

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Allyn W. Amsk for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 1, 1997.

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The creative writing project *Circles in the Sand* began as a collection of interrelated short stories but is now the three opening chapters of a novel, a chapter and an early draft of what was originally the ending to a novella, and one short story. The landscape is the upper Mojave Desert in Southern California; the principle community is Ridgecrest, California, although other locations are integral to the work: Darwin, Garlock, Inyokern, Trona, and others. Throughout these stories the primary focus is on the characters and their connection to each other and to the land, and how that relationship can change over time. In the opening chapter, "Zip Protocol," Frank Grier must adjust to returning to the desert community of his childhood while his wife, Jen, is caught up in the secret world of military research and development. In "Desert Lakes," Tommy Jensen encounters an old flame, Stacy Bennett, and develops a friendship with her young son, Scott. In a relationship destined to go bad from the beginning, Tommy discovers that he can't avoid the joys and sorrows that come from interacting with others. In "Desert Solace," Morris, a World War II veteran learns that even in the silence and calm of the desert, the outside world has an unpleasant way of intruding into long buried memories. "Desert Showdown" is an early attempt to bring a close to the first two chapters "Zip Protocol" and "Desert Lakes." As the name implies, the principle characters have a showdown in the desert. "Angels of Grace" is a short story that is separate from the novel material, but the characters come from the same community and landscape. In this story, Robert Jones gradually comes to understand the difference between religious fanaticism and true belief as he observes the examples of his father, an Assembly of God minister, and his grandmother, a convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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Circles in the Sand

by

Allyn W. Amsk

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Allyn W. Amsk, Author

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Circles in the Sand

Zip Protocol

When Frank Grier sat down to read the morning paper and drink his espresso, the headline read, "Owens Valley Plan Seeks L.A. Water to Curb Pollution."

"Big deal," he said, but he felt a keen satisfaction at the irony: an environmental council had determined that L.A. had to return thirteen percent of its water to the Owens Valley to reduce the tiny salt particles that winds stirred up on the dry lake. Frank had heard horror stories of how a few lizards had stopped a housing project, and how a gas station at Mt. Mesa had to pay \$60,000 for an environmental impact statement before they could get approval to build. But this time, maybe the public would benefit. Maybe an environmental council could do what nearly a century of lawsuits and protests had failed to do—keep L.A. from taking all the water from the Owens Valley and leaving in its place a salt flat, where once there had been a lake and a shipping port.

Jen came in from the bedroom freshly showered, wearing her field clothes, tan slacks and a blouse that she wore when preparing for a day of experiments on the range, land far removed behind No Trespassing signs at the naval base. She cut an orange and pressed the halves into a hand juicer. Then she added her daily dose of Trudy tonic—a potassium additive Frank had named for one of Jen's friends who sold the product. Jen glanced at the paper. She read the front page and the continuation of the article on page twenty-six. In ten seconds Frank knew she'd gotten the gist of it. Speed reading had kept her in her Ph.D. program. She'd specialized in particle beam research, finishing in four short years; she still had colleagues struggling with material she'd learned in a snap.

"That'll help," she said.

"Maybe," Frank said. "L.A. will fight it."

"Who would have thought we'd be grateful to environmentalists?"

"Court battles, smear campaigns, lawyers fees beyond the limit of county budgets."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Whose side should I be on?"

Jen paused, but Frank could see that she was determined to see the conversation through to the end.

“You wouldn’t believe how many times in the last year we’ve had to cancel testing of —” For a moment she faltered.

“The device?” Frank said.

She glanced at him, then acted like nothing was amiss, that her silence about her military research hadn’t just circled the hole in their marriage. “I don’t like going to my department head with excuses for delays.”

“When we were in Santa Barbara,” Frank said, “We had clean beaches.”

“Don’t.” Jen finished her tonic and gathered her coat and briefcase. “What are your plans?”

“Where else?” Frank said. “I’ll be in my castle.”



After she left, Frank cleaned up the table and washed the few dishes. He made another cup of espresso in the special perc pot his dad had found in Solvang. For Frank, this was the toughest time of the day. He kept expecting his dad to call. After Hank had retired he had had a knack for calling just when Frank was getting into his work, when the caffeine was driving away the sluggishness from his mind. He would talk about the weather, ask about a few old friends. They would make plans for weekend get-togethers.

Frank would give anything for one last talk. He still hadn’t looked at the sympathy cards. He had put the cards in a computer program box and shelved it. Jen had sent the thank you notes.

When Frank was ten, his dad tired of the desert and transferred to Vandenburg Airforce Base. For months Frank had been sullen with his dad for moving him away from his friends, but he soon adjusted to the new school and came to accept ocean breezes rather than dry winds and dust storms.

Frank had been content in Santa Barbara. Although he didn’t place much stock in astrology, he knew he had a Cancerion’s love for home life and resistance to change. He got his degree in computer science from the Cal Tech. With a residual income from his mother’s family’s winery, he had the luxury of not having to work for others. Meanwhile,

Jen was establishing herself at Vandenburg Air Force Base. She was promoted three times in two years as she became more adept dealing with the military hierarchy. Then in a rare move for interservice rivalry, budget cuts moved her project to a naval base in the Californian desert. They had been excited about the move. Jen was taking a major step forward careerwise; soon she would have her own team, her own project. Frank was eager to return to a place he still thought of as home.

Then the reality set in. Childhood memories and occasional visits were no match for the daily grind of living in the Mojave desert by a military base while his father was fighting cancer in Santa Barbara. Though he saw his father often up to the day he died, Frank resented the distance that separated them.

No matter how much Frank might want it, his dad wasn't going to call. Frank sat at his computer and punched in his password. Castle Blackrock was waiting.



Frank often wished that his life was as straightforward as a line of computer code, that he could add, remove, or delete events and memories as simply as he could enter a command. If he could do so, he would begin with a simple Unix entry:

`zip -m -9 -p[smiley] bad-decisions *.*`

-m Zip and remove painful memories. Take all the problems in his marriage with Jen and store them in a new file, bad-decisions.

-p Password protect the files with code name smiley.

-9 Compress the past into the smallest possible size, and if the file still took up too much space, there was one last command: -d Delete entries in zipfile.

Frank thought in terms of memory requirements, kilo-bytes, mega-bytes. His specialty was getting the most productivity with the smallest amount of memory. He knew how to maneuver through the intricacies of computer code, to stay within the 640 kilobyte low-memory limit of IBM systems. Using only small amounts of memory, his computer animations were detailed, realistic, and often achieved the game designer's ultimate goal—to be frightening. Jen could calculate the movement of electrons and graph them on an HP plotter. Math was so elegant, so encompassing to both of them. If only it

could provide some framework, a guide to the question in Microsoft commercials: “Where do you want to go next?”

Computers were essential in their lives. Frank used a pentium for his game design. At work, Jen used the latest super computers, though she often talked about how military downsizing had restricted her group’s ability at the naval base to research and develop new projects. But she never talked about her work. “I’m sorry, honey,” she had said when he had asked if her Ph.D. research was paying off. “What we do is secret—sometimes top secret.” When project deadlines loomed, Jen worked twelve hour days and when she came home she worked in the spare room with the door closed.

When they were at home, a silence like a thick cloud took over. Frank could almost see it settling in every corner of the apartment. At first it had been mere fantasy. He’d been at his computer and heard a sound in the kitchen. He looked up to share a joke with Jen, then realized that she wasn’t there, that it was just the refrigerator. The compressor ran for a few minutes then shut off, leaving him in the ubiquitous silence he had come to expect, even on a Saturday afternoon. He turned back to his work. He was designing the parameters for the castle, and that was where it all started. He incorporated the smoke and sound dampener idea in his game. The sound void was a final barrier to the castle, a psychic barrier that worked in conjunction with the moat. The dampener sucked the energy from the player and left him listless, weakened and unprepared for the dangers in the castle. Frank knew he’d have to add a solution that a clever player could use to escape the effects of life-sucking silence. But here the ideas faded. That he could imagine a solution was well and good, but as yet he hadn’t been able to write the code.

He had assaulted the castle with a variety of Players. So far, each had succumbed to the barrier. The first had been a Warrior, but despite his speed, he had been unable to reach the doorway. Then he’d tried a Knight, but the thick, heavy plate armor had offered no advantage; his slow steady march had in fact only made the Knight’s doom more certain. A Magician was a possibility Frank had considered, but a counter spell was useless if the Dark Master who created the barrier spell was immune to magic. At the moment, the Jester seemed the best candidate to survive. His cynicism might provide some inner strength to see him through the encounter; insults might confuse, provoke, or

delay the opposing barrier until the Jester gained entry. But the Jester was ill-suited for the challenges of combat that led up to the castle—the dreadbeasts would surely wipe him out; or one Ka-vulture, a huge winged monstrosity with a love for tender flesh, might finish him with one bite. At the moment the Jester was the best option, but the odds were hopelessly against him.



Frank turned off his computer. After a marathon session, he felt a bit disoriented. He vaguely remembered Jen come home. He was shocked to realize she'd been home for over four hours.

"Jen," he said. When there was no answer he softly knocked and pushed the door ajar. "Jen."

From within he heard the shuffling of papers. "Come in," she said.

He opened the door and saw a brief image of a graphic and flashing data before Jen hit the screen saver button and locked the monitor into an imitation fish pond. Tropical fish gently drifted with an imaginary current. The colors cast her face in a multicolored shadow.

"Let's go to Casa Rancho," Frank said.

"OK," she said. "I'm ready for a break."

Casa Rancho made an acceptable chile verde, and the bar could be a lively place. When they arrived Frank ordered a rum and coke for himself and a vodka tonic for Jen. They found a table.

"I'm tired of working on Saturdays," Jen said.

"Then don't."

"If I don't get this proposal finished, we won't get adequate funding. We might not anyway." She rested her arms on the table and gave him a strained smile. Her shoulder length blonde hair was pulled tight in a bun. She was only thirty-two, but she looked so exhausted that for a moment Frank imagined that he was seeing the Jen to be after thirty years of civil service: old, wrinkled, worn out. She was normally so confident. Frank rarely saw her this down. The last time had been before her oral defense at M.I.T. She'd aced that.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, “and just drive. Go to Huntington Beach. Get a hotel. Wake up and walk on the beach.”

“And my proposal?”

“It’ll sort itself out.”

She smiled. “Life isn’t like your game,” she said.

“It could be,” he said.

Several men and women entered the bar and Jen waved. “I’ll be back,” she said. “I see one of my guys.” Across the room Frank saw Jeff Horton, a project engineer he’d met at Jen’s welcome aboard party.

“Can’t we just spend the evening together for once?”

“I need his input,” she said.

“Don’t go.”

“If I don’t get this budget approved, I might as well scrap all the work I’ve done in the last three years.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“My professional reputation is on the line, and all you can do is joke about it?”

“I’m on a high wire, performing for the military elite.”

“If you ever left your little world, you might realize that life is more than just your little circus.”

“An impenetrable oyster.”

“Sometimes I don’t know why I try,” Jen said, and walked away.

The bartender returned with the drinks, but Frank would be damned before he’d take Jen hers. He drained his glass and started drinking Jen’s, watching while his wife and her coworker smiled and talked. Jeff was muscular and tanned and looked like he belonged in a singles bar.

“Give me another shot of Herradura,” a man at the bar said, “and get me one for my buddy.”

Frank turned toward the voice. As he’d suspected, Tommy Jenson was leaning against the bar. They’d been childhood friends, and even after Frank had moved away, he’d seen Tommy several times on the infrequent trips he and his dad made to Ridgecrest.

In the past few months, Frank had only seen Tommy occasionally. When Tommy wasn't working, he was training for a big motocross event.

"How did you sneak in?" Frank asked. Tommy just shrugged.

"Last time I saw you," Frank said, "you were drunk and popping wheelies on the street."

"But not like when I was a kid," Tommy said. "I've still got the road burn from that one," Tommy said.

"What've you been doing?"

Tommy grinned and took a patch from his shirt pocket and waved it at Frank. Team Yamaha flashed in bright yellow letters.

"You steal that?"

"That'd be too easy. I earned it the hard way."

The bartender brought two shots of tequila a lime wedge on each shot glass.

"Here's to you, Smiley," Tommy said.

"And you, Red Racer." They downed their drinks. The Herradura went down smooth with no aftertaste, but Frank could feel the fire building in his stomach.

"So we're celebrating?" Frank asked.

"Didn't make the team," Tommy said. "They offered me a job on the crew."

"When're you leaving?"

Tommy looked surprised at the question. "You know I'll never move away," he said. "I'm local."

"Loco?"

"That too."

"So am I, for staying."

"That's cause the desert's in your blood. You just don't know it yet."

"You're right about that," Frank said, and looked broodingly at Jen.

"Now what's wrong?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Only what you say when you get drunk."

"Stick around. Maybe you'll hear more."

"She's smart, Smiley, and beautiful."

"This isn't home anymore." Frank said. The tequila was reacting strangely with the rum and gin, giving him quite a buzz, and he wondered if he was saying too much.

"You just need some fresh air," Tommy said. "When I feel down, I head for the desert. A night ride on a dirt bike at seventy miles an hour is guaranteed to put my troubles behind me."

"Loco."

"Just me, my cycle, the trail, and if I'm lucky, the night stars. Nothing else matters." He looked up at Frank, his eyes a disconcerting, intense blue. "Nothing else ever will."

Later that evening, sitting in a dark room with only the monitor's light for company, dizzy from numerous rounds of tequila but at that stage of drunkenness when it wasn't wise to go to bed and face the swirling darkness, Frank searched for the solution to Castle Blackrock.



Frank had been born in 1963. He grew up playing around the flat metallic gray water barrels labeled "Property of US Government," reminders of the Cuban missile crisis that his dad kept, even after they moved to Santa Maria. His mother once told him of the frenzy of shopping, grabbing, just grabbing anything, until all that was left was bare shelves and floors littered with crushed boxes of crackers and a few badly dented canned goods. Bobby Jones' father refused to take his family and run. Instead, he stood on the pulpit that Sunday and pronounced that whatever happened was God's will. "There is no escape," he had said, "from God's judgment." That was why Frank's mother went to the Baptist church. She liked her religion in dainty bites, without the tinge of fanaticism.

But Ridgecrest and China Lake Naval Weapons Center and the surrounding valley survived the Cuban threat, though they never escaped the probability, even after the Cold War, that Russian ICBM's were aimed at China Lake. Due to the base's research, particularly in laser weaponry, and its continued development and improvement of the sidewinder and other air missiles, it was estimated that China Lake was always a top ten target. It didn't help that during the Gulf War the United States ignored the anti-ICBM

test ban and destroyed an incoming missile, firing a laser from the desert, reflecting the beam on satellite mirrors, until it reached its target over Hawaii. The news said that the source came from Edward's Air Force Base, but Frank's dad knew better. Hank was in the hospital undergoing a particularly difficult series of chemotherapy treatments, but when Frank told him the latest news, he smiled and tilted his head up from the pillow.

"That was a Navy weapon," Hank said. "From what I've seen, the Airforce can't pull off something like that." His head pressed back into the pillow and he closed his eyes. "I never should have transferred," he mumbled. "China Lake was where the action was."

And that was before they had even moved back to the desert. Frank wondered what Jen and the other scientists were up to now.



After that night in the bar, Tommy and Frank began to take trips into the desert, short trips to the hills behind the community college and longer, all day trips. This trip was a short one, since Tommy had to get back for graveyard shift at the chemical plant in Trona.

Frank was leaning against Tommy's truck, pouring a glass of Chateau Armand chardonnay, while Tommy idled his dirt bike at the ridge, preparing to jump the dry wash. Over the years, winter flash floods had deepened the stream bed until the edges were over three feet high and smooth and straight like the sides of a cake pan. They had entered the wash from Garlock Road, where it leveled out and in the winter flooded the road. As they drove up the wash, the Datsun pickup had maneuvered well over the hard packed sand, but the sides of the banks were soft, and Frank hadn't seen any places where they could have driven out if they'd needed to. But then, early summer wasn't a time to be overly concerned about flash floods.

Frank swirled the wine; the vapor merged nicely with the sage, though his nose tingled at the dust that puffed up and slowly drifted down. It gave him pleasure to drink from Jen's carefully hoarded supply. What the hell. After all, the case had been a gift from *his* mother.

“Watch,” Tommy shouted, his voice hoarse above the bike engine’s rumble. “I’m going to see if I can hit third gear this time.”

