

Mixed Signals

“Night! Night!”

Okland Farmer had awakened from a variety of hangovers, but total self-indulgence in the arms of a modern day Venus had left his hips, ribs, and even his lips more than a little sore.

His eyes popped open so wide the room was slightly illuminated by the glow of the whites of his eyes.

It was 3:52 a.m. Sunday.

In some long ago, Texas Friday night football game, Okland had crashed into some poor schmuck thinking it was the right thing to do. Both shocked bodies went flying in all directions. The coaches loved it. Sadistic bastards that they were. The crowd ooded! The twenty other players on the field thanked the Lord this maniac hadn't whacked them in the same way.

Okland managed to stand.

Not for long.

It was a star, or a bright flash of light.

Night! Night! Okie.

* * *

The next morning pain was for breakfast. When you're reduced to chewing aspirin, you're desperate.

Now at 3:54 a.m. Sunday, Okland Farmer was digging through his dope kit looking for some aspirin to Chew.

The woman had kicked his butt.

She had out-wrestled him and clearly won the best of three falls. For five hours they tugged, pushed, pressed, lifted and, oh so, tenderly touched.

All the while, Okland's penis had never been hard.

He forgot! Okie couldn't get it up. The image rattled his ego and chilled his soul.

Over dinner, Angie Deere, the aforementioned modern day Venus, had told a story about her office and some of the people who worked with her. She had described one of the fellows and referred to the episode as a "Dickie Thing."

Now, it was Okie's turn to ponder his "Dickie Thing!"

In self-defense, he could only laugh to himself. Just the same as he and Angie had laughed at dinner.

As he thought about it, things had all been so precious, and each touch so meaningful, he had simply not thought of it as sex.

This was no roll in the hay.

This was Armstrong taking the first steps on the moon, or Columbus touching the sands of the New World.

For a Texas Friday night Hero, this king of thinking was blasphemy.

Okland Farmer was no hero.

Every square inch of this new territory scared the hell out of him. He had never felt this way about a full-grown woman.

Especially, somebody else's woman!

3:57 a.m. Sunday is a piss poor time to try and act normal. You know, "Try and get it together!"

"If my mind starts racing again," Okland spoke out loud to himself.

He grimaced, looking at the clock.

Life had gone non-linear on a calm Georgia night. The moon was yellow and the sky was cool.

He was being too kind to himself. This "thang" had become well-advanced of non-linear.

We were in the fourth or maybe even the eighth dimension. Somewhere about forty miles west of outer space.

Man had not invented Okland Farmer's disease. This feeling of his had come from deep within the bowels of nature.

Time tested.

For all mankind! His thoughts were off and funning again.

He held dearly an incredible picture in his mind of Angie. There had been this certain animal quality. Her face in the evening lit room had simply glowed. It was not that she looked like an animal, although there was definitely some wolf; but her presence had totally communicated with him the same way any animal that knows you can catch your eye and hold your attention with its thoughts and

feelings. He could still see the dark spots from the shadows on her face. She had contorted her mouth as she bounced him around like a toy.

Okland tried to go back to sleep.

He had money to collect.

He had responsibilities.

He had a very long trip home, and his body felt like a very old tractor on a January morning.

The aspirin crunched. He was drifting back to sleep. Okland Farmer loved Angie Deere!

Night! Night! Okland.

* * *

“Shit, boy, there are only two reasons to fall in love! Tits and money!!!”

Those jockey strap-laced pearls of wisdom bellowed from the empty halls of the Junior Senator from Texas, Franklin Delano Murdock’s brain, and then mouth! A big mouth!!

“Okie, you’re wastin’ the few hard ons you got left.” The Senator was stirring a strong scotch.

It was 7:01 a.m. Wednesday.

“Jesus, Felix, I voted for you,” Okland wanted to sleep.

The good Senator hadn’t slept since he had been elected. It had been thirty-four hours and twenty-eight minutes; the celebration reigned.

Twenty-seven years ago, when these two sorry excuses for men were the quintessential All-American boys, F.D. Murdock was the star quarterback, like all U.S. Senators were. The press claimed he had a bag of tricks, as in Felix the cat; thus the nickname. Felix fit him like a glove.

What Felix had in his bag of tricks was a bunch of pure God-gifted all-star athletes. Communities have a batch like this ever twenty-five years or so. As boys, they won everything, tried to make everything pregnant, and grew to middle age with all the grace of Mount St. Helens.

Now, Okland was face to face with a member of the United States Senate. One hundred of the most powerful, elite, crooked sumbitches that ever breathed. He felt a certain pride in F.D. Murdock. They were close. Felix meant well, but the good ol’ US of A had another Senator who was three bricks shy of a load.

One thing for sure, F.D. was a mover and shaker. Okland loved knowing the power. Now, it was knowing the power and sharing the power.

Okland was having a flashback! Too many head-on collisions were required to be an All-American. Felix was still shouting Tits and Money.

Okland was feeling Angie Deere's lips. Soft! Moist! Her hot breath on his face. Angie had no tits and Okland didn't care if she had money. He cared about everything that was her. That walk -- the sound of her voice -- everything that made her his dreams.

Time had slowed to a crawl for Okland. Seconds were now hours. In a way, he had adjusted to this new time scheme quickly. As a matter of fact, he loves it.

It had been three days since he had left Angie after heir marathon wrestling match. His ribs and hits were healing, but his lips were still sore. About fifty filthy, rich, beehive-headed, Texas socialites had kissed him when it was clear Murdock had been elected. Felix had gone a lot farther with a couple of those beehives. A little honey for the Junior Senator.

Okland was scheming, like a bandit in a savings and loan, on how to get back to Phoenix and Angie. Men just act. Women just get out of the way. Angie had made it perfectly clear her life was just fine and all things in order. That Okland was just a little icing on the cake. "Bullshit", he thought to himself. Why would she make room for him if there wasn't some need, some feeling on her party?

Those eyes scared him, her lips froze him, and time was moving like a glacier. Something primal had moved deep inside Okland Farmer, and Angie Deere knew it. Would she take advantage of this vulnerable heart, or was something brewing that would change both of their lives?

“Goddammit, Farmer,” the Senator was so close his breath gagged Okie. “Get that tart off your pea-sized brain. She’s spoken for and she’s just pullin’ your chain.”

“Felix, the only thing you ever loved was your reflection and it won’t sleep with you. So just celebrate your ass off, and let me love who I want and dream a little.” Okland was a little pissed.

He could easily fall back to dreamland, and he knew that modern day Venus of his would come drifting into view.

“Okie, you’re gonna drink this here whiskey and then we’re gonna find you some real ass that can make you forget that married skirt.” The Senator had that “I’m in command” tone in his voice.

Okie had been hearing it for twenty-seven years in the huddle, in their oil bidness, and now he was threatening to disrupt Okland Farmer’s ultimate love.

“Senator, pour your friggin’ whiskey, and I’ll drink it. But if you insult this lady that has invited me into her life again, I’m gonna impeach your fucking ass with all the dirt I know about your lyin’, cheatin’ self.” Okie’s capitulating tone was angry and Felix heard every word.

“Whoa, boy! She’s got you by the short hairs. If you’re gonna get mad and take it personal, I’ll punt. But God-damn, I’m Senator Murdock; and we’re going to kick ass, son. So let’s get started.”

“Okay, Felix.” Okland was sick with love.

He had never given a shit before. This stuff was very, very real – real scary. The fumes from the bourbon burned Okland’s eyes. He thought to himself. “This is crazy!” Gearing up to run with the Junior Senator and trying to get a handle on the woman of his dreams all at the same time, and fueling it all with sour mash. Lord, were we really adults living like this or children in size 38 pants?

The telephone rang, and Okland was spared like a death row inmate waiting for the governor to call with a reprieve. He put the glass on the table.

F.D. handled the phone receiver with the grace he used in taking the snap from center.

“Good Morning, America. This is Senator Franklin Delano Murdock at your disposal!” Felix sounded like Foghorn Leghorn.

Okland laughed out loud!

“Are you two boys through takin’ over the world yet?”

F.D. rolled his eyes and covered the mouthpiece.

“It’s Chigger.”

He was motioning to Okland to get his ass up and handle the call.

“Hell, darlin’ we are the world!” Felix was stalling his ass off so Okie could clear the cobwebs and free his mind of Angie.

Chigger was Okland Farmer's wife. Chigger Farmer! Only in Dallas, Texas, could you be listed in the social register as Chigger. They had been married since they were kids, and they were just as much brother and sister as wife and husband. Lately, they weren't much good to each other in bed.

"Hey, Kiddo!" Okland summoned all the charm that could be raised from the dead at 7:30 a.m., especially after all he had been through in the last seventy-two hours.

"So is Felix king by now?" Chigger giggled into the phone. "If so, I guess that makes you a Knight of the Round Table."

Oh, Okie was a Knight alright. He was charging windmills in his mind and trying to impress this angel that lived nine hundred and eighty-eight miles from his front door.

"Well, to tell the truth, I wish he would just pass out," he replied.

"Don't you let him get his picture in the papers drunk? Okie, you know it would kill his mama and daddy if that dickhead shows out in his first week in office."

"I'll watch him."

Okland was a good custodian of people. Folks counted on him, especially Chigger.

"We're going someplace here in a little while. He's tryin' to get me drunk; but since you called, I realize he almost had me suckered into his craziness. Don't worry, I'm goin' with him and I'll call when I know what's up."

“Be careful, those press SOB’s are everywhere.” Chigger was really afraid.

“Babe, if I see Dan Rather, I’ll kiss his ass for Felix - - better yet, I’ll have Dan kiss Felix’s ass. How’s that?”

“God, you’re awful.” Chigger had full confidence in Okie.

“I’ll call you soon, bye-bye.”

Okie placed the phone on the floor and scooted it toward F.D.

As it was sliding it rang again.

“Good Morning, American, this is Sen. . . .”

“Excuse me,” the voice interrupted the grand salutation of the Junior Senator. “Is Okland Farmer staying there?”

Felix was pissed someone had the gall to speak over his voice, but he instantly knew who this was. It was Angie Deere. The aforementioned modern day Venus that Okie was neck deep in shit over. Again, F.D. covered the mouthpiece.

“Hey, cocksucker! How the hell did this bimbo get my suite phone number? It’s very private. We even sweep the line every day.” Felix knew Okie was fully aware of all security measures.

Felix wasn’t so pissed at Okland giving out the number. It was HER. This all important other woman. Felix knew Chigger and Taylor, their daughter. Nothing good could come from this; but Senator F.D. Murdock loved Okland Farmer, and he knew Okie had it bad for Angie.

“Sorry, Felix.” Okie was instantly energetic. Okland started to jump off the bed, but Felix pushed him back down.

“Listen to me, Okie.” Felix was dead serious. “You are the smartest sum bitch I know. You were the nastiest, most cunning free safety in the free world because you could outthink those poor bastards takin’ the snap. Hell, you drove me crazy all week in practice. The games were easy because of you. You made me a hero, boy. But shit, Okie, you’re not playing a game here. This is fire. White hot. Somebody’s gonna get burned.”

Felix wanted to make sense to Okie; but he knew that more than any other person he had ever known, Okland Farmer was his own man.

“Give me the phone, Felix.”

Okie quickly fell back on the bed. His eyes seemed to glaze over.

“Hi,” gushed Okie.

Felix thought to himself, this guy just went from the smartest to the stupidest SOB he knew. He had never heard Okie say “hi” like a wimp before. Hell, he’s pussy-whipped. Long distance, on the phone. Felix felt like he could puke! The whiskey and the puppy love didn’t mix.

Angie was telling Okie she could get away for a lost weekend. Felix could hear them making plans until he had heard enough; he was going to the hotel lobby and find some fans.

“I’ll be back shortly,” Felix frowned.

Okland only nodded. He was floating on the sounds of Angie’s voice.

Before Felix could get out the door, Okland hung up.

“She’s gonna meet me!” Okland was electric with joy.

“God, you’re not going to bring her to Washington are you?” Felix winced, expecting the worst.

“No, we’re going to Austin.”

“Oh, shit!” Felix had finally caught on how deeply Okie was in love. “Son, you don’t want in her pants, you want in her heart.” Felix could feel his old friend’s love pangs.

Okie would fix that pain. Deep in the Heat of Texas.

“What are you gonna do, drive her out to Lakeway and play gold and watch the sunset at the Oasis Club? Felix was in cahoots with every fantasy Okland was having.

“You’ve got it, Mr. Senator”.

Okie was a completely different man. He had heard her voice and life was bubbling all around him. Felix was even caught in the rush of excitement.

“Jesus, be careful, Okie. You know everybody in Travis County.”

“Don’t worry, Felix! You’ve been elected and I’m in love. I’m bringing her to Texas. Shit, life is good!”

Okland was new at this; Felix was new at his job, and Felix needed Okie at his best. But Angie was comin’ to the Lone Star State.

Mixed signals can cause serious problems. Angie was sending – and Okland was receiving! Her plane would land at midnight. The moon would be yellow and the sky would be cool.

Okie was ready to go with Felix wherever now. He just had to be in Austin by midnight. Sixteen hours from heaven.

“Where to, F.D.?” Okie was the trusted friend again.

“The White House, dickhead, where else?”

* * *

*“Roll out the carpet; I’m new in town,
I like loud music and foolin’ around!”*

“Hey, Farmer, it’s your buddy.”

Felix had the stereo real loud.

“Turn that glorified jam box down and start makin’ yourself look like somebody. Remember, Senator, the world is watching.”

Okie in charge.

“Look, F.D., we’ve got some rounds to make and lots of people to thank. Either you get it going, or finish that bottle and do your version of the Titanic.”
Okie was voting for option #2.

“Don’t forget, I’m out of here no later than nine tonight. I’ve got a rendezvous in Austin.”

Okie kept moving. He had slept. F.D. had not.

What energy he had was generated by his anticipation of seeing Angie, so he was scurrying around the hotel suite like he was half-maid - - half cleaning up before his mother got home from a weekend trip.

These boys had quite an infamous history of barn burning parties. Legendary affairs.

*“I need a job, don’t change my name,
Call me . . . Chico.”*

Suddenly, it dawned on him. What Felix is grunting about. Why the volume. It was a new release from Tyler Kincaid, Okie’s lifelong playmate. As boys, they had chased rabbits, thrown the football ‘til dark, and generally played together day and night when they stayed with their grandparents. It was a Texas tradition.

Seemed like everybody had an adult friend from your grandparents’ old neighborhood. Tyler and Okie were as close as Felix and Okie, probably closer; but the dynamics of the friendship were like oil and water.

Ty, or Tink, as his granddad called him, was a real bona fide artist. In the Texas pop scene, he carried the banner that is Texas music.

Part driven by the Amarillo winds, calmed by the deep East Texas pines, spoiled by endless space to test your theories, and totally corrupted by Dallas money, Houston money, and, in general, more Lone Star money than most people thought the Treasury could produce.

Both Okie and Tink had burned with the love of music as boys, right into becoming young men.

Unfortunately, for Okland, he felt he should confront reality. Tink endured, and now made more money a week than his granddad made as a rural mail carrier in his lifetime.

They had shared bands, beds, broads, and bottles of tequila. That made them brothers of the road. The best kin you can have. The ones you choose.

It also got them regular medical check-ups. You never know what lurks in a honky-tonk after midnight. Now as men, fathers and husbands, they shared the most unlikely subject of their lives, F.D. Murdock.

It cost millions to get elected dogcatcher; so when Felix decided to run for the vacant U.S. Senate seat from God's State, he had asked Okland to climb on board and tap dance his charm into a \$10 million war fund.

The events leading to Felix's decision were something that could only be described as so outlandish, they were typical Texas politics.

Felix had been somehow elected Mayor of Dallas and proceeded to use the office for open influence-peddling and padding his own checkbook. He had suffered through a blood and guts divorce, and the newspapers had a field day with his photogenic butt and more than wild lifestyle. Katy Murdock had gone to the same high school with Felix and Okie, and she rode F.D. like an equestrian Leona Helmsley.

She had taken all he could give and produced kids like a machine. Felix's dad, Catfish, and like "Felix" the nickname was perfect, had guarded those grandchildren to the point of making it impossible for F.D. to raise them himself.

Mixed Signals.

Now Felix is semi-alone, broke by Thursday and about to swear to the U.S. Constitution he would personally protect God, mom and apple pie.

Dallas is all chrome and glass, and its collective creed carries the ethical conscience of Robert Tilton. The strong religious foundation only makes it legal to pray for your victim as you remove his pride and appropriate anatomical parts. Then call it quarterly profits.

As mayor, Felix had a high profile; and it's not what they know about you, just that your face and name ring their bell when it's time to vote. Not to mention the usual 40% voter turn-out.

The ultimate in mixed signals.

Leaders elected by the minority of the majority.

Quinton Yarborough had served Texas well. At least that was what his publicist said at his funeral. For eight years, he had kissed babies and opened every new schoolhouse he could. He forever enjoyed the image his family had earned by producing several generations of Texas politicians.

Today if you represent Texas, you fly. What goes up, must come down; and when it's made in America, by Corporate America, sometimes it comes down too fast. With a boom.

On a miserably hot summer afternoon, the private jet of a Houston oil man never made it home. Nor did Quinton.

Texas had only one Senator on the streets of Washington. That's one short.

The remedy, of course, was a special election. A late summer election. The perfect metaphor for a political race that would include every skeleton available, every hack, loose money. This race would be HOT.

F.D. Murdock was the Metroplex's sacrificial lamb. Maybe the wolf in lamb's clothing. Either way the slogan was:

"Texas Is My Country!"

He wasn't a secessionist. Just a Texan. Anybody North of Dalhart or Sherman was them. Plain and simple.

Okie had contacted Tink about donations, and it led to an unusually active campaign commitment from the music people of Texas, and with that came a revival of Tink and Okie.

"Farmer, I've got Meskins to pick up after me and rake the leaves around the condo."

Felix was way too drunk now. Okie recalled – "To the White House, dickhead, where else" – and he almost laughed out loud. Boy, would the Secret Service love to see this sorry package at the East Gate.

"Well, F.D., we've just about torpedoed this hotel's hospitality; and, who knows, we may find something important under this thirty-six hours worth of mess."

Okie kept shuffling stuff around.

"C'mon, Farmer, let's go somewhere. Don't try and dump my Senatorial ass just so you can hightail it to Austin, you weasel."

"F.D., I've had all the advice and consent from you I'd care to hear."

It was fun to jab with Felix. He played so rough.

"Listen, Felix, why don't you load another Glenfiddich an' draw me a map. You couldn't find D.C. on the map if you had too."

Felix was up and on his way to the phone to call the front desk for a U.S. map when the crazy chime the hotel had installed for the Van Cliburn Suite chirped like a sick bird.

Half gong, half cheep-cheep (too cheap).

“Oh shit, who could that be?” Felix was ready to confess that he was completely zonkers and needed to see no one.

“Hang on, F.D., I’ll get it! Take a hike to the back, or upstairs.”

