

THE OLD PARK ROAD



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CHAPTER 1 - THE SETTING

Crawley was your basic country town trying to pick the best things from the last three centuries. And like most such towns they advanced as far as they could afford and rationalized the rest away as old-fashioned values or tradition or something. The library catalog ran on a spiffy little computer (just two chip generations back) but the fire department was still volunteer and got called to action by means of a

hand crank and Edna Pauley's strong left arm. Property tax bills were still typed by hand but the Mayor's office had digital voicemail when Barbara was out getting her hair done on Friday.

Crawley was formed and shaped by the flat lands among a group of small mountains with names like Medlin, Truitt, Walker, Yoder, and Bear. The later was named for its shape like a hibernating mass of fur with a small knob situated near the old mill road and Mcfee stream. If anybody talked about going 'ar to berrhead' it was the same as 'going fishin' in any other town. The bearhead stretch of the Mcfee had always given up the best tasting fish in the area; though some of the women folk thought the men just said so 'cause they were the easiest to catch. And ya didn't need to haul the jugs quite as far in that part of the mountains.

As a whole the town was on the religious side and any group trying to remove the pictures of the Jesus from the school would end up smoking the Pirellis to the county line. Church was 'the church' and to mention it was Baptist was like saying corn has ears and fish sometimes thrive in water. Right was right and wrong was intolerable; except in the case of close relatives which had merely 'backsliden some'. Any fellow inclined to drink smoke or flirt in public could always backslide some and repent with tears the third Sunday; assuming the offending articles of sin and/or any blondes were put out of the sight for a full month or another respectable interval. There was something about welcoming a wandering sheep back that warmed the hearts. It was certainly more interesting than no sin at all. Any fellow with a flair for hard liquor and good theatre might well end up very happy in this town.

Driving into town for the first time you noticed it wasn't so much a main street or a grid of friendly establishments. It was more of a two mile long snake of roads and buildings made by people adverse to being perched on any of the surrounding mountains. At some point the whole stretch fused together and was annexed as a town in the eyes of the state. A few residents thought they were still their own mayor and that would be so until their dying day. The town took a big step when crusty old grandpa Houghtlin declared the family place was 'just outside Crawley'; a compromise signaling it was okay to be seen there by his assorted decendents. If a fire engine happened to be needed again that was acceptable. New taxes? Well they were something completely different.

There was a small restaurant in town that had been there as long as plate glass had been available. For decades it never had a sign and didn't need one. It was just a word of mouth, scent of the air kind of establishment - serving things of all descriptions from an old black chalkboard where only the prices every got erased. You could order almost anything made from crops in the county as long as you promised to smoke, talk, and joke some.

Out of the blue one day Dake (no one is sure how or if this name is spelled), the owner put up a little cardboard sign in the window. It had come from a bright blue bit of cardboard from the back of a carton of pickles he'd ordered. His daughter had cut out some red letters and spelled out C A F E with a style she thought looked French or classy at any rate. Asked if the menu was changing he would always say his familiar 'naaa' and pointed to the three chairs and table setting out front. 'None of them little coffees eh?' old John asked while siphoning his daily platter of double grits and extra thick country ham - butter on only the ham as usual. Then the whole place argued whether it called redresso, espresso or chino- something. Moses Pilter announced with authority he'd once seen one of the those hissing machines while visiting his son in Portage. He was of the opinion they was just little cups full of foam, implying it was not an entirely honest measure. Seeing as there were no Italians in the room he expressed the opinion that was why the whole country never did any work. That and wine too maybe.

'Looks like ya spit it back all day' chimed in another patron. He'd seen one of the machines too. 'Charged a full \$3.00'. Folks were horrified and looked at Dake or checked the chalkboard to see if it was all still 50 cents. A third person was of the opinion it was really hot chocolate and not coffee in the first place; they use 'chocolate beans from the jungle' he professed. No one asked about the little coffees

after that. For this town "CAFE" just meant eating your pie outside on rusty metal chair.

The other side of the hills to the east had the most steep wooded ridges and what little flat land there was had bushel-sized rocks every third step. This piece of land had been known as Crock Ridge on account that most of folks who'd starved there once had that name. Folks today did well to get a few hundred row feet cleared after a couple of generations. They mostly made do with home gardens but a few of them put away enough for the farmer's market once a month or to trade with better off farmers up highway 12. Anyone who even tried to tame the ridge was thought more righteous than the rest. Ambition and folly seemed closely defined.

For as long as anyone could recall there had been a standing joke about those people 'living on the big backside'. However any child caught repeating the humor would get a quick whipping and learned to make the joke only in a hushed voice among cronies in the woods.

Old Lady Brown lived up there in what amounted to a shack with a colored television and some fancy kind of vaporizer her doctor ordered from Michigan. She always showed off both to any visitors. Most folks had seen a color TV many times and that vaporizer encrusted with medicated salts was none too pleasant to view anymore. Folks in town would gossip about 'how it was a ungodly shame how that boy of hers (John Jr.) left for a fancy city job' and made her live like that. He did visit her faithfully each Christmas if the roads permitted and his new fancy wife would bring ma a fashionable new nightgown or pair of slippers. She had a whole closet full of satin things and fluffy slippers of every color. It was a shame she couldn't sell them said the town wisdom. Then she might have enough heat in the winter.

