

The Girl Who Fell Into The Sky

by Kate Wilhelm

This well-known and highly respected author's last tale in *IASFM*, "The Gorgon Field" (August 1985), was a Nebula award finalist. That story evoked a powerfully haunting feeling for the land. "The Girl Who Fell into the Sky" takes place in another part of the country—on the Great Plains of the Midwest—but that same magnificent sense of awe is also integral to listening. Ms. Wilhelm's most recent science fiction novel, *Huysman's Pets*, was published by Bluejay Books last January, and they will be bringing forth a mystery novel, *The Hamlet Trap*, next February.

His father was a MacLaren, his mother a MacDaniel, and for forty years John had been the one thrust between them when they fought. Today they stood glaring at each other, through him, around him, his mother with her flashing green eyes and red hair that she now dyed (exactly the same color it always had been), his father with his massive face set in a scowl, thick white eyebrows drawn close together over his long nose.

"I'll take an axe to the wheels first!" she said in a low, mean voice.

"Since when do I let you tell me what I can or can't do?"

"Knock it off, both of you!" John MacLaren yelled. "For God's sake! It's a hundred and five! You'll both have heart attacks!"

"No one asked you to butt in, either," his father snapped, not shifting his glare from his wife.

She tilted her head higher and turned, marched from the room. "I

asked him,” she called back. “Johnny, you want a gin and tonic?”

“Please,” he said quietly. “Dad, what the hell is it all about?”

The room was green and white, cool, with many growing plants, everything neat and well cared for. The entire house was like this, furnished in good pieces, each one an investment: Hepplewhite chests, Duncan Phyfe chairs, pieces over two hundred years old that had come from Scotland, or France, or England. David MacLaren was the collector; Mary accepted it, even encouraged it sometimes, but she would not walk across the street to add to the assortment that had accumulated over the forty-five years they had been married.

Now that the argument had been stopped by Mary’s departure, David MacLaren smiled at his son, waved toward a wicker arrangement near a window and led the way to it. He seated himself with a soft grunt, then waited until John was seated opposite him.

“Made the mistake of telling her I plan to take a spin over to the Castleman house tomorrow, pick up that player piano and bring it home. You know, I told you about it, first one to cross the Mississippi, still in fine shape, I bet. Probably hasn’t been opened in nearly thirty years, more than thirty years. It’s a beauty. Cherry wood. Keys mahogany-colored and ivory, not black and white.”

The words rang false to John’s ears. “You mean over in Greeley County?”

“Yep.”

“Dad, that’s a three hundred mile drive, and it’s going to be hotter tomorrow than today. It’s going up to one ten before the afternoon’s over.”

He looked past his father, out the window at the lawn, kept green by nearly constant watering this summer. No breeze stirred; heat shimmies rose from the white concrete of the sidewalk; the leaves of the red Japanese maple drooped. And he knew where all this would lead, knew why his mother had called him at the office only half an hour ago. Of course, his father could not drive three hundred miles in this weather, could not have anything to do with moving a piano. He took a deep breath.

His mother returned with a tray, three tall sweating glasses, twists of lemon, sugar frosted rims. Her face was smooth, imperturbable as she looked at him; there was a glint of understanding in her eyes, a spark of determination that he knew quite well. She really would take the axe to the wheels if she had to. She was seventy-three, his father seventy-four.

He drank deeply. "You know you can't do that, Dad," he said then. "It'll keep. It's kept this long."

His father shook his head. "It's kept because Louis Castleman kept it. That nephew, Ross Cleveland, he'll drive in there hot as hell, take a look around, piss-poor land, isolated house, nothing there for him, and he'll head up to Goodland first thing, make a deal with Jennings and head for home again. And Jennings will put that piano in his café and let customers spill beer in it, lay cigarettes down on it."

"Dad, have you even been over there for the past twenty-five years? How do you know it's there? And what difference can it possibly make? You don't need it. You don't have room for it. A player piano! What for?"

"It's there," his father muttered. "I saw it listed on the inventory. Just a matter of getting the nephew to let me take stuff out, accept my offer. Be worth his while, of course, but he might want a separate appraisal or something. The land's not worth a damn, but he might want to realize a little from the possessions." He looked at Mary, his eyebrows touching, and said, "And I want it because it's mine. Oh, I'll pay for it, but I intend to go over there first thing in the morning and collect the thing and bring it home as soon as Ross Cleveland shows up to inspect his inheritance."

John looked helplessly from his father to his mother. Neither of them would give an inch to the other, but they would let him propose a third alternative, the one his mother was waiting for, the one she had called him for. And his father would protest, curse a bit, maybe storm out briefly before agreeing to let John go collect the piano. For a moment he was tempted to finish his drink and leave, let them fight it out. A surge of envy came and went; he envied them their passion, their uncompromising fights, their uncompromising love. They played hard, fought hard, loved hard,

and they had kept all their passion when characteristics were being handed out at his conception. He had her hair and eyes, his father's long thin nose and robust build. They had kept all the passion for themselves.

When he left his parents' house an hour later, the temperature had climbed to one hundred ten, and he was committed to driving three hundred plus miles to load an old piano into his father's truck and bring it home.

He and his father were partners in the law firm his father had started decades ago. He had called his secretary to warn her that he would be gone a few days possibly, that MacLaren Senior would handle anything that came up. There was no point now in going back to the office since it was four, a blistering afternoon, and he was driving his father's ten-year-old truck without air conditioning. He turned toward his house instead of downtown Wichita.

His house overlooked Three Oaks Golf Club; no one was on the greens that hot afternoon. The sprinklers worked day and night, it seemed, and still the grass had brown patches here and there. The groundskeepers kept moving the sprinklers in a futile attempt to cope with the heat wave and drought. John entered the house through the garage door and turned up the air conditioning on his way to the front door mail drop. No letter from Gina. He dumped the mail on the hall table and went to the kitchen to make himself a drink, and again a surge of envy swept him. His parents fought like alley brats and would kill anyone who tried to come between them. He and Gina never fought, never quarreled, never spoke sharply to each other, and she was spending the hot summer with her family in St. Louis. She did not write, did not call, and when he called, she was out somewhere. He spoke on those occasions with his son Tommy, or his daughter Amanda, but not with his wife who was always very, very busy.

Lorna Shields stood behind the heavy glass door of the Howard Johnson restaurant where she had just finished a strawberry soda and a glass of iced tea and two glasses of water. Beyond the door the heat rose crookedly from the pavement; the glare of light was painful. Ever rising heat; cruel light; and no sweat. It's not Ohio,

kid, she told herself with some satisfaction. Not at all like Ohio. Oh, it got hot back there, too, but a thick, sticky, sweat-making heat, not like this inferno that sucked her dry as soon as she walked out into it. Her lips felt parched; her skin prickled; her hair had so much static electricity that when she had tried to comb it on entering the rest room earlier, it had sprung out like the hair of the bride of Frankenstein. She had laughed and another woman in the small space had eyed her warily.

Lorna was tall and lanky, boyish-looking with her short dark hair that curled back home in Ohio, but was quite straight here in Kansas. Her eyes were such a dark blue that many people thought they were black, and she tanned so deeply so easily that it always seemed that the first day of spring when the sun came out and stayed more than an hour, she got the kind of suntan that other people spent thousands of dollars on hot beaches trying to acquire. She was twenty-five.

If she kept driving, she was thinking, she could get there around ten and Elly and Ross wouldn't show up for at least a day, maybe two. Elly had said Friday night or Saturday. The thought of having a house to herself for a day or two, not having to ask questions, listen to answers, smile and be polite was overwhelmingly tempting. Back in February her instructor-advisor on her committee had taken her aside and encouraged her to apply for a grant to continue her master's project after graduation; he had even helped her with the forms, and had written an almost embarrassing letter of recommendation. To her astonishment, she was awarded the grant, to take effect in June, to run for nine months. All expenses and living money, even enough to buy her little, three-year old Datsun. For the first time in her life she felt very rich. And with the grant the work she had been doing changed, became meaningful where it had been the result of nearly idle daydreaming, a last minute desperate attempt to find something for her project that would win approval from her committee. She was doing an oral history of religion, its importance, its rituals, its impact on people who were now over sixty-five or seventy. Not their present religion, but the religion of their youth.

Suddenly, yesterday, she had frozen, could not think what to say

to the old woman waiting kindly for her to begin, could hardly remember why she was in the convalescent home in Kansas City in the first place. Last night in her motel room, she had looked about with loathing. Even the air-conditioned air smelled exactly the same in each motel she stayed in, as if they bought it in the same place that furnished the bedspreads and the pictures on the walls, and the dim lights. She had planned to stop interviewing periodically and rent an apartment, start the transcriptions that would take much longer than getting the information. The time had come for just that, she had realized, and put away her tape recorder, consulted her map, and headed for Greeley County, Kansas.

