IN AWESOME WONDER

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the University of North Texas in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

William C. McMurtry, B.S., M.A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1996
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The dissertation is a collection of eighteen short stories. These stories relate the life experiences of the first-person narrator and chronicle a period of twenty years. They are arranged in five thematic groups: Expectations, Questions, Lighter Moments, Answers, and Separation. The focus of each one represents the narrator’s experiences with his father, as the narrator attempts to understand a man who exerts such control over his life.

Expectations contains three stories, with the first depicting the narrator’s earliest association with his father. The other two represent significant growth experiences.

The five stories in the Questions portion focus on the youthful narrator as he tries to understand the reasons behind his father’s values and moral lessons.

In the section, Lighter Moments, there are four stories in which the narrator is in his late teens and recalls four incidents that lacked the usual serious undertones prevalent in most of his experiences with his father.

Answers is composed of three stories in which the narrator, nearing manhood, struggles with feelings of disillusionment with the life his father has planned for
him, as well as the realization that his father controls
every aspect of his life.

The final section of three stories, Separation, depicts
the narrator, a young man in his twenties with his own
family, coping with the need to escape his father’s control.
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INTRODUCTION

I wrote all of the eighteen stories in this collection between the spring of 1990 and the spring of 1995, and since then, I ceased my fiction writing efforts temporarily, due mainly to a scholarly interest in Ernest Hemingway and the demands of doctoral classes and teaching. Recently, however, I decided that the joys and rewards of creative writing were inspiring enough that I chose to assemble this collection for a creative dissertation. Although I have presented and published seven of the eighteen stories, the ones presented have not always been the ones published and vice versa. The publication of a particular story prompts me to ask several questions which I will address in this introduction, and the questions all center around the genre issue: Are the pieces in this collection personal essays or short stories? How might we distinguish between the two? But the most important question, really, is does it make any difference, either to me the writer or to a reader of this collection?

In the spring of 1992, I submitted "A Nail in the Coffin" to the Concho River Review and received two surprises: 1) the journal accepted it for publication and 2) the editor published it as a personal essay, not as fiction. At the time, I did not think much about the distinction
between a personal essay and a first-person short story, but as I wrote and published more, always in the first-person and always based mostly, though not entirely, upon personal experiences, I began to question the difference, since all my subsequent publications have been published as fiction. In researching for this preface, I found volumes on the short story, the structure, characteristics, definition of, history of and so forth, but little on what exactly distinguishes a personal essay from a first-person short story. What I did find does not exactly clear up the issue, but does make it easier for me, assuming for the moment that it is necessary, to categorize the pieces in this collection.

Since "A Nail in the Coffin," for me at least, initiated the need to probe the paradox of personal essay versus short story, it belongs at the center of this discussion. What did the editor see in the construction of what I consider a short story that led him to read it as a personal essay? The story has a traditional structure of beginning, middle, and an end, with conflict, action, and something of a plot, though there is no resolution of the conflict. Was it the "I" narrator? This could not be true, as an "I" narrator alone does not distinguish it as a personal essay, since personal essays often have a first-person narrator, and first-person short stories obviously do also. So in fact, the story contains characteristics which
are, according to Douglas Hesse, common to both the short story and the personal essay: a first-person narrator, the possibility and actuality of a correspondence between the words on the page and some real world beyond the page, relative brevity, and the dominance of narration (86). Inadvertently, but adding to the confusion of genres, perhaps in writing the story, I encountered the difficulty that Phillip Lopate claims is common to beginning writers. In discussing the personal, or as he sometimes calls it, the familiar essay, Lopate says that people frequently try to work out in personal essay form what they may have tried earlier to work out in fiction but most often they simply try to fictionalize the material gathered from personal experiences (Bennion 3). And Lopate further writes that familiar essays seize "on the parade and minutiae of daily life," including vanities, fashions, love, and other pleasures and disappointments of life (78). But Lopate does not say a writer cannot or should not fictionalize personal experiences, a good thing since we often assume much fiction is based, at least partially, on a writer's personal experiences, including "the minutiae of daily life." We are back at the beginning. How may we categorize "A Nail in the Coffin," as personal essay or as fiction? The piece does conform to Hesse's characteristics common to both genres, and it is, to some extent, fictionalized material based upon personal experiences.
I submitted the piece as fiction, but it apparently falls into a gray area of genre, or what Gary Morson calls a class of texts he categorizes as "boundary works" or "boundary genres" (39). He claims we may draw boundaries around such works and thus identify them according to what we take to be the meaning and interpretation, but he does not say how exactly we may do this (41, 42). Morson does not indicate how we may make sharp, dividing distinctions between fiction and nonfiction works when their characteristics place them too near more than one boundary. These distinctions are difficult to make because, as Hesse writes, "a precise boundary line" between the two does not exist (86). Morson does say that when dealing with "boundary works" there is uncertainty regarding which of "two mutually exclusive sets of conventions governs a work" because such works are "doubly decodable" in that they are possibly "two different works" (48), yet Hesse argues that just as there is no precise boundary line, neither are there mutually exclusive sets of conventions governing a work (85). Taking these critics' remarks on the personal essay into consideration, it is becoming more apparent that "A Nail in the Coffin," as well as the other pieces in this collection, is most certainly a "boundary work." Hesse offers much more definitive guidelines, which I will get to later, for making distinctions on boundary works, but since my desire to call them short stories remains, it is prudent
at this point to consider some aspects of the short story.

Short story theory has changed somewhat in recent years, and the short story is gaining in popularity, if I may point to the publication of more short story collections, inquiries concerning my own collection, and the increasing number of fiction sessions at English conferences as evidence, but almost every article dealing with the short story begins with mention of Edgar Allan Poe. I refer, of course, to Poe's "Review of Twice-Told Tales" in which he makes the famous statement that a skilled artist "having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect" (47). The "single effect" then is perhaps Poe's most significant contribution to short story theory. Brander Matthews agrees, arguing, in comparing the short story to the novel, as many critics do, that the short story "shows one action, in one place, on one day," and "deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation" (52). Perhaps Poe's theory is outdated. James Lawrence claims that the short story "frequently deals with more than one incident, and does not by any means always produce a single foreseen effect" (63), and I tend to agree with Lawrence.

We only need look at some modern works of short
fiction. Flannery O’Connor’s "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and "Greenleaf" are two stories covering more than one day. Or we may read Ernest Hemingway’s "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "Soldier’s Home," William Faulkner’s "That Evening Sun," and D.H. Lawrence’s "The Rocking-Horse Winner," and the list of short stories dealing with more than a single effect, more than one incident, goes on and on. Of my collection of nineteen stories, six cover a period of more than one day and more than one incident, but the gathering evidence indicates they can still be called short stories. In fact, I think that the key point to this discussion is that short story theory has changed since Poe’s time, and the criteria by which we judge or define what is a short story is as varied as the critics who attempt to characterize the short story.

In her "The Short Story: A Proposed Definition," Mary Rohrberger, like James Lawrence, refutes Poe’s and Matthew’s characteristics of brevity, closely wrought texture, and unity of effect. She defines the short story in terms of its "overall purpose and structure," and in the briefest of definitions, says simply that a short story relies upon the meaning "beneath the surface of the narrative" which should "function to question the world of appearances and to point to a world of reality" (81). It seems this definition may be expanded upon. Frank O’Connor comes a bit closer. He writes that there is no essential form, but there are three
essential elements in a story—exposition, development, and drama—and that very often there is an intense awareness of human loneliness (87, 88, 91). When we consider Krebs in Hemingway’s "Soldier’s Home," or the old man drinking alone in his "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," Dilsey in Faulkner’s "That Evening Sun," and Mrs. May in Flannery O’Connor’s "Greenleaf," we find all of Frank O’Connor’s elements present, especially the loneliness aspect. Several of my own pieces conform to O’Connor’s criteria, including that intense sense of a character’s alienation from those around him. Still we want more information to lead us to a more thorough knowledge of what constitutes a short story.

A. L. Bader describes what he calls the "older type" story of traditional plot, one which contains a structure in which the plot is based on conflict and action, an action that is both sequential and progressive, and that leads to some resolution of the conflict. His test of such a story is simple. Each scene, incident, and detail of action must bear a relation to the conflict and carry significance (108). He then says that the modern short story seems to be lacking in narrative structure but really is not. Bader claims instead that the modern short story is different in technique. He states that the conflict, plot, and action are there but the writer tends to focus more upon a limited time frame or limited area of action, so as to suggest, hint, or imply more than is stated (110). We cannot read
this last statement without thinking of Hemingway's celebrated "iceberg" theory of writing short fiction. Up to this point I have not mentioned what exactly is meant by the "short" in a short story, but I should make some attempt to discuss this aspect. I hesitate only because I think that most competent readers have read stories of three pages and stories of forty pages and know each to be a short story and that length is not a criteria designating "short" unless we are trying to compress a story to conference length or to get it into a particular journal. So the very fact that we can arbitrarily change the physical length, indicates that in talking of "short," we are talking about something besides length.

To Norman Friedman, defining shortness is not a question of fixing upper and lower limits on the number of words in a story or the number of pages. He points out that a dividing line cannot and need not be determined. That would be arguing length in quantitative terms, which accomplishes nothing. Instead, he says, a story may be short for either or both of two reasons: the material itself is of small compass or, if broader of compass, the author chooses to condense portions for artistic effect. He further suggests that the first reason is determined by the object to be represented, and the second reason has to do with the manner in which it is represented (132, 133). Friedman discusses size in terms of the action rather than
size in terms of the story. Hemingway for an example, in writing "Hills Like White Elephants," needed only five pages to clearly show the nature of the couple's relationship, their distance, their lifestyle, their lack of communication, and their opposing views, so it need not be any longer and all the action is there. On the other hand, in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," one of Hemingway's longer works, there are several smaller actions that all have a bearing on the few minutes of action in Francis' short happy life. Hemingway could not have made those moments so dramatic without the inclusion of the actions leading up to it, but it is still not a question of length but simply how few or how many actions comprise the story.

However, in contrast to Friedman, Austin Wright does suggest physical limits on what constitutes the short story. Wright lists several of what he calls "tendencies" that we associate with the short story as a genre: 1) The length tends to be between five hundred words and fifty pages. 2) It tends to deal with character and action in its fictional world. 3) The action tends to be externally simple and having few episodes and no subplots. 4) The short story tends to be strongly unified, more so than other prose fiction. 5) The plots tend to be ones of discoveries, epiphanies, and such. 6) Particularly in modern short stories, the writer leaves things to inference (52). Given
the remarks on personal essays, boundary works, and short
story theory, are we any closer to being able to
differentiate between what is a personal essay and a short
story? I doubt it, but as I said earlier, Hesse offers more
distinct guidelines for doing so, and his remarks are worth
exploration.

Hesse, like Morson, regards what he calls the
"narrative essay" and first-person short stories as pieces
that fall into a "boundary zone" of genre classification,
and Hesse claims that prior to reading a personal essay or a
short story, we as readers, regardless of whether we intend
to or not, automatically consider and respond to two
elements that result in "framing" the piece for us: 1) Texts, whether published in an academic journal, a book or
anthology, a magazine, or other publication, are usually
labeled, and we read them accordingly; and 2) The personal
essay very often, though not always, also has a first-person
narrator, and we have a natural tendency to equate the "I"
in either work as being the author (88). A fairly obvious
corollary to these two points is that we have less tendency
to equate the "I" with the author when a work is labeled as,
or we somehow know it to be a short story, but an "I"
narrator still invites a reader, at some point in the
reading, to question whether the piece is fact or fiction.

My "A Nail in the Coffin" is a good example of Hesse's
two points. The piece contains all of the characteristics,
listed previously, that Hesse claims are common to both personal essays and first-person short stories. The work concerns a young cowboy in his late teens who spends a day in a soaking rain working on a ranch. He is in conflict with his father and the weather, but most of the conflict is internal concerning why he continues to do something—working as a cowboy—that he no longer enjoys all that much, if at all. The piece ends with no resolution to the conflict. First, this text is labeled in the Concho River Review under the heading of personal essay, and second, it has a first-person narrator, relating the events in the past-tense. Since it is labeled, a reader would be justified in assuming the piece is based upon personal experience and is factual. From that point we would further assume that the "I" is the author. I am the only reader of this piece who can know whether the author is an eighteen-year old young man who is relating an experience that had recently occurred or a much older man looking twenty-five years back, that is until the reader looks at the notes on contributors. Even then, for all any other reader knows, I could have fabricated the entire piece. I did, in fact, fictionalize portions, proving true what a professor told me once when we were discussing my work and the issue I am now addressing. He said that even if my aim were to write from personal experience, I could not possibly remember everything exactly as it happened, and I therefore would be
creating some of the piece, which in turn would make it fiction. I realize that this example of my own writing and publishing experience does not yet resolve the problem of distinguishing between the personal essay and first-person short story, but merely illustrates the first layer of difficulties in doing so. However, Hesse offers additional criteria which are useful.

Hesse critiques two works, George Orwell's "A Hanging," which is generally considered an essay, as it appeared in Paul Connolly's collection *On Essays*, and William Carlos Williams "The Use of Force," considered by most to be a short story, since it is published in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. Both texts share the characteristics common to both the personal essay and the short story, and each, due to its publication history, is "labeled," setting up reader expectations. Hesse proceeds to read and critique the former as a short story and the latter as an essay, and he arrives at several significant points that affect our reading of any "boundary zone" text. Rather than repeat Hesse's critique of these pieces, I prefer to apply his points to my own "A Nail in the Coffin."

According to Hesse, the first consideration we should note when undertaking this exchanging of labels, is that the tasks of an essayist and of a short story writer are different. The essayist's primary concern is to express thoughts and ideas, while the story writer's concern is to
create an ordered set of actions that point a reader toward some kind of "end" (90). In other words, when reading essays we look for the point the essayist is trying to make about the way things are, and when reading stories, we look at the unfolding action, or the way things happen in the story. If Hesse is correct, then when we read "Nail" as a personal essay, we read it expecting to find a point, and this is troublesome. Is it simply that the young man is cold, wet, and tired of the less romantic aspects of being a cowboy? Could the point be that the young man no longer wants to carry on the family tradition? Might the point be that the young man does not want, and perhaps has never wanted, to be a cowboy but does not know how to quit, which would in effect disappoint his father? None of these seems significant enough for a seven page essay, yet maybe other readers would find more. However, I do see the effects of what happens, the unfolding action in the work, if it is read as a short story.

The young man begins the morning, as well as many other mornings apparently, in conflict with his father, who makes some demeaning remarks and is overly critical in general. The weather turns nasty and the young man must endure hours of being cold and wet, during which time his father seizes an opportunity to question the young man's ability to "measure up" to family standards and laughs at his misery. The first-person narrator reveals his own inner conflict
regarding his desire to "measure up." The work ends with no resolution to any of the conflict, and we only know that for that day at least, he must continue to endure. There is a story in "Nail." There is a plot, action, conflict, and we suspect that the young man is going through some kind of change. A short story does not have to resolve the conflict; this one is open-ended in that regard, but we are left with a hint of a coming resolution. So, to read this piece as a personal essay and look for a point is hardly fulfilling, but when read as a story, it yields an opportunity for a satisfying interpretation.

Hesse's second consideration for reading personal essays and short stories is that we should be aware of two qualities he refers to as "onceness" and "alwayness." "Onceness," indicates that the particular events of the narrative are not necessarily typical and this quality belongs to the short story. "Alwaysness," he claims, is indicative of the essay and causes readers to assume the events are typical and representative of the "way things are" (96). To refer to "Nail" again, if we read it as an essay, then we are to assume the events are typical and are showing the father and son and the work and the weather as they always are. The narrator indicates that the father's criticism is a fairly constant element, but other things are not. The narrator claims to enjoy the ranch work sometimes, and we certainly would not believe that ranchers always work
in a downpour, though the weather contributes to the conflict. However if we read it as a short story, Hesse's quality of "onceness" is most apparent. In addition to the father's critical attitude, this particular day the weather is very unpleasant, making the young man miserable. This particular day the father questions his son's ability to measure up to family standards, and on this particular day, there are eleven other men with whom he must measure up as well. There is nothing to indicate that the day is typical and representative of the ways things always are, with the exception of the father's attitude. The work does possess the characteristics of "onceness" inherent to a short story.

The third point Hesse considers important to reading essays and first-person short stories concerns the "I" narrator and the author, which he refers to as "I-centeredness." "Even if we admit all available information about the authors," Hesse writes, "it is impossible to tell from the pieces themselves whether they are fact or fiction" (99). I made this same point earlier regarding my own work, but Hesse elaborates on the problem. According to Hesse, if we can be certain a piece is personal essay, we naturally assume the "I" is the author, but with a first-person short story, we are inclined to assume that the "I" is not, or is only, some version of the author (99). The issue to Hesse is one of reference. Essays are supposed to refer to a real world and short stories a created one, but again, how does
the reader know? In referring back to "Nail" again, how could anyone know whether the "I" narrator was me, the author and the world depicted real, or were the "I" narrator and the world both created? Another personal experience points to this unsolvable problem of the "I" narrator and the author.

At a conference with a session for short fiction, I, and several others read our stories. Since we had additional time remaining after all had read, the chair of the session asked the readers the question, "Where do each of you get the ideas for your stories?" I replied, "From personal experience." The chair looked surprised and repeated my own words in the form of a question, to which I answered, "Yes." I realized that he, and I would guess others, had assumed the story and the "I" narrator were both created, neither of which was the case.

Hesse admit that he offers no definitive rules for making distinctions between personal essays and first-person short stories, but merely some guidelines to aid readers. We should consider the "labeling," whether the unfolding action or the point predominates, whether the work has the quality of "onceness" or "alwayness," and finally the problem of "I-centeredness." To Hesse, the central issue is not fact versus fiction, but how individual authors render their narratives to hold our attention regarding some meaningful event (105). I belabor the point of
distinguishing between personal essays and first-person short stories because the narratives in this collection do depict meaningful events. Granted, as I have stated earlier, they are based partly upon personal experience, but an equal part of each I fictionalized, in the imaginative sense, and I created the whole of each one in a literal sense. Hesse concludes that at some point we rely on authors and editors to inform us of the genre of a particular piece (105), and H.E. Bates argues that "a short story can be anything the author decides it shall be" (15). I could at this point simply say that the editor who labeled "A Nail in the Coffin" as a personal essay was mistaken, that he should have published the piece as a fictional short story, and in this discussion I have provided ample evidence that such a mistake is easy to make, since the boundaries between the two genres are not clearly definable. Additionally, I have given evidence to support an argument that the work more closely resembles a short story than a personal essay, so I am inclined to call it a short story and let that be the end of the discussion. However, the question of whether or not it makes any difference what we label the pieces in the collection remains, and my reading of several collections of short stories, memoirs, and essays bears on this final question.

I restricted my reading to the following contemporary works, in some cases reading the entire collection, though
in others I only read six or seven pieces, a sampling, and I read various individual works from a recent anthology: Phillip Lopate’s collection of essays, Bachelorhood; Tobias Wolff’s This Boy’s Life: A Memoir; The Watch: Stories by Rick Bass; and The Things They Carried by Tim O’Brien. And from A Pocketful of Prose: Contemporary Short Fiction, Tim O’Brien’s "Field Trip," Richard Ford’s "Electric City," and "Fires" by Rick Bass. Except for the works by Lopate and Wolff, all of the others are labeled fiction. While reading, I kept in mind Hesse’s points of similarity between personal essays and first-person short stories, as well as points of difference, such as the effects of labeling a work, the need for an essay to have a point, whereas a story focuses on the unfolding action, and his remarks on the aspects of "onceness" pertaining to stories and "alwaysness" pertaining to essays. Additionally, I considered aspects we look for in a short story: exposition, development, drama, unity, and details of the action.

Rather than analyze each selection by each author, which would mean nothing unless a reader has read them, I will draw some generalizations pertaining to this personal essay versus first-person short story discussion. Lopate’s "Osao" and "Willy" are both personal essays, as he claims in the introduction, yet the former is equal parts narrative and dialogue, whereas the latter is mostly all narrative. "Willy" has Hesse’s "onceness" quality, while "Osao" has the
"alwaysness" aspect. But both have development, action, and conflict, and there is certainly a story in each one. Wolff's memoirs, arranged chronologically and without individual titles, are largely narrative, with some dialogue in places, and they have the development of plot and action and the "onceness" quality of stories. But because the authors have labeled them as essays and memoirs, we tend to read them as factual reporting of real events. Still, they have what I would call a story-like quality in them, instead of simply making a point, as essays are supposed to do.

Of the fiction, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, stories about Vietnam war experiences, read and sound like essays. They lack the development of plot we expect in stories and are nearly entirely narrative. And even though the individual events reported apparently happened only once, each has the essay-like, "alwaysness" quality in that a reader feels like these events were typical, every day occurrences to someone, if not the narrator. Rick Bass' *The Watch: Stories* have more of the elements we look for in short stories. Though mostly narrative, these selections contain the plot, development of action, and conflict, where each scene and incident contributes to an overall feeling that these are indeed fiction. From *A Pocketful of Prose*, O'Brien's "Field Trip," Ford's "Electric City," and Bass' "Fires," all sound and read like a personal account of an experience, like essays, but each one has the "onceness"
quality of short stories. These events happened only one time to these authors.

I am no closer to drawing conclusions about how to distinguish personal essays from first-person short stories than when I began this discussion. I do believe Hesse's point on the labeling of a piece does prompt reader expectations of the work, to some degree. Yet, as with O'Brien's stories, I could not keep from interpreting them as personal experiences of the narrator, and I could not refrain from assuming the narrator was the author. However, as a result of my reading and as a result of this discussion, it no longer makes any difference to me whether a reader or an editor labels the works in this collection as personal essays or first-person short stories. And I do not think the labeling of a piece detracts from whatever value a reader finds in the work. I think that we derive pleasure from our reading largely on how well the author conveys his ideas, his feelings, and his story, whether fact or fiction or a combination of both.

The stories, or personal essays, in this collection are all told in the first-person and related in the past-tense. While each stands alone as an individual story, they are congruent as a group and arranged in groups based upon a variety of personal experiences of the narrator covering a period of twenty years. And they share a similarity in setting, traditional structure, and a variety of themes.
The collection as a whole is an excellent representation of short fiction.
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EXPECTATIONS
Tom and Big Boy

Dad was already a wiry, grouchy, set-in-his-ways, fifty-year-old rancher when I was born, and my arrival didn’t alter any of those things. I started going with Dad to feed cattle when I was two, sitting up high on the truck seat on a box with a pillow on it. I remember going in the Mobil filling station when I was four or five and hearing men tell Dad that he’d almost waited too long to raise his own cowboys.

