

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Winter*

Article 26

1971

Bound Away

Nicholas Constant

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Constant, Nicholas. "Bound Away." *The Iowa Review* 2.1 (1971): 28-42. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1164>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Bound Away

Nicholas Constant

Albert tied the hitch rein around the post and stepped up onto the board walk in front of Beemer's store. At the door his nose pricked up to the mingled odor of coffee and spices, paraffin and sawdust; on his arms and around his open collar he felt the coolness of the long high-ceilinged place. At the back of the store Mr. Beemer's white-topped head bobbed like a hen pecking corn. The old man was picking up eggs from a galvanized bucket, three in each hand, and transferring them to a rope-handled crate which had a wooden divider down the middle and held fifteen dozen on each side.

"Be with you in a minute," the old man said without looking up. He reached toward the bucket again and came up with two more handfuls. They completed the row and he looked up through his square rimless spectacles.

"Hello Albert. What're you doin' in town? Anything wrong?"

"Busted out a couple of spokes on the farm wagon. Uncle Frederick figures to start haying tomorrow so he sent me in to get it fixed." He fished in his shirt pocket, took out a piece of paper. "Long as I'm in town he wants me to get this stuff too—so he can work us a full day Saturday."

Mr. Beemer took the list, glanced at it, looked back up at Albert.

"Does seem a little early to start with the hay, don't it?"

"Not for him."

Albert felt the storekeeper looking at him, and realized that his face must be tightening into a snarl of anger at the thought of his uncle.

Mr. Beemer looked back down at the list, mumbled a couple of items, moved out from behind the counter to start gathering them up. Albert went outside and slid the wheel out of the bed of the small spring wagon and rolled it down to the wagon maker's. Old Man Ferguson hobbled up on his stump below the knee, grumbled over the wheel a few seconds, said he would have it by afternoon.

Albert went back toward Beemer's. He was a block away when a buggy pulled up behind his wagon and a tall man got down. Albert went on up the sidewalk and followed him into the store.

The man was already at the counter. He was a reedy fellow with an auburn mustache, wearing a dark suit. Beside his foot, in front of the counter, sat his dark leather sample bag. Albert walked toward him. When he got close to the man he realized how very tall he was, one of the few men he'd ever seen to whom he had to look up to meet his eyes.

"Morning," the man said. He offered his hand. "George Geer."

Albert shook hands, found Mr. Geer's grip bony but firm.

"Albert Wessel," he said.

"Pleased to meet you Albert." The salesman pulled a card from his vest pocket and handed it to him. Albert looked at the card:

George Geer
Fashoda Paints
St. Louis, Mo.

Mr. Beemer came up the aisle, carrying a sack of beans. He set it down on the counter.

"Be with you in a few minutes, Mr. Geer."

"No hurry."

Mr. Beemer looked at the list. "Pound of crackers," he mumbled, "Ten pounds of sugar," and started toward the stairway in the back of the store.

Albert looked at the card in his hand. Nobody had ever given him such a thing before and he did not know what to do with it. He offered it back to Mr. Geer.

"Huh?" the salesman grunted.

"Don't you want it back?"

"Why no boy. It's for you to keep."

Albert thought a moment. "What for?"

Mr. Geer smiled, shrugged.

"Suppose you're over in St. Louis sometime and wanta look me up."

"I'm not likely to be in St. Louis—it's a big thing for my uncle to let me come in town."

Mr. Geer cocked an eye at him.

"Stay pretty close to home, do they, your people?"

"Yeah," Albert said glumly. "Pretty close." Then, in a brighter tone, he said: "Gonna be a great show over there, isn't it?"

"What's that? Oh, you mean the fair. Yeah. Quite a town St. Louis."

The travelling man leaned his bony rump against the counter.

"I was raised on a farm," he said. "Nowadays though, people move around. With the railroad, you can be in St. Louis in a day."

"Thirty-four hours," Albert corrected, "if you make your connections."

"Thought you said you stayed close to home?"

"I do." Albert's face reddened. "I used to collect railroad timetables. When I was a kid."

Mr. Beemer came down the stairs carrying the sacks of flour and sugar. He came up the aisle, went behind the counter. On the floor were two pasteboard boxes; one already full of provisions, the other nearly half full; the two sacks filled it another quarter of the way.

"Coupla' more trips oughta get it Albert. I grind your coffee now."

Albert picked up the full box and carried it out to the wagon. When he came back the second box was full too and Mr. Beemer was in conversation with the travelling man. The old storekeeper interrupted the discussion to remind Albert about the flour.

"You know where it is Albert. Too heavy for me to tote any more."

