

Emmett

JUNE 12, 1954—The drive from Salina to Morgen was three hours, and for much of it, Emmett hadn't said a word. For the first sixty miles or so, Warden Williams had made an effort at friendly conversation. He had told a few stories about his childhood back East and asked a few questions about Emmett's on the farm. But this was the last they'd be together, and Emmett didn't see much sense in going into all of that now. So when they crossed the border from Kansas into Nebraska and the warden turned on the radio, Emmett stared out the window at the prairie, keeping his thoughts to himself.

When they were five miles south of town, Emmett pointed through the windshield.

—You take that next right. It'll be the white house about four miles down the road.

The warden slowed his car and took the turn. They drove past the McKusker place, then the Andersens' with its matching pair of large red barns. A few minutes later they could see Emmett's house standing beside a small grove of oak trees about thirty yards from the road.

To Emmett, all the houses in this part of the country looked like they'd been dropped from the sky. The Watson house just looked like it'd had a rougher landing. The roof line sagged on either side of the chimney and the window frames were slanted just enough that half the windows wouldn't quite open and the other half wouldn't quite shut. In another moment, they'd be able to see how the paint had been

shaken right off the clapboard. But when they got within a hundred feet of the driveway, the warden pulled to the side of the road.

—Emmett, he said, with his hands on the wheel, before we drive in there's something I'd like to say.

That Warden Williams had something to say didn't come as much of a surprise. When Emmett had first arrived at Salina, the warden was a Hoosier named Ackerly, who wasn't inclined to put into words a piece of advice that could be delivered more efficiently with a stick. But Warden Williams was a modern man with a master's degree and good intentions and a framed photograph of Franklin D. Roosevelt hanging behind his desk. He had notions that he'd gathered from books and experience, and he had plenty of words at his disposal to turn them into counsel.

—For some of the young men who come to Salina, he began, whatever series of events has brought them under our sphere of influence is just the beginning of a long journey through a life of trouble. They're boys who were never given much sense of right or wrong as children and who see little reason for learning it now. Whatever values or ambitions we try to instill in them will, in all likelihood, be cast aside the moment they walk out from under our gaze. Sadly, for these boys it is only a matter of time before they find themselves in the correctional facility at Topeka, or worse.

The warden turned to Emmett.

—What I'm getting at, Emmett, is that you are not one of them. We haven't known each other long, but from my time with you I can tell that that boy's death weighs heavily on your conscience. No one imagines what happened that night reflects either the spirit of malice or an expression of your character. It was the ugly side of chance. But as a civilized society, we ask that even those who have had an unintended hand in the misfortune of others pay some retribution. Of course, the payment of the retribution is in part to satisfy those who've suffered the brunt of the misfortune—like this boy's family. But we

also require that it be paid for the benefit of the young man who was the *agent* of misfortune. So that by having the opportunity to pay his debt, he too can find some solace, some sense of atonement, and thus begin the process of renewal. Do you understand me, Emmett?

—I do, sir.

—I'm glad to hear it. I know you've got your brother to care for now and the immediate future may seem daunting; but you're a bright young man and you've got your whole life ahead of you. Having paid your debt in full, I just hope you'll make the most of your liberty.

—That's what I intend to do, Warden.

And in that moment, Emmett meant it. Because he agreed with most of what the warden said. He knew in the strongest of terms that his whole life was ahead of him and he knew that he needed to care for his brother. He knew too that he had been an agent of misfortune rather than its author. But he didn't agree that his debt had been paid in full. For no matter how much chance has played a role, when by your hands you have brought another man's time on earth to its end, to prove to the Almighty that you are worthy of his mercy, that shouldn't take any less than the rest of your life.

The warden put the car in gear and turned into the Watsons'. In the clearing by the front porch were two cars—a sedan and a pickup. The warden parked beside the pickup. When he and Emmett got out of the car, a tall man with a cowboy hat in his hand came out the front door and off the porch.

—Hey there, Emmett.

—Hey, Mr. Ransom.

The warden extended his hand to the rancher.

—I'm Warden Williams. It was nice of you to take the trouble to meet us.

—It was no trouble, Warden.

—I gather you've known Emmett a long time.

—Since the day he was born.

The warden put a hand on Emmett's shoulder.

—Then I don't need to explain to you what a fine young man he is. I was just telling him in the car that having paid his debt to society, he's got his whole life ahead of him.

—He does at that, agreed Mr. Ransom.

The three men stood without speaking.

The warden had lived in the Midwest for less than a year now, but he knew from standing at the foot of other farmhouse porches that at this point in a conversation you were likely to be invited inside and offered something cool to drink; and when you received the invitation, you should be ready to accept because it would be taken as rude if you were to decline, even if you did have a three-hour drive ahead of you. But neither Emmett nor Mr. Ransom made any indication of asking the warden in.

—Well, he said after a moment, I guess I should be heading back.

Emmett and Mr. Ransom offered a final thanks to the warden, shook his hand, then watched as he climbed in his car and drove away. The warden was a quarter mile down the road when Emmett nodded toward the sedan.

—Mr. Obermeyer's?

—He's waiting in the kitchen.

—And Billy?

—I told Sally to bring him over a little later, so you and Tom can get your business done.

Emmett nodded.

—You ready to go in? asked Mr. Ransom.

—The sooner the better, said Emmett.

They found Tom Obermeyer seated at the small kitchen table. He was wearing a white shirt with short sleeves and a tie. If he was also wearing a suit coat, he must have left it in his car because it wasn't hanging on the back of the chair.

When Emmett and Mr. Ransom came through the door, they seemed to catch the banker off his guard, because he abruptly scraped back the chair, stood up, and stuck out his hand all in a single motion.

—Well, hey now, Emmett. It's good to see you.

Emmett shook the banker's hand without a reply.

Taking a look around, Emmett noted that the floor was swept, the counter clear, the sink empty, the cabinets closed. The kitchen looked cleaner than at any point in Emmett's memory.

—Here, Mr. Obermeyer said, gesturing to the table. Why don't we all sit down.

Emmett took the chair opposite the banker. Mr. Ransom remained standing, leaning his shoulder against the doorframe. On the table was a brown folder thick with papers. It was sitting just out of the banker's reach, as if it had been left there by somebody else. Mr. Obermeyer cleared his throat.

—First of all, Emmett, let me say how sorry I am about your father. He was a fine man and too young to be taken by illness.

—Thank you.

—I gather when you came for the funeral that Walter Eberstadt had a chance to sit down with you and discuss your father's estate.

—He did, said Emmett.

The banker nodded with a look of sympathetic understanding.

—Then I suspect Walter explained that three years ago your father took out a new loan on top of the old mortgage. At the time, he said it was to upgrade his equipment. In actuality, I suspect a good portion of that loan went to pay some older debts since the only new piece of farm equipment we could find on the property was the John Deere in the barn. Though I suppose that's neither here nor there.

Emmett and Mr. Ransom seemed to agree that this was neither here nor there because neither made any effort to respond. The banker cleared his throat again.

—The point I'm getting to is that in the last few years the harvest

wasn't what your father had hoped; and this year, what with your father's passing, there isn't going to be a harvest at all. So we had no choice but to call in the loan. It's an unpleasant bit of business, I know, Emmett, but I want you to understand that it was not an easy decision for the bank to make.

—I should think it would be a pretty easy decision for you to make by now, said Mr. Ransom, given how much practice you get at making it.

The banker looked to the rancher.

—Now, Ed, you know that's not fair. No bank makes a loan in hopes of foreclosing.

The banker turned back to Emmett.

—The nature of a loan is that it requires the repayment of interest and principal on a timely basis. Even so, when a client in good standing falls behind, we do what we can to make concessions. To extend terms and defer collections. Your father is a perfect example. When he began falling behind, we gave him some extra time. And when he got sick, we gave him some more. But sometimes a man's bad luck becomes too great to surmount, no matter how much time you give him.

