

Brothers · *Bret Lott*

WE WERE GETTING radio stations you wouldn't believe, as will happen on the desert at night. We were headed back from Phoenix in Tim's pickup, a Mrs. Conoley's rocker-recliner tied down in the bed, ropes run back and forth across that thing so tight that all you might see move back there were the stars above us if you looked out the rear window.

This was the stretch of road between Blythe and Indio, that first piece of California that seems like it might last a year before you make the hills and sand outside Palm Springs, then drop down into the low desert toward Indio, which is the date capital of the world. But that was still a good sixty miles ahead of us if it was a hundred yards.

Tim is my brother, though you might not be able to tell that by looking at us. He's taller than me, and a couple of years younger. He is a quiet guy, but he will have his moments when he will say or do something, and you will laugh, count on it. We will be at a party or some such shindig our wives wanted us to go to, and just when things are looking the most dead he will walk up to me, his face all straight, and say, Do you have a dollar? Sure, I'll say, and go for my billfold. Good, he'll say, I've got one too. Let's trade. Little jokes along this line.

He's heavier than me, too, and he always has been. He's not too heavy, just a little portly. Just heavy enough that, say, if we were in a police lineup, you wouldn't think we were relations. His hair's a little lighter, too, and wavy, whereas mine is a dark brown and straight, which my wife says is actually limp.

But the radio stations. The night out there as dark as tar except for those stars cutting out their own light made this the perfect night for picking up radio stations from all over, and I was flipping the radio dial back and forth across the numbers, listening here and there for things. If I tuned in some station in Arizona or California I just skipped over it, looking for the exotic places, places I'd never been before. First there was Boise, and then had come Salt Lake City, and then some town in Oklahoma. Then, believe it not, we started hearing music with a slide guitar and some guy singing out soft and sweet in a foreign tongue. It was beautiful music: the slide guitar slow and clear, someone else strumming a regular guitar, this quiet tom-tom sound, and then it clicked. This was

Hawaiian music, like what you'll hear Don Ho do.

I turned to Tim. I said, "That's Hawaiian music. We're getting Hawaii."

Tim leaned forward over the steering wheel, turned his head toward the music. "That's right," he said, and eased back in the seat.

The DJ came on then, said it was Hawaii. Hilo, he said, and the call letters, and I nodded to myself because I'd already figured it out on my own and here was my brother, who'd confirmed my suspicions. We were getting Hawaii out here between Blythe and Indio.

We were on our way back from a wedding we'd gone to in Phoenix. Some old high school friends of ours who'd been living together out there for eleven years had finally decided to get married. Figure that one out. Tim and I thought we might see some of our old buddies out there, but we were wrong. Who would drive all the way out to Phoenix to see somebody get married? We two, in fact, were the only people other than Don and Diana we knew. We ended up leaving early to get the rocker-recliner. We were picking it up for a client of Tim's, this Mrs. Conoley, who, when she found Tim would be going to Phoenix over the weekend, offered him one hundred dollars to bring it back from her sister's.

He is a gardener. He is a good one, too, and can count among his clients several people who live up in Newport Hills in big squared-off houses that look out over all the rest of us as if we were their personal serfs. He makes good money at it, too, but you take one good look at his hands and you can see that that money didn't come easy: scars and callouses and beat, old red skin. He's got three Mexicans and one Vietnamese in under him now, so he's doing all right.

Me, I am a newspaperman. Hah. I drive truck for the *Santa Ana Register*, dropping off bundles all over Orange County. You'll see me sometimes. I'm the big blue truck that stops somewhere in the middle of your tract every morning, throwing bundles onto some kid's driveway. That's me, flashers and all going. It's an all right job, I guess. Not as much money as Tim, but we've got a little house. We're okay, Julie and me.

So we're in the desert listening to Hawaii. Modern world, I was thinking, this is the modern world we're living in, when we started losing the station. At first it was a little wave in the sound, a little grate, as if

somebody'd been sprinkling Hawaiian beach sand over the DJ's microphone, and then the world and its shape took over, and we started moving out from under where those AM waves were landing back on Planet Earth. Static started in, shaking through that sweet music so that the sound was clear and gentle, then shoved into static, then back to clear. This moving back and forth was getting faster and faster until one second it was music, the next tin foil.

