# THREE STORIES

by

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APPROVAL SHEET

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These stories are autobiographical in that they are attempts on my part to introspect and find and state what I consider to be the truth concerning certain of my personal attitudes toward existence. Charlie, the central character of all three stories, is an autobiographical extension, or probe, which I use to explore depths which are no longer open to me personally.

The language of these stories is as close to that of the people with whom I was raised as I can manage. My object in this pursuit is obviously verisimilitude, but there is another factor involved which is of greater significance; these stories are actually not stories per se; they are yarns: something to be told aloud.

These yarns are all part of a larger work which I intend to call, the Charlie Ledger, in which I record the profits and losses of his days.

## INTRODUCTION

It seems to me that fiction has a tendency to be autobiographical in about the same way that autobiographies tend to be fictional; neither the autobiographer nor the fiction writer has the control over the truth he would wish to possess. Sometimes the writer will tell the truth about himself when he wishes to conceal it and at another time he will not be able to determine what he considers to be the truth about himself, no matter how diligently he sets out to find it.

There are some little tests to which I subject my work to see if I am telling the truth (which I feel obliged to do): I examine the nature of the autobiographical character in a story; if he appears to be somewhat foolish, but not a fool, then he scores on that count. If he seems to understand some aspect of a situation which no one else has perceived, yet has utterly ignored some aspect of the same situation which everyone else has seen clearly from the start, then he rings true. If at times he seems to be attacked by metaphorical monsters: on the one side, that of maudlin sentimentality; on the other by rage, bitterness and disappointment with his life and his fellow humans; if his battles with these apparitions can be detected in my work, then the writing is going very well. And if it can be detected that the character's primary defense

against these aforesaid monsters is ultimately perhaps a mad sense of humor, then he is understood.

In this thesis, the three stories show Charlie as a child, as a college student, and as a young man approaching thirty years of age. My plans for the future are to go back and fill in as many of the gaps which remain in this sequence as will be possible. There should be no need to belabor the Senecan tenate at work here.

It has been commented that these stories are perhaps not stories at all, but rather, tales. I would be inclined to agree that they may not be stories per se, because they are not meant to stand alone but be parts of a larger design. But my inclination would be to call them yarns, rather than tales. This may be a rather fine distinction to make, but to me the yarn is almost an American invention; it is an anecdote, as it were, in which the fun is half in the telling, and if the teller slips away from the truth occasionally, then all well and good. The play of truth against fancy in the good old American yarn appeals to me.

Jack Kerouac, a favorite American yarn-spinner of mine, claims to be writing a huge, hefty tome called, The Jacky Duluoz Legend. I would claim to be on somewhat the same track, though not yet ready to award my efforts with the honorific title, "Legend". I would be inclined more to say that I am writing a ledger, in which I plan to enter the profits and losses of each day.

Naturally, a statement will be issued at the end of the fiscal period.

# THE CLASS REUNION

"Oh, it's going to be just wonderful," twittered my old classmate, Edwina Stritch (now Wallace), "just simply wonderful. Just everybody's going to be there. Patsy Childreth is flying in from New York, and Reggie Poston is coming all the way from Walla Walla, Washington. I'm just so thrilled I've hardly been able to eat for days. You are coming, aren't you? Just everybody's going to be there."

"I don't know whether we'll be able to make it or not," I said. "You know I work every night out at the club and all that. I couldn't stay very late."

"But this is your own class reunion," she gasped. "All your old friends will be there. Don't you want to see your old classmates? It's been ten years. You wouldn't want to miss seeing your old friends, would you? Besides, we want you to play your saxophone for us. Please do come."

"I don't know," I said. "If I do come, I'm certainly not going to bring my saxophone."

"Oh, and bring your wife," Edwina said. "Be sure and bring your wife. Oh, is this your little boy?

"Yes," I replied.

"I thought he was. He looks just like you. How old is he?"

"Five."

"Hello, little blue bird," she said to Sonny, who retreated behind me in embarrassment. "Hello, little blue bird. Aren't you a little blue bird?"

"No," Sonny replied.

"Why don't you come out and see me? I like little blue birds," she cooed. "What's his name?" she directed at me.

"Sonny," I said.

"He looks just like you," she said. "Don't you want to come to see me, little blue bird?" she said to Sonny.

"Have you got any children?" I asked.

"Oh, I've got three," she beamed, "Tammy, Kim and Booboo."

"How old are they?"

"Two, three, and four. They all look like Elmo."

"Three girls?"

"Two girls and a boy," she said. "Booboo's a boy."

"What a nice sized family," I said. "How old is the boy?"

"Booboo? He's the youngest. He looks just like Elmo."

"Good," I said. Then, looking at my watch, I said, "look, I hate to rush off, but I've got to get back over to Greensboro. I only came over to see the folks for a few minutes. If I can, I'll come to the thing. If not, have a drink for me."

"Oh, please come," she pouted. "Just everybody's going to be there. Jeannie Marshall's even flying in from Ohio."

"She is?"

"That's what she said in her letter. You want to see your old flame, don't you?"

"My old flame?"

"Your old flame," Edwina affirmed. "You don't think I've forgotten about what a case you two had, do you? Why you two were the talk of the school, the way she used to come by and pick you up and drive you to school every day and drive you back home to her home."

"Why, she didn't drive me to school every day."

"Well, maybe not every day, but she sure had a crush on you for a while. Everybody thought you all'd get married, but you didn't. I bet you all had some wild old times out at that big house of hers out in Wuthering Heights, didn't you?"

"We had a good time," I said, "but it wasn't all as serious as that. We were just friends. That was all."

"Aw, you can't fool me," Edwina declared. "You two were hot and heavy there for a while. You'll come to see her again, won't you?"

"Maybe I will," I smiled. "Expect me if you see me, OK?"

"It's two dollars and a half per plate," she said. "We're going to have steak, potatoes, and peas and iced tea. It'll be real good. Guess who made out the menu?"

"You did."

"Yes. Doesn't it sound good?"

"You always were the imaginative one. What is it, five dollars?"

"Yes," she said. "Oh, everyone's going to have the best time. They really are."

I gave her a five dollar bill and took Sonny and said goodby and walked down the sidewalk to our car and drove back to Greensboro, some twenty miles away.

* * *

The reunion was held at the country club. A classmate who had been kind enough to tag himself with his name greeted us at the door as we came in.

"Hello, Wayne," I said, shaking his hand. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Ten long years," he said. "You're a banker now, aren't you? Heard there's a lot of money in that field."

"No," I said. "I quit the bank and am trying to get a Master's over at W. C."

"You quit the bank? Why'd you do that? Man, I sure wouldn't quit a job like that, if I had one."

"Where are you working now?"

"Same old place--Crescent Plumbing. Is that your wife?"

"Yes. Barbara, this is Wayne Norris. Wayne, this is my wife, Barbara."

Wayne mumbled something and we waved goodby and went on upstairs to where party was already in progress.

"Did you bring your saxophone?" demanded Edwina, who had apparently stationed herself at the door, waiting for me.

"No," I smiled. "I'm afraid it wouldn't add much to the party for me to toot that damed thing."

"Aw, we were counting on it", pouted Edwina. "Is this your wife?"

"Yes. Barbara, meet Mrs. Edwina Wallace, old classmate. Edwina, meet Barbara."

"Oh, I'm so glad to meet you. I've known your husband since we were just kids. Where are you from?"

"Here in town," Barbara replied.

"Oh, you are? Well, did you go to the Senior High School? I declare, I can't seem to place you."

"I went to Lassiter, the county school," Barbara said.

"When I was in highschool, our house wasn't in the city limits. Now is is, though."

"Well, my, my, my," Edwina said. "I certainly am glad to meet you."

We went over to the bar and I got us a couple of drinks, and Barbara spotted someone she knew and went over to speak to her.

Next to me at the bar was Butch Lytton. "Hello, Butch," I said.

"Chazz, old boy," shouted Butch, turning around and grabbing my hand and shaking it vigorously. "Chazz, how in the hell are you doing? I haven't seen you in a coon's age, boy. What've you been doing with yourself? Big banker, now, I guess? Making plenty of money, haw, haw, haw!"

"No, I'm just a musician now. I got tired of the bank. I'm trying to get a Master's over at the college."

"You quit the bank? I don't believe it."

"'Fraid it's the truth, though. I got to where I couldn't take the place anymore and just quit one day. I haven't been with them for over two years now."

"Well, I'll be damned. I sure never thought you'd quit the bank. Where are you all living now? Got an apartment?"

"Yes. We live over on Wilden Place. Next time you're over there, give us a call."

"Sure will, sure will," Butch declared. "What'd you say you're doing now?"

"I'm a musician--play the saxophone."

"Oh yeah. You always were sort of a musician, weren't you? That's right, you could tear a sax up, if I remember. You're doing that for a living now?"

"Tearing them to bits."

"You always were the kidder, weren't you, Chazz? That's right, I'd forgotten. You were voted the Wittiest, weren't you? I'd forgotten."

"What're you doing for a living now, Butch?"

"Oh, I'm in real estate, real estate, Good field. Aren't looking for a house, are you?"

"No."

"Well, just give me a call if you get interested in anything. Say, is your drink empty? Let me get you a fresh one."

"No, that's all right. I appreciate it, though."

But Butch bought me a drink anyway, and slapped me on the back and made me spill part of it on me.

"Thanks for the drink," I said, and excused myself to go and speak to a girl I had always thought was pretty.

"Hello, Sue," I greeted her. She was standing next to a huge fellow, whom I assumed to be her husband.

"Oh, hello, Charlie," she smiled. "I want you to meet my husband, Pete. Pete, this is Charlie Meadows."

"Runh," grunted her husband jovially. "You sunz Burnk?"

"Pete's had a little too much already," Sue giggled. "I can't understand a thing he says. Isn't that hilarious?"

"Sidesplitting," I said. "How've you been getting along?"

"Oh, fine, just fine. Is your wife here? I've heard so much about her. She's from Greensboro, isn't she?"

"She's over there talking to somebody. She's from here in town. You may not know her. She went to Lassiter."

"Oh. Well. I guess I wouldn't know her, then. How did you meet her?"

"Luzz drnk," Pete said, pulling a pint of bourbon out of his pocket and brandishing it in my direction.

"No, I don't think so," I said. "But thanks anyway."

Pete uncapped the bottle and poured my glass full and then poured some up my arm and then on himself. "Wurps," he said.

