

IV

Fidelity

Lyda had not slept, and she knew that Danny had not either. It was close to midnight. They had turned out the light two hours earlier, and since then they had lain side by side, not moving, not touching, disturbed beyond the power to think by the thought of the old man who was lying slack and still in the mechanical room, in the merciless light, with a tube in his nose and a tube needled into his arm and a tube draining his bladder into a plastic bag that hung beneath the bed. The old man had not answered to his name, "Uncle Burley." He did not, in fact, appear to belong to his name at all, for his eyes were shut, he breathed with the help of a machine, and an unearthly pallor shone on his forehead and temples. His hands did not move. From time to time, unable to look any longer at him or at the strange, resistant objects around him in the room, they looked at each other, and their eyes met in confusion, as if they had come to the wrong place.

They had gone after supper to the hospital in Louisville to enact again the strange rite of offering themselves where they could not be received. They were brought back as if by mere habit into the presence of a life that had once included them and now did not, for it was a life that, so far as they could see, no longer included even itself. And so they stood around the image on the bed and waited for whatever completion would let them go.

There were four of them: Nathan Coulter, Burley's nephew, who might as well have been his son; Danny Branch, his son in fact, who had until recent years passed more or less as his nephew and who called him "Uncle Burley" like the others; and there were Nathan's wife, Hannah, and Lyda, Danny's wife, who might as well have been his daughters.

After a while, Hannah rested her purse on the bed, and opened it, and took out a handkerchief with which she touched the corners of her eyes. She put the handkerchief back into her purse and slowly shut the clasp, watching her hands with care as if she were sewing. And then she looked up at Nathan with a look that acknowledged everything, and Nathan turned and went out, and the others followed.

All through the latter part of the summer Burley had been, as he said himself, "as no-account as a cut cat." But he had stayed with them, helping as he could, through the tobacco harvest, and they were glad to have him with them, to listen to his stories, and to work around him when he got in their way. He had begun to lose the use of himself, his body only falteringly answerable to his will. He blamed it on arthritis. "There's a whole family of them Ritis boys," he would say, "and that Arthur's the meanest one of the bunch." But the problem was not arthritis. Burley was only saying what he knew that other old men had said before him; he was too inexperienced in illness himself to guess what might be wrong with him.

They had a fence to build before corn gathering, and they kept him with them at that. "We'll need you to line the posts," they told him. But by then they could not keep him awake.

They would find him asleep wherever they left him, in his chair at home, or in the cab of a pickup, or hunched in his old hunting coat against an end post or the trunk of a tree. One day, laying a hand on Burley's shoulder to wake him, Danny felt what his eyes had already told him but what he had forborne to know with his hand: that where muscle had once piled and rounded under the cloth, there was now little more than hide and bone.

"We've got to do something for him," Danny said then, partly because Lyda had been saying it insistently to him.

Nathan stared straight at him as only Nathan could do. "What?"

"Take him to the doctor, I reckon. He's going to die."

"Damn right. He's eighty-two years old, and he's sick."

They were getting ready to go in to dinner, facing each other across the bed of Danny's pickup where they had come to put their tools. Burley, who had not responded to the gentle shake that Danny had given him, was still asleep in the cab.

Nathan lifted over the side of the truck a bucket containing staples and pliers and a hammer, and then, as he would not ordinarily have done, he pitched in his axe.

"He's never been to a doctor since I've known him. He said he wouldn't go. You going to knock him in the head before you take him?"

"We'll just take him."

Nathan stood a moment with his head down. When he looked up again, he said, "Well."

So they took him. They took him because they wanted to do more for him than they could do, and they could think of nothing else. Nathan held out the longest, and he gave in only because he was uncertain.

"Are you—are we—just going to let him die like an old animal?" Hannah asked.

And Nathan, resistant and grouchy in his discomfort, said, "An old animal is maybe what he wants to die like."

"But don't we need to help him?"

"Yes. And we don't know what to do, and we're not going to know until after we've done it. Whatever it is. What better can we wish him than to die in his sleep out at work with us or under a tree somewhere?"

"Oh," Hannah said, "if only he already had!"

Nathan and Danny took him to the doctor in Nathan's pickup, Nathan's being more presentable and dependable than Danny's, which anyhow had their fencing tools in it. The doctor pronounced Burley "a very sick man"; he wanted him admitted to the hospital. And so, the doctor having called ahead, with Burley asleep between them Danny and Nathan took him on to Louisville, submitted to the long interrogation required for admission, saw him undressed and gowned and put to bed by a jolly nurse, and left him. As they were going out, he said, "Boys, why don't you all wait for me yonder by the gate. I've got just this one last round to make, and then we'll all go in together." They did not know from what field or what year he was talking.

Burley was too weak for surgery, the doctor told them the next day. It would be necessary to build up his strength. In the meantime tests would be performed. Danny and Lyda, Nathan

and Hannah stood with the doctor in the corridor outside Burley's room. The doctor held his glasses in one hand and a clipboard in the other. "We hope to have him on his feet again very soon," he said.

And that day, when he was awake, Burley was plainly disoriented and talking out of his head—"saying some things," as Nathan later told Wheeler Catlett, "that he never thought of before and some that nobody ever thought of before." He was no longer in his right mind, they thought, because he was no longer in his right place. When they could bring him home again, he would be himself.

Those who loved him came to see him: Hannah and Nathan, Lyda and Danny, Jack Penn, Andy and Flora Catlett, Arthur and Martin Rowanberry, Wheeler and his other son and law partner, Henry, and their wives. They sat or stood around Burley's bed, reconstructing their membership around him in that place that hummed, in the lapses of their talk, with the sounds of many engines. Burley knew them all, was pleased to have them there with him, and appeared to understand where he was and what was happening. But in the course of his talk with them, he spoke also to their dead, whom he seemed to see standing with them. Or he would raise his hand and ask them to listen to the hounds that had been running day and night in the bottom on the other side of the river. Once he said, "It's right outlandish what we've got started in this country, big political vats and tubs on every roost."

And then, in the midst of the building of strength and the testing, Burley slipped away toward death. But the people of the hospital did not call it dying; they called it a coma. They spoke of curing him. They spoke of his recovery.

A coma, the doctor explained, was certainly not beyond expectation. It was not hopeless, he said. They must wait and see.

And they said little in reply, for what he knew was not what they knew, and his hope was not theirs.

"Well, then," Nathan said to the doctor, "we'll wait and see."

Burley remained attached to the devices of breathing and feeding and voiding, and he did not wake up. The doctor stood before them again, explaining confidently and with many large words, that Mr. Coulter soon would be well, that there were yet other measures that could be taken, that they should not give up hope, that there were places well-equipped to care for patients in Mr. Coulter's condition, that they should not worry. And then he said that if he and his colleagues could not help Mr. Coulter, they could at least make him comfortable. He spoke fluently from within the bright orderly enclosure of his explanation, like a man in a glass booth. And Nathan and Hannah, Danny and Lyda stood looking in at him from the larger, looser, darker order of their merely human love.

When they returned on yet another visit and found the old body still as it had been, a mere passive addition to the complicated machines that kept it minimally alive, they saw finally that in their attempt to help they had not helped but only complicated his disease beyond their power to help. And they thought with regret of the time when the thing that was wrong with him had been simply unknown, and there had been only it and him and him and them in the place they had known together. Loving him, wanting to help him, they had given him over to "the best of modern medical care"—which meant, as they now saw, that they had abandoned him.

If Lyda was wakeful, then, it was because she, like the others, was shaken by the remorse

of a kind of treason.

Lyda must have dozed finally, because she did not hear Danny get up. When she opened her eyes, the light was on, and he was standing at the foot of the bed, buttoning his shirt. The clock on the dresser said a quarter after twelve.

“What are you doing?”

“Go back to sleep, Lyda. I’m going to get him.”

She did not ask who. She said “Good,” which made him look at her, but he did not say more.

And she did not ask. He suited her, and moreover she was used to him. He was the kind, and it was not a strange kind to her, who might leave the bed in the middle of the night if he heard his hounds treed somewhere and not come back for hours. Like Burley, Danny belonged half to the woods. Lyda knew this and it did not disturb her, for he also belonged to her, in the woods as at home.

He finished dressing, turned the light off, and went out. She heard him in Burley’s room and then in the kitchen. She heard the scrape of the latch pin at the smokehouse door. He was being quiet; she would not have heard him if she had not listened carefully. But then the hounds complained aloud when he shut them in a stall in the barn.

Presently he came back, and she seemed to feel rather than hear or see him as he moved into the doorway and stopped. “I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. You and the kids’ll have to do the chores and look after things.”

“All right.”

“I fastened up the dogs.”

“I heard you.”

“Well, don’t let them out. And listen, Lyda. If somebody wants to know, I’ve said something about Indiana.”

She listened until she heard the old pickup start and go out the lane. And then she slept.

Danny’s preparations were swift and scant but sufficient for several days. He stripped the bedclothes from Burley’s bed, laid them out neatly on the kitchen floor, and then rolled them up around a slab of cured jowl from the smokehouse, a small iron skillet, and a partly emptied bag of cornmeal. He tied the bundle with baling twine, making a sling by which it could hang from his shoulder. From behind the back hall door he took his hunting coat with his flashlight in one pocket and his old long-barreled .22 pistol in the other. He removed the pistol and laid it on top of the dish cabinet.

His pickup truck was sitting in front of the barn, and the confined hounds wailed again at the sound of his footsteps.

“Hush!” he said, and they hushed.

He pitched his bundle onto the seat and unlatched and raised the hood. He had filled the tank with gas that afternoon but had not checked the oil and water. By both principle and necessity, he had never owned a new motor vehicle in his life. The present pickup was a third-hand Dodge, which Burley had liked to describe as “a loose association of semiretired parts,

like me.” But Danny was, in self-defense, a good mechanic, and he and the old truck and the box of tools that he always kept on the floorboard made a working unit that mostly worked.

The oil was all right. He poured a little water into the radiator, relatched the hood, set the bucket back on the well-top, and got into the truck. He started the engine, backed around in front of the corncrib, turned on the headlights, headed out the lane—and so committed himself to the succession of ever wider and faster roads that led to the seasonless, sunless, and moonless world where Burley lay in his bonds.

The old truck roaring in outlandish disproportion to its speed, he drove through Port William and down the long slant into the river bottoms where the headlights showed the ripening fields of corn. After a while he slowed and turned left onto the interstate, gaining speed again as he went down the ramp. The traffic on the great road was thinner than in the daytime but constant nevertheless. As he entered the flow of it, he accelerated until the vibrating needle of the speedometer stood at sixty miles an hour—twenty miles faster than he usually drove. If at the crescendo of this acceleration the truck had blown up, it would not altogether have surprised him. Nor would it altogether have displeased him. He hated the interstate and the reeking stream of traffic that poured along it day and night, and he liked the old truck only insofar as it was a salvage job and his own. “If she blows,” he thought, “I’ll try to stop her crosswise of both lanes.”

But though she roared and groaned and panted and complained, she did not blow.

Danny’s mother, Kate Helen Branch, had been the love of Burley Coulter’s life. They were careless lovers, those two, and Danny came as a surprise—albeit a far greater surprise to Burley than to Kate Helen. Danny was born to his mother’s name, a certified branch of the Branches, and he grew up in the care of his mother and his mother’s mother in a small tin-roofed, paper-sided house on an abandoned corner of Thad Spellman’s farm, not far from town by a shortcut up through the woods. As the sole child in that womanly household, Danny was more than amply mothered. And he did not go fatherless, for Burley was that household’s faithful visitor, its pillar and provider. He took a hand in Danny’s upbringing from the start, although, since the boy was nominally a Branch, Danny always knew his father as “Uncle Burley.”

If Danny became a more domestic man than his father, that is because he loved the frugal, ample household run by his mother and grandmother and later by his mother and himself. He loved his mother’s ability to pinch and mend and make things last. He was secretly proud of her small stitches in the patches of his clothes. They kept a big garden and a small flock of hens. They kept a pig in a pen to eat scraps and make meat, and they kept a Jersey cow that picked a living in the green months out of Thad Spellman’s thickety pasture. The necessary corn for the pig and chickens and the corn and hay for the cow were provided by Burley and soon enough by Burley and Danny.

If Danny became a better farmer than his father that is because, through Burley, he came under the influence of Burley’s brother, Jarrat, and of Jarrat’s son, Nathan, and of Burley’s and Nathan’s friend, Mat Feltner, all of whom were farmers by calling and by devotion. From them he learned the ways that people lived by their soil and their care of it, by the bounty of crops

and animals, and by the power of horses and mules.

