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Gene and Nancy

Doc's Birthday

Eugene Chaney, or Doc as most people called him, sat on the back terrace of his house drinking coffee and wondering if the birds were singing off-key. He decided they were and shouted at them: 'Keep your damn beaks shut!'

In truth the birds sang no differently, neither better nor worse than usual. They stared at Doc as he settled back into his chair. They were used to his moods, but today he seemed different. Today he was: it was his seventy-second birthday.

Eugene Chaney III had retired from practice seven years earlier and eased himself effortlessly into a life of what his neighbours described as misanthropy. Doc would have balked at this description. He was unsociable yes, and made no effort to meet new people, but a misanthrope? No.

On the day he retired, Doc threw away the suits and bow ties that had characterised his professional life and replaced them with plaid shirts and corduroy pants. His white hair had grown long and was combed back in the style of Grandpa Walton, a character in a television series of his younger years. He had also grown a thick moustache in the fashion of Frank Zappa, a rock musician of his youth, and started to smoke again.

Daily life for Doc was no longer exacting. He would wake on a morning, walk downstairs and turn on the television. Most days he would read. Sometimes he would walk or drive places. He did things to fill time, to kill it stone dead. In the evening he would drink two glasses of red wine, impatient for the day to end, and at night sleep fitfully, his dreams disturbed. He was tired all the time.

The anniversary of his birth, however, always took a different turn. It was the one day of the year he allowed himself to look back on his life and consider its limitations. It was a dangerous, if necessary, safety valve.

He would question how a man could reside on a planet for seventy-two years and still live only ten miles from where he was born. He would meditate on a lifetime of helping others while unable to help himself, and ponder why he now preferred his own company. Above all, he would reflect on life's fragility, its lack of rhyme or reason, and the unbearable pain of loss.

Eugene Chaney had become a doctor by default, through lack of imagination.

Doc came from a long line of doctors. His great grandfather, Robert Chaney, although having no medical qualifications per se, had made a name for himself and something of a small fortune for his family by selling what amounted to little more than snake oil. On the proceeds of Robert's sales, his grandfather, Eugene Chaney, had gone to medical school and become a legitimate general practitioner, as had his own father, Eugene Jr.

In the small town where the family lived, the name Eugene Chaney became synonymous with medicine, and it was fully expected that Eugene Chaney III would also follow the well-trodden family path. Doc didn't disappoint. If not filled with a burning desire to help people, he was at least interested in maintaining an accustomed standard of living and, if honest, coveted the social standing conferred by the title doctor.

With a natural and easy understanding of all things scientific, and with no other career in mind, Doc enrolled at Duke University's School of Medicine in the fall of 1960. He drove to North Carolina in a brand new car, a present from his parents. Life was good and life could only get better. For a time it did but then it didn't. How true to life, life can sometimes be!

As it transpired, Eugene Chaney graduated from Medical School with little or no interest in either maintaining his accustomed standard of living or achieving the social standing he'd once desired. He did, however, leave university with an almost obsessive need to wash his hands and, after the trauma of dissecting his allocated cadaver, an aversion to eating beef that lasted four years.

Of more concern for a man who would be a doctor for the next forty years of his life – and potentially more so for the communities he served – was that he graduated with absolutely no interest in medicine. Fortunately, this lack of concern was compensated by a basic competence on Doc's part, and an awareness of his own limitations: he was happy, if

not relieved, to refer patients to specialists when unsure of the correct diagnosis.

Patients came to him in differing states of vulnerability. Doc saw parts of their anatomy he preferred never to see again, and on a daily basis witnessed the corrosion of once healthy bodies now racked by disease and old age. The position of power he enjoyed and the onus of responsibility he suffered time and again overwhelmed him. He was expected to change lives for the better, but more often than not found himself managing expectations, explaining to patients the chronic nature of their conditions, and on occasion having to break news of the worst possible kind.

Unlike his patients, Doc appreciated how inexact a science medicine actually was, and likened himself to no more than a small-town garage mechanic who tried to figure out electrical faults on high-ticket European imports. In fact, no one was more surprised than he was when one of his patients actually recovered. His greatest and only fulfilment was syringing ears filled with wax.

Although Doc would have never been described as unsociable at this stage in his life, neither by any stretch of the imagination would he have been considered a people person. It might be surprising to learn, therefore, that amongst his patients he enjoyed the reputation of a kindly man, and was credited with a sympathetic manner; all remarked on the calm and reassuring nature of his voice. It was his patients, in fact, who had started to refer to him as Doc, rather than Doctor, and the moniker had stuck.

Doc's first full-time position was in a small town in Maryland, located at the base of the Catoctin Mountains and surrounded by apple orchards. Ominously for future repartee, the doctors in the practice all quipped that they were MDs in MD.

The small town boasted *Ten Police Officers for Every Man, Woman and Child.* After his own recent experiences with the police, Doc wasn't sure whether to feel reassured or threatened by this statement, and for many years would wonder where the supposed twenty officers assigned to his wife and child had been on the day of their deaths. Certainly not protecting them.

Four years after arriving in Maryland, Doc fell in love for the second time in his life. It also proved to be the last time. Her name was Beth Gordon, a twenty-five year old florist who operated a small concessionary close to where he worked.

Doc had been invited to dine at the house of another practice doctor, and had thought it fitting to take a bouquet of flowers for his colleague's wife. He didn't look forward to the evening and could predict from experience how it would unfold. The doctors from the practice would talk matters medical and debate plans expansionist, while their wives would talk amongst themselves, swap recipes for apple desserts and suggest suitable matches for Doc. (Doc was the only unmarried doctor in the practice and therefore considered eligible.)

There were two people working in the florists when Doc walked through the door, but it was Beth who'd greeted him: 'Hi, how can I help you?' she'd asked.

'I'm looking for some flowers,' Doc had replied.

'Well, you've come to the right place, then. This shop is full of them.'

Doc had immediately liked her. He'd explained what the flowers were for and asked her to choose something appropriate. As Beth busied herself picking out flowers, matching their colours and choosing background foliage, they chatted easily – sparring with each other rather than aimlessly chit-chatting. Finally, Beth wrapped the flowers in cellophane and completed the presentation bouquet with a bow ribbon. As Doc was leaving – and halfway through the door – he turned to Beth and asked if she'd like to accompany him to the dinner party that evening.

'Sure, why not,' Beth had replied.

'Well, just try and make something of yourself, then. No jeans! I'll pick you up at seven.'

Two years later they were married.

'I don't suppose you want to get married, do you?' Doc had asked.

'Sure, why not,' Beth had replied. 'Who to?'

Doc had then slipped a ring on her finger. The next day they returned to the jewellers and exchanged it for something Beth thought more suitable.

'Okay with you?' she'd asked.

'Okay by me,' he'd replied. 'By the way, you do realise I'll be the titular head of the family, don't you?'

'Sure darling, and all the emphasis will be on the *first* syllable,' Beth had replied.

Beth was pregnant within the year, and nine months later Doc became father to a 7lb 3oz girl – Esther. How something so small could bring so much happiness into their lives sometimes baffled him. Often, when he looked down on his daughter's still and sleeping form, he thought his

heart would literally burst. The unfulfilment of Doc's professional life paled into insignificance as he now gloried in the completeness of his family life.

Such feelings, however, would last for no more than a year. Shortly after his daughter's first birthday, Beth and Esther were killed by a giant donut.

The accident happened on an autumn day custom-built for convertibles: the temperature was warm, the air still, and the humidity non-existent. The Chaneys' blue Corvette Stingray was usually driven by Doc but, at Beth's request, he'd taken the family station wagon to the surgery that morning: she needed to run errands and wanted to make the most of the weather before it turned.

Beth rolled back the car's roof, secured Esther's chair firmly to the passenger seat and headed downtown. The warmth of the sun on her face and the breeze that rustled her newly short hair felt good. Beth had driven the route a thousand times before and could probably have driven it blindfold. At the intersection near the heart of the downtown district, she slowed to a halt, looked left, looked right, left again and then pulled out. Neither driving school nor her own driving experiences had ever suggested that she look upwards to check for falling donuts. Perhaps this was an oversight.

The giant donut had slipped from a crane in the process of attaching it to a tall advertising pylon adjacent to a donut shop. Without warning, it crashed down on the Stingray and crushed the car. Death for both Beth and Esther was instantaneous. Death for the doctor, however, would be prolonged and extend over a period of forty years. Their memory would be a constant in his life: as fresh as daisies and as dry as old leaves.

No words or damages paid can ever alleviate such loss, and at times like these God wisely removes himself to the sidelines – an anonymous spectator hoping to pass unnoticed. All that had been important to Doc had gone, and that day his soul died. The same day, he also lost his appetite for donuts.

Maryland and its memories began to suffocate him. He broke into a cold sweat every time he passed the intersection where the accident had happened, and involuntarily clenched his fists when he saw the giant donut – a new one – affixed to the pylon. Beth and Esther turned up in too many places for life to be comfortable, and when his father phoned to tell him of his decision to retire and inquire of his son if he'd be

interested in taking over the practice, Doc readily agreed. The day he left Maryland was the last time he saw the town; he never set foot there again. He carried with him the remains of his erstwhile family: two small urns, one smaller than the other.

Doc's parents had aged comfortably over the years, and he again looked forward to spending time with them. The occasion he'd last seen them had been Thanksgiving holiday of the previous year, and then they had still appeared as the archetypal old couple: the kind that telephone companies might use to encourage sons and daughters to phone home, or travel companies feature as model senior citizens journeying to visit grandchildren. Arriving to take over his father's practice, however, Doc had been shocked to find them old people.

It had happened suddenly, and nothing had prepared him for the change. The phone calls and letters of the intervening year had given him no clues, signalled no warning. He wondered if signs of their decline had already been visible on that Thanksgiving visit, but that he'd been too consumed by his own grief to notice. There was no mistaking now, however, that his mother was seriously ill.

Aware of their son's own pain, neither she nor his father had mentioned her cancer to him. The cancer proved terminal, and Doc and his father could only watch as it cruelly ravaged and consumed her body. As his mother faded, so too did his father's spirit. The humour that once characterised and defined the man's being disappeared and he shuffled around the house a mere shadow of his former self. Three years after his return, Doc's mother died of a broken body and, six months later, his father of a broken heart. They now lay buried side by side in a small cemetery behind the Episcopal Church they'd attended, the church in which they'd been married and the church in which Eugene had been baptised.

In little more than an eight-year period of his young adult life, Doc suffered losses that would, for most people, have been spread over a lifetime, or never happened at all. Whether consciously or unconsciously, he withdrew from the world and into himself, protected from further loss by a shell of gruff exterior. For the next forty years, he would shed no fresh tears.

As the sun rose in the sky and the day of his seventy-second birthday grew hotter, Doc moved his chair into the shade, poured himself another coffee and lit a cigarette. Having unravelled the threads of his life, he now drew them together and refined them into a litany of advice he believed all

fathers should impart to their children. Children, he maintained, should be prepared for everything that life might throw at them.

He believed they should be told that their lives would probably get worse rather than better, that they would encounter more difficulties than easy streets, and should learn to come to terms with disappointment. They should be told that they would fail more times than they would succeed, that they would be lucky to find careers that fulfilled them and would, in all probability, be bored stupid for much of their professional lives. Their hearts would be broken, and they would endure relationships that went up in flames or collapsed into rubble; sometimes they would know why, but most times they wouldn't. They would suffer bereavement and loss, and for long periods of time simply exist. For all these experiences they wouldn't be a better or worse person, only a changed person.

Once old, they should compare photographs of themselves as a child with how they were then. They should focus on the eyes: it would be their eyes that would tell the real story of their lives, not the lines on their faces or the loose skin hanging from their chins. Assuredly, their eyes would be sadder; there would no longer be a twinkle there but weariness, a hunted look.

Doc believed that if children knew such cataclysms were possibilities that could strike their lives at any time, the lucky ones would more likely appreciate the providence of their blessed lives, while the unlucky would learn to savour the fleeting moments of happiness allowed them. In particular, he would urge both groups to remember and appreciate the people who had shared in, and were often the reason for their happiness. Always remember to take photographs, he would have advised them. Don't forget the photographs!

And then, five years ago, Nancy had unexpectedly phoned and renewed a relationship that had ended close to forty-five years earlier. In all probability it would end again within the year, and once more at Nancy's choosing.

Uncivil Times

When the clock struck midnight on December 31, 1959, few could have foreseen the troubled years that lay ahead for the nation or prophesied the forces about to be unleashed. The time of Eisenhower had been one of consensus, and its spirit unquestioning and complacent. The parents

of Doc and people their age had little appetite for self-criticism. They had lived through the Great Depression and fought a World War, and their lives were now comfortable. They had every reason to celebrate rather than criticise the America of their birth.

Change, however, was in the air, ruffling the growing hair on their children's heads and tapping into their consciences. By the time Doc enrolled at Duke University's Medical School, his generation was already starting to question the nation's values, especially in the area of race. Negroes, they noted, were still discriminated against in almost all walks of life, and stores, restaurants and hotels remained segregated. They intuitively recognised that racial prejudice was wrong, an unquestionable evil.

Before arriving in Durham, Doc had experienced little of the prejudice that Negroes endured on a daily basis. The town he grew up in had been essentially white, and consequently there had been no racial divide. His early life had also been sheltered, and the success of the high school football team or finding a date for the prom had always taken precedence over any national issues that might have stirred the day.

Duke University changed this. Friends he made there were of the intellectual variety, people who placed emphasis on creativity and originality. By nature, they were more disposed to question and reject traditional and dominant values, and Doc came under their sway. Two friends, in particular, were instrumental in steering him down the path of civil rights activism. Galvanised by a black student sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in nearby Greensboro, they joined the Congress of Racial Equality and, in conjunction with another student called Steve Barrentine, started to organise regular meetings and activities on campus. It was at one such meeting that Doc met Nancy.

Twenty people were gathered in Steve Barrentine's apartment that night. It was the first meeting Doc had attended, and the only two people he knew there were his friends, neither of whom had thought it important to mention that, as a new arrival, he would be expected to describe his own experiences of racial discrimination and suggest ways of combating the unconscionable status quo. Consequently, when called upon to do so, Doc was taken by surprise.

Flustered by having to address the meeting with no thoughts prepared, he started by sensibly admitting that he had few experiences of racial discrimination to recount. He then joked that he'd have probably befriended more Negroes had they had air-conditioning in their houses.

'All the Negroes I knew were poor,' he said, 'and let's face it, who needs poor friends when it's ninety-eight degrees in the shade?'

There was a stunned silence. People let out small gasps of air, shook their heads and examined their shoes in particular detail. Doc noticed only one person in the room stifling a laugh: a scrawny-looking girl sitting cross-legged on the floor smoking a cigarette. The silence was punctured – and Doc saved – by a loud and deep guffaw from the kitchen. A well-built Negro came into the room and walked towards Gene with his hand outstretched.

'I don't know who you are, man, but I think you jus' nailed it. I ain't got no air-conditionin' an' I ain't got no civil rights, neither. Ain't no way they not linked. Hell, if the governmen' jus' give me an' my people some o' the ventilation you white folks have, we'd be on our way to equality!'

As the man who'd spoken these words was the only black person in the room, the others started to smile and nod their heads. 'Good thinking, Bob,' Steve Barrentine said. 'I think we should make that a discussion point for our next meeting.'

Doc imagined that if mud ever became animate, then it would sound like Bob Crenshaw: he'd never heard such a deep and resonant voice. He took Bob's proffered hand with a greater enthusiasm than he usually accepted hands, and made a mental note not to wash until back in his apartment.

'Glad to meet you, Bob – and thanks for speaking up when you did. I was beginning to feel like Jesus on the cross out there. They appear to hold you in some regard.'

'Only reason they do is cos I black, an' they ain't,' Bob smiled, taking Gene to one side. 'I could say any ol' damn shit an' they'd still agree with me. By the way, what you said then was jus' plain dumb, man. This ain't no audience fo' jokes, Gene. Folks here is humourless – well-meaning, but too worthy fo' their own damn good. You wanna get a drink an' be humorous some place safe?'

'Sure,' Gene said (as we'll call him during his time at Duke; just as we'll call black or Afro-Americans, Negroes – as they too were called at the time).

'Hey, Nancy,' Bob called over to the scrawny girl. 'We're goin' fo' a drink. You comin'?'

Nancy nodded and went to get her coat. 'Let's go to my place,' she said.

The three of them left together, and Gene, who had arrived at the apartment on foot, climbed into the passenger seat of Bob's battered old car.

'This the firs' time you been in a black man's car?' Bob asked.

'First time,' Gene replied, 'so drive carefully. I have a promising career ahead of me.'

Bob let out one of his deep guffaws: 'Ha!'

Nancy lived in a house rather than an apartment, and unlike most students at the university didn't share with others. She threw her coat over an armchair and took three beers from the refrigerator. When she handed one of the bottles to Gene, she introduced herself as Nancy Travis.

'This is a really nice house, Nancy,' Gene said. 'It's the size of my parents'!'

'Nancy's a rich girl, ain't you, Nancy,' Bob teased. 'A rich girl from Miss'ippi. How would yo' daddy feel if he knew a black man was sittin' on yo' couch, Nance?'

'He'd be fine with it,' Nancy replied, with what Gene took to be a hint of exasperation in her voice. 'Black people come and go in our house all the time.'

'Yea, but I bet they's servants.'

'They're also friends, and some of them we look upon as family. That's what people here don't understand. They simply see Miss'ippi as a boogey man. It's a lot more complicated than that.'

'I jus' messin' with you, girl. No need to get antsy.'

'Who's antsy…?'

'You two seem to know each other well,' Gene interrupted. 'How did you meet?'

'At one of the meetings,' Nancy answered. 'A girlfriend of his brought him and then dropped out of the group. We got stuck with him. She dropped him too, by the way, and I can't say I blame her.'

Bob excused himself to use the bathroom. 'How you know I didn' drop her?' he called out.

'But you're friends, right?' Gene asked.

'I guess so,' Nancy laughed. 'But there are times when he drives me nuts!'

Bob came back into the room and picked up the phone. 'Okay if I use the phone, Nance?' Nancy nodded her approval. Bob dialled a long number, grunted a few times into the mouthpiece, hung up and then announced he had to leave: some urgent business had come up. 'You okay to get back by yo'self, Gene?'

Gene looked at Nancy to make sure it was okay for him to stay.

'I'll take him back,' Nancy said.

'Will you be at the next meeting?' Gene asked him.

'Hell no,' Bob said, as he pulled on his coat. 'I can think o' better things to do with my time 'n listen to Steve Barrentine talk 'bout air-conditionin'. One mo' thing, Nance – you gotta stop wearin' that top. Looks like it's made outta some ol' bathmat!'

Gene was right in supposing that Nancy had been trying to suppress a laugh at his inappropriate comments during the meeting, but on closer examination proved to be nowhere near as scrawny as he'd first imagined her to be. She was in fact slim rather than skinny, about 5 feet 6 inches tall and really quite beautiful. She had large green eyes, expensively uniform teeth and thick strawberry-blonde hair. She also spoke with a seductively lazy drawl, and Gene found himself drawn to her.

When Nancy stopped the car outside his apartment building, he asked for a date. She paused before agreeing and then paused again. 'There's something you need to know about me, Gene,' she said. As he waited for her to continue his heart dropped, and he feared she was going to tell him that she preferred the company of women or was addicted to prescription drugs. But what Nancy said was this: 'I'm from the Delta, Gene. The most I'll ever be able to cook for you is a grilled cheese sandwich.'

The Delta

Nancy Travis came from a rich family that owned large tracts of land in the Mississippi Delta. The temperature on the day of her birth had been 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit – the exact same temperature as her mother's womb – and the day's accompanying humidity had made for an easy transition into the world. Her parents' money and privileged position similarly ensured that her passage through life would, in all probability, be smooth and uncomplicated.

The Travis family owned 6,000 acres of fertile land in the county of Tallahatchie, and grew cotton on topsoil estimated to be twenty-seven feet deep. The nearest small town was Sumner, and the nearest large town Clarksdale. The Travis family had moved there from Virginia in 1835, two years after the territory was opened for settlement, and with a cohort of slaves transformed the wilderness and swamps into some of the richest land in the state. In the nineteenth century they survived malaria, yellow fever, the Civil War, Reconstruction and the floods of 1882–84; and in the twentieth century embraced the new technologies of machinery and pesticides, and survived the floods of 1931 and 1933.

The family enjoyed a life of advantage, and a lifestyle that came with money. They gave lavish parties; flew to New York for opening nights and shopping trips; holidayed in Europe and the Caribbean; had a reserved suite at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis; and Hilton Travis, Nancy's father, went on safari to Africa. Black cooks prepared their meals; black maids cleaned their house; and black gardeners tended their grounds.

Nancy was the youngest of four children, accidental. Her mother, Martha Travis, had borne her first three children while still in her twenties: Nancy was conceived in her mother's forty-third year. (Bob, with his usual sensitivity, had told Nancy she was lucky not to have been brain-damaged.) There was a gap of some fourteen years between Nancy and her closest sibling. She had one brother and two sisters: Brandon, Daisy and Ruby. She became the centre of attention and, for many years, was treated like a family pet.

Brandon had attended the state's agricultural college in Starkville and now helped his father run the farm. Daisy and Ruby had married early and well, Daisy to a dentist in Memphis and Ruby, Nancy's favourite, to another farmer in neighbouring Leflore County. Nancy was the first member of her family to attend university.

Martha and Hilton Travis wanted the best for their youngest daughter. The first three of their children had grown up in times that placed greater emphasis on training in social and cultural activities than on academic studies – Brandon had attended college purely to acquire practical knowledge. They realised, however, that unlike that of her siblings, Nancy's future would much more depend on the schools she attended and the education she earned.

Before the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that all public schools be desegregated, Mississippi's schools were already poor. The private academies opened by White Citizen Councils in response to that ruling, only served to further weaken the standard of education in the state. At the age of twelve, therefore, Martha and Hilton Travis enrolled Nancy in a private girls' school in Richmond, Virginia; and in 1960, Nancy enrolled herself at Duke University. Herein lay the roots of Nancy's dualism when confronted with the issues of race and racial prejudice.

Nancy was a child of Mississippi but became a stranger to it. She loved the state of her birth, and the Delta more so. Above all she loved her parents and family. She intuitively knew her parents to be good people, and could never remember them treating the Negroes who worked for them with anything other than kindness and consideration. When she'd

told Bob that household servants were considered friends – and some as part of the family – she hadn't been exaggerating.

At school and university, however, the environment was different. Many of the students were from northern states, whose families were politically more progressive or liberal by nature. They looked upon Mississippi as exotic, and Nancy was forever being placed in the position of being its spokesperson, and with increasing difficulty its defender.

The first – and worst – such occasion happened barely a year after Nancy had arrived in Richmond, when the badly beaten body of a fourteen-year-old Negro boy was pulled from the Tallahatchie River. His face had been mutilated: his nose was broken, his right eye missing, and there was a hole in the side of his head. The boy's name was Emmett Till. He came from Chicago and had been visiting relatives in a county adjacent to Tallahatchie. He'd either wolf-whistled a white woman or called her *Baby*; no one was quite sure.

It was decided by some, however, that Till had insulted the nearest thing to an angel walking God's planet. Condemned as an *uppity nigra* who didn't know his place, Till was dragged from his bed three nights later and brutally murdered. Those who killed him went to bed that night with their consciences clear, and the jury that acquitted them of his murder at the ensuing trial, similarly returned to their beds untroubled.

The murder of Emmett Till horrified Nancy and her parents as much as it disgusted the nation. She refused to defend the actions of those responsible or excuse the ignorance and bigotry that caused them to act the way they did. She believed they were uncharacteristic of Mississippians, aberrations. Eventually, however, she came to wonder if this was really so.

As Nancy spent more time away from home, she became increasingly distanced from the romantic memories of her childhood idyll. In succeeding visits to the Delta, the scales that blinded her while living there gradually fell from her eyes. She started to notice the poverty and the gulf that divided the lifestyles of the privileged white few from the unfortunate black many. She saw the Negroes' cabins for what they were – shacks, more suited to hens than humans: leaking roofs, broken windows repaired with cardboard, torn screens and no plumbing. She noticed too, the deep creases in the Negroes' faces, and the look of their being much older than their actual years. More disturbing still for her was the realisation that her own family's wealth was built on such poverty.

Nancy's parents were paternalistic in the best sense, but within that

word lay the dichotomy. The relationship between them and their Negroes was never one based on equality. In reality, her parents viewed them as children whose care was their obligation. In return for this care was an unspoken understanding that Negroes would pay them certain dues: they would defer to their judgements, never speak back, contradict or – God forbid – sass them.

Privately, her father criticised the ways of Mississippi, bemoaned the fact that Negroes could never expect justice from white juries, and recognised the anomaly of black people being barred from exercising democratic rights in what, supposedly, was the world's greatest democracy. He would admit that change had to take place, but maintained that such change could only come from within – and that it would be slow. The worst thing that could happen, he argued, was if outside pressure was brought to bear on the state. He held that it was always easier for people to be influenced by principle the further they were from a situation.

Apart, however, from taking out a subscription to the *Delta Democrat Times*, the state's only liberal newspaper, her father appeared to do little if anything to bring about change. He protested the verdict of the Emmett Till trial, for instance, but only in private. In truth, Hilton Travis could never afford to be seen as a 'nigger lover' by the surrounding white communities. The decade of the sixties might have dawned in America, but in Mississippi the year was still 1890.

At Duke, Nancy joined in the civil rights movement, but with the proviso that she would never take part in any activities within Mississippi. Despite all her soul-searching and new-found insights, when the moment of truth came she proved as incapable as her father of taking any kind of action there. She believed such undertakings would be tantamount to throwing bricks through her parents' windows, and she could predict the hurt and embarrassment it would cause them. She was as much a prisoner of Mississippi as her father, tied to the place of her birth, her home and her family.

Freedom Riders

Gene and Bob struck up an unlikely friendship. Bob would swing onto campus in his worn-out car at no particular time, and with no prior notice. If Gene didn't have classes to attend or his cadaver to dissect, they would grab a bite to eat or drink a coffee together. Oddly for two people

who'd met through a mutual interest in civil rights, they talked about anything and everything but civil rights: Bob's time in the army, the country of Vietnam where he'd been stationed and of which most Americans still hadn't heard; Gene's cadaver, their backgrounds, their hopes and Nancy.

Although Bob always arrived unexpectedly, there came a time when Gene could predict his arrival. The muffler on Bob's car was as old as the rest of the vehicle and could be heard from at least six blocks away; in its wake would trail a pall of blue smoke.

'Why don't you get yourself a new car?' Gene once asked him.

'Hell man, I'm black an' no job. I start drivin' roun' in an El Dorado or some such automobile, an' the police gonna think I'd stole it or was pimpin' girls. I prefer the low-profile approach to life, man: under the radar.'

'How can you possibly think you have a low profile when you're driving around making such a damned racket? Some of my friends in the Medical School already think you're dealing drugs and, what's worse, that I'm buying them from you!'

'Well that jus' plain racist! See what me an' my brothers have to put up with?' He paused for a moment and then turned to Gene. 'I don't suppose you in the market?'

'Give me a break, Bob! I don't want to get kicked out.'

'Jus' thought I'd aks.' He paused, and with a mischievous grin on his face said: 'Nancy smokes dope… bes' grade too. Gets it from me. She got no problem doin' business with a black man.'

'Nancy smokes dope? I didn't know that,' Gene said, unable to disguise his surprise.

'How long the two o' you been goin' out – four months?' Bob asked.

'About that.'

'An' you ain't never see'd her smoke pot?'

'No.'

'Well that's 'cos she don't. I was jus' foolin' with you, Med'cine Man. Ha!'

'Jesus, Bob! Why do you do that? Why do you always screw with people.'

'I guess it the black man's burden, Gene. I ain't got no choice in the matter, man. How else we gonna get things movin'? Gotta cause us a few waves or that tired ol' man rowin' his boat ashore ain't never gonna reach dry land.'

'Well, just make sure you don't sink him,' Gene said.

'You a one to talk,' Bob countered. 'People still aksin' me 'bout yo' air-conditionin' speech!'

Gene didn't take the bait. He'd learned from Nancy that sometimes the best way to deal with Bob was to ignore him. 'I'm off to class,' he said. 'See you at the meeting tonight. I gather it's an important one.'