John Jr. would make a big fuss and hammer and pound the place, pretending to fix it up so it would last another year. The neighbors got to laughing about his big fanfare each year at the hardware store. He'd order enough nails to build a couple of Noah's Arks and as far as anyone could ever see the old shack looked just the same. Gaston Grimley would usually come up her way in a few weeks and repair any damage the boy had done; as all that pounding tended to loosen as much wood as he put up.

The Grimleys were a unique lot as well. Daughter Leona now twenty had gotten in the family way in her teens by a black boy from the big new county school. (Another evil spun from the new county taxes some said). A dark-skinned, curly-haired baby would not have gone over too well in many households in Crawley but the Grimleys were sincere believers and held no real racial bias. They loved Leona and the baby with even more love than if things had been planned.

Older brother Mark had taken to punching out a few lads who dared whisper too loudly one time when Leona was in town pushing the child. To most town folks Leona was more of a celebrity by now; the first sign that the town had expanded and open-minded thinking at last. It was another of those curious paradoxes. Somehow it was more interesting to forgive a sinner and if some racial equality happened in the mix it was just another case of 'all things working together for good'. Not that any young ladies should get any ideas now. Folks were still apt to forgive the isolated failing not a whole new trend.

The most north of the families was a Drake Long. He was a funny sort of boy that did poorly in both school and the usual manly trades. Most folks simply said he was 'a little off' without implying he needed to be locked up or anything. You might just watch him a bit closer is all. Drake earned a very meager living by collecting herbs for a local pharmaceutical company a few counties over. Together with his cows and pigs he and the wife managed to keep a little flesh on their bones. His wife Grace had been a homely girl and most folks figured they were a fair match; since none of their own kids would surely want to marry either one. It was a case of two lonely outcasts finding love in the hills; another one of those 'all things working together' lessons. Neither were seen in town much except to get occasional treats like candy or cloth. Grace made her own dresses usually with large bright flowers and collars the ladies described as lop-sided but well sown. She'd often cut the hems like

ribbons to add more style. More than a few times Drake had run off a few curious boys hoping to catch a glimpse of the crazy lady with big cuts in her dress. It was well known Drake had guns but he hadn't learned that manly way of waving them about yet.

Carl Conway had a family of seven (plus a half) on the back part of the hill closest to town. He had done the most forest and land-clearing of all the 'backsiders'. He and his five sons would hitch a horse up to a big old rock and made a sort of fence-rock garden for the women folk to adorn. Over the last five years he'd manage to free up nearly three acres of decent soil for planting corn and beans. Folks said they could taste his corn and tell it from all others. Still that admiration never transferred into higher prices when he went to sell it. The ladies at church would always stop him and say how his corn made 'the best cannin' and other small talk. Clara Conway was not sure if she liked all the attention her husband got from the younger brides; particularly as she and the girls did most of the weeding and picking of the corn. Still he was the finest man she had ever seen or even heard of. It was natural he got some attention. After this many years of marriage, after all, what a man was became as much an honor to his wife as to his mother.

CHAPTER 2 - TOWN TALK

The boys gathered around the TV in the restaurant to watch the ball game. It was too early to hit the bar. Besides the wives were still snooping around the stores downtown and a run to the tavern was risky. The owner had just upgraded to get himself a genuine infrared remote control color TV from Sears at the new mall up the highway. He called the thing 'Inner Red' but most of the guys were still impressed. Dake didn't usually serve beer in the afternoon but he'd just gotten a keg at a lower price and decided to share a little. The guys cheered.

'I 'kin cover this one at 50 cents a glass boys but the first ones on me.' More cheers. 'Carl is this boy of yours drinking age or what?

'Yea...but if his mama catches him he ain't going be of any age!'. The fellows laughed deeply - all except for poor Tim who was to date of the impression beer tasted like medicine; but for some reason men were supposed to like it.

'Carl. Guess who I passed up the old park road way?'

'Tell me Lloyd...I ain't got all day and the foam's falling.'

'It was Crazy Drake with his truck full of his salads. I couldn't figure why he'd go that way.'

'Hell. Maybe that old Ford crap he drives can't do more than 20 on the highway. Once I saw it belch out a cloud of smoke half a mile long.'

'Merbee he was trying to get 'way from that ugly wife of his...any road looks good compared to being home.' Laughter raised half an octave by the third kicking in.

'Why don't he get a decent truck. He took his hunting gun into Earl to get cleaned. That was one handsome piece with like scrollwork and such. Earl said it must have set 'im back a good seven or eight hundred.'

'Shitttt...he and that woman don't have seven or eight dollars 'tween 'em.'

'They sure ain't got it from a beauty contest!' Maxie interjected.

'No. No. He's right. My wife know's Grace's cousin. I hear tell that old Drake has been getting some fine paydays. This big Farmy-cutical place wants his berries and such for like medicines or stuff. I seen that place last time me and the kids went up to Tateville. '

'What would some big company need with berries? The damn woods is plum full of 'em every fall. Any moron can pick a truck full of branches and crap.'

'If any moron can do it why can't you and your sorry ass get rich'. The brew was really kicking in now. Mark was motioning them to quiet down as a patron entering the restaurant hesitated at the less than family image.

