

## The Executioners Guild

Andy Duncan

When the stranger walked into Blackburn's that Friday morning, there were no other customers in the store, unless you counted Stumpy Turlis, which Mrs. Blackburn, a woman of standards, certainly *did not*. The stranger's entrance set the cowbell above the door to jangling, but Mrs. Blackburn did not look up. She figured the bell was just the youngest Cooper child skipping, or, more accurately, stomping outside with her fistful of already-sodden licorice. The child's penny, suspiciously shiny, still lay on the counter where she had, on tiptoe, placed it. Before putting it in the register, Mrs. Blackburn would give it a chance to dry. In the meantime, she had returned to the task at hand, the slicing of a fresh wheel of cheese, always a delicate operation, and one that couldn't wait until noontime when the sandwich crowd came in, jamming up to the counter and talking at once and wanting everything right *then* and not even having the decency to wash the horse sweat and axle grease and chicken feed off their hands before they unwrapped the wax paper and bit into the cheese-and-baloney sandwiches that would not get made, Mrs. Blackburn felt, if she had to waste her whole morning waiting hand and foot on every white-trash ragamuffin in town. Do I look like some old nigger mammy? she sometimes asked Mr. Blackburn in the quiet of the evening, I am not being hateful but I genuinely want to know, because if that is what *I am*, the lowliest servant of every ditch-born lint-picker in the county, I suppose I should claim my rightful place, and collect my meager belongings, and leave this bed that my very presence defiles, and sleep in the stable with the *other* dumb beasts of God's dominion, and having said this, Mrs. Blackburn would dab her eyes with the corner of an apron, and enjoy what, from Mr. Blackburn, passed for reassurance. All that clomp, clomp, clomp, Mrs. Blackburn thought (biting her lip as the wax skin welled up on either side of her sharpest knife), you'd think the child was trying to dig postholes in the floor, and it *just* now polished to a fare-thee-well, and that only after nagging at Mr. Blackburn for a solid month—and thus preoccupied, she allowed Stumpy Turlis to be the first person in Andalusia, Mississippi, actually to speak to the stranger, a humiliation that would gall her to her grave.

"Morning," said Stumpy Turlis.

"Good morning," said the stranger, and Mrs. Blackburn looked up, startled.

"I'm not in your way, am I?" asked Stumpy Turlis.

"Not at all."

"Cause if *I am*, I'll move. I don't want to be no trouble. I can find me some other place to lie."

"You're fine. No trouble at all. Please stay where you are."

Stumpy Turlis, as usual, was lying full-length on the hardware counter, hat on his chest, arms outflung and hanging down on either side. His right hand held a cigarette; his left hand, though it was behind the counter and temporarily out of sight, certainly held a Coca-Cola in some stage of emptiness. On the crown of his hat was a crumpled paper packet commemorating the headache powder he had taken when he came in.

Standing over Stumpy, his back to the grocery counter and to Mrs. Blackburn, was a tall, white-haired, broad-shouldered man in a derby hat, striped gray trousers, and a black knee-length coat. In his right hand was a gray suitcase. Some drummer with a line of brushes, Mrs. Blackburn decided, or liniment, or iron pills. Well, let him talk to that old fool Turlis, and waste *his* time for a change. I must be deaf sure enough, Mrs. Blackburn thought, as she added a fresh cheese slice to the growing pile on the cutting board, he's a big man and I didn't even hear him walking. That *awinter* coat? When she'd swept the porch at nine o'clock, the Royal Crown thermometer had already said eighty-six degrees.

"I'm just lying here waiting on my Goody's to kick in," said Stumpy Turlis. "You get headaches much, mister?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Be glad, then. I get 'em something awful. Last for a week. You know why?"

"No, I don't."

"Septum. That's what they told me down in Meridian, I got a septum, a deviated nasal septum. You know what that is?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Causes *headaches*, that's what it is. Just like someone clipped you tween the eyes with the end of a board, only worse. You ever been clipped tween the eyes by a board, mister?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Pray to God you never do. It's bad, real bad, but it ain't as bad as a deviated nasal septum, no Jesus. You're a lucky man all around, that's all I got to say *about* it."

Mrs. Blackburn wondered where the stranger was from; he talked too well, as if he had learned English from a book. She kept expecting him to turn around or walk off or at least shift from side to side, but no, he just stood there, frozen, with head slightly bowed, like an old friend mourning the prone body of Stumpy Turlis. She peeled from the knife a little stringy gibble of cheese and ate it, being careful not to touch her fingers with her mouth. The cheese was soft and mild on her tongue. As she stared at the drummer's back, she felt the cool breath of the nearest rotary fan as it swept its idle gaze across her, as it ruffled her hair and leafed through the Meridian papers in their stack beside the register.

Stumpy Turlis asked, "You want to buy something, mister?"

"No, I only —"

"Cause I don't work here. I can't sell you nothing. You want something, you got to —" Here his voice became low and conspiratorial. "You got to ask *her*."

Still, he didn't turn around. The fan lost interest and moved on, leaving the sweat on her neck to proceed about its business, and, in the sudden reminder of heat Mrs. Blackburn found her voice and said, loudly, "May *I* help you?" As she said it, she set down her knife and wiped her hands on the inside of her apron.

The drummer turned, nodded, and tipped his hat. "Good morning, madam. No, I'm just browsing, thank you very much." He might have been sixty or he might have been eighty, it was hard to tell, with those

heavy black eyeglasses and that puffed-up jowly face. But from across the store, Mrs. Blackburn could tell that his eyes, magnified through Coke-bottle lenses, were perhaps the saddest eyes she ever had seen.

Though she hadn't intended to—since, after all, she could show a drummer the door without moving a step—Mrs. Blackburn found herself bustling toward the hardware counter. As always, she went the long way, around the U formed by the grocery and the dry-goods counters, along the depression that her in-laws and their parents had worn in the floor in the nineteenth century. Mrs. Blackburn disdained any shorter path across the store.

"We don't need anything more to sell, Lord knows," Mrs. Blackburn said as she passed the tablecloths and aprons. She realized she was still wiping her hands as she walked, and flung the corner of her apron down. "Enough trouble these days selling what *we have*, I don't care what Mr. Roosevelt says about the forties being better, the forties ain't got to Andalusia yet."

"I have nothing to sell," the stranger said with a slight smile, setting down his suitcase and spreading his hands. He turned briefly to Stumpy Turlis, as if for confirmation. "I'm only passing the time. I came in to look around, where it's cool."

"There's cooler places than this," Mrs. Blackburn said, fetching up behind the hardware counter and folding her arms. But her heart wasn't in it. The old man looked not only sad, but tired, and in that ridiculous winter outfit, too. Strange that he didn't seem to be sweating. They regarded each other across the counter. Lying between them was Stumpy Turlis, who eyed Mrs. Blackburn and pulled his nearly empty Coca-Cola bottle back across his chest, out of her reach.

"I ain't in the way, am I?" Stumpy Turlis quavered. "If I am, I can move. I don't want to be no trouble."

"Hush up," Mrs. Blackburn hissed, slapping her palm onto the counter near his head. "What brings you to town, mister?"

She knew this was rude, and half expected no answer at all, but her curiosity was piqued, and besides, she felt she had to wrest the moment back from Stumpy Turlis *somehow*. Whose store *was* this, anyway? Well, her husband's, but weren't husbands and wives the same person under God's law?

Without seeming in the least disturbed, the stranger said: "To meet a man. A colleague. He's not from here, either," and he pronounced it *eye-ther*, "but we have some business to discuss, and this seemed a . . . convenient place." He smiled at her and at Stumpy Turlis, clasped his hands across his belly, then added, "It's a lovely town. The forests are much more hilly than I had expected. Mountainous, practically. Do you get much snow?"

"Not since I been here," Stumpy Turlis volunteered, "and I been living here since ought-four. Working the sawmill. That's where I done busted my head with the plank." After a pause, he clarified: "At the sawmill. You ever get hit in the head with a plank, mister? Oh," he said, beneath Mrs. Blackburn's thunderhead gaze. "Oh, I guess I done asked you that, ain't I?"

"Think nothing of it," the stranger said, and did an extraordinary thing: He reached out and patted Stumpy Turlis on the shoulder. "You've nearly finished your Coke, I see. Shall I buy you another?" Mrs. Blackburn stared at the stranger in wonderment. "I presume there's an icebox, a cooler? Ah, here it is. It's a rare thing," he said, lifting the lid and plunging one hand among the cubes, "to be welcomed with a friendly word in an unfamiliar town. Most rare." With a cascading avalanche sound, he pulled forth a fresh Coca-Cola, slick and shiny and dripping, one bit of ice sliding down into the waist of the bottle.

"Here you are. Madam? Care for a drink? No? All right, then." He pulled out another and ignored the bottle opener on the wall to pop the cap against the edge of the countertop, catching it in his other hand as it flipped and pocketing it so quickly Mrs. Blackburn almost missed where it went. Without sitting up, Stumpy Turlis, with the grace of years of practice, reached up and slightly behind his head for the bottle opener, popped the cap, then swooped the neck to his lips without spilling a drop, gulping just as the foam surged forth. Both he and the stranger made satisfied drinking sounds. Disgusting! Mrs. Blackburn thought. The stranger pulled from his pocket a handful of coins, which he studied.

"That'll do," Mrs. Blackburn said, snatching a dime. The affable old man in the suit was setting her nerves on edge, and she wanted him gone.

But he just smiled his sad-eyed smile and said, "Thank you."

Stumpy Turlis, meanwhile, was grinning rottenly, evidently feeling he had made a friend for life. He crossed one foot over the other and jiggled it. "Hey, you're all right, mister," he said. "Y'know, I think my headache may be some better, now that you mention it. Not all gone," he added, glancing at Mrs. Blackburn, "not yet, but it's getting there. I'm obliged to you, mister."

The Sunbeam clock showed no more time for this foolishness, yet Mrs. Blackburn was unwilling to leave the stranger alone in the hardware section—alone, because Stumpy Turlis, of course, didn't count. "You *sure* you don't want to look at anything?" she asked.

"Well," said the stranger. "Now that you mention it." He pointed over her head, at the wall behind. "Might I examine a length of that rope?"

Was his finger trembling?

"All righty," Mrs. Blackburn said, feigning jauntiness. She turned to the individual twenty-foot coils of rope, dozens of them hanging in ranks from ancient nails. In the back of the store were longer lengths, of course, and one immense wheel from which any length could be cut, but the short ropes suited most people these days, when so many had decided they were too good to keep horses and mules anymore. She reached up, lifted down a coil, and turned to set it on the counter, but the stranger beat her to it, lifting the rope out of her grasp, bearing it the length of Stumpy Turlis, and setting it down on the counter near the soles of Stumpy's boots. He pulled free a few feet, flexed it experimentally, then tied a knot in it so swiftly that Mrs. Blackburn blinked—this was inch-thick, store-bought rope, hadn't even thought about being broken in, and while Mrs. Blackburn's daddy had taught her a good deal about knot-tying, she didn't recognize the one that the stranger'd just made, nor the one he was setting about making now.

"A good rope," the stranger said, mostly to himself. "Not the best, but a good one, nevertheless."

Something about his twisting, dancing fingers and the rope slithering between them made Mrs. Blackburn remember that night when she was little, when she had followed her daddy and several other men into the woods, wondering where they were going with all that rope. Fighting her way back to the present, back to the store and the stranger and the heat and the fans shaking their heads all around, and the newspapers fluttering in the artificial breeze, she remembered the headlines she'd been looking at all morning, the headlines that had made her expect an even bigger lunch crowd than usual, and, just as her throat was seizing up, she managed to say, in a voice barely above a whisper:

"Withium."

Mr. Blackburn, who was unused to hearing his first name, immediately bestirred himself in the back

room he called an office. His grandfather's chair shrieked as he rolled it backward. Mrs. Blackburn heard the curtain whip aside, and then she heard her husband lumber forth, the jingle of coins as he hitched up his pants. He was beside her, his breath audible, his tobacco-tinged sweat awful but welcome. The Blackburns looked at each other, and then at the stranger, who pulled the rope taut and relaxed it again, then taut, then relaxed, then taut again.

"Mister," Mr. Blackburn said. "Hey, mister!"

The stranger looked up, blinked, as if peering through a fog. Whatever Mrs. Blackburn had expected, it wasn't the bland, placid expression the stranger had worn all along. "Yes?" he asked. He looked at each of them. "I'm sorry. Is anything wrong?"

"Not *yet*, no," Mr. Blackburn said. "Listen, mister. We don't want any trouble this weekend, okay? I mean, we know people will be coming from all over, to meet their friends and be sociable, and see what they can see, but as for—well, as for the *job itself*, that's a job for the county, and the sheriff, and the man what's been hired by the county. Understand?"

The stranger's face darkened. His shoulders seemed to broaden. The rope slipped from his hands. Several feet rustled to the floorboards, but then it slowed and stopped, most of it still coiled atop the counter.

Mr. Blackburn went on: "Now, there's some as think that's a good idea, and some as don't. But I'm on the County Council myself, and I'll tell you, I think it's for the good. But whether we like it or not, it's going to happen at the courthouse, and the townsfolk aren't going to have any part of it, except a few witnesses, and folks from out of town—well, they *sure* pop ain't gonna have anything to do with it! Like I said, it's a job for the sheriff." He nodded in agreement with himself and hitched his pants again. "So I don't think you'll be needing no rope today, mister. You understand me?"

The stranger said nothing. His lips trembled. Mrs. Blackburn was horrified to entertain the suspicion that the old man might cry. Instead, he turned and walked slowly, ponderously, over to his suitcase—he really *is* a big man, she thought, we'd be in real trouble if he—then lifted it and walked to the door, stopped as he pulled it inward, setting off the cowbell, and looked back at the three of them. He said, with great formality and dignity: "I am no murderer. Nor am I an *amateur*. Good morning." He closed the door behind him, clumped across the porch, and was gone. The little blonde girl holding the buttered slice of Sunbeam said that the time was 11:05.

\* \* \*

The sheriff smelled the food before he heard Miss Esther coming up the stairs, mumbling non-stop to God and her ancestors. He was waiting on the landing when the flowers on her straw hat bobbed into view.

"Hey, Miss Esther. Lemme help you with that."

"Thank you kindly, Sheriff."

She was the tiniest, most dried-up-looking little colored woman you would ever hope to meet, and, as she liked to put it, only God knew how old she was. So the sheriff was surprised when he took the basket from her hands.

"My Lord, Miss Esther! What all you *got* in this thing? You pack the stove you cooked it on?" He held

the door for her as she cackled.

"That's my biggest frying pan," she said. "I wanted to fry up a mess of chicken—"

"Oh, my goodness," the sheriff said, lifting the wicker lid. Hooper and Nat gathered round, making wordless appreciative noises.

"—and I remembered I'd done left my big serving bowl down at the A.M.E. We had revival last week. So I just decided to tote it over in the pan. Poured off the grease, now."

"I like the grease myself," Nat said, already munching on a chicken leg. "I sops my biscuits in it." The sheriff nodded at Hooper, who began transferring food from Miss Esther's heavy pans and crockery into tin plates from the jailhouse cupboard.

"Sheriff, if you wouldn't mind . . ."

"Don't worry, Miss Esther. We'll take it on down to him. You don't have to go near."

Miss Esther's voice dropped. She peered over her spectacles and clutched the front of her dress. "I ain't *never* been talked to like that man did, Sheriff."

