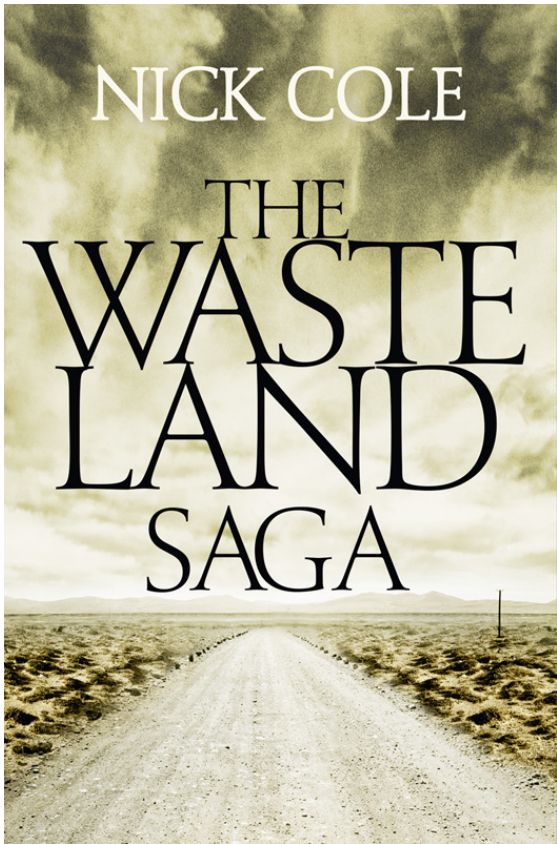


NICK COLE

THE
WASTE
LAND
SAGA



Nick Cole

The Wasteland Saga: The Old Man and the Wasteland, Savage Boy and The Road is a River

Аннотация

Part Hemingway, part Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, *The Old Man and the Wasteland* is a suspenseful odyssey into the dark heart of the Post-Apocalyptic American Southwest. Forty years after the destruction of civilization...Man is reduced to salvaging the ruins of a broken world. One man's most prized possession is Hemingway's classic 'The Old Man and the Sea.' With the words of the novel echoing across the wasteland, a survivor of the Nuclear Holocaust journeys into the unknown to break a curse. What follows is an incredible tale of survival and endurance. One man must survive the desert wilderness and mankind gone savage to discover the truth of Hemingway's classic tale of man versus nature.

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**NICK COLE
THE
WASTELAND
SAGA
THE OLD MAN AND
THE WASTELAND,
THE SAVAGE BOY
AND THE ROAD IS A RIVER**



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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

It was dark when he stepped outside into the cool air. Overhead the last crystals of night faded into a soft blue blanket that would precede the dawn. Through the thick pads of his calloused feet he could feel the rocky, cracked, cold earth. He would wear his huaraches after he left and was away from the sleeping village.

He had not slept for much of the night. Had not been sleeping for longer than he could remember. Had not slept as he did when he was young. The bones within ached, but he was old and that was to be expected.

He began to work long bony fingers into the area above his chest. The area that had made him feel old since he first felt the soreness that was there. The area where his satchel would push down as he walked.

He thought about tea, but the smoke from the mesquite would betray him as would the clatter of his old blue percolator and he decided against it.

He stepped back inside the shed, looked around once, taking in the cot, patched and sagging, the desk and the stove. He went to the desk and considered its drawers. There was nothing there that should go in his satchel. He would need only his tools. His crowbar, his worn rawhide gloves, his rope, the can of pitch, the tin of grease and his pliers. Not the book.

But if I die. If I go too far or fall into a hole. If my leg is broken then I might want the book.

He dismissed those thoughts.

If you die then you can't read. If you are dying then you should try to live. And if it is too much, that is what the gun is for. Besides, you've read the book already. Many times in fact.

He put the book back in its place.

He went to the shelf and opened the cigar box that contained the pistol. He loved the box more than the gun inside. The picture of the sea, the city, and the waving palms on the front reminded him of places in the book. Inside the box, the gun, dull and waiting along with five loose shells, an evil number, rattled as his stiff fingers chased them across the bottom.

Moving quickly now he took the old blue percolator and rolled it into the thin blanket that lay on the cot. He stuffed them both inside the worn satchel, reminding him of the book's description of the furled sail. "Patched with flour sacks ... it looked the flag of permanent defeat." He shouldered the bag quickly and chased the line away telling himself he was thinking too much of the book and not the things he should be. He looked around the shed once more.

Come back with something. And if not, then goodbye.

He passed silently along the trail that led through the village. To the west, the field of broken glass began to glitter like fallen stars in the hard-packed red dirt as it always did in this time before the sun.

At the pantry he took cooked beans, tortillas, and a little bit of rice from the night before. The village would not miss these things. Still they would be angry with him. Angry he had gone. Even though they wished he would because he was unlucky.

Salao. In the book unlucky is *Salao*. The worst kind.

The villagers say you are “curst.”

He filled his water bottle from the spring, drank a bit and filled it again. The water was cold and tasted of iron. He drank again and filled it once more. Soon the day would be very hot.

At the top of the small rise east of the village he looked back. Forty years maybe. If my count has been right.

It was an old processing plant by the side of the highway east of what was once Yuma. It was rusting in the desert before the bombs fell, now it was the market and pantry of the village. Its outlying sheds the houses of the villagers, his friends and family. He tried to see if smoke was rising yet from his son’s house. But his daughter-in-law would be tired from the new baby.

So maybe she is still sleeping.

If his granddaughter came running out, seeing him at the top of the rise against the dawn, he would have to send her back. He was going too deep into the wasteland today.

Too dangerous for her.

Even though she knows every trick of salvage?

I might need her. What if I find something big?

“I may not be as strong as I think, but I know many tricks and I have resolution.”

My friend in the book would say that, yes.

He would send her back. It was too dangerous. He adjusted the strap wider on his shoulder to protect the area above his heart where the satchel always bit, then turned and walked down the slope away from the village and into the wasteland.

CHAPTER TWO

He sang bits of a song he knew from Before. Years hid most of the lyrics and now he wanted to remember when he first heard the song. As if the memory would bring back the lost words he'd skipped over.

Time keeps its secrets. Not like this desert. Not like the wasteland.

In the rising sun, his muscles began to loosen as his stride began to lengthen, and soon the ache was gone from his bones. His course was set between two peaks none of the village had ever bothered to name after the cataclysm. Maybe once someone had a name for them. Probably on charts and rail survey maps of the area once known as the Sonoran Desert. But such things had since crumbled or burned up.

And what are names? He once had a name. Now the villagers simply called him the Old Man. It seemed appropriate. Often he responded.

At noon he stopped for the cool water in the bottle kept beneath the blanket in his satchel. Still mumbling the words of the song among the silent broken rocks, he drank slowly. He had reached the saddle between the two low hills.

Where had he first heard the song? he wondered.

Below, the bowl of the wasteland lay open and shimmering. On the far horizon, jagged peaks; beyond those, the bones of

cities.

For seventy-eight days the Old Man had gone west with the other salvagers, heading out at dawn with hot tea con leche and sweet fry bread. Walking and pulling their sleds and pallets. In teams and sometimes alone. For seventy-eight days the Old Man had gone out and brought back nothing.

My friend in the book went eighty-six days. Then he caught the big fish. So I have a few days to go. I am only seventy-eight days unlucky. Not eighty-six. That would be worse.

Every canyon silent, every shed searched, every wreck empty. It was just bad luck the others said. It would turn. But in the days that followed he found himself alone for most of the day. If he went down a road, keeping sight of the other teams, they would soon be lost from view. At noon he would eat alone in the shade of a large rock and smell on a sudden breeze their cookfires. He missed those times, after the shared lunch, the talk and short nap before they would start anew at what one had found, pulling it from the earth, extracting it from a wreck, hauling it back to the village. Returning after nightfall as the women and children came out to see this great new thing they could have back. This thing that had been rescued from the time Before and would be theirs in the time of Now. Forty years of that, morning, noon, and night of salvage. It was good work. It was the only work.

Until he found the hot radio.

His first years of salvage were of the things that had built the village. On early nights when the salvagers returned and light

still hung in the sky, he could walk through the village and see the things he had hauled from the desert. The door on his son's house that had once been part of a refrigerator from a trailer he and Big Pedro had found south of the Great Wreck. The trailer someone had been living in after the bombs. There were opened cans, beer, and food inside the trailer. Cigarette butts in piles. That had been fifteen years after the war. But when they opened the door it was silent and still. An afternoon wind had picked up and the trailer rocked in the brief gusts that seem to come and go as if by their own choosing. Big Pedro did not like such places. The Old Man never asked the why of how someone salvaged. He accepted this of Pedro and together they'd worked for a time.

Outside he heard Pedro asking if there was anything. The Old Man knew he would find a dead body. There were always dead bodies. Salvage and dead bodies go hand in hand.

The trailer rocked for a moment, and as the Old Man adjusted his eyes to the dim light within, he waited for salvage to be revealed. This was how one salvaged. Just waiting and watching a thing. A wreck, someone's home, or a railway shed. In the desert it paid to wait. A quick choice owned you. A wrench, a hammer, and one might not see the saw. Too often the wealth of the past could distract one from what was really there. He had seen piles of money, gold, jewelry, pornography. What good were such things now?

But in the trailer there was a story. There was always a story of salvage. In a wreck, one could see the skeletons crushed under

the weight of their possessions as the vehicle left the highway. Rolling over and over in the dirt and down a culvert. To lie trapped for years. Waiting for ambulances that would not come. Rescue that could not rescue itself while mushroom clouds broke the unbroken horizon. On that day when everything changed.

On that long ago hot afternoon when Big Pedro waited outside in the sighing wind, all was quiet inside. He stepped in, closing the door behind him. There was no life here. Just dry dust and the shed skins of the rattlers that seemed everywhere at times and then at others could not be found.

All the cans were crushed, all the cigarettes that lay in neat piles had been smoked down to the filter. Whoever had lived here had brought these cans and cigarettes from the cities. Beer and cigarettes, possibly a gun. Cans of food. But it had been too little. Whatever one brought for the destruction was always too little. The Old Man had seen it, would see it a thousand different ways. In the wrecks and the sheds and the boxcars and the fortified gas stations how long can any supplies last? Could anyone during those two weeks, when a new bomb fell on a new city each new day, could anyone have known that the terror would never end? That life as one knew it would never return.

No, even I did not know it.

Next week the government will come, things will return to normal. Next year. In two years' time. One day you stop waiting and you begin to salvage.

What your crowbar can bring up from the desert is the only

thing you can expect.

Whoever once lived in that trailer had refused to believe things would never be the same. It was a tale of smoked cigarettes near a smashed radio in the corner. Alcohol through the long night as angry winds struck at the sides of the trailer like some giant moving in the outer dark. Tomorrow became next year and next year became too much to bear. Eventually, whoever it was left, and that was all the story that remained and could be told truthfully of the trailer. What happened after, a gunshot at the end of a broken leg, sunstroke, exposure, insanity; those also were stories the Old Man had seen in the desert. But who could connect one to the other? One learned after the bombs to stop needing answers or the ends of stories.

There was little salvage in the trailer. What remained was obvious. The refrigerator. Who could take that where they were going? Unless there was power of a sort where the journey, or the flight as it felt, ended. But in the Old Man's village there was power, sometimes.

Soon he and Big Pedro, sweating, had the refrigerator out on the cracked and broken highway, east of the Great Wreck. It took the better part of three days to get it back to the village. Word spread among the villagers that something big had been found. The Old Man and Pedro were bringing something back. On the last day, two hours after dawn the villagers began to arrive in pairs and groups along the broken highway, their curiosity unrestrained, uncontainable. The haul back became a carnival.

By nightfall, remembered the Old Man, a pig had been killed; precious few of them then. All through the night Jason the Fixer worked, cursing coils and elements. At midnight the thing began to hum and two hours later there was ice.

In the hours leading up to dawn, in the main hall of the old factory, the Old Man was the first to stand in front of the open door and feel the cold. How many years had it been since he stood in front of an open refrigerator door in the middle of the night, feeling that precious cold caress the dust-caked lines of his face? He didn't remember, he didn't care. The cold was enough.

“We would have that for all of our lives.”

That's what my friend in the book said when he and the boy talked of taking the great baseball player fishing. He understood.

“We would have that for all of our lives.”

Now the Old Man took another drink from his water bottle. That night of the refrigerator, the days ending in a carnivale of roast pig meat and ice seemed long ago. Something that happened to a hero who was not him, did not look like the old face in the pieces of mirror on the few days he chose to shave each week.

He looked at the bowl of the wasteland. It seemed empty and void. A place of nothing.

I must go into it. I am cursed by that hot radio.

They never said you could not salvage with them again.

They didn't need to.

From the Great Wreck to the village and as far east as the Gas

Station he would no longer salvage, though no one salvaged in the East anyway as it was considered evil. Even the Gas Station, which lay on the far side of a small town that burned to the ground for no reason anyone could remember in the days of the bombs, held little salvage. Further east the bombs had fallen. Anything from there was as bad as the hot radio. The village would allow no salvage from there.

So he could not go east, and west and south was for the village. He must go north. North lay the wasteland.

He rolled his water bottle back into his thin blanket, placing it back in the patched leather satchel. He placed the wide-brimmed hat he always wore back atop the stubble of his scalp. There was nothing in the wasteland. No salvage ever came of it. Treks into it returned with nothing or never returned.

The sun was high above now. Adjusting the strap, he set off down the rocky slope, dodging lone black volcanic rocks that had dotted the landscape long before the bombs, before the Spanish, before the Anasazi.

CHAPTER THREE

In the desert, alone, I must look far and near at once. Things that are far seem very near and I must remember that.

Jagged pink peaks to the east seemed a day's walk. But the Old Man knew they were well beyond that.

Maybe there is another reason for my curse and not the hot radio. Maybe I have become lazy. Too used to finding easy salvage on the ground at my feet. Or others finding it for me.

Heading down the slope into the white sandy bowl of the wasteland, the thought of his failure as a salvager gave the Old Man a new comfort. Maybe it was not a curse. He needed better technique; he had grown lazy. He would return to everything he knew about salvage; he would forget to be lazy and instead remind himself to be vigilant. To leave no stone unturned. This was better than being cursed.

On a far ridgeline, he saw movement and wondered if it were goats moving among the clipped rocks. For a long time he kept checking the ridge, hoping to see them again, but in time he gave up and cursed himself for not sticking to his new promise. Later, after the sun's heat had reached its apex then sank to the horizon behind him, the details of the landscape ahead came into focus.

The heavy sunlight and the sandstorms that seemed to come and go throughout the day had revealed nothing more than a hazy diffusion across his vision. Now as the last light of day shone

directly into the heart of the wasteland, he could make out details. Purple scrub and gentle orange hills rising up along the edge he would make by tomorrow. Off to the east he saw a vehicle.

He'd heard of this vehicle. The few who had tried the wasteland had never gone more than a day or two into its depths. All told of the vehicle. It lay to the east and it was always bad to head east. The villagers would often mutter, *What good could come from the east?*

Stopping for a sip of water, he considered the vehicle, a splotch of red rust in the afternoon haze.

It seems harmless and there may be something to salvage. But it is east.

This is why you are here. Do you believe in the curse or in your own laziness? If it is the curse, then anything east can only make the curse worse. But if it is because you have lost the gift you once had for salvage because you look for what is obvious and easy, then there is no curse and the vehicle is the first rule of salvage. Some always leads to more.

The Old Man replaced the water bottle and shouldered his satchel. Thinking of when he might rest, he turned toward the east and the rusty car.

Night fell, but the sky remained blue for a long time. He lost sight of the car as he descended in and out of dry streambeds. For the last hour he hunted for it in the dark and just when he had begun to curse himself that he was indeed useless and had lost it altogether, he found it.

It was a sedan, half sunk in the dirt that became mud every monsoon season and frozen clay in the winter that followed. Forty cycles of monsoon, chill, and withering summer.

The Old Man dropped his satchel and gathered brush and mesquite. It was early fall and the nights would be cold. It was important to get a fire going.

Once the fire was in bloom with sparks rising into the night, the Old Man retrieved his crowbar and the tin of grease. He searched the wreck, finding a pile of bones on the floor beneath the steering column. The seats had turned to springs and nothing remained of the foam or material that had once covered them. The backseat held nothing, and in the trunk someone had once lit a fire, probably camping under the roof of the car. The fire in the trunk had kept them warm.

The Old Man returned to the fire and removed the cold beans from his satchel. Unrolling his blanket, he found the tortillas but decided to save them for morning. He placed the tin of beans in the fire and waited.

Above, dashing comets and stars restlessly winked at one another. Was there some sort of communication among them? How far away were they? Once the Old Man had seen, on a night far from the village, a satellite moving up there. Long after the bombs. It crossed the sky steadily, almost slowly, still flashing its lights. Its power still on. The Old Man looked for it again tonight.

The beans tasted good.

That was how hungry I was. A hard day's work and food tastes

good.

Putting the beans down the Old Man returned to the car once more.

Why here?

He looked at the front of the car.

The driver either crashed into something or ran out of fuel. But for some reason the driver stopped here. Were you dying?

In the days of the bombs, the Old Man who had been a young man remembered the chaos and disorder. Remembered the authorities shooting people. Fleeing Los Angeles, he had been stopped at a checkpoint just south of San Clemente. For hours he had been stopped as military helicopters crossed the sky above the reactor close to the ocean. It had made him nervous being that close to a primary target, the big reactors. A man arguing with the guards in a car ahead of him began to scream. Then the man left his car and began running for the mountains on the far side of the road. The guards shot him. His family, his wife screaming, a wide-eyed child in the back of the car watching.

I have not thought of that for years.

Why would you?

The fire popped noisily for a moment and then the deep silence of the wasteland at night settled back upon him.

But you stopped the car here. Why?

The windshield still held most of its dirty glass. It had spider-webbed into a blanket of crystals. But on the passenger side the windshield held a hole.

Something was on the passenger seat and when you hit the rock that stopped you, whatever it was came out and left the hole.

It was impossible to see what was underneath the car, but the Old Man suspected a big rock, low and jagged, had snagged the axle and stopped the vehicle dead.

The Old Man returned to his satchel and retrieved the can of pitch. Taking a stick, he covered the end with pitch and lit it in the fire. He returned to the front of the car that lay at the top of a small hill. He turned away from the car and faced outward into the dark.

There is always a story. To find it I need to know what happened. You are wounded. You are fleeing the cities and have become wounded. You have no plan, few supplies, and as the day progresses, as you flee burning Phoenix or forbidden Tucson, you drive off the road. The roads are a mess, refugees and Army fleeing to Yuma, which will be nuked in a day or two because of its base and refugee camps. You drive off the road. You are not thinking clearly; driving too fast you are wounded and sick or hungry and you have begun to believe you will find something out here. Something that will save you. But the vehicle is running out of gas, so you keep driving to the top of ridges and small hills, racing up the sandy shale to avoid getting stuck, then looking to see if there is any refuge in sight. On this hill you race up fast. The ground on the far side was soft. Yes I felt that as I walked up. Suddenly as you gun the accelerator, you slam into the rock and out goes the one thing you managed to grab before

the destruction. The car is hopelessly stuck and soon you die. Maybe you kill yourself with a pistol. But one of the countless salvagers who has wandered here has found that since, along with whatever supplies were in the trunk or backseat. Ah, a pistol and blankets and food, thinks my fellow salvager, what luck I have found good things. And he ignores the hole in the windshield. He has ignored the second rule of salvage. Be still and understand the story of what happened in this place. Quick action blinds.

How fast were you going when you hit the rock? Fast enough that it came upon you and took you by surprise? But not so fast, since you were nearing the top. Maybe you blacked out?

The Old Man walked outward from the front of the car. He thought of the size of the hole and the weight of the object as he walked down the other side of the hill scanning the ground.

Someone may have found it?

That does not matter. You are thinking as you once thought. Telling the story first. If you find the resting place of the thing and it is gone then you have won because you thought the way you are supposed to think. Some will always lead to more. That is the first rule.

I could wait until morning?

Why? You will sleep badly and all night think about where to look in the morning.

At the bottom of the hill was a dry riverbed. Holding his torch down near the ground he checked the bed for ash.

In the years after the destruction, flash floods of ash had filled

the old stream beds as the snowpack of that long winter had finally come to an end.

If the thing had fallen into the streambed then it is lost. Carried off by rivers of ash in the years since. Also most travelers use streambeds to move. They are shady, there might be water, and the rains may have collected salvage.

So if it landed in the stream then it is as good as gone.

Looking back to align himself with the car, he climbed up the rocky slope to the far side of the dry streambed. A few feet away he found a battered aluminum ice chest, half sunk in the mud and hidden by a mesquite tree that had grown up around its base. It was empty. Someone else had found it. Had followed the clues and found the thing in the dried mud with the broken cover.

The chest was too light to have made the journey from passenger seat through the window down the hill and across the streambed to land where it did. Whatever had once been inside had been heavy enough to propel it that far.

In front of the fire, the Old Man sat cross-legged and treated himself to one of the tortillas. He congratulated himself on finding the ice chest and thought little that it contained nothing. Instead he was happy that he had found it. Maybe the curse was a lie. It was he who had been lazy, easily accepting the blame of the curse. He was to blame. If so, then things were changing.

He finished the tortilla, put more mesquite on the fire, and took only a small drink of water so he did not have to pee in the night. He rolled himself in his thin blanket and was soon deep

asleep. In the night when the fire was low, he awoke thinking, 'I am sleeping really well tonight,' as though he had accomplished a great thing that had eluded him for some time. Pleased, he fell asleep once more.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next day he crossed into the dunes of the wasteland. The scrub and hard rock gave way to smooth sand pink with the rising sun. By noon the landscape faded and the pink of morning turned a blinding white.

It was still early fall. It wasn't as hot as it had been earlier in the year. The Old Man sipped the bottle of water, only half full now, and felt the heat more than he had expected to.

I need to look for water. Soon I will go too far and if I don't find anything, then even making it back to the village might be impossible.

Maybe they are looking for me.

In the night, toward dawn, he had dreamed of the child in the backseat of the car of the screaming man the guards had shot. She was the same age of forty years ago but the Old Man was still old, even though he had been younger that long-ago day than her father.

In the dream he was back in the village. The child, who was a girl most surely, had knocked on his door. After letting her in the Old Man gave her cold water and she sat down at his desk, looking out the one window he had salvaged from an overturned semi.

Have you been walking all night to get here? he remembered asking her. As if a night's journey accounted for all the years in

between that day and the dream.

But the child remained staring out the window, lost in thought and when she turned back to the Old Man she looked at him smiling. Then she said, *It never happened, y'know*. In the way a child who is young can affect a certain seriousness.

But the Old Man wasn't sure if she meant her father being shot by the side of the freeway under the shadow of the reactors. Or something else.

He woke with a start, and already a desert breeze was blowing across the soft blue of first morning. He rose quickly, promised himself some breakfast later and was soon away from the wreck. The dream had bothered him. And he wondered if the dream of the child and the wreck of the car weren't the cause of it.

Later, he felt better as he walked through a line of dunes. He was away from what was known to him of wrecks and the worst kind of luck. The wasteland was new. It was unknown. In a few hours, by nightfall, he would be farther than anyone had tell of in the depths of the wasteland. If anything, that was something.

So why did the dream bother you? It's noon, so speak it now and be done with it so the child does not return tonight.

Ahead, the wasteland fell deeper into a series of white dunes, and the Old Man entered them, weaving about the floor of them rather than climbing to the top of each.

