The Incident at the Colonel's

Jason G. Clark
University of Central Florida, jclarkhallvin@gmail.com

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rtd
University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation
Clark, Jason G., "The Incident at the Colonel's" (1997). Retrospective Theses and Dissertations. 2632. https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rtd/2632
The Incident at the Colonel's

by

Jason G. Clark
B.A. University of North Florida, 1992

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
1997
It began raining late one Wednesday evening when the town of X. was dark and quiet. The rain was heralded by one resounding peal of thunder that shook every window and briefly opened every eye. The storm drifted slowly over the town, a mass of bruised clouds half illuminated by a waning moon. At first a light drizzle could be heard pattering against the windows, but within the first hour the sprinkling became a deluge. In the morning everyone awoke, rolled out of bed, and found it was too late to check the water's progress. By the time the town recognized the disaster, the flash flood warning had been in effect for six hours. The storm had caught everyone by surprise.

For six dark hours the rain had fallen without abate. By sunrise, or its dull grey equivalent, the waters had already done irrevocable damage. The streets in low areas became muddy, frothy cataracts, and in the worst areas entire houses were lost. The current lifted them from their foundations with astonishing care before dashing them against trees and other buildings. Many automobiles were also set adrift and displaced by the strength of the current. In one case the mayor's car was carried for two blocks before it crashed through the plate glass window of the drugstore, wedged itself into the farthest back corner, and then sank like a stone.

The cemetery was perhaps worst affected by the flood. It was as if the cataclysm had been concentrated there, and the resulting damage would never be completely
repaired. Several graves were eroded until the natural buoyancy of the coffins lifted them from the earth and the current deposited them elsewhere. Headstones were toppled, making it near impossible to identify or replace the dead in their proper graves. There was, however, one exception—the coffin of Colonel Marcus Mangum, which was unmistakably marked with a brass plaque bearing his name.

The rain fell and the flood gathered strength, winding between knolls, rushing down hills, collecting and whirling, until it had fully exhumed the colonel's remains and ushered them away. The current miraculously lifted the heavy mahogany and brass box and circumnavigated a variety of flotsam as it carried the colonel through the cemetery. It followed the submerged path to the iron gate and carefully pushed it aside. The coffin was guided through and carried down the street toward town. It somehow avoided possible snags and turned left on Main street, and finally washed up on the steps of the courthouse. And that is how the colonel was discovered, his massive coffin resting haphazardly on the stony steps, the golden plaque affixed to the lid catching a glimmer of the diffused morning light...

That is how the colonel came to rest on the steps of the courthouse one year after his death, or at least that is the story everyone swears by. No one saw it happen, but no other explanation has been found. There was a time when I sought a more rational and empirical answer, but that was before I learned to appreciate unseen connections. I have devoted the remainder of my life to understanding them. Since that time I have made it my goal to reassemble the facts which led to so many deaths and the dissolution of the town.
Let me begin by allaying immediate suspicions. I am not a nefarious character. If I am anything, I am a historian (of the local sort), a mere observer. Until recently I made it my responsibility to collect and chronicle, not to sacrifice my integrity by involving myself in the affairs of others. I was content to sit in the saloon, to listen for new stories, and to take notes for posterity, and though I willingly joined in a scheme to keep secret a heinous crime, I had the best possible intentions. My motive was nothing less than to sustain the town's collective pride, to save the people from the disillusionment they would suffer if the source of their pride were defaced. Mine was a sin of complicity, and you will learn more about it in due time.

The clean-up crews were the first to find the colonel, and they sent a man straight to the mayor's house. Mayor Bullock was not yet awake at six in the morning, and the banging on his door startled him from sleep. His wife, Edith, was still under the catatonic spell of the rain. She slept through the commotion without a sound, her only sign of life the almost imperceptible rise and fall of her breathing. The mayor sat up in bed, placed a hand on her side and was disturbed by the feel of her. She felt water-logged, heavy, lifeless. In a confused way he got out of bed, flattened his thinning hair against his head, and clumsily struggled with his robe. He then stumbled into the hallway and felt his way down the morning-darkened staircase.

"Who comes knocking this early?" he grumbled.

He took each step slowly, ensuring each foot was firmly planted before allowing his hand to glide along the bannister. He noticed a heaviness in the house--an oppressive
humidity that filled his lungs and hung thickly in the air. He thought his wife had left the windows open during the night and an unexpected fog had seeped inside. At the bottom of the stairs he shuffled to the front door and opened it without hesitating, and he came face-to-face with an unfamiliar man in dark blue overalls and heavy boots, all smeared with mud. The man was short and bony with small black eyes set too close together. His face had deep lines around the mouth, yet he could not have been much more than thirty years old. He was a veritable incarnation of ugliness. The mayor momentarily feared for his life.

"Mister Mayor," the man mumbled and nodded. "You seem to have weathered the storm all right."

The mayor withstood the instinct to retreat inside, but he kept one hand on the door just in case. In spite of the stranger's appearance, there was something vaguely familiar about him that assured the mayor he had not opened the door to a hoodlum. The stranger's face was showed no trace of expression, but he seemed to realize the mayor could not place him.

"It's Foster, sir," he said. "Webb Foster. I work at Whaley's garage."

"Ah," said the mayor. He recalled the man now. Webb had worked on his car before. He looked past Webb and into his yard. The lower half of his carefully tended lawn, the half nearest the street, had disappeared beneath reddish-brown water.

"What happened here?" he said as he stepped onto the porch. "You say there was a storm? Where is my car?"
"Yes, sir," Webb replied as he scratched beneath the bill of his cap. "There was a storm and a flood last night. By the look of it, everyone slept through it. It's made a mess of things all over town. As for your car, we haven't seen it yet. If you parked on the street then there's just no telling."

The mayor walked to the edge of the porch and again smoothed the hair against his head. Duty called, and for the moment he tried not to think of his car.

"What's the plan, Foster?" he asked. "What's going on around town?"

Webb used the back of a hand to wipe a smudge of grime from his chin. His face remained expressionless, but the mayor surmised he had something on his mind.

"Mayor," Webb said, "there's something you should know. It's about the colonel."

The mayor regarded Webb blankly, clearly confusing the living and the dead.

"What colonel? Colonel who?"

Webb returned his stare and waited, and slowly the mayor understood. He forgot he was still in his robe and pajamas. He squeezed his feet into an old pair of wingtips, grabbed his hat, climbed in the rowboat Webb had arrived in, and they set off toward the town square.

It took only a few minutes to travel from the mayor's house to the square. The courthouse and the town hall sat opposite each other at the center of town. They were separated by a small square surrounded by a wrought iron fence which contained a Civil War cannon and a statue of a Confederate soldier. As they approached the mayor noticed the cannon had disappeared beneath the water, and the base of the statue was submerged, lending the soldier the appearance of standing on water.
As Webb guided the boat toward the square, the mayor wrinkled his brow and half turned in his seat. He had assumed Webb had spoken of Colonel Marcus who was buried in the cemetery. He was about to question Webb when the latter nodded to indicate something ahead. The mayor turned and saw a small group of men surrounding a dark shape resting lengthwise on the courthouse steps. Judging by the size of it, the mayor took it for the carcass of a drowned cow. As they neared, however, the object gained definition, and the mayor recognized it as a very decorated box, resplendent with brass fittings and constructed of intricately hand-carved and beautifully finished mahogany.

"There," said Webb. "That's the way we found him."

As the boat approached, the men stepped back and maintained a quiet, reverent distance. They were dressed in filthy denim like Webb, and they had the haggard expressions one associates with floods. They had a funereal look as they stood with heads slightly bowed and hands clasped before them.

"What's this?" the mayor asked.

Webb opened his mouth to answer, but another man spoke up.

"Near as we can tell, the flood dug it up and carried it here, sir. Lord knows how, though. That box must weigh at least five hundred pounds. We've already been by the cemetery, and it's an awful mess. The colonel wasn't the only one who washed away, but he's the only one who got this far."

Even in death the colonel remained remarkable.
The mayor leaned over the lid to examine the plaque. With a corner of his robe he wiped away a thin layer of grime and the inscription stared back at him. There it was, the name every citizen would remember until Judgement Day. Marcus Aurelius Mangum.

"Yes, sir," the mayor said quietly. He absently felt the pockets of his robe for his glasses, but they were at home on the bedside table. "Without a doubt, this is the colonel."

Around two o'clock that afternoon, after the mayor had time to return home and find a linen suit to counter the heat of the slowly emerging sun: after surveying from the rowboat (still piloted by Webb Foster) the damage done to the town; after the painful discovery of the whereabouts of his car; the mayor met up with the sheriff by the cemetery and discussed the colonel's situation.

"Hell if I know what to do," the sheriff said.

Sheriff Parnell Sutter was frank in his speech and sometimes seemed to lack social graces, but everyone attributed it to his line of work. He was about the mayor's age, in his fifties, and like the mayor he was round in the belly but not at all soft. His forearms were massive and sunburned a deep red. He was tall and imposing, and he had narrow eyes that made him appear skeptical of everything and everyone. He was known to be stern and methodical in his work, and except for a few incidents he had kept the peace for close to ten years.

The sheriff seemed unaffected by news of the colonel, but the mayor could tell he was bothered by the way he chewed on a toothpick.
"There are three other coffins floating around right now," he said, "and we've got to find someplace for them as well. We'll probably bury them on that hill yonder, and relocate the cemetery there once this place dries up. I swear, if I could get my hands on the fool that picked this ground for a graveyard."

"I understand," said the mayor, "and I want the others taken care of as best we can, but we should probably take care of the colonel first."

The sheriff sighed in annoyance.

"We can't put him back in the cemetery," he said. He rested one hand on the revolver at his side. "And we ought not bury him elsewhere until we get in touch with his people. What's left of them are in Tennessee, last I heard. With the phone lines down it might be days before we get word from them."

"What about the morgue?" the mayor asked.

"No," the sheriff replied, shaking his head and crossing his arms. "It's rare that more than one person is dead above ground. It won't hold this many. Besides, I think there's someone in the cooler right now. Mrs. Hartke died Tuesday, you know."

The mayor nodded. He had known Elizabeth Hartke, or at least he knew enough to know she died of a grieving heart. Her husband, Theodore, practiced law in an office two doors from the town hall, and the mayor spoke with him frequently. Ever since their daughter had run away three years ago and had disappeared from the face of the earth shortly thereafter, Mrs. Hartke had been inconsolable. Not long after the girl and her roguish boyfriend ran off, they were identified as the hoodlums responsible for several robberies in neighboring counties. As the mayor recollected, the couple successfully
robbed a number of gas stations, grocery and liquor stores, and they killed two people along the way. Then, after a high-speed chase resulting in a mangled squad car and a deputy now confined to a wheelchair, the couple inexplicably vanished. For the first year the Hartke's remained hopeful their daughter would come to her senses and return home. But when another year passed and they received no word, Mrs. Hartke suddenly took to her bed and began wasting away with alarming rapidity. She declined a doctor's care and she refused to eat. Near the end she was so miserable that she could not even manage to sleep. Though her heart had ached for an entire year, her actual illness lasted only two and a half weeks, at the end of which she meekly expired with the conviction that her daughter was surely dead. Theodore had told the reverend she simply worried herself to death, and judging by her sickly appearance and the vacant stare she wore during her last days, no one doubted it.

"Yes," the mayor said quietly. "I heard about it. Tragic. The poor woman. Lord knows I saw it coming, but I think everyone knew how it would end."

"I suppose," replied the sheriff. He shifted the toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other and spat it out over his shoulder. He then pulled a fresh toothpick from his shirt pocket and placed it in the corner of his mouth. "But there's no room in the morgue for the colonel."

The mayor wandered away without another word. He found Webb Foster sitting in the rowboat where he had left him, and they set off for the courthouse once again.

When they returned to the square they were met by a group of men gathered to move the coffin from the steps. The group was made of volunteers who held a deep
respect for the colonel and his family, and they were not alone. A sizeable crowd of onlookers had heard news of the colonel's unexpected resurrection and had waded into town. They had momentarily put their worries out of mind to once again pay their respects.

Webb guided the boat up to the steps, gripped the mayor by one arm and helped him ashore. The mayor circled the coffin, rubbing his unshaven jaw as if working an equation. Despite its bulk and its awkward position on the steps, the coffin had not moved an inch. Its position defied gravity, yet the heavy mahogany box remained fixed in place.

"Okay, men," the mayor said. "We're going to move the colonel into the courthouse for the time being since the cemetery isn't fit to receive him."

Once they heard the mayor's plan the men went to work. Although the mayor circled and dodged them while issuing instructions, the men paid him little heed. They assumed the positions of pallbearers, and in one fluid movement they lifted the casket onto the wide portico of the courthouse. The mayor, who had been in the middle of a three-count to synchronize their efforts, was surprised by the apparent ease of the task.

"Well done!" he said. He hurried to open the doors for them, and no sooner had he jumped out of their way when it happened. One of the men in front tripped on the small step before the door and fell. It took the others by surprise and they lost control of the burden. They tried to get a better grip as the box slid out of their hands, but once it was in motion they could not stop it. As if on cue they all suddenly leaped away, and the coffin struck the ground. The sound—which was heard by others as far as one mile away—was likened to the resonance of a thunderbolt, the report of a heavy firearm, and even cannon fire.
The mayor, however, heard only a sudden ringing in his ears.

The mayor's hearing fully returned after only a few minutes, but not before he made a fool of himself in front of everyone in town. When the casket had been dropped, the ringing that set upon his ears had been so sudden, so mind-numbingly sonorous as it echoed in the square, that it briefly deafened him without his realizing it. When he saw the box strike the ground he winced and suddenly found himself in a world of ringing silence. At first he was too concerned with the damage to the colonel to notice his hearing had left him. He assumed that everyone--the volunteers, the flood refugees and on-lookers--had been so shocked that they were stricken dumb. But his hearing slowly came back to him, and he began to hear distant voices to match the gestures of the people. He then spotted a fissure, black and splintery, that ran along the side of the coffin at the edge of the lid. He winced at the sight--the colonel would never forgive him--but what he saw next wrapped his head in a torpid haze. There, dangling from the coffin, was a pale, desiccated arm. The mayor, not one to imbibe, suddenly had a taste for bourbon.

"Dear Lord," he said. He suddenly felt cold even though he was perspiring. His knees buckled, but someone caught him by the arm and steadied him. He thanked the man without seeing him, regained his balance and searched for a handkerchief in the breast pocket of his coat. He seemed to be fine, but just as everyone returned their attention to the coffin, the mayor glanced once more at the colonel's mortified arm and fainted.

When he regained consciousness he found himself on the ground surrounded by a group of concerned men. In spite of his weak state, his wits returned instantly and his face reddened in embarrassment. The men helped him to his feet and dusted off his
clothes. He could not have been unconscious for more than a few seconds, but he noticed the colonel was gone.

"We moved him to the courthouse just like you said," they told him.

The mayor stepped into the courthouse, and the men who had been milling around inside left and pulled the door half closed. They had set the coffin on a table at the head of the room, and they had tucked the colonel's skeletal hand safely back beneath the lid. The mayor approached and shook his head at the damage and at his poor handling of the situation. If the colonel had been in the ground he would be turning over in his grave. He lightly ran his hand along the side of the box and sighed. He seemed to be back in a right state of mind, but what he did next defied explanation.

Although the mayor was respectful, timid, and self-conscious, he seemed to possess the same morbid curiosity as the rest of us, the same horrified fascination we all experience in the presence of the dead. Or perhaps he was testing himself in the wake of his fainting spell to prove he was made of tougher mettle. He paused for a moment in the stillness and glanced over his shoulder at the door to make sure he was alone. He then carefully opened the lid of the casket to get a look at the colonel.

He did not know what to expect when he swung the lid back, but suffice it to say he was surprised at what he found. The colonel had been in the ground for one year, and with the exception of desiccation, his remains were surprisingly intact. The mayor had expected mortal decay to give way to a modicum of putrefaction, but apparently the embalmer had outdone himself. Except for the color of the colonel's flesh, which missed by one hue a perfect match to his grey suit, the man looked much as the mayor
remembered him. The wrinkles in his face had deepened from the erosion of a bacterial highway, and the skin was flaking away at the downturned corners of his mouth, but otherwise he seemed as stern and supercilious as in life. His suit still bore sharp, dignified creases, and he had a full head of aspen-white hair that, aside from needing a combing, looked quite stunning. In fact, the only object in the tableau which seemed out of place was the letter on his breast, half covered by one dusty lapel.

It apparently had been inside the breast pocket when the colonel was buried, and the rough handling of the coffin had knocked it free. When the mayor saw it he instinctively picked it up as if it were addressed to him. He shook the dust from it and examined it. The paper had turned yellow and gave off a musty odor. It was folded in thirds, and the flap was sealed with a medieval-looking wax seal that crumbled away before he could identify the insignia. The flap came open, and he unfolded the paper. It all happened quite naturally, and it was only after he had read the few words contained therein that he wished he had been less impulsive.

Marianne has been with me since her death. I thought I was rid of her, but her memory still haunts me. (Even now she watches me from the foot of the bed.) Each night she says my only recourse is confession. Very well, then, I confess. I do it that I may slay her again and obliterate the memory of her. I die knowing I acted justly.

The mayor finished reading and frowned. He had hoped to find a document of historical importance, something inspiring, perhaps the colonel's last words for the town. What he had discovered appeared to be nonsense. The colonel had died of a cancer that
made him delirious and insensible during his last days, that much he knew. The letter was apparently the record of a horrible fantasy induced by drugs and pain, or at least that is what the mayor wanted to think of it. It was unimaginable that the confession could be true, but he could not ignore the frightening sensation the words had evoked. He was almost prepared to dismiss it, to toss the letter back in the coffin and be rid of it, when he heard movement behind him. He quickly tucked the letter inside his own jacket and turned to see Webb Foster standing in the middle of the room.

"What is it, Foster?" he asked. He tried to sound annoyed. He carefully closed the lid to the casket and turned toward Webb. "I was inspecting the damage. You'll be happy to know the colonel is fine."

Webb regarded him blankly, but the mayor's mind was elsewhere. He ushered Webb out of the courthouse and closed the door behind them. The sun was disappearing and the people in the square had gone about their business once the colonel was safely stored away. The workmen were trudging off toward home through the knee-deep water that filled the streets. The boat was still alongside the steps, and the mayor wearily climbed in.

"Take me home, Foster" he said.

Webb rowed against the dying current. The mayor sat in the prow and offered encouraging words each time they passed another victim of the flood, but his heart was not in it. He felt weak and had too many things on his mind. For the remainder of the trip he silently regarded the sky as it faded into shades of red and purple just above the line of trees at the town's edge.
When they arrived at the Bullock residence Webb again helped the mayor from the boat. The mayor thanked him without a nod and headed toward the front door. He stepped inside and removed his hat. As he stood in the foyer he glanced through the window and noticed Webb had not moved. He still stood in the yard beside the boat and stared at the house. The mayor was about to open the door to check on him when Webb stepped into the boat and shoved off.