The banker reached out his arm to lay a hand on the brown folder, finally claiming it as his own.

—We could have cleared out the property and put it up for sale a month ago, Emmett. It was well within our rights to do so. But we didn't. We waited so that you could complete your term at Salina and come home to sleep in your own bed. We wanted you to have a chance to go through the house with your brother in an unhurried fashion, to organize your personal effects. Hell, we even had the power company leave on the gas and electricity at our own expense.

—That was right kind of you, said Emmett.

Mr. Ransom grunted.

—But now that you are home, continued the banker, it's probably best for everyone involved if we see this process through to its

conclusion. As the executor of your father's estate, we'll need you to sign a few papers. And within a few weeks, I'm sorry to say, we'll need you to make arrangements for you and your brother to move out.

—If you've got something that needs signing, let's sign it.

Mr. Obermeyer took a few documents from the folder. He turned them around so that they were facing Emmett and peeled back pages, explaining the purpose of individual sections and subsections, translating the terminology, pointing to where the documents should be signed and where initialed.

—You got a pen?

Mr. Obermeyer handed Emmett his pen. Emmett signed and initialed the papers without consideration, then slid them back across the table.

—That it?

—There is one other thing, said the banker, after returning the documents safely to their folder. The car in the barn. When we did the routine inventory of the house, we couldn't find the registration or the keys.

—What do you need them for?

—The second loan your father took out wasn't for specific pieces of agricultural machinery. It was against any new piece of capital equipment purchased for the farm, and I'm afraid that extends to personal vehicles.

—Not to that car it doesn't.

—Now, Emmett . . .

—It doesn't because that piece of capital equipment isn't my father's. It's mine.

Mr. Obermeyer looked to Emmett with a mixture of skepticism and sympathy—two emotions that in Emmett's view had no business being on the same face at the same time. Emmett took his wallet from his pocket, withdrew the registration, and put it on the table.

The banker picked it up and reviewed it.

—I see that the car is in your name, Emmett, but I'm afraid that if it was purchased by your father on your behalf . . .

—It was not.

The banker looked to Mr. Ransom for support. Finding none, he turned back to Emmett.

—For two summers, said Emmett, I worked for Mr. Schulte to earn the money to buy that car. I framed houses. Shingled roofs. Repaired porches. As a matter of fact, I even helped install those new cabinets in your kitchen. If you don't believe me, you're welcome to go ask Mr. Schulte. But either way, you're not touching that car.

Mr. Obermeyer frowned. But when Emmett held out his hand for the registration, the banker returned it without protest. And when he left with his folder, he wasn't particularly surprised that neither Emmett nor Mr. Ransom bothered seeing him to the door.

When the banker was gone, Mr. Ransom went outside to wait for Sally and Billy, leaving Emmett to walk the house on his own.

Like the kitchen, Emmett found the front room tidier than usual—with the pillows propped in the corners of the couch, the magazines in a neat little stack on the coffee table, and the top of his father's desk rolled down. Upstairs in Billy's room, the bed was made, the collections of bottle caps and bird feathers were neatly arranged on their shelves, and one of the windows had been opened to let in some air. A window must have been opened on the other side of the hall too because there was enough of a draft to stir the fighter planes hanging over Billy's bed: replicas of a Spitfire, a Warhawk, and a Thunderbolt.

Emmett smiled softly to see them.

He had built those planes when he was about Billy's age. His mother had given him the kits back in 1943 when all Emmett or his friends could talk about were the battles unfolding in the European and Pacific

theaters, about Patton at the head of the Seventh Army storming the beaches of Sicily, and Pappy Boyington's Black Sheep Squadron taunting the enemy over the Solomon Sea. Emmett had assembled the models on the kitchen table with all the precision of an engineer. He had painted the insignias and serial numbers on the fuselages with four tiny bottles of enamel paint and a fine-haired brush. When they were done, Emmett had lined them up on his bureau in a diagonal row just like they would have been on the deck of a carrier.

From the age of four, Billy had admired them. Sometimes when Emmett would come home from school, he would find Billy standing on a chair beside the bureau talking to himself in the language of a fighter pilot. So when Billy turned six, Emmett and his father hung the planes from the ceiling over Billy's bed as a birthday surprise.

Emmett continued down the hall to his father's room, where he found the same evidence of tidiness: the bed made, the photographs on the bureau dusted, the curtains tied back with a bow. Emmett approached one of the windows and looked out across his father's land. After being plowed and planted for twenty years, the fields had been left untended for just one season and you could already see the tireless advance of nature—the sagebrush and ragwort and ironweed establishing themselves among the prairie grasses. If left untended for another few years, you wouldn't be able to tell that anyone had ever farmed these acres at all.

Emmett shook his head.

Bad luck . . .

That's what Mr. Obermeyer had called it. A bad luck that was too great to surmount. And the banker was right, up to a point. When it came to bad luck, Emmett's father always had plenty to spare. But Emmett knew that wasn't the extent of the matter. For when it came to bad judgment, Charlie Watson had plenty of that to spare too.

Emmett's father had come to Nebraska from Boston in 1933 with

his new wife and a dream of working the land. Over the next two decades, he had tried to grow wheat, corn, soy, even alfalfa, and had been thwarted at every turn. If the crop he chose to grow one year needed plenty of water, there were two years of drought. When he switched to a crop that needed plenty of sun, thunderclouds gathered in the west. Nature is merciless, you might counter. It's indifferent and unpredictable. But a farmer who changes the crop he's growing every two or three years? Even as a boy, Emmett knew that was a sign of a man who didn't know what he was doing.

Out behind the barn was a special piece of equipment imported from Germany for the harvesting of sorghum. At one point deemed essential, it was soon unnecessary, and now no longer of use—because his father hadn't had the good sense to resell it once he'd stopped growing sorghum. He just let it sit in the clearing behind the barn exposed to the rain and snow. When Emmett was Billy's age and his friends would come over from the neighboring farms to play—boys who, at the height of the war, were eager to climb on any piece of machinery and pretend it was a tank—they wouldn't even set foot on the harvester, sensing instinctively that it was some kind of ill omen, that within its rusting hulk was a legacy of failure that one should steer clear of whether from politeness or self-preservation.

So one evening when Emmett was fifteen and the school year nearly over, he had ridden his bike into town, knocked on Mr. Schulte's door, and asked for a job. Mr. Schulte was so bemused by Emmett's request that he sat him down at the dinner table and had him brought a slice of pie. Then he asked Emmett why on earth a boy who was raised on a farm would want to spend his summer pounding nails.

It wasn't because Emmett knew Mr. Schulte to be a friendly man, or because he lived in one of the nicest houses in town. Emmett went to Mr. Schulte because he figured that no matter what happened, a carpenter would always have work. No matter how well you build

them, houses run down. Hinges loosen, floorboards wear, roof seams separate. All you had to do was stroll through the Watson house to witness the myriad ways in which time can take its toll on a homestead.

In the months of summer, there were nights marked by the roll of thunder or the whistle of an arid wind on which Emmett could hear his father stirring in the next room, unable to sleep—and not without reason. Because a farmer with a mortgage was like a man walking on the railing of a bridge with his arms outstretched and his eyes closed. It was a way of life in which the difference between abundance and ruin could be measured by a few inches of rain or a few nights of frost.

But a carpenter didn't lie awake at night worrying about the weather. He *welcomed* the extremes of nature. He welcomed the blizzards and downpours and tornadoes. He welcomed the onset of mold and the onslaughts of insects. These were the natural forces that slowly but inevitably undermined the integrity of a house, weakening its foundations, rotting its beams, and wilting its plaster.