Albert picked up the box of groceries and went toward the door.

"Look me up if you ever get over St. Louis way," the salesman called after him.

Albert made no reply, fearing that the salesman was making fun of him. He went on out to the wagon and put the groceries in. Then he went back for the flour. From the back of the store he heard Geer's voice, "Make you up an order, come out with it and help set up." Albert bent from the knees and picked up two of the fifty-pound bags, hoisted them to his shoulder. Outside the door he almost walked right over Mary Jane.

She didn't seem at all frightened. "Hello Albert," she said as calmly as if they were at her own front door. "I was at Betsy's, they said they'd seen you drive by." She moved her head while she talked and the ends of her long chestnut hair danced lightly across the bodice of her yellow dress. "I hoped you'd be here."

Albert felt the flour sacks slipping and shrugged them back up.

"Well, aren't you even going to say hello?"

"Sure. Hello."

"Albert Wessel, you're a big silly. It's been a whole month. I had a date, that's all, I had another date; he asked me before you did." Her small mouth contracted from cajolery to coquettish firmness. "It's not as though we were engaged," she said levelly.

Her long upper lip gave her such a mock seriousness that he could not keep from laughing.

"Albert Wessel!"

He laughed again. "Excuse me a minute Mary Jane. I can't talk very well with these things." He went down to the wagon and flipped the sacks in. Mary Jane came down the steps behind him.

"Albert," she said tentatively. "I'm having a party tonight." Her hazel eyes, downcast, flashed up at him. "And I don't have a date. Would you come?"

Albert smiled. If she was doing the making up, he could come part of the way. "Sure. I'd like to." Then his smile disappeared. "I was thinking this was Saturday, coming in town. Uncle Frederick figures to get the hay up tomorrow."

"It's only a little party. It won't be late."

"Listen, I'm not one of your town boys, doesn't come to work till eight o'clock."

He felt awkward at her silence. "I appreciate your asking me," he offered. She was still silent and, fishing for something else to say, he asked if he could give her a ride home. She nodded and went toward the front of the wagon. He gave her a hand up and when her hand grasped his she looked back at him with surprised eyes, then at their momentarily joined hands.

Albert walked around in front of "Headlight," stopped and stroked the white forehead of the old sorrel buggy horse, glanced at Geer's rig. Travelling men. Some of the younger ones would be at Mary Jane's tonight. Albert made as though he was inspecting Headlight's harness, ran his finger along the throat latch, and looked up at Mary Jane, wondering who she had had the date with.

The young travelling men came to the house to see her two older sisters, but she was old enough now for them to be interested in her, too—and old enough to want them to be interested. He took another glance at the pretty little flirt, patted Headlight again, went around and got up beside her.

After they'd gone a block in silence he asked casually, "What was the matter back there?"

"Back where?"

"Back there. When I helped you up."

"Oh. Nothing." But she reddened slightly and Albert thought, I can make her do that. They came to her street, turned up it, and he kept after her.

"What do you mean by nothing?"

"I . . . I'd forgotten how hard your hands are."

"Sorry," he snapped, "I'm just a farmhand."

"Oh Albert, you can be so stupid."

"You're right. Not just a farmhand, a dumb farmhand."

"I don't know why you talk that way. In school you were as smart as anybody. But sometimes you can act like such a big ox."

"I am a big ox. I'm a big dumb ox."

"See, there you go. You know you're not dumb."

"O.K. I'm a big smart ox."

Her laugh was pretty and Albert was suddenly very conscious that she was sitting close to him; her hair smelled clean and he wished they were just starting out on a long ride to somewhere. But her house was only down the street, and even though he drove slower, it kept coming, until finally the white picket fence was beside the right front wheel.

"When are you going back?"

"After lunch," he said.

"Won't you come in and have lunch here?"

Albert looked up at the white house with its many gables and corners. Somehow he did not feel like going up any shaded front walks. He went around and helped her down.

"Will you come in for lunch?" she asked again.

"I brought something with me."

She looked at him with her long upper lip stretched down. It fluttered as it usually did when she was deciding whether to put on anger, but relaxed again.

"All right," she said calmly. "I'll hope to see you tonight."

"If I can." He got back into the wagon and looked down at her. She was all in yellow except two circles of white lace, at her collar and her little waist. "Thanks for asking me," he said. Then, hardly thinking, he added, "I'll make it."

Two hours later, his lunch eaten and the wheel in back, he was driving out of town. Once he'd cleared the city limits he let Headlight have his head. For a while he watched the road go past. Crossing the low hills, it presented a succession of almost identical views, a stretch of road going downhill to a weathered plank bridge, a stretch going uphill on the other side, and over the crest another stretch of road exactly the same. Headlight knew the way, and the only thing to distract Albert from his thoughts, and to remind him that they were one

stretch nearer home, was the harsher vibration of hooves and wheels when they crossed one of the bridges.