I reached over to the dial, started fiddling with it again, trying to home in on Hawaii, to keep that sound from the other side of the world here inside the cab of this truck. I leaned closer and closer to the dial, stared at the green numbers, trying to figure exactly which little line between 105 and 130 brought Hawaii here.

"Turn it off," Tim said then. "Just turn the goddamned thing off."

He'd said it loud, I guess. Too loud for inside the cab. I couldn't see much of his face for the dark, but I knew he was ticked. He never talked very loud.

I clicked the thing off, slowly leaned back in my seat. I put one hand on my lap. With the other I took hold of the window knob, popped the window down a crack. I looked out my window. There was nothing but greasy brush out there, every few feet another bush and on and on, one after another for as far as you could see, all the way to the mountains out there, black as old engine oil, then the stars jutting out above them.

Tim had been chewing over something since we'd picked up the rocker-recliner. Maybe even before that. What I remember is that after we'd left the wedding we'd followed the directions Mrs. Conoley had given him, and'd ended up in some posh neighborhood off Central Avenue. We pulled up into the circular drive of this stone and mortar house, and climbed out.

Right then a fat old woman wearing too much makeup and not enough clothes — she had on a high-cut neon-orange one-piece — came rushing out the door and told us she didn't want the truck in the driveway, but on the alley. We'd had to climb back in, drive around to the back of the place where the rocker-recliner sat square in the middle of an empty three-car garage, oil spots in all three slots.

He pulled the truck up, turned off the engine. He reached under the seat and pulled out a coil of rope, and then we got out.

We stood there a few minutes, neither of us saying a thing, just waiting

for that old woman with no sense of bodily pride to come out there, tell us what was up. We didn't dare step into the garage. Tim will be the first to tell you you never go onto someone's property without them knowing you're there, preferably watching you. He told me once about how he tripped a silent burglar alarm houses like this will have. He had leaned against a window while trying to get at some weeds under an oleander next to the house. A minute later there in the driveway were four cruisers parked at crazy angles, doors open, officers squatting behind those doors, guns out and cocked. They'd made him surrender his hand-clippers there on the spot.

So we waited. And we waited, and we waited some more. Maybe fifteen minutes altogether, the sun sliding down all this time toward the cottonwoods that lined the alley behind us. Finally Tim called out, "Hello?" He pushed himself off the fender of the truck, took a few steps toward the garage, then called out again. Nothing. He went that way the fifteen yards to the garage, calling out every few steps, then listening, until finally he made it to the chair. I was still hanging back, only a few feet from the truck.

He looked down at the chair. "Shit," he said, then leaned over, pulled a yellow slip of paper from the seat. He looked at it, slowly walked over to me, shaking his head. He handed me the piece of paper. It read:

Gardener:

This is the chair.

You must be careful with it.

It was written in big, girlish handwriting, the "i's" dotted with big circles, the capital letters three times bigger than necessary.

I looked up at Tim. I said, "This is the chair. We must be careful with it." I laughed a little, but he didn't, just turned and headed into the garage, started muscling the chair by himself until I got there to help.

He started out gardening by mowing lawns afternoons when we were kids. Actually, the lawns he mowed had been my route, but after a couple of years of it I gave it over to him. Of course at that time I didn't know what he would do with it, didn't know he would end up making more money per year than me, that I would even end up mowing yards for *him*

for money as I did one summer when I'd been laid off at the newspaper. But it makes me happy to be able to say I sponsored the guy back then, got him his start.

From then on out all he wanted were things that he could use for gardening: for Christmas one year he got a wheelbarrow, and one birthday he'd gotten a second-hand gas edger. For high school graduation he got a front-throw reel mower. I was happy all those years getting a BB gun for Christmas, or a balsawood airplane for a birthday, or new tires for my '63 Nova, which is what I got for my graduation. And all those years I was just looking at my nutty brother and his gardening stuff, just wondering what went on inside that head of his.

Which is what I was thinking when, right after he'd jumped on me to turn off what little bits of Hawaii we could have had along with us, he turned to me and said, "I'm quitting being a gardener."

