All eight of Don Zancanella’s wry, pristinely written stories have memorable settings in the historical or contemporary American West, ranging from love among abandoned missile silos to a tale of Laotian refugees in Wyoming to an account of a traveling chimpanzee show. Collectively they form a kind of alternative history of this too-often-stereotyped region.

Some of the stories take as their theme the coming of technology to the western wilderness—television, telephones, telescopes, missiles, even an imaginative account of a visit by inventor Thomas Edison to the Rocky Mountains. Others focus on small-town intolerance, calling into question the myth of individualism and heroic self-reliance set forth by Hollywood.

There is a vivid strain of the fantastic in these stories, a beguiling, offbeat quality that links them. However, despite some extraordinary events and quirky exteriors, most of the characters are typical of the kind of people one might meet in small towns anywhere—schoolteachers, career soldiers, Native American teenagers, telephone line workers, ranchers, cooks, wagon masters. Almost all of them have very mixed feelings about the time and place in which they find themselves. For them the West is not a promised land but a place they have to make the best of. It is these human copings that unite Zancanella’s prize-winning collection.
Don Zancanella

Western Electric
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Each summer morning, Rose saddled the chestnut mare and rode west from her cabin on the Pratt ranch and across the dew-soaked meadows. When she reached the last fence line, she passed through the gate, left the green hayfields, and cantered her horse into the dry scrub-brush prairie where the missile silos squatted like flat gray rocks in the sun. There were four of them, ominous-looking concrete octagons encircled by high wire fences. She chose that route because the land was open and the riding easy, but she sometimes wondered how many missiles were housed in each silo, or how many soldiers manned each station, or even what it would be like to see one fire out from the
treeless land. Most often, though, she tried to ignore their presence as Harold Pratt had advised when she rented the cabin for that first summer, three years ago.

“They’ve been here for twenty years,” he said. “You might see a government truck pass by once in a while, but even that’s rare. You’ll forget they exist.”

And so she rode among the silos as if they were sandstone bluffs or thickets of cedar, natural features upon the open Wyoming plains.

During the winter Rose taught second grade in Cheyenne, one hundred miles to the south. When school let out, she packed her bags and retreated to the prairie to the two-room cabin she’d come upon in a newspaper ad, there to spend her summers on horseback. Though she often traveled into town for a movie or invited friends to the cabin for the weekends, she cherished the solitude, with her horse and two cats, at the end of a rough dirt road. So it was that Captain Fetterman’s arrival on the cabin porch on an unusually cold morning in early September caused Rose to look at the round-faced visitor as if he were a man from Mars.

“I wanted to know who lives in this house.” He said it clumsily, as though speaking in a language just learned.

Rose held her orange cat in her arms and stared at the large features of his face and the sharp crease of his clean blue trousers.

“We’re neighbors,” he continued. “I work in the silos. Sometimes I watch you ride your horse.”

Occasionally, Rose had seen one of the vehicles Harold Pratt had mentioned—a truck or a dark green sedan—emerge from the silo sites and rattle down the dusty road that led to the highway. But not more often than twice a month, and she had never waved to the serious men inside. Such cars would soon disappear over the last rise, the air would become silent again, and dust would hang in the summer heat as she rode on through the sage. Yet now a soldier had appeared on her doorstep, and suddenly the silos seemed more alive.

She told him she was pleased to meet him, his was a neighborly gesture, but just now she was leaving for town. An awkward rebuff, a fabrication, and all the while her single thought was “I wish he’d get off the porch.” One didn’t invite strangers in, there on the range a mile from the next habitation. He seemed
confused but full of good humor, and she watched him leave as he had come, walking out through the brush, shirtsleeves flapping in the breeze.

Rose wondered about him as he disappeared over the first low hill. The installations had always appeared to be so thoroughly uninhabited. She knew there were men there, but they had seemed incidental. Like workers inside a hydroelectric dam or the crew of an ocean-going tanker. Tiny beings in huge machines. For her the silos had been silent, obscure and dark. And as she mused, Captain Fetterman’s heavy-browed, middle-aged face, his rolling walk, took on a more sinister aspect. Why, he had come to case the house, intending to return after dark.

That evening Rose brought out her collection of Indian artifacts: arrowheads, some chopping tools, and a handful of pottery shards. Soon everything was spread across the yellow formica of the kitchen table top, three rows of odd-shaped pieces of clay and stone, each labeled with the location of the find. She would show the collection to her class when school began in a few weeks. Many of her children would be bored by it, unable to make the connection between these pieces of stone and a living history. But there were always two or three students who would come alive on seeing the artifacts. She would encourage those rare children, watching as their imaginations reeled off into prehistory, conjuring the arrow from the arrowhead, then the man who shot the arrow, his family, his village. Thereafter those students would seem special, as though they had shared a secret with her.

As Rose worked, the wind rattled the windowpane above the sink. She was startled by the noise and reached up to check the latch, then went to the door and twisted the deadbolt. Finally, she switched on the radio, letting the music swallow the house noises. The air force must screen their nuclear troops for psychopaths, she thought. But if screened, ought to be physically sifted as well—tall blond young gentlemen with firm smiles. Not this Fetterman. Balding, rough-edged, and hadn’t she noticed a hint of a limp as he walked away?

The rap on the door made her jump and go cold. In three summers at the cabin, unexpected visitors after dark had been rare. Rose called out.

“Who is it?”
"Captain Fetterman. I’ve brought you some trout."
"I’m getting my gun."
"I’ll leave the fish on the doorstep."

She spent the night in the green corduroy overstuffed chair, the pistol resting in her lap. When the first light of morning awoke her, she stepped outside and found only the mangled remains of three rainbow trout, her cats having eaten their fill.

The captain had never been to Wyoming before his current tour of duty. He’d been to Guam, Germany, Tennessee, but the high latitudes of the West were new territory. The air force, his only family, had sent him there on an obscure assignment, the supervision of four missile silos on the plains of northeast Wyoming. The silos were empty. Long ago, they had housed Atlas missiles, but strategy or politics had closed them so that now they were simply vacant—enormous tubes of air reaching deep into the bedrock. Now they were only decoys. Fetterman’s job: to see that a certain minimal appearance of activity was maintained. Keep the roads in passable shape, oversee radio equipment that automatically spewed out phony signals, light an occasional floodlight. It had to do, he was told, with foiling satellite surveillance, all part of a master plan he only vaguely understood. But Fetterman was on the brink of retirement, and he did understand that this was the air force’s way of quietly occupying the waning years of a man whose performance had never been more than adequate. Now, a year later, he wanted to thank whoever was responsible. For he had learned to love the quiet, the trout fishing, and the open vistas of prairie that exploded beyond the windshield of his car.

He commanded a crew of three noncoms who drove in from Cheyenne. A new group arrived monthly, as this was considered undesirable duty: boredom, far from the amenities of civilization. While the captain relished the crimson sunsets and drove to the river to fish, his crews kept to themselves and changed too rapidly to allow real friendships. Even when offered leave himself, he usually chose to stay.

So Fetterman was often alone, the crews hiding in their quarters playing endless hands of poker. Then he would allow himself
to unlock the portal to the central core of one of the silos, where
the dark tubes thrummed with a life of their own. Once inside, he
would climb one of the catwalks and pace the steel gridwork, lis­
tening to his footsteps twang. Sometimes he would shout into the
darkness just to hear the echoes boom.

She had seen him chopping weeds from a long way off as her
horse topped the ridge and dropped into the valley where the silos
lay clustered. She was surprised to find him so easily, having
imagined that he would disappear into the concrete confines of the
installation, never to resurface again, having wondered in the
half-sleep of early morning if the entire trout episode had not
been a vivid dream.

He laughed. “The cats, Jesus, I didn’t think about them. I ran
away so fast I stepped in a prairie dog hole and fell on my face.”

She’d found him near the perimeter of the easternmost comp­ound, cutting high stands of thistles.

“I don’t have to do this,” he said, “but I’ve run out of things
to do.”

“Thanks for the fish all the same,” she said. “I’m sure they
would have been delicious.”

“Come down to the gate and I’ll let you in.”

Rose tied her horse and walked by Fetterman’s side, the chain­
link fence between them.

“I’ll catch more,” he said. “Will you open fire if I bring
some by?”

She watched his limp and noticed that he was broad­
shouldered, more powerfully built than she’d originally thought.
He unlocked the gate with blunt, flat-nailed fingers and locked it
again behind her.

“Security,” he said, and her reservations about him welled up
again. She looked toward her horse and saw that it remained
where she had tethered it, placidly cropping the weeds that Fet­
terman did not cut, those outside the fence.

“I can’t stay long,” she said.

“I don’t know why I brought you in here. There’s nothing
to see.”
“Nothing you’re allowed to show me anyway.”

They both seemed confused, searching for a method of ending the conversation or continuing it with a purpose. Fetterman looked away from her and scratched the back of his head.

“There aren’t any missiles here, you know.”

Rose looked up and stepped away. He had succeeded in capturing her attention.

“Place has been empty for years,” he continued. “One big decoy. And I’m not supposed to tell anybody. How about that?”

“My God. You mean there’s nothing here? No missiles? No secret weapons?”

“Not a one.”

Rose considered the possibilities; he was crazy and she needed out. Or if crazy, why did he have the keys to this place? Or if the silos were truly empty, what then? Why was he telling her this, here alone?

“I’m sorry. You’re scared, aren’t you? Let me unlock the gate and you can go get your horse. But please don’t run away. We can talk through the fence.”

The offer was enough. “It’s OK. Tell me more,” she said, breathing deeply and looking about at the concrete buildings she knew so well. Or thought she knew, for they had changed. Now instead of solid, efficient-looking fortresses, they appeared to her as frail, ghostly shells.

“What is it you do here?” she asked at last.

“I’m not much more than a glorified janitor,” he said, chuckling. “I’m a caretaker. I keep it looking lived in.”

“Take me inside,” Rose said. “Can you?”

“Not much to see,” he muttered but then turned and led her to the nearest building.

Up close everything looked decrepit, peeling paint and rusted steel. The hinges on the door scraped and creaked as he swung the gray panel about.

“I don’t use this entrance much,” he said.

Inside, they proceeded down a narrow, unlighted corridor and entered a room on the right. Fetterman flicked a switch, and a small cubicle packed full of electronic equipment was illuminated by the pale yellow light of a single overhead bulb.
“We send signals to Russian satellites from here,” he said. “I don’t know if it fools them or not. Anyway, it’s all automatic and doesn’t need any maintenance. If it breaks down, I’m to call division. This is the only part of the whole place that’s truly turned on.”

“It’s not what you’d expect,” said Rose. “It’s so . . . shabby.”

“Not like in the movies.”

“Not at all. Not like anything.”
She hadn’t meant to be funny, but Fetterman laughed loudly, the concrete cell ringing with the sound.

“Then wait till you see this,” he said.

He picked up a flashlight and led her farther down the corridor, up a short flight of stairs, and through a second steel door. They had entered the silo.

It was as empty as the night sky, a column of dry, black air reaching down, down, for all Rose could see to the center of the earth. Fetterman yelled, and the echo ricocheted off the bottom and returned in tight little circles of sound, spiraling upward from inside the shaft. “Hello,” he yelled, and “Rose.”

He then guided her up a ladder to the circular catwalk that hovered above the pit. Rose shivered. There was something dreadful about the enormity of the place.

“How far down?” she asked.

“A hundred and fifty feet. You have to understand that these were built for the Atlas program. When the Minuteman missile came along, it was cheaper in most cases to rebuild them than to modify existing sites. But they kept some open as dummies. The Minuteman silos are tiny in comparison.”

Rose eased herself down and sat on the metal walk, dangling her feet into the blackness. It was an odd feeling, like being suspended in outer space or underwater. The only light came from Fetterman’s flashlight as it jumped from wall to wall, slashing momentary streaks of white across the concrete.

“Shine it straight down,” she said, her voice now clear and unafraid.

“Gets lost,” Fetterman answered, and he was right. A pale cone of illumination poured down the shaft, becoming progressively more diffuse until it disappeared in darkness.
“A black hole,” he said, laughing. “It eats light.”

Rose swung her legs slowly, stirring the air. Fetterman and the silo were striking her fancy now. Both seemed so unlikely.

“Why don’t they fill it up?” she asked. “They could use garbage or gravel. Or spare ball bearings.”

Fetterman walked to the other side of the catwalk and shone the light on Rose. A spotlight now, as if she were on stage.

“You aren’t the first to ponder that possibility,” he said at last, his voice booming out of the darkness. “I want to fill one with cold mountain water and then stock it with trout.”

“A fishing hole.”

Fetterman kept the beam on her and continued to hide behind the light.

“Down at the bottom, where it was coldest,” he said, “they’d get to be huge. Rainbow trout as big as a man’s thigh, cruising like little submarines.”

“Wonderful. I can see them now.”

He reminded her of those students who would appreciate her artifact collection, filled with lively imaginings.

Fetterman switched off the flashlight, and they were submerged in darkness.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

“You know, when I ride by these places they always spook me. If an enemy thinks there are missiles here, then you live in a natural target.”

“If I’m doing my job right I’d be vaporized.”

“That’s not funny.”

“We’d all be vaporized.”

They were both silent for a moment, the flashlight off, the unbroken darkness surrounding them.

“I guess I’m ready to go,” she said.

“Rose, I want to bring you more fish. I’ll catch one big enough for the two of us.”

When Rose had gone, riding her horse up, out of the basin, and away, Fetterman walked about the installation until dusk. He pictured her on a shining pony or swimming in a pool among trout, each fish burning like a filament in an incandescent bulb.

He was smitten by her very name. He stomped about, swing-
ing his arms until he felt a sense of calm return. He had spent much of his life alone. With other men, but substantially alone. Now that he had come to be at peace there on the plains, Rose had appeared to confuse things. Why, he asked himself, did I go to her house the first time? Why had he shown her the silos? Her presence seemed designed to upset his contentment, yet he found himself pleased to assist.

With night falling, Fetterman went to his quarters, gathered his fishing gear, and loaded it into a truck. Suddenly he wanted to be at the river. If he left now, he could be back by midnight.

When he parked among the cottonwoods, it had been dark for over an hour, but the moon illuminated the rippling stretch of water as it flowed between the two black walls of trees. He pulled on his rubber waders and surveyed the wide channel. He knew by heart the places where the larger fish would lie, the undercut banks, the knots of submerged tree roots, the big boulders, and the deep pools.

He felt the steady pull of the current as he moved into the stream. This woman, Rose. She made him burn in the cool night air. He cautioned himself: avoid imagining her as more than a striking acquaintance. She is too young, too unknown. I'm happy now, the way I am.

Fetterman's first cast got hung up in a stand of willows just over his right shoulder. The snag was far too high to reach, so he gave a sharp tug on the pole, and the hookless line drifted gently back to him, curling on the surface of the water.

During the next two hours, he worked his way upstream. Not a single large fish took his flies. His casting was awkward and ineffective. So, sometime in the second hour, he began to slip the little eight- or nine-inch fish that were so abundant into his creel, instead of removing the hooks from their mouths and returning them to the water as he always had before. He felt foolish, having never taken so many fish, so small. Before long, there were ten. After that, he stopped counting.

When he finally stepped out of the river and stripped off his boots, it was past midnight, but he cleaned each fish with great care. If they aren't large, at least they should be skillfully handled, he thought.
He drove up the rocky road that led from the river, watching the moon dip below the horizon as he went. Stars disappeared, and the sky began to cloud. If he delivered the fish to her now, he might seem rash, excessive, and overbearing. But he might also appear romantic and unconventional. One thing he knew: if he returned to his quarters, he would not sleep tonight.

Rose sat up late watching television, the single station she was able to pick up from Cheyenne maddeningly fuzzy. She had expected Captain Fetterman to call. She had hoped he would visit again. It seemed somehow magical to her that he had come from where she had previously noticed only barren ocher sandstone and ominous concrete fortifications. He’d been living all along in a place she thought she knew. It was a little like finding that someone had been settled in your attic for months without your knowledge.

The tapping on the door came softly this time. She knew who it was but paused nonetheless to peer out the dining room window, where she could see the visitor’s profile. Rose would not quickly become accustomed to such late-night callers.

"Hands up," she said, swinging open the door. Fetterman stumbled back a step, then smiled carefully, his face full of apprehension.

"What did you bring me?"

"These are awfully small. I wish I had a good excuse, but they were all I could catch. I hope I didn’t wake you."

"I’m a night owl," she said. "It’s OK."

Rose took the damp package of newspaper-wrapped fish and set it in the kitchen next to the sink. The breezy odor of river water and rank fish smell filled the air.

"And something else," Fetterman said, digging into the front pocket of his baggy military-issue trousers. When he held out his hand, a tiny arrowhead lay upon the rough brown folds of his palm.

"My Lord. Where did you get it?"

"Take it. I found it for you."

Rose took the point from his hand and held it to the light. A blue-gray translucent stone, nearly unweathered, perfectly formed.

"How did you know?"
"I've been watching you. You always get off your horse and walk the hills. What else could you have been searching for?"

"Sit down," she said. "You'll have a drink, won't you?"

Fetterman eased tentatively down onto the edge of a chair and perched there like an oversized bird. Rose felt herself blushing from his gift, his thoughtfulness. He no longer seemed even the least bit sinister or strange.

"I can't believe you went to the river in the dark."

"You must not be a fisherman. Otherwise, you'd know that fish are ravenous in the moonlight."

Rose went to the kitchen and brought a bottle of whiskey and a glass. She felt herself attracted to him, not so much sexually, but because his odd subterranean life, his visions of fish and rivers seemed so benign, so thoroughly kind.

"Would you take me fishing with you?" The request sounded abrupt, and Rose spoke rapidly in an attempt to soften the effect. "Any time. I wouldn't be in the way. You probably like being alone."

Fetterman laughed. "No, no. I'd enjoy the company."

Rose had no idea what would be said next. The conversation seemed to lack conventional boundaries. It was odd that he had come from the silos, a place that she regarded as the home of some dark danger, whether there were actually missiles there or not. But he had transformed them into nothing more than echo chambers or trout ponds. She was willing to believe he'd have done the same thing had they been loaded and ready to fire.

"Do you ever get tired of living out there?" she asked. It was a bold thing to say, implying the loneliness she thought must exist.

"You know," he answered, his voice low and calm, "when I first got here, I looked around and said, 'God, this is like being the last man on earth. Not a sign of life for miles.' But I've learned to like it. This is where I want to stay."

He paused and smiled at her, feeling overcome by her presence. As he stared at his drink, he felt the urge to gulp it all at once but restrained himself, taking only a tiny sip and then resting the glass on his knee.

"There's a place I know of in the mountains west of here," he said. "Lots of trout. We could be there by sunrise."
They camped in a valley where a river made a loop to leave a green meadow nearly encircled by water. Rose sat on the bank and watched Fetterman wade upstream, his green shirt blending with the fir trees. At some point during the drive there, she had realized that it was only a matter of days now until school began. She felt a wave of sadness that this friendship would probably not be given time to grow. Once back in town, the likelihood was that she would be consumed by her old friends and job. Perhaps he’d come to visit, but they’d both feel awkward and out of place, away from the companionable isolation of these late summer days.

Fetterman pulled a fish from the water. As Rose watched, she thought about the empty silos, the columns of dark, motionless air. If some enemy were to drop bombs, back there on the brown plain, would the trees here even tremble? Or would the sky simply go dark? Yet everything around here was sunlit, and such thoughts seemed unreal. Across the water, she could see Fetterman continuing to fish, casting toward a pool near some willows, his wet line inscribing bright arcs in the air.

Fetterman concentrated on the fish as they bent their bodies to hold in the current and tried not to notice Rose where she sat on the downstream bank. He was afraid to think of anything for fear of breaking the spell. First his life on the prairie and now Rose: he felt as though he had stumbled upon a windless clearing, a still point which was doomed to dissolve. She was leaving soon; he could be transferred without notice. Yet he might always retire if they tried to move him, and he could visit her in Cheyenne only two hours away. And so he resolved that even when the fall snowstorms came, he would make the drive.
Refugees

Yeng Lee, the fourteen-year-old boy who fell through the ice, left behind only his mother; his father and brothers had disappeared in Laos nearly seven years before: long ago and far away.

Many children were skating that day after school, bundled in their colorful hooded parkas, some swooping like snowbirds, some wobbling on rubbery ankles, and all shouting in the bracing cold. Those who noticed the boy said he stopped to watch from the shore but soon crept out onto the ice, without skates. At first he slid cautiously on the soles of his shoes. But then, gaining confidence, he went running and sliding, running and sliding, arms
whirling and flapping, his unbuttoned coat whipping wildly in the breeze. Witnesses later speculated that he'd been too shy to skate among the others. He appeared to be having his own fun, skittering toward the far end of the lake where the sun shone all day long. The children knew they weren’t to cross the line marked by the little orange flags, but they were too preoccupied or timid to stop him, one girl shouting, “You’re not s'posed to go out there,” with scarcely enough conviction to turn even a native English speaker’s head. To their credit, they went for help as quickly as they could, dashing to the nearest house up the hill, one boy kicking off his skates and running in his socks and another keeping his on, the blades slicing the frozen turf and then leaving a trail of blue sparks when they reached the concrete walk.

Martha heard about the accident even before the boy’s mother, when an addle-brained deputy from the county sheriff’s department rapped on her door after supper to inform her that “one of your Vietnamese kids fell through the ice at Cottonwood Lake.” When she asked which one, he shook his head apologetically, and Martha went for her coat, but not before correcting him: “They’re Laotian—Hmong,” she snapped, as if that detail carried great import.

The Hmong had come to Wyoming from Pennsylvania three months before Yeng Lee fell through the ice. In Laos, they had tended their animals and planted their crops but lived in fear of bombs and soldiers. In Philadelphia, they had lived in brick tenements, searching for jobs and fearing the streets even before dark fell. Now, in Wyoming, they herded cattle and could walk out under a moonless sky without worry. But one of them had been swallowed up by a frigid lake: a tragedy not preceded by fear seemed in some ways even more difficult to bear.

Martha had first seen them on television, in a news story reporting on how a group of Hmong, originally farmers in the highlands along the Laos-Vietnam border, had found themselves in the city of Philadelphia trying to live in apartment buildings that were not at all like the fields and forests of their homeland. Her heart
went out to them, for Martha could imagine nothing worse than leaving the ranch, than giving up the animals and the unencumbered land and the progression of seasons from calving and planting to haying and snow. She watched the images of the Hmong children posing awkwardly before the cameras while the reporter melodramatically described how they were being lost to drugs and petty crime, spending their days on the streets, learning little English, and clinging to one another to survive. In that moment, Martha decided she had something to share. She had lived on the ranch since marrying Al the year she turned seventeen, but even when she felt most isolated, life in the city seemed an oppressive, unhealthy alternative. So she envisioned a perfect act of charity: to return herders to herding. To recreate their lost life of the soil.

“Call a minister,” suggested Martha’s nephew Robby when she asked, in as offhand a manner as possible, how she might learn more about Southeast Asian refugees.

Robby had spent all his college summers working on the ranch. Now that he had graduated, he intended to spend the fall there—“lay up a semester,” he said—before starting graduate school in business administration. Martha thought he might know who she could call or write to about the people she’d seen on TV.

“My roommate’s dad was a minister,” he said. “They get asked all sorts of off-beat questions.”

Al had been a rather strict Mormon, and Martha knew the elders in his church well, but she did not want them involved. A religious organization would be fussy and proprietary and want things done their way, not hers. Before long, she would be seen as merely a source of funds. Martha’s negative attitude toward Al’s church and churches in general was one aspect of their marriage that had remained unreconciled at Al’s death. Her agnostic tendencies had made him huff and puff in annoyance and exclaim, “My, but you do have all the answers.”

But if not with a minister, where might she begin? At times like these she felt crushingly naive, sixty-eight years naive, about how the wider world worked. Instead of a church, she visited the public
library in Jessup and found the phone numbers for the network that had broadcast the story and a magazine article on the plight of Southeast Asian refugees. The first person she reached who knew anything was an assistant producer who had worked on the news story. She sounded young and full of herself and spoke to Martha as if she were some feeble-minded bumpkin.

"My advice is, give your money to the Red Cross," the assistant producer said. "You can sell the land and send the proceeds to an agency that helps refugees. I'm sure you don't really want to give away your—did you call it a ranch?"

Martha took a deep breath and stood her ground. "I know the Red Cross does fine work, but I don't want to make a contribution that will be spent on rent in a housing project. I want someone who needs my land to have my land."

There was a pause. "I suppose there could be some tax benefits," she said.

When, two referrals later, Martha reached the Pennsylvania social service agency that had direct contact with the refugees, she felt the wheels begin to turn. Between calls, she listened for a sign from Al, a curse or just a whisper asking her to reconsider.

Within a month it was done. As it happened, most of the Philadelphia Hmong were moving to Minnesota even as the news story Martha had seen was being aired, but three families had yet to be placed. They would be pleased to try their luck in Wyoming, she was told. On the first of October, she received a call informing her that fifteen homesteaders were packing, nine traveling by bus and six in their own Plymouth station wagon, a vehicle that at least one of her Philadelphia contacts doubted would make it as far as Omaha.

When she was finally sure they were coming, Martha asked Robby to drive her out to the northeast meadow. She wanted to look for some high ground for the used mobile homes she was having hauled in and see if the road needed grading.

Robby wrapped his long arms about the steering wheel and squinted into the low afternoon sun as he followed the gray path
winding out across the land.

"Did you fix the tire on the baler?" she asked. Since Al’s death, she had been gradually shutting down operations. She had sold the cattle, leasing some pastures and hayfields to neighbors and letting some simply lie fallow. It was a patchwork arrangement, not a sound plan. This fall, she had instructed Robby to cut just enough hay to feed through the winter the six horses that were the only stock left on the ranch.

"It needed new bearings. Tricky job, but Uncle Al’s amazing tool shed came to the rescue."

"Your uncle had a passion for tools, I’m afraid. There are probably three of each."

