Shepherd Creed

by Paul Hawkins

SHEPHERD CREED

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Chapter 1

My name is John Smart, and I knew Shepherd Creed as well as any man during his life, and I want to tell his story as best I can, because in the end he was a good man in precisely the sense of how 'good' ought to be. Not great, not flashy, but good in the way one of those stoical saints is good. He may even have been great, but he never would have admitted how great he was. That would have been showy.

He was also a “career man” of forty years with the same place of employment, and to achieve great things in that most banal of circumstances is a tribute to his optimistic human spirit. Lesser men have turned completely ashen under such circumstances, but Shepherd achieved his own quiet kind of triumph.

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It was autumn and the fields that ran away on the horizon were as brown and striated as the shell of a chestnut. Orange leaves hung on the trees and fell here and there and chattered along the ground.

The boy, who was maybe twelve, sat beneath a pin oak with a mostly dry creekbed behind him and an old Model A in front of him on the road. It was his father's car and it had survived across many years and many owners and many miles. It may even have been held together by rust. A faded tractor rested in the field across the road, and his father had left with the car while he walked to the farmhouse for assistance with his broken vehicle.

A red dirt road that ran before him, but the real roads were coming here, the boy thought, the paved roads. The roads were to be built by the state – roads of tarmac forming endless gray lines webbing the state, linking town to town, county seat to county seat, center of industry (such as they were) to center of industry. They were to link farmers to markets, grain to elevators, businessmen to businessmen, and Wells Fargo wagons to people everywhere.

The boy's father, Robert Creed, had sat at the dinner table one night and proudly told the boy how lucky their town was that it would get a road. Roads meant growth and money and progress. Some towns, already passed by time and trade, would not be blessed by the presence of a state road and would hasten in decline. Towns that were not a county seat or that had merely offended a state dignitary might see themselves passed by. But their town didn't need to worry about that, his father said – they were strong social democrats. And so one of the magic roads would be here, the boy thought, a slender pipeline leading to the places where important people might be. Even in his young mind he admired the project's engineering and design. The significance of the road system was marvelously important for a thing to be made of asphalt.

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The boy had the misfortune to be named Shepherd Creed. It was too pious for the decidedly mechanistic boy, but his grandmother had been an agitator in the Women's Christian Temperance Union and his mother, who was a tall thin woman with pale hair in an Amish style, wore her mother's indelible stamp. The grandmother had stood next to Carrie Nation fighting the devil in a bottle, and her soul had enjoyed being fanned to a fire of righteous indignation. If the heady wars of temperance, fought in the dirt and grime of saloons, had been completed by the time of the mother, they were replaced by the quiet broader work of moral temperance; negation gave way to the slow and steady march toward purgation and perfection, the work to winnow away the remaining illusions and turn the soul away from the eyehooks of the world.

The father was in many ways the mother’s temperamental opposite. He had no high ideals. He enjoyed planting, hunting, reaping, and repairing – all in the shadow of the low hills that began to roll green and verdant in Eastern Oklahoma. He was a man of thrift not given to drink or gambling, not so much because they were sins but because they were a waste of money and effort. He spent his days in the fields and his nights in the old out building, by lantern light, sharpening or fixing his tools. He valued not being beholden to other men. His hands were calloused and often greasy. The wife saw in his self-control the natural suggestions of preternatural rectitude. If she was holy he was good, like the classical philosophers who had not known Jesus, which is all a circuitous way of saying he did not like church much.

The son, Shepherd Creed, had button bright eyes of light brown and curly brown hair – from his frame you could see that he would be a sturdy boy and a strong young man. But his bright eyes showed more intelligence and curiosity than they did the poetic sense of wonder that often leads to the door of religion, yet he had a kind of wonder at the disciplined inspiration to accomplish physical achievements. The innovators were more than engineers. They had a mind’s eye that

could see a better place.

He wanted to ride a train someday. And drive the tractor. And someday drive the wide clean roads paving the state, and he wanted to see new places. And he wanted to help build the roads.

His sisters made up for his impiety – except the youngest. His three elder sisters, who looked and dressed in austerity like the mother, had thin frames and long faces and washed-out blonde hair that they often wore in a bun. They would have lived as simply as Mennonites if they could, but the youngest, who was one year younger than Shepherd, was pretty and knew it, and therefore she tossed her golden locks coquettishly at an early age because boys flitted around her likes bees to a flower, and she had a head for worldly things and knew even at an early age that boys were a means to an end.

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These family politics would have sustained themselves for several years if the mother had been well. But the mother had fallen down the steps of the cellar last winter and broken her leg, and it was in the recuperation of this that a general malaise set in, an ague that was soon diagnosed as pneumonia. She could not get warm, she would not eat. The boy remembered long afternoons in winter with his mother seated by the stove, a blanket around her shoulders and her face as wan as a grayed bedsheet. The husband saw her fade away and thought it was because she had never been much but otherworldly in the first place. He invited her mother down to tend to her, her mother being old but rough and as ready in this world as in the other, but nothing but more fever set in, and though her mother was there it was the husband whom she asked to read the Bible to her, and he would bend by lamp light near her bed and thumb through the book, worn and splayed from many readings, and he would read this passage or that at her request, and in the sort of odd way that death lets things in, the two became closer than at any time since they were courting, and the man shook with tears after leaving her each evening, and he recalled in his hidden heart the love his memory had all but forgotten for her in the workaday world of things. He knelt one night and prayed for his own conversion that it might save her. But it was to no avail, and so in the early days one April she passed away, and the man was utterly alone and there was not enough meat on the clean white bones of purity to nourish him.

Her death had a profound effect on Shepherd. For the first time he became aware of the foolishness of an expectation of constancy. One must keep moving. On top of that he felt a profound guilt that if he had been less prone to idle speculation at his own eventual grandeur she might still be here. Forever after there was a hatred at what had happened, a distrust at the 'what if' over the here-and-now.

There was no question that the grandmother would take the boy's older sisters – except the eldest, who was betrothed to the son of the preacher. She had wanted the boy too but the man refused, saying that he should keep him to finish his apprenticeship into manhood. And she had wanted sturdy little Eudora, the youngest, but at this the girl balked with all the fervor of wild mare at a saddle, and she insisted it was out of love for her father that she stay. She was his baby, and she in her glow preserved in him a ladder out of his despair, some love of things that smelled and felt and tasted real. The grandmother had relented in her demands for Eudora because, perhaps, she intuited that any insistence would only send the youth further and faster into the waiting arms of the world.

And so one bright morning in early May the eldest sisters disappeared down the road with in a buggy, to go to Kansas where their grandmother abided, and the man took his son into the field one day, green tall with wheat, and told him of the responsibilities that he would begin to keep. The father began to work double-hard to pay for the employment of a local woman to come in during the days, to see to the chores about the place, to do some cleaning and pickling and canning, and to simply fill the aching void of a need for routine, and in this he found a lady of the church who mirrored his sensibilities for thrift and soon was running a tight ship and even keeping Eudora to her studies and Shepherd (who was increasingly inclined to go hunting) to his.

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A few years passed in this arrangement until the wounded man began to find his feet beneath himself and thrive again, so much so that he came to purchase the neighboring farm and hire a man to sharecrop it. All the while Shepherd studied and found himself growing tall as quickly as Euroda (who now called herself “Topsy”) grew fair, and soon a few more years passed in which Eudora struggled at her education but to her it did not much matter, and Shepherd excelled at his, though he did not much try. Shepherd had become more man than a boy, his frame muscled from the industry of work, and his eyes were still bright with curiosity at the world. He was predicted to achieve great things and gave an oratory at the fair in the manner of Cicero and was sponsored in the farm club by the leading men of the community. He was mid-way through highschool with the hinted promise of a scholarship to the A&M college a few autumns out.

It was then that a thunder-blow in the arrangement of the family politics struck him a second time. His father announced his love for the caretaker woman and her love for him. Eudora said she was not the least bit surprised, but Shepherd reeled from the news. There could be no replacing his mother. The father announced all of this with a tone of

forced pleasantness that Shepherd had only heard one time before, when he had asked where he and his sisters had come from. The boy rebelled at the union – it gnawed at him – it was impossible. For one thing she was not in any sense sublime – she had a workaday coarseness. His mother had been beautiful. He found he could not sleep at night. He did not know he could feel so strongly, although he was becoming a cauldron of feelings lately, often at war with the world of routine. And so it was in the night that Topsy came to him and said “Let's leave.”

At first this occurred to him as absurd, and irresponsible, but a quick check of the sentiment inside of him found all his instincts willing. He saw his future out in the rest of the world. He saw the farm grown too small for him, smaller than last summer's clothes. He was a man as much as a boy – he was fitted to escape.

“My bag is packed and so is yours,” Topsy said. “They will be off for a honeymoon in a few days. We will take the car then.”

And so it was done. He was sixteen and Topsy was fifteen. In the dead of night, when they were entrusted to the care of an aunt who slept through the noisy effort of it all (the creaking of the barn door, the braying of the animals, the coughing of the car) they made a break for it. If there was one thing he knew, it was how to drive a car. He had seen to it for years that his father instructed him. And so they lit out onto the wide metallic moon-reflecting roads, across the gray bands that webbed the world, toward some sort of center, they escaped.

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“God loved her and she still died,” the boy said to his siter. It was the dead of night and the road was rolling underneath them. “I can’t much trust a God like that.”

Topsy was looking at herself in the car's mirror. “What's that?”

“God couldn't have loved someone more than he loved Mom, and she still died,” the boy said.

“Everybody dies.”

“They shouldn't have to – not the people God says he loves.”

“You're tired from driving – let me drive.”

“Since when do you know how to drive?”

“Boys taught me.”

“I’m fine, and in any case I'm not getting in any car with you behind the wheel thank you.”

“Well where are we going?”

“Dad has that brother in the city – the musician. That's why Dad doesn't like him – he's kind of a black sheep. I think he'll let us lay low until we figure out what to do.”

“I always wanted to be a singer,” Topsy said.

“The world will teach you if you can sing or not.”

“You got his address?”

“Yep – on a letter.”

“Well then drive on in the night, country boy,” she said, leaning back. “I got to figure out how I'll get famous as a singer and plan my wardrobe.”

“Mom wouldn't be happy.”

“Since when do you care about what Mom would have thought?”

“Since she isn't here and that washer-woman taken her place. And since you grew up so confoundedly stupid.”

“Well you're your own man now, Shep, and you better get used to it. There's a big life ahead of you since the moment you stole the car keys.”

He was going to say something but then he thought I'd be a waste of breath to bother. He just shook himself awake a little and stared at the repeating line ahead of him.

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Once when he was young, his grandfather had gone to the city on business and brought Shepherd along and one image had always stuck in his mind: the contrast between rich and poor – the beggars outside the train station even as a very rich couple was exiting the depot. Pressed suits and dirty overalls; a beaded dress and broken shoes. His grandfather said that this is what happened when country folks moved to the city. It broke their connection to the earth and removed a man from the harvest of his work. In the city, some men worked but others kept the money. And when young Shepherd asked about this, his grandfather answered that this is the fix built into the system in the world of factories and smoke. But someday a pious voice would rise to fix it. History itself would make him emerge. Someone would rise up and see to it that the world was run by workers, not a collusion of bankers and crooked politicians writing laws that made them richer. In the back of his mind, and sometimes in the front of it, Shepherd let himself imagine that he might be that man – though, as I've said, he did not have that drop of poetry in his sensibility that turns water to wine, that makes people drunk with the

vision you lay out and want to be at your side to see it done.

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And so it was with a sense of wariness at his own eagerness to escape that Shepherd steered their vehicle to the outskirts of town and then into the sudden close ranks of unfamiliar dirty buildings and finally to their uncle's address. They arrived at a drab apartment house in about 8:00 in the morning and knocked on a numbered door. Shepherd's uncle Raymond answered. He was a lanky brown-haired man much taller than their father, and younger but apparently more care-worn. He had a pencil moustache. He opened the door in dumbfounded surprise. He looked like he had slept well after dawn and just been awakened. He rubbed his face.

They identified themselves as his relatives, but this only made him recoil. “Good God, what are you doing here?”

“We ran off,” Shepherd said.

“That was a stupid thing to do. I'm calling your dad.”

“Please don't,” Shepherd said. “He remarried and I just can't stand it. And he was always saying you ran off when you were young.”

The man looked down at him, cinching his bathrobe. “The world was different then. You had to be a man earlier.”

“Well, that's the way I felt when our father got married again. I felt I had to get away and grow up in a hurry. And I wouldn't have done it if I weren't serious.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen – seventeen in August.”

“And how old's she?” He gestured at Eudora.

“Fifteen.”

“That's the trouble with girls,” he said, “they get a certain age and you can't tell.”

“Look, you can send her back, but take me in. I can work. I don't want to be in that house again.”

