THE TAVERN AT THE END OF THE WORLD

“The inn does not point to the road; the road points to the inn. And all roads point to an ultimate inn, where we shall meet Dickens and all his characters; and when we drink again it shall be from the great flagons in the tavern at the end of the world.”

G.K. Chesterton

CHAPTER ONE

His parents left him to die at the edge of the forest in late October, when winter was beginning and the warblers had taken all their voices and had flown south to some mysterious kingdom beyond the horizon. They lifted him from the cart in a hard, firm grip even though he held on desperately to the sides. They pulled his hands loose finger by finger. The house dog barked at everything from under his mother's skirts, barking at the entire world because something was wrong and the dog felt it in the air and was sounding the alarm but the people around him did nothing but make high-pitched unhappy noises.

He felt himself dropped onto the ground like a sack of unconnected bones. His mother's face was wet and her hands were in fists. She would not look at him. She was enormously fat. His father bent over and held him by both forearms and sat him down in the leaf litter beneath an oak tree and said that if he could walk through to the other side of the forest, there would be light, and a river and a pleasant land where he might despite everything find himself alive and well.

He stared up at his father and said "No, I am going to die here."

His name was Sam and his face was narrow as a shoe. As they came down the road in the cart he had bent himself together tightly and said in his thin voice that after all he had worked as long as he was able. What did they want, what did they want? He might get better yet and be able to work some more. Not heavy loads exactly but if you thought about it he would be able to do all kinds of small things. He could sew fairly well and copy out articles from the Childcraft Books for his sister's perusal. Poems; for instance 'The Pirate Don Dirk Of Dowdee'. When they did not reply he took hold of his mother's sleeve.

“No,” she said. “Don’t.”

His father reached over and tore his hand away. “Stop it.”

“This is too hard,” said his mother. “This is too hard.” She sounded as if she were coughing and then she began to cry. Sam took hold of the edge of the cart.

“Would you rather leave him to the burial parties?” his father said.

“No, no.”

The house dog had leaped into the cart as they were leaving the house and for some reason nobody threw him out again. The house dog was a small black-and tan terrier with winking and anxious eyes. The dog whined when his father stepped from the cart, took the boy by his thin forearms and lifted him out. The boy gripped his father’s collar with starved hands.

“Don’t leave me here,” he said. “You are ignorant and mean. Think what you’re doing. You aren’t my father.”

“*You* think. Think about your sisters,” his father said. He pulled the wiry white hands away from his collar. “When people die of the wasting disease the prions jump out of the body with feelers and inhabit the next person. You have to be fed separate from everybody and can’t even lift a bucket, and we are starving and weak ourselves, so think of us, would you?”

They were not starving and weak but his father was a congenital liar and more than that he could no longer stand to look at the boy’s skeleton face in the corner every night, his caustic comments on their clothing and their speech and the simplest things they did every day of their lives. Yesterday the burial party had come through the town and started at the

upper end of the street, pulling the sick from their beds, and it was at that time his parents carried him secretly to the pony cart and here they were.

“Think of your sisters if not us, his father said. Think of me, what I go through. Think of me, think of somebody besides yourself.”

They left him with his back against a tree, wearing a stiff suit of clothes made of coarse wool, and hard shoes, and some food in a knapsack. His pants stopped in the middle of his shins and his stockings were striped around and around vertically in yellow and blue and red. They left him his cane with the T handle and some other little things, a small knife and a bowl and spoon, a pencil and paper, candles and matches, a crystal and a bunch of geranium blossoms as if he were already a dead ancestor or a thin, malicious divinity.

They turned their heads away from him and stepped into their cart. It tilted under their weight and the pony bent his neck and shifted. His father slapped the reins and he saw his mother crying again into her hands.

“Murderers!” he called after them. “You planned this since I was a baby!”

Of course they hadn’t but he was grasping at anything to yell at them, accuse them, make them feel shabby and low.

He sat with his bony legs doubled up against the cold. His eyes were sunken and his arms and legs like broomsticks and his lips cracked in four places. He told himself it was all his father’s doing and that his mother really loved him and she would never have done this on her own. He loved his parents despite themselves, despite himself even.

“Don’t leave me,” he shouted. “Please! Please!”

He called out their names for as long as he could keep them in sight, *Mother, Father*! It sounded as if he were calling them abusive names. As they merged with the autumn leaves he shouted one last time that he would eat nothing from now on, if only they would take him back with them. He would die quietly. He just wanted somebody with him when he died.

He fell back against the tree trunk and looked at his bony hands, opening and closing his spatulate fingers in the cold light. They would repent and come back for him. They would sit in front of the fire and see his chair in the corner, now empty, and suddenly ask themselves why they had done this terrible thing. They would learn the meaning of mercy and all the hard work it took to be merciful because it was not easy, was it? It did not seem to come naturally to people.

He drew up his knees. The lofty oaks ballooned their umbrellas of dry leaves up and down in an increasing wind and it drew on toward evening as he wept against his fists. Fall of the year, and freezing at night.

He had become used to the idea that he would die before long and had come to think it would be a kind of birthday party or some family event and he had held out in this hope even though he had never had a birthday party. Nobody knew when he was born. He knew he would die and he did not know when that would happen either, but he had hoped it would happen there at home, maybe by the fire. That perhaps the burial parties would have taken him for healthy. It could have been done with cosmetics. Certainly it could have been done.

Sam went over these thoughts even after his parents were several hours gone. All over the country, in woods and by the waysides were these same small chirping sounds of the abandoned sick, like the noises

made by the thousands of drowning people in distant seas of ice when the ship of the world went down. How few we are.

After a while he stopped crying because it exhausted what strength he had left and to do something interesting rather than suffer this flattened, mindless terror.

He took out the notebook and tore a page from it, gripped the pencil, and wrote down his name, Sam Garoute, and where he was from. The village of Arrow Rock. He wrote carefully; the tips of his fingers were pale blue and his cracked lips were blue as well. He would fasten the paper to himself like the soldiers did before the Last Battle. *Hic yacet*. Here lies. The wind took up the leaf litter around him and blew it into the air, increasing in strength every minute. He tore a slot in the paper and put it over one of his coat buttons and then sat silent to listen to the wind.

The ride to the edge of the LaMine forest and the crying and turmoil had made him very tired and he thought the best thing to do was to rest all through the night and in the morning he would feel stronger and then he would think what to do with himself. If it were possible to save himself in some way. To avoid the subhuman Nids and their random seeking appetites as well as other predators like dingoes, wolves, the great cats.

He had thought this often enough in the past year but now abandoned on his own it came back with greater urgency. Maybe God would reach down into this secular world, he would reach across the unknown barrier that lay between this world and the world where God lived and cure him. Then he would get his strength back. The wind roared on, increasing in strength, and plastered him with leaves. He reached out with his hands

and drew them in piles to himself to try to cover himself against the night and began to weep in a subdued way, making small noises.

A miracle would happen. He packed the leaves down tightly. He was not even strong enough to untie the strings around his roll of blanket.

He touched his fingers to his mouth and his hand came away bloody. The sunset light came in horizontal rays through the forest and lit up the boles of trees in spots, light fell on the crescent shapes of his hands curled shut. His nails were blue. At his feet a red-and-black beetle rocked from side to side as it walked straight on toward a minute forest of fungus, tiny trees of pale green knobs. Beyond hoping he might not die in the next few days, other than imagining some vague miracle, he couldn't imagine much of anything more. Beyond that he came to a dead end.

I must think what to do now. It was coming on to dark. He turned his cramped hands to the blanket roll and tugged the knots lose. He cleared himself of leaves in clumsy gestures, and spread the blankets as well as he could to one side of himself. He waited a few moments for his strength to come back and then shifted himself onto the heavy wool and pulled the other half over himself. That was better. Then he once again raked up leaves over the blanket. *Well*, he thought. *This is all right. I can get through the night.* His breath was visible in cold puffs. The wind rained more dry leaves onto the forest floor and as he was now reasonably warm and since he found that his crying fit had passed, he looked around himself and at the same time thought, ignorant, vicious people. *That who I was raised with. Ignorant as hogs.*

After some time he heard something moving to one side of him. As he strained to listen it became louder and then he could feel the blood

draining out of his face, his great round blue eyes opening like caverns. Dying or not, his body wanted to live; it said, *you must live, you must*.

The house dog rose up out of a nest of leaves. He had been there for a long time without making himself known. He came to Sam and stood there staring at him with a slow wag of his tail like a repeated question to someone who is hard of hearing.

"It's you," Sam said. He held out his thin hand and his heart slowed down. Groveling as usual. He reached out and put his hand on the dog's neck and he could feel him trembling with nerves and cold. Then he got a grip on himself. "If I stayed positive about things, who knows? Clichés are often comforting. Think happy happy thoughts, wallow in rainbows, think of names for your personal bluebird and so on."

There was a moon, nearly full, and its dim light drained through the clouds. The whole forest was alive with movement. Off to his left there was a glowing broad light. It was an open space. As he watched there appeared in that space several animals who had come to greet one another in the clearing. They were dingo dogs with heavy heads and their jaws were like broad levers. They smelled of one another and then ran in circles chasing after each other until they scented him and then they turned all together and were silent and their ears pointed toward him.

Sam knew they would kill him and eat him. He sat awake and watched with his round blue eyes now as wide open as ports on a ship. The terrier came and stood by Sam facing the dingoes.

Maybe they will eat the dog and leave me alone, thought Sam; and then, *What an unspeakably selfish thought*.

The dingoes had coarse, short hair and broad bodies and they began to make a low noise almost below the level of hearing. They came toward him moving from one spot of moonlight to another. The terrier beside Sam growled in a light tenor voice.

"Go on!" Sam shouted. He waved a stick. "Go away!"

They stopped and tilted their heads to look at him and he could see that their eyes were clear as marbles. Sam was at the level of their muzzles and he wished he could raise himself from the ground but he could not. He moved slowly to wrap his blanket around his throat. They began once more to move toward him and one with spattered dots across its muzzle was ahead of the others. They made soft and careful noises as they put down one paw after another on the leaf litter of the forest floor. The terrier shook and whined but he stayed by Sam.

Still they came on with their heads low. There were three of them. Sam's hand shook so that he could hardly hold the stick. His lips were drawn back into a wide grimace as if he would bite.

"No!" he shouted. "No! No!" He threw the stick at them and still they came on a pace at a time with their eyes fixed on him and one turned his broad head slightly to look at the terrier. Sam heard himself screaming "Help! Help me!" The word help was drawn out into a long scream that went echoing through the woods.

Then he sat staring at the dingoes with eyes as wide as plates and waited for them. They were not afraid of him. The one with the dotted muzzle came up to Sam and put his enormous jaws around Sam's forearm in a gentle, tasting way and then bit down.

"No!" Sam's voice was thin and cracking. The terrier made a low noise and shot forward and set his teeth into the dingo's ear. "No." The

end was before him. Very clear. He felt the dingo's teeth passing through the skin of his arm and reaching down to bone while the terrier flung himself from one side to the other in an attempt to rip the dingo's ear off. Oh no, oh no, said Sam, and blood poured through the dingo's teeth and down the side of its head. The terrier made small, high, whining sounds as he tore at the ear. The other two ran in little circles and whined.

Then a shadowy man walked into the far side of the clearing. He lifted something to his mouth and played a sweet musical phrase. The man had a thin moustache and the sort of jaunty hat that had not been seen in centuries. A spotted tie at his collar. Something lost in time. Sam could see through him to the trees beyond. The figure lifted the musical device and played the same light phrase again.

The dingo opened his mouth which was full of Sam's blood and turned on the terrier. The man faded away into the trees. The dingoes turned their heads from Sam to the disappearing man and then after a moment they trotted after him.

Sam found himself holding his forearm and the terrier sitting beside him.

Sam sat awake all night in the cold gripping his left forearm with his right hand. After a while his coat sleeve became stiff with dried blood. In the small hours of the morning his head fell forward on his chest and the terrier slept against his thigh. At first light of dawn he fell asleep.

He dreamed. In the dream he was being led or directed to some place where he would receive a great vision that was of vital importance to all mankind. He was flooded with a feeling of wonder. All his jeering and cynicism broke from him like an egg shell. Several people standing behind him whom he could not see said it was this way, a way which led

through a flooded area with bare and broken trees like bottomland woods that the Missouri River had drowned. The people behind him were adamant that a vision was waiting for him in that direction and then Sam felt the dream slipping away from him and so in this dream landscape he placed a papier-mâché moon, which glowed of its own light, in the sky at that place, and colored the lower left-hand edge of it a peach color so that he could find his way back here in the next dream and find again this splendid vision, which would be to the left.

He woke up in sunlight. The wind had droned on all night, tugging at him and worrying him, but he was alive still. His arm hurt very much but he would do as his parents had told him, their lie that was supposed to comfort him. It was untrue but he would do it anyway; go on until he came to the end of the forest and there would be light and a river and a pleasant land. And there, for some reason, he would get well.

He pulled himself to his feet and in the cold he took off his jacket and the vest under that and the shirt under that. He shook so with the cold that he could hardly stand. With the knife they had left to him he cut and tore up the tail of his shirt and wrapped it around his arm. Then he put everything on again and he beat the leaf litter from the blankets and slowly rolled them up. He was very thirsty and he looked into the knapsack; there was a water bottle. He uncorked the top and drank from it. The terrier stared at him with such intensity that Sam poured some into the small wooden bowl and watched as the dog drank it. Then he went on, leaning on the cane and the little dog danced along beside him.

Sam crept along all that day. He made perhaps two miles but he was not good at calculating distances and as he walked he puzzled over who the man could have been. He was clearly a spirit of some sort. Common in the woods, they always said. Would he run onto him again and why was he wandering around at night with dingo dogs? He walked slowly

along a path that had been well used at one time but now there were no footmarks on it.

Lift up your heart, he said to himself. *Stay optimistic, why suffer the crushing cable-tool of sorrow? Because I can't help it. It's bigger than me. Well maybe not.*

Thus arguing with himself he came to the edge of a great bluff and below him he could see the wide Missouri, so it was clear that this path was following alongside the river. He felt that he was going vaguely south-east, along with the current. His food lasted for the entire day because he did not feel like eating very much. The dog came at his heels.

He would go on into the back-lands where there were no people and powerful forces took form. He did not altogether believe the stories about the putative powerful forces but then, he never believed his own parents would spill him out of a cart and leave him to die either.

The only people left in the world were those who lived in towns along the Missouri and its tributaries or rivers in general as far as was known and all the backlands were empty. The backlands were inhuman and occupied by ghosts of former ages. The trees walked and bubbling springs steamed and spoke in tongues. There were birds with hands. Yorona sat at all the rapids and waited for souls.

Had he not last night seen these other beings with his own eyes? Maybe he had been hallucinating. Sam shuffled on and clutched his bitten arm.

The towns on the rivers lay distant from each other but the towns themselves were packed tight with narrow three-story dwellings that leaned on each other and people lived close to one another, close, close, so that they could feel there were more people in the world than there

really were. And with every carpenter that died the houses leaned more precariously forward and backwards and were shored up with big beams that obstructed the streets and so the houses weathered every winter unrepaired. With every stonemason and blacksmith that died of the wasting disease the street pavements cracked and door hinges broke and were not replaced. Some towns had walls and palisades but most did not because the enemy was within.

CHAPTER TWO

The dog's name was Jack but Sam was reluctant to call him by his name because something might happen to him, or he might run off after some creature and Sam would be alone again. But on the other hand, naming calls. To speak the dog's given name might put a hold on him.

"Jack," he said. "Ho Jack."

The terrier looked up at him with winking, anxious eyes and Sam leaned down to beat him in a friendly way on the ribs with his good arm and when he straightened up he was dizzy so he sat down again on the collapsing steps of the front porch of an old house where he had spent an absolutely terrible night. But this morning he felt better. It was because he hadn't done any hard work for several days. Just walking. He must find a cave or someplace he where he could press back into the dark and hide from the dingoes and rest, just lie still and rest. So he got to his feet by holding onto the shaky porch rail and started out again. The autumn wind poured across the Missouri River and twilled its surface in a sheening liquid weave far below.

The path made a tunnel or an aisle in the forest at the top of the bluffs. Even though there were no footmarks just at present, neither of Nids nor dingoes nor shoes, the path was not overgrown. So something or some creatures walked along it from time to time; people or the Nids must come through here once in a while. The rare demented hoboes that wandered the empty nation. Only once had Sam been more than ten miles from his home. He had lived in old books that were about another world. The one that had gone away and was full of cities.

He put one foot in front of the other and leaned on the cane and walked slowly. There were deer tracks in the path, and the clubbed, split prints of wild hogs. He saw ahead of him a massive white-oak had thrust out a limb over the trail, growing at right angles to the trunk in the manner of white oaks, and he said to the dog,

"I will make it as far as that limb." Jack trotted on ahead.

After a few minutes he surprised himself in arriving under the great limb and so he looked down the path and saw a small group of slender young hickories growing by themselves and dressed in brilliant lemon-yellow leaves that turned in the wind. They were conversing among themselves, they were vain and trivial, they were getting ready for a woodland dance and discussing what they would wear and then the wind would increase and they would have to go naked as sticks or not go at all. Sam said to himself, *I will go as far as those hickories*, and after a while he was standing by them and the lemon-colored leaves flew about his head, spangling the air. Shafts of sunlight came down through the overhead canopy as great holes were blown in it by the wind, ripping off leaves and throwing them in circles. Crows drifted overhead, looking for some trouble that they could announce, and in the meantime calling to one another in deep, isolated bell tones.

The path dipped down and he managed the going down well enough but then it rose again on the other side. The earth was wet at the bottom of the dip and ferns grew there and moss on the stones. In the earth and mud, little hand-shaped prints were everywhere, beside turned-over stones and at the bottom of two tiny pools. He had to get up the other side and it took him a while and he thought, *I must rest, I can't keep on walking right now.*

But he had to, he had to find someplace to hide away from the dingoes and the apparitions in dancing shoes. Jack's nose was deep in the smell of the raccoon prints but as he saw Sam creeping on up the far side he left them and came trotting after. The wind started up again and in it were a few grains of snow the consistency of sand.

"I never liked you much at home," said Sam. "But life has changed. About now I would like anything that didn't bite me. We are in the backlands, Jack, where the world is different. Requires nimbleness of mind, agility of the imagination." And he thought, *Maybe I could live in this forest, maybe I could make a deal with the demons.*

Sam kept on down the path, foot after foot. Little grains of snow began to salt his coat sleeves. "Especially when you had been laying by the fire and you came over to me and your back was warm."

Then the woods opened up to a clearing with a collapsed windmill or tower of some kind.

He sat down at the edge of the open hillside. It would be hard to get up again without anything to hold on to but he sat down anyway on the crisp autumn grass. The grains of snow pinged on his head. At the bottom of the collapsed wooden tower were impressions of the metal blades of a windmill fan. Down among the jumble of the timbers, fallen every which way were the shorings of an entranceway.

"There's a cellar down there," said Sam. "Under that tower or whatever it is. Now there is a place to lay up and get out of this wind. If there's nothing in there already."

Sam got up with the help of his T-headed cane. Halfway down the easy slope he fell and lay there for a moment. There were two kinds of failing inside him, one was an emptiness and the other was something

vital draining away. *Don't let go. Lift up your heart.* He looked up at the grainy atmosphere above him and the tall grass with its seed-heads bending in the wind. Then he rolled over to one side and then got up on his knees and hands and then to his feet.

"I guess I've got to live as long as I can live. But it isn't easy, or simple, and in fact it is becoming increasingly complicated."

The dog brushed his tail back and forth.

When he arrived at the entrance he was almost beyond his strength. It was square and shored up on its sides and top by heavy cedar beams. He turned and called the dog.

"Go in there and see if there's anything living in there," he said.

The dog stood staring in. The timbers made a crisscross overhead and around them and they were powdering white with the snow. The terrier stepped inside with his nose in the air and then turned back to Sam.

"Well, all right then."

Sam groped around in his pack and found a candle and a block of sulphur strikers and lit the candle. He shook out the match as he stared into the darkness with the candle in his hand and after a moment he stepped inside and saw that it was about fifteen feet square on a side, a good large space, and lined with shelves, and on all the shelves jars of fruit shone in the candle light. Other things piled in confusion on the floor and up against the walls; one of those heavy bricks of indestructible paper, burnt on the edges, a shoe.

"Oh my God!" Sam cried. And then, more quietly, "This was a meant thing! Somebody's old fruit cellar and robber's hole." He stepped

around a pile of metal rods and to the shelves. “Tomatoes, squash, new potatoes, pears. Oh wonderful. I could eat this if I could get the tops off.”

He put out his candle to save it when his eyes adjusted to the dim light that came through the open entranceway. He could see fairly well. He should find his way around now so that when the dark night came he would not need the candle. Outside the snow had increased, and the wind as well, and he thought about his parents leaving him out in that. They had left him to whatever weather came along, to this storm.

“I myself would not leave a grindstone out in weather like this,” said Sam. “But then I am not typical of my family.”

Right about now his mother and his brothers probably sat in front of the fireplace in their second-story home over the printers’ shop and were shelling popcorn off the cob and probably weeping and his father was striding about declaiming with that creepy way of lifting his nose in the air and giving a little shake to his jowls. *It was so hard on me it’s beyond your imagination*, he would shout. *He was just taking food out of our mouths. I couldn’t take it any more. Brought shame to the family, our family harboring a waster! Never lifted a hand, had the easy life, books and a tutor!*

“Why am I imagining things my father would say?” he asked himself. “Jack, Jack, let’s stay with the positive side of life, alright?”

The dog came to him as if Sam had called him and sat down and looked up into his face. “It’s all right,” said Sam. “So far anyway.”

He wandered around in the dim light and the junk. Everything was rusted. Broken scissors and a set of some kind of metal tags rusted to the fragility of fall leaves and a disc with numbers on it from one to twelve,

a metal handle belonging to something to which it was not attached, small figurines of President Kennedy in pottery and remnants of children's shoes and wool batts for quilts that never got made.

There was a plate of broken glass on the floor and he pieced it together. The letters were hard to make out because they were cut or molded into the thick glass and not only took on the color of the jumble and trash of the ground behind but were also prismatic at their beveled edges.

KEEP ON THE SUNNY SIDE

ALWAYS ON THE SUNNY SIDE

And below this happy message was a rayed sun with a rather carnivorous grin.

People had taken to etching things like that on glass because metal rusted and was rare, but the glass would last forever. And light would shine through and turn to prism rainbows on the edges to give hope, a feeling of being saturated with light and a kind of untouchable beauty as they held it in their grimy and scarred fingers.

Lot of good it did anybody.

Sam stood up again carefully because standing up too fast made him dizzy. "That's what this is. This is a lot of old junk the waster-removal committees used to use. Then they robbed the houses. I bet this is all a hundred years old; they made themselves a cavern hidden under an old windmill --- or no, it's not a windmill. It's a signaling device. There's no drawpipe. They robbed people of stuff and then --- they forgot where they hid it? Life is full of mysteries. Right Jack?"

The terrier stared at him for a few more seconds and then went off to nose around in the scattered junk as the light grew dimmer. Sam reached up for a blue glass jar of pears. “Oh good, pears. Now I could eat some pears. But the dog can’t. What could you eat?” Sam crept along down the shelves but the light was so faint he could not make out the contents of the jars but there was one which had a dark mass inside and so it seemed to be some kind of meat. Snow whirled at the entranceway.

He sat down with the jars between his legs and reached inside his pack and brought out the little knife. The jars were sealed with a heavy waxed cloth over the mouth that was tied around and around with string and then it had all been waxed again. He sat down and carefully cut at the string around the jar until it was cut through and then he peeled off the stiff waxed cloth. Inside there was a disc of wax covering the contents. He pried that out and sniffed. It all smelled all right. He speared up a piece of pear and ate it. “Well, it doesn’t matter, then, does it? he said. Maybe dying fast from botulism is just as good as wasting. Now, would you like some of this?”

He turned up the opened jar of dark stuff and it was indeed meat, dark chicken that slithered out onto the ground.

“There you go.”

The terrier ate it noisily. Sam watched him and speared up one section of pear after another. He could feel the sweetness enter his bloodstream like a drug and it flushed through his veins and he felt warmer.

Jack sat back and licked his lips. He had a little dot to one side of his nose that Sam had not really noticed before and he found it endearing. Then the terrier yawned in a trembling way.

Sam felt stronger after the pears so he drained the jar of the last of the juice. He carefully unwrapped the bloody strip of cloth from his bitten arm and looked at it. It looked okay but it hurt, deep inside the muscle. He had to use the same bloody cloth to wrap it again but the blood was dried so it didn't matter all that much. Then he unrolled his blankets. He pulled them around himself and lay back. The light was nearly gone now, only a square where the doorway was, slightly less dark than everything around it.

The dingoes would not come here, nor Nids, just the increasingly human raccoons. Maybe. What did it matter? They say, 'We have to cleanse ourselves of the sick it is our only chance'. Well they had been saying that forever. Now they were hauling away people who came down with a bad cold.

But he had more than a bad cold. *I can call them inept and stupid all I want but there is no denying what I have become. Weak and thin and diminishing by the day, another person with the wasting disease.* It came upon people so slowly that it was only after they were truly sick with it, emaciated, that the committee demanded they be abandoned to die, and by that time others had got it from them, also to begin the slow, years-long process of wasting. So it was a kind of losing proposition.

"I was always sickly," he said. "Jack? Are you listening? Let's see, you must be four years old. I wasn't feeling all that strong when you came as a puppy. I guess it has finally caught up with me. Accelerated or something. Yes, accelerated. It was hard to die without your life's work completed. Now they would throw away all his papers and notes or use them to start fires with. Criminals. Goths. That's what kind of family he came from. Unlettered barbarians."

Jack curled up in the curve of his body, on top of the blankets. Sam disentangled his good right hand and patted the dog on the ribs. The terrier's tail beat on the wool.

"You will inherit the earth," said Sam. "God will say hmm. What can I do with these canines? Will he make you hands? Will your brains blossom up and grow to the size of a cauliflower? Will he be happy with you as his new creation?" Then suddenly his throat closed up and his face flushed and Sam began to cry without sound. He was jealous, that's what it was. Jealousy. The terrier would live and he would not.

Sam slept like the old sleepers in the caves who lay deep in dreams while in the earth beyond, peoples and their civilizations came and went like cloud-shadows passing over an immense river and every passing cloud was darker than the one before and they came closer and closer together until it would soon be a storm without end and darkness everywhere. The wasting disease had changed and spread and had become far more genteel in its afflictions; people did not wobble and slobber but diminished, diminished, shrank to joyless pinpoints of themselves and then died. God had other things to do with his creation than people it all over with human beings, apparently. He had despaired of his creation and turned to something else more interesting.

He woke up in the night and heard the trilling noise that Nids make. He listened carefully. They walked upright and were blue-skinned and had sagittal crests as on Roman helmets with upstanding porcupine roaches, and teeth like piano keys, and tiny careful hooflike feet. It was said they escaped from the emergency room of a mad scientist and they bred and ate and killed on command if rewarded with body parts. The Offices of Better Health used them to kill wasters.

He drew in breath through his nostrils as if that would keep them from scenting him. The terrier for once made no sound or movement. For a long hour suspended in terror he and the dog breathed as if carefully choosing their air. The entire forest was soundless. And at last he fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Sam woke up in a gray light. Dawn, cold and snowy out there. He was surprised to find that he felt tolerably well. Sam had never slept out in the wilderness in his entire life and he was surprised that he had survived thus far without a fireplace and a bed and walls around him and a roof and a big tank of water with a dipper. The big twenty-gallon copper tank that sat on top of the cookstove and the water was always warm and you dipped in and poured it into a basin to wash your face in the mornings. Sheets and pillows and books to read and puzzle over, tales of vast ancient cities, unknown and forgotten leaders, vanished performers. Plots appeared occasionally but not often.

He lay in the blankets and held the terrier to his chest to stay warm. What should he do? Get up and go on or stay here and commit himself to this grave-like place?

Sam sat up and shifted the blanket up around his neck and shoulders. The terrier trotted to the entranceway and looked out with pointed ears, tilting his head one way and another. No Nids. A new day for him; adventures ahead, life in abundance. A living dog is better than a dead lion. Old saying.

Three more jars of fruit; pears, apples with tiny dots of cinnamon flakes, slimy peaches. He tried to eat them all, thinking, *Then I will be stronger. Then I could make myself a weapon of some kind and smash a dingo on the head.* The terrier bolted down another jar of chicken. Or whatever kind of meat it was. Sam dropped the glass jars on the floor among the trash and fragments of the broken glass sign. He held up a piece of the sign: ALWAYS. He looked at the soft gray sunlight beveling through it. He wondered if he should keep it and carry it with

him but he could not think of any use for it and he could cut himself on the broken glass edges.

He should go someplace warm, for the winter was coming. West and south. He would never get there but at least he could start, why not?

He stood straighter and rolled his shoulders, ignored the pain in his arm. He actually felt purposeful. Why not?

As he left he looked back; now he knew what it was. It was an old wireless station where in the past century or even more than a century ago they had tried to send out those powerful shocks into the atmosphere that somehow made intelligible signals to someone else somewhere else, radio waves they were called. It was a wireless station of some kind; or a relay, that's what it was, a relay mast.

They had relayed radio waves; talking about the great flood. And out of the waters of the flood arose a plague like a he-demon in a party dress all merry and free at last burning through the remains of the population and then came the wasting. At least this was the sequence of events Sam had been able to document, feeble as his efforts were. But it was his life's work, after all. To be passed onto posterity. Now all his papers were most likely being used to start the breakfast fire.

He started walking the in thin daylight, the clean air. It had stopped snowing for the time being. He kept on for an hour or so and then he sat down on a rock ledge to rest. On a tree was a *Beware Wasters* sign. It was old and faded. Sam sighed and rested his head on his cane.

Then he heard voices far down the path. He was suddenly aware that he must look positively sordid.

Two half-grown girls came walking toward him. They were dressed in women's baggy trousers. Their big pockets were full of hickory nuts.

Their hair was braided up tightly and they were arguing. Sam listened, happy to hear human voices. He shifted on his ledge of rock; they would see him in a moment. They were arguing with one another in tones of resentment, anger, outrage. He knew they were sisters and they would be arguing either about chores and who had to do them, or about some article of clothing that one had borrowed from the other and not returned. But this did not tell him why there were people out here in the forests or where they had come from or where they lived.

Then they came up and saw him. They stopped and all their arguments were forgotten. Sam saw that the oldest girl had light hair and eyes that looked out of deep sockets, dark brown eyes. All Sam's self-pity and miniature rages evaporated. So pretty. So healthy.

He called out, "What's the magic word?"

"How few we are," the taller one said automatically and then the other cried out,

"Who are you?" The smaller one gave a small scream and picked up a handful of rocks and threw them at Sam, and he dodged. "Get away!"

"My name is Sam Garoute." He smiled with his cracked lips. "Sam Garoute, perishing for the sight of a lovely girl. In a deserted forest." He gestured to the paper that was pinned to his coat front that said Sam Garoute, Hic Yacet.

"Who said you could come here?"

"I was left here. Who are you?"

Jack went up to them wagging his tail but the smaller one picked up a stick and hit the terrier across the back so hard she broke the stick. Jack cried out and went off yelping into the trees.

“Don’t hit him!” said Sam. “That was an uncivilized thing to do.”

“He’s been around you,” said the smaller girl. “He carries them prions.” She turned to the bigger girl and wrung her hands together. “Can we get the wasting disease from a dog, Sendra?”

“No, you can’t.” The older girl turned her head to one side to look at him out of the sides of her large, dark eyes as if the prions could seize upon her by following her line of sight. “Don’t breathe in my direction,” she said. Her small hands were dirty and hardened with work. Jack circled around and came silently out of a stand of buckbrush and slipped in between Sam’s knees. “You’re from those Garoutes in Arrow Rock.”

“Yes.” Sam nodded and put up his hand to his mouth. He knew how rejected, tainted and abandoned he must appear with his skeletal face and his bloody lips, dried blood on his right sleeve, leaves and dirt all over him from the night in the root cellar and circles of weariness under his eyes, so he looked down at the path. “I used to live in Arrow Rock before my present situation. I remember you I think. You’re a Furnival. You all have a boat.”

“Yes, we do, we stay on the river to keep away from the wasting and you know it. We all come on land here away from people, looking for hickory nuts where there’s nobody, to get away from the wasting disease and here you come, carrying it with you. Go on,” she said. “Go on.”

“I am trying to,” said Sam. He felt as if he were some kind of carrion, or offal, that such lovely young girls would scream at the sight of him. “It’s clear I am not pursuing you, isn’t it? I am doing my best.”

The older girl gestured toward the south. “There’s a road going south and they say on down the road is a holy place or some kind of singing place and they’ll give you something to eat. Way on, way far.”

“I’m not very hungry,” said Sam. “If the truth be known.” He patted Jack and then turned the point of the cane, making a hole in the ground. “Where are you tied up now?”

The bigger girl with the dark eyes shifted from foot to foot and the round nuts clattered in her big patch pockets. “I ain’t telling. We intend to stay away from people like you, dammit.”

“People like me,” he said. “I am a certified teller, passed for expert in Jefferson City, and a linear historyman. And so, how far is it to this singing holy place if in fact it exists. Which I doubt. How long a walk is it?” Sam unlimbered his cane and took a few steps toward them.

“He’s coming after us!” the smaller girl screamed. She turned and hit her big sister on the shoulder with her a fist. “What are you standing here talking to that waster for?”

“Shut up,” said the older girl and she shoved the smaller one. The smaller girl fell down and then scrambled to her feet with flying hair and dirt grains embedded in her hands. “You ain’t going to come and beg from us no matter what.”

“Never mind,” said Sam, and all his sarcasm and anger came back to him unbidden like a devil in a sack. “I know. I can imagine where you live. In some primitive stern-cabin with a fire in the middle of the deck and you all sleep together like hogs. So far have we fallen.”

The smaller girl stood back and cocked her arm and flung another rock at Sam, and it struck him on the temple.

“Hogs,” she said. “You’re dying and we ain’t. How’s that for hogs?”

“Oh,” he said, and lifted his hand to his head. He seemed to have been stricken with a shower of tiny stars which he could see swarming at

the edge of his vision. Then it began to hurt. “Don’t do that, he said. There’s no need for that.”

“We live on a very good houseboat,” said the older girl but the younger one cried out, “Hogs!” She began to throw more rocks. Sam held up both hands with the palms out to keep the rocks from hitting him in the face and then got up and tried to walk away. He went step by step and he could feel the blood hammering hard in his throat.

The older girl took hold of her little sisters’ arm and made her stop. They wrestled briefly for a moment; their hair came out of the braids and fell down around their shoulders. Sam went on step by step. Then they stood together and watched him go and the older girl suddenly called after him.

“My name is Sendra,” she said.

Sam half turned. “Sendra,” he said. “Child of my heart.”

“There is only us and our family on the houseboat,” she said. “None of us has got sick.”

“That’s good,” said Sam. “But I saw a man with a pennywhistle night before last, with a pack of dingoes.”

“He’s not real,” said the younger girl. “He’s a movie star.”

“But the dingoes are.”

“They’ll kill you,” said Sendra. “Be careful.”

Sam nodded. “I know it. Are there burial parties coming through? The Offices of Better Health people?”

The younger girl said, “Yes, she said. They will find you. I am sorry for you. I wish I hadn’t thrown that rock. I wish I hadn’t.”

“It’s all right. It’s all right.”

Sendra said, “They’ll give you a nice grave and a glass memorial thing.”

“No they don’t either,” said the smaller one. “They just say they do. They pocket the glass memorial money.”

“Shut up,” said Sendra, automatically. “Keep on where you’re keeping on there and pretty soon you’ll come to a river. It’s the LaMine. Just follow it south.”

“Thank you. Much appreciated.”

Sam lifted his hand to them and then he wavered on down the path. He heard the girl’s voices far in the distance on some other path and he thought that perhaps they were going to get their parents and the grown-ups would come and find him and bury him alive.

The sun rose to the south of east and slid across the sky behind low clouds, rarely bright enough to cast a shadow. It would set to the south of west and it would set earlier and earlier. Sam knew this from the World Book, 1956 edition. Very useful thing to know. There were diagrams showing this that covered a whole page, page 1123 in S, Seasons and also under Sun. Except he did not know when 1956 was and it bothered him and he supposed it would bother him until the day he died.

The path climbed up again to high bluffs, now smooth and snowy and unmarked with human prints but here and there the demure tracks of birds like signatures in tiny scripts printing out forlorn love letters. And those of deer in miniature heart shapes, all of them mourning the loss of summer. Leaves were being torn off by the bushel in the wind.

Sam thought of how he should have stayed in the root cellar. He trudged on down the trail. It was heading southeast, alongside what he supposed was the LaMine. There in the robber's cellar he could have diminished quietly and without fuss, eating bottled fruit, until he expired. Nobody to throw rocks at him or beat his dog. Watching out the entranceway into the crisscross shadows of the old wireless tower. Happy thoughts like gilded candy swarming about his miserable head.

"And then...urk," he said. He flipped over one hand. "Gak."

Jack looked up at him.

"But I never would have come upon those lovely girls. I don't care if they threw rocks. It helped my positive pole for a few, vagrant but gratifying moments."

Jack went off to one side with his nose in the snow, looking for mice.

"I wonder how many there are of other people like them, living outside the towns. You hear about them once in a while." Sam put one foot in front of another. "Sendra. Well she was very lovely. Very alive."

Jack bolted off into the thin underbrush with his nose still in the snow, plowing up a spray of white. He circled around trees and tilted tablets of limestone and snapped up a small wood mouse. He began to eat it. Sam found a fallen tree and sat down on it to rest. He should have brought some of the fruit with him but it was too heavy to carry in the jars and too slimy to carry in his pockets.

"Now consider the fairy tales, he said. Under G, in The World Book, by Jacob Grimm. In essence, they tell us that mankind was at the time of the fairy, or folk, tales, so to speak, at that time few in numbers and lived in either distant homesteads in a vast forest or in castles, likewise in vast forests. Princesses carried their own water into their own kitchens. The

only things that mattered were gold and bread. Therefore, before the time of cities, there was an earlier time when there were no more people than there are now. Except they did not have the wasting disease. They were only eaten by subhuman things called witches. Or changed into swans, horses, fish. Changed utterly."

