

George and Albert (Scenery)

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I

A rusted hatchet lay in the driveway where it had landed after it bounced off the windshield of Conrad's pick-up window. The wooden handle was splintered and eaten away, the blade dull and rusted. It had neatly shattered the glass into little jigsaw puzzle pieces, each frozen in place as before, iced over with opacity.

A tall, burly man in brown studied the scene and skidded the point of his boot into the cement, as though he was snuffing out a cigarette. "Yeah," said the sheriff, "I 'spect he was a little mad at you all right. Go on, tell it. What happened?"

Conrad Cross stood opposite the sheriff. His face was the color of leather, with lines scored into it from years of working in the sun. Both hands were buried in the pockets of his overalls, and he looked down alternating his glance between the hatchet and the sheriff's boots.

"Well, it was late. I was in bed and woke up when he started hollerin' and shouting."

"Which one?"

"George. I think it was George 'cause he always wears that dog-eared hat. He was cursing up a fit, right under my bedroom window. I went out the front door and there he was in the middle of the road, stomping around naked in the moonlight, kicking up dust in the gravel."

The sheriff's eyes squinted as he peered across the road to a beat up old shack standing in a cow pasture. Hardly a shingle remained on the roof, and all the paint had long ago worn off the warped siding. The house had turned the color of ash and bricks from the chimney lay scattered about the weeds surrounding the small fenced-in yard along with an armory of junk car parts. There was also a small tool shed and not far away stood a large, sturdy white hay-barn.

"I yelled for him to get on to bed and cut the racket, then went back inside. Not a minute later I heard gravel hit the side of the house. That did it. I grabbed my shotgun, not intending to shoot him but maybe just blow that bit of floppy shoe leather off his head. But when I got outside I saw him drop into the ditch, or rather it looked like he *fell* into it. I figured it was over then. It ain't unusual for him to pass out right there in the weeds until the

next day. Hell, the county mower almost ran him over one morning."

Just then a door slammed and out from the garage came a white-haired boy, with no shirt, just muddy denim pants that sagged on his hips and came down past his feet so that they dragged on the ground as he walked. He carried a tin bucket and a trowel. As his pants scuffed along the pavement a dirty handkerchief danced like a tail from where it was stuffed into the white elastic band of his underwear. He stopped between the two men and looked up at them, mouth open and eyes trying to go in all directions at once. Conrad put his hand on the boy's head, and pushed the long locks away from his face. The boy reached into the bucket, brought out a quartz stone the size of a grape and held it out towards the sheriff.

"This is Sheldon, my youngest. Good kid. Good hearted, anyway. Every day is a challenge. Doctor says it might a been the well-water Edie drank when she was pregnant. Says somethin' bout the run-off from the fields being tainted with herbicide. I don't know what to believe anymore since—"

"I'm still listening, Connie," said the sheriff, and dug into his teeth with a toothpick. He usually didn't mind socializing but today it was clear he was only interested in the events the night before. This was a quiet Midwest farm town where nothing much ever happened, and the sheriff liked it that way.

"Well you best take his little gift to you there, Roger," Conrad said. "He'll follow you all the way to town unless you do." The sheriff reached down and picked up the rock from the boy's moist palm. Conrad gave Sheldon a little push. "Go on now, boy. Git digging whatever it is you came out for. Just stay out of my tomatoes." He disappeared behind the house, tripping on the hem of his jeans the whole way. The sheriff pocketed the stone. "So George fell in the ditch. Then what?"

"That's about it. I sat down on the top step of the porch and waited a few minutes for the crickets to start up again. Just as I was ready to get back to bed I heard him again, this time laughing. I saw him come up out of the ditch with the hatchet, prancing around like an Indian with a tomahawk. I've seen him crazy and drunk many times, but this one beat all, dancin' and tootin' like a damn clown. He kept yellin' for me to shoot him, and I would've—except I figured I'd end up blowing off more than his hat. I give up. I wasn't mad anymore, I just felt sorry for the daffy bastard. And just when I turned my back I heard the crash. After I seen what he done, I did shoot, well over his head just to scare him off, though the temptation was sure great just to blast his skinny ass into next week. He ran off into the woods like a bandit."

The sheriff frowned and shook his head slowly. "And you say this ain't the first incident?"

"Look, I don't want any trouble. I don't know which one of them brothers is worse, George or Albert, fact is I can't tell them apart except by their hats. But if it ain't one of 'em causing trouble it's the other. I got kids, Roger. Shelly's always poking his nose around God knows where, and my girl won't come outside after dark because she's afraid of bumping into those two when they're all juiced up, not to mention the wife. It ain't any care on my part. It's them I'm worried about."