Robby was her sister Ann’s son, the youngest of that generation and the last possible candidate to be the deserving, hard-working heir to the ranch Al had so desired in his final years. Neither their three children nor any of the nieces and nephews on Al’s side wanted to take it over; at least not on his terms. A few coveted it as a summer retreat, and more than a few would have been delighted to sell it and run, but Al wanted a clear commitment that it would remain a working ranch. Unfortunately, Robby now looked to be as unpromising a prospect as the rest. Aside from his business school aspirations, there was his lack of a sufficiently serious commitment to the ranching life. What kept him returning summer after summer and now this fall was not his love of the work but of a girl in Jessup named Marlene.

They crossed the creek, rumbling slowly over the old bridge, Martha noting that it could stand shoring up.

"I need to start taking stock of things," she said. "I’ve let the place slide."

"That shouldn’t be a problem from now on. There’ll be no shortage of help," Robby replied, with a touch of sarcasm. He’d made it clear that he thought giving the land away foolish when she could have sold it for a handsome price.

It had been more than a year since she’d been to the northeast corner, but it was just as she’d remembered it: a long, triangular hayfield bordered on one side by the creek, on one side by a line of sandstone bluffs where the BLM land started, and on the third side by Highway 16, heading for Idaho. She could transfer the
ownership of this quarter to the refugees, and they could lease as much extra as they wanted, at rates far below what she’d charge some local cattle baron who wanted to expand his empire. She could even sign over her government grazing contracts.

“I do not want sharecroppers,” she had insisted to the social services people in Pennsylvania. “I’ll make every effort to provide them with what they need to prosper.”

Robby stopped, and they waded out into the waist-deep alfalfa, moving away from the blue truck and into the pale green. Each summer Robby renewed his ranch habit of tobacco chewing and now took a rolled foil envelope from his shirt pocket to add a few shreds to the chaw already planted in his cheek.

“That will give you mouth cancer, blacken your teeth, and discourage the ladies from kissing you,” Martha said.

He shrugged. “I’ll give it up when I go back to school again. Ain’t cowboys supposed to chew and spit?”

“You’re not a cowboy. The last cowboys to ride this range were your father and your uncles, and the last time they were cowboys was about 1958—before they started driving big cars and winning seats on the school board. College boys and school board members aren’t allowed to be cowboys.”

The homesteaders in the station wagon came five days later and those on the bus the day after that. Martha awaited their arrival, making several trips between the big house by the river and the meadow, where the three mobile homes she had purchased had been placed in a U to form an inner courtyard, a little grove of cottonwoods closing the open end.

She met Pao Vang first. He was the unofficial spokesman of the group, the patriarch who drove the station wagon up to her house and rapped on her door just before midnight. A lanky, smiling man, about her own age, he shook her hand firmly and said, “It is a pleasure to meet our benefactor.” She tried to invite them all in, but Mr. Vang politely declined. “I’ve been trying to get everyone to sing ‘Home on the Range’ for the last hundred miles, but they keep falling asleep,” he said, laughing. So they followed her truck to the trailers, where she unlocked the doors, showed them the...
light switches, and apologized that they would have to use bottled water until the well driller visited on Thursday. The next afternoon, those riding the bus arrived, and she was introduced to all fifteen of them, six adults and nine children, as they stood outside the trailers looking in amazement at the mountain-toothed horizon and the immensity of the sky.

In the days that followed, the ranch took on an air of bustle and enterprise. There was much to be done around the new homesite, from skirting the trailers with plywood so wind wouldn’t whistle underneath to finding enough beds in secondhand stores in Jessup to sleep everyone. Martha drove her truck for the new residents, to the lumberyard, to the grocery store, and to the motor vehicle office in the county courthouse so that they could apply for Wyoming driver’s licenses. And she started the process of purchasing cattle for them, two hundred head from a broker in Vernal, Utah.

Any business in town seemed to fall to Mr. Vang. Martha would drive to the trailers and wait outside until he appeared, and then off they would go. Reserved at first, he soon began to tell her about the long path that had led him to her ranch. He had been born and raised only miles from the Cambodian border, in a tin-roofed house on stilts in a village of farmers. As a boy, he cared for water buffalo and goats and chickens, but his father wanted him to be a teacher, so he stayed in school after many boys his age had quit. The war was always about, and, at sixteen, he joined one of the several Hmong military units in the employ of the U.S. Army, working mostly as an interpreter because his knowledge of English was good. Before long he was married and had a son, but he continued to work for the Americans off and on, dividing his time between farming, teaching, and sudden trips into the lowland jungles with American troops.

“But one day in 1974,” he told Martha, “I decided we must leave our home. We could see that the Americans were not going to stay much longer. We went to Thailand and spent two years in refugee camps. Then came the worst time of my life. My wife and son contracted meningitis. They died within a week of each other. I wanted to die too.”

He gazed over her shoulder toward some point in the distant hills, and Martha’s eyes began to fill with tears. But after a
moment of silence, the wry smile that she was beginning to find characteristic of him crept across his face.

"However, I chose a fate worse than death," he said. "I went to Philadelphia."

"Oh you," she said and shook her head.

Martha thought his stories both deeply touching and wonderfully exotic. How he and his family had escaped across the Mekong into Thailand on bamboo rafts. How he had gone back into Laos after his wife and son’s deaths and brought out his nephew Kou and his family, guiding them over the mountains by the light of the moon. How the interviewer in the camp who was responsible for deciding who would get to come to the United States tested them by displaying little diagrams of American bathroom fixtures and kitchen appliances, asking what they were and how they worked. And how he remembered being a small boy, sitting on the massive brown back of a water buffalo, tending a small herd of the beasts in a warm rain.

On a Saturday morning less than a month after the newcomers had arrived, Tom Perry, Martha’s neighbor to the east, arrived with four semitrailer stock trucks packed full of the Hereford crosses she had acquired for them, her cost to be repaid over the next dozen years.

Tom had a round red face and a smile held tight by perpetually chapped lips. He was an old friend she had enlisted to help ensure that the delivery went smoothly.

"Do they know what they're doing?" he asked, referring to the five Hmong who stood in a half-circle watching Robby and Tom’s sixteen-year-old son unload the cattle. The animals bawled and lurched and then, seeing open country, trotted easily off across the pasture.

"I’ll help them learn American ranching practices," she said, "but they’re used to tending a few head at a time. They told me that in Laos they didn’t have fences and animals were raised for subsistence, not for sale. They followed the cattle around or tethered them. But Mr. Vang told me he can’t wait to be around animals again."
As Martha and Tom followed the men across the field, Pao fell back to accompany them.

"Mr. Vang, this is Mr. Perry," she said. "He lives on the other side of the river." And then to Tom, "I guess you could say he's the leader of the group."

"Because I am the eldest," he laughed. "Therefore, I have the pleasure of responsibility."

Then with Pao's help, Martha told Tom the names of the other homesteaders: There was Pao's cousin Kou and Kou's wife, Mee and their six children (one a teenage foster son who had been put in their care back in Pennsylvania); Mee's sister Yer Lee and her son Yeng; and Tran and Ti Moua and their two children. Three men, three women, and nine children ranging in age from seven to seventeen.

Two boys who looked to be a little younger than Tom's son heard their names and dropped back to listen.

"How old are these young fellas?" asked Tom.

"Oh, they are already enrolled in school. We intend to be good citizens," explained Pao, all the while shooing the boys away with the back of his hand.

Martha shrugged at Tom and gave him a "who knows?" look but recognized that the cool diplomacy with which Pao was treating Tom was simply his way of dealing with any outsider who held keys to the families' survival and prosperity. She guessed there had been many such politely dealt with people in Pao's past.

"Very nice meeting you," he said to Tom. "Perhaps you will visit again."

When they were alone she whispered, "He's not so formal once you get to know him."

Tom shrugged. "It's hard to read people from other cultures. That's one thing I learned in the army when I went to Korea. In Japan, use both hands when giving a gift, they used to tell us. In Korea, wear a hat if you want a banker to give you a loan. That kind of advice gets you about this far." He held his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

"They've taken over the place with such confidence," she said. "Their second day here, they started digging a canal from the river to divert water for a garden next spring. I had to tell them about irrigation compacts I have with downstream users. But
that’s how it should be, don’t you think? It’s like they’re assert­ing rights that have gone unrecognized for a long time.”

“Well, Martha,” he said, raising an eyebrow and offering a wry smile, “don’t forget I’m one of them downstream users.”

When Tom Perry had gone, Martha and Robby followed Pao to the trailers, where Mee wanted to feed them. A big pot of soup simmered on the stove, and she served it in speckled blue metal bowls that Martha associated with camping and the 1930s.

“We can get only one channel on our TV,” one of the older girls complained. “Only one channel.”

“Only one,” Martha said, “and that comes and goes with the weather.”

Robby made faces at the two littlest girls until they disappeared giggling into a back bedroom. Then he and Martha ate their soup under Mee’s watchful eye.

As they ate, Mee approached Robby and sat beside him. “She is your aunt?” she asked, nodding toward Martha. Robby nodded.

“She said you have been to college,” Mee continued. “Maybe you will help our children in school? They were not very good students in Philadelphia. Sometimes they get confused.”

“Sure,” he said. “You tell them to come see me if they get confused.”

The arrival of the cattle worried Martha. She tried to gauge an appropriate level of involvement for herself and settled at last on suggesting that whoever was going to handle the financial aspects of their operation come to her for some assistance. Pao and his cousin Kou eagerly agreed to weekly meetings during which they could discuss business operations. She wanted them to see that ranching was as much a matter of proper accounting procedures as it was a matter of feeding and breeding. Among the first tasks they undertook together was a visit to her banker, in part so they could borrow the money to buy a good used pickup truck, but more importantly so they could meet the vice-president. Even prosperous ranchers depended upon banks to provide financial bridges across years of drought and low beef prices. She worried that they might be a bit intimidated about the trip to the bank,
but Pao showed up in a charcoal-gray three-piece suit and proceeded to bowl over Willard Knox, the dour VP in charge of lending, with his charm. When the cousins Vang drove away from the auto dealership in a two-year-old, robin’s egg blue Dodge Power Wagon, she felt a surge of satisfaction.

At first, their meetings felt like occasions during which Martha, the landowner, was to give instructions to Pao and Kou, her hired hands. But Pao’s good humor and her own determination to treat them the same way she’d treat someone like Tom Perry gradually banished the formality. Pao always retained his natural, unforced air of dignity, but he was a card too, even to the point of doing impressions of show business personalities, from John Wayne to Johnny Carson. Kou was quieter and almost gravely studious whenever she offered any advice about the ranching business. Initially, she viewed his seriousness as evidence that he was frightened of her, but it wasn’t long before she discovered that what really frightened him was his total lack of knowledge about farming or ranching of any kind. In fact, only Pao had any prior experience raising animals or crops.

“What did you do in Philadelphia?” she asked Kou one day by way of making small talk.

“First I worked in a meat-packing plant. Then they laid me off, so I got a job as a process server.”

Robby, eating a sandwich in the next room, overheard and guffawed. “You delivered subpoenas?” he shouted. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Not as dangerous as these cattle. They step on me, knock me down. You want to know something? I never was a farmer. I grew up in Vientiane. To tell the truth, only Pao really knows about farming. The rest of us, we just figure it out day by day.”

All four of them roared with laughter, but Martha’s heart jumped, and she imagined Al watching from somewhere, shaking his old gray head.

The morning after Yeng Lee’s death, Martha visited the boy’s mother. She wanted to answer any questions about American funeral practices before some huckster mortician got to her and sold
her a silver-plated casket and split-level headstone. Martha insisted that the funeral be handled with dignity, according to whatever traditions they followed. Ever since the Hmong had moved in, little clusters of prayer flags had appeared around the trailers and along the sides of the ranch roads, scraps of crimson attached to willow twigs. Pao had explained to her that the religion they practiced mixed ancient spirit worship with Buddhism, but she didn’t know what that really meant.

When she tapped on the door of the trailer and was let inside, she was escorted into a tiny bedroom that had been converted into a shrine. Beside candles and a ceramic Buddha were tattered photos of Yeng Lee’s father and two brothers, all of whom, Martha had been told, had disappeared in Cambodia while trying to make their way to the refugee camps in Thailand. The two boys appeared to be about the same age as Yeng. Acting on reflex, Martha knelt to say a prayer, but all she could think of was how little she knew about what Yeng’s mother was thinking and how unable she was to help. Responding to grief is mostly a matter of empathy, she thought, of saying, We all have known tragedy before and will again and so we are together in this experience. But what the boy’s mother had lived through seemed of another order, so profound and encompassing that Martha’s imperfect response could only trivialize the pain. She felt a sob rising within and fought to hold it back.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Now I am by myself in a big country,” said the mother, touching Martha’s hand before Pao led her away.

She wondered what Yeng’s life would have been like had he remained in Laos. Perhaps, like his brothers, he’d have been killed by one of the various and violent aftershocks that followed the war. Or maybe now he’d be living with relatives in a small village, helping to raise water buffalo, geese, and chickens, planting rice and vegetables, and inhaling air filled with some sweet smell she couldn’t imagine.

She counted twenty-seven at the funeral. Pao insisted on a conventional Lutheran service, perhaps because he didn’t want to attract attention. To Yeng’s fourteen family members were added Martha, Robby, a couple of Yeng’s teachers, the junior high principal, and a handful of devoted church women she guessed attended every funeral.
On Christmas Eve, ten days after the burial, Martha invited all the refugees, Tom and Virginia Perry, and Robby and his girlfriend, Marlene, to the house. With Robby’s help, she had decorated a tree for the first time since Al’s passing. It was a big Douglas fir from up in the high country, and around it she had heaped gifts, one for each adult and several for each of the children. Unfortunately, everyone seemed even less at ease than Martha had expected. Marlene, who was just out of high school (Robby had no business dating her, in Martha’s opinion), hung on Robby and whispered in his ear. The adults all stood drinking punch, and the children sat on the floor in a little cluster, speaking softly and occasionally stifling a giggle. Even after the opening of the packages, they seemed afraid to play with their new toys. At last Robby took the three eldest boys outside in the bitterly cold night to throw a glow-in-the-dark Frisbee he’d brought for them. That seemed to break the pall of silence. The four girls moved to a corner of the dining room and began dressing the doll the youngest one had received, and Mee came and sat with Martha and Virginia Perry on the sofa before the fire.

“How did you celebrate Christmas in Pennsylvania?” Virginia asked. She was a small, energetic woman. It had crossed Martha’s mind that if Tom Perry died as Al had, Virginia would probably increase both the productivity and efficiency of their ranch.

“Very little. We did not know many Americans, so we celebrate our own tradition more.”

“It’s mostly for the little ones—Santa Claus and all.”

“Oh, yes. The children come home from school and they cannot stop talking about Santa Claus. Tonight is very nice for them. They have been so excited.”

“Your children are adjusting to their new schools?” Virginia asked.

“The youngest are the happiest,” said Mee, “but the older ones do not like it so much. One of the boys, Tong, he has been running away from school. The teachers call us, but he will not listen.”

Martha had gotten a call from the school as well. Tong was the teenage orphan who had been put in Kou and Mee’s foster care when they lived in Philadelphia. Apparently he had taken to cutting classes and hanging out at Watson’s Store. “I’ve seen him...
there," Robby told her. "He smokes Salems and jams the Pac-Man machine with pennies to win games." Martha saw the distress on Mee’s face, but, given the possible range of antisocial behavior, cigarettes and sabotaged video games seemed mild.

“You did not want to be with your children and grandchildren during the holiday?” Mee asked Martha, changing the subject.

“My daughters are scattered from Denver to Florida, and I’m not much of a traveler these days,” she replied. “Some of them will visit this summer.” As she spoke, she wondered what her daughters’ reactions would be. She had given them only the sketchiest of details, making it sound as if the refugees were temporary tenants rather than de facto heirs.

Every few minutes, one of the boys would come bursting through the door, hold the Frisbee over a table lamp until its glow recharged, and share an embarrassed grin as he skittered back outside. Then, through the window over Mee’s shoulder, Martha could see the frosty, phosphorescent disk soaring to and fro against a moonless sky. But as exuberant as the boys seemed, Robby later told her that one of them had begun to weep at one point from the thought that Yeng was not present to take part in their game.

Many of the people in Jessup and up and down the valley did not know of the Hmong’s homesteading until the news of Yeng’s death hit the newspaper. Thereafter, when Martha met acquaintances in town, they sometimes inquired about them, but everyone seemed under the impression that the Hmong were only on the ranch temporarily—some kind of dude ranch for refugees, perhaps. When told the arrangement was permanent, they said, “Really?” or simply raised their eyebrows and sidled away. So it did not completely surprise her when the first primitively scrawled piece of hate mail arrived in her mailbox in mid-January.

“Racists,” she exclaimed to Robby. “They’re stuck in the past. When I was growing up there were so few people who weren’t white around here, their race was part of their name. Black Henry lived by the railroad tracks, and there was a shoemaker everyone called Chinese Jim.”

26 Refugees
“What does it say?”

“'Get the gooks out of the area or face the consequences.' Then in a different hand at the bottom, 'We'll eat you up.'” She handed the note to him and said, “I keep picturing men in white sheets.”

“Maybe it’s not just a matter of race. Maybe it’s because you gave the land away. Some people have pretty strong feelings about that.”

“You’re not defending them, are you? Whoever wrote this is nothing less than a terrorist.”

She fell silent for a moment and then said, “Do you think I should tell Pao about the note? There may be more.”

“Absolutely. I’d want to know if someone was out to get me.”

Martha well understood the proprietary feeling individual ranchers had for the land at large. How Al used to rage at the subdividers who would buy whole mountainsides to hack into “ranchettes” for summer homes for doctors and lawyers from Salt Lake City. Newcomers were looked upon with a cold eye; they remained untrustworthy greenhorns until they’d been in the valley so long no one could recall when they’d arrived. She found such attitudes maddening but understood their source. Nearly every ancestral ranch in their corner of the state had begun as a barren, hardscrabble homestead claimed by a Mormon family who had reached its own personal Zion. They had not come on horseback or in wagons drawn by oxen but on foot, pushing heavy handcarts. When they stopped, they made their lives out of sweat and endurance. To Martha, the Mormon religion always appeared to be built less on faith than on acts of will. Faith played little part in a man’s existence if he rolled over circumstance with muscle and discipline and enterprise. Through Al, Martha had developed respect for such an approach to life, but she did not come by it naturally. Though she had never been religious (living, instead, in the shadow of Al’s religion), she inclined toward a life governed by faith. Bringing the refugees to the ranch was not her attempt to impose order on the world but rather her offering, her expression of hope. Lately, she felt light and new, because, truth be told, sometimes Al had rolled over even her.

That afternoon, Martha found Pao and Kou with Robby in the tractor shed. The cowl was off the old Fordson and all three of
them peered at the engine, Pao and Kou dressed in the spanking new insulated coveralls she’d bought for all of them so that they now looked like an advertisement for the Peace Corps or insulated coveralls.

“I’m showing them how to maintain this thing,” Robby explained self-consciously.

“About which you’re an expert,” she said.

“Well, they asked.”

“I need to speak to them.”

When they looked at the letter, their eyes darted fearfully toward one another.

“I’ll help however I can,” she said. “I don’t expect trouble, but we must take care.”

“Have you notified the police?” asked Pao.

“Oh, I suppose I should, shouldn’t I. I don’t want to overreact. But you’re right, I’ll call the sheriff. He ought to be told.”

Pao nodded and spoke a few words of Lao to Kou. For an awkward moment, Martha waited for a translation, but neither offered one.

“Well,” she said at last, “you were working on the tractor.”

“Very nice tractor,” said Kou. “We will need to buy one like it.”

“You can have this one,” Martha said. She shot a glance at Robby, who had been standing back, absentmindedly clicking the ratchet on a socket wrench. He was shaking his head in amazement when she turned to go.

A while later, Pao came to Martha’s house. She hadn’t expected him, and the knock startled her into imagining another sheriff’s deputy bearing bad news, or worse, some mob of thugs waiting on her porch to punish her. When she saw who it was, she smiled with relief. A frigid wind was blowing outside, and she took Pao to stand by the wood stove in the kitchen. He held his hands toward it and said, “I came to say that I’m sorry you must worry about us so.”

“I never imagined anything like this would happen. Maybe I’m naive.”

“If you had known such problems would arise, would you have invited us?”

“Don’t be foolish,” she said, a little taken aback by his hon-
esty. "I'd still have asked you to come. I just would have been more prepared, that's all."

"It's hardest on the young people," he said. "Not the small children, but the ones who were too old to benefit from American schools and too young to have learned work skills in Laos. They want to be rich like the Americans they see on TV but can't be. So they drink, get in trouble, and wish they owned Toyota Celicas."

In some ways, Pao reminded Martha of Al. He was smart and tough. Many of his comments were biting and double-edged, directed as much at himself and his own people as at outsiders. But he also had the warmth and humor Al had had as a young man but lost as he got older. She felt a wave of affection for him and took his hand in hers.

"Things will be fine," she assured him. They sat in silence for a moment, and then he drew his hand back and came to the original point of his visit:

"Do you have guns in your house? I'd rather not spend money on a gun, and I thought perhaps we could borrow one. I feel we need protection."

"Oh my," Martha exclaimed, thrown entirely off her guard. "Of course I do, or at least Al did. They belonged to him. But I think that's a very bad idea. The kind of person who wrote that note would see the presence of firearms only as an invitation."

"Then we will have to buy our own," he said. "That would be your business."

It pained her to see Pao feeling he had to defend his home. As much as Martha feared the possibility of a lunatic harming someone on the ranch, she suspected that the Hmong's success or failure there would rest more on the small realities of daily life than on the outcome of some Shane-style showdown. She worried most about the children. In the mornings her habit was to sit in the sunroom by the big twelve-pane window. Since the coming of the homesteaders, the hour she spent watching the leafless cottonwoods take light had been punctuated by the children's departure for school. At first, the district social worker had picked them
up in a van. Then, after they purchased the pickup, the sky blue Dodge would haul them to the bus stop at the highway, rumbling by with three adults shoulder to shoulder in the cab and all nine kids sitting in the bed of the truck, holding their knees.

Then, one day, she saw a boy and two girls slip overboard and into the willows as the pickup slowed to cross the cattle guard east of the house. Setting her coffee aside, she went out the back door, figuring they would cut along the river.

“What are you kids doing?” she asked when, having guessed their path perfectly, she ran smack into them as they rounded the barn. The girls cowered like kittens against the gray planks, but the boy bolted for the willows. Martha was just quick enough to snatch his sleeve and drag him back, shaking her finger in his face in indignation.

“No school today,” snapped the boy. “Parent-teacher conferences.”

“I saw you jump out of the truck. You’re playing hooky,” she said, proud of herself for having been spry enough to foil his attempted escape.

“We have to go home,” said the younger of the girls, tears beginning to fill her eyes.

“I don’t believe you. Come inside and I’ll phone the trailers. Or we’ll just wait until the truck comes back.” She shooed them toward the house with outstretched arms and noticed them exchanging looks of anguish as they marched up the gravel drive.

Once inside, Martha sat them down at the kitchen table, poured glasses of milk, and gave the girl who had been crying a Kleenex. She recognized the girls as Kou’s daughters and the boy as the foster-child Tong, whose truancy was no surprise.

“Now tell me why you wanted to skip school today. Maybe I can help.”

They remained silent for a moment. The girls sipped their milk, but the boy pushed his away. He looked more angry than afraid.

Finally the younger girl—Martha estimated her to be about thirteen—said, “It’s no fun. Other kids don’t like us.”

“Don’t like you? How do you know?”

“They laugh at our clothes, say we smell funny and stuff like that,” the older girl explained. “In Laos, girls our age don’t have to go to school much. They work at home.”
Martha nodded and looked out the window. She had gone to the phone but decided as she lifted the receiver that it would be easier to catch the truck as it returned.

"You miss your home?" she asked the boy. "In Laos I mean."

He shrugged and toyed with a silver chain on his wrist.

"Sometimes I miss it," offered the older girl. "I remember I went to market with my mother. We'd buy meat and bananas and mangos. You ever eat a mango? We didn't have to own land to farm. We plant our gardens any place we want."

The younger sister nodded, but then suddenly her face brightened. "I like it better here because we can have boyfriends," she said. Martha smiled and the older one laughed and covered her mouth. "In Laos, if a Hmong boy wants to talk to a girl, he stays outside her house until she goes to bed. Then he blows a thing like a flute called a ncas so she can't sleep and will come out to talk to him. But girls can't go with boys until it's time to marry."

"Do you have a boyfriend at school?" she asked.

The older sister shook her head. "Our mother, she doesn't want us around boys. She's afraid we won't be virgins in marriage."

Suddenly, Tong spoke to them in Lao, his voice rising with anger. Martha looked at the girls questioningly. The older one avoided her eyes, but the younger one responded:

"He says we should not talk like this with you. He says—"

"Why don't you leave us alone, lady," he said, cutting the girl off. "I think maybe I go back to Philly, you know. Where my friends are and we always had some shit going. Some good shit that wasn't like this place." Then he stood up, knocking over his chair, and walked out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

"Where do you think he's going?" Martha asked.

"He wanted us to sneak up to the highway and hitchhike into town," said the older girl.

"You really must go to school," Martha said. "If you don't graduate from high school, things will be very difficult for you."

They nodded, but she knew they had heard the same lecture before. Al would have thundered all three of them out of the house and told their elders they needed a whipping and he'd be happy to administer it. She waited until the truck passed and then drove the two girls into school herself, having extracted a half-hearted pledge that it wouldn't happen again. When she told Pao
about the incident he laughed and said, "I'm in awe of you Martha. What's the expression? An iron fist in a velvet glove."

For weeks after the arrival of the threatening note, Martha opened her mailbox and answered her phone with trepidation. No additional letters came, but there were midnight calls, some from what sounded like teenage boys, asking her if she had "yellow fever" and others offering only silence. And someone dumped a heap of trash where the road leading to the ranch met the highway. She did not tell the county sheriff of the threats because she did not trust that he would be on her side. He would tell her he needed more evidence, that it was difficult to stop anonymous mischief, that he lacked the manpower to place an armed guard at the ranch. But he would be thinking, That's what she gets for being smart, for not paying attention to the way things are done around here.