Really, the only question was, should she stop now, or continue? She could get a motel here in Topeka, but on down the road? They might all be filled later, and it was too early to stop now. Only four. She shook her head, smiling faintly at herself. She had no intention of sitting in a motel room for the next twelve or fourteen hours. She pushed the thick door open and went out into the hot air. More stuff to drink, bread, sandwich makings, fruit... She got into her small Datsun and started looking for a supermarket. And breakfast things, she told herself. She always woke up ravenous. Half an hour later she was on the interstate again, heading for the rendezvous with her sister and her sister's husband at the house he had inherited from an uncle he had never met. She hiked her cotton skirt up to her thighs as she drove; the wind rushed through the little car screeching maniacally, and all around her the world turned into a corn field as far as she could see. She loved it.

What she had not reckoned with, she realized later, was the lowering sun. The sky remained cloudless, clear, pale, sun-bleached to invisibility ahead, a great white nothingness with an intolerable glare at its heart. And she had been right about the motels filling up. By seven when she would have admitted her mistake, there was nothing to be found. Doggedly she drove on into the glare, looking forward to each oasis of gas station, restaurant, sometimes a motel, all huddled together as if pressured by the corn that would have reclaimed even those spots. Finally the sun fell out of the sky, vanished without a hint of sunset. It was there, then it was not

there and the sky came back, violet turning into a deep purple faster than she would have thought possible. At Goodland she made her last stop. It was ten thirty; nothing was open except a gas station. She got more water, filled her gas tank and consulted the notes she had made when she talked to her sister two weeks ago, recalled the instructions: "As soon as you get on the road heading south, watch the odometer; it's exactly fourteen point six miles to the turn-off. Then it's exactly four miles to the house. Mr. MacLaren said the key will be taped to the underside of the kitchen window around the back of the house. He said you can't miss it. So, if you get there first, go on inside and make yourself at home. The electricity will be on; there's well water, everything you need, even beds and bedding. See you soon, honey."

The gas-station attendant had said it was cooling off good, wasn't it, and she had thought he was making a joke, but now, heading south finally, she took a deep breath and another. It was cooling off a bit. The countryside was totally dark; no light showed anywhere, only her headlights on the strip of state road ever rushing toward her. After the traffic of the interstate, the roar of passing trucks, the uncountable trucks pulling trailers, the vans and station wagons and motorcycles, she felt suddenly as if she were completely alone. She felt tension seeping out through her pores and had not known until now that she had become tense in the long day of interstate driving.

Without the explicit directions she never would have found the turn-off. Even knowing it was there, at fourteen point six miles, she would not have found it without coming to a complete stop, backing up a hundred feet and approaching again, straining to see another road. The road she finally found was dirt.

Gingerly she turned onto it and suddenly the land changed, became hilly. She had grown so used to the corn-covered tabletop land that she hit the brake hard when the dirt road began to go downhill. She eased off the brake and slowly rolled forward. The road was narrow, white under her lights, hard-packed, not really difficult. It seemed that the last four miles were the longest miles of all. Then she saw the house and drew in a sigh of relief. The road ended at the house.

Finding the key was easier than finding her flashlight in the mess she had made of her belongings in the car. When she opened the back door, hot air rushed out. She entered, searched for lamps, switches. The electricity was on. She lighted rooms as she entered them to open windows, open the front door, open everything that could be opened. The house was not very big, two bedrooms, a spacious living room, another room off it that might have been a bedroom once but seemed a storeroom for dead furniture now, and a very large kitchen with dinette space and all electric appliances. No wood out here, she thought, nodding. Everything was neat and clean. Her sister had said that the lawyer had hired people to come in and see to things. Lorna plugged in the water heater and refrigerator and put water in the ice trays and then sat down at the kitchen table too tired to pay any more attention to her surroundings.

She roused herself enough to bring her cooler inside, make herself a sandwich, then go back out to find her sleeping bag. All she could think of now was a shower and sleep.

She dreamed of distant music and voices raised in song, laughter, more song. She found herself singing along, in her dream:

*In Scarlet town, where I was born,
There was a fair maid dwellin
Made ev'ry youth cry "well-a-way;"
Her name was Barb'ra Allen.
All in the merry month of May,
When green buds there were swellin',
Young Jemmy Grove on his death-bed lay,
For love of Barb'ra Allen.*

Suddenly she came wide awake and sat up. She was shivering. At last the night was cooling off. She strained to hear something, anything. Far away a lone coyote yipped. As she drifted into sleep again, the refrain played itself through her head over and over: "Henceforth take warning by the fall of cruel Barb'ra Allen."

It was after nine when she woke up again. She blinked at the

ceiling, sky-blue, not a motel-room color. There was a silence so deep it was eerie, other-worldly. She thought of all the things the silence excluded: maids with cleaning carts, automobiles revving up, trucks shifting gears, showers running... She hugged herself and ran to the outside kitchen door where she came to an abrupt stop and caught her breath sharply, then walked very slowly out onto the porch barefoot, in her flimsy short gown. The world had turned blue and gold while she slept.

Everywhere golden grass stretched out under a sky so blue it looked like an inverted lake. There were hills, all grass-covered, the grass gold, brown, ocher. She felt no breeze, yet the golden grass responded to something that was like a shadow passing over it, shading it, moving on, restoring the shining gold. As she stood motionless, her gaze taking in the landscape, she began slowly to make out other details: the grass ended at outcroppings of rock that were also golden, or tan, ocher. There were rocky ridges outlining hills in the distance, and now she saw that the grass was not the lush carpet she had thought it to be at first. It was sparse, in places yielding to the rocky ground, in a few places high and thick, but there were few of those stands. And she could see paths winding through the grass. Leading where? She hurried back inside, eager to dress, have something quick to eat, and get back out to follow a trail or two before the sun got much higher, before the heat returned.

The drive across the state was as hot and tedious as John MacLaren had known it would be. His father had had the truck serviced, even had a new battery in it, but the monster was thirteen years old and cranky. Although his father claimed it was his hunting and fishing truck, actually he had bought it for hauling pieces of furniture from barn sales, estate sales, garage sales. And he had been willing to travel a thousand miles to attend such sales. Not for the past five or six years, John thought then, not since a heart attack had slowed him down a little, and he was glad again that he was the one in the truck, and not his father. The fact that the truck had been tuned up, the battery replaced, the tires checked meant that his father had fully intended to take this trip himself.

He returned to the question that had bothered him all night: Why? What was so damned important about one more piano, one more antique?

There was something, he knew. Castleman's death two weeks ago had stirred a darkness in his father that usually was so deeply buried that few people suspected its presence. John had sensed it now and then, and had seen it only yesterday. He could almost envy his father that, he thought bleakly. His own life had no secrets, no past best left unexplored. He had married the girl most suitable for him according to her family and his. An exemplary citizen, an exemplary husband and father with no darkness in him, no crazy hermit pal to beckon and stir the darkness that didn't exist anyway.

He knew the two old men had known each other for fifty years or more, and had assumed that they never saw each other only because Castleman had been a recluse, three hundred miles away, and not entirely sane.

When John was fifteen, his father had taken him along when he visited Castleman to draw up his will. Even then Castleman had been a crank, raving incoherencies. John had stayed outside while they talked, argued, yelled at each other in the end, and he was certain that his father had not been back since that day; he himself had never been back. He had not even seen the piano then. After the legal work was completed, he and his father had walked in the ruins of the commune that had been built and then abandoned on the property.

His head was starting to ache from the heat and the glare of the sun. He had left early enough, he had thought, to avoid having the lowering sun in his face, but there it was, almost like a physical presence pushing against the visor, burning his chest, his arms. He made his turn north before it slipped below the visor, but it was almost worse having it on the side of his face.

He missed the dirt road. When he finally was certain he had missed it, and maneuvered the truck in a U-turn, headed back very slowly, he remembered his father's curses from the distant past, when he too had missed it. "Made it hard to find on purpose," he had muttered. John crept along, found the turn and followed the dirt road to the house. It was going on six.

He felt disoriented then because it looked exactly the same as twenty-five years before. The poplars shading the house looked unchanged, neither taller nor older; the house itself was just like the memory of it: tan with green trim, well-maintained. The surrounding hills were covered with drought-stricken grass, as they had been then. Maybe the grass came up brown and never changed, he thought, almost wildly. He saw the Datsun in the driveway, back by the rear of the house, and felt disappointment. He had hoped to have one evening alone before negotiating for the stupid piano, had planned on entering the house, inspecting it, snooping around for papers, letters, anything to shed some light on the mystery in which his father had had some unfathomable part.