Okland dumped his armful of clothes, newspapers and assorted gifts and their discarded wrapping paper behind the couch.

He bought a little time so Felix could stumble out of sight.

Earlier, there had been a Texas Ranger outside the suite.

Okie peeked through the peephole. No one!

This time the door knocked.

Okland pulled the door open with a shit-eatingest grin ever conceived on his tired, worried face.

“Whoa, dude, you look like you have formaldehyde in your veins.”

It was Tink!

He walked directly past Okie and headed for the oversized couch.

“Where is he?”

Tink had plopped down like that for thirty-five years. Their grandmothers had threatened to make them sleep in the garage for being so hard on the furniture.

“Passed out, I hope.”

“Go Felix!”

Tink didn't care much for the new Junior Senator.

“Shit, Ty, he hasn't slept. He only eats honey roasted peanuts and I think he's scared to death he won. He can feel in his bones that the game has been upped a notch.”

“Shit, Okie, that won't scare Franklin Delano Murdock. However, it does scare me.”

“Where is he?” Tyler was on the move again. Years of being on the road make it hard to sit still for long. Unless it's on your bus.

“Might as well tell him congratulations.”

Tink and Okie headed for the business part of the three story Van Cliburn Suite. Three floors of decadence just designed for people in over their heads.

“F.D.?”

Tink thought he would be at least announce his arrival.

Okie was right on his heels.

“Felix?” Okie echoed the announcement.

“Something tells me he's reached his threshold of celebration.”

“I second that! Shit, Tinker, that would be the greatest thing that could happen. I gotta go to Austin.”

“Really?” Ty was interested.

“I'm driving, so I go no later than 9:00 tonight.”

“What's up?”

“Let’s talk about that later. Right now, help me get him all the way on the bed.”

Tink and Okie shuffled the unconscious body of F.D. Murdock with no regard for pain or breaking his neck.

“How about this one? He was claiming we were all going to the White House.”

“The White House!” Ty half laughed, half shouted.

“Sh, Sh, Sh!” Okie did not want Felix awakened. He covered Ty’s mouth for noise security.

“They wouldn’t let him into the city limits of White House, Texas, let alone the home of the President. Jesus, Okie, I’ll tell you what. This is gonna be some show watchin’ Catfish and Felix do the Georgetown Shuffle.”

The image was overpowering.

Both could only suppress their laughter until they could scamper out of the room.

Tink was a common sense liberal and he trusted Okland and his politics, but Felix was somewhere between George Wallace and Clayton Williams.

He fit the West Texas old time conservative and the powers that be in the Metroplex were all sure he was for sale. Mixed signals got him elected. Now he had the job and would get paid in all kinds of ways.

Tink thought of public service as a calling, not a profession. Wrong.

“Okie, how do you stand this scene?”

“Now that’s a fair question.”

“Okay, I’ll rephrase. Can you make this goof ball a real senator from Texas? Tink was being playful, but he did want an answer.

“Who knows! We’ve got a partial term to find out.” Okie didn’t squirm or flinch at the innuendo.

“You wanna’ go to Austin with me?”

“That sounds like the Chief of Staff changing the subject.”

“No, no. Look, let me call Margaret, and you ride with me to Austin and we’ll tell each other as many embellished truths as we can fit in three hours. Deal?”

“Deal!”

Okie had found his way to unload Felix and start making his way to the Hill Country.

Margaret was the only woman who could take F.D. in all his splendid glory, and he was damn lucky to have her.

She was a three-time loser on the marriage tail and had never had any kids, so to her Felix looked like a king or maybe a pawn.

Here he was shit out of luck with Katy. Having to raise \$5,000 a month alimony, and all his kids had more problems than Squeaky Fromme.

Catfish had set up college funds and bailed Felix out of all the mayoral problems, so our Mr. Senator needed a maid who could stay over on request and didn’t look like a cocker spaniel in the morning.

Margaret Wheeler was tailor made. Not to mention her American Express was paid in full.

Margaret had tits and money.

She also carried Felix's tallywacker in her purse.

Okland had dialed the phone number so many times he could finger the keys in the dark, in his sleep or in a hurry. Tink and Okie had Felix horizontal and covered up.

Door shut. Shades down. Real quiet. The Senator would miss roll call for several hours; maybe days.

As the phone rang, Okland felt the relief of almost being off duty. His muscles were relaxing, and Angie's eyes looked back at him in his daydream.

"Good Morning, Slaughter Properties."

"Is Margaret in please? This is Senator Murdock's office calling."

Okland wanted to take no chance of not getting Margaret's attention. He could use his own name, but he needed for her to feel his same sense of urgency. Okie needed out of town, out from under Felix and out of touch for a couple of days.

"This is Margaret Wheeler."

"Margaret, this is Okie!" Okie didn't want to sound too eager.

"Hi, Okie! I wondered when I would hear from Felix. How is he? Margaret probably knew.

Some of those beehive-headed ding-a-lings were her neighbors' and Dallas is big, but not that big. And the real rich were a traditional small town.

"To tell the truth, Margaret, he's finally resting."

Okie winced at his choice of words. He thought he sounded like a mortician. Maybe they should all meet at Restland Park Cemetery and just bury poor Felix before he has time to wake up and face the reality that is going to hit him right between the eyes.

Senator Franklin Delano Murdock.

Okland's body shook with a chill.

"Ty Kincaid is here this morning and we're going to run down to Austin tonight. I was hoping you could take charge over here or move headquarters to your house."

"Of course, Okie. What time are you needing to leave?"

Margaret was anxious to help.

"I'm not trying to pass Felix off on you in his present condition," Okland lied, "but as soon as you feel like you can shake free from your office, I'd appreciate all the help I can get. Plus, I'd like you to finally get to visit with Ty."

"Oh, that sounds great. I've heard you all talk so much about Ty, and I think it would be wise to get Felix out of that hotel. Don't you think so?"

"It wouldn't hurt. I'm afraid we've left our usual calling card. Mayhem and one huge mess."

"What if I load up here and meet you and Ty for lunch? We'll just room service and I'll get Felix's account checked out. That way you can use the suite this afternoon. Or will you be just going home?"

"No, I probably won't go home, Margaret. Since Ty's here, we'll keep the suite until we leave for Austin."

Okie felt a little funny negotiating with Margaret Wheeler about whether he was going home or not.

Chigger had nothing in common with Margaret, but they had been thrust together by politics and boys playing follow the leader. Margaret knew nothing of Angie, and Felix knew Okie would castrate him if she ever did. So now Okie was making up excuses to his business partner's girlfriend so he could dodge his family and go to Austin to see his girlfriend. If it's complicated, it's usually wrong.

"Okay, what if I see you and Ty in about an hour? That be convenient for you?"

Margaret was used to setting the tone and the rules and the time tables and everything else.

"Sounds good, Margaret! Thanks. We'll be right here guarding the good Senator."

"He better be good!"

"It's funny you should say that because I told him the whole world was watching before the scotch performed its duty."

"He really relies on you, Okie. Take care of him. I'll be there shortly. Bye, Bye!"

"Bye, Margaret, thanks again."

Tink had been sitting across the room trying to mind his own business as Okie tried to manipulate the situation to his own liking.

"Is this woman the dragon lady I hear she is?"

Tink rolled his eyes at Okie. He wasn't up for an afternoon of dodge the bitch.

"Tinker, I'd say she was successful at divorce."

Okland rubbed his thumb and forefinger together implying money.

"I don't know if that makes her a dragon lady or not. She's always very nice around me."

Okland shrugged his shoulders.

"But I'm not married to her. I couldn't afford it!"

"If Felix hadn't been elected he couldn't afford it. But, I guess that's all history now. I'm pretty sure he'll marry her."

"Hell, she broke every campaign financing law ever written for 'im, and she picked up the tab on thousands of dollars worth of extras, so..."

"So what you're saying is the Murdock bribery scandal starts at home?"

Okie doubled over with laughter.

"Tinker, you're right on the money."

Okie was laughing hysterically.

"I guess Catfish had been bribing Katy with the same philosophy too much. I've never thought of it that way, but I guess the Murdock clan is for sale intra-family as well as politically."

"Farmer, you're sick."

Ty had started to laugh. Maybe to keep from crying.

"Well, we're in for the ride, so hang on; Margaret will be F.D.'s financial dipstick. We can be his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern."

“Don’t you dare include me too much, Okie. I’ve got fans to protect. You gotta realize that concern tickets are twenty-five dollars these days because politicians like Felix have to have their gravy and pork.”

“Plus, you have to protect your promotional rights, managers, and label execs. They eat their own brand of gravy, I do believe.”

“In mass quantities, amigo.”

Tinker shifted chairs as usual and shifted subjects in stride.

“So about Margaret?”

“Like I said, she’s made a fortune on divorce; but she’s had a few million left in an inheritance from good ole’ daddy Slaughter. Her last husband, Dennis Wheeler, built every big shopping mall in Texas and Oklahoma; and one day Margaret caught him doing something worth fighting over. She got the best killer lawyer she could, and he got his version of the best. They settled on sixty million and she got both houses and he kept the ranch outside Lubbock.”

“Sixty million settlement.” Tink, who made several million a year, could even react to sixty million.

“Plus two houses worth another thirteen million.”

“Holy shit. I think I’d tried the ole Cullen Davis trick before I gave anybody sixty million and my home.”

“So you think Dennis should have put on the black ninja outfit and shot her ass? Hugh?”

“Fucking A!”

“Well, maybe that’s where the dragon lady comes from because I think Dennis thought she might have one of the ole Slaughter boys remove his head and put him in the foundation of some high rise office building. A concrete grave spooked his butt.”

“I gotta meet this one.”

“Well, lunch should be interesting.” Okie turned furniture around as he started looking for his belongings. With Ty on line to go to Austin and Margaret on the way, he wanted his ducks in a row for a fast escape.

“Listen, Okie, after this interesting lunch, I’ve got to do the rounds. Some of the local radio boys have a chore or two for me, and I can meet you whenever about dark thirty. Will that fuck up your schedule too much?”

“Shouldn’t.”

You know the routine on promotion.”

“Tinker, no one who’s ever tried to sell music ever forgets promotion duties. Whorin’ in F#, as I recall.”

“Shit, man! Now-a-days, it’s more important than the music itself. I think a good promoter could sell silence for music.”

“I like that idea. KVIL plays Dallas’ favorite nothing.”

Tink jumped up and grabbed his air guitar and did a fabulous job of Marcel Marceau. Lots of motion. No sound.

“Quick, patent that idea.” Okie applauded.

Ty took a deep bow, ala the Beatles 1964.

Okie made crowd noises.

“Now! If we could just silence the political process, we’d be considered nobel laureates.”

Okland Farmer, campaign director, fund raiser, lover of the people, saying what they mean concisely.

“Shit, Farmer, the silent music scene would be easier than shuttin’ up those fucking dickheads that want to be king. God, I really hate the quality of people that run for office.”

“Come on, Tinker, those people are the backbone of this great land.”

“Fucking carnival barkers with their hands in your pocket, you mean.”

“Easy, boy, you own one of those circus geeks, so use it wisely.”

“Farmer, I think you really love corruption. You’re like those fucking car racing fans that go to see the wrecks. You fuckin’ pervert. You’re waiting to enjoy the total corrupting process.”

“My humor does run to the dark side, but watching Felix go to prison ain’t my goal. However, I must tell you being on the inside does intrigue the shit out of me.”

Okie threw the last of his things into a pillowcase he had appropriated from one of the bedrooms of the three-story Van Cliburn Suite.

“That’s one of the things about Margaret that makes her relationship with Felix important.”

“60 million!” Ty emphasized.

“Sure, the money will keep him in office so long as he cares to; but man, her grandfather was powerful. You remember Doc Slaughter?”

“Sure I do. The ultimate Texas millionaire of the 50’s.”

“Well, ole’ Slaughter was rumored to be part of the Kennedy killing, and he sent money and mercenaries all over the world to protect his interest. If Felix can tap into Margaret’s family secrets, no telling what country he will invade.”

“Farmer, Felix is too goofy to invade anything but a donut shop.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Ty. It ain’t the mouthpiece that takes what he wants. It’s the powers that be that opened the door in the Capitol building and gave him his office so the lobbyists can line his pockets. You wait, something will come of all of this.”

“God help us all.”

Tyler pressed his hands together in mock prayer. At the same time, the sick bird noise generated by the suite’s doorbell rang.

“My prayers have been answered!” Ty exclaimed. “Not to mention I’m hearing bells.”

“Okay, Tink, don’t say anything blatantly liberal, and we can do lunch and make our appointed rounds.”

“Free Che” Tyler laughed.

“Jesus, I’m eating lunch with Attila the Hun and Lenny Bruce.”

Okie made his way to the massive suite entrance giving Tyler one last look of “behave yourself, dammit.”

Margaret Lou Slaughter Jackson Cox Wheeler was tall, salt and pepper hair coiffed perfectly, dressed to the 9’s and walking at Tyler Kincaid like she was going to challenge him to a piss-off. She had patted Okie on the arm as she

charged by, as if to say “Hello, you’re my friend, but I’ve got other fish to fry.”
“Excuse me.”

Ty, the good East Texas boy that he was, was rising to greet the Light Brigade dressed in her best Neiman Marcus.

“Mr. Kincaid, you’re a superstar!”

“Please call me Tyler. Mr. Kincaid puts me in the Buck Owens age bracket.”

“Tyler it is then. Felix says you’ve been a real blessing getting all the music people to help us get my new Senator elected.”

Nashville and L.A. have the image of music towns, but industry insiders know that the best of the best come out of Texas. Sure, you had to go to the corporate offices in Music City or Hollywood; but those guys weren’t the music, they were the business. So when the Texas artists had said Felix is our man, he got all their fans. The suits in Nashville and L.A. could care less so long as it sold records and booked arenas. The big country music outlet had become cable. TV and the country stations were owned by a billionaire nut from Oklahoma, but he didn’t give a shit about Texas politics provided he controlled everything North of the Red River.

Both Okie, who was still standing in the foyer, and Tink who was just standing, had noticed Margaret say “my Senator” and had glanced at each other with a little grin. Poor Felix was upstairs passed out, but his gonads had just arrived in Margaret’s purse.

“Margaret, I’m glad I could help. Politics are not my game, but I’ve heard all my life that “Them that don’t do politics shall be done by politics.”

“Hey, Tinker, that should be your next album title.”

Okie had his motion sensor back after the landing of the battleaxe. He was trying to really change subjects, get some lunch ordered and get the fuck out of Fort Worth.

“You boys ready to chow?”

Margaret was opening the room service menu.

“If we order something quick, we can probably get it delivered in a fucking hour.”

Margaret could look like pure prim and proper; but she was a female version of a good ole’ boy, and she could drink, cuss, and be grade A March hare wild with the best redneck Midland can offer. Those crude traits, glossed over by unlimited money to put a pretty face on, were really the best qualities of Margaret’s, in Okie’s opinion. She could move in any circle, any socioeconomic class, because the lady was tough as a boot and her people had helped settle the incredible wilderness that is Texas.

All the stories of her family were probably true. They were ruthless by design; and Margaret had that in her genes, not to mention, she had been the only girl in a family of three brothers. She had been required to marry the right boy that her father selected. When the poor guy realized he was married to a she-wolf that ate human flesh, he gave her all the money he had to get away. Margaret then set out to humiliate her father by going public with her sexual

exploits, stealing lawn sculptures in Rivercrest and claiming her brother, Teddy, who was the president of Fort Worth's biggest chain of banks, was fucking sheep on the weekends.

She was so effective with her campaign of terror on her father that he decided she had the right stuff to be chairman of Slaughter Properties. If she was willing to draw blood from daddy, there was no son-of-a-bitch exempt.

Slaughter Properties was huge: Dixie Oil Company; Reign Drilling; Fortune Bank, and there were thirty-six branch banks; four ranches that contained 780,000 acres with all the minerals so that they retained oil and gas rights; a stock portfolio that Mr. Forbes himself has set up, and about a dozen small investments, each capable of being a great small business for a normal person.

Theodore Doc Slaughter, Margaret's grandfather, had really accumulated the assets; but times were much simpler then, and an army of lawyers and accountants was not required. Max Slaughter, Margaret's father, had bought his way through U.T. Law School and was smart enough to shelter the ole' man's properties. All of Margaret's brothers had accumulated advanced degrees and they maintained the Slaughter cut-throat mentality, but they all feared Margaret. The boys, Teddy, Max, Jr. and Mitch, could behead you in front of the courthouse; but they all knew Margaret would bite their nuts off at the family Christmas dinner, so here she was in charge.

Only Max, Jr. ever challenged his sister and he sometimes won, but people got out of the way then the brother and sister conflict was in session.

Max, Jr. thought Felix was white trash. It's funny how the super rich really can't be the loveable politician they would love to be. They have to find someone from the great unwashed they can mold and place. JFK was probably the real exception and many people were sure that Grandpa Slaughter had been a part of the inner circle that had to put the Eastern money in its place by killing their pretty boy President.

Now, Margaret thought she might be able to take her puppet, Franklin Delano Murdock, to the Oval Office and Max, Jr. would just have to live with it.

Okie and Tyler made small talk from the balcony as Margaret gave orders to the hotel staff about bringing some lunch, keeping the suite until the boys wanted to leave and no press. Her Senator was sleeping and the rest of the world should stay away until he looked senatorial.

"I just told 'em to bring in a cold cuts tray and ice tea! You fellows don't mind makin' yourself sandwiches, do you?"

"Sounds like a winner, Margaret." Okie was very accommodating.

"I assume Felix is upstairs?"

"Yeah. He's out like a light."

"I'm gonna run up and see my baby."

"We really didn't make him too comfortable, but we did get him in the bed."

"Okie, I've seen that man sleep in the floorboard of a fucking four-wheel driver jeep driving across open range land. If he's been in the Glenfiddich, he only needs gravity to hold him to the earth."

Margaret whirled with big theatrical motions, and she was now moving stage left.

“I’ll get him real comfortable. We’ll probably stay here one more night so I can clean him up and dress him in something dark blue in case the chicken-shit media turds want a comment or two.”

“I really appreciate this, Margaret. With Ty here and a chance to blast down to Austin tonight, you’re really bailing me out.”

“No problem, sugar. When the food gets here, ya’ll get after it and don’t wait on me.”

Margaret suddenly got a bright twinkle in her eye.

“My Senator may want me to check his personal equipment.”

Okie smiled and moved in Margaret’s direction so he could speak softly.

“Mrs. Wheeler, you’re good for that dickhead upstairs and I like your style. But, if you can raise that Jr. Senator’s personal equipment after the last four days I’ve endured with him, then I think you should be able to raise the dead.”

“I got talent, Okland Farmer.”

Margaret seemed to glide up the stairs.

Okie liked her; but this lady was not all reputation and he could feel the future taking shape. Felix would have to make some decision and the influence he would have to endure was gliding up the stairs to fondle his tallywacker. Okie would have to learn how to fondle his pride.