Then, on an overcast Saturday morning, it was discovered that someone had mutilated one of the Hmong's cattle, and she felt she had to bring the authorities in. By the time the sheriff arrived, she was standing over the carcass with Pao, Kou, the veterinarian from Jessup, and a state brand inspector. She introduced the sheriff to Pao and Kou, watching his face as he took in the circle of carnage, the blood and disassembled cow parts scattered upon the frozen ground like the results of some cartoon explosion.

"It's a horror," murmured the brand inspector.

"Have you seen anyone out here?" asked the sheriff. He was of Al's generation, a humorless lawman who seemed to believe the mishaps people suffered were mostly the result of their own carelessness or lack of moral fiber.

Martha shook her head. "Mr. Vang and I have already asked ourselves that. He'll speak to the others, but if anyone would have noticed something, it would have been Kou."

"We saw nothing," said Kou.

"We'll want a statement from these two," said the sheriff to Martha. "Can you bring them in this afternoon?"

"You understand this shouldn't be looked upon as a simple case of vandalism," she said. "It's meant as a threat."
The sheriff shrugged. "I’m not sure I know what it means," he said, gesturing at the cow parts.

The veterinarian sauntered to his truck and returned with plastic bags.

"These samples will go to the state lab," he muttered, "but don’t expect much."

"Looks to me like it was done with a chainsaw," said the brand inspector, a man clearly in possession of a lurid imagination. Martha had little doubt that he would soon be spreading the word that he had witnessed the aftermath of a cattle mutilation which was no doubt committed by a satanic cult or visitors from another galaxy.

"There’d be more splatter with a chainsaw," the vet said, matter-of-factly. "All this really took was a sharp knife, a bone saw, and a little elk-hunting experience. Nothing fancy." The vet filled his zip-lock bags and departed, saying only, "I’ll be in touch" as he turned toward his van. Pao and Kou took Martha’s truck to fetch shovels. They planned to salvage what little meat they could and bury the rest to keep the coyotes away. The brand inspector seemed reluctant to depart, however. He stood by, kicking snow and dirt on a foreleg, prodding the hoof gingerly with the toe of his Wellington, wagging his head in dismay.

"You don’t suppose," he mumbled at last, "you don’t suppose it’s them," and poked his chin in the direction of the trailer houses.

"Why would they kill their own cattle?" Martha asked impatiently, thinking, My God, spare me such ignorance.

"Some religious reasons, I guess. I don’t know," he said, backpedaling already from Martha’s frosty tone.

"You clearly don’t know," she snapped, and he skulked off to his truck, giving her an embarrassed nod as he backed around and sped away.

"Lord," she said. "What on earth."

"The problem with a situation like this is that rumors get started," said the sheriff. "And there ain’t one thing you can do about that."

When Martha got back to the house, she was surprised to find the front door standing open. Must’ve left it unlatched, she thought—she’d been so flustered after hearing about the steer.
But as she reached the landing at the top of the stairs and turned to remove her coat, Tong appeared from the back bedroom.

“Oh my,” she gasped, and then, angrily, “Where on earth did you get the idea you could walk into someone else’s house uninvited?”

She looked to his hands, fearing she might find a weapon there or some of her belongings, but they were empty, hanging open at his sides.

“Haven’t you anything to say for yourself?”

“You have a husband?” he asked, pointing to a photograph of Al hanging amid a row of family portraits along the hallway.

“He died two years ago,” she said.

“And children, these your children?”

“My daughters.” She wanted him out of her house but no longer felt quite so threatened. “They live elsewhere.”

He nodded thoughtfully then and walked past her as she backed into her bedroom doorway to let him by. When he had gone, she ran down the stairs, locked the door after him (something she never did during daylight hours), and felt the rush of fear return.

In the days that followed, she thought often of the television producer’s suggestion: sell the land and give the money to a charity that works with refugees. But she had gone too far for that, willfully changing her life, irreversibly. Pioneers like Al’s grandfather had chosen to change their lives just so, striking out into the Rocky Mountain unknown. But her act was a mirror image of theirs, a gathering in instead of a casting out—if an immigrant wasn’t satisfied with one destination, he could pack his wagon and move on. If she wasn’t satisfied she could only dig in now, stand defiantly with the refugees, who had clearly gone far enough. One of Al’s favorite stories about the Mormon leader, Brigham Young, was that his famous words “This is the place” had been just as rehearsed as Neil Armstrong’s “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” That, contrary to popular lore, his decision that his people should settle in the valley of the Great Salt Lake had not been the product of divine guidance. Rather, the location had been carefully selected by advance parties who had begun to visit the area as much as three years earlier. Al interpreted the story as evidence of his faith’s rational ap-
proach to things, but she preferred the popular version, the serendipitous discovery of a place that could change your life.

Even if she hadn’t felt somehow destined to help the Hmong make a life for themselves on the ranch, she would have given them her complete support as a way of showing her respect for Pao. Kou had stopped coming to their weekly meetings—he preferred to spend his time with Robby, tinkering with farm machinery—and so it was just the two of them. She made coffee and showed him photos of her daughters and their children, and little by little found herself telling him things about her marriage to Al and her life on the ranch that she had never told anyone before. About Al’s disdain for the girls and their upbringing because they were not the male heirs he desired; about his closet drinking and the self-righteous hypocrisy with which he attacked anyone else who broke the laws of his church. She watched his eyes and knew she was being listened to for the first time in many years.

The two girls that Martha had caught skipping school sometimes stopped in to visit her now, but Tong never returned after the day she found him upstairs. She heard that he had become an even worse problem at school, not only cutting classes but fighting and drinking in the parking lot during lunch hour. Some students had even accused him of stealing from their lockers, and though the charges were never substantiated, he’d become an outlaw—sullen, defiant, and sadly alone. But the girls she found delightful. They preferred to be called by their chosen American names, Jennifer and Linda, and when they stopped in after school to visit, they peppered her with questions about everything imaginable. What was college like and how much did a car cost and how would one go about getting to Salt Lake City to see a rock concert?

Only two weeks after the cow mutilation, someone cut a stretch of fence so that a dozen of the Hmong’s cattle could wander out onto the highway. They were reclaimed without mishap, but Martha felt the onset of a siege mentality. A period of bitter cold set in, a week of west winds driving blue gray clouds across the sky, and she stayed in, distracted by whatever poltergeist was
responsible for the recent string of mishaps. Ah, yes, she thought, the ghost of Al, come back to haunt me as punishment for the ill way I've used his precious legacy. It occurred to her that he'd have been the first to object if someone in the valley had done what she'd done. His virtue was that any complaint he had would have been stated in plain language, in broad daylight, face to face with the offending party. No predawn fence cutting for him. Of course his retaliation would have been just as mean-spirited as anything done in the dead of night. One time, he had determined that a man who ran a little subsistence farm near the river was letting a handful of sheep—two dozen at most—graze on land leased to Al. After warning the man once, he drove to the pasture, shotgunned three of the animals in question, threw the carcasses in the back of his pickup, and presented them to the farmer on his own front porch.

The thought of Al as a ghost spooked her a bit, playing at the edge of her consciousness as she drifted about the house, making her glance uneasily at his eyes in the photo in the hall. All the activity of the fall and winter had diminished his presence in her thoughts. She couldn't say that made her unhappy. Perhaps he was finally ready to make his last good-bye.

The day after the fence cutting, Martha discovered she wasn't alone in feeling besieged.

"Pao's going to patrol the fence tonight," said Robby, bursting in with Pao as she fixed supper for herself.

"It's time for us to act," said Pao.

A few hours later, the three of them rode out shoulder to shoulder in Robby's truck, the gearshift bruising her thigh whenever he shifted into second. Martha had sensed a little too much bravado in Robby's voice and had asked to go along, figuring she could be a calming influence.

"I've been asking myself all day who might have cut the fence," she said.

"Maybe a heifer just leaned on it," said Robby. "The fences haven't had much care since Uncle Al died."

"The fence was cut," said Pao with complete certainty as the yellow glow of the trailer house windows came into view.

Pulling into a grove of aspen about a hundred yards from the highway, Robby shut off the truck and doused the lights. They sat
then, listening to the ticking sound of the cooling engine and watching cars pass on Route 16.

"That's where the break was," Pao said, pointing up the embankment.

Robby pressed his nose against the window. "Maybe whoever did it will return to the scene of the crime."

"The heifer?" asked Martha.

Robby snorted and then gasped, "Look!" motioning toward what appeared to be a Jeep veering from the highway. It rolled off the shoulder and burst through the barbed-wire fence, uprooting two of the fence posts that had been replaced just that day, then dipping down into the pasture, extinguishing its lights as it cut across the hay stubble toward the trailers. They watched as it veered wildly back and forth, bouncing high over ruts and tipping up on two wheels, driving like high school kids in a four-wheel-drive vehicle always felt required to, driving like kids who'd had too much to drink.

"Maybe we should go back and call the sheriff," said Robby.

"Follow them," Pao ordered. "Leave your lights off and get going."

Robby stayed on the road that bordered the pasture, keeping the Jeep in view until it pulled into the trailer-enclosed courtyard. Then, suddenly in the spirit of things, he roared off the road and across the field, switching on his brights so that the occupants of the Jeep froze like deer when the blast of light hit. Martha knew at least three of them: Tong and the two girls who liked to visit her. The two others looked to be high school boys from town.

"This is inexcusable," she heard Pao say as he opened his door, trying to put a foot down before Robby could completely stop the truck.

The kids all looked boozy and disoriented, and Martha heard one of them say, "Is it the cops?" Then Pao began to speak, a string of angry words in Lao, driving them back against the Jeep. He pointed at the door of one of the trailers, and the girls started meekly toward it. Even Tong seemed to shed his defiance, but suddenly one of the boys from town, a big kid with long red hair, stepped toward Pao, raising his fist.

"I don't know what you're yellin' about but if you touch me I'll kill you."

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As the red-haired boy advanced another step, Pao pulled a small pistol from his jacket pocket and held it at arm's length, pointing the barrel straight into the boy's midsection.

"You go home now," he said. "Don't come back here anymore."

There was a terrifying pause, Martha still only halfway out of the truck, Robby directly behind Pao, the girls and Tong on their way to the door, all of them breathlessly still. Then a light came on above the door of the nearest trailer and Kou stepped outside. Everyone turned toward it, and in that moment, the appalling tension eased. Pao relaxed his arm and lowered the pistol to his side while the boys muttered some face-saving words, climbed into their Jeep, and roared away with as much revving of the engine and dusty fishtailing as they could muster.

Back at home Martha puttered about the kitchen, knowing she needed to unwind before she could get to sleep. Robby was in and out of the refrigerator two or three times, once for a beer, another time for a sandwich, exclaiming on each visit about how exhilarating he'd found the unexpected drama the evening had provided.

"You remember how you told me there aren't any cowboys left around here?" he said. "Well that Mr. Vang, he's a cowboy. No doubt about it."

For a while she could hear country music coming from Robby's room at the other end of the house, but then it was quiet. She sat down to begin composing a letter to her daughters which would explain all that had happened in the past few months as well as the implications of those events for the ranch and their inheritance, but suddenly she felt exhausted—unready, perhaps, to contemplate their likely responses. Instead, she climbed the stairs and began to undress for bed. It was then that she glanced out her window and noticed an orange glow just above the tree line announcing the fire.

Rousting Robby with a shout, she pulled on the clothes that she'd just removed and phoned the commander of the county volunteer fire department. Robby struggled to pull on his boots and then they ran for the truck, Robby releasing the clutch so abruptly that the front wheels seemed to lift off the ground and
they were catapulted into the darkness. When they rounded the last stand of willows obscuring the northeast meadow, she could see at once that it was the center trailer, Kou’s trailer, nearly consumed already, the flames whirling with terrifying violence, wrapping themselves around the now-exposed steel frame of the house and then leaping at the open sky.

She began counting as soon as she could make out the first shadowy forms, praying that she could reach fourteen. Four standing together by the road; one adult holding a child; one running in the direction of the truck. That makes seven. Two on the front steps of one of the other trailers. Nine.

“Robby, leave your lights on,” she commanded as they skidded to a stop. But before the engine died, before she could finish her count, Pao was opening the door of the truck.

“It was set,” he said breathlessly. “I heard the sound of an automobile. After that came the fire.”

“Everyone is safe?” she asked hopefully.

He nodded, and then there was an explosion—probably the propane tank—a blinding flash of blue that seemed to almost extinguish the flames before they erupted again with redoubled intensity. Pao opened his arms toward the burning trailer, as if to gather to himself its awfulness, tears streaming down his face.

Within a week they were leaving. She could have replaced the trailer, but Pao believed the confrontations would only get worse. Their home had been burnt, he had drawn a gun—they were fortunate that no one had been hurt. Pao told her he had friends in the Hmong community in Fresno. They would try their luck there.

Martha waved from her front porch as they departed. First came the station wagon, a long, lime green Chevy that had come all the way from Philadelphia, packed once again with passengers, a tarp-covered bundle lashed to the roof. It threatened to scrape bottom at every rut. Next came the pickup truck, loaded with the remainder of their belongings. Pao was driving with three children sitting shoulder to shoulder beside him. Only Tong was not making the trip. The girls said they’d last seen him hitchhiking toward Interstate 80, heading for Philadelphia.
She envied them all, even Tong. To be moving, moving anywhere. Being driven off your land must be among the most horrible things that could happen, but all she could think of was the possibility of life beyond the next line of hills. Once, just after she had gotten married, she had believed there was an inexhaustible richness to be found on the ranch. And she had believed Al when he explained to her that geography was destiny. But little by little, she had come to think differently. Now she thought she would like to write her daughters and say, "The ranch is yours, do with it what you will." She thought she would like to live in a small house, wedged between other houses just like it. She thought she would like to walk on streets lined with oak trees or even palm trees. And she thought she would like someone nearby to talk to instead of having her words be swallowed up by the wind.

The girls waved to her from the back window of the station wagon. In only two or three days, they would be enrolling in a new school in Fresno. They would be Jennifer and Linda, the new girls, and it would be difficult for a time, but maybe then it would begin to seem like the place they'd always belonged. She hoped they would find boyfriends there.
When Thomas Edison came to Rawlins, Wyoming Territory, most of the townsfolk saw only what the press releases had led them to expect: Thomas Edison, scientist; Thomas Edison, industrialist; Thomas Edison, inventor extraordinaire. A few skeptics saw through the hoopla to the snake-oil huckster peddling himself and his inventions to the diversion-starved frontier rubes. But years later, Owen Schoonover would claim to have been the only one who saw something more, who saw the original, wondrous boy in the man, the natural wizard whose ability to dream up miraculous devices outstripped even the world’s ability to gobble them up.
If the crowd that met Edison at the Rawlins train station hoped for flamboyance, they were not disappointed. Riding in perched on the locomotive's cowcatcher, the great inventor emerged from a cloud of blue steam, waving his hat in greeting as the train hissed to a stop. He had shot a bear near Green River, he announced, and pulled the furry ears from his coat pocket to a rousing cheer. Yet sixteen-year-old Owen, who had expected a more dignified entrance, was surprised by nothing so much as Edison's homeliness—his tiny buckshot eyes and down-turned mouth and unkempt thatch of hair.

Thomas Edison had come west on what had been promoted as a fishing trip. The newspapers, however, speculated that it was an exploratory expedition, a search for exotic materials to be used in his proposed electrical incandescent lamp. When it became known that his itinerary included a stop in Rawlins on the transcontinental railroad, the city fathers (including Owen's own father, the railroad station master) leaped at the chance to oblige. Organizing an oversize fishing party comprised of half the town, they trundled the inventor and his own formidable entourage up twelve miles of dusty trail to Saddle Lake, on the western slope of the Great Divide. There, as everyone scurried to make camp, Owen excused himself and hiked into the woods, where he stopped, unfastened his trousers, and relieved himself on the trunk of a big spruce tree.

Two things Owen disliked were large social gatherings and camping out. If his father spotted him now, he'd accuse him of indolence, but Owen simply preferred town to the wilds and his own company to the demands of society. He grimaced as he listened to the shrieks of children, an ax splitting pine logs, and the clatter of pots and pans. Shrugging his shoulders to readjust his suspenders, he picked his way back through the undergrowth to the edge of the broad clearing by the lake. All the wagons were nearly unloaded, and the men now struggled to erect baggy canvas tents. Not far from the water, the women lit cookfires, the dark smoke rising already into the clear summer sky. And there, in the midst of it all yet coolly aloof from the hubbub, stood Tom Edison, arms akimbo, face shining in the sun.

Owen and Edison had already met. An amateur inventor him-
self, Owen had been proud to serve as porter when Edison's party detached yesterday, ferrying their baggage to the hotel and showing them all to their rooms. Then, retrieving his own worn satchel from behind the front desk where he'd left it that morning, he knocked on Edison's door and forced himself on the inventor, unpacking his nitric acid battery, his electric buzzer, and his rolled sheaf of drawings before one of Edison's assistants, a tall bearded fellow, could shove him back out.

"Let him stay," Edison sighed, and the bearded man departed, but not before he had pulled Owen aside.

"He don't hear too well. Be sure you speak up," he said and left them alone.

Edison ignored him at first, stripping off his coat and vest and shoes, wiggling his toes and washing his grimy face in the basin while Owen connected his gadget to the closet door.

"It's for shopkeepers," he all but shouted. "The door to the shop opens and the buzzer sounds. You always know if someone's walked in."

"A spring-tension switch."

Owen nodded and pointed to the doorjamb.

"Where I come from, we'd call that a burglar alarm. Been done before." When Owen's face fell, he added, "You're an ingenious boy, coming up with that on your own out here." He paused for an enormous yawn. "Damn it, I'm bushed," he said. "I need a rest."

"I've got something else," said Owen. "I call it an electric singing machine. It's based on your gramophone. I haven't built it yet, but I brought some drawings."

Edison had just begun to lay back on the bed, but he sat up now, his eyes brightening, and pushed a hand through his ragged hair.

"Singing machine?"

"A carbon microphone of the kind used in Bell's telephone connected to a network of headsets. The singer's voice comes to each member of the audience through his own personal headset, thereby eliminating—"

"Let me see that," Edison said, snatching the curled drawings from Owen's hands. He spread the designs across the bed, looking at them with great interest, declaring the idea feasible, promising,
marketable even, before asking once more to be left alone. But as Owen was about to shut the door behind him, Edison called him back.

"Have you heard about my newest invention?"

"No sir," he said and watched as Edison reached his open hands toward the ceiling and drew them back tightly closed. And then slowly, before Owen's eyes, he unfolded his fists to reveal a silver dollar upon each palm.

"My newest invention. I make money out of thin air," he said and roared with laughter as he ushered Owen out the door.

Feeling at once disappointed and thrilled, Owen stood in the dark corridor and collected himself. So this, he thought, is the famous Edison, inventor of the gramophone, inventor of the automatic telegraph relay. The man who has promised to bring electrical lighting to the waiting world.

Reclining now in the shadows beneath the pines, Owen propped his head on an elbow and gazed out across the green meadow. His father, dressed as always in severe black serge and a straight-brimmed Stetson, stood on the back of a buckboard wagon shouting instructions to two town councilmen who appeared to be tangled in a length of rope. Owen felt a little guilty not helping but reminded himself that he was usually a hard worker, putting in hours at the depot every day. Since leaving school a year ago, he'd been clerk, baggage handler, and broom pusher and could soon apprentice himself to a conductor in accordance with his father's wishes. But he disliked it all intensely, preferring instead to tinker in the corner of the barn he had converted into a workshop, preferring brainwork to physical labor or the dull pencil pushing of commerce. Some nights he would stay in the barn until after midnight and then curl up on his workbench to sleep.

When at last the tent building and fire starting and horse tending had been completed, Owen got to his feet, stretched, and strode purposefully out of the trees. He had not taken two steps when he heard his mother's voice:

"Owen, you take these buckets and bring some water from the lake. And ask Mr. Edison if he wants his coffee now."
Late morning, the summer sun blazing, Owen could not imagine anyone wanting hot coffee and felt foolish being his mother’s errand boy. Nevertheless, he grabbed two pails and headed for the lake. The men had begun to fish, scattering out along the rocky shoreline. There were so many of them it seemed only a matter of time until lines became tangled and tempers flared. Edison, however, as guest of honor, was given a wide berth and stood perched atop a boulder, casting out extravagantly in all directions. He looked ungainly, as though he might tumble into the drink at any moment, and yet his casts were graceful—long smooth arcs with plenty of snap in the wrist. Not wishing to interrupt, Owen approached quietly and knelt at the water to fill the pails.

“My mother wants to know if you’d like coffee,” he whispered.
“In this heat?”
“That’s what I told her.”
“Ignore her then. You’re old enough to ignore your mother, aren’t you?”
“Yessir,” he mumbled and then remembered Edison’s hearing. “I’m sixteen,” he hollered, attracting startled glances from several nearby fishermen.
“Tell me your name again.”
“Owen Schoonover.”
“Ah yes, Schoonover. Inventor of—what the hell did you call that contraption you showed me drawings of?”
Owen lowered his eyes and poked at the mud with the toe of his boot, unable to respond.
“Look here.” Edison flipped open the lid of his wicker creel to reveal three fish nestled in a bed of leaves. “Are these rainbow trout?”
Owen nodded. “See the pink slash on their bellies?”
“Remarkable. First ones I’ve ever seen.”
Owen was amazed he’d taken three fish so quickly. No one had been at the lake for longer than half an hour. He drew his fingertips along their length, feeling the fine-grained texture of their cool skin.
“Tell me,” Edison said, interrupting Owen’s investigation, “is that slack-jawed, lunkhead look of yours a permanent condition or does it come and go?”
Owen looked up at him and grinned sheepishly. “You’re a pretty good fisherman for an easterner,” he said. Then he hefted the buckets and started to leave, only to stop short and befuddle Edison’s cast.

“About your inventions. Do they just come to you out of the blue?” he asked, adopting Edison’s own bald-faced tone. Edison paused and raised one eyebrow.

“Not the inventions, perhaps. But visions, yes, ‘out of the blue’ as you say. Man unfettered, nature remade, the disembodied voice beautiful on a cylinder of wax. Night becomes day and our bodies are released from their earthly bondage.” His voice trailed off and he smiled. “I do it for money too, Schoonover. My inventions earn large sums of money.”

Owen could only nod. Edison flicked his line out to crease the surface of the lake while Owen lugged the buckets back toward the fires, water sloshing into his boots as he walked. He glanced back just in time to see Edison’s line go taut with a strike.

By noon fish were frying. After helping his mother he had gone searching for his own pole but discovered that his father had lent it to one of the easterners. Instead of fishing, he watched a demonstration arranged by some of Edison’s men, a water trough electrified by a Ruhmkorff induction coil. Unsuspecting subjects who wandered by were encouraged to retrieve a five-dollar gold piece from the bottom of the trough, only to be shocked off their feet and find themselves surrounded by a guffawing crowd who were all the more delighted because the trick had already been played on them.

They all seem more interested in pranks than science, Owen thought as he filled his plate and found a place where he could watch another demonstration taking place at a table nearby. There, Edison had placed a small machine with a hand crank protruding from the side and a dull metal orb on top. When someone turned the crank, a turkey feather danced a few inches above the orb, suspended in midair. Owen understood the principle of static electricity and shook his head, feeling little of the wonder he knew was expected of him. An amusing contraption, but nothing more than a sideshow stunt. He bolted a few bites of fish and left.

If Edison and his party were mostly bluster, they had found
their proper audience in the citizens of Rawlins—in their small-town eagerness to be everyone’s open-mouthed fool. Owen had been born in Chicago, but his childhood had been spent moving westward, encampment to town, as his father followed the new railroad. Though their home seemed blessedly permanent now, Rawlins remained only a ragged little settlement built along either side of the two silver rails that came from the prairie and left again in a clean straight line under the sun. He sometimes wondered what the cities of the East were like. It was all he’d ever heard about, where everything came from and where anything of importance eventually went.

Leaving the campground, he meandered up the mountainside, looking for some way to occupy himself. The other young men his age were all paired up with girls or fishing in boisterous groups or off in the hills somewhere looking for game. The dense canopy of pine and spruce closed over him, and he could hear only the sound of fallen needles crushing beneath his feet. Then, as he passed a granite outcropping surrounded by a tangle of brush, he heard voices. One he recognized as his cousin George and the other as an unidentifiable female. Therefore, he knew what to expect. Dropping to his knees, he crept along a patch of juniper and carefully parted the branches.

George and the Pensky girl. Laura it was, rolling on the pine needle-carpeted ground. Sweating, clothing in disarray, buttons unhitched, and sleeves askew. Owen swallowed his laughter and observed the earnest proceedings for a moment before creeping back down the slope and approaching again, this time whistling loudly and stomping his feet. George’s head appeared first and then Laura’s, both of them weedy-haired and wearing foolish grins.

“It’s just Owen, my cousin,” George explained. “You gave us a hell of a fright.”

“Oh my, shut your eyes,” Laura said, rebuttoning her dress and regaining her composure. “I didn’t know you were cousins. Don’t you work at the depot?”

“Jack-of-all-trades. Clerk, porter, freight donkey, and gandy dancer,” Owen said, only half closing his eyes and watching with some interest as they realigned their clothing. This was not the first time he had stumbled upon George locked in passionate
embrace. A year younger than he, his cousin was something of a sexual prodigy, achieving a level of skill and opportunity by age fifteen that men of twenty-five envied.

“What’re you doing up here anyway?” asked George.

“Dodging my mother’s chores. She’d have me washing dishes right now if I’d stayed. Besides, I’m tired of all this. I’m ready to go back to town.”

“I saw you hobnobbin’ with Mr. Tom Edison,” George teased, winking at Laura. “Don’t act like you ain’t havin’ a real time.”

“They say he’s a genius,” Owen said, a little tentatively. “Later tonight he’s demonstrating a model of his newest invention. Lamps that run by electricity. No oil, no kerosene, just batteries or generators and wire.” He wondered for a moment if Laura was impressed by his show of scientific knowledge, but that notion was quickly squelched.

“What’s wrong with a kerosene lantern,” George groused. “Why do people get so worked up about gadgets?”

“George is going to ride in the cavalry when he turns sixteen,” said Laura. “They don’t need ‘lectricity to fight Indians.”