'I gotta get going boys. Gotta git up early and take the wife's mother to get her blood pressure checked. I hope I never git old...'

'Nothing wrong with been' old'

'Yea if you can 'ford to drink and eat all day'

'I do not. Never drink except 'tween meals or with a little food!' He belched out. The group laughter was cut short by his sharp deep painful series of coughs; which always followed his hyperventilation and reminded all of his other vice.

Meanwhile the ladies in town were gathered at Sara Curtis' house to assemble the last of the fabric scraps for quilting bee. They had agreed to send half the quilts to the needy in Bosnia through the local missions drive and save the fancier more fragile ones for the State Fair. No one was entirely sure where Bosnia was (it wasn't on the school's globe) but if Billy Graham and Rev. Barker considered it a needy place surely it must be. Maude Conway (Carl's mother and a bit of a self-appointed matriarch) had suggested they have their own display in town as the Fair was months off but no one could think of suitable space for a display.

Half a dozen of the ladies left to go to Clark's Department Store to get the remaining colors and textures needed. Clark's had been a General Store until 10 years ago when a new coat of white paint and some fancy metal shelving did the trick. The departments were no bigger. I guess the small glass case of perfume and a bigger popcorn machine was justification enough. And now they took the few credit cards that were kept in town.

'Laura that boy of yours has shot up extra fast this term. He's grown like a weed.' Clara Conway remarked, knowing full the pace and gangliness of her own beloved weeds.

Laura nodded. His unexpected need for 2 more pairs of work pants had been felt in her limited pocket money. 'He's near tall as his grandpa already.'

'Did you see that horrible art thing in the window at the store?'

'Why yes. Someone needs to flat out tell that girl she can't make a face to save her soul'. Sara just shook her head.

'That was no face. I figured it was a ghost or something.'

'Never did see a ghost wearing a necktie dear.' Sara advised.

'Since she went to New York she hasn't done a good piece. She used to make some nice horses. God gave her talent for horses and sunflowers - ever since first grade. I still got one of 'em somewhere. They can keep that modern New York art. Nobody 'round here's goin' buy it.'

I know. Her poor mother. I'd be ashamed if one of mine put such things in public view'. Sara remembered her son's recent depanting by other boys in the middle of town and quieted down. Two of the other ladies giggled to themselves.

Well what's the matter with June Clark? She 'otta know better than to put that in the store. I'll bet her husband put it there. He's got an odd taste in clothes anyhow.'

Don't be so hard on them. I hear young James is ill. They had some large doctor bills from what Maude tells me. He has some kind of blood disease. They might need the money. Bless 'em if some fool buys that thing so the poor child can get well.'

'Really. I hadn't heard he was ill. Come to think of it I ain't seen him at service much of late.' Elizabeth Grimley mused, having a well known running attendance register in her head. It was held in some circles the Lord himself might ask her assistance when it came time to reward or punish folks in heaven..

'Tateville doctors don't work for free no more...' Clara added from experience.

'Maybe we should take up a collection come Sunday.' Sara asked to no one in particular while inspecting the last of the donated remnants in the very depths of the box.

'No. They're too proud. We can do just as well. I'm going to buy all my winter linens from them this year. If we all give them more business it should help some.' Paula Laws piped up once again, taking the upper farmer class approach to solving problems. Folks had always spent as little as possible at the store; preferring heat light and gas for the tractor. Her approach was a puzzler for a moment.

'That's a good idea Paula. I'll pick up a few extra cans tommorrow. The boy is near sick of ma's canned tomatos anyhow.' Sara Curtis spoke up breaking the silence of the others.

CHAPTER 3 - Peace for Now

The sun fell on the town. Clara Conway had just finished unwrapping the last of her purchases from town. It was time to bathe the twins and make the school lunches for tommorrow. That lovely new ivory blouse was enough inspiration to keep her going for another two hours. It would look so good on Sunday morning. Carl was in a slump in the chair wearing off the last of the beers he was unofficially allowed by his mate. The youngest boys were smashing Matchbox cars into each other on the floor below Carl. The scenario was something about a new police force that smashed into tractors who plowed the wrong field. The army had been called in too and somehow the long Cadillac ambulance was also allowed to do some smashing when no green army man was crammed into the back. Martha was reading a stormy romance novel she'd slipped into the book jacket of a mild novel on an easy chair. Her finger marked a harmless page a chapter back - just in case her mother walked by and caught glimpse of a word like 'heaving' or 'longing'.

At Earl and Paula Law's place, father and son were enjoying a game of billiards in the town's only farmhouse with a paneled den; any kind of den actually. Paula was preparing small cakes like they did back home in Corbin - sort of a white cake whose height consisted of at least one-quarter frosting. They were probably the same as small cakes made in any other American town except the Corbin kind had their sides brushed lightly with melted caramel. Traditionally it had butter and a dash of whiskey but Paula had no intension of becoming the latest notorious woman. Paula worked alone, half envying those friends who had daughters to teach and help in this part of the home. Maybe the subject could come up with Earl tonight. This was, after all, THAT night of the week. She'd send Thomas up to bed early and fix Earl the kind of hot chocolate he liked - big mug, little marshmallows, no foam, followed by lots of hugs.

