

# **Alas, Poor Country**

Part I: June 1953

“Ladies and gentleman! Gather round, gather round! Don’t be shy, now. Come close. Collect yourselves in this patch of shade. For I have important news for you today, yessir. My name, Everett Gull, my message, prepare today to change your life forever.”

The crowd, which had grown, murmured and sniffed and moved their feet about in the dirt. Gull wiped his face with a handkerchief he took from his pocket, and waited. He himself was of indistinct middle age, slightly built and dressed in what appeared to be a hand-me-down suit of an overly ample cut for his frame. On his head he was bald and the skin was creased and red under the sun. He wore glasses of a military make, with heavy black frames that at once lent him the aspect of both knowledge and guile. Behind him, built flush against the cab of the truck, stood an ornate dark-wood cabinet about six feet in height with two large metal handles that blinked in the bright mid-day glare. On its front it read: Gull and Sons’.

The barker Gull continued, “Change your life forever. You probably think that’s a big claim, and you’d be right. Indeed it is. But I come equipped; I come equipped with knowledge, with the undeniable strength of the latest-breaking developments in the science of pain-abatement management. What am I talking about? I’m talking about your aches and pains. That’s right, your spasmodic back, sir, and your stiff neck, madam. I’m talking about that man’s afflicted knees, and that gentleman’s pounding migraines. Yes! I

want to talk to you today about what happens when you turn the spade head in this glorious, sun-bitten waste from dawn to nightfall. I want to tell you about the toll it takes on your body, leveling the point of your pick at some patch of rocky ground day in and day out. Ladies and gentleman, I want to talk to you today about what it does to us to bend ourselves to toil this way, as captive as the stones to the heat and the wrecking elements till it seems we too might at once become rocks in our place.

“So tell me, tell me of your pinched backs, your swollen knees and ankles, of your muscles that have so labored in service to some tool, they feel as if clothed in ocotillo branches. Tell me; I want to hear. Why? Because, ladies and gentleman, I have an answer.”

The crowd that had gathered in a loose cluster behind the bed of the truck on which the speaker stood had swelled to twenty odd in number. The truckbed had been decorated to serve as a makeshift stage and was bedecked in colorful streamers and bunting. The speaker, Everett Gull by his introduction, pointed at a short, boxy man in a blue chambray shirt and dirtied chinos.

“You, sir,” Gull said, “you in the blue shirtsleeves, come closer. Let me ask you, sir, would you say you work hard?”

The man smiled boyishly. “I work, I do, yes, every darn day. Except Sunday, that is,” he said.

“And what is your field of employment, sir, if I may ask?”

“I’m a miner.”

“A miner. How fitting. Excellent. One of the world’s most rigorous, most demanding vocations. Not for those of inconsequent spirit or physical deficiency, am I right? And so tell me this, Mr.?”

“Dobcek.”

“Tell me this, Mr. Dobcek, when you wake in the morning to go to work, do you have to contend with stiff, smarting joints, aching muscles? Are you troubled by back pain, pain in your neck or knees?”

“Yes. All of that, everywhere. I got pain in all those places,” he said. At this, he grinned more broadly, exhibiting a mouth missing two teeth in its upper row.

“Of course you do! You work hard. A miner? Of course you have pains. Thank you, Mr. Dobcek. And how about you, sir, I can tell you are a hardworking man. What do you do?”

“Miner,” said a tall, lean man, unshaven and wearing a weather-beaten hat, ragged at the brim and collapsed at the crown. By dress and hunched-shoulder posture, he looked near to destitute and as if having gone without food for some time.

“Another miner...!” Gull shakes his head. “A job for only the heartiest of hearts. So, well, when you are employed in the mines, I’ll ask you, sir, do you find yourself aggrieved by pain, in your back or neck, your knees perhaps? And when you come home, do you feel collected in your very muscles the aggregate weariness of your day’s work?”

The man spat in the dirt. “I don’t work in the mines,” he said. “There’s no money in working for someone else.”

“Ah, independent, self-employed, counsel only to the jackpine and sage, is that it? Bravo, sir, bravo. But then a man who toils by himself is surely no stranger to physical hardship, am I right?”

The man nodded reservedly. “I have my share,” he said.

“Your share? Men like you, sir, are among the hardest-working breed in the world! You are pioneers! You are taking what the heavens have forsaken, what has been driven to dust and brush and punished by the sun, and you are turning it to honest work, to profit, for the betterment of an entire nation. Your share. Let me tell you, I have traveled the length and width of this great country of ours. I have been into Mexico, across the peninsula, traveled South America with my product, and I dare say there is not a place on earth where men work so hard. You have earned the pains you bear, sir. No one can say otherwise. But, more so, you have earned some remedy from those pains. What is your name, sir?”

The man did not at first answer, eyeing, circumspect, those around him as if he were a man in whose answers others sought always to find some measure of deceit or deception, a man, in short, little identified with giving straight answers to straight questions. “Kraft,” he said finally. “Verrill Kraft.” His arms, thick and bare and woolly at the forearms, were crossed at his chest.

“Well, what if I were to tell you, Mr. Kraft, and you, Mr. Dobcek, what if I were to tell you that I’m prepared to put an end to those aches and those pains? What if I were to tell you that you would never again groan when getting out of bed? That you would never again limp up your steps after work. No more tossing and turning at night. Never

again with Epsom salts or messy, ineffective lineaments and dressings and potions? What if I could promise you today, Mr. Kraft, that you could work harder, longer and more productively, all the time free of the wracking pains that slow and finally break other men? Would this be of interest to you?"

The crowd stirred. "How do you propose to do that?" asked the man who had identified himself as Dobcek.

"What's it cost?" another man in the crowd volunteered.

This second question Gull ignored for the time being. "You interested in liberating yourself, in freeing yourself from debilitating pain, are you, Mr. Dobcek? Are you ready to resume the flexibility and verve and vitality you enjoyed as a boy? And what of the rest of you? Shall I share with you the most amazing innovation in pain-abatement management to come along since amputation? Are you ready to see what thousands of others across the country are already benefiting from?"

The many heads nodded and Dobcek spoke for the lot of them, saying, "Yes," and then pointing at the cabinets, added, "So what have you in the cabinet there that's so special?"

"Ah, and special it is, Mr. Dobcek, special it is...!" The man moved to the doors, opening them with a flourish. Revealed were a complex arrangement of shelves and drawers, each identified on the outside by a neatly trimmed placard. "What I offer you, ladies and gentleman, is Mother Nature's own countercharge to pain – Gull and Sons' Radiobalm and Radiotonic...! The world's finest, most perfect physic for the aches and pains of today's working men and women!"

The crowd, visibly bedeviled by the bright bottles and tins and their neat ordering in crisp rows and columns, shuffled forward, moving closer to the lip of the truckbed. They murmured and jostled each other and pointed.

“Gull and Sons’ Radiobalm and Radiotonic use the natural curative powers of carnotite to deliver you from the pain and discomfort attending rheumatism, psoriatic arthritis, sciatica, anemia, migraine headaches, bone spurs, cataracts, hemorrhoids, diabetes, osteoporosis and a thousand other ailments. Just as the Ute and Navajo Indians of this area have known for centuries, carnotite, when properly prepared, can literally erase pain. Let me say that again for the sleeping and hard of hearing — erase pain...!”

Those in the audience chattered and looked at each other and pinpointed a shoulder or an elbow or a spot at the neck with which they had problems. The women amongst them, of which there were a few, pointed generally at spots on their men and diagnosed their sources.

“Digging up the red vanadium and yellow uranium-bearing rocks, which you miners know so well, and which you see an example of here in my hand,” Gull said, “the early Indians would then pulverize them and mix the resulting rock dust with animal fat. This concoction they would apply as a poultice after battles or after their long and labored migrations for food. As further tribute to its healing powers, they also applied this wondrous and revolutionary yellow tincture as war paint — like this, and this — arming those who wore it against the assault of their enemies.”

