door, was the five men at the pushed-together tables. They had done that the moment they came in — pushed the tables together, which no one in Edna's had ever done, there having never before been in Edna's a party of five who wanted their backs to the wall and their faces to the room. They had done it without asking, which was either carelessness or intention, and nothing about these men said carelessness. The four big ones sat round the outside of the arrangement and read the room with the unhurried professional attention of men logging the doors and the windows and who was at which of them; and the small one sat at the center of it and read the menu with the same patient thoroughness he plainly brought to everything, the menu and the room and the town being, to him, one continuous document. Carl Purvey was on his stool at the counter facing them with his coffee and his level look, and he considered the newcomers, and considered his coffee again, and said nothing, which from Carl was very nearly a speech.

Danny sat at the counter two stools from Carl, where he could see them, and kept his eyes down in the way of a man with no particular interest in who had just come in, that being the right thing to wear on his face; and Edna brought his coffee the unhurried way she brought everything, except that Danny saw she had rinsed her counter cloth before she came down to him, and had rinsed it the way she rinsed things when her hands wanted an occupation her face would not give them. The three of them made the small talk the counter was for until the small man set down

his menu and looked at Edna and said, pleasantly, with the settled ease of a man who had been giving instructions to people in aprons so long that the ease had stopped being a manner and become the man, that they would have coffee all round and five of whatever was good that day. Edna said she had the meatloaf. He said that would do. She poured the five coffees and went to her kitchen, and the diner settled into the bad peace of two kinds of people not looking at each other with great concentration.

The small man's look went round the room. It went the way a surveyor's glass goes round a section — from mark to mark, resting a moment on each, not to admire it but to set it down. It rested a moment on Wendell Briggs at the feed-store table, and on the Halverson girl with her sandwich, who was seventeen and looking very hard at the tablecloth so as not to look at anything else, and on Bob Delmore at the end of the counter who had not raised his head once. Then it came to Danny, and it stopped.

Not for the half second a look rests on a stranger. For two full seconds, which is a long time to be looked at by a man you do not know, in a room you have eaten in the whole of your life; and in those two seconds Danny came to understand a thing he had not had occasion to understand before, which was the difference between being seen and being catalogued. To be seen is to have someone take an interest in who you are. This was the colder thing. This was a man deciding what kind of thing you were and what your being in the room signified for the work he had come to do.

"Young man," the small man said pleasantly. "You farm around here?"

"Yeah," Danny said.

"Long time?"

"All my life."

The small nod of a man having a thing confirmed that he had already supposed. He looked back at his coffee. The whole of it had taken perhaps fifteen seconds and left Danny with a clean cold place between his shoulder blades that did not warm up again for some while – the feeling of having been measured by a man for a purpose the measuring was not going to be explained to him and was not meant to be. After a while the small man looked out through the front window at the elevator, and the resting of his look there was longer, and was again not the look a traveler gives a thing he is seeing for the first time. "Nice little town," he said, to the room in general. Nobody answered him. "Quiet." He considered the elevator again. "Big operation, that grain elevator." Still nobody answered. Edna came from the kitchen with the five plates and set them down without a word and without meeting an eye, having decided that quickness was the right answer to a thing she could not yet put in a category; and the men ate quickly and almost without talk, the way men eat when eating is a task to be got through and not a thing to be had, and the small man left a fifty-dollar bill on a twelve-dollar check and did not wait on the change, and they went out. On the walk they stood a while by the cars, and a man glancing out could see

them looking again up the street at the elevator, the way men stand and look at a monument in a town they mean to remember.

Danny paid for his coffee and walked down to the sheriff's office. Walt Prentiss had been the law in that county nineteen years, and was at his desk over the county's equipment-maintenance records, working them the patient unenthused way he worked all paper, because Walt Prentiss held that the paper was the memory of the thing, and that an office that kept no good memory became an office that could not, in the end, account for itself. He looked up when Danny came in and read his face the way he read the records, for the thing that was in it rather than the thing he had expected to find, and he listened the whole way through without arranging his answer while Danny talked, which was his way.

"Two Cadillacs," he said, when Danny was done. "Illinois plates. Five men. The small one in charge."

"He looked the elevator over," Danny said. "More than once. The way you look at a thing you already know, not the way you look at a thing you're seeing for the first time."

Walt Prentiss put his hat on. "Let's go see Edna."

The cars were gone when they got there. Edna was wiping down the two tables and setting them back where tables belonged. She told them how the little one had come back in and asked after a house to rent, and how she had said the Stroud place stood empty and might be had if they meant to stop a while, and had given him the number to call; he had said they would be a couple of months, longer maybe, depending on the business. Walt Prentiss asked, in

the level way he asked the things that mattered most, whether anyone had been in ahead of the men that morning who might have spoken of the place. Edna looked at the table she was wiping and went still over it the way a person goes still who is running a sequence back and seeing, this time through, a join in it she had not seen the first time. "Dub was in," she said. "He spoke of the Stroud place. How it stood empty. How a tenant was wanted." She stopped. "I had it in my mind when the little fella asked. So I said it."

Walt Prentiss said nothing. He looked at the table.

"I didn't think a thing of it," Edna said.

"No reason you would have," Walt Prentiss said, and his voice was entirely level. He put his hat back on. "I'll keep an eye out. I'm sure it's nothing." He said it with the practiced ease of a man who did not altogether believe it and had decided that a room with enough to carry did not need handed another thing to carry yet.

He drove out to the Stroud place the next afternoon and came back with nothing, which was itself the thing he came back with. What he had found was five men, pleasant and unhurried, whose business in the county was, they said, agricultural assessment for a Kansas City investment concern whose name was in no register he could reach before dark; they thanked him for stopping, and offered him coffee from a pot they had already going on the Stroud stove, and he declined the coffee. He told Danny of it the next morning at the counter. "The one called Moretti was in the yard when I pulled in," he said. "Standing

there with a cup of something, watching the road. He put his hand up when I slowed. I put mine up back." He was quiet a moment. "He wanted me to know he'd seen me coming. That is a piece of information."

"What does it mean?"

"It means they're not afraid of the local law. Which tells you what they think the local law can do to them. Whatever they're here for, they've figured the sheriff of a county of twenty-five hundred souls for no great risk to it." He drank his coffee. "They may have that figured right. For the present." He said it with the honesty Danny valued in him past all his other qualities – the honesty that did not dress itself up nor soften itself for the ease of the man it was said to, but told you the thing as it stood and trusted you to carry it, which is the most respect one man can pay another and is, now and again, the hardest of all things to be paid.

The man in the cream suit was a Chicago man, come west by way of a chain of other men – a broker who had noticed a thing in a column of figures, and a man on the commodity floor who had carried the noticing along, and at the end of the chain this one, whose particular gift, as he understood himself, was to read a situation entire and act on the reading with nothing of sentiment or hesitation left in to spoil it. He did not think himself a violent man. He drew a distinction, which he found meaningful and the people on the wrong end of it did not, between a man who did a thing with his own hands and a man who kept other men to do it. What he had read, in the figures and then in two slow turns up

and down Main Street, was a county whose whole life ran through the one elevator and had nowhere else on God's earth to take its wheat; and a county with nowhere else to go is a county a patient man can put his hand on the throat of without ever raising his voice. That was the whole of it. The rest was arrangement.

And there had been a man already in the county for the chain to fasten to, because there is, in such matters, always a man already there. Dubois Meacham had taken from the cooperative's farmers, quietly, across four years, what was theirs, and a man had come to his office in April and laid the showing of it on his desk and named the price of its staying in Chicago; and the price was that Meacham go on being exactly the well-liked, capable, procedurally faultless chairman he had been for eight years, only now in another set of hands. He had agreed. He told himself in the weeks after that he was protecting his family, which a man can tell himself about very nearly anything, and he was a man with intelligence enough to make the telling hold and not the kind of courage it would have taken to stop. He had driven past the Stroud place of a Sunday and seen the lights in the windows and the cars in the yard, and felt a thing he called relief and that had, underneath it, a good deal more fear in it than relief; and he had gone home and eaten his supper with Loretta and talked of the Thursday board meeting, and lain awake an hour after, which is the arithmetic of a man whose reckoning of the lesser harm has not, looked at again in the dark, come out the sound figure he had thought it when he made it.

None of this the county knew. The county did with the strangers what a small place does with anything it cannot place: it talked of them at every counter and across every fence and arrived, all together and without a meeting, at a provisional account of them, which was that they were grain men out of Chicago come to look the harvest over ahead of the season. The account had the merit of being possible. It had the defect of being wrong. But it served for a week, the men themselves doing nothing that week to prove it or to break it; and under the account, unspoken, lay the older thing the county believed and did not say, which every place like Petrovar has always believed: that men who come in big cars out of big cities are not, on the whole, to be trusted, and are best watched and fed and answered civilly and given nothing that has not been asked for.

The cooperative board met on the Thursday, and Dub Meacham ran it with the parliamentary smoothness of a man who had run the same meeting eight years and knew every question before it was put and every objection before it was raised. Ed Halverson asked the question he asked every year about the pricing for the coming harvest, and Meacham gave the answer he gave every year, which was accurate in the narrow way and told a listening man nothing, and Ed wrote it in the margin of his sheet and drew a line under it and said nothing further. He had been asking that question six years and had never once had back the answer he was after, and he went on waiting for it with the patience of a man who farms and has learned that waiting is not the same thing as having quit. What was not in the summary the board read — what had never been

in it — was the account Meacham had been paying himself out of for four years; and Ed Halverson was asking good questions, and would, if he were let go on asking them long enough, ask the one that could only be answered by opening the books underneath the summary. Meacham had lived with that knowledge four years the way a man lives with a noise he can neither stop nor stop hearing: by keeping other things louder.

Danny drove past the Stroud place on the Monday, coming back from a parts run to Liberal. Both cars were in the yard, and the house lights were burning in the afternoon, and there was a man on the porch who was not the kind of man who sat on porches in Haskell County — not a farmer and not a hired man and not anyone with an honest reason to be reading a county road the way this one read it, marking who went by and keeping them. He watched Danny's truck the whole length of the yard, and Danny watched the road in front of him and did not slow, and the two of them understood each other without a word, which was the man's whole purpose in being on the porch.

He told his parents at supper that the Chicago men had taken the Stroud place. His mother looked up from her plate. "How long?" she said. "I don't know," Danny said. She looked at Tom Callahan, and a thing went between the two of them that Danny could not read all of but could feel the weight of, the close speech of two people married long enough to have a language that runs under the words; and then she looked back at her plate. "Then we'd best not count on it being short," she said, and went on with her supper with the plain acceptance of a woman who had

come through three dry years and the Depression and two failed harvests and had learned along the way that what kind of trouble a thing is matters less than whether you will look straight at it.

And on a Thursday evening in the second week of July, Tom Callahan said a thing at the supper table that Danny went back to afterward as one returns to a thing that has the feel of a key before the lock has been found. He said that the dangerous men were not the openly hostile ones; the openly hostile at least handed you something you could take hold of. The dangerous ones were the polite ones. Please and thank you. A good tip left on the table. Your name remembered, and asked after. Pleasant in every way a man could see, the whole time they were doing the thing that was going to cost you everything you had. He said it without saying what it was about, in the way he set such things down – on the table, to be picked up or left, the choosing left to the man across from him, the meaning lying in where he had set it rather than in the words. He was looking at his plate. Danny's mother was looking at her coffee.

"Dub Meacham," Danny said.

"I'm speaking generally," his father said. He was not speaking generally. He was speaking as precisely as he knew how, in the tongue he used when he meant to say the thing he knew without saying it in any shape that could be carried out of the room and laid against him. He set down his fork. "Mind your contracts. Talk to Ray Kreider, if you can get the man to listen. And don't carry this conversation out of this house." Danny said

he understood, and his father went back to his supper; and the summer evening came in at the kitchen window, and at the foot of Main Street the elevator stood white and patient against the going-down of the light, the same as the year before and the year before that, the same as the year Tom Callahan had signed his first contract with the cooperative. It had been raised by men who understood that the only way to be paid fairly for what you grew was to hold in your own hands the place where it was stored and the manner in which it went to market; and it had stood on that one understanding thirty-three years. That understanding was the precise thing the man in the cream suit had come into the county to take away.

In the second week of July the hand that had been on the county's throat began, quietly, to close, and the first the county felt of it was Tommy Briggs on the Liberal road.

He had been to Liberal for a bearing. The seed grinder at Briggs's feed store had gone wrong in its main bearing, and the bearing had to come from Liberal, and Tommy had made that run every second Wednesday three years without anything ever happening on it; and he was thinking about whether the new bearing would cure the grinder or only quiet for a while a thing that was wrong deeper in, and the Kansas evening was doing the thing it does — the sky still gold along the top of the west, the land under it already gone to brown and then to blue, the road running off straight as a chalked line to a far point that the low light made very nearly beautiful — and he was not thinking

about the car behind him until the car behind him gave him cause to.

It came up fast and then did not pass. It stayed — not the flash and rise and blur of a car going by, but a holding-on, close enough that Tommy could see the shape of the man on the passenger side in his mirror and not the face. He went faster. The car kept its place. He slowed, to see would they go round. The car slowed with him. Then it came up alongside on the empty road and held there three seconds, which is a very long three seconds when it is a black car on an empty county road at fifty miles an hour with the sun going down; and then it drifted over the line and crowded him, and Tommy had the ditch or the stopping to choose between, and he stopped.

A man got out of the passenger side and came to the window without any haste in him, and another got out and leaned on the roof of the car and watched the road both ways. The first one knew Tommy's name and let the knowing show, the knowing being part of the thing he had come to demonstrate. He was pleasant about it. He said, in the manner of a man who knows exactly how little he needs to say, that a county road at night was a lonely place, and that accidents came to lonely places, and that a young man with people who thought well of him ought to take some care of himself; and he reached in through the window and took up the wallet off the seat where Tommy had set it for the gas money, and went through it with his thumb, and took the cash that was in it. And then he found the photograph.

It was behind the license in the card sleeve — a picture of Eileen Orr made at the Halverson place the summer before, off her guard, Eileen in profile with the light in her hair, laughing at a thing outside the edge of it. Tommy had put it there the week he got it and had not moved it since. He had carried it the way a man carries a thing that has a private importance he does not announce. The man looked at it perhaps four seconds, with the mild attention of a man looking at something he finds a little interesting and no more, and then he looked at Tommy with a face that was not anything — not pleased, not mocking, not anything with a name to it — and he put the photograph in his breast pocket, and handed the empty wallet back in through the window. "Be careful," he said, pleasantly. "It's a long road." And he went back to the car, and they drove off toward the highway, and Tommy sat on the shoulder of County Road 14 and watched the two red lights go small and then go out; and he sat there ten minutes before he could make his hand start the truck.

He came to Danny the next morning. He was not hurt in his body. He was in the state Danny had no name for but knew when he saw it — the state of a man whose map of the world has been redrawn in the night without his leave. "The photograph," Tommy said. "He looked at it. He smiled, Danny." He stopped, and looked at his hands. "He put it in his pocket. Like it cost him nothing."

Danny said: "I know."

And he did know. The picture had been Tommy's the better part of a year; he had carried it the way some men carry a thing

for luck, for the small private comfort of its being near. To have it taken by a man who pocketed it as a showing of what he could do — who took it for the very reason that it plainly mattered to the man it was taken from — was a thing that went past the money and past the fright of the road and into a place there is no clean word for. Walt Prentiss drove out to the Stroud place again, and came back again with nothing, and told Tommy he was working at it; and Tommy nodded and went back to the feed store and worked his whole day through, which was what Tommy did with pain, and Danny watched him do it and said nothing, there being nothing to say that the watching did not say better.

The Thursday after, Don Holt was ten minutes in the back of the hardware store taking a delivery, and came out to a register two hundred dollars lighter and an open drawer and no one having seen a thing. The Thursday after that, Ed Halverson came back to his own barn late off a farm call and found a man leaning in the dark against the wall with his arms folded, in the way a man leans against a wall when he means you to find him at it; and the man said nothing, and looked Ed over with the flat attention of a man with an errand, and pushed off the wall and walked out to the county road and got into a car that had been left there and drove away. Ed stood in his own yard and felt the cold go over him — the sudden plain understanding of what the summer had turned into. He went to Walt Prentiss in the morning, and Walt Prentiss listened the whole way and wrote it down and said he was sorry and that he was working at it; and what Walt Prentiss had, and knew he had, was a row of happenings any one of which would stand

alone as something else, and which together were a thing the instruments available to the sheriff of a southwest Kansas county in 1955 were not made to take hold of. He had telephoned the Highway Patrol twice. The second time they had put him through to a desk that did not call him back; and he sat at his own desk that evening after the office was empty and looked at the elevator out the window and understood that a call had been made before his call, and that Dub Meacham's twelve years of knowing what every man owed and what every man wanted ran out past the county line, and that the tools he had were the only tools he was going to have and were not going to be enough. He put on his hat and went home.

Danny put the thing together across July the way his father put together a hard year — the facts first, and then what the facts meant, and the conclusion kept for last and not reached for early. Tommy's wallet and the picture. Don Holt's drawer. Ed Halverson in the dark of his own barn. The advance-payment contracts, and whose names were on them. The Highway Patrol call that went to a desk and died there, and what that said about Dub Meacham. He held each piece the careful way his father had taught him to hold a thing not yet ready to be used — the way you hold a tool before you know the work it is for, kept clean, kept close, kept by you against the hour the use of it comes clear. The hour was coming. He could feel it the way he could feel the weight of the summer itself, dense and pressing and full of things that had not yet said what they were. He did not know what was to be done with what he knew. He knew only that the elevator stood white in

the July heat north of town — needful, patient, a thing worth the keeping — and that the man in the cream suit had looked it over the way men look at a thing they have already settled in their minds belongs to them. He drove past the Stroud place those July mornings and both cars stood in the yard, and the summer went on around them at the indifferent pace of a Kansas summer that does not change its step for any trouble of men's; and Danny followed it and waited and added to the list, and somewhere along in it understood that he was going to need help of a kind that Petrovar did not have.

Chapter Four

The Rival

*But her beauty was like to make you shy
Not a livin' boy could look her in the eye
—Traditional*

His name was James Whitfield, and he came to Petrovar on the first Sunday of July in a nearly new Studebaker the color of old copper, and he was, by every plain measure a sensible person would have applied to the matter, everything one could have wished for Eileen Orr.

He was twenty-six. He was the son of Gerald Whitfield, who ran the Whitfield Grain Brokerage out of Kansas City, and whose name stood often enough in the commodity columns of the Kansas City Star to tell a man who read such columns that the concern was real and was substantial. James had gone to the agricultural college at Manhattan and had worked three years in his father's brokerage, learning the business with the patient, orderly attention of a man who meant to be good at the thing he had been given. He was tall and fair, square in the jaw in the way of a man who had played college football and still carried the build of it under a well-cut summer suit; and he moved through a room with the unhurried social ease of a person who has been liked the whole of his life and has never had cause to wonder whether he would be. He was not a proud man. He carried, somewhere below the

place a man examines his own assumptions, the settled expectation that the world would receive him kindly; and the world, on the evidence, had largely agreed to.

He had come to visit his cousins. Ed Halverson's wife, Eleanor, had a sister in Kansas City who had married into the Whitfield connection, and James had grown up hearing of the Halverson farm the way a man hears of a place he has never been that belongs nonetheless to the map of his own family. Pete Halverson had written to him in the spring to say he ought to come out for a part of the summer, the summer being slow at the brokerage and the country being good and the work honest and the people worth the knowing; and Pete had added, in passing and meaning nothing by it, that there was a girl in the nearest town who was worth the drive from Kansas City on her own account. Pete had meant it for a description, the way a man describes a feature of the country to someone who has not seen it — a particular hill, a particular reach of water. But a description is a thing that has consequences a man does not always intend, and James Whitfield came into Petrovar with Pete's description already in his mind; so that when he took his place in the Halverson pew at the Methodist church on the second Sunday of July, and saw three rows ahead of him the back of a dark red braid lying over a blue dress, he spent the whole of the first hymn with the close attention of a man who has been told a thing and is now in the business of finding out whether the thing he was told is so. By the second verse he had satisfied himself that Pete had not oversold.

Danny Callahan was two pews back and to the left, in the Callahan pew, and he watched James Whitfield arrive at that conclusion with the close attention a man gives a game he has money on. He saw Whitfield's eyes settle on the braid with the small involuntary catch a man cannot rightly perform or counterfeit – the least recalibration of the body when it decides that the thing it is looking at is worth the looking – and he saw him turn back to his hymnal afterward with the composed, deliberate manner of a man who has decided that the correct answer to an interesting discovery is to go on behaving exactly as he behaved before he made it. It was, Danny thought, a well-managed thing, and a well-managed thing tells you as much about a man as a badly managed one, and sometimes more.

After the service Pete made the introduction on the church steps, in the warm July sun, with the whole congregation finding reasons to come down those steps slowly. James Whitfield took Eileen's hand and said that Pete had told him a great deal about Petrovar. Eileen said she hoped he would find it worth the trip. He said he was already sure of it – not as a turn of charm but plainly, the way a man says a thing he means and knows that the meaning of it, in such a moment, will be heard as confidence. Eileen took him in with the green eyes, and the taking-in was not hidden, and Danny watched it go from looking to weighing to a provisional verdict in about the time it takes to say so. She smiled. She was gracious. She was kind. What she was not – in any of the several ways Danny had spent his life learning to read her – was lit.

The account she was keeping inside herself was a simpler thing than it would have looked from outside. James Whitfield was exactly what he appeared to be, which is rarer than it sounds: solid, well-made, in possession of a real intelligence and a real courtesy. She knew quality when it stood in front of her and she knew it now. What she did not feel, with his hand a moment in hers on the church steps in the July sun, was the disturbance she had been carrying since the last week of June and trying, without much success, to find a place to set down. What she felt near James Whitfield was the plain pleasure of having met a person worth talking to. What she felt near the other man – who had gone south to Liberal after the fair and was, in the way of such men, both gone and not gone – was a thing she had not yet found the accurate word for; and the not having found it was itself a piece of information, and she was too honest with herself not to enter it in the account as one.

James called at the Orr house the Tuesday following, and brought with him a jar of honey he had got from a beekeeper on the road between the Halverson place and town – a small and nearly perfect thing, the jar with a label lettered by hand, a gift that had thought in it without having display in it, the gift of a man who had marked a detail about a household and acted on what he had marked. Sean Orr received him in the parlor with the careful courtesy of a man who had formed his opinions of a visitor before the visitor had got his hat off – opinions built from what Pete Halverson had said and from what Pete Halverson had as carefully not said, and from Sean's own reading of a

copper Studebaker and a well-cut suit and the particular way the young man had looked at the grain elevator coming into town. Sean Orr had spent the whole of his grown life paying attention to men who paid attention to grain elevators. He knew the difference between the attention of a man who understood grain and the attention of a man who had studied it, the way he knew the difference between a green field and a painting of one; and he filed the distinction where he filed such things, which was a place he did not often open in front of company.

What Sean said of James, when Danny asked him the week after over coffee at the Callahan kitchen table, was: "He's a solid young man. Good family. Knows what he's about." He said it in the way a man says a thing that is entirely true and is not, by a long way, the whole of the truth.

"But?" Danny said.

"But nothing," Sean said. "He's a solid young man." He was quiet, looking into his coffee. "Eileen was kind to him."

"She's kind to everyone."

"Yes," Sean said. "She is." And he let it lie there, which was a kind of Irish speech Sean Orr had refined across nearly twenty-seven years on that ground — the saying of a thing by the laying of two true statements side by side and leaving the road between them for the other man to walk himself: that kindness is not the same as interest, and interest is not the same as the thing Eileen was capable of, and a man who takes kindness when what he wants is the thing she is capable of will carry a particular disappointment a long way and a long while. Sean did

not say it, because it was not his to say. He set down the cup and went back to his morning, and the morning took him, the way the work always took him, and that was the end of it for him though not for Danny.

James called three more times that week. He drove Eileen south along the county road to where the land goes flatter still toward the Oklahoma line and the sky gets enormous in the particular way it gets enormous only where there is nothing at all in any quarter to stop the eye — no hill, no timber, no rise of any kind — so that a person standing in it has the sensation of being not under the sky merely but inside it, the whole blue weight of it coming down evenly to a horizon that is exactly as far in front as it is behind and to either hand, and the wheat going to the rim of it in a single unbroken motion that the wind keeps always a little in. It is a country that does not give a stranger anything to admire in the ordinary way and gives a person who stays long enough something there is no name for and no substitute for; and James Whitfield, driving Eileen through it of a July afternoon, asked her intelligent questions about the farming and the cooperative and the way the price was set, and listened to the answers with the real attention of a man taking a thing in rather than the polite attention of a man waiting for his turn — which Eileen marked, and which Danny heard of afterward at the fence.

"He knows grain," she said. "He understands the economics of it the way most people here don't trouble to. He understands what the cooperative price means to a family that's running on a

margin." She was quiet a moment, looking off. "He's well-read. He's interested in things. He's straightforward — he knows what he wants and he doesn't pretend he doesn't."

"Do you like him?" Danny said.

She thought about it the way she thought about things that had real answers and not the way people think about a thing they have already decided. "I like talking to him. I think he could be a friend the way serious people are friends — where the conversation is worth something and both of them know it." She looked at the horizon. "He deserves a direct answer about whether it's more than that."

"What's the answer?"

"I'm working on being sure before I give it," she said.
"Because he deserves to be given it correctly."

There was an afternoon in the second week of July when James and Eileen sat on the Orr porch over the lemonade Ruth had made, and Danny came up on some errand and stayed on the porch steps because it would have been rude to go straight off again and because he was, as he owned to himself, curious to see what a conversation between those two looked like when it was going well. It was going well. They had got onto Thomas Hardy, and James was saying a thing about the way Hardy used the country — not as a setting for what happened but as one of the things that made it happen; how the moors in the book about the dairymaid were not scenery the people moved across but a power that moved on them in turn, shaping them and wearing them down and now and then handing them a thing they could have got nowhere else. He

said he had come to think of Kansas in the same way: that the flatness here was that same kind of power, that it got into people and set the manner in which they thought about distance and time and what was coming.