Owen had heard George discuss this ambition before and did not doubt that he would achieve it. Already as large as a full-grown man, he could handle horses and shoot straight, and he’d cut a fine figure riding over the plains in brass-buttoned splendor.

“Maybe you could be a genius inventor,” said George. “You’re smart and you like to fix things. You like books too.”

Owen shook his head. “I’ve seen his gramophone. A man came through on the train with one. Human voices coming right out of a machine. That takes more than books.”

“Ah, he’s got you buffaloed,” George said. “I’ve seen better tricks in a traveling circus.”

When they got back to the lake, it was almost sundown, and the camp was quiet. A few fishermen remained, and a group of men played cards at a table under the trees. Everyone had retired to their tents for late afternoon naps. But as they crossed the meadow, a voice came from behind, and all three turned to see Edison seated alone on a stump at the edge of the woods, puffing on a cigar.

“Hey, boy. You, Schoonover,” he called, his voice a raised whisper to avoid disturbing those in their tents. George glanced at

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Owen and grinned, elbowing him in the ribs and shoving him back toward the trees.

"School chums?" Edison asked as Laura and George strolled away hand in hand.

"My cousin and a friend."

"You got a sweetheart?"

"No sir. Not a regular one," he mumbled, feeling himself blush.

"Consider yourself fortunate." He fell silent then, appearing lost in thought.

"I want to talk about tonight's demonstration," Edison said at last.

Ever since the arrival of Edison and his party, a rumor had been circulating that he would demonstrate a working model of his electrical lamp. Owen wondered what the demonstration could have to do with him, but Edison's tone had become thoroughly businesslike, so he squatted on his heels in the grass and listened.

"First, they can dance to the gramophone," he began. "Women and ministers are wild for the gramophone, but even the men like it if they haven't heard it before. Then, when they're primed, when they think they've seen it all, we demonstrate the lamps. The news of Edison's latest conquest leaks out, so that by the time we reach Chicago, rumors are rampant." He paused and jabbed his cigar at Owen. "Business runs on rumors, you know," he said, paused again, and continued. "When we arrive in New York, a crowd of well-wishers meets us at the station, the newspapers print front-page stories, and investors are fighting for a share. Or so I had imagined."

Owen liked the momentum of the events Edison described, but the last remark threw him. "What are you saying?" he asked.

"What I'm saying, Schoonover, is that the lamps are not ready yet. What I'm saying is we still have not found a material to use for a filament that has high resistance, remains stable, and doesn't disintegrate in a few seconds. You follow me?"

Owen nodded, even though he wasn't sure.

"Platinum, silver, titanium. Celluloid, coyote hair, or cactus spines. We've tried them all. What will work, what characteristics must it have? Two days ago I picked up the split end of a broken fishing pole and saw the frayed bamboo fibers. So tonight we try bamboo."
“People are expecting to see those lamps,” Owen said, still surprised he was being told so much.

Edison nodded glumly. “So they are, so they are. But I have a plan. If you’d help me, we could make it appear that it wasn’t the lamps that failed but, shall we say, the lamplighter. No one would hold you responsible if, while lending your assistance, you accidentally caused a malfunction.”

Owen heard Edison out, occasionally fanning cigar smoke from his face as he watched the orange sun drop behind the mountains. “You want me to be your scapegoat,” he said flatly when Edison had finished. “I’m asking you because you’re a fellow inventor. Because you’re the only outsider who could possibly understand. You’d be rewarded. Name your price.”

“Fifty dollars cash,” Owen ventured, seeing a chance for a quick killing, and then, “no, a hundred,” at which point Edison laughed aloud, his voice booming out across the sleepy meadow.

The late darkness of summer finally fell, and people began to emerge from their tents in ones and twos to walk beneath the starlit sky. Kerosene lanterns were brought out to sit upon tables and hang from tree limbs, the yellow flames flickering in the rising evening breeze. Owen stood near the makeshift rope corral with George and Laura, George showing off his knowledge of horseflesh as the motley assortment of ponies and plowhorses nickered and shuffled their hooves.

“This here little bay can run, I’d wager,” he said. “I’d like it if she was a notch leggier and a tad thicker through the barrel. Now this here paint—”

He stopped in midsentence, his mouth wide open. From far down the meadow came a tinkling melody, the music of piano and violins on the night air. The horses’ ears all went up, and Owen looked at Laura and George. “It’s the gramophone,” he whispered, and they stood utterly still and listened. For all the scratchiness and quavering, it was remarkable. Whatever else Edison accomplished, thought Owen, these sounds will remain, the swirling strains of an orchestra.
on a mountaintop miles from the nearest ballroom.

Suddenly Laura bolted, dashing toward the music, the boys following, drawn toward the end of the clearing, where three or four couples had already begun to dance. Laura dragged George out among them, kicking off her shoes, while Owen looked up and down the long table where the gramophone sat and where still more of the inventor’s equipment was being assembled. More condensers, more coils, batteries, loops of wire, and several transparent glass spheres, each atop a two-foot length of pipe.

“His electrical lamps.” It was his father, startling Owen as he appeared beside him. “A red-letter day for Rawlins and the territory. They’ll hear of us from coast to coast. Hell, they’ll hear of us around the globe.”

Owen wondered how much money his father and others were sending east with Edison to help bankroll his projects. In a town like Rawlins, anything from the East smacked of riches.

“Suppose it doesn’t work. Suppose he’s not successful.”

“Nonsense,” his father replied, as though the remark scarcely deserved a response. Then he explained to Owen that he’d volunteered him to power a dynamo for the demonstration. “I told Mr. Edison about your workshop and your interest in electricity. He said he’d be delighted to have you assist.”

While Owen reflected on the fact that he would be participating in gulling his own father, he discovered that at his right shoulder was no longer his father but Edison, who began to speak softly, conspiratorially, as the dancing continued.

“So it’s agreed, you’ll help?”

“What do I do?”

“Very little. Crank one of three dynamos. You see the lamps will fail. We simply tell our audience that you tangled your feet in the wires and shorted the circuit or something of the sort. Who in this crowd knows one jot about electricity?”

“So I play the fool,” Owen said sourly.

“It’s more important than you know. My investors insist on evidence of success, but we need their money now, to carry forward the research. If they hear we’ve made a breakthrough . . .”

Owen didn’t completely trust him, but it was too late to back out. The music stopped and Edison hopped up on a chair and began to address the gathered crowd.
"Ladies and gentlemen. Citizens of Rawlins and Wyoming Territory. Gracious hosts." His practiced, stentorian delivery made it difficult to imagine him as anything but a second-rate politician or a carnival barker—certainly not the Prometheus whose visit the newspapers had heralded for weeks in advance.

When he had thanked everyone, the mayor stood on another chair and thanked Edison and his party in return. Then it was time to commence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Edison began again, gripping his lapels. "The story of the electrical incandescent lamp. Our problem was to find a fiber which, when charged with electricity, would glow brighter than the hottest flame but have the durability to last for hours. We tested hundreds of materials, both in our laboratories and during the course of our present journey. Our discovery, made only days ago in the wilds of the Wyoming Territory: a simple strand of bamboo fiber coated with lampblack. The serendipity of a fractured fishing pole."

Owen's father nudged him forward while Edison rambled on, something about the historic import of it all. At last he introduced two of his assistants and then Owen, embarrassing him by calling him "Rawlins's own young electrician" so that he avoided meeting anyone's eyes as he took his place behind one of the dynamos and firmly grasped the crank that projected from the conglomeration of copper wire and metal rods and gears. The kerosene lamps were extinguished, one after another, until only the pale moonlight remained.

"Start the dynamos," shouted Edison, and Owen began to turn the crank, slowly at first but then faster and faster until it seemed to spin by itself. He heard a high whining sound, and suddenly the globes did begin to shine, orange at first, then yellow as the sun, brighter and brighter, illuminating each face in the crowd in a steady, clear hemisphere of light.

"Let there be light," Edison exclaimed. "The magic of electricity. Globes of fire."

An audible gasp of astonishment arose from the crowd followed by a round of applause. A bedazzled smile appeared on Owen's face as he basked in the encompassing glow.

"By God, it's working," one of the assistants wheezed, and Owen realized they'd been turning the cranks for a long time, five
minutes at least, turning, turning, the muscles in his shoulder on fire, but he didn’t mind, so thrilled was he by the crowd and the brilliant light. And then he saw Edison grinning triumphantly, clapping his hands in delight like a small boy.

At last Edison signaled them to stop. The lamps dimmed and went dark, leaving round white afterimages lingering before Owen’s eyes. The crowd pressed close, and everyone began congratulating him along with Edison and his men, pounding them on the back, touching the hot bulbs gingerly with outstretched fingers, and asking Edison how soon they might expect electrical lighting in Wyoming and what else he had up his sleeve. The kerosene lamps were relit, and Owen’s father came and complimented his crank turning, leaving Owen to wonder if it would now be easier to convince him that he had no desire to be just another railroad ticket clerk.

When the crowd dispersed, Owen helped dismantle the dynamos and lamps. Buoyed by the unexpected success, Edison’s assistants joked with him and asked about hunting and fishing so that he felt like their equal instead of only an inquisitive nuisance. After a while Edison took him aside, and they strolled together toward the lake.

“Many thanks,” he said. “A modest victory for which no one had to shoulder the blame.”

“The bamboo worked,” said Owen.

“So it appears, but how well remains to be seen. For now, I think we’ve silenced the skeptics. Make no mistake, the sodbusters of Rawlins saw a wonder tonight. The word will go out, wait and see.”

Owen didn’t like being called a sodbuster and wasn’t sure why Edison was walking with him. They stopped at the lake, and Owen tossed a few stones into the darkness, listening for the wet kerplunk. After a brief silence, Edison spoke again.

“I owe you a reward. We had an agreement.”

“I didn’t do anything.” He figured he’d settle now for even a dollar or two, but Edison ignored him and went on.

“What I propose is that you come to work for me. We need young men like you, Schoonover. Our operations are expanding by the day. Say yes and you can be on the train with us Monday.”

Thomas Edison by Moonlight 53
Owen was speechless. What did he know about Edison and his work? Was he even a trustworthy man? Inventor, famous personage, and incipient tycoon—all seemed extravagant poses. And now he appeared as some sort of rich uncle offering the glittering, incandescent world.

"This is so sudden," Owen said at last.

"You’re not a goddamn bride. You can’t hide your ambition. Here’s your chance to escape this pestiferous backwater. I’ll expect your decision in the morning."

Before Edison left, however, he showed Owen more sleight of hand. First he removed his pocket watch and disconnected the fob. Then, holding it at arm’s length over the lake, he dropped it. Just as it reached the water it reversed direction and shot back up into his waiting hand. Owen shook his head and smiled, even though there was enough moonlight to see the white elastic attached to the timepiece that made the illusion work.

Owen found his bedroll in his parents’ tent and spread it by the lake. For a long time he remained sleepless, staring up at the stars, wondering if he should board Edison’s train or let them leave and return to his life in Rawlins as if nothing had happened. At last he slept, only to find himself awakened by one of Edison’s bearded assistants.

"Mr. Edison wants to see you. Or should I say, he has something he wants you to see."

He scrambled to his feet, but before he could stretch, he was led rapidly into the woods. They wound through closely spaced aspen trees, down a long slope, and across a little creek, where Owen’s feet got wet, his escort marching mutely onward, until at last they entered a small glade surrounded by enormous pines towering into the sky. And there stood Tom Edison, flanked by three of his men, busily assembling one more machine.

This time there were no speeches. The assistants murmured to one another, but Edison said nothing, pausing and nodding at Owen only to acknowledge his arrival. A single kerosene lantern burned nearby, but it was the blue wash of moonlight that illuminated the silent scene.

54 Thomas Edison by Moonlight
“You boys work long hours,” Owen said, but instead of responding with a smile, one man shook his head and frowned, another held his finger to his lips, and Edison seemed not to hear. Then, as Owen tried to conjure up something else to say, Edison came forward and received into his hands the ends of two long coils of black cable, cable which snaked back to a collection of wooden boxes, glass jars, and shining spirals of copper wire, all instruments for which Owen knew no name. Collarless and in shirtsleeves, Edison flexed his knees and gave each line a vigorous shake.

“This must be our secret,” was all he said.

There was a moment of surpassing stillness then, and Edison nodded. On cue, the assistants threw a series of switches, a little blue flash crackled at each connection, and Thomas Edison lifted slowly, soundlessly off the ground. Inches at first and then three feet, six feet, arms spread, a gently undulating cable trailing from each fist, he rose. No whining bearings, no clank or roar, no shower of sparks or hiss of steam. Only Edison calmly ascending.

Owen ran in disbelief to where the inventor had been standing and leaped to touch the soles of his shoes, but Edison just laughed and continued rising into the starry sky, as though his head were a balloon pulling him upward or as though gravity had lost its grip. Upward to the full extent of the cables, until they were stretched tight, and he floated above the treetops, his black brogans walking on air.

“This is what we’re about, Schoonover. Not nuts and bolts and music machines. One day soon all the horses will be put out to pasture and the steam engines left to rust on the tracks. We’ll travel like birds.”

“I’ll take the job,” Owen said breathlessly.

“Come again?”

“I’ll go, I’ll go,” he shouted with all his might. And at once he could imagine himself being pushed by a breeze, weightless, unfettered, adrift in an eastern sky.
"A little drama is good in a Christmas service," Father Anetto said as he attached the baby Jesus to the wire.

"This is some setup," mumbled Alfred. He rolled his eyes at Will, who peered out from behind the priest's enormous black-cassocked body.

"Stop gabbing and cut the cord with this jackknife," snapped Anetto, glaring at Alfred through thick, black-rimmed glasses. "Willard, do you think the Christ child needs to be propped up to be visible from all the pews?"

"Maybe some."

Anetto lifted the life-size plaster Jesus out of the manger and cast about for something to wedge beneath its head.
“What’s your friend’s name again?” he asked Will, as though Alfred were not present.

“Alfred Small,” said Alfred.

“You go to church on the reservation?”

“No sir. I mean, I’m not Catholic.”

“He doesn’t even live out there anymore,” Will explained.

Anetto nodded slowly, gazing thoughtfully at Alfred’s feet.

“Take off your boot, Al.”

“My boot?”

“For just a minute. I want to gauge the angle.”

Reluctantly, Alfred removed his worn black cowboy boot and watched as the priest slipped the heel beneath the baby’s pink head.

“Perfect,” said Anetto, stepping back to survey his work. “Keep this under your hats, boys. I want it to be a surprise.”

A raw prairie wind met Alfred and Will as they threw open the big double doors of the church and emerged into the snowfall and gray light of a winter noon.

“Does he always growl like that?” asked Alfred, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his jeans and shrugging to force his coat collar up under his chin.

“That’s just Father Anetto. When I went through first communion, he whacked some boy in the ear so hard it started to bleed. The kid wasn’t paying attention.”

Alfred had known lots of Catholics on the reservation, but somehow their religion seemed different from the Catholicism of Will and Will’s girlfriend, Lois. On the reservation, the Methodists and Episcopalians and Catholics shared a small prefab, aluminum-roofed chapel, and when Alfred’s family made one of their infrequent appearances at the Methodist services, they met the Catholics filing out as they filed in. In Jessup, however, the massive stone church alone was enough to make being a Catholic seem both solemn and exotic. The first time he’d entered he’d been startled by the tiers of votive candles flickering beside the altar and the huge, looming crucifix—the red gash in Jesus’ side and his lifelike grimace of pain. It all reminded him of his own

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people’s old religion: obscure, fire-lit ceremonies conducted in a language he didn’t fully understand.

That afternoon they drove Will’s Dodge pickup truck through the snowy streets of town, down Center, where bundled shoppers bustled from store to store, and then out past the Horseshoe Restaurant and the Ford dealership and the feed store until they left the town behind. The snow-mantled prairie opened before them, an unencumbered expanse of white broken only by the black lines of barbed-wire fences running off like dots and dashes toward the hills and the poor cattle huddling in groups of five or ten next to any little rise that could break the wind.

“Lois says her horse keeps getting out,” said Will. “I don’t think the gate’ll be hard to fix.”

“What are you getting her for Christmas?” Alfred asked, but he did not listen to the answer, for inside him was growing the dread that appeared now any time he had to see Lois, and especially any time he had to see Lois and Will together. Once they had been a happy high school threesome skidding toward graduation, but now Alfred could think of nothing but that calamitous night: the night six weeks ago when they had gone to a drive-in movie, had too much to drink, and he had awakened naked in bed with naked Will and naked Lois, his best friend on the left, his best friend’s girlfriend in the middle, and himself on the right feeling clammy and hung over and suddenly shy. Since that morning he’d divided and subdivided his guilt: in bed with his friend’s girl; in bed with a white girl; in bed with a white girl and a white boy; and only the dimmest memory of what they’d done. The only saving grace was that Will and Lois’s memories were probably as foggy as his own.

Upon reaching the crossroads north of town where the little Sinclair gas station owned by Lois’s parents squatted by the roadside, Will switched off the engine and let the truck coast to a stop not two feet from the green plaster dinosaur that was the oil company’s trademark.

“Practice,” Will explained.

Then Alfred watched with admiration as he bounded inside, gathered Lois into his arms, kissed her a passionate movie-kiss, and followed her out. She climbed into the driver’s side and Will into the other, squeezing Alfred between.

“I’ll drive,” she said. “I know where the busted gate is. You
guys sure are nice to do this. Have a stick of gum.” She offered a yellow pack, her face glowing from the cold and from the freedom of being out of the gas station and in the company of her friends.

“It was my idea,” said Alfred. “I had to hogtie him to get him here. ‘Let her fix her own damn fence,’ he says.”

“You lie,” said Will, laughing and punching Alfred in the ribs, smashing him against Lois, against her bulky green sweater and red wool hat and blond ponytail that fell fetchingly across one shoulder.

Alfred liked them both, but he sometimes wondered why they had offered their friendship in the beginning, during his first terrifying days as a new tenth grader entering Jessup High at mid-year. He supposed it was because they fancied themselves small-town nonconformists, outsiders who, because they didn’t play football or cheerlead, because they weren’t musical or clubbish, strived to be unconventional. Alfred could see how he complemented their image, an Indian sidekick in a town where Indians and whites stayed scrupulously apart.

Lois followed the highway for a mile or two before turning onto a dirt lane. From there she steered mostly by dead reckoning, breaking through drifts until she stopped at the little eight- or ten-acre plot where her diesel-mechanic uncle kept her horse and three others for elk hunting and weekend cowboying. The gate hung askew, shuddering to and fro in the gale, and all four horses stood just outside it, thinking of going back to the shelter of their lean-to barn.

Will mended the broken gate while Alfred steadied it and told Lois about Anetto’s plan for the Christmas service.

“He wants the baby in the manger to slide down a wire he’s got stretched from the rafters of the choir loft to the altar. Like it’s sledding down a long hill from heaven or something.”

“You know Father Anetto,” sighed Will. “He phoned my mother and got her to say I’d help. He even expects me to show up at midnight mass to give the manger the push it needs to get started.”

“Once an altar boy, always an altar boy,” Alfred said, putting his palms together in prayer and rolling his eyes skyward.

Lois laughed and said, “I think we should all go to midnight mass and watch the baby Jesus slide down. It sounds sensational.”

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Then, taking a handful of alfalfa pellets from her pocket, she clucked to the horses, enticing them back through the gate.

“Come on Davy, come on girls,” she sang.

Alfred did not know whether he loved her or not. Sometimes she seemed willful and dangerous, and he ached with desire, but other times she was just one more distant, self-centered white girl. He thought he’d probably gone all the way with her but had no recollection of what it had been like. How much did she remember and how did she feel about him now? Perhaps she had no memory of the night whatsoever or thought she’d only done it with Will—they’d been together before, he was sure.

Once inside the gate, the horses nuzzled Lois, nosing her pockets for treats and exhaling vaporous plumes. Suddenly, she grabbed a hank of mane on the nearest one and pulled herself onto its back.

“Wanna ride?” she asked.

Before Alfred could say no, Will leaped atop a horse too, shouting “Hop on” and reaching out to steady a big gray before they scattered. Placing his hands on the horse’s back, Alfred pulled himself up, wriggling and thrashing as it sidestepped away. He was still gaining his balance when Lois hooted and set off at a gallop, and his mount followed, and then the rest, all galumphing across the snow-encrusted ground. Alfred hung on for dear life, his vertebrae whacking up and down like dominoes as the horse rumbled beneath him until they reached the barn, where Lois turned the herd, catapulting both Alfred and Will off into the snow.

“You boys don’t ride much, do you?” Lois drawled and then laughed wickedly. They responded by lofting snowballs at her until she dismounted too, taking cover behind her bay.

The irony of an Indian being afraid of horses was not lost on Alfred. His grandfather had been known for his horsemanship, while his father worked on the railroad. “Iron horses,” Alfred thought. Many men on the reservation still prided themselves on their knowledge of horses and their riding skill, but Alfred wanted nothing to do with the beasts. He’d heard about a Cheyenne chief of a hundred years ago named Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses and wondered how he’d coped.

When the horses had been fed and watered and the gate se-
cured, they sat in the truck, the windows fogging as they waited for the defrost to work and for their red cheeks and noses and fingers to thaw.

"Would your folks mind if you went to church with us?" asked Will.

Alfred shrugged. "I doubt it. We don’t even go to the Methodist services on Christmas because my grandmother thinks it’s all white man’s business. She says winter’s a time to be quiet and remember the dead. Not a time to go around singing and eating."

Alfred’s grandmother was the last member of the old generation in his family, the last member of an Arapaho past even his parents had left behind. She still lived on the reservation with his aunt, but two years ago, Alfred’s mother and father had moved him and his two sisters into town. His father worked as a brakeman on the Burlington Northern line and his mother supervised the kitchen at the Wrangler Cafe. They wanted Alfred to be educated and modern and successful, and he tried to comply. After graduation, he was to attend the state university in Laramie to study chemistry or engineering, something that would lead him away from the dry gulches and prefab houses and dangerous horses of the reservation.

"Don’t be soft in the head," his father told him. "There’s no reason for you to stay around here. If you want to make any money you have to go where the money is."

He wondered what his father would say if he knew he’d slept with a girl. If the townspeople found out it had been a white girl, they’d raise hell. And he didn’t even want to think about what his father or the townspeople would say if they discovered the bed had held three.

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That night, Alfred met Will and Lois at the Christmas dance at the National Guard Armory. As seniors, they considered themselves slightly above such community-sponsored hops, but the cold winter night left them nowhere else to go. A three-piece country-western band played, gamely mixing the latest hits with "White Christmas" and "Jingle Bell Rock," and Lois’s younger

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brother Henry appeared with a passel of junior high boys who shot dancers with squirt guns and then skittered out to the lobby to hide. The cowboys, the kind whose parents were carpenters and secretaries as well as the kind whose parents truly worked cows, danced smoothly, their slick-soled boots gliding across the cement floor, and the town kids congregated around the band, trying to get them to play the newest radio rock ‘n’ roll. The Indians, of whom there were only a handful, stood near the door, clad in boots and jeans like the cowboys, shuffling their feet to the music a little but seldom venturing onto the dance floor.

Alfred nodded at Tom Black Bull and Kenny Bartlett as he came in but did not stop to talk. He felt as though a fog had settled between himself and his reservation friends since his move to town. After school each day, they boarded the bus and he walked home with Will and Lois. The dying of those old friendships saddened him, but he didn’t know how they could be saved.

Standing alone against the far wall, Alfred watched Lois and Will dance a fast one and a slow one before Theresa Hinkle appeared from the shadows to snag Lois and drag her off to the gossip pit in the restroom. Then he steeled himself to confront Will with the question whose answer he thought might calm his distracted heart.

"Let me ask you something," he said when he was sure they were alone. "How often are you screwing Lois?"

Will blushed and shot a glance toward the restroom door. Then he gave an odd, bitter-sounding little laugh and said, "I’ll tell you what Father Anetto says. ‘The act of procreation produces less than six seconds of pleasure. Would you risk an eternity in the fires of hell for that?’"

"That’s no answer," Alfred sputtered, but Lois was returning and he said no more.

He could not parse the emotions churning within him at that moment. He wanted Lois to care about him and he wanted Will to remain his friend. He wanted to be what everyone else wanted him to be. His parents, his old friends, his new friends, his grandmother. Even his teachers at the high school, who he sometimes felt expected him to be a smart, sophisticated Indian like Ed Ames as Mingo on the Daniel Boone TV show, one who could hurl a hatchet and speak with an Oxford accent and ride like the wind.
With Lois back, Will withdrew a half-pint of cherry vodka from his coatsleeve, took a quick nip, and passed it to Alfred, using his body to block the view of the off-duty sheriff’s deputy who strolled the floor as chaperone. Then Alfred passed it to Lois, and they huddled still closer until they formed a tight little triangle, their shoulders almost touching.

“Listen, I’m not sure about going to church with you,” Alfred said, wiping the corner of his mouth with a knuckle. “Don’t I need to know the ceremony? Isn’t there some hocus-pocus I have to recite?”

Lois shook her head. “I know you want to see Jesus come down from heaven. It’ll be fun. You’re just afraid everyone will find out you’re a heathen.” She giggled and poked him in the ribs, but Alfred knocked her hand aside.

“Let me ask you something,” he hissed, glancing at Will, who was taking a careful sip from the tiny bottle. “Am I the only heathen you ever fucked?”

Lois looked momentarily astonished and then stepped back and slapped him hard, missing his cheek but connecting with his ear, the force nearly knocking him to his knees. Her weight was squarely behind the blow, almost as if she’d anticipated the opportunity.

“You never touched me,” she said.

Alfred regretted his words immediately. As his head began to clear, he began to repent.

“I’m sorry, I was joking, I—”

“Get out of here,” she said. “Get him out of here, Will.”

“I’ll be right outside,” Alfred said. “I didn’t mean it,” and he reeled away, rubbing his throbbing ear.

Half an hour later Will and Lois found him in the parking lot chasing Lois’s squirt gun—packing brother between the cars.

“He shot me in the back,” Alfred said and then looked remorseful. “Can we be friends again?”

