

You Ain't Dead Yet · *Barton Sutter*

MARK FLUNG A FINAL shovelful of cement into the mixer and stuck the spade in a pile of sand. "She'll be done soon!" he hollered at Elmer, who was knocking the forms off a fresh burial vault. Elmer nodded and coughed. Like Mark, he wore a red bandana across his face. The air inside the Sunwall Brothers' Vault Company was heavy with fine gray dust. By the end of the day his lungs felt so thick that more than once as he sank into sleep Mark had imagined his lungs were hardening, slowly turning to concrete. Still, it was the best summer job he'd ever had. The pay was decent, Elmer was good if quiet company, and the nearness to death made him feel serious, adult, and curiously alive.

Elmer helped him maneuver the mixer over a new set of forms, and they worked hard and fast to fill them before the cement could stiffen. Then they cleared their throats with a shot of cold water from the hose and stepped out into the bright sunlight. They sat with their backs to the wall of the cinder-block building, and the breeze cooled their skin and dried their damp clothes. Elmer's gray shirt was stained with white patches of salt. The man smelled, Mark thought, like somebody's basement. Elmer was a bachelor and so taciturn that, though they had worked side by side all summer long, he still seldom spoke unless Mark put a question to him directly. At first Mark had thought it was the melancholy nature of his work that made Elmer so quiet, but Eddie disproved that idea. Elmer's partner and older brother, Eddie was a glad-hander who spent half his time driving around the county, drinking coffee, buttering up the undertakers. Mark preferred the honesty of Elmer's silence. Elmer had gotten his breath back now and broke out his pipe. His tobacco smelled like apples and smoldering leaves. Because there was so much time to pass on the job—waiting for cement to dry, driving to and from the cemeteries, waiting for funerals to finish—Mark had taken up smoking, too. He lit a Lucky Strike. Elmer called them coffin nails.

"Well, that's done," Mark said. "How else you plan to entertain me today?"

"Delivery up to Deep River. We got twins this time. Old man whose wife passed on three, four years back. He buried her in a wooden vault, and I guess the family decided as long as we were going in there anyway

we might as well put her in concrete, too. Eddie hauled her vault up there this morning.”

“Wait a minute. You mean we’re going into the grave, take her casket out of the vault, and transfer it to a new one?”

“That’s it. Sort of a transplant. We’ll do that every once in a while. Not much to it, really. The Crusher will have her all dug out by the time we get there.”

This was a new one, and Mark wasn’t sure he liked the idea. He had taken a lot of kidding about this job, but, aside from a few bad dreams, it hadn’t troubled him much. Building vaults was just construction work, and setting one in a grave was hardly any different from installing a septic tank. The only funny part was lowering the coffin and placing the lid on the vault. Otherwise the job was surprisingly ordinary. This transplant business sounded spooky, though. Too much like one of his father’s jokes.

“Time we got going,” said Elmer. “Funeral’s at four.”

Mark was hoping that Elmer would offer him the wheel, but once he had checked to make sure that the vault was locked in place on the truck bed Elmer got in on the driver’s side. Sometimes Mark wondered if the man even knew he was there.

They headed north out of town. Although it had been a warm September, the leaves had already begun to yellow and brown, and the power lines were strung with migrating swallows. Mark mopped his face with the red handkerchief. His father had razed him about that bandana all summer. He said Mark looked like an outlaw. He told the neighbors that his son was riding with The Sunwall Boys. Mark would drag in from work, and his father, fixing supper, would turn from the stove and say, “Well, how did the grave robbers do today? Come on, I won’t squeal. What did you find? Jewelry? Some nice gold fillings?” Mark was pleased and surprised to hear his father talk like that. They had buried his mother the year he entered high school, and his father had grieved for two years. Mostly at the sink, for some reason. How many times had he wandered into the kitchen to find his father up to his elbows in soap suds, weeping over a stack of dirty plates? Either the old man had cried himself out, or the teasing was a way to ease the pain. In any case the bandana had become a standing joke, and Mark had worn it around the house all summer long, pulling it over his face whenever he had a favor to ask. “All right, old man,” he would threaten, aiming a finger at his father’s belly, “your car keys or your life.”