But if Danny became more a man of the woods and the streams than nearly anybody else of his place and time, that was because of Burley himself. For Burley was by calling and by devotion a man of the woods and streams. When duty did not keep him in the fields, he would be hunting or fishing or roaming about in search of herbs or wild fruit, or merely roaming about to see what he could see; and from the time Danny was old enough to want to go along, Burley took him. He taught him to be quiet and watch and not complain, to hunt, to trap, to fish and swim. He taught him the names of the trees and of all the wild plants of the woods. Danny's first providings on his own to his mother's household were of wild goods: fish and game, nuts and berries that grew by no human effort but furnished themselves to him in response only to his growing intimacy with the countryside. Such providing pleased him and made him proud. Soon he augmented it with wages and produce from the farmwork he did with Burley and the others.

The world that Danny was born into during the tobacco harvest of 1932 suited him well. That the nation was poor was hardly noticeable to him, whose people had never been rich except in the things that they continued to be rich in though they were poor. He loved his half-wooded native country of ridge and hillside and hollow and creek and river bottom. And he loved the horse-and-mule-powered independent farming of that place and time.

When Danny had finished the eighth grade at the Port William school, he was growing a crop of his own and was nearly as big as he was going to get, a little taller and a good deal broader than his father. He was a trapper of mink and muskrat, a hunter and fisherman. He farmed for himself or for wages every day that he was out of school and in the mornings and evenings before and after school. If Burley had not continued to be Kate Helen's main provider, Danny could and would have been.

When he began to ride the bus to the high school at Hargrave, the coaches, gathering around him and feeling his arms and shoulders admiringly as if he had been a horse, invited him to go out for basketball. He gave them the smile, direct and a little merry, by which he reserved himself to himself, and said, "I reckon I already got about all I can do."

He quit school the day he was sixteen and never thought of it again. By then he was growing a bigger crop, and he owned a good team of mules, enough tools of his own to do his work, and two hounds. When he married Lyda two years later, he had, except for a farm of his own, everything he had thought of to want.

By then the old way of farming was coming to an end. But Danny never gave it up.

"Don't you reckon you ought to go ahead and get you a tractor, like everybody else?"

And Danny looked up at him from the hoof of the mule he was at that moment shoeing and smiled his merry smile. "I ain't a-going to pay a company," he said, "to go and get what is already here."

"Well," Burley said, though he knew far better than the Hargrave basketball coach the meaning of that smile, "tractors don't eat when they ain't working."

Danny drove in a nail, bent over the point, and reached for another nail. He did not look up this time when he spoke, and it was the last he would say on the matter: "They don't eat *grass* when they ain't working."

That was as much as Burley had wanted to say. He liked mules better than tractors himself

and had only gone along with the change to accommodate his brother, Jarrat, who, tireless himself, wanted something to work that did not get tired.

Burley loved to be in the woods with the hounds at night, and Danny inherited that love early and fully. They hunted sometimes with their neighbors, Arthur and Martin Rowanberry, sometimes with Elton Penn, but as often as not there would be just the two of them—man and little boy, and then man and big boy, and at last two men—out together in the dark-mystified woods of the hollows and slopes and bottomlands, hunting sometimes all night, but enacting too their general approval of the weather and the world. Sometimes, when the hunting was slow, they would stop in a sheltered place and build a fire. Sometimes, while their fire burned and the stars or the clouds moved slowly over them, they lay down and slept.

There was another kind of hunting that Burley did alone. Danny did not know of this until after Kate Helen died, when he and Lyda got married and, at Burley's invitation, moved into the old weatherboarded log house on the Coulter home place where Burley had been living alone. There were times—though never when he was needed at work—when Burley just disappeared, and Danny and Lyda would know where he had gone only because the hounds would disappear at the same time. Little by little, Danny came to understand.

In love Burley had assumed many responsibilities. In love and responsibility, as everyone must, he had acquired his griefs and losses, guilts and sorrows. Sometimes, under the burden of these, he sought the freedom of solitude in the woods. He might be gone for two or three days or more, living off the land and whatever leftovers of biscuits or cornbread he might be carrying in his pockets, sleeping in barns or in the open by the side of a fire. If the dogs became baffled and gave up or went home, Burley went on, walking slowly hour after hour along the steep rims of the valleys where the trees were old. When he returned, he would be smiling, at ease and quiet, as if his mind just fit within his body.

“Don't quit,” Danny said to the truck, joking with it as he sometimes did with his children or his animals. “It's going to be downhill all the way home.”

He was making an uproar, and uproar gathered around him as he came to the outskirts of the city. The trailer trucks, sleek automobiles, and other competent vehicles now pressing around him made him aware of the disproportion between his shuddering, smoking old pickup and the job he had put it to, and he began to grin. He came to his exit and roared down into the grid of streets and lights. He continued to drive aggressively. Though he had no plan to speak of, it yet seemed to him that what he had to do required him to keep up a good deal of momentum.

At the hospital, he drove to the emergency entrance, parked as close to the door as he could without being too much in the light, got out, and walked to the door as a man walks who knows exactly what he is doing and is already a little late. His cap, which usually sat well to the back of his head, he had now pulled forward until the bill was nearly parallel with his nose. Only when he was out of the truck and felt the air around him again, did he realize that it was making up to rain.

The emergency rooms and corridors were filled with the bloodied and the bewildered, for it was now the tail end of another Friday night of the Great American Spare-Time Civil War.

Danny walked through the carnage like a man who was used to it.

Past a set of propped-open double doors, an empty gurney was standing against the corridor wall, its sheets neatly folded upon it. Without breaking stride, he took hold of it and went rapidly on down the corridor, pushing the gurney ahead of him. When he came to an elevator, he thumbed the “up” button and waited.

When the doors opened, he saw that a small young nurse was already in the elevator, standing beside the control panel. He pushed the gurney carefully past her, nodding to her and smiling. He said, “Four, please.”

She pushed the button. The doors closed. She looked at him, sighed, and shook her head. “It’s been a long night.”

“Well,” he said, “it ain’t as long as it has been.”

At the fourth floor the doors slid open. He pushed the gurney off the elevator.

“Good night,” the nurse said.

He said, “Good night.”

He had to go by the fourth floor nurse’s station, but there was only one nurse there and she was talking with vehemence into the telephone. She did not look up.

The door of Burley’s room was shut. Danny pushed the gurney in and reshut the door. Now he was frightened, and yet there was no caution in him; he did not give himself time to think or to hesitate. Burley was lying white and still in the pallid light. Danny took a pair of rubber gloves from the container affixed to the wall and put them on. Wetting a rag at the wash basin, he carefully washed the handle of the gurney. He then pushed the gurney up near the bed and removed the folded sheet from it. Leaning over the bed, he spoke in a low voice to Burley. “Listen. I’m going to take you home. Don’t worry. It’s me. It’s Danny.”

Gently he withdrew the tube from Burley’s nose. Gently he pulled away the adhesive tapes and took the needle out of Burley’s arm. He took hold of the tube of the bladder catheter as if to pull it out also and then, thinking again, took out his pocketknife and cut the tube in two.

He gathered Burley into his arms and held him a moment, surprised by his lightness, and then gently he laid him onto the gurney. He unfolded the sheet and draped it over Burley, covering him entirely from head to foot. He opened the door, pushed the gurney through, and closed the door.

The nurse at the nurse’s station was still on the phone. “I told you no,” she was saying. “N, O, period. You have just got to understand, when I say no, I *mean* no.”

Near the elevator two janitors were leaning against the wall, mops in hand, as stupefied, apparently, as the soldiers at the Tomb.

When the elevator arrived, the same nurse was on it. She gave him a smile of recognition. “My goodness, I believe we must be on the same schedule tonight.”

“Yes, mam,” he said.

She hardly glanced at the still figure on the gurney. “She’s used to it,” he thought. But he was careful, nonetheless, to stand in such a way as to make it hard for her to see, if she looked, that this corpse was breathing.

“One?” she asked.

“Yes, mam,” he said. “If you please.”

Once out of the elevator, he rolled the gurney rapidly down the corridor and through the

place of emergency.

A man with a bandaged eye stood aside as Danny approached and went without stopping out through the automatic doors.

A slow rain had begun to fall, and now the pavement was shining.

The Coulter Lane turned off the blacktop a mile or so beyond Port William. Danny drove past the lane, following the blacktop on down again into the river valley. Presently he turned left onto a gravel road, and after a mile or so turned left again into the lower end of the Coulter Lane, passable now for not much more than a hundred yards. Where a deep gulley had been washed across the road, he stopped the truck. He was in a kind of burrow, deep under the trees in a narrow crease of the hill: the Stepstone Hollow.

He switched off the engine and sat still, letting the quiet and the good darkness settle around him. He had been gone perhaps two hours and a half, and not for a minute during that time had he ceased to hurry. So resolutely had he kept up the momentum of his haste that his going and his coming back had been as much one movement as a leap. And now, that movement completed, he began to take his time. In the quiet he could hear Burley's breathing, slow and shallow but still regular. He heard, too, the slow rain falling on the woods and the trees dripping steadily onto the roof of the truck. "Well," he said quietly to Burley, "here's somewhere you've been before."

The shallow breathing merely continued out of the dark where Burley, wrapped in his sheet, slumped against the door.

"Listen," Danny said. "We're in the Stepstone Hollow. It's raining just a little drizzling rain, and the trees are dripping. That's what you hear. You can pret' near just listen and tell where you are. In a minute I'm going to take you up to the old barn. You don't have a thing to worry about anymore."

He got out and stood a moment, accepting the dark and the rain. There was, in spite of the overcast, some brightness in the sky. He could see a little. He took his flashlight from the pocket of his coat and blinked it once. The bundle of bedclothes and food that he had brought from the house lay with the coat on the seat beside Burley. Danny dragged the bundle out and suspended it from his right shoulder, shortening the string to make the load as manageable as possible. Taking the flashlight, he then went around the truck and gently opened the door on the other side. He tucked the sheet snugly around Burley and then covered his head and chest with the coat.

"Now," he said, "I'm going to pick you up and carry you a ways."

Keeping the flashlight in his right hand, he gathered Burley up into his arms, kneeed the door shut, and started up the hollow through the rain. He used the light to cross the gulley. Beyond there, he needed only to blink the light occasionally to show himself the lay of things. Though his burden was awkward and the wet and drooping foliage brushed him on both sides, he could walk without trouble. He made almost no sound and was grateful for the silence and slowness and effort after his loud passage out from the city. It occurred to him then that this was a season-changing rain. Tomorrow would be clear and cool, the first fall day.

It was a quarter of a mile or more up to the barn, and his arms were aching well before he

got there, but having once taken this burden up, he dared not set it down. The barn, doorless and sagging, stood on a tiny shelf of bottomland beside the branch. It was built in the young manhood of Dave Coulter, Burley's father, to house the tobacco crops from the fields, now long abandoned and overgrown, on the north slopes above it. Abandoned along with its fields, the barn had been used for many years only by groundhogs and other wild creatures and by Burley and Danny, who had sheltered there on rainy days and nights. Danny knew this place in the dark as well as if he could see it. On the old northward-facing slopes on one side of the branch was a thicket of forty-year-old trees: redbud, elm, box elder, walnut, locust, ash—the trees of the “pioneer generation,” returning the fields to the forest. On the south slope, where the soil was rockier and shallower, stood the uninterrupted forest of white and red oaks and chinquapins, hickories, ashes, and maples, many of them two or three hundred years old.

Needing the light now that they were in the cavern of the barn, Danny carried Burley the length of the driveway, stepping around a derelict wagon and then into a stripping room attached at one corner. This was a small shed that was tighter and better preserved than the barn. A bench ran the length of the north side under a row of windows. Danny propped Burley against the wall at the near end of the bench, which he then swept clean with an old burlap sack. He made a pallet of the bedclothes and laid Burley on it and covered him.

“Now,” he said, “I’ve got to go back to the truck for some things. You’re in the old barn on Stepstone, and you’re all right. I won’t be gone but a few minutes.”

He shone the light a moment on the still face. In its profound sleep, it wore a solemnity that Burley, in his waking life, would never have allowed. And yet it was, as it had not been in the hospital, unmistakably the face of the man who for eighty-two years had been Burley Coulter. Here, where it belonged, the face thus identified itself and assumed a power that kept Danny standing there, shining the light on it, and that made him say to himself with care, “Now these are the last things. Now what happens will not happen again in his life.”