The mayor removed his coat, hung it on the rack by the door, and transferred the colonel’s letter to his shirt pocket. He caught a glimpse of his haggard appearance in the hall mirror. Since daylight he had been running around town wearing a suit in spite of the heat, and his clothes were rumpled and damp with perspiration. He had not eaten all day, and he blamed his sickly appearance and fainting episode on lack of sustenance. He removed his hat, placed it on the same hook with his coat, and leaned closer to the mirror. His face was red from the being in the sun, and the flesh around his jaws had an unhealthy sag to it. He examined his reflection more closely and saw an almost imperceptible map of capillaries on his cheeks. As he stared at himself he realized he was developing a headache. He momentarily closed his eyes, made an effort to relax, and felt the pain ebb away, but when he opened them the dull throbbing slowly returned. He feared it might be a migraine and went in search of his wife.
He could hear her moving around somewhere in the house, accompanied by the statical drone of gospel music from an old radio. He found her in the kitchen taking inventory of their canned foods. He coughed to announce himself and asked, "Do we have any aspirin?" She gave him a sympathetic look, began to speak, decided against it, and set off for the upstairs bathroom to search the medicine cabinet.

The mayor stood for a moment massaging his temples and announced he would be in the study. He shuffled down a dark hallway to a room at the back of the house and seated himself behind an old oak desk. In the twilight, in a comfortable swivel chair that had long since conformed to his shape, and with the familiar solidity of the cool, varnished wood beneath his palms, he was distracted from his pain and worries. It felt good to rest, to be home, to find some consistency after witnessing the chaos of the flood. After the day's unsettling events he welcomed the steadfast reality of life within these walls. He looked through the window over his desk, past his swampy back yard, out over the houses at the end of the block, past the trees which hid the highway. Yes, in spite of the flood there was still some consistency. He held the thought and closed his eyes once again.

Mrs. Bullock returned with a glass of water and five aspirin and set them on the desk. She knew the magnitude of his headaches. She placed a hand on his shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze.

"I heard about the colonel," she said and left the room.

The words interrupted his relaxation and he opened his eyes. He placed the aspirin on his tongue one at a time and grimaced at the acidic taste. The bitterness sobered him before he washed them down with water. He then sat back in his chair and thought about
how bad his day had been. The flood, the fainting, the colonel. Why must it all happen to
him?

The sun had disappeared and the study was in shadows. He turned on the small
desk lamp and removed the colonel's letter. He examined it at arm's length and tried to
consider it objectively. The colonel may have been many things—wealthy, pompous,
overbearing—but the mayor could not imagine him as a murderer. The confession had to
be the product of a sick mind, and if so, the colonel's privacy should be respected. There
was no reason to draw attention to a terrible dream the man had on his deathbed.
Shedding light on it would not benefit the town in any way. If this was the case, the letter
should be destroyed before it could do any damage. But the mayor knew the damage had
already been done. Even as he pulled an ashtray and a book of matches from a desk
drawer, he knew disposing of the letter was not the answer. He held it over the ashtray and
lit a match, but he could not bring himself to destroy it. He dropped the match in the
ashtray, laid the letter on the desk and smoothed out the creases. He could not dismiss his
discovery so easily. He could not think of the colonel in the same way until he proved the
confession was untrue. Tired and tormented, he placed his chin in his hands and sat
thoughtfully in a circle of angelpoised light.

I should mention that though the mayor held a deep respect for the Mangums and
their line, he never quite hit it off with Colonel Marcus. The mayor respected the
accomplishments of the early Mangums from the sketchy stories he had heard. They had
survived the Revolutionary and Civil wars, and in spite of adversity they had made a
fortune from tobacco. They had been honorable, dignified and forthright people who possessed qualities the mayor identified with and envied in spite of himself. Colonel Marcus, on the other hand, had been a child of the silver spoon. He had inherited everything his grandfather had built, inherited it all without lifting a finger, and he let much of the family holdings go to ruin. He was more interested in travel and adventure, something of a gluttonous spirit, and he spent far more on his expeditions than he added to the family fortune. The mayor respected the colonel Marcus on the virtue of his lineage, but he had always looked disapprovingly on the gentleman's frivolous ways.

"He should be more responsible," the mayor often said to his wife. He was careful not to speak against the colonel in mixed company.

Although he disapproved of the colonel's eccentric lifestyle, the mayor became particularly agitated when the town's coffers were low. The town's father, James Raymond Mangum, had looked over the town as if it were his child, and for a while he regularly made donations to improve it. When his son, Vernon, inherited everything, the donations continued, but there were much fewer of them. When Colonel Marcus came along, however, the town did not see one cent of Mangum money. While he lived, the Colonel spent money as if it were his calling. He spent it on extravagant dinner parties for local members of the upper crust; he spent it on outrageous and questionable "art" used to decorate his estate; and most of it he spent on traveling to the far corners of the earth to hunt exotic creatures.
"The folks around here look up to him," the mayor would say. "He ought to be more sensible and do something to earn our respect instead of living off his family's accomplishments. Lord knows the town could use his help."

The mayor did not have to wait long for the colonel's contribution. The colonel died one year later and the town inherited his estate shortly thereafter. It seems the colonel never bothered to draw up a will, and when he passed away everything he owned was suspended in a limbo of legalities. The Tennessee Mangum's wanted to sell the property and pocket the wealth, but the locals considered the estate of historical significance and petitioned the governor's office. The governor sent a man in a stylish suit to investigate the matter. He spent most of his time in the library searching for old books and records that would demonstrate the importance of the Mangums, and when he finally left he did not even do the mayor the courtesy of telling him his decision. One month later the mayor got a call informing him that the governor had recognized the historical significance of the property. He declared it protected by the state and gave the town the authority to manage it.

So the mayor got his longstanding wish that the colonel should invest in the town. He had big plans for the estate, and he expected the money it generated would pay for the upkeep and then some. Unfortunately, the estate was more costly than the mayor had anticipated. Maintenance costs and taxes took a startling amount of the town's revenue, and the few tourists who passed by did not seem interested in making a contribution. It was not long before the mayor realized the mistake. Outsiders did not care about the local history, and it seemed the colonel, even in death, continued to spend the money at his
disposal. It was not long before the estate became a serious burden on the town, and the mayor still had not come up with a plan to refill the town's coffers. Only a select few knew this, however. The mayor did his best to hide the fact from the citizenry, and the town council did their best to keep the memory of the colonel alive and pure. The truth is, by the time of the flood, the town was already on shaky ground.

It would be too simple, however, to attribute the mayor's ambivalence for the colonel to the old man's selfishness. Another well-known truth is that the mayor--although he tried his best to cover it--was a thin-skinned, overly sympathetic, hyper-sensitive and timid man, not the type one would expect or want in a leadership position. He was acutely aware of everything he did and said. He was painfully aware of how people perceived him, and he was equally pained by his often exaggerated perceptions. The wrong look or twitch of the mouth from a passerby convinced him that he was being ridiculed and threatened to send him into tears. He was, in a word, a wimp.

So when the mayor won the election, moved into the town proper, and began rubbing elbows with the local aristocracy, you can imagine the hell wrought on his delicate psyche by the domineering personality of Colonel Marcus. The colonel was not a cruel man, but his heritage and social position exempted him from the folkways to which everyone else adhered, and he sometimes gave offense without ill intent. The mayor could recall numerous occasions in which the colonel made him want to cover his face and run away in tears, but the one he recalled the most vividly, the most painfully, was the only time Colonel Marcus extended to him a cordial invitation to the estate.
He was invited to join the colonel, the sheriff, and a few other gentlemen for an afternoon of shooting skeet. He was not proficient with firearms, and he had not handled a shotgun since he was ten years old. As a boy the recoil from the blast had landed him on his rear, and ever since he had habitually avoided guns. When the colonel extended an invitation, however, it was not an easy thing to decline. The mayor showed up at the estate on a Saturday afternoon. He watched as the others blasted pigeons from the sky, but eventually the colonel noticed he had not taken a turn. "You're next," the old man said, and he handed the mayor a twelve gauge, double-barrelled shotgun. The mayor moved into position, and the sheriff released the skeet. The mayor raised the gun, got one pigeon in his sights, traced its path across the sky, and fired. In his haste he had not taken a balanced stance, nor had he paid attention to the fact that there were two triggers, one for each barrel. When he realized he might actually hit his target, he excitedly pulled both triggers and repeated the embarrassing incident from his childhood. The recoil of the blast landed him on his rear, but not before he knocked over another guest, some lawn furniture, and a pitcher of Martinis. The others coughed into their fists to hide their laughter. The colonel, in spite of his typical bullishness and insensitivity, had the grace to blame it on the effects of liquor, but a poorly concealed grin betrayed his amusement. "One too many drinks, eh?" he said. The mayor nodded and said, "Perhaps." He did not mention that he had not taken a drink. He endured another ten minutes of humiliation before he quietly left the estate and went home to sulk in the solitude of his study. The colonel never again invited him to the estate unless it was for something safe, such as a dinner party.
The mayor did not harbor any resentment, but the experience certainly tempered his view of Colonel Marcus. For the remainder of their professional relationship he and the colonel were on cordial terms, but the colonel kept him at a distance and they never became friends.

The hallway clock struck eleven and recalled the mayor to his senses. He heard his wife moving around on the floor above, and he traced her steps with his thoughts: along the familiar path to the bedroom, to the closet, to the dresser, to the bathroom, and finally to the bed. He heard the muffled squeak of bedsprings and a whisper, perhaps a sigh or a quiet prayer. He switched off the desk lamp and sat in the dark, staring out the study window. A warm breeze came through, heavy with the scent of damp earth. He stood to go to bed and caught a glimpse of a car prowling the streets near the town hall. He wondered about it for a moment and then saw the flash of a flood light as it reflected in what remained of the store windows. It's the sheriff, he thought. He then closed the window and went up to bed.
Three

The mayor overslept the next morning until seven thirty, and he would not have opened an eye if his wife had not coaxed him out of bed. He had not yet recovered from the previous day's exhaustion, and for a long minute he stood motionless, as if asleep on his feet, until his wife realized she had to get him started. She arose, led him to the bathroom and placed a damp washcloth on his head. The mayor's senses slowly came to him, and when Mrs. Bullock was satisfied that he had been set in motion, she pulled a linen suit from the closet, hung it on the bathroom door, and went downstairs to prepare coffee.

By Friday morning the water had dried-up or receded, and only a few inches remained in the lowest areas. The streets and sidewalks were filled with people looking for supplies, but few were to be found. Most of the stores had also suffered damage, and many of their goods had been washed away. The proprietors, who now faced the full effect of the flood, handled the disaster according to their abilities. Broad-shouldered Mr. Grossbart, the owner of the hardware store, moved with slow and melancholy determination as he rebuilt displays and restocked shelves, occasionally stopping his work to help a customer find an item among the wreckage. Mr. Thomson, the drug store owner, who in spite of his complete access to a myriad of pharmaceuticals always appeared thin and jaundiced, stood and dumbly watched as a tow truck dragged the mayor's car from his store. Perhaps the most colorful display came from Mrs. Prude, who in complete contrast
to her name was not the least bit prudish. The heavy-set woman owned what had been a dry goods business only two days before. She waddled back and forth hurling curses at every water-logged item she found, and when her expletives ran out she would stand red faced, arms crossed, grinding her teeth until her next tirade. To complete the tableau there was Mr. Thorndike who operated a wire and local delivery service established by the Mangum's more than a century ago. He had nothing invested in the company except his devotion, but he sat on the curb in complete despondence with his head between his knees.

The mayor was on hand to supervise the recovery of his car. He watched as it was pulled from the drug store, and he winced when it slowly plowed through another six inches of brick and mortar. He bit his lip to stay in control and did his best to berate Webb Foster for his clumsy handling of the tow winch.

"Confound it, Foster," he said. "Pay attention to what you're doing."

Webb glanced at him and went about his business.

While Webb finished hooking the car to the tow, the mayor took the opportunity to walk down the street and survey the damage. He paced to one end of the block and looked around. As far as he could see, the streets were filled with debris and the buildings were coated with mud. When he found no good signs he turned and walked one hundred paces in the opposite direction. He stopped on another street corner in front of the grocery store and a long line of people waiting to get in. He tipped his hat and greeted the people as one. Inside he could see a family of grocers busily arranging the perishables that had not yet perished. There were only a few patrons in the store, and they picked over the meager
selections and filled their baskets with the best variety of canned goods and produce they could assemble.

It was nine o'clock in the morning, and since the mayor had overslept, his breakfast had consisted of a single slice of buttered toast and a cup of coffee. As he watched a stack of peaches disappear, his stomach began to grumble. He was so consumed by a sudden taste for peaches that he practically had his nosed pressed to the window when he noticed a tall, thin man in a grey suit separate himself from the other shoppers and step up to the counter. The man caught his attention because, like the mayor, he was the only other person who wore a suit instead of dungarees, overalls, or other work clothes. The man approached the counter grasping a small shopping basket with both hands, his elbows kept close by his sides. His steps were small and tentative, and he kept his head slightly bowed. The grocer took the money, piled the cans, peaches, and one loaf of day-old bread into a paper sack. The man grasped the bag, pressed it to his chest with perhaps too much force, and turned for the door. It was then the mayor realized who he watched, though there was very little familiar about him. The angular, insect-like man was none other than the tragically cursed Theodore Hartke.

The mayor's heart went out to the him. Theodore had lost everything--his daughter, his wife, and now, judging by his gaunt appearance, his health--everything, that is, except his profession as an attorney, but he seemed to have abandoned even that in the last several weeks. As his wife's health had faded he was seen less and less until he finally disappeared altogether. He had remained at home by his wife's bed for the last weeks of her life, and the only proof of his existence during that time was the weekly orders he
placed over the phone to the grocer and the druggist. Only now, as Theodore turned to leave the store, carefully averting his eyes to avoid all contact, did the mayor realize he had not paid his respects or offered any condolences. The business of the flood, not to mention the Colonel, had taken up most of his time since he had heard of Mrs. Hartke's passing two days prior, and he blushed at his forgetfulness. It was not at all like him to forget such a terrible event, and though all the signs suggested the man was not in the mood for conversation, the mayor's good intentions gathered behind him like steam in a kettle. When Theodore emerged from the store, the mayor stepped forward and embraced him.

It was not a full embrace because Theodore was protected by his groceries. The mayor grasped him by the shoulders and administered several reassuring squeezes. Theodore looked up as if he had walked into a wall.

"Theodore, my friend," the mayor said, "I hope you'll forgive me. So much has happened lately that I forgot about you. I'm so sorry about your wife. It's awful, awful news. If there's anything I can get you, anything I can do for you, please let me know."

Theodore slowly returned from his despair, and the mayor could see in his eyes that he was touched by the thoughtful gesture. Then, as if to avoid an emotional display there on the sidewalk, Theodore nodded, walked to a bicycle leaning against a telephone pole, secured his groceries on the back, and quickly pedalled away. The mayor watched after him for a moment longer and made a mental note to call on him at a more appropriate time. He nodded at several individuals in the crowd to show he was aware of their troubles and walked back to the drug store.
When he returned his car was hitched to the tow truck. He climbed into the truck with Webb, they made a wide U-turn which took them several feet on to the sidewalk opposite the drug store, and they headed for Whaley's garage on the west end of town.

The mayor was not mechanically inclined, but even before Webb spent an hour examining the intricacies of the car's engine he had accepted that it would be out of commission. While Webb tinkered beneath the hood, the mayor sat in the driver's seat with his hands on the steering wheel. When Webb finally closed the hood and informed him it would take at least one week to repair, the mayor shoved his hands in his pockets, sighed and nodded.

He had taken the better half of the morning to deal with his car. At eight o'clock sharp he had stopped by the office and placed a call to the governor's office to request flood assistance. The secretary took down his name and number and said she would tell the governor as soon as he was available. In the last year the mayor had made a growing number of calls to the governor, and by now the secretary knew his name and voice. The mayor could sense her mood change every time he called. As soon as he identified himself, her voice went icy. She pretended to be polite, but she did not put much effort in it.

Since the call had been made to the governor there was little else for the mayor to do. One imagines public office as very demanding, but the truth is the position of mayor in X. was little more than a figurehead. Mayoral responsibilities had increased since the colonel had passed away—he had been the true authority—but when dealing with disaster the mayor's role was little more than support. So, he decided to make use of his time. The
matter of the colonel had never been far from his mind, and he decided to take the
opportunity to look into the circumstances surrounding the old man's confession.

He found Mr. Whaley, the garage owner, in a cramped room that served as his
office. The desk took more than half the space and was covered with paperwork bearing
greasy fingerprints. Mr. Whaley sat behind the desk with a pen in one hand and a cigarette
in the other. The mayor explained the situation and Mr. Whaley nodded. They stepped
outside behind the garage and Mr. Whaley gave him the keys to a twenty-year-old jalopy.

"She's old," he mumbled, "but I've been working on her for the last year. She'll run
good enough for you."

The mayor thanked him, used a rag to dust off the seat, and climbed in. The
engine easily started and he set out for the colonel's.

The drive was not a pleasant one, especially for the mayor. Outside of town the
roads were unpaved, and the weather had left them pot-holed and deeply rutted. The
stretch from the nearest edge of town to the Colonel's was about ten miles of rough riding
at any speed. More than once the mayor's head bounced against the ceiling, and by the
time he arrived his hat was ready for retirement.

The colonel's driveway would have been easily mistaken for a side road if not for
the columns that stood on either side. They were more than ten feet in height and had a
circumference greater than the mayor's generous belly. They were Roman in design and
wrapped in kudzu vines that had crept up their sides over the years. The mayor considered
them out of place and gaudy, but they were an accurate testament to the life and mind of
the colonel. Everything he and his predecessors built or bought seemed larger than life.
The driveway led through a copse of trees that hid the estate from the road. After half a mile the trees thinned, and the ground as far as the eye could see was covered in untended fields and punctuated by a shadowy line of trees on the horizon. The house stood atop a gentle rise, and the driveway led right to the front door before looping back on itself. The mayor spotted a car in the driveway and was relieved to know someone was home.

When he climbed out of the jalopy he noticed his shirt was visibly damp beneath the arms. The car did not have air-conditioning, and the hot wind in his face from the drive had worsened his perspiration. In order to maintain the appearance of a well-kept official he put on his jacket, took another moment to wipe his brow and catch his breath, then rang the bell. He waited for what seemed the appropriate amount of time to be answered, and just as he was leaving the porch to give the house a suspicious eyeballing, the door opened. He turned, courteously removed his hat, and was surprised to find a young colored girl, perhaps twenty years old, in jeans and a t-shirt covered with smudges and stains.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Mayor Bullock. I'm looking for the caretaker. Is Henrietta here?"

Henrietta had served as the colonel's housekeeper for more than thirty years. When the colonel passed away and the estate became a landmark, Henrietta was the logical choice for caretaker. She resided there and managed the estate. She could not do much for the grounds, but she kept the house in immaculate condition.

The girl extended a hand.
"Hello, sir," she said. "I've heard your name plenty, but I've never had the pleasure. I'm Naomi, Henrietta's daughter."

The mayor smiled and returned an "Oh!" while he searched for a memory of her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he said. "Is Henrietta here?"

"No, sir," Naomi said. "She went into town for supplies. This place keeps her moving."

The mayor looked to the arched ceiling above the foyer.

"I imagine so," he said. "Will she return soon?"

Naomi gave him a knowing look.

"You must want to talk about the colonel."

"Yes," he stammered. "How did you know?"

"I heard," Naomi said. "I heard the flood dug him up and he's in the courthouse. Isn't that amazing?"

The mayor nodded. He had been so preoccupied with the colonel's letter that he had forgotten about the need to rebury the man.