"I hope you ain't, Miss Esther. It was awful."

"Not even by the trash what lives in the hollow, and *certainly* not by a colored man."

"There was no excuse for it, Miss Esther. Don't get yourself all worked up, now. You don't have to go near that one anymore."

Miss Esther glanced toward the barred door that led to the cells, closed her eyes, and shuddered. "I had been praying for the man," she said, "praying for his repentance, for he, like all of us, is one of God's creatures." Her voice was breaking. "But Sheriff, I done told the other ladies *they* gone have to do *my* share of his praying from now on!"

Nat was already on his second chicken leg, and watching Miss Esther like she was some windup toy set moving for his amusement. The sheriff tried to steer her toward the stairs. Lord, these old gals could turn up the melodrama when they wanted to! Just like his own mama—though she'd faint dead away to hear him compare her to a colored woman.

"Now, don't you worry, Miss Esther. I'll have Hooper bring the basket back to you. We thank you again." The others dutifully repeated their thanks, Nat's somewhat muffled by chicken.

On the landing, Miss Esther turned, suddenly dry-eyed, and asked in a low voice: "That truck coming today?"

"Yes, ma'am. Anytime now."

"Good," she said. "Can't come soon enough for *that* one." She whispered, "He ain't nothing but *anigger*," and then covered her mouth with her hands.

The sheriff fought a grin. "We thank you again for the dinner," he said. "We thank you kindly."

Miss Esther was paid once a month out of the jail budget, and recently had renegotiated her terms with the council, but she and the sheriff never discussed such unpleasant topics.

"I'm pleased to do it, Sheriff," she said, creeping down the stairs, flowers bobbing. "Does my heart good to know y'all are eating well. Lord, these steps, there's more of 'em *vertime* I come in the door, but Jesus walks where Queenesther walks, yes He does, and Queenesther's feet are His feet, and Queenesther's hands are His hands . . ." She disappeared. The sheriff went back inside and picked up his club, wincing as he did so—he wasn't Sheriff Langley, after all.

"Let's go, Hooper. Nat, keep your ears open. And you *might* save some chicken for the rest of us," he added.

Nat's face fell, and he chewed more slowly. In a small voice, he said: "Ain't had but two legs."

"That's all most chickens *got*," the sheriff said, unlocking and trundling aside the corridor door. Hooper, carrying the dinner, walked ahead, past three empty cells on the left, three empty cells on the right. Once again the sheriff thanked God the place was otherwise empty. Even the town drunks had lain low the past few weeks; when the heat wave rolled in, the whole town settled down like a dog under a stove. At the end of the corridor was a small grilled outside window, a supply closet on the right, a final, larger cell on the left. The men stopped before this cell. The sheriff studied its inhabitant before moving to unlock the door.

As always, the wiry colored man with the high, bulging forehead sat on the bunk with his back to the corner and his knees up, sock feet on the mattress, looking out the window at the sky and the visible corner of the Masonic Hall. His arms were folded across his stomach, and his hands dangled. There was no sign of energy, until he slowly turned his head and looked at the men with bright, staring eyes.

"Set still, Childress," the sheriff said, shoving back the door just wide enough for Hooper to get in, set the food on the spindly legged table, and get out. The prisoner didn't move. Skin prickling, the sheriff rolled the door closed, locked it, tugged on it, and turned to go.

"Mr. Simpson got here yet?" Childress asked. He had a voice like a bird chirping.

"This afternoon," the sheriff said, still looking toward the far end of the corridor.

"Cause I got something to tell the man."

"You'll have your chance," the sheriff said. It was what he always said. Childress had been asking for two weeks.

Then Childress asked: "Where's the bitch at?"

The sheriff looked at Childress, whose face was expressionless save for his dancing eyes. He still hadn't moved. If anything, his shoulders had slumped, and he looked even more languid, as if all his energy were going into his words and his eyes.

"The *old* bitch," Childress explained. "I been all worked up to look at her ass a little bit. Check her out. Old ain't gold but it ain't loose change neither. Reckon she'd slip me some if y'all looked the other way? I ain't got nowhere else to put it, I might's well put some of it in there—"

"You shut your mouth," the sheriff said, his hand tight on his club.

"Don't get all hetup now," Childress said. "I won't be putting it in tilly 'all be taking itout . I 'magine it's mighty roomy in there, but it ain't roomy enough forboth of us!"

Hooper muttered a curse. Without looking, the sheriff grabbed his arm.

"Take it easy," the sheriff said.

"I don't mind being at the tail end of the train," Childress went on. "I know where the niggers get to ride. Just so I gets me a little piece of thecaboose . Ha-haaaa!" It wasn't a laugh so much as a whine, and his face twitched when he emitted it, as if it was involuntary.

"Childress," the sheriff said, "you might as well stop trying to get a rise out of us. We ain't gonna do anything stupid. You ain't dealing with Cooter Langley, you know. You're gonna sit right there until your time comes." As the sheriff talked, Childress looked back out the window, moving his lips silently, as if mouthing the words. "And it's gonna be done by the book, you got me? The old days are gone, Childress."

"Bright, white, quite new day," the prisoner murmured. "I feels less like a niggerall the time."

"By the book," the sheriff repeated. He took a deep breath. Because he had been raised Methodist, he added: "Time like this, a man ought to be thinking about meeting his God."

Childress burst out laughing and turned back to the sheriff, grinning. "Listen at thisGod shit!" he said. "Youall the God a nigger needs inthis here town! You gone be waiting for me on the other side, too?"

"Jesus," the sheriff said, yanking Hooper's elbow. "Let's go."

"Maybe you gone climb up on that chair and ride out of town with me? That be some kinda ride, all right!"

"Let'sgo, I said."

Now facing the window again, Childress spoke in a dreamy voice, as if reciting something half-forgotten: "Fuck your white ass, fuck your white laws, and fuck your white God."

Shoving Hooper down the hall, the sheriff fumbled through his keys. As he slammed and locked the corridor door behind him, Nat handed him a plate. "Here you go, Sheriff," Nat said.

The sheriff looked at the chicken, rice, turnips, and biscuits, and felt a surge of nausea. "You can have mine," he muttered, and strode out of the office. Air, he thought as he stomped downstairs, got to get some air. In the lobby, heels clicking on the newly inlaid tile, he walked to the fountain, splashed his face with warm, rusty water, and felt a little easier. He wondered, as he often did, whether the water in the coloreds' fountain was any better. He doubted it. Less than a day, he kept telling himself. Less than a day to go.

\* \* \*

The truck rolled into town atnoon, not from the direction ofMeridian, like mostAndalusiatraffic, but from the north, and so it caught by surprise the dozens of people who were in the courthouse square solely to look for the truck. Most of the crowd, neighbors and strangers alike, had gravitated by silent consent to

the southern side of the courthouse. It not only offered a clear view down Tyburn Street, which eventually became the Meridian highway, but was shady thanks to the Confederate oaks. Here groups of men and women, but mostly men, sat on benches or the marble steps or perched amid tree roots or just walked slowly back and forth, fanned themselves and mopped their faces with handkerchiefs, and looked down Tyburn toward the ice plant, and talked to each other in low tones. There were also many children about, a surprising number, because they normally could find cooler places to play, and dinner should have been waiting at home. But there they were: gangs of them, boys and girls alike, ran and shrieked and played tag among the lampposts and raised such a ruckus that the shopkeepers would have complained if it had been a normal business day—but, of course, it wasn't. The shopkeepers themselves stood in their doorways, on alert, afraid they'd miss something. Most of the adults were secretly thankful for all the whooping hollering children in the square, because the adults were all a damn sight more hush-mouthed than usual, and even people who normally hailed each other across the street, today just nodded in silence and glanced away, and without the children, the square would have suffered a quiet that was unthinkable.

The square was unusual in one more respect: There were no Negroes in sight. The ones who worked in the businesses that fronted the square either stayed inside, finding things to do in the back rooms, or had stayed home sick. The maids and cooks of the town's few well-off inhabitants, who normally would have come to the square to do the day's shopping, were instead having their groceries delivered, or making do. Old Paul, who shined shoes beneath the largest oak every day, was nowhere to be seen. If any of the white people noticed his absence, or the absence of the other Negroes, no one mentioned it.

The first to see the truck was the youngest Woodham boy, Joshua. He was heading home despite the jeers of his friends because he knew his mama would snatch a knot in him if he didn't have his elbows on the oilcloth to say the blessing by 12:05. As he cut across the north lawn of the courthouse, Joshua saw a pretty new red-white-and-blue sign in his path, with a bald eagle on it. It said: "Keep off the grass." Joshua studied it, decided it was Federal doings, and kept walking. His route took him past the Confederate memorial, which was taller even than Joshua's daddy, but not so big around that Joshua couldn't hope to be able to reach around it one day and join hands with himself on the other side. He stopped and flattened himself against the pillar and made the attempt for the umpteenth time, not because he really thought his arms had gotten longer in the past half-hour, but because the marble was cool and musty against his face, and up close and sideways the letters of the dead men's names looked like a secret code that only Joshua could read. He was standing there against the marble when he heard what sounded like a sawmill truck laboring up a grade. He stepped away from the monument and walked around it, dragging his fingertips across it until the marble slipped away, and there was the truck, shifting gears with a shriek as it rumbled down Rose Avenue toward the square. People were coming out of the stores along Rose to look at it.

Joshua was interested to see that the truck didn't have a skull and crossbones on the side, like Eddie Dunn said it would, and it didn't have skeletons tied across the hood with their mouths open, like the Derrick twins said it would. He hadn't but half believed those stories in the first place. Joshua knew this was the right truck, though, because it had the seal of the state of Mississippi on the door, because a billowing green tarpaulin covered up everything on the flatbed, and because the driver stopped at the corner, stuck his head out the window and hollered to Joshua, "If this ain't Andalusia, I don't know *where* the hell I am!"

"It's Andalusia sure enough," Joshua hollered back. "Far as I know," he added. Joshua had learned from the grown-ups in his family to qualify nearly every assertion he made.

"*Out-standing*," the driver said. He looked to left, then right, then left again, though all the automobiles in sight were parked, and then he turned into the square, hauling on the steering wheel with both hands. The

hood vibrated like a tin roof in a hailstorm, and the engine was full of cats. Still wrestling the wheel, the driver eased the truck alongside the curb, hauled up on the brake, and choked the thing down. Joshua watched as he flung open the creaking door and stepped out. He was tall, though not as tall as Joshua's daddy, and thin, but there were muscles beneath his rolled-up shirtsleeves, and scars, too, one down one arm like a railroad track, and another, thinner one right across his jaw past the corner of his mouth, so that he looked to be smiling. Then Joshua realized that the man *was* smiling. "How you doing today, partner?" the man asked Joshua, hands on his hips and stretching.

Purdie Newall, who had let Joshua kiss her just last week and might again, had said the truck would be driven by a man with fangs and a long black robe. This was the only truck story that Joshua had hoped was true. But, to be polite, he answered, just as his daddy would: "Doing all right, I reckon. How you?"

Some of the people from Rose Street were walking across, and others were beginning to come around the side of the courthouse.

" 'Bout stove up from driving," the man said. "You ain't old enough to drive, I guess."

"No, sir."

"Well, don't you ever start. They ain't much that's worth driving *to*, and that's the truth."

Grown-ups began, silently, to gather around, and Joshua felt that his chance to talk to the driver wouldn't last long. Joshua tried to prolong it by thinking of grown-up things to say.

"Damn truck 'bout knocks my teeth out," the driver continued, grinning to reveal two or three gaps. By now, a dozen or more people stood there, but the driver acted as if it was still just Joshua. "And I don't know *who* drew that map, but I'm glad they got the work, because they must a been blind and feeble and on relief! And they ain't no road signs for nigh on thirty miles. Not even a sign that says Andalusia on it. For all I knew, this town coulda been named Rotary, or Burma-Shave, or Get Right with God."

"Don't nobody come into town thataway," Joshua said.

"I don't blame 'em," the man said. "I hope there's someplace to eat on the other side of this courthouse. Otherwise, I'll just have to cry. Come help me tie down this tarp, partner. It's been flapping for a solid hour."

Suddenly remembering his dinner and then just as suddenly forgetting it again, Joshua trotted with the driver to the back of the truck, where several no-count-looking men whispered among themselves. They backed away from the driver, who still acted as if he and Joshua were alone. Joshua clambered onto the tailgate and sat, bare feet dangling, while the driver fumbled with the knots.

"Never was no good at tying things," the driver said. "I guess you ain't either. I see your shoes done fell off."

"Didn't put on no shoes today."

"How come?"

Joshua felt a stab of pity for the man. "It's *summertime*," he said.

"Oh," the driver said. "Nowonder it's so hot! I sorta lose track sometimes. All right, I guess that'll hold

her." Joshua jumped down and stood beside the driver, both of them looking up at the vast green bulk on the flatbed. A rare breeze stirred up, and the tarp bulged slightly outward in one place, as if weakly pushed from inside.

Looking up at the truck with his back to the crowd, able to hear the footsteps and the faltering, dying voices as more people joined the group and were silenced, Joshua felt the way he sometimes felt at church, on the front row with the rest of the children. He felt the silence of everyone behind him pushing the back of his head, goading him to break the silence, to jump up and say something.

"What you got in there, mister?" Joshua asked.

"Electric chair," the man replied.

Whenever Joshua or anyone else said something ugly, his Grandma Nellie would suck in her breath like she was trying to pull the words right out of the air and hide them. When the driver said, "Electric chair," all the grown-ups around them made a Grandma Nellie sound.

Joshua knew that most grown-ups driving around the countryside with an electric chair in the back would not admit it to a youngun. Joshua decided to see what else the man would admit to. "What for?" he asked.

"Kill people with it," the man replied. Another Grandma Nellie sound from the crowd.

Joshua was liking this man more and more all the time. "What you do*that* for?" he asked, though he knew the answer to that one, too.

Looking down at Joshua, the driver suddenly seemed a lot older, and the first facial scar Joshua had noticed, he now realized, was far from the only one. The driver looked as sad as Joshua's daddy had looked when they'd buried Aunt Sophie. The driver reached down and rubbed the top of Joshua's head, which Joshua had always hated, though he decided that this time he could stand it. "*Someone*'sgot to," the driver said. "It's the law."

"Can I sit in it?" Joshua asked, and everybody standing around busted out laughing, like it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard. They all got to talking to each other, repeating what Joshua had said and whooping and carrying on, and Joshua felt his cheeks burn and wished they all would shut up and go away, grown-ups thought younguns were so funny. But the driver didn't laugh; if anything, he looked even sadder. Still ignoring the others, he squatted to look Joshua in the face and said, "I can't let you do that, friend. You ain't mean enough to sit in that chair."

Joshua was determined not to cry, but when he spoke, he was disgusted to hear a tiny little snubbing kid's voice. "I bet*you* sit in it when you want."

Now the driver did laugh, but it wasn't a smart-aleck laugh, and Joshua grinned back, feeling better. The driver said: "I'll tell you a secret, partner. I'll tell you something I ain't never told anyone."

A large hairy-knuckled hand took hold of the driver's shoulder, not roughly, but firmly, and Joshua looked up, and up. The sheriff was so tall and big, with his huge head and his eyes set way back beneath his eyebrows, that some of Joshua's friends thought he was scary, but to Joshua he looked like the picture of John C. Calhoun in his history book, in the chapter about the War of Northern Aggression. And how could anyone who looked like John C. Calhoun be bad?

