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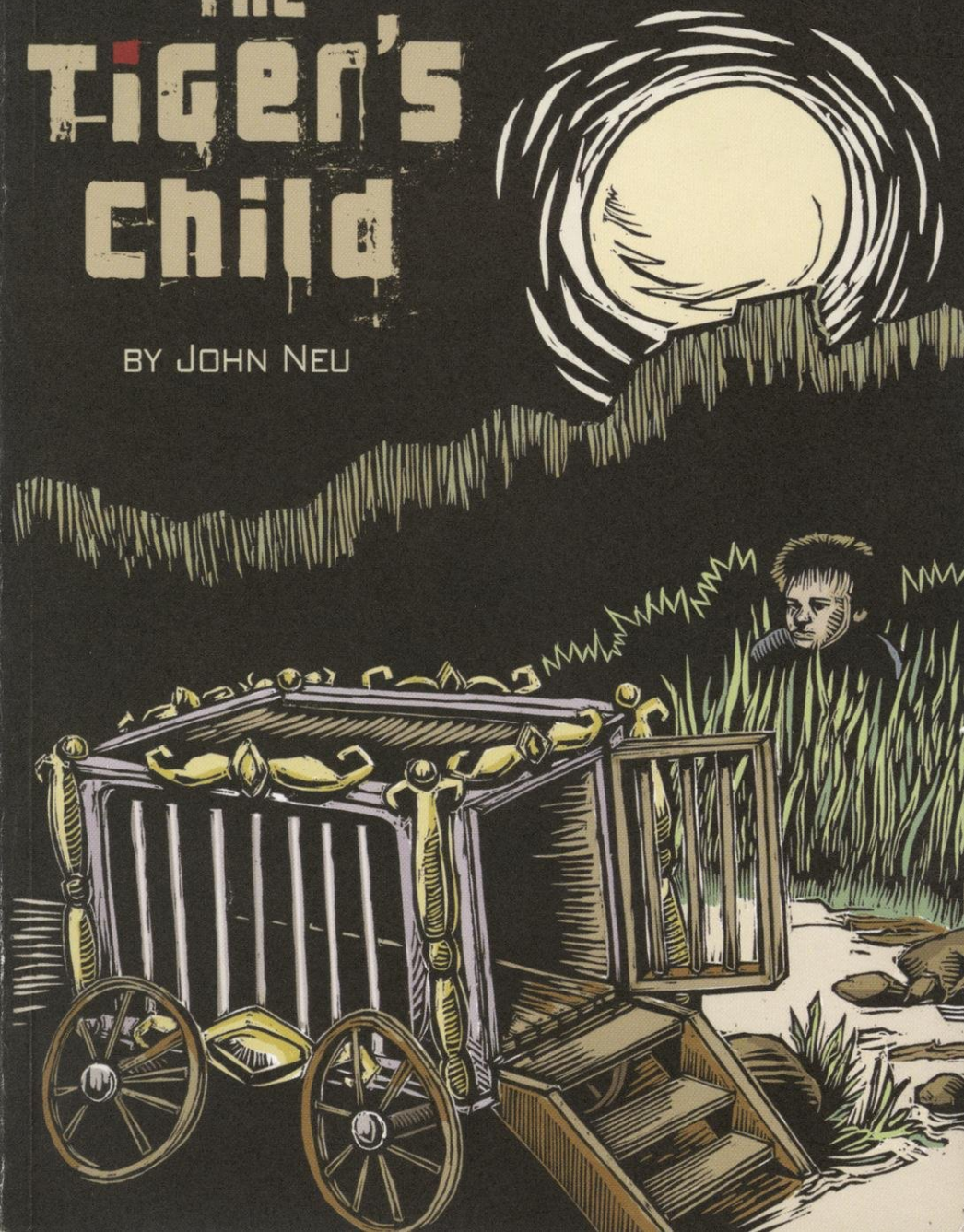
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The Tiger's Child

BY JOHN NEU



**THE
TIGER'S CHILD**

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ISBN 1-893311-77-5

Published by Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
<http://parallepress.library.wisc.edu>

First Edition

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Cover illustration by Steve Chappell.
Book design and production, University Communications, UW-Madison.

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DEDICATION

For my sister, Mary Alyce Radowski

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much gratitude is due the first reader of this book, Louise Robbins, now at Houghton Mifflin in Boston, for her encouraging comments not only on this but also on other works of mine that she volunteered to read. My sister, Mary Alyce Radowski; my brother, Frank Neu; and my niece and her husband, Mary Ann and Drew Fitzgerald, were kind enough to read and comment favorably. Special thanks are due to Joyce and William Reeder, Anne and John Tedeschi, David Henige, and Ken Frazier, whose criticisms made the book better and whose enthusiasm made its publication possible. Thanks also to Elisabeth Owens for all her work in seeing the book through to publication, and to the Friends of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries for their financial support.

I

The boy was dreaming of the tiger. In its cage the great beast roared, its white fangs as thick as the bars of the cage. The huge head jerked sideways to snap at the pole prodding it through the bars. A giant paw zoomed across the dream to smash the bars and the tiger leaped outside, seized the man with the pole and, on its hind legs, seemed to dance with the man whose arms were around the tiger. The tiger bit his head off. Blood spurted everywhere.

Startled awake, the boy pressed damp palms flat to the bed sheet, as if to hold the bed from moving. His heart pounded. A drop of sweat slid down his side. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed and covered his face with his hands. The cold metal frame of the bed cut into the backs of his legs. He breathed in deeply and looked up in the dark room where all he could see was the square of faint light from the tiny window that slid open sideways on half a screen in the side of the trailer. He heard frogs and crickets singing. In another room, his father snored.

The boy did not turn on the light, but found his cut-offs and T-shirt where he had left them on the single chair. He put them on, knelt to swing his arm below the bed until he bumped his sneakers. He carried the sneakers out of the trailer and, sitting on the metal steps, pushed his bare feet into them. Even in the dark it was very warm, with no breeze to move the humid air. A half-moon had sunk to the dark line of trees across the field, and the boy knew he would have to hurry if he was to do this before daylight came. The half-mile road from the trailer to the county road was unpaved and, at the end of this hot August, the dirt was powdery and pale in the skimmed-milk moonlight.

When he reached the blacktop, the boy began to jog. It was two miles to Millard's Wild Animal Zoo. He watched his bare legs appear and disappear against the black road. The shorter leg thumped at each step and his body pulled to the left. His sneakers were black and white. He ran down the middle of the road and no car passed him.

When he reached the big white sign with crudely painted black letters and an image, in orange and black, that was supposed to be a snarling tiger, he stopped and waited for his breathing to slow. Above the dark trees, light was beginning in the sky. He walked up the gravel drive to the mown field Millard called a parking lot and stood, listening. There were no lights in the house farther up the drive. Beyond the tangle of tall grass and weeds and overgrown honeysuckle, he could see the high chain-link fence and, inside, the dark shapes of what he knew were deer moving nervously, sensing he was near. He walked the path to the fence and put his fingers through the wire triangles, and the deer came to him and smelled his hand. Inside the fence, the boy could see, raised on two-by-fours, the doghouse with a wire drum attached, and a raccoon came out of the doghouse and began to walk its endless path in the rotating drum. The drum thumped and creaked as the raccoon walked the wire road.

Behind the deer yard loomed the dark shack where the boy knew Tomorrow would be sleeping. Next to the shack a rusty car crouched on four flat tires, its hood raised over a motor long ago dismembered for parts. The car looked like it was sinking into the weeds, into the earth itself. The boy followed the gravel path past the deer yard and the shack and down a short slope to where the old circus wagon stood, colorless in the dark. Tall weeds grew around it: velvet leaf and foxtail and thistle. Nearby leaned a rust-pocked refrigerator with no door. The circus wagon's canvas flaps had been lowered over the bars on both sides, but the boy could hear the animal moving inside. He walked between the wagon and the refrigerator and down the path to the chain-link pen where the elephant lay on its side in the dust. As the boy

approached, the animal rose with a grunt and pulled against the chain that circled its leg. The boy dug from his pocket the ring of keys. He opened the gate and went to the elephant. The elephant mumbled and put its trunk on the boy's shoulder. The boy, squatting, pushed through the keys to find the right one for the leg chain. He had never used it before and had to try several keys before the lock opened and the chain fell away. He stood up and patted the elephant's trunk.

"You can go now," he said. He went out the gate and turned to look at the elephant, but the elephant only stood and watched. "You can go now, Wink," the boy said again, and he went back up the path to the circus wagon where the tiger was waiting. He pulled back the corner of the canvas, but it was too dark to see inside. He put his hand between the bars so the tiger would recognize him, then he pulled on the rope that raised the canvas. The tiger sat in a corner of the cage, watching him. A rumble like a deep purring sounded from its chest. The boy pushed sweat off his forehead with the heel of his hand and climbed the steps to the cage door. The steps were rusted metal, and they whined under even his slight weight. He fumbled with the key ring again. The first chirps of sparrows began in the trees, and he could hear the rattle of the raccoon's wheel still turning. The padlock opened and he took it off and forced open the corroded clasp and hung the padlock back on the clasp. He hesitated then before opening the door. He had never been in the cage with the tiger before. His heart was pounding so hard his chest hurt. He opened the door and stepped inside, and the tiger rose immediately and moved quickly in a crouch to him. The boy squatted and let the tiger smell his face. The heavy odor of its breath surrounded the boy's head, and he stayed very still until he saw the tiger was looking past him to the opened door. He stood slowly and said to the tiger, "Let's go then."

He went out the door and down the steps. The tiger stood for a moment at the cage door, watching the boy. The boy turned and held out his hand as though there were food in it, and the tiger, avoiding the steps, jumped down

to the side and followed the boy to the porch of the shack where Tomorrow was sleeping. The animal raised its huge head to sniff the air, already sensing the hated man. The boy stood next to the tiger, whose back was as high as the boy's waist, and rested his hand on the animal because he was afraid it might try to run. "Come on now," he said, and went up the porch steps. He opened the door and pushed it wide, then stood back. The tiger looked into the darkness. A wave of scent flowed out the door, and the tiger leaped inside this dark cage filled with the remembered stench of its tormentor. The boy pulled the door shut on the tiger and the man. He pressed his ear to the rough wood of the door and waited. He was smiling because the tiger had done what he wanted. In less than a minute came Tomorrow's first scream.

The screams were worse than he had thought they would be. He was afraid they might carry to the house where Millard was. He heard shouted commands that were too full of panic to intimidate anything. Something crashed against the door and the boy pulled on the doorknob with both hands, leaning back with all his weight, but no one came out. There were no more screams but he could hear the tiger moving about. He waited five more minutes before he opened the door. The tiger leaped past him, knocking him against the door frame. It was almost light now, and he could see Tomorrow lying on his stomach on the floor. He fumbled on the wall for a light switch. Blood was everywhere. The cot Tomorrow had been sleeping on was overturned, and the single wooden chair in the room was smashed, its spokes jutting like broken bones. Tomorrow groaned and moved his arms under him to try to push himself up. He was naked, and claw marks were etched in red on his chocolate skin from his shoulders to the small of his back.

The boy squatted next to him and pushed him over on his back. The man screamed and raised his arms to protect his head and shouted words in the language that no one knew. Half his face was torn and bloody, and a large piece of his scalp had been pulled away. The boy, still squatting, studied the writhing man. His chest had been raked by the tiger's claws, too, and there

was a huge tear in his side, but the boy knew he could not be sure the man would die.

“Shit,” he said. He looked around the room. He went to the overturned bed and picked up the pillow from the dirty wood floor. He knelt behind the man’s head and without hesitating pressed the pillow over his face, then turned around and sat on it. He could feel the man hollering through the thin pillow and feel the sound of it moving up his buttocks into his bones.

“How do you like it now?” he said.

Tomorrow tried to twist away and his legs thrashed, but he was too weak. The boy sat on his head for a long time, until he was sure the man was dead. He stood up and threw the pillow back toward the bed. He studied the mutilated face.

“Bastard,” he said.

He looked around for Tomorrow’s clothes. He went into the little bathroom. The clothes were in a pile on the cracked linoleum. He took the key ring out of his own pocket and stuffed it into Tomorrow’s pants. Then he went out the door and sat on the porch steps again. His heart was pounding. Already it was light enough to see Millard’s house, and he knew he had to hurry, but his hands were shaking and his legs felt like they might buckle if he stood. He looked for the tiger, but it was nowhere in sight. He pushed himself up from the steps and went down to the elephant’s pen. The elephant was gone now, the chain an iron snake in the dust.

Before the boy left, he freed the panicky deer. The fawn he had been caring for since Millard had found it in the woods last spring hesitated a moment near him. He stroked its neck and then pushed it to follow the others. He opened the raccoon’s cage, but the raccoon was still running in its wire circle and ignored him. The boy started for home. Millard had not come down from the house, and again no cars passed him as he jogged on the road. His father was still snoring in the bedroom. The boy got the cereal box from the cupboard and the milk from the refrigerator. He sat at the Formica-topped

table eating, and smiled at the picture of the tiger on the box of Frosted Flakes.



Police Chief Will Sumner sat in his usual window booth in Dolly's café reading the morning paper. His plate and coffee cup had been pushed to the side, and the paper was opened on the table top. He rested his forearms on the paper as he read. He knew it was almost eight and that he should be in his office next door, but no one had bothered him at breakfast this morning, and he was almost done with the paper. He could leave it for someone else if he finished. Only one of the other booths was occupied, and the three men at the counter were sitting next to each other, so there was no need to free up space. He wondered why his friend Harry had not come in yet from his morning hike along the river. Well, there was no use worrying about Harry, who could be distracted by even the shape of a cloud. Thinking of Harry, he caught himself staring out the plate glass window at the line of cars on the town's main street as their drivers began the thirty-mile commute to Madison, and, prone to daydreaming, he slipped into thoughts of fishing with Harry tonight below the Power and Light Company dam in one of the boats for rent at Buck's Landing. Harry was supposed to catch minnows sometime today. Maybe that's why he was late. He didn't know why Harry bothered. They should really buy the minnows from Buck, who needed the business. But Harry was too cheap.

The shape of Lena, his secretary, hurrying past the window brought him back. She lifted her hand to him, looking concerned. What now? he wondered. The bells over the door jingled and she hurried over.

"I'm coming," he said, and pretended to be still reading the paper.

"I wouldn't bother you, Will," Lena said, "but Donald Millard is on the phone, says he has to talk to you right away. He's all worked up about some-

thing.”

Will looked up at her, blurred through the drugstore reading glasses he had started to use just last week. He pulled them off and laid them on the paper. “Is Adam in yet?” he asked.

“Adam’s there, but Millard says he wants you, no stupid deputy. That’s his word—‘stupid’. You should hear Adam.”

“All right, I’ll be there in a sec.” He turned back to the paper, but didn’t bother with the glasses.

“He’s still on the phone, Will. I just told him I thought you were next door and that I’d come sec.”

“All right, all right, I’m coming.” He slipped the glasses into the imitation leather case sticking out of the pocket of his uniform shirt, folded the paper, and left it on the table as he slid out of the booth. He touched his back pocket to make sure his wallet was still there and automatically patted his side pocket for the pipe, missing because he didn’t smoke anymore.

“I’m getting some coffee to take back,” Lena said. “You want anything, Will?”

She was wearing a dark blue dress with white polka dots, and her white shoes were the kind nurses wear. Will knew she was on the third day of a diet and he said quickly, “No, and don’t let Dolly send back any donuts, either.”

She pushed at his arm. “I’m on a diet.”

“You’ll say she forced you. And I’m not eating any donuts.”

“Now Will. Go talk to Millard.”

The sidewalk outside Dolly’s was in full sun, since all the elms that had once lined the street had been cut down, and the heat and humidity of August were already oppressive. The stoplight at the intersection with the highway to Madison had backed up cars past the police station, and Will, climbing the concrete steps to the station, shook his head at how the town was changing.

He had lived in Fox Prairie all his life and still lived in the house he was

raised in, the yellow brick house on the corner, where in the backyard by the little lily pool his doctor father late one summer night had shot himself (still, to Will, inexplicably), and where for the next twenty years he had cared for his mother, his only absence the unhappy semester he had spent at the university in Madison. He had returned to the little river town on the banks of the Wisconsin, in a landscape of limestone bluffs and rich prairie land turned now to prosperous farms; worked two years at Bender's Hardware before becoming a deputy in the police department; then after Calvin Feller died of a heart attack while eating lunch at his desk, became acting police chief, and, a year later, police chief. He had escaped the courtship of two women and unsuccessfully courted two others before he resigned himself, after his mother had died, to living alone.

Now, on the station steps, he watched the cars crowd the sunlit street and remembered the giant elms and how their swelling roots had cracked the sidewalks. Adam rapped on the station's plate glass window and waved him in.

"Morning, Chief," Adam said. "Millard's having fits on the phone there." The young deputy tucked the magazine he had been reading under the arm of his sharply pressed shirt.

Will reached for the phone on Lena's desk. "Donald?" he said into it. "Will Sumner."

While he listened, he pushed a paperclip around like a miniature boat on the sheet of glass covering Lena's desk. He noticed how wrinkled his own uniform shirt was compared to Adam's. A blue computer screen with columns of colored icons stared at him.

"You're sure he's dead?" Will asked.

Adam turned away from the window where he had been watching the street traffic and went over to the desk. "Who's dead?"

Will held up his hand. "What about the animals?" He listened again. "The tiger, too?"

"What's going on?" Adam said.

Lena entered carrying a white paper bag with "Dolly's" in blue letters on it. "What?" she said. She put the bag down on the corner of her desk and stood waiting impatiently, arms crossed, to reclaim her desk. "He doesn't have his own phone?" she said to Adam.

Will tucked the phone against his neck. "Just a second," he said, annoyed. "All right, Donald. Just go back and wait in the house. We're on our way now. Is anyone else out there? Well, get him in the house, too. And don't go shooting at anything. We're on our way."

Will hung up the phone. "Come on, Adam. Something's happened at that damn zoo of Millard's. You'd better get the rifle from the case, too. I'll bring the car around. Lena, call the hospital and tell them to send an ambulance out to Millard's."

"My lord, what's happened?" Lena said.

"It's that fellow Millard's got working for him. Come on, Adam, get a move on. And make sure you've got shells for the rifle."

"Not the boy," Lena called, but Will was already going out the door. He backed the squad car out of the narrow drive between the station and Dolly's and turned on the roof lights while he double-parked, waiting for Adam.

"Come on, come on," he said, hitting the steering wheel with the heel of his hand.

"I couldn't find the shells," Adam said, sliding onto the seat next to Will.

"Put the rifle in back. Did you get shells or not?"

"Yeah, I got them. They were in your desk. What's going on, Chief?"

Will kept the roof lights on while they drove down River Street. Once past the last shops and the park, the road ran alongside the wide river, and ahead they could see the red brick buildings of the Power and Light Company dam and the long spillway that stretched across the turbulent water.

"I knew that damn zoo would be trouble sooner or later," Will said as he

fumbled with the air conditioner's lever. "Shut your window, Adam."

"Is it Mona and her animal rights again?"

"No, no. The tiger got out somehow. Apparently killed that fellow works for Millard."

"Holy Mother. You mean we gotta hunt a tiger? Holy Mother." Adam was grinning.

They left the town and immediately were driving through vast fields of corn that rolled in green waves over the rich river valley until banking against domed and rocky bluffs behind which the big Wisconsin River, blocked by the dam, backed up into a long and wide lake. The cloudless sky was bluish white. Heat waves shimmered over the corn and seemed to erase the black-top road ahead with sheets of shallow sky that vanished as the car approached. Off in the valley, Will could see, rising out of the green sea, the little knoll with cedar trees dark against the blue sky and the old cemetery where last year they had buried Billy Powers and his mother.

"That guy of Millard's is really weird," Adam said. "Tomorrow, they called him. Man, killed by a tiger. Imagine that. That'd be scary, hey—seeing a tiger coming at you. Man!"

"Did you know him?"

"He came into Renner's once. But you know Renner—anybody colored he thought was bound to cause him trouble. So he wasn't exactly welcomed. People shouldn't be prejudiced like that anymore, Chief. That's the only time I ever saw him. But he was weird, not just 'cause he was colored."

"He wasn't a Negro. The times I saw him, I didn't think he was a Negro."

"More South American, or Jamaican—something like that. He couldn't speak much English, or anything anybody could figure out what he was saying."

Will followed the wide curve that merged with the divided highway leading north to the Baraboo bluffs. Ahead he could see the water towers and, in

the color of concrete against the blue sky, the abandoned buildings of the Badger Ordnance plant that the government had built in the heart of the river valley to produce ammunition for all the wars since the forties. Before reaching the plant, he turned off on County C, which crossed the divided highway and led up the valley toward the distant bluffs. Millard's lay at the foot of the bluffs, beyond which stretched the vast swamp formed when ancient glaciers had collided with and disrupted even more ancient rivers.

"You think we'll have to shoot the tiger?" Adam asked. "I could do it, Chief. I got that buck, you know, last fall, running like the blazes toward Peck's cornfield. Never saw a deer run so fast. I'm steady, too, Chief. My arm don't shake no matter what I'm sighting. Man, a tiger. You suppose they'd let us mount it? The head I mean? We could hang it in the office." He started to laugh and punched Will's shoulder. "Behind Lena's desk."

Will smiled in spite of himself, at the thought of the tiger hovering over Lena. "That tiger's probably two counties away by now," he said. "Listen Adam, you just keep it under control when we get there now. Millard said someone let all of the animals out, the elephant, too. So lord knows what kind of mess we'll find. There's a boy there, too. Joey Pickett—works for Millard, I guess."

"I know Joey. He just hangs around there for free, 'cause he likes those animals. My girlfriend teaches him eighth grade. We took him on a picnic with us once 'cause he don't get along with his old man. Jessie feels sorry for him. Old softy Jessie." He was grinning at the thought of his girl. "He don't talk much, though, and he's got this bum leg. Jessie tried to find out how he got it, but he wouldn't ever say. Jessie thinks his old man beats on him. You know Howard Pickett, Chief? They live in a trailer off that way a ways, just before you get to the bluffs." He pointed over the steering wheel. "We picked Joey up there that time. Jessie and me. A real rat trap of a place. The old man wasn't there though. I bet that kid didn't say more'n two words the whole time we were on the picnic. Went over to Parfrey's Glen. Real pretty

place. You ever been there, Chief? Jessie knows the whole history about it—you know, the geology and that, showing us all the kinds of rocks and how they got there, with the glaciers and all. Didn't mean much to me, but Joe really perked up about it. Jessie thinks he's really smart, which is why she tries to help him out, I guess. Old softy Jessie."

Will was driving faster than he knew he should, but the blacktop road was straight, and there were no cars in sight ahead of them. The corn grew taller than the car on both sides of the road, and only a narrow gravel shoulder and a shallow ditch edged with waves of barley grass separated the road from the cornfield.

"Rooster!" Adam pointed at the pheasant that strutted, then half-flew out of the ditch and into the corn as the car passed. "Too much corn to hunt here though. You'd never get him out. Need a fence row someplace. You wanna go hunting pheasant sometime this fall, Chief? We could get Harry to go, too."

"When we get there now, Adam, you stick by me," Will said. "No matter what you see running around. There's nothing much we can do now about catching elephants or raccoons or whatever. The first thing is this Tomorrow fellow. Can you look at a body like that, without throwing up or passing out on me?"

"No problem."

The cornfield ended abruptly, and they were driving slightly uphill through a woods thick with hickory and oak. County C swung sharply south and Will kept straight on a narrow road leaving C on a tangent. Soon, above a tangle of overgrown honeysuckle and wild grapevine, appeared the black and white sign of Millard's Wild Animal Zoo. Will turned too sharply into the drive, and the car's tires skidded on the gravel. Ahead, they could see Millard sitting on an overturned metal drum and the boy standing next to him with his arms crossed. Millard stood up and walked toward them as the two men got out of the car, but the boy stayed where he was.

“Goddamn,” Millard said in a voice that was almost a shout, but Will knew that he always talked that loudly. “Ever know such a goddamn mess?”

Will slammed the car door behind him. Millard, standing in front of him now, was almost a foot taller than Will and a lot wider. Will felt dwarfed beside the man’s bulk. Millard’s hands were thrust deep into overall pockets, as if to stop even the thought of anyone shaking hands with him. The bib of his overalls stretched tightly over a dark blue T-shirt that sagged at the neck revealing curls of grey hair. The T-shirt was stained even this early in the day with dark sweat circles under the arms, the stains edged by white where yesterday’s sweat had dried. A wispy beard did not hide the puffy cheeks and weak chin on a face that seemed childish for such a big man.

Beyond Millard, Will could see the opened door of the deer pen and inside a raccoon running in a wire drum. “Morning, Donald,” Will said. “Where’s this fellow you say the tiger got?”

“You oughta be asking where’s the tiger at,” Millard said. “That man’s not about to be walking away any time soon.” Millard turned and started toward the boy. “Anyways, he’s down here in the bunk house. What’s left.”

Will and Adam followed him, and Adam raised his hand and waved at the boy, saying, “Hey, Joey,” but the boy kept his arms crossed and only nodded toward them.

“It’s that goddamn free-the-animals woman,” Millard said, without turning. “She’s in a shit load a trouble now.”

Adam walked over to the boy and put his hand on his blond head and shook it. “How’s it going, Joey?”

“Okay,” Joey said. He kept looking down, as though embarrassed. He was wearing only cutoffs and black and white sneakers. There was a large dark scab on his shoulder. He kept his arms crossed tightly over his chest as if he was cold, but his skin was sweaty.

“You’re all sweaty,” Adam said.

“I just run over here from home a while ago.”

“Where’s that bike you got?”

“I just like to run better, is all.”

Will said, “Millard says you’re the one found him.”

“I don’t wanna go in there again,” Joey said.

“No need to. You wait here, though. We’ll want to talk to you.”

Millard was nearing the shed now, and he turned and walked backward and hollered at them. “You fellows wanna see this, or talk? It’s that Mona what’s-her-name, I tell you. She’ll pay plenty for this, I don’t get those animals back.”

Will followed Millard up the steps of the shack and through the door and then stopped so abruptly at the sight of the body that Adam bumped into him.

“Good lord,” he said.

The naked man lay on his back in a large pool of blood that was beginning to dry on the wooden floor. The body was badly clawed. Part of the intestines showed though a gaping wound in the side just above the hip bone. Will heard Adam going down the steps behind him and heard the sounds of gagging. He had to force himself to walk further into the room. Sunlight from one of the shed’s two windows lay in a twisted square across the man’s upper body. The room was very hot, and the drying blood already smelled putrid. Black flies sat like stitches along one of the man’s wounds, and others were stuck in the blood on the floor.

“Goddamn tiger coulda got me, too,” Millard said. “I’d a been up early.”

Careful not to step in the blood, Will walked past the body and pulled loose the sheet crumpled at the foot of the cot. He threw it over the body but it didn’t cover all the blood. “We’ve got an ambulance on the way,” he said. “I have to call the coroner. Let’s get out of here.”

Adam pushed himself up from where he had been sitting with his back against a tree. He brushed the seat of his uniform pants and brushed at the front of his khaki shirt, making sure he had not soiled it.

"You all right?" Will asked.

Adam nodded and ran his hand through his hair to distract from the flush spreading on his cheeks.

"Tender stomach, hey kid?" Millard said. He walked beside Will up the slope toward the squad car, and Adam followed them.

"What are we dealing with here, Donald?" Will said. "Besides the dead fellow, I mean. A tiger loose, and what else?"

"Elephant's gone, too. I were you, I'd be in town right now arresting that Mona woman. She was out here marching around with her cronies from Madison a couple a days ago. Threatening to have me inspected again. Them damned DNR people. If you'd a done something about her then, this wouldn't a happened."

"I told you, as long as she stayed out on the road there wasn't anything I could do. Besides, she's got a point. You know you've got to be inspected."

"She's gonna pay for this. You got any idea what them animals are worth? Besides, it's murder now, man."

The boy had stayed where they had left him, except he was sitting on the barrel now, thumping his heels against the rusted metal. The barrel had been there a long time, so the bottom was buried in the gravelly soil, and tall grass and thistles grew around it.

Will turned back to Adam. "Adam, go in the car and call the coroner. Tell him how to get here. There's a book with numbers there in the glove compartment." He walked over to the boy then and asked, "How you doing, Joe?"

Joey pushed himself off the barrel and crossed his arms again. "Okay," he said.

"You remember me, from when that deer got hit by a car?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're the one found all this first, I understand."

"Yes, sir."

Will had met the boy once before, when he had come into the office about a year ago to report a deer that had been struck by a car and was lying crippled by the roadside. He was a skinny kid, about eleven or twelve, Will thought, with thick blond hair that looked like it had been cut by his father, or maybe by the kid himself, and not too recently, either. The summer sun had turned his skin more pink than tan. His face was thin, with high cheekbones that made it seem gaunt, as if he had not had enough to eat, reminding Will of pictures he had seen of kids in the Depression, huddled around their mother on the porch of some shack in the Appalachians. That day in the squad car, driving back to where the deer lay, the boy could hardly stay still in the seat belt that bound him, and more than once urged Will to hurry, as if there would be something they could do for a deer with a broken leg. Will had made him stay in the car while he shot the deer and put the carcass in the trunk. Driving the boy home, Will had tried to explain that there was no saving a deer with a broken leg. The boy had said, "I wish I hadn't seen him now. He tried to get up and run again when I walked up to him. I must of scared him pretty bad."

Millard was standing behind Will now, and the boy was watching him over Will's shoulder.

"Kid gets here early every day," Millard said. "I shoulda been paying him, instead of that lazy Tomorrow."

"You want to tell me what you found, Joe?" Will said.

The boy said, "Just that they were all gone, 'cept the raccoon. Rajah and the elephant. The deer, too. Then I went in to see if Tomorrow knew, and there he was, like that."

"Weren't you scared, with the tiger loose?"

"No, sir. I'm not afraid of him."

"You have keys for the cages, Joe?"

"No, sir. Tomorrow has them. And Mr. Millard."

"How do you suppose the cages got opened?"

Millard said, "That damn woman. She musta busted them open."

"No, sir," Joey said. "The locks weren't busted. I looked. Anyways, she would never do that--Mona. She wanted to, but she'd a been too scared."

"So how do you think this happened then?"

The boy hesitated. Will noticed he was keeping his eye on Millard. "Probably Tomorrow did it himself. He was drunk yesterday. He made me go home without feeding the animals. Said he'd do it himself, that I was getting too bossy and they didn't need me around here anymore anyway. Said he'd tell Mr. Millard to keep me away from the animals, 'cause I was spoiling them, so they wouldn't mind him anymore."

"You didn't think too much of this Tomorrow fellow, I take it," Will said.

"He was mean. The animals hated him. And he was scared of them, and he was a coward."

Millard said, "He was scared enough of that tiger not to open his cage and let him out. You're just trying to help out that woman." He turned to Will. "Kid's nuttier than her about them animals."

"Why do you think he would have opened the cage, Joe?" Will asked.

"I don't know. He was drunk, I told you. Probably Rajah did something when he tried to feed him, so Tomorrow figured he'd teach him a lesson, or something like that."

"He was naked, though, like he was sleeping when the tiger got him."

"Shoot, he was naked half the time," Joey said. "Like he thought he was still living in the jungle, or wherever he came from in the first place."

They were standing out in the full sun, and Will could feel himself beginning to sweat under the heavy cotton of his uniform shirt. He pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped his forehead, patted the bald spot on the top of his head. The bright light hurt his eyes and was making him squint. "Let's get out of this sun," he said, and motioned toward the shade of a big oak near the deer fence. "I guess you can get on home then, Joe, unless there's anything else you want to tell me."

“No, sir.”

When the boy turned away, Will noticed the bruises. “How’d you get those bruises on your back, Joe?”

The boy’s arm whipped up between his shoulder blades, as though he had a sudden itch. “I fell,” he said. “Off my bike.” He looked Will in the eye, and Will felt the boy wanted him to know he was lying.

“You rode your bike over here?”

“No, sir. I like to run.”

“Okay, Joe. I’ll probably have to talk to you some more about this. You can go, then.”

Millard grumbled as they walked into the shade, “What’re you standing around here gabbing with that kid? You should be doing something about them animals. They get in the swamp and I’ll never get ’em back. Probably there already.”

“Let’s hope they’re there,” Will said. “The tiger, at least, or somebody else’ll get killed. We’ll have to get the county in on this. No way I’ve got enough manpower to be hunting a tiger. What’s that elephant likely to do?”

“Likely to die, is what,” Millard said. “Damn thing’s old enough to have died already. Just lays around, ’cept to eat. Ain’t worth feeding anymore, for all the customers he brings in.”

“Donald,” Will said. “When’s the last time you had any customers?”

“What’re you talking? A couple was here just last week, with two kids, on the way up from Chicago. Got a big kick outa that tiger. Petted the deer.”

The squad car started and moved into the shade, and Adam got out and came toward them. “Car’s like an oven already,” he said, pulling his shirt away from his chest. “I got the coroner, Chief. He says it’ll probably take him an hour, ’fore he can get here.”

“Adam, maybe you’d better get that rifle and take a walk around while we’re waiting. Just in case that tiger’s hanging around here yet.”

“By myself, you mean?”

"Just around here."

"You ain't shooting that tiger," Millard said. "That animal cost me a fortune."

"That's not what I heard," Will said. "Mona Zweifel says the tiger and the elephant both belonged to this Tomorrow fellow."

"Bull. That lying woman. You see what she's doing, Will. Anything to get them animals away from me."

"How did you get them, then?"

"From Tomorrow. That summer I was down in Georgia getting outa the Army. God knows where he got them. If he stole them, I don't know nothing about that. He had that elephant hooked up to the circus wagon with the tiger in it, parading around to the towns around there, the small towns, setting up like a circus act. I seen the possibilities right off and he wasn't making enough to even keep them animals fed right, so I bought 'em off him and give him a lifetime job taking care of 'em—guaranteed. Paid him cash right there with the money I got outa the Army. So don't say them animals ain't mine."

"Adam, go on now, look around," Will said.

"Well, what if I see it? What do I do?"

"Come back and tell us."

"Oh sure, like that tiger's gonna just let me walk away?"

"Adam."

"All right, all right." Adam went back to the car for the rifle.

"Man, it's going to be a hot one," Will said, looking around for a place to sit, but there wasn't one. He slapped a mosquito on his neck, and his palm came away wet from sweat and with a star of blood. From a distance, through the trees, they heard the faint sound of a siren.

"What do you know about this fellow—Tomorrow?" Will said. "Where'd he get a name like that anyway?"

"Wasn't his real name," Millard said. "Nobody could figure out what he

was saying was his name, 'cept it sounded like Tomorrow, so that's what I called him, and he never said to call him different."

"He never came into town much, that I saw."

"Naw. He got in a fight there once. Surly little bastard, he was. He'd go off like a rat trap, you riled him at all. Damn worthless around here, far as any work went. Could hardly talk any English. Only reason I kept him on was I guaranteed it. Don't go back on my word, even if it costs me."

"How'd you get those animals up here, from Georgia?"

"He brung 'em. Told him I'd pay him only a hundred down until he got 'em up here—no shipping charges. So he worked his way from town to town all that summer and into the fall. Damn elephant was half-dead, time they got here, walking all that way. Paid way too much for that dumb thing. But the tiger, he puts on a good show, you poke him a few times to rile him."

"How 'bout the boy and this Tomorrow? How'd they get along?"

"That boy weren't no responsibility of mine. I never even hired him, you know. Just put up with his hanging around. Damn father ought to have paid me babysitting money." Millard's voice rose angrily, and his face reddened.

"Something happen between the boy and Tomorrow?"

Millard mopped the top of his balding head with a hand big enough to cover his whole scalp, then pushed the wet palm down the side of his coveralls.

"Shit, you know these foreigner types. Specially if they ain't got a woman around."

Will looked away for a moment at the raccoon still running in its wheel. "Are you saying he was abusing the boy, Donald?"

"Ain't saying nothing like that—abusing. It weren't no responsibility of mine. That boy didn't have to come hanging 'round here."

The siren's sound had been rising louder through the trees, then suddenly droned down to nothing as the ambulance turned into the drive and stopped. Will stepped out from under the tree and waved it toward them. He

walked over to meet it, and spoke to the man behind the wheel.

“Sorry to have dragged you fellows out here.” He leaned against the frame of the opened window. “The man’s pretty much dead. We’re waiting for the coroner to show up, before we move him. Can you guys wait around awhile?”

“Pretty much dead, huh,” the young man said with a smile. “How long you figure it’ll be for the coroner?”

“Shouldn’t be long. You’d better pull over in the shade though. It’s a hot one.”

Will walked back toward Millard and saw Adam coming from behind the shed where the body was. He carried the rifle on his shoulder.

“What they waiting for?” Millard said.

“I need the coroner to have a look before we move the body,” Will said.

“Jesus Christ, the man’s starting to stink already.”

“What we were talking about the boy, Donald—him being abused?”

“I never said that. You talk to the kid. I don’t know nothing about it.”

Will looked at his watch as Adam came up to them and put the rifle butt down on the ground, as if he were at parade rest.

“No sign of him,” Adam said, polishing the dust off his shoes on the back of his pant legs. “I saw tracks in the path there for a while, but once he got on the grass I lost him.”

