

R E A L



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REAL

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Amos Magliocco

THEY NEVER CAUGHT THE SUN

When tourists off the interstate reached the top of the jailhouse steps, Jesse Corcoran pointed to a tall colonial across the square. "The last resident of Old Mobeetie still lives on the third floor," he said. The tourists lifted cameras and camcorders, zooming to the arched window and drawn shade. Children begged for a hoist. "We won't be meeting Isabel Husleby today," Jesse said. "She's been in a foul mood since Texas went for Jimmy Carter."

He led the tourists into the stone building, the first prison of the Texas Panhandle, and up a narrow staircase to small cells where bandits had waited to hang or soldiers from Fort Elliot had slept off whiskey binges and fist fighting, their primary recreation in a desolate outpost. Then the group descended like the worst of those prisoners into the basement and a corridor lined with cylindrical cells built for solitary confinement. A steel door at the end of the corridor admitted grimy sunlight through a window the size of a human hand. A woman from Baltimore was telling other tourists that she had studied Sociology at Johns Hopkins and that Cal Ripken had lived in her building. Another player, too—"the gay one," she said. Jesse talked over her to say that the cramped chambers were used by Wheeler County as recently as seventeen years ago, until prisoners started committing suicide at night. The corridor smelled like moss and sawdust. In spaces four feet high and six feet long, a prisoner could lay or sit cross-legged if he tucked his head. The iron doors barred all but the faintest thread of light around the edges. Inmates crawled to the light and tried to drink it like a trickle of fresh water on stone walls. The dead were found with their faces pressed to the millimeter space between the iron door and rock bottom: a sliver of amber winter light or ionized air from a storm or the faint sound of bodies brushing over the floors of opposite cells. Isabel Husleby, the old woman living across the way, complained of strange noises from the jailhouse, Jesse reported. You could find it in the police reports if you didn't believe him. Tourists kneeled or bent over to see to the back of the

chambers where Jesse claimed messages remained carved on the walls. The woman from Baltimore peered into the last cell to find an ashen face returning her glare. She sprang backwards into the huddled group. With random obscenities and nervous laughter, they recognized a mannequin in pancake makeup and a cavalry uniform. "Looks like we forgot one," Jesse said. He patted her on the back as the group stepped through the door and into harsh sunlight.

Jesse collected a few dollars for the Mobeetie Historical Society and offered a tour of the cemetery, one mile north of Old Mobeetie. The woman from Baltimore said, "No, thank you. We should get back on the road." She gave her companions a long look. "But how did you know we had stopped?" she asked. "You drove up out of nowhere. Some kind of local phone chain or something?" She imitated the motion of a rotary dial phone to her friends while Jesse folded their cash and sealed the envelope.

"Well," he said and turned toward Isabel Husleby's weathered mansion until their eyes followed. Then he turned and pointed to a window over the massive wooden doors of the jail. "Got a webcam." The tourists groaned. Jesse waved as they drove past old buildings he had restored or new ones built from scratch and painted to look one hundred years worn. Each vehicle slowed near the Husleby place. They peered to the top floor where the window shade was still. When they were gone, Jesse locked the courthouse and drove back across the highway to New Mobeetie and a trailer he shared with his fourth wife, a symmetrical row of tuxedo roses and bluebonnets decorating the front porch.

It was the middle of October and overcast when they needed someone to drive Isabel to her pasture. The owner of the ambulance service called Jesse and said two of his drivers were sick and he couldn't spare himself to make the trip to Old Mobeetie. For eight years, on the first business day of the month, Isabel had visited six skinny cows that grazed the last unencumbered parcels of the Husleby estate. Delivering her was no small production. A hip fracture had left her immobile and she lived exclusively on the third floor. Jesse told the ambulance owner that it would take a serious figure for him to suffer a whole day of Isabel's abuse, not to mention the manual labor to carry her up and down the stairs on a gurney. He was under the aluminum parking cover outside his trailer. His property was close enough to the highway to see cars through the

trees. When they would exit and turn on the gravel road to Old Mobeetie, the grind of their tires and dust in their wake signaled him. There *was* a webcam—but it was meant to catch the methamphetamine cooks who sought abandoned structures with the intensity that geologists had prowled the panhandle for oil once upon a time. Now the oil was gone, derricks frozen in rust. Jesse wiped his hands with a rag and held the phone to his ear with his shoulder. Two hundred dollars, he said. The ambulance owner offered one hundred.