"Jimmy Simpson?" the sheriff said. His voice rumbled like feed in the chute at the mill.

"Yes, sir, that's me," the driver said, standing up. He didn't look scared, either, just respectful. Joshua scowled. He'd never find out the secret now. He focused all the hatred he had felt for the crowd on the sheriff alone, but the sheriff didn't notice.

"I'm Sheriff Davis." The men shook hands.

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

"Welcome to Andalusia. I think you'll be right comfortable here. Got a room ready for you at Miss Pearse's, and she sets a mighty good table."

"I thank you."

"Now, let's go on in and talk about getting you set up here. Then we'll head to the cafe and get us something to eat, on the county. My deputies will watch your truck, and all."

"That sounds good, Sheriff."

Determined to pretend he wasn't being ignored, Joshua stuck as close as he could to the driver's heels as the two men moved through the crowd. He'd never seen this many people in the square before. He saw a lot of farmer's shoes, with dusted-over dried-up mud, and worse, lining every crack and crease in the leather, but he saw a lot of fancier shoes, too, and a lot of women in heels. As they went up the walk toward the courthouse steps, the sheriff talked to the now-noisy crowd the whole time, low and gentle, the way Joshua's daddy talked to the cows. "Come on, people. Let us through. Go on about your business. Go on back to the store, Bill. There ain't nothing here to see. No, I'm afraid not, Mrs. Burchett. All that's tomorrow. You won't miss nothing by going on home. That's a mighty cute one you got there. What's he, three months old, now? My, my. Yes, ma'am, just go on home. That's the best thing. Move along, folks. Please move along. Mr. Simpson?"

The driver had stopped at the foot of the steps to look around. Joshua, thrilled, tugged at the man's jeans. He looked down and grinned. "Hang on a second, Sheriff," he said. He squatted, looked Joshua in the face, took him by the shoulders, and whispered: "Don't tell nobody."

"I won't."

"Sometimes, when I'm driving around the country all by myself—"

"Uh-huh."

"—and I come to some lonely pretty place, where the road runs longside a river or a mountain valley—"

"Yeah?"

"—I stop the truck, and get out, and roll up the tarp, and climb in, and I sit in that big old chair and eat my sandwiches."

Joshua thought this was about the most worthless secret he'd ever heard, but, to be polite, he smiled.

"It sits pretty good," the driver said, "and from up high like that, you can see a long long way." The driver

squeezed Joshua's arms, nodded at him, then stood. "All right, Sheriff, let's go."

As a deputy opened the door, the sheriff asked, "That your assistant?" The driver said something Joshua couldn't hear, and the men both laughed as they went inside. A big pair of khaki-covered legs moved in front of Joshua, and he looked up to see a gum-chewing deputy looking down at him, arms folded.

"You better not go in there, partner," the deputy said. It was the same thing the driver had called him. Grown-ups were all alike. As Joshua turned to go, the deputy said, "Hey, ain't you Jack Woodham's baby boy? Yeah, that's right. How old are you getting to be? You're a cute little feller!"

Joshua looked up at the deputy with the most contempt he had ever mustered for an adult, then looked back down and said, to his own great surprise, "Shit," drawing it out just like his daddy did. He turned and walked back through the thicket of legs to a clear patch of lawn, where his friends descended.

"Hey, you were talking to him, weren't you?"

"What'd you talk about?"

"What'd he say?"

"Is he going to let us see the chair?"

"What'd you talk about?"

"I'll tell you later," Joshua said, not breaking stride. He'd make up something good, but he didn't feel like it just now. He was hungry. "I got to go home," he added, and sped up as the others fell away, making aw-shucks sounds. He called back, "Tell Purdie he's missing a few fangs!" Behind him they all chattered about this new information. As Joshua passed the Confederate monument, he kicked it.

"Anything I can do?" asked a strange voice, a voice that didn't sound like anyone Joshua had grown up with. Sounded like Orson Welles on the radio. He looked around. Standing alone on the lawn, with a suitcase beside him, was a tall old man with glasses, dressed all in black. Had he been there before? Joshua must have walked right through him, practically. He had his hands folded in front of him like a deacon. "You look upset," the old man said. "Is something wrong?"

At least he didn't talk like he was talking to a baby. "Naw," Joshua said. "The truck just ain't what I expected, is all."

The old man smiled. "Nor I," he said, gazing toward the crowd.

Joshua looked at him more closely and asked, "Ain't you hot in that coat, mister?"

The old man glanced at him, looking just as sad as the driver. "Actually, I'm a bit chilly," he said, looking back toward the crowd. "Aren't you?"

Disgusted, Joshua turned and headed on home. Grown-ups were all crazy. Must be nearabouts 12:30 by now. His mama was gonna whale him for sure. He hoped there was still some crackling bread, and ham hocks, and molasses. Sits in the chair whenever *he* wants to. Shit. "Shit," Joshua said aloud, drawing out the syllables for effect, and repeated it all the way home.

\* \* \*

This man Simpson could put away the food. As the sheriff toyed with a stale cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie—which Doris *would* put a square of cheese on, no matter how many times the sheriff left it hardening amid the crumbs on his plate—his companion ate two cheeseburgers and a pile of french fries, and these were Doris's fries, thick as railroad ties and nearabouts as heavy.

"You want any more tea, hon?" asked Doris, chin in hands, elbows on counter. The sheriff's coffee had long since gone cold from his and Doris's joint neglect, but she hadn't let Simpson's tea get more than an inch below the rim of the glass in the past half-hour. Granted, the cafe wasn't exactly busy in mid-afternoon, but still, this was a bit shameless even for Doris, known countywide as a fast worker.

"No, thank you, ma'am," Simpson said, mopping the last of his ketchup with his last french fry. Won't be no need to wash the damn *plate*, the sheriff thought. "It all sure was good, though."

"I'm glad you liked it," Doris said. "Like to keep folks coming back, when I can. How long did you say you'd be in town?"

The sheriff cleared his throat, finally earning Doris's languid attention, and said, "Uh, Doris, Deputy Stewart's been out there in the hot a good while." He nodded toward the cafe's front window, through which Stewart's arm was visible, draped across the back of a bench. "How 'bout seeing if he wants some tea, and maybe a piece of pie."

Doris looked at the sheriff with her mouth pulled sideways, not fooled, but not quite discouraged either. "Whatever you say, Sheriff," she said, straightening up. To Simpson, she said, "You don't let this tough guy here take *all* your time, now." She squeezed his arm as she sashayed away.

"No, ma'am," Simpson said, turning and watching her go. He looked back at the sheriff and grinned. "Lord have mercy!"

The sheriff grunted. He glanced at his notebook, at the few details that he had written down, underlined, and circled. He lifted his pencil. Now he would put check marks beside them. "So, five o'clock is gonna work fine, then?"

"Five a.m., yes sir."

"And the basement is best, you think."

"That's right. Nearabouts soundproof, easy to secure, plenty of hookups. And the truck's right there, so unloading will be some easier. The swinging doors are plenty wide. Need some help toting the thing inside, though."

"You'll get it. You want it in tonight, right?"

"Yes, sir, about midnight would be plenty of time. Don't want to do it when everybody's out and about. The prisoner won't see us, will he?"

"His window don't point that way."

"That's good. No need to worry him any more than he already is."

"Agreed," said the sheriff, wondering again what he ought to tell Simpson about Childress' attitude. He

knew his caution was ridiculous; the man who pulled the switch didn't need to be protected from the man who sat in the chair. But Simpson had impressed him. The sheriff could tell when someone's calm was feigned, as his own was just now; Jimmy Simpson's was the genuine article. You'd think he was in town for a Masonic meeting. Bizarre though the feeling was, the sheriff wished he could deliver into Simpson's hands someone more worthy of him. Oh, well, maybe next time. "And I'll double-check with the witnesses," the sheriff continued. "Make sure they know what's expected of 'em, and are willing to do it."

"How many?"

"Three's the law in this county," the sheriff said, proudly; it was one of the newer laws. "Plus a doctor, plus me, plus the deputies, just in case. We don't expect no trouble. Most folks think it's gonna be high noon, or midnight, or some such nonsense. But the deputies will be there to give you a hand, if you need it."

"Shouldn't," Simpson said. "You not gonna eat that pie?"

"Take it." The sheriff shoved the saucer across the table.

"Thank you. No, I ain't needed an assistant yet." He smiled, ducked his head, and for a second his scars seemed to vanish, leaving his face almost boyish. "Frankly, sheriff, just between you and me, it looks impressive, but it ain't that complicated a machine. Why, in ten minutes I could teach you how to work it yourself."

The sheriff laughed, maybe too loudly. "I believe I'll leave it to you, thank you."

"Fair enough," Simpson said, still grinning. "I guess I'll talk myself out of a job one of these days. But I ain't complaining. I'm glad for the work, and I know there's a lot of others who'd be glad for it, too."

The sheriff bore down hard as he made one more check. "If we're lucky, it'll all be over, and the truck loaded again, by the time the town gets stirring good."

"Taking down's always easier than setting up," Simpson said. "Hard work afterward's on your end."

"Tell me about it," the sheriff said. As Simpson made appreciative pie noises, the sheriff re-read his list:

ambulance (remind Mr. Craddock)

funeral home (bring \$\$\$)

autopsy forms (ask Hooper)

FAMILY???

med-school truckten a.m.

bread milk shaving cream Goody's

"The cash gonna be any problem?" Simpson asked.

"No, sir," the sheriff said. "I'll have it for you when the job's done."

"*Out-standing*," Simpson said. "Cash, you know, is just easier, on the road and all."

"I understand."

"From here, they got me going to Corinth, and then way the hell down in Pascagoula, for God's sake! That's some planning, let me tell you. That's some coordination. What sort of roads they think we got in Mississippi?"

The sheriff watched Doris chatting up Deputy Stewart outside. She was doing that thing where she pretended her back hurt, so that she kept stretching backward, hands on hips, pelvis stuck out in the deputy's face, nearly. Her back *ought* to hurt. Tapping the table with the pencil, the sheriff tried to make his voice as flat as possible, rid it of any hint of insinuation. "You need an advance? For tonight, I mean."

"Naw," Simpson said, dropping shiny fork onto shiny saucer with a clatter and reaching for the toothpick shaker. On his ring finger was a gold band with a little empty rectangle inscribed on it. "Too busy. Got to get the paperwork ready, check the equipment, get it unloaded, get it set up, check the connections. Might have a couple hours' sleep, maybe, but then got to be up again by four, checking everything again."

"Thought you said it wasn't complicated."

"It ain't, really," Simpson said, with a shrug. "But you don't want it to go wrong, all the same."

The sheriff laid down his pencil, sat back with a sigh, flashed the palms of his hands before slapping the table, and asked, "What else can I do for you?"

"Well, Sheriff, I'm curious." Simpson rested one foot on the seat and leaned back into the corner. "I'd appreciate your telling me a few things about him, if you don't mind."

" 'Bout who?"

"My client." Simpson laughed. "Well, I guess that ain't the right word, is it? *You're* my client, you and the county. But that's the word we—the word I use in my head. The prisoner, I mean."

"Oh, him." The sheriff drummed the tabletop. "Well, he's a bad one. That's all I know to say. Didn't you get a report?"

Simpson pulled from his shirt pocket a dirty, ragged paper square. It looked like it had been folded and unfolded many times. "All I got was the usual notice from down at Parchman." He squinted at the typescript as he read aloud. " 'Dear Sir: This is to inform you that one execution is scheduled for Friday night or Saturday morning, June twenty-third or twenty-fourth, nineteen hundred and forty-one, at Andalusia, Mississippi, under the supervision of Sheriff Edwin Davis, exact time to be arranged by you and the sheriff, in the case of the murderer William Childress, and we shall expect you and the mobile equipment to be present no later than noon of the previous day. Kindly acknowledge by wire the receipt of this notice. Very truly yours, ' yaddy yaddy." Folding the paper again, Simpson squinted at the sheriff. "The state don't figure I need to know any more than that, but I get curious. I figure I ought to know the facts of the case, if I'm gonna be there for the end of it."

The sheriff nodded. "Makes sense to me. Well, like I say, he's a bad one. Strange thing is, he didn't use to be. Long as I've known him, he was the humblest colored man you ever saw. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. It was yes sir and yes ma'am and morning and evening to you and head bowed and stepping

off the sidewalk and tipping his hat when even the white younguns came by." He laughed, suddenly remembering. "Hell, I used to hire him now and again to clear off brush in my back field, things like that. Never no trouble to anybody."

"No run-ins with the law?"

"Oh, hell yes, I mean, he was a colored man after all, no wife and no kids to rein him in, neither. Some drinking and some gambling and a few fights, but nothing much. Nothing to get all hepped up about." Warming to his story, and to the drama of a new audience, the sheriff leaned across the table, lowered his voice. "Then one of his poker buddies, some of that white trash down around Millville way, got to messing around with some yaller woman that Childress was messing with too, and when Childress found out, why he went over to Mr. George's place, where the coloreds get their hair cut, and walked in and snatched up a razor and walked out without a howdy or a by-your-leave or a go-to-hell neither, and by the time we caught up to him, he'd done laid that old boy open like a hog, and was sitting on the porch waiting on the yaller woman to come home, so he could do the same for her. He was looking up at the clouds, lounging against the post all limp and dreamy-like, and didn't give us no fight at all. Just shuffled along with us to the patrol car, and that boy's blood running down off his overalls into the dust the whole way." He realized he had a half-smile on his face, as if he had told a punchline he was proud of. He cleared his throat, tried to look somber, and felt ashamed.

Without expression, Simpson asked: "Is that what bothers you so about him? What he done?"

So it was that obvious. The sheriff sighed and relaxed his shoulders. In the fingers of one hand, he had been rolling a tiny torn-off bit of paper napkin; he tossed it onto the tablecloth. "Oh, hell no," he said. "I mean, it was bad, but no different from a dozen other bad things I've seen. No, what's *bad* is what happened to him *after*."

"After the killing."

"After the trial," the sheriff said. "I mean, after the verdict. He was quiet and peaceful all the way through. Wouldn't say a word. But *then*, when he found out it was . . . what it was—well, sir, Willie Childress stood up in that courtroom and began telling the judge and all the rest of us exactly what he thought of us, and kept on doing it while we were dragging him away, and such language you never *heard*, Lord have mercy! Every time he opens his mouth, something awful falls out. The poor old colored woman who does for us at the jail, she went running off in tears the other day. I can't hardly stand to look at the man anymore myself."

Now it was Simpson's turn to lean forward. "What sorts of things does he say?"

"Uh-uh. *I* ain't gonna repeat them. I'm a Christian man. You'll find out soon enough, I'm afraid."

Simpson nodded, then sipped at his tea. The sip led to a second sip, then to a long, sustained gulp. Then he held up the glass, tipped it from side to side, and watched the ice clink. "I don't know, Sheriff," he said. "I ain't had this job long, but I ain't seen a mean one *yet* that stayed mean the whole way. You know? Seeing what's there for them . . . well, it pretty much knocks all the mean slam out."

"I hope you're right," the sheriff said. He was suddenly bone-tired, and wished he had some fresh coffee. "Not just for his sake, for everybody's. It just ain't *right*, the way he's acting. Don't he know where he is? Don't he know what's gonna happen to him? I never heard of such."