"Oh, Pete," scolded Sue. "I'm so sorry, Charlie. He doesn't get like this often, but when he does...." She rolled her eyes heavenward.

"I'll see you all later, OK?" I said, and winked at her and walked over to speak to a teacher I had had.

"Hello, Miss Bain," I said. "Do you remember me?"

"I certainly do, you sinner," said Miss Bain. She smiled at me cordially and shot a quick glance at my dark drink. "How are things at the bank?"

"I'm not with the bank any more. I'm trying to get a master's degree over at the college."

"You quit the bank? Whatever for?"

"I just didn't like the bank. I'm going to teach school, if I can get the degree."

"I never thought you'd quit the bank. What are you going to teach?"

"English."

"English? Well, that's nice," she said, and turned to reply to something someone else had said to her.

I walked over to a trio of fellows standing near a potted palm tree.

"Hello, Harris," I said. "What are you all up to?"

"Not a damned thing," Harris replied, then releasing a chorus of the same mad-giggle he had developed back in high school.

"How you been doing, Medders," Jerry Morrison, a happy fat fellow, smiled at me.

"Aw, about half," I said.

"We was just over here listing our achievements of the last ten years," said Larry Warner, a thin dark fellow.
"Maybe you'd like to tell us just what all milestones of accomplishment you've set since you got out of old HHS."

"I've drove a truck almost a million miles," grinned Morrison, then with mock seriousness, "That's something to think about."

"It sure is," I said.

"I've had eight jobs," Harris guffawed. "And now I've got the one I had when I got out of high school--selling saw blades. I've been the full circle."

"I'm still in the Army," Warner said.

"Doing what?" I asked.

"Nothing," he laughed. "I'm in charge of the Post Library. Need any books?"

I laughed and said I didn't need any. "Well, I don't think I've set the milestones of accomplishment you guys have, but I did manage to quit my job and I'm back in school."

"Good God a' mighty, Medders," Morrison bellered, "You've done took the cake. Back in school? How come?"

"Aw I'm trying to get a master's in English."

The trio had a good laugh over my achievements and then the conversation proceeded on to some of the other classmates at the reunion.

"I guess you heard that Butch Lytton is the new real estate king here in town," Morrison said.

"That's right," Harris agreed with a broad grin, "He's just about cornered the market on Mill Hill and central Niggertown."

The rest of the trio laughed over a joke I hadn't caught. "What's old Butch done now?" I asked.

"Aw him and his mama's gone and bought up all the mill shacks and Nigger houses they could get their hands on and now they're living off the fat of the land." The trio laughed again, this time almost hysterically.

"Well, what's so funny about that?" I asked.

"Why they think they're the new social leaders of Homer," Harris cried. "You ought to see old Butch and his mama riding through Niggertown in their big Cadillac limosine on Saturdays, collecting rent."

"Butch wears a vest and a felt hat and his mama has got her a mink stole she drapes around herself as they go prancing up and down Mill Hill," Harris laughed, spilling a little of his drink on himself. "The rest of the time, Butch just swaggers around town, bragging about how many T. V. sets they've got in that big old house of theirs, and how the market's doing."

"That's right," Morrison declared. "Butch is always talking about how the market's doing. He claims he's got extensive holdings in South America. It's the beatingest thing you ever saw. All they've got is a bunch of mill houses and Nigger shacks and to hear them tell it, you'd think they owned half the town."

"Where in the world did they get the money to buy all the houses?" I asked.

"From old man Lytton's life insurance, I guess," Harris shrugged.

I looked around the party to see if anyone else had come in. Not Not many, if any, had. The room was about half full, and of course only

about half of those were folks who had been in the Class of '55. The rest were dates, husbands, wives, teachers, and some curious strangers who had wandered in from other parts of the club to see what was going on in the upstairs bar.

Edwina reappeared and headed toward our group. "You didn't get a name tag," she scolded. "You were supposed to get a name tag." She pinned a strangely shaped tag on me, bearing my name. When I looked at it curiously, she said, "It's supposed to be shaped like a purple pimpernel. Don't you remember? That was our class flower. Don't you think it looks like a purple pimpernel?"

"Very much," I said, having a little trouble focusing on it. "Are these leaves?"

Just as she was answering, there came from the kitchen a huge crash and rattle, followed by lots of excited shouting and even some screaming, so I never heard the answer to my question.

"What in the hell was that?" Harris snickered. Edwina trotted off to see what the matter was.

"God, it sounded like the place was coming down," I said. "I think I'll go get me another drink."

"Naw, here, have some of my old rotgut," Morrison said, and he poured my glass full of gin. "I was drinking bourbon," I said, "But I guess it won't hurt me to mix a little." I hated to be unappreciative. I put an ice cube in my glass to try and tame it down a little.

In a minute, Edwina and the manager of the country club came out of the kitchen and she yoo-hooed and waved her arms about, asking for attention. With a little shushing, the Class of '55 and their escorts and guests got quiet.

"I'm afraid we've had a little difficulty in the kitchen," she began, somewhat embarrassed. "Two of the cooks have decided to quit, of all things. They just walked out."

"Through the Goddam wall?" Morrison whispered.

"It's getting more and more difficult to get good help every year," the club manager declared in a nasal whine. "I just don't know what we're going to do."

"It's probably a little bit my fault," Edwina snickered. "That silly cook only asked me how many were in the class, and I told him thirty-seven, but he should have known that we'd be bringing our wives and husbands. I mean, he should have known."

"Well, I'll be God damned," said Larry Warner, his second speech of the evening.

"Well, we're going to send over to Pinnacle to get plate lunches for everybody," said the manager. "The meal will be a little late, but everything'll be all right."

He and Edwina stood at the kitchen door, having said all they cared to say and apparently not quite knowing how to disassemble the crowd they had assembled. Finally, Edwina shrugged, blushed, and said, "Well, I guess that's all."

With that, the shuffle and muttle of the party once more arose and everyone turned back to whatever he had been talking about.

Harris, Warner, Morrison and I talked for a few more minutes about old times in general, and then I wandered over to speak to some more of my old classmates. A rug almost tripped me and threw me on my face, but I managed to catch myself in time, and didn't even spill any of my drink.

"Hello, Jordan," I greeted my old friend.

"Well, hello, Meadows," Buddy Jordan replied. "How're things with the old boy?"

"The old boy's getting along OK," I said. "Looks to me like you've gained a little weight, haven't you?"

"Could be, could be," Jordan smiled. He stepped over to reveal the presence of a small girl whom I had not noticed before. "Like for you to meet my wife," he said. "Sandy, this is Charlie Meadows, an old classmate of mine. Charlie, this is Sandy, my wife."

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

"Charlie here's the craziest fellow you ever saw," Jordan grinned at his wife. "He used to pull some of the wildest stunts you could think of. Remember that time you caused some kind of explosion down in the lab that ate all the finish off all the desks? Boy, it's a wonder they didn't skin you alive."

"They never found out really whether I did it or not," I said.

"That's right. I remember now. They never really did pin that on you, did they. Well, what about the time you painted all the toilet seats in the girls bathroom early in the morning so they'd come in and sit down in it while it was still wet?"

"They never did prove I did that, either," I said.

Jordan let out a great wah-wha-wha! of a laugh. "You should have heard this one girl squealing when they went in there to get her unstuck. They had to use turpentine to get her up. Took most of the skin off her fanny and the turpentine burned the hell out of her, and wouldn't you know it? She was some shy little preacher's daughter who'd never even had a date before, much less been rescued from a public toilet! Her father threatened to sue the school!" Jordan stopped talking to wah-wha a while.

"How did you get out of that?" he continued, wiping tears from his eyes with a paper napkin.

"They never proved I did it."

"You were a slick one, all right," he said, more or less in control of himself once more. "Say, they did finally prove you put the cow in the auditorium, didn't they?" he said.

"No, but I admitted it," I said.

"Honey," he said to his wife, "You should have seen old man Hauser's face when that old cow stuck her head out from the wings and said Mooo. I just about died. We was having assembly and old man Hauser, the principal, was making some kind of a crazy speech, and all of a dudden this old cow that Charlie put back behind stage sticks her head out and bellers at him. I just about died. How in the hell did you get that old cow on the school ground, much less the school?"

"She was already on the school ground. I just led her on in the building and put her back stage. I've even forgot whose she was," I said. "By the way, weren't you the one who set fire to Wanda Jenkins' hair, one day in assembly?"

"Yeah, that was me, all right," Jordan said.

"Now there was something you ought to have seen," I told his wife, who did not seem to be paying much attention to what we were talking about.

"That was a sight, all right," he said. "I was playing with this old cigarette lighter of mine one day in assembly and there in front of me was Wanda Jenkins, with that great big old head of hair of hers that always looked like something the dogs had fought over, and so I just

reached over before I thought what I was doing and set her on fire."

"Now you talk about something breaking up an assembly," I said, "Now that you should have seen."

"Wooh! Cried Jordan. "Why you never seen such a sight in your life. She hopped up there with her head all a'flaming, whooping and a'hollering and beating at herself in the head. You never seen such a sight, or heard anything like it in your life."

"I think it was cruel," said Sandy.

"Oh, she wasn't hurt," I said. "Somebody threw a coat over her head and smothered out the fire before it hurt her."

"She sure did look like a plucked chicken after that, though," Jordan laughed, giving Sandy a quick, harsh glance.

Butch Lytton came over and touched me on the shoulder. "We're looking for some folks to help bring the food back from Pinnacle," he said. "What kind of a car have you got?"

"Black Devil Rocket," I said.

"What?"

"Ford."

"Can you help us out? We'll need three or four cars."

"Are you taking yours?"

"No. I can't. There's someting wrong with it."

"What?"

"I don't know. The mechanic down at the Cadillac place told me not to drive it out of town. A Cadillac's a good car, but you have to be careful with them sometimes. Anyway, those Cadillac mechanics are trained up at the factory and so they ought to know what they're talking

about."

"I didn't know we had a Cadillac place here in town."

"Oh, we haven't. There's one in Pinnacle, though. You don't think I'd let anyone in this crummy little town work on a Cadillac, do you?"

"Of course not," I said.

"Well, can you help us?"

"I tell you what," I said. "You look around some more and if you get stuck, I'll be glad to help."

"Well.....OK," Butch said, not much satisfied with my reply. He walked on off, and I said goodby and please to meet you to Jordan and Sandy, and then moved on to another couple, Helen Maury and Elmo Wallace, Edwina's husband.