The sheriff removed the toothpick from his mouth and scratched a patch of hair on the back of his neck. "So what else has happened?"

"You mean aside from waking up and finding Marek's cattle in my front yard and tromping up my field? Aside from backing that jalopy of theirs into my mailbox day after day, and running over the Lilac bushes?"

"There ain't no meanness in that. They're just careless is all."

"I know that, Roger. But where does the line get drawn? This here hatchet business *is* meanness, and I have a feeling there's going to be a lot more of it coming my way."

"You mean since George found out you told Marek he wasn't shuttin' the gate at night," said the sheriff.

"Any man a done that. If I hadn't rounded up the herd all those times myself, who knows where his cattle would've wandered off to. Though most likely they'd-a just stomped down all my corn." Conrad cradled his arms out in front of him as though he was asking the sheriff to take a load from them. "And listen, I didn't ask Marek to throw him out of that two-bit shed he rented to them."

The sheriff held the toothpick like a scepter and aimed it at the cold blue of Conrad's eyes.

"Well, I 'spect Darrel didn't know exactly what an ugly can of worms he was opening up by doing that. There's such a thing as due process you know. George and Albert signed a lease, and they pay their twenty-five dollars every month just like they 'spose to. No judge is goin' to toss them fellers out for not minding the gate."

"Yessir. And that leaves me to bear the brunt of their drunken madness, in the form of rocks and hatchets. Do I have to catch one 'tween my shoulder blades, before anybody does anything?"

The sheriff smirked. "As long as he's aiming for you, I reckon you ain't got nothing to worry about."

"Maybe so. But what happens when them two buggers get a hold on a gun? I know they can't even afford the bullets, but just suppose somehow one of 'em puts off the whiskey long enough to pawn hisself a shotgun. It won't matter who they aiming for then, the whole county will have to take cover."

"Just set yourself down now, Connie," said the sheriff. He flicked the toothpick away with a snap. "I'll have a talk with both George and Albert, and I'll try to make it clear there's to be no more shenanigans. I've never known 'em to be violent. I know they get a little wild at times and I'm sure there's more liquor in them veins than blood, but truth is they're as easily spooked as a horse in a pack of dogs. I never seen 'em hurt nobody."

"Well just look at that there window. That's goin' hurt my wallet having to fix it. I'm not askin' for the money, I know they don't have a pot to piss in. Damn it, all I want is some peace and quiet."

"Just keep your peace and you'll get the other. Take a step back now. I don't need you to stir 'em up anymore than you have."

"Just so long as they don't—"

The sheriff's callused hand reached out and firmly grasped Conrad's shoulder. "Just so long as you keep that shotgun of yours in the closet there won't be any need for me to come back here. All right?" Conrad looked down at his boots and nodded. The sheriff picked up the hatchet, brushed off a few crystals of glass and walked to his car.

II

Sheldon kept a steady pace on his way to the creek that ran behind his father's corn field. He walked down one of the rows between thick green stalks that shot up past his head, their long-tongued leaves stung his bare shoulders as he passed.

At the end of the row stood a thicket of weeds and thorns with a curvy path wound through it. Sheldon had come this way many times. He loved the flowers and trees and the way they smiled and waved to him in the wind. He loved the smell of clover after it rained and how the hills rolled and tumbled. The path sloped sharply downhill. The weeds soon thinned out and gave way to giant oaks and elms at the bottom which stood like pillars holding up the

sky. Sheldon touched the bark of each tree he passed. The ground was covered with fallen branches strung out like bones, and he picked out one of these to use as a walking stick. Shortly he came upon a shallow creek, and as he waded into it his eyes scanned the bed for rocks. Sheldon liked all kinds of rocks, but it was quartz that he treasured. He even kept rocks with only a hint of the shiny crystals in them. He dug into the bed of the creek day after day, and had assembled quite a collection of stones which he kept in a pillowcase out in the garage, inside an old tackle-box his father discarded. But he never went anywhere without a few in his pocket to give away. He liked to share his collection.

This area of the creek bed was sparse in its rock selection, so after digging around a bit, Sheldon wandered downstream exploring new territory. He knew most of this area quite well having tramped around here much of his time. There were the familiar old sandbars and fallen logs he had often played on, and steep eroded cliffs the creek had cut out of the land. But he never went further downstream than the old iron bridge. A few neighborhood boys had once pelted him with mud-balls from there. He stayed clear of it ever since. But today he had only found a few stones and since there seemed to be no kids around he ventured on downstream, keeping a cautious eye on the road above.

