

## THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES

"The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones."

-- Ezekiel, 37:25

From the wheelchair in his room at The Meadows he watched Mrs. McCardle snap open the short beige drapes of the picture window with one quick separation of her plump hands. My god, the woman's getting to be as big as a parachute, he thought. Mrs. McCardle supervised the afternoon shift and, as far as Sheedy was concerned, she considered the title on her name tag license to behave like a queen bee. Because he had been there so long, she felt he deserved her personal attention or so she said. He was the only real celebrity at The Meadows and she was determined to make the most of it.

"It's too nice a day to be a shut-in like this, Mr. Sheedy," she said in a voice so sweet and controlled it made him gag. "It's so sunny and green and so...full of robusto."

Easy enough for you to say, he thought, looking down at legs that had outraced his spirit many years before.

"Well, what are we having for treats today, Mr. Sheedy?"

"Who's 'we'?" he grumbled. "Who's 'we' is what I want to know."

Mrs. McCardle cut him short.

"We've got grape juice, apple juice, cranberry juice and lemonade."

"Oh, a little Scotch will do me just fine."

"Now, Mr. Sheedy, we're not going to go into all that again. It's what got you here in the first place. Three strokes are enough for anybody."

"A coupla' big Scotches and over and out is all I'm asking for," he snapped. "And it's nothing short of indecent of you and a crime to keep me from it."

Mrs. McCardle faced him front and center, folded her large forearms and pouted.

"We're just not going to let that happen, Mr. Sheedy."

"Okay then, let's try a twenty-five-year-old and plop her right down on my lap," he said, laughing, wheezing, coughing, coughing uncontrollably.

“Serves you right, Mr. Smarty Pants,” she said, making her mouth smaller. She waited then, wagging her jowls self-righteously, until his coughing subsided and he folded a glob from his mouth into a tissue with his only good hand, the hand he used to hold his camera. His left.

“Are we going to miss treats today then, or are we going to be polite and civil?” she threatened.

“Polite and civil,” he conceded, head bowed.

“All right. Now. What will it be?”

“Grape juice and a chocolate chip peanut butter cookie.”

“Coming right up, and Mr. Hot Shot, I just happen to have an extra half cookie. I’ll be right back.”

Damn her, he thought. Dammit, dammit. If I could stand up, I’d choke the bitch to death.

He might have continued this fantasy but the newspaper he had tossed onto his bed just minutes before again caught his attention. An adolescent ache made him sit upright from his slump. He grabbed the newspaper, shook it, spread it out as best he could with his good hand and read the one paragraph article at the end of the “Notables” section on the obituary page:

#### **NOTED INTERIOR DECORATOR**

Clara Simpson, one-time actress and interior decorator to many of the stars of the Forties and Fifties, died yesterday in a Santa Monica nursing home. She was 79. The cause was cancer. She left no survivors.

"So," he said to the walls. "So, she *has* been alive all these years." There were periods of time — weeks, months — when he did not think of her at all, and then other moments when the memory of her sun-struck face brought him back to tears of spite and fury. "So, she had been alive and *never once* tried to contact me."

Seventy-nine, they say. Well, I’ll be damned. And here I took her for an older woman. By god, that would have made her twenty-three back then. Orphan, my ass. Runaway’d be my take on her. She’d been around the track all right.

At first, he followed her in the papers. Minor roles mainly. She was sleeping with the producers — he knew she was, just knew it — and the leading men too, no

doubt. He'd hear about her through old newspaper friends who, like her, had gone west during the Depression. As she got older, it was the younger actors — and actresses too, he bet — she took for a turn between the blankets. He couldn't really blame them. His black heart burned with lust and envy at every bit of news.

In their brief meetings she rambled about interior design, how to choose and arrange furniture, paintings she might have selected, styles and brands of appliances. He'd see her mentioned in the trade magazines he liked to browse. Why, she had even won awards for her work in the decorating business. He wondered how she looked when she died. A terrible wish shot through him. He cursed himself for it and with the curse, a small testy smirk invariably cut the corner of his mouth. Maybe she looked as bad as I do now, his smirk said.

As he did when he didn't know what to do next, he pushed the button on the control panel of his wheel chair and shot forwards towards the picture window, stopped abruptly, motored backwards. He drove forward and backwards several times using the window as his lens, focusing and refocusing the world outside. He went through this maneuver several times a day, especially when the weather was nice. The once well-known photographer could no longer work the camera properly. Screaming out helped him diminish the urge to scream out, something the staff and other patients found deeply disturbing. He could handle the dark dreary days. He liked a good book. The ballgames on television. And trading stories with some of the other old men. But the women were too run down and cranky to be of any interest. Sheedy prided himself in knowing that his spirit still fizzed with the passions of his youth. Desire — still there, even at his age.

A day like today was painful. Nice outside, crisp, breezy, the limbs of the trees flowing easily side to side, their leaves changing hues of green and shady as they faced the sun. Eyeing the window's lens, he muttered to the part of him that no longer moved, "Make it another photograph. Make it a still life and it will be just another picture in a magazine."

The flesh will never be fully alive again, he thought. But the flowers have kept their scent. Catch them. Lock them in. That's the story. That's the shot.

Damn that camera anyway, he thought. That little box had sucked away his life. I should have sawed lumber like my dad did for a living, Sheedy thought.

After his last stroke, Sheedy tried some of the newer cameras. They were simple enough but he couldn't stop his hands from shaking. That's when he decided to use the window as a lens, his left eye as the shutter. As he had done as a boy before he owned a camera. A camera of the mind. When he caught a shot he wanted, he narrowed his eyes to frame it, then blinked, hoping to remember it forever. Mrs. McArdle thought he was winking at her.

“You can be so cute sometimes, Mr. Sheedy,” she’d say.

“Don’t flatter yourself, you old bag. It’s just a nervous twitch. I’m not used to having relics from the Smithsonian in my bedroom.”

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In his later years Cabot Sheedy was invited to teach photography classes to art students at the regional college. He held his classes on the two nights during the week when his wife, Marge, played bridge with her golfing buddies. The Tuesday class was for theory; Thursday for labs. He liked to tell his students that his left hand grew a camera when he was ten years old, a birthday gift from father, and that he had generally carried a camera of one kind or another in his left hand ever since.

"My dad, Arvid Sheedy, was a good guy who worked plenty hard six days a week in a lumber yard in the West Bottoms in Kansas City. Sundays, he was off. He'd take me and my mother downtown to the Missouri side just to hang out, watch the rich folks show off their new motorcars and what not. For a number of years there was a funny little man who dressed up in a black suit with a vest and watch fob, a derby and a cane who stood on the street corner by his camera stand. It was a little booth with portraits of various people, couples and the like on one side and what he called art pictures on the other. On one such day he was photographing a new building that had just been dedicated by the mayor before a small crowd and my dad and I stood there watching him through the whole process. My dad kept leaning over to me, whispering, 'Did you see this? Did you see that?' and he'd throw back his head and laugh, and say, 'That's quite a machine that man has there,' and 'Why, it's just like magic.' And then he'd look down at me and say, 'How would you like to have one of those things some day?' and I said back, 'Well, I wouldn't mind if I would,' which set him laughing no end and by golly if he didn't show up with one on my very next birthday. That was Nineteen Hundred and Fifteen and

Kodak had just come out with a Brownie camera. It was a brand spanking new one, all nicely wrapped, and I was so excited I almost wet my pants when I saw what it was. And then if he didn't go on and take me up to that man and ask him to show me how it worked. The fellah was just as nice as he could be and every Sunday thereafter when we stopped at his camera stand he asked me to show him the pictures I had taken. Now the point of me telling you all this is that back in those days a camera was pretty much nothing more than a curiosity or for family picture albums and such. But not long after the war, that's when some of us started taking photography seriously. I'm thinking that's what you're in this class for. And if you are not, why, you can probably go down to a camera store or some other such place to learn how to load up your film. This class is for those of you who want to consider photography as an art form."

What Sheedy did not tell his students was that that his father died at the age of thirty-six a few months after he gave Cabot the camera that changed his life. For lack of money, Cabot's mother, Adele, moved them by train to a small community in Northwest Missouri where her older brother had a law office and a dairy farm. That's where she and Arvid had met and married. Cabot was their only child.