Fucking no contest, Okie thought to himself. Suddenly, Angie's influence seemed to be in the room with him. He felt warm and distracted. The battle over Felix would have to wait.

Tink was circling a sandwich buffet that would feed twenty-five. He had met the dragon lady and no massacre ensued, so he was hungry, and, in fact, anxious to get his radio interviews done.

Okie was packed. He now had his own set of errands to run.

Felix was in the office and the money people were in line for their special interest. Okie had to let them know all the right doors would be opening.

"Where you gonna be?"

"Shit, man, you know how these interview go. I could wind up in Dallas sucking down margaritas with some buxom D.J."

"Sex, drugs and rock and roll are alive and well. That does my heart good."

"How about I just meet you here?"

"Fuck no!" Okie insisted. "I don't want to be within one hundred miles of this place. Too much shit can happen. Besides, Margaret and Felix are staying over and I'd really like to miss the chance Felix might wake up."

"Okay, pick me up at KVIL. It's right on the highway and we'll just go from there. I'll be ready no later than 9:00. Will that do?"

"Sounds great. You got a direct line for KVIL?"

"Yeah, it's 861-1110."

“I’ll call and check on you if there’s any change of plan, but believe me, I’m not gonna let that happen. Plus, I’ve got to talk to you. I need some input.”

Tink was on the move again. The man was perpetual motion. The huge doors of the Van Cliborn Suite slammed.

Seconds later, Margaret was standing halfway down the stairs wearing only Felix’s pants.

“Shit, that scared me to death.”

“Sorry Margaret.”

Okie couldn’t take his eyes off Margaret’s tits. They were awesome. Like Felix had said, only two reasons to fall in love - - tits and money. Margaret had them both. It was also painfully obvious she was now wearing his pants.

“Think was just blasting out of here. He’s famous for being kinda rambunctious.”

“I’m about to slip out of here, too!”

Margaret was still eye to eye with Okie and no blush or inhibition seemed probable. Okie was afraid to be the first to flinch so he just held his ground. It appeared they would have to move simultaneously. It was a strange power exchange with no mixed signals.

“I’m gonna call a bellman to grab my stuff and then I’ll be gone. Ya’ll be good and I’ll be in touch Monday.”

Margaret was now free to cover her breasts.

“I’ve got the situation well in hand, Okie. I’ll tell F.D. your plans. Tell Tyler I enjoyed the lunch and I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

Oakland Farmer rushed the phone for relief from the Slaughter standoff. He was ready to dump the responsibility. He was ready to see Angie Deere, the aforementioned modern day Venus. Felix had his woman. Okie was setting a course for his. Margaret was now in charge.

When you play for big stakes, you win big or lose big. Margaret could afford to do both. That made her tough. She had his pants on and she had plans. Big plans. Now they napped at 2:45 in the afternoon. They would all need the rest.

Night, Night, Margaret!

* * *

The urge to get in the car and just go is probably universal, but young men with guitars slung across their backs do it like they have to. Compelled! Dressed as stylish rebels of their era, they play out their dreams until their dreams do them in.

The two hundred miles of concrete ribbon between Austin and Dallas has carried the best. Flat pickers, bluesmen, screamin' feedback artists, you name it and they've played it in vans, cars, buses, trucks and when necessary, with their thumbs. If you can carry a tune in a bucket and your sense of destiny is acute, the I-35 aura is as present as "Remember the Alamo!"

Tink and Okland had made this trip together and alone, and it was never anything but spiritual. Their focus had changed over the years and the gravity of

age had reconfigured their bodies; but here they were, counting the white lines.

Together Again!

“This ride is a little different than the GMC van we bought in '73!”

Tink settled into the Lincoln Towncar passenger seat. Powered six ways!

“Oh, I don't know.” Okie had to laugh. “We were sure prettier with our torn and patched jeans and new Martins”

“That's a fact!”

“Hell, Tinker, I'd kill to have that old eight-track right now.”

“Why?” Tink was used to listening to good recordings and the thought of resurrecting bad tapes could make him not want to listen at all.

“Because they made the trip fun,” Okie explained.

“Then put a CD player in here, duphus!”

“CD?” Okie played dumb.

“Wake up, Okie. Don't be one of those old musicians turned old fart, who can't figure anything out on their kid's stereo.”

Tink gave that knowing look of his and said, “I'll bet you really haven't tried digital audio yet.”

“Now that sounds like quality stuff, digital audio. Is that like puttin' on a condom, leavin' your boots on in bed, then whispering in her ear - - 'Baby, I'm ready for some digital aural stimulation'.” Okland had so tickled himself, the sentence took forever to get out of his mouth.

Humorous aural stimulation.

“I guess you and Felix haven’t spent a nickel on high quality political sound bytes,” Tink grinned. “Probably digital audio, Mr. Farmer.”

“Shit on you, Mr., Kincaid.”

“Will that be DAT or DAD or just plain DO-DO!”

Friends on the road.

It didn’t really matter what level you’d achieved, when its sunset and the headlights tell you where you’re going.

“What’s next for our new Senator?”

“Sobriety, I hope!”

“You know what I mean. Give me a break with the one liners. He won. You can off the cute act.”

Tink had watched the election with great interest, but the process looked so raw and dirty he had stayed arms’ length by design. Okie had talked to him by phone and fax; but the American political scene had become nothing short of insane, so Tyler gave money and voted only. Now, he figured he had bought the rights to the inside scoop.

“After running that campaign, are you sure you can even give me a straight answer anymore?”

“Can you look at a situation without hearing a song that reminds you of someone or seeing a new place without thinking song material?”

“See what I mean! You can’t give me one fuckin’ straight answer.” Tink’s voice had risen a full octave.

“Hey, I was just pulling your leg, hot shot.”

Okland knew he had compromised his beliefs for Felix's political gain, but he could still talk turkey to Tyler.

"Listen, ole' buddy, we've been through a bunch, and this crime called politics tested my soul. I don't know what F.D. will or even can do!"

"Will the redneck fucker even show up?"

"Come on, Ty, he'll do the job. The question is, what the fuck is the job. You know as well as I do there are so many people pulling everybody's string, like puppets, in D.C. that you can't tell good from evil; and Felix will be pretty easy pickin's for a smooth operator."

"Like what?"

"Well, like those monkey farts that run your music business, that's what! Those fellows who get your whiskey gravel voice digitized and recorded. Digital audio remember!"

"They are gonna spend some money lobbying their causes, and they're going to find out your six-string buddies anteed up."

Ty squirmed.

Okie continued.

"Most likely the Japs own your label, and they're going to want their digital equipment protected from import fees and competition."

"I know the Japanese own my label. You know that Japs own my label. Hell, they own my own catalogue. Twenty-four albums of my life are now sushi!"

"Welcome to politics, Mr. Kincaid."

"Shit on you, Mr. Farmer. Digital shit, asshole!"

Okie was well aware of the foreign ownership with Ty's label. Those first three albums had been a long time ago, but to Okie it was just the other day. He had co-written many of the songs with Tink. Some were actually elevator music today; but, like many, he feared the invasion of America and its loss of making products. We were all becoming middle men. The elevator music still paid Okie a royalty and kind of kept him on the edge of the music business.

It had been their progressive country days. Austin had created a truly magical kingdom. The Improbably Rise of Redneck Rock, a cheap, short-sighted book, had once proclaimed Austin's boys of fame.

Now Okland was sure he would see another improbably book about this filthy-do-anything senatorial campaign he and his family had endured. The music book read like sour grapes. The campaign book would read like soured history.

"So, how come you're going to Austin?" Tink had asked several times all day long, but no answer had been given.

"Well!" Okland's pause was lengthy.

Tink just sat. He would give Okie all the room he needed to field the question. Something was up!

"Ty" Another long silent pause. Tink sat.

"I'm going to meet someone tonight at midnight."

Okland was so opaque with his answer he made himself uncomfortable.

"Deep throat, no doubt." Ty couldn't resist the opportunity to zing Okie for being so mysterious.

Okland laughed, but it sounded nervous.

“I’m gonna drop you at Tiny’s when we get to town, okay?”

Okie had so overtly shifted gears, Tink could only go on the offensive.

“Fuck! Let me out of here if you’re going to keep talkin’ around me. You’re the one who said let’s drive to Austin, not fly. Old times – We can visit. We’ll talk. So talk, God dammit !”

Okland’s mind was racing the same way it had been racing for the past one hundred days.

He had met Angie at a political fundraising golf tournament in Atlanta. Since that day nothing was real anymore. After golf, they had talked and talked. Angie had invited him to Phoenix for several days of fun in the sun and pure play. They had solidified their rather uncertain and precarious feelings for one another.

Things had happened a lot faster than either had expected; and it made the relationship erratic, but somehow worthwhile.

Now, no matter what the daily agenda called for, Okland had fought back an intense urge to stop everything and contact Angie.

At first, their communication resembled two boxers sparring. One doing all the pursuing, the other just putting up token resistance. But now, Angie had started to call, punch back so to speak, and that only added fuel to the insatiable Farmer fire.

One more thing. Angie was married. Okland was married. Not to each other obviously.

How those little details can make one’s mind dance and tell tales.

“Her name is Angie Deere.”

Okland started like was confessing to Joe Friday and he was the criminal of the week on Dragnet.

“She’s arriving from Phoenix at midnight and we’re seeing each other.”

Six hundred Hail Marys.

“Jesus, Okie, you mean to tell me this is all about an affair?” Tink had expected the KGB or at least something nasty and political. Scandal maybe. Not boys and girls playing birds and bees.

Tink traveled the world tap dancing to his own drummer and singing melodies of Texas dreams. At the end of every show there were dozens of would be Angie Deeres waiting at the stage door. For those reasons, he had trouble putting his finger on the pulse of Okland’s problem.

“You knock her up?” Tink could only take a lukewarm guess.

“No, Ty, nothing like that.”

“Why the grand tour then? I don’t understand your reluctance to just say what you’ve gotta say.”

Tyler Kincaid saw men caught with their pants down every night.

“Because I don’t understand all this either.”

Okie was left to his own devices again, and the mind can play and rewind things all backwards and forwards at such high speeds your brain simply runs over the rest of your body. It’s called cold chills. Okie didn’t want ‘em.

Analog versus digital of the cerebrum.

“You feeling guilty like a married man should? Got visions of Chigger and Taylor and some newspaper reporter hounding you? Skip Bayless Busts Love Nest!”

Again, Tink was just going through the motions. He was making light of a situation he was neither caught in or even slightly grasped.

“That may be part of my problem, Ty! I feel no guilt. I’m operating on a new set of rules and expectations right now. Look, I realize they may be all changed as fast as they arrived, but for today, I’m not sure I know how to read the dipstick, if you know what I mean?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Tink was listening, not hearing.

“Let me tell you something.” Okie settled into the driver’s seat, changing hands on the wheel to tell his side of the story.

“When I met Angie, she had come to Atlanta with some guy, not her husband.”

“Wait!” Tink interrupted. “She’s two-timing you and her husband? Jesus Okie!” Tink was beside himself. Almost jumping in the car.

“What does her husband do?”

“I think he has a couple of Chevrolet dealerships.” Okie was a little puzzled by the question.

“Hank Deere Chevrolet?”, Okie chirped.

“Let me guess, this guy wears white shoes and a canary yellow sports coat in Phoenix, right?” Okie had a mad Tinker on his hands.

“You both deserve each other. I didn’t mean what does he do for a living. I meant, what does he do about his wife running around the country with shits like you? Why doesn’t he get a gun and shoot her?” Tink couldn’t stop.

“Who does she think she is?”

“That’s my point, Mr. Kincaid. I don’t care how we go about this ‘thang’ right now. It’s too important to me.” Okie thought he was getting through. Tinker was not hearing at least.

“I think she has been seeing this other guy for a long time. They both handle real estate and things just happened between them, you know? Someone to break the monotony of her marriage.” Okie talked like he was making sense.

To Tink he sounded like Felix had said, he sounded pussy-whipped.

“Now she’s selected you as the guy to put a little zip in her life?” Tink’s voice was sarcastic as hell.

“The Bonus!”, Okie glowed.

“Try Butt hole, Okie.” Ty was not one to make moral judgments about anything or anyone. He had made his share of mistakes and he knew what a fling was and what a one-night stand was. He just called things as he saw them. This time he had gotten a little angry. Ty had been married twice, and you have to test the waters looking for number two.

Stage door dolls.

“Butt hole?” Okie’s reply was one-half surprise, one-half more surprised.

“Ty, I’ve known you too long for me to try and put you on about something like this. I tell you this woman has rung my chime and I don’t know if I can live without her.”

“Hey, Pal, I’m not worried about you fooling me. I would, however, suggest you stop at the next Exxon station. Go into the bathroom and look in the mirror. That’s the guy being fooled and he’s looking at the guy fleecing him.”

Tink was so right, he thought. He could only see the practical side. It had been too long since he had fallen off that high cliff of love.

“So you think . . .” Okland stopped. He was no fool, he said to himself, at least not until one hundred days ago, as the after thought. He would try to digest Ty’s “man-in-the-mirror” remarks. First of all, the mirrored man is one of the oldest songwriting ploys ever. Plus, he was certain Ty had completely missed the twinkle in his eyes when he talked to Angie.

Felix had seen the warm shine in Okie’s face and it had made even the new Senator deal with Okland’s reality.

Tink was being hardheaded because he didn’t believe in that “love bites Andy Hardy” shit. Hell, Okland didn’t believe in love at first sight either until the moon was yellow and the Georgia sky was cool after the big golf tournament. He had even finished fourth.

Men just act. Women set the bait, and just get out of the way.

“I think maybe we’re sending mixed signals here.” Okie was making an effort to lighten the conversation.

Tyler would NOT change his mind about Angie.

Okie wasn't trying to convince Ty about anything. He didn't think he was anyway! If he was fishing for Tink's approval, there truly was a set of mixed signals on the table.

"Does Chigger know where you are?" Okland felt like he had been sucker-punched below the belt. He felt himself flush with pain, anger, and embarrassment. You name it, he felt it. All the power, all at one.

"Fuck you, Tyler! She knows I'm in Austin. With you I might add"

"You won't be with me after midnight." Tink was driving nails in the coffin.

"Does Chigger know?" Ty had known Okie's wife forever it seemed. They weren't really close, but she had ridden the same rails when Okie and Tyler were boys making music.

"Of course not."

"Then why on earth are you telling me this soap opera tale, you shit head?" Tink was bent out of shape because he had watched so many musicians over the years play these same games, and he hated it when they pulled him into their games of guilt and share the guilt.

Okland was overcome by Ty's challenge. Had it been so long since he truly let himself go to feel something for someone? Had the oil business, the politics, the sameness of daily repetition and Central Expressway lulled him to emotional sleep? What did compel him to share this giddiness, even though it put enormous pressure on his oldest friend?

Okland suddenly felt very vulnerable.

“Get your head up, Okie. Look man, if this woman has really tattooed you like you think, and I repeat like YOU think she has, then go slow. Find some solid, common ground. Don’t go blasting your emotions all over Texas.” Tink paused and looked at Okland with 100% calm in his eyes.

“Does that make any sense to you considering your present condition?”

Okland felt like he was being drowned and saved at the same time. I think it’s called baptism.

Could he be that transparent? That immature about his own life? He repeated it to himself, like Tink had done for effect. That fucking immature about his own life.

He could feel the urge crawling up his back to say – Yes! Yes! Yes! Angie is everything! But Tyler had made his point and it was a lulu.

“I know we don’t have time to stop and eat, but pull into the Stage Coach Inn and let me pee. Give yourself a minute, Okie. I didn’t mean to come on so strong. Really I didn’t.” Ty winked.

It was an all-knowing, fucking, wiseass wink, too!

The Inn was about sixty miles from Austin. Okie was now one hour and fifteen minutes from Angie’s plane. It was so hard, even after Ty’s rather pointed advise not to let her image race back into his brain. Industrial strength!

Okland sat alone in the car. The silence and the darkness were like friends. Both held back the world. Both hid the pressure he felt after Tink’s surprise attack.

Suddenly, the dome light was on. Tink gently closed the door.

“Would you like me to drive?” Ty was really trying to make some room for Okland to regroup.

“I’m fine, amigo. In more ways than one.” Even Okie’s voice sounded different. The love that he knew consumed him for the aforementioned modern day Venus would not go away. Okland was, however, beginning to get a handle on some of the energy it produced. Thanks to Tink.

The headlights hit the road again. Same men, same car, different destinations.

“I think you’ve got plenty of time to drop me at Tiny’s before midnight.”

Ty was indeed a great friend. Just REAL outspoken and honest. Okland would take him to the ends of the earth if necessary, but tonight Tiny’s it would be.

“He still lives off Bee Caves, doesn’t he?” Now Okie was just going through the motions.

“Same ole’ place.” Tink grinned a huge grin and asked, “You mean Tiny’s not on Felix’s contributor’s mailing list?”

“You’re not going to believe this, but he did send \$10.00.” The answer could only make both men laugh.

Tiny Spear had played bass for Tyler even when Okie was in the band. He was the ultimate Austin player lost somewhere between 1967 and 1974. Everybody loved him. He made his own jerky and beer. He was as reliable as the tower clock at U.T. He also glowed orange when the Longhorns won. Homemade beer will do that.

“You guys gonna be playing anywhere this weekend?” Okie thought about bringing Angie into town for one of those famous “late night anything goes chicken-friend music sessions.”

“Probably, but call me first. If you’re gonna have you . . .,” Tink searched for the right word, “your friend with you. I’ll want things to be cool. That sound okay to you?”

Sure, Tink.”

The Lincoln stopped in front of Tiny’s house. It looked like a cross between a Grateful Dead album cover and a Terlingua Chili Cook-Off poster. Alfred Hitchcock could make a movie here, Okie thought. Then smiled at Tink. Hell, Tink was going to have to spend the night inside.

Their eyes met.

“Okie, I’m sorry . . .” Okland put his hand on Ty’s arm. It was an old habit.

“I should thank you, Tink. You shot-gunned me, but at least you offered a Band-Aid for the bleeding.” Okie covered his heart like he had been wounded.

“I enjoyed the ride, I think.” Okie smiled. It was a smile friends smile when they are better friends than before.

Okland and Angie had shared the same moment in Phoenix.

“Y’all gonna play golf in the morning?” Tink gave that all-knowing grin again.

“You know I’m staying at Lakeway. What do you think?”

“Does she play?” Tink eyed Okie for any remaining signs of hurt.

Okie nodded that they would both be teeing it up.

“Please guard that valuable heart of yours my old friend. It means a lot to me.” Ty had the same “better friends than ever” smile.

“Fairways and greens!”

“Night, Night, Tink!”

The Lincoln raced to the air port.

* * *

Patience. Calm Patience. Okland’s head was bobbing up and down like a fishing cork. His eyes were fixed between the gate between where Angie would be arriving and his watch.

She was late. In reality, the airline was late, but Okie had ridden the razor’s edge with Tyler and banter had turned to self analysis and the solution was a hug and a kiss from the aforementioned modern-day Venus herself.