It was a two man job so Jesse called his wife's nephew, Dustin, to help. Twenty-five dollars did not impress the boy. Jesse offered fifty and said Dustin could drive the ambulance—sirens and lights, Jesse assured him. The old woman would not want to waste time.

Isabel's worthless cattle loitered on property that she had refused to sell to an industrial pig farm three years earlier. Jesse had assumed she meant to punish the sons of men she begrudged from three generations back. The pig farm would stink bad enough to run The Lord Himself out of Texas, the company men had said, but they promised everyone would learn to call it the "smell of money." A group of locals pleaded with Isabel from the Great Room on her ground floor but she refused, calling down to them from her open bedroom door. The next day, Jesse made Isabel a central character on his ghost town tour, arranging her and the mansion alongside Indian fighters, Mexican bandits, and the buffalo hunters who littered the Canadian River valley with rotting carcasses. He built a fake town around her decaying home with a post office, barbershop, and telegraph office. While he worked, driving nails into fresh lumber, Isabel sometimes opened her window. Her face was round and small, eyes like raindrops on a thin pane of glass. Jesse ushered his tourists through the prison door as they turned for a last glimpse of her house, the paint streaked in bleaching tans and blues, fixing their delighted fear on a grimy third-story window.

Jesse and Dustin retrieved the ambulance in Wheeler, the county seat, before turning back for Old Mobeetie. "She needs to see her cows *this* week and not next or even tomorrow, I guess," Dustin said. "She can't wait for the real medics to take her." The last time Jesse had visited Dustin's apartment, the beer cans on the coffee table were half-empty—even at twenty-three-years-old, cheap beer tasted rotten. Dustin smoked generic cigarettes and played the same video

games over and over. In the latest, he told Jesse, he was an elf warrior who'd trained a dog to sniff out danger ahead of him. Dustin admitted it was a little scary the way he felt that his scout dog waited for him when he wasn't online.

"Today is when Isabel sees the cows," Jesse said. "There ain't even a window-of-opportunity sort of deal. It's the first business day of the month. You complaining about fifty dollars for three hours work?"

"Not complaining about anything. It's peculiar is all. A silly habit that others have to accommodate."

"One hundred dollars is hardly an accommodation when you don't have ten in the bank, Dustin. Some day you can say you met Isabel Husleby," Jesse said.

"The day I met Isabel. That'll keep 'em pinned to their seats."

Dustin's parents were gone, the father having committed suicide a few years after his mother ran off. Dustin was five. Jesse's wife Joanne had raised him and, when he surpassed her own children in academics and sports, hoped that he might escape to a wider life. But Dustin returned from Texas Tech after a single semester and then dropped out of Wheeler Community College the next. When they married, Jesse understood that Joanna meant for him to save her nephew in some way she could not. To instill in him some measure of pride, even if it never took him outside Wheeler County, something inside of value that a woman might recognize and find attractive enough to settle for. He was a good looking boy but he wouldn't be for long, Jesse thought. Dustin was on the skinny side and kept his curly hair long. He shaved irregularly. He would stop eventually, Jesse knew, and the untamed facial hair would give him a wild and shiftless appearance.

"If you get such a kick out these vans," Jesse said, "you ought to get your EMT license. Don't take anything special. Any half-wit can do it."

"Thanks for the confidence," Dustin said.

"Well it would save you from having to apply yourself and make your Aunt Jo happy at the same time. Everybody wins. Especially me with the sorry job of making something out of you."

"That's a job more pointless than that cemetery," Dustin said.

Jesse nodded. Dustin started to light a cigarette but Jesse wagged his finger against it. "I'm beginning to come around to that way of thinking myself."

"You know, I never thought you and Aunt Jo would marry."