Simpson rested the damp tea glass against his cheek. "Listen, Sheriff. I'm gonna ask you something you

may think is strange."

The sheriff shrugged. "Well, you got a strange job—no offense. I'm listening."

"I'd like to meet him. This afternoon, if it's possible."

"What for?"

"It's hard to explain." Simpson set his glass down, picked it up, set it down. He looked at the back wall over the sheriff's head, where, the sheriff knew, a calendar cowgirl in a short skirt perched on a split-rail fence, blowing imaginary smoke from the barrel of her gun. Simpson didn't seem to register the calendar. "Think about my position, Sheriff. This is your town. You know everybody that comes through your jail. You may not like them, but you know them. Even the bad ones, even the ones you send to their reward, it's like . . . well, it's sorta like a community thing, a family thing." He squinted at the sheriff again. "Makes it feel *moreright*, somehow. You follow me?"

"I reckon."

"Well, now here *I* come, driving my rig into town, not knowing nobody or nothing, and *I'm* the one supposed to be doing the honors on a complete stranger. Now, I know the state decided this is the best way to handle executions, and all, since no one wanted to do hangings any more, and no one could agree on a permanent site for the chair—"

The sheriff held up a finger. "*And* since we sheriffs wanted to keep control over executions in our own counties. Don't forget that."

"I understand that, yes sir—but since we're doing it this way, well, one thing that makes me feel more right about it, is if I get to meet with the client, I mean the prisoner, introduce myself, shake his hand, tell him I'll be doing the best job I know how, ask him if there's anything I can do for him. Let him know I'm there to help him, not to hurt him. You see?"

"What you're there for," the sheriff finally said, "is to *kill* him."

"Well, yes, but not in a mean way. I mean, I like to keep it all as open and above-board as possible. Not anything mysterious or sinister or creepy. Does that make any sense at all?"

The sheriff rubbed a hand across his face. "Yeah, I reckon it does. I'll be frank with you, Mr. Simpson. Executions in this county—well, they ain't always been on the up-and-up like that, if you get my drift."

"I understand."

"It wasn't none of *my* doing, but my predecessor as sheriff, God rest his soul, well, he wan't any too concerned about, you know, legal niceties, or what they thought up in Jackson, or down in Niggertown."

"I know what you mean. That's a bad situation."

"Yes, it is. But since I took over—and the council is with me on this, y'understand, ever last one of 'em, and the preachers too—I've been doing a lot of things different, and they're going to *stay* different. So what you say about being above-board with all your doins, well, that sets well with me. I'm proud to hear you say it."

"I'm glad," Simpson said.

"In fact, I guess I'll go ahead and tell you what I wasn't even going to mention before, since Childress is being so assy and all. But he's been wanting to meet you, too."

Simpson grinned, an unexpected act that exposed the gaps in his teeth. "Is that a fact?"

"Been asking after you for two solid weeks, and telling us ever day that he's got something to say to you when you roll in. Sounds like y'all maybe got something to talk about."

"I think so. You reckon this afternoon will be all right?"

"How about three o'clock," the sheriff said. He reached for his hat. "No, three-thirty. I got umpteen things to do, and I want to take you up there myself. I hope you'll excuse me for a while."

"Sure thing, Sheriff. I know you want it to go off without a hitch."

"Damn straight I do," the sheriff said, standing up and extending his hand. "Can I count on you, Mr. Simpson?"

"You can, Sheriff," Simpson said. They shook, and Simpson made as if to slide out of the booth.

"No, no, keep your seat. Stay in here where it's cool. I'll leave Deputy Stewart out there at the door, case anybody bothers you, but I don't expect it. You may have to sign a few autographs, I guess." He caught the triumphant glance of Doris, who leaned, arms folded, against the cash register. "Why don't you have you some more tea, or something else sweet? It's on the county. Deputy Stewart will walk you over to Miss Pearce's if you want, or back to the jail. I'll see you at three-thirty."

"I appreciate it, Sheriff. I'll see you later."

"All right, then. Doris, I'll see you."

"See you, Sheriff."

As he passed her, she whispered, "Your deputy said he didn't want none of my pie."

"He's a strong man," the sheriff said, and winked.

\* \* \*

Doris already had the tea pitcher in hand, pleased finally to get a chance to work on her back-booth cowboy alone. The pitcher was dripping, beaded with sweat; she blotted it with her hand as she walked, then used her wet finger to draw a curl or two down across her forehead. She glanced at herself in the long mirror: yes, Joan Crawford, exactly, and, like Joan Crawford, not aging a bit. As she approached, her grin faltered, her step slowed. Shit on a griddle, she thought, Gary Cooper's got him a regular fan club. The tall old man approaching the cowboy's booth had been, for the past half-hour, sitting on a stool beside the cash register, sucking on a chocolate shake, and re-reading the menu as if he had never seen one before. How did he get back there so quick? She'd missed his getting up entirely. Well, he wouldn't be talking to the cowboy for long. She'd been around, Doris had, she'd kept her eyes open when she worked the bus-station lunch counter in Meridian, and she thought, forget it, Pops, he don't go that way, a gal can tell. But at that moment, the cowboy glanced up, saw the old man looming over him, and

jumped as if he had been sitting in the hot seat himself.

"Mr. Ellis!" the cowboy said.

"Hello, Jimmy," Pops replied. "May I join you?"

Doris stopped in her tracks. Looking pretty damned satisfied with himself, Pops settled into the booth, his black coat bunching up around his shoulders, like a buzzard settling on dinner by the side of the road. The cowboy jerked his head around, looked over the whole cafe, then turned back to the old buzzard and started some fast damn whispering. His eyes hadn't lighted on Doris even for a half-second, any more than if she had been one of the soda machines. She whirled and stomped back toward the cash register, toward the old man's milkshake glass, empty but for a brown froth and a crimped straw. Hell *with him*, Doris resolved. Ain't no lack of *real* men in this town. Let the faggots get their own damn tea!

\* \* \*

As he walked alongside Mr. Ellis down Andalusia's main street, Jimmy was conscious of all his failings. The fresh cigarette burn on his wrinkled shirt front. The laborer's pants of thick, faded denim. The scars and the lumps and the schooling he'd missed. His tongue kept finding the skips in his teeth. He could shoot air through those holes as loud as a police whistle, and often he was proud of that, but not today. Mr. Ellis did not walk so much as glide, his hands clasped behind his back, his head thrust forward like the prow of a ship. And beside him was poor old Jimmy, rolling bowlegged down the street like Popeye the Goddamn Sailor Man.

"I can't tell you, Jimmy, how pleased I am finally to make your acquaintance."

"Pleasure's mutual, Mr. Ellis. I've heard a lot about you."

"And I you, Jimmy."

Passers-by stared. The children gave them a wide berth; the men occasionally nodded the silent, unsmiling Southern acknowledgment of mutual manhood, a nod without joy or welcome; the women didn't do that much. Maybe it was just that they were strangers, or that the older man's attire was so out of season, but Jimmy didn't think so.

He tried to keep his mind on the conversation. Mr. Ellis was, after all, his boss-sort of--and Jimmy felt the need to make a good impression. He stepped onto a crumbling edge of the sidewalk, and nearly fell. Swaying, he said:

"I knew I'd meet up with you sometime, and I was looking forward to it. But I don't mind telling you I never thought it would be in Mississippi. I figured I'd see you at one of the meetings, maybe New York or Chicago. Somewhere nearer Canada."

Mr. Ellis tipped his hat to a group of schoolgirls, who huddled closer together, notebooks clutched to their chests. "The meetings have become rather few and far between. I blame the telephone. Certainly guild members don't need each other any less. There will always be technical problems, pay disputes. A sympathetic ear is never out of fashion. But increasingly our business is conducted over the electric lines. Oh, I read all the reports, and I am assured that all the guild's needs are satisfied. But what about isolation? What about the loneliness of the job? How can a telephone alleviate that?"

"Oh, I haven't felt particularly lonely, Mr. Ellis. I'm doing just fine, myself."

"Good. Good." Mr. Ellis stopped to regard a Model-T that had stalled in the middle of the street. Wagons and panel trucks drove around it, and a young woman with Veronica Lake hair perched on the hood, skirt way up past her knees, and waved to the drivers as they passed. Two farmers in overalls were hitching a mule team to the front of the automobile, making slow work of it and watching the girl half the time, and a man in a straw boater and a seersucker suit watched them in silence, jaw set, his furious glances directed equally at the girl, the car, the mules, the farmers, the bright red soupy ankle-deep mud, and the passers-by, including Jimmy.

"Find something else to look at, buddy!" he called across the street. This diverted the farmers' attention again. They stood in the wet clay and stared, chains dangling from their hands, as Jimmy and Mr. Ellis walked on.

"She'll find her another ride soon enough, I reckon," Jimmy said.

"More machines," Mr. Ellis said. "Telephones. Motorcars. I am no lover of machines. No machine can do the work of a man, nor should any man entrust his work to a machine."

"No, sir," said Jimmy, who didn't like the turn this was taking.

"Not *entirely*, at any rate," Mr. Ellis added with a smile.

"No, *sir*," Jimmy said again. It seemed safest.

"I prefer to do guild business in person, when I can. And the most important guild business I do is meeting the new men. Making each one feel welcome and needed and cared for. It's a bit of travel, but I like travel; it broadens. As you should know better than any of us, Jimmy."

Jimmy laughed. "If travel makes a man broader, Mr. Ellis, I reckon I'll be as broad as any man in the guild, by time I retire. I'll be as broad as . . ." He faltered, then blurted: "As a barn."

"I daresay," Mr. Ellis said, rubbing his cheek. Not for the first time, Jimmy noticed the gold ring on Mr. Ellis's left hand.

Jimmy had been fidgeting with his own ring all afternoon, ever since Mr. Ellis slid into the booth. Some days Jimmy remembered to wear the ring, other days he didn't, or just decided not to. He always had avoided jewelry, even in his medicine-show days, when all his colleagues advised him that rings, pendants, necklaces, even hoop earrings, for God's sake, lent credibility to a good hypnotist act. Jimmy had left his days as Dr. Yogi (or Dr. Zogg, or Professor Stingaree) far behind, he hoped, and had not worn jewelry since, until he joined the payroll of the state of Mississippi. With the job came the guild, and with the guild came many things, including the ring that Jimmy was very glad he happened to be wearing today.

Mr. Ellis's finger was swollen on either side of his ring, as if he never took it off. Mr. Ellis reached up with his ring hand and patted Jimmy on the shoulder, startling him.

"You're a rather difficult man to catch up with," Mr. Ellis said. "I wrote to announce my visit, but I take it you didn't get the letter. I'm not sure the guild has your current address?"

"Current as it gets, Mr. Ellis. I reckon I have been living in the truck, pretty much, the last few months. Been a busy time. Twice as many jobs as they predicted when they hired me." Jimmy waited for a

response, got none, and continued. "I ain't complaining, mind you, I can use the money and the experience, but I sometimes wonder if the counties ain't going out of their way to drum up business, just to see what the truck looks like."

"How many jobs have you had?"

"Nine, since I started, back in October. But one of them was a double-header."

"Beg pardon?"

"Two the same morning."

"I see."

A knot of people stood around a street-corner preacher—a very short one, evidently; his listeners hid him as completely as if they had been a wall. The preacher's voice, thin and piping, carried down the block: "When all this begins to happen, my brothers and sisters, you may be sure that the Kingdom of God is nigh. Oh, it's nigh, all right, my friends, it's nigh and near and bearing down hard!"

"Twins," Jimmy continued. "How anyone could get that mean at fifteen, I don't know." Jimmy himself had run away from home at fifteen to join the Guard, but there had been no meanness in it. When his mama sent the marshals, he hadn't even fought them. He sighed. "But it ain't my job to know, is it, Mr. Ellis?"

"Certainly not."

"So it's really ten all told, but half of 'em's been this summer, and summer ain't over yet. They keep me jumping, I tell you."

"Your reputation seems to be spreading," Mr. Ellis said. A group of old men on a bench in front of a barbershop abruptly hushed to stare, all except one white-mustached man with a hearing aid plugged into one ear, its cord coiling down his shirt front. He kept talking, loudly: "Well, that's the very man, right there! Don't shush me! If he can hear me from away over there, he's in the wrong line of work, he oughtta be in the Secret Service!" As Jimmy and Mr. Ellis passed, all the old men resumed talking at once, this time with a new note of excitement, and the loud one was submerged once again in the general hubbub. "In fact, I'd say you're something of a celebrity," Mr. Ellis said. "Even a personal bodyguard. I am impressed."

"A bodyguard?" Jimmy looked around. Deputy Stewart was about a half-block behind, hands on hips, elbows out to hog the sidewalk, holsters bouncing against his thighs. Jimmy had told him, back at the cafe, just to go on about his business, he'd see him at the courthouse. He must have been following them all this while. Catching Jimmy's eye, the deputy nodded, smiled. "Oh," Jimmy said. "That's a little embarrassing, frankly." Jimmy dropped his voice to a murmur, even though the deputy was yards away along a busy street. "This sheriff down here is jumpier than a box of cats."

"Indeed?" Mr. Ellis turned and waved at the deputy, who began to wave back, then caught himself and nodded instead.

Jimmy laughed. "I'm pleased you're here, Mr. Ellis."

"Pleased to be here, Jimmy."

"That sheriff. I tell you. You should have seen him, making little notes with his pencil. He's afraid I'm gonna mess up all his fine plans. Hell, he'd do this whole thing without me, if he could."

"But he can't," Mr. Ellis said, with a note of satisfaction.

"No, sir."

Several women peered at them from the window of a clothing store, their faces tense amid the lace and crinoline.

"Do you know, Jimmy, there were members of the guild who wanted to call a meeting just this past year?"

"Is that right?"

"Yes. A matter came up that caused some of the members great concern. They felt the guild should take a public stand—and a public stand is a very rare thing for the guild, a very rare thing indeed."

"Yes, sir."

"But we on the board decided that the wiser course of action would be to monitor the situation. Do you know why I tell you about this?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"The issue that so concerned the guild, Jimmy, was you."

Jimmy stopped dead, while Mr. Ellis walked on. "Me!"

The older man looked around, smiled. "I'm sorry. I misspoke. The concern was not with *you*, specifically. Your name was not even known to us at the time." He waited for Jimmy to catch up. "No, Jimmy, the guild's concern was with your *job*."

"I don't understand."

"The guild's officers subscribe to an excellent clipping service. It is the one your Mr. Mencken uses. When the Mississippi legislature debated the purchasing of a mobile electric chair, and the hiring of a traveling executioner to maintain and operate it, we followed the accounts with the greatest interest. The public debate was paralleled by a private one, among the members of the guild. Not about the chair per se; that debate was settled more than forty years ago. But *a* mobile chair, being driven from town to town . . . well. There were those who considered your job a giant step backward, a return to the days of executions as public spectacles. Whoever took the job would be in a spotlight that no guild member had suffered in fifty years, and would find himself, wittingly or not, made a symbol, a spokesman for our entire unique profession. Do you understand our concerns, Jimmy?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose I do. But you said y'all decided not to get involved."

They had reached the northwest corner of the courthouse square. Twenty or more townspeople, mostly older men, but a few children as well, sauntered around the tarpaulin-draped truck, chatting with the two deputies on guard. One deputy sat on the front bumper, fanned himself with his hat. The courthouse lawn

was dotted with women who sat on the grass, tending toddlers and infants. Several young men in rolled-up shirtsleeves lounged against the Confederate monument, smoking. Jimmy watched Mr. Ellis take all this in. After a few moments, the older man sighed.