Tommy revved his engine and sped down the hill, picking up speed on the steep, narrow trail. The rumble became a high pitched whine as he approached the bank. His slim body seemed too tall for the bike and he had to hunch over the handlebars, leaning from side to side to avoid the sagebrush. With a final burst of speed his cycle lifted in the air, the tires barely clearing an outcropping of basalt in the center of the streambed that years of floods had never managed to weather away. Tommy called the rock Dead Man’s Hand. On the other side of the dry wash, his tires bounced once, veering at an angle away from the trail. Tommy twisted the handlebars and the cycle straightened and roared over the ridge and out of sight.

Frank sighed and sipped his wine. There wasn’t anything Tommy wouldn’t try. Frank had learned that in grade school when he’d earned the nickname Smiley.



The day before he’d earned the name had ended like many others, with Mrs. Johnson dismissing the third grade class. But this day, rather than dawdle on the playground, Frank and Tommy wanted to get back to Tommy’s and the army men they’d set up in the back yard. They cut through the park and when they came out through the hedge of oleander bushes, they saw Stacy Bennett and her best friend, Tina. For some reason Tommy whooped. The girls saw him and started running.

“Bet you can’t catch them,” Frank said.

Before the chase was over, Frank and Tommy had been joined by other neighborhood boys. Some instinct made Frank stop at his house, after only running for a few short blocks, but Tommy and the others continued the chase to the next block, until Stacy and Sandy ran into their house, yelling and crying and carrying on.

The next day, Mrs. Johnson knew all about the incident and made the boys involved wait in the hall while they were interrogated one by one. Frank stood there with a smile pasted on his face, a smile he maintained even after Mrs. Johnson threatened to send him home to his parents. Frank knew that if his dad had to come home from work, he would really be in trouble, but he couldn’t stop smiling.

"Don't you realize how serious this is?" Mrs. Johnson demanded.

"I didn't do anything," Frank said.

"That's not what I heard."

"I was just running home," Frank said. "I wasn't chasing anybody. And neither was Tommy." That lie, as transparent as it was, sealed their friendship.



Tommy came over the ridge in a cloud of dust. For a moment Frank thought he was going to jump the bank and crash into the truck, but at the last instant Tommy spun the bike and came to a stop.

"Did you see that? Someday that rock's going to get me, but not today!" He laughed as Frank waved the dust away from his face.

"If only Jen could see you now," Tommy said. He swept his hair back from his forehead and curled his hands against his eyes, as if he were holding binoculars. Slowly he scanned Frank from head to toes.

"Yes," Tommy said, "Frank is looking a bit odd at the moment. Even his face is a bit flushed. How ever did you get so dusty, Frank?"

"Very funny."

"This is a sight she's never seen."

"You'd never drag her away from her computer," Frank said.

"Look who's talking," Tommy said. "You go through withdrawal when you leave your work behind. I can see it."

"It's just that I'm close to a solution," Frank said.

"And Jen isn't?"

"You don't know how it is."

"She's probably doing an upgrade on the sidewinder missile."

"She doesn't have to work from other people's designs."

"What do you think she's doing, then?"

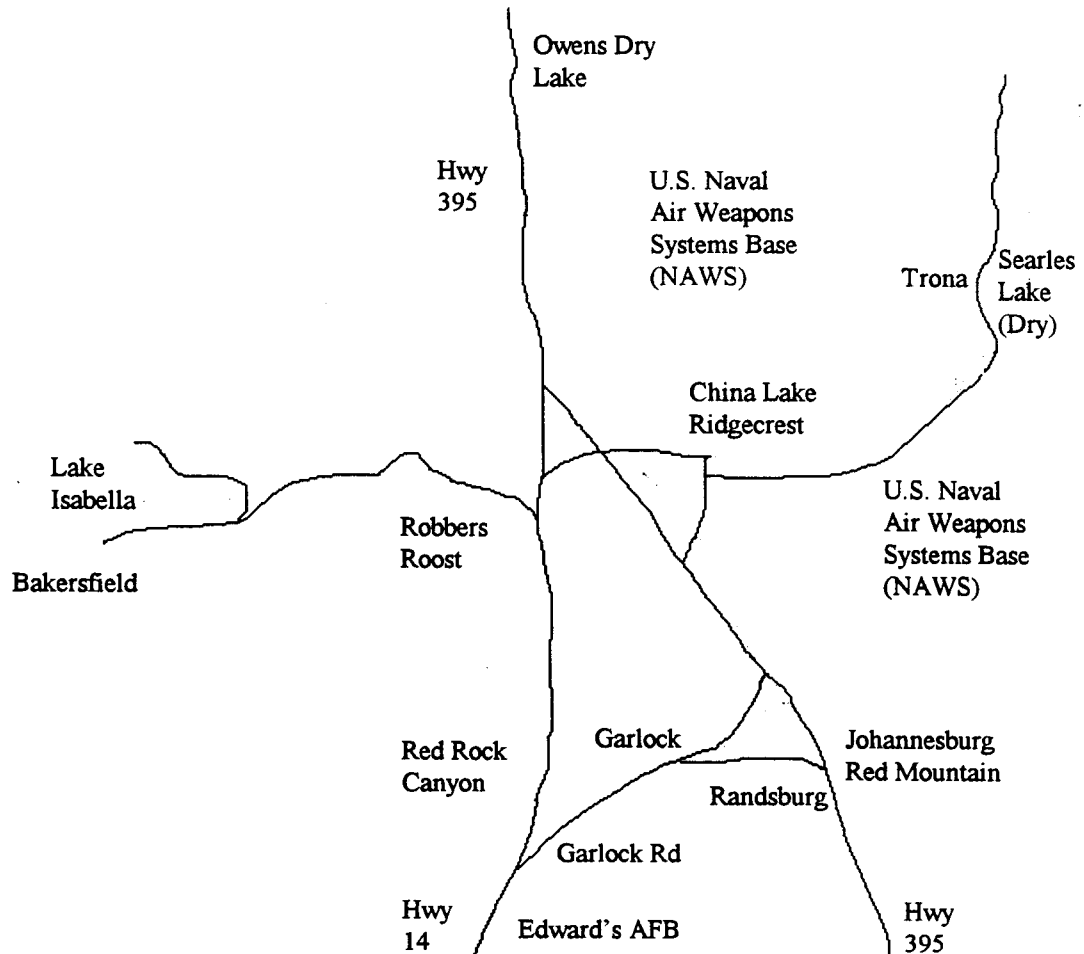


Figure 1. Frank's Circle.

Frank slowly sipped his wine, amazed at a new train of thought. He knew Jen's Ph.D. dissertation by heart. If he said to Tommy in his most nonchalant tone, "She's just working in lasers," would that violate her trust in him? For the first time, he began to realize the strain Jen was under. The urge to confide on one side of the seesaw; on the other, the pressures of national defense, secrecy, and professionalism. "My professional reputation is on the line," she had said.

"She never talks about it," he said. "Want to go for a hike?"

Tommy threw his beer can into a dense sage brush patch on the other side of the dry wash. The can bounced into the rocks. There was a rattle of snakes, like a fire in a popcorn factory.

"Do you?"

"Not today."

"Never seen it without rattlers, but it's still the best place to jump anywhere near Ridgecrest. Where else can you find a rock like Dead Man's Hand?"

Tommy took another beer from the ice chest. They sipped their drinks, watching as a dust cloud slowly approached.

"Who do you think's coming?"

"No idea," Tommy said, "but I knew this was too good to last." On the surface Tommy didn't seem disturbed. He was blond and tanned—a Californian blond who seemed prepared to handle any situation. But Frank noticed a tightening of his lips and a tension in the jaw.

Frank had that familiar, sour taste he got before a confrontation with Jen. They were in the desert several miles off Garlock Road, a road that was misleadingly peaceful in the daylight. Garlock Road was a shortcut Ridgecrest residents could take if they were in a hurry and wanted to avoid Highway Patrol cars. It left Highway 14 just south of Red Rock Canyon and cut northeast toward Highway 395, passing through the ghost town of Garlock. The shacks were fenced off to the public; plywood covered the windows and doors. But still, it was a lonely road even during the day, and transients were known to camp nearby. Frank didn't want to learn firsthand if they were dangerous or not.

An old truck slowly drove up the canyon.

“Relax,” Tommy said. “I know him.”

The truck parked downstream and a bony hand reached out and waved.

“Watch this,” Tommy said. He quickly drained his beer and threw it over both trucks into the brush. Once again, the snakes responded.

A scrawny man got out of the truck. His skin was leathery, sun beaten, with striking white hair. He reminded Frank of a raisin on a vine, swaying with the wind, unclaimed at the harvest, abandoned on the vine. He was the male equivalent of an old crone.

“You little shit,” the old man yelled. “Still stirring up my babies?”

“That’s right,” Tommy yelled.

“Come over here,” the old man said. “I’ll put you to work.”

Tommy nudged Frank with his elbow. “What you doing out here, Mr. Morris? You’ll miss your dinner at the old folks’ home.”

“I’m looking for more of your kind, you little shit,” Morris said.

“Eh? Eh?” Tommy asked. He leaned over, his hand to his ear, and walked as if arthritis had hardened the bones in his back.

“Little bastard.”

“What’s that you said?”

“Heard there was a fresh nest of baby rattlers. Thought I’d come out for a little looksee.”

Tommy abruptly stopped his act. “They’re taking over.”

“Like I always tell you,” Morris said. “Just leave ‘em alone.”

“That’s what I do, just before I put a tread mark on their backs.”

Morris glanced at Frank. “He’s as feisty as a rattler.”

Tommy introduced them.

“Call me Morris,” the old man said. “Only one who ever calls me mister is Tommy. Always playing games.” He opened the tailgate of his truck and removed his gear.

“My back’s acting up today,” Morris said. “One of you fellas want to give me a hand?”

“Not me,” Tommy said. “You’re not going to trick me with that old man stuff. My buddy can help you.”

Morris looked at Frank for moment, assessing him. Then he nodded.

“OK,” he said. He handed Frank a pair of leather gloves.

“Put these on,” Morris said. He took a small bellypack from his toolbox and hung it over his right shoulder. Morris rummaged through the gear in his truck bed and dug out a burlap sack and a three foot square of tarp.

“Good,” he said. “We’re all set.”

He walked down the trail, skirting the patch of sagebrush Tommy had thrown the cans at. Just before walking over the ridge he paused.

“Are you coming?” Morris asked.

“Go on,” Tommy said. “It’s something you should see at least once.”

“What about you?” Frank asked.

“Not me. You know I hate snakes.” Frank smiled to himself. He’d named Tommy Red Racer for the snake they’d caught when they were nine, a four foot hissing monstrosity that Tommy had bravely grabbed when Frank had pinned the snake’s head with a two-by-four, then he hadn’t known what to do when Frank let go and the snake wrapped around his arm. In part, Tommy was called Red Racer for the speed with which he’d thrown the snake away and ran off. His subsequent activities with motocross had given the nickname new energy without taking away the former memory.

“That’s right. Smile, Smiley, smile.”

“You going to help me, young feller, or stand there gabbing?”

Reluctantly, Frank turned and followed Morris. He didn’t know what he was getting into. He’d only come along to get out of the house for a while. He had to admit, though, that he was curious about what Morris intended to do. Was he going to catch the snakes? He didn’t have any cages on his truck.

Morris walked so slowly Frank soon caught up.

“It would be easier to hunt that big patch,” Morris whispered, “but Tommy got them all stirred up. We’ll try over here.”

He led Frank toward a granite outcropping that seemed to spring out of the ground. As they approached the rocks, a snake rattled in warning and Morris stopped.

"I don't know why I whisper," Morris said. "But it just feels right. Snakes are sensitive to vibrations, but they can't hear a thing."

"You're not wearing gloves," Frank said.

"It interferes when I milk 'em," Morris said.

"What?"

"I used to collect 'em. Now I give their venom to UCLA Medical Center so they can make anti-venom. Much as I'd like to decrease LA's population, I don't want my snakes being blamed if I can help it."

"I like LA," Frank said.

"I like rattlesnakes, but I don't sleep with 'em."

"What's that mean?"

"Now old Larry Klauber, he was from the city. He was all right."

"He still around?"

"He used to catch rattlers with a forked stick, but I found an easier way. I like to lure them out of the rocks."

"Sounds dangerous," Frank said.

"It gets their juices flowing—the venom just oozes out of their fangs."

Frank could see why Tommy had stayed at the truck. Morris was giving him the creeps.

The snake lay in shadows, coiled, head raised up menacingly, tail rattling vigorously. Morris flipped the tarp and it landed on the ground near the snake. Morris tugged on the tarp and the snake uncoiled and struck near his heavy boots. In the split second the snake stretched across the tarp, Morris threw the gunnysack over it. Then he crouched down and held the sack down with both hands while his fingers searched for the snake's head. He gripped the squirming snake firmly behind its head with his left hand, and slowly pulled the sack away with his right. Furious, the snake opened its jaws. Ignoring the twitching tail, Morris opened his belly bag and set a teacup on the tarp. With

his thumb and forefinger he kept the snake's mouth open and he gently pressed the fangs of the snake over the lip of the cup. A clear fluid squirted into the cup.

"See how wide his mouth opens? You'd never believe they could swallow whole rats until you see that."

"I've seen nature shows," Frank said, "but it's nothing like the real thing."

"It's a healthy specimen," Morris said. "Mojave rattlesnake, *Crotalus scutulatus scutulatus*, approximately thirty-six inches long. We'll get a good supply of venom from this one." He lifted the fangs from the cup, then gently pressed them back again.

"See the pits just behind his eyes? That's why they call them pit vipers."

Morris lifted the snake from the cup.

"That's it for this one. Want to hold him?"

"No," Frank said.

"What the hell," Morris said. "You only live once."

He held Frank's arm and pulled him over until Frank was forced to grab the snake wiggling dangerously in Morris's left hand.

"That's right," Morris said. "Put your hand behind mine. Get a good grip. Now, with your other hand, grab his body. He may try to shake a bit. Don't be surprised. There. Got him?"

"Yes." His heart was pounding and he wondered if the snake could sense his fear.

"He's all yours."

Frank held the snake, wonder gradually overcoming his fear. The snake twisted to the left and the right, and Frank was glad he had a good two-handed hold. He didn't know how Morris held them with just one hand. The snake twisted again but somehow Frank held on.

"You're doing great," Morris said, "just don't let go. He's probably got enough venom left for one good strike."

"Now you tell me," Frank said. The snake stopped wiggling, but Frank could feel the tension in the body that rubbed against his arm.

Morris took the teacup and poured it into a plastic bottled labeled C. S. S.

“It’s nothing to be concerned about. If it happens, it happens. I’ve been bit sixteen times—only a couple were life-threatening.”

Frank increased his grip. He wondered if it was possible to strangle a snake.

“Okay,” Morris said. “Let’s turn him loose.” Morris held the snake behind its head with his left hand. With his right hand he gently caressed the snake and whispered words Frank couldn’t immediately make out, but later at home he was certain had been, “There you go, my beauty.” With one final whisper, Morris bent to the ground and gently tossed the snake up the trail. The snake lay there, stunned for a moment, then with a shake of its rattle rapidly glided away.

“How was that?”

“Amazing,” Frank said. Jen would never believe what had just happened.

“You hear the legends of snakes born with two heads instead of a head and a tail. I suppose people have spent their lives looking for such things, but you can’t believe how grand it is to see two males fighting over a female. It’s a dance, a grand dance.”

“Then when they’re all worn out, the female strikes?”

“What you talking about? Females don’t kill their mates.” Morris scratched his shiny white head. “Course, that don’t mean they don’t fight a little. That’s only natural. Rattler’s get a little cranky when they’re shedding their skins—or when they’re mating.”

Morris led him back toward the snake patch. “They should be calmed down by now,” he said.

He stopped.

“Look,” he said, pointing to a bush. At the center, perhaps a dozen snakes, six or seven inches long, were writhing about.

“My friend was right,” Morris said. “The snakes are laying their young.”

Frank’s dad had shown him a similar nest when he was only seven or eight, but he hadn’t remembered much more than the warning not to touch them, because baby snakes had even more potent venom than their mothers.

“It’s a miracle of nature,” Morris said. “When they’re born, the mother abandons them. These snakes come out ready to hunt and survive.”

Frank knew now why Tommy had stayed away. The sight would have given him nightmares for months. Imagine these babies crawling in a sleeping bag!