Eileen said: that is exactly right, and I have never heard anyone who was not from here say it.

James smiled — a good smile, particular rather than general, the smile of a man pleased to have been understood at the level he had meant. "I grew up in Kansas City. But I've been driving out to the country since I was a boy. The city is where I work. This is where I think."

Eileen followed him with the real attention — Danny knew it on sight, the attention she kept for people who said a thing worth the hearing. "Where do you want to be?" she asked. It was the direct question, the one she put when she wanted to know a thing and was not going to be content with the thing a person wished her to hear instead.

James looked at the grain elevator, which stood up white at Main Street's end and was visible from the Orr porch as it was visible from very nearly everywhere in that country. He was quiet a moment, deciding, Danny could see, on the honest answer rather than the easy one. "Somewhere like this," he said. "Somewhere a man can see the horizon and the horizon is a real thing and not a row of buildings. I've been in the brokerage three years, and there are mornings I'm at my desk taking the grain prices off the ticker and I think: somewhere out in Haskell County a man put that wheat in the ground. He worked it and worried the rain and

ran the figures on whether the margin would hold and brought it in and hauled it to the elevator. And here I sit, deciding what it's worth, in a market that has never once seen the field it grew in." He paused. "There's something wrong in that. I haven't worked out what to do about it."

Danny watched Eileen. She was thinking, in earnest, about the thing James Whitfield had said — finding it true, and finding the truth of it worth her interest. It was a good deal. It was not the whole of what she needed, and Danny, who had spent his life learning the difference in her between interest and the other thing, saw that it was not, and was ashamed of how the seeing eased him, and did not let the ease show, that being a discipline he had had long practice in.

The men who had spent the spring in their various conditions of hopeless attention to Eileen Orr had, as men will, their opinions of James Whitfield, and the opinions were the more revealing for what each man would not quite say. Tommy Briggs met him at Pete's place on a Saturday and was civil to him in the effortful way of a well-mannered man being civil to someone he has already settled cannot be allowed to matter; and he said to Danny after, with a careful evenness that was the most telling thing he could have managed, "He seems all right. Good family. Good prospects." He looked at his boots. "She could do worse." He said it the way a man says a thing he has decided to believe and is still in the work of getting himself to believe, going over it inwardly until it should take hold. Pete, who had made the introduction and so carried the particular accountability of a

man who has set a thing going that he can no longer govern, liked James, who was his cousin's guest and an agreeable man; and he had read the situation, had read it since the fair and the three slow passes by the horse corral, and the reading made the liking a complicated thing to carry. "James is a good man," he told Danny, one morning, low. "If things were different, I think he'd make her happy."

"But things aren't different," Danny said.

"Things aren't different," Pete said, and left it there, with the farmer's economy with words for a conclusion already reached. Bobby Crane came home for a weekend in the middle of July and spent an hour at the Halverson farm talking Hardy with James, and came away with the considered opinion that James Whitfield understood tragedy in the way that divides the people who have read it from the people who have lived near it. "He knows that decent people get destroyed by forces they didn't make," Bobby said. "He knows that making the right choice doesn't mean you get the right end of it. He'll work the situation out, and he'll handle it well. That's the kind of man he is."

"The situation," Danny said.

"McGraw," Bobby said, at once, as though the word had been standing ready. "Anybody who watches Eileen twenty minutes knows it. James Whitfield is an intelligent man and he has been watching two weeks. He knows." He was quiet a moment. "The question is whether knowing changes anything."

James Whitfield worked out the thing with McGraw in the third week of July, and the working of it out was not the

business of a single moment but of a number of small observations arriving together at a line they crossed. He was not, by his make, a man who could decline to see evidence once it had been set in front of him. He had marked the care Eileen took for accuracy when she answered a question about the horse trader — not the ordinary choosing of words but the particular carefulness of a person to whom the matter mattered enough to be got exactly right, and got right about a man who was not there to correct it. He had marked the way she would come round, without seeming to and without knowing she did it, toward the north — toward the road that ran up out of the county the way he had gone after the fair — the way a needle comes round that does not know it has been magnetized. And he had marked that there was a place in her kept for something that was not in the room: the way her attention would go, now and again, out of a conversation and come back having been somewhere he had not been asked, the settled half-absence of a person who is waiting and has decided not to say so. He carried the three of them together for two days, and then he went down to Edna's by himself and found Danny at the counter.

"The horse trader. McGraw. He said he'd be back in November."

"That's right," Danny said. "He'll be back."

James nodded, considering his cup. His face was not angry and not bitter and not even, particularly, sad; it was the face of a man who had been paying close attention and had come to a conclusion he had not wanted and was now deciding what was to be

done with it. "There's someone she's waiting on," he said. "She doesn't say so, and she doesn't have to. You can hear it in how careful she gets when his name comes near — the care of a woman keeping a thing whole to give to a man who isn't here yet." He picked up the cup. "I've been in the grain business long enough to know when a market's already been spoken for."

"He's a good man?" James asked.

"Yes," Danny said. "He's a complicated man. But yes."

James nodded again. He looked a long moment at his coffee, and then at the window, and then at the grain elevator standing white at the foot of the street. "Well," he said. "That's something, anyway." He finished the coffee and set two dollars on the counter and went out through the screen door with the composed, upright bearing of a man declining to be made smaller by a situation that was not his fault and was not anyone's fault, and simply was.

He did not make Eileen say it. He had decided, sitting with his evidence that Tuesday afternoon, that this was not the kind of man he was; and a man's deciding what kind of man he is, and then being it, was a thing Danny had reason that summer to think a good deal about. He went on calling at the house another two weeks, because the abrupt withdrawal would have wanted an explanation he was not willing to put Eileen through, and because the conversations were honestly worth the having. He was kind to Sean and to Ruth. He never met McGraw at all, the man being two counties off where the roads had him, and was civil about him for all that — the civility of a man who has taken another man's

measure at second hand, through what Danny would say of him and through what Eileen could not keep out of her voice, and has found that he cannot, in fairness, dislike a man he has never once seen, which is a harder civility to manage than the other kind and worth more.

But Eileen gave him the direct answer she had promised him, because she had said he was owed it and she had meant the saying. She told Danny of it at the fence the week after, and what she told him was that James had said he was glad she had told him; that he would rather know; that he had asked her was she certain, and she had said she was, and he had taken her certainty with the grace of a man who had already done his own arithmetic and come, from his own side of it, to the same figure. He had said that whatever she was waiting on, he hoped it proved worth the wait. "He didn't say McGraw's name," Eileen told Danny. "He didn't need to, and he knew he didn't, and the not saying it was a courtesy." She looked off at the elevator standing in the distance. "He has lovely manners," she said. "I wish they were enough."

She said it without any drama in it, with the regret of a person who had wanted a thing to be sufficient and had found that the wanting did not make it so. It was, Danny thought, one of the more honest things he heard anyone say the whole of that summer. It was the exact truth and not the whole truth, which was the manner in which Eileen generally went on: she told you the thing that was real, and she trusted you to understand on your own that real and entire are not the same thing.

"Danny," she said, after a while.

"Yeah."

"Do you think I'm a fool?"

He looked at her. She was studying the horizon with the measuring look she kept for things whose distance she was trying to take. In her profile he saw the whole of what he had always seen: not the beauty only, which was real enough, but under it the intelligence and the stubbornness and the presence that made a room a different room for her being in it — the presence of a person who was not performing herself but being herself, wholly and without apology, which was the rarest thing Danny knew of in the world and the one he had given the most of his life to watching.

"No," he said. "I think you're very clear-eyed about what you want. And I think being clear-eyed about what you want is a harder thing than most people manage, and that the world doesn't particularly reward it, and that you do it anyway."

She was quiet a moment. "That's the most you've said to me in one speech in about four years, Danny Callahan."

"I've been saving up," he said.

She smiled — not the fond-and-insufficient smile, not the smile he did not want, but a different one, warm and particular and, for a moment, privately amused. Then she looked back at the horizon, and the two of them sat on the fence in the summer afternoon; and whatever it was the summer was building toward, it was building still.

James left Petrovar in the first week of August, telling the Halversons that the brokerage wanted him back, which was true in

the way a convenient truth is true — accurate, and also the thing a man can say in the place of the more difficult thing. He shook Pete's hand. He said his goodbyes to Sean and Ruth with the genuine warmth of a man who had found the thing he hoped to find and learned it was not to be had, and had spent two weeks being gracious about that in a county where such things are noticed and kept. Danny walked a part of the way down the county road with him that last afternoon, after Eileen had gone in and Sean had gone back to the barn and the Orr house lay quiet behind them. James was silent most of the walk, in the way of a man who has things to think on and has decided that thinking on them is the right response and very near the only one. At the turn where the road bends off toward the Halverson place he stopped and looked at Danny with the direct look of a man putting the question he wants the answer to.

"He's a good man?" he said.

"Yes," Danny said.

James nodded. He looked at the road ahead of him, and back once toward the Orr house, and then he turned toward the Halverson farm and went on down the county road with the bearing of a man who had looked at a thing squarely and decided that looking at it squarely was the right response and the only one left to him. "She deserves a good man," he said — not turning, walking away, the clean declarative and nothing hung on it: not I hope it works out, not I wish things were otherwise, but the plain statement set down and left. She deserves it, and she has a chance of it, and that is the fact that signifies. Danny stood at

the turn and watched him go and thought about what that kind of decency asked of a man — not the decency of never wanting what you cannot have, which any man can manage who has wanted little, but the decency of wanting a thing honestly and then letting go of it cleanly, which is a far rarer thing and is not learned cheaply. He drove home thinking about James Whitfield, and thought about him the next morning, and the morning after that, and from time to time across the weeks that followed, when the summer was about its other business — the cars at the Stroud place and McGraw still two counties off where the roads had him and the cooperative board meeting in its room and the elevator standing in its white patience as a thing that had lasted a long time by being needed. He thought about what it cost a man to be the kind of man James Whitfield was, and whether he himself was that kind of man, and whether he would be given the chance to find it out.

Eileen stood on the porch steps in the August afternoon and watched the copper Studebaker go north up Highway 83 until the heat off the road took it; and what she felt, watching it go, was the particular sadness of seeing a good thing pass that was not, through no fault of its own and through no fault of anyone's, the right thing. She stood at the end of the lane a while after the car was gone, where the dust it had raised was settling back down onto the road the way the dust always settled, unhurried, indifferent, returning the road to exactly what it had been. Then she turned and went back into the house, to the work of the afternoon, which was waiting for her as the work was always

waiting, and which she took up again because it was hers and because the taking-up of it was, in that country, the form that most griefs and most resolutions were finally given.

Chapter Five

The Weight of a Town

Eileen Orr, me heart is turning gray

Ever since the day you wandered far away

—Traditional

While James Whitfield's courtship ran its course, the heat was the constant of that July, the thing that did not change when the other things did, the condition under which all the rest of it happened. It came up off the worked ground in waves from about ten in the morning and did not let go until well after dark, and by the middle of the month every surface in the town had taken in enough of it to give a little of it back, so that even in the shade a man felt the warmth coming at him off the brick and the boardwalk and the packed earth of the fairground and the wood of the storefronts, as though the place itself had been fired like a kiln and was a long time cooling. People moved more slowly in it, and spoke less, and at less length. The talk at Edna's counter went shorter and lower. Even Carl Purvey's commentary, which had always run on its own clock and paid no mind to the weather, took the heat into account those weeks: the observations set farther apart, and pitched down, as if the summer had put the whole county on a ration of its own breath and a man did well to spend it carefully.

The two cars were still at the Stroud place. They had been there three weeks, and in three weeks a thing becomes part of the country it sits in; the cars had got to be part of the look of the county road the way the county road was part of the look of the land. A man knew they were wrong. A man had also, in the way of people who must live a long while under a thing they cannot move, built the day up around their being there. You marked them going by. You did not slow, and you did not look long, and you went on to the work the day was holding for you, because the work was always holding, and did not wait on the cars, and the cars did not wait on the work; and that, Danny came to think, was the truer harm in a thing like this. Not the blow, when the blow finally came, but the long getting-used-to before it — the way the line of what a county would put up with moved a little, and then a little more, and was never seen to move, until one day a man looked back and could not find the place it had started from.

He went on asking. It was a thing more bearable done alongside someone, and through that July the someone was Walt Prentiss, who had been the law in the county nineteen years and was asking the same question out of the sheriff's office with the same patient, unhurried refusal to let the getting-used-to stand in the place where an answer ought to have been.

The Kansas quiet did not sit well on the man in the cream suit. He had laid in against boredom — a wooden crate of paperbacked mysteries had come out of the Cadillac and gone into the Stroud house — but the flatness and the silence worked on him the way they work on a man not raised in them, who finds in all

that level stillness not peace but the want of something to push against; and a man of his trade, when there is nothing to push against, will go looking for something. He had not meant to hurry the thing. The summer was to have been the slow part, the learning of the cooperative and the laying of the ground against the harvest. But the silence got into him, the way the country got into people, and when it had got into him far enough he did the thing he did when he needed to feel the work moving under his hands: he leaned on the county sooner than he had meant to. Not loudly. In the graduated, unhurried way that had served him in other counties he had done this in and other men he had done it to. He began in the second week of July, and he began with the men the bad years had already brought low, because a patient man begins where the ground is already soft.

Chester Boyle had farmed the same section of Haskell County thirty years. He was sixty-one, a widower since 1949, working three hundred and twenty acres with his son-in-law and a hired man who came on seasonally; and he was not a man given to complaint nor to the asking of help, which was a thing the county had always respected in him and which the summer had quietly turned into a liability, the way a virtue can be turned when the conditions change under it without changing it. His operating loan was at the Sublette bank and was stretched to a length that made his banker uneasy, and Chester knew the banker was uneasy, and the knowing was a weight he carried into every morning and did not set down in front of anyone, because that was the kind of man he was and had been the whole of his life. Meacham came to

Chester's place on a Thursday afternoon in the second week of July. He came alone, in his own car, at an hour he had chosen with the care of a man who knows that some conversations go better with no one by to have seen the choosing — the son-in-law gone to the dealer in Sublette, the hired man off in the east field. He sat at Chester's kitchen table and took the coffee Chester gave him and was pleasant about it in the way he was always pleasant, and he laid out the advance-payment offer the cooperative was making that season: a price guaranteed and paid ahead of the harvest, enough to clear the bank before the bank began to ask its questions. The price was under the market. Meacham did not pretend it was otherwise. He set it down as the cost of certainty — a small premium paid against having the risk taken off a man's shoulders; and the risk, given where Chester stood at the Sublette bank, was not a small thing to have lifted.

Chester sat at his own kitchen table and looked at the figures Meacham had written on a piece of cooperative letterhead, and worked out in his head what eleven cents under the market came to across three hundred and twenty acres at the year's likely yield, and the working of it produced a number that was wrong. He knew it was wrong. He also knew the loan was real, and the bank's patience was not without an end, and the harvest was six weeks off, and six weeks is a long time to carry a question of that weight without setting it down. He said he would think on it. Meacham said that was fine, that the offer stood through the end of the month, that he hoped Chester's summer was a good one; and he shook Chester's hand at the door with the warmth of twelve

years of handshakes — the warmth that knew Chester's name and his late wife's name and the names of his grandchildren, that had been at the June fair every year for fifteen years, that had been at the funeral in 1949 and had sent the right letter after it. Chester signed the contract two days later. He drove to the cooperative office on the Saturday morning and signed it and drove home and sat at his kitchen table twenty minutes before he got up and went back to the work. He had known it was wrong when he signed it. He had signed it for all that, because the pressure was real and the money was real, and there are times when a real thing that is wrong is the only thing a man has within reach.

The Benders signed the week after, for the same reasons and with less of the sitting at the table over it, because Carl Bender was forty-four and had two children in school and a third due in September and a tractor that had wanted a fuel pump since May, and the arithmetic of a man so placed leaves him less room for the keeping of a principle than Chester had had. He did not sit at his kitchen table afterward. He went straight back out to the field, which is its own kind of sitting.

Ray Kreider did not sign. Ray was sixty-eight and had farmed his section since 1918 and had come through the dust years and the Depression and two failed harvests and a son who had not come back from the Pacific; and what those things had left in him was not bitterness, which is what such things leave in smaller men, but a settled and durable understanding of what he would take and what he would not. He would not take eleven cents under the market from a cooperative he had helped to found, and he said as

much to Meacham in the plain, unhedged language of a man who had been plain-spoken the whole of his life and saw no reason to take up the management of his words at sixty-eight. Meacham took it with the civic manner whole and unruffled. He thanked Ray for his time. He said the offer would stand.

Three days after Meacham's visit a second man came to the Kreider place — the one called Moretti, alone, in the late afternoon, in one of the cars — and found Ray in the equipment shed at work on the combine he would need in six weeks. He leaned in the doorframe and said his piece in the same pleasant idiom he had used on Tommy Briggs out on the Liberal road: that the county road at harvest is a busy place; that equipment takes damage, now and again, going to and from; that a man running a combine alone — Ray's hired hand had been let go in the spring when the money went short — stands in a poor position if a thing should go wrong at the one moment it cannot be allowed to. He said it without a threat in it and without raising his voice and without one word in it that a court would have been able to take hold of. Ray heard him out. He did not put down the wrench he was holding. When the man had finished, Ray looked at him a while with the eyes of a man who has seen the actual worst the world keeps in its hand, and has learned from the seeing that the things people use to stand in for the worst are a good deal smaller than the worst itself. "Get off my property," Ray said. The man straightened off the doorframe and said he understood, that it had only been a piece of friendly information, that he hoped the harvest went well; and he drove away. Ray stood in the shed a

while with the wrench in his hand, and then he went back to the combine, because the combine wanted the work and going back to the work was the thing a man did. He telephoned Walt Prentiss that evening, and Walt came out and listened and wrote it down and told him he was sorry and that he was building a picture and that Ray was to call him the moment anything more happened; and Ray said he would, and said too that he was not signing and that Walt had better know it, and Walt said he knew it, and Ray said good night and hung up the telephone and went to his bed.

What the pressure did, past the signing and the not-signing, was make the people of that county present to one another in a way they had not lately been. Petrovar had always been a community in the plain civic meaning of the word — people who shared a water tower and a set of institutions and a year's worth of the same events, and the understanding, held without saying, that they were from here and that here was theirs. What it had been less sure at, in the ordinary running of things, was the deeper meaning of the word: people standing actively in the way of one another's trouble, and answering it with something past the mere knowing of it. A small place knows everything about itself. It is not always so good at doing anything with what it knows; the knowing will stand in for the doing, if a place is not careful, and many places are not.

Something turned in Petrovar that July. Danny marked it first at Edna's, in the morning talk, which had changed in a way that was hard to put a name to and not hard to hear once a man knew what he was listening for: the questions sharper, the

listening closer, the things offered concrete and of use rather than soft and consoling. Tommy Briggs took Chester Boyle's hayrake into the Sublette dealer when it wanted work Chester had neither the time nor, comfortably, the money for. Pete Halverson sent a hand over to the Kreider place for two days when Ray's shoulder went bad on him in the third week of the month. Ruth Orr, who had farm and family enough to manage without taking on the county, began on a Friday afternoon to leave food on Edna's counter for whoever had need of it — no name put to it, and no accounting looked for, and none given. They were small things. They were also the very grain and texture of what a community looks like when it is working as one and not merely living alongside itself; and Danny had been in Petrovar the whole of his life and had not seen them happen quite in this way before. It was the pressure that had done it — not by the fear in it, or not by the fear alone, but by setting down in the middle of the county a thing that did not belong there, and so reminding the county, as nothing in an easy year would have, of what did belong, and of how much it was worth the keeping.

His mother said a thing about it over supper in the third week of July that Danny did not forget and was not going to. She said that fear could go either of two ways. It could draw people back into themselves — every family for its own, every farm for its own, the natural retreat into the private when the public has turned dangerous. Or it could turn them outward, toward one another, for the plain reason that turning outward is the only defense that answers the kind of threat that will not answer to a

man standing against it by himself. Which way it went, she said, came down to what the people were made of, and to whether they had ever in their lives been shown what the turning-outward looked like. She thought Petrovar would turn outward. She said it with the matter-of-fact certainty of a woman who had been reading that county thirty years and had earned the opinion and did not offer opinions she had not earned; and Tom Callahan looked at her across the table with the expression he kept for the things she said that he found both true and past what he himself would have ventured to say – an expression Danny had been watching since he was a boy, and had always counted among the best things in the house.

Walt Prentiss went on building his picture with the tools he had, which were fewer than the thing wanted. He had his own watching, and Danny's, and the accounts from Tommy and Don Holt and Ed Halverson and Ray Kreider; he had been into the cooperative's annual reports and found in them the wrongness in the pricing that Tom Callahan had been pointing at in the dark for four years; and he had tried the Highway Patrol twice more and reached, twice more, a desk that did not call him back. He drove past the Stroud place at dusk one Wednesday and saw lights in every window and two men on the porch and both cars in the yard, and drove on, because stopping would have told the man in the cream suit nothing he did not already know and would have told Walt Prentiss the same; and he pulled over a mile on and sat a while, turning it, and what he had at the end of the turning was five men three weeks in that house with no sign of leaving it

and a set of channels that had not, so far, produced the one thing that would change that. He told Danny of it the next morning at the counter — the dead lines, a man he knew in the attorney general's office at Topeka who had not yet answered a letter, what he held and what holding it was not yet enough to do. "I have a pattern," Walt Prentiss said. "I need a mechanism. The pattern tells me what's happening. The mechanism tells me how, and how is what the attorney general's office needs before it will act." He looked at his coffee. "I need someone who understands how these operations work from the inside. Not the county law side. The other side." Danny said nothing. He filed it, and held it, and did not say it aloud.

The cooperative board met on the last Thursday of July, and Meacham ran it with the procedural smoothness of a man who has run the same meeting so many times that the pretense of it can no longer be told apart from competence. Ed Halverson put his question — not which families had signed the advance contracts, which would have wanted specifics he had not yet gathered, but the general terms of them, and the board rules that governed them, and the discretion the chair had used in approving them. Meacham gave the answer he always gave, accurate in its narrow way and telling a listening man nothing, set down with the patient air of a man explaining a thing to someone slow to take it. Ed wrote in the margin of his sheet and drew a line under it and said nothing further, as he had been writing and underlining six years; and across the table Meacham watched him do it with the awareness of a man who knows that the one across from him is

building a thing, and that the thing is not yet built, and that the window in which it can be kept from being built is not without an end. After the meeting Danny walked out to the lot with Ed Halverson, who stood looking at the elevator in the late-afternoon light with the look he brought to arithmetic that would not come right – not anger and not surrender, but the patient attention of a man who knows the answer is in there and has settled with himself to find it however long it takes. He was working it aloud, more to the air than to Danny: that the rule had been changed in the spring to let contracts go below the floor at the chair's discretion, and that the chair had written the discretion himself and was himself the discretion; and that whoever was at the Stroud place had needed that change made before ever they came, which meant a man had known they were coming before they came, which meant Dub had known. Danny said he thought that was right. Ed Halverson was quiet a while. The elevator stood beyond the town street in the late-July light, white and exact, the PETROVAR lettering gone to the pale wash of things long in the sun. "Six years," Ed said. "I've been asking the right questions for six years and getting the wrong answers." He was not bitter over it. He was setting down a fact, with the farmer's unsparing honesty about what a field has yielded and what the yield means for the year to come. "All right," he said. "Then we know." And he walked to his truck.

On an afternoon in the last week of July the man in the cream suit came into Edna's alone. That in itself was nothing – he had been in twice the first week and twice the second,

building the look of a man whose business in the county was lawful and ongoing. What was not the same this time was the hour, two in the afternoon, with the diner gone quiet; and that he sat not at the window tables but at the counter; and that Edna was back in the kitchen when he took the stool. Danny was at the counter two stools down, over a cup of coffee, with the quiet of a man who has been a month adding to a list and is not yet ready to act on what is on it. He heard the screen door and looked up and saw the man take the stool and set his leather notebook on the counter with the unhurried ease of a man at home in his own country. He ordered his coffee when Edna came out, and made his small talk with her about the heat — was the summer always so, how did people manage with no cooling — charming about it in the calibrated way he was always charming, the charm an instrument and worked like one, wanting neither feeling in it nor any excess; and Edna answered with the wary courtesy she had built up over six weeks of carrying coffee to men out of the Stroud house, the courtesy of a woman being professional inside a situation she had not chosen and could not refuse. Then she went back into the kitchen.

He turned on the stool, slowly, and looked down the counter to the far end, where Eileen Orr sat with her Tuesday coffee and the farm accounts she carried in to Edna's every Tuesday because the kitchen table at home was where her father worked and she would not put him off it. She had not looked up when the man came in. She was at the accounts now, the pen going, the morning's figuring done with the close, private attention she gave the work

of the place. He looked at her a long moment. It was not the look of a man who finds a woman handsome. It was the colder, more deliberate thing: a man taking the measure of a tool. His face did not change. He looked as he always looked – pleasant, present, professionally attentive – and he looked at her the way he had looked at the grain elevator through Edna's front window six weeks before, with the face of a man marking the presence of a thing already entered in its proper place in a ledger. Danny was on his feet off the stool before he understood that he was going to be. The man looked at him. He looked at Danny out of the large dark eyes and smiled the smile with no warmth anywhere in it, the smile of a man who has just been handed an interesting piece of information and is filing it with the same economy he filed everything else; and he held the smile three seconds, and then he finished his coffee and set a dollar on the counter and closed the leather notebook and went out. Danny sat back down. He held the cup in both his hands and looked at the screen door and listened to the car start out on the street and to the silence it left behind it when it had gone.