"Since we're both short-timers," Jesse said.

"No, I mean why hassle with it when you don't plan on more kids? Nobody around here would care."

"I love your Aunt," Jesse said. "You marry the ones you love." Perhaps he should start there, with how to avoid dying alone.

They passed a row of black walnut and chinaberry trees trimming the riverbank. The sky opened between breaks in the trees, a brimming blue sheen like the bottom of a fountain. "I'm going to wait," Dustin said. "I'd like to get married once, if ever. I know it don't always work that way." Jesse and Joanna had both outlived a handful of spouses on their way to a marriage they each considered the end of the line. Each May 10th, she celebrated her third husband Martin Bower's birthday by visiting Lake Meredith near Childress, the low hanging willows decked like Christmas trees with red and white bobbers, plastic minnows, and shads that errant casters had abandoned in the branches. The water's surface invited her touch, cool and mossy. She did not believe she was communing with Martin Bower's spirit, "or some damn thing like that," she said. "It's for me and my memory. It's *mine*." She didn't visit cemeteries or talk to stones, she said.

They turned on the gravel road and the squared outline of the jail rose over the horizon. The previous fall, a shoe-repair shop exploded at two thirty in the morning, a careless meth cook tumbling into the dirt street and falling over horse ties Jesse had installed for show, while the glow of the burning shop played against the facade of Isabel's family home. It was, Jesse told friends, the last manufacturing concern in Old Mobeetie.

When Jesse and Dustin parked the ambulance, a doe ran from behind the Husleby place and stopped ten feet from them, a red tag stapled in its left ear. "What's the deal with her cows anyway?" Dustin needed some bucking up.

"Something she owns that don't look worse every time she sees it? Hell, Dustin. I don't have any idea."

"But she stays upstairs otherwise?" Dustin scrolled through a list on his cell phone. Jesse didn't like to answer Dustin's detached, internet voice.

The front door was unlocked. The drawing room and large living area appeared first, an octagonal space dominated by a piano under a white sheet and furniture covered in painter's plastic. He almost forgot to announce himself.

"Isabel," he said finally. "Isabel, it's Jesse Corcoran."

"Jesse Corcoran?" Her voice was high and alert. "What do you want? Who said you could come into my house?"

He'd waited at the foot of these steps before, recalled pine varnish scents and polished brass on the stairway banister. The memory of his two-week affair with Isabel forty years earlier had eroded like inscriptions on the old headstones he restored. It had lasted no longer than the snow.

"I have a gun," Isabel called downstairs.

"I've got one, too, Isabel. Out in the truck. Should I go get it?" Jesse winked at Dustin. "We can have a shootout."

"You're not in your truck. You've stolen an ambulance."

"I'm working for Stanley Moss this morning. I'm here to take you to your pasture. Dustin is with me. That's my wife's nephew." The boy wandered into the kitchen and Jesse gazed to the second floor landing. He remembered how she had worked herself from her dress while beneath him, his youthful rush of lips and tongue on her shoulders and the soft tops of her breasts. She was trying to ruin her husband because the man was plowing through her family money. She never showed Jesse any attention after the affair.

"Well," she said. "You've had a lot of wives. Who's supposed to remember all their people? Oh, what are you *doing* here? This is the one day of pleasure I get the whole month."

"Well, I don't aim to spoil it, Isabel. For heaven's sake." Jesse lowered his voice. He knew that even a whisper carried.

"Come up then," she said. "Imagine. The Historical Commission comes to fetch me now. I see *real* cows, Mr. Corcoran. Not Wild West plywood props."

Jesse heard the scrape of Isabel's walker on the wooden floor and called to Dustin so they could start. He found the boy in the kitchen with the harsh scent of anhydrous ammonia and sections of rubber hose in the sink. Acid had dissolved spots of formica countertop the size of saucers and a row of large glass bottles sat beneath the cupboards. The sink basin was wet. "Oh, fuck all," Jesse said. Not long ago he would have tracked them across the fields with a dozen sober and sure-handed men. Today, he only had Dustin, a video game warrior.