“Damn tiger’ll make it to the swamp before you guys do anything,” Millard said. “Somebody’s gonna pay me for this or I’m raising hell.”

“Any sign of the elephant, Adam?” Will said.

Adam frowned. “Well, you never told me to look for an elephant.”

Will shook his head. He looked at his watch and thought for a minute, feeling irritated at having to make decisions amid the heat and the annoying mosquitoes. “Okay,” he said, still thinking. “Well, I guess there’s no use us both waiting here. Adam, you wait with the fellows there for the coroner. I’m going back to town and see what to do about tracking down those animals.

What you want them to do with the body, Donald?”

“Me? I don’t give a damn what you do with him. And it ain’t my responsibility, paying for any funeral, anything like that.”

“See what the coroner says, Adam. If they don’t have any reason to take him back to Madison, tell ’em to take him to Timmermann’s in town.”

“How’m I getting back, Chief?” Adam said.

“You can ride with the ambulance. I’ll see you in town. Donald, I’ll be back later today, see what we can do to find those animals. I were you, I’d stick pretty close to the house ’til we get them, the tiger at least.”

The car was hot in spite of having been moved to the shade. Will shut the windows and turned on the air conditioner. He swung the car in a semicircle through the long grass and back onto the gravel drive. Through the rear view mirror, he saw Millard slouching back toward his house, and Adam walking over to talk to the ambulance drivers who were leaning side-by-side against their vehicle. He leaned forward to pull a handkerchief out of his back pocket. He wiped his face and left the handkerchief in his lap, then fastened his seat belt. Out on the blacktop, he headed back toward town until he came to the intersection with Highway C. He had been debating with himself about what to do next to find the tiger, but thoughts of the boy kept intruding, and on impulse he took the curve on C, hoping he might overtake the boy before he reached home.

After he drove three or four miles, the woods broke into a high cornfield on the left, and on the right a tall-grass meadow rose onto the flanks of the bluffs. A barbed-wire fence ran along the edge of the meadow. Between the meadow and the road telephone poles held up twin lines of wire and the poles cast bars of shadow across the road. The shadow bars crashed soundlessly on the windshield as the car broke through them.

Just as Will began to wonder if he should turn back, he topped a rise in the road and saw the tiny white rectangle of a house trailer across the meadow near the base of the bluffs. He slowed and turned onto the dirt road

to the trailer. White dust boiled out behind the car, and he slowed even further. He felt the grit of dust between his fingers.

The house trailer had become part of the meadow, like some giant refrigerator left abandoned on its side to rust amid the long grass and weeds that grew up to the bales of grey straw that edged its base. Meant to keep the winter wind out, the rotting bales had been there so long they had themselves sprouted weeds. In places, velvet leaf grew as high as the band of narrow aluminum windows. Wild grapevines climbed one corner to the roof and wound around the drooping frame of a TV antenna. Metal steps rose to a screen door that bellied out of its frame, as if the shadows inside were leaning on it.

Will slammed the car door hard to attract attention and went up the steps to knock on the rattling screen door. No one came, so he knocked again and turned his back on the door to wait, arms crossed. Still no one came, and he cupped his hands to the screen to see inside.

“Joe?” he called.

He saw a plaid high-back sofa under a ledge of high windows. A green shag carpet remnant partially covered a yellow linoleum floor. Something crashed somewhere inside and someone cursed. He saw the pale shape of a man naked except for boxer shorts coming toward the door. Will stepped backward down a step and looked up at the man behind the screen door.

“Help you?” the man asked. He rubbed his face with one hand, as if he were just waking.

“Mr. Pickett?” Will said.

The man had noticed the squad car now, and Will’s uniform. “What’s going on? Is it the boy?”

“What boy would that be, Mr. Pickett?”

“My boy. Joey.” He was a big man, in his mid-thirties, with broad shoulders, a flat stomach, and a muscled chest. He seemed unaware where the gap in his shorts was, and Will looked away and moved up a step to be at least at eye level with the man’s chest. A fan was blowing inside the trailer, moving

the smell of sweat and last night's beer from the man's body toward Will. His face was indistinct behind the mesh of screen, but Will recognized him as someone he had seen occasionally in Renner's bar, usually with a young woman. Harry knew him and had told Will about him once, but all Will could remember now was that he had a son living with him, going to school in town, but there was no wife, or at least woman, who could have been the boy's mother.

"I just wanted to talk with him," Will said. "Is he here?"

Pickett looked over his shoulder, hollered, "Joey!" and waited. He turned sideways to Will and hollered again, then walked away. When he came back he said, "He's not in his room. Must be outside somewheres. What you want him for? He do something?"

"No, no," Will said. "There's been an accident over at Millard's place. Animals got out there. I talked to Joey earlier about it, and I just had a couple things more I wanted to ask him."

"Christ, him and them animals." He pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. "Goddamn head hurts." He touched his butt for a handkerchief and, looking down at himself, seemed to realize for the first time he wasn't dressed. He shifted his shorts to cover himself. "Well, I don't know where he is but he ain't in his room. He don't hang around here much, 'cept to eat and sleep. Sure as hell don't do any work 'round here."

"All right then," Will said. "Thanks. I'll get in touch with him later."

Will heard the screen door slam as he walked toward the car, and he looked back. Pickett was sitting on the metal steps, leaning back on his elbows, legs sprawled out and head tilted back as if he were sunbathing, hoping the sun would bake out last night's poisons.

Will turned onto the county road and would not have seen the boy if he had not seen the flash of light across the meadow, like sunlight banking off a mirror. He saw the flash a second time, and then saw the boy in a white T-shirt riding a bike at the base of the bluffs. The bike tipped over and the boy

fell into the grass. Will pulled the car over to the side of the road and stopped partway down into the ditch. His sunglasses slid across the dashboard and fell to the floor. He watched for the boy to get up again, but he didn't. Slamming the car door behind him, he went into the ditch and up to the barbed-wire fence. He pushed down on the top strand, which gave easily because the posts were old and loose in the ground. He swung one leg over the wire, switched hands to keep the wire down, then brought the other leg over. The meadow had not been plowed for many years so the ground was firm and easy to walk on. The grass reached Will's knees. He walked through broad patches of goldenrod and clumps of wild daisy and black-eyed Susan. Sweat began to bead on his face and still he did not see the boy rise. As he got closer he saw curving above the grass the handlebar of the bike and then the boy on his hands and knees parting the long grass and watching the ground intently. Will was almost over him when he looked up, startled.

"You all right, Joe?" Will asked.

The boy's face was red from his having bent so close to the ground. He sat back on his heels. "I lost the rabbit," he said.

"Rabbit?"

"I had a baby rabbit and the wheel hit something and I tipped over and dropped it."

Will tugged the creases of his pants and squatted beside the boy. "Probably gone by now," he said, looking over the grass around them. "Where were you taking it?"

The boy pulled a stem of grass and chewed on it. "I got a place," he said. He pushed up to his knees again. "It was a really small rabbit. I should find it."

"Rabbits grow up pretty fast," Will said. "Long as it was big enough to feed itself, it should be all right."

"Hope so. I felt sorry for it." He stood up and looked back toward the distant house trailer. "I should be getting home," he said.

Will stood up beside him. He noticed they were standing in the traces of an old wagon road that ran along the bluff toward the trees. Joey's high-handled, fenderless bike was lying on its side between the tire tracks. Attached to one handlebar on a foot-long aluminum rod was the mirror Will had seen flashing sunlight.

"Where were you taking the rabbit, Joe?"

The boy had been heading toward the trees, not the house trailer.

"I got a place," Joey said.

"A place?"

"A place to keep hurt things."

"Can I see it?"

The boy looked into Will's eyes longer than a boy would usually look into an adult's eyes. Will sensed a judgment there, a calculation. "It's not against the law, or anything," he said, wary of Will's uniform. "I just keep 'em until they're all right and then I let 'em go again."

"That's a good thing to do," Will said. "Let's go look at them."

Joey bent to upright his bike. A cotton bag full of something swung from one of the handlebars. "I'm not supposed to have pets," he said, standing alongside the bike.

Will knew he meant his father. "I won't tell anyone. Besides, they're not really pets, right?"

They walked together down the old road with the bike between them leaning toward Joey who held the handlebars. Once in the woods, Will stopped to wipe the sweat off his face with a handkerchief. He mopped his damp hair.

"Hot," he said. At fifty-five he was out of shape and winded easily. He had found too many reasons not to go with Adam to the workout room in the high school gym.

The woods were oak and hickory, with some maple, so the shade was dense. It was much cooler in the woods, but the road became choked with

blackberry bushes and bracken, and Joey had to leave his bike. He untied the cloth bag and carried it by the neck down one of the road tracks with Will following him. Will noticed the boy's bare legs were marked by old scratches from the brambles and that he limped.

"What's in the bag?" Will asked.

"Corn," the boy said, without looking back.

To his right Will could see the base of the steep bluff through the trees. The road swung closer to the bluff, and they were walking along huge rock outcroppings covered with blue-green lichens and mosses. Ferns and even small trees grew in the crevices of the elephant-grey rock.

Joey stopped. "It's right up here. You have to go slow so you don't scare everything."

In a small glen between two of the outcroppings were cages of different sizes the boy had built out of chicken wire, old screening, and broken pieces of slats he must have retrieved from cast-off crates or snow fences. Most of the cages were empty, but in one were three small rabbits and in others were birds—sparrows, pigeons, and a red-winged blackbird—a baby raccoon, and a squirrel with no tail. Even though Will and the boy had walked slowly into the glen, the birds fluttered in their cages, and the animals scattered to corners. Joey walked immediately to the cages, touching them and whispering things Will could not hear, and the animals and birds became quiet. He reached down into the cotton bag and took out handfuls of corn to put in the cages.

"I don't have anything very big right now," Joey said. "Once I had a fawn and one time a fox cub."

"These are all injured?" Will asked.

"Some are just babies, that can't take care of themselves yet. Like the raccoon. Most of 'em I find by the road, you know, hit by cars. Some of 'em I can't ever let go, like the birds, 'cause their wings were broke or their legs. I don't know how to fix broke things like that. So I just keep 'em and feed 'em.

Sometimes they die, though.”

“Well, it’s pretty nice in here,” Will said. He sat down on a large rock. Joey had taken a plastic milk bottle from behind one of the cages and was pouring water carefully through the chicken-wire roofs into crimped aluminum pie tins.

“Your dad won’t let you keep these up by your house?” Will asked.

“He doesn’t want pets around. Anyways, they’re better here. They’d get pretty scared with other people around.”

“How about a dog? Wouldn’t he let you have a dog?”

“No.”

“I’ve got a dog. A beagle. She’s pretty young yet.”

“They’re nice dogs.”

Will looked up through the tree tops and could see the sun shining brightly above on the higher green slope of the bluffs.

“Is your father good to you, Joe?” he asked.

Joey kept moving between cages with the water and didn’t look at Will.

“Is he, Joe?”

“He’s okay.”

“Ever hit you? He ever hit you?”

Joey put the half-empty bottle back between rocks and sat down by the cage of birds. He drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his shins. “He gets mad pretty easy,” he said. “I stay out of his way, mostly.”

“If you think you need any help, Joe, you know, you should let somebody know.”

“Help?”

“If you think he’s going to hurt you?”

“I can take care of myself okay.”

“I know you can. But if you ever need any help, you let me know, all right?”

They sat in silence for a while. Joey poked his finger through the chicken

wire and let the birds peck at him.

“What about this fellow Tomorrow?” Will asked. “Did he ever hurt you.”

“He hurt the animals. I hated it when he hurt the animals.”

“What about you? Did he do anything to you?”

The boy watched the sparrow sitting on his finger. “I’m not talking about that.”

Will waited. “Did you let those animals out, Joe?”

“No. I told you, they were out when I got there.” He stood up and brushed off bits of leaves and sticks from the seat of his shorts. He picked up the bag of corn and put another handful into the cages of the squirrel and the raccoon. “I gotta be getting home,” he said.

Will stood with him. “All right. Let’s go back then.”

Walking with the bike between them again, Joey looked up at Will, “Are you going to shoot them animals?”

“What animals?” Will asked.

“The tiger, the elephant, the others.”

“Not if I can help it. I’m going in now to get some help. Probably get somebody from the DNR to come out with a tranquilizer gun.”

“What’s the DNR?”

“Department of Natural Resources.”

They were opposite the squad car parked far across the meadow. Joey asked, “Can I come along? They know me. The animals all know me. Probably I could help.”

“Well, I don’t know, Joe. That tiger, he’s out of his cage now. We’d have to ask your dad.”

“I’ll ask him. I’ll come to town on my bike and meet you. When are you going?”

“Soon’s I can get the DNR man here. Probably right after lunch.”

“I’ll meet you. Where should I meet you?”

“I’ll be at the police station. But it’s not a good idea, Joe. You better let

us handle it.”

Joey straddled the bike and pushed off. “I’ll ask my dad,” he called over his shoulder.

Will wished he had told him no right away. But his father would probably do that anyway. Out on the highway again, he started to worry about the elephant and the tiger, and how in God’s name he was even going to find them, much less do something to get them back to Donald Millard. Maybe those people over at the Circus Museum in Baraboo could help. Across the bright green cornfield wavering in the noon heat he could see the steeples of the town’s churches, and he thought how strange it was that such wild beasts might now be hiding in that corn; one of them with the taste of a man’s blood still in its mouth.

II

Few knew the vast and ever-changing world of the Wisconsin River as well as Harry Thorson. Ever since he had returned twenty years ago, still a young man, from a failed attempt to become a writer in New York City, he had rarely missed an early morning exploration of the beaches and sand bars, the marshes and backwaters created when the Power and Light Company dam, built up-river from the town, had changed the course and character of the river forever.

Once past Fox Prairie, past the highway bridge and the railway trestle, the river spread wide into sandy lowlands that rose gradually to meet steep bluffs and rocky hills. The river's swift current could create shelves of rippled sand under ankle-deep water, but also sharp drop-offs, so a walker along the shore might suddenly find himself on a steep slope down into deep water. Sandbars appeared and disappeared, depending on the water released by the dam. Willow, wild cherry, and river birch held small islands in place. Up the sloping beach toward the bluffs, clumps of little-blue stem and prickly-pear cactus grew out of the sand. Great numbers of birds flocked into the marshes: red-winged blackbirds, ducks of all kinds, herons, hawks, bitterns, and geese. Seagulls hunted small fish and pollywogs trapped in pools when the river receded. Into this world every morning, Harry Thorson came at dawn to record in his ever-present notebook the sights and sounds he would later try to turn into prose or poetry.

This morning he had stayed on the town side of the river and had wandered into the broad cattail marsh that fanned out from a small creek flowing down from the bluffs to join the big river. It had been almost two hours since the sun had risen over the bluffs, staining the opposite shore with

golden light, and Harry was sweating as he walked in full sunlight, his wet hip boots squelching with each step. He pulled up the cuff of the long-sleeved shirt he had worn to keep the mosquitoes off and looked at his watch. Eight thirty-five. He had let himself be distracted by a killdeer on the beach performing its broken-wing act to lure him away from eggs nested in the sand, so now he would be later than usual for his breakfast at Dolly's; Will would probably be at work by now.

Harry pulled off his felt hat, mopped his flushed forehead and bushy hair with a green bandanna, and looked around for a place to sit. Toward the edge of the marsh, thick branches of a fallen tree were etched in black against the green and brown of the cattails, and Harry started toward it. The muck of the marsh sucked noisily at his boots and he had to stop once to rest before he reached the tree trunk. At the tree, he turned his back and hoisted his bulky body onto the sloping trunk. The walking boots that hung around his neck by their tied shoelaces bounced against his chest as he edged his butt up the trunk until his feet were a foot above the muck, and he could see over the tops of the cattails. His heart was beating faster than he thought it should. His binoculars rested on his big stomach between the hanging boots. He untangled the leather strap from the bootlaces and lifted the glasses to study a red-winged blackbird clinging sideways to a cattail. The bird's clucking sounded like two stones knocking together. Harry thought there was probably a nest below it. He let the glasses down and wiped his forehead again with his shirt sleeve. He sighed, wishing he did not have the long walk back to the car. From where he sat, he could see the delta where the creek joined the river. A flight of teal raced low over the cattails and slowed suddenly to land, feet extended, wings spread, into shallow water. Behind him he could hear the burps of a bullfrog and further away, where the dry land began, the soft calls of mourning doves.

The hot August sun was high enough now to begin to wash out the blue of the sky, and Harry was about to push himself off the tree trunk and start

back to the car when he noticed, down river, what he at first thought was a large boulder looming out of the cattails. But even as he realized there could be no boulder that size so far away from the bluffs, he saw the grey mass move, and he watched astounded as it came toward him. The cattails parted before it with a rustling crash as if a truck were smashing through the marsh. Then he heard the commotion of water and muck and, at the same time, saw, still half-hidden by the cattails, the flap of the great ears, so that he knew what it was even before the wrinkled trunk rose like some giant, striking snake and he saw the tips of the elephant's tusks and heard that blaring cry that he had heard before only in the movies. Birds fled out of the marsh before it, and Harry, terrified, could only stare in disbelief as the elephant burst out of the cattails and rushed like some giant machine past him, marsh debris clinging to its ponderous legs, its wrinkled hide stained in places black with muck. Ears flaring, the animal veered suddenly away from the man on the log, swinging its rump so close to Harry that he would later swear that he could have reached out and touched the creases in that ancient hide, that he had actually smelled the jungle still clinging to the animal's great bulk.

Then it was gone, and Harry watched a sudden gathering of seagulls following in its wake as they would a fishing boat plowing through waves. He could still see it as it emerged from the rushes onto the sand of the river shore. Distant and small now, still moving quickly with those short jerky steps, as if its legs were hobbled, it finally disappeared under the railway trestle, and Harry thought, "My god, it's heading toward town."



When Will turned into the alleyway between the police station and Dolly's café, he saw Harry's mud-stained, brown Volkswagen parked in the angled spaces in front of Dolly's, both of the car's front tires up on the curb, as if the curb were some kind of mooring to keep the car from sliding back into the

street. Will climbed the steps to the side entrance of the police station and went into the rest room before going out to the front reception area, where he knew he would find Harry and Lena both asking questions at the same time. While he was washing his hands, a heavy fist struck the door twice.

“Will, you’ve got to hear this,” Harry hollered.

“Hold your horses,” Will called over his shoulder. “I’ll be right out.”

“Judas priest, I’ve been waiting hours,” Harry said, walking backwards so he faced Will as they went down the hallway. His face was flushed with excitement and sunburn. His stout legs, bare and white below his khaki shorts, were still marked with red streaks from the pressure of the hip boots he had been wearing. He had stuck a broken stalk of cattail through his bushy hair, like an arrow someone had shot at him. The binoculars, still around his neck, bounced against his stomach with each backward step.

“What’s that in your hair?” Will asked.

Harry’s hand went to it as if he had not been aware it was there. He pulled it out and threw it aside. Will bent to pick it up.

“Harry, Harry,” Will said smiling.

“You’ll never believe this, Will,” Harry said. “I’ve been trying to find you all morning.”

“I’ll believe anything today.”

The phone was ringing as they came out of the hallway into the reception area. Lena held it out. “It’s for you, Will. You won’t believe it.”

Will grunted as if he thought the two were in a conspiracy, and took the phone. Listening, he dropped the cattail into Lena’s wastebasket.

“That’s recyclable paper in there,” she said, retrieving it and giving Will a look.

“When did this happen?” Will asked into the phone. “You need an ambulance?”

“It’s the nursing home,” Lena said to Harry.

“All right, I’ll be right over,” Will hung up the phone. “That damn ele-

phant's been through there. They had all the old folks out on the terrace in their chairs and the elephant went right through the yard."

"You know about the elephant?" Harry said.

Will smiled to himself as he started toward his office. "Nancy said some of 'em got up out of their chairs for the first time since they first sat down in them—even walked."

"My lord," Lena said. "It's a wonder they didn't all drop dead. I would have."

"I saw it, Will," Harry said. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. In the marsh along the river."

"Well, it's not there now. Lord knows where it's gone to." Will stopped before his office door. "Damn, Adam's got the rifle. Well, I've got to get over there. Then find the damn thing. Lena, Adam should be back pretty soon. He's coming in with the ambulance. Tell him. . . well, I don't know what to tell him. I'll call in. Tell him to just wait here."

"The ambulance?" Harry asked. "What's going on, Will?"

"Was anybody hurt?" Lena asked. "Old Alice Waterman is there. My lord, how would she take seeing a wild elephant after her. In that new dress of hers, and all. She always said the Lord would punish her. 'Cept she'd never tell me for what."

"Harry, you can ride along if you want. I'll tell you in the car."

By the time they reached the new nursing home, so close to the edge of town some of the residents could see cornfields from their window, all the old people were back in their rooms.

"They'll think they dreamt it," Nancy Bates said. She couldn't help smiling. "Thank God no one was hurt. Really, Will, all I can tell you is it went that way." She pointed toward the vast cornfield that stretched from the town limits to the divided highway that came down out of the bluffs to run through town and then on to Madison.

"Well, at least it's probably out of town," Will said. "Come on, Harry."

In the car, as they drove along the cornfield toward the highway, Harry said, "You should have a helicopter, Will. Or a little plane, like they do in Africa. You'd see it right away. A trail like a river running through the corn."

"Where you think I'm going to get a helicopter, Harry?"

"I could have touched it, Will, I was that close. My god, it's huge. I could smell it, it was so close."

They saw the chickens first, just as the car entered the broad curve that led to the highway, ten of them strutting toward them in the middle of the road. Will slammed on his brakes, sending squawking chickens scattering into the ditches on both sides.

"What the devil," Will muttered.

"Judas priest," Harry said.

Will drove ahead slowly and the racket of panicked chickens grew. The truck was on its side in the ditch. The slat-sided chicken crates had spilled out of the open top of the truck, and chickens were still escaping from the smashed crates, while in others the frantic birds, imprisoned at all angles, squalled in terror. The elephant lay in the middle of the road. Beyond it, two cars were blocked by the mound of the elephant's body, and their drivers and the truck driver were standing by the bumper of the first car watching the elephant. The truck driver was wearing coveralls as white as the chickens and a blue baseball cap. When he saw the police car, he started around the elephant, walking on the shoulder of the road and keeping his eye on the unmoving beast. Will and Harry got out of the car. The air smelled of chickens and something like wet and rotting hay. The elephant had released a huge pool of water that steamed around its belly on the hot blacktop.

"My god, it just came out of the corn," the driver said while still walking. "I didn't even have time to brake. My god. Can you believe it?"

"You hurt, Jerry?" Will asked.

"Scared shitless, is all."

The three men walked to the elephant. The car drivers came from the

other side and they all stood looking down on the dying animal. Its great wrinkled side heaved slowly; the huge trunk was curled in on itself and lay on the blacktop like an old tractor tire; its opened eye, buried in deep creases of hide, blinked and blinked, perhaps seeing a remembered Africa in the white sky above. They heard the release of gas before they smelled it and saw the balls of dung falling. The elephant tried once to rise and they all moved quickly back, but it managed only to lift its huge head. The head fell back; an ivory tusk dug into the soft blacktop; the pink mouth opened wide and then closed into folds of flesh that seemed almost to resemble a smile.

"Looks like it's dead," the truck driver said.

"Poor thing," the woman driver said.

"What a smell," the other driver said. "Can I go around it? I got a appointment in town."

Will walked to the head of the elephant. "There's room on the shoulder. Don't get too far down in the ditch, is all. Jerry, you'd better see to those chickens. They won't last long like that in this heat."

Jerry threw up his arms. "What am I going to do? Look at this mess."

"Tip the pens upright, the ones you can reach, at least, so they don't suffocate. I'll get a wrecker out here."

Will started back toward the squad car. "Harry, maybe you could stand out there and wave down any cars coming from the highway."

"Jesus Christ, an elephant," Jerry said, astonished. "Would you believe it?" He tipped up the first crate he came to and jumped back as a chicken exploded out of the broken slats and half-flew into the tall corn.

Stout Harry went down into the ditch and directed the two cars around the elephant. He had his little notebook out and was writing as he walked slowly back into the middle of the road.

"Dieter is sending his truck out," Will said as he came back. He stood at the edge of the pool of water the elephant had released. "It's a pretty old elephant," he said, more to himself than to either of the other men.

“I never hit it very hard,” Jerry said as he started stacking crates of chickens. “Just bumped its hinder when I swung my wheel.”

Will squatted by the elephant’s leg, rubbed sweat off his face and balding scalp with his handkerchief. “Probably just wore itself out, all that running. More shock and fright than anything, killed it.” He was looking at the ring of worn and calloused flesh just above the huge disk of the elephant’s foot. For most of the animal’s long life it had been held there unaware of even the possibility of normal movement. He wondered if it would have known there were other elephants in the world.

“What on earth you gonna do with it, Will?” Jerry asked.

“Belongs to Donald Millard. That so-called zoo he’s got.”

“Need a bulldozer to bury that,” Jerry said. He came over to Will. “Shit, it’s hot.” He pulled off his cap and ran his sleeve across his sweating forehead. “Them chickens’ll die pretty soon, I don’t get them to town. Schaffer’ll kill me.”

By the time the yellow wrecker arrived eight cars were parked on either side of the road, leaning into the ditch, and the drivers, amazed, were standing in a semicircle around the elephant’s back.

“You gotta be kidding,” young Tom Dieter said with a grin as he climbed down from the wrecker and came toward Will. He laughed, looking at the dead animal. “Holy Mother of God, an elephant. I don’t believe it.” He wore washed-out Levi’s and a white T-shirt with Dieter Fox Prairie in a circle of red letters on his chest.

“We’ve got to get it off the road,” Will said. “And upright that truck. Think you can handle that?”

“You bet. Which one first?”

“The elephant. It’s blocking the cars.”

The boy went back to the wrecker, turned it around quickly by crisscrossing the road, and backed up to the dead animal. He pulled a cable from the hoist, wrapped it around the elephant’s leg, and secured it with a large iron

hook. Will felt his throat tighten as he watched the animal dragged across the blacktop by the same leg by which it had been bound almost all its life. He wondered if it had been born in Africa, to somehow end up here in a ditch by a cornfield in an alien country, or if it had come out of its mother in some other pitiful imitation zoo and had never known the way elephants are supposed to live.

The wrecker went down into the ditch and bounced along the rough ground until the elephant was pulled off the road.

"How's that?" Tom Dieter shouted, leaning out the opened door.

"Fine," Will said. "I'll leave you to deal with Jerry's truck. Okay? I've got to get back to town."

Doors slammed as the onlookers returned to their cars and drove past, still gawking out side windows at the carcass in the ditch. The exhausted chickens had stopped squawking and Will knew that many of them would be dead by the time Jerry got them to Schaffer's Poultry in town. He remembered how as a boy he used to walk down the aisles of that barn-like building off the main street, across from the John Deere yard, where crates of chickens were stacked almost to the ceiling. He remembered the moldy smell of chicken feathers and droppings, the chickens packed tightly into the cages, their necks sticking out through slats with their heads bobbing, that raucous squawking.

"Come on, Harry, I've got to get back to town. See about that tiger."

Harry was writing in the little notebook pressed into one hand. "Coming," he said without looking up.

The two men had been friends since boyhood and Harry was used to Will's long silences; he would go on talking as if Will were so interested in what Harry was saying that he didn't want to interrupt. But when Will hadn't spoken by the time they reached River Street again Harry asked, "What's bothering you, Will?"

"Nothing." Will always drove with both hands on the upper part of the

steering wheel. The Spandex band on his wristwatch was too loose and the watch had slipped down his white-haired arm. “Didn’t that bother you at all, Harry, seeing that elephant dying like that?”

“Where’d it come from, anyway, Will? How’d it get away from Millard? I wonder what he’ll do with it now. Two bits he’ll say it’s someone else’s responsibility, now it’s dead. Unless he can figure some way to make money out of a dead elephant.”

“Did you know that foreign fellow worked out there for Millard?”

And Will told Harry what had happened that morning.

“You mean there’s a tiger running around loose now, too?” Harry said.

“There was a boy there, too, Harry. Joey Pickett. You know him?”

“Sure, I know Joey. I used to. . .”

But they were in front of the police station now and, as he turned into the alleyway, Will could see through the plate glass window the shapes of people, like ghosts behind the sun-bleached glass.

“Looks like word’s got out,” he said.

“You expect to keep an elephant running through town a secret? I’m starving, Will. Let’s go to Dolly’s first.”

“Can’t,” Will said. Flocks of sparrows burst out of the vines on the side of the brick building as he slammed the car door. “Fellow’s coming from the DNR with a tranquilizer gun. I’ve still got to do something about that tiger.”

Vince Asher was perched on Lena’s desk with two big-game rifles resting against his thigh. His white cowboy hat lay next to him on the desk and Lena was looking at it as if he had just put a rat there. Mona Zweifel, in tan khaki pants and a tan shirt that almost matched Will’s uniform shirt, sat in one of the oak arm chairs that Lena had rescued when the barbershop had replaced its old chairs with new ones made of molded plastic. Her round face was even redder than usual with some outrage she was trying not very hard to suppress. Ray Riley pushed himself away from the wall he was leaning against and said “Will”— with “it’s about time” implied. In spite of the summer heat, he

wore a blue seersucker sport coat and tie, and his white pants were so big on him it seemed as if, without the belt pulled tight to pucker them at his waist, he might slip down into them. *Prairie Star* was stitched not very expertly in red above the chest pocket of his sport coat.

Will put his hands up to stop them from all talking at once. "Here's all I can tell you," he said. "Someone let the elephant, the tiger, and some deer out of that thing Donald Millard calls a zoo this morning. The tiger killed the caretaker there, a fellow named Tomorrow, and it's still out there running around somewhere. The elephant is dead, hit. . ."

"Dead!" Mona Zweifel cried, leaping up from the chair. The chair arms caught her wide hips, and the heavy chair followed her briefly, then clunked back to the wooden floor. "You killed it?"

"Nobody 'killed' it, Mona. Jerry Cole hit it with his truck a little while ago out by County Z. Died of fright more'n anything, I think."

"If you hadn't been pursuing it. . ." Mona started.

Vince Asher pushed away from the desk and held out both rifles, his arms wide, as if he were about to give some kind of war cry. "I'm here to help, Will," he said.

"Don't you have a business to run, Vincent?" Will said. "Lena, did the DNR call?"

"'Vincent'? What's with 'Vincent'? We haven't known each other forty years?"

"They did," Lena said. "Over an hour ago now. A man is coming out from Madison. Don't forget your hat, Vince." She held it out to him as if he were about to leave.

"I need to get some pictures of this," Ray Riley said. He was fishing through various colored ballpoint pens in his shirt pocket as if he expected to find a camera there. "Tell me how to get to the Millard place, Will. The body's still there, I hope. And where's this elephant? I need pictures of that, too. We could beat the Madison papers on this. I've already been to the nurs-

ing home. Got some good stuff.”

“Was Alice Waterman all right?” Lena asked.

“Look, will you people just let me get this organized?” Will said, exasperated. “I got a man dead, a tiger for god’s sakes running around the cornfields, and an elephant who’s going to start smelling a lot worse than he did to begin with in about five minutes from now if I don’t get it buried. So why don’t you all just go home for now.”

“How far out on Z is the elephant, Will?” Ray Riley said. “You said Z, right?”

“Just go, Ray. You can’t hardly miss it.”

Mona Zweifel said, “I suppose you’re going to show that dead elephant on the front page. You’re such a ghoul, Ray Riley. Are you going to put a shot of the dead man on the front page, too? You’d probably think twice about that wouldn’t you? But not a poor dead creature.”

Vince Asher said, “Hey Mona, why don’t you go with him? It’d be a great shot of you, your arms around that dead elephant.”

Mona’s face turned pink, the old acne scars darker yet.

“Why don’t you stuff it, Vince?” She smiled. “The elephant, I mean. It’d look great in your den, though it wouldn’t exactly go with the twenty deer heads, if you’re worried about environmental accuracy, that is. Or you could put it in the entrance of your shopping center, maybe with a life size cutout of yourself holding those rifles.”

Harry laughed. “You people realize I’m getting all this down for my diary. Be published someday.”

Will held out his arms in an imaginary circle around them all. “All right, all of you out now. I’ve got to get going here.”

“The DNR guy’s here, Will,” Harry said, looking out the big front window. “There’s a car with a state emblem on the door looking for a place to park out there.”

“The rest of you out then,” Will said. “Come on, right now. Vince, if you

really want to help, you can stick around. I'll need some volunteers this afternoon to find that tiger."

"You're not shooting it," Mona said.

"We're not shooting it, Mona," Will said. "Unless we have to."

"Well if he's going I'm going, too." She crossed her arms tightly over her chest, as if to make herself immovable. Her arms were sunburned, and both elbows were scabbed. A Swiss Army watch with a brown leather band squeezed one wrist like a tourniquet.

Will threw up his arms. "Lena, I'm in my office when this fellow comes in. You people suit yourself."

"You're supposed to be going birding with my wife," Asher said to Mona.

"Tell her something came up."

"You tell her. I'm not going home."

Harry followed Will into his office. "I love it," he said, grinning.

"You would. Harry, this is just crazy. I've got to deal with this dead guy, somehow get rid of an elephant carcass before it smells up the whole town, and find a tiger, for gods sakes, who's probably in Illinois by now. Why I keep on doing this. . ."

The office door opened while being knocked on. A young man in what looked like army khakis from a forties film stepped in. A frown deeply ridged his tan forehead, and he had one hand on top of his bushy blond hair as if to hold it down.

"I hear you have a tiger problem," he said, grinning.



They assembled in what Millard called his parking lot, an area he had years ago covered with two truckloads of gravel but which now was grown over with plantain, dandelions, and the blue smoke of creeping Charlie. The cars had come in one after another, as if following a hearse into a cemetery.

Millard had met them halfway down the drive and, with a big swing of his arm over his head, had directed them to the parking lot. Car doors slammed as Will and Harry and Adam climbed out of the squad car, and the others converged on them. Vince Asher carried only the one rifle Will had said he could, held in both hands and slanted across his chest, as though presenting arms. The DNR man balanced an imitation leather rifle case by a handle in the center. Mona Zweifel strode behind them as if she were not only trying to catch up to them but to pass them. She had taken off the khaki shirt she had been wearing to uncover a pink T-shirt on which a large green dolphin, or possibly some kind of whale, dove over an arc of lettering that demanded something be saved.

“Who’re all these damn people?” Millard asked Will.

“This fellow, Charlie Roth, is from the DNR,” Will said, ignoring the others. “We’re going to try to get that tiger back for you.”

“Carried upside down on a pole, it looks like,” Millard said. “All these guns.”

“What Charlie’s got is a tranquilizer gun,” Will said.

“So you ‘tranquilize’ it two miles back in the woods. What’re you going to do then?”

“I don’t know, Donald. Worry about it then, I guess.”

“That tiger’s valuable property. I don’t want it killed.”

“You’ve got no right to own it to begin with,” Mona Zweifel said. She stepped around Will to face Millard, hands on her hips. “This place has never had the proper licensing and you know it.”

“Jesus Christ,” Millard said. “You had to bring that one out here, too. You oughta be arresting her.” He pointed a finger like a cocked pistol at Mona. “I know damn well it was you let them animals out. Bitch.”

Will held up a palm to Millard. “All right, Donald, watch your mouth. We’re not here for that now.”

Mona said, stepping toward Millard, “You think you scare me. . .”

“Mona,” Will said, “that’s enough. Just leave it be. Now Donald, I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news for you. About that elephant.”

“Yeah? What’s that going to be?”

“It got hit by a truck this morning. It came out of a cornfield and Jerry Cole ran into it with his truck.”

“You mean it’s dead? You know what that elephant cost me? Goddamn it, someone’s gonna pay for this. He better have insurance.”

“We’d better get started,” Will said. “Adam tracked the tiger this morning for a ways. We’ll try to pick it up from there. Show us, Adam.”

They walked single file down the path past the old circus wagon and past the shack where Tomorrow’s body had been. Adam showed them the first tracks in the dust of the path outside the shack, but tracks that had been visible in the grass in the early morning had now vanished.

“Should’ve brought some hounds,” Millard said. “Left these others home.”

“Show us where you lost the tracks this morning, at least, Adam,” Will said.

Adam led them across the weed-whacked yard and into an oak and hickory woods.

“I followed it up the side bluff here,” Adam said, pointing ahead, “to pretty near the top. The woods open out up there and it gets rocky—rock ledges and that. That’s where I lost it.”

“Millard’s right,” Vince Asher said. “This is pretty hopeless without dogs.”

“Don’t suppose the DNR has tracking dogs,” Will said to the DNR man. The young man shrugged and grinned. “Nope,” he said.

“Get your beagle, Will,” Harry said.

Will ignored him, frowning. He thought now, too, there was little chance they could find the animal like this, and he felt embarrassed at having brought everyone along.

“Arnie Feller’s got that big black hound he uses to hunt coon,” Asher said.

“Well, let’s get to the top here, at least, and see how things look,” Will said.

They spread out to avoid being hit by the spring-back of brush. The slope soon turned steep, and they climbed through tall stands of fiddlehead ferns and patches of mayapple that were yellowing now in late summer. Squirrels scolded in the oak trees and, as they neared the top, a covey of partridge exploded from the forest floor one and two at a time and dodged imaginary shotguns. The air smelled of leaf mold, hickory nuts, and possible rain. The smell reminded Will of the boy’s animals in their cages and he remembered now that Joey was supposed to have come to town on his bike to go with him when he began the search for the tiger. He wondered what had happened. His father, probably.

