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The Cliff is a novel whose setting is a cliff, on the central coastline of California in the year, 1898. The cliff is the site of an abandoned, limestone mining operation.

The principal characters in the story are: Amy Braddock, a thirty-five-year-old widow; Jason Braddock, her eleven-year-old son; and Prophet, a black man, a stranger, and an alleged friend of the deceased father's.

Prophet is a mysterious person who arrives one day on foot, with nothing but the clothes on his back and what he calls a "spirit stick" in his hand. The stick appears to be a totem of some sort, possessed of magical powers.

The first two chapters we see here are concerned with Prophet's attempts to win a place for himself in the family and his initial efforts to persuade them to reopen the limestone mine.

THE CLIFF

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the land in the hilly region of central California was found to contain a significant natural resource, limestone. Lime is a principal ingredient in cement and it was found that cement made an excellent building foundation. Limestone became an important commodity, and the land contained a lot of it. White men, black men, Chinese from San Francisco and Mexicans and Indians, dug it and pried it loose from the ground with pickaxe and dynamite. They loaded it onto barges and filled the holds of ships that put in up and down the coast. Some men, more ambitious than others, built kilns out of stone and fired the ore and broke it down and extracted the pure lime. They poured the white powder into casks and heavy cloth sacks and sold it to the market in San Francisco where the builders paid top dollar and the building boom absorbed it all and more.

In 1898, on the coast, twenty miles south of Monterey, the Braddock family had a farm of sorts, perched atop a cliff that contained one of the purest veins of limestone ore in the area. It was a veritable mother lode and it fronted right out onto the face of the cliff. That in itself was rare; usually lime was found much farther from the coast in the hills to the east. This, coupled with its being such an unusually pure deposit, made it an extremely rich find.

The cliff is a double-stepped formation; a short, lower portion of granite boulders and bedrock that keeps back the ocean, and an upper portion of shale and granite that contains the lime. Black holes and dark strips of newly exposed rock mark where the axes and the dynamite have been at work. A rusty ore cart is slung on a steel cable half-way down the upper cliff. The cart lies overturned on its side. The steel cable runs from a machine house high up on the face of the cliff to a giant pulley apparatus anchored down below to a large shelf of bedrock on the lower cliff.

Atop the cliff and about a hundred yards back from the edge, a log cabin stands facing the ocean. The soil around the cabin has been too exposed to the wind to be very deep or very fertile, but it will grow things when it's coaxed. A strip of garden runs parallel to the north edge of the cabin, and each season can be expected to yield enough food for about three people.

Jason Braddock and his mother, Amy Braddock, live in the cabin and work the garden. Amy occasionally takes in sewing from a settlement just north of them. Jason is eleven and between his chores and his adventures, he manages to trap a rabbit or squirrel for their table at least once a week.

The father, John Braddock, has been dead for a little over three years. He was killed on the cliff in a mining accident, and the cliff has not been worked since.

CHAPTER ONE

Jason saw him out of the corner of his eye as he stooped down for another piece of kindling. The man was waist deep in the barranca at the edge of the trees just north of the cabin. He was on foot, and he seemed to be watching the cabin with interest. Jason saw him bend down and disappear for an instant, then reappear, wiping his mouth on the back of his arm. Then he grabbed a bundle from the bank and slung it on his back, and pulled himself out of the gully and started toward the cabin.

"Momma," Jason said softly. With his chin gripping the top of the load of kindling, he couldn't have said it much louder without strangling. "We got a visitor comin'. Get the gun."

He would have got the gun himself, but his mother thought him too young to shoot it. He figured the axe would at least make him seem dangerous, so he gripped it tightly to his chest. His mother came out of the door wiping her hands on the back of her dress.

"Jason. Put that right back on the stump where it belongs."

"But momma, he--"

"Axe is no way to greet visitors," she said firmly. "Now do as I say." She turned back to their 'visitor' and shaded her eyes from the sun to get a better look at him.

The stranger had made it to the edge of their pasture. They called it a pasture, but it was nothing more than a few clumps of rye grass and milkweed. They had nothing to graze in it but an old mule with a splotchy coat and bad teeth. The milk cow they'd had, had died two years ago. A part of the cliff gave way one night and took her with it. They'd not been able to replace her.

The man was close enough that Amy could pretty well make him out. He wore a black, full-frocked coat like the circuit riders wore. Most of the buttons in front had been replaced with bits of deer antler, tied on with twine. His pants were probably gray when they were clean, and fancy somehow, as if he'd bought them in the city. They were pin-striped and had pockets in the front.

The stranger was a big man, over six feet, and he filled out his clothes well. He was barefoot and bareheaded--and black as the dust that covered him would allow. He didn't have the flat, full features of the Negroes Amy was familiar with. He had a sharper nose, and the nostrils didn't flare quite so much. The cheekbones were sharp and the forehead was high and broad. But for that forehead, Amy thought, he might be part Indian. He could have some white in him somewhere, she wasn't sure.

The Negro climbed up and over the split-wood garden fence and the bundle he'd slung on his back swung around to his chest. The 'bundle' was a medium-size leather drawstring bag,

a pair of boots bent at the middle and a stick or cane of dark wood, all tied onto a length of rope. He shrugged the rope off his shoulder and slipped the stick from its place in the pack. With his boots and bag in his left hand and the stick in his right, he picked his way through the garden toward the two waiting by the cabin.

He used the stick like a walking cane, swinging it at each step with all the affected flair of a dandy. Without showing the slightest concern for the plants as he passed, he managed to make his way through, leaving each and every leaf undisturbed.

He stopped before Jason's mother, smiled, and wiped his brow on his sleeve with a flourish.

"Mrs. Braddock, I presume?"

"Why, yes," she said puzzled. "What can we do--"

"Yes, of course," he chuckled. "Who else could you be?" The stranger grinned and stared at her as if he were infinitely pleased with himself.

Jason moved a step closer to the axe he'd placed carefully on the stump.

Amy tried again. "How is it you know my name, stranger? And what business is it of yours?"

"You need some help," he said, in a flat tone of voice, quiet, sure.

"What's that?"

"People in town said you could use some help around

here, odd jobs, working the cliff."

"The cliff hasn't been worked since my husband died. They know that right enough in town. And they also know that I can do for myself just fine without any help."

It didn't faze him. He shrugged his shoulders and dropped his bundle at their feet as though he meant to stay.