It was only six miles, but the distance it put between him and Mary Jane was multiplied by the number of days between the now infrequent opportunities he got to see her. It had been different before graduation. Then they had seen each other every day at school. The school had been the continual butt of his uncle's jibes at his mother. "You gonna keep him in school his life long?" His own two sons had quit as soon as they were old enough. His mother's answer was always to remind his uncle of the work Albert did before and after school, and on Saturdays; and she would end by saying: "I want him to graduate."

"Graduate. Ha. You Manstein's with your books. But it's us Wessel's put the food on the table."

Well, he had graduated, all right. Now, since May, it was only Saturdays he was in town, and that apparently was sometimes not long enough notice for little Miss Flibbertigibbet. He wondered again who it might have been, decided to forget it; as she had reminded him, they were not engaged.

He looked up at the hot cloudless sky. It would be that way for days, he was sure. Why was Uncle Frederick in such a hurry to get the hay put up? They could wait another two weeks, at least. Even the beginning of August would not be too late.

Vibrations rattled up through the seat again to mark the crossing of another bridge. Albert looked down at the trickle of a stream. If you did not know the road, he thought with a smile, you might think you were crossing the same bridge over and over. Well, the next bridge he had to get across was this party tonight, and he ought to go, he began convincing himself, even though it always made him uncomfortable to be at Mary Jane's with the young travelling men who had nothing better to talk about than the last time they were in Chicago. Some of them were no more than two or three years older than he was. But when the judge spoke to them it was always "Good Evening, Mr. So-and-so," while to him it was merely "Hello Albert."

Still, he ought at least to meet her halfway; she had made a point of doing the making up, and that would be something all his own, something none of the soft hands would be able to talk about. But then, in making conversation, it was not anything that he would be able to use either.

What to talk about: that was a hard thing about going to Mary Jane's. The conversation at dinner was about what was going on at the statehouse in Topeka, or about what new buildings were going up in St. Louis, and if you had never been more than a few miles from home, what could you do when they talked like that, except act like a dumb ox.

What to talk about at the party—he could cross that bridge when he came to it. What he ought to be thinking about now was how to get past Uncle Frederick.

But Uncle Frederick was not up at the house when he got there. He had left word with Aunt Gretchen, to get the wagon ready, so Albert went to work, mounting the wheel and putting up the sideboards. Now and then he glanced up to try to spot his uncle coming up from the field, to get a chance to speak

to him alone. But when he did come up, Jacob and Harold were with him. Albert trailed them toward the back door. When the two sons had gone up the steps, he caught their father's elbow, and fighting down the revulsion it caused him to touch the huge tub of a man, asked his uncle if he could speak to him. He must have put it badly, because hardly had the fat man understood what was being asked when his thick eyebrows knitted and he grunted refusal.

Albert went in and sat down at his place at the big table. His stomach was full with disappointment and he hardly touched his food. But during dessert he brightened a little, because Uncle Frederick seemed to be getting into one of his rare good moods. He had already finished two steins of beer and was working on his third, and Albert put the question again, adding that Mary Jane had made a special trip downtown just to invite him. But the calm cheerful mood that had been developing broke like the stillness of a pond across which he had skipped a stone. The rest of them looked toward Uncle Frederick to get the tone with which they should react. Albert looked around the table, seeking a sign of support in some one of them. But his two older cousins and his three little-girl nieces merely looked back and forth between him and his uncle with unconcerned attention. His mother's face wore its usual apologetic smile. And Aunt Gretchen, as always, was firmly on the side of Uncle Frederick, who sat at the head of the table, grim and massive, hoisting the stein to his mouth, his short thick forearm level with his eyes. He finished draining it, set it down with a bang and shouted at Albert.

"Once already I told you no and I tell you again. When you feed yourself you can be dancing every night. While I feed you it's workday Saturday and no dancing half the night before."

"Uncle Fred," he pleaded, "I already told Mary Jane I'd be there."

"No dancing half the Gott damn night," his uncle roared again.

Aunt Gretchen motioned for the girls to start clearing the table. The three of them got up, scraping their chairs.

"It won't be all night," Albert objected futilely. "I'll put in a full day tomorrow."

Uncle Frederick turned to his wife. "What's happening to the young men now?" he asked rhetorically. "Got no respect, no sense of duty. To go to the house of the judge's daughter is worth the hay rots in the pasture."