"Better to risk one celebrity, the board reasoned, than to drag the entire guild into the newspapers." He cast Jimmy a sorrowful glance. "The newspapers have seldom been respectful of our membership."

Jimmy nodded. That was true enough. At least his mama hadn't seen the articles in the Jackson paper, and the one in the *American Mercury*, the one that said Jimmy had to be "helped from one barroom to another" after a job. Shit. Smartass Yankee reporter hadn't even picked up the tab.

"When my predecessor, God rest him, died by his own hand," Mr. Ellis continued, "the newspapers in Canada treated the affair shamefully, Jimmy. Shamefully."

Jimmy had heard something about this. "He cut his own throat, didn't he?"

Mr. Ellis nodded, tight-lipped. It was less a nod than a sudden jerk of the head. "In life, Mr. Ellis was such a private man, yet in death, his entire biography, his every foible and human fault, was placed on public exhibit, scrutinized as one would scrutinize the wrinkles of a madman's brain. After decades of devoted public service, *this* was his reward. Ah, well." Mr. Ellis gazed at the truck.

"Mr. Ellis?" Jimmy asked, confused.

"Eh?"

"You called him Mr. Ellis," Jimmy said, gently.

"Oh. Yes," he said, looking at Jimmy, blinking his way back to the present, and smiling. "The name goes with the job. Less a name than, well, a sort of title. His predecessor was Mr. Ellis before him. And so on and so forth. It is the custom in Canada, you see."

"I see," Jimmy repeated, though he wasn't sure he did. He tried to imagine the man with his job fifty years down the road, still answering to the name Jimmy Simpson. He couldn't see it. He could see the truck, though. Cheap-ass state would keep the same truck that long, at least.

"Ah, well. History. Where was I? Your case, of course. The board voted for caution, for public silence, and for continued monitoring of the situation."

From the courthouse came *abang*. When everyone looked up, the sheriff was already past the steps and striding down the walk, the brass front door slowly swinging to behind him. His face was grim. The townsmen began to back away from the truck. The deputy on the bumper stood up quick and jammed his hat back on.

"Y'all get away from that truck!" the sheriff barked. "No, not *you two*, for God's sake! Go on, now, people."

Jimmy turned back to the older man and quietly asked: "And how did *you* vote, Mr. Ellis?"

Mr. Ellis's silence seemed longer than it was. Jimmy heard the sheriff and the deputies scolding the younguns: "Y'all stop messing with that tarp, now. They ain't nothing to see." When Mr. Ellis finally looked around, shoulders back, somehow taller than he had been, his thick lenses caught the sun so that

his eyes were hidden.

"I cast the deciding vote, Jimmy. In the past thirty-five years, I have hanged three hundred and eighty-seven people, ranging in age from twelve to seventy-three, twenty-two of them women. More than twice as many as the Mr. Ellis before me. I have hanged people in British Columbia and in Newfoundland, in log cabins and stone fortresses, on permanent scaffolds and on planks laid across railroad trestles. I have heard last words in English, French, Acadian, Inuit, and a dozen other languages and dialects, including some known only to God. Three hundred and eighty-seven, Jimmy. Within the guild, I cast many deciding votes."

The sheriff was upon them, red-faced and scowling at Mr. Ellis. "Do I know you, sir?" he asked. As he spoke, Deputy Stewart trotted up to the group; he replied to the sheriff's glance with a shrug.

Jimmy cleared his throat. "Sheriff Davis, this is Mr. Ellis. Mr. Ellis, Sheriff Davis. Mr. Ellis is a, well, he's a—" Everyone looked at Jimmy. "A colleague of mine. From Canada."

"Colleague, eh? I didn't think you needed an assistant."

"Oh, no, it ain't like that. He's here to—"

"Here simply to visit my young friend Jimmy, and to learn firsthand how things are done in other parts of the world."

The sheriff looked at him without encouragement.

"Mr. Ellis would like to join us this afternoon. I told him that was okay with me—if it's okay with you, of course."

"My interest, Sheriff, is purely a professional one, and you may rely upon my rectitude and my decorum."

"Lord God," the sheriff said. "Mr. Ellis, I take it you have some experience in these matters."

"Oh, yes," Mr. Ellis said, managing to sound both proud and regretful.

The sheriff sucked at his back teeth. "Well, I can use all the experience I can get. All right, Mr. Ellis, you can go on up with us, and welcome."

"I thank you, sir."

"Assuming you still want to meet with the prisoner, Mr. Simpson."

"Sure thing, Sheriff."

"All right, then. Stewart, you keep to the square, and don't miss anything."

"I won't, Sheriff."

"And don't waste time talking to no gals."

"I won't, Sheriff," Stewart said, less happily.

"Follow me, gentlemen." The sheriff headed for the courthouse door. As they fell in behind, the sheriff asked, without looking around, "You get enough to eat awhile ago, Mr. Simpson?"

"I'm full as a tick, Sheriff."

"That's good. We *will* feed you in this town, if we can't do nothing else." He held the door open. The lobby was marginally cooler than the outdoors, and much darker, with strange acoustics; their shoes clattered on the marble floor like hooves. "Mrs. Pearce will do you up right, you'll see. Where you staying, Mr. Ellis?"

Mr. Ellis only stared at him, and Jimmy, feeling uncomfortably like the man's translator, scratched the side of his face and murmured, "Sheriff, uh, Mr. Ellis don't like people to know where he stays."

"I see," the sheriff said, regarding Mr. Ellis anew. The old man's dark clothes practically melted into the shadows, leaving his pale, sagging face looking alone and abandoned. "Well, I'm proud to meet a private man. Here's the stairs. They're right steep, I'm afraid, Mr. Ellis. We're due to have an Otis put in next fiscal year."

Mr. Ellis smiled in reply and gestured grandly. "After you, gentlemen."

On the way up, the sheriff stooped to snatch a Nabs wrapper from the floor of the landing. As he climbed, he folded the crinkling paper into a tiny square. "Look at this mess," he muttered. "Old Hugh ain't been in to clean today, I don't guess. Can't say as I blame him." Hearing no footsteps behind, Jimmy glanced around, but there was Mr. Ellis's pale face bobbing up the darkened stairwell. It smiled at Jimmy, and winked.

\* \* \*

The preceding Mr. Ellis had turned to his apprentice, on the young man's first night of work, and said to him:

"Keep your face expressionless, no matter what happens. Speak only when you have to. Keep your eyes open, so that you don't miss anything important. Do everything as quickly and efficiently as possible. And don't think about it. Not beforehand, and not while it's happening, and not after. Our job is necessary, son, but it can't stand too much thinking."

Thinking nothing, missing nothing, Mr. Ellis walked down the second-floor corridor that was the only cell block in Andalusia County, Mississippi. All his senses were engaged; these men would be surprised to know how many. Jimmy, the sheriff, and the deputy all had their backs to him. Before they reached the dead end, Mr. Ellis slid from his overcoat pocket a cherry jawbreaker and popped it into his mouth. It bloomed on his tongue as he looked through the bars at the diminutive, sour-faced Negro within. *Don't give me lip you little bastard Help me with this wagon boy Ferris is more a man than you'll ever be.* A few seconds' concentration, and then Childress' memories were gone, rebuffed. Or, perhaps, suppressed; the effect was the same. The tang in Mr. Ellis's mouth helped him block, for some reason. He'd figured that out himself. The previous Mr. Ellis had smoked. Jimmy would resort to his own device, eventually.

These particular jawbreakers were hard to find in Canada. He'd have to stock up.

"Here's the man you been wanting to see, Childress."

Jimmy stuck his arm through the bars and offered his hand. "Brother, my name is Jimmy Simpson. I'm the man who'll be in charge tomorrow."

Childress looked wary, but after a few seconds he shook Jimmy's hand.

"Brother, they tell me you had the choice of the rope or the chair, and you picked the chair. Is that right?"

After another pause, Childress nodded. Wrong, Mr. Ellis thought.

"Well, I appreciate that, Brother, I surely do. Let me tell you that you made the right choice, because I'm a professional, and I know what I'm doing. I'm going to do a nice clean job, as quick and trouble-free as any man could do. You don't have to worry about nothing on my end. No mistakes, no delays. And I swear to God, Brother, you won't feel a thing. So you can stop worrying about my end of it, Brother, and focus on what's important, on Jesus and His mercy and on the better place you'll be in by this time tomorrow. I guess that's all I got to say, Brother, except to repeat that you're in good hands with me. I'm gonna give you the most trouble-free, easeful passing a man could ask for. You've put your confidence in me, and I appreciate it. I'm here to tell you I ain't gonna let you down."

After a long pause, Childress ticked his eyes over toward the sheriff.

"You're kidding," Childress said.

"No, sir," Jimmy said. "No jokes here. I'm telling you straight up, the way I tell all the men I work with."

Childress' eyes had ticked back to Jimmy when he started speaking. Now, after a beat, they ticked over to Mr. Ellis. "Whoyou, then?" he asked. "The undertaker?"

"Not at all," Mr. Ellis said, removing his hat. Like so many sweet-toothed people, he could talk fluently with all manner of candy in his mouth. "My name is Mr. Ellis. I will be assisting Mr. Simpson. And you may expect the highest degree of professionalism from me as well."

Childress stopped looking at anybody. His eyes were focused inward. The corners of his mouth twitched, held, and the beginnings of a smile crept across his face. As the grin widened, Jimmy turned to the sheriff and whispered: "A kind word does wonders, as my mama says. Look at that. Does my heart good, it does." Now Childress was laughing faintly, mostly in the form of air sliding through his teeth,sss sss. "I'm always pleased to be able to calm some poor soul's last hours," Jimmy said, sounding unsure. Childress laughed louder and louder. His shoulders shook, he bobbed his head, he gripped his knees. His eyes were wide.

"Ha ha ha HAAAAA!" Childress wheezed. He was out of breath. "Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord have mercy, I can't stop laughing! Ha ha ha! Oh, you poor old cracker. You poor old stupid fucker."

"Shut up, Childress!" the sheriff said, raking his club across the bars.

"Poor old cut-up snaggle-tooth bowlegged peckerwood. Oh, Lord, that's funny!"

"What you mean, funny?"

"Don't listen to him, Mr. Simpson. Let's go."

"No, I want to know. What's so funny? What's so funny about what I said?"

Childress shut off the laughter like water from a new tap. "I'll *tell* you what's funny, you dumbass cracker shit! I'll tell you what I been wanting to tell you all these weeks. The sheriff here ain't got a big enough dick to drag me off in the woods and cut me up and throw me on the pile with the *other* niggers—"

"Be quiet!" the sheriff roared, flailing on the bars with his club.

"—so he goes and hires a poor old dumbass white boy to do his lynching *for* him. And the dumbass don't even know it!"

Mr. Ellis stood very still. His predecessor's face had betrayed nothing, right up until the end. He was a good model, and Mr. Ellis was a worthy successor.

"I'll shut his face," the deputy snarled, jamming the key into the lock. The sheriff shoved him in the chest so hard he fell back across the narrow corridor, arms flailing. "Shit!" he cried, gasping. The sheriff pointed his club at the deputy's mouth.

"Stay over there," he said.

"Where's your white hood and white robe, white boy?" Childress asked. "In the truck with your bucket of nigger balls?"

When the supervisor is incapacitated, the apprentice must act. Mr. Ellis was surprised at how naturally he fell back into the subordinate role. He tugged Jimmy's sleeve. "No more to be done here, Jimmy. Please. *Please*, Jimmy."

Jimmy stared at Childress. "You talking to the wrong man," he whispered.

"I'm talking to the man what's come to *kill* me. You see anyone *else* here that wants to do it?"

"But I don't—" Mr. Ellis grabbed Jimmy's arm and yanked so hard that Jimmy stumbled sideways. The sheriff took Jimmy's other arm, and the two big men hustled him down the corridor.

"Wait," Jimmy said. "Wait, please, fellas, I want to talk to him! I want to *explain* to him!"

"Hooper, you better be right behind us!" the sheriff yelled.

"You bet I am," the deputy muttered.

The four men burst into the sheriff's office, where two other deputies were just coming in from the stairs, demanding to know what the commotion was.

"Nat, Archie, get that corridor door locked and keep it locked. The next person gets in to see Childress is me taking him downstairs in the morning. You understand? I'm tired of this shit."

"Who'd come visit Childress anyway?" one of the deputies asked, slamming and locking the door to the cells. "Some nigger preacher, maybe?"

"I don't care if *Jesus* comes a-knocking," the sheriff said, slumping back onto his desk, hairs plastered to

his forehead. Papers cascaded onto the floor. "Mr. Simpson, you all right?"

Jimmy nodded. He had fallen back onto a swaybacked sofa, hands pressed against his forehead, eyes screwed shut.

"Mr. Ellis," the sheriff said, "I thank you for your help in there."

Mr. Ellis nodded. His chest hurt. He had swallowed his jawbreaker.

The sheriff turned to the deputy he had punched, who stood in the corner, arms crossed, glaring. "Hooper, I'm sorry. You can come over here and give me your best shot. I reckon you got the right."

The deputy pursed his lips. "No, sir," he said. "No, sir, I think I'll take me a walk. *Alone!*" he barked to the deputy who tried to accompany him, who fell back, looking hurt, as Hooper slammed through the door. His footsteps tumbled downstairs.

"How many more hours, Lord?" the sheriff said. He hunched himself backward to sit on the desk, dislodging more papers and a coffee can of pencils that he caught at and missed. As deputies dived for the rolling pencils, the sheriff rested his feet on a swivel chair. "If it weren't for those crowds out there, I swear I think I'd do it this afternoon and be done."

Jimmy spoke, sounding shaken but steady, like a man who no longer has the urge to cry. "Ain't got set up yet." He opened his eyes, braced himself on the sofa with his hands, leaned forward and sighed. "Takes time, Sheriff. Can't be rushed."

"The chair," the sheriff repeated. "Oh, the chair. Sure, sure."

He looked at Mr. Ellis, whose calloused fingers itched. The sheriff had a pleading look, a look Mr. Ellis had seen before. Mr. Ellis would not think about that today. Instead he smiled, patted Jimmy on the shoulder. What a debacle. "No harm done," he said.

"Who's Ferris?" Jimmy asked.

Mr. Ellis froze.

The sheriff frowned. "Ferris? That's the man Childress killed. Buddy Ferris. Why? Who said anything about Ferris?"

"Didn't someone—" Jimmy stopped, shook his head. "Oh, never mind."

So Jimmy was starting early. "Never mind, indeed," Mr. Ellis said, quickly. "Random invective, nothing more." He patted Jimmy's shoulder again. Jimmy was young, strong. He would adjust. "Sticks and stones," Mr. Ellis said. He'd *have* to. A pencil had rolled to a stop against Mr. Ellis's foot. The eraser was missing, and someone had gnawed off the paint.

\* \* \*

At first glance, as four groaning deputies wrestled it off the back of the truck at midnight, the chair seemed enormous, the throne of a giant-king. Arms, legs, and back were thick oaken blocks, more suited for ceiling beams than furniture. Later, in the floodlighted courthouse basement, Mr. Ellis realized the chair's seat was surprisingly narrow. The average department-store Father Christmas would find it a

tight fit.

