

**T**he wagon came out of the sun with its attendant din of iron rims turning on flinty shale, its worn silvergray fired orange by the malefic light flaring behind it, the driver disdainful of the road for the shortcut down the steep incline, erect now and sawing the lines, riding the brake onehanded until the wheels locked and skidded, then releasing it so that wagon and team and man moved in a constantly varying cacophony of shrieks and rattles and creaks and underlying it all the perpetual skirling of steel on stone.

Patton's store. A grinning man would halt the wagon with an upraised arm but it would not halt. When he noticed the quiltcovered cargo the wagon transported, he called, *What you got there, Sandy?*

The driver turned and spat and wiped his mouth and glanced back briefly but he didn't stay the wagon. *Dead folks*, he said. The wagon went on and vanished like some ghostwagon in the vaporous mist rising from the river.

Coming into Ackerman's Field the wagon and its curious freight accrued to itself a motley of children and barking dogs and a few dusty turtlebacked automobiles and such early risers as were stirring and possessed of enough curiosity to join the macabre parade to its ultimate end on the courthouse lawn.

Before he even stepped down from the wagon the man said, *Get Sheriff Bellwether out here.*

A fat man in overalls had approached the wagon. *Bellwether's done been sent for*, he said. *Who all is it, Sandy?*

The man pulled back the quilt covering with the faintest flourish, not unlike

*a nightmare magician offering up for consideration some sleightofhand.*

*Goddamn it, Sandy, that girl's half naked. Did you not have enough respect to cover her up?*

*The man they'd called Sandy spat. I ain't Fenton Breece, Hooper. All I undertook to do was bring em in. That's all the undertakin I aim to do. You want to handle em, then you cover em up.*

*The dead exhibited in the strawstrewn wagonbed. A man or the bloody remnants of one. A rawboned middleaged woman with one bare and dirty foot protruding from the makeshift shroud. A girl with hair the color and sheen of a bird's wing. About her throat an arrowhead tied to a leather thong, and the thong wound tightly into the bluelooking flesh. A boy of fourteen or fifteen and another younger yet and over all a welter of congealing blood. Aligned so and staring at the uncaring sky they are beyond any commiseration you might have for them and you'd be hard put to come up with a sin they might have committed enormous enough to have brought them to so shoddy an end.*

*The fat man in faded Duck Heads shuffled his feet awkwardly. Behind him the malign sun had burned away the last of the morning mist and the falsefront stores and tacky houses assembled themselves almost apologetically, dimensionless and makeshift props for the darker tableau that has played beyond the curtain.*

*There are some sorry son of a bitches in this world, the fat man said inadequately.*

*I believe about half of em are runnin wild in the Harrikin, Sandy said.*

*Who's runnin wild? Who done this mess, anyway?*

*God knows. Or more likely the devil. Old man Bookbinder got jumped by Granville Sutter and faced him down with a horse pistol. There's a Tyler boy lost in there wanderin around with a rifle and some story about a dead sister and Fenton Breece misburyin dead folks. Turned up at my house two or three o'clock in the morning half out of his head. Said we might ought to open some graves. I ain't much for graverobbin but after this I'd believe most anything.*

*Well, I'll be goddamned, the fat man said suddenly. I never noticed that. He pointed. A bloody mound of curly hair. A dog in there.*

*He brought out a taffycolorred dog. Some breed of terrier. The dog's eyes were open and its distended tongue as purple as a chow's. Strangest of all, the dog's ears had been pierced and it wore a gaudy pair of dimstore earrings.*

*Well, I'll be damned. I don't believe I ever seen a dog wearin earbobs.*

*Reckon why whoever it was killed the dog anyway?*

*I've thought about that some, Sandy said. I believe it was just all there was left to kill.*



They came up through the stand of cypress that shrouded the graveyard, the pickup hidden off the road in a chertpit clotted with inkblot bowers of honeysuckle. There were two of them, a young woman and a gangling youth who appeared to be younger still. A leaden rain out of the first slow days of winter had begun some time after midnight and the cypresses wept as they passed beneath them, the tools the pair slung along in their hands refracting away such light as there was and the pair pausing momentarily when the first milkwhite stones rose bleakly out of the dark. Behind and below them the church loomed, a pale outraged shape, no more, and only the impotent dead kept its watch.

The girl moved ahead amongst the gravestones with a sense of purpose but the boy hung back as if he'd had second thoughts or had other places to be. She turned a flashlight on and off again immediately though in truth she hadn't needed it.

Here, she said. This one here.

Yeah, the boy said. Rain ran out of his hair and down his face. His clothing was already soaked and you could hear the water in his boots as he walked. This is crazy as shit, he said.

This seemed so selfevident she didn't even reply. He drove the spade into the earth mounded atop the grave and leaning his weight into the work began to remound the earth in a pile next the grave. She seated herself on a

gravestone and crossing her legs at the ankles and shielding her lighter from the rain with her body lit a cigarette and smoked and watched this curious midnight shift at work. A car passed once below them snaking the curves, the lit cypresses rearing out of the windy rain and subsiding and there was a fragment of girl's laughter and a flung bottle broke on macadam. Gone in a roar of gutted mufflers and dark fell final and absolute and she could hear his breathing and the steady implacable work of the spade. She was on her third cigarette when metal scraped on metal and when it did, something she couldn't put a name to twisted in her like a knife.

The scraping ceased. Bring me the light, he said.

Come and get it.

Goddamn, can't you do anything?

I don't want to see. Come and get it.

Silence. The soft sough of the windy rain in the trees. He said something indecipherable and clambered up out of the grave all gummed with mud and his claycovered boots oversized and clownish and crossed between the stones, a grotesque figure halfcomic here in this township of the dead. He wordlessly took the light and descended again into the grave. When the spade struck the casket this time she stopped her ears with the flat of her hands but she could still hear the wrench when the lid came free.