I'll do my best to keep a rough bearing north and maybe a little east. I'll need water soon.

East is cursed.

Then my curse and the curse of the east will cancel each other out.

He couldn't remember what that was called; it was a law or something, something he had once learned in school.

How strange, he thought in the silence between the dunes. School. To think, once I attended a school. An elementary school, a school after that, and then even a high school. College. I couldn't even begin to explain school to the young of the village.

I am thinking too much. That is why I had the dream of the child. Too many things are coming up from the past and it is making my mind race. The silence of the wasteland is good for thinking.

You must think about water and salvage. You can't just think about the past. If you don't find water you won't be able to find something out here and bring it back to the village.

The shadows began to lengthen and soon the shade of the dunes became cool. Gathering stray brush he set up his camp in the lee of a long dune and soon had a fire going.

There had not been the least sign of any salvage, anything man had made, or even the presence of man. The Old Man sat chewing a tortilla and thinking about this. Usually back near the village, even though it was the desert, there seemed to be nothing but the things of man's past. All the collected salvage. The wrecks, the dead towns and settlements. Bones.

But how long since anyone had been through the wasteland? It had been forty years since the bombs. The years since, reasoned

the Old Man, had been too hard. Too close to the bone for anything that didn't yield enough profit to allow survival to the next day.

Maybe that was why there was no salvage in the wasteland. Staring into the fire, he thought of the child.

Did she survive that day?

Not if she remained on the West Coast, especially from Los Angeles to San Diego.

But if she had survived would her life have been good?

She would have less memories of what was lost. That is a kind of "good."

Those who survived those weeks of bombing, each one struggled with a question that determined whether they would keep salvaging or give up and die.

What was the question?

Can you let go of what is gone?

I think at first I felt that I could not go on. The things I lost were too painful and I could not imagine a life without them. I remember feeling awful. All the time. But I cannot remember when I changed. When I thought of salvage. When I thought of what was today and not of what had been or what was lost.

For a long time he sat hugging his knees, watching the crystal of the sky turn and revolve, and when the fire had burned down to red ash, he moved his blanket close to it and sat for a little while more, listening to it pop. Soon the sky began to grow dark. 'In a few nights,' he thought, his last thought before sleeping, 'we'll

have the moon.' Funny saying "we" he wondered, sleeping.

CHAPTER FIVE

There were no dreams that night and when he awoke, the sun was already well up and the heat a part of the day that could not be separated from it.

His face was heavy from the night as though the sleep had been more fight than rest. Instantly he wanted water and knew that any drink would be his last.

Then it will be my last.

Draining the bottle he decided he would find the water he would need to continue the journey or that would be the end of it.

I have in me what remains. So I have to be smart. If I dig and find no water, I will have sweated for nothing. I must find water.

He continued on now, bearing more east than north.

East is evil and that is why things are not going well. You should have continued north. Why are you going east?

The dunes continued in their sandy smothering brilliance and before long he began to think of the ocean and the book.

How would it be to have such a skiff as that in the book? To have ropes and a hand-forged hook. To catch the tuna and eat it raw with a bit of salt and lime.

He did not have salt and limes in the book. He wanted them but he did not have them. He ate the tuna raw.

He caught himself, sweating, almost sleeping as he walked, thinking that this was just a day at the beach, as if, in any

experience that was his, he'd ever had a day at the beach.

But I did. I remember the sting of saltwater on burned skin. I remember hot dogs and mustard and blown sand in the buns.

It was the thought of the watermelon that jerked him back to the present. Sweet, cool watermelon on a windy afternoon at the beach. School buses idling to take the children back to school during the last week of the school year. No more books, no more teachers' dirty looks. He saw his father's handwriting as he thought of those words. Summer would never end.

"Everything ends," he croaked to the dry silence between two monolithic dunes, as he trudged upslope through the clutching sand.

It is so hot that even the scorpions won't come out.

In the distance, the sun sank lower in the sunburned sky, as dunes began to grow long cool shadows pointing thin fingers to the east.

Without making camp he lay down in the cradle of a shady dune and fell to snoring.

When he awoke, the sun had fallen behind the highest dune and a stiff breeze lifted sand, sending it skirting across the smooth surfaces of the dunes. The body of a dead bee lay in the foreground of his skewed vision. His head pounded and he knew he was beyond any point of thirst he had ever experienced. Already his hand was half buried.

I have been asleep but a few minutes. The sand doesn't waste time.

Not ready to move his aching head, he remained staring at the dead bee in the canted landscape. He wasn't sure, but the sun seemed in the wrong position. If that was the case then it was not a few minutes but maybe the next day, and if that was the case then things were even worse than he had first thought. A new day of heat among the dunes.

There is little hope.

So at least, you have some hope.

It's just a saying. I actually have no hope.

No, you said you have little hope. Why?

Why what?

Why a little? A little hope would have gone a long way for that dead bee. But for you maybe it is too little.

The bee.

The Old Man shook himself upright. His face sandy, he stared wildly about, then closed his eyes as his head began to throb.

Bees always fly straight to water. Big Pedro had taught him that. And he had seen it. Many times.

The bee is dead. How can a dead bee lead you to water?

He was an ambitious bee. Like me.

Or he was cursed. Like you also.

Then this brother is a bee to me, he declared in confusion. I will find more bees. His brothers are my brothers. Some always leads to more and where there are more bees they will lead me to water.

It is morning so it will be cool for a while, but not long. Bees

like the heat.

Bending low he gently picked up the dead bee.

I will find us some water, my brother.

He placed the bee in the tin of grease and snapped the ancient lid shut.

That way seems familiar but dunes are all alike.

Heading into the sun now he climbed the first dune, and far to the east he saw blue ridges shadowed in the rising sun.

East is evil and cursed.

Ah but there are two of us now. I have my brother the bee and he has his brothers.

Soon the sun was hot, as first he climbed a dune, then descended only to start the process once more. It is the only way, he told the bee. It is the only way I can be sure I am heading to the ridge.

At the top of each sandy dune he scanned for swarms or movement of any kind. His eyes were still good and yet he saw no bees.

Maybe in the rocks, brother. Maybe that is where we will find your home.

At the full blaze of noon the Old Man descended the last dune into a short sandy scrub of low bushes. A few miles away lay the now red rock ridge.

For a moment the Old Man considered digging among the scrub for water but the plants were papery and did little to convince him of the chance of appreciable water.

Opening the tin of grease he looked at the dead bee.

I can only go so far, bee. So which way, huh? He held the bee up hoping to catch a breeze and saw himself from afar.

This is insane. Look at yourself. An Old Man holding a dead bee in the desert. If he comes back to life you are really crazy. The Old Man realized it was his young self talking to him. The self he had once been and had been thinking of too much since the dream of the child.

Be quiet. This is not so crazy. One of his brothers might smell him and come for a look. Then maybe I can follow him back to water.

The Old Man lurched forward into the scrub holding out the bee for any passing stray bee to smell. I can't trust my ears he said. They have been buzzing. So I will look for a black shape moving, hopping between the bushes of low scrub. That will be a bee.

When he had reached the limit of the little strength he had left, the ridge was still far off and on fire with the red of a late afternoon sun in decline.

The Old Man sat down knowing he would not rise, the wings of the bee still held gently between thumb and forefinger.

Well, we tried.

He could no longer swallow. His mouth felt coarse and thick. His throat a ragged burning trench and his body ached. Mostly in his throbbing head.

If I can lie here until dark, then the light won't hurt my eyes

so much and then maybe I can make it to the ridge.

But it was a lie as soon as he told it. By nightfall he would be beyond standing.

Then I must stand a little more and maybe a few steps will take me to the rocks of the ridge. And that also is a lie.

Standing, a dull bomb went off with a solid crack in the back of his skull as stars raced forward toward the rocks.

But it is my lie.

He continued forward. Moments later he saw a bee that came diving at him and then quickly tore away off toward the rocks. The Old Man shambled forward, trailing the bee, which hopped from shrub to shrub, sometimes methodical, at other times racing off toward the horizon. Just when the Old Man thought he had lost the bee forever, again the bee would leap up and head off along the same bearing.

Ahead, the Old Man could see a spur jutting out from the ridge, and following the spur back to the crook it left in the ridge, he saw a splotch of green.

But it is too far.

He continued after the bee, still holding the dead bee between his thumb and forefinger. The line from where he had met the bee and the splotch of green was true and straight.

Falling forward, he tripped on an exposed root and fell into the sandy chalk that rose up in plumes around him.

I have never been so comfortable in all my life.

If you don't get up, the bee who is flying will be gone and

you will never find the water, never find salvage, and you will die cursed.

I am cursed. I don't care. I want to sleep now.

He closed his eyes and when he did, he thought of his granddaughter who was just thirteen. It was she who had stayed faithful to him after the other villagers had cursed him and refused to salvage with him. She had begun to salvage with him. He had enjoyed that. The salvage had become more enjoyable and less desperate on those long mornings he spent with her as they walked and talked. Talked of all manner of things from the way the world had been to the way it is and sometimes of the way it might be. That had been enjoyable.

I am sorry, my brother bee.

Arms of sleep beckoned him a little further down the well of darkness.

I must use your help for a moment, little bee. I am sorry. I have to wake up for a while. Long enough to see what lies in the crook of the ridge.

He squeezed his palm hard shut and felt the stinger of the dead bee enter the flesh of his palm. An electric jolt coursed through his body and instantly the palm was alive with fire.

The Old Man kept his fist shut as he pushed away from the sand and began once more to the ridge.

Desert scrub, sandy and brown, gave way to large sunburned rocks. Reaching the crook in the ridge, he entered a stand of palo verdes. The Green Sticks the villagers called them. Back among

the rocks a quiet stream, barely more than a trickle, came out of the rocks feeding the little stand of palo verdes. The Old Man dropped his satchel and lay down to drink. The water was cool.

CHAPTER SIX

Noon turned to afternoon and soon a stiff breeze picked up among the feathery branches of the palo verdes. For a long time the Old Man returned to the stream to drink and drink again. All the while he gathered dead branches, piling them high for the night's fire.

There were just a few beans and one tortilla left. He had not felt hungry during the thirsty hours of torment amid the dunes, but now as his body began to soak up the water, his appetite returned. The few beans and tortilla were a coming feast to his hungry mind.

He went out beyond the perimeter of the palo verdes once more, into the scrub that bordered the wasteland. The dunes through which he had passed were now falling to pink and orange. Thin ribbons of snake-like shade slithered onto the desert floor while the graceful arcs of the dunes told the lie that he did not exist, had never existed among them.

He returned to his camp and started a small fire. In the twilight he finished the remaining beans and reluctantly saved the tortilla for morning. Tomorrow he would look for animal tracks and make the appropriate traps. Once he had enough food and water he could either return across the wasteland to the village or he might continue on.

He had failed to find salvage in the wasteland. The known

parts of the wasteland were behind him and he could only guess where he might be now. If he had to say, he would say west of what was once Phoenix and north of what was Tucson.

In the days of the bombs, he thought while the first stars began to peak through the drifting branches of the palo verde, there had been a large town in that area. The name was lost to him, but the memory of once having known it was not.

If he could find the town he might find salvage. Might find others too and that would present a whole different set of problems.

There is the gun. “Yes,” he mumbled his throat still raw. “There is that.”

He was glad his granddaughter was not with him. People, strangers who came to the village, made him think of this. After the bombs these people had not found villages, had not banded together to survive. They had wandered, and in their eyes he saw that they had done things. Things they found it hard to live with, but things they had done nonetheless. Too many years of “done” things, too many years of desert. Too many years in the cold and heat and condemnation. They didn’t seem human anymore. So, if he had to meet strangers, then it was good he didn’t have his granddaughter.

It is good then, he laughed, that I am cursed.

But what if you stay out here too long? What if you do too many “done” things?

Too long out there is what the villagers would say whenever

those strangers who had no village of their own would show up to trade, to beg, to die. Too long out there.

Now the sky was speckled with the stars above, as the blue light of the west seemed to draw away. He returned his eyes to the fire and tried to think about traps.

He thought of the traps he had been taught by Big Pedro in the days after the bombs when the village was not a village but just a small refugee camp. Traps for varmints, as Pedro had called them. Traps for serpiente. Snake would be good. He had enjoyed snake.

I'll go as far as the town whose name I cannot remember. If there is no salvage then I'll come back. Then the other villagers will know that I am cursed and it won't be expected of me to go out. I can help the women. Watch the children if they'll let me. Make things. I have always wanted to make a guitar.

You don't even know how to play.

Yes, but that has never stopped me from wanting to.

The fire burned the logs to ash among the orange and black glow of its heart. The stars above. The gently moving palo verdes in the night's breeze. The Old Man wrapped himself within his blanket and slept.

CHAPTER SEVEN

He returned to the stream at first light. He had been lying wrapped in his blanket, and for the first time the morning was not so bitterly cold.

At the stream he waited, watching as the light came up. He was thirsty, had been thirsty through the night. But he did not drink from the stream and would not until the light was good enough to see the tracks. Then he would know what made a home of these palo verdes beneath the rocky slope.

At first light he saw the tracks. Different pairs, one behind the other, four toes and a claw. Near the water's edge in the wet mud he could see the impression left by the fur. "It made sense," muttered the Old Man and he knelt to drink the cool water of the stream.

Finished, he looked up to survey the rocky hill that rose above the little oasis of palo verdes. The hill was more a small mountain. Like other small mountains it was more a collection of boulders: large, broken, shattered rock turning a soft hue in the rising sun of the morning.

He looked at the tracks once more. They had definitely come down from the rocks for a drink, and to hunt. The single-file nature of the prints told him they were foxes. He knew these animals. Oftentimes they would come near the village, but never to scavenge at garbage. Once he had seen one pass him on the

highway as he returned from salvage. He was in the southbound lanes walking back to the village; the fox, in the northbound lanes, carried a large dead rattlesnake in its mouth. The fox barely regarded him and continued its bouncing little trot toward the west. His son, then a little boy, had loved that story when he had told it, often asking him to tell it again.

He returned to his camp, hung his blanket in a tree, and began to search for an area under the palo verdes; an area of clearing but near enough to the trees. When he spotted a den of mice he knew he had a good area.

In the center of the clearing he dug a small two-foot hole. The bottom was deep and wide while the top was narrow. He dug two more exactly like it and then began to gather deadfall back at the camp. He thought he might like a nice fire that night even though there would be no food. When the firewood was gathered he selected six sticks and returned to the clearing. He placed two sticks on two sides of each hole and then returned to the stream to drink.

From the bottom of the rocky slope he retrieved three flat stones. He placed these atop the sticks surrounding each of the holes. Now there was a nice roof. Also there was a tiny entrance on each side of the hole underneath the rocks

Feeling tired he returned to his camp and lay down for a while. His strength was fading and he began to sweat thick salty tears. He was starving and the thought of the foxes made him hungrier. He would prefer rattlesnake, but there probably were none. Foxes

also liked snake and had most likely hunted the area clean.

They are good salvagers.

After some rest and another long drink at the stream he returned to the clearing. He watched the dens at the base of the palo verdes. He would need to catch the mice before the fox. He leaned against the thin green trunk of the tree he was standing near and closed his eyes. Then he opened them just enough.

Mice will think I am asleep. That will make them bold.

He waited. The sun turned to late afternoon.

Much longer and I won't have enough time to build a trap for the fox.

The day isn't done yet.

Moments later he was asleep.

As a young man, passing through Yuma on that last day, that last civilized day, he remembered thinking 'I have just three hours to go. Three hours and I'll make Tucson.'

Above, the sky was filled with fighter planes attempting to refuel from the big airborne tankers. People camped out along the road while the state police barred any entrance into Yuma. Surely, it was too small of a target for the bombs. They would hit the major cities first, as they had been doing. Each day another city exploded. First it had been New York. Everyone watched on the news. The next day Chicago. Had it been Chicago? the Old Man wondered in his dream. Had that been the next city?

The major cities were gone after two weeks. Internet and telecommunications were down. Who knew how many cities

were left. When he finally fled Los Angeles, everyone hoped Yuma would survive.

His parents were in Tucson. Tucson was just as off the map as Yuma. Maybe Phoenix would get bombed. But not Tucson. He had been sitting in checkpoints since three o'clock that morning. First the one in Orange County. Then San Onofre. Then San Diego. The Top of the Laguna Seca Pass. El Centro, and finally the dunes outside Yuma.

Suddenly there were no more checkpoints. And no entrance into Yuma. The President had finally landed after being airborne for most of the two weeks.

Yuma had been the destination of flight for so many. Who cared what lay beyond it? Now he was looking at Yuma in his rearview mirror; he was twenty-seven years old. Above, fighter planes ripped across the sky. Tankers circled and the runway was off-limits. One of the guards at the last checkpoint told him the President, who had been airborne, dodging missile strikes for two weeks, had finally landed in Yuma. Maybe the other side was out of weapons. Maybe Yuma was the high water mark. Maybe we had beaten them by surviving long enough to be left with Yuma. In his rearview mirror, heading up the rocky pass that led east from Yuma, he knew they were doomed. He didn't know why, only knew that they were.

He awoke with a jerk. He spotted the mouse instantly. He hadn't even needed to let his eyes unfocus, see everything, and track for movement. Instead he spotted the little mouse at the

instant the mouse noticed his jerk. Its eyes wide with terror, it froze.

The Old Man darted toward its den. The mouse twitched eyes wide with fear. Once the animal remained frozen the Old Man knew he'd cut off its retreat. He advanced with great stomping strides and instantly the mouse attempted an end run, hoping to dodge past him and into the burrow. The Old Man flailed wildly and yelled "Yaah," feeling lightheaded and stiff in his legs all at once.

The mouse retreated, scrambling back toward the middle of the clearing. The Old Man pursued, shaking off the dizziness and yelling as he flailed wildly with his arms. The creature, now in full panic, darted back across his path, hoping to break out past the Old Man. A deft stomp barely missed the mouse and sent it scurrying back toward the center of the clearing.

My granddaughter would enjoy this game.

If you had been a moment too late, the mouse would have gotten past you and the game would be over.

The mouse in full flight, panic-stricken, ran heedlessly away from the Old Man and realized its luck the moment it saw the flat stone ahead. There was enough space to squeeze under. Once inside it would be safe. With purpose the mouse raced for the flat stone, and once underneath fell into the concave hole the Old Man had dug.

When it did not emerge immediately, the Old Man knew it had fallen into the trap. He bent over, sweating hard, and closed his

eyes hoping not to pass out. He picked up the rock. The mouse, teeth bared, squeaked up at him. He placed the stone over the top of the hole and returned to the camp.

He retrieved the wire from his satchel and his knife, along with a little rope. At the stream, the tracks of the foxes had dried and could still be seen. Avoiding them altogether he followed them back into the brush. After a moment he lost their trail but he could guess at where they had made a straight line from the rocks to the water.

He looked left and right of the trail until he found a sapling. Maybe just a year old. He took the stake he had carved before sleeping and sank it firmly in the narrow trail. Looping his wire he connected the stake to a length of rope that he quickly turned into a noose. He laid the rope out some distance toward the small green palo verdes and bent the tree over until its top touched the ground. Then straddling it he tied off the rope around the sapling.

He returned to the hole. With a quick motion, he stabbed the mouse and waited for it to die. Then he set the dead body in front of the noose, which hung inches above the trail. He stepped away, resisting the urge to dress the trap. Leave it alone, he heard Big Pedro say. Washing his hands of the blood of the mouse and the dirt of the trail he took a long drink and returned to his camp.

The sun was low and he thought about food. He lit his fire and stared into it, thinking his own thoughts for a long time. The falling of the sun failed to rouse him as he continued to stare into the fire. He did not think about his aches. Or the village, which

would remind him of food. He thought about Yuma. And the girl whose father had been shot. Had she and her mother made it to Yuma? If so, then they too had died forty years ago.

I might hear the trap spring. But probably not. In the morning maybe there will be a fox. If not, then who knows?

He didn't like to think about that and so, piling a few more sticks onto the fire, he wrapped himself within his blanket.

Why can't I dream about the lions on the beaches of Africa like my friend in the book? At sunset they came down to the water to play like cats.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When he awoke there was a fox. It twisted in the morning breeze, its tongue lolling purple and its eyes wide in terror. It was beautiful. The Old Man admired its healthy coat as he skinned the little fox.

By late morning, strips of fox meat were skewered and roasting over ashy orange coals of smoking mesquite. The Old Man, calm and weak, walked among the palo verdes, drinking from the stream and looking for the honeycomb of the dead bee. Standing near the roasting strips of flesh was too much, so it was better to wander among the quiet trees.

By noon the meat was ready and at first he went slowly. He didn't want to become sick from too much too fast. For the rest of the day he ate slowly and continued to roast more and more of the fox. It would keep for a few days.

As night fell, he looked out into the great desert he had come across.

I survived. I can return and accept the curse. It isn't much of a curse. They will feed and take care of me. I will play my part. But as a salvager I am finished.

Maybe it is time to let that go.

Or I can continue on and try to find the town.

The dunes seemed nothing more than gentle curves and soft colors.

You tried to kill me. There was nothing in you. Nothing to take away. So what good are you? If I go across you again what could I find this time? Nothing. But if I find the town then maybe that is something, and if not I can pick up the Old Highway to the south and that will lead me back to the village.

But you will come from the east.

There is that.

He ate more fox and thought it might be nice with some tortillas. He set the rest of the meat to smoke in the coals throughout the night so that it would last for a few days more. Then he slept.

At dawn he was up. He felt better. He drank from the stream and chewed a little bit of the dried fox meat.

I think I might go on a bit.

He spent the morning climbing up out of the stand of green palo verdes and onto the broken rocks of the mountain. When he gained the summit he looked east. The landscape sank away into a bowl deeper than the one he had crossed.

It will be hotter.

At the extent of his vision he could see mountains, jagged and gray.

Almost at the center of the bowl, halfway between himself and the mountains, he could see a collection of buildings. Too small to be the town he once knew.

There might be a map or a sign that might lead to the town.

By late afternoon the small mountain was far behind him. The

going was mostly smooth and downhill. The heat reminded him of the bread oven back in the village.

CHAPTER NINE

After the bombs there had been dreams. Dreams everything lost had come back. The dead might walk through the barroom door two years after the global car wreck. The survivors, drinking to forget, would put down their cups. All would be as it once was. The dreams after the bombs were like that.

The neon sign came stuttering to life in the twilight of the desert. The Old Man stopped in the smooth blown sand.

There is power here.

The sign showed a sleepy little boy, in nightgown and night cap drifting toward a bed. In rockets bursting script the words “Dreamtime Motel” loomed large, then recessed toward a universe of smiling faced stars. Vacancy, air-conditioning, and color TV were all available.

The cluster of buildings were merely an L-shaped motel complete with swimming pool and the blackened remains of a nearby gas station, its metal twisted in telltale strands away from where the pumps had once been.

The lights of the hotel came softly to life here and there where bulbs still burned.

The east is cursed.

He moved forward cautiously, remembering the pistol within his satchel.

The parking lot was gritty with the windblown sand of the

years. Still, the cracks in it were nowhere near the rents and buckles of the main highway back near the village.

From the office, a man emerged wearing a Hawaiian shirt, his eyes hidden behind mirrored sunglasses.

“Room for the night, mister?” His voice the desiccated husk of a reptile. Used. Spent.

The Old Man remained staring.

If I am dreaming then this does not exist. Maybe the oasis of palo verdes did not exist. Maybe I am dying in the dunes still clutching the dead bee.