'You bet yo' sweet ass,' Bob said. 'An' don't fo'get to bring Nance with you. She'll be scared shitless by this 'n. We talkin' Miss'ippi, man. Ha!'

As usual it was Steve Barrentine who took charge of proceedings. He explained to the gathered few (still no more than twenty attended these meetings), that the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had decided to test the effectiveness of a recent ruling by the Supreme Court that interstate bus stations could no longer discriminate against interstate travellers – whatever the local custom. Segregation of waiting rooms, restaurants and toilets had theoretically been ended.

'But we all know what theory is, don't we?' Steve continued.

'Theory?' Bob suggested.

'Exactly!' Steve replied, taking Bob's comment seriously. 'And if we don't challenge it, that's just what it's going to stay. We have to make sure it *does* become practice. For this reason, CORE's organising a bus expedition through the Deep South. It's leaving Washington in early May and then heading towards Mississippi and picking up additional activists on the way. Whatever the provocation, all responses will, as usual, be peaceful and non-violent.

'They've asked us to provide three volunteers, and I'm glad to say we have them. Bob, Nancy, Gene: take a bow will you. You have our thanks.'

The meeting broke into applause. Bob stood up with a big grin on his face and bowed theatrically. Gene and Nancy just looked at each other: it was the first either of them had heard of this. Bob winked and mouthed: 'I'll explain later.'

When the meeting finally ended, Nancy marched up to Bob. 'My place. Now!'

'How could you, Bob?' she shouted at him when he walked through the door. 'You should have asked us first! Gene and I still have classes to attend and assignments to turn in. We can't suddenly drop everything. And I've told you before: I'm *not* going to Mississippi.'

'Aw c'mon, Nance. It's almos' the end o' the semester. Classes an' exams

will be overed with by then, an' if you ain't finished yo' work you can get extensions. We talkin' two, maybe three weeks o' yo' lives. This a chance fo' you – fo' the three of us – to do somethin' useful fo' a change, steada jus' jawin' the whole time. An' it'll be fun. You can get off the bus in Alabama, Nance. Ain't no need fo' you to go to Miss'ippi.

'An' Gene, yo' cadaver ain't goin' no place, man. He'll wait fo' you. Not like he's gonna miss you cuttin' into him, is he? He'll be prob'ly glad o' the rest: give him a chance to get his strength back!'

The three of them joined the bus in Richmond, Virginia. The first few days were uneventful: they got out of the bus, ate food at still segregated counters and then climbed back on to the bus; the only danger any of them could foresee was haemorrhoids. In North Carolina, however, things started to change. After the bus arrived in Charlotte, one of the black riders went into the bus station's barbershop and asked for a trim. Refused his haircut, he in turn refused to leave the premises and was thereupon arrested for trespassing. The bus rolled on without him, and in Rock Hill, South Carolina, three riders were attacked by a waiting crowd.

In Atlanta, the Freedom Riders – as they now called themselves – divided into two groups and headed to Birmingham, Alabama, in two separate buses: a Trailways and a Greyhound. Bob, Gene and Nancy climbed aboard the Greyhound bus, and Bob lay down on the back seat and fell fast asleep. When a rock sailed through a window six miles from Anniston, he remained sleeping; the incendiary bomb that followed similarly failed to wake him.

The riders quickly disembarked. Fending off blows from the Klansmen who now surrounded them, it took a moment for Gene to realise that Bob was still on the blazing bus. After checking that Nancy was in no immediate danger, he rammed a peaceful and non-violent fist into the nearest face and climbed back on to the Greyhound. He fought his way through the flames and smoke to the backseat, where Bob still slept. He slapped him hard on the face, yelled at him, pulled him to a sitting position and slapped him again. Bob woke up, and fortunately for both of them his reflexes kicked in. Together they scrambled off the bus and reached safety only seconds before it exploded. Nancy burst into tears and Gene put his arms around her.

'Man, that the las' time I takin' sleepin' pills!' Bob said.

It was a more sober group of people that continued the journey through

Alabama. They were attacked again in Birmingham and three of them hospitalised. In Montgomery it got worse and, there, the journey came to its end.

The city police commissioner of Montgomery had refused to provide the Freedom Riders with any sort of protection, and when they arrived at the city's Union Bus Terminal they were immediately surrounded by a hostile crowd of some 3,000 people. Fist fights broke out and, once again, the Freedom Riders were forced to defend themselves. White women joined in the affray this time, swearing at the girl riders and swinging purses at them.

Nancy was hit but unhurt, and Gene and Bob managed to escape with only cuts and bruises. Black bystanders at the Bus Terminal were less lucky: some had their bones broken and some set on fire. US Marshals and the National Guard appeared the next morning, but by then the civil rights activists had already decided to call it a day. Gene, Nancy and Bob returned home. Mississippi, they figured, would be worse still.

Life for the three of them returned to normal. Their friends in the civil rights group hailed them as heroes and Gene, in particular, drew praise after Bob recounted how the Medicine Man had saved his life on the Aniston road. But for the time being they placed activism on hold. Bob returned to the business of being Bob, and Gene and Nancy focused on each other.

Androcles and the Lioness

'They're just two of the sweetest people, Gene. I can't believe they're so nice. You're sure they *are* your parents?'

Nancy and Gene had spent Thanksgiving holiday with Gene's family, and were now returning to Durham.

'I remember them hanging around the house a lot when I was growing up, so I'm guessing they are,' Gene replied. 'Anyway, why does their niceness surprise you? Are you saying that I'm not nice?'

'You're nice enough,' Nancy said, patting him on the knee. 'At least you don't get on my nerves. But your parents are more sociable than you are. You have to admit that.'

'It's not a matter of sociability. I just don't like small talk. I'm no good at it, and I always end up saying something stupid.'

'Tell me something I don't know!' Nancy laughed. 'And drive faster, will you? The movie's going to be over by the time we get home.'

'I'm driving the speed limit, Nancy, and I'm not getting a ticket just to make the start of some dumb art movie. Anyway, a snail has a faster pace than those films. We could turn up ten minutes from the end and still understand the plot.'

'It's not just the plot, silly; it's the meaning and the nuances. You're such a Philistine, Gene. Do you know that? I'm trying to bring some culture into your life and this is the thanks I get.'

'I've got enough culture in my life already. I'm going out with you, remember.'

'Oh hush! The only culture in your life is television. If it was up to you, all we'd ever do is stay home and watch stupid game shows. We wouldn't go to the theatre, we wouldn't go to museums or art galleries, and we probably wouldn't even go to concerts. How many times do I have to tell you that you can't live life on a couch or in a laboratory? There are too many places to see, too many other experiences to be had.'

'And how would any of that be of help to my patients? If they come to me and I can't figure out what's wrong with them, what am I supposed to tell them? "I'm sorry, Mrs Forrester, I can't quite put my finger on what's ailing you at the moment, but if it's of any consolation I could always tell you about the Fellini film I saw the other night or show you some of the snapshots I took when I was vacationing in London last summer"?'

'Just drive, Gene! You might not have any interest in a life but I do, and I'm not prepared to waste mine stuck in a car with you.' She then prodded him in the ribs and Gene flinched.

'For God's sake, Nancy, don't do that when I'm driving! You'll cause an accident.'

Nancy started to laugh and prodded him again.

'I'm warning you, you do that one more time and I'll stop the car and make you walk. I'm not kidding!'

'Of course you are. You'd never do anything to hurt me. You love me too much.'

'I must have been drunk when I told you that.'

'You didn't have to tell me. I knew it already. I know you better than you know yourself – and I know for a damned fact that you can drive over sixty and not get us killed!'

'You've never said that you loved me,' Gene grumbled. 'Do you?'

'Maybe. You should know if a person loves you.'

'Why won't you say it, though?'

'Because,' Nancy teased.

'Because what?'

'Just because.'

She smiled at him, snuggled closer and rested her head on his shoulder. Gene bent towards her and kissed her on the forehead.

'I don't know if we'll ever get married, Gene, but I think you'll always be my friend. You'd do anything for me, wouldn't you?'

'Not right at this moment, I wouldn't.'

Nancy raised her head from his shoulder, kissed his ear and ran her tongue inside it. 'You're sure?'

'Don't, Nancy!'

They made it back to Durham in time for the film, and afterwards drove to a newly opened restaurant. It had a rustic feel to it, sawn-timbered tables and benches, and the food on the menu was down-home.

'Would you like to talk about the film, Gene, or would that embarrass you?'

'The only thing that embarrasses me is the fact that I shelled out five bucks to see it! I don't speak French, Nancy. How the hell am I supposed to discuss a film that I haven't even understood?'

'The movie was subtitled, Gene. You were supposed to read the subtitles!'

'I couldn't. I didn't have my glasses with me.'

'Why didn't you say something, then? We could have left early.'

'Because you were enjoying it – and *I* was happy to waste two hours of my life for the enjoyment of yours. Remember that next time you're *stuck* in a car with me, will you?'

Nancy smiled and pinched his cheek. 'You poor baby,' she said. 'Why do you put up with me? If you treated me this way I'd dump you in a lake.'

The meal passed in similarly discordant harmony, and when the check came Nancy took care of it. 'My treat,' she said. 'You paid for the film.'

They got up to leave and Nancy gave a short scream. 'God, Gene. Look at that!' she said, holding out her index finger. 'Do you think I should go to the Student Health Centre?'

Gene examined her finger. A large splinter had embedded itself in the flesh and the wound was bleeding. 'There's no need for us to go to the Health Centre. I can take care of this.' He wrapped Nancy's finger in a paper napkin and then helped her to the car.

'It hurts, Gene. I mean, *really* hurts! You wouldn't believe the pain I'm in. I think I'm going to faint.'

Gene kept his face straight and drove them to his apartment. There he had Nancy lie down on the couch. He took a pair of tweezers from a small case he kept in the bedroom, and holding Nancy's finger with one hand and the tweezers in the other started to pull the splinter, slowly, carefully.

'Ow-ow-ow, Gene! You're hurting me!'

'Stop fidgeting, Nancy! It's almost out. Please, just keep still!'

But Nancy didn't. She pulled away from him and the splinter broke off in the tweezers, leaving a small sliver below the surface.

'Shit, Nancy! I'll have to use a needle now. Why can't you just do as you're told for once?'

He saw tears welling in her eyes and involuntarily started to laugh.

'It's not funny, Gene!'

'I'm sorry, Nancy. I know it's not. But one day we'll look back on this and laugh.'

'You really think so? God, you can be such a jerk! It's *your* fault I got this splinter in the first place. It was you who insisted we go to that damn restaurant. Why did you have to take me there?'

'Because you were telling me in the car how much you liked new experiences. We'd never been to that restaurant before, and so eating there *was* a new experience. It's impossible to please you, Nancy. Have you ever thought about that?'

Nancy pushed her lips into a pout, and Gene went to the kitchen to retrieve a needle from a small sewing kit his mother had bought him when he'd first gone to university. While he was there, he poured a large glass of brandy for Nancy.

'This is how it was done in the olden days, before anaesthetic,' he said, handing her the glass. 'People had limbs sawn off and bullets extracted, and all they had to dull the pain was alcohol. I'm pretty certain a glass of brandy will do it for a splinter.'

'It's goddamn 1962, Gene! We're not living in the olden days! I knew we should have gone to the Health Centre. *They'd* have given me a local anaesthetic.'

'They wouldn't have even given you a beer! Now stop being such a milquetoast and drink it.'

He struck a match and ran the flame along the needle, and then waited for it to cool. Once Nancy had calmed, he took a firmer hold of her finger and carefully picked at the flake.

'I hate you, Gene. *Really* hate you,' Nancy slurred. 'I'm never going to be nice to you again.'

Gene smiled. 'Will I notice the difference?'

'You know you will, you big lug.'

Gene continued to work on Nancy's finger until no trace of the wooden fragment remained. He then dabbed the wound with antiseptic and covered it with a Band-Aid.

'You want me to drive you home?'

'No, I'll stay the night here. If my finger falls off I'll need someone to put it back on. And don't for a minute think that I've forgiven you, because I haven't.'

Rather than unpack her overnight bag, Nancy cleaned her teeth with Gene's toothbrush and then climbed into bed. Gene joined her there and she nuzzled up to him.

'I'm sorry for being such a wuss, Gene. I'm not very good with pain. And I didn't mean those horrible things I said to you. You know that, don't you? It amazes me how you cope with my moods; you do it so well. Anyway, thanks for saving me tonight. I'll always be able to count on you to save me, won't I? You're my very own Androcles.'

'Who's Androcles?'

Nancy rested on an elbow and looked down on him. 'You're telling me you don't know who Androcles is? You've never read the story of Androcles and the lion?'

'No. I've never heard of him or the lion.'

'God, Gene! This is what happens when you live your life on a couch.' She punched him on the arm and then rolled on to her back. 'You should be ashamed of yourself. And I'm definitely not being nice to you now!'

'I wouldn't expect any patient to be nice to me, Nancy. It's against medical ethics. I could get thrown out of school.'

'Well, in that case, get ready to be thrown out of school then, because my ethics are more than okay with it!'

There are billions of people in the world, and many millions of them in the 1960s lived in the United States. In theory, and with time, Gene and Nancy could have fallen in love with hundreds of other people. They did, however, fall in love with each other, and believed each to be the fulfilment of the other's life; the proverbial needle discovered in their own backyard haystack. They talked of a future together and of marriage.

Like all couples they argued – maybe more than most – but they felt comfortable arguing, and doubted the nature of any relationship characterised by a lack of argument. The sun set on many of these

differences of opinion, and days would often pass without any sort of communication between them, until one or the other would break the deadlock with a phone call or a visit.

It was the occasional silences when they were together, however, that confused and worried Gene. They could be lying side by side, either touching or only inches apart, when Gene would suddenly sense a gulf between them of unfathomable and mysterious depth. Nancy would be in her own world, distant and unreachable, lost in thoughts she'd never share or admit to having.

'Penny for them,' he used to say.

'Nothing to buy,' she'd answer with a forced smile.

'You know I love you, don't you?'

'Of course you do,' she'd answer, and then move away from him. Gene would lie there uncertain.

In the summer of 1963, however, things between them were good, and Nancy invited Gene to spend the last week of August with her and her family in the Delta.

Oaklands

Gene and Nancy flew to Memphis and were met at the airport by Nancy's sister, Ruby, and the heat of an oven. While Gene struggled with the suitcases, the two sisters ran to each other and hugged. Catching up to Nancy, Gene held out his hand to Ruby, who brushed it aside and hugged him. She told him she was pleased to meet him after hearing so much about him for so long, and teased Nancy for not bringing him home sooner.

'I think she was afraid you'd fall in love with me,' Ruby said.

Slightly shorter than her sister, Ruby was also darker complexioned and had the blackest of hair. She also carried more weight than Nancy, but the kind of weight Rubens had been happy to immortalize.

Driving south into Mississippi, Ruby asked Gene what Nancy had told him about the Delta.

'Only that it's flat,' Gene replied.

'Oh boo, Nancy. Shame on you,' she said. 'You didn't tell Gene how it got its name?'

'No,' Nancy said. 'Are you going to?'

'Damn right I am, sister. Now listen up, Gene, because all your friends back home'll want to hear this. It's called the Delta because it's shaped liked a D. Delta's the Greek name for a D. Did you know that?'

Gene nodded.

'Anyway, it stretches two hundred miles from Memphis in the north to Vicksburg in the south – there's a big Civil War battlefield there – and at its widest point it's no more than eighty-five miles. So if you draw a straight line from Memphis to Vicksburg, and then a curved one from Vicksburg to Memphis taking in the widest point, you get the letter D. Now that's interesting.

'Mom and Pop live in Tallahatchie County, but there are eleven others. I live in Leflore County, that's another one, so that leaves ten. Nancy, are you going to tell Gene what the names of the other ten are?'

'No,' Nancy said. 'I doubt Gene's that interested.'

'You are interested too, aren't you, Gene? Your friends back home'll want to know this as well.'

Gene said he was interested.

'In alphabetical order,' Ruby continued, 'they are Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena – that's my favourite name – Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tunica, Washington and Yazoo. And do you know how many acres the Delta has? Four million! Did you know that, Nancy?'

'No,' Nancy said. 'I don't know why you just don't buy a bus and set yourself up as a tour guide.'

'I could do that,' Ruby laughed. 'I love this place. I wouldn't live anywhere else in the whole world – and I've been to lots of places too, Gene. I'm going to die here and be buried here. Make the soil even more fertile. You might want to make a note of this too, Gene, but the soil here is twenty-seven feet deep. It's the best soil in the whole damned country!'

'That's because Miss'ippi was the last state to emerge from the mud.'

'Oh boo, Nancy. Don't come bringing any of your eastern ways back home with you. You know you love it too. Say you do or I'm stopping the car right now.'

'I do,' Nancy said.

'That's what she'll be saying to you soon, Gene. I dooo. I dooo.' Ruby then burst out laughing and didn't stop for what seemed like three miles.

Nancy rolled her eyes, but it was clear she enjoyed every second of her sister's company. 'Don't take what she says too seriously,' she whispered to Gene. Gene smiled, but sat there feeling uncertain again.

'How's Homer doing?' Nancy asked.

'He's doing fine, doll. In fact, I'd go so far as to say mighty fine. He treats me well and buys me presents. If he'd just do something about his damned last name, life would be perfect.'

'Homer's last name is Comer,' Nancy told Gene.

'Can you believe it? Homer Comer! I'm Mrs Homer Comer, for God's sake! He was once stopped by the police in Memphis for going through a red light, and when he told them his name was Homer Comer they thought he was taking the P-I-S-S. Homer Comer! I ask you. He almost got his sweet fanny hauled off to jail that night. I mean, it's like you being called Gene Bean or Gene Mean, Gene. What parent does that to a child – and to their child's wife?'

The car had turned off the main highway and was now travelling through the Delta proper. Gene wasn't sure what he'd expected when Nancy had told him it was flat. The Delta wasn't just flat, it was prostrate; level beyond imagination and endlessly so. But there was also an unexpectedly strange beauty to it: the cotton globes covering the flat fields were of the purest white and shimmered in the sun's glare.

The conversation between Nancy and her sister turned more serious when Nancy asked how her Mom was doing.

'She's doing okay, I suppose,' Ruby answered, 'but she's still as forgetful. Maybe more so. She scared me the other week when the two of us were driving to Memphis to visit Daisy. We'd been chatting away, and all of a sudden she just turned to me and asked me who I was. I said: 'Mom, it's me – your daughter, Ruby!' And she looked so relieved and happy when I told her, I could have burst into tears. It's scary, Nancy. I'm wondering if she isn't going to go like Grandmamma. Daddy says she won't, and he's going to make sure she sees the best people. He's already taken her to doctors in Memphis and Jackson, and now he's got the name of a specialist in New York.'

'It just seems so unfair,' Nancy said. 'She's barely into her sixties. I hope to God she doesn't go like Grandmamma.'

For the next fifteen minutes or so, conversation in the car was sparse and eventually stalled into silence. It was a relief when Ruby squealed out: 'Oaklands!' The car passed through two large brick pillars set at either side of an entrance. *Oaklands* was written in large brass letters on one pillar and *Plantation* on the other. Large trees lined the drive.

'Oaks?' Gene asked.

'Yup,' Nancy said. 'Imagination's always been a Travis strong point. The memory's shit these days, but the imagination's still okay.'

'Nancy! Wash your mouth out!' Ruby rebuked. 'Don't let Mommy and Daddy hear you talking like that.'

'Sorry,' Nancy said. 'What I meant to say was S-H-I-T.'

Gene had seen photographs of houses like this in magazines, but had never supposed he'd ever be a guest in one. Six huge Doric columns rose from ground level to a hipped roof. The façade of the two-storey house was symmetrical, with windows evenly spaced. The second floor bedrooms opened on to a balcony that ran the width of the house, and below the balcony a covered porch similarly ran its width.

'Wow, this is some house you've got yourselves,' Gene said. 'How old is it?'

'The original house was built in 1853,' Ruby said, relieved to be back in her role as tour guide. 'It burned down in 1925 after a lightning strike, and when Grandaddy rebuilt it he decided to use bricks instead of wood – which the house was originally built from. He figured if, God forbid, there was another fire, the house would burn more slowly and the fire trucks stand a better chance of arriving in time to save it. Wood just goes up in no time. The pillars are original though: they're not wood. You'll see a lot of big houses like this in Miss'ippi, and they're all built in this ancient Greek style. Do you know why that is, Gene?'

Gene said he didn't.

'It's because ancient Greece represents the spirit of democracy – or that's what people at the time thought.'

Gene searched Ruby's face for a hint of irony, but didn't find any. *Spirit of democracy* juxtaposed with *Mississippi* had to be oxymoronic.

Two bird dogs came bounding from the side of the house. They ran straight to Nancy, who bent down and fussed with them, greeting them by name: Jefferson and Franklin. The door of the house opened and an elderly black lady walked out, dressed in a server's uniform and wearing a large white apron.

'What y'all doin' standin' out here in the sun? Nancy, come give me a hug an' introduce me to that gen'leman friend o' yo's.'

Nancy stopped playing with the dogs and ran to give the black lady a big hug, indicating to Gene that he should follow her.

'My girl, you all skin an' bones; ain't nothin' o' you to get ahol' of. They ain't feedin' you? How you gonna get chil' rearin' hips if you don't eat nothin'?'

'I've done all the growing I'm going to do, Dora, and my hips are just fine, thank you very much. And who said anything about me wanting children? Who's going to look after you if I leave and start a family?'

'Oh hush yo' mouth, girl. I don't need no lookin' after. What you think

I married Ezra fo' – his good looks? Now introduce me to that fine lookin' man by yo' side.'

'Gene, this is Dora. Dora's been with us forever and a day, because Mommy and Daddy are too scared to fire her. Make sure you don't cross her or she might stick a fork in your back when you're not looking.'

Dora laughed and took Gene's hand. 'Mr Gene, I very pleased to meet you. I surprised you ain't bin scared off by Nancy's big mouth. Sure has a big one, fo' one so skinny.'

Gene smiled, and said he was pleased to meet her, too. 'Nancy's already told me about you, Dora. I hear your cooking's the best in the Delta.'

'Sure is, Mr Gene. An' I gonna make it my business to fatten the two o' you up.'

Ruby went to give Dora a hug. 'Don't go ignoring me, Dora, just because Nancy's home with her gentleman friend. I don't leave you for months on end, and besides, you've known me longer. Where is everyone, anyway? This place is quiet as a Sunday.'

'Yo' Daddy, Brandon an' Ezra's out lookin' for Miss Martha,' Dora said, more serious now. 'She went walkin' this mornin' an' she still gone. Missed lunch an' ever'thin'. They be back by the by, so no use you frettin' yo'self. It happened b'fore an' it'll happen again. Now get yo'selfs unpacked an' I'll fix you a drink an' a bite to eat. You must be wore out by all yo' travellin'.'

Ruby and Nancy looked at each other, and Gene looked at both of them; neither of them spoke. They picked up their cases and went inside the house. Nancy and Gene climbed an imposing staircase that led to the second floor rooms. Nancy put down her case outside her own room, and then showed Gene to the guest bedroom.

'What's wrong with your Mom, Nancy?' Gene asked her.

'Can we talk about this later?' she asked. 'I will tell you. I want to tell you. But when I do, I'll also want to ask something of you. Just let's enjoy the next few days. There's plenty of time for everything else.'

'Sure,' Gene said, 'Whenever you're ready.' The two of them then held each other in silence until a gong sounded.

'Time to go downstairs,' Nancy said. 'You don't want to get on Dora's wrong side on your first day. She's quite something isn't she?'

'Yes,' Gene said. 'I think it's safe to say that.'

Downstairs, Dora had laid out plates of sandwiches and a pitcher of iced lemonade.

'I want it all eaten,' she said. 'Ever' las' crumb! An' Mr Gene, I don't wan'

no soft-shoe walkin' to Nancy's room in the night.'

'Dora!' Ruby shrieked. 'You can't say things like that. Gene's our guest.'

'An' I sure he'll behave like one, but if he anythin' like Ezra…'

'Maybe we're already doing it,' Nancy teased.

'Nancy!' Ruby shrieked.

'Well maybe you is an' maybe you ain't, but there ain't nothin' happenin' in this house,' Dora said. 'You hear me?' she said, turning to look at Mr Gene.

The front door opened and voices sounded in the hallway. Brandon Travis walked into the room, hugged his sisters and shook Gene's hand weakly.

'Daddy sends his apologies for not being here to welcome you, Gene, but he'll see you in the drawing room at seven for pre-dinner drinks and formally welcome you to Oaklands then.'

'Where is he now?' Nancy asked.

'He's taken Mom to lie down.'

'So what happened? Is she okay?'

'I guess,' Brandon said with a shrug. 'We found her wandering on one of the dirt tracks, about a mile from the house. She's forever disappearing these days and it's becoming a problem. I don't know why Daddy doesn't just put a leash on her or keep her in the paddock.'

'Don't talk like that about Mom,' Ruby scolded. 'She can't help herself!'

'It's okay for you and Nancy, Ruby – you're never here! It's not your lives that are being affected by her behaviour so don't go lecturing *me*! I've got more important things to do with my damn time than play hide-and-seek with my mother. I was supposed to be spraying crops today. Maybe the two of you should consider spending more time here and sharing the load a bit more.

'Anyway, I have work to do. I'll see you at seven.'

Five minutes before seven, Nancy knocked on Gene's door, and together they descended the staircase. The drawing room had an expensive formality to it, and an emphasis on antique furniture and animal death. The floor was spread with skins of exotic animals, and the walls were lined with an array of heads. In particular, Gene was drawn to a footstool made from the lower portion of an elephant's leg, and a giant bear skin that lay in front of the large fireplace. He wondered if there was now a three-legged elephant hobbling around Africa, and a bear shivering from cold somewhere in Oregon.

There were shelves against the far wall displaying ceramic and glass ornaments and stuffed birds, and a display case against another wall crammed with antique firearms and daggers. Reading matter displayed consisted of local and state newspapers and glossy magazines: the Charleston *Sun-Sentinel,* the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, the Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, the Greenville *Delta Democrat Times*, *Harper's*, *Time*, *Life*, the *New Yorker* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. The family obviously read a lot, Gene concluded, just not books.

Ruby was already there, and shortly they were joined by Brandon and his wife Becky. Conversation and atmosphere nosedived immediately. Perhaps noticing this, Ezra assiduously attended to their drinks, ensuring that no glass was ever empty. Gene checked his watch: Mr and Mrs Travis were running fifteen minutes late and he'd already drunk two gin and tonics. He was about to catch Ezra's eye to request a refill, when Hilton Travis walked into the room with a smiling Martha on his arm.

Hilton and Martha Travis looked every inch the couple. No one, Gene thought, would have ever raised an eyebrow to question why either one was with the other. Hilton was tall, slim and his features were pale but handsome. He had thick greying hair, worn longer than the norm for men of his age, and a striking aquiline nose. He wore an expensive linen suit and a striped military-looking tie.

Martha, on the other hand, had the dark complexion of Ruby, and the same dark hair that showed only traces of life's autumnal grey. Her face was tanned but relatively unlined, and she wore little make-up. She was dressed in a bright flowered dress with a shawl draped over her shoulders.

Nancy and Ruby went straight to their parents, hugged and kissed them. Brandon and Becky kept their distances. Gene stood there awkwardly waiting to be introduced, wondering if somehow they'd forgotten he was there. Ezra came to his rescue and handed him another gin and tonic.

'Mommy, Daddy, this is Gene,' Nancy said eventually. Gene shook hands with them both and, for some unknown reason, bowed his head Teutonic style as he did so.

'I'm very pleased to meet you,' he said.

'The pleasure's all ours, Gene,' Hilton Travis drawled. 'And I must apologise for not being here to greet you when you arrived. Martha decided to go for a walk today and got herself lost.' He smiled at Martha when he said this.

'Oh my,' Martha said, 'I don't know what I was thinking. I've walked

this land my entire life and I've never once got lost. Why it happened today of all days I have no idea, but I got good and properly discombobulated. I guess this is what happens when you start to lose your marbles,' she laughed. 'But I tell you, when I saw Ezra, I've never been gladder to see a person in my whole life. I thought I was going to be out there forever with the snakes and mosquitoes.'

