

JAMES TERRY

ROAD TO NOWHERE

The markers ran due east from an unused dirt road named Maverick straight towards the mountains, their fluorescent orange ribbons bright as poppies against the pale browns of the desert. It was mostly mesquite bushes and grama grass on this side, the occasional yucca and dried-up ocotillo. Clarence's new bulldozer plowed through it all like a hot spoon through margarine.

It had been nearly a year coming. First the county had cut his budget, leaving him barely enough money to maintain his existing equipment, let alone buy anything new. So he'd applied for a project completion grant from the state. The only problem was that there hadn't been any projects in need of completion. Clarence had remedied that by creating Enchanted View Road SE. He knew there to be a tract of county land seven miles southeast of town, out near the base of the Floridas, already platted for development. Sooner or later it would need an access road. He'd gotten the records from the county clerk, had his usual guy do the survey, drafted the bid himself—he requested \$100,000 knowing he'd be lucky to get half that—and got his old high school drinking buddy Tom Reed, now the county commissioner, to backdate the proposal by a year. Next he'd phoned Ike Crawford, who in his autumn years as state senator was trying to seal his legacy as the champion of Luna County roads. Crawford said he'd see what he could do when the legislature reconvened in January. Road projects being low on the list of priorities for the state in a recession, he wasn't able to get a slot in the capital outlay calendar until late February. At the urging of a personal memo from the governor, who owed Crawford a favor for his help in the last election, the chair of the finance committee made sure that the merits of financing the completion of a rural road in one of the least populous counties in the state, a road that probably wouldn't have a tire anywhere near it for decades to come, were not seriously debated. In the end, "Enchanted View Road Completion" was apportioned \$50,000. Clarence called in his order the very next day, only to be told that there was a backlog on the track loaders—"The Israeli army cleaned us out"—and he'd have to wait six to eight weeks. Four months later the bulldozer finally arrived.

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Some people might have said that what he'd done was dishonest, but Clarence didn't see it that way. The department had needed a new bulldozer and he'd found a way to get one. To his mind, taking advantage of the law was a whole lot different than breaking it. And to prove, if only to himself, that he had every intention of using the bulldozer to complete the road he'd invented, he chose the very next morning to take it out to the site and get started on it.

The mesquite roots were the only thing that gave him any resistance at all. Some of them were as long as thirty feet, snaking out stiff as dead tree branches just below the surface. He snagged the bushes in the teeth of the rippers and gunned it straight up, and the roots leapt through the dirt, thumping and snapping as he dragged them off to the side of the road path.

166 The sun beating down hard on him, baking his cracked knuckles a deep coppery brown, Clarence took a break just after noon. He lifted his hat and wiped his brow with his sleeve. As he was digging out the used-up dip from his right cheek to pinch a fresh one in, he noticed something in the distance, some little man-made structure. It was white, or close to it. He took off his sunglasses and squinted but still couldn't make it out clearly. Whatever it was it looked like it was right in the path of his road.

He cut the engine and got down and set out walking up the gently sloping bajada, weaving around the bushes as he went. Up close Clarence wasn't as big as he looked from a distance. It was his belly that gave people the impression that he was a man of stature. The pride and confidence that ten years as head honcho of the Luna County Road Department had given him exaggerated his natural swagger, pulling his shoulders back, curving his arms parenthetically around him as they swung through their arcs, shifting the brunt of his weight to the back edge of his boot heels, all of which tended to push his belly out tight against the long-sleeve polyester business shirts he favored. It wasn't a beer gut, for when he did drink, which wasn't as often as he liked to let on with the men, he went in for the harder stuff. Nor was an unhealthy diet to blame. Barb made sure of that. She always trimmed the fat from their steaks, used low-fat margarine and two-percent milk. The fact of the matter was that, like Clarence himself, his belly wasn't actually as large as the impression it left on people's minds.

It turned out to be a small camping trailer, a sixteen- or eighteen-footer by the looks of it, white, the lower third of it banded aqua green. The door in the side appeared to be open, or missing altogether. As Clarence came nearer

he observed that the hoist was resting on a stack of rocks and that the tires appeared to be inflated, indications that this wasn't just another old wreck that someone hadn't bothered to dispose of properly. Even so, he wasn't expecting it when someone stepped across the doorway.

Clarence stopped and stood there for a moment, eyes fixed on the camper. He turned his head and spat. He wasn't fond of coming across people out in the desert. Nine times out of ten there was a good reason they were out there instead of with the rest of civilization; namely, they weren't normal. They were outcasts—fugitives from the law, wetbacks, religious fruitcakes, kooks of one stripe or another. The last thing he wanted was to spook some nutcase with a gun.

He considered things for another moment or two, squinting against the sun, marveling how out of all the miles of open desert to choose from, they had gone and parked the thing directly in his road path, then he carried on up the bajada, clearing his throat every now and then so as to make his presence known.

When he was an easy stone's throw from the camper, he stopped and hooked his thumbs over his front pockets and called out.

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"Hey there."

A moment later a woman appeared in the doorway. The first thing Clarence noticed was her belly. By the looks of it she was a good six or seven months pregnant. She looked young but there was a hardness in her face, something gaunt and weary in the way she peered out at him, her black hair tied back tight against her skull. She was wearing a pale yellow cotton print dress that went clear down to her ankles, like something worn a hundred years ago.

Clarence stared at her for a full five seconds, then he lifted his hat a little to show his cordiality and said, "Afternoon, ma'am."

"Howdy," she replied, staring back at him suspiciously.

"This your trailer?"

"Me and my husbunt," she said.

A bunch of plastic milk jugs and various other plastic containers full of water were lined up along the front of the camper. Off to one side sat some apple crates that appeared to be full of rocks.

"Name's Clarence Bowman. I'm with the Road Department."

"Howdy," she said again.

He waited a moment for her to say her name or anything at all to explain what she was doing out there in a camper in the middle of nowhere. She didn't.