The small TV screen that warned passengers and welcomes alike that the airlines have inconvenienced you again had pierced Okie’s heart like a wooden stake.

CXL!

“Cancelled? He queried the ticket agent.

“Sorry, sir. The flight just didn’t have enough seats sold. Can you give me the passenger’s name?”

“Mary Angela Deere.” Okie almost whispered the name.

“That’s a good Catholic name.” It was a new experience. Asking an absolute stranger for help with his own secret heartache.

“She’s changed airlines, sir.” The agent was trying to be light. He could tell Okie was not interested with the pleasantries of delay.

“She must have found a better deal.”

Okie was stunned.

“She’s coming in on flight 683 at 1:16 a.m.”

“What airline? Okie was standing like a man with a thousand pounds on his back.

“That’s Continental, sir. Let’s see.” The agent was communicating with his computer much better than he was communicating with Okie.

“Gate 39, Concourse B.”

Okie again looked at his watch - - 12:10 a.m. He had to wait an hour. Hell, it might as well be forever. Patience. Shit, he had none.

The airport in Austin was about as dinky as they come. For the capital of Texas, it was a joke. So much of the time Okie, Felix and crew flew out of DFW which was a joke on the other end of the spectrum.

Okland started for the bar. One hour in the bar and he and Angie would be in a bar ditch on their way to Lakeway. The drive out to the Inn was on winding roads, and they were built by an engineer that had stayed too long in the bar himself. Bad idea. Alcohol and the hill country. The only thing open on a weekday at 12:15 a.m. was the newsstand.

The only story Okie was sure to read was about Felix being found dead in the Van Cliburn Suite. Probably nude or with an underage girl. The old story is a

political one -- never be caught with a dead girl or a live boy. Okie smiled to himself. Cynicism can be funny if you're sick in the head.

This day alone would make most people insane, but Okie was on the tail end of months of campaigning and living like a legitimate gypsy. If there is such a thing.

As he approached the newsstand, the vendor was locking up.

"Hey partner, can I buy some reading materials?"

"Can you make it quick, please?"

"Sure." Okie turned on the charm.

"What I'd love to have is a Dallas Times Herald." Okie set the bait.

"Sorry mister, they don't make the paper anymore."

Okie had his foot in the small space for the newsstand. He could now look around before the guy locked up.

"Yeah, I know. That sure was a good paper. Did you ever read it?"

"No sir, I can't read. The boss figured if I could make change and I didn't read, I wouldn't steal anything."

"Your boss must own the Dallas Morning News." Okie's joke only worked on himself.

The Dallas Times Herald was the "other newspaper". It had the best writers, the best look, but the worst management. It was an island in a sea of right-wing Texas journalism. The Morning News had supported Felix, just to let you know how crazy and ethically corrupt it was. The Herald had called Felix a blight on the face of Dallas, but the best of the worst for the vacate Senate seat.

Molly Ivins, a Herald staff writer with the bite of a rattlesnake, had decided Texas had become so apathetic it deserved Felix. She was right. Okie had felt the same way. Now the news would own the opinion of the Metroplex, and the Neanderthal days of the 50's were sure to be in vogue.

Better yet, the Neo Neanderthal made lovable by Reagan, trickled down love of your fellow man.

“Hey mister, are you gonna buy something or just stand around?”

The illiterate newsstand operator had no use for a self-analyzing, lonely, two-timing mouthpiece like Okland Farmer. Class distinction ran amuck.

“Yeah, let me have a Texas Monthly and D Magazine. Plus a Butterfinger.”

The gate slammed with a clang as the man who could make change but couldn't read emphasized his impatience. Okie looked at the arrival monitor as he walked toward Concourse B three times in ten seconds to emphasize his impatience. Two magazines and a candy bar for company. Sugar for the mind and sugar for the blood.

As Okie approached the Gate 39 area, he was literally alone. No one was around. No state legislators. No coaches from U.T. returning from recruiting trips, dedicated to talking mothers out of their sons. No students, no Angie. Okie almost felt panic. In a way, he needed this time, but too much time alone can be very dangerous when you're not sure whose rules are in effect.

Decisions and actions that had seemed so crystal clear had a fuzzy edge to them now. Guilt was lurking somewhere on Concourse B. Good ole' Judeo

Christian ethic – guilt. Sold in almost every five and dime in America. Eat your food because people are starving around the world. Recycle. Give a Hoot, Don't Pollute. Call your mother. Respect your elders.

Good God, Okie had lost respect for everything. That was the real burning pain.

People need to know somewhere the sun is shining, the children are playing, and goodness will prevail or at least give a strong showing.

Okie needed that ray of hope like everyone else. Tonight, he shook with anticipation for a beautiful woman from Phoenix who could make the sun shine and the birds sing. It was 1:00 a.m. and time was moving slower than ever. How does one make a Butterfinger last fifteen minutes? Simple. Remember all the great Butterfingers you've had in your life. Ty's granddad, Roy Kincaid, the mail carrier, had gotten both boys hooked on Grapette, Butterfinger's and Tom's Peanuts. In those days, it was acceptable behavior for people to give their kids sweets (as they were called). So Grandpa Kincaid performed his duty with the zeal that all grandpas should possess.

Okie licked his fingers of chocolate and pored over the Texas Monthly and waited, and waited, and waited. He could feel his eyes closing. Just a quick five-minute nap would be good.

"Hey, don't be too enthusiastic!" Okie jumped from his chair. He was no longer alone.

"You mean I missed your arrival?" Okie gushed with joy and glanced at his watch. It was 1:34 a.m.

“We were late and I thought you’d be pacing the floor, but here you are sleeping like a baby.” Angie kissed him on the forehead like a child.

“Don’t tease me.” Okie spoke with Butterfinger gum in his teeth. “I’ve been here forever. When you changed airlines, I considered suicide.”

“Oh, poor baby, had to wait on Mama.” Angie was just as excited to see her new beau, as Okie was to see her, but they were really strangers; and the mixed signals of a new relationship was still their biggest obstacle.

“Let’s get my things and get out to your Hill Country. I’ve got some hugging on you to do, boy.” Her smile was as big as Texas, and her sentiment woke every cell in Okie’s body up like love should. Angie grabbed Okie’s hand and they almost skipped to the baggage claim area.

“Can we be so open here?” Angie was ready for romance, but she was an experienced adulteress so the question had merit.

“Sure!” Okie simply didn’t care at this moment.

This love was a big love, so hiding the intensity of touching seemed just as wrong as the adultery. Angie was along for the fun. She could tell Okie was head over heels for her and there had been times in the past she used men, but she kept her perspective with this crazy Texas boy. Something was happening.

His innocence about her disarmed her. He was always raving about her eyes, but, in fact, his eyes pierced her usual, protective cool. That was a noticeable chill Angie felt, but could not yet share.

“As a matter of fact, Mrs. Deere, may I have a long, slow kiss?”

Like kids beating curfew, they embraced for as long as their adult sense would allow before feeling like spectacles. The whirligig lurched as it began to flash yellow lights and crashed into motion. By design, Angie's luggage belched from the mouth on the conveyor belt first. Okie grabbed the golf clubs and suitcase; Angie grabbed the others. The, both lovers headed for the exit. The sun was shining and the birds were singing at 2:00 a.m.

Okie lifted the trunk and wrestled the golf clubs into place next to his. He loved that sound. Irons rattling in the back. It meant it was time to play. Angie hopped into the Lincoln Towncar and looked very much like his woman, as she fixed her hair and put on lipstick they could kiss of her lips. Okie slammed the trunk and opened his door.

There she was, waiting for him. Her smile said a million things to him. Her beauty was breathtaking. He almost dove headlong into the car. It was one movement to slide into the seat, throw his arms around her and kiss her with all the love he had.

Angie pulled away. Okie obeyed, but he hated how in control the bombshell was.

"We'll be there in about thirty minutes, okay?"

"Sounds good."

"I think maybe we should break the law and let me show you the lights from Mt. Bonnell. It's on the way. It just takes ten minutes."

"Break the law?"

“Well, they have a goofy curfew because people were being stupid. We used to stay up on the hill all night, but now the yuppie population don’t want no kids to act the way they did when they wuz young. I should probably tell you I’m a closet hippie.” Okie polished his best bad grammar for affect.

Angie cracked up.

“A closet hippie?”

“As you get to know me better, we’ll talk more about the details.” Okie tried to be cryptic, but admissions about youthful behavior really couldn’t create the aura of cryptic.

“Bell bottoms?” Angie wrinkled her nose and forehead to add to the mock inquisition.

“Okay, kid! Don’t tease me too much or I’ll suggest we drop acid.”

“Whoa!! Dr. Leary, I presume.”

“Ah ha!” Okie jumped at the remark.

“You were alive in ’67, too!”

“To tell the truth, I had some very cool crushed velvet bell bottoms that served me well. My Army sergeant father would double his blood pressure when I mentioned them, let alone wore them.”

“I hope you brought them along.” Okie rolled his eye and tried to rile Angie a little.

“Sorry, Charlie, my style has changed. Besides, if we’re breaking the law, I’d rather not spend the night in jail with my crushed velvet pants on. Something else might come out of the closet.”

“We’ll just bend the law.” Okie punched the accelerator on the Lincoln for the last steep climb up to Mr. Bonnell.

“Besides, surely we can tell the law that Jr. Senator sent us on a mission.”

“Great! We’ll drag your politician friends into this arrest so we can have our pictures in the paper for sure.”

“Let me tell you what, sister, if your politician friends are placed right, you can get away with marcher.”

“Howe about we just get away with seeing the lights tonight or should I say this morning.”

“No murder tonight?”

“Show me the lights of Austin and take me to Lakeway. That’ll do.” Angie leaned over and kissed Okie.

“Let’s have some fun,” Angie whispered in Okie’s ear.

“Come on!” Okie bolted from the car.

“We gotta do a little climbing.”

“Climbing?”

“Not too far. A couple hundred steps.”

“You’re kidding, I hope.”

“I am.” Okie felt so alive with this woman.

The walk up Mt. Bonnell is made of beautiful stone native to the Hill Country, but it is also enclosed in the evergreen foliage making a long, dark corridor.

Okie could sense Angie's discomfort as they ascended the stairway. People get older. People get cautious. People out of their element get scared.

"Hold my hand, Okie. This is spooky."

"Not to worry, the boogie man is in Dallas or Houston. He generally leave Austin alone."

"It's not the bogie man that worries me, it's the bad guys. Muggers would love this place."

"Well, remember, we're not supposed to be here so neither are they."

"To tell the truth, I'd love to see a policeman right now."

"Okie held Angie's hand tight and pulled her up the stairs. The light from the moon illuminated the clearing ahead. Okie moved faster. He pulled Angie to the gazebo erected by those who instituted the curfew and let her hands go free.

"Austin." He spread his arms wide.

"Oh, this is neat." Angie circled from one spot and created her own panorama. "I love this place. It brings back nothing but good memories."

Okie walked Angie to the cliffs that overlook Lake Austin. Thousands of lights still burn at 2:30 a.m. in the Thursday morning.

"Just thought you should start your visit with this view. It kinda sets the stage for a wonderful time."

"Oh, Okie. I'm so glad to see you." Angie liked the attention Okie gave her. His genuine concern.

"Well, down we go. Miles to go before we sleep."

Together they assaulted the darkness. Down the rocks into the Lincoln. Moving against toward Lakeway and each other.

She was really here. Okie couldn't take his eyes off Angie in the dim glow of the dash lights.

"I dropped off some old music buddies before I cam to get you. They're gonna make some sweet noise tomorrow night. Would you feel comfortable around some people who know me?"

"Would you feel comfortable round them with me is the better question?" Angie forever seemed more experienced and probably less in love.

"I think it would be fun." Okie really wanted Angie to get the full nine yards Austin had to offer, and a special, backstage jam session would be very Austintatious.

"We could behave ourselves in public, I think." Angie rubbed Okie on the leg and with raw sex in her voice said, "Maybe."

She slid across the black, leather seats and held his arm. Quietly she brushed her hand across his chest and slowly lowered her hand until she could play with his pants zipper.

"I think I'm really starting to like Austin." Angie began to unzip Okie's pants while kissing his neck.

"Kiddo, if you don't stop that I'm gonna park this auto in the trees."

"If you don't park us at Lakeway soon, I'm gonna start right here." Angie was fast becoming pure sex.

“Yes, Ma’m, I’m driving as fast as is safe.” Okie was almost electric. The Lakeway entrance was only a blur. The check-in was rapid. They only unloaded the necessary luggage. This time Okie remembered he owned a penis.

Angie smiled.

The hills surrounded them as if the two were cradled in the arms of the Hill Country. Safe, warm, together.

The morning would bring the glorious Texas sun and they would wake to each other. There was breakfast to be savored and golf to be played. For now, it was love and

Night, Night Austin.

* * *

Thwack!

That’s Big,” cooed Angie. She knew more about golf and all its little phrases than all the women Okie knew put together.

Okie could only smile. Nothing quite like getting off the first tee.

The male ego can cause war and basic general no good, but Okland Farmer’s considerable ego was putty in the hands of his angel from Phoenix.

“This course will fool you, girl, so pay attention to my bits of wisdom and local knowledge.”

“You know my game plan, Okie, hit and giggle.” Angie had nuked Okland’s concentration in one of their first rounds of golf, and she seemed to take great delight in reminding him. It was half loveable play, half lowdown, underhanded, skunk foot-rubbing gamesmanship. Either way, Okie was trying to

enjoy a round with Angie and still post some numbers so he could live with. Fat chance.

He loved Austin! His desire to share this paradise with Angie was multi-purposed and multi-layered. She didn't know the place, but had heard great things. Okland also knew in his heart of hearts that the River, the Lake, the Hill Country, and the overall ambiance of the Alleys of Austin would finally make HER love Him.

Senator Murdock had conceded that what Okie had was the "real thang." Bald-faced, bear wrestlin', gotta have that woman love. Angie wasn't sure what she had. She was cautious to the max. She couldn't say "love" to him. She would acknowledge his feelings, albeit reluctantly.

"See that mesquite tree?" Okie was pointing down the fairway. "Just slap that pill right down there and it will roll right into the middle of the short grass." Angie grabbed her driver, rubbed him on the butt and winked. Okie jumped!

"You shit, don't start that crap on the first tee." Angie smiled like she had won the lottery and would get \$1,000,000 a year forever. She was wearing a new summer outfit Okland had given her, and her beauty jumped on Okland's eyes like white on rice.

"You play your game and I'll play mine," she teased.

"How about a kiss?" Her head tilted into position and her eyes gently closed. Okland Farmer couldn't pass up that request even if the starter, the assistant pros, and what looked like 800,000 dedicated male golfers on the driving range were all watching. Men already thought women should only play

the 19th hole and they preferred them on their backs with their skirts pulled up over their heads. Fore! So to speak.

Sheepishly he pecked her lips.

“Chicken!” She jabbed all the sarcasm she could fit into just one deprecating word.

“Just hit the ball, Angie.” Okie was a little nervous. He knew lots of people and lots of people knew Chigger. Angie caught the tone and strolled to the “ladies tee”. Tiptoes! Hips wagging! Moving slowly to make her point. He loved her because she was the strongest female he had ever known, and to be close to her was special.

Now, she was messing up his head and she was making her point a little early in the match. Okland could not scold her, but he made his mind up then to “fight back” somehow.

“At the mesquite tree, huh?” She slowly bent over, making those legs that were already brown and long seem like they went on forever. She finally teed it up.

Thwack! God’s mercy, her natural ability, and Okie’s karma all converged at once. Angie knocked the cover off her new pink Flying Lady. Not only did it head right for the mesquite tree like a laser, but it slowly rolled into the middle of the fairway about twenty yards past Okie’s ball.

The gallery of Lakeway pros and guests went back to what they were doing. Had Angie duffer a dribbler only ten yards after her display of flirtation,

coy, sex golf, Okland Farmer would have been lynched from the not very high branches of the mesquite tree he had pointed out as her target.

“Nice shot, precious.” Okie’s tone carried relief, apology, and an “in-your-face” to the onlookers.

“Trust me,” Angie bubbled. That little phrase had become a running joke between the pair.

She had smoked a drive, she was gonna have some fun and Okie did mean something to her. What it was just hadn’t proved itself clear yet.

They both bounced back to the cart and floored the accelerator. They were off. Love golf! Touching Golf! High number for Okie!

The Texas sun can cook your brain. However, if you’ve spent your entire life soaking up all of outdoors, and these two had, then the Texas sun is like food for the soul. It was a big part of their mutual attraction. The Lakeway Resort juts out on a peninsula into the emerald waters of the infamous Lake Travis and the rolling hills are perfect for a fast track and challenging golf course layout. Gentle waterfalls, deer, and the glare from the limestone all watched as the pink Flying Lady sailed to and fro.

“You’re gonna love this next hole.” Okie shared his love for the game with this new love of his life.

“Oh yeah?” Angie could smile as if to say, “You can’t show me a thing, kiddo.” Confident lady!

“You betcha!” He beamed back at her. The cart slowly crept up the steep incline. Suddenly, the view exploded. It was everywhere. Angie grasped.

“Bingo!” Okie’s pride swelled and he gloated to himself. They were standing on the tee of a golf masterpiece. But the panorama of the Texas Hill Country had to be absorbed. Three hundred sixty degrees of pure God’s creation and Texas money!

Okland slowly eased himself behind Angie Deere and twirled her around with the grace of Baryshnikov. His lips gently pressed against her mouth and they embraced with the impact this beautiful location deserved.

The kiss overpowered them both. They hugged. What they called a power hug. Another real kiss!

Arm in arm they spun around and around feeling the sun on their faces, the sun in their hearts, and the freedom one feels when you really enjoy the company of a friend, a lover, a person who carried a common thread with you through this thing we foolishly call life.

“I love you, Angie Deere!” Okland was looking so deep into her eyes Angie had trouble holding the gaze. He still embarrassed her with his longing, and she hadn’t formulated her response to anyone’s satisfaction.

“I know, Okie.” She was so soft with her voice, it was a whisper. She hoped “I know” was enough for now.

It was!

For a change, Okie was the first to regain composure and he walked back to the cart to grab a six iron.

“From here it’s 187 yards, but it’s pretty much all downhill. I think you’ve got about 135 from your tee box.” He was trying to put them back on the golf course. Okie felt alive!

The green was nestled at the bottom of the valley with a gorgeous, clear, rock lined creek surrounding three-fourths of the putting surface. For a golfer, this little puppy looked tough, but you couldn’t wait to sail a high fade down the hill.

Thwack!

The sun hit the ball and made it look as big as a softball. Okland always hit the ball high, but he had nailed this swing. They both watched as the ball hit nothing but the flagstick and disappeared in the hole.

Pure silence. Birds sang. Wildlife stood perfectly still. Hole in one!

“Whoa!” Angie was running at Okie like an NFL linebacker on a mission from God. He stood stunned. Suddenly she jumped into his arms.