As they neared the top of the bluff, moss-covered boulders as big as cars forced the group farther apart to find separate ways around them. The oaks gave way to open ground broken by limestone ledges, patches of sumac, and ground-hugging junipers. Will was the first out of the trees, and he waited as the others emerged one by one from the woods. He was sweating heavily and he mopped his face with a handkerchief. He felt his heart beating rapidly, and started to take his pulse, but Vince Asher was already climbing toward the crest, the rifle held at arm’s length in front of him, as though he were using it to pull himself forward. Mona was to his left, a little behind him, and climbing fast to beat him to the top. Even from a distance Will could see her T-shirt was sweat stained. Harry had just emerged from the trees. He sat down on a rock, obviously out of breath, and, in order to hide his fatigue, brought his binoculars up at once to study something in the sky. Adam and the young DNR man were standing side by side just beyond Harry. Adam cupped his hand to his mouth and shouted, “You all right, Chief?” Will waved and started to climb again.

Clumps of prairie dropseed and little blue stem grew out of the rocky ground, and patches of dwarf blazing star flowed like lavender smoke around limestone outcroppings. Butterfly weed was in bloom, and coreopsis and purple coneflower. Monarch butterflies, reluctant to fly in the heat, clung to blossoms and opened and closed their orange and black wings as if sending signals. The smell of rain was even stronger now, and Will could see, beyond the crest of the bluff, mounds of white clouds piling up in the bright sky.

He climbed more slowly, feeling a bothersome tightness in his chest, and was the last but Harry to reach the top, where the others had joined to wait for him.

“Well, what do you think of that?” Millard said, holding out a fleshy bare arm to the view beyond the ridge. Even the straps of his coveralls were sweat stained, and the others were standing away from him because of the smell.

“Might as well forget it if it’s gone in there,” Asher said, rifle at his side now, butt on the flinty ground.

Below them the bluff plunged in a tumble of boulders, rock ledges, dark green cedars, and sumac to meet at the bottom, among the detritus pulled down by gravity over hundreds of years, the edges of the great swamp. The swamp stretched before them, a vast plain of tamarack and black spruce, river birch and cedars, alders and dogwood, open bogs and cattail marshes. Small lakes gleamed almost white in the bright sunlight, as if ice covered, and channels of water wound silver ribbons through the dense green. Rocky bluffs hemmed in the swamp on both sides, but in front of them the swamp reached to the horizon, meeting the piled-up columns of cumulus clouds that were beginning to move over it now as, eons ago, the glaciers had moved. The glaciers, as big as states, had dammed the rivers and created the vast lake that had transformed inexorably into the great Castle Bluff Swamp.

“Son of a bitch,” Millard said. “I told you not to fuck around this morning. I knew it’d get in that swamp.”

“Watch your mouth, Donald,” Will said.

“Hurray for the tiger, I say.” Mona sat on a rock and was leaning forward, forearms on her knees, trying to catch her breath. She ran a hand through her cropped grey hair and wiped the dampness off on the leg of her pants. Will noticed red scratches on her arms from the brush she had just pushed through.

“Yeah, well, I hope you’re the first one it eats,” Millard said. “We don’t get it back. ’Cept it’d never take more’n one bite.”

“What do you think, Will?” Asher said.

Will’s legs felt wobbly and he wished he could sit, too. “Well, I have to agree. There’s not much point in trying to track it down there. Didn’t know that swamp was so close.”

“I’d suggest you find a pack of hounds somewhere, Sheriff,” the young DNR man said. “Then give me a call again.”

“Probably right,” Will said. “I’m not a sheriff though.”

Harry was off to their left watching with binoculars two hawks drifting high over the swamp.

“Come on, Harry,” Will called. “We’re going back.”

By the time they reached the line of parked cars again, the shade had moved yards away, leaving the vehicles shimmering in heat waves. The top was down on Vince Asher’s yellow Cadillac convertible and the brown leather seat cushions looked like melted chocolate. Scabs of rust disfigured the side of Mona Zweifel’s old Ford hatchback. She had left the windows down, and, when she opened the door, a swarm of flies rose from an opened package of donuts left on the seat; the men watching saw her suddenly plunge into the car with arms flailing. Will opened the door to the squad car to let the heat out and stood against it, resting his arms on the top of the door.

“I’ll be in touch with you then, Charlie,” Will said. “Soon as I can find out about getting some tracking hounds. Most likely tomorrow. I’ve got your number.”

“It might not be me they send,” the young man said. “Depending on

who's scheduled for what. Actually, it's Chuck. People call me Chuck, you don't mind."

"Shit, I knew this would happen," Millard said. "That tiger'll die of old age, 'fore you find it. I already lost my elephant." He pointed to Mona Zweifel still battling at flies in the car. "And you know who's to blame."

"Just keep a lid on it, Donald," Will said. "We'll be looking into it."

Vince Asher had his rifle across his shoulders, his arms draped over it as if he were on a cross. "I've been thinking about that elephant, Will," he said. "You know, I could take it off your hands—the carcass I mean."

"That's my elephant," Millard said.

"You want to pay to bury it?" Asher said. "What I'm thinking, Will, is, I've got this trophy room out at the ranch, I wouldn't mind having that elephant stuffed."

"The whole elephant?" Adam said.

Harry laughed loudly and slapped his leg. "Mona was right."

"How'll you get it through the door?" Adam asked.

"I'm planning an addition," Asher said. "I've got the blueprints already. Anyway, I might just use the head."

"That's my elephant," Millard said. "It's gonna cost you, you want it. Them tusks alone are worth a fortune."

"All right, you two will have to settle this between you," Will said. "Today, though. That elephant won't last long in this heat. Come on, Harry, Adam, we've got to get back. I'll be in touch, Chuck." Somehow, 'Chuck' never seemed right to him. 'Charles,' or 'Charlie.'

Behind the steering wheel in the hot car, Will waited until the others had pulled out of the parking lot. Adam, in the back seat, leaned with his forearms on the seat top between Will and Harry.

"Can you really stuff a whole elephant?" he asked again. "That deer head I got cost me almost two hundred. Imagine, an elephant."

"He'll probably do it," Harry said. "I never believed it when he said he

was going to start raising buffalo, but he did.”

“It’d be cool, though, you know. Two bits he’ll want that tiger, too—we get it.”

“Mona should never have given him the idea of putting it in his shopping center,” Harry said. “He’ll likely do that, too.”

“You really think Mona let them animals out?” Adam said.

“She did over at the university,” Harry said. “Let all those mink out at their experimental farm.”

“Old Mona,” Adam said, grinning. “The terrorist.”

Will pulled himself forward by the steering wheel and tugged his wet shirt away from his back. “No one ever proved that. It’s just a rumor.”

“She practically admits it, Will, when you talk to her,” Harry said. “Doesn’t say she did it, but gets that little self-satisfied smile, looks at you out of the sides of her eyes like ‘if you only knew what I can do.’”

Adam laughed and pushed Harry on the shoulder. “I seen her do that, too.”

“‘Have seen her,’ Adam,” Harry said. “Not ‘I seen her.’”

“Old Harry,” Adam said, and pushed his shoulder again.

As they neared town, Will saw boys run across the road ahead where the elephant’s carcass had been left in the ditch. The tipped-over chicken truck had been hauled away, but escaped chickens still strutted in the ditch. Three boys in shorts and T-shirts were standing on the elephant’s rib cage and two others were trying to move its head by tugging on the tusks. Four bikes were lying in the gravel on the road’s shoulder. The boys on top of the animal jumped down when Will pulled the squad car over.

Will opened the door and stood alongside the car. “You kids get outa there, now,” he hollered over the roof of the car. “Right now. On your bikes.” He got back in the car and waited until the boys jumped on their bikes and were riding back toward town, one riding double.

“Crazy kids,” Adam said and waved as the car passed them.

“Sad way for an elephant to end its life,” Harry said. “A playground for kids.”



After leaving Harry and Adam at the station, Will had gone home to feed his dog and walk it as far as the old feed store and back. He had showered and changed clothes and eaten the ham sandwich Lena had bought for him at Dolly's that afternoon but that he had never had time to eat. The sun had been down long enough for all the golden light of an August evening to have faded and it was almost dark by the time he walked from his house the three blocks to the corner of River Street and turned toward the police station. Streetlights hung in a gauze of summer insects and the sudden swift shadows of bats. The early show at the Majestic must have ended not long before as a few people still pushed through the glass doors, children running ahead toward the cars, adults looking disoriented in a world that had turned from sunshine to dark while they had sat in air-conditioned chill watching, some for the second or third time, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. The marquee that curved over the doors and the ticket booth had abbreviated the title to *Indiana Jones Temple of Doom* in the same red capital letters that had been used for fifty years—since Will had been a child himself—to announce the different world existing inside. The title of the current movie and the death of the elephant that morning made Will remember walking down the dark aisle that sloped toward the big screen where Tarzan swung through trees and a herd of elephants rushed toward the audience in clouds of dust as he held even tighter to his father's hand. His father dead now. Lying shot in the head by the lily pool in the back yard. Blood in the water by the goldfish. The rock garden. The marigolds like the orange part of fire. The smell of marigolds.

He passed the drug store that was just about to close; Timmermann's funeral parlor, where the body of Tomorrow was lying, perhaps being disem-

bowed even as Will walked by; and the brick library with the town's historical museum on the second floor. The stores on the other side of the street were all closed for the day. They were built on the bank above the river, and the warm summer air carried the smell of the river, of wet sand and fish and oyster shells. Renner's Bar and Grill was directly across the street from the police station. Through the station's front window Will could see Adam at Lena's desk reading a paperback. He looked at his watch: after nine already. The new deputy should be there by now. He thought of going across the street to see if Adam needed anything, but he knew Harry would be waiting in Renner's.

An arc of neon on the big window built into imitation brick scrawled "Renner's Bar" in red. Will could see men and women on stools at the long bar and, behind the bar, Fred Renner in his white apron turning bratwurst on a grill built into the brick wall. A dusty-eyed deer head looked down on the little man and, above a wide mirror reflecting the people at the bar, a neon bass leaped into a blue lake where, just below the surface, the face of a clock and black letters spelling "Budweiser" floated. A row of narrow booths lined the wall opposite the bar. The booths were empty now, but beyond them the tavern opened into a larger room with epoxy-coated tables made from old wagon wheels. Will could see Harry eating at one of the tables.

The people at the bar looked over their shoulders almost as one when Will opened the door and stepped from the humid air outside into the tavern's imitation cool laced with the smells of frying meat and cigarette smoke. Hands were partly raised in greetings of "Will," "Chief," "How's it going." Will touched shoulders of the men as he passed and said the names of the three women there.

"I was about to give up," Harry said as Will pulled out one of the heavy captain's chairs.

"Said I'd be here, didn't I," Will said. He felt a sudden urge for the pipe he had stopped smoking over two months ago, and he touched his pants

pocket where the pipe used to be. "What are you eating?"

The plate in front of Harry was now empty except for a crumpled paper napkin. "I had a hamburger. Didn't you eat yet?"

"I had a sandwich at home."

Harry turned toward the bar and raised his arm high like an eager kid in a classroom. "Did Renner see you? You want a beer, don't you?"

"He'll come," Will said. "How did the business with the elephant go? You went there, didn't you?"

"It was fantastic," Harry said. He leaned his forearms on the table, surrounding the glass of beer in front of him. "Asher brought over a crane from his construction site and they looped huge cables under the carcass." Harry's arms went out and up to imitate a giant cradle. The motion raised his round stomach, bumping the table. He was wearing a navy blue T-shirt with a large caricature of Thoreau pressed in white on the front. The picture was badly faded from many washings and shot through with the blue of the T-shirt. "They hoisted it up over one of Asher's dump trucks, and what a sad sight that was to see, Will, against the blue sky, the body of this wonderful beast hanging limp, its old trunk dangling like a fire hose, enormous tree-trunk legs swinging like there were no bones left at all. And the hide, Will, that wrinkled like a map of all its sufferings. I'm writing a poem about it."

"I'll have to read that," Will said. He looked over his shoulder to see if Renner was coming for his order. "What did Vince do with it?"

"It wouldn't fit in the dump truck sideways," Harry said, "so they had to maneuver it down on its legs and curl the trunk up along side. When they slammed the tail gate and drove away you could see the dome of its head from the eyes up over the tailgate, almost like it was still alive and watching."

Renner hurried up to the table. "What'll you have, Will?" he said, wiping his hands on his white bib apron. The apron was grease-spotted, and Renner had lettered with a red marking pen "Renner's Bar" in big letters across the chest. He was so scrawny the cloth of the apron wrapped completely around

him. His shoulders seemed not much wider than his little head. He kept looking back toward the bar.

“Just a beer, Fred. Maybe a bag of those peanuts in the shell. You alone tonight?”

“Got a new girl coming in.” He pushed up a sleeve that wasn’t there and glanced at his watch. “Shoulda been here by now, too. Okay, a beer and some nuts. Harry?”

“What kind of scotch do you have?” Harry said.

“Goddamn it, Harry, you know I got two kinds. Red Label and Dewars.”

“I’ll have a Dewars, one ice cube.”

“So what did Vince do with the elephant?” Will asked.

“He’s putting it in one of his barns. Said he already talked to a taxidermist on the phone in Madison. Just another of his harebrained ideas. There’s no one north of Chicago could take on a job like that. Besides, it would cost a small fortune.”

“He’s got the money, I guess,” Will said.

Renner returned with the drinks and both men leaned back as he set them in front of them. “You wanna run a tab?”

“Not tonight, Fred. Too tired,” Will said. “Who’s the new girl you hired?”

“Belva Jenkins. From over past Roxbury. You remember her, don’t you?”

“I do indeed,” Will said, thinking of a hot summer day and a flirtatious girl in a yellow dress much too short for someone so young.

“She probably won’t last, but I said I’d give her a try, long as she behaves herself.”

“Who’s she?” Harry asked.

“That girl that got involved with Jim Kellner,” Will said.

Harry lifted the glass of scotch to catch the light in the amber liquid and then brought it to his big red nose to sniff. “I would’ve bet she’d be off to Chicago, by now, or Hollywood.”

Three men at the pool table across the room burst into groans about something, and one of them whacked his cue on the edge of the table. A fourth man was feeding quarters into an old round-shouldered jukebox inside of which a rainbow of colored light quivered. Patsy Kline started to sing.

“Next they’ll turn the TV on,” Harry grumbled. The bulky old set hung on the wall from metal brackets Renner had made himself, its grey face reflecting the lights of the jukebox.

Will took a long drink of his beer and felt for his pipe again. “Well, I got in touch with the people over at the circus museum this afternoon,” he said. “Seems they’ve been trying to buy that tiger off Millard for a long time now. Elephant, too. They’re pretty concerned about what happens to it. Apparently Mona’s convinced them Millard isn’t operating his place up to code. He’s been cited a couple times already by an Ag Department team that inspects these kind of places. Got fined once. So a guy’s coming over from there tomorrow. And they’re finding some tracking hounds for me. So that’ll be a help. And I talked to Timmermann at the funeral home and they’ll take care of burying that Tomorrow fellow. We’ll have to figure out who pays later, I guess.”

“You’ve had a busy day,” Harry said. “You going to open those peanuts?”

Will picked up the bag of peanuts, bit the cellophane package and emptied it on the table. “Help yourself,” he said, and reached for an ashtray for the shells. “Too busy. I was hoping, before all this Millard business started, we’d get to go fishing tonight. Anyway, that new deputy’s starting tonight. I expect he’ll be calling in the middle of the night, asking what to do.”

“It’s supposed to storm tomorrow, you know, if you’re going after that tiger in the swamp.”

“Bad storms?”

“That’s what they said. I’m supposed to go over to the university tomorrow to talk to a writing class.”

Both men cracked peanuts over the ashtray. "Who's that?" Harry asked glancing toward the door.

Will looked back over his shoulder. A young woman wearing a yellow halter top and stone-washed Levi shorts had just come in, her cropped blond hair bright against the white T-shirted chest of the tall man who followed her. Behind the bar, Renner threw up his arms in exasperation, and the girl hurried past the bar stools and around the end of the bar. All the men had turned on their stools to watch her hips as she passed. The man with her threw himself sideways into one of the booths opposite the bar, his back braced against the wall, his long legs crossed outside the booth. Renner led the girl by a bare arm through the door to the storeroom.

"That's the new waitress," Will said. "Belva Jenkins."

Harry laughed loudly. "Good God. Renner's face was redder than her lipstick. I don't think he's too happy."

"The fellow with her is Joey Pickett's father. I met him this morning, out at their house trailer."

"I know who he is," Harry said. "We had a run-in one time. I was picking up hickory nuts under a tree just alongside the road and he came by in that old car of his and chased me off. Said I was on his property. I doubt I was, but I wasn't about to argue. He's a pretty big guy and he was mad."

"I'm a little concerned about his boy Joey," Will said. "You know anything about the situation there? With the father?"

"What? You think he's abusive?"

"I saw some bruises on the boy this morning, at Millard's. Out at their trailer the guy wasn't even out of bed yet mid-morning, and obviously hung over."

"I've heard he drinks a lot. He's worked different places around town, mostly construction, and over in Madison. Never any one place very long. Joey's a smart little guy. Mona Zweifel's sort of taken him under her wing."

"Mona? How does she know him?"

"I don't know. She takes him bird-watching once in a while. I went with them once. Out to where Honey Creek joins up with the river. Lots of birds there."

"The boy's got a sort of hospital for animals, you know, back in the woods. Hurt animals he picks up. He showed it to me this morning. Not many boys his age would do something like that. The other thing is, Harry, Millard sort of hinted maybe that Tomorrow fellow could've been abusing him."

"Jeez, the poor kid. You'd better talk to him, find out what's going on."

"I intend to."

"Talk to Mona, too. I know he spends time with her."

"Millard thinks Mona's the one let those animals out this morning," Will said.

Harry laughed. "I wouldn't put it past her. I still think it was her that released the mink over at the university's animal research farm, whether they proved it or not. And the Primate Center at the university. She's out there picketing them once a month at least. The worst was when she showed that slaughterhouse film to the kids at Babington Elementary, when the teacher thought it was going to be about endangered species. Alice Twiller's class, that was. I don't think Alice has talked to her since, and they were good friends a long time."

"Can't blame people for being mad about that. Even Ray Riley, and he always supported her. His little girl had nightmares for a week after seeing that. Well, I sure hope it wasn't Mona this time. I'd hate to have to arrest her. In a lot of ways, Harry, I admire Mona. She's probably the most kindhearted woman in this whole town, the way she cares so much about not just animals but a lot of people, too."

"It's true," Harry said. "Even back when we were in grade school Mona was always the one who'd stand up for anyone being bullied. She was fearless. I'm not saying anything against Mona, if that's what you think. She's my

birding partner. Has been for years. The only thing is, she likes to argue with me about everything, especially when we can't see the bird. I know perfectly well it's a tanager singing, but she'll insist it's something else, probably just a robin. It's maddening. She's got no education, you know, past high school. Most people would consider me a professional naturalist, the books I've written."

"If only she weren't so riled up all the time," Will said. "To the point she gets people's backs up. More people would like her. It just seems like she's angry most of the time. Maybe being in the army as long as she was she got used to being on the bossy side. She's got ten cats you know. Last year I went to her house because some jerk had called the station, complaining, but those cats are all well cared for. Everyone of them had a name. They all got along. I didn't see anything to complain about."

"I thought you didn't like cats."

"I like cats. I just like dogs better."

Even above the other noise in the bar, they heard the woman's angry voice rise in Renner's storeroom, and they turned to look. Joey Pickett's father pushed up from the booth and headed toward the storeroom door, but before he reached it Belva threw it open with enough force to bang it against the wall. Renner was so close behind her he seemed to be pushing her through the doorway, and he bumped into her when she stopped suddenly and turned to confront him.

"I'd like to know what you'd expect anybody to wear on a hot summer night." She stood with her hands on her hips like an angry child arguing with her mother. "Jesus Christ, it's ninety degrees out there."

"Not in here, it ain't," Renner said.

Pickett came up behind Belva and put his big hands on her bare shoulders.

"What's the problem?" he said. He was a foot taller than either Renner or the girl and his body was broad enough so that Will couldn't see either of

them behind him.

"He's fired me, Howie, and I ain't even started yet," Belva said. She looked up over her shoulder at him with teary eyes and a child's pout on her lips.

The row of people at the bar were all watching.

"You're not working here dressed like that," Renner said, his voice squeaking with anger. "I shoulda known better to start with."

Pickett pulled the girl to his side and stepped toward Renner, but Renner ignored him and pointed a scrawny arm at the girl. "And you're a half hour late your first night, besides."

Pickett pushed Renner on the shoulder, sending him stumbling back. "Watch how you're talking, you little shithead."

Will jumped up from the table and shouted "Hey!" as he walked toward them. "Let's calm down here, fella," he said, and pulled Pickett's arm to turn him.

"Who the fuck asked you," Pickett said, swinging around. He stumbled back. His eyes were bleary and unfocused, and Will could smell the alcohol on him. Will wasn't wearing his uniform, and he doubted Pickett remembered meeting him earlier that morning.

"Come on, Howie, let's just go," Belva said. She moved next to him and hugged his arm to her side. "This here's the police chief. You remember me, don't you, Mr. Sumner?"

"I do, Belva," Will said. "Maybe you'd better take your friend here outside."

Belva pulled on Pickett's arm. "We're going," she said, "but it ain't fair, Mr. Sumner, he should fire me for nothing at all."

"*Wearing* nothing at all is more like it," grumbled Renner.

Pickett suddenly jerked his arm free from the girl, sending her crashing into the opened door. Her head hit the edge of the door and she cried and brought her hand up to her forehead.

“You little fuck!” he yelled at Renner. He lunged toward him, but Renner dodged, and Pickett stumbled and would have fallen if Belva hadn’t grabbed his arm again.

“Will, get this guy outa here,” Renner said. He stepped quickly behind the protection of the bar.

“Come on, honey,” Belva said. She held his arm with one hand and pressed the other to her hurt forehead.

By this time Harry had come up to help, and two of the men at the bar rolled off their stools and came toward Will. Will put up his hand to stop them and took hold of Pickett’s other arm.

“He really is the police chief, honey,” Belva said.

“No more trouble now, Mr. Pickett,” Will said. “Let’s just go outside, okay.”

Pickett swung his bare arm around Belva’s neck and pulled her tight against him, as if she were a hostage. His biceps bulged against her cheek. “He shouldn’t talk like that to you,” he said, but he seemed to be talking to the deer head on the wall. He let himself be walked toward the door between Will and the girl.

“Are you all right, Belva?” Will said across Pickett’s chest. “You’re bleeding.”

“I’m okay,” she said. “Not so tight, honey.” She tried to duck out from under Pickett’s arm, but he squeezed her even more tightly against him. His white T-shirt was sweat stained at the armpits and Will next to him tried to hold his breath against the mixture of deodorant, sweat, aftershave, and alcohol.

The door opened suddenly before they reached it and Mona Zweifel came through, stopping so abruptly that the door bumped open against her back.

“My god, what have you done to her now,” she said, her astonished face reddening. “You bastard!”

“For god’s sake, Mona, get out of the way,” Will said. Pickett’s knees had begun to buckle, and Will braced against the sudden weight of the big man. Mona was forced back onto the sidewalk by the momentum of the three pushing through the door. She stood with one stout leg bracing open the door. Harry followed them out. From the bar, Renner was hollering for them to shut the door.

Once outside, Pickett suddenly straightened like someone springing up out of water, and Will and the girl were pushed aside.

“Lemme alone, damn it,” he said.

Will’s heart was pounding. He held one hand to his chest and with the other wiped the sweat off his forehead.

Mona moved to Belva’s side, and the door she had been holding open slammed into Harry’s shoulder. “You all right, dear?” she said to the girl. “Did he hit you?” She reached to touch Belva’s forehead, but the girl dodged and went to Pickett’s side again.

“I hope you’re not planning to drive like that,” Will said to Pickett.

“I can drive him,” Belva said. “I can drive his car.”

“Well, you better get him home then. I’d say he’s had enough for tonight.”

“Don’t go home with him, Bel,” Mona said. “I thought you were starting work here tonight.”

“Yeah,” Belva said. “I got fired already. Come on, honey, let’s go to the car now.” She took Pickett’s arm, and he let her lead him down the sidewalk along the line of angle-parked cars.

“You touch her again, Howard Pickett. . .” Mona hollered in warning after them.

“Well, that was exciting,” Harry said, grinning. “Are you okay, Will? You don’t look so hot.”

“Just what I needed to end the day.”

“What are you going to do about that man, Will?” Mona swung away

from watching the girl help Pickett into his old Buick station wagon and faced Will, her body noticeably shaking. "That's not the first time he's hit her, you know."

"He didn't hit her," Harry said. "She fell against the door."

Will swished away mosquitoes drawn to his sweating face. "Let's get inside," he said. "Mona, come and have a beer with us."

"I just came down to see Bel, how she was doing her first night. I don't go in that place. I told her it was a mistake working there, but she won't listen to anything I tell her, now she's met that. . . that. . ."

"Come on in, Mona," Will said. "I want to talk to you about a couple things anyway."

The people at the bar turned on their stools to look at them as they passed. Mona was wearing khaki shorts that rode high enough to expose kneecaps and her hands were plunged deep into hip pockets as big as purses. "Don't fall off your stool, Ernie," she said to Ernie Lang at the end of the bar, and turned to show him full front the green letters on her T-shirt demanding he save a place for wildlife.

Renner hurried over to their table as they were pulling out chairs. "I hope you arrested that s.o.b.," he said to Will.

"He's on his way home. He won't bother you again. You want a beer, Mona?"

Renner said, "Not tonight, maybe. But what about tomorrow? Next week? I knew from the start that girl was gonna cause me trouble."

Mona had sat down, but she jumped up again, bumping back the heavy captain's chair. "That girl! What are you blaming her for? Except she's a woman. Always blame the woman first. Right? It was that ass Pickett. And you never gave her a chance even to work."

"All right, all right," Will said. "I don't want to hear all this again. Mona, do you want a beer or not?"

She sat down. "What's Harry drinking?" She reached over and touched

the glass in his hands, almost tipping it.

"Scotch," Harry said, pulling it back as if he had to protect it.

"No. Just give me a beer, then. Leinenkugel."

"You want anything else, Will?" Renner asked. "On me."

"No thanks. I'm all right with this." He held up the half-empty beer glass.

The room was noisier now, as someone had turned on the television set, and several men were sitting at tables pulled together under it to watch wrestling through a haze of cigarette smoke.

Will pulled his chair closer to the table and leaned his forearms on the tabletop. "Where do you know Belva Jenkins from, Mona?" he asked.

Mona shrugged her broad shoulders. "Just around. She's a very nice young woman. She wants to be an actress someday."

Harry laughed. "Don't they all."

Mona ignored him. "It's not going to help her, taking up with that Howard Pickett. God help young people nowadays."

"You know Pickett?" Will said.

"Through his boy. Joey. The man's abusive to him, too, his own son. He's an abusive personality, Will, and you ought to do something about it. I've tried to get the boy to report him, but he won't hear of it. Probably too scared to."

"Joey told you that? His father beats him?"

"Not in so many words, he didn't. So help me, Will, if that bastard starts beating on Bel, too, I'll do something about it myself. There's no tolerating an abusive personality. Towards women and children. Animals. He killed the boy's dog, too, you know."

"He killed his dog?"

"Just last spring. Joey had found it along the roadside. A puppy some bastard probably let out of the car to get rid of. Then drove ten miles and let out another. Joey brought it home and that son of a bitch—drunk as usual—drowned it in the rain barrel right in front of him."

“Joey told you that?”

Harry had pulled his little notebook out of his shirt pocket and was writing in it, his glass of scotch pressed against his cheek.

“He did. Joey’s a real animal lover, you know. He’s been trying his best to take care of those animals Millard’s been mistreating for years. Thank God they got away. Free at last, free at last.”

“Well, that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about, Mona. Millard seems to think you might have had something to do with letting out those animals.”

Mona slapped her palm on the table, shaking the beer glasses, and laughed too loudly. “I only wish I had. Someone ought to have, long ago.”

Harry said, “It didn’t do the elephant much good, though, did it.”

“Better dead than being chained by its foot the rest of its life.”

“You have any idea who might have let them out, Mona?” Will said.

“No. Why do I get blamed for anything with animals that happens around here?”

“Why indeed.” Harry smiled into his glass.

“What about the boy?” Will asked. “Do you think he might’ve done it?”

“Joey? I doubt it. I mean, he felt really strongly about those penned up animals, but he’s a little timid. Intimidated most of his life, I expect. He’s a sweet boy. A little on the cold side when it comes to warming up to anybody. I think he might have a lot of hate in him. I take him bird-watching with me. He knows almost any bird you see around here now.”

“Where were you last night, Mona?” Will asked.

“Oh Jesus Christ, Will, you sound like some detective in the movies.”

Loud laughter broke out at the pool table, and one of the men slammed his cue down on the table and stalked away, then turned back and said something that made the others wave him away amid boos.

“I’m just trying to do my job, Mona,” Will said. “Did you go out last night?”

"I went to the movies with Angie Asher."

"*Indiana Jones?*" Will said.

"We drove to Madison. Just ask her, Will, you don't believe me."

"Vince went too?"

She scoffed. "That'll be the day, he sits still long enough to see a movie through."

"You know what he's done now, Mona?" Harry said. "He's hauled that elephant out to his ranch to have it mounted."

"Doesn't surprise me a bit. All the dead creatures he's got hanging on his walls. It's a morgue out there, Will. A morgue for animals. It shouldn't be allowed." She upended her glass to finish her beer. "I've got to be going," she said. She looked suddenly tired, as if she might not be able to get up. She sighed. "So Will, what do you hear from May Carlson? She's not very good at writing. To me, at least."

"She's fine. Loves Canada. Says the research is going good."

"Going well," Harry mumbled not quite to himself.

"What is it—her project, I mean?"

"Some ecology thing."

"She's a lovely woman, Will. You oughtn't to let her escape, even for a summer."

Will shrugged and touched his shirt pocket for matches that weren't there. For a year he had seen a lot of May Carlson, but after the Gunderson murder and the things he had learned about May's involvement she had been cool toward him and he had found he didn't really care any longer.

"Goodnight, Harry," Mona said, pushing up with both hands on the table. "Will, you look after Joey. He's a good boy."

When she was gone, Harry pulled his glasses down on his nose and said with mock cunning, "So she's got an alibi. What now, Sherlock?"

Will stood. "Time to go, Harry."

Outside, the humid air was heavy with the wet sand smell of the river.

Moths and other night insects fluttered against the glass of the tavern window, trying to reach the red neon script of Renner's name. Beyond the dark roofs of the buildings across the street, heat lightning swelled into piled masses of clouds.

"Be hot sleeping tonight," Will said.

"You ought to get air conditioning, that attic room you sleep in," Harry said. He already had his handkerchief out to mop the sweat starting on his forehead.

"Where's your car?"

Harry pointed. "End of the block. You want a ride?"

Will was looking at the window of the police station across the street. A young man in uniform was sitting on the edge of Lena's desk, arms folded across his chest. He pushed away and walked around the desk and studied what was on top for a minute, then walked to the front door and back to the desk again.

"I should go see how the new deputy is doing," Will said.

"Who is he?"

"Young fellow from Madison—just moved here with his wife and kid. He used to be with Campus Protection and Security."

They heard the bass boom of car speakers before they saw a car stop at the stoplight at the other end of the block. The car was full of teenagers. A girl leaned waist-high out the rear window. She pulled back in as the car accelerated quickly away from the changed light and headed for the bridge and Madison.

"Well, I'm going home," Will said. "The new guy'll be all right in there. He's got the numbers he needs to call if anything happens. See you tomorrow, Harry."

"You're hunting that tiger tomorrow?"

"When the circus museum guy comes with the dogs I hope. You can come along if you want."

“I have to talk to that class at the university.”

“All right then, see you Harry.”

“Night, Will.”

At home, Will stood on the steps of the back porch and waited for the over-excited beagle to find the spot worth wetting. He watched impatiently as it sniffed the grass, gradually lowering its hind legs in the signal that he knew meant it was about to let go, then, frustratingly, deciding there might be a better spot closer to the lily pond. He shook his head to keep away dark memories of the lily pond: his father's body there, blood in the water, the orange marigolds. Tonight he had to think of a black man mauled to death, an abused boy, an enormous animal lying dead on the hot blacktop, and another, more dangerous beast, that must be looking for a place to sleep now out in the dark swamp. Lightning flickered again on the black sky, outlining the high clouds with silver, and a sudden breeze swirled through the yard, carrying with it the smell of coming rain.

III

Thunderstorms that night temporarily broke the heat, but humidity still hung visibly in the air as Will walked to Dolly's for breakfast. The breeze was from the south, and he knew the rising sun would soon make the day unbearable again. The sidewalks had just begun to dry in the early sunlight. Earthworms struggled across a concrete desert to find grass again and their cool dirt tunnels. Will had to keep his eyes down to keep from stepping on them and to avoid puddles gathered where sections of the sidewalk had sunk. Drowned worms were already turning pale in mud at the bottom of the puddles.

River Street was deserted except for a ride-share van carrying day shift maintenance people, with one or two environmentally conscious academics crowded in, to work at the university. The van stopped at the red light where River Street intersected the highway into Madison. The corner buildings on the river side of the intersection had been torn down several years ago to make little parks with views of the river. Dolly's café was next to one of these parks; she had gotten permission from the City Council to keep two picnic tables there for people who wanted to eat outside, but, because of the traffic noise at the stop light, the locals seldom used them. Next to the park on the opposite corner, the old limestone Post Hotel now housed apartments on the upper floors and on the first floor a boat rental where tourists could rent canoes or yellow rubber rafts to paddle down the river for the day and be picked up at one of the neighboring towns. Across from the hotel, kitty-corner from Dolly's, Dieter's service station, a thirties art deco building that resembled an approaching locomotive, stood amid a huddled herd of orange U-Haul trailers guarded by automobiles waiting for repair. All four corners of

this main intersection, once shaded by doomed elms, quivered now in morning heat waves. Will remembered the day Marcus Ballweg's crew had cut down the old trees, remembered the sound of the chain saws, the thump of great limbs falling on concrete, the litter of yellow, withered leaves in the gutters and on the sidewalks. Everything gets uglier, he thought.

In Dolly's, Eldon Diehl was sitting on one of the aluminum stools at the counter when Will entered. He turned and raised his arm to Will, but went back to his breakfast and re-reading the daily letter he wrote to the president of the United States protesting the old outrage to his family when, during the war, the government had taken their farm to build the Badger Ordnance plant. Every day he walked the five miles from where he lived near the plant to personally mail the letter he had spent most of the night writing.

"You're pretty early today, Eldon," Will said, risking a conversation. But Eldon only grunted and went on reading.

Will put two quarters in the newspaper rack and took the paper to his usual booth by the window overlooking the street. Through the service opening behind the counter he could see Dolly readying the grill and knew she had seen him come in. He opened the paper on the table top and searched his pockets for his new glasses, hoping there would be nothing in the Madison paper yet about the escaped tiger or the death of Tomorrow. He did not want reporters on his heels this morning. But the story was on the front page, together with a picture of a tiger that must have been taken in the city zoo, and another of Millard in his overalls standing by the old circus wagon with the door swung open wide. Apparently the photographers hadn't managed to get a shot of the dead elephant before Asher had it hauled away. And as for the dead man, Will doubted that Tomorrow had ever in his life stood before a camera and tried to smile, so there was no picture of him at all, dead or alive. He pulled the paper aside as Dolly put a cup of black coffee and silverware in front of him.

"You got hold of that tiger yet, Will?" she asked. "I was scared to hang

out my washing yesterday, with that cornfield right up to my backyard." She was cleaning her wire-rimmed glasses on her apron, and her plump, sunburned cheeks were pushed up by a grin.

"Not yet, Dolly." He leaned back in the booth and smiled at her. "Nothing for you to worry about, though. It's miles away from here by now."

"Well, I would hope so. I'm putting up a No Smoking sign, Will, now you've given up that pipe."

"Now I'll never be able to go back."

"How's that lady friend of yours? She hasn't been in for a while."

"Lady friend?"

"The professor. May something."

"She's fine. Off on a research grant for the summer."

"Your waffle's on. I'll bring it out."

"Thanks, Dolly." He went back to reading the article on the tiger, wondering how he had gotten so paired-up with May Carlson all of a sudden.

He had finished eating the waffle and had pushed the plate aside to take up the paper again when he saw Joey Pickett ride by on his yellow bicycle. He put his forehead to the window glass and looked back to see the boy lean the bike against the No Parking sign in front of the police station and go up the concrete steps. He knew Lena would be in by now and would tell him to come next door. In a few minutes the boy went past the window, frowning. When he entered, Will held up his arm to signal him and he came to the booth. He was wearing washed-out Levi's that had been cut off above the knee and a clean white T-shirt.

"Sit down, Joe," Will said. "Surprised to see you."

The boy grinned and slid into the booth. The table top was chest high on him. His thick hair was wind blown from the long bike ride into town. He leaned sunburned arms on the marbled Formica, one hand on top of the other, and continued to grin, as if waiting for Will to say something.