"Is your husband around?" Clarence asked.

"He's out."

Clarence scuffed his boot around a little in the dirt.

"Well, we're fixin' to put a road through this way," he said, nodding toward the camper and beyond. "See them stakes over yonder?"

She squinted.

"What for?"

"Oh," Clarence grinned, as if letting her in on some private joke, "just plannin' ahead."

Her expression didn't change. Clarence turned his head to spit but caught himself in time.

"Mind if I have a look around?" he asked.

"Make yourself at home," she said.

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He thanked her and walked around to the back of the camper. It had an Oklahoma license plate with an out-of-date registration sticker. Some blackened tin cans and half-melted plastic marked the spot where they had been burning their garbage. He spat there, then walked around to the hoist. The tire tracks led off to the north.

A few minutes later he came back around to the front. She was still in the doorway, leaning her right hip against the frame. He noticed now that she was barefoot. She raised her hand again and looked down at him. Clarence kept a respectful distance.

"Your husband workin' in town is he?" he asked her.

"Nah, he's up there gettin' rocks," she said, referring with the back of her head to the mountains.

"Rocks?"

"He's a rock collector. We had us a place in Muskogee with a museum and all, but it burnt down."

"Sorry to hear that."

She didn't look all that sorry herself.

"When ya'll startin' on that road?"

"I'm down there now doing some clearin'."

"You want us to move?"

“Well,” he said, giving it a little thought, “it’ll be a while yet before I’m up this far.”

“We ain’t supposed to be here much longer,” she said.

Clarence nodded. He raised his hat. “You have a good day now, ma’am,” he said and turned to leave.

“I’ll tell my husband you stopped by,” the woman said.

Clarence turned back and winked, then carried on down the bajada.

“Modern day Okies,” Ruby cackled when Clarence told her about his encounter in the desert. He knew it would get a rise out of her. She was forever reading some trashy paperback novel about trashy people doing trashy things to each other. She was sixty-two years old and had spent thirty of those years running the office at the Road Department, which mostly entailed filing papers and talking to her daughters long-distance on the county dime. On her desk sat an array of framed photographs of her grandchildren in their infancy, red-faced babies not long from the womb, their eyes and mouths and nostrils identically-shaped little lozenges of perplexity. Ruby had a big jowly face with a mass of bronze hair that she tinted herself every three months and sculpted every morning with a wire hairbrush and a fog of hairspray. She smoked two packs of menthol cigarettes a day and had a voice like a bullfrog.

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The one thing Clarence could always count on from Ruby was her cynicism. It was perfectly in tune with his own. She expected only the worst of people and was seldom disappointed.

“The husband’s some kind of rock hound,” Clarence said.

“Rocks for brains sounds more like it.”

Sometimes Clarence wished Barb could take a few lessons from old Ruby. When he told her over supper about the people in the camper she started right in with the pity.

“That’s no place for a pregnant woman to be stuck all alone.” She set her fork on her plate and looked at Clarence as if he had parked the woman there himself. “Out there without a car. That isn’t right. She could fall down and hurt herself and there’d be no one there to help her. No phone, nothing.”

“Well, I don’t think they intend on startin’ a family out there,” Clarence said.

“What kind of a man goes and leaves a pregnant woman alone all day in a camper in the middle of the desert at the height of summer without any electricity or running water?”

“Them old things run on propane,” Clarence said, cutting into the foil of his baked potato. “Matt Hertz used to have one. Refrigerator and everything. They’ll probably only be there a couple days anyhow. The husband’s some kind of rock collector.”

“I don’t care if he’s John D. Rockefeller. That’s no way to treat a pregnant woman, Clarence.”

Barb believed that the world was a good place and that people were good too, even when they did bad things. She had a knack for talking to complete strangers as if they had been next-door neighbors all their lives, and more often than not the stranger couldn’t help but respond in kind. This frustrated Clarence to no end whenever they went to the mall in Las Cruces. Inevitably she would strike up a conversation with the cashier in Sears, or the people in line with them at the corn dog place, or some old man resting beside her on the bench. It didn’t matter what the subject was—the weather, the price of gas, her aching feet—she always got them talking. Sooner or later she would start talking about Clarence or their daughter Shelly or some other private matter that Clarence didn’t feel was any stranger’s business, and he would shift around and clear his throat in an attempt to remind her that they didn’t know this guy from Adam. The worst was when she started rattling off the names of friends and other Deming people as if they were common knowledge to the whole of humanity. “How the hell is he supposed to know who Rhonda is?” Clarence would say, irately, once they were alone again. But these small frustrations aside, it was this trusting, generous, sometimes downright naive nature of Barb’s that had captured Clarence’s heart nearly twenty-five years ago.

“Did her ankles look swollen?”

“How should I know? I wasn’t lookin’ at her ankles.”

“Well, was her face all puffy?”

“No, she looked half-starved if you ask me.”

“Good Lord,” she shook her head. “Doesn’t that just make you sick?”

“Why should I give a damn if people want to live like gypsies. It’s a free country.”

Barb shook her head sadly and picked up her fork and stabbed her potato to let out some of the steam.

Clarence figured that was the end of it. He should have known better. The next morning as he was pulling out of the driveway, Barb scuttled out

in her pink housecoat with a carton of Vivaway Female Vitality in her hand. Clarence stopped the truck and rolled down his window.

"Here," she said, "take this out to that woman."

"Oh, for Pete's sake."

"Just do it, Clarence. She needs it."

"I'm not out there makin' house calls."

"It won't kill you." She gave him her irritated, maternal glare. He sighed and grabbed the carton and put it on the seat. She stood in the driveway and watched him pull away.

The sight of the new bulldozer basking in the morning sunlight, yellow as the yolks of fresh duck eggs, filled Clarence's heart with gladness. The feeling stayed with him all morning as he worked clearing the brush. For Clarence there was no greater joy than starting a new road. There was something so promising about it. It was the work of civilization, of man taming unruly Mother Earth. What could be more important work than that? Whatever frustrations he may have had to suffer along the way, it was all worth it when he looked out and saw that nice straight stretch of fresh, clean dirt cutting across all that wild desert brush.