They were on gravel now and dropping into the Deep River Valley, raising a wake of dust. Elmer stopped on the bridge and turned off the motor. He was an odd man, Mark thought. He always took time to appreciate things.

The river was slowed here by a series of small dams and backed into marshes and mudflats to form the Deep River Wildlife Refuge. The water was low this time of year, and the breeze blew the rank stink of the exposed bottom through the cab of the truck. Mark noticed a raft of big white birds floating far out. Shorebirds skittered over the sand-spits, crying. Near the bridge a great blue heron stood like a prehistoric relic, a patient fisherman with all the time in the world. A flock of blue-winged teal dropped over the ridge, their wing-patches flashing in the sun, and skimmed the water below the bridge, peeling the surface as they landed.

"Pretty," said Elmer.

"I'll say," said Mark. "You do much hunting, Elmer?"

"Not any more. Used to. When I was a kid. Not for a long time now. Sold my guns here a few years back. Fun went out of it somehow. I still like to look, though."

Elmer turned the key, and the teal, startled, took off. The truck ground uphill, and the steeple of Deep River Lutheran rose like the mast of a schooner against the sky.

Elmer pulled in past the parsonage, around behind the church, and eased the truck down the grassy lane between graves. He parked beside the vault that Eddie had delivered, and they got out, the cab doors slamming like gunshots in the quiet countryside.

The Crusher grinned at them from the grave and wiped the sweat from his face. "About time you boys got here," he said. "And here I was thinking you might like a little extra exercise. Too late now. I'm damn near done."

"Sorry," said Elmer. "We had some forms to fill."

"Yeah, sure. Shame on you both. Leaving a poor old man to break his back in this heat. Could've died of the sunstroke today. Hi, Kid. Hand me that water jug, would you?"

"Well," Elmer said, "you couldn't pick a more convenient spot to keel over."

"Ain't that the truth? This wouldn't be such a bad place to be planted, either. It's a nice view. I seen ducks flying up and down the valley all day."

"Prettiest graveyard in the county, I'd say."

"Except for the slant of the hill here gives me a hell of a time. Reach me that level, Elmer. Close enough. You boys relax, now. I won't be a minute."

Mark and Elmer squatted beside the grave and watched the old man work. Of all the people he'd met on the job, Karl "The Crusher" Lundquist was Mark's favorite by far. Built like a bear, The Crusher had wrestled all over the Upper Midwest in his younger days. He said he had beaten Bronko Nagurski in his prime, and Mark believed him. Eddie said The Crusher had retired from the ring after he broke an opponent's neck, but Mark hadn't been brave enough to ask the old man if the story was true. Way up in his sixties now, The Crusher had his social security and only dug graves in the summer. The hard labor, he argued, preserved his health. Mark loved to watch him work. His tools were always sharp and bright, and he moved with casual efficiency. He was down to the bottom of the grave now, shaving and slicing, scraping and squaring off. As he worked, he talked.

"Can't bury this one deep enough, if you ask me. Malevlevski," he spat. "I ought to go down an extra three feet for that bastard. I knew the bum. You seen his place? Silos all over, tractor as big as a house. Made out of money, they say, but the bugger couldn't buy his way into heaven if I was in charge. I never seen the like for luck. If it hails, it hails on his neighbor's place. Malevlevski picks up the pieces. Born with a horseshoe up his ass. Took every farm on that section. Him and the bank. I seen what he done to his woman, too. They got married, she was the prettiest piece you hope to see. Stop your heart just to look at that woman. High-toned, too, but nice, you know? I can't understand it. Here she is, the prettiest thing in the county, and she marries the most mean-hearted son of a bitch I ever met. And he busted her, too. Just broke that woman down. Worked her like a horse, and she was nothing but a nag by the time she kicked off. They say it was natural, but to my way of thinking it was murder pure and simple, murder over the years. The day she died I told Vera, Vera, that man should get the chair. She knew what I meant. I hear he died of a heart attack, but you could have fooled me. I don't believe the bastard had one. I'd like to see them cut him up. I'd like to see an autopsy. Know what I think they'd find? Liver. A big, fat, black liver right where the heart should be. Wasn't nothing but bile in that man's veins. I swear. The stingy bastard buried his woman in a wooden vault, and, from what I hear, the family felt

so bad about it, they figured they put a puke like him in concrete, it's the least they can do for her. They knew. They knew what he done to that woman. Anna Marie, that was her name. Anna Marie, and she was a lady, too."

