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The Dole

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The Dole

The Dole

by

C. Bradford Eastland



Book i

They were the only noise of the town.

Laughing and singing, stumbling foot and tongue, they instinctively pretended to fight each other through the door:

"Oh-oh-say, can you seeee?"

Byyyyy the dawn's early light"

"Dum dee-*dummmmm*, da dum dum,

Dum dee-dum dum dum dum dum...."

Their duet was cut short when the first one through, unfamiliar with the dwelling, crumpled headfirst and laughing to the floor. Lonely volleys of sound rippled gently away, dying somewhere deep within the ink-blue tranquility of the village slumbering around them. He rolled over on his back like a dog, scratching his stomach, still giggling, full of himself.

"Oh....shooda told y'bout that first step, mate."

"I be feelin' *noooooooooooooooo* pain!" the American said.

Always the same story. A room's dark endless ceiling spinning out of control. But he didn't get up. For by his own precise count he had consumed exactly three quarts of ale, and was thus in no great hurry to quit the cold wood. How much easier it was to lie back, relax in his drunkenness, and ruminate on his rare good fortune! How long ago it now seemed, these few short hours ago, that he had once again resigned himself to having neither his own bed nor a single current friend in the world! But that's the cute thing about Life, right?—just when a guy is about to give up?...Because that is precisely when his new friend had appeared, his benefactor, from right behind the bar and seemingly out of nowhere....god damn....and just as he was thinking about it....*poof!* Next thing you know it was a conversation. What a break. He had been so *sure* he would be spending yet another night in his infernal rental car (as good a reason as any to wander into a pub), so definitively, *depressingly* cocksure, that the first two pints were ingested simply to help him get used to the idea. But pints three and four were better. They were in fact most judiciously well spent. They helped him to blind this likeable local stranger with boorish Yankee charm, dazzling him with a thoroughly colonial bastardization of the language. Good medicine! He'd never imagined how *useful* these innocuous quirks, these earmarks of his "culture", could be! And so by pint number five he was no longer paying for it, and by the time he finally drained the sixth from his well-plumbed mug he'd virtually forgotten how he got there, where he was, what year it was,

forgotten how this utterly likeable and amazingly convenient stranger had come from nowhere to provide him with free beer and offer him free lodging and be his free friend and the whole crazy thing and what's more he didn't care. As Alcohol's invisible agents will often do (when too many at once are invited to be overnight guests in a young man's system) they had played havoc with the furniture in most all the rooms of his short-term memory, rearranging everything to the point where he couldn't precisely recall anything; including why, in the first place, he had drifted to this most hospitable of countries. Lying there on the floor, of course, he didn't really care about precisely. Who cares about "precisely" when he's drunk? He didn't *care* to know *precisely* why The Great Spirit had smiled upon him; after all, free is free. But he did know one thing. He knew it was six pints. This one thing he knew. For with every pearl-handled pull of the pump he had moved his gold ring to the next finger, and only now, no doubt as much from blind instinct as from a conscious craving for some semblance of order in his life, he moved it back from the middle finger of his right hand to the fourth—the awkward finger—of his left. Six pints. Definitely six pints. Precisely....

"We go' a roight good room upstairs f'er yeh, me-Yankee friend, if you'll joost pull y'self up from the bloody deck!"

"Let's have another drink," the American said.

"More ale? Roighto, ol' son! More ale!"

"Right on."

"Roight on! Bloody marvelous, you are!"

"If you say so, friend."

The ceiling's three-ring circus spun slowly to a stop. He sat up. It was dark in what little he could make out of the little house, and but for the curious glances of a nearly full moon peeking through the curtainless picture window he wouldn't have been able to see a thing. His host's short, squarish form was silhouetted against the wall opposite that window. The moon allowed him the crooked teeth grinning back, and the jag-edged, irregular horizon of hair, but that was all. He couldn't see eyes, and nothing else of the face save its singular round outline. He squinted, but it was too dark. Even for him. For it would've had to have been dark for this young man not to see, because this quintessentially *American* American came from an ancestry of most excellent vision. His quick brown eyes were as sharp as they were quick, blade sharp, sharp like his father's, not sunk deep and cowardly in their sockets but rather bulging boldly out into the world in thirsty investigation of their surroundings. The eyes of a hunter, his grandfather used to tell him....

"Actually the bar s'closed, mate," said the silhouette. "All the bars in the village are closed. We joost lucky me-boss is also me-mate, 'else we woodn' a-been able t'chat it up f'er s'long as we did."

The Dole

"It's a stupid custom of yours, closing the bars at eleven."

"Fair comment. I reckon the pubs are quite traditional 'bout things like that. Now c'mon, lad, *oop* we go."

The silhouette swooped suddenly down upon him, grasped him under the arms, jerked him instantly and without warning into a standing position. They both laughed. The benefits of the six pints had expired, and the American, more alert than he cared to be, was very much aware of being alarmed by his benefactor's power. He was also suddenly lucid enough to be proud of himself for isolating traces of a Gaelic brogue, a constituent of the other's voice that had doubtless migrated down from nearby Scotland. He took a sobering deep breath through his nose, and caught the sweet scent of lilac hiding within the square room's otherwise definitively musty aroma. Memories jumped in his head....*lilacs*....His mother *always* used to display her beloved lilacs, all about their government-subsidized apartment when he was growing up. Always. How well he knew their sweet, sweet smell....what an off-the-wall smell for such a stinky room, he found himself thinking.

"Wait!" he found himself shrieking. "Let's have one for you!"

"It's a long way, tuh Tippuhrar-*eeeeee*!"

It's a long way, uh....oh yeah."

"Wrong country, lad," the round face said.

"Huh?"

"Ireland."

"Oh....ah hell, what's the difference," said the American.

Their joint laughter resumed at once, with the American's outburst easily drowning out the other. At the same time, before he could think and without his consent, he found his right arm slung over the shorter man's thick shoulders, and was soon aware of a powerful, frightening force encircling his torso from behind; and was relieved to discover it was only his benefactor's strong left arm. "*Oop* we go," said the voice, and the foreigner, perfectly content to submit to this free ride up the stairs, relaxed. But just before the square little room fell completely from his sight he caught a glimpse of a painting hanging on the wall opposite the picture window. It had been obscured when his host had been standing between it and his eyes, but seeing it now alerted him to the fact that it was the only thing hanging on any of the walls. He could barely make out something that looked like two fingers pointing at each other (the moon being of little use to him from halfway up the stairs), but no more. He would have to wait till tomorrow to get a good look at it.

The Dole

Now he closed his tired, dulled eyes, mumbled strange sounds distantly akin to song, and mortgaged his trust fully to the irresistible force pulling him up the stairs. He could scarcely feel his own feet, tripping up and along the creaky wooden steps. It was like riding a department store escalator.

"We go' be a bit quiet now, mate," whispered the round profile.

"Why."

"*Ssh!*"

The jagged hair was, between steps, intermittently poking him in his right cheek. He was glad to finally make the top step.

"...why?" whispered the American.

"Because I say so. Me-little bird's nestin' up 'ere, an' she 'ad quite the 'ard day at work I reckon, judgin' by the earful she gimme on the phone earlier."

The darkness was somehow even blacker on the upper floor, and so he had to be led—or rather half-carried—down the hall to the second of two doors. The first was closed, the second open. bird, bird....*bird?* The hunter's eyes were bulging now, and thirsty: "You got a *girl* in there?" he managed.

"We do 'ave them over 'ere, you know."

