



BRAD BABIN

## SOUTH OF LITTLE ROCK

It was hot. The sun had stopped in its tracks, hanging just overhead to hammer at Clayton and Lee as they plodded, sweating and silent, through the humid air. The light seemed to take on mass and weight through the course of the day, pressing down on them as they trudged along the shoulder headed south. Clayton carried a small rucksack of army-green canvas, Lee a yellow gym bag. In the last two days they'd had only a couple of rides, both less than ten miles. Clayton set the pace, and at times his overweight friend dropped back, the slap and peel of Lee's sneakers on the hot asphalt growing quieter and quieter until Clayton could no longer hear his steps at all. Like now. Clayton stopped and looked back at Lee. Lee had come along because he'd never been to New Orleans and wanted to see it for himself—for him the whole thing was an adventure, a lark, but for Clayton it was serious business. He imagined the courtroom in New Orleans Monday morning, the judge calling Clayton's name, answered only by silence. Uncle Dolf, who had paid his bail, would be there looking around for him, shaking his head. They would put out a warrant on Clayton and that would be that, off to Parish Prison he would go.

"I kind of need to make some time, here," he hollered back to Lee. "If I'm not in court Monday morning, I'm dead." The highway stretched empty and straight behind Lee into the distance, where it disintegrated in the heat-stirred air. Lee shrugged and jogged a few half-hearted steps before settling back into his slow, steady walk. "Oh, fuck it," said Clayton. He jumped the ditch and, after kicking the weeds for snakes, sat down on the opposite bank to wait. He rolled a cigarette and smoked.

If only he hadn't sold the car Uncle Dolf and Aunt Marguerite had given him when he graduated high school, he and Lee could have been in New Orleans today, walking around the French Quarter with cold beers. Though they



COLORADO REVIEW

both had a little money from the last house they'd painted, it would have taken every penny, and then some, to buy bus tickets, so they had decided to hitchhike and save the money for when they arrived in the city. Uncle Dolf had offered to buy Clayton a bus ticket, but Clayton had refused, saying that Dolf was doing enough for him already. He'd wanted to prove himself. Now he wasn't sure what it was he thought he would prove by hitching and he wished he'd taken his uncle up on his offer. The possibility that he might have to go to jail had become real to Clayton.

The charges against him were criminal trespass, public intoxication, and damage to property. Uncle Dolf had flown him down to New Orleans from Little Rock for Christmas, and Clayton had gone to a bar in the French Quarter one afternoon where he'd met a girl named Nikki, with one side of her head shaved. They went together to another bar, then another, and another. An elderly couple had come out of their house early the next morning, just two days before Christmas, to find Clayton and Nikki asleep in their car in the driveway with the back passenger-side window broken out and Clayton's knuckles crusted with blood. He remembered waking up with his face pressed against the window to see a uniformed cop looking in at him. His hand throbbed painfully. Behind the policeman, the car's owners clung together, looking frightened in matching sweat suits, the woman holding a big scruffy calico, stroking it again and again.

Now, the whole thing seemed absurd. It was all a big misunderstanding. He took a deep breath. Held it. Let it out slowly. The loud buzz of insects seemed to be everywhere. The air smelled faintly of gasoline and, below that, an even fainter whiff of something dead, some rotting animal nearby. Buzzards circled above in the hot blue-white sky. He watched Lee approach, irritation crackling under his skin. Lee had insisted they take this road. And Clayton had to admit that on the map it looked as good as any, a straight shot south. The problem was that no one used it—no one but farmers and locals from the few tiny towns they'd come through, little collections of rotting buildings huddled under shade trees. Every now and then an eighteen-wheeler roared past without slowing, mostly tankers, and last night in the dark they'd had to hit the ditch a couple times to get out of the





Babin

way of shoulder-hugging truckers, the big flat-fronted rigs pushing through the air and dragging violent wakes of gusting wind that threw dust in their eyes and whipped their clothing against their fatigued bodies.

Now sweat slid down over Clayton's ribs. His T-shirt, grubby from sweat and dust, lay plastered to his back. His legs throbbed, the broken blisters on his heels stung, and they were still a long way from New Orleans.