Darel ('one r, one l') Clark was going over the store ledger from the cove of his deep, family heirloom desk in the living room. It had been varnished, polished, shelacued, stained, scratched, burnt, and lacquored so many times it appeared quite near black - easily mistaken for walnut instead of the original entombed pine. He'd only recently took up the habit of thumping the old thing; which June thought might disturb James watching TV in the other room. 'The boy!' she mouthed to him almost

silently. He frowned, nodded, agreed a bit and closed the heavy leaf in front.

'Gotta shift some more of those curtains, Juney. Can't have eighty dollars tied up these many months. There ain't that many windows in all of town anyhow. I don't know what possessed me letting...'. He thought better of blaming her.

'Darel I told you. Lace is out of fashion now. Thick woven fabrics, are quite the necessity in the modern home...'

'I believe there's two of those in town' he muttered, thinking of the Clark and Laws residences.

'Paula Laws bought a set. What she does tends to catch on in time. The word is out where she got them. Besides our stock provides more privacy and a sense of style. They were a good investment. We'll be needing to order more soon. I'm certain of it.'

'I suppose they are more energy efficient. Fire proof aren't they?'

'Resistent a bit. That's no selling point. The weave is quite...European I suppose. We should order some more of the green ones. It's such a refreshing shade...'

'Wives might buy curtains but taggin' along husbands put cash on the counter. I'll make up a sign about the energy savings and fire...whatever features.'

'You'd better let me do it. You remember the undergarment display?'

'I still think 'sturdy' is a good thing in...'. He remembered Thomas was nearby '...upper things'. June rolled her eyes and did that thing with her hand to cut the air in frustration.

The Grimleys were saying evening devotional prayers and singing the usual hymns before retiring to bed. Pop had spotted a lightbulb burning out in the barn and motioned for Mark to go out on snuff out the wasteful thing. Unused photons were like throwing your paycheck into the caverns of Hades; though only Elizabeth tended to phrase it so strongly. Mother was whipping up her pie filling for tomorrow. Ten pies for the church bake sale was too much for one day's work but she'd always outbaked the other ladies. It was simply expected by now. Laura Harkins had privately said her approach was 'quality over quantity' but Elizabeth could hardly believe that rumored quote was true of her friend. Besides it wasn't likely Laura knew the meaning of either word.

Leona and Baby David were comforting each other as only those so bonded in birth and hardship can do. A faint sound penetrated this serene picture. Drake was headed up the road in his mufflerless beast. Twigs and berries for market.

Once again the ladies in town were assembled at Clark's to argue whether this or that bolt of fabric was really 'summer weight' or not; and if so whether it was just a bit too modern for our girls. Most of the women only had the most general idea of who the modern Madonna was but Clara Conway always compared any wild outlandish unmannered girl to that name. Evidently she was a Jezebel-Delilah sort of creature of some sort; and not fitting to have moral descendents in this town. It was generally understood that fine Christian ladies only wore fabric with small tasteful flora patterns (4 inch roses were out) and never stripes which might accentuate contours or remind young men of a landing field. And if solid colors were worn they would on the whole have to be dark and would require a white lace collar or perhaps just one of a contrasting color. Necklines were designed to be close to necks without touching them; hems only high enough to keep the girls from making fun of each other.

Sunday morning was a real delight. Everyone was full of the pies and cakes from yesterday's bake sale and the missionary fund now had an extra eighteen dollars that was unexpected. It had rained the last two Sundays but today the trees had that brightest of looks that spring produces. The shadblow along the edges of the woods provided a cloud of white butterflies and Clark had announced yesterday there was no increase in cornseed prices this year. In fact some of the seed was of a new strain said to yield an extra five bushels without trying much. Kept the smut in check too; something that sounded good to everyone. If only crop prices would hold it meant an extra margin of income this year. In farming nothing is guaranteed. But if anything is more welcome than rain it is hope.

Even the sermon was about the resurrection; loud thunderstorms and brimstone having been a particularly chilling combination this time a week ago. Julina Conway Hadley was back to visit. She had done well for herself as everyone expected. She had been the ideal child, student, young wife, and nurse. She and Paulie (what everybody still called the young lawyer from a nice Christian family up Danforth way) now lived in Illinois somewhere. Clara Conway let it be known their new home had a gas stove and 4 bedrooms; hint hint on the second feature. Folks usually hoped their own kids would turn out 'half as good' as the phrase usually was formed.

Everything that women can do well Julina did exceedingly well by all accounts. Besides Julina's sharp brown eyes and thick wave of curls (suggestive of some clean movie star no one could quite pin down) made her everyone's favorite. She just had that glow. The men had noticed it first. Clara was a beautiful woman too but her daughter was something of a whole different class. She just had a grace, poise, and aura some country girls are given by God; who occasionally sends her sort among us when he's short of decent city girls. Her smile could 'convert a demon' as Sara Curtis once put it. Georgie was still wondering why anyone would want to 'convert a deacon' anyhow.

CHAPTER 4 - NEWS

'Cora. I wish I didn't have to make this call' Doc Martin put on his most stern voice; the voice he rarely used more than once a year in town. 'Jack has some kind of tissue...he needs a few more tests in Tateville. I know that's a long time off during the harvest season but he must go.'

'Dear Lord! Tissue! Is a bad to have any of that? Will he be okay Doc?' the young mother questioned in rapid apprehension.

