Somewhere a Band is Playing, Ray Bradbury

Somewhere a Band is Playing

Contents

CHAPTER 33

“Somewhere”

Some stories—be they short stories, novellas, or novels—you may realize, are written as a result of a single, immediate, clear impulse. Others ricochet off various events over a lifetime and come together much later to make a whole.

When I was six years old my father, who had an urge to travel, took our family by train to Tucson, Arizona, for a year, where we lived in a burgeoning environment; for me, it was exhilarating. The town was very small and it was still growing. There’s nothing more exciting than to be part of the evolution of a place. I felt a sense of freedom there and I made many wonderful friends.

A year later, we moved back to Waukegan, Illinois, where I had been born and spent the first years of my life. But we returned to Tucson when I was twelve, and this time I experienced an even greater sense of exhilaration because we lived out on the edge of town and I walked to school every day, through the desert, past all the fantastic varieties of cacti, encountering lizards, spiders and, on occasion, snakes, on my way to seventh grade; that was the year I began to write.

Then, much later, when I lived in Ireland for almost a year, writing the screenplay of Moby Dick for John Huston, I encountered the works of Stephen Leacock, the Canadian humorist. Among them was a charming little book titled Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town.

I was so taken with the book that I tried to get MGM to make a motion picture of it. I typed up a few preliminary pages to show the studio how I envisioned the book as a film. When MGM’s interest failed, I was left with the beginning of a screenplay that had the feeling of a small town.

But at the same time I couldn’t help but remember the Tucson I had known and loved when I was six and when I was twelve, and began to

write my own screenplay and short story about a town somewhere in the desert.

During those same years I kept encountering Katharine Hepburn, either in person or on the screen, and I was terribly attracted by the fact that she remained so youthful in appearance through the years.

Sometime in 1956, when she was in her late forties, she made the film Summertime. This caused me somehow to put her at the center of a story for which I had no title yet, but Somewhere a Band Is Playing was obviously evolving.

Some thirty years ago I saw a film called The Wind and the Lion, starring Sean Connery and with a fabulous score by Jerry Goldsmith. I was so taken with the score that I sat down, played it, and wrote a long poem based on the enchanting music.

This became another element of Somewhere a Band Is Playing as I progressed through the beginnings of a story which I had not yet fully comprehended, but it seemed as if finally all the elements were coming together: the year I spent in Tucson, age six, the year I spent there when I was twelve, the various encounters with Katharine Hepburn, including her magical appearance in Summertime, and my long poem based on the score of The Wind and the Lion. All of these ran together and inspired me to begin a long prologue to the novella that ultimately followed.

Today, looking back, I realize how fortunate I am to have collected such elements, to have held them ready, and then put them together to make this final product, Somewhere a Band Is Playing. I have been fortunate to have many “helpers” along the way.

One of those, in the case of this story, is my dear friend Anne Hardin, who has offered me strong encouragement over the past few years to see this novella published. For that she shares in the dedication of this work.

Of course, I had hoped to finish the novella, over the years, in order to have it ready in time for Katharine Hepburn, no matter how old she got, to play the lead in a theater or film adaptation. Katie waited patiently, but the years passed, she became tired, and finally left this world. I cannot help but feel she deserves the dedication I have placed on this story.

Somewhere a Band is Playing

for Anne Hardin and Katharine Hepburn, with love

CHAPTER 1

There was a desert prairie filled with wind and sun and sagebrush and a silence that grew sweetly up in wildflowers. There was a rail track laid across this silence and now the rail track shuddered.

Soon a dark train charged out of the east with fire and steam and thundered through the station. On its way it slowed at a platform littered with confetti, the tatters of ancient tickets punched by transient conductors.

The locomotive slowed just enough for one piece of luggage to catapult out, and a young man in a summer dishrag suit to leap after and land running as the train, with a roar, charged on as if the station did not exist, nor the luggage, nor its owner who now stopped his jolting run to stare around as the dust settled around him and, in the distance, the dim outlines of small houses were revealed.

“Damn,” he whispered. “There is something here, after all.”
More dust blew away, revealing more roofs, spires, and trees.
“Why?” he whispered. “Why did I come here?”
He answered himself even more quietly, “Because.”

CHAPTER 2

Because.
In his half-sleep last night he had felt something writing on the insides of his eyelids.
Without opening his eyes he read the words as they scrolled:

Somewhere a band is playing,
Playing the strangest tunes,
Of sunflower seeds and sailors
Who tide with the strangest moons.
Somewhere a drummer simmers
And trembles with times forlorn,
Remembering days of summer
In futures yet unborn.
“Hold on,” he heard himself say.

He opened his eyes and the writing stopped.
He half-raised his head from the pillow and then, thinking better of it, lay back down.
With his eyes closed the writing began again on the inside of his lids.

Futures so far they are ancient
And filled with Egyptian dust,
That smell of the tomb and the lilac,
And seed that is spent from lust,
And peach that is hung on a tree branch
Far out in the sky from one’s reach,
There mummies as lovely as lobsters
Remember old futures and teach.

For a moment he felt his eyes tremble and shut tight, as if to change the lines or make them fade.
Then, as he watched in the darkness, they formed again in the inner twilight of his head, and the words were these:

And children sit by on the stone floor
And draw out their lives in the sands,
Remembering deaths that won’t happen

In futures unseen in far lands.
Somewhere a band is playing
Where the moon never sets in the sky
And nobody sleeps in the summer
And nobody puts down to die;
And Time then just goes on forever
And hearts then continue to beat
To the sound of the old moon-drum drumming
And the glide of Eternity's feet;

"Too much," he heard himself whisper. "Too much. I can't. Is this the way poems happen? And where does it come from? Is it done?" he wondered.
And not sure, he put his head back down and closed his eyes and there were these words:

Somewhere the old people wander
And linger themselves into noon
And sleep in the wheat fields yonder
To rise as fresh children with moon.
Somewhere the children, old, maunder
And know what it is to be dead
And turn in their weeping to ponder
Oblivious filed 'neath their bed.
And sit at the long dining table
Where Life makes a banquet of flesh,
Where dis-able makes itself able
And spoiled puts on new masks of fresh.
Somewhere a band is playing
Oh listen, oh listen, that tune!
If you learn it you'll dance on forever
In June…
And yet June…
And more…June…
And Death will be dumb and not clever
And Death will lie silent forever
In June and June and more June.

The darkness now was complete. The twilight was quiet.
He opened his eyes fully and lay staring at the ceiling in disbelief. He turned in the bed and picked up a picture postcard lying on the nightstand, and stared at the image.
At last he said, half aloud, “Am I happy?”
And responded to himself, “I am not happy.”
Very slowly he got out of bed, dressed, went downstairs, walked to the train station, bought a ticket and took the first train heading west.

CHAPTER 3

Because.
Well, now, he thought, as he peered down the tracks. This place isn’t on the map. But when the train slowed, I jumped, because…
He turned and saw a wind-battered sign over the flimsy station that seemed about to sink under tides of sand: SUMMERTON, ARIZONA.
“Yes, sir,” said a voice.

The traveler dropped his gaze to find a man of some middle years with fair hair and clear eyes seated on the porch of the ramshackle station, leaning back in shadow. An assortment of hats hung above him, which read: TICKET SELLER, BAGGAGE MASTER, SWITCHMAN, NIGHT WATCHMAN, TAXI. Upon his head was a cap with the word STATIONMASTER stitched on its bill in bright red thread.
“What’ll it be,” the middle-aged man said, looking at the stranger steadily. “A ticket on the next train? Or a taxi two blocks over to the Egyptian View Arms?”

“God, I don’t know.” The younger man wiped his brow and blinked in all directions. “I just got here. Jumped off. Don’t know why.”

“Don’t argue with impulse,” said the stationmaster. “With luck you miss the frying pan and hit a nice cool lake on a hot day. So, what’ll it be?”

The older man waited.

“Taxi, two blocks, to the Egyptian View Arms,” said the young man, quickly. “Yes!”
“Fine, given the fact that there are no Egyptians to view, nor a Nile Delta. And Cairo, Illinois, is a thousand miles east. But I suppose we’ve got plenty of arms.”

The old man rose, pulled the STATIONMASTER cap from his head, and replaced it with the TAXI cap. He bent to take the small suitcase when the young man said, “You’re not just going to leave—?”

“The station? It’ll mind itself. The tracks aren’t going nowhere, there’s nothing to be purloined within, and it’ll be some few days before another train takes us by surprise. Come on.” He hoisted the bag and shuffled out of the gloom and around the corner.

Behind the station was no taxi. Instead, a rather handsome large white horse stood, patiently waiting. And behind the horse was a small upright wagon with the words KELLY’S BAKERY, Fresh Bread, painted on its side.

The taxi driver beckoned and the young man climbed into the wagon and settled himself in the warm shadow. The stranger inhaled.
“Ain’t that a rare fine smell?” said the taxi driver. “Just delivered five dozen loaves!”

“That,” said the young man, “is the perfume of Eden on the first morn.”
The older man raised his eyebrows. “Well, now,” he wondered, “what’s a newspaper writer with aspirations to be a novelist doing in Summerton, Arizona?”

“Because,” said the young man.
“Because?” said the older man. “That’s one of the finest reasons in the world. Leaves lots of room for decisions.” He climbed up onto the driver’s seat, looked with gentle eyes at the waiting horse and made a soft clicking noise with his tongue and said, “Claude.”

And the horse, hearing his name, carried them away into Summerton, Arizona.

CHAPTER 4

The air was hot as the bakery wagon moved and then, as they reached the shadows of trees, the air began to cool.
The young man leaned forward.
“How did you guess?”
“What?” said the driver.

“That I’m a writer,” said the young man.
The taxi driver glanced at the passing trees and nodded.
“Your tongue improves your words on their way out. Keep talking.”
“I’ve heard rumors about Summerton.”
“Lots of folks hear, few arrive.”
“I heard your town’s another time and place, vanishing maybe. Surviving, I hope.”

“Let me see your good eye,” said the driver.
The reporter turned and looked straight on at him.
The driver nodded again.

“Nope, not yet jaundiced. I think you see what you look at, tell what you feel. Welcome. Name’s Culpepper. Elias.”
“Mr. Culpepper.” The young man touched the older man’s shoulder. “James Cardiff.”

“Lord,” said Culpepper. “Aren’t we a pair? Culpepper and Cardiff. Could be genteel lawyers, architects, printers. Names like that don’t come in tandems. Culpepper and, now, Cardiff.”
And Claude the horse trotted a little more quickly through the shadows of trees.

The horse rambled through town, Elias Culpepper pointing right and left, chatting up a storm.

“There’s the envelope factory. All our mail starts there. There’s the steam works, once made steam, I forget what for. And right now, passing Culpepper Summerton News. If there’s news once a month, we print it! Four pages in large, easy-to-read type. So you see, you and I are, in a way, in the same business. You don’t, of course, also rein horses and punch rail tickets.”

“I most certainly don’t,” said James Cardiff, and they both laughed quietly.
“And,” said Elias Culpepper, as Claude rounded a curve into a lane where elms and oaks and maples fused the center and wove the sky in green and blue colors, a fine thatchwork above and below, “this is New Sunrise Way. Best families live here. That’s the Ribtrees’, there’s the Townways’. And—”

“My God,” said James Cardiff. “Those front lawns. Look, Mr. Culpepper!”
And they drove by fence after fence, where crowds of sunflowers lifted huge round clock faces to time the sun, to open with the dawn and close with the dusk, a hundred in this patch under an elm, two hundred in the next yard, and five hundred beyond.