"They heard us drive up," Jesse said.

"Good thing. I guess they shoot people who stumble into 'em."

Jesse gave the boy a hard look. "I'll drop you off at the house. You come back and clean this shit up." Dustin spread his arms wide. "Fifty dollars more," Jesse said. Dustin shrugged.

"C'mon," he said and pointed to the ceiling. "Let's get her down."

Four years earlier, Jesse had met Joanna in a bar called Rumors, and they toasted all the ways their spouses had passed from the earth. At each story's conclusion, they tipped another tequila shot. "My first was a traveling salesman who died when his car broke down between here and Albuquerque in '55," she said. "Sheriff took the call from New Mexico and told me he got shot by Mexicans crossing the Rio Grande, but I found out later that he tried walking to town and collapsed in the ditch. Nobody saw him until the buzzards caught their attention." Joanna yelped at the burn of liquor in her throat. "Second guy had a heart attack, then Marty died at the siege of Khe Sanh," she said. "But that's what you learn, you know. That's what a life is."

"That's two shots," Jesse said. She nodded and they drank. Then she hesitated. She glanced around the bar and her eyes seemed wide and bottomless enough for years of memory. She and Jesse had both turned sixty-six the month the shoe repair exploded. Joanna's eyelashes were thin and fine, and when she smiled her high cheekbones caught the light like her silver hair, which was pulled tight and pinned back. It startled Jesse how quickly she could discard memory, like a cigarette in the flimsy tinfoil ashtray. "Look here," he said and pointed to initials carved in the polished wood of their round bartop. "I did this fifteen years ago." The engraving read "JC & LM, last call."

"You're a vandal," Joanna said.

"You've got one more husband to kill for me."

"That one," she said and waved her hand as if to nullify the marriage and save her breath. "This guy falls into Palo Duro Canyon in 1982," she said. "Same sheriff as in 1955 tells me, 'Lord knows, Jo, he must have slipped from the Aspermont Rim.'" Joanna sat up straight and wobbled her shoulders to imitate the lawman. "I said, 'Look, Sheriff Patton. I ain't a little girl anymore. That man was depressed his whole life. He jumped into that hole and we *both* know it.' But he wouldn't call it a suicide and so I don't either, just in case I'm wrong. But I ain't."

"No, I reckon you could tell the difference."

"That's right. You know what I mean."

Jesse nodded. "Louise died delivering Jarod and he didn't last long. No more kids after that. My last swing at respectability."

She took his hand. She could see this single memory was harder for him to carry than all the tragedy she'd witnessed, and her recognition made Jesse feel young and helpless. "Now you hit on old ladies in the bar. That your occupation these days?"

"Are you an old lady?"

Joanna took a long drink, then set her bottle down firmly on the table. "I haven't had time to get old," she said. "My children see to that. I'll get sentimental when they're all rich."

Jesse said, "What I am is the self-appointed handyman for a place nobody lives in anymore. Can't beat it for the lack of complaints. My great-granddad helped start Mobeetie and I'm finishing up."

"And after you're gone?"

Jesse swiped his hand along the table. "It'll all scatter to the wind." They ordered two more Coronas and left for Jesse's place as the crowd grew younger. In the morning, Jesse recounted his wives' deaths to Joanna: childbirth, lung cancer, and finally, a lightning strike. "A warning for you," he said. He ran his fingertips around the curve of her shoulder.

Joanna lit a cigarette and waved away his superstition. "I'm not afraid," she said. "Your wives were accident prone. But you never use their names. Didn't you love *any* of them?"

"Not by the time they were dead."

Isabel Elizabeth Husleby waited on the edge of her canopy bed with a lace fan in her hand and a copy of *Time* in her lap. The room smelled like air freshener and old cheese. A small refrigerator rattled in the corner, a microwave oven balanced on top. The tan carpet was littered with crumpled tissues. "Feast your eyes," she said. "The last of Mobeetie's leading family reduced to her monthly pasture visit."

"The heavens are weeping, Isabel," Jesse said.

"I don't want to be out all afternoon." Her face was narrow, skin light as tissue.