Jack came and lay down beside him in the snow, licking his dog lips. Sam got up, slowly.

"I like talking to you," Sam said.

He came to another open place. Sam stood to watch as two bucks with crowned horns came out into the low grassy valley and began to threaten one another. It was rutting season. The one that was younger or at least smaller pranced sideways on his tiny hooves and then lost courage and turned and fled through the grass and its thin layer of snow. The young buck leaped high into the air at one point and Sam squinted against the glare and saw he had jumped over a pile of bones and rags.

"Ah," he said. "Ah ah ah. You see the skulls."

Jack stood and stared downhill and then tested the air with his nose.

"So this is where they bring them. And kill them. No wonder they take them away at night. No wonder they don't let anybody know. The mystery of death, the dark angels, Yorona crying for her dead children."

Jack trotted downhill a few yards and then turned to look back to see if Sam was coming.

Sam leaned on his cane and placed each foot carefully. We will have to go past them and it is a bad omen. Very bad. Sam felt a failing inside himself. Fear and loathing. It was where they had taken the sick people and killed them, the Nid males tearing them apart. Triage, it was called

and this was an old triage from many years ago, see the weathered surface of the bones. Sam talked to Jack and to himself as he walked carefully down the slope. The skulls were scattered through the grass.

They had holes in them where the burial party had killed them with clubs and hammers. Bits of rag here and there and he was astonished to see the remains of a Mariner's gray coat; the sleeve, the standing collar. Vultures had come after the Nids and the Health people had done their work and they had torn everything to pieces. Sam went on past, shaking. There were the skulls of children as well, with their beautiful perfect teeth, their small hand bones. He was afraid he might recognize some of them. The Whistler child, old Mr. And Mrs. Nawton, so many others. But maybe this triage happened a year ago, maybe from some other town.

" We must stop this," Sam said. "There are so few of us, maybe triage is not the way to solve things." He walked through a scattering of thigh bones and the delicate puzzles of spines lying in the grass and snow. "But who am I to say anything about it? I will soon be with the same as they are. *Hic yacet* indeed."

On the far side, where the forest began again, he sat down under a large white oak to rest. He knew it would be hard to get up again but he was tired to the point of falling. And by now the life of the river town called Arrow Rock would be going onto into noontime. Morning prayers at dawn, *there is in all things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness*, and so on. Then the smell of the fire downstairs in the printing shop, and his mother making up their own fire. He closed his eyes and he could see it all, almost feel it. Himself waking in his small bed in the garret overhead, the smell of tea. His brothers sitting dumbfounded with sleep on the edges of their beds.

Then his father awake and stamping around, making noises to draw attention to himself. Demands, criticism, orders. Then finally his father off to the town hall to administrate whatever there was to administrate with Sam's vast mother fussing over him until the door finally shut behind him and loud thumping as he went down the stairs and his jolly and hearty greetings to the printer. A man of two selves.

At the town hall Sam's father wrote orders for garbage removal and sick inspections; for storage and docking fee applications, wharf repair, distribution of rations and rat killing. He would write these things in the margins in the blank spaces around old departmental reports of disappeared government agencies with strange names but paper was paper. Like everyone for the past centuries people asked anxiously when they would find the cure, the great remedy, the marvelous cure that lay at the bottom of the sea. *What sea*? thought Sam. *Where*?

Sam would sit at his window and listen to the sound of the boats coming in on the Missouri shore and the bargemen unloading. Shipments came in from the storages below the ruins of Omaha and the vast caverns in the Kansas City bluffs. Sometimes the rivermen brought old books for him. Once in a while a traveling platoon of that religious group they called The Mariners in their long gray coats, who sang and tried to pray away the wasting. *O death do pass us by, leave your flag unfurled, hear us sing and hear us pray down here in the wasting world* and so on. They were wanderers and their coat skirts blew in the winds of chance and no one knew where their motherhouse lay.

Books were like children, always hungry to be read and in the reader's hands they were brought alive. Like people they wanted to live. Which one to look at today? He might find time to open B, and read about bullets and barns and bustards and Balzac. If he had not been so weak he could have lived elsewhere. At the glassmakers, perhaps.

“I would have lived at the glassmakers,” he said to Jack. “They are the most hopeful and the happiest of the people. Because their medium is not so much glass as it is light. Maps of the world, windows, plaques for awards and memorials.”

Sam had learned to write in a perfect hand in Bookman Old Style and Calibri and Arial Unicode MS in perfect imitation of the ancient texts but nobody wanted him to work for them anymore since he was suspected of the disease that was erasing them all without distinction of person.

He sat with his back to the white oak trunk for a while and for a moment he was hungry and then the feeling went away. Perhaps even now the burial parties were storming through town searching out the wasting. And if not Arrow Rock then other burial parties were seeking out the sick in Jeff City and Malta Bend and Slater, Glasgow, Rocheport; all the towns along the Missouri River. The Girl in the Heavens sailed through the night in her geostationary satellite, whispering of life everlasting.

But I will leave that alone for now, Sam thought. *No angry negative thoughts. They push down your immunity systems.* Instead he thought of the light snow falling on the crowded roofs of the towns, dropping into the canyons of the streets and the happy sessions with his mentor Mr. Findlay and the rest of the students in the memorizing and the performance classes, before he became too weak to go. How he longed to be back there. And well. And strong. Woodsmoke drifting with the snow, people greeting one another at corners. The smell of pizza dough baking in the baker’s shop. The pretty curtains at small windows and window boxes with shallots and alfalfa sprouts, bright green against the wood. The big horses drawing carts up from the riverfront with loads of food and goods from the storages, the bargemen and carters joking with

one another. Chance Larimer the carter often got books for him from the captains. They found all sorts of things in the storages; reading glasses, tobacco in vacuum packs, indecipherable maps and reams and reams of ancient reports that you could write on the back of. Paper was scarce.

Sam leaned back and looked up into the sky. Circling vultures. They were only playing in the air. They made great sweeps, they sailed sideways and sometimes moved their vast wings to take themselves into another updraft.

"Not yet," Sam said. "Not me yet." He got to his feet and bowed uphill to the bones. "Having a wonderful time," he said to the departed spirits. "Wish you were here."

All that day he walked a little and rested, walked and rested. He was pleased and surprised that his fingertips were no longer as blue as the day before and his bitten arm was hurting a little less. A high yipping: Jack had caught a wood rat. He trotted back and offered it to Sam but Sam pushed it back at him and so he sat down in the snow and began to tear it apart and eat it with loud cracking and ripping noises. Toward nightfall Sam and Jack slept in an old shelter that had been abandoned for many years. The wind stopped and the great evening star came out blue-white and enormous, making some interstellar and unheard music.

The next morning he was faint with hunger and decided that if Jack brought him another rat he would eat it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The wide Missouri carved its way through the heartland and over the decades it whipped its currents from one side of its miles-wide valley to the other. It came up against the bluffs on one side and left the other side as bottomlands. Then it changed again, alive and busy with the eternal job of destruction and edification. It undercut the bluffs of Arabia Bend until they collapsed into the current and then constructed a sni here and an island there, grinding away at the tall bluff on which sat the ruined capitol of Jefferson City. In the hard winters the current threw up towers of dirty ice and pieces the size of houses into meres and marshes alongside. At which time no barges could swim and people did without.

The Furnival family had floated down from Teteseau Bend to the place where the LaMine River poured into the Missouri to get away from the wasting disease, its mysterious paths of affliction from deer to sheep to cattle and then from one human being to another.

The Furnivals had lost every elder to the disease over the past ten years so all those left of the name of Furnival were father, mother and two daughters. They had some relatives in Arrow Rock and there Sendra had once seen the thin boy with the great blue eyes asking for books. So their lives were hard without the help of neighbors or relatives and depending on themselves alone.

They lived on a wide houseboat with a half-acre of decking and in the front stood a sturdy mast that could be used with a sail when the wind was right. It was painted in a variety of colors; a deep rose and yellow, the deck-house turquoise and the rails in brilliant green. A chimney-pipe stuck up out of the roof and puffed hot smoke and cinders into the hazy cold air. Charms hung from the mast. Getting clothes washed was a chore and in the winter drying them out was even worse for they hung

stiff as boards in the freezing air for days. Sendra's hands hurt her for an hour after she managed to break them off the lines. Ow ow ow. But today was a sunny day and her bright-colored underpants and brassiere danced on a clothesline from the roof to the stern.

The father was a stern man who was mostly silent and counted up their store of supplies for winter every week and paced back and forth between the steel barrels of dried fruit and the barrels of salted hams done up in burlap. They went ashore in the spring at some isolated place and there planted a garden and collected apples from deserted orchards and they had a Jersey cow on shore in its pen where she snorted at them over her calf. When they moved the Jersey cow had to be shoved on board and it took every member of the family to get her on. Then in his rest times her father sat down to whittle bowls.

The mother watched her family secretly for signs of the wasting and taught the girls to sing all fifteen verses of Jesse and the Men of James and other dirges of dying and injustice as they sat and made up clothes, sheets, curtains. There were five needles and Mother Furnival counted them every day.

So they lived apart from the towns, drifting along river shores where there were no people and where there had not been any people for a hundred years or more, just the great brown flowing Missouri and the uninhabited forests rolling over hills and ridges unpopulated. How few we are. They had a metal cutout of Flat Stanley the Wanderer hung over the gangway and he turned in the slight wind with his colors of rust and blued steel from the blacksmith's forge. He held out one hand as if he offered the magical remedy, or perhaps he was pointing to the way in which the cure could be discovered. Which was at the bottom of the sea. *What sea? Where?* thought Sendra. They had put up a sign. It said,

THE FURNIVAL FAMILY. BUGGER OF

They mean 'off', of course, thought Sam. He sat between two large oak trees at the edge of the forest and looked out into the clearing where the LaMine River ran into the Missouri. Stared at their rocking houseboat. They had out two anchors and the huge flat vessel turned like a balloon in the wind, tugging first at one anchor and then another. He saw the father on shore laying out rings of apple slices from the last, late apples on a broad shelf of limestone just above the river.

Sam wanted the apple rings. He was so hungry he hurt all over. It was not so easy to die, was it. He moved his feet in the snow. He must either struggle to live or get it over with. Hang or drown himself. The terrier Jack lay in a drift of leaves and snow with his ears cocked up, watching old man Furnival lay out apple rings from a basket as if he were dealing a hand of cards. Sam decided he would go down in the dark of night and steal as many as he could carry away.

Mankind was supposed to have marched on an upward tramping progression from cave men in fur diapers to King Arthur to sleek, clean city people with televisions but his teacher Findlay had said now all generations and all distinctions between humans had collapsed into one and he was right, because here was Sam, the big-eyed intellectual and teller of epics wallowing in melting snow in the woods hoping to steal food. There you are, aren't you. Cold and dirty and longing for both something to eat and his beloved World Books and the text of the Last Battle Story and his *Timeline of Human History* not completed but soon enough he would be longing only for something to eat and he would forget all else. Except Sendra and her charming lassitude, her bright hair.

It was growing dark. As he watched lights came on inside the houseboat windows; a comforting glow. So in the dusk he began to creep down the hillside and the little terrier came after him.

As he snatched up apple rings and jammed them in his pockets and several in his mouth a tiny dog no bigger than a cat shot out of a barrel that was lying on its side by the houseboat's front door. It sprang down the gangway and then vaulted up the hill barking in little shrieks while leaves and snow sprayed from its heartfelt forward charge. Jack barked back and Sam grabbed all the dried apples he could with two hands and pressed them down into his pockets and began to scrabble back uphill. His knapsack and the blankets wallowed around on his back.

The two dogs launched themselves at one another in an explosion of noise, barks, sharp little screams and father Furnival came out the front door with a handgun looking for a target. When he saw Sam he dropped the pistol and took up a walking staff, and then thundered down the gangway onto the shore and ran uphill to Sam.

Sam was gasping and scrambling, sometimes on all fours and sometimes on two feet. Furnival caught up with him and hit him a downward blow on his left ribs and it laid Sam out flat.

"God damn you, God damn you!" shouted Furnival.

The two girls and their mother ran out onto the dimlit deck and then stopped.

"Don't!" screamed Sendra. She clung to the railing. She shouted at her father over the stretch of water.

"Kill him!" said the younger sister. "He's a waster! We seen him in the woods!"

When Furnival hesitated Sam kept on scrambling upwards and between two trees growing out of broken limestone he sat and writhed backwards into a slot in the stone. He faced the man.

"Stop it," he said in a firm voice.

"Now I got to throw all those apples away!" shouted Furnival. "And burn them!"

"Leave him out some," called Sendra. Her voice was breaking. "Please just leave him out some."

"We seen him in the woods!" shouted the younger sister. "He's got it! He got away from a burial party!" She was dancing around in a kind of jig in a fearful circle.

"Shut up, Bren!" Sendra seized her younger sister around the neck with both hands and shook her. "I'll choke you!" Then Sendra shoved her sister backwards against the railing of the deck. Then turned again to look uphill where the two dogs walked in a stiff heavy pace with the fur of their spines on end and growling. They were not now fighting because the Furnival house dog was at the limit of his territory and Jack the terrier had no territory at all.

Sendra saw Sam's face in the dim light, the face of a wasted angel, bruised and alert, his blue eyes shadowed but regarding her father from the slot in the limestone blocks with a kind of calm dignity. A face marked with the rocks they had thrown at him, young and burning out to his end. This was so clear to Sendra that she began to cry and so put one hand to her face to smear away the tears and said, *Why? Why?*

"Why what?" shouted her sister.

"Shut up!"

Sendra ran down the gangway and onto the shore and through the grass to look up at him.

Her father shouted, “Get back on that boat!”

“No!”

Sam turned his eyes to her for a moment and smiled despite all his hurts. It was possible Sendra had fallen into a kind of instantaneous love with this person if only because he was the only young man she had seen in a year or because her heart always went out to hurt things or because she was born with a template or pattern in her mind of who she was to fall in love with, like the pattern blacksmiths used to make Flat Stanleys, and that someone would be a pale, dirty, princely wounded thing attended by mysteries.

She stared up at him as he shrank back into the limestones with one hand held out against her father’s heavy stick: he was as fragile as porcelain china and his expression careful and calculating but not yet given way to fear. A person she had found and lost at the same moment in the woods yesterday because he was bound to die, and soon. He was delicately made but of good courage, look at him pointing a finger at her big mad father and saying,

“Stop it, I tell you. Stop it.”

Her father lowered the heavy staff and stared at Sam for a moment, and the terrier quivering beneath his arm, and then turned away.

Sendra looked long into his face. “Now I’m sorry I’ve been mean, she said. We have lost so many people to the wasting. I’m sorry.”

And suddenly tears rolled down her face.

“It’s all right,” whispered Sam. “Apparently this is my fate.”

She could hardly speak for weeping. She lifted her dress hem and wiped her face. “Oh, it’s hard, hard,” she said. “Maybe you don’t have the wasting, maybe it’s something else.”

“One could only hope,” said Sam.

“You must know about it, don’t you? You sound as if you had had schooling.”

“I have. I don’t know any more about it than others.” He did not have very much energy for speaking, but he continued, “Yes, I have had schooling. I told you before, I am a certified teller.”As if this would impress her and he feared it would not. “Passed for expert in performance.”

“Do you know the story of Captain Kenaty and all of those people?”

“I do.”

Then, in a burst of inspiration, she said, “You know what? They say if you go far enough south, there’s no wasting and no Nids. We are going south one of these days, we are.”

“South to where?”

“The Mexican Sea.”

Sam smiled, creasing his taut, white face. “I will meet you there,” he said.

“Oh go on.”

“You want schooling, do you not?”

She wiped her face. “Someday. Maybe. Goodbye.”

“I will meet you there,” he said again.

It was a day of intermittent clouds and then it began to snow But his face was to the south and he told himself there was light and a pleasant land where he might get well.

He walked on unsteadily, southwards, along the path in the woods with only dried apples to sustain him. Jack ranged alongside running his jaw like a scoop through the drifts and ate snow. Sam in his thirst crammed snow into the mouth of his water-bottle and then held it inside his coat to melt it and then drank. He knew he was near the end of his life's strength when he saw the trees around him suddenly take on a kind of human knowing. They were alive, and they gestured to one another as he passed by: *See, see, even half dead he falls in love with Sendra, the girl that we know.*

He was dreaming perhaps, or had crossed into another world. Sendra lived back in the everyday world. She would meet some young man and be happy. This future young man would make her a fire grate and a new loom. Thinking this made him feel better.

After a mile or so a great white-tail buck stepped into the path ahead of him. The buck stood utterly still and looked at him and gave a whistling snort. He seemed to grow, to become gigantic. His eyes were enormous and as he paused the sun came out and in the sparkling snow he seemed to bear his crown of horns on his head as if he had just departed from some great celestial coronation. An emperor with a glorious white throat. The buck carried inside himself the rogue prions that were destroying mankind but in him, the tall rigid buck of the woods, they were not a disease but something that sparkled and glinted in his black eyes and gave him supernatural strength and a terrible danger.

Sam said, “How about you leave me alone? Overlook me. Turn your eyes elsewhere. Pass over me.”

The buck stamped one hoof and for a moment longer fixed Sam in his large black eyes. The sun shone from each point of his crown of horns and then he vaulted in a great arc and was gone.

It was a visitation, he knew this even when he understood he was hallucinating from hunger. This became even clearer when he saw Jack coming through the trees toward him and the terrier was as big as a horse, a giant dog, taller than Sam, with a writhing, thrashing panther in his mouth. Then after a few moments he was himself again. Small, happy, carrying a wood rat.

Sam took it up by the tail. “Let’s go a little farther,” he said. “A little farther.”

After the sun stood at noon, slightly south, he had come to the end of his strength even though he walked slowly. It was all he could do in one day. He had come upon a broad roadway with slabs of concrete. It was all overgrown. Hundred-year-old oaks stood among the eroded debris. The roadway seemed to have two roadbeds, one beside the other. It must be the old National Road. So he went along that for a while, winding among the great chunks of ancient paving and looked for someplace to lay up. He thought of his obituary. *Hic yacet, that is, here lies Samuel Garoute, scholar, died the year of the ice-jam at Rocheport, author of* Head Wobbles and Other Performative Gestures For Small Audiences.

He came to a cross-path that was beaten clear and looked as if it were frequently traveled. He sat down on a piece of broken concrete and listened. The woods whistled with the remnants of yesterday’s wind; boles of red oak and white oak were spotted with colored fungi, there was almost no underbrush and here and there great rotted limbs and even

entire trees lay where they had fallen. It was an old forest. It had its own life, its own felines and dingoes, its own weather.

The terrier sat bolt upright and cocked his head and stared down the path and so he turned and after a moment he heard a voice.

CHAPTER FIVE

A big, rawboned man was striking at the tree boles on each side of him with a staff and talking to himself as he walked. He was arguing with people who weren't present. He wore a tall straight-sided cap knitted all around with macramé designs, the kind that was called a tour, and a curling reddish beard. He yelled out in a long, floating cry, into the autumn forest, leaving a cloud of breath streaming behind him.

"What can I do with myself?" he shouted.

He danced up and down in place for a moment, flinging leaves around his big feet and their blocky laced boots. He carried a thick walking stick or club, and he struck the bole of a tree. He then turned to look over toward where Sam sat holding the terrier between his knees. The big man's lips opened and shut again.

"Well look here," he said.

"Good morning," said Sam. "Although I suppose it is now afternoon." He carried a hand to his mouth to cover his cracked and bleeding lips. His fingernails were convex as shells and clubbed at the tips. He knew how bad he looked. He figured that the bruises from thrown stones were coming out on his face and head.

"A waster," the big man said. "You're a waster."

"Yes," said Sam. "I can't help it." He paused. Are you going to throw any rocks?"

"Oh hell no."

"Well, good."

“You’re a hell of a sad sight.” The man shifted the pack on his back. There was a cooking pot tied to the top of it, upside down, and the man had a bright gold earring in one ear.

“I know it,” said Sam.

“When is it going to stop. You wonder.” He stared down at Sam and the terrier. “Are you just settin here and all?” He put his hands on his hips and his stiff canvas coat made a rasping noise. In one hand he still held the walking stick.

“Yes,” said Sam. “What are you doing?”

“Me? Walking along.” The big bony man continued to regard Sam and the terrier.

“Well, yes,” said Sam. “I see.” He pressed his lips together and thought about taking a drink from the water bottle but then he thought the man might rip it out of his hands, if he wanted it.

“Talking to myself.”

“I heard you,” said Sam.

The man stared at him a moment longer and then reached down to pluck the page of notebook paper from Sam’s pocket and held it sideways, regarding the letters. Then he turned the paper in his huge, leathery hands so that it was upside down.

“This is writing,” he said.

“It says my name,” said Sam. “And where I am from, for when I die, and people come along.”

“You wrote this?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You can read and write.”

“Yes.”

The big man smiled in surprise. Then he nodded. “Why don’t you say your age too?”

“I don’t know how old I am.”

“Well, you ain’t alone.” He bent over and returned the paper to Sam and then leaned on his stick and nodded again. “So read it all.”

“It says, ‘Here lies Sam Garoute, of Arrow Rock town, abandoned and died this winter of 350, hic yacet’.”

“What’s hic yacet mean?”

“Here lies.”

“You already said here lies.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well well. You can read and write and speak another kind of talking.”

“Language,” said Sam.

The wind started up more sharply even as they were speaking as if somewhere an atmospheric dam had given way and a river of cold air roared and tumbled out onto the earth. It drove birds ahead of it, hard and sharp, and now big snowflakes sieved through the tree limbs.

“Can you figure as well?”

Sam nodded. His head seemed very heavy to him and nodding it was like managing a great weight of dough. His pale hair stood up in the wind.

“I have some skill at arithmetic. I am not all that adept at it.”

“Well well.” The man took a wadded handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose. The cold was making Sam’s nose run also and he wiped it on his sleeve. “You said the year three-fifty. Three fifty from when?”

“Probably the demise of America of Late Antiquity but it’s nothing but a wild guess.”

“Yeah, okay. Well, I got some big decisions to make.” The man turned in a circle and looked all around himself.

“What about?” said Sam. “Considering the state of your outfit they can’t be all that big.”

“What am I going to do.”

Sam nodded. Suddenly he felt very tired. He had walked an entire mile without stopping to rest.

The man said, “I wanted to have a tavern. A house by the side of the road and be a friend to man. But it seems it would take some effort.”

Sam shifted on the stone. It was cold and getting colder. He bent his head down and leaned his forehead on his cane for a moment. The terrier looked from the big man back to Sam and then at the man again.

Sam said, “I am afraid that being a friend to man is going to be more complicated than you imagine.”

“Can’t be all that hard.”

“But there aren’t any. Men, I mean. Or human beings. Or not enough. Well, be that as it may. How far is it to the end of this woods?” Sam looked up at the man. “My mother and father said there would be a kind

of pleasant valley or something on the other side of it. I was making for there."

"What for?"

"They told me it might be a place where I could get well."

"Nobody gets well from the wasting, son. Nobody."

The man shook his head and looked at Sam; his coarse wool coat and pants. Sam's pants legs flopping short around the middle of his shins and from there down to his blocky shoes, his stockings. The stripes were horizontal, around and around his legs. His great, loving, fat, patient mother had knitted them in strong colors and horizontal stripes because she said it would make his legs look more substantial, and not so thin.

"My clothes wouldn't fit you," said Sam.

"I wouldn't take your clothes," said the man. "When do you reckon you'll die? As a practical matter."

"I don't know," said Sam and bent his head and found himself crying again. The intense fear had come back to him, in full force, it was painful. He thought he had got past it. It was an animal fear of death, a powerful surge of panic and he suffered from it and wanted it to go away and here it was again. He wiped his face clear of tears and coughed.

"Maybe you got something else." The man leaned on his staff. "Not everybody that's shrinking up thin has got the wasting disease. Maybe you have worms, or TB. Maybe you have radiation."

"I don't think so." Sam patted the terrier again and again on his ribs. "Where do you come from?"

"I come from the beautiful old capitol alongside the scenic Missouri River, a thriving town full of human hogs who live in the mud and drink

whiskey until they're drunk as Cooter Brown. I'm going where the weather suits my clothes." He waggled his head and the earring glittered and he smiled around himself at the world, with a painful brightness. He threw out one large bony hand in a southerly direction toward the edge of the world and the end of America and its geographical audacity, its old borders. "I'm going where the birds go in the wintertime so they don't lose their colors. I'll build a house by the side of the road where two trails cross and I'll hold shows in my tavern. People will throw money at me."

"There aren't hardly any people anymore," said Sam. "To throw money or anything else. However, there are a few people around throwing rocks."

The man squinted at Sam's face in the low and snowy light. "You been run off from somewhere because you got the wasting," he said. "They threw rocks at you. You got a shiner."

"Well," said Sam. "Something like that."

"You're lucky they didn't bury you alive."

"I suppose."

"Now, anymore, they kill them with clubs. Guns are hard to come by since they make them from scratch in these days, lest you find some old storage with one packed in Cosmoline. Even then. Gunpowder and ammo remain a problem to us all. They're making them in Jeff City and they charge you enough you could buy the St. Louis arch."

Sam nodded. After a moment he said, "Making them from scratch sounds like it would be hard. Hard work."

The big man looked at him for a moment with pity and leaned over and patted him on the head. The tall tour hat tipped forward.

“Yes, calculating the rifling,” he said. “You don’t have to talk simple to me, youngster. My brain’s still good.”

“Well, yes. Of course.” Sam shifted his feet. He had indeed been talking to the big man as if he were an idiot. “Well! Jeff City. I was there once, and I saw the statues there of Thomas Jefferson and the Spirit of the Rivers.”

The man leaned both hands on the head of the walking stick. “Yes. Thomas Jefferson is upside down at the moment but the Spirit of the Missouri River woman with the big kahoongas is still on her rock.”

“And they say there are more than six thousand people.”

“There are. Minus one. Me. And a good big tavern there. Stuff from the big storage places, barges coming downriver. A man has to keep himself and I am tired of pulling freight off scows, and a tavern would be how I would keep myself.”

“Don’t own a tavern,” said Sam. He wiped at his wet face where the snowflakes fell on his cheeks and his old censorious self came back to him like an unwelcome guest. “You’d have to offer entertainment. There would be fighting. And you have to figure out profit and loss and everything.”

The big bony man tapped his coarse fingers on his knee and thought about it.

“Can you write and cipher?” Sam asked the big man.

“Not good at it. I can read numbers though.”

“Then you should think some more.”

“I know it.” He clapped his hands together several times in frustration. “I fight too much. I don’t know what to do with my mind.”

Sam patted the black-and-tan terrier for a moment in silence. “Where are you going, then?”

“Away from here. On south.” He shifted around and then he chose a place to sit down beside the root-pit of a fallen great white oak. The ancient oak had grown old and weak, and the wind had blown it down, and when it fell it turned up its big root-mat and lifted out a pit. The big man sat on the edge of the shallow pit and placed his feet at the bottom, and lifted off the dark-red tour hat and ran his finger around the band and then replaced it.

“Yes, all the ancient texts refer to people going to the south when the world ends.”

“What ancient texts?” The man squinted at him. “What the hell is a text?”

“Writing. Books. Novels, apparently. Rare ones. Most of them not in good condition. Titles such as *Alas Babylon* and *Lucifer’s Hammer* and The Road. And so on.”

“Does it say about all that in the Last Battle stories?”

“No, no, that is a folk narrative about warriors. An epic, actually. These are writings about people trying to survive the downfall. The downfall being caused by a meteor, wars, bombs and so on.”

“Is this the downfall? I thought it was just normal life.”

“Well, I guess it’s normal. It didn’t used to be normal.”

“Well.”

Sam said, “With the Nids and all.”

“Well it’s normal to me.”

“Yes. I would imagine so. Now here you are on the run. A bandit, an outlaw, an adventurous person. You’ve done something untoward.”

“That’s a new one, Untoward.”

“Bad. Perhaps even criminal.”

“Yes.” The man stretched both legs out before him. “I beat up a fellow back in Jeff. I hit him over the head with a skillet. The bottom of the skillet come out. So the skillet was around his neck with the handle hanging down in front. So I grabbed hold of the handle and threw him out the door. But then he was bleeding like a firehose.” The man wiped his hand over his mouth. “And then somebody calls for the Bailey of the Shore and then everybody that lives down on the riverbank where the docks are come running up and I run.”

Sam nodded. It was interesting to hear this; he had never been farther from Arrow Rock than to Jefferson City and back. Stories of wild times and far places seemed to take him out of his bitter and censorious self. His diminishing, wasting self and his death that waited somewhere ahead in time like a road agent.

The man shifted his feet in the leaves at the bottom of the pit. “Only three towns in the world with more than a thousand people and I get thrown out of one. How few we are.”

“Not in the world,” said Sam. “I bet there are big towns or something to the east. Far to the east.”

The man nodded and wiped snow from his beard. “Maybe west, too. And south. I wonder if there is a map of the world somewhere?”

Sam stroked the dog. “Yes, but not very good ones. Why did you beat him up?”

“I don’t know.” The man turned this over several times in his mind like something he had found on the trail and could not make sense of. “I guess I was drunk.”

“And now you got to hurry and go on, because they’ll be coming after you,” said Sam. “With clubs and knives. Various instruments of torture and abuse.”

“Nah.” The man nodded and then fished around in his pockets and came up with a small amount of edibles wrapped in a oiled cloth. “They ain’t very fast.” He opened it and ate from a chunk of bread. “Man, that’s good.” He looked up. “Do you want some?”

“I better not touch your food,” said Sam. He looked at the hard crust in Shettle’s hand. “That’s real bread.”

The big man chewed and swallowed. “Ain’t it though. Flour ground there at Jeff in the watermill and I stole twenty pounds of it. Well, you don’t seem all that dead.”

Sam gripped the T-handle on his staff. “I couldn’t work anymore. And then the burial parties came around.” He smiled at the man. “They worked hard to make my clothes and give me all they had. They were full of affection and warmth when they dumped me at the edge of the woods.”

“Poor little fellow,” said the man. “Poor fellow.”

Sam shrugged and slowly reached for his knapsack. It seemed to weigh more than it had an hour ago. The big man continued to eat. He bit into a shriveled apple and then leaned to one side and spat out a seed.

“Where’d you live in Arrow Rock?”

“On Pump Street, over a printer’s place. Where they printed comic books and pictures and ABC books. But he’s run out of ink lately. When it froze two weeks ago the barges couldn’t get in.”

“That’s Robinson’s Bend, there at Arrow Rock. They make salt on the left bank. I have crewed on barges coming in there many a time. Loading salt.” He wiped snowflakes from his sleeve. “It’s coming down, ain’t it.”

The wind increased and lines of snow snarled among the trees. They had to raise their voices to talk to one another. The man put the last of the bread between his big teeth.

“Where south?” Sam asked. “That is, where in the south are you going?”

“Mmmm.” The man swallowed. “Down to the Mexican Sea, where there is oysters. Maybe out west. I wanted to see the statues of them beheaded Presidents. They got their heads up in stone on a mountain where they was beheaded and the heads turned to stone. But I changed my mind because there’s no river that comes from there as far as I have heard.”

Sam nodded. “I think I know what you’re talking about. It’s under R, Rushmore.”

“Yes. Now I am thinking there has to be someplace where there are a lot of people. Where they don’t get sick. We’re all a-dying but maybe it is just us here.”

“That could be.”

“And I am going to strike out and find them and see things and set up my wayside tavern.”

“And be a friend to man,” said Sam. He was envious. This great clumsy man had a future in front of him, he had life. It was like having a crop in a barn, old silver dimes in a buried chest. His mind would still look out at the world for a while, shrunk though his mind might be. He would go wandering and see things.

“My name is Shettle.” The man got up. He shifted from one broad foot to the other.

“Well, take yourself off, Shettle, and cheer up.” Sam once again lifted his hand to his face. He could feel the bruises and swelling, it was a tight feeling. It was growing dark.

“But see here, if you can read and write do you know all the Last Battle stories?”

“Yes.”

“The whole thing? And all the side characters?”

“I do. I’m a trained teller, probably my only socially useful accomplishment.”

“They say it takes three days to tell the whole thing.”

“That’s correct.”

“Well damn! That’s what I need for my tavern. Entertainment. Now give me some of the Last Battle.” Shettle clapped his hands together.

“No. I just want to sit here.”

“Come on. If you’re dying that’s what you want to be saying when you croak. Courage in the face of death and all like that.”

“No.”

“A little part. That good part when Kenaty the Commander leaves home. When he loads his gear and starts off to the Last Battle.”

“No.” Sam looked up. “Would you take that dog with you when you go?”

“When he says goodbye to his chilren.”

“Leave me alone.”

“It will make you feel better.”

“I feel fine,” said Sam. “Just fine.”

“No you don’t, you feel like shit.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Just a verse or two.” Shettle clasped his huge hands with an expectant look on his face.

“Oh God, God, very well.”

Sam closed his eyes. After a moment he began with the part where Kenaty the Commander said goodbye to his wife and children as they stood at the gate, and the blessing he gave each child according to its nature. Sam’s voice was failing, and raspy. He came to the youngest child who was the Commander’s only girl, who was named Sendra, and Kenaty’s wish that she should seek throughout the world for a man who was an orphan and a father to his sisters, and marry no other.

Goodbye Sendra, child of my heart, in this lone world I leave you, and as I draw apart to death or victory on some distant plain I pray with every step that you should marry for love alone and not for earthly gain.

Shettle sat down, gripped by even this short part of the famous story. He looked carefully at Sam and his blue fingertips, his pale ivory face, and made a decision. He gestured upward.

"You ain't got the wasting disease. You got congenital heart disease. Look at them fingertips. Blue, convex. Like shells. Blue lips. That's heart. You got heart problems."

Sam was silent, open-mouthed for several decisive seconds as his life, what was left of it, which had been on a forward high speed trajectory toward extinction suddenly began to slow. "Really?" Sam looked at his fingertips. "Really?"

"You was weak from the day you was born, wasn't you?"

"I don't know," said Sam. "I was adopted. But well yes."

"I knew a man on the barges had congenital heart disease. You could hear it. Sit beside him after he done some work and it would go wash wash wash. You could goddamn *hear* it."

"Did they take him for the wasting?"

"No. Get up."

"Wait a minute."

"You ain't got time to study on it right now, said Shettle. I am making a plan. I plan quick."

"I see," said Sam. "Just a minute." He looked at his hands again. "Just a minute."

"Listen," said Shettle. He lifted a finger in the air and stared. There was a clicking sound. And then, *Ssss essa essa essa*.

"That's them," he said. "They use them clickers."

“Who?”

“A burial party. When they don’t want to yell at each other. Here.”

Shettle reached for Sam’s upper arm, pulled him to his feet and boosted him onto the lower limb of a great white-oak tree. He came after, and then snatched Sam up again like a rag doll and shoved him higher and so higher. Shettle seemed to be well acquainted with the anatomy of trees, or at least of white oaks, and he dragged Sam after him until the limbs were small and cranky and bending under their weight. They poised themselves among the stiff twigs and the few leaves still around them in rusty colors.

“They will see our tracks,” said Sam.

“They ain’t interested in tracks,” said Shettle.

CHAPTER SIX

Through the screen of dry leaves in their own tree and in others they finally saw them coming. The Nids with their short straight black fur and their narrow feet like some kind of thin shoes in blue leather. A string of people stumbling along with them, the Nids striking them with clubs. Snow layering itself along their heads, the sick and dying. A human walked alongside making clicking noises with a wooden cricket.

"Oh God," said Sam. He put a hand over his eyes.

But he could not avoid the sound of clubs striking heads, the cries. Weakened shouts and people falling, and the Bailey of the Shore crying here, here, get this one. He called out to the Better Health people in their leather jerkins. A small child hid under his dead mother's shawl and then started up, screaming, holding up both hands as if begging to be picked up. A tall Nid brought his club down on the boy's head.

"He wasn't sick," whispered Sam. He pressed his face into his blankets.

"Be quiet," said Shettle.

Sam began to cry. He could not stop himself. It was like throwing up, it started and he could not stop. He put one hand over his face and still tears rained down over his knuckles. Shettle's hand hardened around his upper arm.

"Hush, hush."

The tall hominids strode around among the dead, snow dusting over their pale faces and bloody clothing. Once in a while striking again with their clubs. Then they began to drag the people off into the woods with

limp arms and legs flailing. The sick people had fallen silent one by one. They collapsed with all their prions inside them. The humans of the burial party marched among the bodies with their heads bent down, watching intently for any sign of life. There was none.

Sam and Shettle looked down at the tops of their heads far below.

Sam whispered, “This is so awful.”

“Yah,” whispered Shettle.

Then the hominids lost interest. They began to wander away. They trilled to one another, and pranced in the snow as if dancing, and shook their clubs at one another in clumsy fun. The bodies were now some heaped and indistinguishable carnage that seemed already a year old. Shettle squinted downwards. The Nids had trampled all their tracks. After a while they followed the Baileys of the Shore away down the forest path, singing *Eedemup! Eedemup*!

Shettle waited a while longer and then began to climb down. He reached up at one point and lifted Sam from one limb to another. Small sticks and leaves and other debris came down with them. Sam dropped from the last limb and fell to his hands and knees and then recovered as Shettle dropped lightly behind him.

“Here’s your fice dog,” said Shettle. Sam beat the snow from his knees and looked up to see Jack the terrier bounding out of a stand of short cedar and come leaping around him.

“Well, dear fellow,” said Sam. “Here you are.” He was still sobbing and Jack whined at the noise, looking up into Sam’s face. He beat the terrier lightly on the ribs. He thought of the child stretching out its arms to its murderer. Tears streamed down in a flat flood over his cheeks and

he wiped his mouth and nose and stroked Jack for his own comfort. Good dear fellow.

The terrier suddenly whirled around and faced the screening cedar where the bodies lay. He stood stiffly with his ears cocked up and barked.

"What?" said Shettle. "What is it?"

"Haaaaaaaaa," said the Nid.

The hominid stepped gracefully through some low cedar limbs. It pressed them aside with its immensely long arms and its thin-tipped fingers. A being covered in short black hair and then Sam saw that it was a male. "Ooooooo Chettle." His green eyes under a thick ridge were full of a predatory intelligence, an intelligence that concentrated upon only a very few important things. He was six feet tall, or more. His nose was only a button with its nostrils facing outwards over his thin lips. The pale blue skin of his face was burnt by the sun and freckled. "Oho oho Chettle."