The smile had been the whole of it. Not the looking – the smile after the looking, turned on Danny, to be sure that Danny had understood what had been said without a word of it spoken. The man had no interest in Eileen Orr. His interest was in the fact that Danny had, and in what the having gave him, should the day come when he needed the shortest lever in the county and the surest place to set it. The looking had been the showing of the

thing. The smile had been the asking, and the answering, of whether the showing had been received.

Danny paid for his coffee and went out into the July heat and stood on the boardwalk with the Main Street of Petrovar around him – the elevator at the end of it, white and patient; the feed store and the hardware and the barber's and the sheriff's office and Edna's and the cooperative building with its faded sign – and understood that he had been a month adding to the list and the list was finished. He had what he had. The question was what was to be done with it, and the answer to the question was a thing Walt Prentiss had said three weeks before, and that Danny had filed and held and not said aloud: that what was wanted was someone who understood how these operations worked from the inside, not from the county law's side but from the other. He thought about the fairground corral in the early evening of the fair, and the gray mare's hoof in a scarred hand, and the small tightening at the corner of a pair of dark eyes when a piece went home into a pattern already being built; and he thought about eleven years of road, and what eleven years of it builds into a man, and what it keeps out.

He drove home and sat at his father's kitchen table until supper, and sat at it after supper too, while his mother cleared the dishes and his father read the cooperative's annual reports for what was now the fourth evening running; and when his father looked up over the top of the papers Danny told him he was going to Liberal in the morning. His father looked at him a moment. Something went through his face – the look of a man whose own

arithmetic has just been confirmed from a source he trusts. He looked back at the reports. "Good," he said. His mother said nothing. It was she who had found out where McGraw was: Ruth Orr had said it to her at the church auxiliary on the Tuesday, having had it from Sean, who had had a telephone call from Harold Keast at the Liberty Stables in Liberal about the roan's mending. She had known three days and had not said a word, because it was not hers to say, and because she had learned, in thirty years married to Tom Callahan, the difference between the thing that wants offering and the thing that wants only to be made available; and she had made it available the way she made things available, by being where Danny could come on it when he was ready to come on it, and not before.

Danny washed his cup and went up to bed. He lay in the dark of the room in the farmhouse his parents had built in 1931 and listened to the Kansas July night — a nighthawk somewhere off in the dark, the wind working slow through the corn — and laid out in his mind what he was going to say in the morning, ordering it the way his father had taught him to order the things that mattered: the facts in their order, what was known kept apart from what was only inferred, what the situation required set down beside what it was going to ask of the man it was being asked of. He was going to Liberal to ask Cole McGraw to come back to Petrovar. He was going because the town needed him, and Walt Prentiss needed him, and the cooperative and the farmers needed him, and because the man in the cream suit had looked at Eileen Orr that afternoon in a way that had no business in Edna's diner

or anywhere else in that county; and all of those things were true, and all of them were why he was going. He was going, too, because McGraw was the man Eileen had been waiting for on the fence in May, when she asked whether there was anyone left in the world who was actually surprising – and Danny knew it with the whole, steady certainty of a man who has been paying close attention a long time and has trained himself out of lying to himself about what he sees. He was going to bring back the man who was going to take from him the woman he loved. He knew that was what he was doing. He was going to do it anyway, which was, he understood lying there, the only part of any of it that was entirely his to decide, and he had decided it. The nighthawk called again from somewhere out in the dark. The corn moved in the light wind. At the end of Main Street the grain elevator stood white under the stars, the same as it had been the year before and the year before that, patient and needful and worth the protecting. He went to sleep.

Chapter Six

Ogling Him Underneath Her Shawl

Well, he never seemed to see her standing there at all

Even when she ogled him underneath her shawl

—Traditional

He left before dawn on a Friday in the last week of July. The road to Liberal ran straight and pale in the headlights, and the fields to either side of it were not visible in the dark except as a kind of texture in the air, a flatness that said only: ground, going on, in every direction, as far as the dark went, which in that country was as far as there was. He had ordered on the drive what he was going to say. He had set the incidents in a row the way his father set the figures of a hard year in a row — Tommy Briggs's wallet and the photograph; Don Holt's register; Ed Halverson standing in the dark of his own barn; Moretti in the doorway of Ray Kreider's equipment shed with a threat folded inside a piece of friendly information; Chester Boyle's contract and the Benders'; the Highway Patrol call that went to a desk and died there and what the dying of it said about Dub Meacham; the afternoon Sal Dominici had looked at the grain elevator through Edna's front window, and the afternoon, more lately, when he had come in alone and looked at Eileen Orr in a way that had brought Danny up off his stool before he had finished deciding to stand.

He drove, and the sky behind him lightened by degrees, the east about the slow Kansas business of making up its mind to be day; and he thought about two things he carried that he had not set on the list, because they did not belong on a list of facts, but that rode with him on the highway to Liberal for all that, as solid as the seat under him.

The first was a thing Eileen had said to him on the line fence in May, before any of it had begun – before the cars, before the cream suit, before there was a summer of this kind to be in the middle of. She had asked him, looking off at the rim of the land, whether he thought there was anybody left in the world who was actually surprising; somebody who did not already know everything she was going to say before she had said it, who had no history with her to fill the blank before she reached it. He had offered her the towns a man offers – Dodge City, Liberal, fifty before noon in Wichita – and she had given him the smile he did not want, the warm and fond and insufficient one, and had said the thing he had carried every day since and was carrying now, south, in the dark, toward the man it was about: I don't want fifty. I want one. He had understood, sitting the fence that evening, that she was describing a man who was not Danny Callahan, and he understood, driving, that he was on the road before light to fetch that man back into her county; and that the two understandings were the same understanding, and that he had made his peace with it the only way a man makes peace with such a thing, which is not by ceasing to feel it but by deciding what he is going to do regardless of feeling it.

The second thing he carried was Dennis Crane.

Dennis was twenty-four and had been Walt Prentiss's deputy two years, and the two years had not yet asked him a question hard enough to find the edge of what he had. He had written up drunk drivers and broken a fight at the filling station and carried civil papers, and in all of it had been capable and quick and in possession of a picture of the work that was, without his knowing it, the picture inexperience draws — accurate as far as it went and not going far enough. He was Bobby Crane's brother, the elder by two years, and the two of them had been built, as brothers sometimes are, out of the same stock in different proportion: Bobby had got the gentleness and the books and the inward life that goes with them, and Dennis had got the physical courage and the protectiveness and the flat refusal to give ground to things larger and longer-practiced than himself that other men gave ground to without shame. He had become a deputy on account of Bobby. In their last year of school three boys had set on Bobby for the crime of being found with a book of poetry, and Dennis had come up in time to end it, and had ended it in a way that ended it for good; and the ending had left in him a durable idea — that the world keeps people in it who prey on the Bobbys, and that the only thing standing in the road is now and again a man willing to be standing in the road — and he had decided to be that man by trade. Walt Prentiss had seen what Dennis was and had taken him on, fond of him and watchful of him in equal measure, and had a name for the thing he watched: the single-gear problem. Dennis had no middle answer to certain kinds of challenge. He

stood down, or he went the whole way, and the judgment that lives between those two was still, in Dennis, coming in.

He had been watching Vic Moretti a week the evening it went wrong. He saw him on a Tuesday at half past eight, walking unhurried back from Edna's to the Cadillac at the curb in front of Don Holt's hardware, the street all but empty — Carl Purvey sweeping his front step with the meditative attention of a man who sweeps at that hour every evening and counts it a kind of devotion, Don locking the hardware door, a woman coming out of the post office a block up. Dennis came out of the office and saw him and did the arithmetic, and the arithmetic he did was not the whole of the arithmetic, as he would be the first to say afterward, from the clear-headedness that pain and a bed produce in a man honest enough to use them so. He reckoned: here is the man who took Tommy's wallet and Tommy's photograph and paid nothing for it; here he is alone on a public street with witnesses; here is the badge on my chest and what it stands for. What he did not reckon was what the man's answer to a public challenge would be, or what that answer would look like delivered by someone who had been delivering it twenty years.

He crossed the street and said he wanted a word, and named the evening on County Road 14, and the man considered him with the flat professional attention he gave everything, the quick sorting of a thing into its kind. Dennis said there were five witnesses. There was one, and Dennis knew there was one, and he said five because he was trying to build a place to stand by claiming it, which is a fair tactic in most rooms and was not a

fair tactic in this one, the man across from him knowing to the head exactly how many people had been on that road that night. "Deputy," the man said, pleasantly, "I think you might want to go back to what you were doing."

What happened then took about four seconds. Dennis knew inside the first of them that he had brought the wrong tools to this particular work – felt it the way a man feels the ground go wrong under his boot the instant before the fall, the small wrongness arriving just ahead of the drop – and knew that the thing to do was to step back and regroup, and knew that stepping back and regrouping was the one motion he had no clean way to make in the moment it was most wanted. The man hit him twice. Carl Purvey stopped sweeping and stood with his broom and looked at what was on the sidewalk with the face of a man taking in a thing that has no place in the world as he has so far understood it; and then he went into the barbershop and used the telephone. Walt Prentiss found Dennis at a quarter to nine, and the face Walt Prentiss wore crouching down was not the face of a man looking at a procedural failure but of a man looking at the gap between what he had understood his work to require and what it had turned out to require, and finding the gap wider than he had been told. Doc Harmon said the concussion was moderate and the arm a clean break and the boy would be all right. He was four days in the hospital.

Danny went to the Crane house the Friday morning, one week before the Friday he was now driving to Liberal. Dennis was on the front-room couch with the arm in its cast and the ice against

the side of his head and the look of a man who has had time enough to think it through and has reached the conclusions he was not in a hurry to reach. "I was an idiot," Dennis said.

"You were trying to do the right thing," Danny said.

"Same thing, sometimes." Dennis shifted the ice. "I went at him wrong. I went at him the way you go at a man you have authority over. I don't have authority over Moretti. He knew it, and I know it now, and making a speech at him on a public sidewalk in front of Carl Purvey didn't change it." He looked at the cast. "Walt thinks I was an idiot."

"Walt thinks you were young and good-hearted and underprepared," Danny said. "Those are three different things."

Bobby Crane was at the kitchen table with his coffee and a composition book open in front of him and nothing going into it. He had driven down from Lawrence when he heard, and the face he had come through the door with was still on him, quieter now and still there. "Next time," he said, "backup."

Dennis made a sound that was nearly a laugh. "Walt's sixty-one and I'm the backup. We run a little shorthanded in this county."

"There might be another kind of backup by then," Danny said. Both of them looked at him. He told them about McGraw — not all of it, but enough: the fair, the horses, the man he had been following the length of the summer; the talk at the diner about the lightness and what it cost; that McGraw had been at Liberal, and that something had moved in his face when Danny had told him what the cars at the Stroud place were for, the small tightening

that meant a piece had gone home into a pattern already being built. That was all of it he said. It was enough. Dennis listened with the close attention of a man who has lately lost a fight and is taking the country in again with instruments freshly corrected. "He's a boxer?" he said.

"Was. But that's not the thing. The thing is he reads a situation before he puts his weight on it. He does with a room what your father does with a field - reads the ground before he stands on it." Danny looked at him steadily. "Which is the thing you didn't do on Tuesday."

Dennis looked at the ceiling a while. "No," he said. "I didn't."

These were the two things Danny carried south into the hardening blue of the morning: Eileen on the fence in May saying I want one, and Dennis on the couch saying which is the thing you didn't do. They were, he thought, driving, about the one thing between them - the distance there is between what a man feels and what he lets himself see, and between what he sees and what he is finally willing to do about it. He had spent a summer learning to keep those three apart and honest in himself. He was driving, this morning, to act on all three at once, against his own interest, with his eyes open, which was the only way the doing of it would be worth anything.

Liberty Stables stood on the south edge of Liberal, a well-kept place with a big barn and six corrals and a name that pulled buyers out of three states. Harold Keast, who ran it, was at the gate when Danny pulled in - a lean, sun-cured man of sixty with

the economical manner of a person whose trade has required him to take the measure of things quickly and rightly the whole of his working life. He took in Danny and the truck and made his determination. "Horse trader," Danny said. "Gray hat. You may have him here." Harold pointed toward the third corral without asking for the rest of it. "Been here going on two weeks," he said. "Works early and late and doesn't trouble anybody between times." He looked Danny over with the appraising courtesy of a man who has been around horses long enough to extend their manners to the people who come asking after them. "Good with the young ones. Better than most." He said it the way Harold Keast said the things he held for settled fact, without inflection and without any opening left in it to agree or disagree.

McGraw was working a bay gelding on a long line in the middle of the third corral – a horse of perhaps four, just being started, at the front end of the long patient business of becoming an animal that can be trusted – and he was running him through his transitions, walk up to trot, trot back down to walk, the same asking made the same way each time and the release given the instant it was earned, complete and entire, with the completeness of a man who has understood that the release is not the reward only but the whole of the sentence, the thing he has been the entire time trying to say. He had the gift of knowing the exact moment to give it. Danny had watched him at the fair and across the weeks of the summer and had come to see that this was the thing in him – not the patience, which many horsemen have, nor the technique, which can be taught, but the reading of

the one moment the animal had given what was asked and the knowing of it for the moment it was; a second late as costly as a second early. Danny stood at the rail and watched and tried not to take what he was watching as a description of anything other than a man working a young horse, and was not entirely able to.

McGraw had seen him come across the yard – the direction of him and the pace of him and the thing he was likely wearing on his face – with the same peripheral economy he gave all incoming information, and he finished with the gelding without breaking what he was doing until Danny reached the rail. Then he brought the horse down to a still halt on one long breath of the line and came to the fence. "Callahan," he said. "Petrovar." He read Danny's face the way he read a thing rather than waiting for it to be handed to him. "Something's wrong."

"Several things are wrong," Danny said.

McGraw tied the gelding and told Danny to give him a couple of minutes, and went back and worked the horse through one more series and then a short schooling on the left rein, which the young horse was stiff about the way young horses are stiff about the thing they have not yet learned to be soft in – not defiance, only a body that has not found that direction yet. McGraw asked for the softness ten times and got it on the eleventh, asking the same way every time, without heat and without changing the question, and when the horse gave him two full steps of it he released and stood and let the animal feel what had happened; and the gelding blew out through his nose, the breath that means a

thing has settled, and dropped his head a little. Then McGraw brought him in and tied him and came back. "Tell me," he said.

Danny told him all of it. He had ordered it on the drive — the incidents in their sequence, what was known fact kept apart from what was inference, where the joins were solid and where they were only pattern — and he laid it out the way his father laid out a hard year, the facts first and the implications after and the conclusions kept for the end. Tommy's wallet and the photograph. Don Holt's register. Ed Halverson in the dark of his barn. Moretti in Ray Kreider's shed with the threat dressed as friendly information. Chester Boyle's contract and the Benders', priced under the cooperative's own floor. The Highway Patrol call that died at a desk. Dennis Crane on the sidewalk and the four seconds it had taken. And last, because he had kept it for last, Sal at the counter at Edna's, the long look down it at Eileen, and the smile after, turned on Danny, that was not warmth but a message. McGraw listened the way he always listened, without interrupting and without his face reporting what was landing hardest, with the whole attention of a man trained by eleven years of walking into places he did not know to take a thing in completely before he began to act on any part of it. At each piece of the money — the contracts, the chairman's hold on the board, the price set under the floor — there was the small tightening at the corner of his eyes that Danny had learned to read as a piece going home into a pattern he was already building.

"The mayor is compromised," McGraw said, when Danny had finished.

"That's what I think."

"It's a fact. The question is what he's compromised for and how far in he is." He was quiet a moment. "The grain elevator."

"That's what I've been thinking," Danny said.

McGraw had it whole almost before Danny had finished handing it to him, and what he said of it he said briefly, as one states a thing already known from experience and not needing to be reasoned back to: that there was money somewhere behind this that needed its origins taken off it, and that a commodity run through a cooperative whose board had been bought was one of the old ways of taking the origins off money — you buy low through men you control and you sell at what the market says is fair and the difference comes out clean because the machinery of it is lawful on its face; and that the money itself was not the point and never had been. "The money's incidental," he said. "What he's buying is the look of clean money. For that, the elevator in Petrovar is worth two months of his time and four men and one Dub Meacham." He said it without weight, looking at the gelding, and it was the not weighting it that made the cold of it land. Danny had the feeling he sometimes got listening to McGraw — not awe exactly, something more exact than awe: the feeling of watching a man read off, easily and entire, a language Danny could himself only partly translate. McGraw read the thing the way a man reads his own tongue and not a learned one. Not speaking it. Near it.

Near enough, for a long enough time, that its grammar had got into him.

"Why are you bringing this to me?" McGraw said. He did not say it as a challenge. He said it as the next question in an orderly sequence of them.

Danny told him about Walt Prentiss, and the tools Walt Prentiss had, and the distance between those tools and this; about the call that died at a desk and what that meant for every road that ran out through the lawful structure of the county; about Dennis Crane on the sidewalk and what it had cost him and taught him and what it would cost the next man with a badge and no backup on an empty street; about the town, and the slow accommodation that had come down over it, which was not defeat and was its near neighbor. "You understood what was happening in this county before I had finished telling you," he said. "That tells me you know Sal Dominici's world from the inside, or near enough to the inside that the difference doesn't signify for this." He stopped. He had promised himself on the drive that he would say the rest, and he said it. "And because — that's the other reason I'm here. Not the town only. Eileen."

McGraw looked at him.

"Sal looked at her in a way he had no business looking at her," Danny said. "And then he looked at me, to be sure I'd understood that the looking was a message. He knows I care about her and he's filed it as something he can use. I don't know if he ever uses it. But I know the shape of what he can do, and I know what's standing between Eileen and that, and right now what's

standing there is Walt Prentiss and me and a county with no other leverage." He was looking at the corral rail. "You're the leverage. And I know what I'm asking. I know which way this runs for me if you come back. I'm asking it anyway, because it's what the situation requires, and because it's the right thing, and because those two reasons are enough."

McGraw was quiet a long time. He looked at the gelding standing easy at the rail with the loose attention of an animal that has been given a good morning and is content to wait on what comes next, and then he looked at the grain elevator that stood up white at the south edge of Liberal — not Petrovar's, but the same white patient shape against the same July sky, the shape that country put up wherever it kept its living. "Week from Monday," he said. Danny told him about the spare room at the Callahan place and the east paddock where the mare would have good water, and McGraw said that would be fine.

Danny drove north in the afternoon heat, and the sky did the thing it did sometimes in the late part of the day, opening overhead with an unreasonable generosity, enormous and various, the light coming in at an angle that made every plain thing it touched worth the looking at. He thought about what he had done — laid the town's trouble out plainly and asked the one man who could answer it to come back into it, and said aloud, in a corral outside Liberal, to a man who was owed the truth, the whole and complicated reason why. He had gone to bring Cole McGraw back to Petrovar and he had done it. He drove home under the weight of it, and the weight did not lift for being understood, because

acting rightly is not the same thing as acting easily, and a man who expects the one to feel like the other has not done much of either.

His father was in the east field when he got home and his mother was in the garden. He told his father at supper that McGraw would be through Petrovar on Monday week, and his father nodded the nod he kept for news he had expected and was glad to have arrive. "Good," he said. His mother said nothing. She had made her assessment already, as she generally had, and had put it where it would be available when it was wanted and not before.

That evening Danny went down to the fence between the two places at dusk. A meadowlark was working the line of it in the last of the light. Away across the fields Sean Orr was on his porch, and the song that came over the evening air was one of the old ones, in a minor key – a song about the sea, and leaving, and not going back; and under the words of it the thing the Irish had learned and had set to music so that it could be carried from one country to another, which is that the things a man loves most are very often the things he cannot stay with, and that this is not a punishment but a condition, and is borne better sung than not. Danny stood at the fence and listened until the song was finished, and stood a while after it in the dark. He had set a thing moving that morning and it was not going to stop now, and he found, standing there, that he did not want it to stop; and that the cost of it was real, and was his, and that the paying of it was not a sacrifice in any of the noble meanings of the word but only what the summer had turned out to require of a man who

had been paying attention the whole length of it and had understood, at last, what the attention was for. He had paid it in the space of two sentences, in a corral outside Liberal, Kansas. Week from Monday.

Chapter Seven

The Robber's Game

Well, as it is and it was in the beginning

Eileen's heart was set upon the winning

—Traditional

He came down the farm road from the highway on Monday morning, the eighth of August, the GMC and the two-horse trailer raising their dust behind them at the unhurried pace that told a man, before the truck had stopped, that the man driving it was not in a hurry and did not propose to be. Danny was at the fence when he turned in. Tom Callahan was on the porch with his coffee, and he watched the truck come down the road with the look he kept for things he had been expecting and was glad to see arrive. McGraw put the truck alongside the barn and got down and unloaded the gray mare with the economical, unhurried motions of a man who has done the thing in a hundred yards and long since settled the right way of it; ran a hand down her neck, looked her feet over from where he stood, and then looked at Danny. "Callahan," he said. "Glad you made it," Danny said. "Mare can go in the east paddock. Water's good there."

They settled the mare together, and when it was done Tom Callahan was still on the porch with two fresh cups poured. McGraw took one and his thanks were not performed. The three of them sat a few minutes the way men sit who do not need talk to be

easy in one another's company, looking out over the Callahan ground and, past the property line, the Orr place with its barn and its fence and the county road running north toward the elevator standing white in the morning distance. Tom Callahan set his cup down and looked at McGraw with the measuring directness he gave a thing he was forming a last opinion on. "Danny tells me you know something about how these arrangements work," he said. "Something," McGraw said. Tom nodded once, the nod for a conclusion reached and not wanting further talk, and went inside, and the screen door closed behind him.

Danny drove him into town that morning, and the quality of the town's answer was visible from inside the cab: Roy Akers at the pump island stopped what he was doing and watched the truck go by and then looked at Danny without a word, and Danny looked back without a word, and the thing between them was complete. Something was happening; McGraw was back; and the two facts were understood, in the town's compressed way of understanding things, to be the one fact. McGraw looked the two black Cadillacs over where they stood in front of Edna's with the level reading attention he gave a thing that had to be understood before it could be acted on — reading them the way he read a horse, not the thing only but what its condition said of the man who kept it. They were clean in a county where every car was dusty, which said their men had been on no county road. They stood with three feet of clearance to a side, which was not carelessness but the habit of men who wanted room to move quick if moving were called for.

"Six weeks," McGraw said. "Long time to stay somewhere you weren't planning to stay."

"The grain business isn't finished," Danny said. "Harvest is three weeks out."

"Then he has to stay." He turned off the cars. "Who knows I'm here besides your family?"

"Walt. Eileen."

McGraw nodded. "Keep it at that a few days. I need to know the ground before I move on it. What you gave me in Liberal is the outline. Now I have to walk it." A situation, he said, was a set of relations – between people, and between people and money, and between people and the thing they were afraid of – and a man could have the relations described to him in the abstract, the way Danny had described them, and still not be able to work with the abstract; he had to see the particular. The way Sal sat in the diner. The way Moretti went down the street. The way Meacham held himself when Sal's men were in town. The texture of the thing told a man what the outline could not. "Three days doing nothing anybody can see," he said, looking at the elevator at the end of the street. "After that I'll have something to say." And Danny thought about what nothing anybody could see meant in a man who read rooms for his living.

What McGraw did in those three days Danny pieced together afterward, because McGraw did not explain himself and Danny was not placed to see all of it, and it came to him the way a mosaic comes to a man who is given it one tile at a time. He ate every meal at Edna's, at the counter, at the one stool, at the one set

of hours — seven, noon, six — and the deliberateness of it was the whole of it, because a man who eats at the same stool at the same hours three days running becomes a piece of the furniture, and furniture is not watched, and what furniture hears nobody thinks to filter; and Edna's of a morning was where Petrovar said to itself everything it had to say, the full run of observation and worry and opinion that a place of two hundred and twelve people makes and has nowhere else to put.

He sat in Carl Purvey's chair on the Tuesday and let Carl talk an hour over a haircut. There is in most small places one establishment that is not the church and not the bank and yet keeps a truer ledger than either, and in Petrovar it was the barbershop, and the ledger was in Carl. He was sixty-four and had been barbering in that town since 1919, in the one room with the one chair and the strop and the row of shaving mugs along the shelf, each with a man's name under the glaze, some of the names belonging now to men out in the churchyard whose mugs Carl had never had the heart to take down. In thirty-six years a county had had to sit still under his hands twenty minutes at a stretch, and sitting still it had talked; and what came to him so was not gossip, which is talk that goes nowhere and means nothing, but the slow accumulated record of a place — who owed whom, and who feared whom, and who was doing the thing he said he was doing and who was doing another thing and calling it by the first thing's name — taken in the way a deep well takes water, from everywhere, over a long time, and held. He had cut the hair of three generations of some of those families and buried the eldest of

them, and he kept what he kept without spending it, which was the whole reason men went on giving it to him. McGraw watched himself in the mirror and let Carl run, the scissors going and the talk going with them, and put in three questions only, at the three moments a question would draw the most from the vein Carl was working that morning, so that Carl never once felt himself asked. He went out forty-five minutes later with a haircut and a good deal more than he had carried in — the pattern of the cars across six weeks, the three men whose standing at the bank was the most precarious, the fact that the chairman had been in for a trim oftener that month than the state of any man's hair could account for — and Carl, brushing down the chair behind him, judged it one of his better mornings of the month, and was not wrong, though not in the way he meant it.

He spent two hours the Wednesday at Roy Akers's talking engines, Roy having the entire attention of a man whose world ended precisely at the edge of his pump island and who missed nothing that crossed it — which car had left the Stroud place at which hour and gone which way, and, by its thirst when it came back, about how far. None of it McGraw received with any expression at all; but Danny, at the island on a pretext, saw the small tightening at the corner of the eyes that meant a tile had gone into its place when Roy said that the flat-faced one, Carmody, had three times filled the tank after running toward Sublette, which was where the county commissioner kept his office. Someone was keeping the administrative road clear. Three engines, Danny thought, driving home through the heat: the money,

and the fear, and the paperwork, all turning at once and all of them geared to the one harvest.