“What an opportunity,” Morris said. “With so many snakes around I’ll have to come back when they start traveling to their den. That’s a real sight, seeing those rattlers crawling from every direction, going to their den to hibernate.”

“Is it nearby?” Frank asked.

“Hard to tell. It might be miles from here. It’s a sight you won’t want to miss. You married? Bring your wife. I get a kick out of watching a woman’s reaction when she sees her first rattlesnake.”

When Frank didn’t answer, Morris gestured to Frank’s wedding band. “Is that for show?”

“Not yet.”

“Bring your wife next time.”

“Maybe.”

Morris stared at him. “Something’s not quite right about you,” he said. “But it don’t matter. The desert will clean out your pipes.” Morris continued before Frank could protest. “You want to help me catch another one?”

“Of course,” Frank said. This whole adventure was bringing back memories of when Tommy had earned his nickname. There’d been a time when Frank wasn’t afraid of snakes, when he wasn’t afraid of the unknown. He liked the power he felt when he held a rattler in his hands. He hoped that someday he’d have enough nerve to catch one by himself. He felt a surge of excitement. Maybe Morris would let him milk the next one.



“Thanks, Buddy,” Morris said. His grip was bony but firm when they shook hands. Then Morris slowly eased behind the rawhide covered steering wheel in his truck. He put the bottles of venom in the glovebox—a full one labeled C. S. S. and smaller bottle labeled C. C. C. Morris had explained that in this region, the Mojave sidewinder, *Crotalus cerastes cerastes*, was almost as common as the Mojave rattlesnake.

From the glovebox Morris pulled out a leather string with a snake rattler attached.

“Got a little souvenir,” he said.

"That isn't necessary," Frank said.

"Got to mark your first snake hunt." Morris rattled the necklace and handed it to Frank. "A good luck charm." He smiled and waved at Tommy and drove off before Frank could thank him.

Tommy peeked over Frank's shoulder.

"That old coot," he said. "I've been trying to talk him out of that for years. What's so special about you?"

"We share an interest in snakes," Frank said, a little smugly. He admired the rattle, fingering the buttons, then he put the necklace on. There were twelve delicate circles on the rattle. "But I guess you wouldn't know about that."

"That's for sure," Tommy said. "I ate rattler meat at a picnic once. But I don't play with them."



Since meeting Morris, a new factor had been introduced to Castle Blackrock: the talisman. The Evil Magician could cast his spell, but the hero could remain safe as long as he shook his talisman. Finding it could be a minor quest in itself. Before gaining entry to the Castle Blackrock, the Hero would have to find the Rattlesnake Man and beg, borrow, buy, or steal his magical amulet. The method chosen would depend on the skills and abilities of the player.

Frank was excited when he made this discovery, and he stood, took the rattle from beneath his shirt, and shook it at the four corners of the world, like he imagined a Shaman would. He was turning to the fourth corner, Jen's door, when he saw her standing there regarding him strangely.

"Don't mind me," he said gaily. "I'm just trying out my talisman."

"Where did that come from?" she asked.

"Got it on a rattle snake hunt a few days back."

"What's happening to you? Are things that bad here?"

"I met an old guy named Morris. He gave it to me."

"I know things have been tough since your dad died. I thought you might eventually open up and talk about it, but that's not going to happen, is it?"

Frank could feel a smile growing, and though he knew Jen would misunderstand why he was doing it, he couldn't stop.

"The old man," he said, "was never one to express himself. I take after him."

"He never had any problem talking to me."



When Frank was twelve, he saw his first rocket launch—a triton from Vandenburg AFB. The rocket carried a military satellite, one of the KH series the military and CIA were so fond of in those days. The satellite could sense infrared, which was perfect for analyzing an enemy's smoke stacks in hopes of gaining valuable intel. The lens could zoom in and provide critical data about enemy movements, specialized shots not available even with an SR-22 Blackhawk flyby. As a child Frank didn't think about the payload; he was content to watch the rocket's exhaust light up the sky.

Frank and his father were on the beach. Frank followed the path of the rocket, walking slowly through the sand until he felt the water lapping at his toes, swirling around his ankles. His toes sunk into the sand and he could smell wood smoke and feel his father's hand on his shoulder. "Can you see it, son?" his father whispered. "That's the future. Rockets to the stars."

After the rocket became a dot in the night, they went back to their bonfire. The sand stuck to Frank's feet. The fire dried his damp pant cuffs. He watched his father prepare the hot-dogs. Occasionally a flea dug into Frank's leg and he brushed it away. Soon they were met by some of his father's friends and the beers were passed around. Sam, his father's coworker at Vandenburg AFB, came with his daughter, Jenny.

Frank and Jenny sat in the dunes, just a few yards from the fire. She smelled like soap and spearmint gum.

"We saw it from the car," Jenny said. "It was beautiful."

Ten years later they would go to another beach party. Jen would be on summer break from MIT, and they would slip away from the others and Frank would hold Jen close and feel the warmth of her breath on his chest, the brush of her hair against his arms

and he would ask her to marry him. But for now, they just listened to the men around the fire. Jenny was bit by a flea and rapidly rubbed her leg.

"I hate those things," she said.

"You've got to take the good with the bad," Frank said, quoting his father.

"That's easy for you to say. You don't have to wear a skirt and have people look at the bites on your legs. Just look."

Frank leaned close. He ran his fingers down her leg, searching for the bite marks among all the smooth skin.

"That feels nice," she said.

Frank was whispering an answer when he noticed Sam staring at him. Sam casually walked over and pulled Frank closer to the fire. He gave Frank a sip of beer and laughed when Frank sputtered at the sour taste. "Hank," he said, "your boy isn't much of a drinker."

"Takes after his mother," Hank said, "and his *viticulteur* grandpappy."

"Somehow I can't see you with your pants rolled up to your knees, mashing grapes."

"They wouldn't even let me enter the vineyard," Hank said. "They said I didn't have a palate for fine wine. Ha! I'll stick with Milwaukee's finest."

As the air cooled the men crowded around the fire. Hank and Sam were red-faced, distorted images in the flickering shadows.

"We could do it," Sam said, "but we didn't have a sense of mission."

"Sense of mission?" Hank shouted. "We had a sense of mission. We were going to send a nuclear rocket to the stars. We had a purpose. We were going to make Isaac Asimov proud." Frank's dad stumbled on a piece of driftwood and nearly fell into the fire. "We worked around the radiation safety limits; we put our lives and our dreams in that project in the desert, and what did we get? Budget cuts. Then the project shutdown. We had the sense of mission." He took a long pull on his beer. "But Congress was more interested in subsidizing farmers for not growing crops than in reaching for the stars."

He leaned over Frank. "What ever you do," he said, "don't go to work for people who don't give a damn about you. Do you hear me? I want you to promise."

“Hank,” Sam said. “He’s just a kid. Calm down.”

“Don’t ever go to work for the damned politicians. Promise me.”

Frank backed up until he bumped into Jenny. His father followed, looming over him.

“I promise,” Frank said.

His dad turned and rotated his arm to throw his beer in the fire than stopped just before the hand release. Beer sloshed out of the can and into the fire. “The hell with it,” he said. “Make your own choices.” He dropped the can in the sand.

Frank listened to the beer hissing in the fire and he squeezed Jenny’s hand.



“Tommy wants to go to Lake Isabella on Saturday,” Frank said.

Jen wasn’t ready to change the subject and he tensed for an argument, but she surprised him by not pursuing the conversation.

“Someone has to keep an eye on you,” she said. “Next thing I know, you’ll be keeping snakes in the wine hutch.”

“You never know.”

“Come to bed,” she said.

“To the inner sanctum?”

“Then don’t.”

“If you insist,” he said.



It was billed as a gala event, and on Saturday Frank and Jen were driving west on Highway 178, climbing to Walker’s Pass. To their left, directly south, was Robber’s Roost, an outcropping of rock that rose above the sage and dominated the landscape for miles around. Local lore said that outlaws had buried their stage coach loot in the rocks or in the surrounding desert. Frank and his dad had found a natural cave nearby that went into the ground at a smooth but steady angle. They had walked in without crouching, but as they continued the cave walls narrowed until they were forced to go back. The cave curved around and Frank knew it ended at Robber’s Roost, if only they could get through the restriction. But his dad was firm. They had to go back.

The desert hills narrowed as the car climbed, then suddenly opened into a mountain valley filled with Joshua trees and sage.

"We used to play there," Frank said, pointing to a sand bank on the other side of a dry wash. "Dad would collect flashy rocks for his so-called mineral collection. He'd load them in the trunk of the car while Tommy and I wrestled and rolled down the hill, playing King of the Mountain."

"No worries."

"None. Dad was sick of the desert. He was probably thinking of ways to get a transfer, but overall it was a carefree time. Seeing that hill reminds me of what it was like to be a kid."

"Would you go back?"

"Would you?"

"I wasn't the one raised here."

"Go back to what? Being a kid? Or Santa Barbara?"

"I believe in facing reality. I don't have time to look back."

"What is this all about? Are you ready to call it quits?"

"I'm just running a test," Jen said.



There wasn't much at Stern Cove. After descending from Walker's Pass, the South Fork of the Kern River was bordered by inviting willow trees, incongruously surrounded by hillsides of rock and sage. They should have stopped at the South Fork Game Preserve, Frank thought. They could have eaten in the shade of huge willows, but he knew that Tommy had chosen one of the most barren coves so he could ride his damned motorcycle.

Stern Cove was rocky and the sage extended almost to the lake front, but where the lake had receded due to agricultural usage, the ground was sandy, muddy in low spots, ideal for a dirt bike. Across the lake was the tiny town of Mt. Mesa, dominated by Cook's Peak. The lake was a vivid blue, and besides being stocked with bass, crappie, blue gill, and trout, was also a favored spot for wind surfers and a new sport only made possible by the exposed lake front: dirt biking.

When Frank and Jen arrived, Tommy was taking a sandy-haired boy for rides, bouncing over the rocky ground, then approaching the lake, sliding in the mud and splashing in the water, accompanied by squeals of laughter from the child.

A young woman standing by a rickety card table waved.

"I'm Stacy," she said, extending her hand. "You must be Frank and Jenny." Her hand was moist, soft, and for a brief moment Frank didn't want to let go.

"That's right," Jen said, and Frank released Stacy's hand with a nervous laugh.

"Did you go to school in Inyokern, too?" Stacy asked Jen. "Tommy says I knew Frank there, but I don't remember a lot from those days."

"My dad worked at Vandenburg."

"I used to live on Broadway," Frank said, "and you lived on Sand Canyon."

"So you remember me?"

And though Frank thought he might answer for it later, he couldn't resist saying, "How could I forget you?"

There was an awkward silence. Stacy made darting glances between Frank and Jen. He knew she was appraising him. It made him feel a bit giddy and reckless, like he did after a few glasses of a good chardonnay. He carefully avoided looking at Jen.

"I was about to start the hot dogs," Stacy began, when Tommy and the boy roared up on the bike.

"Glad you could make it," Tommy yelled. He set the kickstand, dismounted, pulled the boy from the bike and pushed him into their midst.

"I see you met Stacy," he said. "This is Scott. My little buddy."

Scott held back as Frank and Jen greeted him.

"You can help me with the wine," Tommy said. He held up a bottle of Chablis from a mass market vintner that both Frank and Jen detested.

"How thoughtful of you, Tom," Jen said.

"To honor the occasion," Tommy said grandly, "I'm only drinking wine today."

Frank noticed that the bottle at least had a cork—he'd expected a screw on cap. He dug in his pocket and withdrew a corkscrew. He and Tommy got the wine sorted out while Jen and Stacy organized the food.

While Tommy rambled on about how happy he was to see them, Frank sat on a rock and watched the women.

Stacy had a lush, well-formed quality. Her loose T-shirt couldn't conceal her curves. Her blonde hair contrasted nicely with her tanned arms and legs and Nordic cheekbones. Jen was willowy—and in comparison to Stacy, looked downright anorexic. She didn't have the abundant curves—but there was something damned sexy about the way her shirt left her midriff bare, and the way her shorts slung low on her hips. Frank felt a reckless impulse to reach out and kiss his wife on her bare belly. The feeling was so palpable that he thought he might have done it in some psychic sense, or unconsciously said something, because Jen was looking at him, startled, like a deer standing in the headlight's glare just before it leaps to safety.

He reached a hand and she tentatively took it. Slowly he pulled her into his lap. His left arm circled her waist and rubbed the smooth, taut muscles on her belly.

"We wouldn't have missed this for anything," he said. He felt a tingling in his thighs as she perched on his lap. Her hair caressed his cheek in a way he hadn't felt for months.

"No," she said, her breath sweet. "We wouldn't have."

Frank could hear the surprise in her answer, the same surprise that he himself was feeling. Stacy was still alluring, leaning against Tommy's shoulder, but Frank knew that no one was more sensual or feminine than his wife.

As they chatted at the table, Frank's fingers straying to the waistband of Jen's shorts, they watched the young boy playing in the wind-chopped waves of the lake.

"He's so cute," Jen said. "You must be proud."

"I am," Stacy said.

"He's adorable," Jen said, and Frank wondered what might be in their future. Were there children inside Castle Blackrock, or was that part of the sequel he had yet to create? The rattle pressed against his chest and he wanted to lift his wife and dance and make the rattles sing to the winds around them.

Desert Lakes

Tommy Jenson loved the desert. He loved the smell of sage and creosote and the taste of dust as he raced down a trail on his dirt bike. Whipping down a dry wash, the banks rushing by at eighty miles an hour, he felt in tune with the rhythm of the trail and the winds that howled in the canyons.

There was a wild side that awoke when he was riding. Some guys needed to drink before they found their courage; others had to be goaded by their friends. Not Tommy. He just wanted a canteen of water and a full tank of gas and a trail to ride. Earlier that summer his buddies had talked him into trying out for Team Yamaha. Tommy knew he wasn't as good as the professionals, but he had never embarrassed himself in the amateur races he'd entered. He chased the leaders around the track, his Yamaha YZ250 lagging behind the Yamaha veterans, but not by far, and when the crew chief found out that Tommy did his own mechanical work, he offered him a job on the crew. "Think about it," the man said. "Your modified carburetor is unique—but how would you like to be on a team where every part is custom?" Tommy was pleased by the offer but he just gave a sideways smile and walked away. He had things good at home. He didn't want to live on the road.

Nothing stopped him when he was on a dirt bike. If he thought about it, he'd say it was from all the reruns he'd seen of *Rat Patrol* where the bloody tough English and American soldiers fought it out in the desert against the Germans.

One Sunday he came into Ridgecrest after a weekend of motocross action. Wearing his jacket and pants with the Xtreme logo, with his racing boots still carrying canyon dust, he stopped at Walmart for some Advil. He had a few aches after a weekend of jumping drywashes, but if anybody noticed, Tommy would blame it on sleeping in the back of his truck. He wasn't going to let a little pain interfere with his plans. He was going to clean up and check out the action at Casa Rancho. As he passed the hardware section, he heard a voice that gave him a thrill—Stacy, a childhood friend who had gotten pregnant and had dropped out of school in order to marry Stanley O'Connor. Tommy had heard that Stacy was back in Inyokern, but he had more reasons not to call her than to call

her—most notably, because she'd disrupted his life before, and he didn't see any sense in going back over an old trail. Then he'd heard her joke with the clerk and felt a familiar tug that he hadn't felt in years. So he said hello.

Stacy stared, then she rushed over and gave him a quick hug. For a moment he got a tantalizing whiff of vanilla perfume.

"Tommy," she said. "I thought you'd be long gone."

"Not me. You were the one who had to escape."

He immediately regretted the remark. Stacy seemed sad and pensive for a moment, then she shook her head and smiled.

"That's all in the past now," she said. "I'm back at Mom's."

"Where's Stanley? How's he getting along with your mother?" Tommy couldn't help smiling. Stanley had been his only rival with Stacy, but he had been even less patient than Tommy, and much less able to cope with Mrs. Benson's piety and a religion that bordered on fanaticism.

"He isn't," Stacy said. "I'm getting a divorce."

"I heard you had a kid," he said.

"His name's Scott," she said. "You'll have to meet him."

"I'd like that," Tommy said.