"I should have stayed my ass at home," said Lee when he walked up. "You'd probably get a ride easy by yourself." He crossed the ditch and sat down on the bank by Clayton. "Nobody wants to stop for *two* axe murderers."

Clayton just shrugged. "I don't know about that," he said. "Even alone I'd be walking—there hasn't been a single car all morning."

Lee seemed to follow his train of thought. "We on the wrong damn road," he said. "Story of my life." He laughed and wiped the sweat from his face, smoothed his mustache.

Clayton was glad to hear him acknowledge his mistake, but immediately felt like a jerk. "It's like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*," he said, trying to joke it off. "The Highway to Nowhere."

"Smell that? Something dead." Lee wrinkled his nose.

They sniffed the air, looking around them. After a while they got up and started walking again. An old dusty and dented pickup rolled by slowly, moving all the way over into the other lane to go around them, the old man inside staring straight ahead at the road. A quarter mile up, the truck turned onto a side road, raising a plume of pinkish dust behind it. The rotten smell got stronger as they walked: a dead dog bloated in the ditch. The loud electric hum of swarming flies. Clayton glanced down at it, saw the white busyness of maggots and looked away.

"Damn," said Lee. "That smell fuckin' wigs me out, man. I can't stand it."

"It's bad." Clayton kept walking.

"Seems like we should have hit the state line by now," Lee said. "We got to be close."

"No way. We're not even close." Even after crossing into Louisiana, they'd still have a long way to go to reach New Orleans. Clayton's shoulders sagged with sudden hopelessness.



COLORADO REVIEW

ness. His arms and legs grew heavy and lifeless as mud. The fields lay flattened under the tremendous weight of the air and light.

After graduation Clayton had drifted, without purpose, ending up in Little Rock only because that was where he'd run out of money. He'd been there a month, living off the money he'd made by selling the car, when he met Lee at The Corner Pocket, a bar with fifty-cent draft and free pool on Tuesdays. Lee and his older brother Tater both worked painting houses with their father, who was looking to hire another painter. Clayton went to work for him, and when it became obvious that Clayton didn't have a regular place to stay, the McCombers had taken him in, though they were already crowded in their small house. "That way I can keep an eye on you," Mr. McComber had said. "Don't have to worry about you showin' up for work—you'll already be there." Clayton had been living with them for over a year now, sleeping on the floor between Lee and Tater, who slept on the two sprung and sagging couches that took up most of the living room. Except for Mrs. McComber, everybody in the family was big, but Clayton was wiry and compact, and so at work he became the ladder man, leaning out over the ground two floors up, stretching to reach as far as possible on both sides, twisting himself up into third floor eaves with fancy beam-work that had to be brushed out. Often the McCombers stopped and stood holding their rollers and brushes, looking up at him with happy smiles. They hated ladder work.

"I miss Mama," said Lee, laughing at himself for saying it. "She's really taken a liking to you."

"I like her too," said Clayton. He loved listening to Mrs. McComber play the guitar and sing old folk songs in her high, clear voice tinged with sadness.

"Your whole family's been good to me." For some reason Uncle Dolf's face kept appearing in his thoughts. "I hope you're comfortable at Dolf and Marguerite's place."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just the way they are." Lee didn't answer, but Clayton could feel him thinking.

There was no traffic, so they could have walked side by side or even in the middle of the highway if they'd wanted, but because of Lee's slower walk, Clayton gradually drifted





*Babin*

to the front each time. He couldn't seem to adjust to his friend's pace. He tried. But it seemed silly to walk so slow. *If you're going to walk, then walk* was how he saw it.

At a bridge over a small creek, they left the road and the heat of the afternoon sun for the shade underneath. Lee stretched out on the cool packed clay. A minute later a car passed overhead, and they laughed. "There goes my ride," said Clayton. He sat on his bag and rolled a cigarette. He lit it. After a minute, Lee asked for one.

Clayton rolled him one. "We're going to have to ration ourselves," he said, tossing the cigarette over to Lee.

Lee sat up but did not light the cigarette. He looked down at it in his hand. He got up and went over to the water and looked down into it, a small stream flowing over a sandy bed. "I'm dry as a old bone," he said. "I wonder if this water's okay to drink."