My brother, Larry, had already left for college by the time that I started going horseback with Dad every day. Over the next twenty years, Larry returned only occasionally, not nearly often enough to help with much of the ranch work, so Dad had no intention of letting another son slip away.

I started going with Dad every Saturday and six days a week in the summer when I was seven years old, though that is not a particularly early age for cowboys to begin their training. I had a big bay horse named Pee Wee, who was too big for me to get on by myself, so Dad always had to swing me up onto his back. I wanted a Shetland pony so that I could get on and off whenever I wanted, but Dad wouldn’t hear of it.

"Hell no! You’re not getting any damned Shetland pony," he’d say, every time that I would ask for one.

"They can’t keep up with a grown horse and they’re
meaner than hell," he'd add. "Larry had one named Polecat, and the sonofabitch tried to drag him off under every mesquite limb he could find."

I remember looking off across the mesquite-covered pasture and thinking Larry must have had a hell of a time of it. Maybe that was why he didn't want to be a cowboy.

So Dad would throw me on Pee Wee and we'd trudge off on our daily rounds of pastures looking for cattle to doctor. The year was 1956, and the screwworm epidemic was going strong. Dad owned 500 or so head of steer and heifer yearlings scattered about the county in several pastures. We'd ride through them day after day, hour after hour, looking for infected yearlings to doctor.

The work was incredibly boring to a seven year old. I really wished that I was home playing with my friends. I wondered too why I couldn't stay at home some mornings like my older sisters did, since, according to Dad, Mom didn't do anything except shop or play bridge or attend the Amity Club meetings. But morning after morning, Dad would get me up about four-thirty or five and here we'd go.

By mid-morning, I was in a hot, sleepy daze. I'd let Pee Wee follow Dad's horse so close that he kept stepping on the other horse's hind feet. That always pissed Dad off.

"Damit, son," he'd say. "I've told you a hundred times not to follow another horse that close. Back him up some or move over."
I'd wake up and hold Pee Wee back, letting him graze a little, while I swatted mosquitoes and put some distance between me and Dad. Pretty soon Dad would miss me and look around and then holler for me to catch up. I'd jerk Pee Wee's head up, sock the spurs to him in hopes of getting him into a good lope until I caught up with Dad. He'd always have something to say about that tactic too.

"What were you doing back there?" Dad'd say. "Don't let that horse graze anytime he wants. Ride on up here and help me look for sick cattle." I'd trot along for a while looking at the cattle.

"How do you tell if they have screw worms?" I'd ask.

"They've usually got a bloody sore around the brand or maybe on their heads," Dad replied.

I'd look for blood and imagine what I thought screwworms must look like, but I never spotted any before Dad did. I soon tired of the job and let Pee Wee lag behind until Dad hollered again, time after time, hour after hour, in the heat and mesquites and mosquitos. That's how we spent nearly every day the summer when I was seven, and I remember thinking that cowboying wasn't much fun. But one day things changed.

The day seemed like any other at first, hot and boring. We were looking for screwworms again. I was lagging behind, wondering what my buddies in town must be doing: playing baseball or digging a neat tunnel in somebody's backyard so
we'd have a hideout. I was drowsy and looking down at the ground as Pee Wee made his way through another mesquite thicket. Dad was several yards ahead, trotting up to get a look at another bunch of cattle when I saw a rabbit dart away from a patch of weeds, and there sat Tom and Big Boy.

They were two little boys, about a foot tall, and they were sitting on two neat little red and white motorscooters. I don't remember any particular features exactly, except that they were about my age, only miniature.

"Hi," one said. "I'm Tom and this here's Big Boy."

I looked up to see how far Dad was ahead.

"Hi," I said. "I'm John and I'm helping my Daddy look for cattle. I'm a cowboy."

"Yeah, we know," Big Boy said. "We've been watching you for a while. Can we ride along?"

"Sure," I said, looking up to see where Dad was when I realized that I was talking aloud. "Come on."

They fired up their scooters and fell in beside Pee Wee. They were nifty. They were dressed like cowboys too, even had little ropes and spurs, but it was their scooters that I liked best. I'd always wanted one myself, though I knew that I was too little. Their scooters were bright and shiny, and as they rode along, they would jump stumps and dart around bushes going anywhere they wanted to.

"What do you guys do?" I asked.

"Oh, we just ride around these old pastures," Tom said.
"Sometimes we rope rabbits and once in a while a coyote or two for fun, but mostly we just ride our scooters."

"Yeah, we're kind of cowboys, too," Big Boy said, "like you."

I grinned big at that. "Yeah, but you boys have scooters instead of horses."

"But we can do anything you can do," Tom added. "We'll rope a rabbit for you directly."

"John!" I heard Dad yell, as he came loping through the brush and up to me.

"Come on, goddamit! Keep up. I've got a little bunch of yearlings headed for the pens. Come on now. What were you doing back there?" Dad turned and loped off and I followed.

I looked back for Tom and Big Boy, but they were already up beside me, grinning and having a big time. I was too close to Dad to say anything.

"Are we gonna get to chase and rope something?" Tom asked.

I looked up at Dad to see if he'd heard, but somehow I knew that he hadn't. I shrugged my shoulders at Tom, but I didn't say anything, and the two of them raced off, darting among our yearlings, doing wheelies on their scooters, hollering and yelling, but of course I was the only one who could hear them.

Dad and I penned the sick cattle and doctored them.
Tom and Big Boy weren't anywhere in sight. We loaded our horses into Dad's big truck and headed to town for dinner. I took off my hat and put my chin on the window to let the breeze blow through my hair. When I looked down at the ground, the boys were riding along right beside the truck. They followed us nearly all the way to town before they turned off, waving to me as they turned their scooters and headed off across another pasture.

Dad and I didn't ride a pasture that afternoon, but I told him at bedtime that I sure wanted to go the next morning. He looked surprised, because usually I asked him if I had to go the next day.

"Hell yeah, you can go," Dad said. "But you're going to have to start keeping up. I could have lost those cattle today by coming back after you."

I promised that I would keep up better.

The days took on new meaning. No sooner than Dad and I would start off across a pasture, I would drop behind a little, and Tom and Big Boy would appear. They would come roaring up on their scooters, laughing and hollering and cutting up. I began to devise things for them to do.

Every time a rabbit jumped up, the race was on. They'd take off after him, jumping stumps and bushes and creeks. Sometimes one would rope the rabbit and sometimes the other would, then they'd ride back up beside me. We'd talk about the race and how hard the rabbit was to catch and so on. I
was fascinated by the boys and the amazing things that they could do on their scooters.

"How do you make your scooters jump?" I asked.

"Oh, you just push this little button here and up it goes," Tom said. "Pretty neat, huh?"

They had a place to tie their rope onto, and they both carried a rifle and pistol in case they needed to shoot anything. They were just like old-timey cowboys, only my age and they rode scooters.

The three of us would ride along just talking and laughing. They were fun, though, of course, Dad interfered sometimes. He heard me talking one day.

"Ride on up here beside me," he said. "Who are you talking to?"

"Nobody," I said.

"Yes, you were. I heard you."

I didn’t say anything. I just rode along looking down.

"Don’t ride along looking down, son," Dad said. "You can’t see cattle looking down at the ground."

I’d look up and ride along beside him for a ways, but I always managed to gradually fall behind so me and the boys could have some more fun. Once in a while we’d spot a coyote and they would take after it. Now that was really wild. A coyote can run like hell, and I could just see the whole thing. They were my constant companions out in those pastures. I began to talk to them all of the time, even
though Dad might be close enough to hear me. He finally quit asking who I was talking to.

Occasionally, Dad and I would help our neighbors work cattle or they would help us with a big working. There were no other boys my age or even close. They were all grown men, close to Dad’s age. Tom and Big Boy would appear on those days too, but I had to be careful when I was talking to them. I didn’t mind too much for Dad to suspect something, but I didn’t want the other men to know about "my boys."

Summers and Saturdays passed with the years, but Tom and Big Boy remained close companions. By the time that I was ten or eleven, I thought that I was getting to be a pretty decent cowboy. I didn’t ride along looking down any more, but I could still ride along and talk to the boys and do my job. I loved them.

The summer that I was thirteen, we got a new neighbor, a young cowboy, probably in his twenties. He was everything that I wanted to be. Wayne became my friend, and he began to teach me the things about cowboying that Dad never had the patience to teach me. I had a new horse, young and kind of frisky, by then. I’d graduated to a bigger saddle and a new pair of spurs, and once in a while Mom would tell me that Dad had said that I was making a hand. But the boys still came around some when I was alone, and they still chased rabbits and coyotes.
And then one day that summer, we were helping a
neighbor round up some wild cattle in a big pasture. I was
riding along, watching what I was doing, and Tom and Big Boy
rode up beside me.

"Hi, John," Tom said. "How are you doing?" Big Boy
nodded his head at me.

"Well, boys, I'm fine. I'm just watching these old
wild cattle," I said. "I'm trying to make a hand. What
have you boys been up to?"

"Oh, about the same things as usual," Big Boy said.
"We just saw you here and thought that we ought to say
hello."

"I'm sure glad to see you fellows," I said. "I guess
that I've been busy lately and haven't seen much of you,
have I?"

"That's okay," Tom said. "We've kind of been busy
too." We rode along a ways just chatting. The men on each
side of me were far enough away that they couldn't hear me.
A rabbit jumped up and took off, but neither of the boys
went after him.

About then, an old, high-headed, Brahma cow turned and
started to lead a little bunch of cattle back into the brush
between me and another cowboy. I turned my horse to go head
her and took off in a run. I turned the cows back into the
herd, got back in my place, and looked around for Tom and
Big Boy. I could just barely see them, way off in the
distance, racing across the top of a big hill, and then I did not see them anymore.
Keeping the Myth Alive

I was thirteen the first time I saw Wayne. He emerged from the early, morning darkness, sitting on a horse as black as the night. Dad had a day's work planned and had called the foreman of a neighboring ranch to see if he could send someone to help us. The foreman, a friend of Dad's, said he'd send a man, and the cowboy would meet us on the road somewhere. Dad slowed the pickup to a stop and we got out, as the cowboy got off his horse. By the pickup lights I couldn't see much of him.

"My name's Wayne Petit," he said to Dad, as they exchanged names and shook hands. I kind of stood back, in the edge of the darkness, wishing I could see better and thinking of the strangeness of this early morning meeting in the middle of the road.

"Been waiting long?" Dad asked.

"No," Wayne said. "Damn mosquitoes were about to carry me off though."

Dad looked at the darkness surrounding us and then at the cowboy and his horse again.

"It was pretty dark coming across that pasture, wasn't it?" Dad questioned. We could barely see the barn light at Wayne's, high on a hill, a good two or three miles away.

"Damn right it was," Wayne chuckled, glancing at the tiny speck of light, "and this black son-of-a-pooch was wanting to throw me off. It was so damn dark I could barely
see his head."

We loaded the black horse into the trailer, climbed into the pickup and headed on up the road. I got a better look at this cowboy in the dim cab light, and he looked to be in his twenties. I'd been going with Dad a long time and this was the first young cowboy I'd seen in a while. Dad was 62 that year, and most of the neighboring ranchers were near his age. I was always the youngest around any cow-working.

Wayne was slim, broad-shouldered, and muscular. He wore a sleeveless shirt, which was kind of strange for a cowboy, a felt hat, though it was summer time, a pair of shotgun-style leggings with big, silver dollar-sized, conchos down each leg, and a pair of spurs that jingled as loud as Dad's. He pulled a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket, rolled a cigarette, found a match that he struck with his thumbnail, and lit his smoke. Then he looked at me through a long stream of smoke and stuck the match in the side of his mouth. God, I thought, he looks exactly like a cowboy ought to look.

"You have a name?" he asked, with a big, old friendly smile on his face. He cocked one leg over a knee and spun the big rowel on his spur.

"John," I replied. I was looking at him, thinking about him riding that bronc across three miles of pitch-dark pasture. That took real nerve.
"Well, John," Wayne said, "you can call me Hotshot."

My heart nearly skipped a beat and then began to race. Dad’s head jerked around suddenly.

"You’re Hotshot Petit?" Dad asked.

"Yeah," Wayne laughed, "someone at the Waggoner Ranch gave me that nickname when I was a kid, and I’ve been trying to live up to it ever since."

I couldn’t believe my luck. I’d heard the men tell stories about a young, extremely wild and reckless cowboy called Hotshot, who worked for Waggoner’s. They claimed there wasn’t anyone wilder or crazier than this man, and he was sitting in the pickup next to me. It was said that he could ride anything with hair on it, and rope and do everything better than anyone had seen it done before. He was a living legend.

"Well, I’ll be damned," Dad said. "Well, that’s good. Yeah, nicknames have a way of sticking to you." Even Dad was a little impressed, though of course he tried not to sound like it, and of course Hotshot paid it no mind.

"I guess they do," Hotshot said. "Anyway, I quit that outfit about a month ago and came to work for Cowan’s. I haven’t had time to get around and meet anybody yet."

"You will today," Dad said, "and we’re glad to have you. We could use some more young hands around here."

Dad resumed his normal, strictly-business tone and they talked on a minute or two about the weather, cattle prices,
horses and so on. It was just getting acquainted kind of
collection, and I was only half-listening. The light was
getting better, and I was taking in every inch of this man.

Hotshot looked at me again. I guess he could feel my
eyes on him.

"Yeah, I started drawin' pay from Waggoners when I was
about your age," he said, looking me right in the eye. "You
wantin' to be a cowpuncher too?"

Hotshot was talking to me but Dad answered.

"Hell, he doesn't know what he wants to be," Dad said,
"but he's going to get lots of practice at cowboying and
ranching while he figures this one."

Hotshot laughed at Dad's remark and winked at me.

"Why, ya look like ya got the makin's of a damn good
hand to me," Hotshot said.

"I'm learning," I said, grinning. I couldn't think of
anything else to say. I'd never met a legend before.

"Hotshot," Dad said, "you'll probably find things on
these smaller ranches a little tame compared to the big
outfits, but most of us still do things the cowboy way. I
do everything I possibly can on horseback. I figure the
good Lord gave a horse four legs and me only two for a
reason."

"Sounds plenty good to me," Hotshot said, chuckling.
"I've damn sure got a bunch of 'em to ride." He looked at
me again.
"Hell, you’re old enough to ride a few broncs, John," Hotshot added. "I started riding ‘em when I was younger than you are. Maybe you can come by and give me a hand sometime."

Dad didn’t say anything to that, so I did.

"I don’t know much about bronc riding, but I’d be glad to come help," I said. I really didn’t know much about young horses, but there wasn’t anyone who wanted to learn any more than I did.

"You’re not gonna learn any younger," Hotshot said. He winked at me again and laughed that easy way that I was already beginning to like.

"Here we are," Dad said, slowing the pickup. "It’s time to go to work."

We had reached our ranch, but I wished we’d had another hour’s drive at least. I wanted to talk to Hotshot some more, but around one of Dad’s workings, I had to be on my toes. Dad expected me to know as much as possible, as soon as possible, and he wasn’t long on patience. He’d chew my butt out if I didn’t pay attention to the work, and that day he chewed on it plenty because I couldn’t keep my eyes off Hotshot.

Several times during the day, I’d be in my usual sulk after getting a butt chewing for something, and Hotshot would ride up beside me laughing and grinning. I’d never thought there was anything funny about butt chewings until
he came along.

"Hey, Honcho," he'd say, grinning from ear to ear, "do ya know what ya did wrong just then?" I didn't know what Honcho meant, but I sure liked the way it sounded, and he was talking to me.

I'd shake my head no, so he'd explain. Sometimes he could even make a joke out of it, so I'd laugh too.

One time, after I really did screw up royally, he looked at me, shaking his head. "Honcho," he said, looking solemn for just an instant, "you got the makin's, but you're going to have to get your head out of your butt, or your Daddy's not gonna let you live to see twenty."

We both just roared with laughter. Cowboying had never been this much fun. And I wasn't the only one to benefit from Hotshot's presence. The other men, including Dad, took to him right away, and he to them. Cow-workings were not necessarily solemn affairs, but the work demanded a serious attitude. Hotshot's easy laughter and his constant banter with me and the others changed the tone. Even Dad laughed more than I'd ever heard him laugh before. The hard, hot workday fairly flew by.

Late that afternoon, while we were sitting around the roundup, Hotshot rode up beside me. He sat there, looking like he and that black horse were glued together, just looking me over good.

"So, Honcho, ya think ya want to be a cowboy, do ya?"
he asked. He was dead serious.

"Yeah, I do. I like it, sometimes," I answered.

"Well, I’ve got some bad news for ya," Hotshot said. "Your Dad’s not gonna let you have time to be a cowboy. He wants you to go from boy to cowman right away. I’ve seen it happen before."

"I know he wants me to be something," I said, "but I’m not sure what."

"That’s where I’m gonna help ya out," Hotshot said. "Do ya know what the difference between a cowboy and a cowman is?"

I wasn’t sure—it seemed like cowmen were old and cowboys were young—but I knew there was more to it. There were a few, older men around who Dad claimed were "old, worn out cowboys who never amounted to much, never owned anything but a saddle" and unless that was all I wanted to be, he said, then I’d better learn to think, study cows, and pay attention constantly.

"I don’t know for sure," I said, "but I think that Dad’s a cowman and you’re a cowboy."

"You’re right as rain about that," Hotshot said. "I may or may not be a cowman someday, but right now I’m a cowboy, and that’s all I intend to be."

"So what’s the difference?" I asked.

"It’s pretty hard to explain," he said, "but I’ll give it a shot."
About then I had to ride off a ways. Dad was looking at me pretty hard, but I didn’t go so far but what I could still hear Hotshot.

"Honcho, it’s all in the way ya look at things," Hotshot said, "and how ya feel about ‘em."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"A cowman like your Dad looks at these cows, this work, everything, as a way of makin’ a livin’," Hotshot said.

"It’s serious business to him, and he figures the sooner you get serious about this stuff, the more likely you are to be a cowman yourself someday."

I nodded, thinking, listening. "And a cowboy?" I asked.

"But to a cowboy," Hotshot said, "punchin’ cows, ridin’ horses is a livin’. A cowboy don’t give a damn who owns ‘em, as long as he can have some fun doin’ what he does best and draw a little pay for doin’ it, and neither should you, not now, and there’s not a damn thing wrong with lookin’ at it that way. Leave that serious, worryin’ about everything crap to the old-timers. You savvy?"

He rode off a ways then, probably to let me think about what he’d said. It made sense. I liked to do things with cows; I liked to be around ‘em; I like to work ‘em; but I didn’t like to think about ‘em all the time, like Dad wanted me to. I rode over closer to Hotshot.

"Hotshot, I think that I understand," I said. "So what
"Ya go right on doin' what you're doin'," Hotshot said. "Ya watch, listen, pay attention, and learn, but ya quit worryin' about doing everything right. Hell, butt chewin' never hurt anybody. I've had plenty of 'em. Laugh once in a while. It's a hell of a lot more fun."

That all sounded pretty good, but I hadn't forgot about Dad's part in this yet.

"But what about Dad and his wanting me to be a cowman?" I asked.

"That'll all come in time, Honcho. Trust me. Many a good cowman was a hell of a good cowboy first," Hotshot said, and he paused for just a second, "like your Dad."

That stunned me. Dad had always been an old-timer to me.

"Dad, a cowboy like you?" I asked, unbelieving.

"Damn sure was," Hotshot said. "I'd heard of him long before I met him today, from other old-timers. But he's forgot about the fun of them old days where you're concerned."

I had trouble thinking of Dad and Hotshot as the same thing, but Hotshot himself said it was so.

"Then it ought to be all right for me to be a cowboy first," I said, thinking, getting excited.

"That's what I'm tellin' ya. You're catchin' on," Hotshot said, "and if ya really want to be a cowboy, I'll
help ya."

"You mean it?" I asked.

"Ya damn right, I mean it," he said. "Me and you gotta be compadres. We're the only ones around here under fifty. We've gotta stick together."

I didn't have the slightest idea what compadres meant, but if Hotshot said it, and we were going to be, then it had to be good. I was all for it.

"What do ya say, Honcho?" he asked. "We got a deal?"

"I say damn right. We got a deal." Lord, I felt so good I could just squeal.

He grinned at me real big then and rolled himself a cigarette.

"Now we'd both better spread apart a little more," Hotshot said, "and start payin' attention, or we'll be needin' another job tomorrow." He winked at me again and rode off.

I couldn't remember ever feeling as good as I felt right then. Something was different; I could feel it!

When we finished work that day, we hauled Hotshot home and met his wife and baby. I hated to go off and leave him, but I knew that he'd be coming to help us regularly from then on. I guess that I was pretty quiet on the way home. I couldn't quit thinking about Hotshot and the things he'd said. Dad looked different too. I kept glancing at him, trying to imagine him and Hotshot as the same thing, and I
wanted to keep it all to myself, sort of a secret that I could play with over and over in my mind.

"What's on your mind?" Dad asked.

"Hotshot," I said. I wasn't going to turn loose of much.

"He's something, isn't he?" Dad said. "He's ever bit as good as any cowpuncher I've ever seen, and I've seen a bunch."

"I like him," I said.

"Yeah, you two seemed to hit it off," Dad said. "I noticed you all talking, maybe a little too much."

"He told me things," I explained.

"What kind of things?" Dad asked.

"Things about cowboys and cowboying," I said. "You know, just things that a cowboy needs to know."

"Did he talk about cowboys that he's been with and the things they've done?" Dad asked.

"Mostly about the ones he's heard about," I said, "and some about the way cowboys do things."

"That's damn good, son," Dad said. "That's the mark of a sure enough good hand. A good cowboy, or cowman either for that matter, always talks about the good ones he's known or worked with, never himself. Hotshot will be a damn good one for you to learn from. You remember that."

I gave Dad a good, long, hard thirteen-year old's look then.
"Okay, I sure will," I said.

That night, I got Mom's scissors and cut the sleeves out of my work shirts. I put a rope string on my saddle and decided to carry a rope, even though I didn't know how to use one. I told Dad that I wanted to save my wages and buy a felt hat, and before I went to bed, I went out to the barn and practiced saying things like Hotshot said them. I even tried to walk like he did. I was determined to remember everything, especially how Honcho sounded a whole lot like a cowboy's nickname.
Triumph

God, I’ll never forget the summer Dad and I built the roping arena behind our house in town. We did it partly so we could have some fun in the evenings and partly for educational purposes. I don’t have any idea why either of us thought we could have fun building or using anything, but I remember why we began the project in the first place. We were on our way home late one afternoon after a day of calf branding. I’d been doing some of the roping, but I hadn’t done a very good job of it.