He hurried back along the road to the truck and removed an axe, a spade, and a heavy steel spud bar from among the fencing tools in the back. The rain continued, falling steadily as it had fallen since it began. He shouldered the bar and spade and, carrying the axe in his left hand, returned to the barn.

Burley had not moved. He breathed on, as steadily and forcelessly as the falling rain.

“You’re in a good place,” Danny said. “You’ve slept here before and you’re all right. Now I’ve got to sleep a little myself. I’ll be close by.”

He was tired at last. There were several sheets of old roofing stacked in the barn, and he took two of these, laying one on the floor just inside the open door nearest to the shed where Burley slept and propping the other as a shield from the draft that was pulling up the driveway. He lay down on his back and folded his arms on his chest. His clothes were damp, but with his hunting coat snug around him he was warm enough.

Though in his coming and going he had hardly made a sound, once he lay still the woods around the barn reassembled a quiet that was larger and older than his own. It was as though the woods had stopped whatever it was doing to regard him as he entered, had permitted itself to be distracted by him and his burden and his task, and now that he had ceased to move it went back to its unfinished preoccupations. The rain went on with its steady patter on the barn roof and on the leafy woods.

Danny lay still and thought of all that had happened since nightfall and of what he might yet have ahead of him. For a while he continued to feel in all his nerves the swaying of the old truck as it sped along the curves of the highway. And then he ceased to think either of the past or of what was to come. The rain continued to fall. The flowing branch made a varying little song in his mind. His mind went slowly to and fro with a dark treetop in the wind. And then he slept.

Lyda had the telephone put in when they closed the school in Port William and began to haul even the littlest children all the way to the consolidated grade school at Hargrave. This required a bus ride of an hour and a half each way for the Branch children and took them much farther out of reach than they had ever been.

“They’ll be gone from before daylight to after dark in the winter, who with we don’t know, doing what we don’t know,” Lyda said, “and they’ve *got* to be able to call home if they need to.”

“All right,” Danny said. “And there won’t anybody call us up on it but the kids—is that right?”

When it rang at night, it just scared Lyda to death, even when the kids were home. If Danny was gone, she always started worrying about him when she heard the phone ring.

She hurried down to the kitchen in her nightgown. She made a swipe at the light switch beside the kitchen door, but missed and went ahead anyhow. There was no trouble in finding the telephone in the dark; it went right on ringing as if she weren’t rushing to answer it.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hello. May I speak to Mr. Daniel Branch, please?” It was a woman’s voice, precise and correct.

“Danny’s not here. I’m his wife. Can I help you?”

“Can you tell us how to get in touch with Mr. Branch?”

“No. He said something about Indiana, but I don’t know where.”

There was a pause, as though the voice at the other end were preparing itself.

“Mrs. Branch, this is the hospital. I’m afraid I have some very disturbing news. Mr. Coulter—Mr. Burley Coulter—has disappeared.”

“Oh!” Lyda said. She was grinning into the dark, and there had been a tremor of relief in her voice that she trusted might have passed for dismay.

“Oh, my goodness!” she said finally.

“Let me assure you, Mrs. Branch, that the entire hospital staff is deeply concerned about this. We have, of course, notified the police—”

“Oh!” Lyda said.

“—and all other necessary steps will be taken. Please have your husband contact us as soon as he returns.”

“I will,” Lyda said.

After she hung up, Lyda stood thinking in the dark a moment. And then she turned on the light and called Henry Catlett, whose phone rang a long time before he answered. She was not sure yet that she needed a lawyer, but she could call Henry as a friend.

“Henry, it’s Lyda. I’m sorry to get you up in the middle of the night.”

“It’s all right, “ Henry said.

“The hospital just called. Uncle Burley has disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“That’s what the lady said.”

There was a pause.

“Where’s Danny?”

“He’s gone.”

“I see.”

There was another pause.

“Did he say where he was going?”

“He said something about Indiana, Henry. That’s all he said.”

“He said that, and that’s all?”

“About.”

“Did you tell that to the lady from the hospital?”

“Yes.”

“Did she want to know anything else?”

“No.”

“And you didn’t tell her anything else?”

“No.”

“Did *she* say anything else?”

“She said the police had been notified.”

There was another pause.

“What time is it, Lyda?”

“Three o’clock. A little after.”

“And you and the kids will have the morning chores to do, and you’ll have to get the kids fed and off to school.”

“That’s right.”

“So you’ll have to be there for a while. Maybe that’s all right. But you’ll have to expect a call or maybe a visit from the police, Lyda. When you talk to them, tell them exactly what you told the lady at the hospital. Tell the truth, but don’t tell any more than you’ve already told. If they want to know more, tell them I’m your lawyer and they must talk to me.”

“I will.”

“Are you worried about Burley and Danny?”

“No.”

“Are you worried about talking to the police?”

“I’m uneasy, but I’m not worried.”

“All right. Let’s try to sleep some more. Tomorrow might be a busy day.”

Danny woke cold and hungry. He was lying on his back with his arms folded on his chest; he had slept perhaps two hours, and he had not moved. Nor had anything moved in the barn or in the wooded hollow around it, so far as he could tell, except the little stream of Stepstone,

which continued to make the same steady song it had been making when he fell asleep. A few crickets sang. The air was still, and in openings of mist that had gathered in the hollow he could see the stars.

Though he was cold, for several minutes he did not move. He loved the stillness and was reluctant to break it. An owl trilled nearby and another answered some distance away. Danny turned onto his side to face the opening of the doorway, pillowed his head on his left forearm, and, taking off his cap, ran the fingers of his right hand slowly through his hair.

He yawned, stretched, and got up. Taking the flashlight, he went in to where Burley lay and shone the light on him. Nothing had changed. The old body breathed on with the same steady yet forceless and shallow breaths. Danny saw at once all he needed to see, and yet he remained for a few moments, shining the light. And he said again in his mind, “These are the last things now. Everything that happens now happens for the last time in his life.” He reached out with his hand and took hold of Burley’s shoulder and shook it gently, as if to waken him, but he did not wake.

“It’ll soon be morning,” he said aloud. “I’m hungry now. I need to make a fire and fix a little breakfast before the light comes. We can’t send up any smoke after daylight. I’ll be close by.”

He gathered dry scraps of wood from the barn floor, and then he pried loose a locust tierpole with the bark still on it and rapidly cut it into lengths with the axe. Just outside the doorway, he made a small fire between two rocks on which he set his skillet. By the light of the flashlight he sliced a dozen thick slices from the jowl and started several of them frying. He crossed the creek to where a walled spring flowed out of the hillside. He found the rusted coffee can that he kept there, dipped it full and drank, and then dipped it full again. Carrying the filled can, he went back to his fire, where he knelt on one knee and attended to the skillet. The birds had begun to sing, and the sky was turning pale above the eastward trees.

When all the meat was fried, he set the skillet off the fire. With water from the spring and grease from the fried meat, he moistened some cornmeal and made six hoecakes, each the size of the skillet. When he was finished with his cooking, he took the pair of surgical gloves from his pocket and stirred them in the fire until they were burned. He brought water from the creek then and put out the fire. He divided the food carefully and ate half of it. He ate slowly and with pleasure, watching the light come. Movement, fire, and now the food in his belly had taken the chill out of his flesh, but fall was in the air that morning, and he welcomed it. The day would be clear and fine. And more would come—brisk, bright, dark-shadowed days colored by the turning leaves, days that would call up the hunter feeling in him. Suddenly he remembered Elton Penn walking into the woods under the stars of a bright frosty night, half singing, as his way was, “Clear as a bell, cold as hell, and smells like old cheese.” Now Elton was three years dead.

As Danny watched, the light reddened and warmed in the sky. The last of the stars disappeared. Above him, on both sides of the hollow, the wet leaves of the treetops began to shine among the fading strands and shelves of mist. Eastward, the mist took a stain of pink from the rising sun and glowed. And Danny felt a happiness that he knew was not his at all, that did not exist because he felt it but because it was here and he had returned to it.

He carried his skillet to the creek, scoured it out with handfuls of a fine gravel that he

found there and left it on a rock to dry.

He picked his way through the young thicket growth closing around the barn and entered the stand of old trees that covered the south slope. There the great trees stood around him, the thready night mists caught in their branches, and every leaf was still. When the first white man in this place—the first Coulter or Catlett or Feltner or whoever it was—had passed through this crease of the hill, these trees were here, and the stillness in which they stood and grew had been here forever.

Timber cutters, in recent years, had had their eye on these trees and had approached Burley about “harvesting” them. “I reckon you had better talk to Danny here,” Burley said. And Danny smiled that completely friendly, totally impenetrable smile of his, and merely shook his head.

Now Danny was looking for a place well in among the big trees and yet not too far from the creek or too readily accessible to the eye. His study took him a while, but finally he saw what he was looking for. Under a tall, straight chinquapin that was sound and not too old, a tree that would be standing a long time, there was a shallow trough in the ground, left perhaps by the uprooting of another tree a long time ago; the place was open and clear of undergrowth but could not be seen except against a patch of thicket around a windfall. Danny stood and thought again to test his satisfaction, and was satisfied.

As he turned away he noticed, strung between two saplings, the dew-beaded orb of a large orange spider. He stopped to look at it and soon found the spider’s home, a sort of tube fashioned of two leaves and so not easy to see, where the spider could withdraw to sleep or take shelter from the rain. It would not be long, Danny thought, before the spiders would have to go out of business for the winter. Soon there would be hard frosts, and the webs would be cumbered and torn by the falling leaves.

Sunlight now filled the sky above the shadowy woods. He went back to the barn, preoccupied with his thoughts, and so he was startled, on entering the stripping room, by Burley’s opened eyes, looking at him.

He stopped, for the force of his surprise was almost that of fright. And then he went over to the bench and laid his hand on Burley’s. Burley’s eyes were perfectly calm; he was smiling. Slowly, pausing to breathe between phrases, he said, “I allowed you’d get here about the same time I did.”

“Well, you were right,” Danny said. “We made it. Do you know where you are?”

Again, smiling, Burley spoke, his voice so halting and weak as to seem not uttered by bodily strength at all but by some pure presence of recollection and will: “Right here.”

He was quoting himself as the hero of an old joke and an old story in which, lost on a night hunt, his companions had asked him where they were, and he had told them, “Right here.”

“You’re right again,” Danny said, knowing that Burley did know where he was. “Are you comfortable? Is there anything you want?”

This time Burley only said, “Drink.” He turned his head a little and looked at the treetops beyond the window.

Danny said, “I’ll go to the spring.”

At the spring, he drank and then dipped up a drink for Burley. When he returned, Burley’s eyes were closed again, and he looked more deeply sunk within himself than before. It was as

though his soul, like a circling hawk, had swung back into this world on a wide curve, to look once more out of his eyes at what he had always known and to speak with his voice, and then had swung out of it again, the curve widening. Danny stood still, holding the can of water. He could hear Burley's breaths coming slower than before, tentative and unsteady. Danny listened. He picked up Burley's wrist and held it. And then he shouldered his tools and went up into the woods and began to dig.

Henry Catlett tried hard to take his own advice, but one thought ran on to another and he could not sleep. There was too much he needed to know that he did not know. Within twenty minutes he saw that he was not going to sleep again. He got up in the dark and, taking care not to disturb Sarah who had gone back to sleep after the phone rang, went downstairs, turned on a light and called the hospital. After some trial and error, he was transferred to the supervisor who had talked to Lyda.

"This is Henry Catlett. I have a little law practice up the river here at Hargrave. I hear you've mislaid one of your patients."

The voice in the receiver became extremely businesslike: "The patient would be—?"

"Coulter. Burley Coulter."

"Yes. Well, as you no doubt have heard, Mr. Catlett, Mr. Coulter was reported missing from his room at a little before two o'clock this morning. Such a thing has never happened here before, Mr. Catlett. Let me assure you, sir, that we're doing everything possible on behalf of the victim and his family."

"Of course," Henry said. "I can imagine. Well, I'm calling on behalf of the family. Have you any clues as to what happened?"

"Um. For that, I think I had better have you talk with the investigating officer who was here from the police. Let me find his number. Please hold one minute."

"Take two," Henry said.

She gave him a name and a number, which Henry proceeded to dial.

"Officer Bush," he said, "I'm Henry Catlett, a country lawyer of sorts up at Hargrave. I'm calling on behalf of the family of Mr. Burley Coulter, who seems to have disappeared from his hospital room."

"Yes, Mr. Catlett."

"I understand that you were the investigating officer. What did you find out?"