The big man threw off his tour hat. He said, "You know my name, don't you, you son-of-a-bitch." He flipped his hickory walking-stick butt-end up. He was taller than the Nid by several inches.

The Nid walked toward them and lifted his club to one shoulder. His legs were spattered with blood and snow to his knees. He darted at Shettle sideways, guarding his torso, and swung the club from his right.

Shettle sprang forward and closed with the Nid instantly, without hesitation. The Nid's club fell without effect because Shettle had darted into the arc of its swing. Shettle smashed the butt of his walking-stick up into the Nid's chin. When its head snapped back, Shettle fell back on his right leg and brought the hickory walking-stick down onto the flat bridge

of the Nid's nose with all his strength, again and again with lightning speed and the Nid staggered back. Then Shettle laid his hickory alongside the narrow face in a broadside swing with a shocking, meaty crunch.

Blood poured out of the Nid's broken face and the tall thing stood with its thin lips open for a moment. His fingers loosened. He stared dumbly at Shettle. Then Shettle brought his heavy club down on the Nid's skull but the club bounced off the Nid's sagittal crest without doing any damage and still the hominid stood as if confused. Blood leaked down onto the short straight black hair of its head and shoulders.

Sam realized that the terrier was barking without cease, and darting at the Nid. Shettle took two steps and stood behind the creature and landed a powerful blow with his hickory at the back of the Nid's neck. At last the Nid went down. All six feet of him collapsed full length with a pouf of powdery snow and he lay still.

Shettle stood for a few moments, watching him. He pursed his lips and blew his breath out carefully several times. Then he took hold of one of the Nid's thin wrists and dragged the body through the trees and left it with the other, human, dead.

"We got to get away from here," said Shettle. "Now."

"You go on," said Sam. He sank down into the snow.

"They'll be back looking for that asshole Nid," said Shettle. "They'd as soon take you as me."

I don't think I have many days left, Shettle…"

"I told you, you ain't dying. We got about two hours before they figure that Nid is missing. That particular Bailey's name is Pelly Chick,

and old Pelly will have me arrested for murder in the fourth degree or homicide in a no-homicide zone or something. Since I just killed his favorite Nid." Shettle shifted his pack around on his back and then slapped Sam on the arm. "I need you to keep the books and figure and tell the stories when I get my tavern." Shettle jammed the walking stick in his belt under the heavy canvas coat. "Up and at 'em."

"No," said Sam. "I think I'll just lay here." He pinched the front of the blanket more tightly together at his throat. The killing had disordered his mind, somehow. He felt destroyed. He said, "Maybe their souls are still in the air."

Shettle crossed his arms and said, "Leave that to the Mariners. That's their job. You're going to keep everything right and squared away in my tavern." His breath smelled of whatever he had been drinking yesterday when he broke a skillet over a man's head. And now he had killed a Nid in front of Sam's eyes. A violent man. It was nearly dark and with the snow, the clouds and behind that, the moon, the forest had a strange light about it. The wind cracked at them like a whip.

The man reached down and took Sam by his two thin forearms and sat him up. Leaves flew from Sam's blankets and were spun off by the wind. Sam lurched to the left and right trying to stay on his feet.

"We'll get a good piece away from here, because now I am a wanted man. And we'll get you cured of the failing heart disease and you'll keep the accounts and everything at my tavern when I get one. And you'll recite *The Last Battle* once a month and otherwise read out loud to people in the evenings." Shettle slapped his hands together again. "And I'll give over fighting and drinking and turn peaceable. I got this figured out."

Shettle walked down the path a little way, on the new, clean snow, leaving great holes of tracks, and then back again. He raised his hand.

“And then I’ll meet up with Linda, somebody named Linda or Heather or somebody named Wanda, and we’ll eat good every day and have music at night and so on. With you keeping the books, you see, and doing the entertainment. We got to get out of here and make some miles.” He reached down and took up Sam’s knapsack. “You’re on their most wanted list now too.”

“Why?”

“Because you left that paper here somewhere. Sam Garoute, hic yacet. And I ain’t stopping to look for it.”

Then he took Sam by the collar Sam like a very child, and hoisted him to his feet and strode off down the snowed-in path; it stood out clearly in the dark of the woods, like a misty bridge to somewhere unknown, Jack the terrier following happily, ready to go anywhere.

Great forests had come back to cover the earth again when the people had gone. The world was going on without them. At last the few remaining people had come to see what a brute world it was, immense hardwoods following their own imperatives, drinking the air at leisure, contending with one another for the sun, harboring deep secrets. Massive oaks grew up out of the expansive heaps that had once been cities. They were cities that people still knew the names of, and stories about those cities when they flooded or caught fire or who were the last people to live in them, the names of the last mayors but these names were often confused with the names of presidents or celebrities.

Various scholarly ascetics living in urban rubble and others who still inhabited the known world came to think that some other life form had arrived in triumph to take over this world because humans had failed. Because they had fallen into a compulsive cynicism and other linguistic poisons, unable to sing or whistle or dance, but people always said that when there was a disaster. They always said these things when epidemics and wars struck. Our time is gone, they said. All we had and all we are is gone. Taken over by something that does not mourn and is not unhappy and is blind to all our vanities. Birds with hands at the joints of their wings maybe.

The people of the towns along the river and even further back in the backlands lived in a world darkened with indignant and furious spirits whose names were Prion, The Black Dog, Yorona crying for her dead children, the Lesser Thrain, Beulah Queen of the Night and Gentleman Jack. The Mariners spoke and sang about all these specters as well as doing the rites, because that was their task, they said. Somebody has to do it. We're not hogs, you know.

The meager population made its way through the tenantless miles of giant trees, on their way to isolated farms or shrunken villages with their important burdens. The most precious burdens were not bales or bags or packs but instead those things you carry in the mind such as songs or legends and genealogies and light-fingered music of stringed and wind instruments.

Shettle wanted to sing something but with the wind and two packs and the fragile young man in tow he had enough to contend with and so instead he asked Sam to sing something.

Sam said in a gasping voice that he could not. He clutched at Shettle's sleeve with fingers like white wire structures, and then Shettle

asked that if Sam's parents were so kind and good then why the hell did they not at least leave him with a hat? And Sam said there were only three hats between them all and what was the point. The snow came down and covered their footprints.

So Shettle put his cooking pot over Sam's wet, snowy head like a helmet and on they went.

They walked and walked and sometime in the night they crossed the Great National Road Eye Seventy. As Shettle stepped through the snow across this broad path, Sam said that if they went on down it either to left or right surely they might find a stayover place or a house with people where they could get out of the weather, but Shettle said No way! He strode on across the National Road and onto the path on the other side. He had assaulted a man with a skillet and killed a Nid, and so the Baileys of the Missouri Shore were all alooking for him, asearching and asniffing and he would do no more time in a jail but have his tavern by the side of the road yet, and be a man with friends.

After a while Shettle shouted over the noise of the wind that they were coming to the cliffs over the LaMine River and that it would be hard going to get down them.

"Why, we are on the LaMine River," said Sam. The cooking pot banged him in the face. His voice was faint.

"Hell yes," said Shettle. "It circles around all over the place. We are afollowing it. That's why. You're like everybody, don't know what's five mile from you. Get away from that river and you're in fairyland."

A smoky gray dawn shone around them in the world. It made it seem that the heavy oaks and the light, slim maples were manifesting themselves in the world after having disappeared in the night. Shettle

said they were coming to Chimney Rock and that at that place they had to get a little way down the cliffs and then they would find a cave. Then after that they would follow along the LaMine River to the power-line path, then to Old Highway Five, called Five-and-Dime, and then on south, many months journey to the south, to a place where he could have his tavern and Sam would keep the books and tell the story of the Last Battle and he, Shettle, would at last give over fighting and drinking.

The long aisles of the monotonous forest came to an end at the limestone cliffs of the LaMine. They looked out over a valley with a few cleared fields which could easily be seen because the fields were white with snow. There were no houses. No, not one, and it was a good little valley with a salt lick, said Shettle. He put his pack down on the ground. That salt lick water boiled out to good white salt, and those fields would grow turnips big as your head.

He did not notice that Sam had fallen over in a heap of stick-like arms and legs with blood running from his cracked lips and the only substantial thing about him was his coarse wool clothes that stood rigid around him. The kettle drooped over his eyes and Jack sat shivering in his lap.

“Here I was born,” said Shettle. He held out one hand toward the valley. “And there is Low Gap, where we robbed a bee tree and brought all the honey home in a wheelbarrow and even then it was spilling over. That was when I was young and good and even then there were more people than there are now, how few we are. There’s a cave down here,” he said. “We’ll recruit there.”

Chimney Rock was a tower of stone that stood out and away from the limestone cliffs by two feet. A long tall column cut away from the cliff in ages past. Below it was a cave hidden by ancient cedars that had

grown as thick around as a barrel. When Sam and Shettle rattled their way down the steep slope alongside Chimney Rock Sam felt he was not long for this living world. Stones avalanched alongside them.

When they ducked into the cave he fell down and pulled his blanket around him and closed his eyes. Shettle dumped his pack and went out again for kindling and in a short time he had a great fire burning. Smoke poured up to the ceiling of the cave and then flowed out, it purled up into the cedar tree outside the entrance like spectral knitting. It held a level about the height of Shettle's hairy head, and then it rolled like a river back into the depths of the cave where it found some distant outlet.

Sam lay wrapped in the blankets in the heat of the fire, among the limestones and the leaves. The face of the stones lit up and glowed. He looked up at the roof of smoke and briefly thought about how he had been abandoned in a wood, had seen Sendra, and a mystical stag and now for some reason he had been carried through the very forest itself, its dense heart, by this rowdy and inexhaustible ruffian.

And what did he want in return? Stories, the epic tales and lost structures in the mind that saw an epic, heard an epic, knew it for what it was. But, in addition perhaps he was a man to become enraged easily and Sam would be without recourse, maybe he was one of those who needed a humble adoring minion and what would Sam do then when this so-far undiscovered pathology appeared?

He had to ascertain in some way if this epic-memorization was something Shettle really valued, if it were a skill that meant he was important and rare and valuable so that he wouldn't be maltreated if the mood took the big man.

He stared out of the cave mouth toward the valley with its armature of bare tree tops and the glint of river far below flowing past the cave

and Chimney Rock. It flowed northward toward the Missouri River. Indolent buzzards seemed to be held up by a gray atmosphere that leaked pinheads of sleet. It was warm by the fire.

For the first time in a long while Sam felt hungry and when Shettle returned up the steep slope, rattling rocks and crushing small bushes Sam regarded him now with suspicion even as he hoped deeply and humbly that the man had food. He had wished to be indifferent to both food and life, like all the great hardwoods that went on with their lives on only air and rain and the sun, like the vultures sailing overhead nourished by chance death, the very clouds with their short and vaporous lives. But here he was, after several alarming events, alive, and he had rejoined those who had to struggle every day of their lives for food and warmth. Their bodies saying, *You must live, you must.*

Shettle held a round of cheese in his hands and laughed to himself as he cut pieces from it into yellow coins and dropped them on pieces of broken bread from his knapsack. He placed these on flat stones next to the fire to toast them. It was full day now. Sam saw the limp torpedo shapes of fish laying on another stone, their bellies had the silky, scaleless texture of catfish.

“Where did you get this?” said Sam. He carefully wiped dried blood from his lips and then made the grace-before-meals gesture of tapping all his fingertips against one another (couldn’t hurt). Then he ate. His fingers were burnt with the stringy hot cheese.

“Old cabin down there,” said Shettle. “Old man, he’s dead now. Now, he got the cheese someplace else.”

“How did you know it was there?”

“I wandered this country many a year.” Shettle turned up Sam’s water bottle. “Now I got to refill that.” Sam nodded and gave Jack a large piece of bread and cheese and as he was handing it to the terrier his head nodded and then he fell asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It seemed he slept for months. Sometimes Jack lay curled at his feet and then from time to time the terrier was outlined at the cave's mouth, sitting with his ears cocked, gazing out over the valley. At other times he trotted into the cave at Shettle's heels when Shettle in his steep decorated tour hat came in carrying something, or the little dog lay at the fireside staring at what cooked in the pot, something that steamed and sent out appetizing smells, and flaky pieces of roasted fish with the skin all blackened and inside the pearly bones and white feathery flesh.

Sam slept like the old sleepers in caves who lay deep in dreams while in the earth beyond, people and their civilizations came and went like cloud-shadows passing over a immense river and every passing cloud was darker than the one before and they came closer and closer together until it would soon be a storm without end and darkness everywhere. God had other things to do with his creation than to people it all over with human beings. There were greater things than us to come.

'Well you done slept for three days," said Shettle. "You ate your way through a good many provisions." Shettle had a forked stick in his hand and was whittling at it. Sunlight streamed into the cave mouth.

Sam lifted both hands before his face and looked carefully at his own wrists and his flat, wide fingertips with their shell-like nails. They were a healthy pink.

"I did?"

"Ate like a starved hog." Shettle began to cut green cedar twigs with his knife and constructed a sort of rack on the fork of the stick. He laid it to face the fire and then on top of the rack he laid a split and headless catfish.

“Where did you get food for three days?”

Sam turned and saw that there was a pile of rising dough in a wooden tray next to the fire, and two kegs sitting tumbled against one another. Two dipper gourds already cut and shaped lay to one side like little fat people.

“Went fishing. And then there’s some storages.” Shettle licked his hands and wiped them on his pants. “All through here. People stored up and then died. I know this valley.”

Sam said, “You were born here.”

“Wasn’t I though.”

Shettle leaned back against a shelf of stone with his legs sticking out in front of him and crossed one ankle over another. His big boots steamed in the heat of the fire.

“Then maybe I *don’t* have the wasting,” Sam said. He had not been asked to carry wood in to the fire, heavy oak splits from downstairs to upstairs, nor churn nor shift the weaver’s beam. O that great beam how heavy it was. He had not been asked to broom soot from the rafters or chop dried mud from boots. He felt a cautious hope. “Maybe it is heart, like you said. Something I could live with, so to speak. Maybe I’ll live.”

“Okay,” said Shettle.

“It’s hard to kind of change thinking.”

“Ain’t it, though.”

“I am just amazed. I have to think about it. I mean, get used to thinking about it.”

“Think on,” said Shettle. “I seen cases like yours.” He tipped a bowl toward himself and peered into it. “I am a-proofing of my yeast here. We’re good.”

“You have? Seen cases like mine?”

“Yepper. Didn’t your parents take you to be seen by a medico?”

“No. The physician there in Arrow Rock died five, six years ago. His apprentice left to be a hobo.”

Shettle nodded. “I seen a case like yours, when people were told they had the wasting but it was something else. Down at Rocheport. A woman had TB. Got a medico to say so, lived ‘til she was eighty with it. They tried to take her two, three times. The third time was the last.”

“Who was it?”

“Amanda Hightower.”

“Ah yes, the big Hightower family.”

“Five boys. Big sons of bitches. They sent a burial party after her and said she had the wasting. From Jeff City. The boys beat up those big Jeff City Nids, went after them with anchor chains when they come to take her. Third time was the last.”

“Yes, said Sam. A singer came with a ballad about it. Something like forty verses. Rhyme scheme a-b-a-b and every one of them with end-stopped lines.”

“There,” said Shettle. “People love entertainment and good stories.”

“He couldn’t sing,” said Sam, his old censorious habit coming back despite himself, despite his good resolutions. “And his rhyming was terrible.” Sam gazed out at the LaMine River valley, framed in the cave

mouth. “He kept putting verbs at the end. It was like ’rain’, and ’down the river they came’.”

“So what the hell,” said Shettle. “People came to listen, didn’t they?”

“Yes they did. They did indeed.”

“So. But in the tavern, you’ll only do ‘The Last Battle’. None of the amateur local stuff.” He poured flour and oil into the bowl and began to glop it all together.

Sam leaned back in his nest of blankets and stoked the terrier, who had fallen asleep in his lap. *Heart disease*, he thought, happily. *Only heart disease*. He turned his hands palm upwards to the light of day. He sat immersed in the bright light of his own future, now stretching out in front of him in a straight broad line instead of a diminishing arrow that would strike its bitter head up against some mortal full stop.

Shettle said, “Din’t your parents figure out it was heart?” Shettle paused as Sam thought about this. “No, they din’t. They wanted to get rid of you.”

Sam dropped his head and looked at his hands again. “Yes, I suppose they did.” And once again he resolved to remain positive and if not exactly gay and gladsome then at least to leave off the cheap sneers.

“I told you,” said Shettle. “Now, how do you like this cooking?” Shettle’s curling brown beard was flecked with bits of fish and his gold earring glittered.

“Very good!” said Sam. He pulled up his stockings with their bold stripes “Excellent cooking, I’m amazed.”

“Well, that’s just it,” said Shettle. “I’m a-pratissing on you. You see I am a-fixing my menu for the tavern.” He reached for the bowl and its

wad of dough and sat it between his legs. He jammed both dirty hands into a bag of flour beside him and then threw himself into kneading the dough with manic energy. Wham! Wham! He punished the dough with fierce squeezes and chokes. “You got to think of your dough as your worst enemy.”

The terrier woke up and stared at Shettle.

“I see,” said Sam.

Shettle hit the dough with his square fists, one two three. Then he gently pinched out a dead leaf from the dough and shook it from his fingers. “Now this here sourdough goes best with sheep cheese of which I have a good wheel covered in beeswax. Your regular brown flour, now that makes a bread that goes with your cow cheese. The yellow one they call cheddar.”

“Yes,” said Sam. “I have enjoyed cheddar, especially shaved over toast.” His great blue eyes fixed on the expanding dough. Now that he was going to continue being alive he was hungry and even the winter air in a cave tasted good to him.

“And then they’s shit on a shingle, the riverman’s delight. Now when we get the tavern we’ll have a regular oven and a bake-stone for the flatbread. We want that flatbread *crisp*.”

He balanced a flat stone on two others. He dropped more wood onto the fire until it roared and threw galloping, fugitive shadows on the fractured limestone walls. He blew on the flat slab and then wiped it off with his tattered sleeve. He smacked the dough down it. “Ain’t that going to bake, though?” He cleaned his hands on his trousers. “Now liquor is the money man in a tavern, they say, but you got to be known far and wide for your food. We’ll get some hogs killed and smoked.

Cheeses are good. But you get that smell of bread baking, why, they'll wade through snowstorms."

Shettle sat down again on the chair of stone he had made for himself and turned his attention full on Sam.

"Now we move on to our main attraction in this tavern. Which reminds me, we got to have a name for it. Now our main attraction is the storytelling and the reading out loud from whatever comes to hand or is in remembrance. Plus the booze."

"Reading out loud?"

"Yes."

"But I am not an accomplished performer. Or a good reader."

"You passed your exams and all that for the Last Battle, din't you?"

"I did." Sam said this in a rather dubious voice since he had, in fact, done well but because of his health he had barely made it through the examination and performance reviews in Jefferson City to obtain his certificate. He had missed only two lines in three days. But then, nobody asked him to perform since he was suspected of harboring the dreaded prions. "I haven't had much practice, to tell you the truth."

"It don't matter. They's so few people that can read people will listen to anything. Didn't you say people came and sat and listened to the ballad of the Baileys? And him a poor singer. So you do the Last Battle or just some readings from old books. Or tell about anything you remember reading. Scientific facts and all."

"Oh no, said Sam. People won't come for that." He wrapped his hands around his knees. "Nobody would come."

“Yes they will, too. Now, I got me a scholar here and I ain’t going to let go, so resign yourself to your fate.”

Sam pressed his lips together. Who wanted to hear about Balzac and beetles and Byelorussia and brass?

Shettle pulled at his beard and bent over to observe the rising of the dough and turned it so that another side was to the heat of the fire. Then he slapped his hands together.

“I figure we could have hoardings readings for a fee. Whatever people would bring, whatever they got and been hoarding, you would stand up and read it out loud. People would pay for that and pay to hear it. They buy themselves some hot cheese and bread and a shot of hard liquor besides.” He smiled out of his reddish, curling beard. “‘Georgia Alley. Born in July of the big flood or whatever, died whenever, wife of whoever he was’, and they’ll eat that toasted food and drink whiskey and look around at the crowd; ‘That’s my great-great grandma, read out loud’. Sometimes they bring old telephone books with names in them to be read. I seen it done.”

Sam thought about this. Himself a small person prematurely aged with ill health and too much work, staring at a fire in a cave and the fire like humanity itself slowly burning down to a heap of gemlike glowing coals. He thought of himself standing up on a chair in front of a crowd of imaginary people in an imaginary tavern in some unknown location and Jack trying to stay near his feet and the imaginary people stepping on Jack’s tail.

But on the other hand.

“Well,” he said. “Maybe I could.”

“There you go. Think of all that stuff you got memorized.”

Sam thought about it some more and then looked up. “And I could, perhaps, recite the old poetry to them.” He felt suddenly hopeful. “‘The grave’s a fine and private place, but none, I think, do there embrace‘.”

“No no no! None of that old coof stuff!” cried Shettle. “That shit’s nothing but crying and whining and depressing crapola.” He waved both hands as if he were dispersing a crowd of noxious insects that would drill his weathered skin. “The whole damn world is sick with heavy thinking.” Shettle slapped his hands together. “Heavy thinking. They are sick and they are sad. They are full of tears and fears all day every day. We are on a mission, Sam Garoute.” Shettle threw out one hand. “A hero mission just the same as if we strapped on our swords. We will have people laughing at that little tough kid that carried the commander’s gear, and cheering when he slits Yorona’s throat.” Shettle pursed his lips. “The evil bitch. Now we got to come to an agreement on this.”

“All right,” said Sam. Shettle was correct. Abandoned homes and weedy swiddens, turnip fields growing on by themselves alone and the planters of them dead of the chronic, the massive forests taking over everything and the early winters. People wanted to cheer up and laugh, they wanted to know that things were possible and that heroes and their comic little servants were still a part of humanity and lived in the imagination. That they walked the earth and were accompanied by stirring music. That human life would flow on in a clean stream of pure water full from bank to bank, and bear them along in some way. At the helm of the boat a heroic man and sitting in the prow a beautiful woman to point the way, saying, *Just ahead will be light and meadows and a pleasant land.* And he too wanted to feel these things and not only to feel them but believe them.

Sam said, “And what besides the genealogies that people find in their family Bibles?”

“Oh there will be plenty to keep you busy, just stuff people find in the storages. Telephone books and old tax forms and advertisements.” Shettle began to excavate a hole in the middle of the great heap of coals. “I am telling you right now, people will, God save me, listen to a bill of lading with all those old device-like technical names. They look at the pictures for years and they’re just tortured to know what the writing says. I know this from a misspent life in riverside taverns from Fort Leavenworth to St. Louis.”

“Now where is this tavern going to be?”

“Down near the Mexican Sea.”

“I thought you wanted to go see the statues of the beheaded Presidents. Out west.”

“Nah. I changed my mind. The Mexican Sea is the place to go.”

“Why there?”

“Because it’s warm, and there will be sailors and that might be the place where the cure is, I’m thinking.”

“The cure for the wasting?”

“Yah. Don’t they say it is at the bottom of the sea?”

Sam shook his head. “Yes, but what sea? And where in the sea? Oceans cover three-fourths of the earth’s surface.”

“Well, ain’t you read anything about it? And you a scholar. It has to be in a book somewhere.”

Sam lifted one hand. “Shettle, there were a great many books in the world.”

“Well, start reading through them. If we come on some.”

“Yes but…” The impossibility of conveying to Shettle the great variety of books both in this world and in the old one seemed too much for him at the moment.

“There’s always truth in an old tale somewhere,” said Shettle. “You just got to figure it out.”

Sam gave up. He nodded. “Yes, I will keep my eye out for a book that might tell us which sea. And where in which sea.”

“You‘ll figure it out, said Shettle. You can read and write, can‘t you?”

After the bread dough had gone through its two rises and was baked on a hot stone, after they had eaten and straightened out their blankets, they settled down for the night in the fading comfort of the fire. They seemed to have decided to go on in the morning since Sam was now much stronger. On to the south, where all the old books said people were to go when civilizations collapsed.

“Although you don’t know how far you can trust them,” Sam said. “We have no context.”

“No,” said Shettle. He yawned. “We don’t have a map either.” He turned to look out the cave mouth. They could see the dim valley between the limbs of the old cedar at the entrance. A moon was up but a mist of light snow was falling. He reached for a twisted cedar root to throw on the fire.

“No, don’t,” said Shettle. He grabbed Sam’s hand and sat up. “Get back.”

“Well, the fire’s dying down.”

“Get back. Out of the light.”

Sam stared at Shettle for a moment and then shoved himself backwards until he was far from the small crown of flames that flickered on the ash heap.

“What?”

Shettle went on his hands and knees into the shadow and then to the cave mouth.

“Them things,” he said.

There was just enough sunset light left to see far down in the valley the man in the fedora hat and with him a woman in a long flying skirt.

Sam squinted his eyes and bent forward. He could see trees through them. “I’ve seen him before,” he whispered. “I never saw her.”

The man and the woman walked along in a jaunty way over a field of weeds. They turned to one another and danced in the snow. Dingo dogs moved around them with happy dog smiles.

“Where’d you see them?”

“When I first got left in the woods. It was just the man. He called the dingoes to him. Who are they?”

“Don’t know,” said Shettle. “They are looking up here.”

The man and the woman paused in their dancing and let go of one another and turned to look up at the cave mouth. They stood very still.

THE TAVERN AT THE END OF THE WORLD

“The inn does not point to the road; the road points to the inn. And all roads point to an ultimate inn, where we shall meet Dickens and all his characters; and when we drink again it shall be from the great flagons in the tavern at the end of the world.”

G.K. Chesterton

CHAPTER ONE

His parents left him to die at the edge of the forest in late October, when winter was beginning and the warblers had taken all their voices and had flown south to some mysterious kingdom beyond the horizon. They lifted him from the cart in a hard, firm grip even though he held on desperately to the sides. They pulled his hands loose finger by finger. The house dog barked at everything from under his mother's skirts, barking at the entire world because something was wrong and the dog felt it in the air and was sounding the alarm but the people around him did nothing but make high-pitched unhappy noises.

He felt himself dropped onto the ground like a sack of unconnected bones. His mother's face was wet and her hands were in fists. She would not look at him. She was enormously fat. His father bent over and held him by both forearms and sat him down in the leaf litter beneath an oak tree and said that if he could walk through to the other side of the forest, there would be light, and a river and a pleasant land where he might despite everything find himself alive and well.

He stared up at his father and said "No, I am going to die here."

His name was Sam and his face was narrow as a shoe. As they came down the road in the cart he had bent himself together tightly and said in his thin voice that after all he had worked as long as he was able. What did they want, what did they want? He might get better yet and be able to work some more. Not heavy loads exactly but if you thought about it he would be able to do all kinds of small things. He could sew fairly well and copy out articles from the Childcraft Books for his sister's perusal. Poems; for instance 'The Pirate Don Dirk Of Dowdee'. When they did not reply he took hold of his mother's sleeve.

“No,” she said. “Don’t.”

His father reached over and tore his hand away. “Stop it.”

“This is too hard,” said his mother. “This is too hard.” She sounded as if she were coughing and then she began to cry. Sam took hold of the edge of the cart.

“Would you rather leave him to the burial parties?” his father said.

“No, no.”

The house dog had leaped into the cart as they were leaving the house and for some reason nobody threw him out again. The house dog was a small black-and tan terrier with winking and anxious eyes. The dog whined when his father stepped from the cart, took the boy by his thin forearms and lifted him out. The boy gripped his father’s collar with starved hands.

“Don’t leave me here,” he said. “You are ignorant and mean. Think what you’re doing. You aren’t my father.”

“*You* think. Think about your sisters,” his father said. He pulled the wiry white hands away from his collar. “When people die of the wasting disease the prions jump out of the body with feelers and inhabit the next person. You have to be fed separate from everybody and can’t even lift a bucket, and we are starving and weak ourselves, so think of us, would you?”

They were not starving and weak but his father was a congenital liar and more than that he could no longer stand to look at the boy’s skeleton face in the corner every night, his caustic comments on their clothing and their speech and the simplest things they did every day of their lives. Yesterday the burial party had come through the town and started at the

upper end of the street, pulling the sick from their beds, and it was at that time his parents carried him secretly to the pony cart and here they were.

“Think of your sisters if not us, his father said. Think of me, what I go through. Think of me, think of somebody besides yourself.”

They left him with his back against a tree, wearing a stiff suit of clothes made of coarse wool, and hard shoes, and some food in a knapsack. His pants stopped in the middle of his shins and his stockings were striped around and around vertically in yellow and blue and red. They left him his cane with the T handle and some other little things, a small knife and a bowl and spoon, a pencil and paper, candles and matches, a crystal and a bunch of geranium blossoms as if he were already a dead ancestor or a thin, malicious divinity.

They turned their heads away from him and stepped into their cart. It tilted under their weight and the pony bent his neck and shifted. His father slapped the reins and he saw his mother crying again into her hands.

“Murderers!” he called after them. “You planned this since I was a baby!”

Of course they hadn’t but he was grasping at anything to yell at them, accuse them, make them feel shabby and low.

He sat with his bony legs doubled up against the cold. His eyes were sunken and his arms and legs like broomsticks and his lips cracked in four places. He told himself it was all his father’s doing and that his mother really loved him and she would never have done this on her own. He loved his parents despite themselves, despite himself even.

“Don’t leave me,” he shouted. “Please! Please!”

He called out their names for as long as he could keep them in sight, *Mother, Father*! It sounded as if he were calling them abusive names. As they merged with the autumn leaves he shouted one last time that he would eat nothing from now on, if only they would take him back with them. He would die quietly. He just wanted somebody with him when he died.

He fell back against the tree trunk and looked at his bony hands, opening and closing his spatulate fingers in the cold light. They would repent and come back for him. They would sit in front of the fire and see his chair in the corner, now empty, and suddenly ask themselves why they had done this terrible thing. They would learn the meaning of mercy and all the hard work it took to be merciful because it was not easy, was it? It did not seem to come naturally to people.

He drew up his knees. The lofty oaks ballooned their umbrellas of dry leaves up and down in an increasing wind and it drew on toward evening as he wept against his fists. Fall of the year, and freezing at night.

He had become used to the idea that he would die before long and had come to think it would be a kind of birthday party or some family event and he had held out in this hope even though he had never had a birthday party. Nobody knew when he was born. He knew he would die and he did not know when that would happen either, but he had hoped it would happen there at home, maybe by the fire. That perhaps the burial parties would have taken him for healthy. It could have been done with cosmetics. Certainly it could have been done.

Sam went over these thoughts even after his parents were several hours gone. All over the country, in woods and by the waysides were these same small chirping sounds of the abandoned sick, like the noises

made by the thousands of drowning people in distant seas of ice when the ship of the world went down. How few we are.

After a while he stopped crying because it exhausted what strength he had left and to do something interesting rather than suffer this flattened, mindless terror.

He took out the notebook and tore a page from it, gripped the pencil, and wrote down his name, Sam Garoute, and where he was from. The village of Arrow Rock. He wrote carefully; the tips of his fingers were pale blue and his cracked lips were blue as well. He would fasten the paper to himself like the soldiers did before the Last Battle. *Hic yacet*. Here lies. The wind took up the leaf litter around him and blew it into the air, increasing in strength every minute. He tore a slot in the paper and put it over one of his coat buttons and then sat silent to listen to the wind.

The ride to the edge of the LaMine forest and the crying and turmoil had made him very tired and he thought the best thing to do was to rest all through the night and in the morning he would feel stronger and then he would think what to do with himself. If it were possible to save himself in some way. To avoid the subhuman Nids and their random seeking appetites as well as other predators like dingoes, wolves, the great cats.

He had thought this often enough in the past year but now abandoned on his own it came back with greater urgency. Maybe God would reach down into this secular world, he would reach across the unknown barrier that lay between this world and the world where God lived and cure him. Then he would get his strength back. The wind roared on, increasing in strength, and plastered him with leaves. He reached out with his hands

and drew them in piles to himself to try to cover himself against the night and began to weep in a subdued way, making small noises.

A miracle would happen. He packed the leaves down tightly. He was not even strong enough to untie the strings around his roll of blanket.

He touched his fingers to his mouth and his hand came away bloody. The sunset light came in horizontal rays through the forest and lit up the boles of trees in spots, light fell on the crescent shapes of his hands curled shut. His nails were blue. At his feet a red-and-black beetle rocked from side to side as it walked straight on toward a minute forest of fungus, tiny trees of pale green knobs. Beyond hoping he might not die in the next few days, other than imagining some vague miracle, he couldn't imagine much of anything more. Beyond that he came to a dead end.

I must think what to do now. It was coming on to dark. He turned his cramped hands to the blanket roll and tugged the knots lose. He cleared himself of leaves in clumsy gestures, and spread the blankets as well as he could to one side of himself. He waited a few moments for his strength to come back and then shifted himself onto the heavy wool and pulled the other half over himself. That was better. Then he once again raked up leaves over the blanket. *Well*, he thought. *This is all right. I can get through the night.* His breath was visible in cold puffs. The wind rained more dry leaves onto the forest floor and as he was now reasonably warm and since he found that his crying fit had passed, he looked around himself and at the same time thought, ignorant, vicious people. *That who I was raised with. Ignorant as hogs.*

After some time he heard something moving to one side of him. As he strained to listen it became louder and then he could feel the blood

draining out of his face, his great round blue eyes opening like caverns. Dying or not, his body wanted to live; it said, *you must live, you must*.

The house dog rose up out of a nest of leaves. He had been there for a long time without making himself known. He came to Sam and stood there staring at him with a slow wag of his tail like a repeated question to someone who is hard of hearing.

"It's you," Sam said. He held out his thin hand and his heart slowed down. Groveling as usual. He reached out and put his hand on the dog's neck and he could feel him trembling with nerves and cold. Then he got a grip on himself. "If I stayed positive about things, who knows? Clichés are often comforting. Think happy happy thoughts, wallow in rainbows, think of names for your personal bluebird and so on."

There was a moon, nearly full, and its dim light drained through the clouds. The whole forest was alive with movement. Off to his left there was a glowing broad light. It was an open space. As he watched there appeared in that space several animals who had come to greet one another in the clearing. They were dingo dogs with heavy heads and their jaws were like broad levers. They smelled of one another and then ran in circles chasing after each other until they scented him and then they turned all together and were silent and their ears pointed toward him.

Sam knew they would kill him and eat him. He sat awake and watched with his round blue eyes now as wide open as ports on a ship. The terrier came and stood by Sam facing the dingoes.

Maybe they will eat the dog and leave me alone, thought Sam; and then, *What an unspeakably selfish thought*.

The dingoes had coarse, short hair and broad bodies and they began to make a low noise almost below the level of hearing. They came toward him moving from one spot of moonlight to another. The terrier beside Sam growled in a light tenor voice.

"Go on!" Sam shouted. He waved a stick. "Go away!"

They stopped and tilted their heads to look at him and he could see that their eyes were clear as marbles. Sam was at the level of their muzzles and he wished he could raise himself from the ground but he could not. He moved slowly to wrap his blanket around his throat. They began once more to move toward him and one with spattered dots across its muzzle was ahead of the others. They made soft and careful noises as they put down one paw after another on the leaf litter of the forest floor. The terrier shook and whined but he stayed by Sam.

Still they came on with their heads low. There were three of them. Sam's hand shook so that he could hardly hold the stick. His lips were drawn back into a wide grimace as if he would bite.

"No!" he shouted. "No! No!" He threw the stick at them and still they came on a pace at a time with their eyes fixed on him and one turned his broad head slightly to look at the terrier. Sam heard himself screaming "Help! Help me!" The word help was drawn out into a long scream that went echoing through the woods.

Then he sat staring at the dingoes with eyes as wide as plates and waited for them. They were not afraid of him. The one with the dotted muzzle came up to Sam and put his enormous jaws around Sam's forearm in a gentle, tasting way and then bit down.

"No!" Sam's voice was thin and cracking. The terrier made a low noise and shot forward and set his teeth into the dingo's ear. "No." The

end was before him. Very clear. He felt the dingo's teeth passing through the skin of his arm and reaching down to bone while the terrier flung himself from one side to the other in an attempt to rip the dingo's ear off. Oh no, oh no, said Sam, and blood poured through the dingo's teeth and down the side of its head. The terrier made small, high, whining sounds as he tore at the ear. The other two ran in little circles and whined.

Then a shadowy man walked into the far side of the clearing. He lifted something to his mouth and played a sweet musical phrase. The man had a thin moustache and the sort of jaunty hat that had not been seen in centuries. A spotted tie at his collar. Something lost in time. Sam could see through him to the trees beyond. The figure lifted the musical device and played the same light phrase again.

The dingo opened his mouth which was full of Sam's blood and turned on the terrier. The man faded away into the trees. The dingoes turned their heads from Sam to the disappearing man and then after a moment they trotted after him.

Sam found himself holding his forearm and the terrier sitting beside him.

Sam sat awake all night in the cold gripping his left forearm with his right hand. After a while his coat sleeve became stiff with dried blood. In the small hours of the morning his head fell forward on his chest and the terrier slept against his thigh. At first light of dawn he fell asleep.

He dreamed. In the dream he was being led or directed to some place where he would receive a great vision that was of vital importance to all mankind. He was flooded with a feeling of wonder. All his jeering and cynicism broke from him like an egg shell. Several people standing behind him whom he could not see said it was this way, a way which led

through a flooded area with bare and broken trees like bottomland woods that the Missouri River had drowned. The people behind him were adamant that a vision was waiting for him in that direction and then Sam felt the dream slipping away from him and so in this dream landscape he placed a papier-mâché moon, which glowed of its own light, in the sky at that place, and colored the lower left-hand edge of it a peach color so that he could find his way back here in the next dream and find again this splendid vision, which would be to the left.

He woke up in sunlight. The wind had droned on all night, tugging at him and worrying him, but he was alive still. His arm hurt very much but he would do as his parents had told him, their lie that was supposed to comfort him. It was untrue but he would do it anyway; go on until he came to the end of the forest and there would be light and a river and a pleasant land. And there, for some reason, he would get well.