“Great shot!” Angie yelled. She was kissing him, sharing the joy of the ultimate 7/8 luck and 1/8 skill shot. The game’s best moment. Okland dropped his six iron and the two danced around as if what had happened would feed the starving world.

“Is that your first?” Angie was really excited.

“Babe, I was a virgin until now. I guess you’ve got a used up man on your hands!” Okie beamed at her. He was laughing from the joy of the hole-in-one, but had also fought back the most unexpectedly perfect way.

Angie was sharing HIS success, however insignificant. She was caught up in the moment. For once, he wasn't chasing her. He felt it. He was the first to recognize the reversal of fortune.

"That's really neat," she gloated! She was his partner today and his six iron from hell was hers as well.

Okie calmed his voice. He gave away all his excitement to her.

"Babe, thanks for makin' room for me."

Angie was caught off guard. She wanted to ride the high of the ace.

"I love you and we're gonna do this right," Okie continued.

"I love you, too, Okie" Angie had said it. "I just don't know how to feel right about all this stuff." Her voice trailed off.

"Our families, our lives are in the balance and mistakes can happen that could only hurt all of them and us too. But I confess you've gotten me."

Angie's posture changed. She had given into herself and love, and it carried some weight. Okie felt it, saw her sink and because he loved this woman like life itself, he quickly responded.

"Hey, sugar maple, that's the sweetest thing I've ever heard." His strength surfaced, buoyed by her heartfelt admission of love.

"Please don't worry. We will find our way and things will always look up."
He was reassuring.

"I promise pure dignity. I 'gar ron tee!" He emulated Justin Wilson's famous claim.

Angie's head had bowed in her disbelief; she had finally confessed what she had known longer that she cared to admit.

Okland took her face in his hands like a man holding a jewel of unspeakable value.

"Angie, look at me. I know you. I know the price, the protection you maintain for your family, for all the life you've cared out of this rat race. I've got the same circumstance." Okland was almost fatherly. He could make sense with the best of them.

Angie raised her eyes. She wanted things simple. She claimed to be a "fly by the seat of your pants" girl, but there was a grand plan in her heart. She could foot herself just like every other human being trying to stay afloat.

"Okie" – no words would come. Her face lowered. She fell into his arms. Waiting arms.

Okland had fought back alright! Now, could he live with winning?

Austin had worked its' magic; and like Okland's crazy ride to love, Angie had bought herself a ride ticket.

"Girl, you're a mess." His hands trembled as he brushed her hair back. He could feel tears in his eyes. Okie had not counted on her reaction, just like she had not expected his "love at first sight" attack.

They never did retrieve the ball from the hole-in-one. The game had changed and an ace was of no value, only a strange catalyst creating chemistry between two people.

Men just act! Women just get out of the way, when they want too.

Angie Deere loved Okland Farmer. Now she had to fix her heart, soul and mind in the same way she had been waiting for him to do.

Turnabout is fair play, except when it happens to be your turn.

* * *

There are at least a million terms people label you with when you're feeling great. Those precious few moments every life has when reality seems to be on vacation, or the shroud of perpetual responsibility suddenly lifts, and the glow of optimism is the only light present. Jerry Lee sang middle-age crazy, trying to prove he still can. Asshole comes to mind. Rat, dead-beat dad.

Okie was in heaven, but Angie wouldn't let him completely drop off the edge by reminding herself and Okie that there were home fires burning. In spite of the constant reminders, Angie, too, was beginning to really float above the terra. Neither one would dare call it an out-of-body experience, but tunnel vision of another's magic does let you explore options. However, a good Catholic girl never really lets go. A good Catholic girl raised by military parents has at least a chance of letting go. All those relocations require a way of making new friends. Sometimes that means calling attention to yourself when you don't want to.

Mary Angela Jorgenson Thomas Deere had learned to flirt at an early age. She had learned men just act and women can act even better. There had been lots of boys, and later, lots of men.

Her first marriage had just happened. She was eighteen and the boy left her high and dry three years later with two girls and a '64 VW bug. Bing Thomas had been a star baseball player and surfer. Angie's dad had been sent to San

Diego, and the beach life fit Angie just fine. Bing had a superstar's ego and Angie had just the right things to say to a kid who had everything.

The Thomas estate was a sergeant's daughter's dream. Overlooking the Pacific, the thirty room mansion had been there over forty years; and the Thomas family's status could withstand Bing's indiscretions, but Angie couldn't. The good life doesn't grow on trees as Bing had always imagined. The thought of coming home to shit-on-a-shingle another night, listening to babies cry and falling asleep in a shack had turned Angie's beautiful body into a nightmare.

The Thomas clan hated to see the children suffer the indignation of financial instability, so they set up trusts that Angie couldn't touch, and then rubbed her nose in the situation by allowing Bing full control. Angie had told Okie the story on one of their first meetings because she had seen her daughter recently and the Thomas trusts were fresh on her mind.

Seems Bing Thomas had never caught on to the give and take of relationships, and his fourth wife was tugging pretty hard on his wallet. Bing had always tapped the children's trust, and now the well was running dry. Dr. Thomas, Bing's dad, was still alive and appalled at his son's behavior. The result was Bing had declared bankruptcy, the trusts were dissolved at great expense, and Angie had been given a wonderful lease on life for her babies, now adults.

The whole affair had started as kids playing house and had followed them through their lives. Angie was glad to be vindicated in the eyes of the people in the mansion overlooking the Pacific; but her first love, Bing, was paying a terrible

price. Granted, he deserved every humiliating moment; but first loves are powerful things, not to mention the father of her children.

Angie had really gotten even years ago when she married Bing's good friend, Hank Deere, just ninety-four days after the Thomas vs. Thomas divorce was finalized. Hank was not the usual type guy in the gang; but he had always been around, and the cool set in every high school in America always has its mascot wimp. Hank Deere was always in tow. His family lived on the edge of the wealthy neighborhood. He was perceived as smart and he also drove a killer car. His jobs included basketball manager, Latin Club President, Junior Achievement and the butt of all practical jokes. He had stayed close to home for college and when Bing shit on Angie, Hank was handy.

To make things worse, he had been the one member of the ole' high school circle to bother to come see the newlyweds; and, when the kids were born and Bing was looking for his superstardom on the beaches and after hours in the thousands of San Diego bars, it had been Hank who dropped by to visit with Angie and play surrogate father. Hank had never tried to put any moves on Angie, although it was his favorite fantasy, but Angie often flirted with Hank to make sure he would return.

They often rode around in his latest, fancy car and took the kids anywhere just to give Angie a break. It seemed she never got out of the house and Hank did rescue her from going crazy.

Bing never cared or worried about Hank and Angie, so the announcement that he received in the mail; he was using an address of some surf bunny he latched on to until her VISA was overburdened, sent him through the thatched roof.

“You fucking whore!” Bing raised his fist. Angie was not prepared for violence. She had seen it, but her wily feminine ways had always avoided such consequences.

“Bing!” Angie shouted covering her head.

“You’re going to marry Hank Deere?” Bing lowered his hand; but his face was one inch from Angie’s, and it appeared he could explode with rage at any moment.

“I’ll fucking take Diane and Leslie away from you. They’ll never see a dime of my money.” It had never dawned on Bing that he had no money. His family had picked up the tab his entire life and he was always assuming the next stop was his name on the Thomas estate mailbox. Wrong!

“Hey, you’re the one out running around all the time. Some of the girls you find call here looking for you.” Angie tried to assert herself. “Bing, you agreed to a divorce. You didn’t want the girls tying you down and now you think I’m embarrassing you by marrying Hank?”

“God damn, Angie, the guy’s a wuss! I can’t have my ex marrying the class wimp. That little fucker has been sneaking ‘round here for years.” Bing was a big man-child and his anger was beginning to surface again.

“I ought to kick his chicken shit butt!”

“Don’t Bing!” Angie’s voice lowered. “Please don’t.” The old flirt could also calm a hurricane. Angie had made a decision for her kids and for herself. Hank, it would be and it was time for Bing to find his new life.

“Hank has never been anything but good friends to us both. He may not be the macho pretty boy you are, Bing, but he’s willing to provide a home for Leslie and Diane. I need that. Can’t you see that?” Angie was marrying Hank in six days and that was that. Her dream boat was great in bed and could play better than anybody, but Angie had made a mother’s decision. Out with the old and in with the new. She would be Mary Angela Deere. Bing would never stop playing the field. Even at the expense of his daughters. Angie never tried to stop the girls from worshipping their dad, but Bing would bring it on himself. He would slowly lose everything and Angie had seen the writing on the wall. Bing was right about Hank. He was not the right man for Angie; but he was available and she needed a home for her offspring. Her decision was very primal. She probably never had a choice. Her instinct took over and the pups would be fed and protected in a new lair.

Needless to say, Bing was not at the wedding, but Dr. Thomas brought everyone from the mansion with thirty rooms. His grandchildren were beautiful flower girls, and his former daughter-in-law looked safe.

Angie would never forget the act of respect by Dr. Thomas. She never let her children see anything but the finest image of their grandfather. True, he was Bing’s father, and bad habits must be learned closed to home; but he had earned Angie’s respect the hard way by swallowing affluent pride. They would be soul

mates until his death and he would reward her with control of new trusts for his grandchildren.

Hand would never question the arrangement. Bing would always forget to call the kids at Christmas and Angie would learn to flirt less and thicken her skin. Yet, here she was riding next to another stranger. Granted the times had provided her with some experience and a few of life's lesions, but the need to free herself from the decision she had made to marry Hank seemed to grow larger every year.

Riding into the night with a man to try to find some excitement. To make a connection of moonlight, music and traditional wooing that could give her the strength to face the kitchen with no Diane and Leslie. To dance under the stars until the lines around her mouth and eyes seemed not so etched in her skin.

Her sudden, emotional explosion on the golf course, of all places, had shocked her. Angie could lie to anyone. Even to herself. She created one illusion after another to get through life these days, but it took some kindred spirit like Okland Farmer to bore through the layers of fabrication she had piled onto her reality to consider telling the truth again.

Driving the car, Okie was enduring almost the identical self-analysis. It was easier to daydream about an affair than sit next to each other wallowing in guilt and mixed signals.

"You're awful quiet." He stumbled into conversation.

"Sorry." Angie was clearly uncomfortable.

“You don’t have to say a word. No need to be sorry. I just thought someone needed to break the ice.” Okie was being totally giving. It was still a brand new relationship and someone has to be willing to be in charge.

“I was just thinking about how little you really know about me. How we’re using the word love and what that means.”

“Shit, maybe you better go back to being quiet.” Okie lied. He too wanted a chance to review the rush that was happening.

“I’m kidding. I’d love to hear you tell me what’s on your mind.” In fact, Angie and Okie had talked some, but it was usually Okland leading the way. Angie had remained guarded; but the day’s events had opened her up, and the time seemed right for her to take the lead about their prospects together.

“Okland Farmer, you know how to do the right thing in any situation don’t you?”

“Well, I was a boy scout for only one day, but I did learn the bit about being prepared.”

“You’ve been very caring and thoughtful. I’m afraid that luxury has dissipated around the Deere house.” Angie arranged herself sideways in the huge Lincoln front seat.

“Are you real?” Okie had to laugh. That question could start World War III in some of his circles.

Angie didn’t like his reaction at all. “Too heavy for you, Farmer?”

Okie took his time. Not because he wouldn’t answer, but how the hell do you answer a question like that?

“If you mean about us, I would say yes! These crazy things I’m going through over you seem real as shit to me.”

Angie focused her conversation more. “I’ve seen the front end of a lot of love affairs. I’ve told you about my bad habits, but his time I’m not feeling so in charge. Your personality is very strong and you’re used to getting your way. That scares me.”

“That’s nice to hear.” Okie couldn’t believe what he was hearing and he wasn’t sure where this tete a’ tete’ was going.

“I’ve been scared to death myself. Felix has really poured the salt in my wounds and Tink tried to take my head off.”

“What’d Tink say?” Andie didn’t know Tink from the man in the moon; but they were en route to a party with Tink, and a bad blood scene was not Angie’s idea of a night on the town along the musical third coast.

“He said Hank should get a gun and shoot your ass!”

“Thank’s great news.”

“Angie, Ty could care less what we do. He just doesn’t want to get caught in the middle.”

“You mean between you and Chigger.”

“Of course, that’s what he means!”

“So now?” Angie had reached that spot she had aimed for.

“What do you do about Chigger?”

All Okie could think of was what a way to fuck up a night on the town. The question was fair but the timing was poor. The subject was Okland's wife. The inquisitor was Okland's girlfriend.

"I don't mind talking this one out, but is right now the time?" Never put off a discussion about your wife with your girlfriend.

"Look, I know I said let's keep it light and simple. Just a little fun to keep the boredom away from the ole' home door, but look at us now. We're talking crazy stuff. We're seeing each other real close up, not through the haze of a one night stand." This was not the Angie Deere, the aforementioned Modern Day Venus, Okie had been chasing. This was a woman rattling pots and pans in Okie's emotional kitchen.

He'd lost weight, sleep and maybe his family over this real estate sales person.

"Mary Angela, slow down." Okie needed to compose the atmosphere a little. "Just because you've reached ground zero finally doesn't give you the authority to go bitchy on me."

"Bitchy?" Angie bristled.

"Oops. wrong word. I'm feeling a little pressure here."

"I'm not bitching at you. I'm trying to get a handle on where I stand. Where we stand." Angie was on a roll and she had unlocked her heart today for the first time in a long time and things of all shapes and sizes were pouring out.

“I can’t stand the thought of hurting your family or my family. They seemed like they were all a million miles away before. We were just playing. But now . . .”
There were tears.

Of all the fucking weapons Okie hated it was tears. Tears of frustration, no doubt.

“Hey, kiddo, mercy.”

“Okie, I’m so in love with you.” The words had so much meat on the bone.

“I don’t know what to say, Angie.” Okie reached out to touch any part of her body. Just contact.

“You know I love you, too. Hell, I’ve been kinda hard on you, haven’t I?”

Angie was regrouping and let her head run East and her heart run West.

Okie was touched by her admission of being so cool and trying to stay above the fray of their reaction to one another.

“I’ve enjoyed every minute.” Okie smiled a warm, caring smile. “Angie, we’ve got no solutions to a bunch of insurmountable problems, I’d say. I can’t tell you how a single scene of this is going to play out. I’m afraid we’re looking at firing shots into the dark.”

“I know. You’re right.”

“Chigger is a big part of my life. I could tell you lots of complaints and lots of respect I have and I’m sure you could do the same about Hank. That wouldn’t do us any good. If we’re gonna do something, it will have to be our choice to move or not. No blaming them.”

“I feel so disconnected.”

“I must say you’ve surprised the shit out of me.”

“Okie, being with you feels like home. I like it.”

“You’ve got me speechless.” Okie had felt almost manipulated by Angie in their early meetings. Now, he was feeling just as manipulated as ever, but from an entirely different perspective. The woman scared the shit out of him. New territory again.

“Shall we forego the jam?”

“Oh, no. I can regroup.”

“How about we hit Sixth Street for a short tour of our baby Bourbon Street and then we’ll see how we feel?”

“You’re driving.” Angie relaxed into her seat.

How many times can two people jettison off into emotional orbit and never know they’re on the launch pad.

Okies was in love with someone who might be as complicated as the world spinning under his feet. He wasn’t sure if he was trapped by the circumstances or trapped by the desire to change the circumstances. Angie had done a 180 on him and he needed some elbow room. He wasn’t disappointed. As a matter of fact, he was reeling with excitement. Hell, the reason you fall into one of these home wrecking affairs is to find excitement. By God, here it was, in living color, 3D, and riding next to him.

Men just act. Women write the review. Pull your chain and tell you that your Act III, Scene 1, plays like a high school thespian operation. Well, fuck’em!

Angie was having her own set of apprehensions. Or, at least Okie believed it. Could be an act, he thought to himself.

Slow down, his brain screamed. Okie looked to his right. She was still there. Probably trying to turn her brain to a lower speed just like the poor bastard driving the car. Their eyes met. Angie reached for his hand. It was so soothing.

Okland stopped the car in the middle of the street as people seemed to be moving all around.

“What’s going on?” Angie seemed to be waking from her dream state.

“We’re just a couple of blocks away from all the action on Sixth Street. Roll down your window and you can probably start getting the sounds and smells. This place has sort of a State Fair of Texas aroma.”

Angie quietly lowered her window and the magic that Austin music poured in as if to ignite the partygoer in us all. As Okie circled the area, Angie could feel the freedom of people letting their hair down in public, encouraging all comers to bob ‘till you drop. The atmosphere was truly contagious and the need to escape the car and hit the sidewalks was overwhelming them both.

School was in session and that means thousands and thousands of eighteen year olds with checkbooks were flooding the Austin economy with millions of dollars. The legislature was also holding court and there is no spendthrift like a sleazy state representative milking the good folks back home, the lizard boot lobbyists and the great State of Texas itself with the per diem. Angie was really surprised to discover the limestone canyon, that is, the Sixth

Street buildings, crowded on a weeknight. Phoenix had the Tempe campus, but there as no central gathering spot like downtown Austin had become.

Someone had really maintained the vision necessary to retain such unique architecture in an urban setting, close to the state capital and only blocks from fifty thousand college students. The results were unlimited success. The standard Austin mystique was instant and aglow with neon and happy people.

“What do you say we survey both sides of the street and circle back to the location that grabs our interest?” Okie was being energized by the crowd.

“Oh, look at that!” Angie was pointing across the street to a local wearing a bandana pirate-style with a parrot on his shoulder.

“Looks like we’ve found the party, huh?” Angie grabbed Okie by the belt and started dancing to the rollicking guitar blasting out of the door of the first club they passed.

“This is amazing. I never dreamed all this.”

“Well, to tell the truth, I’m surprised myself.” Okie could remember when this part of town was almost lost to the so-called urban renewal. Toad Hall had been a favorite gig for the Ty Kincaid Band when Okie was a guitar-playing singer-songwriter. Now, loud voiced kids stood in the century’s old doorways telling all the reasons Okie and Angie should come inside their establishment and spend some money. Neon was the light of choice and flashed with glee for all the revelers to keep time with. Alvin Crow played Buddy Holly. Rusty Weir was yodeling about the coast of Colorado.

Rappers. Ropers. Ska. The Austin musical freedom set the tone. Just as anyone could grab a washtub bass and make it sing, the only rule was be true to your craft and people will stop and let you strut your stuff. Lay some weak ass cover tunes on them and they would tell you in no uncertain terms, “hit the road, Jack, and don’t come back no more.”

Angie head angels singing harmonies learned by hours of rehearsal. Okie drifted back to the early 70’s at Castle Creek and the fun of rushing the mike just in time to sing your part of a glorious three part harmony. Tonight he would be able to share his closet hippie rock and roll past with his groupie from Phoenix.

“Are you still here?” Angie giggled with the joy of a child at a circus.
“Take me on that dance floor and weep me off my feet, cowboy!”