"Not much, I'm afraid, sir. Mr. Coulter was definitely kidnapped. His attacker disconnected him from the life-support system and wheeled him out, we assume, by way of the emergency entrance. We have one witness, a nurse, who may have seen the kidnapper. She described him as a huge man in a blue shirt; she didn't get a good look at his face. She saw him on an elevator, going up with an empty gurney and down with what she took to be a corpse. Aside from that, we have only the coincidental disappearance of the victim's next of kin, Danny Branch, who his wife says may have gone to Indiana."

"Anything solid? Any fingerprints?"

"Nothing, Mr. Catlett. The man smeared everything he touched, and he didn't touch more than he had to. He may have used a pair of surgical gloves from the room."

“Would you let me know as soon as you have anything more to report?”

“Be glad to.”

Henry gave him his phone numbers at home and at the office, thanked him, and hung up. He turned the light off then, felt his way to his easy chair, and sat down in the dark to think.

He knew several things. For one, he knew that Danny Branch, though by no means a small man, would not be described by most people as “huge.” So far as he could see at present, all they had to worry about was the blue shirt, and that might be plenty.

He sat thinking until the shapes of the trees outside the window emerged into the first daylight, and then he went back to the phone and called Lyda.

Lyda called Nathan after she had talked to Henry the second time. Nathan, as was his way, said “Hello” and then simply listened. When she had told him of Burley’s disappearance and of Danny’s, Nathan said, “All right. Do you need anything?”

“No. We’ll be fine,” she said. “But listen. Henry called back while ago. He said the police didn’t find any fingerprints at the hospital. The only witness they found was somebody who saw a man in a blue shirt. Henry wants you and Hannah and me to come to his office as soon as we get our chores done and all. When the police find us, he said, he’d just as soon they’d find us there. He said to tell you, and he’d call Jack and Andy and Flora and the Rowanberrys. He wants everybody who’s closest to Burley to be there.”

“All right,” Nathan said. “It’ll be a little while.”

He hung up, and having told Lyda’s message to Hannah, he put one of his shirts into a paper sack and went out. He had his chores to do, but he would do them later. He got into his pickup and drove out to the Coulter Lane and turned, and turned again into the farm that had been his father’s and was now his, divided by a steep, wooded hollow from Burley’s place, where Danny and Lyda and their children had lived with Burley since Danny’s mother’s death. Beyond the two houses in the dawn light, he could see the morning cloud of fog shining in the river valley.

He pulled the truck in behind the house, got out, and started down the hill. Soon he was out of sight among the trees, and he went level along the slope around the point beyond Burley’s house, turning gradually out of the river valley into the smaller valley of the creek. He went straight down the hill then to the creek road, turned into the lower end of the Coulter Lane, and soon came to Danny’s truck. He saw that Danny’s axe and the digging tools were gone.

For several minutes he stood beside the truck, looking up the hollow toward the old barn. And then he took the switch key from where Danny always hid it under a loose flap of floor mat, started the truck and eased it backward along its incoming tracks until it stood on the gravel of the county road. There were a few bald patches of fresh mud that he had had to drive over, and he walked back to these and tramped out the tire tracks, taking care to leave no shoe track of his own.

When he returned to the truck, he drove back down the creek road toward the river and before long turned right under a huge sycamore into another lane. He forded the branch, went up by a stone chimney standing solitary on a little bench where a house had burned, and then down again to the disused barn of that place, and drove in. As before, he erased the few tire

tracks that he had left in the lane. He stepped across the Katy's Branch Road and again disappeared into the woods.

While he did all this he had never ceased to whistle a barely audible whisper of a song, passing his breath in and out over the tip of his tongue.

The detective came walking out to the barn as if he were not sure where to put his feet. He was wearing shiny shoes with perforated toes, a tallish man, softening in the middle. He looked a little like somebody Lyda might have seen before. His dark hair was combed straight over his forehead in bangs. He walked with his left hand in his pocket, the jacket of his blue suit held back on that side.

Lyda herself was wearing a pair of rubber boots, but in expectation of company she had put on her best everyday dress. She was carrying two five-gallon buckets of corn that, as the detective approached, she emptied over the fence to the sows.

"Good morning. Mrs. Branch?" the detective said.

"Yes. Good morning."

The children were in the barn, doing the milking and the other chores, and Lyda, as she greeted the detective, started walking back toward the house.

He was showing her a badge. "Detective Kyle Bode of the state police, Mrs. Branch. I hope you'll be willing to answer a few questions."

Lyda laughed, looking out over the white cloud of fog that lay in the river valley. "I reckon I'll have to know what questions," she said.

"Well, you're Mrs. Danny Branch? And Danny Branch is Mr. Burley Coulter's next of kin?"

"That's right."

"And you're aware that Mr. Coulter has disappeared from his hospital room?"

"Yes."

"Is Mr. Branch at home?"

"No."

"Can you tell me where he went?"

"Well, he said something about Indiana."

"You don't know where?"

"Well, he sometimes goes up there to the Amish. You know, we farm with horses, and Danny has to depend on the Amish for harness and other things."

"Hmmm. Horses. Well," the detective said. "When did Mr. Branch leave?"

"I couldn't say."

"You don't know, or you don't remember?"

"I can't say that I do."

Lyda had not ceased to walk, nor he to walk with her, and now, as they were approaching the yard gate, the detective stopped. "Mrs. Branch, I have the distinct feeling that you are playing a little game with me. I think your husband has Mr. Coulter with him in Indiana—or wherever he is—and I think you know he does, and you're protecting him. Your husband, I would like to remind you, may be in very serious trouble with the law, and unless you

cooperate you may be, too.”

Lyda looked straight at him. Her eyes were an intense, surprising blue, and sometimes when she looked suddenly at you they seemed to leave little flashes of blue light dancing in the air. The detective saw her then: a big woman, good-looking for her age, which was maybe forty or forty-five, and possessed of great practical strength (he remembered her tossing the contents of those heavy buckets over the fence), but her eyes, now that he looked at her, were what impressed him most. They were eyes not at all in the habit of concealment, but they certainly were in the habit of withstanding. They withstood him. They made him feel like explaining that he was only doing his duty.

“Mister,” she said without any trace of fear that he could detect, “it scares me to be talking to the police. I never talked to the police before in my life. If you want to know any more, you’ll have to talk to Henry Catlett down at Hargrave.”

“Is Henry Catlett your lawyer?”

“Henry’s our friend,” she said.

“Yes,” the detective said. “I’ll go see him. Thank you very much for your time.”

When Detective Bode walked away from Lyda, he already felt the mire of failure pulling at his feet. He had felt it before. Long ago, it seemed, he had studied to be a policeman because he wanted to become the kind of man who solved things. He had imagined himself becoming a man who—insightful, alert, and knowing—stepped into the midst of confusion and made clarity and order that people would be grateful for. So far, it had not turned out that way. He was twenty-nine years old already, and he had been confused as much as most people. In spite of the law and the government and the police, it seemed, people went right on and did whatever they were going to do. They had motives that were confusing, and they left evidence that was confusing. Sometimes they left no evidence. The science of crime solving was a clumsy business. Many criminals and many noncriminals were smarter than Kyle Bode—or, anyhow, smarter than Kyle Bode had been able to prove himself to be so far. He had begun to believe that he might end up as some kind of paper shuffler, had even begun to think that it might be a relief.

He had understood all too well, anyhow, the rather cynical grin with which his friend, Rich Ferris, had handed him this case. “Here’s one that’ll make you famous.”

And what a case it was! Here was an old guy resting easy in the best medical facility money could buy. And what happened? This damned redneck, Danny Branch, who was his nephew or something, came and kidnapped him out of his hospital bed in the middle of the night. And took him off where? To Indiana? Not likely, Detective Bode thought. He would bet that Mr. Burley Coulter, alive or dead, and his kidnapper, Mr. Danny Branch, were somewhere just out of sight in some of these godforsaken hills and hollows.

Kyle Bode objected to hills and hollows. He objected to them especially if they were all overgrown with trees. They offended his sense of the way things ought to be. That the government of the streets and highways persisted in having business in hills and hollows and woods and briar patches in every kind of weather was no small part of his disillusionment.

And that big woman with her boots and her so-unimpressed blue eyes—it pleased him to

believe that she was looking him straight in the eye and lying. In fact, he had wished a little that she would admire him, and he knew that she had not.

Traveling at a contemplative speed down the river road toward Hargrave, he glanced up at his image in the rearview mirror and patted down his hair.

Kyle Bode's father had originated in the broad bottomlands of a community called Nowhere, three counties west of Louisville. Under pressure from birth to "get out of here and make something out of yourself," Kyle's father had come to Louisville and worked his way into a farm equipment dealership. Kyle was the dealer's third child and second son. He might have succeeded to the dealership—"You boys can be partners," their father had said—but the older brother possessed an invincible practicality and a head start, and besides Kyle did not want to spend his life dealing with farmers. He had higher aims that made him dangerous to those he considered to be below him. Unlike his brother, Kyle was an idealist, with a little bit of an ambition to be a hero. Perhaps by the same token, he was also a man given to lethargy and to sudden onsets of violence by which he attempted to drive back whatever circumstances his lethargy had allowed to close in on him. Sagged and silent in his chair at a party or beer joint, he would suddenly thrust himself, with fists flying, at some spontaneously elected opponent. This did not happen often enough to damage him much, and it remained surprising to his friends.

Soon after graduation, he married his high school sweetheart. And then while he was beginning his career as a policeman, they, and especially he, began to dabble in some of the recreational sidelines of the countercultural revolution. He became sexually liberated. He suspected that his wife had experienced this liberation as well, but he did not catch her, and perhaps this was an ill omen for his police career. On the contrary, as it happened, she caught him in the very inflorescence of ecstasy on the floor of the carport of a house where they were attending a party. He was afraid for a while that she would divorce him, but when it became clear to him that she would not, he began to feel that she was limiting his development, and he divorced her in order to be free to be himself.

He cut quite a figure at parties after that. One festive night a young lady said, "Kyle, do you know who you really look like?" And he said, "No." And she said, "Ringo Starr." That was when he began to comb down his bangs. Girls and young women were always saying to him after that, "Do you know who you look like?" And he would say, "No. Who?" as if he had no notion what they were talking about.

His second wife, whom he married because he had made her pregnant—for he really was a conscientious young man who wanted to do the right thing—was proud of that resemblance, at first seriously and then jokingly, for a while. And then he ceased to remind her of anyone but himself, whereupon she divorced him.

He knew that she had not left him because she was dissatisfied with him but because she was not able to be satisfied for very long with anything. He disliked and feared this in her at the same time that he recognized it in himself. He, too, was dissatisfied; he could not see what he had because he was always looking around for something else. And so perhaps it was out of mutual dissatisfaction that their divorce had come, and now they were free. Perhaps even their little daughter was free, who was tied down no more than her parents were, for they sent her flying back and forth between them like a shuttlecock, and spoiled her in vying for her

allegiance, and gave her more freedom of choice than she could have used well at twice her age. They were all free, he supposed. But finally he had had to ask if they were, any of them, better off than they had been and if they could hope to be better off than they were. For they were not satisfied. And by now he had to suppose, and to fear, that they were not going to be satisfied. He had become almost resigned to revolving for the rest of his life, somewhere beyond gravity, in the modern vortex of infatuation and divorce.

Surely there must be someplace to stop. In lieu of a more final place, though it was too early in the day to be thinking about it, he would take the lounge of the Outside Inn, the comers and goers shadowy between him and the neon, a filled and frosted glass in front of him, a slow brokenhearted song on the jukebox.

And maybe the mood would hit him to ask one of the women to dance. Angela, maybe, who admitted to being lonesome and liked to dance close. They would dance, they would move as one, and after a while he would let his right hand slide down, as if by accident, onto her hip. And he would say, "Oh, Angela, you make me feel like I might realize my full potential as an individual."

But his car, as though mindful of his duty when he was not, had taken him into Hargrave. He stopped for the first light and then turned to drive around the courthouse square; he was looking for a place to eat breakfast. The futility of this day insinuated itself into his thoughts, as unignorable as if it crawled palpably on his skin. Here he was, looking for a comatose old geezer who had (if Detective Bode mistook not) been abducted by his next of kin, who, if the old geezer died, would be guilty of a crime that probably had not even been named yet. Maybe he was about to turn up something totally new in the annals of crime, though he would just as soon turn it up someplace else. In fact, he would just as soon somebody else turned it up. It ought, he told himself, to be easy enough to turn up, for it was clearly the work of an amateur. And yet this amateur, who had had the gall or stupidity or foolishness or whatever it took to kidnap his victim right out of the middle of a busy hospital, had managed to be seen, and not clearly seen at that, by only one witness and had left no evidence. So Detective Bode was working from a coincidence, a good guess, and no evidence. His success, he supposed, depended on the improbable occurrence of a lucky moment in which he would be able to outsmart the self-styled "country lawyer of sorts," Henry Catlett.