"I wouldn't."

"You don't think? It's clear."

"No way, man."

Lee stood looking at the water. He bent and splashed water on his face, his neck. He lifted water to his mouth in his hand and swished it around before spitting it out.

"There you go," said Clayton and moved to do the same. He took off his shirt, knelt, and lowered his head. He used his hands to wet his hair, then washed his face and his neck and rinsed his mouth. He flipped his hair back and combed it with his fingers, the wet ends hanging to his shoulders. "That feels great." He rinsed out his shirt and went to hang it in the sun on the fence at the edge of the field that ran along the creek. "I still have a joint," he called to Lee. "But maybe we should save it."

"Yeah, it's too damn hot."

"We *could* smoke it."

"We could."

The weed made Clayton paranoid, and later, as they walked along the road again, he became convinced the water had been toxic. The inside of his mouth seemed to tingle. He spit. "How's your mouth?" he asked Lee.

"Dry."

"You don't have a funny taste from that water?" He spit again.

"I didn't swallow any."



COLORADO REVIEW

“Me neither, but I have a funny tingle in my mouth.” He worked his jaw and lips, tasting his mouth. “Like it might be burning.”

“Well, is it burning or ain’t it?” Lee wore an amused grin.

“I don’t know. It feels like it might start.”

“You’re fucking stoned.”

Lee was right. Clayton worried too much, was always overthinking things, taking life too seriously—taking himself too seriously. But Lee could almost always make Clayton laugh at himself, make him see himself more clearly. It was one of the things he liked about Lee, one of the ways their friendship exerted a positive influence on Clayton’s life. Clayton promised himself to be more patient with his friend—why did he always have to be such a jerk? During a drunken argument after Clayton had returned from his Christmas visit in New Orleans, Lee had accused Clayton of thinking he was better than other people. “It’s written all over your face,” he’d said. Lee’s words had struck home, and Clayton had been bothered by it ever since. He wasn’t a snob and felt he had to prove it somehow but didn’t know how, and anyway, trying to prove he wasn’t one would only make him look more like one.

He was doing it again. Was it possible to hate yourself and still think you’re better than everybody else? He didn’t know, but he felt he had something to make up for, and as the day wore on, it began to seem right to Clayton that they had chosen this lost road. It was only right that he should have to walk. “I’m walking the whole way,” he shouted back to Lee. “I don’t want a damn ride. I’m walking all the way to New Orleans!” A tingle of adrenaline crawled over his body, and he picked up his pace. A pilgrimage toward a new life. His heart was pounding, and he put his hand to his chest. He would change after this. Show some responsibility. Some consideration for others. He began to run. He ran down the shoulder of the road in the waning day and the heat headed south. He ran until the sweat poured from his body and he got a side-ache, and then he sat down on the bank of the ditch. He didn’t know why he was running, but all of a sudden he knew he wasn’t done, and he got up and ran some more. Just running. As he ran, the up and down movement of his body made it seem the land, the world, was bouncing





*Babin*

up and down. That's what it looked like. The whole thing bouncing up and down. It made him feel like he could fall off, like it could really happen, and he stopped and lay face-down on the shoulder of the road, hanging on to the earth, which suddenly seemed no larger than a beach ball, just hanging there, surrounded by nothing. Better on the ball than in the nothing. He held on. His eyes were squeezed shut against it. *Breathe*, he remembered.

When his heart slowed its hammering, he rolled over and sat up. He sat there until Lee walked up, then stood and fell in beside him.

"You all right?" Lee said.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Guess I needed to run."

"You sure ran." Lee made a loud click out of the side of his mouth.

The sun finally moved again, as the world rolled over toward evening. Morning was years ago, a time of innocence before the long hot emptiness of the day. Though they had walked for most of the night before and he knew he'd been tired, now his morning-self seemed pathetically optimistic, a child. He remembered fondly the water they'd drunk in the gray dawn from a spigot in a tiny park in a tiny dusty town. The water had been cool. Clear. Without the fume-y taste of chlorine. Deep well water, maybe. Sweet and pure. Water. It had gushed out over his hands, spilling on the ground, enough for everybody. "Remember the park? The water?"