"Mama left early this morning," Naomi said. "I don't know when she'll be back, but you can wait if you want."

The mayor accepted and Naomi invited him inside. She led him down familiar hallways toward the back of the house and stopped in the kitchen. It was a spacious room with large windows that afforded an ample view of the back fields. In front of the windows stood an easel and a partially painted canvas. The colors on the canvas matched the stains on Naomi's clothes.
"You're a painter?" the mayor said. "How wonderful." He had never possessed the aptitude for artistic pursuits, and in the presence of such things he always reverted to a state of child-like fascination. He had to suppress the urge to pick up a brush and try his hand at the canvas.

"No, I'm not a painter," Naomi said. She removed a pitcher from the refrigerator and poured the mayor a glass of water. "I'm an aspiring painter. I'm an art student."

"Well, I'm sure you're very good," he said, but the remark sounded perfunctory and unconvincing. He took a sip of water and seated himself at the kitchen table. He removed his jacket, loosened his necktie and watched as Naomi returned to the canvas. He could see the land beyond the easel and realized the girl was painting the view from the window. The frame was filled with dead grass and sky.

"That's a bit bleak, isn't it?" he said.

Naomi stood in profile cleaning a brush in a jar of murky water.

"Yes," she said, "but it's part of an exercise, working from memory. I remember when Mama and I moved into the guest quarters when I was little. There was tobacco and curing sheds in the fields back then."

The mayor had only lived in town since his election three years ago. He had never seen the estate at its height.

"At first the fields were kept full and green," Naomi said. "Then the colonel stopped growing tobacco and fired the groundskeepers. He lost interest in the land and it slipped away. The tobacco dried up and weeds began to grow. Now all I've got is the memory."
"So," the mayor said. He recognized the opportunity to peer into the colonel's past. "You grew up here for the most part. It must have been quite an experience growing up in a place like this."

"I suppose," Naomi said. She had her back to him and was painting a dark line along the edge of the horizon.

"A place like this," the mayor said in a knowing voice, "must have offered many opportunities for mischief."

"Sometimes," she replied. "But not as many as you'd think. I was told to keep out of the colonel's way, and there were plenty of places where I was not allowed. The only rooms I could safely visit were Mama's bedroom and the kitchen. I couldn't go in the front rooms unless I had permission, and I wasn't allowed upstairs at all."

"Oh," the mayor said quietly. He felt foolish for introducing the subject.

"The summer he died was the worst, though," Naomi said. The mayor sipped from the glass of water and took advantage of the moment. "You were here that summer?"

Naomi nodded.

"It was a strange time," she said. "The cancer ate at him. It was like there was less of him to care for each day."

"I see," the mayor said. The story piqued his interest. He had no way of knowing when the colonel had written his confession, but he imagined the old man had written it from his deathbed. He paused to pick his words carefully. "What were his last days like?" he asked.
Naomi kept working on the canvas and absently told him the story.

One day near the end of summer the colonel had done something very un-Colonel-like: he spent a day in bed. The man was in his seventies and was certainly entitled to a day in bed, but no one had ever heard of such a thing. Even when he felt a bit under the weather, he stubbornly resisted Henrietta's complaints and would sit on the porch in his undershirt and trousers to smoke his pipe. So, for the colonel to spend a day in bed was a shock to everyone.

When the doctor heard he decided to pay a visit. The town was small enough that he was rarely kept busy, and he spent most of his time reading or sitting in front of the diner next to his office, swapping stories with the old men. On the day of the Colonel's illness he was particularly available, and he leapt at the chance to practice his trade.

The doctor reached the estate and Henrietta led him upstairs, knocked on the door and sent him in. The Colonel was not one bit pleased to see him, or so it seemed at first. The doctor was old, too, maybe older than the Colonel. They had known one another for a long time, and the doctor didn't take any of the Colonel's guff. He grinned and said "What are you doing in bed so late in the day, old man?" The Colonel gave a surly reply, but there was no malice in it. The men had a relationship which each understood.

Twenty minutes later the doctor came downstairs. It seemed the colonel was sick after all, but the doctor had not identified the illness. The colonel's age and contrariness made his condition difficult to diagnose. Men in their seventies are likely to get a number of diseases with similar symptoms, and identifying the problem was complicated by his stubborn refusal to admit he was ill. The doctor carefully slipped questions into the
examination as he probed and prodded, and for the most part the colonel answered him point-blank. When the doctor asked for fluid samples, however, the colonel became indignant. He refused to have his water examined because of one day in bed. The doctor had no choice but to leave empty-handed.

"How is it that you know this?" the mayor asked.

Naomi grinned.

"Mama told me some of it," she said, "but like you said before, there were opportunities for mischief. I wasn't supposed to venture far beyond the kitchen, but I didn't always obey."

The next day the colonel had been up and around as usual. He seemed as well as ever, and everyone except Henrietta and the doctor was convinced he had caught a twenty-four hour bug. His complexion looked healthier, and except for a diminished appetite and a slight stiffness after a day in bed, he moved about the house without a sign of discomfort. He spent the morning drinking plain coffee because Henrietta would not let him flavor it with brandy so soon after being ill. He spent two hours in the study going through mail and old papers which had gathered on his desk, and he spent another hour standing in the yard talking to the sheriff who had stopped by to check on him. During all that time he had seemed like the old man everyone was used to.

"But I saw something the others did not see," Naomi said.

After lunch the colonel had secluded himself in the study and started looking through letters and books. Perhaps something he found there revived a memory or sparked a desire to plan another trip, and he called Calvin downstairs. Calvin was a strange young
man who Naomi never quite understood. He was much younger than the colonel, in his thirties, and his purpose there seemed to be to accompany the colonel on his expeditions. Calvin met the colonel in the study and together they scheduled a hunting expedition in South Africa for the following week. In order to arrive on time they needed to leave the next day. Henrietta had scowled at the idea, but she had known the colonel was unshakable, and she had allowed him to make his plans.

"When the colonel got an idea in his head, there wasn't much to keep him from it," Naomi said.

The mayor hung on her words for a moment before recalling her previous thought.

"A moment ago you said you saw something that no one else noticed."

"Yes," she said, and her hand paused with the paintbrush still on the canvas.

The thought of adventure had put the colonel in a good mood. After making their plans, the colonel told Calvin to fetch some skeet. The colonel pulled a shotgun from the gun cabinet in the study and went to the back fields. Whenever the colonel shot skeet, Naomi usually went in the other direction to get away from the noise, but that day, for reasons she could not recall, she did the opposite. She stood at the large kitchen windows and watched. Calvin launched several rounds of skeet and the colonel blasted every one out of the sky. Naomi jumped slightly at the sound of the gun each time the colonel fired. She watched them for perhaps twenty minutes, and then they stopped. The men seemed to be talking about something that made Calvin hang his head. Then Calvin had shaken his head as if to say no, and the Colonel had sent him away.

"Away from their sport?" the mayor asked.
"Away from the estate," Naomi said. "That was the strange part. Calvin was like a son to him. He accompanied the colonel on all his trips, and when they weren't travelling he practically lived here. They seemed inseparable. I had never seen them at odds."

Naomi had watched Calvin return to the house. He entered through the kitchen door and passed within reach, but he did not seem to notice her. She remained in front of the window and watched the colonel. He stood in the field with his back to the house and stared into the distance. She heard Calvin climb the stairs and cross the floor above her, and she watched the colonel place two pigeons on the skeet-thrower and reload his shotgun. She heard Calvin come down the stairs and leave through the front door. He walked outside, climbed into his car, and left the estate. The colonel spent a moment contemplating the emptiness in front of him, and finally he released the pigeons. As usual, he blasted both of them out of the sky, but before the echo had died he clutched at his chest and fell to his knees. Naomi called for her mother and ran out into the field. When she reached him his eyes were tightly shut, and he was grinding his teeth as if in pain. She touched his arm to help him, but he snarled and jerked his arm away. She stood over him in distress and confusion until Henrietta arrived, and together they had managed to haul him back to the house.

The mayor cleared his throat.

"Is that when you learned of the cancer?"

"Yes," Naomi said.

The doctor had arrived within the hour and concluded the colonel had collapsed from a mild heart attack. The doctor agreed to let him stay at home under the condition
that he remain in bed for another two days. Henrietta agreed and promised she would
watch the disagreeable old man like a hawk. This time, however, before the doctor left he
demanded the colonel give a blood sample. The colonel put up the usual fight, but
Henrietta threatened to hold him down if he did not cooperate. The colonel grudgingly
oblighed, and the doctor left with a small vial of Mangum blood. Two days later he rang the
bell with the news. The doctor and Henrietta climbed the stairs to the colonel's room and
closed the door behind them. Half an hour later they came downstairs and the doctor left
the house. Henrietta sat down at the kitchen table. She looked like a rag doll that had been
dropped there. Naomi sat down across from her and did not say a word. They sat in
silence until Henrietta finally looked up and said, "He's dying."

Then everything changed over night. It was as if awareness of the disease
empowered it and it flourished. The colonel was never again seen downstairs, and he had
all his books and important papers moved into his bedroom. He took no visitors other than
Henrietta and the doctor. At all other times his door had been kept closed.

"It must have been a terrible time for everyone," the mayor said. He listened for
the quiet pat and stroke of the brush on the canvas and realized Naomi had stopped
painting. She stared at the canvas as if in a trance.

"I had never seen anyone dying before," she said.

The colonel had spent the next three months wasting away in bed. In the second
month he seemed to lose the strength to lift his head from the pillow. Henrietta fed him,
cleaned him, and changed his clothes. Every morning she felt for his pulse to find out if he
were still alive. He fell silent for the last month of his life, except for one particular incident in which he had blown a hole in his bedroom wall with a shotgun.

"He did what?" the mayor asked.

One night Henrietta had heard movement in the house after everyone had gone to bed. She stood in silence in the kitchen, her head cocked to one side, listening. It sounded as if someone had passed through the foyer and was on the stairs. She crept into the hallway, but by the time she reached the foyer the sound had stopped. She could hear someone wheezing in the darkness at the top of the staircase. She followed the sound, not knowing what to expect, and at the top she spotted a light beneath the colonel's bedroom door. She knocked before entering, and it was fortunate that she did. She heard a blast, and a large hole appeared in the wall to the left of her head. She threw the door open and found the colonel collapsed on the floor with a shotgun. He was struggling to reload it, but his feeble hands could not get the shells in the barrels. Henrietta grabbed the gun from him, and he looked at her as if she had appeared out of thin air. "She's here," he said. He had a wild look in his eyes, a strange mixture of fear and anger. Henrietta had all but carried him to the bed. In order to make sure he stayed there she had pulled the covers up to his neck and had tucked the loose edges of the sheets beneath the mattress to bind him in.

"Who was the colonel referring to?" the mayor asked.

Naomi looked at him quizzically.

"What do you mean?"

"You said the colonel was convinced someone was there with him. Who?"
"I don't know," she said.

The mayor resisted the urge to mention the name Marianne. It was clear Naomi could not offer him definite answers. He finished off the water and set the glass on the table.

"You want some more water, sir?" she asked.

"No, thank you," he said.

The chair he sat on was not very comfortable, and he stood to relieve a mild pain in his back. He was about to make another inquiry when Naomi saw him rise.

"I'm glad you stopped by, Mr. Mayor. I'll tell Mama you were here. She'll be sorry she missed you."

The mayor was not prepared to leave, but he decided to avoid the awkwardness of the moment. Besides, he had no idea when Henrietta might return, and he had interrupted Naomi's painting. She had been kind enough to entertain him, and he did not want to impose upon her further.

"That's fine," he said. "Maybe I'll catch up with her tomorrow."

He put on his hat and coat and thanked Naomi for her time and hospitality. He glanced at the canvas before heading for the door and noticed the scene was almost complete. During their conversation the girl had blocked his view, and he had not seen the image emerge from her memory onto the canvas. He compared it with the view through the window and saw how Naomi had improvised. The trees, bushes, and sky had been duplicated, but the tobacco and curing sheds had also been restored. It seemed a composite of the past and present, and he imagined the estate must have once looked much
like it. He followed the girl to the front door, tipped his hat, and climbed into the jalopy.
He was simultaneously disappointed and pleased at what he had learned. Naomi had not
given him a reason to disregard the colonel's confession, but she had thrown some light on
the circumstances surrounding it. The picture she had painted of the colonel in his last
days clearly called his sanity into question. Nevertheless, the mayor felt it was his moral
obligation to look further into the matter. As he followed the driveway back to the road, he
noticed Naomi stood on the porch and watched after him. He stuck an arm out the
window and waved goodbye again.
On his way back to town the mayor ruminated over Naomi’s story. It confirmed his suspicion that the colonel had become unbalanced in his last days. The incident in which he had taken a shotgun and blasted away at ghosts was the most disturbing proof that the old man had lost his mind. No matter how much he tried to dismiss it, however, the mayor was still bothered by the confession. No matter how he rationalized it, he could not toss the paper away and free his mind of doubts. This is what it boiled down to: he did not want to imagine the colonel was capable of murder, but deep down he suspected the old man had the potential in him. He had possessed a rather intemperate disposition, and the mayor could imagine him in a moment of rage striking down a woman, but he could not imagine the circumstances leading up to it.

Three miles outside of town the jalopy broke down without warning. The mayor opened the hood, stared at the engine, and realized he knew nothing about cars. He shook a few belts, hoses and wires in hopes that something obvious might turn up, but he knew his efforts were useless. He finally surrendered to his fate and set off for town on foot. He removed his jacket and slung it over one shoulder, but he kept his hat on to protect his bald head from the relentless sun. Before he had taken one hundred paces he was saved by the sheriff.
The road was quiet except for the buzzing of insects and birdsong, and the mayor heard the patrol car grinding gravel beneath its wheels before he saw it. It soon came around a bend in the road and he watched its slow approach. The car stopped beside him, and the sheriff stuck his head out the window.

"Mr. Mayor," he said and nodded. "Was that your car I passed on the side of the road?"

"Yes," he said. "I borrowed it from Whaley. It was running fine earlier. I don't know what happened to it."

The sheriff grunted.

"Get in," he said.

The mayor got in the car and they slowly set off toward town.

"I appreciate it, Sheriff," he said. "The heat is unbearable."

The sheriff moved his jaw slightly and exhaled. He was a hard man to read. The mayor thought he seemed amused at the situation. They did not have much in common, and conversation did not start up immediately. The mayor stared out the passenger window until the sheriff spoke.

"You been to the colonel's?" he asked.

"Yes," the mayor replied. "How did you know?"

The sheriff shrugged.

"Not much else out this way. What's going on out there?"

"Nothing, really," the mayor said. "I just had some business with Henrietta."

"Is everything straight, then?" the sheriff asked.
The mayor regarded him as if he had spoken a different language.

"I mean, did you talk to Henrietta?" the sheriff said.

"No," the mayor replied. "She wasn't home." He sensed in the following silence that the sheriff was waiting to hear more, such as the reason for the visit. The mayor did not like being questioned, particularly when he had a genuine secret to keep. He wiped his brow with a handkerchief and realized he was not hiding his anxiety.

When the mayor offered no explanation the sheriff grunted and said nothing more. He pulled a toothpick from his shirt pocket, placed it in his mouth, and began chewing one end. They drove for another mile in silence and the mayor considered his position. He was hesitant to mention the letter because he feared one slip of the tongue would irreparably damage the colonel's reputation, and there was no telling what effect it would have on the town. The town was poor, but the people were uncommonly proud, even if much of their pride was borrowed. They were proud of what the Mangums had achieved, and it affected them profoundly. The mere mention of the colonel's name over drinks was cause for a toast. When travellers occasionally passed through, the citizenry swelled with pride as they described the town's rich history and gave directions to the estate. The mayor did not want to rob them of this simple, singular joy. However, he realized he would never make any headway in his investigation unless he started asking questions, and the sheriff was perhaps the best person to begin with. The mayor held his tongue for another minute before he summoned the courage to breach the silence.

"Sheriff," he said. "Do you know of a woman named Marianne in these parts?"
The sheriff did not answer immediately. The mayor was about to repeat himself when the sheriff spat his toothpick out the window and pulled another from his pocket.

"You got a last name to go with that?" he asked.

"No," the mayor said. "But I suspect she was an acquaintance of the colonel's. Maybe close to his age. Do you know a Marianne hereabouts?"

"No, I surely don't," the sheriff said. "Why do you ask?"

The mayor's mind locked up. He lacked the talent for lying. He offered the first response that came to mind.

"I spoke to Naomi out at the estate."

"Henrietta's girl?"

"Yes," the mayor replied. "She told me about the colonel's last days and mentioned his interest in a woman named Marianne. Try as I might, I can't place her, but then I've only lived here for a few years. I thought a native such as yourself would know her."

The sheriff paused as if in thought, then sighed.

"Nope," he said. "I don't recollect anyone by that name."

The mayor was mildly surprised. The sheriff knew everyone in the county. Even if he could not recall the name, the mayor had expected him to offer a lead of some sort. For the first time since they had met, the sheriff disappointed him. The mayor did not speak more on the subject, and they completed the drive in silence. When they reached town the mayor thanked him for the ride. The sheriff nodded in response and dropped him off in front of his office in the square.
The mayor checked in with his secretary before calling it a day. She handed him a list of calls that had come in his absence, and he had her give the garage a call to inform Mr. Whaley that the jalopy had broken down outside of town. He looked over the list and was bothered that the governor's office had not yet returned his call. He considered calling again but knew he would only encounter resistance from the governor's secretary. He spent an hour on the phone reassuring various local officials that the funds would come through as soon as he spoke with the governor, and he spent another hour completing paperwork and praying for the phone to ring. At five o'clock he accepted that the governor would not call and he left the office.

When he reached home he was pleased to find dinner on the table. The flood had thrown off the Bullock's dinner schedule the night before, but his wife had managed to make up for it tonight. She had outdone herself. She had prepared a meal the like of which he only had the pleasure of enjoying on holidays. There was a roast with potatoes, green beans, corn, and homemade bread that gave the house the warm, comforting smell of a bakery. The sight of his wife and the feast she had prepared made him forget his problems for the time it took to fill his generous belly.

The drawback to such a sumptuous respite was that the mayor—who normally exercised thoughtfulness, etiquette, and a self-control that saints would die for—had the rather disgusting habit of over-indulging himself on such occasions. He had not eaten much that day, and when presented with so grand a dinner he went too far. He ate to capacity and then he ate more. His wife had only small helpings, but by the time the mayor was finished the bread and vegetables were exhausted, and barely enough roast beef
remained to make a sandwich for tomorrow’s lunch. His next plan was to retire to the
living room, to recline on the couch and listen to the radio and the complaints of his
stomach, and to try and forget the town and the colonel for one evening: but his wife
would not have it. She allowed him thirty minutes of rest and then ordered him to take his
evening constitutional, a long, casual walk to help his digestion. He looked at her with
pleading eyes, but his efforts were useless. There were certain instances between them
when her will far outmatched his own. He was so wonderfully miserable that he did not
take care for his appearance. He abandoned almost all concern of being seen walking
around town glutted and perspiring in his shirt sleeves. As he passed through the front
door, however, he did think to take his hat.

The climate did not encourage activity. The air was still thick from the recent rain,
and when he reached the street he felt the heat rise up from the pavement. He
thoughtlessly wiped away the first beads of perspiration with a sleeve before he found a
handkerchief in one trouser pocket.