"Hello, you two," I said, shaking Elmo's hand, but looking at Helen, who was still one of the prettiest girls I've ever seen.

"Hello, Charlie," Elmo smiled, wrinkling his nose and pushing his thick glasses back. Elmo had new glasses, I noticed. His old ones had been large and powerful enough--we had excused him of having milk bottle bottoms on his eyes--but these new ones were even larger, of a rakishly modern design which made him appear to be continuously surprised.

"Hello, Charlee," Helen smiled, her speech still flavored with just a touch of her original Canadian French.

"Y' glass is just about empty there, isn't it, old buddy?" said Elmo, pushing his glasses back and wrinkling his nose.

"Thanks, but I've had enough for a while," I said. "I'll take you up on that later, OK?"

"Aw, come on and have a little drink," Elmo snorted, pouring my glass full of scotch with one hand and pushing his glasses back on his

nose with the other.

"Good God," I said.

"Pardon?" Helen smiled, raising her eyebrows curiously.

"Nothing," I said. "Thanks, Elmo."

"We wair just talking about you," Helen said. "Edwina told us you are going to play your clarinet for us tonight."

"She did? When was that?"

"She told us at the first of the party, when we wair coming in," she said.

"Good God," I said.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. I hear you've got three kids," I said to Elmo.

"Uh huh. Tammy, Kim, and Booboo," He said, pushing his glasses back. "Edwina says you've got a little kid. Girl or boy?"

"Boy."

"What do you call him?"

"Imp of the Perverse."

"What?"

"Sonny," I said, pretending to cough and clear my throat. "He's five."

"We're two ahead of you," Elmo grinned, pushing his glasses back. "You better get to work."

"I'm working just as hard as I can," I said.

"Oh, speaking of working," Helen said, "I hear you are working as a musician now, playing your clarinet in a nightclub where they have dancing girls. Is that true?"

"Well, it's a saxophone, but I do play over at the Fol-De-Rol Club in Greensboro. That's how I'm keeping Barbara and I in school."

"Is Barbara your wife?" Elmo asked, pushing his glasses back.

"I have no idea."

"Pardon?" said Helen.

"Yes, we've been married almost seven years," I said.

"Do they have dancing girls over there?" Helen asked.

"Yes."

"I bet they're really something," Elmo said, pushing back his glasses.

"Yes, they're something," I said.

"Nice girls, I bet," Helen said, a little ironically.

"Whores."

"Pardon?"

"They're real nice girls. A couple of them are from over at the college. I don't really know any of them. They seem nice enough," I said.

"You don't know any of them?" Elmo asked, grinning.

"No. While the band's playing, the girls are backstage. While the girls are onstage, the band is off. They dance to records."

"What about after everything is over?"

"We die."

"What?"

"What do you mean, after everything's over?"

"I mean, can't you get together with the girls after everything's over? What about after the club's closed?"

"I guess so. Ordinarily everything's over for me. Playing all night tires me out and I have to get up the next day, so I just go home and go to bed."

"All the time?"

"Is your wife here tonight?" Helen asked.

"Yes."

"Which one is she? I don't believe I've ever met her."

I looked around and finally spotted her, still talking to the same group she started talking to when we came in. "She's the blonde over there by the piano," I said, "The one in the blue dress."

"She' very attractive," Helen said, looking at her and furrowing her brow. "I don't believe I know her. Is she from around here?"

"No."

"What's her name?"

"Little Moon Turkey."

"What?"

"Little Moon Turkey. She's a full-blooded Commanche."

"She is?"

"Her great grandfather was Sitting Bull himself."

"Really?"

"I met her on the reservation in Oklahoma and we were married in Texas."

"Charlie, you're putting us on," Elmo said, fixing his glasses.

"I most certainly am not. She's a bull-blooded Commanche, and she'd scalp you in a minute."

"Charlie, you're drunk."

"And you're a wall-eyed son of a bitch."

"Well, that's old Charlie," Elmo laughed, and a look passed between him and Helen.

"Charlie, you were always so funnee," Helen smiled.

"I don't remember being too funnee," I said.

"Well, you were," she said. "Tell Little Turkey hello for us."

"That's Little Moon Turkey!" I shouted after them as they made their way towards the bar.

I walked over to where Barbara was talking to her friends. "Hello," I said.

"Are you having a good time?" she smiled.

"Pretty good."

"Seen a lot of people you know?"

"Um Hmm."

"They sure were expecting you to bring your saxophone. They all thought you'd play it for them tonight."

"Who are your friends?" I asked.

"This is Evelyn, and this is Mollie, and this is Brenda," she said, pointing to her friends. "Evelyn and I went to Lassiter."

"Nice to meet all of you," I said.

Barbara pulled on my sleeve and motioned for me to bend down so she could whisper something in my ear. I did.

"Who is that?" she asked, pointing in the general direction of the bar, where nearly a dozen people were standing.

"Butch Lytton," I said, knowing she could not have been curious about anyone else in the group.

"Wow," she said, and indeed Butch was a wow. He was over six feet tall, had dark wavy hair, and had looks like a movie star, compared to the rest of us, who ranged from plain to just plain ugly.

"He's a looker, all right," I said. "When we were in high school he had his pick of all the girls--you can bet on that. They used to get right glassy-eyed if he spoke to them in the hall. Don't just keep pointing," I joshed her, "and close your mouth."

"I wasn't pointing and my mouth wasn't hanging open," she grinned. "Tell me something."

"What?"

"Is he conscious?"

"Part of the time. He's no Einstein by a long shot, but he's been known to come in out of the rain, occasionally."

"Without coaxing?"

"Aw, he isn't <u>that</u> dumb," I said. "When he's turning on his Hollywood personality he's intelligent enough. It's just that blank stare he gets when he's not talking to anyone, or anyone to him. He's a good boy. I always tried to like him simply because the other guys were jealous of him and didn't."

"He's looking over this way."

"Quick, turn around and let's start talking to your friends. He's been on my back all night about going to Pinnacle," I said.

"Pinnacle?"

"Shhh," I said, and turned her around and began to try to pick up the conversation her friends were having.

"Who's that he's with?" Barbara asked, "his wife?"

"No," I said. "He isn't married. That's Edwina Wallace."

"Anything going on there?"

"I don't know," I said. "It was always impossible to say, with Butch. If he spoke to a girl in high school the rumor got around that they were practically engaged. He's never married--never had to, I guess."

Barbara poked me in the ribs.

"It's the truth," I said. "I could have spent the night with a girl, and nobody'd ever've thought anything about it, but if Butch walked a girl home, everybody always assumed she was positively enslaved by him."

"Was she?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Butch Lytton came up and tapped me on the shoulder. Edwina was with him. "Looks like we're going to have to ask you to help us out on getting the food over here, old man," he said.

"Oh, would you, please?" Edwina begged, giving me her kittenish twirl of the head.

Barbara looked at me questioningly.

"They want me to drive over to Pinnacle, to help them bring back food for the suppper," I explained.

"Dinner," corrected Edwina.

"Dinner," I said.

Edwina looked at Barbara. "Charlie was always the most helpful thing, back when we were in high school. We just knew he'd volunteer when we asked him."

"I don't believe you've met my wife," I said. "Barbara, this is

Edwina Wallace and Butch Lytton. Butch and Edwina this is my wife, Barbara."

Butch and Edwina exchanged a look.

"So nice to meet you," Edwina beamed. "I've heard so much about you."

"Pleased to meet you," Butch said.

"Well, will you please help us?" Edwina grinned at me.

It occurred to me to ask her if she could give me any approximation as to how much her parents had spent on her teeth, but I didn't. "Why don't you ride along with me?" I said to Barbara.

"Why?"

"Oh, I just want somebody to ride along with," I said.

"Oh, you don't have to go if you don't want to," Edwina said.

"That's right," Butch declared. "I was going to ride along with the old boy to help load everything in the car and all that--not woman's work, you know."

Barbara looked back at me. "Come on and ride with me," I said.

Butch and Edwina exchanged another look and then walked off. Butch said, "See you down in the parking lot, old boy," and then they disappeared in the crowd.

"Well, do you want to come along?" I asked Barbara.

She thought a minute and then said, "no, I don't think so. I can't see any sense in it. I'd rather stay here at the party."

I kind of wanted her to come along, but couldn't think of any good reasons for her to, so I walked downstairs and out of the building and around it to the paved parking lot behind it.

A head poked up from behind a car. It was Butch. He waved to me and then dropped back out of sight. I wandered over to where I thought I had seen him, but he wasn't there.

"Hey," said a voice somewhere behind me. I recognized it as belonging to Butch.

"Where are you?" I said, turning around, trying to locate him.

"Over here." The voice came from a huge Cadillac limousine.

I walked over to the limousine. Butch grinned at me from the window of the driver's seat. "Come on around and get in," he whispered.

I went around and got in the front seat next to him. "What's all the whispering about?" I asked.

Butch grinned and held up a finger meaning, just a second. He pulled a bottle of scotch out from under the seat and handed it to me. "First, let's have a little drink," he said.

"I don't believe I care for one. Unless I miss my guess I've just about reached my limit."

Butch shrugged and turn the bottle up, brought it down again, made a terrible face, coughed several times, wiped his mouth, gasped for air, shook his head, and blinked a few times. "Good stuff," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"What's going on? I asked. "Are we going over to Pinnacle after the food, or not? What's all this whispering for?"

"Listen," Butch said. "I want you to do me a little favor. You don't mind doing a little favor for a friend, and old buddy, do you?"

"What kind of favor?"

"Aw, just a little favor. What I want you to do is drive around to

the club and pick up Winnie--Edwina--and then drive us over the Pinnacle."

"I don't get it."

"Well, that's all there is to it. All you have to do is pick up Winnie and then drive over to Pinnacle. That isn't much to ask of an old buddy, is it?"

"Where'll you be all this time?"

"Oh, I'll be crouching down in the back seat. You know how it is. I can't be seen picking Winnie up right in front of the club."

"But I can?"

"Well, I'll be right there in the car with you, won't I? It won't be as if you were picking her up by yourself."

"It will be too," I cried. "You fool, don't you realize you'll be crouching down in the back seat? No one will see you. It'll look just exactly like I'm picking Edwina up to take her off some place. What's wrong with you, Butch? Have you lost your mind, or something?"

Butch gave me a look of scorn. "Won't help an old buddy, huh?"