'I've seen this kind of thing before Cora. Some of the time it works out well if the Lord wills. But I don't want to get your hopes up. This could be some kind of...growth.' He was avoiding the obvious word. For now the words tissue and growth did not seem to alarm her.

'We'll go up there tommorrow. I can get my cousin to help out Jed and I'll drive the boy myself.'

'No need. They don't do tests on Saturdays. I've got the top...doctor to look at him Monday afternoon. He's the best specialist for this kind of thing. I'll talk to him about the money. He comes from country folk.'

'We won't take any char'ty. If he's a good doctor we'll pay him a fair amount. God will provide somehow.'

'I don't want you folks worrying now. Lots of times it's nothing and they cut it off and its done. He's a strong boy and that will help alot.'

'Lord these are tough days. Just last week I heard that the Clark boy is serious ill.'

'Well yes. But your Jack has something much different. It's not that kind of thing.'

Cora Dillage went up to see her son and satisfied he wasn't any worse she prepared a few sentences for when Jed got home. 'You foolish child' she told herself outloud. 'This has to go to Jesus first'. She went upstairs and found her grandma's old leather Bible; the industrial strength kind for prayers of this sort. Tears didn't show up as much on dark cowhide. Besides every comforting passage had its own bookmark complete with a comforting yarn edge. Cora would need them all today.

The boys gathered in the restaurant again for another ballgame. No keg today. They'd polished that off two days back. Mark had gotten a few bowls of chips for the lads and a plate of the fancy finger foods that went unused at last night's party. The restaurant had done a bit of catering since Mark's wife had taken a business class at the community college. The Cost of Mushrooms Stuffed had not yet impacted the Family Net Income much. But Mark was willing to take on new experiments as long as he got to eat the failures.

'You boys need any lumber? My nephew up Clayton way just cut some straight pine boards. He'll give ya a good price if you'll do the haulin. They'd make a fine shed or barn wall.'

'Since when did he stop drinking long nuff to saw straight?' The whole place erupts. Mark pretends to take new interest in the game. He couldn't sell lumber or mushrooms today.

'Hey Earl. I hear you cleaned old Drake boy's gun for 'im?'

'Yea. It was a right fine piece too. I ain't seen one that good since before Hamilton sold their summer place. That Mr. Hamilton had some fine shotguns - ivory, silver, and all that.'

'Where do 'spose Crazy Drake got money for a gun like that.

'I hear he's been takin' in a good harvest for those drug people. '

'Drug people?!? He's doing dope now?'

'Will you shut up. He's gettin' paid to collect rare herbs and such for that Killian Corporation up near Tateville. They need natural like stuff for testing or something. I guess they's tryin' to cure cancer or AIDS.

'AIDS!! They better not be bringin' that homo bug in this county.'

'I'd wish they'd cure him. He gives me the creeps everytime I see him.'

'He can cure his dang wife with an old paper bag...wooooooo!'. Hilarity returns.

Her daddy shoulda drowned her out back down by the river.'

'He gives me the creeps too. I was driving back late the other night and we all passed him up the park road near the reservoir. He was stopped by the road fixing a flat tire. He had the road full of twigs and stuff just to get at the old tire. He was acting kinda wierd and mad like.\

'You stopped to help him?'

'I had too. I didn't see it was him at first. By the time I full stopped like I couldn't rightly drive off.'

'I wouldn't stop for him in plain daylight. You're lucky he didn't cut out your liver and sell it to that factory.' The boys were in rare form for having nothing stronger than potato chips and stuffed mushroom caps. The Braves were up three. That helped too.

'Bless be God' June announced to her husband 'We've sold the sculpture, Darell!'

'That's some good news for once. I was beginning to think folks around here had no culture.'

'Actually it was a lady from out of town...just driving through'.

'I'll take it anyway it goes. I told you, Juney we need to cultivated the tourist market more.'

'Maybe we can her to make us another one?'

'Nothing for the deposit. Not this month anyhow.'

'Artists send things out on consignment some times. I read it in the Women's Chronicle last month. 'Why, we might even come up with some things of our own to sell'

Don't be silly, Juney. You and I don't have enough talent to paint a barn door.'

I was rather thinking of James actually. He always got good comments on his pieces for parent's day.'

'I'll get a watercolor set tommorrow. It'll give him something to do least-wise. '

'And I suppose folks in town would feel a certain...'

'We aren't going down that road now. I'd just as soon as he paint under a...whatever you call it when...'

'You're someone else...'

'Or make up a person to be. Pen name I think they call it? I've got a few old frames in the storeroom...from those seashore prints that didn't sell. Maybe with a frame his watercolors might sell a piece or two.'

'Bring some of that thick cardboard...to staple in the frame'

'How much do I owe you, Gladys?' Paula asked her old school friend.

'Fifty-two, ten with the tax. Make it fifty even.'

'Let me give you something for gas'

'Don't be silly. I really came here to see you. Besides when you told me about the boy...the situation...'

'They'll not take any other kind of help. Some of us had tried.'

'What are you going to do with it?'

'It's not the best piece but it would look fine enough in my sewing room upstairs.'

'Did you tell Earl?'