"Let's get her!" he blurted as if still drunk, but his whimsical retreat back to the first door was halted at once by the trunklike left arm. He felt air being driven from his lungs. He shuddered before the equally frightening power of an increasingly familiar bellylaugh. The arm wrapped around his stomach and lifted him high in the air. Seconds later he was lying in a heap on a bed in the second room.

"I thought we were supposta be quiet...."

"Better that I wakes 'er than a bloody American," said the round, comfortable face. Now, suddenly, the voice was soothing him, making him trust its invisible face completely, intuitively, implicitly. He felt strong hands claw the tennis shoes from his feet. "She's no' too keen on Yanks roight 'bout now. Y'see, 'bout two months ago this one bloke drifted through 'ere, wound her up pretty good. And then joost up'n took off! You Yanks. Left her t'deal with it all by 'erself, dint 'e."

"Hunh?"

"She wernt lucky," the round face explained.

"Oh...." said the American, in a tone manufactured to sound as if he knew what was going on.

The Dole

"So I borrows her a few quid t'get square, an' then after she's taken care of *naturally* I joost let the bird move in 'ere with *me*. Brilliant, roight? And a roight good arrangement f'er the both of us, 'fi do say so. Been t'gether ever since."

"Oh. Good for you," the American said.

"Get some sleep, mate. I got somewhere t'go in the a.m., an' if I 'ave me-way it joost may go till late aft'noon, bu' I'll make bloody-certain the little woman gives yeh tea. Then you can meet me'n me-mates later in the pub, roight?"

"Listen, man," he finally objected, struggling to free his limp body from the bed, "if you think it's gonna drive yer girl batty to have an American in the house, maybe I should just split. I mean it's no big deal for me crashin' somewhere else, y'know." He thought about squeezing into the hatchback of his rental car, for the umpteenth night in a row, and instantly wished he hadn't said anything.

"Nonsense! This is my house, mate, *my* bloody house, an' if I say y'stayin' y'*stayin'*!

"But if it—"

"What was that y'said? Batty? Ha! The way you talk, my friend. That's why I likes yeh." He amused himself by placing the American in a firm headlock, briefly, fortunately, then strutted briskly from the room. The American followed his host and benefactor into the dark hall. He was relieved, but alert enough to play out the hand:

"So it's okay then, right?"

"Shoore it's alright, okay indeed. Fact is, the bloke dint look a bit like yeh—'e was dark too, but a different dark. Yoo're so bloody tan-colored, mate, I doubt she'll even make the connection. That's why me-mates want me t'bring y'back to the pub t'morrow. We joost don't *get* many *real* Yanks in Yorkshire."

"Right...."

"Roight on!"

"Then I should prob'ly take a drive up to Doncaster first thing and maybe cash some traveler's checks, and maybe buy some, uh....supplies and stuff. Yeah. Oh—and I should prob'ly get in some roadwork to sweat out all the beer, too."

"Fine, lad. Then I'll see she 'as an aft'*noon* tea ready. 'Long as yoore 'round, I'll always take care 'yeh! An' I'll make shoore she don't go off'n leave yeh 'lone."

"Don't put her out on my account—"

"Get some kip, mate."

The Dole

The dark hall was painted bleak with overlapping shadows, and still the round face was not clear. The jag-topped head ten feet away issued the words without evidence of a mouth, a neckless head, balancing on sloping shoulders that were thick and irresistible in the foreground. And still the head had no eyes. The hall disappeared behind in a diminishing corridor that was soon completely black; and thus, to his fogged mind, endless. He liked him.

"Okay, Cliff—yer the boss. And thanks again, I owe you."

"G'night, Rodney ol' son," came the voice, and the first door slammed shut.

Suddenly, standing there in the dark hall, he was aware of being alone. It came, as always, as a surprise. A familiar feeling he knew he would never get used to. It was a feeling that had cruelly purged the excess alcohol from his head, leaving him alert to deal with the agony of his thoughts and senses. He retreated behind the second door and gently shut it. Right away (and of this for the first time) he became aware of the unusually damp, pungent odor of this his night's free cramped cell, so much more foul than the ground floor, like an attic storeroom never aired out, or a wet sock just removed from a foot too long in possession of it. The precise antithesis of lilacs?...He smiled in disapproval. There was one toothpick left in the back pocket of his jeans. He looked at it, admiring it as if it were a fine cigar, and immediately upon committing it to his mouth began to roll it back and forth along the edge of his upper teeth with his tongue. That's what he meant by "supplies and stuff"; you don't tell a brand new friend everything, especially something as eccentric as a pathetic fixation for toothpicks. And this was a relatively new fixation, a nervous tick he sort of figured he needed about now, conceived about two months ago or right about the time he commenced his self-imposed exile from his adopted Southern California. (He was going through about a dozen toothpicks a day. He'd been keeping track.) The dull moon, only slightly curious about his second-floor quarters, gently pulled him to the lone window. He opened it. The heavy Fall air, moist and clean, refused to rush in and cleanse his foul-smelling quarters, oddly, and so he was forced to lean out into the air so that his nose could gather in as much of it as it could. Hands braced against the dirty window sill, his entire torso thrust up and out at a dark angle into the dull, dark night, he looked out and over the sleeping South Yorkshire town of Tickhill. A small town. A village. He was struck by how small and simple and similar the quaint square houses were. With this listless local moon disinclined to violate the heavy mist that cloaked them the houses were colorless; random, geometrically similar shapes, thrown across a cold and colorless town. It was as if the lights had been turned off in the playroom, and some spoiled, toddler giant had gone to bed and failed to put his building blocks away. His nose sucked in another swallow of this moist and cool-clean air. Actually it wasn't that cold, this being reportedly the warmest October in local memory. But it was far colder than he was used to. And far cooler than his 2nd-floor cell, that was for sure. He wondered what time it was in America. Do they have Daylight Savings Time over here? and exactly how many hours ahead or behind the West Coast is "here" supposed to be? Were his countrymen just sitting down to dinner? turning off their alarm clocks? making love to their stupid wives? He decided it was too

much work, deciding concurrently that he didn't really care. Noises....He inhaled a final time and retreated back inside his cubicle. It was coming from the first room, through the thin membrane of their shared bedroom wall. He tried not to speculate as to the precise nature of the noises. He knew it would only make it worse for himself (assuming he needed women, which he knew he didn't), so he refused to speculate. Fortunately, he hadn't seen even one female in his eight-plus weeks here that could compare with even the most ordinary of the sun-dipped goddesses that litter Orange County beaches, and Cliff wasn't exactly Don Juan and so there was no reason to expect that this girl of his would be any different. Lucky break. If he *did* need women, which of course he knew he didn't, all he would need do would be to remind himself of just how plain and ordinary the locals were. Just knowing this made things easier. And then there was Cliff...Christ, how lucky to run into a guy like Cliff in a pub. He thought about how much he liked him. People like Cliff were the reason for coming here in the first place, he reminded himself (coupled with the convenience of the English language), such unusually wonderful people. So digestible. So unconditionally friendly. This amazing re-discovery had its seed in his only previous visit, about seven years earlier with his folks. The people here—people like his new free friend—accepted him for what he was, another human being, in Cliff's case accepted him even before he'd had a chance to prove he was a *decent* human being. Remarkable. He sat down on the bed, absentmindedly fondling the gold ring safely back on his left hand. Such a far cry, he seethed, from the so-called "beautiful" people back home, whose primary criterion for ultimate social acceptability was the impeccability of one's breeding, that private pasture, a convention of intelligent, well-dressed cattle seeking out only similar stock. And he had found that if one can't ford the fence of acceptance with a flawed pedigree, only the weight of a superior bank account can break the fence down and cause the cows to smile. Just thinking about it nearly made him sick. Sitting there, leaning slightly forward with hands gnarled together, for several seconds he shook with silent rage. And then he was all right. Tense, but all right. He lay down on the bed. His tongue deftly reversed the toothpick in his mouth so he could chew the other end. The hard mattress felt good, and again he was overcome with the very idea of a whole night free from the bed of his car. How wonderfully could such a well-conceived stray thought transform tension into relief! He was lucky. And while he cursed his perpetual aloneness, at least he hadn't let them trap him. Lucky. Who wants to be married anyway, he thought....who needs it....he was never that thrilled with the idea of becoming a well-dressed cow in the first place.