Resignedly he left the truck, ran his hand through his hair, gritty with road dirt, and went up to the front porch. He did not knock. There were voices clearly audible on the porch. An old woman was talking.

“... didn’t dare laugh or even smile, nothing. I did like the singing though. Mamie Eglin could sing like someone on radio or television today. Pretty! Ma’s favorite was ‘The Old Rugged Cross.’ Makes me soup up every time I hear it even now.”

They were not in the living room. He could see the empty room through the screen door. The kitchen, he decided, and backed away from the front door. He walked around the house slowly, not in a hurry to break up the conversation. No breeze blew, yet the grass moved slightly, stirred by pressure perhaps, the lifting and falling of the blanket of heat that pushed hard against the land. He stood at the corner of the house and let his gaze follow the shadows of the invisible something that played over the responsive grass.

He no longer listened to the words of the old woman; her voice was a droning in the background of his thoughts. How had Castleman stood it? So alone, so far from anyone else, just him and the grass and heat in summer, blizzards in the winter. Why had he stayed? What had he done with his time day after day after day, year after year? A hawk rode an air current into his field of vision and he watched it out of sight. It did not fly away, it merged with the sky, vanished.

Suddenly he was jolted by the sound of a truck rumbling by, close

enough, it seemed, to hit him. He jerked away from the house at the same time a clear, young voice said:

“Shit!”

The other voice continued without pause, apparently not bothered by the noise. “... preached to scare us, meant to scare us. And did scare us near to death. And Aunt Lodie, she scared us to death. Not my aunt, but everyone called her that. She told us girls stories that scared us to death. About being turned into a mule and being rode all night, things like that. Such terrible things. We was scared all the time. Most of us didn’t pay much mind to the sermons unless he hollered and then we sat up and listened until one of the boys would wiggle his fingers at us, or one of the girls would have a coughing fit and then all of us would have to cough and Brother Dale would thunder that the devil was there with us and please, God Almighty, give us strength to put him out of our hearts, and we’d be scared again.”

John looked in the window then and at first glance thought the person he saw was an Indian youth. Short, windblown dark hair, dark skin. A girl? Who? He moved to the door and looked in. No one was with her and he realized she was listening to a tape recording, transcribing the words into a portable computer.

“... wouldn’t have missed it for nothing. You see, there wasn’t nothing else to do. It took all day just to get to church and back home and make dinner for a crowd, and clean it up again, and by then it was time to go to bed. But it might of been the only time for weeks on end that we’d even see another soul.”

Another truck roared by; the girl scowled and tapped her fingers on the table top, waiting. John knocked on the door.

What intrigued him the most was that although she obviously had been startled by him, she just as obviously was not afraid. She looked up with widening eyes, then squinting, with her head tilted slightly as if trying to get him in focus. He spoke; she responded, and he stepped inside.

“John MacLaren—”

“Oh, the lawyer?”

“One of them. Mrs. Cleveland?”

“No. She’s my sister. I’m waiting for them to show up.”

“Oh.”

“I’m Lorna Shields.”

“Ah,” he said, nodding, as if that explained a lot.

She looked around guiltily. Probably he had come to make sure everything was neat and clean for the new owner, and she had managed to create a mess everywhere. The table was covered with her tapes and papers. Her cooler was on the floor, dirty dishes in the sink. Actually she had decided that Elly and Ross would not arrive until Saturday evening, and by then she would have straightened it all up again. She glanced back at John MacLaren and forgot the rush of guilt.

“I wasn’t expecting company or anything.”

“I suppose not. I wasn’t expecting to find anyone here.”

She wanted him to go away, John realized uncomfortably. She looked very young, wearing shorts, a tank top, barefooted, too young to be out here alone at night. Her skin was deeply tanned all over, as far as he could tell, but her high cheekbones, her nose, the tops of her shoulders all glowed redder than the rest of her. She must not understand about the prairie sun, he thought, must not know how dangerous it could be. He looked past her toward the refrigerator.

“May I have a drink of water?”

Now her whole face glowed with embarrassment. “Sorry,” she said. “Sure. Water’s about it. Or coffee, or apple juice.”

“I’ve got some cold beer in the truck. Would you like one?”

She nodded and he turned and left the kitchen. As soon as he was off the back porch, she raced through the room, into the living room where she picked up a stack of papers from the sofa and looked around for a place to deposit them. There was no good place. She went into the smaller of the two bedrooms and dumped the papers on her sleeping bag on the floor, folded the bag over to hide them, and returned to the kitchen.

She had started to read the stuff that afternoon and then put it off until night, but one of the names she had found in the early papers was MacLaren. Surely not this MacLaren, but she did not want him leafing through the material, and she did not want him to think she had been snooping.

He brought in the beer and they sat at the kitchen table drinking it. She told him briefly about her project, amused that he had thought the conversation was in real time.

“That’s the problem with taping,” she said. “You have to listen to it in real time, and transcribe it in real time before you can do a thing about editing. It’s going to be a bitch to get on paper.”

He realized how closely she was watching him when he finished his beer and she stood up, her own can still virtually untouched. Reluctantly he rose also. He offered her another beer and she refused, politely and firmly. When he asked if he could look around she shook her head.

“You’d better wait for Ross, don’t you think? I mean, I don’t have the authority to give permission or anything.”

Still he hesitated, and then, surprising himself, he asked her to have dinner with him.

Her eyes widened as they had done before in startlement. She shook her head.

“I really do have work to get to. I guess Ross and Elly will be here tomorrow by this time. Why don’t you drop in then?”

He could find no other excuse to stay. He went to the truck, turned it, and started back up the dirt road, and he began to chuckle. He was acting like a damn schoolboy, a lovesick, love-stricken junior-high-school boy. At the highway, he stopped and stared at the landscape and thought what fine cheekbones she had, what lovely eyes. He thought briefly of Gina and could not visualize her; it was as if she were in another universe. The face before his mind’s eye had high sunburned cheekbones and wide, dark-blue eyes, straight dark hair swept back carelessly. The eyes looked at him directly without a hint of flirtation.

As soon as the truck made the first turn and vanished from sight,

Lorna had hurried to change her clothes. Jeans, sneakers, a long-sleeved shirt that she did not put on, but carried to the kitchen. She already had checked her camera, and found her flashlight. She looked around, remembered the papers, and went back to the bedroom, collected them and took them out to her car where she locked them up in the trunk. She did not expect Mr. MacLaren to return, but then she had not expected anyone in the first place. She took the house key with her when she started her walk.

It was still too hot for this, too hot for jeans, but the heat did not have the intensity that had driven her inside earlier that day. She had learned that unless she stayed on the well-beaten trails, the grass cut her legs; in some places it was high enough to cut into her arms. That morning her walk had taken her to a ridge overlooking a valley perfectly enclosed on all sides, and in the valley she had seen ruins. There had not been a trail down to the valley as far as she could tell, and she had known even then that was wrong. If people had gone down there to build anything, there was a way to get down now. She had started over at the house, first searching for a map, then studying her road map, and finally examining the road that stopped so abruptly out in front of the house. And she had seen that the road at one time had continued, that it had been bulldozed and the grass had invaded, but it was discernible to anyone really looking for it. By then the sun had been too high to continue. But now the shadows were lengthening and, although the air was inferno-hot, it was impossible for it to become any hotter. The temperature could only go down from now until dark. She had a canteen of water clipped to her belt, her camera slung from her neck, a notebook and pencil in her pocket, and the shirt. Presently she tied the arms together and draped it over her shoulders; she did not need it yet.

She learned the feel of walking on the ruined road, how it differed from walking on the grass that never had been disturbed. The grass was sparser on the old road, rocks more numerous, sometimes making a trail of their own. After some minutes of walking steadily she turned to look at the house and could see only the tips of the poplars. For the first time she hesitated. She

supposed it was possible to get lost in the grass, to wander aimlessly until thirst and then dehydration claimed one. She laughed softly. All she had to do was head east, she knew, and within minutes she would come across the highway. She continued.

There was no warning, no indication that the land dipped, formed the valley. One moment it appeared fairly level with hills in the distance, and then she was on a ridge again overlooking the round valley below. This time, she could see where the road had gone down the side of the sloping hill, where the bulldozer had knocked the land over onto it, tried to eradicate it. She nodded and started to pick her way down through the boulders and the grass that grew around them, between them, hid them from view. The boulders and the ground and the grass were all the same color, all gold in the lowering sunlight. She paused often; too hot for strenuous activity, she told herself, and wished she could sweat, could help cool herself that way. The sweat evaporated as fast as it formed. People always had told her that this dry heat was manageable, not bad at all, that it was the humidity that hurt. She took a sip of water and let it trickle down her throat, then another, and continued downward. She could not even take pictures from here, not facing into the sun as she was.