The crowd included a few Navajo men. These men said nothing and gave no outward evidence they were aware their people had been invoked. One, a heavy man in

weathered cap into which his large head seem crowded, placidly concentrated on the sandwich he had moments before extracted from the lunchpail at his feet. The rest of the crowd glanced at the Indians, as if to do so was to confirm the veracity of the speaker's claims.

“Yeah, so how's it work, then?” a man from the rear of the group asked.

“Ah, yes, its reparative properties. Excellent question, and one I was shortly to address.” Gull cleared his throat. “Ladies and gentleman, after lengthy double-blind trials, scientists have determined that just such a mixture of carnotite as I hold here stimulates the body's pituitary gland, that is to say, it invigorates the small, cherry-sized gland attached at the base of the brain that is dedicated to emitting chemicals that control your metabolism. Now, the carnotite causes this gland, the pituitary gland, to boost its production of natural ACTH and cortisone, two steroids commonly used to treat pain. Everyone following me? The watchword here is ‘natural.’ Synthetic duplicates of our products are available, but let me warn you, they can have serious side effects. Gull and Sons' proprietary Radiobalm and Radiotonic are 100 percent natural, and free of polymers, additive agents or artificial compounds.”

Dobcek, now come to stand directly at the tailgate of the truck, raised his hand. “So the stuff in that jar there is supposed to take away the pain? Is that what you're saying?”

“That is precisely what I'm saying, Mr. Dobcek. If you would you care to come up here, I will show you how it works.” Gull hung off the end of the open truck a small platform comprised of three carpeted steps.

Dobcek briefly considered the others around him and then proceeded to climb the steps to the truckbed and into the ruthless brilliance of the sun, which had just climbed over the large, sprawling-limbed oak under which the truck was parked. Gull produced from the display a smallish square tin like that used to keep coffee or cocoa. In an ornate calligraphic script one might have thought particular to an earlier era, it read: “Gull and Sons’ Radiobalm. ‘For What Ails You.’ Net. wt. 8 oz.”

What then took place was an accounting of Dobcek’s “problem areas,” which he identified to be his shoulders and neck, and the small of his back. At Gull’s instruction, Dobcek removed his shirt to stand in a once-white undershirt, gone gray from handwashing and drying on the line. His arms were ruddy-colored to the elbows and also at the neck. Elsewhere on his now partially exposed torso, he was white as whipping cream. Gull explained the topical application of the concoction, then invited Dobcek to try it for himself. With a meaty thumb, Dobcek pried open the tin, scooping from within it a particularly unwholesome-looking yellow mixture. As Gull narrated, the crowd remained rapt and whispered and mimicked in movement the actions of their companion as he lay the thick, dripping compound on his shoulders and neck. At first, he applied it hesitantly, then more vigorously, rubbing it in. Gull explained what he should be feeling, a cooling, then a warming. And in time, the eradication of aching muscle and ligamenture.

Dobcek made faces befitting the changing properties of the ointment. Some in the crowd yelled, “So, what do you say, Owen?” or “How’s it feel, Owen?”

Dobcek nodded and rolled his shoulders as if finally free of a heavy encumbrance. “It tingles...!” he shouted. He wore the good-natured but mildly suspicious expression of one plucked from the crowd to serve as the subject of a magic trick.

“If it costs more than a bottle of whiskey, I ain’t interested,” said a man in the audience, to the considerable enjoyment of the others.

“Whiskey’s natural...!” a second man added. The crowd laughed.

“Yeah, but talk about side effects!” answered the first.

Everett Gull swabbed his forehead again and said, “To the question of price, the better question, sir, is how much is it worth to you to be free of nagging pain...? I ask you, can you put a price on that, sir?”

Before the man could answer, and as Dobcek was drawing his hands down his pant front to clean the excess ointment from his fingers, a commotion began near the center of the collected crowd. Shouting erupted and exclamations, and shrieks from the women. People jumped toward the edges, making a circle around two men. One was white-bearded and suspended and his face was as red as the rich red sandstone everywhere evident in the surrounding hills. He carried a shovel, which he wielded like a bat.

“I’m going to goddamn take your head off, you claim-jumping son of bitch...!” the man yelled.

The second man, wiry and tall, with feet that seemed too big for his body, awkwardly danced away, one hand bracing the air before him, the other scooping his dark

bangs from his eyes. His ears stuck from the sides of his head like the companion wings of a large butterfly.

“He didn’t do anything...!” shrieked a pale, freckled, redheaded woman who came to stand between the orbit of the men and that of the wide-eyed crowd.

“Gentlemen!” tried Gull from the truckbed. “Please...!”

The two men circled each other.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Tanner,” the tall, wiry one said. “I’m no claimjumper. I wouldn’t claimjump any man.”

“I’m going to bury you with the goddamn fossils!” the first man said. He feigned an attack.

“Don’t you dare touch him!” the woman screamed.

Dust rose at their booted feet. The brown shirt of the bearded man was dark at the pits and down the draw of his back. The crowd quickly swelled as men came running from the nearby tenement of trailers and tents. They hooted and cheered. “Get that claim-jumping son of bitch!” one yelled.

“Come on now, Tanner, let’s talk about this,” the wiry man said. He was breathing hoarsely and had gone nearly as pale as his woman, who was now madly collecting rocks from the ground around her.

Meanwhile, back at the truck, a boy, unseen, having positioned himself at the hidden side of the truckbed, purloined three of the nearest Radiobalm tins from the open cabinet and then disappeared once more into the crowd.

“Gentleman, I’m sure we can work this out without resorting to violence!” Gull said. Still in the truck, and enjoying a favored vantage point, Dobcek made fists of his hands and watched the men as if understudy to the action he was witnessing.

In the next moment, the bearded man lunged and brought the tool down on the other’s head, impotently protected by the arms he had raised to meet the blow. This dropped him to his knees, where he attempted at once to both cover himself and escape as the man took the shovelhead to him a second time, and a third. The impact of the metal on his body made a distinctly heavy but hollow thud, sounding sharply when it struck bone.

“He’s going to kill him! Someone do something!” the pale woman yelled, now discharging her rocks, which flew wildly off target and managed only to further disband the nearest members of the crowd.

The man reeled back and struck him again and then again, to the abject animal moans of the other. As if having permitted the number of strokes mandated by some recondite law, a few men from the crowd moved in and subdued the attacker and dragged him away. The woman frantically took to the wounded man, who lay in a heap in the dirt. The hands he’d used to fend off the shovel were bloodied and raw and she took them in her own and lay them on the lap of her dress and cried over him.

“Animal! Animal!” she yelled after the other.

The shovel lay not far off, its convex side darkened in the middle where the blood had wetted its dusty surface.

## Cora

They brought the man to me because I'm a woman. And because I'm an old woman, and because my husband is dead, which to some makes me fitter to care for the living. Why this is, I can't say. In truth, I don't care as much for people as I once did. I guess he sort of took that with him when he went. Like all I knew about caring for people I put in him and then when he died out in Qijeto Wash that was it, it were gone. And in a way, though I loved him even as I love this land, I'm glad also that he's gone from me. Being a woman ain't easy. Being a woman with a man who has got mining in him is harder still.

People also know that though I work hard, which I do, to the very bones in me, I do not go out in the midday. We knew a man when we was mining vanadium for World War I and he was from the East somewhere and did not care to keep himself hidden during the heat of the day. Every day he took himself out into it, digging and picking and mucking rock. Every day he went. We told him it were no good to brave the sun like that, but he was from the East somewhere and didn't know about our sun, and so one day when he come back to his trailer he up and killed his wife with a pick handle then burned himself in his house. That's one story about it.

Anyway, they brought this other man to me at my trailer because I am a woman and because they knowed I'd be there at that time of day. Two men dragged him and his wife was carrying on and they brung him to me and said, "Cora, can you help him, he been beat with a shovel and he needs cleaning and doctoring...!" So I told them bring him in and I put my meal to the side and we moved the table and they put him on the floor.

