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Miami Beach, Kentucky

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Miami Beach, Kentucky · *Jim Hall*

“I LOVE IT,” he said. “I think it’s a superb idea.” He poured the last of the Schlitz into the peanut jar glass with the clowns on it. Normally it was my glass, but every time Thornton Blanding came to eat with us, he claimed it, and made a great show of drinking his beer from it.

“You see,” Mean Buck said to Billie Butterworth. “It’s not some crack-brained idea. Thornton likes it.”

“I never said I liked it, Buck. I said I love it. I think it’s just what Sinking Fork needs at this particular juncture.”

Billie Butterworth fiddled with a carrot stick. She drew a circle with it through the gravy left on her plate.

“May I be excused?” asked Lilly.

Thornton Blanding stood up as Lilly stood. He smiled and nodded at her like they’d just had a long waltz together. Lilly was my sister. Two years older than me, white blonde hair that she’d let get long, and green eyes that at that moment she had turned to red to show Thornton Blanding that no amount of standing up or gentlemanly nonsense was going to win her over. She could make those eyes into any color she chose and it was her gift to be able to burn people with them, brand them good, and walk away leaving them wondering what the hell happened.

Billie Butterworth, my mother, stood up then and began to gather up the supper plates. I stayed put, though normally it was my job to scrape the plates. All the rules changed when Thornton Blanding came to supper.

“You don’t want any blueberry cobbler, girl?” Mean Buck asked Lilly. “Your momma made it up special.”

Lilly turned her eyes on him and gave him a taste of them. They were drifting back to green, only a dash of scarlet left.

“I lost my appetite.”

Mean Buck got up and opened up two more Schlitz’s and topped up that clown glass. He and Thornton sat and smiled at each other though it seemed to me that Mean Buck’s smile flowered up from a place a little deeper down than Thornton’s.

“You only want to encourage Buck so you can write about the folly of it later. We know just how you work, Thornton Blanding. Think of us as naive country folk if you want, but we can see straight on through you.”

“Miss Butterworth. It’s not so. I admit that Buck’s schemes have often provided me with some excellent material, but I truly believe that renaming Sinking Fork, Miami Beach, is a remarkable, imaginative, and bold idea.”

“Miami Beach, Kentucky,” said Mean Buck. Beer foam fluttered on his red upper lip.

“Bold?” said Billie Butterworth from the stove where the cobbler was warming and sending out waves of buttery flavor. “It’s loony. Loony, degrading, and useless.”

“Why Miss Butterworth, I can remember clearly you telling us years ago in your art classes that we had to cut the mooring lines of our imagination and float out to the deep dangerous waters. Those, I believe, were your very words. Out into the deep dangerous waters.”

“I was wrong,” she said and opened up the oven.

“I’m going full blast on this thing starting tomorrow,” said Mean Buck.

“Who wants ice cream?”

Everybody did.

Thornton Blanding and Mean Buck went into the library after dessert to drink brandy and chortle. Lilly came back into the kitchen and had some cobbler while Billie Butterworth and I washed the dishes.

“Why do you let him come to supper all the time?” Lilly asked.

“He’s lonely,” said Billie Butterworth.

“He gets Mean Buck stirred all up.”

“Your daddy was stirred up long before Thornton came back home.”

“I read one of his books,” Lilly announced.

Billie Butterworth put down her dishrag and went over to the kitchen table where Lilly was scooping up the last flake of cobbler crust. She sat down next to Lilly and let go of a sigh that could have filled two balloons.

“Which one did you read?”

“The last one.”

“Where’d you get hold of it?”

“I ordered it.”

“You ordered it.”

“I wanted to find out about him,” she said. “I read it and now I can’t see how you can let that man into the house. He hates all of us. He makes fun of Mean Buck so bad that I don’t see how Mean Buck hasn’t shot him dead a hundred times.”

“Your daddy doesn’t read his books.”

I kept on scrubbing at my clown glass, trying to get his lips off it, the beer smell.

“He ought to.”

“Thornton Blanding is using the only subject he has. He’s writing the best books he knows how.”

“You haven’t read his books if you can defend him like that.”

“I’ve read them all.”

“People read about us and think we’re a bunch of morons from the moron museum. He lies about us, Mama.”

“He exaggerates.”

“Why’d he come back here anyway?”

“To live.”

“So he could mock us more,” said Lilly.

“Sinking Fork is his home. He grew up here and he can live here if he wants.”

“He got out of here and he should’ve stayed out. When I leave I sure ain’t ever coming back here. I know better than that.”

Thornton Blanding and Mean Buck came out of the study guffawing like they were choking on chicken bones. Lilly got up quickly, rinsed her plate off and went out the kitchen door just as the whooping cranes were coming through the dining room.

Both of them quieted down as they came into the kitchen. Mean Buck was squinting back another belly laugh so hard he was turning pinker than usual.

“Another delicious meal, Miss Butterworth. Unparalleled cooking. I’m deeply indebted to you for making my return home such a pleasure. And, Buck,” said Thornton, as he clapped Mean Buck on his hammy shoulders, “another giddy, delirious evening.”

He looked around, probably for Lilly, and seemed to notice me for the first time that evening.

“Artie,” he said. “Artie, Artie, Artie.” He tilted my chin up so he could stare down my eyes. I gave it back to him, peering into those dark eyes, into his shifty smile.

“My lad, are you still aspiring to join the ranks of the inspired scribes? Become my protégé?”

Before I could figure that out, Billie Butterworth said, “A writer, Artie. Do you still want to be a writer?”

“No,” I said. “I want to be a drag racer.”

“No longer want to carve the great sentence of your life into immortal Kentucky limestone?”

Too much brandy. His boney face was crimped. There was a smudged smile on his lips now.

“I want to drive Funny Cars,” I said. I did. I had taken a job at a local repair shop where I was hoping to discover the secrets of souping engines.