"You’re going to have to learn to rope better, or nobody’s going to let you take a turn," Dad said.

I didn’t see any need answering that statement. Dad was driving and I was sulking. He’d hollered at me every time I’d missed a loop.

"Did you hear me?" Dad asked, looking over at me.

"Yes, I heard you," I replied. "What do you want me to say? I’m learning as fast as I can."

I was sixteen years old and had only started learning to rope six months earlier. Roping cattle was an art that took quite a bit of skill. Nobody learned without lots of practice, and I’d had practically none, but Dad expected me to be an expert the first time I picked up a rope.

"Well, you could offer some excuse, at least," Dad said.

"I haven’t had much practice, you know?" I said.
"At making excuses or roping?" Dad said, his tone solemn.

"Roping," I said. "I've had plenty of practice at the other."

"I guess you're right," Dad said, knocking the tobacco out of his pipe on the metal dashboard of the pickup.

We rode along quietly for a ways while Dad refilled his pipe. He was thinking pretty hard about something too, but only the Lord knew what it might be. Just because we'd been discussing my roping ability earlier didn't mean that was what Dad still had on his mind.

"Maybe we could change that," Dad said. "You know we could build you a roping arena behind the house in town."

I almost went into shock on that one. The only people who had their own arenas were men who made part of their living roping in rodeos. Those guys needed to practice every day. I would never have thought of asking for my own arena. Most ranch cowboys just learned on the job, as I was trying to do. Dad had several ranches, so it looked like I would have had plenty of chances to learn, but I hadn't.

"You mean just for us?" I asked. "You mean we'll build one right there in town, handy?"

"Yeah, but you know it'll be lots of work," Dad said, "and you'll have to do most of it and look after the roping calves too. Are you sure you want to do all that just to learn to rope better?"
Hell, I thought, anything would be better than having to learn around a bunch of men who already knew how and having Dad yelling all the time.

"Why yeah, yeah, I'm sure," I said, beginning to get excited. "When are we going to get started?"

I was still having trouble believing this. Dad was pretty tight, as most ranchers were, so he wasn't known for having ideas that cost him money. It would take materials to build with and calves to practice roping on. Maybe he meant to do this arena building after I got out of college and could help pay for it, I thought.

"When we get home and get these old horses turned loose and fed, we'll look for a good place," Dad said. "I'll probably have to get a dozer to clear the ground a little, and maybe you can be digging post holes for the fences in a day or two."

Well, that meant we were as good as committed. I was right about the money part, though. Dad knew of plenty of old posts and wire around our places that needed picking up anyway, so we used them on the arena. The only money he actually spent was for roping calves, and he knew he could resell them when they got bigger, for a profit. Dad stood to make money on the deal! Naturally, he didn't reveal these ideas right away, and in the month that it took me to figure things out, that damned arena occupied all my spare time.
Dad had the ground cleared and plowed and we staked the fence lines. After that all progress depended on how often I would come in from working all day with Dad and feel like working on the arena, digging another post hole or two. That wasn't often enough to suit Dad, and I found out he really meant it when he told me I would have to do most of the work. He didn't dig one damned hole.

Our diggers were the iron-handled kind that weighed about thirty or forty pounds. I'd pick them up as high as I could reach and slam them down against that hard, clay ground, and hope they went in an inch or two. I had to keep this up until the hole was at least eighteen inches deep. Dad even had a mark on the handles for measuring depth. Those heavy diggers were the number-one reason why all the unemployed men in town ran the other way if they heard Dad was looking for fencing help. Post hole digging was damned hard work.

There were probably fifty or sixty holes to dig, counting the various little holding pens, the roping box, and the calves' feed pen. The ground was pretty dry and hard in Archer County in June. Dad and I would come in about sundown each day. After taking care of our horses, we'd start to the house and often Dad would stop and stare in the direction of the proposed arena. Sometimes he'd make a comment or two.

"Well, how are you coming on your post holes?" he'd
ask. Or maybe he'd say something sarcastic.

"It's a damn good thing I haven't bought the roping calves yet. They'd be grown animals before you get ready for them," he'd say.

Either of those remarks would make me feel guilty enough to turn and head back out to my post hole digging. Never mind the fact that we might have left home that morning before five a.m. Sometimes I'd get mad about ever starting the damned arena, so I would keep digging until after dark, knowing Mom would make him come and get me for supper. By then I would be so tired I couldn't even raise my hands to fight off the mosquitoes, much less lift the diggers. I'd be bathed in sweat and self-pity, and all the time I would be reminding myself that this was for fun, and I had agreed to it.

Around the end of June I had all the holes dug and the posts set, and the real work began. Dad had to help me string the wire and build the pens and calf chute and various other things. Pretty soon I wished I was back to digging holes. At least I'd been alone then. Now I had to work whenever Dad wanted to, which was more often than I wanted to, and I had to do everything his way. Dad was damned hard to work for because there were only two ways of doing things--his way and the wrong way. I'd always had to work according to that, but I thought this time it would be different because this arena was mostly for me.
Anyway we were getting along pretty good until about the first week in July. Mother had a family reunion for her kinfolks planned, and it happened to occur about the same time Dad and I were nearly done with the fencing portion of the arena. We got in early, about three or four o’clock, one Friday afternoon and Dad decided to finish the fence. It was hotter than hell in the shade and about a hundred and ten in the sun. We were working our butts off, stretching and tying bull wire, and I looked up and here came Mom’s oldest brother, Uncle Luther, walking out to see us.

Uncle Luther was some kind of businessman, though I never did know what he did exactly, and he lived near McAllen in the southern tip of Texas. That day he had on a dark blue, three-piece suit with a white vest, black and white shoes, and topped off with a little white, Panama straw hat. I’d never seen such an outfit on a man in my life. He was carrying an unlit cigar that was about a foot long and as big around as a half dollar. He’d arrived for the reunion a little early, driving a huge, black, four-door Buick sedan.

When Dad looked up from tying some wire and saw Uncle Luther, his jaw clenched so hard I thought he was going to bite the stem off of his pipe like he did the night he found out Mom had bought herself a mink stole. He reached down for another wire to tie.

"Well, how are you men today?" Uncle Luther said, as he
carefully picked his way across the uneven ground and stuck his hand out for Dad to shake. Dad was on one knee, looking down, working, so he didn’t shake his hand, but he did answer him.

"Well, we’re pretty damn hot and pretty goddamn busy right now," Dad said, without looking up.

Uncle Luther managed a weak grin, waved the cigar a little, and tried some more conversation.

"Jeff, how come you men are working so hard in the heat?" he asked.

Dad came up, bristling.

"By God, because some of us have to work for a living no matter what the weather’s like!" Dad said.

Uncle Luther took a step or two back at that, and I did too. Dad never spoke favorably of Mom’s relatives, but I didn’t know just how deep his contempt ran. No wonder they didn’t come to see us much!

Uncle Luther looked around at the work that had been done and tried once more to be friendly.

"What are you men building, corrals?" he asked.

"Hell no, we’re not building corrals, we’ve got some corrals already," Dad said, pointing toward our little horse barn and lots. "We’re building an arena."

Uncle Luther got the message and began edging his way back toward his car.

"Do you think Hazel is at the house?" Uncle Luther
"If she’s not, then she’s gone somewhere," Dad replied. "Go up to the house and see for yourself."

Uncle Luther waved at me and ambled on off toward the house. I noticed the horses standing looking at him, too. They’d never seen a man dressed quite so flashy either.

"Damn four-flusher!" Dad said.

Dad was standing, wiping the sweat off his glasses, and looking at Uncle Luther’s retreating figure.

"What’s a four-flusher?" I asked.

"It’s somebody like him," Dad said. "Somebody that dresses and acts like a bigshot, but doesn’t even have a pot to piss in. Let’s get on with this fence. We won’t get to work tomorrow because of the reunion, so let’s finish today."

I was dying to know more about Uncle Luther, but was afraid to ask any more about him. Early on I’d learned that the madder Dad was, the harder he worked us both, and we worked on that day until after dark. By the time we dragged into the house, a couple more relatives had arrived, and the sight of them certainly didn’t improve Dad’s disposition. With Dad in such a bad mood, it was a blessing not to have to work the next day. It took us another week to finish the arena, and by then we both hated it. If I’d had any idea that the time spent roping was going to be even worse than the time spent working on the arena, I’d have given up for
sure and just let the arena become some sort of shrine to our effort at having fun.

In the first place, arena roping took two people, and in my case that was me and Dad. In the second place, Dad had quit roping at least twenty years earlier, and therefore wasn’t too good a teacher. And finally, Dad had no patience and I mean zero-none.

But we tried. We went to the livestock auction and bought some small, roping calves the day after the arena was completed. We didn’t intend to waste any time making the arena pay off. The minute we got the calves home, I saddled my horse and headed for the arena. Dad wanted me to fix everything on my saddle and horse just as the rodeo cowboys did.

That was more complication than I wanted to put up with, but I went along. All I really wanted to do was get on my horse and chase the calves around the arena and see if I could get close enough to throw a loop at one. I told Dad this, but he wouldn’t hear it.

"You built this damned arena to learn to calf rope in," Dad said, "and by God I’m trying to show you how it’s done."

So I had to rig up the barrier which determines how much headstart the calf gets on the roper. Next I had to put my pigging string in my belt in case I actually caught one of the calves, and I had to do various other things rodeo ropers do. Since I couldn’t rope yet, I didn’t think
I needed all those things to bother me, but Dad insisted. It was twice as bad as learning out on the ranch.

When I actually got to the roping, we started having arguments immediately. He'd turn a calf out of the chute, I'd chase it for a while with him shouting instructions all the time, and finally I'd make a feeble throw just so my horse and the calf and I could stop and rest. This wasn't near the fun I'd thought it was going to be, and Dad wasn't having too much fun either. He was the one having to push the calves into the little chute by getting in with them. They were crapping all over him and stomping hell out of his old, corn-knotted feet. When I got back to the chute for another run, he'd be mad and he'd start in on me.

"Why in the goddamn hell don't you throw when I tell you to?" Dad asked.

"Well, I can hear you making noise, but I can't make out exactly what you're saying," I said, in my defense. "It's kind of hard to listen to you and make this damn horse follow that calf all over the place at the same time. Plus, I have to swing my rope."

"That's another thing," he added. "You don't have to swing your damn rope all the time, only when you're about to throw."

Hell, I thought I'd been about to throw almost all the time during the chase, but I couldn't quite make up my mind whether I was close enough to the calf, so my arm got tired,
and I finally threw so I could stop.

That was how our arena roping instruction days went. He'd chew my ass out for not knowing something that he hadn't told me. I think it took a week or so of ass-chewing and rope swinging before I managed to catch one of the calves. I was so surprised to see an animal on the end of my rope that I just sat there staring at him. Directly I realized Dad was hollering something again.

"Well goddamit, you got one finally," Dad yelled, "don't just sit there, get down and tie him up."

I had already practiced tying the calves by catching, throwing, and tying them while they were in their little feed pen. The tying was quite a bit easier than the roping, but unfortunately, since I couldn't rope too well, once I was out in the arena, I didn't get to show off my tying ability very often. The whole situation was just a bad deal. It damn sure wasn't fun, and I wasn't getting better very fast either.

I soon made a suggestion that I hoped would salvage all the work we'd done. If I could get some of my cowboy buddies to come and practice with me, Dad would be relieved of arena duty, and I could get pointers from them, since one or two were pretty good ropers. Doing this with friends might work better, I thought.

Dad agreed, and the next week Jim, Dave, and I got together and had a big time. We roped a little and
bullshitted a lot. We had a ball for two or three afternoons, as Jim was a pretty good roper and helped me more in two days than Dad had in two weeks, but Dad just couldn’t leave us alone. We were simply having too much fun.

One afternoon we were sitting around talking and joking, and Dad came out to the arena. He wanted me to make a few runs to see how I was coming on my roping. Right away Dad started coaching and hollering again. Pretty shortly I told him I was tired, and I unsaddled my horse and quit for the day. After this happened a couple of times, Jim and Dave quit coming by. We all just let it go. Soon the calves got too big for me to tie, and weeds were growing in the plowed arena. I mentioned to Dad that I thought he should take the calves to the auction, and I didn’t want another bunch of them either. If I learned to rope at all, I was going to have to learn on the ranch.

The arena in town wasn’t a total waste though. Just before school started, I met a lovely girl from South Texas when I attended the Texas Farm Bureau Citizenship Seminar at Baylor University in Waco. We wrote to each other often. Once she asked for some pictures of me and my horses, and I borrowed Mom’s Polaroid, and Jim took some of me, mounted, with the roping arena for a backdrop. They were perfect!
QUESTIONS
"You better eat a big breakfast," Dad said. "It may be a long time till noon."

He started about ninety percent of our summer mornings that way. I'd be trying to wake up enough to eat, and he would be firing orders at me faster than I could handle them. He'd already been up two hours and it still wasn't daylight, so he was primed and ready to go and I was just getting started.

I was fourteen that summer and Dad was sixty-two. When I got to the age that most boys think they're smart enough to get sassy with their Dads, I never had a chance with my Dad, not that I would have said anything witty even if I could think of something at six o'clock in the morning.

"What are we going to do today?" I asked, thinking that to be a safe question.

"Well," he said, "we're going to do one of your favorite chores."

Between bites of hard, fried eggs, I perked up a little at that. I had so few chores that I would call favorites, I looked forward to those rare occasions.

"Really!" What is it?" I asked.

"We're going to cut cockleburrs today," he said, grinning, waiting for my reaction.

I damn near choked on a piece of bacon and biscuit.

"What?" I asked. "We cut burrs last week. I thought we
were through with 'em."

"Hell, son," Dad said. "A rancher never gets done with chores he hates. You hurry and eat now and come on." He went out the door putting on his hat.

I stuck some bacon on another biscuit, got my hat and followed. Dad didn’t like to be kept waiting. I climbed into the pickup and he took off. I was sulking, but I couldn’t help it.

I loved ranch work that involved cowboying, and I hated every kind that didn’t. You couldn’t cut burrs on horseback. A cockleburr grew on a weedy stalk similar to that of cotton. It had eight or ten hard, spiny pecan-shaped burrs. They grew in low-lying pasture areas. To cut them, you had to take a shovel or scythe and walk up and down in the pasture finding the areas where they grew and cut them, one stalk at a time. There were thousands each year, and there was no way to cut them all and Dad knew it.

Dad noticed right away that I was sulking.

"Now there’s no use in you getting mad," he said. "We’ve always cut burrs and we’re always going to, whether you like it or not. Why make things worse?"

I didn’t say anything, but I didn’t get any happier either. Beside being boring, hot, hard work, burr cutting was lonely work. I couldn’t talk to anyone and work too. At least when we were cowboying, there were other hands to
talk to.

"Well, how come nobody else cuts burrs?" I asked. I knew they didn’t. We were the only ones that did this particular job.

That question pissed Dad off.

"By, God," he said, "I don’t know why nobody else does or doesn’t do some of the things we do. I don’t take care of other people’s business."

I didn’t say anything else because he were at the ranch. He drove off down into the pasture and stopped near a bunch of burrs. We got out and sharpened the shovel and scythe blade.

"Which one do you want, the shovel or scythe?" he asked.

I took the shovel and walked off thirty or forty yards and began cutting. It was still cool, but it wouldn’t be for long, and the damn mosquitoes were fierce.

We cut all morning, moving from one patch of burrs to another. I just hated it, but I really wasn’t sure why. Burr cutting wasn’t the only boring, hard job we did, and it didn’t require a whole lot of thinking. At noon, we climbed into the pickup to go to town for dinner. We hadn’t spoken since we started working. We were wringing wet.

"You don’t look like you’ve gotten in a better humor," he said, "and I’m about tired of it. What is it? You don’t usually act this way about hard work."
"I just don’t understand," I said. "Why do we do something nobody else does and why do we cut 'em if we can’t cut 'em all?"

He looked mad, but he didn’t say anything for a while. He had his hat off, wiping the sweat from his forehead and glasses. I guessed he was thinking about it.

"Son, I’m not sure you’ll understand even after I tell you," he said, "but I guess you’re old enough to wonder about why we do things, so I guess I’d better give you some answers."

I didn’t say anything, but just nodded. I really did wonder, though, and that wasn’t just because I hated the work.

"We cut those goddamn burrs," he said, "because when I was your age, I had to milk a few cows ever morning and those cows’ tails were full of burrs and they’d switch their tails at the flies and that big wad of burrs would hit me in the head. It hurt like hell and sometimes it made me spill the milk pail and I caught hell from Mother. That’s one reason."

"But we don’t have any milk cows," I countered. That pissed him off again, though I hadn’t meant to.

"By God we may have some before night if I decide it would do you any good," Dad replied.

I was quiet a ways and he was too. He calmed down some.
"I know we don't have any milk cows," he said, "but the point is that I learned from that experience, which brings up the second reason we cut burrs."

I wasn't quite sure about the learning from the experience part, but I kept my mouth shut anyway.

"The main reason we cut those burrs and fix fence and fix the windmill and do every other damn hard, boring thing that we do," Dad said, "is because there isn't anyone else to do it for us and because a man needs to do things he hates every once in a while so that he can appreciate doing the things he likes to do. Think about that awhile."

I thought about it the rest of the way to town. It still didn't make much sense to me.

Just before we got out at the house, I brought it up again.

"So you mean that I cut burrs so that I can enjoy cowboying?" I asked.

"Well, you're sort of getting it," Dad said, "but not quite. There's more to it than that. A man can't go through life doing just the things that he likes to do. I damn sure haven't been able to, and I doubt you will either."

We ate dinner and went back to the burr cutting later in the afternoon. We spent many more days that summer cutting burrs, fencing, things like that. And we kept right on doing those jobs for a couple of more summers. Back
then, I never did understand why we cut the burrs, but then
I don't think he really expected me to either.
The Midwife

Dad kept and raised a bunch of heifers one year so we could raise our own cows from them. At least that's what he said. I think he kept them and had them bred to all calve in the winter, so I would have a job morning, noon, and night tending and calving two-year old heifers.

Some ranchers raised their own brood stock, but most just bought cows with calves already at their side. That way one could escape the job of calving heifers. A heifer usually could not have her first calf without assistance. She had to be kept in a pen and watched carefully the last week before the calf was due, and when time came for birth, someone had to help her have her calf. This process of delivery was called pulling the calf. The process involved being there at the time the heifer lay down to have her calf. A device was attached to the forelegs of the calf to aid in its being "pulled" from its mother. We had thirty of these heifers to "calve" that winter.

I was sixteen that year and I guess Dad thought that I was old enough to tackle yet another aspect of ranching. We had a little barn and trap, or small pasture, behind our house in town. Dad kept five or six of these heifers at a time there so we could keep a close eye on them. Actually, I was the one who kept a close eye on them. I watched them, fed them, and watched them some more. After one had a calf, we would keep her and her baby there a day or two, then take
them back to their regular pasture at the ranch and bring in
another to take her place in town. This had been going on
since late September, and it was now the week after
Thanksgiving.

One day Dad found some knots under his arm and our
doctor put him in the hospital to have them removed. I was
left to do all the "calving" myself for a while. That was
okay. I would get up early enough to check them and feed
them before school, come home at noon to check them again,
and stay around close to the house after school to check
them some more. I was doing all right, except for the need
to also feed our other stock on the various places where Dad
had cattle. Feeding took sometime too, so Dad suggested
that I take one or two of the heifers to Clabe.

Clabe was the rancher's equivalent of a midwife. He
was nearing eighty years old that year. He lived with his
grown daughter and grandson. Clabe had a small barn and
some corrals like ours, and he made his living taking in
heifers to calve for a small fee. Clabe was old,
bow-legged, and stooped. He was a man heavy of frame. His
hands hung nearer to his knees than any man I'd ever seen.
He would have been fairly indisputable evidence for the
evolution argument.

Dad told me to take one or two of the heifers to
Clabe's so I would have more time to feed and go to school.
He also told me to be ready to go to Clabe's to help him, if
he should call and that I should drop by there "once in awhile" whether he called or not. The arrangement really only allowed me to keep more heifers in town; it didn’t give me more time. I pointed this out to Dad, adding that now I had heifers in two places instead of only one. Dad easily dismissed the logic of that. He said I needed the availability of Clabe’s experience. I guess it worked all right. I watched my heifers and went by Clabe’s to help him watch his and the days dragged on. One night he called me and told me to come by the next morning, early.

Since I had been feeding the cattle at one place before school, I had been getting around pretty early anyway. I got to Clabe’s about four-thirty, just as he and Amy Lee sat down to breakfast. They invited me to eat, but I already had, so I accepted a cup of coffee and sat down to wait on Clabe. As I took a sip of coffee, I noticed Clabe had a huge dab of butter on his upper lip. He was eating biscuits and butter with his eggs. Amy Lee noticed it too, and told her father to wipe his mouth. He ignored her and continued eating. Before I had finished my coffee, she had told him about the butter twice more. It was still there. I silently laughed to myself at his stubbornness. I thought Dad had a corner on that market. When he finished eating and was getting up from the table, Clabe wiped his mouth. When we walked into Clabe’s barn, the heifer was standing, but the forelegs of the calf were visible. We were just in
time. Clabe told me to put her in the little stall so I could get hold of the legs with the pulling device.

This tool had several feet of small cable wound around a spool. A hand-operated lever turned the spool, taking up the cable. The tool was attached to something solid, such as a post set in the ground, and the cable was attached to the calf’s feet by a small chain. You could work the hand lever to take up the cable, thereby pulling the calf from its mother and aiding birth. Though the process looked and sounded crude and rough, it was in actuality humane. Without the aid of a man and this device, the heifer could not always have the calf naturally, and both she and the calf would die.

I put the heifer in the stall and attached the puller to the calf’s legs. Clabe told me to go ahead and start pulling the calf. As I began pulling the calf, the heifer lay down on her side just as she should do. This was great. Sometimes one would try to fight or remain standing or anything to complicate matters. I continued to work the tool and Clabe knelt by the heifer to ease the calf’s head out gently. Suddenly Clabe got real excited and shouted for me to hurry. I frantically worked the lever and soon the calf was free of its mother. Clabe quickly removed the chain from his legs and dragged him nearer the light. The calf wasn’t breathing. Clabe worked his legs and gave him some firm slaps around the chest area. The cow, as she was
no longer a heifer, got to her feet and began to search for her calf. There was nothing I could do to help. The calf still had not drawn a breath. Clabe was kneeling in the straw beside the calf. The cow was standing next to him and smelling her calf. I walked over and stood between Clabe and the new mother. Sometimes one would get very protective and want to fight a man.