Stacy didn't have the speed or agility to be an athlete; in high school, she didn't have a desire to be on the cheerleading squad, though she was certainly popular enough; she wasn't a brain or a druggie or a geek. What she was, though, had been enough to make Tommy wake up in the middle of the night, his heart revving like a dirtbike when it was airborne. In Inyokern Elementary, she was the little blonde in pigtails, always willing to play a game of tetherball. She cried when she fell, and once as she ran, when several boys chased her and her friend home, hooting, their voices raised in wordless insults. When their teacher found out the next day and questioned the children involved, while waiting in the hallway Stacy accepted Tommy's desperate apology and said she wouldn't tell. But her friend did, and Tommy told his first lie at school: "I wasn't chasing anybody. I was just running home."

Stacy had changed from that awkward girl in Inyokern, the girl who had shrieked when she opened the box containing a rare and valuable leopard lizard Tommy and Frank had captured before class, a hissing, spitting, furious lizard. Frozen by her scream, the boys could only watch as Stacy dropped the box and the spotted lizard sped away, too fast to catch on the gravel parking lot. Stacy went from that quiet girl in Inyokern who always placed second in the spelling contests to a desert flower in full bloom when they started school at Burroughs High in Ridgecrest. But what made Tommy wake up in the night wasn't what Stacy had become. She was as nice and sweet as always, qualities Tommy had dismissed as a child, but now, when he wanted to ask her out, he discovered that she was only interested in Stanley, his best friend.

When Frank moved away, Tommy felt lost. He hadn't even been able to say a proper good-bye. One moment they were in class, waiting for Frank's father. When Mr. Grier arrived he spoke to the teacher; Frank and Tommy looked nervously at each other; then Tommy was distracted while the teacher's aide checked his homework, and when he looked up again, Frank was gone. For days Tommy was in a slump. Then Randy, the slow class bully, pushed him off the swing set. Tommy cursed and Randy charged. When Randy reached him, Tommy stepped to the side, extended his right leg, grabbed Randy, and threw him over his leg, using the only Judo throw his dad had taught him. Randy hit hard and lay in the sand. Then he slowly looked up and there was a look of rage in his eye. Tommy felt riveted to the spot, like the time he'd flipped over a board and found a sidewinder coiled and hissing, ready to strike. The shock Tommy felt seeing a snake in such an unexpected place was like the surprise and fear he was feeling now. Randy brushed off the sand. "I'm going to bust you," he said. Tommy's leg began to tremble, and that was when Stan walked up and knocked Randy down again. Then the teachers noticed the fight. Stan was taken to the principal, and it was Stan who got paddled, without ever telling anybody how the fight got started; and Tommy and Stan became friends.

Tommy had been able to return the favor. Years later their gym class was rock-climbing in the Trona Pinnacles. As usual, Stan was showing off, climbing before the teacher was ready, with only a tentative hold on his rope. He slipped, the rope got

tangled, and he would've choked to death if Tommy hadn't been on the ground and been able to reach Stanley's legs and hold him until their teacher arrived and released the rope. Not surprisingly, that was the last time Stanley tried rock-climbing.

Stanley O'Connor had always been tough. In Ridgecrest and Inyokern, many of the children's parents worked on the military base. Their parents were part of the rising middle class, people with blue collar laborer backgrounds, now receiving training in government apprenticeship programs, becoming technicians who rubbed shoulders with engineers and designers of advanced military weapons. Stanley's dad owned the Shell station. He was a gruff, coarse old man, always the one for a joke, one that carried across the street when Mrs. Benson, who bought her gas in Ridgecrest because she refused to trade with Mr. O'Connor, walked into the Inyokern Market.

As Tommy followed Stacy back to her mother's home, they passed the market and the Shell station and Tommy wished that old man O'Connor was still alive. He'd been a good old man. He wondered what O'Connor would think if he knew Tommy was following Stan's wife back to her home? But he knew the answer. O'Connor would tell Stan to kick Tommy's ass. Sorry, buddy, Tommy thought. You had your chance. The friendship they'd thought was so stable had fallen apart after Stanley and Stacy eloped to Reno without Mrs. Benson's approval. That was when Tommy became passionate about motocross. He entered races. He found a few local sponsors—Mr. Adam's from the meat market, ACE Hardware, Desert Autoparts. Since Stacy had left town, Tommy had never been in love; instead, he tended to have brief flings with women who thought he had an exciting life.



It had been years since Tommy had been in Inyokern. Whenever he drove through town he was reminded of the little house on Canyon Street with the redwood fence his dad had made. Building the fence had been one of the few things they had shared. Together, they had dug the holes and set the fence posts. His father had been meticulous, spending extra days making sure the fence was perpendicular to the ground and straight not only to the eye but to the string he tied to stakes on the boundary of their lot. Above all, his dad had wanted the fence to be sturdy, able to withstand the desert winds. Mr. O'Connor had

thought it was a great joke, but when Tommy drove down Broadway he glanced down Canyon and was pleased to see that after seventeen years the fence was still standing. This was also where Tommy's dad left home for the last time, though not before the neighbors heard the loud voices that penetrated Tommy's back bedroom where he played music and pretended that the noises were just part of the rhythm of the song.

Stacy lived on Sand Canyon, just past Canyon. The street was paved now, but her house had the same weather-beaten look it had had for years.

"Stacy," Mrs. Benson said as soon as they walked in the house, "Stanley called again. I refused the charges."

"God," Stacy said. "He won't leave me alone."

Her mother glanced at her and Tommy saw that nothing had changed about Mrs. Benson. The years had just made her more dour. The look she gave Stacy was the same one she used to give to Mr. O'Connor when he'd holler a good morning across the street when she was going to the market.

"You promised."

"Yes, Mother."

There was a photo of Stacy on the piano. Stacy with a smile and a flower in her hair, standing in a wedding chapel. A man's arm circled Stacy's waist but the man wasn't in the shot. Looking closer, Tommy could see that the photo had been bent, removing the groom. Had Stacy altered it? Or had her mother, still bitter about the elopement and the surprise of gaining old man O'Connor for an in-law?

The old woman adjusted her glasses.

"Is that you, Tommy?"

"Yes, Mrs. Benson."

"I read in the paper you were racing motorcycles in Mexico."

"Just a few events this summer."

"I didn't know you raced," Stacy said.

Tommy just smiled. "It's no big deal," he said.

"We have a sister church in Mexico," Mrs. Benson said. "Did you know that?"

"How could he, Mother? He doesn't go to the Assembly."

"It's never too late, now is it?" When Stacy didn't answer, Mrs. Benson turned to Tommy. "Is it?"

"I'm just here to help with the cockroaches," Tommy said.

"Stacy brought them with her from Bakersfield."

While Stacy and her mother were arguing about the source of the cockroaches, Tommy looked in the kitchen. Her son, Scott, was on his belly by the kitchen cupboard, a jar in hand, two fat roaches scurrying inside. His straw blond hair was cut razor short above his ears in a bowl-cut. Tommy nodded to a remark Mrs. Benson made and then slipped into the kitchen.

"Hi there," Tommy said. He opened the box of boric acid powder and started spreading it underneath the sink and behind the refrigerator. Though the boy didn't speak, Tommy knew he was watching. Tommy spread the powder in other likely spots. Then Stacy came in.

"She drives me crazy," she whispered. "Can we get out of here?"

"Sure," Tommy said. "Whatever you want."

Stacy was hungry so they went out for Chinese food. As they talked, she complained about life with Stanley. They'd lived in low income apartments and had scrounged for part-time jobs. She was currently looking for work. Stanley was still in jail for spouse abuse.

Scott started playing with his spoon, sliding it over the table. His head was bent, his body stiff and alert since the reference to Stanley.

"Scott," she said. "Stop that." The boy rattled the spoon on the table.

"It sounds like a hard way to live. I could never just pick up and move."

"Every time he quit I knew it was time to start packing. I hated that."

She took the spoon away from Scott.

"Scott," she said. "Did you know Tommy was racing in Mexico?"

"Big deal," he mumbled.

"See," Tommy said. "I told you."

"It's nothing Dad couldn't do."

"Your father never did anything right."

“He did so.”

“What he did best put him in jail.”

“It isn’t true,” Scott said.

“Look,” she said to Tommy. She opened her purse and handed Tommy a photo.

Stacy had only been part of the reason Tommy and Stanley had split paths.

Tommy had been on probation for three years after helping Stanley break into some old mining shacks above the community college. So Stanley had gone from thief to wife abuser. The connection seemed unreal, even for Stanley, but Tommy held the proof between his fingers. Stacy’s eyes were black blots above cheekbones mottled black and blue.

“This is what your buddy did to me,” she said.

He compared the images. Stacy, before him, in a loose B.U.M. sweatshirt and the Stacy in the photo, defeated and beaten. This was not something he could cope with.

Tommy decided to take Stacy home. He decided to go to Casa Rancho after all.



Stacy started visiting Tommy regularly, though with his rotating shift work it was difficult for them to see each other every day. When he worked daylight and graveyard shifts at the chemical plant in Trona, they spent the evenings together. She frequently drove to Trona and spent the day at his trailer, even if he was working. Stacy wouldn’t live with him; she wouldn’t even spend the night because she said she didn’t want trouble with her mother. She did, however, stay until she knew her mother had gone to bed. But Tommy couldn’t complain. The sex was good. After seven years of marriage, Stacy was matter of fact about what she liked. That first night, after she put Scott to bed, she and Tommy went for a drive and she went down on him in Albertson’s parking lot.

One evening Tommy brought over a bottle of wine when Mrs. Benson was at the Wednesday night prayer meeting. Stacy told Scott to get ready for bed. She followed him into the bedroom.

“You’ll do as you’re told,” she said. She returned to the living room and gulped her wine.

“He didn’t want to go to bed?”

“He didn’t want to wear a diaper.”

“At his age, who would?”

“You think this is a joke? He’s been wetting the bed since Stanley went to jail.”

She poured another glass of wine and stared at Tommy. “You don’t know what it’s been like since the trial. Scott won’t listen to a thing I tell him.”

“He’ll come around. The desert is a great place to grow up.”

“I hate it,” she said. “It was a mistake come back.”

“Give it a chance. You’ll like it here. Trust me.”

She gave him an assessing look. “We’ll see,” she said.

They drank another glass of wine. She leaned against him while he massaged her shoulders. He ran his fingers through her hair and over her cheek. He kissed her neck and she nibbled on his ear lobe.

“I love it when you do that,” she said. “Remember how much fun we had before we got mar—”

His hand tightened on her arm and Stacy moaned, whether from pain or passion he wasn’t sure. His hips pressed into her, grinding her into the sofa. A series of images hit him, then. Stacy with a smile and a flower in her ear—Stanley glaring at him across the jail cell—Stacy after the beating. She thought he was acting like Stanley? His loins went cold at the thought. Feeling nauseous, Tommy pushed Stacy away.

“I’m not Stanley,” he said.



Tommy didn’t sleep well that night. In the morning, he drank his coffee and hoped for a quiet day at work. From his trailer he could see the white expanse of Searles lake, merging with hazy mountains in the distance. The lake was one of the greatest potash deposits in the world, and the unit Tommy worked in was part of an intricate network. The liquor—mother liquor one—was pumped out of Searles Lake, heated up to dissolve the minerals, and piped to the Potash unit where Tommy worked. Tommy’s unit removed the potash and pumped the liquor, now called mother liquor two, to the next unit, where the boron was removed. Then the liquor was sent to the sulfur unit, and so on, until all that was left was waste water, which got sent back to the dry lake and pumped into the

ground. The lake amazed him. There were enough minerals for a thousand years or more. He was fascinated with the changes taking place deep in the earth, the waste water churning and mixing and dissolving minerals, becoming useful once again.

Three hours into the shift that day, a temperature gauge in the dryer control room malfunctioned. Instead of dry fertilizer, several tons of wet fertilizer came out of the dryer. The elevator shaft plugged up and the equipment shut down. The product was too heavy to go out on the conveyor belt. Tommy and the dryer operator spent several hard, hot hours with shovels cleaning up the mess, getting the equipment back on line. Though he was tired, it fit Tommy's mood perfectly. He didn't have to think. He didn't have to talk. All he had to do was stab, scoop, and swing the shovel.

When the equipment was running, Tommy went to the warehouse and walked along the series of belts that carried the potash out to the warehouse. The shed was over a quarter-mile long. In the distance he could hear a grader, but nearby the only sounds came from a squeaking pulley, the whine of a conveyor motor that faded away as he walked, and the tapping of his rubber boots on the metal grate. Slight vibrations stirred up dust on the catwalks and beams. He checked the end of the belt. It was forty feet to the concrete below; the potash was only about halfway up. He wouldn't have to move the chute.

He took off his hard-hat. The grader had moved away and the warehouse was silent. At that moment Stacy seemed very far away. Night shifts could be spooky, with just a narrow strip of light along the walkway. But in the daylight as Tommy leaned against the rail and closed his eyes, the warehouse seemed to be the most peaceful place he had ever known.



Stacy and Tommy and Scott met Jen and Frank for a picnic at Stern Cove. It was a marvelous day. There were a few bass fisherman in their fancy-dancy boats. Across the lake, jet skiers were active at Paradise Cove, and the wind surfers were out as well. It was the first time Tommy and Scott went dirt riding, and the boy was excited when Tommy started the dirt bike and waved him over, but he seemed reluctant to get on.

"Don't worry," Tommy said. "I haven't fallen in years. We'll just take it easy at first." Scott gingerly climbed up and in front of Tommy, and they were off. He squealed when he realized that Tommy had no intention of taking it slow. The tires spun around in a half cookie and they raced toward the lake. Tommy went right down to the shoreline, where the ground was a soft mush. They started doing figure eights in the mud, Scott gripping Tommy's arms.

Tommy couldn't see how Scott was reacting, other than an occasional desperate grasp on his arms, but from his shouts, the boy was enjoying himself. Tommy remembered the first time he'd jumped a dry wash. He'd been filled with a mixture of fear and excitement, but he'd gotten an amazing adrenaline rush when the bike bounced down and he brought it under control.

"Hold on," Tommy yelled, and with an extra burst they started doing a wheelie in the mud. They continued for several yards then Tommy let the bike bounce back to the ground. They stopped to catch their breaths, idling the dirtbike at the edge of the lake. Tommy slapped Scott on the shoulder.

"Having fun?"

"Let's do that again!"



After their picnic, while circling the east side of Lake Isabella on the way back to Ridgecrest, Stacy told Tommy that Frank was a pervert. Tommy glanced at Scott, but he was crowded against the passenger door of the Datsun truck, head out the window, feeling the breeze.

"It was creepy, the way he watched me, with his wife standing there."

"Frank doesn't have a creepy bone in his body."

"You should have seen him."

"He's a dreamer. He'll probably put you in the game he's designing."

"He wanted me."

"You just think that with your blonde hair and big headlights every guy wants to get into your pants."

"Tommy, you didn't see him. You were out with Scott."

"And you know what? You'd be right."

"He was looking at me."

"I saw a man in love with his wife. I bet they didn't get out of the parking lot before they did the wild thing."

Tommy ran his hand over her leg, stopping just below the hemline on her shorts.

"And who are you thinking about? Him, or me?" He pressed his hand further up her leg.

"Not with Scott in the truck."

"Ah, Scott," he said. They were approaching a dirt road and a sign that said, South Fork Game Preserve. "Hang on, Buddy," he shouted, and made a hard right turn. The truck skidded in the gravel and their heads bumped against the roof before they jounced down a short dirt road and stopped against a locked gate in an empty parking lot. Before them was an inviting thicket of shady willow trees. With all the dry, sage covered hillsides around, South Fork was a green paradise. They sat there, somewhat dazed, then Scott looked around.

"This is great," he yelled. He crawled out the window and ran toward the woods.

"Damn it, Tommy. Why are you so wild?"

Tommy moved his hand from the steering wheel back to her leg.

"I thought you liked that about me?" They stretched out on the seat.

Her skin was damp. He could taste the sweat on her upper lip.

"Not here," she said.

He pressed his knee between her thighs.

"I'll never understand you," he said.

"Scott might come back."

Tommy looked over the dashboard.

"He's nowhere in sight," he said.

Later, when Stacy was slowly readjusting her shirt, they heard a shout from the woods.

"Maybe we should check on him," she said.

Tommy listened closely. It was a shout of excitement, not fear.

"He'll be all right," he said.

He wanted to hug her but she held him at arm's length.

"I want to know something," she said. "When we were kids, why did you chase me?"

"I didn't know enough about girls then to do the job right."

"No," she said, "that day. Why did you yell and chase me with those other boys?"

"I don't remember."

"I had bad dreams for weeks. Did you know that?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Did you want to hurt me?"

They heard another shout from the woods. Tommy started to pull away, but Stacy would let go.

"Didn't you like me?"