Every curb was lined with the tall green stalks ending in vast dark faces and yellow fringes.
“It’s like a crowd watching a parade,” said James Cardiff.
“Come to think,” said Elias Culpepper.
He gave a genteel wave of his hand.

“Now, Mr. Cardiff. You’re the first reporter’s visited in years. Nothing’s happened here since 1903, the year of the Small Flood. Or 1902, if you want the Big One. Mr. Cardiff, what would a reporter be wanting with a town like this where nothing happens by the hour?”
“Something might,” said Cardiff, uneasily.

He raised his gaze and looked at the town all around. You’re here, he thought, but maybe you won’t be. I know, but won’t tell. It’s a terrible

truth that may wipe you away. My mind is open, but my mouth is shut. The future is uncertain and unsure.

Mr. Culpepper pulled a stick of spearmint gum from his shirt pocket, peeled its wrapper, popped it in his mouth, and chewed.
“You know something I don’t know, Mr. Cardiff?”

“Maybe,” said Cardiff, “you know things about Summerton you haven’t told me.”
“Then I hope we both fess up soon.”

And with that, Elias Culpepper reined Claude gently into the graveled driveway of the sunflower yard of a private home with a sign above the porch: EGYPTIAN VIEW ARMS. BOARDING.
And he had not lied.

No Nile River was in sight.

CHAPTER 5

At which moment an old-fashioned ice wagon with a full dark cavern mouth of frost entered the yard, led by a horse in dire need of his Antarctic cargo. Cardiff could taste the ice, from thirty summers long gone.

“Just in time,” said the iceman. “Hot day. Go grab.” He nodded toward the rear of his wagon.

Cardiff, on pure instinct, jumped down from the bread wagon and went straight to the back of the ice wagon, and felt his ten-year-old hand reach in and grab a sharp icicle. He stepped back and rubbed it on his brow. His other hand instinctively took a handkerchief from his pocket to wrap the ice. Sucking it, he moved away.

“How’s it taste?” he heard Culpepper say.
Cardiff gave the ice another lick.
“Linen.”

Only then did he glance back at the street.

It was such a street as could not be believed. There was not a roof on any house that had not been freshly tarred and lathed or tiled. Not a porch swing that did not hang straight. Not a window that did not shine like a mirrored shield in Valhalla halls, all gold at sunrise and sunset, all clear running brookstream at noon. Not a bay window that did not display books leaning against others' quiet wits on inner library shelves.

Not a rain funnel spout without its rain barrel gathering the seasons. Not a backyard that was not, this day, filled with carpets being flailed so that time dusted on the wind and old patterns sprung forth to rococo new. Not a kitchen that did not send forth promises of hunger placated and easy evenings of contemplation on victuals contained just south-southwest of the soul.

All, all perfect, all painted, all fresh, all new, all beautiful, a perfect town in a perfect blend of silence and unseen hustle and flurry.
"A penny for your thoughts," said Elias Culpepper.

Cardiff shook his head, his eyes shut, because he had seen nothing, but imagined much.
"I can't tell you," said Cardiff, in a whisper.
"Try," said Elias Culpepper.

Cardiff shook his head again, nearly suffering with inexplicable happiness.

Peeling the handkerchief from around the ice, he put the last sliver in his mouth and gave it a crunch as he started up the porch steps with his back to the town, wondering what he would find next.

CHAPTER 6

James Cardiff stood in quiet amazement.

The front porch of the Egyptian View Arms was the longest he had ever seen. It had so many white wicker rockers he stopped counting. Occupying some of the rockers was an assortment of youngish not quite middle-aged gentlemen, nattily dressed, with slicked-back hair, fresh out of the shower.

And interspersed among the men were late-thirties-not-yet-forty women in summer dresses looking as if they had all been cut from the same rose or orchid or gardenia wallpaper.

The men had haircuts each sheared by the same barber. The women wore their tresses like bright helmets designed by some Parisian, ironed and curlicued long before Cardiff had been born. And the assembly of rockers all tilted forward and then back, in unison, in a quiet surf, as if the same ocean breeze moved them all, soundless and serene.

As Cardiff put his foot on the porch landing, all the rocking stopped, all the faces lifted, and there was a blaze of smiles and every hand rose in a quiet wave of welcome. He nodded and the white summer wickers refloated themselves, and a murmur of conversation began.

Looking at the long line of handsome people, he thought: Strange, so many men home at this hour of the day. Most peculiar.
A tiny crystal bell tinkled in the dim screen doorway.
“Soup’s on,” a woman’s voice called.

In a matter of seconds, the wicker chairs emptied, as all the summer people filed through the screen door with a hum.
He was about to follow when he stopped, turned his head and looked back.
“What?” he whispered.

Elias Culpepper was at his elbow, gently placing Cardiff’s suitcase beside him.
“That sound,” said Cardiff. “Somewhere…”

Elias Culpepper laughed quietly. “That’s the town band rehearsing Thursday night’s performance of the short-form Tosca. When she jumps it only takes two minutes for her to land.”
“Tosca,” said Cardiff, and listened to the far brass music. “Somewhere…”

“Step in,” said Culpepper, who held the screen door wide for James Cardiff.

CHAPTER 7

Inside the dim hall, Cardiff felt as if he had moved into a summer-cool milk shed that smelled of large canisters of cream hidden away from the sun, and iceboxes dripping their secret liquors, and bread laid out fresh on kitchen tables, and pies cooling on windowsills.

Cardiff took another step and knew he would sleep nine hours a night here and wake like a boy at dawn, excited that he was alive, and all the world beginning, morn after morn, glad for his heart in his body, and his pulse in his wrists.

He heard someone laughing. And it was himself, overwhelmed with a joy he could not explain.
There was the merest motion from somewhere high in the house. Cardiff looked up.

Descending the stairs, and pausing now at seeing him, was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Somewhere, sometime, he had heard someone say: Fix the image before it fades. So said the first cameras that trapped light and carried that illumination to obscuras where chemicals laid out in porcelain caused the trapped ghosts to rouse.

Faces caught at noon were summoned up out of sour baths to reestablish their eyes, their mouths, and then the haunting flesh of beauty or arrogance, or the impatience of a child held still. In darkness

the phantoms lurked in chemicals until some gestures surfaced them out of time into a forever that could be held in the hands long after the warm flesh had vanished.

It was thus and so with this woman, this bright noon wonder who descended the stairs into the cool shadow of the hall only to reemerge in a shaft of sunlight in the dining room door.

Her hand drifted to take Cardiff's hand, and then her wrist and arm and shoulder and at last, as from that chemistry in an obscura room, the ghost of a face so lovely it burst on him like a flower when the dawn causes it to widen its beauty.

Her measuring bright and summer-electric eyes shone merrily, watching him, as if he, too, had just arisen from those miraculous tides in which memory swims, as if to say: Remember me?

I do! he thought.
Yes? he thought he heard her say.
Yes! he cried, not speaking. I always hoped I might remember you.
Well, then, her eyes said, we shall be friends. Perhaps in another time, we met.

"They're waiting for us," she said aloud.
Yes, he thought, for both of us!
And now he spoke. "Your name?"
But you already know it, her silence replied.

And it was the name of a woman dead these four thousand years and lost in Egyptian sands, and now refreshed at noon in another desert near an empty station and silent tracks.
"Nefertiti," he said. "A fine name. It means the Beautiful One Is Here."
"Ah," she said, "you know."

"Tutankhamen came from the tomb when I was three," he said. "I saw his golden mask and wanted my face to be his."
"But it is," she said. "You just never noticed."

“Can I believe that?”

“Believe it and it will happen in the midst of your belief. Are you hungry?”
Starved, he thought, staring at her.
“Before you fall,” she laughed, “come.”
And she led him in to a feasting of summer gods.

CHAPTER 8

The dining room, like the porch, was the longest one he’d ever seen. All of the summer porch people were lined up on either side of an incredible table, staring at Cardiff and Nef as they came through the door.

At the far end were two chairs waiting for them and as soon as Cardiff and Nef sat, there was a flurry of activity as utensils were raised and platters passed.
There was an incredible salad, an amazing omelet, and a soup smooth as velvet. From the kitchen drifted a scent that promised a dessert sweet as ambrosia.

In the middle of his astonishment, Cardiff said, “Hold on, this is too much. I must see.”
He rose and walked to a door at the end of the dining room, which opened into the kitchen.
Entering the kitchen, he stared across the room at what seemed a familiar doorway.

He knew where it led.
The pantry.

And not just any pantry, but his grandmother’s pantry, or something just like it. How could that be?

He stepped forward and pushed the door, half-expecting that he would find his grandmother within, lost in that special jungle where hung

leopard bananas, where doughnuts were buried in quicksands of powdered sugar. Where apples shone in bins and peaches displayed their warm summer cheeks. Where row on row, shelf on shelf, of condiments and spices rose to an always-twilight ceiling.

He heard himself intoning the names that he read off the jar labels, the monikers of Indian princes and Arabian wanderers.
Cardimon and anise and cinnamon were there, and cayenne and curry. Added to which there were ginger and paprika and thyme and celandrine.

He could almost have sung the syllables and awakened at night to hear himself humming the sounds all over again.

He scanned and re-scanned the shelves, took a deep breath, and turned, looking back into the kitchen, sure he would find a familiar shape bent over the table, preparing the last courses for the amazing lunch.

He saw a portly woman icing a buttery yellow cake with dark chocolate, and he thought if he cried her name, his grandmother might turn and rush to hold him.
But he said nothing and watched the woman finish the job with a flourish, and hand the cake to a maid who carried it out into the dining room.
He went back to join Nef, his appetite gone, having fed himself in the pantry wilderness, which was more than enough.

Nef, he thought, gazing at her, is a woman of all women, a beauty of all beauties. That wheat field painted again and again by Monet that became the wheat field. That church façade similarly painted, again and again, until it was the most perfect façade in the history of churches. That bright apple and fabled orange by Cézanne that never fades.

“Mr. Cardiff,” he heard her say. “Sit, eat. You mustn’t keep me waiting. I’ve been waiting too many years.”
He drew close, not able to take his eyes away from her.

“Great god,” he said. “How old are you?”
“You tell me,” she said.

“Oh, hell,” he cried. “You were born maybe twenty years ago. Thirty. Or the day before yesterday.”
“I am all of those.”
“How?”

“I am your sister, your daughter, and someone you knew years ago back in school, yes? I am the girl you asked to the Senior Prom but she had promised another.”
“That’s my life. That happened. How did you guess?”

“I never guess,” she replied. “I know. The important thing is that you’re here at last.”
“You sound as if you expected me.”
“Forever,” she said.

“But I didn’t know I was coming here until last night, in the middle of a dream. I fixed my mind only at the last moment. I decided to write a story…”
She laughed quietly. “How can that be? It sounds so like those unhealthy romances written by healthy housewives. What made you choose Summerton? Was it our name?”
“I saw a postcard someone must have picked up on their way through.”

“Oh, that would have been years ago.”
“It looked like a nice town—a friendly spot for tourists looking for a place to relax, enjoy the desert air. But then, I looked for it on the map. And you know what? It’s not on any map I could find.”

“Well, the train doesn’t stop here.”
“It didn’t stop today,” he admitted. “Only two things got off: me and my suitcase.”
“You travel lightly.”