The chair's platform was carried in separately, by a single little bowlegged deputy who shrugged off assistance, obviously glad to have nothing to do with the chair. The platform, a square five feet to a side, was made of sawmill-yellow two-by-fours covered by a stapled-down rubber mat ribbed like the mat inside a bathtub.

As the deputies maneuvered the chair, the ceiling lights played inside the metal headpiece, a shallow bowl cocked back on a coiled metal stand that reared above the entire contraption like a cobra. After bolting the chair down, Jimmy's next move was to untangle and plug in the fat black electrical cords that fed the machine. One snaked from the helmet to the portable generator, which Jimmy had insisted on carrying in himself. ("That chair ain't gone break even if you drop it, but this generator, why it'll go queer on you if you look at it hard.") A second cord connected the helmet to the base of the chair; a third led from the left leg of the chair to the wall socket. Finding this socket caused a few bad moments, until someone thought to look behind the Christmas decorations. Fortunately, only the baby Jesus box had to be shoved out of the way. Roaches scattered. Jimmy blew dust from the socket before shoving in the plug.

The deputies who had carried the chair were trying not to breathe too visibly. "Why do you need the wall socket at all?" asked the slowest to recover, red-faced, hands on knees. "I mean, you got the generator."

"The socket ain't for current going *in*," Jimmy said. "The socket's for current going *out*. It's gotta go *somewhere*. Less'n you want it," he added, yanking the plug from the wall and holding it out to the deputy with a grin.

They all laughed.

Mr. Ellis sensed the edge beneath the jape. All these bystanders, their jobs done, were making Jimmy nervous.

He cleared his throat—startling a couple of men who apparently had forgotten his presence—and said: "Mr. Simpson, is there any further assistance these gentlemen can render at this time?"

"I don't reckon so, Mr. Ellis," Jimmy said. "But I do appreciate all the help, fellows. I'll commend you all to the sheriff, I surely will."

With a slight bow, Mr. Ellis began herding them toward the stairs. "If you'll excuse us, gentlemen. Making ready the . . . *instrument* is a delicate matter, one that requires concentration and solitude." He very nearly had said *gallows*, from force of habit. "I'm sure you all understand."

They grumbled, but they went. The last one looked back and called to Jimmy. "Two of us will be at the top of the stairs. You need anything, just holler."

"I appreciate it," Jimmy said, not looking around.

Mr. Ellis smiled and shut the door on the deputies. Through the metal, he could hear one of them mutter, "Who's he think he is, Arthur Treacher?" He waited, expecting to hear a padlock clank into place, but heard only footsteps ascending.

"You're good at that," Jimmy said, fussing with the generator.

"Practice," Mr. Ellis said. "How may I help you?" He placed his hands in the small of his back, and awaited instructions.

Jimmy looked up, a fleck of grease on his nose. "Just your being here is a help, Mr. Ellis. But you reckon you can fetch me a bucket of water?"

While Jimmy unloaded his carpetbag, Mr. Ellis cleaned out the junk in the corner sink sufficiently to wedge a bucket beneath the spigot. He was careful not to slop any on his return trip. He found Jimmy kneeling amid sponges, straps, and tools. Next Mr. Ellis soaked the sponges and wrung them out, handing them to Jimmy to affix to the chair. At first he used too much water, but Jimmy showed him that the sponges needed to be merely damp, not dripping, and after that, the work went better.

That done, Jimmy rolled up his sleeves and said: "Take off your coat, and have a seat."

The chair's angles had looked severe, but Mr. Ellis found himself actually reclining a bit. The padded headrest gave pleasantly. Two shallow depressions in the wooden seat contoured themselves to his buttocks, and the small metal drain beneath his coccyx wasn't noticeable. He felt something cold in the small of his back, so he sat forward and looked around. The damp circle on his shirt corresponded to the glistening metal disk in the base of the back of the chair. The disk was the size of a saucer in a child's tea set. "The body electrode," Jimmy said. "That's the first sponge you did. Probably still a little wetter than it needs to be."

"Is that a problem?"

"Oh, no," Jimmy said. "Not less it's uncomfortable for you."

"Not at all." He sighed and sat back, ignoring the spreading dampness behind. He rested his elbows on the chair's broad arms. Mr. Ellis had a longstanding grudge against most chairs, especially hotel-room chairs, because the arms often seemed too high, but these were just right.

Jimmy had been watching with a smile on his creased face. "What do you think?"

"It's quite comfortable," Mr. Ellis replied. "Frankly, I'm surprised."

"Oh, yeah, it's a good-sitting chair. Nobody believes me, at first. You'd be surprised how many folks I meet want to sit in it. Women, especially."

Mr. Ellis had snagged his right coat sleeve on the bolt that held the wrist strap. "Ah, indeed?" he asked as he worked the fabric loose.

"Oh, yeah. Pretty young gals, they always want to sit in it." He winked. "I let 'em, too."

Mr. Ellis chose to say nothing.

"The original design had a footrest on it," Jimmy said, disappearing behind the chair to the right, "but it never got added for some reason. Budget cuts, I reckon. Hold still, now, please, sir." He walked back into view holding the free end of a foot-wide leather strap. He moved quickly around the chair from right to left and disappeared, pulling the strap tight against Mr. Ellis's chest. "That ain't too tight, is it?"

Mr. Ellis breathed, watching the heave of his breastbone, and replied, "No, it's fine." He tried leaning

forward, and couldn't. He thought he could move a little from side to side, though, and was succeeding in the experiment when Jimmy reappeared, walking this time from left to right and carrying the free end of a second foot-wide strap. "Uh-uh," Jimmy said, grinning. "None of *that*, now." As the second strap pulled tight around his middle, Mr. Ellis involuntarily sucked in his stomach and was vexed to find that he couldn't push it out again. He sighed, tried to inch sideways, and failed. "Still comfortable?" Jimmy asked, stepping back into view.

"Not as much, no, but tolerable."

"You want the straps tight, believe me," Jimmy said. "I mean, if this wasn't a rehearsal. If this was the real show."

Wincing at the words *show*, Mr. Ellis again chose to say nothing.

Jimmy then fastened the straps across Mr. Ellis's upper arms, wrists, and ankles. He tugged on each strap, working deftly and quickly, asking each time whether the fit was okay. Then Jimmy knelt and said, "Now let me roll up your pant legs just a little."

"Are you this solicitous with all your clients?"

"I don't talk to 'em, no, but I try to make 'em as comfortable as I can. There, now." Mr. Ellis felt the padding clamp his left shin, the metal disc cold and damp against his flesh. "That too tight? Good. The right leg, now. No need making this any worse than it has to be, right?"

"Exactly right," Mr. Ellis said, pleased. "That is the essence of our creed, Jimmy. The guild has taught you well."

Jimmy looked up with a grin, but his face fell. "What's wrong, Mr. Ellis? Oh, hell, this right one's too tight, ain't it? No problem. A lot of men have one leg thicker'n t'other. It's one of those everyday deformities. Hold on a sec."

"No, the fit is fine," Mr. Ellis said. "I just was wondering . . ."

"Yes, sir?" He remained on his knees, his face almost boyishly earnest.

"During the actual preparations," Mr. Ellis asked, "wouldn't the client be blindfolded?"

Jimmy hung his head. "Well, yes, sir, sure he would. I mean, he'd have on the black mask. But I hated to do that to you, since it ain't necessary tonight, and all."

Mr. Ellis felt a flash of anger. "Jimmy," he said, firmly, and the younger man looked up again. "If you are to test this apparatus, and this procedure, you need to do *sofully*. Otherwise, I am no help to you."

"Yes, *sir*," Jimmy said, duckwalking over to his carpetbag and pulling out a folded square of fabric. Its buckle clinked against the concrete as Jimmy unfastened it. "You're right, yes, sir."

Mr. Ellis swallowed and took the deepest breath he could manage. "I am no tourist, Jimmy. I am no 'pretty young gal' to be coddled and impressed." Jimmy lifted his eyeglasses off his face. "I am a fellow member of the guild, here to help you ensure that this operation is carried out—" He inclined his head slightly as Jimmy tugged the black hood over his eyes. "—with one hundred percent efficiency."

"You're absolutely right, sir," said Jimmy's muffled voice as it moved behind the chair. "I swear, usually I put on the mask right after the chest strap, second thing. Wouldn't do for the client to be able to watch all my rigmarole, now would it?" The strap at the base of the hood pulled tight across Mr. Ellis's chin, forcing his jaw backward. Startled, he lifted his chin so that the strap fell against his neck. It continued to tighten as Mr. Ellis reared his head as far back into the rubber cushion as possible. Just as he thought *He's going to strangle me*, the strap loosened a bit. He heard Jimmy buckle it into place. He sighed, and felt his hot reflected breath. The mask was porous enough, but it sucked in when he inhaled. He wished he could tilt his head forward, but the neck strap wouldn't allow that. He managed to tease a bit of lint off his lower lip with the tip of his tongue. A hiss, and it was gone.

"Time for the helmet now, sir." Mr. Ellis flinched as he felt Jimmy's fingertips beneath his chin. "Chin up for me just a little? There you go." Mr. Ellis tried to refocus as Jimmy bustled about. He heard water being dipped. "The helmet has a sponge in it, too, sir, so don't be surprised."

"I won't be," Mr. Ellis said. Something soft, cold, and wet pressed down on the top of his head, and he flinched again. "Sorry."

"No problem," Jimmy said. "Most folks jump more'n that. Got this one a little wet myself, I'm afraid." Cold water trickled down Mr. Ellis's right cheek to the corner of his mouth. Salty. A second runnel flowed down the back of his neck, beneath his collar, and seeped into his shirt between his shoulder blades. Mr. Ellis shivered without moving his body, a disagreeable sensation. Jimmy straightened the mask with both hands while the sponge continued to press down atop Mr. Ellis's head, as if held by a third hand. "It's the damndest part of the business, sometimes, getting the water just right," Jimmy muttered. "Oh, well. Better too much water than not enough, believe me. How's the helmet feel? Too tight?"

"Not at all," Mr. Ellis replied. He shivered again, and hoped he wouldn't catch cold. Being able only to hear Jimmy as he moved about, his voice swooping, made Mr. Ellis uneasy. "What are you doing now?" he asked.

"Just double-checking the straps, electrodes, connections. You can't be too careful, you know."

"Yes, I know."

Jimmy's voice was farther away. "Voltmeter's at two thousand. All right, then. Ready?"

Mr. Ellis wasn't sure how to respond. "Ready for what?" he asked.

"The switch. It's kinda loud."

Mr. Ellis considered. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I'm—" He was interrupted by a metallic clash, like the coupling of railroad cars. As the echoes died, Mr. Ellis relaxed and found that he somehow had lifted himself an inch or so off the chair.

"I oil that switch and oil it," Jimmy said, his voice coming closer, "and I can't make it no quieter. At least it don't creak like it used to. Used to sound like the goddamn Inner Sanctum." The sponge lifted from Mr. Ellis's head. The neck strap loosened with a clink. Just as Mr. Ellis drew a breath, the cloth rustled past his face. Jimmy held the blank black hood aloft.

"Pee-pye," Jimmy said. "That's what Mama used to say when I was little. Other younguns always said peek-a-boo, but I've said pee-pye ever since. Your glasses, sir."

They had been riding in Jimmy's shirt pocket. When Mr. Ellis put them on, they sat crooked.

"Here, lemme get those straps undone. I sure do appreciate your helping me out, Mr. Ellis. I still got to run some tests on the generator, but I feel a lot better knowing the chair's ready to go. This'll make things a heap faster in the morning."

"How long does the preparation normally take?" Mr. Ellis asked, flexing his stomach as the strap peeled away.

"Shouldn't be more'n one flat minute from the time the client walks through that door to the throwing of the switch. With you I took a lot longer, to explain things and to check everything two and three times. I figured you wouldn't mind."

"Of course not." He stood and stretched.

Jimmy squatted beside the carpetbag, made a show of rummaging, and said, without looking up: "Mr. Ellis."

"Yes, Jimmy."

"What do you think of all that this afternoon?"

Hands on hips, Mr. Ellis took a deep breath. "Mr. Childress is an angry man, Jimmy."

"Huh!"

"And he has reason for anger, in his own eyes. The sheriff does not. Nor do the deputies. Nor do you."

Jimmy looked up. "What do you mean?"

Mr. Ellis sighed. "I was *there*, Jimmy. I saw your reaction. You held it in check, to your credit, but you felt it nonetheless."

Looking at the floor, Jimmy said, "I wanted to kill him."

Mr. Ellis felt his shoulders sag, his knees spasm. He sat down in the chair. He started to lean back, then remembered the clammy sponge and leaned forward, elbows on knees, his fingers lightly interlaced. "Yes," he said. "Yes, that is the danger, isn't it?" He sorted words. "There is always danger in meeting the client beforehand. Always."

"They warned me against it," Jimmy mumbled. "From the first."

"Yes. We . . . *traditionalists* avoid it, at all costs. It causes confusion. The client's emotions are so forceful as to be, shall we say, contagious. One either wants to spare the client, or otherwise . . . loses perspective."

"I couldn't help it!" Jimmy cried out. Moving more quickly than Mr. Ellis could have imagined, he snatched up a pair of pliers and cast them backhanded into the corner. They crashed against the faucet and clattered into the sink. "It was like he was inside my head!" Jimmy said, balance regained in squatting position. Fingertips touched the floor to left and right. Muscles roped his arms, corded his neck. "But he

don't belong there. *Hedon't* ." He stared at Mr. Ellis. "He don't know me at all."

"Of course not," said Mr. Ellis, motionless.

In a quieter voice, Jimmy said, "I ain't a lyncher."

"Of course not," said Mr. Ellis.

"I ain't had a privileged life," Jimmy said. "I reckon you can tell that by how I talk, how I act. And I ain't always been the most law-abiding citizen. Hell, I'm from Thompson County, from the piney woods. That says it right there. You probably heard about Thompson County clear up your way, even."

Mr. Ellis smiled. "We have our own such places."

"You know what I mean, then. Drank myself blind. Busted heads. Shot a man in the belly for talking nasty to my mama. He crawled into the ditch like a crab. I went squalling to the doctor. Man was so grateful he lied and said he'd shot himself. Last I heard, he was in Memphis, waiting tables at the Peabody Hotel. Ain't that something? Making big tips. I was fourteen."

"You learned your lesson," Mr. Ellis said.

"That truck job, I was so drunk, I don't know *what* I was thinking. But Governor Hugh White pardoned me in 1939. I got the letter in the glove compartment to read now and then. Spelled my name wrong, but meant well. He recommended me for this job. He's a fine Christian man."

"I'm sure he is," Mr. Ellis said.

"But I never been part of the things Childress is talking about." He added, in a whisper: "*Thinking* about." He shuddered. "No, Childress don't know me."

"Childress," Mr. Ellis said, "is a layman." He pointed to himself and Jimmy. "We are professionals. We know the truth of what we do. Don't we?" A pause. "*Don't we?*"

Perhaps it was too stern, too quick. Mr. Ellis held his breath. Jimmy sighed and slid backward on his haunches to sit on the floor. "Yes, sir," he said, massaging his arms. Callouses and scars slid together with the sound of sandpaper.

Mr. Ellis allowed himself to relax. Some days, he felt he had outlived his usefulness. Some days, not. In a gentler voice, he said, "You will not get any less sensitive to the client's emotions, Jimmy. As the years pass, as you gain . . . experience, you'll become even *more* attuned. A lot more. You must always fight it, Jimmy. You must maintain your self-control. Hence the creed. Have you forgotten your creed, Jimmy?"