Clabe had not said a word since beginning his attempts to revive the calf. He reached down and grasped the calf’s head in his huge, bare hands. He pulled the calf’s face up to his own, quickly ran his coat sleeve across the calf’s mouth, and began blowing air into the calf. I had seen some strange things associated with ranching before that moment, but I’d never seen anyone resuscitate an animal. He kept it up for a couple of minutes before the calf jerked and bellowed right in Clabe’s face. He smiled broadly, laid the calf’s head down, rose to his feet, and slowly backed away, motioning for me to follow. The cow began licking her calf and in a matter of minutes he was up on all four shaky, spindly legs looking for his first meal.

We eased out of the barn and left them alone. Clabe matter of-fact-like told me to come back that afternoon and bring him another heifer and take this one home. He wandered off to his house leaving me standing there still in awe of what I’d seen. Dad didn’t know which heifer I had taken to Clabe. He couldn’t have known one would be born
not breathing. I guess he did know it was time for another lesson.
Snakes

Nothing had been done. Absolutely nothing! I had one, entire, perfectly clear, hot, summer day in which to do only two jobs Dad had told me to do, and I hadn’t done either one of them. He’d be home any time now, and I didn’t have anything to show for my day. What in the hell was I going to say? I knew better, but I hadn’t done better. There’d be hell to pay, that much I knew for sure.

I was sixteen, and Dad was the crankiest, old rancher in our part of North Texas. Dad wasn’t a big man. He didn’t weigh over a hundred and thirty-five pounds, soaking wet; and in his old, high-heeled, scuffed up boots, faded Levis, long-sleeved, grey, work shirt, and straw hat, he couldn’t have been over five-foot seven; but you’d think he was a giant when he was giving orders.

Dad had a big, clear, commanding voice that could carry fifty yards easy, even if he wasn’t hollering. I’d spent my summers and Saturdays working for Dad since I was eight or nine years old. In that time I’d received plenty of orders from him, and I’d always done them, not usually to his liking, but I’d still done whatever he told me to do. Until today.

We were eating breakfast long before daylight when he put his paper down a minute to reach for another piece of bacon. He had fixed us a big breakfast of bacon, eggs, gravy, and biscuits.
"You're going to be on your own today," Dad said. "I'm going up near Childress to look at a bunch of cows that I'm thinking about buying."

Dad was silent a minute as he got up from the table to pour himself another cup of coffee. I went on eating my eggs and biscuits.

"I thought about taking you with me," Dad continued, "but there's nothing you could do but drive for me. I think I'd rather you'd stay here and do a chore or two that really needs doing."

I didn't show it, but that kind of statement always made me a little uneasy inside. When Dad referred to chores that "really needed doing" he usually meant to give me some shit-work to do. I loved to cowboy, but I'd found that ranching also involved a whole bunch of mean-ass work like digging post holes for fences, repairing windmills, hauling hay, and a host of other kinds of work that I just hated. Cowboying amounted to a small portion of ranch work.

"What exactly did you have in mind?" I asked. When I realized that I probably wasn't going to like something Dad had to say, I didn't mind making him mad by interrupting his train of thought.

"Well, by God, at least a couple of things that we haven't had time for," Dad said, kind of stern. "Besides, there's not any use in both of us sitting on our butts in the car all day. One of us ought to be doing some work."
He took a long drink of coffee and resumed his reading.

I sat there and stewed. I figured he was enjoying my anxiety. Dad knew all the jobs that I liked to do and all the ones that I hated. He didn’t mind making me wait. I got up from the table, carried my plate to the sink, and poured myself a big glass of milk getting before sitting down again. I was getting nervous, as I didn’t like having bad news put off.

"I sure wish I knew what it was you wanted me to," I said. "I’m ready to go to work, whatever it is."

"You won’t be when you hear what I have in store for you," Dad said, with just a trace of a grin on his lips. He put his paper down, picked up his pipe from the ashtray, fished his tobacco pouch from his shirt pocket, and began the long process of preparing himself a smoke.

"I want you to go down to the ranch and clean out the hayloft," Dad said, puffing on his pipe a little. "Clean all the old hay out, just kick it out the end doors, and get things good and clean. I may buy a load of hay while I’m gone."

I didn’t say anything. I figured there was more to come, and there was.

"While you’re down there, you might as well clean out the saddle room too," Dad added. "When you get that done, you better straighten up the hallway of the barn and then sharpen your shovel and cut the broom weeds around all the
corrals. I don’t want to step on a damn rattlesnake one of these days. That should hold you for the bigger part of the day. If you have any time left when you get back here, trim our old horses’ feet some. Mine stumbled every other step yesterday."

That wasn’t the longest list he’d ever given me, but a couple of the items bothered me a lot. I hated climbing up in the hayloft, and I hated cutting the weeds. Rattlesnakes have a habit of living in haylofts where there are plenty of field mice to eat, and we’d killed plenty of rattlers around the corrals too. I’d never told Dad how scared I was of snakes. Cowboys were expected to kill the bastards whenever they found them in a pasture, and I always had. But I hated to go looking for them, and working around the barn and corrals amounted to just that.

"Don’t you think those are the kinds of chores where there ought to be two of us?" I asked.

"Yeah, probably, but you’re old enough to look out for yourself," Dad said. "Just watch what you’re doing, don’t fall out of the hayloft, and you’ll be fine. You still remember Larry dragging that rattler out of the barn that morning, don’t you? Well, it was dark that morning."

"Yeah, it sure was," I said. I could still remember the morning, clearly.

Dad, my big brother, Larry, and myself had gotten out of Dad’s old truck one morning about four-thirty. I
couldn't have been over eight years old at the time. We had
to catch our horses early to go help a neighbor do some cow
work. Larry had come home that summer from college, and he
went with us sometimes.

The evening before, Larry and I had put our saddles
just inside the big, sliding, barn door. There was always
some hay scattered there in the hallway. We didn't have any
barn light back then, and Dad had turned the truck lights
off when he stepped out of the truck. Larry and I could see
pretty good by the moonlight, so we grabbed the barn door
and slid it open. Larry had reached inside, grabbed his
saddle, and dragged it toward us. A rattlesnake came with
it, and we couldn't see the bastard, but we could sure hear
him. He must have been right at our feet, and he was mad as
hell at our having disturbed him in his warm, hiding place.
Larry and I both hollered and jumped back, and Dad turned
the truck lights back on and came running with the shovel.
Neither of us had been bitten, but the incident scared the
hell out of me, and I'd never forgotten it.

"Well, you'd better get going, or you'll never get
done," Dad said, awakening me from my daydream. "Just
remember to watch real close around the barn. You know
where those bastards hide now. I've got to be going
myself."

I left the house with good intentions. I did go to the
ranch; but when I got there, I didn't feel like working just
then, so I sat in the pickup awhile looking at the barn and thinking. Usually, I got right after the work, regardless of what it was. Sometimes when Dad sent me off alone to work, I could almost feel his eyes on me. Many times I suspected he was lurking somewhere near, watching me to see if I was actually minding him or not. Of course he wasn't, that would have been sneaky. Often as I worked alone, I could imagine what he'd be saying if he was there. "Do it this way, damnit," he'd say, or maybe something like, "Damnit, think about what you're doing! How many times do I have to tell you?"

But this morning I didn't feel those things at all. I didn't feel much of anything really, except like not working. But I thought, if I wasn't going to do any work, what would I do all day? I couldn't go home. Mom would know I hadn't done my work. I thought about fishing but didn't have a pole. Besides, I wasn't a good fisherman anyway. I couldn't ever catch anything.

And then an idea came to me! Today was sale day at the livestock auction in Wichita. I could go over there and watch cattle sell. I might even catch a nap in one of the ringside chairs. I was one of those rare people (Dad said) who was put to sleep by the rhythmic sounds of the auctioneer in a sale ring. Yeah, that's what I would do, after I'd done at least part of my chores. I'd clean out the saddle room and the hallway of the barn and then take
off.

With some clear objectives in mind, I jumped out of the pickup and got after the work. I figured too, that doing a little work would be better than doing none. Dad might even buy my reasoning, I thought. After all, we often went to the sale when Dad didn’t have any more pressing work in mind.

I finished my work about eleven o’clock, jumped into the pickup, and headed for Wichita. By then, I’d almost convinced myself that Dad had intended for me to go. I even felt a little important, having made that kind of decision.

I ran into a couple of Dad’s rancher friends on my way into the auction ring. They asked about Dad, our cattle, our grass, and of course, whether or not we’d had any rain. I answered fine to everything and made my way to a seat in the second row behind the ring. I sat there awhile watching and listening to the action in the ring. I kept expecting to get sleepy, but instead I felt a little uneasy. Running into Dad’s neighbors had made me think of him again. That bothered me.

I’d sat there a couple of hours before it hit me. I’d never failed to do or at least try to do, everything Dad told me to. Until today. And worst of all, I wasn’t even sure why I’d acted as I had. I began to get nervous, wondering what I was going to tell him. I got considerably more nervous imagining what he was going to tell me, because
I didn’t have to imagine very hard. He was going to tear my ass up! Jesus! What had I done? Nothing. Or practically nothing! Oh, God!

I couldn’t sit in that seat a minute longer. I jumped up and headed for the pickup and home. It was nearly four o’clock, too late to go back to the ranch and finish the work. I drove on home pretty slow. I needed the time to think.

I got home before Dad did, but I knew he’d be along soon. And here I was, leaning on the corral gate, trying to figure out what to tell Dad. I hadn’t exactly done nothing, but I hadn’t done what he told me to do either. The worst of it was that I didn’t even have a good excuse. I couldn’t lie; I didn’t know how. I’d never had to.

I heard tires on the gravel drive and looked over my shoulder. Sure enough, Dad was home. He pulled Mom’s big Oldsmobile into the garage, just across the alley from where I stood. I heard him shut the car door. I heard the hollow thuds his boots made on the old, wooden, garage floor. I heard the metallic groan of the spring when he closed the garage door. I watched the horses eat hay and wished I was a thousand miles away. Dad walked up beside me and leaned on the gate too.

"Well, son, I bought us some more cows today," Dad said, "and I bought a truck load of hay in Vernon on my way back. The hay should be at the ranch in the morning, and
the cattle trucks should be there with the cows by noon.
What have you done?"

"Nothing," I said. I didn't know what else to say.

"What do you mean nothing?" Dad asked. He pulled out
his pipe and tobacco and prepared himself a smoke. He
puffed on his pipe and looked the horses over good. "You
must have done something," Dad said. "You didn't get back
in time to trim the horses' feet."

"I did do something. I cleaned out the saddle room and
the hallway." I said. "Then I went to Wichita to the sale." I
watched the horses eat awhile longer before looking at
Dad. He had his pipe in his hand now. His jaw was
clenched; he wasn't leaning on the gate any longer; his
eyebrows were raised, and his whole, lean body was tensed.

"Goddamit, is that all? I told you I might buy some
cows and I might buy some hay," Dad hollered, right in my
face. I told you to do those chores so we'd be ready."

Dad was looking right into my eyes, and his look was
fierce. He stood there stiff, looking at me, his eyes black
as coals. He kept clenching his old, big-knuckled,
callused, crooked hands. He stuck his still smoking pipe
back in his shirt pocket, then yanked it out again. Our
eyes weren't a foot apart. My heart was beating hard enough
for me to hear it.

"Yes, sir, I know you did," I said, finally looking
down at the ground. I dug a little, round hole with the toe
of my boot. "I’m sorry. I usually do what you tell me." I raised my eyes to meet his again.

"Why didn’t you do what I told you to?" Dad asked.
"You know goddamn well that I tell you to do things for a reason. You’ve always done them. What happened?"
"Nothing happened," I said. "I just didn’t think it’d matter this time. That’s all."

"You didn’t think is damn sure right," Dad said, sarcastically. "I’ve told you what happens when you don’t think, haven’t I? Why in the hell wouldn’t it matter this time?"

God, he was mad. He looked mad enough to bite my head off. I knew he would be. How did I ever think I could shrug my work and get away with it?

"I bet you were afraid of the goddamn snakes, weren’t you?" Dad asked next. "You were afraid to go up in the loft. Is that what it was?"

"Hell no, I’m not afraid of snakes. That’s not it at all," I said. It wasn’t either, whether he believed me or not. I wasn’t much afraid of a goddamn snake, not like I was of him anyway. I didn’t like the bastards though.

"Then what the hell is it? What did you do today, damit?" Dad asked, his voice angry, rising again.

"I cleaned the saddle room and the hallway," I replied, "just like I said. Then I went to Wichita to the sale. I saw Mr. Jones and Mr. Rucker. You can ask ’em."
"Goddamit, son, I believe you were there," Dad said.
"That’s not the point."

Dad looked at me a long time without saying anything else. He kept raising his eyebrows like he was about to say something, but he didn’t. He lit his pipe again and leaned on the gate, watching the horses eat.

"Why didn’t you do what I told you, son?" Dad asked.

"I don’t know, Dad. I really don’t. I guess that I just wanted to do something important for once, Dad," I replied. The horses had finished the hay and were drifting out into our little, horse pasture, swishing their tails at the flies.

"And you figured just doing part of your work was important, did you?" Dad said, still sarcastic.

"I meant the part about going to the sale was important," I replied.

"Son, going to a sale is only important if it’s part of your work," Dad said. "Today it wasn’t. Another day it might be. You have to know the difference."

We watched the horses grazing, and Dad smoked his pipe some more. Directly he let out a sigh and tapped the tobacco from his pipe on the iron gate. He took out his pocketknife and scraped the inside of the bowl clean. His anger had passed, finally, and I’d lived through it. God, when would I learn?

"I guess you know you’ll have to clean out the loft in
the morning; there won't be much light, but you'll have to
do it before the load of hay comes," Dad said. "We'll get
to the weeds if we have time."

"Yes, sir, I know. I don't mind," I said. I meant it
too.

"Well, let's go see what Mom has for supper," Dad said,
turning toward the house. "I'm hungry. It's been a long
day, hasn't it?"

"Yes, sir, real long," I said, following him to the
house.
"There's a right and wrong to everything, son," Dad said. Since he'd been saying that to me at least five times a day for the last ten of my fifteen years, I knew a lecture was coming. Somehow though, I didn't mind that morning. We were going to the ranch to cut cockleburrs or fix fence or some other damn kind of work that I hated. It was going to be hot and hard damn work, and I was dreading it, so I needed something to take my mind off of what was ahead.

"What are you talking about this time?" I asked.

Dad was lighting his pipe, an operation that sometimes took a mile or two, so he didn't answer for a while. He finally got it going, blew a couple of big clouds of smoke my way, and motioned with one hand back over his shoulder.

"Oh, we just passed the Ikard place back there and I was wondering if you ever got paid for helping old man Ikard work cattle the other day," Dad said.

"Yeah, I got paid or I'd still be there waiting," I said. I'd heard a cowboy friend of mine say that, and I thought it sounded pretty cocky.

"Well, don't sound so sure of yourself," Dad chuckled. "Old man Ikard has been known to be tighter than Dick's hat band when it comes to wages."

Suddenly the smile vanished and a hard look came over Dad's face.
"He's been known to be a few other things too," he added with disgust. "Do you remember that we neighbored with him when you were a boy, but for years now he hasn't called us for help until recently, and then he only asks for you?"

I thought about that a minute or two before answering.

"Sure, I remember lots of times we helped him until I was about ten. What happened?"

Dad was refilling his pipe and didn't answer. I swear he was always either filling the damn thing, lighting it, or cleaning it. I don't believe he ever smoked it much.

"Can't you talk and fill your pipe at the same time?" I asked.

He didn't pay me any mind but went on packing the tobacco just so-so. I guess he was thinking about things.

"Well," Dad began, "it happened like this. Back in '56 or '57, Ikard sold his steers one year to a woman cow buyer. She was the only woman buyer I'd ever seen in this country, and I never saw her but that once. She was crippled too, on crutches."

He had to stop there and puff on his pipe some to keep it going. I didn't remember the woman buyer.

"Anyway," Dad continued, "when it came time for her to inspect the cattle, so she could cull the bad ones, she couldn't get close enough to really look at 'em good. Do you get the picture so far?"

I nodded. Any cow buyer was allowed to cut back a
percentage of sick, crippled, or otherwise undesirable animals from the herd. It was a range practice, but the buyer usually inspected the cattle from on horseback.

Dad went on. "Of course this woman couldn't get on a horse, and it suddenly dawned on me and Luke Smith that old Ikard was counting on that woman not being able to get a good look at the herd."

Luke was a neighbor of ours with as much reputation as a cowman as Dad, nearly. He wasn't as old though.

"Well, by God," Dad said, "I rode up to the woman then, told her who I was, and offered to inspect the cattle for her so she'd get her percentage of culls out. Luke was right behind me and seconded my offer."

I couldn't believe what he was hinting at. I'd never heard of a dishonest rancher. I thought they all had reputations like Dad's, though maybe not as big as his.

"What'd old Ikard say to that" I asked.

"Not a damn thing," Dad said. "There wasn't much he could say. If he objected, it would have been pretty clear what he had been about to do. Though in looking back, I'm surprised that he didn't object because things were already obvious. He intended to take advantage of that woman."

"That's pretty bad, isn't it?" I asked.

"It's about the worst thing a man can do," Dad said. "You can sort of whitewash taking advantage of another man in a deal, but taking advantage of a woman is just plain
"What happened then?" I asked.

"Old Ikard helped the woman back to the shade of the barn," Dad said, "while me and Luke went on with our work. Then we all went over to the shade to wait for the cattle trucks."

"Did you and Luke stay to help load?" I asked.

"No," Dad said. "After the woman paid him and left, old Ikard told the rest of us that we could leave too, so we did."

Dad was watching me. "You don't quite follow from there do you?"

"I don't guess so," I said.

"See, we wondered ever since whether or not Ikard left the cattle as they were," Dad said, "or did he put the culls back into the herd to be shipped to the woman?"

"How come you wondered that?" I asked. I still didn't see.

"Because he never had either of us on his place again," Dad said. "We would have been looking for those culls to still be around, and he knew it."

I finally understood.

"So you figure he sent her the culls and kept the good cattle for himself?" I asked.

"Right," Dad said. "Either that or he was just mad at us for costing him some money in the name of honesty."
"You lost a neighbor then because of it," I said.

"That’s where you’re wrong," Dad said. "We haven’t missed old Ikard as a neighbor, but you can bet that he has missed us. It was his choice and such is the price of dishonesty. You remember that."

We were nearly to the ranch by then, but I was still thinking about the incident. I wasn’t surprised by Dad’s actions. He’d told me many times that if a man can’t be anything else, he can at least be honest. But I was surprised to find that all ranchers didn’t think like Dad. I guess that I thought that everyone thought like he did. Dad must have still been thinking about the tale too.

"You know what the supreme irony is, son?" he asked. "Here years later, old Ikard is having to pay my son to do work that I would be doing for free as a neighbor. Yes sir, there is a right and a wrong way to do things, and there is still a little justice in this old world."
The Lesson

"So, you think you want to farm a little, do you?" Dad asked.

The question came early one morning over breakfast and was in reply to a statement I'd made several days earlier. I'd said that it looked like to me that sitting on a tractor all day was an easy life, and that I believed I should try it sometime to see. I'd made the remark as we were passing a field where a neighbor was plowing. I'd just spent another endless day digging postholes with our old hand diggers.

"Well, yeah, I think it might be fun for a little change once in a while," I answered. "All we ever do is ranching kind of work, like fencing, fixing windmills and water gaps, and of course, some cowboying."

I was bored with doing the same kinds of things all the time. We didn't have any farm land, though on a couple of Dad's ranches there was a plot or two that had once been plowed land. Dad had been the one who plowed it.

"I can tell you one thing about farming," Dad said. "I did my share looking at the tail-end of a team of mules. Believe me, that's a slow life. I had intended to spare you that misery."

"I didn't say I wanted to follow a team of mules," I said. "People use tractors today. It might even be kind of fun."
"Doesn't matter what they use, it damn sure isn't going
to be fun," Dad replied. "Whoever does the farming has to
go round and round in a big circle for hours on end. If you
think ranch work is boring, you haven't done anything yet.
I know there has to be farmers in the world, but I don't
have to be one of them and neither do you."

"But I want to," I said. "That's the point. I want to
find out a few things for myself instead of you always
telling me what I will and won't like."

Dad was silent as he mulled this over a little. He
went on eating his eggs and reading the morning paper, like
we hadn't even been discussing anything. That was his way
of telling me he'd think about it. If he never brought the
subject up again, that meant the discussion was over.

I had no intention of being a farmer or even of wanting
to farm some of our own land. I had spent a year in college
and was home for the summer. Some part-time jobs in feed
stores and on a road-building crew had given me the yearning
to try some different things. The only kind of work I'd
known before was ranch work. Dad was nearly seventy, and
like most old-time ranchers, he had old-time ways. Since he
owned several small ranches, and always had plenty of work
to be done, it was only natural that I was the one to help
do it. It had never occurred to him that a person might
actually want to do something other than ranch work.

"That might be a good idea after all," Dad said a few
minutes later. "Maybe you need to find out that there are quite a few things that are worse than the jobs I come up with."

This was beginning to sound better all the time. I had also figured out that if I could spend enough time farming for someone, that would leave less time to do all those things for Dad that I really despised doing.

"You got any ideas of who might need part-time farm hands?" Dad asked.

"No, I haven't thought that far ahead yet." I was stretching the truth a little here. I had casually inquired of one or two of our neighbors whether they needed any extra help farming.

"I wanted to check it out with you first, just in case you had other plans for me this summer," I added.

"Your doing a little farming isn't going to keep you from getting to our work this summer," Dad said. "It doesn't take all summer for any farmer around here to get his plowing done. I'll talk to G.C. and see if he needs any help. If you're determined to farm, he'd be a good one to learn from."

That worked out real well with my plans. G.C. Jones was one I'd talked to. He managed a good-sized ranch and some farm land for an estate. He had good equipment and I didn't think he'd be as hard to get along with as Dad. Also, a good buddy of mine was riding and breaking some
horses that summer for the same ranch. That would offer excellent chances for us to get together after work and get into some mischief.