“Ah well, it is probably best. The world of literature is not the noble hall some imagine it to be. It can be torturous and mean. To make more than a measly living one must pawn his very soul. It is only through the most rigorous self-discipline that I have managed to remain so untainted.”

“I’m saving up to buy a Chevrolet 385 short block,” I said.

“Lofty,” he said. “Lofty goal, my lad.” And then he patted me on the head like he might have done to a dog or a thirteen year old.

He stood at the kitchen door winding his scarf around his throat. He and Mean Buck exchanged a clamped-back bellylaugh and Thornton screwed on his red felt beret. He’d picked it up somewhere in his travels and wore it non-stop, to funerals or fishing. There was some secret story to that hat that only Mean Buck knew. They’d flaunt the story at supptime, pretending it was so good that it might drive us insane if we heard it. I never once wanted to hear it, though. How good could a story about a hat be?

“Viva Miami Beach,” Thornton said as he waved to us and pushed out into the cold night.

“Wonderful man,” said Mean Buck, a little later, as we watched Thornton drive out our long dark driveway. “And I consider it a blessing that he finds this household worthy of his interest.”

“Don’t start talking like the boy,” Billie Butterworth said.

“I talk the way I talk,” he said and moved away from the darkened window where I could see Thornton’s taillights turning out onto Hollow Road.

“When that boy is here, you take on his affectations so quick I think there’s two Thornton Blandings for a minute. But there couldn’t be two. There’s not enough presumptuousness in the world to spread that far.”

“What’s presumptuousness?” I asked her as we followed Mean Buck into the living room.

“It means she don’t like Thornton,” said Mean Buck. “That fellow gives all the credit in the world for his success as a writer to your

mother, even dedicates his books to her, I understand. That boy'll tell anybody who'll listen that your mother showed him the road to art, to the whole vast world of beauty, opened his eyes like a surgeon slitting away cataracts. He's full of praise for your momma, boy, but does she return an ounce of affection? Sorry, son, but she don't. And Thornton Blanding is going to put us on the map. Put us on it big."

"And you're going to take us all right off it, if you aren't careful," said Billie Butterworth.

Mean Buck sat down in his big padded recliner, leaned it way back and muscled up one of those heavy books from the huge stack of them beside his chair. It was something about universal brotherhood, or heavenly wisdom on earth, or something. Not that Mean Buck was a bit religious. He'd as soon drive away a new Bible thumper as spit. But he was always reading those books. Most nights I'd see him fallen asleep with one of them lying like a dead eagle open on his chest.

The next day was Monday. I lay in bed and watched the second hand hum around. I watched it go around from five fifteen to five thirty, imagining it was some kind of broken propeller on a plane that wouldn't ever fly. If I watched it hard enough I could make it go so slow that I'd have an extra hour in bed. But the trouble was, I had to stay awake and work so hard keeping it from going around that it almost wasn't worth being in bed.

I flicked on my crystal radio and put the earplug in and I lay back and listened to Mean Buck give the hog prices. Mean Buck was Mayor of Sinking Fork, and he also owned the only radio station anywhere around. You could listen to other stations, of course, but WOHO was the loudest, and lots of times you'd be listening to some station in Nashville or Bowling Green and here would come WOHO bleeding its way into your other station; quiet at first, then second by second getting louder and finally crowding out the other station altogether.

Between being Mayor and running that radio station, Mean Buck always seemed to get his way. There didn't seem to be anybody in Sinking Fork who could stare him down or who could hang onto the other end of a scrap of meat or a piece of bone that he wanted. No one but maybe Billie Butterworth. He'd get to wanting something and allowing as how it was the thing he wanted most in all the world, and talking to anybody he met about this thing he wanted until everybody else was saying, get it, Buck, do it, Buck, go on, Buck, have it.

It might have been nothing more than a new collection of books for

the library or a swing set for the park or new cheerleader dresses. But he'd moan and whine and then all at once be quieter about it than any man you'd ever seen. And people would come up to where he was moping about in the poolroom or the Elks Club and they'd say, "Buck, get them cheerleaders the dresses you want." And out would come the money for those dresses and everybody in the poolroom would go 'whew.' He just knew how to want things so much better than anybody else, that it made you start to think that Mean Buck deserved everything he got.

When Mean Buck had finished with the hog prices that Monday morning and he'd said a word or two about what a raw mean March day it was about to be, he dropped his voice down into a croon and started in on Miami Beach. He said how he had in front of him a half dozen postcards that people had sent him over the years, and each and every one of them was of Miami Beach. Now wasn't that peculiar.

"I just want to describe these here photographs for you, help you wake up in a good frame of mind," he cooed. "This first one is of a row of buildings so white you'd think they were made of ground-up angels. And over the top of them you look out at the warm lazy blue Atlantic Ocean where the sun is just now coming up for another day. The sky is awful pink and there are flamingoes floating in from some unspoiled off-shore island, and they're just gliding along on a sea breeze, salty and brackish and they don't even have to flap a wing."

He made his voice go low and soft like he was trying to convince a young girl to do something she'd always regret. He didn't let any spaces get in between his sentences, just hummed along like an auctioneer in slow-motion, drowsing in the warm bath of his fantasy.

I curled my toes hard and gritted my fists, squinched my face tight, but it got to me anyway. I started picturing the summery easiness, the pink buildings with shady patios, the huge white birds on their stalky legs standing out in every yard, the perfume of tropical fruits and red blossoms, yellow blooms as big as women's hats, everything drenched and ripened by a sunny lush bounteousness that was caused by the place being named Miami Beach.

I didn't have to do any of the work either. All I had to do was close my eyes and fall into the lull and sway of his voice and he described it, every lazy insect gone fat on nectar, every splash and slide of ocean wave coming ashore.