"Later for that," Kyle Bode thought.

Among the dilapidating storefronts he found the place he thought he remembered, the Front Street Grill, and he parked and went in.

When Lyda had called, Nathan and Hannah were just waking up. Before Nathan turned the light on by the bed, they could see the gray early daylight out the window. After Nathan went to the phone, Hannah lay still and listened, but from Nathan's brief responses she could not make out who had called.

She heard Nathan hang up the phone. He came back into the bedroom and told her carefully everything that Lyda had told him.

"But wait," she said. "What's happening? Where *is* Danny?"

"We'd better not help each other answer those questions, Hannah—not for a while,

anyhow.”

He opened a drawer of the bureau and took out one of his shirts, a green one.

“Where are you going?”

He smiled at her. “I’ll be back before long.”

Though Nathan was a quiet man, he was not usually a secretive one. But she asked no more.

He went out. She heard him go through the kitchen and out the back door. She heard the pickup start and go out the driveway. And then the sound of it was gone.

Usually, after Nathan got up, there would be a few minutes when she could stay in bed, sometimes rolling over into the warmth where he had slept, before she got up to start breakfast. She loved that time. She would lie still, listening, as the night ended and the day began. She heard the first bird songs of the morning. She heard Nathan leave the house, the milk bucket ringing a little as he took it down from its nail on the back porch. She heard the barn door slide open, and then Nathan’s voice calling the cows, and then the cowbells coming up through the pale light. If she got up when the cows reached the barn, she could have breakfast ready by the time Nathan came back to the house.

But this morning, as soon as the truck was out of earshot, she got up. For there was much to think about, much to do and to be prepared for. Now that she was fully awake, she had, like the others, caught the drift of what was happening.

She took the milk bucket and went to the barn and milked and did the chores, the things that Nathan usually did, and then she went to open the henhouse and put out feed and water for the hens—her work. At the house, she strained the milk, set the table for breakfast and got out the food. But Nathan was not back. She sat down by the kitchen window where she could see him when he came in. She kept her sewing basket there and the clothes that needed mending. But now, though she took a piece of sewing onto her lap, she did not work. She sat with her hands at rest, looking out the window as the mists of the hollows turned whiter under the growing light. She wanted to be thinking of Burley, but amongst all the knowing and unknowing of this strangely begun day she could not think of him. Who was most on her mind now was Nathan, and she wished him home.

It was home to her, this house, though once it had not been, nor had this neighborhood been. She had come to Port William thirty-six years ago. She had married Virgil Feltner as war spread across the world, and had lived with him for a little while in the household of his parents, before he was called into the service. When he left, because her mother was dead and replaced long ago by an unkind stepmother, Mat and Margaret Feltner had made her welcome. She stayed on with them, and they were mother and father to her. In the summer of 1944, Virgil came home on leave; he and Hannah were together a little while again, and when he went back to his unit she was with child.

The life that Hannah had begun to live came to an end when her young husband was killed, and for a while it seemed that she had no life except in the child that she had borne into the world of one death and of many. And then Nathan had called her out of that world into the living world again, and a new life had come to her; she and Nathan had made and shaped it, welcomed its additions and borne its losses together. They moved to this place that Nathan had bought not long before they married. Run-down and thicket-grown as it was, its possibility had

beckoned to him and then to her. They had moved into the old house, restored it while they lived in it and while they restored the farm; they had raised their children here. And they were son and daughter both to Margaret and Mat Feltner and to Nathan's father, whose oldest son, Tom, had also been killed in the war.

They had raised their children, sent them to college, seen them go away to work in cities, and, though wishing they might have stayed, wished them well. Their children had gone, and over the years, one by one, so had their elders. And each one of these departures had left them with more work to do and, as Hannah sometimes thought, less reason to do it.

They were in their fifties now, farming three farms simply because there was no one else to do it. In addition to the Feltner Place and their own, they were also farming Nathan's home place, which he had inherited from his father. Like everybody else still farming, they were spread too thin, and help was hard to find. The Port William neighborhood had as many people, probably, as it had ever had, but it did not have them where it needed them. It had a good many of them now on little city lots carved out of farms, from which they commuted to city jobs. Nathan and Hannah were overburdened, too tired at the end of every day, and with no relief in sight. And yet they did not think of quitting. Nathan worked through his long days steadily and quietly. Some days Hannah worked with him; when she needed help, he helped her. They had two jersey cows for milk and butter; they raised and slaughtered their meat hogs; they kept a flock of hens; they raised a garden. And still, in spite of all, there were quietnesses that they came to, in which they rested and were together and were glad to be.

And though their loneliness had increased, they were not alone. Of the membership of kin and friends that had held them always, some had died and some had gone, but some remained. There were Lyda and Danny Branch and their children. There were Arthur and Martin Rowanberry. After Elton Penn's death, his son Jack had continued to farm their place, and Mary Penn was living in Hargrave, still a friend. There were the various Catletts, who, whatever else they were, were still farmers and still of the membership: Bess and Wheeler who were now old, Sarah and Henry and their children, Flora and Andy and theirs.

When she thought of their neighborhood, Hannah wondered whether or not to count the children. Like the old, the young were leaving. The old were dying without successors, and Hannah was aware how anxiously those who remained had begun to look into the eyes of the children. They were watching not just their own children now but anybody's children. For as the burden of keeping the land increased for the always fewer who remained, as the difference continued to increase between the price of what they had to sell and the cost of what they had to buy, they knew that they had less and less to offer the children, and fewer arguments to make.

They held on, she and those others, who might be the last. They held on, and they held out, and they were seeing, perhaps, a little more clearly what they had to hold out against. Every year, it seemed to her, they were living more from what they could do for themselves and each other and less from what they had to buy. Nathan's refusals to buy things, she had noticed, were becoming firmer as well as more frequent. "No," he would say, "I guess we can get along without that." "No. Not at that price." "No. I reckon the old one will run a while longer." And though he spoke these answers kindly enough, there was no doubting their finality. Nobody ever asked twice.

Maybe, she thought, this was Danny's influence. Danny was eight years younger than

Nathan, and it was strange to think that Nathan could have been influenced by him, but maybe he had been. Danny never had belonged much to the modern world, and every year he appeared to belong to it less. Of them all, Danny most clearly saw that world as his enemy—as *their* enemy—and most forthrightly and cheerfully repudiated it. He reserved his allegiance to his friends and his place.

Danny was the right one for the rescue that Hannah did not doubt was being accomplished, though she did not know quite how. He had some grace about him that would permit him to accomplish it with joy. She smiled, for she knew, too, that Danny was a true son to Burley, not only in loyalty but in nature—that he had shared fully in that half of Burley’s life that had belonged to the woods and the darkness. Nathan, she thought, had understood that side of Burley and been friendly to it without so much taking part in it. Nathan would hunt or fish with Burley and Danny occasionally and would enjoy it, but he was more completely a farmer than they were, more content to be bound within the cycle of the farmer’s year. You never felt, looking at him, that he had left something somewhere beyond the cleared fields that he would be bound to go back and get. He did not have that air that so often hung about Danny and Burley, suggesting that they might suddenly look back, grin and wave, and disappear among the trees. He was as solid, as frankly and fully present as the doorstep, a man given to work and to quiet—like, she thought, his father.

They were her study, those Coulter men. Figuring them out was her need, her way of loving them, and sometimes her amusement. The one who most troubled her had been Nathan’s father, Jarrat—a driven, work-brittle, weather-hardened, lonely, and nearly wordless man, who went to his grave without completing his sorrow for his young wife who had died when their sons were small, whom he never mentioned and never forgot. His death had left in Hannah an unused and yearning tenderness.

Burley lived in a larger world than his brother had lived in, and not just because, as a hunter and a woods walker, he readily crossed boundaries that had confined Jarrat. Burley was a man freely in love with freedom and with pleasures, who watched the world with an amused, alert eye to see what it would do next, and if the world did not seem inclined to get on very soon to anything of interest, he gave it his help. Hannah’s world had been made dearer to her by Burley’s laughter, his sometimes love of talk (his own and other people’s), and his delight in outrageous behavior (his own as a young man and other people’s). She knew that Burley had his sorrows. She knew he grieved that he had not married Kate Helen Branch, Danny’s mother, and that he regretted his late acknowledgment of Danny as his son. But she knew, too, how little he had halted in grief and regret, how readily and cheerfully he had gone on, however burdened, to whatever had come next. And because he was never completely of her world, she had the measure of his generosity to her and the others. Though gifted for disappearance, he had never entirely disappeared but had been with them to the end.

And now the thought of him did return to her. As he had grown sicker and weaker, the thought of him had come more and more into her keeping, and she had received it with her love and her thanks as she had received her children when they were newborn.

She thought it strange and wonderful that she had been given all these to love. She thought it a blessing that she had loved them to the limit of her grief at parting with them, and that grief had only deepened and clarified her love. Since her first grief had brought her fully to birth and

wakefulness in this world, an unstinting compassion had moved in her, like a live stream flowing deep underground, by which she knew herself and others and the world. It was her truest self, that stream always astir inside her that was at once pity and love, knowledge and faith, forgiveness, grief, and joy. It made her fearful, and it made her unafraid.

Like the others, she had mourned her uselessness to Burley in his sickness. Like the others, she had been persuaded and had helped to persuade that they should get help for him. Like the others, once they had given him into the power of the doctors and into the sterile, hard light of that way and place in which he did not belong, she had wanted him back. And she had held him to her in her thoughts, loving the old, failed flesh and bone of him as never before, as if she could feel, in thought, in nerve, and through all intervening time and distance, the little helpless child that he had been and had become again. Knowing now that he was with Danny, hidden away, somewhere at home, joy shook her and the window blurred in her sight.

She heard, after a while, the tires of Nathan's truck on the gravel, and then the truck came into sight, stopped in its usual place, and Nathan got out. She watched him as he walked to the house, not so light-stepping as he used to be. She knew that as he walked, looking alertly around, he would be whistling over and over a barely audible little thread of a tune.

When he came in and she looked at him from the stove, where she had gone to start their breakfast, he smiled at her. "Don't ask," he said.

She said, "I will only ask one question. Are you worried about Burley?"

"No," he said, and he smiled at her again.

Henry hurried up the steps to the office, knowing that his father would already be there. Wheeler came to the office early, an hour maybe before Henry and the secretary, because, as Henry supposed, he liked to be there by himself. It was a place of haste and sometimes of turmoil, that office, where they worked at one problem knowing that another was waiting and sometimes that several others were waiting. Wheeler would come there in the quiet of the early morning to meet the day on his own terms. He would sit down at his desk covered with opened books, thick folders of papers and letters, ruled yellow pads covered with his impulsive blue script, and with one of those pads on his lap and a pen in his hand he would call the coming day to order in his mind.

He had been at work there for more than fifty years. In all that time the look of the place had changed more by accretion than by alteration. There were three rooms: Wheeler's office in the front, overlooking the courthouse square; Henry's in the back, overlooking an alley and some backyards; and, between the two, a waiting room full of bookcases and chairs where the secretary, Julia Vye, had her desk.

Wheeler was sitting at his desk with his hat on, his back to the door. He was leaning back in his chair, his right ankle crossed over his left knee, and he was writing in fitful jabs on a yellow pad. Henry tapped on the facing of the door.

"Come in," Wheeler said without looking up.

Henry came in.

"Sit down," Wheeler said.

Henry did not sit down.

“What you got on your mind?” Wheeler asked.

“Burley Coulter disappeared from the hospital last night.”

Wheeler swiveled his chair around and gave Henry a look that it had taken Henry thirty years to meet with composure. “Where’s Danny Branch?”

Henry grinned. “Danny’s away from home. Lyda said he said something about Indiana.”

“You’ve talked to the police?”

“Yes. And a state police detective, Mr. Kyle Bode, has already been to see Lyda.”

Wheeler wrote Kyle Bode’s name on the yellow pad. “What did you find out?”