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Shortly after noon he cut the engine and walked back to the truck to have his lunch. He sat in the hot silence of the cab, eating his turkey sandwich, the carton of Female Vitality resting beside him on the seat.

"Vivaway," it said in bold white letters across the blue and pink box. "For a New Tomorrow."

Clarence picked up the carton.

"Female Vitality," he grumbled, shaking his head with sufferance. He turned the carton around and read: "Designed to support proper balance of the female reproductive and glandular systems." He read the ingredients, a long list of strange-sounding roots and herbs. He read everything else, the recommended intake, the claims and disclaimers, the company's mailing address, etc.

The desert heat wafted in through the open windows, stinging Clarence's cheeks. He sat for some time, staring at the mountains, trying to picture some guy out there looking for rocks, leaving his pregnant wife stranded in a sweltering trailer. Then, with an annoyed grunt, he grabbed the carton and set out up the road path.

He stopped about twenty feet short of the camper and loudly cleared his throat. The woman came to the door. She was in the same dress as yesterday.

"Afternoon, ma'am," Clarence said. "Sorry to bother you again. My wife asked me to give you this." He walked up to the door. The woman went to take a step down then yanked her bare foot back from the hot metal.

"Watch yourself there." Clarence handed the box up to her. She took it and looked it over curiously. Clarence's face was almost level with her belly, and he couldn't help but notice how her navel was poking out against the stretched fabric of her dress.

"It's supposed to be good for...well, uh, somethin' or other," he said with an embarrassed little smile.

She thanked him.

"I don't know if it works or not," he said. "I guess some people think it does or she wouldn't be sellin' so much of it. Our garage is full of the stuff."

"I'll give it a try," she said, slipping her feet into a pair of blue plastic flip-flops just inside the door.

Clarence stepped back and surveyed the desert.

"It's a hot one today, ain't it," he said.

172 She stepped down cautiously onto the metal step, then settled in the doorway in a familiar way. He noticed now that her eyes were an unusually light brown, almost the color of the desert sand, as if their natural color had been bleached out of them.

"I told Trevor you was puttin' a road through here," she said. "He got a kick out of that. Puttin' a road out here."

"You'd be surprised at some of the places we've put roads," Clarence said. "My crew's down near the border as we speak, workin' on a five-miler. That one's just about nowhere to nowhere, too. You got a road department, you got to make roads. Sooner or later someone'll need them."

She looked at him and scratched her ankle. Clarence took note that they weren't at all swollen.

"Why ain't you with them?" she asked him.

"Huh? Oh. Well, I figured I'd give this new dozer a spin, have a look out this way," he said, glancing out at the desert.

She didn't say anything.

Clarence was just about to say he'd better be on his way when she asked him if he was thirsty. "We got some cola. I'm gonna get me one. You want one?"

"Well," he said, stroking his mustache, "if you're going to the trouble."

"It ain't no trouble," she said and smiled. It was the first smile he'd seen on her, and it put him a little more at ease.

She stood up and went in. Clarence turned his head and spat and scuffed some dirt over the wetness. He stepped over to one of the apple crates and had a look at the rocks. There were a few rough geodes, but most of it looked worthless to him: shale and quartz and plain old chunks of granite. She came back to the doorway, handed him the can, and sat down.

"Nice and cold," Clarence said, opening it and taking a sip. It was awful. The can said "Cola" on it. "Mighty nifty, these old campers, runnin' on propane."

She sipped her cola and looked at him.

"How long you been married?"

That took Clarence aback a little. He reached up and adjusted his hat.

"Oh, going on twenty-two years, I reckon."

"Shee, now that's a long time. We only been married a year," she said. "Seems like a lot longer," she added a moment later with a twitch of her lips. "Any kids?"

He told her about Shelly being in college in Las Cruces.

"I'm expectin' myself," she said.

"I kinda figured."

She looked down at her belly as if she hadn't noticed it before.

"Ah, hell," Clarence said, patting his gut proudly, "you got nothin' on me."

That almost made her laugh. Or else the single grinning bob of her head was as far as laughter went with her. Clarence drank as much of the cola as he could stomach and was about to thank her and get going, but again she thought of something else to say to keep him there talking to her.

"We went down to some little Mexican town last night," she said.

"That'd be Palomas."

"Wildest thing I ever seen. Not ten feet from America. A whole different world. Everyone was lookin' at me. Every beady little eye. They'd liked to have gobbled me up."

"What'd you all go down there for anyway?"

"To get Trevor's medication. He said it was cheaper down there. Course they didn't have his brand. I could've told him that myself."

Clarence nodded. He glanced up at the mountains. From that vantage they were stunning to behold, a curtain of blue-gray granite blocking out the entire eastern sky, so sharp and clear that it seemed he could reach out and touch them. It gave him a pleasant floating sensation just to look at them,

as if all that mass piled up in one spot were exerting a gravitational pull on his insides.

When he glanced back down at her he noticed that the hem of her dress was hitched up to her knees and that her legs were spread enough for him to see that she wasn't wearing any underwear. He caught an eyeful of black pubic hair under the pale dome of her belly before he quickly looked away. He glanced out across the bajada nonchalantly, as if milling something over in his mind.

"Well," he said a moment or two later, "I best be pushin' off."

When he glanced at her again her dress was back over her knees.

"You take care," she said.

It took him most of the following morning to think of an excuse to go back up to the camper. His boots made a dry sucking sound in the sand as he followed his own footprints up the bajada, scattering jackrabbits as he went. Already the walk was shorter than before, thanks to the progress he'd been making with the clearing, but it was still nearly half a mile to the camper.