His route was a two mile stretch that practically circled the town proper. He
walked to the end of his street and turned right, heading away from town. He headed
toward the gas station, but before reaching it he turned left and followed a seldom-used
gravel road that eventually terminated in the vast, mulch-filled lot of a planing mill. Before
reaching the mill he turned left and skirted the far edge of town until he came to a
residential area. He followed the meandering lanes lined with small cookie-cutter houses.
The windows glowed with tungsten light, and he heard the far off, tinny sounds of radios
and televisions. The residential path deposited him near the Mangum Memorial School.
just within sight of the town square. He followed the sidewalk along a commercial road lined with pill-box businesses until he came to the town's very first saloon.

It was a reputable place financed by the Colonel's grandfather. It was rustic, but otherwise clean and decent. It was where respectable men gathered for drinks and conversation. Although the mayor did not drink, he frequently stopped by for political discussion and to hear stories. It was not publicly acknowledged, but the saloon was actually where town policy was often made. The men debated nightly on multiple topics, becoming louder and more assertive with each successive round, and by the time the place closed they usually reached a general consensus that made council meetings a formality. The mayor found the place hospitable and entertaining, and to satisfy a meager need to catch his breath, and a greater need for conversation, he passed through the old-style swinging doors.

The interior was much as it had been since the building was erected. The floor was covered in wooden planks, and the furniture was worn from long years of use. The bar was also the original and conformed to an older style. It was made of dark mahogany and long enough to host twenty men side by side. The surface was heavily scarred and told its own story in carved initials and phrases. The mayor felt in touch with local history just to sit there.

Although he was comfortable in the place, he had the pathetic habit of standing just inside the door until someone invited him in. He knew he was welcome, yet upon entering he always carried with him an air of social awkwardness. He stepped inside and stood by the coat rack, and only then did the idea form in his head. The misery of
indigestion must had clouded his thinking, but suddenly he realized he had at his disposal the sum of local history, both significant and trivial, right there in the saloon. His round, red face brightened at the thought, and this time he did not wait for an invitation. He strode through the room to the bar, ordered a glass of water, and scanned the crowd for one particular face, one lined and leathery countenance that served as the mouthpiece to a repository of history and gossip. One face: mine.
From my usual table near the bar I glanced up from my book and spotted the mayor the moment he walked in. He surprised me when he confidently scanned the room in search of someone, forego ing his predictable awkward shuffle on the doormat. He hesitated only to remove his hat and dab at his brow with a much used handkerchief, and then he spotted me. My face was half hidden behind a dusty book, but he did not need to see it. He only had to look to my familiar table to know I was in residence that evening. He found me and caught my eye with a wave.

"Good Evening!" he exclaimed and strode forward. He had an eager smile on his face which meant the greeting was not formal pleasantry. He was in the mood for conversation. I marked my place in the book, set it aside, and had time to refresh myself with a sip of beer before he reached my table.

"Good evening, Mr. Mayor," I said, and I half stood for the perfunctory handshake. I saw him at least once a week, and I never understood his need to shake my hand each time we met. I assume my age somehow contributed to his behavior, for if we know one thing about Mayor Bullock it is that he respects his elders.

"How are you tonight," I asked. I motioned toward an empty chair into which he gladly collapsed. "You seem a bit worn out. Has Mrs. Mayor sent you on a walk in this heat?"
The mayor smiled at the mockery. I have always been rather blunt with familiar faces, perhaps rude and disrespectful, but the mayor was generous with charm and tolerance. We were not close, but we got along famously. He allowed me a few pokes at his ribs each time we bumped into one another.

"Yes," he replied, "She sent me out to walk off my supper. I was passing by and needed a moment to cool down."

He again scanned the room from his seat, taking in the faces of those present and trying to pick up scraps of conversation to discern the prevalent topic that evening. Conversation in the saloon was rather uninspired that night, however, and each table was its own island. The boredom had eventually got to me. I had opened a book I had carried around for two days but had not started on. The mayor had interrupted me just as the story was getting interesting.

We made small talk for the first few minutes, but I could tell something was on his mind, something he had not got around to mentioning. At the time I thought it might be a political matter, perhaps an issue in which he had a personal interest, but as it turned out he was second-guessing if it was appropriate to raise a question about the Colonel's personal life. I sipped my beer and let him think for a moment or two. I could see his thoughts percolating, but I finally grew tired of waiting and pushed him to it.

"What is it you want to ask me then, Mayor?"

He blushed unnecessarily and leaned a little closer.

"I have some questions regarding the Colonel," he said.
When the Mayor entered the saloon he had only one question, but by the time I was finished he was more perplexed than before. As the local historian I had accumulated a wealth of stories, and when invited to speak on a subject I had the tendency to go on and on. It seems my vocation enhanced my ability to expand a tale, and my old age compounded the problem. In short, I was long-winded, and when the mayor brought up the famous Mangum clan, I had no shortage of tales to tell. Unfortunately for the mayor, history, like time (if the two can be seen exclusively), is continuous, and as I look back, events blend into one another and it is often difficult, if not impossible, to find an end to a story. More often than not, it seems the only way to end a story is in death, and once I started down the path of Mangum history, the mayor realized nothing short of death would shut me up.

My first response was meant to facetiously confuse the issue for my own amusement.

"Which Colonel are you referring to?" I asked. "Because you may not know there have actually been several Colonel's from that family. This is a small town, but it has a surprisingly long history. I think the first colonel worth mentioning is undoubtedly Colonel James Raymond Mangum, the grandfather to Marcus Mangum. You've probably heard of him referred to as Colonel J.R."

"Really?" the mayor said.

I knew he was not interested in James Mangum and was simply being polite. I should not have continued, but the beer made me talkative and I unashamedly pressed on.
"James Mangum was born in 1842, which made him ripe for battle when the Civil War rolled around. He had no military training, but by virtue of his family's good reputation he started out as a lieutenant in the Confederate army. When he left home in 1861, leaving behind a weeping mother and a visibly distressed father, he was pure green. The most adventure he'd seen was chasing skirts. So when he rode off to battle, his folks had good cause for concern. As it turns out, however, James Mangum was made of surprisingly tough mettle.

"He turned out to be an excellent soldier. He may not have been among the Confederacy's brightest officers, and he certainly lacked military experience, but he had a lion's heart. I don't think he would get far today with nought but bravery, but in James's case courage--and a life which I insist must have been charmed--made up for wits, and he excelled as a combat officer. By 1864 James was promoted to the rank of colonel. However, his stint as a colonel was short lived.

"By the time he became a colonel, rumors of southern defeat were already widespread. Like most zealots, however, James believed too strongly in the Confederate cause to surrender, and he was prepared to sacrifice himself on the altar of history to keep the fight alive. One night, three days after Lee surrendered to Grant, James and a band of loyalists rode out on a very clandestine and personal mission. They had been performing reconnaissance near Mobile, Alabama, and they decided to make a bold and resolute statement. Mobile had recently fallen to the Union, and an infantry company was bivouacked there. They rode into the camp and caught the sleeping soldiers completely by
surprise. They struck with the speed and fury of a lightning bolt and claimed the lives of three times their number before disappearing into the night."

I paused and leaned back in my chair to lend some emphasis to the moment. I knew the mayor was timid and possessed rather delicate sensibilities. I let him think on that last image for a moment, to imagine the town's father slaughtering Yankee boys in their sleep.

"But who can blame him?" I said and shrugged. "I don't know that I would have acted differently in those circumstances. Remember, the colonel was fighting for a way of life, and he was on the losing team. He acted out of desperation. I don't excuse his methods, but I take them with a grain of salt. The point is moot, however. James and his men were caught by their own troops and court-martialed as soon as their deed became known. There was some wisdom to that move on behalf of their commander, though. James lost his commission, his loyalists were booted out of the army, and they were on their way home by morning, before the outraged Yankees could root them out.

"If James had made his attack a few days earlier then it would have been called a victory, but because it happened when the armies were supposed to be at peace, when those Yankees had already set aside their weapons and were dreaming of going home--and because the attack seemed cowardly--the deed was considered a sin, and such sins never go unpunished. James returned home to find the family land in ruin, to find his mother had disappeared, and his father was hospitalized with a sword-wound to the head which left him insensible. His heart sank when he saw the trampled and burned fields of tobacco, but
the hardest blow was that his mother was gone, her fate lost among the damaged faculties of his father's mind.

"From that point James's life steadily declined, prolonged by less than a handful of hopeful moments which lacked the potency to save him. The sight of his father caused him so much grief that he sent the old man to a sanitorium. He then spent the next four years of his life breaking his back to save the family land. He no longer had slaves or money to hire help. In essence he became his own slave, slave to his obsession to hold on to what little he had. The land became the link to his family and better times. He spent all his time single-handedly tilling, planting and harvesting, but for all his work he never recovered from the ill-fortune which had befallen him.

"Gritting his teeth in the face of his misery, James managed to revive the land, and after several successful crops and shrewd trading reminiscent of his father, he made a remarkable sum of money. He invested half of it in local businesses, which drew no small amount of carpetbaggers and hopefuls who he chased away with his sword. He shrewdly picked the best prospects and cornered all markets in the area. He was a silent partner who grew wealthy from the work of others. Thus X. was born and sprung up from the dust in a matter of years. The rest of his money he put back into the land. He hired the cheapest labor he could find, built them meager quarters, built more curing sheds, a barn and stable, and he rebuilt the house his mother and father had once lived in. It wasn't actually the same house because it was much larger, but he built it on the same spot where the previous one had stood.

"And that's the very same Mangum house?" the mayor asked.
I could not tell if he were being polite or if I had kindled a genuine interest.

"The same house built by James Raymond Mangum," I replied.

I was surprised the mayor knew so little of local history. He had only moved to town three years ago, but these stories were well known by all. It seemed to me that he should have heard them already.

"The rebuilding of that house was the first bright moment in James's life," I continued. "and the next came only one year later. James had become a somewhat affluent businessman and the owner of the largest house within one hundred miles, and the local aristocracy began to take notice. Several gentlemen approached him with words of friendship, but their real intentions were to marry off their daughters. James had not been interested in marrying while he had the estate to rebuild, but now he had restored his family's name and reputation. 'What better,' the gentlemen said, 'to ensure your accomplishments live on? It's time you made a family.' While they patted him on the back and plied him with brandy, James considered their words and realized they were correct. He needed an heir.

"James had a variety of wives to choose from. His wealth was an important factor, but so was his reputation. Although the Confederate army had denied knowing the identity of the renegade colonel who had massacred sleeping Yankees, word had got around. There were still plenty of rebel sympathizers throughout the South, and they kept stories of James's deed alive. He was considered a hero by many Southerners, especially by the aristocracy, and gentlemen lined up with their daughters at their sides. James tolerated the weekly production for several months, and finally his desire for an heir overshadowed his
interest in wifely companionship. He pulled a name from a hat. The name was Miss Cornelia Culpepper from Mississippi.

"As strange as it may seem, almost nothing is known of Mrs. Mangum née Culpepper. She is only mentioned in James's papers by name and without detail. Out of personal interest I've tried to trace her family line back to Mississippi, but I've had no success. Our only knowledge of her comes from two brief excerpts in a poorly kept diary James began when he returned from the war. In the diary he mentions he has been married for six months, and the woman he married out of necessity 'has of late looked like she might be beautiful.' I have seen pictures of Mrs. Mangum, and I must mention that she was not an attractive woman. I can only surmise from his words that he had discovered an inner beauty, therefore his wife must have brought him a modicum of happiness. The next and last mention of Mrs. Mangum involves the birth of his son in 1868. This is the longest entry in the diary. James goes on for eight pages praising the virtues of fatherhood and laying plans for his son's future. His wife quite literally faded away shortly thereafter. She died in 1881. There is no mention of it in any document written by James's hand. The only record of Mrs. Mangum's death is on her tombstone in the family plot in the local cemetery.

The mayor regarded me stolidly. I had motioned to the bartender to bring a beer for me and another water for the mayor. When the drinks arrived I immediately gulped down half of mine. The mayor took a small sip and folded his hands on the table.
Although I had ended my previous tale on a note of finality, a death, he seemed to know I was not finished with the telling.

"Vernon Mangum," I said. "James's son. Another interesting fellow. He was born John Vernon Mangum, but he seems to have been called Vernon by all. I've found no explanation for it, and when I asked Colonel Marcus, he could not offer an answer.

Vernon was unusual for a Mangum because he was so unlike his father or his son. They were adventurous spirits, men of action, but Vernon turned out to be quite bookish. He was a thinker, perhaps even a dreamer. His mother, before she passed away, was a strict teacher and kept him inside to study most of the time. Perhaps that is why Vernon never set out to achieve anything beyond the boundaries of the estate.

"We don't know what James thought about this, but we're given a hint in Vernon's writings. It seems Vernon, unlike his father, wrote expertly and enjoyed it, and as a result he kept meticulous notes in a journal. His father was at first impressed by such intellectual habits because he had never managed to cultivate them, but as Vernon grew older, James grew concerned. His son clung to his books and imagination more and more. By the time Vernon entered adolescence, his father had given up hope for a son who would follow in his footsteps, take over the tobacco business, and carry on his hatred for the North. And if he harbored any secret desires that Vernon might change his ways, those hopes were shattered when he sat Vernon down to explain his political views.

"One night after dinner James spent an entire evening talking about the North and how it had nearly eradicated the Mangum family. He treated his narrative as a history lesson, but it was a poorly disguised sermon born of spiritual defeat and impotent rage.
When he finished he leaned back in his chair and watched Vernon's young face. I suppose he hoped Vernon would sympathize and comfort him, perhaps say, 'Don't worry, Father, the South will rise again!' But Vernon stared at the fire and remained silent. At length he asked his son for his thoughts on the subject, and Vernon replied, 'I don't think much of it.' James stared at the boy while trying to understand the meaning until Vernon said, 'Sir, the war is over.' James handled the statement with dignity and composure, but the boy's apathetic words left a wound in his heart. A wall sprang up between them at that moment. They remained civil to one another, but they never really spoke again. And if they had wanted to, they never got the chance.

"As I mentioned earlier, James was quite famous for his deeds. The South did its best to keep the memory alive without compromising his safety, but to no avail. Somehow the word got around to the wrong people. It seemed the colonel's crime was also remembered by the Yankees, particularly those who had lost their sons during his cowardly attack. It turns out that since 1865 a small group of those families had banded together and had sworn to find the unknown officer who was responsible. To this day the facts of the matter elude me, and I don't know how they tracked him down, but on an April morning in 1882 four gunmen found the colonel in a curing shed and shot him dead. They shot him twenty-three times and disappeared without being seen."

The mayor pursed his lips and stared at his clasped hands. I thought the violence might be taking its toll on him and decided to skip the details of the medical examination and embalming, events which Vernon witnessed and noted in shocking detail. I considered my position in the story, shuffled some events, and chose a new direction.
"Are you familiar with the Sons, Mayor?" I asked.

"Who?" he replied.

"I can see you're not," I said. "The Sons of the Confederacy, the society responsible for giving Marcus Mangum his honorary title."

The mayor frowned slightly and I knew he did not understand.

"When James Mangum died," I said, "a large crowd attended his funeral. Vernon didn't recognize half of them, but he figured they turned up because they knew of his father's reputation. His thinking was correct but for different reasons than he knew. After the service he was approached by three men who looked close to his father's age. They introduced themselves as soldiers in his father's service. Vernon didn't know what to make of them, and they must have noticed his confusion. They detached themselves from the crowd, led him to the barn where no one would overhear, and introduced him to their secret society. The Sons of the Confederacy was a group of Southern patriots, most of them ex-soldiers, who had banded together to continue the battle against Northern oppression covertly and from within. Their plans were too dangerous to risk discovery, so rather than build an army to retake the South, they chose to work secretly, to appear as proponents of unification, to take seats of power and effect changes through political means. James Mangum had been one of their greatest leaders.

"The men explained to Vernon that according to the rules of their order, male descendants of officers were automatically conferred the rank held by their fathers when they turned eighteen or, in this case, if the father died. Since Vernon had no military experience the rank would be purely honorary, but he would still have a say in the Son's
council and could affect their political machinations. The men had come to tell him of his new title, to say he was now an officer among them, and to protect him from other assassins who might very well want to wipe out the Mangum line for good.

"We already know Vernon was a diffident lad with no taste for conflict, and you would expect him to have replied, 'Gentlemen, I have no interest in this,' and to have walked away. Something strange took hold of him, however, and he suddenly found an interest in his father's work. He tried to explain it in his writings, but there's the impression that he's actually trying to explain it to himself. He attributes his change of heart and mind to the loss of his father and the suddenly-and-seemingly real threat to his life. If four gunmen could locate his father, ride onto his land, walk across a dozen acres of open fields, murder him and escape, what would stop them from killing Vernon if they so decided? After a few minutes of consideration, Vernon accepted their offer.

"Little more is known about Vernon beyond that. Once he joined the Sons it appears he guarded his privacy and wrote very little, or he hid away his subsequent journals out of paranoia. This is all we know of him after 1882: he found a wife on a trip to Tennessee, a Miss Amelia Coopersmith, and together they had one son, Marcus. He was schooled at home and therefore grew up around his father. He was introduced to the Sons by the time he was ten, but by then the society had gone public and was considered a private fraternal order. If the Sons still had a secret agenda then it remained a secret. They built a meeting hall and met regularly, but unless you were a descendant of a charter member you had no chance of joining. By the time they disbanded in 1967, they were considered nothing more than an exclusive historical society."
I finished off the beer in my mug. It had grown warm and bitter during my storytelling. To my astonishment, the mayor seemed to be disappointed when he realized I was finished.

"There's more to tell, isn't there?" he asked.

"Nothing of consequence." I replied. "Next came Colonel Marcus Mangum, and you know all about him. He was born in 1899. He was an overbearing spendthrift. He never married, never had children, and in my opinion was chronically unhappy. What else is there to tell?"

His look of disappointment did not disappear.

"So," he said, and his brow wrinkled as if he were working a mathematical problem, "do you mean to say the colonel--Marcus Mangum, that is--wasn't really a colonel?"

"It depends on your perspective," I replied with a sigh. The story and the beer had tired me out. I was an old man, after all. "As far as the United States or any such institution is concerned, Marcus Mangum was a civilian. But if you ask a member of the Sons, or anyone who grew up in this vicinity, they'll tell you he was a colonel all right."

"Fascinating," the mayor said. I could tell by his tone he was sincere. I had given him much to think about. I reached over and placed a hand on my book to indicate I was going home, but the mayor placed a hand on mine.

"One moment," he said. "I have a question for you that I've not yet asked."

I raised my eyebrows to show he had my attention. He removed his hand from mine and fidgeted in his seat. His inability to spit it out piqued my interest.
"What is it, Mayor?"

"This business with the colonel," he said. He looked around to see if anyone else was listening. "When his casket was damaged it came open..."

"Yes?"

"And I found something I don't know what to make of."

I had no idea what it could be, but I suddenly felt a sense of foreboding.

"Such as?"

He leaned closer and again placed his hand on my arm.

"A letter."

"Really?"

"A confession," he said.

"I see," I replied. I leaned back in my chair to put some space between us. I was naturally curious to hear more, but I was afraid to pursue it. My mind cast about for a way to change the subject, but we had come too far. I felt myself stiffening and took a sip of beer to relax. I realized there was no way around it and forged ahead.

"A confession to what?"

The mayor opened his mouth but suddenly reconsidered. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his upper lip.