Lying on his back he stared hunter's eyes through the black ceiling, and into all the flame-bright constellations of a brilliant Arizona sky. His grandfather had taught him to know every one.

Book ii

"I'm joost no' *worth* it to 'im!" the blonde-haired girl lamented, but then, perhaps owing to a long proud heritage of charming and consummate hostesses, quickly, and with a different facial expression, added, "Anotha' cuppa tay?"

"Maybe just a couple more. I wouldn't want my kidneys to get the idea that I was depriving them of their daily gallon of tea," the American said.

"Yoo're a funny Yankee bloke!"

His head was paining him both inside and out. Inside, the wages of Alcohol; outside, the bruise marking the spot where his forehead was introduced to the floor.

"Oh, yes ma'am. You know what they say about us Ugly Americans. You might not like us, but ya gotta admit we're hysterical."

"Sorry?"

He'd tried aspirin, sit-ups, a big breakfast, throwing up, and a long hot shower all to no effect. An abortive late-afternoon run up and down Castlegate Road—east on Highway A-631 to The Millstone Pub, then north past the parade of tiny shops that comprise the whole of the town's "business district", to the ages-old Butter Cross and back again—accomplished little but remind him he was a million miles from his world, and that's why he didn't sprint home the final 200 yards like he usually did. And so, now, understandably, he didn't much feel like being funny...but something inside him was nonetheless screaming at him to be charming:

"You might say it's our...well, our humble destiny to forever travel the globe, availing the world of our superior presence, uh, spreading mirth and money and assorted ill-will wherever we go," he explained; but this time something held back her smile. He was out of practice, and grimaced at how stiff and bumbling he supposed he was. All the while his eyes traced the curve of her shapely calves, from the creamy-white ankles on up, proceeding ever northward as she stepped slowly toward him with the teapot. He didn't stop at her hemline: "And stop that cryin', willya? I'm a very sensitive guy. If ya don't quit blubberin' I may hafta marry you myself!"

She finally smiled, guardedly, yet nonetheless disarmingly. She then snuffed up twice, while leaning directly over where he was sitting on the long lumpy couch. He held the cup for her, so she wouldn't have to bend down too far. As she poured, her sweet-smelling hair touched his face and she apologized. He accepted her apology, drawing a brief giggle. His own hair was a mess. A dark black contrast to her light blonde, he always kept it a foot long in back; it was always wild and unruly after a run. But the rest of it—sides, top, front—was quite short, and usually compulsively neat and well

groomed, as repressed and difficult a contradiction as his two-world childhood. Yet on this day, of all days, Fate let one runaway lock trickle down his forehead like a corkscrew. With her free hand she brushed it back into place, and it made his stomach dance. It never occurred to him that she might actually *touch* him. Her loose-bloused torso close to him now, he was then treated, briefly, to the rare, deliciously sour aroma of the deliciously rare woman who doesn't feel it necessary to bathe every single day. For a few delirious seconds, his nose couldn't find the lilacs. Even so, he managed to resist the standard male urge to look down the front of her blouse.

"I'm afraid I'm no' bein' ver' good comp'nay!" the young woman suggested. "I woke up feelin' a bit queer, an' I reckon I still 'aven't sorted me-self out." She took a seat at the other end of the long couch. As she sank into it the couch changed shape, new lumps bulging up to threaten the resilience of the threadbare cloth material. Knees locked together, she leaned forward a little so that she could dig her elbows into the tabletops of her legs to support the weight of her upper body. Her thin white forearms extended out over the coffee table, to where delicate, trembling hands kept her tea from spilling with only minimal success. "I am sorry....'last thing Clifford said before 'e went....went out, was make sure me-friend Rodney's....entertained." She was staring straight ahead, into and through the empty fireplace. She snuffed up again.

"I can assure you I find you very entertaining," the American said. He whitened his tea with too much milk, and stirred in two large teaspoonfuls of sugar. He stirred too hard, and a sip or two of the discolored tea slopped out of the cup and onto his jeans. They were his only pair of pants, and it made him mad, but luckily they were still dark blue and when he rubbed it into the denim he knew it wouldn't show and she hadn't seen it and so it didn't make any difference. He plucked the soggy splintered toothpick from his mouth, and, pleased that she wasn't watching, stored it with the thirty or so unspent ones in the back pocket of the jeans. Silently, he cursed himself for caring what any woman might think about a man's "manners". He didn't need any of this. But still he continued to sneak well-timed glances to his left. Her convoluted posture took turns tugging at his imagination, teasing his mind's eye.. First she was a three-foot-high S, then a scrunched-up human ball, the S formed of a five-and-a-half-foot strip of soft, tender flesh, the ball a one-hundred-twenty-pound mass of hard, inaccessible tension.. He watched her sip her tea. She didn't sip it really, but rather occasionally touched her upper lip tentatively, or absently, to the steamy liquid heat. In what he surmised to be an unlikely oversight, he noticed her skirt had hiked up to where the most generous portion of her right thigh was exposed to his breathless scrutiny. "Don't worry about me," he said.

"....hm?"

"I said this is great tea."

With a thin smile not worthy of teeth she turned her face away, and absently, almost mechanically, replied, "Oh. Thank you. It's nothing, really." A wall of silence

kept their eyes from meeting. But perhaps retreating into centuries of ingrained selfless hospitality, she eventually turned back to him to mechanically (and, as far as he could tell, no more than conversationally) inquire, "So what brings you up 'ere? We simply don't *get* Yanks in Yorkshire, you know. It's too fa' north."

"The north has more to offer a guy like me," he responded, accepting her bland offer of conversation.

"You know you'll lose that pretty tan of yours if y'stay 'ere *too* long!" she said a little less dryly. His quick brown eyes struggled to remain content with her far-more-dazzling blues: "I've decided that the color tan is overrated," the American said. He could feel his Adam's apple stick in his throat. He was in no great hurry to explain to her that it wasn't a tan. She looked away. Not satisfied, his eyes finally dropped to her knees, milky white, knees which were curiously punctuated with many red blotches. Since she refused to re-establish eye contact, he took the opportunity to study them. He couldn't tell if they were scars or abrasions....or weird birthmarks or what. On most girls, he mused to himself, they would surely have struck him as most unattractive, aberrations indeed. But a long-dormant, still-powerful quadrant of his imagination would not allow him to spoil the scene. Instead, he managed to convince himself that he'd finally discovered what the English mean by the expression "strawberries and cream". She was beautiful. And he just hadn't figured....he just hadn't expected....he didn't need any of this.

And then suddenly, quite without planning or expecting it, and only half realizing he was doing it, he was ripping the worthless gold ring from his left hand and concealing it in his right fist. When he was sure she wasn't looking he stuck it in his pocket.

"So y'say the north 'as....more to offa'?" Abruptly, their eyes were together again.

"More for a guy like me, anyway."

"Such as?"

"Well, such as the countryside for instance. And the lack of cars up here is pretty great too. I rented a car so I could open 'er up, not sit in London traffic."