174 This time he walked right up to it and knocked lightly on the side. He heard some racket like the clanking of utensils in a pot, then she came to the door. She was holding a can opener in her right hand.

"You're gettin' to be a regular neighbor," she said. She stood in the doorway with her hips cocked left, looking down at him as if he were some exasperating kid come to sell her something. She was in the same dress again.

"My wife was curious to know if that stuff I brung you did you any good."

That wasn't true. Last night over dinner Barb had asked him if he'd given it to the woman, but she knew better than anyone that you couldn't expect results overnight. Ideally it was best taken in conjunction with Good Life Revitalizer and Worry Away.

"It sure did," she said. "I feel like a million bucks. You thank her for me again."

Clarence couldn't help but grin at the obvious sarcasm in her voice.

"You want a drink?" she said.

"I should probably get on back," he said unconvincingly.

She turned from the doorway, ignoring his remark, and was back a moment later holding a clear, unlabeled bottle by the neck. The bottle was half empty. She gave it a little shake.

Clarence looked back and forth a few times between the bottle, her belly and her face.

"Well are you comin' in or you just gonna stand out there in that heat all day?"

Clarence adjusted his hat, gave a little tug to the right arm of his mustache, then stepped up into the camper.

It was tiny inside, and suffocatingly hot. The walls were all wood paneling, stained here and there from water leaks. Awkward stacks of apple crates full of rocks stood at every wall. A dirty yellow curtain hung limply to one side of the back window, which was missing altogether its glass and screen. From the bare aluminum undersiding showing through a rectangular section low on the back wall, it looked as though some built-in furniture, probably a sofa, had been ripped out. In its place stood two metal chairs with torn olive-green vinyl seat cushions. A few feet in front of them sat an overturned apple crate with some magazines on it.

Clarence was struck by the feeling, as intense as the first time he had entered a Mexican's home as a kid, that he didn't belong in there. Out of force of habit he took off his hat and looked around for somewhere to hang it before setting it on the seat of one of the chairs. He took off his sunglasses and put them in his shirt pocket.

"You'd never guess from the outside how roomy these things are," he said.

She was standing behind the narrow Formica counter that partially divided the living room, if it could be called that, from the tiny kitchenette. She scooted a styrofoam cup his way and took a sip from hers.

"I don't guess that's water," Clarence said with a nervous chuckle, stepping over to get the cup.

"Trevor's daddy makes it," she said. "It's strong."

Clarence stepped over to the door and dug the remnants of his dip out with his forefinger and flung it to the ground. He took a sip and scowled. A glowing coal rolled down his esophagus and into his stomach.

"You ain't lyin'," he said, eyes brimming with tears.

She grinned at him.

"Have a seat," she said.

"Nah, I sit all day. My back ain't so good."

He took another drink.

"This stuff is awful," he said.

"You get used to it."

"Whoa," he said a few seconds later as a warm breeze wafted across his brain. She smiled again. She seemed to be getting a kick out of him. He didn't mind. There was a part of him, not expressed often enough, that liked to play the merry fool.

"You know you ain't supposed to drink when you're pregnant," he said lightheartedly.

"You ain't supposed to fuck strangers neither," she replied, as if it were the most innocent thing in the world.

That made Clarence laugh—a quick sharp bark of a laugh. He stood there for a second, looking out the door, rolling the remark around his mind, in the end deciding it had to be a joke, odd as it was. He laughed again.

"No, I guess you ain't," he said, still looking out the door. A flying beetle buzzed by, a flash of iridescent green in the blinding sunlight.

He took another sip. He could see the strip of naked earth he'd already cleared, and the bulldozer at the edge of it, a speck of bright yellow in a sea of tan. His heart was pumping a little more forcefully than it should have been. He went to take another drink but there was nothing left in his cup.

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At last he turned and looked at her. She was on the near side of the counter now, her arms down at her sides. She was staring at him intensely, not blinking at all.

"Your husband carry a gun?" Clarence asked, almost under his breath.

"He's got one in the truck."

Clarence walked over to her and set his cup on the counter. Her eyes hadn't left him for a second. He tried to look into them but they were too intense. He stared at her belly instead, his heart knocking hard against his sternum now. Then he slowly raised his right hand and set it on her stomach. The fabric of her dress was thin and he could feel the warmth of her body through it, even in that stifling heat. He brought his other hand up. Staring down in dumb amazement he watched his hands roam in tender circles around that lovely sphere. When his fingers grazed her belly button she inhaled sharply then gradually let her breath back out.

"Would he use it if he was to walk through that door right now?" Clarence said without looking up.

"Right now he might not," she said, "but a minute or two from now he probably would."

With that she took a fold of her dress in each hand and slowly began to pull it up, pulling Clarence's eyes up with it as it passed her knees, slid up her

pale skinny thighs, up over and around her bulging belly, exposing the fleshy pink clot of her belly button. Beneath it her thick black pubic hair spread out toward the top of her thighs, thinning to a fine line creeping toward her navel. She pulled the dress over her head and off.

The sight of her little freckly tits nearly touching the top of the white globe of her belly just about knocked Clarence over. He stepped back, balanced himself, and teetered there slackjawed, as if on the edge of reason. The dress dropped silently to the floor.

After that it was all panic and fluster, him clutching her ass and sucking at her tits, her fumbling with his belt buckle, both of them grunting and gasping in haste to be done with the preliminaries and find some place to fuck. In the end he turned her around and bent her down against the counter and got up into her from behind, his hands gripping her swaying belly as if for dear life as he banged away against the blunt knobs of her haunch bones. Finally he collapsed against her with a hoarse little bleat, panting, covered in sweat, the whole business having taken less than two minutes.

“Sweet Jesus,” he gasped, and stood there for a while breathing hard, still inside her. “I don’t even know your name.”

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When he got home that evening some of the ladies were already there for the Wednesday night Vivaway social. They looked up from their brochures and greeted him from the sofa with big, frivolous smiles. Barb came from the kitchen and kissed his cheek and told him his dinner was in the oven.