'Not yet. But he already agreed to spend a little more in town and a little less in Tateville. He's going to get all his feed from Darel this year. It cost a little more...but we have some margin.'

'Yes. Margin! It's all about margins isn't it. That little extra...some advantage to make life less of a worry. '

'Earl calls it his 'financial elbow room''

'He would.'

'Are you staying for dinner, dear? I forgot to ask.'

'No. I told Sam I'd be back to take the children to piano lessons. How is Thomas' music coming?'

'I let him give it up for the year. He wants to help his father with new acreage and all. Besides I think he wants to shift over to the trumpet next school term.'

'I couldn't bear the noise'

'That's what barns are for. Cows and brass musical instruments'

'My Irma plays the violin as well. I have to put her down in the pantry with that thing.'

'They don't teach that here. Oh!'

'You're boiling again, Paula. Men and boys better tremble when Paula Trumbell is cooking something...'

'I could have Clark's order me one. That would be very convenient.'

'I'm sure they run well over a hundred ...for anything sounding better than a dying cat anyhow'

'If it's for Thomas we could make an allowance. Or his sister....'

'Sister....? Paula are you really...'

'Yes. A future musician of some kind anyway...'

The two women embrace, smile, laugh, and cry, and hug and repeat; then repeat the process while a grim, gaunt face looks on.

CHAPTER 5 - WIDER VIEW

That fall as in every other the golden birch thought they had it all over the alder; whose bark never got any notice. Both thought it payback for the Magnolia's boast earlier in the year which had yet to be forgiven or even discussed on the wind. The Magnolia could barely manage the faintest tinge of yellow this time of year. 'Where is your luminous, pink perfume now?' asked the hornbeam whose virtues, if we can be polite, are rather subtle. The oak clan in muted reds and oranges felt all the others were just plain gaudy; in addition to being short. The beech being a cousin raised a similar point and expressed the opinion that the beauty of simple, clean bark and 3-cornered nuts was indeed a most underrated virtue. The serviceberry piped up and remind all that the hoards of annoying, messy, acrobatic squirrels could be blamed almost entirely on the oak-beech clan. The maples of course proclaimed themselves into a state of superiority for an ability to produce most any color and often rare, brilliant combinations at that. They were quick to remind all they also provided syrup and a sort of candy favored by the lovely children that walked the woods. These and a hundred other counter-arguments went on dendrological court that day while the wind slowly become cooler and kids kicking colors drowned out the squadrons passing overhead.

'Sheriff's Office. How may I direct your call?' Ann Marie rattled off the same old thing.

'This is Dr. Bellows with the State Health Service. I have an urgent matter for the Sheriff personally.' Sounding a bit insecure and fatigued at once he continued 'It's very important I speak with him.'

'One moment please.' Ann Marie had a modern switchboard phone but no intercom yet. She yelled.

'This is the Sheriff. What can I do for you?' The last sip of coffee went down as the words came out.

'This is Simon Bellows with the State Health Service. This is a Section HCC-9B Notification, Sheriff. A unsafe level of iso-chlorosilides was found in your town's water supply last week.'

'Unsafe level of a what?'

'Iso-Chlorosilides is the short name. They are organic byproducts of certain chemical processes'. Bellows was sounding that foolish way an MD feels when he hasn't talked to normal folks in a month.

'I don't understand. What was that Section again?'

'HCC-9B. You should have a big blue notebook from the State Emergency Civil Procedures Board?'

'Oh yes. Got that somewhere over here. Just a second.' The Sheriff remembers opening it last year for something about flood evacuations when rivers rose last time.

'I'm back. Give a quick summary of what I need to do Doc.'

'You need to immediately shut down the water supply without notice and advise all residents to use bottled water for next 24 hours. This isn't official but most towns announce some kind of mechanical problem so no one is alarmed.'

'Don't rightly think we can do that. Maybe up your way. This town is too small for those games.'

Bellows felt a bit silly again. Had he just told a Sheriff to lie? 'We have someone on the way. It probably isn't much. Chlorosilides are usually due to some illegal dumping. They usually run out of the supply in a few weeks...'

'Weeks!' Then softer. 'Weeks you say? That is hard on the town folks. Only half the people 'round here have wells. As for bottled water...no one stocks much of that.'

'I'll call the County Water people right away and they'll get it first sun-up.'

'No sir. This requires immediate seizure and shutdown of all water flow. The water sample is ten hours old. We have to move. Some people could get sick if this continues.'

'How sick?' 'Mostly gastroenteritis and abdominal discomfort. Long term effects are unknown but likely injurious.' The long g-word just went over his head. It sure sounded worse than a tummy ache. The old blue and gold LTD was moving down the road in no time. All the way he was fooling with the giant master key ring trying to find that thick one that opened the old pump house at the reservoir.

CHAPTER 6 - Meetings

I think we can get down to it, gentleman...and uh...Ms. Leonard' Dr. Trantham of the County Health Department announced. Until a decade ago he was just like any other

overstressed, underpaid small city doctor. But the state came down and declared this was no longer the Middle Ages. Every county had to have a Health Department; sort of General Practitioner General who could push paper and make sure kids got the right kind of shots in the right order and dose. He was also in charge of reporting on the state of disease and suffering through a series of statistical forms and charts; which fortunately his semi-literate county secretary could still bang out on the newly acquired tan IBM Selectric. The charts were made using a series of XXXXXXXXX's next to where the form had the printed name of each disease. She used the Liquid Paper to correct the Influenza bar which had spread too far while trying to hide a run in her new stockings.