Okie was still drifting back from his time tracks through his youth as Angie dragged him through the crowded bar to the dance floor. “Don’t be cruel!” 90’s style erupted at 120 decibels and the dancers began to move with the rhythm Elvis had revolutionized. Okie couldn’t think, the music was so loud; but his eyes were full of the silky movements of Angie. She was expecting her first grandchild and she was four years older than Okie; but she gilded through the neon glow with the confidence of know how to touch, how to kiss and how to bring your lover along for the ride. They brushed their bodies together creating their own sexual exchange in the midst of a crowd of people. Their eyes told the truth of just how sexual their dance had become.

Okie smiled as a boy. He was at Fair Park in Dallas. He was ten years old. The midway called. The hot dogs were endless and here only inches from his grasp was the cotton candy.

The air on a Texas summer night is thick. It only cools down when all the people close their eyes and stop stirring up the heat absorbed into white limestone. Okie moved close to Angie and the sweat they generated from the dance glistened under the sparkling globe dangling from the ceiling. Tonight neither of the two would ever cool off. Okie could hardly breathe.

“Come on, “ Okie grabbed Angie and headed for the exit. Okie needed some fresh air. They slowed at the door only long enough for the girl, with the earrings that looked like they contained several pounds of silver, to stamp their hands with some odd design that would allow re-entry to the festival inside.

Angie burst from the club which once housed a storefront that long ago gave the Texas pioneers supplies to head into the Hills.

“OK, big boy. I’m yours.” Angie still moved her hips to the rhythm of being ready to play.

“I was burning up in there.” Okie wiped his forehead on his short sleeve. It was like the move athletes make. Not a senatorial fundraiser prime candidate for Chief of Staff on a date type gesture. His shorts were attached to his body and needed rearranging. No time for modesty he thought.

“Hell, I think I lost ten pounds in that hell hole.” Okie was picking at his underwear trying to find some air for his private parts.

“How does anyone get anything don in this City.” Angie idled at full tilt boogie.

“I think the trick is get it done before dark.” Okie had unstuck most of his clothing. The sweat on his legs cooled as they waltzed down the sidewalk looking for the next experiment in entertainment. Each doorway acted like a loud speaker. As the Chief of Staff and his Venus would approach a new door, they paused to hear what progression the band inside was using. Were they fucking with time or rhythm or playing acoustic or howling straight twelve bar blues?

All of the clubs end on the North side of the street when you reach the Driskill Hotel.

“You’ve gotta look inside this place.” The huge old balcony that cantilevers out over the Sixth Street sidewalk looked so majestic.

“I take it this old girl has housed some real history.” Angie swallowed the Austin bug and every nuance meant something to her.

“Kings and pawns,” Okie took her hand. “We’ll mellow a second at the bar.” Okie opened the gorgeous front entry and pointed to the grand stairway leading upstairs.

“Up we go. The bar’s real nice up here. Quiet, too!”

Hand in hand the two ascended the bright red carpeted staircase rising above the lobby. Paintings of the famous and their legendary events were eye level and their importance penetrated Okie’s vulnerable state of mind. At the top of the stairs, Angie noticed a sign leading to the back of the pay phones.

“Okie, I should call home.” It made sense to Angie. To Okie, she would have caused less confusion if she’d called a cab to leave the city altogether.

“Okay.” Okie was very uncertain as to what he should do. As a kid, his hands were too big and it was always an embarrassing problem finding a hiding place. Pockets were sometimes too small, but now he stood with hands in pockets looking like he’d lost his name.

“Hey, don’t worry! It just seems like a good time. I’ll just say goodnight and we can feel free to go all night.” Angie was sending signals to her Sixth Street companion that were not only mixed, but all mixed up. We’re talking mixed metaphor. Mix and match. Mixed drink.

Angie disappeared behind the partition that provided privacy for the caller. Okie disappeared into a bottle at the bar. A mixed drink. Fuck it. He’d order something straight, God damn it.

Here he sat. There she sat calling fucking Arizona. A white shoe wearing used car salesman. Tequila. Shots. Lime. Salt. Again. Tequila. Shots. Lime. Salt.

Men just act. Women bring the bottle and leave it in plain sight until you’re drinking alone.

Angie popped from behind the privacy wall beaming a smile. A Cheshire cat smile. Poor fucking canary. Hank the canary. Okie could feel the tequila!

“Everything okay?” Okie sheepishly inquired.

“Yeah. Leslie called and the baby’s kicking around. She was afraid her water had broken.”

Okie would drown himself in tequila if Angie suddenly needed to leave.

“You feel like continuing our pilgrimage down the boulevard?” Okie seemed to have lost some of his spunk and Angie was reading his posture.

“Sure. Maybe I should not have blasted down that tequila so fast.”

“Okie, you silly boy. I’m yours. I just felt like covering bases, sugar.”

“I’m a dickhead, I know. An insecure male with no backbone.”

“Look, if I don’t play the good wife, we’ll have a cuckoo tracking our every move. Trust me.” Angie motioned to the waitress. “Bring this boy another round.”

“No!” Okie waved off the third shot of tequila. “We need to walk a couple more blocks and then we should start making our way out to Tinker’s rehearsal hall.” Okie was kind of depressed all of a sudden.

“Do you still care to sit in on a jam?” Okie almost wished Angie would say no.

“Of course I do!” Angie jumped from the booth and grabbed Okie with the same exuberance she had dragged him to the dance floor earlier.

“Come on, cowboy. You need to get your chin off your shoes and start acting like you’re glad to be here.”

Mixed signals are the swizzle sticks of life. Without them, all the alcohol floats to the top. Poor Okland Farmer. He was overmatched by this older woman. She could operate his psyche like a yo-yo.

He could feel his feet moving. He could feel the cool air on his bare legs again. The music in the doorways would increase in volume and decrease. He was drifting down the street.

Tequila, lime, salt. Yo-yo.

Angie held him against the car. Okie could smell her hair. It worked like smelling salts. He slid his hands around her and tugged. Angie let her body rest against Okie as he rested against the Lincoln. Again, he inhaled her scent. His consciousness was returning. Their lips touched. For a long time. Okie could hear a wolf call from the crowd around them. He had a cheerleader.

Angie pulled away and searched his pockets.

“No key for this one.” Okie concentrated as he tried his luck at the keyless entry. He was playing drunken roulette. If you drink, don’t drive. With the keyless entry, there may be no choice.

“What’s the code? Angie wasn’t impatient, but she did want off the street. Okie tried again. The door lurched open.

“See, I can drive. Besides, I’d do better high as a kite than you’d do sober as a judge on the roads we’re about to drive.”

Angie almost scrunched herself down in the seat lower than the windows as Okie aimed the Lincoln across the old Enfield Dam Bridge. The structure looked old and separated Lake Austin from Town Lake. It was dark as hell and when you don’t know where you are or where you are going, and the chauffeur is chanting tequila, lime, salt, yo-yo, one feels precarious at best.

The old Bee Cave Road had once led to the Soap Creek Saloon and beyond into rugged solemn country. Nowadays, Bee Cave Road led to mass civilization. Too many people enjoyed the view, so now there was no view. Okie really hated the builder developer mentality, but no one had given Felix more money for his ragged glory campaign than the bastards who know how to rip off the S&L's, leave Barton Spring full of toxic pesticides and discolor nature so it looked almost real again. Who the fuck ever painted grass green? Okie was driving too fast in his tequila rage over Bee Cave Road.

“Are you sure you can handle this rig through this maze?”

Up and down these back roads they went. Dark and darker were the only colors.

“You’d love this drive in the sunshine!” Okie avoided Angie’s concern.

“Okie, really, slow down.”

“Kiddo, this evergreen tunnel gets pretty dark. We’ll return this way tomorrow so you can take a gander at the beauty.”

Two people. Two subjects. Mixed signals. It’s as simple as that.

With no warning, a deer darted into the headlights. Okie only braked lightly.

“God dammit, we’d have had to buy ourselves a hunting license if I hadn’t seen that doe a comin’.”

Angie was about to endure her last smart-assed remark from the Richard “The King” Petty imitation when Okie slowed to a crawl and entered a driveway that had a cattle guard across some sort of drainage ditch. There was no

number, no mailbox, no lights. Only the invited could possibly locate this entrance. Rocks shot in all direction as the huge Lincoln tires eased along the two-path road. The noise was very loud and surely everyone within miles could see the headlights and hear the gravel under the tires.

Without warning, Okie took one last hard right and down. Angie actually grabbed Okie for security. Gravity doesn't fail even at night.

"Jesus Christ. Where are you taking me?" Angie was completely lost and completely at the mercy of Mr. Tequila Lime Salt – No Yo-Yo! Okie smiled and looked at his passenger. He'd known what he was doing all along. He wasn't that drunk; but all virgins of this trip should be taken at night and the trip should have plenty of suspense. The deer was extra.

"Here we go!" Okie locked his arms in a rigid position and pushed himself back into the seat giving Angie one last loop that had been this roller coaster ride.

Angie, no fool, reacted by grabbing anything. The car seemed to be going straight down. Even Okie was concentrating.

From the evergreen tunnel into a well lit beautiful clearing came the Lincoln and its passengers to a rest.

"We're here!" Okie crowed.

"Fifty Hail Mary's," Angie, the good Catholic girl with military parents, prayed.

The clearing was right on the waters of Lake Austin. It was the upper part of the Colorado river below the damn at Lake Travis. There was a large house

with a front balcony of the second floor. It looked old, but perfectly conditioned. There was plenty of light, too. Angie opened the car door and tested her footing. After that practical joke of a drive, she needed some reassurance like a foal first walking.

Another building was built so it looked like it was protruding from the hill they had nose-dived from. Lights were on and Angie could hear the faint sounds of music.

The big house was majestic, but the life seemed to be happening in what appeared to be the smaller house.

Okie reached under his seat and searched for his cellular phone.

“Who do you call from here?” Angie seemed puzzled.

“I guess I could say I was checking in at him, but I won’t,” Okie barked.

“I’ve got to call those yahoos inside.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Believe me that building is like Fort Knox. It keeps everybody out and all the noise in. The first thing all musicians do when they make a little money is find some security from the bitching they take over rehearsing. Well, when they make a lot of money, you get something like this.” Okie defined the parameters of the compound by waving his arms as he waited for an answer from within the fortress.

“I think Tink’s got about \$2.5 million in this six acres.” Okie started toward the rock staircase leading up to the small house. Someone was on the other end of his phone line.

“Tell Tink Okie’s here, please.”

“You never mentioned being mountain goat when we discussed coming to Austin.” Angie had scaled Mount Bonnell, the Yapon golf course at Lakeway and now she looked at sixty steps up to the rock and roll Fort Knox.

They were halfway to the front porch when Tyler Kincaid, the superstar property owner, came to the top step.

“Ya’ll are just in time for the shindig. Just a few more steps and you can catch your breath and sing with us.” Ty offered encouragement to the two goats.

“You must be Angie.” Tyler held out his hand and helped Okie’s dream to the top.

“Whew! You must be Tink.”

“Only my good, good friends call me that, but somehow I’m sure you qualify.”

Angie couldn’t tell if she’d been insulted or not. She remembered Okland’s remark about Ty trying to take his head off. Angie smiled a good “I’m not worried” smile and extended her hand.

She offered Tink a solid, firm handshake learned from years of selling people their dream house.

“Hey, just call him Butthead if he gets to important for his own good.” Okie had run through the same train of thought Angie had. However, he could be feisty in his response and not start the evening off with a thud.

“Hey, Chief of Staff, you shouldn’t call anybody Butthead. You may need some more money soon.”

“How much are you gonna give me?”

“Will twenty-five do?”

“I’ll call you Butthead for that amount.” In fact, Tyler Kincaid had helped Okie find about \$3.5 million and it took every cent to find another \$7 million to convince people that Felix and his “Texas is My Country” bullshit was the kind of leadership we all needed.

So Ty’s money was early money that enables the political lies to become political boasts which draw secondary money that turns boasts into political promises. A commodity that has NO value. In other words, campaign dollars really bring nothing but loyalty from a crook. Felix had only one thing of value and that was Okland Farmer. It was true, Margaret Wheeler had one hundred million valuable dollars that appeared to be on F.D.’s team, but Okie had the camaraderie of Friday nights and the twenty-five years that followed.

The political world is like a small country town. Lots of gossip. Lots of skeletons. But an outsider never really gets to first base.

Okie would be there long after Margaret. No question.

Tiny Spear emerged from the front door of the fortress wearing bib overalls and a t-shirt touting Felix’s slogan he’d received for his \$10 donation.

“Hey, Tiny!” Okie hugged the giant. I’d like you to meet Angie Deere. She’s a real good friend of mine from Phoenix.” Without skipping a beat, Tiny wrapped his six-foot, five inch, three hundred thirty pound body around Angie.

Startled, but not totally shocked, Angie nestled into the hug and managed to wink at Ty and Okie. The acknowledgment was timed perfectly and the two

normal sized men grinned back to let Angie know she would be released in due course.

“Hi, Angie,” Tiny’s voice was as friendly as a child’s.

“Tiny, it’s nice to meet you. I’d say that was a real Texas welcome.”

Angie tried to be one of the boys.

“You guys about ready to shake, rattle and roll?” Tyler was heading the visitors and Tiny back inside.

“Fellas, I can’t sing. I thought I should lay that myth to rest before you expect anything.” Angie really didn’t know what to expect; but as the door opened, her fear of singing swelled to massive proportions. There seemed to be hundreds of guitars.

Angie had been fooled, as were all first times, at the size of the fortress. There were at least six or seven sofas, a big kitchen and what looked like a full stage with dozens of microphones and huge speakers everywhere. Smaller rooms were on each side and one appeared to contain walls of electronic equipment.

“Hey, darlin’, you ain’t got nothin’ to worry about. That ole’ boy over there behind that console can make Richard Nixon sound like Julio Iglesias. Y’all come on over here and I’ll find you a good seat.”

Tyler took Angie by the hand and led her through the cables and cords. Angie was realizing there were at least twenty people and yet the fortress still seemed cavernous.

Okie followed Ty and Angie while Tiny found his way back to his bass guitar and a plate full of macadamia nut cookies. He was washing them down with Shiner Beer. A joint hug from his lips.

Other members of the entourage freely smoked marijuana and it had been some time since Angie had witnessed such nonchalance. Drugs had become the Darth Vader cartoon demon for politicians like Felix to be in mortal combat with. No matter that all fundraising was 86 proof or that 300,000 people died annually from cigarette-related illness.

All Angie could picture was how much this reminded her of the Sixties. Her children had experimented just as she had; and her reaction, as tough mom, was “just say no.” She’d felt like a hypocrite then and now she accepted the offer to try a puff or two.

Okie shaved his fingers together as if to say “shame on you,” but his smile betrayed his shallow advice. As she handed the joint back to a total stranger, Angie realized who isolated her world had become. Like millions every day, she had forgotten to take the time. It was rush, rush, rush.

In the kitchen area, candles were gently burning and the scent seemed peaceful. Red lights were everywhere. The whirl of power seemed to make your hair stand on end. Recessed lighting made the glow soft, but each player seemed to be directly below a light. It made their guitars bright and their hair cast off the image of haloes. Some lights were colored amber or soft green and the whole room looked like a stage.

Angie curled her legs under her body as she tried to act comfortable. The pot had helped. There was unlimited energy in the room and it took hold of anyone that entered whether participating or not. She foolishly realized that she was not here to sing with Tyler Kincaid. Her comment had never been considered by the boys, but she felt sorry she had implied such a preposterous notion.

With no warning, Tyler signaled the players throughout the room.

One, two, three . . . Suddenly, there was glorious music everywhere.

Angie had seen many concerts and heard the best, but she had never been in the belly of the beast. The movement of the music makers was like ballet. They swayed and emphasized their technician ship with body language. Eyes closed for concentration or perhaps pure delight.

She turned to Okie. Before she could speak, he put his forefinger to his mouth. Be quiet, his motion spoke. Angie obeyed.

No one could possibly hear over the volume, but she knew that she was there to experience the music from the inside out, not as a ticket holder to a show.

Tyler began to sing and the band balanced every note around his voice. They were the river he would guide his musical voyage on. They supported his melody. His message. Angie was entranced.

Okie was gobbling up everything. He felt at home. They joy that is music may be the only pure thing of which mankind is capable.

Angie couldn't help herself. As the song slowly ended she found herself clapping.

"Hey, Farmer, you brought a fan!" Tink's voice boomed through the PA. "We've got a new one. I'll dedicate it to you and Angie." The room grew incredibly quiet. Tyler leaned into the mike and stared at his old friend.

*"Mistakes of the heart can
Carve a future
You can't behold
Crying, through the night won't
Replace that little band of gold.
Until someone's light shines
On the good side,
Of the you, you used to know;
There's gonna be some hurtin',
And you're gonna lie some,
Packin' up the pictures,
Headin' for the door.
Yes, You're gonna d some hurtin',
And you're gonna lie some,
'Cause you don't need no answers
When you feel it's time to go.*

Okie was hearing the lyrics through his ears, but they seemed to be exiting out his rectum. Angie had no idea how deeply moved Okie was, but she was sure that her six years of piano had never sounded so clean. The song progressed and every new line kicked Okland Farmer in the “Who’s been reading my mail?” part of his groin.

Tyler had created the perfect piece of progressive country. Or crossover of whatever the jack-off happy program directors call good music these days.

Okie was thrilled to be so close to Tyler. He felt like he’d given Ty some concrete substance on which to create. On the other hand, he was having his plight put to music and it stung.

“Cause you don’t need no answers

When you feel its time to go.”

It was over.

It was beautiful.

Angie was clapping again. Hell, everybody was clapping.

Okie had tears in his eyes. Tyler had a wicked smile on his face. Tiny was on the cordless phone that connected the fortress to the outside world.

He took for steps and opened the fortress door.

There stood Senator Franklin Delano Murdock.

And Margaret Lou Slaughter Jackson Cox Wheeler. The dragon lady. The champion of divorce.

Tink looked at Okie. Okie looked at Angie.

Ole' Foghorn Leghorn himself stepped sideways so Margaret could enter first.

The place had come to a full stop.

"Hey people. We were in the neighborhood and thought we should pay our respects." Senator Murdock thought he was being cute and funny.

He got no response. Only Felix laughed.

He'd never gotten it. The music. The freedom. The self-expression. He was a good company man. Vanilla.

Tyler and Okland practically bolted from their respective positions in the fortress to head off a certain disaster. Another classic Felix Faux Pas.

"God Almighty, Felix, I thought you were near death." Okie was reeling.

"Shit, Farmer, they can't keep me down for long."

Felix kissed Margaret on the cheek in an awkward forward motion.

"Besides, you left me in mighty wonderful hands."

"How did you get here?" Okie was still under the influence of being overwhelmed.

"We caught a ride!"

The door to the fortress still stood wide open and F.D. pointed to a limousine that must have had hell negotiating it way in. A black man stood at attention by the back door.