"I neve' been as far as London," the girl said wistfully.

"Wow...." the American said stupidly.

"Nothing else?"

"Else?"

"You comin' all the way t'Yorkshire, the *reasons*."

He knew he had to loosen up.

The Dole

"Hmm, what else....let's see....well, it's nice and cool up here, which I really like—where I come from, dollface, it's unbelievably hot and it never rains a drop and I'm sick of it! And I think the beer's better up this way too, which of course for a man is tremendously important. Oh, and the castles. Don't laugh, but I *love castles!* Ever since I was a kid. Guess I must be sort've a romantic, huh? That's what brought me to Tickhill. I noticed on the map that there was a castle near here."

"The oldest still-standin' Norman castle i'noll of England!" the girl proudly and provincially trumpeted.

"So I've been told," the American said.

"You 'aven't *seen* it?"

"Hell, I just *got* here," was his defense. His laugh was especially good natured and a brief comfort, he was sure, to both of them. "I blew into town just in time—"

"Doon't tell me! Joost in time t'toddle right on over to The Millstone for a couple 'var fine Yorkshire ales!"

"That's it, sweetheart. The minute Cliff heard there was an American in the pub with no place to stay, he was all over me. Next thing you know, your house had become my hotel....Oh, hey. I'm sorry again for the inconvenience. Cliff didn't tell me he had a girl livin' with him or I wouldn't've even—"

"It's no' muchuvva hotel," the girl said. Once again, her dazzling blues were landing everywhere but on him. He thought briefly of risking an innocent kiss on the cheek, a gratitude type of kiss, but the three or four feet of lumpy couch between them would have made the move stylistically, painfully awkward. It might as well have been The Grand Canyon. "It's perfect," he assured her. He swallowed and tried to take quiet deep breaths.

A couple minutes were allowed to slip by without dialogue, the welcome intermezzo of quiet that was needed to finish their cups of tea. The American glanced over her shoulder at the wall opposite the picture window. The picture on the wall, the one he could not identify in the wee hours' darkness, was a well-known fragment of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. But if she hadn't been to London he knew there was no point in asking her if she'd been to Rome....and so still he said nothing. The girl set her empty cup on a cracked saucer. She rubbed her moist, reddening eyes with the heels of her hands. Her nervous fingers imitated the eyes in both touching and then avoiding her lap. Finally, with no prop to protect her, she turned to him, welded her hands securely to her bare upper arms, twisted up her smooth, angelic features into an expression of genuine bemusement and said, very softly, "Why are you....'ere?"

Now it was the American who would not look. The skin of his face drew tight. There was a cryptic urgency to his mouth and forehead. The resulting tension to his skin

caused his cheekbones, quite prominent anyway, to stand out from the rest of his face like twin arrowheads. He had often asked himself the same question. He had asked it more than once last night: "Where," he said dryly.

"*Here!* Britain, I mean! You 'ave so much ove' there, so much, why d'you Americans insist on comin' t'this, this cold dreary—" She looked over his shoulder to the picture window. Dusk. The mere threat of night had again driven all color from the town. Already the ravaged outlines of the quaint square houses were being blurred and soothed by a kind, compassionate moon. Something in the window seemed to beckon her; she rose in mid-sentence and walked over. She stood there, feet together, hands again clutching and petting her stomach, looking out at her world. Her back was to him.

"Sometimes," he said, "a guy just goes around in circles when he's got no place to go."

It was obvious and painful that she didn't hear him. She was shaking. He could hear the faint, plaintive noises a woman makes as she tries to control her sobbing. The young man's heart went out to her. He wanted to go to her, to hold her, to tell her everything would be all right. But he knew he couldn't do these things. He knew if he did his emotions could easily bubble up and cascade over the edge the wrong way. For even as he considered it his eyes began to roam freely over her again. He followed the ascent of her legs, marvelous, marvelous legs, their magnificent bilateral symmetry coming together where her skirt indented naturally into the slight crack of her buttocks. He forced himself—or rather his eyes—to keep going, up the sheer white blouse conspicuously absent of any bra clasp beneath it, past the twin flanges of her shoulder blades, angels wings now, then finally the shy, inward curve of her hair. These fine blonde wisps of straw barely reached the delicate shoulders. He imagined what a flimsy barrier they would be to his urgent breathing, the tender kisses he would rain down on her soft white neck, her sharp, intoxicating scent swirling and eddying in his nostrils, his grateful nostrils. He stood up. His hands trembled and hung weightless at the thought of sliding them around her, clutching, testing the firm, rubbery resistance of her chest...then, his mouth still on her neck, so exquisite, so sweet-tasting, sucking the blood to the surface, she would finally groan from a wild, sweet, long-repressed agony, "I neve' felt so *hot*—oh Christ, 'ow I *need* you, Rodney....*take* me, please....please....oh please...." And then she would turn to him and——

The fragile silence of this darkest and tiniest of rooms was broken with her crying. She put her hands over her face as she cried, as if sensing the need to hide the pain in this cathartic release of emotion. He couldn't just stand there. He went to her, securing a soft shoulder in each strong, sinewy hand. He allowed himself the wildly romantic notion that all of his adult labors—construction worker, carpenter, wrangler, bartender, even dishwasher—had been merely exercises for his hands that they might one day, now, perform this single sublime task. He squeezed gently. He did not embrace her. He just sort of leaned against her from behind, simply a brace, simple, platonic, respectful. She did not immediately turn to him, and it tore at his insides, but he knew if

she turned completely around he would not have the strength to hold back and so he was thankful. "There there, girl," he said. "It can't be as bad as all that."

"You know 'e's....not....so terribly bad 'less....'e's been drinkin'," she said. The sobs between the words rendered this statement hopelessly unconvincing. He could sense that she had leaned back just a little, submitting fully to his support, her back now firm against his chest and her buttocks soft against his groin. His hands still in charge of her shoulders, he deftly, and under the circumstances somewhat courageously, pushed her gently back up to vertical: "It's joost when 'e's drinkin' that I...I'm....oh, Rodney. I'm so afraid. I'm so afraid of 'im," she said. And all the while she was whimpering.

He realized he was back in control again, that he had been able to put the most renegade of his heathen impulses to bed. Knowing this, sure of it, he stroked his strong dark hands slowly up and down her milkwhite upper arms, tenderly and respectfully, trying at once to soothe her and keep her from leaning back against him again. Since the blouse was sleeveless, it was only a matter of time before he happened to catch sight of her elbows. There were strawberries on each to match the ones on her knees.

"You shouldn't be afraid," he said softly. "You should never hafta be afraid."— And his voice ran off and got lost somewhere, perhaps through the window, escaping forever into the starless Yorkshire night....

"You know it's *me* that pays the bloomin' *rent* on this place!" she exploded suddenly. She glanced back over her shoulder, her smile again disarming him, and this time his eye caught the moistness in her lipstick with the help of a runaway moonbeam shooting through the glass. The closeness of her face broke the spell. He quickly disengaged his hands from her shoulders, pocketed them both, let go of her eyes, and shuffled quickly and casually over to the other side of the room. He made sure to laugh a little. "I *do*!" she maintained, and stamped her foot in mock petulance. "It ain't much, but do y'think the bloody sod could lift a finga'? Oh *no*!—'says 'e doon't 'afta! Says 'cause of the gov'ment 'e doon't 'afta."

"But he's got his job at the pub—"

"Job? Ha! *What* job? It's joost an excuse t'gulp down five or twenty free beers! An' joost two nights a week? Job....It's bad enough 'e won't....won't....but 'e won't let *me* do better *either*. I 'ad a chance last month at a job ove' in Sheffield, I did—a rilly *good* job, workin' in a 'ospital, twice the pay'n all that. I....we could actually've gotten *out* of 'ere. But 'e wouldn't let me. Wouldn't even let me take the bloomin' job."