'Well. I've read all the reports and trust all of you have done the same...at least once' the doctor boomed in the cavern of Tateville Co.'s conference room; which had been the entire Mayor's office in days when paperwork meant buying another box full of white ruled file cards and two packs of dividers.

The Sheriff sat there still offended he'd not be asked to chair the emergency session. Still he recalled the last time (a forensic case) that medical brains had sat around this same table. He did not come off looking too sharp. Perhaps he'd let them do their lingo and he'd interject when the subject of criminology was even lightly touched.

'Let's start with you, Dr. Grover...excuse me...Dr. Groves. You have the floor sir'.

'I'm Charles Groves, Board Certified Toxicologist and Head of Medicine at University Medical. We believe many of the pathologies found so far are at least of possible causation. These are by far the highest Meta-trocol levels found in drinking water in this state. I've asked several colleagues in other states if any similar levels have been reported...uh elsewhere.'

'What of these other compounds. Are the trocols the worst you think, doctor.'

'They are the best studied I should say. The Methyl carbonate groups are troubling perhaps. The studies are quite old when it comes to the organic oxide variants we have here. They really are quite rare compounds. Found in nature actually though...'

'Found in nature!' the Sheriff snorted.

'I'd better let Dr. Lanning of the Botany Department speak on...uh...the particulars on that...'

'Dr. Lanning. Can you help us? I believe most of us were under the supposition these were hazardous waste residues or perhaps byproducts of an industrial process.'

'They may be. Not a few organic processes do involve these phytopharmaceutical compounds. There are many sources really. I am a physiologist so I cannot speak to the industrial processes that might release these compounds. But we do have high levels of 9,10-Meta-trocols and trocoloids in several plant families. Mainly the Sennutabulaceae. There are several species in the state flora.'

'Lord! How could they get in the drinking water. It must surely be some criminal act.'

'One would need trunkloads of the raw biomass or a sizeable distillate. It would likely come from an manufacturing process I think. I doubt if anyone would have a sufficient quantity of herbal extracts to do this. Or even know about it...'

'Lemee introduce Docker Harkins at this point. He needs to git back to Conny Gen'ral...He's one of our very bay-ist...if I may say so...go 'head if ya wool sir...'

'You know a Laura Harkins up Crawley way' Deputy Creech burst out, feeling some close political connections at hand. He knew how the doctor could bind, heal, and craft plain old country politicians like a limp, fragmented ulna. 'Crawley being most important in our investigation here' he added to rebuff his Sheriff's stiff look.

'Yes sir. I have a sister of that name. Pleased to meet you sir. I did not catch your name...'

'Deputy Leon Prescott. Four years under the badge'. He wished he had said 'in official service' as was said of a man attaining five, ten, or more years in the brown handbook. It was a slip of course. Leon was small and the badge thick and heavy.

'Good to know you, Deputy Sheriff' he said with deference respect, and nod well beyond the way the man had presented himself. At regular of hospital rounds he had learned to treat every man as a king and a master of something. It certainly did not his reputation as a man of civil manners and professional demeanor. Besides it was funny to act so with a straight face.

'If I may resume, gentlemen' he gave his voice direction to the coffee maker where a few had gathered. 'We have a most serious toxicological event here. As my own sister is located this very community I do fear for my very own flesh and blood; numbering six as of a month ago. Yet I temper my perspective with the rigid skepticism of a scientist. Even by the most rigorous of professional standards and not heeding a single emotion, I must say we have a most troubling situation.'. He stroked his chin, then his thick report, and finally his gold pen before raising his head in a thoroughly sold performance. 'Our best evidence, by all these charts and most of all by our own human hearts...tells us something highly unnatural and foul and vile is at work here. As a man of science I have no force of law. But I hope the power of this truth... (three stiff thumps to the bound white stack) will carry us to move as prudently and swiftly as God gives us power....Gentlemen I tell you now....science and the law have never seen a finer unity as we have before us in this hour...' Men sighed, chests inflated with slow solemnity, and something holier than cubed bread and wafers was consumed whole.

Hergrove was the emblem of batchelor bureaucratic efficiency. His blue polyester jacket was not so much tailored as it was draped. Forty dollar pants with forty dollar jackets prove to be a mismatch. I guess he liked the financial symmetry. He walked with a curious metallic crunch as his heels were worn to the tacks; grinding and clicking down the sidewalk like a pair of shy tap shoes. He always spent a fair sum on lunch with daily-pricey drink specials of blended fruit kind, giving him a grin. Don with his usual speedy line summed it up: 'meals before heals'.

'Here. Give this box of books to that creep. He'd been asking for some books to prepare his case. Doesn't look smart enough to get past the cover...but it's our modern way...And whatever you do don't touch the books. You know our lawyers are...'

'Yea, sheriff. But his 'torney said he wasn't to read nothing or watch TV. Not even a radio...'

'Now you do as I say. It's his neck. If he wants to defend himself no lawyer can prevent that. I wouldn't trust my skin to that greasy little Jew anyhow.' Hergrove remarked with genuine distain.