I turned to him. He'd already looked back out the windshield to the road and that broken white line, the only thing to alter what you saw out there in the light from the headlights the occasional bat that swung down and disappeared.

I said, "You're just pissed at that woman. At letting us wait, ignoring us like we were toads or less."

Tim was still looking out the windshield. He said, "I'm not pissed. It's not that. I deal with that crap every day, people regarding you as if you were trash just because you do something to the ground and you do it with your hands. I've put up with that since day one." All I could see was his profile, black there in the cab, beyond him, out his window, greasy bushes, black mountains, those stars.

"Then what is it?" I asked, and I waited for an answer. I waited, but when after a couple of minutes he didn't say anything, I shrugged my shoulders. Then I leaned forward, started to reach for the radio. I was lonesome for Hawaii, for Boise, Boulder, anywhere, but when my hand touched the knob, Tim said, "Don't." He'd almost whispered it this time.

I looked at him. He had turned to me, and I could see the faintest face, the green light cast from the dashboard just filling in his cheeks, his chin, his forehead. His eyes were still gone, still in there somewhere. He looked back to the road.

He cleared his throat, scooted around in his seat. He said, "You know," and stopped. He took a breath. "You know," he started again, "Lew's

wife died. Betty. Sunday morning.”

Lew was my brother’s next-door neighbor, an old guy, in his seventies, Tim had once told me. He was a big guy, six-two and thin, his white hair slicked back on the top and sides. I’d met him only once, when I’d been over at Tim’s borrowing of all things a lawn mower. Lew had walked up the driveway, said to Tim, “Who’s this bastard going to abscond with your professional materials?” We’d all laughed, and he gave me this smile. He had bad teeth on top and bottom, but he had the easiest smile, so simple you didn’t even mind the teeth, the kind of smile that made you feel like you’d known him since you were a kid, like he knew the good and bad of you all at once.

I’d never met Betty, though. All I knew about her was that she’d had a stroke three or four years ago, and this I’d heard from my wife through Tim’s.

“Massive brain hemorrhage,” Tim went on. “She’d been in the hospital three weeks when she died. The night she had the hemorrhage, the night she went into the hospital, everything came out to the house. It was three in the morning. Police, fire trucks, ambulance, the works came out for it. Beth and I watched the whole thing from the bedroom. We thought they’d had a fire or something.”

He went quiet, and another bat fell into the light of the headlights, then shot back up. It just disappeared, a little brown chip in and gone.

He put both hands on the wheel. I could tell he wanted to say this, finally figured that this was what he’d been working on in his head the whole trip, and so I settled in, let him talk. When he had something to say he would say it, and we had all the time we could use to get across this desert.

“I was mowing the yard,” he started up. “Sunday morning, about seven, when Lew pulls up. He sits there in his car a minute before the motor’s off. I knew that she’d died. I could just tell. He didn’t even have to get out of the car. I cut the mower right then.

“We used to mow our lawns together, I was thinking. Lew and I used to get up every Sunday morning and do our lawns, match each other stroke for stroke up and back. We both had Bermuda in front, and we’d have contests to see who could cut his lawn closest without losing the green. That’s what I was thinking about.”

He stopped, looked out his side window a second. “Keep going,” I said,

though I knew he'd go ahead whether I said anything or not.

"Azaleas," he said. "The man had azaleas in the flowerbeds in the front yard, along the sidewalk, next to the mailbox. He had them in his back yard, too. Against the back fence. Bordering the patio. Azaleas."

I tried to picture azaleas, but couldn't get anything together. All I could remember of Lew's yard were green bushes. Just bushes to me.

"All colors," he said. "Violet, white, pink, red. Azaleas everywhere. You know why? It was because Betty loved them. When things blossomed, the whole yard went crazy. So much color. Pink and white and red. Azaleas."

I reached up to the visor, pulled out the pack of cigarettes he had wedged up there. It was time for another cigarette. The last ones we had were all the way back at Gila Bend. We'd bought the pack at a Circle K just before we'd gotten on the freeway out. We figured we'd need the things in order to pass the time, and now here was the time. A sign we'd passed a minute or so before had let us know we were only nine miles from Desert Center, Desert Center being not even halfway to Indio.