"I don't get it."

"The drive, love. Sheffield's thirty miles west've 'ere. Cliff....likes me when 'e gets home t'be....oh, 'ow I hate it the nights 'e works!" she said. Her face grew sullen, again, and again she spoke as if no one else were in the room: "All that beer....an' when 'e gets home 'e—" Her eyes dropped. She rubbed her face dry and adjusted her clothing.

The Dole

Her nervous hands explored her flat stomach, briefly, then cuffed themselves together behind her back. She looked up smiling: "More tay?...love?"

"Tea? Sure. Let's have a few more cups."

"Rilly? Should I make a fresh pot?"

"Jesus-God, no!" the American said sharply, smiling through his entire soliloquy: "I'm kidding! You tryin' ta kill me? Howda you people manage to force down so much liquid! Have you no bladders? Tea, beer, coffee, more tea, more beer, I think the whole thing's a plot. A communist, crypto-socialist plot to infect all unsuspecting tourists with uremic poisoning just so you crazy Brits can conquer the world again."

She widened her smile, but that was it.

"I, uh....I guess I better get down to the pub," he finally said. "I promised Cliff I'd come by and entertain all his buddies."

"Oh! Oh, I'm so sorry! You should 'ave told me I was keepin' you!"

"No, it's no big deal," the American said. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was leave, but of course he wouldn't tell her that. "It's just that he did put me up and I did promise the guy. And besides, I think I'm the main attraction tonight! The Ugly American, that's me. He walks, he talks, he braids his hair....I kinda get the feeling that I'm Cliff's adopted alien life form. He may charge admission."

"Yoo're so funny!"

"Am I?" he said softly. Their eyes collided. "Am I really funny?"

"Well *I* think y'funny," she said quietly, then added, "And yoo're....no' a bit ugly, either."

He had to get out.

"Well I'm off," he said, all but bolting for the door.

"Rodney?"

"What."

"Y'stayin' anotha' night, aren't you? Cliff said you were."

"Oh right, if it's not too much trouble. The pub's walking distance, so I left my keys up in the room. My car's okay where it is on the street, I guess. I even took the liberty of unpacking my suitcase, hope you don't mind?"

"No-no!" she objected. "I'll make y'bed!"

The Dole

"Thanks, you don't hafta."

"I know. I'll see y'soon."

"Yeah. Yeah, sure. See ya later, Virginia."

"Ginny."

"Okay. Ginny."

Book iii

Every tickhill has its millstone.

In Tickhill itself, it happens to actually be called The Millstone, the local pub, the one great watering hole, the designated after-dinner rendezvous point for seemingly all of a small town's young people between the ages of eighteen and infinity. As he stood in the doorway, Rodney could not see the bar for the patrons. The village had crammed itself into the long square room. He instantly recognized at least a dozen of the wide, perpetually smiling faces that had followed him around the previous night. It was as if that night had carried over into the prevailing day, and now into this day's night, and that no one had found or cared to find compelling cause to leave. In England, far more than in his native land, the people are willing servants to their habits; and therefore utterly content to live within the shell-walls of their inherited predictability.

Moving forward, he eventually picked out Cliff's face through the crowd, behind the bar, smiling ravenously as if to devour and doling out compliments to the ladies and pints of beer to their men as fast as his hands could work the pearl handles. It was a fat face. Shockingly homely. A face scaring the red hair upwards from the head in unusually stiff, straight spikes. The teeth in the smile were dark and rotten, but no more rotten—the American had already decided—than the lion's share of his countrymen. And it was an older face, years older than it seemed in the shadow of his previous night's drunkenness. He figured it might have been as old as forty. But at least now it was a face with eyes....

"Rodney! Rodney, ol' son!" the Yorkshireman cried, now smiling wider and even more aggressively, and employing a strong right arm as a fulcrum he somehow vaulted his considerable girth over the bar in one fluid, gymnastic motion, crashing into two or three of his smiling friends and spilling their beer to everyone's obvious delight. "I been waitin'! What'll y'ave, mate, what'll y'ave?" He slapped his new American friend hard on the shoulder and shook his hand. "Yeah, hello Cliff—I'm thrilled to see you too," the American managed, smiling mirthlessly, his agitated teeth gnashing a toothpick flat at the same time, "and thanks again for the bed, I'm grateful. Just gimme a beer, if that's all right."

"Alright? *Shoore* it's alright! *Ever*'thing's alright f'er me-good friend, what! Bitter or lager, mate? Bitter or lager." The Yorkshireman's manner was so charming in its rude interpretation of gregariousness that at first it was hard for the American to work his anger up for him. And then, of course, there was the standard guilt invariably attached to the acceptance of hospitality, *anyone's* hospitality, charity....subsidy. . . welfare....damn. He was trapped.

"Bitter's fine."

The Dole

"Roighto, ol' son—Mary! Mary MacGwire! Draw me up two Stones Bitter, love!" he fairly yelled to a fast-aging woman behind the bar. She complained something about being left alone with the thirsty crowd, but the imperious Cliff, his order placed, had effectively tuned her out. They found a few cubic feet of space next to the juke box, against the wall, and established their drinking territory there.

The woman soon arrived with the two Stones. She looked at the Yorkshireman like he was something worth looking at, and he looked back at her, all over her, like she might have been covered with chocolate syrup. Exceptionally tall for a woman, she was able to look directly into the American's eyes without having to look up; and each could easily have rested their chin on the Yorkshireman's spiked head. Her glance found the foot-long black rope of hair, causing her to sneer derisively. But when they established eye contact, a line of sight strung just above the red spikes, Rodney forced himself to smile. Rock-faced and tight-lipped, she glared and dropped her eyes; as if his closed-mouth grin were an insult. She handed Cliff the two heavy beer mugs. Concurrently, she whispered in his ear, and then kissed it, and when she finally returned to the bar her generous rear carriage took four eyes with it. The Yorkshireman smiled, left his eyes there as long as he could, then downed half his beer in one enthusiastic gulp. "Horny lit'l tart," he proclaimed, as if it were the grandest distinction he could bestow upon one of his female subjects. He bracketed the appointment with another bold swallow. The American searched briefly for the Yorkshireman's eyes, but they were beady little things sunk so deep in the skull that it was difficult to read them. So instead he glanced about the place, picking out the smiles of those faces seemingly most concerned with his presence. They were the same lot as the night before; ugly-legged young girls in short skirts and high heels, chip-toothed men of all ages, whose pinkish faces often featured the black soot of the nearby coal pits that fueled the area's economy. Again they seemed all to be looking him over as if he were a traveling Yankee sideshow, pointing at him, waving, signaling, saluting....and always, invariably, smiling.

"So y'met Ginny?"

"Yeah."

"She's a bit of alright, ain't she!"

"Yeah. She'll do," the American said.

"I say, mate, I'm bloody-glad y'came—been wantin' you t'meet me-regular mates! They ain't bad blokes. Good as any, I reckon."

The American followed his host's eyes over to the other end of the establishment, where a tense handful of young men were locked together in a rousing game of darts.

"I suppose you grew up with these wonderful guys."

"That's it. Since we were lads."

The Dole

"Ay, Biff! Come on, son, 'ave a throw!"

"Bring the Yank over, Biffer! He' be on our team, what!"

"In a minute, lads!"