After his shower Clarence ate his supper alone in the kitchen, staring at the wall. He could hear the ladies arriving, chattering away, laughing, but for all intents and purposes he was still in the camper with Angela’s pregnant belly in his hands.

“Now that’s a strange sight,” Barb squawked, all juiced up on Vivaway Vision, when she came in half an hour later to get the snacks out of the refrigerator. Clarence had already washed his plate and the other dishes that were on the counter and was now in the middle of cleaning all the aluminum trays beneath the stove burners.

He mumbled something about burnt gunk.

“You can clean the rest of the kitchen while you’re at it,” she said on her way out the door.

He did. It was so clean when he finished that Barb had to bring all the ladies in to show them what kind of a man she had. Clarence heard it all from

the deck chair on the back porch, where he sat thinking about the silence of the desert at night.

“Is there something you aren’t telling us, Barb?”

“Hold on. What’s this? He didn’t dust the knife holder.”

Clarence didn’t return to Enchanted View Road for the rest of the week. Instead he joined his crew at the road site near the border. They had been on the site for two months already and were well into the paving. All the men had their jobs and didn’t need Clarence loafing around telling them what to do. It was only when he was around, they always said, that they messed things up. As if to prove the point, Hector forgot to load the bitumen into the hopper, and they had to rip up fifty yards of fresh pavement. Still, Clarence felt grateful to be among his men again, good simple men, free of the burdens of shame. Of course they all knew about the Okies in the camper—Ruby had made sure of that—and they wanted to know more. What did the woman look like? What were they doing out there? Did they intend on staying? “How the hell should I know?” Clarence replied to all their questions, bewildered by how much energy it took to say it with just the right amount of feigned indifference.

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By Thursday afternoon Clarence was starting to feel bored. Being around the men always got his upper lip twitching with barely restrained frustration. He had a variety of tactics for relieving this tension, one of them being tugging fitfully at the right arm of his mustache. He was also a master of the slow, disgusted shake of the head. Tapping the fingernail of his left pointer against the brass bull on his belt buckle was another. On those occasions when a series of relatively minor incompetences suddenly flared into a blazing display of ineptitude, he had no choice but to take off his hat and run his fingers through his thinning black hair in stonily silent disappointment.

By Friday morning all his twitchings and tappings and tuggings were back from vacation.

It was a long, dull weekend. He spent all day Saturday working on the front and back yards, mowing the grass, pulling weeds, clipping the shrubs. Sunday after church he settled into a golf tournament on TV. At one point Barb came up behind him and started rubbing his shoulders. Images of the camper, of Angela, of her pregnant belly, flashed across his eyes and flowed up Barb’s fingers into her unsullied mind.

“Was that a hole in one?” she asked.

Clarence grunted. He knew what she was after. She always got frisky Sunday afternoons after church, when at last the world was pure again.

"Your shoulders sure are tense," she said. She massaged deeper. He could feel her breasts against the back of his head. A few putts later they were naked in the bedroom, Clarence trying to maneuver Barb into the doggy position. She resisted. She never liked doing it from behind. Clarence tried to tug her around but she wasn't having it.

"Why do you have to be so damn prissy about it?" he snorted. "Everyone else does it."

She turned around, her neck and face flushed with indignation.

"How do you know what everyone else does?"

"Ah, hell," he said and started getting dressed.

Monday morning Clarence checked in at the office and left his truck there and drove back out to Enchanted View Road in the big flatbed hauler. It was time to get the bulldozer out of there.

As he pulled up to the junction of the clearing he glanced out across the bajada. In his own truck he hadn't been able to see it from the dirt road, but the cab of the hauler was higher, affording him a clear view straight across to the mountains. Clarence sat there tugging pensively at his mustache. The fact of the matter was, they didn't even need the bulldozer down at the border site. They were well past that stage of things. They didn't need him either. If he didn't carry on with the clearing here, he had no option but to go back to the office and deal with the paperwork he'd been putting off for weeks. As much as he loved Ruby, he had no desire to be stuck in the office with her all day.

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He pulled out his can of snuff and set a clump in his cheek. He managed to work until ten before the urge to go on up there and say his piece got the best of him. She must have heard him coming, for she was already at the door when he got there.

"Where you been?" she said, an accusatory tone in her voice.

"I had some business to take care of."

She nodded, not impressed. "Must've been pretty important."

On each of his previous visits the sun had been right in her face, but at this time of day she was entirely in the shadow of the camper, and it made her pale skin look almost blue.

"You all right?" Clarence asked her.

“Right as rain.”

He glanced over at the crates of rocks, which had multiplied considerably since his last visit.

“Looks like your husband hit the mother lode.”

She made no reply. She crossed her arms atop her belly. Her foot was tapping the floor. Clarence looked up at her.

“Is that the only dress you got, woman?” he said and immediately felt sorry he had. It was none of his business. Her foot stopped tapping.

Clarence lifted his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. He'd never felt such confusion. Pity one second, disgust the next. Ten seconds of dense silence hung in the air between them before she spoke again.

“You want a drink?” she said sullenly.

Clarence glanced down for a second then looked up at her again, his heart all knotted up in his throat.

“What the hell's wrong with you?” she said.

Clarence shook his head. He didn't know.

“Get over here,” she said.

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He stepped up to her. She took off his hat and set it on her head. It was too big for her. It nearly covered her eyes. It only made the guilt and pity all the worse for Clarence seeing his hat on her like that.

All of a sudden he dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around her legs and sank his face into her belly. He felt a stifled laugh ripple through her body. A moment later she was running her fingers through his hair, pulling his face hard against her. He reached under her dress and ran his hands up and down the backs of her legs, and whatever remorse he was feeling was quickly replaced by a sharp jolt of lust. She went on petting him as he stroked her legs. Then, knowing there was no sense fighting it, he pushed her dress up over her belly and put the knob of her navel into his mouth and proceeded to suck it like some big hairy baby at the nipple of an enormous breast, and the sounds that came from his throat were new to him and not entirely human.