Emmett didn't say all of this when Mr. Schulte asked his question. Putting his fork down, he simply replied:

—The way I figure it, Mr. Schulte, it was Job who had the oxen, and Noah who had the hammer.

Mr. Schulte gave a laugh and hired Emmett on the spot.

For most of the farmers in the county, if their eldest came home one night with news that he'd taken a job with a carpenter, they would have given him a talking-to he wouldn't soon forget. Then, for good measure, they would have driven over to the carpenter's house and given him a few words—a few words to remember the next time he had the inclination to interfere with the upbringing of another man's son.

But the night Emmett came home and told his father he had secured a job with Mr. Schulte, his father hadn't grown angry. He had listened carefully. After a moment of reflection, he said that Mr. Schulte

was a good man and carpentry a useful skill. And on the first day of summer, he made Emmett a hearty breakfast and packed him a lunch, then sent him off with his blessing to another man's trade.

And maybe that was a sign of bad judgment too.

When Emmett came back downstairs, he found Mr. Ransom sitting on the porch steps with his forearms on his knees and his hat still in his hand. Emmett sat beside him and they both looked out across the unplanted fields. Half a mile in the distance, you could just make out the fence that marked the beginning of the older man's ranch. By Emmett's last accounting, Mr. Ransom had over nine hundred head of cattle and eight men in his employ.

—I want to thank you for taking in Billy, Emmett said.

—Taking in Billy was the least we could do. Besides, you can imagine how much it pleased Sally. She's about had it with keeping house for me, but caring for your brother's another matter. We've *all* been eating better since Billy arrived.

Emmett smiled.

—Just the same. It made a big difference to Billy; and it was a comfort to me knowing that he was in your home.

Mr. Ransom nodded, accepting the younger man's expression of gratitude.

—Warden Williams seems like a good man, he said after a moment.

—He is a good man.

—Doesn't seem like a Kansan. . . .

—No. He grew up in Philadelphia.

Mr. Ransom turned his hat in his hand. Emmett could tell that something was on his neighbor's mind. He was trying to decide how to say it, or whether to say it. Or maybe he was just trying to pick the right moment to say it. But sometimes the moment is picked for you, as when a cloud of dust a mile up the road signaled his daughter's approach.

—Emmett, he began, Warden Williams was right to say that you've paid your debt—as far as society is concerned. But this here's a small town, a lot smaller than Philadelphia, and not everyone in Morgen is going to see it the way the warden does.

—You're talking about the Snyders.

—I am talking about the Snyders, Emmett, but not just the Snyders. They've got cousins in this county. They've got neighbors and old family friends. They've got people they do business with and members of their congregation. We all know that whatever trouble Jimmy Snyder happened to find himself in was generally of Jimmy's own making. In his seventeen years, he was the engineer of a lifetime of shit piles. But that don't make any difference to his brothers. Especially after they lost Joe, Jr., in the war. If they were none too pleased that you got just eighteen months in Salina, they were in a state of righteous fury when they learned you'd be let out a few months early because of your father's passing. They're likely to make you feel the brunt of that fury as much and as often as they can. So while you do have your whole life in front of you, or rather, because you have your whole life in front of you, you may want to consider starting it somewhere other than here.

—You've no need to worry about that, said Emmett. Forty-eight hours from now, I don't expect Billy and me to be in Nebraska.

Mr. Ransom nodded.

—Since your father didn't leave much behind, I'd like to give you two a little something to help you get started.

—I couldn't take your money, Mr. Ransom. You've done enough for us already.

—Then consider it a loan. You can pay it back once you get yourself situated.

—For the time being, observed Emmett, I think the Watsons have had their fill of loans.

Mr. Ransom smiled and nodded. Then he stood and put his hat on his head as the old pickup they called Betty roared into the driveway

with Sally behind the wheel and Billy in the passenger seat. Before she had skidded to a stop with a backfire out of the exhaust, Billy was opening the door and jumping to the ground. Wearing a canvas backpack that reached from his shoulders to the seat of his pants, he ran right past Mr. Ransom and wrapped his arms around Emmett's waist.

Emmett got down on his haunches so he could hug his little brother back.

Sally was approaching now in a brightly colored Sunday dress with a baking dish in her hands and a smile on her face.

Mr. Ransom took in the dress and the smile, philosophically.

—Well now, she said, look who's here. Don't you squeeze the life out of him, Billy Watson.

Emmett stood and put a hand on his brother's head.

—Hello, Sally.

As was her habit when nervous, Sally got right down to business.

—The house has been swept and all the beds have been made and there's fresh soap in the bathroom, and butter, milk, and eggs in the icebox.

—Thank you, said Emmett.

—I suggested the two of you should join us for supper, but Billy insisted you have your first meal at home. But seeing as you're just back, I made the two of you a casserole.

—You didn't have to go to all that trouble, Sally.

—Trouble or not, here it is. All you have to do is put it in the oven at 350° for forty-five minutes.

As Emmett took the casserole in hand, Sally shook her head.

—I should have written that down.

—I think Emmett will be able to remember the instructions, said Mr. Ransom. And if he doesn't, Billy surely will.

—You put it in the oven at 350° for forty-five minutes, said Billy.

Mr. Ransom turned to his daughter.

—I'm sure these boys are eager to catch up, and we've got some things to see to at home.

—I'll just go in for a minute to make sure that everything—

—Sally, Mr. Ransom said in a manner that broached no dissent.

Sally pointed at Billy and smiled.

—You be good, little one.

Emmett and Billy watched as the Ransoms climbed into their trucks and drove back up the road. Then Billy turned to Emmett and hugged him again.

—I'm glad you're home, Emmett.

—I'm glad to be home, Billy.

—You don't have to go back to Salina this time, do you?

—No. I never have to go back to Salina. Come on.

Billy released Emmett, and the brothers went into the house. In the kitchen, Emmett opened the icebox and slid the casserole onto a lower shelf. On the top shelf were the promised milk and eggs and butter. There was also a jar of homemade applesauce and another of peaches in syrup.

—You want something to eat?

—No, thank you, Emmett. Sally made me a peanut butter sandwich just before we came over.

—How about some milk?

—Sure.

As Emmett brought the glasses of milk to the table, Billy took off his backpack and set it on an empty chair. Unbuckling the uppermost flap, he carefully removed and unfolded a little package wrapped in aluminum foil. It was a stack of eight cookies. He put two on the table, one for Emmett and one for himself. Then he closed the foil, put the rest of the cookies back in his backpack, rebuckled the flap, and returned to his seat.

—That's quite a pack, Emmett said.

—It's a genuine US Army backpack, said Billy. Although it's what they call an army surplus backpack because it never actually made it to the war. I bought it at Mr. Gunderson's store. I also got a surplus flashlight and a surplus compass and this surplus watch.

Billy held out his arm to show the watch hanging loosely on his wrist.

—It even has a second hand.

After expressing his admiration for the watch, Emmett took a bite of the cookie.

—Good one. Chocolate chip?

—Yep. Sally made them.

—You help?

—I cleaned the bowl.

—I bet you did.

—Sally actually made us a whole batch, but Mr. Ransom said she was overdoing it, so she told him that she would just give us four, but secretly she gave us eight.

—Lucky for us.

—Luckier than just getting four. But not as lucky as getting the whole batch.

As Emmett smiled and took a sip of milk, he sized up his brother over the rim of the glass. He was about an inch taller and his hair was shorter, as it would be in the Ransom house, but otherwise he seemed the same in body and spirit. For Emmett, leaving Billy had been the hardest part of going to Salina, so he was happy to find him so little changed. He was happy to be sitting with him at the old kitchen table. He could tell that Billy was happy to be sitting there too.

—School year end all right? Emmett asked, setting down his glass. Billy nodded.