“I’m just here overnight. When the next train runs through, not stopping, I’ll grab on.”
“No,” she said softly. “That’s not how it’s supposed to be.”
“I’ve got to go home and finish my story,” he insisted.
“Ah, yes,” she said. “And what will you say about this town that no one can find?”

A cloud crossed the sky and the dining room windows darkened, and a shadow fell across his face. There were two truths to tell, but he could tell only one.
“That it’s a lovely town,” he said, lamely. “The kind that doesn’t exist anymore. That people should remember and celebrate. But how did you know I was coming?”
“I woke at dawn,” she said. “I heard your train from a long way off. By noon the train was just beyond the mountains, and I heard its whistle.”

“And did you expect someone named Cardiff?”
“Cardiff?” she wondered. “There was a giant, once—”
“In all the newspapers. A fraud.”
“And,” she said. “Are you a fraud?”

He could not meet her gaze.

CHAPTER 9

When he looked up, Nef’s chair was empty. The other diners, too, had all left the table, gone back to their rocking chairs or, perhaps, to summer afternoon naps.
“Lord,” he murmured. “That woman, young, but how young? Old, but how old?”

Suddenly Elias Culpepper touched his elbow.

“You want a real tour of our town? Claude needs to deliver some more fresh-baked bread. On your feet!”

The wagon was loaded with a redolent harvest. The warm loaves had been neatly stacked row on row within the oven-smelling wagon, thirty or forty loaves in all, with names lettered on the wax-paper wrappings. Beside these were waxed boxes of muffins and cakes, carefully tied with string.

Cardiff took three immense inhalations and almost fell with the overconsumption.
Culpepper handed him a small packet and a knife.
“What’s this?” said Cardiff.

“You won’t be a block away before the bread overcomes you. This is a butter knife. This here is a full loaf. Don’t bring it back.”
“It’ll ruin my supper.”

“No. Enhance. Summer outside. Summer inside.”
He handed over a pad with names and addresses.
“Just in case,” said Culpepper.

“You’re sending me out on my own? How do I know where to go?”
“Don’t you worry. Claude knows the way. Never got lost yet. Right, Claude?”
Claude looked back, neither amused nor serious, just ready.

“Just go easy on the reins. Claude’s got his own system. You just tag along. It’s the only way to see the town without any jabber from me. Giddap.”
Cardiff jumped aboard. Claude tugged, the wagon lurched forward.

“Hell.” He fumbled with the notebook, scanning the names and addresses. “What’s the first stop?”
“Git!”

The bread wagon drifted away, warming the air with the heady scents of yeast and grain.

Claude trotted as if he could hardly wait to be right.

CHAPTER 10

Claude jogged at a goodly pace for two blocks and turned sweetly to the right.
His eyes twitched toward a front yard mailbox: Abercrombie.
Cardiff checked his list.

Abercrombie!
“Damn!”
He jumped from the wagon, loaf in hand, when a woman’s voice called, “Thank you, Claude.”

A woman of some forty years stood at the gate to take the bread. “You, too, of course,” she said. “Mister…?”
“Cardiff, ma’m.”

“Claude,” she called, “take good care of Mr. Cardiff. And Mr. Cardiff, you take good care of Claude. Morning!”
And the wagon jounced along the bricks under a congress of trees that laced themselves to lattice out the sun.
“Fillmore’s next.” Cardiff eyed the list, ready to pull on the reins when the horse stopped at a second gate.

Cardiff popped the bread in the Fillmore mailbox and raced to catch up with Claude, who had resumed his route without waiting for his driver.
So it went. Bramble. Jones. Williams. Isaacson. Meredith. Bread. Cake. Bread. Muffins. Bread. Cake. Bread.
Claude turned a final corner.

And there was a school.
“Hold up, Claude!”

Cardiff alighted and walked into the schoolyard to find a teeter-totter, its old blue paint flaking, next to an old swing-set, its splintery wooden seats suspended from rusted iron chains.
“Well, now,” whispered Cardiff.

The school was two stories high. Its double doors were shut, and all eight of its windows were crusted with dust.
Cardiff rattled the front doors. Locked tight.

“It’s only May,” Cardiff said to himself. “School’s not out yet.”
Claude whinnied irritably, and perhaps out of pique, began a slow glide away from the school.
“Claude!” Cardiff put iron in it. “Stay!”
Claude stayed, drumming the bricks with both forefeet.

Cardiff turned back to the building. Carved in the lintel, above the main door were the words: SUMMERTON GRAMMAR SCHOOL, DEDICATED JANUARY 1st, 1888.
“Eighteen eighty-eight,” Cardiff muttered. “Well, now.”

He gave one last look at the dust-caked windows and the rusted swing chains and said, “One last go-round, Claude.”
Claude did not move.

“We’re all out of bread and names, is that it? You only take bakery orders, nothing else?”
Even Claude’s shadow did not move.

“Well, we’ll just stand here until you do me a favor. Your new star boarder wants to cross-section the whole blasted town. What’s it to be? No water, no oats, without a full trot.”
Water and oats did it.

Full trot.

They sailed down Clover Avenue and up Hibiscus Way and over on to Rosewood Place and right on Juneglade and left again on Sandalwood then Ravine, which ran off the edge of a shallow ravine cut by ancient rains. He stared at lawn after lawn after lawn, all of them lush, green, perfect. No baseball bats. No baseballs. No basketball hoops. No

basketballs. No tennis rackets. No croquet mallets. No hopscotch chalk marks on sidewalks. No tire swings on trees.

Claude trotted him back to the Egyptian View Arms, where Elias Culpepper was waiting.
Cardiff climbed down from the bread wagon.

“Well?”

Cardiff looked back at the summer drift of green lawns and green hedges and golden sunflowers and said, “Where are the children?”

CHAPTER 11

Mr. Culpepper did not immediately respond.

For dead ahead there was afternoon high tea, with apricot and peach tarts and strawberry delight and coffee instead of tea and then port instead of coffee and then there was dinner, a real humdinger, that lasted until well after nine and then the inhabitants of the Egyptian View Arms headed up, one by one, to their most welcome cool summer night beds, and Cardiff sat out on the croquetless and hoopless lawn, watching Mr. Culpepper on the porch, smoking several small bonfire pipes, waiting.

At last Cardiff, in full brooding pace, arrived at the bottom of the porch rail and waited.

“You were asking about no children?” said Elias Culpepper.
Cardiff nodded.

“A good reporter wouldn’t allow so much time to pass after asking such an important question.”

“More time is passing right now,” said Cardiff, gently, climbing the porch steps.
“So it is. Here.”

A bottle of wine and two small snifters sat on the railing.
Cardiff drained his at a jolt, and went to sit next to Elias Culpepper.

Culpepper puffed smoke. “We have,” he said, seeming to consider his words with care, “sent all the children away to school.”
Cardiff stared. “The whole town? Every child?”

“That’s the sum. It’s a hundred miles to Phoenix in one direction. Two hundred to Tucson. Nothing but sand and petrified forest in between. The children need schools with proper trees. We got proper trees here, yes, but we can’t hire teachers to teach here. We did, at one time, but they got too lonesome. They wouldn’t come, so our children had to go.”

“If I came back in late June would I meet the kids coming home for the summer?”
Culpepper held still, much like Claude.
“I said—”

“I heard.” Culpepper knocked the sparking ash from his pipe. “If I said yes, would you believe me?”
Cardiff shook his head.
“You implying I’m a mile off from the truth?”

“I’m only implying,” Cardiff said, “that we are at a taffy pull. I’m waiting to see how far you pull it.”
Culpepper smiled.

“The children aren’t coming home. They have chosen summer school in Amherst, Providence, and Sag Harbor. One is even in Mystic Seaport. Ain’t that a fine sound? Mystic. I sat there once in a thunderstorm reading every other chapter of Moby-Dick.”

“The children are not coming home,” said Cardiff. “Can I guess why?”
The older man nodded, pipe in mouth, unlit.
Cardiff took out his notepad and stared at it.

“The children of this town,” he said at last, “won’t come home. Not one. None. Never.”

He closed the notepad and continued: “The reason why the children are never coming home is,” he swallowed hard, “there are no children. Something happened a long time ago, God knows what, but it happened. And this town is a town of no family homecomings. The last child left long ago, or the last child finally grew up. And you’re one of them.”

“Is that a question?”

“No,” said Cardiff. “An answer.”

Culpepper leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes. “You,” he said, the smoke long gone from his pipe, “are an A-1 Four Star Headline News Reporter.”

CHAPTER 12

“I…,” said Cardiff.
“Enough,” Culpepper interrupted. “For tonight.”

He held out another glass of bright amber wine. Cardiff drank. When he looked up, the front screen door of the Egyptian View Arms tapped shut. Someone went upstairs. His ambiance stayed.
Cardiff refilled his glass.
“Never coming home. Never ever,” he whispered.

And went up to bed.
Sleep well, someone said somewhere in the house. But he could not sleep. He lay, fully dressed, doing philosophical sums on the ceiling, erasing, adding, erasing again until he sat up abruptly and looked out across the meadow town of thousands of flowers in the midst of which houses rose and sank only to rise again, ships on a summer sea.

I will arise and go now, thought Cardiff, but not to a bee-loud glade. Rather, to a place of earthen silence and the sounds of death's-head moths on powdery wings.
He slipped down the front hall stairs barefoot and once outside, let the screen door tap shut silently and, sitting on the lawn, put on his shoes as the moon rose.

Good, he thought, I won't need a flashlight.
In the middle of the street he looked back. Was there someone at the screen door, a shadow, watching? He walked and then began to jog. Imagine that you are Claude, he thought, his breath coming in quick pants. Turn here, now there, now another right and—
The graveyard.

All that cold marble crushed his heart and stopped his breathing. There was no iron fence around the burial park.
He entered silently and bent to touch the first gravestone. His fingers brushed the name: BIANCA SHERMAN BATES

And the date: BORN, JULY 3, 1882
And below that: R.I.P.
But no date of death.
The clouds covered the moon. He moved on to the next stone.
WILLIAM HENRY CLAY
1885–

R.I.P.
And again, no mortal date.
He brushed a third gravestone and found:
HENRIETTA PARKS
August 13, 1881
Gone to God
But, Cardiff knew, she had not as yet gone to God.

The moon darkened and then took strength from itself. It shone upon a small Grecian tomb not fifty feet away, a lodge of exquisite architecture, a miniature Acropolis upheld by four vestal virgins, or

goddesses, beautiful maidens, wondrous women. His heart pulsed. All four marble women seemed suddenly alive, as if the pale light had awakened them, and they might step forth, unclad, into the tableau of named and dateless stones.

He sucked in his breath. His heart pulsed again.
For as he watched, one of the goddesses, one of the forever-beautiful maidens, trembled with the night chill and shifted out into the moonlight.

He could not tell if he was terrified or delighted. After all, it was late at night in this yard of the dead. But she? She was naked to the weather, or almost; a mist of silk covered her breasts and plumed around her waist as she drifted away from the other pale statues.

She moved among the stones, silent as the marble she had been but now was not, until she stood before him with her dark hair tousled about her small ears and her great eyes the color of lilacs. She raised her hand tenderly and smiled.

“You,” he whispered. “What are you doing here?”
She replied quietly, “Where else should I be?”
She held out her hand and led him in silence out of the graveyard. Looking back he saw the abandoned puzzle of names and enigma of dates.

Everyone born, he thought, but none has died. The stones are blank, waiting for someone to date their ghosts bound for Eternity.
“Yes?” someone said. But her lips had not moved.