He got the cooperative's annual reports off Millie Hanson at the office, saying he had a mind to put a little into agricultural futures and would the reports help him see the local picture; and Millie, who had been there fourteen years and had the helpfulness of a person never given a reason to be otherwise, gave him the year's and the two before it without a second thought. He read all three that night in the Callahan barn by a lantern, the horses quiet in their stalls and the August dark outside the boards, and when Danny came out in the morning he had them open on a hay bale and was going through the figures with the unhurried attention of a man finding the thing he came to find and not surprised to be finding it. Five contracts, he said — Chester Boyle, the Benders, Ray Kreider, old Gus Pratt who had been farming past Sublette since before the elevator was built, and Don Holt, who was the odd one in the set, a hardware man and no farmer, who had bought a quarter section three years back against the day the store trade thinned and had an operating loan on it that a careful man could time an offer to. All of them under the cooperative's own floor price. All countersigned by the chairman. All dated inside six weeks of one another. He turned a page. The chairman had changed the board's rules in the spring to make an opening for contracts below the floor, and had written the opening himself, and was himself the discretion that filled it. "He changed his own board's rules to make room for the

scheme," McGraw said. "In March. Three months before the Cadillacs came."

"Can you prove it?" Danny asked.

"I can show it. Proving it — the criminal case, the prosecution — is Walt Prentiss's work and the county attorney's and the state's, and they can do it if they're given the time to do it properly. What I can do is faster. I can make the cost of going on with the thing higher than the cost of dropping it. That's not law. That's economics. And economics moves quicker than law." What he needed, he said, was three things: a man named Tremblay out of Wichita who did investigative work and had a documented history with Sal's organization four years deep, whom he had already reached by telephone from Liberal; a few evenings of cards with Feist and Carmody at the Stroud place; and a conversation with Sal, at the right moment, about the arithmetic of his situation. The card game he meant to be invited to the way a man is invited to anything, which was by making himself available and letting the invitation come to him; and it came, off an idle half hour at Roy Akers's while Feist gassed the Cadillac, a conversation McGraw governed at every turn without seeming to govern any of it, so that Feist drove off with a full tank and the feeling of having met a man worth the knowing, which was the exact feeling McGraw had set out to leave him with.

What Danny knew of those card evenings came in McGraw's short accountings after — what was played, what was said, what the two together let a man infer. Feist and Carmody lost, steadily, McGraw managing the losing with the care of a man who

knows that winning too much too fast buys the wrong answer; losing enough to keep them at the table and winning enough to stay worth their while, and in the space between asking questions so folded into the rhythm of the cards that the men answering had no way to hear them as questions. He put together, evening on evening, the shape of the thing inside the farmhouse – who answered to whom, which of them spoke to Chicago direct and which through another man, what the harvest looked like from Sal's side of it – the way he put everything together, without hurry, in the certainty of a man who has learned that a picture comes clear if you look at it long enough from enough sides and do not try to hurry it clearer than it means to come. Sal knew McGraw was back inside two days of his coming. Moretti had carried it in – the horse trader off the fair was at the Callahan place, his mare in the east paddock, a routine to him that read like a man settling and not a man passing. Sal took it with the neutral attention he gave everything and sat with it an hour in the Stroud kitchen while the August evening came on and the fields held their heat past dark. He was not alarmed. He was, in the professional way, interested. A sheriff stopped through the paperwork was one kind of opposition; a man who had come back to a town he had no professional reason to come back to was another, and the second kind wanted a different reading. He set Moretti to learn who had brought the horse trader back and what the horse trader had behind him, and went back to his book – he was down to the last two in the wooden crate – and what Moretti brought him in three days was a partial thing: eleven years on the circuit, eastern

Kansas to start, a Golden Gloves runner-up in 1946, no record, no law connections, no affiliation that showed. What it did not bring him, because it was not the kind of thing that shows in any record Moretti knew how to reach, was the more important thing, which was what eleven years of moving through the country where the ordinary rules did not reliably hold had made of the man; and that was in McGraw and not available to Moretti's methods. Sal marked the gap between what had been found and what he judged was there, filed it, and went back to his book. The harvest was three weeks off. He was, though he would not have reached for the word, somewhat less comfortable than he had been the week before.

Eileen marked the change too, though not in the weather-reading way the town marked it. She marked it the way she marked the things that touched her directly, with the whole honest attention of a person who is not going to pretend she does not see what she sees. McGraw had begun coming to the Orr farm on the Wednesdays and the Fridays now that he was back, working the roan's left hind on through its slow mending and doing in the mornings whatever else the place wanted, and his presence there was what it had always been, entire and given to the thing in front of him. And on a Wednesday evening in the second week of his being back — Sean gone in to his supper, the long light going gold across the worked ground, the gray mare led out and McGraw taking her to the gate — the thing that had been standing unspoken between him and Eileen Orr was spoken; and Danny, who was mending the line fence within earshot and did not make himself known, because the moment for the right choice goes by

before a man has finished deciding what the right choice is, heard it.

"Cole," she said. Quietly, to his back, as he led the mare through.

He stopped. He did not turn at once. There was a space in which Danny could hear the mare blowing through her nose in the evening quiet, and then McGraw turned and looked at Eileen with the full, present attention he gave the things that mattered. Her hands were at her sides. "I know you're running a calculation," she said. "I don't know what all the variables are. I'm not asking you to tell me, and I'm not asking you for an answer you're not ready to give." She paused. "But when you've finished running it — whatever the answer is — I'd like to know. Not because I need to arrange myself around it. I just —" She stopped, and looked a moment at the mare, at the quiet gray patience of her. "I'd rather know," she said. "I've always found that to be true."

Something landed in McGraw the way a thing lands that has been circling a man long enough that he has started to expect it and that comes in differently than expected for all that. She had named it accurately, and without accusation, the way a person speaks who respects you enough not to pretend they do not see what they see. He looked at her — the green eyes level and direct in the evening light, the still hands, the chin up not from bravado but from the particular dignity of a woman who has decided to say a true thing and is not going to lessen it by flinching — and he read all of it, and was quiet in the way he

was quiet when he was reading himself before he opened his mouth. His right hand, on the mare's withers, pressed down a little without his telling it to, and the mare, reading the pressure, stood the way she stood when he asked her to stand. "All right," he said. He said it without elaboration and without promising any particular answer, but with the completeness of a man who has been given a thing and has received it — the actual thing. Eileen nodded once, the nod of a person who has said what she needed to say and has no wish to take more than she asked for, and went back up the porch steps, and the screen door closed behind her the way screen doors close in summer. McGraw stood at the gate with the gray mare at his shoulder a moment, and then walked her down the county road in the long light; and Danny stood at the fence post with the wire in his hand and turned over the words all right and what they did and did not contain, and the summer moved around him the way it moved when it was doing a thing that would not be undone. It was not resolved, what lay between those two. It was changed. The distance was the same distance. The nature of the distance was not the same.

Danny watched it from the place he had always stood — the known country, the fence post, the familiar — and found, to his own mild surprise, that the watching felt the way he had hoped it might feel when he made his decision in the corral outside Liberal: like a thing that was right, and like the rightness of it being enough, even where it was also hard. He had not known, driving south that Friday before light, whether he had it in him

to hold both of those at the one time. He was finding out that he had.

It was Meacham who came to the Orr farm, on the Wednesday of McGraw's first full week back. He came on a working day, which told you a thing; most of Meacham's dealing was done on his own ground — the diner, the cooperative office, the commissioner's chambers, the church hall — where twelve years of relations and place put the leverage in the air for him so that it never had to be said. The Orr farm was not his ground. It was a county road and a fence and a paddock where a man was working a horse on a long line and had no part in Meacham's twelve years of anything, and Meacham knew it coming in; Danny could see him know it in how he stood at the fence, the civic manner still on him but gone small, like a coat too big for him in the wrong weather. McGraw finished the exercise he was at before he acknowledged the car. "You should know what you're getting into," Meacham said — with no warmup, and the missing of the warmup was itself the signal, Meacham always using the warmup, so the absence of it said he was more frightened than he was playing.

"I have a reasonable idea," McGraw said.

"Sal Dominici is not a man who takes well to interference. He has resources. He has people. He has the means to make things a good deal worse for the people who make things worse for him." He paused. "For everyone concerned."

"I'd imagine not," McGraw said. He set the foot down and straightened and looked at Meacham with the level even attention that was his way of making a statement, and held it a long moment

saying nothing; and Danny, at the fence behind Meacham, watched Meacham take the look and hold his ground and find the holding effortful. "You're worried he's going to make things worse for you," McGraw said. Something went through Meacham's face – the look of a man accurately named, whose first motion is to deny the naming and whose second is the understanding that denying it would tell more than confirming it – and took perhaps two seconds. "I am advising you," Meacham said, "as the mayor of this town, that the situation you have put yourself into carries serious risk for the people of this community."

"I understand the risk," McGraw said. He picked up the mare's next foot. "Do you?" Meacham left. When the car was gone Danny came to the fence and said he was afraid. "Yes," McGraw said. "Of Sal or of you?" He thought about it with the care he gave a thing that had a real answer and not a convenient one. "Both. A man like Meacham has spent his life managing several fears at once. He's getting worse at it this week because they're converging and the things he worked out for each are contradicting the others. A man whose fear is getting away from him makes a mistake." He straightened. "We need him to make one. He's close." Danny looked at the elevator in the afternoon, white beyond the street. "How close?" "Five days," McGraw said, and went back to the work.

That evening Danny sat with Walt Prentiss at Edna's and told him what McGraw had made of it – the laundering of the money, the rule changed in the spring, the five contracts that were the trail of it – and Walt Prentiss listened with the whole building

attention he gave a thing confirming a picture he had been months assembling, and was quiet a long time after, looking at his coffee. "I've worked beside Dub eight years," he said. "I took him for a capable man who understood how the county's business ran and helped it run. A man with the relations that move things." He was quiet a moment. "I was right about the relations. I was wrong about what he was moving with them." He would document what he had in a form that would hold, he said, and put the five contract copies somewhere that was not the county's own files, where Dub had a key, and get a letter to his man in the attorney general's office by a road that ran nowhere near Dub. He put his hat on. "I'm also very glad your mother found out McGraw was in Liberal." Danny said he was too. Walt Prentiss looked at him with the look he kept for the things that were both plain and worth the saying. "That man," he said, carefully, "is going to need a very good reason to stay in this county when this is over. I hope he finds one." "I think he already has," Danny said. Walt Prentiss set his hat and went back to his office, and Carl came to his stool, and the elevator stood beyond the town street in the evening light, white and exact and present; and four miles south at the Stroud place Feist and Carmody were settling to another evening of cards with the horse trader who had come back to Petrovar in August and slept now in the Callahan spare room, and the losses on their side of the table were mounting with the patient economy of a man who has decided that the cards are not the point.

Chapter Eight

The Explanation

*Well, argh me boys, the fate is hard to grapple
Of all those girls well our Eileen was the apple
—Traditional*

It was the second week of August, eight days after McGraw came to the Callahan farm, that Sean Orr had his heart attack.

He was in the north field on a Tuesday morning, hitching the roan to the harrow for the first time, the mare's left hind sound at last and Sean having decided it was time to see what she was made of on working ground. He was threading the trace through the harrow ring when it came — not building, not gradual, but whole and at once, a pressure in the chest unlike any pain he had had before in the thoroughness of it, as though the body were trying to gather everything in it into a smaller room. He sat down in the dirt of his own north field, because there was nothing else to be done with a man in that moment but let him sit down in the dirt. The roan turned her head and looked at him out of the calm intelligent eye he had paid four hundred dollars for, and stood absolutely still, which was the whole of what she was worth and worth every dollar of it. He sat there ten minutes. The pain changed its shape and did not leave — went from the sharp thing to a held thing, a vise kept closed rather than turned — and after the ten minutes it let him up. He unhitched the mare one

strap at a time, and walked her back, and watered her and forked her stall with the systematic attention of a man doing the thing that wants doing while his body delivers its message with the patience of something that means to be heard. Then he went in and sat at the kitchen table and did not tell Ruth.

He had learned, in twenty-seven years of Kansas and before that in Galway, that there were troubles a man named and troubles he carried until the carrying told him something, and this one he was still in the way of understanding. He had his tea and listened to his body and took its message the way he took information he did not want — directly, without arguing, a man who knew that arguing with a fact costs more than the fact does. It was Ruth who saw. She saw it the way she saw everything that touched Sean, not by the one sign but by the gathering of small departures from his ordinary self: the color two shades under his working color, the care in how he crossed the kitchen that was not tiredness but management, the silence at supper that was not the easy silence of a man going back over his day but the close silence of a man holding something. Twenty-five years of mornings had taught her the difference. She told Eileen at nine that evening, and Eileen telephoned Doc Harmon's house.

Doc Harmon came on the Wednesday and examined Sean on the kitchen table with the close attention of a man who had spent thirty years listening to hearts and lungs in farm kitchens and had learned not to let the familiar room make him careless. He listened a long time. He asked his questions in the plain direct manner Sean valued, being himself a man who set specific

questions above the general kind, and when he was done he sat at the table and told Sean what he had found: that it had been a true cardiac event and no metaphor of one, a real warning from a real and mechanical condition that had likely been two years building and that Sean's willingness to work through discomfort had let build undetected. Three weeks of complete rest, at the least. No heavy fieldwork after, ever — no hitching, no driving of posts, no lifting of anything that signified. The alternative to heeding it, Doc Harmon said in the plain unsoftened way he said the hard things, was a far more serious event, at a time and place the condition itself would choose. Sean took it sitting in the kitchen chair with his big work-shaped hands flat on the table, and went through the deliberation of a man who accepts a reality presented plainly and does not argue it but must take a moment to get it down before he can say his yes. He looked at his hands. He looked at Doc Harmon. "All right," he said.

By daylight the next morning Eileen had made her own list. She wrote it on the back of the feed bill with a pencil stub: north fence, pump handle, roan's light work, three dinners carried to the field, one call to Pete Halverson about posts, one to Tommy Briggs about a coil of wire, one to Doc Harmon if Sean so much as tried to lift a sack. She did not ask permission for the list. She put it under the sugar bowl where Ruth would see it, then went out before breakfast and moved the roan herself, slow and easy, with a hand on the mare's neck and her attention on every hitch in the animal's gait. When Sean came to the porch and opened his mouth to object, Eileen looked up at him and said,

"Daddy, sit down." He sat down. It was not defiance exactly. It was succession, and every person on that farm recognized it, though none of them said the word.

"Three weeks at the least," Doc Harmon said. "And after that — the garden, the porch, the fields on foot if you want them. But not the work. Not with your hands." He looked at Sean with the steady directness of a man who had carried this kind of news into a hundred kitchens and learned that the steadiness was the part that mattered. "You've built something real here, Sean. Your work now is to still be here to see what it does." Ruth, who had been at the stove the whole while and had not once turned around, made a small sound that might have been relief and might have been a more complicated thing. Eileen sat with her hands in her lap and said nothing until Doc Harmon had gone, and then she said, "Daddy" — the way a person says a name when there is nothing past the name to say and the name has to carry the whole of it.

McGraw came to the Orr farm on the Thursday morning. Sean heard the truck on the county road before he saw it, from the porch where the doctor's orders had set him and where he had been since the afternoon before, and he read the character of the arrival before it arrived, the way a man reads it who has had nearly twenty-seven years of vehicles coming down his lane: this one was not tentative, and was not a social call, and was not uncertain of its welcome. It came down the lane like a man coming to work. He answered the door in his nightshirt and his boots, which was how Sean Orr answered a door at seven in the morning when the morning asked for an answer, and McGraw was on the

threshold with his hat in his hand, and there was a conversation of perhaps five minutes that Danny, come early himself and at the Callahan fence within sight of the Orr house, was too far off to hear a word of. What he could see was the shape of it and not the words – two men talking plainly about a thing both of them understood before either said it – and at the end of it Sean put his hand out, and McGraw took it, and Sean went back inside, and McGraw went to the truck and began unloading his own tools. A wire stretcher. A post driver. A come-along for the heavy work. A leather apron gone dark with years. A fence pliers and a box of staples. He had brought exactly the tools the Orr farm's work wanted and not one tool for anything else; and he put on the apron and took up the pliers and the stretcher and walked to the run of fence along the county road that had wanted attention since June.

Danny watched him go and thought: this is a man showing himself. The posts went in square, the wire ran true, and the ordinary machinery of a working farm held together under the steady presence of a man who had decided this was where his attention belonged. He worked the Orr place two and a half weeks, from first light to last, unasked, and made nothing of it. Pete Halverson came three days and worked well. Tommy Briggs came once and worked hard and said little. But McGraw was the constant, and it was McGraw whom Sean Orr studied from the porch with the grave attention one working man gives another when the work is the testimony.

Danny helped when he could, his own work done first, and what he watched was a man learning a place — actually learning it: that the north field drained otherwise than the south; the exact lift the equipment-shed door wanted to clear its sill; the way the roan said discomfort as against the way she said preference, which were two different things and asked two different answers. He learned them with the unhurried systematic attention of a man who meant to be using them a long time. The day Danny went back to oftenest from those weeks was a Thursday in the first of them. The heat had crested by mid-afternoon and the air had the quality it takes on in August when the day begins to think about ending, the sun's active hostility suspended into a kind of truce; and Eileen came out at half past four with water and sat on the fence and watched them set a rotted post. She had been at the house all week with the cooking and the managing, and had the look she had when competence had run smooth long enough to let something else come up onto the surface of her attention; and she watched McGraw drive the post with the two-handed rhythm of a man who had done the work before.

"You grew up on a farm," she said. McGraw set the driver down and looked at her with the direct attention he was giving her more of now. "My father's farm. Eastern Kansas. Near Emporia."

"Grain?"

"Wheat and milo. Same as here." He tried the post with both hands, checking the set. "Left when I was eighteen."

"And went west."

"Gone west," he said, with the faint acknowledgment of a man stating a settled fact about himself.

"Why?" He was quiet. Danny kept his eyes on the wire he was stringing, giving the talk the privacy it wanted to go on. "My father farmed that ground twenty years," McGraw said. "He was a careful man. He did everything the way it was supposed to be done — tended the equipment, managed the soil, read the weather, made every decision he could make with what he had to make it on. And every year the margin came in a little thinner." He set the hook of the stretcher. "I watched him do everything right for twenty years and end every year with less than the year before it. And I came to understand that doing everything right is not sufficient inside a system built to hand the profit to somebody else."

"The grain market," Eileen said.

"The grain market. The elevator price. The futures. The cooperative boards run by men who understood that if you hold the buy price, the farmer's margin is whatever you decide to leave him." He began to pull the wire taut. "My father did everything right. The system was wrong. I was eighteen and didn't have the word for it, but I had the feeling of it."

Danny, listening from the wire, understood then what the fraud had been in its simplest shape. The cooperative had the farmers' grain and therefore had the first hand on the money. Meacham and the board had reported a lower local price than the grain would bear, urged frightened men to sign advance contracts against next harvest, and used the gap between the true price and the paid price to keep the town's accounts looking orderly while

selected debts and favors were hidden inside the books. A farmer short of cash took the early money because his children needed shoes or his note at the bank was due; by harvest he had already sold the crop cheap, and the man who held the contract held the year. It was not theft with a gun in the road. It was theft with a ledger, which in a wheat county could do more damage and leave fewer tracks.

"So you became a horse trader," Eileen said.

"I set my prices," he said. "I answer to what an animal is worth, not to what a man in Chicago decides a market is. The animal's in front of me. I can see what it is. The price is between me and the buyer and whatever the animal is in honest work and honest bone." The corner of his mouth moved. "It's not a grand philosophy. But it's mine." Danny looked up from the wire and saw Eileen's face, and what was in it was the intensity she had when she was recognizing a thing rather than learning it — seeing, in another person's putting of it, a thing she had already known and not had the words for. He had watched her wear that look over a book worth reading, and when Sean said a thing at supper that finally said the thing he had been working toward. He had not before watched her wear it about a person.

"Your father," she said. "Is he still on the farm?"

"He died in 1949. The farm went to my sister and her husband. They sold it in '52." He said it without weight, the flat statement of a fact lived with long enough to have become part of the country of what was true. "He had a good life. Hard,

but good. He knew what he was and was it, fully. A man who knows what he is and is it completely – that's not a small thing."

"I'm sorry," Eileen said.

"He'd have liked this farm," McGraw said, looking over the Orr place, the house and the outbuildings and the fields running to the edge of the light. "He'd have known what Sean built here and what it cost to build it. He'd have respected it." Eileen was quiet. Danny stapled the wire and went to the next post, and for a while there was only the work and the meadowlarks doing the thing meadowlarks do in August on a fence line, which is to lay claim to the territory with a completeness that seems to leave nothing out. Then Eileen said: "My father sings about Ireland."

"I know," McGraw said. "I've heard him. From the road, in the evenings."

"He left everything he knew when he was twenty-two," Eileen said. "He came to America with seven dollars and a trunk of tools and the songs in his head. He built this farm and married my mother and raised three children and became the person he is, here, in this county, on this ground. He's been here nearly twenty-seven years." She looked off across the fields. "And he still sings about leaving. Every evening. As if the leaving never quite finished."

McGraw straightened from the post he was setting and looked at her with the whole attention. "Some things you carry," he said. "Not because you haven't moved past them. Because they're part of what you are. The carrying is you."

"He says the songs keep him company," Eileen said. "He says they're the friends who came with him from Galway. That they're the only ones who made the whole trip." McGraw looked at her a moment — not the full assessing look and not the careful measured one but something more open than either, something that was, near as Danny could read it, simply genuine. "That's about the truest thing I've heard said about what a song is," he said. Eileen took it with the stillness she kept for things that landed correctly, which was not acknowledgment but the receiving of something true; and in the space between them, which was eight feet of Kansas fence line and everything that had been building since June, Danny saw the thing he had been watching build all summer: two people who had been moving a long time toward a common ground and had, standing at last in the actual dirt of it, found themselves there together. He started on the next post.

The household took McGraw's presence in the way households take the presences that belong in them — not with announcement, but with the incremental naturalness of things that are right. Ruth set a place for him at supper without being asked, which was the first time and made the pattern. Sean, who had called him McGraw through the fair and through the weeks of the roan's mending, called him Cole one morning off the porch, and the name came out with the ease of a thing settled somewhere below the level of settling and now only what it was. Ruth Orr had been wary of him since the fair — not of his character, which she had judged honest from the first telling, a man's horses being a thing you can read a man's character off and this man's horses

having been exceptional, but of the situation: a man eleven years on the road, and her daughter attending to him with the attentiveness Ruth had been twenty years watching come and go in Eileen, through Tommy Briggs and Pete Halverson and Bobby Crane and James Whitfield, and that had never once in twenty years made this particular thing in relation to any of them. A man eleven years on the road was a risk. Not the risk of bad character, which she could not find in him. The risk was the road itself, which a person who has needed tends to need again whatever he tells himself in a summer; she had seen what it had made of good men before – the drift, the restlessness, the not being anywhere long enough to let a place take hold – and she did not want it for Eileen.

Danny came most evenings, to look in on Sean and to put a second pair of hands to whatever wanted them, and Sean was on the porch in his enforced rest with his coffee and the Irish repose of a man told to be still who has found a stillness that is attention and not defeat. McGraw sat the other chair most evenings, with the ease of someone sitting in a place that has made room for him. They talked sometimes of the farm or the horses or the country south toward Oklahoma or the harvest coming on, and sometimes Sean sang, the old songs in the minor keys that carried best in the still air, and McGraw listened the way he listened to everything that mattered, completely and with no impulse to explain it or put it another way. Once Danny came by at nine and heard Sean finish something in the Irish – a last verse, with the falling quality endings have in that tradition –

and heard McGraw say, into the silence after it, "I wish I knew what the words meant." And Sean said: "The words matter less than the feeling the man has for them. The feeling is the translation." McGraw was quiet a moment. "Then I understand it," he said. Danny stood in the road and listened, and thought that McGraw was the first person he had followed — outside Ruth and Eileen, who were native speakers of Sean's tongue — who took the songs whole and right, without reaching for an explanation or a more legible form; who heard the feeling in them and knew the feeling for the same feeling that was in the porch and the farm and the August evening and the elevator at the end of the world: the feeling of a thing that was worth being exactly where it was.

Danny sat with Sean on the porch one Thursday after the fence conversation, McGraw gone to the pump to wash and Eileen in to start the supper, the two of them in the quiet of the August evening with the last light gone amber on the elevator to the north and Sean holding his cup in both hands. "He's a good man," Sean said, to the evening rather than to Danny, with the weight of a conclusion and not an opinion. "He is," Danny said. "He didn't have to come." "No." Sean turned the cup in his hands. "I've been watching him with her," he said. "I know." "He's careful," Sean said. "Careful of her. Not the careful of a man afraid of her, or managing her. The careful of a man who understands she is worth being careful of — that how he attends to her is a form of respect for what she is." He paused. "That's the difference between wanting a person and seeing one. Wanting is easy. Wanting is about you. Seeing is about them, and it costs

something, and it's the thing you have to earn." Danny did not say: I have been trying to earn it nine years. He said: "I think he sees her." "Yes," Sean said. "I think he does." He looked at the elevator. "He's not what I'd have chosen for her. Too much road in him. Too much past, the kind that's hard to put down even when a man wants to." He paused. "But the thing about a man with a lot of past is that he knows what things cost. He doesn't throw a thing away carelessly. He's been on the road long enough to know what he'd be trading for it, and that knowing is worth something when he comes to choose."

"Has he said anything to you?" Danny asked. "About Eileen?"