His uncle, Langford Mosley, remodeled the back of his downtown law office as a small apartment where Cabot and his mother could live and he could walk to school. Two years later Cabot lost his mother in a flu epidemic whirling through the county, brought to the small town by whom and in which way was a matter of gossip and speculation. Probably the darkies, the townfolk decided. Langford took Cabot to his farm and made him a small bedroom in the attic of his farmhouse. Uncle Langford and his wife, Bessie, had married later in life and did not have or want children. Bessie became a loving aunt to him. She was a school teacher and brought him books from the town library. He liked picture books best, drawings and paintings; the magazines like National Geographic, Life Magazine, Vanity Fair, Ladies Home Journal, any magazine or book that had professional photography. After Cabot started high school she would return from trips to Kansas City with books borrowed from the library that included the works of Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz and Man Ray.

Langford recognized early that Cabot would never be a farmer nor did he show any interest in commerce or horses or hunting or athletics. He was disappointed when

Cabot didn't ask about spending time in his law office going over cases. No curiosity there. Deeds, trusts, estates, real estate deals left Cabot with blank expressions and sad smiles. Langford was an easy man and it occurred to him that the boy never seemed inclined to put his camera down. He carried it with him as though it was a sacred stone. Though Cabot had no money to develop most of the pictures he took, he seemed content to explore the woods and streams close to the farm and pretend to snap pictures of what he found interesting framed by his hands and with a click of his left eye. On one of his adventures he found the skull of a longhorn, hid it behind a tree and brought back his camera, arranged the skull against a backdrop of fallen leaves and took a picture. Langford let him be as long as he did his chores and kept up his school work. Better that than to have him scoot off as a lost and lonely runaway.

Over the years Cabot's parents became shadows to him, early nineteenth century images in the two oval wooden cameo frames Bessie hung on the wall of his attic bedroom. The camera became his closest and most honest companion. He covered his feelings with it.

Though Langford offered Cabot a semester or two at the local college, he talked little of wanting to go. He seemed content to work odd jobs on nearby farms with his former high school friends and unload supplies for the farm supply company and general store, hanging around the small newspaper office in between. It had one of the few darkrooms in town and he relished the scent rising out of the solutions in the pans the paper's lone photographer used to conjure the pictures from their plates.

Marjory Walker, the cute dark-haired young woman Cabot married, had gone to a women's college in Chicago for two years. Marge, as her family called her, was one of his few close childhood friends, then his high school sweetheart. She seemed to have singled out Cabot from the crowd and enjoyed following him on his treks into the woods with his camera and stop to smooch as often as they could. Her father, Ford Walker, by that time a sudden and forlorn widower, could see where they were headed. It didn't suit him at all to have a daughter married to a man who spent most of his time fiddling around with a camera. Walker had a hand in most of the business of the town. He was not the richest man around but he owned a large farm, several of the town's buildings including the mortuary, was mayor for a short time and then continued to serve on the town

council. He insisted that his daughter be an educated woman and familiar with what he called “refinements.” When he saw she had no interest in art or music or returning as a teacher he finally gave his blessing for Cabot and Marge to marry but only after persuading his closet friend, Morton Bentley, the newspaper’s owner and publisher, to take Cabot on as an apprentice photographer. Like it or not, Cabot felt obligated to his father-in-law and tied from then on to Marge, though the feeling of being bound to her didn't catch up to him until after his brief encounter with Clara Simpson had turned him into being both resentful and thankful for Ford Walker's largesse.

Walker had already set aside funds from his wheat and corn crops for his three daughters and it was Marge's money that guaranteed the mortgage payments for the small gabled house just off Main Street three blocks from the newspaper office. It was her money that paid for the canned goods and other staples they couldn't grow in the garden out back when times were lean. He reckoned Marge was destined to be the love of his life.

Marge often told her friends how lucky she was to have snagged him. Though his bachelorhood was short lived, he was on the local ladies' short list and he knew it. They would say he was different, a romantic, an interesting young man to be around. His photographs began to be noticed. Within a year of their marriage, he was asked to join the leading newspaper in Northwest Missouri. Over Ford Walker's plea for Cabot and her to stay in their hometown, Marge followed Cabot to his new job.

He'd seen a lot by the time he met Clara Simpson, the last name she adopted after her second divorce: murders, speakeasy prostitutes, fights in highway taverns, barns and farm homes struck by lightning and burned to ashes, the wrath of tornadoes, blizzards and hail storms, horrific car accidents, the suicides of the desperate people of hard times. He thought of himself as quite an accomplished young man.

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He first saw Clara on the arm of her first husband, Lewis Lockhart. Cabot spotted the well-dressed couple strolling arm and arm through the grounds of a town square. Lewis was an important man in the county. Many thought he would make a good governor. He had a broad open face crowned with a thick bush of salt and pepper hair that kept falling over his forehead, wide shoulders and hirsute muscular forearms that

bulged forward from rolled cuffs after he peeled off his suit jacket in the muggy early spring afternoon and threw it over a shoulder. Sheedy estimated that Lewis was a good ten years older than his wife.

The event was the dedication of a small World War I memorial park across from the county courthouse. Lewis was one of the honored speakers. The crowd was larger than usual. Politics was in the air. Sheedy watched Lewis quickly edge away from Clara to visit with the other dignitaries, shaking hands and laughing loudly at whatever they said, leaving Clara by herself in the middle of the crowd. Several women had set up tables and put out a potluck of casseroles, sandwich platters, pitchers of lemonade, cakes and pies. Clara stood apart from them. It was clear to Sheedy that she hadn't brought anything for the get-together and appeared to have little interest in mixing with the other women. Looking around for admirers, he thought. The sight of her in that pose immediately stirred a desire in him to be with her, to photograph her and something more.

She stood tall and comfortable in a glowing yellow dress, perfect for the warm spring weather, that made her look glamorous and conspicuously out of place. Sheedy had to wonder if she was posing. The dress was a long slim-fit dress with short sleeves that hung easily from her solid, almost muscular frame, a dress one might have seen at Wieboldt's or Marshall Fields in Chicago or even the fashionable New York stores unlike the flowered patterns and prints of homemade clothes from Simplicity catalogues that hung off the other women there. She stood there boldly, bareheaded, no hat — and how could she? It would be hard to wear a hat over her massive mane of hair that reminded him of female movie stars. Her hair seemed sun struck, bold and honey blond, as thick stemmed as golden straw. A lion's mane on a woman's head, he thought, one that lit a fantasy he often had of such a woman standing in wheat field. A woman with the eyes and demeanor of an animal on the lookout.

Sheedy moved through the trees of the park trailing her as she wandered through them, holding up the camera as inconspicuously as he could, trying to imagine what a photograph might catch of her in the brightness of the day.

He followed her into the small groups making conversation, eyeing her sideways, pretending not to notice, looking for other ways to frame her with his left eye. He wanted



more of her in his camera. It was uncommon to take more than a few photographs at one of these events. Just needed a photo for the front page. He knew that. The newspaper's owner, Old Man Bentley, was keen on having the latest equipment. He was among the first in the state to buy the new Graphlex Speed Graphic camera that soon became the industry standard for news photographers, the camera seen most often flashing in the faces of politicians and gangsters. It thrilled Sheedy just to hold it in his hands, assemble and take it apart, adjust the two shutters, be in control of the big round conical flash. Bentley went on to buy the special holder that held six film sheets. The film was expensive, Bentley often complained, and made his two photographers account for every film slide. "Don't go round snapping pictures of every goddamn little thing. Use some judgment. It's not a toy. Just like a hunting rifle. Make every shot count. Ammunition doesn't grow on trees," he said.

Within a few minutes Sheedy had snapped two pictures of Clara Lockhart before suddenly realizing he may have snapped one too many.

He looked up from his camera and there she was, face to face.

"Are you flirting with me?" she asked, tilting her head to one side and looking him over, looking taller than him, though she wasn't. She carried herself with an openness most of the town's women rarely showed. In a time when women did not often wear makeup or go to beauty shops, she had done both. She smelled richly of lilacs.

"Yes," he blurted out with a thickness in his throat that he didn't want to own. "I suppose I have been and I..."

"Good," she said, stopping him with an upward flip of her opened hand, and walked away into the crowd smiling over her shoulder at him, moving up behind her husband who was sweet talking three older ladies in decorated bonnets and slipping her arm into his.

Sheedy continued to lurk in the shade of trees until the luncheon on the lawn of the square ended, snapping another picture of the picnic crowd with a remaining film and watching her with more side glances. She seemed to him to be older than he was, but not by much. At twenty-seven, Sheedy was of average height, trim with a boyish face and wavy brown hair, a man who easily caught a woman's eye. Marge often told him how handsome he was and how friendly his face.