"I come to help," he repeated, and that ended the argument.

He looked around, as if assessing the value of the place. His eyes took in the cabin; the small doorway and the one window with the rolled deerskin at the top. The skin was oiled and let through a small amount of light when it had to be rolled down on cold days and at night. Off to the side of the cabin, attached to the east wall, a lean-to had been built to hang caches of meat and drying candles in and to store wood for the winter. It had a rough-hewn, plank door that was set in front and simply latched on both sides. It had no hinges. In the back of the cabin, half-way out to the woods, a stone platform had been built. It looked like a squat chair with a chimney at the back. It was apparently some sort of combination grill and oven. There was no well. They got their water from the stream in the barranca.

"Look here. You're welcome to come and have supper with us, if you're hungry. It's almost ready. But then you'll have to go, I'm sorry." She walked toward the cabin door. "Follow me and I'll give you something to wash up with inside."

The stranger picked up his boots and the rest of his baggage and followed her to the cabin door. Before she reached it, she turned. "Jason," she said, "You go pick us some ripe tomatoes, about three, for salad--and don't squeeze them."

Jason had been standing off to one side, near the stump where he'd laid the axe and in one step he grabbed the axe up in his right hand.

"Jason!"

"Well? What about him? You're not gonna feed that nigger are you? In dad's house?!"

"Jason," his mother said quietly, "I don't believe I heard you right."

Her tone made him wince inside. "I just said that I don't think you should feed him, that's all." He put down the axe. "We don't owe him nothin'."

"Jason Braddock. You do as I say before I take a switch to you."

"Yes'm."

"Go on now. I'll want an apology when you get back."

She disappeared inside the cabin and Jason went over to the garden to hunt in the weeds and vines for the tomatoes. He couldn't understand why all of a sudden she was treating him like a kid. He was just trying to look after her like he should. Like dad.

He ripped up a handful of weeds and flung them at the cabin.

It wasn't easy, livin' out here and being the man of the house. Damn. He stepped on a tomato. Taking care of them both like he was--he picked up the ruined tomato and threw it into the field so she wouldn't see it--wasn't easy at all.

Inside the cabin it was close and smelled of damp earth and frying meat. A rectangular wooden table, made from planks like those that made up the front door, was set flush against the west wall to the right of the door. A bench ran along the front of the table and two wooden chairs with canvas bottoms were at each end.

The visitor was seated in the chair nearest the door. He'd just finished pulling on his boots. They were black and streaked with dirt, with creases above the ankles where they'd been folded over.

"Here's the tomatoes." Jason came in and handed them to his mother and turned to go outside.

"Jason?!"

He paused to look at her and she glanced meaningfully from him to the man in the chair.

Jason stalked over and stopped in front of the stranger. He stared him in the face long enough to say, "I'm sorry for what I said." Then he turned his back on them both and walked out the door. He knew his mother was watching--he hoped she was. He walked past the fence, slowly, through the pasture to his spot on the cliff.

Inside, the stranger was talking.

"Oh, let him be Mrs. Braddock. The boy has a right to his feelings, I wouldn't worry too much."

His voice was quiet, yet it filled the cabin.

"That's the second time you called me by name," Amy said.

"Yes." He nodded.

"But how--?"

"How indeed. Didn't your husband ever mention me?"

* * *

Jason sat on Garvey's cliff, straddling the large, exhumed root of an old cypress. Garvey had been the name of their cow. She'd been a good milker; docile and regular, willing to trade her milk for a few quiet words and some choice weeds from the garden. When she went over in the slide, Jason named the cliff in her honor.

The cliff, with the mine shut down and the men gone from its face, was silent. The large, gaping areas of dark earth were smoothing and fading, and rust and rot were consuming the remains of discarded iron and wood.

Jason was drawn to the cliff. It fascinated him. Even before his father'd died, the cliff had claimed his attention just as surely as if it could speak his name. It was no different now, really. He went and ignored the ruin there. He refused to see the decay and the waste. Rather, he saw the cliff as it had been, or maybe as it <u>might</u> have been. What he couldn't remember, his imagination

filled in for him. What he didn't want to remember, his imagination forgot. He created another whole world for himself, complete with ore carts and dynamite and sweating men and sometimes it was hard for him to keep his two worlds separate.

The cliff was more his, even, than it had been his father's, and he guarded it jealously from influences from the outside. Not even his mother knew where he was most of the time. She hated the cliff and would have forbidden him to go near it if she knew.

He looked below at the ocean. Today it was calm and lazy, the waves whispered up at him and slapped the rocks almost as an afterthought. Some days it was different. In the winter, when the storms at sea came close to the coast, the waves reached to the bottom of the second cliff. The lower cliff would be completely covered with swirling, brown-gray water that heaved and crashed and shook the land; and huge landfalls would break off and giant boulders would toss and roll around in the waves like marbles until they could find a safe, new place to lodge.

Sometimes, in the spring especially, the water would be flat as glass, and the sound of the waves would never reach the top of the cliff. In the mornings, with the onset of warmer air from the land, fog would lie on the water thick and snowy white as a cloud. Then the sun would rise and tinge the blanket with pink and orange lights.

In the afternoons he liked to peer straight out at the horizon. He had to shade his eyes just right to find where the sky and the water meet. At times he could make out the sliding, humped backs of a school of whales or see the silent splashes of hundreds of tiny smelt fleeing from some hunter in their midst. Or he watched for the ships.

The ships were almost always sailing north, to the harbor at San Francisco. The southern routes took them, especially the three masters, too far from the sight of land. The smaller ones, the one and two masters--scows his father called them--were the cargo ships that put in up and down the coast to take in passengers, livestock, and ore, mainly ore. They filled their holds with it.

Limestone was a commodity in much demand and abundance on the coast. Builders were using huge quantities of it in a new material they called cement. His dad had staked off their cliff when he found that it contained an almost pure strain of ore. Most of the ore around had a smattering of silica in it. That made it harder to kiln. The silica would break down in the fire and combine so with the lime that it could never be extracted. They had a good business here for awhile, he and his dad and some of the Mexicans from nearby. They worked long hours on the cliff, blasting, digging, hauling. Then the cargo ships would anchor close offshore until they filled their holds. Just loading it was an all day operation.