“You're both going home. Now come in – I need to make some coffee.”

He opened the door and the two of them walked in behind him. His rooms were gray and spartan.

“Sit down,” he said.

They did, in silence, while he set the coffee on. Then he settled in the kitchen chair opposite them and lit a cigarette.

“So he remarried? I would have thought he'd tell me.”

“It disgraces my mother,” Shepherd said, and he felt himself get hot. “And I'm getting out of there whether you like it or not.”

The man smiled at him – the cigarette was calming him. “Look son, you have to finish school. And it's not like I don't understand. You get to be a certain age and the world doesn't fit anymore.”

“I just hate it,” Shepherd said, but the man would not budge. He took one long pull on his cigarette and exhaled slowly and gave the boy a sideways look. “There's fire in you.”

Shepherd nodded. “Dad got comfy. I don't want to get that way. Comfortable men settle for things.”

His uncle rose and ran a hand through his greasy hair. “Look, it's not that I don't like you, but you don't run off at your age and not get into trouble. I got no kids and I don't intend to have any, but I'm not letting my brother's children make a mistake. I'm going to gather my thoughts then I'm going to call your dad.”

“He’s on his honeymoon.”

“Then I’ll drive you back myself. I’ll have to borrow a car. I’ll ask a friend tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“I’m a musician – we do two shows a night at a fancy hotel. I’ll ask my friend. That gives you one day of freedom.”

“You take me home I'll just run off again,” Shepherd said.

The uncle just ignored him. “Coffee's boiling,” the he said finally. He returned to the table with two cups. He put one in front of Shep.

“Man up.”

“I've been drinking coffee since I was six,” Shepherd said.

“So you have,” his uncle said, and took a sip. “I'm not surprised. But can you play the trombone?”

“No sir.”

The man walked across the room and picked up a long case. Then he took the instrument from it and played a long low note. “It isn't the instrument that will get you the girls, but it's alright. Is that something you'd like to do son?”

“No.”

“Then finish school.”

Shepherd could think of nothing to say.

“Well make yourselves comfortable – you're going home tomorrow, and some of us still have to work. Eudora, I know a woman who can watch you. And as for you, Shepherd,” he took a long draw on his cigarette, “You get one chance to show if you have what it takes to make it in the city. Think you can bus tables tonight? You know, pick up the dirty dishes in a restaurant.”

It was the last thing the boy had pictured himself doing – but he would do it.

“Okay.”

“For one night then, you can see what the city's about. Glamorous and cruel – just like Cleopatra’s fingernails.” He took a sip of his coffee and looked at them. “How long have you all been awake?”

“Since yesterday evening.”

“Well then, get some sleep. Eudora gets the bed, and Shepherd, you get the couch.”

Despite their protestations, the very mention of sleep reminded them they were exhausted. He fed them scrambled eggs and sent them to their stations.

“Now sleep,” he said. And in spite of their nervous energy, they did.

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That night while Eudora was put under the loving vigilant care of an obese “Aunt Olive”, Shepherd was working at the restaurant. They dressed him in a moth-bit, too big tuxedo (he still wore his old shoes) and set him loose upon a world of what he considered to be ritzy diners. It was the busiest he had ever been in his life, and he was not doing a good job of it. He dropped dishes, he knocked over people's water, he bumped into the waiters. The other bus boys laughed at him.

But Shepherd was fascinated by the place. It was like all the riches of the world had been poured in there, but in a contradictory way. The gold and mirrored decoration of the place and the tunes of the band were impeccable, but the club had an air of seaminess. There were rich and powerful men hobnobbing with beautiful women, but it was filled with a kind of boozy laughter. The carpet was thick rich crimson but downtrodden into paths; the ash trays were always full; the voices were as coarse as the crystal was delicate. It was a world of the money and power of this part of the state and the capitol, all reflected to a grotesque in the silverware.

He did not want them to know he was a country boy.

Suddenly he felt eyes watching him, and he turned to see someone in the shadows like a pearl set in steel, a life-filled contrast to the dazzling mire of the place. He saw the person he would forever after think of as the most beautiful girl is the world. She had hair like spun gold and unprepossessing large blue eyes. She looked displaced and a bit forlorn, like himself.

He ran back to the back and asked a waiter: “Who is she?”

“That's just the hat check girl,” he said.

“What's her name?”

“Rosemary.”

“Introduce me to her.”

The man yawned and stretched. “You're only here for one night, kid.”

But Shepherd persisted. “Introduce me to her, please.”

So the man did, and from that point on in the night he missed busing many tables. He went over and spoke with her. It turned out she was from the country too, but she had bigger plans. She had been sent to live with an aunt at the death of her father and she hated it. She wanted to run off as soon as she could. She was saving up.

“Do you want to run off with me?” she asked indifferently.

“I can't.”

“California is where to be. There's stuff happening out there.”

“I can't. I promised to finish highschool then college.”

“And get what? To be king of nothing out here?”

“I want to build roads.”

She scowled at him as if she were his elder, and laughed. “There's a road right out to California already and there's jobs for the taking.”

“I know.”

She looked at him coyly. “If I said I was leaving tonight, would you go with me?”

He looked at her and saw more strength in her to challenge him than he had expected, because he did not yet know what to make of the opposite sex. He straightened his sad tuxedo and wanted to puff out his chest and preen, but then all he said was, “I can't do it.”

“Well, suit yourself,” she said, and turned away.

“Wait...” he said.

“What?”

“Sit with me after work. I am only here for tonight.”

“And what will that gain me?”

“A little company, for one night. Company from someone who is displaced like you, somebody who needs someone to understand them.”

She could sense he was forlorn and laughed. “Okay.”

The sat together than night on the loading ramp behind the restaurant. She combed her fingers through his hair. “You look like a mess,” she said. “I think you are a mess.”

He kissed her, and then they sat closer the rest of the evening, looking at the stars which were as beautiful as the interior of the place was overwrought, and then his uncle found them.

“Where have you been?” He asked. “I was looking all over for you. I thought you'd run off.”

“I could have,” the boy said. “But I decided to stay and make a man out of myself.”

His uncle made him say goodbye to Rosemary, and they left to catch a scant bit of sleep before he drove them back home in the morning.

“I could have left with her, you know,” Shep said.

“Welcome to the big city, kid. It's full of 'almosts' with no second chances. But hey, if you come back after you finish highschool, maybe she'll still be here.”

The boy did not find this encouraging, and the next day he was sitting with his sister in the back of the car, heading for home.

Chapter 2

Time passed quickly for the boy. He ended up finishing highschool, then college, and got his engineering degree. He grew to be a man of sturdy build who topped out at maybe 5' 11', but he still had the face of naïve youth. Eudora ran off again and again, and finally she was off for good. The father gave up hunting her down this last time. He figured the world would send her running back to him, soon enough, when she had seen what it was really like. But she never returned home.

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By the time Shepherd graduated from college, the one thing he did know was how to make roads. He had studied, he had interned with important people and he had impressed them all. He could become an indispensable man to the state roads commission, and then an important one.

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But it was before all that, before he entered his career, that Shepherd had a peculiar episode.

He was at a gathering of all his graduating colleagues in a hot room that was an orgy of drink and laughter. He saw them all crowded in the room, lugubrious and coarse and not a one of them in control of themselves and something hit deep inside him. None of them were beautiful. All of them had achieved great things academically only to abase themselves. The carelessness of their behavior struck him as grotesqueness. He felt a sudden sharp recoil from a place deep inside himself. Too many faces, too hot, too frivolous. He felt disturbed until his thoughts roll back in his head and came back to him as a different person. He stood on a table in the middle of the room and shouted:

“Listen! Listen to me. Rise up from the world of soddenness and whoresons! Cast off the shackles of your complacency. Seize upon these turbulent times to make a new world better than the old.”

The room got quiet and they looked at him.

“Shep?”

He violently shook off a man who was trying to lead him down from the table. The man fell back into his friends, and Shep continued:

“We have all seen the dishonesty and greed of the system and have looked the other way, thinking that in our education we could become one of them. We have weakened ourselves in vanity and pride in our hallowed halls of learning to think we are becoming more than we are. It is time to shed these false notions and purify. The world depends on us! The generation downtrodden by Depression and catastrophe depends on us. We have taken money to pretend we are becoming more than we are, and more than they. And worse – oh brothers, much worse, we have loved illicitly and taken drink! Even now there are people fornicating in the laundry room. So now is the time to make ourselves clean again! Cast out the temptations as we stand on the threshold of the changing world. Cast them out that we may put our shoulders to the wheel of the common man for a better tomorrow!”

He leapt down and began trying to smash every piece of furniture in the place. They tried to stop him but he had unnatural strength. He accused them all of being unclean. Finally they were able to wrestle him down and call the police. Shepherd thrashed and then suddenly fell silent. He vaguely knew what he had done, but it was as if someone else had done it.

They called the cops, and he was taken away.

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For the better part of the next day and into the night he was convinced that someone had started a fight with him; when pressed, however, he could not say who he had been fighting or what it had been about. The day after that he was able to recall more objectively what he had done but could not remember why he had done – it was if he were watching someone else in a movie.

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He spent three months in a sanitarium, but he was nothing less than the picture of industry, and in truth there was hardly a better place to be for a man in his condition. Three squares and penitence. He turned his mind to their familiar home, plans for the construction of long-lasting, durable systems of transportation not only for this era but for the systematized efficient new agricultural and industrialized productivity to come, emerged from the dust, for the ordinary people to use. In his mind, when the thoughts of roads finally coalesced from their tangle of overlapping bands into one uniform and useful design, one purposeful whole, he saw more than bands of grey – he saw beyond them to an ideal beautiful and pure and liberating and clean.

He had them bring him books by the bushel. He studied every nook and cranny of road construction from every state and emerged from within the walls as a singularly qualified civil engineer. There were public works to be run. When he left prison he had his parcel of designs and papers underneath one arm, and he was ready to do his part.

I speculate that this episode was from fatigue and stress, but it was in fact one of the times that the terrible swift sword of Shepherd's egalitarian streak came out, the desire to become bigger than himself ostensibly for the sake of others. He knew it was a vain-glorious temptation and usually suppressed it under the workaday, but now and then it escaped.

Chapter 3

Through the influence of a well-connected professor, Shepherd was soon working in the State Department of Transportation, and in short time people were saying, “Nobody knows their stuff like Shepherd Creed.” He was able to successfully and immediately transform himself into a button-down man, an efficient machine like his father before him, and any inklings of self-reflection fled his mind as sparrows would scatter at a tossed rock. It was strange that way with Shepherd – he could move into a space that defined who he ought to be – a very narrow space –and he could only be in one space at one time. At work there were straight lines plenty enough to distract him from self-reflection, albeit there were also a lot of forms and formality. Still, he was glad to have his job working in the office of a big man, while he himself was not a big man. The big man had another assistant, a nephew named John Smart, who was far less qualified that Shepherd was. I am John Smart.

Nobody was sure exactly what I did but they could guess who I was related to. Back then I was wiry smart-ass man of sharp nose and chin like an etching of Puck, always hob-nobbing, never actually doing much. My hair was curly red. I instantly sensed in Shepherd a rival who could expose my every subterfuge and deficiency, and I began to play pranks on Shepherd to make the others laugh at him, but after Shepherd punched me in the nose I began to rethink my persecution of him. You might even say we began to get along. I started to show him around the office, help him with his tasks, as a way of an unspoken apology. For his part Shepherd knew I was (back then) hopeless but in no sense a rival or a hinderance, and he knew enough about his own stodginess to admit he needed livelier company than his own, and he knew no ladies. In turn, I felt like he ought to look out for Shep, because I instantly sensed that he had only one oar in the water of this world, and someone or something would always come along trying to knock even that one out.

He was a man of all math and protractors, and I hung close to him to help him out with the people side of things. I made sure I went along with Shep on surveying tasks, in case a leery farmer with a shotgun got in the way of his trigonometry.

So Shepherd and I would go out to the small towns and survey the land, and there would be a tiny little thrill go through the town when they found out were were there from the roads department. They would sometimes put us up in the finest hotels, or in a rich man's house, or in the house of some egghead professor who wanted to talk about the social significance of automotive transport in an industrial age and its effect on the urbanization of a populace whose religious notions were grounded in a myth of agrarian idealism. Or something like that.

Shepherd always demurred at the occasional small-town bout of celebrity. He was always too modest but I would brag him up just to make him uncomfortable – especially in front of the pretty girls. I knew Shepherd wanted to be a bigger man in the world someday, to do some ubiquitously generous thing for it, but that he just did not have the poetry in his heart to inspire a single, grandiose scheme.

“When you gonna get married, Shep?”

“Married?” he said. “It hadn't crossed my mind that I had time for such a demanding social enterprise, although I recognize there comes a time in a man's life when it is expedient...”