He was almost too tall for the room but it were fine and they lay him out. His face was dusty except at the corners of his mouth and the corners of his eyes where tears had made the skin clean as scars. "What happened to him?" I asked, and one of the men said, "August Tanner took to him with a shovel for jumping his claim out at Dead Horse Point."

"He didn't jump no claim!" his wife said. "That's not the kind of man he is. Are you, Winton?"

But her man, he only moaned and coughed and did not himself say anything about the kind of man he was or wasn't. I got a wet rag and began to wipe his face. Then I told one of the men to put the kettle on and heat up some water, which he did straight off, and told the rest of them that if he were beat with a shovel there likely was things broken or bruised inside him, which hot water and iodine could no way fix.

"Just now we can't afford a doctor," the woman said. "You got to help him." Then a light came into her eyes and she said, "We can pay you later. We can. Winton's close to a big find, a real good one he told me. Could be a million dollars' worth!"

At this, her man roused some and groaned and tried to sit up, but we held him down for his own good. Meanwhile we took notice of the woman's words which buzzed around the hot room like bees at flowerbuds, and I said, "You there, go see if anyone has dressing for his hands. And you, leave the water boil and go ask that man I heard out there if we can have a bit of his balm." But of course the men did not want to go and I had to tell them again and still they didn't go and instead stood and shuffled their feet and looked

at each other nervous as mongrel hounds. I asked them if they wanted this here man to die and they finally shook their heads and I told them go do as I said and they did.

I returned to cleaning the man and drew up each hand in its turn. They were badly misshapen and bloodied. I took hold of each wrist and wiped them delicately as I knew how. I said to the woman, "I ain't no doctor, so paying me ain't really of no issue. You can't pay me and have me suddenly know how to do things I don't know how to do. Plus, everyone's ready to say they found a big one when they is in a bind. It's like men turning to God on their deathbed. But mostly they never do find it. Plus, I'd venture you know less about mining than I do about doctoring."

She said, "No, no, it's true. He's found it. He showed me a rock and passed the wand over it and it went right off the dial! Don't let him die and I'll pay you whatever you want!"

The man stirred and tried to sit but I held his hand tight in mine and washed it. Outside I could hear the mess of people that come with them when they brought him to me and I could smell the smell of their cigarettes. "I won't let him die if I can help it," I said. "But I'll tell you this, I think your man is lying to you about finding what you claim he found. It's harder to find uranium than it is God in the La Sal Mountains. My husband, he was a miner's miner. He took out for gold, radium, vanadium, everything that the rock could give up. But miners by their very nature is prone to hope and sometimes they confuse what's real from what's just been dreamed. I loved my husband, but he were a miner before he were a husband, which means he were a liar, too."

And the woman said, “But my husband, we are from St. Louis, he worked for the electric company. I know where the land is. I know. He showed me on the map. ...” At this, the man made a terrible noise and tried again to sit up and I told him stay the way I might tell a horse that’s been spooked. I told him the men was coming with the balm and dressing and I’d fix him up nice, but he continued to gibber and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“He’s delirious and maybe you best prepare yourself for the possibility,” I said, and she said, “What possibility?” and I said, “The possibility that that shovel done started some bleeding in his brain.” The woman put her hand to her mouth and began again to cry and so I assured her I was doing what I knew and that he were a handsome man, which he weren’t, with big ears better fit for a bat and pinched, pointy features to his face. I told her too that he seemed a nice man, and this she appreciated which I thought peculiar as a person’s face says nothing about their heart and in fact too often can lead you wrong.

Then I heard one of the men returning outside and a commotion of voices and specifically that of boy’s raised and angry voice, saying, “Thief! Thief! Give me back what’s mine!” and the sound of all their boots scraping in the dirt. So I hurried to the point and said to the woman, “Likely he won’t remember any such find so it’s good you know where it is. And you’re lucky it been claimed already.”

“But we haven’t made the claim yet,” she said. “That’s where we were headed this afternoon, before this happened. That’s why I was saying he’s not a claimjumper. We were on our way to the claim office when we saw that man’s truck and stopped and

we shouldn't have stopped...! Oh Winton...!" She lay her head down on his chest and cried and clutched at him like he were dead already and then the kettle whistle started and I said, "Dear, now, you got to get that water for me and pour it in a bowl, and when you poured it in the bowl, then get me iodine from that far cupboard." She wiped her eyes with thin trembling hands and she did as I said and moved to the kitchen and in another moment the kettle hissing stopped. Outside I could hear a man laughing and the shuffling boots and laughter of the others come to see, and the boy still saying, "Give me what's mine! Give me what's mine!"

What I did then I ain't proud of, but I did it just the same. I searched the man's pockets and found there the claim and folded it twice and put it in my shirt front and then called to his woman that I were ready for the iodine. Then one of the men that carried him to me opened the door and the light were very bright as he walked in and he were only shadow except for his teeth which I could see and I could see the people outside and one man holding a teenage boy high on the arms as he kicked at the dirt and yelled, "You pay me for that jar! Three dollars, that what it's worth! Three dollars!"

The man were chuckling and right away I could smell him and he stepped heavily inside and the door clambered shut after him, and the boy's voice went a note softer now having to come through the wall of the shack.

"How's he doing?" the man asked as he handed down the jar of balm.

I said, "I don't rightly know for sure. I ain't no doctor. I been trying to tell you all that. All I know is he ain't dead."

The man seemed to think about this and then himself said, "People would think that it's always easy to know that, but sometimes it ain't so clear whether a man's alive or dead. ..." We looked at each other and I knew his meaning. But before he could go on, the second man come in carrying an armful of stripped dressing and he stood above me and said, "Where do you want this?" and I asked him where did he think I want it and so he put it down next to me and said nothing more at all. Then the woman come back with the iodine and the bowl of hot water and I cleaned the man up and bandaged his hands and then I told them to wait that I was going to fetch a proper doctor.

#### Owen

"I think it's working. I mean, I think it works. It feels sort of like, well, I don't know what it feels like, but I think it's working." I raised my arm to see if somehow I might be able see it working, but I couldn't.

"It's not doing a thing," Tom said as we left the sun and the land that is colored like the sun and entered the dark, hot mine with the other men.

"How do you know?" I said. "I can feel it. My shoulder don't hurt the way it did." I rotated it to show him.

"Well, you tell me how it feels when you start mucking. Tell me then that it's working." He nodded his head.

Tom was from Iowa and he has a funny way of talking. I liked to just listen to him the way he takes normal type words and flattens them and stretches them until it's

almost like singing. Plus, well, he's the smartest man I believe I know, went to college in the town where he's from. I asked him once why he was working in the mines at all and he explained it but I still didn't understand.

I said, "Yeah, well, I think today I'm going to be able to do like the man said and work harder and faster than you other guys, so we'll see."

We followed the line down, as the occasional muck skip came up to dump its load. The air became thicker and hotter as we walked and the footsteps of the men made echoes off the walls. Some men like to look back to watch the exit get smaller, but I always just look ahead of me. I find it's easier that way.

"Hell, work till you kill yourself if you like," Tom said. "I just do what I have to do and try not to get killed. It's all about the paycheck, pard, all about the paycheck. My pound of flesh for a few pieces of gold. That's all. If you want to be in a race, that's on you. That's what they want. Don't you know that? I'm just telling you I think it's stupid to give them what they want. Let them come down here and do the digging!"

I still carried the tin I bought from the salesman in my hand and I looked at it in the dim light as we lit our headlamps. Maude wouldn't be happy. She was always saying that I don't know about money, that I'm not wise about it. But I know about money, because I work, so I know what it means. The tin was nice and cool in my palm, except where my skin was hard from work.

Tom said, "Plus, you get too greedy and you'll end up like that fella back there, somebody showing you the business end of a shovel. That's what I'm telling you."