That all ended one day, about three years ago. They were blasting and hadn't cleared the area properly. His dad was working with the donkey engine they used to power the cable cart. He'd come around the machine house and was halfway down the cliff before he was noticed. Jason could still see him. He'd fixed the engine; he held up a broken belt and was yelling something to them. He must've realized then that something was wrong because he started to run. The dynamite blew right above him and the slide covered him in less than a minute.

It didn't take long for them to dig him out. But he was dead, probably from the concussion. He'd bled from his ears and his nose and dirt filled his mouth. He still had the piece of belt in his hand.

That's how Jason remembered his father; there, on the cliff, half-buried, with dirt in his eyes and his hair, bent and crooked like something that had never been alive, couldn't have been alive. That was the worst, because then he never really had a father, not the warm kind, the real and loving kind he could remember when he needed. The loving father Jason had had to make up. His imagination had to fill in the blanks almost completely, and, in defense, he linked his father and the cliff inseparably in his make-believe.

They'd been alone ever since, he and his mother. Neighbors and some of the Mexicans stopped by with food or sewing, but mostly they were alone. Visitors were scarce. The ladies in town had stopped coming around when they felt their consolations were no longer appreciated. People passing through either went by boat or took the north-south route further inland. No-one chose the broken terrain of the coast as a means of getting anywhere fast.

That nigger at the cabin, he thought, is the first stranger to come around in almost two months. Oh, good God!

Jason jumped up and lookedto the house. He'd forgotten he'd left them alone. He saw a wisp of smoke curl from the chimney and he ran toward it, cursing himself for a fool.

"Please God, please God, don't let me be too late. If he's hurt her, I'll kill him, I swear I will. I'll kill him."

* * *

"Your husband and I have known one another, well, we've been friends for many years. Did he ever talk about the engineers, the digger corps they called us, from his army days? We got the railroad through the Sierra mountains. Let's see, that must've been about--thirteen years ago?"

"Well, of course I knew John <u>had</u> been <u>in</u> the army; he used to talk about it when we first met. He'd just been discharged and those days were still very close to him. But that's been, like you say, thirteen years, or close to it."

"Then I don't suppose you remember him mentioning me? Prophet? Mase Prophet?"

"No, I'm sorry, I can't--I can't remember if he did or not, Mr. Prophet."

"Prophet, please Mrs. Braddock, just call me Prophet. I guess you're right, it has been a long time. I suppose--well, never mind. I'm sorry to have troubled you, busting in on you and your boy like this. I don't know what you must have thought."

Prophet pulled off his boots, picked up the bundle that was on the floor beside him, and stood up.

"Now, wait a minute, Prophet."

"Ma'am, I enjoyed the rest, and your company, and your food most of all. It was splendid. But I really must be going. I've imposed on you enough already, and I'm not one to be takin' handouts."

"Oh, Prophet, sit down. Don't be silly. If you're really that anxious to work, I'm sure we can find something for you to do. In the meantime, sit down. And put your boots on, for goodness sake, while I think of something for us for dinner."

Outside, Jason had just reached the porch. He came pounding up to the door hot and out of breath.

"Momma--you all right?" He clung to the sides of the door frame for support and his words were spaced between gasps.

"Jason. Honey, of course I'm all right. Why shouldn't I be? Come inside here, I want you to meet an old friend of your father's."

Jason walked in and stood just inside the door.

"Come here now, Jason. Jason Braddock, I'd like you to meet Mase Prophet. Prophet," she said, "This is my son, Jason."

"How do you do, Jason?" Prophet stuck out his right hand. "Call me Prophet, your dad called me that."

Jason stared at the hand for a second and then backed away.

"My dad never knew you," he said. "And he wasn't never your friend. Now you get out of here and leave us be. We don't need you here."

"Jason! That is just about enough."

"Dad never knew no nig--"

"Jason!" His mother walked over and grabbed him by the shoulders and whirled him around to face her. "Prophet is--listen to me!--Prophet is staying for dinner tonight. He may be staying with us longer. I won't have you behaving like this, embarrassing me and Prophet, and shaming your father--yes, your father--all because of some childish notions of yours. Do you understand?"

Jason nodded.

"Now, I thought you were growing up to be my little man. You were doing very well too. I see now that maybe I was wrong. Maybe you're not as grown up as I thought."

Jason's mother hadn't hit him, she rarely did. But she'd never been that mad at him before either. He felt his stomach knot and he wanted desperately to run away and hide, but she still had hold of him.

His throat swelled and he felt his eyes begin to sting. Damn! He wrenched away from his mother's grip and ran outside before they could see what was going to happen. He swept the axe up off of the stump on his way by, and headed for the woods.

He picked on a pine too far from the cabin. The mule wouldn't be able to drag it out through the trees, and it was too big for him besides. It was perfect.

Every time he sank the blade into the trunk, and the sap welled in the cut, he damned them, both of them. He cursed until he was too tired to swing anymore. Then he sat with his back to the tree and cried.

* * *

Prophet stayed with them two, three weeks, doing the jobs around the place that would've been too much for an eleven-year-old boy, though Jason kept his hand in as much as possible. He didn't like the idea of a stranger coming in and doing things only the man of the house should be doing. Still, it <u>was</u> a relief to be able to shrug off a little of that responsibility, a little of that weight.

They strung a wire fence around the pasture, being especially careful to run a stretch well back from the edge

of the cliff. They re-dug the post holes for the garden fence and shored the timbers up with new wood. They weeded the garden and re-chinked the cabin's north wall and laid in enough wood to last a month.

Prophet stayed in the storeroom, though it took a bit of cleaning up to make it livable. Prophet and Jason worked on it together. Jason got rid of most of the loose dirt and junk, and Prophet put hinges on and re-hung the door. He built a rail bed from some unused lumber piled at the back, and uncovered a family of gophers in the bargain. They'd apparently dug in under the back wall and were gradually extending their tunnels into the center of the shed.

"Looks to me like you got you a regular family there," Jason said, not sounding at all unhappy about the idea. "Bet there's a great-granddaddy down there and all of his kin too, diggin' away and havin' babies."

Indeed, the ground near the back wall of the shed was literally pock-marked with holes, and beside each one was a soft cone of freshly dug dirt. Every now and then, a brown nose would appear for an instant, then disappear. Sometimes only a backslide of the soft earth marked where they'd been watched.

"Hm." Prophet stroked his chin and looked worried. "I don't really think me and them are going to get along, do you? They probably do all their digging at night."