And you followed me, he thought, to stop me from reading the gravestones and asking questions. And what about the absent children, never coming home?

And as if they glided on ice, on a vast sea of moonlight, they arrived where a crowd of sunflowers hardly stirred as they passed and their feet were soundless, moving up the path to the porch and across the

porch, and up the stairs, one, two, three floors until they reached a tower room where the door stood wide to reveal a bed as bright as a glacier, its covers thrown back, all snow on a hot summer night.

Yes, she said.
He sleepwalked the rest of the way. Behind him, he saw his clothes, like the discards of a careless child, strewn on the parquetry. He stood by the snowbank bed and thought, One last question. The graveyard. Are there bodies beneath the stones? Is anyone there?

But it was too late. Even as he opened his mouth to question, he tumbled into the snow.
And he was drowning in whiteness, crying out as he inhaled the light and then out of the rushing storm, a warmness came; he was touched and held, but could not see what or who held him, and he relaxed, drowned.

When next he woke, he was not swimming but floating. Somehow he had leaped from a cliff, and someone with him, unseen, as he soared up until lightning struck, tore at him in half terror, half joy, to fall and strike the bed with his entire body and his soul.

When he awoke again, the storm over, and the flying gone, he found a small hand in his, and without opening his eyes he knew that she lay beside him, her breath keeping time with his. It was not yet dawn.
She spoke.
“Was there something you wanted to ask?”
“Tomorrow,” he whispered. “I’ll ask you then.”
“Yes,” she said quietly. “Then.”
Then, for the first time, it seemed, her mouth touched his.

CHAPTER 13

He awoke to the sun pouring in through the high attic window.
Questions gathered behind his tongue.
Beside him, the bed was empty.
Gone.

Afraid of the truth? he wondered.
No, he thought, she will have left a note on the icebox door. Somehow he knew. Go look.
The note was there.

Mr. Cardiff:
Many tourists arriving. I must welcome them.
Questions at breakfast.
Nef.

Far off, wasn't there the merest wail of a locomotive whistle, the softest churn of some great engine?
On the front porch, Cardiff listened, and again the faint locomotive cry stirred beyond the horizon.
He glanced up at the top floor. Had she fled toward that sound? Had the boarders heard, too?

He ran down to the rail station and stood in the middle of the blazing hot iron tracks, daring the whistle to sound again. But this time, silence.
Separate trains bringing what? he wondered.
I arrived first, he thought, the one who tries to be good.

And what comes next?
He waited, but the air remained silent and the horizon line serene, so he walked back to the Egyptian View Arms.

There were boarders in every window, waiting. "It's all right," he called. "It was nothing."
Someone called down from above, quietly, "Are you sure?"

CHAPTER 14

Nef was not at breakfast, or lunch, or dinner.
He went to bed hungry.

CHAPTER 15

At midnight the wind blew softly in the window, whispering the curtains, shadowing the moonlight.
There, far across town, lay the cemetery, immense white teeth scattered on a meadow of fresh moon-silvered grass.
Four dozen stones dead, but not dead.

All lies, he thought.
And found himself halfway down the boarding house stairs, surrounded by the exhalations of sleeping people. There was no sound save the drip of the ice pan under the icebox in the moonlit kitchen. The house brimmed with lemon and lilac illumination from the candied windows over the front entrance.

He found himself on the dusty road, alone with his shadow.
He found himself at the cemetery gate.
In the middle of the graveyard, he found a shovel in his hands.
He dug until…
There was a hollow thud under the dust.

He worked swiftly, clearing away the earth, and bent to tug at the edge of the coffin, at which moment he heard a single sound.
A footstep.
Yes! he thought wildly, happily.
She's here again. She had to come find me, and take me home. She…
His heartbeat hammered and then slowed.
Slowly, Cardiff rose by the open grave.

Elias Culpepper stood by the iron gate, trying to figure out just what to say to Cardiff, who was digging where no one should dig.
Cardiff let the spade fall. "Mr. Culpepper?"

Elias Culpepper responded. "Oh God, God, go on. Lift the lid. Do it!"
And when Cardiff hesitated, said, "Now!"
Cardiff bent and pulled at the coffin lid. It was neither nailed nor locked. He swung back the lid and stared down into the coffin.
Elias Culpepper came to stand beside him.
They both stared down at…

An empty coffin.

“I suspect,” said Elias Culpepper, “you are in need of a drink.”
“Two,” said Cardiff, “would be fine.”

CHAPTER 16

They were smoking fine cigars and drinking nameless wine in the middle of the night. Cardiff leaned back in his wicker chair, eyes tight shut.
“You been noticing things?” inquired Elias Culpepper.

“A baker’s dozen. When Claude took me on the bread and muffin tour I couldn’t help but notice there are no signs—anywhere—for doctors. Not one funeral parlor that I could see.”
“Must be somewhere,” said Culpepper.

“How come not in the phone book yellow pages? No doctors, no surgeons, no mortuary offices.”
“An oversight.”
Cardiff studied his notes.
“Lord, you don’t even have a hospital in this almost ghost town!”

“We got one small one.”
Cardiff underlined an entry on his list. “An outpatient clinic thirty feet square? Is that all that ever happens, so you don’t need a big facility?”
“That,” said Culpepper, “would about describe it.”

“All you ever have is cut fingers, bee-stings, and the occasional sprained ankle?”
“You’ve whittled it down fine,” said the other, “but that’s the sum. Continue.”

“That,” said Cardiff, gazing down on the town from the high verandah, “that tells why all the gravestones are unfinished and all the coffins empty!”
“You only dug one up.”

“I don’t need to open more. Do I?”
Quietly, Culpepper shook his head.
“Hell, Mr. Culpepper,” said Cardiff. “I’m speechless!”

“To tell the truth,” said Culpepper, “so am I. This is the first time anyone has ever asked what you’ve been asking. We folks have been so busy just living, we never figured anyone would come, gather his spit, grab a spade, and dig!”

“I apologize.”
“Now you’ll want a practical history. I’ll give it to you. Write it down, Mr. Cardiff, write it down. Over the years, when visitors arrived, they got bored quick, and left even quicker. We tried to look like every other town.

We put on nice false-front funerals, hearse and all, real flowers, live organ music, but empty coffins with shut lids, just to impress. We were going to hold a pretend funeral tomorrow, show off, so you’d be assured we sometimes die—”

“Sometimes?!” cried Cardiff.
“Well, it has been a while. Cars occasionally run over us. Someone might fall from a ladder.”
“No diseases, whooping cough, pneumonia?”
“We don’t whoop and we don’t cough. We wear out…slow.”

“How slow?”
“Oh, at last count, just about—”
“How slow?!”
“One hundred, two hundred years.”
“Which?”
“We figure about two hundred. It’s still too early to tell. We’ve only been at this since 1864, ’65, Lincoln’s time.”

“All of you?”
“All.”
“Nef, too?”

“Wouldn’t lie.”
“But she’s younger than I am!”
“Your grandma, maybe.”
“My God!”
“God put us up to it. But it’s the weather, mostly. And, well now, the wine.”
Cardiff stared at his empty glass.
“The wine makes you live to two hundred?!”
“Unless it kills you before breakfast. Finish your glass, Mr. Cardiff, finish your glass.”

CHAPTER 17

Elias Culpepper leaned forward to scan Cardiff’s notepad.
“You got any more doubts, indecisions, or opinions?”
Cardiff mused over his notes. “There don’t seem to be any roaring businesses in Summerton.”
“A few mice but no buffalo.”

“No travel agencies, just a train station about to sink in the dust. Main road is mostly potholes. No one seems to leave, and very few arrive. How in Hades do you all survive?”
“Think.” Culpepper sucked on his pipe.

“I am, dammit!”
“You heard about the lilies of the field. We toil not, neither do we spin. Just like you. You don’t have to move, do you? On occasion, maybe, like tonight. But mostly you travel back and forth between your ears. Yes?”

“My God!” Cardiff cried, clutching his notepad. “Hideaways. Loners. Recluses. By the scores of dozens. You’re writers!”
“You can say that again.”

“Writers!”
“In every room, attic, broom-closet, or basement, both sides of the street right out to the edge of town.”
“The whole town, everybody?”

“All but a few lazy illiterates.”
“That’s unheard of.”
“You heard it now.”

“Salzburg, a town full of musicians, composers, conductors. Geneva, chock-full of bankers, clockmakers, walking wounded ski dropouts. Nantucket, once anyway, ships, sailors, and whale-widow wives. But this, this!”

Cardiff jumped up and stared wildly toward the midnight town.
“Don’t listen for typewriters,” advised Culpepper. “Just quiet things.”
Pens, pencils, pads, paper, thought Cardiff. Whispers of lead or ink. Summer quiet thoughts on summer quiet noons.

“Writers,” murmured Cardiff, spying this house or that, across the street, “never have to get up and go. And no one knows what color you are, by mail, or what sex, or how tall or how short. Could be a company of midgets, a sideshow of giants. Writers. Godfrey Daniel!”

“Watch your language.”
Cardiff turned to stare down at his companion. “But they can’t all be successful?”
“Mostly.”
“Would I know any of their names?”
“If I told you, but I won’t.”
“A beehive of talent.” Cardiff exhaled. “But how did they all wind up here?”

“Genes, chromosomes, need. You’ve heard of those little writers’ colonies? Well, this one’s big. We’re soul mates. Similar people. Nobody laughing at what someone else writes. No alcoholics, however, no bats out of hell, or wild parties.”
“F. Scott Fitzgerald can’t get in?”
“Better not try.”
“Sounds boring.”
“Only if you lose your pad and pencil.”

“You one of them?”
“In my own quiet way.”
“A poet!”
“Not so loud. Someone might hear.”
“A poet,” Cardiff whispered.
“Mostly haiku. At midnight when I put on my specs and reach for my pen. Semi-haiku, too many beats.”

“Example?”
Culpepper recited:

Oh, cat that I truly love,
Oh, hummingbird that I madly love.
What are you doing in the cat’s mouth?

Cardiff whooped with delight. “I never could write that!”
“Don’t try. Just do.”
“I’ll be damned. More!”

A pillow of snow by my warm face.
A snowdrift at my touch;
You are gone.

Culpepper quietly reloaded his pipe to cover his embarrassment.
“I don’t recite that one often. Sad.”

To break the quiet, Cardiff said: “How do you writers stay in touch with the outside world?”
Culpepper stared off into the distance toward the empty train tracks beyond the silent road.

“I take a truck full of manuscripts to Gila Springs once a month, so we mail out from where we are not, bring back windfalls of checks, snowfalls of rejections. The wheat and chaff go into our bank, with its one teller and one president. The money waits there, in case some day we have to move.”

Cardiff felt sweat suddenly break out all over his body.
“You got something to say, Mr. Cardiff?”
“Soon.”
“I won’t push.” Culpepper relit his pipe and recited:

A mother remembers her dead son.
Today how far might he have wandered,
My mighty hunter of dragonflies.

“That’s not mine. Wish it were. Japanese. Been around forever.”
Cardiff paced back and forth on the porch and then turned.

“Good grief, it all fits. Writing is the only activity that could support a town like this, so far off. Like a mail order business.”

“Writing is a mail order business. Anything you want you write a check, send it off, and before you know it, the Johnson Smith Company in Racine, Wisconsin, sends you what you need. Seebackoscopes. Gyroscopes. Mardi Gras masks. Orphan Annie dolls. Film clips from The Hunchback of Notre Dame. Vanishing cards. Reappearing skeletons.”