"I can carry you down as easy and more comfortable than using the stretcher."

"You'll hurt yourself. You're an old man," she said with what looked like satisfaction. "Use the gurney. That's what we always do." They held the gurney level with her bed. She lifted herself from the mattress with her walker, then turned and sat on the gurney. She swung her thin legs up one at a time, careful to hold her brown dress down around her ankles. Then she lay back and looked straight up at Jesse. "Okay. Let's go."

Halfway down the staircase Isabel said, "You're too old to carry people down the steps."

"I'm sixty-seven," Jesse said. "Which by my math makes me still eleven years your junior."

"Don't be so proud. *Nobody's* old as I am," she said. She was looking back and forth at the walls along the staircase and the ceiling. "Slow down a little." When they reached the ground floor she peered around the living room and foyer. "Do you like what my children have done with the place? What's that smell from the kitchen? Why if you stuff me and pose me in an evening gown, you could open the ground floor for parties. Or a bed and breakfast. Show your tourists that Mobeetie had *some* style." They carried her out the front door and Jesse closed it behind them.

"Why don't you ride up front?" Jesse asked her. "See a lot more that way."

"I ride in the back," she said. "If I ride up front, I might as well drive myself."

Dustin laughed and Isabel faced him for the first time. "Don't you talk?"

"Not if it ain't needed, Ms. Husleby."

"Well, carry me up front so your uncle doesn't cry all afternoon," she said. Dustin lifted her like a child and placed her in the passenger seat. "I remember reading about you in the Wheeler paper," Isabel said. "You played basketball and they wanted you at the university. National Merit Scholar. Isn't that right?"

"Yes ma'am. A long time ago in a small place."

"It's as small as you need for it to be," she said. "If that's your excuse. But don't think it's something original from men around *here*."

"God almighty, Isabel. You been waiting to cut loose on somebody," Jesse said.

She watched the small shops move past as they gained speed. Dustin concentrated on driving. "Well, they'll all think I finally tipped," she said. "Why else would Jesse Corcoran be driving me out but to restore me to my original condition?"

They stopped to drop off Dustin. They parked next to Jesse's pickup, and Isabel craned her neck to see inside the cab. "Let's take your truck, as long as you're making me sit up front anyway."

"That truck doesn't project the majesty of an emergency vehicle," Jesse said.

"Wait," Isabel said and pointed. "Here comes your wife." Joanna jogged down the steps in a white blouse and baby blue shorts with the white tennis shoes she wore for aerobics. A bead of sweat rested on the tip of her nose. She kissed Dustin on the forehead and pointed back to the house, probably suggesting that he should get something to eat, then came over to Jesse and Isabel.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Husleby," Joanna said and extended her hand. "It's an honor."

"Why, thank you. But you've made a nice little home here."

"I try to keep this one interested," Joanna said. "And the other ones," she said and glanced over her shoulder, "I just try to *keep*, period." They chatted while Dustin wandered toward his car with the phone pressed to his ear. They agreed it was a fine day for a ride and then Jesse and Isabel left for her pasture.

A half-mile down the road, Isabel made him stop the truck. "All this dirt." She opened the door and tried to push it out with her shoe.

"Let me come around there and do it." Jesse scooped the dirt, careful not to touch Isabel's spotted knees, shoveling with both hands the caked mud and sand from Mobeetie Cemetery that had fallen from garden equipment and stones.

"Joanna Bower," Isabel said while he cleaned at her feet. "Your Joanna was Martin Bower's wife."

"Mine now," he said. "Joanna Corcoran."

"That nephew doesn't have any business here," she said. "Dustin. You should encourage him to *leave* the Panhandle. If you had any sense."

"That's not very civic-minded of you, Mrs. Husleby. Running off our young people."

"I'm not the one who let the horses out," she said. "But Marty Bower was a good man. A few more like him might have saved Mobeetie."

Jesse thought of what it might have been like for Martin Bower when the North Vietnamese broke the perimeter of Hill 861A, the hand to hand combat, and how long he might have bled. He wondered if Joanna imagined these things. Bower had been Joanna's school sweetheart before her first marriages. Jesse's heart sank when he thought of how she must have remembered the boy before he was a soldier, a farmer's son begging to drive the sorghum to market once a week for a look at Joanna Roberts.