"Oh, man." Lee gave a sad laugh. "Don't talk about it."

"It was all over the ground, everywhere."

"No, I know."

Clayton needed to call Uncle Dolf. He'd be expecting Clayton any time now. But there had been no sign of civilization since the morning. He had a vision of the cool, quiet gentility of his aunt and uncle's house, the dim lights, the graceful old furniture, and walls and walls of books. Dolf and Marguerite themselves carried an aura of unconscious and threadbare elegance; it was in the way they moved and sat, in the soft, refined accents of their speech.

Though Clayton had spent much of his childhood in Dolf and Marguerite's house, deposited there by his mother, who couldn't seem to settle down anywhere long enough to keep him in school, after graduation he'd wanted nothing but to



COLORADO REVIEW

get away from them. He'd packed some clothes, a few books, and his guitar into the car they'd given him and left without saying goodbye the day before the graduation ceremony that Dolf and Marguerite had so looked forward to. But when he called them days later from Atlanta, the first of many places he would stay briefly before arriving in Little Rock, his aunt and uncle had forgiven him and said it was okay—they understood. He knew what they were thinking, that he was wild like his mother and headed for trouble.

But now the idea of family, of tradition and blood, pulled at him, an umbilical spooling out into the swampy past. Connection, he needed that—didn't he? Didn't everybody? The dark history of the South repelled him but also seemed to contain the possibility of understanding. When he'd gone back to visit at Christmas, it was as if some ghost of himself haunted the place.

He'd been surprised to discover in himself an appreciation for material wealth, for the finer things. The bed in the guest room where he'd slept during his visit was high, with head and foot-boards of dark hardwood, a soft cloud on which he floated into his dreams. The old house had tall French windows, and those in Clayton's room opened out onto a brick-walled garden, jasmine covering the ground under crepe myrtles with their slim, smooth, light-skinned trunks, ivy crawling over the old bricks. He'd relished the quiet privacy, a welcome change from the McCombers' living room floor, where he'd already been sleeping for several months by then. Moving through the cool, quiet house, he'd felt the warm sense of well-being that came from financial security, and his own life suddenly seemed harsh and shabby. And ever since he'd returned to Little Rock after Christmas, after the arrest and after promising Uncle Dolf he would return for the appointed day in court, he'd been irritable, smothered by the close, noisy life at the McCombers'. They were always right on top of each other, piled into small rooms with their big bodies, elbow to elbow at the kitchen table, submerged in the thick smell of gravy and fried food.

"I'm not walking all night tonight," he said over his shoulder. "We need to find a place where we can get some sleep." Lee was keeping up now, or maybe Clayton was just walking slower. He couldn't tell.





*Babin*

“I’m with you, cuz. What’s them trees up there?” A small grove of tall trees stood next to the road a half-mile up, almost black against the coloring sky.

“Might be our spot,” said Clayton. When they got close, there was a gravel turn-in under the trees, grass, steel picnic tables, an outhouse.

“They got water,” said Lee. He hurried over to the old-fashioned, long-handled pump. The handle squeaked and the pump hissed and gurgled, hissed and gurgled, then rusty water gushed out, and they moaned in disappointment, but the water cleared up after a few seconds. “It just ain’t been used in a while.” Lee bent over and stuck his head under the water.

They drank their bellies tight and washed themselves as well as they could and sprawled out on one of the picnic tables. They smoked the rest of the joint and sat and rested as the sun crept lower. They rolled cigarettes and smoked. The air cooled. They got up once in a while to drink more water.

“Man, my legs are gettin’ stiff already,” said Lee, getting to his feet, his usual easy grin gone for a moment. But then he began tottering around, groaning comically and exaggerating the stiffness of his body, rocking side to side with each step. “I’m the Tin Man,” he said.

In the coolness the air smelled of dust. They were almost out of tobacco, so they didn’t smoke again, saving it for the morning. They each took a picnic table and lay on their backs watching the light and color go out of the sky. Later Clayton awoke to the mad yapping and yowling of coyotes from the blackness on the other side of the trees surrounding the picnic area.