“All that good stuff.” Cardiff smiled.
“All that good stuff.”
They laughed quietly together.
Cardiff exhaled. “So, this is a writers’ township.”
“Thinking about staying?”
“No, about leaving.”

Cardiff stopped and put his hand over his mouth as if he had said something he shouldn’t have said.
“Now what does that mean?” Elias Culpepper almost started up from his chair.

But before Cardiff could speak, a pale figure appeared on the lawn below the porch and started to climb the steps.
Cardiff called her name.

By the door the daughter of Elias Culpepper spoke. “When you’re ready, come upstairs.”
When I’m ready!? Cardiff thought wildly. When I’m ready!
The screen door shut.

“You’ll need this,” said Elias Culpepper.
He held out a last drink, which Cardiff took.

CHAPTER 18

Again, the large bed was a bank of snow on a warm summer night. She lay on one side, looking up at the ceiling, and did not move. He sat on the far edge, saying nothing, and at last tilted over and lay his head on the pillow, and waited.

Finally Nef said, “It seems to me you’ve spent a lot of time in the town graveyard since you arrived. Looking for what?”
He scanned the empty ceiling and replied.

“It seems to me you’ve been down at that train station where hardly any trains arrive. Why?”
She did not turn, but said, “It seems both of us are looking for something but won’t or can’t say why or what.”

“So it seems.”
Another silence. Now, at last, she looked at him.
“Which of us is going to confess?”
“You go first.”

She laughed quietly.
“My truth is bigger and more incredible than yours.”
He joined her laughter but shook his head. “Oh, no, my truth is more terrible.”

She quickened and he felt her trembling.
“Don’t frighten me.”

“I don’t want to. But there it is. And if tell you, I’m afraid you’ll run and I won’t ever see you again.”

“Ever?” murmured Nef.
“Ever.”
“Then,” she said, “tell me what you can, but don’t make me afraid.”

But at that moment, far away in the night world, there was a single cry of a train, a locomotive, drawing near.
“Did you hear that? Is that the train that comes to take you away?”
There was a second cry of a whistle over the horizon.

“No,” he said, “maybe it’s the train that comes, God I hope not, with terrible news.”
Slowly she sat up on the edge of the bed, her eyes shut. “I have to know.”
“No,” he said. “Don’t go. Let me.”
“But first…,” she murmured.
Her hand gently pulled him over to her side of the bed.

CHAPTER 19

Sometime during the night, he sensed that he was once more alone.
He woke in a panic, at dawn, thinking, I’ve missed the train. It’s come and gone. But, no—

He heard the locomotive whistle shrieking across the sky, moaning like a funeral train as the sun rose over desert sands.
Did he or did he not hear a bag, similar to his own, catapult from a not-stopping train to bang the station platform?

Did he or did he not hear someone landing like a three-hundred-pound anvil on the platform boards?
And then Cardiff knew. He let his head fall as if chopped. “Dear God, oh dear vengeful God!”

CHAPTER 20

They stood on the platform of the empty station, Cardiff at one end, the tall man at the other.
“James Edward McCoy?” Cardiff said.
“Cardiff,” said McCoy, “is that you?”
Both smiled false smiles.
“What are you doing here?” said Cardiff.

“You might have known I would follow,” said James Edward McCoy. “When you left town, I knew someone had died, and you’d gone to give him a proper burial. So I packed my bag.”
“Why would you do that?”

“To keep you honest. I learned long ago you leaned one way, me the other. You were always wrong, I was always right. I hate liars.”
“‘Optimists’ is the word you want.”

“No wonder I hate you. The world’s a cesspool and you keep swimming in it, heading for shore. Dear God, where is the shore? You’ll never find it because the shore doesn’t exist! We’re rats drowning in a sewer, but you see lighthouses where there are none. You claim the Titanic is Mark Twain’s steamboat. To you Svengali, Raskolnikov, and Hitler were the Three Stooges! I feel sorry for you. So I’m here to make you honest.”

“Since when have you believed in honesty?”
“Honesty, currency, and common sense. Never play funhouse slot machines, don’t toss red-hot pennies to the poor, or throw your landlady downstairs. Fine futures? Hell, the future’s now, and it’s rotten. So, just what are you up to in this jerkwater town?”

McCoy glared around the deserted station.
Cardiff said, “You’d better leave on the next train.”

“I got twenty-four hours to steal your story.” McCoy squinted at the shut sunflowers that lined the road into town. “Lead the way. I’ll follow and trip over the bodies.”

McCoy hoisted his bag and began to walk, and Cardiff, after a beat or two, jogged to catch up with him.

“My editor said I’d better come back with a headline—one thousand bucks if it’s good, three if it’s super.” As they walked, McCoy surveyed the porch swings motionless in the early morning breeze and the high windows that reflected no light. “You know, this feels like super.”

Cardiff trudged along, thinking: Don’t breathe. Lie low.
The town heard.

No leaf trembled. No fruit fell. Shadows of dogs lay under bushes, but no dogs. The grass flattened like the fur on a nervous cat. All was stillness.

Pleased with the silence he sensed he had caused, McCoy stopped where two streets intersected, panoplied by trees. He stared at the green architecture and mused, “I get it.” He dropped his bag, pulled a pencil from his shirt pocket, which he licked, and began to scribble in a notepad, pronouncing the syllables as he wrote. “Leftover town. Stillborn, Nebraska. Remembrance, Ohio. Steamed west in 1880, lost steam 1890. End of the line 1900. Long lost.”

Cardiff suffered lockjaw.

McCoy appraised him. “I’m on the money, right? I can see it in your face. You came to bury Caesar. I came to stir his bones. You followed your intuition here; I came thanks to an itching hunch. You liked what you saw and probably would have gone home and said nothing. I don’t like what I see, past tense.”

He stuck the pencil behind his ear, jammed the notepad in his pants pocket, and reached down to heft his bag once more.

As if propelled by the sound of his own voice, he continued striding down Summerton’s streets, proclaiming as he went, “Look at that lousy

architecture, the gimcrack scrimshaw rococo baroque shingles and hangons.

You ever see so many damn scroll-cut wooden icicles? Christ, wouldn't it be awful to be trapped here forever, even just two weeks every summer? Hey, now, what's this?" He stopped short, looked up.

The sign over the porch front read, EGYPTIAN VIEW ARMS. BOARDING.
McCoy glanced at Cardiff, who stiffened. "This has got to be your digs. Let's see."
And before Cardiff could move, McCoy was up the front steps and inside the screen door.
Cardiff caught the door before it could slam and stepped in.
Silence. The obsequies over. The dear departed gone.

Even the parlor dust did not move, if there ever had been any dust. All the Tiffany lamps were dark and the flower vases empty. He heard McCoy in the kitchen and went to find him.
McCoy stood in front of the icebox, which was opened wide.

There was no ice within, nor any cream or milk or butter and no drip pan under the box to be drunk by a thirsty dog after midnight. The pantry, similarly, displayed no leopard bananas or Ceylonese or Indian spices. A river of quiet wind had entered the house and left with the priceless stuffs.

McCoy muttered, scribbling, "That's enough evidence."

"Evidence?"
"Everyone's hiding. Everything's stashed. When I leave—bingo!—the grass gets cut, the icebox drips. How did they know I was coming? Now, I don't suppose there's a Western Union in this no-horse town?" He spied a telephone in the hallway, picked it up, listened. "No dial tone." He glanced through the screen door. "No postman in sight. I am in a big damn isolation booth."
McCoy ambled out to sit on the front porch glider, which squealed as if threatening to fall. McCoy read Cardiff's face.

“You look like a do-gooder,” he said. “You run around saving people not worth saving. So what’s so great about this town that’s worth the Cardiff Salvation Army? That can’t be the whole story. There’s got to be a villain somewhere.”
Cardiff held his breath.
McCoy pulled out his pad and scowled at it.

“I think I know the name of the villain,” he muttered. “The Department of—”
He made Cardiff wait.
“—Highways?”
Cardiff exhaled.

“Bingo,” McCoy whispered. “I see the headlines now: ACE REPORTER DEFENDS PERFECT TOWN FROM DESTRUCTION. Small type: Highway Bureau Insists on Pillage and Ruin. Next week: SUMMERTON SUES AND LOSES. Ace Reporter Drowns in Gin.”

He shut his pad.
“Pretty good for an hour’s work, yep?” he said.
“Pretty,” said Cardiff.

CHAPTER 21

“This is gonna be great,” said James Edward McCoy. “I can see it now: my byline on stories about how Summerton, Arizona, hit the rocks and sank. Johnstown flood stand aside. San Francisco earthquake, forget it.

I’ll expose how the government destroyed the innocents and plowed their front lawns with salt. First the New York Times, then papers in London, Paris, Moscow, even Canada. News junkies love to read about others’ misery—here’s an entire town being strangled to death by government greed. And I’m going to tell the world.”

“Is that all you can see in this?” said Cardiff.
“Twenty-twenty vision!”

“Look around,” said Cardiff. “It’s a town with no people. No people, no story. Nobody cares if a town falls if there are no people in it. Your ‘story’ will run for one day, maybe. No book deal, no TV series, no film for you. Empty town. Empty bank account.”

A scowl split McCoy’s face.
“Son of a bitch,” he murmured. “Where in hell is everyone?”
“They were never here.”

“No one’s here now, but the houses get painted, the lawns get mowed? They were just here, have to have been. You know that and you’re lying to me. You know what’s going on.”
“I didn’t till now.”

“And you’re not telling me? So you’re keeping the headlines to yourself to protect this pathetic little ghost town?”
Cardiff nodded.

“Damn fool. Go on, stay poor and righteous. With you or without you I’m going to get to the bottom of this. Gangway!”

McCoy lunged down the porch steps, onto the street. He rushed up to the adjacent house and pulled open the door, stuck his head in, then entered. He emerged a moment later, slammed the door, and ran on to the next house, yanked open that screen door, jumped in, came out, his blood-red visage quoting dark psalms. Again and again he opened and closed the doors of half a dozen other empty houses.

Finally, McCoy returned to the front yard of the Egyptian View Arms. He stood there, panting, muttering to himself. As his voice drifted off into silence, a bird flew over and dropped a calling card on James Edward McCoy’s vest.

Cardiff stared off across the meadow-desert. He imagined the shrieks of the arriving trainloads of hustling reporters. In his mind’s eye he saw a twister of print inhaling the town and whirling it off into nothing.

“So.” McCoy stood before him. “Where are all the people?”
“That seems to be a mystery,” said Cardiff.
“I’m sending my first story now!”
“And how will you do that? No telegraphs or telephones.”
“Holy jeez! How in hell do they live?”
“They’re aerophiles, orchids, they breathe the air. But wait. You haven’t examined everything. Before you go off half-cocked, there’s one place I must show you.”

CHAPTER 22

Cardiff led McCoy into the vast yard of motionless stones and flightless angels. McCoy peered at the markers.
“Damn. There’s plenty of names, but no dates. When did they die?”
“They didn’t,” Cardiff said softly.
“Good God, lemme look closer.”

McCoy took six steps west, four steps east, and came to…
The open grave with a coffin gaping wide, and a spade tossed to one side.
“What’s this? Funeral today?”

“I dug that,” said Cardiff. “I was looking for something.”
“Something?” McCoy kicked some dirt clods into the grave. “You know more than you’re telling. Why are you protecting this town?”
“All I know is that I might stay on.”