'You're not losing your marbles, Mamma,' Ruby said, 'and you've got to stop saying that. The doctor said that with the right medication you'll be fine.'

Martha smiled at her. 'You're so sweet Ruby – and you too Nancy: I know you worry about me as well. I hate to be a bother to you both.'

'Mom, you're not a bother!' Nancy said. 'If you were, I probably *would* put you out with the cottonmouths and bugs, but it's not going to happen!'

'Oh be whisht, Nancy,' Martha said, a beam stretching from one side of her face to the other. 'Sometimes you talk such foolishness.'

Gene imagined that Brandon stood there thinking it would be okay by him if his Mom got lost for good among the cottonmouths and the bugs; at least he'd be able to get on with his tractoring, or whatever it was he did on the farm.

Ezra had barely poured Hilton and Martha their drinks when Dora came into the room and told them dinner was ready to be served.

'Give us five minutes will you, Dora,' Hilton said. 'Miss Martha and I have only just made it downstairs.'

'Well, jus' don't go blamin' me if the food gets spoilt,' she said. 'Not as if I ain't got nothin' better to do wit' my time.'

'Boy, Ezra, you sure got yourself one cantankerous woman there,' Hilton said.

Ezra smiled. 'You bes' get yo'selves in there or it gonna be the worse for me, Mr Travis. Dora'll blame me fo' pourin' y'all too many drinks or pourin' 'em too slowly. Either way, I'll get it.'

'Okay everybody, let's go sit down and take our drinks with us,' Hilton said. 'We can't afford to lose Ezra just yet.'

Once everyone was settled, Martha rang a small hand bell placed next to her on the table and signalled that they were ready to be served. Dora, and a young black girl Gene hadn't seen before, came into the room with bowls of steaming soup. Everyone started to eat except Martha, who appeared to be staring at the mass of silver cutlery surrounding her plate. It seemed to Gene that she was unsure of which implement to choose.

'I'm no world's expert on cutlery, Miss Martha, but I find this one is probably best suited for the job.' He then placed a spoon gently in her hand.

'I might be losing my marbles, Gene, but I still know what a spoon is! I was wondering why there was no bread on the table.' She rang the bell again, and told Dora they needed bread.

Dora banged a basket of bread on the table without seeing any need to apologise for the oversight. Gene sat there embarrassed, wanting to apologise but fearful of making matters worse. Nancy and Ruby bit their tongues, while Brandon scowled.

'Nancy tells me you're going to be a doctor, Gene. Are you going to specialise in a particular field or become a general practitioner?' Hilton asked.

'General practitioner, sir,' Gene replied. 'I can't say I've found any particular field that interests me more than another, and I don't want to have to get involved with any kind of cutting. Surgery's my least favourite subject at the moment. It seems I have an aversion to the sight of blood.'

'Well, maybe we can talk about this more once the meal's over,' Hilton said. 'Nancy, how are your studies? Last time we talked, you were reading and enjoying the nineteenth century English poets. Wasn't it Dryden who was your favourite?'

'Hazlitt,' Nancy corrected. 'Hazlitt's my favourite.'

'What I don't understand is what you're going to do when you finish your studies,' Brandon said. 'I mean, what can you do with poems and books when you get down to it?'

'I'll probably write verses for the inside of cards,' Nancy replied. 'Something like: *Dear Brother, I Wish I Had Another.*'

'Now you two be nice to each other,' Martha said. 'Let's not spoil the meal, and remember we have a guest with us.' She turned to Gene. 'What's your name again, dear?'

'Gene, Miss Martha. Gene.'

Gene became further alarmed when Dora served the main course: particularly rare steaks. It struck him that Nancy had failed to mention to either Dora or her parents that since being given a cadaver to dissect, he could no longer eat beef without gagging. Gene looked to Nancy for help, but all she said to him – rather sharply he thought – was: 'Eat it!'

Gene made willing and cut the steak into pieces, which he then moved around his plate while eating only the vegetables and potatoes. When conversation revolved around others, and no eye was upon him, he

carefully picked up pieces of the meat with his fingers and placed them in his jacket pocket. At other times, he put pieces of steak in his mouth and manoeuvred them into his napkin while pretending to wipe his lips. He would then sanitise his mouth by taking a drink of red wine. By the time Dora and her helpmate came to collect the plates, his was as clean as any. 'Well done,' Nancy whispered. 'Mind over matter, right?'

Ruby said her goodbyes before dessert: she had a drive ahead of her and didn't want Homer worrying. As the meal came to an end for the rest of them, Hilton suggested the men step out on to the porch and smoke a cigar.

'One each, or are you going to share the same one?' Nancy asked.

'I think I can run to three,' Hilton said smiling. 'You and Brandon go on ahead, Gene. I'll take Miss Martha upstairs and get her settled. Nancy can give me a hand – unless you'd prefer to help Dora with the dishes?' Nancy pulled a face.

Internally, Gene also pulled a face. Although having promised Nancy to play a full part in the family's conversations, the idea of being alone with Brandon was a presentiment. His situation might have been eased if he'd removed the meat from his pocket before stepping out on to the porch, where Jefferson now lounged.

Smelling the meat, Jefferson raised himself from the floor and walked over to Gene. When Gene tried to push him away, the dog started to bark. Believing that the best way to extricate himself from another potentially embarrassing situation was to feed the meat to the dog, Gene took the steak from his jacket pocket and placed it on the porch floor. It was at this moment that Brandon chose to join him.

When asked by Brandon what he was doing, Gene had no option but to explain his aversion to meat, its origins, and his struggle not to appear rude at the table. It gave the two of them something to talk about, but Gene was left with an uneasy feeling that this wasn't the last he'd hear of the matter.

True enough, it wasn't. The next day, Brandon told Dora that her cooking reminded Gene of dead people.

The Field of Cotton

Gene found the days that followed long and increasingly slow to end. It wasn't simply the fact that it was high summer and the days were naturally long, or that Delta days were always slow to end, but more the strain of actually being there.

Gene had been apprehensive even before arriving at Oaklands. Nancy had given him a long list of pointers of what, and what not, to say. He was to address her father as Sir and her mother as Miss Martha. He was also to make no mention of civil rights unless her father originated the conversation, and he was certainly to make no mention of the bus they'd ridden to Birmingham – two years after the event, and still Nancy hadn't divulged this to her parents. It might also be a good idea, she added, if he made no mention of the fact that his best friend at Duke was an unemployed Negro.

Dora now cold-shouldered him and Ezra, though polite when they bumped into each other, was distant. Conversation with Hilton Travis proved difficult and faltering, and Miss Martha never seemed too sure of who he actually was. On one occasion, she'd reported him to Nancy and asked her to find out from him what his business in the house was.

He met some of Nancy's friends but warmed to none of them, and wondered why she'd befriended them in the first place. The only person he truly liked was Ruby. The atmosphere always lightened when she visited the house. Ditsy as hell and always full of fun, she couldn't have been more different from Homer, who struck Gene as a dufus.

It was while Gene and Nancy were staying with her parents that Martin Luther King stood at the Lincoln Memorial and told a crowd of 200,000 that he had a dream. 'So do I Martin,' Gene thought, 'Just to get out of here!'

The family sat around the television set and watched as King spoke. After only a few minutes, Brandon left the room. Hilton Travis continued to leaf through his newspaper. Dora, who was standing behind them, commented that Martin Luther King was a troublemaker and that no good would come from him stirring things up like this. Nancy watched but made no comment, while Gene pretended to wipe drops of sweat from his face when the occasional tear spilled from his eye.

The day before he and Nancy were due to leave Oaklands, they took a long walk. Nancy led him through the back garden, past the pecan and walnut trees and out to where the cotton grew.

'This is the most beautiful time of the year in the Delta,' she told Gene. 'After the cotton's harvested in the autumn, all that's left are dried stalks. Everything changes from white to brown, to monotony.' Maybe it was this talk of the life cycle that now led Nancy to talk of her mother.

'You might have noticed that Mom's not well.' She gave a deep sigh.

'She's displaying the early signs of Alzheimer's,' she continued, 'and it's only going to get worse. What do you know about Alzheimer's? Is it something you've come across in your studies, yet?'

'We've touched on it,' Gene said. 'All I know is that it's cruel and unforgiving – as much for the family as it is for the person suffering from it. Are you sure it is Alzheimer's? Your Mom seems a bit on the young side to be starting with it now.'

'We're sure,' Nancy said. 'The doctors in Jackson and Memphis don't have any doubts, and the specialist in New York that Ruby talked about would only be advising on treatment. The diagnosis has already been made. He won't be able to change that.

'I saw my Grandmamma suffer from the same thing and it was horrible. She started with the same confusion my Mom's showing. At the time it seemed funny, and even she laughed about the things she did – much like my Mom does now. But then she got depressed, and then irritable – really irritable. She couldn't understand what was happening to her and got scared. She ended up not recognising us, and started to look for people who'd been dead for donkey's years.

'Her personality changed, too. At one time she'd been my favourite of all the family, so sweet and so kind; but then she became abusive and started to say really hateful things and cuss – horrible words. I still don't understand how she ever knew them.

'She lived with us at Oaklands – in the room you're staying in – and Mom and Daddy looked after her for years. It was Dora who took the brunt of her insults though, and for all her foibles and occasional rudenesses, my parents would never dismiss her because of the way she cared for Grandmamma. She was kind and patient with her.

'Eventually, my Gran lost control of her bowels and became as helpless and messy as a new-born babe. It got too much for everyone and my parents had to put her in a nursing home. She lingered there for another two years, alive for the sake of being alive, and when she died, I was glad.

'I hated myself for thinking this, but it's true, I *was* glad. It put her to rest and it brought the nightmare she'd been living to an end. And her death stopped the nightmare for us, too. I still have difficulty remembering her as the person she used to be, rather than the person she became. It's so hard, Gene – really hard. And the same thing's going to happen to my mother.'

Gene listened as the words came pouring out of Nancy, a log jam of fears and emotions undammed.

'The same thing happened to my Grandmamma's mother too. We don't know of any others before then, because people tended to die younger in those days; but there's something hereditary going on – I just know it. And the same thing will probably happen to me.'

She made contact with Gene's eyes and held them. 'I never want to have children, Gene. If I inherit this dementia, I want it stopping with me. I don't want to pass it on to my own children!'

Gene took hold of her hand. 'From what I know, Nancy, Alzheimer's isn't hereditary. There's no documentation or any proof of that being the case. I know you're worried, but I think you're worrying for nothing. Even if it did happen, thirty years from now there'll probably be a cure for it, or at least medication to control it. Things are moving fast in medicine. I'm sure any children you have would be okay.'

'I don't care what medicine says,' Nancy said, 'or any logic that says it won't happen to me. All I know is that it happens to people in my family – to the women of my family. Something's passed from one generation to the next. Maybe it is a strange thing to happen, and it doesn't fit with medical science, but it's a fact. You have to take my word on this.

'And now I have to ask you something, something I don't think I could ever ask another person.' She let go of Gene's hand and moved away from him, turning her back. 'If it happens to me, Gene, and I get Alzheimer's… I want you to bring it to an end.'

'Of course I'll take care of you, Nancy. That goes without saying.'

'You're not understanding me, Gene. What I'm asking you to do is bring my life to an end – prematurely. I don't want to live through it, and I don't want anyone who knows or loves me to have to live through it with me. There's too much hurt, too much damage. I want people remembering me for the person I was and not for the demon I'll become. Will you promise me, Gene, promise me you'll do this?'

Gene didn't reply immediately. He pulled a cigarette from its pack with his lips and lit it. As he blew the smoke upwards, he noticed white cumulus clouds floating high in the sky without a care in the world. At that moment, he wished that he and Nancy were those clouds.

'But if you feel so strongly about this,' he eventually asked, 'why wouldn't you just take your own life? Why would you need me to do it?'

Nancy now turned to face him. 'Because I don't think I'd be able to do it,' she said. 'A small part of me still thinks that suicide is a sin and that if I killed myself I'd go straight to hell. The larger part of me thinks that I'd

never get the timing right – and I don't want my life to end before it absolutely has to. I could live through the early confusion, but once the disease progressed I'd probably lose all knowledge of what I'd intended to do. I wouldn't have a clue what was going on, and if I tried and botched it, I'd be worse off still and probably placed in a mental institution or something. And you'd be a doctor, Gene. You'd be able to judge when the time was approaching; when the time was right. And I know you'd make it painless for me.'

Gene thought about it. He was familiar with the Hippocratic Oath and aware that his intended role in life was to save rather than take lives. Saving lives, however, was one thing; prolonging nightmares another thing altogether. He loved Nancy. She was, and always would be, the priority of his life. He would never willingly allow her to suffer.

'Okay, I'll do it Nancy. You have my word. But don't live your life expecting the worst to happen. It might not. If it does, then I'll take care of it.'

'And whether we're still together or not? Even if we're not a couple, you'll do it? I'd still be able to count on you?'

A quizzical look crossed Gene's face. 'Yes, you have my word on it,' he said, and after a pause asked: 'You don't know something I don't, do you?'

'No,' Nancy said, 'but things happen in life. Bad things.'

That night Nancy did the soft-shoe walk to Gene's room and told him she loved him.

Five months later, Gene and Nancy were no longer a couple. She never returned to Duke after the Christmas vacation, and when Gene arrived back at the university a brief letter awaited him.

Dearest Gene,

I don't think we should see each other again. It breaks my heart to write these words, and I know you'll be just as hurt to read them. Please don't ask me to explain.

I hope you have a great life, darling – and I hope that I have a great life too. I just don't think we can have a great life together. If it's any consolation, and I hope that it is, please know that I'll always love you, and you'll never be far from my thoughts.

Please don't try and contact me. This is difficult enough.

Yours always,

Nancy

The letter came as a shock to Gene. He read and re-read it, puzzled over it for days before eventually placing it in a drawer. What the hell had happened? He'd recently and – to his way of thinking – magnanimously agreed to kill Nancy, and now she'd dropped him like a hat. What kind of gratitude was that?

Nancy was right, however. Reading her words did break his heart.

It would be another forty-five years before he understood them.

Hershey

Hershey is a small town in Pennsylvania, thirteen miles from the state capital of Harrisburg. Surrounded by cows and pastures, it nestles in the rolling hills of Dauphin County and is home to the chocolate manufacturing company of the same name. (The word *nestles* should be used advisedly in these parts, for fear of being confused with the name of the rival Swiss chocolate manufacturing company, Nestlé.)

The man whose name became an eponym for both town and company was Milton Hershey, a leading player in the late nineteenth century world of candy, and considered by many to have been the king of caramels. In 1893, however, Milton renounced this sweetmeat crown and became a convert to milk chocolate. He'd tasted the brown delicacy at a world's fair in Chicago that year, and thereafter lost all interest in caramels; he sold his company in Lancaster and embarked on a mission to bring the luxury of the rich to the taste buds of the ordinary. To this end, he built a factory at Derry Church.

A life in confectionary had sweetened not only Milton's tooth, but also his general disposition. As an employer, he embraced benevolence and exhibited a keen social conscience. Determined that his workers would enjoy the lifestyle of the middle classes, he built a model town for them; a utopia of his own design with schools, sports and leisure facilities. In 1906, the new model town slipped a ring on Derry Church's finger, and Derry Church changed its name to Hershey.

Seventy years later, the Vice President of Milk Production at the Hershey Foods Corporation slipped a ring on the finger of Nancy Travis, and she changed her name to Mrs Arnold Skidmore. In doing so, Nancy exchanged the paternalism of the agrarian south for the paternalism of the industrial north, Oaklands for Hershey. It was progress of a kind, she supposed.

Thirty-one years later still, Eugene Chaney III drove into the town that advertised itself as *The Sweetest Place on Earth,* and checked into a hotel for three nights. If life in cocoa producing countries was cheap, the room rates at Hotel Hershey were anything but.

Doc slept badly that night, worse than usual: a strange bed and thoughts of strange days ahead. He hadn't seen Nancy for well over forty years, and in that time both of them had grown old, married other people and been widowed. This, they had in common. But what of the feelings they'd once had for each other? Were they still existent? Would their history make for awkwardness or could they start out afresh: two friends renewing an old and easy relationship? He had no idea.

Although Nancy's letter had requested Doc not to contact her after her sudden departure from Duke, he had, nonetheless, tried on several occasions: he'd phoned her parents' house, tried to speak with Ruby and written letters. But the Travis wagons had been circled: if it was one thing Mississippians understood, it was defence! The answer was always the same: Nancy had gone away and couldn't be reached. His letters were returned unopened.

Bob proved a good friend during this time. He sympathised, but told Doc he should never expect to make sense of the Delta or its people, and should therefore stop trying.

'Let it drop, Gene. Fo' whatever reason, Nancy's gone an' there ain't no damn thing you can do 'bout it. Jus' make sure you don't lose yo' dignity, man. That's my advice. Control what you can an' let go o' what you cain't. Black pearls o' wisdom an' no charge.'

Doc remembered taking Bob's hand and grasping it firmly, thanking him for both his friendship and his thoughts. Bob had responded by asking Gene if he could borrow ten dollars.

As Doc dressed that morning, he thought about the conversation he and Nancy had had in the cotton field those many years ago. At the time, he'd been naively optimistic that a cure for Alzheimer's would by now have been found, that medication would be available to either solve or manage the condition. Medications had improved, but it seemed that little progress had been made finding a cure. Nancy, however, had been proved right in thinking that the condition might be hereditary in her family.

Although there was still no obvious inheritance pattern to Alzheimer's, clusters of cases in an extremely small number of families had now been documented, and it was agreed that genetic factors could play a role. A

gene called Apolipoprotein E found on chromosome 19 was considered a risk factor, and other genes and pathological mutations had also been identified on chromosomes 1, 9, 10, 11, 14 and 21. Even for Doc with his medical training, these numbered chromosomes seemed more like the names of planets in a science fiction movie than anything to do with real life. He knew he would be unable to bring any medical solace to his meeting with Nancy – and that meeting was only two hours away. He finished dressing and went downstairs to eat breakfast.

Nancy had agreed to meet Doc in the formal lobby of the hotel at ten o'clock. She'd told him she was still fine to drive, and that the onset of her Alzheimer's was at a stage that didn't wholly interfere with her day-to-day life.

The lobby was one floor up from the hotel's entrance and designed, Doc supposed, to give the feel of a Spanish courtyard. A turreted balcony ran around its top, and the high ceiling was painted to give the impression of white clouds floating across blue sky. To pass the time, he picked up a brochure from the table nearest to him and read about the various treatments available in the hotel's Spa. The therapies were all based on chocolate and roses, and ranged in price: he could have a Whipped Cocoa Bath for $45, a Chocolate Bean Polish for $65, a Mojito Body Wrap for $115 or a Chocolate Fondue Wrap for $120.

He replaced the brochure and looked at his watch: three minutes to ten. He wiped the moisture from the palm of his hand onto his pant leg. He was dressed in his usual attire – plaid shirt and corduroy pants – and started to wonder if he might have underdressed for his meeting with Nancy, especially when surrounded by such opulence.

Doc had always figured that Nancy's beauty would grow with her years, and in thinking this he'd been right. No one would have thought that the elegantly dressed woman who entered the foyer was anything but in the rudest of health. Her face, like her mother's had been at this age, was relatively unlined and there were only slight traces of grey in her hair. She wore a modicum of make-up, no more and no less than was called for, and was dressed in an expensive two-piece suit, emerald green in colour. Doc rose uncertainly as she walked towards him. 'Nancy?'

Nancy's face broke into a smile and she put her arms around him. 'Gene!' They hugged, as he remembered her hugging Ruby.

'You look beautiful,' he told her. 'I always said you'd look better the older you got.'

'And look at you, Gene,' she smiled. 'You look like an old tramp – just as my father predicted… A joke!' she added, when she saw the look of surprise on Doc's face. 'You did graduate though, didn't you? You weren't too broken-hearted when I left you that your whole life went down the pan?'

'I got through it,' Doc said. 'And yes, I graduated. Look at the register if you don't believe me: Dr Eugene Chaney III.'

'I'll take your word for it,' she smiled, 'though anyone can call themselves a doctor these days.'

They ordered coffee from reception and arranged to take it on the terrace. It was too nice a day to sit indoors, and besides, the terrace would afford Doc a good view of the town – its houses, parks, silos and smokestacks. Doc found a couple of rocking chairs at the perimeter of the rooftop, away from the geranium and petunia baskets attracting the bees and, more importantly, well away from the other hotel guests sitting there.

Nancy poured, and asked Gene to tell her about his life: what he'd done, had he married, did he have children, had he been happy?

Doc gave her an outline of his life: his final years in the civil rights movement with Bob, his time as a doctor in Maryland, his marriage to Beth, the birth of Esther, the death of Beth and Esther, his taking over his father's practice, the death of his parents and retirement.

Tears came to Nancy's eyes when he told her about Beth and Esther. She now regretted asking him if his life had been happy. How could it have been?

And now it was her turn, her time to tell Doc of her life. She started in the present and gradually returned to the past, the reason she left Duke. 'I was pregnant, Gene. Pregnant with your child.'

She described the panic that had taken hold of her the month she'd missed her period, and later, when the doctor confirmed her pregnancy. 'I couldn't go through with it, Gene, I just couldn't. I told you why I never wanted children, and I still don't regret having the abortion – especially now. I always wanted the Alzheimer's to end with me. Remember me telling you that?'

Doc nodded.

'But I also knew you wanted children. You were always talking about us having a family, and I knew that if I'd told you I was pregnant you'd have tried to talk me out of an abortion and persuaded me to keep the child. You'd have told me I wouldn't get Alzheimer's, and that if I did, by the

time our children were grown up the disease would be a thing of the past. And you'd have been wrong, wouldn't you?'

Doc nodded again. He sensed that Nancy had braced herself for this conversation, had carefully practised the words she now spoke. He was also conscious of the strength draining from her voice.

'I knew when I decided to have the termination, that once I had it I'd never be able to look you in the eye again. If we'd stayed together, Gene, there'd have always been a dark secret I could never have shared with you. How could I? I'd have killed your child – and how would you have still been able to love me knowing that? You might say now that you would have done, but you wouldn't. It would always have been something that hung over us, and eventually it would have broken us. I never wanted you to know. I never wanted you to think of me, or feel about me, any other way than you did the last time you saw me.

'Even though I can forgive myself for doing what I did, I know that what I did to you was unforgivable. It was selfish of me to leave you the way I did, but I was never uncaring: I knew you'd be hurt. I wasn't lying to you when I wrote that I'd always love you. They weren't empty words, and it almost killed me to write them. You'd been the best thing that had ever happened to me. I'd have left Oaklands behind for you, Gene, I honestly would. But everything I did, I thought I was doing for the best, and I hope you can come to accept this – even after the tragedy of losing Esther.

'After you told me about Esther, I wasn't sure if I should go ahead and tell you all this or not, but I think it's important that I'm completely honest with you. You'd have made a great father, I know it, and I hate it that you've never had a full chance to be one – and part of that reason is me. I'm sorry Gene, so very, very sorry. I hope you can forgive me. It's… it's important to me that you do.'

Nancy fell silent and stared down at the hands in her lap, which played together nervously. Doc took hold of them. He couldn't speak. Not once had he ever suspected this to be the reason. He could now only imagine how hard it must have been for her at the time, the intrusive indignity of the procedure she'd undergone, and how scared and alone she must have felt; he should have been there with her. Finally, he whispered: 'It's okay, Nancy, it's okay.'

It was a relief for both of them when the topic had been raised and excised. They were now free to enjoy the days that followed unencumbered by its burden. They strolled down the avenues of

Chocolate and Cocoa arm in arm, and explored the lesser streets named after varieties of cocoa beans. Nancy pointed out the brown and silver street lamps made in the shape of Hershey Kisses, and the sweet smelling mulch made from cocoa husks that protected the roots of the town's plants and hedges. They drank coffee at Fenicci's, visited the town's Grand Theatre at the rear of the Community Centre and, at Nancy's insistence, drove to Chocolate World to experience The Great American Chocolate Tour.

They walked into the building's foyer and down a dark ramp. Under the watchful eye of two young attendants, they climbed carefully into one of the small cars attached to a continuously moving belt, and moved slowly from one illustrated process to the next. They saw how cocoa beans were cleaned, screened, blended, roasted, shattered and milled before milk was added to the mix. Three mechanical cows called Gabby, Harmony and Olympia wagged their tails and sang a song about the importance of cows – and the commentator's voice backed them up: the factories, it said, used a quarter of a million gallons of their milk every day! At the end of the tour, each of them was handed a miniature candy bar: Doc got a small piece of Hershey Milk Chocolate, and Nancy a miniature Heath Bar.

Doc left Chocolate World with no real memory of how chocolate was made, but with the cows' song stuck firmly in his head. What he'd really wanted was a tour of Nancy's missing years.

He didn't have long to wait.

The Missing Years

The abortion had been performed by a doctor in New York City and arranged by her father. Hilton Travis had come into his own during this episode in his daughter's life, and was the only member of the family to ever know of Nancy's pregnancy – or her reasons for termination. Initially, the news had shocked him, but he didn't shout and he didn't scream. Instead, he regarded the problem as if it were a farming complication and proceeded to solve the matter in a practical manner.

Nancy had been only a few courses short of graduating when she'd left Duke, and after the abortion chose to complete her studies at Vanderbilt, a reputable university in Nashville. She then travelled for a year in Europe, spending most of her time in Italy and learning to speak its language. She returned to Oaklands bronzed and refreshed, only to evidence a marked

deterioration in her mother – a decline the rest of the family had observed only gradually.

Nancy qualified as a grade school teacher, and after holding positions in the Memphis school system for three years applied for an opening at a private school in Pennsylvania. A friend from her Vanderbilt days, now living in Philadelphia, had forwarded her the advertisement, commenting in an attached note that the post would suit her down to the ground. The school was the Milton Hershey School, and the vacancy was for a teacher of English Literature. Nancy was successful in her application and moved to Hershey.

The Milton Hershey School was funded by a trust established by Milton and his wife Catherine. An expression of their benevolence and childlessness, the school provided a home as well as an education for children of families in financial and social need. Its mission was to nurture these children, build their character and provide them with the necessary skills for future success. The school's *raison d'être* appealed to Nancy, played to her social conscience and salved her self-imposed childlessness.

Nancy proved a born teacher. She developed an easy rapport with her students, inspired in them a love for the written word, and encouraged their creativity. She also took an interest in their welfare outside the classroom, sympathetically listening to their problems and proffering advice when able. She continued to teach at the school after she married, and retired at the age of sixty. Old students would drop by her house and some, after her husband's death, became her friends.

Nancy met her husband-to-be in a road accident. Arnold Skidmore had been driving home from a visit to one of the Mennonite dairy farms contracted to supply milk to the factory. He was smoking a cigarette and, at the time of impact, trying to insert a cartridge into an eight-track player the dealership had recently installed in his car. He didn't notice the brake lights flash on the car in front until it was too late, and although he managed to swerve and avoid colliding with that car, he mounted the sidewalk and shunted Nancy a good two feet back towards the shop door she'd just exited. Nancy fell to the ground, and Arnold rushed to her assistance.

Property was always uppermost in Arnold Skidmore's mind, and before asking Nancy if she was hurt gathered together her belongings – shopping bags and purse – and brought them to her side. No bones appeared to have been broken, but Nancy was in shock and Arnold insisted on driving her to the hospital. She lay on the backseat of his car listening to the atonal

drone of music she didn't recognise. It wasn't the kind of music to hasten anyone's recuperation.

'What is this?' Nancy asked.

'Captain Beefheart,' Arnold replied.

'Well it's *awful*,' Nancy said. 'Can you turn it off please: it's giving me a headache! I thought you'd have been more of a Lawrence Welk and his Orchestra man.' Arnold had been offended by such a suggestion but, from a position of weakness, complied.

Theirs hadn't been the most propitious of first meetings but, surprisingly, they started to date. Nancy often wondered if Arnold had asked her out after the accident simply to avoid the possibility of having to pay damages; despite the expensive car he drove, there was a thrifty, almost penny-pinching side to his nature that she never fully understood.

Arnold would disguise his frugality by attaching it to one or another lofty cause, in particular the conservation of natural resources. 'One day the planet will thank me, Nancy,' he told her. His conservation measures included flushing toilets in the house only once a day, and at its end, providing the bowls held nothing more than urine. When she first visited Arnold's house, Nancy had been shocked to find a pool of amber liquid in the downstairs bathroom, and even more shocked when Arnold became agitated after she flushed it away. 'Water, Nancy! We have to conserve it!' he shouted through the cloakroom door.