He turned back to Albert. His huge face was getting red, the veins dilating in his cheeks and nose.

"Got no respect, Gott damn. Tell you twice already but you got no respect."

"Fred," his mother interjected, "The boy is not meaning to sound ungrateful."

But she was ignored as Uncle Frederick stood up, placed his broad fat hands near the corners of the table and ponderously leaned toward Albert so that his belly overhung the blue and white plate that the little girl had been about to remove. Albert's eyes moved from his uncle's hands to the thick forearms and up to the padded-looking shoulders. Finally, Albert's eyes met his uncle's, but he could only keep them there for an instant, because he was afraid, because he knew already what he would have to do.

“So, I’m telling you the last time. You can’t go. You got work tomorrow.” He raised one of his big hands and gestured toward Albert with its open palm. “And don’t give me no talk. When you pay your own way, you can go your own way. While you eat my food you do what I tell you.” He straightened up, pushed back his chair and walked into the living room.

Albert got up and walked out onto the back porch. Behind him he heard the tinkle of silverware on plates as the girls proceeded with the table. Presently the two women walked past him and out the door at the other end of the porch, on their way toward the open shed that covered the big brick oven where they cooked in the summer. The summer kitchen sat between the two houses, the smaller of which had not been lived in for fifteen years. Often as he tried, he could not remember having lived there. When he was old enough to wonder and to ask questions, and old enough to understand her explanation, his mother had told him why they did not live in their own house. And he could understand the sense of it. Uncle Frederick’s house was bigger than theirs in the first place, for he was older and had married sooner and had built additions as new babies kept arriving. Besides, Uncle Frederick had lost a son and a daughter in the same epidemic which had taken his father and baby sister, so there was plenty of room. But while he could understand it, recognize it as a thing that had to be, he still could not be satisfied with it, nor pretend happiness about it, when he had only to glance up from the field to see the two houses, the one, his house, rotting year by year and becoming worthless, while the other, the house of his uncle, seemed to prosper and grow fat just as his uncle’s great belly spread wider and hung lower as the prosperous years passed.

But the land—that he resented most. His mother had also tried to explain that to him, though he was not old enough to ask her about it until many years after he had asked her about the house. She had tried to explain it to him, how both wills had named the other brother as heir and then had settled the inheritance on the eldest son of the surviving brother, so as to keep all the land under one family, as was the tradition of the patriarchal German family from which he descended.

When he could think of no other reason to hate his uncle, he hated him as the embodiment of that tradition. But he seldom had to call upon such abstractions. He had many old reasons stored up, in the memory of the pain, the shame, of past years’ beatings. New reasons he found every day, in the constant orders he had to take from the fat man and, more than in the orders, in the infuriating and disgusting fear which made him obey them. It made him want to spit on himself, the way he cringed before the fat man. And all the more so because there was no reason for it. He had not felt the bite of the strap for years, and although his uncle had put hands on him as recently as a few weeks ago, there was in that no cause for cringing. He had kept his feet from a backhand which would have set many men unconscious on the ground. And yet that blow was also one of the reasons he wanted to spit on himself, because he had taken it and done nothing about it, had taken it as old Headlight would take a pop from the whip, as something merely due him, as something that was an inevitable part of his whole way of life. All the while he was taking it that way he had burned with a powerless

rage, had wondered unbelievably why he did not kill the fat man, and had wanted to spit on himself because he could not bring himself even to strike his uncle, the elder, the head of the family. It was a fear that disgusted him because it was based on nothing but the remembered pain of childhood and the unavoidable but unwillingly digested morality of the patriarchy, the tradition. His prostration before such dreams and shadows disgusted him most of all because he knew his own strength, yet was incapable of proving it. He knew well that his uncle, after many years of lighter work and heavier indulgence at a table which offered two kinds of potatoes at every meal, was not the man who had instilled, either with the strap or the word, the terror of former years. Yet for all his knowing of his strength, he could not bring himself to the proving of it.

It was a failure he could not forget. But the most active recent source of hatred for his uncle had become the way the fat man taunted him as he had at dinner, whenever he objected or argued, as he felt a man almost grown should have the right to do. It infuriated him, his uncle's continual reply that when he was on his own he could do things the way he wanted and not until then. The fat man seemed now to pronounce the phrase "on your own" nearly as often as he had mouthed "in your father's place" during the days when he got a talking-to along with a strapping. "When your father and me left Prussia"—whack with the strap. "Your grandfather made me head of the family"—and whack with the strap. "Now your father's gone and I'm in his place"—and whack, whack, whack with the strap.

On his own. He would never be on his own. Moon-faced Jacob would inherit the land and he would continue working it like a hired man and he would never be on his own.