"I don't think it's appropriate to discuss it yet," he said. "But I could use your help on one point."

I felt a tightness in my chest and butterflies in my stomach. I knew what was coming.
"Yes?" I said.

"Do you know, or have you ever known, a woman named Marianne in these parts?"

As I look back on the moment I can appreciate the irony. The truth is that not only could I recall a Marianne, but I knew precisely who he was searching for. I also knew of her fate. I did not need to hear the confession because I had a very good idea of its contents. I knew it all, and I wanted nothing to do with it. But in order to keep up the appearance of a friendly and helpful historian, I foolishly prolonged the subject.

"Marianne, you say?" I rubbed my chin. I looked to the ceiling and watched a fan spin. Smoke whirled at its edges before being whisked away. "Marianne. Marianne..."

I said the name aloud three times, and I can only wonder if the events that followed would have been different had I stopped at two. I am of the opinion the third time was, as they say, the charm, or in this case the curse. Either way, the repetition had an unseen effect, perhaps invoked a restless spirit whose presence could suddenly be felt by all in the room. Conversation throughout the saloon died almost immediately, and I was aware that several people had heard me speak the name, including—*confound him*!—Webb Foster. For the space that it takes to draw a deep breath there was an awkward silence, quickly followed by a dozen hastily resumed conversations.

"No," I said with feigned certainty. "I don't recall anyone by that name."

The mayor seemed frozen for a moment, then his shoulders sagged and I knew I had quite possibly dashed his hopes of ever knowing the truth. I began to feel better. The
tightness in my chest faded and the butterflies began to vacate my stomach. Then I heard a voice just over my shoulder.

"Are you talking about Marianne Hartke?"

The voice was too nasally to be my conscience. I turned and was surprised to see Webb Foster. I knew the young man, but I had never heard him speak.

The mayor shot me a glance.

"What's that, Foster?" he asked.

Webb took one step forward and stood where I could see him. He wore jeans and a shirt with a name tag over the pocket, and his cap was pulled down over his beady eyes. He smelled of grease and oil. He had a beer mug in one hand.

"Marianne Hartke," he said. "The girl who disappeared three years ago."

The mayor contemplated Webb in a strange way and remained silent. I could see in his face he was trying to make the connection. It made sense that he had not recalled the Hartke girl because she had disappeared before he came to town. He knew Theodore had lost a daughter, but if he had known her name he apparently had forgotten it. After a moment he looked at me for a sign, but I was dumbfounded by the ill-fated turn of events. When he realized I had nothing to say he looked at Webb.

"I hadn't thought of her," he said. "But I don't think she's the one I'm looking for. The woman I'm looking for was an acquaintance of the colonel's."

Webb was motionless. I could not read his expression, but the way he tarried and stared at the mayor gave the impression he did not believe it for a second. I shuddered when I realized that he, too, was on the threshold of making the connection. My mind was
reeling at my misfortune. I silently cursed the both of them for entangling me in the matter.

At length the mayor rapped his knuckles on the table.

"It's time I headed home," he said.

He stood, nodded and said goodnight, but his eyes tarried on me. Only minutes before he had trusted me completely. He did not question me further on the subject--after all, he had a secret, too, or so he thought--but I clearly had raised his suspicion.

He left the bar and continued his solitary walk, and Webb disappeared into the crowd. I had been ready for bed, but I was now sobered by my anxiety. I ordered another drink and wondered how I should proceed, but I was at a loss. I drank my beer in a stupor, and I hardly noticed Webb Foster when he quietly detached himself from the crowd and passed through the swinging doors.
I once considered Webb's role in this story the result of coincidence; I now believe otherwise. Webb Foster willingly entangled himself in the events surrounding two deaths—one arguably justifiable, the other unnecessary and extreme—both of which were integral threads in a tapestry of violence reaching back more than a century into the town's past.

Like all psychopaths, Webb Foster is a difficult character to understand or explain. As a boy Webb was unexceptional and unnoticeable. He was always less than average height with a bony frame and narrow shoulders. He had wiry limbs, but his hands were strangely overdeveloped and strong. As a child his head was too large, and as an adult his head was perhaps too small, but all his life he had the same hook nose that made him look like a pickax. The poor boy never filled in or outgrew these unbecoming features. He was an ugly specimen, all right, but not ugly enough to draw attention. As a result, and by no fault of his own, he lived in a social limbo.

Webb tried to make friends but gave up early on. Children initially made fun of his appearance, but when he gave no sign of being affected they quickly lost interest. By the time Webb was ten years old he had become practically invisible to his peers. Even his teachers frequently overlooked him in class and on the playground. Webb could have easily walked away and never returned without raising much concern. He then simply gave
up trying: he no longer made an effort to reach out to anyone; he chose to wait until someone reached out to him.

When someone finally reached out to him it was not in the fashion he had hoped. When Webb dropped out of school at the age of sixteen, his father decided it was his responsibility to ensure the boy made something of himself. One day, without forewarning, Mr. Foster took Webb to Whaley's garage. Mr. Foster was one of two mechanics who worked alongside Mr. Whaley, and all three men were hardened by their work. They looked twice their age and were always smeared with grease and oil, even when they arrived in the morning. They were the type who had worked on cars all their lives. They worked hard and spoke to one another rarely. When Webb and his father arrived, Mr. Foster opened the hood of a sedan, motioned for Webb to approach, and began to teach him the inner workings of cars. They worked for ten hours, and by the end of the first day Webb had enough understanding to identify a variety of simple problems.

When the sun disappeared Mr. Foster led Webb over to the office. Mr. Whaley was inside doing paperwork behind a rusty aluminum desk. Mr. Foster described the things Webb had learned and said, "He's a hard worker, and honest." Mr. Whaley leaned back and dragged on a cigarette while looking Webb up and down. "Okay," he said finally, then returned to the papers in front of him. Mr. Foster gave his son a pat on the back and they went home. No one, not even his father, said anything to Webb about employment, but he understood he had been hired for his first job.

The next day he returned with his father. They walked into the garage, Mr. Whaley pointed at truck, and his father told him to get started. His father disappeared
beneath another vehicle and no one spoke until quitting time. His first job took most of the
day to complete, but Webb felt he had the aptitude for it. The socially sterile environment
offered no distractions, and he focused on his task until he completed it. After sundown
Mr. Whaley opened the hood of the truck Webb had worked on, inspected the engine, and
said "Okay." Mr. Foster then appeared, gave his son a pat on the back, and they went
home.

There is not much to tell about the next fifteen years of Webb's sad life. He never
returned to school, he never looked for new work, and he excelled as a mechanic. Six days
out of the week he rose an hour before sunrise, went to work, spent ten hours beneath cars
or in engines up to his elbows, and went home each night after receiving Mr. Whaley's
benedictive "Okay." The only significant change he experienced in all that time was the
death of his parents. His mother was the first to go. She died unexpectedly at the age of
forty, and his father followed her less than two years later. He expired in the yard behind
the garage. He had spent the morning trying to hoist the engine out of a truck, and the task
had tired him out. He was winded and looked pale. He decided to take on an easier job
until he felt better, and he stepped out back to work on another car. An hour later Mr.
Whaley found him collapsed on top of the engine with a spark plug clutched in one hand,
apparently dead from a heart attack. Webb had not entirely recovered from the loss of his
mother, and the death of his father left him numb. At his mother's funeral he had fought
back the tears, but at his father's funeral he felt nothing. He wanted to weep but somehow
lacked the ability. He stood in dry-eyed silence until the service was over, and he would
have remained there, statuesque, waiting for an emotion to stir, if Mr. Whaley had not stepped up beside him, given him a slight pat on the back, and said "Okay."

Work was Webb's salvation. Since the age of ten he had kept to himself, remained inconspicuous, waited for someone to embrace him. His mother and father had given him all the attention and love of which they were capable, but the truth is they were distant parents. They meant a lot to Webb, but for them he was more of a responsibility than a child. Nevertheless, Mr. and Mrs. Foster had always been there, and once they were gone Webb found the silence of his house intolerable. The silence at work never bothered him because he followed the example of his associates, and even if they did not speak he knew they were near. The silence he faced at home, however, was oppressively vacuous: to sit in that silence made him feel hollow. To escape it he began rising an hour earlier and working an hour later than usual. Mr. Whaley did not mind because he knew Webb needed a diversion from his grief, and the faster turn-around time on repairs was good for business. Both men benefitted by the arrangement until the day came when Webb's industriousness had cleared out all their work, and Mr. Whaley sent him home early.

Rather than sit in the silence of the house, Webb decided to take a walk. He lived in a modest neighborhood near the mill road, and the course he chose was not much different from the one the mayor followed on his evening walks. He meandered through the neighborhood, admiring lawns and cars, wondering what went on inside each little house. When he left the neighborhood his route deposited him near the courtyard of the Mangum Memorial School, and there he unexpectedly fell in what he considered to be love.
There was something in the dichotomous nature of the girl that caught his eye. She was in her teens and clearly a student at the school. She was in the parking lot with two girls and a boy who leaned casually against a midnight-blue car with a jacked-up rear end. She wore a white blouse, blue skirt, white socks and saddle shoes. Her attire caught Webb's attention because she looked as if she were in uniform, but the Mangum school did not require uniforms. She had dark hair tied back in a pony-tail that had come loose. In her arms she held several text books clutched to her chest in the best schoolgirl fashion, and from her lips, from her perfect lips, dangled a cigarette.

Webb blinked to make sure he had seen what he had seen. The tableau was like a perverse Norman Rockwell painting. The sight fascinated him, and he slowed his pace to take in more. He leaned against the far side of a tree and peeked around the trunk to watch the scene unfold, but nothing much happened. The girls stood talking with the boy who apparently had supplied them with the cigarettes. He pulled a pack from a shirt pocket, lit one, and gave it to one of the girls. They talked until one girl looked at her watch and let fly an expletive that Webb heard from across the courtyard. The two girls then dropped their cigarettes and hurried off in the direction Webb had come from. The schoolgirl who had caught his eye, however, did not seem to be in a hurry. She talked with the boy for several more minutes, smoked another cigarette, then tossed her head and abruptly turned to walk away. The boy's response almost made Webb leap from his hiding place. Before the girl took two steps the boy grabbed her, spun her around and took a swing at her. Webb was about to yell when he saw the boy had just missed her face and had knocked the cigarette from her mouth. The boy then pulled the girl to him and they kissed roughly.
They held the kiss for perhaps ten seconds, but to Webb it seemed longer. She then broke free and girlishly skipped away toward the town square.

As he watched, Webb was inexplicably enthralled. When the tableau was broken he noticed perspiration on his brow and upper lip, and when he stepped away from the tree he felt dizzy. He remained for another minute, watching the girl retreat as his head cleared. He found her youthful charm alluring, and he felt he had not yet seen enough of her. He was about to pursue her when he noticed the boy in the parking lot had not moved. The boy stood, cigarette in mouth, hands on hips, and watched the girl until she left his sight. He then spat out his cigarette, climbed into the car, spun twice around the parking lot, and darted off toward the mill road.

Before Webb knew what he was doing he began running after the girl. He did not try to understand his actions because they seemed correct at the time. She was beautiful, like a piece of art, and like any work of art he wanted a better look at her. He spotted her just as she crossed the square, and he fell in behind her. She strolled through town, glancing at store windows and greeting those who passed by, but she did not go much further. Four blocks past the square she turned right into a neighborhood, an area well known by everyone in town. The lawns there were well kept and free of yard tools and garbage cans. The houses looked as if they had been recently painted, and the cars in the driveways always gleamed. This was where the mayor and other important people lived, an area not frequented by people like Webb. When he reached the intersection where she had turned he stopped beneath the street sign and tried to be inconspicuous. He watched as she walked half a block, turned into the driveway of a spacious two-story house and
disappeared from sight. He waited another minute—as long as he could stand—and then followed her path. As he passed the mailbox he noted the name painted on its side: Hartke.

By now you know the name, and so did Webb. The home belonged to the spindly, doom-laden Theodore Hartke, though at the time his troubles had not yet begun. The girl was none other than the now infamous Marianne Hartke. She was barely fifteen and already leading a double life. She was considered by all but her closest friends (who knew of her alter-ego) as a figure of virtue. She was graceful and charming for her age, and she always dressed well. She made good grades in school, and she maintained the illusion of obedience to her elders. In fact—it sounds too good to be true—she even sang in the church choir. She was considered by all to be the town's resident angel.

Is it any wonder, then, that after his first glimpse of her Webb fell head-over-heels in love? He was trapped in an abyss of loneliness and lacked the skills to set himself free. He had no romantic prospects because he was an ill-proportioned recluse. It was pure coincidence that he happened to find Marianne that day. She could not have appeared for him at a better time, and once he found her he could not get her divine image out of his head. Who, I ask you, can resist an angel, pure or fallen? Webb certainly could not, and when Marianne Hartke caught his eye she unwittingly and everlastingly caught up his heart.

There were, of course, obstacles to Webb's love. First, he would have to overcome his awkwardness. Second, she came from the upper class, he from the lowest, and he could provide her with little more than his devotion; everything else she could get in abundance elsewhere. Third, but not the least important, he was sixteen years her senior.
At the time Marianne was fifteen and a sophomore in high school, and Webb was a thirty-one-year-old mechanic with a dangerous obsession.

As Webb casually strolled past the Hartke residence that day, he had already decided he must sooner or later profess his love for Marianne, and with the resolve of the obsessed he devoted his spare moments to plotting a passionate strategy to win her over. The scheming progressed slowly, however, if it can be said to have progressed at all. Until then the circumstances of Webb's life had made him reclusive and anti-social, and when he tried to lay plans to win Marianne's heart he was stymied. He had romantic notions involving candy, flowers, and jewelry, simple methods that were rumored to have effect, but he did not entirely trust them. Besides, he was too impatient. He had decided he loved Marianne the moment he saw her, and he wanted nothing less than to produce an immediate and reciprocal response. However, he had not the slightest idea of how to proceed.

Webb lasted for four weeks before crumpling beneath that duress. He continued repairing engines the best he could with the dreamy image of Marianne hovering before him, but soon it drove him to distraction. He began cutting back his hours until one day he did not come in at all, and Mr. Whaley did not hear from him for another two months.

What was Webb doing with that time? What was so important that he forsook his job, the only thing that had until recently maintained his sanity? He took that time to get to know the object of his desire. He still arose an hour before sunrise, but he sat at the kitchen table and watched the wall clock until quarter to seven. He then left the house and followed the mill road until it deposited him on Main street, and there he waited on the
sidewalk, hidden behind the corner of the grocery store, until he saw Marianne leave her neighborhood and head for school. He then discreetly followed as far as he could without being noticed. Sometimes he only got to the end of the square before she met up with friends who might notice him, and sometimes he safely followed her to the edge of the school courtyard before turning back. On a few occasions he even ventured on the school grounds and wandered the hallways, glancing in doorways and windows until he found her and learned her schedule. The thought that he could locate her at any time during the day comforted him and made the hours in between easier to bear.

It was not long before knowing was not enough. One day he followed Marianne to school and realized he would be much happier there, sitting in the stands beside the baseball diamond where he might catch a glimpse of her between classes. He did not worry that he was almost penniless because he had always required so little to survive. Marianne would expect more from him, but he would handle the obstacle when it presented itself. For now he wanted only to be near her, and when he was he felt happy.

Step by step, Webb maneuvered himself closer to Marianne until he frequently passed within reach of her, but he was always careful to remain inconspicuous. He would approach her from behind, get as close as possible, breathe in her scent, then turn as if his business were in a different direction. Or, since he knew her daily routines, he would position himself out of sight and step out just as she passed so he could brush against her. If Marianne noticed how often she met this strange man then she gave no indication. Webb, however, was certain she had noticed him at one time or other, and he was certain
she knew her role in their secret affair. After all, she could not openly love him because it was forbidden on more than one level. He understood this, and that is how he persevered.

In reality, Webb lasted only two weeks from the time he left the garage until he was driven mad with jealousy and prepared to openly profess the magnitude of his love. One day after school Marianne did not leave by the usual exit and he could not find her. Stricken by anxiety he hurriedly traced the familiar path between the school and her house, stopping by her familiar haunts to search for her angelic face. When he could not find her he walked to the square and collapsed on a bench in front of the statue. He was on the verge of tears when he heard the grumbling of a large engine approaching. He looked up and spotted a blue car with a jacked-up rear end as it passed by, and in it he saw Marianne and the boy from the parking lot. Webb was too shocked to react. As he sat slack-jawed and watched the car pass, he captured a mental photograph of the scene inside. The boy had the same hoodish appearance as when Webb had seen him in the parking lot. He wore a t-shirt with cigarettes in the breast pocket. He leaned back in his seat, comfortably and coolly, with one hand on the wheel and the other around Marianne. The windows were open and the wind made her hair dance around her face. The boy’s right hand was just behind her head, twining itself in her hair. Then the car passed and Webb heard the sound of her laughter, a sound that simultaneously filled him with joy and rage. In that moment he knew he must not only approach her but speak to her, to acknowledge the love they had kept hidden for the past two weeks. The next day, a Friday, he would confront her and end the painful charade.
On Friday morning he once again could not find her and spent the day combing the town. He suspected she was with the same boy, and he was prepared for any eventuality. Inside his jacket he carried a kitchen knife. At four thirty in the afternoon he was exhausted and gave up for the evening. He went home to a silent house and collapsed in front of the television. He absently turned it on, and within minutes he knew why Marianne was nowhere to be found. There, on the screen, was Sheriff Parnell Sutter describing a nearby robbery and shooting, and superimposed over his right shoulder was Marianne Hartke's photograph taken from the yearbook at the Mangum Memorial School. Webb did not catch the whole story, but the meaning was clear: she had become an outlaw.

When Webb left the bar he followed the mayor all the way home, and the entire time he tried to come up with a plan of action. He knew neither what to do nor what he was capable of, but he had to find out any news he could about Marianne. She and the hood she consorted with—the news had identified him as Dennis Carter—had never been captured. They simply had disappeared. One week they were the top story in every local broadcast, the next week they were believed to be in hiding, then news about them steadily dwindled and disappeared as well. Webb had lost his true love without knowing her fate, and although he could not be more miserable, the depth of his loneliness and desperation convinced him that news of her death would offer some consolation.

He quietly followed the mayor down dark streets while mulling over if he should approach him. He had heard only scraps of the mayor's conversation in the saloon, but he
was not convinced by the mayor's dismissal of Marianne Hartke. Webb had seen something in the his face that suggested he had news of her. He followed the mayor home, and from beneath a shadowy tree he watched him climb the steps to his house and shut the door. Webb leaned against the trunk and thought about the bits of conversation he had overheard. He had heard names: James, Vernon, Henrietta, the colonel. They all pointed in one direction. He did not know how long he stood there, but he left when he saw the sheriff's car approaching from the opposite end of the street. By then he had chosen his next move.
Seventeen

Webb did not sleep that night. He reached his house, went to the kitchen and sat down at the table across from the wall clock. He did not turn on the lights. The night was bright with a waxing moon, bright enough to see shapes in the kitchen and the hands of the clock as they made their rounds. He leaned over the table and rested on his elbows, hands before him, fingers interlocked. He watched the clock for eight hours. Time seemed to crawl but he could feel it passing, at first washing over him like a stream, then pushing him forward like a wave. The sky above the trees began to change hues. He heard the distant and strained call of a rooster, and he straightened and rubbed his eyes.