"Sure, I'll be glad to help you, but not on such a crazy stunt as this. What you're suggesting is crazy. You can't expect me to make it look like I'm the one who's going off with Edwina, just to disguise the fact that you're the one who's actually going to do it. That's the craziest thing I've ever heard." In the dark of the parking lot, which was lit by only one of those big purple mercury lights, it was hard to see his features very clearly, but I could tell by the way his speech had become slurred and the way he nooded his head strangely that he was on the way to being good and drunk. I came to pretty near the same conclusion concerning myself.

"Well, suppose we do it this way, if you're not going to do it my way. Suppose I just wait back here in the parking lot and you go and pick up Edwina and then come back around and get me. How's that?"

"Butch, for God's sake, that's not going to look a bit different from having you crouching down in the back seat like a madman as I drive around. It'll still look like I'm the one that's running off with Edwina."

Butch took another drink from his scotch and looked off into the darkness, thinking. In a few minutes he said, "I bet you have your fun with those dancers over at the Fol-De-Rol, all right, don't you?"

"So?" I said.

"You always were the one with plenty of good advice for everyone, weren't you?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Butch?"

"Aw, you think you can come back over here and tell us what's right and wrong, just because you've gone off and got yourself educated and live over there in Greensboro."

"Who's telling you what's right and wrong?" I'm just telling you I'm not going to pull some stunt that'll make it look like I'm the one who's taking some broad off, right in front of everybody. You're the one who wants to take her off somewhere. It's your problem, not mine." I couldn't actually tell whether Butch was listening to me or not. He appeared to be in some sort of drunken reverie, rhapsodizing blearily on my various faults.

"You think we're just a bunch of hicks from out in the sticks, don't you? Well, I bet you have your fun with those girls at the

Fol-De-Rol, all right."

"Look, Butch, I haven't said I thought there was anything wrong with your taking Edwina out and giving her a tumble. Why should I care whether you roll her in the hay or not? For all I care you can ride her down Main Street like a wheelbarrow tomorrow at noon. Why should it make any difference to me?"

"You play that damned trumpet of yours every night at the Fol-De-Rol and wouldn't even bring it over here and play one stinking note for us. I guess you think we're from out in the boondocks and couldn't appreciate your kind of music."

"I didn't bring my horn over here <u>because</u> I play it every night of the week. I had to get off from work to come over here tonight. If I wanted to play the god-damned thing I could have stayed over at the Fol-De-Rol and played it until I dropped and made money instead of coming over here and losing a night's salary and spending money and having to put up with a bunch of lunatics, and besides, it's a saxophone, not a trumpet."

"Yeah, you have your fun with those chlorines and look down your nose at us."

"<u>Chlorines!</u> And I am not looking down my nose at anybody. I'm going back inside. You can work out your own problems." I opened the door and got out and started back to the club. As I passed by a Chevrolet sedan, I heard muffled talking and whispering. It was too dark to identify whoever was in the car, but I could tell there were two of them, and someone had foolishly left his thick glasses on the rear deck of the car, clearly visible through the back window of the vehicle.

When I got back in the club, Edwina was down in the foyer, talking to Wayne Morris.

"I just had to get out of all that smoke for a while," she said. "It was just driving me crazy." She gave me a strange look.

"Elmo is out in the parking lot," I said to her. "He's in Butch Lytton's Cadillac, and he wants to see you about something concerning the dinner."

Edwina looked puzzled for just an instant, and then beamed at me. "Oh, thanks, Charlie," she breathed. "I was just wondering where I'd find him." She shot me another smile and siezed a fur wrap she had draped over the back of a chair. She tossed it around her shoulders, tossed me another grin, and clicked out the door in her high-heeled shoes, which I noted to be encrusted with rhinestones.

Wayne gave me a curt nod, and I went back upstairs to the party. Barbara was still talking to her friends.

"I thought you were going to help with the dinner," she said.

"They worked it out without me, so I just came back."

"How long will it be before we eat?" she asked. "I'm about starved."

"I have absolutely no idea," I said, settling myself in an overstuffed chair, "absolutely no idea."

And Jeannie Marshall never did show up.

# A COMMERCIAL VENTURE

Athiests Arise, Ltd. read the sign on Frank Warner's door. It was printed in neat, bold Roman letters on a five by eight filing card and done in black magic marker. Charlie pushed the door open and walked in.

"Anybody home?" he called out, peering into the gloom. Frank had painted all the windows in his room with several coats of black paint.

"Ho!" came a call from over behind a set of double-decker bunk beds which had been placed in the middle of the floor.

"How about some light?" Charlie said, closing the door behind him and trying to get his eyes accustomed to the dark.

"Just a second," came the voice of Frank from the darkness. Two feet hit the floor, and then came the sound of someone fumbling with the chain on a dangling light fixture. In a moment the light came on, falling dimly from a lamp that had been made from a tomato can. "What's happening man?" Frank yawned, rubbing his eyes sleepily and scratching his head.

Charlie went over and sat down in a big arm chair that had part of its stuffing on the floor and part still inside it. "You got this room coming along nicely," he said, glancing around with a wry grin.

The room, now that Charlie's eyes had gotten accustomed to the darkness, was revealed to be a good Frank Warner room. The only light in it was from a fifteen watt bulb, which was struggling as best it could inside the tomato can which hung at eye level. On the floor in front of the bunk beds was a leopardskin rug, complete with paws, jaws, claws, and

tail. A huge color representation of The Disemboweled Man was stapled to the wall over the fireplace and on each side of it were the Zodical figures of Libra (on the left) and Scorpio (on the right), each obviously done by artists of the first water. In one corner dangled a skeleton on a stand--obviously the type used in anatomy classes--but thisskeleton had on voluptuous lips in red lipstick. Several birds--stuffed birds--had been hung from the ceiling in postures allowing them to appear to be in full flight. The use of black silk thread in hanging them plus the art of the taxidermist made them seem wildly authentic. An owl seemed to be diving right at Charlie. The only thing that distracted from the realness of the birds was the fact that Frank had put tags on them all. One said, American Coot. Another was tagged, Egret. Another bore the label, Barn Swallow. Another, which turned out not to be a bird at all, was labelled, Fruit Bat.

The room was cluttered with clothes, piles of magazines, newspapers, bricks, fireplace wood, and shoes and underwear.

"Let's just go on and drink," Frank said, still scratching his head and wandering over to a dresser. He opened a drawer and took out a bottle of bourbon. "How're things going for you?" he asked.

"Pretty good," Charlie shrugged. "I guess I'll get out of here one day. It's a lot easier since I moved out of the house. I'm surprised they let you fix your room up like this. They used to bug the hell out of me when I live in the house."

"Aw, they don't bother me too bad," Frank said. He straightened himself up and brought a glass with a little bourbon in it over to Charlie. Frank was a tall, lean boy, with dark hair that he couldn't

seem to keep out of his face. He set the bottle down in front of Charlie and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Where'd you get all the art work?" Charlie asked, taking a sip of his drink.

"This buddy of mine swiped it out of the Med School for me," Frank grinned. "I'm getting a real kick out of it. How do you like the two Zodiac figures?"

"Fine," Charlie said. "Who did 'em for you?"

"That little blonde chick in the Art Department," Frank said. "I only gave her five dollars apiece for 'em No kidding."

"Where in the hell did you get ten bucks for art work?" Charlie smiled. "The last time i saw you, you were on the panic."

"Aw, you haven't heard about the new thing I got going." Frank smiled, waving toward the ceiling, as if shoving something up at it. "I'm in the soul business now. I got this real good thing going for me."

"Soul business?"

"Oh yeah. I got this thing where I buy and sell guys' souls."

"You're out of your mind."

"Oh no, no, no," he waved a cautioning finger at Charlie. "It's a real good thing. I already made almost two hundred bucks this month. Last month I made three hundred. A real good thing."

"So you're running a soul market? Is that it? I think you're putting me on."

"Ah, you know I wouldn't do that, Charlie," Frank said. "If you'd come around the house more, instead of running around with your girl all the time, you'd know what's going on."

"And the other guys in the fraternity just let you sit up here and buy and sell souls? Pretty as you please?"

"They can't say nothing 'cause I bought Peacock's and Armbruster's and Windy's souls, and won't sell 'em back to them if they give me a bunch of jive."

Charlie sat back in his chair and laughed. "Frank, you always were crazy as hell, but this is the goofiest scheme you've ever come up with. I don't believe a word of it."

Frank laughed too, but upon hearing something that Charlie didn't hear, he started up, and listened carefully, holding out a hand at Charlie, which meant: be quiet.

Footfalls came from the staircase below. Frank looked at his watch. Then he looked at Charlie.

"Want to see something?" Frank said.

"Sure," Charlie smiled.

"OK, well, just be quiet," Frank whispered. "Slip off your shoes and come on here and hide in the closet. I want you to hear something."

Charlie kicked off his shoes and stood up, still grinning, and still holding his drink. "What's gonna happen?" he said.

"You just don't worry so much and do like I tell you," Frank grinned. He steered Charlie in the closet and closed the door on him. Then he opened it back up and handed Charlie the bottle. "You might get lonesome," he said, and closed the door again.

From within the gloom, Charlie heard footsteps approach the door of Frank's room. They hesitated, and then there came a knock at the door.

"Who's there?" Frank asked.

"Culbreth," said a voice, "Connie Culbreth. You busy?"

"No, come on in."

The door scraped and the footsteps entered the room.

"What's the trouble, Connie?" Frank said amiably.

"Aw, nothing, nothing," Connie said. "I just thought I'd drop by. What'd you think of the game Saturday?"

"I hate we lost it, but that Michigan crowd is something else," Frank said. "Have a seat."

"Aw, I haven't got time to visit, or anything. I just thought I'd drop by."

"Glad you did, glad you did. Drop by any time. I'd offer you a drink, but a friend of mine just grabbed the last of my liquor."

"Aw, that's OK. I don't really need a drink, anyway. Say, this is some room you've got here. You've added a bunch of stuff since I was here last. It looks real good."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. Business has been right good. Looks like I'll be here another semester or two. Maybe I'll even finish. Who knows?"

"Looks real good," said Connie, and then they were silent.

"Well, what's on your mind?" Frank finally said. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Well," Connie said, and then he released kind a kind of laugh, "I thought I'd come over and have a word with you about that little deal we were talking about last month." He laughed his strange laugh again.

"What little deal was that?" Frank asked.

"Oh, you know that little deal we were talking about one night over

at the Gamma Gamma Gamma house. You remember I was going to sell you my soul, or something like that. I don't exactly remember what the deal was. We were both drunk that night." He laughed his half-laugh again. It was a kind of heh-heh-heh, with a hmmmmmm on the end of it.