Albert looked up at the sun, which was still well up, and reckoned from its position how much time he had before Mary Jane's party was to begin. He walked back into the house and on his way toward the stairs glanced into the living room. The fat man always napped on the sofa after dinner. Soon he would doze off. There would be time enough to make it.

The dying sun lighted his room softly. Albert went to the bed and stretched out. Two patches of light fell onto the wall opposite the foot of the bed, but the corners of the room were in shadow. His gaze fell on the small wooden bookcase. The only title he could make out from where he lay was that of a book his mother had given him on his twelfth birthday: the words "Adrift in New York" were still bright above the faded illustration. He swung his legs off the side of the bed and went over to the bookcase, squatted down in front of it. The titles of the schoolbooks were faded out, but he knew them by sight. He ran his hand along their backs, evaluating them by asking himself which he would ever want to look into again. The four Language Arts readers? No. Latin Grammar? *The Gallic War*?—that one was all right. Cicero?—Ugh! His roving finger stopped at the geography book and pulled it out. He sat back on the floor and opened the book across his knees. The end paper was a large map of the United States, split right down the middle, Kansas on the left page, Missouri on the right.

Yes, the geography book maybe, for the map if nothing else. He put it back and continued down the shelf. At the end he came to the stack of Western

Railway Guides. They were all from five or six years ago. He flipped through the top one, amazed at the labor he must have put in going over the closely printed schedules, even memorizing the stops. How many could he remember now? Say from here to Kansas City. First up the spur to the main line, then . . . well, he could remember the big stops anyway. There would be Dodge, then Emporia, a few little stations and then the junction at Topeka where the road branched north to Atchison and east to Kansas City.

How would you go on from Kansas City? Suppose you wanted to go over to St. Louis. Sure, see the exposition, look up the travelling man. That was easy: Missouri Pacific. Now suppose you wanted to go on to, say, Chicago. That was harder, more choices: the Wabash, or the Chicago and Alton; or you could swing east and come in by way of the Illinois Central, or roundabout to the west by way of the Burlington.

Albert flipped on through the guide, looking for the transcontinent route. The schedule filled two facing pages, and across the top of the pages ran the long legend of the Central & Union Pacific and Chicago & Northwestern. At the bottom of the right-hand column was "Chicago," at the top of the left-hand column "San Francisco"; in between were a hundred places in smaller type. He remembered that he had worked it out one time: you woke up in a new state every morning. The fourth night out from Chicago you crossed into California. You would wake up that morning in the mountains, and a day's run would bring you down to the city at the edge of the Pacific.

Albert tossed the guide back onto the dusty pile and smiled at his foolishness. Getting even to Kansas City was not his problem, not tonight at least. He was going to Mary Jane's. He stood up and dusted himself off. Then he crossed the room and opened the door to his closet.

Twenty minutes later he climbed through the fence from the hay pasture and set out rapidly down the road, feeling conspicuous and uncomfortable. He had to carry his patent leather shoes, strings tied together and dangling from his left hand. If he wore them they would get dusty and scuffed. Besides, although he had hardly ever worn the shiny things to walk farther than from the buggy to their pew in the church, that was far enough to tell him that his ankle-height boots would be far superior for the six-mile walk over the hummocky road. It was familiar ground which for years he had walked every morning to school. Yet because of the different time of day, or perhaps because of the reason he was on the road now, it appeared to him as though he had never walked it before.

The planks of the first bridge thudded beneath his boots and he kept up a good pace, putting two more bridges between himself and his uncle's house in the first fifteen or twenty minutes.

He had decided against running to make up the time he had lost waiting for his uncle's snores to become loud and regular. A good steady pace would get him there in time enough, while running would only work up a sweat. The suit he was wearing, a medium-weight wool, dark blue with widely spaced white pin-stripes, was hardly ideal for the mid-summer heat, although by now the sun was down far enough to make the outfit at least bearable. It had been a present on his fifteenth birthday, a "Sunday suit," and he had worn it for that purpose almost

every Sunday since, when the whole clan came this way in the buggy. Over the past two years and a half the suit had become more and more ill-fitting, and now the coat, even though he let it hang unbuttoned, pinched him severely beneath the arms, and its sleeves did not come within two inches of his wrists.

He had gone about three miles when he stopped for a moment, on a level stretch of high ground between the creek he was about to descend toward and the one he had just crossed. Back across that stream he could see a buggy approaching, more from the train of yellow dust it was swirling into the sunset than from any clear view of the rig or its driver. The buggy was about as far away from the bridge as he was past it, a good half-mile between them; he could not yet hear the sound of its approach.