"Miami Beach, Kentucky," he said, wooing us all, all in our beds,

all of us half-dazed from dreaming. "Miami Beach, Kentucky," he whispered. "We can make our town anything we got the gumption to imagine. All it is, is like good Billie Butterworth always is saying, all life is is whatever you can imagine it to be. If you imagine it good enough, it's there. No one is forcing us to live with a shriveled-up sense of our lives. We can have the Garden of Eden, pure and simple, if we can imagine it hard enough."

Then he went on about palm trees and ferns and lobsters and crabs and egrets and laughing gulls, sandpipers and marlin, dolphin, sailfish, red snapper, sea turtles, tarpon. Everything had a charmed echo to it like something you'd wished for years and years ago that suddenly was coming true. Waterfalls, sand dunes, shrimp, rum drinks, suntans, bathing suits, sandals, sea oats, gardenias, toucans, cockatoos.

I floated in a cool green current, drawn ahead into a rush of cooler, greener, clear waters, and I was gliding into a sort of drunken happiness, when Billie Butterworth yanked my earplug out and snapped me all of a godawful sudden to raw, gray, stubbly Sinking Fork, Kentucky, where out my window the branches of the Chinese elm were clacking like the horns of battling elk.

"He's doing it again," she said.

"This is a good one."

"They're all good ones."

"This one could work, I'm thinking."

"They all could work," she said. "Except that nobody can wear an earplug every minute of the day." She let my earplug drop on the bedside table.

She was dressed for school already. A brown wool dress with a high collar. I was thinking more along the lines of my shirt with the hula girls on it.

"You lay there till you got your brain back, boy. Then get on to breakfast." She held my hands for a minute and looked at my eyes like a referee checking out a boxer after he's been down.

I lay there and let the surf noises die down. I squirmed and listened to her walking downstairs, trusting me not to plug up again.

For years Mean Buck had been dreaming up schemes which were going to save Sinking Fork from itself. Not that there was any thread running through all the gimmicks. Every year or so he'd catch some new sickness, and the town wouldn't have a blink of rest until Mean Buck had squeezed every recollection, every date, snatch of gossip,

family tree, from every single citizen so that Sinking Fork could have the most complete historical record and genealogy record of any town in Kentucky. Next time you'd almost caught your breath, Mean Buck would be heating up again, and in your face claiming that each and every Sinking Forker should donate ten percent of their income so we could once and for all get rid of poverty. I don't know how much he squeezed out of the town on that one, but it was enough to buy new suits and dresses for all eight of the Negro families who lived in a little shanty town out by the graveyard. And it was enough to buy them all bus tickets to Los Angeles.

There was kissing and hugging at the bus depot that morning, and the high school band was there to play, and lots of flash pictures were taken. Mean Buck gave them each a wad of bills, right down to the little ones, and they all smiled and waved at us and got on that bus and waved and smiled till the bus disappeared. So we all stood around and listened to the band play for the rest of the morning. And I heard one or two people ask Mean Buck, why Los Angeles? And all he could tell them was that if they'd had a better idea, where'd it been when the choosing was going on?

So Sinking Fork didn't have a poor problem anymore, and we had the greatest genealogy records anywhere, and we had a football team with uniforms made up in France or somewhere, and a lake on the edge of town churning with more fish than could've survived in a lake five times as big.

The one before Miami Beach was still on everybody's mind, I imagined. It was his there-ain't-nothing-out-there-we-can't-bring-in-here campaign. It had started off a year or two earlier when a few families had got tired of it all and moved off to Nashville or Bowling Green. Mean Buck called an emergency town meeting and explained how Sinking Fork was glad to get rid of those faithless bastards and how Sinking Fork was just like the country, a great big experiment that required everybody to spend damn near all their waking hours figuring ways to keep it all bright and new and alive. And how it was cowardly and un-American to leave the town where God had had the good sense to drop you in, cowardly and shameful to drift off searching for some cheap satisfaction. It was one of his speeches that had whiskey in it, that made everybody, even the old women in their berry-covered hats, stand up and wolf-whistle and stomp their feet till the turned-up basketball goals in that auditorium swayed.

He had some of us children walk up and down the aisles taking up all the suggestions of what to bring to Sinking Fork to make the town a cultural paradise. I was swollen up with pride, my shirt tight against my chest, thinking how I was blessed to be the son of such a mover and saint. I took the wad of papers up and dropped it beside his feet and he leaned down and mussed my hair and split his cheeks smiling out at the wonderful lucky citizens of Sinking Fork.

A couple of days later the Sinking Fork *Reporter* printed up a list of the most popular suggestions. Miss America was number one with seven votes. And five people wanted to bring in some blonde Hollywood actress I hadn't heard of. Four people had asked to see a pig with three heads and there were a couple votes each for a giant squash collection, a seven-hundred-pound wrestler, The Mormon Choir, John Dillinger's weapon, a pygmy, and the horse that came in fourth at that year's Kentucky Derby. I heard that Mr. Mosley and his wife requested that so they could shoot the old nag for losing them so much money. My suggestion didn't get into the newspaper. I wanted to invite Little Daddy Crawdaddy to drive his double V-8 dragster at the Sinking Fork drag strip.

Mean Buck was disappointed with the suggestions but he told everybody on his morning radio show that he was going to do his damndest to get Miss America at least, and maybe even that squash collection. It was six months later when Miss American arrived. She'd won the thing about fifty years before, and could barely walk anymore, but she wandered around town for a couple of days smiling and shaking everybody's hand, and saying how happy she was that people hadn't forgotten her and she made everybody feel so sorry for her that I didn't hear anybody complain that she wasn't that year's Miss America. But if Mean Buck thought she was liable to keep anybody else from moving away from Sinking Fork, he was wrong. Five more families moved out the week the squash collection arrived.