“You hear that?” said Lee. “They sound crazy.”

“I don’t know,” said Clayton. “They sound lost.”

“They won’t bother us?”

“No.” Later he woke up again and was cold. He sat up and hugged himself and looked around. His whole body throbbed painfully. He thought about a fire. He pulled his jean jacket from the pack he’d been using for a pillow. He buttoned it up and lay back down. When he woke up next, the sky was gray and he was too cold to go back to sleep. He’d been dreaming: he and Lee were at Dolf and Mar-





## COLORADO REVIEW

guerite's, drunk, pulling everything out of the kitchen cabinets and smashing it on the floor, in the sink, against the wall. His body hurt, a deep, solid ache in his legs and back. He got up and rummaged around for sticks, moving with board-legs and plank-back under the trees where it was still dark, and made a small fire. He hunkered over it, wishing for coffee. Cigarettes. Breakfast. Whiskey. Behind, he heard Lee's soft curse. "Fire here," Clayton said.

Lee grunted. "You're my hero," he said. Then, rolling over and trying to rise, he groaned and flopped back down. "I can't get up. I'm broke." After a while he crawled toward the warmth.

Overhead the sky lightened, and around them the trees came out of the shadows, the texture of individual leaves emerging from flat blackness. They huddled over the fire for a while, then stood trying to work the stiffness out of their legs and backs, moving around the tables in short, stiff little steps. They rolled the last of the tobacco and smoked it while they watched the fire die out. They picked up their bags, walked out to the highway, and headed south down the shoulder of the road. They tottered along through the cold dawn, swinging their arms for warmth. But once the sun cleared the horizon, the day turned sultry.

Clayton couldn't quit thinking about the dream. "We have to be cool at my aunt and uncle's house," he said. He could only imagine what Dolf would make of Lee. Dolf, who knew a lot of people, had said that he could help Clayton with this trouble if Clayton held up his end of things, which didn't include missing the very first court appearance. Suddenly he dreaded arriving on their doorstep with Lee in tow.

"I don't know what you think I'm gonna do," said Lee. "Eat their cat, maybe?"

"The thing is, it's pretty quiet at their house. They're not . . ." Clayton felt Lee's eyes on him. "They're quiet people," he said. "Old, quiet people." The words felt wrong in his mouth, hollow, stiff as new shoes.

"I promise I won't eat the cat."

Clayton walked along looking at the ground.

"Or rape the dog." Lee laughed.

Clayton tried to laugh but it sounded phony. He had no reason to believe that Uncle Dolf and Aunt Marguerite would





*Babin*

treat Lee with anything other than the respectful consideration they showed everyone else. That's how they were. Clayton took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He couldn't lie to himself. It wasn't Lee's feelings he was worried about. The truth was he didn't want to bring Lee to Dolf and Marguerite's house because he was ashamed for them to see who his friends were. It made Clayton squirm to admit this to himself, so he pushed the thoughts away, told himself he was thinking too much. Again. Since when did he care about such things? Money. Social status. He and Lee were friends, and you stuck by your friends, that was all.

By eight o'clock they reached a little place called Tarboil, a few tired old buildings and some houses surrounded by cropland. They saw the planes before they saw the town. Little yellow crop-dusting planes that dove and climbed and turned, banking steeply, and dove again. A long store of boards sagged on crumbling brick pylons two feet over its own black shadow. As they approached, a skinny cat streaked out from underneath the store with another chasing it. They ran in a wide circle around Clayton and Lee and shot off toward an old El Camino with the windows broken out, sitting on blocks in the lot next to the store. It was full of cats playing and flowing in quick rushes over and around each other, in the bed and on the roof, on the dash, the hood, the back of the seat. Orange and black and white and calico, all flowing together all over each other like a ball of colored snakes. It was a strange thing to see before coffee, and they stopped and stared for a minute before they went on.