He did not bathe or shave, nor did he change his clothes. He still wore the stained denim from the previous day at the garage. He filled the bathroom sink with cold water, immersed his head to sharpen his senses, and dried off with a towel that smelled of mildew. He returned to the kitchen, paused, scanned the room as if there were something he needed. Nothing caught his eye and he left the house by the back door.

He took the tow truck he drove for Mr. Whaley and headed for the colonel's. When he arrived the sun was breaking over the horizon behind the house, and it cast the front in shadow. No lights were visible in the windows, but there was a car in the driveway and he knew someone was home. He pulled up to the house, parked the truck at the foot
of the porch, walked directly to the front door and rang the bell. It sounded like a telephone ringing inside.

The door was opened by a rotund Negro woman, perhaps in her fifties, wearing an apron and holding a broom. When she saw Webb standing on the doorstep and the tow truck in the driveway she must have been perplexed. Her brow crinkled, and the tone in which she said "Yes?" was full of suspicion. Webb removed his cap from his tiny head and fixed her with his stare.

"Where's Marianne," he said.

The woman stared for a moment in confusion, then Webb saw a dim light in her eyes.

"There's no one here with that name," she said.

She began to close the door, but Webb placed a hand against it. The light in her eyes looked like it might break into a fire, but the effect was lost on Webb.

"I said there's no one here with that name," she said. "Now get your hand off the door or I'll call the sheriff." She lifted the broom a few inches off the floor to show it could be a weapon.

Webb held his ground. He could see that coming here was the right decision. The woman knew where he could find Marianne but did not want to tell. He pressed harder against the door to keep it from closing. As the seconds ticked away he saw the fire in the woman's eyes burn brighter and brighter. She knew exactly what had happened to Marianne and wanted to keep it hidden. Yes, coming here was the right decision. She was getting angrier every second, but she was also afraid because he knew something, because
he was close to the truth. He watched her composure fade away until she looked almost maniacal. The broom trembled in her fist, her eyes were wide, and every muscle in her face scowled. She spoke through clenched teeth and the quaver in her voice told him she was close to tears.

"The girl is dead," she said. Her tone was pure venom. "They're both dead. May they burn in Hell."

The woman must have expected him to walk away with the answer because she let up some of the pressure from her side of the door. The moment Webb sensed it he pushed the door inward with a hidden strength. He was small and wiry, but sixteen years of working in the garage had hardened his muscles and swollen his hands and forearms. Both the door and the woman easily gave way. The woman was knocked off balance, dropped the broom and grabbed the bannister to keep from falling.

Webb stepped into the foyer. His body felt numb but his awareness seemed sharpened. He felt like he could see himself from above, as if his spirit were floating near the vaulted ceiling. He saw the woman leaning against the bannister, and he saw himself pick up the broom and break the handle over his knee. She regained her balance and turned to face him, and he struck her above the left eye with the broom handle. She grabbed her face and staggered backward, but she did not seem seriously hurt. She again placed one hand on the bannister and straightened, and her look changed from anger to terror. The fire in her eyes had disappeared. Webb struck again, hitting the same spot above her left eye, then stood back and watched her crumple. First her ankles shook, then her knees wobbled, and the tremor continued up her frame until her eyes rolled back and
she fell on her face. He then sat on the staircase and waited for her to regain consciousness.

When Henrietta came to, her first sight was Webb sitting on the stairs watching her. The spot above her left eye was swollen, and there were blood stains on her apron and the floor. She had expected to wake up dead and was strangely relieved when she saw Webb. His face was still the mask it had been from the moment she had opened the door. She got to her hands and knees and managed to stand. Once she was on her feet Webb stood and motioned toward the kitchen. She was not ready to die. She held her left hand over her swollen eye and shuffled down the hallway. Webb pulled a chair from beneath the kitchen table and Henrietta seated herself. She felt inexplicably safe now, as if the violence between them had been a mere formality. Now that it was out of the way they could talk, and the sooner business was taken care of, the sooner he would leave. She watched him take an ice tray from the freezer and wrap three ice cubes in a soiled washrag he found in the sink. When he was finished he handed her the dirty compress and she placed it against her head.

"Thank you," she said. Her voice was little more than a whisper.

Webb nodded and leaned against the sink. Although she was sure he meant no more harm, his look was frightening and she stared at the floor. He did not speak to her, but she knew what he was waiting to hear. She did not understand how this little troll of a man fit into the grand design, but here he was in the colonel's kitchen. He had shown up on the doorstep, and the first word out of his mouth had been Marianne. Enough time had
passed that she thought the memory was dead. She had never expected to hear the name again. She had spent the last three years pushing the memory out of her mind until it finally stopped harassing her and she could continue life in a normal fashion, free of terrible secrets. She was fifty-two years old, for God's sake, an old woman with precious few years ahead, and she did not have time to worry about two dead white hoodlums who got what they deserved. But two wrongs did not set things a-right, or so she had been taught, and here was proof of God's displeasure, embodied by a little man who could easily be a demon by the look of him.

Henrietta was not eager to speak about it because to mention it was to resurrect the memory, and once it returned she feared it would hound her the rest of her life. Webb was patient, or at least seemed to be. He let her wrestle with her thoughts and muster up the courage for the telling. She opened her mouth once to begin but backed away. To say it felt as wrong as to harbor it. Eventually Webb rustled as if growing impatient, and she closed her eyes and summoned the memory.

"She's dead," she said. She had hoped saying it might give her some release, but she felt no different.

The boy and girl had come while the colonel was away. He had been gone near three months on a hunting expedition in India, and he had called three days prior to say he and Calvin were coming home earlier than expected. Henrietta and Stafford, an old Negro man who served as the resident manservant, had spent the morning preparing for him, and they had the place looking spotless. That afternoon Stafford was in his room napping, and Henrietta was polishing the wood floor in the study. The window was open and she heard
the crunch of gravel as a car came up the drive. She thought it was the colonel, back sooner than she had expected. It never had occurred to her that it might be trouble.

"Nothing bad had ever happened around here, least of all on the estate," she said. "Everyone respects the colonel, and no one would harm his place or his people, or so I thought."

The bell had rung, and she had opened the door without hesitation. She was surprised to find a teenaged girl standing on the porch, one hand on her hip in a casually defiant stance. She wore a white blouse with a plaid skirt and saddle shoes, and Henrietta instinctively identified her as a child of the local aristocracy. As she stood in the doorway greeting the girl, she noticed the girl's clothes were rumpled, as if she had slept in them, and her shoes were scuffed. The girl's blouse was unbuttoned too far to be proper, and her hair was slightly tangled. She knew then that something was wrong, and she was sure of it when she saw the boy.

He had been in the car when she opened the door, and now he approached while she and the girl stood facing one another. He stepped up behind the girl and concealed the right side of his body as if he were hiding something in his hand. He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, and he wore sunglasses even when he stood in the shade of the porch. He chewed gum and held a cigarette in his mouth at the same time. If Henrietta had any suspicions about the couple, she had begun to acknowledge them when she saw him.

"He looked like he was nothing but trouble," she said. "He just looked wrong. But I thought I recognized the girl, so I figured they must be good people."
It was not long before she had learned otherwise. She invited them inside, and as soon as she closed the door the boy pulled his hand from behind his back and pointed a gun in her face.

"I've already killed one person today," he said. "Want to be number two?"

Then Henrietta knew they were the two she had heard about on the news. She knew the girl was Marianne Hartke, and the boy, Dennis, was white trash from a neighboring county. They had killed two people in their small-time robberies, and she knew they were to be taken seriously. But when Dennis pointed the gun in her face, the girl started giggling and would not stop, and Henrietta could not resist taking a shot at her.

"Girl," she said, "don't you know the grief you're causing your parents?"

The remark wiped the smile from Marianne's face and she fell silent. Dennis smacked Henrietta with his free hand and said it was her last warning.

They all went to the kitchen and Dennis ordered Henrietta to fix them lunch. She dug some coldcuts out of the refrigerator and made them bland sandwiches. Then they all sat at the kitchen table, Dennis across from Henrietta, Marianne between them. He set his gun on the table and attacked his sandwich, but Marianne only stared at her plate. When he had finished his sandwich he took Marianne's as well. As he finished off their lunch, Marianne looked up and out the large kitchen windows. She seemed surprised to see so much land, and without explanation she left the kitchen through the back door. Henrietta had watched her wander aimlessly in the fields, and Dennis had watched Henrietta with anxious eyes.
"The boy stared at me the whole time," she said, "and that's when I realized he was nothing but evil. I didn't have to look at him. The room was full of his thoughts."

She had realized that Dennis wanted an excuse to shoot her, perhaps just so he could watch her die. He glanced out the window at Marianne and then turned to face Henrietta. The gun was still on the table. He placed a hand on it, pushed it toward her by a few inches, and withdrew his hand.

"Go ahead," he said.

Henrietta looked at him and the gun. She kept her hands in her lap and directed her attention out the window again. He did not seem put off by it. He again placed his hand on the gun, inched it further toward her, and withdrew his hand. Henrietta kept her attention on the girl outside, watched her bend over and pick a dandelion. But she could see Dennis from the corner of her eye. His eyes were bright, and he had a confident grin on his face. When she did not respond he moved the gun closer still. It was now closer to her than it was to him. She wanted nothing more than to grab it, to show up this murderous, white trash hoodlum, but she did not move. She watched Marianne stick the dandelion in a button hole and meander further away. Finally, Dennis pushed the gun to the edge of the table nearest her and sat back with his hands in his lap.

"Go ahead," he said.

She closed her eyes and summoned up the courage. She was old and slow, but the gun was close enough that she could reach it faster than him. She had never shot a gun before, but she thought she could manage. She had almost convinced herself to grab it when the opportunity had been snatched from her.
"I had forgotten about Stafford," she explained.

The colonel's old manservant had awoke, and he came shuffling down the hall toward the kitchen. The boy heard him and snatched up the gun before Henrietta realized what had happened. Sleepy-eyed and senile, Stafford shambled into the kitchen completely unaware of the danger, and Dennis used the pistol to rap him on the head. Stafford was already feeble, and the blow was more than enough to knock him out. Dennis, however, thought Stafford was playing dead, and he yelled at him to get up. Marianne heard the noise and came running back to the house. When Dennis realized the old man was really unconscious, he had Marianne hold the gun while he dragged Stafford back to his room and locked him in. When Dennis returned it was Henrietta's turn. He led her upstairs, found the linen closet, and locked her in.

She spent two days wedged in the closet between the shelves. The space was so small she had to stand the entire time. After the first couple of hours her joints began to ache and weaken, but the closet was so cramped she could not even collapse. The only comfort she could manage was to rest her head against a stack of towels when she was tired.

Meanwhile, Dennis and Marianne made the place their home. They dirtied the kitchen preparing their meals. They left the dishes wherever they happened to be when they finished eating. They slept in the colonel's spacious bed. Dennis had discovered the study, and for no apparent reason other than pure meanness he had dumped all the books from the shelves. He had smoked the colonel's ten-dollar cigars, and he had discovered the gun cabinet.
"When I heard the first blast," Henrietta said, "I thought the colonel had come home and caught them in the house, but when no one let me out of the closet, I figured the boy had found the colonel's guns."

The gun cabinet was more for decoration than security. It had a glass door to show off the variety of shotguns and rifles the colonel had collected. Dennis had wasted no time getting to them. He smashed the glass doors and picked a twelve gauge shotgun that caught his eye. He then stepped out back and took pot-shots at anything that moved. While he was outside, Marianne came upstairs and sat down outside the closet door. She apologized for the way Henrietta had been treated, but she would not let her out of the closet.

"Dennis will get mad," she said.

By then Henrietta figured she would die before the ordeal reached its conclusion, so she spoke her mind and let the girl have it.

"You're disgracing yourself, your family, and the town," she said. "I know you have more sense than to run with a murderous boy like that one. I can tell by the look of you, you're a decent girl in spite of what you've done. I know you don't want to hurt anyone. I know all the murdering was the boy's doing. I saw it in your eyes. I know what's in your heart, and so does God. He's watching and making notes in His book. He knows you're a good girl led astray. You ought to repent here and now, before it's too late."

When Henrietta had finished she sat in silence for a long time. She thought Marianne had left her, but then she heard someone stir and knew the girl was still beside
the door. She listened as best she could and thought she heard the girl whispering, maybe praying. Henrietta thanked merciful Jesus and waited to be let out, but the whispering stopped and nothing happened. She called to the girl, and Marianne replied, "I'm sorry. If I let you out, Dennis will get mad." She had tried to get her to reconsider, but the girl had walked to the far end of the hall and down the stairs.

"Did she mention me?" Webb asked.

Henrietta looked at him and was surprised to see anxious movement in his eyes.

"I don't know," she said cautiously. "What's your name?"

Webb did not answer. She sensed he would catch her in a lie.

"I know your name," she said. "I recognize you from the garage. You're that Foster boy."

She got no response. She tried to use the space to figure out what to do or say. She thought the violence was behind them, but the longer he stared at her, the less sure she became. There was no way to read him, no way to tell. She wanted to say the girl had mentioned him, even though it made no sense to her, but she felt as though she were being called to reckoning. If Webb were a tool of God then He was surely watching and listening. She was already mired in the sin of complicity, and she dared not gamble with her soul to save her skin.

Henrietta surrendered herself to the truth. She took a deep breath and told him everything. She told him the colonel had killed the girl, and she went on to name everyone who knew.
Webb remained as expressionless as the kitchen wall, and only when she finished
did she notice emotion in him. He looked as if he might break down and cry right there,
and though she was sure he was inhuman, she felt an inexplicable pity for him. She might
have even wrapped him in her arms to comfort him if a car were not approaching. They
both heard it at the same time, gravel crunching beneath tires and the squeal of old brakes
right outside the front door. They looked wide-eyed at one another.

"What we did seemed right," Henrietta said.

It was little more than a whisper, and she barely heard her own voice. Webb
certainly did not hear it because he was scrambling for the back door and escape.

As Webb raced across the field he felt the tears welling in his eyes. His chest
ached, but he thought it was because he was winded. He ran full tilt for a mile before he
reached the treeline, but he did not stop there. Something pushed him on, perhaps the
need to escape his crime, or perhaps it felt good to push himself to exhaustion, to purge the
rage that felt like a knot in his stomach. He ran through the woods until he collapsed and
lay in a bed of leaves, his chest heaving. His legs felt like rubber and his chest was on fire.
He was consumed by pain from the run and the certainty that Marianne was dead. He had
thought knowing would bring some relief, but what he heard from Henrietta only caused
his grief to change into a new kind of anger, into righteous indignation. Marianne had
been taken from him and the guilty had to pay. Something had to be done. Call it justice,
call it revenge, call it what you like, but something had to be done.
Theodore Hartke sat in the solitude of his den. It was morning and he had awoke earlier than he liked. Ever since his life had taken such a tragic turn he preferred to remain in bed longer. He tried to fill his spare moments with sleep to escape his anguish. Since the death of his wife, Elizabeth, he had spent much of his time asleep. He had given up housekeeping, church and his job so he could stay in bed. He groomed himself only before going out in public, and he went out only for necessities such as groceries. He had lost his appetite. The sack of groceries he bought on Thursday still sat on the kitchen counter. It contained mostly canned goods, but he had also purchased a few ripe peaches. From his spot in the den he could smell the sickly-sweet scent of the fruit as it grew overripe.

He was not sure which day it was because he had lost track of time. The day had the feeling of a Monday, but he calculated the days since his wife’s death and reckoned it was Saturday. It was not long ago that he awoke every day with a purpose, even on Saturdays. His wife would fix breakfast for the family on the weekends, and as she stood over the sink munching toast he and his daughter would feast on eggs and bacon, catch up on recent gossip, and discuss their plans for the day. When they parted until later that evening Theodore had carried part of that moment with him and it brightened his spirits. It
had been a brief weekly event, a moment so small that he had taken it for granted, but now the memory shone with a cold light in the darkness of his despair.

He kept the curtains and shades drawn. Ever since Marianne ran away the house had steadily fallen into shadow. As time had passed and hope had faded, windows were sealed and covered one by one until he and his wife became creatures of darkness. Theodore maintained a modicum of normalcy because his job demanded it, but his wife had no reason to leave the house. While Theodore was gone she remained inside, staring at the ceiling from beneath a musty blanket, and when he returned they both sprawled on their bed and shared their despair. Sometimes they recollected pleasant memories, sometimes they wept together for hours on end, but it was all done in darkness.

For Theodore the house became an oppressive transition between unbearable days. He kept practicing law and maintained a public image of sanity and self-control, but the days were torture. He could hardly take a breath without wondering about the fate of his daughter, and his constant worry was like a knife in his heart. He did not care what crimes Marianne had committed. He just wanted her back, safe and sound, and if he could not have that, he at least wanted to know what had happened to her.

Marianne's safe return was paramount to him, but he was also bothered by her initial need to run away. Neither he nor Elizabeth had given her a reason to leave, or at least he could not think of any. Marianne had never voiced or shown any unhappiness. He had never seen or heard of Dennis before the couple's crime spree, but he concluded Dennis must have somehow corrupted his daughter. He held on to that idea for as long as he could. His anger would not be satisfied until he throttled the boy for leading Marianne
astray. He realized, however, that it was perhaps too easy to blame Dennis. The boy was a murderer, there was no denying it, but all the signs suggested Marianne had gone with him willingly. Rather than attribute his prodigal daughter's behavior to youthful recklessness, Theodore looked to the past. He pulled out dusty photo albums and peered at the faded images on each page, recollecting every memory he had of his daughter and the family. He relived the memories with his wife during their nightly lamentations, and he finally came to the only remaining conclusion: it was all his fault.

The conclusion was, of course, erroneous. Theodore was not perfect, but he was as good a father as one could expect. He had managed to raise a decent and obedient child (her recent activities excluded) without once striking her or raising his voice. He had done everything in his power to ensure she grew up to be a model citizen. Nevertheless, he did not see it that way. If Marianne had chosen to run away, to embrace a life of wantonness and crime, then he must have failed somewhere along the way.

He did not share this new insight with his wife. He kept it hidden as if he should bear all the responsibility and all the pain. He continued his daily routine and never once let on to anyone that he was convinced he had destroyed his own daughter. He carried the conviction around with him until he was so consumed with guilt that he could not bear his wife's presence. To see her weeping and wasting away only made matters worse, and he eventually consigned himself to sleeping in the den. Perhaps if he had confided in her she would still be alive. After her death he found her diary in the bedside table, and she had come to a strangely similar conclusion. She had been convinced Marianne's destruction was her fault.
He had only been awake for an hour, and already the waiting for his next chance at sleep had exceeded his tolerance. From his chair in the den he spotted a bottle of pills on the kitchen counter near the grocery bag. He was considering the release they could give him when he heard a knock on the back door. He did not answer it at once because it seemed too unusual. No one came to visit by the back door. He sat in the chair and waited, and after a few seconds the knocking repeated with more force and urgency. It sounded like the person might beat down the door. Theodore was not in the mood for conversation or sympathy, but he gave in and opened the door.

He did not recognize the ugly little man on his doorstep, but he noticed the patch on his shirt with the name Webb stitched in cursive letters. At first he thought Webb might be a county employee, perhaps here to read the meter, but he was too dirty and drenched with sweat.

"Yes?" he said.