"Well, I think that would be just fine," I replied to Dad's offer. "I sure would appreciate it if you would."

I didn't really think Dad would voluntarily let me out of his sight that easily, but I never had learned to predict him either.

I had another reason for wanting to do a different kind of work. I was tired of worrying about everything I did, most of which was wrong anyway, according to Dad. When we were working together, he was forever telling me to think, think, think! Every job had three or four lectures to go with it.

When I worked for the road crew, I'd found out that only bosses had to worry while they worked. Common hands only had to work a lot and think a little. Dad had never made work that easy, and I had enjoyed a damn small portion of it.

I figured I'd feel about farming much the same as I'd felt about working on the road crew; I might not love the work, but I'd sure as hell like not having to be so damn responsible all the time.

A few days later the topic came up again at the breakfast table.

"You still pretty certain you want to farm a little?"
Dad asked.

"Yeah. Have you already talked to G.C.?' I replied.

"I talked to him last night and he said he could use you for a week or so," Dad said. "Call him tonight and then let me know what's up. I need to know when you plan to start."

I couldn't believe it had been that easy. I was so tickled about the prospects that I didn’t even mind building fence that day. All I could think about was the possibility of a whole week of work out of sight and sound of Dad. I could hardly wait to get home to call G. C.

I called him that night after supper, and he told me to be at his place before six the next morning. I told him I would and then went in to tell Dad of my plans.

He surprised me by telling me to be sure and enjoy myself and he’d see me in the morning at breakfast. The whole deal had been so easy, I decided I’d better look around our area and see if there was any other jobs I wanted to take a crack at. I’d better take full advantage of Dad’s generous mood.

I drove up to G.C.’s house the next morning about a quarter of six, just in time to see him headed for the barn for his morning constitution. G. C. was four or five years younger than Dad, but he’d spent enough years around chuckwagons on the open range that he had no need for indoor plumbing.
The two tractors belonging to the ranch were sitting next to the overhead fuel tanks. One of the machines was practically new. The other looked old enough to have been built about the same time Henry Ford was putting in his assembly line. I just knew that new one would be fun to drive. Both of them even had big umbrellas over the driver's seat. I was liking this better all the time. I was going to make money sitting in the shade on my butt without a care in the world.

"Morning," G.C. said. He was headed my way from the barn and he was in a hurry.

"Morning," I replied. "I was just looking them over."

"Oh, yeah, that's all right," G.C. said. "We'll get one of them fueled up for you and get you going directly. You'll have plenty of time to look it over good the next few days. Know anything about tractors, son?"

G.C. went on checking the oil, filling the tractors with fuel, and explaining things about them to me as he worked. I was dying to know which one I'd get, but didn't want to ask. I didn't really have time either because he was constantly telling me something that I was not to forget, sending me to the barn for something or other, or handing me a wrench and telling me to tighten all the bolts here and there on the plow.

"After today, you'll learn to do these things morning, noon, and night without me reminding you," G.C. said.
"These tractors cost money and you really have to keep a close watch. You've got to watch things like oil and filters and especially watch the plow for loose bolts or cracked places or you can really tear something up."

Damn! Here was that responsibility again, I thought. When I drove the truck for the road crew, that company had a service man check those things every evening when we climbed out of them.

"Okay. Looks like we're ready to go," G.C. said.

"You're going to drive this Farmall."

The Farmall was the old one.

"I figure you wanted to drive that new, little Massey-Ferguson," G.C. went on, "but it doesn't pull as big a plow as the Farmall. You'll plow the majority of the fields, and I'll plow the corners and tight spots and what I can of the fields on the Massey."

I probably had a sick look on my face because G.C. grinned and tried to lift my spirits.

"Besides, I think you'll get along great with the old Farmall," he said. "You two are about the same age."

I tried to grin and laugh, but I could only manage a pretty weak effort. If things didn't start looking up soon, I'd gotten myself into a hell of an ordeal. I'd even asked for it.

"Yeah, sounds great. Where do I start?" I managed to say.
"We're going to start in this field next to the barn today," G.C. said. "I'm going to drive the first round for you and show you what gear to put the tractor in, how deep to set your plow, and a few other things you need to know. Come on and climb up here."

With that G.C. and I both climbed onto the Farmall. He showed me how to start it, how to raise the plow for traveling on the road, and the gear to use. We were off.

Once we were in the field, G.C. showed me the right gear for plowing.

"You just put it in second or third here and leave it," he said. He did and we took off.

He lowered the plow and it dug in; the old Farmall engine belched black smoke under the load and suddenly the brown earth began to ripple and roll off the plowshares like waves on a wind-blown lake. We were plowing.

It wasn't so bad. There was a little breeze, I was in the shade, and at least I wasn't fencing or fixing windmills.

"When are you going to shift gears?" I asked G.C.

The shifting gears part was what I was looking forward to. I had enjoyed driving the dump truck for the road crew because of the constant gear shifting. It gave me something to do to pass the time. That would have been a boring as hell job otherwise.

"You don't usually have to shift gears," G.C. answered.
"Sometimes in rough spots you may have to stop and put it in a lower gear for a little ways, but not often."

I couldn’t believe it! I’d been looking forward to that part. That was one of the things I thought would make it fun. I hadn’t even bothered to find out that driving rock trucks in a quarry and driving tractors in a field weren’t even remotely similar.

"You mean I just put the tractor in that one gear and go around and around this field like that?" I asked, unbelieving.

"Yeah, but you’ve got to look back most of the time to see how your plow is doing, and you’ve got to make sure your plow overlaps the plowed area on each round," G.C. explained.

"You’ll get the hang of it in no time," G.C. went on. "Your neck will get a crick in it, but you’ll work it out tomorrow."

Hell, a moron could get the hang of this in no time, I thought. I was beginning to wonder what other cheery piece of news he had for me. We had just about completed one round. When we were back where we had started, G.C. stopped the tractor and climbed down.

"Well, she’s all yours now," G.C. said. "I’ll keep an eye on you and if you have any trouble, just stop and I’ll soon notice you. Otherwise, I’ll come out at noon and relieve you while you go to the house and eat. Then you
come back out and stay until about six this afternoon. That’s a good quitting time and leaves us time to look after the equipment."

"How long will it take to plow this field?" I asked. I was tempted to ask how many rounds I would have to make, but thought that would be a stupid question.

"Oh, it usually takes the bigger part of four days in this field," G.C. replied. "Then there’s three others, but they’re a little smaller. I’ll see you at noon."

I put the tractor in gear and took off. I wanted to think about my situation in solitude, which was a good thing, since I was going to have plenty of it and nothing else to do. I looked at my watch. It was about eight-thirty. I had about nine hours to go on day one.

I just couldn’t figure how something that sounded so good the day before could have turned out so bad. No wonder Dad hadn’t put up any more of a fight than he had about my doing this. He knew damn well what was in store for me! Hell, for once he even tried to tell me! Of course it wasn’t that he wanted to spare me the misery; it wasn’t benefiting our ranch any. If we’d had farm land, I wouldn’t have had any choice about whether to plow or not.

The hours passed slowly. By noon I had exhausted all means of entertaining myself. The dullness of plowing had me practically in a stupor. By six o’clock the first day, I had devised new methods of entertainment and exhausted them
also. This was going to be a long haul.

When I sat down at the table for supper that night, Dad was in a grand mood.

"Well, how did it go?" he asked. "Should I start looking for bargains in tractors yet?"

I could see he was going to enjoy this, but I wasn't going to help him any.

"I don't believe I would buy one just now, though you never know," I replied. "I don't think it's the worst thing I've ever done."

"How many days do you think you'll be there?" Dad asked next.

"Well, I didn't tell G.C. I'd help him plow the whole damn farm, so I guess four or five days is all," I replied. I wasn't sure I could use that argument to get out of it. I had implied that I would help until everything was done.

"Good. Good. That should be enough to let you know whether or not you want to be a farmer," Dad said. "It doesn't pay to be hasty about things like that. That should be enough for a while."

"Probably so," I said, casually. I'd already had enough farming in one day to last me seventy or eighty years.

Dad got up from the table and carried his things to the sink. He usually went to his chair after supper and read until he fell asleep. He was headed that way now.
"By the way," Dad said, turning my way again "your friend Jim called just before you came in. He said he was on horseback up near one of G.C.'s fields today, and he thought he saw you on a tractor. He just called to find out if it was you."

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"Why, I told him the truth," Dad replied. "I told him that it was you, and that you had hired out to plow for a few days for G.C."

"What did he say to that?" I asked. Dad looked pretty tickled.

"Well, first he was relieved to know his eyesight was okay, and then he wanted to know if you'd learned to drive tractors while you were in college. Finally, he said to tell you that he had a pair of lace-up clodhopper boots someone gave him and you could have them," Dad said. "He said he'd bring them to you tomorrow at your new job."

With that final stab, Dad walked on out of the room, laughing like hell.
LIGHTER MOMENTS
Dad, the Drunks, and the Muddy Road

We were sitting in the pickup on top of the hill in what we called West Westfork pasture. It was called West Westfork because a highway that had been cut through the pasture years before had divided it. You could see into East Westfork from where we were and that’s where Dad’s attention was focused.

It was raining, like a cow peeing on a flat rock as the men would say, and that means pretty hard. We’d come down to fix some fence and before we’d done much, the rain had started. Dad didn’t quit anything easily, so we’d worked on and off most of the day. After we’d both got good and wet, he decided to call it quits and go home, but first he said he wanted to drive up on the hill and see if he could see any of the cows on the East side of the road.

As I sat listening to the rhythm of the windshield wipers and the radio, I noticed Dad’s jaw tighten and his teeth clamp down on his pipe. Those signs, along with about fifteen or twenty others I knew, indicated that Dad had seen something he didn’t like. I didn’t even bother to try to see for myself what it was. Course, he noticed my lack of curiosity right away.

"Look at that, will you," Dad said, pointing toward the county dirt road that cut perpendicular across the East Westfork pasture and intersected with the highway.

"What is it?" I asked, before I’d even sat up where I
could see. I didn't really figure I could see a thing since Dad could usually see things that even people with good vision missed. He was near sixty-five and I was fifteen, but I swear he had better eyes than I did.

"Well, it's a damn pickup coming down that slick, muddy road," he said, as if that was about the rarest thing ever.

I just hated it when Dad did this. He'd make me try to figure out what was so odd about something instead of just telling me and letting me forget about it. Sometimes it even made me about half mad.

"Hell, I can see that it's a pickup on the muddy road," I said. "But what about it"

"Well, do you know who it is?" Dad asked.

I resisted the urge to say, "Hell no, and I don't really give a big damn." I had said that once when we'd been having one of these games of his. That particular time, he'd been pointing to different men in the auction barn at Olney one day and asking if I could identify them. Anyway after I'd said I didn't give a damn who one was, Dad got real mad and didn't say a word to me for the remainder of the day.

"Why no, do you?" I finally managed.

"Yes, I damn sure do," Dad said. "It's old Trent, Trigg, and Gholson from town, and I'll bet they're all big drunk."

Dad had the funniest way of always saying drunks were
big drunk. I always wanted to ask if there was such a thing as little drunk.

"I'll also bet you a day's wages that they slide off the road and into the ditch before they get to the highway," Dad added. "It's hard enough to drive on a slick road when a man's sober and damn near impossible for a drunk. It'll serve them right if they get stuck and have to walk to town."

I knew Dad didn't like drinking, but deep down I knew that he wouldn't actually leave them there if they got stuck. It wouldn't be due to the fact that he felt the need to help his fellow man, however; it would be because he wouldn't want drunks stuck in his pasture. He wouldn't actually care if they stayed stuck forever, just as long as they were somewhere else.

"Look at them; they're getting sideways in the road," Dad said, a little disgusted. "Once you get like that, it's damn hard to straighten her up."

The entire episode had my full attention now too. The nearer to the highway they got, the more nervous Dad and I both became. It was like after all this anticipation of their getting stuck, we were going to be kind of disappointed if they didn't, and as they got closer to the highway and freedom, we got closer to being disappointed.

They were still a good half mile from the highway, however, and it had begun to rain hard again.
"Well, this rain will finish 'em off," Dad said with finality.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "They're not paying any mind to the rain."

"Yeah, but what you don't know," Dad continued, "is that now that it's raining, one of them will begin to talk about it and this will distract the driver just enough that he's going to have even more trouble staying on the road. See, you just don't know how a drunk's mind works."

I wanted to ask how he knew how a drunk's mind works, considering he had never drunk any more alcohol than there was "in the neck of a bottle" as he put it, but I didn't.

"Why don't we drive down the hill and park just across the highway where we could see all this better?" I asked. "I'm getting tired of trying to see through the rain and windshield wipers and all that. I'd like to see closeup them sliding into the ditch. It might be funny when it happens to someone else."

I'd been stuck several times with Dad over the years and it wasn't one damn bit funny. It made Dad mad, kind of like he'd failed at something, and we'd work our tails off getting unstuck.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Dad replied. "If we get close enough for them to see us, they'll be sure to get stuck then. Not many drunks can bear up under the strain of having a teetotaller watch as they make asses of
themselves."

But something made him change his mind because he put the pickup in gear and we slowly eased down the hill to see. They were now within two hundred yards of the highway. We stopped just across the highway from the road they were coming down. It had stopped raining hard and was just a drizzle now. We were parked with the drizzle at our backs, so Dad rolled down his window.

"We might as well have a little sound to go with this show, don't you think?" Dad said. He was grinning a little. He was actually beginning to enjoy this. It was almost like he knew the outcome already.

Sure enough, about that time the pickup got sideways on the road, and we could hear the roaring of the engine as the driver gunned it trying to keep moving in the slick road. Mud was flying in a spray from behind both wheels. As the pickup bounced roughly across the two ruts in the road, muddy water flew up across the hood and windshield. The wipers were going ninety trying to keep the windshield clear, but they were losing the battle. They got straight in the road again, then bounced across the ruts the other way and got sideways again, and again we heard the revving of the engine as the muddy spray shot out from behind the wheels.

Dad got tickled. He just busted out laughing so hard he had to take his glasses off and wipe his eyes. He put
them back on, took another look at the drunks, and started laughing again.

"What's so funny?" I asked. Dad had to wipe his eyes again before he began.

"Well, it just dawned on me what those fellows must be feeling like about now. They got on that road three miles back. That whole road is clay and just as slick as it is here. They've been fighting that mud for probably an hour or so, sloshing their beer-filled bellies back and forth in that pickup like a man on a roller coaster. They've probably been praying for a good place to get stuck just so they can stop and rest and pee."

About that time, the pickup got sideways once again and with a mighty roar of the engine and spray of mud and water, the pickup and the drunks hit the ditch and stopped, not thirty yards from where we sat. They had nearly made it.

Steam rose from under the hood where water had splashed on a hot engine. All the windows were covered with mud. The wipers were still going, spreading muddy water back and forth on the windshield. The engine roared to life again and mud flew from behind the wheels again. The pickup didn't move. Once more the engine roared, the wheels spun, mud flew, but the pickup remained still.

I looked over at Dad to see his reaction. He wasn't laughing any more, but he was still smiling. It had started raining a little harder. Suddenly one of the windows in the
pickup was rolled down a little and we could hear shouts and
curses from within.

"What are we going to do now?" I asked kind of quiet,
like I thought the drunks might hear me.

"What do you mean, what are we going to do?" Dad
snorted. "We aren't the ones stuck."

He didn't really say it with conviction though, because
he knew that since we were that close, we were going to be
involved, somehow.

The driver's door, which was the one facing us, opened
abruptly and Trent sat silently surveying the situation. He
hadn't as yet shown any sign of noticing us. Finally, he
turned to his companions, muttered something which we
couldn't hear, and boldly stepped from the pickup.
Fortunately, he didn't have to step far because the ground
level was even with the bottom of the door.

Dad had begun to laugh again. "You need to pay real
close attention to this," he said. "It's not often you will
get to see three drunks flounder in the mud. It's hard
enough for a drunk to walk on dry, smooth, level ground.
This is going to be a real test for them."

When Trent stepped out on his side, the other two piled
out of the other side of the vehicle. Other than that one
step, that was all the forward progress any of them made.

Trent sank almost to his knees, and the momentum
pitched him forward on his stomach. He let out a stream of
curses as he placed both hands into the mud in an effort to push himself upright again.

A similar scene was taking place on the other side of their pickup. We couldn’t clearly see everything, but we could hear enough to figure it out.

"Goddamn you, Trent. Look what you’ve done now!" Trigg shouted. "I told you not to go down this road. But hell no, you wouldn’t listen. Shit, look at this mud. Shit, I’ve lost one of my shoes in this shit. Damit, Gholson, help me find my shoe and quit holding on to me. Shit!"

"Find your own goddamn shoe," Gholson replied. "A man who wears shoes all the time shouldn’t get out in the mud anyway."

They went on that way chewing on each other and totally unaware of Trent or us either. Dad and I were both laughing pretty hard now, but I was also getting a little anxious because I didn’t know what they would do when they discovered we were laughing at them. Dad opened his door and got out, motioning for me to follow.

As Trent was in the process of getting up, he saw us. Gholson saw us too, when he got hold of the pickup and slowly worked his way around to Trent’s side. Trigg was apparently still searching for his shoe in the mud since we could neither see nor hear him.

"Well look there," Gholson said, relieved, "help has arrived and not a minute too soon."
Trent wasn't quite so cheerful. "Well before you get your hopes up, you might notice that help is McMurtry and we are in his pasture. Did you and Trigg knock any beer bottles out when the door opened? McMurtry hates bottles in his pastures. Course he hates beer bottles in general and beer drinkers in particular. He probably won't even speak to us."

Gholson was undaunted. "I don't give a damn whether he speaks to us or not, as long as we get a ride to town. That ride you gave us was so wild we couldn't ride and drink too. I'm damn near sober."

Trigg's head appeared, for the first time, above the bed of Trent's pickup. He didn't look to be near as sober as Gholson claimed to be. His little, narrow-brimmed derby-looking hat was sitting almost sideways and pushed way back on his head. His hair was in his eyes and he was panting, his mouth wide open. He had both arms resting on the pickup now, and they were muddy clear up above his elbows. In one hand he held what appeared to be a large glob of mud, but was, in all likelihood, his shoe. The front of his white shirt was sporting various smaller globs of mud. However, he did look cheerful.

"Look," Trigg said, "I found the son-of-a-bitch."

"Wonderful," Gholson said, "now we can all go home."

Trigg had been so interested in his search, he hadn't noticed us or apparently even heard his friends' discussion.
Trent was the only one of the trio who sounded out of sorts. He was probably the only one more or less sober, as the result of having wrestled that pickup down that road for an hour or two.

"Oh, you mean we already have a ride home?" Trigg asked, enthused.

"If you want to take a chance on asking McMurtry," Trent said dejectedly. "Personally, I’d just as soon ask a Highway Patrolman. The law is usually more lenient on drinkers than he is."

"Oh sure, I’II ask him," Trigg said, still confident. "We’re neighbors. We live on the same street. He won’t mind helping a neighbor."

Dad and I stopped about thirty feet from them on kind of a reasonably dry, solid place.

Dad stood taking the entire scene in. He was taking note as to whether or not their pickup had damaged any of his grass. That would determine whether or not he felt obliged to help them. Dad was pretty particular about taking care of his grassland. Trigg broke the silence of the moment.

"Jeff, Jeff, hello, how are you?" Trigg said in his most neighborly tone.

He made it sound like they were buddies. He should have known this kind of approach didn’t work with Dad. Dad’s face took on a slight scowl.
"I’m a damn sight better than you fellows, that’s for sure," Dad replied. "At least I’m not drunk and I’m not stuck and you all are both."

Trent quickly decided he’d better do the talking for them.

"Yeah, Jeff, we’ve got a little trouble here, as you can see," Trent said. "Can you give us a hand? We’d sure appreciate the help."

Dad right away liked that attitude better. He relaxed some.

"Well, what did you have in mind?" Dad asked. "Do you want a ride to town?"

He didn’t exactly give them many choices. It was plain to see that the men didn’t want to leave their pickup and beer stuck in the mud twenty miles from town, but it was also pretty plain that they didn’t want to pass up a ride either. So far, Gholson hadn’t said a word since we walked up.

"Why don’t you go get your shovel and help us dig her out?" Gholson asked. "Someone might steal it before we get back today."

Dad had to snort at that. "Who the hell would want to steal a stuck pickup?" Dad said. He turned to go and I knew the conversation was over. Dad couldn’t abide stupidity in people, drunk or sober.

"You men are welcome to a ride to town," Dad said as we
walked away. "We are leaving now." He didn’t look back.

I was watching where I stepped and couldn’t look back either for a ways. When I did, all three were following and walking down the middle of the road, where the mud was the deepest.

We got in our pickup and Dad started it, so they would have to hurry. When they got there, he motioned for them to get in the back and once they did, Dad headed for town. We’d gone a little piece when I noticed Dad chuckling to himself.

"What are you laughing about?" I asked.

"Well," Dad said, "it takes all kinds of people to make this world. If they had half as much fun getting drunk as we have had watching them sober up, I guess we’ve all been pretty well entertained today."

I looked back at the wet, cold, muddy men huddled in the back of our pickup. From the looks of misery on their faces, I didn’t think they had enjoyed the events near as much as we had. As I sat there thinking about it, I realized Dad must have really enjoyed the whole thing. He had even forgotten to use this as an example of the pitfalls of drinking.
"Hurry up and eat," Dad said. He was walking through the kitchen dressed and ready to go. "I’ve got someone coming with a ditch-digger to help us dig up the old waterline today. I want to get to the ranch first." He put his hat on and went out the door.

I had just sat down to eat and it looked like I was going to have to eat in a hurry. I looked out the kitchen window; it was barely good daylight. I doubted that the ditch-digger was even awake yet, much less on his way to our place. Even if the man was an early riser, he wouldn’t be foolish enough to be eager to get somewhere early to work for Dad. I damn sure wouldn’t have if I’d had a choice.

It was early July, 1964, and I was fifteen. I spent summers working for Dad on our ranch. The day before, we began replacing a waterline from the windmill, which sat near the ranch house, down to the horse trough, a good hundred yards away, and I absolutely despised ranch jobs that didn’t involve cowboying. We had trouble from the start.

"How are we going to dig up the old line?" I asked. We had just got out of the pickup and Dad had told me what he had planned.

"By God with picks and shovels," Dad answered in surprise, "what did you think we’d dig with, our hands?"