"If momma would gimme the gun, I could shoot 'em," Jason offered. "But she probably won't. We haven't got many shells left," he added quickly, in case Prophet thought there might be another reason. Jason shrugged his shoulders, acting as crushed as he could.

Now it was Prophet's turn.

Prophet walked over and reached above the doorway for the stick he'd had tied across his back on the first day. He'd set it up there on nails, much as one would a shotgun, the first night he'd moved in.

"No, I don't think shooting them is the answer. Probably more of them than bullets, even if you shot them two at a time," he said, winking at Jason. "We'll have to try something a little different."

"Well," Jason said, "I don't think you're gonna have much luck with <u>that</u> thing. They don't never show their heads long enough to get a whack at." Still, he didn't try to dissuade Prophet too much. He was going to enjoy watching him flail away with that stick. It ought to be a pretty good show.

Prophet gently rubbed the stick with a corner of his shirt. He polished and rubbed until the stick shown with a glow and a warmth that seemed to emanate from deep inside the wood. Jason thought to himself that if he touched it, it might be hot enough to burn his hand. Prophet hugged the stick to his chest, the very center of his chest, so that

the stick lay directly on top of his breastbone. He folded his arms over it, crisscrossed, like he was waiting for something, and he closed his eyes.

This was not at all what Jason was expecting, and he stood surprised and silent and watching. He watched and he listened too, for he realized now that he'd been hearing something, for how long he couldn't tell, something that began a long way off, like a windstorm, and was on him before he could really be sure when it had begun.

It was getting louder and he looked out the door, but the sky was blue and sunny and only a light breeze stirred the plants in the garden. It wasn't out there, it was inside, and, incredibly, it seemed to be coming from Prophet --and his stick!

Prophet stood rock still with his mouth half open; as far as Jason could tell, he wasn't breathing. The sound swirled around them, leaping at them from the walls and hanging in the corners, everywhere, all at once. It got louder and louder and Jason realized it didn't sound like wind at all, really, but more like wings, hundreds of wings, flapping at once, angry and excited and frantic like a covey of quail sounded the instant they flushed. But the instant never stopped. It got longer and longer until Jason was sure he must run...escape...he didn't know. He didn't want to think about it. He couldn't. The sound was swirling in his head now, spiralling down to the center of his chest,

and he was powerless to affect it, or try to affect it, in any way.

Prophet stood rooted to the ground like a tree. His eyes were closed and his mouth was still half open and he was shaking like he had fever. Jason watched him and wanted to tell him, to scream to him to stop it, please, when all of a sudden, the stick slipped from Prophet's arms and fell to the ground, and when it touched the dirt, the noise stopped.

Just like that. It didn't fade. It didn't hang on. It was as if it had never been, and Prophet was Prophet again, almost. He was smiling at Jason, but the smile was more than that. It seemed to say: I know what you're thinking, and it did happen. And I made it happen. And only you and I must know it.

Jason stood, unable to speak quite yet, and watched Prophet stoop and pick up the stick and place it on its spot above the door. Jason noticed that the stick had lost its warm, shiny glow. It looked dull again, and scuffed and old.

The shed seemed very empty now, and close, like a vacuum. Jason's world returned to him only in small bits and pieces. Sight was the first to come back, sight and the feeling of being here, now, existing. His other senses were slow to react; touch, smell, hearing. His mouth was so dry he had trouble swallowing. But in a short while

things were better and Jason was able to begin again, accepting and cataloguing and remembering what had happened.

Prophet stopped still a moment, watching Jason, thoughtful, sizing him up.

"Jason," he said, too loud.

"Jason, I want to show you something now and explain something that is very secret and very hard to understand. But before I do I must have your promise, as your father's son and as a man, that what I show you will remain between us--you and I--and no-one else, not even your mother, must know." He paused to let that sink in. "Deal?"

"Of course," Jason said, as manly as possible.

"Good. I thought as much. Okay, now this," Prophet reached up and took down the stick, "This is what's called a spirit stick. It's a Yaqui spirit stick and it was given to me by a Yaqui medicine man years ago, when I was younger and before I joined the army and I met your dad. Here, go on, you can hold it. It won't bite you."

Jason took it carefully into his hands, palm up.

"That's right. Look at it. Turn it over in your hands, feel it. See, it's just wood, nothing else."

"Well, what makes it so special?" Jason asked. "Looks like any old cane to me." And, in his hands, it was an old cane, very smooth, with a knobby end and so light it seemed hollow.

"Yes. It's hard to tell, I'll agree. Only the medicine

man could tell for sure. But, this stick, as the Yaquis say, has the spirit trapped inside it."

"Inside?!"

Prophet nodded. "The old man looked for many weeks for it. He fasted, he went without water. He walked through miles of desert living only on special roots and herbs. He was looking to see the spirit in whatever form it chose; a rock, a pool of water, a bird."

"It was in the stick."

"Yes. In that stick. In a mesquite bush. And so, when he saw it he cut the main trunk swiftly, before the spirit could escape out through the roots, and it was trapped."

"How'd <u>you</u> get it? The stick I mean?"

"I--that's another story, too long for us now. But I will tell you this much. I was raised by the Yaqui Indians, adopted, when I was very small. My parents died crossing the desert and a hunting party found me and brought me back to camp. The medicine man kept me." Prophet laughed, "He thought I was special, an omen or something. And so, he became--was--my father."

"Oh," Jason nodded. "Well, who <u>is</u> the spirit, Prophet? Is he the devil?" Jason asked, uneasily searching his memory for a tidbit of information he might have forgotten from one of those meetings his mother was always dragging him to.

"No, of course not," Prophet said. "The spirit's not the devil."

"Then he's God," Jason said, relieved.

"No, he's not God either. He's not the devil. He's not good. He's not bad. He's just power, like--like wind or like the strength in your arm. Power, that's all."

"And he lives in this stick?"

"Yes. Look, Jason, the spirit is in the stick. But he's in everything, everywhere, at different times. He has many different parts and they are all different places, yet they are all one." He could tell that none of it was sinking in, so he tried another approach. "It's like an apple," he said.

"An apple?" Prophet must think he was awfully stupid.

"Yes. An apple that you pick from the tree is still an apple isn't it? Even though you put it in your pocket and take it to town to sell it? Even though it's not on the tree anymore?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Now, if you squash the apple and make cider out of it, or cut it up and put it in a pie, it's still an apple?"