Startled: "No, sir!"

"I'm glad. Begin."

Jimmy glanced around. "Here?"

Mr. Ellis slapped the armrest twice. "Yes, *here*, exactly! Please. Begin."

Jimmy cleared his throat, rubbed his neck with both hands, took a deep breath, and recited:

*"I am neither judge nor jury.  
I am their instrument,  
Their right hand,  
Their Will given life—"*

"Good," Mr. Ellis interrupted. "Very good. There is strength in those words. *Neither judge nor jury*. Never forget that, my boy. Never forget that."

"I won't, sir. Thank you, sir."

Mr. Ellis smiled and asked, "Have you learned only the English?"

Jimmy grinned as he stood. He swatted dust from his pants. "So far, yes, sir. That other version, I don't know, it's hard to get my mouth around."

"Keep at it. You'll get it eventually. Much correspondence among the board members is transacted entirely in the ancient tongue of the guild."

"Like the Masons."

"Hardly," Mr. Ellis said, offended. "Europe needed *us* thousands of years before it needed cathedrals!"

As Jimmy removed the sponges and towed the metal parts dry, Mr. Ellis sat, rested, enjoyed the businesslike movement around him. No wasted energy, this boy, once the fit passed. A good lad, all in all. Dedicated. Much yet to learn, of course, before he could be entrusted with the higher levels, the higher duties. How had he, Mr. Ellis, proven himself for the ultimate duty, so many years before? He'd never been sure. Certainly he had upheld the highest standards of the guild, but just as certainly, his predecessor had seen in him something more. Something like a pair of pliers slung across the room. Something quick, and feral.

"How about you?" Jimmy asked.

Mr. Ellis started. "I beg your pardon?"

Jimmy had a slight smile on his creased face. "How many times have you met a client beforehand?"

Mr. Ellis relaxed. "Ah, Jimmy. We both are too easily read for this work. Once. Only once, and that many years ago. Quite early on, really." He laughed, sat up straight on the edge of the chair, hands on his knees. "Very different circumstances."

"How different?"

Mr. Ellis hesitated, decided he had no reason to hesitate, and continued: "It was in Moose Jaw. Much like Andalusia, only louder, colder. I was much younger, much more sure of myself. The evening before the event, all was ready in the square. I received a note at the hotel, from the principal keeper at the jail, that the condemned man desired to see me. Unprecedented. I couldn't fathom what the man might want. But I had dined well, quail with fennel, and had allowed myself a glass of port after, and I had my feet at the grate and the *Times* in my lap, only two days old, quite current by Canadian standards. I was happy with my lot in life. So when the note arrived, I felt both curious and generous. I donned my shoes and my coat and accompanied the messenger to the jail. The unfortunate man was sitting on his cot, sleepless, of

course, as Mr. Childress no doubt is, at this moment, and when we appeared, he stood and walked very near the bars, regarded me intently. A squat man, Indian, Mohawk unless I miss my guess. The keeper said, 'Do you know who this fellow is? This is Mr. Ellis, whom you were asking for, and he left his warm fire to come out and have a word with you.' The prisoner nodded but said nothing. I said, 'Hello,' feeling awkward, and I smiled, and then I asked, 'What did you want to see me about?' He replied, 'I just wanted to see what you looked like.' I nodded and did a foolish thing. I stepped back and turned about for him, as if modeling my suit. Imagine the cheek! I'm ashamed to recall that, now. The port in me, I suppose. Then I asked: 'Well? Now that you've seen me, what do you think of me?' And the prisoner said, 'I think you're just what I deserve. I'm going to be hanged by the ugliest son of a bitch in Saskatchewan!' "

Jimmy laughed. "You're shitting me!" he cried.

"Inever shit," Mr. Ellis said. "In the sense you mean. Oh, it was a chastened man who returned to his fireside that night, you can well imagine!"

Mr. Ellis's face began to fall as Jimmy continued to laugh. "I'll bet you were," Jimmy said. "Oh, boy!"

"He was silent on the scaffold," Mr. Ellis said. "I was told later those were his last words."

He stood, faced the younger man, close enough to feel Jimmy's last breath before he held it.

"From his height and weight, I knew he would require a four-foot drop. Berry's formula is quite precise, you know."

He barely touched Jimmy's jaw with his fingertips.

"I placed the noose so that it fell this way," he said, tracing the line, "with the knot here, beneath the angle of the left jaw. When he dropped, his chin went back, so." He tipped Jimmy's chin up. "Breaking his spinal cord and his first three vertebrae."

Jimmy kept his chin tipped up as Mr. Ellis stepped back.

"No lacerations. No pain. Death was instantaneous. What the editorial writers and the legislators don't know, *cannot* know, is that in the proper hands, hanging is an exact science. Speedy. Certain. That Mohawk was in the right hands. I did my job well. As you will do *yours*, tomorrow." He patted the younger man's shoulder. "As you will do yours." He smiled, and Jimmy smiled, first tentatively, then broadly, head still tilted slightly back. They were standing that way when the stairwell door slammed open.

"I hope that damned murderer ain't getting any more sleep than I am," the sheriff said. "What y'all doing in here, anyhow? Dancing?"

\* \* \*

Mr. Ellis's fingers were cold and wet. He could not seem to dry them no matter how many times he applied the towel. He draped the yellow daffodil print across the back of the folding chair, raised one hand to his mouth as if to cough, and flicked out his tongue. Salt. He thought he felt the granules as he rubbed his fingers together. Perhaps it was imagination. Perhaps he should stop fretting about it.

Mr. Ellis was conscious of the stares of the sheriff, the deputies, the doctor, the witnesses. The folding

chairs were stenciled CRADDOCK & SONS, and they tended to squeak. Ten people sat or stood in the already cluttered basement with nothing to do but wait and watch. Jimmy allowed no one to help him but Mr. Ellis. The sheriff looked at his watch every five seconds and sucked his teeth.

"Right on schedule," Jimmy kept saying. "We're right on schedule here."

After thirty minutes of fuss with the cords, electrodes, and sponges, Mr. Ellis at his side, Jimmy produced a snarl-clotted strand of Christmas lights that snagged and jerked forth in installments from the recesses of the carpetbag. Despite the sheriff's obvious disgust, Jimmy insisted on untangling the lights, and Mr. Ellis helped with that, too, as well as he could. The tiny cords and bulbs defied his thick fingers.

He wondered why he of all people should be so nervous, as fidgety as a boy who knew nothing of death. The answer came readily: He wasn't in charge. This was a younger man's show.

One of the deputies, chasing a roach, kicked some boxes, and Jimmy jumped as if shot. All the more reason for calm, Mr. Ellis decided. He tried to sort lights with the fewest, most economical motions.

Once the lights were plugged into the chair, both men stepped back, and Jimmy threw the switch, again with that disconcerting crash. Everybody but Jimmy and Mr. Ellis jumped. There was a whine like a fury of bees, but the lights didn't respond.

"The chair's broke," someone whispered.

"Shoot," Jimmy said, yanking the switch back down. "Hang on a second." He fumbled through the lights. His shirt rode up as he squatted, and Mr. Ellis looked away. "There," Jimmy said. "Just as I thought. Loose bulb."

"Jesus God," the sheriff muttered.

This time, when Jimmy threw the switch, the lights twinkled red and green.

A deputy said, "Well, ho, ho, ho."

"Be quiet," the sheriff said.

Jimmy announced: "The lights show that two thousand volts are passing through the chair." He cleared his throat and added, in a more normal tone: "In some states, the law says you got to say that. Seems sorta silly to me."

"Well, we appreciate knowing it," the sheriff said. "It's a comfort to us. Can we bring him in now, Mr. Simpson?"

As he stooped to help Jimmy dampen the sponges yet again, Mr. Ellis slipped a jawbreaker into his mouth. A sour ball this time. Fiery hot. He heard the chains clinking down the stairs, the steady murmur of obscene patter. Childress entered, surrounded by six deputies. Handcuffed, trussed, and chained, he could walk only with short, sliding steps.

"Look at me shuffle along," he was mumbling as he entered. "Just call me Sambo. Just call me Rastus. Gimme some watermelon and put me on tour with Walcott's Rabbit's Foot Minstrels. All singing all dancing all colored *all* the time. Don't be feeling my ass! I ain't one of your grab-ass deputy girlfriends!"

His nonstop mumbled diatribe was his only sign of resistance as the deputies removed the fetters and held him down long enough for Jimmy to secure the straps.

The sheriff called out, "Childress, you change your mind about wanting a preacher?"

"You change your mind about being *white*?"

"All right, then," the sheriff said. "Mr. Simpson?"

As Jimmy tugged the hood down, Childress noticed the lights. "Damn, it Christmas *already*? Come sit on my lap here, boys and girls! Come tell Santa what the fuck you want him to bring you!"

Childress' thoughts were a thick oil coiling about Mr. Ellis's arms, slowing him. He fought free of them, and continued to work quickly. Now Jimmy looked wide-eyed and pale. Mr. Ellis glanced around. No one else was within fifteen feet of the chair. Mr. Ellis murmured:

"The creed."

Jimmy nodded. As he worked, he began to whisper the words, in English. Mr. Ellis whispered along with him, in a tongue that was old when the forward-thinking Dr. Guillotin ran his thumb along the edge of a cleaver, and mused; old when a translator in James I's employ bore down on his stile to write, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," and smiled, pleased by the rhythm; old, indeed, when the Babylonian king had a list of capital crimes chiseled onto a seven-foot pillar of basalt, to the glory of the sun god Shamash.

I am neither judge nor jury.  
I am their instrument,  
Their right hand,  
Their Will given life.

"Santa got some chicken in his pockets for you," Childress called. "It's gone fry up *real* good. Come on over here and bite Santa's chicken leg one time!"

I am the blade,  
The rope,  
The gun,  
The chair.

How the membership had debated that addition!

I am methods now shunned  
And methods yet unknown,  
But methods only.

"Hey, these fellas be *chanting* and shit! You white people got some *strange* -ass mumbo-jumbo, you know that?"

What I do, I do without anger,  
Without malice,  
Without clumsiness or delay,  
Without the infliction of needless suffering,

Without thought of personal gain.

The only sounds in the room were Childress ranting, Jimmy and Mr. Ellis mumbling to one another, and the sounds of their work: water being dipped, sponges being wrung out, leather sliding, and buckles clicking into place.

And with awe and reverence  
For the door that I open  
And for the door that I close  
And for the citizens whose Will  
I enact,  
Whom I pledge to serve  
Faithfully and obediently  
And heedless of self  
Until this my sad duty  
Shall cease to be.

"Take off this hood! *Isaid*, take off this hood! It's you *white folks* that wears the hoods in *this* country, don't you know that? Didn't your daddy tell you *nothing*? I said, take off this hood!"

I am neither judge nor jury.  
I am their instrument,  
Their right hand.

As they spoke the last line, they looked at each other:

God, too, be just.

"How many of us you gone kill?" Childress shouted. "How many of us you gone *beable* to kill? How many?"

Jimmy and Mr. Ellis now stood beside the switch. The generator hummed behind them. Jimmy's hands darted about the control panel, checking relays. Then he turned, looked at the sheriff, mouthed the word: "Ready."

The sheriff nodded. Jimmy turned back toward the chair, took a deep breath, and, with one eye on the voltmeter, gripped the switch.

"Hey, Mr. Cracker," Childress said.

No one said anything. Jimmy was motionless.

"Lynch me *good*, Mr. Cracker! Lynch me good so *all* the niggers can see. Keep all the niggers *down*."

Jimmy remained motionless, but Mr. Ellis saw a nerve jump in his jaw.

Deputy Hooper yelled: "Shut up, Childress! Shut up or I'll—" He caught the sheriff's eye and faltered.

The black hood pulsed as Childress jeered. "Ha ha ha! Or you'll *dowhat*, asshole? What the fuck you got *left* to do, you dumb shit? I ain't studying 'bout *you*. This is tween me and Mr. Cracker and his magic fusebox, haaaa ha ha!"

"Simpson," the sheriff hissed. "End this! Simpson!"

Mr. Ellis forced himself to look away from Childress. Jimmy had let go of the switch. He stared at his hands, rubbing them together as if warming them. He turned to Mr. Ellis and whispered:

"I can't."

"What's wrong, Mr. Cracker? Can't get it up today?"

In Mr. Ellis's head was a clear picture of a Negro suspended from a tree, eyes bulging, mouth filled with—

Focus, old man. Focus.

Forcing Childress' thoughts aside, Mr. Ellis asked Jimmy:

"Why not?"

"Because *I want* to."

Mr. Ellis blamed himself. If he had not been here, had not insinuated himself into these proceedings, Jimmy would have done his duty, however provoked. Yet here was Mr. Ellis, a relic, a meddler, a damned nuisance. The conscience of the guild, he was sometimes called. As if a conscience was what Jimmy needed. Was what anyone needed.

"Please," Jimmy whispered.

"They's a lot more where *I* come from, Mr. Cracker! A whole hell of a lot more! You can't kill *all* of us!"

Enough. Mr. Ellis's duty was clear. "I understand," he said. He looked down, reached out with arthritic slowness, and gripped the switch.

The red rubber was clammy from Jimmy's sweat, and surprisingly inconsequential, compared to the ax-handle levers Mr. Ellis was used to. He feared breaking it. He found himself leaning on it, and made himself stop. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, blanked his mind. He opened his eyes and looked at Jimmy, who, tight-lipped, nodded once. *God, too, be just.*

"Hey, Mr. *Cracker* —"

There was no resistance as he shoved the switch forward.

Childress lunged.

One last image flashed into Mr. Ellis's head, gone so quickly it didn't register. Consciously.

The strap yanked even tighter across Childress' chest, held him an inch or two from the back of the chair. He kept straining forward, belly bulging, arm muscles ropy. Something sizzled. Upstairs, a phone began to ring. Childress had kicked with both feet at the first jolt, and now his heels were about a half-inch off the floor, trembling. All the straps held. The keening of the current increased in pitch. The flesh of Childress' arms flared dark red. Beneath the hood, he began to gurgle. His knees, imperceptibly

at first, made as if to knock together, but even as they jerked more violently, the gap never closed. The phone kept ringing. A soft Southern voice counted Mississippis. Childress' left ankle began to spark. His fingers were outstretched. Smoke wisped from the top of his head. The phone stopped in mid-ring. The gobbling rose and fell. "Five Mississippi," Jimmy said, fingertips brushing Mr. Ellis's hand. "Half power." Mr. Ellis pulled back, and Childress' limbs relaxed. The sparks and smoke ceased. His arms darkened to normal. At thirty Mississippi, Jimmy tapped Mr. Ellis's hand, murmured, "Full power." Childress jerked forward, straining anew. There were three more cycles of Childress rising and falling. Then Jimmy placed his hand atop Mr. Ellis's, and together they inched the switch down to a thousand, to five hundred, to one twenty-five, Jimmy's hand forcing Mr. Ellis's to slow down, to twenty-five, to zero. Childress sat motionless. The smell was of hot tires and sewage and beef.

"Is it over?" someone asked.

"That's for the doctor to say." Jimmy let go of Mr. Ellis's hand to look at his wristwatch. "A little more'n two minutes. That ought to've done it."