I lay there in my cold bed for another five minutes till I could feel the proper chill for a March day. Then I got up, dragged myself in and out of the bathroom and went downstairs where Lilly and Billie Butterworth were dangling their spoons into the steam from their oatmeal, and generally having a funeral. I sat down, dug into the oatmeal and watched the steam fog over a purple broach Billie wore on her wool dress.

"Why does he do this?" Lilly asked. She kept staring at her spoon which she held like a mirror in front of her face.

"He has to do it. It's the way he's built."

"Why don't you make him stop?"

Billie smiled not real convincingly at Lilly.

"I know it's embarrassing for you two. And it's never been easy for me either. But I tried once to stop him from this and I saw then that if I'd won and I'd got him to give up all this foolishness, it would've been like I snatched his heart right out from his chest. The man has never been any other way. He gets an idea how to make the world a little more interesting and that just crowds out every other thing in the man's mind."

"Including his common sense," said Lilly.

"I don't see how calling it Miami Beach is so bad," I said.

"You wouldn't, half-wit." Lilly put down her spoon and changed her eyes on me, turning them a sickening yellow, the color of a withered-up skink.

"Changing the name is just the beginning of something bigger, I'm afraid," said Billie.

"You should've gone on and ripped his heart out of his chest," Lilly said, her eyes still shiny yellow. "You might've donated it to somebody who could've used it proper."

"He's your father," said Billie, like she wasn't sure.

"I don't have one," she said, "I ain't got any use for fathers."

We drove to school in the Falcon, Billie's car. She'd bought it a few years before so she could drive out into the countryside and paint cows and barns and streams and meadows. When she'd painted every barn and cow and every single tree within a day's drive of Sinking Fork, she'd slowed down a whole lot. It was one of the reasons I was trying to learn to soup up engines. I guessed that if I could get that Falcon to do over sixty, Billie could get out a little bit farther and see some new sights, and maybe cheer up a little.

When we'd parked in the gravel lot, Lilly stalked off one way and Billie Butterworth went on up to her office. She was Principal of Sinking Fork High, which might've been hard on me if she'd been some kind of maniac paddler or rule maker. But she wasn't. She treated everybody, even the punks and hoods, like they were her children and like all of us were on some kind of leaky lifeboat in the middle of the ocean, and we had to stick together if any of us had a lick of a chance.

I was glad she didn't make it hard on the punks and the hoods, cause mostly they were who I was hanging around with. It wasn't that I didn't like the creased-pants crowd. I might've liked to be in a bunch who got each other elected to all the clubs and cheered each other at the big games, if they'd known about cars. They didn't. It was just the punks and hoods who knew about cars.

Most of the hoods had old Buicks and Chevy jalopies that needed work all the time. And they'd all hang out near school, in a parking lot next to Dunn's Grocery, where there'd be two or three of them every morning getting greasy in their engines. Somebody might be rebuilding a carburetor or putting in a new timing chain, and there'd be spark plugs and wrenches and sockets lying all around, and somebody would be playing their radio loud, and all of them would be smoking and cussing and talking about some hot-rod or other they'd seen come through town, something bright yellow with flame decals coming off the front wheel wells and black furry dice hanging from the ceiling, with lake pipes, street slicks, moon hubs, no hood chrome, rolled and pleated naugahyde, rhinestone mudflaps and a thirty degree rake.

"A nigger car with no guts," somebody'd say.

"I could take that car in reverse, man."

"If you had a goddamn reverse."

There'd be haw-hawing and a little recreational punching maybe. But mainly they'd talk cars. Fast ones and pretty ones, street metal that was likely to overheat if you drove it under eighty-five.

But on that Friday as I came around the side of the shop building, I didn't hear any hawing, or anybody's engine racing, no squealing tires or loud radio.

I stepped out of the cold shade into a patch of half-hearted sunshine and there they were, all of them hunkered on their bumpers and their hoods, some even sitting up on their roofs. Black jackets zipped up, cigarettes dangling, all of them looking on as Peggy Belle Brewster sluiced up her thighs with coconut butter. She sat on a Confederate flag beach towel, wearing nothing but her red bikini, and there was no guessing about what she was oiling herself with cause the air was practically edible with coconut smell.

Peggy Belle's father owned the only car dealership in town, so she already had aroused more than average notice among the hot-rod hoods. And lately, as her sweaters had begun to throw bigger and bigger shadows, she had become the only other subject out there in the parking lot, aside from fuel injection and the like.

Peggy Belle was down to her wiggly toes, oiling up each one with so much care it looked like she might spend her morning on just one foot. Her legs were shining and drops of oil on her stomach lit up like fish scales. It was hard to know where to look and what to look for.

Speed Covington, the oldest and meanest of the car hoods, swooned as Peggy Belle oiled up her big right toe. He slid down the windshield of his '39 Packard, his arms wide open, moaning under his breath. He kept on sliding until he came over the right fender and sprawled in a panting heap a yard or two from Peggy Belle's blanket.

As she finished her right foot and moved slowly up that leg, I heard the first period bell. By the time she'd finished doing her shoulders and the firm meat of her upper arms, the bell for second period had rung and two more of the hoods and fallen off their cars and lay like wreck victims on the ground near Peggy Belle. The others made swallowing sounds, and groveling noises.

It couldn't have been much above freezing, but she didn't look a bit cold, and I was pretty sure that none of the rest of us were either. Her eyes were as blank as someone just saved by a traveling preacher, and I knew that Mean Buck's cooing voice must have been sloshing around inside her still. There were always a few of them like Peggy Belle who slipped in early and deep when Mean Buck had a fresh idea. And you'd see them on the street or at the grocery humming whatever tune he'd hummed into them, or breathing with his rhythm, smiling silly.

And you could always spot the other kind too, the ones who knew better than to wake up with their radio on and let Mean Buck have a free shot at their muddled brains. They'd be the ones gritting their faces, looking nervous this way and that, looking like they were stalking a housefly, more careful and shivery than seemed good for a person. They'd hang back from whatever it was Mean Buck had decided was good for them, and they'd talk to nobody.