He pulled himself to his feet and in the cold he took off his jacket and the vest under that and the shirt under that. He shook so with the cold that he could hardly stand. With the knife they had left to him he cut and tore up the tail of his shirt and wrapped it around his arm. Then he put everything on again and he beat the leaf litter from the blankets and slowly rolled them up. He was very thirsty and he looked into the knapsack; there was a water bottle. He uncorked the top and drank from it. The terrier stared at him with such intensity that Sam poured some into the small wooden bowl and watched as the dog drank it. Then he went on, leaning on the cane and the little dog danced along beside him.

Sam crept along all that day. He made perhaps two miles but he was not good at calculating distances and as he walked he puzzled over who the man could have been. He was clearly a spirit of some sort. Common in the woods, they always said. Would he run onto him again and why was he wandering around at night with dingo dogs? He walked slowly

along a path that had been well used at one time but now there were no footmarks on it.

Lift up your heart, he said to himself. *Stay optimistic, why suffer the crushing cable-tool of sorrow? Because I can't help it. It's bigger than me. Well maybe not.*

Thus arguing with himself he came to the edge of a great bluff and below him he could see the wide Missouri, so it was clear that this path was following alongside the river. He felt that he was going vaguely south-east, along with the current. His food lasted for the entire day because he did not feel like eating very much. The dog came at his heels.

He would go on into the back-lands where there were no people and powerful forces took form. He did not altogether believe the stories about the putative powerful forces but then, he never believed his own parents would spill him out of a cart and leave him to die either.

The only people left in the world were those who lived in towns along the Missouri and its tributaries or rivers in general as far as was known and all the backlands were empty. The backlands were inhuman and occupied by ghosts of former ages. The trees walked and bubbling springs steamed and spoke in tongues. There were birds with hands. Yorona sat at all the rapids and waited for souls.

Had he not last night seen these other beings with his own eyes? Maybe he had been hallucinating. Sam shuffled on and clutched his bitten arm.

The towns on the rivers lay distant from each other but the towns themselves were packed tight with narrow three-story dwellings that leaned on each other and people lived close to one another, close, close, so that they could feel there were more people in the world than there

really were. And with every carpenter that died the houses leaned more precariously forward and backwards and were shored up with big beams that obstructed the streets and so the houses weathered every winter unrepaired. With every stonemason and blacksmith that died of the wasting disease the street pavements cracked and door hinges broke and were not replaced. Some towns had walls and palisades but most did not because the enemy was within.

CHAPTER TWO

The dog's name was Jack but Sam was reluctant to call him by his name because something might happen to him, or he might run off after some creature and Sam would be alone again. But on the other hand, naming calls. To speak the dog's given name might put a hold on him.

"Jack," he said. "Ho Jack."

The terrier looked up at him with winking, anxious eyes and Sam leaned down to beat him in a friendly way on the ribs with his good arm and when he straightened up he was dizzy so he sat down again on the collapsing steps of the front porch of an old house where he had spent an absolutely terrible night. But this morning he felt better. It was because he hadn't done any hard work for several days. Just walking. He must find a cave or someplace he where he could press back into the dark and hide from the dingoes and rest, just lie still and rest. So he got to his feet by holding onto the shaky porch rail and started out again. The autumn wind poured across the Missouri River and twilled its surface in a sheening liquid weave far below.

The path made a tunnel or an aisle in the forest at the top of the bluffs. Even though there were no footmarks just at present, neither of Nids nor dingoes nor shoes, the path was not overgrown. So something or some creatures walked along it from time to time; people or the Nids must come through here once in a while. The rare demented hoboes that wandered the empty nation. Only once had Sam been more than ten miles from his home. He had lived in old books that were about another world. The one that had gone away and was full of cities.

He put one foot in front of the other and leaned on the cane and walked slowly. There were deer tracks in the path, and the clubbed, split prints of wild hogs. He saw ahead of him a massive white-oak had thrust out a limb over the trail, growing at right angles to the trunk in the manner of white oaks, and he said to the dog,

"I will make it as far as that limb." Jack trotted on ahead.

After a few minutes he surprised himself in arriving under the great limb and so he looked down the path and saw a small group of slender young hickories growing by themselves and dressed in brilliant lemon-yellow leaves that turned in the wind. They were conversing among themselves, they were vain and trivial, they were getting ready for a woodland dance and discussing what they would wear and then the wind would increase and they would have to go naked as sticks or not go at all. Sam said to himself, *I will go as far as those hickories*, and after a while he was standing by them and the lemon-colored leaves flew about his head, spangling the air. Shafts of sunlight came down through the overhead canopy as great holes were blown in it by the wind, ripping off leaves and throwing them in circles. Crows drifted overhead, looking for some trouble that they could announce, and in the meantime calling to one another in deep, isolated bell tones.

The path dipped down and he managed the going down well enough but then it rose again on the other side. The earth was wet at the bottom of the dip and ferns grew there and moss on the stones. In the earth and mud, little hand-shaped prints were everywhere, beside turned-over stones and at the bottom of two tiny pools. He had to get up the other side and it took him a while and he thought, *I must rest, I can't keep on walking right now.*

But he had to, he had to find someplace to hide away from the dingoes and the apparitions in dancing shoes. Jack's nose was deep in the smell of the raccoon prints but as he saw Sam creeping on up the far side he left them and came trotting after. The wind started up again and in it were a few grains of snow the consistency of sand.

"I never liked you much at home," said Sam. "But life has changed. About now I would like anything that didn't bite me. We are in the backlands, Jack, where the world is different. Requires nimbleness of mind, agility of the imagination." And he thought, *Maybe I could live in this forest, maybe I could make a deal with the demons.*

Sam kept on down the path, foot after foot. Little grains of snow began to salt his coat sleeves. "Especially when you had been laying by the fire and you came over to me and your back was warm."

Then the woods opened up to a clearing with a collapsed windmill or tower of some kind.

He sat down at the edge of the open hillside. It would be hard to get up again without anything to hold on to but he sat down anyway on the crisp autumn grass. The grains of snow pinged on his head. At the bottom of the collapsed wooden tower were impressions of the metal blades of a windmill fan. Down among the jumble of the timbers, fallen every which way were the shorings of an entranceway.

"There's a cellar down there," said Sam. "Under that tower or whatever it is. Now there is a place to lay up and get out of this wind. If there's nothing in there already."

Sam got up with the help of his T-headed cane. Halfway down the easy slope he fell and lay there for a moment. There were two kinds of failing inside him, one was an emptiness and the other was something

vital draining away. *Don't let go. Lift up your heart.* He looked up at the grainy atmosphere above him and the tall grass with its seed-heads bending in the wind. Then he rolled over to one side and then got up on his knees and hands and then to his feet.

"I guess I've got to live as long as I can live. But it isn't easy, or simple, and in fact it is becoming increasingly complicated."

The dog brushed his tail back and forth.

When he arrived at the entrance he was almost beyond his strength. It was square and shored up on its sides and top by heavy cedar beams. He turned and called the dog.

"Go in there and see if there's anything living in there," he said.

The dog stood staring in. The timbers made a crisscross overhead and around them and they were powdering white with the snow. The terrier stepped inside with his nose in the air and then turned back to Sam.

"Well, all right then."

Sam groped around in his pack and found a candle and a block of sulphur strikers and lit the candle. He shook out the match as he stared into the darkness with the candle in his hand and after a moment he stepped inside and saw that it was about fifteen feet square on a side, a good large space, and lined with shelves, and on all the shelves jars of fruit shone in the candle light. Other things piled in confusion on the floor and up against the walls; one of those heavy bricks of indestructible paper, burnt on the edges, a shoe.

"Oh my God!" Sam cried. And then, more quietly, "This was a meant thing! Somebody's old fruit cellar and robber's hole." He stepped

around a pile of metal rods and to the shelves. “Tomatoes, squash, new potatoes, pears. Oh wonderful. I could eat this if I could get the tops off.”

He put out his candle to save it when his eyes adjusted to the dim light that came through the open entranceway. He could see fairly well. He should find his way around now so that when the dark night came he would not need the candle. Outside the snow had increased, and the wind as well, and he thought about his parents leaving him out in that. They had left him to whatever weather came along, to this storm.

“I myself would not leave a grindstone out in weather like this,” said Sam. “But then I am not typical of my family.”

Right about now his mother and his brothers probably sat in front of the fireplace in their second-story home over the printers’ shop and were shelling popcorn off the cob and probably weeping and his father was striding about declaiming with that creepy way of lifting his nose in the air and giving a little shake to his jowls. *It was so hard on me it’s beyond your imagination*, he would shout. *He was just taking food out of our mouths. I couldn’t take it any more. Brought shame to the family, our family harboring a waster! Never lifted a hand, had the easy life, books and a tutor!*

“Why am I imagining things my father would say?” he asked himself. “Jack, Jack, let’s stay with the positive side of life, alright?”

The dog came to him as if Sam had called him and sat down and looked up into his face. “It’s all right,” said Sam. “So far anyway.”

He wandered around in the dim light and the junk. Everything was rusted. Broken scissors and a set of some kind of metal tags rusted to the fragility of fall leaves and a disc with numbers on it from one to twelve,

a metal handle belonging to something to which it was not attached, small figurines of President Kennedy in pottery and remnants of children's shoes and wool batts for quilts that never got made.

There was a plate of broken glass on the floor and he pieced it together. The letters were hard to make out because they were cut or molded into the thick glass and not only took on the color of the jumble and trash of the ground behind but were also prismatic at their beveled edges.

KEEP ON THE SUNNY SIDE

ALWAYS ON THE SUNNY SIDE

And below this happy message was a rayed sun with a rather carnivorous grin.

People had taken to etching things like that on glass because metal rusted and was rare, but the glass would last forever. And light would shine through and turn to prism rainbows on the edges to give hope, a feeling of being saturated with light and a kind of untouchable beauty as they held it in their grimy and scarred fingers.

Lot of good it did anybody.

Sam stood up again carefully because standing up too fast made him dizzy. "That's what this is. This is a lot of old junk the waster-removal committees used to use. Then they robbed the houses. I bet this is all a hundred years old; they made themselves a cavern hidden under an old windmill --- or no, it's not a windmill. It's a signaling device. There's no drawpipe. They robbed people of stuff and then --- they forgot where they hid it? Life is full of mysteries. Right Jack?"

The terrier stared at him for a few more seconds and then went off to nose around in the scattered junk as the light grew dimmer. Sam reached up for a blue glass jar of pears. “Oh good, pears. Now I could eat some pears. But the dog can’t. What could you eat?” Sam crept along down the shelves but the light was so faint he could not make out the contents of the jars but there was one which had a dark mass inside and so it seemed to be some kind of meat. Snow whirled at the entranceway.

He sat down with the jars between his legs and reached inside his pack and brought out the little knife. The jars were sealed with a heavy waxed cloth over the mouth that was tied around and around with string and then it had all been waxed again. He sat down and carefully cut at the string around the jar until it was cut through and then he peeled off the stiff waxed cloth. Inside there was a disc of wax covering the contents. He pried that out and sniffed. It all smelled all right. He speared up a piece of pear and ate it. “Well, it doesn’t matter, then, does it? he said. Maybe dying fast from botulism is just as good as wasting. Now, would you like some of this?”

He turned up the opened jar of dark stuff and it was indeed meat, dark chicken that slithered out onto the ground.

“There you go.”

The terrier ate it noisily. Sam watched him and speared up one section of pear after another. He could feel the sweetness enter his bloodstream like a drug and it flushed through his veins and he felt warmer.

Jack sat back and licked his lips. He had a little dot to one side of his nose that Sam had not really noticed before and he found it endearing. Then the terrier yawned in a trembling way.

Sam felt stronger after the pears so he drained the jar of the last of the juice. He carefully unwrapped the bloody strip of cloth from his bitten arm and looked at it. It looked okay but it hurt, deep inside the muscle. He had to use the same bloody cloth to wrap it again but the blood was dried so it didn't matter all that much. Then he unrolled his blankets. He pulled them around himself and lay back. The light was nearly gone now, only a square where the doorway was, slightly less dark than everything around it.

The dingoes would not come here, nor Nids, just the increasingly human raccoons. Maybe. What did it matter? They say, 'We have to cleanse ourselves of the sick it is our only chance'. Well they had been saying that forever. Now they were hauling away people who came down with a bad cold.

But he had more than a bad cold. *I can call them inept and stupid all I want but there is no denying what I have become. Weak and thin and diminishing by the day, another person with the wasting disease.* It came upon people so slowly that it was only after they were truly sick with it, emaciated, that the committee demanded they be abandoned to die, and by that time others had got it from them, also to begin the slow, years-long process of wasting. So it was a kind of losing proposition.

"I was always sickly," he said. "Jack? Are you listening? Let's see, you must be four years old. I wasn't feeling all that strong when you came as a puppy. I guess it has finally caught up with me. Accelerated or something. Yes, accelerated. It was hard to die without your life's work completed. Now they would throw away all his papers and notes or use them to start fires with. Criminals. Goths. That's what kind of family he came from. Unlettered barbarians."

Jack curled up in the curve of his body, on top of the blankets. Sam disentangled his good right hand and patted the dog on the ribs. The terrier's tail beat on the wool.

"You will inherit the earth," said Sam. "God will say hmm. What can I do with these canines? Will he make you hands? Will your brains blossom up and grow to the size of a cauliflower? Will he be happy with you as his new creation?" Then suddenly his throat closed up and his face flushed and Sam began to cry without sound. He was jealous, that's what it was. Jealousy. The terrier would live and he would not.

Sam slept like the old sleepers in the caves who lay deep in dreams while in the earth beyond, peoples and their civilizations came and went like cloud-shadows passing over an immense river and every passing cloud was darker than the one before and they came closer and closer together until it would soon be a storm without end and darkness everywhere. The wasting disease had changed and spread and had become far more genteel in its afflictions; people did not wobble and slobber but diminished, diminished, shrank to joyless pinpoints of themselves and then died. God had other things to do with his creation than people it all over with human beings, apparently. He had despaired of his creation and turned to something else more interesting.

He woke up in the night and heard the trilling noise that Nids make. He listened carefully. They walked upright and were blue-skinned and had sagittal crests as on Roman helmets with upstanding porcupine roaches, and teeth like piano keys, and tiny careful hooflike feet. It was said they escaped from the emergency room of a mad scientist and they bred and ate and killed on command if rewarded with body parts. The Offices of Better Health used them to kill wasters.

He drew in breath through his nostrils as if that would keep them from scenting him. The terrier for once made no sound or movement. For a long hour suspended in terror he and the dog breathed as if carefully choosing their air. The entire forest was soundless. And at last he fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Sam woke up in a gray light. Dawn, cold and snowy out there. He was surprised to find that he felt tolerably well. Sam had never slept out in the wilderness in his entire life and he was surprised that he had survived thus far without a fireplace and a bed and walls around him and a roof and a big tank of water with a dipper. The big twenty-gallon copper tank that sat on top of the cookstove and the water was always warm and you dipped in and poured it into a basin to wash your face in the mornings. Sheets and pillows and books to read and puzzle over, tales of vast ancient cities, unknown and forgotten leaders, vanished performers. Plots appeared occasionally but not often.

He lay in the blankets and held the terrier to his chest to stay warm. What should he do? Get up and go on or stay here and commit himself to this grave-like place?

Sam sat up and shifted the blanket up around his neck and shoulders. The terrier trotted to the entranceway and looked out with pointed ears, tilting his head one way and another. No Nids. A new day for him; adventures ahead, life in abundance. A living dog is better than a dead lion. Old saying.

Three more jars of fruit; pears, apples with tiny dots of cinnamon flakes, slimy peaches. He tried to eat them all, thinking, *Then I will be stronger. Then I could make myself a weapon of some kind and smash a dingo on the head.* The terrier bolted down another jar of chicken. Or whatever kind of meat it was. Sam dropped the glass jars on the floor among the trash and fragments of the broken glass sign. He held up a piece of the sign: ALWAYS. He looked at the soft gray sunlight beveling through it. He wondered if he should keep it and carry it with

him but he could not think of any use for it and he could cut himself on the broken glass edges.

He should go someplace warm, for the winter was coming. West and south. He would never get there but at least he could start, why not?

He stood straighter and rolled his shoulders, ignored the pain in his arm. He actually felt purposeful. Why not?

As he left he looked back; now he knew what it was. It was an old wireless station where in the past century or even more than a century ago they had tried to send out those powerful shocks into the atmosphere that somehow made intelligible signals to someone else somewhere else, radio waves they were called. It was a wireless station of some kind; or a relay, that's what it was, a relay mast.

They had relayed radio waves; talking about the great flood. And out of the waters of the flood arose a plague like a he-demon in a party dress all merry and free at last burning through the remains of the population and then came the wasting. At least this was the sequence of events Sam had been able to document, feeble as his efforts were. But it was his life's work, after all. To be passed onto posterity. Now all his papers were most likely being used to start the breakfast fire.

He started walking the in thin daylight, the clean air. It had stopped snowing for the time being. He kept on for an hour or so and then he sat down on a rock ledge to rest. On a tree was a *Beware Wasters* sign. It was old and faded. Sam sighed and rested his head on his cane.

Then he heard voices far down the path. He was suddenly aware that he must look positively sordid.

Two half-grown girls came walking toward him. They were dressed in women's baggy trousers. Their big pockets were full of hickory nuts.

Their hair was braided up tightly and they were arguing. Sam listened, happy to hear human voices. He shifted on his ledge of rock; they would see him in a moment. They were arguing with one another in tones of resentment, anger, outrage. He knew they were sisters and they would be arguing either about chores and who had to do them, or about some article of clothing that one had borrowed from the other and not returned. But this did not tell him why there were people out here in the forests or where they had come from or where they lived.

Then they came up and saw him. They stopped and all their arguments were forgotten. Sam saw that the oldest girl had light hair and eyes that looked out of deep sockets, dark brown eyes. All Sam's self-pity and miniature rages evaporated. So pretty. So healthy.

He called out, "What's the magic word?"

"How few we are," the taller one said automatically and then the other cried out,

"Who are you?" The smaller one gave a small scream and picked up a handful of rocks and threw them at Sam, and he dodged. "Get away!"

"My name is Sam Garoute." He smiled with his cracked lips. "Sam Garoute, perishing for the sight of a lovely girl. In a deserted forest." He gestured to the paper that was pinned to his coat front that said Sam Garoute, Hic Yacet.

"Who said you could come here?"

"I was left here. Who are you?"

Jack went up to them wagging his tail but the smaller one picked up a stick and hit the terrier across the back so hard she broke the stick. Jack cried out and went off yelping into the trees.

“Don’t hit him!” said Sam. “That was an uncivilized thing to do.”

“He’s been around you,” said the smaller girl. “He carries them prions.” She turned to the bigger girl and wrung her hands together. “Can we get the wasting disease from a dog, Sendra?”

“No, you can’t.” The older girl turned her head to one side to look at him out of the sides of her large, dark eyes as if the prions could seize upon her by following her line of sight. “Don’t breathe in my direction,” she said. Her small hands were dirty and hardened with work. Jack circled around and came silently out of a stand of buckbrush and slipped in between Sam’s knees. “You’re from those Garoutes in Arrow Rock.”

“Yes.” Sam nodded and put up his hand to his mouth. He knew how rejected, tainted and abandoned he must appear with his skeletal face and his bloody lips, dried blood on his right sleeve, leaves and dirt all over him from the night in the root cellar and circles of weariness under his eyes, so he looked down at the path. “I used to live in Arrow Rock before my present situation. I remember you I think. You’re a Furnival. You all have a boat.”

“Yes, we do, we stay on the river to keep away from the wasting and you know it. We all come on land here away from people, looking for hickory nuts where there’s nobody, to get away from the wasting disease and here you come, carrying it with you. Go on,” she said. “Go on.”

“I am trying to,” said Sam. He felt as if he were some kind of carrion, or offal, that such lovely young girls would scream at the sight of him. “It’s clear I am not pursuing you, isn’t it? I am doing my best.”

The older girl gestured toward the south. “There’s a road going south and they say on down the road is a holy place or some kind of singing place and they’ll give you something to eat. Way on, way far.”

“I’m not very hungry,” said Sam. “If the truth be known.” He patted Jack and then turned the point of the cane, making a hole in the ground. “Where are you tied up now?”

The bigger girl with the dark eyes shifted from foot to foot and the round nuts clattered in her big patch pockets. “I ain’t telling. We intend to stay away from people like you, dammit.”

“People like me,” he said. “I am a certified teller, passed for expert in Jefferson City, and a linear historyman. And so, how far is it to this singing holy place if in fact it exists. Which I doubt. How long a walk is it?” Sam unlimbered his cane and took a few steps toward them.

“He’s coming after us!” the smaller girl screamed. She turned and hit her big sister on the shoulder with her a fist. “What are you standing here talking to that waster for?”

“Shut up,” said the older girl and she shoved the smaller one. The smaller girl fell down and then scrambled to her feet with flying hair and dirt grains embedded in her hands. “You ain’t going to come and beg from us no matter what.”

“Never mind,” said Sam, and all his sarcasm and anger came back to him unbidden like a devil in a sack. “I know. I can imagine where you live. In some primitive stern-cabin with a fire in the middle of the deck and you all sleep together like hogs. So far have we fallen.”

The smaller girl stood back and cocked her arm and flung another rock at Sam, and it struck him on the temple.

“Hogs,” she said. “You’re dying and we ain’t. How’s that for hogs?”

“Oh,” he said, and lifted his hand to his head. He seemed to have been stricken with a shower of tiny stars which he could see swarming at

the edge of his vision. Then it began to hurt. “Don’t do that, he said. There’s no need for that.”

“We live on a very good houseboat,” said the older girl but the younger one cried out, “Hogs!” She began to throw more rocks. Sam held up both hands with the palms out to keep the rocks from hitting him in the face and then got up and tried to walk away. He went step by step and he could feel the blood hammering hard in his throat.

The older girl took hold of her little sisters’ arm and made her stop. They wrestled briefly for a moment; their hair came out of the braids and fell down around their shoulders. Sam went on step by step. Then they stood together and watched him go and the older girl suddenly called after him.

“My name is Sendra,” she said.

Sam half turned. “Sendra,” he said. “Child of my heart.”

“There is only us and our family on the houseboat,” she said. “None of us has got sick.”

“That’s good,” said Sam. “But I saw a man with a pennywhistle night before last, with a pack of dingoes.”

“He’s not real,” said the younger girl. “He’s a movie star.”

“But the dingoes are.”

“They’ll kill you,” said Sendra. “Be careful.”

Sam nodded. “I know it. Are there burial parties coming through? The Offices of Better Health people?”

The younger girl said, “Yes, she said. They will find you. I am sorry for you. I wish I hadn’t thrown that rock. I wish I hadn’t.”

“It’s all right. It’s all right.”

Sendra said, “They’ll give you a nice grave and a glass memorial thing.”

“No they don’t either,” said the smaller one. “They just say they do. They pocket the glass memorial money.”

“Shut up,” said Sendra, automatically. “Keep on where you’re keeping on there and pretty soon you’ll come to a river. It’s the LaMine. Just follow it south.”

“Thank you. Much appreciated.”

Sam lifted his hand to them and then he wavered on down the path. He heard the girl’s voices far in the distance on some other path and he thought that perhaps they were going to get their parents and the grown-ups would come and find him and bury him alive.

The sun rose to the south of east and slid across the sky behind low clouds, rarely bright enough to cast a shadow. It would set to the south of west and it would set earlier and earlier. Sam knew this from the World Book, 1956 edition. Very useful thing to know. There were diagrams showing this that covered a whole page, page 1123 in S, Seasons and also under Sun. Except he did not know when 1956 was and it bothered him and he supposed it would bother him until the day he died.

The path climbed up again to high bluffs, now smooth and snowy and unmarked with human prints but here and there the demure tracks of birds like signatures in tiny scripts printing out forlorn love letters. And those of deer in miniature heart shapes, all of them mourning the loss of summer. Leaves were being torn off by the bushel in the wind.

Sam thought of how he should have stayed in the root cellar. He trudged on down the trail. It was heading southeast, alongside what he supposed was the LaMine. There in the robber's cellar he could have diminished quietly and without fuss, eating bottled fruit, until he expired. Nobody to throw rocks at him or beat his dog. Watching out the entranceway into the crisscross shadows of the old wireless tower. Happy thoughts like gilded candy swarming about his miserable head.

"And then...urk," he said. He flipped over one hand. "Gak."

Jack looked up at him.

"But I never would have come upon those lovely girls. I don't care if they threw rocks. It helped my positive pole for a few, vagrant but gratifying moments."

Jack went off to one side with his nose in the snow, looking for mice.

"I wonder how many there are of other people like them, living outside the towns. You hear about them once in a while." Sam put one foot in front of another. "Sendra. Well she was very lovely. Very alive."

Jack bolted off into the thin underbrush with his nose still in the snow, plowing up a spray of white. He circled around trees and tilted tablets of limestone and snapped up a small wood mouse. He began to eat it. Sam found a fallen tree and sat down on it to rest. He should have brought some of the fruit with him but it was too heavy to carry in the jars and too slimy to carry in his pockets.

"Now consider the fairy tales, he said. Under G, in The World Book, by Jacob Grimm. In essence, they tell us that mankind was at the time of the fairy, or folk, tales, so to speak, at that time few in numbers and lived in either distant homesteads in a vast forest or in castles, likewise in vast forests. Princesses carried their own water into their own kitchens. The

only things that mattered were gold and bread. Therefore, before the time of cities, there was an earlier time when there were no more people than there are now. Except they did not have the wasting disease. They were only eaten by subhuman things called witches. Or changed into swans, horses, fish. Changed utterly."

Jack came and lay down beside him in the snow, licking his dog lips. Sam got up, slowly.

"I like talking to you," Sam said.

He came to another open place. Sam stood to watch as two bucks with crowned horns came out into the low grassy valley and began to threaten one another. It was rutting season. The one that was younger or at least smaller pranced sideways on his tiny hooves and then lost courage and turned and fled through the grass and its thin layer of snow. The young buck leaped high into the air at one point and Sam squinted against the glare and saw he had jumped over a pile of bones and rags.

"Ah," he said. "Ah ah ah. You see the skulls."

Jack stood and stared downhill and then tested the air with his nose.

"So this is where they bring them. And kill them. No wonder they take them away at night. No wonder they don't let anybody know. The mystery of death, the dark angels, Yorona crying for her dead children."

Jack trotted downhill a few yards and then turned to look back to see if Sam was coming.

Sam leaned on his cane and placed each foot carefully. We will have to go past them and it is a bad omen. Very bad. Sam felt a failing inside himself. Fear and loathing. It was where they had taken the sick people and killed them, the Nid males tearing them apart. Triage, it was called

and this was an old triage from many years ago, see the weathered surface of the bones. Sam talked to Jack and to himself as he walked carefully down the slope. The skulls were scattered through the grass.

They had holes in them where the burial party had killed them with clubs and hammers. Bits of rag here and there and he was astonished to see the remains of a Mariner's gray coat; the sleeve, the standing collar. Vultures had come after the Nids and the Health people had done their work and they had torn everything to pieces. Sam went on past, shaking. There were the skulls of children as well, with their beautiful perfect teeth, their small hand bones. He was afraid he might recognize some of them. The Whistler child, old Mr. And Mrs. Nawton, so many others. But maybe this triage happened a year ago, maybe from some other town.

" We must stop this," Sam said. "There are so few of us, maybe triage is not the way to solve things." He walked through a scattering of thigh bones and the delicate puzzles of spines lying in the grass and snow. "But who am I to say anything about it? I will soon be with the same as they are. *Hic yacet* indeed."

On the far side, where the forest began again, he sat down under a large white oak to rest. He knew it would be hard to get up again but he was tired to the point of falling. And by now the life of the river town called Arrow Rock would be going onto into noontime. Morning prayers at dawn, *there is in all things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness*, and so on. Then the smell of the fire downstairs in the printing shop, and his mother making up their own fire. He closed his eyes and he could see it all, almost feel it. Himself waking in his small bed in the garret overhead, the smell of tea. His brothers sitting dumbfounded with sleep on the edges of their beds.

Then his father awake and stamping around, making noises to draw attention to himself. Demands, criticism, orders. Then finally his father off to the town hall to administrate whatever there was to administrate with Sam's vast mother fussing over him until the door finally shut behind him and loud thumping as he went down the stairs and his jolly and hearty greetings to the printer. A man of two selves.

At the town hall Sam's father wrote orders for garbage removal and sick inspections; for storage and docking fee applications, wharf repair, distribution of rations and rat killing. He would write these things in the margins in the blank spaces around old departmental reports of disappeared government agencies with strange names but paper was paper. Like everyone for the past centuries people asked anxiously when they would find the cure, the great remedy, the marvelous cure that lay at the bottom of the sea. *What sea*? thought Sam. *Where*?

Sam would sit at his window and listen to the sound of the boats coming in on the Missouri shore and the bargemen unloading. Shipments came in from the storages below the ruins of Omaha and the vast caverns in the Kansas City bluffs. Sometimes the rivermen brought old books for him. Once in a while a traveling platoon of that religious group they called The Mariners in their long gray coats, who sang and tried to pray away the wasting. *O death do pass us by, leave your flag unfurled, hear us sing and hear us pray down here in the wasting world* and so on. They were wanderers and their coat skirts blew in the winds of chance and no one knew where their motherhouse lay.

Books were like children, always hungry to be read and in the reader's hands they were brought alive. Like people they wanted to live. Which one to look at today? He might find time to open B, and read about bullets and barns and bustards and Balzac. If he had not been so weak he could have lived elsewhere. At the glassmakers, perhaps.

“I would have lived at the glassmakers,” he said to Jack. “They are the most hopeful and the happiest of the people. Because their medium is not so much glass as it is light. Maps of the world, windows, plaques for awards and memorials.”

Sam had learned to write in a perfect hand in Bookman Old Style and Calibri and Arial Unicode MS in perfect imitation of the ancient texts but nobody wanted him to work for them anymore since he was suspected of the disease that was erasing them all without distinction of person.

He sat with his back to the white oak trunk for a while and for a moment he was hungry and then the feeling went away. Perhaps even now the burial parties were storming through town searching out the wasting. And if not Arrow Rock then other burial parties were seeking out the sick in Jeff City and Malta Bend and Slater, Glasgow, Rocheport; all the towns along the Missouri River. The Girl in the Heavens sailed through the night in her geostationary satellite, whispering of life everlasting.

But I will leave that alone for now, Sam thought. *No angry negative thoughts. They push down your immunity systems.* Instead he thought of the light snow falling on the crowded roofs of the towns, dropping into the canyons of the streets and the happy sessions with his mentor Mr. Findlay and the rest of the students in the memorizing and the performance classes, before he became too weak to go. How he longed to be back there. And well. And strong. Woodsmoke drifting with the snow, people greeting one another at corners. The smell of pizza dough baking in the baker’s shop. The pretty curtains at small windows and window boxes with shallots and alfalfa sprouts, bright green against the wood. The big horses drawing carts up from the riverfront with loads of food and goods from the storages, the bargemen and carters joking with

one another. Chance Larimer the carter often got books for him from the captains. They found all sorts of things in the storages; reading glasses, tobacco in vacuum packs, indecipherable maps and reams and reams of ancient reports that you could write on the back of. Paper was scarce.

Sam leaned back and looked up into the sky. Circling vultures. They were only playing in the air. They made great sweeps, they sailed sideways and sometimes moved their vast wings to take themselves into another updraft.

"Not yet," Sam said. "Not me yet." He got to his feet and bowed uphill to the bones. "Having a wonderful time," he said to the departed spirits. "Wish you were here."

All that day he walked a little and rested, walked and rested. He was pleased and surprised that his fingertips were no longer as blue as the day before and his bitten arm was hurting a little less. A high yipping: Jack had caught a wood rat. He trotted back and offered it to Sam but Sam pushed it back at him and so he sat down in the snow and began to tear it apart and eat it with loud cracking and ripping noises. Toward nightfall Sam and Jack slept in an old shelter that had been abandoned for many years. The wind stopped and the great evening star came out blue-white and enormous, making some interstellar and unheard music.

The next morning he was faint with hunger and decided that if Jack brought him another rat he would eat it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The wide Missouri carved its way through the heartland and over the decades it whipped its currents from one side of its miles-wide valley to the other. It came up against the bluffs on one side and left the other side as bottomlands. Then it changed again, alive and busy with the eternal job of destruction and edification. It undercut the bluffs of Arabia Bend until they collapsed into the current and then constructed a sni here and an island there, grinding away at the tall bluff on which sat the ruined capitol of Jefferson City. In the hard winters the current threw up towers of dirty ice and pieces the size of houses into meres and marshes alongside. At which time no barges could swim and people did without.

The Furnival family had floated down from Teteseau Bend to the place where the LaMine River poured into the Missouri to get away from the wasting disease, its mysterious paths of affliction from deer to sheep to cattle and then from one human being to another.

The Furnivals had lost every elder to the disease over the past ten years so all those left of the name of Furnival were father, mother and two daughters. They had some relatives in Arrow Rock and there Sendra had once seen the thin boy with the great blue eyes asking for books. So their lives were hard without the help of neighbors or relatives and depending on themselves alone.

They lived on a wide houseboat with a half-acre of decking and in the front stood a sturdy mast that could be used with a sail when the wind was right. It was painted in a variety of colors; a deep rose and yellow, the deck-house turquoise and the rails in brilliant green. A chimney-pipe stuck up out of the roof and puffed hot smoke and cinders into the hazy cold air. Charms hung from the mast. Getting clothes washed was a chore and in the winter drying them out was even worse for they hung

stiff as boards in the freezing air for days. Sendra's hands hurt her for an hour after she managed to break them off the lines. Ow ow ow. But today was a sunny day and her bright-colored underpants and brassiere danced on a clothesline from the roof to the stern.

The father was a stern man who was mostly silent and counted up their store of supplies for winter every week and paced back and forth between the steel barrels of dried fruit and the barrels of salted hams done up in burlap. They went ashore in the spring at some isolated place and there planted a garden and collected apples from deserted orchards and they had a Jersey cow on shore in its pen where she snorted at them over her calf. When they moved the Jersey cow had to be shoved on board and it took every member of the family to get her on. Then in his rest times her father sat down to whittle bowls.

The mother watched her family secretly for signs of the wasting and taught the girls to sing all fifteen verses of Jesse and the Men of James and other dirges of dying and injustice as they sat and made up clothes, sheets, curtains. There were five needles and Mother Furnival counted them every day.

So they lived apart from the towns, drifting along river shores where there were no people and where there had not been any people for a hundred years or more, just the great brown flowing Missouri and the uninhabited forests rolling over hills and ridges unpopulated. How few we are. They had a metal cutout of Flat Stanley the Wanderer hung over the gangway and he turned in the slight wind with his colors of rust and blued steel from the blacksmith's forge. He held out one hand as if he offered the magical remedy, or perhaps he was pointing to the way in which the cure could be discovered. Which was at the bottom of the sea. *What sea? Where?* thought Sendra. They had put up a sign. It said,

THE FURNIVAL FAMILY. BUGGER OF

They mean 'off', of course, thought Sam. He sat between two large oak trees at the edge of the forest and looked out into the clearing where the LaMine River ran into the Missouri. Stared at their rocking houseboat. They had out two anchors and the huge flat vessel turned like a balloon in the wind, tugging first at one anchor and then another. He saw the father on shore laying out rings of apple slices from the last, late apples on a broad shelf of limestone just above the river.

Sam wanted the apple rings. He was so hungry he hurt all over. It was not so easy to die, was it. He moved his feet in the snow. He must either struggle to live or get it over with. Hang or drown himself. The terrier Jack lay in a drift of leaves and snow with his ears cocked up, watching old man Furnival lay out apple rings from a basket as if he were dealing a hand of cards. Sam decided he would go down in the dark of night and steal as many as he could carry away.

Mankind was supposed to have marched on an upward tramping progression from cave men in fur diapers to King Arthur to sleek, clean city people with televisions but his teacher Findlay had said now all generations and all distinctions between humans had collapsed into one and he was right, because here was Sam, the big-eyed intellectual and teller of epics wallowing in melting snow in the woods hoping to steal food. There you are, aren't you. Cold and dirty and longing for both something to eat and his beloved World Books and the text of the Last Battle Story and his *Timeline of Human History* not completed but soon enough he would be longing only for something to eat and he would forget all else. Except Sendra and her charming lassitude, her bright hair.

It was growing dark. As he watched lights came on inside the houseboat windows; a comforting glow. So in the dusk he began to creep down the hillside and the little terrier came after him.

As he snatched up apple rings and jammed them in his pockets and several in his mouth a tiny dog no bigger than a cat shot out of a barrel that was lying on its side by the houseboat's front door. It sprang down the gangway and then vaulted up the hill barking in little shrieks while leaves and snow sprayed from its heartfelt forward charge. Jack barked back and Sam grabbed all the dried apples he could with two hands and pressed them down into his pockets and began to scrabble back uphill. His knapsack and the blankets wallowed around on his back.

The two dogs launched themselves at one another in an explosion of noise, barks, sharp little screams and father Furnival came out the front door with a handgun looking for a target. When he saw Sam he dropped the pistol and took up a walking staff, and then thundered down the gangway onto the shore and ran uphill to Sam.

Sam was gasping and scrambling, sometimes on all fours and sometimes on two feet. Furnival caught up with him and hit him a downward blow on his left ribs and it laid Sam out flat.

"God damn you, God damn you!" shouted Furnival.

The two girls and their mother ran out onto the dimlit deck and then stopped.

"Don't!" screamed Sendra. She clung to the railing. She shouted at her father over the stretch of water.

"Kill him!" said the younger sister. "He's a waster! We seen him in the woods!"

When Furnival hesitated Sam kept on scrambling upwards and between two trees growing out of broken limestone he sat and writhed backwards into a slot in the stone. He faced the man.

"Stop it," he said in a firm voice.

"Now I got to throw all those apples away!" shouted Furnival. "And burn them!"

"Leave him out some," called Sendra. Her voice was breaking. "Please just leave him out some."

"We seen him in the woods!" shouted the younger sister. "He's got it! He got away from a burial party!" She was dancing around in a kind of jig in a fearful circle.