"No," Sean said. "He's not that kind of man. He doesn't explain himself in words when he can do it in work." He nodded at the fence line, straight and taut along the county road, the posts square and the wire rightly tensioned. "That's his explanation. You want a man who explains in words, you have plenty of those; I've had plenty of those at my door these several years, asking about my daughter. What's out there is a man showing himself in what he does with his hands in the morning and how he listens in the evening and how he looks at her when he thinks nobody's watching. A man who has been watching him does not need him to say it." Ruth called them in. McGraw ate with them that evening — Ruth had set the place without being asked, which was Ruth's way of enacting a thing already decided in her — and it was one of the most ordinary suppers Danny had eaten in his life and one he would go on thinking about: Sean at the head and Ruth at the foot and Eileen between them and McGraw across

from Danny, the plain food and the plain talk and the light going down at the window and the elevator standing white at the end of town in the distance. Sean said grace in the Irish, the way he always did, a few lines of something old that no one at the table but Eileen could follow word for word, and no one translated it, and no one needed it translated. McGraw sat with his head bowed and his eyes down the length of it with the stillness of a man who understood that a thing need not be comprehensible to be worth the honoring; he was there, completely, the way he was completely wherever he was. And Ruth, watching from the foot of the table, formed her opinion in that moment — Danny saw her form it; he could not have said what he saw except that something in her posture settled, the way a thing settles when a decision that has been pending is finally made. The road had been her fear. A man who could bow his head over words he did not know with the genuine attention of someone honoring the intention and not the content was not a man who could not be still. He was a man who had been moving because there had not yet been a place worth stopping for. She set his place every evening after that without ceremony, and made his coffee in the morning at the hour she made Sean's, and took him into the household's ordinary round with the completeness of a woman who, having made a decision, makes it entirely.

The conversation that was the hinge of the whole summer happened on a Saturday evening in the second week of McGraw's time at the farm. Sean had gone to bed early and Ruth had gone to sit with him, and the house was quiet the way a house is quiet

that has held a full evening and is now holding an empty one. Eileen made coffee and carried it to the porch, the evening being the kind of August evening that deserves to be sat in, and McGraw was in the chair on the far side of the door – the chair he had come over the two weeks to occupy the way a presence comes to occupy the place that fits it, without assignment and without ceremony, because the place was right and the presence was right. She gave him the coffee and sat in the other chair, which was her father's, and they talked a while of his father's farm and the country up there, whether it was different from the country here; and he said it was and it wasn't, that Kansas was Kansas but the edge of the Flint Hills was not the southwest corner, that the ground up there stood in a different relation to the sky. And then she asked him the thing she had been carrying since the evening at the gate.

"Cole," she said. "I need to know something."

"What's that?"

"When this is over," she said. "When the harvest is past and Sal Dominici has gone wherever he goes and the cooperative is back to what it should be. When it's over – what does over mean, for you?"

He was quiet a long time. It was not the quiet of evasion; she would have known that quiet, and it was not that one. It was the quiet of a man hunting language for a thing that had been living in him without it, the way a thing lives in a person before the right words for it come. "I've been on the road since I was nineteen," he said. "Eleven years. I know what that life

is. I know what it's given me and what it's cost me. The cost is — it adds up. It adds up in a way you don't notice until you're somewhere that isn't the road and you can feel the subtraction. What's been taken out. What's not there."

"What's not there?" she said. He looked a long moment at the fields, the dark fields going off to the horizon under the early stars, the elevator white to the north. "This," he said. "This porch. Your father's voice carrying across the field in the evening. The way this country looks at the end of a day you've worked in." He looked at her. "You." She took it the way Eileen took the things that mattered, with the whole of her attention, the green eyes steady and present; she did not deflect it and did not qualify it; she let it be what it was. She was seeing him in the lamplight with a paying of attention she had decided not to manage — the way he filled her father's chair, the shoulders wider than the slats had been built for, the forearms heavy and still on the arms of it; his hands in the lamplight, the right one lying open and uncurled on his thigh, the pale scar from the base of the thumb to the wrist, the middle knuckle healed a little off-true. She had marked the hands in June at the corral and filed the marking. She was marking them again now, and the marking was a different thing, because the hands were the same and the distance to them was not.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said. "I want to be honest with you about that. I've been on the road a long time, and I've had reasons for it that haven't gone away because I've been in Petrovar a summer. But —" He stopped, and looked at his hands,

the scarred hands that had been doing the Orr farm's work two weeks. "Something's different here. In this place. With this family." He paused again. "With you. I don't know yet what to do with that. I'm trying to be honest about not knowing, which is harder than having an answer." Eileen looked at him a moment and then said the thing she had come out to the porch to say: "I'm not asking you to know. I'm asking you not to look the other way."

He looked at her then, and what she saw in his face was a thing she had not seen there in all the months of watching him. The careful equanimity was still there — it was structural in him and not an act — but under it, and visible through it, the other thing: the actual thing, unguarded, present, looking back at her like a person who had stopped managing the distance between himself and a thing he wanted. Open. Wide open. "I can do that," he said. She told Danny later that they had talked till midnight, and that by the end of it she knew the thing she had not been certain of before; and that the certainty, when it came, felt less like a discovery than like the recognizing of a thing that had been true a while and had only now been said aloud — not the thing becoming true, but the truth of it being spoken, there being a difference between those and the difference mattering, and Eileen Orr being the kind of person who knew the difference.

The second week of McGraw's time at the farm moved differently than the first. The work went on — there is always more work on a farm, the list of it filling itself back in faster than a man working full days can quite outpace — but the other

thing was happening alongside it. The presence of him had been taken into the household. Ruth set his place without ceremony. Sean called him Cole. Eileen worked beside him in the mornings with the naturalness of a person who had stopped measuring the distance between what was and what might be, the distance having closed enough that the measuring was no longer the point. Danny drove home that evening through the August dark and sat a while on the Callahan porch, where the spare-room window was dark because McGraw was already asleep, and looked north to the elevator and thought about Sean Orr saying the feeling is the translation, and about McGraw saying I can do that with the plainness of someone asked for the one thing he is actually able to give. Sean Orr, Danny thought, had been right all along. Not about who the man was — he had never been wrong about that. About what the man needed. A man with a great deal of past knows what things cost. He does not throw them away carelessly. He had been on the road long enough to understand what he would be trading for it, and the understanding was worth something now that he had come to the choosing.

Chapter Nine

The Still of It

Says he, "I know a girl that would knock you into fits"

At this our Eileen nearly lost her wits

—Traditional

The days Meacham needed to make his mistake were not quiet days. They had the quality the last of August took on that year, which was a thing Danny had been trying to find the word for and had not quite found. It was not tension, exactly, because tension means a structure under strain, a taut thing that may snap and whose snapping you can point to. What the town had was more diffuse than that. It was the feeling of a place that has carried something heavy a long time, and organized itself around the carrying, and has not yet been told whether the carrying is going to stop. Ordinary life went on, the way it does, which is the thing about ordinary life. The elevator took its daily wheat. Carl Purvey barbered. Edna cooked and poured her coffee. The Halverson place ran its late-summer work, the men out in the heat of the forenoon and in again at the worst of the afternoon and back out when the sun had come off its height. The town gardens were giving their late tomatoes and the last of the sweet corn, and the women were putting up what the gardens gave, so that the back kitchens of Petrovar smelled all that week of vinegar and dill and the steam of the canner; and the dust hung over the

county roads in the long evenings the way it hung every August, gold where the light came through it, and settled toward dark, and was raised again the next day. The Methodist church held its Wednesday prayer meeting with its usual attendance and three more besides who had not been regular since the winter, which was itself a kind of reading of the weather, the town's interior weather, if a man knew how to take it. The harvest was three weeks out, and Sal Dominici's business had a date on it, and the date was coming, and every day between now and it was a day in which a thing might move one way or the other.

Ed Tremblay came on a Tuesday morning in a nondescript two-year-old Ford, out of Wichita, with a manner that would not have set him apart from a county extension man or a rural insurance assessor or any of the dozen kinds of professional visitor who moved through Haskell County in an August without drawing a second look. He was fifty-three, lean, with a patience in his face that was not resignation but the patience of a man who has spent his working life building things that take a long time to build and has learned not to take the slowness of the building for the absence of progress. He had the look of a man who had done a great deal of waiting in motor cars outside a great many ordinary buildings, and had made a kind of peace with it, and did not expect to be thanked for the part of his work that mattered most, because the part of his work that mattered most was the part nobody was meant to notice. He took a room at the house on Third Street that Edna's cousin kept, and ate his meals at the counter, and was unfailingly civil to the woman who served him

and asked after no one's business that he did not have a reason to ask after, and spent his days in the county records office and in talk with farmers whose names he had been given before he came. The farmers found him easy to talk to, which was the largest part of what he was, a man it was easy to talk to who forgot nothing that was said to him. His being there changed the balance of the thing in a way that did not show and was immediately felt by the people whose instruments were tuned to feel it. Walt Prentiss felt it when Tremblay laid his identification on the desk the first afternoon with the unhurried precision of a man long enough at the work that he has no need to manage the impression it makes – not federal, not officially, but feeding what he did into federal paper in ways that were specific and had consequences, and the men whose work he was documenting understood that, which was the most of what Tremblay needed them to understand. Sal Dominici felt it inside a day, and sat with it an hour in the Stroud kitchen, running the arithmetic of what a patient professional with four years of documentation and a present address in Petrovar meant for the timeline of a thing that had to close clean by the harvest; and the arithmetic gave him a number he did not like.

McGraw felt it the way he felt a thing that confirmed what he had arranged, which was with a quiet and complete satisfaction that wanted no expression. He had told Danny, explaining Tremblay at the Callahan barn, that the man was not about prosecution but about arithmetic – about making the cost of going on with the scheme higher than the cost of dropping it. What he had not said,

because he understood it and had not needed to say it, was that Tremblay's arrival also changed the card table. A man who knows his behavior is being recorded says different things over cards in the evening; and Feist, whose way of carrying worry had always been to talk, and who had more worry in him now, said more. Not as a man who has decided to talk. As a man whose anxiety has been raised by an outside thing and who is managing the rise of it the only way he knows. What he said across the next three evenings, set against what Roy Akers had of the cars' movements and what Carl Purvey had of the chairman's barbershop habits, made a picture of the operation's timeline specific enough to act on. McGraw brought it to Danny on a Thursday at the barn, laid out as he laid out everything, the facts and then what they meant and the conclusion last: the contracting had to be closed by the first of September, three weeks off, after which Sal's being in the county turned from an asset to a liability; the contracts in place by then, the board amendments processed, the harvest pricing locked. Three weeks. That was the whole of the window.

"And Tremblay?" Danny asked.

"Tremblay narrows it from the other end," McGraw said. "Sal knows he's here and roughly what he has. A man in Sal's place, with documentation being actively built against him, starts to figure whether the thing is worth finishing or whether the cleaner way out is to close it and go. That figuring comes to a particular answer when the margins are right. We make the margins right."

"How?"

"By having a conversation with him. At the right time, and with the right things behind me." He looked at the elevator. "Not yet. A few more days."

The conversation with Sal happened in a way neither of them had planned and neither could quite have prevented, because it happened at Edna's on a Tuesday morning with both of them there and the place otherwise empty and Edna in the kitchen, and the geometry of it made the not having of it more deliberate than the having. Sal came in at a quarter past nine and took a stool two down from McGraw with the ease of a man who has read his ground and found it acceptable, and ordered coffee, and looked at the counter a moment with the patient expression he brought to a thing he was deciding how to come at. Then he marked McGraw. "Horse trader," he said. Not unpleasantly. The tone of a man naming a category he has already filed.

"Grain buyer," McGraw said, in the same register.

Sal looked at him a moment — not the quick categorical scan he gave most people but the more careful reading he kept for the ones who had put him in the position of needing to read carefully. "You've been in Petrovar a while," he said. "For a man passing through."

"I like the town," McGraw said.

"It's a good town," Sal agreed, with the sincerity of a man who can say a true thing in a context that makes the truth sound like irony. "Small. Straightforward. The people here understand what they have, and they take care of it." He turned his cup. "That's rarer than it sounds."

"It is," McGraw said. There was a pause in which both men drank their coffee and the diner held its mid-morning quiet and the elevator stood through the front window, white at Main Street's end, white in the August light, doing nothing in particular except existing, which was what it had always done and was, at that exact moment, the entire subject of the conversation.

"A man in your line sees a lot of towns," Sal said. "All up and down the circuit. You get a feel for them."

"You do," McGraw said.

"Some of them have something worth staying for. Most don't." Sal looked at his coffee. "The ones that do, you know it when you see it. The ones that don't, you keep moving." He turned the large dark eyes on McGraw, and the assessment in them was not hostile and not warm; it was the assessment of a man who wants to know whether the person across from him understands the conversation they are having. "I think you know it when you see it."

McGraw looked at him with the level even attention that was his way of making a statement, and held it a moment. "I do," he said. He set his money on the counter and took up his hat. "Safe travels." He went out. Sal sat and watched him go and finished his coffee in the unhurried, thoughtful way of a man who has taken a measure and arrived at a conclusion that asks for the revision of an earlier one. Not alarm. Revision. He put his own money down and left. Edna came out two minutes after, looked at

the two empty stools, looked at Danny at the far end of the counter. Danny said nothing. She went back to the kitchen.

The alley fight happened on a Wednesday evening in August, behind the feed store, in the dark that the alleys of small Kansas towns make after eight o'clock, when the storefronts have gone dark and the only light is the street at either end of it. Danny had been at Don Holt's hardware until closing, helping Don run down an inventory question that had been wrong since the spring and that Don had at last decided to settle, and he left at a quarter past eight and cut through the alley behind the feed store, because it was two minutes faster than going around, and because he had cut through that alley the whole of his life without anything in it ever asking to be thought about. He heard them before he saw them — not the sounds of the thing, not yet, but a wrongness in the air, a presence in the alley before he had assembled the why of it: three men at the far end, stood in the spread of men who are not there by chance, and McGraw coming from the near end at the even unhurried step of a man who has seen them before they saw him and has already made his decision about what the decision is.

Feist was on the right, Moretti in the center, and on the left a third man, Santoro, whom Danny had seen twice at the Stroud place, with the compact deliberate build of a man who has been paid a long time for what his body can do; and they were spread the width of the alley in the practiced geometry of men who had done this before in other alleys in other towns, the geometry built to take away the going-around. McGraw stopped,

twenty feet from them, and stood in the working stillness Danny had marked in him at the fairground and at the fence and over the cards – the stillness of a man whose stillness is a condition and not a pause. He had heard Danny come in behind him; the small tilt of his head said so; he placed him, and put his attention back on the thing in front of him. And he did the reading he always did before he put his weight on any ground – who was the most able, where the commitment would come from, what the first move would tell him of the order of what came after. Moretti was the most able; he had shown it on the sidewalk in front of the hardware store, putting Dennis Crane down in four seconds with a professional economy. Moretti would wait. Feist would go first, because Feist had been a week losing at cards to this man and had a personal debt to collect, and a personal debt makes a man early. Santoro would come from the left when Feist committed. He stepped right, toward the feed-store wall, which took Santoro's angle from him and made Moretti choose between moving and holding, a man deciding whether to move being a man half a second behind the thing. Then he waited.

It was over in not much more than a minute, and Danny, who saw all of it, could afterward put almost none of it in order, because it went faster than a man can hold a thing in sequence; and what he kept of it was not the blows but the spaces around them. Feist came in fast and committed and certain, the way Danny had known he would, and there was one short sound and Feist was down and not getting up, a hand to the side of his face. Santoro came from the left and there was a brief economy of motion Danny

never could reconstruct and then Santoro was on his side on the alley floor with his right arm held against his chest in the way that tells you, before any doctor does, that the collarbone is gone. And then there was only Moretti, who was the careful one and the dangerous one, and who did not bring pride or anger to it but only twenty years and a professional's economy, pressing where the cover was thinnest because that was what the twenty years told him to do; and that part was not quick, and it cost the man across from him something — Danny could see it after, in the slight forward lean, the hand laid a moment to the left side the way a man takes inventory — and at the end of it Moretti was against the feed-store wall and down, and the alley was still, and the stillness came back into it the way water comes back over a place a stone has gone through.

McGraw straightened and took a careful breath and looked the three men over with the thorough attention of a man doing a last inventory. He went through Moretti's pockets the methodical way he had learned to go through things that might tell him something — looked at the billfold and put it back, read three pages of a small notebook with his good eye and put it back — and then he found, in the breast pocket, the photograph: Tommy Briggs's photograph of Eileen Orr, made at the Halverson place the summer before, Eileen in profile with the light on her hair. He looked at it about four seconds and put it in his own pocket and stood up. Then he looked at Danny.

"Are you all right?" Danny said. It was an inadequate question for the circumstances, but it was the one he had.

"Yes." He looked the three over again. "Call Doc Harmon. Tell him there were men in an altercation in the alley behind the feed store. Don't say my name."

"You need Doc Harmon yourself," Danny said.

"I'll go in the morning." He picked his hat up from where it had gone against the wall and put it on with the motion of a man restoring his own appearance after an interruption. "Walt needs to know about this tonight." He walked toward the street end of the alley at the same even pace he walked everywhere, a little forward in it, the left hand not entirely at rest. Danny telephoned Doc Harmon from the hardware store, and then went to Walt Prentiss's house, because Walt had been home since six and Danny did not want this in the office where it could be heard, and told him what had happened the organized way Walt's answers always required — the facts in order, what he had seen, what he had inferred, what Doc Harmon had been told. Walt Prentiss listened with his whole attention and asked two questions only — whether Danny had been seen going into the alley, and whether McGraw's name had been used to Doc Harmon — and Danny said no to both, and Walt put his hat on. "Feist's jaw," he said, working it the patient way of a man who thinks in documentation. "If Feist's jaw is what I think it is, he's in Sublette several days. Moretti too. That's two of Sal's five out of commission."

"The operation still runs with three," Danny said.

"Yes," Walt Prentiss said. "But it doesn't run as confidently with three." He looked at Danny. "And Sal knows now, if he had any doubt left, what kind of man he's dealing with." He

was quiet. "So does the town." The town did know, by the next morning, the way Petrovar knew the things that were not announced — through what Carl Purvey had off the hardware delivery boy who had been in the next alley when Doc Harmon's car came, and from Don Holt who had seen the Sublette ambulance from his upstairs window, and from Edna, who had it from the night desk at the Sublette hospital, where she had a cousin, that two men with Chicago addresses had been admitted, one with a broken jaw and one with a moderate concussion. The name of the man who had put them there was in no official account of it. It was in every conversation at the counter by half past seven.

McGraw went to Doc Harmon's at nine, as he had said he would, and Doc Harmon examined him with the brisk focused attention of a man thirty years at the examining of people who have been hurt, and said the ribs were bruised and maybe cracked and would mend in six weeks with him or without him, and the face would look worse before it looked better, and to come back if the head ached or the vision changed; and McGraw thanked him and paid and left. That evening at the Callahan farm he set the photograph from Moretti's pocket in the kitchen drawer, the shallow one by the window where the string and the stub pencils and the church calendar were kept, where a man coming through in the ordinary run of a morning would find it without having been told to look. He did not give it to Tommy, and he did not say he had it, and he did not say where he had got it or what it had cost to get it. He put it in the drawer and shut the drawer and went out to see to the gray mare, and that was the whole of what he did about it,

and the whole of what he meant to do. Danny marked it and said nothing. Some things are stated more cleanly by their being there than by any account of them; the photograph in the drawer said what it said, and adding words to it would only have been a way of asking to be thanked, and asking to be thanked was not in the man. Tommy came by three mornings on from that, on a parts run to Liberal, and stopped for coffee. He had not had the photograph since the second week of July; he had stopped speaking of it after the first few days, the way a man stops speaking of a thing he has decided is gone and that it does no good to go on wanting; and he had carried the not-speaking-of-it the way he carried most things, which was quietly, and without making the want of it anyone else's to hold. Danny looked up from the table to see him at the open drawer with it in his hand. He had not been hunting in the drawer for anything; the drawer had only been open; and he stood there a long moment with his eyes on the image of Eileen in profile with the light on her hair, the way a man looks at a thing he had made his peace with not having and is now, without warning and without having asked, holding again. He did not ask how it had come to be there. He was a Briggs, and he had grown up four miles from the Callahan place, and he had heard, as everyone had heard, what had happened in the alley behind the feed store, and he was able to do the arithmetic of a photograph in a kitchen drawer without needing it set out for him. He put it in his shirt pocket, over the breast, and shut the drawer, and sat down, and they had their coffee; and the only thing that passed about it passed without words, which was the way McGraw had arranged for

it to pass, and the way, Danny thought, that Tommy would least have to carry the weight of having been done a kindness he could not repay.

What the alley changed was not the structure of the thing but the air of it. The cars were still at the Stroud place. The contracts were still wrong. Meacham still ran the board. But something had shifted in the weight of the summer, in the accommodation the town had been making and revising and trying to hold in honest proportion: Petrovar understood now, in the way a place understands what it cannot quite say outright, that the man off the fairground was not a witness to the summer but in it; and that what his being in it had was a thing the deputy's badge and Walt Prentiss's patient paper did not have, which was the willingness to meet a certain kind of force at the level of force and not take the defeat. Sal Dominici sat in the Stroud farmhouse and thought about the horse trader a long time after Moretti came back from Sublette. He had revised his assessment twice since McGraw came — once when Feist reported off the filling station the first day with the news that the man was not what the first category had said, and once after the diner, when he had taken the measure of someone who could sit across a counter and have two sentences mean five things and give nothing away. He was revising it a third time. He was not a man who decided from feeling; he decided from arithmetic; and the arithmetic of the thing had changed in seventy-two hours in ways the arithmetic of three weeks before had not allowed for, because three weeks before, the variable of Cole McGraw had not been in it. Now it

was in it. He opened the last of the mysteries in the wooden crate. The harvest was three weeks out. He would think about this carefully and arrive at the right conclusion, which was the thing he always did, and the right conclusion was going to want a conversation with the horse trader who had been running his own arithmetic all summer and was, Sal understood now, further along in it than Sal had been the day he came. Outside the window the August evening came on over the flat fields, the sky going from the hard blue to the amber this country made at the end of a day, and the elevator stood beyond the town street to the north, white in the last of it, patient and exact and present, the way it had been present through every summer anyone in the county could remember. The harvest was coming. Whatever was going to happen before it had to happen soon.

Chapter Ten

A Man With a History

*Eileen Orr, there's more fish in the sea
But there's none just like the Pride of Petrovar
—Traditional*

Sean Orr found McGraw at the Callahan farm the morning after the alley fight. He had heard of it the evening before from Dennis Crane's younger sister, who had it from Doc Harmon's wife, and had taken it in with the stillness he gave a thing he was running through his own accounting, and then had told Ruth he was going to the Callahan place in the morning. Ruth said he was supposed to be resting. He said he would rest at the Callahans'. She gave him the look she had built over nearly twenty-seven years of marriage to a man who made up his mind quietly and then acted on it — the look that said she had decided to let him do the thing he was going to do, and that also said she had her own assessment of the thing and found it consistent with the man — and she said nothing further, and wrapped two paper cups of coffee in a cloth to keep them warm.

He walked to the Callahan farm in the early morning, slowly, with the care Doc Harmon's orders had laid on him and that he was keeping with the dignity of a man who complies with the thing that must be complied with. The morning air was the first cool air they had had since June, and it had the feel August mornings

take on the high plains when the first breath of the thing coming reaches out ahead of itself: a faint clean suggestion of September, the smell of a summer that had begun to think about finishing. McGraw was up when he came, in the east paddock with the gray mare, working her through the morning exercises with the patient competence that was in everything he did with a horse. His face was in the deep-color stage of it – the left cheek a whole spectrum from socket to jaw, the purple at the center of it already at the slow work toward yellow and then toward nothing – and he moved with the deliberate containment of a man whose rib had been educated and was sharing the education with the rest of him. But the eyes under the bruising were the eyes Sean had been seeing at the Orr farm for two weeks: quick, direct, unchanged. The face had taken the alley. The man under it had not. Sean registered the distinction in the first five seconds and filed it among the things that were going to matter.

He saw Sean crossing the field and stopped what he was doing. "Mr. Orr. You shouldn't be walking out here."

"I shouldn't be doing a great many things," Sean said. "That's never been much of an argument against doing them." He looked at McGraw's face with the frank attention of a man who called a thing what it was. "You look like a county road."

"I've seen worse," McGraw said. Sean handed him one of the coffees and sat down on the hay bale at the paddock fence with the deliberate careful movement of a man minding his heart. McGraw took the coffee without comment and stood a moment giving the situation its full assessment, and then sat on the bale

across from him; and they were two men in the August morning with the horses moving quietly in the paddock and the first of the light going gold on the fields that ran east to the rim of the world. For a while neither said anything. Sean Orr was a man who knew that a silence is not empty and that the right thing comes in its own time if you do not fill the space it wants with something smaller; McGraw was a man who had been eleven years on the road and had learned that patience with silence was among the more important things the road had to teach. They sat and drank their coffee and let the morning be the morning.

Sean had decided to come the moment he heard of the fight. Not because of the fight — he had understood, from two weeks of watching McGraw work his farm, that the capacity for that kind of thing was part of what the man was and no surprising feature of it. He had come because the fight was the thing that told him the summer was ending, that whatever was going to happen was going to happen soon, and that there were things a father could say to a man who was about to decide something large that could not be said any other way. He had been two weeks watching McGraw with Eileen, and had seen how the man attended to her — not the consuming attention of a man considering a woman so hard he can see nothing else, not the management of a man working his own interest, but the honest paying-attention kind, which was the rarest kind and the most worth the having. And he had also been watching a man who had spent eleven years building a life that did not require him to want anything he could not carry. Sean knew the shape of that life. He had tried a version of it

himself, between twenty-two and twenty-eight, and knew what the road gave and what it did not; and he knew a thing a man of thirty who had been on it since eighteen might not yet fully know, which was what the other side of the choice looked like. He had not come to advise and had not come to persuade. He had come to give the testimony of a man who had made the choice and could say what was on the far side of it.