“If you stay, you cannot tell these people the whole truth—that the bulldozers are coming, and the cement mixers, the funeral directors of progress. And if you leave, will you tell them before you go?”
Cardiff shook his head.
“Which leaves me,” said McCoy, “as guardian of their virtues?”

“God, I hope not.” Cardiff shifted by the open grave. Clods fell to drum the coffin.
McCoy backed off, nervously staring down at the open grave and into the empty coffin. “Hold on.” A strange look came over his face. “My

God, I bet you brought me here to stop my telephoning out, or even trying to leave town! You…"

At this, McCoy spun, lost his footing, and fell.
"Don't!" cried Cardiff.

McCoy fell into the coffin full-sprawled, eyes wide, to see the spade fall, loosened by accident or thrown in murder, he never knew. The spade struck his brow. The jolt shook the coffin lid. It slammed shut over his stunned and now colorless eyes.

The bang of the coffin lid shook the grave and knocked down dirt showers, smothering the box.
Cardiff stood amazed and in shock, a mile above.
Had McCoy slipped, he wondered, or was he pushed?

His foot dislodged another shower of dirt. Did he hear someone shrieking beneath the lid? Cardiff saw his shoes kick more dirt down into silence. With the box now hidden, he backed off, moaning, stared at the tombstone above etched with someone else's name, and thought, That must be changed.

And then he turned and ran, blindly, stumbling, out of the yard.

CHAPTER 23

I have committed murder, Cardiff thought.
No, no. McCoy buried himself. Slipped, fell, and shut the lid.

Cardiff walked almost backward down the middle of the street, unable to tear his gaze from the graveyard, as if expecting McCoy to appear, risen like Lazarus.
When he came to the Egyptian View Arms, he staggered up the walk and into the house, took a deep breath, and found his way to the kitchen.

Something fine was baking in the oven. A warm apricot pie lay on the pantry sill. There was a soft whisper under the icebox, where the dog was lapping the cool water in the summer heat. Cardiff backed off. Like a crayfish, he thought, never forward.

At the bay window he saw, on the vast lawn behind the house, two dozen bright blankets laid in a checkerboard with cutlery placed, empty plates waiting, crystal pitchers of lemonade, and wine, in preparation for a picnic. Outside he heard the soft drum of hooves.

Going out to the porch, Cardiff looked down at the curb. Claude, the polite and most intelligent horse, stood there, by the empty bread wagon.
Claude looked up at him.
“No bread to be delivered?” Cardiff called.

Claude stared at him with great moist brown eyes, and was silent.
“Would it be me that needs deliverance?” said Cardiff, as quiet as possible.
He walked down and stepped into the wagon.
Yes was the answer.

Claude started up and carried him through the town.

CHAPTER 24

They were passing the graveyard.
I have committed murder, Cardiff thought.
And, impulsively, he cried, “Claude!”

Claude froze and Cardiff jumped out of the wagon and rushed into the graveyard.
Swaying over the grave, he reached down in a terrible panic to lift the lid.

McCoy was there, not dead but sleeping, having given up, and was now taking a snooze.

Exhaling, Cardiff spoke down at his terrible enemy, glad that he was alive.

“Stay there,” he said. “You don’t know it, but you’re going home.” He dropped the lid gently, taking care to insert a twig in the gap between top and bottom to allow for air.
He ran back to Claude, who, sensing the visit was over, started off again at a good clop.

All around them the yards and porches were empty.
Where, Cardiff wondered, has everyone gone?
He had his answer when Claude stopped.

They stood before a large, rather handsome brick building, its entrance flanked by two Egyptian sphinxes lying supine, half-lioness and half-god, with faces he could almost name.
Cardiff read these words: HOPE MEMORIAL LIBRARY.

And in small letters beneath that: KNOW HOPE, ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE.
He climbed the library steps to find Elias Culpepper standing before the great double front doors. Culpepper behaved as if he’d been expecting the younger man, and motioned at him to sit down on the library steps.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” he said.
“We?” said Cardiff.
“The whole town, or most of it,” said Culpepper. “Where have you been?”
“The graveyard,” said Cardiff.
“You spend too much time there. Is there a problem?”

“Not anymore, if you can help me mail something home. Is there a train expected anytime soon?”
“Should be one passing through sometime today,” said Elias Culpepper.
“Doubt it’ll stop. That hasn’t happened in…”
“Can it be stopped?”
“Could try flares.”

“I’ve got a package I want sent, if you can stop it.”

“I’ll light the flares,” said Culpepper. “Where’s this package going?”
“Home,” Cardiff said again. “Chicago.”

He wrote a name and address on a page ripped from his notepad, and handed the piece of paper to Culpepper.
“Consider it done,” said Culpepper. He rose and said, “Now I think you ought to go inside.”
Cardiff turned and pushed the great library doors and stepped in.

He read a sign above the front counter: CARPE DIEM. SEIZE THE DAY. It could have also read: SEIZE A BOOK. FIND A LIFE. BIRTH A METAPHOR. His gaze drifted to find a large part of the town’s population seated at two dozen tables, books open, reading, and keeping the SILENCE that other signs suggested.
As if pulled by a single string, they turned, nodded at Cardiff, and turned back to their books.

The young woman behind the library front desk was an incredible beauty.
“My God,” he whispered. “Nef!”
She raised her hand and pointed, then beckoned for him to follow.

She walked ahead of him and she might well have had a lantern in her hand to light the dim stacks, for her face was illumination. Wherever she glanced, the darkness failed and a faint light touched the gold lettering along the shelves.
The first stack was labeled: ALEXANDRIA ONE.
And the second: ALEXANDRIA TWO.
And the last: ALEXANDRIA THREE.

“Don’t say it,” he said, quietly. “Let me. The libraries at Alexandria, five hundred or a thousand years before Christ, had three fires, maybe more, and everything burned.”
“Yes,” Nef said. “This first stack contains all or most of the books burned in the first fire, an accident.

“This second stack from the second burning, also an accident, has all the lost books and destroyed texts of that terrible year.

“And the last, the third, contains all the books from the third conflagration—a burning by mobs, the purposeful destruction of history, art, poetry, and plays in 455 B.C.
“In 455 B.C.,” she repeated quietly.
“My God,” he said, “how were they all saved, how did they get here?”
“We brought them.”
“How?!”

“We are tomb robbers.” Nef ran her finger along the stacks. “For the profit of the mind, the extension of the soul, whatever the soul is. We can only try to describe the mystery. Long before Schliemann, who found not one but twenty Troys, our ancestors played finders-keepers with the grandest library in time, one that would never burn, would live forever and allow those who entered to touch and scan, a chance to run after an extra piece of existence. This building is absolute proof against fire. In one form or another, it has traveled from Moses, Caesar, Christ, and will continue on toward the new Apollo and the Moon that the rocket chariot will reach.”

“But still,” he said. “Those libraries were ruined. Are these duplicates of duplicates? The lost are found, but how?”
Nef laughed quietly. “It was a hard task. Down through the centuries, a book here or there, a play one place, a poem another. A huge jigsaw, fitted in pieces.”

She moved on in the comfortable twilight spilling through the library’s tall windows, brushing her fingers over the names and titles.
“Remember when Hemingway’s wife left his novel manuscript on a train, lost forever?”
“Did he divorce or kill her?”

“The marriage survived for a while. But that manuscript is here.”

He looked at the worn typewriter box labeled: FOOTHILLS; KILIMANJARO.
“Have you read it?”

“We’re afraid to. If it is as fine as some of his work, it would break our hearts because it must remain lost. If it’s bad, we might feel worse. Perhaps Papa knew it was best for it to remain lost. He wrote another Kilimanjaro, with Snows instead.”
“How in hell did you find it?”

“The week it was lost we advertised. Which is more than Papa did. We sent him a copy. He never replied, and the Snows was published a year later.”
Again she moved to touch more volumes.

“Edgar Allan Poe’s final poem, rejected. Herman Melville’s last tale, unseen.”
“How?”

“We visited their deathbeds in their last hours. The dying sometimes speak in tongues. If you know the language of deliriums you can transcribe their strange sad truths. We tend them like special guardians late at night, and summon a last vital spark and listen closely and keep their words.

Why? Since we are the passengers of time, we thought it only proper to save what might be saved on our passage to eternity, to preserve what might be lost if neglected, and add some small bit of our far-traveling and long life.

We have guarded not only Troy and its ruins and sifted the Egyptian sands for wise stones to put beneath our tongues to clear our speech, but we have, like cats, inhaled the breaths of mortals, siphoned and published their whispers.

Since we have been gifted with long lives, the least we can do is pass that gift on in inanimate objects—novels, poems, plays—books that

rouse to life when scanned by a living eye. You must never receive a gift, ever, without returning the gift twice over.

From Jesus of Nazareth to noon tomorrow, our baggage is the library and its silent speech. Each book is Lazarus, yes? And you the reader, by opening the covers, bid Lazarus to come forth. And he lives again, it lives again, the dead words warmed by your glance."

"I never thought…," Cardiff said.
"Think." She smiled. "Now," she said, "I believe it's time for a picnic, to celebrate we don't know what. But celebrate we must."

CHAPTER 25

The picnic was spread waiting on the back lawn of the EGYPTIAN VIEW ARMS.
"Speech!" someone called.
"I don't know how to begin," Cardiff said.
"At the beginning!" There was a gentle laughter.
Cardiff took a deep breath and plunged in.

"As you may know, the State Department of Highways has been measuring string from Phoenix east and north and from Gallup north and west. The exact measurements of a new freeway will touch latitude 89 eighty miles west of longitude 40."
Someone on the far side of the picnic let his sandwich fall and cried, "My God, that's us!"
"No!" someone else cried, and a dozen others whispered, "No!"
"That's not possible," someone said.

"Anything," said Cardiff, quietly, "in government, is possible."
"They can't do that," one of the ladies cried.
"But they can. No freeway in any part of your state has ever been put on the ballot. The highway men, God listen to that, highway men, are their own conscience."
"And you traveled here to warn us?" said Elias Culpepper.
Cardiff blushed. "No."

“You were going to keep it secret!?”

“I wanted to see your town. I planned nothing. I assumed you all knew.”
“We know nothing,” said Elias Culpepper. “God almighty. You might as well say Vesuvius is threatening to erupt at our city limits!”
“I must admit,” said Cardiff, “that when I saw your faces, had breakfast, lunch, and dinner with you, I knew I couldn’t leave and not tell you.”
“Tell us again,” said Elias Culpepper.

Cardiff looked at Nef, who gave him the merest nod.
“The State Highway Commission…”
Lightning struck. Earthquakes shook. A comet hit the Earth. Cats leaped off roofs. Dogs bit their tails and died.
And the picnic ground, the sweet grass, was empty.

Sweet Jesus, thought Cardiff, have I done this?
“Fool, idiot, stupid dumb idiot fool,” he muttered.
He opened his eyes and saw Nef standing on a rise of green lawn calling over to him. “Come into the shade. You’ll die of sunstroke.”
And he went over into the shade.

CHAPTER 26

My God, Cardiff thought, even the sunflowers have turned away. He could not see their faces, but he was certain they fixed him with a fiery stare.
“I’m empty,” he said at last. “I’ve told all my secrets. Now, Nef, you must give me yours.”

“Well,” she said, and began to take sandwiches out of a hamper, to cut bread and butter it and offer it to him as she spoke.

“Everyone in this town was once somewhere else,” she said. “We came together one by one. Long, long ago, we knocked elbows in Rome or Paris or Athens or Dallas or Portland until, very late in time, we found out that there was a place where we might collect. Sanctuary, Arizona,

was one of the names, but that was foolish. I imagine Summerton's just as foolish, but it fits. It has to do with flowers and survival.