"No," Jason said, "It's not an apple. It's pie then, or cider."

"Well, where did it go then?" Prophet asked. "Where did the apple go when you squashed it for cider?"

"I don't know. Somewhere I guess." Jason was not enjoying himself.

"Right. It <u>did</u> go somewhere. It had to go somewhere.

It went where the spirit is. It became part of the spirit." Prophet saw the confusion on Jason's face. "I'm sorry, Jason. I told you it wouldn't be easy. It'll take time getting used to. I couldn't have understood it at your age either."

Jason didn't appreciate the reference to his age, nor the fact that he was as bewildered as Prophet had guessed.

"I know what the spirit is," he said defensively. "You don't have to tell me that. I just want to know how you work it, that's all. Can I do it?"

"Whoa," Prophet laughed, "Wait a minute, not so fast. It would take weeks to explain <u>that</u> to you, even if I could. Right now we're supposed to be working, remember? We'll take this up again later. For now though, remember, it's our secret, okay?"

Jason wasn't worried about that part. He couldn't explain it to himself, much less explain it to anyone else.

CHAPTER TWO

It was mid-August now--the dry, hot weeks of late summer had already started. Ranchers were watching their wells and creeks anxiously for any sign that they might be drying up. Gardens were beginning to shrivel, yielding only their last, sparse crops of beans and corn. The livestock in the area were hard put to find any grazing other than the more succulent, but less tasty, weeds.

Prophet had been with them five weeks. Together, he and Jason had pretty well taken care of all the outstanding work about the place. It was looking as good now as it ever had, better, in some respects, than when Jason's father had been alive. There toward the end, his father had put most of his energies into the cliff, leaving little for the general upkeep of their home.

Jason hadn't found out much more about the spirit stick other than that one time in Prophet's shed. Oh, he'd asked all right, often. But he got more of the same run-around that he couldn't understand, and so he quit asking. The gophers were gone, he knew that much for sure, and Prophet never used the stick again, as far as he could tell. He was almost able to convince himself that that time some weeks ago had all been his imagination.

"Jason."

"Yes'm," he called from outside.

"After you lay me in some more kindlin' for inside here, I guess you'll be done with your chores for today."

"All right, ma, maybe I'll see if I can't scare up something in the woods."

It'd been like this lately, long days and nothing to do. He and Prophet were so caught up it was embarrassing sometimes; he, trying to get done as quickly as possible so he could be off to the woods or the cliff, and Prophet, trying to come up with new chores, anything to make himself useful.

They all felt Prophet's time and usefulness drawing to a close, even Prophet, and each of them was too uncomfortable with the thought to think about it for very long.

Jason still would like to see him go, tomorrow, today even. But he didn't know how his mother would react to it. And besides, that incident with the stick kept nagging at the back of his mind.

Amy wasn't sure what she wanted. She liked Prophet, and he had been a help to them, and a friend of John's. But there really wasn't much left for the man to do, and it was demeaning to a man, she thought, to have to sieze on the smallest of jobs as if it were vitally important to him.

And Prophet? Well, of course, Prophet wanted to stay.

"That's all of it, ma," Jason said, dusting off his shirt front. "That's the last load of kindlin'."

He lifted the shotgun, a Stevens side-by-side, from its place on the wall. "I guess I'll go out and see if there's a squirrel or two feelin' reckless today."

He took three shells from the box in the cupboard and stuffed them in his front shirt pocket. He wouldn't have done that, been so casual about taking the gun, a month ago, his mother wouldn't have let him. But since he and Prophet had more or less taken on the responsibility of keeping the place up, he thought he'd grown more mature and able to handle himself and the gun. His mother must have thought so too. She never said anything.

"You be careful with that, Jason," his mother said. "Prophet wandered off a while ago and I don't know where he's at. So watch you don't mistake him for a deer in the bushes."

Good grief, he thought, she <u>still</u> thinks I'm a baby. He turned and strode through the door with the gun clamped across his chest.

"Good luck," she called after him, but she knew he wouldn't hear. He'd been in the woods the moment he stepped out the door.

It was a beautiful day. The jays glided between the trees and scolded him, each other, and the world in general. It was warm, even hot, here at the start of the trees. They were not so close together here as farther on and the sky shown easily above him, the sun heating the brown carpet of leaves and pine needles until the ground gave off that peculiar pine-earth scent that meant a warm day in the woods.

He thumbed the swing lever and broke open the gun. He pulled two shells from his pocket, and blew off any threads that might have stuck to them from his shirt. The two cylinders dropped home with two very satisfying thunks and he snapped the gun together. He felt elated now and excited with the loaded gun in his hands.

Under his bare feet, the ground was springy, prickly, and crackled softly with each step. He headed straight for his favorite squirrel spot, deeper in and near where the stream cut a swathe through the trees. The sound of the water would mask much of the noise he'd make, and the blue jays were not plentiful. It was impossible to hunt squirrels with jays nearby. Often as not, they'd screech warnings to every squirrel for a mile around, or chase and harass them so that he'd never get a shot.

He came to a place, his place, where a thick stand of pines clustered around a tall redwood like children around a parent.

The redwood had survived countless fires and electrical storms thanks to its thick, fibrous bark. But the scars left behind were awesome. The side facing away from the sun was charred coal-black, and the bark had split and pulled away to reveal the darkened heartwood underneath. At the top, huge branches were splintered and broken off near the trunk where lightening had struck. They too were blackened and burnt. But the tree was still alive. Its

massive, shallow root system still brought water and nutrients to the living wood and high above the other trees, its limbs sported fresh green.

Jason picked his usual spot under the redwood where two giant roots rose on either side of him and the soft bark seemed to mold to his back. It was a comfortable, living chair, and he settled in easily to wait for the squirrels to show themselves. It would probably be a while yet, until they either forgot the noise he made settling in or their curiosity got the better of them. Whichever way, he hoped it wouldn't be too long.

* * *

Jason snapped awake and grabbed for his gun before he realized he'd even been asleep. He wondered what it was that had awakened him. He hadn't long to wait. There was a soft scrabbling above him and a piece of bark hit him square on top of the head. He kept as still as he could, breathing as little as possible. The squirrel or squirrels above him were playing, probably tag or chase or something. He figured he'd wait them out, hoping one or both of them would leap to some other tree where he'd have a chance for a shot. If he moved now, they'd hole up and he'd have to wait all over again.