“Forget your answer: Look I got me two honeys in town for the fair lined up for dates tonight. Their old man's big in the Corporation Commission and he and the big man are having a meeting. There are only two men I can trust with these girls – you and me – and I can only trust myself if I’m with you.”

“I don't know,” Shep said.

“Look,” I said. “I'll worry about the conversation. All you got to do is be able to dance a little.”

Shepherd did not like dancing, but it seemed to daunt him less than talking.

“Well if the big man wants it...”

“Hell yes he wants it, and you might even have some fun. Look, I'll even gloss over the fact that you don't like to drink.”

And so I picked up the girls in a nice car I had borrowed from the roads agency, and that night Shep and I went to a fancy hotel that oil money had erected downtown. We straightened our suit jackets and walked into the brass and marble foyer and met the ladies. One was a curvy brunette and the other was a more demure, quiet blonde.

“Ladies,” I said. “We'll be your escorts on a whirlwind tour of the town tonight. My name is John Smart and this is my esteemed associated, Shepherd Creed.”

The brunette girl said, “Take us to a fancy restaurant and then to a speakeasy.”

The blonde girl said, “I was hoping to see a museum.”

And so we went to a restaurant near the stockyards where cattlemen and oilmen ate steaks as big as the plate and where a big band played and the carpet was so tall it tickled your ankles and pretty waitresses bent over your table until you could see a little something so as to get you to leave bigger tips. I was in heaven.

“This is all right, huh Shep?” I said when the two girls had disappeared off to the powder room.

“I can't think of anything to say to them.”

“You don't have to say – you just have to ask and compliment. 'I like your hair. What's happening back where you live? Damn it's been hot. Do you get those pretty eyes from your momma or your daddy?' See? Now you use some of those lines when they get back.”

And so Shep asked the blonde, whose name was Alice, 'What academic subjects are you interested in?' and 'Is that dress silk?' But it worked.

She looked at him. “I went to the Normal School but I never really wanted to teach. I just wanted to read some of the great writers and learn about different countries. I guess I have always wanted to travel the world.”

“Me too,” Shepherd said. “Where would you really like to go?”

“Well, I studied French, so I suppose I'd like to see the Louvre and the Versailles and the Eiffel Tower. France has always seemed like the perfect balance between romance and culture.”

“You have pretty eyes,” Shepherd said, “Did you get those from your mother or your father?”

She laughed in reply. “I think from my grandmother, actually. The blue eyes seem to skip a generation. Well what about you? I can tell from your gait and rough hands that you must have grown up on the farm. There's nothing quite as interesting as a man from the farm who makes it in the city.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’ve made it…”

And so they fell into talking, and the brunette girl elbowed me as if to say ‘Let’s give them some space.’

“Would you like to dance?” Shepherd asked Alice.

“Well, wait for something slower,” she said. “I don't like all that gyrating like a chicken with its head cut off.”

And so they waited a bit and the lights got lower and the music got a little more relaxed and then they danced a few songs.

“You dance very nicely for a farm boy,” she laughed.

After a while it was decided that my girl and I would go seek out a speakeasy (it being a dry state) and Shepherd and Alice would walk around the fair and see all the exhibits.

“We'll meet you two at the front gates at the closing time,” I said and drove off.

And so Shepherd and Alice went to the 'Around the World' exhibits, the 'Hall of Inventions,' the 'World of Tomorrow'

tent, the livestock show, and finished up at the amphitheater listening to the calm orchestral music that said 'it's time to wind down until tomorrow.'

And a little later than we'd promised my date and I pulled to the front gates to pick them up. And Shepherd and Alice talked some more about the world. It would sure be nice, they both agreed, to take a year off from everything and travel from continent to continent and see the sights and meet the people.

And it seemed like only moments later that we were dropping the girls off. When my girl got out she slapped him on the back and told me, "Thanks for showing a country gal a good time!" Shepherd, however, walked Alice to the door and told her it was nice to meet her. And then he ducked in for a quick kiss and she didn't mind.

"I think I'm in love," Shepherd said.

I ground through the gears. "Can't anyone be in love after one date, but I suppose you can."

And it was to no one's surprise that Shepherd and Alice were married a year later.

*

In no time Shepherd was rising through the ranks of the department and overseeing surveyors and plotting the paths of roads for decades out, from main arteries to tributaries, ranking the necessity and utility of each. And then the big man would take all Shepherd's plans and factor in "Who needs a road to get reelected?" and ''What very important person would like a straight line to his mother?' But it was okay to Shep – he had learned a little something since his first blush of idealism had faded.

Shepherd and Alice had seen the world in each other's arms, on a honeymoon paid for by her oil tycoon father, and had crossed the oceans of the world on cruise liners, and had basked in the sun from the Bahamas to Tahiti. And finally they came back and settled on a house that was a compromise between Shepherd's modesty and Alice's father's sense of displaying one's proper station.

One morning I cornered Shepherd just as he came in the door and said "Shep, we saw your kid sister when we were at the speakeasy the other night."

"Topsy? You saw Topsy?"

"Yep – someone heard her use her given name, 'Eudora Creed.' By the way, she isn't calling herself 'Topsy' anymore. It's Isabella Fontaine.' And man does she put on a show."

"Where did you see her?"

"At one of the crummier speakeasy's that's open after all the other speakeasy's close. But there was quite a crowd. You might call it a burlesque show. It ends up leaving nothing to the imagination! They get this fella up there talking about the virtues of pure living – how we'd all be healthier and free from woe if we returned to the state of nature like Adam and Eve. And of course people start booing him and shouting 'Bring on the girls!' And so this troupe of showgirls comes out doing these fan dances and then they bring out Lola held up on a bed by four strong men and she's all covered in fig leaves like from the Garden of Eden. Well, then, the music starts gyrating and she gets down going and goes through the crowd and one by one those fig leaves come off. They was throwing dollars at her but she had no place to put them. She's got a monkey to gather'em all up."

"Take me there tonight." Shepherd said.

"But Shep, you don't want to see your sister all nekkid."

"Oh, I'll put a stop to it before that," he said.

*

And so that evening about ten o'clock we drove over to the Marble Swan, on the bottom floor of one of the downtown's seedy hotels, and Shepherd and I walked into the crowd. Shepherd looked a little too 'straight' to be let in at first but I said, 'Have a heart – the poor sap lost his best friend wildcatting in the oilfields today." And so they let him in.

"Sorry to hear that – this place'll loosen you up a little," the doorman said, and he even offered to put Shep's first drink on the house.

Shep accepted and gave the drink immediately to me. He drank Coca-Cola.

And so about a half hour later the lights got dim and this queer Egyptian music started playing, and these harlots in what was supposed to pass for Egypt clothing come down the aisle and start throwing rose petals around them. Then a man in a striped suit got up in a spotlight and started to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, from time immemorial man has been afflicted with maladies and ailments, living in misery and woe in his too-short existence on planet Earth. Old age sets in and people are bent over from pain and suffering, the elixir of youth too soon vanished from their limbs and the love of a robust life too soon extinguished in their hearts."

"Bring on the girls!"

"But there was a time, gentlemen, there was a time when none of this had come to be. And I am here tonight, my

friends, to tell you that that none of this has got to be! For it is living too far from our natural instincts that brings us down."

One man hooted.

"It is in the suppressing of our natural urges that our spirit transmutes itself to woe!"

Excitement began to rumble through the crowd; here and there were whistles.

"And so I say to you, my friends, it is time to return Man to his natural state such as he enjoyed in the Garden of Eden! Only then can Man be restored to his original vitality and vigor! Only then can we live in the uninhibited manner that gives us life and youth in perpetuity! Only then can we truly be free to love and frolic like a colt again. Ladies and Gentlemen, I come before you tonight to show you what this uninhibited life can be. I bring to you, for your appraisal and enjoyment, the lovely Isabella Fontaine! But more importantly, my friends, I bring you straight from the Garden of Eden nature's own first daughter, the lovely Eve!"

The dimmed and odd Egyptian type music started playing, low and meandering at first, and then the men appeared at the end of the hall, holding a woman on a dais held up to their shoulders. At first they were in the darkness. Then the spotlight shone on them as they approached the center of the hall, and the music got more gyrating and louder, and a troupe of lovelies walked before them, in see-through tops of frilly gauze. And then finally all the gals moved to either side of the floor and the men lowered the dais and the spotlight jumped up one notch brighter and the amazing Isabella/Eve stood up and raised her hands above her head and started gyrating around the stage and began to sing.

"I'm from Eden,
Oh I'm from Eden,
and I've been needing
me a man!
Oh I'm from Eden,
Yes I'm from Eden,
And I need someone
who understands
my special needs.
I need a man who begs and pleads
To shed old inhibitions,
All those silly superstitions,
And unleash those feelings inside!
To push aside the need to hide
My silky skin.
To peel away these leaves I'm in!
And so I'm here to show you
The way I want to get to know you
Because I'm Eve!
Because I'm Eve!
I'll never leave!
And you'll believe me when you see!

At that the music rose to a frenzy and she began strutting up and down the aisles, peeling off leaves and throwing them to the rowdy crowd. The men hooted and hollered.

"Take'em off!"

"Let's see what you got!"

And as she gyrated, Shep pushed me to one side and began walking toward the middle of the room. "I reckon I seen enough," he said.

He pulled a gun out of the arm of his jacket.

"Good God, Shep!" I said.

"He's got gun – he's got a gun!"

"Topsy!" he shouted in a loud clear voice until his sister turned her head and the music stopped. "Topsy," he shouted, "I reckon I seen enough of my little sister for one night! It's time for you to come home!" And with that he shot out the spotlight.

The crowd went into a panic with men tripping and falling and pushing and shoving each other in a frenzy to get to the door. I made himself as skinny as I could up against the bar to let them by.

“I reckon every mother's son of you who doesn't want to end up in the slammer tonight better get himself on home! I called me a state policeman who isn't on the take!” Shepherd shouted as the lights came up. “I got a squad car coming up right now, boys, so I suggest you scatter!”

“Topsy!” Shepherd shouted, and his sister stood and scowled at him. He walked amongst the tables and here and there picked up some leaves and tossed them at her.

“Shepherd!” she said. “Shepherd – how dare you ruin my act! I'll never be able to work in this town again!”

“What you better do is get yourself home,” he said. “And get some clothes on. Now I can't make you go home, but I can make you think about what you done.”

“What I done is what I'll keep doing – making my way in this world. Who died and made you God's conscience?”

“Mamma died,” he said. “and grandma died. And I sure as hell can't live my life in this world letting you get away with all your sins without a pang of remorse. I gotta go now before the sheriff gets here but you remember this: aint nothing you can do that these men aint already seen or imagined, except maybe love someone.”

She glowered at him. “That's noble Shep – read it on a match book cover?”

“You think about what I said.”

And with that Shepherd and I raced back out into the night and jumped back in our car, even as the flaring lights of a squad car raced past.

“Good God, Shep!” I panted. “Let's get out of here. You're a wild man – don't you know you could have gotten us both killed?”

“I suppose I did what had to be done.”

“Well ask me first next time! Sometimes you may be making the wrong decision. You need someone like me to check your thoughts against common sense before doing something like that.”

He said nothing, and I knew it was of those rare incidents in which he felt objectively right in doing exactly what he had done, and no one could talk him out of it. That was a streak that I was to see manifest itself in him occasionally too, and it was as jut-jawed as a prairie woman.

“After that I need a little something,” I said, and took a swig from a small flask.

Shepherd scowled but said nothing, and he drove me back to the office where I had parked.

Nothing was said between us of the evening after that, but the amazing Isabella/Eve was not heard from in that town for a little while, anyway – or if she was she had changed her name – and Shepherd could live with himself knowing he had done what he needed to do.

Shepherd's life resumed its quiet after that. His wife never heard about what he'd done, and in spite of his belief in upfront honestly, in this one particular he didn't see a need to let her know. In spite of my need to gossip I kept it from her. And so his career at the transportation agency jogged along smoothly in the years that followed. He rose higher through the ranks, gaining more and more responsibility.

He and Alice had two children by the time of the Second World War. I ended getting married myself, because in youth we're not immune to love and I found myself swept off my feet by a girl I met at an automotive trade show. Shepherd might have wanted to advise me otherwise, but he did not. She ended up begin a lot nicer than anyone might have thought. She was anything but shallow and petty.

But it was only a matter of time before the Pacific Theater ratcheted up and Shepherd and I found ourselves called away from the office and working in the same battalion of the Seabees to build airstrips, Quonset huts, and roads on all the stepping-stone islands in the Navy's relentless push toward Tokyo.

Chapter 4

I was worried about Shep cracking up in the war. He seemed like the kind of guy whose ideal might be shattered by cold hard reality, but I thought that, in a way, cold hard reality might be what he was best at. He manipulated physical things to achieve predicted ends. I was full of slogans.