"Oh, I remember that night very well," Frank said. "I remember buying it for--let me see--five dollars, if I'm not mistaken. Was it five dollars? I'm almost positive it was. Yes, I do believe it was five dollars."

"It was five dollars," Connie said, and then cleared his throat and coughed. "You're right, it was five dollars."

"We sure were having a ball that night, weren't we?" laughed Frank. "Do you remember old Charlie Meadows? He was the one that played the piano and sang that crazy song--aw, what was the name of that song? You remember that crazy song he sang about the postman, don't you? Wasn't it something about, My bag's made of leather, or something? You remember that song he sang."

"I kind of remember it," Connie said. "The thing I wanted to talk to you about was that little deal....."

"I remember now," Frank interrupted. "There were two postman songs he sang. One was called, 'Our Mailman's Got the Longest Route In Town,' and the other one was a takeoff on 'Bye Bye Blackbird.' I remember now. That Charlie's a crazy old son of a bitch, isn't he?"

"He sure is," Connie said. "But....."

"You know, I liked the one that was a takeoff on 'Bye Bye Blackbird' better than the other one, because the rest of us could sing along with him. That Charlie's a crazy son of a bitch, isn't he?" Frank laughed.

"He sure is," Connie said. "But the main reason I came over to

see you is about that little matter we were discussing that night at the party."

"Oh, my buying your soul for five dollars," Frank said.

"Yes," Connie said, releasing a strange little cough. "Well, you see, I thought the whole thing was a joke at the time, and I wouldn't have taken your five dollars if we hadn't been drunk and all, but I got to thinking about it and I've decided that it wasn't right for me to take your money like that and I've decided to give you your money back and just forget the whole thing. I had no business taking advantage of you that way."

Connie waited for a few minutes and then said, "Well, you see, what I'd like to do is give you your five dollars back and just call the whole thing off. You see, I don't feel right about taking your money like that." There was a rustling about and then Connie said, "Here, I've got your five dollars right here. You just take it and we'll call the whole thing off. I don't feel right about taking your money."

"I don't want your five dollars back," Frank said. "I don't feel cheated at all. I'm perfectly satisfied with the deal. Here, you just take your five and put it back in your wallet. You haven't cheated me at all. I'm happy as a lark."

"Well," Connie hesitated again, "I just don't feel right about it. It's not the right way to do, taking a fellow's money like that. I wouldn't feel right about keeping it."

"Well, I can't take it back," Frank said. "A deal's a deal. I never back out on a deal, no sir."

"Aw, look, Frank," Connie said. "This is rediculous. You can't

buy somebody's soul. You just gave me five dollars for nothing."

"Well, it may seem like five dollars for nothing to you, but I think I got my money's worth. Besides, I never welch on a deal."

They were silent for a few more minutes. Then Connie spoke up again.

"You know," he said, "I'm a pretty religious fellow. I know sometimes I drink too much and chase the broads a little too much, but basically, I'm a pretty religious guy."

"So am I," said Frank brightly.

"You are?"

"Sure, what'd you think?"

"Well, I didn't know, you know, what with that sign you've got written on the door, and all."

"Aw. That doesn't mean I'm an atheist. It's just a joke."

"A joke?"

"Sure. Me and God're just like that."

"Well, anyway, I wish you'd take this five dollars and just call the whole thing off. As I said, I'm a pretty religious guy, and I don't like to make jokes about it. I know sometimes I get a little potted and say some things I don't really mean, but I don't really mean them. I wish you'd take the money back and call the whole thing off."

"I can't," Frank said.

"Can't what?"

"Can't take the money back or call the whole thing off."

"You can't?"

"Nope. Sorry."

Connie hesitated a few more minutes. "How come?" he finally asked.

"Well, it's a matter of business. You know how that goes."

"Business? What business?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't have your soul any more."

"You don't?"

"Nope. So I can't take your five dollars back. It wouldn't be fair. You see the situation, of course."

"What?.....I mean,....Well, how could you?...I mean what do you mean, you haven't got my soul any more? You didn't have it in the first place."

"I didn't?"

"Of course not."

"Well, suit yourself," Frank said.

After a few moments of silence, Connie said, "What did you do with it?

"I sold it."

"You sold it?"

"Sure, why did you think I bought it?"

"Who did you sell it to?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that. Professional ethics, you know."

"Look, just what are you trying to pull over me? Do you think I'm some kind of a nut, or something? Just take the five dollars and give me that piece of paper I signed. I don't want to fool around about this all afternoon."

"We've been through that," Frank said. "I told you I haven't got your soul any more. I sold it."

"Well, how about telling me who you sold it to so I can go and talk

to him about it?"

"Sorry," Frank said. "Professional ethics."

They were silent for a while.

"Besides," Frank continued, "I couldn't get it back for any five dollars, anyway."

"What?"

"Just what I said. I couldn't get it back for any five dollars, and I'm not going to lose money on the deal, believe you me."

"You sold it for a profit?"

"Of course. Why else buy it?"

"How much did you make off it?"

"Well, you couldn't expect me to tell you that, could you?" Frank laughed. "I mean, after all, business is business."

"Look, Frank, I'm not going to sit here and take any more of this tool talk from you. Just take this money and give me that paper back and I'll be out of here."

"Can't do it."

"Why not?"

"Ive already told you. Business is business. I'm not going to lose money on the deal. If you don't want to do business, you can just park your carcass somewhere else, I got work to do."

"Frank, am I going to have to bring a bunch of guys from over at my house to get you to straighten this out with me? You know I will if I have to. Why don't you just give me that paper, take the money, and call the whole thing off? I don't want to have to get rough with you."

"I want you to see something," Frank said. A drawer opened and closed. "You see this? It won't be necessary for me to fire it out the

window a couple of times to convince you that you shouldn't get rough with me, will it? Of course, I'll be glad to give you a free home demonstration if you want one."

"Where in the hell did you get that thing?"

"Pawn shop in Durham. Want to see it?"

"Sure."

There came the sound of Connie getting up from his chair. Then he said, "OK, now you're staring down the end of this thing, maybe you'll be more inclined to see things my way, is that right?"

"'Fraid not," Frank said. "Surely you're not under the impression I'd hand you a loaded gun, are you?"

"You son of a bitch."

"Besides," Frank continued, clunking the gun in the drawer and then closing it, "you wouldn't be able to get very many of your fraternity brothers to come over here on a mission to get your soul back, would you? They'd laugh you out of the house."

There came the sound of Connie and Frank sitting back down in their chairs.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Frank said. "I'll see if I can buy your soul back from the fellow I sold it to. I don't think I'll be able to work much of a deal with him, but I'll try. He's a pretty crafty businessman, let me tell you."

"Do I know this guy you're talking about?"

"I'm almost positive you know him," Frank said, "but it wouldn't do to give away valuable business contacts. I'll do what I can for you. Come see me Monday. I think I'll be able to help you out.

"Monday?"

"Sure. You didn't think I could get it all straightened out in a day or two, did you?"

"OK, OK, I'll see you Monday."

"Oh, and by the way, I'm not going to be able to get you fixed up for any five dollars. It's going to cost."

"Cost?"

"Sure. This fellow's shrewd, I tell you."

"How much?"

"Twenty bucks."

"What? You're out of your mind."

They got up out of their chairs and footsteps headed toward the door. "I'm going to get you back one day for this," Connie snarled, fumbled around a bit, and then stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Monday," sang out Frank behind him.

Charlie came out of the closet. "I don't believe it," he said. "I just don't believe it."

Frank pointed to the two ten dollar bills that lay on the table amidst a pile of scribbled chemistry notes and textbooks. "Neither do I," he shrugged, "but there you are. The first time I pulled it, I thought I'd drop my teeth when the poor sap fell for it, but I'll be damned if it doesn't work." He picked the money up and put it in his pocketbook.

Charlie still had the bottle in his hand. He poured himself a drink and poured Frank one and set the bottle down on the table. "Where do you pick all these suckers up? Parties? Stuff like that?"

"You'd be surprised," Frank said, settling himself in his chair. "I get a lot of them at parties, but I've bought souls in the soda shop and in Y Court and in the library and up on Franklin Street, right in the middle of town. You see, the way it all started out, I was just joking with this guy, and we were drunk, and I bought his soul from him for five bucks, and we had a good laugh over it, and I figured I was just out of five bucks. Then one day he came around and asked for the paper sack we had written the whole thing up on and he wanted to give me my five dollars back. I couldn't find the sack, but he was glad to let me have my five back and I was glad to take it. Then after a day or two, this guy started calling me up on the phone, bugging me to death about the paper sack, so I hunted the thing up and took it over and gave it to him. It was then I realized that this guy had actually got it into his head that he had really sold me his soul and that it was in the brown paper sack. I couldn't believe it, but I saw the guy, and I could tell by looking at him that he was really a little nervous about the whole thing. Then is when I realized that if guys are so damned stupid and superstitious, I could mop up on them, so I started my deal what you see right here. I let it get out all over campus that I was some kind of a dope who would give away five dollars to anybody who would sign a little brown paper sack for me, selling me his soul. Pretty soon I started getting kidded about it and then some fish started biting. I guess I must have given out about seventy-five dollars before the first one came back and wanted to talk business. I've almost gotten my ass whipped a couple of times, and that's why I bought the old pistol, but as you can see, the damned fools are falling for it. Now Monday, all I got to do is

have old Connie's sack ready for him when he comes by, and have my gun ready."

Charlie had a good laugh and another drink over Frank's story.

"Hey," said Frank, getting up and going over to a metal filing cabinet. "Want to see something?"

"Sure," Charlie said.

Frank pulled a key out of his pocket and unlocked the cabinet. He took a flashlight from the top of the fixture and used it to search for something inside it. In a moment he came up with a little brown paper bag. "Look at this," he said with a grin, handing it to Charlie.

Charlie took the bag and squinted at it in the gloom. On the front of the bag was written in bold, India ink letters, with a fine Spencerian hand:

Transferred to Frank Warner in return for Due and Ample Consideration: The Immortal Soul of Conrad J. Culbreth, L. S.

"What does L. S. mean?" Charlie asked, shaking his head in wonder at the document.

"It's Latin for Locus Sigilli," Frank replied. "That means the thing is legal." He blew out his cheeks and crossed his eyes, mocking himself.

"I can't believe it," Charlie repeated. "How long have you had this little enterprise going on?"

