

## SIXTY-SIX



2003

I'M GOING TO TELL YOU a story and you're not going to believe it, but nevertheless I'm going to tell you. It's kind of a murder mystery. On the other hand, maybe it's a time-travel story, and come to think of it, it's also a story of vengeance, and then throw in a couple of ghosts and there you have it.

What I am is a motorcycle officer with the Oklahoma police on what used to be called Route 66, somewhere between Kansas and Oklahoma City. During the last month a series of very strange discoveries has been made along the route from Kansas City to Oklahoma.

I discovered the bodies of a man, a woman, a younger man, and two children in fields along the way in early Octo-

ber. The bodies were widely distributed over an area of more than a hundred miles, and yet the way they were dressed indicated to me that, somehow, they were all related. Each of the bodies appeared to have died from some sort of strangulation, but that has not been definitively ascertained. There are no marks on the bodies, but all indications were that they were slain and left not far from the road.

The clothes they wore did not belong to this day in this month, in this year. Indeed, the clothing was not at all like what you'd buy at shops today.

The man appeared to be a farmer, dressed in work clothes: denims, a ragged shirt and battered hat.

The woman resembled a timeworn scarecrow, starved by life.

The younger man was dressed as a farmer also, but with clothes that looked like they had traveled five hundred miles in a dust storm.

The two children, a boy and a girl around twelve, also looked as if they had wandered the roads in heavy rains and blistering sun and then fallen by the way.

When I hear the phrase "Dust Bowl," memories come back that are not mine. My mother and father were born in the early 1920s and were alive during the Great Depression, which I heard about all my life. We people here in the center of America suffered that nightmare, which we've all seen in motion pictures—dust blowing in great billowing gusts across the land, destroying the barns and leveling the crops.

I've heard the story and seen it so often that I feel I lived

through it. That is one of the reasons why my finding the bodies of these people was so strange.

I woke some nights ago around three in the morning and found that I had been crying and I didn't know why. I sat up in bed and realized I'd been dreaming about those bodies found all along the road, from Kansas City to the Oklahoma border.

It was then that I got up and rifled through some old books left to me by my parents and found pictures of the Okies: people who had gone west and who had been memorialized in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. The more I looked at the pictures, the more I felt the need to weep. I had to put the books away and go back to bed, but I lay there for a long time with tears streaming down my face and only slept when the sun rose in the morning.

I've taken the long way to tell you about this because it has been so hurtful to my soul.

I found the body of the older man in an empty cornfield, strewn in a ditch, his clothes burnt by the sun and parched as in a dry harvest. I called in the county coroner and continued searching; I had an uneasy sense that there were more bodies to be found. Why I should think this still remains an immense mystery to me.

I found the woman thirty miles farther on, under a culvert, and she, in turn, bore no marks of violence but seemed dead as if from an invisible bolt of lightning having struck her in the night.



Fifty miles still farther on lay the bodies of the children and the young man.

When they were all assembled, like a jigsaw puzzle, in the county coroner's office, we surveyed them with a terrible sense of loss, though we did not know these people. Somehow we felt we had seen them before and known them well, and we mourned their deaths.

This entire case might have remained a terrible mystery forever. Many weeks later, as I waited for a haircut in a barbershop one afternoon, I leafed through a pile of magazines. Opening an issue of an old magazine, I came to a page of photographs that caused me to jump up, throw the magazine against the wall, then pick it up again, shouting to nobody, "Damn! Oh, Jesus! Damn!"

I clenched the magazine in my hand and stormed out.

Because, my God, the pictures of the Okies in the magazine were the same people I'd found along the road!

But, looking closer, I read that these pictures were taken weeks ago in New York, of folks dressed up to look like Okies.

The clothes they wore were new but made to look dusty and worn, and if you wanted to have them you could go to a department store and buy these old clothes at new prices and think yourself back sixty years.

I don't know what happened next. I kind of went redhot bloodshot blind. I heard someone yelling, and it was me. "Damn! Oh God!"

Crushing the magazine, I stared at my motorcycle.

The night was cold, and somehow I knew I had to ride my cycle somewhere. I rode off in the autumn weather for a long while and stopped every once in a while. I didn't know where I was, and I didn't care.