They didn't bother with the drink. As before, they did it up against the counter. Clarence tried to take his time but it wasn't easy, what with the rush of premeditated adultery, the seediness of the camper, even the hard-to-forget fact that the husband carried a gun. Most of all it was her belly. He couldn't keep his hands off of it. He loved the way it hung down when she was bent over, the weight of it, the tightness, how it heaved forward and

back in his hands, how it pulled taut the skin around her ribs and backbone, how soft and round and smooth it was, and even the knowledge that another man's fetus was the thing in his clutches did something to Clarence, made him feel more alive than he ever had before. And if there was one point on Angela's body that unleashed this feeling in him more than any other it was her belly button, or rather what it did to her when he touched it. He would push it in and twirl it around between his fingers, and she would let out a stifled, laughing cry, as if she were swallowing a scream, and her knees would start to jitter. He kept pressing it until she was moaning and whining like a sick dog. Clarence had never heard those kinds of sounds from a woman.

Afterwards they sat on the olive green chairs facing the open door. She was back to her terse, inscrutable self. They stared vacantly out at the desert, Clarence upright in the chair with his arms crossed in front of him, Angela reclining with her head against the back of the seat, her legs way out in front of her.

He started to say something, then stopped. He pulled out his can of snuff and pinched a fresh wad into his cheek.

"He don't like doin' it with the baby in me," Angela said. "Says it'll give it brain damage."

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Clarence shook his head and nearly chuckled, but she wasn't joking.

That wasn't the only thing that got Clarence thinking that the man had a screw loose. When he asked her about the rocks, what exactly her husband did with all of them, she told him again about the rock shop they'd had back in Muskogee. "Course he burnt it down himself to get the money from the insurance," she said, "only the insurance had done run out. So he stole five hundred dollars from his old man. That helped get us out here."

Clarence frowned in disgust, picturing Ruby's face receiving these new details, but he'd already started lying to Ruby, and to Barb, saying he hadn't paid the Okies any more visits.

It was a while before she spoke again.

"I shouldn'ta come," she said. "He wanted me to stay back home but I didn't want to."

"Why not?"

"I can't stand my mama," she said. Again there was a long silence before she spoke again. She said they had been out in some desert in Texas for two months before coming here, that she thought she would go out of her mind

out there, just sitting there day after day, nothing to do but stare out the door. "I'm fed up with it. This ain't no way to live."

"Why don't you all just stay in town at one of the RV parks? You could at least take a shower without having to use a bucket."

"We ain't got the money for that."

Clarence put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a sympathetic squeeze. It was strange feeling bone everywhere he touched on a woman. Barb was so much thicker and softer. All the hardness of Angela's life was right on the surface, in her bones and in her eyes. He leaned over and kissed her dry lips. That seemed to strike her as a novelty. She smiled, as one might at the sight of some exotic animal in a zoo.

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It didn't cross his mind until the next morning, as he was ripping at a particularly tenacious mesquite bush, that maybe she was asking him, without coming right out and saying it—she seemed too proud for that—for money. He pondered this as he worked. He thought about that day she'd hitched up her dress and spread her legs. Considering all that had transpired he could no longer see that as an innocent oversight. Was she really just lonely and horny, or was there more to it? He thought about the various times she'd mentioned money, how she'd let him know how bad off she and her husband were, and it seemed to Clarence now that a certain awkwardness had lingered in the air following her remarks. He wondered if he ought to give her something, if that was the right thing, the noble thing, to do. But even if she did accept it, he couldn't see what good it would do. She couldn't exactly go out shopping. And the husband would immediately know something was going on if he ever found it.

This question, and the quandary it put Clarence in, remained unresolved in his mind as he made his way day after day up the bajada to see her. The shame had long since waned into a kind of guilty peace, the feeling that at last he too had joined the race of man, for whom there was no redemption. Here he was, screwing another man's wife, barely older than his own daughter and pregnant to boot, and somehow it felt right, like he deserved it. Like God had put Angela out there in that camper for a reason, smack dab in the path of Enchanted View Road, and that reason was Clarence J. Bowman. A little gift for his life of hard work. A bonus.

Every day before setting out for the camper he took a minute to scope out the terrain through his binoculars for any sign of the husband, either in

his truck or wandering around the mountains, but he never saw a thing. It was as if the man didn't even exist. She was usually sitting there on the step waiting for him. Clarence would go to his knees before her in the dirt, whisk off his hat and sunglasses, pull up her dress and start sucking on her belly button. More than once he felt a little kick against his lips that spooked the hell out of him but only made Angela giggle. Then, tearing him away from her navel, she would pull him up into the camper.

Afterwards they would sit and talk on the olive green chairs facing the open door. One of the magazines on the apple crate that served as a crude coffee table was an old *Better Homes and Gardens*. Angela said she liked to look at the pictures. One day as she sat there thumbing through it, she asked Clarence if he had a house. "Of course you do," she answered herself. That got Clarence telling her about the hot tub he'd put in a few years back, and how Shelly and her boyfriend had been the only ones who ever used it.

"You let your daughter bring a boy into your hot tub?"

"Yeah, me and Barb had a real argument over that one." Clarence frowned at the memory. "I said that ain't no place for teenagers of the opposite sex to be fraternizin' half-naked. You're just askin' for trouble. But Barb liked to think they were less likely to get up to no good under our nose than out in some parked car somewhere."

"She's right."

"That don't mean I got to like havin' my daughter half-naked with some snot-nosed runt feeling her up behind my back."

Angela grinned at him. "You got a jealous streak in you."

"Yeah, when it comes to Shelly."

"You got a picture of her?"

Clarence pulled out his wallet, a big fat rattlesnake-skin thing nearly three inches thick, full of credit cards, receipts, notes, bills, business cards. He showed her the picture. It was one of Shelly's prom pictures. She was in a white satin dress with a big pink ribbon around the middle. She had blue mascara on.