—I got a hundred and five percent on my geography test.

—A hundred and five percent!

—Usually, there's no such thing as a hundred and five percent, Billy

explained. Usually, one hundred percent of anything is as much as you can get.

—So how'd you wrangle another five percent out of Mrs. Cooper?

—There was an extra-credit question.

—What was the question?

Billy quoted from memory.

—*What is the tallest building in the world.*

—And you knew the answer?

—I did.

. . .

—Aren't you going to tell me?

Billy shook his head.

—That would be cheating. You have to learn it for yourself.

—Fair enough.

After a moment of silence, Emmett realized that he was staring into his milk. He was the one now with something on his mind. He was the one trying to decide how, or whether, or when to say it.

—Billy, he began, I don't know what Mr. Ransom's told you, but we're not going to be able to live here anymore.

—I know, said Billy. Because we're foreclosed.

—That's right. Do you understand what that means?

—It means the Savings and Loan owns our house now.

—That's right. Even though they're taking the house, we could stay in Morgen. We could live with the Ransoms for a while, I could go back to work for Mr. Schulte, come fall you could go back to school, and eventually we could afford to get a place of our own. But I've been thinking that this might be a good time for you and me to try something new . . .

Emmett had thought a lot about how he would put this, because he was worried that Billy would be disconcerted by the notion of leaving Morgen, especially so soon after their father's death. But Billy wasn't disconcerted at all.

—I was thinking the same thing, Emmett.

—You were?

Billy nodded with a hint of eagerness.

—With Daddy gone and the house foreclosed, there's no need for us to stay in Morgen. We can pack up our things and drive to California.

—I guess we're in agreement, said Emmett with a smile. The only difference is that I think we should be moving to Texas.

—Oh, we can't be moving to Texas, said Billy, shaking his head.

—Why's that?

—Because we've got to be moving to California.

Emmett started to speak, but Billy had already gotten up from his chair and gone to his backpack. This time, he opened the front pocket, removed a small manila envelope, and returned to his seat. As he carefully unwound the red thread that sealed the envelope's flap, he began to explain.

—After Daddy's funeral, when you went back to Salina, Mr. Ransom sent Sally and me over to the house to look for important papers. In the bottom drawer of Daddy's bureau, we found a metal box. It wasn't locked, but it was the kind of box you *could* lock if you wanted to. Inside it were important papers, just as Mr. Ransom had said there'd be—like our birth certificates and Mom and Dad's marriage license. But at the bottom of the box, at the very bottom, I found these.

Billy tipped the envelope over the table and out slid nine postcards.

Emmett could tell from the condition of the cards that they weren't exactly old and weren't exactly new. Some of them were photographs and some were illustrations, but all were in color. The one on top was a picture of the Welsh Motor Court in Ogallala, Nebraska—a modern-looking lodge with white cabanas and roadside plantings and a flagpole flying the American flag.

—They're postcards, Billy said. To you and me. From Mom.

Emmett was taken aback. Nearly eight years had passed since their mother had tucked the two of them in bed, kissed them goodnight,

and walked out the door—and they hadn't heard a word from her since. No phone calls. No letters. No neatly wrapped packages arriving just in time for Christmas. Not even a bit of gossip from someone who'd happened to hear something from somebody else. At least, that's what Emmett had understood to be the case, until now.

Emmett picked up the card of the Welsh Motor Court and turned it over. Just as Billy had said, it was addressed to the two of them in their mother's elegant script. In the manner of postcards, the text was limited to a few lines. Together, the sentences expressed how much she already missed them despite having only been gone for a day. Emmett picked up another card from the pile. In the upper left-hand corner was a cowboy on the back of a horse. The lariat that he was spinning extended into the foreground and spelled out *Greetings from Rawlins, Wyoming—the Metropolis of the Plains*. Emmett turned the card over. In six sentences, including one that wrapped around the lower right-hand corner, their mother wrote that while she had yet to see a cowpoke with a lasso in Rawlins, she had seen plenty of cows. She concluded by expressing once again how much she loved and missed them both.

Emmett scanned the other cards on the table, taking in the names of the various towns, the motels and restaurants, sights and landmarks, noting that all but one of the pictures promised a bright blue sky.

Conscious that his brother was watching him, Emmett maintained an unchanged expression. But what he was feeling was the sting of resentment—resentment toward their father. He must have intercepted the cards and hidden them away. No matter how angry he had been with his wife, he had no right to keep them from his sons, certainly not from Emmett, who had been old enough to read them for himself. But Emmett felt the sting for no more than a moment. Because he knew that his father had done the only sensible thing. After all, what good could come from the occasional reception of a few sentences written on the back of a three-by-five card by a woman who had willfully abandoned her own children?

Emmett put the postcard from Rawlins back on the table.

—You remember how Mom left us on the fifth of July? asked Billy.

—I remember.

—She wrote us a postcard every day for the next nine days.

Emmett picked up the card from Ogallala again and looked just above the spot where their mother had written *Dearest Emmett and Billy*, but there was no date.

—Mom didn't write down the dates, Billy said. But you can tell from the postmarks.

Taking the Ogallala card from Emmett's hand, Billy turned all the cards over, spread them on the table, and pointed from postmark to postmark.

—July fifth. July sixth. There was no July seventh, but there are two July eighths. That's because in 1946, July seventh was on a Sunday and the post office is closed on Sunday, so she had to mail two of the cards on Monday. But look at this.

Billy went back to the front pocket of his backpack and took out something that looked like a pamphlet. When he unfolded it on the table, Emmett could see it was a road map of the United States from a Phillips 66. Cutting all the way across the middle of the map was a roadway that had been scored by Billy in black ink. In the western half of the country, the names of nine towns along the route had been circled.

—This is the Lincoln Highway, explained Billy, pointing to the long black line. It was invented in 1912 and was named for Abraham Lincoln and was the very first road to stretch from one end of America to the other.

Starting on the Atlantic Seaboard, Billy began following the highway with his fingertip.

—It starts in Times Square in New York City and it ends three thousand three hundred and ninety miles away in Lincoln Park in

San Francisco. And it passes right through Central City, just twenty-five miles from our house.

Billy paused to move his finger from Central City to the little black star that he had drawn on the map to represent their home.

—When Mom left us on the fifth of July, this is the way she went . . .

Taking up the postcards, Billy turned them over and began laying them across the lower half of the map in a westward progression, placing each card under its corresponding town.

Ogallala.

Cheyenne.

Rawlins.

Rock Springs.

Salt Lake City.

Ely.

Reno.

Sacramento.

Until the last card, which showed a large, classical building rising above a fountain in a park in San Francisco.

Billy gave an exhale of satisfaction to have the cards laid out in order on the table. But the whole collection made Emmett uneasy, like the two of them were looking at someone else's private correspondence—something they had no business seeing.

—Billy, he said, I'm not sure that we should be going to California. . . .

—We have to go to California, Emmett. Don't you see? That's why she sent us the postcards. So that we could follow her.

—But she hasn't sent a postcard in eight years.

—Because July thirteenth was when she stopped moving. All we have to do is take the Lincoln Highway to San Francisco and that's where we'll find her.

Emmett's immediate instinct was to say something to his brother that was sensible and dissuasive. Something about how their mother

didn't necessarily stop in San Francisco; how she could easily have continued on, and most likely had; and that while she might have been thinking of her sons on those first nine nights, all evidence suggested that she hadn't been thinking of them since. In the end, he settled for pointing out that even if she were in San Francisco, it would be virtually impossible for them to find her.

Billy nodded with the expression of one who had already considered this dilemma.

—Remember how you told me that Mom loved fireworks so much, she took us all the way to Seward on the Fourth of July just so we could see the big display?

Emmett did not remember telling this to his brother, and all things considered, he couldn't imagine having ever had the inclination to do so. But he couldn't deny it was true.