“You want something to eat?” Will said. The boy’s grin started Will smiling, too. “A waffle? Sweet roll?”

“Well. . .” he hesitated. “I don’t have my money with me.”

“It’s on me. What’ll you have?”

“Can I get one of those?” He pointed at the waffle. His fingernails were rimmed with dirt and there were bramble scratches on the backs of his hand and on his arms.

Will looked toward the counter where Dolly was waiting on two men in work clothes who had just come in and had sat at the far end of the counter from Eldon Diehl. He caught her attention and mouthed “waffle” while pointing at the top of Joey’s head.

“What brings you to town so early in the morning?” Will said.

“I thought you were going to wait for me yesterday, to hunt for Rajah. I came in on my bike but you were gone already. The lady there said you went already.”

“Well, Joe, I had a bunch of people to help me and I really couldn’t keep them waiting. And to be honest, I sort of forgot about you, in the excitement and all.”

The boy grinned again.

“What?” Will said.

“Nothing.” He inspected his palm, then looked up, still smiling. “I like when you call me Joe; everybody else says Joey.”

Dolly brought the waffle to the booth and put it in front of Joey. “And who’s this young man?” she asked, arms crossed over her stout bosom.

“This is Joe Pickett, Dolly. Joe, this is Dolly, she owns the place.”

“What else can I get you, Joe?” Dolly asked. “Orange juice?”

The boy looked at Will. “Okay, bring him some orange juice, Dolly.”

Joey reached for the metal canister of syrup and tipped it over the waffle, spilling too big a pool of syrup. “Holy cow,” he said. He looked at Will as if he expected to be cuffed.

"Looks to me like you've got enough for two waffles there." Will handed him a knife. "Here, spread it around a little."

The boy was very hungry. He hardly stopped to swallow before putting another bite of waffle into his mouth. When Dolly brought the orange juice, he drank half of it without stopping.

"Well, you didn't miss anything yesterday," Will said. "I'm afraid your tiger's gotten into the swamp."

"The big swamp past Millard's bluffs?" He was looking at the orange juice and smiling slightly, as if remembering something happy.

"We followed him up to the top of the bluff yesterday where you could see the whole swamp. It wasn't any use going in there without dogs."

"My teacher says that swamp goes on for miles. That one time it was a great big lake, after all the glaciers went through and pushed up the bluffs and melted. I think it'll be like his own jungle again, for the tiger."

Will looked into Joey's eyes and the boy looked away quickly.

"Well, we can't leave a tiger running loose, swamp or no swamp," Will said. "We're going after him again today soon as the fellow gets here with the dogs."

"You're chasing him with dogs?"

"We'd never find him otherwise, in that swamp."

"He'll be really scared of dogs. You said I could come with you, okay?"

"Well, I'm not so sure that's a good idea, Joe."

"You said so yesterday, if I asked my dad."

"What'd he say?"

The boy didn't answer.

"Look, Joe. It's too dangerous. I can't take you in a swamp with a tiger on the loose."

"Rajah knows me. He knows I feed him. He even lets me pet him. I could help you."

"Joe, there's going to be four grown men trying to keep up with a pack

of hounds running through stuff it'd be hard even to walk in. We can't worry about you keeping up. Shoot, I probably won't even be able to keep up myself."

A frown creased the boy's high forehead, and he studied the window. His eyes had gone cold, the skin on his high cheekbones whitened, and Will remembered what Mona Zweifel had said last night.

"Are you going to shoot him?" Joey said.

"Heck no. The DNR fellow's got a tranquilizer gun. We'll drug him and get him out of there somehow and take him over to the circus museum in Baraboo."

"And they'll put him in a circus?"

"I don't know what they'll do. Anyway, Joe, they take real good care of their animals there. It wouldn't be like at Millard's."

"That's not what Mona says. She says circuses are a crime. They force animals to do all kinds of things that aren't natural to do."

"Well, Mona Zweifel's not always the best one to get advice from." Will lifted his wrist to eye level to look at his watch. "Finish up your waffle there now, Joe. I've got to get to my office before they come."

The boy pushed in a piece of waffle bigger than his mouth, and the syrup ran down his chin. He wiped it with the back of his hand. "What about the elephant? Are you gonna try and hunt him, too?"

Will hesitated. "Well, Joe, sorry to say, yesterday that elephant got hit by a truck. It ran out on the highway outside of town a ways and got hit by a truck and killed."

The boy stared at him, open mouthed. "He got killed?" He looked down at his plate. One hand went to his forehead.

"Sorry, Joe," Will said. "The truck driver just couldn't stop, that elephant came out of the cornfield so sudden, onto the road."

"Probably he was scared. I should have. . ."

"What, Joe? There was nothing you could do, an elephant running loose

like that.”

The boy pushed to the end of the booth. “I have to go now.”

“I do, too,” Will said, standing. “Where you going now, Joe?”

“Nowheres. Can I come to your office? I never been in an office.”

Will smiled. He sensed the boy had formed some sort of attachment to him, and he wondered what he had done to cause it. “If you want.” He pulled off his glasses, pushed them into his shirt pocket, and got out his wallet to leave money on the table. “I won’t be there long, is all.”

“Thanks for the waffle,” Joey said, as he slid out of the booth. His bare leg squeaked on the Formica surface of the seat.

“You’re welcome,” Will said.

“Where’s your dog when you go to work?” Joey asked as they climbed the stairs to the police station. Fox Prairie Police Department was painted in gold letters in upper and lower curves on the full glass door in front of them.

“He’s got a house in the backyard.”

“Probably he gets lonely all day.”

“I imagine he does.”

“Can I see him sometime?”

“Sure, if you want.”

“Animals like me.”

“Well, I bet more than animals like you, Joe.”

Lena stood up behind her desk as they came in. She wore a green polka dot dress with a wide white belt and she stood as straight behind her desk as a school teacher about to start her class. “I see he found you, then.” Her big smile fell immediately into the well-worn grooves a million previous smiles had creased.

Joey seemed to move closer to Will, as if he needed protection even from someone as friendly as Lena.

“He had breakfast with me,” Will said. “Anyone call, Lena?”

“Stanley Roberts did, from Circus World. Just to confirm eight o’clock,

he said. And Vince Asher's coming over, too. Wanted to know when you were leaving."

"I'll be in my office, then, Lena. Come on, Joe, you wanted to see my office."

Will closed the door behind them. The boy ignored the large picture window that looked over the big river running behind the town's main street and went to the huge bird's-eye map of Fox Prairie someone had painted on the wall several administrations before Will had become police chief. All the houses and stores and streets of the village were depicted in bright colors as they had looked years before Fox Prairie had begun its transformation into a commuters' town, circled now by new developments of curved streets and shopping malls erected so quickly that cornfields still grew outside their back entrances. On the wall, white dots of seagulls swam on the postcard blue river, and across the river bumps of hills rolled away in green to a sky painted the same blue as the river. A bridge crossed the river, and, beyond it, two miniature black cars drove on the highway winding through the hills toward the distant skyline of a large city hovering on the horizon.

"Man," Joey said, looking up at the painted wall. "Is that a map?"

"Of Fox Prairie," Will said. "Sit down a minute, Joe. I want to talk to you." Will sat at his desk with his back to the window and motioned the boy to the captain's chair in front of the desk.

Frowning, the boy sat on the chair's edge, his hands folded into a tight fist between his knees. "What?" he said.

Habitually, Will touched the pocket of his khaki shirt for the matches he would have used for his forsaken pipe.

"Joe, I noticed out at Millard's you had some pretty ugly bruises on you. How'd that happen?"

"I don't know. Just different things. Falling down, off my bike, bumping stuff."

"Nobody did that to you, then? Millard, that dead fellow, your dad?"

Punched you, I mean." Will picked up a rubber band from his desk and fooled with stretching it.

Joey shrugged. "My dad gets mad sometimes."

"Mad enough to hit you?"

"Sometimes."

"You mean when he's had too much to drink? When he's drunk, or just for no reason?"

"He's always got a reason. For him, anyway. I don't care. I just stay out of his way. Long as he lets my animals alone."

Will stood up behind the desk. "Well, I think I'm going to have to talk with your dad, Joe. He shouldn't be hurting you."

"No," the boy said, looking frightened. "He didn't hurt me. I can take care of myself. I know how."

"Well, we'll see about that. Where's your mother, Joe?"

He shrugged. "She went when I was little."

The noise of excited dogs barking and howling reached them even through two closed doors. Someone pounded on the office door and Harry pushed in without waiting.

"You ought to see the show out here, Will," he said, a big smile spreading across his bearded face. He was dressed in light blue slacks and a white shirt, with a red beret pulled down like a mushroom cap on his thick hair, so Will knew he was on his way to the university. "Ten hounds tying themselves in knots in the back of his pickup. How's Joey this morning? You remember me, Joey, from bird-watching with Mona? Mona's out there, too, carrying one of her placards over her shoulder like a cross, fighting with Vince Asher. I wish now I hadn't promised to give a talk today."

Joey had gotten up from the chair without saying anything. Will came around the desk, put his hand on the back of the boy's neck, and pulled him next to him. "I can see this is going to be just a wonderful day. Let's go have a look at those dogs, Joe."

The red pickup was parked in front of the station, between Harry's Volkswagen and Vince Asher's Cadillac. A plastic top with special ventilator windows covered the bed of the truck. The windows were open, and the hounds inside whirled past them as if being blown around by a high wind that existed only within the confines of the truck. Scrawny tails whipped the windows and the baying intensified until the stocky man in green khaki shirt and pants, hiking boots, and a brim-backward baseball cap pounded on the plastic top without even pushing himself away from leaning on the truck's back fender. The barking fell to excited whimpers that soon broke into a single bark, then two, then three, until the whole pack seemed again about to explode from the back of the truck.

Mona Zweifel raised over her head the cardboard sign she had made that morning from the side of the box her computer had come in. Lettered in red capitals with a felt pen, it was nailed none too securely to a broken broom handle and demanded SAVE THE TIGER. "Those dogs are suffocating in there," she hollered at the man leaning on the truck, and seemed about to hit him with the raised sign. Intimidated by Mona's big body in a white T-shirt and oversized Alpine shorts, the man stood away from the truck and stepped back.

"They're all right," he said, rather meekly, and put his hand into one of the windows. The dogs began to lick it wildly.

"Is there water in there?" Mona demanded.

"They only been there like half a hour, lady," the man said. He wiped his hand on his pants leg.

"For Christ's sake, Mona, let the man be," Vince Asher said. He was sitting on the front bumper of his car. His feet, in rubber boots, were pushed against the curb as if to hold the car from running onto the sidewalk. A leather Indiana Jones hat was tilted back far enough on his head to show his thick white hair, and he had tied a red bandanna around his neck.

"In this sun, a half hour is a lot," Mona said. She lowered her sign when

she saw Will coming down the steps.

Asher pushed himself up from the bumper. "We ready to go?" he said.

Will looked at his watch. "Adam'll be here in a minute. And the DNR guy."

"How's Joey this morning?" Mona said to the boy.

"You're not taking a kid along on this are you?" Asher said. "No place for a kid. Or that one." He cocked a thumb at Mona.

"You men are not doing this alone," Mona said, her voice rising. "I'm a witness."

"To what?" Asher said.

"All you want is a tiger head to hang on your wall, Vince Asher. Mr. Big Game Hunter. That's your only interest here."

Will said, "Mona, I think you'd better stay here. You can't go through a swamp like that anyway, in shorts. Just the mosquitoes alone. . ."

Mona planted the sign next to her Goodwill store army boots and held it out as if she were at parade rest. "Screw the mosquitoes. I'm going."

"Well you're not, Mona," Will said. "So pack up that sign and go on home now."

People were beginning to stand around, attracted by the noise of the hounds: two teen-age boys on their way to work shelving at the Piggly Wiggly; Mary Cannon, always the first to work at the bank; Fred Renner, watching from across the street as he got ready to sweep his sidewalk; Eldon Diehl and the construction workers drawn out of Dolly's café.

"Can't you keep those dogs quiet?" Will said to the man from the circus.

The man pounded on the side of the truck again. "Shut up in there," he hollered.

"We haven't met," Will said, holding out his hand. "Will Sumner."

"Stanley Roberts. It'd be a good idea to get going soon."

The dogs had quieted briefly at the knock on the truck, but then one began to yelp as if in pain.

“Something’s wrong,” Mona said. She moved quickly to the truck and, even as Stanley Roberts was hollering “Don’t!”, she turned the tailgate handle and let it drop down, so the dogs boiled out like water released from a dam and swarmed around Mona’s bare legs, yelping as if she were the quarry they had found at last after a long hunt. Panic showed on Mona’s face and she pumped her legs knee-high like someone treading water.

Harry and the others were laughing. Stanley Roberts waded into the pack of dogs, grabbing those he could by the scruff of the neck and yelling, “Get back in the truck, you sons a bitches! Get! Get! Now!” But the hounds might as well have been alley cats for all the attention they paid.

“I could use a little help here,” Stanley Roberts said over his shoulder to those watching. Will, Harry, and Vince all moved to help, but it was the boy who jumped into the back of the truck and called to the dogs and clapped his hands at them, and they all jumped in a pack into the truck and began licking at the laughing boy’s face and arms.

“I should slug you,” Stanley, his face wet with sweat, said to Mona.

“I don’t see any water in there,” Mona said.

“Crisis over,” Will said. “Come on out, Joe.” He helped the boy climb down and slammed the truck’s tailgate.

Adam and the DNR man arrived and, in the confusion of giving directions to Millard’s and deciding what cars to take and who would ride together, Will forgot about the boy. As he backed the squad car out of the alleyway between Dolly’s and the police station, he saw him standing with his yellow bike leaning against his hip. Mona was next to him, her back to Will, but he could tell by the movement of her head she was talking to the boy, and he hoped it wasn’t about what had happened in Renner’s last night, hoped she would have more sense than to ask about the girl who had brought Joey’s father home. Will raised his hand and smiled at the boy, and Joey waved back, but he did not look happy.

“That Mona,” Vince Asher said from the back seat. “One’s about a dozen

too much of her. She's buddies with my wife, you know. Comes around way too much. How Angie stands her is beyond me. Get this." He moved forward to lean on the back of the seat between Will and Adam. His rifle in its leather case was cradled between his legs, and he pushed it away from his head to his shoulder. "She's got Angie going out bird-watching with her, if you can believe it. Angie, she thinks all birds are sparrows, 'cause she's from Los Angeles, wouldn't go out of the house without nylons on a bet."

"Mona's all right," Will said. "You shouldn't egg her on like that."

Asher sat back, then leaned forward again. "How long you think this is gonna take, Will? I have to check in sometime today at the shopping center. We're having the opening pretty soon, you know."

"Can't tell, Vince," Will said. "You volunteered to come along, so I figured you weren't on any time schedule."

"Well, I'm not. Just like to know, is all. Hope we get a look at that tiger."

Will looked up at Asher's face in the rear view mirror. "How'd it go with the elephant?"

"Oh, I don't know. Probably wasn't a good idea. Angie is hollering already she can smell it from the house, and the guy I called in Madison, taxidermist, said he couldn't do it. Nobody outside of Chicago could. Might just have to bury it. Get a backhoe and bury it. Except for the tusks. Shame though."

"You can make stools from the feet, you know," Adam said. "I saw it once."

"How much do you know about this Howard Pickett, Vince?" Will asked.

"Just that he's a first-class son of a bitch. And a drunk, too. I hired him once, when I was building Prairie West. He'd show up about three days a week, even then most of the time so hung over he was good for shit, working. I fired him."

"That was his boy back there, that got in the truck with the dogs."

“Didn’t know he had a kid. Didn’t know he had a wife, far as that goes.”

“She left him a while back, apparently. Left the boy behind.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. Why’re you interested in that jerk? To arrest him, I hope.”

Adam shifted in the front seat and asked over his shoulder, “What was he so mad about the other day, I saw you outside the post office? You looked pretty worked up.”

Asher sat back, surprised. “Well, let’s see.” Will watched him in the rear-view mirror. “Oh yeah, I remember that now. He wanted to work again. Wanted me to hire him on the new shopping center, which I didn’t need any more men anyway, since it was almost done. But I told him I wouldn’t hire him even if he worked for free. He got pretty pissed at me. You wanna turn the air conditioning on, Will? It’s getting pretty hot back here. Gonna be hot in that damn swamp, I bet.”

They might as well have been in the African jungle. They stumbled all morning through stagnant pools, dense thickets of alders, bogs with grass hillocks that tripped them if stepped on. Mosquitoes swarmed around them, and black gnats fought to get in their eyes, even under sweat-streaked glasses. Stands of tamarack, spruce, and cedar shut out the sunlight, but in spite of that dense shade the dead air seemed as hot as when they were out in the open sun following what seemed like a river but for the fact that the water did not move. Their shirts were sweat-soaked and swamp muck stained their pants black to above the knees. The hounds had been given the scent of the tiger from the straw in the cage at Millard’s, but they had not been in the swamp long before a startled deer dashed away in front of them, and it had taken most of the morning and a lot of hollering to get the dogs back again.

“This is bullshit,” Asher said when they had gathered together after struggling through another thicket of alders. “No way are we going to flush out that tiger. Not with those, anyway.”

The exhausted and panting hounds had gathered around the legs of

Stanley Roberts who was looking for a place to sit but there was no place dry enough. Adam was swinging his hands at swarms of gnats and mosquitoes around his head. He pulled off his uniform hat, wet with sweat, and swung it like a butterfly net in front of his face. "Get the hell off me," he hollered, exasperated.

The DNR man had stumbled a half hour ago and fallen into the muck. The front of his shirt and pants looked as if kids had been throwing fistfuls of mud at him. He was trying to wipe clean with his handkerchief the tranquilizer gun he was carrying. "I've got to be getting back pretty soon," he said. He was younger than the others and he kept his eyes on the rifle he was cleaning so they would not see his embarrassment at being so tired and miserable.

Stanley Roberts said, "I think you're gonna have to wait for that tiger to come out on his own, he gets hungry enough."

"The mosquitoes probably ate him already," Adam said.

Will looked around. "No place to sit and take a break. I guess we'd better head back in then." He hoped his voice didn't shake and betray how exhausted he was. He pointed at the top of bluffs they could see above a line of black spruce. "We've sort of circled around in here. There's the bluff at Millard's over there, so it won't be so far back, at least."

When they were on high ground again, they managed to climb far enough above the detritus at the foot of the bluff to reach the shade of a lone maple. All five of them collapsed on the stony ground. The hounds milled around them for a while and then lay down, too, their slobbering tongues panting, muck-crusting ribs heaving.

Adam was lying on his back, his arm over his eyes, his hat on his chest. "God, I wish we had the river to jump in right now. I feel like a million bugs are crawling on me."

Will was sitting next to Adam, his legs stretched in front of him on the steep slope, his hands pressed on the ground to keep him from sliding. He looked over his shoulder at Stanley Roberts sitting above him. "So, you have

any suggestions what to do now, Stanley?” he asked. “About the tiger?”

Stanley was inspecting the paw of one of the hounds that had come to him limping. “Like I said, I think you just wait. He’ll come out sooner or later.”

“Well, that’s the problem, isn’t it?” Will said. “Where he’ll come out, and what he’ll do when he does.”

Vince had climbed the highest and was lying on his back above Stanley. He sat up, his rifle in his lap. “I’m hunting that tiger, Will,” he said. “Not in this goddamn jungle of a swamp. I’m cruising the roads around it. In the evenings toward dark. And when I see it, I’m shooting it. Or maybe we could put out some bait. A goat or something like that. Like in that movie I saw on TV about those lions coming into the railroad camp in Africa, eating the workers.”

“You’re not doing that, Vince,” Will said. “Not on your own, anyway.” He turned to the DNR man sitting next to him with his forehead on his knees. “I would think this is going to be your department’s problem, Chuck. There’s no way I can handle it, with the few men I’ve got.”

The young man looked up and wiped the sweat off his face before he realized how dirty his palm was. He spit out something that had gotten into his mouth. “You’re probably right,” he said. “I’ll talk to my boss when I get back. He’ll be in touch with you about it.” He pushed himself up from the ground and struggled to keep his balance on the steep slope. “I’ve gotta get going. I was supposed to be back by one.”

Will stood, too. “Come on, Adam. We’re going.”

Adam kept his arm over his eyes. “I’m dying,” he said.

Vince Asher was already up and climbing the hill before the rest of them started after him.



Will cleaned up as best he could back in the station bathroom. When he came out, Lena had a sandwich and a Coke from Dolly's waiting for him in his office. Adam was sitting in the chair in front of Will's desk, already eating a hamburger and French fries he had gotten at Dolly's.

"Go on in there and clean up, Adam," Will said. "I'm going home for awhile to shower and change clothes. You can go home when I get back."

"Do I have to come back?"

"What do you think?"

"Just checking. Be great to have the afternoon off."

Will sat at his desk and unwrapped his sandwich. Lena said from the doorway, "Ray Riley was calling for you, for his newspaper. He wants you to call him soon as you're back."

"Anything else, Lena?" Will's hand was shaking as he ate the sandwich.

"You know, Will, that boy waited for you here almost two hours. I let him sit at your desk awhile."

"He did, huh. Where'd he go?"

"He just left without saying. He's an awfully nice boy. A little shy, is all."

Adam bunched up the wrapping from his food and stuffed it into the bag it had come in. "You should have a shower installed here, Chief. So we wouldn't have to go home in the middle of the day, like now, and come back."

"You're right," Will said.

"You know, Chief," Adam said, "that Vince Asher? When I said in the car about seeing him the other day arguing with Pickett? He said it was about Pickett wanting a job, but I heard him saying something about his wife. Pickett saying something about Vince's wife, I mean."

"Like what?" Will put the other half of the sandwich back in the bag and drank from the can of Coke.

"Well I was just walking by, all I heard was 'your wife' and Vince saying 'You son of a bitch, if you think. . .'" and him red in the face as an apple."

Will rose behind his desk and scrolled the paper bag down to save the last of his sandwich. "Seems our Mr. Pickett is quite the troublemaker. I'm going out there tomorrow, have a talk with him. About that boy, anyway. I'm going home now, Adam. Be back as soon as I can."

"Okay, Chief." Adam got up, too, and threw his balled up bag into Will's wastebasket with a hook shot over his shoulder.

Will parked the squad car halfway to the old wooden garage at the end of the gravel driveway behind his house. He was sweating again in the midday heat, and felt immensely tired and dirty as he crossed the yard to the back door. The grass needed mowing, and there were dandelions growing through cracks in the old concrete walkway. A flock of sparrows squabbled in the thick ivy that covered the yellow bricks of the house, and a blue jay twitched tensely on the edge of a bird bath, watching him. He was so tired he had forgotten his dog, and then realized the dog wasn't barking. He turned back toward the lily pool and rock garden where the dog was chained. He saw Joey sitting on the grass stroking the dog next to him. The dog's tail was wagging so fast in the grass Will could hear it. The dog half rose and sat again, torn between being petted and wanting to run to Will. The boy's yellow bike was lying on its side. Joey stood up and brushed the seat of his shorts as Will walked toward him, and the dog, freed from its indecision, raced to the end of the chain to greet Will.

"So, you met my dog," Will said. He squatted and let the beagle bob around him, licking his face. He unhooked the chain from the dog's collar.

"What's her name?" the boy said.

"Molly."

"She's a nice dog."

"How'd you know where I live?"

"The lady at your work told me. What happened with Rajah?"

"The tiger? No sign of him. You been here ever since I left?"

"Are you mad?"

"Mad? Why would I be mad? Molly's happy for the company, I'm sure. Was she barking when you came?"

"When she saw me, she did."

"She barks sometimes, but nobody complains, because I'm the police chief."

The boy smiled.

"You must be hungry," Will said. "Did you eat anything? It's two o'clock."

The dog had lost interest in them and had run toward the parked car. The boy squatted and called to her, and she came running back.

"I've got to get cleaned up," Will said. He looked down at his muck-stained pants. "You can come in if you want. There's some donuts, at least, you could eat."

They entered the small sunporch where an oilcloth-covered picnic table almost filled the area to the right of the door. There were two double-hung windows on the wall at the end of the table and three along the side. Oversized red geraniums were printed on the white oilcloth.

"Joe, I left a bag with half a ham sandwich in the car. Why don't you go get it and I'll put some milk out here for you. Take the dog if you want."

When Will came back from showering, dressed in a clean uniform, the boy was at the table on the sunporch. He had finished the sandwich and milk and a powdered donut Will had left for him. The dog sat at his side, looking up, as though it expected something to drop. Will sat on the bench opposite the boy.

"I think that dog likes you," he said.

"Animals like me," Joey said.

"Well, I bet a lot of people like you, too."

"That's what you said already." With the side of a cupped hand, Joey pushed powdered sugar that had fallen from the donut into a small pile on the oilcloth. He didn't look at Will.

“Mona likes you, I know,” Will said. “And my deputy, Adam, says your teacher likes you.”

The boy remained silent, drawing roads in the powdered sugar.

“And, let’s see, my secretary, Lena, she told me just now she likes you.”

Still Joey did not answer.

“And I like you.”

The boy looked up then, with a quick smile, but went back to the powdered sugar.

“So that’s a bunch right off the bat,” Will said, “that think you’re a pretty nice kid. What about at school? I bet you have friends at school, too.”

“I hate those kids.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Once I was with Jimmy Bender and some of them, last summer it was, and they caught a cat down by the river, eating a dead fish, and they drowned it. Tommy Simon held it and Jimmy tied this iron thing they found in the sand on the cat’s tail with a piece of fish line and they threw it as far out as they could in the river and it drowned. I tried hitting Jimmy but he’s bigger than me and he just pushed me down. They all think I’m weird.”

“Well, not all the kids are like that. Mean like that.”

“You know something? I wouldn’t care if there weren’t any people in the world but me. Just animals and me. Once I read this book, about Mowgli the Jungle Boy. Did you ever read that book? It’s in the library. That was the best book I read. I wish it would be like that.”

“I think you’d get pretty lonely, Joe. Nobody but animals to talk to.”

“No I wouldn’t. I’d be happy.”

The dog had turned its attention to Will now, and jumped to put its front paws on Will’s leg. Its tongue hung out the side of its mouth and it was panting.

“Stay down, Molly,” Will said. “I’m going to feed you. Joe, just inside the door there, in the kitchen, there’s a bag of dog food and a bowl next to it.

How 'bout you put two cups of food in the bowl and bring it out here for Molly.”

The boy jumped up. “Sure,” he said. “This one here?” he called when he was in the kitchen.

“Right,” Will said, without getting up.

When Joey came back with the bowl, the dog bounced around him until he put it down. The boy wiped his palms on his shorts. “She’s really hungry,” he said.

“Beagles are always hungry,” Will said.

“Don’t you have a wife?” Joey asked. He sat down at the table again and crossed his arms on the oilcloth.

“No wife,” Will said.

“You live all by yourself in this big house?”

Will smiled. “I guess it looks pretty big to you, compared to your trailer. This was my mother and dad’s house. I’ve lived here all my life.”

“Really?”

“Joe, I wanted to talk to you about something. I ran into your dad last night, and, well, he wasn’t feeling any too good. Did he get home all right last night?”

The boy looked down, and Will sensed his immediate withdrawal. Joey began picking at a scab on his elbow, twisting his elbow up close to his face and concentrating on it as if the scab were some sort of biting insect he needed to get rid of right away. Will reached over and pulled his arm down.

“You’re going to make that bleed again,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me what happened last night, Joe?”

Joey folded his hands on the table and looked up at the ceiling. “Hmm,” he said. “Well, I was asleep.”

“You didn’t even hear him?”

“Hmm.” Joey looked at his elbow again, then put his arm down quickly, remembering he had just been told not to do that. “I heard him. He was

fighting with somebody. I didn't go out there."

"Fighting?"

"With a girl. I heard them. And he hit her, too."

"Hit her?"

"My dad's mean, Mr. Sumner. I didn't go out there."

"So you don't know who the girl was."

"It was that one comes over all the time now. With a funny name."

"Belva?"

The boy just nodded. He twisted his arm again to look at the scab on his elbow. "Do you like to fish? Would you like to go fishing with me sometime?"

Will smiled. "We could do that. Some evening. I go fishing in the evening sometimes. Rent a boat at Buck's and fish by the dam for walleyes."

"That'd be great."

"Joe, what happened with the girl then? With Belva?"

"She left. She screamed something at him, a swear word, and ran out."

"She took your dad's car?"

"Somebody else came. I heard another car coming down the driveway and the car door slam. Somebody else came to get her. Maybe her dad. She's not very old, you know."

"You don't know who it was that came?"

"No. I didn't look out."

"Your dad, Joe, did he hit you?"

"No. I stayed in bed. This morning he was still sleeping when I left."

"Stop that, Molly," Will said to the dog scratching at the door. The white paint on the lower part of the screen door was marred with deep scratches from other dogs Will had owned.

"She wants to go out," Joey said. "We could take her for a walk."

Will stood up and brushed his pants where the dog had jumped on him. "I've got to go back to work now, Joe."

"I could walk her. I could stay here and take her for a walk. I wouldn't mind taking care of her 'til you get home."

"Well, that's nice of you, Joe, but I might not be home 'til after supper."

"I don't care."

"Well, you've got those animals of yours to take care of, too, you know. I imagine they're waiting for you to feed them about now."

"I suppose."

"So you be on your way. I'll see you again soon."

"When can we go fishing?"

"Pretty soon. You can count on it."

"But when?"

Will smiled and turned the boy by his shoulders toward the door. "Maybe Saturday. Why don't we plan on Saturday, when I don't have to work all day."

"Can we bring Molly, too?" He had squatted to pet the dog's head.

"Beagles aren't very good in boats. Come on, Joe, on your way now."

After they had chained the dog again and the boy had left on his bike, Will went back into the house and cleaned off the table and took the empty milk glass to the sink to rinse. He put the glass on a rack to dry and let the water run on his hands in the sink. He watched the water running over his hands and wondered what he was going to do about Howard Pickett, and how he was going to save his son.



He was still thinking about the boy and his father as he drove down River Street back to the police station. Howard Pickett was sitting on the steps in front of the station smoking a cigarette. He stood up as Will turned into the alleyway between the station and Dolly's and leaned over the wrought iron railing that still held between two of its posts the ornate letter T from when the building used to be Timmermann's funeral parlor. Pickett started walk-

ing down the alley toward Will as he was getting out of the car. He took a last long pull on his cigarette and tossed it to the ground.

"I been waiting for you, Chief," he said, and held out his hand to shake. He was wearing clean Levis and a white T-shirt so tight that a pack of cigarettes in the shirt pocket stood out like a deck of cards against his chest. Not drunk and not just waking up hung over, as Will had seen him before, he seemed younger than Will remembered. His handshake was very strong and Will, backed up against the still open car door, could not help but feel intimidated by the size of him.

"Mr. Pickett, what can I do for you?" Will said.

Pickett was already fishing the cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. He shook another one out and took it with his lips, leaning sideways to dig in the tight pocket of his jeans for matches.

"I just come in to apologize to you," he said, blowing away a cloud of smoke. "I guess I was pretty obnoxious last night."

"I won't argue that," Will said. "You're lucky I didn't put you in a cell for the night."

"That's what I'm saying," Pickett said. "I appreciate your not doing that. I gotta start watching more how I drink."

"Mr. Pickett, I've been wanting to have a talk with you anyway. Why don't you get a booth in Dolly's. I'll be in soon as I check in at the office. I'll buy you coffee."

"I'll do the buying, Chief," Pickett said. "I appreciate it."

He was still outside, leaning against the door frame of Dolly's finishing a cigarette, when Will came back.

"They won't let me smoke in there," he said, flicking the butt into the street. The smile he had kept on his face earlier was gone now and he seemed more agitated. "Bar's about the only place you can smoke these days. Or home. Anyways, I looked inside and there's a couple of empty booths there, the old ladies don't have yet."

Mid-afternoon people occupied Dolly's now. Will's morning booth by the window was taken by four women in their sixties, all in flowery summer dresses, who met every day for coffee at three. In the booth behind them, two old men with coffee cups held in both hands on the table in front of them were trying to think of something to talk about. Young women clerks from the hardware store, the drug store, and Piggly Wiggly had taken all but one of the stools at the counter.

"This one all right?" Pickett asked as he slid into the corner booth ahead of Will. He put his hands on the edge of the Formica tabletop as if he could push it away from him. "Not much room in these."

Their knees bumped as Will sat opposite him, and Pickett shifted to sit sideways, his back propped against the wall. Closer to him now, Will could see the man's handsome face was beginning to show signs of too many late nights, too many hangovers. His skin was whiter than a man's skin should be at the end of August. His thick brown hair needed cutting and looked like the only combing it ever got was a run-through with spread fingers. He folded his arms across his chest, with fists pushed under his biceps to swell them, and Will thought he probably lifted weights on the floor of his trailer when he was sober enough to think he should do something about keeping in shape.

Dolly's new waitress, a high school girl, brought two cups of black coffee without being asked and a dish holding little plastic cups of cream. Will noticed Pickett smile at her.

"Can I get you anything to eat?" the girl asked nervously.

Pickett kept smiling at her, and Will said, "No, this'll be good. Thanks."

Pickett leaned forward to tip cream into his coffee. "Bet she's a cheerleader. At the high school there. Looks like a cheerleader."

Will lifted the thick white cup to his mouth and blew on the coffee. "Anything else bring you in, Mr. Pickett, except to apologize?" he said.

Pickett started to pull the pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, then

pushed it back. "Matter of fact," he said, and hesitated. "Well, you know that girl I was with last night? You know, in the bar when you saw us. Belva Jenkins? She come in to see you today anytime?"

"Not yet she didn't," Will said. "She have reason to?"

"Well, you know, we had this argument. Belva, she's a sweet kid, but she can get funny ideas sometimes."

"What kind of funny ideas?"

Pickett pretended a laugh and took a drink of the coffee. "Well, as long as she cooled off, is the main thing. Women, you know, they get themselves pretty worked up sometimes. You wouldn't happen to know of any job openings, long's we're talking, would you Chief? I've been out of work a couple months now. I need to get back on track here."

"Job openings? No, I don't, right now. Maybe I should have a talk with Belva myself. See what the problem is."

"No, no. It was just an argument. She's pretty hotheaded, you know."

"Judging from last night at Renner's, I'd say you're the hotheaded one."

"Well, I had too much to drink. You know how that goes. I'm doing something about that, though. Get back on track." Pickett watched the waitress crossing the room to another booth. She was carrying a tray carefully in front of her and walking slowly, as if afraid the coffee cups might slop over. "Cheerleader. I'd bet any money."

Will twisted his coffee cup between both hands on the table top, thinking how to proceed.

"Mr. Pickett. . ." he started.

Pickett pushed himself upright in the booth. "My name's Howie," he said. "Howard." Both powerful forearms were rested on the table, and his hands were folded into a fist. "Always hated that name, though."

"Howard," Will said. "I've met your son a few times. That's a nice boy you've got there."

"Joey?" Pickett seemed relieved about something and leaned back again

against the wall. He brought one foot up to the seat and hugged his knee. "Well, you don't have to live with him. Lazy little bugger. Can't depend on him to cut the grass even. I was his age, I had summer jobs. Brought in a little money for my folks. What's he do? Fucks around with animals, he don't even get paid for, over at that 'zoo,' he calls it."

Anger rushed into Will so strongly he almost stood up. He glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone could have heard. ("*Never use that word again,*" Sister Alberta had said to him, the sting of her slap almost unbearable. "*Never never never never. It's the worst word you can ever say to anybody.*") He looked down at his coffee cup and kept silent until he knew his anger would not show in his voice. When he looked at Pickett again, he could tell the man was concerned he had said too much.

"He's smart, though," Pickett said. "Gets good grades in school, I guess. That teacher a his come out one time, said he was smart. She wasn't bad looking, either. For a teacher."

"The thing I noticed. . ." Will stopped and then started again. "When he was over at Millard's and I saw him, he didn't have a shirt on, and the thing I noticed, he had a lot of bruises on him, it seemed like."

"That kid, he's always falling down, falling off his bike. Can't pick his feet up. He'd trip over a leaf on the grass, he didn't watch it."

"How come he limps?"

Pickett shrugged. "Broke his leg one time. His wacko mother took him to some local quack, never set it right, I guess. Limped ever since."

"Where is his mother?"

"She lit outa here a long time ago. Left me with the kid. Never even said goodbye to him. Left it all up to me, raising him. It ain't easy on a man, you know, raising a kid alone. Trying to get a job, and that." He reached for his cigarettes again. "Damn, I need a smoke. I gotta be on my way anyway." He sat up straight in the booth and held his hand out to Will. "Been nice talking to you, Chief. No hard feelings, I hope, 'bout last night."

Will didn't take his hand. He drank from his coffee. "Actually," he said, swallowing, "I've got a couple questions yet. The bruises, you know, on Joey, they didn't seem to me so much the kind he'd get from falling off a bike. Maybe the scabs on his elbow, scratches on his legs. The bruises are what bother me."

"Bother you. Like how? You mean you think I been hitting the kid? Shit no. I'd never hit my own kid. He tell you I did that?"

"Could you watch your language in here? This isn't a bar, you know. No, he didn't tell me that, at least not in so many words, but. . ."