“Got room if yer lookin’.” Then the man with the mirrored sunglasses began to wheeze and laugh. After a second he said, “Have ever since before the bombs.”

The Old Man still standing in the twilight, his face illuminated by the flickering glare of the last wisps of neon, remembered the gun. His fingers, bony and old, adjusted the strap of his satchel.

“I got snake.” Mirrored Sunglasses moved forward. His body was long, though he wasn’t tall; the only roundness a potbelly that seemed more pregnant than fat. “You want snake for dinner?”

“What is this place?” croaked the Old Man.

Mirrored Sunglasses whirled, taking in the motel against the dying light in the west.

“This my hotel. Even before the bombs, I swear.” He seemed all out of breath and ragged at once.

“You got power.”

“Just a little ever’ night. Went solar before the bombs, but the

panels ain't doin so good these last few years. Got a well for water. Power ever' night. No air-condition though. And snake. Lotsa snakes east of here."

East is cursed.

"Where ya headed?"

"Into the town I thought used to be near here."

"The town? Why ya wanna go there fer? Burnt down during the bombs."

The Old Man was silent.

Still.

"Nothing left that way. All of it's gone. Seen two clouds that week. First Phoenix then Tucson. Nothing there but death. Won't be for another hundred years. Say where you come from?"

"West."

"Really?"

"Three days to the other side of the dunes. On the Old Highway a couple days this side of the Great Wreck."

"Never heard of no 'Great Wreck.'"

They remained standing in the parking lot, the Old Man considering what was his and his alone.

"I'll get the snake reheated. Et myself earlier, but I can get you some going."

"That would be nice of you. Thank you."

Mirrored Sunglasses turned and headed back into the darkened office mumbling, "Maybe afterwards you'd like to see the pool."

The Old Man lowered his satchel to the ground.

How had this place remained? There was no sign of a town, other than the remains of the gas station. The road leading away from the motel seemed in better condition than the Old Highway near the village. It must have been new at the time of the bombs.

The Old Man looked again at the neon coursing through the tubes. The design of architecture had once meant something to him. He remembered living in a time when architecture was at war with itself. The old being swept away for the new. You could tell, he remembered, when you walked into someone's house, a restaurant, even a gas station, what the architect's idea of the future was. Glass blocks seemed so outdated to him at the time. That was all he could remember.

The snake was good. The two men stood in the parking lot as the Old Man ate it out of a bowl using a bent spoon. All this had survived the apocalypse under neon tubes humming and buzzing, manufactured before the world was the way it would be.

"Built it the year before the war. I did. I built it." Mirrored Sunglasses never looked straight on at the Old Man. Always to the side or over his shoulder.

The moon would be full tonight. The last curled bits of snake were scooped up in a red sauce that might have been either peppers or ketchup, as the Old Man remembered ketchup to taste. Finally, the bent spoon clanged loudly against the silence that stood between them.

"Finished?" Mirrored Sunglasses held out a gnarled hand to

take the bowl and spoon. The Old Man moved the bowl toward the hand noticing it didn't move farther than initially extended. Another hand would always reach to meet what was offered. This one didn't. When the bowl touched the fingertips of Mirrored Sunglasses, the tips curled instantly and the bowl was jerked away.

“Good huh? Made it myself.”

It was, nodded the Old Man.

Mirrored Sunglasses didn't say anything and for a brief moment confusion crossed the craggy face beneath the sunglasses.

Mirrored Sunglasses is blind.

“Sure is. The best. Always got lots of snake. Always snake. Not much else but there is always snake.”

Blind, thought the Old Man. Blind for how long? Alone. No village. How had he survived? Who knew.

“Like a dip in the pool now? Then we can get you fixed up for the night. A real hotel room. Betcha never thought you'd have that again. I've kept ready since the bombs. Sometimes folk stay awhile. Like to stay for awhile?”

The Old Man considered the moon and the desert. It would be a good night for putting some distance toward the old town. But the chance of finding salvage after the moon went down was poor. He needed good light.

But wasn't this place salvage? Was a motel beyond the wasteland with power salvage?

“That would be kind of you to put me up for the night.”

“A dip in the pool first? A good swim and you’ll sleep like a dead sailor.”

“Maybe in the morning. I think I need to lie down. It’s been a long few days.”

Mirrored Sunglasses turned to the office, muttering that the Old Man should follow along. Moments later he handed the Old Man a card.

“Room five. Card unlocks it like one of them fancy hotels before the war, ’member ’em?”

The Old Man looked at it. Had he ever stayed in a hotel with a card as a key? He had a vague memory of once having done so. A laughing girl at his shoulder as he ran the card through a slot and red became green and there was some meaning to him at that moment. Young. It must have meant something to a young man. The meaning of it now was lost among the blown sand and dying heat of a world where cards did not open locks. That was the work of crowbars.

“I’ll knock on your door before dawn. Then you can have a swim while the water’s still cold.”

The Old Man said that would be fine and left the office. Five was on the bottom floor, halfway down the long end of the capital L that was the shape of the place.

Inside the room it was quiet. It was not his shed where light came through at all angles and where the wind brought the unwanted gift of sand. Or where the business of the village could

always be listened to. Comforted by. This room was too quiet. A quiet he had not experienced for many years.

He flicked a switch on the wall and one lamp cast a thin cone of light against the gloom. He lay on the bedspread. It was thick and stiff. It smelled of heavy dust.

Already his eyes were closing. For a moment he awoke and realized he had been sleeping. He needed to turn off the light. But he was too tired. More tired than he had ever been.

I feel as if I am made of grease. I must turn off the light. I would be a bad guest if I didn't turn off the light and used up all the power. He flailed and heard the lamp fall.

He was asleep.

CHAPTER TEN

In the dream he was awake in the hotel room, knowing he must turn off the light or he'd run down the power of the motel. Cars were pulling up in the parking lot as the bombs went off. Lots of bombs.

And then he was awake. There were no bombs. No sound. No cars.

HE WILL KILL U!!!

A jolt of blue fire raced across muscles and arms. Above him the letters of the words were written in glowing yellow light on the ceiling. They seemed to grow larger as he stared at them. The room was dark.

'I must be hallucinating,' he thought. He closed his eyes and tried to rub them, but his arm would barely move.

I am so tired.

When he opened his eyes again he saw the words.

HE WILL KILL U!!!

I must be going crazy.

Sweating, he pushed himself up and realized he was breathing heavy. Too heavy. With more effort than it should have taken, he got the lamp upright and switched it on again. Nothing happened.

I must have broken the bulb.

He looked upward, and again the glowing warning remained above his head. The letters were made up of little stars and

moons. Planets with rings. He knew those things, those glow-in-the-dark shapes. A girl he once knew. He remembered her to be sad. Or maybe he was the one who was sad. But she had put glow-in-the-dark planets and stars on her ceiling. He remembered lying next to her in the dark as music played nearby. He remembered the sadness though he could not say whether it had been his or hers.

Someone had written those words on the ceiling with glow-in-the-dark planets and stars. Standing with more effort than it should have taken, he stood on the bed to examine them. They were real. He peeled off a star. Held it between his thumb and forefinger.

He moved to the window and parted the curtains. The moon had fallen to the other side of the sky.

Dawn in a few hours.

He looked once more at the warning.

Taking his satchel, he opened the door and stepped out into the night. He crossed the walkway heading into the parking lot. His huaraches scraped quietly. He kept his eyes on the dark office door.

“No swim, my friend?” Mirrored Sunglasses stood in the doorway of the room next to him, his arm cradling a double-barreled shotgun.

“You’re not thinking of running off without paying your bill?”
Was he truly blind?

Ahead the moon sank into the black horizon turning the silver

nightscape a dark blue.

“How’d you know?” asked Mirrored Sunglasses.

The Old Man swallowed thickly.

When did I last have some water? I am thirstier than I should be.

“Tell me. It won’t do you no good not to.”

“Some words written on the ceiling.”

Mirrored Sunglasses moved the shotgun to the other arm. He seemed to stare off, considering a different matter altogether.

“Shoulda knowed it,” he mumbled. “How ’bout that swim?”

“I don’t know what the problem is,” began the Old Man. “But I mean you no harm. Just headed to the old town east of here. Just going to look for salvage. That’s all. I won’t steal from you.”

“Right, you won’t. Can’t have people knowing I’m here. You’d tell. They’d come for my stuff. Come for me. I wouldn’t be king anymore.”

“That’s not true. Why don’t I just move on? No harm, friend.”

After a moment’s silence in which the Old Man thought he might just walk into the desert and be free of this nightmare, Mirrored Sunglasses raised the shotgun. It wasn’t dead on straight in his face, but it was close enough.

Two barrels with the right shot and he doesn’t need to see me move. Just squeeze at the sound of me. I’ll be nothing but shredded flesh and bones.

He thought of his own pistol hidden in his satchel. Getting it out? He’d know.

But he's only got one chance to shoot you. Then he's got to break the barrel and reload. Then fire again. Takes time.

"Think it's time for that swim, mister," said Mirrored Sunglasses in a voice that was both mean and low. "Start walking."

The pool lay beyond a gate at the far end of the complex. The Old Man began to shuffle and by the time he reached the gate, the double-barreled shotgun hovered a foot behind his kidneys. The rusty gate swung open and landed with a clank.

"Move."

The Old Man walked to the edge of the pool.

It was drained.

Along its cracked concrete bottom, hundreds of snakes lay sleeping and lethargic in the cool predawn. Occasionally one moved. A corpse lay on the far side near the steps, what would have been the shallow end of a filled pool. Beneath the snakes lay more humps that might be corpses.

As he neared the edge of the deep end, he heard Mirrored Sunglasses suck in air.

Barely thinking, the Old Man twisted and stepped back as he saw Mirrored Sunglasses raise the shotgun into both hands across his chest and rush at him as if pushing a plow.

Recoiling in horror sent the Old Man off the lip of the edge and saved his life. He fell and felt his hands grasping for the edge. A familiar childlike feeling as he found it. Then he swung hard into the concrete wall of the empty pool to hang just a few feet

from the snakes.

Above, Mirrored Sunglasses's feral swear turned to a scream as the expected resistance remained unmet and he sailed outward above a snake-filled concrete pool.

Hanging from the edge the Old Man heard the snapping crunch of a bone-breaking headfirst dive twelve feet below.

The snakes, hissing, snapped on the attacker in the cool dark shadow of the deep end. Rattles raged in unison as the Old Man, head swimming, heaved himself over the side of the pool and onto the deck.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The morning sun found the Old Man in the office. Locked, he had broken it open with his crowbar.

First he laid out his bedroll and removed the pistol. He checked the rounds within and then went back to the edge of the pool. Mirrored Sunglasses stared skyward, his neck twisting to meet his body. The snakes were already covering him, seeking his fading heat in the predawn chill of the desert.

The double-barreled shotgun lay nearby.

Salvage. But at the bottom with the snakes it is as good as gone unless ...

I could burn them.

And damage the gun no doubt.

He returned to his satchel and considered rerolling the bedroll with the pistol inside.

There might be others here. Maybe if I am going farther into the wasteland I need to keep the pistol within reach.

Once the office door was broken, the Old Man found a dirty kitchen at the back of it. It smelled greasy and old and like the snake he had eaten. Though the sink was dirty its faucet gave up a cool stream of clear water.

Well water.

He drank and drank again. He was still thirsty so he continued to drink. His head was clearing from the fogginess. Beside the

sink, at eye level as he bent to drink, he noticed an old steak knife. A half-cut pill lay nearby.

He drugged me.

The rising sun turned the tiny office golden. Magazines littered the racks and the front of the office.

Was Mirrored Sunglasses truly blind?

What did it matter?

For the rest of the morning he searched the office, which contained little in the way of salvage. Boxes of coins and paper money. A few tools, but the village had these tools and often in great supply.

He took the cards that unlocked the rooms and went to the first room. A motel room like the one he had slept in. It was too bright to see if another message had been written on the ceiling. The other rooms for the most part were the same, except for the rust-stained bedspreads sometimes shredded and torn. One room seemed to be permanently lived in. The room Mirrored Sunglasses had come out of. He found an old toothbrush too disgusting to be used again. An abundance of clothing, crossing a spectrum of styles. Drawers full of medication from the year of the bombs. Prescriptions for people named Harriet Binchly. Or Kevin Adams. Or Phillip Nuygen. Take once a day with water.

Sitting on the bed for a moment the Old Man considered returning to the office for more water. But then he felt he must finish the rooms first. Make sure the place was clear.

This place is evil.

East is cursed.

Yes, and I too am cursed.

What was its story?

If he knew its story then maybe he might find salvage. If there was salvage to be found.

But the rooms and the office told of a hermit. “Loners” the village called them in the years after the bombs. People who had run so deep into the desert, they didn’t know of villages. Didn’t know others survived. Hermits didn’t last long. Seven years was the longest he’d ever guessed of one making it on his own.

This man had a hotel. Some power. The road nearby.

He thought of the power system. A salvage of that was beyond him. He could return and tell of this place. Then the villagers could come and get the power.

And the water. It might be good to have a place with water if the village ever wanted to come this far.

They would not come this far. “East” was enough to prevent them from ever considering it. So the solar power was no salvage.

Finished resting, he continued to search the rest of the rooms. In the last two he found the story. But he wished he hadn’t.

The first room held the desiccated corpse of a woman. Her long blond hair framed the rictus grin of a skeleton laughing or screaming.

Probably screaming.

The handcuffs at each end of the bedpost said screaming. Arms still connected to bony wrists thin enough to slip through

as the victim must have once wished to. One leg lay on the floor. There were no clothes.

Was she the one who tried to warn me?

In the next room at the end of the balcony, the last room of the Dreamtime Motel he found the bags. Bags upon bags full of the last remaining possessions of lost wanderers. Wanderers who had come in from the wind and fire of the bombs. The long winter that followed. The years of sun afterward. Empty rotting bags from uncountable travelers.

He burned it. He stood watching in the charred remains of the gas station across the road that had once been something more than twisted and blackened metal. Even the ash that must have once covered the station, covered the entire world, had long since gone.

He leaned against a blackened cement pylon. He took pains to avoid the black blooming flower of metal that the pumps had become on that long-ago day when they had gushed forth jets of fuel on fire and burning hot.

Now the motel burned in the late afternoon heat. The Old Man started the fire in the room he had slept in. Started it with some paint thinner and a few other solvents. It consumed the bedspread, and by the time the Old Man had backed away from the motel door, the drapes were aflame and belching black smoke. Forty years of sun and the parched wood and lathe were more than ready to burn.

By the time he crossed the road to watch it all burn to the

ground the fire was already visible behind fluttering curtains in the second-story windows.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He ate some of the fox he'd dried, drank a little cold water, and counted the extra bottles and canteens he'd salvaged from the motel, now tied in a loose bandolier. Before setting the fire he'd filled them all with the cold water from the faucet in the office.

That faucet had almost been enough reason not to burn it all down. He could have put a sign on the road or painted the word "WATER" in big red letters across the sides of the motel. A modern oasis for travelers.

But there had been too much evil. Too much wrong had happened within the gold curtained rooms. Too many lives ended in a drugged stupor as Mirrored Sunglasses brained or bashed or shot, by the look of some beds, those who had wandered out of the destruction and found the Dreamtime Motel.

The Old Man guessed the shotgun, buried under the rattlesnakes, was empty. Emptied long ago into the back of another victim. He found a box of shotgun shells. It was empty. Along with the shot-shredded rust-stained bedspreads, the empty box told the story of the shotgun beneath a pile of snakes.

The handcuffs themselves could have been salvage. But when the Old Man went to inspect them, he found no key.

Maybe that's why they were locked? The key had been lost by a blind man.

Would he have let her go if he could have found the key? How

long had she lived on that bed?

The grooves and scratches in the frame were numerous. Too numerous for just one victim.

That could have been enough to burn it down. But there was more. In the dying light of the embers he ate the dried strips of fox.

The woman justified burning it all down.

But the water from the faucet was another thing. An oasis was not easily come by.

An early evening desert wind picked up embers, scattering sparks across the road. The fire was finished. Only gray smoke from a few hot spots came up through the charred remains. Where the motel had once been seemed lost and altogether a lie.

It was the marks that made you burn it.

Sí. The marks.

In the room of bags, on the wood paneling near the door and just above the lightswitch, had been the marks. Little sticks grooved into the wood. Four uprights and finally a horizontal slash. Five. Sets of five. Too many sets. Other stray marks along the border, half the size of the sets of five, told him of the children.

Children had been special to Mirrored Sunglasses.

So it had to burn?

Sí.

Yes.

It had to burn.

One day we might not be, and the people who come next don't need to take this with them. My granddaughter.

Tired, he rose to his feet. The moon was large and it would be a cool night for walking. He drank a little more water and adjusted his satchel. He tucked the gun that had lain on the ground next to him into his waistband. He tightened the electrical cord he used for a belt. The gun fit nicely.

From now on I must keep the gun ready.

But I hope I do not need it.

He set off down the blacktop leading away from the Dreamtime Motel.

The ground on the side of the road was smoother than the blacktop that eventually proved itself unsafe in the night as tears and eruptions lay shadowed beneath his feet. Occasionally he would stumble, and finally he kept to the side of the road.

If I twist my leg then I will wish I had not burned that place down.

Don't say such a thing.

So he moved to the shoulder and continued following the white dirt along the moonlit road. North.

North is not as bad as east.

Once the moon was overhead, he stopped for water and a bite of fox meat though he didn't feel hungry. The only road sign he passed had been one of the large ones that spanned the entire road. It had fallen facedown and what was written upon it was beyond the strength of his arms to know.

He continued on, and when the moon was waning far to the west, he saw that the road began a long curve toward the east. A mountain ridge to the north blocked further progress. To the east, the remains of four large overpasses that had once connected the highways lay in ruins. Only the pillars and sections of the road like the capitals of columns remained.

I could find shelter there for the day. Maybe some vehicles. Maybe salvage. It will be dawn in a few hours.

He picked up his satchel and slung it once more across his chest.

If it is occupied it might be best to come upon it before dawn. If I smell cook fires then I will know.

The moon went down and soon it was dark.

I was spoiled walking by the light of the moon.

He picked his way along the broken concrete of the highway thinking of nothing more than where his next footstep should be.

Arriving just as the eastern sky began to show the first hints of blue, he crouched in a debris-cluttered culvert. He heard nothing, even as the sun began to cast a steady soft orange light across the desert behind him. His nose smelled nothing on the wind, and once the sun was two hands above the horizon, he left the culvert and continued into the wreckage of the overpasses.

He chose the fallen road sections that had collapsed onto the highway beneath.

If there is anyone here, maybe they are lazy. Then at least I will be above them. They might not even see me.

The fallen sections were made of clean white concrete, grooved as if combed by a brush. He took off his huaraches and continued along the road as it climbed quickly. A break in the road caused him to stop, and he lowered himself onto the section that had fallen on the other side of the break. He climbed this section and another one like it, and soon he was beneath one of the large pillars where part of the highway remained above him.

How long would that last?

He marveled at what man had once built. What he had once driven over. What was once so common seemed a thing of lost giants.

At the end of the broken road he could see the intersection of the four roads. The ground beneath was barren. An old Winnebago lay on its side off in the weeds. He watched for a moment, wondering if it might be someone's home. But the weeds around it and growing out the back window told the story of salvage.

There is no one here.

He climbed back down the broken sections and thought better of the Winnebago.

If it has been here for so long then it has already been salvaged.

On the other side of the ruins, two roads led away. One headed northeast, the other southeast.

What about the Winnebago? Fleeing the bombs, many such RVs had often been loaded beyond safety with such things as might be salvaged.

If that is the case then I would have seen some lying on the ground nearby. It has been searched.

He continued looking north, wondering if that is the east he should pick.

Something, a knife, a tool perhaps, could be lying in the weeds or the dirt.

Unlikely. I would need to go into the wreck and a Winnebago out here by itself would be a place for rattlesnakes or even the brown spider.

Then you expect salvage to be laying in the middle of the road for you to happen along and pick up. Neatly untouched these forty years. A bottle of aspirin or medical tools for the village. Maybe even an entire set of encyclopedias. The village is right. You are cursed. It is your laziness that is the curse. You are the curse of yourself.

Be quiet.

To the north must be Phoenix.

Low hills of red dirt climbed toward Phoenix.

Phoenix was destroyed. I know that. In L.A., just before I left, that had been part of the decision. The bombs were falling each day on a new city. First New York and then Washington, D.C., then Pittsburgh, then Chicago ... was that right? Or had Chicago been first?

I chose Tucson. Tucson was too small to be hit. The terrorists were choosing bigger cities.

And your parents lived there. On a golf course.

Yuma was smaller than Tucson. Later, on the day the President landed, the Old Man had seen the cloud over Yuma in his rearview mirror as he picked his way through the beginning of the Great Wreck. He had seen it about 2:00 in the afternoon. 2:06 he remembered by the digital clock of his car's instrument panel. The cloud rising from the valley behind him. Ninety miles away. The United States of America had lost its last president.

His car had stopped. The EMP had finished it. In the days that followed, walking the highway, moving away from Yuma, he headed east. Survivors told him they'd seen the cloud over Tucson. L.A. was gone also. They had gone for two that day. That last known day. After that, there was no news. No radio. If the bombs continued to fall, who knew? Had we retaliated against the Middle East like we'd threatened? Was there still a world beyond the United States? A Europe? Africa?

I will never see those lions at sunset. Playing on the beach. Unless I dream them. And my dreams are past stories that cannot be finished.

He thought of the little girl.

I will never know.

I know Phoenix is gone. It went after Miami. I know that Phoenix is gone. That I know.

Those are problems solved long ago. Salvage is your business and if you cannot search the wreck of the Winnebago, then what salvage will you find?

Be quiet.

He turned south along the highway once more.

There will be nothing toward Phoenix. In the days of the bombs, everyone took to the road. Everything they could grab. Headed away, much like myself back then, from the bombs. Phoenix was destroyed. Everyone had known that, so no one went there to escape.

But you heard Tucson was hit also.

“Sí,” he whispered softly in the late morning air.

But I saw Phoenix destroyed on the TV.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was later he realized he had not stopped to rest in the shadows of the ruined overpasses. He wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and the Dreamtime Motel. He was afraid of the dreams he might have.

How much longer until the monsoons?

He stopped to drink in the thin shade provided by a small bridge.

An orange sun hung low off to the west. Afternoon dust storms rolled across the broken red horizon. He wondered how far west, if he started from this bridge, he would need to walk to find the village.

If the monsoons came soon, there might be trouble with the flash floods.

The torrents of ash would be dangerous.

Where does the ash come from after all these years?

Does it matter?

Maybe it's the answer to what's left of the world. So much ash, so little world.

There is still the village.

Too tired to go much farther, he camped under the bridge, and just before nightfall made a small fire of mesquite.

In the blue twilight, he thought it might be nice to have a guitar. That being alone wouldn't be so bad if he had a guitar.

With a guitar he might just continue to wander and never return to the village.

But what about your granddaughter?

The village must think I am dead.

I hope no one came looking for me. They might have gotten hurt.

That is the love of not wanting someone to come and look for you when you have gone.

He tried the phrase out against the wall under the bridge. Letting his shadow speak the words in the light of the fire.

It felt like a phrase one says and doesn't mean. But the words were true.

Maybe it's not enough for something to just be true?

Truth is enough.