Arnold's concerns similarly ran to toilet paper. If guests visited the house for overnight stays, he would remove the roll from the bathroom and leave on their pillows only what he considered to be a sufficient amount of paper for their stay: neatly folded strips, each one no longer than two perforations. When she asked him why he did this, he replied: 'Trees, Nancy! We have to conserve them!'

After she married Arnold, Nancy saw to it that these strange practices came to an end. The marriage, however, came after the deaths of Arnold's parents and too late for her to do anything about their funerals – or lack thereof. Arnold had persuaded both parents to leave their bodies to medical research, telling them that he planned to do the same when he died. It was, he explained, an opportunity for them all to help save the lives of future generations – generations that might well number their own grandchildren, even though his parents might well be dead by the time they were born and in all likelihood never get to meet them.

When Nancy asked him nearer the time of his own death if he wanted his body donated to medical science, Arnold had responded: 'No way,

Nancy! I don't want some kid rummaging around in my insides.' It then dawned on Nancy that Arnold had donated his parents' bodies to medical science purely to save him the expense of burying them.

Nancy told Doc that although Arnold was the most complicated, inconsistent, irrational, and often infuriating person she'd ever met, there was also an ever-present kindness to him. For all his foibles, he was a good man and she'd genuinely loved him. He was fourteen years older than her, fifty when they married, and had no interest in becoming a father. This too suited Nancy, and although she might have secretly wondered if Arnold's aversion to fatherhood had something to do with the cost of bringing children into the world, never once pursued the matter with him.

Arnold loved his job. As Vice President of Milk Production at the Hershey Foods Corporation, it was his responsibility to secure regular supplies of milk for the factory; without milk there could be no milk chocolate, and hence, he told her, his position was pivotal. Ensuring the quality of the milk was as important a part of Arnold's job as contracting the dairy farmers to provide it: the Hershey factory had no use for milk that tasted unnaturally sweet, aromatic or bitter.

'The milk that comes out of a cow is only as good as the food that goes into it,' he'd explained to Nancy over dinner on their first formal date. 'The farmers have to make sure that their pastures are clear of weeds such as buckhorn, ragweed and wild dog fennel, because those are the kinds of weed that flavour milk. They also have to be careful not to feed clover, alfalfa or soybean silage to the cows immediately before milking. Strong-flavoured feedstuffs like these can make the milk taste as bad as the weeds do. And sure as icicles melt, they should never feed them vegetable crops: nothing tastes worse than milk flavoured by cabbages and turnips!'

'What about thistles?' Nancy had asked him. 'Do they make milk taste funny?'

Nancy recalled for Doc the look Arnold had given her: 'He made me feel as if I had special needs or something. "Cows *avoid* thistles!" he said. I told him if he ever looked at me like that again, I'd deck him.'

Arnold died in his seventy-second year with Nancy at his bedside. Shortly before he breathed his last, he gestured to Nancy that he wanted to say something to her. Presuming Arnold wanted to tell her how much he'd loved her, she drew closer to him. 'Dust, Nancy,' he whispered. 'Where does dust come from? And money, where does money go?'

The funeral he'd arranged for himself had spared no expense. The

coffin was the most lavish model the funeral home stocked and made from the finest mahogany – ironically, the most endangered tree on the planet. The music he'd chosen for his exit from the world had been as eccentric as the life he'd lived – and equally as puzzling as his final words. The opening hymn was *Good King Wenceslas*, a Christmas Carol about a king going out in the snow to give alms to a poor peasant, followed by *When Mothers of Salem*, a hymn about children. For a childless man who never gave to charity, as Nancy could recall, these were enigmatic and arcane choices.

Arnold Skidmore had also chosen two contemporary pieces of music for the service: *The Heartache* by Warren Zevon, a sad song about unrequited love, and *Pachuco Cadaver* by Captain Beefheart. If Nancy had been mortified by Arnold's death, she was even more so by these choices of music. Anybody hearing the lyrics to *The Heartache*, she told Doc, would have been convinced that the real love of his life had been someone else, certainly not her. She recalled people leaving the church and giving her their condolences, but few actually looking her in the eye. Nancy also wondered if by choosing a piece of music by Captain Beefheart – music she'd never allowed him to play in the house if she was present – Arnold wasn't also cocking a final snook at her.

The minister had also taken exception to Arnold's last choice of music. Written down on a service sheet, the title *Pachuco Cadaver* conjured in the minds of the unknowing – and this was the entirety of the congregation – a piece of seventeenth century European funereal music, when in fact it was a discordant four-and-a-half-minute song about a Chicano who wore zoot suits in the 1950s. From the opening and endlessly repetitive chord sequence, the minister decided that this was music that should never be heard inside a church again.

The intervening years had also taken their toll on Nancy's family, its members and its fortunes. Martha Travis had been the first to die. From the time of Doc meeting her, Miss Martha's condition had deteriorated unabated, and with a speed that had taken the family by surprise – much faster than Martha's own mother's decline had been. News of her mother's death reached Nancy shortly after she'd moved to Hershey. She didn't dwell on the details of her mother's final years, but told Doc she took solace in the fact that her mother had died at Oaklands and not in some soulless and amorphous nursing home. Hilton had promised his wife such an ending and, despite the distress it caused him, had kept to his word.

'I know you and my father never really hit it off, Gene, but he was quite a man. I couldn't have asked for a better father, or my mother for a better husband.'

'I presume he's dead too?' Doc asked.

'Well, if he isn't, then he's well over a hundred and living some place I don't know about,' Nancy replied. 'Yes, he's dead; Daisy and Ruby too.'

Doc had never met Daisy, but news of Ruby's death stung him. Apart from Nancy, she'd been the only member of the Travis family he'd actually liked. 'What happened to Ruby?' he asked.

'She died in childbirth when she was forty-five,' Nancy replied, tears welling in her eyes. 'She should never have been trying for a child at that age. It was Homer who was insistent, and Daddy never forgave him for Ruby's death. There was no trial or anything, but everyone pretty much assumed that Daddy killed him.'

Ruby and Homer had started trying for children soon after they were married, but for many years Ruby had failed to conceive. When eventually she did become pregnant, the parturition proved a difficult one, and the baby (a girl) was delivered still-born. Doctors warned both her and Homer that any future pregnancy might well put Ruby's own life at risk: apart from her already advancing years, she was now beginning to show signs of diabetes and high blood pressure.

Homer, however, set upon the continuation of the Comer name, reminded Ruby that her own mother had given birth to Nancy while in her forties. He persuaded Ruby to try for a child one last time, promising her the best medical care available, whatever the cost. Things, however, hadn't worked out quite the way Homer had hoped, and his wife and future heir (a boy) ended up on mortuary slabs in the Memphis Baptist Memorial Hospital.

Still grieving the loss of Martha, Hilton Travis was totally unprepared for the loss of Ruby. He could understand the death of his wife, but not the death of a daughter, and in his mind he knew the person responsible for it: Homer F Comer. (And the F he placed between Homer and Comer didn't stand for Fred – Homer had no middle name.)

For the sake of his family, however, Hilton made heroic efforts to disguise the feelings of contempt he now bore his son-in-law, but in doing so often failed miserably. During one of her regular visits to Oaklands – and several months after Ruby's body had been laid to rest – Nancy had asked him casually how Homer was doing. Hilton had looked up from the newspaper he'd been reading and said matter-of-factly that for all he

cared Homer could be crawling across the Tallahatchie Bridge with a knife stuck in his back.

Hilton's disdain for the man only grew after Homer remarried. The insensitivity of this act had appalled him, and caused him to doubt the sincerity of the man's grieving. Another year was to pass, however, before he actually decided to kill his son-in-law.

When Hilton suggested to Homer they take a hunting trip together and get reacquainted, family and friends were surprised. Surprise, however, turned to shock when Hilton returned from the trip with the body of Homer sprawled on the backseat of his truck. 'Terrible business,' Hilton had said, somewhat perfunctorily. 'Shot him by mistake.' That night, and for the first time since the deaths of Martha and Ruby, Hilton could be heard wandering around the house whistling.

It was quickly settled that Homer's death had been an accident, that he'd been killed by a single shot to the back of the head after Hilton had mistaken him for a buck. Even though the sheriff thought the damage to Homer's skull suggested that the bullet had come from much closer range than that described by Hilton, he readily accepted Hilton's story. Hilton Travis, after all, was a friend and, moreover, the person who had been most instrumental in securing his election as sheriff in the first place.

Though Hilton knew his actions would never bring Ruby back to life, he was consoled in his final years by the knowledge that Homer had now joined her in death; buried in his own county far away from the Travis family plot. Still an elegant man in his old age, Hilton dated occasionally but told his children he would never remarry. He died of a heart attack in his eightieth year and was buried next to his beloved wife.

'Jesus, Nancy, that's some story,' Doc said. 'No one could ever accuse your family of being dull.'

'True,' Nancy replied, 'but on reflection, dull would have been preferable. Dull and ordinary. No major ups and no major downs. No tragedies. But that's not the way life is, is it? You know that as much as I do.'

Doc nodded. 'You know who I've often thought about over the years?' he asked. 'Dora. I never met anyone quite like her. She still brings a smile to my face.'

Nancy laughed. 'Well, Gene, you might like to know that she never forgave you for what you said about her cooking. You sure wiped the smile from her face.'

'That was your damned brother's doing,' Doc said. 'I hope to God he's

dead – sorry, Nancy. Just a figure of speech. Of course I don't hope that. How is he?'

'Alive,' Nancy said, 'though I don't have much to do with him these days, and can't remember the last time I actually saw him. It might have been better if he had died. Maybe then, Oaklands would still be in the family. Do you know where he's living now?' Doc indicated he didn't. 'In an apartment complex in Clarksdale!'

Hilton had left Oaklands equally to his three surviving children. Brandon had been charged with its stewardship on the understanding that all profits would be shared with his siblings on a yearly basis. Neither Nancy nor Daisy had minded when Brandon moved his family into Oaklands: from a farming perspective it made practical sense, and as both daughters had established lives outside the state, neither had any interest in moving back to Mississippi. For the first few years Hilton's arrangements ran to plan, the estate continued to prosper and dividends were deposited into Nancy and Daisy's bank accounts. But then things took a turn for the worse. Apart from his personality, Brandon had one other weakness: he was a gambling man and, ultimately, an unsuccessful one.

During his father's lifetime, Brandon's gambling had been controlled and hidden from the rest of the family by the finite salary he received and his lack of any real collateral. When he moved into Oaklands and took control of the estate's finances, however, all constraints were removed and the wagers he ventured grew larger as his trips to Las Vegas became more frequent. His reputation as a high roller crystallized in the city, and casinos vied with each other to fly him free of charge to their desert lairs and accommodate him, at no cost, in their best hotel suites. Brandon was too dumb, too addicted to smell a rat. All he smelled was money and, eventually, his own stale sweat.

'Brandon gambled Oaklands clean away. The estate had to be sold to repay his debts and what was left, which wasn't much, Daisy and I shared. Brandon's wife left him and took the children with her. He got a job as a farm manager, and ever since he's rented a place. He's supposed to have gotten treatment for his addiction, but I still hear stories of him bumming rides to Tunica and catching the bus to the casinos on the Gulf Coast.

'He's started calling recently, asking me about my health and feigning concern. He's waiting for me to go like Mom, thinking he'll get my money when I die, but that's never going to happen. He doesn't know it, but I've already made my will and he gets squat. He'll contest it, of course – if he's

still alive – but the lawyers have told me that the will is water-tight, and I also have doctors on record attesting to the fact that the state of my mind was sound when I wrote it.'

Nancy's story unfolded over the two days they spent together in Hershey. The first evening of Doc's visit they ate at his hotel. Aware of the formality of the hotel's elegant Circular Dining Room, Nancy had brought him one of Arnold's suits to wear. Doc agreed to wear the jacket but told Nancy that if it was okay with her, and with no disrespect to Arnold intended, he'd stick to wearing his own pants.

On the second evening, and the night before Doc was scheduled to return home, Nancy cooked a meal at her house. After they'd eaten, they retired to the living room and Nancy poured brandy into two snifter glasses.

'That was a damn fine meal, Nancy,' Doc said. 'Not bad for a girl who could only cook grilled cheese sandwiches when I met her.'

Nancy smiled. 'Do you think the elephant enjoyed his meal, too?'

'What elephant?'

'The one in the room, Gene. We've spent two lovely days together – and I mean that – but we've both been avoiding the one subject we have to talk about, the reason I phoned you.'

'I presume you mean the promise I made to you at Oaklands?'

'Yes,' Nancy said. 'I need to know if you're still prepared to keep it.'

It was the conversation Doc had dreaded.

The Promise

Like most decisions Doc made in life, his promise to help Nancy had initially come from the gut. It was a decision-making process that generally worked well for him. His track record for getting things right or wrong was no better or worse than those of his more cerebral-minded peers who, no doubt, would have dismissed his two-cigarette decision as hasty and ill-considered. In Doc's mind, however, he could have stood in that cotton field for another two years and still come to the same conclusion; all the reading and subsequent thought he'd given the matter had in no way changed his mind.

Doc believed that death was a part of life's course, natural and unavoidable. Sometimes, it was a bad thing, as in the case of Beth and Esther, but other times it could be a good thing, a blessing. After a lifetime spent ministering to the sick and dying, it was difficult for him to think

any differently. He'd watched terminally ill patients inch their way towards painful and undignified deaths too often, and it had been impossible for him not to register their sufferings. On occasion, he'd given them drugs to reduce their pain, even though he knew – and, if truth be told, often hoped – that the drug itself would cause the patient to die sooner. He had felt no guilt.

In Doc's opinion, any person with no hope of recovery and no quality of life had the right to decide the circumstances of their own death, when it would happen and how it would happen. He saw no reason for a person to go on living against their wishes and exist for the sake of existence. Moreover, Doc wasn't a religious man, and so wasn't swayed by the argument that only God could determine the length of a person's life and how that life ended.

Doc knew that Nancy's request to die was of her own volition and that she'd considered it well. No one had pressurized her into making this decision, and no close family member now remained to be affected by her premature death. He knew too, that the future she faced was one of wretchedness and indignity, a future without hope.

In light of this logic, the answer to Nancy's question should have been a simple yes, but it wasn't. He should never have hesitated in granting her wish, but he did. When it came down to it, Nancy wasn't an abstract idea – she was a living friend. He hated the idea of losing her again.

'You're sure about this?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'One hundred per cent sure. Anything I say to the contrary after this evening, you should ignore.'

'But what if I promise to take care of you instead; swear to you that I'll never put you in a nursing home?'

'No, Gene, I don't want that! I don't want that for me and I don't want that for you. And besides, you might die before I do, and where would that leave me then?'

Doc was silent for a moment and then looked Nancy in the eyes. 'Okay, you still have my word on it. When I judge the time's come, I'll take care of it. You won't suffer.'

In that moment, he honestly believed he was telling her the truth.

Nancy breathed an audible sigh of relief. She'd worried that her long-ago desertion of him might have changed his mind and in some way negated the promise he'd made to her at Oaklands. She hugged him and started to cry, while Doc stood there feeling numb.

Nancy composed herself and returned to the matter at hand in a

business-like, almost detached manner. She told Doc she wanted to die in Coffeeville. Doc's job was to get her there and, after her death, contact a firm of attorneys in Hershey who would then take matters in hand. Her will, she said, stipulated that she was to be buried in the family plot close to Oaklands, alongside Ruby and her parents. Once settled, her estate would be divided equally between Milton Hershey School and Alzheimer's Research; there were to be no other beneficiaries.

'Before we have to leave Hershey though, I'd like you to choose something of mine; anything at all that might remind you of me after I'm gone, and hopefully bring back fond memories.'

'Not one of Arnold's suits, then?'

'Hah! Did I tell you that Arnold was a Republican, Gene? No? Well he was. Last night you wore a Republican's jacket! How about that?'

Doc smiled. 'Why Coffeeville, Nancy, and where the hell is it?'

'It's in Mississippi but away from the Delta. It's maybe forty miles or so from Oaklands, but in another county – Yalobusha. It's small: only a few hundred people live there. My father owned a farm on its outskirts, for tax reasons as much as anything, and he left it to me and Daisy when he died. It's secluded and not even Brandon knows about it. I became sole owner when Daisy passed, and Brandon thinks I sold it. I did, but only to Arnold. He put it in the name of a limited purpose corporation and leased it to a management company in Memphis that sold hunting rights. The lease expires next year and from that time it will be empty. Ideally, I'd have liked to have died at Oaklands, but that's no longer possible. This is the next best thing. After all this time and I'm still a Miss'ippi girl. Can you believe it?'

'I can believe anything of you and your family, Nancy. Strangest bunch of people I ever met… I'll take the portrait, by the way.'

'Of Arnold?' Nancy asked, somewhat surprised.

'No, of you, you clutz. It's hanging right there above the fireplace.'

'Sure,' Nancy said. 'If that's what you want. I never thought it was all that flattering of me, to tell you the truth. The nose is nothing like mine. I think the artist spent more time painting the bowl of fruit on the table than he did considering my face.'

'I think it captures you just fine,' Doc said. 'But do me a favour, will you: can I take it with me tomorrow?'

Doc had reason to ask for it now. Once Nancy was dead, he wasn't sure if he'd need anything to remind him of her.

The next day, Doc drove home with the portrait of Nancy propped on

the backseat of the car and the cow song going round in his head. For some reason, Arnold's final words also kept popping into his mind: 'Dust, where does it come from? Money, where does it go?'

A Visit to the Doctor's

Doc made two more trips to Hershey and then Nancy visited him. He picked her up at the airport.

'Good journey?'

'So far,' Nancy replied. 'Don't you think you're driving a bit close to that car in front?'

'What car?' Doc asked.

'God in Heaven, Gene! How bad *are* your eyes? I don't want to die just yet!'

'You won't die with me at the wheel, Nancy. This car's got the best airbags on the market!'

While Doc manoeuvred erratically through the afternoon's traffic, Nancy glanced at him nervously and held on to the door handle. She gave a sigh of relief when, eventually, he pulled into his driveway.

'Oh shit!' Doc said. 'Frisbee's out front. Don't make eye contact!'

Dennis Frisbee was Doc's next-door neighbour and Doc had disliked him from first meeting. It wasn't the man's stupid comb over or loose bottom lip that caused Doc's aversion – though, in truth, neither of these helped – but the fact that Frisbee was a crashing and self-centred bore, inconscient and uncaring of the discomfort his rambling monologues caused others.

'Hey, Doctor Chaney,' Frisbee called out to him. 'Are you going to introduce me to your lady friend?'

'No!' Doc said. 'And I've told you before: either muzzle that dog or I'll have it put down!'

Doc took Nancy's bag from the trunk and ushered her into the house.

'That was a bit rude of you, wasn't it, Gene?' Nancy said. 'All the man wanted to do was say hello.'

'Believe me, Nancy, I did you a favour. That man's a menace, and so too is his dog – the damn thing bit me last year.'

'What kind of dog is it?' Nancy asked.

'Part pit bull and part West Highland terrier, but don't ask me which part is which because I haven't a clue, and I doubt Frisbee has either.'

'He's not invited to the barbecue, then?' Nancy smiled. 'Who will be coming?'

Doc looked at her puzzled. 'Just you and me, Nancy. There is no one else to ask.'

Doc carried Nancy's bag upstairs and showed her to the guest room. At Nancy's request, he then reluctantly gave her a tour of the house. 'They're just rooms, Nancy. You'll find the same in all houses.'

'Stop being so stubborn, Gene, and just show me!'

Gene led her through the house and ended the tour in the living room. 'So, what do you think?'

'I can't get over how neat and tidy everything is. Maybe I'm misremembering how you used to be, but I thought you'd be living more like a slob, especially when you dress the way you do.'

'Give me a break, Nancy! There's nothing wrong with the way I dress. Coffee?'

They stood for a while in the kitchen and then took their cups through to the living room, where Nancy's attention was drawn to the framed photographs arranged on the sideboard. She moved towards them and picked one up.

'Oh Gene, this is beautiful! Is this a photograph of Beth and Esther?'

'Yes,' Doc said. 'It was taken on Esther's first birthday, shortly before the accident.'

'It must have been awful for you. How did you hear of the accident – or would you prefer not to talk about it?'

'No, it's okay,' Doc said. 'I was at the surgery when the call came through, getting ready for some home visits. I don't know why, but I had a feeling it was bad news even before anything was said. I couldn't let go of the phone – another doctor had to prise it from my grip. Damn near broke my fingers.

'But, you know what they say: life goes on. And it did, but it's never been the same, and I never expected it to be.'

Nancy stroked his back comfortingly, and then carefully replaced the photograph. She moved on to the next one, hoping for happier stories. 'Who are these people?'

'The old guy's Sydney Guravitch, and the young one's his son – and my godson – Jack.'

'Couldn't they come to the barbecue?' Nancy asked.

'Jack lives too far distant, Nancy, and Sydney's tied up at the cemetery these days.'

'Is he a groundskeeper there?' Nancy asked.

'No, he's a resident,' Doc explained. 'He was my best friend, too. Died of a heart attack the same year you phoned. It's a pity the two of you never got to meet.'

Sydney had been two years younger than Doc and displayed none of his friend's academic ability or ambition. He'd followed his father into portrait photography and continued to work in the studio after his father had died. His world view was finite; he'd stayed local and married local. He'd been there when Doc went away to university and there when he returned; there when Doc left to practise medicine in Maryland and still there when Doc returned from Maryland. Sydney had, in fact, been the only constant in Doc's life, and Doc told Nancy how much he missed his old friend: the ease of his company, the minutiae of their conversation and the unreserved nature of his loyalty.

'I'm sorry, Gene. I didn't realise. What about Jack? Are you close to him, or is it just the usual godparent–son relationship? You said he lived far away.'

'He does. He lives in Arizona, but we're still close. He's a good kid, a friend more than a godson. It's a good relationship.'

'Shall we move away from the photographs?'

'Yes, let's do that. It's not wise to have more than one dead person ganging up on you at any one time.'

'What a strange thing to say. Are you mad at me for asking about them?'

'No, of course I'm not mad at you, Nancy. It was just a throw-away comment. I didn't mean anything by it.'

He changed the subject. 'I've booked a table for eight o'clock, so you have time to shower if you want.'

Nancy went to her room, and when Doc heard the sound of running water he returned to the sideboard and stared at the photographs.

They ate in an Italian restaurant, small and noisy. They talked easily but aimlessly during the meal, and it was only after the dessert dishes had been cleared and coffee served that Doc asked Nancy if she'd noticed any changes.

'It's words mainly,' Nancy said. 'I see objects I've seen all my life and I find myself struggling to remember what they're called. It could be something as simple as a pan or an ice-cream scoop. I keep misplacing things, too, and God knows how many times I've keyed the wrong code into the alarm system. I'm thinking it might be easier just to have it

disconnected. It's frustrating, but at the moment that's all it is. It's manageable.'

'Sometimes it's difficult to know what's caused by Alzheimer's and what's caused by old age,' Doc said. 'I have to search for words these days too, and I've lost count of the times I've gone into a room and then wondered why I was there. I wouldn't worry too much about it, if I were you. Are you on any kind of medication?'

'The doctor wrote me a prescription, but I don't know if the pills are helping or not. Don't worry though, Gene, I still have a few good years in me yet.'

'I hope so,' Doc said. 'It's nice having a friend again.'

Nancy smiled and took hold of his hand. 'It is, isn't it? It was only after Arnold died that I realised how important it was to share an experience with another person. If I hadn't been there with Arnold, I'm sure the Grand Canyon would have been no more than a big hole in Colorado and Venice just a crumbling and waterlogged city in Italy.'

'Nicely put, Nancy. It's as if you studied literature at university. You didn't by any chance read the works of the nineteenth century English poets, did you?'

'If you value your shins, Gene, I suggest you don't say another word! Now pay the check and let's go. I've had enough of you for one day!'

Doc smiled broadly – and then did as he was told.

'You have to bear in mind, Nancy, that this town isn't Hershey. There's not much to do here but potter.'

'Then let's potter. We can go for a walk.'

They were about to leave the house when Doc saw Frisbee emerge from his front door. 'Hold your horses, Nancy! Let's wait till he's gone.'

'Oh really, Gene! Don't tell me you're a prisoner in your own house because of that man. What if he stays there?'

'He won't. He's already climbing into his car – probably going to visit that new girlfriend of his.'

'What's she like?' Nancy asked.

'I think he dug her up at the cemetery,' Doc said absent-mindedly

'Gene!'

Doc took Nancy to a small park he occasionally visited. They walked for a while, and then sat down on one of its old wooden benches and watched children play softball. Doc's eyes closed and for a few minutes he dozed, jolted awake by a cheer from watching parents. He glanced at

Nancy. She was lost in thought, staring into a distance of a thousand yards.

'Penny for them,' he said.

Nancy turned to him and smiled. 'You used to ask me that all the time. Do you remember? It used to irritate the hell out of me, too.'

'I might well have done, but from what I remember you never once gave me a straight answer. You used to shut me out – remember? It's me that should have been irritated.'

'I wasn't consciously shutting you out, Gene. It's just that there were some things I didn't want to talk about. It was difficult enough just thinking about them.'

'So, are you going to tell me now?'

'I was thinking about children, if you must know. I suppose it's sitting here with so many parents watching their own children at play. They all look so happy, don't they? I was just wondering what it would be like to be them; what it would have been like if the two of us had married and had children, been able to lead normal lives like everyone else. I'm being silly, I know, but sometimes I get like this.'

'Do you regret not having children?' Doc asked.

'I don't regret the decision not to have children – but yes, the biggest regret in my life is not to have been a mother. There's not a day goes by that I don't consider it.'

Doc took hold of her hand, and Nancy rested her head on his shoulder.

'Do you hate me for having the abortion?' she asked quietly.

'Of course I don't hate you. What you did was selfless – it wasn't an act of convenience. I wish you'd have told me at the time you were pregnant, though, and not just disappeared the way you did. It was my child as well as yours and we should at least have discussed it. In all likelihood, I would have tried to persuade you to keep the baby, but for reasons probably no less selfish than Homer wanting Ruby to have his child.

'At the end of the day I'd have gone with whatever you decided, though. It was your body, so it was always your right to choose. If you'd decided to go ahead with the abortion after we'd talked, then I'd have supported you in that decision. You should never have doubted me on that, and you should never have gone through the abortion on your own.'

There was a lull in the conversation, and then a shout of warning as a ball came sailing towards them. With reflexes Doc was no longer aware of having, he caught the ball one-handed, and to cheers from both children and parents, threw it to the nearest player.

'Well done, you!' Nancy said admiringly.

'It was either catching it or getting zonked on the head!' Doc said. 'Let's move before a ball comes our way that I *can't* catch. I don't want you going back to Hershey with a black eye!'

Nancy took his arm and they walked from the park.

'You know what you were saying about us getting married if things had been different? Did you mean that?'

'Yes, I think we'd have married,' Nancy replied. 'I'm not sure my father would have approved, and Brandon certainly wouldn't. He told me if I married you, he wouldn't come to the wedding – but that was more of an incentive *to* marry you!'

'How come your father never warmed to me?'

'My father never warmed to any of my boyfriends. I'm not sure he even liked Arnold for that matter, but by that time he was more concerned that I wouldn't get married, rather than who I married. How did you get on with Beth's parents?'

'Not a whole lot better, come to think of it. We stayed in touch for a while after the funeral, but not for long. Beth and Esther were the only things we had in common, and I suspect that deep down they blamed me for their deaths. Beth's mother – she was the force in the family – once told me it should have been me that had been killed. She was drunk at the time and apologised later, but I think she meant it. In my experience, people usually say what they mean after a few drinks.'

They came to a halt in front of a small stone church and Doc pushed open the gate. He took hold of Nancy's hand and led her to the churchyard at its rear, where his parents and Sydney lay buried.

'I think this is the first time I've been taken to a cemetery on a date, Gene. You sure know how to show a girl a good time.'

'It's pretty here, Nancy – peaceful too. Some days I bring a sandwich and eat lunch.'

'Are Beth and Esther buried here?'

'No, they were cremated. I keep their ashes in the house.'

'They're not in my room, are they?' Nancy asked, slightly alarmed by the idea.