Sure enough, the noise above him stopped and he saw the branches of a pine tree off to the right sag and jump with the weight of two squirrels as they leaped from his tree.

They chased over the limbs and spiralled down the trunk, never more than six inches apart. Then, along the ground, they hopped like rabbits, twigs and pine needles sprayed from under their feet as they scrambled to another tree.

Jason had to sit patiently and watch, moving the shotgun slowly toward his shoulder whenever he thought it safe. He'd never hit them on the run, with the branches as thick as they were. He had to wait for them to tire out, or at least stick to one tree.

His chance came sooner than he thought it would. The squirrel in the lead had turned around and decided he didn't want to be chased, and the other one refused to switch roles. The two of them were out on a limb chattering and scolding and twitching their tails.

The squirrel nearest the trunk turned and darted on up the tree and disappeared. The one left on the limb was silent now and unmoving. His dark gray color made him practically invisible, and Jason kept his eye on him lest he lose sight of him there.

He was able to shoulder the Stevens without spooking his quarry and he brought it around slowly to bear. It was like sighting down a long, black shiny road. He centered the squirrel's head and as much of the body as he could see and gently squeezed the double trigger.

Nothing.

Not even a click.

Damn! He'd forgotten to cock the stupid thing!

Gently he eased his grip fron around the triggers and slid his thumb up and over the curved tangs of the hammers. He pulled. They were much too stiff for him to cock together, so he had to settle for one. He pulled in on the trigger at the same time to reduce the click and cocked the right barrel. He eased his hand back around the grip and sighted for his squirrel.

Oh, no! He stared until his eyes ached, trying to piece a squirrel out of the brown and gray shadows, but without any luck. He'd lost him.

Then a movement farther along the branch caught his eye and he found him again. The squirrel'd moved, not far, and given him a much better shot. He'd crawled around the front of the limb and exposed his whole body.

Jason centered the right-hand barrel on him and let go.

The twelve gauge slammed back against his cheekbone and his shoulder and brought tears to his eyes it hurt so much. His ears were ringing from the blast and the black-powder smoke stung his nostrils.

The shot spread in its characteristic pattern and splattered the limb all around the squirrel. Jason thought he'd seen the wad head straight for him. It was a good shot.

The squirrel relaxed his grip and slipped from the branch and landed with a quiet thud on the soft earth below. Jason ran and caught the squirrel up by its tail and it hung,

trembling in his hand. Its tiny, clawed feet curled inward, and then it was still.

He didn't like this part of it. His dad had told him once not to worry, that the squirrel was dead and couldn't feel anything. That it was just nerves. But still--those tiny, curled up feet and that bushy tail. If only he hadn't watched it for so long.

He shook off his feelings and picked up his gun and headed for the stream.

Once down to the water he laid both the gun and the squirrel on the rocks and fished in his overall pockets and brought out a large folding knife and a cloth sack.

He pulled out the longest blade with his teeth and tested it on his arm. It felt sharp enough, but then it always did. The knife was his pride and he sharpened it whenever there was the barest hint of its becoming dull.

Jason took the squirrel and his knife to the water's edge. He slipped the blade in and around the skin at the neck and then twisted the head off. It came away with a wet crack. He threw the head into the water and slit the small carcass on the underside from the bottom to the top. He scooped the entrails out with his finger and flicked them away, and washed the blood off what was left.

The water felt good, icy cold and clear and running. It was hot work, squatting in the sun. He wiped his forehead on his arm and wished that he had gone down to the beach today instead.

He pulled the skin back, scraping with his knife as he went. It took time, like peeling a tough piece of pink fruit. The skin had pulled back to the tail and over the legs like an inside-out nightshirt. He sawed with his knife until it came free and he tossed it into the water and watched it carried away, swirling, the tail sticky now and flat on the water's surface.

He washed the slick little carcass in the stream and placed it carefully in the cloth bag. It was small, no larger than a large pine cone. He rolled and stuffed the bag into his pocket, then he cleaned his knife on his pants and folded it and placed it in his other pocket.

He still had some time so he stepped into the water to cool his feet. Then he picked up his shotgun and struck off downstream. He meant to follow the water, on the bank and hopping from rocks when he had to, down through the barranca to the spot on the cliff where the water dribbled over in a trickling falls, to the ocean below. It was a good walk; he'd walked it many times before and really, it was only a little longer going home this way.

When he came to the end of his walk he was wet from the waist down and thoroughly tired. His cheek and his shoulder ached where the gun had recoiled and his butt hurt.

The heavy old gun was a burden he'd regretted half-way down the stream. He'd leaped for a rock and the gun overbalanced him so that he slipped and sat down hard in a

tiny pool. The gun was high and dry and not a scratch on it. His behind felt like he'd been spanked with a boulder.

He stared down the cliff at the falls and would have been happy to enjoy the quiet beauty of it all as he always did, but a movement below, and recognition, halted any such thoughts.

It was Prophet below, on the lower shelf, picking his way along the cliff face. He wasn't going very fast, indeed, he seemed to be taking his time. Every now and then, he'd stop to examine a handful of soil, or some plant he'd discovered, or the view. Then he'd be off again. Once, he looked above him, and without knowing exactly why, Jason ducked back out of sight.

Prophet would be on his cliff in a while, Jason thought, where the mine was and where nobody had been in over three years. He wasn't about to share it with anyone, especially Prophet.

Jason ran back upstream, splashing in the mud and the water, and pulled himself out of the barranca close to where Prophet had emerged on that first day. He picked his gun up from the bank and headed at a dead run for the cabin.

"My goodness," his mother said when he burst through the door, "Indians on your trail?"

"Got somethin' I gotta do momma. Here's a squirrel," Jason almost threw it at her. He placed the gun on its pegs and was out the door before she could think of anything

to do but smile. "I cleaned it for ya," he yelled from the pasture, still running.

Got to get there before he does, he thought. Can't leave him there alone. He's got no business there.

He came to a niche at the top of the cliff, out of sight of the cabin, where a small fissure, just large enough for him, cut into the side of the cliff. He let himself over and down. He'd done it a hundred times before when he knew his mother wouldn't be looking for him. She never came near the cliff anymore anyway.