Though he had rolled up his pants before wading in, the water still soaked them as he clumsily trudged along. After the distance he had wandered there was not a dry spot on them and the weight of the wet denim tired him out. Since going under the bridge he seemed more interested in the unexplored surroundings than looking for quartz, so he stopped to rest on a sandy shore where the sun shot through the leaves.

He stretched out on the sand and watched as the crows cawed and the sparrows warbled overhead, flitting from tree to tree. The hair tingled on the back of his neck when he heard a throaty growl behind him. His head perked up and he looked around slowly this way and that trying to pinpoint the sound, but it had stopped and all he saw were a few green leaves spiraling down into the water.

He picked up the bucket, trowel and the stick he was carrying and prepared to go back home when he heard the noise again, this time distinctly from the bushes higher up on shore. Sheldon spotted some movement from the area. There in the sand was the remains of a man's boot. The sole was worn out in the middle and the heel had a crack in the rubber. Laces dangled loose from both sides and the tongue stuck out like dead bark. Sheldon was not afraid of men. All the men he knew either ignored him or patted his head. And though there was no man connected to this shoe, he was sure it had moved. He stepped closer, the

crooked branch held out stiffly in front of him. He poked at the boot, anticipating a small animal to spring out, while he sprang back himself each time the branch made contact. He repeated this process unconvinced the boot was lifeless. Each time he gave it a push it flopped back a little ways further into the weeds.

Then he saw him. Sprawled out on the ground lay a man. Except for a hat and one shoe, he was naked. His small pale body had sparse patches of dark hair, and his bones protruded through his skin as though he was a plastic-wrapped skeleton. The man's face was unshaven, his beard speckled with gray as his chin came to a point, and his nose seemed to curve down in an effort to reach it. A moth-eaten Stetson covered the man's eyes, and Sheldon used the stick to poke it away from his head. A few flies buzzed out from underneath. He recognized him as the old man who lived in the house across the street. The man who sat on his front porch day after day carving little soap statuettes and talking to himself, occasionally leaning over to deposit a stream of tobacco juice through a crack in the floorboards. He had never been this close before. Sheldon surveyed him curiously from head to toe, mesmerized. The man's breath rasped through his open mouth, void of teeth except for a few black and yellow stumps. His right hand held tight onto the neck of a tall bottle with a small amount of auburn liquid in the bottom. He stared at the man's groin and decided it was too ugly to be uncovered, and so he took out his handkerchief and neatly draped it over the area. Further down, he recognized the mate of the old shoe he had been poking at but this one had something shiny stuck inside it just below the man's ankle. He appeared to be sleeping soundly, so Sheldon crouched down and carefully pulled out the object. It was a pearl-handled pocketknife.

His eyes struggled to remain focused, but his excitement made it difficult. Immediately he tried to open the knife but having never held one before he fumbled with it for some time. At last he found the niche in the blade and heard it lock into place with a snick. All at once the man's eyes opened wide and he sat straight up. The bottle was raised up over his head like a hammer and he howled as though he had just smashed his thumb with it. Sheldon was so scared he couldn't move. His body became rigid except for his wobbling knees. All the blood ran out of his face and down to his hands where it pulsed and throbbed. His breath came in short puffs. There were purple spots all around and then there was nothing but black.

When Sheldon awoke he found himself propped up against a tree. He had a bitter, vaporous taste in his mouth. There in front of him was the naked man, squatted down holding the pocketknife and peering into his face. "So the little assassin comes to. How you feel little

feller? That's why they call whiskey 'the water of life.' I thought you was dead fer a minute. But here you are, ready to go sneak up on somebody else. It's not nice, son. Someday someone will teach you that. But I reckon it won't be your daddy. Need another swig?" George held out the bottle, and Sheldon shook his head, and tried to put a little distance between himself and the man's potent breath. His hand tingled and he realized that his handkerchief was wrapped tightly around it.

"You're that young 'un of Conrad's aren't you? They say you is as dumb as a post, boy. I reckon that's true by the looks of ya. But it would take a right clever man to track me here and a brave man to steal my knife and cut off my head, wouldn't it? What's a matter? Can't you talk?" George stood up and spit, then paced back and forth in front of the boy, his arms crossed and his eyebrows narrowed. "By golly that Conrad has got some gumption sending you out to do his dirty work. I ought to slice you up, pack you in a barrel of salt and send that yellow son of a bitch a Christmas present."

Sheldon watched amused and unafraid, as George scratched his chin and then fixed his hat. He was somewhat mesmerized by the nakedness of the man and the voice clucking like an agitated rooster.