"What do a couple old hangers-on talk about anyway?" Isabel said. "You and her."

"We talk about her work. And mine."

"That graveyard? That's your work?"

"That's where the dirt at your feet came from."

Isabel shook her head. "It's typical. That's exactly why it's the only thing left to do."

"Joanna and I talk about who's going to kick the bucket first. Those are some lively jaw-bones."

"Well, she's lucky," Isabel said. "You look good with silver hair and the white moustache." Before he could answer she said, "But that old cemetery went to pot a long time ago. What's the point? Nobody visits except the tourists you lure out there to tell heroic pioneer stories and pass the collection plate."

Jesse had begun restoring Old Mobeetie Cemetery after Joanna made him promise not to remarry if she should pass first. Such a vow seemed like bad luck until he realized that he could now plant their shared marker and design a place among the generations of Corcorans already in attendance. Morbid, Joanna said, crushing out a cigarette, but if that's what it takes for you to commit. Just don't ever show me a gravestone with my fucking name on it. You're a ghoul, she said. Jesse started repairing the older stones that were falling and cracked or obscured by weeds, rescued delicate sandstone markers threatened by low branches of hackberry. He cleaned them with a non-ionic detergent and soft-bristle brush. For marble, he used ammonia and water. He polished the rock and replanted the bases. He concentrated sunlight on the oldest slabs with a

pocket mirror and recorded the inscriptions on a site map. Once he had brought Dustin, but the boy had no patience for the work. He spent the afternoon on his phone.

The cemetery had not always meant so little to Isabel. In the summer of 1974, a woman from Philadelphia had come looking for a man named Charlie Seals who she claimed was her maternal grandfather. The County Judge brought the woman to Isabel who showed them the unmarked gravesite. Charlie Seals had worked for Isabel's father, and because he enjoyed the family's affection and never mentioned any kin, they buried him among their own. Isabel told the visitor that in her memory, Charlie was still a strong young man and the thought of him made her smile. The woman thanked Isabel with a hug and clasped her hands over the gravesite. She said Charlie Seals' family was in Philadelphia, the living and the dead. He had run away during the Depression to relieve his parents of the burden of feeding him. Now it was time to bring him home, she said. Isabel was horrified, but her political connections had long withered from financial neglect and she could not prevent the woman from exhuming the body of Charlie Seals. They collected his remains in a polished bonebox that bore the crossed lances of the Husleby family crest.

"I've got it looking fine," Jesse said. "And yes, the tourists enjoy it. We take them through the jail, give em' a good scare downstairs. I walk past those cells like nothing's happening, going on about Indians and what-not, and when they catch sight of those dummies, they shriek like Halloween. It's a riot." Isabel waved him away but Jesse thought he caught a grin. "That's how we pay for the materials I need," he said.

"Tell me something, Jesse Corcoran. Do any of those visitors think to ask you how such a hearty band of Panhandle frontiersmen lost a railroad, an oil business and then an entire town?"

"I think you might be the only one who sees it that way."

"How does that nephew of yours see it? What's he care about the dead when his own mother is still alive somewhere?"

Jesse was surprised at Isabel's memory and listened. Finally he said, "Things change." He rolled his hand to collect the words. "Economic centers of gravity move. *This* is our industry now. History. The past is our most valuable asset unless you want to take the jail apart and sell the stones."

Isabel shifted her entire body to face him fully. She pushed herself up to the edge of the seat so her arms were free. "Don't lecture me. I'm not some two-bit Amarillo waitress. I made more money than any twenty of you hobos. The railroad was the first nail in the coffin. All they had to do was lean on the bosses and politicians, but we didn't have men around here with enough steam or brains to know it. I could have helped, but they froze me out. Mobeetie died because we had a run of weak and stupid men with weaker and more stupid sons. Two bad crops, back to back. Now you want to burn eternal flames like they were all Jack Kennedy. I say let the wind blow them all to hell."