The Alpha picked up the Old Man's scent near the wreck of the Winnebago below the mountains. He hunted here at the end of most nights, and the scent had come only faintly to him. He'd pulled down five men in his life. Alone, when the pack had scattered, he pulled them down.

He had been the leader of the wolf pack for seven rains now. He felt tired most nights. The thrill he experienced in pulling down the wild mule deer to the north didn't cause him to go rigid with electricity at the thought of their meat as it once did. When he had first killed, he had eaten most of the kill before letting his mate at the remains. Lately he made the kill, took his favorite part near the spine at the top of the back, then wandered away to

chew with the good side of his teeth.

The smell he tasted in the dawn air was not mule deer. Nor was it the coyote or other prey of the valley. This was man. He remembered the man they caught the spring before. He'd smelled terror in the dark forest moments before the pack crashed through the wall of trees and into the meadow. He'd been halfway across the high meadow, running, when the pack of thirty wolves, his wolves, spotted the man.

In a moment they were on him. The Alpha had fought hard to keep the two killers from the best parts of the man. He wondered how much longer he would be able to keep them at bay. Soon enough they would come for him. As he had, they would.

When the pack passed through the meadow at the end of spring, the shattered bits of white bone were still there.

He had enjoyed the taste of man.

At the two roads the large wolf padded back and forth scenting the air. Even the wolf knew what was north. He had seen the ruins of Phoenix with his own eyes. He knew it was lifeless, and what remained there long was soon poisoned. The deer they killed there always had that taste of death. Often the pack would leave after a few torn strips had been tested. In those times the kill had been enough.

Satisfied the man had gone south, the wolf turned, heading back toward the mountain above the ruined overpasses. He picked his way up through the broken rocks in the early morning light.

How long could he keep his two killers at bay?

At the top of the pass, not far from the den, he turned to look at the valley floor. Where would the man be? Turning toward the den where the pack lay sleeping, exhausted from the night, the wolf trotted into the darkness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At dawn the Old Man was up. The cool morning air wouldn't last long. He hadn't had coffee in years. Hadn't missed it in years. But now in the cold air beneath the broken road, he wished for it.

He stretched slowly and began to pack his things while taking cautious sips of water.

Where are you going?

South. I am going south today.

Really more east than south.

Just for this morning, let us say it is south.

He had a momentary memory of fog. Fog outside the windows of the house he'd grown up in. The first foggy days of school in autumn. Arguing with someone.

It is because you are arguing with yourself. That is why you remember fog.

For the next few hours he stayed to the side of the great bent and warped highway. The road headed south, mostly. Looking ahead, it seemed the road must eventually turn to the east.

If I can find salvage before it goes east, then I'll head straight west. At some point I will find the Old Highway and from there I will find my way home.

Crossing another fallen bridge, he stopped in the late morning shade of the broken sections. Rebar sprang from the chunks like wild strands of hair. When he resumed his climb out of the tall

ditch of red earth, he was sweating.

Let's be clear my friend.

All right.

You say that if you find salvage you will head west and return to the village. Your curse will be lifted?

If you say so but I do not care.

Then why are you out here?

Be quiet.

On top of the dirt embankment, the gentle slope of the road fell away. In the distance a small mountain rose up, broken and dusty brown.

I know that mountain. There was once a large A on its side.

That was common in Arizona in those days. To put a large A on the side of every small mountain near a town or city.

Then it means there must be one nearby. I think it is the one whose name I cannot remember. It seems familiar.

He crossed the flat landscape toward the mountain. To the side of the road, lone stands of scrub grew up in solitary dark patches, as if too hurt to ever grow near another living thing.

Further along the highway, he passed the remains of a burnt fueling station off to one side. It was little more than a concrete pad and blackened cement. In the lone shade of a mesquite tree he ate the last of the fox and drank some water.

Now you have two problems.

Now I have no food and no salvage. If I could walk straight to the village day and night for three days I might make it. But not

without food. The effort would be too great and I might make a mistake if I were so hungry I couldn't focus. Then a broken leg would be the end of me.

Tonight I will stop early and make some traps.

A gas station like this once had a tin awning that made a singsong noise in a strong wind.

Another thought that has no place in the present.

Maybe just another memory trying not to be forgotten.

I might know that because I once stopped here for fuel.

You always came to visit your parents on the Eight. Not the Ten.

Amazed, he stopped chewing. He hadn't referred to the Old Highway as the Eight in a long time. Since the days just after the bombs. The names of places had been forgotten. Or were too painful to remember.

The Eight.

He tried to remember the name of the town he was looking for. Something "Big" he remembered. But it wouldn't come and the air seemed to be getting hotter with the noonday heat.

He began to move again, south along the highway.

In the afternoon, brilliant white sails of cloud began to form to the east. Climbing upward, each full-blown sail exploding beneath an eruption of white foam. The armada of clouds came no closer than a dark ridge of jagged mountains to the east that embodied everything he felt about that direction.

The monsoons were coming.

The Alpha led the thirty wolves of his pack off the mountain and passed the Winnebago on its side. At the road, he smelled the night wind coming out of the south. He didn't smell the man. But he knew men. He had watched them. Men always moved in one direction, as if always on the hunt of just one animal.

The two killers challenged him briefly as he started off down the highway but his mate snarled back at them. For a moment, it looked as though the pack might split. The two killers wanted to circle to the north and for a while they yelped about it, making the noises that indicated mule deer.

But the females went with the Alpha, and soon the entire pack lay strung out behind him as he scented the sides of the road for the man.

Near the bridge where the Old Man made camp the night before, the wolf picked up the scent of urine. The Old Man had urinated just before sleeping.

Slowly the Alpha crept down along a path and followed the trail directly into the camp under the bridge. He smelled the gray ash of the night's fire. Some paper the Old Man had wrapped the dried fox in. The rest of the pack milled about above the camp on the main road. Dawn wasn't far off and they'd nothing to eat so far.

One of the killers howled in warning and the entire pack turned toward the sound of it.

A family of havalina had come up the dry riverbed under the bridge from the east and the wolves fell upon the wild pigs, easily

snatching the babies as the male and the females stubbornly stood their ground hoping to minimize losses.

But the wolves were too good for the wild pigs. Had hunted too long under the Alpha. Soon, the last sow's eyes rolled back in her head. She'd watched the killers tearing out the entrails of the male that had presided over the brood for as long as she could remember. Seconds later, a warm softness came over her as the Alpha sunk its teeth deeper into her jugular vein, forcing her to release.

Swinging her to the side, the Alpha looked at the two killers. They should have known the females were the most dangerous. She could have killed them or made the victim wish for death. That might have solved his problems right there. But treachery was not in the Alpha.

The snarling pack devoured flesh and blood. The Alpha settled down to the dead sow. He had lost the pack for the night. There would be no going any farther after this meal. Dawn would soon be upon them. They would sleep in the shade under the bridge in the man's camp from the night before. And tomorrow they would hunt him again.

Tearing at the haunch of the desert pig, he thought it might be good for them to sleep in the man's camp. They would have the smell of him. That way he wouldn't have to do all the work.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the twilight at the end of the next day, the Old Man standing on the road didn't feel as tired as he should have. He'd caught two snakes in the late morning coming out on the highway to sun themselves. Big rattlers, he'd pinned their flat heads and swung the crowbar down with a ring on the old highway.

He'd roasted them quickly and eaten. Just after noon he was headed south again. Later the "thunder-bumpers," as some of the villagers called the big late afternoon cumulus clouds, though Big Pedro had called them "the Chubasco," built up to the east over the iron gray mountains. As twilight came, a cool wind whipped up from the south, and in the dust of it he could smell rain.

I might walk a bit longer tonight. The snake tasted so good I might walk a bit longer. Maybe I will make the town in the night, and if anyone lives there it might be better that way.

A few minutes later he heard the first mournful howl. Behind him. To the north from where he had come.

If it is just one I might be fine.

If not?

A chorus began, but each successive howl was more urgent as if hoping to outdo the previous one by speed.

The Old Man shifted his satchel higher onto his back and bent quickly, hoping, praying, that the wolves were about some other business. He tied his huaraches tighter, adjusted his burden once

more, and moved off quickly.

If I can find something tall, they might not get to me.

But the road seemed a straight flat course bearing off into the south and the night. There were no rocks or boulders, no wreckage of overturned tankers or piled cars. There had not been since the days before the bombs. Tucson had evacuated early. After Phoenix had been hit. The roads had been empty as survivors fled into the desert or other places they hoped might be safe.

Going south the town will be off to my right.

Ay, but you're not anywhere near it. You don't even know where it is. And Mirrored Sunglasses told you it burned.

He lied about other things.

The Old Man darted off into the scrub and down an embankment. Behind him, the wolves were calling back and forth.

They are still away off, but wolves must move fast.

He pulled out his crowbar as he ran and placed his other hand on the pistol in his waistband. After a moment, when one of the wolves seemed closer, back near the road, he pulled out the gun, flicking off the safety.

It's really not enough you know. Five bullets. It sounds like a lot of them from the howling.

In the sand he stepped on something thick and long. Man-made. Kicking his feet through the soft desert powder he found the remains of a thick cable.

A downed power line.

He followed it away through the brush to the south.

If I can find the tower I can climb it even if it's down.

He headed south, maneuvering around the scrub and keeping one step on the cable as he ran.

Looking back over his shoulder he could see the elevated rise of the highway. In the last moments of light he saw the shadowy wolves. He counted quickly but gave up as they shifted. It seemed there were maybe twenty of them. It was a large pack.

Behind him, a cacophony of yapping went up as the wolves tried to find his trail.

At least there must be a town ahead. This power line must have been going somewhere.

He could hear the wolves in the brush now, bounding and leaping about. Making a game of hide and kill with the Old Man.

The downed power line began to rise from the sand, and soon it was high enough for him to follow with his hand.

It's rising. Something to climb.

Frantically he plowed through the scrub, heedless of scorpions.

The evening wind had picked up and was blowing sand across the desert. Ahead he could hear the singsong of metal bending in the wind. It reminded him of the village.

The wolves had his scent now and he could hear them racing in the brush behind him

Rising out of the dark he could make out a toppled power

tower. The kind that was nothing more than cross welded steel frames rising high above the landscape. But this one had fallen on its side.

A wolf howled behind the Old Man, and not daring to look back he raced for the nearest girder and began to climb.

At first, he had to climb with the gun and the crowbar in his hands, but once he was high enough, he hung for a second, placing the gun in his satchel.

Below him, the entire pack circled, whining and yelping.

Once the Old Man was as high as the toppled girder would rise, he wedged himself between two supports and glanced down.

The wolves whined and howled in high little yelps. Pacing, they began to race back and forth until the largest of them let out a bone-chilling howl.

If I fall ...

Then don't. Don't fall.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Old Man lay under a blanket of stars. Above him a thousand points of broken glass shimmered. The moon had gone down and now the sky was black before dawn.

This is how the world is in the night. In all the nights I was a child and a young man before the bombs. It was like this in the night.

It was like this for the man in the book. At night. With the great fish. Will I find my great fish? Will my story go that far?

Below the wolves had disappeared for the most part. He could hear them ranging through the dirt and scrub. All except the big one. The big one waited. Sitting mostly. Waiting. Occasionally he would pad around beneath the Old Man, checking the perimeter. A loping little gait, almost friendly. Just business.

The Old Man lay precariously across the top of one of the girders where it intersected with another. It was a small space and not much more.

A strong wind or sleep and over I go. So no sleep tonight.

What will the wolves do in the morning?

What will you do in the morning?

The big wolf didn't answer. But he seemed to be listening.

The Old Man drank some water.

His neck was tired. His back felt numb from the girder. And his legs were falling asleep. He flexed them, moving back and

forth. He winked at the big wolf.

If I fall, you must be ready. So no sleep for you either.

Are you crazy?

No.

The wolves won't let you go five feet.

I must try.

You will fail if it comes to that.

"If" it comes to that.

Below the wolf waited.

At dawn, the wolves settled to wait. There were thirty of them. The two killers baited the Alpha. They wanted to leave the scrawny man and return to the sickly mule deer near Phoenix, a hot pile of ruins the wolves called "The Uneven Ground." The two killers walked away decidedly. But none of the females followed. The young watched. As if their decision mattered. But the big Alpha waited.

The Old Man watched the wolves play their game.

It's obvious to me.

How so?

They don't want to stay. They want something to kill. To eat. But the big one there won't let them. What he says goes. There is more to me, for him, than just a meal. So I think all of us must wait.

He awoke with a start. He had drifted for only a moment. But he had started to roll. Started to roll off the girder to the wolves below.

I can't wait all day, my friend. Maybe you should listen to the rest of your family and go. That would be for the best.

The big Alpha watched from underneath the top of his eyes, giving away nothing.

I have a family too, you know.

Do you?

The Old Man looked behind him, toward where he had been heading. A dawn breeze moved softly over his gray hair in the orange light of a new day.

The power lines ran down the length of the fallen tower, which was even higher at the far end. The lines continued out across a low riverbed. They stretched loosely across the gap to meet another tower, twisted and fallen in the same direction on the other side of the dry riverbed.

These must have fallen in the shock wave after Phoenix.

The Old Man rose to his knees. He moved his satchel onto his back.

Listen, wolf. I can't wait for you to leave. So I must go. You understand, don't you?

The Old Man began to crawl over the length of the tower. At once the wolves were up and pacing, whining and crossing back and forth underneath him. Some growled.

This requires all the concentration you have ever had in your whole life, so pay attention. You must focus like your friend in the book. He needed to bait the hooks and cut the tuna while his hand was cramping. And still he held the line the big fish was on.

I will.

Patiently, unlike the rest of the pack, the big Alpha below paced the Old Man above, each of the paws tracing each of the hands and knees of the Old Man.

When he arrived at the end of the tower, he was at least ten feet higher and the girders were wider. The power lines were draped and bunched on the desert floor around the tower but they continued up across the base of the fallen tower and out across the riverbed.

I must be fifty or sixty feet up from the riverbed.

I don't think I have the strength.

The heavy cables swung in the morning breeze.

He tried them. He would never know for sure. Never know if halfway across the gap they might start to slide downward.

These are heavy cables. They stretch for miles and miles. They weigh tons. Surely they can support the weight of just me.

You will never know.

I don't have much choice.

Most of the wolves below were losing interest and they began to chase small animals. All except the big Alpha. As the Old Man began to work at his satchel, cutting it into strips, the big Alpha began to growl. And when the Old Man began his journey across the void, the big Alpha let out a sudden mournful howl, and soon all the wolves were back and baying at him.

His tools were in his pockets and he had secured the grease in his bandolier with his water bottles. Everything he had tied

across his waist.

Cutting the leather satchel into strips, he missed his wife.

She had made the satchel for him before she died. It had not been salvaged. It had been made. He left it at that. He didn't think anymore about their love. Their love after the end of everything. Or the short time they had together. Or her olive skin. Or the boy he raised. Or all the things that are made when love is reason enough.

He tied the strips three times about one wrist. He tied another set of strips about the other wrist. He did the same with his ankles, ending up with a leather collar for each limb. He ran thicker straps made of sturdier leather through those bands about his wrist. He did the same with his ankles.

Moving to the cable that stretched across the riverbed, he greased the tough straps and then tied them to the other bands about the opposite ankle and wrist, leaving the power cable between his body and his arms and legs.

The sun was directly above him. He looked across the gap to the other fallen tower.

Two hundred yards.

He started out headfirst, using his hands to pull and his feet to brace. He was thankful for his gloves.

The big Alpha howled and then stopped.

This might be tougher than I'd thought.

The cables were dropping down at first and so the Old Man was braking himself more than pulling. Halfway across when he

would be most tired, he would need to pull.

Just work and think about something.

What will the wolves do?

Think about something else.

What is the name of my friend in the book?

He is not much of a friend if you don't know his name.

I would like to have been in the boat with my friend. I could have helped him with the fish.

Great drops of sweat broke out across his body, and by the time he was three quarters of the way down the descent, one glove tore above his index finger.

Listen. Do you hear the wolves?

I think they have gone.

He looked down and saw the big Alpha bounding across the rocks of the dry riverbed. Two leaner wolves paced behind him.

At the lowest point of the descent, he could barely see from the glare of the sun and the salty sweat running into his eyes.

He gripped the cable with his legs and felt it slip, or thought he did. He opened the tin of grease he had placed in the bandolier across his chest. Trembling fingers flipped open the lid as he poured the rest of the grease across the straps and the cable.

He let the empty tin of grease that had accompanied him on so many salvages for so many years fall as the wolves danced away from it.

Now you must pull.

Ten feet farther up and climbing, he was exhausted.

I can't. I am too tired.

You have no choice. You must pull. Think about something.

I wonder what the wolves will do when I get to the other side.

Think about something else and pull.

Pull.

You must pull.

You should teach your granddaughter to do this in case she is ever surrounded by wolves and trapped on top of a fallen power tower.

I would rather teach her to read.

You must pull.

I am pulling.

Pull. Pull. Pull harder.

There is nothing left.

You have no other option, now pull, Old Man.

I am pulling.

Whatever happened to all the people you ever knew? Knew before the bombs.

I don't care.

The women you loved?

I still love my wife.

Pull. Pull. Pull.

I can't see. There is too much sweat in my eyes.

There is nothing to see now. Pull harder. Pull harder.

I can't go much farther.

You must go to the end.

Then the end is the farthest I'll go.

Pull and stop with the nonsense.

Okay.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull. Pull. PULL!

The Old Man's shoulder bumped against the rough dirt wall of the far embankment. His shoulders felt like glowing iron bands of steel just pulled from the heat of a furnace. The thongs keeping his feet across the cable were frayed and only one remained whole. Below him, the wolves danced back and forth, insane with anger.

The Old Man pulled himself over the edge of the cliff and lay breathing heavily. The air burned hot and clean in his lungs. Reaching for his knife, he cut the straps at his hands and feet and stood. He thought about drinking some water, but without meaning to he glanced down below and saw that the wolves had disappeared.

They're coming.

The Old Man turned to look at the downed power tower. This tower was more crumpled and bent than the one on the other side of the gorge. What it might provide in refuge wouldn't last long.

I am at the limit. There isn't much more in me.

He reached into his bandolier and took out the can of pitch. Bending down, he quickly collected some sticks and then piled them near a wall of dry tumbleweeds that had gathered against

the side of the ruins of the power tower. He spread the pitch over the dry weeds and took out his matches. Using one match and then another he quickly had a fire going. Smoky heat waves rose into the afternoon heat. For a moment the Old Man broke out into a cold sweat as his vision blurred. He drank quickly from a bottle and threw it aside.

He reached into his waist belt and pulled out the pistol. Listening for the wolves above the crackle of the growing fire, he snatched up three smoldering sticks and threw them into other stands of weed and brush nearby. He grabbed another torch, and looking to the sides of the cliff for the wolves and not finding them, he dove into the smoking brush.

The smoke was thick and gray and smelled of desert mesquite. A good earthy smell that always reminded him of cooked meat.

Wolves, you're afraid of fire. Remember that.

He continued to light other stands of brush as he passed down a sandy track leading south. One of the wolves howled.

That sounded like the big one. You wolves might even get lost and burned up in the fire. It's a wall between you and me.

A wind picked up from the west, and when the Old Man looked back great walls of flame were leaping toward the highway east of his position. The Old Man began to light the bushes to his right as he pushed on to the south.

Soon I will have two walls. Then how will you find me, wolves?

Now the wind shifted to the east and it came at him in

blowing gusts, leaping ahead of the brush he was running into and igniting. The smoke grew thick and tasted of sulfur. The Old Man began to choke and cough. He took off his shirt, tied it about his mouth, and moved off, hoping he was going south. The sun above him was obscured by gray smoke and drifting ash. It was too high in the sky for him to find a direction, so he hoped he was going south and not north. Away off he heard the wolves yelling back and forth. They seemed farther off to his right and behind him.

He came through a wire fence long blown down. He crossed it, stumbling in the thick acrid smoke. His huaraches landed on cracked and broken asphalt. He could see no more than a few feet at times, as ash and sparks mixed with gray smoke and the blown dust and sand of the desert wind.

Ahead of him, a large wide building with an arched roof and an opening to an inner darkness groaned in the gusts of the firestorm. It was an old aircraft hangar. The Old Man stumbled forward.

As he reached the entrance of the aircraft hangar, he heard the wolf behind him. Turning, he raised his pistol, but the fatigued arm felt foreign to him, felt like leaded weights tied and sent to the bottom of an ocean of mud.

It's the big one.

The Alpha came on hard, bounding fast out of the smoke and dust. His muzzle a rictus of hate and anger. His eyes burning with rage. The Old Man emptied the gun and felt a dry click on the

sixth cylinder after five little cracks had cleared the barrel.

The wolf stumbled and then veered off to the left. The Old Man saw that the wolf was bleeding. The look of anger and rage was gone as the big wolf circled, looking down and then back again at the Old Man

The Old Man backed into the open darkness of the hangar, leaving the wolf to the firestorm.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The big Alpha lay down on the cracked and broken tarmac of the old runway outside the hangar. The flames surrounded the downed fences and burned at the decades-dry wreckage of the place. The man had gone into the building. If he just rested he might still get him, thought the Alpha.

Where is the pack?

The killers appeared out of the smoke. One had been burned, its fur singed. The big Alpha had thought so. He'd heard him yelp in pain during the chase.

The killers padded forward. Their eyes taking in the scene. The big Alpha turned, leading their gaze toward the old hangar.

You should go in there and get him out. He can't have much left in him. We've run him to his hole.

But when he turned back, the killers were looking at him and he knew what would happen next. He had a memory of a distant day, high in the mountains. A memory of youth.

The two killers fell on him.

The Old Man found a locked gate at the back of the hangar. His crowbar quickly snapped the lock and he moved on, shutting the gate behind him. He picked up another crowbar from a nearby bench containing an array of tools and wedged it into the clasps of the gate so the wolves couldn't force it open.

He lit a match and found himself in a toolshed at the back of

a maintenance hangar. Outside, the wind began to howl as the fire-heated air rushed against the metal side of the building. It was getting hot.

The Old Man went quickly through the tools; most were old and brittle. Jars and cans that once contained fluids contained nothing more than powder and dust. When he smelled smoke, he looked back through the gate and saw debris piles near the entrance to the hanger igniting. Smoke and ash trails followed by dancing sparks were blowing into the hangar.

The Old Man went back into the darkness, lit another match, and made his way through shelves that had fallen like dominoes. They crumbled to dust as he climbed atop them. In the end, he wallowed waist high through rotten timber.

A perfect place for the brown spider.

This place is on fire. Would you rather burn or die of poison?

He remembered the death of Big Pedro.

At the back wall he found a door marked "Men" and smashed it inward with his crowbar, splintering the rotten wood. Inside he found a toilet, a urinal, and finally an industrial shower with a large grate beneath.

This might lead somewhere.

He pried out the grate, and the bolts gave away with a dusty *smuph* in the darkness. Below he could see an old sewer. He took his shirt from off his face and wrapped it around a piece of the broken door. He counted his matches as he lit the torch. He had three left.

The floor of the sewer below ran off toward the front of the hangar. The route he'd come from. It also continued in the opposite direction.

Maybe the sewer had once been disgusting. The two-year nuclear winter that followed the bombs had sent rushing torrents of black ash flushing through every hole and channel in the thaw that finally happened. Followed by forty years of abandonment, the sewer was relatively clean and dry.

Once inside, it was dark and quiet and only the guttering of the torch made any sound.

Above, the flames had gotten into the roof of the structure. Metal rivets twisted and popped.