They went into the store, the screen door whacking against the frame, and found the coffee machine. They got coffee and cinnamon rolls and went to the counter. A woman came out through a door at the back of the store and went behind the counter. She was small and tired looking, and her hair was the color of lead. Not the gray of aging, Clayton noticed, but one solid dark color. They got tobacco and paid for their things and went back outside. The screen door whacked again. They sat on the edge of the low porch by the pay phone and ate their rolls and drank the coffee. In a field across the highway stood a long, low hangar with a single short blacktop runway, where the yellow cropdusters took off and landed for fuel and for spray. *Sky King Dusters*





COLORADO REVIEW

read a hand-painted sign on the hangar. Lee rolled cigarettes for both of them. Clayton lit his and went to the phone.

Aunt Marguerite accepted the charges, then Dolf's deep voice spoke into his ear. "Clayton?"

"Hey, Uncle Dolf. How are you?"

"Clayton, where are you?"

"I'm on my way. I'm in Tarboil, Arkansas."

"You're still in Arkansas?" There was silence on the line, then a long sigh.

Clayton looked at Lee, the back of his head and the side of his face. "Don't worry. I'll be there." Lee and Dolf could not exist in the same space, occupy the same room, one of them would simply shrink down to nothing and disappear.

"It's Friday, Clayton. If you aren't there Monday morning you are going to be in a lot of trouble." Again Dolf paused. "You know that, don't you, Clayton?"

"Yes, I know. I'll be there. I promise." The screen door banged again and Clayton looked up. A thing stood there on the porch. Some sort of child in a child's summer dress.

"Jesus," breathed Clayton.

"Don't promise, just get your butt down here. Call me when you get close and I'll come get you." There was a pause. "Clayton? Are you there?"

The child made a noise. Her dress had puffy shoulders and a tiny lace-edged apron in front, but she wore no shoes, and her dirty, tough-looking feet scuffed the porch boards with restless energy. Her elongated head was cocked back, the skin wine-purple and shiny, her eyes small bulbous beads of black glass under a short, sloping brow. Her mouth pushed out in front of the rest of the face with large wet lips and no chin underneath, the nose two horizontal slits in a bump of flesh.

Clayton tore his eyes away and turned his back. "Yes," he said into the receiver. "I'm still here. I promise I'll be there, Uncle Dolf. I won't let you down." Behind him Lee spoke to the girl in a soft voice. Clayton concentrated on the telephone, Uncle Dolf on the line. "I should probably tell you—" said Clayton.

"What? Tell me what?"

"Nothing to worry about," said Clayton. "It's just that there is someone with me. A friend."



*Babin*

“What? You have a friend with you?” Clayton turned to see Lee and the girl facing him, Lee’s big hand clasped in both of her smaller ones. Clayton cut his eyes away when he saw her staring back at him. He assumed the girl belonged to the woman in the store, and he wished she’d come out and take the girl inside. She shouldn’t be allowed to wander around bothering people. “That’s fine, Clayton,” Dolf continued. “Your friend is welcome here. I don’t care about that. Just get down here, okay? I can’t help you with this if you don’t show up for court.”

“No. I know.” Clayton rolled his eyes for Lee, conscious of the girl’s steady gaze. Dolf said he’d see Clayton when he got there and hung up, but Clayton did not hang up. Some instinct he hadn’t even known he possessed took over. He held the phone to his ear tightly so that Lee would not hear the buzz of the dial tone. He hadn’t planned this. “I know, Uncle Dolf,” he said. “I’m sorry, you’re right. I should have asked.” Again he pulled a face for Lee and shook his head as if in exasperation. “I know you guys like to keep things quiet at your place . . . No.” Clayton hung his head, looked at the boards under his feet. “No,” he said. “We’ll be . . . No, Uncle Dolf. I understand. Yes, Uncle Dolf. Goodbye.” He gave a deep sigh and hung up the phone.

“Oh, man, what a drag,” he said. “Uncle Dolf’s not too happy about me bringing somebody with me.” He let the words hang in the air. The girl held Lee’s hand, her eyes fixed on Clayton’s face, and a cold certainty grew in him that she knew he was lying. He saw judgment in those unblinking eyes. “I guess I should have asked first,” he said lamely, looking away across the fields. The day was already hot and the ground breathed steam into the heavy air. A plane droned in the silence.

Finally, Lee spoke. “Well, hell. Maybe I ought to just turn around and go home.” He hesitated, but Clayton did not reply.