Shepherd had a complex view of the war. He hated being a small cog in the big system. He may have been the only man for whom the war was too small a thing. He was more or less perturbed by the enemy interrupting his ambition to help engineer a peaceful and productive future. He saw the dictators as setting the world back twenty years. He wanted to win the peace, not the war. He fought the good fight but patriotism on its basest level did not motivate him – he loved his country insofar as it realized the potential of the world. The idea of stamping out the Japs for Uncle Sam could not wrap itself around every situation of the war’s inhumane violence. To Shepherd, slogans could not wrap it so that it made sense.

It was all such a waste.

On every other island there was some vestige of the occupying Japanese forces after the US conquest, squirreled away in caves or deep in the jungle, and when they emerged they almost never surrendered because their honor would not let them, so they attacked in starved, futile ways.

Shepherd had to kill one of them. We had been platting the land for a Quonset hut that was to be the officers' club on a bed of crushed coral on the highest hill on the island. Another man and I stood looking over plans while Shepherd walked toward us from the Jeep. At that moment a starved Japanese soldier, more skeleton than man, jumped toward us through the trees. Shepherd pushed us aside and unholstered his revolver. He jerked his gun to shoulder height and shot the man in the chest, and the man fell backwards and his blood splattered on Shepherd's face and clothes.

After that I kind of cracked up for a while. I was the one who took to waking up screaming. They put me in a hot windless room full of beds on a hospital ship and gave me drugs and it tamped the feelings down inside. Shepherd always came to visit me.

“You'll be all right,” he said. “It's just the machinery of war.”

I would have thought he’d be the one to crack up, but I think that looking after me gave him a kind of paternal purpose that allowed him to put his own feelings aside. He could be strangely objective at times.

But the battles advanced and we had to move on – other islands, other roads and airstrips to be built. I squelched it all down. But when we got home it erupted here and there in everything I did. My temper got the best of me. Finally, in a little argument over nothing, I overturned the kitchen table and smashed everything on top of it. That was the first time my wife left me.

I stewed inside himself. I felt so angry that I wanted to fight someone, but there was no one to fight.

I promised to see the VA doctor about it and so my wife came back.

I literally could not live with the feeling of being outraged and exhausted inside. It was at a meeting out of town that I saw a girl that reminded me of a girl he used to know. She was easy to talk to and she made me feel like I was understood, like there was a reason why I felt like I did. There were none of the tensions of family. After a while I just fell into her arms and was crying, and she comforted me. That night I had planned to hold her in my arms and be savage with her, just to let it all go in a meaningless act, but before I could meet her Shepherd came through the door of me room and grabbed me by the arm and hauled me out into the evening air.

“Shape up, man,” he said. “Your wife needs you.”

I got violently angry at him. “Get out of my goddamn life!”

“Look, love your family, see the doctors. If you want to get the anger out of your system, come with me.”

“What?”

“Look, I know a guy who owns a gym. “Let's you and me put on the gloves. Go a round with me.”

And so we did. Neither of us knew how to box, but we knew how to hit, and so we suited up and there was Shep across the ring from me with his hands held up like one of those old timey boxers you'd see in a yellowed encyclopedia. A man at the gym rang the bell and we circled each other in the middle of the ring.

Shepherd had his hands up under his chin.

“Hit me,” he said.

“Aw Shep, I can't.”

“Hit me,” he said again.

“Oh all right,” I said, and made a glancing blow against his glove.

“You call that a punch? I'll start then,” he said, and he clocked me right in the face. I fell back several paces.

“Shep...” I said.

“Fight or stay crazy,” he said, and began laying into me with a series of blows to the head and stomach.

“Goddamn you, Shep!” I said. “Stop.”

“You stop me, you adulterous little weasel of a man!” he said, and rained blows on me again.

“You got no right to judge me, you son of a bitch,” I said and began to hit him back. “You don't know what I went through.”

“I was there. I know exactly what you went through, but I didn't crack up!” He punched me so hard I fell back in my corner.

“You lousy bastard!” I said and began punching him mercilessly. “You were there but you don't know. You’re a goddamn robot!”

He paused a little and I laid into him mercilessly and he staggered back.

“That's it,” he said.

“You weren't raised the way I was – we weren't killing chickens at the farm and gutting hogs – we were civilized, damnit it. We weren't stupid farm boys like you. To see all that slaughter, it was just too much...” I began to shake and put my hands down. “It felt like hell, Shep – oh God, it felt like hell!”

I leaned against Shep and suddenly big tears were running down my cheeks.

“Oh God Shep – there was no one to understand.”

“I understand.”

I looked at him. His face was bruised and the bridge of his nose was bleeding. “That's right – you do understand. You were there and saved me.”

“I did it because you are my friend, John.”

“So are you done punching me in the face?”

He nodded.

“Then let's get bandaged and ready to get back work.”

Shepherd agreed. “There things that have to get done.”

And that's when I realized that to Shep, life is work. That is not the same thing as saying his work was his life, but rather life is a series of tasks to be completed successfully.

Chapter 5

Consider the career man. The career man is the sort of person who gets a job and stays there for forty years. A career man learns not to rock the boat, to do the things he is assigned, to do them well enough not to get in trouble, and to get along. And long did the career man struggle to keep the family pictures up to date, and document the trips to Yellowstone so that others might exclaim admiration and envy, however sincere, and in doing so, exclaim the approbation they might themselves expect someday, when showing off the photos from their own trips, as they cast themselves perilously out into non-routine, out into places like the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone.

*

It was right after the war and the department was full of young bright men, and so Shepherd and I found ourselves consigned to doing legwork again, roaming up and down the state, surveying sites, plotting roads, securing the land. We would be back to our desk jobs soon, but for now we were glad just to be back to work, in a state we knew, with a lay of the land we could understand.

One day we were in a hilly portion of the state, brown and green and dewy, and light came filtered between thick low-hanging leaves and the air was cool but humid and there were even ferns growing in the thick underbrush beneath the trees. We were driving a rutted dirt road, barely more than a trail, in an old department Jeep when a logged rolled down in front of us and almost hit our bumper.

“Good God, Shep – this is no good – turn around!”

But Shepherd calmly shifted the car into neutral and set the brake and got out. He walked over to the log and looked down at it. Then he raised his head back and shouted:

“Come out! We know you're here. We're from the state roads department. We just want to talk.”

A shot fired in the air.

“For the love of God, Shep, let's go!” I was not about to get shot negotiating for a patch of bottom land.

But Shepherd walked calmly to the other side of the log and shouted out again. “We're here to offer you a sizable chunk of money if you'd have it – and you will have helped out the people here by building them a pipeline to prosperity.”

“Put down your guns!” a voice shouted back.

“We aren't armed,” Shepherd said.

“You aren't revenuers?”

“No sir,” said Shepherd. “We're from the department of roads.”

With that the brush began stirring, and before long a lanky young man stepped into our midst. He wore overalls and a white cotton shirt and a straw hat and broken down old dress shoes. He walked up within twenty feet of Shepherd and spat tobacco and raised his shotgun.

“What do I want roads for? Roads just let the revenuers get to places they couldn't get to before. You're the harbinger of woe.”

“Listen,” Shepherd said and stepped forward calmly.

“Don't move a step closer!” the man said.

Shepherd stopped. “Listen,” he said. “You don't want to hurt us. Roads mean jobs, and jobs mean prosperity. Roads are a pipeline to a prosperity, and the future is coming whether you want it to or not.”

"Turn around and get out of here."

Shepherd raised his hands. "I went to war. I saw a lot of men get plugged by bigger pea-shooters than that. Now let's just talk." He took a step forward.

The man shot at his feet. "I warned you!"

"Come on Shep. Let's go!"

"Relax," said Shep over his shoulder. "I have everything under control."

"The next one won't miss," the man said.

"Listen to me," Shepherd continued. "We have a road to build and we need your right of way. There are a lot of loggers around here who would be very grateful to have the road – there are towns here that would benefit greatly. And so we are here to offer you a generous sum for the right to build on a very narrow strip of your land."

"Build a road for loggers? Like the loggers who are always eating into my hunting land?"

"You'll get to keep every square inch of your land – minus the right of way – and if the loggers are encroaching on it, I personally guarantee we have a whole department back at the capitol that can help you defend your property rights against them – we've handled cases like this before."

"How much money are we talking about?"

Shepherd told him the sum.

"That is the amount *today*," Shepherd said. "Because I represent the department, I have been given leeway to err on the side of generosity. If I come back empty-handed, though, they send someone here with lawyers. Or we can go around you land – we have plated three alternate routes. But either way the road goes through."

The man spat. "You got cash money today?"

"I only have maps and designs today. And you have my promise – my word – that you will have every penny I said. My name is Shepherd Creed, and you can throw my name around the department of roads whenever you like, and it will get things done."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

Shepherd took a step forward, and the man aimed his gun again but did not fire.

"You can trust me because I'm not a bureaucrat – I hate paper pushers. I design roads and I design them because the common man deserves better than he has now. I don't want what's best for any one man, and certainly not the folks who wheel and deal with other people's money at the state capitol. I come from a small town that had nothing til it got roads. Then came the jobs and the hope, the link to the wealth. I can from strong social democrat roots. I wouldn't do anything if I didn't think it was good for the people."

"Hmm – my old man was in the Green Corn Rebellion."

"My people were Wobblies and members of the Farmer's Alliance."

The man lowered his gun. "Hell," he said. "I didn't think you were going to take one step past that birdshot."

"I could tell you were a man I could trust. And you're not liquored up."

"All right," the man said. "You got a deal if we can agree on the particulars. But you come out here and deliver the papers and the money personally. I don't want one the state slicksters, like your friend here, coming out to seal the deal."

"I promise I'll come back personally."

"Well then come over here and let's talk," he said.

Shepherd went over and they talked for a while, with Shepherd gesturing in the air and then crouching down and drawing lines in the dirt with a stick. Finally he got up and walked back to the Jeep.

"I'll be back in one week!" Shepherd shouted.

"I'll be here," the man said.

Shepherd turned the Jeep around and trucked us out of the heavily forested land and back onto a dirt lane.

"Pull over so I can piss," I said. "That scared the hell out of me. You're a mad man."

That night his wife Alice repeated my sentiments. "What were you thinking?" she said. "You – a man with a wife and two kids walking out there and negotiating about eminent domain with a man with a gun? That's what sheriffs are for, Shep."

"I had it under control. I had to do it for the department."

"Sometimes I think you live for the department," she said. "Sometimes I think you live more for them than you do for us."

*

Soon we were back to our usual jobs in the office, and Shep was much more in his element again. The debacle of Korea aside, the post-war era seemed full of possibility and promise. America was rebounding into a new-found prosperity

that saw the suburbs spring up and the grass grow green. Trees tossed gently in rural landscapes already becoming something mythic, an image of wholesomeness, less a thing to be tilled than a thing to be photographed. The Marshall Plan was building new markets for a revitalized world, one that would suck at the teat of American manufacturing and bring prosperity for decades to come. Sunday car rides were a thing to be enjoyed – always prosperity centered around the car, one for him and one for her now, and always the journey from the suburbs to the city, or from the city to Grandma's, or from Grandma's to Yosemite or Yellowstone, all needing roads to fulfill the dreams. Days were like neat-squared cells on a calendar from a motor oil compant with a pretty girl on top, all to be checked off happily with no shadows on the days to come, just holidays and colored tin trees at Christmas, all while they were testing hydrogen bombs on Bikini Atoll – which Shep found fascinating.

Shepherd was proud of his work. Over six months, in the night hours after his children went to bed, he sat in the part of the garage he had made into his study, banging away furiously on an old typewriter writing a book on the considerations and execution of road design that would come to be used in classrooms for the next twenty years.

And when he was not working on the great treatise he was teaching night courses at the local colleges, and soon he was invited to lecture at schools across the region. He enjoyed standing at the podium at the front of the classroom, projecting his voice across the rows of wooden desks and writing vatically on the blackboard, which by the end of the evening was covered to every last square inch with lines and arrows and equations. Once he even tried wearing a tweed jacket with patches on the elbows, but he felt ridiculous in it and never wore it again, preferring instead his reliable short sleeve white shirts and old cardigan.

*

And five years before it was even proposed, Shepherd had sat down and designed his version of the interstate highway system, all the way down to the individual exits and the number of lanes needed per segment based on traffic flow now and projected out for the next twenty years of suburban growth. He sent it to Washington and got no reply but was not surprised to see the same idea emerge full-fledged a few years later, at the behest of Dwight David Eisenhower.

Eisenhower unveiled his post-war interstate highway plan – the "National System of Interstate and Defense Highways" and Shepherd was in heaven. Post war where no one trusted the Russians and the country needed roads to move military assets around the country at greater speeds. Shepherd got put in charge of the Oklahoma aspect of these and was like a boy with a new set of toys. He stayed late late, later than anyone else, his furrowed head bent over reams of papers, and loved every minute of it. An outsider would have seen the yellow lighted window of his office half-way up the building in the dead of night. He was going to do his part wrap the country from sea to sea in continuous bands of asphalt.