“Somebody went into Burley’s room at some time around two o’clock. Whoever it was disconnected him from the life machines, loaded him onto a gurney, and escaped with him ‘into the night,’ as they say. They found no fingerprints or other evidence. They have found one witness, a nurse, who saw ‘a huge man’ wearing a blue shirt going up on an elevator with an empty gurney and then down with what she thought was a dead person.”

“We don’t know anybody huge, do we?” Wheeler said. “What about the blue shirt?”

“Don’t know,” Henry said.

“Do you know this Detective Bode?”

“I had a little talk with him once, over in the court room.”

“You’re expecting him?”

“Yes.”

Wheeler spread his hands palm down on his lap, studied them a moment, and then looked up again. “Well, what are you going to do?”

“Don’t know,” Henry said. “I guess I’ll have to wait to find out. I’ve told Lyda and everybody else concerned to come here as soon as they can. And I think you ought to call Mother and Mary Penn and tell them to come. I don’t want the police to talk to any more of them alone.”

This time it was Wheeler who grinned. He reached for the phone. “All right, my boy.”

Working with the spade, Danny cut into the ground the long and narrow outline of the grave. It was hard digging, the gentle rain of the night not having penetrated very far, and there were tree roots and rocks. Danny soon settled into a rhythm in keeping with the length and difficulty of the job. He used the spud bar to loosen the dirt, cut the roots, and pry out the rocks. With the spade he piled the loosened dirt on one side of the grave; with his hands he laid the rocks out on the other side. He worked steadily, stopping only to return to the barn to verify that the sleeper there did not wake. On each visit he stood by Burley only long enough to touch him and to say, “You’re all right. You don’t have to worry about a thing.” Each time, he saw that Burley’s breath came more shallow and more slow.

And finally, on one of these trips to the barn, he knew as he entered the doorway that the breaths had stopped, and he stopped, and then went soundlessly in where the body lay. It looked unaccountably small. Now of its long life in this place there remained only this small artifact of flesh and bone. In the hospital, Burley’s body had seemed to Danny to be off in another world; he had not been able to rid himself of the feeling that he was looking at it through a lens or a window. Here, the old body seemed to belong to this world absolutely, it

was so accepting now of all that had come to it, even its death. Burley had died as he had slept—he had not moved. Danny leaned and picked up the still hands and laid them together.

He went back to his digging and worked on as before. As he accepted again the burden of the work and measured his thoughts to it, Burley returned to his mind, and he knew him again as he had been when his life was full. He saw again the stance and demeanor of the man, the amused eyes, the lips pressed together while speech waited upon thought, an almost inviolable patience in the set of the shoulders. It was as though Burley stood in full view nearby, at ease and well at home—as though Danny could see him, but only on the condition that he not look.

When Detective Bode climbed the stairs to the office of Catlett & Catlett, the waiting room was deserted. Through the open door at the rear of the room, he could see Henry with his feet propped on his desk, reading the morning paper. Kyle Bode closed the waiting room door somewhat loudly.

Henry looked up. “Come in,” he called. He got up to meet his visitor, who shook his hand and then produced a badge.

“Kyle Bode, state police.”

Henry gave him a warm and friendly smile. “Sure,” he said. “I remember you. Have a seat. What can I do for you?”

The detective sat down in the chair that Henry positioned for him. He had not smiled. He waited for Henry, too, to sit down. “I’m here in connection with what I suppose would be called a kidnapping. A man named Burley Coulter, of Port William, was removed from his hospital room without authorization at about two o’clock this morning.”

“So I heard!” Henry said. “Lyda Branch called me about it. I figured you fellows would have made history of this case by now. You mean you haven’t?”

“Not yet,” Kyle Bode said. “It’s not all that clear-cut, probably due to the unprecedented nature of the crime.”

“You show me an unprecedented crime,” Henry said, falling in with the detective’s philosophical tone. “Kidnapping, you said?”

“It’s a crime involving the new medical technology. I mean, some of this stuff is unheard of. We’re living in the future right now. I figure this crime is partly motivated by anxiety about this new stuff. Like maybe the guy that did it is some kind of religious nut.”

Henry put his dark-rimmed reading glasses back on and made his face long and solemn, tilting his head back, as he was apt to do when amused in exalted circumstances. “In the past, too,” he said.

“What?”

“If we’re living in the future, then surely we’re living in the past, too, and the dead and the unborn are right here in our midst. Wouldn’t you say so?”

“I guess so,” Kyle Bode said.

“Well,” Henry said, “do you have any clues as to the possible identity of the perpetrator of this crime?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, we do. We have a good set of fingerprints.”

Kyle Bode spoke casually, looking at the fingernails of his right hand, which he held in his

left. When he looked up to gauge the effect, not the Henry of their recent philosophical exchange but an altogether different Henry, one he had encountered before, was looking at him point-blank, the glasses off.

“Mr. Bode,” Henry said, “that was a lie you just told. As a matter of fact, you don’t have any evidence. If we are going to get along, you had better assume that I know as much about this case as you do. Now, what do you want?”

Kyle Bode felt a sort of chill crawl up the back of his neck and over the top of his head, settling for an exquisite moment among his hair roots. He maintained his poise, however, and was pleased to note that he was returning Henry’s look. And the right question came to him.

“I want to find the victim’s nephew, Danny Branch. Do you know where he is?”

“Son,” Henry said. “The victim’s son. I only know what his wife told me.”

“What did she tell you?”

“She said he said something about Indiana.”

“We have an APB on him in Indiana.” Detective Bode said this with the air of one who leaves no stone unturned. “But we really think—I think—the solution is to be found right here.”

But looking at Henry and remembering Lyda, he felt unmistakably the intimation that he and his purpose were not trusted. These people did not trust him, and they were not going to trust him. He felt his purpose unraveling in his failure to have their trust. In default of that trust, every stone must be turned. And it was a rocky country. He knew he had already failed—unless, by some fluke of luck, he could find somebody to outsmart. Or, maybe, unless this Danny Branch should appear wearing a blue shirt.

“Maybe you can tell me,” he said, “if Danny Branch is Mr. Coulter’s heir.”

“Burley was—is—my father’s client,” Henry said. “You ought to ask him about that. Danny, I reckon, is my client.”

The detective made his tone more reasonable, presuming somewhat upon his and Henry’s brotherhood in the law: “Mr. Catlett, I’d like to be assured of your cooperation in this case. After all, it will be in your client’s best interest to keep this from going as far as it may go.”

“Can’t help you,” Henry said.

“You mean that you, a lawyer, won’t cooperate with the law of the state in the solution of a crime?”

“Well, you see, it’s a matter of patriotism.”

“Patriotism? You can’t mean that.”

“I mean patriotism—love for your country and your neighbors. There’s a difference, Mr. Bode, between the state, or any other organization, and the country. I’m not going to cooperate with you in this case because I don’t like what you represent in this case.”

“What I represent? What do you think I represent?”

“The organization of the world.”

“And what does that mean?” In spite of himself, and not very coolly, Detective Bode was lapsing into the tone of mere argument, perhaps of mere self-defense.

“It means,” Henry said, “that you want whatever you know to serve power. You want knowledge to *be* power. And you’ll make your ignorance count, too, if you can be deceitful and clever enough. You think everything has to be explained to your superiors and concealed from your inferiors. For instance, you just lied to me with a clear conscience, as a way of serving

justice. What I stand for can't survive in the world you're helping to make, Mr. Bode." Henry was grinning, enjoying himself, and now he allowed the detective to see that he was.

"Are you some kind of anarchist?" the detective said. "Just what the hell are you, anyway?"

"I'm a patriot, like I said. I'm a man who's not going to cooperate with you on this case. You're here to represent the right of the state and other large organizations to decide for us and come between us. The people you represent will come out here, without asking our opinion, and shut down a barbershop or a little slaughterhouse because it's not sanitary enough for us, and then let other businesses—richer ones—poison the air and water."

"What's *that* got to do with it?"

"Listen," Henry said. "I'm trying to explain something to you. I'm not the only one who won't cooperate with you in your search for Danny Branch. There are several of us here who aren't reconciled to the loss of any good thing. We know that for a hundred years, the chief clients and patrons of that state of yours have been in the business of robbing and impoverishing the country people and their places."

"I'm not in charge of the state," Kyle Bode said. "I'm just doing my duty."

"And you're here now to tell us that a person who is sick and unconscious, or even a person who is conscious and well, is ultimately a property of the organizations and the state. Aren't you?" Henry was still grinning.

"It wasn't authorized. He asked nobody's permission. He told nobody. He signed no papers. It was a crime. You can't let people just walk around and do what they want to like that. He didn't even pay the bill."

"Some of us think people belong to each other and to God," Henry said. "Are you going to let a hospital keep a patient hostage until he pays his bill? You were against kidnapping a while ago."

Detective Bode was resting his brow in the palm of his hand. He was shaking his head. When it became clear that Henry was finished, the detective looked up. "Mr. Catlett, if I may, I would like to talk to your father."

"Sure," Henry said, getting up. "You going to tell on me?"

And only then, finally, did Detective Bode smile.

Danny dug the grave down until he stood hip deep in it. And then he dug again until it was past waist deep. And then, putting his hands on the ground beside it, he leapt out of it, and stood looking down into it, and thought. The grave was somewhat longer than Burley had been tall; it was widened at the middle to permit Danny to stand in it to lay the body down; it was deep enough.

Using the larger flagstones that he had taken from the grave and bringing more from the creek, Danny shaped a long, narrow box in the bottom of the grave. Digging to varying depths to seat the stones upright with their straightest edges aligned at the top, he worked his way from the head of the grave to the foot and back again, tamping each stone tightly into place. The light beams that came through the heavy foliage shifted slowly from one opening to another, and slowly they became more perpendicular. The day grew warmer, and Danny paused now and

again to wipe the sweat from his face. Again he went to the spring and drank, and returned to his work. The crickets sang steadily, and the creek made its constant little song over the rocks. Within those sounds and the larger quiet that included them, now and then a woodpecker drummed or called or a jay screamed or a squirrel barked. In the stillness a few leaves let go and floated down. And always Danny could smell the fresh, moist earth of the grave.

When he had finished placing the upright stones, he paved the floor of the grave, laying the broad slabs level and filling the openings that remained with smaller stones. He made good work of it, though it would be seen in all the time of the world only by him and only for a little while. He put the shape of the stone casket together as if the stones had made a casket once before and had been scattered, and now he had found them and pieced them together again.

He carried up more stones from the creek, the biggest he could handle. These would be the capstones, and he laid them in stacks at the head and foot of the grave. It was ready now. He went down to the barn and removed the blankets that covered Burley and withdrew the pillow from under his head. He folded the blankets into a pallet on the paved floor of the grave and placed the pillow at its head.

When he carried Burley to the grave, he went up by the gentlest, most open way so that there need be no haste or struggle or roughness, for now they had come to the last of the last things. A heavy pressure of finality swelled in his heart and throat as if he might have wept aloud, but as he walked he made no sound. He stepped into the grave and laid the body down. He composed it like a sleeper, laying the hands together as before. And the body seemed to accept again its stillness and its deep sleep, submissive to the motion of the world until the world's end. Danny brought up the rest of the bedclothes and laid them over Burley, covering, at last, his face.

As before, the thought returned to him that he was not acting only for himself. He thought of Lyda and Hannah and Nathan and the others, and he went down along the creek and then up across the thickety north slope on the other side, gathering flowers as he went. He picked spires of goldenrod, sprays of farewell-summer and of lavender, gold-centered asters; he picked yellow late sunflowers, the white-starred flower heads of snakeroot with their odor of warm honey, and finally, near the creek, the triple-lobed, deep blue flowers of great lobelia. Stepping into the grave again, he covered the shrouded body with these, their bright colors and their weedy scent warm from the sun, laying them down in shingle fashion so that the blossoms were always uppermost, until the grave seemed at last to contain a small garden in bloom. And then, having touched Burley for the last time, he laid across the upright sides of the coffin the broad covering stones, first one layer, and then another over the cracks in the first.

He lifted himself out of the grave and stood at the foot of it. He let the quiet reassemble itself around him, the quiet of the place now one with that of the old body sleeping in its grave. Into that great quiet he said aloud, "Be with him, as he has been with us." And then he began to fill the grave.

Henry rapped on his father's door and then pushed it open. Wheeler was still wearing his hat, but now he was holding the telephone receiver in his right hand. His right arm was extended at full length, propped on the arm of his chair. Both Henry and Kyle Bode could hear somebody

insistently and plaintively explaining something through the phone. When the door opened, Wheeler looked around.

“Detective Bode would like to talk with you.”