"Oh, I dropped the seeds of it back during the summer, but it didn't start netting me anything until just here lately."

"How long do you figure it'll keep up?"

"That's hard to say. If word gets around about just what I'm

doing, I guess the whole thing'll fold up pretty quick, but I'm counting on the pride and vanity of most of the suckers to keep them quiet. The thing could keep on for a year or so. Who knows?"

"Not I." Charlie shrugged jovially. He poured himself another drink. Frank had one too, and took the bag back and put it back in the filing cabinet, and locked it up. "What a racket," Charlie said.

"It's a living," Frank said. "Oh, by the way, I've got five bucks here for you if you want to get in on the deal."

Charlie grinned at him. "You're kidding," he said.

"Naah, you're an old buddy. If you want to get in on the gravy, why not?"

"Aw, you're not getting me in on your crazy crap for any five bucks."

"Well, I can be bargained with," Frank shrugged, pouring the last of the bourbon more or less equitably into each of their glasses. "I can go as high as ten, just because you're you."

"I can't believe it," Charlie shook his head.

Frank pulled one of the ten dollar bills out and tossed it on the table in front of Charlie. "There y'are," he said.

"Hell," Charlie shrugged. "If you think I'm so stupid I won't take your money, you got another think coming." He picked the ten dollar bill up and stuffed into his shirt pocket.

Frank pulled out a paper bag and opened a little bottle of India ink. He took a staff pen and dipped it in the ink and wrote the contract on the bag. Then he waved the bag back and forth to dry the ink. When he was sure it was dry, he handed it over to Charlie and handed him the staff pen. "Sign'er up," he said.

Charlie grinned at him and signed the bag. Frank took it, grinned at it, waited for it to dry and then got up and unlocked his file cabinet and filed the bag away. Charlie got up too. "Well, I think I'll get out of here before you realize what an ass you've made out of yourself," he smiled.

"Don't run off," Frank said. "I may have another bottle of booze around here somewhere."

"No more for me, thanks," Charlie said. "No kidding, I guess I better run along. I'll see you later, OK?"

"Later," smiled frank. "Come by the house more. You look good in the room."

"Aw, shut up," Charlie said. "I'll see you later. Drop by the room sometime and tell us a ghost story."

"Later," Frank said.

Charlie walked out in the hall and closed Frank's door behind him. He walked to the head of the stairs and hesitated. After a moment he drew the ten dollar bill out of his pocket and looked at it. Then he frowned at it. He looked back at Frank's door and then back at the bill. The house was almost perfectly still, save for the sounds of distant traffic that filtered through the windows and what Charlie could have sworn was the sound of snickering coming from somewhere.

# OLD NED

The shoes of the old man had always given him away. They did not scrape and drag the way Charlie might have expected those of a common tramp to do. Rather they rustled and shuffled and skuffled in a way that no one else's did, and that sound of those bedraggled old shoes coming down the sidewalk was never missed by Charlie on summer afternoons when he was near, and the feeling that arose inside the boy when he heard them he knew no name for at the time, but later he would feel it again and he would call it respect.

The old man was seen by Charlie all over town, at different parts of the day and in such random spots that his movements could hardly have been called anything other than wandering or rambling. Old Ned was a tramp, a hobo.

There was a stone wall around the corner from where Charlie lived, and it was in front of the old Sullivan house. Ned liked to sit on this wall and sun himself in the afternoon. Charlie liked to sit with him and watch the old man carve the wooden animals that he sold for his living. Ned could take a scrap of gumwood from the local furniture factory and turn it into an elephant, or a grizzly bear, or a fierce alligator, or a 1935 Cord roadster with the unmistakable coffin nose.

As they sat there one afternoon, Charlie began to notice the tune that Ned hummed to himself was a rather peculiar one. It occurred to him that Ned never talked much, but always seemed to be humming this tune. It sounded like a cross between a hymn and a jitterbug record. The

melody would go along for a while pretty smoothly, as the old man rounded the ridiculously swayed back of an old mare with his horn-bladed pocket knife, and at other times it would jump up and down and dart this way and that as he gave the proper curl to the tail of a very curly-tailed pig. Charlie decided that Ned made up the song as he went along.

One afternoon the old man slipped and cut himself with his knife. He was trying to give an old hound dog's ear just the right droop, and he was turning the knife up and urging it along with his thumb and squinting in the afternoon sunlight when the knife flew free of the wood and sliced his left forefinger to the bone.

"Wup," the old man said.

"You cut yourself bad," Charlie cried, and drew closer to see the wound better.

Ned reached in the pocket of his overalls and pulled out a handkerchief that Charlie thought was perfectly filthy and wrapped it around his finger.

"Sure did," Ned agreed. "See what happens when you play with knives? You get cut if you don't watch what you're doing."

You better put something on it, " Charlie declared. "It might get infected. There might be germs on that knife."

"I got some iodine at home," he said, pronouncing the word as iodeen. "If it ain't all dried up when I get home, I'll put some iodeen on it."

"It ain't gonna dry up before you get home," Charlie cried. "You ought to put some iodeen on it right now. My Momma's got some at our house. We live just around the corner. You come with me and we'll put

some on it before it gets infected," Charlie had decided that he liked Ned's way of saying iodine.

The old man chuckled at Charlie's misunderstanding of what he had said and he looked again at the depth of the cut on his finger and the diameter of the boy's eyes and he decided to accept his invitation to come home for a drop of iodine and perhaps a little gauze.

When they got to the house, Ned insisted on going around to the back door, much to the amazement of Charlie, and he insisted that the boy go inside and bring the medicine out to him. Charlie was bewildered by such an attitude, but dashed up the back steps and into the house.

Inside, his mother was cooking something in a saucepan on the stove, probably a sauce, he thought.

"I got to have some iodeen for old Ned's finger," he announced. "He cut himself real bad."

"Iodine," mother corrected, "and just who is old Ned?"

"Oh, you know old Ned, Momma. He carries a paper sack and carves out animals and cars. He cut his finger real bad and I want you to put some medicine on it for him."

"Is that him out in the backyard? Good heavens, Charles, why in the world did you bring that old hobo home with you?"

"He cut his finger," Charlie replied, "real bad,"

His mother released a couple of her favorite noises of exasperation but went and got some iodine and a small roll of gauze.

"Tell him to put some of this on it and wrap it up with this gause," she said.

Charlie took the gauze and the iodine but hesitated for a moment.

Somehow he had had the idea that his mother would come out and put the medicine on Ned's finger for him and possibly blow on it to keep it from burning, but he decided that she was not in the mood at the time and so he took the medication out to the old man himself and didn't ask her about helping.

The injured finger had just about stopped bleeding and Ned bravely doused it with the iodine and began to wrap it up with the gauze, without even wincing, or blowing on the cut. Charlie's mother stood on the back porch watching all that took place, but she didn't say anything.

"Does it hurt?" Charlie asked.

"Not much," the old man replied. "I guess it's kind of hard to hurt an old mule like me."

Charlie watched the rest of the bandaging operation and was kind of sorry when it was over, for the old man announced that he had to move along home.

"Thanks a lot, Sonny," he smiled, "and thank you too, Mrs. Medders," he nodded up to the back porch.

Charlie turned and looked at his mother. He had not realized that she had been standing up there watching him.

"You all are mighty kind," the old fellow concluded, and turned and walked out of the backyard and up the driveway to the street.

Charlie tried to think of some excuse to keep Ned at the house for a few more minutes. While he had been watching him bandage his finger a strange feeling had come over the boy, as if he had in a way adopted the old man, and now he wanted to take him into the house and make him part

of the family. But he could not think of a thing to say to Ned that might have persuaded him to stay, so he just walked up the driveway beside him and waved goodby to him when he went away.

Back inside the house Charlie discovered that whatever had been in the saucepan had boiled over and made a big mess on the steve while his mother had been out on the back porch watching Ned fix up his finger, and somehow this was all Charlie's fault.

"I would have hoped you'd have known better than to come dragging an old tramp home with you," she said to him as he arrived back in the kitchen. "Sometimes you act like you haven't even heard a thing your father and I have tried to teach you. Just look at what you've made me do."

Charlie looked at the black and brown goo that she was trying to get off the steve.

"You don't want to associate with people like that, do you?" she said. "You don't want to be that kind of person when you grow up, do you?"

Charlie didn't say anything for fear of saying the wrong thing, which he had discovered he had a tendency to do when his mother was mad at him, or for that matter, mad at anything. He realized that his mother did not mean to be as harsh with him as she was sometimes. When she was mad at him she would yell and holler and cry and make him feel real bad, but she was always sorry when she lost her temper with him. He had decided that she was just one of those people who are either mad or not, like Bobby Jenkins over at Reid Street Grammar School. Bobby laughed and joked most of the time and could not have been nicer, but when he got

mad, he lost control of himself and would bite and scratch and kick and pull hair and throw rocks.

So when his mother was mad, Charlie just kept his mouth shut and let her carry on until she was through, and sure enough, as the top of the stove got cleaner his mother's anger went away, and when the top of it sparkled again, her eyes sparkled again and she smiled at him and flipped water at him from the sink where she was wringing out the dishcloth she had been using. He smiled back at her. Everything was all right now.

"How did old Ned cut his finger?" she asked pleasantly.

"Making a hound dog," Charlie replied. "He's real good at making things. He makes all kinds of things."

"Well, I didn't mean that you shouldn't help out somebody that's hurt or in trouble, because that's what the Bible tells us to do," she said, "but I don't want you to make a habit of hanging around with old tramps. It doesn't look nice. There are lots of boys and girls your own age here on the street for you to play with."

"I like to watch old Ned carve things," Charlie said.

"I've heard he's real good at it, too," his mother said, "but just the same it would be better for you to play with the children here on the street. Old Ned's been in jail I don't know how many times for stealing. Did you know that?"

"Well, he has. He'll pick up anything that isn't red hot or nailed down. He used to do yard work around town and he was real good at it too, but was so bad about picking up things and taking them off that it got to where nobody would hire him any more. You don't want to run around with a

person who steals, do you?"

"No," Charlie said. "I didn't know he stole stuff. What kind of stuff does he steal? Money?"

"Oh, I reckon he's got his hands on money from time to time, but there isn't much money left lying around for him to get his hands on," she said, drying her hands on a dish towel. "Mostly what he steals is stuff you wouldn't think he had a bit of use in this world for, like one time I heard old Mrs. Pliskin was having some work done on her furnace and Ned was out in the back mowing her yard. The furnace men kept missing their tools and even pieces of the furnace and it turned out that Ned was just helping himself whenever they'd turn their backs." She laughed.