Mark looked over at Anna Marie. The Crusher had lifted the heavy load of earth off her vault, and the wooden box, reddish and stained at the corners by some sort of rot, lay exposed. The Crusher had scarred the lid with his shovel.

"That does it," The Crusher said. "How you want to go about this, Elmer? You think we need the belts?"

"Naw, let's try it by hand."

"Okay by me. You boys think you can hold up your end against an old man?"

"Hope your Medicare covers rupture," said Elmer, and he and Mark jumped into the grave. Mark stumbled over a spade and brushed against the wall, creating a small landslide.

"Careful," The Crusher warned, "or you'll bury us all."

They forced a pick and shovel underneath the vault, pried it loose, and dragged the wooden box to the middle of the double grave. Then they knelt beside the vault and clawed at the earth until they could work their hands beneath it. "Lift with your legs now," The Crusher said, "not with your backs. Ready? Heave!"

Mark pressed his face against the damp wood and strained. Groaning as if in pain, they hoisted the vault waist-high, paused for breath and a better grip, then lifted on up, slipping and swearing, and then they had her over their heads. Mark looked up at the moldy bottom. He and Elmer lunged and propped their end on the edge of the grave. They hustled back to help the old man. The Crusher counted to three, and they slid the vault like a heavy toboggan out of the grave and onto the grass.

They hauled themselves out of the hole. Mark was trembling.

"Heavier than I expected," Elmer said.

"Yeah, I guess she's a little water-logged."

Mark looked at the wooden box with dread. "What now?" he said.

"Better sink those vaults," Elmer said. "They'll be here in under an hour."

They put their shoulders to the carriage, in which the heavy concrete vault hung suspended from pulleys and lightweight cable, and rolled it into position over Anna Marie's empty grave. Mark and The Crusher

steadied the vault, Elmer turned the crank, and they slowly lowered the concrete box into the hole. Mark jumped down and unsnapped the cables. Sweating in the sun, they wheeled the second vault off the truck and sank it beside its mate. Then they hooked the heavy lids to the carriages and hid one behind the church. Elmer called for a break.

They sat beside The Crusher's pickup and drank from his thermos of ice-water. "Hot," the old man said. He poured some water over his head. "One thing about my job, at least you get cooler the further down you dig."

"This heat won't last," Elmer said.

"Nope. Nights are cool already. We'll get the deep frost before you know it, and I can retire again. Used to be, I'd dig right through the winter. Had to burn tires to thaw the ground. What a mess. Cemetery looked like a goddamn junkyard. And cold? Christ. Work up a sweat with the shovel, freeze your ass if you stopped to rest. I'm glad them days are over. Summers I don't mind, but come December I'll take the TV and a hot-buttered rum. What about you, Kid? You must be just about done with this monkey business."

"I leave for the U on Monday. I guess I won't see you again."

"Well, that won't kill you. What you plan to take up up there? The teacher's time?"

"That's it," Mark smiled. "No, I thought I'd try pre-med. I thought I might like to be a doctor."

"Oh, sure, and put me and Elmer right out of work. What do you want to do that for? Christ, there's already too many old buzzards hanging around. Just this morning Eddie was telling me if we don't get a flu epidemic pretty soon we'll all be on welfare. That's the trouble with people today. They all want to live forever. Not me. I was up to the nursing home last Sunday, to see my old pal Swenson? Had himself a stroke last year, and the poor son of a bitch can't hardly talk. About all he can do is sit there and moo like a goddamn cow. And he was the strongest son of a buck! I could've almost cried. So I'm sitting there with Swenson drooling all over this nightie they've got him in, when who comes rolling by but Alma Berg? Hell, I went to school to that old heifer! She's about four hundred years old, and there she is, still hanging around. And for what? She's flat on her back, and they roll her up to the window, and I can hear her mumbling around. Crazy as a goose. 'Sky,' she says. 'Blue sky.' Way to go, Alma. She's about four years old. And then you know what she says? This really got me. There's this