"That's a silly question."

Then Scott shouted again.

Tommy pulled away.

"There might be snakes around here," he said.

"Why did you do it?"

"I chased you because you ran," he said. He pulled away, and this time Stacy let him go.

Entering the game preserve was like stepping into another world. Tommy was glad to leave that other world behind. The South Fork of the Kern River was dry in the fall, so he walked down the streambed, his feet sinking into the loose sand. The trees formed a canopy above his head, allowing the sunlight to enter only in mottled patches. The air was cool. Tommy followed the yells until he saw the boy, standing on the bank, looking wildly downstream.

"What happened."

"A bird flew through here. It must have been ten feet wide."

"Sounds like a monster."

"It was huge."

"Be real quiet," Tommy said, "and maybe we'll see it again."

They walked several hundred feet and a bird emerged from a tree, its great wings flapping as it flew beneath the tree canopy.

"Is that what you saw?"

"Yes."

"That's an owl," Tommy said. "It must have a three foot wingspan." They watched as the bird flew out of sight. "What a sight."

"If we follow this river bed," he continued, "it runs into the lake."

"If we go too far, Momma will be alone."

"We won't go any farther," Tommy said. "If we're quiet, we might see a deer."

"That'd be neat."

"You ever see one?"

"No."

"Little Buddy," Tommy said, "we'll just have to change that." He brushed a few twigs from Scott's shoulders. His shoulders were thin and bony. Scott jumped when Tommy first touched him, then he relaxed. They stood there for a moment, Tommy's hand resting on his shoulder. If things had turned out differently in high school, Scott could have been his son. Tommy wondered what it would be like to have a son.

They heard a muffled shout from the direction of the truck.

"It looks like your mom's wondering what happened to us. We'd better go back."

"I want to see a deer."

"We'll do it next time, I promise."

Tommy turned back and Scott reluctantly followed.

"My dad and I came here years ago," Tommy said, and immediately regretted his words.

"My dad's in jail," Scott said. His eyes were sad but there was a set to his jaw. Knowing kids, Tommy knew Scott had already had to put up with a lot of teasing about that.

"I know."

"He said he's getting out soon."

Tommy focused on the boy, his senses alert.

“Did he say when?”

“No. He wants to take me fishing.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Sometimes. We did stuff together.”

“So did I.”

“You know him?”

“We grew up together,” Tommy said.

The last time Tommy had seen Stanley was after they’d been arrested for breaking into a mining shack above the community college. Stanley thought they’d find a fortune in mining equipment, but all they found were a bunch of old *Playboys*. Then the sheriff pulled up and arrested them and Judge Porter threw them into jail until they could come up with bail. They spent the afternoon in the holding cell glaring at each other, the TV camera monitoring them from above. “This is your fault,” Tommy had said. “We’re in this together,” Stanley had replied.

“Do you ever see him?”

“Not for years.”

“We saw him last month. He said he missed me.”

“My dad left when I was twelve. I missed him for a long time.”

“What did you do?”

“I stayed busy. I got my first dirtbike that year. At first I wanted to be a motocross hero—then as I got older and learned that I wasn’t good enough to win the big races, I just rode, and still raced once in a while, because it felt good.”

“You race even if you can’t win?”

Tommy was glad the conversation had turned to safer ground. “Remember *The Great Escape*?” They had seen it the week before. “The Germans are chasing Steve McQueen along that tall fence. If he wants to get away, he has to jump the fence. But it’s ten feet high, and he’s on level ground. There’s no way he can jump it, right? But he has to try.”

“I wanted him to get away.”

“So did I. We hoped he’d make it. Every time I watch that movie I hope he’ll make it—but I know he won’t.”



A few days later, Scott was playing with his action figures while Tommy looked on, giving him pointers about the best spots on the sofa to position them for an ambush.

“Have you ever watched *Rat Patrol*, Scott?” Tommy asked.

“No. Are they like *Power Rangers*?”

“It was a series we watched before they had all the cool cartoons.”

“Oh.” Scott turned back to his toys.

“The Americans fought the Germans in the Sahara desert. You like the desert?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we’ll have to change that, if you’re going to live up to your name.”

“What?”

“Your mother’s never told you about Death Valley Scotty?”

“No.”

“Scotty was the greatest desert rat who ever lived.”

“What’s a desert rat?”

“A desert rat is someone who can live in the desert—like the guys in *Rat Patrol*. They know where to find water. They know how to survive.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“You have a proud name, but if you ever want to live up to it, you’ll have to join my rat patrol. There was a guy on that TV show who could jump his motorcycle over a German tank. And he had old equipment. Think of what you could do today with a YZ250 or maybe that new Honda Silver Surfer. What do you say? Wanna be on my motocross team?”

“Mom,” he shouted, running into the kitchen. “Me and Tommy are gonna be desert rats.”

Later that day, Tommy watched Scott from the window. For a while Scott studied the ants carrying tiny twigs and leaves and bugs to their hill. Then he plugged up the anthill with a stone and watched them scurry about, trying to figure out how to get home

for supper. When he tired of teasing the ants, he took a hose, filled their hill with water, and made a lake for his Tonka trucks.

Tommy used to dig elaborate trenches and fill them with water for a cement plant, swamps for soldiers to navigate, obstacles for toy trucks. When Tommy was ten his mother went back to work at the bank and his father left on longer and longer business trips, until one day he didn't come back at all. After his father left, Tommy was often alone. He used to go into the desert after a rain, turning over boards to find and tease scorpions with a stick, watching them curl their tails and strike. He liked to catch hissing, puffed-up horned toads. When his mother died, the desert was all the family he wanted.

Stacy joined him by the window.

"I like watching Scott play," Tommy said. "I used to play like that before my dad left."

"My mother said—"

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Tell me."

"You won't like this. When your Dad left town, my mother said it was because your family was sinful and didn't go to church on Sundays."

"That sounds like her," Tommy said. "The old bat."

"Tommy, she's still my mother."

"There's times when I find that hard to believe."

"I'd hate to think what she'd do with Scott if something happened to me."

"I'd look out for him."

"He's not your concern. You're not his father."

"I could be."

"But you aren't. I don't want him getting attached to you."

Tommy didn't know what to say. It was like riding down a trail at night without a headlight. The farther he went down the road with Stacy, the more uncertain became the terrain. He had made friends with Scott so he could be closer to Stacy, but he wondered if maybe he liked her boy better than he liked her.



The next day, Stacy and Scott came over to Tommy's trailer. Tommy had promised Scott he'd take him target shooting, but when he started digging through his toolbox, looking for his gun oil and cleaning patches, Stacy said she wouldn't allow it.

"He's seen enough violence in life," she said.

"There's nothing dangerous about it as long as he understands basic gun safety." He pushed tools aside, digging through the army ammo box.

"He saw enough with his father. He doesn't need another model to learn from."

"That isn't fair! I'm not like that psychopath!" He gripped a crescent wrench until the tips of his fingers went white. "My father left us but he never hit me."

"All men are violent." Stacy said. She gave Scott a hug. "Only little boys are sweet and untainted. Isn't that right? Aren't you momma's little boy?"

Tommy shrugged and walked out to the carport. He still had the wrench in his hand. His starter had gone bad on his last desert trip, so he squatted by his bike and started working on it. He was so intent on his task that he didn't notice the boy looking over his shoulder until he'd disconnected the battery cable and began unbolting the starter.

"Sorry, Pal," he said. "Maybe next time."

"It's OK. What are you doing?"

"Changing the starter. Racing parts are built for performance, not for lifetime use. Want to help?"

Some of the nuts were in hard to reach spots for Tommy's hands, so he got Scott to help. The wrench was big in the boy's hand. His fingers were nimble but frail—more like a girl's.

"You're good at that," Tommy said. "Maybe you should think about being a motorcycle mechanic."

"Dad wants me help him drive trucks."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know."

"You already know how to change a starter. All you have to do is unbolt the battery cable, unbolt the starter, and then one final step that's really important. You have to spit in the wind."

"No way."

"It's true. Spitting is the most important part. Always spit in their eye."

Scott started laughing.

"Really," Tommy said. "It never hurts."

When Stacy came out she saw Tommy and Scott laughing, their hands and shirts smeared with grease.



Tommy planned to go camping at the Barker Ranch. He'd leave his Datsun at Ballarat with some old hippies he liked who lived off the tourist traffic, selling a soda for a buck fifty. He'd ferry supplies up the trail on his Yamaha. It would still be a rough ride, but the road was too damned rocky for his truck. Even Charles Manson had been forced to drive his big old schoolbus around the long way through Death Valley. Tommy might even take Scott.

A few days earlier Scott had asked Tommy if he was going to be his daddy. Tommy was suddenly very aware of Stacy sitting on the couch, waiting for his answer.

"Do you want me to be?"

Scott was silent for several minutes.

"Yes," he said. Stacy reached out and stroked Scott's hair, but when she looked at Tommy, instead of the love he expected to see in her eyes, all he saw was emptiness.

Tommy decided he'd take Scott with him. If Stacy wanted to go, he'd borrow a jeep from one of his buddies. They could all go together.



When Tommy was fifteen he got drunk and rode his dirt bike down the center of the street. He was popping wheelies and having a hell of a time, then the bike started to slip away. His butt slowly slid down the seat until he fell off and scraped his back on the pavement, all the time watching as the cycle bounced once, twice, and then cartwheeled

over him, the spinning spokes barely missing his head. That was the way he felt when he saw the boxes stacked in Stacy's bedroom.

"Going someplace?" he asked.

"Stanley's getting out of jail. He says he's changed. For Scott's sake, I have to try one more time."

"Just like that."

"You knew it would come to this," she said.

"You haven't given me a chance," he said.

"I have to think about Scott," she said.

Mrs. Benson looked up from her sewing.

"It's God's will," she said.

"Mother," Stacy said.

"For Scott's sake, now it's for God's sake? What's God got to do with this?" Tommy asked.

"Stacy is still married. She has obligations."

"After the way he treated her? Is that what you want, Stacy?"

"He says he's changed," she said. "I need to give him another chance."

"What about Scott?"

"Stanley is his father," Mrs. Benson said.

"You're a fool," he said.

Mrs. Benson stiffened. "Get out of my house," she said.

"But so am I," he said.

Stacy followed him to the door.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Maybe one day we can still be friends."

"You can't have it both ways," he said. "And I'm still a damned poor loser." He started to leave, then he pulled her close and kissed her. Over her shoulder he could see her mother bracing for another barrage. For a moment Stacy didn't resist, then she pushed him away.

"You'll never have it this good again," Tommy said as he left. He wondered how she'd explain the kiss to her mother. Then he saw Scott standing by his truck.

"Where you going?"

"I'm going for a long, hard ride," Tommy said.

"Can I come?"

"Not this time," he said.

"Don't go," Scott said.

"It's the way things work out sometimes."

Tommy started to get in his truck, then he paused.

"You still remember how to change a starter?"

"Sure. Disconnect the battery, unbolt the starter, and spit!"

"You've got it," Tommy said. He nodded. "Well that's something. See you, Buddy."

Scott looked so unhappy, Tommy felt queasy. He looked around the cab, panicked, uncertain how to deal with his sudden case of jitters. Then he saw his Xtreme jumper tucked behind the passenger seat. He reached over and tore off the Team Yamaha shoulder patch and handed it to Scott.

"Here," he said. "A little souvenir."

The boy nodded, and Tommy drove away. He hoped the boy would keep the patch. Tommy still had the army chevrons his father had given him. Thinking about his father depressed him, though, and he decided to get a bottle from the liquor store before going home. He'd adjust the timing on his Yamaha and go for a night ride. The last time he'd gone night riding he'd ridden over a twenty-foot ledge and wrecked, cracking the crankcase of his dirt bike and driving a creosote branch in his leg. He'd had to drive twenty miles back to his pickup listening to his blood hiss against the crankcase. The doctor gave him some stitches and a tetanus shot, but the wound took months to heal and he had a scar right next to the teeth marks Stacy had left in his thigh the night before last.

Desert Solace

If anybody had been there, they would have seen the truck approaching for miles before it stopped at the fence that bordered the military base, but the only person who might have noticed, the night foreman at the mine, was on his rounds, making sure that his two workers were still processing the tailings and weren't hiding out and sleeping. Morris got out of the truck and rummaged through his toolbox in the truckbed; his friend, Jake O'Connor, got out more slowly. Jake coughed the moment the cool night air hit his lungs, dry wracking coughs that shook his body as he leaned against the truck.

"You OK?" Morris asked.

Jake raised a hand and signaled yes. He coughed once more then slowly straightened. "Just need a cigarette," he said.

"It'll warm up as soon as the sun comes over the mountains," Morris said.

"Don't worry about me."

Morris handed Jake a shotgun and a box of shells. Morris picked up his bolt action 30-06 he'd bought just before the Korean War and put an extra handful of bullets in his pocket. He waited while Jake loaded the shotgun then he approached the fence. With a boot he pushed down on a strand of barbed wire while he pulled up on the strand above.

"You first," he said. Jake slowly crawled through the fence, then Jake held the weapons while Morris climbed over.

Jake chuckled. When Morris glanced at him, Jake explained. "We just broke a number of federal laws."

"You sure you want to go through with this?"

"Are you?"

"There's no other way," Morris said.



The events that brought Morris to that fence in 1968 weren't exactly linear, but all the same, there was something predictable about them. His father had been one of the first to protest LA's theft of the Owens Lake watershed and a ringleader in the 1925 fiasco when local residents shut off water to the California aqueduct, the same year that

Morris was born. Perhaps the birth of a baby boy slowed Harry Morris's efforts, curbed for a time his bitterness with outside authorities imposing their will on locals; but when Morris was twelve Harry went to prison for blowing up a pump house, a futile gesture that only momentarily stopped the flow of water to LA.

Morris was born in and had lived most of his life in a town that was more dead than alive. For most drivers on Highway 190, Darwin was a sign and a narrow road they passed on their way to Panamint Springs and Death Valley. Perhaps because there was only a collection of rundown shacks, a silver, cobalt, copper, and tungsten mine that closed for good in 1980 (though a milling operation still worked the tailings), and a tiny, volunteer post-office, the AAA autoclub didn't even list Darwin as a ghost town. Tourists passed without taking the side road, and that suited Morris just fine.

He often studied the newcomers who came to the desert to work at the power plant at Coso Hot Springs, or at the Naval Ordnance Test Station (NOTS) at China Lake, like he would any tame critter suddenly adrift in the wild. He refused to keep up with the numerous name changes he'd seen since the base had been established in 1944. They complained about the heat, the glare of the sun, the lack of moisture, but to him their comments showed a general lack of moxie. Newcomers were part of a familiar pattern Morris had noticed in the years he'd spent prospecting and catching rattlesnakes. The desert had a way of weeding out the weak, as it had shown when a wagon train of would be gold miners attempted to cross Death Valley willy-nilly in 1849. Most had died because they didn't know the country. They didn't know the trails. And most importantly, they didn't know where to find water. Only a few had survived from that early expedition. Sometimes Morris found a person who could thrive with a little encouragement. In such cases, he often felt an obligation to help them along. Morris had come to recognize that others, the ones who pissed and moaned, were like a species transplanted by meddling government biologists who only understood enough to disrupt an ecology they'd learned about in a book. Unless newcomers could adapt to the environment and become part of the existing pattern, they were destined to move on or die. Morris had seen the results of Darwin's law throughout his life. He didn't just believe it; he lived it.

As an adult he might have been called Ed, but in boot camp they called him Morris, and the name stuck. Released from the army in the spring of '46, a bit later than most other veterans due to a bout with malaria, Morris took the first bus out of Sacramento. The trip down the San Joaquin Valley was uneventful. The eastbound bus from Bakersfield, though, was another matter.



The air in the bus was stifling. Next to Morris, a large woman with plump forearms, the flesh hanging from her bones like miniature hammocks, elbowed into his space. She said her name was Ogleby and pestered him to tell her about his war experiences, until she realized that he wasn't going to respond to her leading questions. Her perfume reminded Morris of the smell on the lieutenant's uniform after he returned from visiting the nurse's compound in the Philippines. Behind Morris, an asthmatic man wheezed and coughed softly into a kerchief. Further back, a baby's diaper was due to be changed. The smells floated around the tiny space until Morris could feel them pressing into his skull. But when he opened the window, Mrs. Ogleby began to complain about the chill. He took a deep breath of air then closed the window, refusing to acknowledge either her exaggerated sigh or the muted "Thank God." When he turned back from the window, he noticed that she had encroached further into his space.