"I still can't figure it. Let's see now," said George. "You bring a shovel to bury my bones, a bucket to carry my head home in, and figure on using my own knife to do the killin.' That right?" The open pocketknife teeter-tottered in between George's fingers. "Question is—where do these rocks fit in?" He kicked the tin bucket nearby. "You wasn't gonna make a rattle out of my skull were ya? Or maybe you thought you was gonna be like Davy and bring down old Goliath with a sling, but these here rocks is so puny you couldn't put a welt on sow's keister."

George stopped pacing, took a last pull from the bottle and then threw it into the creek. He closed the pocketknife and stuck it back into his boot. "Aw hell. You ain't no assassin at-tall. Got no stomach for it. You likely pissed yourself, you was so scared. And you gave that knife such a squeeze you almost took a few fingers off. The *handle* is for your hand, sonny. Try to remember that." George held up his hand and made a slicing motion across it with one finger. Sheldon looked down and saw the handkerchief wrapped around his left hand stained with blood. He had seen blood only once before when a fishhook snagged his wrist. It had hurt much worse than this, but his father had wrapped up the wound in much the same way.

"Boy, your pa has outdone hisself this time. If I hadn't woke up maybe you would've figured

out which end of that knife to stick in me. And who would know? I'd be dead and out of your pa's hair. Let me ask you something." George reached down, pulled Sheldon up on his feet and shook him. "What did I ever do to you?" He paused as if expecting an answer. "I don't know why he's trying to make my life so miserable, but by god I've had it." He crouched lower and looked menacingly into the boys face so close that their noses touched. "You tell that bastard if—" Sheldon's soft watery eyes stared straight back at George and the moment of anger was gone. When he released his grip on the boy he noticed Sheldon had a quartz stone in his unbandaged hand. He held it out to George and it sparkled in the sun.

"You giving it to me are you? Well, well. Time to be friends is it?" He curtly smacked Sheldon's hand and the rock flew into the weeds. The boys eyes followed its trajectory until he saw George's finger wave in front of his nose. "I don't want nothing from you. Understand? Nothing." George turned away, picked up his one boot still laying in the sand and struggled to put it on while hopping around on one foot.

Sheldon was on his knees in the weeds where the rock had flown. The old man adjusted his hat, walked to the creek and waded in, his pale skin glowing in the sunlight. "You better git on home now, boy. You shouldn't a come so far downstream anyhow." Halfway across George stopped, turned around and saw Sheldon still busily searching. "I said *git*, boy. This here ain't your property." Kid's dumber than a damn mutt, he thought. He shook his head and went on his way through the woods towards home. A few minutes later, after he found the rock, Sheldon left all his things behind and followed.

III

Sheriff Roger McCray pulled up in front of the Corner Tavern that afternoon. He had hoped to find George and Albert here so he could resolve the issue before they both began their daily drinking. He pushed open the screen door and walked into the smoky blackness of the room. The smell of greasy fried food, smoke and stale beer soothed his nerves. He nodded to a few regulars and sat on a stool at the bar.

"Hey, Roger, how ya doing?" shouted the bartender over the sound of spattering oil. "I got some tenderloins coming right up. You like one?"

"No thanks, Grady. I'm not here for lunch today."

"Uh oh. That don't sound good." Grady wiped his hands on his apron, grabbed a pot of coffee from the kitchen and sauntered over to the sheriff. He poured a cup and sat it down.

"Have you seen George or Albert today?" asked the sheriff.

"George, no. Though he was here till closing last night. You just missed Albert. Believe it or not he wasn't here to drink."

"Now that's a first."

Grady leaned over and rested his elbows on the bar. "I had an old rusty padlock on the basement door outside. It kept sticking and I ain't got no patience to fiddle with it, so this mornin' I stopped over to Frank's and bought a new one. Albert was in there too, and he asked me what I did with the old one. Says he's been looking to lock up his tool shed out back. Thinks someone has been stealing from him. There ain't a lock he can afford, so I told him to come by and I dug the old one out of the trash and let him have it. Like I said, sometime the key sticks a bit but it'll still hold."

A pinball machine in the corner came to life, lights flashed and bells rang hoping to attract someone with a quarter. The sheriff took a sip of black coffee and looked down the bar towards the pool hall in the back. No one was playing. A few faces in the booths behind him tried to get his attention but he ignored them.

"Tell me, Grady. You ever have any problems with those boys?"

"Naw. They're not saints by any standard. They spout off at the mouth a bit when they're soused but I don't think anybody pays 'em any mind. They do something wrong, Roger?"

A voice boomed from behind them. "I guess 'ol Grady hasn't heard the news." Everyone in the bar looked up at the same time. "Last night George tried to kill Conrad Cross. Threw an ax at him and just missed giving him a new part."

"Well if it ain't the town crier. As usual you haven't got the facts straight. Why don't you just stay over there with Ernie and finish your dinner," said the sheriff and nodded his head in the direction of the booths.