'No, the urns are in the garage.'

'Don't you think you're being a bit morbid?'

'No,' Doc replied, slightly baffled by the question. 'I keep them next to the six-inch nails.'

'But why would you want to keep them at all?' Nancy pressed.

'Because when I die I'm going to be cremated too, and I've arranged for all the ashes to be scattered in a sandy area of Zion National Park – it's where Beth and I honeymooned.'

'You'd look well if there is a spirit world,' Nancy said. 'The only people you'd meet there would be Paiute Indians, and I doubt you'd understand a word they said! Anyway, let's go. All this talk of death is starting to depress me. We could go to a matinee, if you like – maybe take in a comedy.'

Doc slept through the movie but Nancy enjoyed it, laughing at all the contrived slapstick. They drove home and Doc prepared the barbecue he'd promised her.

'Does the dog next door always bark this much?' Nancy asked.

'Yes, and if I had a gun I'd shoot it!'

'I can't even envisage you holding a gun, Gene,' Nancy laughed. 'Arnold had a big collection, though. I gave them away when he died.'

'To the police?'

'No, to the school children. Of course I gave them to the police!'

After the plates had been cleared Doc excused himself, explaining to Nancy that he had meat stuck in his teeth. He went to the bathroom and flossed, and then returned to the living room where Nancy was sitting. 'If I was a pharaoh, I'd forego the ornaments and treasure and insist they bury me with a box of dental tape in my sarcophagus: there's nothing worse than having food stuck in your teeth.'

Nancy smiled. 'You're not a pharaoh though, are you, Gene, and seeing as how you're going to be cremated when you die, it would be a waste of everyone's money. Now tell me, where did you get that piece of artwork above the fireplace?'

'*The Barbed Wire Flag*? It was a present from a friend.'

'Well, he must have known you well. I suspect that the metal bars and barbed wire are meant to be representations of separation and containment, and that's you Gene. That's your life.'

'I'd be surprised if the artist was thinking that deeply,' Gene replied with a smile. He shook a cigarette from its pack and moved towards the door.

'Where do you think you're going?' Nancy demanded. 'I'm talking to you! And don't think I haven't noticed how you use cigarettes to escape people and conversations you don't want to have. Now sit down and listen to me!'

Gene sat down and poured himself a large measure of red wine.

'And that's another thing. I've noticed you drink to be with people, too.'

'Jesus, Nancy! I drink to be with myself. What's all this about?'

Nancy moved to sit next to him.

'I'm talking to you as a friend now, Gene, and not someone trying to hurt you. One day my mind is going to go, and when it does I won't make any sense; but while I still do, please listen to me.

'For most people life is too short, but for you – it's as if it's been too long already. There's no reason why your life has to be so empty and solitary. You're not the first person to have suffered tragedy and you won't be the last. People bounce back from such misfortune, and it's okay to do that: it's not a betrayal of the people who are dead. Beth would have wanted you to enjoy life, to live it to the full!'

Doc listened impassively, disbelieving that Nancy might consider he hadn't turned these thoughts in his mind a thousand times already.

'Doesn't it ever strike you as odd,' she continued, 'that I've still managed to lead a meaningful life while knowing the worst is yet to happen, while you appear to have led a meaningless life after the worst has already happened?'

Doc shifted uncomfortably. 'I don't feel sorry for myself, if that's what you're thinking. Besides, I think there's a self-limiting gene in the Chaney DNA: I remember my father withering on the vine after my mother died.'

'That's nonsense, Gene, and you know it. The only self-limiting gene in your family is you, Gene!' (Or had she said Eugene?) 'I worry about you, do you know that? I worry what will become of you after I'm gone.'

'I'll be fine, Nancy. I'll potter about for a while, and then go blind.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I have macular degeneration. I'm losing my sight.'

'Well, that explains your driving then, but I can't see it being responsible for all this pessimism of yours. You're wandering around in a world full of minor chords. Do you know this? Your glass is always half empty, never half full.'

Doc pretended to give the matter serious thought. 'I don't know about you, Nancy,' he said eventually, 'but I've always found that a cliché is as good a place as any to leave a conversation. I'm going to smoke that cigarette now!'

'Ugh, Gene, I give up, I really do!'

Doc smoked his cigarette and returned to the room where Nancy was

sitting with her arms folded. He kissed her on the cheek. 'I'm sorry, Nancy. Thanks for what you said.'

'I doubt my words have done a scrap of good!'

'Probably not,' he smiled. 'But let's look on the bright side – there's always tomorrow!'

Nancy punched his arm.

Conversation returned to less controversial topics and Doc refilled their glasses.

'Where's that, er, square thing you took from my house? The thing with me in it?'

'Your portrait?'

'That's the word! See what I mean? A simple word and I forget it!'

Doc led her to the study and showed it to her. It was on the same wall as an autographed photograph of Martin Luther King.

'Did he sign this for you personally?' Nancy asked.

'No, I bought it in a shop,' Doc said.

'When did you leave the civil rights movement, by the way? After they locked you up in Jackson?'

'About that time. It wasn't so much the arrest as the music, though. *Michael Row the Boat Ashore* was bad enough, but nothing compared with *We Shall Overcome*. I grew to hate that song with a passion and, if you want to know the truth, I got sick of the sanctimony of the people who sang it.'

Nancy laughed. 'What happened to Bob? Did he have musical differences with the movement too?'

'He was killed in action in 1965,' Doc said, secretly pleased to be able to wipe the smile from Nancy's face. 'Having said that,' he continued slowly and deliberately, 'he gave me *The Barbed Wire Flag* you were admiring, just five years ago.

'We could pay him a visit if you like…'

2
Bob

Mississippi

The last occasion Doc had spent time with the man known as Bob Crenshaw was in the summer of 1964, in Hinds County, Mississippi, to be precise. It was the final days of their civil rights activism, and Doc was still called Gene.

Two years had passed since the time of the Freedom Rides, and the civil rights movement had gathered momentum. The national spotlight now oscillated between the states of Mississippi and Alabama, the towns of Oxford and Birmingham, and Governors Ross Barnett and George Wallace. It illuminated their dark and shabby corners, and captured on film the brutality of methods used to stem the threatening tide: electric cattle prods, clubs, high-pressure water hoses and savage dogs. It recorded bombings and burnings, bullets fired and Molotov cocktails thrown, white-sheeted Klansmen and burning crosses. And then came the summer of 1964 and the fateful decision to drive the registration of black voters in the state with the lowest registered percentage – the state of Mississippi.

'C'mon, man, one las' trip; one mo' try to get the black man on the ladder,' Bob said to Gene.

Gene didn't need much persuading. His student days were coming to an end, and very soon he'd be stuck in full-time employment with his freedom effectively curtailed. There was also the possibility that he might bump into Nancy.

'Okay, let's do it. When do we go?'

'Two weeks,' Bob said. 'I jus' need time to sort some things out b'fore we go. We'll take my car. One place it'll fit right in is Miss'ippi; they all poor as dirt down there.'

Gene and Bob arrived in Mississippi in the second week of July and reported to a small black church on the outskirts of Jackson. At the evening's orientation meeting, they were told of three activists who'd gone

missing in another part of the state while investigating the burning of a black church. 'Be careful,' they were warned. 'Stick together, vary your movements and steer clear of the local police.'

Over a drink that night, Bob said to Gene: 'Let me aks you somethin', Gene?'

For some unknown reason, Bob had developed the habit of prefacing any question he had for Gene with a question to ask it, or to Gene's hearing of the word, *axe* it.

'Axe, Bob? Axe? It's ask, there's no X in the word! No wonder white folks are scared to death of you and your brothers when they hear you talking about axes all the time. They probably think you're going to creep up in the night and chop them into little pieces. Have you ever stopped to think that maybe the black people's worst enemy is their own diction?'

'You too much, man, too much,' Bob laughed.

'So what's your question?'

'I ain't aksin' it now. I takin' offence on behalf o' my people.'

'Suit yourself.'

A few minutes later, Bob spoke again: 'Let me aks you somethin', Gene?'

'What?'

'Same question I was gonna aks you b'fore.'

'Okay.'

'What you think o' my hair?'

Bob had spent the last two years of his life growing an Afro and it had become his pride and joy. He'd comb it over and again, taking out tangles and ensuring its symmetry with a wide-toothed comb he kept lodged in his hair.

'I think it looks good,' Gene said, somewhat nonplussed. 'Why do you ask?'

''Cos you ain't never said, not once mentioned it.'

'Well, I think it suits you. What does it feel like?'

'Well it don't feel like no Brillo pad, if that what you thinkin'! I get tired o' that ol' ches'nut. It soft and springy if you really wants to know.'

'Can I touch it?'

'You ain't turnin' fruity on me, are you, Gene? Cain't says I see'd you with a girl since Nancy hightailed it.' He laughed and then gave Gene permission: 'Don't go messin' it!'

'It's like moss!' Gene said surprised. 'It feels good.'

'Well remem'er it, 'cos you ain't touchin' it again. Clumsy hands like yo's'll probably do it a mischief. If you likes it so much, you oughta grow

one yo'self. You could become an honorary brother. You wan' me to put a word in fo' you?'

'I'll stick to being white, thanks. It's an easier life.'

Registering the black vote was slow and often frustrating. It helped if out-of-state volunteers were accompanied by black activists native to the state, but even then they were often viewed with suspicion. Worse was the reaction of white Mississippians, who resented outsiders coming to their state to change it: unsurprisingly, some volunteers were beaten and hundreds more arrested. The news that the three missing activists had been found murdered, however, came as a shock.

The three bodies were discovered buried under an earthen dam near the small town of Philadelphia. Two of the dead were white and from New York, and the third was a twenty-one-year-old local Negro from Mississippi called James Chaney. (Nancy would later tell Gene that she misheard the name when it was first read out on the news, and for two hours thought it was he who was dead.) Two bullets were found in each of the white bodies and three in Chaney's, which had also been badly beaten; as always, Mississippi was more generous to its own – if also less forgiving. The nation was appalled by the outrage, and the government sent the FBI to investigate. It was their presence in Jackson that probably saved Bob and Gene from similar fates.

It was late afternoon, and the two of them were driving to eat at a friend's house in Jackson. There was little traffic on the road and Bob was driving within the speed limit. It was Gene who first noticed the flashing blue lights behind them.

'Shit,' Bob said. 'What you suppose they want?'

'God knows,' Gene replied, 'Probably just to mess with us.'

When Bob failed to stop, the police car pulled alongside him. The cop on the passenger side rolled down his window and shouted: 'Pull over! Pull over!'

'I ain't wearin' no pullover, man,' Bob shouted back at him. 'It's a jacket, seventeen dollars an' change from Sears, Roebuck.'

'Jesus Christ, Bob,' Gene said, 'Don't fool with the man. Do as he says. There's another police car behind us now!'

Bob checked the mirror to confirm what Gene had told him, and then slammed his foot on the brake. The police car following was taken unawares and smashed into the back of them. There was no way, Gene thought, that Bob hadn't intended for this to happen.

Bob got out of the car and walked to its rear to survey the damage. He turned to the driver. 'Yo' gonna have to make restitution, sir. *You* went into the back of *me*. It's the law o' the land, I b'lieve.'

'Fuck the law,' the policeman said, 'You've broken my damn nose, you fuckin' nigger!'

One of the cops from the first car drew his baton and clubbed Bob on the back of the head. In a knee-jerk reaction, Bob turned and punched the cop on the jaw, knocking him clean out. The third and fourth policemen drew guns, and only then was order on the roadside restored.

As only one of the three vehicles was now capable of being driven, all six men crammed into the surviving police car and drove into downtown Jackson, with Gene and Bob in handcuffs. 'Cain't help thinkin' six in a car's illegal,' Bob said to no one in particular.

'You're lucky we don't stuff yo' damn nigger ass in the trunk,' the policeman with the broken nose said.

Bob was charged with resisting arrest, assaulting a police officer (two), dangerous driving and reckless endangerment, while Gene was charged with being his accomplice. They were processed together, but then separated: Bob was taken to a holding cell reserved for blacks, and Gene to one reserved for whites; oddly, both cells were painted lime-green.

Alone in his cell, Gene was unashamedly scared; a prisoner in a foreign land whose language, judicial system and customs were alien and unintelligible. He took deep breaths, waited for the feelings of panic to subside, and wiped the palms of his hands on his trousers. What the hell had got into Bob?

He thought of his parents, of Nancy, and wondered when, or if, he'd ever see them again. He worried about being sent to the notorious state prison and his chances of survival there; if he was falling apart now, how on earth would he survive in Parchman Farm? He doubted that a civil rights activist would be given the friendliest of receptions there, either by guards or inmates.

He paced the small cell for a time and then tried to distract himself by exercise: push-ups and sit-ups. Eventually, he lay down on the small cot and stared at the ceiling, listened to the sounds of the building and the occasional muffled voice. At last, he fell into a sporadic and disturbed sleep, resigned to the worst.

When the cell door opened the following morning Gene was already awake, but, when told he was now free to leave, wondered if he was still

asleep and dreaming. 'I can go?' he asked.

'I don't know who your nigger friend is or who *his* friends are, but we been told we cain't hold you. I don't know how many lucky days you had in your life, young fellah, but I doubt you'll have one lucky as this again. Now get your ass into gear and follow me.'

Gene was led to the reception area and handed over to two FBI agents.

'You know the deal?' the Chief of Police said to the agents. 'He's on the next bus out of the state or we re-arrest him. You got that?'

One of the agents nodded, and took Gene to a waiting car.

'Where's Bob?' Gene asked. 'Shouldn't we wait for him?'

'He's already gone,' the agent replied. 'He told us to tell you that the deal cost him his Afro – if that means anything to you.'

Under the Radar

Bob Crenshaw was born into a loving family, but the love soon ran out.

Moses and Clarissa Crenshaw did everything in their lives early: they married early, became parents early and died early. The dreams that would eventually separate them from each other and Bob, however, formed late in their young lives and were no more than opaque desires on the day they exchanged vows. They set up home in Atlanta. Mo went to work at the Coca-Cola bottling plant and Clarissa found work as a seamstress. Their lives were comfortable and, until the birth of Bob, uncomplicated. It was Bob's unanticipated arrival, however, that catalysed their opaque desires into transparent dreams.

Barely out of their own childhoods, and now with a child of their own to look after, Mo and Clarissa started to feel trapped. It was at this juncture that Mo realised he'd always wanted to travel the world and Clarissa, that she'd always wanted to be a jazz singer. The cruelty of these realisations became all the more unrelenting after Mo and Clarissa accepted that their dreams would never be fulfilled. But then the United States declared war on Germany and Mo, at least, got his chance to travel.

Mo was taken by train to New York and then by ship to Liverpool, England. From there he was transported to a training camp on the Isle of Wight, where he and other recruits prepared for the planned invasion of Europe. He wrote letters home describing his journey, the English countryside, its climate and its people, and the new friends he'd made. He told Clarissa that he didn't think it would be too long before he'd be returning home, and that he loved and missed her and Little Bob. What

he didn't tell her in these letters was that he was having the time of his life. What he also didn't tell Clarissa in these letters was that his life was nearing its end – though this, he himself didn't know at the time.

D-Day arrived and Mo's company set sail for an area on the coast of Normandy designated Omaha Beach. They were promised a display of precision bombing that would decimate the German defences and allow them a Sunday morning's stroll along the beach and, in all probability, an early breakfast of coffee and croissants in one of the local cafes. As it transpired the precision bombing was anything but precise, and the bombs missed their targets completely.

The troops were now faced with having to cover three hundred yards of open sand under heavy fire. Some of them thought it a challenge, others an opportunity, but whatever their thinking they ended up dying in droves, their bodies strewing the beach like clumps of red seaweed. Mo lasted no more than thirty-seven seconds before his travelling days came to an end, his soul departing the beach long before his body was dragged from it. Moses Crenshaw now lies buried in a cemetery overlooking the sea, popular with thousands of other American corpses.

Clarissa took the news of Mo's death badly. Having already found single parenthood difficult, his death not only robbed her of a husband she'd loved, but, in her increasingly fragile state of mind, seemingly fated her to an eternity of being alone with Bob. It wasn't as though she didn't love her son – she did – and it wasn't as though Bob was a difficult child – he wasn't – but he was always there, always. She never had time for herself, and eventually came to resent his constant and suffocating presence.

She knew she had talent. On those rare occasions she managed to persuade family or friends to take Bob for the night, she'd visit jazz clubs in the city's underbelly and guest with various bands. All who heard her voice, its cadence and velvet tones, were impressed, and at least two bands had offered to take her on tour with them. But she'd always had to say no, and explain that she had a young son waiting for her at home. 'Then ditch the kid,' one alto-saxophonist once said to her. At first she'd thought he was joking, but then realised he was deadly serious. The thought started to gnaw away at her, and thinking about it day after day and month after month eventually led her to act upon it. Her decision to abandon Bob and follow her dream fated him to a life spent in the company of his mother's sister, Selena.

On the second of July's two Dismal Days, she and Bob rode the bus to Aunt Selena's small house. It was a Sunday morning and Clarissa knew

that Selena would be in church. She carried a suitcase packed with Bob's clothes and a few toys, and a letter of explanation for her sister. Selena's door was locked, and Clarissa told Bob to wait for his aunt on the porch and hand her the letter when she returned from morning service. She had an errand to run, she told him, but would return in an hour or so. She gave Little Bob a hug and then walked away. Bob stared after her, but she never looked back. It was the last time he saw his mother.

Selena Priddy was a spinster, and no more than four feet two inches tall. She was four years older than Clarissa, and as a growing child had been considered the prettier of the two sisters. Then, at the age of ten, something went wrong with her growing. When the Priddys eventually took their daughter to see a doctor, they were told she had a severe form of scoliosis, or curvature of the spine. Both the family and available treatment at the time were poor, and Selena's growth was effectively stunted. The upper part of her spine continued to curve to the right, while her ribs and shoulder blade started to stick out on the side of her back like a hump.

Returning from church that Sunday morning, Selena was both surprised and overjoyed to see Little Bob sitting on her porch steps. Bob's eyes lit up too when he saw his favourite aunt appear. He ran to kiss her and hand her the letter his mother had written. Selena took the letter and opened the house door.

'You had anythin' to eat, L'il Bob?' she asked.

'No, Ma'am. Nothin' since breakfas'.'

'Well, sit yo'self down an' I'll make us both a san'widge.'

She knew what was in the letter before she even read it. Her sister's behaviour had been getting stranger by the day. All that talk about jazz and how Bob was holding her back. She wondered sometimes if Clarissa wasn't popping some kind of pill, or taking powders when she went to those nightclubs. The letter said she'd be back for Bob in a couple of weeks, but Selena knew it was a lie. 'Looks like it jus' you an' me, L'il Bob,' she murmured to herself. Secretly, she was pleased.

Selena showed Bob real love, the kind of love a small boy of seven should have expected from his mother. Early in their time together, Bob asked her about his mother, if she loved him and when she'd be coming home, but soon stopped asking these questions and appeared to forget about her altogether. He seemed to accept that Aunt Selena was now his new mother, and wasn't unhappy with the situation. He made friends

with children in the neighbourhood, started school there and ended his schooling there.

When Bob was small, he and Selena – forever limited to the fashions of the very young – shopped for clothes in the same children's department store, but it wasn't long before Bob grew taller than his aunt. He'd stand next to her and proudly point out this fact. He never saw the hump on her back or the crookedness of her small body; all he ever saw was someone he loved more than any other person in the world. For her part, Selena was thrilled to have Bob in her life. Apart from her work in the mill during the week, and attending church on the Sunday, hers had been a relatively lonely life. She knew men didn't find her attractive and that she'd never have a husband, but now at least she had her own child. She hoped Clarissa would never return.

Clarissa didn't return: she followed her dream for two years and then died of a heroin overdose. She was found dead in a cheap hotel room by the man who'd introduced her to the drug, the very same man who'd advised her years earlier to ditch Bob. Selena arranged her sister's burial, but for many years made no mention of the matter to Bob.

Bob was a bright child, inquisitive and naturally mischievous; he was also lazy. Miss Priddy lost count of the times she was summoned to the school by his teachers. On her return she would scold Bob, but all he did was smile his big goofy smile at her. Bob did, however, excel on the baseball field: he had a keen eye and an accurate throw, and every year was chosen to pitch for the school team. Nothing made Selena prouder than to see him on the field wearing his baseball uniform, or when Bob took her hand and walked her home after a game.

Bob and Selena walking together made for an incongruous sight. At six feet two, Bob dwarfed his aunt, and from behind it was difficult to tell who the adult was and who the child. Bob, by now, had come to look upon himself as his aunt's protector. He didn't have to rescue her from fist fights, but he couldn't help but notice the snide looks as they walked through town, or hear the cruel jokes made at her expense. Despite Selena telling him to ignore these people, he never hesitated to confront them. These confrontations often led to altercations and, occasionally, an overnight stay in jail. After one such fracas with a white grocer, Bob was given the choice of going to prison for a short spell or joining the army. Both he and Selena opted for the latter.

Bob proved a natural soldier. He was big, strong, naturally athletic and surprisingly – under direction – exceptionally disciplined. He also looked

the part. What really caught the eye of his superiors, however, was his *eye*, and shooting ability. He had twenty-twenty vision and accuracy honed on the baseball field, and years of sitting quietly in a chair watching cartoons on the television had also equipped him with a natural stillness. Bob, they decided, was a natural born sniper.

For his part, Bob delighted in his new-found skill and the elite status he now enjoyed. He boasted of both to his Aunt Selena, and she was the first to know of his posting to Vietnam, though neither of them was too sure just exactly where Vietnam was. The French had known where the country was for some time, and until 1954 had made it their home away from home. In that year, however, their forces were defeated and expelled. What had once been one country, now temporarily became two, split by the Geneva Accords at the seventeenth parallel until elections could be held.

The United States viewed the nationalists in the north of the country as communists, and Ho Chi Minh as no less than a thinner version of Mao Tse-tung. Consequently, to ensure the creation of a non-communist government that would act as a bulwark against communist expansion from the north, it poured vast amounts of financial and military aid into the south. It also sent people. They were amorphously termed advisers or technicians, and their duties were similarly irregular; one of them was Bob.

Bob arrived in Vietnam in 1958. Insurgency in the south had targeted government officials, school teachers, health workers, agricultural officials and village chiefs; Bob's brief was to target the insurgents. For the next two years he rarely moved, spending his time motionless in trees, on the ground or on the roofs of buildings. He stopped counting the bodies at fifty.

Bob's rifle became his best friend. Unlike other snipers stationed there, who preferred the newer and semi-automatic M1D rifle, Bob stuck with the M1903A4 Springfield. It was a pound or two heavier, but its bolt-action made for greater accuracy and range; mounted with a Stith-Kollmorgen Model 4XD scope, Bob could kill a target at 1,200 yards. He called it Old Mo, in memory of his father.

Though he personalised his rifle, Bob never personalised his targets. They always remained targets, and never became living people. The scope allowed him such detachment. Every killing was at a remote distance, and he never had to witness the results of his handiwork at close quarters. Bob felt no guilt, no remorse; in his mind killing was no more than a regular

nine-to-five job sanctioned and paid for by the government. If the US government viewed communism as an evil, then communism *was* an evil.

Bob made friends among the other advisers, but most of his free time was spent alone; he preferred to explore the strangeness of the country he was there to defend, rather than joining them in their search for what they crudely called chicken-chow-pussy. Vietnam, in fact, fascinated him. More people should come visit here, he thought, and within a matter of years they did – hundreds and thousands of them, all soldiers. Unfortunately, it wasn't the kind of tourism Bob had had in mind.

After two years in Vietnam, Bob returned home to serve out his final months at the Fort Bragg army base in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Shortly before his discharge, Bob was summoned to base headquarters and introduced to Colonel William B Fogerty, a man who appeared to live life in the shadows. Even when asked, Fogerty never directly told Bob which agency or branch of government he worked for.

'It doesn't matter, son,' he told Bob. 'The mere fact we're having this conversation on base tells you I'm legit, and that my business isn't just army business but government business.

'You did a hell of a job in Vietnam, Crenshaw; killed more gooks than the rest of the other snipers put together. You're blessed, kid. God has given you a talent for putting lead into people when they least expect it, and it would be a crime to waste it, a sin. Now here's the deal…'

The deal was that Bob would work for him – and therefore the government – on an informal and freelance basis. There would be no contract or written paper trail; he could tell no one what he did or where he went. In return, he would be paid a monthly retainer for – as Fogerty put it – essentially sitting on his butt, and larger sums after completing missions.

Bob took the deal. He'd had little idea of what to do after leaving the army anyway, and this option appeared to allow him the part of being in the army he enjoyed, without the rest of it. Besides, he needed money: Aunt Selena's health had deteriorated. A relatively short lifetime of hard work and deformity had taken its toll, and she'd suffered a stroke; her beautiful face was now as crooked as the rest of her small body.

His decision pleased Fogerty. Apart from one trip to Laos in the three years that followed, the majority of Bob's missions were to Central America: Haiti, Guatemala, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic. Wherever Bob went, dead bodies were left in his wake.

'What you do, Bobby?' Aunt Selena once asked him. 'You never rightly say.' She was in a nursing home now, sitting in a chair propped up with cushions, her small legs sticking out parallel to the floor.

Bob hesitated. 'I work fo' the governmen', Aunt Selena. Take care o' problems o'erseas.'

'But you do good, right?'

He hesitated again. 'I figure so,' he said uncertainly.

He found her questions unsettling. There were official reasons why he could never tell his aunt the truth, but there were also personal grounds. If he told her he killed people for a living, she'd be shocked and more than disappointed in him; and the realisation that he could never tell her the truth also shocked and disappointed him.

He'd been proud of his achievements in Vietnam and had understood the nature of his task there, but now he had no idea of the rights and wrongs of his actions and an uneasy feeling started to eat away at him. He began to question the nature of what he was being asked to do, and over the months that followed reluctantly concluded that it was no more than blood money that allowed his aunt the comfort and care of a nursing home. If she'd known this, Aunt Selena would have left immediately.

His decision to leave his vocation was made all the easier after his aunt's death. Selena's body had never been strong, but her will and spirit had always appeared to Bob to be indomitable. After her stroke, he knew her time on earth would be limited but, even so, was still surprised she died as soon as she did. The second stroke was massive. For two days, Selena lay in a coma, twitching and flinching, her body in the throes of a spasm that looked to be trying to straighten its own misshapen form. And then she died.

Bob had visited his aunt regularly after her first stroke. Her once beautiful smile had become lop-sided, but the light that radiated from her face never dimmed. She still laughed at his stupid jokes, listened to his stories and told him she was proud of what he'd made of himself.

'All this travel o' yo's, Bobby,' she'd once said to him. 'Yo' daddy woulda been jealous. All he ever wanted was to travel the worl'. It prob'ly in yo' blood, boy.'

'If you'da had a chance to travel, Aunt Selena, an' you coulda gone any place in the worl', where would you o' gone to?'

Without blinking an eye, she answered straightaway: 'China, Bobby, I'da gone to China.'

'Why China?' Bob had asked her, somewhat taken aback.

''Cos ever'body there little. No one woulda given me no mind. No one woulda looked twice at me there.'

Bob sat by her bedside stunned into silence. It was the first time his aunt had ever indicated she didn't like the way she looked, or that her appearance had made her life a trial. Because she'd never complained, and seemed to accept the way she was, he'd wrongly presumed it didn't matter to her. Obviously, he'd been wrong, very wrong.

Tears from a six foot two inch man are no larger than those shed by a woman of four feet two, and they still fall – just a lot further.

Aunt Selena died with Bob holding her hand.

The Congo

It was now 1965 and Bob straddled a tree branch in the eastern Congo, the Springfield carefully balanced across his arm. More than a year had passed since he and Gene had been arrested and thrown into jail.

He still kicked himself for getting the two of them locked up, and felt particularly guilty for involving Gene in the roadside altercation. Even at the time he knew he shouldn't have been messing with those police, but something outside his control had driven him on. Maybe it was as simple a thing as a man being programmed to take only so much bullshit in one lifetime, and that by the time the police had pulled him over his quota had been filled. Maybe. He couldn't say for sure. Whatever the reason, he'd managed to get both of them in deeper shit than he could dig either one of them out of. It was then he'd remembered Fogerty and the colonel's last words to him when he'd told him he was quitting.

