

Blood Drive

By the time the news of Bailey's accident spread through the rural settlement of Box Hill, there were several versions of how it happened. Someone from the construction company called his mother and reported that he had been injured when some scaffolding collapsed at a building site in downtown Memphis, that he was undergoing surgery, was stable, and was expected to survive. His mother, an invalid who weighed over four hundred pounds and was known to be excitable, missed some of the facts as she began to scream and carry on. She called friends and neighbors, and with each replaying of the tragic news various details were altered and enlarged. She neglected to write down the phone number of the person from the company, so there was no one to call to verify or discount the rumors that were multiplying by the minute.

One of Bailey's co-workers, another boy from Ford County, called his girlfriend in Box Hill

and gave an account that varied somewhat: Bailey had been run over by a bulldozer, which was next to the scaffolding, and he was practically dead. The surgeons were working on him, but things were grim.

Then an administrator from a hospital in Memphis called Bailey's home, asked to speak to his mother, and was told that she was laid up in bed, too upset to talk, and unable to come to the phone. The neighbor who answered the phone pumped the administrator for details, but didn't get much. Something collapsed at a construction site, maybe a ditch in which the young man was working, or some such variation. Yes, he was in surgery, and the hospital needed basic information.

Bailey's mother's small brick home quickly became a busy place. Visitors had begun arriving by late afternoon: friends, relatives, and several pastors from the tiny churches scattered around Box Hill. The women gathered in the kitchen and den and gossiped nonstop while the phone rang constantly. The men huddled outside and smoked cigarettes. Casseroles and cakes began to appear.

With little to do, and with scant information about Bailey's injuries, the visitors seized upon every tiny fact, analyzed it, dissected it, then passed it along to the women inside, or to the men outside. A leg was mangled and would probably be amputated. There was a severe brain injury. Bailey fell four floors with the scaffolding,

or maybe it was eight. His chest was crushed. A few of the facts and theories were simply created on the spot. There were even a few somber inquiries about funeral arrangements.

Bailey was nineteen years old and in his short life had never had so many friends and admirers. The entire community loved him more and more as the hours passed. He was a good boy, raised right, a much better person than his sorry father, a man no one had seen in years.

Bailey's ex-girlfriend showed up and was soon the center of attention. She was distraught and overwhelmed and cried easily, especially when talking about her beloved Bailey. However, when word filtered back to the bedroom and his mother heard the little slut was in the house, she ordered her out. The little slut then hung around with the men outside, flirting and smoking. She finally left, vowing to drive to Memphis right then and see her Bailey.

A neighbor's cousin lived in Memphis, and this cousin reluctantly agreed to go to the hospital and monitor things. His first call brought the news that the young man was indeed undergoing surgery for multiple injuries, but he appeared to be stable. He'd lost a lot of blood. In the second call, the cousin straightened out a few of the facts. He'd talked to the job foreman, and Bailey had been injured when a bulldozer struck the scaffolding, collapsing it and sending the poor boy crashing down fifteen feet into a pit of some sort. They were putting the brick on a six-

story office building in Memphis, and Bailey was working as a mason's helper. The hospital would not allow visitors for at least twenty-four hours, but blood donations were needed.

A mason's helper? His mother had bragged that Bailey had been promoted rapidly through the company and was now an assistant job foreman. However, in the spirit of the moment, no one questioned her about this discrepancy.

After dark, a man in a suit appeared and explained that he was an investigator of some sort. He was passed along to an uncle, Bailey's mother's youngest brother, and in a private conversation in the backyard he handed over a business card for a lawyer in Clanton. "Best lawyer in the county," he said. "And we're already working on the case."

The uncle was impressed and promised to shun other lawyers—"just a bunch of ambulance chasers"—and to curse any insurance adjuster who came slithering onto the scene.

Eventually, there was talk of a trip to Memphis. Though it was only two hours away by car, it may as well have been five. In Box Hill, going to the big city meant driving an hour to Tupelo, population fifty thousand. Memphis was in another state, another world, and, besides, crime was rampant. The murder rate was right up there with Detroit. They watched the carnage every night on Channel 5.

Bailey's mother was growing more incapacitated by the moment and was clearly unable to

travel, let alone give blood. His sister lived in Clanton, but she could not leave her children. Tomorrow was Friday, a workday, and there was a general belief that such a trip to Memphis and back, plus the blood thing, would take many hours and, well, who knew when the donors might get back to Ford County.

Another call from Memphis brought the news that the boy was out of surgery, clinging to life, and still in desperate need of blood. By the time this reached the group of men loitering out in the driveway, it sounded as though poor Bailey might die any minute unless his loved ones hustled to the hospital and opened their veins.