Now I'll tell you another thing that you won't believe, but when I'm done, maybe you will.

Have you ever been in a really big windstorm? The kind of storm that came through Kansas and blew over Oklahoma all those years of the Dust Bowl. When you see the photos and hear the name there is hardly any way for you to imagine how it was when the people inside the great wind couldn't see the horizon, didn't even know what time it was. The wind blew so hard it flattened farms, tore off roofs, knocked over windmills. It ruined a lot of poor roads, which were already nothing more than red mud.

Anyway, you get lost in the middle of a storm like that, when the dust burns your eyes and fills your ears, and you forget what day it is or what year and you wonder if something awful is going to happen and then maybe it's not awful, but it does happen and it's there.

This big wind roared up and I was on the road on my motorbike when it hit. I had to stop my bike I was so blind. I stood there with the sun going down beyond the storm and the wind howling and I was afraid for the first time. I didn't know what I was afraid of, but I waited with my motorbike and after a long while the wind sort of died, and coming along Route 66 from the eastern horizon, going real slow, was an old jalopy;

an open car with bundles in the back and a water bag on the side, and steam coming out of the radiator and dirt crusted over the windshield so whoever was driving had to half stand to look over to see the road.

The car pattered up close to me and then sort of ran out of gas. The man behind the wheel looked at me and I looked at him. He was tall, even sitting in his seat, and his face was bony and his hands were bony on the wheel. There was a crumpled hat on his head, and he had a three-day beard. His eyes looked like he'd been in a night storm forever.

He waited for me to speak.

I walked over and all I could say was "You lost?"

He looked at me with his steady gray eyes. His head didn't move, but his lips did. "No, not now. Is this the Dust Bowl?"

I sort of pulled back and then I said, "I haven't heard those words since I was a kid. Yeah, this is it."

"And this is Route 66?"

I nodded.

"That's how I figured," he said. "Well, if I go straight on, will I get where I want to go?"

"Where's that?"

He looked at my uniform and his shoulders sort of sagged. "I was looking for, I think, a police station."

"Why?" I said.

"Because," he said, "I think I want to give myself up."

"Well, maybe you can give yourself up to me. But why would you want to do that?"



"Because," he said, "I think I killed some folks."

I looked back down the road to where the dust was settling. "Back there?" I said.

He looked over his shoulder very slowly and nodded. "Yup, back there." The wind went high again and the dust was thick.

"How long ago?" I said.

He closed his eyes. "Some time during the last few weeks."

"Folks?" I said. "Killed? How many?"

He opened his eyes and his eyelashes quivered. "Four, no, five. Yeah, five people, dead now. Good riddance. Do I give myself up to you?"

I hesitated because something was wrong. "This is too easy. You've got to say more."

"Well," he said, "I don't know how to tell you, but I've been driving this road for a long time. Gotta be years."

Years, I thought. That's how I felt too, that he'd been driving for years.

"And then what?" I said.

"These people sort of got in the way. One of them looked like my pa and the other looked like my ma when she was very young and the third one looked like my brother, but he's long dead. I used to have another brother and sister, and they were there too. It was so damned strange."

"Five people?" I said. And my mind went back to the days behind and the five people I'd found on the road between Kansas City and Oklahoma. "Five?"

He nodded. "That's it."

"Well," I said, "what had they done? Why would you want to kill them?"

"They was just on the road," he said. "I don't know how they got there, but the way they dressed and the way they looked, I knew something was wrong and I had to stop and fix each one, make them drop forever. I just had to do it." He looked at his hands on the steering wheel, which were clenched tight.

"Hitchhikers?" I said.

"Not exactly," he said. "Something worse. Hitchhikers are okay, they're going somewhere. But these folks, they were just poachers I guess. Claim jumpers, criminals, robbers of some sort. It's hard to say." He looked back down the road again where the dust was beginning to stir up just a bit.

"Do you ever come out of church Sunday noon, feeling clean, like you had another chance for who knows what, and you stand there, reborn, with folks happy unto joy, as the preacher says, and then in the midst of noon folks from across town drive up in their dark suits and undertake you, I mean undertake your happiness with their demon smiles, and you stand there with your folks and feel the joy just melt away like a spring thaw and when they see they've undertook your joy they drive away in their own kind of sinful undertaking of happiness?"