There was no point in running, he reasoned. If it was his uncle he would catch up in a few minutes anyway. If it was not, he would tire himself for no reason. He might just as well stand where he was and wait. He might even get a ride into town.

The buggy started its descent toward the bridge. After watching it for a few moments Albert turned abruptly and started toward the next bridge at an easy jog, throwing back a glance once or twice to see if he could catch a glimpse of the buggy.

Behind him he heard the rattle of iron-rimmed wheels and the confused pounding of hooves on the bridge, then their softer thudding on the hard-packed dirt of the road as the rig ascended the bank toward the spot from which he had first spied it. Albert lengthened his stride until he was running and did not slow until the road began to slope down toward the next creek bed and he had to check his momentum to keep his balance. Twice in his descent he threw a glance over his shoulder but due to the hump of the road he did not see his pursuer until he glanced back a third time, when he was almost over the bridge. The buggy was just beginning to descend the slope and its driver's bulk, placed squarely in the middle of the seat and nearly filling it, was outlined unmistakably against the setting sun.

The rig descended from the crest and Albert began heaving himself up the opposite slope. Blood ran to his head and increased the beating of his temple pulse to such a rate that he seemed to hear it, but he forced himself to run harder. Behind him he heard the now not far-away rattle of the insistent wheels over planks and then the continuous drumming of hooves. His stomach was becoming hot and refusing to stay where it belonged. The slope began at last to level out and he looked frantically for a hiding place on the unprotected road. Then he saw a gate close ahead. He slung his shoes into the ditch and slowed enough to get a hold on the topmost of the white wooden crosspieces. Pulling with his shoulders and pushing off with his legs, he vaulted over, landed on his feet, and was running again, heedless of the sleeves he had hooked on a nail, before the rig came up over the rim of the slope.

After some stumbling over the rough footing, Albert reached a patch of unploughed ground about a hundred yards from the road, where a tree had been left standing. He leaned against it, breathing quickly. His head hung down and a warm drop of perspiration ran over an eyelid. He brought his sleeve toward his

forehead but stopped when he saw the rip: he looked at it and experienced a sudden drained feeling of defeat. No party for him, he saw, even if his uncle had not seen him leap the fence. He could not go to Mary Jane's with his coat in that condition. His coat, he repeated to himself in disgust. His uncle's coat. Everything his uncle's. The farm he worked, the house he slept in, even his clothes. He looked down at the ill-fitting thing. Then he brought his arms together as if to hug himself and deliberately and maliciously flexed his shoulders and the muscles along the side of his back until he heard the seams ripping. He flexed again and again, each time hearing with satisfaction the thread pulling through the fabric, with satisfaction feeling the increased freedom of movement given his arms.

He was bending almost double by the time the fury left him. He straightened up and looked toward the gate. The rig was sitting outside it and the fat man was grappling with the latch.

Albert looked down at his side, saw the glistening lining which was now visible through the opened seam. It was only this, he thought, only this and other things which were given to him, that had made him powerless to act against his uncle. They had been offered to him and he had accepted them and their possession had made him powerless. But he did not want them any more. He did not want a room or a bed or the food and the clothes. He did not even want any more the land he had so long coveted, to which he had so long bound himself—no, by which he had for so long been bound. Now, at last, he did not want any of it.

He was surprised that he no longer wanted any of the things, and he was happy with not wanting them. He was surprised, too, that he still wanted to go to Mary Jane's. Wanting to go there made him sad, because he knew, clearly, that he could not go; not now anyway; not, perhaps, for a long time.

He watched his uncle remount the rig and watched as the carefully stepping horse carried the rig toward him at a walk. His uncle stood up in the well and shouted.

"I see you run out here Albert Wessel, and I am going to beat you all the way home." He gathered the reins in his left hand and reached down with his other, took out of its scabbard the long black buggywhip. He held it up and its skinny end did a willowy dance, the tassel bobbing against the background of darkening sky while the buggy covered the remaining distance of uneven ground. The fat man pulled up on the reins, got down; the buggy rocked back on its springs, as though glad to be free of him. Albert walked from under the tree, looked at the whip which his uncle held out from his side. Its tassel end lay near the front wheel. Vaguely he speculated how many times his uncle might be able to hit him with it before he could reach him. Once certainly, he decided, but no more than twice.

"I am going to beat you within an inch of your life," Uncle Frederick growled.

"If you touch me with that," Albert said evenly, gesturing toward the whip, "I will kill you."