At Mojave, Morris was in for a surprise. First, there was a five hour delay for the northbound route to Bishop. Second, the depot was filled with a group of unusually cheerful members from the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks lodge in Lancaster. The men and their wives walked around the depot, several taking surreptitious sips from whisky flasks. Morris overheard the talk. They were looking forward to the gaming tables at Vegas. Outside, the driver was warming up the engine on their bus. Mrs. Ogleby was also checking the schedule. She complained to the clerk about the delay to Bishop. Morris knew he didn't want to share another seat with her. He was certain that the baby, now screaming though its diaper had been changed on the bus, would also be going to Bishop.

Morris walked to the counter. The clerk was in his early twenties; he appeared unconcerned about the turmoil in the lobby. He had a US Marine Corps bulldog tattooed on his right forearm.

"I want to change my ticket to Barstow," Morris said. "But I want you to send my duffel bag on to Lone Pine."

"Sure," the man said. "That'll cost extra for the bag."

Then he looked up and smiled when he saw Morris's military uniform with the sergeant's stripes. "Normally, it's extra."

Morris paid the fare. There was a stack of postcards on the counter. Leafing through the pile, he selected a black and white shot of a desert scene with a scraggly Joshua tree, a spindly skeleton set before a gray sky. He jotted a quick note addressed to his folks: "Don't worry about me."

"Have the driver leave this in Lone Pine."

"We don't deliver personal messages—" the clerk began from habit, then he paused. Morris had unthinkingly used the command voice he'd developed in the South Pacific. At only five foot six, Morris had been challenged throughout his army years to get respect from men taller than he was. His friends had joked that, considering their height restrictions, he might have been happier on a submarine crew. He thought they were probably right.

The clerk straightened his shoulders. "I'll tell the driver," he said.

"Thank you," Morris said.

When he boarded the bus for Vegas, an Elks member drew back, then pulled off his hat and waved Morris on the bus.

"Make way for our military hero," the man yelled, and Morris knew that it would be a long drive to Barstow.



Morris had given the order to the company, but he hadn't turned in his own combat pack or his canteens or his blanket with the rest of his men; instead, he stocked up on c-rations. Without knowing why, but just feeling that the decision was right, he had kept most of his gear. Now that choice made sense. At the hardware store in Barstow, he

bought a twenty-two pistol and two hundred rounds of ammunition. He stopped at a cafe on the outskirts of town and got a piece of apple pie and a glass of ice water. He took small bites and slowly sipped the water. He left a fifty-cent tip, filled his canteens at a spigot in a nearby flower garden, and walked into the desert. It was spring. He knew where he could find water, and in his pack he had a plastic sheet he would use to collect dew. He planned to live off rabbits and conserve his rations.

He didn't want to see or talk to anyone. The only sound he wanted to hear was the wind blowing through the sage, and perhaps the occasional warning of a snake. What he wanted wasn't to be found at his parents home in Bishop. He didn't need their gentle efforts to reintegrate him into their lives. What he wanted wasn't to be found in a job, a girlfriend, or a town. He did need to leave behind the smell of fear and illness and jovial attempts to pretend all was well that he'd been reminded of by the smells on the bus.

That first trek lasted six months. He watched as workers built fences around the military bases at China Lake and the Fort Irwin Military Reservation. He walked through the Panamint Range and the Argus range. He saw Death Valley up close, going to Badwater, Stovepipe Wells, Scotty's Castle, Panamint Springs, and finally, the family property in Darwin.

In Surprise Canyon in the fall of '46, Morris met Larry Klauber, a world renowned authority on rattlesnakes. Klauber was one of those rare individuals who could excel in many careers. An engineer by training, he became president of his company, ran the San Diego Rotary club, the Chamber of Commerce, and was involved with half a dozen charitable organizations. Rattlesnake collecting was a hobby, but when he started writing papers on the subject he was published. When he donated snakes to the San Diego Zoo and discovered that the zoo didn't have a curator for reptiles, he took over. He even had a subspecies named after him, *Crotalus lepidus klauberi*, the banded rock rattlesnake, which was no easy feat, since most of the subspecies had been identified in the nineteenth century. He took Morris on several trips in the Argus and Panamint ranges, lecturing on rattlesnake lore, teaching Morris how to catch, identify, and handle rattlesnakes.



"I sure am sorry we have to do this," Jake said, when they stopped to catch their breath.

"I know."

"Do you think there's any other way?"

"Weren't you the one who told me there wasn't?"

"I know," Jake said. "I was just wondering."

"We're committed," Morris said. "We've been committed since we crossed that fence."

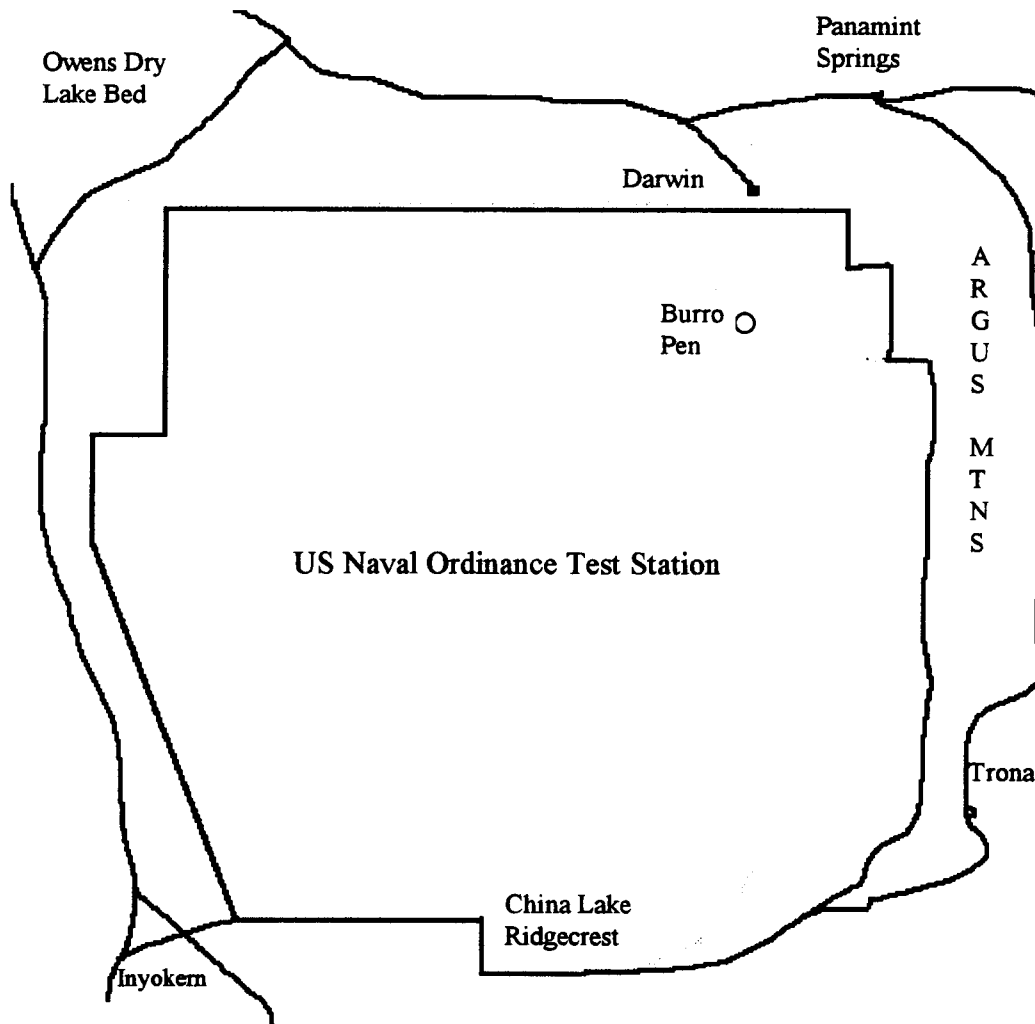


Figure 2. Morris' Circle

Darwin was nestled at the northern tip of the Argus Mountains. Directly south was the naval base. The base was shaped like an upside-down mortar round. The northern border was only a few miles south of Darwin and ran east-west for about twenty-five miles. The eastern border of the base followed the crest of the Argus Mountains south, keeping west of Trona. The southern border skirted the road from Ridgecrest to Trona while the western border roughly paralleled Highway 395. East of Trona, the base continued in a second wedge shape, its eastern border meeting the western border of Fort Irwin Military Reservation. Having fought in a world war, Morris could hardly complain about the need for national security. What he didn't like, however, was the way the military fenced off land without regard for water holes. From the autoclub maps, it appeared that nothing existed within the confines of the base—no mountains, no canyons, no life of any kind. But the base enclosed a legacy of Californio history. In the forty-niner gold rush party that ran into trouble, several survivors, including the hero, Manley, crossed the Argus mountains at Shepherd Canyon, found water at Providence Spring, and continued southwest through Wild Horse Mesa and what they called "Big Petroglyph Canyon." It took special permission from the base commander to see the petroglyphs. Morris didn't play that game. He was like a wild burro himself, going where he pleased.

Desert burros ranged throughout the Argus Mountains. Travelers to Death Valley frequently noticed the droppings left on the road; less frequently did they see a burro. The burros were shy creatures. They went to their water holes in early morning. They grazed during the early morning. In the afternoon they rested in the shade of the canyons, protected from the worst of the desert heat. There was a herd of burros that occasionally watered at Darwin Canyon, a canyon that began and ran roughly northeast of Darwin, dropping down to Panamint Springs. In the mid sixties the herd split, and Morris was entertained by the sight of two dainty jacks fighting over the division of the jennys. The main herd remained at Darwin Falls. The second herd moved south, ranging into the naval base.

Morris kept track of the second herd. He had admired the courage it took for the jack to challenge the older one. Sometimes the burros crossed the fence and came back to Darwin Canyon. They weren't worried about a little stretch of barbed wire. They

couldn't read the no trespassing signs, and like the burros, Morris crossed the fence when he pleased. He watched the burros as they grazed in Darwin Wash, a wide canyon that ran generally south, directly into the military zone.

Early morning was the best time to watch the burros. Morris would sit motionless on a rock on the hillside, watching the water hole. Soon he'd hear the soft crackle of hooves on gravel, then dark shapes would appear. The jack, black with a white face and two white stockings, proudly lifted his head and sniffed the air before drinking. He pranced around, then stayed alert while the jennys drank. He had six jennys and three colts in his herd. The colts often made playful dashes at the jack. He nipped at them and they darted aside. The herd grazed through the early morning; by afternoon they were looking for a place to shelter from the sun.

For several months that fall, watching the burros became part of Morris' morning routine. Then the weather changed and the burros moved further south, back to their range on the base. Morris was also away in San Diego, visiting his old friend Larry Klauber. With one thing and another, he didn't see the burros for nearly a year. When he did, he was shocked to see that while the herd had grown—there were now eight jennys and several colts—their coats were ragged and patchy. The jack didn't prance when he went to water. The herd moved slowly, but when Morris stepped closer, they saw him and trotted away, ungainly, shambling as if they were carrying great weights on their backs. He realized that the burros hadn't just had a bad winter—they were ill. He'd heard about a herd that had caught some kind of venereal disease; the entire herd had to be destroyed. But Morris still had faith in modern veterinary science. He'd gotten that from his encounters with Klauber.

So he notified the base commander. He tried to get in touch with a government biologist, but no luck. For several weeks he watched as the herd painfully went about their routine. His calls to the military establishment became more heated. He was certain they were ignoring him or thought he was joking when he said he was from Darwin and wanted to talk to a biologist. Then one day the burros didn't appear. Nor the next day. Don't worry, the base commander's secretary said, the biologist is here.

The next morning Morris crossed the fence and moved south down Darwin Wash, looking for his burros. He found them about five miles inside the base, penned in a side canyon. From the tracks, it looked like the military had used trucks to drive the herd into the canyon, then they had put chainlink across the opening, trapping them. They left several barrels of water, but that was all. They just fenced in the burros and left.

It was evening before Morris got back to Darwin. By the time he called the base, the office was closed. The next morning, though, Morris finally got lucky and talked to a biologist named Nims. Nims had an eastern accent. He said not to worry. The burros would be treated. And by the way, didn't Morris know that he was trespassing? He shouldn't be out there, and the concerned citizen thing only went so far. He'd done his job. He'd gotten the ball rolling. Now it was time to let an expert take over.

So Morris waited. He delayed checking himself, because he thought the military police might be waiting for him. But after receiving no reply for nearly five weeks, he had to know what was happening. The burros were still penned in, but their water was running low. There was no grass left. From the tracks, no one had been there since that first day. Where was the great biologist, Nims? The ribs of the burros were clearly defined. They looked like walking cadavers. The jack managed a weak snort when Morris approached the fence, but he didn't have the strength to even shy away.



Feeling frustrated, with no alternatives, Morris went drinking in Ridgecrest that night and ran into his buddy, Jake O'Connor, who owned the Shell station in Inyokern. Jake had graying temples and a substantial pot belly. He had a crick in his back so he kind of leaned over when he walked, but he still got around okay. Normally they played poker at the Two Spot, but when Jake found out what was happening, he ordered two shots of Wild Turkey and downed them one after the other.

"We've got to do something," he said.

"I have," Morris said. He'd called the biologist. No response. He called the commander, but was informed that he was out. He thought about calling Larry Klauber. As a former curator at the San Diego Zoo and renowned rattlesnake expert, Klauber knew

people, but Klauber was seriously ill. Morris had started to call, then he'd hung up. Morris couldn't disturb a friend over a choice he knew he had to make.

"No," Jake said, "It's cruel what they're doing. *We* have to do something." His eyes glinted in the bar's light, gray like gun metal.

"You're right," Morris said.



In the military he had carried his rifle with the barrel pointing down, the butt over his shoulder. At boot camp, the drill instructors had gotten after him about that—but nobody said much in the South Pacific, especially after Morris got his sergeant's stripes. They didn't care how he carried his rifle there. What they liked was the ease with which he could whip up his rifle, aim without thinking, and fire. In boot camp he'd earned an expert rifleman's patch. They knew his potential.

When he got out of the army he hunted rabbits, frequently during his first desert trek, then less so. Now Morris didn't much care to hunt. If Jake talked him into a hunting trip, Morris stayed in camp and cooked the meals. He didn't even kill rattlers when they became a nuisance. He trapped them for folks and moved them elsewhere. Even Klauber thought that was crazy. If a snake's a nuisance, he once said, I have no problem with killing it.

They stood in the near dawn, waiting for the sun to rise. Jake had wheezed throughout the hike from the truck, and more than once Morris had wished he hadn't involved his friend. But what he was about to do was so difficult, for the first time in years he needed a friend's support. Morris had told Jake he was waiting until it got a little lighter, but he hoped, he hoped for a miracle. If only the government would do something. If only the burros would show some life, some recovery. He wanted to release the herd and couldn't. They'd spread the disease to other herds, and the herd at Darwin Falls was still healthy. He bitterly resented the bureaucracy that had put them into this position. The chain of command had been streamlined in Morris' day at Guadalcanal.

"We've got it to do," Jake said, and Morris nodded and raised his rifle.

He would never forget the scream of the burros and the hooves on rock as those in the back, aware of the danger, attempted to scrape their way up the rock face. Morris felt

the rifle jumping against his shoulder. His right hand continued to work the bolt, ejecting the shells, while his left hand kept a steady grip and the traitorous right finger continued to gently squeeze the trigger. Beside him, Jake O'Connor fired his shotgun at terrorized animals lunging at the fence. And then it was over. Morris felt the tension ease away. The stock felt damp against his cheek. He slowly lowered the rifle. Before them, the burros were all down. As was to be expected.

"We didn't have a choice," Jake said. His statement was almost a question, and Morris knew that he needed reassurance.

"You're right," Morris said. "We didn't have a choice."

They heard a vehicle moving up the canyon.

He tossed Jake the truck keys. "Take off," Morris said.

"Come with me."

"Someone has to answer for all this," Morris said.

"Then I'll stay with you."

"Your station does business with these people," Morris said. "I've been here before."

Slowly, Jake moved away. Morris settled on a rock and waited in the early morning light, his back to the killing zone. He couldn't see the burros, but he could smell the blood. It smelled like the South Pacific.



In his life, Morris had been bit twelve times; the last time more serious than the rest, the year Klauber died, the year he and Jake killed the burros. Morris spent a week in the hospital due to complications with his blood circulation. He'd received the most mild bite when he was a young man, helping Klauber milk rattlers at the San Diego Zoo.