A hero quickly emerged. His name was Wayne Agnor, an alleged close friend of Bailey's who since birth had been known as Aggie. He ran a body shop with his father, and thus had hours flexible enough for a quick trip to Memphis. He also had his own pickup, a late-model Dodge, and he claimed to know Memphis like the back of his hand.

"I can leave right now," Aggie said proudly to the group, and word spread through the house that a trip was materializing. One of the women calmed things down when she explained that several volunteers were needed since the hospital would extract only one pint from each donor. "You can't give a gallon," she explained. Very few had actually given blood, and the thought of needles and tubes frightened many. The house

and front yard became very quiet. Concerned neighbors who had been so close to Bailey just moments earlier began looking for distance.

“I’ll go too,” another young man finally said, and he was immediately congratulated. His name was Calvin Marr, and his hours were also flexible but for different reasons—Calvin had been laid off from the shoe factory in Clanton and was drawing unemployment. He was terrified of needles but intrigued by the romance of seeing Memphis for the first time. He would be honored to be a donor.

The idea of a fellow traveler emboldened Aggie, and he laid down the challenge. “Anybody else?”

There was mumbling in general while most of the men studied their boots.

“We’ll take my truck and I’ll pay for the gas,” Aggie continued.

“When are we leavin’?” Calvin asked.

“Right now,” said Aggie. “It’s an emergency.”

“That’s right,” someone added.

“I’ll send Roger,” an older gentleman offered, and this was met with silent skepticism. Roger, who wasn’t present, had no job to worry about because he couldn’t keep one. He had dropped out of high school and had a colorful history with alcohol and drugs. Needles certainly wouldn’t intimidate him.

Though the men in general had little knowledge of transfusions, the very idea of a victim injured so gravely as to need blood from

Roger was hard to imagine. “You tryin’ to kill Bailey?” one of them mumbled.

“Roger’ll do it,” his father said with pride.

The great question was, Is he sober? Roger’s battles with his demons were widely known and discussed in Box Hill. Most folks generally knew when he was off the hooch, or on it.

“He’s in good shape these days,” his father went on, though with a noticeable lack of conviction. But the urgency of the moment overcame all doubt, and Aggie finally said, “Where is he?”

“He’s home.”

Of course he was home. Roger never left home. Where would he go?

Within minutes, the ladies had put together a large box of sandwiches and other food. Aggie and Calvin were hugged and congratulated and fussed over as if they were marching off to defend the country. When they sped away, off to save Bailey’s life, everyone was in the driveway, waving farewell to the brave young men.

Roger was waiting by the mailbox, and when the pickup came to a stop, he leaned through the passenger’s window and said, “We gonna spend the night?”

“Ain’t plannin’ on it,” Aggie said.

“Good.”

After a discussion, it was finally agreed that Roger, who was of a slender build, would sit in the middle between Aggie and Calvin, who were much larger and thicker. They placed the box of food in his lap, and before they were a mile

outside of Box Hill, Roger was unwrapping a turkey sandwich. At twenty-seven, he was the oldest of the three, but the years had not been kind. He'd been through two divorces and numerous unsuccessful efforts to rid him of his addictions. He was wiry and hyper, and as soon as he finished the first sandwich, he unwrapped the second. Aggie, at 250 pounds, and Calvin, at 270, both declined. They had been eating casseroles for the past two hours at Bailey's mother's.

The first conversation was about Bailey, a man Roger hardly knew, but both Aggie and Calvin had attended school with him. Since all three men were single, the chatter soon drifted away from their fallen neighbor and found its way to the subject of sex. Aggie had a girlfriend and claimed to be enjoying the full benefits of a good romance. Roger had slept with everything and was always on the prowl. Calvin, the shy one, was still a virgin at twenty-one, though he would never admit this. He lied about a couple of conquests, without much detail, and this kept him in the game. All three were exaggerating and all three knew it.

When they crossed into Polk County, Roger said, "Pull in up there at the Blue Dot. I need to take a leak." Aggie stopped at the pumps in front of a country store, and Roger ran inside.

"You reckon he's drinkin'?" Calvin asked as they waited.

"His daddy said he's not."

“His daddy lies, too.”

Sure enough, Roger emerged minutes later with a six-pack of beer.

“Oh boy,” Aggie said.

When they were situated again, the truck left the gravel lot and sped away.

Roger pulled off a can and offered it to Aggie, who declined. “No, thanks, I’m drivin’.”

“You can’t drink and drive?”

“Not tonight.”

“How ’bout you?” he said, offering the can to Calvin.

“No, thanks.”

“You boys in rehab or something?” Roger asked as he popped the top, then gulped down half the can.

“I thought you’d quit,” Aggie said.

“I did. I quit all the time. Quittin’s easy.”