Billy reached for the last postcard, the one with the classical building and the fountain. Turning it over, he ran his finger along their mother's script.

—This is the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco's Lincoln Park and every year on the Fourth of July it has one of the biggest fireworks displays in all of California!

Billy looked up at his brother.

—That's where she'll be, Emmett. At the fireworks display at the Palace of the Legion of Honor on the Fourth of July.

—Billy . . . , Emmett began.

But Billy, who could already hear the skepticism in his brother's voice, began shaking his head, vigorously. Then looking back down at the map on the table, he ran his finger along their mother's route.

—Ogallala to Cheyenne, Cheyenne to Rawlins, Rawlins to Rock Springs, Rock Springs to Salt Lake City, Salt Lake City to Ely, Ely to Reno, Reno to Sacramento, and Sacramento to San Francisco. That's the way we go.

Emmett sat back in his chair and considered.

He had not chosen Texas at random. He had thought about the question of where he and his brother should go, carefully and systematically. He had spent hours in the little library at Salina turning through the pages of the almanac and the volumes of the encyclopedia until the question of where they should go had become perfectly clear. But Billy had been pursuing his own line of thinking just as carefully, just as systematically, and he could see his own answer to the question with just as much clarity.

—All right, Billy, I'll tell you what. Why don't you put those back in their envelope and let me take a little time to think about what you've said.

Billy began nodding now.

—That's a good idea, Emmett. That's a good idea.

Gathering the postcards together in their east-to-west order, Billy slipped them into their envelope, spun the red thread until they were securely sealed, and returned them to his pack.

—You take a little time to think about it, Emmett. You'll see.

— — —

Upstairs, while Billy occupied himself in his room, Emmett took a long, hot shower. When he was done, he picked his clothes off the floor—the clothes that he'd worn both to and from Salina—removed the pack of cigarettes from the shirt pocket, and threw the heap in the trash. After a moment, he threw the cigarettes away too, being sure to tuck them under the clothes.

In his room he dressed in a fresh pair of jeans and denim shirt along with his favorite belt and boots. Then he reached into his top bureau drawer and took out a pair of socks tucked into a ball. Unfolding the socks, he gave one of them a shake until out came the keys to his car. Then he crossed the hall and stuck his head into his brother's room.

Billy was sitting on the floor beside his backpack. In his lap was the old blue tobacco tin with the portrait of George Washington on it, while on the rug were all his silver dollars laid out in columns and rows.

—Looks like you found a few more while I was away, said Emmett.

—Three, Billy answered while carefully putting one of the dollars in its place.

—How many more to go?

With his index finger Billy poked at the empty spots in the grid.

—1881. 1894. 1895. 1899. 1903.

—You're getting pretty close.

Billy nodded in agreement.

—But 1894 and 1895 will be very hard to find. I was lucky to find 1893.

Billy looked up at his brother.

—Have you been thinking about California, Emmett?

—I have been thinking about it, but I need to think about it a little bit more.

—That's okay.

As Billy turned his attention back to the silver dollars, Emmett looked around his brother's room for the second time that day, once again taking in the collections that were neatly arranged on their shelves and the planes that hung over the bed.

—Billy . . .

Billy looked up again.

—Whether we end up going to Texas or California, I think it may be best if we plan to travel light. Since we'll be making something of a fresh start.

—I was thinking the same thing, Emmett.

—You were?

—Professor Abernathé says that the intrepid traveler often sets out

with what little he can fit in a kit bag. That's why I bought my backpack at Mr. Gunderson's store. So that I'd be ready to leave as soon as you got home. It already has everything in it that I need.

—Everything?

—Everything.

Emmett smiled.

—I'm headed out to the barn to check on the car. You want to come?

—Now? asked Billy in surprise. Hold on! Wait a second! Don't go without me!

Having carefully laid out the silver dollars in chronological order, Billy now swept them up and began pouring them back into the tobacco tin as quickly as he could. Closing the lid, he put the tin back in his backpack and the backpack back on his back. Then he led the way downstairs and out the door.

As they crossed the yard, Billy looked over his shoulder to report that Mr. Obermeyer had put a padlock on the barn doors, but Sally had broken it off with the crowbar she kept in the back of her truck.

Sure enough, at the barn door they found the bracket—with the padlock still secured to it—hanging loosely on its screws. Inside, the air was warm and familiar, smelling of cattle though there hadn't been cattle on the farm since Emmett was a boy.

Emmett paused to let his eyes adjust. Before him was the new John Deere and behind that a battered old combine. Proceeding to the back of the barn, Emmett stopped before a large, sloping object draped with canvas.

—Mr. Obermeyer took off the cover, said Billy, but Sally and I put it back.

Gripping the canvas by the corner, Emmett pulled with both hands until it was piled at his feet, and there, waiting just where he'd left it fifteen months ago, was a powder-blue, four-door hardtop—his 1948 Studebaker Land Cruiser.

After running his palm along the surface of the hood, Emmett opened the driver's door and climbed inside. For a moment, he sat with his hands on the steering wheel. When he'd bought her, she already had 80,000 miles on the odometer, dents in the hood, and cigarette burns in the seat covers, but she ran smoothly enough. Inserting and turning the key, he pushed the starter, ready for the soothing rumble of the engine—but there was silence.

Billy, who had been keeping his distance, approached, tentatively.

—Is it broken?

—No, Billy. The battery must be dead. It happens when you leave a car idle for too long. But it's an easy thing to fix.

Looking relieved, Billy sat down on a hay bale and took off his backpack.

—You want another cookie, Emmett?

—I'm fine. But you go right ahead.

As Billy opened his backpack, Emmett climbed out of the car, stepped to the rear, and opened the trunk. Satisfied that the upright lid blocked his brother's view, Emmett pulled back the felt that covered the recess in which the spare tire rested and gently ran his hand around its outer curve. At the top, he found the envelope with his name on it, right where his father had said it would be. Inside was a note in his father's script.

Another handwritten missive from another ghost, thought Emmett.

Dear Son,

By the time you read this, I imagine the farm will be in the hands of the bank. You may be angry or disappointed with me as a result, and I wouldn't blame you for being so.

It would shock you to know how much my father left me when he died, how much my grandfather left my father, and how much my great-grandfather left him. Not simply stocks and bonds, but houses and paintings. Furniture and tableware. Memberships in clubs and societies. All three of those men were

devoted to the Puritan tradition of finding favor in the eyes of the Lord by leaving more to their children than had been left to them.

In this envelope, you will find all that I have to leave you—two legacies, one great, one small, both a form of sacrilege.

As I write this, it shames me some to know that in leading my life as I have, I have broken the virtuous cycle of thrift established by my forebears. But at the same time, it fills me with pride to know that you will undoubtedly achieve more with this small remembrance than I could have achieved with a fortune.

With love and admiration,

Your father, Charles William Watson

Attached to the letter by a paper clip was the first of the two legacies—a single page torn from an old book.

Emmett's father wasn't one to lash out at his children in anger even when they deserved it. In fact, the only time Emmett could remember his father expressing unmitigated ire toward him was when he was sent home from school for defacing a textbook. As his father made painfully clear that night, to deface the pages of a book was to adopt the manner of a Visigoth. It was to strike a blow against that most sacred and noble of man's achievements—the ability to set down his finest ideas and sentiments so that they might be shared through the ages.

For his father to tear a page from any book was a sacrilege. What was even more shocking was that the page was torn from Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays*—that book which his father held in greater esteem than any other. Near the bottom, his father had carefully underlined two sentences in red ink.

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe

is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.