“I ain’t greedy,” I said. “I ain’t never been greedy. Ask anyone. I just want what I need for my family. But if a guy wants to start something with me, that’s up to him.”

We moved our way farther down, and I could feel the same feelings as always, the sweat, the nervousness because of where you were, the smell of the rock and spent powder, the sound of the feet like soldiers. As for the work, I like it well enough. It’s good, honest work. I couldn’t stand to be in no office. And it lets me work with real things like dirt and stone, and with my hands, and as my daddy always said, “Hard work is its own reward.” My daddy was an oilman. He had a real nose for it, everyone says. Still, as for nowadays, I don’t know about this uranium we’re digging. People are going crazy for it, uranium on the cranium, people say. To me it’s just one more thing, same as oil, same as vanadium, which was the first thing I mined when come up this way. It’s all just strange names that we have to go underground and dig around to find and muck out, and at least the vanadium was important for making steel stronger for airplanes for the war. This uranium, I’m not too sure about it yet.

Tom took a plug of chewing tobacco from his shirt pocket. But before he put it to his lips, he split it and offered some to me just like I knew he would. I took it of course and began to work it in my jaw. I thought Tom was going to say something, but he didn’t, so I told him a story as we made our way into the dark.

“I remember when I first come out here,” I said. “I got myself in a dust-up or two. It was hard not to back then. Once – here’s a good one – once after me and Tweedy’d been drinking, we were driving in his truck and he launched in and started talking to me about Maude.”

“Tweedy. ...” Tom shook his head. “Now there was a first-rate asshole. ...”

“Ah, he was OK. Anyway he knew I didn’t care for no one talking about Maude like that, everyone knew that, but here he was going on about how her breasts, I don’t know, looked like I don’t know and how he bet I just loved to dive into them, and I told him I didn’t really appreciate it his speaking about her that way. But Tweedy’d never stop when you told him to, that was part of his personality. In fact he seemed to like it more, and so he just kept at it, going on about stuff and asking about what she was like and all. And I told him to knock it off I don’t know how many times, and I said it nice, but he kept at it and kept at it and so finally, finally I had no choice but to sock him in the jaw. Pow!”

I showed Tom how I done it, reaching across and touching my fist to his chin.

“Just like that,” I said. “Pow.”

“You hit him while you were driving?” he asked.

“Yeah, just like that.” I showed him a second time. “And once I done that, well, you know it never took much with Tweedy, and he started at me, swinging, one hand on the wheel, the other going after me. And so we started fighting right there in the truck doing I don’t know 30 miles an hour down the road out toward Uravan! We was swinging and punching and then Tweedy he starts kicking at me. I don’t know how he done it while he was driving but pretty soon he is whacking at me good with his boot — kicking me. You know, and I ain’t got nowhere to go. I’m right up against the door, and I’m trying to hit him myself, swinging, and I’m a little drunk like I say. And so it goes on like that

for I don't now how long, a mile maybe, when he finally kicked me so hard I just fell out of the truck!"

Tom stopped walking, and the light from his headlamp was on me. "Fell out of the truck! What are you talking about? While it was moving?"

"While it was moving," I said.

He shook his head, a look of amazement on his face. I thought he had more to say, but he just shook his head and then started walking again.

"While it was moving," I repeated to him. "I don't know how fast, but fast enough. And so there I go, falling out the door and rolling down the road, ass over tea kettle, you know, like an armadillo or something, and Tweedy he slams on the breaks and comes backing up and there I am in the ditch more or less and before he can say anything or before I can start cursing at him we both just start laughing. Laughing. And we go on, busting a gut like it was some kind of joke or something after he done just kicked me out a moving truck!"

"Christ," Tom said. He took off his helmet to scratch his head and I could see the shadow of the dent in his own skull where the timber fell on him the year before and almost killed him.

"Anyway, there was one time where being drunk probably saved my life. I just rolled right down that road."

Tom thought this was the funniest part and started laughing real loud and clapped his hands, and in the beam of my headlamp, I could see the dust go up from it. I was always liked making Tom laugh.

“Funny story, ain’t it? Kept me out of two games though. Kind of banged up my elbow some. I can tell you the coach weren’t none too happy about it. But I thought it was pretty funny.”

“You’re lucky it didn’t kill you,” he said. “Did he ever say boo about Maude again? Knowing him. . . .”

“You’d think he wouldn’t have, but he still said stuff sometimes to get at me,” I said. “Still, it was a pretty funny that one time, I got to say.”

As we walked, men split off from the group to follow different drifts. They carried their lunches and were mostly quiet because they were just starting and knew it would be many hours before they could walk the other direction and even then, when they exited, it would be evening and the daylight would be gone. That does something to you, sure enough. The mine don’t know anything about day or night. It doesn’t matter when or what time you’re there, I don’t believe there is a place so dark. As we moved down the haulage drift, the lights of our headlamps made long shadows on the ribs. The stretched figures moved along beside us. It could be downright eerie down there if you let it, especially the way the light lit the men’s faces making them look like ghouls. It’s a hard to thing to imagine if you ain’t seen it.

Finally, we turned off ourselves and walked the uneven ground to our heading. We’d been working it for nearly a week, pushing due west foot by foot. The real danger in mining was thinking it was like any other job. Truth be told, the rock don’t care about you one iota, don’t care who you are or nothing, and it seems sometimes that it would just as soon swallow you up as let you mine her.

We set our lunchpails down and Tom poured us some coffee, which was our routine. I set to barring the loose rock down so we could get started blasting.

Tom sat on his helmet. “So whatever happened to that Tweedy?” Tom said.

I set to poking at the rock with the scaling bar. “I heard he got thrown into jail out in California, but I don’t know if they told me what for,” I said. A slab above me groaned and fell to the ground.

“Watch it there, pard,” Tom said. “Don’t want to get yourself brained.” He tapped his head where the timber had landed on him. The old helmet, the one dented into an odd shape, he kept at home on his dresser. I seen it there but have never said nothing about it.

“Anyway, it’s too bad about Tweedy,” I said, “because he sure could pitch. When he wasn’t drunk anyway. Had a fastball that was like it was shot from a gun.”

After awhile, Tom began readying the drill. We were told jumbos were coming, but for now we still had to use an old jackleg that took a toll on your back and near vibrated a man’s hands clean off his arms. After Tom’s accident, I started doing a good part of the scaling and the more dangerous timbering and cribbing. He said he could do it, but I lied and told him I wanted to. He would’ve done the same for me. The truth is that kind of thing can ruin a miner, take whatever stuff he had for the work right out of him. That’s what all these tenderfoots don’t know, these men that are coming from all over to pick at the ground for this uranium just because the government says they’ll pay them good money for it. They don’t know a thing about it. There’s an art to it, to knowing the rock and knowing how to talk to her, how to work her. It takes experience to learn the right

ways, and certainly more than just a Geiger and pick and the government pamphlet I see them guys carrying around. That by itself don't make a miner in the same way jumping off a barn roof don't make you a bird.

After I was done scaling the back, and Tom had prepared the drill, we sat down to finish our coffee. It was quiet and we did not talk and just enjoyed the silence as it was soon to get very loud. When the coffee was gone and we had thrown the dregs onto the ground, we set to readying the face. As we moved around, the beams of our headlamps darted around on the rock like they was trying to find some way out. We had been told to drill in with the ten-footers, so those were the bits Tom readied into the jackleg. In a minute it was going to be just shy of hell in there -- hot, loud, a cloud of dust sent up from the rock that near made it impossible to see your hand in front of your face. But there was something real exciting about it, too, and I can't say as I don't love it in some way.

“Ready, pard?” Tom said.

“Let's get it done,” I said.