Margaret sized up the room as the boys performed their dance of mixed signals.

"I hope we're not interrupting anything, Tyler." Margaret fished.

“You two are welcome to find a spot, but we’re pretty booked up.” Tyler lied.

“That’s okay, Ty, we knew you and Okie had come down here for something. We thought maybe we’d find out.” Margaret was catching wind of something and she was hot on the trail.

Men just act.

Women act up.

The door remained open and no one had any idea how to get the Senator on the outside and the music started again on the inside. Angie was stoned and sat like a statue hoping she was invisible.

Tyler could only put his hands on his hips and make body language. Okie had brain lock.

Margaret could fry them all with her fiery breath at any moment.

Without any adieu, Tiny strolled to the group stuck in cultural miscommunication and politely took Margaret by the arm. “I’d be glad to help you down all those steps.” The giant wearing the F.D. Murdock “Texas is My Country” t-shirt had put the dragon lady on notice.

It was time to leave.

There was no protest.

She’d seen what the boys were up to.

Angie had an obvious vacant spot beside her on the big sofa close to Tyler.

Okie looked a little pale.

Tink glared.

Felix turned to Okie and poked him on the arm.

“See you Monday, I understand.”

“I’ll be there.”

“I’d like to thank you all for the wonderful job you did.”

Senator Murdock goes to Washington. Margaret couldn’t shake the grasp of Tiny. Thank God.

Where Margaret goes, so goes Felix.

Tiny would take them to the black man and the black car. Margaret never looked back.

Felix couldn’t resist.

“Night Night Everybody!”

* * *

PHASE II
“THE BASIC”

In the eyes of everyone, Roy Kincaid was the closest thing to a real American hero they would ever encounter. White hair and plenty of it, too!

For a sixty-eight year old champion of goodness, he will walked upright, straight and tall. He had a daily uniform of Stetson hat, modest, but a perfect fit. Khaki trousers. White dress shirt, ironed, light starch and when the Texas weather allowed, a khaki all purpose windbreaker jacket.

He drove Studebakers and Nash Ramblers. And he drove ‘em ‘till they dropped. Seventy-eight country miles every day.

Neither rain, nor snow, nor his favorite thing on this planet, his baby grandson, Tyler, kept Roy Kincaid from bringing his mail Rural Route Number Two to life. Six days a week. Three hundred twelve days a year. Forty-seven years.

He knew the blessings and tragedies that played out in what we now call the real world, with each mailbox and family that trusted him to be their lifeline to civilization.

He delivered dreams, medicine, good news and bad news. He watched children grown into their own box number on Rural Route Number Two. They loved him and he loved ‘em back. But, twice a month, he carried a package that the entire universe knew was the apple of Roy Kincaid’s eye. Tyler Long Kincaid. Ty. Tink.

When that boy rode shotgun, Roy smiled a little wider. He would breeze through Rural Route Number Two with the joy and comfort that all the county dirt roads seemed smoother. The ruts not so deep.

He and Tink would leave the mail for Roy's friends from their loved ones. Watching Ty climb out the window to struggle with the jammed mailboxes. Roy would beam with pride when the youngster yanked it open and delivered. They'd stop and shoot the .22 rifle.

Tink would sit in his granddad's lap and rive. Bonding is a lousy, overused, modern term invented by jerks that need to explain things they either don't have or can't understand. They try to conjugate the mechanics of friendship. Too bad. It makes people learning the ropes seem like lab rats.

Tink had a mentor. A guide to decency. Today, he'd probably be denied that luck of the draw. Some grouch would tell the granddad, "You're gonna ruin that boy!"

News Week study reports that love and friendship cause dementia in white mice. Holy Cow! Tink had a great soul mate helping him find a voice. A direct line to his heart. A confidence that comes from knowing you've got room to move. Air to breathe from the same sky that all creatures inhale from. He was challenged to define a moment that felt like it was worth repeating.

Roy put another man's shoes on the learning curve and said, "Better see how this ole' boy's gonna get things done. He may not see the situation like you do. Now don't get mad or scare." Roy would shift in the Studebaker seat for a better look at his angel.

“Look him in the eye and reason with yourself first. He is just trying to get somewhere too. Know what I mean?” Ty would just sit. He would hear of Gibran and Ghandi in years to come. Lincoln and Jefferson would be lionized into manufactured stories of greatness. But Roy set the stage. He baited the introspective hook on Rural Route Number Two.

Tink was immersed in opportunity, but to really get it you have to be gifted a pure moment. Some one person is the best, but sometimes us mortals just can't find that significant voice so we settle on an event. A catastrophe. An impulse to grab the ring. A beautiful day. A perfect song. It happens to all the lucky ones. Unfortunately, there are souls that just drift.

Tyler was granted the richest prize man owns. It's called unconditional. No strings attached. No negative enters the emotional equation.

The eyes of Roy Kincaid looked deep, but the vision was clear and soft. The touch was pure and always there for the taking. No possession needed ownership. Best of all, the entire process is reciprocated. It's like two plus two can only be four. Will always be four. You build on that basic. The needs, the wants, the how to come and go on that basic between friends. Man relies upon changes so long as things remain the same.

The insecure complaints about being the only turkey in the race only gum up the parade. Roy was capable of leading the parade, but he didn't need to bullshit that goes with that territory.

He was shepherd to his flock on Rural Route Two six days a week, and life hand thanked him with a little boy that couldn't yet define respect. But acted out the purest form of respect one man can give another – unconditionally.

They'd go to town and eat pie at Chris's Café. The waitresses would flirt with Tyler. He couldn't stand it, but his Papa beamed. Ty would squirm and smile. They all called him a little gentlemen. They went to ballgames. Fished, Hunted.

Roy opened the treasure chest that some call rich. Roy called it wisdom. Tyler's Papa would wonder out loud what the future would offer his little gentleman. Ty just wanted today. He could feel his Granddad in everything he did. But he had no insight into this future business. He was a child. One day was a long time. All that would change soon enough. Roy knew it. Ty just wanted to be sixteen. Loafers and White Sox. To drive his own car. This age was just mediocre. You still had to go to bed early. Not at Papa's. Ty always watched the 10:00 o'clock news with Roy. He rarely made it, but he was at least given the chance. If he didn't make it, he could feel his body floating through the air supported in his granddad's arms. Then he'd be gently laid into the old feather bed. Safe. Sleep so sound only the morning would disturb its purity.

Ty was immersed in opportunity and he accidentally took advantage of the gift. Fate. Luck. Design.

When you're a kid, no matter that the mule is blind, just load the wagon. There were not so many motives. Things were basic.

The morning would bring Okie. They'd shoot the .22 and laugh all day on Rural Route Two. The Grapette at Elmo would wash down the Tom's peanuts. Papa would tease 'em and tell stories about baseball players who save the game with a perfect play. Homeruns that Okie and Tink would hit one day were described in living color. Okie would scream with excitement and punch Ty in the arm.

Roy Kincaid was in touch with the art of living. These two purple-stained mouths were tomorrow's hope and the Grapette would be their memory.

Roy would take them to the backwoods and let them see the landscapes of his time before it was gone. Tyler would use these joyous days. There would be an instant in some unknown future. An indecision. Perhaps a moment of truth for a boy being forced to become a man.

Tink would have a spirit with resolve sculpted from these afternoons delivering the mail. Duty by choice. Coming through because it's your chemistry. Ty was that person. Roy kept the fire burning.

The fire to achieve. The flame of respect. The burning desire to get the job done. And he did it all on Saturdays riding through the heaven on Earth he called Rural Route Two.

Some Saturdays were better than others; and like it should be, some Saturdays last forever.

Okland Farmer's eyes popped open as they would thousands of times in the years to come. You might say the boy was truly a morning person. Oh, he

could stay up, too, much later than Tink; but when the sun rose, Okie's eyes were automatic.

Instantly, his brain went to work sizing up his surroundings. For such a young boy, he had found himself in unfamiliar places too many times when the sunrise called his name.

This morning he lay face-to-face with Ty. It was one of those fabulous Saturdays when they would have each other for every minute.

Okie watched as Ty remained lost in some boyhood dream. He looked so peaceful, Okie thought.

Birds were singing their joyous morning song through the bedroom window that was wide open. The cool, summer morning air had driven both boys under the covers that had started at the foot of the bed.

Roy and Emma Kincaid lived simple, humble lives, but that didn't mean a thing to Okie. All he knew was the most basic enjoyment every time he entered their front door.

The rock house was nestled into a beautiful old stand of cedars. The smell was always rich, and the honeysuckle that surrounded the front porch was the icing on the cake.

Emma cooked every day like it was Roy's last meal; and when the boys were around, there seemed to invariably be some fresh-baked apple pie.

Okie felt part of something. Roy hugged him. Tink worshipped him and Emma made his belly swell with manna from heaven.

On this glorious Saturday designed for storybook memories, Okie will had to deal with his other life. He lived in a house, not so much a home. He carried too much uncertainty around for a boy.

Looking at Tink sleeping like the baby he was and hearing nothing but joy out the bedroom window made it easier to recall the turmoil he faced most days.

Okie was on this third “Daddy.” For some obscene reason, they always wanted him to say Daddy. The word had come to mean nothing and sometimes it was actually hard to say.

Okie rolled in the warm safe Kincaid bed and gazed out the screened in window. It had been a terribly long week for such small shoulders.

Violence was the problem.

However, in Texas, before John Kennedy became President, it was called a family spat (whispered under your breath). Adults chunking verbal debris at each other until they chunked fists or anything handy to strike back with.

Seems Okland had come home from a little league baseball game and walked right into Daddy Number Three’s version of dispute resolution.

Dad Three was John Wagner.

Dad Two was Leon Farmer.

Dad One was gone.

Like a hundred times before, Dad Wagner had taken a belly full of Okie’s mom, Rachel. Oakland could never tell for sure if Dad Wagner had a low tolerance or Rachel just had the gift of making life miserable.

When the bodies started slamming against the wall and the very worst people have to offer permeates all through your house, it doesn't matter much who really caused the incident.

Okie had seen them both pour plenty of fuel on the fire.

"God damn you, Rachel." Daddy Wagner had a handful of hair, and he was trying his best to get a clear shot at Rachel's face.

Ole' Dad Wagner was a class A curser and the venom of a fight really made his mouth spout blue.

"Can't you fuckin' say anything worth listenin' to?" Daddy Number Three continued, whirling Okland's mother around.

All Rachel could do was hold on and occasionally grunt something inaudible complaint. She rarely fought back anymore than what it took to defend herself. Her weapons were sarcasm and a good showing of disrespect.

Problem was they usually triggered the physical stuff and, like they say, sticks and stones . . .

Okland had watched them bounce around every room in the house many, many times, but somehow they always ended up in the bathroom.

Daddy Wagner would then slam the door with Rachel up against it and proceed to beat the shit out of her.

Now, here they were again. No-shows for his ball game and greeting him after a fine pitching performance with sorry, no-class, family violence. Okie had seen enough.

Without considering the consequences, he charged down the hall screaming with fear and rage. He had no specific target. He was not even sure what the impact would feel like. All he could think was they would not reach the bathroom for the final assault.

The hall had never seemed so long. Okie seemed to be running in place. His spikes were still on his feet and he could hear the carpet being torn as he charged the fighting grown-ups that should have known better.

“God damn it,” Okie screamed. It was all he knew to say. It was all Daddy Number Three could muster. Without warning, Okie learned the advantage of power. Of size. Dad Wagner turned with purpose and a look in his eyes Okie would forever keep.

The blow was somewhere in the chest area. It was flush. There seemed to be no way of controlling the fall.

Okie had rushed the idiot grown-ups, but he was now sailing backwards down the hall.

First his butt landed. Then his head whipped back into the wall with enough force that the drywall sheet rock gave way. Okie had received his first gift of heartless, mean-spirited, pure bully from another man.

He was totally vulnerable and, had Daddy Wagner cared to, he could have put Okie out of his misery. But for now, his target was Rachel Wagner.

Okie could hear the bathroom door slam. He could hear the pounding. He could feel his body shaking and the first throbs of the pain in his chest. Okie could feel defeat all around him.

A boy alone. He had just played baseball with all the lessons the game shares. Sportsmanship. Teamwork. The rules. Now, he sat stunned. There were no rules to this sorry sport.

Children learn between the lines just like idiot grown-ups play both sides against the middle. Okland Farmer had paid his tuition this day. There would be others. Days that you pay, that is.

Boys grow to mean. That's a basic. They get stronger. Smarter. They get even if it's worth it.

* * *

Okie could feel the tear crossing his cheek until it dropped to the pillow that rested his worried thoughts. He rubbed his chest. There was an enormous bruise hidden beneath his t-shirt.

He'd have to hide his body here in the safety of the Kincaids. Roy knew the score; and he always let Okie slough it off, even though Okie sometimes held Roy for that extra second because it felt so good.

Roy Kincaid had known Okie's mother, Rachel, since she was even younger than Okie's age; and the girl had become a woman in front of his eyes. We're talking Roy's all-knowing eyes.

Small town gossip quoted: Rachel had an attitude from day one and it only got worse with every birthday.

She'd been Rachel Vincent. The second and final daughter of Dr. String Vincent.

Roy and String fished a little, played forty-two and loved their grandbabies. When Okland and Tyler were born exactly one month apart, the whole town knew these boys would be friends no matter what.

Tyler's dad was Roy's only son and he just had not been blessed with the chemistry that made Roy special. Some folks tried to hold "Roy's boy," Randall, to that Kincaid standard, but it just wasn't fair. Roy knew it.

Randy had seen the world from the eyes of a young soldier serving his country during World War II and East Texas seemed confining.

He'd tried Chicago, Tulsa, and all the growing metropolises that chant fast, easy money. Finally, Dallas had come through.

Randall Kincaid married for image.

Tyler Long Kincaid was just a by-product.

The Dallas banking community required a wife, a child or two, a country club membership and total conformity. Randy Kincaid was happy to oblige. Roy never said anything but congratulations. Then one day, Jean Marie Kincaid, better known as Mrs. Randall Kincaid, told Roy she'd be having a baby in early summer and the distance Randall had tried so hard to put between his small, East Texas roots and his self-image as Dallas' banking baron, just went away.

Randy saw his father. More importantly, he saw himself.

Tyler Long Kincaid would be the catalyst that would keep Roy and Randy whole. Not bad for seven pounds, six ounces. Tyler would be Randy's son, but his soul would be seasoned by Roy.

Jean Marie was Tyler's mother and the father-son deal was never spoken, but she knew it was best.

Randall, the Dallas conformist.

Roy, the rural mailman.

Tyler, the beneficiary.

Twelve years in the making and the results had made life full of memories that were keepers.

Tink could smell bacon cooking in Argentina. So if it was coming from Emma's kitchen, there was no contest.

Slowly, he rolled on his back and stretched for all he was worth.

"Hey, Bozo!" Okie poked Ty in the ribs.

"Smell that pig fryin', Farmer?"

"Come on, Papa will be here any minute." Tink was jumping out of the bed as he had every time Rural Route Number Two was waiting.

Okie still lingered in his re-enactment of the battleground he encountered after his five-hitter.

"Okie?" Tyler stopped. He, like Roy, knew the score.

"You ready to shoot the .22?" Ty reached for the most exciting thing he could think of. Okland rolled over and looked Ty straight in the eye. They touched from ten feet. They both paused because the intensity was as real as the smell of bacon cooking.

"I want two eggs," Okie blurted as he bounded from the safe, warm Kincaid feather bed.

“Me, too,” Tinker smiled.

Both boys raced to the only bathroom in the old stone house and washed the sleep from their eyes. They kinda’ brushed their teeth. They were jumping into their blue jeans when the familiar honk of the Studebaker sounded up the driveway. It was amazing how much energy that car could inject into these seventh graders.

Tyler could hear the car door slam and he raced to the front door with Okie on his heels.

“You boys slow down!” Emma called from the kitchen. She’d tried to corral those two for all their lives and now she just said it to hear her own voice.

Roy was first to hit the front door. These two youngsters might appear to be the most energetic; but when it came to Saturdays with Ty and Rural Route Number Two, Roy was unquailed.

The front door was a gorgeous old thing. Solid wood with a porthole-type window that had pie-shaped panes of beveled glass.

As the boys raced for the privilege of opening the entry for Papa Kincaid, he pushed it open. All Khaki. Smiling from ear to ear.

“Yawl ready to deliver mail?” The answer came in affirmative shouts of glee.

“Emma, these boys look hungry.” They all eased into the breakfast nook and Roy watched as the Saturday helpers devoured eggs, bacon, biscuits and gravy. He laughed every time he watched them eat and it was a big part of her

personality, so the challenge of filing a bottomless pit was one of her favorite activities.

Cholesterol was a future concept.

Before John Kennedy was President, all boys cleaned their plates.

Roy had a great habit of taking his knife and cleaning every last layer of food he'd been served. He'd slowly scrape the hardened egg yoke and lick the knife. Okie used a piece of toast. Ty used his fingers. Everyone could tell he was going to be an artist. His hands were his favorite tools.

The Saturday morning ritual was a 5:00 a.m. start.

The keeper of Rural Route Number Two would turn in the bed, put his feet almost straight into his khaki trousers, socks, boots, tank type t-shirt. He'd then rise and pull his suspenders up over his broad shoulders.

Tyler had seen him do this routine through sleepy eyes all his life. He'd hear the pull chain of the light above the bathroom sink and listen as the brush handle tapped the soap bowl whipping up lather for Roy's morning shave.

Sometimes when Okie was not around, Ty would join his Papa under the glare of the bathroom light bulb and marvel at the sound the straight razor made as it scraped the stubble from Roy's weathered, handsome face. Tyler loved how Roy's suspenders now hung to his side.

Tink had tried the saving bit a couple of times, but the sound was not as neat. He did like how clean his face felt. It kind of tingled. It felt like morning.

Roy would soon warm the Studebaker, leave the house and go to the Post Office. There he sorted all of Rural Route Two by memory. He never made a

mistake. Those letters could have been fragile as antique glass the way Roy gently placed them in his leather satchel.

Oh, how Tyler loved that satchel. He'd have to become a man before he would realize what a quality piece of craftsmanship that leather bag was. You probably couldn't buy one today. Thick leather. Solid Stitching. Wide, sturdy strap. It was designed by men who had to deliver.

Roy's was worn and soft.

More than once, Tink had used that ole' bag as a perfect head rest. It could be as soft as a pillow, but durable enough to carry all the news to Rural Route Two.

Roy would load the days' deliveries and boost the heavy leather satchel over his should. Then down the hall he would go every morning except Sunday, and he'd drink a cup of coffee with his good friend, Enos. Enos Seller was a black man. He swept. He mopped. He kept Coca Colas in the pop machine. He wasn't allowed to deliver. Regrettably, most of those who were allowed to deliver didn't pay Enos much mind. But Roy and Enos looked each other in the eye when they spoke and they drank coffee from the same pot.