He began, Sean told Danny a week after, by telling McGraw about leaving Ireland. Not the facts of it — the ship, the year, the cousin in New York, the seven dollars and the trunk of tools; he had told those facts at a hundred tables and the telling had gone smooth with use. He told him the inside of it: what it had been to stand on a dock in Galway in the spring of 1922 and understand that the ground he stood on was the only ground that had ever been specifically his, and that he was about to leave it, and that the practical reasons for the going did not, in that one moment, feel adequate to the weight of what he was leaving. McGraw listened with the whole receiving attention Sean had come to know in him, the stillness of a man for whom listening was not the run-up to speaking but the thing itself, the thing he was actually doing. "I thought I'd go back," Sean said. "Every man who leaves thinks he'll go back. The ones who go back find it's a different place from the one they left — that the place they left only existed in the moment of their leaving, and that moment is gone, and what's there now is something else wearing the same name. The ones who don't go back spend their lives carrying the version that was there when they were twenty. Either way the real

thing is gone. What you have is a ghost. And the question is whether you carry the ghost or the ghost carries you." He told McGraw about the songs: how they were the Ireland he could still have, the part that had come with him the whole way and belonged to him wherever he was, the friends who had made the entire trip. And then he asked McGraw what he carried.

McGraw was quiet a long time — not the evasive quiet, which Sean had been recognizing in people thirty years and which this was not, but the quiet of a man hunting a thing he knew was in him and trying to find it accurately rather than fast. "My father," he said at last. He told Sean about the farm outside Emporia: a hundred and twenty acres of eastern-Kansas ground his father had worked twenty years with the meticulous care of a man who understood that the margin between a good year and a bad one was entirely within his hands if he managed everything that could be managed and gave the rest to the weather and the market. He had kept his books. He had nursed his equipment past the point other men replaced theirs, because the figuring always came out repair and not replace. He had rotated the crops and minded the soil and sat on his cooperative's board and asked at the meetings the questions the man who was meant to ask questions was meant to ask. He had done all of it, all of it, for twenty years. And the ground was hard and the prices low through most of those years, and the margin he worked was thin and going thinner, year on year, the way margins do when the system that fixes the selling price is not the system that carries the weather and the equipment and the labor; a farmer takes all the risk and the

market says what the work is worth. "My father did everything a man is supposed to do and the figuring was not in his favor," McGraw said. "And by the time I was old enough to see it clear, he was a worn man. Not broken — he was not a man who broke. Worn. The way a piece of machinery sounds when it has been run past its rated hours and is still running, but you can hear the cost of it in every revolution."

Sean had asked: was he bitter? "No," McGraw said. "That's the thing I want to say first. He was not a bitter man. He never said the system was wrong. He took it the way he took the weather — the conditions he was working in, not an injustice done to him. He was careful to say that." He paused. "I was less careful about it. I was eighteen, and I could see what twenty years of careful work had made, and I had done the arithmetic on what another twenty would make, and it came out to the same place. And I could not watch that happen to me. I could not do everything right and end up worn. I could not live inside a system built to leave the man who did the work the thinnest margin."

"So you went west," Sean said.

"I went west. Found the horse trade. Found a business where I set the price off what the animal is worth and what I know, and not off what a man in Chicago decides the market is. The road gives you that — pure consequence. Everything you have, you made. Everything you lose, you lost by your own judgment. It's the most honest accounting I know." Sean had nodded. He said he understood that freedom; that he had wanted the same thing at twenty, to be accountable only to himself, to live outside the systems he had

not chosen; and that he had found it, a few years. And then he asked: what does the road not give you? McGraw was quiet again, the longer quiet, the one that meant the question had found the thing it was after. "A place," he said. "I don't have a place. I know every back road between here and New Mexico. I know a hundred towns and the diner in each one. I can read any county's farming in an afternoon. I have a horse and a truck and eleven years of knowing the work I do, and I'm good at the work." He looked at his hands, the scarred hands that had been doing the Orr farm's work two weeks. "None of it is mine. The road gives you things and takes them back when you move on. After eleven years you have a great deal of knowledge and very few things that belong to you."

"That's what I was afraid of," Sean told him, "when I first came here. That's what roots looked like to me at twenty-eight — the things you get that you can also lose. The vulnerability of belonging somewhere." He paused. "But I found a thing I hadn't accounted for. A thing the road can't account for, because you can't understand it until you've stayed long enough to have it."

"What's that?" McGraw said.

"The freedom of being known," Sean said. "Of belonging to a place and having that place belong to you. Of not being a stranger everywhere you go. This county has thirty years of my work in it. My children grew up in it. When a thing happens here it happens to me, because this is my place and I am part of it. That is not a cage. A cage is what you're in when you don't belong anywhere." He looked off toward the elevator, white in the

morning light beyond town. "That elevator has thirty years of my wheat in it. My neighbors owe me favors and I owe them favors and the debt is kept in memory and not in a ledger. When I sing on the porch in the evening, the people who hear it know it's me and are glad it's me. That is what the road costs you. That richness." He had asked McGraw then whether he understood what he was afraid of — whether he knew why the road had felt necessary eleven years. McGraw looked at his coffee a long moment. "I've been protecting myself," he said. "The road protects you from wanting things you can lose. I made it into armor." He paused. "I've been wearing it so long I forgot that was what it was."

Tom Callahan had been in the barn doorway since just before the armor came into it, doing whatever Tom Callahan did when he needed to be in a doorway near a conversation without being in the conversation. Danny did not know when his father had come or how long he had stood there. He knew Tom had heard at least the last of it, and knew it by what Tom did next, which was to come to the paddock fence and lean his forearms on the top rail the way he leaned on a fence when he had a thing to say that wanted the fence between him and the thing he was saying it about. "My grandfather came from County Clare in 1887," Tom said, to the east fields and not to either of them. "The drought was bad in Kansas in '88 and '89 and he lost most of what he'd put in the ground. Lost the seed stock. He was twenty-six and he had nothing. He could have gone back." He was quiet. "He dug in instead. Borrowed seed off the Benders' grandfather and planted the north forty the next spring and paid it back and a third over

by July. And by '95 this ground knew him." He straightened and looked at McGraw directly. "Ground that knows you is a different thing from ground you're passing through. It's different in a way you can't understand until you've had it." He went back into the barn. He said nothing else.

Sean told Danny what he had said to McGraw before he left. He had stood up from the hay bale with the careful movement of a man minding his heart, and looked at McGraw with the direct attention of a man who had one thing left to say and meant to say it correctly. "My daughter," he said. McGraw looked at him and said nothing. He was listening with the whole attention. "She is not a woman to pass through," Sean said. "She is not a stop on a circuit. She is not a thing you can have for a summer and move on from. If you stay, you stay for her. Not until the next fair. Not until whatever you're finishing here is finished. For her, and for whatever a life in this county is, and for the twenty years of this ground she grew up on that is part of her the way the songs are part of me." He paused. "She'd tell you she can make her own decisions, and she'd be right. I'm not asking your intentions for her sake. I'm asking because you're a good man, and good men deserve to be held to the standard good men can meet."

McGraw held his look a long moment. "I know that," he said. "I've known it since the second week I was here. What I know and what I do about it aren't the same thing — there's a distance between them I've been working at closing." He paused, and the pause had the quality of a man checking his own honesty before he

went on. "I think I'm about there." Sean looked at him a long moment. What he saw in McGraw's face was the thing he had walked to the Callahan farm to look for: not a promise, which can be performed, but the look of a man who has examined a decision and accepted the full weight of it. Sean had been reading faces more than fifty years and knew the difference between a man saying what he needed to say and a man saying what was true. McGraw was saying what was true. Sean nodded – the long settled nod of a man who has heard the thing he came to hear – and put out his hand, and McGraw took it, and Sean's grip was the grip of a man moving something from his own keeping into another's: not a handshake but a handing over. He walked back across the Callahan field in the morning light, slowly, with the care he owed his heart. He did not look back. He did not need to.

He told Danny of it a week later, on the Orr porch in the evening with the last light going gold on the fields, the way he told the things that mattered – without sentiment and without conclusions, only the events and what was in them, as you tell a story you trust the listener to understand – and when he was done he looked at the elevator north of town and said: "He's going to be all right, that man."

"Because he's going to stay?" Danny asked.

"Because he's decided to want something," Sean said. "A man who won't let himself want anything is a man who won't let himself live. McGraw has been protecting himself from wanting for eleven years. The protection works – it's very effective protection. But it costs you exactly everything it saves you,

because what it saves you from is also everything that makes a life worth the living." He drank his coffee. "He's done protecting himself. That's the thing that matters."

Danny told Eileen the shape of what Sean had told him, carefully, which was the way the telling required: the father's farm and what it had cost the man who worked it, the arithmetic McGraw had done at eighteen, the freedom the road gave and the price of it, what Sean had said about protection and what McGraw had said about being about there. She listened with her hands folded in her lap and the green eyes steady and fully present, the way she listened to a thing she meant to understand and not only to receive, and when he was done she was quiet a while – not the polite quiet of a person waiting to answer but the substantive quiet of a person thinking. "He left because he was afraid of becoming his father," she said at last.

"Yes," Danny said.

"Not of becoming a bad man, or a wrong one. Of becoming a good man whose goodness wasn't enough. Whose careful work wasn't enough. Who did everything right and still ended up worn by a system that took most of what the work made." She paused. "And the road looked like the answer because the road puts you in charge of the price. Nothing takes from you what you haven't agreed to give."

"That's the shape of it," Danny said. She was quiet another moment, doing the thing she did with an idea she was working, running it against what she knew, testing the seams. "The distance between where he is and where he needs to be is the same

whether he moves toward it or runs from it. The question is only which way he's facing. And I think he's facing the right way now." She looked at the elevator down the road, white in the late afternoon. "What he was protecting himself from was wanting a thing he could lose. But the only way to have a life that can't be lost is not to have one. He's thirty years old. He's been in the armor since he was eighteen. That's a long time in armor."

They were on the line fence in the late afternoon, the two of them, the way they had been on it a hundred times since they were children. "Does it change anything for you?" he asked. He said it honestly, not knowing exactly what answer he was hoping for. She thought about it with the seriousness she gave a question that deserved it. "It explains the care," she said. "The way he's been so careful with me. Not distant – not holding me off, not cold about it. Careful. Like a man for whom getting it wrong would cost him something he can name. A man who doesn't understand what's at stake is careless. McGraw is not careless."

"No," Danny said. "He's not." She nodded, and something in her settled the way a thing settles when a question is answered that you did not know you were asking – not new information but the information she had, organized so the shape of it showed. She looked at the elevator and then at Danny. "Am I seeing this clearly?" she said. "Not whether you're happy about it. Whether I'm seeing what's actually there and not just what I want to be there." He thought about it. He owed her the real answer. "Yes," he said. "You're the clearest-sighted person I know. It's something you've always been." She was quiet. "Thank you, Danny,"

she said. "It's not nothing," he said. She looked at him with the green eyes he had been looking into nine years, since he was eleven years old, and in the look he saw all the things she was not going to say because she did not need to say them to him, because he knew them and she knew he knew them. The knowing was its own kind of intimacy. The knowing was what they had, and what they had was real, and what it was not was also what it was not, and all three of those were true at once and none of them cancelled the others. They sat on the fence in the late afternoon, and the year did the thing years do in that place at that season, running its course, arriving at the thing it had been building toward all along. He walked home in the dark, and across the fields Sean Orr was singing on his porch, one of the old songs in the minor key, the Irish coming through the evening air like a thing carried a long way and still intact, and the elevator stood beyond the town street in the last of the light, white and exact and necessary.

Danny thought a long time about what it meant that Sean had gone to the Callahan farm that morning, the way you think about a thing that has a real interior if you look for it. Sean could have waited; McGraw would have come to the Orr farm on Thursday as agreed and whatever wanted saying could have been said there. He could have left it to Eileen, who was entirely able to manage whatever wanted managing in her own life without her father in it. He could have stayed on the porch and rested, which was what Doc Harmon had told him and what Ruth had told him and what his heart had told him in the north field on a Tuesday morning. He

went because he was a man who had been young and had made the choice to stay and had never been sorry for it, and who understood something about the exact crossroads McGraw was standing at – not because the circumstances were the same, which they were not in any of the particulars, but because the shape of the choice was familiar: the choice between keeping yourself clear of consequence and committing to the weight of a place and its people. Sean had made it at twenty-eight. Leaving at twenty-two had cost him his country; staying had given him everything that mattered. He had gone to give that testimony the only way a man who has made the choice can give it, which is as lived evidence and not as advice. It was what fathers did for daughters when they trusted the man they were speaking to. He could not be in the room for the talk between Eileen and McGraw. He could be at the Callahan farm, and say the things that could only be said from where he stood, and give McGraw the receiving – the confirmation that a man's decision is real when it is said to someone who hears it correctly. A man who has decided a thing and said it to someone who received it properly is more committed to the thing than a man who has only decided it in his own mind. Sean understood this because it was the same thing the songs did: they made the interior external, and the making-external was the making-real.

Danny told Tommy Briggs the shape of it a week after the talk with Eileen. Tommy was in the back of the feed store, sorting a delivery that had come that morning, working the bags with the efficient unhurried motion of a man who had done that

work so many times his hands could do it while his attention did something else. He listened with his hands working and his attention complete, and when Danny finished he was quiet a while — the quiet of a man doing his own accounting, running the numbers against what he knew and what he felt and arriving at the balance that was there and not the one he might have preferred. Then he said: "So he's staying."

"I think so," Danny said. Tommy picked up another bag and set it on the stack with a firmness that was also a statement. "Good," he said. He did not say anything else about it. He went back to the sorting. This was Tommy Briggs at his best, and Danny had always loved him for it — the willingness to say the true thing even when the true thing was not the one he wanted, to pay the cost of the saying without making the paying visible; not easily, and not without cost, but without hesitation once the cost had been reckoned and accepted. Danny drove home and thought about Tommy, and about Sean, and about what it had cost the people who loved Eileen to receive what was happening with the grace they were receiving it, and he thought about it the way you think about a thing you are inside of and around and cannot step far enough out of to see clear; and he arrived at this: that the summer had asked more of the people in it than any of them had expected, and that most of them had given what was asked, and that this was the kind of answer there was to the question of what a community is when it is actually being one. The elevator stood beyond the town street in the last of the evening light,

and the harvest was some weeks out yet, and the accounts were nearly settled, and the year was thinking about its conclusion.

Chapter Eleven

The Outcome of the Whole Thing

The outcome of the whole thing is that now the robber sits

With his arms around the Pride of Petrovar

—Traditional

Tremblay had been in Petrovar eleven days when Sal Dominici ran out of patience. Not visibly. Sal had not become careless or desperate or demonstrative; the professional discipline was the thing that had carried him this far and he was not going to put it down because the situation had got more complicated than he had figured for. What had changed was the arithmetic. The harvest was still coming and the board was still held by a man with every reason to cooperate, but the margin was thinning and the visibility of the thing was no longer Sal's to control, because Tremblay's documentation was building its own record regardless of anything Sal did. You could not unring a bell. You could not unsummon a man like Tremblay once he was in a county. The arithmetic said: move toward a clean exit, or take a version of the thing that would cost more than the operation had been built to pay.

On the sixth day of Tremblay's being there, Meacham called an emergency meeting of the cooperative board, nine in the morning in the back room of the cooperative office, and Walt Prentiss spent the length of it in the lot behind the building —

not inside, not where he would be seen, but present. The minutes went to the county clerk the next morning, and Danny read them in the fifteen minutes it took for Walt to be called away, and in the bland language of the official record the board had reviewed certain advance-payment contracts in the light of a pricing-methodology review and had determined that several warranted administrative revision. What the minutes did not say was that the revision reversed the pricing Meacham had pushed through six weeks before; that it was being made under the pressure of an investigator's being in the county; or that Ed Halverson had sat across the table and watched a structure he had distrusted for six years finally show, in the open, the damage it had been hiding.

"He's accelerating," McGraw said, when Danny told him. He was at the hay bale with the annual reports. "Sal knows Tremblay's here, and Meacham knows Sal is nervous, and a nervous Sal is a liability Meacham won't carry now the documentation is building on its own. He's trying to clean the visible record before the federal attention gets too organized to get around."

"Does it change your timeline?" Danny asked.

"It compresses it. The conversation with Sal has to happen before harvest, not after. And the one with Meacham before the board can move again." He looked at Danny. "Three more days. I need to talk to Chester Boyle and the Benders. They need to know what they're in and what's likely to come of it."

Chester Boyle came to Edna's on a Wednesday morning. He was sixty-one and had been farming the same section of Haskell County

since he was old enough to be of use, with the big work-hardened hands and the economy of motion of a man who had learned early that the ground did not pay for wasted effort. He had come through the drought years and the Depression and two equipment disasters and his wife's death in 1949, and what the surviving had given him was not optimism, the evidence not supporting optimism, but the practical durability of a man who kept on working because stopping was not one of the things on offer. He sat across from McGraw with his coffee and heard the whole of it — what the advance-payment contract was, what Meacham's hand in it had been, what the annual reports showed when a man read them with the right knowledge, what the present situation was likely to make — and he asked two questions in the hearing of it, both of them arithmetic. When McGraw was done he was quiet a long time, turning the cup in his hands. "I knew the price was wrong," Chester said. "I knew it was too low. I did the figuring myself, at my own kitchen table, and I knew what it meant." He looked at his hands. "And I signed the contract anyway."

"You needed the cash," McGraw said.

"I needed the cash. And Meacham knew I needed it. He made the offer at the moment I needed it and wasn't going to look too hard at the terms, and he knew what he was doing when he made it." He paused. "That doesn't change what I did. I let myself be talked into a thing I knew was wrong, because the pressure was real and the money was now and the wrongness was — theoretical. At the time."

"The wrongness is less theoretical now," McGraw said. "But the responsibility for it is Meacham's. He found your situation and used it. That's a different thing from what you did."

"Different," Chester said, with the tone of a thing true and also incomplete. "Same result for the people who didn't need it to happen." He looked up. "What do you need from me?"

"Nothing right now. Sit tight. Don't sign anything that comes off the board or off anyone tied to Meacham. And know the contract may not look the same by harvest." Chester looked at him a long moment with the assessing attention of a man who had been in enough situations to know a promise from a statement of intention. What McGraw had given him was the second kind, and Chester knew the difference and took it accordingly. "I don't know who you are or why you're doing this," he said.

"Horse trader," McGraw said. Chester almost smiled. He stood and put out his hand and McGraw shook it. "Whatever the reason," Chester said, "I'm in your debt." "You might not be yet," McGraw said. "Let's see how it goes." Chester left two dollars for a sixty-cent coffee and walked out with the deliberate stride of a man who had been carrying something heavy and had been told there was a chance he would not have to carry it much longer, and was in the middle of deciding how much of that he was willing to believe.

The town had its own ways of doing the thing that wanted doing, parallel to McGraw's and running the same direction in channels that were not his. Danny learned, about this time, that Eileen had been calling on the wives of the men who had signed

the advance contracts — not to organize anything, not to offer anything she could not deliver, but to sit with them and listen. Three of the five women had told her things about their households that Chester Boyle's diner conversation afterward confirmed from the men's side. She said nothing to any of them of what was being done or who was doing it. She listened, and let them know that someone had heard them. When Danny told her he knew of it, she said: "The men are handling the situation. The women are carrying it. Somebody ought to know both things." Danny thought about that a long time. He was still thinking about it.

The Sal scene at the diner happened on a Thursday morning in August, and it was the moment Danny went back to most often when he thought about what McGraw was. Sal came in alone and took a table near the back and ordered coffee and the lunch special and ate with the focused efficiency of a man with somewhere to be, and read a newspaper, and was placid and contained the way he had been placid and contained for eleven weeks; and whatever was under the placid was under significant pressure now, and the pressure showed only in the tightness of the containment. Eileen and Ruth came in ten minutes after him and sat at the front and ordered their usual things and were talking about the garden and when to bring in the last of the beans, which was a real conversation about a real thing and had nothing to do with the rest of the room. Danny was three tables off with a cup of coffee he was not drinking. McGraw was at the counter. Sal looked at Eileen. It was not the managed look he had been giving her about town, the careful deliberate one built to say capability and not

interest. This was direct and appraising in the way of a man who had decided that managing cost more than it was worth and had fallen back on something more basic. Two months in Kansas had done a thing to Sal Dominici's patience, and the thing it had done was in that look, stripped of its professional wrapper. Danny saw Ruth's hand go to Eileen's arm under the table. He saw Eileen take the look in without turning to meet it, the way you take in a change of temperature without looking at the glass to confirm what you already know. She did not turn. She went on talking to Ruth about the beans. And Sal said, to the room generally and to Eileen in particular, that a town like this could use some real energy, some people who knew how to make things interesting; that the right company made all the difference — in the pleasant tone that was his professional default, the tone of a man meaning something other than what he is saying and not much concerned whether you know it.

Danny had both hands flat on the table, calculating the distance to Sal's table and what his standing up would make and arriving at the conclusion that neither figure was in anyone's favor. He was perhaps three seconds from the worse decision when McGraw spoke. "You know what I've been thinking?" He said it without turning, from behind, in the tone of a man adding to a conversation he had been half-following, the way you add to the talk at the next table when a thing said in it touches a thing you happen to know. Entirely ordinary. Entirely unhurried. Sal paused; the pause held a full second, which was long enough for

everyone in the diner to register that the room's weather had shifted. "What's that?"

McGraw came around on the stool with the unhurried ease of a man with nowhere particular to be — not just the head; the whole of him, shoulders squared, forearms settling on his thighs as though he had decided to give his entire self to the next thirty seconds of the morning — and looked at Sal across the diner with the level attention he gave everything, the last of the alley still on his face, the bruising gone yellow at its edges. Then the grin came up, the full one, the unhurried one, rare enough in the diner's three months of knowing him that everyone who could see it registered they were seeing it. "I know a girl in Albuquerque," he said, the grin right there in his voice, "that would knock you clean into next week. Name of Carmen Villanueva. You want, I could write you the address." He said it as you say a helpful thing — the tone of a man offering a useful piece of information to someone who might have need of it, the way you might say I know a good mechanic in Liberal, if your truck's giving you trouble.

The silence after it had a texture. Every person in the place had gone entirely still — not the background stillness of people going on with their business but the active stillness of people who have stopped and are waiting to see what the next thing is: Edna at the counter with the pot, Carl on his stool, Danny with his hands flat and his weight forward, Ruth with her hand on Eileen's arm — and Sal at his back table and McGraw on his stool and the space between them carrying what passes between

two professionals who have been two months circling the same thing and have at last looked straight at each other. Sal ran his calculation. He was good at running one quickly and under pressure, and this one took perhaps four seconds, which from the outside felt long: Tremblay a block away with four years of paper; three men in the Sublette hospital; the operation still weeks from done; the horse trader on the stool with his face still fading; a room full of witnesses; the corrected contracts and their trail. A man at the counter had just treated Sal Dominici's implied threat as a thing amusing enough to answer with a restaurant recommendation. The humor was the weapon. You could not escalate against a man treating you as a minor inconvenience; escalating against a minor inconvenience announced that the inconvenience had become more than minor, and the announcement would be made in a room full of witnesses. The arithmetic was clear. The arithmetic was never ambiguous for Sal when he ran it right, and he had been running it right twenty years. "I think I'm fine," Sal said. He said it pleasantly, as a man implementing a decision he had just made. "But thanks."

"Suit yourself," McGraw said, and turned back to his coffee. Sal finished his lunch unhurried and left a good tip and walked out the front and down Main Street toward the Cadillac, and the diner exhaled. Ruth went to the post office with the manner of a woman who had decided a private conversation was about to happen and that her presence at it was not required, and Eileen waited until Ruth was through the door and then walked to the counter and sat two stools from McGraw — the geography of their counter

talks, always two stools, never one and never three, the distance that said present but not presuming, arrived at without discussion and kept with the unconscious consistency of people who understood each other's sense of room.

"That was a risk," she said.

"It wasn't really," he said.

"He could have —"

"He could have done a number of things," McGraw said. "But not then. Not in there, with Tremblay's camera a block off and the operation still weeks from done. He's not irrational, and irrational is the only thing that produces action in a room full of witnesses when the arithmetic doesn't support it. He escalates when escalation pays. It didn't pay."

"You made it simple," she said. "He was trying to make it complicated — to put in a variable that would need an answer from you — and you made it simple by treating it as nothing." He looked at her. "That's a better description." She held his look. She had been holding his look for months, across the various distances of the summer — the corral, the counter, the Orr fence, the porch in the August evenings — and in all that watching she had marked the careful surface, the managed equanimity, the precise distance. It was not there now. He was looking at her the way he had looked at her on the porch at midnight, when the careful surface had gone and what was under it was there.

"McGraw."

"Yes."

"You're not just passing through." He was quiet — the checking quiet, the honest-assessment quiet. "The road's been waiting eleven years," he said. "It can wait a while longer."

"How much longer?"

"I need to finish what I started here. After that, there are reasons to stay. Good reasons. I've been working on deciding whether they're good enough."

"What would make them good enough?" she said — directly, without inflection, the way she asked the questions that deserved direct answers. He looked at her a long moment. "Knowing clearly that the person I was staying for wanted me to stay. Not having to guess about it." Eileen Orr looked at Cole McGraw with the green eyes that were slightly too large for her face in a way that was not a flaw but the central fact of her beauty, and she did not look away, and she did not manage what was in the look. "I'm not asking you to guess," she said. He nodded — the small settled nod of a man who has had an answer he was waiting for and is acknowledging it without theater. "All right," he said. "Then I'll be staying." She nodded back, and picked up her coffee, and they sat a while in the ordinary noise of Edna's on a Thursday morning, the elevator visible through the window, the summer nearly through with what it had to do. Danny was three tables off, taking it in over the coffee he was not drinking, with the feeling he had carried since June, the one he had paid for at Liberty Stables in Liberal and that was real and worth what it had cost. He watched it to the end of it, which was the right thing to do.