He was also shy. He lost the shyness as time went on, but in those days, he was very shy. He had to work hard at looking and acting forceful. As he left the park, he was afraid his candid “Yes” might cost him his job. What if she told her husband about the brash young photographer and Lewis turned him into Old Man Bentley. Marge thought Cabot was slightly prone to exaggeration. If she knew the word "paranoid," she didn't use it, but maybe he was, just a little. Sheedy thought of himself as being skeptical. He was a newspaper guy and that was a given.

He worried about Clara until the next morning when he returned to work. Nothing was said and he went about developing the pictures, anxious only to see if he had one in the batch that might bring a compliment from the paper's editor, Charley Meeks.

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Clara surprised him a few days after their brief meeting with a telephone call. She asked to see the pictures he had taken of her.

He was working in the darkroom when Charley Meeks poked his head through the curtains. and told him he had a telephone call.

“Are my pictures ready yet,” Clara asked without announcing her name. It wasn't Marge's matter-of-fact voice. It was a fulsome voice that sounded sure and demanding.

“Who is this?”

“Just a small town girl who could use a cup of coffee.”

He spent most of the two days after the dedication thinking of her. He glanced at her prints as he worked. Some people liked a copy for a scrapbook or to mail to a relative but usually not someone like Clara. So, why then? He took a deep breath and told her he knew of a place and suggested they could meet there during his lunch hour without being gawked at.

"Perfect," she said and hung up.

The cafe he picked was used as a lunch spot by transient salesmen, single pensioners and war veterans from the old soldier's home. It sat on the corner of a street on the outskirts of town. Nice enough; simple and private. He learned of it from a waitress he met doing a story a few years before. She served whiskey for special customers in soda bottles. Some people in the county still favored Prohibition but the

townspeople generally ignored it. The waitress was a middle-aged woman he rescued at a highway joint a few seconds before a drunk threatened to change her looks with a broken beer bottle. She'd keep her mouth shut, pour them a real drink if he asked, slip her some money.

The cafe was in an old building on the corner of a back street west of town. None of the men at the newspaper whom Sheedy knew went there. Marge didn't often go out to eat with her friends as women do now. They visited each other in their homes. Sheedy wasn't afraid of gossip. He could concoct a reason for meeting with her as part of her job. He was more afraid of Clara herself, her mere presence. At first, his sole means of making conversation was to ask questions and to answer hers.

"May I ask," Sheedy said, still shy but feeling gutsy sitting across from her in the cafe where they met and taking in a slight scent of her perfume, "why then did you marry him?"

"I'm an orphan," she answered in a candid tone, not seeming flustered at all by his question. "You're not, so you wouldn't know what it's like." Sheedy never told her that he was an orphan too. "I was working in a furniture store in Kansas City and he came up to me to ask my advice about some fabric for a chair in his living room. Lewis lost his wife several years ago, you see. He inherited a beautiful old house, her family's. He's very fond of nice things. I told him I needed to see his house and the room where he wanted to place the chair and he drove me there the next Sunday afternoon. We went back to Kansas City that night and had dinner at a hotel downtown. The next day he asked me out to lunch and told me he'd been thinking about me all night and decided I was just the right woman for that house. One thing led to another and I married him. There is something warm and friendly and protective about him. He won't let anything happen to me. I know that he won't."

Sheedy told her about his fear of offending her husband.

"Lewis isn't a mean man," Clara laughed when he told her about his fear of Lewis Lockhart later that week during their first private meeting. "He really is a very sweet, a charming man. Very busy, that's all. Too busy sometimes for a gal like me."

After their coffee was served, Clara pulled the prints out of the envelope and held them up to the light.

“These really are good pictures,” she said, laying them down. “You want some more?”

As they talked, they passed the sugar and cream back and forth. She surprised Sheedy again by touching his hand.

By then their hands had brushed passing the sugar and cream. It happened that fast. Her dark clever eyes and the smile that parted her lips erased any reluctance he felt about being with her in the cafe and attracting attention or gossip.

"I do," he answered, "want...would like...more pictures of you. In fact, I have an idea. For more pictures. Not sure I should tell you about it."

He couldn't believe he brought it up, his obsession. But he did. Something about her told him he could. She sat back in such a relaxed way that if she hadn't been married to such an important man like Lewis he might have thought she had something up her sleeve as well.

"Go ahead," she said. "Shoot. I'm listening."

"I've had this thought, this idea," he went on, "for some time but never thought I'd find the right woman for it. I really don't know how to go about telling it to you. I'm afraid I might offend you. You might want to slap my face and walk out. More than an idea, really. An image that's comes to mind many times driving down the road looking for buildings, unique objects, landscapes worth capturing with my camera."

She leaned forward and rested her chin on her fist.

"Go on," she smiled.

When he told her outright and in detail, she sat back in her chair with wide eyes, tilted her head with a puzzled frown, maybe even a shocked expression. He wondered if he had gone too far. He might have misread her. Gone too fast. He wanted to stand up, excuse himself, apologize, turn and run.

“Really? Look,” she said, relaxing after a thoughtful pause. “I can’t say much right now.” She lowered the volume of her voice. “I want to see you again but only like this for a while. It’s complicated. Some day we may be able to do what you want to do but I need to know you a lot better. You must understand. You're pretty fresh, you know. To bring up something like that after just meeting a woman. I might very well have slapped you or screamed or run into the street to look for a policeman.”

"I've taken a big chance. I know that," he said, frightened again. "I don't know why. Sometimes I act on impulse. I just had a hunch. You must do that to a lot of men. You must already know that. I knew it the minute I saw you. I don't mean anything disrespectful. I mean what I say as a compliment. I've been waiting for a woman like you to show up. A one of a kind in my book. I may still be young but I'm not as green as you may think. I've been working on the paper for a while. I've seen a lot."

"I'll bet you have. There's a lot more to this part of the country than meets the eye. That's for sure. I will say this about you. You don't scare me. I can usually tell about people. I've had my eyes opened over time. There's a lot of bad people running around. That's why I've thrown in with Lewis. He doesn't scare me. If anything, I know I can trust him. He's steady."

There were more lunches after that and a drink now and then in his Model T pick up or in her roadster with the convertible top buckled down. Some afternoons they would skip the cafe entirely. She hid her car in a grove of thick maple trees further down the road from the cafe. From there Sheedy drove them in his pickup to a spot by the little river where he had gone as a boy when he wanted to be alone. A car parked there couldn't be seen from the highway or the road that led to it. Sometimes she nipped out of a flask of vodka from her purse. He just looked on as she did. Marge would notice. After several sips from the flask she would look over at him, smile and kiss him softly on the mouth, then turn away. On other days, she slid across the seat and snuggled into his shoulder wanting to be held silently as they listened to the sound of the trees. After he dropped her off at her car and drove away, he shuddered at what he was doing. He was putting himself in danger in so many ways. He worried the scent of her perfume would linger on his shirt. He wanted to ask her to not wear any. He didn't want anything to spoil or end his time with her. On occasion when she kissed him — he had never tried to kiss her — he could feel the very tip of her warm tongue slip between his lips, an act that thrilled and terrified him. Other times she just felt comfortable to be with and he liked laying his face onto her hair. A time came when they could openly discuss the photograph he wanted to take of her. He had no idea of what he might do with it.

The winter wheat crop that spring spread gloriously through Missouri and Kansas, one of the last before the great dust storms. The final weekend in June Marge decided to

take the children on the train to visit her elderly aunt and uncle for the Fourth Of July. That's when Cabot called Clara and asked her if she might be up for the shoot he had in mind and she quickly and enthusiastically again said, "Perfect." Maybe he could include her in her in a portfolio he was hoping to send off to an art gallery in Chicago. He could turn her face slightly away from the camera so she could not be identified without destroying the effect. He wanted to create an iconic photograph that would catch a publisher's eye. A work of art.

Often sitting alone at night after Marge and the two children were asleep, he sipped a glass of homemade wine and debated an even more terrifying idea —leaving Marge and the two children for a life of photography in Chicago or New York. Just disappear from his current life. Start his life over. Or maybe he could have it both ways. Be a family man during the week with a secure income and practice his art on his days off. Sell the plan to Marge and her father as a way to make extra money. One style of photography for the common folk and another as art on the sly. The daily humdrum was getting to him. Seeing Clara had given him a face, a body, a chance to his make his fantasy real. The specter of a self-inflicted disaster for himself and for everyone involved hung over him.

The idea had come to him on one of his weekend drives past wheat fields ripe for harvest. Daring. One that might interest a national magazine editor. A photo of an attractive woman at the height of her beauty standing nude in the middle of a wheat field in a provocative pose.