"She takes after her mother," he said.

Next to it was an older K-Mart studio photo of Clarence and Barb. He was in a dark brown suit with a striped tan-and-brown tie, his hair slicked back. Barb was thinner and her hair was down to her shoulders. Her glasses were smaller then. She and Clarence were smiling, gazing out into the great blue beyond.

“Now if that ain’t the picture of wedded bliss, I don’t know what is,” Angela quipped.

“Yeah, well, we used to have a lot of fun when we was younger,” Clarence replied, ignoring the touch of sarcasm in her voice. “Used to go to the dances all the time. Hell, I ain’t complainin’. It’s just part of life. You ain’t meant to have fun all the time. I done had my fun. I don’t need any more.”

Angela looked at him.

“Ain’t I your fun?”

Clarence set his hand paternally on her knee and smiled.

184 Meanwhile, the road progressed. Sometimes while he was clearing he’d look up the bajada (he was close enough now for an unobstructed view) and see Angela in the distance, outside the camper doing something—hanging some of the husband’s clothes out to dry, taking their garbage out to burn, or just standing there watching him work—and he’d feel that this was the way things were meant to be: the man working the land, his home over yonder, his woman there with a child on the way. It got him thinking about civilization in general. What was it good for? What was everyone working so hard for? What was the point of all these computers and telephones and wall-to-wall carpeting and all the debt you had to get into to pay for it all? He didn’t have any answers. He knew Reagan had beat the Russians, which pretty much proved that capitalism was a good way to run things, but sometimes he wondered if it wasn’t just a little bit out of hand.

Most days she was happy to see him, but on a few occasions she seemed to be suffering from some pregnancy-related discomfort and wasn’t up for any sex; she only wanted to talk. When Clarence asked her if she was taking her Female Vitality, she laughed.

“Is it me you’re concerned about or yourself?”

“Come on now,” he said.

Those were the days he felt the least comfortable being there in the camper with her, as if friendly conversation were the greater violation. Sometimes he would hear something outside and ask her to be quiet for a second, and he’d sit there, listening, but it was usually a small plane passing overhead, or nothing at all.

“The more I see of this life,” she said on one of those moody days, a Friday afternoon, “the more I think it’s a cruel thing bringin’ a new one into it. Nothin’ but lies the moment we take our first breath. Is that what

my baby's got to look forward to? A life of lyin' and cheatin'? Is that the way it's gonna be?"

"I've got no complaints," Clarence said.

"Then you're just plain dumb."

"Dumb hell. I'm the smartest guy I know."

Clarence was itching to get back to the bulldozer, to the nice, clean, predictable lines of the road. But she had more to say.

"So after I'm gone you're just gonna carry on with your wife like nothin' ever happened and never mention a word of it?"

"That's right."

Angela shook her head in disgust.

"What kind of life is that? Carryin' that lie around inside you the rest of your life? And her probably carryin' her own lies too."

"My wife ain't carryin' around any lies worth a damn."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know."

"She could be out there fuckin' someone right now, goin' door to door, and you wouldn't even know it."

Clarence smiled at the thought. "She hasn't got it in her."

"Same thing Trevor thinks."

She got up and walked over to the counter and poured herself a cup of liquor. She stood there drinking it almost spitefully, staring at Clarence. He'd told her more than once that drinking was the worst thing you could do to a baby in the womb. It annoyed him that she didn't seem to care.

"I've seen what it can do to you," she went on. "Carryin' secrets around. It eats a hole in you. Trevor wouldn't need them pills if he just got rid of all the stuff inside his head. He won't even tell me, his own wife. I said to him, 'All right, we'll swap secrets. You tell me what you done in Vietnam and I'll tell you somethin' you don't want to hear.' He said I didn't have anything he didn't want to hear. Well, now I do, don't I? Maybe it's time we had us a little truth swap."

"Vietnam?" Clarence sat bolt upright, aghast at the sound of that word. "You're tellin' me you're married to a Vietnam vet?"

"So what?"

"Jesus, girl. Are you nuts?" He stared at her. "He must be thirty years older than you."

"Well you ain't exactly no spring chicken yourself."

"I ain't the one married to you."

Clarence stood up and ran his fingers through his hair. He picked up his hat and put it on his head. He walked to the door. He turned and looked at her. "Why didn't you tell me your husband was a goddamn Vietnam vet?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Every difference in the world."

More than once he had come across Vietnam vets living out in a trailer or a shack in the desert, exiled from humanity, as if silence and isolation had become the essential nutrients of their troubled souls. There was something in their eyes that cut right through Clarence, no matter how seemingly friendly they were.

"This ain't me," Angela carried on, oblivious to the state she'd put Clarence in. "I need people. I need people to talk to. This is prison. I've thought about it a lot and this ain't no different from prison at all. It's worse. At least in prison you got other prisoners to talk to."

Clarence looked her squarely in the eye and said, "Well why don't you just go on home?"

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"I ain't got any money. How am I supposed to go back without any money? What am I supposed to live on? I can just hear Mama now: 'I told you not to marry that crazy bastard.'"

"Well how much you need? You could take the bus."

"How should I know? What difference is it to you anyway?"

Clarence opened his wallet and took out a fifty and handed it to her. She looked at it, looked at him.

"Get the hell out of here, you goddamn sonofabitch."

"Hold on, now, Angie. It ain't that way at all."

"Get out!" she shouted.

He did. He turned and walked out the door and didn't look back.

Monday morning he drove the flatbed hauler out there again. He thought about her as he walked up the path to the bulldozer. He wished it had ended on a better note, but he wasn't about to make the same mistake twice.