Wheeler acknowledged Henry with a wave of his left hand. To Kyle Bode he said, “Come in, sir,” and gestured toward an empty chair.

Kyle Bode came in and sat down.

Wheeler put the receiver to his mouth and ear and said, “But I know what your problem is, Mr. Hernshaw. You’ve told me several times . . .” The voice never stopped talking. Wheeler shifted the receiver to his left hand, clamping his palm over the mouthpiece, and, smiling, offered his right hand to the detective. “I’m glad to know you, Mr. Bode. I’ll get done here in a minute.” He dangled the receiver out over his chair arm again while he and Kyle Bode listened to it, its tone of injury and wearied explanation as plain as if they could make out the words. And then they heard it say distinctly, “So. Here is what I think.”

In the portentous pause that followed, Wheeler quickly raised the receiver and said into it with an almost gentle patience, “But, Mr. Hernshaw, as I have explained to you a number of times, what you think is of no account, because you are not going to get anybody else on the face of the earth to think it.”

Something was said then that Wheeler interrupted: “No. A verbal agreement is *not* a contract if there were no witnesses and you are the only one who can remember it. Now you think about it. I can’t talk to you anymore this morning because I’ve got a young fellow waiting to see me.”

He paused again, listening, and then said, “Yessir. Thank you. It’s always good to talk with you.” He hung up.

“That was Walter Hernshaw,” he said to Kyle Bode. “Like many of my friends, he has got old. I’ve had that very conversation with him the last four Saturdays. And I’ll tell you something: if I sent him a bill for my time—which, of course, I won’t, because he hasn’t hired me, and because I won’t be hired by him—he would be amazed. Because he thinks that if he conducts his business on Saturday by telephone, it’s not work. Now what can I do for you?”

The detective cleared his throat. “I assume you’re aware, Mr. Catlett, that Mr. Burley Coulter was taken from his hospital room early this morning by some unauthorized person.”

“Yes,” Wheeler said. “Henry told me, and I’m greatly concerned about it. Burley is a cousin of mine, you know.”

“No,” the detective said, feeling another downward swerve of anxiety. “I didn’t.”

“Yes,” Wheeler said, “his father and my father were first cousins. They were the grandchildren of Jonas T. Coulter, who was the son of the first Nathan Coulter, who was, I reckon, one of the first white people to come into this country. Well, have you people figured out how Burley was taken by this unauthorized person?”

“He just went in with a gurney,” Kyle Bode said, “and loaded Mr. Coulter onto it, and covered him up to look like a corpse, and took him away—right through the middle of a busy hospital. Can you believe the audacity of it?”

“Sure, I believe it,” Wheeler said. “But I’ve seen a lot of audacity in my time. It’s not as hard for me to believe as it used to be. Do you know who did this? Do you have clear evidence?”

“As a matter of fact, we don’t. But we have a good idea who did it.”

“Who?”

“Danny Branch—who is, I’m told, Mr. Coulter’s son?”

“That’s right,” Wheeler said. “And you’re wondering why he doesn’t have his father’s name.” Wheeler then told why Danny went by the name of Branch, his mother’s name, rather than Coulter, which was a long and somewhat complicated story to which the detective quit listening.

“Anyhow,” Kyle Bode said, “Danny Branch seems also to have disappeared. I wonder, Mr. Catlett, if you have any idea where he might have gone.”

“I only know what Henry says Danny’s wife told him.”

“And what did she tell him?”

“He said she said he said something about Indiana.”

“The Indiana police are watching for him,” Kyle Bode said. “But a much likelier possibility is that he’s somewhere around here—and that his father, alive or dead, is with him.”

“You’re assuming, I see, that Danny Branch is the guilty party.” Wheeler smiled at the detective as he would perhaps have smiled at a grandson. “And what are you going to charge him with—impersonating an undertaker?”

Kyle Bode did not smile back. “Kidnapping, to start with. And, after that, if Mr. Coulter dies, maybe manslaughter.”

“Well,” Wheeler said. “That’s serious.”

“Mr. Catlett, is Danny Branch Mr. Coulter’s heir?” The detective was now leaning forward somewhat aggressively in his seat.

Wheeler smiled again, seeing (and, Kyle Bode thought, appreciating) the direction of the detective’s thinking. “Yes,” he said. “He is.”

“That makes it more likely, doesn’t it?” Kyle Bode was getting the feeling that Wheeler was talking to him at such length because he liked his company. He corrected that by wondering if Wheeler, elderly as he was, knew that he was talking to a detective. He corrected that by glancing at the writing pad that Wheeler had tossed onto his desk. On one blue line of the pad he saw, inscribed without a quiver, “Det. Kyle Bode.”

“Now your logic is pretty good there, Mr. Bode,” Wheeler said. “You’ve got something there that you certainly will want to think about. A man sick and unconscious, dependent on life-prolonging machinery, surely is a pretty opportunity for the medical people. ‘For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.’ You suspect Danny Branch of experiencing a coincidence of compassion and greed in this case. And of course that suspicion exactly mirrors the suspicion that attaches to the medical profession.”

“But they were keeping him alive,” Kyle Bode said. “Isn’t that something?”

“It’s something,” Wheeler said. “It’s not enough. There are many degrees and kinds of being alive. And some are worse than death.”

“But they were doing their duty.”

“Oh, yes,” Wheeler said, “they were doing their solemn duty, as defined by themselves. And they were getting luxuriously paid. They were being merciful and they were getting rich. Let us not forget that one of the subjects of our conversation is money—the money to be spent

and made in the art of medical mercy. Once the machinery gets into it, then the money gets into it. Once the money is there, then come the damned managers and the damned insurers and (I am embarrassed to say) the damned lawyers, not to mention the damned doctors who were there for the money before anybody. Before long the patient is hostage to his own cure. The beneficiary is the chattel of his benefactors.

“And first thing you know, you’ve got some poor sufferer all trussed up in a hospital, tied and tubed and doped and pierced with needles, who will never draw another breath for his own benefit and who may breathe on for years. It’s a bad thing to get paid for, Mr. Bode, especially if you’re in the business of mercy and healing and the relief of suffering.

“So there certainly is room for greed and mercy of another kind. I don’t doubt that Danny, assuming he is the guilty party, has considered the cost; he’s an intelligent man. Even so, I venture to say to you that you’re wrong about him, insofar as you suspect him of acting out of greed. I’ll give you two reasons that you had better consider. In the first place, he loves Burley. In the second place, he’s not alone, and he knows it. You’re thinking of a world in which legatee stands all alone, facing legator who has now become a mere obstruction between legatee and legacy. But you have thought up the wrong world. There are several of us here who belong to Danny and to whom he belongs, and we’ll stand by him, whatever happens. Whatever happens, he and his family will have a place, and he knows it. After money, you know, we are talking about the question of the ownership of people. To whom and to what does Burley Coulter belong? If, as you allege, Danny Branch has taken Burley Coulter out of the hospital, he has done it because Burley belongs to him.”

Wheeler was no longer making any attempt to speak to the point of Kyle Bode’s visit, or if he was Kyle Bode no longer saw the point. And he had begun to hear, while Wheeler talked, the sounds of the gathering of several people in the adjoining room: the opening and shutting of the outer door, the scraping of feet and of chair legs, the murmur of conscientiously subdued voices.

Kyle Bode waved his hand at Wheeler and interrupted. “But he can’t just carry him off without the hospital staff’s permission.”

“Why not?” Wheeler said. “A fellow would need their permission, I reckon, to get in. If he needs their permission to get out, he’s in jail. Would you grant a proprietary right, or even a guardianship, to a hospital that you would not grant to a man’s own son? I would oppose that, whatever the law said.”

“Well, anyway,” Detective Bode said, “all I know is that the law has been broken, and I am here to serve the law.”

“But, my dear boy, you don’t eat or drink the law, or sit in the shade of it or warm yourself by it, or wear it, or have your being in it. The law exists only to serve.”

“Serve what?”

“Why, all the many things that are above it. Love.”

Danny stood in the grave as he filled it, tamping the dirt in. The day in its sounding brightness stood around him. He kept to the rhythm he had established at the beginning, stopping only one more time to go to the spring for a drink. Though he sweated at his work, the day was

comfortable, the suggestion of autumn palpably in the air, and he made good time.

As he filled the grave and thus slowly rose out of it, he felt again that the living man, Burley Coulter, was near him, watching and visible, except where he looked. The intimation of Burley's presence was constantly with him, at once troubling and consoling; in its newness, it kept him close to tears. It was as though he were being watched by a shy bird that remained, with uncanny foreknowledge, just beyond the edge of vision, whichever way he looked.

When the grave was filled, he spread and leveled the surplus dirt. He gathered leaves and scattered them over the dirt and brushed over them lightly with a leafy branch. From twenty feet, only a practiced and expectant eye would have noticed the disturbance. After the dewfall or frost of one night, it would be harder to see. After the leaves fell, there would be no trace.

He carried his tools down to the barn, folded the pot and skillet and the piece of jowl and the cornmeal into his hunting coat, making a bundle that he could sling over his shoulder as before. Again using a leafy branch, he brushed out his tracks in the dust of the barn floor. He sprinkled dust and then water over the ashes of his fire. When his departure was fully prepared, he brought water from the spring and sat down and ate quickly the rest of the food he had prepared at breakfast.

By the time he left, the place had again resumed its quiet, and he walked away without disturbing it.

The absence of his truck startled Danny when he got back to where he had left it, but he stood still only for a moment before he imagined what had happened. If the wrong people had found the truck, they would have come on up the branch and found him and Burley. The right person could only have been Nathan, who would have known where the key was hidden and who would have taken the truck to the nearest unlikely place where he could put it out of sight. And so Danny shouldered his tools and his bundle again and went to the road.

The road was not much traveled. Only one car passed, and Danny avoided it by stepping in among the tall horseweeds that grew between the roadside and the creek. When he came to the lane that branched off under the big sycamore, he turned without hesitation into it, knowing he was right when he got to the first muddy patch where Nathan had scuffed out the tire tracks. And yet he smiled when he stepped through the door of the old barn and saw his truck. He laid his tools in with the other fencing tools in the back, and then, opening the passenger door to toss in his bundle, he saw Nathan's green shirt lying on the seat. He smiled again and took off the blue shirt he was wearing and put the green one on. He thought of burning the blue shirt, but he did not want to burn it. It was a good shirt. A derelict washing machine was leaning against the wall of the barn just inside the upper doorway, and he tossed the shirt into it. He would come back for it in a few days.

When he got home and went into the kitchen, he found Lyda's note on the table.

"We are all at Henry's and Wheeler's office," she had written. "Henry says for you to come, too, if you get back." And then she had crossed out the last phrase and added, "I reckon you are back."

Wheeler talked at ease, leaning back in his chair, his fingers laced over his vest, telling stories of the influence of the medical industry upon the local economy. He spoke with care, forming

his sentences as if he were writing them down and looking at Kyle Bode all the time, with the apparent intent to instruct him.

“And so it has become possible,” Wheeler said, “for one of our people to spend a long life accumulating a few thousand dollars by the hardest kind of work, only to have it entirely taken away by two or three hours in an operating room and a week or two in a hospital.”

Listening, the detective became more and more anxious to regain control at least of his own participation in whatever it was that was going on. But he was finding the conversation difficult to interrupt not only because of the peculiar force that Wheeler’s look and words put into it but because he did not much want to interrupt it. There was a kind of charm in the old man’s earnest wish that the young man should be instructed. And when the young man did from time to time break into the conversation, it was to ask a question relative only to the old man’s talk—questions that the young man, to his consternation, actually wanted to know the old man’s answer to.

Finally the conversation was interrupted by Wheeler himself. “I believe we have some people here whom you’ll want to see. They are Burley’s close kin and close friends, the people who know him best. Come and meet them.”

Kyle Bode had not been able to see where he was going for some time, and now suddenly he did see, and he saw that *they* had seen where he was going all along and had got there ahead of him. His mind digressed into relief that he was assigned to this case alone, that none of his colleagues could see his confusion. Conscientiously—though surely not conscientiously enough—he had sought the order that the facts of the case would make. And not only had he failed so far to achieve that clear and explainable order but he had been tempted over and over again into the weakness of self-justification. Worse than that, he had been tempted over and over again to leave, with Wheeler, the small, clear world of the law and its explanations and to enter the larger, darker world not ordered by human reasons or subject to them, in which he sensed obscurely that something might live that he, too, might be glad to have alive.