maple tree outside, and the leaves are starting to turn, real pretty, you know, and she looks at that, and she says, 'Look at the flowers. Look at the lovely flowers.' Then she turns my way—she's damn near bald—she turns my way, and she says, 'I just love spring. Don't you love the spring?' 'Sure,' I go. 'Spring. Love the spring. Real nice, Alma.' I had to get out of there. Christ Almighty, give me a shovel. I'll dig myself a hole and pull the dirt in after me. That got me, though. 'Look at the flowers,' she says."

"I'll give you a shovel," said Elmer. "We've got about forty minutes to get this place in shape."

Elmer got a crowbar from the truck, and they stood before the wooden vault. "Here goes," Elmer said, and he drove the crowbar under the lid. The nails complained, and water oozed from the wood like sap where he forced the iron in. He worked his way around the vault, gradually raising the lid, an inch here, a half inch there. Mark and The Crusher pushed, Elmer pried with the bar, the wet wood squealed, squawked, and the lid popped free. It lay on its back in the grass like a door into the earth, a ragged row of rusty nails, twisted and bent, staggered around the rim.

Bruised by green and purple mold, the gray coffin looked diseased. Mark imagined it new, shining and smooth. His mother's coffin had looked like a treasure chest. At the funeral he had hardly mourned his mother at all, but the thought of that rich, copper-colored casket sunk out of sight had troubled him for days.

Nobody spoke. They had made such a racket raising the lid that the silence now seemed huge. Mark wondered what was left of the woman inside. He thought, very quickly, of Egyptian mummies, of Lazarus and Jesus. He stared at the coffin, thinking it looked as flimsy as cardboard, thinking how thin was the membrane of metal between himself and the corpse, and he knew when they lifted the casket it would break in their hands like rotten fruit.

The silence grew, and he heard, at its heart, a dull bass beat, and, above the bass beat, the quiet seemed to whisper and twang, to crackle and sing. He might have been standing inside a power station. He knew this feeling. This was death. This was what happened. A quiet so deep it disturbed the molecules of the air. He could hear them vibrate and hum. He could feel them. He had felt this before, at his mother's funeral, as he stood staring down at the lifeless body that seemed to be made of translucent wax. He wanted to run, but his legs wouldn't work, and

then, as if the air had turned into water, he heard the distant sound of Elmer's voice. "Let's go," it said, and he found he could move after all but slowly, as if underwater, as if he'd been shocked, as if his limbs had been shot full of novocaine.

Slowly he moved to one end of the coffin. Elmer nodded, and he watched his own hand reach inside the wooden box and grasp the corroded metal handle. The Crusher hugged the other end of the casket and grunted, "Ready? Heave!" Mark strained at the handle, and then they had her up and out of the box and were shuffling sideways. It was lighter than he had expected. Maybe she's nothing but dust, Mark thought, and the handle broke off in his hand. The casket dropped, Elmer said, "Shit," and Mark slipped, fell, and skidded against the casket.

He sat up. He was all right. Then he looked at his hand. It was green, and his arm was coated with mucus, and the side of his shirt was wet. And then, as if he had fallen on a hornets' nest, he was up on his feet and turning in circles, tearing at his shirt and screaming again and again: "Get it off me!"

The Crusher grabbed Mark from behind and held him, ripped the soiled shirt down the front, and, using it like a rag, he scrubbed the fungus off Mark's arm. The old man released him and stepped away. "There," he said. "You're okay."

"I'm all right!" Mark shouted. "I'm okay."

"It's only mold, Mark," Elmer said.

"I know it. I'm sorry." He was hot now not with fear but with shame.

The Crusher kicked the casket. "At least we didn't bust the son of a bitch."

"Thank God for small favors," Elmer said. "Why don't you take a break, Mark? We can handle this."

"I'm okay."

"I know. But go have a smoke, anyway."