The American observed that three of the dart throwers were standing off together when they weren't throwing, a few feet away from the others. They stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb, and it jarred him into remembering that he'd overheard the previous night that there was to be a "league dart match" this very evening, against a team from a rival pub of some distant, disliked village. They were the best dressed young men in the place (dress shirts, ties, pleated slacks), clearly the outsiders. There were no black smudges on their pink faces. And they were clearly several years older than their loud, less-than-gracious hosts. Compared to the local crowd, they could easily have been a trio of dart-throwing scholars. He observed further that each of the outsiders' hair was flat to the head, short, conspicuously well groomed. The host throwers, the ones who had tried to recruit him for their team, had shaped their hair to reflect the stiff, straight-up spikes of his benefactor.

"Biff?"

"Roighto. Me-nickname, tha' is. Rhymes with Cliff, get it?"

"Amazing," the American said dourly.

"We all got nicknames, ol' son. See the short fellow throwin' darts? That's Andy White. We call'm Chalk. Get it? White, *Chalk*. And the gent that's 'e's partner? That's Nime, short for Nimrod 'cause 'e's sort of a dolt, y'see. I'm not altogether sure what 'e's *real* name is....Paul, I think. Follows me everywhere."

"Very clever."

"Oh, an' the tall chap throwin' now? That's Myles Pitchfork. Come on, Rodney, guess. What y'suppose we call him? You can do it. Pitchfork's 'e's name. You can get it, ol' son."

"I dunno....Prick?"

"Prick? Ha! Good show, son! Prick! I *like* it—but it's no' right, lad. It's Prongs. Get it? We call 'im *Prongs!*"

"That was my second guess," the American said. He sipped his beer, and the Yorkshireman laughed all the way from his ample beltline.

Guilt had by now run clean away, and the Yorkshireman's charm had eroded into a boorish pretender to charm, and finally, little by little, the American succeeded in assembling the proper team of emotions that would best assist him in defeating his host

and benefactor's generosity, with dislike. He hadn't previously acknowledged the ugliness of the face. The previous night they were friends, and the face was full and comfortable. Now they were adversaries, and it was fat and flabby and white and irritating. The red spikes of hair were flames to his new hatred. The rotten teeth were insults to his ragged sense of justice. Why is it always the *ugly* guy who gets the great girl?...why the drunken slob that beats her?...why the cowardly bastard that cheats on her?...And why always the guy from the "right" family, the "proper" background, the "impeccable" bloodlines....could this fat slob have possibly descended from impeccable bloodlines?...He wanted to violate that fat face, punish it, employ fists or shoes or anything painful to cave it in for all the decent, respectful, stupid, considerate guys the world over, who had been rewarded for their decent treatment of their women with contempt, lies, betrayal....desertion. He hated that face. He hated the dart throwers, this pub, this whole stupid smiling country. He hated himself for running away to it. And he hated most of all his pathetic inner self, for never doing anything about the things he hated....

"I say now, ol' son, 'ow 'bout a nickname f'you?"

He drank, pretending not to be paying attention.

"That's it! We'll get'cha a fine ol' nickname we will, and then you'll be one of *us*, lad!"

"The name's Rodney," the American said.

"So 'ow 'bout *Rod*, then?"

"Rodney," the American said.

"Alright then, alright....mebbe it's....I reckon it's....it must be....Roddy? *Roddy!* Ha! I *like* it! Drink up, Roddy ol' son! Brilliant!"

He took a huge swig of the ale, imagining what it would look like spat out and dribbling from the Yorkshireman's vile, pink-white countenance.

"Can this stupid pub really be the only place to drink in this jerkwater town?"

"Ha! Too crowded f'you, mate? Well I reckon it's the only spot worth drinkin' at around 'ere, anyway. This is my town an' this is my pub, mate, an' the folk 'round 'ere reckon if I say this is the place t'be drinkin' then it must be so. What was that y'said? *jerkwater*? That's a good one, Roddy! The way you talk."

"So then what about yer wonderful job?" the American said suddenly and awkwardly. (He caught a nearby soot-stained face sneaking a smile at him; he deflated it by letting a little saliva drool down his chin.)

"Me-job? Whatta 'bout it?"

The Dole

"Like it?"

"Well—"

"Plenty of challenge and career advancement?"

"I—"

"Pays good, does it?"

"Pay? Ha! That's a ripper, that is! No, Roddy ol' son. A bloke doon't work in this town f'money, no sir."

"What a surprise...."

"Y'want a *payin'* job y'go down to Worksop or up to Doncaster or over to Sheffield. The big cities 'ave the jobs, lad. Pay! Ha-ha! I *like* it!" He slapped his guest hard on the shoulder.

"The delicious free beer, then?"

"Me-mates are 'ere, mate," the Yorkshireman said, "I like bein' wit' me-mates." As if in loyal response, a rousing cheer whistled over from the dart match.

The American inhaled the final two inches of his bitter and smiled forth his anger: "So how 'bout bummin' me another one a'these, then. Use yer influence....Biff."

"Say no more, lad—Mary! Two more, lass! And move y'bloody *arse* this time!"

"Oh I remember now," Rodney said, pretending to remember. "Yer girlfriend says you, well, that you receive some sort of support from the government, is that right?"

"Support? Ha! Another cracker! They way you talk, my friend. Brilliant, i'tis. I reckon that's why I likes yeh, Roddy. But dint Gin tell you? I doon't *need* t'work t'ave a good life. Y'see this job doon't pay 'ardly nuthin', but the gov'ment will pay a bloke sixty quid a month joost fer askin'. Fact is, this blinkin' place only gets me three bloody quid a night."

"You mean welfare?"

The Yorkshireman's laugh showed all the rotten teeth.

"Well, we call it the dole over 'ere, mate, but I reckon it's the same."

The American paused as if to watch the darts....

"But sixty pounds isn't much," he finally said. His quick thoughts were of the blonde-haired girl, working and scrimping to make sure the rent got paid. His bite finally severed the toothpick in half. He spat both halves to the floor. He fought to control the

seethe of his emotions. He was losing the fight: "Just think how much more you could make workin' a full-time job, man."

"That's joost it, Roddy ol' son—then I'd 'ave t'*work!* Why should I work all day long fer a dustman's wage, an' give away half me-money to the bloody tax man, when I can pick up nearly half as much f'doin' nuthin'? Why, it'd be the same as you floppin' at a bloody hotel, when you can kip as long as y'want at my place f'bloody free. You can see me-point, Roddy. You see me-point. It's joost no' *worth* it to me."

The barmaid arrived with their drinks, and smiled her own crescent of decay at the Yorkshireman. She barely acknowledged the American's presence. Cliff accepted the mugs one-handed, by grabbing the two handles together, and the jostling inherent in this cavalier maneuver caused the amber liquid to cascade over the edge and run slow and sticky down the heavy glass. He dug the fingers of his free hand deep into the middle-aged woman's generous buttocks, and, on his toes, whispered something apparently both amusing and provocative in her ear. She went bouncing back to the bar, radiating, as if she'd misplaced a few of her years and now had suddenly found them. "Horny lit'l tart," the Yorkshireman muttered.

The American's anger was now on the verge.

"Seems you kinda like that big old gal."

"I like all the birds, mate," said the Yorkshireman, handing Rodney the mug that had been least spilled. "I likes 'em in the a.m., in the aft'noon, in the evening', an' any bloody-time in between! Ha! All a bird needs is a lit'l stonkin' every now'n again. These birds 'ere, they no different."

"Uh, stonkin'?"

"Shoore, ol' son, *you* know! Must be the same with the American birds, ay Roddy? They get a lit'l difficult, a mite edgy, y'give 'em a good stonkin' an' they purr like bloody kittens!"