The crisis came two days after, on a Tuesday morning in the last week of August. Sal had done his arithmetic. The documentation was building on its own; the corrected contracts told him the inside man was losing his nerve; the harvest was still weeks off. What the situation wanted, he concluded, was a demonstration of capacity – a reminder that the protection he could withdraw had been operating around these people whether they had known it or not. The nearest thing in Petrovar, to the most of the people working against him, was Eileen Orr. Not because he had anything against Eileen Orr. Because she was the calculation. She was the thing McGraw had made plain he valued, and showing that Sal could reach her was showing that he could reach McGraw. He sent Moretti and Carmody, with instructions to go to the Orr house, to present themselves, to make it clear the house and the people in it were within the operation's reach, and to leave. No violence. The presence only, held long enough to be understood.

What Sal did not know, and could not have put into his planning, was that McGraw was at the elevator office that Tuesday morning, checking the monthly statement against the annual report. The elevator was three hundred yards from the Orr house. The Orr house was visible from its east side. And Eileen Orr, when she was genuinely angry, had a voice that carried in still August air a distance Danny would afterward verify by standing at the elevator and listening for himself. Danny was at the fence between the two places at half past nine, pulling wire on the section that had been giving him trouble, when he heard it –

sharp and particular the way the voice of a person who is angry and not afraid is always particular: no fear in it, no negotiation, no attempt to manage the thing down to something manageable. The voice of a woman approached in her own yard in a way meant to make her feel small, who had found instead that the approach had produced an entirely different result. He was in the truck and across the field in ninety seconds.

The Cadillac was in the Orr yard. Moretti stood twenty feet from the porch steps with the easy unhurried authority of a man who expected his authority to be the conclusive fact of any situation; anyone who had seen him before the alley would have marked the adjustments — the nose a quarter-inch off center, the front tooth a gap, the whole assembly carrying under the composure the look of a man handed a piece of information about himself three weeks before that he had not yet found a place for. Carmody was a little to his left and back, where he stood when Moretti was in front. Eileen was on the porch steps, both feet on the second one, which put her near Moretti's eye level, with the expression Danny knew for the kind of anger that is past managing — the white, controlled fury of a person whose dignity has been miscalculated. Not fear. The incandescent anger of a woman approached in her father's yard on a morning her father was on the porch resting his heart, who had decided the approach would be met with the full weight of everything she was and everything she knew. She had been telling them to leave. Moretti had been answering with the patience of a man who found her instructions beside the point. "Go home, kid," he said to Danny, without

looking at him, in the tone of a man briefly noting a minor interruption. Danny was not going home.

What Moretti did next was a thing he would not have done three weeks before. Three weeks before he had been a professional who carried out instructions with the proportionate discipline of a man who had survived twenty years in a business that killed men who improvised. Sal's instructions that morning had been what they were every morning – go, be seen, leave. But Moretti had been carrying the alley three weeks, and the carrying had been working on him the way a professional humiliation works on a man who had not before understood himself to be a man who could be humiliated, and what it had made by this Tuesday in the Orr yard was a man who had come onto Sean Orr's ground with the private intention of recovering something – not by disobeying the instruction but through a margin alongside it the instruction had not thought to forbid. He turned and took two steps toward Danny, unhurried, which was still the professional register, but the two steps were two steps Sal had not authorized; and he put his hand to the front of Danny's shirt at the collarbone and bunched the cloth in his fist and lifted him onto the balls of his feet with the easy leverage of a man who had done it before. "I said," Moretti said pleasantly, the gapped smile still on him, "go home."

Sean came up out of the chair too fast for a man with a heart he was supposed to be resting, and Ruth, in the doorway behind him at the first raised voice, put her hand flat to his chest in the gesture that was not a push but a presence, a wife's

hand saying wait; and Sean waited, because nearly twenty-seven years of marriage had taught him to wait when Ruth's hand came in that particular way; and in the two seconds Sean waited, the hoofbeats came.

They came from the west, from the elevator, and they came the way hooves come over open ground at real speed – not the bright quick patter of a horse at play but the deep rhythmic ground-eating stride of a horse ridden by a man who knew exactly how much horse was under him and exactly what he meant to do with it, the sound arriving across the still morning air a moment before the thing that made it, the way thunder you have been waiting for arrives. And then the gray mare was at the Orr fence line, and she came over it at the full reach of her stride – twelve hundred pounds of horse leaving the ground and taking the top rail with the unforced, almost unhurried certainty of an animal bred for it and made for it and conditioned through a long patient summer for precisely that asking, the forelegs folded and the hindquarters driving and the whole of her describing in the air the clean arc that a horse describes only when the man on her has asked correctly and left her free to answer. He was deep and still in the seat and light in the hand and he was not holding her so much as going with her, and the picture of the two of them coming over the rail in the slant of the August morning – the gray mare at full extension and the still man on her and the worked fields running away behind them to the rim of the world – was a thing Danny carried the rest of his life and was never

afterward quite able to say to anyone, the way the truest things a man sees are mostly the ones he cannot hand on.

He was off her before she had fully stopped – not the gathered dismount of a man ending a ride but the hard practiced version, and the reins dropped where the mare would stand, because the mare would stand – and what happened then happened fast, and Danny, who saw it, kept of it not the blows but the edges of them: one short sound and Moretti was sideways into the side of the Cadillac with the cloth of Danny's shirt tearing free of his fist, and a second and the jaw that had taken the first punch three weeks before went again, and Moretti was down in the gravel at the rear wheel, not unconscious and not far from it, looking up out of a sequence he was still reassembling. Carmody's hand went inside his jacket. "Don't," McGraw said – one word, flat, in the voice of a man stating the result of an arithmetic already concluded – and Carmody's hand came back out slow, the fingers showing, and stopped at his side.

He took Moretti by the back of the collar the way you take hold of a thing that has to be moved from where it is, and he put him in the back of the Cadillac and shut the door without unnecessary noise, unnecessary noise being its own kind of waste, and the doing of it cost him visibly – the left hip short from the dismount, the breath short from the ride – and he did it anyway and without drama. Then he came around to the driver's side and stopped four feet from Carmody and looked at him with the level unhurried attention he gave everything, and in it there was a thing that had not been in the earlier versions of that

face: not anger and not adrenaline and not the management of either, but the composed focus of a man who has finished one piece of work and is willing to start a second if the second is required. "Get him out of here," McGraw said. "Take him back to Sal. Tell him the horse trader will be by at three o'clock to have the conversation that was going to happen Thursday. Tell him the timetable has moved up. Tell him to have his coffee made." Carmody looked at him — the longest thing Carmody had done in Haskell County, which was to look at something — perhaps three seconds, and what went through it was a twenty-year professional's figuring of whether the situation required him to do anything and the arriving at the answer that it did not; an answer he was readier to arrive at today than he would have been three weeks back, because three weeks back Moretti had arrived at it too, in the yard of this same house, and had changed his mind this morning, and Carmody had seen what the changing of it had cost. "All right," Carmody said. He went around and got in and started it and drove down the lane and turned south, and the Cadillac went off toward the Stroud place with Moretti in the back coming up slowly through the layers of a consciousness that had been, for the second time in three weeks, temporarily withdrawn from him.

McGraw stood in the driveway and watched it go, and then turned. Danny was on his feet at the edge of the drive, his shirtfront torn and his collarbone aching the way a collarbone aches when it has been used for a handle. Eileen was on the steps, lower than she had been, having come down a step during

the dragging without knowing she had, her hand on the porch rail in the way that means the hand has not fully decided whether it is staying on the rail or coming off it. Sean was back in his chair, Ruth having got him into it during it with the determined hand of a wife who had followed her husband's heart through nearly twenty-seven years and was not going to lose it to the yard, and Ruth stood behind him with her hand on his shoulder. "You all right?" McGraw said to Danny, first. "Yeah," Danny said. "Shirt's worse than I am." "Good." He looked at Eileen. He held the look. There was no apology in it; whatever he was giving her he gave at full weight, and she took it at full weight, and neither of them said anything, because the saying was not, at that moment, the point. Then McGraw looked up at the porch, at Sean; and Sean looked back at him from the chair, and in that look was nearly twenty-seven years of a marriage and the years of a daughter and the whole of a life that had begun in Galway and passed through a great many things before it came to rest in a chair on a porch in Haskell County and had watched, from the chair, a man take a professional across the driveway for the one offense of putting a hand on his daughter's land. Sean gave him one nod. The nod of a man confirming a thing he had already decided, which was the confirmation McGraw had crossed the field for. McGraw picked up the reins where the mare had dropped them and led her into the Orr barn without any particular drama, limping a little at the hip, breathing short, the mare at his shoulder; and the morning opened up around the Orr place in the

unchanged way a southwest-Kansas morning opens around a place where a thing has just happened that is not going to be undone.

The conversation with Sal happened that afternoon. McGraw drove to the Stroud farm and went to the door and asked for Mr. Dominici and was taken to the kitchen, where Sal was at the table with his coffee and his newspaper and the composed ease of a man who has made a decision and is waiting for its consequences to arrive. What was said there Danny did not hear and was never told in full. What McGraw gave him afterward was the outline: the arithmetic of Sal's situation, laid out with the directness McGraw used for everything – Tremblay's documentation; Walt's referral to the state attorney's office; the corrected contracts and what they implied; and the nature of the interest that had been taken in Sal's organization at a level that made the Kansas operation an exposure and not an asset – all of it arriving at the one conclusion, that the cost of finishing the thing had passed its return. A man in Sal's position did not need to be told what the conclusion meant. He was a professional. Professionals understood arithmetic. Sal listened with the patient attention of a man for whom this kind of conversation was a known genre, and asked two questions and was given two answers, and looked out the window at the southwest-Kansas farmland he had occupied eleven weeks and that had never quite been the straightforward operation it had looked from Chicago, and then he looked at McGraw with the look of one professional acknowledging another. "Thursday," he said. "Thursday," McGraw said.

Meacham was in the Methodist church lot on the Wednesday evening. He had been going to the seven o'clock Wednesday service there twenty-two years, a habit that had once been genuine and had long since become civic routine, the kind a certain sort of public man keeps because it confirms to his community the coherent self he is presenting to them. He was coming out the side door when McGraw came across the lot toward him, and he saw him at twenty yards and did the thing he always did with a thing he would rather not handle in a public space, which was to arrange his face into the civic expression and hold his pace and let the social machinery handle what came. McGraw walked to him and stopped, the church wall behind them and the lot empty, and said, quietly: "Chester Boyle. The Benders. Ray Kreider. Don Holt. Gus Pratt." Five names, no pause. "You ran their situations through the same analysis. You knew which were under enough pressure to take below-market prices for cash now, and you made each offer at the moment they were most likely to take it." Meacham held the civic expression about a second. Then it went, and what was under it was a thing Danny had never seen on Dub Meacham's face, which was the plain unmanaged look of a man who has come to the moment he has spent a long time managing toward and away from at once and has nothing left to manage. "What do you want?" Meacham said.

"The contracts corrected to fair market price before harvest," McGraw said. "All five. In writing, through the board, the paperwork filed in a form that stands up. Walt Prentiss to have copies direct." He paused. "And your resignation from the

cooperative board, before the November meeting." Meacham looked at him and ran his own calculation, and it arrived where Sal's had arrived the day before: the arithmetic was the arithmetic; it did not care about the civic manner or the good suits or the twenty-two years of Wednesday evenings. "The contracts will be corrected," he said. "I'll submit the paperwork on Friday." "Thank you," McGraw said, and walked back across the lot. Meacham stood at the church wall, then went to his car and drove home, past the elevator lit against the evening at Main Street's end, white and solid and thirty-odd years standing, and past Edna's where Carl Purvey was on his stool and the light was in the window, and he went home and had his supper with Loretta and said nothing of any of it.

Ed Tremblay and Danny talked once, on a Tuesday morning at Edna's counter when they were there at the same time. Tremblay had the manner of a man who had seen enough of enough kinds of things that the capacity for surprise had settled into a comprehensive familiarity – not cynicism, which is surprise turned to contempt, but the equanimity of a man who has been in difficult situations his whole working life and has come to an understanding of what they are. He asked Danny how long he had lived in Petrovar. Danny said all his life. Tremblay nodded as though it confirmed something. "That's a good thing to be able to say," he said. "Most of the places I work are places where nobody has been all their life. Where the mobile and the damaged and the rootless collect. People with no place they're specifically from." He looked out at the elevator. "Petrovar is different from

those places. You can feel the difference. The difference is worth protecting." He said it as a professional observation, without sentiment, in the tone of a man stating a fact he had confirmed by repeated experience.

Danny thought about that a long time after. He believed it. And he thought the elevator had something to do with it – not just as a building and not just as an economic mechanism, but as the visible standing structure of a set of agreements the county had been making with itself for thirty years. A man could drive the county roads in any direction and see it from a long way off, white above the section lines, the one tall thing in a country that did not otherwise go up; and what it was, under the paint and the grain dust, was a promise a few hundred people had made to one another and had gone on keeping. The cooperative had been built by farmers who had understood, the hard way and together, that the only road to a fair price ran through controlling where their grain was kept and how it went to market; and they had put up the elevator together, with their own money and their neighbors' money and notes signed at the bank on one another's word, and had run it together, and had trusted one another with the season's living for three decades, the trust kept not in a ledger but in the longer memory a place has of itself. And even in the summer Meacham had been quietly betraying that trust from the inside of it, the structure had held. The elevator was still there. The cooperative was still working. The trust had been wounded and it was not dead, because the thing under the trust was real and solid and the men who had built it had built it, in

the way of people who have known scarcity, to outlast the worst year anyone could throw at it. That was what had been worth the protecting. That, Danny understood, was what the whole summer had been about — not the harvest only, and not the contracts only, and not even, in the end, the men who had come out from Chicago to use the thing and had been shown the door of it; but the thirty-year structure of agreements and trust and shared investment and remembered debt that made it possible for two hundred and twelve souls in the southwest corner of Kansas to stay, and work, and raise their children, and build lives that were not, finally, at the mercy of a man a thousand miles away who had decided their grain elevator was a convenient mechanism. The grain elevator was still there. It stood at the end of Main Street in the last of the light, white and exact and necessary, the way it had stood through every summer anyone in the county could remember, and the way, Danny thought, it would go on standing after the summer was a thing the county told about itself in the winters to come.

Chapter Twelve

After the Dust

Eileen Orr, me heart is turning gray

Ever since the day you wandered far away

—Traditional

Danny did not sleep well the night before the Cadillacs left. He lay in the bed in the farmhouse his parents had built in 1931 and listened to the dark of a Kansas August night — the far call of a nighthawk, the wind working through the corn, the gathering of small sounds at a volume that came to the ear as quiet — and went back over all of it in the order it had happened: McGraw at the Stroud farm, measured; Meacham in the church lot saying yes; Chester Boyle reading his corrected contract at Edna's counter; Dennis Crane with his arm in its cast; Walt writing his letters out by hand; Sean on the porch with his restricted heart. He thought about the way the summer had moved. The scheme had been four years building, and the correcting of it did not cancel the cost; the six men had each lost something real, and small differences gathered, the way they do, into large ones. He thought about Eileen — with the complete and somewhat painful attention that had been his steady condition all summer — and about the fact that she now knew what she was going to have, and that the summer had made that, and that it was the right outcome; and he believed that, fully and without

qualification, and did not yet entirely feel it, and the gap between the believing and the feeling was the country where a man finds out what kind of man he is. He found out that he was the kind who could carry the gap without letting it become the whole of what he felt; that this was not as comfortable as it sounded; that it was real regardless of how comfortable it was; and that real was what he had decided he wanted to be.

He got up at five and dressed and went out to the porch. The eastern sky was at the slow Kansas business of deciding to be day, the amber-to-gold of a clear horizon and a willing air, and the elevator was barely there to the north, a white shape in the not-yet-light, present and not yet clear. In the spare room behind him McGraw was still asleep, and Danny could hear how the house had changed for having another man in it, the inhabited fullness it had not had since his father's health went down; he had given something back to the house without knowing he had, which was, Danny thought, entirely of a piece with how he did everything else. At twenty minutes to eight the first Cadillac came down Main Street, and Danny watched it from the porch, the white shape of it going south through the morning at the pace of people leaving on a schedule and not in flight; thirty seconds behind it the second. They turned south on the highway and they went, and the distance between them and Petrovar became the full flat distance of the Kansas highway in an August morning, and then there was nothing on the road in either direction but the road and the sky and the light coming up on the elevator.

He stood on the porch a long time after they were gone. Then he went in and made coffee and sat at his father's table and drank it while the morning arrived in full, the elevator coming clear in the light, the meadowlark finding his post on the south fence and starting the commentary he gave every morning – territorial, confident, entirely certain – and the summer was over. McGraw came down at eight and poured himself coffee and sat across the table, and they were quiet together a while, and then Danny said: "They're gone." McGraw said: "I know." He looked at the elevator through the window and turned his cup and drank his coffee, and outside the meadowlark was still at his post.

Edna was at the front window of the diner when Danny came in at half past eight. She had been at the window when the Cadillacs went by, and had followed them to the highway and a full minute after, and then had gone back behind the counter and started the morning's second pot. She said nothing when Danny came in. She poured him a cup and set it on the counter with the quiet efficiency of a woman who understood that some mornings wanted coffee before they wanted words. Walt Prentiss came in at eight and Edna poured him one without being asked, and they sat a few minutes saying nothing, and then Walt said, quietly, to his cup: "Dub Meacham came to see me this morning. He's resigning. End of the month. He cited Loretta's health."

"Loretta Meacham," Danny said, "is in excellent health. She was at the church auxiliary on Tuesday."

"She was indeed," Walt said. He drank his coffee. "I'm going to go through the infrastructure accounts carefully. Whatever's

there, I'll document and refer. What the county prosecutor does with it is not my call and I'm not going to pretend it is." He paused. "Dub Meacham leaving Petrovar quietly is probably the right outcome for the community, even if it's an imperfect legal one. A long public accounting would not help this town go forward, and going forward is what this town needs to do."

"You sound like McGraw," Danny said. Walt looked at him with the look he had when he was deciding whether to say a thing. "That man," he said carefully, "has been the most useful person in this county since July. I'm not going to pretend that isn't so either." He put his hat on and went back to his office. Carl came to his stool. The elevator stood beyond the town street in the morning light, white and exact and present.

The Cadillacs left on a Friday and the harvest came in on a Monday, and to the people who noticed it felt like a gift of the most unsentimental kind — not a celebration and not a reward, but the plain continuation of things as they were supposed to be. The wheat had been growing in the fields the whole while Sal Dominici was at the Stroud farm. The wheat did not know about Sal. It went on being wheat and came in on its own schedule, and the elevator opened its doors Monday at seven, and Chester Boyle brought his first load in at a quarter past, and the price he was paid was the fair market price and not below it. Chester sat in his truck in his own yard ten minutes when he got home with his settlement slip. He had done the arithmetic on the road — fair price times yield times his delivery share, against the number the advance contract would have made — and the difference was the difference,

and he had been knowing what it was for six weeks; but standing at the scale and watching it become official, watching Bobby Halverson's boy stamp the slip with the right number on it, was a different thing from knowing it. It was the satisfaction, quieter than relief and quieter than triumph, of a thing being right when it was supposed to be right.

He told Danny of it the next week at the counter, in the matter-of-fact way he told everything, and Danny asked what he had been doing in the truck the ten minutes. "Accounting," Chester said. He looked at his coffee. "Not the financial kind. The other kind. What I owe, and to whom. And what I mean to do differently." He was quiet. "I signed that contract because I was afraid and the money was now and I let myself believe that below-market was the market. I'm not going to do that again. I'm not going to let any man tell me what the market is if I can read the market myself." Danny said that seemed a good lesson. "It's an expensive one," Chester said. "The best ones are." He paid for his coffee and went, and Danny sat thinking about Chester ten minutes in his truck doing the accounting that was not financial, which was a form of honesty that cost something and that not every man managed, and he counted it.

The Benders brought their grain Tuesday — Carl and Roy, forty-four and forty-eight, who had farmed the same six hundred and forty acres their father broke in 1908 and had the manner of men who have worked alongside the same man thirty years, the economy of motion and of speech that comes of it: they did not need to say much to each other and what they said was complete.

They delivered at fair price and did the figuring at the scale without apparent need of discussion and drove home together, and whatever the accounting between them was, it happened in the cab of the truck on the county road and wanted no witnesses. Ray Kreider delivered Wednesday and took his number and drove home without stopping at Edna's, which was his way after a harvest delivery, and went straight to the equipment shed and spent the afternoon on the combine maintenance that always followed the harvest, working with the systematic attention of a man doing the work the work required; and he said nothing of the arithmetic to anyone until his daughter came on the Sunday, and then he told her, in the kitchen, that it had been a hard summer but that things had come out right, which was about as much as Ray Kreider ever said of anything that had cost him something and come out right. Don Holt brought his wheat off the quarter section on the south road on the Thursday. He was not a farmer by vocation — everyone in Petrovar understood that of him — but he had put three years of evenings and Saturdays into that ground and the wheat was his wheat, and when it came up fair price on the scale he gave Bobby Halverson's boy a nod and drove home without stopping, because he had a hardware store to open by eight, and he opened it. Old Gus Pratt drove in from past Sublette on the Friday with his load, his paperwork in the meticulous order of a man who had been bringing grain to that particular elevator thirty-three years and had never changed his methods because it had never seemed necessary; he took his settlement slip and read it standing by the truck in the elevator yard, doing the private

arithmetic that was his habit, and when he was done he folded it into his chest pocket and drove back out to Sublette without remark. Bobby Halverson's boy at the scale — nineteen, working his first harvest — stamped and signed and went to the next without knowing that the prices he was recording were the resolution of a thing that had nearly gone very wrong. He was only doing his job. Danny thought that was about the most accurate description there was of what a working cooperative looked like from the inside of it.

Eileen went to Walt Prentiss the Monday after the Cadillacs left. She had not been asked. She went because she had been in her own yard when Moretti and Carmody came and understood, without needing telling, that what had happened in that yard was evidence that belonged on the official record; and she gave Walt a full account — what was said, how long they were there, what the manner of it was, in what order — and Walt listened and wrote it all down with the comprehensive attention he brought to a thing that wanted documenting correctly, and thanked her when she was done. She said there was nothing to thank her for. He said he disagreed. She said all right, and went home. Walt told Danny of it after, at the counter. He said: that woman understands how things work. He said it with the respect he kept for the people who did the difficult ordinary things without being asked and without making anything of the doing.

Ed Halverson spent two Saturdays in September in the cooperative's records room with the annual reports and the board minutes and the documentation Walt had made available,

assembling, with the patience of the six years he had been at it, the whole picture of what had been done and how and what it had cost the county's farmers over four years of quietly wrong prices, and he laid it before the board in October as a twenty-two-page report containing no opinions, only documented facts in their order, and the board voted to send it to the county prosecutor. Ed had been asking after the cooperative's accounting since 1949, when he first noticed that the figures on the quarterly statements did not match the figures he made himself from the published prices and the elevator's own volume records. It had taken him six years to get the answers. He had not been wrong about the arithmetic. Walt Prentiss filed his referral to the state attorney's office on the third Monday of September. He did not announce it. He filed it in the morning and came to Edna's at noon and ate his lunch and told Danny, briefly, what he had done and what he expected. He had documented the infrastructure-account discrepancies with specific reference to projects recorded as completed that had not been built, or built at a fraction of the recorded cost, and the documentation was thorough because he had been three months building it.

"What will the state do?" Danny said.

"Investigate. Slowly, the way official investigations go, which is the only way they can go if you want them to hold up. A year. Maybe two." He ate his lunch. "What matters for this county is that the documentation is thorough and that it's on the record. The rest is not in my hands, and I'm at peace with that. My hands did what my hands could do." He said it without drama,

the way he said the things that were conclusions — set on the table, there to be picked up or not, the meaning in the placing of it and not the saying — and finished his lunch and went back to his office and the recorder's report waiting on it; and Danny sat at the counter a while longer turning over what Walt had said. My hands did what my hands could do. That was, Danny thought, about the best accounting a man could make of a summer — not the outcome, which was always partly out of a man's hands, but the work; the specific work; what your hands could do, and what they did.

Dub Meacham moved to Wichita in October. He and Loretta had family there, Loretta's sister and her husband, and the move went off with the quiet organized efficiency of a man who had been getting ready for it longer than the announcement had let on. He shook hands at the church and at the cooperative and at the diner his last week in Petrovar, and the handshakes were received with the courtesy of people who had been well-mannered all their lives and were not going to stop being so on his account; and he drove away on a Tuesday morning in October, and the town marked him go with the complicated unresolved feeling that attaches to a man who had been genuinely able and had spent the ability on a thing that did not deserve it. Walt Prentiss was elected mayor the following spring with no one running against him.

Sean Orr was mending well. Doc Harmon cleared him for light work in October and for moderately heavier in November, and Sean met each clearance with the barely-held energy of a man who had been made to go slow and was glad to be done going slow. He was

on his porch every October evening as the light changed its character, and he sang with the same ease as ever, and the songs in October had taken the summer up into themselves and were carrying it the way songs carry things – the same songs he had always sung, with something added in them now, the way a place has something added in it after a thing of significance has happened there. He said a thing to Danny one evening in the first week of October that Danny had been turning over since: that the summer had been good for Petrovar, not because suffering is good, but because being tested and holding together teaches a place what it is made of, and knowing what you are made of is worth the testing. He said it on the porch with the October light on the fields and the elevator in view and his coffee in his hand, in the quiet authority of a man who had been nearly twenty-seven years paying attention to that one county and whose assessment of it, once formed, could be banked.