Before they could respond, Henry popped out from behind a Buick and shot Will in the groin, a dark patch appearing on his jeans. They all laughed as Alfred disarmed Henry, grabbing his
wrist and twisting until the green plastic six-shooter clattered to the pavement.

"Lois wants to see the baby," said Will, once Henry had high-tailed it back inside. "You want to come with us? You can drive the truck."

It was past eleven, and the downtown streets had fallen silent, approaching Christmas under the snow. Faded garlands and shabby elves and reindeer, decorations purchased by the Chamber of Commerce years ago but never maintained, dangled from streetlights and telephone poles, twisting in the breeze. Alfred extinguished the truck's lights, pulled into the alley behind the church, and parked. He enjoyed being behind the wheel of the big old truck and considered the opportunity a peace offering, but their mission seemed somewhat harebrained.

"Are you sure we won't get caught? How do we get in?" he asked.

A large man walking a dog emerged from the shadow of the church to cross a strip of moonlight between the buildings, and they fell silent as he passed.

"Catholic churches are always open," Will whispered, and then said to Lois, "You can tell he's a Methodist."

"All I know is, this gives me the willies," said Alfred, and Lois stifled a giggle as they scrambled out and slipped along the church wall single file, Will in the lead. Finding the side door locked, they waited until the street was clear and entered by the huge wooden doors facing Center Street.

"Almost midnight," said Will. "It'll be deserted."

"God is everywhere," said Alfred, and Lois began to shake with swallowed laughter again.

The interior of the church was lit only by two candelabra-shaped fixtures flanking the altar. All the overhead lamps were dark, and the moonlight and streetlights together shone through the stained-glass windows to cast a ghostly, violet glow.

"I see it," whispered Lois. "I see the wire."

She pointed up at the strand of silver angling from the loft to the base of the altar, more visible now in the gloom than it would be in the brightly lit church at midnight tomorrow or in the sunlight of Christmas morning.
They found the manger in the choir loft behind the organ, covered with a bedsheet in reverence or against dust, and hovered for a moment above it.

"I want to send it down," Lois said.

"That priest, Father Anetto, he'll kill us if he finds out."

"Maybe we shouldn't," said Will, but Lois overruled him.

"He's home in bed. He'll never know."

Will switched on the music light affixed to the organ, and Lois whipped the sheet from the manger with a flourish. There lay the plaster Christ child, nestled in a cloud of golden angel hair. It had sky blue eyes and the tiny, perfect red lips of the Gerber baby. She cootchie-cooed its round belly, and Will lifted its head to reveal a half-empty bottle of Pepto-Bismol propping it at the desired angle.

"Help me," Will said and, with Alfred, carried the manger to the edge of the loft, balancing it there on the oaken rail while Lois secured it to the wire with loops of Vaseline-lubricated rope Father Anetto had painstakingly prepared. She tested the tension with a vigorous tug.

"Go down front and get set to catch this thing," Will told Alfred.

"What would your grandmother say about this?" asked Lois.

"She might think it was pretty good. She says the trouble with white man's church is everything is talk, talk, talk."

"Hustle," said Will. "I want to get out of here."

Alfred dashed down the steps and started to run up the center aisle but skidded to a halt and walked the rest of the way.

"I almost forgot I was in church," he hissed over his shoulder in a loud stage whisper. Then, taking his place before the altar, he gave an exaggerated thumbs-up signal.

"Geronimo," Will said and shoved the manger over the edge. It began slowly, sluggishly, appearing at first as if it might stall in midair. Soon, however, it started picking up speed, sliding faster and faster so that halfway down it was traveling at a brisk clip, its weight drawing the wire into a long, shallow arc, the baby's head and shoulders visible like a passenger on a roller coaster until at last it reached Alfred in a frightening whoosh, with enough weight and velocity to knock him back two steps as he cradled it in his arms.
The three of them met the next day at Will’s house, his mother having insisted he invite friends for punch and fruitcake on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. As she served, they sat making awkward conversation, enveloped in the stuffing of overstuffed chairs.

“I understand you helped Will and Father Anetto with the church decorations,” Will’s mother said.

“I never saw anything quite like that before,” Alfred deadpanned, and they all laughed, even Will’s mother, who had apparently heard what was planned.

“Well, Father Anetto likes his pageantry,” she said and added, half to herself, “sometimes too much.”

“Has Will told you we’re going to midnight mass together?” Lois asked, balancing her cup and saucer on her knee, trying to be charming and polite and respectful, and, except for a slight nervous tremor succeeding.

It struck Alfred that Lois might one day be Mrs. Will and that he was not the first in the room to have considered the possibility.

“Won’t Alfred’s family be disappointed he’s not attending services with them?” she asked. “On the reservation?”

“They don’t have midnight services out there,” Alfred said, deciding it was too much trouble to explain that his parents belonged to the Methodist congregation in town. “They definitely won’t have the baby on the wire,” he added.

“Sometimes I feel like your mother thinks I’m uncivilized,” Alfred said when they’d left.

“My mother thinks everybody’s uncivilized,” said Will.

Kicking through the snow, they ambled down the long hill from Will’s house toward town. Soon, in the clear, bracing air, they could hear the tinkling of the bells rung by men collecting for the Salvation Army and the metallic notes of Christmas carols being piped onto the sidewalk at Hinton’s appliance store.

“That went OK,” Will said after a prolonged silence.

“Meaning what?” Alfred asked.

“I’m talking about Lois. I want my mother to like her.”
"Sounds very serious."
"Suppose I bought your mom a Christmas present," Lois offered brightly.
"Don't overdo it," said Will.

The rest of the afternoon they spent downtown, watching the harried, last-minute shoppers who rushed from store to store, weighed down with heaps of packages, and following Alfred as he searched for a winter hat for his grandmother, an extra-warm one, size six and three-eighths.

Alfred arrived at the church early to wait for Lois and Will. The sidewalk and the steps leading up to the door had been recently shoveled and salted, but already the gray concrete had begun to disappear under a new layer of snow. After rocking from foot to foot for a few minutes and clapping his hands for warmth, he went into the vestibule. There he found knots of parishioners cheerfully conversing, their Christmas outfits bright beneath unbuttoned overcoats, the snowmelt puddling about their shiny shoes. He still did not see Lois and Will and had started into the sanctuary when Anetto's beefy hand fell upon his shoulder.

"Al, isn't it? Will's chum?" The priest squinted down at him, his red-rimmed eyes magnified by his spectacle lenses.

"Yes sir. Yes Father."

Anetto cast a distracted glance about the vestibule.

"You know," he said, as if the thought had just occurred to him, "you may be exactly the person I need to see. Could I have a moment with you in the sacristy before mass starts?"

Alfred mumbled his assent and followed the priest out a side exit and down a long, dimly lit corridor that ran the length of the church. It put him in mind of a secret passageway, and he wondered if anyone but Anetto used it. At the end they turned into a suite of rooms, passing first through a small, cluttered office and then entering what appeared to be a dressing room with two large chests of drawers, a tall walnut wardrobe, and a single high window, black now and bordered with frost. After motioning Alfred to a steel folding chair by the door, Anetto unbelted his cassock
and began to disrobe. His huge body filled the room, and Alfred felt as though he were in the musty den of an enormous, near­sighted bear.

"It's almost time for mass, so I'll make this short," he said, pulling vestments of red and gold from a drawer. "I guess you know the wise and admirable thing your friends have done."

"Will and Lois?" He had been noting that the priest wore or­dinary underwear when the reference to his friends focused his attention.

"Don't play games. The girl's pregnant. Her mother called me this afternoon, of all afternoons. The poor lady is beside herself." He paused to pull a long gold robe over his head. "Family problems increase during the holidays, did you know that? It's a sta­tistical fact."

Alfred felt as though Anetto was waiting for a response, but his heart began to pound and he averted his eyes.

"Lois is pregnant?" he asked at last, expecting Anetto to add, "and you, Alfred Smalt, are responsible," but the priest just nodded gravely and continued.

"Sometimes in cases like this the boy tries to hoodwink the girl into putting the baby up for adoption. We recommend marriage. I called you here because you're their friend. Could you try to talk some sense to them?" He opened the wardrobe door to reveal a long mirror and straightened his robes in it. "She can finish high school by correspondence. You pay for your mistakes in this life."

"How long until the baby?" asked Alfred, thinking he might count backward and pinpoint the night.

Anetto turned, his stern expression becoming a sneer. "That's not your concern," he snapped. "Cattle breed like that. At their biological whim. Talk some sense. Tell her not to do anything foolish and Will to do what's right."

Anetto looked at him blankly for a moment and sighed. Then he threw up his hands as if he was finding their discussion worth­less, as if he'd just determined Alfred too simpleminded to help.

"My life is made miserable by irresponsible youths," he said coldly. "It's time for mass."

Alfred stood and stepped toward the door, but Anetto jabbed a finger at him.

"One other thing. I know you were in here last night. You do
anything like that again and I'll kick your ass all the way back to
the reservation."

Alfred’s eyes burned, yet he all but ran down the dim passage­way, holding his fingertips against the long smooth wall to guide himself. Only one chance in twenty or fifty or five hundred or however many times Lois and Will had been together without him, he thought. A little brown-skinned, black-haired baby growing inside Lois to come one day to appall Anetto and Will’s prim mother and Lois’s parents and his own family and probably Lois and Will as well. And himself, for that matter, the smart, modern boy his parents wanted, fucking forbidden fruit. “You let yourself be contaminated” is what his grandmother would say.

He found Will and Lois in the loft seated next to the organ. Across from them stood the sixth grade choir, whose members fidgeted in their lavender robes as their director shuffled pages of music and assumed her seat at the keyboard.

Alfred took the place Will and Lois had saved between them and said, without preparation or warning, “Why couldn’t you tell me? Father Anetto knows you’re pregnant and he knows every last thing about us.” Shaking his head, he looked to the floor, but not before he sneaked a glance at Lois’s stricken expression. He could feel them going cold beside him, their faces and hands draining to a bloodless white.

“How did Anetto find out?” asked Will.

“No idea. He was so mad I was afraid to ask.”

“I didn’t tell him,” Lois protested, glaring at them furiously—as if, Alfred felt, to fix the blame for all she might suffer thereafter.

Mass began then, and Alfred noticed that the manger was in place, perched on the rail halfway between their seats and the choir. Lois opened her small black prayer book to focus her acid gaze on the page, and neither she nor Will recited the opening lines of Latin with the congregation.

“What will I do?” whispered Lois. Alfred took her hand and squeezed, but she pulled it away, her eyes filling with angry tears.

“He says he wants it sent down when he starts the Gloria,” Will said.

Anetto’s bass boomed from the altar, and the colorful patch­work of Christmas finery below undulated with the cadence of each phrase. The manger sat motionless, hoisted and moored like
a ship in dry dock. The choir sang, the priest sermonized, Lois seemed to pass into another world, staring off toward a blazing chandelier, and Alfred felt his tenderness toward her withering.

Then Will pulled him toward the manger, each of them unfastening a side as the Gloria began. "Gloria in excelsis deo et in terra pax hominibus," chanted Anetto, looking up and nodding emphatically as they gave the manger a firm shove. The lights dimmed for effect, a spotlight borrowed from the high school drama department tracked the descending Christ child, and the congregation’s faces turned upward, mesmerized by the white glow of incarnation. It was then that Alfred heard a folding chair overturn behind him and glanced back in time to see Lois hurtling through the darkness, aiming approximately at his shoulder blades, aiming to knock him over the rail and headlong toward the floor below. Dodging aside, he avoided the full force of her charge, but together they fell against the wire, plucking it like a giant guitar string with their tangled limbs. At that, the descending manger began to pitch and buck, whipped about by the shuddering wire. Will grabbed the line to steady it, but that only made the rolling spasms grow more profound until suddenly, the manger capsized and the baby Jesus flew free. The congregation shrieked and then gasped to silence as they watched it vault from its nest, cartwheel through the air, and explode into dust and plaster shards as it shattered on the terra cotta floor, shattered despite Anetto’s heroic, diving attempt to catch it in his outstretched arms.
Cynthia Rising

Cynthia sat beneath the sapphire stars of the winter sky. In the west, just above the ragged horizon, the waning moon floated like a backward letter C. C for Cynthia, she fancied, adjusting her telescope to bring the silver arc into focus. Her fingers were numb from the cold, and she could feel the icy presence of the snow beneath the brown wool blanket on which she sat. “Wind chill minus ten,” she murmured. “Perfect conditions. Less atmospheric disturbance, less distortion.” Though just a slice of the moon was visible, she recited the names of her favorite landmarks: “Mare Humorum, Mare Imbrium, Mare Nostrum, the Sea of Tranquility. Just lovely tonight.”
She took a pad and pencil from inside her coat and noted the moon’s celestial coordinates; across the page she recorded the date and precise time. On schedule, she thought, and took one last look before packing up her little observatory, folding the legs of the telescope against its barrel and rolling everything inside her blanket. On that snow-covered hilltop Cynthia could see the whole dome of the night sky, from the feathered violet outline of the mountain range, to the consuming blackness overhead, to the small cluster of lights marking Coulter, Montana, a mile and a half away.

As she walked back to town, she reviewed her figures, clicking off azimuths and arcsines like a computer. Once again, the answer she got was the answer she expected. It all meshes, she thought. There can be no mistake. Such an irresistibly beautiful event, a rapturous dynamic that will alter everything. She smiled and ran a few steps, kicking up snow.

Cynthia liked to believe that the world would end on February 23. She liked to believe that on that day would come earthquakes and typhoons, hurricanes and even fire storms: the final fulmination, apocalypse on a Thursday before noon. She chose February 23 because she had read, more than a year ago now, that it would be the date of a solar eclipse. The moon would intervene between the earth and the sun and for two minutes and thirty-eight seconds little Coulter would be immersed in darkness. Two minutes and thirty-eight seconds was what the newspaper said, but not long after she had seen the article, she had decided the darkness would endure. What she predicted was this: when Coulter first slid into the black, everything would stop. Moon stops revolving around Earth, Earth stops rotating on its axis. A single shattering jolt. The results? No rotation, no gravity—everyone floats off to the stratosphere. The moon halts in its orbit, and either the earth becomes forever sunless and icebound or the atmosphere disintegrates and the land is swept by fire storms. She wasn’t sure which.

Of course, Cynthia did not truly expect such wonders to occur. It was all a conscious, carefully wrought exercise of the imagination. Ever since childhood she had imagined people and places and adventures more intriguing than the tedium of daily life. But unlike other children, as Cynthia had grown older such imaginings had become not less frequent but more so. And they had become
more vivid and elaborate as well. On occasion the border between reality and fantasy would blur, but at bottom she remained in control, always aware of her unexceptional self, a quiet, thirty-year-old woman in a small Montana town.

In her current fantasy, as in all others, Cynthia played the starring role. This time she was a thirty-year-old woman living in a small town. Lacking any higher education, she had tutored herself at the public library to become, through hard work and an unexpected streak of talent, a brilliant astronomer. Then, working from a makeshift laboratory atop a cold mountain in Montana, she had made her discovery: what everyone else thought would be a simple solar eclipse would in fact be the end of the world. Such voluntary illusions were a regular part of Cynthia's life. Once she had been an artist, painting abstract masterpieces on large canvases. Another time she was a detective, spending her waking hours scouring the downtown streets for suspicious characters, collecting clues to solve an unsolvable crime. Yet one aspect of the present fantasy distinguished it from those that had come before: this time she would attempt to include someone else. The role would go to Leonard Keppler.

Down in Coulter, Leonard Keppler stood behind the counter at the Silver Spoon Diner and rapped out the rhythm of a jukebox tune with his long fingers. He had washed the last coffee cups, refilled the glass doughnut vault with a new dozen and a half, and even cleaned the ugly grease traps beneath the grill. Now he awaited Cynthia's arrival. Leonard managed the diner, and for the past three years, Cynthia had worked the night shift. During the day, kids just out of high school waited tables while he cooked, but after dinner Cynthia took over and it became a one-person operation, mostly coffee trade for truck drivers and night owls. His day help came and went, but Cynthia remained. Then, just as he felt they were becoming friends, she had burst in last night bearing lunatic news, something about the eclipse and the destruction of the world.

She had come in early. Leonard had been alone except for a young couple in a corner booth. Her entrance brought a gust of
north wind, and she stomped her feet at the door, chunks of snow flaking from her frozen pant legs like bark from a pair of skinny corduroy trees.

"You look like an arctic explorer," he said, admiring her bright cheeks and the way she had tied her straight brown hair back with a red rubber band, making it look neater than usual.

"It's kind of quiet here," she said, crossing to the counter and pulling herself up to sit on it. "Have a big dinner rush?"

"Bigger than normal. A lot of people in town for the eclipse."

"I noticed. The Travelodge had its No Vacancy sign out."

"Still snowing?" he asked.

"Look outside! It's almost a blizzard." Then she crossed her legs and clasped her hands in her lap, seeming to examine her thumbnails. She appeared distracted to him, a little giddy even, and he backed up to take his customary position beside the ice machine. Leonard had a bad eye, and standing in that corner put it next to the wall so he could survey the whole diner with his good one. Cynthia seemed to be preparing to speak, but it was taking a long time. He lit a cigarette and watched the headlights pass outside.

"Lenny, there's something I've been wanting to tell you," she said suddenly.

"What's that?" There was a catch in his voice, a kind of hiccup, and he felt his breath seize. He had suspected Cynthia of a growing affection these past few weeks, and he was afraid she was going to tell him how she felt. He wasn't ready for that yet.

"It's a long story, but I'll try to shorten it," she continued. "It has to do with the eclipse." She paused and looked at her hands once more.

"The world's going to end."

Leonard forced a smile and followed it with a burst of loud laughter, trying to anticipate the punchline. "No kidding," he said.

"No kidding."

Then Cynthia glanced at the couple in the corner booth, and Leonard sensed something wrong.

"Could we go into the kitchen?" she asked. He followed her to the back, all the way past the grill and deep fryer to the dead-end corridor that went into the walk-in freezer. When she turned on him it was with a glittering, wild-eyed gaze that made him rock back on his heels.
"This eclipse is a divine conjunction," she said. "The moon will be the nearest it's ever been, and there's going to be a proliferation of solar flares, and what will happen? Kaboom! Everything will just come apart."

"Knock it off, Cyn. I don't even get it."

He continued to assume it was a joke, maybe a long, complicated joke of the kind that ends up not being funny.

"This isn't a gag," she said. "I figured it out in the library. I've spent weeks studying and making my own observations. The numbers are right, and I've done the calculations. I can show you the calculations."

"You don't have to come in tonight if you don't want to," he said. "I'll work your shift for you. Just stop it."

She seemed to relax some then and smiled at him, but it was the sort of smile you'd give a child to reassure him.

"I won't say any more, at least not tonight. But something is wrong with this eclipse, something other scientists haven't discovered." She opened the door that led into the dark alley behind the diner, saying, "I learned it at the library" as it slammed behind her.

By the time she disappeared down the alley, Leonard was too angry to wonder what she'd meant by it all. He finished waiting on the last customers, took them their check, and, when it was clear she wasn't returning, turned out the lights and locked the doors, closing early for the first night in months. As he trudged home, he tried to consider what she'd said, but it was like replaying a conversation from a dream. She learned it at the library, is what she said.

In fact, Cynthia had spent a great deal of time at the Coulter Public Library. Last summer, during the sweltering days of mid-July, she had begun to frequent the old building. It was air-conditioned, and since she worked the night shift, it was a pleasant place to pass the uncomfortable hours when she found it impossible to sleep. There, the evolution of her present masquerade began. She would page through astronomy books, reading a paragraph here and there, always pausing to look at the photos
of the moon. She would read the astronomy magazines, especially any article about eclipses, until, somewhere near the middle of almost every piece, she would become hopelessly entangled in the complex technical language. And finally, late in the afternoon, when she found herself nodding over the equations and columns of figures scattered across the page, she would know that it was time to return home for a few cool hours of sleep before work. During those summer days, she became Cynthia the astronomer, the brave woman whose genius would startle the world.

Later, beneath clear autumn skies, she began her nightly observations. Purchasing a three-inch refractor telescope through an ad in one of the magazines at the library, she developed her ritual of watching the moon across the months and recording its course. Her first night out, three shooting stars appeared at once, an event she took as a sign confirming her in her mission. Now as she approached Coulter, she felt sad that this was the last night. It was February 22, the eve of the eclipse, the eve of the obliteration of life on earth. As Cynthia crunched over the wind-frozen snow, she watched the blue lights of town become distinct as streetlights, neon signs, and the square, soft shine of lighted windows. She wondered what it would be like when all those lights shone at noon, when the stars were forever out, and daylight became nolight or daynight—one long oblivion with no one left to watch the show.

When she reached the first houses at the edge of town, she hugged her telescope bundle and tucked the flapping blanket tighter. She did not want any of Coulter's busybodies knowing about her charade. Last night Leonard had been informed, but that was a calculated move. No one should find out by accident. Cynthia valued her privacy and knew that outsiders might think her crazy, but that simply wasn't true. "Some people," she told herself, "watch TV soap operas all day or read trashy novels. I don't need anyone else to make life interesting for me. I do a better job myself." But there was another reason for keeping the telescope concealed: Cynthia the astronomer had no intention of telling the authorities what she had so skillfully deduced. They would laugh at a woman who had taught herself astrophysics in a public library in Coulter, Montana. Her plan was to simply sit by
and watch the world explode and be the only one to go with a
smile on her face, the only one who had understood for months
that the end was on its way.

When she reached the center of town, all the buildings were
aglow. The restaurants were still open, the old Foster Hotel was
a grid of shining windows, and the neon signs hanging in front
of the bars flickered and hummed. As she crossed the street to­
ward the Silver Spoon, she could see Leonard standing alone
behind the counter, beneath the blue green wash of fluorescent
light. Cynthia knew he hadn’t believed her, but that was to be ex­
pected. She guessed she should have been more subtle and chided
herself for having been so abrupt. Yet some errors were bound to
be part of any new enterprise. Leonard’s participation was a test
case. She just hoped he wouldn’t fire her for not returning to
work last night.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come back yesterday. I’ll make up the
hours,” she said as she entered. “But guess what I saw tonight?”
She set her bundle on the counter and boldly let the telescope
peek out at one end.

“I don’t want to hear about it.”

“Suit yourself.”

She took a seat and swiveled to and fro, her lips pursed in a coy
smile. There was a long pause as Leonard busied himself at the
coffee machine. Cynthia clasped her hands on her lap and waited.

“God help us all,” she said, unable to outwait him.

“I said I don’t want to hear about it,” Leonard sputtered.
“What’s wrong with you, talking about exploding stars?”

“First of all, it’s not the stars I’m observing, it’s the moon. And
second, I’m letting you in on one of the biggest secrets ever, and
you don’t even want to hear.”

Cynthia found herself fascinated by Leonard’s exasperation.
Unlike last night, it no longer seemed essential that he believe
her. His very skepticism was helping her achieve a wonderful
sense of realism in this fantasy.

Leonard set a cup of coffee in front of her. His face was long
and angular, birdlike, with high cheekbones and one eye that
wandered off on its own recognizance from time to time. His
hands were likewise, elongated, bony, bird feet. They shook a little
as he put the cup and saucer down.
“Listen to me,” he said. “In a town like Coulter, everybody knows everybody else’s business. You’re on unsafe ground to begin with since you’ve had this night job forever and you’re thirty years old and not married. But you do this star—this moon thing, and you’ll be the new town fool.”

“I’m not doing anything, and you’re the only one I’ve told,” she said, gathering up the blanket and scope. “I thought you’d like to know.” Then she stomped toward the back door just as she had last night but stopped short and glanced over her shoulder. “It’s 7:30. I’ll be back before 10:00, I promise.”

Leonard looked at the cup of coffee where it sat steaming, untouched. Yesterday’s anger had passed; now he just hoped she would come back for her shift and stop acting like this. He was, he guessed, her only friend in Coulter, and he worried about her as he worried about himself. Would she end up as the town character, a half-wit bag lady who talked to parking meters? Would he end up as the wall-eyed soda jerk that everyone would still treat like a kid when he was sixty? He tried to behave in ways that would prevent such a destiny, but for two nights in a row now, she had claimed that the end of the world was upon them, that tomorrow would bring darkness and hot winds and people being swept into the sky like tumbleweeds in a storm.

Leonard did not know where Cynthia had come from. When he had first hired her as night waitress and cook, their paths crossed for only the few moments it took to exchange places each evening. But later, as Cynthia had taken to spending time at the diner before her shift, he had begun to like her more and more. Yet there remained a clear distance between them. Even now he did not know where she lived except that it was in one of the little houses between Second Street and the railroad tracks. Just one of those people who never quite belong, he thought. But now she’s asking for it. You can be odd and people will tolerate you, but the minute you scare them you’re in trouble. He prayed she’d told her “discovery” to no one else.

Cynthia ambled down Center Street. Usually deserted at this time of night, it was now clogged with traffic. Eclipse-watchers had been converging on the town all week long. Coulter was dead-center on the eclipse path. Its altitude enhanced telescope viewing and photography, and the meteorologists had predicted clear skies.
That made it a magnet, drawing high-powered astronomers with their high-powered instruments, as well as a mixed bag of jet-setters, nature lovers, and evangelist sundancers who were there only to see the spectacle. Earlier in the day Cynthia had noticed two women who appeared to have stepped out of a fashion magazine buying Blackout in Montana T-shirts from an overweight man hawking souvenirs from the trunk of his car. What interested Cynthia, however, were the visitors with the big computer-driven telescopes and infrared cameras who didn’t know what it was she knew. They wouldn’t believe her if she told them. Even Leonard did not believe yet, but he would come around. Together the two of them would die in a flash of fire with the others, but maybe they could go in one another’s arms, secure in the knowledge that even the brightest, the most educated, the wealthiest would turn to their loved ones with looks of absolute astonishment when the final moment arrived.

Though Cynthia the astronomer was full of rapt anticipation, Cynthia herself felt uneasy. The event that had charged her fantasy life for so long was at hand; that it would end tomorrow meant that she had already begun to feel its loss. Furthermore, she had started worrying about Leonard’s distress. Perhaps tomorrow, when it was over, she would explain it all to him, and perhaps he would understand.