Burning with embarrassment, Mark carried his dirty shirt to the truck, plucked the pack of Luckies and the matchbook from the pocket, and threw the shirt on the floor of the cab. He lit up, inhaled, and was suddenly sick. He hurried behind a row of shrubbery, paused as if trying to remember something, then sank to his knees and threw up.

A song sparrow sang from a fence post. The silence was normal now. He could hear a tractor throbbing in a distant field. So that was the bass beat he'd thought was death itself. That was a good one, he thought,

confusing death with a John Deere. He picked a few dusky blue berries off a juniper bush, chewed them, and the foul taste in his mouth was replaced by the tart, clean tang of wintergreen. He wiped his face with the red bandana, walked to the grave, and took a long slug of water from The Crusher's thermos. They had already lowered the coffin and dropped the lid on the vault.

"You okay?" Elmer asked.

"I'm fine. Sorry to make such a fuss. Here, let me do that."

He took the shovel from Elmer and began flinging dirt on the vault. The clods of earth burst on the concrete lid with a hollow sound. Elmer knelt beside the grave and started assembling the brass frame on which the coffin would rest during the graveside service. Trying to atone for his hysteria, Mark worked furiously while The Crusher shoveled slowly but steadily, pacing himself. The grave was quickly filled, and they leaned on their shovels, panting and wet with sweat.

Elmer looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes," he warned. "Go get the grass, Mark."

Mark ran to the truck and hauled out the artificial turf. He draped the heavy carpets over his shoulders, struggled to the grave, dumped the rugs, and ran back for the other set. By the time he returned The Crusher and Elmer had carpeted the grave of Anna Marie and gathered the grass like green bunting about the base of the brass frame. They spread the second set over the mound of raw earth beside Malevolevski's grave.

"Now the tent," Elmer said.

They had it down to a system. Elmer raised the canvas on the poles while Mark drove the stakes and drew the guy-lines taut. The Crusher collected his tools and tidied up the gravesite. Then they all stood back to admire their work. The brass frame gleamed in the sunlight, and the artificial grass disguised the dirt. The pale green awning, which protected the mourners from precipitation on gloomy days, would shield them from the sun today. The tent was sometimes rented out for carnivals and church bazaars and, consequently, made the gravesite almost gay.

"Good," said Elmer. "Let's clear out."

For the next half hour their job was to make themselves invisible. Mark and The Crusher wheeled the second carriage out of sight. Elmer drove to the rear of the cemetery and parked behind a screen of evergreens. The Crusher pulled his battered pickup alongside, got out,

and squeezed into the cab beside Mark. He poured coffee from a thermos and passed the cup.

"Here they come," said Mark, and they watched the funeral procession turn into the churchyard. The headlights of the cars burned dimly in the daylight, and the little flags on the fenders fluttered in the breeze. The heavy hearse eased up to the grave, and the doors flashed open. We could see Severson, the mortician, giving directions. The pallbearers crowded close.

"Hope they got some he-men to carry him," The Crusher said. "He ate like a pig."

The pallbearers rested the shining casket on the brass frame and stepped away. A parade of mourners filed up and huddled beneath the awning as if the sunshine were rain. Severson nodded. The minister stepped forward and began to read from a little black book.

"Wake me up when it's over," Elmer said.

The pleasant murmur of the minister's voice mingled with bird songs and the rustling of the nearby cornfield. Mark looked at the faint green stain on his arm. He spit on his fingers and rubbed, but it wouldn't come off. It would have to wait until he could shower. The sun warmed his bare chest, and his eyelids grew heavy. He bowed his head.

He was afraid he was going to dream. He had moved all his things to the basement in June, and, though sleeping was easy and cool down there, the dark was deep, and the first time he dreamed he was buried alive he was unable to find the light. He'd left the lamp burning from then on. Not all his dreams had been nightmares, though. His mother had visited him several times. They had laughed and reminisced warmly, and he had wakened from those dreams so gently he had felt as if he were floating on his back. Recently, though, she had scared him. He was following a dark, hooded figure down a spiral staircase and, knowing who it was, he called to her again and again, trying to get her to stop and acknowledge him. Finally, she turned, and her face was a cold, flat mirror. Transfixed, he stared at his own image, and as he stared his features melted, as if his face were wax, and bared the skull, and his eyes clouded over until they were pale as milk, as mild and bland as the blind eyes of a statue, and he felt himself turning to stone. He woke from that nightmare screaming so loudly his father had come pounding down the steps to see what was wrong. "Go away," Mark had told him, still crazy with sleep. "Everyone I want to talk to is dead."