"Shut up, Bren!" Sendra seized her younger sister around the neck with both hands and shook her. "I'll choke you!" Then Sendra shoved her sister backwards against the railing of the deck. Then turned again to look uphill where the two dogs walked in a stiff heavy pace with the fur of their spines on end and growling. They were not now fighting because the Furnival house dog was at the limit of his territory and Jack the terrier had no territory at all.

Sendra saw Sam's face in the dim light, the face of a wasted angel, bruised and alert, his blue eyes shadowed but regarding her father from the slot in the limestone blocks with a kind of calm dignity. A face marked with the rocks they had thrown at him, young and burning out to his end. This was so clear to Sendra that she began to cry and so put one hand to her face to smear away the tears and said, *Why? Why?*

"Why what?" shouted her sister.

"Shut up!"

Sendra ran down the gangway and onto the shore and through the grass to look up at him.

Her father shouted, “Get back on that boat!”

“No!”

Sam turned his eyes to her for a moment and smiled despite all his hurts. It was possible Sendra had fallen into a kind of instantaneous love with this person if only because he was the only young man she had seen in a year or because her heart always went out to hurt things or because she was born with a template or pattern in her mind of who she was to fall in love with, like the pattern blacksmiths used to make Flat Stanleys, and that someone would be a pale, dirty, princely wounded thing attended by mysteries.

She stared up at him as he shrank back into the limestones with one hand held out against her father’s heavy stick: he was as fragile as porcelain china and his expression careful and calculating but not yet given way to fear. A person she had found and lost at the same moment in the woods yesterday because he was bound to die, and soon. He was delicately made but of good courage, look at him pointing a finger at her big mad father and saying,

“Stop it, I tell you. Stop it.”

Her father lowered the heavy staff and stared at Sam for a moment, and the terrier quivering beneath his arm, and then turned away.

Sendra looked long into his face. “Now I’m sorry I’ve been mean, she said. We have lost so many people to the wasting. I’m sorry.”

And suddenly tears rolled down her face.

“It’s all right,” whispered Sam. “Apparently this is my fate.”

She could hardly speak for weeping. She lifted her dress hem and wiped her face. “Oh, it’s hard, hard,” she said. “Maybe you don’t have the wasting, maybe it’s something else.”

“One could only hope,” said Sam.

“You must know about it, don’t you? You sound as if you had had schooling.”

“I have. I don’t know any more about it than others.” He did not have very much energy for speaking, but he continued, “Yes, I have had schooling. I told you before, I am a certified teller.”As if this would impress her and he feared it would not. “Passed for expert in performance.”

“Do you know the story of Captain Kenaty and all of those people?”

“I do.”

Then, in a burst of inspiration, she said, “You know what? They say if you go far enough south, there’s no wasting and no Nids. We are going south one of these days, we are.”

“South to where?”

“The Mexican Sea.”

Sam smiled, creasing his taut, white face. “I will meet you there,” he said.

“Oh go on.”

“You want schooling, do you not?”

She wiped her face. “Someday. Maybe. Goodbye.”

“I will meet you there,” he said again.

It was a day of intermittent clouds and then it began to snow But his face was to the south and he told himself there was light and a pleasant land where he might get well.

He walked on unsteadily, southwards, along the path in the woods with only dried apples to sustain him. Jack ranged alongside running his jaw like a scoop through the drifts and ate snow. Sam in his thirst crammed snow into the mouth of his water-bottle and then held it inside his coat to melt it and then drank. He knew he was near the end of his life's strength when he saw the trees around him suddenly take on a kind of human knowing. They were alive, and they gestured to one another as he passed by: *See, see, even half dead he falls in love with Sendra, the girl that we know.*

He was dreaming perhaps, or had crossed into another world. Sendra lived back in the everyday world. She would meet some young man and be happy. This future young man would make her a fire grate and a new loom. Thinking this made him feel better.

After a mile or so a great white-tail buck stepped into the path ahead of him. The buck stood utterly still and looked at him and gave a whistling snort. He seemed to grow, to become gigantic. His eyes were enormous and as he paused the sun came out and in the sparkling snow he seemed to bear his crown of horns on his head as if he had just departed from some great celestial coronation. An emperor with a glorious white throat. The buck carried inside himself the rogue prions that were destroying mankind but in him, the tall rigid buck of the woods, they were not a disease but something that sparkled and glinted in his black eyes and gave him supernatural strength and a terrible danger.

Sam said, “How about you leave me alone? Overlook me. Turn your eyes elsewhere. Pass over me.”

The buck stamped one hoof and for a moment longer fixed Sam in his large black eyes. The sun shone from each point of his crown of horns and then he vaulted in a great arc and was gone.

It was a visitation, he knew this even when he understood he was hallucinating from hunger. This became even clearer when he saw Jack coming through the trees toward him and the terrier was as big as a horse, a giant dog, taller than Sam, with a writhing, thrashing panther in his mouth. Then after a few moments he was himself again. Small, happy, carrying a wood rat.

Sam took it up by the tail. “Let’s go a little farther,” he said. “A little farther.”

After the sun stood at noon, slightly south, he had come to the end of his strength even though he walked slowly. It was all he could do in one day. He had come upon a broad roadway with slabs of concrete. It was all overgrown. Hundred-year-old oaks stood among the eroded debris. The roadway seemed to have two roadbeds, one beside the other. It must be the old National Road. So he went along that for a while, winding among the great chunks of ancient paving and looked for someplace to lay up. He thought of his obituary. *Hic yacet, that is, here lies Samuel Garoute, scholar, died the year of the ice-jam at Rocheport, author of* Head Wobbles and Other Performative Gestures For Small Audiences.

He came to a cross-path that was beaten clear and looked as if it were frequently traveled. He sat down on a piece of broken concrete and listened. The woods whistled with the remnants of yesterday’s wind; boles of red oak and white oak were spotted with colored fungi, there was almost no underbrush and here and there great rotted limbs and even

entire trees lay where they had fallen. It was an old forest. It had its own life, its own felines and dingoes, its own weather.

The terrier sat bolt upright and cocked his head and stared down the path and so he turned and after a moment he heard a voice.

CHAPTER FIVE

A big, rawboned man was striking at the tree boles on each side of him with a staff and talking to himself as he walked. He was arguing with people who weren't present. He wore a tall straight-sided cap knitted all around with macramé designs, the kind that was called a tour, and a curling reddish beard. He yelled out in a long, floating cry, into the autumn forest, leaving a cloud of breath streaming behind him.

"What can I do with myself?" he shouted.

He danced up and down in place for a moment, flinging leaves around his big feet and their blocky laced boots. He carried a thick walking stick or club, and he struck the bole of a tree. He then turned to look over toward where Sam sat holding the terrier between his knees. The big man's lips opened and shut again.

"Well look here," he said.

"Good morning," said Sam. "Although I suppose it is now afternoon." He carried a hand to his mouth to cover his cracked and bleeding lips. His fingernails were convex as shells and clubbed at the tips. He knew how bad he looked. He figured that the bruises from thrown stones were coming out on his face and head.

"A waster," the big man said. "You're a waster."

"Yes," said Sam. "I can't help it." He paused. Are you going to throw any rocks?"

"Oh hell no."

"Well, good."

“You’re a hell of a sad sight.” The man shifted the pack on his back. There was a cooking pot tied to the top of it, upside down, and the man had a bright gold earring in one ear.

“I know it,” said Sam.

“When is it going to stop. You wonder.” He stared down at Sam and the terrier. “Are you just settin here and all?” He put his hands on his hips and his stiff canvas coat made a rasping noise. In one hand he still held the walking stick.

“Yes,” said Sam. “What are you doing?”

“Me? Walking along.” The big bony man continued to regard Sam and the terrier.

“Well, yes,” said Sam. “I see.” He pressed his lips together and thought about taking a drink from the water bottle but then he thought the man might rip it out of his hands, if he wanted it.

“Talking to myself.”

“I heard you,” said Sam.

The man stared at him a moment longer and then reached down to pluck the page of notebook paper from Sam’s pocket and held it sideways, regarding the letters. Then he turned the paper in his huge, leathery hands so that it was upside down.

“This is writing,” he said.

“It says my name,” said Sam. “And where I am from, for when I die, and people come along.”

“You wrote this?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You can read and write.”

“Yes.”

The big man smiled in surprise. Then he nodded. “Why don’t you say your age too?”

“I don’t know how old I am.”

“Well, you ain’t alone.” He bent over and returned the paper to Sam and then leaned on his stick and nodded again. “So read it all.”

“It says, ‘Here lies Sam Garoute, of Arrow Rock town, abandoned and died this winter of 350, hic yacet’.”

“What’s hic yacet mean?”

“Here lies.”

“You already said here lies.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well well. You can read and write and speak another kind of talking.”

“Language,” said Sam.

The wind started up more sharply even as they were speaking as if somewhere an atmospheric dam had given way and a river of cold air roared and tumbled out onto the earth. It drove birds ahead of it, hard and sharp, and now big snowflakes sieved through the tree limbs.

“Can you figure as well?”

Sam nodded. His head seemed very heavy to him and nodding it was like managing a great weight of dough. His pale hair stood up in the wind.

“I have some skill at arithmetic. I am not all that adept at it.”

“Well well.” The man took a wadded handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose. The cold was making Sam’s nose run also and he wiped it on his sleeve. “You said the year three-fifty. Three fifty from when?”

“Probably the demise of America of Late Antiquity but it’s nothing but a wild guess.”

“Yeah, okay. Well, I got some big decisions to make.” The man turned in a circle and looked all around himself.

“What about?” said Sam. “Considering the state of your outfit they can’t be all that big.”

“What am I going to do.”

Sam nodded. Suddenly he felt very tired. He had walked an entire mile without stopping to rest.

The man said, “I wanted to have a tavern. A house by the side of the road and be a friend to man. But it seems it would take some effort.”

Sam shifted on the stone. It was cold and getting colder. He bent his head down and leaned his forehead on his cane for a moment. The terrier looked from the big man back to Sam and then at the man again.

Sam said, “I am afraid that being a friend to man is going to be more complicated than you imagine.”

“Can’t be all that hard.”

“But there aren’t any. Men, I mean. Or human beings. Or not enough. Well, be that as it may. How far is it to the end of this woods?” Sam looked up at the man. “My mother and father said there would be a kind

of pleasant valley or something on the other side of it. I was making for there."

"What for?"

"They told me it might be a place where I could get well."

"Nobody gets well from the wasting, son. Nobody."

The man shook his head and looked at Sam; his coarse wool coat and pants. Sam's pants legs flopping short around the middle of his shins and from there down to his blocky shoes, his stockings. The stripes were horizontal, around and around his legs. His great, loving, fat, patient mother had knitted them in strong colors and horizontal stripes because she said it would make his legs look more substantial, and not so thin.

"My clothes wouldn't fit you," said Sam.

"I wouldn't take your clothes," said the man. "When do you reckon you'll die? As a practical matter."

"I don't know," said Sam and bent his head and found himself crying again. The intense fear had come back to him, in full force, it was painful. He thought he had got past it. It was an animal fear of death, a powerful surge of panic and he suffered from it and wanted it to go away and here it was again. He wiped his face clear of tears and coughed.

"Maybe you got something else." The man leaned on his staff. "Not everybody that's shrinking up thin has got the wasting disease. Maybe you have worms, or TB. Maybe you have radiation."

"I don't think so." Sam patted the terrier again and again on his ribs. "Where do you come from?"

"I come from the beautiful old capitol alongside the scenic Missouri River, a thriving town full of human hogs who live in the mud and drink

whiskey until they're drunk as Cooter Brown. I'm going where the weather suits my clothes." He waggled his head and the earring glittered and he smiled around himself at the world, with a painful brightness. He threw out one large bony hand in a southerly direction toward the edge of the world and the end of America and its geographical audacity, its old borders. "I'm going where the birds go in the wintertime so they don't lose their colors. I'll build a house by the side of the road where two trails cross and I'll hold shows in my tavern. People will throw money at me."

"There aren't hardly any people anymore," said Sam. "To throw money or anything else. However, there are a few people around throwing rocks."

The man squinted at Sam's face in the low and snowy light. "You been run off from somewhere because you got the wasting," he said. "They threw rocks at you. You got a shiner."

"Well," said Sam. "Something like that."

"You're lucky they didn't bury you alive."

"I suppose."

"Now, anymore, they kill them with clubs. Guns are hard to come by since they make them from scratch in these days, lest you find some old storage with one packed in Cosmoline. Even then. Gunpowder and ammo remain a problem to us all. They're making them in Jeff City and they charge you enough you could buy the St. Louis arch."

Sam nodded. After a moment he said, "Making them from scratch sounds like it would be hard. Hard work."

The big man looked at him for a moment with pity and leaned over and patted him on the head. The tall tour hat tipped forward.

“Yes, calculating the rifling,” he said. “You don’t have to talk simple to me, youngster. My brain’s still good.”

“Well, yes. Of course.” Sam shifted his feet. He had indeed been talking to the big man as if he were an idiot. “Well! Jeff City. I was there once, and I saw the statues there of Thomas Jefferson and the Spirit of the Rivers.”

The man leaned both hands on the head of the walking stick. “Yes. Thomas Jefferson is upside down at the moment but the Spirit of the Missouri River woman with the big kahoongas is still on her rock.”

“And they say there are more than six thousand people.”

“There are. Minus one. Me. And a good big tavern there. Stuff from the big storage places, barges coming downriver. A man has to keep himself and I am tired of pulling freight off scows, and a tavern would be how I would keep myself.”

“Don’t own a tavern,” said Sam. He wiped at his wet face where the snowflakes fell on his cheeks and his old censorious self came back to him like an unwelcome guest. “You’d have to offer entertainment. There would be fighting. And you have to figure out profit and loss and everything.”

The big bony man tapped his coarse fingers on his knee and thought about it.

“Can you write and cipher?” Sam asked the big man.

“Not good at it. I can read numbers though.”

“Then you should think some more.”

“I know it.” He clapped his hands together several times in frustration. “I fight too much. I don’t know what to do with my mind.”

Sam patted the black-and-tan terrier for a moment in silence. “Where are you going, then?”

“Away from here. On south.” He shifted around and then he chose a place to sit down beside the root-pit of a fallen great white oak. The ancient oak had grown old and weak, and the wind had blown it down, and when it fell it turned up its big root-mat and lifted out a pit. The big man sat on the edge of the shallow pit and placed his feet at the bottom, and lifted off the dark-red tour hat and ran his finger around the band and then replaced it.

“Yes, all the ancient texts refer to people going to the south when the world ends.”

“What ancient texts?” The man squinted at him. “What the hell is a text?”

“Writing. Books. Novels, apparently. Rare ones. Most of them not in good condition. Titles such as *Alas Babylon* and *Lucifer’s Hammer* and The Road. And so on.”

“Does it say about all that in the Last Battle stories?”

“No, no, that is a folk narrative about warriors. An epic, actually. These are writings about people trying to survive the downfall. The downfall being caused by a meteor, wars, bombs and so on.”

“Is this the downfall? I thought it was just normal life.”

“Well, I guess it’s normal. It didn’t used to be normal.”

“Well.”

Sam said, “With the Nids and all.”

“Well it’s normal to me.”

“Yes. I would imagine so. Now here you are on the run. A bandit, an outlaw, an adventurous person. You’ve done something untoward.”

“That’s a new one, Untoward.”

“Bad. Perhaps even criminal.”

“Yes.” The man stretched both legs out before him. “I beat up a fellow back in Jeff. I hit him over the head with a skillet. The bottom of the skillet come out. So the skillet was around his neck with the handle hanging down in front. So I grabbed hold of the handle and threw him out the door. But then he was bleeding like a firehose.” The man wiped his hand over his mouth. “And then somebody calls for the Bailey of the Shore and then everybody that lives down on the riverbank where the docks are come running up and I run.”

Sam nodded. It was interesting to hear this; he had never been farther from Arrow Rock than to Jefferson City and back. Stories of wild times and far places seemed to take him out of his bitter and censorious self. His diminishing, wasting self and his death that waited somewhere ahead in time like a road agent.

The man shifted his feet in the leaves at the bottom of the pit. “Only three towns in the world with more than a thousand people and I get thrown out of one. How few we are.”

“Not in the world,” said Sam. “I bet there are big towns or something to the east. Far to the east.”

The man nodded and wiped snow from his beard. “Maybe west, too. And south. I wonder if there is a map of the world somewhere?”

Sam stroked the dog. “Yes, but not very good ones. Why did you beat him up?”

“I don’t know.” The man turned this over several times in his mind like something he had found on the trail and could not make sense of. “I guess I was drunk.”

“And now you got to hurry and go on, because they’ll be coming after you,” said Sam. “With clubs and knives. Various instruments of torture and abuse.”

“Nah.” The man nodded and then fished around in his pockets and came up with a small amount of edibles wrapped in a oiled cloth. “They ain’t very fast.” He opened it and ate from a chunk of bread. “Man, that’s good.” He looked up. “Do you want some?”

“I better not touch your food,” said Sam. He looked at the hard crust in Shettle’s hand. “That’s real bread.”

The big man chewed and swallowed. “Ain’t it though. Flour ground there at Jeff in the watermill and I stole twenty pounds of it. Well, you don’t seem all that dead.”

Sam gripped the T-handle on his staff. “I couldn’t work anymore. And then the burial parties came around.” He smiled at the man. “They worked hard to make my clothes and give me all they had. They were full of affection and warmth when they dumped me at the edge of the woods.”

“Poor little fellow,” said the man. “Poor fellow.”

Sam shrugged and slowly reached for his knapsack. It seemed to weigh more than it had an hour ago. The big man continued to eat. He bit into a shriveled apple and then leaned to one side and spat out a seed.

“Where’d you live in Arrow Rock?”

“On Pump Street, over a printer’s place. Where they printed comic books and pictures and ABC books. But he’s run out of ink lately. When it froze two weeks ago the barges couldn’t get in.”

“That’s Robinson’s Bend, there at Arrow Rock. They make salt on the left bank. I have crewed on barges coming in there many a time. Loading salt.” He wiped snowflakes from his sleeve. “It’s coming down, ain’t it.”

The wind increased and lines of snow snarled among the trees. They had to raise their voices to talk to one another. The man put the last of the bread between his big teeth.

“Where south?” Sam asked. “That is, where in the south are you going?”

“Mmmm.” The man swallowed. “Down to the Mexican Sea, where there is oysters. Maybe out west. I wanted to see the statues of them beheaded Presidents. They got their heads up in stone on a mountain where they was beheaded and the heads turned to stone. But I changed my mind because there’s no river that comes from there as far as I have heard.”

Sam nodded. “I think I know what you’re talking about. It’s under R, Rushmore.”

“Yes. Now I am thinking there has to be someplace where there are a lot of people. Where they don’t get sick. We’re all a-dying but maybe it is just us here.”

“That could be.”

“And I am going to strike out and find them and see things and set up my wayside tavern.”

“And be a friend to man,” said Sam. He was envious. This great clumsy man had a future in front of him, he had life. It was like having a crop in a barn, old silver dimes in a buried chest. His mind would still look out at the world for a while, shrunk though his mind might be. He would go wandering and see things.

“My name is Shettle.” The man got up. He shifted from one broad foot to the other.

“Well, take yourself off, Shettle, and cheer up.” Sam once again lifted his hand to his face. He could feel the bruises and swelling, it was a tight feeling. It was growing dark.

“But see here, if you can read and write do you know all the Last Battle stories?”

“Yes.”

“The whole thing? And all the side characters?”

“I do. I’m a trained teller, probably my only socially useful accomplishment.”

“They say it takes three days to tell the whole thing.”

“That’s correct.”

“Well damn! That’s what I need for my tavern. Entertainment. Now give me some of the Last Battle.” Shettle clapped his hands together.

“No. I just want to sit here.”

“Come on. If you’re dying that’s what you want to be saying when you croak. Courage in the face of death and all like that.”

“No.”

“A little part. That good part when Kenaty the Commander leaves home. When he loads his gear and starts off to the Last Battle.”

“No.” Sam looked up. “Would you take that dog with you when you go?”

“When he says goodbye to his chilren.”

“Leave me alone.”

“It will make you feel better.”

“I feel fine,” said Sam. “Just fine.”

“No you don’t, you feel like shit.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Just a verse or two.” Shettle clasped his huge hands with an expectant look on his face.

“Oh God, God, very well.”

Sam closed his eyes. After a moment he began with the part where Kenaty the Commander said goodbye to his wife and children as they stood at the gate, and the blessing he gave each child according to its nature. Sam’s voice was failing, and raspy. He came to the youngest child who was the Commander’s only girl, who was named Sendra, and Kenaty’s wish that she should seek throughout the world for a man who was an orphan and a father to his sisters, and marry no other.

Goodbye Sendra, child of my heart, in this lone world I leave you, and as I draw apart to death or victory on some distant plain I pray with every step that you should marry for love alone and not for earthly gain.

Shettle sat down, gripped by even this short part of the famous story. He looked carefully at Sam and his blue fingertips, his pale ivory face, and made a decision. He gestured upward.

"You ain't got the wasting disease. You got congenital heart disease. Look at them fingertips. Blue, convex. Like shells. Blue lips. That's heart. You got heart problems."

Sam was silent, open-mouthed for several decisive seconds as his life, what was left of it, which had been on a forward high speed trajectory toward extinction suddenly began to slow. "Really?" Sam looked at his fingertips. "Really?"

"You was weak from the day you was born, wasn't you?"

"I don't know," said Sam. "I was adopted. But well yes."

"I knew a man on the barges had congenital heart disease. You could hear it. Sit beside him after he done some work and it would go wash wash wash. You could goddamn *hear* it."

"Did they take him for the wasting?"

"No. Get up."

"Wait a minute."

"You ain't got time to study on it right now, said Shettle. I am making a plan. I plan quick."

"I see," said Sam. "Just a minute." He looked at his hands again. "Just a minute."

"Listen," said Shettle. He lifted a finger in the air and stared. There was a clicking sound. And then, *Ssss essa essa essa*.

"That's them," he said. "They use them clickers."

“Who?”

“A burial party. When they don’t want to yell at each other. Here.”

Shettle reached for Sam’s upper arm, pulled him to his feet and boosted him onto the lower limb of a great white-oak tree. He came after, and then snatched Sam up again like a rag doll and shoved him higher and so higher. Shettle seemed to be well acquainted with the anatomy of trees, or at least of white oaks, and he dragged Sam after him until the limbs were small and cranky and bending under their weight. They poised themselves among the stiff twigs and the few leaves still around them in rusty colors.

“They will see our tracks,” said Sam.

“They ain’t interested in tracks,” said Shettle.

CHAPTER SIX

Through the screen of dry leaves in their own tree and in others they finally saw them coming. The Nids with their short straight black fur and their narrow feet like some kind of thin shoes in blue leather. A string of people stumbling along with them, the Nids striking them with clubs. Snow layering itself along their heads, the sick and dying. A human walked alongside making clicking noises with a wooden cricket.

"Oh God," said Sam. He put a hand over his eyes.

But he could not avoid the sound of clubs striking heads, the cries. Weakened shouts and people falling, and the Bailey of the Shore crying here, here, get this one. He called out to the Better Health people in their leather jerkins. A small child hid under his dead mother's shawl and then started up, screaming, holding up both hands as if begging to be picked up. A tall Nid brought his club down on the boy's head.

"He wasn't sick," whispered Sam. He pressed his face into his blankets.

"Be quiet," said Shettle.

Sam began to cry. He could not stop himself. It was like throwing up, it started and he could not stop. He put one hand over his face and still tears rained down over his knuckles. Shettle's hand hardened around his upper arm.

"Hush, hush."

The tall hominids strode around among the dead, snow dusting over their pale faces and bloody clothing. Once in a while striking again with their clubs. Then they began to drag the people off into the woods with

limp arms and legs flailing. The sick people had fallen silent one by one. They collapsed with all their prions inside them. The humans of the burial party marched among the bodies with their heads bent down, watching intently for any sign of life. There was none.

Sam and Shettle looked down at the tops of their heads far below.

Sam whispered, “This is so awful.”

“Yah,” whispered Shettle.

Then the hominids lost interest. They began to wander away. They trilled to one another, and pranced in the snow as if dancing, and shook their clubs at one another in clumsy fun. The bodies were now some heaped and indistinguishable carnage that seemed already a year old. Shettle squinted downwards. The Nids had trampled all their tracks. After a while they followed the Baileys of the Shore away down the forest path, singing *Eedemup! Eedemup*!

Shettle waited a while longer and then began to climb down. He reached up at one point and lifted Sam from one limb to another. Small sticks and leaves and other debris came down with them. Sam dropped from the last limb and fell to his hands and knees and then recovered as Shettle dropped lightly behind him.

“Here’s your fice dog,” said Shettle. Sam beat the snow from his knees and looked up to see Jack the terrier bounding out of a stand of short cedar and come leaping around him.

“Well, dear fellow,” said Sam. “Here you are.” He was still sobbing and Jack whined at the noise, looking up into Sam’s face. He beat the terrier lightly on the ribs. He thought of the child stretching out its arms to its murderer. Tears streamed down in a flat flood over his cheeks and

he wiped his mouth and nose and stroked Jack for his own comfort. Good dear fellow.

The terrier suddenly whirled around and faced the screening cedar where the bodies lay. He stood stiffly with his ears cocked up and barked.

"What?" said Shettle. "What is it?"

"Haaaaaaaaa," said the Nid.

The hominid stepped gracefully through some low cedar limbs. It pressed them aside with its immensely long arms and its thin-tipped fingers. A being covered in short black hair and then Sam saw that it was a male. "Ooooooo Chettle." His green eyes under a thick ridge were full of a predatory intelligence, an intelligence that concentrated upon only a very few important things. He was six feet tall, or more. His nose was only a button with its nostrils facing outwards over his thin lips. The pale blue skin of his face was burnt by the sun and freckled. "Oho oho Chettle."

The big man threw off his tour hat. He said, "You know my name, don't you, you son-of-a-bitch." He flipped his hickory walking-stick butt-end up. He was taller than the Nid by several inches.

The Nid walked toward them and lifted his club to one shoulder. His legs were spattered with blood and snow to his knees. He darted at Shettle sideways, guarding his torso, and swung the club from his right.

Shettle sprang forward and closed with the Nid instantly, without hesitation. The Nid's club fell without effect because Shettle had darted into the arc of its swing. Shettle smashed the butt of his walking-stick up into the Nid's chin. When its head snapped back, Shettle fell back on his right leg and brought the hickory walking-stick down onto the flat bridge

of the Nid's nose with all his strength, again and again with lightning speed and the Nid staggered back. Then Shettle laid his hickory alongside the narrow face in a broadside swing with a shocking, meaty crunch.

Blood poured out of the Nid's broken face and the tall thing stood with its thin lips open for a moment. His fingers loosened. He stared dumbly at Shettle. Then Shettle brought his heavy club down on the Nid's skull but the club bounced off the Nid's sagittal crest without doing any damage and still the hominid stood as if confused. Blood leaked down onto the short straight black hair of its head and shoulders.

Sam realized that the terrier was barking without cease, and darting at the Nid. Shettle took two steps and stood behind the creature and landed a powerful blow with his hickory at the back of the Nid's neck. At last the Nid went down. All six feet of him collapsed full length with a pouf of powdery snow and he lay still.

Shettle stood for a few moments, watching him. He pursed his lips and blew his breath out carefully several times. Then he took hold of one of the Nid's thin wrists and dragged the body through the trees and left it with the other, human, dead.

"We got to get away from here," said Shettle. "Now."

"You go on," said Sam. He sank down into the snow.

"They'll be back looking for that asshole Nid," said Shettle. "They'd as soon take you as me."

I don't think I have many days left, Shettle…"

"I told you, you ain't dying. We got about two hours before they figure that Nid is missing. That particular Bailey's name is Pelly Chick,

and old Pelly will have me arrested for murder in the fourth degree or homicide in a no-homicide zone or something. Since I just killed his favorite Nid." Shettle shifted his pack around on his back and then slapped Sam on the arm. "I need you to keep the books and figure and tell the stories when I get my tavern." Shettle jammed the walking stick in his belt under the heavy canvas coat. "Up and at 'em."

"No," said Sam. "I think I'll just lay here." He pinched the front of the blanket more tightly together at his throat. The killing had disordered his mind, somehow. He felt destroyed. He said, "Maybe their souls are still in the air."

Shettle crossed his arms and said, "Leave that to the Mariners. That's their job. You're going to keep everything right and squared away in my tavern." His breath smelled of whatever he had been drinking yesterday when he broke a skillet over a man's head. And now he had killed a Nid in front of Sam's eyes. A violent man. It was nearly dark and with the snow, the clouds and behind that, the moon, the forest had a strange light about it. The wind cracked at them like a whip.

The man reached down and took Sam by his two thin forearms and sat him up. Leaves flew from Sam's blankets and were spun off by the wind. Sam lurched to the left and right trying to stay on his feet.

"We'll get a good piece away from here, because now I am a wanted man. And we'll get you cured of the failing heart disease and you'll keep the accounts and everything at my tavern when I get one. And you'll recite *The Last Battle* once a month and otherwise read out loud to people in the evenings." Shettle slapped his hands together again. "And I'll give over fighting and drinking and turn peaceable. I got this figured out."

Shettle walked down the path a little way, on the new, clean snow, leaving great holes of tracks, and then back again. He raised his hand.

“And then I’ll meet up with Linda, somebody named Linda or Heather or somebody named Wanda, and we’ll eat good every day and have music at night and so on. With you keeping the books, you see, and doing the entertainment. We got to get out of here and make some miles.” He reached down and took up Sam’s knapsack. “You’re on their most wanted list now too.”

“Why?”

“Because you left that paper here somewhere. Sam Garoute, hic yacet. And I ain’t stopping to look for it.”

Then he took Sam by the collar Sam like a very child, and hoisted him to his feet and strode off down the snowed-in path; it stood out clearly in the dark of the woods, like a misty bridge to somewhere unknown, Jack the terrier following happily, ready to go anywhere.

Great forests had come back to cover the earth again when the people had gone. The world was going on without them. At last the few remaining people had come to see what a brute world it was, immense hardwoods following their own imperatives, drinking the air at leisure, contending with one another for the sun, harboring deep secrets. Massive oaks grew up out of the expansive heaps that had once been cities. They were cities that people still knew the names of, and stories about those cities when they flooded or caught fire or who were the last people to live in them, the names of the last mayors but these names were often confused with the names of presidents or celebrities.

Various scholarly ascetics living in urban rubble and others who still inhabited the known world came to think that some other life form had arrived in triumph to take over this world because humans had failed. Because they had fallen into a compulsive cynicism and other linguistic poisons, unable to sing or whistle or dance, but people always said that when there was a disaster. They always said these things when epidemics and wars struck. Our time is gone, they said. All we had and all we are is gone. Taken over by something that does not mourn and is not unhappy and is blind to all our vanities. Birds with hands at the joints of their wings maybe.

The people of the towns along the river and even further back in the backlands lived in a world darkened with indignant and furious spirits whose names were Prion, The Black Dog, Yorona crying for her dead children, the Lesser Thrain, Beulah Queen of the Night and Gentleman Jack. The Mariners spoke and sang about all these specters as well as doing the rites, because that was their task, they said. Somebody has to do it. We're not hogs, you know.

The meager population made its way through the tenantless miles of giant trees, on their way to isolated farms or shrunken villages with their important burdens. The most precious burdens were not bales or bags or packs but instead those things you carry in the mind such as songs or legends and genealogies and light-fingered music of stringed and wind instruments.

Shettle wanted to sing something but with the wind and two packs and the fragile young man in tow he had enough to contend with and so instead he asked Sam to sing something.

Sam said in a gasping voice that he could not. He clutched at Shettle's sleeve with fingers like white wire structures, and then Shettle

asked that if Sam's parents were so kind and good then why the hell did they not at least leave him with a hat? And Sam said there were only three hats between them all and what was the point. The snow came down and covered their footprints.

So Shettle put his cooking pot over Sam's wet, snowy head like a helmet and on they went.

They walked and walked and sometime in the night they crossed the Great National Road Eye Seventy. As Shettle stepped through the snow across this broad path, Sam said that if they went on down it either to left or right surely they might find a stayover place or a house with people where they could get out of the weather, but Shettle said No way! He strode on across the National Road and onto the path on the other side. He had assaulted a man with a skillet and killed a Nid, and so the Baileys of the Missouri Shore were all alooking for him, asearching and asniffing and he would do no more time in a jail but have his tavern by the side of the road yet, and be a man with friends.

After a while Shettle shouted over the noise of the wind that they were coming to the cliffs over the LaMine River and that it would be hard going to get down them.

"Why, we are on the LaMine River," said Sam. The cooking pot banged him in the face. His voice was faint.

"Hell yes," said Shettle. "It circles around all over the place. We are afollowing it. That's why. You're like everybody, don't know what's five mile from you. Get away from that river and you're in fairyland."

A smoky gray dawn shone around them in the world. It made it seem that the heavy oaks and the light, slim maples were manifesting themselves in the world after having disappeared in the night. Shettle

said they were coming to Chimney Rock and that at that place they had to get a little way down the cliffs and then they would find a cave. Then after that they would follow along the LaMine River to the power-line path, then to Old Highway Five, called Five-and-Dime, and then on south, many months journey to the south, to a place where he could have his tavern and Sam would keep the books and tell the story of the Last Battle and he, Shettle, would at last give over fighting and drinking.

The long aisles of the monotonous forest came to an end at the limestone cliffs of the LaMine. They looked out over a valley with a few cleared fields which could easily be seen because the fields were white with snow. There were no houses. No, not one, and it was a good little valley with a salt lick, said Shettle. He put his pack down on the ground. That salt lick water boiled out to good white salt, and those fields would grow turnips big as your head.

He did not notice that Sam had fallen over in a heap of stick-like arms and legs with blood running from his cracked lips and the only substantial thing about him was his coarse wool clothes that stood rigid around him. The kettle drooped over his eyes and Jack sat shivering in his lap.

“Here I was born,” said Shettle. He held out one hand toward the valley. “And there is Low Gap, where we robbed a bee tree and brought all the honey home in a wheelbarrow and even then it was spilling over. That was when I was young and good and even then there were more people than there are now, how few we are. There’s a cave down here,” he said. “We’ll recruit there.”

Chimney Rock was a tower of stone that stood out and away from the limestone cliffs by two feet. A long tall column cut away from the cliff in ages past. Below it was a cave hidden by ancient cedars that had

grown as thick around as a barrel. When Sam and Shettle rattled their way down the steep slope alongside Chimney Rock Sam felt he was not long for this living world. Stones avalanched alongside them.

When they ducked into the cave he fell down and pulled his blanket around him and closed his eyes. Shettle dumped his pack and went out again for kindling and in a short time he had a great fire burning. Smoke poured up to the ceiling of the cave and then flowed out, it purled up into the cedar tree outside the entrance like spectral knitting. It held a level about the height of Shettle's hairy head, and then it rolled like a river back into the depths of the cave where it found some distant outlet.

Sam lay wrapped in the blankets in the heat of the fire, among the limestones and the leaves. The face of the stones lit up and glowed. He looked up at the roof of smoke and briefly thought about how he had been abandoned in a wood, had seen Sendra, and a mystical stag and now for some reason he had been carried through the very forest itself, its dense heart, by this rowdy and inexhaustible ruffian.

And what did he want in return? Stories, the epic tales and lost structures in the mind that saw an epic, heard an epic, knew it for what it was. But, in addition perhaps he was a man to become enraged easily and Sam would be without recourse, maybe he was one of those who needed a humble adoring minion and what would Sam do then when this so-far undiscovered pathology appeared?

He had to ascertain in some way if this epic-memorization was something Shettle really valued, if it were a skill that meant he was important and rare and valuable so that he wouldn't be maltreated if the mood took the big man.

He stared out of the cave mouth toward the valley with its armature of bare tree tops and the glint of river far below flowing past the cave

and Chimney Rock. It flowed northward toward the Missouri River. Indolent buzzards seemed to be held up by a gray atmosphere that leaked pinheads of sleet. It was warm by the fire.

For the first time in a long while Sam felt hungry and when Shettle returned up the steep slope, rattling rocks and crushing small bushes Sam regarded him now with suspicion even as he hoped deeply and humbly that the man had food. He had wished to be indifferent to both food and life, like all the great hardwoods that went on with their lives on only air and rain and the sun, like the vultures sailing overhead nourished by chance death, the very clouds with their short and vaporous lives. But here he was, after several alarming events, alive, and he had rejoined those who had to struggle every day of their lives for food and warmth. Their bodies saying, *You must live, you must.*

Shettle held a round of cheese in his hands and laughed to himself as he cut pieces from it into yellow coins and dropped them on pieces of broken bread from his knapsack. He placed these on flat stones next to the fire to toast them. It was full day now. Sam saw the limp torpedo shapes of fish laying on another stone, their bellies had the silky, scaleless texture of catfish.

“Where did you get this?” said Sam. He carefully wiped dried blood from his lips and then made the grace-before-meals gesture of tapping all his fingertips against one another (couldn’t hurt). Then he ate. His fingers were burnt with the stringy hot cheese.

“Old cabin down there,” said Shettle. “Old man, he’s dead now. Now, he got the cheese someplace else.”

“How did you know it was there?”

“I wandered this country many a year.” Shettle turned up Sam’s water bottle. “Now I got to refill that.” Sam nodded and gave Jack a large piece of bread and cheese and as he was handing it to the terrier his head nodded and then he fell asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It seemed he slept for months. Sometimes Jack lay curled at his feet and then from time to time the terrier was outlined at the cave's mouth, sitting with his ears cocked, gazing out over the valley. At other times he trotted into the cave at Shettle's heels when Shettle in his steep decorated tour hat came in carrying something, or the little dog lay at the fireside staring at what cooked in the pot, something that steamed and sent out appetizing smells, and flaky pieces of roasted fish with the skin all blackened and inside the pearly bones and white feathery flesh.

Sam slept like the old sleepers in caves who lay deep in dreams while in the earth beyond, people and their civilizations came and went like cloud-shadows passing over a immense river and every passing cloud was darker than the one before and they came closer and closer together until it would soon be a storm without end and darkness everywhere. God had other things to do with his creation than to people it all over with human beings. There were greater things than us to come.

'Well you done slept for three days," said Shettle. "You ate your way through a good many provisions." Shettle had a forked stick in his hand and was whittling at it. Sunlight streamed into the cave mouth.