We all grew up in Madrid or Dublin or Milwaukee, some in France or Italy. In the very beginning, a long time ago, there were some children, but as time passed the children got fewer. It had nothing to do with wine or flowers, nothing to do with the environment or the families, even though it seems to have been genetic. I guess you'd call us 'sports.' That's a scientific term for something that can't be explained.

The Darwinians said the process was all jumps, hops, genetic leaps, with no links between. Suddenly, members of a family whose ancestors had lived to seventy years were living to ninety, a hundred. Others, even longer.

But the peculiar thing, of course, was that there were those of us—young men and women—who did not much change at all, and then simply did not change. While all our friends moved on to sickness and old age, we strange ones stayed behind.

It was one long picnic spread over the entire North American continent and Europe. And we, the lonely ones, were the exceptions to the rule of 'Grow up, grow old, and certainly die.' For a while, we hardly noticed this peculiar longevity ourselves, except to note that we felt fine and looked good while our friends jumped headlong into the grave. We peculiars lingered in mid-spring with summer always just around the corner, and autumn somewhere far down the road, not even a rumor. Does any of this make sense?"

Cardiff nodded, fascinated with what she was saying, the flow and beauty of her telling making it, somehow, believable.

"Most of our meetings were by chance," she went on. "A trip on a ferry boat, a voyage on a ship, a descent in an elevator, a collision going through doors, a place at a table, a passing glance on a seventeenth-century street, but somewhere in time we gave pause and asked where

we came from, what we were doing, and how old were we, and saw the lie in each other's faces.

"'I am twenty, I am twenty-two, I am thirty,' we said, at tea, or drinking in a bar, but the truth was not there.

We had been born during Victoria's reign, or when Lincoln was shot, or as Henry VIII laid his queen's head on the chopping block. It took many years for the truth to rise, one here, two there, until our real births were revealed. 'Good Lord,' we cried. 'We are Time's twins.

You ninety-five, yes, and I one hundred and ten.' And we searched each other's face, as in mirrors, and saw soft-showered April and sun-filled May instead of raining October, dark November, and Christmas with no lights. We wept.

And when the weeping stopped we compared long-lost childhoods and the bullies who had tormented us for being different, and not knowing why. Friends abandoned us when suddenly the friends were fifty and sixty and we still looked fresh out of high school. Marriages failed and the grave shut out all the rest.

And we were left stranded in a great mausoleum that echoed with the laughter of school chums now incinerated or, if still alive, wielding crutches and piloting wheelchairs.

Soon we found, by instinct, that it was best to keep moving, on to new towns to take up new lives, old souls in new bodies, lying about our past. We were not happy, then. We became happy. How? The rumor, after centuries, of a new town reached us.

The myth held that a man on horseback crossing a great desert got off in emptiness, built a hut, and waited for others to arrive. He placed an ad in a magazine that extolled the young weather, fresh times, new circumstances.

It contained multitudinous hints that might be unraveled by similar freaks in Oswego and Peoria, fellow lonely ones who watched the fall of friends all around and heard the earth thunder on too many coffin lids. They felt their limbs, still as limber as on graduation day, and wondered about their desolation. They read and reread the strange travel ad that promised a haven, a new place, as yet unnamed.

A town that was small, but growing. Only twenty-one-year-olds need apply. Well, there, you see? Hints! No direct pronouncements. But lonelies everywhere, from Deadfall, Dakota, and Wintershade, England, felt the hair rise on their necks and packed their bags.

Maybe, they thought, it would be worth the time and travel. And what was once a roadside bypass became a post office, a Pony Express standby, and then a jerkwater train stop, where strangers scanned each other's faces and found yesterday's sunrise instead of tomorrow's midnight.

They were driven by more than birthright. They were driven by one final terrible fact: at last, none could give or produce children."

"It came to that?" whispered Cardiff.

"Yes, it finally happened. We lived longer but at a price. We had to be our own children, having none. So, year by year, strangers got off the train, one way, or rode up on horseback or walked the long walk and never looked back.

By 1900 Summerton had its crops planted, its gardens full, its gazebos built, its social life established, and world communications running out but not in. No radios, no TVs, no newspapers, well, almost none.

There was and is the Culpepper Summerton News, with not much news, for no one was born and almost no one died. Occasionally someone fell down a flight of stairs, or off a ladder, but we tend to mend fast. No cars, so no fatalities. But we were all busy, busy raising

food, socializing, writing, dreaming. And then, of course, there were romances.

For while we could not propagate, we could still enact passion. A perfect population, assembled from the four corners of creation, a jigsaw beautifully fitted with no rough edges. Everyone had a job, some wrote poems, others novels, all got published in far places, fantasies mainly of cities beyond belief, whose readers thought the tales mere figments of wild imagination, but we were living it. So there it is. Here it is. Perfect weather, perfect town, perfect lives. Long lives. Most of us shook hands with Lincoln, attended the obsequies at Grant's tomb, and now…"

"Now?" said Cardiff.
"You are a messenger of doom, come to destroy it all."
"I am not the message, Nef. I do deliver it, yes."

"I know," said Nef, quietly. "But how I wish you could go off and come back with some better truth."
"If I could, so help me God, Nef, I'd gladly bring it to you."

"Go," she said. "Please. Find it and bring it here."

But he could only sit on the evergreen grass of eternal summer and let the tears run down his cheeks.

CHAPTER 27

"And now," said Nef.
"Now?" said Cardiff.
"I must prove that I do not wish to kill the bearer of bad news. Come."

And she led him across the lawn where the picnic blankets still lay as after a storm, tossed and half-furled, and some few dogs had arrived with the army ants while several cats waited for the beasts to leave, and Nef walked among them and opened the front door of the Egyptian View Arms and, ducking his head, blushing, Cardiff stepped in swiftly,

but she was already at the stairs and halfway up before he touched the first riser, and then they were in her tower room and he looked and saw that her vast bed had been stripped and the windows thrown open wide with their wind-tossed curtains and the town clock was striking four in the afternoon as Nef lifted her arms and a great soft bloom of sheet rose in a summer cloud over the bed and he seized his half and with her gentled it down in a field of white over the bed to cover its face.

And they stood back and watched the late afternoon exhale and fill the lace and blow the curtains inward toward the bed, like a fall of never-arriving snow, and there was a glass of lemonade on either bedside table, and his questioning look caused her to laugh and shake her head. Only lemonade, nothing more.

“Because,” she said, “I will inebriate you.”
It was a long fall to the bed. She arrived an eternity later. He sank under white sheets of snow and recalled his whole life, in a whiplash of memory.

“Say it,” he heard her cry, a long way off.
“Oh, Nef, Nef,” he cried. “I love you!”

It was twilight. The lace curtains continued to move in a white snowfall above them. The Chinese wind crystals on the porch chimed. They lay hand in hand, dear chums most dearly met, eyes shut, drinking the silence, dressed only by the late sunlight and the weather, and at last she said: “How would you like to live a few hundred years? Or,” she added, “forever, whichever comes first.”

“Forever, I think,” he said.
“Good.” Her hand tightened on his. “Trust me?”
“Yes. No. Yes.”
“Which?”

“I’m confused,” he said. “I’m not one of your miraculous longtime historical ‘sports.’ Can you make me one?”
“You came to us, remember.”

“But for two reasons. To see your town before it was buried under cement. And I was carrying the news of your destruction, which you didn’t know, and I had to tell. Two reasons.”

“Three,” she said. “There was a sense in you, as in most of us, like a homing pigeon, a thing printed in your blood or behind your face, a ghost in your head. And why not? A ghost of a need, just as our ghosts moved us, let us recognize each other when we met on street corners or in passing trains.

Your third reason for coming here was as natural as breathing. You came here looking for the right place, but you couldn’t admit it, so you gave other reasons. You’re like us, or almost like us. You have the inclination, the grammar printed in your genes, to let you live to four times the age you are now. We can only encourage you with our company and, of course, the weather, food, and wine.”

“Is the fountain of youth bottled, then?”

“No, no.” She laughed quietly. “There is no such medicine, no cure. We only supplement what God gave you first. Some people never have colds, never break bones, don’t get headaches, drink without getting hangovers, climb mountains without having to stop to rest, remain passionate beyond belief, all God-given.

Our gift from Darwin’s God or God’s Darwin is simply being part of a moveable feast of inheritance moving upstream against death. Oh, Lord.” She laughed quietly. “How can moveable feasts swim upstream? But you know my meaning. You refuse that dark tide that sinks down into night. Otherwise you would not be here, listening to a fool.”

“Beloved fool, crazed lady, beautiful lunatic,” he murmured.

“Now, let me give you the final explanation for myself and all the friends whom you have met here. The great ‘medicine’ was finding that we were alive and loving it. We have celebrated every day of our lives. The celebration, the exhilaration, of worshipping the gift, has kept us young. Does that sound impossible?

By simply knowing you’re alive and looking at the sun and enjoying the weather and speaking it every moment of your existence, this ensures our longevity. We live every moment of our existence to the fullest, and that is a superb medicine. In that way we refuse the darkness. Now think of what I’ve said and tell me about your future.”

He lay back and scanned the ceiling for answers. “Good grief!” he said. “I don’t know. I’ve got obligations back home. Many friends. Mother and father both still alive. A woman I’ve been almost engaged to for two years—two years—think about it!

I’ve been dragging my feet, taking advantage, typical male. So many loose ends, knots to be tied, goodbyes to be said. I’ve just started thinking and don’t know what to think. I know that I love this town, these people, and you. God, I’m in the midst of love and am afraid to fall further. It’s too much in a few days.”

She waited and saw an outline of her future on the ceiling, also. “I will not be the cat on your chest that inhales the air you need to breathe,” she said. “But you must decide. And I have saved one final thing for last.

If you stay you will be in many ways the center of our existence. You will definitely be the center of mine. Because, as you well know, there have been no children born in this town for a long, long while.”

“And soon,” he put in at last, “the first new child must be born and someone must be the father. Perhaps that father is me.”
“Perhaps you already are.” She placed her hands upon her stomach, as if trying to sense a presence. “Perhaps you are.”
“That would be quite a responsibility,” he said.

“So,” she said, “I’ve put a big burden on you. I must let you go and hope that you will return. But you must decide soon. We won’t be here much longer, soon the town will be gone. We’re leaving.”

“Is that possible?”
“Yes. It’s happened many times before, before Summerton even existed. We carry our homes in our heads. All across country, from Providence to Kansas to points farther west. If we can’t save this town, we’ll burn it and scatter the ashes. We won’t be revealed again. The bullies must never know we exist.”

“Oh God,” he whispered. “It is a burden. Let me sleep. Sometimes in dreams I find answers.”
“Sleep then,” she said.

“You,” he said. “Not the weather, not the genetics, you, dear Nef,” he paused, “are my fountain of youth.”

“Let me make you young again,” she said.

And sealed his mouth with hers.

CHAPTER 28

He slept and he dreamed.

He was on the train, going east, and then suddenly he was in Chicago, and even more suddenly, he was in front of the Art Institute and was going up the stairs and through the corridors to stand before the great Sunday in the Park painting.

A woman was standing by the painting and she turned and it was his fiancée.
As he watched, she grew older, aging before his eyes, and she said to him, “You’ve changed.”
He said, “No, I haven’t changed at all.”