Jesse looked from Isabel to the road and back again. "I'm afraid that sort of thinking makes you ineligible to run one of my tours," he said. "Nobody's fault the oil dried up. No more than it's your grandfather's fault all the buffalo got killed."

"We lost power to Wheeler and Shamrock and they rubbed our noses in it. We didn't even have a working siren in 1969."

"The best we can do is not forget."

"You're a fool," she said. She sighed and settled back into the seat. "The only thing left to do is forget." She removed her hat to examine the white linen band and the artificial rose pinned beneath on a green plastic stem.

"I don't guess you care to see the cemetery then," he said.

"Might as well—you're going to plant me there sooner or later."

Jesse laughed out loud, made no effort to catch himself.

At Old Mobeetie Cemetery, Jesse Corcoran and Isabel Elizabeth Husleby, the last who'd lived among those buried in that baked ground, spoke in whispers as they negotiated her exit. Jesse lifted the folded chair from the bed of his truck. He opened the seat and locked it, then pushed the footrests into place, but with the pedals facing outward. The passenger door opened with a timid click. Hold on now, he said. Bring it around and let me show you, Isabel called. Her thin leg hesitated toward the gravel of the cemetery's only trail. Sit tight, would you? Jesse shook his head and turned the foot pedals back and forth then tried to lift the stems to invert them. She asked him to face the chair toward her, and she stepped out, gripping his shoulder with her hand, then turned slowly and sat down.

Jesse pushed her through the uneven rows and she spoke the names aloud: Sam and Elsie Meriwether, two very ignorant people, Isabel said. Their shared marker was flanked by five smaller ones, three girls on one side and two boys on the other, three dead during infancy, all buried before age twenty-one. The last girl's marker bore an inscription in such tiny, weathered figures that Jesse had spent three months restoring the message lost for sixty years. Isabel leaned forward and read aloud: "*Her inconsolable father sets this stone.*" She brought her hand to her mouth. Her fingernails were the lightest shade of teacup red. A cumulus cloud grew tall in the valley and sent a shadow sliding west toward the cemetery and the town behind it. Jesse congratulated himself for the smooth lay of the grass, and how he'd cleared so much of the broken sandstone and rocks that Isabel's chair hardly jostled as they approached the older markers at the back of the yard.

"What about me?" Isabel said. "Where will I go?" He let go of the plastic handles of her chair.

"You? Well, I don't have any say — that's for your children to decide, Isabel. I mean." Jesse took off the cap and smoothed his hair back. "You're talking about out *here*? In *this* yard?"

She turned to face him. "Where else? What kind of museum will this be without the last survivor?"

Jesse forced a smile. "Well, you've got a point *there*. But, why there ain't a square inch left, Isabel," he said and stomped his boot as if some echo of layered tombs might convince her. "How about a statue instead?" She waved him away. "Look, there's more bodies here than stones, you know. We didn't find half the markers the tornado got," he said. "Some of them flush plaques from the military have sunk. I'd be afraid to dig anywhere. The place is packed," he said and sliced his hand through the air. "All sold out."

"There's one place," she said. She pointed to a cottonwood that Jesse often used for shade. He pushed her toward the tree, its thick leaves rattling in a southeast wind. "Right here." Though the earth had sealed long ago, Isabel remembered precisely where Charlie Seals had been buried and then exhumed. A rumble of thunder pushed a stiffening breeze. "Bury me here."

"I always meant to ask why you didn't buy another marker for Charlie after '69."

"Anybody who would have wanted to know was dead," she said. "And I wasn't going to forget."

"But you were wrong. That woman came."

"Yes. Sometimes I think that's why she took him. Maybe I was trying to hide him. Protect him with my memory. I wish I had built a goddamn mausoleum with marble columns. Then she would have taken pictures instead of Charlie. Put them in the Philadelphia paper."

"Nobody in Philadelphia gives a shit what happens here."

"And nobody under the ground gives a shit what happens above, Mr. Corcoran. But you stay at their beck and call anyway. Don't pass that collection plate my way. You get your money's worth out of me."