Tom steadied himself behind the drill. It ain't the easiest job, operating a jackleg. It takes practice, and can kill you if you don't know how. One time I seen a man put his finger on the chuck of the drill and get it torn clean off. They brought the finger back to the office in the wax paper he'd had his sandwich in. Another guy, when the leg of the drill slipped in the muck, it shot backwards, sticking into his chest with the steel forks of it. He lived, but it was no way a pretty thing to see.

“OK, here we go...!” Tom said. In the next second it was only noise, a grinding, whining, screeching, terrible noise as the drill point bit into the rock and sprayed us with dust and muck and kicked at Tom. Tom was good with the jackleg and so held his ground and kept it steady, skillfully operating the lever that gave the air to the drill and the knob giving the air to the leg, until after what seemed a long while it was done and the drill stopped and the leftover noise lingered in the air with the dust, everything seeming to vibrate. Tom was just an outline, the glow of his headlamp like a distant train coming.

“Everybody OK?” he asked.

“Check,” I said. “Number two?”

“Number two,” he said.

I tried to cover my mouth and nose with my hand but it was already so hot it made it hard to breathe and I just took in the dead, hot air and the dirt smell of my glove. It gives a man the worst cough, that dust. At night, especially when I lay down to bed, I think I could call up the entire rock face from my insides. Tom always said that while we’re getting into her, she’s also getting into us, making us rock too in the end, maybe.

Once Tom had set himself up, the drilling began again, digging another hole next to the first, and then a third, and a fourth, and so on, each about ten-feet deep, until he had created a sort of triangle design in the face. Now it was my turn. When the holes were bored in, I loaded the gelatin dynamite into them. I put a time-delay electric detonating cap into the first stick placed in each hole. This is what we call the primer. Then I put four or five more sticks in and rammed the whole thing home with the wooden loading stick. Two holes we always leave empty because this helps create the kind of hollow core

at the center that we want. And because of the delays, they all go off in a kind of order around that middle part and this brings the rock down easier. It really looks like a Christmas tree when it's all ready, the red and green wires hanging out of each of the holes, even sort of pretty that way.

When I was finished, I yelled, "Fire in the hole...!"

"Fire in the hole...!" Tom answered.

We checked each other and nodded, the lights on our headlamps bobbing up and down through the filtering dust from the drilling. Then I flipped the little red switch on the firing box and it began. The blasts went off one at a time – crack! crack! crack! – for about eight seconds, creating sharp snapping sounds like huge trees falling and also a deep rumbling like from way inside the rock and everything shook and rattled and crashed and you could feel it under your feet like the very earth was coming apart. It shook for a long time and more rocks fell, but there was no way to see through the thick smoke and dust and the fumes of the dynamite that were sharp in your nose along with that smell of fresh rock.

Finally, when it was safe, I looked for Tom that we should move in to see what we had done. This always excited me because who could guess what we might find.

"Tom," I said. I held my hand over my mouth after I said it. When I didn't hear anything, I said it again, "Tom." I put my hand over my mouth. The air was thick and gray and it was like standing in the middle of a dust devil. Still nothing, and I could hear bits of rock tumbling down and landing on the mucking board, and also the low creaking of the back, which also sounded to me like a man in a rocking chair. Now I was getting

nervous and I tried to see through the cloud of dust with my light and couldn't see anything really. "Tom!" I yelled.

"Yeah, pard, right here I said!" Tom said. I felt his hand on my shoulder. "Christ, how many times do I have to answer you?"

I turned. "There you are," I said. His face was like it was a drawing of his face sketched really fast with a pencil. "I didn't hear you say anything. Got worried there for a second," I said.

Shining our lights on the hole, it looked pretty clean, which is good and isn't always the case. After some scaling to get down the leftover bits, we started mucking. I'd dumped half a dozen shovelfuls into the skip, when I realized Tom was right about that stuff the guy sold me. My shoulder hurt just the same now.

## Winton

“Your mother always said you had a hard head,” Della said.

This was her idea of a joke. It was meant to take some of the sting out of my getting publicly thrashed by an old man twice my age. But Della needs to know when to keep her mouth shut. She’s always rattling on, giving untiring comment to whatever comes to her mind.

When I did not respond, she said it again, feeling it such a good line as to merit repeating. “Your mother always said you had a hard head.”

“You’re giving me a pain behind my eyes,” I said. “Can’t you just get me a drink and give me some peace and quiet? Can’t you just do that?”

“I’m just so glad you’re alive,” she said. Sitting at my bedside, she bent down and hugged me. “I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure at all.”

“The man was my father’s age,” I said. “But he had to use a weapon. He had a weapon.” I waved my hands, wrapped and bandaged like a boxer’s. “What did I have?”

“He had a shovel,” she said.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I demanded. “You don’t think a shovel is a weapon? Is that what you’re saying? Hey, anything can be a weapon if it’s used the right way. You know the Chinese can kill a man with a pair of chopsticks? Chopsticks! A shovel, chopsticks, whatever, it’s all in the way it’s used!”

Our trailer was stifling and my head itched under the dressing where the sweat trickled in my hair. I could feel my undershirt clinging to my back as I moved on the sunken mattress.

“Well, all that matters to me is that you’re alive.” She tried again to hug me.

“Damn it, Della, go! Would you just go and get me that drink? I need a drink. Just go and get me a drink and leave me be. It’s too damn hot, and my head is throbbing. I don’t have the energy for this.”

Della is very fair skinned and freckled. She closed her eyes and the lids were thin as onionskin, and she kissed my forehead. In her pale dress she looked a ghost as she got up and took herself out the trailer into the sere light of the afternoon.

“Where are you going?” I yelled. “Della!”

She returned, standing in the light of the open doorway. “We’re out,” she said. She waved at me. “I’ll be right back.”

The glare hurt my eyes till the door was closed. I could smell the rich, baking dirt of the ground outside and hear her shoes move away. I knew it as I listened: she will not last here. She does not have what these other people have. She is a city girl, softened by privilege. Daughter of a bank manager. Product of prep school and summer camps in the Catskills. She is too delicate, like a confection or a painting. Red rims about her eyes, the lean white neck, the long delicate hands that are speckled too on their backs. And when she smiles, her teeth are those of a child and too small for her, giving her mouth also a pale, pink quality for the prominence of her gums. On our way out here, she said,

“Winnie, let’s get a piano first thing. I so want a piano... To play on a Saturday afternoon, with the windows open, it’s perfect. And if we are going to entertain....”

I took my bandaged hand to my breast where my shirt pocket would’ve been. I had overheard two men talking in the Jackrabbit. High-grade, the old man had said. Rich and ready for digging and worth millions, all told.

I struggled, stiff and aflame with pain, to sit up. I scanned the room for my shirt. My shirt. Where, what had she done with it! That claim at Hudson Wash was going to set us up for life. I was going tell Della’s Daddy once and for all he could go to hell! While all these other suckers were clamoring before the daily AEC postings, plotting and plodding, and getting nowhere, and servicing themselves on grand dreams about Lincoln Continentals and swimming pools, I was cutting to the chase. A man has to cut to the chase.

Moving was no easy task without working use of my hands, being bundled up as they were like trout by a fishmonger. Where the hell was my shirt? White with blue stripes. I could not see it anywhere. Then it struck me with the force of that shovel. God, don’t tell me she took it to wash. The area was already crawling with prospectors. The multitudes of them waving their Geiger counters over that barren, petrified, waterless desolation. The way I see it, if a man is going to bide his time when fortune has found him, he deserves nothing in his cup. Poor old Tanner, his brain stewed in his head from the sun. If he’s not going to register the claim, am I jumping it if I do? I say no. If he’s too lazy to do the paperwork or too poor to pay the few dollars in rent to the state, that is no fault of mine. Where is my shirt?

I swung my feet gingerly out from the creaking bed frame. They are themselves bruised and notched from walking in new boots, new boots that were fast made old in that wicked terrain that is designed to cut and scrape and scar you by its rocks and thistled plants. Never had I seen such a lifeless and inhospitable land. It's like searching for a gold ring in a lion's den, this hunting for uranium.