“Your face is different. You’ve come to say goodbye.”
“No, just to see how you are,” he said.
“No, you’ve come to say goodbye.”

And as he watched, she grew even older and he felt very small, standing in front of the painting and trying to think of something to say. Quite suddenly she was gone.

He walked out of the building and there at the bottom of the stairs were seven or eight of his friends.
As he watched, they grew older and they said the same things that she had said.
“You’ve come to say goodbye.”

“No,” he insisted. “No, I haven’t done that.”
Then he turned and ran back into the building, a young man suddenly old among old paintings.
And then he awoke.

CHAPTER 29

He sat for a long while listening to the wind howl in the chimney and the rain funnels outside.
The old house creaked down into a deep swell of night then backed up and over, out of sight of land and light.

Rats practiced graffiti on the walls and spiders played harps so high that only the hairs inside his ears heard and quivered.
How much loss, how much gain? he wondered. How much leave, and how much remain?

What to decide? he thought.
All right, he called into himself. What? Which?
Not a stir of dark in his head. Not an echo.
Just a whisper: Sleep.

And he slept again and put out the light behind his eyes.
He heard a locomotive whistle across his dreams.

The train was gliding, rushing in the night, taking the curves under the moon, hitting the long straight-aways, tossing dust, scattering sparks, laying out echoes, and he was atilt and adream and somehow the familiar words came back in his head:

One kiss and all time's your dominion
One touch and no death can be cold.
One night puts off graveyard opinion
One hour and you'll never grow old.
Drink deep of the wine of forever
Drink long of eternity's stuff
Where everyman's learned and clever,
And two billion loves not enough.

He cried out in his dream. No! And then again, Oh God, yes.
And some final few words spelled his dreams:

Somewhere a band is playing,
Playing the strangest tunes,
Of sunflower seeds and sailors,
Who tide with the strangest moons.

He was waking now. His mouth sighed:

Somewhere a band is playing
Listen, O, listen, that tune?
Learn it and you'll dance on forever
In June and yet June and more…June.

The train was not far off now. It was rounding some hills. The sun was rising and he knew he had changed his mind.
He looked out at a sunrise that was bloody, a town filled with farewell light, and a weather that was so strange he would not forget it for a thousand days.

He saw his face in the bathroom mirror as he shaved, and the eyes looked immensely sad.
He came down to breakfast and sat before the mound of hotcakes and did not eat.
Nef, across from him, saw what he had seen in the mirror and sat back in her chair.
“Have you been thinking?” she asked.

He took a deep breath. Up to this very moment he didn’t know what would come from his mouth.
“Stay,” she said, before he could speak.
“I wish that I could.”
“Stay.”

And here she reached and took his hand.
And it was a warm hand and his own was cold. She seemed a goddess, bending to reach into his tomb and help him out.
“Please.”

“Oh God,” he cried. “Oh Christ, let me be!” He wept inside. “You don’t understand. I’m not made to not grow old.”
“How can you know?”

“Each of us knows. I was born to live and die at seventy. Then I will really be filled up. The fire of life, the good stuff, goes straight up the chimney. The sins, the sadness, whatever, stays like soot on the chimney walls. One can gather only so much darkness. I’ve collected too much. How do you knock the soot off the walls inside your soul?”

“With a chimney sweep,” she said. “Let me sweep and knock those walls until you laugh. I can, if you let me.”
“I won’t allow it.”
“No,” she said, quietly. “I don’t suppose you can. Oh, God, I might cry now. But I won’t. Goodbye.”

“I’m not going yet.”

“But I am. I can’t watch you go. Come back someday.”
“Do you think I’ll never come back?”
She nodded, eyes shut.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s so hard. I don’t know if I’m ready to live a hundred and thirty years. I wonder if anyone is or can be. It’s just,” he said, “it sounds so…lonely. Leaving everyone behind. Coming to the day when the last friend goes into the graveyard.”

“You’ll make new friends.”
“Yes, but there are no friends like the old ones. You can’t replace them.”

“No. You can’t.”
She looked at the door.
“If you go, and you do decide to come back, to try and find us, don’t wait too long.”

“Or it won’t work? I know. I’ll be too old. Must I decide before I’m…fifty?”
“Just come back to us,” she said.
And suddenly her chair was empty.

CHAPTER 30

At the train station, there were sunflowers out on the track. Someone had been there ahead of him and if it was Elias Culpepper, he never knew.

The train stopped this time, and he got on and as he bought a ticket from the conductor he asked, “Do you remember me?”

The man looked at his face intently, scowled, and looked again and said, “Can’t say I do.”

And the train gathered steam and chugged away from the station and Summerton, Arizona, was left behind.

CHAPTER 31

The train flew across flat corn lands, over the horizon, by the lake and to the great turbulent city next to the lake, and he was running up the steps of the museum and walking among paintings to sit before the endlessly intriguing Seurat, where the Sunday strollers stood still in an eternal park.

Now beside him sat Laura, glancing back and forth from the green park to him, stunned and questioning.

At last she said, “What have you done to your face?”
“My face?” he said.
“It’s changed,” she said.
“I didn’t change it.”
“What is it, then?”
“Things. Things changed it.”
“Can you change it back?”
“I’ll try.”

And then, as in the dream, but now in reality, he walked down the steps of the museum and all of his friends were waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

There were Tom and Pete and Will and Sam and all the rest and they said, “Let’s go out for a long dinner.”

He said, “No, I haven’t the time.”

“You’ve only just said hello,” they said.

“It’s not easy,” he said. “I’ve known you all for years. But, I’ve changed. And now I’ve got to go.”

He looked back up and at the top of the stairs stood Laura. A single tear rolled down her cheek as she stared at his so-familiar yet oh-so-changed face.

He smiled, and turned away and walked down the street toward the railroad station.

CHAPTER 32

The train came out of the east and without thinking of time or place, glided slowly past a spot that was marked only by dust, wind, cacti, a scatter of leaves, and a profusion of ticket-punch confetti that celebrated on the air and settled when the train was gone.

Meanwhile, a familiar suitcase skidded to a halt on the remains of a ramshackle station platform, a few surfboards on a tide of sand, followed by a man in a wrinkled summer suit who tumbled out like an acrobat, shouting with pride when he landed, swaying but intact.

“Damn, I did it!”

He picked up his flimsy suitcase and stared around at desolation, wiped his brow, and looked toward the end of the station platform where the mail catcher stood. He saw a white envelope in its steel holding arm and went to pluck it from the equipment’s grasp. On the front of the envelope he saw his name. He looked around, studying thirty thousand acres of blowing dust, and no roads leading in or out of the desolation.

“Well,” he whispered, “I’ve returned. So…”
He opened the envelope and read:
“My dear James. So you’ve come back. You had to! A lot has happened since you went away.”

He paused and regarded the empty desert where Summerton, Arizona, once had stood.
He returned to the letter:

“When you read this, we will be gone. There will be nothing left but sand and a few footprints soon to be blown away by the wind. We did not wait for the arrival of the machines and their operators. We pulled up our roots and vanished.

Have you heard of those orchards that once thrived near certain small California towns? As the small towns grew into big cities, the orange trees mysteriously disappeared. And yet, passing motorists who glance off toward the mountains will see that somehow those orchards have drifted or blown to settle and take root in the foothills, green and flourishing, far from the gasoline stampede.

“Well, my dear James, that is us. We are like those orchards. We’ve heard, through the years, late in the night, the great boa constrictor, the terrible endless snake of concrete rushing upon us, nearly soundless, no men swearing or shouting or revving tractor and truck engines, but just a terrible oiled hiss, the sound of reptiles sidewinding the grass or sifting the sand, all by itself, no men guiding, no one riding its loops and folds, a destination to itself, mindless but drawn by body warmth, the heat of people. And so, drawn by that warmth, as reptiles are, it came seeking to disturb our sleep, evict us from our homes.

All this we imagined in our dreams, long before you arrived with your awful burden of news. So do not let this weigh too heavily on your soul. We already knew this day was coming; it was only a matter of time.

“Years back, dear James, we began to prepare for the death of our town and the exodus of our people. We brought in hundreds of giant wooden wheels and a plentiful supply of heavy timbers and iron fastenings to bind them together. The wheels lay waiting on the edge of town for years along with the timbers drying in the sun.

“And then the deadfall trumpet blew, to tell it with your humor, at the picnic of the Apocalypse and you saw the faces before you pale with each new revelation. Once in mid-speech I thought you might back off, break, and run, panicked by our panic. Yet you stayed on. Finished, I thought you might fall and die so you could not witness our deaths.

“And when you looked up we were gone.

“We knew you were sick at heart, so I gave you what medicine I had, my attention and my pitiful words. And when you left on the noon train, leaping on long before it stopped, we looked at all those iron and wooden wheels beyond the city, and the platform timbers on which we imagined our houses, barns, and orchards transported so far off that no one would suspect this place had once known a life and now would know no more.

“You have seen, have you not, those solitary parades, single houses hoisted up on wooden plates and pulled like toys along the streets to empty lots to be replanted while the old sites turned to dust? Multiply that by three hundred homes and witness a parade of pachyderms, an entire town gliding toward the foothills, followed by the orchard trees.

“It is all quite impossible. Yet, in times of war, think of the preparations, the blueprints, the final accomplishments, thousands of ships, tens of thousands of tanks and guns, more tens of thousands of rifles, bullets, millions of iron helmets, tens of millions of shirts and jackets. How complicated but how necessary when war shouted and we ran. How much simpler our task to uproot a town, to run and rebirth it with wheels.

“In time, our fevers turned into a festival of triumph instead of a funeral march. We were forced on by the imagined thunder, the threatening hiss, of that new road beyond the eastern range. At night we could hear the road coming toward us full steam, rushing to catch us before we vanished.

“Well, the purveyors of concrete and movers of earth did not catch us. On the final day of our escape there remained, where you stand, the ruined station surrounded by a jungle of orange and lemon trees. These were the last to go, a beautiful excursion of softly scented orchards that drifted, four abreast, across the desert to nourish our newly hidden town.

“There you have it, dear James. We moved and left no pebble, no stone, no basement larder, no graveyard tombstone. All, all, all of it was transported.
“And when the highway arrives, what will they find?

Was there ever a Summerton, Arizona, a courthouse, a town hall, a picnic ground, an empty school? No, never.
Look to the dust.

“I will post this letter on the station platform mail-loop in the hope that it will reach you, if you should return. Somehow I know you will come back. I can feel your touch on this envelope even as I sign and seal it.

“When you finish reading this, dear friend and lover, consign it to the weather.”

And below this was her signature: Nef.
He tore the letter in quarters and then quarters of quarters, and quarters again, and loosed the confetti into the air.
Now, he thought, which way?

He squinted at the northern rim of desert where lay a length of low half-green hills. He imagined the orchards.
There, he thought.

He had taken but one step when he looked back.
Like an old brown dog, his suitcase lay on the dust-blown station platform.

No, he thought, you’re another time.
The luggage lay, waiting.
“Stay,” he said.
The luggage stayed.
He walked on.

CHAPTER 33

It was twilight when he reached the first row of orange trees.

It was deepening twilight when he saw the familiar crowds of sunflowers in each yard and the sign, EGYPTIAN VIEW ARMS, swaying above the verandah.

The sun was almost gone as he walked up the last sidewalk, mounted the porch steps, stood before the screen door, and pressed the doorbell. It chimed quietly. A slender shadow appeared on the hall stair.

“Nef,” he said at last, quietly.

“Nef,” he said, “I’m home.”

The end