He was half asleep now, but he could hear singing or was it the wind?

It was singing. They were singing about the river. The beautiful, the beautiful river. Shall we gather at the river that flows by the throne of God? And then he came wide awake as The Crusher said, "Mark? Elmer? Come on, you goldbricks, they're leaving. Time to get back to work."

The last few cars were pulling out. Mark and The Crusher lowered the coffin, disassembled the frame, and rolled up the grass while Elmer conferred with Severson. They struck the tent and were stowing it in the truck when Elmer walked over.

"Think you can finish up alone, Mark? Severson wants to talk business with me and Eddie, so I've got to go back to the shop. I can ride in with him, but that means you'll have to take the truck."

"Sure. No problem."

"Good. We'll come back for the other carriage tomorrow. Karl, maybe you can help him here, and then come on in for your check if you want."

"Don't worry about us. You just get your pencil out and practice up your penmanship."

"Greedy old bugger, isn't he?" Elmer said. "Okay, see you later then."

They waved him off and wheeled out the carriage they had hidden behind the church. They lowered the lid on Malevlevski's vault, and, as they swung the hooks free, The Crusher spat in the grave and said, "Bye-bye." They rolled the carriage onto the truck bed and locked it in place.

The air was growing cooler now, and they shoveled at a leisurely pace, working just fast enough to keep warm, the day's work all but over. The late-afternoon light slanted across the cemetery, and all the stones threw shadows on the graves. "Good riddance," The Crusher said, loading his spade with loam, "to bad rubbish." The dirt hit the vault with a solid thump.

"I don't think," Mark said, "I've ever seen anyone take more satisfaction in his work."

The Crusher laughed. "Well, this one was special. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. Normally, you know, you don't take much pleasure in putting people under, and sometimes you feel pretty bad if it's a young one, say, or someone you grew up with. 'Let the dead bury the dead,' The Good Book says, and sometimes I feel half dead myself. Hell, who knows? Maybe you'll be dropping the lid on me this time next year."

"Baloney," Mark said. "You're stronger than most guys my age."

"That may be, but I'm running out of pep, anyway. What's the point? Half my friends are gone, and the rest of them can't even go to the can without a nurse to show them how."

"But you've got a lot of younger friends."

"Yeah, but it's not the same. And then I miss the old lady, too. The winters get awful long without her."

"How long ago did you lose her?"

"Five years next month. We used to get snowed in, you know, and we'd play a lot of gin, and, I don't know, it was fun. I never cared much for solitaire, myself, and it seems like the bed never really gets warm any more. I used to call her my hot water bottle." He laughed. "She hated that."

Mark watched a nightcrawler ooze from a clod at his feet. "Well, even if you do kick off," Mark said, "I won't be here to bury you. I've had enough of this. I think I'll try to get a job as an orderly next year. I'd rather be helping people stay alive, even if I'm only giving enemas to old men. This just gets too depressing."

"I know what you mean. It's a lonesome kind of a job. But then somebody's got to do it."

They smoothed the dirt over the double grave and set the sod back in place. Then they arranged the flowers that would melt back into the earth with the first rainfall. As they walked to The Crusher's pickup Mark clanged the blade of one spade against the other. They rang like a small bell. "Well, anyway, it's been fun, sort of. I liked the hard work, and Elmer's a good guy. And I sure have enjoyed working with you."

"The same to you, Kid." They laid the tools in the bed of the pickup. "The first funeral we worked together, I told Elmer, you got a good one there. A hard worker and a smart kid who don't act it." They shook hands, and The Crusher got in. "Best of luck with the books, now. And you come see me whenever you're back in town."

"Thanks," Mark said. "I will."