Webb stared at him and waited for his breath to return. Theodore began to suspect the man was unbalanced. He began to close the door but Webb pressed against it.

"Don't," Webb said. "I have something to tell you."

"Yes?"

Webb removed his hand from the door and straightened.

"It's about Marianne."

Theodore thought it was part of a cruel joke, but there was something in Webb's face, something behind his ill-proportioned features, that convinced him Webb was sincere. He hesitated for a moment before standing aside so Webb could come in. Webb walked to
the center of the kitchen and pointed to a chair. Theodore seated himself and sat patiently waiting to hear what Webb had to say. After a few minutes of panting and pacing, Webb stopped in the middle of the floor. He revealed what he had learned and how he had learned it.

"I did it for Marianne," he said.

When Theodore heard the news he was incredulous. He thought Webb was insane, especially when he proclaimed his love for a schoolgirl who had been half his age. Theodore stood, picked up a dish towel, and began to twist it in his hands.

"Get out," he said.

Webb regarded him with a blank expression.

"But I loved her," he said.

Theodore's face turned red. His grip on the towel made his knuckles turn white.

"Get out!"

Webb genuinely looked hurt. Tears began to well in his eyes again and he left by the back door.

Theodore returned to the den and collapsed in a chair. The story was madness. It seemed impossible, but the longer he considered the possibility, the more he began to believe it. He did not have a rational explanation for his growing conviction, but something told him it was all true. Perhaps it was a gut instinct, or perhaps he had blamed himself for so long that he needed to believe Webb's story, even at the expense of the colonel's memory and the town's pride. Just before dinner time he stuffed a box of kitchen matches
in his pocket, he got a can of gasoline from the tool shed in his back yard, and he casually strolled toward the town square and the courthouse to see that justice was done.
Nine

Sheriff Sutter sat in his squad car and stared at his hands on the steering wheel.

"I'm not proud of what I did, but I ain't ashamed, neither."

He was parked on the roadside just outside of town. It was dusk, but he could still make out the edge of the square and see one corner of the courthouse. The fire was out, but the smell of smoke still lingered in the air. He looked in the rearview mirror at the road to the colonel's, then ahead at the road into town. Two distinct paths that never seemed disparate before now. He pulled a toothpick from his shirt pocket and placed it in one corner of his mouth. Too much had happened in one day. It was an effort to put it all in order.

He had awoke that morning in good spirits in spite of his troubling dreams. The mayor's sudden interest in the colonel's secret life and the mention of the Hartke girl had reminded him of what he wanted so desperately to forget, and ghosts of the past invaded his dreams. He dreamed Marianne Hartke stood over his bed with scornful eyes, and he awoke and struck at the ethereal image. It was a difficult night and he slept very little, but in the morning he was surprised to feel refreshed. He got up fifteen minutes earlier than usual. He made a hot breakfast instead of eating cold cereal, and he still had plenty of time to shave and dress before leaving the house. He even checked the barrel of his revolver to make sure it was clean. It was a meaningless chore since he had not fired the gun in almost
a year, but he was in a good mood. At seven fifteen he left the house, climbed in the
patrol car and headed for the station. He felt so invigorated that he took it as a sign the
ghost had moved on for good.

He checked in with his deputy, they talked over coffee, and he climbed back in the
squad car and cruised the streets. It was a perfunctory duty, more for show than anything,
but the sheriff was glad to do it. It gave him a chance to get fresh air and see people he
would not otherwise see. He saw Mr. Green, the courthouse guard, standing on the
sidewalk and smoking a pipe. He asked him if the colonel had been buried yet. Mr. Green
said the old man was still inside, and the sheriff shook his head and clicked his tongue.

"The mayor better get on the job," he said.

He pulled away and headed for the Mangum school to see if he could catch any
truants. Then he got the call.

The radio operator said a girl named Naomi Beam out at the Mangum estate had
called to report a break-in, and the perpetrator was still in the house. The sheriff
acknowledged and put the car in gear. There was no reason to associate the call with the
memory of Marianne Hartke, but it was the first thought that came to mind.

When he arrived at the estate he saw Whaley's tow truck parked in front of the
house, and he could not make sense of it. He thought the call might be a mistake; perhaps
Henrietta's girl had seen Whaley or one of his men in the house and had mistaken him for a
burglar. He stopped behind the truck, climbed out of the car and approached the front
door. When he saw the door was open he stepped inside and saw blood on the floor. He
drew his revolver and nearly shot Naomi as she ran down the stairs. Naomi had been
asleep when she heard a commotion downstairs. She had peeked over the bannister to see a man standing over her mother with a club. She had then retreated to the colonel's room, locked herself in, and called the sheriff's office.

They found Henrietta sitting at the kitchen table, one eye swollen and bleeding. The back door stood open, and the sheriff spotted someone running across the field toward the trees. The man had enough of a start that the sheriff would never catch him. He was too old and fat for a foot pursuit. He got on the phone and called his two deputies. He said they should high-tail it to the truck paths between the estate and the town, that the suspect was headed in that direction. He then hung up the phone and watched Naomi care for her mother. He did not know what had happened or how it came about, but when Henrietta finally lifted her head and looked him in the eye he knew his dream had been a premonition. The secret was out.

She said his name might be Foster. The sheriff knew the man, but he was not the type you noticed and it was an effort to get a clear picture of Foster in his head. He managed to call up the image of a scrawny little man, thirty-ish, narrow-shouldered and with a head perhaps too small for his body. He phoned in the information to the station, and the radio operator sent the call to the deputies who were already racing down dirt roads to cut the suspect off from town.

The sheriff lingered as long as he could, but Naomi showed no signs of leaving her mother's side. He wanted to speak with Henrietta alone, to know exactly what had transpired, but he finally gave up and left the girl with her mother. Foster may not be a reliable source, but the truth has a way of shining its own light. Foster had to be stopped.
If they caught him before he made it to town, the sheriff might be able to explain it to him, to convince him of the necessity that this all remain a secret. The town's future depended on it.

He met the deputies on a dusty road not much traveled. One of them had seen Webb dash across and disappear into the woods. The deputy had chased after him, but Webb was small and had managed to get through the tangles and snags and to disappear again. The deputy had tried to draw his weapon, but his shirt sleeve had caught on brambles. He raised an arm to show a torn sleeve cuff and tiny spots of blood. They decided to circle back toward town because that was clearly Webb's destination. The sheriff told the deputies the suspect had severely beaten a woman, maybe even tried to kill her. He was dangerous, maybe insane, and certainly a threat to other citizens. They should do everything in their power to keep him from town.

"Give him a chance to surrender, but don't think twice about shooting him."

The deputies nodded, perhaps a bit frightened and exhilarated. They were both young, still in their twenties. The sheriff had recruited them out of high school, and they had no real police training. They had never been involved in a criminal pursuit. They climbed in their cars and went back the way they had come.

By noon they had not found him. One deputy thought he spotted Webb running through the brush. He opened fire, but the suspect—if it were really him—was too fast and disappeared again. The sheriff figured a man on foot, running through ten miles of brush, would take two to three hours to reach town. He got on the radio and told the deputies to tighten their search area, to focus their attention on a one mile radius around the town. He
spent another half hour cruising the back streets, then he called the radio operator and asked for Webb’s address. The radio was silent for a moment before the operator replied, her voice little more than static. The sheriff turned the car around and headed for the mill road.

He found Foster’s house only after passing it twice. It seemed the house, like the man, had the tendency to be overlooked. It was a small clapboard house in need of some repair. The wood was rotted in places and the paint was chipping away. It was wholly unremarkable. The other houses on the street were painted in light colors, but this one was painted dark green and seemed to hide in the shadows of trees. The mailbox was attached to the house by the front door, but there were no numbers anywhere. The sheriff pulled into the driveway, realized he had better get the patrol car out of sight, and pulled around behind the house. A woman neighbor saw him and averted her eyes as she backed into her house.

The back door was unlocked and the sheriff let himself in. He was surprised at how much smaller the house seemed on the inside. If he stretched his arms out he could almost touch opposite ends of the kitchen. The house needed cleaning but was not in disorder. The air was musty as if the windows had not been opened for years. There were dishes in the kitchen sink. The den was free of the usual clutter such as magazines and unopened mail, but patting his hand on the back of a chair raised a small cloud of dust. The hallway from the den to the bedrooms was only two feet long, just large enough to fit an electrical socket evenly along one wall. One bedroom door stood open, and he saw more of the same dusty orderliness inside. The other bedroom door was closed. He
opened it and found a similar room containing a double bed piled with boxes. He opened one and found women's clothing and cheap jewelry, then he noticed the picture of Webb's mother and father in a frame on the dresser. He closed the box and left it the way he had found it, left the room and closed the door behind him.

His search of the house took less than one minute, and he found himself back in the kitchen staring at the wall clock. It was quarter to one and the sun was heating the air. He dampened a paper towel at the kitchen faucet and held it against his forehead, then laid it across the back of his neck. The water also had a stink to it, as if it had been in the house too long and taken on the smell. He sat down at the kitchen table, removed his revolver from its holster and set it on the table. He looked at the nickel-plating and thought about the coolness of steel.

He stared at the clock for several hours, and when he was not worrying about Foster he thought about time. For most of his life he had felt he could make time conform to his notions of it. People were impressed by his patience and tenacity. The truth, however, was that waiting had never bothered him because he had the ability to see the end and to leap to it, to focus on his goal and to single-mindedly pursue it. He had come to rely on this propensity, but now he seemed to have lost it. As he stared at the clock he felt the moment stretch out forever, but he also felt as if time were running out. The contradiction gave him a headache. He had the ridiculous notion the world was coming to an end. He asked God to lead Webb to him before it was too late.

He remained at the house until four o'clock that evening. He spent most of his time staring at the clock, but he occasionally stepped outside to monitor calls on the radio. Most
of what he heard was worthless chatter between the deputies. After three hours of waiting in the kitchen he realized Webb was not coming home. As he climbed into the squad car he heard a call come over the radio. There was a fire at the courthouse.

When he arrived at the town square he did not see any fire, but smoke was billowing from the doors and windows of the courthouse. A fire truck was parked on the street and firemen were running a hose inside. In the middle of this he spotted his deputies wrestling with someone. They had him pinned against a patrol car and were struggling to get handcuffs on him. The sheriff thought they had captured Webb, but when the deputies restrained the man and stood back, it turned out to be Theodore Hartke. When Theodore saw the sheriff he lunged at him, but the deputies grabbed him and threw him against a patrol car.

"I know all about it, sheriff!" he cried. He struggled with the handcuffs as if he wanted to point an accusing finger. "You knew all along. You were part of it. How could you do this to me?"

Theodore's anger turned into tears, and the deputies had to support him. The sheriff surmised what had happened. It was not what he had expected and it seriously complicated the situation. He pointed at Theodore and addressed the deputies.

"Jail and guard him. No one talks to him before I do."

The deputies forced Theodore into the back of a squad car. Even after they sealed Theodore inside the sheriff could still hear him wailing.

"Sheriff," said a deputy, "what about Foster?"
"Leave him to me," he mumbled. Then they all climbed in their cars and went their separate ways.

It was pure coincidence that the sheriff spotted Webb on his way back to the colonel's estate. He had figured he better talk to Henrietta and learn the details of her encounter with Webb before things got any more out of hand, if that were possible at this stage. He was three miles outside of town when the road passed through a clearing, and glancing to his right he saw what he thought was a deer sprinting through tall grass. For a second he forgot his troubles and tried to get a better look at the animal, but the longer he watched, the more convinced he was that it was not a deer. It was a man running at breakneck speed. It was Webb Foster.

The sheriff stopped the car and hesitated for the length of a breath. He tried to think out his next move, but the moment was upon him and he had to act. Webb was moving fast, approaching a treeline that would obscure him from sight. It would then be impossible for the sheriff to track him. He would have to rely on dumb luck to offer another such opportunity. He reached into the back seat and grabbed a hunting rifle from the floor. In one swift move he stepped out of the car, dropped a cartridge into the chamber, and slid the bolt into place. He leaned on the top of the car to steady his aim and maneuvered Webb into his sights. He was a skilled hunter, and it only took him half a second to draw a bead. He lined up with the dark figure, tracked the tiny head as it raced just above the grass, preceded it by a hair, exhaled, fired. The figure fell and disappeared in the grass.
The field turned out to be larger than he had ever noticed. He had noted exactly where his prey had fallen, but it took him several minutes of circling in the vicinity before he found it. He approached with the rifle aimed low, like a veteran, in case Webb still lived. There, sprawled face down in the grass, was Webb Foster. His face was buried in bloodied earth. The sheriff noted with detached satisfaction that the bullet had struck just behind the left ear. He stood over Foster in contemplation as mosquitoes buzzed his ears.

"It had to be done. I didn't want it this way, but I had no choice."

Sheriff Sutter sat in his patrol car and stared at his hands on the steering wheel. He was parked on the roadside just outside of town. It was dusk, but he could still make out the edge of the square and see one corner of the courthouse. The fire was out, but the smell of smoke still lingered in the air. He looked in the rearview mirror at the road to the colonel's, then ahead at the road into town. Two distinct paths that never seemed disparate before now. He pulled a toothpick from his shirt pocket and placed it in one corner of his mouth.

"I ain't no murderer, but sometimes a man's got to make a decision, be resolute."

He had been parked in front of the saloon the night it happened. He had stopped by to break the monotony of patrolling the town's quiet streets. He spent a few minutes at the bar joking with the locals and then headed back to his duties. When he reached the patrol car he found an old acquaintance sitting in the passenger seat and reeking of beer.

"Evening, Ambrose," he said.

The man lifted his chin from his chest and slowly focused on him.
"Evening, Sheriff," he replied. "You mind giving me a lift home?"

The sheriff sighed, but he did not mind doing the favor. The night was progressing slowly for him, and he secretly welcomed the distraction. He climbed in the car and headed toward the mill road. Ambrose did not offer any conversation, but the sheriff was entertained by his sad state. The old man opened a window, laid his head back against the seat, and let the breeze beat against his face in an effort to sober up. The sheriff glanced at his passenger, shook his head and chuckled to himself.

They were almost to the mill road when the call came over the radio: a disturbance at the colonel's. It struck him as strange because it was after eleven o'clock on a Wednesday, and most people were already in bed. Wednesday was not a night for mischief. If the call had been for anything else he would have taken his passenger home first, but since it came from the colonel he altered course and headed for the estate.

"Hope you don't mind a brief interruption," he said. "I'll get you home soon enough."

Ambrose mumbled something and nodded to indicate he did not care.

When they arrived at the estate the sheriff easily spotted the house even though the night was pitch-black. For some reason all the lights in the house were on. As he pulled up he saw the colonel's limousine parked before the porch, the trunk standing open. The front door of the house was also wide open, and sitting on the front steps with a shotgun across his lap was the colonel himself.

"You stay here, Ambrose," he said. He could not tell if the old man had heard him. He seemed to be asleep.
"Evening, Colonel," the sheriff said as he approached. He removed his hat and fanned the mosquitoes from his face. "I didn't expect you back for another month."

The colonel stared into the distance and did not look at him. The sheriff thought he may be deep in thought, but his gaze was hard, not thoughtful.

"It seems no one expected me to return so soon," he said.

The sheriff tilted his head to one side and looked for a sign in the man's face.

"Colonel?..."

The colonel stood and motioned for him to follow. As they passed through the front door the sheriff noticed blood on the floor and three bullet holes in the wall.

"Colonel?"

The colonel did not acknowledge him and continued up the stairs. At the top of the stairs the colonel stopped and crossed his arms, cradling the shotgun. When the sheriff reached the top step he saw more blood. He stepped into the hallway and found the body of a young man shot twice with a shotgun. There was a revolver laying nearby on the floor.

The sheriff recognized the boy as Dennis Carter, the boy who had teamed up with Marianne Hartke and had recently terrorized local towns. He noted that one wound was in the gut, the other in the upper back. He was afraid to ask what had happened. He closed his eyes and wished he were anywhere but here. When he opened them the colonel was continuing down the hallway. He followed the old man to an unused bedroom. The colonel walked to the middle of the room and nodded to a corner behind the bed. The sheriff crossed the room to get a look in the corner and saw the body of a girl, slumped
against the wall, shot once in the chest. Her hair hung over her face, but he did not need to see it. He already knew her name. He felt like he might be sick and coughed into his fist.

"Buck up, Parnell," the colonel said. "They brought it on themselves."

The sheriff wanted to get out of the room. He walked past the colonel and looked straight ahead; he did not know if he could face the man. He stepped over the body in the hallway and went downstairs. He seated himself on the bottom step and held his head in his hands. This was an ugly business. Nothing could change the fact that the boy and girl were dead, but he dreaded hearing the story.

He found Henrietta and Stafford in the kitchen with Calvin, and he learned from them what had happened. Henrietta described the events of the last two days the best she could since she had spent them in a closet, and Stafford nodded dumbly in agreement. When the two servants had finished their tale, the sheriff looked at Calvin.

"All right, Calvin," the sheriff said. "I've seen the bodies. I have an idea of what happened, so tell it to me straight."

Calvin did not look at him. He stared at the far wall and explained what he had seen. When they arrived they saw the midnight-blue sedan in the driveway. The colonel was immediately suspicious, but he did not seem too concerned. He sent Calvin inside to get Henrietta and Stafford to help unload their luggage, and Calvin obeyed. The moment he opened the door he heard a gunshot, and he realized someone had taken a shot at him from the darkness inside. He froze for a moment unsure of what to do, but then the colonel appeared beside him. He seemed to be prepared for any contingency. He had a shotgun in one hand, and with the other he found a light switch beside the door. When the
lights came on they spotted a boy at the top of the stairs holding a gun on them. The light temporarily blinded him, but he kept firing in their direction. Bullets struck around them, but the colonel was not shaken. He took careful aim and shot the boy in the gut. The look on the boy's face was pure disbelief. He turned and tried to take cover, but the colonel was not about to give him the chance. He fired again and hit the boy in the back. The boy had taken three steps before he had fallen on his face and died.

"I thought that was the end of it," Calvin said. "I wish that had been the end."

Next, as if from nowhere, they had heard a girl screaming. Calvin had been too shocked by the events to react, but the colonel had immediately fixed on the sound and raced up the stairs. Calvin managed to get a hold of himself and to follow, but he had been more than ten steps behind. Everything had happened before he reached the top of the stairs.

"The colonel murdered that girl," he said.

Marianne had stepped into the upstairs hallway just in time to see Dennis collapse on the floor. She began to shriek uncontrollably, gasping for breath between her screams. When she saw the colonel coming up the stairs she ran to the furthest corner of the house and hid behind the bed, but she did not stop screaming. The colonel found her and did not hesitate to fire. One well-aimed shot to her chest had silenced her, and a stillness had descended over the estate.

"It was cold-blooded," Calvin said.

There was nothing else to hear. The sheriff placed a hand on the young man's shoulder before leaving the kitchen. Now it was time to discuss with the colonel how they
should proceed. He expected the colonel would be in the study, and as he stepped into the foyer to look for him his heart sank. There, in the doorway, stood Ambrose.

The old man had sobered enough to reach a waking state. He had been so drunk that he had forgotten getting in the sheriff's car, and when he awoke he was surprised to find himself at the colonel's. He was alone in the driveway, and in order to make sense of it he went in search of someone to explain it to him. When the sheriff noticed him he was standing just inside the door, staring in horror at the sight at the top of the stairs.