"I thought you might be interested in this, Roger. Ernie and I have just come up with a plan to solve your problem...with old Albert and George, that is."

The sheriff stared down into his cup and wished he could disappear into it. "Sanford," he said. "I really don't think I have time for this, if you don't mind."

"Let me just say this, Roger. I talked to Darrel Marek this morning, and he wants those two

senile old drunks out of there, but you and I and everybody knows that there ain't no way to evict them as long as they pay their rent. Specially under the conditions of that there corn-crib they call home. Why, the county judge sees that and he's liable to make Darrel pay *them* twenty-five dollars a month." The words spilled out of Sanford's mouth like a well rehearsed speech. "Now Ernie here has touched on a scheme of such brilliance that I'm recommending that he look into other professions aside from delivering the mail. It will ensure the legal removal of the brothers, upon which Darrel promised to immediately destroy the eyesore he has so shamefully rented in the first place."

"That ain't right, Sanford," Grady said. "Where are them two fellers going to live? Do you have a plan for that?"

"Now, now, Grady," said Sanford. "You and I and everybody knows that those two would be just as happy inside a tent or the back of a pickup truck. Hell, the only reason they wound up here is that they got kicked off of some hobo train bound for Denver."

"That's bunk. They was born and raised here. Their mama has a little place over in Solon. And here's a little kernel for your ear, Sanford. I believe their mama has been staying with them ever since she took ill. Now you just let them be."

"A poor old woman in that house? God, help her." Sanford made a face in an attempt to look genuinely concerned. "I'd be surprised if there was still a shingle to keep the rain out. It's not the place her."

"You're a mean-spirited son-of-a-bitch, Sanford," said Grady as he walked disgustedly to the other end of the bar.

"Don't fret about your business, old man. I'm sure the money they save on rent they'll blow on booze." His smile revealed square white dentures that reminded the sheriff of a mule's teeth.

"Cut the bullshit," said the sheriff. "I've heard enough. Whatever it is you and Ernie got cooking, can it."

"C'mon now, Roger. That ain't no way to be. It's the only way to handle this situation. Hear me out a minute."

"Your minute is over. Now get out of my face," said the sheriff. He dropped some change on the bar and walked out.

IV

Sheldon wandered in the woods for three hours before he came to a large pasture. Until then he had fought his way through thick undergrowth and a virtual wall of trees. He had no way of knowing where he was going, his only thought was to catch up with the man who had refused his gift.

Insect bites dotted his back and arms, and he had been scratched by sharp weeds and thorns. He had torn his pants while crossing a barbed-wire fence and had fallen down several times causing the cut on his hand to continue bleeding through the handkerchief. None of this seemed to bother him when at last he saw the ramshackle home that was George and Albert's. He had come up from the timber behind it, and he could even see his own house across the road. Sheldon opened his hand and studied the rock he had come so far to give away...again. He was determined to symbolically commensurate their friendship.

He saw George come out of a backdoor. Though still over one-hundred yards away, he noticed something large and purple slung over George's shoulder. It must have been heavy the way he struggled to carry it. He saw him open the door to the little shed in the yard and disappear inside. This was Sheldon's chance. He began to run and almost immediately fell to the ground. There was an old rusted axle hidden in the clover. He lay on the ground for a few minutes rubbing a welt the size of an orange on his shin and then got up and limped to the shed. He couldn't have known that by the time he reached it, George was back inside the house. The double doors of the little shed were slightly ajar and creaked on the hinges as Sheldon entered.

It was dark inside, the only light came from between gaps in the narrow panels of wood which lined the shed. There was a labyrinth of workbenches covered with tools, car parts and a multitude of screws and nails in all sizes. The dirt floor was cluttered as well which made it difficult to walk through. There were cogs, axles, rusted bolts, dead batteries and disassembled farm machinery piled up and scattered about.

Sheldon was immediately aware of a strong unpleasant odor and drew his hand up over his face to plug his nose. Inadvertently he smeared his face with the blood soaked handkerchief. When his hand began to hurt he put it down and breathed out of his mouth only, something he had learned to do while watching his father work in the hog pens.

He didn't see George anywhere around but there was a partition blocking off the rear of the shed and he thought that was where he must be. As he carefully made his way towards it

through the dark, he heard Albert's truck pull up in the drive.