He smiled as full and hard as he could, and laughed right along with his host, and thought about all the different ways he would like to mutilate the fat, pink-white face that grinned back at him. For all the decent guys....for all the naive, stupid, decent guys in the world. Tumblers clicked in his mind. He slapped the Yorkshireman warmly on the shoulder and raised his glass in a toast. "To stonkin'!" he said with feeling, they drank, and he slapped the shoulder a little harder. Some beer was spilled. "Aye, to stonkin'" the Yorkshireman said.

"That barmaid's probably a good one fer stonkin', huh Biff?"

"That's a fact, Roddy."

This time the shoulder was slapped with violent enthusiasm.

The Dole

"I knew it!" the laughing American said. "But I bet you gotta knock her around a bit first, huh?"

"Sometimes, mate—but not half as 'ard as y'knockin' *me* about...."

"Ah, c'mon Biff ol' boy—you'n I are a couple a'big strong guys, we can take it!" He pounded the shoulder again, and it knocked the shorter man off his stance and almost off his feet.

"Roighto, son....we can take it."

"Righto *indeed!* We've gotta keep the little bitches in line, right mate? Hey, I'm sure *I've* punched out a couple of unruly gals—oh, 'scuse me, I mean birds—in my time too. And then *stonked* 'em, of course. Stonked the hell out of 'em till they couldn't even *walk!*" He slapped him this time on the other shoulder.

"Roddy....ev'thing alright, ol' son?"

"What about yer *live-in* bird?—god, what's her name again?"

"Ginny?"

"Yeah, *mate*, what about her? How's *she* fer stonkin'? She a good stonk, is she?"

"Sorry?"

"I said is she a good stonk! *Is* she, Biffer? *Is* she a good stonk or *isn't* she? We're two worldly guys, let's swap stonk stories."

"Well, uh....yeah, she's alright, I reckon—"

"Sure she is! What bird isn't? And I bet some days you get the bar bird in the a.m. and this Ginny bird the same night, right?"

"Well, I—"

"C'mon, Biff, don't be shy. Just answer the question! Two in a row? Two in one day?"

The Yorkshireman flashed a broad, toothy smile that didn't match his eyes.

"Alright, shoore. Shoore I does, but—"

"And this Ginny bird of yours seems....oh, what would you call it....well, sorta disagreeable, wouldn'tcha say? How was it you put it....a mite edgy? Bet *she* needs a good knockin' around now'n then, 'specially before a good stonkin'. Hey, that's pretty funny—knockin' before stonkin'. Sorta rhymes."

"See 'ere, mate, what's yer—"

The Dole

"Come come, man, no need to be modest. We're both big rugged men, right? Admit it. You sorta like to knock her around once in awhile, don'tcha. Just fer kicks, of course, I understand. Bet those red welts on her knees'n elbows are no coincidence either, though I can't *imagine* why any self-respecting bird would be that nervous over the prospect of somethin' as delightful as havin' her face beat in....I mean some chicks just don't know howda have any fun, huh....But tell me, Cliffie-Biffie, exactly where do ya like ta dish it out—the face? The gut? Tell me, *mate*, just where does a woman respond best to bein' hit? I'd really like to know. C'mon, *ol' sod*, tell me. Tell *ev'rybody*, while yer at it. (—the pub was quiet, the dart match suspended, the entire clientele their audience, no smiles, an open-mouthed semi-circle that thoroughly engulfed them; he took a quick look to see what route he might take to the door—) Let's hear it, Biff. How many first-round knockouts you scored over women? Does Ginny fight back or just lie there and take it? What's the matter, cat got'cher tongue? Speak up, Biff ol' boy! Can'tcha see yer adoring public wants to hear how big'n strong you are? You *like* to hit girls, don't you. Don't you. Don't you. *Don't* you! C'mon, *mate*, *don't* you!"

The strange new pride smoldering red and hot in his blood wouldn't let him wait for a reply. He'd made a decision, half-unconsciously at first, perhaps, yet one which would nonetheless provide him with matchless peace in years to come. For it was the all-or-nothing type of decision from which there is no turning back. He felt lucky to just happen to have a heavy glass beer mug in his hand, and gratefully it was now that he slammed it down in an overhand pitcher's motion into the fat, pinkish face. Relief was split-second and absolute, like the breaking of a fever. He found himself acutely aware, surprisingly, of the facial bones shattering and giving way as the glass hit home. And that was the last thing he remembered of the pub; not the hail of fists, not his own fists against the Yorkshireman's face, various and nameless strangers' fists on him, the spike heads pummeling the flat heads and even more emphatically vice versa, nothing of the rain of beer and beer mugs and bodies in a bona fide, old fashioned, western-style barroom brawl. His timely disagreement with Cliff had proved to be an elaborate trigger, just the excuse the flat-hairs from the rival village needed, evidently, to finally vent their own frustrations. He would have very much liked to have watched it. Thinking about it later, he didn't know how he managed to make the door, or how it was even possible, but somehow (thanks to an assist from his flat-haired allies) he was soon safely outside, free of the continuing melee of The Millstone, his battered face stinging from a light rain, heading west on Highway A-631, running.

Book iv

It was about fifteen minutes before he allowed himself the luxury of slowing down. He wanted to make sure he wasn't followed. He knew he'd eventually have to go back for his things, but he hadn't had time to figure out the details. His breathing (virtually the only noise the dark night had for him) was heavy from the hard run, but he wasn't really tired. Not really. Years of running cross country in high school and college had honed and hardened his lithe body into something of a tireless human piston. There had been times, back then, when he had begun his morning run at the choppy shore of Newport Beach, flat soles slapping out a trance on wet sand, and hadn't realized he was still running until he reached the lesser waves of Huntington. He didn't know how long he had been running just now. As he relaxed finally to a walk, as his breathing returned to normal, all he knew for sure was that it was dark and he was walking down a long country road, skin and clothes soaked and stuck together, his face bruised and a little sore, and that he was lost and spiritually spent and totally without prospects in a foreign country. And he was alone.

Alone. The longest and darkest of all words. But somehow the word didn't sting as much as it usually stung him. In fact, he was feeling pretty good about things. Pretty god damn good. He felt as if he had finally struck that blow that he had always failed to strike in the past, a blow for all the stupid decent guys and all the beat-up Ginnys of the world. He would miss her....But as for himself, the big picture, the long view, it was as if something of great consequence had finally been purged from his system, as if a terrific flesh-eating snake had made an opening and slithered blissfully free from his body. Relief. In a queer, almost mystical sort of way, he figured he had earned the right to go back. He would try to make a new start....He would risk the abuse, the slurs, meet it all head on....Maybe he could even learn to actually accept things the way things were....the way things had always been....and of course he would not run, not anymore. He'd already made that decision. Yes, yes, he had earned the right to go back. Suddenly all he could think about was home....

....the screech of tires holding onto a curve....

He turned back and squinted into the car's headlights, felt his body fully illumined by the hard white glare, and at once—his standard response to danger—he turned and ran. But it was only a few half-hearted strides before he remembered he couldn't, wouldn't, run anymore. He stopped and let the car catch up to him. Cliff? His spike-haired cronies? The police? He didn't care. When a guy hasn't got much left to lose, even the snake of consequence can lose its bite.

The car rolled to a stop a few feet shy of him. Headlight beams danced in the thickening rain. Quick sharp eyes stared back, studying the car for shape, size, design. It

was a hatchback....*his* hatchback! He didn't know what was going on. The rough night had dulled his senses. He couldn't see who was driving. He was very confused. He didn't move forward.

"Need a lift, Yank?"