"Better not. I'd never hit my own kid. Little bugger trips over his own feet half the time. No way I'd hit him."

"You hit that girl last night, didn't you? Belva."

Pickett flexed his right biceps and caressed it with his left hand. "She tell you that?" He looked at his hand squeezing his muscle and seemed to be somewhere else in thought.

"I told you I haven't talked with her yet," Will said.

Pickett sighed and looked up at Will. "I didn't hit her. Anyway, that's between us. Look, I really gotta go." He started to get up. "Shit," he said, and sat down again.

"What?" Will turned to see what Pickett had seen. Vince Asher's wife had just come in the door with Mona Zweifel.

"What in hell's she doing with that goddamn hellion?" Pickett said.

"Who?"

"Angie."

"You know Mrs. Asher?"

"Shit, they saw us, too."

The two woman standing by the door were arguing about something, but Angie Asher was smiling and pulling on Mona's arm. She was tall and slim, probably ten years younger than her husband's fifty-five. She wore a light blue summer dress with a white scarf at her throat to match the white

lacquered handbag she carried on a strap from her shoulder. Her high-heeled shoes were white, too. Her skin was so perfectly tanned that it could not have been done by the sun. With abundant blond hair that curled part way down her neck, she looked like a forties movie star.

Mona's hands were planted on her hips in khaki shorts. The maroon T-shirt she wore was lettered with white words that Will could not read. She turned away from Angie Asher and stalked angrily to the counter to sit on the end stool, one leg planted on the floor to prop up the half of her body not quite on the stool.

Angie, smiling somewhat nervously, started toward Will and Pickett, but Pickett slid out of the booth.

"I gotta go, Chief," he said. "Nice talking to ya."

He nodded at Angie, who had stopped as he passed her, said something to her under his breath that Will couldn't hear and kept on going to the door. Angie watched him a moment and then went over to Mona, put her hand on her shoulder and bent to talk into the side of her face. Mona only shifted onto the stool and did not reply.

Through the window Will could see Pickett leaning with his shoulder against the streetlight, watching the passing cars. He brought his hand up to his face, and cigarette smoke rose around his head. Angie went out the door and came up behind him, and he turned and propped his back against the light post. He kept his eyes down as she talked to him.

"That s.o.b.," Mona said, coming over to Will. She sat sideways on the edge of the booth seat across from Will, then turned and slid in slowly. "I'm filing a complaint against him."

"About what?" Will said. He kept watching the two outside on the sidewalk and saw Pickett push away from the light post, flick his cigarette away, and walk off. Angie looked after him for a moment and then left in the opposite direction.

"About last night," Mona said. "For assaulting Belva Jenkins."

Will brought himself back inside. "I didn't see that, at the bar."

"Not at Renner's. Later, when she took him home."

"Well, Mona, she's the one would have to file a complaint. I can't just go on what she told you."

The waitress came with the coffee pot. "More coffee?" she said to Will. "Can I get you anything, ma'am?"

Will held up his cup. Mona shook her head. "I got all the agitation I need right now. She didn't just tell me, Will. I went out there last night, to his trailer, 'cause I was worried about her. And a good thing, too. She was sitting there on the steps sobbing her eyes out. One eye starting to swell already. She couldn't even get out of bed this morning when I phoned her to see how she was doing. That son-of-a-bitch." The tip of her tongue flicked quickly over her lips.

"Mona, for gods sakes, watch your mouth in here," Will said. "Well, if that happened, she's the one has to file a complaint. I'll talk with her. How come he knows Angie Asher?"

"Because he's a damn tomcat. The guy'd make a pass at a nun on her way to communion, she was pretty enough. Thinks he's irresistible. Robert Redford himself."

"I can't see Mrs. Asher being taken in by him."

"Are you kidding. She's a worse flirt than he is."

"Well, I don't know her very well."

"Californians. I mean, she's a lovely woman and all, and I like her very much, but Californians are different, you know, from us. The main thing in life for them is skin tone. I just wish old Vince would see that bastard making a play for his wife once. That'd be the end of that, he did. I got half a mind to tell him."

Will finished his coffee and looked at his watch. "I've got to get back to my office," he said, but he didn't get up. "Mona, you've spent time with that boy of Pickett's—Joey. You said last night at Renner's that Pickett might be

abusing him?"

Mona shrugged her shoulders. "I never actually saw it myself, but I wouldn't put anything past that bastard. I've taken Joey bird-watching a couple times. He's a hard one to get to say anything. At least for me. He's got that limp, but I guess he broke his leg when he was younger and it never got set properly."

"Did you ever know his mother?"

"I met her once. Pretty girl. Very attractive, but moody. Younger than Pickett. They moved out here from Madison for him to find a job. Bought that old trailer off of Ned Gannon. She took off not long after they got here, left him with the boy. He was beating her, too, no doubt. Are you going to do anything about him beating up Belva?"

Will stood up then. "I'll talk to her. If she'll file a complaint, that's one thing."

"She's so nuts about him, she'll probably just let it go 'til he does it again. The bastard." She ran her hand through her cropped, greying hair and inspected her palm, as if she expected to have chased something out of the stubble.

Will looked down at her. "It's probably best you stay out of it, Mona."

She smiled up at him. "Sure I will. What happened about the tiger? Asher shoot it?"

"We couldn't find it."

"That's good, at least."

Later that evening, Will gathered up the fly-tying materials he had spread out on a card table in the TV room, disgusted at the two ugly flies his clumsy fingers had managed to assemble. His father had loved to fly-fish for trout in some of the county's smaller streams and would spend many evenings in the TV room tying flies on the same card table Will used now, while Will and his mother watched her favorite programs. He had tried to teach Will, but Will had been a clumsy boy and his father had not had much patience and

never praised the awkward knots of string and feathers and hook that Will managed to put together. But he had loved to fish with his father, and, earlier in the evening, remembering his promise to take Joey fishing, he had gotten out the boxes of fly-tying equipment. Now he put them back on the top shelf of the closet where he kept his hunting clothes, tackle box, and fishing rods. Outside, the streetlight on the corner had just come on and, on his way to the kitchen, Will saw through the bay window in the dining room a boy by the swing set in the schoolyard across the street, leaning against a bike. He cupped his hands to the window to block reflections on the glass, but still couldn't quite make him out. He went to the door and out onto the porch. The boy was peddling away fast down the street, the bike rocking from side to side. In the dusk, he couldn't be sure if the bike was yellow or if the boy was Joey.

IV

Will stood alone at the head of the grave looking down at the wooden box that held the body of the man who, sometime during the unknown number of years he had lived, had been dubbed Tomorrow by some long-forgotten person simply because the name he had brought with him could not be pronounced in any comprehensible way. And the man himself had finally given up, too, gave up on his own name and called himself Tomorrow to those few who even bothered to ask. Strange, Will thought, that his life should end here, in a small Wisconsin town, and in a savage way that would have been more probable years ago in whatever wilder country had been his birthplace. Most likely the man had had more than his share of torment in life, but had given it back, too, it seemed, to any animal or man he had somehow managed to have cornered.

Will's shoes and the cuffs of his khaki pants were wet from the early morning dew in the cemetery grass. Mounds of black dirt stood on each side of the grave, to be pushed by machine later that afternoon down over the wooden box. The two men from Timmermann's funeral parlor were loading back into the hearse the equipment they had used to lower the coffin. Will could hear their voices, but not what they were saying. One of them laughed. Will looked around the unkempt cemetery, all but abandoned now for a larger one closer to town. The grass was seldom mowed and never trimmed around the grave stones. It seemed as though a field-stone wall covered in bittersweet and wild grapevines was all that stopped the sea of green corn that flowed up to the little cemetery on three sides. Some of the older gravestones, grey limestone so weathered that the names of the buried were almost indistinguishable, had settled over the years and tilted precariously. Some had

been pushed over by vandals.

The doors of the hearse slammed, and the man behind the wheel honked as they pulled away down a gravel drive almost overgrown with plantain. Will waved and started toward his car. Mourning doves were calling from somewhere in the tall cypress, a sound as soft as their warm grey color. He leaned for a moment on the opened car door and listened to that melancholy song that more than anything could recall memories of his own boyhood, a sound that would always mean to him the town he had lived in all his life and the big river that ran alongside. Since last night's botched attempt at fly-tying, he had felt depressed, plagued with thoughts of childhood, his father's suicide, and now, by a graveside, thoughts of unpredictable death.

Piled cumulus clouds moved slowly in the blue sky over the bluffs as he drove back into town. It would likely rain later in the day. The car window was open and he could smell the river on the warm air: wet sand and fish, water-logged wood, oyster shells and snails drying on sandbars. Just above the trees to his left he saw the triangular towers of power lines carrying electricity from the big dam out to the rest of the state. As he passed the spot where the elephant had been killed, one of the escaped chickens dashed back into the sheltering cornfield.

Before going to his office, he stopped in Dolly's and, over the shoulders of two workmen sitting at the counter, ordered a coffee and danish to go. Harry, in the booth by the window, had seen him come in and was waiting for him. Will took the white paper bag from Dolly and sat sideways on the edge of the seat.

"I can't stay, Harry," he said. He put the bag on the table and held onto the crimped top with one hand. "I'm late already."

"Where've you been?" Harry asked, folding up the newspaper he had been reading. "I thought you'd be here before me." He pulled off his wire-rimmed bifocals and laid them on the paper. He was wearing a navy blue T-shirt with the large head of someone Will didn't recognize printed in white.

"I went out to Prairie View," Will said. "That fellow Tomorrow was being buried. I was the only one there, besides the undertaker's men."

"You should've told me. I would've come. There's always something different at burials, to notice. Maybe just the way the light is in a cemetery that morning. Did you get the tiger?"

"No. We couldn't flush him out of the swamp. Assuming he's even still there. Harry, you know everything, what can you tell me about Vince Asher's wife?"

"Angela?" Harry looked up at the pressed-tin ceiling as though putting in order something he was about to narrate.

Will said, "I mean, I know her, through Vince over the years, but I can't say I know much about her."

"He met her in California," Harry said. "She comes from a lot of money. Her father bought up half of California before it became a suburb and sold it to developers. I think she's hated every day of her life she's spent out of California. She actually told me once, at one of their Christmas parties, she believes the sun is different here. 'I mean,' she said, 'I know it's really not a *different* sun, but the *light* is different, I believe. It doesn't have the same tanning qualities or the beneficial health effects.' Basically, she's a very pretty, very bored woman whose surface is rapidly wearing off, so sometimes you see things underneath that are not so attractive."

"Like what?"

"For one, she's got an ugly temper. Once after one of those meetings over Vince's zoning requests for his shopping center she tore into me because I had said something like Vince was a money-grubbing environment destroyer. She actually waited in the hallway for me to come out. Red in the face. She accused me of 'sullyng' her family, but it was more as if I had said something about her personally. Why are you interested in her, all of a sudden?"

"Oh, nothing. Just that yesterday I saw her with that Pickett fellow, and they seemed a little more, well, friendly, than I would have expected. Pickett's

not somebody you'd think would be in her circle. I was surprised she even knew him."

Harry sat up, grinning. "Well now, that is interesting. So you think something's going on? Vincent will kill him."

"No, no. God, Harry, you always take things too far. I've got to get to work."

"You don't even have time for coffee?" Harry held up the palms of his hands. "I could tell you about my day at the university yesterday. I didn't get back 'til almost eleven. They took me out to dinner."

"I'm late already, Harry. You can tell me later. Give me something to look forward to."

Will half expected to find the boy waiting for him when he entered the police station and felt a little disappointed when he wasn't.

"Where's Adam?" he asked Lena, who was looking eagerly into the monitor of her computer, as if her favorite soap opera was playing there.

"There was an accident out near the canning factory a while ago," she said without looking up. "He's out there."

"A bad accident?"

"No. He just called. Something about one of the trucks bringing in peas broke down."

"You've got that air conditioner too high again," Will said. He went to the control dial on the wall. "It's an icebox in here."

Lena looked up and scowled at him but didn't say anything.

"I've got to go over to Madison this morning," Will said. "See the sheriff about that tiger. The county'll have to handle it now."

"That your breakfast there?" Lena nodded toward the paper bag he was carrying. "A donut."

"I didn't have time to eat. Anyway, it's a danish."

"Oh, well, that's a lot better. That nice little Pickett boy called you earlier. He seemed pretty upset about something."

Will frowned. "He didn't say what?"

"No. And he didn't leave a number either. I looked him up but I guess they don't have a phone out there."

"Well, I'll be back, probably midafternoon, if he comes in, or calls again."

Will went into his office and stood by the big window to look out at the river running high now with water released from the dam. The yellow sand bars were smaller than usual, and the longest one, near the far shore, had disappeared altogether, although a band of seagulls stood on it, knee-deep in the water, searching for minnows. A big cloud shadow moved slowly across the green hills beyond the river, changing the light and colors.

Will thought about the boy. On the way to Madison he planned to stop at the farm outside of Roxbury where Belva Jenkins lived with her mother. He hoped to convince her to file a complaint against Pickett, but if she did, and Pickett went to jail, what would happen to the boy? Whatever happened, he couldn't very well leave him in a place where he was being abused. Still, to get the county social services involved—they'd most likely put him in a foster home, over in Madison. Will would lose track of him, wouldn't know how things went for him. Some of these foster homes, they were only interested in the money they got for taking care of the kids. He'd heard some horror stories, read in the papers about kids being moved from one place to another. But some saved kids too. There were still saints out there.

On the highway to Madison, worry about what to do distracted him until he reached the turn-off to Roxbury. Then he had to try to remember the way to the Jenkins farm. He had been there once before, when he had been looking into Jim Kellner's murder, Kellner another older man Belva had taken up with in her almost desperate attempt, even then, at sixteen, to escape small-town Wisconsin. That had been over two years ago and he had not been that way since. He drove slowly through the little town of Roxbury, centered around its big limestone church built by German immigrants who, accustomed to cathedrals, had not yet scaled down their idea of what a Catholic

church should be. Through town, he was out into tall cornfields on both sides of the narrow blacktop road that wound through a long valley between round, rocky bluffs covered with cedar and sumac. The road made a sharp right turn and, within a mile, a sharp left, following old property lines. The cornfields gave way to open marshy fields across which Will could see a meandering line of willows that traced the route of a small stream. Ahead, an old bur oak stood alone at the intersection with a dirt road. Will recognized the tree and turned onto the dirt road leading across unplowed and weed-choked fields to the Jenkins farmhouse, a two-story white building, badly in need of paint, with a covered porch across the front and a fringe of hay bales around the base to keep out the winter winds. A red barn with a sway-back roof was obviously unused and surrounded now by velvet leaf and giant ragweed. Under a big, half-dead silver maple, the only tree in the dirt yard, a badly rusted Ford hatchback was parked. It seemed familiar to Will, but it wasn't until Mona Zweifel followed Belva out of the screen door that Will remembered whose it was.

As he parked next to the Ford, Will could see that the two women were arguing. He got out of the car and raised a hand to them. Mona's arms were crossed over her broad bosom, and she wore her usual khaki shorts cut just above the knees and new tennis shoes. Her mouth compressed in anger, she kept looking at Belva, as though she had not even seen Will. Belva waved to Will and pulled the skirt of the yellow dress she wore under her as she sat on the top step. The dress was sleeveless and cut very low at the neck, exposing the top of her breasts. Her skin was very tanned and, as she leaned toward him, forearms on her knees, Will could see the tan did not end at the neck line of the dress.

"Surprised to see you here, Mona," Will said. Belva had leaned back now, her palms flat on the porch, the yellow dress pressed tightly against her slender body. In order not to seem to be looking at her, Will glanced at the black and white cat licking its paws on the porch railing.

"For God's sake stand up, Belva," Mona said. "He can see right up your dress from there."

Belva sat up and hugged her knees. "Sorry," she said. She smiled at Will, and he could see the bruise on the side of her face.

"I'm trying to talk sense into her, Will." Mona came down the steps and stood next to him. "That fool Pickett wants her to move in with him. Can you imagine? After what he did."

"What brings you way out this way, Chief Sumner?" Belva said. She looked directly into Will's eyes and kept a half-smile on her lips in the flirtatious way of a pretty girl who has known for a long time how attractive she is.

Will tucked in his uniform shirt and pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his forehead. They were standing in full sunlight, and he had begun to sweat almost as soon as he left the air-conditioned car. "Actually, I wanted to have a talk with you about something." He looked at Mona. "It might be better if we did it alone, though."

"Why?" Mona said, indignant, her tongue flicking her lips. "I know what you're going to talk about. The s.o.b. himself." She looked at Belva. "Well, I hope you'll listen to him better than you do me. I'm going now." She started toward her car, deliberately kicking up dust to show her frustration.

"Bye, Mona," Belva called, with a small smile.

"Call me later," Mona said, walking backward to face them. "And remember what I said."

"Can I get you something cold to drink?" Belva asked, as the Ford started down the dirt road in a cloud of dust. "You look awful hot."

"No thanks." Will put one foot on the lower step, crossed and uncrossed his arms awkwardly. He looked up at the sky. "Maybe we could go inside, get out of this sun. Is your mother home?"

Belva stood up and brushed at the back of her skirt. "She's over in Madison. Got a boyfriend there. She don't come home very much."

“You’re living here alone?”

“Well, she *lives* here. Just she’s not here very often.”

Will climbed the steps to the porch, and Belva turned to open the screen door. The porch swing he remembered from his last visit still hung on chains from the wooden ceiling, and two wicker chairs crouched under windows that were still, in August, protected by storm windows.

“How ’bout we just sit here,” Will said, pulling one of the chairs away from the other. “It’s probably cooler than inside.”

“Whatever,” Belva said. She turned the chair to face Will and sat down, crossing her legs.

Will pushed the handkerchief across his forehead again. “What I wanted to ask you about was. . .well, I wanted to ask you about Howard Pickett.” He pointed at her face. “Is he the one gave you that bruise?”

She touched the side of her face. “Not really. I just bumped into something, when I got up in the dark.”

“Seems like almost an epidemic of bumping into things. Mona says, when she picked you up at his place the other night, you were crying because he hit you.”

She waved her hand toward him and laughed. “That Mona. She makes such a big deal outa things. You’d think she was my mother, or something.”

“Howard Pickett never hit you, then?”

“No.”

“His boy, Joey, he’s got bruises on him, too. You ever see him hit his boy?”

“Not hit him, no. I seen him get a spanking, you know, for doing something. Like, he’s got all these animals, you know, that his dad told him he couldn’t have. Hidden away in the woods. Howie went out there after him yesterday, when he took off without doing the chores he was supposed to. Followed him out there and let all those animals go free, like they shoulda been in the first place. Howie said he even had a skunk there. Imagine that.

Anyway, Joey got a spanking for that.”

Will looked down at his hands folded into a double fist. “When was that?” he said.

“Yesterday afternoon.”

“Was it a spanking, Belva, or a beating?”

“Well, Howie can get pretty mad. But, you know, the kid shoulda done his chores. Cut the grass and that. He can be pretty sassy to his dad, sometimes.”

“Are you moving in there, like Mona says?”

She sighed dramatically and looked up at the porch ceiling, smiling. “Oh, I don’t know what to do. He sure wants me to. He’s pretty good looking, don’t you think? Mona, you know, she thinks I’m nuts to go with him.” She pushed her hand toward Will. “But I just think Mona’s kinda jealous, she can’t get a man looks so good as that.” She laughed. “That Mona.”

“Well, if you want my opinion, young lady, Mona’s right. Pickett’s a violent man, and sooner or later, if he hasn’t already, he’s going to be hitting you, too, like he did his boy. You’ll be making a big mistake, you move in with him.”

She looked down at her lap, shyly. “Well, I just don’t know what to do. First, I gotta find a job. You couldn’t put in a good word for me with that Renner, could you Chief? I just was planning on that job, and now I gotta start looking all over again. You know any other jobs around, Chief?”

“No, I don’t. It’s canning season. Did you try at the canning factory?”

“Oh, that smelly place. I’d never work there.”

Will leaned forward, his forearms on his knees. The wicker chair creaked under him. The cat jumped down from the railing and hurried toward the end of the porch, stalking something it had just seen.

“Look, Belva, I came out here hoping I could get you to file a complaint against Pickett, saying he hit you. I’m just afraid if he doesn’t get stopped he’s really going to hurt you bad.” Will stood up and hooked his arm behind him

to pull his shirt away from the heat of his body. "And to be perfectly honest about it, I'm more concerned what he does to his boy. You're old enough, I would think, to take care of yourself, and you don't have to go there if you don't want. The boy has to live there."

"You mean have him arrested?" Belva said. "Shoot, that sure would be the end of it for us if I did that."

Will sighed, frustrated with what he thought was her stupidity. "Okay, Belva. You do what you want. But I'm telling you, if he hits you again, you come and see me."

Belva stood up, too, and raised her arm to her forehead, as if to shade her eyes from the sun. She had turned sideways to Will, and the sleeveless dress exposed part of her breast.

"He never really hit me, you know," she said. "We was just fooling around. If you know what I mean." She smiled at him.

Will started down the unpainted steps. "Well, you just remember what I said, Belva. Take care of yourself."

"Bye, Chief," she called to his back as he walked to the car.

A wind had come up and dust blew across the yard toward the barn in a miniature whirlwind. The piled clouds had bunched together and their flat bottoms were turning dark. As he drove back toward Roxbury through the wind-tossed cornfields, Will debated about going to Madison. He was worried now about the boy. Pickett had apparently beaten him yesterday because of the animals, and the boy had left a message at Will's office that morning. He might need Will's help. But he had an appointment with the county sheriff about the tiger and, even now, he would be late. At the intersection with the highway, he hesitated a moment, then turned toward Madison. By the time the highway began the climb up Springfield Hill, jagged lightning ripped from the clouds. As he crested the hill he saw the clouds ahead dissolve to the ground in a grey sheet of rain. Cars coming toward him had headlights on and windshield wipers flapping. He drove into the wall of rain,

and by the time he got to Springfield Corners it was so heavy he could hardly see. He pulled into the yard of the abandoned gas station to wait out the storm with two other cars. For five minutes rain pounded the roof of the car and closed him off from everything, as if in a tiny dry space under a sea.



No one had actually seen the tiger, but the Madison papers had been so filled with photos of generic snarling beasts and the weed-choked, dilapidated cages at “Millard’s Zoo” that more than one farmer was claiming a slaughtered sheep or vanished pig, even a wife who had gone into her garden carrying a pail of compost and had left behind only parallel heel marks dragged into the nearby corn.

“It’s a lot of pressure on me,” the county sheriff had said to Will. “I hope you realize.”

Vernon Apple was a little man, the size of an outdoor mailbox, whose first election to any office after several defeats—once for county treasurer, even once for condominium president—had so inflated his self-image that he now wore every day a freshly ironed shirt and pants and had grown a mustache he could not help touching, one that looked to Will more like a molting caterpillar than anything that belonged on a man’s face. In the hour Will had spent with him, rain pattering on the office window, the sheriff had diagramed on photocopied plat maps of the big swamp several alternatives for tracking the tiger, drawing with red felt pen dramatic arrows as if they were real arrows he was shooting at the charging beast itself.

Will had been happy to turn the whole matter over to him, knowing he would still have to deal with Millard’s demands to know who had set the animals free in the first place, as well as the inevitable schemes to somehow make money out of his loss. As he drove back to Fox Prairie, the great black-bottomed thunderheads had flattened into a tin-grey sheet of sky from which

raindrops seemed to drip rather than fall, spattering on the windshield like transparent bugs. It was only four, but traffic was heavy because of workers leaving early from the university and the state offices. Cars with headlights on in the storm-caused dusk seemed to be pushing the cars in front on cones of light. After the wide curves winding down Springfield Hill, the highway ran straight in a broad valley on both sides of which rose rounded limestone bluffs gray-green in the rain. In the barnyards near the highway, cows huddled close, their round sides rubbing, steam rising from their warm bodies.

In half an hour, Will was crossing the bridge over the river and could see to the north, over the metal railing, the lights of the Power and Light Company dam. The stoplight at River Street had caused cars to back up on the bridge, and Will had to wait before he turned the corner and pulled into the alley between the station and Dolly's café. Even before he had left the suburbs of Madison, he had stopped thinking of the sheriff and the tiger and had begun to worry about Joey again, and now he smiled to himself when he saw the yellow bike leaning against the No Parking sign that was in front of the station.

He went into the men's room first, then out into the front room where Lena was talking to someone. But it was not the boy. Millard was leaning against the edge of the second desk wearing the same grey striped overalls he had worn the day the animals had been released. The rolled up cuffs and the knees of his pants were crusted with dried mud, and knobs of mud clung to the ends of his flopping boot laces. A faint smell of manure hung in the air. He rubbed the white curls of hair on his arms as if he were chilled, and stood, dragging the desk blotter away with him and knocking pencils to the floor.

"Mr. Millard, I told you. . ." Lena stood up from her desk, too.

Millard ignored her. "It's about time you showed up," he said to Will. "I been here over an hour."

"I told him you were out of town," Lena said, "but. . ."

"What is it you want, Donald?" Will asked, frowning. He looked at the

open door to his office. "Is that boy in there?" he said to Lena.

"He was waiting on the steps the longest time." Lena leaned over her desk trying to see if he was still there. "I don't know where he's gone."

"Is he all right?"

"Now look here, Sumner." Millard stepped toward Will, pushing the odor of manure and sweat in front of him. "I been here an hour. I woulda expected by this time you'da come out to my place instead of me having to drive in all the way to town. And then you not here, even."

"Just wait in my office a minute, Donald. I'll be right in to talk with you."

"In here?" Millard looked toward the office door as if surprised he was being asked to step on something carpeted. He held onto the edge of the door and looked around inside before going in.

"Did you talk to the boy?" Will asked Lena. "His bike's still out there."

"No, I didn't talk to him. He peeked around the door and when I said you weren't here he went back out to wait on the steps and that was the last I saw him. Then it started raining, and I don't know where he went."

"Well, did he look all right? Was he hurt or anything?"

"Not that I saw. Why?"

"You said he seemed upset when he called his morning." Will nodded his head toward the office. "What's Millard want?"

"He wants you to arrest Mona." Lena smiled. "Won't that be fun. You should have talked to him outside. Now I'll have to spend tomorrow morning cleaning this place out."

Will started toward the office. "If Joey comes back, make sure he waits. I need to talk with him."

"Vince Asher called a couple times, too, Will. Says to call him right away. And Ray Riley's been in for something to put in his paper. He wasn't a bit interested in my reception for the new priest, either, Saturday. You'd think the first time in fifteen years. . ."

Will went into his office and closed the door. Millard was standing behind

Will's desk looking out the window at the river. Will pulled the captain's chair away from the front of the desk and said, "Have a seat here, Donald. Tell me what's so all-fired urgent."

Millard brushed around one side of the desk, and Will went around the other side and sat in his chair.

The captain's chair creaked under the shifting weight of Millard crossing his legs. "Goddamn it, Will," he said, "I've lost my livelihood and what the hell do you do about it? I'm going from here two blocks down to that son-of-a-bitch lawyer above the drugstore, you don't do something. File a lawsuit against Mona Zweifel for destroying my livelihood. Another one against Vince Asher, for hauling off my elephant without my say-so. That was a valuable elephant and he's gonna pay for it."

Will leaned forward to pick up a paperclip off the desk. He began twisting it out of shape. He felt the accumulated irritations of the day coming to a head, and he fought to keep anger out of his voice. "What would you want with a dead elephant, Donald? You know what Asher had to pay just to have it carted away? Which is good for you, otherwise it would have been you responsible."

"Elephant meat is gourmet. I could probably have sold it to one of those restaurants in Madison for steaks. Not to mention them tusks."

"Sure you could, Donald. Do you want me to have Vince bring that carcass out to your place, along with the bill?"

"Well, what did Asher want it for, if it weren't worth nothing?"

"He wants to stuff it." Will looked Millard in the eye and emphasized the last words.

But Millard missed the insult. "You see. Well, I'll be talking to Mr. thinks-he-can-get-a-valuable-animal-for-nothing Asher. What I want from you is to arrest that goddamn Mona. You know damn well as I do she's the one let those animals out. 'Free-the-fucking-animals Mona.'"

"Watch your language in here, Donald." Will's jaws tightened and he

knew the anger was beginning to show in his face. "I talked to Mona about it, and she denies doing that. You didn't see her do it and nobody else did, either. So there isn't much else I can do." The paperclip snapped and Will threw the pieces onto the desk.

"If wasn't her, it was that little chickenshit Pickett kid, then. One of them two. Did you talk to him? I bet not. I'll sue his father, is what I'll do. Take that trailer of theirs. Not that that dump is worth the elephant's toenail even."

Will stood up and turned his back to look out the window at the river. "I'm continuing to investigate this, Donald. I'll let you know what I find out. I think you'd better be off now."

"Continuing to investigate," Millard mimicked. "That's a laugh. And what are you doing to get my tiger back?"

"That's where I was this afternoon, talking with the sheriff in Madison. He's taken over organizing a search of the swamp."

"Shit. I got my own plan. That fawn that was in the deer pen, it came back this morning, looking for its ma. I'm staking that fawn out tonight. Ten to one that tiger'll come back home, once it gets hungry enough." Millard planted his big hands on the arms of the chair and pushed up. The chair almost tipped sideways under his uneven weight. "I said my piece. I better hear from you, otherwise it'll be the lawyer'll do my talking."

Will watched the big man go to the door. The seat of his overalls was stained with something he had sat in a while back, and Will wondered what he might have left on the chair seat. He waited until he heard the bells over the outside door jingle, then went out into the front office. Lena had propped her shiny vinyl purse on her desk and was rummaging around in it, getting ready to go home.

"No sign of the boy?" Will said. He walked past Lena to the glass door, his eyes level with the gold arc of letters spelling Police Station. "His bike is gone." He stepped back from the door as Adam came up the steps.

The bells over the door rang when Adam opened it. "Afternoon, Chief," he said. "How's it going?"

"Did you see the Pickett boy?" Will asked. "On his bike just now."

"Nope. I been chasing kids after those canning factory trucks. They run along behind and pull big hunks of pea vines off." He laughed. "Like I used to, when I was a kid."

"You didn't see him, Lena?"

Lena was putting her desk paraphernalia into its predetermined night time arrangement. "Will, I didn't see him." She stood back to admire the desk's neatness. "I was closing down the computer. He might have looked in the door, but I'd've heard him if he opened it at all. Why're you so concerned about that boy?"

"Nothing," Will said. He leaned into his office doorway and turned off the light. "I'm going home to feed the dog. I'll be at Renner's later, if you need me, Adam."

"Night, Chief," Adam said, and went over to Lena's desk to tease her by moving something.

As Will drove home, the streets and sidewalks were just beginning to dry in the still humid air. The grey sheet of cloud cover had begun to crack, letting through a blunted yellow light that seemed to paint the houses and the lawns and the trees in colors softer than they were before the rain. A large branch had fallen from a silver maple in his neighbor's yard and lay in the debris of broken wood and bark on the concrete walk up to the house. Across the street from his own house, the windows in the big red brick schoolhouse, where he had first gone to school, reflected the late afternoon sun in its silver panes.

When he turned into his driveway, he saw the yellow bike propped against the old arched rose arbor between the driveway and the walk to the house. The sudden relief of tension that he felt made him realize how much he had been hoping to find the boy there. Joey was sitting on the grass next to the

dog, with his arms wrapped around his shins and his forehead pressed to his knees. Will knew the boy must have heard the car door slam but he did not look up at Will. The dog seemed puzzled and started toward Will and then returned to the boy, wagging its tail tentatively, as if uncertain whether or not it was being punished for something.

Will knelt down on the wet grass in front of the boy and sat back on his heels. "Joe?" he said, and put his hand on top of the boy's unruly hair. When the boy looked up, Will was alarmed not as much by the dirty, tear-stained face and the red-marked cheeks as by the boy's stony expression, the empty look in his eyes.

"I been looking for you all day," Joey said.

"I was gone most of the day in Madison. What's wrong, Joe? Are you hurt?"

The boy put his head down again. "No."

"Then what's happened? Why are you crying?"

His head came up quickly. "I'm not crying." There was an intense anger in the boy's voice that surprised Will, and he began to realize that he did not know this boy at all.

"Okay, then. You want to tell me what happened? Why you were looking for me?"

Joey began to stroke the dog's head, and the dog looked at Will as if it was puzzled, too.

"Why don't we go in the house and talk, Joe. Come on, you're getting all wet here, from the grass."

They stood up together then, and Joey brushed the seat of his pants and looked at his hands. "I gotta be going," he said.

Will began to feel annoyed. "Well, you say you been looking for me. I'm here now, so let's go have a talk." He put his arm around the boy's shoulders and led him toward the house. But at the steps to the sunporch, Joey pulled away.

“He killed all the animals,” he said. He bent down and pulled up a handful of grass and began picking at it.

“The ones you have in the woods? Belva said he just let them go.”

“He smashed all the cages.”

Will touched the boy’s cheek. “Did your dad hit you there?”

Joey pulled back. “Yes. I don’t care if he did. I hate him. I’m never going back there again.” He tried to throw the clump of grass as far as he could. The dog raced after it, as if it had been thrown for her.

“Sit down here a minute, Joe.” They sat next to each other on the steps to the sunporch. Will thought for a minute, his big hands hooked together into a fist. Then he said, “Joe, I’m going to have to do something about your father. I’m afraid if I don’t, he’s going to hurt you bad. Or somebody else, too.”

Joey looked at him, alarmed. “Do what? Don’t tell him I said he hit me. He’ll get really mad.”

“That’s just it, Joe. Seems to me he’s always mad about something, and he takes it out on you. Tomorrow I’m going to talk to the county human services people. I’ll have them come out and talk to you and your dad both.”

The boy jumped up and almost tripped over the dog. The dog yelped and dodged away from him. “No way. They arrest him, they’ll send me to one of those orphanages. I know about them. My mom used to always tell me she’d put me there, if I didn’t mind.”

“No orphanage, Joe. We’ll work something out. There’s foster homes these days. With real families to take care of you. With brothers. I’ll be there to see to it.”

“No way. I can take care of myself. I will, too. He’s not going to hit me like that again. I know how to take care of myself.”

Will looked up at the boy who was standing facing him now. His jaws were clenched in anger, and the blank stare in his eyes was at something only he could see, remembering.

In a distant room of the house, the phone rang. Will pushed himself up from the steps. "Come on in, Joe. Wait while I get the phone."

"I gotta go."

Will opened the screen door and the door into the sunporch. "Just wait there now, 'til I get back," he said through the screen. "I'm not done talking to you yet." The dog had come up the steps and jumped, pushing the screen inward with its paws. "Get down, Molly," Will said. He tapped the dog's paws on the screen. "Watch the dog for me now, Joe. I'll be right back."

He went through the kitchen, crossed the big wrought iron heat vent in the floor of the dining room, and picked up the phone in the TV room.

"I thought you'd be at Renner's," Harry said

"I had to come home first." Will was annoyed and carried the phone as far as the cord would reach, even though he knew he would not be able to see where the boy was.

"Are you coming back?" Harry said. "I'm there now."

"I'm not sure, Harry. I'm trying to deal with the Pickett boy right now. Maybe I'll be there later."

"Well, I'm going ahead and eat. I'll wait around a while for you."

"All right. But I can't promise." Will hung up the phone. He wondered why some people found it so hard to be by themselves. He wished everyone would just leave him alone for once.

In the kitchen, he could see ahead through the sunporch door that the boy was not standing there. Maybe he sat down on the steps again, he thought. But he wasn't there, and his bike was gone, too. Will went back into the kitchen, forgetting the dog was still out, and sat at the little drop-leaf table. He felt very tired. He studied the back of his hand on the oilcloth, the big blue artery forking down from his wristwatch, branching between his swollen knuckles, the brown age spots. Why should he care so much what happened to this kid? Will felt himself walking hesitantly over the thin ice of his own memories, and carefully he retreated, lest he break through into the

deep past. He curled his fingers into his palm to make a fist, and wondered what he should do now.



“You should’ve stayed home,” Harry said, “if you’re in a mood. I needed some cheering up. You don’t know what it’s like to sit in front of a typewriter all afternoon and just stare at the rain outside. Nothing comes. I didn’t write a page all day.”

With thumb and finger, Will slowly turned the still-full glass of beer in front of him on the epoxy-glossed table top. The beer’s foamy head began to break down, and a drop slid down the side of the glass and bumped his fingerprints. “Must be tough,” he said. “Specially on the rear end, sitting that long.”

Because the night was still warm and humid, Harry was wearing a tight blue T-shirt of the type meant for a man who wanted to show his muscles rather than someone, like Harry, who should hide his big stomach.

Will, annoyed, said, “Why do you wear shirts like that?”

But Harry was watching the doorway now, where Vince Asher and his son had just come in. “Did I tell you they want me to teach American Lit. at the university this fall?” he said absently, his mind recording Asher’s backslapping progress down the bar, with his eighteen year old son following awkwardly behind. “Will, look at the expression on Asher’s boy, like a dog’s when you stare at it too long. Tells you a lot about the two of them, doesn’t it.” He pulled the little spiral notepad out of his shirt pocket and retrieved the pencil held behind his ear by the thick bush of his hair.

Will turned to look. “Here he comes,” he said, and stood up, as Asher, grinning, his hand held out to shake while he was still two tables away, came toward them, his son following as though dragged along behind by Asher’s other hand.