"Ungrateful." The fat man raised the whip. "Runaway sneak." His arm came down and Albert felt a spark kindle and burn across his shoulder. The fire kept

burning but Albert ignored it and plunged toward the whip. The fat man jerked it back to raise it again but Albert was already too close for him to use it effectively. Albert grabbed the wrist of the whip hand; it was thick, a great handful, and felt goeey. Then they both had their hands on the short whip handle and the fat man's chins billowed in his effort to twist the handle out of Albert's grasp. Albert felt his left shoulder being pulled up till it was hunched against his neck. He shifted his weight from right foot to left, pushed with his right shoulder and smashed the shaft against his enemy's chest. The fat man lost a step and thudded against the buggy, pushed off from it and regained his balance.

He knew he would have to struggle long. He was going to take the whip away, but to do that he would not only have to be stronger, but last longer, because the fat man was like some big boulder that you had to rock and rock and rock before you finally got it to budge. He kept telling himself, this next time, it may budge this very next time. The muscles at the back of his arm felt frozen and hot at the same time. He kept telling his arms and shoulders what to do, which way to push, where to resist; he told them to keep resisting and not let up and to keep pushing; but soon he could not tell whether they were doing what he wanted them to do or whether they merely had become self-thinking extensions which only happened to be attached to him. When he told them to push against the heavy-chested bear the shaft did not budge; when he told them to twist in the opposite direction to try to break the grip of the bear's wrists, the wrists did not give. He could not tell whether the messages were getting through. His hands seemed ten feet away, frozen on the shaft like bat claws to a rafter.

And fearing, he gave them more orders, imperiously, continuously: move, twist, push. It was not hard to send the messages, but to keep sending even when the answers of pain returned, when the muscles along the outside of the arm began trembling and the trembling walked down to his elbow and crept toward his wrist; but the one who sent the messages longest and paid the least heed to the answers would be the one who would win.

He reached the point, when the pain was coming back in unbroken protest, where the possibility of not winning presented itself; he considered the ease with which he could stop the flow of orders and answers. For those seconds, defeat appeared as something that might be acceptable. But he did not accept it. Instead, he sent more messages, because it was not a possibility and the messages had to go out and the arms had to do what he told them, because he said so.

And finally a sign came, the tiniest give, that showed him the messages were getting through. He looked down at his arms and saw that they were not frozen; they were moving, slowly, they were twisting the arms of the bear. In that moment he caught the glint in his adversary's little pig eyes, and he saw there what must have been in his own eyes before, what he had kept veiled: the first glimmer of fear, the knowledge of the possibility of defeat. Then he knew that he was going to make the fat man give up the whip. The fat man did not want to give it up but he wanted the whip and he was going to take it. He looked into the eyes of his adversary and behind his own eyes he said, I am going to take you fat man, because I am stronger and can last longer, because I am tougher and better than you are. And then with his arms and shoulders he said the same

thing, twisting up, until the fat man had yielded his good hold and was hanging on awkwardly with his arms stretched out, and Albert pulled the shaft higher and yanked violently and it was his.

He held it, only half-believing, and looked at it for a second too long. The bristly head butted his stomach and he staggered back, the whip flying out of his hands. He had a moment to marvel, Quicker than I thought. Then he felt himself falling and his only thought was to get to his feet before the bear could get him on the ground and use his weight.

He hit the ground with his shoulder and kept rolling. He was up by the time the bear's knees thudded into the place where he'd been a second before. The fat man knelt where he'd landed and looked first to one side, then the other. When the face turned toward him, Albert smashed his fist into the side of the giant head. He heard a crunch and felt the pain in his knuckles. The bearish head shook a couple of times and rose a foot as the fat man started to get up. Twice more Albert crashed his left hand and then his right into the head, hitting softer places or, in his haste, his panic, simply unaware of any further pain to his knuckles. The fat man got to his feet and stood with his knees slightly bent. He gave a violent shake of his head, growled and came toward Albert with a spring of his thick knees.

The sweating body was close again and Albert felt himself being forced against the tree. The calloused hands thrust at his neck and he grappled again with the thick wrists. The fat man's weight pressed him to the tree and the big hands searched for his neck. He felt the calloused fingers on the back of his neck and the thumb pressing into its right side; the bear's left paw tried to thrust under his chin on the other side but he kept his jaw pulled down and it could not get under. But the right hand was under his chin and the thick thumb was gouging into the side of his neck. His eyes got dry and began to burn. He kept resisting with his neck muscles and with his left hand as well, but the thumb was hurting him and the pain rose from his neck into the side of his face. The bear's stinking breath snorted in and out. Albert felt nausea, and he knew that he must either break away from this stench of beer and sauerbraten or else be suffocated by it and then the fire on the side of his neck would eat through and cut off his head. With his right hand he let go of the thick left wrist and slammed the heel of his hand into the bear's upper lip. Then with the tree as a fulcrum behind his shoulder, he pushed against the underside of the bear's snout. The huge animal did not want to yield but he was hurting it and it had to yield. A moment's resistance, then a pig squeal, and the giant head retreated, the wooden fingers left his numbed throat.