"You see, stuff like that. I guess that's not as bad as robbing a bank, but it's thievery just the same. You don't want to be seen with a thief, even if he is just a peculiar old man." She patted him on the head and that made him feel better. "Now you go and clean up and put on a fresh pair of britches and clean shirt. You're as dirty as that old hobo."

That night at supper Charlie's mother told his father about his bringing old Ned home for first aid. She seemed amused by the idea now.

"I thought about our old dog, Duke, when I saw Charles coming around the corner of the house and down the driveway with Ned," she laughed. "Duke used to bring home everything he could find. Why, he'd even bring home old dead snakes and possums up to the back door and want to be let in, and it always used to hurt my feelings so bad when we'd make him take them back."

"Can we have a dog?" Charlie asked.

"No," said his father.

* * *

Charlie could not have been called a disobedient child, but then again he was not what might have been called an obedient child. He never brought Ned home with him again, but by the same token he didn't stop seeing him and being his friend. It was as though he and the old man had signed a pact that summer afternoon, a pack that though of necessity had to be kept secret, was nonetheless binding and sacred.

Ned always smiled when he saw Charlie coming to sit beside him and this made the boy feel good, and earned him a genuine hand-carved white oak German Luger pistol that just fit his small hand. Charlie was delighted with the gift and thanked the old man again and again for it.

I'm gonna kill me some Germans and Japs," Charlie declared, and pointed the weapon at an Axis fireplug, making the Krr; Krr! Krr! noise that was supposed to be an imitation of the sound a German Luger makes.

"There's a war on," he added gravely, nodding in self-agreement at the old man.

There sure is," Ned agreed.

"When I get big I'm gonna be in the Army and go overseas and fight."

"By the time you get to be old enough there might not be no war," Ned smiled.

Charlie thought Ned surely must be teasing him. The war had been going on almost as long as he could remember. It showed absolutely no signs at all of stopping. Charlie smiled back at Ned and killed a German telephone pole. When he got big he would go overseas and bomb Berlin, he assured himself.

"Why aren't you in the war?" Charlie asked.

"I done had my time in the war," Ned replied.

This surprised Charlie. He had never heard of anyone coming home from the war, unless he was dead, like Mrs. Myers' boy was. "Why did you come back?" he asked.

"Well, you see I was in a different war and it got over and all us soldiers that was fighting in it got to come home."

"What made it get over?" Charlie asked in bewilderment. He thought Ned must surely be teasing him again.

"We won," the old man replied.

"Won what?" Charlie cried. So Ned explained to him that there had been another war a long time ago and that he had been a soldier in it and the Americans had whipped the Kaiser, who was sort of like Hitler, and then everybody had got to come home. Charlie tried to understand as much of it as he could, but that wasn't very much.

"If we whipped the Germans, then what...?" Charlie tried to put words to the question that was rumbling around inside him, trying to get out, but he could not, and just then a train whistle in the distance announced the arrival of the afternoon freight, which meant that all conversation in the middle of the little town, where lay the railroad tracks, would have to stop until the train was gone. And by the time the train had roared and clanked and rattled and hooted its way through the town and away, Charlie's thoughts had strayed to other places and the question was forgotten.

"Did you get shot?" Charlie asked after the train was gone.

"No," Ned replied, "but I got some mustard gas."

This was too much for Charlie. Now he knew Ned had to be teasing

him. He laughed and rolled around on the grass in the yard behind the wall. "Mustard gas?" he cried. "How about some ketchup gas? Did you get some ketchup gas too?"

Old Ned laughed with him, and over at the mill the four-thirty whistle blew, meaning that it was quitting time and also that Charlie had to go home, so he went around the corner to his house, after saying goodby to Ned and telling him to be careful of mustard and especially ketchup gas.

At home, he said hello to his mother and went into his bedroom and began to get out some clean clothes to wear for supper. He always had to take a bath before supper in summertime when he had played outside all day and gotten filthy. It was a nuisance to him but his nother had explained that his father didn't like to come home from work and have to look at a dirty boy sitting in front of him at the supper table.

During the evening meal Charlie got tickled when he remembered about Ned's mustand gas.

"What in the world are you laughing at?" his mother asked him.

"Nothing," he snickered.

"You must be laughing at something," she declared. "Only crazy people laugh at nothing. Tell me what it is."

So Charlie said, "Mustard gas," and then he laughed and laughed.

"Where on earth did you hear about mustard gas?" his father asked him.

But the boy was laughing so hard that all he could manage in the way of an explanation was, "Ketchup gas," and he laughed until tears ran down his cheeks.

A look was exchanged between his folks that he did not see.

"You've been hanging around with that trifling Ned, again, haven't you?" his mother said, not a bit amused by the joke. She turned to his father. "That old hobo sits up on Mrs. Sullivan's wall and carves his animals and Charles goes up there and sits right beside him and talks to him. I've told him and told him not to, but he does it anyway."

"You ought not to go on and do something your Mother tells you not to do, Son," his father frowned at him, not really mad at him. "That's no way to do."

Charlie quickly forgot about how funny his joke had been and he stopped laughing. He wondered how they knew he had been talking to old Ned again, but he was afraid to ask.

"He won't play with the children on the street," his mother said. "He likes that old tramp better. It's a mystery to me." She shook her head worriedly.

"Yes," Charlie admitted. "He was just teasing me. He said he was in another war a long time ago and he got some mustard gas and got to come home." He almost laughed again, but was able to reduce the laugh to a broad grin.

"He was telling you the truth," his father explained. "He wasn't teasing you. Mustard gas is a kind of poison gas the Germans used to shoot at the Americans, trying to kill them. They don't use it any more. Ned was hurt while he was in that war and that's why he hasn't been worth a flip since. He was injured in his brain so he isn't right in the head any more. That's why he doesn't work. He can't. The reason your mother and I don't want you hanging around with him is, he isn't right in the

head. We're afriad he might hurt you, or something."

They explained it to Charlie about four more times and he told them he understood what they were saying.

But he didn't really understand about Ned getting injured in his brain. Also, the idea that Ned might hurt him seemed unbelievable. Ned had given him the wooden German Luger, hadn't he? It ended up that Charlie kind of half-way promised never to mess around with old Ned again, and his mother had concluded with: "And the whole town can see you sitting up there hobnobbing with that old hobo," so stay away from him from here on out."

Then the conversation had changed to the subject of the Missionary Society of the Main Street Methodist Church, a topic which Charlie did not understand nor cared to, and he was once again left to his own thoughts, where he felt most at home.

* * *

If it is possible that someone could love a thing so humble as a trash pile then it must be said of Charlie Meadows that he loved trash piles. He didn't know why. He just did. They fascinated him, especially the ones that lay behind the stores uptwon. He loved to ramble through them, throwing papers and boxes this way and that, looking for and gratefully accepting whatever they had to offer him, and for his travails he was awarded burned-out radio tubes, punctured inner-tubes, broken automatic pencils, and once an entire radio that someone had cast off. It made a terrible noise and released a cloud of acrid smoke when he took it home and plugged it in, but he prized it highly none the less.

There was a great big trash pile right behind Hobgood's Department

Store up in the middle of town and it was soft with warpping tissue and brown paper and cardboard boxes. It yielded little in the way of worldly goods but was a wonderful place to lie down in the afternoon and look up at the sky and perhaps take a little nap, keeping one eye open for the trash collectors, who apparently had no regularity whatsoever to their activities.

Once they had caught Charlie asleep in the trash and they had good-naturedly threatened to take him to the city dump with them--a joke which had not been the least bit funny to him and had caused a terrible ruckus in his home when his father found out about what had happened.

"I've never been so embarrassed in my life as when Elmer Hobgood came up to me in the street and said, 'Bill, they found your boy asleep in my trash,'" his father had said, "Why I bet he goes and tells it all over town."

"What on earth has gotten the matter with you, Charles," his mother had cried, and he could tell she was about on the verge of tears. "What in heaven's name would possess you even to go back there behind the stores, much less go to sleep in a pile of trash?"

But Charlie had answers to none of these questions. He had no idea why he liked a burned-out radio better than he did an Erector Set. He did not know why he liked to lie on his back in a pile of trash and look at the sky. He didn't even know why he liked to talk to old Ned the hobo better than he did the boys of his own age that lived on the street near him.

Charlie found it terribly hard to love something of which he was afraid, and he was afraid of his parents, especially his mother. When

she got mad her voice took on a terrifying pitch and her eyes stared at him and blinked violently, and she always asked him questions he couldn't answer, which always made her even madder.

His father wasn't so bad. He never got as mad as his mother did, and for that matter, stayed at his job most of the time, coming home only on Sundays and scattered holidays for whole days at a time.

But when his mother was mad about something--really mad--she would stomp through the house like she was going to tear it down and Charlie would sit on the edge of his bed in his room, afraid to move for fear of inciting her to greater wrath, and his silent, staring, motionless reaction to her storming would make her madder than ever. She always acted as if Charlie had done something to her personally when he did something wrong, and he didn't understand this at all. Whenever she got mad at him she always kept repeating over and over how much she loved him, but it was always in that terrifying tone of voice, and with those eyes flashing, so that Charlie didn't know whether to believe her or not.

As she had done several times before, when she had been angry at Charlie, his mother jumped up and ran out of the room, and he could hear the bedsprings creak and groan as she threw herself across the bed to continue ger crying.

Charlie could relax a little when she left the room. His father was not so violent or frightening. His mother still made her presence known by releasing an occasional whoop that would send cold chills up his spine, but he felt better with her out of the room, whooping or not. Somehow the sound of her voice and the expressions that raced across her face stripped him of all ability to answer even the simplest question. It

was as if someone were continuously ringing a bell in his ear when she got mad at him and began to ask him questions. But his father was different. He didn't raise his voice too much, and in truth it was almost as if Charlie was talking to a stranger when they spoke. His father remained a distance from him that allowed him space to get his bearings and breath, but it always seemed that his mother was right up in his face when she spoke to him, smothering him.

And even when the inevitable whipping came, administered by his father with his belt, he could hardly feel it stinging his legs until the voice of his mother came from the bedroom where she lay crying. "Whip him, Bill. Whip him good."

Then he had begun to cry, and the belt had begun to cut his legs.