I pulled out a cigarette, then gave the pack to Tim. He shook one out, gave me the pack to put back above the visor. He pushed in the lighter.

We got the things lit, and I took in the first hard smoke. I knew I'd catch hell from Julie for this when I got home, as I've quit the nasty habit four times in recent memory. But smoking now was different, I would tell her. There is a distinct difference, I would say, between smoking in the desert and smoking while throwing bundles out the back of your truck. This smoking was okay, I would say.

Tim just pulled on his cigarette, didn't even inhale it. He shot out the smoke, then went on. "He had Bermuda there in the front," he said, "and Saint Augustine in the back, that stuff with the wider blades. The thick stuff you need to cut just as close as the Bermuda. And the trees he had over there were all things you could eat, I was thinking. In the front yard he had an olive tree, and around to the side yard was a plum tree. In the back he had dwarf lemon and orange trees, planted in those oak half-barrels. He had an avocado tree, and a peach tree back there. And against the other side of the house he had a grape arbor. He told me it was Betty who wanted trees, trees that would grow things you could eat. That's why he planted everything."

We sat there a few minutes, quiet. I was having a good time with the

cigarette, that menthol air down in my lungs like some old friend.

“He used to bring her out into the sun while we worked on our yards,” Tim said, and I could tell by his voice that he was smiling talking about this. He was happy. “He’d set up a lawn chair in the middle of his driveway, then walk her out and set her down in the sun, and then we’d have at it. She sat there without moving, you know, because of the stroke, and she watched us. Sometimes Beth would come out, too, maybe brush out her hair for her, or just sit next to her in one of our own lawn chairs, and talk to her. The four of us would be out there in the sun, just there.”

His voice cracked a little, and I took it to be the cigarette. Maybe he’d finally decided to inhale, I figured. He let out his smoke, took a deep breath.

“Some nights I’d lie awake and think about what it would be like,” he said, this time a little slower, a little quieter. “What it would be like to have just those things to worry about. Just your own yard, your own trees, your own azaleas. Nobody else’s. Some nights I’d get up and look out the bedroom window at Lew’s yard, and just wonder. And I’d start envying him, even though he had a wife who’d had a stroke, who he had to take care of all the time.” He stopped a second, readjusted himself in the seat. “He fed her,” he said. “He washed her hair. He took her to the bathroom. He taught her to walk again. Each day for seven months he made her get out of bed and take a step, one more step each day, until by the seventh month he’d gotten her to walk all the way to the kitchen.”

We’d finished our cigarettes by now, and at almost the same time we both reached to stub things out in the ashtray. Tim didn’t notice that he’d almost burned a hole in the back of my hand, his eyes so fixed on the asphalt in front of us.

Tim had gotten me to thinking of Julie, though, and I tried to imagine for a few seconds doing all those things for her, taking care of her, but I couldn’t come up with anything, no real pictures in my head of her leaning over the sink, me scrubbing her scalp, or of me taking her to the bathroom. I just couldn’t muster those pictures.

I shook out another cigarette then, which of course would make it two in a row, which of course constitutes taking up smoking again, but I didn’t care. I really didn’t care. I just wanted Tim to keep talking. I put the pack in my front shirt pocket, popped in the lighter.

“That’s tough,” I said. “That’s a tough life, for certain.” And it was, too, I figured. The lighter popped, and I took it out.

Tim hadn't heard a thing. He just stared out the windshield. He hadn't even noticed my second cigarette.

"So what I did was this," he said. "It'd been three weeks since Lew had touched his yard, not since Betty'd gone into the hospital. Lew had already gone into the house by this time, so I pushed the mower out onto the sidewalk and went over to his yard and went in on his lawn. It was all I could think to do. I had at it. I mowed his grass as close as I could, and then I mowed it again. Then I took out the edger and went all the way around the yard. Then I turned the dirt in the flowerbeds, then swept everything off—the sidewalk, the porch, the driveway—and then I hosed everything down. I could feel Lew watching me all this time, somewhere in the house, but it didn't matter. I was thinking about the lawn, about how it still didn't look right, something still didn't look good about it.