Then she was in the valley and it seemed even hotter than it had been up above. Nothing stirred. The ruins were of houses; foundations of stone and brick, fireplaces remained, nothing else. No wood. In some places the land had collapsed in areas fifteen feet wide, twenty feet. Sod houses, she realized, and tried to find an entrance to one. Only stones, boulders indicated where they had been; the earth had reclaimed its own.

The valley was much larger than she had thought; she would not be able to explore it all before dark, but already a pattern was emerging. Here there had been a big building, bigger than the houses, and directly opposite it, all the way across the valley floor there had been another large building. The houses lined a path between the two. She squinted, could almost see how it had been laid out. She shook her head; there was only grass and stones and bricks, nothing else. She turned and saw a stone fireplace standing over a cave of shade that was longer than the fireplace was tall.

Wearily she sank to the ground in the shade to rest. She drank again, then leaned her head back against the bricks and closed her eyes. She had not known how exhausting the heat could be. After she rested a minute or two, she would go back to the house, she decided, and in the morning she would set her clock for five and come down here at dawn, before the heat was so bad.

And then she began to hear the grass. First a soft sighing, a whisper on one side then the other, a long-drawn-out exhalation, a rustling. Singing? No words, just a hum, so low it was felt even more than heard.

“Lorna! Lorna!”

She opened her eyes to a deep violet twilight without shadows. Around her the unmoving grass had turned to silver. The voice came again:

“Lorna!”

Then she saw him, the lawyer, clambering down the slope. She could not for the moment remember his name. She stood up and started to walk toward him. MacLaren. John MacLaren.

“What the devil are you doing down here? You know it’s going to be dark within ten minutes? Come on, let’s get out of here.”

He was afraid, she thought in wonder. His face looked pinched and his voice was rough with fear. She glanced behind herself at the silver grass, stiff and still, and could not understand his fear. He grasped her hand and began the climb back up, pulling her along with him. When she stumbled, he simply pulled more strongly.

“Wait,” she gasped, unable to breathe.

“We’re almost there,” he said brusquely. “Come on.”

Then he was hauling her up over the last boulder that started the ridge and finally he let her rest. She dropped to her knees and drew in long shuddering breaths. Her heart was pounding; her chest hurt and she could not get enough air.

“Take a sip,” he said.

She felt the canteen against her mouth and took a drink,

coughed, drank again and gradually began to breathe normally.

“Okay now?”

“Yes. Thanks, I think.” She began to get to her feet, his hand firm on her arm, helping her, and she realized that it was fast getting dark. But the sun had been out, there had been shadows. She looked at him then, her own eyes widening with fear, and his gaze was troubled.

“Let’s move while we can still see,” he said.

His voice was normal again, no longer harsh and brusque, but his hand on her arm was tight.

They walked silently for several minutes. The violet deepened; the horizon in the east vanished. Wall of night, she thought. In the west the sky was the color of bad picture postcards from the Florida Keys or someplace like that. An uncanny blue, the blue of peacock feathers. She looked up at the sky overhead where stars were appearing out of the void like magic: not there, there. When she looked at the horizon again, it had deepened to midnight blue, and she marveled at the speed of nightfall here. Then a constellation of lights appeared in a tight cluster, a galaxy straight ahead. It could have been a ship far out to sea; or it could have been a warning buoy signaling danger, rocks, shoals. John MacLaren grunted his satisfaction and eased up on the fast pace he had set for them.

“What were you doing out there at dark?” he asked.

She bit back her retort that she had not intended being there at dark and said, “I fell asleep. Why did you come back? Why did you go to the valley?”

He was walking ahead of her now, a shadow against the shadowed sky, merging with the, grass from his waist down; grass man, shadow man, floating above the grass that was as dark as a magician’s cape, and she thought that was right. There was so little to work with here, grass, sky, stones, the tricks of the land had to be accomplished with few props; the illusions demanded magic. The illusion of a cool cave of shadows by the fireplace in the valley, the illusion of voices humming, sighing. The illusion of sky beneath her.

She stopped and caught her breath and let it out slowly, started

to walk again. He had gone on, unaware that she had paused. She had forgotten her questions, forgotten that he had not answered, might never answer, when his voice floated back to her.

“I was worried about you,” he said, sounding very far away. “Funny things happen out on the prairie to people not used to it. Visual distortions happen, make you think something’s near enough to reach in a couple of minutes, when actually it might be a hundred miles away. It’s so quiet people provide noises, and sometimes are frightened by the noises their own heads create.”

“How did you know where I was?”

“I followed your trail,” he said and the brusqueness was again in his voice. He did not say the grass told him because that sounded too crazy. The Judge—his grandfather—had taught him to read the grass the way a sea captain could read the open sea, follow another ship across the ocean without ever sighting it by following its wake. A subtle change in water color, a flattening of waves, a smoothing out peculiar to that one passage. And so it was with the grass. Her trail had been arrow sharp. He also did not tell her the other crazy things he had felt, thought, had known out on the prairie: how, when the sky vanished, as it had done this evening, it took all space, all distance with it. Then he could reach into the firmament and touch the stars, the moon; he could reach across space from horizon to horizon. He did not tell how the grass could play with sound so that a whisper uttered miles away could be the warm breath from lips not quite touching your ear; or how the grass could banish sound so that the one you touched could not be heard without effort.

Ahead, the house formed around the lights; the trees arranged themselves in tree shapes. She was almost sorry. The magic was gone.

“Have you eaten yet?” she asked as they drew near the house.

“No. Have you?”

“No. It was too hot.”

“I bought a very big steak and some lettuce. Share it with me?”

“You’re on,” she said cheerfully. “All I have is peanut butter and

sardines.”

He laughed and she joined in and they entered the house. He apologized for letting himself in earlier when he realized she was gone. He had a key, of course, and had put the steak in the refrigerator. She nodded. Of course.

She waited until they had finished eating and were having coffee before she asked about the valley. “What was it? What happened?”

He frowned and looked past her, considering.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she said quickly. “Not if it bothers you.”

He brought his gaze back to her, puzzled. “Why would it bother me?”

She shrugged and did not say she had seen the name MacLaren on the papers she had hidden away.

“I’m just not sure where to start,” he said then.

“Start at the beginning, go to the end, and stop.”

He grinned and nodded. “Right. My grandfather was the beginning. Everyone called him the Judge. Before him this was all Indian country. How he got hold of this land no one knows for sure. He used to tell half a dozen different stories about it. Maybe he won it at cards. That was one of his stories anyway. So he came out here from New Orleans back in eighteen ninety-seven, owner of twenty-five hundred acres of scrub prairie, and he saw right off that he was not going to make it on the land. He never had farmed or run a ranch or anything like it. He became a preacher at first, traveled all over the state, over into Colorado, back. Then he went into politics, settled down in Wichita and started to raise a family. Somewhere in there he was appointed a circuit judge. And he still had this land that he was paying taxes on.”

His voice was almost dreamy as he told the story; his gaze was distant, perhaps even amused, as if he was proud of his grandfather. Lorna poured more coffee for both of them and wished vaguely that she had turned on her tape recorder.

“Anyway, during his many travels meting out justice, the Judge met Josiah Wald. No one talks much about this particular period,

you understand. I doubt that anyone even knows what went on. Josiah was being tried for something or other; my grandfather was the judge, and when it was all over, Josiah had bought himself twenty-five hundred acres of scrub prairie, and he did not go to jail.

“The time was the mid-twenties,” he said, bringing his gaze back, seeing her again. He liked the way she listened, as attentive as a schoolgirl with a test coming along any minute. And he wished that thought had not intruded because he wanted to think of her as a woman past the age of consent. He sighed and looked out the window again and went on with his story.

“It was the boom swing of the cycle, a dress rehearsal for the sixties, wild, amoral; the devil walked the earth gathering in his own. And Josiah was a prophet, a showman, a tent revivalist who suddenly was a landowner with a following. So he started a commune down in the valley. A religious community.” Her eyes widened the way they did when she was surprised. He shrugged and spread his hands as if to say, don’t blame me. “So far this is all pretty much on public record. Nothing else really is recorded until nineteen forty-one when there was a fire in the valley and Louis Castleman became the owner of the land. Somehow they had survived the dust bowl conditions and the depression, but it seems the fire ended it all. The commune simply vanished after that. Six people died in the fire; Josiah was not listed as one of them. He vanished, one of the mysteries of the prairie. Castleman salvaged what he could, built this house, and tried to destroy the road down to the valley. Finis.”