V

The sheriff had an uneasy feeling of urgency as he headed over to George and Albert's that afternoon. He was not a superstitious man but as the day progressed he felt more and more like there was something ugly waiting to rear its horrible head. He had been an officer of the law for many years, and he never doubted his gut feelings. From the bar he went directly to their house even though it was not the way he would have preferred to handle this situation. He didn't like to disturb a man in his home unless it was absolutely necessary to do so. It made the situation seem more serious than he knew it was. Besides, he had never been inside the old shack Darrel Marek rented out to them, and from the stories he'd heard about it he had no desire to. A few locals claimed they'd seen better living conditions in an outhouse. Even knowing all he knew about the two men and their relative harmlessness, the sheriff took comfort in the fact that there would still be plenty of daylight when he arrived.

As he cruised down the dusty road he came upon Conrad coming up out of the ditch. He waved the sheriff to stop and leaned in through the open passenger side window. "My boy's been gone since this mornin,' he said. "The kid usually tramps up and down the creek one way or another, but I can't find him. The wife is all upset and I ain't got a stitch of work done all day."

"You want me to call on some boys to help you?" said the sheriff.

"Nah. Not yet anyway. He's got to be around somewhere. He done this once before and turned up in the cow pasture trying to catch the calves. I'll check there first."

When his car skidded to a stop in the gravel drive of George and Albert's house, the sheriff picked up the hatchet from the passenger seat and looked it over. Conrad's news did not make things look any brighter.

As he walked up to the house he noticed Albert fiddling with the door of the tool shed. The sheriff called out to him and Albert swaggered over. "Hidy, sheriff," he said. George and Albert were not identical twins but middle age had left them looking more alike than ever. They both had the same scruffy beard, hooked nose and beady blue eyes, along with looking pathetically undernourished. Though they always dressed the same they never dressed alike. Albert wore overalls and a John Deer duckbill cap, while George (when he wore clothes) stuck to a flannel and black trousers. "Grady said you suspect someone's been stealing your

tools," said the sheriff.

Albert's eyes lit up like a jack-o-lantern's. "You catch the bastard did ya?" He rubbed his hands together as though they were cold. "I thought George was rummaging through there and misplacing 'em. But when my good ratchet disappeared I knew it had to be a thief since George don't know how to use one. And anyway he don't have nothing to fix, 'less he used it to knock out a tooth."

"Slow down there partner. I didn't catch nobody but I don't figure you'll have to worry now that you got that door padlocked. I have another reason for being here."

Albert looked puzzled. "Mmm. And just where did you get that?" he said pointing to the hatchet in the sheriff's hand. "I believe if I'm not mistaken that ax is mine. I scratched a cross on the flat of the blade."

The sheriff didn't even look. "Oh yes, I was sure it belonged to one of you two."

"Well *where* did you find it if you don't mind me asking," said Albert.

The sheriff was relieved to have the conversation proceed so nicely. Communication proved challenging with the two brothers whether they were drinking or not. "*That*," he said, "is exactly what I came here to discuss."

The tone of the sheriff's voice pricked Albert to remain silent. "Is George around?" The sheriff said.

"I just got here myself. Maybe he's inside." The boards groaned under their feet as they stepped up on the porch. The sheriff remembered more stories about the old house. Part of it had been destroyed by a tornado and walled up with plywood in lieu of rebuilding. The door swung open and the sheriff recoiled. A nauseating stench hung thick in the air. "Jesus Christ," the sheriff said. "What have you boys done?" He took off his hat and placed it over his nose and mouth, then stepped further inside. Albert stood in front of him acting as if there was nothing wrong. Instead he seemed confused by the sheriffs behavior.

He looked from side to side and saw the broken bricks and black soot of the fireplace. Strewn all around were clothes and rags amongst bottles, cans and bits of uneaten food covered with clumps of flies. The cracked tiles in the kitchen had veins of black and green mold spreading across it over the floor and walls. Weeds sprouted up in places where the wooden floorboards had rotted through. A folding card table in the middle of the room with

only three legs and had been propped up by a cooking pot turned over and a few dusty books. George sat behind it with a flask and a piece of bread in front of him. His face looked stony and cold. He too was unaffected by the ripe smell of decay permeating the house.

"Mama's dead," said George.

Albert craned his neck. "You went into mama's room?"

"I did. She didn't answer me when I knocked."

He picked up the piece of bread and it crumbled as he started gnawing it.

"George, she ain't *never* answered. She said she was sick and didn't want to be bothered. Now why did you go do such a thing?"

"Didn't you once hide a gun in the floorboards? I was looking for it." He stopped chewing for a moment as if trying to recall something, then continued. "Anyway, she must have been dead over a month. Had a lot a bugs on her."

The sheriff stepped outside, took a breath and came back in. His hat remained over his face and it muffled his voice though he was yelling. "The smell! The god-damned stench in here! Jesus, boys how do you stand it? Didn't it occur to you that—" He stopped when he saw them both looking at him as though baffled by his ranting.