Sweat rolled down Clayton’s temples and he wiped it away with his hand. He did not look at the girl, or at Lee. He looked instead at the gray boards of the porch’s floor. There was a shuffling movement and Clayton looked up to see the girl pulling Lee by the arm around the corner of the building.





“Where we going, sweetheart?” Lee asked her. She replied by taking a tighter grip on his hand and leaning against Lee’s weight at the end of his arm like a tugboat towing a tanker out of port.

Clayton moved to the corner, watching the girl lead Lee down the steps and toward the road. “We need to get going,” he said to Lee, but Lee didn’t answer, only shrugged and gave a helpless grin. He and the girl moved along the shoulder of the road. “What are you doing?” Clayton hollered at Lee. His heart thumped, quickening.

“Ask her,” called Lee, laughing. The girl stopped and Lee stopped with her.

Clayton moved a few steps in their direction. “We really need to get going,” he said again. “Come on.” He’d changed his mind. He didn’t want Lee to turn back. He wanted his friend with him, the comfort of his easy humor, his grin and friendly paunch. Clayton’s heart was pounding, a dull roar in his ears, and he wanted to run again. He tried to sound casual. “Let’s go to New Orleans.”

“I been thinking about that,” said Lee. “You’d be better off without me here. Maybe you’d even get a ride.” He paused, shrugged. “I guess I better get on home.” The girl pushed at Lee gently with both hands, and he took a step backward.

“What about New Orleans?” shouted Clayton, his voice cracking, jumping an octave. “Getting drunk in the French Quarter? What about that?” He couldn’t stop. “What about all those beautiful women? The food, the music, the bars? All those bars, what about them?”

Lee and the girl stood quietly, watching him.

“Forget about Uncle Dolf and Aunt Marguerite,” he called, much louder than he’d meant to. “They said it was fine! Really! They’re nice people! They’ll love you, I know it!” He held his hands out. “Come on, man. Don’t leave!” There was a wheedling sound in his own voice that sickened Clayton.

But Lee was already moving away. “Sorry, cuz—I hope everything works out for you, but I’m goin’ home. Drop by the house if you get back up to Little Rock.” Walking slowly backward, he raised his hand in a wave, to Clayton and then to the girl, before turning around and picking up his pace, headed north, back the way they’d come. The girl turned and walked back toward the store. She went wide around



*Babin*

Clayton when she got to him, and after watching Lee's shrinking figure for a minute he turned and followed her back to the store. The cats were gone from the El Camino. There was a droning buzz in the sky, or maybe it was in his head. He didn't know how he'd come here, to this strange place in his life. Nothing ahead. Nothing behind. The girl went back inside through the banging screen door, and Clayton stood with his nose pressed to the rusty mesh and watched her go to the back of the store, to the door the woman had come out of. When she opened the door to go inside, he heard the tinny banging of a television gunfight. She shut the door, and a split second later it opened again, and the tired woman came out and went to the counter.

Clayton went in and headed to one of the standing coolers full of beer. He picked three forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor on sale for ninety-nine cents each. He put a dollar bill and some quarters and dimes and nickels and pennies on the counter, trying not to let the coins jingle and clatter too much in the quiet. The woman rang him up, and he put the bottles in his pack. They clinked as he swung it to one shoulder. He walked out of town, headed south on the side of the road. After a mile or so, he crossed the ditch and a barbwire fence and tramped off through a field. At the top of a low rise, he crossed another fence into a field of grass and weeds hidden from the highway. In the distance a few horses grazed. He sat down cross-legged and took one of the bottles from his pack and opened it, the twist top releasing a sharp hiss of carbonation. His mouth went dry and he felt the heaviness of fear in his bowels. He drank. He drank steadily and tried not to think about who he was or where he was going or what might be waiting for him there.

Over the fields, both nearby and in the hazy distance, small yellow planes circled and looped in the hot blue sky, diving low to fly just over the ground in tandem with their shadows, then pulling up into steep climbing turns, engines roaring, then diving again, their smooth deliberate movements like writing in the sky, the lines of a message being written out just for him, clear and precise and full of secret knowledge.

Clayton tipped back the cool brown bottle and drank.