* * *

But the love that Charlie had for things discarded could not be staled by a whipping or fear and before the summer was over he was in the trash piles again, this time more wary of trashmen and store owners to be sure. He was in a trash bin behind Babcock's Radios and Furniture one afternoon when he spotted a familiar figure ruffling through the garbage behind the Piedmont Telephone Company. It was Ned.

Charlie climbed out of the bin and went over to him. Is your finger still doing all right? he asked.

"Good as new. Good as new," the old man replied as he always did. "What you been doing?"

"Just messing around," Charlie replied. "What you been doing?"

"Just messing around," Ned replied.

There the conversation ended until Ned had finished looking through

the telephone company's trash. When he was through, they walked over to the blacksmith's shop that stood behind Billings' hardware. They got a drink of water at the spigot that had been turned so that it spurted up instead of down, for the convenience of drinkers both human and animal. There was a mule in town named Rufus that knew how to turn the spigot on but either did not know how to turn it off or simply refused to. None of the horses knew how to turn the spigot on.

Charlie had a question to ask Ned and he didn't know exactly how to ask it. It was a question that had been brewing inside him for a long time and he had thought a lot about it, but he had never been able to get it into words properly, although he had tried. In a way he didn't really know what it was he wanted to know of Ned, but he was sure that he wanted to know something.

That afternoon at the blacksmith's shop he tried as best he could to ask Ned what it was he wanted to know, but as soon as he said it, he had the distinct impression he had said the wrong thing.

"Why are you a hobo?" Charlie asked. He instantly wanted to restate the question, and flushed with embarassment, but could think of no other way to put it so he just kept his mouth shut.

Ned did not seem to be the least bit embarrassed by the question however, as they sat in the sun on empty nail kegs that afternoon, listening to the coals pop in the smithy's forge and watching the birds have their supper in the chaineyball tree that shaded part of the yard. "That ain't no easy question, Sonny," the old man said. "I don't reckon it's easy for any fellow to say why he's what he is, but I reckon all of us know if we put our mind to it."

The old man had sat silent for a while and Charlie wondered if he had heard the last from him for that afternoon, but soon he took a deep breath and said to the boy,"You know how a sailboat works? You do? Well, you just imagine that you was out in a sailboat: out in the middle of the ocean and you couldn't see no land anywhere you looked and the wind was blowing you this way and that way and every which way, and while you was sitting in that sailboat the idea come to you that there was something you ought to go and look for because if you found it you'd be right proud, and it come to you that the thing you was looking for was hid somewheres down in that boat. Well, I don't reckon you'd go steering that sailboat all over the ocean trying to find what you figured was hid down inside it, would you? Heck no. You, you'd forget all about where that sailboat was headed and you'd get yourself down inside it and get to looking around as hard as you could. That's what you'd do, wouldn't you? Sure you would. Course you might poke your head up every now and then to make sure you wasn't gonna run into another boat or a big old rock or something, but soon as you'd made sure you was out in deep water you'd get right back down in that boat and start to looking again. You see what I mean?"

Charlie nodded his head Yes, because he had a feeling inside him that what the old man was telling him was the truth, but he made no bones to himself that he understood what Ned was telling him.

Ned went right on with his explanation when he saw Charlie's nod of agreement.

Well, you see, Sonny, some of us folks is just like that fellow in that boat," he continued. "We just let the wind blow us where it wants to because we figure we got better things to do than worry about where the

Good Lord wants us to be at. I guess that's why people call me a hobo. They just don't understand, I reckon. The only difference between me and the rest of the people is I'm happy with whatever the Lord leaves lying around for me to pick up, and I'm just as happy as I can be wherever He wants me to be. I just leave it all up to him. That's all that makes me a hobo, I reckon. The Lord's took care of me for nigh on to fifty years and He's been right good to me."

The old man went over and took another drink from the spigot and then he came back and sat down beside Charlie. "You're too young a fellow to be worrying your head about what folks is," he laughed. "There ain't a thing I've said made a bit of sense to you, has it?"

Charlie nodded Yes and said, "Yes it did."

"Well, I don't reckon I got no call to expect nobody to understand something I don't rightly understand myself, leastwise a young fellow like you," the old man chuckled.

Then the four-thirty whistle blew and Charlie had to go home. He said goodby to Ned and walked back to his house, thinking about Ned, and the boat and looking for something down inside it and the words of it didn't make much sense to him, but he got the idea that there was something way back behind the words that did make some sense and he tried to figure it out, but it would be a long time before he would be able to do it.

* * *

Charlie saw Ned one more time. Summer was just about over and school had started back. It was early in the term and report cards had not yet come out so he had not yet had to face the ordeal of explaining

to his folks why he didn't do well in arithmetic and got graded down on conduct.

He was in the third grade this year and his teacher was a long, lean woman who had a perfectly terrible disposition and he had overheard her described as being "man-hungry" by another of the teachers. Charlie was of the opinion that she liked to eat little girls and boys as well. She called for absolute silence and undivided attention at least a dozen times a day and either got silence and attention or flew into a rage and paddled someone or sent someone to the principal's office, there to be devoured by that horrific creature.

When she got undivided attention and absolute silence the class could not understand half of what came out of her mouth and they were accused of being impertinent and disobedient when they couldn't answer her questions.

Later on the principal of the Reid Street Grammar School died of cancer, an event which was heartily greeted by all the children, since they had been petrified of her. But she was replaced with none other than Charlie's third grade teacher, who had still not snared a man and now roamed the halls, looking for wayward children to gobble up alive. A month after her rise to office, the former monster was sincerely mourned and wished back from the grave.

One afternoon as Charlie was leaving school, thankful at having gotten through another day without having run afoul of the principal or any of her familiars, he spotted Ned, who was seated on a stone bench in front of the school building. Just what had brought the old man to this part of town Charlie accredited to Ned's freewheeling navigational system,

and he ran up to him happily and released his usual greeting.

"What are you doing?" he greeted Ned. "How's your finger?"

"Nothing much," Ned replied. "It's good as new, good as new."

"Who are you waiting on?" Charlie asked, and to tell the truth a little pang of jealousy ran through him at the thought of his friend wai waiting on someone instead of him. He still felt that in a way he owned Ned or had adopted him into the family.

"Oh, nobody you know," Ned replied, seeing a chance to tease him.

"Is it somebody in the building?" Charlie asked.

"Nope," the old man said. "You wouldn't know him. He's an old friend of mine."

"When will he be by?" Charlie persisted.

"Oh, I don't reckon I know," Ned replied. "He might be by today and then he might be by next week and then he might not come for a year or two. You never can tell about this fellow."

Charlie realized that he was being teased, but decided to go along with the hoke. He liked for Ned to tease him.

"What does he look like?" Charlie asked. "Maybe I know him."

"I doubt if you know him," the old man said, "and to tell the truth I don't even know what he looks like, it's been so long since I saw him."

"Well, if you don't know what he looks like, then you won't know when he gets here, will you?" Charlie replied, feeling very satisfied with himself.

"Oh, I'll know when he gets here, all right," Ned assured him. I'll recognize him, all right."

"How will you do that if you don't know what he looks like?"

Charlie asked.

Ned got up off the stone bench and walked over to the sidewalk and Charlie followed him. It seemed to the boy that the old man walked a little different than he had the last time he had walked beside him, and it looked like one of Ned's arms hung down kind of funny.

"I can tell by the way he walks," Ned told the boy. "He's got this way of walking that I can tell a mile away."

Charlie really didn't know what to say to this. It had never occurred to him that there was much difference in the way people walked. "What makes his kind of walking so different?" he asked the old man.

"Oh, I don't know," Ned replied. "There's just something about the way this fellow walks that I can always tell."

"You're teasing me," Charlie said, not knowing much else to say.

"No I'm not," the old man said. "In fact, I think I hear him now. Yes, I do believe I hear him way off in the distance right now."

But all that Charlie could year was the skuffling and shuffling of Ned's old shoes as he made his way down the sidewalk--perhaps a bit slower than usual, but with the same sound those shoes had always made.

* * *

Later that fall his mother said to him one afternoon in the kitchen, "I saw where your old friend died."

"Who was that?" Charlie asked.

"You remember your friend Ned," his mother said. "He was found up behind the stores uptown. He must have had a heart attack."

Charlie could not believe at first that Ned was gone. He was surprised at himself that he did not feel sad or unhappy or, for that

matter, anything. It was almost as if he refused to accept the fact that the old man had died. "I didn't know that," he replied, for it was all he could think of to say.

"It was in the paper," his mother said. "He wasn't really very old. I guess he couldn't have been over fifty. I guess it was the life he led that killed him.

The way she used to talk about Ned, Charlie would have expected her to act glad that he was gone, the way he had grinned sheepishly when he had been told that the principal had died of cancer, but she seemed not at all happy. In fact, she seemed a little sad. Charlie could not understand it.

He went to his room and looked out the window at the big fat water tank that stood guard over the town like a huge, many-legged sentinel. It looked like a big spider, he thought. He decided that someday he would climb the spiral staircase that led around the pipe that descended from the middle of the thing. That's just what he would do, he told himself, and then he would be able to look out over the town and maybe even see all the way to Pinnacle, the next town.

He did not mention Ned all during supper and it may have been his imagination or his parents could actually have been a little more silent than usual.

That night he listened to Henry Aldrich and Corliss Arthur on the radio and the old armchair Atwater Kent picked up Charlotte pretty good.

But after he went to bed, he got to thinking about Ned, and his parents heard him tossing and turning and fixing his pillow over and over again in his room, and they knew what was the matter.

"Can't you get to sleep?" his mother asked.

"Unh unh," Charlie replied.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing?"

"Is it about old Ned?"

"No."

They remained silent for a while and Charlie still couldn't seem to get his pillow arranged right.

"Old Ned was a good man," his father said finally, and he cleared his throat loudly. "Everybody liked him. He never did any work but he never did any harm. That's a lot better than some of us do."

Charlie still didn't say anything.

"He might have sole something once in a while and spent a while in jail, but he was hurt in the war and couldn't help some of the things he did. He was a good old fellow," his father continued. "He was Will Daughtry's brother. Did you know that? You know Will, don't you? He announces over the radio in Pinnacle."

"Was his name Ned Daughtry?" Charlie finally asked.

"His name was Nathaniel Daughtry, " his mother said. "Everybody just called him Ned for short. "I was in school with him when we were young. He's a lot older than me, but I remember him pretty well before he got hurt. He used to be all right."

And again, it was not until he heard the sound of his mother's voice that he began to cry very softly.