'You ever change your mind, son, or find yourself in some kind of predicament, call me on this number. I warn you now there'll be a price to pay, because there's no such thing in life as a get out of jail free card – but we can talk about that then.' He'd then written a telephone number on a small blank piece of paper and, for some reason, Bob had placed it in his wallet and kept it. (Bob still thought it strange that Fogerty had used the expression 'get out of jail free card'. How had he known?)

Bob remembered the colonel's words while being led to the cell, and insisted he be allowed the one phone call that was his due. The number Fogerty had given him had rung and rung, and Bob had grown nervous; but then came the familiar click of a phone being lifted from its cradle and the sound of Fogerty's gruff voice.

'You believe in God, Crenshaw?'

'Yes sir, I do.'

'You ever seen Him?'

'Cain't says I have, sir.'

'You ever heard His voice?'

'No sir,' Bob said, wondering where the conversation was heading.

'Well, you're hearing it now, son, and when you see me, as far as you're concerned you'll be seeing Him. From then on, you'll be beholden to me. You got that?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Okay. I'll see you in the next day or so. What's the name of this other clown you want out?'

'Chaney, sir. Gene Chaney.'

Fogerty hung up. Six hours later, Bob was handed over to the FBI and put on a plane for Washington, DC.

The Congo had become independent from Belgium in June 1960. Scarred by the savagery of its colonial experience and cursed by vast mineral wealth, the Democratic Republic soon spiralled into chaos. That the United States judged its first prime minister anti-western also didn't help matters; Patrice Lumumba, they told anyone prepared to listen, was a communist.

The bulk of the nation's wealth – cobalt, copper, gold and uranium – lay in the province of Katanga. Under the leadership of Moise Tshombe, and supported by Belgium and the United States, Katanga seceded from the republic. Patrice Lumumba, meanwhile, was overthrown in a US-inspired military coup led by Joseph Mobutu and, in January 1961, assassinated. Three years later, his ideological heirs rebelled and the United States despatched two hundred advisers and technicians to support the established government, now headed by its old friend Tshombe. Among them was Bob.

Bob had been grateful for Fogerty's intervention in Jackson, but now felt trapped by it. He'd escaped prison in Mississippi only to become a prisoner of the colonel, serving a non-determinate sentence in cells overseas – the Congo being the most recent of a series of such cells. He was wondering how long this situation would prevail when his attention was caught by the glint of sun striking either glass or metal.

He looked through the scope and saw a white man with a trained rifle. The weapon he was holding was an M1D, but had no cone-shaped flash hider; Bob quickly surmised that the man was therefore one of the

mercenaries operating in the area, and not an American. He followed the direction of the man's rifle and made out the crouched figure of a dishevelled-looking Hispanic man in the process of emptying his bowels on to the baked Congo soil.

Bob had to make a split-second decision: did he let the mercenary kill the man, or did he save the man and kill the mercenary? He disliked mercenaries and resented their contempt for the Africans whose country they operated in; he also thought it unfair that any man be shot in the middle of a bowel movement. It was another thought crossing his mind, however, that ultimately won the day for the Hispanic. As the mercenary's finger closed on the gun's trigger, a bullet from Bob's Springfield hit him square in the temple, and the mercenary slumped to the ground.

Bob walked towards the Hispanic with his arms held in a gesture of surrender. The crack of rifle fire had disturbed the man mid-motion, and he trained his pistol on Bob. When Bob saw that his presence had been noted, he carefully took the rifle from his shoulder and placed it on the ground. He then looked away while the man cleaned himself and gathered his trousers.

When the man came towards him, Bob motioned for him to follow. They reached the body of the mercenary, whose arms were heavily tattooed. 'He was gonna shoot you,' Bob said.

'Espanol?' the man replied.

Fortuitously for Bob, the only Puerto Rican family in the whole of Atlanta had lived next door to his Aunt Selena. He'd made friends with the son, and tiring of ever making himself understood in English started to learn Spanish word equivalents. The result was that his friend learned to understand and speak English, while Bob learned to understand and speak Spanish with an almost perfect accent.

'He was going to shoot you,' Bob repeated. 'He's a mercenary.'

'What's your name?' the man asked.

'Bob Crenshaw.'

'American?' Bob nodded.

'Ernesto Guevara de la Serna. I'd give you my hand, but in the circumstances I doubt it hygienic. I'm interested as to why you saved me?'

The part of his name that struck a chord of recognition in Bob's mind was Guevara, and his eyebrows rose. 'Guevara as in *Che* Guevara?' he asked. It was Che's turn to nod.

'Well, I don't like mercenaries, Che.' Bob said, 'But I was also hoping you might be able to help me out. I'd heard there were Cubans operating

in the area and figured you were one of them.'

'Argentinean,' Che corrected him. 'I recently renounced my Cuban citizenship. But help you? How?'

Bob explained his idea. During the endless hours he'd spent in his own company, he'd daydreamed elements of a plan, but the final part had only slipped into place after he'd caught sight of the mercenary and Cuban that morning. His intention had always been to somehow disappear and return to the United States with a new identity, but there had been logistical holes the size of planets in his scheme. By placing the Cuban in his debt, he was hoping to fill at least one of these holes and hitch a ride to Cuba; Cuba, at least, was a lot nearer to home than the Congo.

'And how were you going to disappear? Simply evaporate?' Che asked.

'I was hoping they'd think I was dead,' Bob replied.

'That's no good. Your superiors will want proof. Do you have dog-tags?'

'Not dog-tags as such, but this chain around my neck would identify me to a commanding officer if I got killed.'

'Okay, follow me,' Che said after a few moments thought, and led him to the Cubans' encampment.

'Go get Raoul's body!' he ordered two of the soldiers with hair as long as his. 'Put it on a stretcher, get some gasoline and then follow me.'

The four of them walked back to the tree where Bob had positioned himself that morning, unwrapped Raoul's body and placed it on the ground. Bob saw then that Raoul was Afro-Cuban and pretty much the same height and build as himself. Without being asked, but knowing what he was supposed to do, he took the chain from his own neck and placed it around Raoul's. Che nodded his approval. The mercenary's body was brought to the same spot, and gasoline poured over both.

'It's your death,' Che said to Bob. 'You do the honours.'

Bob struck the match Che passed him, and tossed it on to the bodies. There was a whoosh as the gasoline caught fire and Bob's identity disappeared in flames.

'Now *that's* how you fake your own death,' Che said, a look of satisfaction on his face.

A sudden thought crossed Bob's mind. 'What were Raoul's teeth like?'

Che looked at him. 'I was his commander, not his dentist. How the fuck should I know?'

'It's just that the US army takes teeth seriously.'

'Why? Do you need a perfect smile to join your army these days?' Che sneered. 'I thought you Americans only needed good teeth to run for

political office or enter beauty pageants. We have no time for such fripperies in Cuba. We don't have beauty pageants and we don't have elections.

'So tell me Senor Crenshaw, why *does* the mighty US army take such an interest in the teeth of its soldiers?'

'It keeps dental records for purposes of identification,' Bob said. 'If they recover a body that's been dead for a long time, or mutilated and unrecognisable, they look at the teeth.'

They waited for the flames of fire to lick their last bone, and then poked around the skeletons of Raoul and the mercenary. It became immediately apparent that Raoul's teeth would never pass for Bob's: the central four teeth of Raoul's upper jaw were completely missing.

'Now what?' Bob asked.

Che handed him a machete, kept in a leather scabbard attached to his belt. 'Cut off both heads at the neck and bring their skulls.'

Bob took the machete and did as instructed. He returned the heavy knife to Che and then threaded a piece of thin rope through the eye sockets of each skull. He tied the two ends of the rope together to form a handle, and followed Che and the two Cubans as they headed back in the direction of their encampment. After about a mile Che halted, and ordered one of the Cubans to dig a hole four feet deep.

'Why so deep?' Bob asked.

'To make sure no animal gets a scent of them,' Che replied. 'I think you'll agree that it's best these bones never see the light of day again?'

Bob agreed and, after a while, relieved the Cuban using the spade and finished digging the hole himself. He placed the skulls at its bottom, packed the soil firmly around and above them, and then placed fallen branches and loose vegetation over the disturbed area.

'Congratulations,' Che said to him. 'You are now dead. All we have to do is get you to Cuba.'

For the rest of the day and deep into the night, Bob and Che talked; it was natural that two people now beholden to each other would want to learn more about each other's lives. Che talked about growing up in Argentina, meeting Fidel in Mexico and travelling to Cuba; he talked of the time he'd lived in the Sierra Maestra Mountains fighting Batista and, with less enthusiasm, about his time in government. He told Bob about the disagreements he had with Fidel, how the man was a fool to trust the Soviets after the way they'd betrayed Cuba during the Missile Crisis, and

of his decision to leave Cuba and offer his services to the revolutionaries of the Congo; revolutionaries, he lamented, who'd turned out to be little more than a jumble of in-fighting splinter groups with no discernible revolutionary programme. Disheartened by their incompetence and debilitated by asthma and dysentery, he'd already decided to leave the Congo to its own devices.

In turn Bob told him of his life and Che listened intently.

'For young men we've both led interesting lives,' Che said. 'More interesting things will happen to us and, when they do, we should think of each other and remember the time we spent together in this hell-hole.' He then gave Bob his beret with the single red commander's star sewn on to it. 'A present,' he said. In return, Bob gave him the Springfield, and told him its name was Old Mo.

Che explained to Bob that he wouldn't be travelling to Havana with him, but would write a letter of introduction for him to give to Fidel; Fidel would see to it that he got to the United States safely. When Bob asked him why he wouldn't be returning to Cuba, Che turned downcast.

'I've never failed at anything in my life, Bob. Okay, I never got a permanent position as a doctor and, come to think of it, I've never done too well as a husband or a father for that matter, but apart from these things, nothing. Failing as a revolutionary is a hundred times worse than failing on the personal level. It would be humiliating for me to go back to Cuba after making such a furore about leaving the country and devoting my life to world revolution. I'd be looked upon as a dog with its tail between its legs. They would never understand how impossible it's been here, how futile.'

'I think they'd understand,' Bob said. 'Surely the others would vouch for you?'

'That isn't the point.' Che said. 'I don't want anyone vouching for me! Maybe in a few months, I'll return. Maybe.'

When the two of them said their goodbyes, they shook hands and embraced.

Cuba

'I can't read this scrawl!' Fidel shouted, after Bob gave him Che's letter. 'It may as well be a fucking prescription. We'll have to wait till he gets back and verifies your story.' He walked to within two feet of Bob and looked him in the eyes. 'You know who I am, don't you? But I don't have a fucking

clue who you are, gringo. You see my point?'

Fidel left Bob alone in the room and shouted instructions to an official sitting at the desk immediately outside its door. The official immediately made a phone call and, half-an-hour later, took Bob by the arm and escorted him downstairs to a waiting jeep.

'Where are we going?' Bob asked.

'Out of the way,' the official replied, and climbed into the backseat.

Out of the way proved to be a remote farm in the mountains of Pinar del Rio called San Andres de Caiguanabo. An old man and woman lived there as caretakers, and showed Bob to a small cabin close to the main house. The official told him the old couple would look after him, feed him and take care of his laundry; in return, he would be expected to perform farm chores. 'Everybody works in Cuba!' the official informed him.

While Che stayed in Dar-es-Salaam and then Prague, Bob helped with the tobacco crop, fixed fences, chopped firewood and painted the house and outer buildings. He ate well, smoked good cigars and enjoyed the company of Bebo and Hilda, the old caretakers. He also found he enjoyed the manual nature of his work. What he didn't particularly enjoy, however, were the visits of Fidel, the man's endless and meandering harangues and the questions he'd ask and then always answer himself.

'How tall are you?' he asked Bob on one of these visits.

'About six two.'

'I don't think so, gringo. I'm six foot two and I think I have the edge on you. I could have been a professional basketball player. Did you know that? What about you, did you ever play?'

Bob thought that if Fidel took off his boots, they'd be exactly the same height, but said nothing. 'I shot a few hoops,' he said, 'but baseball was my game. I used to pitch for the school.'

'For the school? Ha! I was one of the *country's* top pitchers,' Fidel retorted. 'I doubt you'd have been my standard. I could have made a living playing either baseball *or* basketball, but I didn't, I chose not to. I set aside my own ambitions, sacrificed them and myself for the good of the country, for the people of Cuba. Have you ever done anything like that? I didn't think so! You Yankees like making money too much. But do you give it to poor countries like Cuba?

'I once wrote your President Roosevelt asking him for a ten dollar bill. You think he sent it? Fuck no! All those millions and he couldn't spare ten dollars for a small Cuban schoolboy. Even Batista wasn't such a

tightwad. He came to my first marriage, did you know that? Gave me and Mirta $1,000 for our honeymoon. Probably knew I was going to topple him one day and thought he could buy me off. The bastard got it wrong, though. No one buys Fidel off: not the Americans, not the Soviets and not the Chinese. If ever a man was his own man, then that man has to be me: Fidel Fucking Castro.'

'I don't suppose you've heard anything from Che, have you? Is he coming home any time soon?'

'You know something that's funny, gringo? People think they're all chummy with Guevara when they get to call him Che. He ever tell you his nickname, the name his real friends call him? No, I didn't think so. Telling you would have been too much of an irony. It's Sniper! Sniper Guevara. Ha!'

'Did he used to be a sniper?' Bob asked.

'Not in your sense of the word. The name comes more from his lack of social graces, the way he talks to people, assassinates them mid-sentence if he doesn't think their argument's worth a shit.'

'So, is he coming back any time soon?' Bob asked again.

'A month, two at the most. He's in Europe now, but thinking Latin America. He thinks countries there are ripe for revolution just like the Congo was. Gets it fucking wrong every time. He ought to listen to me more.

'Was he still wearing his hair long in the Congo? He was? I thought as much. I can't get it into his head that he's not a rock star or one of those fucking hippies. I don't mind the beard, we all wear those, but his hair's a mess. Makes him look too much like a pretty boy.

'He'll be staying here when he gets back and you'll see him then. He'll like the place. You've done a good job fixing it up. The fences look particularly good.'

Bob had barely finished thanking him for his comments when Fidel launched into what he obviously considered a related topic.

'You know the two things a man needs most of in life? No? Then I'll tell you. Rubble and wood! A man can never have too much. Rubble and wood always come in handy. And it's the same for a country. No country can have too much rubble or wood. They're the basis of a nation's economy.'

Bob never did figure out how a man who talked as much as Fidel ever found the time to accomplish anything, let alone run a country. The man talked for hours on end, and on all subjects. He had opinions on anything

and everything. After taking three hours to answer a simple query about Cuban cigars, Bob learned never to ask Fidel further questions. It was strange how he ended up liking the man.

Bob was leaning against a fencepost and smoking his first cigar of the day when he noticed the plume of dust rising from the mountain road leading to the farm. Dust always signalled the arrival of a visitor, usually Fidel, and Bob braced himself. It was late afternoon and the month was June.

The vehicles came into view and Bob saw that it was a small convoy: two jeeps to the front, an old American sedan in the middle and two jeeps to the rear. His interest was aroused and he walked to the house where Bebo and Hilda were standing.

'What's going on?'

'Commandante Guevara has returned to us, Senor. He is to be our guest,' Hilda said excitedly.

'Well I'll be damned,' Bob said. 'I'd almost given up on the guy.'

The vehicles drew to a halt, handbrakes were applied and engines extinguished. Sixteen soldiers dismounted from the two jeeps, and the driver of the sedan climbed out shaking his head. Fidel and Che remained in the backseat of the car, arguing and gesticulating furiously.

'Same old same old?' Bebo asked the driver, a broad smile on his face.

'You got it,' the driver replied exhaustedly. 'We'd barely left Havana before they got into it: People or Individuals, Soviets or Maoists, Agrarianism or Industrialisation. And then Fidel went and called him Wispy Beard and all hell let loose. You know how sensitive he is about his beard.'

The door of the sedan was suddenly flung wide open and the two revolutionaries came tumbling out, grappling with each other and trading insults. No one intervened and no one – apart from Bob – even showed the least bit surprise. Hilda shrugged her shoulders and announced there was food waiting for them inside the house, and that they should eat it before it got cold. Everyone headed inside and sat down at the long table, leaving Fidel and Che rolling around in the dust, one moment the advantage with Fidel, the next with Che.

Ten minutes passed before the two men joined them at the table. They entered the room laughing, arms around each other's shoulders. Hilda put two plates of food in front of them and told them not to blame her if it was cold. She spoke to them as she would errant sons.

The meal ended and Fidel and most of the other soldiers lit cigars. Che

took a pipe from one of his pockets, filled the bowl with tobacco and leaned back in his chair, disappearing behind a cloud of smoke.

'So, gringo,' Fidel said to Bob. 'Did you finish making the bunks?'

Bob said he had.

'So where are they?'

'Surprisingly enough, I put them in the bunkhouse,' Bob replied.

Fidel gave him a hard stare. Over the months, and when it had been just the two of them together, Bob had been allowed to speak to Fidel with familiarity. He interpreted the look as an indication that he should be more reverential when others were in the room.

'Show me them!' Fidel commanded.

Fidel followed Bob to the bunkhouse. He stopped at the door and surveyed Bob's handiwork from a distance: ten sets of two bunks, five against each side of the room perpendicular to the walls. He then walked the length of the room and inspected each bunk in detail.

'They're adequate, gringo, but I could have done better. At school, they said I showed the talent of a master carpenter. I could have been a fucking cabinet maker, you know that? Another Chippendale or a Hepplewhite. No one had seen such craftsmanship for two hundred years. They called me a woodworking prodigy!'

Che, who had followed them to the bunkhouse, interrupted Fidel. 'Then why did the bookcase you made wobble? You told me yourself it rocked from side to side. You laughed about it, remember?'

'It was sabotaged! I distinctly remember telling you that someone *sabotaged* it – and, for God's sake, stop creeping around like that, Guevara. You're not in the jungle now!

'I laughed only at the pitifulness of the person who did it, the shallowness of the life he led, his mean and jealous spirit.' He turned to Bob. 'This person planed half an inch off one side of the bookcase's base. He sneaked into the woodworking studio at night like a thief, to steal from me, to undermine me. I promised Che that if this hedge-creeper was ever found, I'd allow him to execute the bastard. You like executing people, don't you, Guevara? Eh?' Che didn't react, and Fidel continued.

'If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I now have to return to Havana. Unfortunately, the country won't run itself. I'll see you in two days.' He embraced Che and made to leave the room. As he drew level with the door he turned to Bob. 'Start packing your bags, gringo. Next time I leave here, so do you.'

After Fidel had left the room, Che burst out laughing. 'There'll be no

execution,' he said to Bob. 'The truth is he got his measurements wrong: *that's* why the bookcase rocked from side to side. It's as simple as that. The man's got two left hands. Hell, if you gave him two pieces of wood and a nail, he'd be hard pressed to make a cross…

'Good bunks, by the way,' he added.

In the two days before Fidel returned, Bob saw Che only in the evenings. The Commandante and the sixteen soldiers would rise from their bunks before daybreak and spend the day trekking through the surrounding countryside, and returning only shortly before dinner. Che told him they were training for a new expedition which this time, he said, would be in Latin America. He also told Bob that his departure from Cuba was now in hand, and would happen after he returned with Fidel to Havana.

Fidel returned to the farm and stayed for two days. During this time training was suspended and conversation became the order of the day, sometimes meaningful and sometimes seemingly meaningless. Fidel talked about Bolivia, its history and geography; he talked about recent worker uprisings there and the country's unique positioning at the centre of the continent. Fidel, however, also spent time talking to Che about the way he brushed his teeth, the way he tied his boots and the way he poured beer from bottle to glass.

'Guevara, what are you doing?' he asked Che one morning, as the revolutionary rinsed toothpaste from his mouth. 'Use a fucking glass. Scooping water into your mouth with a brush takes too much time, valuable time. How would you feel if you failed in your mission because you'd spent too much time brushing your fucking teeth instead of fighting imperialists?'

'I've always cleaned my teeth this way,' Che retorted. 'Ten scoops of water and rinse; ten scoops of water and rinse; ten scoops of water and rinse. It suits me fine. I don't carry a glass with me into the jungle! Do you think I go there for a picnic, for a holiday?'

'Suit your damned self then,' Fidel shouted back at him, 'but don't come running to me if Bolivia goes tits up.'

Another time, Fidel saw Che in the middle of changing the boots he wore inside the house for those he wore outside. 'Guevara, what are you doing? You have no boots on your feet. What would you do if enemy soldiers stormed into the camp and you didn't have boots on your fucking feet? It would be hard for you to make a run for it, and if you did, your feet would be cut to pieces. Change one boot at a time and make sure you

always have a boot on each foot. It's common sense. You got any of that left, Guevara?'

Che ignored him.

As Bebo handed around bottles of beer before dinner on the first evening of Fidel's return, Che prised off the cap on the bottle and poured the beer into a glass. The beer foamed and he had to wait for it to settle before he could pour the rest of the bottle's contents.

'Guevara, what are you doing?' Fidel asked him. 'You should hold the glass in your left hand and pour the beer over the area where your thumb shows through from the outside of the glass. Your thumb warms the glass, and if you pour beer over warmth it won't foam. Look!' Fidel then poured a bottle of beer into his own glass without it foaming. 'Perfect!' he said.

Che stood up and started shouting at Fidel. 'I'm not taking any lessons from someone who puts fucking hair conditioner on his beard! Why do you think I renounced my Cuban citizenship? For the fun of it? No! I did it because the revolution in this country is dead. How could it be alive when its so-called President has fallen into such bourgeois habits?'

'Oh, back to the beard argument again, are we, Guevara? You're just sore because you never really qualified as a *barbudos*. How could you when you have such a wispy beard? I had a thicker beard than you have now when I was fourteen! The teachers made me shave it. They were jealous, of course, because I attracted the attentions of the senior girls and their own frustrated wives! They saw me as a threat. They were aware of my sexual power over women even then, and they were scared.' He then turned to the soldiers in the room and explained that it hadn't been his idea to use hair conditioner on his beard. The doctors had ordered him to use it: it was too dangerous for any man to have a beard as thick as his!

Fidel slept with Che and the soldiers in the bunkhouse for two nights. On the morning of the third day, he told Bob to gather his belongings and say goodbye to Che, Bebo, and Hilda. Bob embraced all three, but when he tried to thank them his voice broke, and Hilda started to cry.

'Save your tears for Cubans, old lady.' Fidel teased her. 'This man is a gringo – an American gringo.'

Fidel held his hand out to Che and, as Che made to grasp it, he took it away and flicked Che's nose.

'Hah! Get you every time, Guevara!' Che smiled, and the two men hugged.

On the journey back to Havana, Fidel asked Bob about Mississippi. 'You

spent time there. What do you think of the people – did you like them?'

'Not the whites, no. They were mean people. Weaned on hatred, if you ask me; sucked poison from their mothers' teats from the day they were born.'

'Do you know how they reacted when President Kennedy was assassinated?'

'No,' Bob said.

'They laughed and cheered,' Fidel said sombrely. 'I was sadder than they were when I heard the news. If he'd lived, I think matters between our countries would have been different, that somehow we would have learned to live together.'

He paused in his conversation, and then asked: 'Will you be able to find a home when you return?'

'I hope so,' Bob said. 'Sometimes the thought of going back scares me, but it's where I belong.'

'You'll be an outsider in your own country – you know that, don't you? In this world, Cuba is an outsider too, but at least we have our own country to be outsiders in. And we also have ourselves.' He smiled. 'Maybe we should send each other postcards, gringo. Hah!'

Five days later, Bob flew to Mexico City as an attaché to the Cuban embassy there. The following week he left Mexico as Percy Collins, a chewing gum salesman from Chicago.

Dead or Missing in Action

Colonel Fogerty read the report on his desk with his brow furrowed: Crenshaw, or what was thought to be left of Crenshaw, had been found dead, his charred and headless skeleton discovered lying alongside that of a mercenary whose head was also missing. The only piece of positive identification found was Bob's army necklace. Fogerty's frown deepened: it wasn't just the missing head that puzzled him, but the fact that whoever killed him had gone to the trouble of cremating the body – as if they didn't want it to be recognised. Bodies were found all the time in the eastern Congo, sometimes suffering from the processes of decomposition, but always intact. He wondered if something in the Kingdom of Denmark wasn't quite right.

He looked through Crenshaw's personnel file and noted the next of kin was named as Eugene Chaney III. The name rang a bell. He read deeper into the file and found the reason: Chaney was the person who'd

been locked up with Crenshaw in Mississippi, and whose release Crenshaw had asked him to arrange. He pressed a button on the intercom that connected him to an adjacent office.

'Get me the whereabouts of Eugene Chaney III,' he barked. 'He's a recent graduate from Duke Medical School, so you might want to start there.'

Two weeks later, Fogerty drove to Maryland in full uniform and knocked on Gene Chaney's door; it was eight o'clock in the evening. When the door opened, Fogerty saw a man wearing jeans and a T-shirt and no shoes.

'Are you Dr Eugene Chaney III?'

Gene acknowledged that he was and, for one awful moment, wondered if he was being drafted. He nervously asked Fogerty to step inside and offered him a drink. Fogerty declined.

'Robert Crenshaw has made you his next of kin. My question is: Have you seen him recently?'

'Bob? Bob Crenshaw?' Fogerty nodded. 'What's happened to him? He's alright, isn't he?'

'If you'd just answer my question, Dr Chaney: Have you seen him recently?'

'No… No, I haven't. The last time I saw him was over two years ago. We were locked up together in Mississippi for the night. When I was released the following morning he was gone. He just disappeared.'

'And you haven't seen or *heard* from him since?'

'No. I keep thinking he's going to get in touch, but he never does. What's happened? Has something happened to him?'

'Something *has* happened to him, but at the moment we don't know what that something is. I gather he's a friend of yours so I don't want to cause you any needless distress, but we think he might be either dead or missing in action.'

Gene thought that if his own bedside manner was somewhat lacking, Fogerty's was completely missing.

'I didn't even know he was in the army. I mean, I knew that he'd been in the army, but I didn't know he'd rejoined. Where is he missing? What country?'

'Vietnam,' Fogerty lied.

The Colonel watched Gene carefully throughout their short exchange, looking for any hint of a lie, any sign of deception.

'I mentioned to you earlier, Dr Chaney, that Crenshaw made you his

next of kin. It appears you're the nearest thing he has to family. The investigation is still on-going but, once it concludes, do you want us to send his remains and personal possessions to you?'

'Yes, I'd want that. I'll make sure he gets a good burial,' Gene said.

'As you're his heir, you'll also receive a cheque for $10,000. It's standard payment.'

Gene didn't react. He sat in his chair unmoving, feeling as though someone had just given him a huge injection of novocaine. Fogerty stood up and went over to him. He took Gene's hand, shook it and then let himself out of the house.

Gene saw the half-eaten apple he'd placed on the kitchen counter after he'd invited Fogerty into the house. He threw it into the bin. It would be the last apple he ever ate. Thereafter, even the smell of an apple reminded him of death and loss. First meat and now apples. Little did he suspect that donuts were waiting for him just around the corner, biding their time until they too could join his growing list.

The Dentist

Bob passed from Mexico into the United States without incident. The border policeman examined the passport given to him by the Cubans, asked him a few disinterested questions about the chewing gum industry, and then waved him through. 'Home!' Bob thought, though just where home actually was, he had no real idea.

These thoughts turned in his mind as he drank coffee in Laredo; it was tasteless and disappointing; but how else could it be after drinking Cuban coffee for six months? He could hear Fidel's voice in his head: '*Smell* the coffee, gringo. Your country *is* fucking tasteless and disappointing!'

He smiled briefly and took a small folder of documents from his case. Most of them related to his supposed employment as a chewing gum salesman, but amongst them were the names and addresses of two people given to him by an American he'd met at the Cuban embassy, and also a handwritten letter of introduction. One of the two names, Bob noticed, had been asterisked. He walked with his case to the bus station and bought a one-way ticket to Charlotte, North Carolina. 'Who the hell was Newton Ballard?' he wondered.

Three days later, he found out.

Newton Ballard was a white man in his late fifties, a successful dentist and

property owner, and to all outward appearances a man of the Establishment. Lurking beneath the surface, however, was a dissident, whose moral code and political consciousness had been forged in the southern coalfields of West Virginia.