Calvin was now holding the box of food and out of boredom began munching on a large oatmeal cookie. Roger drained the first can, then handed it to Calvin and said, “Toss it, would you?”

Calvin lowered the window and flung the empty can back into the bed of the pickup. By the time he raised the window, Roger was popping the top of another. Aggie and Calvin exchanged nervous glances.

“Can you give blood if you’ve been drinkin’?” Aggie asked.

“Of course you can,” Roger said. “I’ve done it many times. You boys ever give blood?”

Aggie and Calvin reluctantly admitted that they had never done so, and this inspired Roger to describe the procedure. “They make you lay down because most people pass out. The damned needle is so big that a lot of folks faint when they see it. They tie a thick rubber cord around your bicep, then the nurse’ll poke around your upper forearm looking for a big, fat blood vein. It’s best to look the other way. Nine times out of ten, she’ll jab the needle in and miss the vein—hurts like hell—then she’ll apologize while you cuss her under your breath. If you’re lucky, she’ll hit the vein the second time, and when she does, the blood spurts out through a tube that runs to a little bag. Everything’s clear, so you can see your own blood. It’s amazing how dark it is, sort of a dark maroon color. It takes forever for a pint to flow out, and the whole time she’s holdin’ the needle in your vein.” He chugged the beer, satisfied with his terrifying account of what awaited them.

They rode in silence for several miles.

When the second can was empty, Calvin tossed it back, and Roger popped the third top. “Beer actually helps,” Roger said as he smacked his lips. “It thins the blood and makes the whole thing go faster.”

It was becoming apparent that he planned to demolish the entire six-pack as quickly as possible. Aggie was thinking that it might be wise to dilute some of the alcohol. He’d heard stories of Roger’s horrific binges.

"I'll take one of those," he said, and Roger quickly handed him a beer.

"Me too, I guess," Calvin said.

"Now we're talkin'," Roger said. "I never like to drink alone. That's the first sign of a true drunk."

Aggie and Calvin drank responsibly while Roger continued to gulp away. When the first six-pack was gone, he announced, with perfect timing, "I need to take a leak. Pull over up there at Cully's Barbecue." They were on the edge of the small town of New Grove, and Aggie was beginning to wonder how long the trip might take. Roger disappeared behind the store and relieved himself, then ducked inside and bought two more six-packs. When New Grove was behind them, they popped the tops and sped along a dark, narrow highway.

"Ya'll ever been to the strip clubs in Memphis?" Roger asked.

"Never been to Memphis," Calvin admitted.

"You gotta be kiddin'."

"Nope."

"How 'bout you?"

"Yeah, I've been to a strip club," Aggie said proudly.

"Which one?"

"Can't remember the name. They're all the same."

"You're wrong about that," Roger corrected him sharply, then practically gargled on another slosh of beer. "Some have these gorgeous babes

with great bodies; others got regular road whores who can't dance a lick."

And this led to a long discussion of the history of legalized stripping in Memphis, or at least Roger's version of it. Back in the early days the girls could peel off everything, every stitch, then hop on your table for a pulsating, gyrating, thrusting dance to loud music and strobe lights and raucous applause from the boys. Then the laws were changed and G-strings were mandated, but they were ignored by certain clubs. Table dancing had given way to lap dancing, which created a new set of laws about physical contact with the girls. When he was finished with the history, Roger rattled off the names of a half-dozen clubs he claimed to know well, then offered an impressive summary of their strippers. His language was detailed and quite descriptive, and when he finally finished, the other two needed fresh beers.

Calvin, who'd touched precious little female flesh, was captivated by the conversation. He was also counting the cans of beer Roger was draining, and when the number reached six—in about an hour—Calvin wanted to say something. Instead, he listened to his far more worldly sidekick, a man who seemed to have an inexhaustible appetite for beer and could gulp it while describing naked girls with astonishing detail.

Eventually, the conversation returned to where it was originally headed. Roger said,

“We’ll probably have time to run by the Desperado after we get finished at the hospital, you know, just for a couple of drinks and maybe a table dance or two.”

Aggie drove with his limp right wrist draped over the steering wheel and a beer in his left hand. He studied the road ahead and didn’t respond to the suggestion. His girlfriend would scream and throw things if she heard he’d spent money in a club gawking at strippers. Calvin, though, was suddenly nervous with anticipation. “Sounds good to me,” he said.

“Sure,” added Aggie, but only because he had to.

A car approached from the other direction, and just before it passed them, Aggie inadvertently allowed the truck’s left front wheel to touch the yellow center line. Then he yanked it back. The other car swerved sharply.

“That was a cop!” Aggie yelled. He and Roger snapped their heads around for a fleeting look. The other car was stopping abruptly, its brake lights fully applied.