Sam lifted both hands before his face and looked carefully at his own wrists and his flat, wide fingertips with their shell-like nails. They were a healthy pink.

"I did?"

"Ate like a starved hog." Shettle began to cut green cedar twigs with his knife and constructed a sort of rack on the fork of the stick. He laid it to face the fire and then on top of the rack he laid a split and headless catfish.

“Where did you get food for three days?”

Sam turned and saw that there was a pile of rising dough in a wooden tray next to the fire, and two kegs sitting tumbled against one another. Two dipper gourds already cut and shaped lay to one side like little fat people.

“Went fishing. And then there’s some storages.” Shettle licked his hands and wiped them on his pants. “All through here. People stored up and then died. I know this valley.”

Sam said, “You were born here.”

“Wasn’t I though.”

Shettle leaned back against a shelf of stone with his legs sticking out in front of him and crossed one ankle over another. His big boots steamed in the heat of the fire.

“Then maybe I *don’t* have the wasting,” Sam said. He had not been asked to carry wood in to the fire, heavy oak splits from downstairs to upstairs, nor churn nor shift the weaver’s beam. O that great beam how heavy it was. He had not been asked to broom soot from the rafters or chop dried mud from boots. He felt a cautious hope. “Maybe it is heart, like you said. Something I could live with, so to speak. Maybe I’ll live.”

“Okay,” said Shettle.

“It’s hard to kind of change thinking.”

“Ain’t it, though.”

“I am just amazed. I have to think about it. I mean, get used to thinking about it.”

“Think on,” said Shettle. “I seen cases like yours.” He tipped a bowl toward himself and peered into it. “I am a-proofing of my yeast here. We’re good.”

“You have? Seen cases like mine?”

“Yepper. Didn’t your parents take you to be seen by a medico?”

“No. The physician there in Arrow Rock died five, six years ago. His apprentice left to be a hobo.”

Shettle nodded. “I seen a case like yours, when people were told they had the wasting but it was something else. Down at Rocheport. A woman had TB. Got a medico to say so, lived ‘til she was eighty with it. They tried to take her two, three times. The third time was the last.”

“Who was it?”

“Amanda Hightower.”

“Ah yes, the big Hightower family.”

“Five boys. Big sons of bitches. They sent a burial party after her and said she had the wasting. From Jeff City. The boys beat up those big Jeff City Nids, went after them with anchor chains when they come to take her. Third time was the last.”

“Yes, said Sam. A singer came with a ballad about it. Something like forty verses. Rhyme scheme a-b-a-b and every one of them with end-stopped lines.”

“There,” said Shettle. “People love entertainment and good stories.”

“He couldn’t sing,” said Sam, his old censorious habit coming back despite himself, despite his good resolutions. “And his rhyming was terrible.” Sam gazed out at the LaMine River valley, framed in the cave

mouth. “He kept putting verbs at the end. It was like ’rain’, and ’down the river they came’.”

“So what the hell,” said Shettle. “People came to listen, didn’t they?”

“Yes they did. They did indeed.”

“So. But in the tavern, you’ll only do ‘The Last Battle’. None of the amateur local stuff.” He poured flour and oil into the bowl and began to glop it all together.

Sam leaned back in his nest of blankets and stoked the terrier, who had fallen asleep in his lap. *Heart disease*, he thought, happily. *Only heart disease*. He turned his hands palm upwards to the light of day. He sat immersed in the bright light of his own future, now stretching out in front of him in a straight broad line instead of a diminishing arrow that would strike its bitter head up against some mortal full stop.

Shettle said, “Din’t your parents figure out it was heart?” Shettle paused as Sam thought about this. “No, they din’t. They wanted to get rid of you.”

Sam dropped his head and looked at his hands again. “Yes, I suppose they did.” And once again he resolved to remain positive and if not exactly gay and gladsome then at least to leave off the cheap sneers.

“I told you,” said Shettle. “Now, how do you like this cooking?” Shettle’s curling brown beard was flecked with bits of fish and his gold earring glittered.

“Very good!” said Sam. He pulled up his stockings with their bold stripes “Excellent cooking, I’m amazed.”

“Well, that’s just it,” said Shettle. “I’m a-pratissing on you. You see I am a-fixing my menu for the tavern.” He reached for the bowl and its

wad of dough and sat it between his legs. He jammed both dirty hands into a bag of flour beside him and then threw himself into kneading the dough with manic energy. Wham! Wham! He punished the dough with fierce squeezes and chokes. “You got to think of your dough as your worst enemy.”

The terrier woke up and stared at Shettle.

“I see,” said Sam.

Shettle hit the dough with his square fists, one two three. Then he gently pinched out a dead leaf from the dough and shook it from his fingers. “Now this here sourdough goes best with sheep cheese of which I have a good wheel covered in beeswax. Your regular brown flour, now that makes a bread that goes with your cow cheese. The yellow one they call cheddar.”

“Yes,” said Sam. “I have enjoyed cheddar, especially shaved over toast.” His great blue eyes fixed on the expanding dough. Now that he was going to continue being alive he was hungry and even the winter air in a cave tasted good to him.

“And then they’s shit on a shingle, the riverman’s delight. Now when we get the tavern we’ll have a regular oven and a bake-stone for the flatbread. We want that flatbread *crisp*.”

He balanced a flat stone on two others. He dropped more wood onto the fire until it roared and threw galloping, fugitive shadows on the fractured limestone walls. He blew on the flat slab and then wiped it off with his tattered sleeve. He smacked the dough down it. “Ain’t that going to bake, though?” He cleaned his hands on his trousers. “Now liquor is the money man in a tavern, they say, but you got to be known far and wide for your food. We’ll get some hogs killed and smoked.

Cheeses are good. But you get that smell of bread baking, why, they'll wade through snowstorms."

Shettle sat down again on the chair of stone he had made for himself and turned his attention full on Sam.

"Now we move on to our main attraction in this tavern. Which reminds me, we got to have a name for it. Now our main attraction is the storytelling and the reading out loud from whatever comes to hand or is in remembrance. Plus the booze."

"Reading out loud?"

"Yes."

"But I am not an accomplished performer. Or a good reader."

"You passed your exams and all that for the Last Battle, din't you?"

"I did." Sam said this in a rather dubious voice since he had, in fact, done well but because of his health he had barely made it through the examination and performance reviews in Jefferson City to obtain his certificate. He had missed only two lines in three days. But then, nobody asked him to perform since he was suspected of harboring the dreaded prions. "I haven't had much practice, to tell you the truth."

"It don't matter. They's so few people that can read people will listen to anything. Didn't you say people came and sat and listened to the ballad of the Baileys? And him a poor singer. So you do the Last Battle or just some readings from old books. Or tell about anything you remember reading. Scientific facts and all."

"Oh no, said Sam. People won't come for that." He wrapped his hands around his knees. "Nobody would come."

“Yes they will, too. Now, I got me a scholar here and I ain’t going to let go, so resign yourself to your fate.”

Sam pressed his lips together. Who wanted to hear about Balzac and beetles and Byelorussia and brass?

Shettle pulled at his beard and bent over to observe the rising of the dough and turned it so that another side was to the heat of the fire. Then he slapped his hands together.

“I figure we could have hoardings readings for a fee. Whatever people would bring, whatever they got and been hoarding, you would stand up and read it out loud. People would pay for that and pay to hear it. They buy themselves some hot cheese and bread and a shot of hard liquor besides.” He smiled out of his reddish, curling beard. “‘Georgia Alley. Born in July of the big flood or whatever, died whenever, wife of whoever he was’, and they’ll eat that toasted food and drink whiskey and look around at the crowd; ‘That’s my great-great grandma, read out loud’. Sometimes they bring old telephone books with names in them to be read. I seen it done.”

Sam thought about this. Himself a small person prematurely aged with ill health and too much work, staring at a fire in a cave and the fire like humanity itself slowly burning down to a heap of gemlike glowing coals. He thought of himself standing up on a chair in front of a crowd of imaginary people in an imaginary tavern in some unknown location and Jack trying to stay near his feet and the imaginary people stepping on Jack’s tail.

But on the other hand.

“Well,” he said. “Maybe I could.”

“There you go. Think of all that stuff you got memorized.”

Sam thought about it some more and then looked up. “And I could, perhaps, recite the old poetry to them.” He felt suddenly hopeful. “‘The grave’s a fine and private place, but none, I think, do there embrace‘.”

“No no no! None of that old coof stuff!” cried Shettle. “That shit’s nothing but crying and whining and depressing crapola.” He waved both hands as if he were dispersing a crowd of noxious insects that would drill his weathered skin. “The whole damn world is sick with heavy thinking.” Shettle slapped his hands together. “Heavy thinking. They are sick and they are sad. They are full of tears and fears all day every day. We are on a mission, Sam Garoute.” Shettle threw out one hand. “A hero mission just the same as if we strapped on our swords. We will have people laughing at that little tough kid that carried the commander’s gear, and cheering when he slits Yorona’s throat.” Shettle pursed his lips. “The evil bitch. Now we got to come to an agreement on this.”

“All right,” said Sam. Shettle was correct. Abandoned homes and weedy swiddens, turnip fields growing on by themselves alone and the planters of them dead of the chronic, the massive forests taking over everything and the early winters. People wanted to cheer up and laugh, they wanted to know that things were possible and that heroes and their comic little servants were still a part of humanity and lived in the imagination. That they walked the earth and were accompanied by stirring music. That human life would flow on in a clean stream of pure water full from bank to bank, and bear them along in some way. At the helm of the boat a heroic man and sitting in the prow a beautiful woman to point the way, saying, *Just ahead will be light and meadows and a pleasant land.* And he too wanted to feel these things and not only to feel them but believe them.

Sam said, “And what besides the genealogies that people find in their family Bibles?”

“Oh there will be plenty to keep you busy, just stuff people find in the storages. Telephone books and old tax forms and advertisements.” Shettle began to excavate a hole in the middle of the great heap of coals. “I am telling you right now, people will, God save me, listen to a bill of lading with all those old device-like technical names. They look at the pictures for years and they’re just tortured to know what the writing says. I know this from a misspent life in riverside taverns from Fort Leavenworth to St. Louis.”

“Now where is this tavern going to be?”

“Down near the Mexican Sea.”

“I thought you wanted to go see the statues of the beheaded Presidents. Out west.”

“Nah. I changed my mind. The Mexican Sea is the place to go.”

“Why there?”

“Because it’s warm, and there will be sailors and that might be the place where the cure is, I’m thinking.”

“The cure for the wasting?”

“Yah. Don’t they say it is at the bottom of the sea?”

Sam shook his head. “Yes, but what sea? And where in the sea? Oceans cover three-fourths of the earth’s surface.”

“Well, ain’t you read anything about it? And you a scholar. It has to be in a book somewhere.”

Sam lifted one hand. “Shettle, there were a great many books in the world.”

“Well, start reading through them. If we come on some.”

“Yes but…” The impossibility of conveying to Shettle the great variety of books both in this world and in the old one seemed too much for him at the moment.

“There’s always truth in an old tale somewhere,” said Shettle. “You just got to figure it out.”

Sam gave up. He nodded. “Yes, I will keep my eye out for a book that might tell us which sea. And where in which sea.”

“You‘ll figure it out, said Shettle. You can read and write, can‘t you?”

After the bread dough had gone through its two rises and was baked on a hot stone, after they had eaten and straightened out their blankets, they settled down for the night in the fading comfort of the fire. They seemed to have decided to go on in the morning since Sam was now much stronger. On to the south, where all the old books said people were to go when civilizations collapsed.

“Although you don’t know how far you can trust them,” Sam said. “We have no context.”

“No,” said Shettle. He yawned. “We don’t have a map either.” He turned to look out the cave mouth. They could see the dim valley between the limbs of the old cedar at the entrance. A moon was up but a mist of light snow was falling. He reached for a twisted cedar root to throw on the fire.

“No, don’t,” said Shettle. He grabbed Sam’s hand and sat up. “Get back.”

“Well, the fire’s dying down.”

“Get back. Out of the light.”

Sam stared at Shettle for a moment and then shoved himself backwards until he was far from the small crown of flames that flickered on the ash heap.

“What?”

Shettle went on his hands and knees into the shadow and then to the cave mouth.

“Them things,” he said.

There was just enough sunset light left to see far down in the valley the man in the fedora hat and with him a woman in a long flying skirt.

Sam squinted his eyes and bent forward. He could see trees through them. “I’ve seen him before,” he whispered. “I never saw her.”

The man and the woman walked along in a jaunty way over a field of weeds. They turned to one another and danced in the snow. Dingo dogs moved around them with happy dog smiles.

“Where’d you see them?”

“When I first got left in the woods. It was just the man. He called the dingoes to him. Who are they?”

“Don’t know,” said Shettle. “They are looking up here.”

The man and the woman paused in their dancing and let go of one another and turned to look up at the cave mouth. They stood very still.

THE TAVERN AT THE END OF THE WORLD

“The inn does not point to the road; the road points to the inn. And all roads point to an ultimate inn, where we shall meet Dickens and all his characters; and when we drink again it shall be from the great flagons in the tavern at the end of the world.”

G.K. Chesterton

CHAPTER ONE

His parents left him to die at the edge of the forest in late October, when winter was beginning and the warblers had taken all their voices and had flown south to some mysterious kingdom beyond the horizon. They lifted him from the cart in a hard, firm grip even though he held on desperately to the sides. They pulled his hands loose finger by finger. The house dog barked at everything from under his mother's skirts, barking at the entire world because something was wrong and the dog felt it in the air and was sounding the alarm but the people around him did nothing but make high-pitched unhappy noises.

He felt himself dropped onto the ground like a sack of unconnected bones. His mother's face was wet and her hands were in fists. She would not look at him. She was enormously fat. His father bent over and held him by both forearms and sat him down in the leaf litter beneath an oak tree and said that if he could walk through to the other side of the forest, there would be light, and a river and a pleasant land where he might despite everything find himself alive and well.

He stared up at his father and said "No, I am going to die here."

His name was Sam and his face was narrow as a shoe. As they came down the road in the cart he had bent himself together tightly and said in his thin voice that after all he had worked as long as he was able. What did they want, what did they want? He might get better yet and be able to work some more. Not heavy loads exactly but if you thought about it he would be able to do all kinds of small things. He could sew fairly well and copy out articles from the Childcraft Books for his sister's perusal. Poems; for instance 'The Pirate Don Dirk Of Dowdee'. When they did not reply he took hold of his mother's sleeve.

“No,” she said. “Don’t.”

His father reached over and tore his hand away. “Stop it.”

“This is too hard,” said his mother. “This is too hard.” She sounded as if she were coughing and then she began to cry. Sam took hold of the edge of the cart.

“Would you rather leave him to the burial parties?” his father said.

“No, no.”

The house dog had leaped into the cart as they were leaving the house and for some reason nobody threw him out again. The house dog was a small black-and tan terrier with winking and anxious eyes. The dog whined when his father stepped from the cart, took the boy by his thin forearms and lifted him out. The boy gripped his father’s collar with starved hands.

“Don’t leave me here,” he said. “You are ignorant and mean. Think what you’re doing. You aren’t my father.”

“*You* think. Think about your sisters,” his father said. He pulled the wiry white hands away from his collar. “When people die of the wasting disease the prions jump out of the body with feelers and inhabit the next person. You have to be fed separate from everybody and can’t even lift a bucket, and we are starving and weak ourselves, so think of us, would you?”

They were not starving and weak but his father was a congenital liar and more than that he could no longer stand to look at the boy’s skeleton face in the corner every night, his caustic comments on their clothing and their speech and the simplest things they did every day of their lives. Yesterday the burial party had come through the town and started at the

upper end of the street, pulling the sick from their beds, and it was at that time his parents carried him secretly to the pony cart and here they were.

“Think of your sisters if not us, his father said. Think of me, what I go through. Think of me, think of somebody besides yourself.”

They left him with his back against a tree, wearing a stiff suit of clothes made of coarse wool, and hard shoes, and some food in a knapsack. His pants stopped in the middle of his shins and his stockings were striped around and around vertically in yellow and blue and red. They left him his cane with the T handle and some other little things, a small knife and a bowl and spoon, a pencil and paper, candles and matches, a crystal and a bunch of geranium blossoms as if he were already a dead ancestor or a thin, malicious divinity.

They turned their heads away from him and stepped into their cart. It tilted under their weight and the pony bent his neck and shifted. His father slapped the reins and he saw his mother crying again into her hands.

“Murderers!” he called after them. “You planned this since I was a baby!”

Of course they hadn’t but he was grasping at anything to yell at them, accuse them, make them feel shabby and low.

He sat with his bony legs doubled up against the cold. His eyes were sunken and his arms and legs like broomsticks and his lips cracked in four places. He told himself it was all his father’s doing and that his mother really loved him and she would never have done this on her own. He loved his parents despite themselves, despite himself even.

“Don’t leave me,” he shouted. “Please! Please!”

He called out their names for as long as he could keep them in sight, *Mother, Father*! It sounded as if he were calling them abusive names. As they merged with the autumn leaves he shouted one last time that he would eat nothing from now on, if only they would take him back with them. He would die quietly. He just wanted somebody with him when he died.

He fell back against the tree trunk and looked at his bony hands, opening and closing his spatulate fingers in the cold light. They would repent and come back for him. They would sit in front of the fire and see his chair in the corner, now empty, and suddenly ask themselves why they had done this terrible thing. They would learn the meaning of mercy and all the hard work it took to be merciful because it was not easy, was it? It did not seem to come naturally to people.

He drew up his knees. The lofty oaks ballooned their umbrellas of dry leaves up and down in an increasing wind and it drew on toward evening as he wept against his fists. Fall of the year, and freezing at night.

He had become used to the idea that he would die before long and had come to think it would be a kind of birthday party or some family event and he had held out in this hope even though he had never had a birthday party. Nobody knew when he was born. He knew he would die and he did not know when that would happen either, but he had hoped it would happen there at home, maybe by the fire. That perhaps the burial parties would have taken him for healthy. It could have been done with cosmetics. Certainly it could have been done.

Sam went over these thoughts even after his parents were several hours gone. All over the country, in woods and by the waysides were these same small chirping sounds of the abandoned sick, like the noises

made by the thousands of drowning people in distant seas of ice when the ship of the world went down. How few we are.

After a while he stopped crying because it exhausted what strength he had left and to do something interesting rather than suffer this flattened, mindless terror.

He took out the notebook and tore a page from it, gripped the pencil, and wrote down his name, Sam Garoute, and where he was from. The village of Arrow Rock. He wrote carefully; the tips of his fingers were pale blue and his cracked lips were blue as well. He would fasten the paper to himself like the soldiers did before the Last Battle. *Hic yacet*. Here lies. The wind took up the leaf litter around him and blew it into the air, increasing in strength every minute. He tore a slot in the paper and put it over one of his coat buttons and then sat silent to listen to the wind.

The ride to the edge of the LaMine forest and the crying and turmoil had made him very tired and he thought the best thing to do was to rest all through the night and in the morning he would feel stronger and then he would think what to do with himself. If it were possible to save himself in some way. To avoid the subhuman Nids and their random seeking appetites as well as other predators like dingoes, wolves, the great cats.

He had thought this often enough in the past year but now abandoned on his own it came back with greater urgency. Maybe God would reach down into this secular world, he would reach across the unknown barrier that lay between this world and the world where God lived and cure him. Then he would get his strength back. The wind roared on, increasing in strength, and plastered him with leaves. He reached out with his hands

and drew them in piles to himself to try to cover himself against the night and began to weep in a subdued way, making small noises.

A miracle would happen. He packed the leaves down tightly. He was not even strong enough to untie the strings around his roll of blanket.

He touched his fingers to his mouth and his hand came away bloody. The sunset light came in horizontal rays through the forest and lit up the boles of trees in spots, light fell on the crescent shapes of his hands curled shut. His nails were blue. At his feet a red-and-black beetle rocked from side to side as it walked straight on toward a minute forest of fungus, tiny trees of pale green knobs. Beyond hoping he might not die in the next few days, other than imagining some vague miracle, he couldn't imagine much of anything more. Beyond that he came to a dead end.

I must think what to do now. It was coming on to dark. He turned his cramped hands to the blanket roll and tugged the knots lose. He cleared himself of leaves in clumsy gestures, and spread the blankets as well as he could to one side of himself. He waited a few moments for his strength to come back and then shifted himself onto the heavy wool and pulled the other half over himself. That was better. Then he once again raked up leaves over the blanket. *Well*, he thought. *This is all right. I can get through the night.* His breath was visible in cold puffs. The wind rained more dry leaves onto the forest floor and as he was now reasonably warm and since he found that his crying fit had passed, he looked around himself and at the same time thought, ignorant, vicious people. *That who I was raised with. Ignorant as hogs.*

After some time he heard something moving to one side of him. As he strained to listen it became louder and then he could feel the blood

draining out of his face, his great round blue eyes opening like caverns. Dying or not, his body wanted to live; it said, *you must live, you must*.

The house dog rose up out of a nest of leaves. He had been there for a long time without making himself known. He came to Sam and stood there staring at him with a slow wag of his tail like a repeated question to someone who is hard of hearing.

"It's you," Sam said. He held out his thin hand and his heart slowed down. Groveling as usual. He reached out and put his hand on the dog's neck and he could feel him trembling with nerves and cold. Then he got a grip on himself. "If I stayed positive about things, who knows? Clichés are often comforting. Think happy happy thoughts, wallow in rainbows, think of names for your personal bluebird and so on."

There was a moon, nearly full, and its dim light drained through the clouds. The whole forest was alive with movement. Off to his left there was a glowing broad light. It was an open space. As he watched there appeared in that space several animals who had come to greet one another in the clearing. They were dingo dogs with heavy heads and their jaws were like broad levers. They smelled of one another and then ran in circles chasing after each other until they scented him and then they turned all together and were silent and their ears pointed toward him.

Sam knew they would kill him and eat him. He sat awake and watched with his round blue eyes now as wide open as ports on a ship. The terrier came and stood by Sam facing the dingoes.

Maybe they will eat the dog and leave me alone, thought Sam; and then, *What an unspeakably selfish thought*.

The dingoes had coarse, short hair and broad bodies and they began to make a low noise almost below the level of hearing. They came toward him moving from one spot of moonlight to another. The terrier beside Sam growled in a light tenor voice.

"Go on!" Sam shouted. He waved a stick. "Go away!"

They stopped and tilted their heads to look at him and he could see that their eyes were clear as marbles. Sam was at the level of their muzzles and he wished he could raise himself from the ground but he could not. He moved slowly to wrap his blanket around his throat. They began once more to move toward him and one with spattered dots across its muzzle was ahead of the others. They made soft and careful noises as they put down one paw after another on the leaf litter of the forest floor. The terrier shook and whined but he stayed by Sam.

Still they came on with their heads low. There were three of them. Sam's hand shook so that he could hardly hold the stick. His lips were drawn back into a wide grimace as if he would bite.

"No!" he shouted. "No! No!" He threw the stick at them and still they came on a pace at a time with their eyes fixed on him and one turned his broad head slightly to look at the terrier. Sam heard himself screaming "Help! Help me!" The word help was drawn out into a long scream that went echoing through the woods.

Then he sat staring at the dingoes with eyes as wide as plates and waited for them. They were not afraid of him. The one with the dotted muzzle came up to Sam and put his enormous jaws around Sam's forearm in a gentle, tasting way and then bit down.

"No!" Sam's voice was thin and cracking. The terrier made a low noise and shot forward and set his teeth into the dingo's ear. "No." The

end was before him. Very clear. He felt the dingo's teeth passing through the skin of his arm and reaching down to bone while the terrier flung himself from one side to the other in an attempt to rip the dingo's ear off. Oh no, oh no, said Sam, and blood poured through the dingo's teeth and down the side of its head. The terrier made small, high, whining sounds as he tore at the ear. The other two ran in little circles and whined.

Then a shadowy man walked into the far side of the clearing. He lifted something to his mouth and played a sweet musical phrase. The man had a thin moustache and the sort of jaunty hat that had not been seen in centuries. A spotted tie at his collar. Something lost in time. Sam could see through him to the trees beyond. The figure lifted the musical device and played the same light phrase again.

The dingo opened his mouth which was full of Sam's blood and turned on the terrier. The man faded away into the trees. The dingoes turned their heads from Sam to the disappearing man and then after a moment they trotted after him.

Sam found himself holding his forearm and the terrier sitting beside him.

Sam sat awake all night in the cold gripping his left forearm with his right hand. After a while his coat sleeve became stiff with dried blood. In the small hours of the morning his head fell forward on his chest and the terrier slept against his thigh. At first light of dawn he fell asleep.

He dreamed. In the dream he was being led or directed to some place where he would receive a great vision that was of vital importance to all mankind. He was flooded with a feeling of wonder. All his jeering and cynicism broke from him like an egg shell. Several people standing behind him whom he could not see said it was this way, a way which led

through a flooded area with bare and broken trees like bottomland woods that the Missouri River had drowned. The people behind him were adamant that a vision was waiting for him in that direction and then Sam felt the dream slipping away from him and so in this dream landscape he placed a papier-mâché moon, which glowed of its own light, in the sky at that place, and colored the lower left-hand edge of it a peach color so that he could find his way back here in the next dream and find again this splendid vision, which would be to the left.

He woke up in sunlight. The wind had droned on all night, tugging at him and worrying him, but he was alive still. His arm hurt very much but he would do as his parents had told him, their lie that was supposed to comfort him. It was untrue but he would do it anyway; go on until he came to the end of the forest and there would be light and a river and a pleasant land. And there, for some reason, he would get well.

He pulled himself to his feet and in the cold he took off his jacket and the vest under that and the shirt under that. He shook so with the cold that he could hardly stand. With the knife they had left to him he cut and tore up the tail of his shirt and wrapped it around his arm. Then he put everything on again and he beat the leaf litter from the blankets and slowly rolled them up. He was very thirsty and he looked into the knapsack; there was a water bottle. He uncorked the top and drank from it. The terrier stared at him with such intensity that Sam poured some into the small wooden bowl and watched as the dog drank it. Then he went on, leaning on the cane and the little dog danced along beside him.

Sam crept along all that day. He made perhaps two miles but he was not good at calculating distances and as he walked he puzzled over who the man could have been. He was clearly a spirit of some sort. Common in the woods, they always said. Would he run onto him again and why was he wandering around at night with dingo dogs? He walked slowly

along a path that had been well used at one time but now there were no footmarks on it.

Lift up your heart, he said to himself. *Stay optimistic, why suffer the crushing cable-tool of sorrow? Because I can't help it. It's bigger than me. Well maybe not.*

Thus arguing with himself he came to the edge of a great bluff and below him he could see the wide Missouri, so it was clear that this path was following alongside the river. He felt that he was going vaguely south-east, along with the current. His food lasted for the entire day because he did not feel like eating very much. The dog came at his heels.

He would go on into the back-lands where there were no people and powerful forces took form. He did not altogether believe the stories about the putative powerful forces but then, he never believed his own parents would spill him out of a cart and leave him to die either.

The only people left in the world were those who lived in towns along the Missouri and its tributaries or rivers in general as far as was known and all the backlands were empty. The backlands were inhuman and occupied by ghosts of former ages. The trees walked and bubbling springs steamed and spoke in tongues. There were birds with hands. Yorona sat at all the rapids and waited for souls.

Had he not last night seen these other beings with his own eyes? Maybe he had been hallucinating. Sam shuffled on and clutched his bitten arm.

The towns on the rivers lay distant from each other but the towns themselves were packed tight with narrow three-story dwellings that leaned on each other and people lived close to one another, close, close, so that they could feel there were more people in the world than there

really were. And with every carpenter that died the houses leaned more precariously forward and backwards and were shored up with big beams that obstructed the streets and so the houses weathered every winter unrepaired. With every stonemason and blacksmith that died of the wasting disease the street pavements cracked and door hinges broke and were not replaced. Some towns had walls and palisades but most did not because the enemy was within.

CHAPTER TWO

The dog's name was Jack but Sam was reluctant to call him by his name because something might happen to him, or he might run off after some creature and Sam would be alone again. But on the other hand, naming calls. To speak the dog's given name might put a hold on him.

"Jack," he said. "Ho Jack."

The terrier looked up at him with winking, anxious eyes and Sam leaned down to beat him in a friendly way on the ribs with his good arm and when he straightened up he was dizzy so he sat down again on the collapsing steps of the front porch of an old house where he had spent an absolutely terrible night. But this morning he felt better. It was because he hadn't done any hard work for several days. Just walking. He must find a cave or someplace he where he could press back into the dark and hide from the dingoes and rest, just lie still and rest. So he got to his feet by holding onto the shaky porch rail and started out again. The autumn wind poured across the Missouri River and twilled its surface in a sheening liquid weave far below.

The path made a tunnel or an aisle in the forest at the top of the bluffs. Even though there were no footmarks just at present, neither of Nids nor dingoes nor shoes, the path was not overgrown. So something or some creatures walked along it from time to time; people or the Nids must come through here once in a while. The rare demented hoboes that wandered the empty nation. Only once had Sam been more than ten miles from his home. He had lived in old books that were about another world. The one that had gone away and was full of cities.

He put one foot in front of the other and leaned on the cane and walked slowly. There were deer tracks in the path, and the clubbed, split prints of wild hogs. He saw ahead of him a massive white-oak had thrust out a limb over the trail, growing at right angles to the trunk in the manner of white oaks, and he said to the dog,

"I will make it as far as that limb." Jack trotted on ahead.

After a few minutes he surprised himself in arriving under the great limb and so he looked down the path and saw a small group of slender young hickories growing by themselves and dressed in brilliant lemon-yellow leaves that turned in the wind. They were conversing among themselves, they were vain and trivial, they were getting ready for a woodland dance and discussing what they would wear and then the wind would increase and they would have to go naked as sticks or not go at all. Sam said to himself, *I will go as far as those hickories*, and after a while he was standing by them and the lemon-colored leaves flew about his head, spangling the air. Shafts of sunlight came down through the overhead canopy as great holes were blown in it by the wind, ripping off leaves and throwing them in circles. Crows drifted overhead, looking for some trouble that they could announce, and in the meantime calling to one another in deep, isolated bell tones.

The path dipped down and he managed the going down well enough but then it rose again on the other side. The earth was wet at the bottom of the dip and ferns grew there and moss on the stones. In the earth and mud, little hand-shaped prints were everywhere, beside turned-over stones and at the bottom of two tiny pools. He had to get up the other side and it took him a while and he thought, *I must rest, I can't keep on walking right now.*

But he had to, he had to find someplace to hide away from the dingoes and the apparitions in dancing shoes. Jack's nose was deep in the smell of the raccoon prints but as he saw Sam creeping on up the far side he left them and came trotting after. The wind started up again and in it were a few grains of snow the consistency of sand.

"I never liked you much at home," said Sam. "But life has changed. About now I would like anything that didn't bite me. We are in the backlands, Jack, where the world is different. Requires nimbleness of mind, agility of the imagination." And he thought, *Maybe I could live in this forest, maybe I could make a deal with the demons.*

Sam kept on down the path, foot after foot. Little grains of snow began to salt his coat sleeves. "Especially when you had been laying by the fire and you came over to me and your back was warm."

Then the woods opened up to a clearing with a collapsed windmill or tower of some kind.

He sat down at the edge of the open hillside. It would be hard to get up again without anything to hold on to but he sat down anyway on the crisp autumn grass. The grains of snow pinged on his head. At the bottom of the collapsed wooden tower were impressions of the metal blades of a windmill fan. Down among the jumble of the timbers, fallen every which way were the shorings of an entranceway.

"There's a cellar down there," said Sam. "Under that tower or whatever it is. Now there is a place to lay up and get out of this wind. If there's nothing in there already."

Sam got up with the help of his T-headed cane. Halfway down the easy slope he fell and lay there for a moment. There were two kinds of failing inside him, one was an emptiness and the other was something

vital draining away. *Don't let go. Lift up your heart.* He looked up at the grainy atmosphere above him and the tall grass with its seed-heads bending in the wind. Then he rolled over to one side and then got up on his knees and hands and then to his feet.

"I guess I've got to live as long as I can live. But it isn't easy, or simple, and in fact it is becoming increasingly complicated."

The dog brushed his tail back and forth.

When he arrived at the entrance he was almost beyond his strength. It was square and shored up on its sides and top by heavy cedar beams. He turned and called the dog.

"Go in there and see if there's anything living in there," he said.

The dog stood staring in. The timbers made a crisscross overhead and around them and they were powdering white with the snow. The terrier stepped inside with his nose in the air and then turned back to Sam.

"Well, all right then."

Sam groped around in his pack and found a candle and a block of sulphur strikers and lit the candle. He shook out the match as he stared into the darkness with the candle in his hand and after a moment he stepped inside and saw that it was about fifteen feet square on a side, a good large space, and lined with shelves, and on all the shelves jars of fruit shone in the candle light. Other things piled in confusion on the floor and up against the walls; one of those heavy bricks of indestructible paper, burnt on the edges, a shoe.

"Oh my God!" Sam cried. And then, more quietly, "This was a meant thing! Somebody's old fruit cellar and robber's hole." He stepped

around a pile of metal rods and to the shelves. “Tomatoes, squash, new potatoes, pears. Oh wonderful. I could eat this if I could get the tops off.”

He put out his candle to save it when his eyes adjusted to the dim light that came through the open entranceway. He could see fairly well. He should find his way around now so that when the dark night came he would not need the candle. Outside the snow had increased, and the wind as well, and he thought about his parents leaving him out in that. They had left him to whatever weather came along, to this storm.

“I myself would not leave a grindstone out in weather like this,” said Sam. “But then I am not typical of my family.”

Right about now his mother and his brothers probably sat in front of the fireplace in their second-story home over the printers’ shop and were shelling popcorn off the cob and probably weeping and his father was striding about declaiming with that creepy way of lifting his nose in the air and giving a little shake to his jowls. *It was so hard on me it’s beyond your imagination*, he would shout. *He was just taking food out of our mouths. I couldn’t take it any more. Brought shame to the family, our family harboring a waster! Never lifted a hand, had the easy life, books and a tutor!*

“Why am I imagining things my father would say?” he asked himself. “Jack, Jack, let’s stay with the positive side of life, alright?”

The dog came to him as if Sam had called him and sat down and looked up into his face. “It’s all right,” said Sam. “So far anyway.”

He wandered around in the dim light and the junk. Everything was rusted. Broken scissors and a set of some kind of metal tags rusted to the fragility of fall leaves and a disc with numbers on it from one to twelve,

a metal handle belonging to something to which it was not attached, small figurines of President Kennedy in pottery and remnants of children's shoes and wool batts for quilts that never got made.

There was a plate of broken glass on the floor and he pieced it together. The letters were hard to make out because they were cut or molded into the thick glass and not only took on the color of the jumble and trash of the ground behind but were also prismatic at their beveled edges.

KEEP ON THE SUNNY SIDE

ALWAYS ON THE SUNNY SIDE

And below this happy message was a rayed sun with a rather carnivorous grin.

People had taken to etching things like that on glass because metal rusted and was rare, but the glass would last forever. And light would shine through and turn to prism rainbows on the edges to give hope, a feeling of being saturated with light and a kind of untouchable beauty as they held it in their grimy and scarred fingers.

Lot of good it did anybody.

Sam stood up again carefully because standing up too fast made him dizzy. "That's what this is. This is a lot of old junk the waster-removal committees used to use. Then they robbed the houses. I bet this is all a hundred years old; they made themselves a cavern hidden under an old windmill --- or no, it's not a windmill. It's a signaling device. There's no drawpipe. They robbed people of stuff and then --- they forgot where they hid it? Life is full of mysteries. Right Jack?"

The terrier stared at him for a few more seconds and then went off to nose around in the scattered junk as the light grew dimmer. Sam reached up for a blue glass jar of pears. “Oh good, pears. Now I could eat some pears. But the dog can’t. What could you eat?” Sam crept along down the shelves but the light was so faint he could not make out the contents of the jars but there was one which had a dark mass inside and so it seemed to be some kind of meat. Snow whirled at the entranceway.

He sat down with the jars between his legs and reached inside his pack and brought out the little knife. The jars were sealed with a heavy waxed cloth over the mouth that was tied around and around with string and then it had all been waxed again. He sat down and carefully cut at the string around the jar until it was cut through and then he peeled off the stiff waxed cloth. Inside there was a disc of wax covering the contents. He pried that out and sniffed. It all smelled all right. He speared up a piece of pear and ate it. “Well, it doesn’t matter, then, does it? he said. Maybe dying fast from botulism is just as good as wasting. Now, would you like some of this?”

He turned up the opened jar of dark stuff and it was indeed meat, dark chicken that slithered out onto the ground.

“There you go.”

The terrier ate it noisily. Sam watched him and speared up one section of pear after another. He could feel the sweetness enter his bloodstream like a drug and it flushed through his veins and he felt warmer.

Jack sat back and licked his lips. He had a little dot to one side of his nose that Sam had not really noticed before and he found it endearing. Then the terrier yawned in a trembling way.

Sam felt stronger after the pears so he drained the jar of the last of the juice. He carefully unwrapped the bloody strip of cloth from his bitten arm and looked at it. It looked okay but it hurt, deep inside the muscle. He had to use the same bloody cloth to wrap it again but the blood was dried so it didn't matter all that much. Then he unrolled his blankets. He pulled them around himself and lay back. The light was nearly gone now, only a square where the doorway was, slightly less dark than everything around it.

The dingoes would not come here, nor Nids, just the increasingly human raccoons. Maybe. What did it matter? They say, 'We have to cleanse ourselves of the sick it is our only chance'. Well they had been saying that forever. Now they were hauling away people who came down with a bad cold.

But he had more than a bad cold. *I can call them inept and stupid all I want but there is no denying what I have become. Weak and thin and diminishing by the day, another person with the wasting disease.* It came upon people so slowly that it was only after they were truly sick with it, emaciated, that the committee demanded they be abandoned to die, and by that time others had got it from them, also to begin the slow, years-long process of wasting. So it was a kind of losing proposition.

"I was always sickly," he said. "Jack? Are you listening? Let's see, you must be four years old. I wasn't feeling all that strong when you came as a puppy. I guess it has finally caught up with me. Accelerated or something. Yes, accelerated. It was hard to die without your life's work completed. Now they would throw away all his papers and notes or use them to start fires with. Criminals. Goths. That's what kind of family he came from. Unlettered barbarians."