They nodded good-bye, the pickup coughed and roared, and Mark stood watching until the old man disappeared.

Proud that Elmer had trusted him with the truck, Mark drove the gravel road carefully, gearing down and descending slowly into the valley. When he reached the bridge, he turned off on the dike, drove out to the dam, and parked. The marsh was wild with waterfowl, and as soon as he cut the motor his ears were filled with their gabbling. He

could hear swallows twittering, too, and the creak of insects and frogs. Excited, he picked his dirty shirt off the floor and got out. He slammed the door, and a pair of wood ducks shot out of the channel. The wind off the water chilled his bare chest. He sucked in his breath.

The shoreline was mostly muck and reeked with a sour odor, but the water ran more swiftly through the channel. Mark knelt on a wash of gravel there, soaked his shirt, and scrubbed his forearms clean. He wrung out the shirt and wiped his face. Then he sat back on a piece of driftwood and smoked, watching the water turn to wine, watching the sun go down.

He was about to leave when he felt them, heard the rush of their wings, and there they were, ghostly and strange as angels in the half-light but nonetheless real, row after row of snow geese flooding above him and close enough to touch. Paralyzed with excitement at first, as the final row passed over him, he reached up, felt feathers. The startled goose honked, veered off, and there was a thunderous beating of wings as the whole flock ascended, then coasted down on the dark water, far out.

No one was going to believe this, he thought, but he hurried toward the truck. He wanted to get back to the shop in time to tell Elmer. Coming up the path, he felt something crunch beneath his boot. He looked down. Skin and bones. What was it? He turned it over with his toe. Carrion beetles scurried away. A muskrat, most likely. He ran to the truck.

When he turned the key the motor groaned and quit. "What now?" Mark moaned. "What is it now?" He flicked on the lights; the battery was good. He kicked the accelerator and tried again. Then he read the gas gauge. "Damn it," he said. "God damn it!" he shouted. "God damn it all to hell anyhow!"

Now he was going to be late. Now his father would worry, and Elmer would think he was dumb. First that rotten casket. Now this. He would have to walk to the nearest farm and hope that someone was home, and even if he could beg some gas and a ride he was going to be late.

He got out of the cab, slammed the door, and then, instead of walking away, he sat down on the running board. The wind off the marsh was cold, and he crossed his arms and rocked a little. He wasn't going anywhere. He was beat. Defeated and ashamed, he sat in the dark and listened to the small birds and animals disturb the dry weeds. He thought of Malevlevski and Anna Marie, the carcass he had stepped on, his mother and Jesus, and he knew he was going to die.

Because that's life, he thought. Either you were somebody decent or you were a bastard and then you died. You had a heart attack and went down like a cow in a slaughterhouse or you got cancer and they cut you to pieces. Then what? Nothing. Worms and beetles and mold.

His mother had taken two years to die, and the morning his father had called him downstairs to tell him she was dead, he was glad. First there was a lump, and the doctors removed it. Then she went back, and they took her insides out. And then there was the morning she had called Mark and his brother into her bedroom and said she wanted to show them something. She had thrown back the blanket and said, "I wanted to show you this because people will talk, and I'd rather tell you myself." She had gone on talking, but her voice was only a murmur because Mark had never seen a woman's breasts before, and it was so different from what he'd imagined, so strange and nice-looking, and the air in the room began to vibrate and buzz, and he knew that his mother was going to die because she only had one. Where her other breast had been, her chest was flat, the skin pinched by a lumpy, purple scar.

Later there were radiation treatments, prayers, and other operations. She had lost her hair and gone blind. The two of them had spoken little then, communicating more and more by hand. He rubbed her back. She read his face with her fingers, as if his features were braille. She wanted kisses, but he was horrified by her breath. Every afternoon that final autumn he had walked home from school repeating, "She's dead. You know she's dead." He prepared himself so well that when she finally did die he couldn't even cry. He and his brother had come downstairs, his father had put an arm around each of them and told them and wept, and Mark had been absolutely calm and wide-eyed. What he remembered most clearly of that moment were the Indians on his brother's pajamas.