As it happened, Clara let him know that Lewis was on his way to Washington, D.C. and might even have to spend the Fourth of July there at a congressional committee's invitation. It was unusual but the committee at the Department of Agriculture had more than the usual amount of business and it made no sense for him to leave Washington over the holiday just to return home, turn around and go back. It might be a good time, Cabot thought, to have more than a short visit on the kind of Saturday that gave him an excuse to go out on one his field trips, one that Marge had given him the freedom to do in his pursuit of a more lucrative career.

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He and Clara arranged to meet again outside the cafe just after daybreak. The cafe had not yet opened. She drove a brand new DeSoto convertible that had been custom painted a dark shiny green. His Model T pickup, a loaner from the newspaper for chasing stories, looked drab and trashy beside it.

“You drive,” she said, scooting over to the passenger seat of her car.

Cabot stepped back.

“Clara, I’m not so sure that driving your car is such a good idea. Every farmer in Kansas will look up at this car speeding down the roadway. It’s a knockout. They’ll see your hair whirling around your beautiful face. Might be safer, don’t you think, just to hide it here in the trees. I know this pickup might seem pretty rough but...”

“No, no, I guess you’re right,” she shrugged. “I thought it might be worth a rip. But you’re right. I can see that.”

By agreement the day before, he brought some beer and a bottle of wine packed in a wooden box with chunks of ice from the bait shop and a quilt to spread on the ground. She had a basket of chicken fried by her negro maid, Henrietta, hard boiled eggs, fresh tomatoes, and homemade coleslaw dressed in vinegar and bacon grease and a full fifth of whiskey. Henrietta kept the big house in order, cooked and answered the phone. Clara trained her to say nothing about her comings and goings and paid her on the side to keep quiet. That gave Sheedy some assurance that Lewis would not learn about their meetings. Though he woke at nights at the thought, he was determined to live out his fantasy, come what may. He had carried it so long that the sudden reality of seeing Clara Simpson standing beside him in the shade of the tree, looking up at him, smiling and actually willing to follow him into the unknown made him want to back away, call it off. No, he said to himself, he might never have another chance. As surreal as this moment was he had to make it happen now.

They drove the country roads through the corn fields on the west side of town where they were likely not to be identified in the dust cloud that followed the pickup. Further west they drove past fields of wheat with newly formed tassels waving in the wind. As he drove Sheedy talked about landscape features that attracted him and what he looked for in his hikes through the woods.

“For some reason that I've never fully understood I am drawn to old animal bones, especially the skulls of longhorn cows,” he told her as he drove along. “Don’t ask me why except to say I find a hidden wisdom, a reverence, in their... gosh, how to say it...in their lack of expression, their silence. My uncle used to bring me out here on long drives and we’d go for hikes in the woods and he’d point out animal tracks and burrows and different kinds of nests. We’d come across bones and skulls of deer and cattle. Somehow they still seemed to still live but in a different kind of way. There’s lots of bones out here. Makes you wonder what they've seen, what they've heard. I look into the hollows of their eye sockets for some kind of explanation. An explanation of what or where I don't know.”

“Makes me want to shiver,” Clara said, looking away.

The sun came and went through the clouds, turning the wheat fields from gold to silver and back to gold. After reaching a stretch with no farmhouses in view, Cabot turned off the highway and followed a dirt road until there was nothing but wheat fields in all directions.

He found a hiding place for the pickup after seeing tractor tracks covered with weeds that stopped at a narrow wooden bridge downhill in the middle of a dense grove of cottonwood trees. He set the brake, dismounted from the truck, walked across the bridge to find it firm. From there he drove slowly downhill to park by a stream. With a wheat field on one side and the cottonwood trees on the other, he felt comfortable that the pickup was well hidden. Clara climbed out of the truck to stretch, watched as he unloaded the camera and his wooden tripod while she flung the quilt over her shoulder and carried it behind him. He pointed to a grassy open space near the stream where they could spread the quilt.

“Would you like to eat first?” Sheedy asked. “We could spread the quilt there.”

“No,” she said. “Afterwards.”

“Okay then. Let's bring the quilt with us for now. We'll need it for the staging area.”

He strung two camera bags, one with the film and attachments, the other with the camera itself by their straps over his shoulders and grasped the tripod.



She trailed him uphill to the dirt road through the gulley next to it. They stopped at a barbed wire fence.

"We can climb through it," he said. "Just have to be careful."

He set down the two bags and the tripod and gestured her towards the fence. He made an opening through the fence by spreading the wire with both hands and watched as she stuck her skirt between her knees, bowed her head and slowly climbed through avoiding the barbs one leg after the other. On the other side, she stood and straightened her skirt. She faced Cabot reaching out as he handed her the quilt, the camera and camera bags over the top wire. She laid down the quilt onto a narrow dirt track between the fence and the wheat field, set the camera bags on top of it and the tripod on its side. She pulled open a space through the fence for Cabot who grasped a wooden post in its middle to steady himself putting one leg through and then the other as she had. Both looked into each other's faces, slightly shaking at being able to climb through the fence without cutting themselves on the barbs.

Clara carried the folded quilt in her arms; Cabot the tripod and his camera bags as they walked single file into the wheat. While he cleared an opening by tramping down a broad section of wheat and unfolded and steadied the tripod, she spread the quilt over the open space and began tossing off pieces of clothing like leaves. She did so without a word as if they had been married twenty years. Sheedy was surprised at how closely she had listened to his instructions in the cafe as he described the scene to her. She undid the two combs holding back her hair and let it drop onto her shoulders. The wind caught the tresses and scattered them across her back. She rehearsed one pose and then another, admiring her body, disheveling her hair, lifting her breasts, inspecting them as they peaked.

"I need to settle my feet," she said. "The ground is pretty rough."

The aroma of the ripening wheat rose in the wind, smelling strongly of straw and earth.

After he had assembled the camera on the tripod, Cabot strode towards her, positioned her, ran his eyes up and down her face, angled it right and left, lifted her chin slightly and stood back. He wanted to make love to her then and there.

He inhaled and said:

"We'll want you to stand at a half angle. Put your right foot slightly ahead. Leave your left foot where it is now. We want to show as much of you as we can. I'd take a full frontal shot of you but then... Anyway, this pose will work. Are your feet okay?"

"I can handle it. I'm very excited."

Cabot gathered up her skirt and sandals and carried them back to the quilt. He had arranged her so he could expose as much of her and bathe her in as much sunlight as he could. At times the sun was almost completely behind the clouds yet bright enough to cause her to squint. Then it shown through to light her from above. She laughed and turned in small circles between shots, a young girl playing in the slight breeze. He commanded her to stand naturally, arms at the side, turning at slight angles, one knee slightly bent. As she did, she invented her own poses, modeling the air and the sun. He hadn't realized how well formed she was, how red her nipples, how tawny her complexion. Made him wonder if she had some Mediterranean blood in her lineage. Her strong thick hair shook long and wavy over her shoulders. Half lion, half lioness, he thought, with her royal mane, an athletic build muscular for a woman, arms and thighs sinewy, buttocks tight, pointed, raised and firm.

He took five shots. He remembered the exact moment when he took the shot he kept. She had just said, "Here is where I belong. Out here, nothing to hold me back, no husband, no nothing," lifting her arms slightly outward from her side, smiling. Her skin drew tight and smooth over her ribs as she stretched slightly on her toes and took the sprays of light shooting from the clouds.

When they finished and she was dressed, their silence was a mix of awe and reverence. They had done it, hadn't they, the unspoken grandeur of woman in nature, the triumph, however brief, of flesh over bone, of light over darkness? Sheedy had in his camera, he hoped, the work of art that had been haunting him.

They reversed the procedure they had used to climb through the fence and returned to the pickup. After she spread the quilt in the small opening of the cottonwoods, she fetched her purse from the seat of the pickup.

"Cabot, I need to go for a short walk," she said.

"I do too," he said.

He walked along the stream and relieved himself. As he moved along the stream he clicked his left eye at the stream, the shadows on its flowing water, pebbles and stones, the greenery on its banks. He heard Clara shout, "Cabot, come see what I've found!"

He saw her bent over something on the ground behind a tree not far from the quilt.

"Cabot, up here. You won't believe what I've found." She turned and pointed in a direction away from the stream.

"The skull of a longhorn," she said. "I want it. I want to take it back. I'll tell Lewis I bought it off a farmer's wagon or a that souvenir shop in town. I've always wanted one."

The skull was a good specimen, clean and unbroken, the horns in tact, an animal that might have strayed from the herd, gotten lost, fell ill, broken a limb, starved alone there. Just a solitary skull laying by itself.

It was unusual to find a longhorn that far east. Their remains were more likely to be further west along the trails of the cattle drives from Texas across Kansas up into Montana. But there it was. "Naked and alone..." Sheedy thought, echoing words that stuck with him from the Sunday sermons he heard at his uncle's Methodist church.