Newton's father – known affectionately to his friends as Pickaxe – had worked as a miner in Logan County, West Virginia. The company he worked for owned his house and everything else in town. Pickaxe leased tools and equipment from the company, bought food and other provisions at inflated prices from the company store, and paid rent to the company. All financial exchanges were made through the medium of scrip, and the company made sure that the scrip he received each week was always short of the scrip he already owed them. The family was forever in the company's debt, forever its prisoner. It was the way the company liked things.

The work was hard. Pickaxe spent his days stooped, kneeling in water and breathing bad air. Wages were low – below average for the mining industry – and conditions bad. He lived in fear of roof falls and gas explosions, and had a greater chance of being killed than an American soldier fighting in WWI. What the miners needed, he believed, was a union to represent them.

The United Mine Workers of America tried to accommodate Pickaxe and those of similar mind and, in 1921, 13,000 miners marched on Logan County to unionise the mines by force. They were met at Blair Mountain by a well-armed force of two thousand men – a mixture of deputies, detectives, state police and soldiers – and from positions on the crest of the mountain, these men fired down on the miners, expecting them to turn and flee. When the miners not only held their ground but gained new ground, they called on the government for assistance. The government obliged them by dropping bombs on the miners.

Although no doubt surprised by this turn of events, the miners remained strangely undaunted: discipline was maintained and the attack continued for a further three days until federal troops arrived in the area. Only then – and to avoid greater loss of life – did the miners' leaders call for a withdrawal. The battle had lasted a week, and a hundred miners lay dead. It had been the largest uprising in the United States since the Civil War. The owners had triumphed, and life for the miners of West Virginia returned to normality – feudal brutality.

Pickaxe Ballard had fought alongside the miners on Blair Mountain

but had escaped injury and managed to avoid capture. He returned to the mine with his hopes extinguished and his helplessness confirmed. Three years later he was dead, killed in an explosion. His body was never recovered and the mine shaft where the methane gas had ignited was permanently sealed.

His wife, Bella, was evicted from the house – company property – and she and her three children moved to Raleigh, North Carolina. There she met and married Henry Perkins, the owner of a local convenience store. Henry fell in love with his new family, but reserved a special place in his heart for Newton. He encouraged his adoptive son to aim high and was pleased when Newton decided to become a dentist, and happy to pay for his education.

Despite his new life, Newton never forgot his old one – or that of his father. He remembered its hardships and the toll it had taken on the family – especially the toll it had taken on his father. Pickaxe had been thirty-seven when he was killed in the mine accident, but by that time had already looked like a man of sixty. In particular, Newton recalled his father's conversations at the dinner table, the way he'd railed against the mine owners, their exploitation of the miners who made them rich, and their callous disregard for all lives other than their own.

Pickaxe had made it clear to them that he had little time for governments. Whether state or national, he argued, governments would always side with the owners, the people of their own class. Rather than acknowledge abuses in the system, they would happily look the other way – and were probably paid to do so. Their concern wasn't for the welfare of the poor or the helpless: it was for stuffing their pockets with dollar bills and building their bank balances. No poor or working man could ever hope to get justice in a court of their law. The poor and the dispossessed had to look to themselves, and if necessary operate outside the law. (Unsurprisingly, Pickaxe's views on government became even more decided after the government dropped a bomb on him.)

Undeterred by his newly acquired status as a qualified dentist, psychologically Newton still looked upon himself as a dispossessed coalminer, and consequently sided with the causes of the poor and the helpless. To this end, he joined the American Socialist Party and remained an active member until Norman Thomas, the party's leader, decided that future electoral activity by the party was pointless. Newton's social activism was now without a home and for a period fell dormant. It sprang back to life, however, on the emergence of the civil rights movement.

From identifying with the black faces of West Virginian coalminers, it was but a short step for Newton to identify with the black faces of people who were naturally black. He equated the abuses of their civil rights with those suffered by the miners, and saw no difference between the company owners' treatment of their employees and the segregationists' treatment of Negroes. As usual, the state and federal governments erred on the side of the powerful and upheld laws that were, to Newton's way of thinking, not only immoral but unworthy of respect. Consequently, when situations arose that demanded he step outside the law, he willingly took that step, and when Bob Crenshaw stood on his doorstep asking for help, he didn't hesitate in offering his help.

Newton lived alone and the two men talked into the early hours. He listened intently to Bob's story, smoking one cigarette after another and sipping from a glass of bourbon he occasionally refilled. He examined the forged documents Bob had been given and gave a low whistle.

'I know a man who'd be interested in seeing these,' he said. 'Very interested. They're good – some of the best I've seen – but to be on the safe side I think we should find you a new identity. I'll start working on that first thing in the morning after we get you fixed up with a place to stay.'

'I ain't got much money, Mr Ballard, so you need to make it cheap.'

'Don't worry about money, Bob – and I already told you, my name's Newton. I own a boarding house near downtown and you'll stay there as my guest. No one will bother you, and you'll find Miss Lettie to be a fine cook.' He looked at his watch.

'I suggest we call it a night. I'll give you a shout about seven. Sleep well, Bob, and – if I haven't already said so – welcome home!'

The boarding house was an old wooden structure but in good repair. Newton knocked on the front door and walked in. 'Lettie?' he called out, 'Lettie? We have a guest.'

A large black woman bustled into the room, a big smile of welcome on her face. Newton introduced Bob as Percy and apologised that he couldn't stay longer: 'Root canals,' he explained. He turned to Bob and told him he'd return about seven.

'Set a place for me, Miss Lettie. I'll eat here tonight.'

The boarding house had six guestrooms on the second floor. Miss Lettie Williams showed Bob to the first one they came to and handed him a key. She pointed out the bathroom and toilet at the end of the corridor, and then led him back downstairs and showed him the lounge and dining

areas. The lounge had a television which, she explained, he was welcome to watch anytime until 11:00 pm; at that time it had to be switched off. Breakfast, she informed him, was served at 7:30 am and dinner at 7:00 pm; a few minutes either way, however, was of no mind to her. She indicated her own rooms at the back of the first floor and told him to holler if he ever needed anything – but not after 11:00 pm.

Bob unpacked his case and put most of his clothes in the drawers of an old dresser; his suit, courtesy of the Cuban government, he placed on a hanger. He lay on the bed and started to relax; it seemed to him that things were starting to work out. After an hour or so, he stood up from the bed and splashed water on his face. He looked in the mirror and smiled. 'Bob Crenshaw,' he asked himself, 'What's gonna become o' you? Who you gonna be?'

The answer to that question came two weeks later when Newton brought him his new documents: Lucius Tribble. It wasn't the name Bob had been hoping for, and Newton sensed his disappointment.

'We never get to choose our parents in life, Bob, and consequently we never get to choose our names. If I'd had a choice in the matter, do you really think I'd have wanted to be named after a fig bar?'

Bob looked quizzical.

'Newton. I'm named after *Fig Newton.* My parents were trying to think of a name for me, and my mother's attention was caught by an opened packet of cookies on the table. She thought it had a certain ring to it and, for reasons I'll never understand, so too did my father.

'You're stuck with Tribble, I'm afraid, but you don't have to be called Lucius if you don't want. It'll always be your official name – and you can't get around that – but you can decide on a nickname for yourself and then get people to call you by that.'

Bob's mood lightened. It sounded like a plan – and plans, after all, were what he and Newton were supposed to be discussing that day.

'What I'm thinking, Bob, is that it would be a good idea if you moved out of North Carolina for the time being. The place is crawling with military, and though they don't have a base here in Charlotte, Fayetteville's a bit too close for comfort.

'The army still has you down as Missing in Action. Until they pronounce you dead and you get your money from that friend of yours, I'm afraid you're in limbo. I've got contacts who can tell me if and when your status changes, but it will likely take time.

'There's a small town in the Blue Ridge I suggest you go to. Crawford's

the kind of place where they don't ask questions; you'll understand why when you get there. I know someone living there who's in a similar situation to you and can be trusted. He's renovating a house, and I know he could use some help. I've already talked to him, and in return for your labour he's happy to provide you with board and lodging. Of course, as soon as I hear anything about your status, I'll let you know.

'How does it sound, Mr Tribble?'

Lucius Tribble said it sounded fine to him.

That night Miss Lettie cooked Bob a T-bone steak for dinner. He looked at it admiringly, savoured its taste and then named himself after it. Lucius Tribble became T-Bone Tribble.

Crawford

The town of Crawford sat on a high plateau in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was isolated and small – very small: it had one stop light and fewer than four hundred residents. It was the county seat of Crawford County, and where its two roads intersected stood a memorial to the Confederate dead.

For geographical reasons, all rivers and streams flowed out of the county, and from the late 1950s, and in search of a better life, so too did its population. Land and property prices plummeted and hippies moved into the small town. The new residents of Crawford wore their hair long and dressed in jeans, overalls and tie-dye T-shirts. Sweet aromas of incense and marijuana filtered from their houses into the streets, and the memorial to the Confederate dead became a meeting place for Confederate deadheads.

Newton stopped the car outside an old wooden house three hundred yards from the town's centre, but still at its outskirts. A tall thin slat of a man pushed open the screen door and walked out on to the porch. He stood there silently while Newton and his passenger climbed out of the car, and spoke only when both men had climbed the steps. Newton and Bob followed him into the house.

'Merritt,' Newton said, 'this is the man I was telling you about.'

The man held out his hand and introduced himself as Merritt Crow. In turn, Bob introduced himself as T-Bone Tribble. Merritt took three beers from the fridge and prised off the caps. He handed one to Newton and one to Bob.

'New beginnings,' he toasted.

'New beginnings!' Bob and Newton replied in unison and the three men clinked bottles.

Newton stayed long enough to ease the two men into their own company, and then headed back to Charlotte. Bob and Merritt drank more beer and Merritt made sandwiches. He apologised to Bob for not offering him a hot meal, but explained he didn't yet have a cooker. As they ate, Merritt asked Bob if he'd ever had a rum bun.

'Cain't says I have, Merritt. What's a rum bun?'

Merritt put down his plate. 'Rum buns are similar to sweet rolls – but different, much stickier. So far as I can tell, the buns are made out of dough and a cinnamon sugar mix, and then glazed and iced. From what people say, the secret's in the glaze and the kind of rum they add to it. It's the only thing about Washington I miss. They used to serve them in the seafood restaurants on the south-western waterfront: always hot and always before dinner. Hogate's restaurant had its own bakery and their rum buns were the best. If you ever figure out how to make them, I promise you, I'll be your friend for life.'

Merritt Crow, whose real name was John Driscoll, had been an analyst with the CIA. He'd been recruited during his final year at Princeton and had gone to work for the Agency straight after graduating. He'd majored in international relations and been considered the brightest student in his year; throughout his four years at the university he'd maintained an unblemished 4.0 average. Merritt's father had been a Vice-Admiral in the US Navy, and his family pedigree had been considered a plus by the CIA.

Merritt told Bob that for many years he'd enjoyed the work. It had been challenging and stimulating, and he'd proved adept as an analyst. In the seven years he'd spent dissecting information he'd been promoted three times, and by the time he left for the field was managing a team of six other analysts. It had been his decision to go into the field. He was unmarried and wanted adventure, a chance to do rather than read about what others had done, and a chance to put into practice plans he'd only been able to theorise about. His first (and only) assignment was Vietnam.

'When I worked as an analyst, T-Bone, I worked in an office. I was hermetically sealed from the real world. Everything was abstract, and all the abstracts were clear cut. There was black and there was white, right and wrong, good and evil. We were the good guys and our enemies were the bad guys. It was as simple and uncomplicated as that.

'And then when I worked in the field everything blurred; there was no black and there was no white. Everything came out of the wash grey. There was good and evil everywhere and no one side had a monopoly of either; there was as much evil on our side as theirs. I did things in Vietnam that were wrong – unjustifiably wrong.' Merritt paused and stared at the floorboards.

'I was in too deep to just resign though. I knew too much – and they knew I knew too much. I'm not saying they'd have put a bullet in my head, but I couldn't be sure at the time that they wouldn't.

'I got transferred back to the States and they gave me a non-job. Subtle threats were made – not just against me, but against my family. I got home one night and found my house broken into. The only things missing were the journals I'd been keeping and some documents I'd photocopied without authorisation. I left the house that night and never returned.

'And now I'm here. Thank God for people like Newton Ballard.'

'I'll drink to that!' Bob said.

Merritt's house was a mess. The roof leaked and the back part of the structure had collapsed. It took them six months to get the house back on its feet and furnished to a level of comfort both men found acceptable, and to celebrate its completion they threw a party and invited the town.

Merritt roasted a pig and guests brought bowls of salad, vegetable sides and desserts. Bob filled an old bathtub in the back garden with ice and crammed it with beer and wine. The music of West Coast psychedelic bands blared from speakers, and people danced, shared joints and laughed. The sheriff came by, drank beer and took tokes. Crawford, it seemed to Bob, was a good place to spend time when life was on hold; it was like being on holiday.

The following day, Bob and Merritt cleared debris and washed dishes. Merritt then went for a walk and left Bob to watch the evening news.

The report of Che's death came on Merritt's black-and-white television set, but hit Bob in Technicolor. His friend, the newscaster said, had been captured by Special Forces close to La Higuera in south-eastern Bolivia and executed the following day, shot nine times by a single soldier who took his pipe as a keepsake. Che's handless body had been flown to Vallegrande for display purposes, and his amputated hands to Buenos Aires for identification purposes.

Bob was one of the few people in the United States to be saddened by the news. He retired to his room and sat there thinking. He thought of

Fidel and how devastated by Che's death he would be – and also annoyed: Che hadn't been wearing boots at the time of his capture! He remembered the beret Che had given him and took it from the polythene bag he kept hidden behind a chest of drawers. Che should have had a better ending, he thought, or no ending at all; not yet anyway. He put the cap on his head and shaped it the way Guevara had. He stood looking in the mirror for a long time and then saluted his old friend.

The date was October 9, 1967.

Che's death released the logjam of suspicion that had surrounded Bob's disappearance and kept his life in limbo. Among the objects found in the guerrilla's possession was an M1903A4 Springfield rifle with a Stith-Kollmorgen Model 4XD scope attached to it, and Fogerty had known instinctively that the sniper rifle had belonged to Crenshaw. Knowing snipers the way he did, the colonel also knew that the gun would have comprised too great a part of Crenshaw's being for him to have parted with it willingly. He concluded that Robert Crenshaw had been killed by Cubans while serving his country in the Congo. He closed the file and released his remains to Eugene Chaney III.

Newton gave Bob the news in person. He told him that he was to be buried with full military honours on December 22 – ironically, another Dismal Day.

Bob was laid to rest in Atlanta, in a plot close to his Aunt Selena. Six soldiers carried the lighter-than-usual casket, and as the coffin was lowered into the ground a volley of rifle fire tore into the afternoon's silence. The Minister, Fogerty, the soldiers and the handful of mourners who'd shown up for the service – Bob's baseball coach, a few of his friends who'd avoided going to prison, and three elderly women who'd been friends of Selena Priddy – didn't linger for long, and slowly made their way from the cemetery grounds. Three figures remained at the graveside: Gene, holding the folded flag presented to him by one of the soldiers, and Gene's mother and father. A fourth figure stood in the distance and out of sight.

''Bout damn time,' Bob thought, and smiled at the thought of Colonel Fogerty having just given full military honours to a Cuban guerrilla fighter named Raoul. He never did know Raoul's last name.

In early February of the following year, Bob paid a visit to his old friend.

'I hope you ain't spent my money, Gene.'

The ethereal voice came from the backseat of Doc's car. Doc gave an involuntary yelp and drove straight into a fire hydrant.

'Why in God's name didn't you just knock on my front door?' Gene asked.

'I gotta be careful, man. Wouldn' surprise me if ol' Fogerty ain't got an eye open fo' me yet – an' I never knows which way that eye pointin'. If I'da marched up to yo' house an' knocked on the door, who knows who mighta see'd me.'

Doc and Bob stood in Doc's closed garage looking at the damaged front fender. Doc looked at Bob and shook his head, unable to decide whether to punch him in the face or fling his arms around him.

'Goddamn son-of-a-bitch, Bob!' he shouted. 'Have you any idea what you've put me through? A guy in a uniform comes to my house and tells me you're missing in action, and then, six months later that you're dead and recommends that I keep your casket closed. I just fucking buried you for Christ's sakes!'

Bob gave him a big smile. 'Look upon it as a miracle, man, an' be happy fo' me. No one give Lazarus shit when he come back from the dead.'

'Lazarus didn't come back from the dead in the backseat of a moving car, you dimwit! You could have got us both killed – and how ironic would that have been? Why didn't you contact me, tell me you were still alive instead of letting me believe you were dead all this time. Did you think I'd turn you in or something?'

''Course I didn' think that, Gene. You my bes' frien', man, but you a fuckin' useless actor. Fogerty woulda read yo' face like he was readin' a chil'ren's book; hauled yo' ass off to jail, too. Had to be this way; no other way it coulda been. Tell you what, though: as recompense fo' all the emotional upset I put you through, you can keep the flag they give you at my funeral. You can hang it out ever' Fourth o' July an' celebrate *my* independence!'

Doc scrunched and un-scrunched his face, clenched and unclenched his fists and then, without warning, threw his arms around Bob and pulled him towards him. He then surprised them both by bursting into tears.

'Man, you wettin' my T-shirt,' Bob said. 'An' all this cryin's makin' me thirsty – you got any beer in that house o' yo's?'

Doc's emotional turmoil gradually quieted, and as the evening progressed he relaxed once more into the easy company of his resurrected friend. Although he'd often wondered what Bob did the times he disappeared from Durham, he had never known about Bob's life as a

sniper. He listened while Bob told him of his adventures, particularly intrigued by his tales of the Congo and his relationships with Che and Fidel. The story was too far-fetched to be invented, and Doc saw the pain in Bob's eyes when he told him of the day he heard of Che's execution.

Fortunately for Bob, the money Doc had received from the government was still intact, but the matter remained of how to transfer this money to his newly risen friend. Bob told him a man from Charlotte would contact him and arrange for the money to leave Doc's account without drawing suspicion; it would be some kind of investment plan.

Over breakfast the following morning, Bob warned his friend that contact between them for the immediate future would be difficult, and possibly unsafe. He told him to look out for postcards initialled TT.

Doc left for the surgery with Bob lying on the backseat. Two blocks from the surgery, Bob opened the car door and climbed out.

'You pull any shit like this again, Bob, and I'll kill you myself!' Gene said.

Bob laughed. His exit was unseen, and he walked to a car parked in an adjacent street with an air of nonchalance. The engine turned at the third time of trying. Bob pulled away from the curb and drove back to Crawford.

He left the town a month later – this time for good. He had $10,000 in his pocket and seemingly the world as his oyster. It therefore surprised Merritt when he learned that his friend had gone to work for a dry cleaner in Seattle.

The Dry Cleaner

If it had been Bob's decision to head for Seattle, the initial suggestion had come from Newton. One meeting, he asked Bob if he remembered him mentioning a friend of his who'd be interested in seeing the documents given to him by the Cubans. Bob had nodded that he did.

'The thing of it is, T-Bone, Morris is getting old and he could do with an assistant. He's the person I got your new identity from, by the way. He asked if I could recommend anyone to him and I immediately thought of you. A person in his line of work needs someone he's able to trust, and needless to say a person in your circumstances has the same need. He'd pay you well and you'd be as safe out there as anywhere. Is it something that interests you?'

Bob said that it might well interest him, but asked for a few days to

think it over. His answer, when it came, was *yes*. He found himself in the same situation he'd been in when he first planned to leave the army and Fogerty had approached him: he had no idea of what to do next. There was also a part of him that believed in fate and the serendipitous nature of life: if something came up, then it probably came up for a reason. Seattle, he thought, might well be the destination that destiny itself intended for him.

Ballard made a phone call to Morris and arrangements were made. Two weeks later Bob boarded a flight to Seattle; it was the first time he'd been on a civilian airplane and was surprised to find no parachutes.

Bob took the bus to downtown Seattle. He ignored the light drizzle and decided to walk the few blocks to the address he'd been given. The city's economy was experiencing a periodic slide in its fortunes, and the neighbourhood of the dry cleaning store was similarly down-at-heel. Businesses either side of the dry cleaner's were boarded, and the people he passed in the street looked dishevelled.

As he pushed the door open, a bell rang. A man came from a back room and gave him a gentle smile.

'Good day to you, sir. How can I help?'

'My name's T-Bone Tribble, sir. I lookin' fo' Morris Fowler.'

'You've found him, T-Bone. I'm the man you want.'

He took Bob's hand and shook it firmly. He then walked to the door and changed the OPEN sign to CLOSED. Bob followed him behind the counter and into the back room.

Morris Fowler was a man in his late seventies. He wore black working boots that were badly scuffed and a pair of loose-fitting jeans, patched at the knees; above the waist he wore a thick woollen shirt and over it an out-of-shape cardigan. The glasses perched on the end of his nose had tortoise-coloured frames and thick tinted lenses. He was just short of six feet and looked to weigh around two hundred pounds. His shoulders were broad and his forearms big, suggesting an earlier working life that had demanded strength. His face was unshaven and a three-day growth of grey bristles contrasted with the smoothness of his bald head. He also walked with a pronounced limp.

Fowler poured Bob a coffee and asked him about Newton: was he well, and had he explained to Bob the nature of his work in Seattle? He also asked to see Bob's Cuban documents. He studied them carefully but without comment. He asked Bob if he could hang on to them for a while, and Bob told him he could.

The dry cleaning store was a front, and Morris Fowler turned out to be not only a forger but also a fixer. People came to him primarily for new documents and new identities, but they also came to him as a man who knew how to get things. It worked like this:

Although the store had the equipment to dry clean, none of it was in working order and the polythene-encased clothes hanging from the racks were purely for show. In the rare event that a customer actually left clothes for cleaning, they would be taken to another dry cleaner's and then returned to the store. White tickets would be issued for such transactions. It was, however, the pink slip transactions that were the lifeblood of the store.

Any person doing bona fide business with Morris knew to ask for a pink slip: that was the code. Such people would bring clothes to the store, usually a single jacket or coat, and within one of the pockets would be a note of what was required, and also payment. A week or even a month later, dependent on what had been asked for, the customer would return to the store with the numbered pink slip. He – rarely a she – would then be returned the clothes they'd brought in, and within a pocket would be the documentation or goods paid for.

The documents supplied by Morris ranged from passports and driving licences to birth certificates, social security cards, high school diplomas and degree certificates. For such products he determined his own prices. For the goods he supplied purely as a middleman – firearms, explosives, pharmaceuticals, machine tools, duplicate keys and risqué photographs – he added thirty per cent to the price charged him. It was a marketplace where questions were never asked, where paper trails were non-existent and the only medium of exchange was cash.

Bob worked front of house, taking and returning clothes from customers and giving out and taking back the pink slips. Every once in a while he gave out a white ticket, and took these clothes to an actual dry cleaners; even on these transactions the store made a profit. Other times, Morris would send Bob to churchyards and cemeteries, not just in Washington but in surrounding states: Oregon, California, Idaho and Nevada. This was the part of his job that Bob enjoyed most, driving on open roads through new countryside, and exploring towns and cities he'd never before visited.

The purpose of such journeys was to collect the names of children who never had the chance to grow old; children who had died at different times and in different decades. Morris gave Bob a list of his requirements: white

children, black children, Hispanic and Chinese children; children with Polish names, Norwegian names, German names, and children who'd been born with true-blue Anglo-Saxon names. Bob was then to visit libraries and read old editions of newspapers to find out as much about these unfortunate children as possible, and also their equally unfortunate families. Morris then took this information and, by exploiting cracks in the system, brought them back to life as new identities for those wishing to escape old ones.

Morris lived in a large apartment immediately above the store, and Bob lived in similar quarters on the third floor. They spent most of their evenings together in one or another of the apartments. Sometimes Morris prepared the meal and sometimes Bob – though neither could have been described as a good cook. Morris came to look upon Bob as the son he'd never had, and Bob, upon Morris, as the father he'd never known.

One evening when the two men had finished eating and the pots been cleared, Bob asked him how he'd got started doing what he did. Morris poured a large measure of bourbon from the bottle that sat between them.

'It's a long story. You're sure you're up for it?'

'Sure,' Bob replied. 'Somethin' I been meanin' to aks fo' a while.'

'Okay, then.' Morris paused and drew breath. 'You ever heard of the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW?'

'No, sir, cain't says I has.'

'In that case you probably won't have heard of Centralia – that's where I'm from. It's a small town over in Lewis County, not a place you'd visit unless you knew people living there. I got arrested there when I was twenty-nine and charged with second degree murder. I got acquitted, but it took 'em long enough to figure out I hadn't done nothing wrong in the first place. Even now, I get a bad taste in my mouth when I think about it.

'My best friend back then was a man called Wesley Everest. We were born in the same year, 1890, went through school together, worked as lumberjacks together and fought in World War I together. Both of us were lucky enough to get back in one piece, and we went back to lumbering.

'It was hard work but we didn't mind that. What we did mind though was the lumber company we worked for. It's not so bad these days, but back then companies played by their own rules. They were ruthless. Workers didn't have any rights, wages were piss-poor and people got hurt. If they didn't get killed outright in an accident, then they were maimed bad enough to wish they had been. There was never any compensation

paid. Me and Wes thought it wrong, so we joined up with the Industrial Workers of the World.

'Anyone belonging to that union was called a Wobbly. Don't ask me why; something to do the Ws is my guess. Anyway, if you needed help, the Wobblies were the best people to have on your side. If angels feared to tread some places, the Wobblies never did: they just rolled up their sleeves and marched right in. They'd do battle with scabs, take on the police and not one of 'em was afraid of going to jail. They were fearless, and that's why they were hated.

'It wasn't just the lumber companies who hated 'em neither – it was all the factory owners they tangled with. And when you messed with management in those days, you also messed with the local politicians and the newspapers. Always the best of buddies those people. And then, after the IWW opposed US entry into World War I, the government in Washington DC, started to take an interest in 'em too, and tried to smash the union.

'Wobblies were arrested left, right and centre, and some of 'em imprisoned. The government accused 'em of being un-American and unpatriotic and, after the war, accused 'em of being Bolsheviks. They whipped up public opinion and got 'em to hate the Wobblies. Vigilante mobs took to the streets and attacked meeting halls owned by the union, and any Wobbly found inside was dragged out and beaten to a pulp.'

Morris paused to refill his glass and then started to recount the events of November 11, 1919.

'There was a parade that day to celebrate the first anniversary of the Armistice. The Wobblies knew it meant trouble for 'em, because the last time the town of Centralia had a parade their meeting hall was attacked and those inside it beaten up. This time though they decided to take precautions and armed 'emselves with guns. They weren't looking for trouble, but they'd just got 'emselves a new meeting hall and didn't want it destroyed. Me and Wes went down to help out – and if needs be – defend the place.'

'Was you armed?' Bob asked.

'No. I didn't even own a gun. Wes did though and he took his. If he hadn't, he might well be alive today…

'Anyway, the parade got set and started to move through the town: American Legion war veterans, civic groups and a bunch of thugs hired by the lumber companies. They stopped outside the IWW hall – only time the parade ever did stop that day – and there was the sound of gunfire, shots ringing out. I don't know who fired first, but if it was one of us then

it would've been in self-defence. All hell let loose and the next thing I knew the doors of the hall were being kicked in and men were charging at us.

'I saw Wes fire his gun and hit someone, but that's the last thing I did rightly see. I got clubbed unconscious and woke up in a police cell. I heard later that Wes shot and killed two people and wounded a few others, but the man must have feared for his life to do this. Wes wasn't a violent man. Apart from when we were in the war, I never saw him hit another person once. Hell, the man didn't even cuss!

'He got brought to the same jail I was in, but he wasn't there long and I didn't get to see him. The guards turned him over to a mob that'd gathered outside…' Morris paused, collecting himself before he continued.

'The mob took a rifle butt to his teeth. Smashed 'em. Next they castrated him. Then they took him to the Mellon Street Bridge, put a rope 'round his neck and threw him over the parapet; not once, not twice. Three times. The last throw broke his neck and they left him dangling there, and used his body for target practice. By the time they got 'round to cutting him down his neck had stretched to around fourteen inches.

'You know what the coroner said the cause of death was? Suicide! Wesley Everest, he said, died at his own hand!'