I had better find a way out. This torch won't last long.

He began to walk toward what he hoped was south, going slowly, checking the floor and the ceiling. He didn't want to fall into any holes or cracks. The tunnel ran straight for a hundred yards then turned sharply to the right. After ten feet he came to a large grate that opened on a dark emptiness. He coughed and heard an echo. He put the torch down and worked at the rusty bolts of the grate and just as it gave way, falling outward into the blackness, his torch went out.

Blind, the Old Man waited as the grate clanged onto a floor not far down.

There could be light. A crack in the ceiling or some such.

After a moment, his eyes adjusted to the gloom and he could make out details. Soft orange light filtered down from a high

circle in the ceiling. The air smelled of concrete. He edged his feet forward, checking for a drop beyond the grate. There was one. Below the circle of light, in the middle of the darkness, he could see a patch of dusty pavement.

He lit one of his matches and inspected the floor. Behind him, a loud rending of metal was followed by a crash. A hot gust of wind rushed down at his back seconds later, and the match went out.

Now I have two matches.

How much of the floor did you see?

Not enough. I can't remember.

The Old Man got down on his hands and knees and edged toward the drop. He looked hard into the darkness below. Moving his hands about, he looked for something to toss onto the floor below, but the floods had swept the tunnel clear. He took a water bottle and emptied it. The water felt warm and did little to quench his thirst. His back and shoulder muscles spasmed painfully as he lifted his head to drain the bottle.

Maybe you have hurt yourself.

He dropped the empty water bottle into the darkness below and heard it immediately bounce around on the floor.

The ground is not far.

Gently he lowered himself down and found the floor far sooner than he expected. He swept the ground, feeling for the water bottle but it was gone. Cautiously he walked toward the circle of light below the opening in the ceiling high above.

Looking up he could tell it was a manhole. High above. On a street maybe. He could see nothing beyond its thin light.

How do I get up there?

There are still the wolves to consider.

The Old Man turned in a circle.

The room is big. A cave almost. Somewhere there must be a ladder to the manhole.

Moving cautiously, he used his hands to find the far wall. Once he found it he moved along the sides of the wall until he came to a rung mounted there. He pulled on it and the rung tore loose from the wall with a rotten metallic *puff* of dust and concrete. He found the next one higher up and again the rung came out in bits of concrete.

I cannot trust the others.

Someone's poor workmanship has made this place your grave.

There is another way out.

He continued along the wall. He came to one corner, then another, and halfway down the wall, the opening he had come through. Another corner and halfway down the next wall he found a new opening. It was darker than the rest of the room and he felt a cool draft of air.

He lit a match and scanned the dark ahead. It was a large tunnel with a channel running down the center of it. Just inside the wall were written large black letters that trailed off into the darkness.

He checked the entrance to the tunnel for signs or a placard

that might indicate where the tunnel went and just as the match was about to burn the tips of his fingers, he moved to the other side of the entrance looking for some kind of sign that might indicate the purpose of the tunnel. On the floor a pile of boxes were stacked in a corner. Then the match went out.

Damn.

He stood still in the darkness.

I am down to my last match. What were those boxes? I saw letters. Like the military. A long series of letters and numbers.

It could be debris. Just empty boxes piled in a corner.

But the floods after the thaw would have swept them away.

They swept them here. Here is “away.”

I have to check.

It is your last match. If the boxes contain nothing then you will be stuck. You will have to climb the rungs.

I will light part of the boxes on fire. I can tear off a flap.

He moved next to where he thought he had seen the boxes in the last moments of match light. When at first he didn't find them he panicked fearing he'd imagined the boxes. Soon his waving hands caught the side of a box.

Cardboard.

Watch out for the brown spider.

He ran his hands over the box. It seemed dusty but whole.

No floods have touched this box.

The four flaps were open and he gently tore one away.

He took out his last match. A nightmare of dropping the match

or even breaking it, flashed across his mind. He shut out the evil thought and took hold of the match between his thumb and forefinger.

He struck the match and lit the flap.

There were three boxes on the floor. Military boxes. He had seen their kind before. Such things were often found salvaging.

“MRE” was written on the side and then a long serial number. He tore the other three flaps off the top box and made a small fire. Nearby he found a tumbleweed that had fallen into the sewer and broke it up, adding it to the tiny flames.

It won't last long.

He went to the top box and looked in. Three brown plastic packages lay on the bottom. He had also seen these before. In the early days. MREs. Survival rations.

The second box contained a five-quart plastic canteen that felt full. It was wrapped in camouflage material and had fasteners.

It must attach to a pistol belt.

A couple of wool blankets lay beneath the canteen but when the Old Man shook them out he found a centipede. He slammed his huarache down on it angrily.

He ripped up the two boxes and added them to the already fading fire. He pulled the third box close to him.

The centipede looked dead.

It is now.

He added it to the fire just to be sure.

He opened the box. Inside he found a military flashlight and

many batteries. He also found a small penknife.

He tried the flashlight. It was dead. He unscrewed the bottom of the flashlight and threw the dead batteries off into the darkness and tried two new ones. A cone of yellow light erupted cleanly into the darkness ending in an oval against the wall. He had a flashlight.

The fire guttered to wispy ashes. The Old Man sat in the cool darkness for a moment and then clicked on the light with a dry chuckle.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MAN IS INCAPABLE OF PEACE. Carved into the concrete wall of the old sewer, each blackened letter rose three feet high. Someone had used a blowtorch to etch the message against the wall of the tunnel that led away from the big room.

The Old Man's light played across the words as he considered their meaning.

He'd eaten an entire MRE. It had been two days since the snake on the road. The water in the canteen tasted stale and he poured it out, filling it again with the water from his bottles.

He ran his fingers over the letters. The blowtorch had left melted waves when it traveled over the surface of the wall.

He had a steady hand.

How do you know it's a "he"?

It feels like a "he."

Someone did this after the bombs. Not long ago. Maybe five years. Ten at the most.

How do you know?

The boxes.

He is right. Was right. Man is incapable of peace. What's left of the world confirms that.

So he came down here. Spent all the time that you and the village have been surviving, barely, and carved these words no one will ever see?

These words will be here long after I have gone. Long after my granddaughter's granddaughters. The hieroglyphs in the pyramids were thousands of years old.

So why? Why do this?

To tell the story. Maybe a warning.

To who?

Whoever comes next.

So who's to say he's right?

He is, I guess. I don't know that I will be around to argue.

Do you agree?

The Old Man considered the world above. The frozen ground after the bombs. The ones who died of radiation sickness. The hunger. What it looked like when the United States ended in his rearview mirror that day at the beginning of his present life.

He rolled up the MREs and the bullet-less pistol along with the empty bottles in his blanket. He added the other two green wool blankets after inspecting them thoroughly for more centipedes. He shined his new flashlight down the tunnel, enjoying its power and clarity. There were more words written farther along.

I wonder what else he had to say.

The Old Man continued down the tunnel and when he came to the next message he read: **THERE CAN NEVER BE TWO ANSWERS TO THE SAME QUESTION.**

Further on he read: **WE DIDN'T BELIEVE THOSE WHO HAD SWORN TO KILL US.**

WE TRIED TO FIRE GOD.

POWER IS NEVER SATISFIED.

BEWARE OF ANYONE WHO WANTS TO MAKE DECISIONS FOR YOU.

PEOPLE WILL TELL LIES TO GET WHAT THEY WANT.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION LEADS TO DEATH.

CITIES BURN DOWN.

FREE WILL WAS THE GREATEST GIFT EVER OFFERED. GOD IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT WE DID WITH IT. WE ARE.

EVERY PLACE IS THE SAME.

EVERYTHING YOU DO WILL BE FORGOTTEN.

CHILDREN ARE THE ONLY THINGS YOU LEAVE BEHIND.

CHILDREN ARE SMARTER THAN YOU THINK.

HATE FIRE AND OTHER THINGS THAT HURT YOU.

HATE IS NOT WRONG WHEN WHAT YOU HATE IS WRONG.

HISTORY HAS LIED TO US.

THE GOOD GUYS DIDN'T WIN.

DON'T LET SOMEONE SPEND MONEY WHO NEVER EARNED IT.

DON'T LET ANYONE BUT A SOLDIER TELL YOU HOW TO FIGHT A WAR.

IF YOU ABSOLUTELY HAVE TO GO TO WAR, KILL EVERYONE.

ROCK STARS, ACTORS, AND POLITICIANS DON'T ACTUALLY DO ANYTHING.

TEACHERS, ARCHITECTS, AND MOTHERS KNOW A LOT MORE THAN YOU THINK.

THE YOUNG DISCOVERING THE WORLD FEEL LIKE CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS. THEY IGNORE THE INDIANS WHO HAVE BEEN HERE FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS.

PEER PRESSURE IS WHEN YOU DECIDE TO LOB A FEW WARHEADS AT THIS WEEK'S NAZI BECAUSE CNN TOLD YOU TO.

IT ONLY TAKES A BULLET TO SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE NAPOLEON, HITLER, POL POT, STALIN, SADDAM HUSSEIN.

PEOPLE DON'T HATE EACH OTHER. THEY HATE EACH OTHER'S IDEAS.

BEWARE OF THE SELF-LOATHING GOVERNMENT.

And finally: VISIT THE LIBRARY AT FORT TUCSON.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

On the other side of the manhole at the end of the hall of messages, the Old Man found a moonlit night. The air smelled of desert and sage. The cool wind that blew through the place had a faint tinge of char, though the fire that had happened here happened long ago.

Blackened wooden frames rose up on all four sides of the intersection. Desert sand had blown across the streets. He walked to a mailbox and sat down with his back against it. He hadn't slept since the night under the bridge.

How many days ago?

Who cares.

What about the wolves?

The tunnel went for several miles. If they survived the fire I doubt they'll come this far looking for me. Anyway I am too tired to care.

He unrolled his blankets on the sidewalk and placed his items on them. He started a small fire from charwood he found inside the ruins of a building. For a moment, standing there, he wondered what the use of the building had once been.

What was the story of this place? If I knew, there might be salvage and then I could head home.

But the fire had made it unrecognizable and whatever had once gone on there was lost.

He opened an second MRE and ate Chicken à la King. He put hot sauce on it. He'd found a little bottle of Tabasco inside a packet that contained plasticware and a book of matches. He drank some more water and added wood to the fire. He rolled up in his own blanket and one of the wool ones.

I wonder about Fort Tucson.

What ...

He didn't move the whole night. When he awoke, his side was numb and stiff. His shoulders ached with hot fire and his wrists throbbed. His chest felt heavy, and when he sat up, a morning cough turned into a prolonged hacking in which his vision narrowed to a tiny pinpoint. Each convulsion caused the needles in his shoulders to scream with anger.

The fire had gone out long ago.

It's good the wolves didn't find me. I might not have woken up for the feast.

For a moment he was afraid he might be sick.

Have I gone too far? Exhausted myself?

But he sat up and then got to his feet. He drank water and walked up and down the sidewalk. He considered plundering the mailbox but he was too tired and sore.

He banged on its side. It sounded hollow.

He rolled up his things slowly and mixed a packet of cocoa in a water bottle with some water from the canteen. He ate a cookie.

I feel better.

It was silent in the stubbly remains of the burnt town.

This must be the place I was thinking of.

It burned to the ground. Long ago. Mirrored Sunglasses was right.

How could he be right if he was blind?

Maybe he wasn't blind.

The Old Man began heading south down the street. At the next intersection, a half-burnt sign that had fallen down among the charred support beams of a building looked familiar.

I know those letters.

But those are just the middle or last ones.

For a long moment he tried to remember what business they were associated with, but in the end he couldn't.

Coffee, maybe.

How long has it been since you had coffee?

Years. I remember the night I married my wife. Someone gave us a can. Something salvaged from an RV deep inside the Great Wreck. I can't remember who.

Floyd? Big Pedro?

I can't remember. But the next morning after the ceremony, I woke up early. She was still asleep. I made coffee and woke her up. I remember lying on our bed in the shack, late morning because I didn't go out that day to salvage, the village said I couldn't. I remember thinking: So this is life? This isn't bad. Sitting with a woman who loves me. Having coffee.

I think I got over the world ending that morning.

You should tell your granddaughter about that memory.

Yes. I should.

The Old Man looked again at the sign amid the burned ruins. Once it had sat atop the building. When the fire collapsed the roof it had come crashing down.

It was a newer business. Toward the end of civilization. A chain. This town was old, so I must be on the outskirts of it. They built these new ones on the outskirts. Maybe there'll be some salvage farther on.

He walked deeper into the ruins. He passed old cars sitting on rusty rims that had burned in the fire. There were no skeletons in them. In one he found a pair of dice that had melted to a dashboard.

When Phoenix and Tucson went, people must have run away, fearing the radiation.

At noon after wandering down a long street of burnt wood and sand, he came to an open square. He sat down and ate some peanut butter from the MRE. It was dry.

There's nothing here.

In his mind he tried to picture the town. The highway that ran back to the village would be on the south side of it. It was here that the two major highways once met and continued on south.

I've come a long way and I haven't found anything. I am still cursed.

By now the village must think you're dead.

He wondered if that were true.

What is the story of these places? I used to be so good at

finding their stories. I could find a shed or trailer or a wreck and know where the salvage was hidden. I was good at it then. What happened to me? I should have gone through that mailbox.

You're not cursed, you're lazy.

What about the writing in the tunnel?

Maybe it was done before the bombs.

The boxes?

Maybe they don't go together.

Here is what I think. Ready? Someone lived here. Lives here maybe even now. Or nearby. They wrote the words down in the tunnel as a warning to whomever comes next.

Whomever?

Not us. We are finished. We are just the survivors. But someday a society will happen. He left them a message. Telling them where we went wrong.

As he saw it?

Yes.

So what?

Down one of the streets he spied a building more intact than the rest. It had walls. He stood up and adjusted his bandolier of blankets and moved off toward the building, the sound of his huaraches the only noise in the desert air.

So what? I will tell you. Whatever he made those carvings with was a piece of equipment the village could use. It was some sort of industrial blowtorch. The village could make things with a tool like that.

Those use gas.

He must have lots of it. He's out wasting it writing on walls. He must have loads of it. The boxes of supplies he left behind? That's not a man who is worried about tomorrow's rice.

He came to the building at the end of the street. It was made of cinder blocks. He turned the corner and came upon more buildings made of the same material.

The fire had destroyed everything inside. But the shade was nice.

These walls are still good. A roof and I could live here.

Broken bottles and glass littered the ground.

This must have been a liquor store. The bottles exploded in the fire.

Once he guessed it was a liquor store he found the debris where the counter must have been. A melted plastic register at the bottom of it. He saw a few coins encased within the hardened plastic.

Whoever the writer is, he must have supplies. Maybe the village could trade with him. Or maybe he is lonely and might like to come live with us.

He walked down the row of burned-out concrete buildings.

This was some sort of market he said at one, a small one. Maybe that one was a clothing store. Farther on he found a barbershop. He could tell because the big iron chairs had survived the fire. He combed the store and found a pair of blackened scissors. He tucked them in his blanket and moved on. The last

building was large. It was on the corner of the block.

This was an old movie theater. Built before I was a child. This must have been the center of town back in the old days. Not a megaplex like near the end. This was a theater with only one screen.

He walked in and found the auditorium. The seats had all burned and the screen was gone. All that remained of the projectionist booth were the two square windows through which the projector had shown. The floor had collapsed onto the concession stand.

For a long while the Old Man stood in the quiet, listening to the ticks the debris made as the heat of the day began to fade.

I think I will rest here today and tonight. It's probably best to find the highway in the morning and head west back to the village. There isn't any salvage between here and there.

He set up his camp and gathered wood. He spent the rest of the day resting in the shade. He went to bed early and awoke after midnight. The night air was cool and he smelled rain coming.

In the morning I will find where the two highways meet and head back along the Eight to the village.

Late in the morning he found the Y where the two ruined highways merged into one heading south to Tucson. He also found the remains of six bodies stretched out on charred wooden boards, each in the shape of an X. Their skin leathery and mummified by the desert heat. Their socket-less eyes and openmouthed rictus made the Old Man step back.

Had they been alive when they'd been left here?

All the bodies faced south and east toward Tucson.

On the ground, thousands of rust-colored handprints were stamped into the old pavement of the highway.

Beyond the bodies, melted into the road in the same blackened writing from the tunnel, was the word SAFETY. A large arrow pointed down along the center of the highway toward Tucson.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The stretch between the Y and Tucson was a long road. It was interrupted by only one landmark he could remember. Of all the names of the past he'd forgotten, he remembered the name Picacho Peak. It was a tall, rocky outcrop that rose straight up out of the desert floor. A lone mountain in an expanse of flatland alongside the highway. It lay between the Old Man and Tucson.

The Old Man stood at the Y considering the messages and their conflict.

The bodies are old, maybe a few years. The carving in the road, who knew.

But the bodies are newer than the carving.

He started down the on-ramp leading to Tucson.

“Safety” means salvage.

Unless whoever left the bodies went there also.

I must go and see. I know already, this will give me no peace unless I have an answer to it.

Yes, but you could go back to the village. Do you need the answer bad enough to lose your life?

He didn't answer himself and instead walked for a long time that morning and into the afternoon. He passed road signs that had not blown down but had been scoured clean by violent sandstorms. The remains of a gas station were his home for the night. It had been looted, and when he checked the tanks they

were bone dry. This caused him to wonder.

Gasoline has other uses than just to run cars.

At twilight he ate a packet of spaghetti and meatballs from the third MRE. He ate pound cake for dessert.

You are making a pig of yourself. You won't be used to having less.

In the night, after the fire died, he heard something in the bushes outside the station. He lay still and after a few moments it was gone.

In the morning he ate a light breakfast and drank some instant cocoa from the MRE. The morning air smelled like rain, though there were only a few clouds to the south.

The blue desert sky was wide and the land a flat brown. He could see for thirty to fifty miles at a time. On the far horizon, dark mountain ranges cut jagged borders against the sky. He knew it was time for the monsoons and that when they came it would be very dangerous on the desert floor. A flash flood could come upon him from out of nowhere.

I should stay out of gullies and ravines. Also, don't sleep in dry riverbeds.

At noon he caught two more rattlesnakes on the road and carried them along for another few hours. He would roast them over the fire at dusk.

By now he could see Picacho Peak in the distance. Between lay the burned remains of another small gas station city off to the left-hand side of the highway and a wild pecan orchard on

the right.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Himbradda led his small band down through the Sonoran Desert plains, skirting its eastern edge. They were many days ahead of the main body of the People. The People were returning to Picacho Peak to start their ceremonies again. The Professor had ordered the People to return to their most sacred place. Picacho Peak. So Himbradda had been sent ahead. To see if the Dragon still lived there.

Himbradda was very afraid, had always been afraid. The woman that delivered him into the world didn't even know she was pregnant until he appeared nine months after she had been raped one morning, as the People grazed on wild beans and desert peyote. She lay under the hot morning sun, being raped in the rough yellow grass as she had been many times before and many times after.

When Himbradda arrived she carried him with her. Because of his withered left arm, he was accepted as part of the People and followed in the wake of their wanderings. He was fed on wild beans, pecans, uncooked coyote, and sometimes the warriors' peyote. He even tasted the meat of other children, perfect unblemished children. Children not of the People. Once those children reached the bottom of the drop below Picacho Peak, then all of the People could take what could be grabbed and torn away.

Himbradda had been raped and he had raped. He had been hit and he had hit. He had been beaten and he had beaten. If he had known how to count, the number twenty would have represented the number of children he had begotten, the number thirty-two for the amount of people he had killed, and the number fifteen for how old he was.

Regardless of his withered left arm and crooked teeth, he was almost beautiful. He had a strong build and a taut hulking physique. Long hair hung over one of his green eyes. His good arm rippled with muscles at the biceps, triceps, and forearm. In his good hand he carried, dragging mostly by the long iron bar, a parking meter that had been taken from the hot ruins of Phoenix. Most of the thirty-two dead had met the parking meter.

Nu-ah, who dragged himself everywhere because of the missing legs he'd never known, eased down from his watch-place atop the tall sign that still read GASOLINE. He crawled quickly across the parking lot to Himbradda, who sat in the shady petals of an exploded propane tank. Himbradda felt absently at the running sore underneath the hair of his scalp, while Nu-ah made whispers that indicated a lone man came toward them on the road from Phoenix.

The People had known Phoenix. It was the northern extent of their ranging, and some winters found them rooting around its slag heaps and twisted metal, finding bits of glass for their weapons. It was then that the sores appeared along with the sickness. They had stayed too long and now it was time to head

south, all the way into Mexico.

A lone man was prey but seldom encountered. If he continued down this road, thought Himbradda, then the man would reach Picacho Peak and the Dragon. That would make Himbradda's work easier. To see if the man brought out the Dragon.

He grunted that Nu-ah should return to his hiding place and watch the man. This was the last thing Nu-ah expected. He'd hoped, because of his sharp eyes, he might get a piece of the man's liver when the small band took the loner. A reward for finding him among the burning brilliance of the desert floor.

Nu-ah hesitated. Was he being left out of the kill?

Himbradda swiveled the head of his parking meter, grinding it in the faded asphalt for Nu-ah to understand.

Once Nu-Ah was back in his place Himbradda stood up shouldering his club. He tucked his withered left hand into his torn overalls. The overalls had been pulled off the body of a man in Mexico, after the People had overrun and destroyed a small settlement of salvagers. Himbradda grunted for the others to follow.

Eating the man and then having their woman in the dust of the highway afterward would have been a pleasant afternoon. But the Professor said that Himbradda must know if the Dragon still lives.

Gutch and Ha rose to their feet as Himbradda loped off into the desert behind the sign, looking for a crevice they might hide in.

Gutch pulled on the rope he wore about his waist, dragging their girl to her feet. It had been good of the Professor to give them a woman for the journey; otherwise Himbradda would have attacked them all. It was good that they could have her whenever they wanted. Even if she was blind and had to be led with the rope everywhere. He pulled savagely on the old tow rope wound about her neck. Fresh blood ran down her naked sunburned body. But she gave no cry, showed no intelligence, and only followed them into the desert waste beyond the remains of the station.

The Old Man reached the wild orchard of pecans at nightfall. He didn't like the place. But even more so he didn't like the violence of the old gas station on the other side of the highway.

Looks like a war took place there.

But the orchard was not much better. The sky turned a burnt orange as the sun disappeared, and the silhouettes of the trees looked like fingers clutching at the last of the day. Large crows roosted in the trees and the Old Man was not comforted by them.

He built a small fire and roasted the two snakes he'd found on the highway, eating a little and saving the rest for the next day.

You will run out of water soon if you don't find some.

It was dark now, and still he could see the fingers of the trees clutching at the night sky. He thought about moving on, but then remembered the wolves and thought he might get up into the trees if they returned.

He lay down but it took him a long time to get to sleep and when he did he woke often. Toward the deepest part of the night,

the crows burst out in terror and the Old Man heard them ‘*caw, caw, cawing*’ angrily. They sounded like a woman who was angry or crying out in pain.

He lay in the dark for a long time after the crows had stopped. In the silence, the memory of the crows’ anger came back to him, and he thought he faintly heard a woman’s cry, but only once and so little of it, that upon reflection he wondered if he’d heard it at all.

At dawn he was glad to be away from the place. He calculated that he might reach the base of the peak by midmorning and so he walked fast, chewing bits of snake as he went.