"Then I went around to the side gate and let myself in, wheeled the mower and edger in, then had at the back yard. I gave it the same treatment as the front. I never cut grass any lower in my life. I swear it.

"And all this time Lew's back there in the house, watching me, I can tell. I felt like he was right there with me, right behind me sometimes, watching me weed the beds, trim the yard, dump grass into barrels. Sometimes I'd look out the corner of my eye to the sliding glass window on the porch, but I never saw him. I just kept on."

He stopped talking, and I think we both saw the rabbit at the same time. It was just there all of a sudden, this skinny Western Jack, all back legs kicking out, black-tipped ears sticking straight up. It'd run out onto the highway, then made a crazy turn and started zig-zagging up the road, as if it thought it had a chance of outrunning us. All this in a second, the time it takes you to sit up and take a cigarette out of your mouth, which is what I did.

Then it stopped, sat there like a cutout in a shooting gallery, the reflection of the headlights in its eyes, that ugly bright yellow.

Tim swerved to miss it, took us off the road onto the shoulder, both of us bouncing up and down in the cab, rocks and gravel shooting up into the fenders and sounding like fireworks. Then he swerved back onto the blacktop, and we were riding right along, no difference in anything, except Tim. He had both hands tight on the steering wheel, sat hunched up over it.

"Relax," I said, even though I was still feeling the rocks in my stomach,

too. "Just relax. It was only a rabbit."

But Tim just sat there, whispered *Son of a bitch* once, then went quiet.

Two cigarettes later we hit Desert Center, a poke up of lights, an overpass, and then we were back on the desert.

I'd already smoked half the pack, and the guilt was starting to wear off. Cigarettes will do that to you when you start up again. The first couple of them will make you feel as guilty as all hell, like everyone you know or ever knew who'd smoked and quit or had never even started were watching you, but along about the tenth one down, halfway through that first pack, you start thinking *Hey, I deserve this*. These cigarettes are okay. My reward. And then the eyes of everyone on you just start dropping away, fading out, until you're the only one, just you and that friendly cigarette there at your lips.

That was how I was feeling. Tim hadn't said a word about the cigarettes yet, and I didn't imagine he would. Julie was still a couple hundred miles away, probably getting ready for bed now in a little house in Garden Grove, where on good days you could catch a hint of the ocean in the air, the salt and the green of it.

I smiled at nothing, then turned to Tim. "Keep going," I said. "You're not done yet, are you?"

He didn't move.

I said, "You want another smoke?"

He nodded then, a quick jerk of his head, and I was there with a cigarette already pulled out for him, had the lighter pushed in before he got the cigarette settled between his fingers. When the lighter popped I pulled it out, and Tim leaned over. I put it to his cigarette, the orange glow lighting up his face, and I could see his eyes for the first time since the sky had gone dark. They were a little glassy, maybe a little wet. He pulled away, and I put the lighter to my own cigarette.

I said, "Hit it. Get on with the story."

"Things," he said, and that was it for a minute. He just sat there, leaned his head to one side. "Things, things still didn't look good," he said, and now his voice was all low, almost whispering, and I tried to figure what was coming next. I didn't have an idea in my head. I thought that I could figure this guy out, thought I knew what he would do one minute to the next. Now his words were all quiet, his eyes full. He might as well have been crying.

“Things still didn’t look good,” he said again. “I figured a good trim and cut and weeding would do the trick, but it didn’t. So I went to my garage and got out the garden shears. That was it, I knew. Things had to be cut back. Things were shaggy. I started with the oleanders along the left fence in his back yard. Then I got a pair of pruning shears and cut back his rosebushes against the back fence. They didn’t really need it, but I still cut the hell out of them. And each snip, each branch falling back made me feel better.

“I finished that, and then I started in on everything else in his back yard. I cut everything back. I knew he was watching me, but I didn’t look to see if I could catch him. I got a pair of lopping shears from my garage, and cut back his avocado tree, his peach and plum trees. I cut back branches until it looked like dead winter and some big storm had torn leaves, branches, everything off. I went back to the grape arbor and cut the hell out of everything back there. Everything will come back, I was thinking. It’ll all come back. And then I went at the azaleas. I got down on my knees and started trimming and shaping and trimming some more. That was when Lew finally came out.”