His heart jumped, sang, fairly pulled him over to the driver's open window. He tried not to smile. He tried to think, but it was too much work.

"Nice night for a drive," he said.

"Oh, Rodney—I'm sorry I took y'car, love. Mary MacGwire called me from the pub an' told me wha'appened. I couldn't *help* me-self."

"It's okay," the American said smiling.

"But I shouldn't 'ave—"

"I forgive you," he said, and he could feel the taut smile soften against a bruise developing on his cheek.

"Well? Get in, then, you silly Yankee bloke, 'less you'd prefer t'spend y'whole bloomin' life in the wet!"

He ran around the car and got in on the passenger's side. Almost before he had the door closed they were accelerating into the night.

"In a hurry?"

The dissimilar beams of moon and dashboard competed for her thin smile. "I was worried 'bout you," she said. The car continued to quicken into the teeth of the driving rain.

In relative silence, two or three miles of Highway A-631 disappeared under their car. As English cloudbursts are known to do, the heavy storm quickly thinned itself into a rain of needles. Wiper blades were no longer necessary. The American, full of himself, looked straight ahead at the full moon and would not allow himself to grin. He could feel the hot breath of the floor heater washing dry his feet, and the sweet scent of lilac delighted his nose. The proud Englishwoman also refused to look, she was steadfast, and she drove one-handed. Her left hand—her gear-shifting hand—she let rest in her lap between shiftings, where it busied itself with the sky-blue fuzz of a pullover sweater. When it became clear he wasn't going to say anything, she had no choice but to continue: "Fact is, I would a'taken it no matta'....I mean I'd sort of already planned....oh, I joost *couldn't* spend anotha' bloomin' night in that house, Rodney! I 'ad enough, I did. But I am sorry. I'm truly so sorry. I should 'ave told you, but I was afraid y'might....that y'might no' want—"

The Dole

Something in her voice made him look in the back seat. There were two suitcases there. One was his. And suddenly he felt as warm and secure as a man in soaking-wet clothes can feel. "So is my good friend Cliff okay?" he said cheerily.

"Well, Mary says you knocked up 'e's face a bit!" the girl said. "Probbily improved the piggy thing, if y'ask me. But 'e's alright. Mary'll take care of 'im."

"I'm sure she will," the American said.

They relaxed into another short silence. It was as good a time as any for a final thought or two about Cliff. The round, comfortable face, suddenly so friendly, that face which had once inspired such otherworldly confidence and trust, was immediately clear and present in his mind. Or at least the face that existed before he got through demolishing it. He winced at the thought, at the recollection of glass against bone. Pretty harsh justice....And a part of him felt like a heel for betraying the one who had so unquestioningly, unconditionally availed him of free lodging, not to mention all the free beer....maybe we're *all* on the dole, he wondered, in one way or another....He knew he didn't absolutely have to hit him. He didn't have to. But on the other hand, weren't his actions more than justified? Wasn't the guy, after all, an authoritarian brute, a selfish, gluttonous abuser of women? The more he thought and re-thought the more difficult the whole thing was. Ultimately, he managed to convince himself that the action he took was at least within the realm of reason. Big deal. Any way he sliced it he was still forced to admit (being a young man who prided himself on being "objective") that his first intuition, his strongest and most compelling instinct, was to like him. He had liked him. He *did* like him. There was no escape from the confusion. And trapped within this eternal struggle of instinct versus reason he was no less trapped and no less confused than the first of his species, who long ago crawled meekly from his cave, into the blinding light of civilization, in the vain search for another creature of his own image, anybody older and wiser, that might be worthy of being looked up to. Nobody's perfect, he mused in colossal understatement....

* * *

Like a play about the end of something, or the beginning of something better, the quintessential American and the beautiful young Englishwoman drove silently on, throwing sideways glances at each other, most not catching, once in awhile the briefest clutch of eyes, then always the nervous, smiling disengagement and finally all eyes to the road ahead, a long, dark, rain-slick road rapidly giving way to the ravenous swallow of the car's engine. Pinpricks of rain, steady but still not quite worthy of the wiper blades, deflected the moon into their compartment and isolated the two profiles, silent, cool, waiting....

"So, have you stolen many rental cars?"

She smiled broader than before, yet made her eyes remain fixedly ahead. "Do y'ave any....plans?" she re-queried.

"I was sorta planning on going home," he replied under his breath, only half-hoping she could hear him, "but I just forgot where that is."

"What I mean is f'now," she said quickly. "Sheffield's no' a bad town, an' I—"

"I haven't made plans in a long time," the American said.

"Lots a' *good* jobs in Sheffield. I'll be takin' a job at me-'ospital there. An' I go' some *money*, Rodney, money that Cliff gimme once, for the....bloody doctor." Her voice weakened momentarily. "Mebbe....if y'plans aren't too——"

"I guess my immediate plan, angel face, is to get this old tan mug of mine back to normal."

She looked, turned on the inside light, looked again, and at once her face became a squinched-up thing that made her veer left and pull over onto the loud, gravelly shoulder of the highway. The moment the car was stopped she turned to him: "Yer '*urt*, Rodney!

Oh dear—y'face is....it's....oh, dear!"

"Relax. It's not that bad."

She reached out a delicate white hand. The fingers lightly brushed the swollen right cheek, her face moved nearer to examine it, and what she discovered elicited a sort of guttural purring sound, as from a kitten. "I'm so sorry....it's my fault, y'know....I'm so....oh, I'm so sorry, love," she said tenderly, mournfully; indeed passionately. She brushed the rogue lock of black hair back from his forehead. He engaged her dazzling blue eyes with bloodshot pretenders, and a battered mouth that had no trouble finding one more smile. "It's really not that bad," he insisted, but she continued to thoroughly explore his wounds. Looking at her, he couldn't help but be aware of how truly different they were. The disparity in coloring alone was a red-flag invitation to gossip....A standard impulse, he tried to picture what a child of theirs might actually look like....and he realized his own disparate parents must have once done the very same thing. He started to rest his hand comfortingly on her bare left knee, and resolved to lightly kiss the fingers that even now brushed against his swollen lips, but did neither. He decided there was plenty of time for that. For everything.

"C'mon, girl, let's get this show on the road. I just got an overwhelming desire to see what Sheffield looks like."

The Dole

"I see!" the girl said; and resting her hand briefly on the knee of his bluejeans, smiling ever-so-slightly, she coaxed the car back onto the A-631. Three quick shifts, the rise and fall of a transmission's shrill voice, and they resumed their flight from Tickhill at a leisurely 50 m.p.h. Finally she turned on the wiper blades. The excess water flew off to the sides, and immediately she turned them off. He leaned his head back against the headrest and closed his tired eyes. He didn't need a toothpick. He was utterly relaxed.

"Maybe I'll get a job there too. We could use the extra cash, y'know."

"Couldn't 'urt...."

"At least while I'm making my plans."

"Mighty good thinkin'...."

"Y'know something," he said, "I never did get to see that stupid castle back there."

She swallowed hard, but his eyes were closed, of course, so he didn't see it:

"Mebbe....mebbe we'll find a couple along the way," she said.

The immediacy of gentle rain gradually gave way to the eternal, placid tranquility of night. Cool and clean and pure, the shower's aftermath was a constant whisper through the slightly open windows. The moon continued to light the way, sitting low in the windshield of the western sky, unusually low, as if to indicate the city of Sheffield sleeping below it. There was no dialogue to spoil this scene. Soon a delicate white hand folded around long tan fingers, finally warm, still relaxed, but not quite asleep....

"Keep yer eyes peeled for a bed-and-breakfast," the American said.

END

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