He was happily working until his boss abruptly busted him down to smaller jobs. What led to this is something we all knew: never let Shepherd know you were taking a bribe. Shep knew how business was done as much as anyone else and for him a little quid-pro-quo was okay – build a road for a guy who needs to get reelected – that was the machinery of politics – but outright bribes disgusted him. Maybe he thought they were an 'inelegant solution.' There were more discreet, systemically integrated ways to ensure that people got what they wanted.

"Did you notice Jim is wearing an awful lot of new clothes these days?" Shepherd asked me casually as we met for coffee one day.

"No Shep, I didn't notice that. He's always prided himself on being dapper."

"But it's the degree," Shep said.

"Maybe he got a raise. They did move him into that bigger office, remember?"

Shepherd just nodded like he had a thought he was not ready to speak yet. I could see in his dark brown eyes that there was a thought behind them.

A few weeks went past and then Shep said, "I noticed Jim pulled up in a new car today." This time he paused in a certain way after he said it, as if there were an inference I should draw.

"Aw come on Shep," I said. "Let it lie. It all ends up good for the department."

But Shep could not let it go. It smacked of lucre.

"I'm going to talk to the boss," he said.

"No Shep, no."

"Imagine if all government worked this way," Shep said. "It is too bold – it is the slippery slope to complete corruption. I am going to talk to the boss now."

In truth, after the success of his book and lectures, and after achievement of designing an entire map of superhighways for the country of tomorrow, he may have been getting a little full of himself.

And so he talked to the boss, and for thirty minutes you could see them going at it hammer and tongs through the glass window of the boss's office, and the boss got out from behind his desk and got right up to Shep and Shep did not give

an inch and both of them were wearing these vein-bulging faces and then finally Shep turned on his heels and marched back to his desk and quietly sat there doing what he usually did when he was thinking about a problem he could not solve – he began stacking pencils into log cabins.

"Shep – Shep, how'd it go?"

"Well, I'm not fired," Shep said, "But I got busted down. He was not going to give on this one. He did not admit a thing, which weakened my hand. He implied that nothing had happened and I implied the papers might want to learn about it and he said 'Who do you think owns the goddamn papers?' I said I had not thought of that and he said 'you're good Shep but you need to mind your own damn business' and so I got busted down. But at least I still have a job and at least I get to do the kind of work I like. So I guess I learned a lesson."

"To butt out of some people's business?"

"To get evidence first."

And so he got busted back down to the relatively menial work of scheduling road maintenance (though still at his current salary) and he stewed – but it was work, and Shepherd was good at work. He kept his head down and told himself that it was temporary. And on his way home he sometimes drove past the new houses, and he and Alice finally decided to move out of their craftsman bungalow in the near northwest part of the city and into one of the new houses out in the suburbs where Mom and Dad and the children and the dog could all seen through a wide bay window, watching a game show. The kids would be drinking milk while Mom and Dad had highballs.

*

But the new house had been the kind of desperate change that couples make when the end is imminent, and it was no more than six months later that Alice filed for divorce after ten years. She told him she was too young to be trapped in a loveless marriage. She told him he had become a cold fish. She would not be second to a man's work. The divorce proceedings were expedient. Shepherd did not contest the divorce and she did not ask for any money – her father had plenty of that. He made sure he had visitation rights to see the children, but it was not a privilege he exercised nearly as often as he should have. He had a hollow feeling inside of him that wanted reciprocal silence. He did not love her and that was one less pure thing to atone for.

He wondered if he had ever loved her or had loved fulfilling some sanctioned dream.

*

I had known Shepherd long enough to tell that he was in a funk even if he did not know it. He moved to an old, dark, cluttered house near downtown. After his wife and children left him the silence was more deadening than he realized. He tried to work on a follow up to his great treatise but found himself getting nowhere on it. He hunkered down at his work at his long flat gray metal desk like the deck of an aircraft carrier, with awards on every side of him and a loving cup for a first prize in draftsmanship as a pencil holder, and he poured over countless roads designs and he suppressed the frustration inside him. He still worked harder than any three other men. But one day when he got up from his desk I walked over and noticed that the stacked pencils had spelled out "HELP." When I pointed this out to Shep he was surprised – he had not been trying to spell anything. He remarked that perhaps it proved something true about psychology – he would check out a book.

I was about to put my neck out on the line and ask the boss to lighten up on him, but then a more serendipitous circumstance arrived to lift him out of his malaise.

"Eisenhower's coming!"

"Eisenhower's coming?"

"Eisenhower's coming to commemorate the groundbreaking of the interchange. He wants to meet the man whose cloverleaf design is being embraced all over the country!"

"Good gawd, that's Shep's work!"

"Well, we've got to get someone to replace him for the ceremony. If Ike finds out he was busted down to county roads again, we're all sunk."

"We could just... beg Shep."

"No – Shep would talk. We need a stand in."

But in the end they could think of no one who could talk shop like Shep, and even if Eisenhower did not know the in's and out's of road construction, he *was* Eisenhower, and the man was keen as a hawk. He would sniff it out if something was up and then they'd all be sunk. So they decided it was best to beg Shep to come back and receive the award, but Shep would only do it for a price.

"I want my old job back."

"Old job back – right right. Consider it done."

“And if Eisenhower asks anything, I have to tell him the truth.”

This demand was more ambiguous and so they had to ask him what he meant.

“If he asks me about the construction, I tell him the truth. If asks me about my family, I tell him the truth. And if he asks me how I like my work, I tell him the truth.”

The men looked at each, then back at him. “Aw, you like your job okay, don't you Shep?”

“I've liked it better.”

“Think of it in these terms: you like what you do. You like the nuts and bolts of it. You like surveying the land, you like approving the designs or making your alterations, you like the thrill of a good job getting done on time and under budget. You like that, don't you? You can answer that way and it would be an honest answer.”

“That's true,” Shepherd said. “So do we have a deal?”

“We have a deal,” the political man said.

And so Eisenhower came to town and he was touting “From Highways to Skyways: America's Tomorrow,” And he appeared at the interchange and cut a ribbon and beside him stood a man in a white short sleeve shirt and non-descript tie and a pocket full of writing implements. And the two stood for the photographers with Shep pretending to point out particular features of the design on a big white piece of paper, and Eisenhower pretending to be engaged.

“How do you like your work?” Eisenhower asked.

“I like viewing and approving designs,” Shepherd said.

“How's your family?”

“I'm divorced, but I hear my children are healthy and making good grades and have a strong sense of right and wrong.”

Ike nodded.

“It was pleasure serving under you in World War II,” Shepherd said, and he felt his heart suddenly melt because it felt good to say something so apolitical and free from taint and true. His eyes teared up. It was so nice to not have to worry about impure things.

Eisenhower looked down at the man and put a hand on his shoulder. “Stiff lip before the camera, son – it was my honor to have you serve.”

“Do you need a man in Washington?” Shepherd asked, but he never got an answer.

*

Shepherd forever after treasured the photograph of him with Eisenhower. It went on a corner of his desk right beside his loving cup pencil holder. He showed it to everyone who walked past. And he got a corner office – for a while. Then things died down, and Shep found himself ensconced in his old office again, and he was busted down again, but not quite so far. He got to work on aspects of the interstate highways for a while. But then the county highways system went to hell under five years of mismanagement, and Shep was called back into them to fix the mess because only he could. He realized it was necessary work, but it frustrated the hell out of him.

*

One day he got a letter saying that his father had passed away, and he asked me to go with him to the funeral.

“Nobody brings a buddy to a funeral,” I said.

“I went to your wife’s funeral,” Shepherd said.

My wife had died a few years back and we had been childless, and Shepherd had been kind enough to help abate my loneliness by attending the ceremony, and by attending to me for weeks afterward.

It became clear that Shepherd would not go to the funeral at all if I didn’t augment his courage, so we both went.

As we drove I gradually found out just how complex his relationship with his father was. Shepherd at once loved and reviled the man. The man had been a kind of presence-in-absence in Shepherd's life. He had freed him from the confines of his mother's rectitude but had not filled the void. He was always lost in his work, in his husbandry.

As we drove we went past his father's old homestead, which looked abandoned. He told me that his father had left their farm years ago. He had lost the extra acreage in the Depression and then it took all he could do to retain his own farm, on which he and his second wife merely subsisted rather than taking many harvests to market. He had come out of the Depression a care-worn man, and the woman's housecleaning around town had to provide most of their income. They persisted across the years, however, until the man crushed his right hand helping a neighbor hitch a tiller to a tractor. After that he sharecropped his place until he was just plain tired of it all, and so they moved to the town into a little house near the church that his wife had saved to purchase. But once emancipated from the soil his body was tired, spent past its allotted resources and then its reserves, and he died as quietly as a man could, in sleep as if his body were finally relaxing its muscles, finally relaxing after 70 years, and he sank beneath the covers, not fevered or broken or exhausted, simply spent.

The day of the funeral we got in his car and drove out to the country across the quiet clean roads – Shepherd's roads. When he got to the town and church he was struck by how unchanged it all seemed, but smaller than he remembered.

He parked in the gravel lot and walked across the green soft grass under an overcast sky to the steps of the church. It was a small buff brick building, made from local stone, and its stained glass windows show dark blobs of color from the outside. He walked into the foyer where the immediate family was waiting and talking softly, all under the gaze of a worrisome little funeral director.

Here and there family members talked in little clutches, their soft tones vocalizing sympathy and the long delayed greetings of reunion. Shepherd was not good at this sort of thing. He told me that he felt completely out of place with the family members he had not seen in ages. They were like chess pieces in his memory now – they were not supposed to be alive.

I saw a sense of mechanism fall over him as he met his family. He extended a perfunctory hand in greeting to his step-mother. He felt she was still no more than a guest in their family proceedings. She looked dowdier than he remembered – a simple short woman of nondescript figure, with smallish eyes and plain hair all but surrendered to gray. All she said was 'Shepherd, it's been a long time,' which made him cross because it was exactly what he was going to say to her, so he used his back-up line, ''Dad would have wanted to see us all together."

I saw his older sisters and had never realized how spot-on Shepherd's description of them had been until now. They were rigid and otherworldly and as tall and thin as corn husks; he learned they had converted to Mennonite and joined their community. They said he looked well and when did he grow a mustache? He honestly could not recall.

And then there was Topsy – she was a breath of fresh air. She seemed as ribald and full of life as her old self. She was jovial and audacious and slightly more rounded – a Mae West kind of shapeliness. She ran up and greeted us.

"Oh Shep!" she said. "I was hoping you'd come. It's so good to see you. And I remember this man from when you saved me at the saloon all those years ago."

She gave Shepherd a big hug and his arms splayed out helplessly on either side of her back before he finally held her in return.

She told him she had long since forgiven Shepherd for ousting her from the saloon that night. She told us that in the post-war tide of tight morality she had written a book about how her rigid upbringing had driven her into the open arms of sin, (in fact it was entitled 'Into the Arms of Sin!') and while it purported to be an edifying text, in reality it spared no lurid detail to illustrated how far the prodigal had fallen – oh Lord, avoid my path or fall to salacious ruin, every scarlet detail of which I will inform you of right now, with no dearth of adjectives, and fiction where the facts do not suffice. It became to morality what the squirreled away life-drawing book became to art – it sold rather well and was serialized in a sister periodical to a true crime magazine. And she had married (and divorced) rich and kept the money and bought sound stocks and bonds, and was well off if not exactly wealthy. But she was happy and expansive.

"Oh Shep," she said. "That was like hugging a filing cabinet. Why don't you take two weeks off and we can see the country on these highways that you build? I have a right mind to see Yellowstone."

The idea briefly sparked in Shepherd, but he was neck deep in his work at the time and drowning with his routine.

"Think about it," Topsy said.

He agreed to.

The immediate family were then hustled together by the waspish funeral director and told the order in which they were to solemnly process into the church and into the pews reserved for them up front, and Shepherd looked up front to see it was an open-casket funeral, which he had been dreading. He had seen the waxen dead in such a setting before – there was not the least hint of life about them. He told me later that there should have been dirt beneath his nails.

As the service proceeded and the soloist sang "Amazing Grace," Shepherd in spite of himself began to feel a vague religious longing, until he almost felt like he would surrender himself to the thing if it would reveal itself sufficiently, but one look at the waxen corpse and the sentiment bounded off. He walked past the casket and looked down at the aged figure that was more totem than memory. Of all the emotions he thought he would feel the only one that came to the fore was relief, that he was doing his duty. The man was been as dead as cord wood, and he told me that now and then a memory of a some brief time of their shared joy would rise up in his mind the way small fish might rise to scattered raindrops, mistaking them for bait, but they were few.