The floor of the trailer was hot to my feet, especially at the sores made from my boots. By a series of cumbersome and inexpert movements, I got myself the edge of the bed. It made my head swim to sit fully upright. My stomach turned over and I thought I might bring up the beans and bread Della fed me for lunch. As for the old man — that bastard and his shovel — I may not be the man he is when it comes to exchanging blows, but his day will come. For every action in this world, there is an equal and opposite reaction. And everything can be turned to a weapon; it's all how you use it.

The claim parcel, it's a particularly hardscrabble section out in the middle of nothing and nowhere. It was supposed to be fat with high-grade ore and worth millions for the man who can find it. Millions.

“Goddamn it. Della!”

I couldn't see the shirt. The trailer was small and hot and item was piled up on item, clothes and newspapers and maps and bags of rocks and canned food and here a washtub and here a tipped thermos for my coffee, which is damnably hard to get around here, and over there in the corner, a pick and a shovel of my own and my Geiger counter, which I rented from a man at an electric shop who claims to have built it from an old radio, mail-order parts and a used string-bean can. It is no way to live.

I pushed myself up from the bed to better survey the clutter, and moved myself like a blind man a few feet from the bed toward a pile of unlaundered clothes and linens by the door.

“Della!”

Just then she entered the room, cheeks flushed, hair flying about her face, bringing with her the eruption of light from outside. “What! What is it?” she clamored. “Mr. Leonard said he heard you yelling all the way down at his place.”

“Where’s my shirt? The one I was wearing earlier? I need to find that shirt. You didn’t take it to wash, did you? Tell me you didn’t take it to wash!”

She took me at the elbow and led me back to the bed, which was fouled by my sweat and blood.

“Sit down,” she said. “Here, sit down, will you. You’ll kill yourself.”

I dropped heavily onto its edge, my hands useless as stumps. “Goddamn it, where is my shirt? It’s got the claim in it! I need to get those claim papers. It may already be too late. I should’ve had you do it. Damn, damn! Where is it?”

“The claim? You mean the big one you’ve talking about?” she said.

“No, the worthless one, the one full of sand and – of course that one, the one I got my head bashed in for! Now what did you do with my shirt?”

I noticed she was carrying a brown paper bag. This she took to the sink, and set it down and found a cup in the cupboard and then took a bottle from the bag and unscrewed its cap and poured a drink in the cup.

“Honey, you’re delirious. Here, just relax. Let me get you a drink.” She walked the cup to me. “It wasn’t easy to find a bottle out there, let me tell you,” she said, affecting a smile. Her face was flushed and her bare arms covered in tawny dust.

“And your shirt is right here,” she said. “I was readying it to be washed, though I’m not sure you’ll ever be able to wear it again. Blood can be nearly impossible to get out.” She drew the blue-striped shirt from a pile on the floor near the door. “Oh, and I should tell you too. Because, you know, we made this big find, I told the woman that saved you, Mrs. McAfree, I have it written down, very nice woman, I told her that we’d pay her when we got our uranium.”

“You what?” I said, feeling an icy cold spread over me.

“It seems the least we could do considering—”

“Give me the shirt! Give it to me!” I reached after it, taking myself hard to the floor.

“What...!” Della said. “Winton? Winton?”

## Will

I left when I saw the AEC plane overhead. I've been here long enough to know what that means. While the rest of that sorry lot troubled themselves to place blame and corroborate what had passed between the two men, I hurried to the Jeep. I had no water with me, but I didn't have time for any of that. I had my Geiger counter, and I would chance it without other provisions. Forget that three different men had already in the past few months wandered out into that petrified waste and not come back. I can only blame their feet for not knowing the way home. About the competence of my own feet I have no worries. The reliability of my Jeep, on the other hand, is another matter altogether.

It was the hottest part of the day, not really fit for man or animal of good sense. But then it's only those with no gusto who know the limits of good sense. Let them keep to the shade. That way, they won't obstruct me. Because I know my million-dollar patch of ground is out there. I know it as well as I know you must have heart to find it. Some say it's easy to mistake the voice of the devil for that of destiny. He joins us at our most vulnerable to shepherd us to disastrous ends. People say that's what's happened to me; I've heard them whispering behind me at the gas station as I beg a few more gallons. They say that's the only explanation for a man who would let his family go hungry just so he can prospect after some pipe dream. Others just say I've gone sun mad. What other kind of person would stand by and let his baby live on sweet tea and nothing more? Last time Tillie went into town for food, the man said he was sorry, but he couldn't afford to keep giving us groceries on credit. He said one can't continue to help another who won't help

himself. But Tillie assures me the children are fine, that they're good, and healthy, and I trust her.

I tried to keep the plane in view as I hurried out of town. At a stop sign, I could hear its faraway whine, though it was somehow out of synch with its progress. I took the Jeep after it as fast as it would go. Each bump threatened to collapse into a heap of rusted, workworn parts. I manage to keep it together by solder and spit. The town is crawling with would-be prospectors these days, and I passed a steady pulse of their vehicles heading into town: army surplus Jeeps like mine, cars of every brand and make, packed station wagons, lumbering ore trucks, which seem too big and too heavy for the old wooden cantilevered bridge that spans the Colorado north of town.

As I drove, I thought that perhaps, without my knowing it, I was in fact in service to the orders of some darker power. Because I do not deny that I want; I want nothing less than to break this beautiful landscape at my own hand. I want to pick at every sandstone rim, tear at every slickrock face, blow from my path every inch of sand and scrub, and there find that deep vein I knew is waiting for me. Then let them talk, let them talk all they want. We'll have no shortage of food then. Around a table the size of a barn door, we'll eat like royalty. Game hens and ham steaks and lamb chops and vegetables of every kind and fresh fruit toppling out of the bowl. I'll drive a light-blue Cadillac. It will be a convertible and will have a horn that plays the first few bars of Beethoven's Fifth. When I park it in town, people will gawk at its size and its gleaming shape like it was hammered into existence in another world entirely. And me and Tillie and the kids, we'll live on the highest hill above town, in a mansion built to look like that of a Spanish baron.

We'll have a swimming pool, stables, a maid to clean my boots of the rust-red dust. Around the house there will be grass, green grass like people in these parts have rarely seen. Green as a Christmas wreath. People will look up from their desks, from their kitchen windows in awe at that white house skirted by lush, verdant lawns. They will know that some men can in truth turn the land to their will. And then we'll invite these same people to see it for themselves. Tillie will greet them in clothes and perfumes and jewelry, all flown in from New York and Paris. They'll come for barbecues and cocktail parties on our patio, all those who ever scoffed at me, and I will cast a shadow over them like Augustus. I also know this: In the chests of most men, their filaments are cold and dull as tin, and what passes for dreams is little more than jealousy, and that requires no heart at all.

That's why my family is hungry. And that's why we're living in a one-room tarpaper shack near Crescent Junction, away from all those who have come to make their fortunes here like so many dust-bowl refugees. So what if we're remote; our place, which costs only \$15 a month, is near the rail line, and I can scavenge railroad coal for heat. Tillie, she's the best woman a man could hope for; she's made the place as comfortable as she could for everyone, me and the boys and little Iris. She does what she can and doesn't complain. My Tillie, just you wait.

The air was stove-hot on my face, and dusted red with the clouds kicked up by all the passing vehicles. Each day, I think the land itself should be enough to draw us here. It's like no other place. The spires, the suspended bridges of sandstone, the knobbed and

spindled architectures. It's a burial ground of immemorial time. Everywhere visible are the volcanic cones, the folds and terraced faults, the scalloped anticlines and synclines that are a rendering of ceaseless tectonic forces. Everywhere the fossilized seas, the shales and sandstones, the limestones and conglomerates layered in random and breathtaking patterns, here in vermilion and amber and there russet and salmon and colors that only the Indians have names for. It's a pastel marvel that, depending on the time of day, can countenance near-human sentiments in combinations of color and light. It is stark, damaged country, routed and gored and striated, and terrible in its beauty. I have never felt so small as when I first traveled beneath this limitless sky. In apposition to one another, sky to land, land to sky, it is impossible to fathom which might have come first.