"In many ways, it's more beautiful dead, don't you think?" she said. "I mean they're such dumb looking things with those sorrowful eyes. Clumsy, the ones I've seen, wandering around as if they didn't know where they're supposed to go. Maybe I could hang it over the barn door."

Cabot nodded and said nothing, not wanting to contradict her. He saw the skull himself from another view, as an emblem, a holy thing, exuding the need for reverence. He walked around it, knelt on one knee, framing it this way and that, wanting to make it memorable. He had three plates left in the truck. He retrieved the camera. The skull sat in a shadow and needed polishing. He snapped it as it lay, one shot from the front to include both horns, the other from the side. He wanted to capture it in the natural setting where Clara found it. He lifted it from the ground and carried it to the steam. He carefully washed it and set it in the sunshine near the quilt to dry. That was where he took the third

shot. He hoped that in the dark room he might discover a detail in one of the photographs that took it from ordinary to extraordinary.

Clara had opened the wine and poured them a drink into the water glasses from the wooden box. They sipped the wine and watched the leaves of the cottonwoods above them flutter. Clara poured more wine while Sheedy set out the plates, napkins and silverware. They ate silently in the shade. When they finished eating, they held each other and traded small kisses, lay back together with Clara's face against his chest, taking in the sound of the leaves and the coolness of the grove.

Sheedy thought he might have dozed. He opened his eyes to see Clara stand, stretch and smile down at him. She dropped her skirt on the quilt, pulling off the rest of Sheedy pushed himself up, stood behind her, slid his arms around her waist and down onto the front of her thighs, kissed her in the curvature of her neck, behind her ear. She turned and helped Sheedy undress and pulled him down by his hands to the quilt. Sheedy could feel the breezes brush over his skin and the bottoms of his feet. He would forever remember that sensation at night when the breezes stirring the trees outside the windows of his house ruffled the curtains and filled the bedroom he shared with Marge.

Her lovemaking was careful and slow. Sheedy had expected her to be aggressive and fierce but she followed his movements and rhythms softly, compliantly. Any fears he had of not pleasing her drifted into the air around them. They moved together softly until their passion intensified and he fell onto her breasts, heaving, his face buried in the sweet-smelling nape of her neck and shoulder.

With Marge it was different, he thought then. She rarely refused him but when she did she merely turned aside and yawned. That was her signal. Even when she seemed agreeable, Sheedy often sensed she was in a hurry for him to finish. Clara took her time. Her tenderness calmed him. Cabot had felt a pang of doubt when he saw her undress so readily in the wheat field with no hint of needing to hide herself. In the time of their love making her bones felt small and fragile. She had given herself willingly, her quiet pleasurable moaning adding to the sensation. Their bodies were a natural fit. What they did with each other felt spontaneous, their nakedness raw. They lay quietly a moment with the breeze stirring lightly over their skin.

They held each other a moment longer, then sat side by side staring ahead as if trying to decide what they might do next. Thinking back on that moment over the years Sheedy, the old man, often said aloud, "Art and sex, the perfect pair, and when they are not, booze and baseball."

Feeling Clara beside him, Sheedy puzzled over what they had just done. There was no reason for him to be unhappy or troublesome with Marge. She was a capable, a smart woman, easy to look at and be with, a good wife and friend. She had made the two of them and the children a comfortable home, was pleasant in their every day encounters, ran the household as one should be. He felt fortunate to have missed the war. Unlike some of his friends who slunk around quietly in the company of veterans, feeling guilty, he was thankful for his youth and good luck. His job at the newspaper and the fact that he could use the camera as his hunter's spear might have made another man happy. But Sheedy wanted something more. He wanted to use the camera as the instrument of his art, to have the means and the time to show and explain what he saw. He wanted a partner to do with him what he had daydreamed for years, a woman of the world, a woman like Clara, a perfect woman standing nude and defiant in a field of luminous wheat.

Painters had their oils and brushes. Sculptors their hands, their tools and an infinite universe of materials. Musicians had their voices and instruments. Sheedy had his camera, his eye, the lens his weapon, the whole world to capture. It was the restlessness that gnawed at him, the hunt, the hunger to search and find a perfect shot.

They drove back to the outskirts of town in the fading light of early evening. Standing by her DeSoto Cabot was suddenly tired, his body disjointed. As he moved to help Clara into her car she slid down against him, grabbed him around the middle, nestled tightly into him and whispered, "Cabot..." her voice trailing away.

"I'll call you," Sheedy whispered. "Maybe we can have lunch on Thursday. All right?"

"Not sure. I'll have to see what I can do." She was more formal now. "But I will be thinking about you," she said, kissing him quickly on the cheek, pulling herself up by the steering wheel onto the seat. She started the DeSoto with the efficiency of a

mechanic satisfied with his work, revved the engine and turned onto the road in the direction of Lewis Lockhart's farm.

\* \* \*

On the following Wednesday morning when he woke Sheedy thought immediately about calling her, looked through the twilight towards the door that led to the kitchen and the telephone, raised up on an elbow, fell back onto the sheets. By Thursday, the image of Clara in the wheat field seemed ephemeral, impressionistic: at once elated, then struck by shock and remorse. What had he done overall? To himself, to his family? Was he losing his mind? Or, like the longhorn who had stumbled into its death by a tree, had he wandered into a dark valley of his own?

After church the next Sunday Sheedy stood in the garden with Marge and his two children, hoeing and trimming tomato plants. The tomatoes were a week away from picking. His boy, Ford Walker Jr. and Annie, his beautiful blond headed little girl, had their small baskets at the ready on the back porch and were giggling secretively, stopping whenever Sheedy looked over at them. Marge looked pretty in her straw bonnet and apron, pretty enough that Sheedy wanted to hug her as she turned to smile at him. She planned to pick up her father, Ford Walker, now at a nursing home, to bring over for dinner. Cabot wanted to be excited about the evening, the prospect of one of Marge's famous country meals and some tall whiskeys with the old man, a fatherly dignified soul with the kind of stories and business and political talk that Sheedy enjoyed. Then he shivered again remembering what he and Clara had done, his long hoped for project preposterous looming in memory.

When the telephone rang, he flinched and dropped the hoe. Marge looked over briefly at him, then continued clipping the vines. He hurried into the house and dropped the receiver as he lifted it with one hand, catching it with other, shaking, cursing it. They were one of few families in town that owned one, courtesy of Marge's well-to-do family. Strangers knocked on the door asking to use it. She and Talbot agreed to turn them away. Close neighbors only. He shivered that Clara might be on the line. He couldn't bring sound to his voice. When he did, he sounded cowardly, inept, a green horn at adultery.

"Cabot, is that you?" Clara said.

Even as he knew it would be her, he froze a moment in denial. Surely not.

“Who is this?” he lied.

“It’s me, Clara.” The line crackled with interference. “Can you hear me?”

“Not very well,” he lied again. He whispered his words. “Can I call you back later? Meet you in the park. In that little spot by the bench?”

“Cabot, you must speak up. I’ve got to talk to you.”

“Look,” Sheedy said in a raspy, choking voice, “I may have to hang up on you.”

“That’s all right. But try not to. Is she there? Is that the problem? I’m sorry to do this to you. But this is urgent. Is she there with you?”

“No.”

The crackling on the telephone line came and went.

“Cabot, it’s only because of Saturday. I haven’t been able to settle down. My skin is crawling. I think I’m falling apart.”

“Is it something I’ve done?” He choked as he said it. His could hear feel his rapid heartbeat. Had she told Lewis? Had she talked to Lewis on the phone?

“Where’s Lewis?” Sheedy threw in.

“I don’t know. I think he’s staying in Washington another day or two and then stopping in Chicago about some kind of livestock deal. He may be gone for a week. It’s a perfect time.”

That word again. “Perfect.”

“Perfect for what?” Sheedy asked, hollow inside. He kept looking through the kitchen at the screen door.

“I can’t stay here, Cabot, you know that. I’ve got to get out of here. Come with me. Come with me, Cabot. Let’s get out of here. The time is right. I’m suffocating. I know that now. I’m dying a slow death. I’m too young to die young.”

Sheedy leaned against the wall, the receiver perpendicular to his ear, the line shaking along his arm. He thought about his daughter, not three years old, and how she smiled shyly ear to ear when he walked in the door. He thought about Marge in her maternity gowns, how tender she looked sitting there next to a vase of flowers from the front lawn. He wondered what his son would think of him when he was old enough to understand.

“Clara, look here,” he pleaded. “I can’t just up and leave my family.”