Nothing for some time. Then he came up to the gravestone and hunkered there in the rain. There was a ragged sound to his breathing but she couldn't tell if he was crying or just out of breath.

What we thought?

Yes. Worse. The son of a bitch—

She leant forward abruptly and stopped his mouth hard with the palm of her hand and they just sat there, his dark face like rainwashed stone and his wide frightened eyes burning palely out of the dark.



On the last mild morning of an impending winter and on what was one of the last peaceful days of his life, Fenton Breece came out of his undertaking establishment and stood for a moment on the edge of his manicured lawn just breathing deeply the morning air. He looked about and there was reassurance in all he saw on this December morning in the year of our Lord nineteen-fifty-one. Past the glass sign that told in gothic script BREECE FUNERAL HOME he could see the intersection of Oak and Maple, and on opposing corners there were three churches. The Centre Church of Christ, the Cumberland Presbyterian, the First Methodist. He had stood so as a child with his father's hand clasping his own and he had no reason to doubt it would always be so.

The trees had bared and even as he stood listening to the distant sounds of commerce from the town a few last gold maple leaves drifted with the breeze. Winter was coming. He exulted in this knowledge, there was something warm and comforting about it. He'd live in his own cozy rooms, venturing out only when he had to, as comfortable as Badger from *Wind in the Willows*. He'd see few people, and most of them would not see him back, business was always good in the winter, old folks were always going to sleep and just not waking up.

Here in this land of Duck Head overalls and felt hats he was a model of sartorial elegance. He wore a fawn-colored topcoat over a tan gabardine suit with a matching vest buttoned over his wellfed belly and an offwhite shirt with a green tie of iridescent watermarked silk. He wore a brown Stetson with a rolled brim and a flat crown, and he carried an umbrella though there was no cloud in sight.

He looked at his watch. It was time for his morning coffee break. He figured he'd take it at the Bellystretcher Café this morning, and he leisurely ambled that way. Townfolk he met nodded formally to him. Sometimes if they were women who appealed to him in some way and whose death he anticipated with relish he'd tip the Stetson and watch their eyes skitter away to somewhere else and they'd hurriedly walk on.

Folks were always doing that. Their eyes would sidle away to study intently something they hadn't noticed a moment before. They had been known to cross the street to avoid meeting him. Some loathsome bird. His penguinlike waddle, some dark and unlovely bird of paradise. He'd smile his one-size-fits-all smile. That's all right, he would think. Laugh at me while you can. The last laugh is mine, for it is my stainless steel table you will lie on. The water that flushes away your blood and offal and the last perspiration you ever perspired will be charged to my bill. We'll see how you like it then when there's no one left in the round world to snigger to.

At the Bellystretcher he seated himself next to a pair of oldtimers in overalls and denim jumpers and ordered his coffee. He nodded to the two men and they gave him back little nods so distant as to barely qualify as greetings. A fierce anger perpetually ached in him but he'd learned to bank it. The living are capable of revenge the dead cannot exact. He just went back to sugaring his coffee.

He had a horror of people but he'd learned to control this too. All he had to do was imagine them naked and dead on his table with the pump humming their blood away and he'd be able to hold his own.

But on this morning one of the old men would not let him be. He kept sniffing the air ostentatiously and nudging the other oldtimer in the ribs, and after awhile he said, Somethin sure does smell sweet.

The other nodded. Flowers damn sure in bloom somewhere, he said.

Breece pretended he didn't hear him.

The man said, Somebody sure does smell good in here.

Breece turned to face him. He dreamed the old man's face ashen and slackjawed, the rheumy eyes dry and staring.

Well, it's obvious it's not you, he said conversationally. You smell like cow shit and Sloan's liniment.

It took all he had to say it. He commenced drinking his coffee though it was so hot it almost scalded his throat. The man next rose with his coffee and moved a few stools down. Breece finished his coffee and set the cup

down hard. He laid too much money on the counter and rose and went out. The door closed behind him and the small bell chimed once and ceased.

You best leave him alone, Shorty, one of the men called. He ain't just right in the head. One of these days he's going to pull out a sawedoff shotgun about a yard long and put you to sleep. Then he'll drag you by the hair of the head up the street to his parlor and embalm your dead ass.

Hell, I didn't do nothin, Shorty said. The truth shall set you free. He did smell good. Put me in mind of an old gal off Tom's Creek I used to go with.



It rained for four more nights and Tyler and his sister opened as many graves. These were nights of cold winter drizzles and sullen heavens with no one about and they felt perhaps rightly that the dark belonged to them. She seemed possessed by this folly. He'd begun to think her mad. Had begun to accept that this madness had infected him as well. For they both by now moved in a peculiar detachment from reality. A sort of outraged disbelief that such things could be.

She didn't go to work. He didn't know if she'd quit her job and he didn't ask. He didn't know if she slept during the day or whether she'd reached some curious state of grace in which she was sustained not by food and sleep but by the fixation that drove her. He would lie up and sleep in a dreamless state of exhaustion and awaken in the same position he'd held when sleep took him. He would have expected nightmares but then he came to suspect he was getting his full quota of them during his waking hours and that no more were allotted. His hands were raw with bleeding blisters from the shovel and his fingers felt permanently cupped to fit its handle.

Each day he swore was the last. Each night they'd be abroad with the tools in the bed of the old truck. It was a wide world with no shortage of graveyards, and he began to think of the earth as ripe and fecund with the dead, stick a spade anywhere and you'd strike a corpse. Nor was it lost