“Just the guy I was hoping to see,” Asher said, shaking Will’s hand and squeezing his shoulder. He was wearing a tapered white shirt of heavy cloth with turquoise stitching on the pockets and the cuffs of the short sleeves. His Levi jeans fit tightly, and the belt, with an oversized buckle, was studded with round turquoise pieces set in silver. “I knew I’d find you here. Thank god for people you can predict. You know my son, Josh, don’t you?” He turned to reveal the young man behind him, and Josh tentatively extended his hand, as if practicing. “And Harry here,” Asher said, swinging his arm down to Harry, who had not gotten up. “Who could forget that brilliant speech of his to the town council against our shopping center. Lucky for us it didn’t work.” He laughed. “Huh, Harry.”

Harry only nodded acknowledgment. “Vince,” he said.

“Look, Josh, why don’t you have a game of pool or something over there,” Asher said, releasing Will’s hand to turn Josh away. “I need to talk with Will about something.”

“What is it, Vince?” Will said as the two of them sat down again. “That elephant starting to smell?”

“Exactly. How’d you know? Anyway, I didn’t want to say in front of the boy, but I have to admit that was a mistake. I just can’t find anyone to take on the job of mounting it—not even the head. So what do I do? You want it back?”

Harry laughed loudly. “I’d say it’s non-returnable, Vince.”

“Or maybe that idiot Millard. Can you believe he’s threatening to sue, saying I stole it from him. I’ll have it carted out to him, is what I’ll do.”

“I’d say you better just go ahead and bury it,” Will said. “Since you’ve got it there.”

“I’d have to pay for a back hoe. It’s already cost me just to get it off the highway for you guys. It hardly seems fair I’d have to bury it, too.” He held up both hands as though to forestall the barrage of arguments he was used to getting against most of his projects. “All right, all right, I’ll take care if it

myself. Once again. Anyway, Will, what I really wanted to talk to you about—well, two things. First, I'd really love to have that tiger skin. I'd pay for it, you know. Pay Millard. What's the progress on that?"

"The county's in charge of that now," Will said. "You'll have to talk to the sheriff about it. Or Millard. I suspect the carcass, if there ever is one, would be Donald's. You'd better find out about those elephant tusks, too. They'd be pretty valuable and Donald's not going to just forget about them. Seems to me there'd be laws about what you can do with ivory, too."

"Just don't remind him about the tusks. Okay? I got to get *some* return on what I spent already. Anyway, he hasn't said anything about them yet. Just he's going to sue me."

Harry said, "Hopefully they won't have to shoot the tiger."

"You'd rather have it running around eating people?" Asher said. "You and Mona."

"What's the other thing?" Will asked. "You said two things you wanted to talk about."

Asher leaned his tanned forearms on the table and looked down at his folded hands. The silver band of his wristwatch held bits of turquoise, too.

Harry touched it and chuckled. "What's all this southwestern motif?" he said. "You dress to match the decor of your shopping center?"

"You like it?" Asher held up his wrist to show off the watch. "I picked this up in Santa Fe last fall. On sale at one of those sidewalk Indian places on the square there. The natives bring in their handicrafts to sell. I think it's cool. Pretty good price, too."

"What's the other thing, Vince?" Will asked impatiently.

"Well, it's a little confidential." He glanced at Harry. "Not to go beyond this table, Harry. Anyway, this Pickett fellow—you know him? Lives in a trailer past the Ordnance Plant?"

"I know him," Will said. "What about him?"

"Angie—my wife—well, this guy thinks he's some kind of stud, it seems,

comes on to all the women. He's been bothering Angie even. My wife, Angie—if you can believe it. She's afraid almost to come to town, for fear she'll run into him on the street. I'll tell you, Will, I don't stand for that shit with my wife. I already told him once—the other day I saw him down the street here in front of Waller's. Anyways, yesterday I was driving through town, on my way to Madison on business—to a business meeting I had in Madison—and I see Angie walking away from the guy and he looking after her like—well, you can imagine. I would've stopped then and there and clobbered the son-of-a-bitch, I had the time. And Angie says, when I got home that night, he made a pass at her again. So I'm just saying, Will, I warned the guy, and if it happens again, I won't be responsible. So I think you should tell him that, too. He gets the message. I don't want to have any trouble with you—with the law—but I'm just saying, I warned him. Just so's you know."

"Well, Vince," Will said, "I'm not sure there's anything I can do about a guy flirting."

Asher's face reddened. "I'm just telling you, Will. So's you know. The son-of-a-bitch. It happens again. . ."

Josh Asher came up behind his father. He was holding a glass of beer in his hand, and a young woman in a white summer dress followed him and peered around his shoulder when he stopped. "Dad, I wanted you to meet. . ."

"Jesus H. Christ!" Asher stood up so quickly the heavy captain's chair almost tipped behind him. "Can't you see I'm having a conversation here?"

Josh Asher flushed and looked down. Will stood up to relieve the young man's embarrassment. "We're about done here, anyway," he said. He held out his hand to Vince. "I'll keep in mind what you said, Vince."

Asher brought himself under control and shook Will's hand. "You do that." He put on a big smile. "Well, Josh, let's meet your lady friend here." He turned Josh away by the arm and led him through the tables toward the bar, with the girl following them.

Harry was writing in his notebook.

“Why do you have to write everything down?” Will said, irritated.

“Not everything.” He finished writing and tucked his notebook into his shirt pocket. He chuckled, pushed the stub pencil just far enough back into his hair so people could still see it, and took up his second scotch. “Old Vincent. Mr. Macho defending his woman. I get a kick out of watching him pretend he can control his temper. Mr. Cool. Remember in high school—that time with the principal, Miss Monroe? Feel sorry for that boy of his, though—Josh.”

Will tilted his half-full beer glass and studied the surface as though he had seen something swimming on it.

“Come on, Will, why so down tonight?”

Will didn’t answer. He drank the beer and pushed the empty glass away from him. He had changed from his uniform to a short-sleeved plaid shirt from Penney’s. The crescent moon of his undershirt sagged under his neck. He looked down and brushed at the shirt front as if he had spilled something. “That Pickett boy—Joey. . .?” he said. He leaned his forearms on the table and looked up at Harry. “He was at my house when I got home tonight. He’d taken a licking—a beating from his father. Tomorrow I’m going to get the social services people out there. I told the boy that, and he got really upset. Took off. I should be doing something about it.” He stood up. “In fact, I’m going to do something. I’m going out there now, see if he’s all right.”

Harry stood, too. “Now? It’s dark out.”

“I’ve got headlights.” He hesitated. “In fact, I don’t. I walked here from the house. Harry, you drive your car.”

Harry shrugged, as if he had just been asked to hold the weight of the world. Will started toward the door.

“See you, Will,” Renner called from behind the bar. Will lifted his hand in goodbye.

Harry's old Volkswagen was angle-parked against the curb halfway down the block. Will had to swing a plastic bag of groceries from the front seat into the back.

"I hope there's nothing melting in there," he said.

"Just canned stuff, bottle of mineral water."

Will made a place for his feet amidst the accumulation of paperbacks, a pair of boots, last winter's ice-scraper, and a plastic box of fishing tackle. The car's floor felt as if it were made of cardboard.

"You sure this thing is safe?" Will said.

"Ha, ha."

The shoulders of the two big men brushed against each other in the front seat of the little car, and their heads almost touched the tattered upholstery of the roof. Harry drove hunched forward, both hands on the cloth-covered steering wheel, as though driving in a snowstorm. Once off the highway, they passed through high cornfields washed with silver from the light of an almost full moon.

"Turn left on C," Will said.

"I know where it is. Are you going to tell Pickett about calling in the social service people?"

"I don't know. What do you think? It's probably better to let them come out without his expecting them."

"What will you tell him we're there for, then?"

Will shrugged. "I'll just say Joey left on his bike when it was getting dark, and I'm just checking he got home all right. Probably Pickett won't even be there."

"Deer!" Harry slammed on the breaks, and Will braced his arm on the dashboard. A metal peace symbol hanging from the rear view mirror clanged against the windshield and kept swinging. The animal stood alert in the ditch alongside the road, its red eyes like tiny taillights. With one sudden, curving movement, it leaped into the center of the road and down into the woods on

the other side.

“Beautiful,” Harry said. He released the breaks and the car started moving.

“Careful,” Will said. “There’s likely another.”

And there was. A buck, with antlers large enough to make the hearts of both men leap, suddenly appeared broadside in the headlights a few feet in front of the car and just as suddenly was gone.

“Jesus,” Harry said.

“There’s usually more than one.”

Harry started the car, which had stalled when he braked, and drove on. The road between cornfields and woods seemed a tunnel, the bouncing headlights of the little car small flashlights in the dark. Neither man spoke for a while. Night insects rose on ghost wings out of the beams of light and bumped the windshield.

“Why are you doing this, Will?” Harry asked. “I mean, how come you’re so concerned about this one kid?”

“I don’t know, Harry.” He sighed. “I guess I did something, said something or other—somehow the boy’s taken a liking to me. I can tell it every time I’m around him. It almost feels like he’s holding on to my hand. Now I feel like I owe him something.” He thought a moment. “Funny how you can do something like that, without even knowing, makes people like you.”

Harry smiled. “Well, *you* can. I’m more apt to make people mad at me.” He laughed. “You’re feeling fatherly, Will. You’re about the most fatherly guy I know, except without any kids. Speaking of which, I got a letter from Audie yesterday, I forgot to tell you. He wants to come out here and meet me. After all these years. How about that.”

“He still in California? With his mother?”

“In California, yes, but not with her. Lord knows what *she’s* up to now. God, I never thought—what if she comes with him? Maybe it’s all her idea. Oh my god, I never thought of that. And I already told him to come.”

“She’d never come back here, Harry. Not after the way she left.”

Harry’s son, Audubon, had been born three months after Harry had returned from his failed attempt to live a writer’s life in New York City. Town gossips (led by Lena) had predicted, the day he introduced her, that the young woman he had married and brought back pregnant to the Midwest wouldn’t stay a year. Harry’s son was six months old when, one morning, Harry came home from his longer than usual walk along the river to find the house empty of wife and child. She’d gone to California, the note said. For a week Harry made a half-hearted attempt to find them in Los Angeles, but returned without them, and for two months played a tragic figure devastated by betrayal when everyone knew he was more than a little relieved. Carmen had not been an easy woman to live with. Lena told Harry he should never have insisted on naming his son Audubon.

Now Harry, alarmed, was lost in thoughts of the possibility of her return, and they drove on in silence. When they turned onto the dirt road leading to Pickett’s house trailer, Will felt his heart begin to beat faster. He hated confrontations and hoped that Pickett would not be home. All he wanted was to make sure the boy was all right.

As Harry turned the car to park, the headlights swung across the side of the white trailer and gleamed on the aluminum trim and the window panes. The little car rocked as the two men climbed out. They stood side by side by the front bumper. No lights were on inside the trailer. In the moonlight, the long metal structure, settled in long grass and weeds, seemed ghostly, like a white boat sunk to the bottom of the sea.

“Nobody home,” Harry said.

“His bike’s not here, either,” Will said. He started toward the trailer and Harry followed.

Will climbed the two metal steps to the screen door. The inside door was open, and he cupped his hands to the screen to peer in. “Anybody here?” he called, and waited. He pulled the handle of the screen door and the door

opened. "Just have a look around," he said over his shoulder to Harry. He held the door for Harry with one hand and with the other felt for a light switch on the wall next to the door. A ceiling light in an opaque bowl came on. The bottom of the bowl was grey with dead insects.

"Kind of a dump," Harry said, squeezing in behind Will.

The long room they stood in had a living room at one end and a kitchen at the other. The floor of the kitchen was covered with lime green linoleum. The sink and stove and refrigerator were along one wall. A small Formica-topped table with metal legs and white resin patio chairs at each end was pushed against the other wall. A half-empty coke bottle stood next to a paper plate on the table.

The rug in the living room was an unbound remnant of gold shag laid over the same linoleum. In the corner, an oil burner stood on a square of yellow linoleum that had curled at the edges. The only furniture consisted of a colonial style davenport with a high back and arms, a resin end table with splayed legs, a lamp made from the hub of a wagon wheel, and a Naugahyde recliner tilted back so the foot support almost blocked a door at the end of the room. A television sat on a construction of concrete blocks and pine boards in the corner. Behind it, a double-barrel shotgun leaned against the wall.

"This must be the bedroom," Will said, walking the rug's matted path toward the door at the end of the room. Inside the door, a bathroom the size of a closet opened just to the left, and in the bedroom itself the double bed on a metal frame was unmade, and there were shorts and socks in a pile next to barbells on the same lime green linoleum floor.

"Smells like mice in here," Harry said, looking over Will's shoulder. "Or bats."

Will turned back. "The boy's room must be at the other end."

That room held only a metal framed cot and small wooden chair with a curved back. On one wall pictures of tigers and elephants cut from magazines

hung by pieces of Scotch tape.

"Nobody home, Will" Harry said. "Let's get out of here."

Out in the night air and moonlight again, the two men stood by the car. Will looked across the fields as if he expected to see the boy out there.

"I'd rather live in a boxcar," Harry said. "He needs a woman around."

"Or a fire," Will said. "He probably has too many women around already."

"You ready to go?"

Will pointed out to the dark line of trees across the field. "The boy's got a place in the woods there, Harry, he keeps animals he's picked up. Hurt things. I've got an idea he might be staying out there. I think I'll have a look, long's we're here."

"In the woods? It's dark out, Will."

"There's a moon. You can wait in the car if you want." Will started walking.

"Well, wait until I get a flashlight at least. In the car."

They went single file down the overgrown gravel road that once long ago had been a road for tractors or other farm vehicles at the edge of plowed fields, and for cows coming home to a now vanished barn. While they were in the open field, the moonlight was all the light they needed. Shoals of fireflies drifted over the long grass, miniature search parties looking for something lost in the night. The woods loomed ahead like a black cliff. Once inside the woods, the road became an almost invisible path, and Will had to walk carefully.

"Judas priest, Will," Harry grumbled behind him. The flashlight's beam bounced wildly around Will's feet.

"Hold the light ahead of me, Harry," Will said.

"What if that tiger's around here?" Harry stumbled and the light climbed into the trees. "Judas priest, Will."

"It's just ahead now."

Off to his left, Will could see the dark elephant-size shapes he remembered were boulders fallen to the base of the bluff. Then they were in the little clearing where the boy kept the cages.

“Give me the light, Harry,” Will said, holding his hand behind him. “Joe?” he called, and swung the light beam around the ruined cages. “Joey?”

“Nobody,” Harry said.

“No bike, either,” Will said.

The flashlight beam stopped on one cage where the head of a young rabbit was visible under a rock and the broken spokes of the cage.

“What happened here?” Harry said.

“Pickett did this to punish him for something.”

“Poor kid.”

“Come on, Harry. Let’s get back.”

They walked in silence out of the dark woods. Across the field, the house trailer glowed like a ghost whale swimming on a sea of silver grass. They reached the little Volkswagen and drove down the dirt road back toward town.



Late that night, Howard Pickett walked ahead of Belva to the trailer’s screen door. Before he could open it, a shotgun blast blew apart his chest and threw him back down the metal steps to land on his back. His arms and legs quivered a moment; his sightless eyes stared at the star-strewn sky.

Belva dropped the little suitcase she carried and covered her mouth, one hand on top of the other. She looked up at the blasted screen door, then turned and ran for her life.

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The tiger left the swamp in the dark and climbed the bluff, loping up the steep slope as if jumping from rock to rock in a stream. At the top, he sprawled on a rock ledge, cool and dry at last, and with both paws rubbed eyes irritated by the swarms of insects that had surrounded his head like mist trying ceaselessly to crawl into his eyes and nostrils. He looked back at the moonlit swamp, a great silver lake tarnished by the dark shapes of vegetation. His tail switched on the flat rock. He lifted his head to smell the night air and searched the hillside for any movement. He was very hungry. Unused to having to hunt for food, he had been able to catch only a mud hen and two rabbits. He jumped down from the rock and started back to where he had lived, to where he had left an uneaten carcass.

From a grove of oaks, he watched the dark house. He watched the shed where he knew the carcass was. He smelled the deer, but he could not see it tethered to the bars in his old cage. Crouching, he began a slow stalk out of the trees and into the long grass, and then he could smell the man. He stopped and crouched lower, belly touching the ground. Uneasy, he leaped in a wide backward curve at the same time as he heard the shot and saw the flash of light. In two bounds, he was back in the cover of the trees and running toward the bluff again. Behind him, the man was cursing.

In the dawn light, Sheriff Vernon Apple gave directions to the men he had assembled in the gravel parking lot at the north end of the swamp. They stood in a circle around him, as if in a huddle. He was so much shorter than the rest of the men he seemed almost to be down on one knee. The smell of mosquito dope hung like smoke around them. The sheriff stretched both

arms out and the circle broke up, the men forming a long line at the edge of the swamp. Then together they walked into the alders fringing the swamp and began to blow whistles.

On the rock ledge, the tiger heard in the distance the faint sound of the whistles. He jumped down from the ledge and squeezed into the sandy crevasse under it. He was remembering the deer.



Will was almost finished with his breakfast at Dolly's when he saw Harry's car pull to the curb. Harry rolled out, bumping the horn with his elbow, and stood up behind the opened door, waving at Will with both arms, like an oversized cheerleader. He slammed the car door and crossed the sidewalk, wearing baggy seersucker Bermuda shorts and a sweat-stained T-shirt. His binoculars, hanging from a leather strap around his neck, swung over his stomach. The pink pressure marks from the rubber waders he had been wearing were still visible on his stout white legs.

"Hotter than sin out there already," he said, sliding into the booth opposite Will. "Humid." He lifted the binocular strap over his head and it caught in his bushy hair, knocking the stub of pencil onto the table. He laid the binoculars next to the glass canister of sugar, where they stared at Will through pink lenses. "There was a sandhill crane out there this morning, just at the end of Bittersweet Island, with two young ones. Watched them for half an hour, feeding."

"You're gonna drop dead of a heart attack one of these days, Harry," Will said. "It's too hot to be tramping around in marshes."

Dolly, in a white bib apron over her green uniform, came to the booth.

"Harry?" she said.

"Maybe I'll have iced tea, Dolly. I need to cool down. Are you doing everything this morning? Waiting tables?"

Dolly affected a hopeless look. "As usual."

"Any sign of the boy?" Harry asked Will.

Will folded his newspaper and laid it on the seat next to him. "Nope. I half hoped he'd show up here, like he did the other morning."

"Guess what message I had on the phone when I got home last night? From Audubon. He's thinking now he might go to the university in the fall. The university here. Can you believe it? He'll let me know, he said. He'll call me when I'm home. I would never have recognized his voice, changed from a boy. I wonder how he knew my phone number."

Will finished his coffee. "I'm about done here, Harry. I wanna drive out to Pickett's place again this morning, before things get too busy. Check on the boy once more. They're starting the drive on the swamp this morning, too, for the tiger. County sheriff and his men. I should drive over there, see how it's going."

"Well wait 'til I finish my breakfast, at least. You're not in that much of a hurry. I don't want to sit here alone."

They saw Lena hurrying past the window.

"What now?" Will said.

She walked in the door and quickly over to their booth and said in a half whisper. "You'd better come right away, Will. There's been a shooting out at Pickett's. Someone just called."

"Lord," Will said, and pushed himself out of the booth. The newspaper fell to the floor.

"Wait." Harry struggled to get his stomach past the table top.

Out on the sidewalk, Will stopped Lena at the steps to the station. "What did they say, Lena? Who got shot?"

"They didn't say. Just that someone's been shot." She shaded her eyes against the bright sunlight. Someone in a passing car honked and waved.

"Well who was it called? A boy?" Will said, not looking at the car.

Lena shook her head. "It could've been. It was either a boy or a woman."

And all's they said was somebody's been shot and I should send out the police."

"All right." Will thought a moment, then turned Lena by the shoulder. "Go in and get an ambulance out there. I'll drive out now. Tell the new deputy to stay 'til I get back, or 'til Adam comes in, anyway."

Harry followed Will into the alleyway between the station and Dolly's. "I'm going with," he said, and climbed into the passenger seat before Will could say no.

Will put the siren and lights on to get through the early commuter traffic heading down main street toward the bridge. Once out of town, he turned off the siren but left the blue and red lights on top of the car flashing as they sped out the divided highway toward the Ordnance Plant.

"If it was the boy that called," Harry said, "at least it wouldn't be him that got shot."

Bloody pictures flashed through Will's mind, like slides projected onto a screen, and he didn't say anything. At the turnoff from the highway to County C, he flicked on the siren again to get across the two lanes of cars going fast toward town. He left it on, and it wailed over the high cornfields, startling flocks of blackbirds that rose out of the corn to line the telephone wires alongside the narrow road. A car coming toward them slowed at the siren and moved too far onto the road's shoulder, sending a cloud of dust and gravel swirling out behind it.

At the drive into Pickett's trailer, Will turned off the siren. They drove through the woods and out into the field. Will's heart pounded at they approached the trailer. The lights from the flasher streaked across the trailer's side.

"Holy Mother," Harry said.

The body was lying where it had fallen, at the foot of the steps, but someone had covered the top half with a plaid blanket. As he walked toward it, Will felt some of the panic leave him, as the body was obviously a man's. The

tassel-fringed edge of the blanket touched the knees, and the legs were bare, making it appear as if the body might be naked. Will bent and took one corner of the blanket and pulled it back.

“Judas priest,” Harry said, behind him.

A dozen flies followed the blanket up and disappeared. Pickett’s blood-soaked T-shirt was pushed into the gaping hole in his chest, and he lay in a pool of blood that was already turning dark. His eyes were still open and a black beetle sat at the corner of his mouth, as if waiting to be let inside. The crotch of his Levi’s cut-offs was stained black.

Will dropped the blanket and both men turned away. They looked at each other, and Will shook his head. Neither man spoke. They heard far away the siren of the approaching ambulance. Will sighed and went up the steps to the screen door. The shotgun blast had loosened the door on its hinges, and the screen ballooned out around a hole the size of a dinner plate. Bits of screening crunched on the metal steps under Will’s shoes. He hooked his finger into the door handle to pull the door open, his heart pounding not in fear but in dread of what he might find inside.

But the trailer was empty. Harry had followed him in and they went from room to room in stale air still laced with the sharp smell of gunpowder. The rooms were as they had been the night before—the Coke bottle still on the table, Pickett’s bed still unmade. But the shotgun that had been in the corner behind the television was gone.

“Thank God the boy wasn’t home, at least,” Will said. Hands on his hips, he looked carefully at the floor for anything that might have fallen.

Harry looked at his friend, puzzled. “Let’s hope not, anyway.”

The inside of the trailer had become very hot as the sun had risen higher, and Will mopped the top of his thinning hair with a handkerchief. “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

The sound of the ambulance’s siren was nearby now, out on the county road. The two men stood looking down at the body.

“I wonder who put the blanket over him,” Harry said. “I wouldn’t think whoever shot him would bother.”

“He didn’t do this, Harry,” Will said. “The boy.”

“I hope not, too,” Harry said.

“You think he did though, don’t you?” Will felt anger rising, not at Harry but at something else. Perhaps he had not tried hard enough to find the boy yesterday, before this happened. “Harry, he wouldn’t hurt a fly. Look how he took care of those animals.”

“Some people are a lot kinder to animals than they are to their fellows,” Harry said.

The scream of the siren fell sharply to nothing as the ambulance appeared out of the trees and sped toward them in the dust of the road. The driver parked behind the police car, and a young man and middle-aged woman, both dressed in identical blue shirts and white shorts, got out.

“Looks like we’re too late,” the young man said, looking down at the body. He was the same man who had driven the ambulance to Millard’s when Tomorrow had been killed by the tiger. “Again.” He squatted next to the body and picked up a corner of the blanket to look. Two flies flew out. “Jesus,” he said, jumping up. “I guess. Someone blasted him good.”

“He’s been dead awhile,” Will said. “We had a call, just said there was a shooting, so I didn’t know how bad it was.”

“Who is it?” the woman asked.

“Howard Pickett. This is his place here.” Will swung his arm toward the trailer that suddenly seemed as empty of life as the man lying in dried blood on the ground.

“Better get the stretcher, I guess,” the young man said, but he keep looking at the body.

“Not yet,” Will said. “Let him be ’til the coroner has a look. You two will have to stick around, I’m afraid. Bring the body in when he says okay.”

“Ambulance is air-conditioned, at least,” the woman said. “We’ll wait

inside.”

“I’ll call the coroner from the car on the way in,” Will said. “And the county sheriff. He’ll want people out here to look around, so don’t touch anything, walk around too much. Shouldn’t be too long. My deputy’s on his way out, too. Okay? Just don’t touch anything.”

“Got you,” the young man said. He had both hands thrust deep into the pockets of his shorts and the tendons on his arms were swollen from clenched fists.

“This isn’t as bad as the fellow got killed by the tiger,” Will said.

“I guess. ’Cept that was an animal did that. This, some guy did.”



County Sheriff Vernon Apple would not sit down. Hands behind his back, he paced the floor in the muck-stained uniform he had not had time to change out of when the cell phone call had ended his search of the swamp. His men, miserable to the core after only two hours, had followed him single-file through cattails and dense tangles of alders back to the gravel parking lot, with the little sheriff in front looking like a college ROTC lieutenant leading his scoffing squad out of the jungle. Harry, sitting in the captain’s chair facing Will behind his desk, grinned and winked. Through his office door, Will could see the sheriff’s two deputies moving about in the front office, and Lena at her desk watching them as if she suspected they might try to steal her cluster of sharpened pencils in the blue pottery vase hand-made by her niece.

“Sure you won’t have a chair, Vernon?” Will said.

Harry moved his chair away from the empty one. “Plenty of room,” he said. Harry was still pleased with himself because, when Will had introduced him to the sheriff, Vernon Apple had said, “The famous writer?”

Will had laughed and said, “I thought Harry was the only one who knew he was famous.”

As if bowing, Vernon Apple bent at the waist to look down at his muck-crusted pants legs. "I'd get your chair all dirty."

"It's wood," Will said, but the sheriff continued to pace, looking up at the ceiling. Will suspected the little man was picturing himself through their eyes.

The sheriff stopped and leaned with the palms of his hands on the edge of Will's desk. "The site was a mess, you're aware," he said. He reached over the desk top to align a ball-point pen with the stapler, then touched his little moustache, as if to make sure it was still there.

Will said, "Well, there was the ambulance, and us, and the coroner. I warned them not to touch anything. Tried to get a hold of you as fast as I could, out in the swamp."

Vernon crossed his arms and paced again. He affected a stiff-legged march, like a robot, and studied the tips of his muddy boots.

"I think there was another car there," he said. "Besides the ones you just said. We found evidence of another car, spun its wheels, like in a hurry to get out of there."

"Probably the killer," Harry said, amused.

"Come to think of it," Will said, "Pickett's car wasn't there this morning. Either someone dropped him off, or the shooter took it after killing him. Maybe he interrupted a housebreaking."

"And where's the shotgun?" Vernon said. He stopped and looked at Will, as though accusing him. "We found a shell, under the davenport in the house, twelve-gauge. The coroner said the man got it full in the chest. You say the shotgun was there last night, when you were out there?"

"Behind the TV set," Will said. "Against the wall. Double-barrel."

"Double-barrel? We only found the one shell. Hmm." He dug into his pocket and held up the green and brass cylinder. "Twelve gauge," he said. "Makes a pretty good hole. So, if it wasn't the killer's own gun, why'd he take it with? Strikes me as odd. Don't you think?"

"I guess I hadn't thought about it yet," Will said.

"Well think, man, think." Vernon's high-pitched voice cracked with excitement. "Someone was waiting there for him, shot him with his own gun before he could open the door. Then took off carrying a shotgun with him?"

"Maybe he was afraid of fingerprints," Harry said.

Vernon thought a minute. "That's a good suggestion, Harry."

Will said, "To me, it means it wasn't premeditated. The gun was there and apparently loaded. I still think it could've been a housebreaking. Pickett came in on it, the guy shot him, and he took off with his gun and his car."

"Good thought, Will," Vernon said. He finally sat down in the chair, slouched at first, until he realized how big Harry was next to him. He sat up straight and traced his moustache with the tip of his little finger.

"Any luck finding that tiger?" Will asked. He thought the little man looked very tired, and felt sorry for him.

Vernon sighed. "No. None. We didn't get very far into the swamp though, before your call came. We'll get him, though. Bet on it. No man-eating tiger is going to roam my county for long. Anyways, what do you know about the dead man? Pickett? Is that it? Who do you know would want to blow him away? And why? Assuming it wasn't a burglar, like you say."

"Well, Vernon," Will said, "Howard was something of a bully. Not very many people around here liked the man. Some of the ladies thought he was pretty appealing, I understand, at least until he slapped them around once or twice. He wasn't above beating up on his boy, either."

The sheriff's face seemed to sag and the shoulders he had been holding square wilted. "So there's plenty of people could have shot him then. Won't be an easy case then. Mad wife—something like that?"

"No wife," Will said. "Couple of girlfriends, though."

Vernon dug out a little spiral notebook from his pants pocket and planted it on the desk. "Well, give me some names, Will. Hand me that pencil there."

Will leaned across the desk with the pencil. "It's a touchy situation, Vernon," he said. "I hesitate, you know, to get anybody in trouble that's got nothing to do with this."

"This is murder, Will. Can't be too sensitive about feelings getting hurt. Give me some names."

"Well, I guess you could start with his girlfriend—Belva Jenkins. Lives over past Roxbury. Old farm off of County V. I can show you on the map."

"Belva Jenkins," Vernon repeated, writing it down. "Funny name—Belva. Who else? What about his boy? You said he beat up on his boy."

Will stood up and turned to look out the big window at the river for a minute. "He's just a kid. Twelve, thirteen, something like that. Anyway, he's missing right now." He turned back. "I'll find him today and talk to him myself."

"Missing? Since when?"

Will thought the little man's ears actually widened. "Since before the shooting, at least. I'll talk with him. There's no way he could have done this. Like I said, he's just a kid. I'll be talking with a few others I can think of, too, and let you know. Let you know the results. Okay, Vernon?"

Vernon stood up and pushed the notebook back into his pants pocket. "Well, I appreciate any help you can give, Will. What with this tiger to deal with, too." He leaned over the desk and put the pencil down in line with the ruler, then held out his hand to Will to shake. He turned and did the same to Harry. "Very nice to have met you, Mr. Thorson. Maybe I can get you to sign one of your books for me, next time."

"Be glad to," Harry said with a broad smile.

They watched him go out to the front office and motion the two waiting deputies to him. All three seemed to be trying to go through the outside door at the same time, with Lena in her blue polka-dot dress following, as if herding them out.

"Nice fellow," Harry said, sitting down again.

Will looked at his watch. "I'd better get home and check on the dog," he said. "It's after two. Probably late before I can get home again."

"You think the boy's there?"

Will shrugged. "It's possible. I don't know where else to look."

"You really think this was a break-in, Will? If I was a thief, that rust bucket trailer would be the last thing I'd target."

"He got a car and a shotgun, didn't he?"

"Come on, Will. You just don't want to admit the boy is the one most likely to have shot him."

"You're a detective now, Harry?"

"Look. He beat the kid regularly and he just killed all those pet animals of his."

"A woman called in this morning. It was a woman reported the body, according to Lena. Don't forget that, Harry."

"So who do you think did it? And don't tell me a 'burglar.'"

"I suppose the most likely is Belva. To have made the call anyway—I don't say she killed him. If he came home with anybody, it would most likely have been Belva." He sat down at his desk again and pushed a paper clip around with the ruler.

"What?" Harry asked, watching Will think.

"There's Mona, too," Will said. "She could have made the call. If she found the body."

"Mona? Why Mona?"

"You know how protective she is of Belva. Maybe she went out there—out to Pickett's—looking for her. Found the body."

"So you've got Belva or Mona finding the body, but you don't want to say either one of them shot him."

"Belva—he beat up on her, so I suppose it's a possibility. But Mona would have no reason to shoot him. She was very motherly to Belva—protective. She might haul off and slug him one, but. . ."

Harry hung his head and smiled at his stomach. “Will, Will. Motherly? I don’t think Mona’s interest is exactly ‘motherly’.”

Will was looking through Harry and not hearing him. “The only other one. . . the only other woman I can think of to make the call would be Vince’s wife, Angie. Pickett was flirting with her. I suppose she might have had a reason to go out there.”

Harry sat up straight. “Now that’s interesting. Maybe Vince shot him, even. A love triangle.”

Will laughed. “You’re always trying to get Vince to murder somebody, Harry.”

“Well, he’s murdered everything else in town, with that bloody shopping center of his.”

Lena came to the door and leaned in. “Will, Eldon Diehl’s out here, wants to talk with you about something urgent, he says.”

“All right. Send him in. Harry, maybe you’d better take off.”

Harry looked hurt. “Why?”

“Because maybe it’s private, is why. Go on, now. I’ll see you later, if I can get to Renner’s tonight.”

Will watched through the doorway as Harry encountered Eldon. The two men stood and talked, with Eldon using his gnarled old hands as much as his mouth, and Will suspected Harry, in those few minutes, would have learned as much about what Eldon wanted as Will would. He smiled to himself and looked at his watch again. He just wanted to get home to see if the boy might be there.

“Afternoon, Eldon,” Will said, standing up as the old man came in. “What seems to be the problem? You want to sit down?”

For some reason, after years of wearing Levi’s overalls no matter what the temperature, Eldon had started this summer to wear Bermuda shorts. Lena said it was because he got them free when Rose Haleron’s husband died in Florida last winter. After Rose brought his body home to bury, she gave away

all his old clothes. Lena said Eldon was there early with the box his 21-inch TV had come in years ago. But Tony Haleron had been a big man, and Eldon was, by any standard, scrawny.

He stood before Will now with a belt cinching the puckered blue and white seersucker shorts to his waist like a drawstring. He had put the pink T-shirt on backward so at least only those coming up from behind would see on it the picture of palm trees and a smiling woman waving from a speed boat. The shorts hung below his knees and his hairless legs looked as if a cartoonist had drawn them to look as chicken-like as possible. Will would have felt sorry for the man but he knew that Eldon, with all the obsessions that ruled his life, never thought for a minute about what other people might think of him.

"No need for sitting," Eldon said, but he leaned with his palms on the back of the chair in front of the desk. Will knew that the old man had walked the seven miles into town from where he lived out by the Ordnance plant, as he did daily, to mail his protest letter to the U.S. government or the president.

"Sit down, Eldon," Will said. "You're tired."

"Just doing my duty, Chief. I come to tell you I saw some kids in the powder plant this morning, on my way in. Playing in the buildings. They'll get themselves hurt, sure as heck."

"I would have thought you'd stay out of there, Eldon, after what happened last year." But Will knew that cutting across the fenced-in acreage of the plant saved Eldon at least two miles of walking, and even the horror of finding Janet Powers's mutilated body there last year probably had not stopped him for more than a couple of months.

"I just come to tell you, is all. They get hurt, it's on you then. Not me."

"How many kids, Eldon?"

"Well, I only saw the one. Ducked down from looking out the window when he saw me. But there was bikes out front, too."

“Bikes?”

“Well, one, anyways. A yellow one.”

Will stood up quickly. “Okay, Eldon. Well, I appreciate your help. I’ll get out there and take care of it.”

“Just doing my duty. No one can say I don’t do my citizen’s duty, in spite of the s-o-b’s run this country.”

“I’m going to run out there now, Eldon. Can I give you a ride? Save you walking.”

“Well, all right. Kind of tired, actually. Hot today.”

In the car, the old man held up his arms to let the cool air from the air-conditioner vents blow up the sleeves of his T-shirt. Will turned the blower down a bit, and tried to ignore the man’s odor.

“You mail your letter today, Eldon?” Will asked.

“You bet.” The old man watched out the side window the passing corn-fields and the flight of flocks of blackbirds. Finally he said, “I know they don’t ever answer. But you can’t let them forget, you know, what they done. Never forget, them signs said. They used to carry. Well, I remember. And I remind them.”

“Who, Eldon? Who do you remind?”

“Them government people.”

Will had been only a young boy at the start of the second war, and remembered little of the great upheaval when the government confiscated hundreds of acres of rich farm land at the foot of the bluffs to build the Ordnance plant that would supply powder and ammunition for not only that war but the Korean War as well, and eventually the Vietnam War. Back then, the distant explosions at the plant had been only vivid background for the war games Will and Harry had played with their friends. And while they played, Eldon Diehl’s father died of a heart attack one day in his barn, two months after being notified their farm would be taken in the spring, and the next year his mother drowned herself in the river, and Eldon himself went to jail for a

while for destroying government property. Now the plant was deserted, and tall weeds all but erased the railroad tracks where thousands of boxcars had passed, and dandelions and plantain grew out of cracks in the concrete roadways and courtyards.

Across the cornfields, they could see the plant now, rising mirage-like in the shimmer of heat waves above the green corn. Like a rusted, ruined ocean liner, it sailed on a green sea. And out of it for thousands of days had leaked the chemicals that now polluted the once rich earth, and that, even underground, had flowed in lightless streams down to soil the great river itself.

"Well, you keep at it, Eldon," Will said. "There's talk now, in the papers, the government's going to close the plant permanently. Give the land back to the state."

"Sure, give it back to the state. I heard about that. Or give it back to the Indians. Like they was the ones farmed it for hundreds of years! That'll be the day, I give my land back to the Indians."