Morris was holding a Western diamondback, *Crotalus atrox*, behind the head, pressing its fangs against the porcelain cup they used for collecting venom. Klauber was telling him about the many ways people had been bitten. Morris felt sympathy for the child who, while foraging for firewood, mistakenly picked up a snake. He laughed, though, when he heard about the collector who was so eager to catch his prize that he

reached for the snake's tail as it went into a hole and got bit by a second rattler. Only an idiot stuck his arm down an animal's hole, especially in the desert.

"Oh," Klauber said. "The pain." He held his hand and stumbled around the lab. "Why did you bite me?"

Morris, in a twitch of glee, briefly relaxed his grip. The snake slithered on his arm and the fangs pricked his wrist. "Damm," he said, and danced around the lab, the snake's jaws locked on his arm.

"This is too much," Klauber giggled. He collapsed on a lab stool. "You didn't have to let the snake bite you, just to join in the fun. Don't you know how to pretend?"

"It isn't funny," Morris said. He pulled the snake from his arm and dropped it into its aquarium. But it was, and he and Klauber chuckled as they cleaned the wound.

The irritable and aggressive Western diamondback was only a nuisance after it had been milked. Morris felt a momentary weakness, then that passed. Klauber slapped him on the back and said, "Now you're a member of the exclusive San Diego Zoo Snakebite Club." Then they bandaged his hand and went back to work. They still had several hundred snakes to milk that day.

In 1976, Morris saw a Hopi snake dance ceremony. The performers, working in trios, danced around the circle. The lead dancer held a snake in his mouth, while his buddy danced by his side, arm around his shoulders. A third dancer followed closely behind. Occasionally the buddy would brush the snake's head with a short stick that had eagle feathers attached to the end. Folks said the feathers kept the snakes from biting. Others said it didn't matter because the snakes were defanged prior to the ceremony. Others argued that in the nine days between capture and ceremony, they were milked daily, so the snakes posed no danger. Morris saw the fang sheaths when one snake opened its mouth. He knew the fangs were still intact. He didn't know if the Hopis milked the snakes, but it made sense if they did. He wondered, though, what happened when the snakes were released? The Hopis used prairie rattlers and Arizona prairie rattlers in their ceremonies, and the prairie rattler in particular had some moxie in its bite. Were they more peaceful the next time they met a human, or did they sleep in their dens during the cold months, dreaming of new ways to spread their venom?

Showdown in the Desert

Tommy went loco after Stacy dumped him. The workers at the chemical plant noticed that he rarely smiled. Before, when he relayed the foreman's orders, he joked and shared a humor that was in tune with the world around him. Now, he gave orders without comic asides or winks. He became a gear that didn't mesh with the rest of the crew.

He quit calling his friends. Frank, who had always felt a bit annoyed when Tommy arrived unannounced, began to miss his lanky friend. He was a piece missing from Frank's daily puzzle. So one morning, after trying again to reach Tommy by phone, Frank got in his car and drove to Trona.

The sun was directly overhead, accentuating the white powder crust of Lake Searles. At times like these, the lake seemed full of promise, and Frank could share Tommy's enthusiasm for the minerals hidden beneath the surface. At least he always could until he reached the smokestacks at the West End plant and got the first smell of rotten eggs from the hydrogen emissions. That first view of the dry lake, though, had perhaps inspired the owner to name his bar The Searles Lake Yacht Club.

When Frank arrived, Tommy was in the yard, loading his pickup. The dirt bike was in the center, secured by ropes to the four corners of the truck bed. Packed around the bike were the familiar gas cans and water jugs, sleeping bag, and assorted camping gear. Tommy nodded, then went back to the trailer and came out with a shotgun, a bandoleer of shells, and a pistol on a webbed military belt. He tossed the weapons in the cab of the truck.

"What's with the guns, Tommy?" Frank asked, disturbed by the sight. "You didn't need them last time we went out."

"I'm going into some rough country," Tommy said. "You never know what'll happen when you're on your own."

"For how long?"

"I'm on vacation. Maybe I'll get a leave of absence. Then again, maybe I'll quit."

"You're coming back, right?"

"I'm going back to the country I love," Tommy said. "I'm going to do some hard riding and hard drinking and a lot of forgetting."

"What about your friends?"

Tommy met Franks' gaze.

"Want a beer?" he asked.

"Sure," Frank said.

Tommy looked around the carport. He pushed a carburetor to the side. Then he saw the ice chest in the back of his truck. He handed Frank a beer.

"It's too quiet around here," he said.

"What's going on?"

Tommy didn't answer, but if it was going to be a contest of wills, Frank was an expert when it came to silence. After several minutes, Tommy was the first to speak.

"Been thinking about *The Great Escape*."

"I always liked the guy the commander the German's shot."

"I used to think that that movie was all about trying, and having hope. I used to watch Steve make that jump. I was always felt like I was with him when he was in the air."

"And?"

Tommy finished his beer.

"It's an illusion. No one can make a jump like that." He took another beer from the ice chest. "I don't need to be reminded about the impossible."

"I know it's been rough the last few weeks but—"

"It's been fate from the start," Tommy said. "I'm cursed. When I was fifteen, I saved Stanley's life when we were rock-climbing out at the Trona Pinnacles."

"He was lucky."

"If I hadn't lifted his feet, maybe my life would be different right now."

"You can't think like that."

"A game designer's telling me about imaginary outcomes?"

"Games are just fantasies."

"And I'm just asking what if."

Frank remembered Tommy's smile and a young boy's shrieks as they rode a dirt bike at Stern Cove.

"If you hadn't, Scott wouldn't be here either. What do you say about that?"

Tommy looked up, his eyes streaked with red. "Damn you," he said.



Stacy wanted to talk about Tommy. They met at Denny's.

"I never would have bothered you," Stacy said. "But I'm desperate. He's not answering his phone. He's not at work."

"He's been hard to reach," Frank said.

"It's such a mess," Stacy said. "Have you seen him?"

"Could be," Frank said.

It amused Frank to see the reactions of the men around him. The waiter was hovering around their table, keeping their coffee warm. The business men in the booth across from them surreptitiously watched Stacy; their conversation had lulled since she and Frank had entered the restaurant.

"You have to tell me where he is."

Frank liked seeing her this frustrated. It eased in a way the memory of strung out Tommy in Trona.

"He's in the desert," Frank said. Loyalty to his friend made him add, "And he may never come back. Since we were kids, he's always had a love for the desert."



Morris called Frank Saturday morning and said he was going out to the Barker Ranch, and he wondered if Frank would like to come along. Morris had heard that the Panamint rattler had been seen at the ranch, which in his memory was at a higher altitude than the snake usually went. He wanted to check it out before the snakes went into their dens for winter. Since Jen was at work, Frank agreed. An hour later they were on the road to Trona, the wind whistling through a crack in the windshield of Morris's old Jeep pickup.

"That's a damned rough road up there," Morris said. "But don't worry. We're ready."

Looking in the back, Frank had to agree. Morris had an extra set of tires as well as the usual supply of water and extra gas.

As they drove, Morris gave Frank the rundown on desert climatology. He was angry with all the water that went through the aqueduct to LA.

"Hell of a waste," he said. "Did you know that China Lake used to have water?"

That was news to Frank. It was an old joke with locals that tourists periodically came into town towing boats and asking directions for the lake—a lake which had been dry as long as Frank could remember.

"It's true," Morris said. "The water used to run south from Owens Lake, spill into China Lake, then drain over to Searles Lake."

"Funny how nature works just fine until people get involved. Then things can change in an instant. The city folks take the water, then they pass the Desert Conservation Act. We can't do anything with the dirt we've got left. Somehow it doesn't seem right."

"But environmentalists are helping now. They're going to put water back into the Owen's Valley."

"Have you seen it happen yet, young feller?"

Frank had to admit that he hadn't. He seemed to remember a similar conversation with Jen a few months back. Now he was an advocate for environmentalists?

"There you have it," Morris said with a finality that Frank didn't care to question.

They passed though Trona and climbed the grade out of the valley. As they descended toward Ballarat, they saw a desert burro watching from behind a patch of desert holly. Morris slowed and pulled over. The burro was black save for a white blaze on his face and two white stockings.

"Look at him," Morris said. "See how he's standing? They're careful critters. They'll never give anybody a broadside view."

"Why not?"

"Someone might take a shot."

"Who'd do that?"

"I would if necessary," Morris said. "Years ago several herds got a strain of venereal disease. Had to kill 'em."

Frank didn't agree. Surely there could have been a way to treat them?

"Didn't seem that way at the time," Morris said.

They continued on until they reached the turnoff for Ballarat. They passed an unmanned radar installation, the silver dish whirling behind a chain-link fence, and continued on an elevated road that went through a mud flat. They continued for several miles until they reached Ballarat. At Ballarat, there was a monument near the old post office, long closed, a tiny gift shop, and several travel trailers.

"I ain't been out this way for a while," Morris said. "I hope we don't have trouble with the BLM."

Morris stopped and took a pistol from his tool box and laid it on the dashboard.

"What are you getting me into?" Frank asked.

"Don't worry. This isn't for them!"

"Then what's with the gun?"

"Haven't been up to the ranch for years," Morris said. "Never know who you might run into up there."

"Is it that dangerous?"

"I've heard rumors. The Sheriff's Department does a fly-by from time to time, but it's hard to see much from the air."

Frank thought he'd been on rough roads, but when they drove south past the mud flat and turned into Goler Wash, Frank found a new definition for rough. Six times he had to get out and move rocks from the road. Once, Morris had to help him. To complicate matters, the road had deep ruts and the truck periodically high-centered. When that happened, Morris would back up, carefully straddle the ruts, and with the tires spinning, continue uphill. It took two hours to travel five miles.

Frank's first view of the ranch was disappointing. He had seen the photos of the Barker Ranch in *Helter Skelter*, and he expected to see Manson's school bus dominating the scene. He hadn't considered that the bus would be long gone by now. A Yamaha was parked next to a tent pitched in front of the main ranch building. There was a ring for a fire built with loose bricks. Nearby was a pile of beer cans and whisky bottles.

Tommy lurched from the tent. Hair unkempt, his face was a blonde stubble. He looked like he'd been sleeping in the same clothes for a week or more.

"If I'd known you were coming," he said, "I'd've had you bring some beer."

"Didn't expect to see you here," Morris said. "Where's your truck?"

"Left it at Ballarat," Tommy said.

"Is it safe there?" Frank asked.

"If Manson could park his vehicles there, then so can I."

"Seen any rattlers around here?" Morris asked.

"I've got a better idea," Tommy said. "Instead of stirring up the local wildlife, why don't you have a drink with me."

"Maybe later," Morris said. He glanced at Frank and nodded toward the hill. "Ready?"

"I'll stay here for a while," Frank said, feeling a touch of regret as Morris shrugged and walked away.

"I've been worried about you," Frank said.

"I'm doing great," Tommy said. "I'm having a hell of a time."

"All alone?"

"That's the way I like it. It gives me time to think."

"If you say so."

"You're not the only one who can sit around and think."

Frank smiled to himself. He could play this game.

"And what have you been thinking about?"

"Murder," Tommy said.

"What?"

"In the middle ages, murderers used to gouge out their victim's eyes. Poets tell you that the eyes are the mirrors of the soul. But the truth is, in the old days people thought a victim's eyes recorded the identity of the murderer. Today, people think it's crazy. Most people don't even believe in a soul."

"It's a mystery," Frank said.

"Only to the educated. Ocular Petika. Ever heard of it?"

“No.”

“Blood spots in the eyes.”

“What are you getting at?”

“When someone is strangled, their eyes tell the story. Ocular Petika. People today think they know so much. And a simple murderer in the middle ages knew how to keep someone from finding the truth. Gouge out their eyes.”

“What good would that do? What’s the point?”

“You figure it out,” Tommy said. “A little puzzle for Castle Blackrock.”

○ ○ ○

As they left the Barker Ranch, Frank felt a let down.

“Tommy’s a mess,” he said. “Did you see how rough he looked?”

“Maybe you noticed,” Morris said, “that the engine on his motorbike was still as shiny as ever?”

“So?”

“Nothing. That boy sure does love to ride.”

○ ○ ○

For several days, Frank continued work on Castle Blackrock. Tommy’s cryptic message, though it was disturbing, had given Frank new ideas to enhance the traps and other dangers in the castle. He spent marathon sessions at his computer, and for once he didn’t complain when Jen brought her work home. He begrudged the time spent away from Castle Blackrock, but his kidneys forced him to take a break. Coming back from the bathroom, he noticed the right light on the answering machine. In a message garbled with background noise, Tommy was saying something about jumping a black rock. There was another message from Morris. The snakes were going to their den.

Frank called Stacy. “If you want to talk to Tommy,” he said, “I think he’s out at the big dry wash off Garlock Road.”

○ ○ ○

The sky was overcast and there was the smell of rain in the air. Despite his interest in the snakes and his concern for Tommy, Frank decided to park his car on high ground and walk up the wash. The weather was ideal for a flash flood.

It took Frank nearly an hour to reach the black rock, and he was thoroughly warmed up and sweaty when he arrived. Tommy was parked in the center of the dry wash, apparently unconcerned about the darkening clouds in the upper canyon.

"You got my message," he said.

"This is crazy," Frank said.

"It has been a crazy day," Tommy said, "but it's just about over."

"There's a storm coming," Frank said. "You have to get out of the wash."

"You're just in time to see me make my jump."

"Tommy—"

"Relax. One jump then we'll go."

There was movement beyond Tommy's truck.

"Look," Frank said.

A large rattler, close to three feet in length, slithered across the dry wash and onto the trail Tommy used for a landing pad.

"I'd better get it on," Tommy said, "if I've got to compete with a storm and the snakes."

He stumbled as he stepped toward his dirt bike.

"Tommy."

"No problem, Buddy. I was born on a dirt bike, remember?"

Frank noticed an approaching dust cloud, but before he could say anything, Tommy started his dirt bike and headed toward the ridge. He revved his engine and sped down the hill. Frank cringed, but Tommy easily cleared the rock. He turned around and rode back.

"Just once more," he said. "Then I'll pack up."

He returned to the ridge just as a car pulled into view. Stacy was in the passenger seat. Behind the wheel was a broad-shouldered man. Though Frank hadn't seen him in years, he knew it was Stanley.

When they got out of the car, Stacy gave an embarrassed shrug.

"Sorry," she said. "He insisted on coming."

"There's no need to apologize," Frank said.

“How sweet,” Stanley said.

Before Frank could reply, they were distracted by two snakes that crawled right through the camp—a Mojave green and a Mojave sidewinder. They didn’t seem concerned about the humans nearby. They continued on their course, following the path the previous snake had taken. The snakes crawled up the side of the streambed and disappeared in the brush.

Tommy roared down the hill—his tires scraped the rock, but once again he cleared Dead Man’s Hand and landed safely on the other side. He parked on the ridge and watched. They could hear the rumbling of thunder in the canyon.

“Come on,” Frank shouted. “Let’s get out of here.”

Frank thought Tommy was going to ignore him, then he started down the hill. At that moment the sidewinder slithered into the trail. Startled, Tommy popped the clutch and the motorcycle lurched into a rock. Then it all seemed to happen in slow motion. Tommy hit the rock. The dirt bike tipped over and he fell over with it. The rattler coiled near Tommy’s head. They could hear its rattle even above the whine of the dirt bike.

Stacy screamed. Frank ran up the hill, wondering where Morris was when they needed him. He pulled off his shirt and stomped the ground just before he reached the snake. The snake turned to the new threat and Frank threw his shirt at it. For once he had good luck and the shirt covered the snake. Moving quickly, Frank grabbed the slithering body, but unlike the ease that Morris had shown, Frank couldn’t find the damned head. The snake was thrusting against the shirt, its fangs tearing through the material, narrowly missing Frank’s hand. In desperation, he grabbed the snake by the tail and lifted it, keeping it at arms length. Even as he acted, Frank was aware of the absurdity of his observations. Hmm, he thought, a fine specimen of *C. Cerastes Cerastes*. Nearly two feet long. He wished Morris could see him now.

Even upside down, the snake twitched toward him but before it could strike, Frank threw it into the bush.

“I did it,” he shouted and began to dance with glee, and that was when the second snake bit him in the calf. Too late, Frank jumped away. With disdain, the snake crawled

up the trail, uninterested in continuing the attack. Frank could feel a sharp pain in his leg. He imagined the venom already at work in his blood.