August Tanner, he who took the shovelhead to the other man (Winton Weams, who was bound by his suspect tactics to receive such compensation) warned me the second night I was here. He said: "You're a young man, and young men are hungry for beauty. I'm not so young as I was, and I can tell you, there are few things one should trust less than beauty."

My Jeep, as it turns out, was not able to keep up with the plane; I got too slow a jump. The AEC is building roads out of Moab into the surrounding country, but they have been hastily made and are rocky and rutted and not designed for moving quickly or comfortably.

Soon, I lost the plane. But rather than head back, I continue on, clattering over dried-out creekbeds and vanquished, dusty draws. And as always, while I drive, I follow

the story that can be read in the shape and colors of the country if you know where to look. Even the smallest pile of rocks has a story; that's what the geologist learns and what drives him. You just have to know the language. Since we got here, everyone has been talking about the Morrison foundation. That's where the uranium is, that's where the AEC is telling people to look, these Sunday prospectors come with their leisure slacks and rented Geigers. But I know it is in the Chinle that it will be found, the big vein. So on days like that when I'm driving, I trace it in the landscape, across the canyons and the gaunt sandstone mesas. No one believes, and that's just as well.

In time, the makeshift road took me into a region I did not immediately recognize. But then recognition is elusive out there, except for the old-timers and Navajos, both of whom seem able to navigate the area by the slightest variations in topography. For me, the landmarks of hill and outcropping can be hard to distinguish. Each columnar rock, each crenellated butte begins to look like all the rest. I drive for half an hour or more and am about to stop and investigate what seems a promising anticline of rock when I see in the distance an odd, unnatural glinting of light. At first, I take this to be only a trick being played by the sun on, perhaps, some discarded piece of metal or glass. As I approach, taking the short rise of the nearby hill, I saw instead another Jeep, and beside it, a man. Retreating in the opposite direction, and sending up a screen of dust, was a second vehicle. The man holds his hand toward the sun and watches me.

I recognized Verrill Kraft immediately. At first, I did not believe my eyes as I was certain I had earlier seen him in the audience at the peddler's truck. How he could have beat me to this particular location, this far out, when I had driven directly and without

delay, was a mystery. He must be privy to some alternate approach, I concluded, another road, though I could see no evidence of one. Or it may be that he had not lingered as I had, watching the fight. It is also not impossible, given the heat fever one is prone to in these parts, that I earlier mistook another man for him. It would not be difficult. The ochre-colored dust clings to everyone's clothes the same. It and the sun are without prejudice and make short time in marking all who spend more than a day here.

Whatever the explanation, I was surprised to find him standing there in the road, one hand in a back pocket, the other shading at the brim of his hat. We had never met as he kept mostly to himself, but I knew of him. Word in town was that he had owned a handful of machinery shops in the Midwest, but that he'd gone bust and was heading to California to elude creditors when he stumbled upon the news that money could be made in Utah. He was a tall man, and slightly stooped at the shoulders. His arms seemed overlong when hung at his sides, and he walked with a decidedly pigeon-toed gait. Together, this gave him a calm, unhurried quality like that of some athletes. But because he rarely spoke and because he did not often consort with other men, it also gave one the impression that he had secrets.

I stopped the Jeep behind his truck and climbed out. With the engine cut and the rattling clatter of its innerworkings ceased, all became very quiet. The sound of the departing vehicle was already barely a distant buzz and otherwise there was only the crackling of the land baking under the sun. Verrill Kraft stared at me, his hand still at his hat brim as if trying to make me out from a distance.

“Hey,” I said as I climbed out of the Jeep and stretched and groaned for my back. “Christ, I’m not sure what’s harder, walking, or driving those roads. Does a job on a guy’s back.”

He pushed his hat back on his head, revealing his thin, drawn face. From his pocket he retrieved a red bandana that he opened in his hand and then drew down the length of his face, hairline to throat. He did this twice more before returning the handkerchief to his pocket.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any water, would you?” I asked.

“You don’t have water?” he said.

I shook my head. “I guess I sort of got caught up in that fight back there, and before I knew it, I was well on my way out this direction. Stupid, I know,” I said.

He moved to his truck and, reaching in through the driver’s window, produced a canteen, which he extended to me.

“What are you doing all the way out here?” he asked.

I jiggled the water in the canteen to survey its volume.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Just driving really, I suppose.”

“This is no place to be without water,” he said. “Only man that comes out here without water is either lost, or he ain’t looking to get back. Or he’s Navajo.”

I took a drink and handed the canteen back to him. He wiped the opening with his shirtsleeve and took a drink himself, before once more plugging it and drying his mouth with the same sleeve and returning the canteen to the truck.

“Thanks,” I said. I reached out my hand. “I’m Will Bowen.”

Verrill Kraft had a judge's facility for impenetrability, communicating only but the subtlest and most discreet body movements. One suspected he developed this skill as a boy, and found in practice that it was generally superior to words, which, for a man like him, are too often misinterpreted.

He squinted at me, head tilted slightly. "Verrill Kraft," he said.

"So what brings you out this far, Mr. Kraft?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Ah, ain't nothing out here," he said. "It's just dead rock is all. Ain't nothing out here but what nature don't aim to keep." At his neck and throat, the red dust had mixed with sweat and turned the color of fired Navajo pottery.

He spat again in the dirt at his feet. "Well, I best be going." He moved to his truck and got in and closed the door, the noise of which was loud and jarring.

"Say, do you know what this area is called?" I asked as he started the truck. "Just in case I want to get back here."

"Ah, you don't want to come back here," he said. The truck shuddered and knocked and he put it in gear and pulled forward and turned around, sending up plumes of dust, and then took himself back toward town.

## Eldon

The End of Days is surely nigh when men are turning on each other in such brute fashion.

“See?” I said as I held up the newspaper to my family at the dinner table. The headline read: “Man Arrested for Assault on Alleged Claim-jumper.” “Do you see the ways of man without agency of God? They turn on each other, butchering one and another for money and position. Acting like beasts because like beasts they know only hunger and want, and without agency or council of God. They are doomed. I tell you, this is what makes beasts, and this is what makes the righteous different from beasts.”

“Shall this be our prayer, Father, that one day these men may know God as we know God?” asked my eldest son, Daniel. His hands were quiet in his lap.

But this made me angry and I said to Daniel, “Do you presume to know God, Daniel? Are you so far different from the rank of men that you could presume to speak for their failings in God’s place?”

“No, sir,” he said.

“What, then, son?”

“I only hoped to pray for them as I would pray for one who’s taken lame or sick,” he said. And this was a sound answer.

“Yes,” said I, “that is the right way. Yes, let us pray tonight, family, for all of those living outside the commandments of God. The men who abjure Celestial Law and carry on without benefit of divine guidance. And let’s pray for their women and children who can expect no shepherding or leadership and so are ultimately lost just the same.

None can jump right into the fullness of God's laws until they are prepared. I ask God to bless these people and give them of his spirit that they might know of these laws. I ask also that we and our community here are blessed so that we might remain true to all of God's commandments. For the Lord has said, "If you live all laws and reject one of them, you have failed." Let us also thank Him for this food we are about to eat, that it may sustain us to do His work on earth. I ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

I could see the word "amen" on the lips of my children and my wives just as I could hear it. It formed there like a pearl and shone. There is that moment of greatest silence when the prayer has just been delivered, and before the world returns. In that moment we are suspended above this life and everything is still. This is the Lord's answer. The heads of my family came up from their folded hands like flowerbuds opening, their faces bright, their eyes toward me. I nodded at Daniel.