Shepherd declined politely to go to the graveside service – he told them he had work to do – and got as quickly to his car as he could without running to it. He hardly waited until I jumped inside before he gunned the engine.

"I hate ceremony," he said. "If he's dead, he's dead."

I was struck by his stoicism until I realized that the father had shown just about as little emotion in his life as Shepherd was showing now. He had been a man of practical purpose, as was his son. That the father might have wished for the son

to transcend this and bear in some ways the influence of his mother did not yet cross Shepherd's mind. Shepherd had a clear idea of men's and women's roles that might as well come out of an 1890's Sears catalog.

He turned on the airconditioning and steered once more onto the soft gray roads between retreating elms and, in due course, back to work.

And once he had settled back into work he recalled the mental metal jags of inverse lightning in his mind, dark against a kind of faded light, purple on gray, the after-image of inspiration rather than the image of it. He used this – it had been sustaining him for years – but he could only squeeze his eyes hard so many times and see the thing that had appeared to him as his vision.

And as time went on, work slowly became a repetition. He would never become an inside man, or so he thought, and he would never advance any farther.

And as career progressed, he saw the small towns he had built roads to in the 30's and 40's dying anyway. Decades passed, people left – people used to roads to escape, but not to go back, and the towns left behind were not even quaint enough to photograph. They had not been blessed with the prosperity he had imagined in the early days. It would not be hard to think of all his effort as a failure, and the approbation of his book and lectures was slowly wearing off as he failed to advance at the department.

*

In the night, after returning home from his father's funeral, he felt old and thought about the problem of his continued existence. He sat at his pristine desk, got out a box of pencils, and began stacking them. He set them parallel to each other, then in series, and after a while in lattices. For two hours the silence was only interrupted but the soft clack-clack of pencils being stacked and restacked. And then, toward morning, he began to make polygons. He stacked the pencils until one time he inadvertently left the top of the shape open, and he was startled by the thing inside it. If the top was open, it could get free. He began looking at the shape to see the thing inside. It was himself, and it could get free from the space described by the lines if he let it.

He looked at the space, and this time, inside its regimen, he also saw his father, the original mechanical man of habit and routine but no emotion, the living presence in absence.

For his father it had been a the scandal to show emotions as if it were a sign of weakness, and Shepherd wondering what his father did feel, when he was alone, when the cows were fed and the tools were sharpened what did the machine man feel, toward his mother and toward him, his sacred mother white and outside of this world. What did he feel and why did he distrust to feel it, with brown buttons for eyes and nothing behind them, and why did he marry then or now, the secret thing inside but not shown or acknowledged, the carnal thing, the thing that moves a man through time yet Shepherd remaining uninstructed how ought a man to feel?

Suddenly he remembered the one strong emotion he could recall from his father was anger, the beatings in the shed over transgressions great or petty. He had not thought of these in years, but now he did so and a great heat flushed his face. To have received only one gift from the stoical man and this was it? He felt sick inside.

He looked at his desk at the space inside the shape where his father must be like in a coffin and he drew a line through it. It was the only time he had ever drawn on his table.

With the space lined out Shepherd began to see the influence of his mother – the thing in grace and faith patiently abiding the man, the otherworldly holy woman who had to have had a great human heart to love the father – to love the son – not just in gossamer strands of the gospel-as-metaphysics but in the love that saw him through his studies, school plays, great orations of twelve-year-olds, and more. He finally felt the warmth from her that was not pious. His memory unreeled what it had sealed off for so many years in order to hunker down and get things done. A quiet calm briefly flowed into him, reminding him of the respite he had felt looking into the small fish-filled tide pools he had seen on coral islands in the Pacific.

*

Topsy once told me a story of an event that occurred when she was no more than four years old.

It was a blustery Spring afternoon and she had tied a length of yarn to a baby doll and was tossing it high beneath the arms of an elm tree. Her father came shouting for her.

“We've got to get in the cellar!” he said, but she cried as the doll became snagged in the branches. She grabbed for the string.

“How many times have I told you not to do that?” he said. “My God, you're nothing but trouble!” He grabbed her under one arm and spanked her hard. “We've got to get in the cellar!”

She began to cry harder and he spanked her harder and told her to hush but she would not stop crying and he hustled her with the rest of the family down below ground.

“Would you shut her up?”

The mother gave him a frightened look and held her girl tight. The father sat there seething as she listened to the wind roar, and Topsy was afraid of him and hugged close to her mother's knees.

Finally, when the wind quieted, his father opened the cellar door and bolted from it as if he were spring loaded. He stomped away and she could tell he was angry and she didn't dare go near him.

She walked slowly to the front yard and saw her doll, now soaked and dripping, stuck in the branches and the yarn handing limp. Shepherd had come up beside her and gave her a hug and she knew why he had given her a hug but did not dare say anything. They both looked to see if their father was around but he was not, so Shepherd offered to climb into the tree to get it.

She looked at him and thanked him but words could not express what she had really felt. She looked up into the branches at the doll and found herself wishing that it had gotten caught up in the wind and carried away.

Chapter 6

It was after meeting Eisenhower that Shepherd gave up working on the follow-up to his great roads treatise and began working on a treatise on the rights of man. It was grandiose – he tried to read the works of John Locke and Rousseau but they bounced off of his mechanical brain, and so he read old Wobblie tracts and issues of Populist periodicals and leaflets from the Farmer's Alliance. These he more or less regurgitated onto paper, almost word for word, because he had had a dry spell in his brain for years now and it profoundly frustrated him.

A couple years into the treatise of all rights human (twelve single-spaced pages), and frustrated by it, he decided to run for a vacant state representative's seat. He assumed that people would vote for him because of his rational superiority. He ran as the 'dry' candidate in a state that increasingly wanted to legalize liquor, and this alone got him a solid 30% of the vote right out the gate, but he had trouble attracting much of a following beyond that, in spite of putting thousands of dollars into yard signs and redwhiteandblue boater hats, but when he finally got close in the polls his opponent mentioned the fact that years ago Shepherd had been briefly committed to an asylum. Well it was all downhill from there and Shepherd got a little bitter – more so when he realized that at least half the 'drys' were really on the take from bootleggers who wanted to keep the state dry so as to retain their sky-high profit margins.

Nonetheless he threw himself into the final weeks of the campaign with gusto, because it is better to try your best and fail than to give up and defeat yourself, and one feverish night he wrote an addendum to his platform, which he promptly had mimeographed and delivered in stacks to local libraries and dry churches.

The tract actually scared drys into the arms of the wet candidate. It was 100% sincere and it read:

“All working for the good of all, for the strength of the collective beyond the sum of its parts, that it might not only exist but thrive, in such a way as to challenge the current world order, built around the Cold War stalemate perpetuated for the sake of the Military-Industrial Complex in all polarizing countries, the arms merchants, the merchants of death, the men who have not been to war but would profit off it, encouraged by the bankers who learned in World War I that there is no stronger return on investment than the stoking of paranoia and hatred, but for us, for us of higher motivation, liberated from distrust and violent reciprocity, freed to pursue a higher calling of love and compassion for our fellow man via the collective compassion that inculcates a better world, founded out of love because love is not a feeling but an action, a force applied in time to objects for the sowing and reaping of worldly benefits – food clothing shelter – but also for intangible ones like prosperity, introspection, the leisure to purse enlightened studies and to tend to the poor and to others through acts of kindness and edification that there can be a better way – to lead by example and inspire, so that our organization might not be for the betterment of ourselves only but for the betterment of the world. Liberté, égalité, fraternité.”

We called it “Shepherd's Creed.”

Afterward Shepherd admitted that he had no idea how the verbosity came to be unleashed, and his brain returned to its stymied form after its composition. It had no doubt been building in the back of his head for decades, a long-simmering pot of righteous indignation, unleashed, perhaps, by the lingering fumes of turpentine from when he had been refinishing a bass boat in the garage. But the words were there now through whatever means and he meant every last one of them, and the fact that they had been long-building was evident – they had all the feist of his temperance-loving grandmother and all the social democracy of his IWW grandfather. But the words themselves were all Shep – egalitarian, full of the virtue of responsibility, disdain for the status quo, full of hope that instead of building roads to places he would build a destination for the roads.

He lost, garnering less than eight percent (these being the other crackpots who hadn't dared to run themselves but who had buttonholed Shepherd at every public event), and he decided to give up on structured and strictured politics. But as the campaign (however dismal) affirmed, and as his increasingly adversarial attitude at work confirmed, he had probably

gotten bored of it all.

*

Shepherd was becoming the old dog at work. The department had hired a young man whose head was all numbers and angles and calculations, and he had the boundless energy that Shepherd had had when he was young, and he was made Shepherd's assistant, but everybody knew that Shepherd could not work with anyone else. He felt like maybe it was time to retire, but then fate dangled the one thing in front of him that he still wanted – the boss's retirement and the chance to be head of the agency. Shepherd thought that he had paid his dues and deserved it. This became the one thing in his life he dearly wanted.

Chapter 7

Consider the career man – he exists for the sake of his department. Whenever he exceeds the scope of his responsibilities, he risks upsetting the order of the department, because change at even the smallest level would imperil others' responsibilities as defined in their job descriptions, and ripple throughout the department to a possible cataclysmic end. Ultimately, initiative poses an existential threat to the Department, because the goal of the Department is not to solve problems but to perpetuate the Department, in all its pigeon-holed glory.

He is allowed to choose slightly visually interesting ties; he can use a coffee cup from a national park as a pencil holder. Other than that he should submit a form.

*

One day, out of nowhere, the boss announced that he was retiring. Shepherd expressed all the disappointment he could muster, but in truth he had been waiting for this event for decades. Shepherd wanted the old man's job worse than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

Shepherd wanted the job, and he felt that he had truly earned it. He was eminently qualified – except he knew that it was not all protractors and slide rules – it was a political game. And he was not made for that – but he could be. He told himself he could be. And more importantly, he told himself, he could make some rudimentary understanding of engineering *their* game – he could drag them at least a little out of the medieval age of cronyism and get them to see how it was good engineering that was in the best interests of the people of the state.

The more he thought about it the more he saw himself like a man on top of a hill with a standard bearer at his side, looking toward a sunrise, ready to usher in a new era in a department that would not only build new roads but would serve as a model for other departments – shent of the old ways of bribes and cronyism – a department run for the people, by the people, for the interests of the state, and not just another slush fund to move around budgets to line the pockets of the well connected.

He may or may not have been wearing armor in his vision – it was glorious to his mind's eye and he could not look at it directly.

*

What Shepherd failed to realize was the degree of inertia in bureaucracies. There were no bottom-up reforms in vast government agencies, as in politics, when no one gives a damn. There was no vast army of the populace or of the department's workforce to move for change, to back him in his reformation of the system. And there was no mechanism in the system to reward someone beyond a certain station even if he was the best at his job that ever was. Politics transcended expertise in the same way it transcended intelligence: all it had to know how to do was perpetuate itself and move money around for in exchange for favors.

But Shepherd had been a loyal and productive man at the agency for ages, and he had achieved both seniority and acclaim due to his technical excellence, and so it was a moot point as to whether he would be given an interview for consideration to fill the boss's spot – of course he would be. And had he not had a rival he might even have acquired the position – it would have been easy enough to promote him to the highest spot, knowing full well he would not be there forever, and that, while he was there, he would gladly rebury his head in the calculations and the blueprints, and permit the appointment of a liaison to handle the budgets. There would, in fact, be a compelling argument to do just this – it would leave Shepherd free to do what he did best, and if he was like other engineers, he would embrace the arrangement.

But Shepherd did have a rival in the department's current legislative liaison, Jim Dixon, a man of the people and former quarterback turned state representative turned the face of Oklahoma's 'Roads to Tomorrow' campaign which had successfully foisted an 1/8 sales tax on every purchase in the state to fund the dreams that Shepherd built with his drafting tools. The man was known to the people and known on a first name basis on Capitol Hill.

“Don't worry about him,” Shepherd told me. “He has bigger fish to fry. I know for a fact that he is going to run for Lieutenant Governor.”

“I'm not so sure, Shepherd. That's the old news. Rumor has it that spot's been promised to someone else now – a man who decided not to run for senate because of his old age. So Jim's been told to cool his heels for six years. He'll stay with the department and he'll head it.”

“You mean I'll head it.”

I wiped a hand across my face and looked at him. “Yes Shep, in an honest world, you'd head it. But it's a dirty world. It's a rough-and-tumble world. This position is all about the funding. Money spent is money skimmed. You have got to know that.”

“That's why I know it's time for a change. Maybe the times are just waiting for the right man.”

“You say that in your interview and you'll never get past first base. You have to play to your strengths, your expertise.”

“And then what?”