"sheriff, it's not our fault. We was just respecting her privacy. I give up my room for her. She was sick, I tell you," said George.

"Where's the body now?"

George stuck a thumb over his shoulder. "Out back," he said.

"You buried her?" asked the sheriff.

"Naw. Wrapped her up in the bedspread and put her in the shed for the time being."

Albert pulled off his cap indignantly. "You son of a bitch. You put mama in the tool shed?" The sheriff had enough of the madhouse. He backed out of the door and waved for them to follow. They stood in the yard facing one another, as the sheriff tried to regain his composure.

"Now. Am I to understand that your mother has been laying dead in that room for over a month and neither one of you ever wondered why you never saw her?"

"Them's the rules she made. Nobody supposed to go in mama's room. She want to be left alone," said Albert. George nodded in agreement.

"But you just said you knew she was sick. Why didn't you check up on her? You could've hollered through the door. Didn't it seem strange to you that she never came out?"

Both George and Albert looked dumbfounded. Albert spoke. "Aw, sheriff. We ain't hardly ever home. I figure she waits for us to leave 'fore she comes out."

"We didn't kill her, sheriff. I swear," said George. He held up his right hand. "Maybe somebody else snuck in and did it. But not me."

"Of course you didn't kill her." The sheriff was thoroughly vexed. This scenario took him completely by surprise. He kept rearranging the hat on his head. Maybe these two are crazy besides just being drunks, he thought. By god, Conrad might not be blowing this out of proportion.

He looked hard at the two men. Albert's face was downcast. George fidgeted with his belt loop until his eyes suddenly stopped on the hatchet still in the sheriff's hand. "We'll get to this in a minute," the sheriff said holding it up. "Right now I want you to show me where you put that body."

They were halfway across the yard when they heard it. It was a wailing, tormented cry, audibly human yet somehow odd, as if the scream was fear itself running like electricity through weak lungs. At the same time they saw the locked double doors of the shed burst outward. The lock held firm though the doors swung in and out and shook with a violent fury. They heard the heavy thud of a body throwing itself repeatedly against the wood.

George turned and ran. His feet slipped and skidded and threw up clumps of grass. One eye bulged out like a golf ball and the other was shut as though someone poked it. He fell again and again, but his pace never slackened as his hands clutched at the earth and his lips whimpered a prayer of escape from the living dead.

The sheriff pulled out his gun put it back and then pulled it out again. He ran to the doors and called out but the cries continued and the doors kept swinging. He yelled to Albert who was already walking casually towards him, jingling his keys. "I done told you she didn't

want to be bothered."

VI

It could be seen for miles around. And everyone who looked up in the sky knew exactly what it was. From a distance it appeared motionless, a pillar of black stone against the horizon. Up close it was a swirling storm of ash and heat billowing up and branching out like a tree, carrying the dust of what was laid to waste by the flames below. Neighbors of Conrad Cross set up lawn chairs in his front yard to watch as the fire department oversaw the burning down of George and Albert's rented house. It was a quiet affair for the most part, except for the snap of the fire and the murmuring of the onlookers still rehashing the bizarre events.

The sheriff did not feel good about his decision. But it was the only alternative he could think of opposed to sending Albert and George to prison for kidnapping Sheldon Cross. In his heart he still couldn't believe that they had actually done such a thing. In theory their behavior did not support that accusation, but then again their behavior in general was altogether too unusual to predict.

What the sheriff had seen and heard that day left him doubting even his own gut feeling which by now had turned to nothing more than a stomachache. The pain had started the moment Albert unlocked the doors of the shed and flying out in a fit of hysteria came Sheldon. He was bleeding and in fact was liberally smeared with his own blood. There were cuts and scratches, insect bites and mud on him and his denim pants had been flayed open to the thigh of one leg. He fit the description of someone who had been held captive, even beaten. It was at that point the sheriff began to assume partial responsibility for what had happened. He realized he had treated this situation too casually and had misjudged what the brothers were capable of doing. The boy was surely not in the shed to steal anything. Since he lacked cleverness, stealth and plain old common sense, he had to be discounted as a thief. Albert however, demanded Sheldon's immediate arrest. The sheriff couldn't tell whether he was serious or not. After all Albert had just padlocked the door as he drove up. His pretending not to know anything about Sheldon seemed as crazy as his inability to smell the rotting corpse in his house. In any case he didn't want Albert hanging around the boy, so he sent him to find George, who was probably past the county line by then. He got Sheldon calmed down and washed him up a bit with some water from the cow's trough. Then he bandaged his hand up proper and sent him home. He radioed the town mortuary to pick up the old woman's decayed body that he had wrapped back up in the purple sheet. His

conjecture was that Sheldon had pulled the sheet off the body and it had rolled off the workbench on top of him. All that remained for him to do was to piece this whole mess together somehow. Though he harbored no malice toward the two he wished George and Albert would never return. It would save him a lot of explanations. He justified these feelings by telling himself that in any case that house was unfit to live in, even for them. But he knew they would. They were too far gone to even realize they were in trouble.