They were on the highway in front of the plant entrance now, and Will pulled into the road crossing the center strip between the two lanes of highway. Across the highway from the plant were the workers' barracks that after the war had been converted to apartments to house the huge influx of students going to the university on the G.I. Bill. Now they were owned by a Madison developer, and Eldon rented tiny rooms where once his father's farm had been.

"I'll let you off here, Eldon. Can you get across the highway all right?"

The old man looked at him as if he had said something stupid. "You look out for them boys," he said, holding open the car door. "They could get hurt in there. I done my duty, anyways."

"Thanks, Eldon. Take care now."

Will made a U-turn and crossed the highway to the road into the plant. A chain-link fence ten feet tall blocked the entrance. Since the murder that had occurred there last year, the old guard house had been repaired and

newly painted by the government and a guard employed for those months when the plant was not snowbound. Will honked and rolled down his window. Behind the guard house an old pick-up truck was parked so close it seemed to be leaning against the little building for support. Rock music blew out through the open windows and door on the wind from a large fan that Will could see standing on a pole behind the young man who had come to the door. He was shirtless and was wearing red gym shorts. He leaned against the door frame with a bare shoulder and tapped his leg with a rolled-up magazine.

“How you doing, Chief?” he said, smiling.

“Brady. I didn’t know you were working here.”

“Summer job. Boring as hell though. You don’t need somebody, do you—new deputy?”

“You’re too young. Let me in, will you.”

The young man ducked back into the shed and came out with a ring of keys.

“What’s the problem, Chief?” he said after he had swung open half of the big gate and come back to the car.

“I got a report of some kids in one of the buildings. You seen anyone?”

“Nope. I made a round an hour ago. We used to play here all the time, too, when I was a kid. Lots of places to hide in.”

“Well, I’ll just have a look around. Thanks, Brady.”

Will rolled up the window and drove through the gate. He bumped across railroad tracks and entered what seemed to him a ruined city. Clumps of grass grew through the broken concrete streets, and velvet leaf and giant foxtail fringed the base of odd-shaped buildings sheathed in corrugated metal. Wild grapevines climbed the legs of the water tower and the telephone poles and hung like town Christmas decorations from the wires. In the buildings, long rows of windows reflected the sun’s glare, but many panes were broken out, so it looked as if someone had painted black squares on the sil-

ver windows.

Will drove slowly, looking for the yellow bike. The boy must have seen him coming because he stepped out from a doorway and stood without waving or smiling as Will approached the old administration building. He was wearing the same shorts and T-shirt and tennis shoes he had worn when Will had last seen him. Will's heart thumped once and then began to pound when he saw the shotgun, butt on the ground, half hidden by the boy's arm as he pressed it against his side. He leaned forward, his arms encircling the steering wheel, and pressed his forehead to the back of his hands. "Dear God," he said. He took a deep breath and climbed out of the air-conditioned car into a blast of afternoon heat that seemed to emanate from all the ruined buildings around him, as if the old furious fires of ammunition production still burned there.

The boy stood almost at attention, the shotgun at his side, as Will walked to him. Sweat glistened on his forehead, and his T-shirt was dirty and sweat-stained. The black barrel of the shotgun was glued to his sunburned arm. His eyes were blank and his face expressionless.

Will stopped a few feet from him. "I'm glad to see you, Joe. I've been looking for you."

"My dad's dead," he said without moving.

Will wanted to go to him, but he felt awkward and unsure of what to do. He hardly knew this boy, but somehow it seemed to him he had known him a long time. And he thought of his own father lying dead by the lily pond in the back yard, his head on the rock rim of the pool, the pistol, blood on the lily pads, on the orange marigolds. The bitter scent of marigolds.

"I know," he said. He stepped closer to the boy and put his hand on his shoulder. "You want to tell me what happened, Joe?"

At Will's touch, the stiffness left the boy, and he leaned heavily on the shotgun as if to keep from falling. Will took hold of both his shoulders and held him up. The boy smelled sweaty, unwashed.

“Are you all right, Joe?” Will said.

“I’m really thirsty. It’s so hot.”

Will looked around as if he expected to see a Coke machine outside one of the buildings. “Let’s get you in the car. I’ll take you home. . .”

The boy pulled away from him. “I’m not going there,” he said angrily.

“I mean my house. I’ll take you to my house and get you something to eat and drink. Get you cleaned up.” Will held out his arm to him. “Come on, Joe.”

He came to Will then and let Will put his arm around him, and he leaned against Will’s side as they walked to the car.

“Better let me take the gun,” Will said, opening the car door for the boy.

Joey gave it to him and climbed into the car. As he walked around the back of the car, Will broke the double-barrel shotgun to check for shells. It was empty. He opened the trunk and laid the gun next to a shovel and battery cables.

“Hot in here,” he said, sliding in behind the steering wheel.

But the boy was already out the other door. “I forgot my bike,” he called over his shoulder. He went around the administration building and came back with the yellow bike, wheeling it with one hand on the seat and the other on the handlebar. Will got out again and lifted the bike into the trunk of the car.

“I need my bike,” Joey said as Will started the car. He was slouched in the corner of the seat, and Will could see his eyelids beginning to droop.

The young guard had left the entrance gate open, so Will only slowed the car, honked and waved as he rolled through. In the rearview mirror, he saw Brady pushing the gate shut again.

Will concentrated on crossing to the center strip as the highway north from Madison up through the bluffs was heavy with cars carrying people who had left work early on this hot summer day. Once in the south lane heading

back into Fox Prairie, he looked over at the boy.

He was sleeping now, his head against the door frame, his mouth open. A miniature snore sounded occasionally from the back of his throat.

He was still asleep when Will turned the squad car into the driveway behind his house. The dog came out of the dog house and began barking, standing on its hind legs at the end of its taut chain. Will watched the boy sleeping for a minute. He looked so frail. How would he ever be able to stand all the terrible things that were yet to come. It was not possible that this small boy could have shot his father. But why does he have the shotgun then? And why were both barrels empty?

“Joe. Wake up now, Joe,” Will said, shaking the boy’s shoulder.

He woke with a start, a look of panic in his eyes because he did not know where he was.

“We’re at my house, Joe,” Will said. “Let’s get you something to eat and drink.”

Joey walked beside him to the house in a daze, and did not even look at the barking dog.

“Be quiet, Molly,” Will said. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

In the kitchen, Will handed the boy a can of soda out of the refrigerator. “All I have is diet Coke,” he said.

Joey snapped it open and began drinking it so fast it ran down the sides of his neck and into his T-shirt. He smelled of dried sweat, and his shorts were stained as if he had wet himself and that had dried, too.

Will steered him by the shoulders into the bathroom and turned on the shower. “Get yourself clean now, Joe. Throw your clothes out. I don’t have anything else to give you to put on. Just wrap yourself in the towel until I get your clothes clean.”

Will waited outside the door until the clothes were thrown out. He did not have a washing machine because he used the laundromat for his own laundry, so he put the shorts and T-shirt in the kitchen sink and filled it with

hot water. He put dish detergent in, scrubbed the clothes, rinsed and wrung them out. He hung them outside on the sunporch doorknob and brought the dog into the house. Will was making a sandwich of cold cuts and cheese when the boy came back into the kitchen with an oversized yellow bath towel wrapped around him from his shoulders to his knees. Joey had put his tennis shoes back on, but they were unlaced. Molly rushed to greet the boy, and Joey turned sideways to deflect her with his hip.

“Feel better?” Will said. “Get away, Molly. Sit down at the table, Joe. I’ve got something for you to eat.”

“Thanks,” Joey said, sitting down. He freed one arm from the towel and began to eat the sandwich.

Will sat opposite him. “You look better, at least. You’ve had a pretty rough time, I guess.”

Joey only nodded, his mouth full of bread. He kept his eyes on the table. He had not combed his wet hair and it spiked in all directions. Will waited until he finished eating. When he raised his arm to drink the rest of the Coke, the towel slipped off his shoulder and Will saw the vertical pink mark there, as if someone had struck him with the side of a hand.

Will reached across the table and almost touched it. “How’d you do this?”

Joey looked down, pressing his chin into his chest. He hugged the towel up around his neck again, as if he were cold. “Don’t know. Probably when I went through the fence, I guess. My bike got caught by the pedal and I had to pull it and it fell on me.”

“Did you get enough to eat? I can make you another sandwich.”

“I’m okay.”

Will smiled. “You’re really tired, aren’t you?”

Joey only stared at the big red geraniums on the oilcloth. In the living room, the pendulum clock on the wall struck four. The beagle had given up all hope that food might fall her way and was lying on the linoleum next to

Will's chair.

"You'll have to tell me what happened last night, Joe." Will leaned toward the boy, resting his forearms on the table. When he didn't answer, Will said, "You ran off from here yesterday, before we finished talking. I looked for you, you know. I was worried about you. I even went out to your place."

Joey looked up at him then. "My dad's dead," he said, as if he were being forced to admit something.

"I know that, Joe. I was out there this morning. How did that happen?"

The boy sighed deeply and slipped down in his chair. "I didn't want to stay there anymore. I wanted to go and find Rajah and live someplace by ourselves. Like that boy in the book. Mowgli."

Will shook his head, amazed. "Live with a tiger?"

"Better than him."

"Your father?"

"Rajah would protect me. I know he would. Like I was his child. 'Stead of beating on me all the time."

The boy studied the oilcloth again and began tracing with one finger the outline of the red geranium.

"How did your father get shot, Joe?" Will said.

"I don't know," Joey said, almost whining.

He waited, as if he expected Will to ask him again, or, Will thought, as if he expected to be sworn at and slapped. Will waited, too. Joey pulled the towel tighter around himself, lowered his chin into it and chewed on the nap. Finally, he looked up at Will and said, "I was going to run away. I went back to get the gun. I was waiting. . ."

"Why did you want the shotgun?"

"Well, I figured if I was living outside with Rajah I might need it. In case there were rattlesnakes, you know. Or bats. I'm afraid of bats."

"Then what happened?"

“I was waiting in those woods by the trailer a long time, ’til way dark, cause I wanted to be sure he wasn’t there, there weren’t any lights on. A car came and I thought it was you, in the headlights I thought it was you and that other guy you’re always with—the birdwatcher guy—walking to the trailer, but I wasn’t sure. I waited a long time ’til the car left again and then I was going to go in and another car came. It was my dad’s car and I thought, well I might as well just go now ’cause I won’t be able to get the gun anyway. And I was going to go when I heard this shot and then right away my dad’s car went driving off fast. So I waited a while and then I went up there on my bike and there he was, on the ground, where he was shot. It was weird. His eyes. The moonlight was shining in them ’cause they were open yet. So I got pretty scared and I just took off.”

“How’d you get the shotgun?”

“It was there. On the ground by the steps. So I just took it with.”

Will thought a moment, studying the boy’s face. “Did you see who drove off with the car, your dad’s car?”

“No. It was somebody he came with. I just saw them in the moonlight going to the trailer and then there was this shot and then the car drove off.”

“Man or woman?”

“It was a woman.”

“You didn’t try to call anybody? 9-1-1? An ambulance? The police?”

Joey shook his head. “I knew he was dead. I was scared. I covered him with a blanket from the house.”

“So you went to the powder plant then, and spent the night there.”

“First I went over to Millard’s ’cause I was going to sleep in Rajah’s cage. I thought Rajah would come back there when he got hungry. But the fawn was in the cage. He put Cricket in the cage for Rajah to eat. I was going to go in and let her go, but I saw the rope he had rigged on the door. He thought he could trap Rajah that way. He’s not too smart, Mr. Millard. Then I heard a shot and I crawled under the wagon, behind the wheels, and Millard

came running, hollering and cursing.”

“Millard shot at you?”

“I don’t know. He probably just shot in the air ’cause he saw I was going to let Cricket out. I didn’t hear no bullets go by.”

“Did he see you then?”

“No. I stayed under the wagon ’til I saw him going back toward his house. Then I went to the powder plant for a place to sleep. I’m gonna go back tonight to wait for Rajah. If Rajah sees me, he’ll come with me. I know he will.”

“Well, Joe, I don’t think that’s too good of a plan. I wish you had thought to come here, come to me for help.”

The boy looked embarrassed. “I wanted to get Rajah and run away from here. Just live with Rajah.”

“Run away, Joe? With a tiger? Where did you expect to live with a tiger?”

Joey shrugged. “In the woods somewhere. I know lots of places in the woods.”

Will sighed and shook his head. “Joe, Joe.”

“Well, what if I did come here? You wouldn’t have let me live here anyway.”

“I would have tried to help you. I will now. Help you.”

“Can I live with you? You don’t have anybody to live with you.”

“It’s not that simple, Joe. Your father’s dead. There’re rules we have to follow.”

The dog put its front paws on Will’s thigh for attention, and Will pushed it down. “Stay down, Molly,” he said. Joey had his elbow on the table and his chin propped on the heel of his hand. His eyelids had begun to droop. His chin slipped off his hand, and he looked up with a start. The towel slid off his narrow shoulders, and Will saw the pink mark again, just below his collar bone. It would become a deep bruise.

“Do you know where your mother is, Joe?” Will asked. “Where is your

mother living now?"

But the boy seemed dazed with trying to stay awake and didn't answer. Will looked at his watch. He got up from the table and pulled the towel around Joey's shoulders again and helped him stand.

"You're going to bed for now, Joe. At least 'til your clothes get dry. Then we'll decide what to do."

He guided the unresisting boy up the steep stairs to the second bedroom. The room was hot and Will opened both windows. New strands of ivy had started to grow across the screens, and in the thick ivy on the brick wall outside flocks of sparrows chattered. Will pulled the heavy bedspread down over the high footboard of the bed and got the boy under the sheet. He threw the towel on the cane seat of the chair next to the bed. The phone rang downstairs, but he knew he would not have time to reach it.

"Joe, I'm going to have to go out for a while. I want you to promise to stay here 'til I get back. All right?"

The boy didn't answer and Will shook his shoulder. "Did you hear me, Joe? Will you promise me? Not like last time."

"Yes," he said, and turned on his side.

The phone stopped ringing as Will went down the stairs. He went to it and dialed the station number.

"Good Lord, where have you been?" Lena said. "I've been calling your car phone for an hour and I just now called your house."

"I'm on my way in now, Lena. What's the problem?"

"Good Lord. There's a young woman here, name of Belva. She's been crying and crying for over an hour. She says Mona Zweifel has shot that Pickett fellow."



Her bloodshot eyes looked as if she had kept them open too long while swim-

ming under water, the skin under them pink and puffy. She kept one knuckle of her fist pressed to her mouth to keep her lips from trembling.

"Are you all right now?" Will asked from behind his desk. Through the office door he could see Lena talking to Adam as she got ready to leave work.

Belva nodded. She gripped the arm of the chair with one white-knuckled hand and kept the other to her mouth. Will thought how young she looked, and this was already the second time someone she had been involved with had been killed. She was wearing very tight blue jeans and a white T-shirt that, even though it was much too big for her, seemed to emphasize the movement of her breasts whenever they touched the cloth.

"It was you that called this morning, then?" Will said.

Belva nodded. She lifted the bottom of her T-shirt to wipe her eyes again, showing her bare stomach.

"You want some water or something?"

"No. I'm good. Lena out there gave me a Coke before, while I was waiting."

"Why do think it was Mona did this, Belva?"

"I was there. She shot Howie."

"When was this, Belva? Tell me what happened, from the beginning."

Belva sighed and gripped the chair arm with both hands now. She leaned toward the desk as if she were about to whisper something. "I shoulda probably stayed," she said, looking at Will. "To help Howie. But I was so scared. I thought she was going to shoot me, too."

"Start at the beginning, Belva."

"We went out there last night, Howie and me, to his trailer. I was going to move in with him. I decided. I packed some things and I was going to leave home and move in with Howie, and later we were going to move to Chicago and get jobs there. We were at the trailer and Howie was going ahead of me, up the steps, and. . ."

She stopped and kept looking at Will as though she expected him to fin-

ish what she was saying.

“And what, Belva?”

“There was this explosion, like the whole door ahead of us just exploded and Howie came flying backward down the steps with his arms flung out sideways and landed bang on his back right there in front of me. He didn’t even holler or anything and his whole front of his shirt was all blood, just blood all over. I just stared at him, like it was a dream or something, like it wasn’t even happening. And then I heard the door squeaking open and I just ran. I turned and just ran as fast as I could to the car, ’cause I knew she was going to shoot me, too. Mona. God, Mona.”

“Why would Mona shoot him?”

“She was really mad, ’cause I was moving in with him. She hated Howie. Mona doesn’t know too much about men, you know. She kept saying he was playing me for a fool. ‘Playing me for a fool,’ that was her exact words. Said he just cared about one thing and he’d dump me as soon as he got tired of it. Which wasn’t true. We were going to Chicago. I think Mona was just jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Mona always thought she was my best friend. She really hated it when I started seeing Howie.”

“But she wouldn’t have hurt you. You really thought she was going to shoot you?”

“Ha. You don’t know Mona. She was pretty mad when I told her I was moving in with Howie. Said she wouldn’t stand for it. Them were her exact words. She wouldn’t stand for it. Lot of business it was of hers, anyway. Now Howie’s dead.”

She acted like she was going to cry again, but Will could tell she was forcing it now.

“Belva, look at me.”

“What?”

"You actually saw Mona come out the door with the shotgun, as if she was going to shoot you?"

"Well, no. I didn't actually see her. I was running too fast to the car."

"But you saw her shoot Howie."

"Well, no. She was in the trailer. Behind the screen door. There weren't no lights on."

"Well, how do you know it was Mona then, if you didn't see her?"

"Because, she said she would kill him. Them were her exact words: I'll kill that son of a bitch."

Will sighed. "I see," he said, getting up. He turned his back to the girl to look out the window at the river. The late afternoon sun had tinted the colors of the river and the hills with a wash of amber light, and thunderheads were building in white billows in the deep blue sky. He thought of the sleeping boy and the mark on his shoulder.

"Where's Mona now?" He turned back to her. "Do you know?"

"God no. I drove Howie's car around most of the night, 'cause I was scared to go home. Then this morning I called you, except I didn't know if I should say who I was, 'cause, well, the police and all. I was scared. What should I do now?"

"You should go home. I'll go have a talk with Mona. Is your mother home?"

"God no. She's over in Madison with some guy. I don't know when she'll be back. Are you going to arrest Mona? Goddamn her anyway."

"You go home now, Belva. I don't think you have to worry about Mona." Will started around the desk to walk her to the door.

"Goddamn her anyway," Belva said, walking in front of him. "We were going to Chicago, Howie and me. She ruined everything."

In the front office, Adam, sitting behind Lena's desk, jumped up quickly and Belva said, "Hi, Adam," in the teasing voice of a schoolgirl. Adam put his hand on top of his hair and said, "Belva." Will watched her go down the

concrete steps and cross the street to Pickett's old Buick station wagon parked with the front wheels to the curb in front of Renner's bar. Another car honked and braked to wait for her as she was backing out.

"What's happening, Chief?" Adam said. His uniform was clean and pressed with deep creases and Will wondered how he always managed to keep it looking like an Army sergeant's when he didn't have a wife to do his ironing. A quick picture of Adam in his shorts standing at an ironing board made him smile.

Adam looked down at himself. "What's so funny?" he said.

"Nothing. Nothing, Adam. How'd it go out at Pickett's this morning?"

"Good. That sheriff got there right after I did, so he pretty much took over. Said we'd all walked around too much, though, messing things up. He left a couple guys to go over things, the trailer and that. I just waited 'til they took the body off. Man, was he blasted. Poor guy. Lena says Belva's saying Mona Zweifel shot him."

"What do you know about Belva, Adam?"

Adam looked at the floor and blushed. "Nothing. Why?"

"You were in high school with her, weren't you?"

"No. She was two years behind me."

Will waited.

"I just know that she had this reputation, is all. I mean, well, they used to say. . .the other guys used to say. . .well, that she was. . .well, you know, hot."

"Hot?"

Adam's face was getting redder, and he sat down at Lena's desk again and began pushing her computer mouse around. "She just had this reputation of not being a very nice girl, is all. You know what I mean. Anyway, she was two years behind me, so I didn't know her all that well. You know how guys talk."

"Okay. I get the picture." Will started toward the hallway and the back entrance. "I've got to go out to Mona Zweifel's, Adam. If Harry comes

around, tell him I probably won't be at Renner's tonight."

Before starting the car, Will sat for a minute, thinking. The relief he had felt when Belva had said that Mona had shot Pickett was gone now. Belva hadn't actually seen Mona, and once again the fear that Joey had shot his father filled him with anxiety. Staring at the windshield, he saw again the pink bruise on the boy's shoulder, and he knew it was where the butt of a shotgun could have recoiled. Or the falling bike's handlebar could have struck him there, as Joey had said. And, if he had done it, there were a lot of extenuating circumstances that could keep him from jail—or juvenile detention—or whatever it was they did with kids these days. Will could argue that he himself would take. . .

A noisy flock of sparrows returned in a sudden rush to their roost in the dusty vines on the side of the police station. Will shook his head. Let's just not get too far ahead, here, he thought. And he started the car.

On the way to Mona's, he drove past the front of his house, turned the corner and stopped at the entrance to his driveway. He could see the boy's shorts and T-shirt still hanging from the doorknob outside the sunporch. The shadow of the big silver maple by the edge of the driveway completely covered the side of the house now, and the deep green ivy was alive with sparrows. Mourning doves on the roof of the old garage made their soft evening sounds. Will thought of going in to check on the boy, but he looked at his wristwatch and drove on. I've got his bike in the trunk yet, he thought. He won't be going anywhere.



Mona Zweifel lived in what used to be a farmhouse on the edge of town. Now the white two-story house with a wide porch that wrapped around one corner was surrounded by new ranch houses that looked more like thinly disguised trailer homes than houses meant to stand a hundred years, as Mona's

had. Her yard was four times as big as any other on the block, and she herself had built the six-foot-high board fence around the back, as much to keep her neighbors out as to keep in the many abandoned cats she compulsively rescued. The one-car garage stood farther away from Mona's house than the neighboring houses did from each other. Mona's old Ford was parked in the garage, the rear of the car exposed, as if meant to moon the neighborhood.

The battleship grey paint on the wide steps had worn down to wood in the path people usually took, and the porch sagged between its brick supports. As Will climbed the steps, goldfinches and a cardinal fled from a feeder hanging from a porch beam. Scattered birdseed crunched under his shoes when he crossed the porch to the door.

"Mona," he called through the screen door. He cupped his hands to the screen and looked in and saw the sudden flight of several cats. He stepped back as Mona came from the kitchen. In her right hand she was carrying a white coffee mug pointed like a pistol at Will. She pushed open the screen door.

"Hello, Will," she said. "I thought you'd be here before this. Come on in."

"Mona," Will said, and followed her into the living room.

In spite of opened windows facing the street, the air in the room was warm and smelled of dusty upholstery, a worn dusty braided rug, and the litter boxes of cats.

"Sit down," she said. Without putting the coffee cup down, she tried to move a pile of magazines from a big upholstered chair for him, but they slipped from her hand and slid away on the rug. "Hell with it," she said. "Sit down. You want some coffee?"

"No thanks, Mona. I've had too much already today." Will sat in the chair she had cleared. Cat hair coated the arms like thick dust. Most of the magazines on the floor at his feet had pictures of animals on the covers.

Mona, holding the coffee cup out in front as ballast, sank into the big

davenport opposite Will. "She didn't do it, you know," she said. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face puffy.

"Do it?" Will said, even though he knew what she meant.

"Shoot him. I did. That's what you're here for, isn't it?"

"You shot Howard Pickett?"

"Yes. The son of a bitch." She stared at Will defiantly.

"You want to tell me about it, Mona?"

The cats were beginning to come back into the room. One sat at Will's feet and looked up at him as if it were about to jump onto his lap, and another had jumped onto the davenport and was lying next to Mona's leg.

"She was going to move in with him, you know," Mona said. "Even after he beat up on her like that. I just don't understand it, Will. Why would she take that? I told her she could move in with me if she was so desperate to get away from home. She was considering it, too, until that bastard. . ." She covered her face with her hands.

Will felt embarrassed. The cat had jumped onto his lap now, and he scratched its ears. He pushed it down. "Why would it be you to have to shoot him, Mona? She's the one he was beating up on."

"She was going to move in with him, for Christ's sakes. I wasn't going to let him hurt her again. No way. A guy like that, he never stops, no matter what he promises."

"Tell me how it happened, then, Mona."

"We were supposed to go to a movie last night, over in Madison. She called and said she couldn't go. Howie was there helping her pack and she was going to move in with him. Can you believe it?" She pulled the cat onto her lap and began twisting its ear between her thumb and forefinger. The cat jumped down. "Anyway, I went out there, to his trailer, and waited until they came and then I shot him."

"With Belva right there?"

"I really don't know where she was. It was dark. I guess she must've been

in the car yet.”

“What did you shoot him with?”

“I’ve got a gun.”

“What kind of gun?”

“I don’t know the name. A pistol. I threw it in the river after I left there.”

“Come on, Mona,” Will said. “Why’re you doing this? Pickett was shot with his own shotgun.”

“A shotgun?”

“According to Belva. . .”

“You saw her, then? You already talked to Belva? Where is she? Is she all right?”

“She’s all right. She’s scared. According to her, somebody was waiting in the trailer when they got there, she and Pickett, and shot him through the screen door as he was going up the steps. She thought it was you that did it, but she didn’t see you. She’s scared out of her wits ’cause she thinks you’re going to shoot her, too.”

“Shoot her? She thinks I would shoot her? Oh God, this is too awful.” She put her hands to her face again, but took them down immediately. “Where is she now? I have to talk with her. There’s no way she could have done this, Will.”

“Why are you trying to protect her then? By lying like this. You must think it’s a possibility she did it. Maybe when they got to the trailer they had a fight again and he hit her. He went out to the car for something and as he was coming back in she decided she had had enough and took the shotgun against the wall there and shot him. Now she claims it was you shot him.”

A small smile tried to lift the heavy corners of Mona’s mouth. “She thinks I did it, huh? Well, at least she knows what I would do for her.”

“So you didn’t shoot him, then?”

“No comment. Whoever shot him, he had it coming. You ought to just let it go at that. Say he shot himself, by accident.”

"Mona, I know you didn't do this. And you're not helping Belva any by telling a bunch of lies. Now, tell me what you really know about this."

"Or what? You'll arrest me? Huh. I've been arrested more'n once, you know."

"For those silly demonstrations of yours. Not for murder."

"They're not silly."

"Mona, for god's sakes. I want to know if you were really out there, at Pickett's, and what you saw."

Mona hesitated. She stroked her leg as if she expected a cat to be lying there. "All right. I went out to her house, Belva's, after she told me she was moving in with him. But they were gone already. So I decided, hell with it, I'll go there and drag her away, if that's what it takes. I was just turning into the driveway there when that old dump he drives came barreling out—fish-tailing out onto the road—and I saw in my headlights it was Belva driving. I turned around to follow her, but she was going like crazy, and by the time I got out onto the highway I lost her. So I drove out to her house again, but she wasn't there. I waited there a long time, but she never showed up. I was half-nuts, wondering what happened. So I went back to the trailer. It was almost morning by then. And there he was, lying on his back with a hole big as a grapefruit in his gut. The son of a bitch. Her suitcase was lying there where she must've dropped it. I took it. I hoped nobody but me would know she was there."

"I see," Will said. He ran the faded crease of his pants between his fingers. "Did you see anyone else? What about his son?"

"Joey? No. Nobody was there. I took the suitcase and left. I didn't go inside at all. Do you have the gun? The shotgun?"

"No. That's gone."

Mona smiled. "I'm not testifying about this, you know. I'm not saying I saw her there. I know she didn't do this. I'll still say I did it, Will. My tire marks are there. That'll show I was there, and I'll swear I shot the bastard."

Will sighed. "I gotta hope you're not serious, Mona. You'd ruin your life for that girl? I don't get it. She's mad at you, you know. Says you wrecked her chances to get away from Fox Prairie. She was planning on moving to Chicago with Pickett."

"She was? No, she'd never've done that. She'd of come to her senses. She said she was mad at me? I've gotta go talk to her, Will. Tell me where she is. She must be scared to death, poor kid." Mona tried to stand, but the sofa was low and soft, and her heavy hips pulled her back down.

"I think you'd better let it alone for now, Mona," Will said. He stood up and brushed at the seat of his pants and rubbed his hands together to shed the cat hair. "You'll just make things worse for everybody."

Mona covered her eyes again. "Oh, God, this is so awful. Poor Belva."

When she looked up at Will, her face seemed to have suddenly changed. The usual brash defiance was gone, replaced by utter sorrow, and Will had to look away, embarrassed, realizing for the first time that this woman he had sat next to in grade school, had seen almost daily in the twenty years since she had returned home to Fox Prairie, was someone he had not known at all.

"Well, whatever," she said, speaking now to a black and white cat that had jumped onto her lap, stroking its head. "I've done what I could. I never will learn when to stop, I guess. It's *hard* to stop, Will. You know what I mean? Sometimes I'm such a pain in the ass."

"No more'n the rest of us, Mona," Will said.

Two cats followed Will to the door. When he turned to look back at Mona, she had covered her face again.

He sat in the squad car for a while, thinking. He decided he had better go back to the station and check in by phone with the county sheriff, but first he would stop at home to make sure the boy was all right. It was close to dark now, and the streetlights were on and filigreed with a late hatch of insects and the darting shadows of bats. The intense heat had fallen with the sun, but the air was still humid. The air-conditioning in the car chilled the sweat on Will's

forehead and under his shirt, and he turned it down as he approached the house. At the same time as Will turned into the driveway, Harry got out of his little Volkswagen and was flooded by the glare from Will's headlights. He walked toward Will with his hand cupped over his glasses against the glare of the light. Will switched off the lights and climbed out of the car.

"Where've you been, Will?" Harry said. "I've been waiting at Renner's. Then Adam came in and said you might not be coming back."

"I've been working on the shooting, Harry. You know that." Will brushed past him impatiently and started across the yard. The dog barked frantically, but he ignored it.

"I've got some news to tell you," Harry said, following. "I heard from Audie again."

"Did you," Will said absently, and his heart began to beat faster as he saw the boy's clothes were gone from the door knob. There were no lights in the house. He switched on the light in the kitchen and called, "Joe?"

"Is he here?" Harry asked. "You found him?"

"He's supposed to be." Will opened the door to the staircase and called again as he climbed the steep steps, but he knew before he even got there that the bedroom would be empty.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, looking up at him from the bottom of the stairwell.

"He's not here. Damn, I should've known better."

Harry followed him back into the kitchen. Will went to the closet and began scooping dried dog food out of a twenty-five pound bag into the dog's dish, saying over his shoulder, "Do me a favor, Harry, and let the dog in."

He was sitting at the kitchen table when the dog came bounding to greet him.

"You let that boy go," Will said, cupping the dog's head in his big hands. "Why'd you do that, huh?"

The dog went to his bowl and Harry sat down heavily in the chair oppo-

site Will.

“He called me again, Will,” Harry said. “On the phone this afternoon. He definitely wants to go to the university in the fall. If he can get in.”

“Audie?”

“God, you realize I’ve never even heard his voice before, except that answering machine. Dad, he says, this is Audie, your son. Can you believe it? Dad.”

“That’s great, Harry. I’m glad you’re getting back together with him.”

“I hope he doesn’t hate me. Lord knows what she told him. It didn’t sound like he was mad at me or anything.”

“What reason would he have to be mad at you? Outside of naming him Audubon.”

Harry traced the red geranium printed on the oilcloth. Will thought of Joey.

“You never know what kind of things his mother told him. About me.”

“When’s he coming?”

“Day after tomorrow already. Can you believe it? I cabled him the plane fare. He wants me to get him some stuff on registration and find out if he’s a resident, since I’m his father, even though he hasn’t been living here.”

Will stood up. “I’ve got to go, Harry.”

“What’s going on? You found the boy, I take it.”

“He was here. Exhausted. I put him to bed and told him to wait until I got back. Now he’s taken off again.”

Harry followed Will out the door. “Where are you going?”

“I’ve got an idea where he might be. I’d better find him.”

“I’ll go with you. Wait up.”

Will did not talk in the car. He tried to block out Harry’s excited talk about his son. He had turned off the divided highway onto the blacktop road to Millard’s when Harry said, “Why so quiet? Where are we going? Millard’s? What’s going on with the shooting? Is that why we’re looking for the kid?”

He did it, didn't he? Like I said this morning."

On the edges of the headlights's bright beams, silver walls of cornfields rushed past on both sides of the road. The sudden eyes of small animals appeared like miniature flashlights in the tall grass by the roadside and disappeared as quickly. Flights of insects rushed at the windshield like the beginning of snowfall.

Will sighed. "Mona's claiming she did it—shot Pickett."

Harry laughed. "Mona? That's crazy. Why would she say that?"

"Trying to protect the Jenkins girl."

"I see. Well, that doesn't surprise me any. Do you think Belva shot him?"

"I don't know. She's scared out of her wits. She claims it was Mona did it."

"Mona wouldn't shoot anybody. At least I don't think she would. Do you?"

"I don't think she shot Pickett. She was out there last night. After we left. After Pickett was shot. She saw the body and picked up the suitcase Belva dropped when she ran off. I believe that much, anyway."

Neither man spoke for a while. They could hear the tiny pop of insects on the windshield.

"What about the boy?" Harry said.

Will shifted behind the wheel, cleared his throat. "I don't know," he said.

"I know you don't want to believe it, Will. A young kid like that."

"I know, I know." He was silent for a moment. The road to Millard's appeared in the headlights, and he turned into it. "I picked him up at the powder plant this afternoon. Eldon Diehl had seen him there. He had the shotgun with him that he took from the trailer."

"He's got the shotgun? That doesn't sound good."

"He told me he was going to run away. He wanted to take the shotgun with him, so he waited in the woods until dark so he wouldn't run into his father. He saw us when we were out there last night. He waited until we left

and then he was going to go to the trailer, but his dad drove up, so he waited in the woods. Then he heard a shot, and saw somebody drive his dad's car away, fast. When he went down there, he found him dead. He took the shotgun and went out to Millard's, thinking he might find that tiger. He's crazy for that tiger."

"So whoever Pickett came with shot him then. Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm not saying anything. I'm just telling you. It was Belva with him, and she claims they got out of the car and Pickett was going up the steps to the trailer ahead of her and somebody inside shot him through the screen door. She thought it was Mona and she was afraid Mona would shoot her, too, so she took off in Pickett's car."

"And Mona claims she did shoot him?"

"She did at first, but she didn't even know he'd been shot with a shotgun. She just thinks Belva did it. That's why she took the suitcase when she found it, so nobody would know Belva was even there."

"And you don't believe Belva did it."

"I said I don't know. She could be lying. Pickett might have started slapping her around again and she just lost it and shot him. The gun was right there. Against the wall. You saw it yourself."

"The only other one is the boy, isn't it," Harry said. "He might be the one lying."

"I guess so," Will said.

Millard's Wildlife Zoo in black letters on white boards rose into the headlights, and Will turned into Millard's drive.

"Why are we going here?" Harry asked.

"I thought this is where he would come again. He's determined to find that tiger. Wants to run away and live with that tiger. Can you imagine that? Live with a tiger. What's he thinking?"

"Crazy kid."

Will pulled the car into the gravel parking area and shut off the lights. "I don't know, though. It's pretty far out here and I've got his bike in the trunk back there. I don't know if he could've gotten this far already."

They got out of the car into almost total darkness. Will reached back in and fumbled in the glove compartment for a flashlight. Somewhere behind the trees the moon was beginning to rise, and slowly the blackness began to fade into the shapes of things.

"He told me that Millard's got a fawn staked out in the tiger's cage, thinking he can trap him. Let's check there first."

Will shone the flashlight on the path he remembered from the last time they were there. He could feel Harry following closely behind him.

"Judas priest, Will," Harry said. "What are we doing looking for a tiger in the dark?"

"We're looking for Joey," Will said. "Not the tiger." He heard Harry stumble and felt him grab his shoulder.

"Judas priest. I can't see a damn thing," Harry said. "This is not a good idea, Will."

"That tiger's long gone from here," Will said. "Quit worrying about the tiger."

He flashed the light into the tiger's cage and found it empty. He walked around the wagon, twisting the flashlight's beam around the wheels of the cage, scaring out a rabbit.

"The cage door is shut, and there's no fawn in there," Will said. "I'm betting Joey's been here already and let the deer out."

He pointed the beam at the shack where they had found Tomorrow's body. "Let's check the shack," he said, and started down the path. Harry mumbled something behind him and followed.

Fireflies were rising out of the long grass, and just the rim of an almost full moon rose above the dark shape of a hill. The door to the shack was part-way open. It creaked as Will pushed it in with the head of the flashlight. He

searched the wall by the door for a light switch and found it, but the light did not come on.

“I’m waiting out here,” Harry said from the steps.

Will washed the room with the fracturing circle of light. The dark stain from Tomorrow’s blood still marked the spot on the wooden floor where he had died.

“Nothing,” Will said, coming back onto the porch.

“Let’s go, then,” Harry said. “I don’t like this one bit. I feel that tiger, Will. I feel him watching us.”

“Nonsense. There was a light on up at Millard’s house. I want to talk to him.”