Emmett recognized immediately that this passage from Emerson represented two things at once. First, it was an excuse. It was an explication of why, against all good sense, his father had left behind the houses and paintings, the memberships in clubs and societies in order to come to Nebraska and till the soil. Emmett's father offered this page from Emerson as evidence—as if it were a divine decree—that he had had no choice.

But if, on the one hand, it was an excuse, on the other, it was an exhortation—an exhortation for Emmett that he should feel no remorse, no guilt, no hesitation in turning his back on the three hundred acres to which his father had dedicated half his life, as long as he abandoned them in order to pursue without envy or imitation his own portion, and in so doing discover that which he alone was capable of.

Tucked in the envelope behind the page of Emerson was the second legacy, a stack of brand-new twenty-dollar bills. Running his thumb over the crisp, clean edges, Emmett figured there were about 150 in all, amounting to some three thousand dollars.

If Emmett could understand why his father considered the torn page a sacrilege of sorts, he couldn't accept that the bills were. Presumably, his father characterized the money as a sacrilege because he was bestowing it behind the backs of his creditors. In so doing, he had gone against both his legal obligation and his own sense of what was right and wrong. But after meeting the interest payments on his mortgage for twenty years, Emmett's father had paid for the farm two times over. He had paid for it again with hard labor and disappointment, with his marriage, and finally with his life. So, no, the setting aside of

three thousand dollars was not a sacrilege in Emmett's eyes. As far as he was concerned, his father had earned every penny.

Taking one of the bills for his pocket, Emmett returned the envelope to its spot above the tire and laid the felt back in place.

—Emmett . . . , said Billy.

Emmett closed the trunk and looked to Billy, but Billy wasn't looking at him. He was looking at the two figures in the doorway of the barn. With the late afternoon light behind them, Emmett couldn't tell who they were. At least not until the wiry one on the left stretched out his arms and said:

—Ta-da!

Duchess

YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN the look on Emmett's face when he realized who was standing in the door. From his expression, you would've thought we'd popped out of thin air.

Back in the early forties, there was an escape artist who went by the name of Kazantikis. Some of the wisecrackers on the circuit liked to call him the half-wit Houdini from Hackensack, but that wasn't totally fair. While the front half of his act was a little shaky, the finale was a gem. Right before your eyes, he'd get bound up in chains, locked in a trunk, and sunk to the bottom of a big glass tank. A good-looking blonde would wheel out a giant clock as the emcee reminded the audience that the average human being can only hold his breath for two minutes, that deprived of oxygen most grow dizzy after four and unconscious after six. Two officers of the Pinkerton Detective Agency were present to ensure that the padlock on the trunk was secure, and a priest from the Greek Orthodox Church—complete with a long black cassock and long white beard—was on hand should it prove necessary to administer the last rites. Down into the water the trunk would go and the blonde would start the clock. At two minutes, the members of the audience would whistle and jeer. At five minutes, they would ooh and aah. But at eight minutes, the Pinkertons would exchange worried glances. At ten, the priest would cross himself and recite an indecipherable prayer. At the twelfth minute, as the blonde

burst into tears, two stagehands would rush from behind the curtains to help the Pinkertons hoist the trunk from the tank. It would be dropped to the stage with a thump as water gushed across the footlights and into the orchestra pit. When one of the Pinkertons fumbled with his keys, the other would brush him aside, draw his pistol, and shoot off the lock. He would rip open the lid and tip over the trunk, only to discover . . . it was empty. At which point, the orthodox priest would pluck off his beard revealing that he was none other than Kazantikis, his hair still wet, as every single member of the audience looked on in holy amazement. That's how Emmett Watson looked when he realized who was standing in the door. Of all the people in the world, he just couldn't believe it was us.

—Duchess?

—In the flesh. And Woolly too.

He still looked dumbfounded.

—But how . . . ?

I laughed.

—That's the question, right?

I put a hand to the side of my mouth and lowered my voice.

—We hitched a ride with the warden. While he was signing you out, we slipped into the trunk of his car.

—You can't be serious.

—I know. It's not what you'd call first-class travel. What with it being a hundred degrees in there and Woolly complaining every ten minutes about having to go to the bathroom. And when we crossed into Nebraska? I thought I was going to get a concussion from the divots in the road. Someone should write a letter to the governor!

—Hey, Emmett, said Woolly, like he'd just joined the party.

You've got to love that about Woolly. He's always running about five minutes late, showing up on the wrong platform with the wrong luggage just as the conversation is pulling out of the station. Some

might find the trait a little exasperating, but I'd take a guy who runs five minutes late over a guy who runs five minutes early, any day of the week.

Out of the corner of my eye I had been watching as the kid, who'd been sitting on a hay bale, began edging his way in our direction. When I pointed, he froze like a squirrel on the grass.

—Billy, right? Your brother says you're as sharp as a tack. Is that true?

The kid smiled and edged a little closer until he was standing at Emmett's side. He looked up at his brother.

—Are these your friends, Emmett?

—Of course we're his friends!

—They're from Salina, Emmett explained.

I was about to elaborate when I noticed the car. I'd been so focused on the charms of the reunion that I hadn't seen it hiding behind the heavy equipment.

—Is that the Studebaker, Emmett? What do they call that? Baby blue?

Objectively speaking, it looked a little like a car that your dentist's wife would drive to bingo, but I gave it a whistle anyway. Then I turned to Billy.

—Some of the boys in Salina would pin a picture of their girl back home on the bottom of the upper bunk so they could stare at it before lights out. Some of them had a photo of Elizabeth Taylor or Marilyn Monroe. But your brother, he pinned up an advertisement torn from an old magazine with a full-color picture of his car. I'll be honest with you, Billy. We gave your brother a lot of grief about that. Getting all moon-eyed over an automobile. But now that I see her up close . . .

I shook my head in a show of appreciation.

—Hey, I said, turning to Emmett. Can we take her for a spin?

Emmett didn't answer because he was looking at Woolly—who was looking at a spider web without a spider.

—How are you doing, Woolly? he asked.

Turning, Woolly thought about it for a moment.

—I'm all right, Emmett.

—When was the last time you had something to eat?

—Oh, I don't know. I guess it was before we got in the warden's car. Isn't that right, Duchess?

Emmett turned to his brother.

—Billy, you remember what Sally said about supper?

—She said to cook it at 350° for forty-five minutes.

—Why don't you take Woolly back to the house, put the dish in the oven, and set the table. I need to show Duchess something, but we'll be right behind you.

—Okay, Emmett.

As we were watching Billy and Woolly walk back toward the house, I wondered what Emmett wanted to show me. But when he turned in my direction, he didn't look himself. As a matter of fact, he seemed out of sorts. I guess some people are like that when it comes to surprises. Me, I love surprises. I love it when life pulls a rabbit out of a hat. Like when the blue-plate special is turkey and stuffing in the middle of May. But some people just don't like being caught off guard—even by good news.

—Duchess, what are you doing here?

Now it was me who looked surprised.

—What are we doing here? Why, we've come to see you, Emmett. And the farm. You know how it is. You hear enough stories from a buddy about his life back home and eventually you want to see it for yourself.

To make my point, I gestured toward the tractor and the hay bale and the great American prairie that was waiting right outside the door, trying its best to convince us that the world was flat, after all.

Emmett followed my gaze, then turned back.

—I'll tell you what, he said. Let's go have something to eat, I'll give

you and Woolly a quick tour, we'll get a good night's sleep, then in the morning, I'll drive you back to Salina.

I gave a wave of my hand.

—You don't need to drive us back to Salina, Emmett. You just got home yourself. Besides, I don't think we're going back. At least not yet.

Emmett closed his eyes for a moment.

—How many months do you have left on your sentences? Five or six? You're both practically out.

—That's true, I agreed. That's perfectly true. But when Warden Williams took over for Ackerly, he fired that nurse from New Orleans. The one who used to help Woolly get his medicine. Now he's down to his last few bottles, and you know how bluesy he gets without his medicine. . . .