Jack curled up in the curve of his body, on top of the blankets. Sam disentangled his good right hand and patted the dog on the ribs. The terrier's tail beat on the wool.

"You will inherit the earth," said Sam. "God will say hmm. What can I do with these canines? Will he make you hands? Will your brains blossom up and grow to the size of a cauliflower? Will he be happy with you as his new creation?" Then suddenly his throat closed up and his face flushed and Sam began to cry without sound. He was jealous, that's what it was. Jealousy. The terrier would live and he would not.

Sam slept like the old sleepers in the caves who lay deep in dreams while in the earth beyond, peoples and their civilizations came and went like cloud-shadows passing over an immense river and every passing cloud was darker than the one before and they came closer and closer together until it would soon be a storm without end and darkness everywhere. The wasting disease had changed and spread and had become far more genteel in its afflictions; people did not wobble and slobber but diminished, diminished, shrank to joyless pinpoints of themselves and then died. God had other things to do with his creation than people it all over with human beings, apparently. He had despaired of his creation and turned to something else more interesting.

He woke up in the night and heard the trilling noise that Nids make. He listened carefully. They walked upright and were blue-skinned and had sagittal crests as on Roman helmets with upstanding porcupine roaches, and teeth like piano keys, and tiny careful hooflike feet. It was said they escaped from the emergency room of a mad scientist and they bred and ate and killed on command if rewarded with body parts. The Offices of Better Health used them to kill wasters.

He drew in breath through his nostrils as if that would keep them from scenting him. The terrier for once made no sound or movement. For a long hour suspended in terror he and the dog breathed as if carefully choosing their air. The entire forest was soundless. And at last he fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Sam woke up in a gray light. Dawn, cold and snowy out there. He was surprised to find that he felt tolerably well. Sam had never slept out in the wilderness in his entire life and he was surprised that he had survived thus far without a fireplace and a bed and walls around him and a roof and a big tank of water with a dipper. The big twenty-gallon copper tank that sat on top of the cookstove and the water was always warm and you dipped in and poured it into a basin to wash your face in the mornings. Sheets and pillows and books to read and puzzle over, tales of vast ancient cities, unknown and forgotten leaders, vanished performers. Plots appeared occasionally but not often.

He lay in the blankets and held the terrier to his chest to stay warm. What should he do? Get up and go on or stay here and commit himself to this grave-like place?

Sam sat up and shifted the blanket up around his neck and shoulders. The terrier trotted to the entranceway and looked out with pointed ears, tilting his head one way and another. No Nids. A new day for him; adventures ahead, life in abundance. A living dog is better than a dead lion. Old saying.

Three more jars of fruit; pears, apples with tiny dots of cinnamon flakes, slimy peaches. He tried to eat them all, thinking, *Then I will be stronger. Then I could make myself a weapon of some kind and smash a dingo on the head.* The terrier bolted down another jar of chicken. Or whatever kind of meat it was. Sam dropped the glass jars on the floor among the trash and fragments of the broken glass sign. He held up a piece of the sign: ALWAYS. He looked at the soft gray sunlight beveling through it. He wondered if he should keep it and carry it with

him but he could not think of any use for it and he could cut himself on the broken glass edges.

He should go someplace warm, for the winter was coming. West and south. He would never get there but at least he could start, why not?

He stood straighter and rolled his shoulders, ignored the pain in his arm. He actually felt purposeful. Why not?

As he left he looked back; now he knew what it was. It was an old wireless station where in the past century or even more than a century ago they had tried to send out those powerful shocks into the atmosphere that somehow made intelligible signals to someone else somewhere else, radio waves they were called. It was a wireless station of some kind; or a relay, that's what it was, a relay mast.

They had relayed radio waves; talking about the great flood. And out of the waters of the flood arose a plague like a he-demon in a party dress all merry and free at last burning through the remains of the population and then came the wasting. At least this was the sequence of events Sam had been able to document, feeble as his efforts were. But it was his life's work, after all. To be passed onto posterity. Now all his papers were most likely being used to start the breakfast fire.

He started walking the in thin daylight, the clean air. It had stopped snowing for the time being. He kept on for an hour or so and then he sat down on a rock ledge to rest. On a tree was a *Beware Wasters* sign. It was old and faded. Sam sighed and rested his head on his cane.

Then he heard voices far down the path. He was suddenly aware that he must look positively sordid.

Two half-grown girls came walking toward him. They were dressed in women's baggy trousers. Their big pockets were full of hickory nuts.

Their hair was braided up tightly and they were arguing. Sam listened, happy to hear human voices. He shifted on his ledge of rock; they would see him in a moment. They were arguing with one another in tones of resentment, anger, outrage. He knew they were sisters and they would be arguing either about chores and who had to do them, or about some article of clothing that one had borrowed from the other and not returned. But this did not tell him why there were people out here in the forests or where they had come from or where they lived.

Then they came up and saw him. They stopped and all their arguments were forgotten. Sam saw that the oldest girl had light hair and eyes that looked out of deep sockets, dark brown eyes. All Sam's self-pity and miniature rages evaporated. So pretty. So healthy.

He called out, "What's the magic word?"

"How few we are," the taller one said automatically and then the other cried out,

"Who are you?" The smaller one gave a small scream and picked up a handful of rocks and threw them at Sam, and he dodged. "Get away!"

"My name is Sam Garoute." He smiled with his cracked lips. "Sam Garoute, perishing for the sight of a lovely girl. In a deserted forest." He gestured to the paper that was pinned to his coat front that said Sam Garoute, Hic Yacet.

"Who said you could come here?"

"I was left here. Who are you?"

Jack went up to them wagging his tail but the smaller one picked up a stick and hit the terrier across the back so hard she broke the stick. Jack cried out and went off yelping into the trees.

“Don’t hit him!” said Sam. “That was an uncivilized thing to do.”

“He’s been around you,” said the smaller girl. “He carries them prions.” She turned to the bigger girl and wrung her hands together. “Can we get the wasting disease from a dog, Sendra?”

“No, you can’t.” The older girl turned her head to one side to look at him out of the sides of her large, dark eyes as if the prions could seize upon her by following her line of sight. “Don’t breathe in my direction,” she said. Her small hands were dirty and hardened with work. Jack circled around and came silently out of a stand of buckbrush and slipped in between Sam’s knees. “You’re from those Garoutes in Arrow Rock.”

“Yes.” Sam nodded and put up his hand to his mouth. He knew how rejected, tainted and abandoned he must appear with his skeletal face and his bloody lips, dried blood on his right sleeve, leaves and dirt all over him from the night in the root cellar and circles of weariness under his eyes, so he looked down at the path. “I used to live in Arrow Rock before my present situation. I remember you I think. You’re a Furnival. You all have a boat.”

“Yes, we do, we stay on the river to keep away from the wasting and you know it. We all come on land here away from people, looking for hickory nuts where there’s nobody, to get away from the wasting disease and here you come, carrying it with you. Go on,” she said. “Go on.”

“I am trying to,” said Sam. He felt as if he were some kind of carrion, or offal, that such lovely young girls would scream at the sight of him. “It’s clear I am not pursuing you, isn’t it? I am doing my best.”

The older girl gestured toward the south. “There’s a road going south and they say on down the road is a holy place or some kind of singing place and they’ll give you something to eat. Way on, way far.”

“I’m not very hungry,” said Sam. “If the truth be known.” He patted Jack and then turned the point of the cane, making a hole in the ground. “Where are you tied up now?”

The bigger girl with the dark eyes shifted from foot to foot and the round nuts clattered in her big patch pockets. “I ain’t telling. We intend to stay away from people like you, dammit.”

“People like me,” he said. “I am a certified teller, passed for expert in Jefferson City, and a linear historyman. And so, how far is it to this singing holy place if in fact it exists. Which I doubt. How long a walk is it?” Sam unlimbered his cane and took a few steps toward them.

“He’s coming after us!” the smaller girl screamed. She turned and hit her big sister on the shoulder with her a fist. “What are you standing here talking to that waster for?”

“Shut up,” said the older girl and she shoved the smaller one. The smaller girl fell down and then scrambled to her feet with flying hair and dirt grains embedded in her hands. “You ain’t going to come and beg from us no matter what.”

“Never mind,” said Sam, and all his sarcasm and anger came back to him unbidden like a devil in a sack. “I know. I can imagine where you live. In some primitive stern-cabin with a fire in the middle of the deck and you all sleep together like hogs. So far have we fallen.”

The smaller girl stood back and cocked her arm and flung another rock at Sam, and it struck him on the temple.

“Hogs,” she said. “You’re dying and we ain’t. How’s that for hogs?”

“Oh,” he said, and lifted his hand to his head. He seemed to have been stricken with a shower of tiny stars which he could see swarming at

the edge of his vision. Then it began to hurt. “Don’t do that, he said. There’s no need for that.”

“We live on a very good houseboat,” said the older girl but the younger one cried out, “Hogs!” She began to throw more rocks. Sam held up both hands with the palms out to keep the rocks from hitting him in the face and then got up and tried to walk away. He went step by step and he could feel the blood hammering hard in his throat.

The older girl took hold of her little sisters’ arm and made her stop. They wrestled briefly for a moment; their hair came out of the braids and fell down around their shoulders. Sam went on step by step. Then they stood together and watched him go and the older girl suddenly called after him.

“My name is Sendra,” she said.

Sam half turned. “Sendra,” he said. “Child of my heart.”

“There is only us and our family on the houseboat,” she said. “None of us has got sick.”

“That’s good,” said Sam. “But I saw a man with a pennywhistle night before last, with a pack of dingoes.”

“He’s not real,” said the younger girl. “He’s a movie star.”

“But the dingoes are.”

“They’ll kill you,” said Sendra. “Be careful.”

Sam nodded. “I know it. Are there burial parties coming through? The Offices of Better Health people?”

The younger girl said, “Yes, she said. They will find you. I am sorry for you. I wish I hadn’t thrown that rock. I wish I hadn’t.”

“It’s all right. It’s all right.”

Sendra said, “They’ll give you a nice grave and a glass memorial thing.”

“No they don’t either,” said the smaller one. “They just say they do. They pocket the glass memorial money.”

“Shut up,” said Sendra, automatically. “Keep on where you’re keeping on there and pretty soon you’ll come to a river. It’s the LaMine. Just follow it south.”

“Thank you. Much appreciated.”

Sam lifted his hand to them and then he wavered on down the path. He heard the girl’s voices far in the distance on some other path and he thought that perhaps they were going to get their parents and the grown-ups would come and find him and bury him alive.

The sun rose to the south of east and slid across the sky behind low clouds, rarely bright enough to cast a shadow. It would set to the south of west and it would set earlier and earlier. Sam knew this from the World Book, 1956 edition. Very useful thing to know. There were diagrams showing this that covered a whole page, page 1123 in S, Seasons and also under Sun. Except he did not know when 1956 was and it bothered him and he supposed it would bother him until the day he died.

The path climbed up again to high bluffs, now smooth and snowy and unmarked with human prints but here and there the demure tracks of birds like signatures in tiny scripts printing out forlorn love letters. And those of deer in miniature heart shapes, all of them mourning the loss of summer. Leaves were being torn off by the bushel in the wind.

Sam thought of how he should have stayed in the root cellar. He trudged on down the trail. It was heading southeast, alongside what he supposed was the LaMine. There in the robber's cellar he could have diminished quietly and without fuss, eating bottled fruit, until he expired. Nobody to throw rocks at him or beat his dog. Watching out the entranceway into the crisscross shadows of the old wireless tower. Happy thoughts like gilded candy swarming about his miserable head.

"And then...urk," he said. He flipped over one hand. "Gak."

Jack looked up at him.

"But I never would have come upon those lovely girls. I don't care if they threw rocks. It helped my positive pole for a few, vagrant but gratifying moments."

Jack went off to one side with his nose in the snow, looking for mice.

"I wonder how many there are of other people like them, living outside the towns. You hear about them once in a while." Sam put one foot in front of another. "Sendra. Well she was very lovely. Very alive."

Jack bolted off into the thin underbrush with his nose still in the snow, plowing up a spray of white. He circled around trees and tilted tablets of limestone and snapped up a small wood mouse. He began to eat it. Sam found a fallen tree and sat down on it to rest. He should have brought some of the fruit with him but it was too heavy to carry in the jars and too slimy to carry in his pockets.

"Now consider the fairy tales, he said. Under G, in The World Book, by Jacob Grimm. In essence, they tell us that mankind was at the time of the fairy, or folk, tales, so to speak, at that time few in numbers and lived in either distant homesteads in a vast forest or in castles, likewise in vast forests. Princesses carried their own water into their own kitchens. The

only things that mattered were gold and bread. Therefore, before the time of cities, there was an earlier time when there were no more people than there are now. Except they did not have the wasting disease. They were only eaten by subhuman things called witches. Or changed into swans, horses, fish. Changed utterly."

Jack came and lay down beside him in the snow, licking his dog lips. Sam got up, slowly.

"I like talking to you," Sam said.

He came to another open place. Sam stood to watch as two bucks with crowned horns came out into the low grassy valley and began to threaten one another. It was rutting season. The one that was younger or at least smaller pranced sideways on his tiny hooves and then lost courage and turned and fled through the grass and its thin layer of snow. The young buck leaped high into the air at one point and Sam squinted against the glare and saw he had jumped over a pile of bones and rags.

"Ah," he said. "Ah ah ah. You see the skulls."

Jack stood and stared downhill and then tested the air with his nose.

"So this is where they bring them. And kill them. No wonder they take them away at night. No wonder they don't let anybody know. The mystery of death, the dark angels, Yorona crying for her dead children."

Jack trotted downhill a few yards and then turned to look back to see if Sam was coming.

Sam leaned on his cane and placed each foot carefully. We will have to go past them and it is a bad omen. Very bad. Sam felt a failing inside himself. Fear and loathing. It was where they had taken the sick people and killed them, the Nid males tearing them apart. Triage, it was called

and this was an old triage from many years ago, see the weathered surface of the bones. Sam talked to Jack and to himself as he walked carefully down the slope. The skulls were scattered through the grass.

They had holes in them where the burial party had killed them with clubs and hammers. Bits of rag here and there and he was astonished to see the remains of a Mariner's gray coat; the sleeve, the standing collar. Vultures had come after the Nids and the Health people had done their work and they had torn everything to pieces. Sam went on past, shaking. There were the skulls of children as well, with their beautiful perfect teeth, their small hand bones. He was afraid he might recognize some of them. The Whistler child, old Mr. And Mrs. Nawton, so many others. But maybe this triage happened a year ago, maybe from some other town.

" We must stop this," Sam said. "There are so few of us, maybe triage is not the way to solve things." He walked through a scattering of thigh bones and the delicate puzzles of spines lying in the grass and snow. "But who am I to say anything about it? I will soon be with the same as they are. *Hic yacet* indeed."

On the far side, where the forest began again, he sat down under a large white oak to rest. He knew it would be hard to get up again but he was tired to the point of falling. And by now the life of the river town called Arrow Rock would be going onto into noontime. Morning prayers at dawn, *there is in all things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness*, and so on. Then the smell of the fire downstairs in the printing shop, and his mother making up their own fire. He closed his eyes and he could see it all, almost feel it. Himself waking in his small bed in the garret overhead, the smell of tea. His brothers sitting dumbfounded with sleep on the edges of their beds.

Then his father awake and stamping around, making noises to draw attention to himself. Demands, criticism, orders. Then finally his father off to the town hall to administrate whatever there was to administrate with Sam's vast mother fussing over him until the door finally shut behind him and loud thumping as he went down the stairs and his jolly and hearty greetings to the printer. A man of two selves.

At the town hall Sam's father wrote orders for garbage removal and sick inspections; for storage and docking fee applications, wharf repair, distribution of rations and rat killing. He would write these things in the margins in the blank spaces around old departmental reports of disappeared government agencies with strange names but paper was paper. Like everyone for the past centuries people asked anxiously when they would find the cure, the great remedy, the marvelous cure that lay at the bottom of the sea. *What sea*? thought Sam. *Where*?

Sam would sit at his window and listen to the sound of the boats coming in on the Missouri shore and the bargemen unloading. Shipments came in from the storages below the ruins of Omaha and the vast caverns in the Kansas City bluffs. Sometimes the rivermen brought old books for him. Once in a while a traveling platoon of that religious group they called The Mariners in their long gray coats, who sang and tried to pray away the wasting. *O death do pass us by, leave your flag unfurled, hear us sing and hear us pray down here in the wasting world* and so on. They were wanderers and their coat skirts blew in the winds of chance and no one knew where their motherhouse lay.

Books were like children, always hungry to be read and in the reader's hands they were brought alive. Like people they wanted to live. Which one to look at today? He might find time to open B, and read about bullets and barns and bustards and Balzac. If he had not been so weak he could have lived elsewhere. At the glassmakers, perhaps.

“I would have lived at the glassmakers,” he said to Jack. “They are the most hopeful and the happiest of the people. Because their medium is not so much glass as it is light. Maps of the world, windows, plaques for awards and memorials.”

Sam had learned to write in a perfect hand in Bookman Old Style and Calibri and Arial Unicode MS in perfect imitation of the ancient texts but nobody wanted him to work for them anymore since he was suspected of the disease that was erasing them all without distinction of person.

He sat with his back to the white oak trunk for a while and for a moment he was hungry and then the feeling went away. Perhaps even now the burial parties were storming through town searching out the wasting. And if not Arrow Rock then other burial parties were seeking out the sick in Jeff City and Malta Bend and Slater, Glasgow, Rocheport; all the towns along the Missouri River. The Girl in the Heavens sailed through the night in her geostationary satellite, whispering of life everlasting.

But I will leave that alone for now, Sam thought. *No angry negative thoughts. They push down your immunity systems.* Instead he thought of the light snow falling on the crowded roofs of the towns, dropping into the canyons of the streets and the happy sessions with his mentor Mr. Findlay and the rest of the students in the memorizing and the performance classes, before he became too weak to go. How he longed to be back there. And well. And strong. Woodsmoke drifting with the snow, people greeting one another at corners. The smell of pizza dough baking in the baker’s shop. The pretty curtains at small windows and window boxes with shallots and alfalfa sprouts, bright green against the wood. The big horses drawing carts up from the riverfront with loads of food and goods from the storages, the bargemen and carters joking with

one another. Chance Larimer the carter often got books for him from the captains. They found all sorts of things in the storages; reading glasses, tobacco in vacuum packs, indecipherable maps and reams and reams of ancient reports that you could write on the back of. Paper was scarce.

Sam leaned back and looked up into the sky. Circling vultures. They were only playing in the air. They made great sweeps, they sailed sideways and sometimes moved their vast wings to take themselves into another updraft.

"Not yet," Sam said. "Not me yet." He got to his feet and bowed uphill to the bones. "Having a wonderful time," he said to the departed spirits. "Wish you were here."

All that day he walked a little and rested, walked and rested. He was pleased and surprised that his fingertips were no longer as blue as the day before and his bitten arm was hurting a little less. A high yipping: Jack had caught a wood rat. He trotted back and offered it to Sam but Sam pushed it back at him and so he sat down in the snow and began to tear it apart and eat it with loud cracking and ripping noises. Toward nightfall Sam and Jack slept in an old shelter that had been abandoned for many years. The wind stopped and the great evening star came out blue-white and enormous, making some interstellar and unheard music.

The next morning he was faint with hunger and decided that if Jack brought him another rat he would eat it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The wide Missouri carved its way through the heartland and over the decades it whipped its currents from one side of its miles-wide valley to the other. It came up against the bluffs on one side and left the other side as bottomlands. Then it changed again, alive and busy with the eternal job of destruction and edification. It undercut the bluffs of Arabia Bend until they collapsed into the current and then constructed a sni here and an island there, grinding away at the tall bluff on which sat the ruined capitol of Jefferson City. In the hard winters the current threw up towers of dirty ice and pieces the size of houses into meres and marshes alongside. At which time no barges could swim and people did without.

The Furnival family had floated down from Teteseau Bend to the place where the LaMine River poured into the Missouri to get away from the wasting disease, its mysterious paths of affliction from deer to sheep to cattle and then from one human being to another.

The Furnivals had lost every elder to the disease over the past ten years so all those left of the name of Furnival were father, mother and two daughters. They had some relatives in Arrow Rock and there Sendra had once seen the thin boy with the great blue eyes asking for books. So their lives were hard without the help of neighbors or relatives and depending on themselves alone.

They lived on a wide houseboat with a half-acre of decking and in the front stood a sturdy mast that could be used with a sail when the wind was right. It was painted in a variety of colors; a deep rose and yellow, the deck-house turquoise and the rails in brilliant green. A chimney-pipe stuck up out of the roof and puffed hot smoke and cinders into the hazy cold air. Charms hung from the mast. Getting clothes washed was a chore and in the winter drying them out was even worse for they hung

stiff as boards in the freezing air for days. Sendra's hands hurt her for an hour after she managed to break them off the lines. Ow ow ow. But today was a sunny day and her bright-colored underpants and brassiere danced on a clothesline from the roof to the stern.

The father was a stern man who was mostly silent and counted up their store of supplies for winter every week and paced back and forth between the steel barrels of dried fruit and the barrels of salted hams done up in burlap. They went ashore in the spring at some isolated place and there planted a garden and collected apples from deserted orchards and they had a Jersey cow on shore in its pen where she snorted at them over her calf. When they moved the Jersey cow had to be shoved on board and it took every member of the family to get her on. Then in his rest times her father sat down to whittle bowls.

The mother watched her family secretly for signs of the wasting and taught the girls to sing all fifteen verses of Jesse and the Men of James and other dirges of dying and injustice as they sat and made up clothes, sheets, curtains. There were five needles and Mother Furnival counted them every day.

So they lived apart from the towns, drifting along river shores where there were no people and where there had not been any people for a hundred years or more, just the great brown flowing Missouri and the uninhabited forests rolling over hills and ridges unpopulated. How few we are. They had a metal cutout of Flat Stanley the Wanderer hung over the gangway and he turned in the slight wind with his colors of rust and blued steel from the blacksmith's forge. He held out one hand as if he offered the magical remedy, or perhaps he was pointing to the way in which the cure could be discovered. Which was at the bottom of the sea. *What sea? Where?* thought Sendra. They had put up a sign. It said,

THE FURNIVAL FAMILY. BUGGER OF

They mean 'off', of course, thought Sam. He sat between two large oak trees at the edge of the forest and looked out into the clearing where the LaMine River ran into the Missouri. Stared at their rocking houseboat. They had out two anchors and the huge flat vessel turned like a balloon in the wind, tugging first at one anchor and then another. He saw the father on shore laying out rings of apple slices from the last, late apples on a broad shelf of limestone just above the river.

Sam wanted the apple rings. He was so hungry he hurt all over. It was not so easy to die, was it. He moved his feet in the snow. He must either struggle to live or get it over with. Hang or drown himself. The terrier Jack lay in a drift of leaves and snow with his ears cocked up, watching old man Furnival lay out apple rings from a basket as if he were dealing a hand of cards. Sam decided he would go down in the dark of night and steal as many as he could carry away.

Mankind was supposed to have marched on an upward tramping progression from cave men in fur diapers to King Arthur to sleek, clean city people with televisions but his teacher Findlay had said now all generations and all distinctions between humans had collapsed into one and he was right, because here was Sam, the big-eyed intellectual and teller of epics wallowing in melting snow in the woods hoping to steal food. There you are, aren't you. Cold and dirty and longing for both something to eat and his beloved World Books and the text of the Last Battle Story and his *Timeline of Human History* not completed but soon enough he would be longing only for something to eat and he would forget all else. Except Sendra and her charming lassitude, her bright hair.

It was growing dark. As he watched lights came on inside the houseboat windows; a comforting glow. So in the dusk he began to creep down the hillside and the little terrier came after him.

As he snatched up apple rings and jammed them in his pockets and several in his mouth a tiny dog no bigger than a cat shot out of a barrel that was lying on its side by the houseboat's front door. It sprang down the gangway and then vaulted up the hill barking in little shrieks while leaves and snow sprayed from its heartfelt forward charge. Jack barked back and Sam grabbed all the dried apples he could with two hands and pressed them down into his pockets and began to scrabble back uphill. His knapsack and the blankets wallowed around on his back.

The two dogs launched themselves at one another in an explosion of noise, barks, sharp little screams and father Furnival came out the front door with a handgun looking for a target. When he saw Sam he dropped the pistol and took up a walking staff, and then thundered down the gangway onto the shore and ran uphill to Sam.

Sam was gasping and scrambling, sometimes on all fours and sometimes on two feet. Furnival caught up with him and hit him a downward blow on his left ribs and it laid Sam out flat.

"God damn you, God damn you!" shouted Furnival.

The two girls and their mother ran out onto the dimlit deck and then stopped.

"Don't!" screamed Sendra. She clung to the railing. She shouted at her father over the stretch of water.

"Kill him!" said the younger sister. "He's a waster! We seen him in the woods!"

When Furnival hesitated Sam kept on scrambling upwards and between two trees growing out of broken limestone he sat and writhed backwards into a slot in the stone. He faced the man.

"Stop it," he said in a firm voice.

"Now I got to throw all those apples away!" shouted Furnival. "And burn them!"

"Leave him out some," called Sendra. Her voice was breaking. "Please just leave him out some."

"We seen him in the woods!" shouted the younger sister. "He's got it! He got away from a burial party!" She was dancing around in a kind of jig in a fearful circle.

"Shut up, Bren!" Sendra seized her younger sister around the neck with both hands and shook her. "I'll choke you!" Then Sendra shoved her sister backwards against the railing of the deck. Then turned again to look uphill where the two dogs walked in a stiff heavy pace with the fur of their spines on end and growling. They were not now fighting because the Furnival house dog was at the limit of his territory and Jack the terrier had no territory at all.

Sendra saw Sam's face in the dim light, the face of a wasted angel, bruised and alert, his blue eyes shadowed but regarding her father from the slot in the limestone blocks with a kind of calm dignity. A face marked with the rocks they had thrown at him, young and burning out to his end. This was so clear to Sendra that she began to cry and so put one hand to her face to smear away the tears and said, *Why? Why?*

"Why what?" shouted her sister.

"Shut up!"

Sendra ran down the gangway and onto the shore and through the grass to look up at him.

Her father shouted, “Get back on that boat!”

“No!”

Sam turned his eyes to her for a moment and smiled despite all his hurts. It was possible Sendra had fallen into a kind of instantaneous love with this person if only because he was the only young man she had seen in a year or because her heart always went out to hurt things or because she was born with a template or pattern in her mind of who she was to fall in love with, like the pattern blacksmiths used to make Flat Stanleys, and that someone would be a pale, dirty, princely wounded thing attended by mysteries.

She stared up at him as he shrank back into the limestones with one hand held out against her father’s heavy stick: he was as fragile as porcelain china and his expression careful and calculating but not yet given way to fear. A person she had found and lost at the same moment in the woods yesterday because he was bound to die, and soon. He was delicately made but of good courage, look at him pointing a finger at her big mad father and saying,

“Stop it, I tell you. Stop it.”

Her father lowered the heavy staff and stared at Sam for a moment, and the terrier quivering beneath his arm, and then turned away.

Sendra looked long into his face. “Now I’m sorry I’ve been mean, she said. We have lost so many people to the wasting. I’m sorry.”

And suddenly tears rolled down her face.

“It’s all right,” whispered Sam. “Apparently this is my fate.”

She could hardly speak for weeping. She lifted her dress hem and wiped her face. “Oh, it’s hard, hard,” she said. “Maybe you don’t have the wasting, maybe it’s something else.”

“One could only hope,” said Sam.

“You must know about it, don’t you? You sound as if you had had schooling.”

“I have. I don’t know any more about it than others.” He did not have very much energy for speaking, but he continued, “Yes, I have had schooling. I told you before, I am a certified teller.”As if this would impress her and he feared it would not. “Passed for expert in performance.”

“Do you know the story of Captain Kenaty and all of those people?”

“I do.”

Then, in a burst of inspiration, she said, “You know what? They say if you go far enough south, there’s no wasting and no Nids. We are going south one of these days, we are.”

“South to where?”

“The Mexican Sea.”

Sam smiled, creasing his taut, white face. “I will meet you there,” he said.

“Oh go on.”

“You want schooling, do you not?”

She wiped her face. “Someday. Maybe. Goodbye.”

“I will meet you there,” he said again.

It was a day of intermittent clouds and then it began to snow But his face was to the south and he told himself there was light and a pleasant land where he might get well.

He walked on unsteadily, southwards, along the path in the woods with only dried apples to sustain him. Jack ranged alongside running his jaw like a scoop through the drifts and ate snow. Sam in his thirst crammed snow into the mouth of his water-bottle and then held it inside his coat to melt it and then drank. He knew he was near the end of his life's strength when he saw the trees around him suddenly take on a kind of human knowing. They were alive, and they gestured to one another as he passed by: *See, see, even half dead he falls in love with Sendra, the girl that we know.*

He was dreaming perhaps, or had crossed into another world. Sendra lived back in the everyday world. She would meet some young man and be happy. This future young man would make her a fire grate and a new loom. Thinking this made him feel better.

After a mile or so a great white-tail buck stepped into the path ahead of him. The buck stood utterly still and looked at him and gave a whistling snort. He seemed to grow, to become gigantic. His eyes were enormous and as he paused the sun came out and in the sparkling snow he seemed to bear his crown of horns on his head as if he had just departed from some great celestial coronation. An emperor with a glorious white throat. The buck carried inside himself the rogue prions that were destroying mankind but in him, the tall rigid buck of the woods, they were not a disease but something that sparkled and glinted in his black eyes and gave him supernatural strength and a terrible danger.

Sam said, “How about you leave me alone? Overlook me. Turn your eyes elsewhere. Pass over me.”

The buck stamped one hoof and for a moment longer fixed Sam in his large black eyes. The sun shone from each point of his crown of horns and then he vaulted in a great arc and was gone.

It was a visitation, he knew this even when he understood he was hallucinating from hunger. This became even clearer when he saw Jack coming through the trees toward him and the terrier was as big as a horse, a giant dog, taller than Sam, with a writhing, thrashing panther in his mouth. Then after a few moments he was himself again. Small, happy, carrying a wood rat.

Sam took it up by the tail. “Let’s go a little farther,” he said. “A little farther.”

After the sun stood at noon, slightly south, he had come to the end of his strength even though he walked slowly. It was all he could do in one day. He had come upon a broad roadway with slabs of concrete. It was all overgrown. Hundred-year-old oaks stood among the eroded debris. The roadway seemed to have two roadbeds, one beside the other. It must be the old National Road. So he went along that for a while, winding among the great chunks of ancient paving and looked for someplace to lay up. He thought of his obituary. *Hic yacet, that is, here lies Samuel Garoute, scholar, died the year of the ice-jam at Rocheport, author of* Head Wobbles and Other Performative Gestures For Small Audiences.

He came to a cross-path that was beaten clear and looked as if it were frequently traveled. He sat down on a piece of broken concrete and listened. The woods whistled with the remnants of yesterday’s wind; boles of red oak and white oak were spotted with colored fungi, there was almost no underbrush and here and there great rotted limbs and even

entire trees lay where they had fallen. It was an old forest. It had its own life, its own felines and dingoes, its own weather.

The terrier sat bolt upright and cocked his head and stared down the path and so he turned and after a moment he heard a voice.

CHAPTER FIVE

A big, rawboned man was striking at the tree boles on each side of him with a staff and talking to himself as he walked. He was arguing with people who weren't present. He wore a tall straight-sided cap knitted all around with macramé designs, the kind that was called a tour, and a curling reddish beard. He yelled out in a long, floating cry, into the autumn forest, leaving a cloud of breath streaming behind him.

"What can I do with myself?" he shouted.

He danced up and down in place for a moment, flinging leaves around his big feet and their blocky laced boots. He carried a thick walking stick or club, and he struck the bole of a tree. He then turned to look over toward where Sam sat holding the terrier between his knees. The big man's lips opened and shut again.

"Well look here," he said.

"Good morning," said Sam. "Although I suppose it is now afternoon." He carried a hand to his mouth to cover his cracked and bleeding lips. His fingernails were convex as shells and clubbed at the tips. He knew how bad he looked. He figured that the bruises from thrown stones were coming out on his face and head.

"A waster," the big man said. "You're a waster."

"Yes," said Sam. "I can't help it." He paused. Are you going to throw any rocks?"

"Oh hell no."

"Well, good."

“You’re a hell of a sad sight.” The man shifted the pack on his back. There was a cooking pot tied to the top of it, upside down, and the man had a bright gold earring in one ear.

“I know it,” said Sam.

“When is it going to stop. You wonder.” He stared down at Sam and the terrier. “Are you just settin here and all?” He put his hands on his hips and his stiff canvas coat made a rasping noise. In one hand he still held the walking stick.

“Yes,” said Sam. “What are you doing?”

“Me? Walking along.” The big bony man continued to regard Sam and the terrier.

“Well, yes,” said Sam. “I see.” He pressed his lips together and thought about taking a drink from the water bottle but then he thought the man might rip it out of his hands, if he wanted it.

“Talking to myself.”

“I heard you,” said Sam.

The man stared at him a moment longer and then reached down to pluck the page of notebook paper from Sam’s pocket and held it sideways, regarding the letters. Then he turned the paper in his huge, leathery hands so that it was upside down.

“This is writing,” he said.

“It says my name,” said Sam. “And where I am from, for when I die, and people come along.”

“You wrote this?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You can read and write.”

“Yes.”

The big man smiled in surprise. Then he nodded. “Why don’t you say your age too?”

“I don’t know how old I am.”

“Well, you ain’t alone.” He bent over and returned the paper to Sam and then leaned on his stick and nodded again. “So read it all.”

“It says, ‘Here lies Sam Garoute, of Arrow Rock town, abandoned and died this winter of 350, hic yacet’.”

“What’s hic yacet mean?”

“Here lies.”

“You already said here lies.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well well. You can read and write and speak another kind of talking.”

“Language,” said Sam.

The wind started up more sharply even as they were speaking as if somewhere an atmospheric dam had given way and a river of cold air roared and tumbled out onto the earth. It drove birds ahead of it, hard and sharp, and now big snowflakes sieved through the tree limbs.

“Can you figure as well?”

Sam nodded. His head seemed very heavy to him and nodding it was like managing a great weight of dough. His pale hair stood up in the wind.

“I have some skill at arithmetic. I am not all that adept at it.”

“Well well.” The man took a wadded handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose. The cold was making Sam’s nose run also and he wiped it on his sleeve. “You said the year three-fifty. Three fifty from when?”

“Probably the demise of America of Late Antiquity but it’s nothing but a wild guess.”

“Yeah, okay. Well, I got some big decisions to make.” The man turned in a circle and looked all around himself.

“What about?” said Sam. “Considering the state of your outfit they can’t be all that big.”

“What am I going to do.”

Sam nodded. Suddenly he felt very tired. He had walked an entire mile without stopping to rest.

The man said, “I wanted to have a tavern. A house by the side of the road and be a friend to man. But it seems it would take some effort.”

Sam shifted on the stone. It was cold and getting colder. He bent his head down and leaned his forehead on his cane for a moment. The terrier looked from the big man back to Sam and then at the man again.

Sam said, “I am afraid that being a friend to man is going to be more complicated than you imagine.”

“Can’t be all that hard.”

“But there aren’t any. Men, I mean. Or human beings. Or not enough. Well, be that as it may. How far is it to the end of this woods?” Sam looked up at the man. “My mother and father said there would be a kind

of pleasant valley or something on the other side of it. I was making for there."

"What for?"

"They told me it might be a place where I could get well."

"Nobody gets well from the wasting, son. Nobody."

The man shook his head and looked at Sam; his coarse wool coat and pants. Sam's pants legs flopping short around the middle of his shins and from there down to his blocky shoes, his stockings. The stripes were horizontal, around and around his legs. His great, loving, fat, patient mother had knitted them in strong colors and horizontal stripes because she said it would make his legs look more substantial, and not so thin.

"My clothes wouldn't fit you," said Sam.

"I wouldn't take your clothes," said the man. "When do you reckon you'll die? As a practical matter."

"I don't know," said Sam and bent his head and found himself crying again. The intense fear had come back to him, in full force, it was painful. He thought he had got past it. It was an animal fear of death, a powerful surge of panic and he suffered from it and wanted it to go away and here it was again. He wiped his face clear of tears and coughed.

"Maybe you got something else." The man leaned on his staff. "Not everybody that's shrinking up thin has got the wasting disease. Maybe you have worms, or TB. Maybe you have radiation."

"I don't think so." Sam patted the terrier again and again on his ribs. "Where do you come from?"

"I come from the beautiful old capitol alongside the scenic Missouri River, a thriving town full of human hogs who live in the mud and drink

whiskey until they're drunk as Cooter Brown. I'm going where the weather suits my clothes." He waggled his head and the earring glittered and he smiled around himself at the world, with a painful brightness. He threw out one large bony hand in a southerly direction toward the edge of the world and the end of America and its geographical audacity, its old borders. "I'm going where the birds go in the wintertime so they don't lose their colors. I'll build a house by the side of the road where two trails cross and I'll hold shows in my tavern. People will throw money at me."

"There aren't hardly any people anymore," said Sam. "To throw money or anything else. However, there are a few people around throwing rocks."

The man squinted at Sam's face in the low and snowy light. "You been run off from somewhere because you got the wasting," he said. "They threw rocks at you. You got a shiner."

"Well," said Sam. "Something like that."

"You're lucky they didn't bury you alive."

"I suppose."

"Now, anymore, they kill them with clubs. Guns are hard to come by since they make them from scratch in these days, lest you find some old storage with one packed in Cosmoline. Even then. Gunpowder and ammo remain a problem to us all. They're making them in Jeff City and they charge you enough you could buy the St. Louis arch."

Sam nodded. After a moment he said, "Making them from scratch sounds like it would be hard. Hard work."

The big man looked at him for a moment with pity and leaned over and patted him on the head. The tall tour hat tipped forward.

“Yes, calculating the rifling,” he said. “You don’t have to talk simple to me, youngster. My brain’s still good.”