But he'd wear them down eventually. Either they finally turned on WOHO cause they knew they'd never sleep or have a second's easy breathing until they'd at least heard what he had to say, or else they'd simply march up to Mean Buck's office in the courthouse and demand to have it out. More than a few times I'd been there and had seen Mean Buck smooth down a jumpy one, talk and smile, joke and croon. And before they'd leave that office they'd be saying, "Yes, sir, I knew it was a good idea for everybody to learn French, but I just was a little confused as to why." "*Au revoir*," Mean Buck would say.

I watched Peggy Belle Brewster oil herself silly until finally Billie Butterworth came back to the lot, probably having smelled the coconut butter in the breeze. It was noon by then and we'd drawn a little crowd. The football coach was there, a delivery man for Sinking Fork Dairy, the school janitor, the butcher from Dunn's Grocery and half a dozen stray dogs. When Billie cleared her throat the dogs broke for home and Coach Thurgood hunched over and tried to hide inside his baseball cap.

"You people go find where you left your brains," she said. "Look hard and I think you'll find enough of them that the pigs haven't scarfed up yet to get you safely through the day."

I went over to her and touched the sleeve of her wool dress. She drew her arm away and studied me for a minute.

"You got your brain back?"

"Yes, mam."

"Sure it's yours?"

"Yes, mam."

We stood there looking at each other for a while in that uninterested sunlight. Her hair was primer black and it hung long and heavy down her shoulders. Her eyes were as tough and blue as faded denim, and they could sometimes be as soft. If she wore make-up, I never saw her put it on. Nothing could have softened her features anyway, short of sand-blasting. All the bones in her face made impressions. Her eyebrows were squirrel-colored and thick. And there was always a smile on her lips that was just a bit painful looking, as though somebody had just confessed to being scared of butterflies.

"Miss Billie?" It was Peggy Belle, wrapped in her Confederate blanket, looking purplish and weak now.

"Girl, I don't want to hear a word of what you got to say. I heard it before. I hear it in my sleep."

"It's the Miami Beach. . . ."

"Peggy Belle Brewster, you find yourself a bar of soap and wash off that gunk and put your clothes back on and get in there and learn something useful. And tomorrow morning when your alarm goes off, you don't even get a whiff of turning on the radio."

"Yes, mam."

When Peggy Belle had edged away, shivering, Billie regarded me again.

"You've got some of his blood," she said finally.

"Yes, mam." It was true. I could feel it in me sometimes.

“And you got some of mine. And that means you’re going to have one terrible time telling loony from true. A harder time than even the average dizwitty in this town.” She put her arm around my shoulder and steered us back toward the high school. “I been spending so much time with Lilly, helping her tell which from what, that I just hadn’t given you enough thought.”

“I’m all right.”

“Are you?”

Nobody in his right mind could have answered her yes. Especially somebody who was Mean Buck’s son.

“I’m not sure.”

“We’ll get this straight,” she said. “Somehow.”

I got through school that day by counting up the Florida shirts and Bermuda shorts and sandals. Billie might’ve sent them all home for dressing so crazy, but that wasn’t how she went about things. I counted five parrot shirts and two hula-girl shirts in homeroom. And I got three more parrots, a green tropical island shirt and four Bermuda shorts and four sundresses the rest of the afternoon. By the time school was out all of them were shivering and chattering and hugging themselves, cause Billie Butterworth had cut the furnace way down low to remind everybody where they were and what part of the year it really was. That’s how she worked.

I had kept thinking about that blood in me and how every other corpuscle of it was liking all the summertime clothes, was grinning and feeling warm, while the in-between corpuscles were sneering and embarrassed, wobbling with shame for the mush-headed human race.

After school I walked down to Al’s Garage where I worked. I just wanted to set timing or grind a cam shaft and not think about any of it anymore. But the minute I stepped inside that cold greasy building I could hear Mean Buck’s voice on the radio, making love to whoever’d listen. Miami Beach love. Sand and warm breezes, the crash of the surf, a fresh-water swimming pool for every child, woman and man, shuffleboard, sailing, deepsea fishing, mangoes and grapefruit and coconuts, orange blossoms pumping out their sugary perfume.

Big Al and Little Al were sitting in the waiting room. Both of them wore their blue overalls and Little Al held a crescent wrench. Neither of them looked up when I came in.

“Pink fish, pink shrimp, pink houses, pink flamingoes, pink sunrise, pink ocean at sunset, pink skin, pink hibiscus.”

Big Al was looking up at the speaker in the ceiling like he'd heard a tune and was trying to place it. Little Al beat on his leg with the wrench in time with Mean Buck's chant. I felt those corpuscles going at it in my legs. They quivered to go but I stayed.

"Balmy moonlight, saxophone and rum, a slow dance beneath a canopy of stars, deck chairs in front of the phosphorescent sea, the rattle of palm fronds, the gardenia-drenched night, hot damn what a place!"

"What does he want from us this time, Artie?" Big Al asked me, his eyes still struck numb from so much radio jabber.

"It ain't any of my business," I said. I took a good grip on the door frame and pulled myself away from his voice. When I got to the doorway and stuck my head outside for some rough honest Kentucky air, I felt half my corpuscles squealing, trying to lock the brakes on me. They held me there and let Mean Buck work on me some more, but then those other ones nudged me toward the sidewalk. I felt a splitting rip of lightning fire through me. There was one last, "boatride across a rolling meadow of moonlight," and I was free.

Thornton Blanding was at supper that night and he amused himself and Mean Buck by telling tales about famous cities he'd been to. He was holding up the clown glass half-full of beer and describing a bullfight he'd seen in Madrid where the bull had refused to go charging at the cape. No amount of slapping or whistling, clapping or name-calling would make the bull run. And when finally the matador came around behind him and struck him an awful blow with the side of his sword on the bull's rump, the bull let go of a mountain of shit and covered the matador from slippers to sequins. Mean Buck sputtered then coughed up a laugh that trembled the table.