—It's not his medicine.

I shook my head in agreement.

—One man's toxin is another man's tonic, right?

—Duchess, I shouldn't have to spell this out for you, of all people. But the longer you two are AWOL and the farther you get from Salina, the worse the consequences are going to be. And you both turned eighteen this winter. So if they catch you across state lines, they may not send you back to Salina. They may send you to Topeka.

Let's face it: Most people need a ladder and a telescope to make sense of two plus two. That's why it's usually more trouble than it's worth to explain yourself. But not Emmett Watson. He's the type of guy who can see the whole picture right from the word go—the grander scheme and all the little details. I put up both of my hands in surrender.

—I'm with you one hundred percent, Emmett. In fact, I tried to tell Woolly the very same thing in the very same words. But he wouldn't listen. He was dead set on jumping the fence. He had a whole plan. He was going to split on a Saturday night, hightail it into town, and steal a car. He even pilfered a knife when he was on kitchen duty. Not

a paring knife, Emmett. I'm talking about a butcher knife. Not that Woolly would ever hurt a soul. You and I know that. But the cops don't know it. They see a fidgety stranger with a drifty look in his eye and a butcher knife in his hand, and they'll put him down like a dog. So I told him if he put the knife back where he'd found it, I'd help him get out of Salina safe and sound. He put back the knife, we slipped into the trunk, presto chango, here we are.

And all of this was true.

Except the part about the knife.

That's what you'd call an embellishment—a harmless little exaggeration in the service of emphasis. Sort of like the giant clock in Kazantikis's act, or the shooting of the padlock by the Pinkerton. Those little elements that on the surface seem unnecessary but that somehow bring the whole performance home.

—Look, Emmett, you know me. I could have done my stretch and then done Woolly's. Five months or five years, what's the difference. But given Woolly's state of mind, I don't think he could have done five more days.

Emmett looked off in the direction that Woolly had walked.

We both knew that his problem was one of plenty. Raised in one of those doorman buildings on the Upper East Side, Woolly had a house in the country, a driver in the car, and a cook in the kitchen. His grandfather was friends with Teddy *and* Franklin Roosevelt, and his father was a hero in the Second World War. But there's something about all that good fortune that can become too much. There's a tender sort of soul who, in the face of such abundance, feels a sense of looming trepidation, like the whole pile of houses and cars and Roosevelts is going to come tumbling down on top of him. The very thought of it starts to spoil his appetite and unsettle his nerves. It becomes hard for him to concentrate, which affects his reading, writing, and arithmetic. Having been asked to leave one boarding school, he gets

sent to another. Then maybe another. Eventually, a guy like that is going to need *something* to hold the world at bay. And who can blame him? I'd be the first to tell you that rich people don't deserve two minutes of your sympathy. But a bighearted guy like Woolly? That's a different story altogether.

I could see from Emmett's expression that he was going through a similar sort of calculus, thinking about Woolly's sensitive nature and wondering if we should send him back to Salina or help him safely on his way. As a quandary it was pretty hard to parse. But then I guess that's why they call it a quandary.

—It's been a long day, I said, putting a hand on Emmett's shoulder. What say we go back to the house and break bread? Once we've had something to eat, we'll all be in a better frame of mind to weigh the whys and wherefores.

— — —

Country cooking . . .

You hear a lot about it back East. It's one of those things that people revere even when they've never had any firsthand experience with it. Like justice and Jesus. But unlike most things that people admire from afar, country cooking deserves the admiration. It's twice as tasty as anything you'd find at Delmonico's and without all the folderol. Maybe it's because they're using the recipes their great-great-grandmas perfected on the wagon trail. Or maybe it's all those hours they've spent in the company of pigs and potatoes. Whatever the reason, I didn't push back my plate until after the third helping.

—That was some meal.

I turned to the kid—whose head wasn't too far over the tabletop.

—What's the name of that pretty brunette, Billy? The one in the flowery dress and work boots whom we have to thank for this delectable dish?

—Sally Ransom, he said. It's a chicken casserole. Made from one of her own chickens.

—One of her own chickens! Hey, Emmett, what's that folksy saying? The one about the fastest way to a young man's heart?

—She's a neighbor, said Emmett.

—Maybe so, I conceded. But I've had a lifetime supply of neighbors, and I've never had one who brought me a casserole. How about you, Woolly?

Woolly was making a spiral in his gravy with the tines of his fork.

—What's that?

—Have you ever had a neighbor bring you a casserole? I asked a little louder.

He thought about it for a second.

—I've never had a casserole.

I smiled and raised my eyebrows at the kid. He smiled and raised his eyebrows back.

Casserole or no casserole, Woolly suddenly looked up like he'd had a timely thought.

—Hey, Duchess. Did you get a chance to ask Emmett about the escapade?

—The escapade? asked Billy, poking his head a little higher over the table.

—That's the other reason we came here, Billy. We're about to set off on a little escapade and we were hoping your brother would come along.

—An escapade . . . , said Emmett.

—We've been calling it that for lack of a better word, I said. But it's a good deed, really. A sort of mitzvah. In fact, it's the fulfillment of a dying man's wish.

As I began to explain, I looked from Emmett to Billy and back again since the two seemed equally intrigued.

—When Woolly’s grandfather died, he left some money for Woolly in what they call a trust fund. Isn’t that right, Woolly?

Woolly nodded.

—Now, a trust fund is a special investment account that’s set up for the benefit of a minor with a trustee who makes all the decisions until the minor comes of age, at which point the minor can do with the money as he sees fit. But when Woolly turned eighteen, thanks to a little bit of fancy jurisprudence, the trustee—who happens to be Woolly’s brother-in-law—had Woolly declared temperamentally unfit. Wasn’t that the term, Woolly?

—Temperamentally unfit, Woolly confirmed with an apologetic smile.

—And in so doing, his brother-in-law extended his authority over the trust until such a time as Woolly should improve his temperament, or in perpetuity, whichever comes first.

I shook my head.

—And they call that a *trust* fund?

—That sounds like Woolly’s business, Duchess. What does it have to do with you?

—With us, Emmett. What does it have to do with us.

I pulled my chair a little closer to the table.

—Woolly and his family have a house in upstate New York—

—A camp, said Woolly.

—A camp, I amended, where the family gathers from time to time. Well, during the Depression, when the banks began failing, Woolly’s great-grandfather decided he could never entirely trust the American banking system again. So, just in case, he put a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash in a wall safe at the camp. But what’s particularly interesting here—even fateful, you might say—is that the value of Woolly’s trust today is almost exactly a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

I paused to let that sink in. Then I looked at Emmett directly.

—And because Woolly's a man who's big of heart and modest of needs, he has proposed that if you and I accompany him to the Adirondacks to help him claim what is rightfully his, he will divvy up the proceeds in three equal parts.

—One hundred and fifty thousand dollars divided by three is fifty thousand dollars, said Billy.

—Exactly, I said.

—All for one and one for all, said Woolly.

As I leaned back in my chair, Emmett stared at me for a moment. Then he turned to Woolly.

—This was your idea?

—It was my idea, Woolly acknowledged.

—And you're not going back to Salina?

Woolly put his hands in his lap and shook his head.

—No, Emmett. I'm not going back to Salina.

Emmett gave Woolly a searching look, as if he were trying to formulate one more question. But Woolly, who was naturally disinclined to the answering of questions and who'd had plenty of practice in avoiding them, began clearing the plates.

In a state of hesitation, Emmett drew a hand across his mouth. I leaned across the table.