Rotten with disease, his mother had screamed a lot that last year but slipped away peacefully in the end, dreamy with drugs and free of pain. On the final night she had smiled at the nurse and said, "I believe that Jesus is my savior," then turned her face to the wall.

Mark did not believe in Jesus or in medicine or prayer. He didn't believe in anything. Or did he? Those geese, maybe. And dirt. He believed in dirt.

As an experiment he had dug a compost pit in the garden in June, and he had been amazed by his results. He had dumped some garbage into the hole—coffee grounds, egg shells, bad bananas—and seasoned the

whole mess with dead leaves and grass clippings. He'd covered this refuse with a thin layer of loam. At the end of August he had returned and sunk a spade in the compost pit. Instead of the sour slime he expected to find, he discovered nothing but earth—good, clean dirt. It was the only miracle he had ever witnessed, and he had talked about it for days.

That was the only afterlife he believed in, and what had he and The Crusher and Elmer been doing all summer? Sealing embalmed bodies behind cement walls, they were ruining the only form of resurrection there was. Unless you counted dreams, and how could you? What were they but chemicals gone crazy, a mishmash of wishes and buried memories. You might as well believe in UFO's. People said death was like sleep, but the dead didn't dream. Did they? If he dreamed his mother was living, did she dream he was dead? No. It was just a blank. A black blank.

He was never going to sleep again. He would lie on his bed and look at the light bulb until his brain burned out. For now he would keep his eye on that low star. Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. So bright, he thought, it must be a planet.

As he stared the star seemed to move and grow, and he knew, then, it was coming for him, and he didn't care. Then the star divided into the twin headlights of a truck, and The Crusher's pickup came grumbling down the dike, stopped, and the lights died.

The Crusher got out and walked over. "What happened, Kid? We waited over an hour."

"I ran. Out of gas."

"Well, that's nothing to cry about, for Christ's sake."

"Who's crying?"

"You are."

Mark wiped his cheeks. "Oh, God," he moaned. "I didn't mean it. Mean to. I mean. I just ran out of gas, but first that lousy casket, and then the truck wouldn't go, and I was so tired I felt so stupid I just sat down, and I started to think."

"Well, it wasn't your fault you ran out of gas. What the hell? It's Elmer's damn truck. He should have checked it before you left. Look," the old man said, "you got goose bumps. You must be freezing. Here. Put this on." He held out his jacket, and Mark pulled it on. It was smelly and warm, and the wool scratched his bare back. "What were you thinking about that made you feel so bad?"

"I don't know. That casket. And all those people we buried this summer. My mother."

"Oh, yeah. That would do it. I remember your mother. She was a good woman."

"I've been dreaming about her all summer. I've had a hard time sleeping."

"Yeah? You never said anything."

"It seemed too stupid."

"That can happen, though. You ask Elmer sometime. And Vera. After she died she kept coming to me in the night and crying. She kept me awake for a year. Oh, boy. One night I remember I dreamt I was buried beside her, and I kept trying to lift the lid off the vault all night long. I had whiskey for breakfast that morning, I'll tell you."

"Really? Really bad, huh?"

"I'm telling you. They stopped after a while, though. Oh, she'll still visit me now and then, but now it's kind of nice. We're younger, most often, and maybe it's after a match, and we're out on the town, and she seems just as real. I like it."

"Do they mean anything?"

"What?"

"Those dreams. Do they mean anything?"

"Oh, I wouldn't know about that. I never put too much stock in them. Just kind of take them as they come, you know."

They listened to the waves run against the shore. The wind off the water was cold.

"Crusher?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you believe in life after death?"

"Like in the Bible, you mean? I don't think so. Nope. I believe in life before death. Come on, Kid. You're too young to be brooding about this stuff. You got your whole life ahead of you—school, a good job, women and drinking, a family. You ought to leave this kind of thing to old farts like me. Tell you what. Let's drive into town, and I'll treat you to supper. Then we'll fill my five-gallon can and come back here and try to bring this old pig back to life. What do you say?"

"Okay," Mark said and got to his feet. He was going to be all right.

"Good," The Crusher said, clapping him on the back. "Let's go. You ain't dead yet. Not by a long shot."