The driver stopped, added up the sums inside his eyelids, and at last let his breath out. "Ain't that a sort of, I don't know, kind of—" He searched and found the word. "Blasphemy?"



I waited, thought, and said, "That's **the** word."

"We weren't doing nothing, just standing there, fresh out of **the** revival, and they just came by and undertook us."

"Blasphemy," I said.

"I was only ten, but that was **the** first time in my life I wanted to grab a hoe and rake their smiles. And you stand there, feeling naked. They've stolen your Sunday best. Don't you think I got a right to just say give back, hand over, I'll take that coat, shuck off those pants and **the** hat too, yeah, **the** hat?"

"Five people," I said. "An older man, a woman, a younger man, and two kids. That sounds familiar."

"Then you know what I'm saying. They were wearing those clothes. It's funny, **the** clothes they were wearing, it looked like they had been through **the** Dust Bowl, stayed there a long time, and maybe lived out in **the** open and slept at night with **the** wind blowing and their clothes getting full of dust and their faces sort of getting thin and I looked at each one and I said to **the** older man, 'You're not my pa.' And **the** old man couldn't answer. I looked at **the** woman and said, 'You're not my ma,' and she didn't answer either. And I looked at my brother and my other younger brother and sister and said, 'I don't know any of you. You look right, but you feel wrong. What are you doing on this road?' Well, they didn't say anything. They was kind of, I don't know, ashamed maybe, but they wouldn't get out of **the** way. They were standing in front of **the** car, and I knew if I didn't do something they wouldn't let me go on to Oklahoma City. So you know what I did?"

"Put a stop to them," I said.

"*Stop* is a good word. Yank off the clothes, I thought to myself. They don't deserve to have those clothes. Take away their skin, I thought, because they don't deserve to look like my mom and dad and brothers and sister. So I sort of edged the car forward, but they didn't move and they couldn't speak because they was ashamed and the wind came up and I moved the car. As I moved, they fell down in front of it and I drove straight on and when I looked back I hoped the bottom of the car had ripped their clothes off, but no, they were still full dressed, which they didn't deserve, and they were lying there on the road, and if they was dead I wasn't sure, but I hoped they was. I got out and went back and one by one I picked them up, put them in the back of the car, and I took off down the road with the dust rising and I laid them out here and there and somewhere else, and by that time they didn't look like any of my folks at all. That's a peculiar story, don't you figure?"

"It's peculiar," I said.

"Well then," he said, "that's it. I've told it all. You gonna take me in?"

I looked into his face and looked down the road and I thought of the bodies still lying in the coroner's office in Topeka. "I'll think about it," I said.

"What do you mean?" he said. "I've told it all. I'm guilty. I did them in."

I waited. The wind and the dust were rising even more. I

said, "No. Strange, I don't think you're guilty. Don't know why, but I don't think you are."

"Well, it's getting late," he said. "You want to see my identification?"

"If you want to show it," I said.

He pulled a battered wallet out of his pocket and handed it over. There was no driver's license, just an old card with a name on it I couldn't quite read, but it looked familiar, something out of **the** newspapers long before I was born. **The** back of my neck got real cold and I said, "Where you heading after this?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I'm feeling better than when I started **the** trip. What's ahead up there on **the** road?"

"Same as always," I said. "California, postcards, oranges, lemons, maybe government camps, bungalow courts." I handed him back his card and wallet. "There's a police station about ten miles ahead. By **the** time you get there, if you still feel you've gotta give yourself up, do it there, but I'm not your man."

"How come?" he said, his eyes quiet and gray and steady.

"All I know is sometimes some people don't deserve to wear **the** clothes that they wear or wear **the** faces that they got. Some people," I said at last, "get in **the** way."

"I drove real slow," he said.

"And they didn't move."

"Right," he said. "I just went right over them and that was it and I felt good. Well, I guess I better be gettin' on."



I stood back and let the car drift. It went down the road, the driver hunched over the wheel, his hands on the steering wheel and the dust following him as he got smaller in the twilight.

I stood watching him for the next five minutes until he was gone. By that time the wind was rising and the dust was filling my eyes. I couldn't tell where I was or if I was crying. I went back to my motorcycle, got on, hit the throttle, and turned around and went the other way.