An hour later they showed up—with Albert still blustering about how he wanted Sheldon taken to jail, and to further complicate matters, George began reciting a fantastic tale of how Sheldon had tried to kill him in the woods that very morning. The madness had reached its apex. It was at that point he remembered Sanford and Ernie's 'plan' for evicting the twins. There was too much doubt about George and Albert's innocence, yet he couldn't bring himself to file charges against them. He had to consider another alternative, for certainly something had to be done. Though it pained him to do so, he sought out the man he called 'the town crier,' and the next day the plan was carried out.

The scheme was a breach of moral conduct to be sure. Ernie was a postman. He simply put a paperback bible inside a package marked 'special delivery' and presented it to Albert. Albert insisted that he didn't order anything, but Ernie told him it was already paid for and all he has to do was sign for it. Albert complied and since he cannot read, he unknowingly signed a lease termination agreement effective immediately.

The following day while George and Albert were away attending the funeral of their mother, (paid for by the city) volunteers set fire to the house under careful supervision of the fire department and the sheriff. Albert's tools were loaded into the back of his pickup truck, and several hours later they were all that remained of either brothers possessions.

There was quite a crowd of onlookers assembled by the time they returned to the smoldering ashes they once called home. Sanford and Ernie were there, happy to see their scheme brought so flawlessly to fruition. Grady sat on a stump nearby angry and ashamed of everyone involved. He felt a little sick, and it showed on his face. The sheriff stood next to him and for a long time neither one said a word.

Then Grady said, "I'm taking up a collection for them, Roger. They're gonna need some help."

The sheriff reached in his pocket and handed Grady some assorted change. "Let me be the first to make a contribution," he said.

"That's mighty kind. But you can keep this." The sheriff watched as Grady separated the coins and left a small white stone in his palm. He held it out to the sheriff.

Better take his little gift, Roger. He'll follow you all the way to town unless you do. "Lord have mercy on me, Grady," he said. "What have I done?"

Albert and George got out of the police car that provided them transportation to and from the funeral service. At first both seemed to disbelieve their eyes. Maybe they had often seen fantastic visions after their nightly drinking. But this was no hallucination. Albert fell to his knees and began to cry. He banged his fists against the ground and tore up the sod. He stayed there in a crouched position, and rocked slowly back and forth. George pulled the floppy hat low over his face. Only his lips moved while he cursed in a barely audible whisper. He wanted to yell but he couldn't find his voice. Sorrow had strangled him.

Later, they were told that some oil rags had accidentally ignited probably due to a cigarette left burning. The fire had spread quickly and there was no time to save the house or the shed, but fortunately Albert's tools were recovered. The brothers eyed one another. Neither one of them smoked. It was a fact that was as overlooked as the birth defect which had rendered both of them without the sense of smell.

At one point Sanford strolled over to where Albert sat on the open tailgate of his pickup. "I hear your mother had a little house in Solon," he said. "I guess it's yours now."

Albert's knuckles were red, his hands still knotted into fists. "It ain't mine. It's mama's."

"She's passed on, Albert. I'm sure she'd want you boys to have it."

Albert nodded his head and then leaned over and spat near Sanford's boots. "I always hated it there," he said. He slid off the rear of the truck, and walked toward the dying flames. The paperback bible was in the pocket of his overalls. He took it out and ran his fingers over the gold letters printed on the cover, then threw it on the pile of hot ash. "Can't read anyways," he mumbled.

George stood at the edge of the yard and stared across the road at Conrad's big white farmhouse. *God knows I ain't never had nothin' and I ain't never complained. But now I got even less than nothin'.*

He saw Connie sitting on his porch drinking a beer. Sheldon was chasing a dog around in the front yard, running between the chairs of spectators that had gathered there to watch.

His eye suddenly caught George standing there and he stopped cold. He took two rapid steps forward but a neighbor slipped his finger through the belt loop on Sheldon's pants and pulled him back.

George made up his mind. He climbed over the fence in front of him, waded through the weeds in the ditch and came up on the road. He began walking south, towards the railroad tracks. He was tired, and just wanted to sleep. He looked over his shoulder one last time and saw it coming. A rock flew through the air and landed in the dust at his feet. He picked it up. It was heavy and round and sparkled like glass. He held it high as if to salute the boy. Then he put it in his pocket and turned away.