Standing with his right arm outstretched and then with his hand spread hospitably on Kyle Bode’s back, Wheeler gathered him toward the door, which he opened onto a room now full of people, all of whom fell silent and looked expectantly at the detective as though he might have been a long-awaited guest of honor.

Guided still by Wheeler’s hand on his back, Kyle Bode turned toward the desk to the left of the stairway door, at which sat a smiling woman who held a stenographer’s pad and pencil on her lap.

“This is Detective Kyle Bode, ladies and gentlemen,” Wheeler said. “Mr. Bode, this is Julia Vye, our secretary.”

Julia extended her hand to Kyle Bode, who shook it cordially.

Wheeler pressed him on to the left. “This is Sarah Catlett, Henry’s wife.

“This is my wife, Bess.

“This is Mary Penn.

“This is Art Rowanberry.

“This is his brother, Mart.

“This is Jack Penn, Jack Beechum Penn.

“This is Flora Catlett, my other daughter-in-law.

“This is my son, Andy.

“You know Henry.

“This is Lyda Branch, Danny’s wife.

“This is Hannah Coulter.

“And this is Hannah’s husband, Nathan.”

One by one, they silently held out their hands to Kyle Bode, who silently shook them.

He and Wheeler had come almost all the way around the room. There was a single chair against the wall to the left of the door to Wheeler’s office. Wheeler offered this chair, with a gesture, to Kyle Bode, who thanked him and sat down. Wheeler then seated himself in the chair between Julia Vye’s desk and the stair door.

“Mr. Bode,” Wheeler said. “All of us here are relatives or friends of Burley Coulter.”

The secretary, Kyle Bode noticed, now began to write in shorthand on her pad. It was noon and past, and he had learned nothing that he could tell to any superior or any reporter who might ask.

“Nathan,” Wheeler went on, “is Burley’s nephew.”

“Nephew?” Kyle Bode said, turning to Nathan, who looked back at him with a look that was utterly direct and impenetrable.

“That’s right.”

“I assume you know him well.”

“I’ve known him for fifty-three years.”

“You’ve been neighbors that long?”

“I was raised by his parents and by him. We’ve been neighbors ever since, except for a while back there in the forties when I was away.”

“You were in the service?”

“Yes.”

The detective coughed. “Mr. Coulter, my job, I guess, is to find your uncle. Do *you* know where he is? Or where Danny Branch is?”

The eyes that confronted him did not look down, nor did they change. And there was no apparent animosity in the reply: “I couldn’t rightly say I do.”

“Now them two was a pair,” Mart Rowanberry said, as though he were not interrupting but merely contributing to the conversation. “There’s been a many a time when nobody knew where them two was.”

“I see. And why was that?”

“They’re hunters!” Art Rowanberry said, a little impatiently, in the tone of one explaining the obvious. “They’d be off somewheres in the woods.”

“A many a time,” Mart said, “he has called me out after bedtime to go with him, and I would get up and go. A many a time.”

“You are friends, then, you and Mr. Coulter?”

“We been friends, you might as well say, all along. Course, now, he’s older than I am. Fifteen years or so, wouldn’t it be, Andy?”

The Catlett by the name of Andy nodded, and Lyda said, “Yes.”

And then she said, “You knew him all your life, and then finally he didn’t know you, did he, Mart?”

“He didn’t know you?” said Kyle Bode.

“Well, sir,” Mart said, “I come up on him and Danny and Nathan while they was fencing. Burley was asleep, propped up against the end post. I shook him a little, and he looked up. He says, ‘Howdy, old bud.’ I seen he was bewildered. I says, ‘You don’t know me, do you?’ He says, ‘I know I ought to, but I don’t.’ I says, ‘Well, if you was to hear old Bet open up on a track, who’d you say it was?’ And he says, ‘Why, hello, Mart!’ ”

There was a moment then in which nobody spoke, as if everybody there was seeing what Mart had told.

Kyle Bode waited for that moment to pass, and then he said, “This Bet you spoke of”—he knew he was a fool, but he wanted to know—“was she a dog?” It was not his conversation he was in; he could hardly think by what right he was in it.

“She was a blue tick mostly,” Mart said. “A light, sort of cloudy-colored dog, with black ears and a white tip to her tail. And a good one.” He paused, perhaps seeing the dog again. “I bought her from Braymer Hardy over yonder by Goforth. But I expect,” he said, smiling at Kyle Bode, “that was before your time.” And then, as if conscious of having strayed from the subject, he said, “But, now, Burley Coulter. They never come no finer than Burley Coulter.”

Another small silence followed, in which everybody assented to Mart’s tribute.

“Burley Coulter,” Wheeler said, “was born in 1895. He was the son of Dave and Zelma Coulter. He had one older brother, Jarrat, who died in the July of 1967.

“Burley attended the Goforth School as long as he could be kept there—not long enough for him to finish the eighth grade, which he thought might have taken him forever. His fame at Willow Hole was not for scholarship but for being able to fight as well on the bottom as on the top.”

Wheeler spoke at first to Kyle Bode. And then he looked down at his hands and thought a minute. When he spoke again, he spoke to and for them all.

“He was wild, Burley was, as a young fellow. For me, he had all the charm of an older boy who was fine looking and wild and friendly to a younger cousin. I loved him and would have followed him anywhere. Though he was wild, he didn’t steal or lie or misrepresent himself.

“He never was a gambler. Once I said to him, ‘Burley, I know you’ve drunk and fought and laid out at night in the woods. How come you’ve never gambled?’ And he said, ‘No son of a bitch is going to snap his fingers and pick up *my* money.’ I said, ‘Why?’ And he said, ‘Because I never got it by snapping my fingers.’

“His wildness was in his refusal, or his inability, to live within other people’s expectations. He would be hunting sometimes when his daddy wanted him at work. He would dance all night and neglect to sober up before he came home.

“He was called into the army during the First World War. By then he was past twenty and long past being a boy, and he had his limits. He hit an officer for calling him a stupid, briar-jumping Kentucky bastard. He might have suffered any one of those insults, if given singly. But he felt that, given all together, they paid off any obligation he had to the officer, and he hit him. He hit him, as he said, ‘thoroughly.’ I asked him, ‘How thoroughly?’ And he said, ‘Thoroughly enough.’ They locked him up a while for that.

“He was acting, by then, as a man of conscious principle. He didn’t believe that anybody

had the right, by birth or appointment, to lord it over anybody else.

“He broke his mother’s heart, as she would sometimes say—as a young man of that kind is apt to do. But when she was old and only the two of them were left at home, he was devoted to her and took dutiful care of her, and she learned to depend on him.

“Though he never gave up his love of roaming about, he had become a different man from the one he started out to be. I’m not sure when that change began. Maybe it was when Nathan and Tom started following him around when they were little boys, after their mother died. And then, when Danny came along, Burley took his proper part in raising him. He took care of his mother until she died. He was a good and loyal partner to his brother. He was a true friend to all his friends.

“He was too late, as he thought and said, in acknowledging Danny as his son. But he did acknowledge him, and made him his heir, and brought him and Lyda home with him to live. And so at last he fully honored his should-have-been marriage to Kate Helen.

“He and I had our differences. Sometimes they came to words, and when they did I always learned something from him—a hard lesson sometimes, but good to know—because he knew himself and he told the truth.

“He was sometimes, but never much in a public way, a fiddler. And he was always a singer. His head was full of scraps and bits of songs that he sang out at work to say how he felt or to make himself feel better. Some of them, I think, he made up himself.

“From some morning a long time ago, I remember standing beside a field where Burley was plowing with a team of mules and hearing his voice all of a sudden lift up into the quiet:

*Ain’t going to be much longer, boys,
Ain’t going to be much longer.
Soon it will be dinnertime
And we will feed our hunger.*

And he had another song he sometimes sang up in the afternoon, when the day had got long and he was getting tired:

*Look down that row;
See how far we’ve got to go.
It’s a long time to sundown, boys,
Long time to sundown.*

“What was best in him, maybe, was the pleasure he took in pleasurable things. We’ll not forget his laughter. He was hunting once for two or three days. When he got home he was half starved, and it was the middle of the night. Rather than disturb the house, he went to the smokehouse and sliced part of a cured bacon with his pocketknife and ate it as it was. He said, ‘I *relished* it.’ He looked at the world and found it good.

“ ‘I’ve never learned anything until I had to,’ he often said, and so confessed himself a man like other men. But he learned what he had to, and he changed, and so he made himself exceptional.

“He was, I will say, a faithful man.”

It was a lonely gathering for Henry Catlett. He was riding as an humble passenger in a vehicle that he ought to have been guiding—that would not be guided if he did not guide it—and yet he had no better idea than the others where it might be going.

So far, he thought, he had done pretty well. He had gathered all parties to the case—except, of course, for the principals—here under his eye for the time being. How long he would need to keep them here or how long the various ones of them would stay, he did not know. He knew that Lyda had left a note for Danny where he would see it when he came home, telling him to join them here. But when Danny might come home, Henry did not know. Nobody, anyhow, had said anything about eating dinner, though it was past noon, and he was grateful for that.

Either he would be able to keep them there long enough, or he would not. Either Danny would show up, or he would not—wearing, or not wearing, that very regrettable blue shirt. At moments, as in a bad dream, he had wondered what it would portend if Danny showed up with fresh earth caked on his shoes. He wondered what concatenation of circumstances and lucky guesses might give Detective Bode some purchase on his case. It occurred to Henry to wish that Danny had given somebody a little notice of what he was going to do. But if Danny had been the kind of man to give such notice, he would not have done what he had done. It did not occur to Henry to regret that Danny had done what he had done.

As Wheeler spoke, his auditors sat looking at him, or down at their hands, or at the floor. From time to time, tears shone in the eyes of one or another of them. But no tear fell, no hand was lifted, no sound was uttered. And Henry was grateful to them all—grateful to his father, who was presuming on his seniority to keep them there; grateful to the others for their disciplined and decorous silence.

Out the corner of his eye, Henry could see his brother, Andy, slouched in his chair in the corner and watching also. Henry would have given a lot for a few minutes of talk with Andy. They would not need to say much.

Henry would have liked, too, to know what Lyda thought, and Hannah and Nathan. But though he sat in the same room with them, he was divided from them as by a wide river. All he could do was wait and watch.

And without looking directly at him, he watched Kyle Bode, partly with amusement. The detective’s questions to Nathan and to Mart and now his attention to Wheeler so obviously exceeded his professional interest in the case that something like a grin occurred in Henry’s mind, though his face remained solemn.

“He was, I will say, a faithful man,” Wheeler said.

And then Henry heard the street door open and slow footsteps start up the stairs.

Wheeler heard them, too, and stopped. Kyle Bode heard them; glancing around the room, he saw that all of them were listening. He saw that Lyda and Hannah were holding hands. Silence went over the whole room now and sealed them under it, as under a stone.

The footsteps rose slowly up the stairs, crossed the narrow hallway, hesitated a moment at

the door. And then the knob turned, the door opened, and Danny Branch stepped into the room, wearing a shirt green as the woods, his well-oiled shoes as clean as his cap. He was smiling. To those seated around the book-lined old walls, he had the aspect and the brightness of one who had borne the dead to the grave, and filled the grave to the brim, and received the dead back into life again. The knuckles of Lyda's and Hannah's interlaced fingers were white; nobody made a sound.

And then Henry, whose mind seemed to him to have been racing a long time to arrive again there in the room, which now was changed, said quietly, "Well, looks like you made it home from Indiana."

And suddenly Kyle Bode was on his feet, shouting at Danny, as if from somewhere far outside that quiet room. "Where *have* you been? What have you done with him? He's dead, isn't he, and you have buried him somewhere in these end-of-nowhere, godforsaken hills and hollows?"

"I had an account to settle with one of my creditors," Danny said, still smiling, to Kyle Bode.

"Sit down, Mr. Bode," Henry said, still quietly. "You don't have the right to ask him anything. Before you have that right, you have got to have evidence. And you haven't got a nickel's worth. You haven't got any."

The room was all ashimmer now with its quiet. There was a strangely burdening weight in Kyle Bode that swayed him toward that room and what had happened in it. He saw his defeat, and he was not even sorry. He felt small and lost, somewhere beyond the law. He sat down.

Henry watched him until he had fully subsided in his chair, and then went on:

"A man has disappeared out of your world, Mr. Bode, that he was never in for very long. And you don't know where, and you don't know how. He has disappeared into his people and his place, not to be found in this world again forever."

"And so," Wheeler said, after the room had again regained its silence, "peace to our neighbor, Burley Coulter. May God rest his soul."