He despised the metallic taste and in his mouth.

“Cabot, listen closely to me. I’m desperate now. You’ve let me out of the gate. I liked it. I liked all of it, the wind on my skin, in my hair. Being naked with you. Fucking you on the quilt on top of the grass.”

Hearing her speak those words embarrassed him.

“I can’t stay here,” she said. “If I go, I want you to be with me. Just pack up my car with a few things and enough money to get to California. That’s where everyone is going now. California, Cabot. It’s different there. The ocean’s there, and the sun, and olive groves and vineyards.”

“Clara, I need time to think about it.”

“But Cabot, we’ve talked about this. In your truck. Both of us did. You and me. How we wished we could get away. How we feel tied down and caged up. The whole world out there, Cabot. We could go anywhere. Europe. Africa. No limit to it. We don’t have time, Cabot. This chance may never come again. It’s perfect. Lewis is gone. The world just keeps turning and turning and there’s no need to be stuck in a rut of a place like this. Listen to me. If we leave now, he’ll never catch up. The longer we wait the easier it will be for him to find us. He’s got friends, Cabot. Important friends.”

Sheedy’s mind drifted involuntarily. By the stream on a quilt. Cottonwood trees overhead.

“I can’t think right now. I need time to figure things out,” he said.

She paused. He thought he could hear her breathing heavily through the crackle and static.

“Cabot, I don’t have *any* time,” she yelled, angry now. He heard her crying. “Cabot, I must leave. I need to go *now*. I’m falling apart. I’m being suffocated. It’s the boredom and the same day-to-day, do nothing, know nothing. I want every day to be like Saturday. I can’t waste any more time. We only get to live once, Cabot. The time is now.”

Sheedy knew well what she saying, what she was feeling, the humdrum, the need for excitement. And he agreed, deep down, he agreed. He ached to leave, drop everything, run with her into the wind.

“But what about Lewis?” he asked with nothing else to say.



“I’m sorry about Lewis, but I’ve already given him too much. I can’t stand to be around him. I know that now. Not after our time together. I don’t like being coddled. Left behind when he travels. I can’t stand being owned. I’m not a cow. You’ve got your eye and your camera and I’ve got my body and my spirit. It’s not right to be held back. It’s just not right.”

Sheedy looked again at the screen door. He would be able to hear Marge coming in with the children and would have time to hang up the telephone if he had to. Along with his fear, Sheedy’s body tingled with anticipation. He could take his camera. He would have the entire West to photograph, the mountains, and the ocean and all the places along the way. They could go anywhere. Mexico. Europe. Saturday was the first time in his life he had taken such a monstrously foolish chance. It was a desperate move, a frightening one. Being with her had been like a blurred all day drunk. He had awakened terrified, shaken and desperate. He looked out the small front door window into the fading light of the afternoon. The fading light. That's what ate at him.

He settled into his childhood self again, Cabot Sheedy, the orphan. He hadn't let her know that. Didn't think he should. Being an orphan was her prize possession, the card she played. She hadn't had a Langford and a Bessie, a Ford Walker to be good to her. Here he was coming over tonight for dinner, to be with his grandchildren, looking to see his daughter happy and safe. Packing up, getting in Clara’s car and driving away forever, felt sacrilegious. His legs felt weak.

“Clara, listen to me. I can’t,” he said, choking on his words. "I just can't. Not yet. Not now. I can't show cause."

“Why not? What cause do you need? What cause does anybody need. It's who you are, Cabot. The way you were last Saturday. The real Cabot. The way we were together. That's who we really are.”

“I don’t know. I just can’t.”

“I can’t believe you. Cold feet? I never took you for a coward. Not then. Do you believe in yourself or don’t you? Or is that camera of yours just a toy? Am I a toy?”

She stopped a minute to listen for his answer. Then she said, "I know this. I am going with or without you, Cabot. I’m not just a small-time whore. I’m an enterprise. I’m the whole shebang. Maybe you're just not in my league.”

Cabot's mouth was desert dry. He felt the receiver of the telephone tapping against his ear.

"Let's, let's...talk about it some more. Can I see you Friday?"

"I won't be here no goddamn Friday," she said and hung up.

\* \* \*

Four days later there was another call, at four in the morning. Even two rooms away from the kitchen the telephone seemed to ring so loudly Cabot feared it would wake the children.

He slid over the edge of the bed, half crawled to the kitchen tripping over himself, reached up and grabbed the telephone on the fifth ring. He could hear Marge groan. A deep sleeper, she turned to her other side. He prayed it would not be Clara. By the sound of the voice babbling on the line he wasn't sure who it was. The voice paused a minute. Then a coughing spell.

"Cabot!" he heard Clara shout.

Her voice sounded slurred, drugged.

"Clara," he whispered harshly. "I asked you not to call me here."

"Cabot, listen. Shhh. Don't be angry. Just listen. I know it's insane but listen. Please. I'm really in bad shape, Cabot. Listen. Stay on the line. I need your help badly."

"Where are you?"

"In Kansas City. In a hotel. It's a place run by some nuns I know. A woman's hotel. But they won't let me stay."

"Why call me at home? It's safer at the paper. Don't you care what happens to me?"

"Of course, I care. But Cabot, listen. You don't understand. I'm all beat up. I got beat up, Cabot, and I can't let Lewis know. I need someone to get me to a doctor. You're the only person who can help me. My maid can't know. Even so. She can't drive."

"Wait a minute," Cabot whispered. "Somebody beat you up?"

He could hear her sobbing. He looked over his shoulder to see if Marge might be coming into the kitchen. Clara's crying slowed to whimpering and then she answered.

“I’ve been on a drunk. A two-day drunk. After you turned me down, I drove to Kansas City and went to some clubs. I don’t remember where I left my car. I met two men in a club and we got drunk together. They took me to a flophouse and I fell asleep. When I woke up, they were tearing my clothes off. I fought with them. I told them I was too drunk. Wait until tomorrow. I thought that would put them off. But they got mad at me and started yanking me around and shoving me against the wall. I grabbed at their arms to slow them down and scratched one of them in the face and he started bleeding. He pushed me down and kicked me and then he and the other one jumped on me and beat me up. Cabot, I think my nose is broken. Maybe some ribs too. It hurts to breathe.”

Sheedy felt sick. About her face. About what was going to happen next. This had to be a nightmare. It wasn't happening.

“What do you expect me to do?” he hissed. “I’ve got to be at work in a few hours.”

“It’s the least you can do. Tell them an old friend of yours needs help. Tell them it’s an emergency.”

Sheedy didn’t like the way she assumed he would help her, automatically, just like that. But he did worry about Lewis Lockhart. He didn't know what to say to Marge. Suddenly, he didn’t trust Clara. She must be crazy. She could tell anybody anything.

He had an idea. An old friend was in trouble and needed his help. That's what he could tell Marge. It happened once before. In real life. And Marge knew it to be true. He might be able to sell the idea to her again. Charlie Meeks on the news desk would understand about an old friend in Kansas City. Sheedy was lucky to have his job. Ford Walker’s friendship with Old Man Bentley would only go so far. Times were worse now than anyone could have imagined.

“Please, Cabot. I want to catch a train. Get out of here for good. I won’t bother you again. It’s the *least* you can do.”

“Okay, okay. Let me think. I’ll do what I can. But don’t call me here again. If you have to, call me at the newspaper.”

Sheedy waited an hour, then called Bill Simmons, the paper’s only other photographer, at his home. He promised to talk to Meeks if Sheedy would take the following Tuesday and work in his place in the darkroom. Sheedy left a note for Marge

about having to help out an old friend in Kansas City and hoped he would be back by dark.

"Keep this between us, Marge," he wrote. "I'll explain it all later. Don't you worry now."

The early morning sunlight on the road to Kansas City shot through the windshield in bolts. Sheedy, still half asleep and frantic, struggled around the curves and fought to concentrate on controlling the pickup. He knew the section of the city Clara described to him, the "down part," people often joked, outside lower downtown.

"I've got someone's name," she said getting in his truck without looking at him. She carried a worn blue travel bag. She read him directions from a piece of a torn paper sack. They drove east of downtown by the river to a section called Harlem and over several gravel roads to a small tarpaper shack. A thin black woman somewhere into old age with a scarf knotted behind her short gray hair came to the doorway with her hands folded. She nodded at them, shuffled over to the pickup and looked through the window.

"Oh, honey," the old woman said. "Oh me, oh my."

She helped Clara out of the truck and led her inside. Sheedy followed with the travel bag. The old woman led them down a hallway and seated Clara on an armless wooden chair in a small room smelling of rubbing alcohol. Bottles, bandages and a tray of medical instruments were arranged on the top of a waist high cabinet with numerous small drawers. She removed Clara's scarf, stepped back to look at her and clasped her hands in front of her face.