“And then? You trust to the angels that have always steered your fate. You give it your best shot and live happy with yourself that you did all you could. Who knows – maybe they are aiming for something bigger than the local stage this time. Maybe they feel like the federal government is finally watching the best rural road system in the country unfold and want to know how it happened – maybe they want their valedictorian up on stage for the nation to praise. Who knows? There has always been a little something in this state that wanted to get respect for something other than farms and football – something that wants the rest of the world to know we're not some backwater devoid of eggheads.”

Shepherd rubbed his chin. “You could be right.”

“Well, Shep, I could – but I doubt it. It would take a miracle for the scales to fall off their eyes. You just have to do the best you can.”

But for once Shepherd decided it might take a little more than his best to get what he wanted. He would try his worst.

*

“You know, Jim,” Shep said as he walked past Jim's office one day, “I don't see why you don't run for Lieutenant Governor right now. You're a young healthy man with a vision. Why let some old bag of bones get in the way of what you know you were born to do? These old fossils who play power broker always tell you half the story. If anything, I'd say they're keeping you from running for Lieutenant Governor because they're scared of you.”

Jim looked up. “Who are you?”

“Why it's me – Shepherd Creed – head of engineering.”

Jim laughed. “Oh of course – I'm sorry Mr. Creed! I get over to that side of the building so seldom, but you can't go ten minutes in this office without hearing your name. Now as to Lieutenant Governor – I'm flattered that you think I'm suited for it, but the powers that be figure I need to 'season' a little more.”

“Season – hah! If I had waited for myself to season, I would never have been brave enough to jump into engineering deep end first and get where I am now. Be wary when someone tells you to season. You've been a state rep – you know that some people tell you to shut up just because you're a rookie. But they really do it just to keep you from butting in on their cozy little deals.” Shep leaned forward. “You know what I think?”

“What's that, Mr. Creed?”

“They're afraid that in you they'd have a wildcat on their hands that's not afraid to say 'no.'”

“I told them I'd wait for my time.”

“Suit yourself,” Shepherd said. “All I know is a man has to strike while the iron is hot. You were the face of the roads campaign. But you know they're not going to pass another 1/8 cent sales tax in our lifetime, right? So where is the name 'Jim Dixon' going to be in the public mind six years from now? Jim Dixon will just be some guy who works in some anonymous office at the capitol. If I didn't know better I'd say that the men who told you to 'season' are really hoping the people will forget you, because they know you'd be one step away from the governor's office – in six years – you'd be a governor's candidate in six years.”

Jim leaned back and thought. “My name will certainly have a lot less recognition in six years if I just sit here,” he said.

“Why let them take your future away from you? That's one thing you can't get back.”

Jim stood up and shook his hand. “Thanks Mr. Creed – I never thought of things that way. I certainly have some thinking to do now – some serious thinking.”

“It's not a problem. I just heard your name bandied around and wanted to see a fellow department member get all he can for himself, while he can. I'm tired of these party power brokers meeting in the shadows and pushing these old horses around for state office – it's all so secretive, like they're popes or something. Anointed and appointed – doesn't sound like the country I grew up in. Oh, and call me 'Shepherd.'”

He left Jim seemingly lost in thought, and Shepherd had to catch his breath once he got around the corner. His heart was pounding like a sledgehammer. He did not know the man who had just moved his body and his tongue to try to

manipulate Jim the way he did. He felt exhilarated, or else disgusted. Still, he felt alive in a way he enjoyed, framed by his caution like a jewel in a foil.

*

The next day Shepherd asked Jim's old secretary, Irene Fischer, to meet him for lunch at a diner across town. He told her it was for old time's sake – she had been with the department almost as long as he had. He said he wanted to talk about their families.

“Yes, Luke's okay and Emily is finishing highschool,” Shepherd said. “And how about your children, Irene? I suppose you had a lot more time for them after Jim let you go.”

This was a sore spot with Irene. She had been a secretary in the department for twenty years until she and Jim had a falling out over his inability to file expense reports properly. She had run it up the flagpole only to be told not to make waves. It was her persistence that got her fired. She and Shep were kindred spirits.

“I still rue the day they assigned me to him,” she said. “We used to run a tight ship. And then they move these political boys in and the rules fly out the window – just look the other way, they tell us. But Shep – what if we all did that? That's what I asked myself – what is everyone in the department flew that fast and loose? Then we'd go to hell in a handbasket. So the way I see it we're either one big team or we're two castes of people – the decent honest folks and the better-than-you's.” She stirred her coffee viciously.

“Well it's funny you should say that,” Shepherd said. “Because it just so happens that Jim is up for a big promotion and I just don't think he deserves it. I am tired of those of us doing the real work getting overlooked for the really plum jobs by these stuffed suits air-dropped into the department by their cronies. Now, if you wouldn't mind telling me a little more about those expense reports...”

“Expense reports – sure, I'll tell you about the expense reports. But listen, Shep, let me tell you some other things that will knock your socks off, starting with his dishonorable discharge...”

*

Shepherd seemed a little too satisfied with himself a few days later, when I promised to drill him with practice questions for the interview. Still, I did not bother to ask, since I thought a little confidence going into an interview was a good thing.

“Mr. Creed, what is your vision for the department?”

“My vision? Well, all roads must be structurally sound...”

“No no no,” I interrupted. “These men don't want facts and figures. The vision is a kind of inspirational thing – what *they* can be proud of, not you. When they tell people about Oklahoma's roads, they want to say something like, 'Oklahoma's roads have always been an important bridge between our agricultural roots and our space-age future, between our prairie school houses and our top-notch universities. Oklahoma's roads link its proud people with the hopes and dreams of the whole United States. Our job is to get people where they want to be, so that they can be everything they aspire to be.' See?”

“A vision,” Shep repeated.

“Now, you try again.”

“Oklahoma's roads link yesterday to tomorrow with approximately 145 pounds of asphalt per square foot. Imagine all of those square feet, working together, to bring the little man across our vast seas of prairie grass to the centers of learning, progress, and power...”

“Not bad,” I said.

“Thanks,” Shepherd said.

“Just lose the hard stats about the asphalt.”

Shepherd was taken aback. And as we practiced gain, it became apparent that if you removed the asphalt, he completely lost the poetry. So we put the asphalt stats back in.

*

The day came when Shepherd was to interview for the position. He tried on his suit for the funeral and it still fit. He got to the building and waited outside the office on a hard bench like a pew in the hall outside. He adjusted his tie; he sniffed his own breath.

After making him wait twenty minutes past the appointed time, they let him in. All three men rose from the table to shake his hand.

“Well well well – hello Shepherd – we've heard so many great things about you. From what I understand you’re the brain trust, the anchorman behind the Department of Transportation. It's a great honor to meet you – you are no doubt responsible for us having one of the best rural road systems in the country.”

“Oklahoma's roads link yesterday to tomorrow with approximately 145 pounds of asphalt per square foot. Imagine all of those square feet, working together, to bring the little man across our vast seas of prairie grass to the centers of learning, progress, and power...”

“Why yes they do,” one man said. “It is nice to hear such a clear vision. We are impressed at what you have accomplished over the years.”

“I have had a lot of help over the years,” Shepherd said. “The boss was good at hiring talent. Still, I do have some plans to make our system even better. We could start with a better grade of asphalt. There are new innovations...”

They were taken aback when he began to open his briefcase and take out a thick stack of papers. One man leaned over quickly and put his hand on the briefcase lid.

“Hah – no need for details, Shepherd – we trust you 100 percent with the details! Look at what you've accomplished – you have effectively and efficiently built teams of engineers that have solved every problem the state has thrown at you.”

Shepherd was pleased at the 'teams of engineers' comment, though in truth he found it almost impossible to delegate. He would rather do it all himself and work into the wee hours of the morning to see something done right. It had taken him twenty years just to trust someone else to make coffee.

“I feel it's my vision as well as my motivation that have helped the state get where it is,” Shepherd continued. “I have introduced efficiencies where there were bottlenecks before. I have streamlined departments and reduced redundancies.”

“Yes Shepherd – about that. See, a lot of our constituents need good jobs...”

“And by improving the quality of our output, and improving our throughput, we will have more jobs than ever for qualified personnel.”

One of the men across the table smiled. He completely did not understand the answer.

Shepherd sat back, thoroughly convinced he was making a great impression on these people. “The thing we need to do now is follow the lead of the interstate highway system and build for growth and sustainability. We need to stop asking ourselves where people live now and ask ourselves where the population centers will be twenty years from now. And what will cars be like in the future – because I'm here to tell you, cheap gasoline won't be here forever. And rest stops – how many will we need? We need to know how many families and old people and truckers are going to be on the road to answer that.”

“You certainly are a visionary, Mr. Creed – as advertised. I'm in awe to be in the presence of such talent. We all are. Now look, the thing is, Shep...”

“And I've gotten us more federal matching funds per capita than any other state in the union!”

“Well Shep, we have some pretty well connected Congressmen who've helped out a little with that too – not that your work didn't justify the investment. Now look, the thing is, Shep...”

“And I promise I'll improve on my track record of good work, because I like to think that even after all these years, I'm just beginning. I won't just meet but will exceed my own high expectations for executing the responsibilities that come with this high office.”

“Look, you're a go-getter and an indispensable member of the team. That's why we'd like to offer you a generous raise and keep you exactly where you are.”

Shepherd's mouth stopped moving for a moment, and his eyes widened. Then he found himself again. “But listen...”

“Look, Shepherd. There are brain men and then there are political animals. At the top of this organization you have to have the ability to grab elbows, twist arms, to get the legislature to listen to you when they don't want to listen to anyone, to give favors and keep track of favors given. And as talented as you are, Shepherd, that just isn't your cup of tea – and that's a good thing. Hell, that's a great thing! It speaks very highly of your determination and character. Look, at the top this can be a very rough and tumble game, and to ask you to play that would be to ask you to compromise your real strengths. We want you doing exactly what you're good at. We want you cracking the whip and getting things done and done right, like always. You stay where you are, Shep, and we are going to reward you with a new title and a handsome raise and all the resources you need to continue doing your very best.”

“But...”

“I don't see where there's much to think over, Shepherd.”

“But, all my years of service. My dreams...”

“Dreams – 'the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.' You are a reality man.”

“I can do better...”

“Look Shepherd, we have a lot of meetings today – why not just be happy and say 'yes' to our offer?”

Shepherd looked far away and it seemed like the world was melting around him, and when he looked back at the three men it was like he was looking at three leering skulls.

“Jim Dixon slept with a whore,” he said.

“Jim Dixon – ah – he told us about your little game to try to throw him off the scent of this job.”

“But he's a dishonorably discharged skirt-chasing whoremongering son of a bitch. You need to know this.”

“Watch what you say, now.”

“I know you guys think Jim Dixon is the man for the job, and I won't deny he's the kind of political animal you've described, but I have it first hand that he used to slip out every Thursday afternoon and go to the In-and-Out Motel and sleep with some painted Jezebel – all on the state payroll.”

“Now Shepherd, let's not start in with stuff like this. Be happy with what you have.”

“As scarlet as the Whore of Babylon!” Shepherd said, and he began getting red in the face. “And if a man would betray his own wife before God, just think of how much loyalty he'd have for you.”

“Now Mr. Creed, I find your behavior unbecoming. We all do. Which of us is fit to judge? For the Lord said...”

“I am fit and I am clean. I worked thirty years not taking a bribe, not padding an expense report, not coming in late, not chasing a skirt, not goofing off. I've given my life to this department and I think I deserve to lead it!”

“I think you need to lower your voice, Mr. Creed.”

“Sons of bitches money changers in the temple!” Shepherd said in a voice that was not quite his own. He put his hands to the table and rose. “'Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murders and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood!'”

“We have it on record that you were once committed to an asylum.”

“Who the hell told you that. Jim Dixon? Jim Dixon!”

“We have no need to continue this discussion. Now if you will kindly return to your department.”

“Return? Return? I AM the roads department! Wherever I am, that's the department!”

“I'm sorry to hear that, because of now, you're fired.”

His eyes widened in disbelief. “I'm what?”

“You're fired effectively immediately. Look, we came here ready to play nice with you, but you just had to push it. There are young men in the ranks, Mr. Creed, plenty of young men from the universities ready to do exactly what you do. And so now with your outburst you've given us no choice. Get out of this building. We'll send someone to your office to get your things.”

“But you can't do this.”

“Enjoy your retirement, Mr. Creed.”

And with that the three men rose to leave but Shepherd lunged at them across the table while uttering a stream of obscenities. It took three security guards to restrain him and escort him, kicking and screaming, out to the parking lot. They tossed him to the tarmac.

“You get in your car and get out of here before you buy yourself a one-way ticket to the slammer.”

Shepherd stood up and seethed, but then did nothing. He fumbled for his keys and the guards walked away. He took a few aimless steps. Just as he removed his keys from his pocket his briefcase fell open and papers scattered in the wind. He just stood and stared.