"What's going on here, Sheriff?" he asked.

The sheriff did not respond at once. His first impulse was to lie, to get Ambrose out of there as quickly as possible, but he realized Ambrose had already seen too much. He was not in the mood, however, to explain things to a drunk. He told Ambrose to wait in the car, but before Ambrose could collect his wits the colonel entered from the study and spotted him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded.

Ambrose could not answer the question, so the sheriff intervened.

"I was giving him a ride home when I got your call. Let him be, Colonel. He's already seen enough."

The colonel eyed Ambrose suspiciously for a moment before he acquiesced. He then led the men to his study. He seated himself behind his desk, and Ambrose sat on the edge of a chair and held his head in his hands. The sheriff stood facing a window, but he could not see anything because of the darkness outside. He still could not bring himself to look full upon the colonel.
"Let's finish with this business," the colonel said. "What do you need from me for the report?"

The sheriff cleared his throat. He had seen the evidence and considered the options. He already knew the course they must take, and he despised himself for his role in it.

"It's not that simple, sir," he said.

The colonel lit a cigar and waited for an explanation.

"The boy was nothing to us," the sheriff explained. "but the Hartke girl is a different matter."

The colonel removed the cigar from his mouth and gave the sheriff questioning look. The sheriff realized he had not known the girl's identity. The colonel paused for a moment as if in thought and placed the cigar back in his mouth.

"Nonsense," he said. He puffed several times to get the cigar burning. "They broke into my house and tormented my people."

"Yes, sir," the sheriff said. "But consider what this will do to your reputation. Consider what this will do to the town."

The colonel considered it in silence. Ambrose did not look up. The sheriff watched the colonel's reflection in the window.

"Yes," the colonel said at length. "I see your point. A secret, then. How do we proceed?"

The sheriff stepped up to Ambrose and placed a hand on his shoulder. He bent over slightly so the man would hear him.
"Do you understand what's happened here, Ambrose?" he said quietly.

The drunk did not answer, but the sheriff knew he understood.

"You're one of us," the sheriff said. "You and the colonel are our eldest. I need to know you'll stick by your oath and keep this between us."

Ambrose gave no response.

"For the town's sake," the sheriff said. "If news of this gets out, the people won't care anymore and the town will die. Maybe not this week or the next, but it will die. This is the land of our fathers, and we can't let it go. I know you understand, Ambrose, but I need to know that you'll honor your oath."

Ambrose slowly shook his head, paused, then nodded.

The sheriff straightened and nodded at the colonel.

"See to it, then, Parnell," the colonel said.

The sheriff got Calvin to help him with the bodies. They wrapped them in linens, dragged them down the stairs, out through the kitchen, across the field and into the brush. They dug one grave until they hit ground water and could go no deeper, and they dropped the bodies in and covered them. There was no chance anyone would stumble across the spot, but they were careful to level the ground and to spread leaves and nettles over the spot. When they got back to the house Henrietta and Stafford had cleaned the walls and hallways of all traces of violence. The floors had been swept and mopped, and except for the shattered gun cabinet and the three slugs in the wall beside the door, there was no sign the incident had occurred. It was five o'clock in the morning and the colonel was asleep in bed, had been for hours. The sheriff's work was done. He did not speak to anyone. He
washed the dirt from his hands in the kitchen sink and found Ambrose in the study. Ambrose had moved to another chair, but he was in the same position as before with his head in his hands. The sheriff tapped him on the shoulder and they left the house. They climbed in the car and drove home in silence. The sheriff did not think of what he had seen or had become a part of that night. He thought only of his father, grandfather, and great grandfather, and he cursed the day he swore an oath to the Sons of the Confederacy.

Sheriff Sutter sat in his squad car and stared at his hands on the steering wheel.

"What I did, I did for the town, for the colonel. If that ain't right, what is?"

After he had left Webb Foster lying face down in the field there was no point to visit Henrietta. Nothing she could tell him would change the fact that Webb was dead. He would keep his deputies on the lookout for the suspect for another week before telling them to give up the search. No one would find the body in the field. The land belonged to the colonel, and the colonel was dead. No one would plant crops or develop there, at least not soon. By the time someone stumbled across Webb he would be an anonymous pile of bones.

He tried to console himself with these thoughts as he headed back toward town. He told the radio operator to have the deputies prepare Theodore Hartke for questioning, and the operator told him the mayor had already talked with Mr. Hartke.

"The mayor wants you to contact him as soon as possible," she said.

"Where in the hell are my deputies?" he demanded.

"They left with the mayor," the operator replied. "Shall I call them?"
He stopped the car on the road just outside of town. It was dusk but he could still make out the edge of the square and see one corner of the courthouse. The fire was out, but the smell of smoke still lingered in the air. He looked in the rearview mirror at the road to the colonel's, then at the road into town. Two distinct paths that had never seemed disparate before now. He pulled a toothpick from his shirt pocket and placed it in one corner of his mouth.

The sheriff sat in the squad car at the edge of town for several hours. It grew dark and he ignored the repeated hails from the radio operator. She had not heard from him and the mayor was still waiting. It was clear she did not know what was happening. When she spoke he heard concern in her voice. There was no deception in her tone. If the deputies were waiting to grab him then she did not know it. In her eyes he was still a symbol of protection and justice, and he took one last moment to bask in that integrity and respect.

He wondered how many knew by this time. The mayor was a decent man, but secrets burned a hole in him. He could tell this about the mayor. He saw it in the mayor's tendency to touch people's arms when talking with them, as if he wanted their confidence and, in turn, could not wait to share his. While thinking on this he realized the mayor had never touched him in that manner. There must have been something about him that the mayor did not trust. Perhaps it was his eyes. He had narrow eyes that made him look shifty at times. For a long time he had felt that his eyes undermined the authority of his position, but then he had learned to use them to his advantage. People were uncomfortable
beneath his gaze, and it helped him get confessions. He preferred to sit and stare at a man rather than interrogate him. He had tried both methods, and both had met with success. He knew there was a power in his stare, and it must be what always had kept the mayor away.

A car passed through the square and for a moment he knew fear, but the car continued on its way and did not turn down his street. He supposed he felt fear because he had not chosen a path or made a plan of action. For three hours he had sat in his car and stared at his hands as if waiting for an epiphany that would show him how to set everything right. No ideas had come to him. The murder of Webb no doubt had sealed his fate. The moment he had shot down Webb he had committed himself. He could always explain it away as an unfortunate aspect of his job, but he could not lie to himself. It had been his second chance at redemption, a chance to disassociate himself from the sins of the past, and he had failed. He knew there was only one path left to him, but he had put off accepting it because it would lead to more of the same, more deception and murder, and he was not that type of person. In the end, however, he knew no alternative.

He got out of the car and proceeded on foot, walking close to the edge of the road so he could duck into the brush if a car came along. He approached the town square and walked in the shadows. He moved along the sidewalk and kept under eaves and awnings to conceal himself. The town was unusually quiet for a Saturday night; even the movie theater has closed early. He moved along without encountering a soul and finally came in sight of his office. The deputies' cars were absent, and he supposed they were looking for Foster and himself. He could see much of the office through the glass door. There was no
sign of the mayor, so he retraced his steps toward the square. He checked the mayor's office and found it empty as well. He decided to try one more place before returning to the patrol car.

At the mayor's house he noticed a light on in a first floor window at the back of the house. He had approached from an adjacent street and had cut through yards to go unnoticed. A neighbor's dog barked, but the dog knew him and went back to sleep when it caught his scent. He stepped into the mayor's back yard and spotted the man in his study, a very round and bald head in the window. It was a very dark night and the desk lamp was shining, casting the mayor in a circle of light. From the mayor's side of the window the night must have looked like a wall of darkness. The grass was damp and made little sound as the sheriff approached. He walked right up to the window, almost within arm's length, and stopped. The mayor was busily typing out a letter. He did not look up, and he did not hear a sound over the tapping of the keys. The sheriff stood there for long minutes, still waiting for an epiphany or some form of deliverance. He eventually unholstered his revolver and aimed it at the mayor. He closed one eye and aimed down the length of his right arm. *This is what it has come to.* He and the mayor never had been close, but he had considered the mayor a friend in a broader sense. *This is all I have left.* He had to silence the mayor to save himself, to keep the memory of the colonel untarnished, to sustain the honor and pride of the town. *There's more at stake here than the life of one man.* The revolver weighed four pounds, but at arm's length the weight seemed to multiply every second. Already his arm trembled and his aim was erratic. He thought of the clean barrel of the revolver and the wound behind the left ear, and he lowered his arm and
holstered the weapon. He shook his head as if to say no and quietly headed back to the patrol car.
The mayor smelled the smoke before he heard the cries in the street. He hurried out the front door of his office and saw the courthouse was on fire, or seemed to be. The doors were standing open and black smoke billowed into the street, but he did not see flames. He heard a bell clanging in the distance and recognized it as the alarm at the fire station. A crowd was gathering at the edges of the block, and he stepped into the street to instruct them to stay back. As he waved people away from the building he noticed movement through the smoke. A gust of wind swept through the street and cleared the smoke long enough for him to see Theodore Hartke exit the courthouse.

The event had passed within minutes of its beginning. The fire truck was only one mile away and arrived in record time. Seconds later the deputies arrived, followed by the sheriff. Several people in the crowd had seen Theodore walk into the courthouse with a can of gasoline. The deputies spotted him standing nearby, threw him in the back of a car and whisked him away to jail before the mayor could get an explanation. Then the sheriff sped away without a word on the matter. The firemen were the only ones who paid him any attention. They herded him into the crowd and pushed everyone back away from the building. They extinguished the fire before they had the crowd under control.

"What happened?" the mayor asked. The question was directed at no one in particular, but a fireman stopped while hauling a length of hose back to the truck.
"Gasoline fire," he said. "Set deliberately. I think the sheriff caught the fellow, though."

The mayor acknowledged the man with a nod, but he still did not understand. He went straight to the jail and found the deputies in the sheriff’s office. One was sitting behind the sheriff’s desk and filling out a report, and the other sat in a chair by the doorway to the jail.

"Hello, boys," the mayor said. "Am I to understand that Theodore set fire to the courthouse?"

The deputy behind the desk answered without looking up from his report.

"Yes, sir. Well, actually no, sir. The building was in danger, but it wasn't the suspect's intent to burn it down, or so he says. He dumped a gallon of gasoline on the colonel and set him afire."

"What on earth for?" the mayor asked.

"We're not sure yet," the deputy replied. "Somehow Mr. Hartke got the idea the colonel killed his daughter."

The mayor frowned and felt an uneasiness in his stomach. He had not breathed a word to anyone about the colonel's confession. The fact that Theodore somehow had found out made him believe the confession was true. Perhaps the old man had killed Marianne Hartke after all. The particulars, however, did not fit together and did not make sense to him.

"This can't be," he said quietly. "Boys, I need to speak with Theodore."

The deputy at the desk gave the mayor his full attention.
"Sorry, sir. The sheriff said no one talks to him until he gets back."

"Where has the sheriff gone?"

"I don't know," the deputy replied.

"When do you expect him back?"

"Don't know that, either," the deputy said. He returned his attention to his report.

The mayor looked at the deputy guarding the jail door and thought of walking past him, but he thought better of it. These two clearly relished the recent action they had seen, and now the authority the sheriff had given them seemed to have gone to their heads. He did not think they would harm him, but he decided not to risk it. He stepped into the adjoining office and found the radio operator thumbing through a magazine.

"Call the sheriff," he said, "and have him get in contact with me as soon as possible."

The woman nodded and sent the message over the radio, but she got no response. The mayor said he could be reached at his office and turned for the door. He did not look at the deputies when he passed through the sheriff's office.

Although he was relatively new to the town, the mayor knew the repercussions that would result from these strange events. The town was unusually proud of its heritage, and he supposed he understood why. A century ago, the town had seemed like it would continue to grow into a city of considerable culture and industry as people flocked to be near James Raymond Mangum, the first colonel. They borrowed money from him to set up shop, and soon he owned or had a stake in virtually every life and business in the vicinity. Before long, however, he got tired of the expansion and money-lending, and
growth stopped altogether. He single-handedly brought the town's progress to a sudden halt, and that is how the town remained until the last of their line. Colonel Marcus, spent the family fortune and died. With the passing of the last Mangum and the family money, the town's lifeblood had ebbed away. The Mangum's had breathed life into the area and shortly thereafter had robbed it of hope for the future. Today, all the people had left seemed to be their pride for things past.

He headed for his office. The roads and sidewalks were still littered with debris and covered with mud. Many storefronts were boarded up because the town lacked the resources to repair the damage. The mayor shook is head. The flood could not have come at a worse time. As he crossed the street he had a premonition that this was the beginning of the end. The stores would not re-open. The people would soon begin to move away. They would leave to escape the town's dissolution, Mangum history, and the memory the colonel had left them.

He let himself in the office. The place was empty because it was a Saturday. He still had not heard from the governor. He knew he would not get results, but he phoned the governor's office anyway. He reached the same uncooperative secretary who coldly reminded him that it was a Saturday and the governor was unavailable.

"But this is an emergency situation," he said.

The secretary assured him the governor would return the call when he had time. She then thanked him for the call and hung up. The mayor held the phone against his ear for several seconds before finally replacing the receiver. He sat down and stared out his office window.
At five o'clock he left the office for home. He paused for a moment on the sidewalk and considered a second attempt to see Theodore but decided against it. When he reached home he was relieved to hear his wife humming to herself in the kitchen. He went straight to her and in a sad way kissed her on the cheek. It was then he learned of the disturbance at the Mangum estate. It seemed he was always the last to know. At around ten o'clock that morning his wife had received a call from a neighbor to inform her of the crime.

"Some hooligan broke into the colonel's and tried to kill the caretaker," she said. "What's her name? Henrietta."

The mayor collapsed in a chair at the kitchen table and marveled at how bad the week had been. He called the sheriff's office again, but the sheriff was still nowhere to be found. The mayor reiterated that the sheriff should contact him as soon as possible, and the radio operator promised she would send the message again.

"If he doesn't turn up in the next hour," he said, "have the deputies go out and find him."

"But they're supposed to guard the prisoner," she replied.

The mayor gave in to the frustration and anger that had been building all week.

"Theodore Hartke is not a dangerous man, and he does not need to be guarded," he said. "Tell the deputies that if they don't get off their tails and find the sheriff, I'll have their badges by morning."

He retired to his study and turned on the desk light. He found a sheet of paper bearing the official letterhead of his office and fed it into the typewriter. He did not know
where to begin. It took him an hour to assemble the facts as he knew them, and he finally began with his discovery of the colonel's confession. He hoped his evaluation of the events and evidence would convince the judge to go easy on Theodore Hartke.

When I heard about the sheriff I became ill. I had been in the saloon when a man walked in with his head hung low. I recognized him but did not know his name. He was forty-ish, a farmer. He wore his work clothes in spite of it being Sunday. He walked to the bar, sat down at the end nearest my table and quietly ordered a beer. The drink arrived but he did not imbibe. He hung his head low over the bar and stared into the glass.

It bothered me to see a soul so troubled, so I left my table and nodded to him as I took the barstool beside him. He reacted slowly as if in a torpor. I gave him a solid clap on the back, a cheerful platitude, and asked why he looked so down. He replied quietly that the sheriff was dead.

The sheriff had died on a lonely road that ended at the edge of a cliff overlooking a quarry. He had pulled the car up to the edge; another inch and it would have gone over. He must have sat there for five or six hours, and he probably saw the sunrise. Perhaps he slept part of the night, or perhaps he sat up all that time thinking of the past and how different it should have been. Either way, he was clear-headed when dawn came. He then took his revolver and unceremoniously shot himself in the head.

Two boys had been on their way to the quarry to look for snakes when they heard the shot. They thought someone was hunting and paid it no mind. When they came across the patrol car the driver's window was a spider's web of shattered glass. The sheriff
sat upright in the seat, eyes closed, a gaping hole in his head. The boys ran back home and called the station, and thirty minutes later the deputies found the spot. They were used to following the sheriff's orders and did not know how to handle the situation, so they simply roped off the area and returned to town.

When the mayor heard he was mortified. He rang the mortuary but got no answer, so he found a tree-cutter with a truck who was willing to transport the body back to town. The doctor showed up and climbed in the truck, and they followed the deputies to the site. When they arrived the doctor opened the door to the patrol car and winced. Flies quickly gathered, and he had the deputies load the body into the back of the truck. They took the sheriff back to the doctor's office and laid him on a steel table. The cooler still contained Mrs. Hartke and several corpses evicted by the flood, so the doctor piled ice on the sheriff and hoped he would not get too ripe before they buried him. An hour later Mr. Whaley had driven out to the quarry and towed the patrol car back to town. He had left the car in a small lot behind the sheriff's office surrounded by a six foot chain-link fence where it became a grim attraction for everyone who passed by.

The farmer did not have the details leading up to the sheriff's suicide, but I did not need to hear them. I made the connections for myself. Ever since my conversation with the mayor I had been nagged by a sense of foreboding, but I had attributed it to mere superstition. When the moment came I was not prepared to hear the farmer's news, and it troubled me in a way I had not expected. I suppose I knew that one day we would all be called to reckon for what had happened, but as time passed I had been lulled into a state of
security. Now, hearing of the sheriff's end caused me a heartache that far exceeded grief. I excused myself and left the morose gentleman at the bar.

I was only half aware that I had left the saloon, and I wandered the sidewalk in a stupor. I crossed the street and leaned against a post in front of the barber shop. I was sweating buckets and the pain in my chest shouted with every beat of my heart. I staggered to a nearby bench and collapsed on it. I heard a door open to my left, and I saw the mayor leaving the sheriff's office. He stepped onto the sidewalk and stopped, stared at his feet for a moment, then looked up and spotted me. I must not have looked as poorly as I felt at that moment, or perhaps he was too consumed by his thoughts to notice my condition, because when he saw me he casually walked over and gave a funereal nod.

"I suppose you know about the sheriff," he said.

I nodded. My mouth was too dry to speak. He placed his hands in his pockets and his chin dropped to his chest.

"I just spoke with Theodore," he said. "I can't believe what's gone on here. The sheriff dead, that Foster boy going out of his mind and beating Henrietta, and now he's disappeared. And poor Theodore. He says Foster told him the colonel killed Marianne, and the sheriff apparently knew it all along. It sounds insane, but the sheriff's suicide suggests there's some truth to it."

I swallowed hard. He pulled one hand out of his pocket and in it held a piece of paper folded in thirds.

"Then there's the matter of this letter," he said. "It's damning evidence that everything I've heard is true."
He looked at me for my reaction. I was too distracted by my condition to speak. I felt light-headed and feared I might faint.

"You knew all along, didn't you, Ambrose?" he said.

In that moment I did not care about the colonel or the town. The pain had driven me to distraction and I nodded without hesitation.

The mayor pursed his lips, sighed, and looked at the square. The base of the statue and the cannon were still covered in grime. The doors to the courthouse still stood open from the night before, and inside everything looked black. He stood there a moment longer taking in the scene, then he walked away without another word.

I watched him cross the square. Perhaps it was an effect of my condition, but as he walked away everything became hazy and diffused, as if I were seeing through a filter of the past. The scene had the look of a photograph bleached by time. I saw the streets and buildings of a century past mirrored in that ghost-image, and in that moment I knew it was finished. The Mangum's, the town, everything we had achieved, had long since passed away.