They crowed and blustered for near to five minutes over it, all the while Lilly was putting her eyes through ninety-nine colors. She glared mostly at me like she was daring me to so much as smile, but then she'd turn on Mean Buck and Thornton and her eyes would turn as blue-white as a welding torch.

"Have you never seen anything in your travels for which you have the slightest respect?" Billie Butterworth asked him when the laughing had almost died down.

Mean Buck kindled his laughing up again, probably thinking he was saving Thornton from an embarrassing question.

"It's not the job of a writer to respect things, Miss Butterworth. I have only to observe and report."

"But you've seen nothing out there that you love or admire, or care about?"

"That's not the point," he said. He held my clown glass up then. "I would like to propose a toast."

Mean Buck cleared his throat and stood up beside Thornton.

"To the person who elicits from me the greatest measure of respect, love, admiration and all the other eternal emotions, Miss Billie Butterworth."

"No thanks," she said, as she stood up and began to clear away the lamb-chop remains. "I'm not honored to be placed above a cowardly bull, thank you."

"How high did the shit actually get?" asked Mean Buck.

Thornton drank the last of his beer and saluted Billie's back with his empty glass. "Up to his cravat," he told Mean Buck.

"Up to his neck in shit!" He trumpeted out another laugh.

Thornton joined him then and they were still sputtering when the back door barged open. A cold swish of wind blew the napkins off the counter and into the kitchen stepped Mrs. Edith Sherwood Pickles. No one called her anything short of that, though I had heard some versions longer. She was the librarian at the public library and the granddaughter of the only Confederate general from those parts.

I'd never heard of her breaking into people's kitchens before.

She stood there for a second getting her bearings. On her white hair she wore a gray and beaten-up forest ranger's hat. And as usual, she had on long wool pants and a sailor's blue jacket.

"You men stand up. There's a lady here," she said as she pulled off her leather gloves.

The men stood up, Thornton smiling cock-eyed and Mean Buck red-faced. Billie asked Mrs. Edith Sherwood Pickles if she wanted to sit down and have some cobbler and coffee.

"I came to give a speech," she said. "I don't sit down with the enemy."

"Artie, you and Lilly go on in the living room, now. You can be excused."

"The children stay," Mrs. Edith Sherwood Pickles said.

"The children can stay," Mean Buck said right away after her. He looked confused. Thornton was grinning like a moron in mud.

"How are we the enemy?" asked Billie.

"Don't be coy with an old fox," she said. "You better sit down, Billie Butterworth. I've got a harangue here, burning." She patted her breast. "And if I don't get it out now I may just have to strangle someone instead."

"Harangue away," said Thornton.

We all got back in our chairs and watched her pace between the stove and refrigerator. She was so gaunt she appeared to have been feeding on nothing but paper clips and bobby pins. She made a clicking noise in her mouth like she was fiddling with her dentures. A sneeze from a normal-sized man would have blown her against the sink. She paced and paced with her hands behind her back, and Mean Buck grumbled and sipped his beer and watched her careful.

"I own a radio," she said, finally coming to a stop. "Somebody gave it to me for a present. But I never learned to listen to it and I'm awful glad of that. I haven't ever had a yearning for the voice of someone who I wouldn't let through the front door crawling over me and my things. I don't feel the fevering desire to hear someone's guessing about the weather when it's right outside the window. And what they're calling music this year, I'm calling pig squeals. But I've got some lady friends who aren't so ornery as I am and they get lonely and dreamy and want to have somebody talking to them at all hours of the night or day. And it's them that's brought me the news of this . . . this . . ." She waved her hands around in the air drawing some kind of pantomime monstrosity.

She cleared her throat and straightened her forest ranger hat. "I'm proud to say that I have pointed out the folly of your various intrigues in the past and I have willingly borne the label of malcontent. I am not a simpleton, sir. I'm not so easily seduced by your nonsense.

"But today your latest campaign has been described to me by friends of mine who *can* hear the radio and I have come here tonight to declare war on you and on this inhuman plan to steal the history and birthright from those of us who have our roots in Sinking Fork."

"Now, now, now," said Thornton. "I must disagree with you, Mrs. Pickles. Renaming towns in America is not uncommon nor inhuman. I think your somewhat obsessive preoccupation with chronicling the history of Sinking Fork is muddling your thinking on this issue."

"You call yourself a writer."

"Yes, mam, I most humbly do," Thornton said, straight back at her. He touched his goatee then.

“And he’s a famous one,” chimed in Mean Buck. “And his books fill a whole shelf, I’d reckon.”

“Not in my library, they don’t.”

She paraded between the refrigerator and stove again, huffing, slapping her gloves against her open hand.

Mean Buck pushed his chair back and stood up, his face a Florida sunset.

“I am surprised, Mrs. Pickles, that you would admit to hiding Mr. Blanding’s books from people. I believe we may have us a First Amendment violation here.”

“I don’t hide them. I burn them.”

Some gas went out of Thornton’s smile, but he held on to a last tatter of it.

“I don’t believe a mayor in my position can tolerate such a thing.”

“Pshaw,” she said at him. “Billie, how could you go on for all these years putting up with a frog-faced weasel like this? Have you lost every ounce of Bufford gristle?”

Colonel Noble Bufford would have been my granddaddy if he hadn’t been killed in a car wreck.

Billie Butterworth didn’t have any answer for her. It could have saved me a whole awful lot of time if she’d just said right then how someone with blood so different from Mean Buck could stay around him so long.

“Is it just the marriage bonds? Cause if that’s all that’s keeping you caged up here, I can speak to Judge Dyer tomorrow and, snap, like that, you’d have cooked this rascal’s last good supper.”