'I think he's Hispanic...'

'Same damn thing. 'Cept the State House doesn't force us to hire Jew deputies...not yet anyways'

'I want you to hear me good, boy. I said twenty times. No. You better make it thirty. You don't look like you can count so good. Just stamp out one of your damn rap tunes with this hear piece...'

'Sheriff...I...'

'I want him gushing good. No noise. Just a steady warm river of his last...'

'But I just could not...when my mother hears about me doing such a terrible thing'

'Now boy. If I tells you to do it it's a good thing. Do you remember 'bout them little kids he helped kill. He might as well have slit their throats as drug it out months like that. Did you look at the picture of the momma I gave you. '

'Yesir'

'Did you look into her eyes'

'Only could a little while...'

'There was ten mothers if there was one. You just remember that now. Thirty strokes. Nice'n deep and fast like.'

'But sir I never run before...I wouldn't know how...'

'I told you boy it's all worked out. You never heard of the Witness Relocation Program run outta Washington'.

'Yes I believe so.'

'You're in it! I sent 'em up your name just last week. Aint't no cop within a thousand miles will dare touch you. Long as you go south like that map there...'

'Do they know in Texas?'

'They're the first to know. It comes over the wire in every county for miles. Boy you have a ticket to freedom. We in law enforcement view this is sort of your doing your time. 'Cept it's in one honorable deed. It's what we call alternative rehabilitation. Got a whole book on it in my office. We can overlook a few petty burglaries, son - if I may call you that'

'Sure.'

'You see. I can't ask any of my boys to give this fellow a...hard time. It's just the way the law is wrote up. Seems as though some evidence was collected a little sloppy like...bunch of stupid technicalities is all. Everyone know the man did it. God knows it sure as I do. We all know that, don't we son.'

'No doubt of it from my readin'

'Are you going let that weasal get out with the help of some slick New York lawyer. He just might do it your kind of folks next time he's out. He's been heard tellin' them kinda racial jokes. I won't even havem' told in my department here. That's the kind of shop we run here.'

'Yes, sir'

'I just wanted you to know what kinda fellow he his. Murderer and racist. Worst kind I figure. You'll have a good break for half an hour. We got a good solid truck fer ya. Runs better than mine come to think of it. Full of gas. Maps. Some food and a roll of money for hotels under the seat.

'I still have mixed leanings, Sheriff. '

'Like I said. Thirty times. Any less and well some word on the truck might get out...accidentally now. I can only help ya so much now.'

'I'm obliged. Food sure was good this morning.'

'Jus' keep this in yer head the whole: murderer and racist. You're doing society a big favor. It's right close to heroism even.'

'Hadn't thought of it that way.'

'Like I say. You're in the program now. It's first class all the way assumin' you cooperate like.'

'I will. I may do 'im forty just for good measure'

'That's what I like to hear. Get some sleep now. I'll have Draper wake you when it's time.'

Crawley awoke on the crisp day. Folks gasped, gave thanks to the Lord, swore, spat and some things defying classification. The Tateville Herald said it plainly for once: DRAKE LONG FOUND DEAD. Seems he'd been stabbed by another prisoner ('yet to be determined according to sources close to the Sheriff's Department') with a screwdriver filed to a deadly point. He didn't have a chance and no body thought he deserved one anyone.

'The Lord will do his justice regardless' Mrs. Grimley told her family assembled at the breakfast table and surrounding the open paper in Gaston's hands. Sermons were preached around most breakfast tables that day. The two Wellman boys were grounded for having a battle with two of dad's screwdrivers.

The next day it become clearer. A fellow prisoner with whom Long was suspected of 'demanding unnatural contact' (the Sheriff's own constructed phrase) had stabbed him and in the confusion managed to escape. The black man was soon caught outside Lubbock however and was being held by federal authorities on assorted federal charges including possession of narcotics and interstate transport of a stolen vehicle. The Sheriff always kept a little cocaine on hand for such purposes. And there were at least two murders now. Seems a hotel clerk a hundred miles between Crawley and Drummond had received similar final treatment. Even the computers in Texas had made the screwdriver connection in minutes. Just if he could find a way to nail that slimy lawyer, the Sheriff thought. Maybe we can ask for him some time in the future when we get another tough case. New York lawyers were big game but he already had the taste a larger head.

A week later the Herald gave details of the prosecution evidence. Seems they were puzzled how such a man as Drake could learn so much of the chemical world. An anonymous tip to the District Attorney had helped them find three books in the State Library with Long's fingerprints on them. Two were on Poisonous Plants and one on Human Toxicology; together more than enough of a 'how to' on killing the animal kingdom with the plant kingdom.

Three months later the Long place was found burned down with Grace's body in it. A bullet was found in her head. It was suicide and 'auto-arson' beyond official doubt. Not everyone was sure though. Some of the women in town had taken Grace to themselves as Christian project. She'd been in town occasionally and was preparing some quilts for the second year of the Bosnia project. She was very enthusiastic and was looking forward to moving into town to work in the new Farm Supply Store the Laws and Clarks were building as a joint venture. By all accounts her life might be happy for once since childhood. It was a shame and mystery. The burning hurt for many in town. To others who secretly thought she shared in the crime it was a quiet victory. Few wanted to express either opinion just yet.