“Judas priest. How did I ever let you talk me into coming out here in the first place?”

The house was farther up the steep drive in an area that had long ago been cleared of trees. What had once been a mown lawn was now a field of long grass full of fireflies and crickets. The dark shape of the house stood in the center of the field, and from one window, set back on a roofed porch, yellow light poured.

“Watch yourself,” Will said. He held the flashlight beam behind him for Harry as they went up the porch steps.

“Jesus, what’s that?” Harry said.

A hunched shape crouched at the end of the porch, and Will swung the light to it. Like a bright moon, the round window in the front of a rusting washing machine reflected the flashlight. A decaying porch swing leaned against it.

Will opened the screen door and knocked on the window of the wooden door. No one came, and he leaned his forehead against the engraved glass and tried to see into the lighted living room. He knocked again.

“Let’s go, Will. He’s not here,” Harry said.

Will tried the door and it opened. He stepped into the hallway and

switched off the flashlight. "Millard?" he called. The only sound was the chirping of a cricket hidden somewhere by the steps that led to the dark upstairs. The air was stale and smelled faintly of spoiled meat.

"What a dump," Harry said from behind Will.

Will started towards the arched entry into the living room and saw, on the wooden floor at the very edge of a worn carpet from which age and trampled dirt had removed all color, the green and brass cylinder of a shotgun shell. He bent to pick it up. His heart began to beat faster. The shell had been fired.

"What is it?" Harry said.

Will showed him. "Twelve-gauge," he said, and he thought of the shell Vernon Apple had shown him that morning.

"Donald," he called again, and stepped into the living room.

Millard was slouched in the corner of the davenport with what was left of his head resting on the blood soaked afghan pinned with oversized safety pins to the mohair. The lard-grey skin of his remaining face was pock-marked with black flies. One bulging eye stared at them.

"God in heaven," Harry whispered.

Will felt the brass edge of the shotgun shell cut into his palm as he squeezed it tighter and tighter. He turned and bumped into Harry as they both hurried back out onto the porch.

"God in heaven," Harry said again, and then they were both silent for a while, breathing deeply the night air that, even though heavy still with humidity, seemed somehow fresh and clean.

"I've got to go back in there," Will said. "Maybe you'd better stay here."

"No. It's something I should see." Harry dug his little notebook from his shirt pocket and plucked a pencil stub from behind his ear. "Are you ready?"

They stood side by side looking down at the body again. Dried blood stained the front of Millard's overalls like a crusty bib. The blast from the shotgun had torn out his false teeth, and they lay in his lap as though grinning up at him.

“This didn’t just happen,” Will said. “He’s stiff as a board already. Blood’s dried.”

“Look at the flies, too. He’s starting to bloat. God.”

“Well, he was alive last night yet. Joey saw him. He came out here looking for that tiger, and he says Millard took a shot at him, thinking he was the tiger, I guess.”

“Joey was out here last night?” Harry said.

Will didn’t answer. Finally he said, “Well, there’s nothing we can do here. I’ve got to get back to town and get the coroner and the sheriff. Again.” He looked at his watch. “They’ll love that, this hour.”

Neither man spoke until Will turned onto the highway. Then Harry said, “Where do you suppose he is now? Joey.”

Will shrugged. “I’ve a pretty good idea.”

“Where?”

“He’s probably hiding in the powder plant again. Where I found him this afternoon.”

“You want to go look for him there?”

“No. We’d never find him in the dark. All those buildings, he could be in any one of them.”

As they approached town, Will said, “He had the shotgun, you know. It’s back there, in the trunk. The twelve-gauge from his father’s.”

Harry said, “Yeah, you said he took it with him.”

After Will was silent for a while, Harry said, “What are you thinking, Will?”

Will sighed. “Harry, I hate like sin to tell you.”

VI

Massive head resting on his paws, the tiger had lain under the rock ledge near the crest of the bluff all day, away from the torment of insects and the hot sun. On the far side of the great swamp that spread before him, the sun slipped behind a red and orange horizon, dragging with it all the light and color from once pink and rose remnants of clouds. The sky above the swamp turned violet, then deep blue, then lost all color, except for the silver stars. Hunger squeezed the tiger's stomach so relentlessly that his whole body ached. He stood up, lowered the front half of his body on outstretched paws, and opened his jaws wide in a silent yawn. He stood again and shook himself like a dog coming out of water. He sat, watching, for a long time. Then he turned, crossed the crest of the bluff, and started down the other side.

He was in an open field of tall grass when the moon began to rise. Fireflies rose out of the grass and fled before him. He could smell the river. He was too hungry to move cautiously, and he trotted through long grass the moon had turned to silver, and it parted before him as if he were swimming in moonlit water. The smell of the river grew stronger, and the ground under his paws became soft and sandy. The grass gave way to scrub brush. He was very thirsty, but he waited, hidden in the brush at the edge of the wide beach beyond which the silver river flowed through long and narrow sandbars. Finally, he crossed the beach to the water and lowered himself so his belly touched the wet sand, and he drank for a long time. He was returning to the cover of the scrub willow and clumps of cord grass when he found the decaying carcass of a large carp. He devoured it quickly. He walked for a long way at the perimeter of the beach and the brush, eating whatever dead things he

came across.

The beach narrowed and then disappeared as the river flowed to the edge of steep bluffs. The tiger left the river and went up into the woods. He rested in leaves and ferns for a while, watching all the time for any animal or bird he might catch. When he came out of the woods, he was in a field again, and then he encountered a tall chain-link fence. He walked along it for a long way until he found a place where the links had been cut and the sheet of fencing pushed in far enough for someone to squeeze through. He went through the fence and in the distance saw the odd shapes of buildings dark against the moonlit sky. Hunger tormented him again, and he moved through the long grass toward the abandoned buildings of the Army Ordnance plant.



As the sun rose, Will was staring out the window at the line of sunlight slowly sliding down the front of the buildings across the street from Dolly's. The Prairie Star was yellow brick, with Ray Riley's office behind the row of double-hung windows on the second floor. Next to it, Monson's Furniture's brick facade had recently been painted white, the arch of bricks over the bay window a robin's-egg blue. Next to the furniture store, imitation bricks fronted the first floor of Renner's bar and grill, while the old board siding on the second floor was badly in need of repainting.

An old black man with a short salt-and-pepper beard was washing the furniture store windows. He dunked a brush on a long pole into the metal bucket next to him on the sidewalk and pushed columns of bubbly water up and down the window. Once a week he came from somewhere near Madison in an old white station wagon he had parked in front of Renner's, the only car parked on the street this early in the morning. Two sparrows sitting close to each other on the curb seemed to be discussing the old man's work. The sunlight reached the tops of the second-story windows and the glass burst

into light too bright for Will to look at.

"You all right, Will?" Dolly asked as she put the waffle and coffee down in front of him. "You don't look so hot, you don't mind my saying."

Will came back into the room. He put the paper he had not opened yet onto the seat beside him. "Me?" he said. "I'm fine. Tired is all."

"Long night?"

"It was, yes."

"Was there trouble?"

"Yeah, you'd say that. I can't talk about it just yet. You'll hear before the day's over. Anyway, what about you? What's with the limp?"

She pushed her hand at him. "It's nothing. Twisted my ankle carrying the wash out to the line yesterday. Mercy. Went right down on the grass with the clothes flying like a flock of gulls around me." She laughed. "Mercy. Good thing that tiger wasn't around. I'd've been fast food for sure."

"You should be more careful, Dolly, your age."

She pushed at him again and went back behind the counter, laughing.

Will drank coffee and watched the syrup spread into the nooks of the waffle. It had been after two before he had gotten to bed last night, and then he had not slept well, dreaming dreams he could not now even remember. Vernon Apple had come over from Madison with one of his deputies and the coroner.

"Dead at least twenty-four hours," the coroner had said.

"What's going on here, Will?" Vernon had said. "Two shotgun killings in twenty-four hours? We got a serial killer here? These guys aren't even related."

Will had given him the shotgun shell, but he had not told him anything about the boy. He intended to find him and talk to him first. But he was feeling sick at heart. The waffle was like paste in his mouth, and he pushed it aside and drank more coffee. He looked at his watch. It was only seven fifteen and Adam would not be in until eight. He wanted Adam with him to

help search the buildings at the powder plant for the boy. He unfolded the paper alongside his plate, but he could not read, and he put it aside again.

Vince Asher's white Cadillac pulled to the curb. Will thought Asher had left the headlights on, and he knocked at the window and motioned toward the car, but Asher just waved his arm at him, and the headlights went off by themselves.

"Your headlights," Will said as Asher slid into the booth opposite him.

"Hoped I'd find you here," Asher said. He looked like he had just gotten out of bed and hadn't bothered to shave or comb his hair. His eyes were bloodshot. He was wearing a green short-sleeved shirt with silver snaps for buttons. The top two snaps were open and a small gold medallion on a gold chain swung out of his shirt and then back in as he leaned toward Will and put his forearms on the table. The curly hair on his arms was very white against his tan skin.

"Something wrong, Vince?" Will said. He pulled the folded newspaper next to his plate, hinting he wanted to be reading it.

"Am I interrupting?" Asher said. "Go ahead and eat that." He pointed to the waffle.

Will picked up his fork. "What's the problem, Vince?"

"It's Angie. She didn't come home last night. At all. I'm worried, Will."

Will pushed his plate aside.

"Aren't you going to eat that?"

"I'm not hungry, I guess." He felt annoyed. He did not want to have to deal with any other problems right now. "You two have a fight?" he said.

"I was pissed off, you know. She was going on and on over that prick Pickett getting shot. Just scum low life, you know, and she was all hot and bothered 'cause he'd made a pass at her the other day, like she was some damn movie queen or something. God, Will, these women, when they start getting old. . ."

"Well, Vince, she's just mad at you." Will looked at his watch. "She'll be

back.”

“Mad at me? She’s the one. Where the hell would she go overnight? I mean, she never did that before, Will.”

“You might check with Mona Zweifel. She seems to be the refuge for upset women these days. They’re friends, aren’t they?”

“Jesus Christ.” He pounded his folded fists on the table. “These damn women, Will. What’s a guy suppose to do. You’re lucky you’re single.”

Will started to get up. “I’ve got to get to work. Let me know if she’s still not home by tonight, Vince.”

“You didn’t finish your waffle.”

“It got cold.”

“Well, wait, I’ll walk out with you. You don’t look so good, Will. You all right?” He stopped before they got to the door and looked at his watch. “Shit. Might as well eat, long as I’m here,” he said. “I’ve got to be in Madison by nine.”

“Let me know,” Will said, going out the door.

Lena glanced up from behind her desk as he walked into the station. “You don’t look so good, Will, something wrong?” She touched her new permanent as if that might help.

“What is this?” Will said. “I guess I’d better look in a mirror.”

“Sheriff Apple called a minute ago. Says to call him when you get in.”

“Where’s Adam?”

“It’s not eight yet,” Lena said. “He’s not always on time, you know. I were you, I’d speak to him about it, maybe. Oh, there he is now, parking.”

“Tell him to come in my office. You have the number for Apple?”

Vernon Apple was excited. “The shells are identical,” he said on the phone. “Exactly the same. Whoever’s got that shotgun killed the both of them.”

“Well, Vernon, that might not be entirely true. Lots of people use twelve-gauge Remington shells. Unless there’s some test I don’t know about yet to

show shotgun shells came from the same shotgun.” Will stood by the window watching a flock of seagulls in white-winged disarray over a school of minnows near the bridge pylon. With the hand not holding the phone, he tumbled pieces of dog biscuit in his pants pocket. He had not told the sheriff he had the empty shotgun in the trunk of his squad car, and he didn’t intend to. He was thinking ahead now as he watched the birds, and had difficulty concentrating on what Vernon Apple was saying.

“This Millard fellow was shot the same night,” Apple said. “Apparently only a few hours after the other guy got it. I’d have a hard time thinking they’re not connected.”

“Well, you’re probably right, Vernon. I’m not saying you’re not.” Adam leaned into the doorway and Will motioned him to come in.

Vernon Apple said, “I’ll be out there in a couple hours, with a crew to go over the house. Will you be there?”

“Actually, Vernon, I’m in the midst of something right now. I’ll get over there soon as I can.”

“What? In the midst of what? Something to do with these shootings?”

Will imagined the little man pacing to the end of the phone cord and back. “There’s one fellow I need to talk with yet. I’ll let you know when I see you.” He covered the mouthpiece of the phone with one hand and said softly to Adam, “Get the car and wait out front.”

After he hung up, Will went to the glass-fronted gun case behind the office door. To repay a favor, Arnie Kaufman had made it for him out of knotty pine sealed with high-gloss varnish, some of which gleamed even on the edge of the glass. His pistol in its holster hung from a peg next to a rifle, and next to the rifle stood his own twelve-gauge shotgun. He kept it in the office for the times in the fall when he could get away for a while to hunt rabbits or pheasant. At the bottom of the case, next to the butt of the shotgun, was a box of Remington shells, a small oil can, and an aluminum case with a segmented rod for cleaning the gun. For some reason he was not even sure of,

he reached down, opened the box, and rolled a handful of shells into his palm and put them in his pocket. At least he could show Apple that there were lots of Remington twelve-gauges around.

Adam was waiting in the no-parking spot in front of the station. The motor was running and he was behind the wheel. Will went to the driver's door and opened it.

"Come on, Adam," he said, holding the door open.

"Jeez," Adam said, and climbed out. As he went around the front of the car to the passenger side, he pounded the hood lightly in mock disgust. Will noticed he was wearing his pistol.

"Where we going, Chief?" Adam asked as he slid into the car and slammed the door. "Tiger hunting?"

"We're going to the powder plant. I've got a hunch the Pickett boy is hiding there."

"What's happening with his dad? They find out anything yet, who might have shot him?"

Will didn't answer right away. He backed the squad car away from the curb and started down River Street out of town. "You don't know this yet, Adam," he said. "There was another shooting last night. Somebody shot Donald Millard."

"Holy sh. . . I mean, no kidding. This is getting like a gangster movie. Shot dead, you mean?"

"Yes. Very dead. With a shotgun, like Pickett was shot."

"You figure it was the same guy did it?"

"Most likely it was."

"What's with Joey Pickett? He running away or something?"

"I don't know, Adam. It's pretty complicated. I just hope we can find him out there, if that's even where he is."

When they pulled up to the high chain-link gate at the entrance to the Ordnance plant, the young man who had let Will in the day before came out

of the guard house. Will rolled down the window as Brady came to the car and bent down, hands on his knees, to look in.

“Morning, Chief. How’s it going?”

“Brady.”

“Hey, Adam. How’s it going, man?”

“Call this a job? Sitting on your ass all day, reading magazines,” Adam said across Will.

“Gotta make a living somehow,” Brady said, grinning. “Can’t everybody ride around in squad cars.”

Will said, “Anything happening out here, Brady? Have you seen anybody?”

“Actually, Chief, I just got here ’bout half hour ago. I haven’t gone around yet.”

“All right. Let us in then, okay.”

“You got it.”

Will drove across the railroad tracks and entered the maze of ruined factories. “Keep your eyes open, Adam,” he said. “Look down any of the side streets. He’s got on khaki shorts and a white T-shirt.”

“Jeez, I’ve never been in this place before,” Adam said. “Kinda creepy, isn’t it. That kid’s got guts, he spent the night here.”

The sun had risen high enough now to bank white light off the corrugated metal sides of buildings and off grimy window panes. Sparrows flew in and out of broken windows and rows of blackbirds were strung like beads on sagging stretches of telephone wire. A feral cat made a dash from the weeds at the base of one of the buildings to the safety of a line of abandoned boxcars where giant foxtail, dried yellow by the hot sun, had grown high and thick enough to hide the iron wheels of the cars. From the cover and shade under the boxcars, the tiger watched the slowly moving police car.

Will stopped the car. “That’s where he was yesterday,” he said, pointing to the old administration building. “Might as well start there, I guess.”

The two men climbed out and slammed their doors in unison. Adam reached high over his head with both arms and stretched, leaning backward. "Man, I'm not all the way there yet," he said. He reached behind him and pulled his shirt away from his back. "Sweating already."

"I suppose we might as well split up," Will said. He pointed to a structure next to the administration building. The upper, windowless part was cantilevered over the first floor so it looked like it had been tipped upside down. "Why don't you start there, whatever that building is. I'll start where he was yesterday."

"You sure, Chief? Maybe we should stick together." Adam's hand went to the butt of his pistol in the holster at his side.

"No sense following each other. Go on now, Adam. Holler if you find him."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BADGER ORDNANCE PLANT was lettered in gold on the glass pane of the door into the administration building. The letters were chipped and the glass was almost too grimy to see through. Will turned the doorknob and found it locked. "Son of a gun," he said to himself. "I never thought. . ."

Adam, coming from the other building, said, "The door there's locked, Chief." He had a big grin on his face as Will turned to him.

"I just didn't think about the buildings being locked, with the gate and all. And Joey was in here yesterday. He came out this door."

"Probably climbed in a window," Adam said. "Most of 'em are broken anyway."

"Well, let's have a look," Will said.

They walked around the corner of the building and found the second window broken, the whole lower half free of glass and framing so that it could be crawled through. The window was head high, and Will had to stand on his tiptoes to look in. He could see nothing but an array of desks and chairs.

“Give me a hand, Adam. I’m going in,” Will said.

“A hand?”

Will demonstrated. “Go down on one knee like this, and plant your other leg steady so I can step on it.”

“Jeez,” Adam said. He brushed the knee of his neatly pressed pants leg as if it were already dirty, and knelt as Will had shown. “I just washed these pants last night, you know.”

Will stepped on the top of Adam’s thigh, grabbed the window sill, and hoisted himself up so that he was partway into the window, his stomach pressed on the sill. He swung one leg up until his knee was on the sill. He brought up the other leg and rolled into the room. He stood for a moment, his back against the wall. He was sweating and his heart pounded from the exertion.

“Are you okay in there, Chief?” Adam called.

Will turned to the window again. “Go around front, Adam. I’ll come open the door. I’m not even sure this is going to do any good, anyway, just the two of us.”

The room he was in had apparently been an office for several people. Olive-drab metal desks were still stuck in some not very self-evident arrangement, each with its own oak straight-back chair, wire wastebasket, and 1940s typewriter. A picture of Franklin Roosevelt hung at an angle on the colorless wall. An errant sparrow fluttered from one corner of the ceiling to another as Will worked his way through the desks to the door.

The metal, windowless door opened into a long hallway lined with similar doors, and Will immediately felt a surge of anger as he realized the foolishness of what he was doing. The building had four floors, and each would most likely have the same hallways and the same doors into numberless rooms where the boy could be hiding. Not to mention the maze of other grotesque buildings surrounding them. The anger turned to a feeling of despair, and he leaned his back against the wall and studied his shoes.

"Where are you, Joe?" he said softly to his shoes.

He pushed away from the wall and walked down the corridor toward the front of the building. At the corner, he turned right and the hall opened into a large reception area. The door they had tried to enter was on his left and a long, waist-high counter faced the door. A placard on one end of the counter said "All Requisitions Here." On the floor under the sign, his arms hugging his shins, sat Joey.

"Good lord, Joey," Will said, astounded.

The boy only glanced at him briefly, then put his forehead down on his bare knees.

Will squatted next to him. "Are you all right, Joe?"

Without looking up, Joey said into his lap, "I don't know what to do now."

Will put his hand on the back of the boy's neck. "Come on, Joe, get up now. You can come with me."

He flinched at Will's touch but looked at him then, his face drawn, his eyes red. "You're not mad? 'Cause I didn't stay, like you said to do."

"No, I'm not mad. Why'd you leave, though? I've been really worried about you."

"I thought I could find Rajah, you know, but I don't think I can now. There's too many places to look, you know. I thought if I went back to his cage again he might come there looking for me. He's gotta be tired by now, and hungry. I always used to feed him. But I'm scared to go back there now. I don't know what to do anymore." His voice was high and trembling and he seemed not to be talking to Will.

"Why scared to go back there, Joe?" Will asked. "Scared of Rajah?"

"Rajah? Heck no. Rajah'd never hurt me. I could go right in his cage with him. I went right in his cage and knelt down and he smelled my face and went right on out. What I shoulda done was to go with him. That's what I shoulda done."

“It was you let Rajah out?”

“I let them all go. All the animals.”

“Why’d you do that, Joe?”

The boy picked at a scab on his knee, rubbed it with the heel of his hand. “Mainly so’s they’d be free. But to kill Tomorrow, too.”

“Tomorrow?”

A slight smile came to the boy’s lips and he stared at Will’s chest, as if he could see it happening again. “And he went right there, too. Rajah. Like he knew just what I told him to do. He went right to where Tomorrow was sleeping and I held the door shut so he couldn’t get out, ’til Tomorrow was dead. The only thing is, I shoulda went with Rajah right then, ’stead of waiting around. Now probably I’ll never find him.”

All the dread thoughts Will had tried to keep from his mind for days fell suddenly on him. He tried to take a deep breath, but his lungs would not fill, and he put his fist to his mouth and coughed.

“What?” Joe said, noticing the expression on Will’s face.

“Why. . . why would you do something like that, Joe?”

The boy shrugged and leaned forward to hug his shins. “I hated him. He hurt Rajah all the time. Poked him with sticks ’til he’d get so mad he’d go crazy in his cage.” He hesitated a moment, then said, “He hurt me, too.”

“Hurt you? You mean he hit you? Is that where the bruises on you came from?”

Joe looked directly in Will’s eyes. “He did things, sex things, to me, is what he did. More than once, too. And Millard did, too. I guess I showed ’em I can take care of myself, like I told ’em I would.”

“Joe!” Will felt as if he had broken suddenly through ice into freezing water.

The boy kept looking at him, and Will had to look away. “He used to hurt the animals all the time,” he said. “Tomorrow. I don’t know how people can hurt animals like that, you know. Be so cruel like that, when the ani-

mals can't even do anything about it, can't save themselves."

Will stood up. He flexed his legs against cramps from having squatted so long. "Come on, Joe. Get up now. I'll take you with me." He reached down and took the boy's arm at the biceps and pulled him up.

Joey brushed at the seat of his pants. "Take me where? To jail, you mean?"
"To jail?"

"'Cause I shot Millard. And my dad." He said it without expression, as if he expected Will already knew.

"But you told me. . ."

"I didn't want you to know, is why I lied. I thought you wouldn't like me. But Millard, he would have killed Rajah. He shot at me when I was waiting by the cage, even though he couldn't see anything, see if it was Rajah or what. Just shot, 'cause he's crazy mean. When he went back up to the house, I went there and shot him sitting on the davenport. He saw me, too. Grinning stupid, 'til he saw what I was going to do. The fucker."

"Don't talk like that, Joe," Will said.

"And my dad." Joey smiled to himself. "He didn't know what hit him. Just like all my animals he killed. That old screen door just blew up in his face. I just wish he'd know'd it was me."

Will's heart was thumping so hard his chest hurt. He kept hold of the boy's arm and started for the door. But before they reached it, they heard Adam outside screaming.

Will grabbed the doorknob and heard the first shots. "My God," he said. Through the lettering on the glass paneled door he saw Adam and the tiger. The tiger was on its hind legs with its front paws on Adam's shoulders, and Adam was pulling away, trying to turn away with his forearm up in defense against the tiger's snarling jaws. They seemed locked in a grotesque dance. With one hand, Adam was firing his pistol wildly, trying to hit the tiger's stomach or chest.

Will pulled on the door, but it was locked. "My God," he cried. He

turned to the window alongside the door, unlocked it, and threw up the lower half. He held onto the window frame and kicked out the screen. He sat on the sill and jumped to the ground, falling with a grunt on his hands and knees. He rose immediately and began yelling as loudly as he could "Hey, hey, hey!" as he ran, waving his arms crazily, toward Adam and the tiger. The tiger arced away from Adam and bounded to the cover of the boxcars. Adam fell and his pistol slid across the gravel toward the squad car.

"Adam, Adam." Will went down on both knees beside the young man lying curled on his side. He gripped Adam's shoulders and pulled him over onto his own legs. "Adam," he said again, breathing hard.

Adam's eyes were open and he was staring at the sky. The front of his khaki shirt had been ripped open by the tiger's claws. His chest was raked with the bloody tracks of the claws. He held up his arm.

"My arm," he said, dazed. The arm dripped blood. Will took it and turned it toward him to inspect the torn flesh. But the wounds only oozed blood.

"You're okay, Adam," Will said. "You'll be okay."

Adam sat up suddenly. "Where is it?" he said. He tried to stand, pushing on Will's shoulder so that Will himself almost fell over. Will stood and helped Adam to stand.

"Let's get you to the car," Will said. Adam leaned heavily on him and Will half dragged him toward the squad car.

"My gun," Adam said, seeing it on the ground. He stooped to reach for it and almost fell again. "I think I hit him, Chief."

Will picked up the gun. "I've got it, Adam. Get in the car now." He opened the back door and held onto Adam's sides to guide him in. "Stay there now. I'll be right back."

He slammed the car door and looked toward the boxcar where the tiger had disappeared. He was breathing hard and felt his chest tighten until he had to lean against the fender for-a minute. Sweat ran down his face and

dripped from his chin onto his shirt front. His mouth was so dry he could hardly swallow. He realized he was holding Adam's pistol, and he flipped it open and checked the shells, but they had all been fired. He pushed away from the fender and opened the trunk of the car. Joey's yellow bike was on top of the shotgun. He pulled the bike out and threw it aside. Breaking the double-barrel shotgun, he loaded two of the shells that he had stuffed in his pocket earlier to show Vernon Apple. He slammed the trunk lid, but before he could start back toward the building where he had left the boy he heard his voice.

"Rajah," Joey called softly. He was walking across the weed-tufted gravel toward the boxcars, his arm held out straight, palm up. "Rajah."

The tiger's massive head appeared out of the tall foxtail that grew as densely at the base of the boxcar as any grass that grew on the African plains.

"Joey!" Will yelled. He started to run toward the boy.

The boy had both arms up now, with his palms cupped as though he were carrying water carefully in his hands to the thirsty beast. "Come, Rajah. It's Joe."

"Joey!" Will cried.

The tiger leaped out of the grass. Will raised the shotgun.

"Don't shoot him!" Joey had turned sideways to yell at Will when the tiger hit him with such force that the boy's legs dragged for yards under the tiger's belly before the animal stopped, the front half of its body lowered to hold down the boy, its huge paws clamped to the boy's chest and back, its teeth sunk into his shoulder. The boy was screaming.

Will fired both barrels of the shotgun. The tiger leaped sideways, dragging the boy with it.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Will screamed. He tried to dig more shells from his pants pocket, at the same time running toward the tiger, shouting only noise now, not words.

The tiger dropped the boy and disappeared under the boxcar.

Will threw the gun aside and fell on his knees next to the bloody boy. He lay on his stomach, one arm sprawled above his head at an impossible angle. Will turned him over and Joey's mouth opened in a silent scream. His T-shirt was ripped away from most of his small body. His shoulder and neck were torn open so tendons and the white socket of shoulder bone were visible. Dirt and small gravel were embedded in the wound. Blood was everywhere.

"Joey," Will whispered, so shocked that his extended arms, meant to lift the boy to him, stayed frozen over his body.

Joey looked directly at Will. He seemed to be trying to say something, but blood welled from his mouth suddenly. Will thought he heard one word before the boy's eyes rolled upward and froze.

VII

Fred Renner glanced up at the Budweiser clock as he waited for Vince Asher at the end of the bar to finish his drink. It was eleven-thirty and Asher was the last customer. Elbows on the bar, he stared into the tumbler of bourbon as if at the bottom someone might soon appear and smile up at him.

“Vince, I think you’d better forget about Will showing up,” Renner said. He wiped the bar with a damp cloth as he moved down toward Asher. “I’m closing up here pretty quick.”

Vince look up, surprised out of his thoughts. “Already? What time is it, anyway? Will’s *always* here. Just when you need him he’s not here.”

“What you need Will for?” Renner said. “He can’t do nothing about it. You pack up now.”

“A note. She leaves me a *note*. I come back from Madison, looking all day for her, and she leaves a *note*. Gone home to California. Bye bye. Can you believe it. A fucking note. If I’d a stayed home instead of looking for her I’d a caught her. It was that goddamn Mona, talked her into it. ‘I’ll be in touch with Mona about my stuff.’” He wagged his head in imitation of what he considered feminine.

“Gimme a break, Vince,” Renner said. “You told me already.”

“What time is it? I promised Will I’d let him know if I found her.”

“If he comes before I close I’ll tell him.”

“I don’t want him to spend time looking for her. The bitch. She went to California.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Will’s had a busy day.”

“I’m going then.” He slid off his stool, reached back to finish the drink.

“California. Can you believe that? What can you do with these women, Fred?”

“It’s a problem,” Renner said.

With Asher gone, he began his closing routines. It had been a busy night and he was tired. He still didn’t have good help, and all anyone had talked about all night long was that tiger. He was sick of hearing it.

Harry burst through the door as if he were entering a stage instead of a small town bar.

“Not too late, I hope,” he said.

Behind him, Will pulled the door shut on the humid night air. He moved up next to Harry. “Hello, Fred. This okay? Just say so if we’re too late.”

“It’s okay. Take your table,” Renner said. “What you want to drink? No food anymore.”

“Just a beer for me, Fred. Thanks.”

“Scotch, straight up,” Harry said.

“You just missed Vince Asher, Will,” Renner said, drawing the beer. “Lucky for you. His wife ran off on him.”

“He told me that this morning,” Will said.

“No. Really ran off for good. To California. She left him a note.”

“You’re kidding,” Harry said.

“What’d he want me for?” Will asked.

“Said he promised he’d tell you if he found her or not. He was more’n a little drunk.”

“Poor Vince,” Will said. “Well, I’ll look him up tomorrow. Tonight I’m too tired.”

Renner turned the light on over the tables again as the two men made their way back.

“Do I need a shower,” Will said. He pulled his blood and dirt stained uniform away from his chest as he sat down. “That dog’ll be crazy wild, not being fed yet.”

"You worry too much about that dog," Harry said.

"I should've gone right home."

Renner brought the drinks. "How's Adam doing?"

"He'll be okay," Will said. "We just came from the hospital over in Madison."

Harry laughed. "He looks like a stitched-up scarecrow. Wait'll you hear him tell it. He thinks Will here is the hero of the century."

"More'n likely he is, too," Renner said. "The boy's dead, huh?"

Will only nodded.

Renner looked at his wristwatch. "You fellows don't take too long now, okay."

Will held up one hand in agreement as he took a deep drink of the beer.

Harry raised his scotch glass to the light and watched the amber liquid swirl. He sniffed the glass, took a sip, let the sharpness flow around and under his tongue. "Ahh," he said.

Will had hardly spoken on the drive back from Madison. As they crossed the bridge into Fox Prairie, Harry had insisted they stop for a drink. "You'll never get to sleep tonight, otherwise. All that adrenalin."

Now Harry watched Will silently study the oval surface of his beer as he tilted it around the half-empty glass. He knew him well enough after all these years to wait for Will to tell him what he wanted to tell him.

Finally, Will said, "Seeing Joey like that, Harry, you know, was so much worse than anything else I ever saw." He hesitated. "Except maybe my dad, that time."

Harry waited.

"I mean, right there on my lap. Still alive yet. All that blood. He couldn't even talk anymore." Will watched the tiny bubbles rising from the bottom of his glass.

Harry sipped his scotch and waited.

"It was Joey let the tiger out, you know," Will said. "I didn't say any-

thing to Vernon Apple about that. I don't see as it's necessary for people to know everything he did." He shifted in his chair and looked up at Harry. "So keep it to yourself, okay?"

"Well, it's hardly all that important, compared to killing two people."

"Three."

"Three?"

"He let the tiger out so's it would kill that black fellow. He got it in where the guy was sleeping in that shack, and then he held the door shut so the guy couldn't get out."

"Lord," Harry said.

"Harry." Will leaned forearms on the table and almost knocked over his glass.

"What?"

He leaned back into his chair again. "Nothing. I don't know."

"Come on, Will."

"I don't know, Harry. It's just. . . Why's it so hard to get to know people, Harry?" Will glanced at him, then away.

Harry just looked at him over the top of his scotch glass and waited.

"The only thing he said was. . .his last word was the name of that tiger, Rajah. I think, anyway. He had blood in his throat, Harry."

Harry waited.

"When I was holding him there, after the tiger, I mean, he seemed like he weighed nothing, like I was holding just a little boy, not some thirteen-year old who could do what he did. Maybe that was the problem all along. I thought he was this innocent little kid who needed help."

"He did need help."

"Well, seems like he was more than able to help himself."

"Look, Will, it was pretty obvious how you felt about that boy right from the start. Why're you taking it back now?"

"For crying out loud, Harry, he killed three people."

“Will, who knows what it does to kids when they don’t get love from where they’re supposed to get it. When they get abuse instead.”

Will looked up at the ceiling. Insects that had entered all day with customers swirled in elaborate dance around the light globe. “More than just abuse,” he said.

“Like what?”

“He told me something really terrible, Harry, after I found him in the building. And the way he told me. It just floored me. I mean, this young kid. Just so cold.” He hesitated. “I didn’t tell the county people anything about it, either. Just that his father used to beat him. Harry, he told me that that black fellow—or whatever color he was—and not just him, but Millard, too. He told me that they...” Will pulled himself up in his chair, cleared his throat, and started twisting his beer glass on the table top.

“For god’s sakes, what?” Harry said. “Something sexual, I suppose.”

“That they. . .that they. . .raped him. Anyway, keep it to yourself, Harry. No need for anybody else to know that.”

“Judas priest, Will, you’d think it was his fault—Joey’s—the way you’re acting.”

“Why would he keep hanging around there, at Millard’s, after something like that?”

“Who knows. Probably because of those animals he was so crazy about. Sometimes people depend too much on the love of animals, you know. It’s easier than dealing with humans.”

Will grunted. “Humans. What humans?”

The two men sat in silence for a while. Finally, Will said, “He seemed to take to me, Harry, right away. I don’t know why, but for some reason we seemed to hit it off right from the start. Like he trusted me to maybe look out for him. I think, you know, if I had had more time. . . Or maybe the time with that deer, hit by a car, before he ever went out to Millard’s in the first place, if I had. . .Anyway, I thought maybe I could save him.”

“Well, Will, it’s nice to think so, but. . .”

The lights overhead blinked and the two men looked toward the bar. Renner was pointing at the clock. Will pushed his chair back and stood up. “All right, time to go. Tomorrow we get the tiger, and that’ll be that.”

As they walked toward the door, Harry said, “Tomorrow’s a big day for me, Will. I told you. I’m picking Audie up at the airport.”

“That’s pretty exciting all right.” Will raised his hand to Renner as they passed the bar.

“Scary, too,” Harry said, almost stepping on Will’s heels. “Seeing him the first time after all these years. He sent me a picture, so I’d recognize him at the airport. Good looking kid, if I do say so. Monday, I’ll take him over to Madison to see about registration. I think I’m going to like him, Will. He seems really excited about going to school, which is a good sign. It’ll take some getting used to, having a son around. I think we’ll get along okay, though. I’m a nice enough guy, don’t you think, Will?”

“You are, Harry.”

“If his mother hasn’t filled him with a lot of bull about me, anyway.”

Out on the sidewalk, in the blue and red glow of Renner’s neon sign, Will said, “Where’s your car, Harry?”

“Down the block. Are you taking the squad car? I’ll give you a ride.”

“No. I’ll just walk. I need some air.”

“Okay, if you want. Well, I, for one, am really looking forward to tomorrow.”

“Good. Bring him in to meet me when he gets here, okay?”

“Sure. Goodnight, then.”

“See you, Harry.”

Once he was away from the light of the stores, pieces of a moon were visible in the barely moving leaves of the old maples that lined the sidewalk, and when he crossed the street corners he could see the stars. In the humid air, the stars seemed blurred. He thought of the boy, and his throat ached. He

stopped and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and tried to swallow the ache in his throat. The stars blurred again. He felt exhausted. He brushed the front of his shirt, stiff with dried blood. Nearing home, he heard a single bark from the waiting dog, and he smiled. "Poor dog," he said to himself. "Waiting so long."



Under the boxcar, the tiger licked the blood that kept leaking from the wounds in his side and stomach. He licked his paw and rubbed it over his nose, as if that old ritual would ease the pain. After a while, thirst and hunger surpassed the pain of the wounds. He rose on his front legs, but his back legs refused to follow. He dragged himself out through the tall foxtail into the moonlight. He half stood, mouth open and great tongue drooping to one side, and watched for a long time the yard where the men had been. A sweet smell of blood hung in the humid air. He dragged his hindquarters like a carcass he had slain across the grass-tufted gravel to the dried blood where the boy had died. He licked the blood, then could no longer hold himself up. He lay down on the blood of the boy who once had fed him, and during the night he died.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

John Neu retired in 2000 from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Memorial Library, where, since 1963, he had been Bibliographer for the History of Science, responsible for developing the book collection in that discipline. He held a joint appointment in the Department of the History of Science and, for 33 years, was editor of the *Isis Current Bibliography of the History of Science*, an annual international bibliography. He now lives in a cabin on a lake in the Wisconsin northwoods.

Violent deaths follow after a young boy frees the wild animals from a private zoo near a small town on the Wisconsin River. The police chief and his sidekick, a local writer, work their way through this psychological mystery to a stunning conclusion.



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