As she passed the Foster Hotel, Cynthia put her face up to a large window and peered into the brightly illuminated lobby. The old, high-ceilinged room was bustling with more activity than she’d ever seen there before. Some sort of party or reception, everyone with a drink in hand. A poster on an easel near the doorway said American Astronomy Society. “Highfalutin scientists,” she thought. She could stroll in there and tell them what’s what, what they’ve all missed but what they won’t miss, like it or not. The women inside wore silky dresses or wool suits, and the men had on blue blazers and tastefully patterned ties of the kind only bank presidents or school principals in Coulter wore. She looked at herself, corduroy trousers tucked into the tops of her boots, her ratty blue peacoat and misshapen green sweater. Cynthia the astronomer wanted badly to enter, but her attire would give her away. They’d think she was a crackpot. She wanted to infiltrate the establishment, mingle with the real physicists, not
books in the library or programs on TV, but face to face. Not even to tell them what was coming, because they wouldn’t believe it, but to be for a time with those who thought like herself, who belonged to that elite group of minds that defined the universe.

It was a chance not to be missed. She turned and went back the way she had come, past the hardware store and the bank, and then cut across the school playground to Second Street and began to run. Once inside her little house, she stashed the telescope under her bed and set the notebook full of calculations on the nightstand. She found her brown skirt and beige blouse and the low-heeled shoes she hadn’t worn in months. I’ll look OK, she thought. They’ll take me for a junior high school science teacher or a local amateur astronomer, but they’ll talk to me. She considered for a moment that taking her masquerade into a room overflowing with genuine astronomers would be going too far but couldn’t resist. It was a perfect way to energize her make-believe life on this final night.

At the diner, Leonard leaned against the ice machine, shifting positions impatiently, the cigarette in his right hand held out and away from his body, taking care as always not to get ashes in the ice. He was afraid Cynthia wouldn’t come back again tonight. Once, not long ago, he had considered asking her out to a movie on her night off, but now he wasn’t sure. She would be pretty, he thought, if she didn’t dress like a lumberjack. Maybe this crazy episode would pass tomorrow, with the passing of the eclipse. In the meantime, though, he wondered if he should be doing something to help her, if she needed to be protected from herself.

Just then, two men walked in. They were dressed in sport coats and ties. Leonard grumbled to himself; he had already scrubbed the grill and hoped they wanted only coffee.

"Can I help you?" he asked as they slid onto stools at the counter.

"Two coffees," the man in the blue coat said cheerfully.
"Cream in mine," said the one in the gray coat.
Relieved, Leonard fetched the coffees and served them.

80 Cynthia Rising
"You’re here for the big eclipse, I guess," he asked, trying to make his inquiry sound nonchalant. "Have you seen one before?"

Both men nodded.

"My fourth opportunity," the one in the gray coat said. "It’s exciting. Be sure you find a good vantage point, away from houses and trees. You’ll be amazed. I just pray we have good weather. And be sure to get some protection."

"Protection?"

"For your eyes."

"Ah," said Leonard, nodding. "I’ve heard about that." While they took their first careful sips, he fiddled nervously with the valves on the sink below the counter. Then he spoke again:

"You know, I heard a rumor that this wasn’t an ordinary eclipse. That something special might happen." He didn’t believe Cynthia but thought he might as well investigate.

"Well," said the man in the gray coat, "it’s going to be an extraordinarily close syzygy. That’s the alignment of Moon, Sun, and Earth. They’ll be closer to one another and more precisely in line than at any other time in recorded history."

Leonard felt a little spasm ripple through his midsection. Slowly, he removed another cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket and tapped it endwise on the counter.

"Will that do anything to us?" He lowered his voice, although there was no one else in the diner to hear.

"How do you mean?"

"To us." He pointed at his chest. "This perfect line-up."

"Syzygy." The two men said it in unison.

"Syzygy?"

The men looked at each other, and then the gray-coated one said, "No, no, nothing an untrained observer would notice. There will be a blackout, and it will last longer than usual, over two and a half minutes in Coulter. But nothing more. It might affect the tides a bit."

"That’s all?"

"The astrology freaks, the horoscope crowd, they may think the world’s coming to an end for all I know," said the man in the blue coat, "but don’t they always? Now, if we were druids..."

"Druids?"
“Ancient religious cult. Worshiped celestial bodies.”

“I see,” Leonard said, nodding rapidly. “I was just wondering. I don’t know much about astronomy.”

“Eclipses are spectacular, but there’s nothing to be afraid of. Not now in the twentieth century. We know better.”

When they had gone, Leonard spoke the words aloud in the empty cafe. “Druids. Syzygy.” They sounded magical, but he quickly scolded himself. Enough, he thought. You’ll let your imagination run away with you. For all the excitement and thrill of the unknown Cynthia’s predictions called up, he knew there were only two possibilities: either it was an elaborate practical joke, or she had lost her mind. Whatever the case, he felt as helpless as if her ravings were true.

Cynthia returned to the Foster Hotel, satisfied that she looked acceptable. Just as she reached the entryway, a tall bald man with thick glasses came from behind and opened the door for her. She smiled at him and went inside, self-consciously brushing back her hair and surveying the shining faces beneath the bright lights; everyone appeared so confident and attractive and well dressed. She sidled across the room, searching for a stable island in the flow of bodies, a landmark from which she could establish her bearings. As she approached the long refreshment table, the bald man who had opened the door stepped in front of her.


Cynthia gaped up at him and opened her mouth with no notion of what might emerge.

“Sixty-nine,” she blurted.

“Of course. Off New Brunswick in the North Atlantic. That’s where we met. I knew I’d seen you before.”

“Oh yes, New Brunswick. Do you remember the cloud cover?”

“Do I remember? Nearly wasted our time out there, didn’t we? Until that beautiful break came at noon.”

“We were so lucky,” she said, and suddenly she could picture the azure crack in the clouds, the streaming sunlight, the crossing moon.

“Have you made it to any others since then?”

82 Cynthia Rising
She struggled to recall the location of a recent eclipse. She’d seen the dates and places so often in the library but nothing came to her.

“Kenya in ’76?” he asked. His forehead glistened with perspiration.

“I’m afraid I missed that one,” she said, too nervous to push the lie any further.

“Wonderful to see you again anyway. You’ll be at the midnight weather briefing of course.”

“Of course.”

“Perhaps we can visit again. Right now I owe Art Harrington a drink.”

Cynthia stood for a moment flushed with her success and brushed back her hair once more. The clouds off New Brunswick. A lucky guess, but not at all unlikely. She knew from her reading that the bane of every eclipse watcher was cloud cover.

She filled a glass from a crystal punch bowl and then surveyed the room, feeling a little light-headed. She wished there were an empty chair. Near her, two men sat at a small cocktail table having an animated discussion. Listening to them was like hearing a language she had heard as a child but had forgotten over the years—granulation, oblation, the Doppler effect. She found it both exhilarating and overwhelming.

Then, as she watched one of the men pull a thick packet of folded computer printouts from the pocket of his gray coat, a small, bony woman backed into Cynthia, causing her to spill her drink.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t looking,” the woman exclaimed. “I’ve made a real mess, haven’t I?”

Cynthia’s face turned crimson, and she backed away, moving toward the men at the little table.

“No, it’s all right. Excuse me.”

“Let me help you clean up. I’ll pay the cleaning bill.”

“Please, no, I’m fine,” Cynthia said, feeling her knees weaken. She reached down to support herself on the table, which now lay buried beneath great drifts of green and white computer printouts. The man in the blue coat stood up.

“Are you all right? Maybe you’d better sit down.” He grabbed a nearby chair and pushed it under her.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said breathlessly and tried to
calm herself, feeling at once confused and ashamed for having come. The woman who had made her spill the drink hovered there for a moment and then moved away, still apologizing.

"What group are you with anyway?" asked the man in the gray coat. "Are you staying here at the hotel?"

"Oh, no," she answered, suddenly remembering her story. "I live here in Coulter. I'm a science teacher."

Both of them nodded and smiled at her, watching as she blotted the pink punch stain on her blouse with a paper napkin.

"Why don't you join us," the blue-coated one said. "We're discussing the coronal ambience of such an extraordinarily complete syzygy."

She had no idea what they were talking about. She knew what the corona was, but no more than that.

"These figures are pretty involved," he continued. "Let me explain what they signify."

She listened then, with all her might, but didn't understand a single sentence. Even in her readings she'd never encountered such words and numbers. Before long, she found herself simply staring at the columns on the computer paper and remembering the dog-eared notebook on the night table at home.

Finally, the one who had been doing most of the talking looked over at her. "I'm sorry, this is all beyond you, isn't it?" he said.

"I'd better go," Cynthia said.

"There are some books in the lobby. Very straightforward explanations of eclipse phenomena and information on what to watch for tomorrow."

"Thank you, but I really have to go."

She stood and searched for a way to the door, nearly in tears from embarrassment. Since she had come here, Cynthia the astronomer had become lost, had disintegrated even, leaving Cynthia herself alone in a room full of people she did not know or have the right to associate with. Then, as she began to cross the room, she saw Leonard standing in the foyer scanning the crowd.

He had been there for some time. He still wore his grease-splattered apron and could sense that people thought he was kitchen help at the hotel. From the windows of the diner, he had seen Cynthia enter the Foster and couldn't stop himself. He had left the place unattended, crossed the street, and come in just in
time to see her seated with the two men he had talked with ear­lier in the evening. For several minutes he stood there frozen in indecision. It was all so baffling. That she should be in contact with these scientists rattled whatever confidence he had in his diagnosis of the situation. But when he saw that Cynthia had spotted him, he knew he had to act. He crossed the room to meet her and took her roughly by the arm.

“All right, what’s going on?”

“Nothing, Leo, it’s OK. Let’s get out of here.” She looked bewildered.

“What happened to your blouse? I want to get to the bottom of this,” he said and dragged her toward the two men, good eye flashing about the room. He wasn’t sure what he intended to do, but he knew he wanted to understand.

The two men glanced up together, and the one in the blue coat stood, looking alarmed.

“I want some answers,” Leonard said.

“Look,” replied the blue-coated one, “we don’t even know her. I didn’t spill the drink.”

“I don’t care about the drink.”

“She looked so upset we asked her to sit with us,” said the gray-coated one. “That’s all.”

“That’s not all,” Leonard said and grabbed the edge of the table, upending it and sending the printouts unfurling across the floor.

“She’s been telling me about the moon stopping, and you came into the diner tonight and talked about it too. Is this a setup?”

The two men backed away, looking fearfully at one another and then at Leonard.

“Listen, buddy, we don’t know what you’re talking about. The moon’s not stopping anywhere and—”

“Leonard,” Cynthia said sharply. “leave them be. It was all something I made up. They haven’t done a thing.”

Leonard fixed his eye on her face, trying to see if she was finally telling the truth. She looked frightened and confused. So he had made an error. There was nothing going on between her and these men. Whatever Cynthia had been trying to do, she had stopped now, and it was over.

“I’ll still meet you in the morning to watch the eclipse,” he said.

“That won’t be necessary.”

_Cynthia Rising_ 85
“Please.”

Cynthia shivered as she watched him walk back toward the diner. Surely Leonard must think her crazy. She wanted to go home and lock her door and never come out again. Yet, standing on that cold sidewalk, it suddenly seemed wonderful that he had come charging into the hotel, as if he really believed her, as if he really believed the world would end.

In the morning they sat together on Cynthia’s hilltop. She had left the telescope and notebook behind, bringing only the brown wool blanket. She had considered staying home to hide her shame and loss. If she faced Leonard, it would have to be as herself, without Cynthia the astronomer, without the veil of fantasy she’d lived with for so long. But she had come, simply because the momentum of the past months led to that place and that time with such power. Whatever the end would be, it would have to happen there and then. And so, as the moon began to cross the sun, she felt the old tug of her fantasy, the creeping greed of her imagination, and she wanted Leonard with her in that world but knew that it was not possible.

Then the darkness came. The sparrows in the trees below the hill stopped chirping and the automatic streetlights in town came on. The stars became visible at once, not with the slow dissolve of twilight, but as if a switch had been hit. It made Cynthia want to cry or cheer.

Leonard watched Cynthia more than he watched the moon. He watched the sunlight on her face and then the shadow, and he watched her rise from sadness, to an odd agitation, to calm. And as he waited for the light to return, he imagined what it would be like if the darkness remained and the streetlights were always on and the hot winds came.
It’s raining again tonight. We kneel in the cold mud, trying to work in the glow from the van’s headlights. Every few seconds, lightning splits the sky, and I can see Delbert and Jane in a white flashbulb freeze, the droplets gleaming on their slickers.

“What time is it?” I ask. Jane had knocked on my door at midnight. “There’s a line out on County Road 16, off Spring Creek Drive,” she said. “Some farmer out working late cut a buried cable with a backhoe.”

Delbert answers my question: “Two a.m. Goddamn farmers pick the goddamnest times to be out dredging irrigation canals.”
He may have found the Lord, but he still talks like a lineman. "This one's hot," says Jane, pulling one mangled cable end out of the mud and bending it back toward herself. "When Stephens called, he was having a fit. Major toll cable, he tells me. This is probably costing Ma Bell a couple thousand dollars a minute. He wants it spliced by daybreak."

There aren't many female field workers, but Jane knows her business. This is electric gold running into the ditch. Otherwise, they wouldn't have sent a supervisor like Delbert out with us. Jane and I kneel on opposite sides of the irrigation ditch, scooping our hands through the mud, searching for the other end of the severed cable. Her brown eyes shine at me. She's as pretty and smart as ever, but these days I don't understand her. Somehow we no longer communicate.

The break in the line is a typical backhoe cut. Not a clean separation, but a mangled mess. The cable end Jane pulled out is a shredded spray of plastic and steel, with the central core of copper wires flushed into a tangled blossom.

The wind begins to pick up, angling the rain toward the south­east. We are beside a desolate Wyoming backroad, somewhere east of Cody. The breeze sweeps across the flat fields, and I can see the moon glimmering faintly behind the thunderheads.

"Bad night," I say.

"No weather's too bad when Stephens sees dollar signs," says Jane.

Delbert pulls his cable-skinning knife from its pouch on his belt and begins to slit the plastic casing lengthwise. He is on his knees, straddling the black tube, drawing the knife along with both hands.

"It's not the rain or the cold," I say, "it's the—"

"The lightning," Jane says.

Delbert stops cutting and sits back. "It doesn't bother me. I don't know why it should bother you. It wasn't you who was struck, was it? I'm thankful. Let it happen again."

Well no, it hadn't been me. But it was on a night like this, in a place like this. Rain, an open field, a submerged break. Delbert was standing in the ditch, groping for the lost cable in the mire. Jane was near the van, ten or fifteen yards away, and I sat on the
wet ground, trying to cut a waterproof cover for the splice. Then came the faint buzzing and the momentary rush of static electricity that lifted the hair on my arm. Delbert had found the cable ends and was holding them up, one in either hand, when the hammerhead shock of the strike came. I was knocked unconscious by the concussion. With Jane watching, Delbert disappeared in a flash of white energy. And, as he held the copper cables, the great blue bolt of voltage passed through him and shot up the buried phone line in both directions. The switchboards for a hundred miles on either end exploded. Lights flashed. Buzzers buzzed. Circuit breakers fused into place. Delbert became, momentarily, a human splice, wired into the big grid of Bell Telephone lines.

I look up at Delbert and watch him carefully peeling away the steel and aluminum conducting jacket that lies just beneath the plastic cable cover. The rain runs off the short brim of my hardhat and drips inside the front collar of my poncho.

"All this for overtime pay," I say.

"You have to work for more than money," Delbert says. "When I woke up in the hospital while they were treating me and saw the green plastic trash bag full of my clothes lying in the corner, why for a minute . . ."

I've heard it all before. Delbert's "out of body experience." The doctors had to cut off some of his clothes to get at the burns, and they put what they'd removed in a bag on the floor. Standard procedure. Delbert thought (he says) he'd died and gone to heaven, and there sat his body in a green garbage bag in the corner of the emergency room of Campbell County Hospital.

Jane has given up searching for the other half of the break and watches Delbert. She's heard the story before as well—many more times than I have, I'm sure.

After the strike, Jane came to Delbert's rescue. She checked my pulse first—slapped my face, yelled my name. I could hear her voice quaver above the bright ringing that filled my head, and I struggled to open my eyes.
"You're okay," she said. "Thank God. Just lie there. I want to check on Delbert. I think he got the worst of it."

"Of what?" I managed to ask.

"Lightning. He's been struck by lightning."

I lifted my back off the ground and propped myself on my elbows. Jane ran to Delbert and began to slap him and shout his name as she had with me. The fact that she came to me first hasn't escaped my notice. It serves as a marker in our relationship that even more than the actual strike separates then from now.

When Jane reached Delbert, I could hear the panic in her voice: "Jesus, Phil, no heartbeat. Nothing. He's barely breathing."

His silhouette was like a low mound of earth, and I could smell the faintly carboniferous odor of burnt hair on the wind. His breathing was only a soft, brittle wheeze. "Death rattle," I thought, surprised at myself for so readily recalling the name for a sound I never thought I'd hear.

Jane went to work on him. She gave him mouth-to-mouth and pumped his chest to keep the blood flowing. I couldn't believe she had remembered so much from the company safety films. As I lay there, I tried to recall the steps of cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Which came first? A thump on the chest? Two sharp breaths into the victim's lungs? Two fingers in the mouth to clear the air passage? It was obvious Delbert was fortunate to be in Jane's hands rather than mine. She stopped and looked up.

"Damn it. Do something. Get on the radio. Call somebody." I felt foolish being upstaged by her, especially during an emergency. I always assumed I was the calm, competent one.

"I thought you already did," I lied.

"Well I didn't. Call."

I drew myself to my knees and shook my head. I was feeling chilled from the rain, but the bells had modulated to a steady hum. Then I stood and wobbled toward the van.

"Myer-Exchange," I said, calling the all-night board.

"This is Mary Lou. It's late—what's going on?"

I knew there was a number I was supposed to say for an emergency, but I couldn't remember it.

"Mary, we're out here and Delbert's been struck by lightning. We're going to need help."

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Delbert had finished his trash bag story. Most of what he has to say isn’t quite so ridiculous, but none of it is particularly intelligent. I’ve only seen him four times since the accident, but on each occasion, he’s been spouting nonsense. Now, as I get a grip on the remaining cable and wrench it from the muck, he continues talking to Jane.

“It’s a gift, but I have to find my own way with it. A calling. I guess I just have to wait for another sign.”

Jane quietly nods. I can’t believe she listens to him with such respect.

“Some signs you can’t ignore,” he continues, without a trace of humor. No you can’t. Hit a man with a few thousand volts and he’ll sit up and take notice. I’d laugh if I didn’t think it would anger Jane. The changes in her are bewildering. Delbert gets his brains rattled by a giant shock treatment and you can expect some bizarre behavior. But Jane—I thought she cared for me. I thought she was so levelheaded. Why is she attaching herself to him like this?

Jane and I met three months ago, when we were assigned to work together as troubleshooters. That meant traveling from town to town, checking out newly installed systems, and repairing breakdowns. I liked her from the start. She was quiet, sensible, and sexy in the way she could cast an inviting glance or make an intriguing remark while sinking a four hundred pair load coil into the ground. Our motel rooms were always next door to one another, and before long we became lovers. We’ve always kept our feelings secret because Jane is adamant about on-the-job professionalism, but I’m sure some of our coworkers guessed the truth. It is more than a simple physical relationship. Deeper than that. Less than two weeks before the lightning strike, I suggested we request joint transfers to nontraveling jobs so we could be sure we wouldn’t be separated. Jane said she’d have to think about it, but I know I could have convinced her. I could have convinced her if things hadn’t changed. But then Delbert entered her life. I haven’t given up on her, but I’m frustrated by how transfixed she has become by Delbert’s lunatic ways.

Jane goes to the truck to sort out the necessary tools and hardware. Delbert and I each strip and cut a cable end, exposing a
Sheaf of copper wires at the center that must be individually spliced to carry the current.

"Have you ever considered what goes into a splice?" Delbert asks. I ignore him. The last thing he needs is encouragement. Of course he continues. "It reminds me of dissecting a reptile. Not a mechanical job at all, but an organic exploration."

I have to admit that this strange transformation of his is fascinating. Where does he get these words? "Organic?" It seems so random. He's found the Lord, but he still says "Goddamn" every chance he gets. And then he launches into these homilies that have nothing to do with God or anything else.

"The textures, the colors," he says. "A layering from shell to core. So vital. And there's the steady stream of energy that flows, even as we tinker with its parts."

"What's 'it'?" I ask, unable to let him go on.

"Why, the system," he says, taking a wad of wires and shaking them in the air like a squirming animal. "The system. It might as well be alive."

Jane spent the twenty hours following the accident at Delbert's side. The two medical technicians in the ambulance said that her prompt action saved his life. His heart had stopped, and I'd been right about the death rattle. When the ambulance arrived, my ringing noise and general disorientation were diagnosed as mild shock. Very mild—they asked me to drive the van back to town and let Jane ride in the ambulance with Delbert. I was a little put out by that; it was me who might have been injured. I didn't drive the van to the hospital for an examination as they'd asked but went home to bed. If I was well enough to drive, I was well enough to ignore them. Jane later said it was a spiteful gesture, but I hadn't meant it that way. I knew I was okay and wasn't especially interested in Delbert. He was only another local field supervisor, a cable splicer with four or five years of experience and one month of management training. Certainly not a close friend. And on-the-job injuries do happen. You can't overreact. He had treated us well since we'd been in Cody, taking Jane under his wing, always checking on her, seeing that all was well. But that was common where there were male supervisors and female employees.

When Delbert awoke after the accident, it was Jane's glowing
face that he first beheld. I'd finally come to the hospital to find out if he was going to live or die, as well as to ask Jane if she was ever coming back to the motel. When I stepped into Delbert's hospital room, however, I saw Jane sitting on his bed, holding his hand.

"Did he come to?" I asked. Delbert opened his eyes and rolled them toward me without moving his partially bandaged head.

"He's been awake all morning."

"How's he doing?"

Jane stroked his arm and listed his injuries: "Burns on his left leg and arm. Minor head burns. A punctured eardrum. They said it's miraculous, you know. He should be dead."

"Jane saved me," Delbert said.

His remark was premature, of course. He hadn't found out who really saved him yet. That would be the Lord.

Jane and I now sit across from one another on opposite banks of the ditch, dangling our rubber boots in the muddy water. Between us are the two cable ends, stripped and ready to splice. It's a large cable and will take a long time to finish. We'll have to hurry to meet the daylight deadline. Any splice is only a two-man job, but when there's an emergency with a lot of money involved, they send a supervisor. That fact leaves Delbert to pace in the shadows as Jane and I go to work. The rain continues, and Delbert splashes softly through the puddles as he walks.

"Phil, I know you don't like the things I've been saying, but it's a big change, and whether you like it or not, you're a part of it. You were there when it happened," he says, his voice coming from somewhere beyond the yellow headlight beam.

"Don't start," I say. "Let us get this done. You can turn Hindu for all I care. Just leave me out of it."

"A change, a fabulous change. At least listen to Jane. She understands."

I look across at her and feel a mix of desire and resentment that makes me grind my teeth. She looks to the bundle of wires and doesn't say a word.

"Jane, tell him."

"This is a rush job, Delbert," she says. "He'll understand. But this isn't the time or the place." A good sign. She seems to be avoiding him, and I try to give her a knowing smile.
"The Reverend Pomeroy has asked me to come to Oklahoma," Delbert says. "I'm thinking about making the trip."

The Reverend Pomeroy, ah yes. Delbert's accident and subsequent miraculous recovery received far-reaching press coverage. Paul Harvey, the famous radio commentator, recounted the incident on his nationally syndicated program. Associated Press sent the story out over the wires, causing it to turn up in the back pages of newspapers from coast to coast. Delbert heard from admirers around the nation, well-wishers who sent cards and kindred spirits who wrote to tell about their lightning strikes or near misses. And it also soon became apparent that there was a large religious underground who read the papers and listened to the radio in search of miraculous survivors. Delbert was deluged by letters and literature from every conceivable denomination and sect.

Then, on his last day in the hospital, Delbert received a visitor. The Reverend Jim Pomeroy from Idabel, Oklahoma. As Delbert was to relate later, the visit was short and to the point. Reverend Pomeroy had driven the twelve hundred miles from Idabel to Cody to reveal to Delbert a vision that had come upon his reading of the two-inch item on page 27 of the July 27 Tulsa Tribune headed "Telephone Linewoman Saves Coworker." Delbert, Pomeroy said, had been shown to him as "one of the anointed, a member of the elect, a twentieth-century apostle."

Delbert took Pomeroy's advice to heart. It was a simple act of charismatic conversion. The reverend blessed him and drove off in his Plymouth station wagon, probably in search of other near fatalities. Delbert rolled over and fell asleep, dreaming (as he told Jane when she arrived to take him home from the hospital) of a cool white light, a golden river, and a mystical stranger who touched his shoulder. In the next two days, as I visited (only to see Jane), he was to read the Bible for several hours, give it up on the grounds that "the truth is within me," have one waking vision of himself on that night, spliced into the closed circuit of throbbing phone lines around the world, and tell Jane that she was integral to his change, his plan. The Lord had saved his life through her, after all. God knows, it was a miracle that she remembered the steps for treatment from the company safety films.
Four A.M. The sky is a predawn gray, and the rain has diminished to a steady drizzle. We are nearly finished. Delbert has taken a toolbox from the van and uses it as a stool so he can sit next to Jane. He has rattled on for most of the night, and I long ago stopped listening. Across the field, I see a pair of headlights cut through the dim mist and angle toward us. That will be the farmer who damaged the line. No doubt he'll be worried about the potential fines for cutting a cable. I was surprised he wasn't here when we came. Many a farmer in the same predicament has spent the night looking over our shoulders.

The pale blue pickup pulls up beside the van. An older man, tall and gray, with the slow work-walk of a long-time farmer, gets out and comes toward us.

"Gonna burn out your battery running it all night like that," he says.

"It runs off a separate source when we use it like this," Delbert says, standing and offering his hand.

"I'm real sorry about this. It was late and I had to finish digging. I saw the line marker, but I think they're off a couple feet."