I was in shock. Dad wasn’t one to balk at a hard job,
so I was used to tough work, but even I knew that digging up a hundred yards of dry, hard ground was a little beyond our abilities, at least beyond mine.

"How deep do we have to dig?" I managed to ask. I was trying to remember what I’d done to deserve this treatment.

"Well, let’s see," Dad said. He took a little time lighting his pipe while he studied. "I imagine that old line is a good two-foot down up there at the windmill, but probably not over eighteen inches deep here at the trough."

I looked at the picks and shovels again and shook my head in despair. I couldn’t believe it.

"Aw, don’t look so down-hearted," Dad said reassuringly. "We aren’t going to do it all today. We’ll see how things go today, and we’ll probably have to do a little each day for a few days."

A little each day for the rest of our lives, I bet, was what I wanted to say. The thought of all the coming misery gave me courage. I wanted to make a point. I reached in the pickup for a pick and put my gloves on to give it a swing where we stood. We were at that moment right in front of our barn. The ground was smooth and bare and packed. The waterline was directly underfoot. I took a mighty swing with the pick only to have it bounce back almost in my face. I looked at Dad, hard.

Dad took that show as an insult. I might as well have openly stated that we couldn’t do what he had said we could.
"Well, Goddamit, did you expect the damn ground to just open up, easy" Dad fairly snarled. "By God, we'll have to work at it, like everything else we do. You get on up there to the windmill and get started, and I'll start down here by the trough."

I did like he said and by noon, we each had a hole maybe a foot and a half deep and a yard long. Dad's hole was a little bigger because the ground was softer right by the trough. We sat in the shade of a big tree and ate some sandwiches Mom sent along for lunch. I was so hot, mad, and tired, I couldn't say a word. I just sat there looking at the distance between the little piles of dirt. I could imagine spending the rest of my life at this job. Dad broke into this horrible daydream.

"I think I'm going to change the plan a little," he said. "I don't think we're getting along as well as we need to. We can't spend all summer at this. I believe we'll finish digging around the connections both at the windmill and the trough this afternoon, and see if I can get old Graves to come down tomorrow with his ditcher and help us out."

I was so relieved at that news that it was a couple of hours later before I realized Dad hadn't admitted that I had been right in my estimation of the task. The afternoon was a breeze compared to the morning. I felt great just knowing some miracle had spared me the punishment of digging that
ditch by hand.

Anyway, that's what had happened on Day One of the waterline job. Today was a new day and Dad was honking the pickup horn for me to come on. I stuck some bacon on a biscuit, grabbed my hat and gloves, and went out the door running.

We went through town about six-thirty. Graves, the only plumber in town with a ditcher, was just getting out of his pickup in front of the Oil Patch cafe. Dad noticed him too.

"Hell, he won't be down there for another hour and a half," Dad said, disgusted. "We'll go on anyway. We can be doing something while he's in there socializing."

Dad was always irritated when he saw men just starting to have their breakfasts a good hour or two after he'd had his. He thought all people, especially me, should adopt his eating, sleeping, and working habits. It further grated on his nerves that other people might have the time to socialize a little, not that he would socialize even if he had the time, which he didn't.

"He probably just wants to have breakfast," I said. "He can eat and still get to the ranch by his normal eight o'clock starting time."

"Normal to everybody but hard working farmers and ranchers," Dad added, finishing the topic.

We continued on in this fashion all the way to the
ranch. The drive took about twenty minutes, and in that
time Dad could easily point out several aspects of the
working world that bothered him to no end. He always spent
driving time lecturing me on various topics of interest,
usually ranching and working, the two most interesting
topics to him. By the time we reached the ranch, I was
ready to work just to get a rest from Dad’s lecturing.

I was cleaning out the small hole in the ground I’d
made the previous day, when Graves arrived. He unloaded his
ditcher and Dad showed him where he thought the waterline
should lie on an imaginary line between the windmill and the
horse trough. Graves fired up his machine and went to work.

While having Graves and his ditcher certainly sped up
the digging process, it didn’t eliminate all the hard work.
I had to go along behind the machine and use a shovel to
clean out the loose dirt the ditcher left in the hole.
Also, Graves couldn’t dig all the way to the old line,
because the machine might hang on the line and tear
something up. I had to finish the last inch or so with my
shovel.

It took the better part of two days, not counting the
day we’d already put in, to dig the trench. Shortly after
noon on the second day, Graves had his part done. Dad
quickly paid him and let him leave. Dad didn’t like to have
high-priced machinery on his payroll any longer than
necessary. Late in the afternoon we finished tearing all
the old line from the ditch. Dad had a few of the old rusty parts in a sack and had counted the amount of new pipe we'd need. He was ready to head for Windthorst and the feed store to buy new pipe and fittings. As we got in the pickup to go, he leaned over to show me a short piece of the old pipe.

"Do you see why we need to replace this pipe?" Dad asked. "This water has so much mineral in it that the pipe corrodes up inside and just a bare trickle is all that can go through."

"Why are you showing me that?" I asked. I hadn't asked why we were doing the work; I'd quit asking that kind of question a couple of years earlier.

"Because you need to know things like this whether you ask about 'em or not," Dad said. "You might own a ranch some day yourself."

I didn't comment on that statement.

We got to the feed store just before closing. When we walked in, there were still six or seven of the area farmers standing around talking about the weather, the price of grain, and various other topics of interest to farmers and dairymen. Dad carried his sack of old waterline parts in with him. Frank Veitenheimer, who ran the store, was behind the counter. Frank was in his late forties or early fifties and had been running the store as long as I could remember. He'd done business with us before.
"Hello, Jeff," Frank said. "What can we do for you today?"

"Well," Dad said, making a show of putting the dirty sack of old parts down on Frank’s clean counter, "I guess I need some waterline and I need to lodge a complaint with the management around here."

I had no idea what was coming, since he’d not mentioned anything about a complaint to me on the way to town. He didn’t really sound mad though, and if there was one thing I had learned, it was how to tell when Dad was mad. As the farmers began to edge toward the counter, Dad paused to make sure he was getting their attention. They all knew Dad wasn’t bashful about chewing on people, and I guess they wanted to hear old Frank get this one.

"What’s the trouble, Jeff?" Frank asked. He looked into Dad’s sack and began to remove pieces of the old faucets and pipe and look them over.

By now, several of the other men had some of the old pieces of waterline, holding them and looking each piece over good. Everyone in the store was gathered around now.

"Well," Dad said, pausing just a few seconds to light his pipe, "you can see for yourself. The damn stuff is worn out. I bought it here, and by God I wanted you to know it’s a damn shame a man can’t buy good quality anymore. It’s a considerable chore replacing it too." Dad looked pretty solemn.
Dad had stressed the part about it being hard to replace in case Frank hadn’t noticed how dirty, sweaty, muddy, and tired we were. Frank turned a piece of the old pipe over and over in his hand, and I’m sure he was trying to think of something to say in his defense. Finally, Frank tilted his cap back on his balding head a little, and looked at Dad real serious.

"Damn, Jeff. I’m sorry you’re having to go to all that work on account of this sorry pipe we sold you," Frank said. "How long has it been in the ground?"

"Well, let me think a minute," Dad said. He stood there a minute rubbing his chin and puffing on his pipe some more.

At this point I was as intrigued by this story as the others. I had seen Dad draw this kind of circle of curious listeners often enough that I felt something funny might come of this situation. Sometimes, however, Dad drew a circle of listeners just so they could have the pleasure of hearing someone get a butt-chewing.

Dad finally pushed his hat back on his head a little and took his pipe out of his mouth so he could talk better. He picked up a piece of the pipe and looked at it again, closely, like he was trying to identify it.

"You know? Damned if I don’t believe that me and my Dad put this line in the ground," Dad said, kind of matter-of-fact like. "Yessir, we did. I know we did, now
that I think about it."

My Grandfather McMurtry had been gone a long time, though I didn't have any idea of how long. Dad had turned sixty-four back in February.

"When might that have been, Jeff?" Frank prompted.

"Well," Dad went on, "Frank, we must have put that line in about 1916, or there about. I guess you just can't expect anything to last any more, can you?"

It took about three seconds for all of us to realize the pipe had been in the ground nearly fifty years, longer than most of the men were old! You never heard as much laughing and leg-slapping and carrying on as there was over that one. Frank turned a little red in the face, like he'd been the butt of a joke, and then he almost got down on the floor he was laughing so hard. But Dad laughed the longest and hardest of all.
Guineas Run

I learned the truth about one of the obscure mysteries of nature simply by accident the summer that I turned fifteen. Dad, a wiry, old rancher, and I were on our way to work at one of Dad's ranches one morning about daylight, and I was driving, as I did most mornings.

We lived in a small town, and at least two or three mornings a week, we took the same gravel road that went right by Roy and Ester Haigood's place, near the edge of town.

The Haigood's had a small, native-rock house with a green, neatly trimmed yard, flower beds around the house, and several fruit trees scattered about. They had a guinea pen and coop and a feed shed just a little ways from the screened back porch. Most mornings we went by just before the sun came up, and Roy would be feeding a flock of guineas he'd let out of the pen. If we were a little later than usual, the flock often would be crossing the gravel road on their way to a small pond just across the road from the Haigood place.

Now on many of these mornings, some of the guineas would be standing in the middle of the road, pecking at the gravel because, according to Dad, fowl needed gravel in their diet to help digest their food. I always slowed down to give them time to move, and Dad would stick one arm out the window and wave at Roy, while impatiently waving me on
with the other.

That morning we were late, and Dad was grouchy as hell, having gotten up with another one of what Mother said were tension headaches. His disposition wasn't anything to brag about, headache or no headache. He was chewing on my butt for some reason or other. I'd probably loaded the wrong thing in the pickup or forgot to load the right thing. It didn't matter. Anyway, we were both a little tense, and I was driving faster than usual. As we neared the Haigood place it looked like the entire flock was strung out across the road. Domestic fowl were everywhere. I slowed down as usual to give them time to get out of our way, and Dad blew up.

"Why in the goddamn hell do you always slow down for these sons-of-bitches?" Dad yelled. Obviously, his head still hurt, I thought.

"Well, you don't expect me to just run over 'em, do you?" I said. "I've got to give 'em time to fly out of the way."

"Fly hell!" Dad snorted. "You don't know a damn thing about guineas, do you?"

"No, not much other than the little you've told me," I replied.

I had gotten through the guineas and was quickly picking up speed again.

"Well, let me tell you some more about them," Dad said,
as he began lighting his pipe. Some of the anger was gone
from his voice, so I guessed that the opportunity to educate
me a little must have eased the tension. I was thankful.

"In the first place," Dad began, "a damn guinea doesn’t
fly worth a shit, if at all. When the good Lord gave them
wings, He only intended them for decoration. Think about
it. You haven’t ever seen those bastards flying over to
Killian’s pond have you? Hell no. They’re either walking
or running, and they can run like hell."

"Really?" I interrupted, earnestly surprised. "How
fast are they? Can they outrun a horse or something?"

"Damit!" Dad replied, "I don’t know exactly how fast
they are because I never had a race with one, but I just
know they’re pretty damn quick. Why, you couldn’t run over
one of them with the pickup if you tried. I’ve been up this
road a thousand times, and I’ve never even come close to
one."

Dad puffed on his pipe awhile, and I thought about what
he’d said about the guineas.

"In other words, you’re telling me that I don’t have to
slow down for ’em next time," I said. "Is that right?"

"That’s right," Dad replied. "I don’t know why I
hadn’t thought to tell you sooner. It would have saved us
lots of time."

Well, right then I made a silent vow that the next time
I wasn’t going to slow down. I didn’t have anything against
guineas, and I'd certainly never been in a hurry to get to work, but I was pretty eager to see if Dad knew as much as he thought he did about guineas. At sixty-four Dad did know a great deal about nearly everything, but I was constantly looking for a subject he wasn't an expert on.

Not over two days after Dad's enlightening talk on guineas, we were traveling the same road again, and I was driving pretty fast; we were both late and tense. It was cloudy that morning, so it was darker than usual. We were almost to Haigood's before I noticed there was a pair of guineas standing precisely in the middle of the road. I held the accelerator steady and forged ahead, and the guineas disappeared.

We heard a couple of dull, but solid thumps. Dad yelled and dropped his pipe in the floorboard when a guinea and a wad of guinea feathers rolled up onto the hood and slid clear to the windshield.

"Stop, goddamit!" Dad shouted.

"I hit the brakes and slid to a dust raising stop, but not before I had a chance to look in my mirror and see the other guinea bounce once, roll over three or four times, and come to rest amid a cloud of gravel, dust, and black and white feathers. He didn't even twitch. The guinea on the hood had his head twisted sideways, his wings outstretched, and his beak under the arm of the windshield wiper. A few of the loose feathers floated around the windshield and blew
away. He was quite dead too.

"What in the goddamn hell do you mean pulling a stunt like that?" Dad shouted. "Didn’t you see those bastards?"

"Hell yes, I saw ‘em," I said. "You told me I couldn’t run over ‘em even if I tried, didn’t you? You told me they run like hell, but I believe that one tried to fly."

"Well goddamn, just goddamit!" Dad exclaimed, looking at the dead bird on the hood, while he refilled his pipe. His eyebrows were raised and the corners of his mouth jerked a bit, like he wanted to say something else.

He knew that I had an argument.

"What happened to the other one?" he asked a minute later.

"Oh, he’s still in the road back there," I replied.

Dad’s face fell a little more. He didn’t have to be told the other one wasn’t standing back there watching us.

"Those must have been the two slowest, oldest birds Roy had," I said. I thought a little humor might help, but Dad didn’t laugh.

"You’re damn sure right about the had," Dad said. "Roy won’t have to feed those two any more, and we won’t have to slow down for them either." He grinned a little then.

"Well," Dad continued, "you better back up and pull in at his place. He’s standing outside. I’d better go back and offer to pay for them." Dad looked grim once again.

I ground the pickup into reverse and started backwards.
I couldn’t back very straight and ran the wheels over the guinea in the middle of the road. That pissed him off too.

"You didn’t have to run over the son-of-a-bitch," Dad said. "He was already dead. What did you run over him for?"

"I didn’t mean to. I can’t drive as straight backwards as I can forwards," I said.

"I damn sure won’t argue with that," Dad said, "you couldn’t have driven any straighter at those guineas than you did."

I didn’t say anything else, but concentrated on my backing, and Dad concentrated on how much to offer Roy for the birds.

I pulled into Roy’s gravel drive, and Dad got out, taking the guinea off the hood as he started toward Roy. I saw Dad reaching into the hip pocket of his Levis for his billfold. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew he had a pained expression.

Dad dropped the guinea on the ground, and he and Roy shook hands. I saw Dad point to the guinea in the road, and then he turned and pointed towards me in the pickup. I heard them laugh a little, and Dad opened his billfold. Roy waved his hand to Dad’s offering, so Dad quickly put his billfold up, and they stood and chatted some more. They had one more good laugh before Dad came back to the pickup. He got in, and I backed out and headed up the road again, being
especially careful to miss the dead guinea that time.

"Well, what did he say?" I asked. "Did he refuse money?"

"He damn sure did," Dad said. "It surprised the hell out of me." Dad laughed really big then.

I was tickled at the outcome. Dad would have worked my ass off, if he'd had to part with five or six dollars for a couple of dead guineas, or live ones either for that matter.

"When I offered to pay for them, Roy said he didn't want any money; and he even wished to hell that the whole flock had been in the road this morning," Dad said, grinning. "Roy said the damn birds were Ester's and he was tired of messing with them. I guess you were pretty lucky today."

"I was pretty lucky!" I exclaimed. "What do you mean? You're the one who told me to keep on going and not to slow down for the guineas."

"Maybe so," Dad said, solemn. "But I damn sure didn't tell you to run over any of them, did I?"

"Well, no, but you did tell me that I couldn't run over any of 'em, even if I tried," I said, defending myself.

"Yes, but I don't know everything," Dad said, "and a man has got to use his own judgment sometimes." He got busy filling his pipe.

Somehow the whole incident wasn't coming out right. Dad made things sound like it was all my fault.
"How am I supposed to know when to use your judgment and when to use my own?" I asked.

"Why hell, son," Dad said, grinning a little. "You're not old enough to use mine, so I guess you'd better learn to use your own." After that, he just sat there puffing on his old pipe and looking straight up the road.

I spent the rest of the day digging post holes and thinking about what Dad had said. Sometimes, I just had hell figuring him out.
Rewriting the Book

"Get up, get up!" Dad said, shaking my foot hard. "We’ve got to go. Hurry and eat."

As I sat up and stretched, he headed for the bathroom, meaning he’d already eaten and was nearly ready to leave. Most mornings he waked me in time to feed the horses while he cooked breakfast, since Mom had retired after thirty years of breakfasts.

I dressed and stumbled to the kitchen. Dad left a plate of cold eggs and bacon that looked like they’d been there for an hour or two at least. It was still dark outside. I mashed up my eggs and was reaching for the paper when he came through the kitchen.

"You don’t have time to read," he said. "Just eat and come on. It’ll be good daylight when we get where we’re going." He put on his hat and went out the door.

I swallowed my breakfast in three bites. Damn! I hated mornings when Dad was in such a stew so early. I was sixteen and had been helping Dad on the ranch since I was seven, so I had learned to interpret a few signs. They didn’t look good that morning.

We loaded our horses; I took the driver’s seat and we took off. Fortunately, the ranch we were going to wasn’t far from town.

"What’s the big rush this morning?" I asked. "Why didn’t you get me up earlier if you were in such a hurry?"
"I was reading the paper and forgot about you," he answered. "I guess I thought you were feeding the horses until I saw you still in bed."

At sixty-five, Dad was old enough to be forgetful, though he never completely forgot me when he needed work done.

"We're in a hurry," he continued, "because I almost forgot that I told Doc Andrews I'd bring a bull in today for testing."

"What kind of test?" I asked.

"Fertility test, I think he called it," Dad said. "It's probably some new thing these damn veterinarians have come up with to make money off ranchers, but the idea sounded reasonable to me."

That surprised me. Dad had a reputation as one of the best ranchers and managers in our area, but he wasn't known for trying new things. He generally stuck with the old-timey, guaranteed-to-work way of doing something. I stopped in front of the pasture gate.

"How come you let Doc talk you into this?" I asked.

"He didn't talk me into a damn thing," Dad said, gruffly. "I told you the idea sounds reasonable. I'm just going to try it on one bull first. Besides you don't know a damn thing about it yet." He slammed the pickup door pretty hard when he got out to open the gate.

There was no telling why I asked him a question like
that. I knew it'd really piss him off. It seemed that the older I got, the dumber I got, instead of the other way around.

We found a bull, loaded him, and headed for town to Doc’s clinic. Dad told me all he thought I needed to know about the test.

"Doc told me," Dad said, "that he can take a semen sample, I don’t know how yet so don’t ask, and he can tell from that whether the bull is likely to be a high producer or a low one. The test costs thirty-five dollars, not counting our time. Even I can figure that’s a damn sight cheaper than leaving a no good bull out with my cows all year."

I knew enough biology to grasp the idea of a semen sample, but didn’t quite understand how that could determine how many cows a bull was likely to breed.

"Tell me more," I said.

"I'm going to," Dad said, "just listen a minute. Doc knows how many bulls I own, and he’s betting that if I do this with my stock, other ranchers will follow suit. It’s strictly a matter of economics, son. Doc needs cash to pay for the new facilities he built last month. Just because he learned everything he knows in college, it doesn’t mean he’s stupid."

I still didn’t see the advantage for us, but managed to keep my mouth shut during all of that, and we pulled into
Doc's place a little after nine. He was waiting with the gates open.

We unloaded our bull and ran him into the working chute. Doc's new facilities included an indoor work area, complete with squeeze chute, storage cabinets, and a counter to lay his instruments on. Doc took time to show us around, pointing out all the details he'd incorporated into the place. He had long fluorescent lights hanging everywhere, even over the chute. He mentioned more than once that he'd had a hand in all the design.

I was impressed whether Dad was or not. I'm sure all he could see in the new-fangled facilities was an increase in vet bills.

Doc Andrews, or Arch as Dad called him, was a character himself. He was nearly forty, but had been practicing medicine only a year or two. He was way over six feet tall, grey-headed already, and plenty arrogant, a condition that Dad said he had even before he went to vet school at A and M.

"Let's get on with this," Dad said. "Where do you want the bull?"

"Just leave him there in the working chute," Doc said. "Put some bars in front and behind him. Leave him some room to move."

We did like Doc said while he made his own preparations.
"Now I want you to look at this McMurtry," Doc said in his normal, condescending tone. "Modern veterinarian science has finally come to Archer County." Doc pulled something out of a long cardboard box.

"This is called a probe, and it's brand new," Doc said. The instrument was a bullet-shaped, metal cylinder, about a foot long and an inch and a half in diameter. It had a pig-tail like electric cord attached to the blunt end.

"Yes, sir!" Doc said proudly, holding the device up for our inspection. "This is $500 worth of high technology that I'm about to use on your bull. What do you think about that?" He was just beaming.

"I think that's fair enough," Dad said, "considering that's $1000 worth of black bull standing there. But that means I've got twice as much invested in this experiment as you have."

Doc missed Dad's point entirely, but immediately took offense to the word experiment.

"It's not an experiment at all, McMurtry," Doc said, kind of huffy. "Let me explain just how this procedure works."

Dad pulled out his tobacco and began to fill his pipe. "I'm listening," he said.

"Okay, it goes like this," Doc said. "I insert this probe into the bull's rear end and plug the cord into electricity. I slowly and at intervals increase the
current. The probe is kind of vibrator that stimulates the appropriate internal organs until the bull produces a semen sample. There's nothing to it. We'll do it strictly by the book. It generally takes about fifteen minutes."

"How does the bull react to all this stimulation?" Dad asked.

"Ah, it doesn't bother him a bit," Doc said. "He may even like it."

Dad raised his eyebrows, wrinkling his forehead, and shifted his pipe around in his mouth a few times. That was his "I'm listening but not necessarily believing" look. I'd seen it a thousand times.

"Well, are you ready to get with it?" Doc asked. He was just dying to use his new equipment.

"Might as well," Dad said. "We didn't bring that bull all the way in here just to have something to do."

Doc instructed me to get on the opposite side of the chute and hold the bull's tail out of the way. I could do that easy enough, as I didn't have many summertime jobs where I stood in the shade holding a bull's tail.

Doc inserted the probe. The bull fidgeted a little and bellowed once or twice, but otherwise accepted the intrusion without much fuss. About then I noticed that the top rail of the chute wasn't as high as the ones on our chutes.