The beast rebounded but Albert met it with a thrust of his right arm, not in the head this time, but in the vast middle of its smelly meat. He heard with satisfaction another animal sound of yielding, a great sow grunt. A disgusting sound like that could not come from anything human. This was only some huge sow which now he had to destroy, punch its yielding flesh until every part of it, every unspeakable organ hidden in those slimy folds had been smashed and punched. Quickly as he could send them following each other, he drove his fists into the meaty center of the huge animal. He felt something brush against the

side of his head, and then, two of his own punches later, felt something else interfere with the thrust of his left fist. The thing was fighting back. Imagine. Did not want to be destroyed. Ridiculous. Had to be. But there it was; for every two of his punches, the beast managed to throw a punch of its own, or at least to throw up an arm to block a blow. Albert felt a dull thud against his ribcage and put extra venom into the punch he threw in return. No doubt about it. The thing did not want to die. Stupid thing. Had to, had to die. He tightened his diaphragm so that when the beast managed to hit him, there was no snort or grunt as from this pig that had to be slaughtered. The pig's grunts were coming more often now, its breathing quicker and its blows less frequent, and Albert got his weight into each punch, not just throwing them but stepping behind them and pushing through toward the pig's fat-shrouded backbone, to crush everything in between, all the unspeakable innards that he digested slop and garbage with. He heard with satisfaction the gasping for breath that signaled the nearing destruction of the beast and he threw two punches into thin air before he realized that the thing was not there any more and he ducked involuntarily, thinking it had tricked him and was about to smash him from behind.

Then he stepped back and saw the huge form on the ground in front of him. He looked at it and slowly recognition came. Slowly he saw that it was no longer a beast which had to be destroyed but only a man about three times his age, who had recently eaten his customary large dinner, kneeling on hands and knees, vomiting in the brown dirt. Between long rumbling heaves he gasped for breath, then rumbled again. The rumbles shortened, modulated to a cough, finally stopped altogether. The big man leaned down on his elbow, stretched out on his side like a beached whale. He had so little breath that his voice was quieter than Albert had ever heard it.

"So, you would fight your uncle, who stands in place of your father, just to go to a party." He took several quick breaths. "So go then. I can't stop you."

"I was not going to the party," Albert lied. "I was leaving."

His uncle pushed himself up to a sitting position, his short thick legs straight out in front of him.

"Leaving? To go where?"

"Kansas City," Albert heard himself say, and he knew this was not a lie. He would have to go to Kansas City first.

"Kansas City? So big, so many people. What you do?"

"I don't know. I'll get something."

"Kansas City," his uncle repeated. He had not got his wind back and his words came in spurts of available breath. "The family, Albert. Your father and me, we always hoped, keep the land together, the family."

The big man tried to rise, grunted and sat back.

"I rest another minute," he mumbled. He was silent for a while. Around them it continued to grow dark.

"Your grandfather, Albert, he sent us to America. Prussia, you don't know, everybody has to go to the army. When we got a place we were going to send . . . they both died before we got on our feet. Then your father. I tried, Albert. The family . . ."

The big man rose to one knee and Albert went to him and helped him to his feet. He looked at the young man.

“Albert. What you want?”

I want to go to Mary Jane’s, Albert wanted to say, but knowing that his uncle would misunderstand, he merely said, “I don’t know.”

“Maybe better you go. But you should write. The family should not . . .”

“I’ll write,” Albert said, feeling strangely embarrassed for his uncle; it was the first time he could remember feeling that way toward him. “And I’ll be back sometime, for a visit,” he added, and he knew again that he was not telling a lie.

The old man walked slowly toward the buggy. Albert walked beside him and helped him up.

“Wait a minute,” Albert said. He went over and picked up the whip. His uncle took it and returned it to the socket.

“I give you a ride to town, if you want.”

Albert looked up at his uncle, who appeared again as a massive outline against the fading light of the faraway sky. He knew it would be all right to say yes, but he shook his head.

The buggy creaked off but stopped again after only a few steps. Albert looked toward it. He could hardly make out any details of the large dark objects which his memory knew were the horse, the rig, and the man.

“Albert.” His uncle’s voice came quietly out of the darkness. “I didn’t know you was so strong.”

Albert looked toward where the voice had come from.

“Neither did I,” he said.