—The one hitch is that the camp always gets opened up for the last weekend in June, which doesn't give us a lot of time. I've got to make a quick stop in New York to see my old man, but then we're heading straight for the Adirondacks. We should have you back in Morgen by Friday—a little road weary, maybe, but on the sunny side of fifty grand. Think about that for a second, Emmett. . . . I mean, what could you do with fifty grand? What *would* you do with fifty grand?

There is nothing so enigmatic as the human will—or so the head-shrinkers would have you believe. According to them, the motivations

of a man are a castle without a key. They form a multilayered labyrinth from which individual actions often emerge without a readily discernible rhyme or reason. But it's really not so complicated. If you want to understand a man's motivations, all you have to do is ask him: *What would you do with fifty thousand dollars?*

When you ask most people this question, they need a few minutes to think about it, to sort through the possibilities and consider their options. And that tells you everything you need to know about them. But when you pose the question to a man of substance, a man who merits your consideration, he will answer in a heartbeat—and with specifics. Because he's already thought about what he would do with fifty grand. He's thought about it while he's been digging ditches, or pushing paper, or slinging hash. He's thought about it while listening to his wife, or tucking in the kids, or staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night. In a way, he's been thinking about it all his life.

When I put the question to Emmett, he didn't respond, but that wasn't because he didn't have an answer. I could see from the expression on his face that he knew *exactly* what he'd do with fifty thousand dollars, nickel for nickel and dime for dime.

As we sat there silently, Billy looked from me to his brother and back again; but Emmett, he looked straight across the table like he and I were suddenly the only people in the room.

—Maybe this was Woolly's idea and maybe it wasn't, Duchess. Either way, I don't want any part of it. Not the stop in the city, not the trip to the Adirondacks, not the fifty thousand dollars. Tomorrow, I need to take care of a few things in town. But on Monday morning, first thing, Billy and I are going to drive you and Woolly to the Greyhound station in Omaha. From there you can catch a bus to Manhattan or the Adirondacks or anywhere you like. Then Billy and I will get back in the Studebaker and go on about our business.

Emmett was serious as he delivered this little speech. In fact, I've never seen a guy so serious. He didn't raise his voice, and he didn't

take his eyes off me once—not even to glance at Billy, who was listening to every word with a look of wide-eyed wonder.

And that's when it hit me. The blunder I'd made. I had laid out all the specifics right in front of the kid.

Like I said before, Emmett Watson understands the whole picture better than most. He understands that a man can be patient, but only up to a point; that it's occasionally necessary for him to toss a monkey wrench in the workings of the world in order to get his God-given due. But Billy? At the age of eight, he probably hadn't set foot out of the state of Nebraska. So you couldn't expect him to understand all the intricacies of modern life, all the subtleties of what was and wasn't fair. In fact, you wouldn't *want* him to understand it. And as the kid's older brother, as his guardian and sole protector, it was Emmett's job to spare Billy from such vicissitudes for as long as he possibly could.

I leaned back in my chair and gave the nod of common understanding.

—Say no more, Emmett. I read you loud and clear.



After supper, Emmett announced that he was walking over to the Ransoms to see if his neighbor would come jump his car. As the house was a mile away, I offered to keep him company, but he thought it best that Woolly and I stay out of sight. So I remained at the kitchen table, chatting with Billy while Woolly did the dishes.

Given what I've already told you about Woolly, you'd probably think he wasn't cut out for doing dishes—that his eyes would glaze over and his mind would wander and he'd generally go about the business in a slipshod fashion. But Woolly, he washed those dishes like his life depended on it. With his head bent at a forty-five-degree angle and the tip of his tongue poking between his teeth, he circled the sponge over the surface of the plates with a tireless intention, removing some spots that had been there for years and others that weren't there at all.

It was a wonder to observe. But like I said, I love surprises.

When I turned my attention back to Billy, he was unwrapping a little package of tinfoil that he'd taken from his knapsack. From inside the tinfoil he carefully withdrew four cookies and put them on the table—one cookie in front of each chair.

—Well, well, well, I said. What do we have here?

—Chocolate chip cookies, said Billy. Sally made them.

While we chewed in silence, I noticed that Billy was staring rather shyly at the top of the table, as if he had something he wanted to ask.

—What's on your mind, Billy?

—All for one and one for all, he said a little tentatively. That's from *The Three Musketeers*, isn't it?

—Exactly, *mon ami*.

Having successfully identified the source of the quotation, you might have imagined the kid would be pleased as punch, but he looked despondent. Positively despondent. And that's despite the fact that the mere mention of *The Three Musketeers* usually puts a smile on a young boy's face. So Billy's disappointment rather mystified me. That is until I was about to take another bite, and I recalled the all-for-one-and-one-for-all arrangement of the cookies on the table.

I put my cookie down.

—Have you seen *The Three Musketeers*, Billy?

—No, he admitted, with a hint of the same despondency. But I have read it.

—Then you should know better than most just how misleading a title can be.

Billy looked up from the table.

—Why is that, Duchess?

—Because, in point of fact, *The Three Musketeers* is a story about *four* musketeers. Yes, it opens with the delightful camaraderie of Athos and Porthos and Artemis.

—Athos, Porthos, and Aramis?

—Exactly. But the central *business* of the tale is the means by which the young adventurer . . .

—D'Artagnan.

— . . . by which D'Artagnan joins the ranks of the swashbuckling threesome. And by saving the honor of the queen, no less.

—That's true, said Billy, sitting up in his chair. In point of fact, it is a story about four musketeers.

In honor of a job well done, I popped the rest of my cookie in my mouth and brushed the crumbs from my fingers. But Billy was staring at me with a new intensity.

—I sense that something else is on your mind, young William.

He leaned as far forward as the table would allow and spoke a little under his breath.

—Do you want to hear what I would do with fifty thousand dollars? I leaned forward and spoke under my breath too.

—I wouldn't miss it for the world.

—I would build a house in San Francisco, California. It would be a white house just like this one with a little porch and a kitchen and a front room. And upstairs, there would be three bedrooms. Only instead of a barn for the tractor, there would be a garage for Emmett's car.

—I love it, Billy. But why San Francisco?

—Because that's where our mother is.

I sat back in my chair.

—You don't say.

Back at Salina, whenever Emmett mentioned his mother—which wasn't very often, to be sure—he invariably used the past tense. But he didn't use it in a manner suggesting that his mother had gone to California. He used it in a manner suggesting that she had gone to the great beyond.

—We're leaving right after we take you and Woolly to the bus station, added Billy.

—Just like that, you're going to pack up the house and move to California.

—No. We're not going to pack up the house, Duchess. We're going to take what little we can fit in a kit bag.

—Why would you do that?

—Because Emmett and Professor Abernath agree that's the best way to make a fresh start. We're going to drive to San Francisco on the Lincoln Highway, and once we get there, we'll find our mother and build our house.

I didn't have the heart to tell the kid that if his mother didn't want to live in a little white house in Nebraska, she wasn't going to want to live in a little white house in California. But setting the vagaries of motherhood aside, I figured the kid's dream was about forty thousand dollars under budget.

—I love your plan, Billy. It's got the sort of specificity that a heartfelt scheme deserves. But are you sure you're dreaming big enough? I mean, with fifty thousand dollars you could go a hell of a lot further. You could have a pool and a butler. You could have a four-car garage.

Billy shook his head with a serious look on his face.

—No, he said. I don't think we will need a pool and a butler, Duchess.

I was about to gently suggest that the kid shouldn't jump to conclusions, that pools and butlers weren't so easy to come by, and those who came by them were generally loath to give them up, when suddenly Woolly was standing at the table with a plate in one hand and a sponge in the other.

—No one needs a pool or a butler, Billy.

You never know what's going to catch Woolly's attention. It could be a bird that settles on a branch. Or the shape of a footprint in the snow. Or something someone said on the previous afternoon. But whatever gets Woolly thinking, it's always worth the wait. So as he