Roy had seen too much suffering by Negroes. He didn't try to change folks. He just had his own way. Enos was a good man and that was enough.

Roy always took Tyler by the back room in the Post Office so Enos could hug the boy close to his chest and share Roy's pride for the boy.

Tyler knew the smell of Enos. It was different.

He knew the laugh. It was deep and basic.

Roy and Enos has lived to the point in their lives that nothing was worth doing, but finding the good side of the moment.

The distinctions of black and white, whether they be religious, political or racial, had turned all shades of gray for these men who shared coffee and sincerity.

Enos Seller was a man. He cared for his family and he did a good job.

Roy felt like that was the type company a fellow should drink his one cup of coffee with in the morning. They'd talk about the high school football team, the Jackrabbits and everything else.

Roy would look at his watch and if it was a special Saturday he'd smile that Papa smile and tell Enos, "I've got a partner today, you know." Enos would grin that all-knowing smile, flash his gold tooth and tell Roy, "That boy's gonna be something someday."

They'd slap their legs and hare the anticipation.

"Enos, he's got eyes that look deep into you."

"Oh, Roy, everybody knows Tyler's made of real clay."

The image made Roy swell with the glory of being a grandfather.

"Yawl have a fine day, Roy." Enos clapped his hands together to emphasize his words.

"We'll see you this afternoon. Okie Farmer's staying with us so we'll be along." Roy hoisted the fine leather satchel into the front seat of the Studebaker. He'd make the short drive home, have breakfast with Emma and the boys, then on to Rural Route Two.

That was what happened everyday but Sunday, and of course, the boys were the occasional exception and bonus.

The first mail box was twelve miles away. Out of town, they'd go past the only remaining cotton gin. There had once been three when cotton was king.

They'd go by the dam to the lake and stop to check the water level. Good fishing starts with understanding the water. Ty and Okie would skip a rock or tow. Then the city was gone.

Everywhere the eye could see had no connection to the life Tyler and Okland lived. The suburbs had gutted the America most people in Texas had known. World War II brought home millions of people wanting more. Wanting out. Just plain wanting.

The technology that beat the Japs and the Nazis needed a permanent place in the workings of what had been country folk.

Tyler and Okland went to new schools. Had their clothes bought at a huge department store. They'd been taught to throw it away when you either didn't want it anymore or it stopped working. There was more right around the corner.

Out here, they felt much different. Livestock roamed like there were no boundaries.

Okie asked, "Roy, how do people know whose cows these are?"

"Well," Roy needed a minute. "Okie, these people know their animals in the way your mama knows you. When she comes to get you at school, she don't get you mixed up with the other boys and girls."

“Papa, do they burn ‘em with a brand?”

“Oh, not much anymore.” Roy slowed the Studebaker and pointed to the rows of barbed wire fence. “This may look wide open, but everybody’s got their own ground. Now when we get back in yonder, cows can get a little hard to find sometimes, but that’s what your neighbors are for.”

It just seemed impossible to Okland that people could live like this.

Tyler had been on this turf enough he knew the people here were a lot different than those that lived down the street in Dallas.

The blacktop roads were now gravel covered, and the mailboxes began popping up along the roadside. Sometimes you could see a house that probably belonged to the mailbox, but most of the time it seemed to be standing in the middle of nowhere. Roy would fill it and move on.

There were things to pick up too. Pennies for stamps. Letters to mail. Notes for someone down the road. Medicine.

Roy’s friends left jelly made fresh for Emma. Crocheted stuff, jelly, eggs, fruits, and vegetables. Once, Roy found a baby chick with a note that Tyler was to be the new owner.

Some people would walk to the mailbox and meet Roy. They’d smile and wave. They dressed so old, the boys thought. A fellow doesn’t see scarves or bonnets much in the city.

“They sure do talk funny,” Okie would cackle.

“Where’d their teeth go, Roy?”

“Boys, these folks just got what they got and when it’s gone, it’s gone.”

“Papa, why do they stay out here?” quizzed Ty, with the eyes that look into your.

“Honey, this is their home. Some of these families have been out here since I was your age.” Roy put his arm around Ty and pulled him across his lap so he could open the next box.

“You boys will be glad you got to see this someday.”

Tyler gently laid the letters in the oversized mailbox and eased back in the window. Roy turned the Studebaker from the gravel road onto a two-lane dirt path that seemed to just cross the field in front of them. Weeds were three feet high down the middle and raked the belly of the car.

“Papa, can we drive out here?” Ty knew this stretch of Rural Route Two and he knew that there were no obstacles to stop a child driver.

Okie’s eyes were dancing with excitement. No one in his life shared such a real life treat as driving a car.

“We’ll take this package down to the house and you boys can take turns on our way out.”

Young boys can just explode if the timing’s right and, out here, they were free to be as rambunctious as it gets. Driving the car was a sure fire sign you were growing up. Next they’d shoot the .22 and their day would be complete.

Roy was the first to see the old, red pickup coming across the pasture. It rode on no path at all. The truck was bouncing ferociously and the driver was holding on for dear life. Roy eased to a stop and waited for the charging, bucking

bronco of a truck to pull alongside. Roy, of course, knew everything on Rural Route Two so the face behind the wheel of the red truck was no stranger.

“Hey, Toolie,” Roy offered an ordinary greeting.

“Roy, you and them boys be careful. Vesper Tadlock’s lion got out last night. Bucky and Scooter Rowden saw it kill a calf down by their pond.” Toolie was old or, at least, he looked old to Ty and Okie. His voice was real high and he was talking so fast the words were all strung together.

“You seen Vesper yet?” Roy asked in a calm, no problem tone.

“Yeah, he and some ole boys are gonna meet at Elmo real soon.” Toolie still talked like he was shouting.

“They was hoping I’d find you. They’d figured you’ll cover more ground than anyone and if you see it you can tell Vesper. Then a whole bunch of us can track it down.” Okie and Tink had ears of their own and the events that were unfolding were awesome. A lion loose. A hunt.

Okie, the City Slicker, imagined a Rural Route Two safari.

Tink just wanted to see a wild animal up close.

Both boys could feel their blood pumping a little faster.

“Vesper ought to know better than to keep that big cat out here. I don’t care how big a cage he builds.” Roy didn’t mind people being people, but raising a full grown lion in Kaufman County, Texas? Good Gracious! What kind of man locks up a lion? Worse yet, what kind of man does a lousy job of locking up a lion and scares the pants off of all his neighbors?

“This ain’t the first time it’s got out, Roy.” Toolie stuffed some chewing tobacco inside his already black teeth.

“Yeah, I know Toolie,” Roy shook his head. “He’s got some kind of gun that tranquilizes the animal, doesn’t he?”

“That’s what he told Scooter. But everybody I saw had their rifles. Ain’t nobody gonna mess with no beast like that thing.” Toolie spit for emphasis.

“OK, I’ll finish this part of the route, and I’ll meet everybody at Elmo. I can leave the boys there.” Okie and Ty squirmed at the thought of being left out of the hunt, but if Roy said so. It was so.

“It’ll take us twenty minutes or so. I’ll be there.”

Toolie could wait no more. The red pickup headed back across the pasture making its own road. Soon it was a cloud of dust and gone over the rolling hills of Kaufman County.

Elmo was a wide spot in the road. If there was a census, the population would have been one. Alma Meredith ran a little store that also served as a post office, gas station and meeting place in case of emergency. She had a telephone at a time many folks did not. There was one gas pump and your limit was ten gallons. She had some dry goods and all the county gossip.

Roy stopped every day. He’d sit and listen. When you’re the only person in town, it’s easy to get elected mayor, but talking company meant a lot.

Tyler had been drinking her Grapettes and eating a bag of Tom’s peanuts on every Saturday he road the mail route.

Alma, like all around the countryside, worshiped Roy Kincaid. They'd joke and make the day brighter for everybody. Tink was treated like royalty and that always feels good.

Locals would stop and grab a moment with Alma and be on their way. It was her whole life waiting on people to show up.

There was a front porch with two old chairs with a view of the spot in the road. She had an old hunting dog named Bob that just laid in the sun. His hunting days were over.

The store was one room with a corner that said U.S. Post Office. Behind the store, she had a two room house. It was basic. That was Elmo!

The Studebaker arrived in a cloud of dust as Roy and the boys pulled up next to Alma's house. There was no room to park out front as Roy usually did.

Tink had never seen so many people in Elmo.

Okie nudged Ty and nodded at all the rifles.

"You boys go inside and get yourself a Grapette." Roy knew these boys so there was no need to suggest anything else.

"Tell Almo I'll be right there." Roy walked deliberately to the group of men talking to Vesper Tadlock. The emotional conversation had not reached anger, but it was getting close.

"Roy, I'm glad you're here." Vesper would lean on Roy's integrity. "Tell these boys I'll pay for their beef and there ain't no need to start shooting at everything that moves out there."

“Vesper, me and Scooter know you’ll square with us on the calf. We’re just afraid that lion of yours is gonna get somebody’s young’uns.” Bucky Rowden had six kids, so he knew of which he spoke.

At least fifteen men now stood around Vesper, their rifles were poised to hunt. Vesper had some odd-looking dart gun.

“Listen to me, please. I paid \$800 for that lion and all I ask is that you all help me find it. I’ll hit it with this.” Vesper raised the dart gun for all to see.

“I promise it won’t get out again,” Vesper pleaded.

“Has anybody seen anything?” Roy asked.

“Hap Jenkins said he saw it over by his pecan stand,” a voice from the group called out.

“Well, we better split up in groups and go looking.” Roy spoke in a tone of having no other choice.

Tadlock motioned, “Scooter, why don’t you come with me? I want you to see me stop that lion.” Vesper didn’t want Scooter shooting the beast. The men started loading into their assorted vehicles. Bob Estes was on his tractor.

“We’ll meet back here in one hour,” Vesper yelled about the commotion.

Roy turned from the Chinese fire drill and walked inside the Elmo store.

“Tinker, you and Okie stay here with Alma. We’ll be back shortly.” Roy turned for the front porch and stopped. “Now, you fellows go easy on those peanuts. Emma will be upset that we’re late, but she’ll have my scalp if you’ve ruined your Saturday lunch.” Roy smiled at Alma.

“Yawl make sure she’s protected.”

“Don’t you worry, Roy, these boys and me can handle anything that comes along.”

The Studebaker door slammed shut and the silence was noticeable. After all the shouting and motors running, it felt kind of eerie being left behind.

“I bet you fellas are ready to sit on the front porch and wash down some peanuts.” Alma was dead right.

Okie loved the old pop machine. You worked your bottle to the opening and dropped your nickel in and pulled.

Today they were on the house. Alma let the boys take what they wanted, and all she did was turn the latch.

Sitting on the front porch at Elmo, Tyler had been in exactly this same place a hundred times, but he’d never felt like this before. There was a cloud of doom over the place. You could feel it like you could feel the sticky heat of a humid summer day.

Bob, the over-the-hill hunting dog, moved from the sun to the shade of the front porch with the boys. Okie rubbed his tennis shoes across Bob’s stomach and Bob groaned with delight.

The boys could hear Alma banging on something in her store and cussing the results. Okie mouthed the cuss words to Tinker and they tried not to giggle out loud. They were killing time and being boys on the front porch at Elmo. The Kaufman County safari would go on without them.

Okie was the first to finish the traditional Grapette and Tom’s peanuts. Tink had always savored his as long as possible.

“Come on Bob.” Okie jumped to his feet and tried to coax Bob into a playful game of chase. No dice. Okie began dancing about trying to get Bob’s old juices flowing. Ty sat in the rickety old porch chair and laughed out loud as Okie did his best silly-boy routine.

“Tinker, finish up. Let’s get Bob to chase us.”

Alma had come to the front porch door and chuckled at the city boy’s dance. Okie was trying everything.

Tyler was in tears with laughter. All at once Bob moved with the speed and grace he had hunted these parts with for many years. Okie cheered and started running for the single gas pump.

Tyler, still laughing, went chasing after Bob.

It was a form of slapstick comedy. Keystone Cops meets Our Gang in Elmo.

Ty ran directly behind Bob calling his name and he was caught in the spirit of the chase.

Okie was the first to see the lion. Bob had not fallen for the city boy’s silly dance. He had come to life as a hunter.

“Ty! Stop!” Okie’s voice barely worked. Ty looked back at Okie. H heard the growl from Bob before he saw Okland pointing.

There it stood. A cat the size of a cow. It was coming around the side of the Elmo store. Okalnd immediately raced for the front porch door. Tyler was too far away.

“Alma, the lion is outside!” Okie screamed.

Bob continued to circle the lion, but the huge beast seemed to pay him no mind. Tyler was frozen. He really had no place to run. Alma and Okie stood at the front door. Alma's fear was older. She had seen more life, more danger.

Okie's fear was immediate. Tyler was face-to-face with the King of Beasts. Bob was doing his best, but the agility of his youth no longer was present in his muscles.

"Ty, Honey, stand real still," Alma pleaded from the front porch.

Okie stared with disbelief. His body and brain were not in sync. Ty would have to make a decision. If he could only make it to the front porch. It looked so far away.

Without warning, the lion suddenly turned on Bob so quickly the old hunter had no chance.

The movement was pure power. The enormous teeth simply bit through the entire body of the old dog.

As Alma, Okie and Tyler watched in total shock, the lion cut Bob into two separate pieces. He never even yelped. He just died. The savagery had locked Tink to the ground.

Just seconds ago he had been considering running from a lion. He could no longer think that clearly. The lion suddenly roared like no sound on earth.

Tyler could feel his body losing control of itself. The volume of the primal scream had left Ty no choice but to run. He bolted for the front porch. Alma screamed.

Okie was in shock and could not longer focus on the drama.

Tyler's feet were moving, he could tell. He had to look at the lion. He had to know if it was coming for him as it had come for Bob. Tyler could see the movement in the corner of his eye. It was coming so fast that he had to turn his head for a better look. There were so many sounds. His heart. His ears were still ringing from the unleashed volume of the lion's roar. Also, he heard the roar of an engine.

At least his head turned to the beast that stalked him. It was not moving. But he had seen movement from the corner of his eye. It was now the beast that caught the movement from the corner of its eye. As the lion had overpowered Bob, the lion was now overpowered by Roy Kincaid's Studebaker.

It struck with the force of steel against flesh. Tyler scrambled for a lane of safety. The Studebaker launched the beast at least thirty feet high into the air. The lion actually sailed over Ty's head.

Roy could not risk hitting Tyler, so the Studebaker slid through the dusty drive and out of position for another attack of steel against flesh.

The King of Beasts lay gasping for air and badly damaged from the crushing blow.

Tyler was on all fours not sure which way to move. Roy was emerging from the assaulting Studebaker with the .22 that the boys shot cans with.

The lion was rising. It was injured, but its will to defend itself was intact.

Roy landed the first blow before the beast could counter. He would not discharge the small caliber bullets, but beat the struggling beast with the stock of the rifle.

Tyler watched as Roy delivered blow after blow. It became a bloody battleground as Roy defended his most precious assets.

The last time Roy lifted the barrel above his head to inflict the final blow, his weary arms could manage, and it looked like slow motion.

Alma still stood at the front porch door. Okie was in tears and shaking. He held Alma by the arm. Tyler still sat on the ground. He was perched on his knees and staring in disbelief at the war zone that lay in front of him.

Bob was in two pieces.

The beast lay motionless and stained with blood from its brain.

Roy was staggering toward Tink. His face was blank and discolored. He couldn't speak from exhaustion. His steps became erratic and he suddenly dropped to his knees.

"Roy!" Alma screamed.

His hands finally released the rifle barrel that had been his weapon against the beast. Portions of the solid wood stock were splintered, and fur and blood remained lodged in the cracks created from the force of Roy's attack.

The .22 rifle rattled to the ground. He took one last look at Tyler Long Kincaid. His head dropped and all life left his body. He had fought the King of Beasts and won, but it had broken his heart to have to kill and his heart had broken in the fierce struggle.

Roy stood balanced on his knees, his feet under his body like a foundation to hold him upright. His head bowed to the end of his life.

Alma called for help from her telephone that so many people used.

Help would come, but it would make no difference.

The boys surveyed the panorama of Elmo, the spot in the road from the back seat of Dr. Sting Vincent's Cadillac. The rifle that had never fired a shot, but had killed the King of Beasts, still lay in the dust where Roy had no longer managed the strength to handle its weight.

The Studebaker looked wedged between the loan gas pump and the old front porch. Having delivered the first blow more like a battleship than a rural mail delivery vehicle. The light green car now sat cockeyed and damaged with its right headlight knocked out.

In an odd moment of grasping for his senses, Tyler had asked how the Studebaker would get home. To his knowledge, Emma didn't drive a car. String had assured him the Studebaker would be in Roy's garage where it belonged. The car represented so much, Ty felt it was worth worrying about.

The beast had been covered by someone, but its frame was too large to hide its entire body. Parts of its head and tail could be seen. The blonde mane stained with blood was still visible.

Bob had received no attention at all and he still lay in two parts.

In the mad rush by String to somehow produce the miracle that would bring Roy back to life, poor Bob would have to wait while the doctor worked and Alma watched. The lone citizen of Elmo would have to bury her dear Bob later and alone.

The crowd that had made the search party began arriving in groups of two and three. Back to the spot in the road, but things had changed. They no longer hunted the King of Beasts, but were bit players in a story people would tell for years in Kaufman County.

Vesper Tadlock would be remembered for this tragedy every single day, of the many days he had left. In short, he never lived it down. The man who tried to own a lion.

Tyler was fighting the tears because he was afraid to really let go. He turned and plopped down into the back seat of String's Cadillac. String put the huge, black car in gear and followed the ambulance that carried the late Roy Kincaid.

Tink had been unable to look as the men from the hospital ambulance had lifted Roy's body into the panel truck with the big red cross on the side.

Okie crawled up on his knees and turned to look another time. The motion from the cars had stirred the light brown Kaufman County sand into a beige haze making the whole scene kind of blurry.

Alma stood near the front porch. As Okie watched, she leaned over and picked up the Grapette bottle Tink had dropped in the sand as he chased Bob from the porch in what seemed like a long ago memory. She straightened up and shielded her eyes from the sun.

She would not wave goodbye.

Okie stayed perched on his knees and watched as the spot in the road disappeared and maybe for the last time in his life, he could hear his grandfather sobbing for Tyler's Papa.

Okie again turned and slid down in the giant back seat next to Tinker. He put his hands on Ty's arm and left it there the entire ride home.

Tyler would drift through the days to come and Okie showed the courage that would always define him as a man.

Okie would be there for Tink like no one else could

To this day, no one can recall the funeral. It would take years for Tink to resurface. He'd live a form of life, a soulless, going-through-the-motions-type living.

There would be the discipline of piano and the escape of guitar; but like everything else, he only dealt with the technician ship.

The safe structure of being emotionless.

He'd laugh, but softly, and not very often.

Through it all, Okie was there.

They'd have to wait until John Kennedy became President.

Wait for the day passion was okay again.