Danny drove home thinking about what Sean had said and about the summer it described. He had been a younger man in June, when the fair was just over and McGraw had driven north to Liberal and the prices were wrong and Eileen was on the fence asking whether there was anybody left who was actually surprising; and he was something other now, and the difference was not the events of the summer only but what the events had asked of him and what he had found in himself when they asked it. The summer had asked him to act on what he saw and not on what he wanted to see, in the most personal context there is, and he had done it, and the doing had made him a thing he had not been in June. That, he thought, was

what Sean meant by being tested and holding together. You found out what you were made of. If you were fortunate, what you found was solid.

McGraw settled into the Callahan household's October routine with the easy unannounced naturalness that had been in everything he did. He was at Liberty Stables in Liberal on Tuesdays and Thursdays, where Harold Keast had two that wanted starting and where the work suited him and the drive gave him the road in the limited manageable dose that seemed to be the right amount of it now. He was at the Orr farm Wednesdays and Fridays. He was in town most evenings. He moved the gray mare from the Callahan east paddock to the Halverson stable in the second week of September — two miles from the Orr farm, which was the right distance for a man with a horse and a place to be — and Danny noticed the move and said nothing about it. Tom Callahan said a thing to Danny in the kitchen one October morning, a Thursday, the coffee on and McGraw's truck already gone south toward Liberal: "He asks good questions." He said it the way he said the things that were conclusions and not observations, and went back to his breakfast; and Danny understood that his father had reached his assessment and found it favorable, which was not a small thing.

The harvest came in at fair prices. The accounts were settled. The elevator stood beyond the town street in the October light, white against the deep blue of a Kansas autumn, and the meadowlark was on the south fence, and the fields were gold, and the year did the thing years did in that place — running its course, arriving at the thing it had been building toward all

along. Danny sat on his porch the last evening of October with his coffee and the dark coming down over the fields and the elevator catching the last of the light to the north, and thought about what Walt Prentiss had said, that long while back, about that man needing a very good reason to stay; and about what he himself had done to bring that man to Petrovar in the first place, and what it had cost, and what the cost had bought. The elevator was still there. Sean was on his porch across the field with his songs intact. Chester Boyle had done his accounting, the financial kind and the other kind. The summer was over. He went inside. The feather bed was empty in the spare room, McGraw being at the Orr farm that evening, and the house held the feel of a house with someone in it who was often elsewhere – not empty; inhabited; a presence reliably there and reliably elsewhere in the ratio that made the balance work. Danny understood that ratio. He had been sitting on fences his entire life, and he had an instinct for the distances that held.

Chapter Thirteen

The Courting

Well, as it is and it was in the beginning

Eileen's heart was set upon the winning

—Traditional

What McGraw's courtship of Eileen Orr looked like, from the outside, was this: he showed up. He showed up on Wednesdays and Fridays at the Orr farm and did the work the farm wanted and made nothing of the doing. He showed up at Edna's in the evenings and drank his coffee and was present in the town's ordinary social life with the easy unannounced availability of a man who has decided he is going to be somewhere and is being there. He showed up for Sean's porch evenings and Ruth's suppers and the talk that fell naturally out of them, and when Eileen was part of it he gave her his whole attention, and when she was not he gave his whole attention to whatever else was there, which was the same quality of attention, and which was — in a way she found she could not quite explain — the more telling demonstration of the two. He did not perform a courtship. He brought no flowers and made no speeches and arranged no occasions designed to impress. He mended the south-road fence Sean had been putting off since July, replaced two rotted windowsills in the barn, and spent four hours resetting the stone wall along the east paddock.

He came to the farm at half past seven the Saturday after the Cadillacs left, said good morning to Sean on the porch, got the tools out of the barn, and started on the wall. No announcement. No asking whether anyone thought it wanted doing. Only the wall, and the methodical patience of a man who had done masonry before and understood that a stone wall is a conversation between the man who builds it and the man who keeps it up. Sean had built that wall in 1934. He had been three months at it, in the evenings after the day's work, setting each stone with the care he gave the things he meant to last; and it had lasted, through Kansas summers and Kansas winters and the particular abuse a working farm visits on the edges of its paddocks, and it would have gone on lasting if the dry years had not taken the mortar and if anyone had had the time to reset it. McGraw worked it from the south end and read it as he went, lifting out the stones that had lost their seating and resetting them with fresh mortar and his hands, each one put back in the place it had first held, because the first arrangement was sound and wanted only keeping. Sean watched all of it from the porch with the close attention of a man entering a long assessment, and said to Ruth that evening, when she asked how he thought things were going: "The stone wall along the east paddock is going to stand another twenty years." Ruth said that was good. He said it was. They went to bed.

Eileen told Danny about it at their fence the week after. "He spent four hours on it," she said. "On a Saturday. The Saturday after the Cadillacs left." She was quiet. "You don't

rebuild a stone wall in a place you're leaving. It's not a quick job. It's not a this-needs-doing-today job. It's a here-for-the-long-run job." She looked at the elevator in the distance. "And also, I thought it was the most romantic thing I had ever seen. Which tells you something either about me or about the stone wall." Danny said he thought it told you something about her. "Probably," she said.

The gray mare had a name. He called her Mira. Danny heard it once, in the early morning at the Halverson stable fence, on a Tuesday in the first week of October. McGraw was leading her out for the day's work and he said it as she came through the stall door — not a command and not a correction, only her name, said with the intimate directness of a man speaking to a long companion, the way you say the name of someone you have been with so long that the name is no longer identification only but a form of acknowledgment. Danny stood at the fence and listened and thought: he has had her eleven years, and I did not know her name until now. The arrival of it surprised him, and the surprise told him something about how near he had got to understanding the man — near enough to be surprised by a thing this small. He went home that morning thinking about the name and about what it meant that he had not had it. The mare had been a constant the whole summer: the gray at the fair, the gray at Liberal, the gray in the east paddock, the gray coming across the Callahan fence line at speed the morning the Cadillac went down the Orr lane. She had been as present as McGraw himself, which was perhaps the reason it had taken until now to notice she had a name at all; some presences

are so complete that you stop asking what they are called and know them only as what they are.

At the Orr farm he knew where the good rope was kept, which hinge on the equipment-shed door wanted lifting, and how the roan's left hind looked when she moved sound. He knew these things by attention, the knowledge of a man who had been attending to one place for a season. His looking at Eileen was not desire made into a project; it was the patient, unpossessing attention of a person who found her specifically worth understanding. That, Danny thought, was what she had been asking for on the fence in May.

Tommy Briggs formed his opinion on a Friday evening in October, watching McGraw help Sean Orr carry a heavy bag of feed from Roy Akers's truck to the barn without being asked, with the natural ease of a man doing the thing that was the thing to do. Sean had been at the truck to check a delivery and had started to shoulder the bag with the particular deliberateness of a man who has been told not to lift substantial weight and is going to lift it anyway because the bag has to get to the barn; McGraw was twenty feet off and without a word had come and taken the other end, and they had carried it together. Sean had not seemed surprised. McGraw had not looked helpful. They had done the thing that wanted doing in the way it wanted doing, and the bag was in the barn, and the effort was over. Tommy was at the feed store across the road and watched it from the doorway with the patient unhurried attention he gave the things he was still working through, the ones that wanted his honest accounting before he

came to a conclusion; and when Danny came in a few minutes after, Tommy said, quietly, with no preamble, in the tone of a man delivering a verdict he had worked hard to arrive at: "He's a good man." He said it once and did not say it again and went back to the order he was filling. It was the most generous thing Tommy Briggs said that year, and Danny counted it; he had always known that Tommy's generosity, when it came, came from a place that had cost him something, and that the cost was the proof of the worth of it.

Dennis Crane would become sheriff of Haskell County in 1956, when Walt moved to the mayor's office and Dennis moved into his; the summer was making him into the thing the years before had only been preparing him to be. He had a patience now in how he worked — a willingness to read the ground before he put weight on it, to build a position before he committed to it — that the old single-gear method had had no room for; and he had, and this was the part the summer had given him that no other thing could have, an awareness of the cost of a certainty arrived at too fast. He knew what it was to be wrong about the read of a situation at the exact moment the consequences were immediate and could not be taken back, and he carried the knowing not as a wound but as information, the way good men carry their worst experiences, as the thing that makes them better at the next thing. He asked McGraw once, in October, whether patience could be hurried — whether it could be practiced, or whether it was the kind of thing that only came through having needed it and not had it. McGraw thought about it the real way and said: both. You

practiced, and the practice opened you to the experience, and the experience deepened the practice; but the opening had to come first, and the opening wanted the willingness to be wrong in a way you could learn from. Dennis looked at his arm, which had healed clean and straight and was unambiguously his arm again. "I had that," he said. "I didn't recommend it. But I had it." McGraw looked at him with the level acknowledging attention that was his version of respect. "You'll be a good sheriff," he said.

Bobby Crane came home for a long weekend in the third week of October and spent an evening with Danny at the counter at Edna's, talking about the things he was working on and what the summer had done to his notebooks, which were three filled now and a fourth begun. He had been trying, he said, to write about what it meant to love a person clearly — not possession and not projection, but the love that actually saw the person and wanted for them what was right for them and not what was right for you; and most of the poetry he admired, he said, was secretly about the failing to do it. The summer had given him more material than he could use in a decade. He said it not as a boast but as a plain fact, the way he said the things that were plain facts, and Danny believed him; Bobby had always been the one who saw the shape of a thing from the outside, had been doing it since he was seventeen, standing at the edge of a scene and reading its structure, and the summer had been, by his own count, the most structurally rich thing he had ever followed. "You know what the summer was, don't you?" Bobby said. Danny said he thought so. "It was a lesson in what it costs to see clearly," Bobby said. "How

much it costs, and why people don't do it, and what happens when they do anyway. That's everything. That's all the poems that have ever been written about anything that matters. I'm going to be writing about it for twenty years." He said it as the plain truth, the way he said the things that were plain truths, and Danny believed him.

The rainy afternoon happened on a Wednesday in the third week of October. It had been raining since before dawn, the first true autumn rain – not the summer's grudging violence but something quieter and more patient, coming down steady and settling into the fields and the roads and the dry wood of the porches with exactly the moisture that had been wanted. The Orr farm took it the way a farm takes a good rain, with a general settling, the ground receiving it without complaint. The shed framing McGraw had meant to work was damp and cold, so he set the job aside without frustration and came to the porch instead, where Sean was already in his chair with his coffee and the October contentment of a man who had found that resting in his own chair watching his fields take the rain they needed was not the defeat he had expected it to be. Eileen brought coffee. McGraw sat in the third chair. They sat two hours watching the rain come down over the Orr fields. The rain made its sound on the porch roof – a sound different from the one it made on the barn roof and different again from the one it made on the hard-packed yard, because the porch roof was nearer and the angle other, and the sound it made there was the more immediate, the sound of a thing happening directly above you and not merely

around you. The three of them sat in the warmth of people who are in the right place in the right weather with the right company and know it, which is a form of happiness that does not announce itself as happiness because it has no need to.

They talked, but not steadily. Talk came when a thing was worth saying and then settled back into the rain's sound when the saying was done, and the settling back was as natural as the talking. Sean sang something at one point, quiet, half to himself, in the Irish, more of a hum, the kind of song that comes of itself in rainy weather as though the rain calls it out of a man; and McGraw listened with his head a little toward the sound and his eyes on the fields, and the completeness of his listening was what it always was when Sean sang, which was simply there. Eileen watched McGraw listen to her father sing, which was one of those observations that lived in her differently from the rest, filed where she filed the things she was most certain of. When the rain eased toward late afternoon and the work was possible again, McGraw set his cup on the porch rail and went back to the shed, and Eileen watched him go across the yard, his collar up against the last of the drizzle, moving with the same even unhurried efficiency through the wet afternoon that he moved through everything. Then she went inside.

She told Danny of it the Thursday after, at their fence, and what she told him he kept with the care of a man who understands he is being given a thing that is not his by right but is given freely, and who does not want to waste it. She said she had been watching him through that afternoon and waiting for him to go

restless – waiting for the impatience men get in still situations when the situation is not moving fast enough for them, the small impatience, the fractional restlessness that tells you a person is tolerating the moment rather than inhabiting it. She said: it never came. She said: he was there. In the rain. On the porch. With Daddy singing and the fields wet and a cup of coffee. Not waiting for it to be over. Not impatient. Not figuring the next thing. Only present in the plain afternoon the way you are present in a place that is entirely sufficient and that you know is sufficient and that you have no wish to improve or to hurry or to turn into something more interesting – as though there were nowhere else he was supposed to be and nothing else he was supposed to be doing.

“And?” Danny said. She was quiet. The October fields were gold and brown on both sides of the fence. The elevator was white in the afternoon light, and Sean Orr’s farm ran away to the south and east in the colors of a Kansas harvest completed, the stubble gold and the soil dark and the whole of it under the October sky that was bluer than the summer sky and carried in it the memory of what had passed and the anticipation of what was coming. “I realized I have been waiting my whole life for someone who could do that,” she said. “Not the dramatic things. The ordinary afternoon. The rainy porch. The coffee and the conversation that didn’t need to go anywhere. James could do the books and the intelligent questions. Tommy could show up and do what was needed, every time. Bobby could see me completely. But none of them could just – be there. In the rain. Without needing it to be

more than it was." She paused. "He's the first man I've been with who makes me feel like the ordinary is enough." Danny said he thought that was probably the most important thing she could say about a man she meant to spend her life with. She looked at him. "I know," she said. "That's why I'm telling you."

Danny drove home through the October afternoon thinking about the rainy porch he had not seen. Eileen had found the language for what he had watched all summer: McGraw could inhabit the plain hours without asking them to become anything else. Men had courted her with dramatic gestures; what she had been waiting for was the man in the third chair who was completely there. The summer had moved from the June fair to this late-October fence, and both of them had finally named what the movement meant.

The light was going. Somewhere across the fields Sean sang one of the minor-key songs that carried best when the harvest was done and the year was thinking about ending. Danny listened until it was finished. He had been one man when the summer began and was another now. The difference had cost him, and the cost was worth it. Then he walked home through the October dark.

Epilogue
Walking Toward the Chapel

*Well, all I have is just one thing to say
If you go a courtin' then look the other way
—Traditional*

The decision itself had come earlier, in the week after the Cadillacs left. McGraw told Danny at the Callahan farm on a Thursday evening, in the way he said the things that were decisions and not conversations: "I'm staying." He was cleaning tack at the barn door. He did not stop cleaning tack.

"For good?" Danny said.

"That's the plan."

"And the reason?"

He looked at Danny with the level direct look. "You know the reason."

"I know one of them," Danny said.

"It's enough," McGraw said. He went back to the tack. It was not a dramatic announcement. It was the next thing that was true, arrived at through the accumulated weight of everything that had gone before it — the porch evenings, the weeks at the Orr farm, the conversations with Sean and Tom Callahan, and the eleven years of road that had at last produced their answer. He went to Harold Keast at Liberty Stables and asked whether there was a local arrangement that could use what he knew. Harold said there probably was. McGraw drove back to Petrovar in the late-August

afternoon, the flat land running away to every horizon under the pale, exhausted sky of summer's end, the elevator white ahead. He drove past it and turned in at the Callahan farm road, and that was that.

He took part-time work at Liberty Stables, starting young horses, which gave him an income and a professional reason to remain in the country. He kept Mira at the Halverson stable and spent his evenings in town, and the town took his presence in the way a community takes the presence of a person who has shown through action that he belongs – not by ceremony or vote, but by the gradual accommodation of someone who had been there, had been useful, and had not left. He told Danny the other reason six weeks later, on a clear October evening at the Callahan porch. The town had needed someone who understood how those operations worked, he said, and that had been the immediate, honest reason when Danny found him in the Liberal corral. Then he had been in Petrovar a month, and then two, and somewhere in those months the town had become this specific town and the farm this specific farm and the porch this specific porch. The reason had quietly become something else. "I stopped being here for a reason," he said. "I started being here." He looked at the elevator. "There's a difference." Danny said he knew.

"I'm aware," McGraw said, "of what it cost you. Going to Liberal. Saying what you said." He paused. He was not a man who said things twice, but he said this once with the full weight of a man who had been carrying it months and had decided that

carrying it in silence was no longer the right arrangement. "I intend to be the kind of man who makes it have been worth doing."

"You already are," Danny said. McGraw nodded and went inside, and Danny sat on the Callahan porch a long time with the October light going and the meadowlark somewhere on the fence and the elevator white in the distance, and thought about what it was to have been told directly a thing that had always been known indirectly, and how the direct knowing was a different thing from the indirect even when the content of it was the same.

He and Eileen talked through October and November the way two people talk who have acknowledged something large and are now finding their way over the country it has opened. She told Danny of these talks in pieces, the way she told him the things that were personal and important — not the words but the direction, the shape, the thing they were building toward. She said McGraw was honest in a way that was occasionally uncomfortable, because honesty that cost nothing was easy and the kind he offered cost him something and she could feel the cost in it. She said he asked her questions she had never been asked. She said he listened the way he listened to horses. She said once, coming back from the fence where she had been talking to Danny in the early-November dark, that she had spent her whole life being known, and that there was a kind of knowing — the deep kind, the kind that came of being looked at all the way through, not as a person who was remarkable but as a specific person with specific thoughts that were worth the understanding — that she had not known was missing until it arrived. "Everyone has always looked

at me as though I were a statement," she said. "He looks at me as though I were a question." She paused. "I find that I prefer it."

By October the community had formed its opinion: the horse trader was going to marry Sean Orr's daughter, and this was the right outcome. Petrovar formed the opinion the way it formed all its important ones – collectively, without a meeting, through the accumulated observations and conversations that added up to a shared understanding of what was happening. Tommy Briggs had said it on the October Friday he watched McGraw help Sean carry the feed: He's a good man. He had said it to Danny privately and had not repeated it and had not needed to, because once Tommy Briggs arrived at a conclusion he stayed at it, and the conclusion was that this was the right man, and that the summer had been worth what it had cost to arrive at him, and that Petrovar was the better for his being in it. Tommy went back to the feed store and did not discuss it further, which was of a piece with his general way with the things that mattered most to him: he showed up, he did the work, and he kept his own counsel about the cost. The engagement was understood in Petrovar before it was formally announced, because in a place of two hundred and twelve people certain things are visible before they are official, and this had been visible since September to anyone who had been paying attention, which was most of the town; and when the announcement came in the county paper it was received the way a confirmed truth is always received – the pleasure of having the correct thing acknowledged, and not the surprise of learning it.

Sean Orr was incandescent about it in the way a man is incandescent who has conducted a twenty-seven-year Irish argument with Kansas about whether Kansas was adequate to his expectations, when Kansas at last produces a thing that exceeds them. He made no speeches about it. He sat on his porch and sang, and the songs in November were different from the songs of any other month – fuller, more settled, carrying a thing the summer had added to them that the songs were now carrying forward into whatever came next – and Tom Callahan, in the next field, stopped what he was doing and listened, and said nothing, and did not have to. The wedding was in February of 1956, in the Methodist church, on a Saturday morning when the Kansas winter had briefly relented and the sky was the pale clean blue the Plains make after a cold front has gone through and scoured the air. The church was full. Sean stood at the front in his good suit with the face of a man who had been right about a thing a long time and was now watching the rightness be confirmed, an expression that suited him and that Danny had seen on him before, over horses and weather and songs and the general question of whether Petrovar was a place worth coming to. McGraw came down the aisle with the same even unhurried way he brought to everything; the suit fit well enough to say that someone had told him what fit looked like; and he had the look of a man who had made a decision and was at peace with it – not a performed serenity but the actual peace of a person who is exactly where he has decided to be. Eileen came down on her father's arm with the green eyes direct and present and the composure of a woman who was not

nervous because she had been paying attention eight months and had arrived at a complete understanding of what she was doing and why. She was in a dress Ruth had made, the color of winter wheat, and she was twenty years old and she was the Pride of Petrovar, and she was walking toward the man who had looked the other way at the June fair and had been looking at nothing but her since August; and the song in the old tradition was right about all of it, which was the thing about the old songs – they had been right about all of it for a hundred years and they were right still.

Danny Callahan was in the third pew and watched it happen with the attention he had been giving the summer's events since June. The right ending to the right story. He did not perform what he felt. He felt it, which included the cost and the rightness in equal measure, and he let both of them be what they were. Sean offered a blessing in Irish, the old words, and the church held the sound of them with the quality old churches have for old languages, as though the words had been there before the walls and would be there after them. Then it was done, and they walked back up the aisle together, and the town that had been watching and waiting since June went out into the February morning with the communal pleasure of people who have been through a hard thing together and have come out at the right place. Danny was among the last out. He stood on the steps in the February cold and watched the light on the elevator and let the morning be what it was, which was sufficient and complete and his.

The years that followed arranged themselves the way years arrange themselves around people who have decided what they are doing – through the accumulation of seasons and work and loss and ordinary joy that is the texture of a life honestly lived. McGraw and Eileen built their horse ranch north of Liberal out of marginal ground and two horses and thirty years of work, and it became one of the better horse operations in southwest Kansas, which was a country that understood horses and did not give the designation easily; McGraw's hand was in every animal they made – good bone, easy temper, the intelligent responsiveness that comes of being started right by people who know what they are working with. He still traded now and then, because he could not quite stop, it being too much of what he was, and he still knew every back road between Haskell County and New Mexico, and he was in that country a known quantity of the kind most valued: a man who did what he said and stayed what he was. They had two daughters and a son. The elder daughter, Margaret, became a veterinarian in Dodge City; the younger, Ruth, studied animal science at the college; the boy, Sean, learned horses with the absorbed patient attention of his father, and watching young Sean McGraw work a horse was one of the more satisfying things Danny saw in his later life. He had his grandfather's eyes.

Tommy Briggs married Gloria Haas in 1958 and they had three children, and the feed store was Briggs and Son now, and Tommy was a contented man. He told Danny once, over coffee at what was Carol's Diner by then, Edna's niece Carol having taken it over in 1978, that he was glad things had worked out as they had; and he

said it with the ease of a man who had genuinely arrived at the conclusion and not performed it. Tommy never performed. It was among his best qualities. Bobby Crane was a professor of literature at the college, where he published poetry that was reviewed seriously and taught with the same focused attention he had brought to everything as a young man, and he dedicated two collections to people in Petrovar, the first to his mother and the second to Dennis. Dennis Crane had been sheriff of Haskell County since 1956, patient and methodical and willing to build a case until it was solid before he acted on it, and he had never been carried off a sidewalk again. Pete Halverson and Dorothy had four children and the farm produced well. Ed Halverson died in 1970 still asking questions about cooperative board accounting, which Danny always thought was the right way to die if a man had to be angry about something. Walt Prentiss was mayor from 1956 through 1968 and was the best public servant the county had had, and he died in 1979 in the garden behind his house, which had no business being as productive as it was given the Kansas climate and which he had tended with the same patient thoroughness he brought to everything. Dub Meacham died in Wichita in 1977; he had made restitution to the cooperative over two years and had lived the rest of his life in the quiet of a man who had paid a debt and knew the paying of it was not the end of the account, and there was nothing more to say about him. Carl Purvey's stool was still the third from the left at the counter and nobody used it; Carl died in 1969 at seventy-eight, and his last words were that the weather was going to change, which was accurate. Sean

Orr died in 1978 at seventy-eight with his boots on and his songs intact, which was the way he had always said he meant to go, and Ruth survived him by six years. The porch where he had sung was still there. The songs were in the air the way songs stay in the places that have received them long enough, which is what songs are for.

In September of 1985 Danny Callahan was at the kitchen table in the farmhouse his parents had built in 1931, fifty years old, with a ledger open in front of him and a cup of coffee at his elbow, writing down the summer of 1955 for his niece Clara, who had asked why he never married and had said she had time for the long answer. He had been farming this land since he was seventeen. His father had died in 1971 and left him the farm in a condition that made plain he had been keeping it with Danny specifically in mind, which was the most eloquent thing Tom Callahan ever said about his feeling for his son and which he said not in words. The farm produced well. The elevator still stood where it always had. Two years before, in October of 1983, McGraw had driven up on a Tuesday morning, without calling ahead, and got out of his truck and came to the porch where Danny was having his coffee and sat in the other chair – the chair that had been his father's, which Danny had not replaced because it was the right chair for that porch – and Danny poured him a cup. They sat a while. The October light was on the fields. The elevator was there, as it always was. McGraw said: "I wanted to tell you something." Danny said: "All right."

McGraw said: "I've been thinking about what you did. Driving to Liberal in July of 1955 to get me. I've been thinking about it nearly thirty years and never found the right thing to say, so I've been saying nothing. But I'm fifty-eight now and I've decided not saying the right thing is worse than saying the approximate thing." He stopped. He looked at the elevator. "I know what it cost. I know the shape of it. I've been aware of it all this time, and I intend to keep being the kind of man who makes it worth having done." He stopped. "That's all."

"That's enough," Danny said. McGraw nodded. They drank their coffee, and after a while he drove back south toward Liberal and the ranch, and Danny sat on the porch a long time after he had gone, with his coffee and the October light and the elevator north of town, and all of it — nearly thirty years of it, from the June fair to that Tuesday morning — arranged itself in front of him with the clarity of a long account that had at last been settled. Now it was 1985 and he was writing it down for Clara, and the account was settled, and the summer was worth it, and the grain elevator was still there.

The old song ended with the instruction: look the other way. For thirty years Danny had thought about that line. It was not a refusal to see. It was the discipline of seeing clearly enough to know when the thing a person needed was not the thing you wanted to give.

He had loved Eileen Orr from the time he was eleven until, at twenty, he learned the difference between wanting a person and seeing her clearly. The truest expression of what he felt had

been the willingness to act on what he saw. It was a hard lesson. He had been honest, and he counted that.

Outside the window the fields were gold and brown, and the grain elevator caught the last of the light beyond the town street. Somewhere north of Liberal, Eileen would be bringing the horses in. Danny could almost hear Sean Orr's old song moving over the stubble, changed by distance and age but still itself. The wind came up and took the last of the chaff east. Danny closed the ledger. The account was settled. The grain elevator was still there.