"Oh honey, what has they done to you? Them damn mems, anyway. We don't need them nasty old things around, now do we? No ma'am, we don't need no goddamn mems."

She looked up at Sheedy and nodded at the door. He sat on the wooden steps outside the shack watching two thin dogs growl at him. Even then in that circumstance, he wished he had brought his camera. The dirt yard was strewn with the remains of what was once a household: overturned washtub, an icebox, bottle caps, rusted bed springs, a shovel. More skeletons, Sheedy thought, clicking his left eye.

Two hours later Clara emerged from the shack on the old woman's arm. Some of the puffiness had gone from her eyes and lips. The skin under her eyes were covered

with purple and orange bruises. Her nose was bandaged. A bloody scratch showed along her hairline from under the brim of an old hat the woman must have drudged up from another day.

“Now honey, you will get better. You will heal, chile. So don’t you go gettin’ blue. You jest get on wiff it now,” the old woman said as Clara climbed back into the pickup. “You stay clear of mems for a while. Honey, they ain’t nuttin’ but trash. Oh, lordie be.”

“Thank you, Grandma Smith,” Clara said, as though she had known her from the past. She slipped her a wad of bills. “Remember, you’ve never seen me,” she pleaded.

“Hell, honey, they’s a lot I ain’t seen. Too many things. You got no worries from me. You jest get on wiff it, chile. And don’t forget your bag.”

Sheedy took the travel bag from the old woman. Cabot helped Clara onto the front seat of his pickup and set the travel bag at her feet.

They spent the next two hours looking for Clara’s car. Clara would name a spot and lay her head back on the seat while he drove. “Oh, I’m so hung over, Cabot. I hurt so much,” she moaned. Twice he had to stop so she could be sick. Sheedy had never felt so frightened or depressed. He could feel his life with Marge and his children spinning away into the universe. He was ruined.

Clara thought she had started at a club out in the county and then vaguely recalled several smoke filled rooms at a honky-tonk. Men sat at tables playing cards and laughing and drinking whiskey straight from the bottle. Sheedy didn’t know where to begin. She could have been any place. By chance — the luckiest moment of his life, he thought — he spotted her car out of the corner of his eye out as soon as he drove up Main Street and passed by Union Station. The custom paint job of her roadster stood out like an apparition among the rows of dusty cars parked haphazardly in the lot.

“Oh, that’s right, that’s right,” Clara said when he pointed it out. “It was part of my plan. Leave it there and then ask for a ride back to the station. Then I could just get on the train.”

Sheedy couldn’t figure it out. How did she get from Union Station to the bar out in the county. He would never know.

When Sheedy stopped his truck in front of her car, she tugged frantically at the door handle in a hurry to get out, tugged without success until Sheedy turned off the engine, circled the hood, opened the door, took her hand and helped her step down to the gravel.

"I'm leaving the car here," she said. "I don't want Lewis to have me arrested as a car thief. I've already sold the jewelry he gave me and bought a ticket. He can't get me for that. That stuff is mine."

"It's a wonder they didn't rob you," Sheedy said. He wanted to say more, wanted her out of there and gone, to send her on her way with as few words as possible.

She began to disguise herself with the old hat over her forehead, a pair of spectacles and a neck scarf from the travel bag.

Their time at the station was short and uncomfortable. What bothered Sheedy was that it no longer seemed to matter to Clara whether or not he was there. In fact, he was not unhappy that she looked so bad. It made her departure easier for him. He held her arm walking through the station onto the platform as if he might be a friend or relative. As she slowly climbed the steps onto the train, she turned and finally mumbled through her broken lips, "You'll be sorry, Cabot. I hear California's a really swell place."

He sat stiff and quiet on a bench as the train curled out of the station and out of sight. He wanted to be certain she was gone.

\* \* \*

He arrived home just before supper. Marge was standing outside the front door with a mug of coffee to hand him. He shook his head as walked up the steps to meet her.

"An old friend," he said. "One of those things we keep to ourselves. I can't believe he called me, of all people. I haven't seen him in years."

Marge shrugged and made a weak smile. She was good about it. He'd give her that. She could keep a secret if she had to. A trait she must inherited from her father. Good business sense. Keep it close to the vest. A tight lip. One less secret to carry in the baggage of life's worries. He remembered her for that. She had nothing on him. Nothing at all about Clara. He was sure of it.

Then the real worry. Weeks of worry. The police found the DeSoto at the station and told Lewis Lockhart that his wife might have just taken an unexpected trip. Did she have any relatives out west? Lockhart insisted right away she must have been a victim of foul play but there was no evidence, no sign other than she was gone. Sheedy followed the story in the city newspapers. He would wake a few hours after going to sleep and sit in the parlor sliding his hands up and down the tops of his thighs. Some speculated she had been kidnapped; others said she must be dead. A lot of hobos and spongers these days. The police from St. Joseph and Kansas City were in and out of town asking questions. He managed to avoid them. He stayed away from the cafe where he and Clara met and kept his fingers crossed.

Clara shortened Sheedy's misery. They said Lewis Lockhart almost collapsed when he received the letter, postmarked from Colorado, a month later. Sheedy wondered who and how much she had paid to mail it for her. Lewis kept the letter out of the papers and sent detectives looking for her. But she was a clever woman, Sheedy told himself. When he did find her, it would be too late. And it was.

Her photograph didn't show up at the newspaper until two years later. It was taken at a swimming pool at what looked like the back of a mansion decorated with potted plants and surrounded by poplar trees. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. and Joan Crawford were seated in director chairs wearing bathing suits toasting and laughing at an unseen photographer. Behind them in whimsical poses stood three women in bathing suits and caps making faces at the camera. One of them was Clara Lockhart. Sheedy was sure of it. He would know her anywhere, even with the hair covered by the cap and her body partially blocked by the two sitting movie stars holding up highball glasses. Her face had changed. It *was* her but it was not her. Not the Clara he had made love to in a grove of trees by a river.

Gossip about Lewis Lockhardt and Clara's disappearance was soon replaced by more pressing concerns: money, politics, goings on in Washington. Over time, the general consensus was that Lewis needed a woman in that big house of his. After his divorce was finalized two years later he remarried. His new wife was a society lady, a hometown girl well known in the community. She eventually gave Lewis four children. No mention was ever made of the divorce. In the aftermath of the Depression people

moved away, new people rolled through town, some of the original families stayed. Those who knew Lewis seldom spoke Clara's name. Whenever Marge mentioned her shortly after the newspapers published articles that mentioned her disappearance, Sheedy cringed and changed the subject. The press quickly lost interest and moved on.

In those years after Clara left, Sheedy would have the same conversation with himself when he paused to think of her. What if he had dug up the courage in the graveyard of his ambitions to have gone with Clara to California? Would she have abandoned him anyway? No doubt, Sheedy decided. She had a quality people noticed, one that he didn't. In his imagination, hers was of a powerful animal wandering out of the jungle, primal, fearless, probing. His was of the bystander, an observer cowering in the bushes with a camera. But they had something in common, didn't they? A recklessness, the thing in him that said, "Yes," without thinking of consequences. Nah, Sheedy relented the next minute, she'd have left me in the dust. She'd have left me broke and broken with the other rubes she used to get what she wanted. Better to be here with those who love me, with Marge, with the children. I don't need to have that kind of aggravation in my life to be a great photographer, Sheedy decided, if only for that instant.

He'd hear about her from people in the business.

"Ah yes, you mean Clara Lockhart. Married briefly to a millionaire, Thaddeus Simpson. Don't know what happened but he divorced her six weeks into the marriage. Heard it was infidelity."

"Ah yes, Clara Simpson. You've seen her in the movies. Bit parts mostly. Looks great in person, they say, but not photogenic enough for the big screen."

"Why not?" Sheedy would ask amazed.

"Her nose, so they say."

"Her nose? What about her nose?"

"Must have been broken or changed as she got older. Just doesn't photograph right. That's the talk from people working in the studios."

Sheedy would pull out her picture in the wheat field, now Clara Simpson, as fulsome and classic as the wheat that swayed around her. Too bad it's in black and white, Sheedy thought. Color. The photograph would have been unforgettable in color.



A day came when his children were old enough to go to school and one afternoon after Marge left for the grocery Sheedy took all of Clara's pictures, film sheets and negatives and fed them into the flames of the trash barrel. Except the one. He kept his only print in an oversized book of Shakespeare's plays. Neither Marge nor the kids showed any great interest in reading Shakespeare. He kept most of his old books in boxes in his shed in the backyard. There were spiders there that kept the children away. Marge was happy, the world went to another war and any more talk of Clara Simpson in the small town disappeared with her.