"Accidents happen," Delbert says. "But I'll need your name for the office."

"Henry Voss," he says. Delbert pulls a pad from his hip pocket and jots down the name.

"Pleased to meet you." Delbert is momentarily his old self again, friendly but businesslike, soft-spoken. But then the farmer speaks:

"Say, aren't you the fellow who was struck by lightning?"

"Yes. You heard about it?"

"Hell yes. They said it was a miracle. You were as good as dead."

"She was the one that saved me," Delbert says, motioning toward Jane. "Her and the Lord."

The farmer laughs and slaps Delbert on the back. "Thank God every chance you get. That's what I always say."

Delbert is suddenly solemn, even angry. "I do thank the Lord, for it was meant to happen. You can laugh and you can be damned as well. You who aren't saved can't understand."

*The Electric Evangelist*
I’m embarrassed. Not only does he bore me, he scares poor farmers. I watch as the old man backs away toward his truck, his voice shaking.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. I’ll be careful about those line markers from now on. You all have a good morning now.”

Delbert stands, hands in fists at his sides. Then he walks away, disappearing behind the van.

“Jesus, Jane. He’s overdoing it.”

“You leave him alone,” she says.

Jane and I began working together again a week after the accident. I’d been on the job all along, but she took time off to nurse Delbert. She said she felt somehow responsible to see the recovery through, but I can’t imagine why. She saved him; she didn’t shock him. As we drove down the road on her first morning back at work, I asked her the question that had been nagging me for days.

“Why are you seeing so much of Delbert?”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to know why you stayed off the job. I want to know why you haven’t been seeing me. Delbert’s a grownup. He can take care of himself.”

She gave me a sharp look and turned her face toward the window. “Not that it’s any of your business,” she said, “but at first I was just amazed. Amazed at what I’d done and what he’d gone through—what we’d gone through together. I couldn’t just let it go. But later that preacher came, and things changed. He’s a different person. He’s stronger.”

“Come on! You don’t believe that old-time religion crap?”

“Delbert isn’t how you think. He’s not just a dumb lineman. Listen to him talk. The strength, the passion. If you listen carefully you’ll hear it. Maybe it was always there and this just brought it out. I know he may sound crazy at times but that will pass.” She reached across the seat and touched my arm. “I still care for you, but I want you to hear him out.”

I was speechless. I thought I understood Jane, even loved her, yet now she’d fallen, if not physically, then spiritually for a low-rent prophet who’d been knocked senseless by an errant light-
ning bolt. I found myself wishing there'd been a few thousand extra volts to finish the job. It won't last, I told myself. I'd heard about this reaction—the sudden but temporary attachment of a life saver to the one saved. That must be it, I thought, and Delbert's delusions, his spectacular conversion, would not last either.

"We'll need to evacuate this trench more," says Jane. Even after a night of work, her pretty face shines in the morning light. We are finishing the last few delicate steps before sinking the cable back into the ground. "The mud keeps sliding back into the pit. Can't do a clean job."

Delbert comes from behind the van, carrying a shovel. I notice him limping, favoring the left leg that was burned.

"I thought the doc said your leg was OK," I say, trying subtly to suggest that he's limping for effect.

"There's no pain," he says, walking toward Jane. But halfway there, he stops and squares himself to face me. "But I've been changed, in body, mind, and spirit. How could He give me the sign without making it physically manifest to the world? The illusion of burns, yes, but no real wounds. The only time it hurt was when I forgot my eardrum was broken and washed my hair. The soap ran down inside there and it burned real bad."

I can't contain myself and begin to laugh. The picture of Delbert in the shower with "no real wounds" but hollering in pain is too much for me. Jane reaches across the web of wires and grabs my arm.

"You stop it. Stop laughing. Leave him alone."

She does it with such anger that I'm momentarily taken back.

"No, no, you stop," I say shakily. "Both of you. What a bunch of bullshit. I've never heard anything like it. A crazy apostle with a congregation of two." And as I speak, I rise, backing away from Jane's frigid stare. For once Delbert is silent, and he begins to dig feverishly, widening the ditch into a broad, low-banked depression. But then he starts muttering, as if no one is here.

"Can't argue with the prophecy—heavenly Father—await your sign—by God, just keep raining, keep raining. Keep on raining."

Jane steps to his side. "It's all right. What's the matter?"

"He doesn't believe. Can't you force him to believe? He'll see. The lightning was a sign. The rain's a sign. Did you see the
switchboard in Cody? The energy passing through me, all along those wires. I absorbed that energy so that now I can emit it. They felt the shock in Oklahoma, Pomeroy told me so. Would any mortal man be allowed that without reason?"

All craziness of course. The charge dissipated at the first couple of exchange boards. The only reason that it got that far is because buried cables have no structural protection. Overhead lines are struck nearly every thunderstorm. There are built-in breakers every mile.

"Jane," I say, "this has gone far enough. Listen to him. He's talking nonsense, and you're as bad as he is if you go along. You understand the technology. It's simple science. A man standing in a water-filled ditch in a storm gets hit by lightning." I'm trying to sound logical, controlled, but I can hear my voice shaking.

"No," she says. "He's talking about energy. Somehow that's within him. You don't have to listen, but you should. Think about it. The three of us together could leave this job, go away, and do something with his gift."

And suddenly I understand how far things have gone. I've been ignoring all the signs, but now I see. She has passed over a line with him, and maybe they do feel something that is beyond me. But whether their feelings are genuine or an act, I won't have it, I won't be part of it. I feel as if the two of them are surrounding me, closing in. Then Delbert jumps across to my side of the ditch and drops the shovel on the ground.

"Leave her out of this," he says. "She was chosen as I was. She's not interested in what you think."

I begin to stride back and forth along the trench. I feel disgusted and frightened at the same time. "Jane," I say finally. "Say something. Tell me the truth. Are you really with him?"

"The truth is, if he goes to Oklahoma, I'll go too. Won't you listen? You could come along."

That's enough. I half expect Delbert to fall on his knees and begin singing hosannas. The shovel is lying by my feet, so I pick it up and take a long, slow swing, holding the very end of the handle. Delbert raises his hands, but the corner of the blade catches him on the side of the head and sends him sprawling back into the splice pit with a low moan. Jane glances at me with a look of pure disbelief and drops to her knees in the ditch without a
word. Then she takes a blue bandanna handkerchief from her back pocket and begins to mop the blood from the red gash above Delbert's left ear.

Today, six months later, we three are still together, a tenuous triangle, now on the gospel road. In the beginning, I went for love, my feelings for Jane determining all my decisions. Now I think I’d leave if they didn’t pay me so well to work as a road manager for the traveling revival the Reverend Pomeroy has organized to tour the Southwest. It’s surprising how profitable these organizations are. Delbert is a junior partner, giving impromptu sermons, springing from the audience, sweating with fervor at Pomeroy’s cue. Jane and I are there for each performance, ushering people in and then taking seats for ourselves near the back of whatever grimy church basement or garage we happened to have rented for the day.

Disenchantment has not yet infected Jane or Delbert, although she seems more low key about the whole thing by the day. Perhaps what I’m really engaged in here is a waiting game. Unfortunately, I lack patience. Sometimes, as I sit on a metal folding chair at the back of some overheated hall, listening to Delbert recount his apotheosis to the sweating crowd, I wish I’d finished the job. I wish I’d swung the shovel with more level force and laid him to permanent rest in that splice pit in the rain.
The Frontier Index, a newspaper published from a railroad car that moved west with the workers building the first transcontinental railroad, reported in their issue of June 10, 1868, that chimpanzees had recently provided an evening of theatrical entertainment at a saloon in Laramie City, Wyoming Territory. No further mention of the animals appeared in the historical record until the following fragments from the journal of their keeper, Samuel Coffey, were discovered by Coffey's great-granddaughter.
JUNE 9

Left Laramie City at sunrise. A rough, disorderly settlement—just what one would expect to find at the farthest edge of civilization. To our advantage, the residents had money to spend and were starved for entertainment. Our performances were well attended, and when I passed the hat, it came back overflowing.

For the first few hours today, I followed the new railroad tracks. They are truly marvelous, the bright steel rails like two lines of quicksilver drawn across the undulating plains. Although I had hoped to see the encampment where the actual laying of the track is occurring, I turned north, following the trail as I had been advised. I feel compelled to continue toward South Pass City without delay, for I have been warned about foul weather and hostile Indians so often that I expect to see bolts of lightning and flying arrows over the crest of every hill.

The apes are traveling well, if a bit subdued. Whenever I stop, I open their cage, but they seem stunned by the immense openness of the landscape and will come forth only with great coaxing. During the afternoon they slept, lulled by the rocking of the wagon. We are all three pleased with our new outfit—two sorrel mules and a small buckboard wagon. My only worry about the apes is the rough diet our journey has forced upon them. Fresh fruits and vegetables, which they prefer above all, have become increasingly unavailable since Omaha. Tonight, their dinner consisted of potatoes and an oat porridge which I spoon-fed to them like babes.

JUNE 10

A day spent plodding over an unbroken plain. I am bone-tired. One of the mules chomped me on the shoulder as I unharnessed her for the night. They are both ill-tempered but strong.
JUNE 11

Forced the North Platte today. Had been told that it could be easily crossed by mid-June, but it took all my courage and ingenuity to get the team and wagon across. I released the apes from confinement so that, if the wagon overturned, they would have a fighting chance. To my surprise, the Duchess plunged in immediately and swam to the far shore. I knew the beasts could swim, but not with such ease and grace. For his part, the Duke lolled about in the back of the wagon as if it were an emperor’s chaise, dipping his long hand into the current from time to time to bring up a cool draught. I saw no human nor any sign of one for the entire day. Nonetheless, I have convinced myself that Indians are lurking just out of sight. The apes were exhilarated by the river crossing. They screeched and chattered all through a sunny June afternoon.

JUNE 12

If yesterday was lonely, today was a social whirl. A party of five men overtook us just before midday. First came the usual questions and excitement about the apes, and then speculation about prospects for gold in South Pass. They had all heard fantastic tales of riches, but the letters I received from my brother have all been much more cautious in their optimism. I never thought I would view a brace of hairy apes as my financial security, but I find myself comforted by the knowledge that if Brother Andrew’s claim fails to prove out, I can continue my work as—I don’t believe I’ve ever called myself such before—an entertainer.

Later, during the afternoon, we passed a party of three men, one of whom had gotten a sizable knot on his head from being thrown by his pony. I offered to let him ride in the wagon for a spell, but as he was climbing in, he caught a glimpse of the Duke (who bared his teeth). He recoiled in such horror that he tumbled
over a thistle bush. He said he'd rather crawl than ride with monsters. Then, just at dusk, I saw a small band of Indians riding single file along a ridge parallel to the trail. I began to tremble and wished I'd convinced the injured fellow to ride along, but presently the Indians appeared to lose interest in us and turned away to the north.

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**JUNE 13**

The Indians I saw yesterday reappeared this morning but not to cause any harm. There were six, all on horseback, and they paralleled my path for half a mile before veering closer. They only wanted to see the apes.

—Do they speak? one inquired, in English.
—No sir.
—What do they eat?
—About anything a man will eat, though they are partial to fruits and grains.
—Are they for sale?

I hadn't given the possibility any consideration and had to gather my thoughts.
—Eighty dollars, I said.

He frowned and shook his head. Before they left I allowed each of them to stroke the Duchess's arm. From their friendly demeanor, I take them to be Shoshone.

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**JUNE 14**

The apes appear lethargic and low-spirited. I suspect it is because their rations are so meager and inappropriate to their nature.

*The Chimpanzees of Wyoming*
JUNE 15

Last night we camped on Russell Creek with three other parties, all gold seekers headed for S.P. An air of festivity prevailed, with everyone throwing a portion of their provisions toward a grand feast. Afterward, the Duke and Duchess performed. The evening’s playbill:

- acrobatics (tumbling and balancing)
- husband and wife spat
- mother and ill-mannered child

It was a lively performance, despite their poor health. I purposely did not include “Romeo and Juliet” because all who were present may become part of my audience in S.P. and I want them to be eager for more. (I have also begun to train the Duke to ride one of the mules—I see great possibility.)

Bought 1 peck carrots and 20 turnips from a man from Dayton, Ohio. The apes ate with gusto.

JUNE 16

Rain all day. The apes seem to enjoy it, or perhaps it is their improved diet. As for me, I am wet and miserable. My slicker is one issued me during my military service. It was the only item fit to take with me when I was discharged, and now it is in damn poor shape too.

JUNE 17

We reach South Pass City. In my anticipation I had imagined it to be a metropolis, a city of gold, but it is little more than a single muddy street flanked by log huts and hastily constructed lean-tos. Slops are emptied onto the road, and skinny dogs snapped at...
the mules as we proceeded through town. But I am delighted to have a warm bed and a tight (or only slightly leaky) roof under which to sleep.

Andrew is astonished by the apes and laughs wildly every time he looks at them. I had explained in my last letter that they would be accompanying me, but he says he never received it and wouldn’t have believed it if he had. I explained how the apes had been left in a field beside Mother’s house when the owner of a one-horse circus was shot dead in a barroom. How I coaxed them into the barn with a pan of molasses and saw in their eyes a pleading that I could not ignore.

Good news about Andrew’s claim. It is northeast of town and has been paying out as much as $12 a day. He says the mules are a godsend. Then he asked what salary the Duke and Duchess would take for hard-rock mining. And laughed uproariously.

Five of us sleep in the one-room cabin. Brother Andrew, his partner, Tim Haggarty, the apes, and myself. The apes are well-mannered and nest like spoons on a cowhide rug beside the stove.

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**JUNE 18**

To the claim with Brother A. It is in a narrow, rocky draw, surrounded by pine and juniper. The two main seams run along one side of the draw for a stretch of more than 40 feet, and then split into several smaller veins which turn back into the hillside. The bedrock is sandstone and granite. Gold mining will be an entirely new enterprise for me so I asked many questions. Gold, I find, comes not in thumb-size nuggets but embedded in quartz that must be pulverized in a noisy, steam-powered machine called a stamp mill. The resulting rock dust is then washed with quicksilver, to which the tiny fragments of ore adhere. But though the process was unfamiliar, the work itself is as back-breaking as I had expected—digging rock and hauling rock, the fortune hunter’s lot.

Inquired of the owner of the Republican Tavern about the possibility of the apes performing there on Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon. As luck would have it, he is something of an
amateur naturalist and knew as soon as he laid eyes on the Duke and Duchess that they are chimpanzees, species *Pan troglodytes*. Not only will he sponsor our performance, but he agreed to pay us a portion of the net proceeds, sure to be quite beyond what the passing of the hat generally obtains. A welcome offer, as I have today only $5.11 in ready money, a large part of my savings having been spent on the mules and wagon in Laramie City.

During the day when I work the claim, I will tether the apes nearby, in the shade of a juniper perhaps, so they may have some freedom of movement and fresh air.

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**JUNE 19**

This morning, as I was loading the wagon, two hard cases (pretty drunk it seemed and this at 7 o’clock) approached and began taunting the apes. The Duke screeched at one of them—a barrel-chested fellow with a yellow beard. In retaliation he took a length of cordwood from the stack by the fence and said, “I’ll break his goddamn noggin if he comes at me.”

At that very instant, Andrew came out the door brandishing his shotgun.

“You be on your way,” said he.

The ruffians backed off, but the taller one said, “I was at Chancellorsville. You can’t scare me.”

Not a one of us spoke for a long moment, but finally they did move up the street. I could have told him that I was at Chancellorsville too, but he was drunk and would not have appreciated the coincidence.

Since I have owned the apes, I have made a study of the responses they provoke from onlookers. Some laugh wildly, as if these man-shaped creatures are a joke, a caricature of human form and behavior. Others approach with childlike curiosity, asking question after question, as if the strangeness they see might be dispelled by words. Still others are terrified, thinking them furry demons, hunchbacked goblins with toothy grins.
JUNE 21

The vein Andrew and Haggarty have been digging for nigh on thirty days turned out to be blind. That is, it disappeared into the hillside more abruptly than anticipated. They conclude that it will not be worth our trouble to mine it out further, and so we start on the second major ledge tomorrow, hoping it will pay out. At this rate, our labors will not even cover our expenses. But miners are like poker players. They continue because all their hardships can be redeemed by a single run of luck.

Last night I dreamed of Chancellorsville. As usual it is raining heavily and I am lost in the woods. As I walk, I begin to notice that wounded men, dying men, are somehow entangled in the branches of the trees. I will not recount the dream in more detail because I fear writing it down will hasten its return.

JUNE 22

There is a certain nobility about the apes. They are exceedingly kind to one another, and their eyes sometimes reveal a melancholy thoughtfulness. This is the tenth month in which they have been in my possession, and I have begun to view them as more than mere beasts. Indeed, they often seem at least half human. Even those who see them as curiosities are moved by their portrayal of Romeo and Juliet—when the Duchess cradles her dying mate in her arms and then lays herself down beside him.

JUNE 23

Tonight we played the Republican. The evening’s playbill:

- acrobatics
- husband and wife spat

The Chimpanzees of Wyoming
dancing
Romeo and Juliet

Although the applause was gratifying, the hat was not well filled. Miners, I begin to see, are a penurious lot. Thus, the small share of the evening’s drink receipts given us by the owner is a welcome supplement. Our earnings for the evening: $6.23.

As I gazed out across the audience, every third soul seemed to bear some mark of warfare—a missing limb or scar or clotted eye. Hardly a man in South Pass City did not fight in some great battle—at Chancellorsville or Chickamauga or Antietam or Lookout Mt. Andrew and I started off in the same unit, two knot-headed farm boys from Missouri. Then we were separated and I did not lay eyes on him for two and a half years.

Occasionally, a fight erupts at one of the mining camps over old animosities, Blue and Gray. But mostly we seem to do our best to forget. Some of the men from the South we call “galvanized Yankees” because they have so quickly and completely shed their former allegiances. But we have all been galvanized.

JUNE 25

The apes have been stolen.

Early this morning, I tethered them at the claim, just as planned. When I returned to visit before midday, they had vanished. Andrew insisted they must have escaped, but I know they could not have untied the ropes. If they chewed through them, fragments would have been left behind. Still, we searched up and down the surrounding hills until nightfall, but to no avail. Tonight I discovered that the two men who harassed the Duke and Duchess on the street on Tuesday have left town. I am convinced they have robbed me. I will set out to hunt them down tomorrow. Andrew cannot accompany me because he does not have complete faith in his partner, Haggarty, and fears losing his claim. So I will go alone.
JUNE 26

Followed the trail south, but a party heading in the opposite direction said I was the first soul they'd met all day. Turned back. I am riding a small gray mare belonging to the stable smithy, having left the larger of the two mules at the livery as collateral. I carry a carbine rifle belonging to Andrew which I hope I will not have to use.

Late this afternoon, went a little way north toward the Wind River Mountains following a recommendation from Andrew, based upon intelligence gathered from other miners. I should have listened to him in the beginning. It has been unseasonably cold and I am sore with rheumatism. I do not believe I am cut out for tracking desperadoes.

JUNE 27

Early today I found the remains of a recently used camp. I do not have evidence that it was the thieves but see no other option than to follow this trail farther.

Whenever I sit beside a fire in the darkness, I am carried back to the nights before battle when we would stay up until dawn, made sleepless by fear and excitement. Then the thunder of the cannons would commence and the horses would start to stomp and moan and I would wish for my mother and father, using the prayers I learned as a boy. I think I am somewhat like a father to the apes. I know they are not Christian and cannot pray, but I hope they are now remembering me and can take some comfort in those memories.

How does a beast think? What causes it happiness and what causes it pain?
JUNE 28

At last today I am on the trail of the thieves. Early this morning, I encountered two trappers coming down from the high country. Yes, they said, they had indeed seen the very robbers, one on horseback and the other driving a buckboard wagon on which was lashed a large crate covered with tarpaulins. "Pigs," the trappers were told when they inquired about the nature of the cargo. They estimate I am only a few hours behind. It occurs to me that I do not know which army the man with the yellow beard fought with at Chancellorsville.

Now, as I write by the firelight and wait for the morning when I can take up my pursuit, my heart swells with compassion for the apes. Perhaps they are being beaten, or starved, or, even if not, they must be terrified to travel all day in darkness, hearing only strange voices. They have the minds of small children and cannot understand.

JUNE 29

Tonight I am almost too tired to write. Just after sunrise, I glimpsed the outlaws on a high plateau, perhaps a mile distant. Certain I could overtake their slow wagon, I spurred the little gray onward but lost them where the trail forked into two wooded canyons. Searched them both from end to end and then explored the steep ridge between the canyons on foot. Came near to a bear but did not shoot because I did not want to disclose my position. Only with luck did I find my way back to my horse. Tonight I build no fire and make these marks by the light of the moon.

JUNE 30

It is with great sadness that I write these lines. Today, I arose at

110  The Chimpanzees of Wyoming
first light and rode hard. Presently, I heard a single gunshot and, following the sound, spied the smoke from a campfire rising from a copse of willows by the south fork of the creek. I urged the gray to a gallop, holding the rifle in one hand, ready to fire. But they had escaped, leaving the Duke shot dead. The Duchess sat beside him on the ground, holding his hand to her face and softly keening. What I took for a campfire was their little wagon set ablaze. I reason that they intended to shoot them both and burn the bodies but heard me coming and only finished half the job.

What unnatural evil is it in men that one would do such a deed? What motive had they for stealing the apes, and what enmity for me or for them that they would in cold blood murder a husband before his very wife? I wept to see her there and then gathered her in my arms.

JULY 1

Today, we buried him. All night, she slept beside his body. At first I did not know how I would bring her back. She does not ride and walking would take several days and we haven’t the food to last. Then I hit upon the idea of a travois of the kind I have seen Indians use. I was able to build a rude version, the Duchess seated upon a pallet of pine boughs and two long poles lashed to the saddle. It is clumsy but faster than walking. From time to time she becomes agitated and peers back in the direction from which we have come.

JULY 2

Late today we reached South Pass City. Andrew is outraged at the murder of the Duke and wants to mount a posse, but I am not in favor. You have been robbed of your livelihood, says he. I do not believe the courts will provide adequate redress, I tell him. Also, violence begets violence. During our dispute, the Duchess throws herself at him, teeth bared, and it requires all my strength.

The Chimpanzees of Wyoming
to wrestle her away. Her fangs closed only on the fabric of his shirt or he would have been badly injured.

I pity mankind. We have contracted a disease of the spirit. It robs us of our compassion. It is a contagious madness. It is worse than typhoid. It compels us to murder the innocent. We bleed the grace from our everlasting souls.

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**JULY 4**

Independence Day here is a great cutting loose. Drunken miners shoot off their pistols on Main Street and explode whole cases of dynamite in the nearby mining camps. Windows shatter and horses bolt. I was awakened at dawn by an ungodly explosion that sounded as if it were in the next shack. The Duchess shrieked and cowered on her rug. I dressed and took her into the hills near Andrew's claim, away from the cacophony.

The day was warm and I napped for a time. Then fed us both a holiday picnic—tinned apricots, barley sausages, and biscuits baked by the Swede who lives in the house behind Andrew's. When we finished, we sat in the sun, and the Duchess began to frolic on a patch of grass. Presently, she executed a pirouette that is part of a dance that she often performed with the Duke. A second time she did it, now looking expectantly at me. I responded with the Duke's step, a hop and a bow, as best I could, and she followed suit. Together, we perform a little minuet on the hillside. When we are finished, we drink the juice from the apricot tin. I notice that the shooting has ceased and all that remains is the faint smell of gunpowder passing now and then on the air.
Television Lies

I remember the summer of 1961 as the summer television came to the Arapahoe Valley. I was fourteen, and I can still picture myself riding my bicycle through the quiet streets of town toward home. It is nine o'clock in the evening, but because it is early July, the sky remains blue gray with a line of rose tracing the mountaintops where the sun has only now disappeared. In the slowly diminishing light I pedal the last block, hands off the handlebars, guiding the wheels with subtle shifts of weight until I steer from the pavement and up our gravel drive. Though the day has been warm, the night chill is already arriving, cold breezes from the hills that can put a skim of ice on the dog's water dish even in the heart of summer. Just before I reach the
I leap off the bike and let it careen onto the lawn, its wheels spinning freely where it falls.

Inside, the new TV remains dark.

"It looks like we'll have to wait another day or two," my father sighs, seated forlornly on the floor before the blank screen.

"They're taking forever," I reply and collapse onto the sofa, joining him in his disappointment.

Dad places one hand on either side of the mahogany cabinet, his nose nearly touching the glass. "I wish you'd been here earlier," he says. "I got a picture for about five minutes but then it faded. I called Jack McCoy to make sure it wasn't our set and he said the same thing happened to them."

"Could you tell what show it was?"

"All I could make out was a lady and some kind of animal. It looked like it was chasing her, but the music sounded happy."

My sister Nancy is sitting at the dining room table dressing a doll from a round oatmeal box full of clothes.

"Did you see it?" I ask.

"I was with Mom at the store. By the time we got back it was off again." She sounds more disgusted than disappointed, as if she's fed up with waiting.

"So you were the lucky one," I say to Dad. He just shakes his head and gives me a weary smile.

For days we had shared in his keen anticipation. Although now the principal of Arapahoe's only high school, his early years as a science teacher had left him enamored of gadgets, especially the electronic kind. We had all seen TV before, in department stores in Denver and in the homes of relatives in Cheyenne, but it remained a marvel. Now, however, the signals for two stations from Cheyenne were to be sent to our corner of Wyoming by way of a relay transmitter on the crest of LaPrelle Rim. All across town roofs sprouted antennas, and everyone waited eagerly for the broadcast to begin.

On a summer evening such as the one I've described, I would have just returned from the drive-in restaurant where I worked frying hamburgers. Once home, the first thing I did was shower to rinse away the smell of stale grease. Then I would go out into the backyard and call across the fence to Clay Wells. Hearing my voice
through his open window, he would bound from the rectangle of light that was their kitchen screen door and into the cool darkness beneath the cottonwoods shading our adjoining yards.