“Wow!” she said softly. Then she got up and started to clear the table.

“What? No questions?”

“Hundreds. But I’m not sure what they are yet. Where are you going to sleep?”

“Dad keeps camping gear in the truck at all times. I’ll sleep out under the stars.”

She nodded and did not protest, and he thought it was a victory of some sort that she seemed to assume he had a right to stay around. He liked the way she accepted things without fussing. He

felt certain she would have had the same acceptance if he had said in the bedroom, or the living room. Just not her room, he added, also certain of that.

She began to wash the few dishes. "Why did you tell me all that?"

"I'm not sure. Probably because you went down there. Maybe because I don't think you should go back."

"Do you believe in ghosts, evil spirits? Any spirits at all?"

"No."

"Are you religious?"

He hesitated this time. Then he said slowly, "My wife takes our kids to Sunday School and church, and I go along much of the time. We have church weddings and funerals in my family. I support our church financially."

She turned to give him a long searching look and he added, "No. I'm not religious. Are you?"

She shook her head, still gazing at him, almost absently. "Why are you here? Elly told me the legalities were all settled. They just want to look around and make decisions about what to do with things."

He stood up and walked to the door. "I'm on an errand for my father. To buy the old player piano, if your brother-in-law will sell it."

She turned back to the dishes. "Is there music for it?"

"I guess so. I don't know." He had his hand on the screen door, yet did not push it open, did not want to go out, go to sleep. "You're asking the wrong questions," he said.

"Are you and your wife together?"

Now he pushed the door open. "Good night," he said and walked out into the warm dark air.

She dreamed. She was on a stage wearing a filmy blue dress, fastened only with one pearl clasp at the waist. She had nothing on under it. She sang to an audience of men and women who stared

silently with vacant expressions.

*“I will never more deceive you, or of happiness bereave you,
But I’ll die a maid to grieve you. Oh! you naughty, naughty men;
You may talk of love, and, sighing, say for us you’re nearly dying;
All the while you know you’re trying to deceive, you naughty men;
You may talk of love, and, sighing, say for us you’re nearly dying;
All the while you know you’re trying to deceive, you naughty,
naughty men.”*

She sang almost demurely, with innocent flirtatiousness, not moving. Then the music changed, the piano started over, but this time it was different and when she went on to the next verses, she moved obscenely, lewdly, and the audience stirred, seemed to come awake, out of trance.

*“And when married how you treat us, and of each fond hope
defeat us,*

*And there’s some will even beat us, oh! you naughty, naughty
men;*

*You take us from our mothers, from our sisters and our brothers,
oh!*

you naughty, cruel, wicked men.”

Two men were with her, fondling her, and she sang, smiling at one, then the other, accessible to their hands. She twisted away as one of them started to force her down, but it was a game she was playing with them for the audience, all hooting and whistling, clapping to the mad music. One of the men on stage with her had his belt in his hand; men and women were coupling on tables, on the floor, and she knew he was going to beat her, beat her, beat her... She tried to run away; the other man caught her and held

her and the belt whistled through the air and she woke up, drenched.

She was tangled in her sleeping bag, fighting to be free of it; the music was still there, still in her head. She jammed her hands against her ears. Silence returned.

She crawled free of the sleeping bag and got to her feet, made her way to the kitchen for a drink of water, an aspirin, coffee, anything. No more sleep, she thought almost wildly. No more dreams, not that night.

“What in hell have you been doing?” John MacLaren demanded, motionless in the center of the kitchen.

“What did you do? Why—” She stopped, clutching the door frame. “You heard it?”

Shock, he thought distantly. She was shiny with sweat; when he took her arm to move her to a chair, she felt clammy. He went to the room she was using and found a short terry robe, went by the bathroom and picked up a towel and returned to her. She had not moved. He wiped her face and arms and got the robe on her, and then made coffee. By the time it was ready, she looked better, bewildered and frightened.

“What happened?” she asked in a low voice. “I was dreaming. What did you hear? Was I making noise?”

“I heard music,” he said bluntly. “I thought you were playing the piano and singing.” He poured coffee and she held her cup with both hands. “Were you?”

She shook her head.

“I want to look at that damn piano.” When he stood up, she did too, and he did not try to dissuade her. Together they went through the living room. She pointed silently at the door to the adjoining room.

He felt baffled by her. Crazy? She did not look or act like any of the crazies he had known, yet... He knew he had heard her playing the piano and singing and that was crazy in the middle of the night. He felt curiously betrayed, even angry, the way he was angered when he caught a client lying to him. He opened the door and felt

the wall for the light switch.

There was another television, an ancient model, one of the earliest. There was a rocking chair with the rocker aslant. There were boxes; an open one was stuffed full of clothes, apparently. A kitchen chair, painted blue, a chest of drawers with one drawer gone, charred-looking. And behind it was the piano against the far wall. Things had been moved so that it was possible to get to it, but he no longer believed she had played it that night. She would have had to be in here in the dark, he realized; he would have seen this light from outside when the music woke him up. Silently they stared at the piano.

The keyboard cover was down, dusty, the way everything out here was during the drought. He worked his way to the piano and touched it, opened the compartment where the music rolls went in. Empty. He pulled the piano bench out and tried to open it. Locked. That was where the music rolls would be, he thought, locked away. Finally he recrossed the room, looked back, then turned off the light and closed the door.

“I think there’s a bottle of booze in the truck. Right back.”

“I put some papers in my car,” she said quickly. “I’ll get them. Castleman’s papers,” she added.

He thought she simply did not want to remain alone in the house for even a minute, and waited for her to slip on sandals and get her car keys. He found a bottle of bourbon in the truck; she retrieved a stack of papers from her car, and they returned to the kitchen.

He made them both drinks and they started to sort through the papers. There was very little of any use, he thought after several minutes. A few newspaper clippings, a few letters, receipts.

“Mr. MacLaren,” Lorna said a bit later, “is your father’s name David?”

“Yes. Why?”

“He already owns the piano. Look.”

She held out a slip of paper, a bill of sale. It was signed by Louis Castleman, who had sold the piano to David MacLaren for one dollar. Twenty-five years ago, the summer John had come to this

house with his father, the day they had gone down into the valley to look at the ruins.

But that was not where she had seen the name before, Lorna knew. "MacLaren" had been on a full sheet of paper. There were not many left to examine; she picked up the next one in her pile.

"Lorna, please call me John," he said. "In this part of the world only the senior male member of the family is Mister."

She looked up at him in the direct way she had. "Are you having a midlife crisis?"

He snatched his glass and stood up, went to the sink where he had left the bottle and poured himself another drink. Only then did he look at her. "Isn't that a bit impertinent?" he asked coldly.

"Sure it is." She finished scanning a sheet of paper, put it down, picked up another one. "I found it," she said in satisfaction and leaned back to read.

He looked out the window where he could see the eastern horizon, lightening in streaks. In an hour it would be sunrise, and he suspected that neither of them would sleep any more that night. He began to make more coffee.

When he glanced at her again, she was sitting very still, staring at the wall.

"Coffee, *Miss Shields*?" His voice was quite impersonal, he thought. He looked more closely. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She started, and pushed her chair away from the table, not looking at him. "You'd better read it," she said, and left the kitchen. Before he reached the table, he heard water running in the bathroom.

The paper was a letter written on Judge MacLaren's stationery, addressed to Louis Castleman. It was written in the kind of legalese that attorneys sometimes used to obfuscate an issue, language designed to bury the meaning in so many layers of verbal garbage that only a very persistent, or trained, reader, could possibly grasp the contents. John MacLaren read it twice, then sat down and read it a third time.

His grandfather, the Judge, had been blackmailed by Louis

Castleman, had yielded to his demands. He stated that he was satisfied that the unfortunate deaths had been the result of a disastrous fire, which was clearly an act of God. He had brought the weight of his good office to bear on the official investigation and the matter was now closed.

The last paragraph said: "David left this morning to be sworn in in the armed forces. I have no forwarding address for him; therefore I am returning your letter to him. I believe this concludes all our business."

He let the sheet of paper fall to the table and went out on the porch. In a few minutes Lorna joined him.

"I brought you coffee," she said. "Black, the way you had it last time. It does finally cool off a little, doesn't it?"

"Thanks. A little. When the weather changes, it'll be on the storm front. Black clouds gather like a phalanx and march across the land. I used to stay down in Tribune with the Judge quite a bit. We watched a tornado once and he said it was the devil pissing on earth." He sipped the coffee. "He died when I was seven."

"Did he teach you to love the prairie?"

"You can't teach that, just learn it."

"One of the women I interviewed back in West Virginia said people there had the mountains in their eyes. I didn't know what she meant. I think I do now. You have the prairie in your eyes."