Himbradda followed the Old Man, leaving Ha to lead the woman, and Nu-ah to crawl on his trail as he shadowed the Old Man who seemed in a hurry to meet the Dragon. The body of Gutch, his head beaten to a pulp, lay in the crevice where they had spent the night. He had been at the girl while Himbradda tried to get close to the campfire of the Old Man. The crows, hearing her cries as Gutch worked at her had almost given him away and Himbradda had fled in terror at the ruckus of the evil birds. Himbradda’s terror turned to anger, and when he made it back to the crevice, he bashed in the skull of the sleeping Gutch and had the girl for reasons he knew not.

Himbradda, crouching in the soft morning light, followed the Old Man, who arrived soon at the most sacred birthplace of the People and the lair of the Dragon.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Picacho Peak's three peaks rose up in rocky defiance over the Old Man. Like a great ship beached in the desert, its tallest point, a mast, soared overhead. The Old Man craned his neck back to see the summit but could not make out anything there.

Another abandoned gas station town sat astride the main highway in the shadow of the peak and the Old Man inspected the ruins. Fire had long ago collapsed the roof, but inside the main building he found walls covered in rust-red handprints. Older writing, done after the fire in paint, lay underneath the handprints.

“Laws of the People” adorned one wall. On another, “History of the People.”

The Old Man stepped across the rotten charwood of the room and read the one marked “Laws of the People.”

THERE ARE NO LAWS

THERE IS NO GOD

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS WRONG

DON'T HATE ANYTHING

YOU ARE THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

The Old Man stepped to the side wall and read “History of the People.”

“On the day after we come. All those who heard and seen Phoenix go up in smoke and ash and those who seen the Cloud

over Tucson. For many days we sat and cried. We didn't no where to go. Then Professor said 'This is our paradise.' He gave us the laws and now at the end of our old world our perfect world has begun. It was laws that destroyed the old. It were hate that killed everyone. Now nothing is wrong and we is happy. We the People."

But where did you go?

You know where they went.

He thought of the corpses stretched on the boards back at the Y.

The Old Man dropped his bandolier and stroked the whiskers he needed to shave. He took out the canteen and drank sparingly.

Laws. Rules. I think that's what lets people get along. It must have been shocking once someone wanted something that was yours. Or murdered someone you loved.

The Old Man stepped out of the building. He walked toward the peak wondering if he should do what he was thinking he ought to do next.

If you fall.

Stop.

You won't make it out of here alive.

Stop. I can't think like that. I need to get to the top of the peak and take a look. I might be able to see Tucson from there.

They said they saw a cloud. That's the answer.

Sometimes you've got to see a thing for yourself to know it.

He walked up a slope of scree and reached the jagged face of

the peak. While it had looked sheer from far away, now he saw the cracks where he might make his way. Beyond that, leading to the highest peak, there seemed to be a trail he might take most of the way up.

He turned back to the valley, seeing the unbroken road heading south toward Tucson. The world was divided into blue sky and dusty orange dirt. Then he saw the flagpole and two flags hanging in the still desert air farther down the highway, near the base of the tallest peak. He hadn't seen it from the ruins of the gas station town.

He slid down off the scree and walked in the afternoon shadow cast by the peak until he came to the flagpole.

“On June 3rd, 2061, a great battle was fought here at Picacho Peak. The 6th Troop, 1st Cav, ‘The Black Horse’ out of Fort Tucson, engaged and defeated the numerically superior main body of the Horde. This action was taken to stop the Human Sacrifice being conducted atop Picacho Peak, in which the leaders of the Horde would toss human children from atop the highest peak. During the battle and in the days that followed, over 10,000 enemies were estimated to have been killed in action against the Black Horse. They are buried at the base of the Peak and it is hoped that the Horde has scattered and will not return to this place for fear of the Black Horse.”

—Sergeant Major John Preston,
6th Troop, 1st Cav, “Black Horse”

The plaque at the base of the flagpole was a large piece of

beaten sheet metal. The engraved words had been done in the same blowtorch-writing as those he had seen in the sewers of the burned-up village and on the highway at the Y. Above him, on the flagpole, a slight afternoon breeze out of the southeast snapped the tattered American flag to life. Drifting in the breeze below it, a yellow flag with a black stripe and the black silhouette of a horse's head waved gently.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Himbradda had watched long enough. The scrawny Old Man had violated the houses where Himbradda, even as a child, knew he must not go. When the People had lived in the shadow of the peak, there were two places they did not go. The hut of the Professor and the top of the peak.

Himbradda had waited for the Dragon to come. He had seen the Dragon years ago. He had seen it come upon the people in the night, belching great bursts of fire that exploded into the midst of the People. When the People had tried to rally and drive the Dragon away it had spit hot bolts that left gaping holes in all the fierce ones whom Himbradda had hoped one day to be like. But that had been a long time ago when Himbradda was a boy.

Then the Old Man walked toward the cliff, as if to climb to the most sacred place. The place where the babies had come falling from the sky, rejected, to crash down onto the rocks as a gift to the hungry people. Himbradda remembered those days as though a forgotten festival of better times.

If the People could return, then all would be right again. The festivals, the feeding. Still the Dragon had not come out against the Old Man.

Himbradda, hiding in the tall rocks, watched the Old Man. Ha and Nu-Ah and the blind girl with the swollen belly waiting, not breathing, waiting.

When the Old Man moved on, sliding down the scree of the sacred peak and disappearing into the great field where the people had lived, where Himbradda had been born, where his earliest memories had taken place, the Dragon still had not come. Himbradda knew the Dragon must be dead now.

As all thirty-two of his skull-crushed victims had never moved again so, surely, he reasoned, must someone have crushed the Dragon's head.

He made grunts and noises and hugged himself, then pointed east. Nu-ah and Ha would return to the People.

He grabbed dirt and threw it toward the peak.

They understood. They were to bring the People back. The Dragon was dead. They both turned toward the blind girl with the swollen belly.

Himbradda waved them away. Nu-ah, grabbing Ha's chest, rode piggyback and soon the pair were leaping away to the east to find the People.

Himbradda hefted his club to his shoulder and set off at a hunched run for the Old Man. He would leave the girl here, she wouldn't move. He would finish the Old Man and have his meat all to himself. Then he could return to the girl for what he wanted next.

Tucson must have survived.

The Old Man, staring at the flag and the plaque, looked toward the south. To the east clouds were bunching up fast and the Old Man knew monsoon season had come.

It will be dangerous now.

He heard the scream and whirled in time to see Himbradda standing at the top of the rise that led into the small bowl of the field beneath the peak.

To the Old Man, Himbradda appeared to be a large man with one huge arm waving a club in the air. He looked filthy and unkempt. For a moment, the dark savage was silhouetted against a gingham sky of soft blue dotted with white puffy clouds. The savage screamed in rage, whirling the club above his head and then he loped down upon the Old Man.

The Old Man turned and ran in the opposite direction. At the end of the field was a long fence twisted and bent by time. The Old Man made the fence and heard Himbradda screaming hoarsely in the hot still air, his shoeless feet slapping the hard red dirt behind him.

At the fence, the Old Man ran along its twisting path, coming to a pile of tumbleweeds that had built up against it. He dropped to the ground and crawled into a warren of weeds. The savage was no more than a few feet behind him now.

His world turned to brown dust and dry brush as he crawled farther and farther into a pile of tumbleweeds that had accumulated over forty years. Behind him, Himbradda tore through the maze, grunting and keening all at once.

This man is no more than an animal.

He turned right and pulled more weeds behind him as he crawled forward, bursting into the open. He had maybe a

moment or two before the savage would be free of the weed pile.

The Old Man looked around. He was near the great highway that bent itself toward Tucson. He crossed the road and dropped to the ground on the far side. There was little cover.

Above him, on the road, the savage screamed in pain.

If he makes the right choice in the next moment, I'm going to know what it feels like when that club comes crashing down on my head. If not, then maybe I have a chance.

Himbradda screamed again but farther away, on the opposite side of the road.

He must be circling the pile looking for me.

The Old Man slithered backward down the dirt embankment and headed south alongside the road. Himbradda yelled raggedly, almost crying. The Old Man took off his huaraches to lessen the sound of his steps.

He had not gone ten steps before the thing he had hoped would not happen, happened.

The scorpion stung him on his instep. It happened a second after he felt his foot crush its peanut-shell carcass. White-hot pain shot up his leg, and the Old Man stuck one dusty huarache in his mouth and bit down on the scream. His vision went red as his eyes fought a black tunnel that seemed to crush the world about him.

He looked down, praying it was not one of the baby white scorpions.

They are the most poisonous.

Instead he was rewarded with a frightening-looking scorpion. Large, black, and crushed in the dirt.

These old ones have less poison.

They are cursed like you.

Quiet.

He hobbled along the ravine hoping the savage man wouldn't check this side of the road. If he did, there would be no way he could outrun him now.

The pistol has no bullets.

I know. But he doesn't know that.

The pain is blinding.

He may not even know what a gun is. I think if he finds me he won't give me the time to explain it to him. It won't make a difference.

The Old Man limped farther down the descending embankment below the ruined highway.

The first drops of rain began to splatter in the red dust as the Old Man looked at his foot. Large glistening drops settled on the thick dust, remaining globes of water for a moment, then dissipating. His foot, though not swollen, tingled. It felt foreign to him.

He worked his way down the side of a broken bridge that once ran over a ravine. The rock-littered embankment descended into a dry streambed and then rose to meet the other side.

Above him, he could still hear the wild man screaming hoarsely in the desert air.

There's no time to treat the foot.

But you must. You must clean the wound and elevate it.

The Old Man had seen many stings and been stung many times. This one was not bad. It wasn't timely, also. He reached the riverbed as the rain began to fall with hard wet thumps against the dry ground.

This place will be dangerous soon.

Hurry.

He began to climb the rocky embankment, dragging the foot.

You rest for a while, foot. I'll give you that.

The wild savage screamed, having come to the end of the broken bridge and seeing the Old Man dragging himself up the far embankment. Near the dark range of hills to the east, thunder cracked and a moment later a flash of lightning lit the darkening sky. Toward the west, hot blue sunshine ground away at the sandy desert beyond Picacho Peak.

The savage looked down, considered jumping, then disappeared. A moment later he returned, running and grunting as he scrambled down the embankment on the side of the bridge. Halfway down he caught his foot on a jagged volcanic rock and yelped painfully.

The rain was coming down hard when the Old Man reached the summit of the broken highway. On the far side, the screaming savage raced down the embankment, kicking up dust in his wake.

If the rain had come earlier, I could have lost him in the ravines.

It's still your only chance.

It will be dangerous. The water will come fast, pushing everything. I could get caught.

Better than getting caught in the open by the savage and his club.

The Old Man ran, dragging the tingling leg. The fire was gone but the foot was tender.

Forget it.

Farther down he could see a crack in the highway. When he reached it he lowered himself into it. The Old Man raised his head above the lip and spotted the savage. It had taken the savage longer than the Old Man would have expected for a young man to ascend the embankment. But now the Old Man could see why. Dragging the club with the one arm while the withered left arm remained tucked into the dirty overalls must have slowed him down.

The Old Man dropped into the dark crack in the highway and inched along the wall toward the ravine it opened into.

He could hear the slap of feet coming closer and then saw the figure of the savage above him. Screaming gibberish, the savage smashed the parking meter club into the pavement, sending bits of stone and sand down on the Old Man.

Years after the bombs, an earthquake had shaken the village. This crack must have been caused by the quake.

Mud began to sluice down upon him from above. The rain came down heavily on the dry desert floor. Wet hair hanging in

his face, the savage raved in gibberish at the Old Man below.

You will need to come down here to get me.

The Old Man squeezed farther along the crevice. Then it opened into a jagged ravine that jogged off toward the south. The Old Man, who had felt a touch of closeness in the tight spaces of the crack, breathed deeply and coughed.

I said you will have to come get me, boy.

It's the only way I can get rid of you.

The Old Man limped off along the ravine in the opposite direction from where Himbradda stood at the cliff's edge.

Maybe he won't come. That would be for the best. For both of us.

Another flash of lightning lit the afternoon as Himbradda stood silent. Tension and worry contorted the snarl of his lips as he worked at crooked teeth with his tongue, thinking what to do.

The Old Man was just disappearing around the far bend of the ravine to the south, when Himbradda threw himself down the cliff at a run. His legs worked hard to keep ahead of the fall. His torso fell forward, ahead of his running feet. Then the muddy walls became too thick, catching at his struggling feet. He tumbled forward smashing into the floor of the ravine, hearing a dull crack inside himself while emitting a heavy grunt as the air was driven from him all at once.

A moment later he came to, in the mud of the ravine, unable to breathe. He rolled onto his back waving his club with the brawny good arm. He would scream at the sky. Scream as he always had

at the hardness of a life he barely understood. The screaming had always helped. But no sound came out. His head thudded and he could feel a tremble in the ground. Moments later his breath returned.

He rose shakily to his knees looking for the Old Man who had gone past the bend.

He would have him soon.

The wall of water and debris that hit Himbradda from behind started in the hills to the east. The surge had been growing in force with mud and debris as the water ran off the desert floor and into the ravine. When it finally arrived upon Himbradda, it slapped him down with mindless force and drove his body through the swirling chaos. All the debris of a broken world moved farther down the ancient riverbed.

The Old Man heard the flash flood coming, heard its low rumble through the riverbed behind him, heard the dry snap of branches above the din. Turning, he saw the sudden churning rapids. He reached the side wall and found it too steep to climb.

He removed the belt that had once been an extension cord. He tied a loop in its end and cast it above the lip of the ravine just beyond the reach of his fingertips. When he pulled on it the loop came flying back at him.

You are stupid.

Run!

Wait. There is no chance if I run. This is the only way.

He dropped his bandolier of blankets. Thick currents of cold

water rose around his feet. It felt soothing to the wound in his foot but the cold was terrifying as the water began to rise sharply. He knotted the belt in his hand, stepped back, and rushed at the wall, leaping for its edge. He dangled, grasping the edge, as the thunder of the debris wave erupted with a rumble at the far end of the ravine he had just come down. With one hand holding on to the edge, he waved his other hand across the ground above the lip, and finding a root, he quickly passed his cord underneath it. Just before the surge hit him, his other hand grasped the loose end of the extension cord. The flood drove into his waist like a wild bull.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

He hung on as long as he could, but soon the walls of the ravine had turned to mud and began to collapse into the torrent. The Old Man heaved himself upward, even as the wall collapsed, and felt himself scrambling to stand. At last he kicked away from the collapsing mud and found himself breathing hard in a pool of water a few feet from the cliff's edge.

The sky was gray with rain. Wet slaps hit the mud about him, embracing him in a soft white noise. He turned skyward and opened his mouth, drinking what rainwater fell into it. After he'd filled a mouthful he would swallow. It tasted of iron. It was bitter and it burned his throat. He drank again.

You are a dead man.

Not yet.

Your stuff is gone. How will you survive?

I'm glad I didn't bring the book. Now when I return I can read it again.

He stood shakily. In his pocket was a soggy book of matches and the pliers. The rest had been carried off. Gone.

You are a dead man.

Not yet.

He walked for another few hours. The flooded ravine forked south and east. He headed south.

If Tucson still stands, I will see it tonight or tomorrow. That

is my only hope.

His other voice did not reply.

The valley floor was filled with the violence of the flash floods, and at times he waded through pools and, at others, followed the course until he could jump across, knowing this was dangerous.

At one such crossing, the far side caved away at his sudden weight and all he could do was fall forward into the mud to keep from falling back into the torrent. He lay panting.

I am feeling very weak.

When was the last time you ate?

I can't remember. Maybe the snake.

Start looking for flint.

For a fire?

Yes.

I have nothing to eat.

Again his other voice was silent.

He forgot to look for flint, and when he had gone on another few hours, he stumbled and realized he'd been stumbling for some time.

There is nothing here.

You are beaten.

I am cursed.

That is the same.

I don't agree.

The sun came out and everything dried almost instantly. If

there had been rain, rain in abundance, the evidence was hidden. Only the clean smell of air without dust betrayed the monsoon. The sun made him sleepy, and when he began to crawl, he remembered he must look for flint. Flint to make a fire. But again he forgot and soon it was night.

The wind came up and he found himself on hands and knees in a sandy depression. He heard a sound. A sound he knew. A sound he had heard in the village.

I will lie down for a few hours and then walk.

He slept the whole night. He dreamed that he was back in his shed, back among the village, listening to the desert wind move through the tin and corrugated metal that was the village. Waiting for morning. Waiting to go salvaging once more with his granddaughter. He kept waiting. He should get out of bed, he thought during the dream. Get out and get ready his tools and breakfast. Get ready for his granddaughter who would spend the day walking. Talking. Listening. It was she, of all the village, who had not given up on him. Just like the boy in the book. He was very excited just for those things. Not so much the salvage. But if they did find salvage, then of course that would be nice also. In the dream, he kept looking out the door of the shed to see if she was waiting. But it was still the middle of the night, dark and cold and clear with the stars like the broken glass east of the village. He had woken too early.

When he awoke it was light. The light was soft. Wind blew sand across his skin. The sound of the tall grass was the sound of

a husky broom being swept purposefully in long strokes across a stone floor.

The tail of the airplane was white. It was tall, and it rose above the field of tall grass.

An airliner.

He stood slowly. His side ached where the flood had hit him. There were many tails. Like tombstones shifted slightly right, one to the next.

He moved through the waving grass and found himself standing on the concrete apron that girded the airport. Airplanes stretched away across the field, their metal groaning in the morning wind.

Marana Air Park. The airplane graveyard.

Of all the names from the past that you cannot remember, you remember this one?

My dad ... was a pilot. He was an airline pilot. I haven't thought about that in years.

He walked forward.

The planes, all of them white, faded paint visible on some, stood like headstones. Large wings had collapsed. Some lay on their bellies. Their number stretched off into the distance.

Their doors sealed tombs.

If I had my crowbar, maybe I could get in.

What could there be of use inside?

He thought of electronics, seat cushions. Flotation devices. The galley. Maybe he could find a knife or a fire axe. Planes

had fire axes. He remembered that from the many times his dad would take him to the cockpit where he worked.

He found the hangars that once stood watch over the graveyard of planes. They had fallen down. What tools or a crowbar he might have used to violate the tombs of the airplanes lay underneath and out of reach.

He walked toward the far end of the airfield.

These planes once crossed the world.

He thought of Hawaii. He had been five times. Flown there five times as a child. It was his dad's route. He and his mother in back. A vacation.

Had such a thing like that ever happened? He stood in the bright sunshine of the place. The wind was dying and the cemetery music of lonely tin slowly faded.

In the book my friend talked of Africa. Of the lions on the beach at sunset. I remember.

“When I was your age I was before the mast on a square-rigged ship that ran to Africa and I have seen lions on the beaches in the evening.”

Had ever such a thing happened?

If I could get in. If I could get into one of these, I might stay for a while. Gather tools. Hunt. Then trek back to the village.

I could head back to the peak and turn west. The Eight leads back to the village.

What if there are more of them? More of that boy. Chasing me with the club. The plaque said Human Sacrifice.

The Horde.

If the Horde still exists, they might find the village some day. We could not defend ourselves.

Maybe the boy is the last.

There could be others. Watching you. Letting you lead them back to the village. Or if they find you they might make you talk.

What about Fort Tucson, the Army, that Sergeant Major?

They will think you are one of the Horde. You must look like one.

I will tell them there is a village. They might help us. Or we could trade.

You are cursed. This whole journey has been nothing but a curse, and here you are in a graveyard of airplanes without food or water or a weapon.

Then I must get into one of these planes. At least for the axe.

He still had not made up his mind as he sat working with the gear he had collected. It had taken him a long time to get into one of the airplanes but he finally had. Going up through the nose gear of a four-engined plane, he'd found the trapdoor that led into the belly of the aircraft. Working hard at the pin and lock that secured it, he'd finally gotten it open. His head pounded with thirst and hunger and he was tired.

He wound his way up into the dark plane. Feeling his way along a gloomy corridor that twisted to the right once, he saw light coming from a square in the ceiling above and found a ladder that led up to the square. It swung open easily and he was

overwhelmed by the smell of stale fabric and dust.

He had some ideas about what he might find aboard the plane that might be of use. Now he put these ideas to the test. He went to the door at the front of the plane, the one where passengers had once embarked. After a few moments reading the instructions, he pulled the red handle marked EMERGENCY. Nothing happened. He read the instructions again. Realizing his error he tried again, and this time the oval boarding door swung open to the desert sky. He deployed the safety slide. With a bang and a hiss it flung itself away from the aircraft. Inside the compartment he found instructions for deploying the life raft case if the plane needed to land in the ocean. With what strength was left, he found the case, then threw it out onto the runway. After bouncing a few times the large suitcase opened and a round raft burst forth, inflating at once.

He slid down the slide and entered the covered raft on his hands and knees. He found a pouch built into the rubber floor marked SUPPLIES. The pouch contained a stash of stale protein bars and silvery bags filled with water. He ate and drank.

Now later, in the last moments of twilight, sitting near the fire of mesquite and working on his supplies, he still did not know what to do next.

He had found three more life rafts and collected an abundance of supplies. Besides the emergency food and water, he'd collected medical kits, scissors, matches, a flare gun and some flares, fishing line, and hooks. Now he sat cutting a raft into strips.

Later, when the firelight cast too many flickering shadows making it difficult to focus, he stopped work and carried his supplies back up the boarding slide into the plane. Back outside he sat by the fire for awhile drinking a pack of water, then he went into the plane and closed the door. He slept on a row of seats with an emergency blanket and several pillows.

For a long while Himbradda lay beside the raging floodwaters. Stunned. Numb. He had lost the man, and his rage boiled up within him. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the club.

He would return to the People, but when he stood, his right leg collapsed and he screamed in pain. It was broken.

He stood again, crying and grunting all at once. He began to limp back along the river's edge. He would return to the People and maybe he would get food.

Then he saw the tracks. Thick and gloppy in the mud. The tracks of the man. Dragging the broken leg, he followed them and forgot the pain that rushed up in him at every step. He drank greedily from evaporating pools of muddy water and chewed hungrily at seeds the People carried for nourishment. He would save the peyote for the kill.

Himbradda followed the muddy tracks until it was too dark to track them anymore. He would find the man and that would make him happy again. For a while he sat shivering in the dark. Then he slept.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The next day the Old Man made a rucksack using cut strips of yellow rubber from the raft. He sat in the shade under the large wing, sewing it together with some needle and thread from the emergency medical kit. Then he made a vest and finally a hat. In the emergency kit he found a little bottle of sunscreen. He would use that also.

I have enough to head back.

The heat made everything quiet. His voice seemed to carry under the wing of the plane and then fall into the dirt beyond.

This is salvage. We could come back here and search these planes. There's medicine, axes, pillows. These things would be good for the village. For a moment he saw movement underneath the wings of faraway planes. He crouched low, looking.

It was the savage. Dragging a leg, he came limping toward the Old Man.

Quickly the Old Man packed his ruck with supplies. He donned the vest and rolled up his hat, stuffing it in the rucksack. He grabbed the fire axe from the nose wheel where he'd left it to lean.

You can't lead him back to the village.

I'll head south for now. I must go to Fort Tucson.

At the perimeter fence, as the Old Man crossed onto the road leaving the air park, the savage gave a cry that pierced the still

desert air. The savage had seen him.

Looking back, he saw the boy limping furiously after him. The boy was slow and the effort he exerted great. But the Old Man felt he could stay ahead of the savage. Turning his back he hustled off down the road.