*

Shepherd's outburst during his campaign for the boss's old job would have surprised me twenty years ago, but not anymore. I knew the nature of the man. Topsy once told me that she loved her brother very much but that if Shepherd had been raised with even one less drop of moral rectitude, he would have become the kind of quiet man who murders prostitutes while screaming “Bringing in the sheaves.”

*

After his unsuccessful efforts to advance his career, Shepherd's whole life scattered in the wind like his papers. Finally, after days of sulking, his body found its motion again late one afternoon and he walked slowly to his car. He unlocked it and sat inside. He had been telling himself he had no place to go in spite of all the roads he'd built. His chest hurt like hell and he was about to run a hose from the exhaust to the front seat and roll up the windows when at the last moment he thought of one place that would welcome him, a place that had long been fitted for a man in his current state.

Chapter 8

Shepherd got in his car and in a kind of blinding pain drove to where the highway turned into the rural roads, and the roads turned to gravel, and the gravel to a dirt road and then nothing but a rutted track across the grass. He drove to the old homestead where he'd grown up.

The place was boarded and abandoned. The word “Creed” was still etched above the doorway. He tore the boards

from the door and walked inside. He looked around it with a flashlight and found a wooden chair and propped himself down in it.

“Is this all you ever wanted from me?” he yelled. “To die here?”

He got no answer.

He walked to the doorway and then turned and looked out onto the vast fallow field and took out a pocket watch he had inherited from his grandfather and threw it as far as he could.

“In the end we can't get out of the box.”

He went inside and took out a bottle of whiskey and pulled at it, and the pain in his chest didn't go away but he didn't care. He drained the bottle and threw it across the room, He felt miserable and conflicted deep inside himself and needed respite. Within an hour he was curled up on the hard wood floor and sleeping.

When he woke up there was a flaxen-haired girl standing looking down at him and he was in a blinding pain and out of the corners of his eyes he saw gray lines darting all around him – flashing and leaving trails in straight lines until they boxed him in. When he looked straight at the lines they would disappear, but in the periphery they were frantic.

It struck him that she looked like Rosemary, the girl he had met busing tables so many years ago. In his blinding state she seemed to step out of an aura.

His chest heaved in pain. “I can't get up,” he said.

The girl had to use all her strength to help him onto a chair.

“You're a Creed, aren’t you?” the girl said.

“Rosemary…”

“What?”

“Am I dying and you’ve come from the other side to meet me?”

“Lord you have been drinking. I was driving by and saw the light of your flashlight.”

“How do you know I’m a Creed?”

“Bad penny – my grandad sharecropped for your dad. Worst run of luck he ever had. And I seen you all at your dad’s funeral.”

“Thank you for your help.”

“Granddad always said ‘Aint no good can come of a Creed.’ I guess he was right. Of course dad turned our fortune and owns practically half the county now. Now get up.”

“Wait a moment,” he said. “My chest aches. Let me rest.”

“You're in a state. I shouldn’t wonder if it isn’t just the whiskey backing up in you. Some people can’t handle it.”

“No, I think I’m dying.”

“Probably – you look old.”

A rumble shook the house.

“Storm's coming,” she said. “Pull yourself together so I can get you up into my truck and to a doctor.”

“I can't – my chest is about to split open.”

“Sit down then – I'm going to get help.”

And so she left and the pressure in his chest did not relent and he had turbulent visions. He saw blobs that formed the faces he had seen all his life, strangers from the roadside of his many drives while banding the state in asphalt, hands reaching out for a brush of the garment of the promised prosperity. But the grey lines rose off to fence him off from them and from everyone he knew.

He passed out and awoke to find he had dragged himself across the grass of the front yard in the pouring rain. He saw headlights in front of him, and two figures running toward him from out of the headlights.

His chest was about to break and he became aware of his self-imposed loneliness for the selfishness it was, like the bright blood of a wound ripped suddenly, red with a brighter red at the center, the abstract pattern of some designer who never intended to make sense. But now it made sense.

He swooned and regretted and wanted to live to make amends.

The girl had found a farm boy to help her and together they tried to hoist Shepherd into the girl's truck.

“God – he's like a sack of sand.”

“He’s a wreck. He’s a Creed.”

“God forgive me because I cannot damn myself,” Shepherd said.

“What's he talking about?”

“Self-pitiful gibberish. For all I care he can damn himself. All these years old Creed mistreated my grandfather.”

“I won't kill myself,” Shepherd said.

“Well good God thanks for that!” the young man said exasperatedly. “Now why don't you just stop rolling around so we can get you in the truck?”

They loaded him in and he passed out, his last vision filled with the intersecting lines of a cage fading to nothing.

*

He recuperated for weeks in the hospital – and a sanitarium – and long dark days gave way to a storm abating in his head. Toward the end of his rehabilitation he could go on the grounds by himself. One day he rose and sat on the bank of a river, the water interrupted by a jutting stone. He went out onto the stone and sank down on his knees and submerged his face and unmade himself until he had returned to the point when he was yet to be unmade. All he wanted now was to be good, not do good.

*

In time he recovered his health to the degree that he could work again, and the department offered him a part-time job so that he could return to life with some normalcy. It was too kind. He heard that Jim Dixon himself had made the initiative. But in the new role he would be bored and purposeless so he tried to plan something to do. He would call Topsy about that trip to Yellowstone. But then an opportunity to do something useful came to him. Alice called him saying that their son was in trouble, and it gave him something other than himself to worry about.

*

Chapter 9

His son's name was Luke Shepherd Creed, which in some ways was more of a curse than his father's, and it may even have impelled him further than his father. His mother was worried about their college-aged son.

“Shepherd,” she said when she called, “Are you well enough to help our son? We have lost almost all contact with him at college – since your illness he has pulled inside himself, but then yesterday he called and said he wants to see you. Shepherd, he wants you to do something for him.”

“What?”

“He didn't say. He wants you to meet him where he lives on campus. He won't return our calls now.”

Shepherd paused and traced his fingers over a glass in front of him. He asked for his son's address. She gave it to him, and he shaved and got dressed and got in his fine sedan (he liked cars) and drove to the campus. He knew that colleges were dens of freaks. He tucked a pistol in the back of his pants and put on a light poplin jacket such as might be purchased at Montgomery Wards.

It was in his Cadillac that he drove to the campus and then wheeled around through the neighbors of once-nice houses since gone shabby in their proximity to the university and their occupation by transient and careless student inhabitants. Some had football pennants hanging from the balconies; some had posters of Jimmy Hendrix. It was to one of the latter that he pulled up. He knocked at the door but heard loud music inside. He knocked again but no one answered, so he went in.

“Luke?”

He walked into the thoroughly abused once-nice wood-floored living room. A stereo and tall speakers sat blaring on the far wall, and there was an acrid smell in the air mixed of marijuana and petuli. No was up front, or in the kitchen, so he went up the stairs.

Here he saw three young men and two lanky girls sitting around a bong. Their faces were a mess of gaunt slack distortion. They did nothing but sway slightly to the music

One of the slack bodies looked up at him and seemed repelled but did not have the energy to do much about it. Shepherd grabbed the young man by the arm and said “Where's Luke Creed?”

Luke Creed?” he said.

“Luke Creed.”

“I'm Luke Creed!” a young man from the corner said. “What do you want with me?”

“It's Dad, damnit, and I'm getting you out of this dump.”

Shepherd grabbed the tall lanky man by the shoulder of his shirt and escorted him down the stairs.

“Watch your step, son,” Shepherd said. “I don't trust a person high on drugs to be able to navigate the stairs.”

“I'm fine I'm fine. And Dad?”

“Yes?”

He stared at Shep. A strange warm expression crossed his face. “You came, Dad. It's actually you. I needed you to save me.”

“Save you from what?”

“From my own inertia. Mother couldn't do it. My step-father couldn't do it. I needed you. I trust you though I've hardly

known you."

"Let's get some air," Shepherd said, and he threw open the screen door and they went out and down the steps of the front porch. The son blinked in the light.

"What the hell have you been you doing to yourself?" Shepherd said.

"Where the hell have you been the last twenty years?" the boy said, but then with warmth in his expression that he could not hide.

"It's good to see you son," Shepherd said, and felt himself suddenly moved to tears. "When you came to visit me at the hospital, you felt so far away."

"I was far away. I was watching a man I should have known better almost die."

"I was a slave to my work for too long," Shepherd said.

"Dad," he said again.

"No, it's true."

"No, I mean 'Dad, you're not a narc, are you?'"

"No son."

"I just wondered, you know, because of the gun in your belt..."

*

He took the boy out and fed him up, and then he asked the boy why he had dropped out of school. The boy could only admit the truth: that he had been introspective and then depressed; that he had gotten lazy, he had fallen in with some bad friends – and yes, that he probably just wanted some attention.

"Well, I'm here now," Shepherd said. A sudden idea came to him. "Look, your Aunt Topsy and I are thinking of taking a road trip to Yellowstone. I think you need to get away from here for a while, and then make a clean start next semester. So, I don't know your situation, but if you don't have any plans..."

"That sounds great and all, Dad. But I have this girlfriend..."

"Hell, bring the girlfriend," Shepherd said and instantly regretted it, and the potential immorality it invited, but it was already flown from his mouth like a bird.

*

Shepherd phoned Topsy that night and reminded her about the trip they had agreed to take, and then he told her he had promised his son he could take his girlfriend along and apologized for ruining their plans without her consent.

"It's no problem, Shep," she said. "Having young people along will keep us young, and you need to be around the boy. I'll rent an RV. But if you get to take Luke, I get to ask your friend John to come."

"John?"

"Yes – we've had a thing going on since I met him at the funeral. We've hidden it from you because of your sensitive condition."

Shepherd stared at the phone in slack-jawed wonder.

"Shep? Shep?" Eudora asked.

He finally put the receiver phone back up to his face.

"That old fox," he said. "If there's any man fit to watch out for one of us crazy Creeds, it's him."

*

And so two weeks later, with Autumn in the air and the road open before us, Shep and Topsy and Luke and Luke's girlfriend and I were in an RV driving over the high plains of Colorado toward the Tetons and then Yellowstone. Shepherd made sure we all packed jackets because he knew it would be chilly, and he made us all show him the jackets we had packed.

"This will be great, Dad," Luke said, and he and Topsy fell immediately into a jovial rapport, and when the boy took his turn driving with his girlfriend in the front beside him, Topsy went into the back and said, "You've got a good boy there, Shep. You must have done something right."

"I was gone for two long. My problems will someday be his problems."

"You never know. Look at him. You being here now is what he needs. Make the most of it, Shep – this will be the foundation you two build on from now on – this will be his memory of you."

"She's right," I said.

"Damn straight she's right," Shepherd said.

*

And in the shadows of the Tetons we were all glad we had heeded Shepherd's packing advice. But once up in the air of

the mountains, the young couple began kissing and cuddling all the time. This made Shepherd uneasy. It even made Topsy uncomfortable.

“My goodness,” Shepherd said to his sister. “Is it going to be this way all the rest of the trip?”

“I think so,” Topsy said. “They're driving me crazy, Shep. What do you say we just ditch them?”

“Ditch them? That wouldn't be right – would it?”

“They're young, they know how to use a phone. And Western Union can get money anyplace.”

For a moment the idea seemed tantalizing to Shep. But he had to respond to her with, “I guess it wouldn't be right.”

“Well, for a few days then,” Topsy said. “Put them up in Jackson Hole for a while. Then let's you and I and John drive out to...”

“Where?” Shep asked.

“Well not Yellowstone, because we have to save that for when we're with them.”

Shepherd thought. “You know what, Topsy? Let's just drive around and see what there is to see.”

And so we spent two days just rambling to nowhere, in mountain passes and on logging roads the RV was unsuited for, over the lava plains of Idaho, through dense pine forests smelling wild and sharp and clean.

“This is all right,” Shepherd said, and Topsy agreed. It was nice to see the orange sunset reflected on the pavement. It made us feel young again.

*

In time I married Topsy, and Shepherd was my best man. He tried to plan the wedding down to the very last detail but all I let him do was buy the buttermints and then I said, “We've hired a preacher – I'll wing the rest.” He found the strength of will within himself to agree and just stand there looking as resplendent as he could in a rented tux.

Topsy and I decided to take a road trip for our honeymoon. To where? To anywhere – we would plan it as we went. And as I felt my mind unpack with the road before me, with Topsy at my side, I felt what Shepherd and Topsy must have felt all those years ago, the impulse to travel that in itself is no surprise – it can be in a person without needing to have been building for any period of time. It can be full-born. It is a desire that not everyone has, but if possessed it impels a creature. It is motion in a wide dry place, pure, an outgoing activity on however many cylinders, the invisible movement of a soul to the City of God mapped onto the concrete and the steel and asphalt of the City of Man.

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