The sheriff voiced Mr. Ellis's thoughts. "What the hell was that phone call? Who went to get it? Was it Nat? What the *hell* was that phone call?"

"Doc, you better hold on a second," Jimmy said. "Wait up."

Stethoscope in hand, the doctor stopped a few feet from the chair. "Why wait?" he asked, frowning. "Why prolong the poor nigger's miseries?"

"That poor nigger's miseries ended more'n two minutes ago," Jimmy said, "and right now, the body he left behind is running about a hundred and thirty-eight degrees. I wouldn't be in a rush to touch him right yet."

The stairwell door crashed open and Deputy Nat stepped through, scratching his ear. He seemed in no hurry to speak. He looked surprised to see everyone staring at him.

"What's that smell?" he asked.

"For God's sake, Nat," the sheriff said. "Who was it on the phone?"

"Oh, the phone," Nat said, and laughed. "You'll love this one, Sheriff. It was old Miss Curry, Miss Adele Curry. Wanting to know when the execution was gonna be."

Mr. Ellis expelled his breath. Voices started up all around. The sheriff mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"I told her I was sorry ma'am, but I couldn't give out that information, and she said she only wanted to know because she thought the power might cut off when it happened—"

"Nat," said the sheriff.

"—and she was planning to bake her a funeral cake and she didn't want it to fall, and I told her there wouldn't be no loss of power, and she wanted to know how come that was because whenever the McClellands next door turned on their radio her parlor lights got dim—"

"Your family's gone be eating that funeral cake," said the sheriff, "if you don't hush up."

"Yes,*sir* ."

One of the witnesses, a shiny-headed bald man who was pale around his black mustache, asked: "What was that gurgling sound? Oh, Jesus! That was plumb awful."

"Air in the lungs," Jimmy said. "No way to avoid it, really." He passed his hands over Childress, a few inches from his body, as if molding him from the air. "Oh, you could try and watch the rise and fall of the chest, I reckon, to time the current just right, but what's the point? That wasn't Mr. Childress talking, anyway. He was dead before you ever heard that sound."

The man did not look reassured.

Jimmy stepped back. "Ought to be okay now, Doc. Go on ahead."

"Phew, what a stink!" the doctor said. "Hadn't the boy taken a dump this week?" He held the stethoscope just above Childress' chest and reached with his other hand for the shirt buttons. He jumped back with a cry. His stethoscope bounced off the rubber mat to clatter onto the concrete.

The sheriff was beside him. "What's wrong?"

"He shocked me!"

"Hewhat? "

The doctor rubbed his hands, eyes wide. "Like in the wintertime, when you go to touch a radio knob and a spark jumps out at you. Whoo! Lordy!"

"Are you hurt?"

"No, no. Scared me, though." With a grunt, he stooped and picked up the stethoscope.

With an index finger, Jimmy poked Childress on the shoulder, then jumped back. "Damn! It's true. Never had*that* happen before."

The deputies had not come within yards of the chair since carrying it in the night before, but now they crowded around. "Let me touch him." "Me, too!" "Ow! I'll be damned! Feel of him, Earl." "Men*ext* ."

Jimmy tried to push them away. "Hey, now, boys, step back, please, step back and let the doc do what he's got to do. Come on, now. He ain't*officially* dead yet. Come on, now."

"Sparks jumping out like he's got a battery in his britches! Ow! Ain't that something? Ow!" Now the witnesses were joining the crowd.

The sheriff had been frozen, mouth open, face red and swollen. Now he bellowed: "God damn it, what's got into y'all? Come away from there! A bunch a younguns would have better sense than you men got!"

The doctor squirmed his way through the melee, feinting with his stethoscope. The sheriff cursed and roared, grabbing men by their shoulders and pushing them away. Jimmy, angry now, was in Deputy Hooper's face: "You think I don't know my own job? Huh? Is that what you think?" The deputy squared his shoulders, rolled something from cheek to cheek.

Mr. Ellis stood alone, his hand still gripping the switch.

He looked down at it.

For a moment he pictured Childress lunging forward one more time, scattering the crowd, showering sparks. His hand tightened on the switch.

Then the doctor called out: "Gentlemen, I hereby pronounce William Childress dead."

Mr. Ellis let go of the switch, closed his eyes. Childress hung below him, pendulous, weighty, dignified. Hands reached up to steady him, to receive him. As Mr. Ellis sawed, the rope blossomed, strand by strand. Childress dropped away. Thus lightened, the scaffold rose and floated free.

\* \* \*

On Friday night, the deputies had unloaded the truck in a silence broken only by grunts and muttered oaths. On Saturday morning, they talked and joked constantly as they hauled and lifted. A few townsfolk stood and watched, but nothing like the insistent crowds of the day before.

The tarp was a struggle. An overnight break in the weather made for a nice day, with temperatures in the low 80s and a gusty breeze that beat the Mississippi flag overhead like a rug during spring cleaning, but the same breeze kept seizing the tarp and threatening to yank it and its handlers clear to Perdition, as Jimmy put it. By the time Jimmy tied the last rope, it was nearly noon. Jimmy and Mr. Ellis shook hands with the sheriff and with a few of the more gregarious deputies.

"Boys," the sheriff said to the deputies, "thank you for all your hard work and dedication. I hereby declare you all off duty!" The deputies whooped and laughed and started walking off, in twos and threes. Several unhooked their badges and put them in their shirt pockets.

One deputy told another, "Darla don't like no metal rubbing against her bosoms."

To Jimmy and Mr. Ellis, the sheriff said: "Gentlemen, I thank you. Is there anything else we can do for you here in Andalusia?"

Mr. Ellis was glad to see that Jimmy, too, could take a hint. "No, sir," Jimmy said, sliding the fat envelope into his pocket. "I appreciate it."

"Thank you for the hospitality," Mr. Ellis said.

"Thankyou . Safe travels to you both. Mr. Simpson, we'll see you next time."

They watched the sheriff walk back to the courthouse door. He had an oddly prissy gait, short-stepped and hurried. Rather than cut across the grass, he went first to the left and then diagonally, as the sidewalk dictated. The click of his heels was audible all the way. He entered the courthouse without turning or waving again.

"He's glad to be rid of us, ain't he?" Jimmy said.

"Oh, he'll be glad enough to see you again. Eventually."

Jimmy put one foot on the running board of the truck, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his hands. "Mr. Ellis, I ain't had the nerve to talk to you about what happened in there this morning."

"The equipment performed flawlessly," Mr. Ellis said. "You said so yourself."

"You know what I mean," Jimmy said. "He was in my head again, Mr. Ellis. Nearbouts the whole time. I saw things—things I don't ever want to see again. And I hated him for it. That's why I did what I done. I mean, what I *didn't* do. Oh, hell."

Mr. Ellis nodded. He had pondered for some time, as he watched the deputies wrestle the chair into the truck, what his parting words to Jimmy would be. He had made his decision. The board might disagree, but this was a field emergency, and in field emergencies, as far as Mr. Ellis was concerned, he *was* the board.

"I know what you didn't do, Jimmy," Mr. Ellis said. "You didn't pull the switch. You didn't hide your feelings. You didn't *lie*. You easily *could* have, but you didn't. In handing me that switch, you upheld the highest principle of the guild. And now I want you to do something else for the guild."

Jimmy stuffed his handkerchief into his pocket, squinted at the sun. "Quit, I reckon."

"No!" Mr. Ellis seized Jimmy's arm. "No, Jimmy. You misunderstand. The guild *needs* men like yourself, brave and principled men. What if this business were left to others, to men who weren't so brave and principled?" He let go, stepped back. Jimmy rubbed his forearm. "What *then*? Well. We need to know that the next generation is in good hands. *I* need to know that. That's what you can do for the guild. Go on with your work, with your principles. Reassure us."

Jimmy squinted into the sun. "I didn't think you exactly saw eye to eye with the way I did things, Mr. Ellis."

Mr. Ellis shrugged. "I am a man of my time, and my place. You have your equipment, I have mine." He rapped the fender with his knuckles. "Do your work, Jimmy, with the equipment you know best. You have the guild's support, and mine."

He extended his hand. Jimmy shook it.

"Thank you, Mr. Ellis."

"I'm pleased to have met you, Jimmy."

"Likewise, Mr. Ellis." Jimmy swung up into the cab, slammed the door. The impact made the side windowpane rattle and fall askew in the frame. "Damn it all," Jimmy said. He shoved the pane down and leaned out. "Good thing the chair's in better shape than the truck! Give you a lift someplace? Oh, right. Sorry. Well, I hope to see you soon, sir. Maybe we can work together again."

Mr. Ellis smiled and

Eyes wide the preceding Mr. Ellis said Please for the last time leaned his head back and looked up

said: "Perhaps so, Jimmy. I would have every confidence in you."

Jimmy nodded, smiled, and cranked the truck. After a five-second tubercular rattle, the engine coughed

to life. Jimmy revved it. The exhaust pipe vibrated and spat like a tommy gun. Gas fumes filled the square. Jimmy put the truck into gear and lifted his hand in a wave that turned into a salute as he drove away. Mr. Ellis lifted his hand, too, in a wave that turned into a futile attempt to ward the truck's flatulence away from his face. Some of the people on the street waved at the truck as it passed, but most went along their business without even a glance, as if it were no more interesting than the chicken truck that roared into the square a few seconds later, scattering feathers. In moments, the gutters were white and soft with down.

Mr. Ellis picked up his valise. At the curb, he waited for a Ford and a mule-drawn buggy to pass, and then crossed the street, tipping his hat to a well-upholstered lady in white lace and to a thin colored girl in gingham who walked behind her holding out a parasol. On the opposite sidewalk, Mr. Ellis first turned to the right, then changed his mind and went left, parting in two a surge of children who rushed past him so fast and noisy and dirty that their age and sex and race were indistinguishable. He climbed the three steps to the porch of Blackburn's General Store, where an old colored man and a grey-flecked hound both studied him.

"Good morning," Mr. Ellis said.

"Morning," the old man replied. "Say . . ."

Mr. Ellis paused, hand on the knob. "Yes?"

The old man leaned forward, overalls bunching at the waist. He had one clouded eye. "You that English feller, ain't you?" he asked in an ancient, trembling voice. "The one that came to watch—to watch old Childress go home. Ain't you?"

A small town indeed. "That's right," he said.

The old man glanced about, whispered: "How was he at the end? Won't nobody say. Was he peaceful-like? Did he go easy? Did he make his peace with the Lord?" Mr. Ellis said nothing, and the old man's face spasmed. "Oh, now, please sir, don't lie to a old feller what ain't done you no wrong. Tell me the truth. Did he put aside his hateful ways at the end?"

What harm would it do? Mr. Ellis nodded and murmured: "Yes, he did. He repented, and asked forgiveness, and went in peace."

The old man studied Mr. Ellis's face for a long time, then began to smile. He sat back, crossed his legs, and pulled a pipe from his pocket. "*Did* he, now?" he asked, striking a match on his shoe and lighting the bowl. "Did he, now? Old Willie *Childress*? " He nodded and puffed, began to cackle with laughter, still looking at Mr. Ellis, his good eye dancing. He no longer sounded old. "Yes, *that's* likely, ain't it?" he chortled. "Ain't *that* a good 'un, to tell the old nigger? And you tells it *sowell*, too! Tells it like you was *born* here!"

He was still cackling as Mr. Ellis entered the store, his footsteps changing from hollow thumps to solid thuds as he crossed the threshold. At first, he could see little in the relative dimness, but after he blinked and strained for a few seconds, the sausages and clothes and pots hanging from the ceiling and the crates and cans and sacks piled in the floor began to resolve themselves. He glanced toward the coiled shapes on the hardware wall, disregarded them, and focused instead on the shaving mugs and brushes cluttering one of the glass countertops. As he walked toward them, someone said:

"Morning."

Startled, Mr. Ellis replied automatically: "Good morning." It was the little headache man, who was no longer lying on the hardware counter but on the household-goods counter, quite near the shaving implements. As Mr. Ellis leaned over to peer through the glass, he could smell the mud and leather of the little man's shoes.

"I'm not in your way, am I?" asked the little man.

"Not at all," said Mr. Ellis.

" 'Cause if I am, I'll move."

Arrayed beneath the countertop, nestled among an artful snarl of leather straps and carrying cases, were a half-dozen fully extended straight razors.

"Hey, I talked to you yesterday, didn't I, mister?"

"Yes, you did," said Mr. Ellis, without looking at him. "How is your headache today? Better, I trust?"

"Head's a good bit better, thank you kindly for remembering. But don't even *ask* about my sciatica. I got such a throb in my sciatica, I can't even tell you. That counter over yonder's better for my head, but this one's better for my sciatica, don't ask me why. I don't question the Lord's ways His wonders to perform."

The longest blade, at nine inches, looked as if it could mow crops. To get a better look, Mr. Ellis slid aside a shaving mug that depicted a straw-hatted Negro boy holding up a fish on a line.

"But I done took me a Goody's, and that'll be kicking in rectly. Goody's don't advertise it's good for sciatica, but it *is* . Goody's good for everything."

"I'll have to remember that," Mr. Ellis said. "May I buy you a Coke today?"

In the burnished steel, Mr. Ellis could see his dulled outline and the sweeping blades of the ceiling fan.

"No thank you, sir, I just did open me one. Ain't hardly stopped fizzing good. I 'preciate it, though."

Once, the preceding Mr. Ellis, in an expansive mood, had taken his young assistant to dinner at a French restaurant in Montreal, where the reflected pulse of the ceiling fan in the overly polished silverware proved so distracting that the assistant laid his napkin over them. Groping for conversation, the young man studied the menu and finally said: "The snapper sounds good. What do you recommend, Mr. Ellis?" The older man gasped and knocked over his water glass. Pale and wide-eyed, he glanced about, then leaned across the darkening tablecloth to whisper: "For God's sake, man, no names in public! Do you want a riot on your hands? Think of my position, please!"

Please Eyes wide Mr. Ellis said Please for the last time leaned his head back and looked up at his successor who lifted the razor and drew it once across to the right and intended to draw it once again across to the left but found that wasn't necessary and jumped back as the old man's head lolled leaving the younger man alone in the shabby farmhouse kitchen to hear a cow past milking low across the highway and hear the flood on the linoleum become a patter and then a drip in counterpoint to the faucet and while hearing these things the younger man mumbled Without anger Without malice Without clumsiness or delay Mumbled at first and then spoke aloud and then spoke loudly the creed taught him

by the older man who had trained him well and then when he was ready passed on to him the duty so that Mr. Ellis who taught Mr. Ellis also became first client of Mr. Ellis and Mr. Ellis left Mr. Ellis and his darkening tablecloth and turned up his coat collar as he stood atop Mr. Ellis's back porch steps blew into hands smelling of Mr. Ellis's soap and shivered in the cold that came early to Mr. Ellis that fall and never fully left God, too, be just.

Someone with a deep voice cleared his throat, and Mr. Ellis looked up to see the two store owners standing behind the counter, gazing at him not with hostility, but not with friendliness either. The man had his hands clasped behind him and a spatter of gristle on his apron. The woman was screwing on the head of a porcelain doll, a foot-high bride. As the fit at the neck tightened, the painted eyes slowed, then grated to a stop, and they, too, gazed at him.

The man with the apron asked, not unkindly, "Can we help you with anything, sir?"

Mr. Ellis cast one final glance at the longest razor. What workmanship! What efficiency! He looked up, smiled. "No, thank you," he said. "Not today."