“We can’t have no librarians burning books,” said Mean Buck, like he was landing in the conversation for the first time. You could see his heart beat in his face. Blue earthworms dug for cover in his forehead. He was standing so close to Mrs. Edith Sherwood Pickles that he might have been about to pin a medal on her coat.

“I want to know what you’re up to with this Miami Beach insanity.”

“I’m not in the habit of explaining my actions to former librarians.” She held her ground and he leaned toward her and you could have toasted marshmallows in the air around them.

“You tell me here and now what you’re up to or I’ll go out in my car and get General Pickle’s long rifle and ventilate that runty little head of yours.”

“A death threat?” said Thornton, raising his eyebrows. You could see him scribbling away behind his eyes.

“I don’t have nothing more in mind than unburdening all of us of a name that makes us sound like a passel of hayseeds. People don’t believe we discovered electricity yet when they hear that name Sinking Fork.”

“A real writer would know this is wrong,” she said to Thornton. “A true writer respects the past and tries to create in harmony with those pure authentic verities that spring from history. A real writer shows no interest in the trivial and empty baubles of his time. He’s too busy arm-wrestling with the gods.”

Thornton just stared at her like she was a talking pig.

“I intend to sweep all this jerkwater nonsense away,” said Mean Buck. “I’m bringing us into the twentieth century. Making us the jewel of Kentucky, the bright pink beauty of the South. I intend to move beyond the mere dabbling I’ve been doing, and correct the whopsided interest in farming and whatnot around here, and make this town the utopia it was meant to be.”

“It was meant to be a widening in the road, and that’s all.”

“No, mam. I disagree.”

“Buck,” said Thornton. “This woman has made a public threat on your life.”

He heard Thornton but it didn’t settle in. “I plan to rewrite history, correct the nincompoopism that’s been the way here for so long. I got a way. There ain’t nothing I’m not going to change about this town. Nothing, not even the weather.”

“The weather!”

“She means to kill you, Buck,” said Thornton.

“Does she, now?” Mean Buck looked at her suddenly, out of his trance. “You either join up with me, Mrs. Pickles, and help put every other town in America to shame, or you get left out in the cold.”

Mrs. Edith Sherwood Pickles hauled back and slapped Mean Buck once, twice, three times. And then got in a fourth one with her left hand.

“Wake up, you old fool,” she shouted at him.

“Help me with this bone bag, Thornton.” Mean Buck took hold of her under the armpits.

“If I must,” said Thornton.

“Don’t do this,” Billie said, and her voice would have given a shark the shivers; but Mean Buck didn’t even look her way.

Lilly was staring green-eyed normal at me. It scared me more to see her like that than if she’d revved up those eyes to blue-white.

Mrs. Sherwood kicked and twisted but Thornton and Mean Buck got her up off the ground and swung her like an empty hammock between them.

“You can’t change the weather!” she screeched.

“You’ll please excuse me, Miss Lilly.” Thornton nodded at Lilly on their way out and gave her a smile he’d bought on sale somewhere. They carried her out the back door and a few minutes later I heard Mean Buck’s Lincoln start up and drive off down the driveway.

We must’ve sat around for another ten minutes digesting it all. It got so quiet you could hear that big house creaking and moaning like an old man asleep. I didn’t dare look across at Lilly cause I knew she’d have her eyes racing. It came to me then that maybe it was possible that I had nothing but Mean Buck’s blood in me and that Lilly was all Billie blood. We’d split it down the middle. It gave me the willies thinking like that and something in my stomach went dizzy. I started picturing it, how it wasn’t really red like blood was meant to be, like Billie’s was, but something with froth in it, something weak-eyed and whitish. Pink blood.

I reached out across the table and picked up my clown glass and poured out the last of Thornton Blanding’s beer onto my dinner plate and slung that glass across the kitchen over Billie’s head at the back door. I took that look at Lilly then. And just as quick I wished I hadn’t cause her eyes were unplugged. Still green like normal, but there wasn’t a fleck of light, a bubble of fizz still in them.

“I’m sorry,” I said. About the glass. About her eyes. My blood.

“It’s the least you could do,” said Billie. She stood up then and went over to the coat-peg by the back door, crunching through that glass. She took down her coat and put it on and took down Lilly’s and mine too. “Come on, let’s get.”

“Get where?”

“Come on, Lilly,” said Billie. But Lilly didn’t wink, didn’t breathe.

“Come on,” I said to her. But it wasn’t any use. She was already there, off somewhere else.

“Leave her,” Billie told me. “She’s got to do it her own way.”

I got into my coat and followed Billie Butterworth outside. She walked over to her Falcon parked in the driveway under a pear tree. Cold night, the air clean, no grass smells, not even woodsmoke, just the bright empty sting of frost.

She got behind the wheel and cranked it up. The fine whine was still

there from a tune-up and carburetor adjustment I'd done on it earlier that month. I slid in beside her and watched the Hurst tach I'd installed on the steering column. The needle rose and fell like a windshield wiper as Billie pumped the gas.

"Where we going?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"California."

"Why?"

"That's where Little Daddy Crawdaddy is, I guess." He was absolute king of speed. Pro stocks, funny cars, jet dragsters, top fuelers and anything with wheels.

"So you can go there."

"You're not going, too?"

"We don't have to go the same place."

She revved up the Falcon then, 3500 rpms and held it there, steady, and I thought she was going to pop the clutch and go screaming, fish-tailing down the driveway. But she didn't touch the clutch and she held onto that steering wheel like it was Mean Buck's throat, and she looked out into that dark cold night.

Five minutes, ten. I was fidgety.

"What's going on?" I called to her over the racket.

She didn't answer me but kept her eyes on the road ahead of her, giving the wheel little nudges and pulls like she was darting in and out of slow traffic.