They were silent for several minutes. John spoke first. "Think you could sleep an hour or so?"

"No!"

"I don't mean inside. Out in the grass in your sleeping bag. I won't sleep. I'll stand guard. An hour's about all the time you'll have before the sun will be up, the heat back."

"I'll collapse later, I guess, but right now I don't feel at all sleepy. You could go find someone to help with the piano and just take it, couldn't you? Since your father really owns it."

"Afraid not. As executor he had someone come out and make an inventory and send a copy to your brother-in-law. The piano's listed.

And the question really is why is the bill of sale here. Why did Castleman keep it? Let's sit down."

They had been standing at the porch rail; now they went to the steps and sat on the top one, his back to one of the railing uprights, hers to the opposite. The sky was definitely getting brighter. No stars were visible any longer. It was as if the sky were simply retreating farther and farther away.

"I'm not going to make a pass," John said. "Might have yesterday, but not now, now that I know you."

She nodded. There had been a moment yesterday when she thought he would make a pass, and she had realized that he didn't know how to start and had felt safe. Keeping her eyes on the brightening sky, she said, "I'd like to tell you the dream I had."

She related the dream matter-of-factly, distancing herself from it as if she were retelling a story she had read a long time ago. When she was done, she said, "I never heard that song before, and now I know it. It's flirty and innocent at the same time, not like music now. No innuendoes, nothing like that, just a little teasing, but what I dreamed was grotesquely obscene. I think the song's among the music rolls. That and the other one I dreamed."

"God," he muttered. "This is crazy. Do you walk in your sleep, have you ever? Could you have played the piano in your sleep?"

She gave him one of her long level looks and shook her head.

"Okay. I heard that song and assumed it was you. It sounded like your voice, but it was dark. Let's go have a look at that goddamn piano."

"I'll go shower and get dressed. It'll be light by then, I think."

Dusk was yielding to daylight although the sun had not yet appeared. No clouds reflected the sunrise.

The clear, sharp light was all about them when they returned to the storage room. John moved junk to make a path and together they pushed the piano through it into the living room. He opened the cover—mahogany and ivory keys, just as his father had said. The piano was out of tune, and when he stooped to examine the bellows behind the foot pump, he found them brittle and useless.

Obviously the piano had not been played for decades.

He went back for the bench and brought it out, then forced the lock with his pocket knife. The music was so brittle that when he tried to open a roll, a piece of paper broke off in his hand and he looked at it dumbly, paper with many holes punched in it, nothing more than that. He dropped the roll down among several dozen others and closed the lid. He was angry, his anger directed at himself this time. He had expected to solve a little mystery and instead had simply revealed a larger one. It would have been neat to prove that she might have been up playing the piano in her sleep—he had abandoned the idea that she had done it consciously—and instead he had proven that no one could have played the thing. When he turned his glare to her, she was frowning almost absently in his direction, not at him.

“Let’s eat,” he said, trying to submerge his frustration. His voice came out brusque and harsh.

“Peanut butter and sardines and fruit,” she said, trying to achieve the same light-hearted teasing tone that she had come by so naturally the day before. It sounded false this morning.

They settled for the peanut butter and fruit and more coffee.

“You should pack up your stuff and go up to Goodland, get a motel room and get some sleep,” he said. “I’ll be here when your sister and her husband come. I’ll tell them.”

“Tell them what? That’s the problem, isn’t it? There’s nothing to tell anyone. And I can’t let Elly and Ross just walk in on... on—I have to be here.”

She packed up her computer and tapes and tape recorder and straightened the room she had slept in, and there was nothing else to do. The papers they had examined were still on the kitchen table.

“If I were you,” she said slowly, “I’d sort through that stuff and take out things that really don’t concern Ross. If I were you.”

He nodded. She moved to the door and looked out.

“I’m going to take a walk before it gets any hotter.”

“You’re not going back down there?”

She shuddered. “Never! Don’t worry about me. I’ll stay on the trails.”

He watched until she was out of sight, heading directly away from the ruins, on a well-defined trail that first rose, then dipped; her shiny dark hair was like a sail vanishing over the edge of the sea. The grass, shadowed without wind, disguised the point of origin of a faint “Chuketa, chuketa,” the hoarse call of a quail. Above, where the sky should have been, there was only the vastness of empty space stretching away forever.

When he went back to the table and the papers, the house seemed preternaturally quiet. What had Louis Castleman done out here every day for over forty years? How had he paid his bills, bought food, paid taxes? He began to read the papers again, this time sorting them as he went, searching for clues.

Lorna walked aimlessly, needing to be away from the house, away from the piano, the papers that hinted at terrible things. She heard the sounds in the grass all around her without identifying them. Birds, quail probably, but she was not sure. Snakes? If there were birds, mice and voles, then there would be snakes and hawks and coyotes, she told herself, and tried to follow the food chain higher, but lost track. How had he managed to keep so many trails clear of grass, she wondered. The trails were not very wide, but they were easy to follow, well trodden down, so clear that it seemed he must have spent most of his time just maintaining them. Why?

She had been going downward for some time until now she was at the bottom of a ravine, a snow run-off possibly. The trail went through, out the other end, up a steep hill, over its crest. She stopped at a boulder large enough to cast shade and rested. And now the thoughts that she had denied surged back. The nightmare, the singing the first night, her lethargy down in the ruins. There was a pattern, she thought, and just by admitting it was there, she was jeopardizing everything she had ever thought she knew. That was what frightened people: Not that strange things happen, everyone admitted that readily, joked about it, used strange happenings as anecdotal material at cocktail parties. And then they all denied any meaning, any pattern and went on to other things.

Because, she went on, if you admit the pattern, a meaning, you are saying the world isn't what you thought it was, what you were taught from earliest infancy. All the stories had to be treated alike, with the same value, and that was no value at all, except as amusements.

She thought of the many elderly people she had interviewed already for her oral history of religious experiences. How easily they had accepted the various superstitions, the Aunt Lodies being turned into mules, the magical cures and powers they talked about. One woman had said, "Well, we went to any church being held. Didn't make no difference. They's all about the same."

And another: "Oh, we was scared to death all the time."

Fear of the inexplicable was channeled into religious fear that merely doubled its effect. And when religion became rational, the fear of the inexplicable had to be denied; there was nothing left to incorporate it. The inexplicable became small talk at cocktail parties. One event was caused by indigestion, one by misinterpreting the signals, one by a psychological problem.. That was the only way to handle the inexplicable.

Her instructor had been surprised, then elated with the ease with which she managed to get people to talk about their experiences. It was because, he told her finally, she had no strong system of belief that she used to challenge whatever she heard. She did not threaten anyone with contradictory dogma.

"I'm an uncritical listener," she had admitted cheerfully. "I believe that they believe and that's enough for me."

"And all women are twits," he had said.

She had stiffened with instant anger, and then realized what he had done.

"You see, until you feel threatened personally, you don't pose a threat to anyone else. The people you're interviewing sense that and confide in you."

She had listened to so many stories with uncritical interest, had felt no terror and had discounted the terror of others. That was a long time ago, she had thought, when people were still

superstitious. And she had known those people had brought the fears upon themselves by admitting to the supernatural, to magic, to witchcraft. Where would one draw the line, she had asked herself. If you believe one such story, why not the next and the next?

Her world was defined by air travel and moon walks and computers, by wonder drugs and heart transplants, by instant communication. Life was defined by the first brain waves of a fetus in the womb and the flattening of the EEG line that marked brain death. The fears were of things that people did to people, fear of disability, of incurable disease, of accidents, war. Fear of tornadoes and hurricanes and blizzards. There was no place in her world for the terrors of the inexplicable, no place for the terror of sensing a pattern that would mean the end of the world she knew. Admitting that such a pattern might exist created a void, and the void filled itself with terror.

“We was scared to death all the time.”

She got up then and looked at the ravine, up the far side, back the way she had come. She had been out longer than she had intended; the sun was high and hot already. Out here with the white-hot sky, the golden grasses withering from a lack of water, the quiet air, it was impossible to believe in the ghost piano playing by itself in the middle of the night. And she wouldn't believe it, she told herself.

John had put the papers for Ross Cleveland in the living room, and the others in his pocket, the ones he never intended to show anyone. Twice he had gone to look at the prairie to see if Lorna was in sight, not actually worried about her, just wishing she would come back. When he heard the automobile out front, he assumed it was Ross and Elly at last, and was stunned when he went to the front door to see his father approaching.

“The Buick's air conditioned and the office is closed,” David MacLaren growled as he entered the house.

He stopped, gazing at the piano still in the living room. He looked old and frail, John realized. Even when his father had suffered a

warning heart attack—that was what they all called it—he had not looked frail. And now he did.