He took a swipe across his eyes with his forearm, his cigarette waving through the air in the cab. He’d only taken one drag, and I knew the ash must have been an inch long if it hadn’t fallen into his lap yet. If it had, he hadn’t made a move, hadn’t noticed a thing. His eyes were on the road, both hands back on the wheel.

He took a deep breath. “I looked up from the flowerbed,” he said, “and there he was with his arms crossed, his head lowered. He didn’t look at me, only at the bushes. He nodded, and I went on. I didn’t say anything.

“He went around the yard then. He went to the arbor and touched the branches, went to the orange tree and put his hand around the trunk. He squatted down and ran his hand across the grass, that grass I’d cut so short. Then he came over and watched me finish shaping the azaleas. Then I led him into the front yard and started working on the azaleas there.” He stopped again, took another breath. He seemed to relax, and took one hand off the steering wheel. “We never said a word. There was nothing to say. He just watched me. And then I came home. I went into the kitchen to the sink and started running the water so I could wash my hands, and when I looked out the window over the sink, there was Lew, standing out in the middle of the street. He’d gone into the house and brought out a

camera. It was an old thing, ancient. But there he was. He had the thing up to his face, and he was taking a picture of the house, of the yard. He was taking a picture.”

He leaned forward, stubbed out the cigarette he'd taken only one drag from.

That was it. He'd finished his story. He put his right hand on the wheel, moved his left hand to his forehead, his elbow against the window.

I waited a few seconds. “That’s sad,” I said. I turned to him. “That’s sad about his wife.” I finished off my cigarette, then let three more telephone poles pass us before I said, “If you’re really quitting gardening, then I’ll take your route over. I’ll take it off your hands.” I was serious, too. I said, “I’ll take the dirt on my hands over newsprint any day.” I laughed a little, then coughed, felt the smoke down there already settling in my lungs.

He turned and looked at me. He didn’t say anything, just looked at me.

I said, “Hell, it makes sense, doesn’t it? I gave the damned thing over to you when we were kids in the first place, if you’ll remember. It was me who gave you my business. Who else would you give it to? I’m your brother, remember?” I was smiling at him.

He turned back to the road. Then he slowly shook his head. He rolled down his window all the way, his arm pumping the handle around and around as fast as he could.

The wind from outside shot into the cab, warm wind from off the desert. You wouldn’t think the air would be that warm, everything so dark out there, but it was. Tim put his elbow out the window, that piece of him sticking out into the dark.

“Too much cigarette smoke,” he said above the roar of the wind. “Too goddamned much cigarette smoke,” he said. He was still shaking his head.

I put my hand up to my shirt pocket, felt for the pack. I pulled it out, put my finger into the top of it. There were only two cigarettes left. Only two.

“You’re right,” I said, more to myself than to anybody. I coughed, and there was that smoke again. “You’re right,” I said so he could hear me. I took the pack, shoved it up above the visor, up there where it belonged.

I reached for the radio, turned it on. I wheeled that knob back and forth ten times before I turned the thing off. Hawaii was long gone. There was nothing. Not even a station from Indio or Blythe or Desert Center, if they had one. Only static all the way across.

I sat back, looked at Tim, my brother, saw his profile, his wavy hair jumping around in the wind. I tried to figure him out. I tried to figure what he would do next.

He had to be hungry, I knew that. The last thing we'd had to eat was a sliver of wedding cake two hundred miles and a rocker-recliner behind us. I knew he was hungry, and I imagined us dropping down into Indio, down into air even warmer than this, the low spread of lights below us that would be Palm Springs. We would pull into a Denny's, go in and take stools at the counter, wait for an over-tanned waitress to come up to us, ask us what we'd like. And I'd look at her, thin wrinkles beside her eyes and under her chin from all that sun, and I'd look at my brother, the same one sitting here with me in this cab, and, just to lighten things up a bit, I'd say to the waitress, Would you guess we were brothers? Look at us. Would you guess that? I might even lean over toward him, put my arm around his shoulder, give a grin like what kids will do in photo booths. We're brothers, I'd say. Believe it?