Sheedy and Marge moved with their two children into a larger brick home in the middle of the town after he sent a portfolio to an agent in Chicago that led to more freelance assignments than he could handle. It was his photo of the longhorn skull Clara found on the fallen leaves of a cottonwood grove that the agent admired most. When Roosevelt declared war Marge begged him not to volunteer as a war photographer. He gladly honored her request. He had no intention of going overseas. Some of the major magazines called on him to cover events on the home front. After the war, he was offered teaching assignments from small colleges, even as dean of a school of journalism. Local galleries showed his work. He built an addition to his house for a darkroom. He could pay his bills. Where was the national recognition though? Why wasn't he written about?

\* \* \*

At the end of a workday in his darkroom or home from an assignment Sheedy would stare out towards twilight and see nothing there, nothing carnal or erotic or merry in the sorry glint of the late sun. A meal with the family. Radio programs. A walk. Reading in bed while Marge did needlepoint and used him as an outlet for her take on the town's gossip. He would look out the window of their bedroom and watch the trees swirl. He wanted something more. He could feel his body giving way to its slow dying and he wanted to have it until he knew he couldn't.

The specter of Clara in the gold and silver light of the wheat field in the summer of 1931 is what he wanted. On Saturdays and Sunday afternoons he still roamed the countryside; weekday afternoons coming home later from Shorty's bar and then sometimes he couldn't remember where else. Marge discovered golf and the two children

didn't seem to need him anymore. He agreed to teach classes at the local college two nights a week. Told Marge he needed to keep his hand in it. What he wanted was to be around the young women, to be reminded of the Clara he once knew.

Bah. Photojournalism, they called it now. Sheedy, now an honorary dean, taught them how to do it. Some of his students won awards. He had a plaque at the university. It was easy, that kind of photography. But finding and producing a spectacular photograph of a Clara Simpson, now that was art. You had to have guts though. You had to have a lot of guts.

In time Sheedy fell into the habit of meeting up with Simmons and Fitzmorris and Henderson, old buddies from his newspapering days, at Shorty's every afternoon after four. The others had long gone off to other papers, retired, moved back to grow old. Marge called them "the boys." They started right off at the bar mulling over news and politics ("Joe Kennedy's boy is a smart aleck little shit") and baseball, lots of baseball. Then they'd loosen up on a few jokes and end up arguing about God, life and family. "Shit, I'd stayed single if I had to do it over again," Simmons admitted. Sheedy'd say one day he was ready to take off and the next day he just didn't know. Then he'd stumble home and fix himself a sandwich and a beer and fall asleep watching television, the machine that changed everything. The world as a photograph. Talking pictures in every household that could afford one.

Then Marge sick with cancer.

And more news of Clara Simpson. Married to a Mexican businessman and living in a villa in Puerto Vallarta.

Sheedy didn't remember much between his first stroke and his third. Only waking up and not being able to move or speak for months and unable to pick up his camera. He managed the boredom with his human camera, squinting his left eye, freezing faces, birds, clouds.

\* \* \*

Sheedy glanced again at the newspaper he had thrown to the floor. Mrs. McArdle was still in the room, digging around in his chest of drawers. He squinted his eyes and framed her posterior. Snap. A bum shot, he chuckled. Then his face fell to slate. He wheeled to the small bookshelf they brought over from the house when he had no

alternative but to sell it. He pulled out his one and only book, "Specters of the Central Plains," and opened it on his lap. He flipped to the epigram at the front of the book he had chosen from the Bible, a verse from Ezekiel, as a fitting frame for the photographs he had taken over the years of the bones and skulls of animals and fragments left at Indian burial sites and fire rings, most notably bones of the longhorn, coyote, elk, deer, fox, a stray mountain lion, and of rabbits, their tiny skulls like pearl carvings in the undergrowth and now and then of human skulls that he let lay undisturbed and untouched.

"Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones: Behold I will cause breath enter into you and ye shall live: And will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live..."

In the house alone at night after Marge died, he would sit before the skull of the longhorn steer above his living room mantel and behold — yes, he liked the word, "behold," he decided — the empty, longing sockets where the eyes had looked out onto the world and wondered what they had seen and ask himself, "If they could talk, what do you they think they would tell me now about what they saw?" He wondered what another man or woman would think of the images that had passed through his eyes and created his thoughts and the thoughts and opinions and desires he added to them. When he read those words from Ezekiel, the only image he saw, the single thought, the striking picture he held in place was the unclothed body of Clara Simpson standing proud and defiant in the golden wheat of the early afternoon.

Now she was going to decay into bones in a box in the ground. A skeleton, a skull, with sockets for eyes as empty for him as this world was now. He shuddered

As he looked at each photograph in his book, at the elegance of the skulls, the artistry of his camera, he felt a flicker of joy. It was after all a marvelous book. Which was when, as he closed and slid it back onto the shelf, his good arm began to shake. He had chances left, didn't he?

"Nietzsche," he grinned and said aloud, "face it. There's still a little hope."

Why didn't I think of it before? he thought, his head bobbing. How can I be so goddamn dumb? The volunteer. The girl from the university would help him make a comeback. She could hold the camera for me. I'll frame the shot; she'll pull the trigger.

We'll draw blood. Goddammit anyway, Clara, I can still take a crack at it. There's more to it than bones. There's a whole world out there.

"Is she coming today?" he growled at Mrs. McArdle.

"Now who's saying, *she*," not *we*," Mrs. McArdle smiled grimly, shaking her jowls as she turned to look back at him. "How am I supposed to guess who the *she*" might be?"

"You know damn well who the *she* is. What's her name? Just wait until your memory starts to go."

"Oh, my memory is going just fine."

"Bitch," he mumbled.

"I heard that. No name calling, Mr. Sheedy. That's our agreement. We've got it in writing right there in the file cabinet of the Director's office."

"Well, you know who I mean. The girl from the college. The photography student. Aha. Got it. Becka."

"Oh, that *cute* little thing you say you are *mentoring*. Teaching her how to take obscene photographs. I've seen that horrid photo you have hidden in your book. Corrupting our young."

"You wouldn't know what corrupt is."

"I know very well what is obscene and what is not. It very clear to most of us. Regular church going people. Sober at that, and free from unnatural desires and impulses."

"That the problem. The most of you. No unnatural desires and impulses. But never mind that. That's part of the agreement too. You mind your business and I'll mind mine. Just answer my question. Is she coming today or not?"

"You'll know it when you hear all those beads and bells and baubles she wears a' jangling down the hall. As far as I'm concerned, she can leave her vulgar tattoos back at the dorm as well. The least she could do is cover her arms."

"Mercy. Your brain *really is bent*."

"Speak for yourself. I'm the one who's still up and about."

"Now that's a lowdown remark coming from a child of God."

"Blasphemy is not welcomed here either."

Doesn't matter, he thought. She'll be coming one day this week. Has to. To get credit for the independent study class. And to bring me some more vodka. Plus, she likes me. I know she does. She can wheel me outside. Maybe next outing they'll let her ride with me in the van. I'll pick the shot and spot it. She can pull the trigger.

As he thought of her and how they might work it, his enthusiasm quickly sank. The last time she tried to help him his hand shook too much. He'd forgotten that. At least he'd have the vodka.

He wondered again what Clara looked like at the end. Old, but dazzling? Never mind the aging. It would have shown through. The camera would have caught it in her eyes. The luminescence of her skin, her lush raging blond hair, the set of her face challenging the elements, gone maybe. Not so her eyes. Not before they closed them.

As he sat in the sunlight through the window, lips pursed, jaw clenched, he saw three women across the common area where they grilled outdoors and served picnics. He accelerated his wheelchair towards the glass. Was that her out there? Was that Clara Simpson here at The Meadows come back to haunt him? Surely not. And yet, for an instant he thought he saw Clara Simpson holding the arm of an older lady in a black overcoat as they walked along. No, couldn't be her. She's dead. Couldn't be. Paper says she's gone. Must be another volunteer. Even so. A puzzlement.

“My camera!” he shouted.

“Did you say something, Mr. Sheedy?” Mrs. McArdle asked, looking up again from the drawer she seemed to be endlessly searching.

“Bring me my camera, dammit,” he snapped, breathing deep and fast. The skin he had scratched open on his face in the excitement of the sudden sight of the two younger women burned with the salt of his lost days. A streamlet of blood snaked down the sinews of his bony neck.

“I want my camera!”