Morris stopped talking and Bob waited until he was ready to finish his story.

'Twelve of us were put on trial for second degree murder. They dropped charges against two, and me and another man were acquitted, but the other eight got convicted and sentenced to twenty-five to forty years. Anyone but a Wobbly would have got the normal sentence in those days – ten years!'

Morris went on to explain that after his acquittal it was impossible for him to find work in Centralia or any place close by. He moved with his wife to Seattle, and through the IWW got a job as a stevedore. He worked on the docks for three years until a box of machine parts slipped from the unloading cradle and smashed the bone in his leg. He found himself out of work, a Wobbly who actually wobbled. And then his luck changed. He was walking towards Pike Place Market one day when he heard someone calling his name; it turned out to be the man he'd shared a prison cell with while waiting to be tried. Morris admitted to Bob that the man was an out-and-out chancer, but likeable with it.

'He'd always been impressed with the drawings I did to pass the time,

and he used to get a kick out of me forging his signature. He said I had a natural eye for facsimile. I'd always been pretty good at signatures, I knew that. I used to forge my mother's when I was at school, and for a consideration I'd forge the signatures of other pupils' parents. Saved 'em from having problems, and it gave me extra pocket money. I never thought it was something I could do for a living, though.

'He brought me to the building we're in now, the same dry cleaning store. It operated pretty much on the same lines, but in those days we used to fence more goods. The man who operated it took a shine to me and took me under his wing. I became his apprentice and me and my wife moved into the apartment you live in now. When he died, the business transferred to me. It's worked out okay. I know what we do is illegal, but what governments do is often illegal; they don't have a problem breaking laws when it suits 'em, and there's no love lost between me and them. I'll tell you straight, T-Bone, I'd rather shake hands with Ho Chi Minh than I would Richard Nixon, or any of his like.'

Bob worked at the dry cleaners for twelve years. Returning from a week-long trip scouting the graveyards of North Dakota, he arrived back to find the door of the basement workshop wide open. He looked inside and found it empty. He went to Morris' apartment and Morris met him at the door. He smiled at Bob.

'I'm retiring, T-Bone, calling it a day. I'm ninety years old and feel like I've worked two lifetimes already. I have more money than I'll ever be able to spend, and for the rest of my life I'm going to sit back and relax, do nothing.' He noted the surprised expression on Bob's face.

'I've closed everything down, T-Bone, but I haven't forgotten you.' He handed Bob an old shoe box. 'In there, you'll find ten complete identities – in case you ever have need for a new one – and the deeds to the building: it's yours now! There's also $50,000 in cash. Call it severance pay, a pension, or what you will, but it's yours to do with as you like, and I don't want any argument. Tonight I've booked us a table at the best restaurant in town, and tomorrow I go to Florida. I hope you'll come visit me there.'

Bob ate his last meal with Morris at the Hunt Club in the Sorrento Hotel. A month later he flew to Jacksonville, hired a car and drove to Ponte Vedra Beach. There, he laid Morris to rest.

Having spent most of his life in a Seattle basement, Morris Fowler had no intimate relationship with the sun; he was ignorant of its power and

unaware of sunscreen. Shortly after his arrival in Florida, Morris died of hyperthermia.

The sun he never knew cremated him, and the son he never had buried him.

The Barbed Wire Flag

When Bob returned to Seattle, he put the building he now owned up for sale. The decade of the eighties had dawned and gentrification was nibbling at the edges of the neighbourhood. The property sold easily, and if not rich, Bob was certainly now comfortable. He moved into a loft apartment in Pioneer Square and bought a small cabin in the Klamath Mountains of California. The money would run out eventually, but for the time being he had no need for a job. Rather, he spent his time reading, learning to paint and collecting pieces of barbed wire.

Bob had never been a reader. His youth and early adulthood had been times of physicality rather than cerebration, and spent playing baseball with friends or shooting dead the nation's enemies. He associated books with enforced study and had never once entertained the idea that a book might be an origin of pleasure, a source of enjoyment in its own right. Indeed, the only book he'd ever owned was a copy of the Bible given to him by his Aunt Selena on the day he joined the army, and although this book was still in his possession it remained pristine and unread. But now Bob had time on his hands, a cabin in the Klamath Mountains with no television, and a new girlfriend who worked in a bookstore.

Marsha Hancock's first impression of Bob wasn't favourable. In fact, she thought he was as dull as a paintbrush. She'd noticed that he only came into the bookshop when it rained and made no pretence of even looking for a book. Rather, he would sit eerily still in one of the store's easy chairs and hum tuneless drones to himself, only ever stirring to check on the progress of the rain outside; when the rain let up, like clockwork he would leave.

One day, Marsha confronted him and asked why he didn't just buy a damned umbrella. Bob mistook her question as a sign of romantic interest and immediately asked her for a date. She snorted disdainfully, and told him he should ask her again once he'd read *War and Peace* – which to her way of thinking was the same as replying: *not before hell freezes over, buddy!* That Bob then purchased a copy of the book both surprised and disquieted her.

The size of *War and Peace* similarly surprised and disquieted Bob. Had he known that within its pages five hundred and eighty characters lay in wait for him, it is doubtful the transaction would have been completed and their future together ensured.

He returned to the bookstore six weeks later. Ominously for Marsha, the day was one of blue skies and streaming sun. Bob walked up to her holding an umbrella in one hand and a well-thumbed copy of *War and Peace* in the other.

'You owe me *least* one date fo' readin' this mutha,' he told her.

Against her better judgement, Marsha agreed – but for one date at *most*, she told him. One date, however, led to another, and passing acquaintanceship became intimate relationship.

Marsha Hancock was thirty-one, ten years younger than Bob, and happily divorced twice. Her father was a mid-level manager at the Boeing plant, and her mother a teacher in the city's school system. She had two older sisters and a younger brother. She had studied at the San Francisco Art Institute for four years, but had subsequently failed to make a living as an artist. Critics described her work as competent but derivative, and hence her job at the bookstore.

'What 'bout the two guys you divorced? They happy?' Bob asked.

'I hope not!' she replied. 'And that's all I'm saying on the subject. What's past is past. Concern yourself with the present and count your blessings that you have a date with the most beautiful girl you're ever likely to date.'

Bob laughed out loud. What Marsha had said was true: she *was* the most beautiful girl he'd ever dated. She was statuesque in appearance and had striking looks. Her hair was cropped close to the head and her cheekbones were high and chiselled.

Tolstoy, or T-Man, as Bob called him, hadn't been the easiest of introductions to the world of reading, and neither was Marsha's second choice: *Crime and Punishment* by D-Man (or Dostoyevsky, as the Russians and the rest of the world called him). Melville and Hawthorne, despite being American writers, proved even worse. One night, while he and Marsha were lying in bed together, Bob plucked up his courage and made an announcement:

'I ain't readin' no mo' books published b'fore my parents was born, an' – 'ceptin' fo' the Bible – I ain't readin' no book not written by an American. An' I gonna start choosin' my own books. You okay with this, Marsha?'

'When were your parents born?' Marsha asked sleepily.

'I ain't rightly sure, but I figure 1920.'

'Okay,' Marsha said. She then turned on her side and fell asleep. Bob could scarcely believe his luck; she'd given in so easily. That night he started to fall in love with Marsha, and, the next day, reading for pleasure.

Bob wasn't a discerning reader, but he was voracious. He attached the same importance to the writings of the *National Enquirer* and *People Weekly* as he did to the novels of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. He bought novels and serious non-fiction from bookstores, and quirk, trivia and gossip from supermarket checkouts. He also developed idiosyncratic habits. Possibly as a result of reading Tolstoy's epic, Bob would always check the number of pages in a book. If the count was more than 320, he would put the book back on its shelf and choose another. The only exception he made to this rule was for the Bible.

After twenty years of owning a copy, he opened Aunt Selena's gift and read it from cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation, from *In* to *Amen*. It was, he believed, the culmination of everything he'd ever read: *War and Peace* and the *National Enquirer* rolled into one, and wondered why it was never sold at supermarket checkouts.

Marsha had given up painting abstracts long before she met Bob but, at heart, still yearned to be an artist. She decided therefore to try a different medium, and signed up for an evening course in screen printing. One afternoon, Bob returned to the house they now shared and found her old brushes, palettes and oil paints boxed up and set next to the garbage cans. He took them back into the house and waited for Marsha.

'You min' if I try my han' with these?' he asked.

'No, of course not, honey,' Marsha replied, 'but can you take them to the cabin and work there? I need to make room for a screen printing machine.' Bob agreed. The cabin was where Marsha also made him keep his growing collection of barbed wire.

Bob and Marsha's cabin was located in the remote and jagged landscape of Siskiyou County. Few people lived there, and the likelihood was greater of meeting a black bear or a mountain lion than another person. They would repair here together in the summer months when the climate was warm and dry, and Bob would go there alone in the winter when the snow lay heavy.

Bob carried no illusions that he had conventional artistic abilities. He could neither draw figures nor put landscapes in correct perspective. He did, however, have patience and a steady hand, traits that had made him a valuable and deadly sniper. Oil paint attracted him. He liked its

thickness and texture, its malleability. He learned how to mix colours and add flecks to highlight and change an overall effect. On pieces of wood and later canvasses, he would draw thick bands of textured colours juxtaposed against each other, sometimes horizontal, sometimes diagonal and sometimes vertical.

It was the horizontal bands that sparked the idea of *The Barbed Wire Flag.*

Bob's interest in barbed wire stemmed from his days working for Morris in the field, scouting rural areas for churchyards and cemeteries. Although he'd known of the existence of barbed wire from his time in the army, he'd never once seen a barbed wire fence until the day a barb caught his pants and ripped open the flesh below. Once the pain had subsided he'd taken a closer look at the wire and become fascinated by its design. On subsequent field expeditions he noticed that the shape of the sharp-edged prongs varied enormously, and concluded that there was more than one signature in play. He decided to start collecting the wire, and later, after he'd started reading for pleasure, bought books on the subject and visited fairs and dealers to add to his collection.

It took Bob almost two working months over a six-month period to perfect the prototype of his Barbed Wire Flag. Once satisfied, he wrapped it in a thick woollen blanket and secured it carefully to the roof of his car. Back in Seattle he placed it on an easel in Marsha's studio and once again draped the blanket over it. He said nothing to Marsha about it when she returned from the bookstore, but after they'd eaten he took hold of her hand and led her into the studio.

'I got somethin' to show you, doll. Somethin' I been workin' on. Now close yo' eyes an' open 'em only when I says so.'

Marsha smiled and did as instructed.

'Okay, you can open 'em now.'

When Marsha saw Bob's creation, she was stunned into silence. The canvas before her was four feet by three feet in size and framed in thick weathered fence wood. It depicted the flag of the United States, its thirteen alternating red and white stripes painted in thick textured oil and separated by twelve strands of antique and rusted barbed wire (Brinkerhoff Face Clamp Barb, Bob would later explain to her). The rectangle, which would have housed the fifty stars, had been rebated by two inches to allow for the insertion of six vertical metal prison bars, and behind the bars, was a grainy photograph of Bob that had been tinted blue and flecked with white.

'So, what you think, Marsha? I'm callin' it *The Barbed Wire Flag*.'

'I think it's the saddest, most beautiful thing I've ever seen,' she said quietly. 'Do you know what you've done?'

Bob looked puzzled. 'Made me a Barbed Wire Flag, doll. No mo', no less.'

Marsha wanted to take the piece to a gallery whose owner she knew, but Bob was wary of the idea. Too many people would see his face, and even though Fogerty was now dead he still nursed the paranoia of discovery. He told her that this Barbed Wire Flag was for them only, and that it would hang in the cabin. They could, however, make others, and she could help in their construction. The barred window, he suggested, could be filled with all kinds of icons – images that he could never draw but she could screen print.

Together they made a list of images they would display in the rebated window, and decided that each representation would be replicated fifty times to mirror the number and arrangement of the stars in the real American flag. Each concept would be limited to only ten editions, and each edition would use a different type of barbed wire.

The first image they decided upon was that of an American Indian. The Indians, Bob told Marsha, referred to barbed wire as the Devil's Rope, because it had excluded them from their traditional hunting lands.

'How do you know that?' Marsha asked.

'I read it in a book, doll,' he replied.

The second image was that of the buffalo, another native of America almost brought to extinction by its gung-ho settlement.

'How do you know this?' Marsha asked.

'I read it someplace. You oughta try readin' books yo'self some time,' he replied.

Later images included a black slave, an atomic mushroom cloud, Che Guevara, a helmeted West Virginian miner, a vulture, a drug death, and the McDonald's Arches. (Marsha also wanted to include images of bananas, soup cans and Brillo pads, but Bob vetoed these on the grounds that they were derivative. 'How do you know that?' Marsha challenged him. 'I've see'd 'em in books,' Bob replied. 'Books on yo' shelves!')

Marsha left Bob to decide which types of barbed wire they would use for the Flags. After looking through his collection, Bob settled on the Glidden Hanging Barb, the Glidden Large Square Strand, the Knickerbocker Applied Three Point Barb, the Merrill Four Point Twirl, the Kelly Thorny Common, the Hodge Spur Rowel on Large and Small

Strands, the Cady Barbed Link, the Jayne and Hill Locked Staples and Wood Block, and the Brinkerhoff Opposed Lugs Lance Point.

They formed a limited company called Rainy Day Sneakers, to which all expenses were charged and all monies paid. It was decided that the artwork would be signed TT Hancock, and that Marsha would be the public face of both the company and the artwork; as always, Bob would remain in the background, in comfortable shadow.

Rainy Day Sneakers took off like a rocket and Marsha stopped working at the bookstore. After the initial launch of *The Barbed Wire Flags* in the bayside community of Sausalito, galleries vied with each other to represent Bob and Marsha's work. The Flags sold for thousands of dollars each. People waited patiently on lists and bought sight unseen. Bob and Marsha moved into a bigger house in Seattle and had the cabin extended. Life for both of them was good – and always for the better when Doc came to visit.

Although Marsha was educated to a high standard herself, she was surprised that Bob had any other friend so educated. Wrongly, she presumed that any friend of Bob's was more likely to be a graduate of the School of Hard Knocks than an actual university. That Bob's closest friend was also a general practitioner confused her even more.

Marsha hated visiting doctors, and the idea of a doctor visiting them slightly concerned her. Meeting Doc, however, had been a pleasant surprise. He didn't look like a doctor, didn't talk like a doctor and was completely unaware of himself. His history was with Bob, but he made a point of making her a part of their present. They grew comfortable around each other, and Marsha was pleased when Doc started to tease her the same way he teased Bob. She thought it a genuine pity that these two men in her life had been unable to spend more time of their own lives together.

Circumstances, however, had prevented this from happening, and for many years Doc and Bob's relationship was necessarily one of long distance. They had communicated solely by letter and phone, and met only after Fogerty – Bob's nemesis – had died. At first they rendezvoused in anonymous cities, but then, as their confidence grew, in their respective homes. It was during a visit to the Klamath Mountains retreat that Bob presented Doc with *The Barbed Wire Flag* that Nancy had admired. In the rebated rectangle were fifty identical images of a cadaver.

There had been one visit by Bob, however, of which Doc was still

unaware: to the funerals of Beth and Esther. At the time of their deaths, Bob had been afraid of exposing either his grieving friend or himself to discovery, and had therefore felt unable to attend the service. He had, however, been there, and, as at his own funeral, in the background. He'd watched as the mourners filed into the church, the limousines arrive and Doc and his family step into view. He'd looked on helplessly as the two coffins were unloaded from the hearse and Doc, his father's arm around him, followed them into the church. His friend had looked a broken man. He'd wanted to run to him, hold him close and tell him it would be okay – but he didn't. He couldn't. Instead, he'd stayed where he was, silent and unmoving, his head bowed in prayer. Only after the coffins had been taken from the church to the crematorium, did Bob take his own leave and head back to Seattle.

'Who's Nancy?' Marsha asked. 'I don't remember you ever mentioning her.'

Doc had phoned, suggesting he and Nancy pay them a visit.

'An ol' friend o' mine he dated back when he was at Duke. 'Bout tore him up when she left him, an' then, outta the blue she phones him. You'll like her, Marsha. Nancy wouldn' stand fo' any o' my shit neither! Ha!'

Deterioration

Doc and Nancy's trip to Seattle didn't take place. Shortly before its due date Doc caught pneumonia and, afterwards, suffered an endless series of complications. Simultaneously, Nancy's life also became more complicated. Areas of her brain progressively shrank, and the cells located there were ransacked. Slight memory loss became severe memory loss, and minor confusions, significant. Though faces and objects remained familiar, their names escaped her. She came to forget her address and phone number, lose track of where she put things and invariably find her car keys in the microwave oven. She drove not knowing why she was driving or where she'd intended driving to; lost her bearings easily and failed to recognise once familiar landmarks. Eventually, she stopped driving, sold the car and very soon forgot how to drive.

Money, in value and amount, now confused her. Shop assistants would help her count the dollars and cents she'd take from her purse, and with varying degrees of patience explain that prices had changed considerably since 1972. Nancy also began to confuse the hours of the day with the hours of the night, and would often phone Doc at four in the morning;

every day of the week became a Sunday to her, the dead day of the week when nothing ever happens.

As the past grew in importance, recent events and the present became meaningless. In Nancy's altered state of mind, Ruby and her parents came back to life. She'd prepare meals for them and wonder why they never arrived to eat them; stand for hour after hour at the window or on the front porch waiting for their cars to turn into the driveway. Often, she'd look at herself in the mirror and wonder who the old woman staring back at her was; certainly not the young Nancy Travis she imagined herself to be.

Nancy's pride in her appearance evaporated. There came a time when she rarely combed her hair or brushed her teeth. Her dress sense and colour co-ordination disappeared, and on a cold winter's day she would as likely be clothed in a light summer's dress as a thick woollen sweater. Eventually she started to smell of urine, and so too did the house.

The stays Doc made with her became longer and more fraught: her restlessness, the way she anxiously clasped and unclasped her hands, her habit of pacing rooms, trying doorknobs and endlessly bending to pick imaginary pieces of lint from the carpet. She'd agitate easily and, on occasion, become aggressive; she'd shout at Doc, sometimes scream at him to take his goddamn hands off her! Towards the end of the period he visited her in Hershey – and while paying a visit to the bathroom – Nancy mistook him for a night-time prowler and hit him over the head with a baseball bat. Recovering in hospital the next day, fresh stitches in the back of his head, Doc reluctantly judged that their time to travel to Coffeeville was approaching.

By the time Doc celebrated his seventy-second birthday, he had already decided on a plan of action. Ideally, he would have preferred to have driven Nancy to Coffeeville, but his failing eyesight made such a long journey impossible. Although nervous of taking Nancy on any form of public transport, he'd decided they would fly from Harrisburg to Philadelphia and then take another flight to Memphis; there he would hire a car and drive the remaining distance. Within days of his birthday, however, he was forced to abandon such ideas and think again: Nancy had been admitted to the secure wing of a nursing home.

It transpired that Nancy had set out from her house one evening and left the front door wide open. She'd passed through the streets of her own neighbourhood unnoticed, walked along East Caracas Avenue and down Para Avenue until she came to Hwy 422, one of the town's main arteries.

Instead of turning left, which would have taken her to the centre of Hershey, she'd headed east in the direction of Lancaster and Reading. As she tramped unsteadily down the hard shoulder of the road and alongside the Spring Creek Golf Course, she'd been spotted by a passing police car. The cruiser pulled over and its driver climbed out, adjusting his hat and taking the precaution of unclasping his holster.

Immediately, he'd discerned Nancy's distress, but had been unable to calm her. Just as Nancy could make little sense of the world she now lived in, neither could the policeman make any sense of Nancy's: she didn't know where she was or where she lived, what day it was or what time of day it was. All she could tell him was that her name was Nancy Travis and that she was looking for her parents. The policeman had coaxed her into the back of his cruiser with the promise of helping her find them. Why he thought they'd be found in a police station, Nancy never fully understood, but together they searched for them there the rest of the evening.

As Nancy had no purse or form of identification on her, and the police could find no record of a Nancy Travis living in Hershey, she was detained at the station overnight. It was only after a neighbour phoned the following morning to report an open front door that her true identity became known. Her own doctor was on vacation at the time, and the practice administrator revealed to the police that her next of kin was listed as Brandon Travis, a resident of Clarksdale, Mississippi. (Nancy had always intended replacing Brandon's name with Doc's, but too late: Brandon was the person the police contacted.)

On hearing the news, and unaware he was no longer a beneficiary of Nancy's will, three like fruits lined up in Brandon's slot machine mind, and he started to imagine the dollar coins that would soon be tumbling his way. He told the police it would take him time to re-arrange his schedule and scrape together the necessary bus fare to Hershey, but that until he could get there, they should put his sister in a nursing home. He explained to them that although Nancy had money, he didn't want them putting her anywhere fancy.

'I'm glad he's not my next of kin,' the policeman, who'd made the call to Brandon, said to a colleague. He then checked her into the fanciest secure unit he could find.

Doc knew he had to think fast. Once a person got caught up in the care system, extrication was no easy matter; next-of-kin pulled the strings and

well-meaning friends counted for nothing. He had to get her out of there, and quickly.

Fortuitously, on the same day he heard from Nancy's next-door neighbour, he also received a phone call from his godson, and a new plan started to shape in his mind.

The next day, he flew to Pennsylvania and went in search of Nancy. The neighbour, who'd reported her missing to the police and her detention to Doc, was helpful. A close friend of Nancy herself, she told Doc she knew the whereabouts of the Nursing Home but not its name. She drew a map and asked him to give Nancy her love. 'Tell her I'll be along to visit as soon as I can.' Doc thanked her and climbed back into his rental, declining the cup of coffee she'd offered. The directions were easy to follow and he drove there directly. 'God in Heaven!' he exclaimed out loud when he read the name of the retirement centre: *Oaklands!*

The Oaklands Retirement Community had been in existence for ten years, and was the creation of a syndicate of doctors motivated by profit. Their initial idea had been to provide independent living in a communal atmosphere for senior citizens who were lonely, frail or tired of doing chores. Necessarily, their intended clientele had also to be wealthy, as the rents charged for the one- and two-bedroom apartments in the community's three storey building were high and increased yearly.

The doctors' intention had been to keep fee-paying customers – or cash cows, as they occasionally referred to them – in the community for as long as possible – ideally, until the day they died. They found, however, that despite their best efforts to maintain the mental health of the people they cared for, they were fighting a losing battle against the waves of dementia that crashed on to the shores of old age and pounded their residents' brains into mush. They lost residents to Alzheimer's, to vascular dementia, to Fronto-temporal dementia, to Binswanger's disease and occasionally to dementia with Lewy bodies. The inevitable transfer of such valuable assets to outside specialist facilities threatened to undermine the community's business model, and it was then that the doctors decided to build and open their own dementia care amenity: The Assisted Living Community – or Secure Unit, as it came to be called.

The plan worked: not only did the new unit plug a potential hole in the community's finances, but actually boosted them by allowing the facility to tap into a new, lucrative and ever-expanding market – dementia care. In-house guests who succumbed to the disease were no longer transferred to outside institutions, but simply wheeled – with a minimum of fuss –

from one community building to another. There, they joined patients from other retirement communities unable to provide a similar service.

Unlike the Retirement Community, where guests enjoyed freedom of movement and choice, residents in the Assisted Living Community were deprived of both. There was no sign over the door to the secure unit reading *Morituri Te Salutant,* but there might as well have been: like all such institutions, it became no more than a holding tank for death. Those who walked through its portals left only on a gurney and, while there, had little or no say in their own lives.

Nancy had been placed in the secure wing of the centre, accessed by a door code. Doc signed the visitor's register and followed the instructions given to him by the receptionist. 'It's easy to remember,' she'd said. 'Once you reach the door, punch in 1111 – it's the same code to get out.'

Nancy was standing by the door dressed in a green hospital gown, randomly pushing the buttons she hoped would release her back into the world. Upon seeing Doc, she flung her arms around him.

'Gene. Darling Gene. I thought I'd never see you again! Take me home with you, Gene. *Please,* Gene! Take me home with you.'

Doc stroked her hair. 'It's going to be fine Nancy, just fine, but let's go someplace we can talk.' Nancy led him to the bedroom she'd been given, and when the door closed behind them started to cry.

'Hey, what kind of greeting is this for an old friend? You're supposed to smile when you see me, not cry. Now dry those tears and give me a smile.'

Nancy calmed and gave Doc the biggest forced smile he'd ever seen. He couldn't help but laugh.

'A policeman arrested me, Gene, and I swear to God I hadn't done anything wrong. Why have they put me in prison? I haven't broken a law in my life!'

'It's not a prison, Nancy; it's a nursing home. There's been a big misunderstanding, but I'm going to sort it out. It might take a few days, so you'll have to be patient.'

'Can't you just tell them I didn't do anything and take me home with you? They'll listen to you, Gene: you're a doctor! Or at least, you said you were. You are a doctor, aren't you, Gene?'

'Yes, Nancy, I am, but listen to me. I can't take you with me today; it's just not possible. I promise you, though, the next time you see me will be the time we leave together. You'll never have to return here again. Now, how does that sound? Do you understand?'

Nancy nodded her head, seemingly understanding his words, but then said: 'Shall we go now, Gene?'

Doc explained the situation again, and afterwards Nancy asked him the same question. He held her to him and whispered: 'Nancy, my dear, dear Nancy.' In that moment, he wondered if he'd ever loved her more. He then opened the door, walked to the reception area and signed out.

Doc didn't drive straight to the airport, but instead to Nancy's neighbour's house. For emergencies, she held a duplicate key for Nancy's house and Doc borrowed it. He filled suitcases he found in the bedroom with some of Nancy's clothes, and then went to the medicine cabinet and took out all her prescribed tablets. He unlocked the safe Nancy had shown him in the hall closet and took out a shoe box filled with dollar bills. He then returned the key to the neighbour and drove to the airport.

He arrived home late that night, a new plan formulated in his head. The next day, he phoned Bob.

'Hey, Marsha, it's Gene. Bob there?'

'Sorry, Gene, I didn't quite catch that. Were you asking me how I was?'

'You know your welfare's always uppermost in my mind, Marsha; it's just that phone calls cost money.'

'What century are you living in, Gene? Phone calls are cheap! Now tell me, what are you up to?'

'Right now I'm trying to make a phone call to Bob, but there's some damned woman seems to think I want to talk to her instead. It's kind of urgent, Marsha.'

Marsha laughed and went in search of Bob. Doc looked at his watch as the minutes ticked by. Eventually, Bob's voice sounded.

'G-Man!

'What the hell, Bob! I thought you'd fallen down a drain.'

'I was on the can, man, so I guess a part o' me's down the drain, but I came fast as I could. Marsha tells me it's a matter o' some urgency. What's ailin' you?'

'It's Nancy, Bob. She's got herself locked up in a nursing home and I need your help to get her out. How are you fixed – can Marsha spare you for a couple of weeks?'

'Sure she can. She could spare me fo' a coupla years, if you wan' the honest truth!' He laughed, and then became serious. 'Nancy real bad, now?'

'She's a fair way down the hill, but not bad enough to be locked up in

a secure unit. I'm going to get her out of there and take her to Mississippi.'

'An' you wan' me to help spring her?'

'No, my godson's going to do that. What I need you to do is to source some drugs and find an unrented vehicle that can accommodate four, and then meet me in Hershey a week on Monday. Will you be able to do this? I'm presuming you still have your old contacts.'

'Time frame's a bit tight, Gene, but I'll be there. Drugs is no problem, but the vehicle might be mo' diff'cult. Let me get a pen…'

Doc read out the list of drugs, carefully spelling each one as Bob wrote them down, and then added nonchalantly: 'Oh and I'll need you to overnight me a handgun. It doesn't have to be anything fancy.'

'A gun! What you wanna gun fo', man?'

'I'm not planning on using it, but I have to be prepared for all exigencies: I've never held up a nursing home before.'

'You ain't never shot a gun b'fore neither, Gene. You as likely blow yo' damn foot off loadin' the thing. Guns ain't fo' foolin' with, man.'

'I know it, Bob, and I'll be careful. If it makes you any happier, I'll buy one of those *Dummies* books on how to load guns and shoot people. Now stop worrying, will you.'

There, they left the conversation, and agreed to meet in the parking lot of the Stoverdale United Methodist Church, a week Monday.