A few hours later he entered a series of rocky rolling hills. Saguaro cacti littered the sides of the hills, their arms upraised. The road began to twist and he passed a weather-beaten granite sign. He was now entering the Saguaro National Monument.

Aha, I am west and north of Tucson. I can follow this road and it will take me to Gates Pass. I remember that. From Gates Pass it's a short downhill walk into Tucson. I'll see the city from there. If it is gone, then I can turn west and head back to the village.

What will you do about the boy?

He turned back to see. The boy was falling farther behind. For a while, flailing his good arm, he'd chased the Old Man. Now he seemed to be stumbling. Weaving. Sometimes he would raise his head and scream at the Old Man, then return to his efforts, limping forward in angry determination.

The Old Man set off into the park. In the afternoon the clouds began to build up thick and white, and the Old Man could smell the musty scent that came before the desert rain. His bones felt tired and his muscles remained cold. When he stopped at a covered picnic area to rest, he felt dizzy.

Maybe the water? Or maybe the food from the plane?

Maybe it's been too much.

When the rain came a few minutes later he felt hot and sweaty. He'd lost sight of the boy.

I can't rest.

Shouldering his pack, he started off into the rain moving steadily, slowly but steadily up the winding road.

Can he still be behind me?

It got dark early and the air became cold. The rain continued as a slight mist. Standing in the gloom, the Old Man smelled the pavement and wondered what he should do.

If it comes to a fight I have the axe.

He's a boy. Your granddaughter's age.

I think he means to harm me.

He smelled woodsmoke from a breeze that came at him out of the north. In the distance he saw a small orange fire farther down the valley.

He has fallen far behind.

It could be a trick. To make you think he has stopped for the night.

The Old Man shouldered the pack and set off into the evening drizzle. Moments later, a flash of light caught the image of him receding into the negative, against the photograph of a land turned bone white and shadow.

Himbradda heard the thunder and sat shivering in front of his fire. He ate the last handfuls of the seed. He took out the peyote and fingered it, chanting over and over his nonsense words.

He threw more brush on the fire and white smoke issued up

as the fire slowly caught. He ate the peyote. He felt tired as he sat there staring into the fire. Later when the laughter came upon him, he got up and the leg felt numb. The pain was gone. He began to circle the fire, laughing and muttering. The rain stopped and he stared at the stars twirling and moving faster.

The Dragon was dead and the People were the stars.

The Dragon was old and now he was just an old man, chased through the desert by Himbradda. Chased by a hero across the stars.

He shouldered his club and set off into the night. The Old Dragon was sticking to the hard roads. Himbradda didn't need to track him through the desert. He would stay on the hard path and he would find him.

At the bottom of Gates Pass, the Old Man turned back to look along the way he had come. He didn't see the boy.

Ahead, a serpentine road wound its way up the rocky face of the pass. At the top he would be able to see Tucson. He would be in the suburbs of Tucson.

He shivered and felt chilled to the bone. He drank an entire packet of water and thought about eating a protein bar, but his throat felt as though it were on fire.

I am at the last of it and I am too sick to go on.

You must.

The boy is asleep no doubt. I can afford to borrow a little rest against the lead I have taken.

Your friend in the book would tell you, "First you borrow,

then you beg.”

True.

The moon was out as ghostly white clouds skidded off into the deep blue of night. It was quiet.

I heard coyotes a while back and I am just thinking of it now. I think I am very sick.

If there is a Fort Tucson they can help you.

“If” is the question.

The savage boy loped into view on the road below. Using his club as a cane, he was pumping hard to catch the Old Man. The Old Man tightened his grip around the axe resting across his shoulder and knew he was too weak to swing it to any effect.

Himbradda charged forward seeing the Old Dragon. The night air burned clean and fresh in his lungs. He screamed and thought of victory and dipping his hands in the blood of the Old Dragon, and covering the rock walls where he had chased the Old Dragon to, making the sign of the People. He screamed and felt better than he had ever felt in all his short life. He felt alive.

The Old Man labored hard up the steep grade. The next stretch of the cracked and broken highway was extremely steep.

Another bend or two and I'll be at the top.

He'll be on you by then.

He is my shark. I must try until there is nothing left like my friend did with first the harpoon, then the paddle, and finally the club.

He spared a glance back at the boy and knew the boy was

nothing human. Humanity hadn't been something the child had ever possessed, been taught, experienced.

The flare gun might scare him off.

The Old Man reached into the ruck. He had four flares. He loaded one and took aim. Himbradda labored up the first grade below. He fired and Himbradda stopped, watching the flare streak over his head. When it passed, the Old Man could see the features of the wild boy. Teeth missing in a mouth agape. Thick hair. The withered arm. Animal amazement at the red streaking light. His pupils large and dark. When the flare had gone into the bushes to burn, Himbradda surged forward up the hill, closing in on the Old Man.

Start moving now.

But I am tired.

Just move forward. Get to the top. Then think of something else to do when you get there.

He began to move.

At the top of the pass he turned, breathing hard, and felt dizzy. The savage boy was running now, rounding the bend on the narrow road that would lead straight to the Old Man.

He let the axe fall to the ground while holding the handle, and he knew it was beyond himself to use it. He let it go and backed toward the edge of the cliff.

You've got time for one trick, Old Man.

The boy charged forward closing the distance rapidly. The Old Man could hear the savage boy wheezing as he gasped for breath

to close the gap.

I've got nothing.

Try the flare.

Without thinking he loaded another round.

I'll just shoot him in the chest and that will be done.

But he doubted it would stop the savage boy. Not twenty feet away, the animal child raised the club over his head to smash it down on the Old Man.

The Old Man stumbled backward, knowing the cliff's edge was nearby. He felt himself falling and, for a brief moment, thought he was going over the edge, but the dusty ground greeted him with a dull reassurance as he fell onto it.

I came this far. If I had just a moment, I'd see Tucson at the other side of the pass.

That would have been enough. To know. To know it still exists, could exist for the village.

He raised the flare gun lamely as sweat poured cold and clammy across his forehead. He aimed it right into the face of the charging boy.

The wild snarling youth bore down upon him. Himbradda had crushed many. Many had raised their hands in defense, hoping to ward off the blow of the parking meter, to change the inevitable. Himbradda knew what to do in these moments. He wanted nothing between him and the skull of the Old Dragon. He kicked the Old Dragon's arm away with his leathery foot.

The Old Man's aim went wide. He urged his finger not to

squeeze the trigger, to re-aim, and try once more. But the impulse to squeeze raced ahead of the caution not to, and he felt his finger, his hand squeeze off the flare. It shot skyward past Himbradda's feral grin of rage and triumph.

This is death.

Himbradda jerked his head skyward, gigantic pupils following the falling star, the angel, the most beautiful thing he would ever see. The peyote revealed the world to him as he wanted it to be.

He watched the flare arching skyward, falling out and away from him, against a universe of broken glass. He twirled to follow its course and felt himself falling away from it.

The rocks at the bottom of the pass greeted him with a jagged reception. First his feet hit, then his wrist snapped, and finally his skull struck a rock. It felt as if those things could have been separate events, instead of the single instant they were.

The Old Man knew he was about to be killed. He had closed his eyes, waiting. But the blow had not come. And when he replayed what should have happened, what must have happened, he knew it had not happened. He saw the rush of the boy, the flying kick at his hand. Saw the flare racing away and felt Himbradda stumble forward, out over the cliff. He heard the crunch below. But his mind had not accepted it.

He lay there breathing, his fever breaking for just a moment. He sat up to drink water and felt his stomach turn. He curled into a ball and fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Morning wind caressed his old head and when he awoke, wrapped in his emergency blanket and using the ruck as a pillow, he felt hollow. His eyes ached and he hoped the weakness of the day before might have been just a short fever.

He sat up and drank some water. His throat was still sore, but not on fire as it had been.

Maybe that was the worst of it and now I'll just be sick. I can handle that.

At the bottom of the cliff near the bend in the road below, he saw the broken body and blood of the boy. The boy still clutched the club that was a parking meter.

What life did you live?

Is it your concern?

He never knew the things of the past. Never knew the first day of school. How the fog of California smells like damp wood in the morning. Never knew those things.

Let it go.

The Old Man sat for a long time in the golden rays of morning. It was still cold, but the sun at the top of the pass felt good and seemed to get down into his bones.

You've made it. You should go and see now.

The Old Man left his gear and walked to the far side of the pass. He crossed an old stone wall and then a parking lot scorched

and faded by forty years of sun and rain.

The rising eastern sun burned bright. For a moment it blotted out everything and the Old Man had to look away. He remembered coming to Gates Pass with his mother one time. To talk. She bought some jewelry from an Indian woman who sold them on a blanket. He had been maybe twenty-five.

He looked again and saw the city. It was a low collection of buildings with a few tall ones at the center. The city was dark against the brightness of the sun.

It didn't get hit.

Then he began to laugh. But it didn't feel right.

You made it.

He went back to his gear and soon was on the road toward the city. Morning birds flitted in the brush, calling rapidly to one another. To tell what they had seen or done. Or that they had survived. Or that they were still there. Or maybe that they were simply happy. Later, he passed the overgrown remains of a golf course. He saw a bobcat on a rock.

Soon he entered the old part of Tucson. Buildings were still standing. In a store, he saw the items it had once sold within. The front window had been shattered. Within lay a collection of sewing machines and vacuum cleaners.

He passed a grocery store and stopped to look in through the dark holes where the glass had once been. The shelves all lay atop one another but the cans and products still remained, piled in the dark against the bottoms of the toppled shelves.

He passed apartment complexes and finally came to a bridge that spanned the dry riverbed girding the western edge of Tucson. At the freeway off-ramp, blowtorched into the abutment wall was the word SAFETY and then an arrow pointing to the left under the bridge.

He followed the arrow and found others leading along the streets. Soon he entered the City Center. Birds flew everywhere, their calls echoing off the silent buildings. He crossed an intersection and walked toward an arrow that pointed farther down the street. He rounded a corner near a hotel and saw the gray square structure of the Federal Building.

At its base he saw a wall of sheet metal reinforced with sandbags. Written in large letters near a break in the sheet metal wall were the words "Welcome to Fort Tucson."

He came to the gate, which was just an opening, and saw a courtyard and the steps leading into the main building. A gate that could have closed the opening had been swung back and left open.

The Old Man walked up the steps and entered through the main doors of the Federal Building. A large marble entrance was bisected by a spray-painted orange line that ran across the length of the floor. Beyond the line, spray-painted in orange were the words "Raise your hands and walk forward or you will be killed."

The Old Man raised his hands.

He stood for a while and nothing happened. He walked forward into the dark at the far end of the hallway. Abruptly

an automated noise hummed forth on a note, then reversed and sounded again. The process repeated itself. In the dark ahead he could see a small dog-shaped thing swiveling its head.

The auto sentry gun traversed back and forth across the lobby, and once the Old Man began to lower his hands, the motion stopped and the sentry gun ground to a halt, locking its barrel in his direction. He raised his hands quickly. Automatically the gun began to traverse its field.

This is salvage.

The Old Man passed the sentry gun and turned. A red light on the ground attached to a battery pack switched to green and the gun ceased to move. An elevator lit up and the Old Man waited as the doors opened with a soft hush and then a poignant *ding*. On the back wall was a hand-painted sign that read Enter.

When the doors opened again, the Old Man stepped into a stark white lobby with polished floors. It was government. The feeling of the fluorescent lights, the cheap linoleum, the polished floors, and the smell of paper. The Old Man remembered a place where he had gone to get a Social Security card when he was eighteen. It had been like this.

Or was that a passport?

I don't remember.

Beyond the lobby were two halls leading in opposite directions. On one wall another hand-painted sign read THIS WAY! He followed.

The door at the end of the hallway with the next hand-painted

sign was at the corner of the building. The sign read Enter and the Old Man did.

Inside, a large desk and an executive chair looked out over the iron blue skies of Tucson. The Old Man could see the northwestern section of the city from here. On the desk lay a composition book. Written on the cover were the words “Read Me.”

The Old Man sat in the chair, his rucksack still hanging from his tired frame. He leaned back in the chair and didn't feel as sick as he knew he should feel. His throat still felt raw.

You're excited. Too excited.

He closed his eyes and listened to the tick of the building. He heard clocks. A creak somewhere. But mostly silence. He thought he heard the breeze outside the windows. He felt his mouth open and he heard himself snore for a second.

I cannot remember when I have ever been so comfortable.

He sat up, wiping the drool from his lips, and set his ruck down next to the chair.

He turned to the desk and opened the book.

“If you couldn't read, you wouldn't have made it past the sentry gun. So you must be civilized. Or no one ever came and the building's back-up batteries finally ran down, though that shouldn't have happened for another hundred years after I wrote this. Which means I was the last and these markings mean nothing to you. So go ahead and burn it for fire. At least that might be the start of a civilization.

“If on the other hand you can read, it means you are probably from my time; is that the right answer? My civilization. You survived the bombs or knew someone who did and they taught you. I guess.

“I survived.

“My name is John Preston. I was a tank platoon sergeant in the last days before the bombs. Our cavalry troop guarded the border. We were sent here to restore order. The city had been evacuated by the time we got here. Everyone had left because of the bombs. They figured Tucson must have been on someone’s list and that they’d get to it eventually. We spent three weeks here. There was an airburst out over the desert to the east but I think it was a low-yield bomb. It didn’t damage much, and the winds shifted the fallout over eastern Arizona and New Mexico. By then most of the troop had deserted. They figured America was done for and they went to find their loved ones.

“I stayed. We had a lot of equipment here and the city was still intact. So I figured someone had better keep the lights on. Haha. I tried to protect the city and all the supplies. I boarded up as many stores as I could and I covered things in plastic. I cleaned out all the home improvement centers and a few other places. I placed cars, generators, and tractors and a lot of other things in the parking garage below this building, which used to be the Federal Building. Now it’s Fort Tucson.

“Here’s the truth: no one ever came. I think you all must have thought every city went up in a cloud. Probably did. Somehow

Tucson made it. Did you know it's the oldest continually inhabited place in North America? I learned that in a book about Tucson. Now it's got that record by a long shot. I saved every book I could find in this city. They are in libraries I set up throughout the building.

"I know Phoenix is gone. We saw it on TV in the early days. I also drove there in a tank about two years after the bombs, when the winter was winding down. It's gone. Don't go there.

"There are people. Maybe you're one of them, but if you are who I am thinking of, you probably wouldn't come near Tucson because of the Dragon. I'm the Dragon. Or more importantly, the M-1 MK3 Abrams Main Battle Tank that I managed to keep operational is the Dragon.

"So here's the story of the Dragon. You can judge if you want. I don't suspect it matters much in my current situation. When I took that drive to Phoenix in the tank I found a settlement living in the gas station and the rocks of Picacho Peak. I tried to tell 'em they could come back to the city but they said city ways is what caused all this mess. They wanted to start a new society. No rules. Had a college professor, or so he said he was, that ran the whole place. We were friendly enough at first. I'd drive out every six months or so and give what medical aid I could. But every trip they got wilder and wilder. Crazy stuff I don't need to go into. But you will find a movie in the video library on the third floor, room 307, called *Apocalypse Now*. That might explain how it got. Anyway the professor, as they called him, was running amok. He

had a harem. I suspected he was killing his people. Maybe just his enemies within the tribe, which I took to calling the Horde after this computer game I played when I was kid, called *Warcraft*. Or just because he could. People I'd treat wouldn't be there the next time for me to follow up. I'd ask, but no one could tell me what happened to them. They were eating a lot of peyote. Lots of accidents, burns, falls, that sort of thing. I let it go.

“One day I go out there and they're gone. I looked over the whole place and that's when I found the bone pile beneath the peak. I climbed up to the top of the peak. They had a whole weird cave system slash temple up there. Chalk drawings of what they were doing told me the whole story. But they were gone. I tried to track them down. I found another settlement out in the west called Ajo, which means ‘garlic’ in Spanish. It was easy to follow the Horde because they moved like locusts. This was ten, maybe fifteen years after the bombs. There were lots of them by then. Anyway, Ajo had been surviving out there. They had a sheriff. Walls. A store. The Horde found them and destroyed the whole town. It was terrible what they did to those people who had survived out there for so long.

“You might ask ‘Do I feel bad about what happened to those people in Ajo?’ I do. Anyone would. But I had my orders and they were to save Tucson and hold position. I was trying to keep the candle burning by saving as much as I could for whoever would come along. It wasn't my job to go find those people and bring 'em in. I should have, but I didn't and that's the way it is. Like I

said you can judge me if you want.

“The Horde moved on over the border of Mexico. I figured they would either die out there or never come back, and that was for the best. I continued to work on the Fort, and periodically I started driving out to other towns on the map, a day’s journey or so out. Most were dead. Some had their own stories of what went wrong. You could tell by the bodies and the bloodstains the Horde got to a few. I checked Picacho Peak. It was quiet for a long time. I waited. About ten years ago they came back. They started the sacrifices as soon as they got back. I shot the head off the leader with a Barrett from a ways off, as he was about to throw an infant off the top of the peak. He and the kid tumbled into the crowd below and they ... well, forget it.

“Then I went in with the tank. They call it the Dragon. I interrogated a few of them after the battle. Scattered all the rest and shot the place up. Held it for a few days. They kept trying to re-take it at night. I had four sentry guns set up around the tank. It was not a quiet night. I killed a lot of them and came to two conclusions. One, Picacho is important to them. Two, there are a lot of ’em. So whoever you are, watch out for Picacho Peak. They ain’t nothing more than animals now. If that’s what’s left of humanity, then this was all for nothing. But if I made it, someone else must have made it too.

“I wish I could hear your story. I think I would like it very much. I waited for you, but I think cancer got me. I tried to make this place safe and easy to get into at the same time. I set the auto

gun to recognize ‘a hands up’ silhouette profile as ‘safe.’ So if you made it past the gun, you can read.

“I started a project. When I neutralized the temple at Picacho Peak I found laws the Horde had written down. Utter nonsense. I decided to write my own. For the next bunch who want to have a go at civilization. I used a plate welding torch and carved them into the sewers here and others places throughout the area. Kinda like the pyramids, except useful, and sewage systems outlast most civilizations.

“You are civilization now. What more can I say? I’ve left lots of these composition books throughout the buildings and on the equipment to tell you how to use it, or what’s where and such. Cancer got me. You can find my body in bed on the top floor of this building, in an apartment I set up. I promoted myself to Sergeant Major. God Bless America.”

The Old Man leaned back in the chair and wept.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

He felt weak. Later he went to one corner of the room, which had once most likely been an executive office, and rolled out his emergency blanket. He found a bathroom down the hall and heard Muzak playing in the sound system of the building. The tune was familiar but he couldn't remember it. He ran cool water on his face and drank from the sink. He thought about finding the infirmary. Medicine might help, but the feeling of fatigue was bone deep. He went back to the office and slept.

He awoke in the night. He stood for a moment looking out the large windows. White clouds scudded across a night sky that seemed bigger than any he could remember.

How long have I been gone?

He tried to count the days by their adventures. But they seemed too many.

He went to the restroom again and heard another familiar tune coming from the building's Muzak system. He couldn't say its name either. He came back to the office and wrapped himself in his blanket and sat in the chair watching the clouds drift across the sea of night.

In the morning when he awoke sitting in the chair, he felt hollow and sweaty.

Maybe the worst of the sickness has passed.

When he moved, he felt fragile as though it all might come

back upon him.

I need to make it back to the village.

If you start now, it will take a few weeks.

I know that. It is also monsoon season. Very dangerous.

The desert looked calm and cool beyond the city boundaries. Distant mountains of orange rock and brown shadow seemed pleasant from the safety of the building.

I have to make it back before I die. I have to tell them. If this fever turns into something, they will never know.

You have to make it back without dying.

He thought of the tank in the garage.

He searched the building for the rest of the day, finding the libraries of books and discs and computers that still worked. Medical supplies, equipment of every sort; all had been catalogued, ordered, and stored. Waiting. The Old Man wondered at all the years and the person of Sergeant Major Preston.

Finally he went to the top floor suite and found the corpse of the Sergeant Major. The room was orderly, and only the photograph of a woman, young, bangs, glasses, was any clue to the personal life of the man. There was a body bag beside the bed.

The Old Man closed the door and went back to the elevator. In the garage he found vehicles, farming and construction equipment. Each had a composition book. Near the main entrance to the garage he found four tanks. Three were

missing parts, obviously cannibalized to keep the fourth in good condition. He climbed up to the cupola and found a note on the hatch instructing him how to enter the tank.

Inside he found a VCR tape and a note that read “Watch First!!!” He returned to the offices of the building, and in one of the video libraries he found a VCR.

These were extinct when I was a kid.

Soon he had it working.

He sat down and watched as Sergeant Major Preston, middle aged, instructed him how to run the tank.

The tank had been fitted with a remote control system, slaved to the tank’s command compartment. This centralized the operation of the tank in the commander’s cupola. Sergeant Major Preston instructed the watcher on how to swivel and sight the main gun. How to fire it and how a reloading system would automatically rack another round. There were only twenty rounds on board. The video then detailed the starting of the engines, firing the fifty-caliber machine gun, and re-loading the tank’s fuel compartment at a fuel depot a few miles away where the Sergeant Major had managed to store fuel. Though, he said, the fuel tanks of any gas station could be siphoned using an auto pump on board the tank.

The Old Man had passed only a few gas stations that hadn’t burned to the ground. He doubted their fuel had survived. The video ended with the Sergeant Major putting the key to the fuel pumps on a wallboard inside the fuel station and showing

a drawing of how to get to the station from the Fort. Then he lowered the white placard map and smiled into the camera. The tape ended.

Earlier in the day the Old Man had found the kitchen. He'd made a breakfast of powdered eggs and canned tomatoes from the pantry, one of several in fact. There was coffee and creamer too, though his throat had been too raw for it. Instead he had made some tea from tea bags he'd found on the counter.

Now he returned and opened a can of ham, made more powdered eggs, and put ketchup on them. He sat, chewing slowly.

I need to go, get there and back before someone comes.

No one has come in all this time. Who will come?

He thought about the savage boy lying at the bottom of Gates Pass. He thought about his own parents' house.

There will be time for that once you come back with the village.

Will the village want to come?

He laughed at himself and chewed more egg.

When he had finished eating, he felt weaker than he should have.

The desert was too much. I won, but it may have beaten me. Maybe I got too close to Phoenix, or the rations or snakes were irradiated.

He thought of cancer.

I could leave now. Drive the tank through the night. Be home before dawn.

In the dark over broken roads and monsoon mud? It will take skill in the daylight. Don't even think about it at night.

He went back to the office. He rolled out a new army-issue sleeping bag he'd found in an office full of supplies ranging from camping stoves to cots.

He made some tea and added a packet of honey. He wondered if they might grow lemons here some day. He lay back in the sleeping bag with a fresh clean pillow he'd unzipped from a package that bore the name of a very expensive store. He wondered if there might be a gym and showers in the building. But he had not seen either.

It would be nice to have a hot shower before bed.

He fell asleep in the middle of the thought and woke up later, still holding the Styrofoam cup of cold tea. He rolled over and slept until just before dawn.

Awake and moving stiffly, he tried to tell himself he wasn't worse.

I won't ask much of you today. Just get me back to my village. Then you can die.

Why are you so concerned about death now? Is it because you have everything to lose?

The eastern night ended in thin blue streaks. He rolled up the sleeping bag, stopped by the infirmary, and grabbed a bottle of aspirin. In the kitchen, he took bottles of water and cans of tuna and chili. He found a can opener, almost forgetting to, laughing at himself as if he had forgotten.