He jammed his heels into the rocky, craggy ground and scooted along on his backside. He winced now and again, reminded of his dunking in the stream. The fissure was a bit left of the original mine site, so when he made the lower shelf, he had to come back over a few yards.

It was low tide, so he had no trouble making his way along the bottom of the cliff.

Prophet hadn't had much trouble either. He arrived at the foot of the mine the same time that Jason did.

"What're you doing here?" Jason asked. "You got no business here. This is private."

"Sorry, Jason. I didn't realize, I mean, there were no signs posted and it looked safe enough. I thought I'd take a look and see what sort of operation your dad had going."

Prophet shouldered past Jason and made his way over to the downside cable apparatus.

"Hm, very nice work."

The downside pulley was the end of the line for the cartloads of ore that had been dug out higher up. The cart traveled on a cable to the bottom and was unloaded onto barges or huge, shallow-draft skiffs.

The apparatus itself Jason's father had constructed. It was pretty simple. He made a triangular structure from iron girders and bolted them to the bedrock. Then he slung a pulley from the top and that was it.

Prophet scraped at the iron with his thumbnail and a huge flake of rust came off.

"Hm," he said. He picked up a rock and banged it against one of the girders. It gave a loud clang and rained a shower of more rust.

A thick, woven steel cable hung slack from the pulley and Prophet followed it up the cliff with his eyes.

It appeared to be intact, though he couldn't tell for sure. It was covered over with dirt in a few places.

"Ah, ha!" Prophet said and scrambled up the slope. Jason followed.

"This is <u>the</u> ore cart? Did you only have one of them?"

Jason didn't answer. He stared at the cart and saw it, not over-turned and rusted and half buried; he saw it dusty black and creaking down on its cable to the waiting men below. He saw how their hands reached out to steady it at the bottom and their sweating backs as they unloaded it onto

the waiting barge. He could hear the voices of the men, cursing, and his father's voice above them all, shouting encouragement and directions, and the donkey engine chugging in the little shack and belching clouds of white smoke.

"Jason."

He could smell the cordite fumes of the dynamite blast and the rich, damp smell of new-turned earth.

"Jason!"

"Huh?" He looked up puzzled.

"I said, is this the only ore cart you had?"

"Oh, yeah. Dad was gonna rig another, but--"

"Yes?"

"He never got around to it, I guess."

"Uh huh, well, is that the engine house?" Prophet pointed to a collapsed pile of weathered boards.

"Yeah. The engine's still there, under the wood. Nobody had any use for it after we closed down."

Prophet and Jason climbed up to the collapsed shack and began prying up the loose boards. The rusted nails twisted and broke with little trouble. The boards themselves were in pretty sad shape; rotted through, grayed and pitted from the weather and the wood mites.

After a strenuous few minutes, they'd managed to uncover nearly the whole thing. They threw the wood in a pile to one side and Prophet was on his hands and knees, peering and probing into the machinery. There was a boiler the size of Jason, rusted a little but apparently seam tight.

The furnace would need some work here and there, cleaning mostly, and the pressure lines from the boiler to the engine would have to be replaced.

The engine itself was a single, horizontal piston arrangement with a drive shaft coupled off-center to a large pulley wheel. The cable was supposed to run around the wheel and be driven along by friction, much the same way that a locomotive drags itself along the track. Only in this case, it was the track that moved, not the engine.

"Hm." Prophet sat back on his heels a minute and wiped his hands off on his pants. "Got enough grease in there," he said to himself, "Kept a lot of exposed parts from rusting up too bad. Course, she'd still take a lot of work to refit."

Jason let him talk. He was somewhere else altogether, or rather, 'sometime' else...

"What's your dad doin', son?"

"I don't know, Mr. Preston. I think he went for more coal for the furnace. We're gettin' kinda low up there and dad's wantin' to get down a couple more loads today."

"Okay. Just wanted to make sure. Luis!"

"What you want now Preston?"

"We need them charges set. How many you got left?"

"I have only this one and they will all three be ready to blow."

"Well, hurry it up. We got us a couple more loads to bring down today."

"Si, I am trying my best with this stuff. It does not pay to hurry."

"Jason. Jason!" Prophet was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Wh--what?"

"I said we better be getting on back. Your ma ought to have dinner ready pretty soon."

"Oh, yeah, sure, let's go." Jason thought it strange that Prophet had black grease smeared on his pants and shirt, but he thought little else about it as they scrambled up his fissure to the top of the cliff.

"There's an easier way up Prophet, a little farther to the right, if you don't want to try this here," Jason said. He was ahead of Prophet and disliked the thought of Prophet's climbing to the top in <u>his</u> fissure.

"No, that's okay. I think I can make it," Prophet grunted as he reached for another handhold.

Jason crawled up the cliff as fast as he could, careful to let slide a good portion of sand and small rocks. He stood at the top and watched Prophet scale the last few yards, one eye clamped shut and spitting gobs of dirt.

"Whew. That's some climb." Spit. "We're gonna have to see if we can't improve on that a little." Spit.

* * *

That night at supper, Prophet broached the subject they'd been avoiding for days now.

"Mrs. Braddock," he began, "It seems things're getting pretty well caught up around here. The cabin and the fencing are as good as new--pass the potatoes Jason, thanks--and with the garden down the way it is, there's hardly work left fit for a man. Why, Jason here can take care of most all that you'll need, including hauling in the heavy timbers from the woods. He's got the mule to help him with that."

Prophet added meat and vegetables to his plate before going on. Jason and his mother remained silent.

"Now, I've never been one to accept charity. I work for what's mine, always have. I couldn't live any other way."

"Prophet, you know we've been awfully lucky to have you with us these past few weeks," Amy said. "Some of it we just couldn't have done alone, and, I know the pay was quite a bit less than a man might expect--"

"Now hold on ma'am, Mrs. Braddock. Bein' with you and Jason, John's family, why, I wouldn't have had it any other way. Fact is, I still feel beholdin' to you the way you took me in and all, a perfect stranger."

"Oh, no Prophet, you don't have to--"

"No, let me finish. That's why I want to try it. It'll take some work, I know, and time. But we got nothin' but that, and I'd be willin' if you were."

"What? I'm afraid I don't quite follow you," Amy said.

"Why, the mine of course. I'm talkin' about the mine. It'll take some work like I said, but I checked the grade out there and it'd be well worth the--"

"No! Absolutely not! It's crazy Prophet. The mine hasn't been worked in three years."