“Well, yes. Of course.” Sam shifted his feet. He had indeed been talking to the big man as if he were an idiot. “Well! Jeff City. I was there once, and I saw the statues there of Thomas Jefferson and the Spirit of the Rivers.”

The man leaned both hands on the head of the walking stick. “Yes. Thomas Jefferson is upside down at the moment but the Spirit of the Missouri River woman with the big kahoongas is still on her rock.”

“And they say there are more than six thousand people.”

“There are. Minus one. Me. And a good big tavern there. Stuff from the big storage places, barges coming downriver. A man has to keep himself and I am tired of pulling freight off scows, and a tavern would be how I would keep myself.”

“Don’t own a tavern,” said Sam. He wiped at his wet face where the snowflakes fell on his cheeks and his old censorious self came back to him like an unwelcome guest. “You’d have to offer entertainment. There would be fighting. And you have to figure out profit and loss and everything.”

The big bony man tapped his coarse fingers on his knee and thought about it.

“Can you write and cipher?” Sam asked the big man.

“Not good at it. I can read numbers though.”

“Then you should think some more.”

“I know it.” He clapped his hands together several times in frustration. “I fight too much. I don’t know what to do with my mind.”

Sam patted the black-and-tan terrier for a moment in silence. “Where are you going, then?”

“Away from here. On south.” He shifted around and then he chose a place to sit down beside the root-pit of a fallen great white oak. The ancient oak had grown old and weak, and the wind had blown it down, and when it fell it turned up its big root-mat and lifted out a pit. The big man sat on the edge of the shallow pit and placed his feet at the bottom, and lifted off the dark-red tour hat and ran his finger around the band and then replaced it.

“Yes, all the ancient texts refer to people going to the south when the world ends.”

“What ancient texts?” The man squinted at him. “What the hell is a text?”

“Writing. Books. Novels, apparently. Rare ones. Most of them not in good condition. Titles such as *Alas Babylon* and *Lucifer’s Hammer* and The Road. And so on.”

“Does it say about all that in the Last Battle stories?”

“No, no, that is a folk narrative about warriors. An epic, actually. These are writings about people trying to survive the downfall. The downfall being caused by a meteor, wars, bombs and so on.”

“Is this the downfall? I thought it was just normal life.”

“Well, I guess it’s normal. It didn’t used to be normal.”

“Well.”

Sam said, “With the Nids and all.”

“Well it’s normal to me.”

“Yes. I would imagine so. Now here you are on the run. A bandit, an outlaw, an adventurous person. You’ve done something untoward.”

“That’s a new one, Untoward.”

“Bad. Perhaps even criminal.”

“Yes.” The man stretched both legs out before him. “I beat up a fellow back in Jeff. I hit him over the head with a skillet. The bottom of the skillet come out. So the skillet was around his neck with the handle hanging down in front. So I grabbed hold of the handle and threw him out the door. But then he was bleeding like a firehose.” The man wiped his hand over his mouth. “And then somebody calls for the Bailey of the Shore and then everybody that lives down on the riverbank where the docks are come running up and I run.”

Sam nodded. It was interesting to hear this; he had never been farther from Arrow Rock than to Jefferson City and back. Stories of wild times and far places seemed to take him out of his bitter and censorious self. His diminishing, wasting self and his death that waited somewhere ahead in time like a road agent.

The man shifted his feet in the leaves at the bottom of the pit. “Only three towns in the world with more than a thousand people and I get thrown out of one. How few we are.”

“Not in the world,” said Sam. “I bet there are big towns or something to the east. Far to the east.”

The man nodded and wiped snow from his beard. “Maybe west, too. And south. I wonder if there is a map of the world somewhere?”

Sam stroked the dog. “Yes, but not very good ones. Why did you beat him up?”

“I don’t know.” The man turned this over several times in his mind like something he had found on the trail and could not make sense of. “I guess I was drunk.”

“And now you got to hurry and go on, because they’ll be coming after you,” said Sam. “With clubs and knives. Various instruments of torture and abuse.”

“Nah.” The man nodded and then fished around in his pockets and came up with a small amount of edibles wrapped in a oiled cloth. “They ain’t very fast.” He opened it and ate from a chunk of bread. “Man, that’s good.” He looked up. “Do you want some?”

“I better not touch your food,” said Sam. He looked at the hard crust in Shettle’s hand. “That’s real bread.”

The big man chewed and swallowed. “Ain’t it though. Flour ground there at Jeff in the watermill and I stole twenty pounds of it. Well, you don’t seem all that dead.”

Sam gripped the T-handle on his staff. “I couldn’t work anymore. And then the burial parties came around.” He smiled at the man. “They worked hard to make my clothes and give me all they had. They were full of affection and warmth when they dumped me at the edge of the woods.”

“Poor little fellow,” said the man. “Poor fellow.”

Sam shrugged and slowly reached for his knapsack. It seemed to weigh more than it had an hour ago. The big man continued to eat. He bit into a shriveled apple and then leaned to one side and spat out a seed.

“Where’d you live in Arrow Rock?”

“On Pump Street, over a printer’s place. Where they printed comic books and pictures and ABC books. But he’s run out of ink lately. When it froze two weeks ago the barges couldn’t get in.”

“That’s Robinson’s Bend, there at Arrow Rock. They make salt on the left bank. I have crewed on barges coming in there many a time. Loading salt.” He wiped snowflakes from his sleeve. “It’s coming down, ain’t it.”

The wind increased and lines of snow snarled among the trees. They had to raise their voices to talk to one another. The man put the last of the bread between his big teeth.

“Where south?” Sam asked. “That is, where in the south are you going?”

“Mmmm.” The man swallowed. “Down to the Mexican Sea, where there is oysters. Maybe out west. I wanted to see the statues of them beheaded Presidents. They got their heads up in stone on a mountain where they was beheaded and the heads turned to stone. But I changed my mind because there’s no river that comes from there as far as I have heard.”

Sam nodded. “I think I know what you’re talking about. It’s under R, Rushmore.”

“Yes. Now I am thinking there has to be someplace where there are a lot of people. Where they don’t get sick. We’re all a-dying but maybe it is just us here.”

“That could be.”

“And I am going to strike out and find them and see things and set up my wayside tavern.”

“And be a friend to man,” said Sam. He was envious. This great clumsy man had a future in front of him, he had life. It was like having a crop in a barn, old silver dimes in a buried chest. His mind would still look out at the world for a while, shrunk though his mind might be. He would go wandering and see things.

“My name is Shettle.” The man got up. He shifted from one broad foot to the other.

“Well, take yourself off, Shettle, and cheer up.” Sam once again lifted his hand to his face. He could feel the bruises and swelling, it was a tight feeling. It was growing dark.

“But see here, if you can read and write do you know all the Last Battle stories?”

“Yes.”

“The whole thing? And all the side characters?”

“I do. I’m a trained teller, probably my only socially useful accomplishment.”

“They say it takes three days to tell the whole thing.”

“That’s correct.”

“Well damn! That’s what I need for my tavern. Entertainment. Now give me some of the Last Battle.” Shettle clapped his hands together.

“No. I just want to sit here.”

“Come on. If you’re dying that’s what you want to be saying when you croak. Courage in the face of death and all like that.”

“No.”

“A little part. That good part when Kenaty the Commander leaves home. When he loads his gear and starts off to the Last Battle.”

“No.” Sam looked up. “Would you take that dog with you when you go?”

“When he says goodbye to his chilren.”

“Leave me alone.”

“It will make you feel better.”

“I feel fine,” said Sam. “Just fine.”

“No you don’t, you feel like shit.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Just a verse or two.” Shettle clasped his huge hands with an expectant look on his face.

“Oh God, God, very well.”

Sam closed his eyes. After a moment he began with the part where Kenaty the Commander said goodbye to his wife and children as they stood at the gate, and the blessing he gave each child according to its nature. Sam’s voice was failing, and raspy. He came to the youngest child who was the Commander’s only girl, who was named Sendra, and Kenaty’s wish that she should seek throughout the world for a man who was an orphan and a father to his sisters, and marry no other.

Goodbye Sendra, child of my heart, in this lone world I leave you, and as I draw apart to death or victory on some distant plain I pray with every step that you should marry for love alone and not for earthly gain.

Shettle sat down, gripped by even this short part of the famous story. He looked carefully at Sam and his blue fingertips, his pale ivory face, and made a decision. He gestured upward.

"You ain't got the wasting disease. You got congenital heart disease. Look at them fingertips. Blue, convex. Like shells. Blue lips. That's heart. You got heart problems."

Sam was silent, open-mouthed for several decisive seconds as his life, what was left of it, which had been on a forward high speed trajectory toward extinction suddenly began to slow. "Really?" Sam looked at his fingertips. "Really?"

"You was weak from the day you was born, wasn't you?"

"I don't know," said Sam. "I was adopted. But well yes."

"I knew a man on the barges had congenital heart disease. You could hear it. Sit beside him after he done some work and it would go wash wash wash. You could goddamn *hear* it."

"Did they take him for the wasting?"

"No. Get up."

"Wait a minute."

"You ain't got time to study on it right now, said Shettle. I am making a plan. I plan quick."

"I see," said Sam. "Just a minute." He looked at his hands again. "Just a minute."

"Listen," said Shettle. He lifted a finger in the air and stared. There was a clicking sound. And then, *Ssss essa essa essa*.

"That's them," he said. "They use them clickers."

“Who?”

“A burial party. When they don’t want to yell at each other. Here.”

Shettle reached for Sam’s upper arm, pulled him to his feet and boosted him onto the lower limb of a great white-oak tree. He came after, and then snatched Sam up again like a rag doll and shoved him higher and so higher. Shettle seemed to be well acquainted with the anatomy of trees, or at least of white oaks, and he dragged Sam after him until the limbs were small and cranky and bending under their weight. They poised themselves among the stiff twigs and the few leaves still around them in rusty colors.

“They will see our tracks,” said Sam.

“They ain’t interested in tracks,” said Shettle.

CHAPTER SIX

Through the screen of dry leaves in their own tree and in others they finally saw them coming. The Nids with their short straight black fur and their narrow feet like some kind of thin shoes in blue leather. A string of people stumbling along with them, the Nids striking them with clubs. Snow layering itself along their heads, the sick and dying. A human walked alongside making clicking noises with a wooden cricket.

"Oh God," said Sam. He put a hand over his eyes.

But he could not avoid the sound of clubs striking heads, the cries. Weakened shouts and people falling, and the Bailey of the Shore crying here, here, get this one. He called out to the Better Health people in their leather jerkins. A small child hid under his dead mother's shawl and then started up, screaming, holding up both hands as if begging to be picked up. A tall Nid brought his club down on the boy's head.

"He wasn't sick," whispered Sam. He pressed his face into his blankets.

"Be quiet," said Shettle.

Sam began to cry. He could not stop himself. It was like throwing up, it started and he could not stop. He put one hand over his face and still tears rained down over his knuckles. Shettle's hand hardened around his upper arm.

"Hush, hush."

The tall hominids strode around among the dead, snow dusting over their pale faces and bloody clothing. Once in a while striking again with their clubs. Then they began to drag the people off into the woods with

limp arms and legs flailing. The sick people had fallen silent one by one. They collapsed with all their prions inside them. The humans of the burial party marched among the bodies with their heads bent down, watching intently for any sign of life. There was none.

Sam and Shettle looked down at the tops of their heads far below.

Sam whispered, “This is so awful.”

“Yah,” whispered Shettle.

Then the hominids lost interest. They began to wander away. They trilled to one another, and pranced in the snow as if dancing, and shook their clubs at one another in clumsy fun. The bodies were now some heaped and indistinguishable carnage that seemed already a year old. Shettle squinted downwards. The Nids had trampled all their tracks. After a while they followed the Baileys of the Shore away down the forest path, singing *Eedemup! Eedemup*!

Shettle waited a while longer and then began to climb down. He reached up at one point and lifted Sam from one limb to another. Small sticks and leaves and other debris came down with them. Sam dropped from the last limb and fell to his hands and knees and then recovered as Shettle dropped lightly behind him.

“Here’s your fice dog,” said Shettle. Sam beat the snow from his knees and looked up to see Jack the terrier bounding out of a stand of short cedar and come leaping around him.

“Well, dear fellow,” said Sam. “Here you are.” He was still sobbing and Jack whined at the noise, looking up into Sam’s face. He beat the terrier lightly on the ribs. He thought of the child stretching out its arms to its murderer. Tears streamed down in a flat flood over his cheeks and

he wiped his mouth and nose and stroked Jack for his own comfort. Good dear fellow.

The terrier suddenly whirled around and faced the screening cedar where the bodies lay. He stood stiffly with his ears cocked up and barked.

"What?" said Shettle. "What is it?"

"Haaaaaaaaa," said the Nid.

The hominid stepped gracefully through some low cedar limbs. It pressed them aside with its immensely long arms and its thin-tipped fingers. A being covered in short black hair and then Sam saw that it was a male. "Ooooooo Chettle." His green eyes under a thick ridge were full of a predatory intelligence, an intelligence that concentrated upon only a very few important things. He was six feet tall, or more. His nose was only a button with its nostrils facing outwards over his thin lips. The pale blue skin of his face was burnt by the sun and freckled. "Oho oho Chettle."

The big man threw off his tour hat. He said, "You know my name, don't you, you son-of-a-bitch." He flipped his hickory walking-stick butt-end up. He was taller than the Nid by several inches.

The Nid walked toward them and lifted his club to one shoulder. His legs were spattered with blood and snow to his knees. He darted at Shettle sideways, guarding his torso, and swung the club from his right.

Shettle sprang forward and closed with the Nid instantly, without hesitation. The Nid's club fell without effect because Shettle had darted into the arc of its swing. Shettle smashed the butt of his walking-stick up into the Nid's chin. When its head snapped back, Shettle fell back on his right leg and brought the hickory walking-stick down onto the flat bridge

of the Nid's nose with all his strength, again and again with lightning speed and the Nid staggered back. Then Shettle laid his hickory alongside the narrow face in a broadside swing with a shocking, meaty crunch.

Blood poured out of the Nid's broken face and the tall thing stood with its thin lips open for a moment. His fingers loosened. He stared dumbly at Shettle. Then Shettle brought his heavy club down on the Nid's skull but the club bounced off the Nid's sagittal crest without doing any damage and still the hominid stood as if confused. Blood leaked down onto the short straight black hair of its head and shoulders.

Sam realized that the terrier was barking without cease, and darting at the Nid. Shettle took two steps and stood behind the creature and landed a powerful blow with his hickory at the back of the Nid's neck. At last the Nid went down. All six feet of him collapsed full length with a pouf of powdery snow and he lay still.

Shettle stood for a few moments, watching him. He pursed his lips and blew his breath out carefully several times. Then he took hold of one of the Nid's thin wrists and dragged the body through the trees and left it with the other, human, dead.

"We got to get away from here," said Shettle. "Now."

"You go on," said Sam. He sank down into the snow.

"They'll be back looking for that asshole Nid," said Shettle. "They'd as soon take you as me."

I don't think I have many days left, Shettle…"

"I told you, you ain't dying. We got about two hours before they figure that Nid is missing. That particular Bailey's name is Pelly Chick,

and old Pelly will have me arrested for murder in the fourth degree or homicide in a no-homicide zone or something. Since I just killed his favorite Nid." Shettle shifted his pack around on his back and then slapped Sam on the arm. "I need you to keep the books and figure and tell the stories when I get my tavern." Shettle jammed the walking stick in his belt under the heavy canvas coat. "Up and at 'em."

"No," said Sam. "I think I'll just lay here." He pinched the front of the blanket more tightly together at his throat. The killing had disordered his mind, somehow. He felt destroyed. He said, "Maybe their souls are still in the air."

Shettle crossed his arms and said, "Leave that to the Mariners. That's their job. You're going to keep everything right and squared away in my tavern." His breath smelled of whatever he had been drinking yesterday when he broke a skillet over a man's head. And now he had killed a Nid in front of Sam's eyes. A violent man. It was nearly dark and with the snow, the clouds and behind that, the moon, the forest had a strange light about it. The wind cracked at them like a whip.

The man reached down and took Sam by his two thin forearms and sat him up. Leaves flew from Sam's blankets and were spun off by the wind. Sam lurched to the left and right trying to stay on his feet.

"We'll get a good piece away from here, because now I am a wanted man. And we'll get you cured of the failing heart disease and you'll keep the accounts and everything at my tavern when I get one. And you'll recite *The Last Battle* once a month and otherwise read out loud to people in the evenings." Shettle slapped his hands together again. "And I'll give over fighting and drinking and turn peaceable. I got this figured out."

Shettle walked down the path a little way, on the new, clean snow, leaving great holes of tracks, and then back again. He raised his hand.

“And then I’ll meet up with Linda, somebody named Linda or Heather or somebody named Wanda, and we’ll eat good every day and have music at night and so on. With you keeping the books, you see, and doing the entertainment. We got to get out of here and make some miles.” He reached down and took up Sam’s knapsack. “You’re on their most wanted list now too.”

“Why?”

“Because you left that paper here somewhere. Sam Garoute, hic yacet. And I ain’t stopping to look for it.”

Then he took Sam by the collar Sam like a very child, and hoisted him to his feet and strode off down the snowed-in path; it stood out clearly in the dark of the woods, like a misty bridge to somewhere unknown, Jack the terrier following happily, ready to go anywhere.

Great forests had come back to cover the earth again when the people had gone. The world was going on without them. At last the few remaining people had come to see what a brute world it was, immense hardwoods following their own imperatives, drinking the air at leisure, contending with one another for the sun, harboring deep secrets. Massive oaks grew up out of the expansive heaps that had once been cities. They were cities that people still knew the names of, and stories about those cities when they flooded or caught fire or who were the last people to live in them, the names of the last mayors but these names were often confused with the names of presidents or celebrities.

Various scholarly ascetics living in urban rubble and others who still inhabited the known world came to think that some other life form had arrived in triumph to take over this world because humans had failed. Because they had fallen into a compulsive cynicism and other linguistic poisons, unable to sing or whistle or dance, but people always said that when there was a disaster. They always said these things when epidemics and wars struck. Our time is gone, they said. All we had and all we are is gone. Taken over by something that does not mourn and is not unhappy and is blind to all our vanities. Birds with hands at the joints of their wings maybe.

The people of the towns along the river and even further back in the backlands lived in a world darkened with indignant and furious spirits whose names were Prion, The Black Dog, Yorona crying for her dead children, the Lesser Thrain, Beulah Queen of the Night and Gentleman Jack. The Mariners spoke and sang about all these specters as well as doing the rites, because that was their task, they said. Somebody has to do it. We're not hogs, you know.

The meager population made its way through the tenantless miles of giant trees, on their way to isolated farms or shrunken villages with their important burdens. The most precious burdens were not bales or bags or packs but instead those things you carry in the mind such as songs or legends and genealogies and light-fingered music of stringed and wind instruments.

Shettle wanted to sing something but with the wind and two packs and the fragile young man in tow he had enough to contend with and so instead he asked Sam to sing something.

Sam said in a gasping voice that he could not. He clutched at Shettle's sleeve with fingers like white wire structures, and then Shettle

asked that if Sam's parents were so kind and good then why the hell did they not at least leave him with a hat? And Sam said there were only three hats between them all and what was the point. The snow came down and covered their footprints.

So Shettle put his cooking pot over Sam's wet, snowy head like a helmet and on they went.

They walked and walked and sometime in the night they crossed the Great National Road Eye Seventy. As Shettle stepped through the snow across this broad path, Sam said that if they went on down it either to left or right surely they might find a stayover place or a house with people where they could get out of the weather, but Shettle said No way! He strode on across the National Road and onto the path on the other side. He had assaulted a man with a skillet and killed a Nid, and so the Baileys of the Missouri Shore were all alooking for him, asearching and asniffing and he would do no more time in a jail but have his tavern by the side of the road yet, and be a man with friends.

After a while Shettle shouted over the noise of the wind that they were coming to the cliffs over the LaMine River and that it would be hard going to get down them.

"Why, we are on the LaMine River," said Sam. The cooking pot banged him in the face. His voice was faint.

"Hell yes," said Shettle. "It circles around all over the place. We are afollowing it. That's why. You're like everybody, don't know what's five mile from you. Get away from that river and you're in fairyland."

A smoky gray dawn shone around them in the world. It made it seem that the heavy oaks and the light, slim maples were manifesting themselves in the world after having disappeared in the night. Shettle

said they were coming to Chimney Rock and that at that place they had to get a little way down the cliffs and then they would find a cave. Then after that they would follow along the LaMine River to the power-line path, then to Old Highway Five, called Five-and-Dime, and then on south, many months journey to the south, to a place where he could have his tavern and Sam would keep the books and tell the story of the Last Battle and he, Shettle, would at last give over fighting and drinking.

The long aisles of the monotonous forest came to an end at the limestone cliffs of the LaMine. They looked out over a valley with a few cleared fields which could easily be seen because the fields were white with snow. There were no houses. No, not one, and it was a good little valley with a salt lick, said Shettle. He put his pack down on the ground. That salt lick water boiled out to good white salt, and those fields would grow turnips big as your head.

He did not notice that Sam had fallen over in a heap of stick-like arms and legs with blood running from his cracked lips and the only substantial thing about him was his coarse wool clothes that stood rigid around him. The kettle drooped over his eyes and Jack sat shivering in his lap.

“Here I was born,” said Shettle. He held out one hand toward the valley. “And there is Low Gap, where we robbed a bee tree and brought all the honey home in a wheelbarrow and even then it was spilling over. That was when I was young and good and even then there were more people than there are now, how few we are. There’s a cave down here,” he said. “We’ll recruit there.”

Chimney Rock was a tower of stone that stood out and away from the limestone cliffs by two feet. A long tall column cut away from the cliff in ages past. Below it was a cave hidden by ancient cedars that had

grown as thick around as a barrel. When Sam and Shettle rattled their way down the steep slope alongside Chimney Rock Sam felt he was not long for this living world. Stones avalanched alongside them.

When they ducked into the cave he fell down and pulled his blanket around him and closed his eyes. Shettle dumped his pack and went out again for kindling and in a short time he had a great fire burning. Smoke poured up to the ceiling of the cave and then flowed out, it purled up into the cedar tree outside the entrance like spectral knitting. It held a level about the height of Shettle's hairy head, and then it rolled like a river back into the depths of the cave where it found some distant outlet.

Sam lay wrapped in the blankets in the heat of the fire, among the limestones and the leaves. The face of the stones lit up and glowed. He looked up at the roof of smoke and briefly thought about how he had been abandoned in a wood, had seen Sendra, and a mystical stag and now for some reason he had been carried through the very forest itself, its dense heart, by this rowdy and inexhaustible ruffian.

And what did he want in return? Stories, the epic tales and lost structures in the mind that saw an epic, heard an epic, knew it for what it was. But, in addition perhaps he was a man to become enraged easily and Sam would be without recourse, maybe he was one of those who needed a humble adoring minion and what would Sam do then when this so-far undiscovered pathology appeared?

He had to ascertain in some way if this epic-memorization was something Shettle really valued, if it were a skill that meant he was important and rare and valuable so that he wouldn't be maltreated if the mood took the big man.

He stared out of the cave mouth toward the valley with its armature of bare tree tops and the glint of river far below flowing past the cave

and Chimney Rock. It flowed northward toward the Missouri River. Indolent buzzards seemed to be held up by a gray atmosphere that leaked pinheads of sleet. It was warm by the fire.

For the first time in a long while Sam felt hungry and when Shettle returned up the steep slope, rattling rocks and crushing small bushes Sam regarded him now with suspicion even as he hoped deeply and humbly that the man had food. He had wished to be indifferent to both food and life, like all the great hardwoods that went on with their lives on only air and rain and the sun, like the vultures sailing overhead nourished by chance death, the very clouds with their short and vaporous lives. But here he was, after several alarming events, alive, and he had rejoined those who had to struggle every day of their lives for food and warmth. Their bodies saying, *You must live, you must.*

Shettle held a round of cheese in his hands and laughed to himself as he cut pieces from it into yellow coins and dropped them on pieces of broken bread from his knapsack. He placed these on flat stones next to the fire to toast them. It was full day now. Sam saw the limp torpedo shapes of fish laying on another stone, their bellies had the silky, scaleless texture of catfish.

“Where did you get this?” said Sam. He carefully wiped dried blood from his lips and then made the grace-before-meals gesture of tapping all his fingertips against one another (couldn’t hurt). Then he ate. His fingers were burnt with the stringy hot cheese.

“Old cabin down there,” said Shettle. “Old man, he’s dead now. Now, he got the cheese someplace else.”

“How did you know it was there?”

“I wandered this country many a year.” Shettle turned up Sam’s water bottle. “Now I got to refill that.” Sam nodded and gave Jack a large piece of bread and cheese and as he was handing it to the terrier his head nodded and then he fell asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It seemed he slept for months. Sometimes Jack lay curled at his feet and then from time to time the terrier was outlined at the cave's mouth, sitting with his ears cocked, gazing out over the valley. At other times he trotted into the cave at Shettle's heels when Shettle in his steep decorated tour hat came in carrying something, or the little dog lay at the fireside staring at what cooked in the pot, something that steamed and sent out appetizing smells, and flaky pieces of roasted fish with the skin all blackened and inside the pearly bones and white feathery flesh.

Sam slept like the old sleepers in caves who lay deep in dreams while in the earth beyond, people and their civilizations came and went like cloud-shadows passing over a immense river and every passing cloud was darker than the one before and they came closer and closer together until it would soon be a storm without end and darkness everywhere. God had other things to do with his creation than to people it all over with human beings. There were greater things than us to come.

'Well you done slept for three days," said Shettle. "You ate your way through a good many provisions." Shettle had a forked stick in his hand and was whittling at it. Sunlight streamed into the cave mouth.

Sam lifted both hands before his face and looked carefully at his own wrists and his flat, wide fingertips with their shell-like nails. They were a healthy pink.

"I did?"

"Ate like a starved hog." Shettle began to cut green cedar twigs with his knife and constructed a sort of rack on the fork of the stick. He laid it to face the fire and then on top of the rack he laid a split and headless catfish.

“Where did you get food for three days?”

Sam turned and saw that there was a pile of rising dough in a wooden tray next to the fire, and two kegs sitting tumbled against one another. Two dipper gourds already cut and shaped lay to one side like little fat people.

“Went fishing. And then there’s some storages.” Shettle licked his hands and wiped them on his pants. “All through here. People stored up and then died. I know this valley.”

Sam said, “You were born here.”

“Wasn’t I though.”

Shettle leaned back against a shelf of stone with his legs sticking out in front of him and crossed one ankle over another. His big boots steamed in the heat of the fire.

“Then maybe I *don’t* have the wasting,” Sam said. He had not been asked to carry wood in to the fire, heavy oak splits from downstairs to upstairs, nor churn nor shift the weaver’s beam. O that great beam how heavy it was. He had not been asked to broom soot from the rafters or chop dried mud from boots. He felt a cautious hope. “Maybe it is heart, like you said. Something I could live with, so to speak. Maybe I’ll live.”

“Okay,” said Shettle.

“It’s hard to kind of change thinking.”

“Ain’t it, though.”

“I am just amazed. I have to think about it. I mean, get used to thinking about it.”

“Think on,” said Shettle. “I seen cases like yours.” He tipped a bowl toward himself and peered into it. “I am a-proofing of my yeast here. We’re good.”

“You have? Seen cases like mine?”

“Yepper. Didn’t your parents take you to be seen by a medico?”

“No. The physician there in Arrow Rock died five, six years ago. His apprentice left to be a hobo.”

Shettle nodded. “I seen a case like yours, when people were told they had the wasting but it was something else. Down at Rocheport. A woman had TB. Got a medico to say so, lived ‘til she was eighty with it. They tried to take her two, three times. The third time was the last.”

“Who was it?”

“Amanda Hightower.”

“Ah yes, the big Hightower family.”

“Five boys. Big sons of bitches. They sent a burial party after her and said she had the wasting. From Jeff City. The boys beat up those big Jeff City Nids, went after them with anchor chains when they come to take her. Third time was the last.”

“Yes, said Sam. A singer came with a ballad about it. Something like forty verses. Rhyme scheme a-b-a-b and every one of them with end-stopped lines.”

“There,” said Shettle. “People love entertainment and good stories.”

“He couldn’t sing,” said Sam, his old censorious habit coming back despite himself, despite his good resolutions. “And his rhyming was terrible.” Sam gazed out at the LaMine River valley, framed in the cave

mouth. “He kept putting verbs at the end. It was like ’rain’, and ’down the river they came’.”

“So what the hell,” said Shettle. “People came to listen, didn’t they?”

“Yes they did. They did indeed.”

“So. But in the tavern, you’ll only do ‘The Last Battle’. None of the amateur local stuff.” He poured flour and oil into the bowl and began to glop it all together.

Sam leaned back in his nest of blankets and stoked the terrier, who had fallen asleep in his lap. *Heart disease*, he thought, happily. *Only heart disease*. He turned his hands palm upwards to the light of day. He sat immersed in the bright light of his own future, now stretching out in front of him in a straight broad line instead of a diminishing arrow that would strike its bitter head up against some mortal full stop.

Shettle said, “Din’t your parents figure out it was heart?” Shettle paused as Sam thought about this. “No, they din’t. They wanted to get rid of you.”

Sam dropped his head and looked at his hands again. “Yes, I suppose they did.” And once again he resolved to remain positive and if not exactly gay and gladsome then at least to leave off the cheap sneers.

“I told you,” said Shettle. “Now, how do you like this cooking?” Shettle’s curling brown beard was flecked with bits of fish and his gold earring glittered.

“Very good!” said Sam. He pulled up his stockings with their bold stripes “Excellent cooking, I’m amazed.”

“Well, that’s just it,” said Shettle. “I’m a-pratissing on you. You see I am a-fixing my menu for the tavern.” He reached for the bowl and its

wad of dough and sat it between his legs. He jammed both dirty hands into a bag of flour beside him and then threw himself into kneading the dough with manic energy. Wham! Wham! He punished the dough with fierce squeezes and chokes. “You got to think of your dough as your worst enemy.”

The terrier woke up and stared at Shettle.

“I see,” said Sam.

Shettle hit the dough with his square fists, one two three. Then he gently pinched out a dead leaf from the dough and shook it from his fingers. “Now this here sourdough goes best with sheep cheese of which I have a good wheel covered in beeswax. Your regular brown flour, now that makes a bread that goes with your cow cheese. The yellow one they call cheddar.”

“Yes,” said Sam. “I have enjoyed cheddar, especially shaved over toast.” His great blue eyes fixed on the expanding dough. Now that he was going to continue being alive he was hungry and even the winter air in a cave tasted good to him.

“And then they’s shit on a shingle, the riverman’s delight. Now when we get the tavern we’ll have a regular oven and a bake-stone for the flatbread. We want that flatbread *crisp*.”

He balanced a flat stone on two others. He dropped more wood onto the fire until it roared and threw galloping, fugitive shadows on the fractured limestone walls. He blew on the flat slab and then wiped it off with his tattered sleeve. He smacked the dough down it. “Ain’t that going to bake, though?” He cleaned his hands on his trousers. “Now liquor is the money man in a tavern, they say, but you got to be known far and wide for your food. We’ll get some hogs killed and smoked.

Cheeses are good. But you get that smell of bread baking, why, they'll wade through snowstorms."

Shettle sat down again on the chair of stone he had made for himself and turned his attention full on Sam.

"Now we move on to our main attraction in this tavern. Which reminds me, we got to have a name for it. Now our main attraction is the storytelling and the reading out loud from whatever comes to hand or is in remembrance. Plus the booze."

"Reading out loud?"

"Yes."

"But I am not an accomplished performer. Or a good reader."

"You passed your exams and all that for the Last Battle, din't you?"

"I did." Sam said this in a rather dubious voice since he had, in fact, done well but because of his health he had barely made it through the examination and performance reviews in Jefferson City to obtain his certificate. He had missed only two lines in three days. But then, nobody asked him to perform since he was suspected of harboring the dreaded prions. "I haven't had much practice, to tell you the truth."

"It don't matter. They's so few people that can read people will listen to anything. Didn't you say people came and sat and listened to the ballad of the Baileys? And him a poor singer. So you do the Last Battle or just some readings from old books. Or tell about anything you remember reading. Scientific facts and all."

"Oh no, said Sam. People won't come for that." He wrapped his hands around his knees. "Nobody would come."

“Yes they will, too. Now, I got me a scholar here and I ain’t going to let go, so resign yourself to your fate.”

Sam pressed his lips together. Who wanted to hear about Balzac and beetles and Byelorussia and brass?

Shettle pulled at his beard and bent over to observe the rising of the dough and turned it so that another side was to the heat of the fire. Then he slapped his hands together.

“I figure we could have hoardings readings for a fee. Whatever people would bring, whatever they got and been hoarding, you would stand up and read it out loud. People would pay for that and pay to hear it. They buy themselves some hot cheese and bread and a shot of hard liquor besides.” He smiled out of his reddish, curling beard. “‘Georgia Alley. Born in July of the big flood or whatever, died whenever, wife of whoever he was’, and they’ll eat that toasted food and drink whiskey and look around at the crowd; ‘That’s my great-great grandma, read out loud’. Sometimes they bring old telephone books with names in them to be read. I seen it done.”

Sam thought about this. Himself a small person prematurely aged with ill health and too much work, staring at a fire in a cave and the fire like humanity itself slowly burning down to a heap of gemlike glowing coals. He thought of himself standing up on a chair in front of a crowd of imaginary people in an imaginary tavern in some unknown location and Jack trying to stay near his feet and the imaginary people stepping on Jack’s tail.

But on the other hand.

“Well,” he said. “Maybe I could.”

“There you go. Think of all that stuff you got memorized.”

Sam thought about it some more and then looked up. “And I could, perhaps, recite the old poetry to them.” He felt suddenly hopeful. “‘The grave’s a fine and private place, but none, I think, do there embrace‘.”

“No no no! None of that old coof stuff!” cried Shettle. “That shit’s nothing but crying and whining and depressing crapola.” He waved both hands as if he were dispersing a crowd of noxious insects that would drill his weathered skin. “The whole damn world is sick with heavy thinking.” Shettle slapped his hands together. “Heavy thinking. They are sick and they are sad. They are full of tears and fears all day every day. We are on a mission, Sam Garoute.” Shettle threw out one hand. “A hero mission just the same as if we strapped on our swords. We will have people laughing at that little tough kid that carried the commander’s gear, and cheering when he slits Yorona’s throat.” Shettle pursed his lips. “The evil bitch. Now we got to come to an agreement on this.”

“All right,” said Sam. Shettle was correct. Abandoned homes and weedy swiddens, turnip fields growing on by themselves alone and the planters of them dead of the chronic, the massive forests taking over everything and the early winters. People wanted to cheer up and laugh, they wanted to know that things were possible and that heroes and their comic little servants were still a part of humanity and lived in the imagination. That they walked the earth and were accompanied by stirring music. That human life would flow on in a clean stream of pure water full from bank to bank, and bear them along in some way. At the helm of the boat a heroic man and sitting in the prow a beautiful woman to point the way, saying, *Just ahead will be light and meadows and a pleasant land.* And he too wanted to feel these things and not only to feel them but believe them.

Sam said, “And what besides the genealogies that people find in their family Bibles?”

“Oh there will be plenty to keep you busy, just stuff people find in the storages. Telephone books and old tax forms and advertisements.” Shettle began to excavate a hole in the middle of the great heap of coals. “I am telling you right now, people will, God save me, listen to a bill of lading with all those old device-like technical names. They look at the pictures for years and they’re just tortured to know what the writing says. I know this from a misspent life in riverside taverns from Fort Leavenworth to St. Louis.”

“Now where is this tavern going to be?”

“Down near the Mexican Sea.”

“I thought you wanted to go see the statues of the beheaded Presidents. Out west.”

“Nah. I changed my mind. The Mexican Sea is the place to go.”

“Why there?”

“Because it’s warm, and there will be sailors and that might be the place where the cure is, I’m thinking.”

“The cure for the wasting?”

“Yah. Don’t they say it is at the bottom of the sea?”

Sam shook his head. “Yes, but what sea? And where in the sea? Oceans cover three-fourths of the earth’s surface.”

“Well, ain’t you read anything about it? And you a scholar. It has to be in a book somewhere.”

Sam lifted one hand. “Shettle, there were a great many books in the world.”

“Well, start reading through them. If we come on some.”

“Yes but…” The impossibility of conveying to Shettle the great variety of books both in this world and in the old one seemed too much for him at the moment.

“There’s always truth in an old tale somewhere,” said Shettle. “You just got to figure it out.”

Sam gave up. He nodded. “Yes, I will keep my eye out for a book that might tell us which sea. And where in which sea.”

“You‘ll figure it out, said Shettle. You can read and write, can‘t you?”

After the bread dough had gone through its two rises and was baked on a hot stone, after they had eaten and straightened out their blankets, they settled down for the night in the fading comfort of the fire. They seemed to have decided to go on in the morning since Sam was now much stronger. On to the south, where all the old books said people were to go when civilizations collapsed.

“Although you don’t know how far you can trust them,” Sam said. “We have no context.”

“No,” said Shettle. He yawned. “We don’t have a map either.” He turned to look out the cave mouth. They could see the dim valley between the limbs of the old cedar at the entrance. A moon was up but a mist of light snow was falling. He reached for a twisted cedar root to throw on the fire.

“No, don’t,” said Shettle. He grabbed Sam’s hand and sat up. “Get back.”

“Well, the fire’s dying down.”

“Get back. Out of the light.”

Sam stared at Shettle for a moment and then shoved himself backwards until he was far from the small crown of flames that flickered on the ash heap.

“What?”

Shettle went on his hands and knees into the shadow and then to the cave mouth.

“Them things,” he said.

There was just enough sunset light left to see far down in the valley the man in the fedora hat and with him a woman in a long flying skirt.

Sam squinted his eyes and bent forward. He could see trees through them. “I’ve seen him before,” he whispered. “I never saw her.”

The man and the woman walked along in a jaunty way over a field of weeds. They turned to one another and danced in the snow. Dingo dogs moved around them with happy dog smiles.

“Where’d you see them?”

“When I first got left in the woods. It was just the man. He called the dingoes to him. Who are they?”

“Don’t know,” said Shettle. “They are looking up here.”

The man and the woman paused in their dancing and let go of one another and turned to look up at the cave mouth. They stood very still.