Dinner is best served on a bare table. There is nothing to distract from the company of family and the importance of eating together. In such simplicity, there is no affront to the provenance of God, only praise. Plus, the meal, while provided by Him, is the work of our hands and this should be noted and savored. There is the steaming soup, which, though thin, is so aromatic it seems to fill your belly as the smell is taken in through your nose. The few vegetables that give it color and flavor we grow in our modest garden. The whole-wheat bread comes from flour ground in our own mill. The homemade sorghum is delivered from our own cane, and the peaches we can ourselves (they make a delicious

dessert). And the water we drink, it is the clearest I know and is taken from the well we dug with our own hands, no small feat in this place where the ground has no protection and is dripped dry of water. When the church claims we have wandered from God's will, I point to two things: the word as it is written, and what has been provided us in this place. The state is against us. The government is against us. We can't expect it to be otherwise. They accept heathens and all other churches, but not us. We are not accepted, and this proves we are not of the world. To us alone God has given his true plan, and He has given us the right to go on and have eternal increase. It is up to us whether we do or whether we don't. If we believe it and live it, we will get the blessing of it. If we don't, we will get the cursings of it.

Surely among those blessings are the voices of my family at the end of the day. Some men do not care for it, finding it vexatious and distracting. But for me it is like a flock of killdeer in the trees, singing to each other. The children's voices, the voices of the women, they relax me like music. Perhaps it is because the land about is so barren and soundless. Out there, voices are made heavy in the heat and do not carry far. The rocks are silent. The dirt is silent. The sky is silent. Everything is silent. One might think it a place without life altogether. But sometimes, in the full sun of the day, there is a different voice that can be heard and it is like whispering. More than once I have turned, believing myself spoken to, only to find I am alone. I have listened but only rarely can make out what it says.

My eldest daughter, Anna, asked if I might like more water and I told her yes. The children were going on about the snake that today bit Brother Williams' dog.

“We didn’t know but then we heard its rattle,” said David. He did his best to duplicate the sound, which made the little ones sit straight in their seats and look at him.

“Oh, David...!” my young wife, Mary, said. “You mustn’t approach snakes.”

“Then John Beck poked at it with a rake and it rattled and tried to bite the rake,” said Matthew. “I saw it. It had a big head as big as this here plate.”

“John Beck...,” Jane said and shook her head. She is my elder wife. As she spoke, her mouth was serious, but her eyes did not match her mouth.

“Then Marty Beck come over. He had Toby Loughlin with him and then all of us we watched John Beck keep messing with the snake, and the snake didn’t like it one bit,” said Matthew.

“I was telling it...!” said David.

“But you wasn’t even there,” said Matthew.

The heads of the little ones went back and forth from speaker to speaker. There were crumbs of bread at their mouths and their little hands were frozen before them as they listened.

“I was there...!” said David.

“Yeah, but you come later when it was over,” Matthew said.

“David,” I said. The boy looked at me and quieted and his brother continued on.

“So, John Beck, he kept poking at it, and then it got mad and shot out from there and started slithering away, rattling, and we all run for it even John Beck, laughing. Only problem is Brother Williams’ dog took after it and the two of them they were dancing around each other, the snake all coiled up and its rattle going.”

“Oh dear,” said Mary, and this made me smile, for she is so young and so pretty. She is the middle daughter of Brother Wallace, and her eyes are bright and her hands able and I know she has been brought up right. In her arms, she holds my youngest, Helen, only now three months in age.

“We was watching and laughing because it was funny the way they were carrying on. Then Brother Williams come out of the house from lunch still wearing his napkin, and he sees his dog after the snake and he says, ‘Lindy! Get away from that there snake!’ But then just as the dog turned his head, the snake went for him and bit him in the leg. Lindy started yelping and crying like crazy, and so the snake, he just bit him again! Just like that. So—”

“So... So then Brother Williams, he come out and he grab the rake from John Beck, I saw him do it, and he beat the snake with it and then throwed it in the weeds,” said David.

“You’re lucky you didn’t get bit,” Jane said. “You’re very lucky. You do as you’re told and stay away from snakes.”

“Listen now,” said I. “Don’t you go messing with snakes. You’ve been told. You remember what happened to Tom Burwell?”

“Yes sir,” they said.

“Well, what happened to Lindy?” asked Mary, my daughter, who’s nearly 10 and has the red hair of my second wife, Susan. The little ones in their seats remained cautious as if at the report of some strange sound. I love the little ones best, for their faces and their hands are the gentlest, softest things one can know.

We all looked to Matthew. He wiped the hair from his eyes. “I don’t know exactly,” he said. “Brother Williams told us to get home and he just took the dog somewheres. I don’t know.”

There was a long pause and it grew quiet enough that one could hear the clap of a neighboring door shutting closed. Also the distant murmur of family voices in another house. The hissing of the lantern.

“Alright, now,” Jane said. “Don’t let your food get cold. Eat up. Daniel, more soup?”

Daniel extended his bowl and in another moment the room was restored to the clink of silverware on plates, the screeching of the chair legs on the bare concrete floor, the rattle of the ladle in the tureen, the voices like killdeer in the trees, all the sounds of family at this hour of night.

“Father, did Brother Madden tell you we found another hot spot of rock on the west side of the anticline? The needle literally jumped off the dial.”

“He did. God is never finished giving to those who make the Celestial Law their own. Now, I don’t know how many ton of ore there is all total, but it will surely be of great aid to the community.”

“We were talking today and wondering, especially with what we found this morning, when we might start digging?” he said.

“I’m not sure about that, Daniel,” I said. “There are things to consider. This is goodly land, which the Lord promised to the faithful for their inheritance, where He has

said time and again that those who possess this land shall be a God-fearing people and a people that will serve God.”

“Yes sir,” Daniel said. But I could see he wanted to say more and so I bid him continue if he would.

“Well, sir, Uncle Loren said he believed we need to stake soon otherwise we might lose it.”

The others quieted and listened and Mary shushed the infant in her arms.

“Daniel, this earth belongs to the Lord, and all that is in it belongs to Him. And when He delivers some piece of it to us, we must count it a sacred possession and do all that we can to sanctify it and make it produce in its strength. A man may be called to till or mine a part of this earth, but unless he is connected with the people of God and believes that Joseph Smith was a prophet, unless he commits to the Lord, he might as well be standing on quicksand. Because the Lord can take away from us that which we seem to have been given. And if we are not true, we will cry about it like children and maybe reproach God. But on the other hand, if we secure Him into our confidence and remain fast in our efforts to make the earth produce, it will deliver for us. That goes for every enterprise that we undertake to do.”

I glanced at Jane, and she once more started the bread around and dished soup into bowls and Anne took the water pitcher to everyone’s glass.

“Yes sir,” Daniel said. “But Uncle Loren said that others don’t care for our ways. They don’t care about doing right by God. They would rather see us gone and take what we found for their own. He said its good ore, father, good commercial ore, and because we

are so close to highway, all we need to do is shovel it onto a truck and haul it to the ore-buying station.”

“Your Uncle Loren is my brother,” said I. “He is a good man, he is a hard-working, God-fearing man, but he is rash. This situation calls for delicacy and patience. What Loren does not understand is that before we start trucking the ore, we have to develop the property, open it up, drill it to see the extent of the ore body. The Geiger, however hot it reads, only gives a surface reaction. If we were to start development work, do you know what would happen? Every prospector within 300 hundred miles and farther would race in here with their shovels, their jacklegs, their trucks. They would set up camp here. And you’re right, Daniel, about one thing you are right, there are plenty who would prefer us gone, including the government. So can we expect protection when our claims are raided? No. We are alone but for God and it is on His justice that we must rely.”

Daniel dropped his eyes to his hands as they fidgeted on the tabletop. “So what do we do?” he asked. “How do we start? It’s all just sitting there.”

“That is not your concern, Daniel. The council will decide. Now finish your dinner, the women worked very hard to prepare it.”

“Yes, sir,” he said.