He and Barb had had the nicest weekend. Friday night they'd gone out to dinner and rented a video. Saturday afternoon they drove out to the pond at the El Paso Natural Gas Plant, like they used to when they were dating, and walked around it holding hands, talking about Shelly. Sunday at church Clarence felt his soul being cleansed by the word of God. Afterwards he

made love to Barb the way she liked it, front to front, and he apologized for being grumpy lately, blaming it on his frustrations with his crew. He vowed to himself that he would never betray her again.

He had just settled into the seat of the bulldozer when he noticed some movement from the camper. He glanced up to see Angela in the doorway trying to signal to him with a hand mirror. But the sun was behind her.

"What in God's name?" Clarence muttered as he watched her trying without success to get a sunbeam onto him. He was sorely tempted to ignore her, just fire up the bulldozer, turn it around, and drive it down the road without looking back.

He sat there for several minutes, waiting for her to give up and go back inside the camper, but she just stayed there in the doorway, pivoting the mirror. There was something conciliatory, something pathetic, in that futile gesture, and Clarence wasn't one to turn a blind eye on someone trying to set things right.

He cursed himself as he got down and set out for the camper. He wasn't too far from it when he noticed that all the crates of rocks were gone. That put a hitch in his stride. He instinctively surveyed the surrounding area for the truck, sensing changes afoot.

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She had dispensed with the mirror by the time he reached her. He stopped short of the camper, hooked his thumbs over his front pockets and looked her over without comment, figuring the burden of speech was on her this time.

"We're leavin' tomorrow," she stated flatly.

Clarence looked over to where the crates had been.

"Where is he?" he said.

"Gettin' some stuff in town."

"Why didn't you go with him?"

"Why do you think?" she said.

Clarence turned his head and spat.

She settled down in the doorway with her feet out on the step. Clarence looked up at the mountains. The sun was just breaching the crests, and there was still a hint of coolness in the air.

"Sorry I yelled at you," she said after a while.

"Forget it."

An image of the camper gone, the road path clear at last, flashed across Clarence's mind, and it pleased him.

"Where you all off to?" he asked her.

“What’s the next state over?”

Clarence turned his head and looked out across the desert. The shadows lay long westward of the bushes, insects flitting in the angled sunlight.

“Woman, if you don’t know that.”

She stepped down from the camper and walked over to him, her flip-flops thwacking her heels with every step.

“I told you I was sorry,” she said, taking hold of his hands. “Or ain’t my apology good enough for you?”

Clarence looked her in the eyes. “I told myself I was finished with you.”

She pulled his hands forward and set them on her belly. She started moving them around in circles.

“You can be finished tomorrow,” she said.

Clarence closed his eyes and, despite his determination not to, began to reconsider things. The sound of her breath as his palm grazed her navel settled it. One for the road, he thought.

She led him over to the camper, and he followed her up the steps and in. She went straight to the counter. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness he saw that she was holding a pistol in her hands. It was pointed at him.

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Clarence stood there looking at her, offended by the notion that she thought he was someone she could point a gun at.

“What in God’s name do you think you’re doing?”

“Get them pants off,” she said.

Clarence stared at her, not knowing whether to laugh or get mad.

“If it’s money you’re after, all you have to do is ask.”

“You’re a fool,” she said.

Clarence stared at her for a few seconds then turned to step back out the door and be on his way. She fired. The blast, or the shockwave it sent down his spine, knocked his hat off and opened a small hole of sunlight in the wall a few feet to the left of his head. The bang echoed through his brain as if through an empty canyon, gradually leveling out to a high-pitched ringing in his left ear.

Clarence slowly turned back around, his hands instinctively rising. “Off,” she said. He quickly unlatched his belt buckle and lowered his pants. “All the way,” she said. He pulled off his boots and took his pants off and stood before her in his boxers and socks. “Sit on the chair,” she said, pointing with the pistol. He went over and sat down. She backed her way to the door, keeping the pistol pointed at him, and stepped down.

She took the keys from the front pocket of Clarence's pants and the wallet from the back. She opened the wallet and pulled out the photographs of Barb and Shelly. She tucked them into the front of her dress and tossed the wallet aside. Until that moment Clarence had been more pissed off than afraid. Now he felt a cold wave of fear roll through him. If she had taken the money, or the entire wallet, that would have been something he could understand.

"What do you want?" he said, his mouth suddenly dry.

She smiled. "I wish you could see your face."

She draped his pants over her shoulders and turned and set out walking down the road path, the gun in her right hand, Clarence's keys in her left.

When she was about fifty yards away, Clarence got up and went to the door.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Give me my goddamn pants back, you crazy bitch!"

She didn't look back. He watched her walk down to the bulldozer and step up into the seat. She sat there for what seemed like several minutes, looking down at the controls.

Then Clarence heard the rumble of the engine firing up, saw the black exhaust belch from the stack. He watched in stupefaction as the blade jerked up, rose to its full height, then began descending again. The engine revved. The bulldozer jerked backwards. It stopped. More time passed. She seemed to be pushing and pulling everything. The blade rose again. Then the dozer jerked forward and stayed in motion.

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Clarence stood there in a kind of trance, watching his bulldozer drawing nearer, as one watches in silent awe the needles of lightning flashing in a distant storm. She was bearing down on him with the same dispassion, and there was something both awful and beautiful in her placid face coming at him above the mud-encrusted blade.

It was the sound of a yucca stalk cracking less than fifty feet away that snapped Clarence out of it. He reached for his boots and frantically yanked them on. He grabbed his wallet from the floor, picked up his hat and jumped out the door, scrambling out of the way just in time to see the blade dig into the side of the camper. The camper leapt up with a piercing squeal. Everything inside flew up and slammed into the back wall. The teeth of the treads caught the undercarriage and gnawed the floor to splinters as the bulldozer rolled up and over the camper, flattening it to rubble as it climbed through it and out the other side.

She managed a wide turn out into the desert and circled her way back around to the road and carried on down it. Clarence stood there barelegged, mouth open, watching her, and as she receded down the road atop his bulldozer it seemed to him as if the sky itself was ripping wide open before her.