Tommy turned off the Yamaha and crawled out from under it, and together they hobbled down the hill. Stacy fussed over their injuries.

"Someone's coming," Stanley said, and Morris drove up.

"You damned fools," he said. "Don't you know a storm's coming?"

Then he saw Frank and listened as Stacy blurted out the story.

"You poor sap," he said when Stacy finished. "Don't you have enough sense to kill the damned things when you have to?" Morris shook his head.

"Let's get you to the doctor," he said. "Did you at least see what species of rattler bit you?"

"Of course," Frank said.

"That's something, anyway," Morris said. He helped Frank into the truck.

"I'm coming too," Stacy said.

"What about me?" Stanley said.

"And me?" Tommy said.

"I've had it with both of you," she said. She crowded in the truck next to Frank and looked at Morris. "What are you waiting for? Let's go."

"Whatever you say, Missy," Morris said.

Frank felt a prickling in his face and his mouth tasted like metal. There was a fire in his leg and he could imagine the flesh already swelling. But despite the pain, he twisted in the seat to watch Tommy and Stanley through the window. The last Frank saw of them, they were standing in the center of the streambed, watching as Morris circled the black rock and drove around the bend.

Angels of Grace

My father could call angels down from heaven. A broad-shouldered man over six feet tall, when he stood at the pulpit, red-faced, his voice booming in the tiny church, physically sharing his convictions with the congregation, it seemed likely that angels could appear at any moment, if only to bring peace and quiet back to heaven.

For Father, people either followed God's path or that of the world. From what he said at the pulpit, it was clear that most if not all of his congregation were of the world. They enjoyed sensual things: the women had their cosmetics and perfumes and jewelry, while behind the men's bland expressions, were nights spent drinking and carousing. Temptation was everywhere; a Warrior of God had to be ever vigilant. Since I shared his name, the welfare of my soul was of particular concern to my father, Robert William Jones, Sr. At five, I could recite the books of the Bible; at ten, I had read the Bible three times and could explain the basic message behind each story of the Old and New Testament; by fourteen, I was fed up.

So, like any good church boy who wanted out, I joined the US Air Force when I turned eighteen, and traded father's spiritual and moral rules and regulations for a code that sought instead to control my physical and mental world. But I didn't mind. I was going to be an aviator. Growing up in Ridgecrest, sonic booms had been as much a part of my daily life as the morning devotions. I was fascinated by the jets that took off from China Lake Naval Weapons Center. I had seen *The Right Stuff*. I knew where the action was. However, when I got to basic training and took my first physical, I learned the hard facts: no guy who wears specs is ever going to fly a jet, despite the promises of the Air Force recruiter in Lancaster. It was another thing I could thank my father for. His mandatory reading plan had cut me off from the only thing I wanted from life. So I became an aircraft mechanic. If I couldn't be the pilot, at least I'd have the satisfaction of knowing that my work made it possible for others to be in the air. At the time, it was the best trade I could make.



Father said he knew what was best. I had just turned fourteen and was beginning to ache for freedom. Saturday evening, when I told my father that I wanted to watch the SuperBowl at a friend's house, he looked up from his *Daily Bread* devotional booklet.

"Bobby," he said, "Sunday is God's day. No TV. You know that."

"But Dad," I said, "this is the big game, and besides, I won't be watching it here."

"We don't make exceptions. Sunday is a day for worship, not revelry in sports."

"Deacon Miller watches football, the way he hurries home after a service."

"We have to set an example for others."

"It isn't fair."

"God's commandments are always fair, though I have to admit, it doesn't always seem so to a child. One day you'll see that I'm right." And that was that.

But the next morning, I could see Brad and his father, Mr. Byers, tossing a football back and forth and running pass plays while I had to get ready for church. They weren't worried that it was Sunday. They weren't concerned that their souls were in risk of eternal damnation. Mr. Byers just wanted to throw an accurate pass. Brad just wanted to make the catch. Why couldn't Father be more like Mr. Byers?

I ignored him that morning. I talked to my mother as she fixed our breakfast, but I refused to look to my left, where Father was making notes and preparing for his sermon. At 8:45 we left the parsonage and walked across the gravel parking lot to the church with the stone siding and the huge cross that spanned the end of the building. Father adjusted the thermostat and the floorboard heaters popped and crackled. We put our Bibles and Sunday school papers on the first bench on the left, the customary place for the preacher's family to sit, and waited. Father always timed things perfectly. Just as the building was getting warm, the first members of the congregation began to arrive: Old Mr. Ferguson and his wife; Mr. Bailey, the local dentist; and Mr. Mackey from the hardware store. Soon the hard, wooden pews were filled.

Ridgecrest had many churches, but we had built this church. The outer building was lined with stones; I had placed several while my father had dabbed on the cement. Father was an experienced bricklayer, and his trade kept us in food when the weekly offerings hadn't been enough to pay the heating bill in the church, let alone provide for the

preacher and his family. When I was old enough, I asked him about the lean times, but he would only said that “God will provide.” It didn’t seem like God was doing much when dad came home, sore and hunched over. It was Mother, not God, who rubbed the Ben Gay into his shoulders and the bad disks in his lower back. But Father insisted that “God was good.”

Just before the service started, I noticed Father’s sermon notes poking out from his Bible. I had really wanted to see the SuperBowl with my friend Tommy. We watched college games, but I never saw the pros unless there was a playoff on a Saturday. It would have been great to have seen one big game, but here I was, bracing for another of Father’s windjammers.

Father was always so sure that he had all the answers. While he was talking to the song leader, telling him what song he should end with, I took his sermon notes from his Bible.

Father didn’t notice that the notes were gone until after song service. At the pulpit, he casually thumbed through his Bible, then more frantically, searching for those elusive notes. The congregation, ever alert for things out of the ordinary, remained silent, holding their collective breath. Father leafed though the Bible and several pages came loose. There was a titter from the crowd as he bent down and began collecting his pages. I felt sorry, then, to be responsible for his trouble. The notes in my pocket crinkled when I moved. I was sure everyone knew what I had done. Suddenly Father calmed, though, as he looked at one of the loose pages.

“As you may have noticed,” he said, continuing to stare at the page, “I seem to have misplaced my notes, but that’s no matter. What’s important is the verse I’m holding in my hand. It’s one of the most precious promises that Christ made and is the basis for our faith.” Then he began to read John 3:16, “for God so loved the world” and so on, and I knew that my little trick had backfired. Father’s sermon would be stronger, better than if he had his notes. He got on a roll when he quoted scripture.



My family had a secret. Unknown to the congregation, my grandmother had left the sanctity of the Assembly of God (she had never been a member, though Father was

certain she would join one day) and became a Latter Day Saint. She made the conversion in Wyoming. A few months later, when she came out on a visit, and eventually moved to Lancaster, it was a done deal. Father did his best to save his mother from the Utah cult, but to no avail. She was adamant. She liked the family values of the church, and what they did for the elderly. She wanted to be part of an organization that did useful things for the community. For over six months my father refused to speak to her, but then his training began to get the better of him. After all, one of Christ's first commandments was "Honor thy father and thy mother." Even a preacher couldn't get around that one.

We visited Grandmother on Saturdays, driving up to Lancaster, sometimes stopping to watch the jets land at Edward's Airforce Base. She made the best lemon cake, and when she made pies, she had a little pan she used just for me. If my parents went shopping, I got to stay with my grandmother. She told me stories about life in Wyoming, about her parents and their parents and their friends on the ranches around them. One day I asked her how she could stand living on the desert when she had come from a place that was so green and beautiful, and she said that it was the family, not the place, that mattered most to her.

One day we made her a brick barbecue. Father had cleared the ground and had staked out the foundation the week before. Before we came, he arranged for the bricks and concrete to be delivered. Father brought his own tools. When we arrived, he gave Grandmother a hug and immediately started work. I watched as he mixed the cement. I stirred it and kept it from hardening while he carefully but efficiently ladled the concrete and set each brick. He stopped from time to time to wipe the sweat from his eyes. Later, he took off his shirt, and the sweat ran down the taut muscles on his arms and chest. He had a dark reddish tan from days spent on similar jobs. Several times Grandmother brought us lemonade and asked us to come inside and take a break from the heat, but Father would just shake his head and say, "Not until the job's done." He built a grand barbecue with double grills set at waist level, with a chimney that went up over seven feet. It was important, Father said, with all the wind, to keep the smoke out of the cook's eyes.

The Bishop visited that day. Father nodded to him through the glass door but continued working, and despite Grandmother's efforts, refused to enter the house until the visitor had left.

For our visits, Father studied up on his doctrinal points. Grandmother took Father's little quirks in stride. She would sigh, search for her reading glasses, take her Bible, and prepare for Father's onslaught. Although they would never admit it, I think they both enjoyed these encounters. They always found a few moments to calmly attempt to change the other's view.



I was twenty when I learned that Grandmother had cancer. The Air Force gave me emergency leave, and I came home immediately. She was in the oncology ward. Her body had responded negatively to a recent series of chemotherapy. Though she was in critical condition, she still had better skin color than my father. His clothes hung loosely on his frame; his shirt sleeves were baggy around his formerly thick, muscular hands. His belt was at the last notch. When I hugged him I could feel the bones in his shoulders. He felt weak and wobbly. Grandmother was sleeping, gently breathing in oxygen through nose tubes, so I turned my attention back to my father.

"Dad," I said, "what's happened to you? Why have you lost so much weight?"

"I've been spending a lot of time at the hospital, praying," he said.

"Prayer never had this effect before."

"I've been fasting for the last two weeks," he said. He quickly waved aside any objections. "Not a word from you. I'm going to continue until Mom recovers or God gives me an answer."

"You have to suffer along with her?"

"It's all becoming so clear to me," he said. "It's just a question of faith. God always responds to those who have faith."

There was a bottle of olive oil on the table. It brought up memories of late night prayer services where the sick were anointed with oil. It was out of place on a table covered with pills, water glasses, magazines, and flowers. I picked up the bottle.

"And this is going to help?"

“Why are you so bitter? You should ask the Lord to take your anger away.”

“What good will that do?”

“It’s all just a question of faith,” he said, his voice rising at the end to a high pitch. His congregation wasn’t in the room. I wondered who it was he was trying to convince?



Father knew all about faith. At least twice that I could remember, he held revival meetings in Trona, a mining town in the northernmost tip of San Bernardino County. We had yearly services in Ridgecrest, of course, with missionaries from the Assembly of God or a famed preacher directing services, always beginning on a week night and running through Sunday, sometimes even into a second week. In Trona, although Ridgecrest was only twenty-five miles away, Father was the visiting preacher. On the last night of the revival, Father would hold a healing service. After the preaching had ended, a long series of prayers would begin. The congregation would begin to moan and groan. One night, they began to march around the pews, going in circles, singing “Marching to Jericho.” That was fun. I didn’t know what was going on, but after a two-hour service an eight year old is happy to stretch his legs. We sang, a long ungainly human chain moving around the church, our hands on the hips of the person in front of us. And Father talked to God.

With people panting and stomping their feet and everybody but me in a religious fervor, Father brought the group to order, asked the deacons of the church to come forward, and called for those with special requests to step up and be healed. Mrs. Murphy was the first to walk up. She whispered in Father’s ear. He nodded and the deacons started praying. Father applied oil to his handkerchief and with a shout pressed it against Mrs. Murphy’s forehead and said, “Be healed.” Mrs. Murphy fainted and the deacons caught her. My father moved slightly to the side to make room for the next person, while members of the congregation cared for Mrs. Murphy. Then he prayed for Mr. Bailey, who had a bad leg, then Mrs. Stern, who had a bad eye. Father continued this process until only Mr. Carter in his wheelchair was left.

Father looked at him. “Jesus could make the lame walk, Brother Carter. Do you believe that?”

"I do," Mr. Carter said.

Father clapped the olive oil on Mr. Carter's head.

"Then rise and walk," Father said. Mr. Carter tried, but he couldn't raise above the arms of his chair.

"You must have faith," Father said. After another round of prayers, they tried again. "Rise and walk."

Mr. Carter was unable to rise. Father and the deacons prayed for another ten minutes. Then one final attempt was made, but Mr. Carter was still unable to rise. Sadly, Father shook his head.

"Brother," he said, "it is not yet God's Will that you should walk."



Six weeks after I talked to my father at the hospital, Grandmother died; the funeral service was held in the Mormon church in Lancaster. Father was strangely silent. He voiced no objections to his mother's last wishes, though I thought he would. It was, of course, the first time he and my mother and I had been in a Mormon church. We curiously looked around. So this was the place where they did their cultish rituals? Their place of worship was much larger than ours; the pews were soft, high-backed, with velour cushions. The podium was larger as well, and in the rear were several rows for a choir. Still, despite the room's size, it looked normal, except for the casket placed in front of the podium. I was wearing my dress uniform because Grandmother had been so proud when I joined the service.

The Bishop was slim and pale, uninspiring in speech and action. We didn't realize how Grandmother was being honored. Later, I was assured that Bishops never directed services—but this one did. He read the newspaper obituary then spoke about Grandmother's service in the church. He read the service from a book, his voice hesitating as he turned a page. Then he asked if anyone in the audience wished to say a few words in remembrance, and Father raised his hand. Oh no. I knew we were in for it then.

Father walked to the podium and gripped the sides with both hands, as if to say, I'm going to make this place *mine*. He was wearing a new suit; his old clothes didn't fit

anymore, though thankfully he had started to eat regular meals once it had become clear to everyone, even him, that grandmother wasn't going to recover, that love and prayer and chemotherapy treatments weren't going to be enough. He never spoke of his disappointment, but I could see it in his drooping shoulders. His prayers had failed. Staring at the casket below him, he started quoting scripture.

"In John 3:15, Jesus says, 'that whosoever believeth in me should not perish but have eternal life.'" I slowly rubbed my temples. This was going to be a long afternoon. What did Dad think he was doing?

"And in the next verse, 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'" Dad was doing his own service.

"And in Romans 6:23: 'For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.'" He didn't know when to stop. Come on, Dad, I thought, enough is enough.

"And remember Titus 1:2," he said. "We have 'hope of eternal life which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.'" My family and friends were listening solemnly; the Bishop didn't seem disturbed by my father usurping his authority. I hoped that it would end soon, but I knew that it wouldn't.

"When Lazarus died," Father said, "Jesus said to Martha, 'Your brother will rise again.'" He paused, then he continued to recount the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Suddenly he stopped. His face was strained, and his hands went white gripping the pulpit. I realized, maybe because I was feeling the same way, that if he began to cry he wouldn't be able to stop. Softly he continued the story, ending with Jesus' prayer and the fervent "Lazarus, come forth." Slowly he returned to the seat, somewhat blindly, since his eyes were still focused on the casket. Finally it was over.

On the way to the cemetery, I asked my father if he had been trying to convert the congregation. My mother reached over and held his hand. She knew something that I didn't yet know.

Father looked at me, his eyes very sad, his face softened by grief.

“I just wanted to share a few scriptures,” he said quickly, lip trembling, deep pain behind his words. He had always been so strong, so adamant. Suddenly I didn’t know him at all. I knew then that he hadn’t quoted scriptures for the congregation’s benefit, or even for my family’s. He had said the words for himself, to himself, to reaffirm his own faith. Without his faith he had nothing—Grandmother would just be gone, never to be seen again. Only the faith that he would see her again kept him going, validating a lifetime he had spent in worship.

I squeezed his wrist. Maybe his certainty could reach across the gap.



I am stationed now at Edward’s Airforce Base, and I go to the cemetery once a month. Grandmother is buried near a tree, and her stone is frequently littered with leaves, twigs, and dry grass clippings. Crouching, I sweep the debris away with a brush and trim the creeping weeds with a hand spade. I don’t know why I feel compelled to do these things. Certainly Grandmother wouldn’t expect it—but maybe somewhere, she knows that I’m thinking about her, doing what I can. My parents have purchased plots next to her, so someday I will be doing the same for them. I run my hand over the cleaned stone, feeling the grains with my fingertips. A tear falls on the stone and I rub it away. The desert wind has picked up and is irritating my eyes. It is time to go, but I don’t have the energy to move. Grandmother used to tell me about the prophet Moroni, and how for centuries he kept the faith alive until he could return the holy scriptures to humanity. A stature honors him outside the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. He stands tall, his hands uplifted to heaven. I focus on the angels that frame her stone, wondering if they too have names, and how one goes about calling them.