"Doc Andrews, isn't this rail a little low?" I asked.

"Not a bit," he said. "I planned it that way so I
could reach over into the chute without having to stand on
something."

I looked over at Dad but he just shrugged his shoulders
at me and puffed on his pipe a few times. Doc plugged in
the electricity and turned the dial to low. The bull leaned
forward, straining against the pipe and bellowing kind of
low. When Doc turned the current off, the bull relaxed.

"See there," Doc said, turning to Dad. "It doesn’t
hurt him one bit. Seven or eight more doses of juice and
we’ll have our sample."

Dad nodded but made no comment.

Doc turned the electricity up higher the next time.
The bull strained harder. When he relaxed, he fidgeted a
little more. Five more times Doc went through the procedure,
each time turning up the current. Each time, the bull got
more and more nervous. He paced up and down in the chute,
bellowing louder and louder, but he still had not produced a
sample. It wasn’t working, and Doc was getting concerned.

"McMurtry, are you sure this bull can breed a cow?"
Doc asked, kind of sneering a little.

"I damn sure am," Dad assured him. "I’ve seen him do
it several times, though he wasn’t carrying that probe."

Doc ignored Dad’s sarcasm, so intent was he with the
job at hand.

"Maybe he’s just slow to get excited," Doc said.

"We’ll try some more."
And he tried and tried. Sweat spots were showing on his shirt. The bull wasn’t the only one getting worked up over the procedure.

"Arch, have you noticed that the bull is getting more and more nervous?" Dad asked.

"Yeah," Doc replied, "but that’s just too damn bad. He’s not going anywhere until I get my sample." He turned the juice up on high.

The bull strained so hard that time that his legs trembled, but still no sample.

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" Doc exclaimed. "What’s the matter with this bull?"

"Maybe you need to slow down a bit, be patient, Arch," Dad suggested.

"I guess by God that I know how to do this," Doc said, angrily.

He turned the current on high again for some long seconds, turned it off, and stepped back to survey the situation.

The bull relaxed, took a couple of steps back, stuck his head over the side of the chute, and then jumped right straight up. His head crashed into the light fixture, breaking both bulbs and scattering glass everywhere. Even with his careful attention to design, Doc neglected to calculate just how high a twelve-hundred pound bull with an electric probe in his butt could jump.
"Goddamn watch him!" Dad yelled. "Turn the juice off!"

"It's off. It's off." Doc yelled back. "The son-of-a-bitch is going to tear my place up!"

The bull came down in the chute that time, bellowed once more and jumped again. That time he came down on the low rail on my side of the chute. The welds broke and the bull and the rail slammed into the next rail, breaking it too.

When the second rail broke, the bull fell out of the chute, free, and the extension cord jerked loose from the probe. I had long since turned loose of the tail and climbed another section of the chute. I'd seen bulls get mad and want to fight with a lot less cause.

I looked over at Dad. He was laughing so hard that he had his handkerchief out wiping his eyes.

Doc was not laughing a bit. He was the picture of dejection, leaning against the chute, sweat dripping off his long nose, his shoulders slumped and the extension cord dangling from one hand. The light fixture swung from one chain, like a giant pendulum.

The bull trotted to the far side of the work area, turned and faced us. He didn't look like he wanted to fight, just relieved to be out of the chute.

Dad pulled his pipe out, lit it and puffed a few times to get it going good.

"Well, Arch," Dad said, "what exactly does the book say
to do when that happens?" Dad and I both laughed, but Doc just slowly shook his head.

"Mr. McMurtry," Doc said. "I guess that was the only bull you could find this morning out of all you own?"

We got another good laugh out of that and Doc finally grinned a little himself.

"Oh, hell no," Dad said. "He was just handy, that's all."

"Just my luck," Doc said, shaking his head and laughing off the situation.

"What do you want to do now?" Dad asked. "Try again?"


Dad and I ran the bull back into the chute and got the probe. We left the bull for Doc to try again and went on about our business. I could tell that Dad was thinking about the morning's events.

"Do you really think this fertility testing is going to be worthwhile?" I asked.

"I sure do," Dad replied. "I believe a man's going to have to try some new ideas to make this business pay, and this is one of them."

We rode along a ways and Dad began laughing.

"Besides that," he added, "anytime it doesn't cost me more than thirty-five dollars to wring a little arrogance out of old Arch, I'll consider it money well spent."
ANSWERS
Getting in the Business

I was eating breakfast and Dad was finishing another cup of coffee that morning when I glanced out the window. It was good daylight on a July morning. I figured that something must be up, because we were usually half-way to one of his ranches by this time most mornings, and here we sat, just taking our good, easy time about leaving. Dad was still thumbing through the paper.

"What are we going to do today?" I asked. I was peacefully building a little pile of plum seeds on my plate. I loved to eat Mom’s wild plum preserves and spit the seeds into a pile.

Dad looked at me over the top of his paper.

"I’m thinking about that right now," he said.

He kept watching me spit seeds.

"How many of those are you going to eat?" he asked. Dad could tell that I was enjoying myself, and something about that always irritated him.

"I’m about through," I said. "I’m ready to go to work."

"Good," he said, "you go feed the horses while I decide what I want to do."

I put my dishes in the sink, got my hat, and went out to the little barn behind the house. Boy, it was a pleasant morning. Dad wasn’t in his usual hurry; the sun was just peeking over the horizon, and I had a few minutes to enjoy
the only part of the day that was likely to be enjoyable.

When I got back to the house, I noticed that Dad had on his good Levis and good boots. He was sitting at the table figuring on a little tablet. I sat down to wait, resisting the urge to eat more preserves. Mom came in then to wash the dishes. She'd quit cooking early breakfasts that very summer, but still washed up for us.

Dad looked up from his figuring and put his tablet away.

"You're sixteen, aren't you?" he asked.

"Will be in October," I replied.

"That's old enough," he said. "When I was thirteen, I drove a bunch of cattle to Graham, sold 'em, bought some more and drove 'em home. By myself. Twenty-seven miles and most of it brushy. Course you could go like the crow flies then; there weren't many fences."

I'd heard that story before, and so far, I couldn't make a connection between that event and my being sixteen.

"Old enough for what?" I asked. I felt some anxiety. Often when Dad decided I was old enough for something, there was a better than average chance that the something would not be any fun.

"It's about time that you got in the cow business," Dad said. "Today's sale day at Wichita. I'm going to teach you how to buy cows, borrow money, things like that." He got up and put his hat on.
"Are those the best clothes you have?" he asked.
"You’re going to meet a banker. Put on some clean Levis, a clean shirt, with both sleeves in it, and your Sunday boots. Hurry up." He went out the door.

I looked at Mom. "What do you think of that?" I asked.

"I think that your Dad intends for you to be a rancher," she replied, turning back to her dishes.

I changed clothes as fast as I could. Dad wasn’t long on patience.

"You can drive this time," Dad said, when I got outside. "I need to do some more figuring."

Actually, I’d been doing all the driving for the last two years. Dad was sixty-six and liked to joke that being chauffeured around was one of the advantages of age.

We hadn’t gone far when I decided to find out some more about his plans for me, as they seemed to be proceeding without my having the slightest input.

"When did you decide that I wanted to be in the cow business?" I asked, casually. "I kind of like being a cowboy right now, working for you and other ranchers."

"Oh," he said, "you’re going to have plenty of time for more cowboying, and you owning a few cows isn’t going to keep you from working for me. In fact, you’re going to have to keep working for me to have any money at all."

I didn’t know what he meant by that last remark, but I let it slide.
"Okay," I said, "but you still didn't answer my question."

"What question?" he asked.

"When did you decide that I wanted in the business?" I repeated.

"I don't remember exactly," he said. "It just came to me one day that if I could be in business for myself when I was thirteen, then surely to hell you could manage at sixteen."

"Hell, I don't have any money for cows or a place to put 'em if I had 'em," I protested.

"The banker is going to take care of the money part," he said, "and I've already leased you a pasture. You can pay me back after you see the banker."

It was becoming apparent that I was about to borrow some money and buy some cows, period.

When we got to the auction, Dad instructed me on how cow-buying worked. I guess he'd forgotten that I'd been with him to buy cows a hundred times before.

"Here's how it works," Dad said. "We look through the cows. If we find some we go to the bank and ask the banker for enough money to buy 'em. Then we come back here and try to buy 'em worth the money. You understand?"

"Yes, I understand," I said. "We've done this before when you were buying some."

"Yeah, but there's one big difference today," Dad said.
"What?" I asked. "Buying cows is buying cows."

He got real close to me then, eye-to-eye. He looked dead serious.

"You and you alone are going to repay the money that you borrow today," he said, gravely. "Oh, I'll co-sign the note since you're so young, but I'm damn sure not going to repay the money. You are." He turned and started to the corrals.

I was stunned. I didn't know anything about owing money, and couldn't think of a single reason why I should. I didn't even need much. I worked. I had spending money to do the things that I liked to do. Very simple. No problems. Why should I buy something that I couldn't pay for?

"How am I going to pay back a bunch of money?" I asked.

"We'll get to that lesson later," Dad said. "Let's see if we can find some cows."

We did find eight or ten cows that Dad said would do. That meant we'd spend the afternoon sitting round the auction, waiting for them to come through so I could bid on them. Dad said that would be another part of my lesson.

"Well, you need some money all right," Dad said, "let's go see the banker."

Dad had been banking at City National Bank for thirty years. His banker was a senior vice-president, E.A. Jones. He was a big, burly man who always crushed my hand when we
shook. We were shown right in, and Dad had a little talk with him off to one side, then Mr. Jones motioned for me to sit next to his desk, where Dad usually sat.

"What can I do for you, John?" Mr. Jones asked.

I had my hat in my hand, twisting the brim, tight. Dad reached over and snatched it out of my hand.

"Dad said for me to borrow some money and buy some cows," I said.

"Since you're the one borrowing the money," he said, "what do you say?"

"I guess I need to borrow some money," I replied.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Mr. Jones said. "How much do you need?"

That stumped me. I knew about what cows cost, but since I hadn't planned on owning any, I hadn't stopped to figure much, and I didn't know what I owed Dad for the lease. I squirmed in my chair.

"I don't know how much I need," I said.

Dad snorted at that. "You can figure can't you?" he said. "Stop and think about it."

He'd been doing all the figuring, I thought, but didn't say so. I'd given anything to have my hat in my hand again.

"Well, let me see if I can help," Mr. Jones said. "How many cows do you plan to buy?"

"Oh, probably eight or ten today," I answered.

"They're about two to two hundred fifty a pair aren't
they?" Mr. Jones asked.

"Yes, sir," I said, "that sounds about right." I looked over at Dad for some acknowledgement that this was going right. He looked solemn but nodded.

I did some quick mental figuring.

"I need about twenty-five hundred dollars," I said, hesitantly.

"What about lease money?" Dad broke in. "What are you going to do about that?"

I turned to face Dad. "You haven't told me how much I owe you yet."

"You haven't asked either," he replied. "You need about a thousand dollars for a year's lease."

I turned back to Mr. Jones. "Make that thirty-five hundred dollars now," I said.

He and Dad both laughed. "You're spending money pretty fast, son," Mr. Jones added. "Is that all you'll need? What about feed bills, vet bills, other expenses?"

I didn't know what to say, so I looked to Dad again. "I'll help him figure those things when the time comes," Dad said. "He'll do good to pay back what he's borrowing."

They both laughed again, but somehow I was missing all of the humor in this. My shirt was sticking to my back.

"That brings us to the last question, John," Mr. Jones said. "How do you intend to pay us back?"
"I don't know," I said, honestly, trying to think. "I guess by selling the calves like Dad does."

"Good answer," he said. "I'm going to let you have the money. Your last name was enough for me anyway. I'm not too worried about whether or not you'll pay."

I fully understood the responsibility in that statement. I knew by heart the story of the only one of Dad's eight brothers to go officially broke in the cow business. He eventually paid all of his debts and owned another ranch but it took him a life time.

Mr. Jones stood and we shook on the deal. He told his secretary to fill out the paperwork, while he and Dad went for coffee. I signed a note for thirty-five hundred dollars at five percent interest, whatever that meant. When they returned, we all shook again, and Dad and I headed back to the auction. He looked pretty pleased, with one of us.

"So that's how you do it?" I asked.

"Yeah, but that's only the beginning," Dad said.

"Let's go buy some cows."

That afternoon I bought eight cows and calves. The buying was actually the fun part. I'd watched him enough to know how it worked. You just raise your hand and get in on the bidding, though once Dad had to pull my hand down because I kept on going higher and higher when I should have stopped. It didn't really seem like I was spending money.

On the way home that evening, Dad told me where my
pasture was, the shape of the fences, who owned it and so on. He explained that when the note came due, if I hadn’t sold enough calves to pay it off, and I wouldn’t the first year he said, then I just had to pay the interest, what I could of the principal, sign another note and begin another year.

"Yes, son," Dad said. "There’s nothing to it but lots of hard work for you. You’re on your way. How do you feel about it?"

"Pretty good, I guess," I replied.

By the end of that winter, I had two leased pastures, twenty more cows, two bulls, and an additional note for five thousand dollars. I had a hay and feed bill to pay and had discovered that veterinarians charged a lot for their services. Yes, sir, I got in the cow business in a big way, and from where I stood, I couldn’t see any end to it.
A Nail in the Coffin

You bring your slicker?" Dad asked. It was a little after five a.m. and we were saddling our horses and getting ready to go help a neighbor work cattle.

"No, I forgot it," I lied. I hoped he'd let it go, but I knew better.

A minute later he came around to the other side of his horse to tie his own slicker in place at the back of his saddle.

"You mean that you forgot and left it tied to your saddle that you forgot and left in Wayne's trailer up at the other place the day before yesterday, don't you?" Dad said, sarcastically.

I didn't answer, but just went on saddling my horse with a saddle a buddy had loaned me until I got a chance to get mine.

"Maybe if you have to ride all day in the rain without a slicker, your memory might improve a little," Dad continued.

Dad sure did enjoy asking the kind of questions that allowed him to take the answer and twist it around a bit.

I didn't see any need in replying to his last remark. I reached under my horse to get my flank cinch, buckled it, and straightened up just as he walked by me to the gate.

"What makes you think it's going to rain all day anyway?" I said.
I knew he didn’t sit up at night late enough to see the weather on television. Dad was 68 and I was 18. My nights started about the time his stopped.

"Well, for one thing, the sky is heavy overcast, which you would have noticed if you weren’t always sleepy-headed from staying out too late. The wind is cool and out of the east. And in case that’s not proof enough, the morning paper said so. That is how I know," Dad said.

"Anyway," he went on, "it won’t have to rain all day to get you wet if you don’t have a slicker. Fifteen minutes will do it and it’ll take you the rest of the day to dry out."

As usual he had an air-tight case, but I decided to try and match wits just for the sake of argument.

"Well," I said, "for all you know, maybe I left my slicker and saddle up there at the other place on purpose. I might be saving them wear and tear by not using them." I thought that sounded like something he’d say and it might get a laugh. I was partly right.

Dad chuckled but went on loading his horse before answering.

"Why hell," he said, "why didn’t I think of that? When we get through at Cowan’s today, I’ll come home in the pickup and you can walk. That’ll save wear and tear on my truck seat where you generally sit. Now that makes about as much sense as what you said."
"Okay. You’re right. I did forget the saddle," I said. This was getting old already. "Is that what you’ve been waiting to hear? I don’t suppose you ever forgot anything, did you?"

Boy, there wasn’t anything like starting your day with someone constantly reminding you of your shortcomings, especially at five a.m. Dad could do this better than anyone in the world, probably because he’d had me to practice on for years.

"No, goddamit, the point isn’t that I wanted you to admit you forgot something," Dad continued. "The point is that you need to learn to use your head for something besides a hatrack."

Dad loved to use that remark, and it really pissed me off. He’d said that to me so many times in the last ten years, that I’d made a mental note to leave instructions to have it put on my headstone someday. Even when I did stop and think before doing something, the result was still wrong, according to Dad. The only two ways of doing things were his way and the wrong way.

The last year or two, I’d begun resenting those kinds of remarks. We began most of our mornings in this same fashion, and I was finally getting to an age where I felt I could take up for myself with Dad, even if it meant risking talking back a little.

"That may be the point to you, but it’s damn sure not
"the point to me," I said, angrily.

"What is the point to you?" Dad asked, a little surprised.

"It's that I'm eighteen goddamn years old and if it doesn't bother me to get wet, then I don't see why you have to make an issue of it," I said.

Dad didn't say a word. I loaded my horse, we climbed in the pickup, and headed off.

We were going to help Cowan and Son Ranch work cattle. Cowan and Son was the largest ranch in the area. They also had land in other adjoining counties near our own ranches. I normally enjoyed the days spent helping them because there were always several of my cowboy friends around. Some of them worked full-time for the ranch.

Dad was usually more relaxed also on days when we helped neighbors because he didn't have to do any of the day's planning himself. If Dad was relaxed, it usually meant that I could be too, but apparently this wasn't to be the case today. We hadn't gone five miles when he started again.

"I don't suppose you noticed that the old saddle you've borrowed is hurting your horse's back, did you?" Dad said.

Of course that made me feel guilty as hell, just as he knew it would. I didn't actually own any horses. All of the ones I rode were Dad's. So I was hurting his horse's back. I had noticed because a saddle that's hurting a
horse’s back leaves two small, round spots on either side of his back, under the front of the saddle.

"Hell, yes, I noticed," I replied. "I’m not blind, Dad. But just what in the hell do you expect me to do? I couldn’t ride bareback. I had to have a saddle. I can’t help it cause the one I borrowed hurts horses."

"You could have helped it by not having to borrow one," Dad said.

Damn! There just wasn’t any winning when Dad was in one of these moods.

"When we’re done this afternoon, I’ll go back up there, and I’ll get the damn saddle and the slicker too," I said. "You know it has been raining all week there or I would’ve already gone after it. Will that please you?"

He didn’t answer. Instead, we just rode along in silence for ten miles or so. True to form, though, the next words to come out of his mouth picked up right where we’d left off.

"What would please me is for you to slow this pickup down a little," Dad answered. "We’re almost there. The gate where we’re to meet the others is just over this little hill. We’ll wait and see about you going after the saddle this afternoon. There’s an old half-slicker behind the pickup seat. Be sure and get it when we stop. Some slicker will be better than none this morning. I believe it looks like it might rain all day."
Most of the other neighbors and cowboys were there when we drove up. While I unloaded the horses, Dad, Joe, who was Cowan’s foreman, and G.C., another neighbor of ours, cussed and discussed whether or not to call the day’s work off. By now everyone was there and most of us were mounted. Joe decided to go ahead with the work, so we left the pickups behind and headed off to round up the pasture of cattle.

This particular pasture of Cowan’s contained about seven thousand acres. That means it is several miles across. Within two hours our crew of twelve cowboys was scattered over a distance of five miles or so. At that point in a roundup, it is too late to call it off. Also at that point it began to rain. It didn’t just sprinkle; it rained so hard that it would have made Noah nervous. There was nothing to do but continue the roundup and hope that the rain would let up a little.

Around the middle of the morning with the rain still pouring, I came close enough to Dad to stop and chat a minute. I came out of the brush into a little, salt-scald clearing and there Dad sat. His huge, yellow slicker covered him, his saddle, and about two-thirds of his horse. His pipe was turned upside down in his mouth, and he was peacefully puffing big, blue-grey clouds of smoke that the rain washed away as quickly as they formed. He looked just as comfortable as he did when sitting in his easy chair at home. The sight just made me more miserable.
There wasn't a dry spot on me. The little slicker he had given me was jacket length. All the rain that landed on my saddle ran under my butt. I had made the mistake several times of leaning over to light a cigarette and had the cold spring rain run down my collar and spread out across my back to work its way down to my butt also. My cigarettes were soggy and my matches useless. I was beginning to get cold. Dad took in my condition at one glance.

"Cold?" he asked, "Or just wet or both?" He grinned.

As miserable as I was, I still had enough reserve that I felt it necessary to uphold the cowboy's code of endurance in the face of hardship.

"Yeah, a little," I replied, tight-lipped.

"A little hell!" Dad said. "You look like a drowned rat and I know damn well you feel like one too." He laughed, big.

I saw plenty of drowned rats during the rat plague of '57, and I hoped to hell that I didn't look that pitiful. Even if I did, I wasn't about to let him know how I felt. He was just dying for a chance to say something about how my big slicker would keep me dry, if I had it.

"Well, I'm a little damp from the waist down, but other than that I'm fine," I lied. I'd probably taken baths without getting as wet as I was at the moment.

"I'd say you're a little wet from the waist up too," Dad said. "I've watched at least a gallon of water run down
the back of your neck while you tried to light that cigarette. You haven’t felt it yet, because you are already so damned uncomfortable. I guess days like this take some of the romance out of cowboying, don’t they?” He handed me his cigarette lighter.

"Hell, it doesn’t take something this drastic to take the romance out of it for me,” I said. I meant it too. Conversations like we’d had early that morning didn’t exactly make my cowboy days appealing.

Dad didn’t know it, but I’d already had serious doubts about whether I had what it took to devote a life to ranching, or even wanted to, for that matter.

"You reckon your Uncles Charley, Jim, or John ever felt as you do right now while they were sitting around a campfire on the plains, trying to keep warm or dry out?” Dad asked.

I handed his lighter back and puffed on my cigarette a little to be sure it was lit before answering.

"Oh, probably not," I replied. "Seems like our whole damn family enjoys seeing how much we can suffer, and they probably enjoyed suffering more than anyone."

I’d grown up on stories about my cowboy uncles and their cowboy days. According to the stories, their cowboy talents were exceeded only by their capacity to endure hardships.

The conversation had lifted my spirits enough to want
to argue. I thought my last remark would do it, but Dad didn’t take the bait.

"We’d better move on now, or we’ll get behind," Dad said. "We should be at the corrals by one o’clock or so. Think you can hold out?"

"Hell yes!" I shot back. "What other choices do I have?" That ticked me off. He was laughing again as he turned his horse and rode off into the downpour.

The rain was coming in sheets now. It was whipped by the wind like big, grey bed-sheets flapping on a clothesline. The cattle were getting harder to drive. They kept wanting to turn their tails to the storm. The ground was so soggy, it was tough going for horses and cattle. Progress had slowed to a walk.

I continued to get wetter and colder. My spirits sank to a new low and stayed. I had been wet and cold plenty of times while cowboying, but I couldn’t remember a time as bad as this. Maybe it was just beginning to bother me more.