Clay and I were friends by virtue of neighborhood geography. The same age, growing up backyard to backyard, it was inevitable that we should become playmates. Yet, by fourteen, I had begun to sense that we were drifting apart. That summer for the first time I had a job and wanted to spend more time with new friends from work. Still, I called for him nearly every evening because I knew he was waiting for me and because it was what we'd always done.

"Another day," Clay grumbles, joining me in the shadows. "It makes me want to kick in the picture tube."

"Somebody at work today said they're having trouble getting some parts for the transmitter. They said it could be two or three weeks."

Max, our barrel-chested Labrador retriever, appears from behind a lilac bush and butts his head gently against my knee, begging to be petted.

"I heard they're going to put a set in every room at school," says Clay. "They can just teach us by TV."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Downtown."

"That can't be true. My dad would have told me."


We are both silent for a moment. A chilly breeze curls through the yard, rattling the leaves on the trees.

"My mom won't let me turn our TV on anymore," Clay says. "She's afraid I'm going to wear out the switch."

We both laugh and groan in mock anguish. During the last year, we have begun to lack things to talk about, but at least now we are united in the painful wait for the dead screen to come to life. I scratch Max behind one black velvet ear and watch as Clay plucks a leaf from a low-hanging branch and absentmindedly tears it to pieces.

"Let's ride bikes up into the canyon tomorrow," he suggests. "We can go fishing and get away from these TVs."

"I can't, I have to go to work," I say, secretly pleased at having a legitimate excuse for avoiding a day in his company.
At the time, I had come to the smug conclusion that I was outgrowing Clay. While my interest in girls awkwardly emerged, he remained mired in BB guns and model airplanes; while I looked forward to high school sports, Clay wished only to spend his days wandering the hills, with or without a fishing pole, with me as his companion or alone.

Not that I lacked feelings of guilt. He was an only child and fatherless as well, Mitch Wells having abandoned his family when Clay was only three. More than once my father had reminded me that Clay's life was emptier than mine. So I justified my shrinking interest in our friendship by cataloging his shortcomings: he was a chronic liar, even to me, and he was unreasonably jealous of everything about me that did not include him—my job, my family, and my other friends.

Around ten, my mother would call me and I would leave Clay in his backyard, where he would occasionally remain, lying in the grass or idly tossing an old tennis ball against the fence until after eleven. I knew because I could see him from my bedroom window. How late he stayed out wouldn't have been of much interest to me except that it was when he didn't go back inside that we could expect a visit from Clay's mother, an event that always made me hold my breath and listen hard. First a knock at our front door, and then my mother's bedroom slippers shuffling down the hall from her sewing room.

"Is Clayton here?" Mrs. Wells asks, her voice pinched with worry.

"No, I'm sorry, he's not. Michael is already in bed," my mother responds, a little more curtly than seems necessary, keeping Clay's mother on the other side of the screen door and not inviting her in. Then my father appears at my mother's shoulder.

"Look in your backyard. I think the boys were out there earlier."

"Perhaps you're right," she says, "but you'd better check on your boy again. I think they both may have slipped out."

Then the door thumps shut, and I hear my mother's footsteps pass once more.
Every small town has its characters, two or three residents who are roundly recognized as odd or even crazy but who (unlike the masses of the lost in cities) are accepted as part of the weave of small town life. Clay’s mother was one of these. No doubt she needed more help than she was given—mental health services in towns like Arapahoe are almost nonexistent even today—but she lived as coherently as most, holding a cashier’s job at the grocery store, caring for her home, raising her son.

Lilly Wells’s late night visits in search of Clay were not the only way in which her condition manifested itself. Other times, she arrived to report some impossible but minor crime. “I’ve lost my yellow sleeveless blouse,” she would say, pointing one sharp finger accusingly at my mother’s nose. “I don’t suppose it’s in your closet.” Or, “I’ve seen your car parked in the alley. Stop your surveillance.” Two or three times she called the police, the officers going first to her house and then calling on my parents, who spoke with them in hushed tones at the foot of our driveway. I even recall a morning she appeared wearing an old pair of plastic, horn-rimmed glasses.

“Are your eyes bothering you, Lilly?” my father asked, trying to be patient but in a hurry to back his car out of the garage and leave for work.

“Confidentially,” she muttered, “they protect me from the flames.”

Her visits were always brief and harmless, but they never failed to leave me uneasy. I think I was afraid that the slightest shift in whatever it was that caused her spells might bring about episodes even stranger and more severe. As close as I was to Clay, however, I never asked him about his mother’s behavior, sensing from an early age that such questions were out of bounds. It wasn’t difficult to separate Clay’s mother’s visits from our daily life. Once she had said her piece, she would return home and not appear on our doorstep again for weeks. In the interim, she would seem almost ominously untroubled, waving cheerfully from her garden, where she spent Saturday mornings on her knees in pastel pants harvesting lettuce, or coming through the back gate with a bone for our dog.

If anyone took offense, it was my mother, who sometimes hissed about Lilly’s “condition” and encouraged my father to look
at the new brick houses with double garages being built on the plains east of town—or at least to build a higher back fence without a gate leading to Clay's yard.

One subtle but ever-present sign that Clay's mother was viewed as different from other adults in the neighborhood was the way my parents always called her "Lilly." Never Mrs. Wells, but "poor Lilly" or "that Lilly" or just "Lilly" while shaking their heads, even in front of Nancy and me. "The Canfields" lived next door and "the Wagners" lived across the street, but over the back fence lived "Lilly and Clay." I could hear the pity and condescension in their voices, but I liked her name. It fit. Pale, ethereal, otherworldly Lilly. But of course my father wouldn't have me using it. I always said "Mrs. Wells" or "Clay's mom" when I spoke.

I sometimes wondered what relationship Clay's lies had to his mother's behavior. At first glance, it seemed as though he had inherited the trait, a propensity for disregarding reality encoded in his genes like the sandy hair and blue gray eyes they shared. But it wasn't difficult to see that Lilly Wells's delusions were nothing like Clay's self-serving inventions. Clay lied to one-up me ("my mom is teaching me to drive"), to enliven a story ("when the Conoco station burned down the firemen found the bones of a kid in the ashes"), or for no reason at all ("we found a tarantula in our garage"). But his mother had no car, only Clay had heard about the child's bones, and tarantulas didn't live within a thousand miles of Arapahoe. At times I would become so frustrated that I'd demand proof. Once, when I told him my family was going to California to visit relatives, he said he'd already been there. I ran to Lilly and asked if it was true. When she said no, Clay denied having ever made the claim.

"I only said I wish I could go," he said.

Two days after I rejected Clay's fishing invitation, he rode his bicycle up to the drive-in, fishing pole balanced across the handlebars, and waited at the picnic table under our swaybacked aluminum awning for me to appear.

"Any luck?" I asked, motioning to the canvas creel slung from
his shoulder.

"They’re biting like crazy," he said, "but I just kept two." He lifted the flap to reveal a pair of medium-size trout, their milky eyes like plastic shirt buttons. "You should have come," he added. "I was just walking along the river when out of the willows comes the biggest bull elk I’ve ever seen. Looked right at me and then disappeared into the trees."

That he’d seen such a thing was perfectly possible, but I was in no mood to believe him. To keep myself from getting angry, I went inside and got him a free lime drink and changed the subject as I gave it to him.

"We started getting TV Guide. If it would come on tonight, we could watch Wagon Train."

"Who cares about TV," he snapped, turning suddenly cross. "I think it’ll be a waste of time. I don’t even want it anymore."

I did not call out to him for several nights after that. One minute he was lying (I was sure he hadn’t seen the elk, not that close to town) and the next, being unaccountably quarrelsome, turning his back on one of our last shared interests. Instead, I stayed at work after my shift ended, hoping one of the girls I liked would stop in, or I simply went home and passed the evening listening to music on the radio in my room.

When I hadn’t been out in the backyard for over a week, my father asked why. "I saw Clay out there by himself and wondered what was going on," he said.

"We aren’t getting along."

"You guys have been friends for too many years to stop now," he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Why don’t you give him another chance."

I gave him a skeptical look and then slipped past him and went out the door. It was already dark, but I could see Clay flipping a jackknife in the air and watching it stick in the ground, the silver blade reflecting little patches of porchlight or moonlight as it fell.

"Hey there, what’s new?" I asked lamely.

"I’m seeing how many times in a row I can stick it in the dirt. My record is five."

Neither of us spoke as I watched him throw it twice more.

"I’m sorry I haven’t been around lately," I said. "I’ve had to work overtime. They’ve been shorthanded."

*Television Lies*
"I thought you were inside watching TV."
"You bet," I said. "Watching a blank screen."

Clay stopped throwing the knife and became silent, standing back in the shadow of the tree so that I could see only his silhouette.

"If it was on tonight, we could watch Rawhide or Route 66," I said, trying to draw him into a conversation.

"Our TV started working three days ago. I thought yours had too," he said flatly. Then he pulled the knife from the ground and came out of the darkness to meet me at the fence.

"That can't be. What do you mean?"

"Just one station. Channel two. My mom said she didn't think other people were getting it yet, but I didn't believe her. I've watched Danny Thomas and Have Gun Will Travel and a bunch of cartoons." He paused as though trying to recall other programs he'd seen. "Not Rawhide," he said, shaking his head. "That must be on another station."

I knew at once he was not lying, not this time. The story was too audacious. Still more revealing was the look on his face, telling me that he thought we'd been getting the signal too.

"You've got to promise not to tell anybody," he said, his blue eyes opening wide. "Maybe we aren't supposed to be getting it yet."

For some reason I reacted as if this was just one more of his lies. Maybe I was jealous, or maybe I simply didn't want to be on his side.

"Who am I going to tell? You're such a liar. Let's go inside right now and turn it on. Let's see you prove it."

"I would but my mom said to keep it a secret. Can't you just believe me?"

"Why should I? Go back inside with your mom and watch your wonderful TV."

"I'm not lying," he said, pleading. "Why don't you like me anymore?" Then his eyes filled with tears and he ran back toward his house. I gasped, noticing he was carrying the open knife, but he made it to the door without falling on it.

Back inside I found my father sitting at the kitchen table balancing his checking account. I told him what Clay had said, hoping that it would serve as evidence of Clay's poor character but
also seeking confirmation that what he'd said couldn't possibly be true.

"Did Lilly tell you that?" he asked.

"Clay."

He put down his pen and sighed.

"It can't be. I mean, I suppose it's possible, but it's highly unlikely. You know how late at night you can get radio stations from far away. But the picture would be fuzzy, and I doubt it would stay tuned in long enough to watch even one program."

"Like the lady and the animal you saw the other night."

"Exactly." He glanced at my mother, who had appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"It sounds like Lilly," she said.

"Maybe I'll go over tomorrow and see how she's doing," said Dad. "Maybe she's having problems again."

Later that night, I lay in bed contemplating Clay and his working TV. Sitting up, I looked out the window at the Wells's house. The lights were still on in their living room, so I dressed quietly and crept down the hall and through the kitchen to the back door. My mother and sister had gone to bed, but I could hear the rustle of newsprint coming from where my father sat in his easy chair turning the pages of the paper. Once outside, I ran to the fence in a crouch, like a soldier on night maneuvers. Quickly scaling it, I fell onto my hands and knees in the cool grass and then crawled until I could conceal myself in the fan of lilacs that flanked their living room windows. There, through a narrow gap in the curtains, I saw Clay and his mother held in rapt attention by the image of a single horseman galloping across the screen. A dim lamp was on in the corner, but their faces were lit by the blue white glow of the miraculous TV.

I had to stand on tiptoe, fingers hooked on the window sill, nose nearly touching the pane, but I wasn't afraid they would discover me, so intent was their gaze. I hung there for nearly an hour, through a gunfight and a newscast, through car commercials and cigarette commercials, and not once did they leave their seats. They were still watching when I stole back to bed.

Early the next morning I returned to Clay's house and knocked on the door. I wanted to see their TV up close, to try to discover
what accident, what mechanism, what magic made their set work while all the others in Arapahoe remained dark. I was sorry I'd called him a liar, but that seemed unimportant compared to my need to see his television. Perhaps, I thought, I could learn how to bring our TV to life as well.

Lilly answered the door, smiling brightly. She called Clay and said, "You've been awfully busy with work this summer, haven't you? Clay certainly misses your company."

Then Clay appeared, looking sleepy, and we went outside and stood in the morning sun next to the garage.

"What do you want?" he asked sullenly, his mouth turning down in a childish pout.

"I'm sorry about last night," I said, wanting to move on to more interesting business. "It's just hard to believe your TV works when ours doesn't. When nobody's does."

He didn't speak and wouldn't let his eyes meet mine. His hands were thrust into the back pockets of his jeans as he toed a tuft of grass with his sneaker.

"Suppose I'd told you the same thing," I said. "Would you have believed me?"

He seemed resolved to be angry until an enormous yawn overcame him and we both laughed.

"Come on," he said. "I'll show you."

I followed him back inside, but we stopped in the kitchen, where he pulled a chair out from the table. "Sit here," he ordered and then disappeared down the hall. I leaned forward, propping my elbows next to a half-empty cereal bowl, and strained to listen until I thought I could hear the voices and music of TV but reminded myself that it could just as well be the radio. And then I heard Clay and his mother talking in anxious whispers, a hushed argument at the end of the hall.

When Clay finally reappeared, he motioned me dramatically into the living room, where I found their TV on, tuned to a daytime game show. The MC chatted cheerfully with his contestants, but Lilly stood by looking uneasy, her troubled expression holding me by the door.

"Channel two," she said when I'd watched for a few minutes. "The picture is very clear."

"Very clear," I agreed, transfixed by what I was seeing.
“We don’t know why it’s happening,” Clay said. “It’s not even one of the Cheyenne stations. It’s WBBM from Chicago. Maybe our antenna’s just pointing in the right direction.”

I continued watching, but from the corner of my eye I could see that Clay and Lilly were looking not at the television screen but at me.

“What do you think?” Clay asked.

“It’s fantastic. I can’t believe it.”

“There’s a baseball game on tomorrow. Want to come over and watch?”

“Well, sure,” I said, but the words had barely left my mouth when Lilly leapt in front of the set and switched it off. She looked like she did when she made one of her late-night visits to our house, her eyes roaming the room distractedly, her small hands wringing one another, scrubbing her knuckles red.

“That’s enough,” she snapped. “It will wear out. I’m not even sure we should use ours until everyone else’s is working. It’s a lovely day, and you two should be out in the sun.”

Clay uttered a word of protest, but she shushed him with a wave of her hand and herded us briskly back outside.

“Chicago,” I said, still amazed, after the door had slammed behind us.

Clay smiled shyly. I could see that he was overflowing with pride. He had conferred a great honor upon me by allowing me to see their TV.

“I think it scares my mom,” he said. “I had to promise her you would keep it a secret. She’s afraid everybody in town will want to come over and watch.”

On my way to work that afternoon, I nearly drove my bike off the road as I scanned the rooftops of houses, trying to see which direction their antennas were turned.

The next day my friendship with Clay Wells ended. If I felt any remorse, it was mostly because the end hadn’t come on my terms.

I slept late that morning. The night before I had called to Clay from the fence and waited, but he never came. I could picture him, watching whatever was on WBBM-TV, his feet resting on
the coffee table, savoring each new program like a succulent sweet. For a moment the lilacs beckoned, but it didn’t seem worth the trouble now that I knew what I’d see. I went to my bedroom and fell asleep, wondering if it was possible to watch TV all night long.

When I awoke, it was after nine, and Dad had already gone to see Mrs. Wells. As I stood in the kitchen making toast, I looked through the window above the sink and saw him just leaving their yard. I hadn’t forgotten his promise to investigate, but somehow I thought he’d confer with me again first. He came in the back door, said good morning, and poured a cup of coffee from the electric pot on the counter.

“Well, I don’t think Clay’s getting any more TV than we are,” he said.

I let out the breath I’d been holding and sat down at the table.

“When I went over there just now, she had their set covered up with an old fringed tablecloth. Knickknacks all over the top. They’re using it for an end table, believe it or not.”

“She’s afraid Clay is going to wear out the switch.”

He pulled a chair back and sat down across from me as I continued. “I should have talked to you before you went over. I made Clay turn it on yesterday. It was as blank as ours.”

“So this is another one of Clay’s, uh . . .” He paused, being the kind of man who thought “liar” was among the worst things you could call someone. “Of Clay’s inventions,” he said at last, clearly not satisfied with that word either. “At least Lilly’s okay,” he added. “TV is just the kind of thing she could get confused about. She seems to be all right until there’s some kind of interruption in her routine.”

It was the first time he’d ever spoken directly to me about her spells.

“Why do you think . . . why does she . . . ?” I stammered, feeling that I was finally being invited into an adult discussion about Mrs. Wells rather than being dealt with as a kid who wasn’t old enough to understand. But just then Nancy padded into the kitchen in her yellow pajamas, sleepily rubbing one eye with the heel of her hand.

“What’s for breakfast,” she muttered.

“They’re good neighbors all the same,” said my father, his tone
of intimacy having vanished with Nancy's arrival.

While he poured her a glass of orange juice, I put on my shoes and left for Clay's house, pleased with myself for having done my part to preserve our secret. We were going to watch a baseball game today, and I couldn't wait. But when I reached the porch, Clay appeared suddenly and held the door closed from inside, glaring at me furiously through the sagging screen.

"You promised not to tell anybody," he said. "And then you send your dad over here to check on us."

"He didn't find anything. Besides, what difference would it have made if he had?"

I gave the door handle a sharp tug but he would let go. Then Lilly came into view behind him. She looked stricken, her eyes moist and fearful.

"Let him in," she said.

We all stood there for a moment, but at last Clay released his grip. I pulled the door to me and slipped inside.

"I'm sorry," I said. "When I told my dad about your TV, I hadn't seen it yet. I thought you were lying."

"I didn't want Clay to tell anyone," said Mrs. Wells. "It's as much his fault as it is yours." Then she put her hand on his shoulder and gently squeezed, taking the sting out of her admonition.

"Dad didn't see a thing. I promise not to talk to anyone else."

Mrs. Wells looked at me, and I could tell by her expression that she was trying to decide what to say. Trying to decide, it seemed, whether I was friend or foe. At last she spoke.

"I know how I am sometimes," she said. "If people were to hear about this, they'd laugh themselves silly. It would be one more story about poor Lilly Wells. The stories get back to us you know."

Clay was shaking his head, and, as his mother spoke, his hand flew toward her mouth as if to cover it.

"Stop it. You shouldn't be saying this to him. It's time for him to go home."

But Mrs. Wells just took his outstretched hand and held it to her face.

"I don't have the slightest idea why we're getting channel two," she said, "but it might be gone tomorrow. Then how would I prove it really happened? It's better if nobody knows."
Within a week television did come to the rest of the Arapahoe Valley, channel seven and then channel ten, both from Cheyenne as promised. Hidden in a fold of the Rocky Mountains, the silver antennas of Arapahoe gleamed in the sunlight, almost visibly quivering as they began to snatch signals out of the air.

The first night my father whooped and hooted and gathered us all ceremoniously before the screen. For the next two days, he switched channels or adjusted the tuning knob so frequently that we saw only brief fragments of any show. Thereafter, I stayed inside evenings, fastened to the floor in front of the set. By the time the novelty started to wear off, school was about to begin.

On the few occasions I saw Clay, he was distant, taking care to keep his eyes from meeting mine, both of us saying so little that our already weak conversations faltered and died. When he was in their yard he would hurry back inside the moment he saw me step out our door. And when I finally risked asking him about channel two, he just shrugged and said it had disappeared the same day the new channels went on the air.

Only once after that summer did the subject of TV come up between us. It was on an afternoon in October of that year, just as the geography class we were both taking was about to begin. I was seated three rows away from Clay when I heard a girl next to him exclaim, "He says he got TV before the rest of us. He says he was watching it back in June." She laughed incredulously and tossed her long hair, turning to see if others were listening.

"Where'd it come from, Mars?" asked a boy in the back row. Everyone was silent for a moment, awaiting some response from Clay, but I spoke instead.

"That's not true," I said. "I live next door to him, and he got it the same day everybody else did. The day they turned the transmitter on."

The teacher came in the room then and class commenced. I looked over at Clay and saw that he was furiously gripping the edges of his desktop, his muscles trembling, his eyes fixed on the yellow shirt of the boy in front of him. From that day on we
stopped even nodding to one another in the hall or waving half-heartedly when we passed on the street.

My family did finally move to the development east of town, not to escape Lilly Wells but because my father had been promoted to the superintendent’s office, where he made more money. Clay and his mother moved as well, halfway through our senior year in high school. They went to a town in the northern part of the state for reasons I never learned. I’ve since wondered if whoever bought our house lacked the sympathy for Lilly my father had and drove them away.

Now, twenty years later, I’m surprised at how often I think about them. It happens in the evening after dinner when I take a walk and notice a TV on in every house. Or when my five-year-old daughter turns our set on and off and then on again and I worry she’ll wear out the switch. When I visit my parents in Arapahoe I can’t pass the still-vacant lot where that Conoco station burned down without thinking of the kid’s bones. And when a fellow I work with tells me in a hushed voice about “mental problems” his brother-in-law is having, I immediately picture Lilly standing outside beneath our porch light, telling my mother she’d better check to see if I’m still in my bed.
The Iowa Short Fiction Award and John Simmons Short Fiction Award Winners

1996
Hints of His Mortality, David Borofka
Judge: Oscar Hijuelos

1996
Western Electric, Don Zancanella
Judge: Oscar Hijuelos

1995
Listening to Mozart, Charles Wyatt
Judge: Ethan Canin

1995
May You Live in Interesting Times, Tereze Glück
Judge: Ethan Canin

1994
The Good Doctor, Susan Onthank Mates
Judge: Joy Williams

1994
Igloo among Palms, Rod Val Moore
Judge: Joy Williams

1993
Happiness, Ann Harleman
Judge: Francine Prose

1993
Macauley’s Thumb, Lex Williford
Judge: Francine Prose

1992
Where Love Leaves Us, Renée Manfredi
Judge: Francine Prose

1992
Imaginary Men, Enid Shomer
Judge: James Salter

1991
The Ant Generator, Elizabeth Harris
Judge: Marilynne Robinson

1991
Traps, Sondra Spatt Olsen
Judge: Marilynne Robinson

1990
A Hole in the Language, Marly Swick
Judge: Jayne Anne Phillips

1989
Lent: The Slow Fast, Starkey Flythe, Jr.
Judge: Gail Godwin

1989
Line of Fall, Miles Wilson
Judge: Gail Godwin

1988
The Long White, Sharon Dilworth
Judge: Robert Stone

1988
The Venus Tree, Michael Pritchett
Judge: Robert Stone

1987
Fruit of the Month, Abby Frucht
Judge: Alison Lurie
1987  
*Star Game,* Lucia Nevai  
Judge: Alison Lurie

1986  
*Eminent Domain,* Dan O'Brien  
Judge: Iowa Writers' Workshop

1986  
*Resurrectionists,*  
Russell Working  
Judge: Tobias Wolff

1985  
*Dancing in the Movies,*  
Robert Boswell  
Judge: Tim O'Brien

1984  
*Old Wives' Tales,* Susan M. Dodd  
Judge: Frederick Busch

1983  
*Heart Failure,* Ivy Goodman  
Judge: Alice Adams

1982  
*Shiny Objects,* Dianne Benedict  
Judge: Raymond Carver

1981  
*The Phototropic Woman,*  
Annabel Thomas  
Judge: Doris Grumbach

1980  
*Impossible Appetites,*  
James Fetler  
Judge: Francine du Plessix Gray

1979  
*Fly Away Home,* Mary Hedin  
Judge: John Gardner

1978  
*A Nest of Hooks,* Lon Otto  
Judge: Stanley Elkin

1977  
*The Women in the Mirror,*  
Pat Carr  
Judge: Leonard Michaels

1976  
*The Black Velvet Girl,*  
C. E. Poverman  
Judge: Donald Barthelme

1975  
*Harry Belten and the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto,*  
Barry Targan  
Judge: George P. Garrett

1974  
*After the First Death There Is No Other,* Natalie L. M. Petesch  
Judge: William H. Gass

1973  
*The Itinerary of Beggars,*  
H. E. Francis  
Judge: John Hawkes

1972  
*The Burning and Other Stories,*  
Jack Cady  
Judge: Joyce Carol Oates

1971  
*Old Morals, Small Continents, Darker Times,* Philip F. O'Connor  
Judge: George P. Elliott

1970  
*The Beach Umbrella,*  
Cyrus Colter  
Judges: Vance Bourjaily and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
DON ZANCAVELLA grew up in Wyoming and has lived most of his life in the Rocky Mountain West. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with his wife and two children, where he teaches at the University of New Mexico.

The Iowa Short Fiction Award and the John Simmons Short Fiction Award

The Iowa Short Fiction Award has been conducted annually by the Iowa Writers' Workshop since 1969. In 1988 the University of Iowa Press instituted the John Simmons Short Fiction Award—named after the first director of the Press—to complement the ongoing award series; this competition is also conducted by the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Serious critical consideration is guaranteed by such judges as Alison Lurie, Raymond Carver, Marilynne Robinson, Joy Williams, Ethan Canin, and Oscar Hijuelos.

Jacket photo by Kent Wood
"As a collection, Western Electric generates its necessary power as much from Don Zancanella’s affection for his landscape as from his respect for the language heard on it. This is storytelling from the wide wildness of the hinterlands, those crossroads where we’ve no place to hide from the weather and the weal and the woe of us. This is a book where history, both the lived and the imagined, is as close and as foreign as a neighbor. There’s current here, hot and dangerous and vital."

Lee Abbott, author of Living after Midnight and Dreams of Distant Lives

"Western Electric is a diverse collection of stories about a ‘new West’ which in Don Zancanella’s skilled hands is a compelling, witty, and highly amusing commentary about modern America. Though these stories are brought together in the context of a collection, there is a nice epic continuity to them and a wonderful naturalness of voice that is also precise and lyric. With a diversity of theme and character—from Laotian settlers in Wyoming to Thomas Edison in the West—these stories are at once accomplished, wise, and entertaining. For the most part this collection finds a refreshing point of view in the much-worked-over, written-about territories of the West and its literature."

Oscar Hijuelos, author of Mr. Ives’ Christmas and The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love