I looked out at the stars. They were all there. I'd always been meaning to learn the names of them, learn how to read the roadmaps I'd heard were printed up there. I watched one faint one for a while pretending we were really on a trip somewhere, just Billie and me and it was up to me to keep us steered right. She drove on and I kept watching that star I didn't know the name of until some water clouded over my eyes from the eyestrain and some of it ran cold down my cheek and my nose got runny. I had to give up pretending I knew where we were and let Billie just drive.

A long way later I fell asleep, my head bumping against the window. The last thing I remembered was that pear tree swaying a little like a drunk late late at night.

Then I was awake again. And there was frost on the side window and the heater was going on, keeping the front windshield clean and Mean Buck was hammering on the hood of the car with his fist. Billie held it at 3500 and Mean Buck whammed away at the hood.

When that got nowhere he came huffing around to my door.

“Let me in, Artie.”

I wouldn't look at him.

“I'll break this goddamn window.”

But I knew he wouldn't.

He thumped on my window with his knuckles until they must have hurt him. The engine churned on. Hot oil and rubber smells were coming through the floorboards. Billie was bulling ahead into the darkness. Going somewhere she had to get to. Mean Buck came around and stood in the headlights again and put his hands on the hips of his khaki trousers and panted like a horse.

“Throw her in gear, woman. Go on! Run me down!”

I thought I felt the engine nudge up a notch. He screamed at her to run him over now instead of humiliating him into the grave. When that didn't faze her, he came out of the headlights and stood next to her window and yelled in that he wouldn't fire Mrs. Pickles and he'd think twice about the Miami Beach thing, though he did say he still thought it was the best idea he'd ever had. Then he slapped his open palm on the windshield in front of her a few times, but she didn't flinch. It must have been no more to her than smearing a bug at fifty miles an hour.

Finally Mean Buck stalked off. And the engine drove on.

I woke up a little before daylight and the tach was still hovering at 3500. I listened for any dings or sputters or one of those little coughs Big Al had taught me signaled carburetor clogging down the line. Nothing doing. It purred perfect and the sun came on out and it all warmed up a few degrees.

It was maybe nine-thirty on that Saturday morning when Mean Buck came outside with Lilly and got into the Lincoln and sped off. Neither of them looked over to see us and I felt spooky, like maybe we had actually disappeared onto some road that only Billie knew the way to.

I played around with that for a while, pretending to myself we were on some straight highway that shot directly toward California, a wide endless dragstrip with Little Daddy Crawdaddy waiting at the finish line. I imagined what we might be seeing out there beyond the Sinking Fork city limits, beyond Kentucky even, heading west, dipping down from mountains, skimming across bridges that looked down on huge rivers or canyons, and zooming through frontier towns lit up with neon and reflective signs, and flying out across prairies and deserts, past cactus, sagebrush, tumbleweed. And then it was like getting to the

second verse of a Christmas carol and not knowing any more words, but still having the tune singing away in your head and going on and faking the words but really just mumbling: tumbleweed, cactus, sagebrush, mountains, deserts, prairies, ghost towns, valleys.

I sat there dead and awake. Listening to the engine, knowing I could never keep up with Billie Butterworth, with how far she could burrow inside of herself. I was just there, in that cold front seat, watching the pear tree move, watching sparrows jitter around on the phone wires, hoping she'd bob back to the surface soon.

It was Monday morning before that Falcon ran out of gas. I'd peed out the door twice and nearly clawed off the fake green leather from the dashboard to have something to chew on. And I'd had dreams I wasn't sure were dreams and pains that I wasn't sure were pains.

As the car sputtered and slurped the last of the gasoline, Billie began to loosen up the frown that had set like a plaster mask on her face. She softened up into a smile and sniffed once or twice the way she might to test a casserole of squash. Then she was back.

"Well, we got to get us a bigger gas tank next time," she said.

"We'd make better time if you'd have put it in gear."

"We did all right. It was fine to be away, wasn't it?"

"I didn't go anywhere, I don't think."

She glanced over at me then and her eyes took back some of the sadness she'd left behind on the drive.

"I see that," she said. "We're different, that's all."

"Who?"

"All of us. And you and me."

"I think my blood's pink."

"You're different is all it is. And I'm different."

I didn't understand that anymore than the rest of it. I opened the car door then and smack, it hit me right off. It was warmer out there and there was some kind of flowery honey in the breeze, something like the smell of coconut flowers or hot sand, or something I didn't have anything close to a name for.

Out of the back door came Lilly. She had her arm around Thornton's waist. As they walked over to the car, to where Billie was out limbering up, touching her toes, taking deep breaths, I saw Lilly's eyes. They were green and smiling. But it wasn't any smile you'd want to dream about. It was like the way a butcher smiles, all peaceful and happy, talking to you across the meat counter while he hacks away at some carcass.

“Come around front, y’all,” she sung out, and started off down the driveway, that arm still slung around Thornton Blanding.

“Welcome back,” he called over his shoulder. He waved his red beret at us. His arm was around her shoulders.

“We were away too long,” I said. Billie just sighed.

Around front we stopped beside Lilly and him on the edge of the terrace. And there was Mean Buck wearing a pair of white overalls, up on a scaffold, putting the last swatches of turquoise paint on the top of the last of eight columns on the house. They’d been white. And the red brick wasn’t red anymore either. It was rusty pink, the color of the inside of a fish’s mouth.

The air was swarming with new smells. Not just spring smells either. Fishy, fruity, salty smells.

“I love it,” Thornton yelled up to Mean Buck. “It’s perfect.”

“Hello, Mother,” said Lilly, still inside Thornton’s arms. “You’re looking well.”

She didn’t answer. She was looking at a white bird standing out on the terrace. It had long orange stems for legs and a warped black beak. She made a run at the creature, clapping her hands, and it untangled up into a lazy kind of flying.

“He’s doing it this time,” I said. And I took a long breath of that new scarey air.