In the garage, he raised the door by electronic control in a guard shack and went to the tank. Soon he had the first engine on the tank started. It sounded like a jet engine. Then he started the second engine and felt for a brief moment that controlling the tank would be beyond him. He checked the instruments and found that the tank was full of fuel. He went down into the brightly lit cupola of the tank and stowed his gear on a seat near the rear, then returned to the seat in the cupola. He took hold of a joystick and swiveled the main gun, sensing a momentary sickness as the entire cupola swung to the right. Then he pointed it back to the front of the tank and placed his hands on two levers below the joystick.

The right controls the right tread, the left the left tread.

Pushing forward on both would move the tank forward. Or so Sergeant Major Preston had assured him. He pushed forward on both cautiously and nothing happened. He tried again. He thought back to the instructional video.

The gas pedal.

Below him, near the new boots he'd found in a different supply room, was the pedal. He stepped on it and heard the tank's engines spool up to a high-pitched whine. He pressed forward on the two sticks while gassing the pedal as the tank eased through the garage doors. Outside he dismounted and closed the doors, then climbed aboard once more.

He gassed the pedal and pulled back on the left stick and went forward with the right as the tank swerved to the left. He looked

back at the Fort. Then he eased the tank out onto the road leading to the highway. His throat felt sore. Maybe he was sick. But he wouldn't think about it. The tank took all his concentration.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

At first the going was slow, as he wound through the side streets that led onto the main freeway. Once atop the eight-lane, the going got better.

For a while he rode the blacktop. The evacuation had left the city empty forty years ago. The Old Man knew where the people had fled during that long-ago exodus from a wrecked civilization. Many lay trapped between the cities in great wrecks of their own. A few had become his fellow villagers.

The highway ran smooth and eventually became a two-lane and a median with two lanes on the other side. Other than the occasional downed bridge that he maneuvered around or through, there was little that stood in the way of the tank. Soon he had the tank up to forty-five miles an hour.

He passed a semi overturned on its belly and stopped. It was covered in red handprints.

Is that recent?

Are they getting closer?

He revved the tank and sent it down the road once more. Soon the hum of the engines lulled him to thinking, and at times almost sleep. The day was cold. He could feel the rain in the air. Knew the heat of the sun hadn't driven away the cold of night completely. Winter was coming.

In the distance he could see Picacho Peak as the road began

a long gentle curve to the west.

I am finally heading west.

He thought about the end of curses. What needed to be done once he returned to the village? How to organize them and get them back to the Fort?

The village is over.

How so?

When I return with this tank. Everything changes. My life in the village will be something that happened long ago. A dream. Just like my life before the bombs. A dream also.

It was noon when he spotted them coming down from the northern mountains across the plain like a vast dark herd. They were crossing the highway in groups, running for Picacho Peak just on the other side. He stopped the tank. The roar of the engines was still loud and he could hear nothing above it. He could feel the north wind on his face. He could feel the cold of the arctic and the high mountain passes it had come down through to reach the Sonoran Desert.

The Horde lay scattered in bands across the horizon. Now they formed into two groups.

So they still exist.

One group resolved itself into men and boys painted and various in weapons and dress. Savages of the new wasteland. The other group drew itself toward Picacho Peak, running like a startled herd of buffalo.

There is the main gun and then the machine gun.

If not today, when?

I don't think I've ever killed a man.

Mirrored Sunglasses? The savage boy?

They killed themselves.

I don't think it will be just a couple today.

The wild men came on in a ragged line, running with mouths open.

What you do today determines the future of the village. Civilization even.

I don't know if I'm the man to make that choice.

There's no other. Act now or die. Do this today or forget tomorrow!

The Old Man tapped the accelerator and listened to the engines spool up to a high-pitched whine.

Maybe this will give them something to stop for.

The ragged mobbed surged over the soft sand, closing the distance.

Do something now, Old Man!

They were twenty yards off when he gave the tank full power and pushed forward on the control sticks. The tank jumped forward with a roar, and the Old Man closed his eyes as he crashed into their line. They were hundreds turning into thousands and the air was suddenly thick with missiles of rock and broken pipe. He tucked into the hatch and kept forward on the sticks. He heard their wild screams above the thunder of the engines.

When the rain of debris ceased, he popped out of the hatch and checked the tank's progress as it veered across the median. He overcorrected and the tank gave a sharp right turn. Before he could get it straightened out he'd gone out over the northbound lanes and into the desert off the road.

He surveyed the mob. There were thousands surging all around the tank. Thin gaunt men the color of dust chased his wake, waving and yelling. Potbellied, sun-browned women and feral children snarled as they ran from him. Stones began to fall, but they were too far off. The main mass of the mob seemed to be collecting around the base of the peak but the warriors were gathering again for another charge.

He moved the tank back onto the road and started toward the abandoned gas station. The desert scrub was thick on the far side of the road and at times, wild-eyed men and screaming women ran gibbering before the tank, darting off into the bushes like frightened animals.

He traversed the gun and toggled the gun sight onto the building where he'd found their laws. Behind him, their main force pounded down the road after him, their eyes wild with anger and fear. He depressed the red button atop the joystick and sent a round into the building.

At once, two things happened. The tank rocked back in a cloud of powdery dust, and the wall of the building exploded in a spray of cement. Beyond the building a moment later, the round exploded in dirt and sand, having passed straight through

the decrepit wall without exploding.

The Old Man traversed the gun, hearing nothing but dull silence and feeling, more than hearing, the servos that swiveled the cupola. He landed the main gun on the advancing wall of savages.

“This must mean something to you!” he screamed and barely heard himself.

He felt a sharp blow on his shoulder as a club smashed down hard upon it. He turned to see a crazed naked man with cracked skin and open sores, his watermelon head drooling crazily amid a mouth full of misshapen teeth. The savage raised a club to strike once again. His attacker had climbed from the back of the tank onto the cupola. Three others were struggling up the same way, each as lunatic as the first.

The Old Man sank into the turret, grabbing at the hatch with his free hand as he stepped hard on the accelerator. The tank bolted forward across the road and onto broken ground. Sure that they had fallen off, he popped up from the turret once more to scan the terrain ahead. As he turned to look forward he saw that the tank was headed off the lip of a dry riverbed. He took his foot off the pedal hoping to stop in time.

The tank fell. He had just enough time to swing the hatch shut and throw himself to the floor of the tank.

He awoke to a cacophony of noise. Everywhere the sound of hammers and pipes could be heard across the interior of the tank. The Old Man was bathed in red light. He stood shakily and

locked the hatch, marveling that they hadn't pulled on it.

He reached into his ruck and got out some water. It was hot, though the sweat felt cold on his back. He wondered if they would try to set the tank on fire. He wondered if the tank would burn.

He found his way awkwardly into the control seat. The tank was in a facedown angle.

At least we are not on our side.

He stepped on the accelerator and the engines whined. He pushed forward on the sticks and felt the tank strain, but refuse to go forward. He reversed the sticks and felt the tank jump backward straining and digging. He took his foot off the pedal.

I might be stuck.

Anew, the ringing sounds of metal on metal began again.

Too much and I will dig a ditch I might not get out of. Then all they have to do is wait me out.

What other choice do you have? You only brought two cans of food and some water. They might damage something and stick you here whether you like it or not.

He pulled the restraint harness across his shoulders and snapped a belt around his waist.

I can't go forward. But I can go back just a little.

He imagined what the tank might be stuck in. What position would cause that and how to get out without making things worse.

Outside the tank, someone had found a sledgehammer or something equally capable of making a tremendous ringing gong. Mixed with the other assaults, it was becoming unbearable.

I am not beaten. I am just stuck.

He thought of the old man in the book. What would he do?

Sometimes there is nothing to do but the only thing that you can do.

He gassed the accelerator hard and held back on the sticks with all of his might, as his fingers and wrist turned sweaty with heat and tension. At the top of the rise, he pushed forward on the tank, and then almost immediately, once it leapt forward, he pushed back again.

I have to pop the nose up. It's the only thing I can imagine that must be done.

He felt his stomach float for a second and knew that the attitude of the tank had changed. He hoped it was enough. He gassed it forward, and then at the last second, felt he needed more of one stick than the other. He went with the right stick, pulling back on the left before he could think further on the subject. He felt the tank turning and finally moving forward. The attacks on its shell ceased.

I've got to see or this will happen again.

He opened the hatch but kept the tank moving. He traversed the turret, taking in the panorama of savagery that surrounded him. Black smoke filled the area and the sun was low in the sky, turning everything blood red. As he traversed east, monsoon clouds built up in angry red and purple bruises.

I must have been out for a while.

The Horde, toothless, angry, misshapen, twitching, hobbling,

screaming, gashing, beating, wild animal thing that it was, surged in every direction as he gunned away from the center. His passing clotted quickly as they followed him howling and yelling.

There must be an end to this.

Atop Picacho Peak, a large bonfire burned against the deep blue of the high altitude.

When he had some distance from them, he swiveled the tank to face the peak.

It must be this then.

He traversed the gun and set it on the face of the peak just below the topmost edge and fired. This time he put one finger in his ear. He heard the reloading system eject a hot shell and reload another. He fired again once the ready light went from red to green, near the firing button.

The rounds began to fall directly into the side of the peak, and almost instantly the walls began to crumble in great sheets of dust and rock.

He fired again and saw the savages scream, dropping to their knees, unable to comprehend the horror of what was happening to them.

In the last moments of daylight, he switched on the tank's high beams and fired again. The Horde fled the field, heading east into the dark.

When he had fired most of the rounds, he alone remained. Bodies crushed by the tank turned up as he crossed the field. But the rest had gone. He returned to the main road and set the tank

on it.

We will have to watch them.

Over the hum of the engines, he considered the place as he readied for the long push back to the village.

What had been the difference between this place and the village?

He set off down the road making slow but steady progress. A harvest moon came out and it stayed dry. It smelled dusty when he arrived at the burnt town where the two highways intersected. The bodies were still spaced across the blacktop. He maneuvered around them and set the high beams on the road heading west.

If I remember right, the village will be beyond the next valley. But it has been some time.

He crossed a small plain where once crops had grown. An overpass had collapsed across the road and he went around it. Shaking with hunger, he stopped and turned off the tank. He opened the can of chili and ate it as he walked around the silent tank. It was cold and he began to shiver.

Back in the tank, he started it, momentarily knowing it wouldn't. But it did and soon he eased forward into the night as the road climbed a small desert plateau, crossing a pass and descending into a valley of jagged peaks.

I remember this part. I remember driving it many times.

Thoughts that had seemed so important then, as he passed over the same ground now, seemed foreign.

I was different then, he said in the wind and the night.

When he reached the end of the valley he felt tired enough to stop. He thought about buttoning up the tank and sleeping on the floor.

I need rest. I know I am very sick.

If you die ... or if in the morning you cannot get up ... no one will know. Eventually the Horde will find the Fort. The machine gun won't keep them away for long. Once it runs out of bullets, what then?

He drank some water and pressed on. He passed a conical mountain, and then came to the Gas Station that had burned down at the edge of the town that was the farthest limit the villagers would salvage.

Just a ways more.

The Old Man in the book is not his name. His name is Santiago. In the book he wanted the boy with him as he fought the fish. Just as I wanted my granddaughter with me.

He passed the blackened ruins and a little later the moon fell low in the sky.

He topped the rise and saw the village. He turned off the tank feeling the heat dissipate quickly. He was just a mile off from the village but he could see it below. It was a collection of sheds and huts built around an old processing plant. It was his home. He could see the field of broken glass glittering like the stars above.

He left the tank, feeling hot and sore.

I will walk home and go to my house and in the morning they will see the tank.

There has never been such a fish.

He knew he made little sense. But it seemed right not to wake anyone.

Let them sleep in the village one night longer. To have the village one more night. Then they can have the world.

My journey was like the one in the book.

That is the thing about books. You take their journeys with you.

You came home with something more than just the remains of a fish.

The book was never about the fish.

He neared the sleeping village and passed through unseen.

Even the dogs are asleep.

I want to tell my granddaughter the lesson of the book. The lesson that they can beat you, but they cannot defeat you. I must tell her that.

At the door to his shed, he wondered if someone might live here now. His thoughts were scrambled and came in waves. But he knew it was the sickness and the fatigue.

He pushed open the door and heard its sound, knowing it as his own. He loved the sound of it. All was as he'd left it. Still holding his rucksack, he lit a candle and carried it to the desk where he kept the book. He looked at the cover for a long moment and then set down his pack.

Your must tell her that.

What?

They can beat you but they cannot defeat you.

He put the book on his bed and lit a fire in the stove.

My friend in the book is safe.

Maybe just some tea. Then sleep.

But when he sat on the bed to take off his new boots, he couldn't get back up.

Be sure to tell her.

I will.

For just a moment he mumbled, then lay down.

He dreamed of lions playing on distant beaches at sunset. His granddaughter was right next to him, watching, both of them silent. Her little hand in his old hand.

She was going out again. In the dark, she gathered all the tools she would need, and when she found the claw hammer her grandfather had let her carry, she placed it in her belt. It was like having him with her. She needed that.

On the way to the cantina for the tea that the old women made while they fried the sweet dough, she felt the cold earth on her toes. This was the best time of day, she thought. This was the time when they would meet and she would go out with him to salvage.

She looked at his shed as she had every morning, its silent, gray, unlined in look a memorial to her grandfather.

It's a good thing. That way you will remember everything he taught you. You will need it out there.

But as she looked this morning, she saw the wispy smoke in

the chimney of his shed and she was angry.

Someone has moved in! It's too soon ...

She charged toward the shed door, intending to wake the village with her rebuke at whoever had taken her grandpa's shed as his own. But then she was running and hoping. Hoping he had come back.

Like she knew he would.

She found him sweaty and hot atop his cot, mumbling in his sleep. She kissed him but he did not recognize her in his fever. His body felt thin and gaunt.

She hurried back to her parents' door, telling all in one burst that he had returned. Then to the kitchen to tell the women.

Back at the shed, her father knelt by the side of the cot, crying and talking softly to the Old Man. She would nurse him back to health. She would make him drink soup. They needed to kill one of the chickens. Then when he was well, they would go out again to salvage, and then she too was crying.

Her little brother came running to her as he always did.

"There is something on the road. Something wonderful." He pulled her through the lanes of the village to the edge of the highway.

Alone and in pairs, the villagers approached the tank atop the hill as the morning sun rose behind it. She didn't care. Even though it was the greatest salvage ever, it was nothing compared to what she cared about.

EPILOGUE

The Chief Excavator stood atop the scaffolding, the wind blowing at his jacket. He stepped back from the hole he had just made with the cutting tool.

“It’s your turn.”

The Doctor of Antiquities stepped forward. He had campaigned long and hard for this day. Now that it was upon him, he didn’t want to go through with it. From theory to paper, to committees and hearings, it had been one thing. The game of academics. But now those questions would be answered. He would have to find something new to uncover because the riddle of the tank would be solved.

His heart beat rapidly as he moved his light toward the opening, his head close behind. Inside, a wrapped body was the first thing he saw. He knew it was a body. The first residents of the reoccupation of Old Tucson, the foundation of their culture, had prepared their bodies in the same manner. But those bodies had all been found in the graveyards of Starr Pass.

“It’s true,” he mumbled.

“You were right?” asked the Chief Excavator.

The Doctor stuck his head and light back in the hole.

“It’s a body. Probably an early warlord. Maybe the first to conquer the area. There is something on top of the body. A book perhaps.”

A strong wind, a danger at this altitude, gusted past the Doctor's head and turned the ancient book to fragments, floating and swirling about the inside of the tank.

"Looked like a book, I should say."

"Any clue how they got the tank to the top of the tower?" asked the Chief Excavator. The Doctor stepped back and pulled a plastic sheet over the opening to prevent further wind damage.

"We'll never know how they did that." He took in the panorama of the world's oldest still-populated city. Towers and buildings raced toward the heights above, the Space Elevator beyond that, its thin diamond line tracing away into the sky above.

"That was never the point of this project. We wanted to know who was in here. It's our city's oldest monument and no one knows a thing about it."

"So who was he?"

"Can we ever know? Probably not. We will make some guesses from what we know about the survivors of that period. But we can never know for sure."

"So we can just guess a little better, is that it?"

The Doctor put his hand on the tank, feeling its ancientness.

"I can say one thing."

"What?" asked the reporter who'd come out to the historic district to cover the story.

"Whoever put him here, in a war machine of the period, which was impossible as we know it by their standards after the

catastrophe, to hoist a multiton vehicle to the top of this tower, whoever it was, loved him very much. He was very important to them. I can say that.”

INTERMEZZO

For those who loved
The Old Man and the Wasteland,
You will find this novel a bit different.
This time the Apocalypse is personal.
I thank you in advance for this brief indulgence.
God willing, we may yet hear more of the Old Man.

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

You take everything with you.

That is the last lesson. The last of all the lessons. The last words of Staff Sergeant Presley.

You take everything with you, Boy.

The Boy tramped through the last of the crunchy brown stalks of wild corn, his weak left leg dragging as it did, his arms full. He carried weathered wooden slats taken from the old building at the edge of the nameless town. He listened to the single clang of some long unused lanyard, connecting against a flagpole in the fading warmth of the quiet autumn morning.

He knew.

Staff Sergeant Presley was gone now.

The last night had been the longest. The old man that Staff Sergeant Presley had become, bent and shriveled, faded as he gasped for air around the ragged remains of his throat, was gone. His once dark, chocolate brown skin turned gray. The muscles shriveled, the eyes milky. There had been brief moments of fire in those eyes over the final cold days. But at the last of Staff Sergeant Presley there had been no final moment. All of him had gone so quickly. As if stolen. As if taken.

You take everything with you.

The cold wind thundered against the sides of Gas Station all night long as it raced down from mountain passes far to the west.

It careened across the dry whispering plain of husk and brush through a ravaged land of wild, dry corn. The wind raced past them in the night, moving east.

A week ago, Gas Station was as far as Staff Sergeant Presley could go, stopping as if they might start again, as they had so many times before. Gas Station was as far as the dying man could go. Would go.

I gotcha to the Eighty, Boy. Now all you got to do is follow it straight on into California. Follow it all the way to the Army in Oakland.

Now, in the morning's heatless golden light, the Boy came back from hunting, having taken only a rabbit. Staff Sergeant Presley's sunken chest did not rise. The Boy waited for a moment among the debris and broken glass turned to sandy grit of Gas Station, their final camp. He waited for Sergeant Presley to look at him and nod.

I'm okay.

I'll be fine.

Get the wood.

But he did not. Staff Sergeant Presley lay unmoving in his blankets.

The Boy went out, crossing the open space where once a building stood. Now, wild corn had grown up through the cracked concrete pad that remained. He crossed the disappearing town to the old wooden shamble at its edge, maybe once a barn. Working with his tomahawk he had the slats off with a sharp

crack in the cool, dry air of the high desert. Returning to Gas Station, he knew.

Staff Sergeant Presley was gone now.

The Boy crossed the open lot. Horse looked at him, then turned away. And there was something in that dismissal of Horse that told the Boy everything he needed to know and did not want to.

Staff Sergeant Presley was gone.

He laid the wood down near the crumbling curb and crossed into the tiny office that once watched the county road.

Staff Sergeant Presley's hand was cold. His chest did not rise. His eyes were closed.

The Boy sat next to the body throughout that long afternoon until the wind came up.

You take everything with you.

And ...

The Army is west. Keep going west, Boy. When you find them, show them the map. Tell them who I was. They'll know what to do. Tell them Staff Sergeant Lyman Julius Presley, Third Battalion, 47th Infantry, Scouts. Tell them I made it all the way—all the way to D.C., never quit. Tell them there's nothing left. No one.

And ...

That's the North Star.

And ...

Don't let that tomahawk fly unless you're sure. Might not get it back.

And ...

These were all towns. People once lived here. Not like your people. This was a neighborhood. You could have lived here if the world hadn't ended. Gone to school, played sports. Not like your tents and horses.

And ...

There are some who still know what it means to be human—to be a society. There are others ... You got to avoid those others. That's some craziness.

And ...

"Boy" is what they called you. It's the only thing you responded to. So "Boy" it is. This is how we ...

Make camp.

Hunt.

Fight.

Ride Horse.

Track.

Spell.

Read.

Bury the dead.

Salute.

For a day the Boy watched the body. Later, he wrapped Staff Sergeant Presley in a blanket; blankets they had traded the Possum Hunters for, back two years ago, when their old blankets were worn thin from winter and the road, when Staff Sergeant Presley had still been young and always would be.

At the edge of the town that once was, in the golden light of morning, the Boy dug the grave. He selected a spot under a sign he could not spell because the words had faded. He dug in the warm, brown earth, pushing aside the yellowed, papery corn husks. The broken and cratered road nearby made a straight line into the west.

When the body was in the grave, covered, the Boy waited. Horse snorted. The wind came rolling across the wasteland of wild corn husks.

What now?

You take everything with you.

Horse.

Tomahawk.

Blankets.

Knife.

Map.

Find the Army, Boy. All the way west, near a big city called San Francisco. Tell them there's nothing left and show them the map.

When he could still speak, that was what Staff Sergeant Presley had said.

And ...

You take everything with you.

Which seemed something more than just a lesson.

CHAPTER TWO

The road and the map gave the number 80. For a time he knew where he was by the map's lines and tracings. He alone would have to know where he was going from now on.

I followed him from the day he took me. Now I will need to lead, even if it is just myself and Horse.

Horse grazed by the side of the broken and cracked highway.

The short days were cold and it was best to let Horse eat when they could find dry grass. The Boy considered the snowcapped mountains rising in the distant west.

Sergeant Presley would've had a plan for those mountains.

You should be thinking about the snow, not about me, Boy.

The voice of Sergeant Presley in his head was strong, not as it had been in the last months of his life when it was little more than a rasp and in the end, nothing at all.

You're just remembering me as I was, Boy.

I am.

You can't think of me as someone who can get you outta trouble. I'm dead. I'm gone. You'll have to take care of yourself now, Boy. I did all I could, taught you everything I knew about survival. Now you got to complete the mission. You got to survive. I told you there'd be mountains. Not like the ones you knew back east. These are real mountains. They're gonna test you. Let me go now and keep moving, Boy.

The sun fell behind the mountains, creating a small flash as it disappeared beyond the snowcapped peaks. Horse moved forward in his impatient way. The Boy massaged his bad leg. This was the time when it began to hurt, at the end of the day as the heat faded and the cold night began.

Sometimes it's better to ride through the night, Boy. Horse'll keep you warm. Better than shiverin' and not sleepin'. But stick to the roads if you do go on.

The Boy rode through the night, listening to Horse clop lazily along, the only sound for many hours. He watched his breath turn to vapor in the dark.

I should make a fire.

The Boy continued on, listening to Sergeant Presley's voice and the stories he would tell of his life before the Boy.

Ah got caught up in things I shouldn't have. You do that and time gets away from you. It shoulda taken me two years to get across the States. Instead it's taken me almost twenty-five or twenty-eight years. I've lost count at times. How old are you, Boy? You was eight when you come with me. But that was after I'd finished my business in Montana. That took me more than twenty to do. Maybe even thirty. Nah, couldn't have been that much.

We fought over San Francisco maybe ten years. After the Chinese kicked us out of the city and dug in, that's when the general sent us east to see if there was anyone left in D.C. My squad didn't make it two weeks. Then it was just me. Until I met you, and that was up in Wyoming.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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