"Well, you could come to the window and wave once in a while."

She stuffed a white handkerchief back in her bag and snapped the silver clasp shut. "These are all story characters now—Martin Bower, your rough-riding great-grandfather, and my Charlie. We can let them visit and we may saint them, but they're not half as interesting as my cows wandering their pasture. So you outlived all your wives," she said. "So what? What's so tragic about that?"

"Nothing," he said. "It's the way it happened."

"Well don't count your chickens," she said. "You might not outlast this one. She tends to problems in *this* world." She rolled herself away from the tree. "You want one of them to die while you're still in love." He started to argue but she turned her chair and her eyes were the same as long ago, like rare, rich soil. "Your nephew," she said. "He's one of them down in my kitchen. I hear them talking down there. I can hear everything you know. *You* know. Your honors student—he's the head chef. I admire them in a way. They're making something from nothing. Not like their fathers who tried to live on nothing. Tried to eat the sand. And you, out here calling poor, foolish Sam Meriwether's pain back into the world. All while they wreck my kitchen and make an awful stink. You get them out of my house."

Jesse felt the Panhandle's vast emptiness spreading him over the ground, molecule by molecule, and that his nephew's living ashes already were lifted into the breeze, and he wondered if the boy felt it like this every day, with the acuity of youth, this terrible unbinding.

"Next month we'll go to the pasture," Isabel said. "I'll show you a good time. My friends there are still *above* ground. Take me home now."

That next afternoon, Jesse and Dustin drove to the cemetery. They dug out the marker for Marion Wellshanks, an Old Mobeetie native who worked as the station agent in Shamrock until the railroad closed his depot. Marion had returned to Mobeetie and waited to die. Jesse ran his index finger over the engraving and rubbed the chalky residue on his pant leg. On their way back to town, he took a gravel road and parked next to Isabel's pasture, climbed out and leaned against the door. A few cows started over. Jesse stepped through the barbed wire and approached the two nearest him. Without prompting, Dustin followed. Near the back of the herd, a steer stood over a stillborn calf. The young cow would swell and burst in a few days. "Buzzards will clean it," Jesse said. But Dustin was already in the truck bed, pulling the shovel and pickax.

"She'll see the skeleton when she comes next month," Dustin said. "It won't be for nothing. We can raise a marker if that makes it worth your while. 'Baby Calf.'" As he walked away from Jesse he added, "We remember."

The two men dug for hours a grave wide enough for both to work inside and deep enough to discourage coyotes. They heaved the black dirt up onto the ground and when they were many feet deep they pitched it over their shoulders in tandem. Dustin's hair was soaked and dark and a film of dust covered his face like thin soot. His eyes were bright like globes in the darkened face and his teeth shone white when he raised his head and smiled to Jesse. Jesse looked away and dug. There was no wind or even a breeze to brush their faces. He felt as if the wind had held him together until now and that the earth growing around them began its work by first relaxing the body from that struggle against wind.

"Look at them floating in the air," Dustin said. His bright eyes blinked in the sooty face as dozens of cottonwood spores drifted overhead. The fibrous tufts glowed with sunlight then rushed away on a breath of sky. They were so faint that it was easier to see them from the corner of your eye. "I've never noticed those before," Dustin said. "You?" Jesse leaned on his shovel and shook his head no.

He told Joanna that he would have to take back his promise never to remarry. Joanna laughed. "You planning to push me off a cliff?" she said. Jesse lifted her warm palm to his cheek. He made biscuits and gravy, heavy with ground pepper, and served Joanna breakfast in bed. Isabel would never notice the missing calf, she said brightly, full of frightened wonder that Dustin had insisted on a burial. Jesse said the better question was if the old woman would live another month to find out one way or the other. Joanna laughed into her coffee. She offered a bet for Isabel's longevity: a twelve pack of Shiner Bock. When Joanna left for work, Jesse called Dustin. He was thinking of building a saloon in Old Mobeetie and hiring actors to stage weekend shootouts and wagon heists. Some of the young men around town could help. He wanted to sit with the boy and map it out.