“What are you doing here?”

“Restless. Wanted to see to this myself after all. Got up at five and here I am. Not bad time actually. Anything cold to drink?”

“Water.”

“Water’s fine,” the father said mildly. He had not yet moved, had not shifted his gaze from the piano.

John took his arm and steered him to the kitchen, saw him to a chair, glad now that Lorna had not returned. He put ice in a glass and filled it with water, thinking furiously. His father could clam up tighter than anyone he knew, and if he took that tack, nothing would budge him. He put the glass on the table and sat down.

“Before the others show up,” he said, “there are things I have to know. They’ll have questions—”

His father was looking with great interest at Lorna’s purse on the counter. “Seems to me someone has already showed up,” he said.

“Lorna Shields,” John said, and then plunged in, knowing if he had decided wrong, he never would learn anything. “She’s convinced the piano’s haunted.” He told his father about Lorna.

“Romantic schoolgirl nonsense,” David MacLaren said, and drank his water without looking at his son.

“I’d like to think so, but I heard the music too, and neither of us ever heard that song in our lives before last night.” He drew in a long breath. “And I found a letter from the Judge to Louis Castleman, virtually acknowledging blackmail. You were here when the commune burned. You told me it burned while you were in the army.”

David shook his head. “Never said that. I said when I came home it was all gone, done with. And it was.”

“Tell me about it. What went on here? Why is that damn piano so important? What was your connection with Josiah Wald?”

“Give me a minute.” He drained the glass and John took it,

refilled it while he was making up his mind. When he went to the table again, his father said, "Sit down, son."

He drank, and wiped his mouth with his hand. "Even with air conditioning that's one hell of a dry drive this kind of weather. You know, John, there are things you just never get around to telling your kids. There must be a thing or two you haven't brought up with yours." He was facing the open door, his gaze on the prairie beyond. "Well, there are things I never got around to talking about. I was eighteen when the crash came and the Judge was wiped out, and he never got around to mentioning it to me. Father to son, father to son, the same pattern again and again. Anyway it was time for me to go to college, the way my brothers had done, and the Judge was broke. Then Josiah Wald appeared. And Josiah had money and was on the run. Next thing he owned the land here, and I was off for Lawrence, no questions asked. I was too ignorant to know what to ask, I guess. And Josiah started building down in the valley, got his people coming in, was off and running, and I never knew a thing about him, or what was going on here. The Judge managed to get me a summer job at City Hall in Kansas City, and I was in school the rest of the year, and just not home much at all until I got out of school. And that summer I learned what Josiah Wald meant."

His father's voice had become almost a monotone and grew flatter as he continued. "I was bone ignorant when I graduated from college. Bone dumb. I never had had a girl. The first girl I kissed thought she'd get pregnant from open mouth kissing and wouldn't do it. That's how ignorant we all were those days. And Josiah Wald had a little Sodom and Gomorrah and Eden all wrapped up in one package in the valley. You have to remember there was the dust bowl and ruination and people jumping off buildings, only here there wasn't anything high enough to matter and they just picked up and left. There was Prohibition and the devil was on the earth everywhere you looked. Josiah prospered. You wanted a hideout, you had it. You wanted dope, no problem. Girls, they were there. Anything you wanted, if you had the price, it was there. And he mixed in religion. His message was that no one can choose good who hasn't experienced evil. And he provided the

evil. The devil was loose on earth, all right.”

He drew in a long breath and looked at John. “If I ever had found you in a place like that I would have killed whoever took you there. Anyway, the Judge found out I was sneaking off there when I could and he sent me packing to Kansas City again, to work part time, starve, whatever. And he tried to run Josiah Wald out. Didn’t work, though. By then Josiah had other, even more influential backers. Along about then I met Louis Castleman, and we came over together one week, and he stayed. He played the piano in the hotel. There was one building they called the hotel, and one they called the church. The hotel was a gambling casino, whorehouse, God knows what all. It was all a perversion. They turned everything into mockery and blasphemy. What Josiah was especially good at was corrupting the innocent. He got me and he got Louis even worse. What saved me was my state of finances. Down around zero most of the time, and I couldn’t play the piano worth a damn. I thought he was being good to me but I know now that he let me in just to taunt the Judge. He never let me stay, only long enough to spend every cent I’d scraped together, then he’d kick me out. So I wasn’t around the year that Louis was hired on. Then Louis wrote me that he was in love with a girl there and that he was going to kidnap her, to save her, and would I help him. A man doesn’t get many chances in this life to wear the shining armor and ride the white horse,” he said reflectively, and took a deep breath.

“You saw the valley, one road down there and that was it. No one ever went in there without an invitation and no one ever left without permission. I went in on the north side, sliding on my belly in the grass most of the way. And no one saw me. Louis sneaked me into his room and we plotted for three days and made one plan after another until we finally had it down pat. The girl was a singer, pretty as an angel, and thoroughly corrupt. She hadn’t been, Louis said, when someone brought her there. She had been frightened and innocent, a virgin. I don’t know how much he made up, how much he actually knew, but he was in love with her and that was the truth.”

He stood up and went to the sink for more water, not bothering with ice this time. Then he stood with his back to the room.

“The act was supposed to be funny,” he said. “The stage was a copy of an Old West saloon with a piano player and a girl singer, nothing else. He plays and she sings and then he leaves the piano and falls on his knees in front of her, and the piano keeps on playing by itself. The audience loved it usually. She kicks him away and he crawls back to the piano and takes up where it left off. They had music from back in eighteen sixty-five or so, a comic song from a Broadway musical, one of the first to strip the girls, I guess. Anyway, she sang it pretty nearly stripped. They had an electric motor rigged up to work the bellows. And that gave him the idea. After the act, the piano was out of sight, but he was supposed to keep on playing for the next hour or so. He planned to turn on the motor, grab the girl and tie her up and hand her over to me. I was to carry her to the high grass on the north slope and hide with her there and wait for him. He’d continue to play his usual numbers until he was through and by then she would have been missed, of course, but he’d be in the clear, and later he planned to join me and drag or carry her up over the top and save her.”

John felt frozen in that brilliant, hot kitchen as he listened to his father. His mouth was so dry he could not have spoken.

“We were all a little crazy.” His father went on as if he had rehearsed all of it over and over, waiting for a chance to perform, keeping his voice dispassionate as if long ago he had severed any connection between himself and the events. “The girl was the craziest of all. Louis told her he wanted to save her and she told Josiah, because she loved him and she thought he’d be nicer to her then, and that night the show was changed without anyone mentioning it. I was outside, keeping out of sight at the start. She sang and he played all right, but then the new action began. Two men joined her and at first it looked like a mock rape, but it didn’t stay like that. I ran in when she screamed and others were screaming by then and some running out wanting no part of what was happening up there, and some liking it just fine. They beat the living hell out of her on stage while two goons held Louis just off stage and the piano never stopped playing. The girl died.”

He said it so simply, so emotionlessly that it took a second or two for John to realize what he had said, what it meant.

“Oh my God.”

His father turned, his face a dark blur against the glare of light. He came back to the table and sat down and his voice was brisk now.

“Louis went crazy. Everyone was crazy, leaving the valley as fast as they could get their cars started, get up the hill. Louis carried her out and got in someone’s car and drove off with her. I got myself out of there the same way I had gone in, up the north side and walked the twenty-two miles to the Judge’s house before daylight. The next day there were rumors but nothing concrete, and that night the fire broke out and more people died and Josiah vanished. Well, that was too much to cover up. We all knew the war was coming fast and the day after the valley burned the Judge gave me an ultimatum. I could join the army that day and get the hell out or I’d be indicted along with half a dozen others as accomplices to murder. No one ever was indicted for murder. The girl’s death was laid to the fire along with the others’. No one disputed Louis’s claim to the land. He took what he wanted and bulldozed the road and lived in this godforsaken place until he died.”

“The piano?” John said after a moment. “What is that all about?”

“I never was sure. The day I brought you here with me, he said he wanted it in his will, that he wanted me to have it, and I said chances were about even that I’d go first and then what? I told you he was crazy. He went wild then and sold it to me for a dollar and kept the bill of sale. If I went first he’d tear it up, and if he went first, it was legally mine.”

“He killed Josiah Wald,” John said slowly.

“Yes. He buried the girl and went back to the valley and started the fire. When Josiah came running he pulled a gun on him and took him out. I never knew that until the day I came back with you.” He looked at his son shrewdly and said, “You heard something that day and denied it. I always wondered how much you heard, what it meant to you.”

“I thought it was the raving of a madman. It scared me. All that talk about the girl on the prairie.” He glanced at his watch and

abruptly stood up. Lorna! He had forgotten her and she had left more than two hours ago.