"Yes ma'am, but--"

"No 'buts'. That cliff has claimed one life already Prophet, my husband's. It's a dirty, tiresome, dangerous business and I'll not have it started up again. Besides, it'd cost money to do what you're talking about and we're just a little short of that right now."

Prophet shut up and pushed the food around on his plate for awhile. Jason had stopped eating completely and was waiting for a chance to butt in.

"Momma, we could do it. I know we could. You know dad would want it that way."

"Don't bring your father into this Jason."

"Well, why not? It was his cliff. He worked hard on it."

"Yes, Jason, I know. It was his. It was all he cared about after awhile. He did work hard on it. And then he died on it," she spoke softly. "One man was enough. Too much. I'll not risk another."

"Mrs. Braddock--"

"I'm sorry Prophet," she said briskly, "I appreciate what you think you were trying to do. It just won't work out. I'll pack you a hamper tomorrow, to feed you on the road. It won't be as much as I'd like, but--"

"Mrs. Braddock, please. You don't have to do that."

"I know that. I want to. You've been a great help to me and my family," she looked to Jason, "I just wish we could have been as good to you. Goodnight Prophet. We'll all be up tomorrow in time to see you off. Jason, if you would, please help me clear off the dishes."

She made no more mention of the topic that night. Prophet went off to sleep; Jason sat on his bed and sharpened his knife on a stone. Amy sat at the table, staring into the lantern flame.

"Ma, I'm going out for a little bit. I wanna check on something."

She never turned around. "Don't be very long Jason. Nights are getting cooler lately."

She sat there alone, mesmerized by the bright, kerosene light. She saw them all, like they had been that day....

The file of quiet men, their hats in hand and too embarrassed to speak. The few at the back with their awkward, covered burden. It was Preston, the black man, who spoke first.

"Miz Braddock," he'd said. "Gawd Miz Braddock, we're sorry--" He had tears in his eyes, she remembered that.

That big, burly black man. He mumbled something about dynamite and a slide. She paid no attention.

She'd not believed him then, refused to comprehend what the man was trying to tell her. Two men, she didn't recognize them, strangers, they brought the covered body to her and laid it at her feet. The canvas parted just enough. She saw John's red plaid shirt, wrinkled and covered with ugly, yellow dust.

"Get out of here," she screamed. "Get out! Leave us alone. John, oh my God John, what did they do." She sobbed and collapsed on top of the body, to hug it to her breast and draw comfort from it, John, her husband. But it was cold and stiff and there was nothing for her, not even a good-bye.

The men left, confused in the face of her grief. They didn't know what to do, so they sent their wives.

The wives came by, one a day for two weeks, with food and clothes. They comforted her and washed for her. They were all so pitying and thankful that it hadn't been <u>their</u> man that died. She couldn't stand the sight of them and their solemn faces any longer. She railed at them when they came, and insulted them, until finally word got around and they stopped coming....

Outside, Jason stood in the garden, listening. The ocean crashed, muffled in the night. The moon touched everything with silver and the shadows were black enough to

get lost in. It was cool and Jason stuck his hands in his pockets. He walked off to think of a way to get his mother to change her mind. As set as she was, it was going to take a miracle to get her to change it, and he was fresh out of--wait a minute!

He snapped his fingers.

Prophet was pretty good with miracles, he thought. Why not see what Prophet has to say.

He hurried over to Prophet's door, careful not to make any noise, and listened to see if Prophet might still be awake.

"Come in, Jason." The voice startled him, he'd been listening so hard. "Come in. It's not bolted, I was expecting you."

Jason opened the door and saw Prophet on his knees in the center of the floor. He was stripped to the waist and the spirit stick was laid out on the floor in front of him. His dark body glistened in the light fron one candle placed in the dirt beside him.

Jason stepped inside and shut the door and the candle flame wavered and sent grotesque, monstrous shadows leaping on the walls around them. His memory of all that had happened before in this room came rushing back at him. "I think I better go, I--"

"Come and sit beside me, Jason."

"I just thought we ought to talk--"

"Yes. About the mine. I know."

"Yeah, um," he licked his lips, "We've got to get ma to change her mind or else she'll never let us near the place. That's all I wanted to say, I--"

"Why is it so important to you? You know your mother's right. It is dangerous and hard work. Maybe we should leave well enough alone. Keep it closed."

"No," Jason said quickly. "We can't. We have to try. We have to, for dad."

"Yes, I think we owe him that at least. Sit down here."

"I don't know, I--"

"Come on, you want to help don't you? Then sit."

Prophet reached on the ground beside them and picked up a leather bag, the one he'd had when Jason first saw him. He pulled apart the drawstrings and reached in and drew out some kernels of dried corn and a handful of what looked like brown grass. He placed the grass in a pile before him, arranging it carefully so that its shape was roughly that of a mountain--wide at the bottom, narrow at the top.

He bent over, placed his hands on both ends of the stick and remained that way, mumbling in a low sing-song and swaying up and back on his knees. Jason sat and watched too scared--too curious, to move.

The spirit stick seemed to glow, from within, like before. In the relative dark, Jason could distinguish every ridge, every shading of the wood grain.

Prophet leaned back and picked up the kernels of corn, three of them, and held them in his hands, between his palms, as if he were praying. He rubbed his palms together slowly and then opened his hands and took each kernel and set it in a hollow place on the stick. Jason hadn't noticed before, but indeed, there were three indentations spaced evenly along the length of the stick.

When that was done, Prophet took up the candle and lit the pile of grass on fire.

It seemed to Jason that the little shed filled immediately with thick, white smoke. It was too thick. He began choking and he couldn't seem to get his breath, and through it all he heard Prophet's voice raised in that wailing sing-song that Prophet'd used earlier.

The voice filled the room, thicker than the smoke, it went around and around. It seemed Prophet must be racing around the room, howling, but Jason knew he hadn't moved from beside him.

Louder and louder it got. Jason's eyes were watering and he couldn't breathe and he felt soon he would either faint or die of suffocation. Then suddenly, the door slammed open.

The singing and the smoke were gone in an instant, fled it seemed, through the door. Indeed, Jason thought he heard the thing outside, wailing itself away into the night.

The cold, night air sucked in on them and Jason heaved a deep, grateful breath, filling his lungs with the sweet coolness.