An hour or so after talking to Dad, I noticed the intensity of the downpour had let up a little. I could see the corrals, where we were headed, about a quarter of a mile in the distance.

I could almost imagine my cold, wet hands wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee. It would be a luxury to stand next to a fire and pull my cold pants away from the wet skin of my butt that had been pressed against my saddle.
for five hours. Surely there was no way we’d have to go back out this afternoon. These thoughts raised my sinking spirits again.

About this time Joe rode out of the brush and up beside me. He too was completely covered by a huge slicker like Dad’s.

"How’re you doing?" Joe asked.

"I’m fine, just fine," I lied. I was trying to stop my teeth from chattering.

"Well, that’s good," he said. "I’d been of a notion to call this off this afternoon, but since everyone is already soaked, I guess we’ll just go on. When we get these cattle to those corrals, we’ll eat a bite, catch some fresh horses, and head back out for another swing through the middle of this pasture. We sure missed a lot of cattle somewhere in the rain this morning."

He headed off into the rain, his horse slipping and straining in the wet muck. Rain was pouring off his felt hat in the front and back simultaneously, like two tiny waterfalls.

I gritted my teeth, sat up a little straighter, and plodded on.
Dad came from a long line of ranchers, and he did not disgrace the line at all. He was considered one of the best ranchers and managers in our part of North Texas. By the time I was sixteen, he owned and leased over four thousand acres of rangeland and ran upwards of two hundred and fifty cows. That was a fair amount of land and cattle for our part of the country.

In addition to those holdings, Dad partnered with some insurance men on another ranch of three hundred cows and five thousand acres. They provided the land, and Dad provided the know-how. This too, was a successful operation.

I had worked for dad on all of his ranches since I turned seven. I wanted to be a cowboy. Before I was sixteen and at Dad’s insistence, I borrowed some money and leased a couple of small pastures of my own, and ran thirty or so cows and calves. Dad wanted me to be a cowman, and he explained the difference to me one day.

"Son," he said, "anybody can be a damn cowboy. It doesn’t take many smarts, just mostly a weak mind and a willing back."

"That doesn’t make it bad, does it?" I asked. "I kind of like being a cowboy."

"I didn’t say it was bad," Dad replied. "I’m trying to tell you why you should be more of one than the other,
I didn’t tell him that I had more fun cowboying with other people’s cattle that I did with my own. That would have pissed him off.

"So, what are you getting at?" I asked.

"I’m getting at the fact that cowboys work for other people," Dad said, "and those other people are cowmen. If you can make money for the other man, you can make money for yourself."

I thought about that for a while. My best friend was a cowboy for a neighboring ranch, and the happiest man I knew. I longed to be like him, both in ability and every other way.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"Son," Dad said, "I’m getting too old to run as much country as I have. I might want you to run some of it for me someday."

Dad was sixty-six that year, but he hadn’t slowed down any. He worked twelve hour days, like always. I worked them too, and I thought that I was helping him run his country.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"No, by God that’s not all," Dad said, kind of gruff, "though that’d be enough."

We rode along aways while he thought about it.
"I don't think you take enough interest in your own damn cattle, much less mine," Dad said. "You don't think about them enough."

I knew what he meant there. We'd had plenty of arguments about my not knowing my cows. Dad thought a cowman ought to know each and every cow by her markings. He was forever saying "Cattle are just like people. There's not any two that looks exactly alike." When we worked my cattle and some were missing, I didn't know which ones were gone, but he did. That just aggravated the hell out of him.

"Dad, we've been through this before," I said. "I know that I don't know my cows, but I'm learning as fast as I can." Actually, I was learning every bit as fast as I wanted to.

"By God, it's not fast enough," Dad said. "But that's not the only reason we're talking about this."

"What is it then?" I asked.

"Well, you know this partnership ranch has been giving you a heifer to keep and raise each year for the last several years," he said. "That's pretty nice of those men."

The truth was that they gave me the heifer each year to stimulate my interest in their ranch and because they didn't think Dad paid me enough for my work. One of the partners told me that himself.

"Dad, I thank them every year," I said. "What else do you want me to do?"
"Starting today," Dad said, "you’re going to know your own cattle. You’re going to start showing more interest, and I’m going to start bearing down on you."

Dad didn’t say any more because we reached the ranch and it was time to go to work, and I still didn’t know exactly what he meant by "bearing down," but I found out that day.

We were going to brand calves that day on the partnership ranch, so six or seven ranchers had gathered to help. Now every one of those three hundred cows on that ranch were black, including the three or four that I owned, and mine were mixed in with the others. They all looked exactly alike to me. The only way I could tell my cows from the others was if I could see the brand, as mine was different, but Dad could tell just from looking at the head and body.

We penned one pasture of seventy or so cows and were about to separate them from the calves for branding. Dad rode up to me where I sat with the other men around the cattle.

"Do you have any cows in this bunch?" he asked, in his booming voice.

He startled me some, asking that way in front of the men, and I squirmed in my saddle.

"I don’t know," I said, and I didn’t. Always before, he’d motion for me to follow him into the herd, and he’d
point mine out. "I don't know which pastures you have mine in, Dad," I said.

"Then I guess, by God, you'd better look and see," he said. He sat there on his horse, filling his pipe, and looking at the herd.

I rode through the herd ten or fifteen long minutes. All those black sons-of-bitches looked alike. I didn't see my brand on any, so I rode out of the herd and up beside Dad.

"I don't think I have any cows in there," I said, kind of low.

"You Goddamn sure do," Dad said. "You've got one cow and calf. Your cow is in there because her mammy is in that pasture."

That didn't mean a damn thing to me, but I turned and rode back into the herd. Dad followed.

"You follow me," he said, "and I'll point her out to you one more time." I did and he did.

We branded those calves, including mine, and turned them back into the pasture. I didn't feel too good for some reason. My good friend, Wayne, tried to make me laugh it off, but I couldn't.

After dinner, we penned another pasture with a hundred or so cows. Dad rode up beside me again.

"I don't guess you know if you have any in here either, do you?" he asked.
I didn’t answer, but turned to ride into the herd. He hollered at me.

"You don’t have any in there," he said. "I’ll save you the trouble of looking." He kind of grinned, so I guess he thought he was doing me a hell of a favor.

We worked those cattle and turned them back into the pasture and penned one more pasture. I knew that I had two more cows somewhere, and I knew that I’d never hated anything as much as I hated those black cows. If I never saw another one, it would be too soon. And here came Dad again.

"You’ve got two cows and calves in there," he said.

"Find ’em."

I got lucky and found one pretty quick and took her out, but I rode for another fifteen minutes and couldn’t find the other one. I was getting nervous and couldn’t think. I stopped my horse and let them mill around me. Goddamn it was hot and I was tired. Finally, Dad rode into the herd and right up to the cow. He pointed her out to me and I took her out. We branded the calves, turned them all back into the pasture, and called it a day. I didn’t have one damn thing to say on the way home, but he did.

"Well, you’re learning to be a cowman," he said.

"You’ll get better." I doubted that but didn’t say so.

He continued. "Those men might let you run this ranch some day, you know? It would be one hell of an
opportunity."

I nodded but didn’t say anything.

After that day, every time we worked that ranch, we went through the same thing. The situation didn’t improve, and for some reason, I didn’t get any better at finding my cows. After a couple of years though, I did learn to deal with it. I’d look for my cows a few minutes, then ride out of the herd. Dad would ask if I’d found them all, and I would say that I didn’t know and didn’t give a damn. And I didn’t.
SEPARATION
Dark Morning

My wife and I and our baby lived on the ranch, Dad's old home place, twenty miles from town. I'd been out of agricultural college a couple of years, but I was still cowboying and ranching. I had two or three small pastures leased and owned twenty or thirty cows and made a fairly poor living working for Dad and the other ranchers in the area.

Dad and I neighbored with one big ranch that had land in a couple of counties. For the last week, seven days in a row now, we'd been going to their Baylor County ranch to work, seventy miles from home. It was fall, and we were trying to get the herds shaped up, ready to ship calves. I left the house at three-thirty in the morning, stopping in town for Dad, and continuing on another fifty miles. Dad was seventy-two, and I couldn't figure how he kept it up. We rode along for thirty minutes without a word.

"How's the baby?" he asked, finally.

"Cried all night."

He chuckled. "Paying for your raisin'."

It wasn't very damn funny to me. Our baby had the colic, and I wasn't sleeping over two or three hours a night.

I ran into some heavy fog then and slowed down. Lord, it was dark.

"Shit, Dad, there's no way we'll be able to see the
cattle till daylight," I said. "Why do we have to go so
dawn early?"

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. I'd been a
cowboy too long to ask questions like that.

"I heard you bought a few cows a couple of weeks ago," he said. "How much did you give for 'em?"

I told him.

"That's too damn much," he said. "You can't make any
money that way."

"I can't make money without 'em either."

"No, maybe not," he replied.

I wasn't about to tell him that one died and two more
were going to. I was supposed to be better at ranching than
that.

The fog got thicker, and I slowed down some more.

"You pay anything on your bank notes lately?" he asked.

"No."

"You have to pay your debts, son," he said.

"With what?"

He didn't answer but filled and lit his pipe. I hated
that damn pipe and thought about grabbing it and throwing it
out the window.

"Can you see their barn light yet?" he asked.

"No, no, I can't see any light."

Shit, I thought. I'm going up here in the fog and
darkness to get on a horse that I don't know and ride off
into total, damn darkness for fifteen damn dollars. Why?

"There's the light," Dad said. "Hell, I thought maybe you'd taken the wrong road."

"I thought so too. Maybe I have."

"No," he said again, "there's the light."

It didn't look like it to me, but I kept driving. Directly a barn took shape in dark, fog-shrouded blackness.

"Park right there," Dad said, pointing.

"How about here?"

"No, there," he insisted. "Park where the back will be to the sun."

"There's not any sun, Dad."

"Goddamit, there will be this afternoon," he said.

"Park where I tell you."

I did. We dragged our saddles out of the pickup and headed for the barn. I figured I might as well go in there and bullshit the other cowboys. I was there.

Nobody had much to say.

In a little while, we caught horses by the barn light. I didn't recognize mine. Someone said we had a four mile ride in the dark to get to the west side.

I looked up and Dad was standing watching me.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said. "You'd better hurry. They're about to turn out the light. Watch that horse. He's a bad one."
Goddamn, I wished he'd quit looking out for me.

Somebody turned out the light. It was so dark, I fumbled for the reins, grasped at the saddle-horn, and climbed on my horse by feel. I felt like I was in a cave.

I'd been horseback plenty of early mornings but never in that much darkness. I heard the latch sliding on the iron gate, spurs jingling, saddle leather creaking. The horses moved out together. I couldn't see my horse's head, couldn't see the men around me. Goddamit, I couldn't see where I was going. There was nothing out there but the dark. Surely, there would be light soon.
A Heavy Hand

By the time I was twenty-four years old, I was a young rancher in a business dominated by old-timers, like Dad. Oh, there were a few young cowboys around, but not any young ranchers. Most of the sons of area ranchers found better ways of making a living.

Dad was a small, slim man with a booming voice and a giant reputation as an honest, dependable, hard-working manager. He demanded a lot of himself, and every bit that much from me. Dad enjoyed good health, other than the usual broken bones from cowboy mishaps over the years, right up until he had a stroke, the summer when he was seventy-three. I was left pretty much alone running the ranch, though he made me come by the house twice a day, every day, to report on things. By calf-shipping time in late September, he was getting around good using a walker and had begun to drive himself places again. The afternoon before I was to weigh and ship the calves, Dad said he'd be there the next morning in plenty of time to witness everything. I said we'd be looking for him.

Long before daylight the next morning, I was stuffing Rolaids in my mouth three at a time. My baby had the colic and cried most of every night, and between her, my wife, Dad, and the ranch, I wasn't getting a whole lot of rest.

By sunup, we had penned the cows and calves and were separating them in preparation for weighing the calves. I
was sitting on my horse, watching the work and thinking about what needed to be done next when Dad drove up. He stopped near the livestock scale house, and I watched him drag his walker and a cane out of the back of his pickup. He ambled over to the shade of the scale house and watched us.

We had to separate the steer and heifer calves then, since ranch custom dictated that steers and heifers are weighed separately. Steers customarily sold for three dollars per hundred pounds more than heifers, so since they were worth more money, they were weighed first; it was that simple.

Everything was going according to plan when I noticed Dad standing next to the corral fence, waving his cane at me. I stopped the work, as I was right in the middle of it then, and rode over to see what he wanted. I got off of my horse and looked through the fence at him.

"What do you want, Dad?" I asked.

"What are you doing?" he replied.

I took off my hat and wiped the dust from my forehead, puzzled. He could see what we were doing, and he knew that I knew how to do it.

"Dad, we're separating the steers and heifers right now," I said, "then we'll be ready to weigh." I got back on my horse and as I turned back to the work, I noticed the tense set of his jaw. I'd seen that look a thousand times,
but I rode on off while he made his way back to the shade of the scale house. I looked back once and he was talking to our neighbor, G. C., and the calf buyer, Doug Brown. G. C. would do the weighing as a neutral party, even though he was Dad’s good friend.

We finished separating the steers and heifers, and Wayne and I got ready to run a bunch of steers onto the scales. Wayne worked for a neighboring ranch, and had been close friends with Dad and me for years. We were talking, waiting on G. C., when Dad made his way to the fence again.

"What are you about to do?" he asked, looking straight at me.

I simply couldn’t understand why he’d ask a question like that twice within an hour, when he knew damn well what I was about to do.

"Dad, we’re going to weigh the steers and then we’ll weigh the heifers," I said, "like we always do." Wayne edged a little closer to hear what was going on.

Dad stood there, looking back and forth between me and the steers for a minute, thinking.

"Was there something you wanted me to do first, Dad?" I asked.

Dad looked right at me. "Yes, by God there is," he said. "I want you to weigh the heifers first."

I honestly didn’t believe it. The morning was going so well. I was sure I’d heard him wrong, so I leaned over the
top rail, closer to him.

"You want me to do what?" I asked again.

"I said, I want you to weigh the heifers first," Dad repeated, and he began pointing his cane in various directions, indicating how he wanted me to move the stock around.

"Take these steers out of this pen and put the heifers in to be weighed first," he commanded.

I looked to Wayne for help, but he just shook his head. There wasn’t any explaining this move. Before we could make a move, G. C. and Mr. Brown walked up.

"Okay, we’re ready," G. C. said, "what’s the holdup?"

Dad looked annoyed but turned to address G. C.

"I told John that I want to weigh the heifers first," Dad said. "They’re going to have to move the cattle around, so it’ll be a few more minutes."

There were several minutes of awkward silence as Dad’s order soaked in. No one knew what to say. No rancher ever weighed heifers first. Mr. Brown looked embarrassed, but didn’t say a word. The longer the steers milled around in the pens, losing weight, the less they would cost him. G. C. was stunned but didn’t say anything.

I made a mighty effort to control my temper. I didn’t understand why Dad was insisting on this, but I thought that I was old enough to deserve an answer.

"Dad, do you mind if I ask why you want to weigh the
heifers first?" I asked. "We’ve always done it the other way."

Dad drew himself up as close to me as he could get. He had all of our attention.

"By God, because I said to weigh the heifers first," he said, "and that’s all the reason you need."

I just looked at him but didn’t know what else to say. Directly Wayne motioned for me to get on with the work, and we did exactly what Dad said to do.

"Why did Dad do that?" I asked Wayne sometime later as we sat waiting to weigh another pen of heifers.

"I don’t know," Wayne replied. "It sure didn’t make any sense to me."

"It didn’t make any sense to anybody," I said. "He was wrong."

"Yeah, he was," Wayne said, "but that doesn’t change anything."

My heart was pounding in anger and defeat.

"Everybody here knew it was wrong," I said, to no one in particular. "Goddamn right he was wrong. I know he was wrong, and I’m damned tired of it."

"John, he’s an old man," Wayne said, trying to make another excuse for Dad.

"So what?" I nearly screamed. "That’s all the more reason he has to be glad that I know how to do this ranching shit."
We put another bunch of calves on the scales, and I looked over at Dad. He was laughing and talking about something with Mr. Brown, oblivious to me, my anger, my feelings.

"Look at him, Goddamit!" I cursed. "Would you just look? It's like nothing has happened."

"Goddamn him!" I said one more time, nearly screaming. "There's not one son-of-a-bitching thing I can do." I felt that my chest would burst.

Wayne had not said a word, letting me work off steam. We'd been through this sort of thing many times.

"Why don't you quit this life?" Wayne asked. He'd not suggested that possibility before, not in all the times that things like this had happened.

"Hell," Wayne went on, "you got a college degree. Do something else. Quit this shit!"

I thought about that a minute. "Wayne, I quit football one time because I thought that Dad needed me to help him. I couldn't figure any other reason why he didn't encourage me to play. You know what he said?"

"No, but I can guess," he replied.

"Dad said that he didn't plan on raising any Goddamn quitters," I said. "That's what he told me."

We let it go for a few minutes, giving our attention to the work. I calmed down, but something had happened.

"John, I don't think that anybody would call it
"Quitting," Wayne said. "Just think about it."

"Yeah, I'll think about it," I said.

Nothing else happened that morning. Nothing else could have happened. We finished the weighing, loaded the trucks with the calves, and the neighbors went home. Dad left while I was closing the gates and seeing that things were put in order. I couldn't get my mind off what Wayne said about doing something else for a living. I couldn't believe that I'd never thought of it, but I hadn't.

Then again, maybe that was easy for Wayne to say. He didn't come from a family that had produced nine ranchers, Dad being the last until I came along. I was good at what I did, real good, and sometimes even I believed that. I unsaddled my horse and put my saddle in the old barn. I was just going through the motions, not really seeing the ground, and things were sort of blurred, as I grabbed the handle of the heavy barn door and slammed it shut one more time.
Funeral

I was twenty-seven when Dad passed away. That morning, I stopped my welding truck at a corner one block from his house. I hesitated for a few minutes, then drove on out to my oldest sister's. I didn't really feel like talking to anyone much, but I thought that I might get her to make me some coffee. My wife and I had separated the week before, and she had moved to Wichita, taking both kids with her. I had plenty of work to do, but I thought that it could wait a day or two.

Louise was out watering her yard when I stopped. It was September, but still warm for fall. We were standing in the driveway talking, about to go get the coffee, when our nephew drove up. He'd been spending the summer with Dad, just sort of driving his seventy-seven year old grandfather around, each getting to know the other. Dad didn't have cows any more. He'd leased his land a year or two after I'd quit the business and started welding.

James got out of Dad's pickup looking his usual, solemn self.

"Papa's dead," James said. His mouth quivered some. He was only sixteen.

He stood there a minute looking at us, letting it register, then Louise began bawling and we helped her into her house. I walked back outside with James, and Mom drove up just at that time. She'd come over from Wichita early, I
guess. She and Dad were separated after forty years of marriage, though she still spent a couple of nights a week at his house. James and I walked out to meet her.

I put my hand on her car door to keep her from getting out.

"Momma, Dad’s dead," I said.

"Oh my God!" she wailed. She started bawling too. James and I just stood there by the car, waiting for her to settle down.

"How do you know?" she finally asked.

"I was there, Granny," James said. He looked remarkably composed for sixteen.

"Oh my God," she repeated. "Where’s Louise?"

"She’s in the house, on the bed," I said. Mom went on in.

I felt a terrible urge to see my kids. They were five and two, and I remember thinking that they wouldn’t remember Dad much; I had not known any of my grandparents. I’d forgotten how close to his house I’d been that morning.

"When did he die, James?" I asked.

"About an hour ago," he said. "He was getting another cup of coffee and had a stroke or something. The ambulance has already come."

"Well, I’m going to tell my kids," I said. I climbed into my truck and left him standing there, alone.

I went on to Wichita to see them. Their mother said
that they were too young to come to the funeral, and I agreed. She said that she'd be there, but not to expect her to sit with the family. I didn't.

I don't remember the next six or seven hours. I really don't know what I did. I guessed that Mom would call Larry, my brother, and Jewel, my other sister. Neither of them lived near.

About four that afternoon, I found myself with a list of pallbearers and the date and time of the funeral. I haven't the slightest idea where I got it. I called them, all ranchers of course, and of course, they all said it would be an honor to be a pallbearer for W. J. McMurtry. That was kind of hard to hear six times without weakening.

That evening, I sat down at Dad's desk and looked through some papers. Louise was in and out of the house, carrying off personal mementos. I didn't notice, and no one else was around to notice. I guess someone called what was left of Dad's family because they all showed up a day or two later, I don't know how many days, for the funeral. I don't remember talking to anyone after I called the last pallbearer.

I heard later that the church and fellowship hall and half of the grounds were packed for the funeral. During the service, I looked at the hair on a pallbearer's head, nothing else. That was the only way that I could keep it all together. I heard part of one hymn, "How Great Thou
Art" and I heard a couple of lines of the sermon.

The preacher, a young man, said that the first time he met Dad, a few years earlier, he asked him if he could call him Jeff.

"If I can call you John" was Dad's reply, simple and typical of Dad. He didn't stand on ceremony.

The cemetery ordeal was terrible. My estranged wife and Dad's banker were the only people that I remember speaking to me, and I only spoke to one of them, the banker.

I couldn't wait to get out of the hearse back at Dad's house. The driveway and street were lined with cars. Relatives and friends were pouring into the house and yard. Everybody looked at me funny when I got into my truck and drove off, but I didn't have to care any more. The only person who could impose that feeling on me was gone.

I went down to my small house, changed clothes, and sat down to drink a beer that I didn't really want but could now freely enjoy. The wife of a good friend knocked on the door and came in.

"How are you doing?" she asked, genuinely concerned.

"Fine, I think," I replied. "I've never done this before."

"I'm sorry that I didn't come to the funeral," she said. "I don't like funerals."

"It's okay," I said, "I don't either. I was a pallbearer at one of my uncle's funerals when I was fifteen,
and I haven't liked them since."

The phone rang and I answered.

"Don't you think you ought to come back to the house to see people," someone, probably one of my siblings, asked.

"No," I said and hung up. Another small victory.

My friend's wife left sometime or other.

Sometime in the next day or two or week or two or whatever, we divided up what was left of Dad's personal items. We all got a share of everything, except for the cowboy things that Louise had already carried off. I hadn't enough will of my own yet to fight that kind of battle, maybe because I'd followed him step-for-step for seventeen years, but I had something better. I had more of him, good and bad, than all of the others put together, and that was no small thing.