Lorna sat in the high grass and tried to think what to do. Long ago she had made herself a hat of sorts, woven grass held on by strips torn from her shirt. What else could she do? What did animals do when the sun got so high and hot? Burrow into the ground and wait for shadows, wait for cooler air? Wait for water next month or the next? She pressed her forehead against her knees. No tears, not now. She could not afford to waste the water that went into tears. Presently she pulled herself up and started to walk again. It seemed incredible that she could be lost when the trails were so clear and easy to follow, when she knew that if she went east she would reach the highway. She had gone east over and over, but she had not reached the highway. Once she had seen half a dozen red-winged blackbirds, wounded-looking, bloodied with the bright red on their shoulders, and she had started to run after them. They would be heading for the cornfields, east, the highway. Then, panic-stricken, the birds lost from view, she had jolted to a stop, surrounded by high grass, no sign of a trail anywhere. She had forced herself not to move, to think first. What had John MacLaren said? You can read the grass if you really look at it. She made herself study it all around and only then began to pick her way back to the trail. It had taken a long time to find it again, and if the grass had been less brittle, if she had not crashed through it so roughly, she might never have found the trail again. Now she left it only to rest in the grass from time to time.

Why were there so many trails? Louis Castleman must have been mad. Some of the trails wandered as aimlessly as a leaf miner on foliage, twisting and turning, going nowhere, crossing themselves. Landmarks meant nothing. They changed or vanished or receded continually. And there was only the grass left. The next rise, she thought, the next high place where she could look out over the countryside, there she would find a flat rock and make a map or something... then she heard voices.

“For God’s sake, just shoot me and be done with it!” A hoarse male voice slurred the words.

Lorna dropped to her knees in the grass, crouched as low as she could.

“Haven’t decided yet,” a second voice said. It was almost as hoarse and raspy as the first.

“God! Just cut me loose. We’ll both end up dead out here.”

“Shut up!”

Then she could see them, two men, one with his hands bound behind his back, the other holding a rope attached to him, leading him as if he were a horse. The bound man stumbled and fell; the other one continued to walk, dragging him through the grass until he regained his feet, sobbing and cursing. Suddenly he rushed the man leading him, and that man veered off, let him dash by, and jerked the rope. The bound man crashed to the ground, then scrambled to get up again as the other walked in the new direction.

Lorna held her breath until they were out of sight. Cautiously she raised her head and listened, and more cautiously she crept after them, following the beaten grass. When she saw them again, they were in a shallow gully, the bound man tied to a boulder, the other one vanishing over the crest of the opposite ridge.

“Don’t leave me here! Louis, don’t leave me here!”

She must have made a noise. He swung his head around and saw her.

“Get down! Don’t let him see you! He’s crazy, a madman.”

His voice was a harsh whisper that seemed to be in her head, not across the gully. Desperately he looked up the ridge, then back to her, and he caught and held her gaze with his own. His eyes were the incredible blue of high mountain lakes, and even now, unshaven and filthy, he was beautiful, she thought, and found herself moving toward him.

“Get down! Duck behind the boulders and come to me that way!”

She took a hesitant step.

“Listen. I’ve got money. Lots of it, more than you dreamed of. I’ll give it to you, all of it. Please help me! Untie me!”

She moved another step, another.

“He intends to drag me through the grass in the heat until we both drop dead. Do you know what it’s going to be like dying of thirst under that sun, tied to a dead man, or a raving maniac? Help me!”

“He won’t die,” she whispered, so softly her words failed to reach her own ears. “He’ll live and walk this trail every day for the rest of his life.”

A shriek of insane laughter came from the ridge. “You hear that, Josiah? I told you we’d get a sign. If she wants to help you, I won’t stop her. Otherwise, we keep walking, Josiah, you and me.”

She looked up the ridge where he was a black shadow against the brilliance of the void. Then she was falling, falling into the sky.

John MacLaren walked steadily up a hill to scan the surrounding prairie. Strange, he thought, how he had put out of mind the day he had come here with his father, twenty-five years ago. He had decided Louis Castleman was a nut, and with the arrogance of youth, he had dismissed him entirely.

That day he had been under the poplar trees, bored, hot, and the voices had carried out clearly, the way they sometimes did on the prairie. Castleman had raved and his father had yelled from time to time.

“Wanted to shoot him and I had the gun, but I just couldn’t do it. Couldn’t bring myself to do it. He was the devil and you know it and he deserved shooting and I couldn’t.”

“Why didn’t you just turn him over to the sheriff, you damn fool?”

“Couldn’t do that either. We made a deal, the Judge and me. And that devil would have brought in everyone, you, the Judge, my girl, everyone, made filth of everything he talked about, everything he touched. He would have done that, the devil. So we walked and I tried to pray and forgot the words and she came. God knew she was innocent, the devil couldn’t take away that innocence no matter what he did to her. God knew and sent her to me as a sign and she told me the price I’d have to pay and that was all right. A fair enough price to get the devil off the face of the earth. And then God

took her back up to His heaven.”

He had heard talk like that all his life, John thought, and had always dismissed it without considering what personal tragedies might lie behind it, what real terrors it concealed. He reached the crest of the hill and looked out over the prairie at the crazy, meandering trails that went nowhere in particular and briefly tried to find a pattern to them. There was none. Then he saw Lorna moving through the grass. She was not on a trail, but was walking directly toward the house as if she knew exactly where it was.

He watched her for several minutes. She had asked, mockingly he thought, if he was having a midlife crisis. Yes, he thought at her as she moved easily through the grass. He liked the loose jointedness of her walk, the way she held her head. It pleased him that she had had enough sense to make herself a sunhat out of grass. She would do, he thought nodding as the phrase came to him, revived from the Judge's pronouncement made more years ago than this girl had lived.

He waved then and she waved back. He joined her at the foot of the hill.

“Are you okay? I got worried, after all.”

“I'm okay. I got lost for a while, then I... I reached a high place that let me see the house.” She realized she could not tell him. She did not know him well enough; she did not understand enough to tell anyone, and she could not turn what had happened into small talk. Suddenly the silence between them became awkward and they walked to the house without speaking again.

He watched her drink thirstily, watched his father's careful neutrality turn into acceptance, and he knew the girl he had first met here, the girl he had yearned for like a schoolboy, was gone, lost on the prairie perhaps. He was very much afraid that he was in love with the woman who had replaced her.

After her thirst had been satisfied, David MacLaren said he wanted to take the piano out to the middle of the dirt road and burn it. No one objected. There was a dolly and straps in the truck; the truck could be backed up to the porch and he didn't give a damn how they dumped the thing into it. An hour later they stood and

watched as the first flames caught and flared straight up. They had brought out buckets of water and a broom and a rake, even blankets that had been soaked and were already drying out. They knew that if the prairie caught fire it would all burn. No one had mentioned it and they watched the fire silently. The back of the piano popped off and stacks of money fell out, caught fire and burned. No one made a motion to salvage any of it.

The devil's money, John thought, watching it curl up, blaze, turn to ash. He wanted to take nothing with him, nothing that belonged here.

She had not earned it, Lorna thought as she watched it burn. Had there been a choice? Could she have intervened? Not having an answer had put shadows in her eyes although she was not yet aware of them.

When the fire was little more than smoldering ashes, John dug a pit in the road. It was too hard-packed to go very deep, but it was enough to rake the ashes into, to let him pour water over them, and finally to cover them with the pale, sun-bleached dirt.

"Will you come to visit us?" David MacLaren asked Lorna, holding her hand. "I'd like my wife to meet you."

"Yes," she said. "Thank you."

He would take it easy, he assured John. The Buick was comfortable and he was not in a hurry now. He wanted thinking time, a lot of thinking time.

Lorna and John sat on the top step of the front porch where the poplars cast deep shade. They would keep an eye on the hot spot in the road, they had told his father.

"Hungry?" he asked, thinking of her peanut butter and sardines. She looked surprised, then nodded, and he went in and brought out everything edible he could find. The silence was companionable now, not awkward.

"I'd like to have your address," he said after they had eaten.

"Yes. It's not fixed at the moment, though."

"Mine is."

She turned to give him one of her long searching looks and then nodded. She was glad that he realized they could meet now in an ageless relationship, wherever it might lead eventually. She was glad that they could move with the unhurried rhythms of the prairie itself, take the time they both needed before decisions had to be made. She was most glad that none of them had demanded answers, that they had by silent consent agreed that first they had to find the right questions, and that might take a lifetime. She leaned her head against the newel post and listened to the rustlings of the grass and did not know that he heard the sounds as a singing that his heart could not contain.

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

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