“Damned sure is,” Roger said. “A county boy. Go!”

“He’s comin’ after us,” Calvin said in a panic.

“Blue lights! Blue lights!” Roger squawked. “Oh shit!”

Aggie instinctively gunned his engine, and the big Dodge roared over a hill. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” he said.

“Just go, dammit,” Roger yelled.

“We got beer cans ever’where,” Calvin added.

“But I’m not drunk,” Aggie insisted. “Runnin’ just makes things worse.”

“We’re already runnin’,” Roger said. “Now the important thing is to not get caught.” And with that, he drained another can as if it might be his last.

The pickup hit eighty miles per hour, then ninety, as it flew over a long stretch of flat highway. “He’s comin’ fast,” Aggie said, glancing at the mirror, then back at the highway ahead. “Blue lights to hell and back.”

Calvin rolled down his window and said, “Let’s toss the beer!”

“No!” Roger squawked. “Are you crazy? He can’t catch us. Faster, faster!”

The pickup flew over a small hill and almost left the pavement, then it screeched around a tight curve and fishtailed slightly, enough for Calvin to say, “We’re gonna kill ourselves.”

“Shut up,” Roger barked. “Look for a driveway. We’ll duck in.”

“There’s a mailbox,” Aggie said and hit the brakes. The deputy was seconds behind them, but out of sight. They turned sharply to the right, and the truck’s lights swept across a small farmhouse tucked low under huge oak trees.

“Cut your lights,” Roger snapped, as if he’d been in this situation many times. Aggie killed the engine, switched off the lights, and the truck rolled quietly along the short dirt drive and came to rest next to a Ford pickup owned by

Mr. Buford M. Gates, of Route 5, Owensville, Mississippi.

The patrol car flew by them without slowing, its blue lights ablaze but its siren still off. The three donors sat low in the seat, and when the blue lights were long gone, they slowly raised their heads.

The house they had chosen was dark and silent. Evidently, it was not protected by dogs. Even the front porch light was off.

“Nice work,” Roger said softly as they began to breathe again.

“We got lucky,” Aggie whispered.

They watched the house and listened to the highway, and after a few minutes of wonderful silence agreed that they had indeed been very lucky.

“How long we gonna sit here?” Calvin finally asked.

“Not long,” Aggie said as he stared at the windows of the house.

“I hear a car,” Calvin said, and the three heads ducked again. Seconds passed, and the deputy flew by from the other direction, lights flashing but still no siren. “Sumbitch is lookin’ for us,” Roger mumbled.

“Of course he is,” Aggie said.

When the sound of the patrol car faded in the distance, the three heads slowly rose in the Dodge, then Roger said, “I need to pee.”

“Not here,” Calvin said.

“Open the door,” Roger insisted.

“Can’t you wait?”

“No.”

Calvin slowly opened the passenger’s door, stepped out, then watched as Roger tiptoed to the side of Mr. Gates’s Ford truck and began urinating on the right front wheel.

Unlike her husband, Mrs. Gates was a light sleeper. She was certain she had heard something out there, and when she was fully awake, she became even more convinced of it. Buford had been snoring for an hour, but she finally managed to interrupt his slumber. He reached under the bed and grabbed his shotgun.

Roger was still urinating when a small light came on in the kitchen. All three saw it immediately. “Run!” Aggie hissed through his window, then grabbed the key and turned the ignition. Calvin jumped back into the truck while grunting, “Go, go, go!” as Aggie slammed the transmission in reverse and hit the gas. Roger yanked his pants up while scrambling toward the Dodge. He flung himself over the side and landed hard in the bed, among the empty beer cans, then held on as the truck flew back down the driveway toward the road. It was at the mailbox when the front porch light popped on. It slid to a stop on the asphalt as the front door slowly opened and an old man pushed back the screen. “He’s got a gun!” Calvin said.

“Too bad,” said Aggie as he slammed the stick into drive and peeled rubber for fifty feet as they made a clean escape. A mile down the highway,

Aggie turned onto a narrow country lane and stopped the engine. All three got out and stretched their muscles and had a good laugh at the close call. They laughed nervously and worked hard to believe that they had not been frightened at all. They speculated about where the deputy might be at that moment. They cleaned out the bed of the truck and left their empty cans in a ditch. Ten minutes passed and there was no sign of the deputy.

Aggie finally addressed the obvious. “We gotta get to Memphis, fellas.”

Calvin, more intrigued by the Desperado than by the hospital, added, “You bet. It’s gettin’ late.”

Roger froze in the center of the road and said, “I dropped my wallet.”

“You what?”

“I dropped my wallet.”

“Where?”

“Back there. Must’ve fell out when I was takin’ a leak.”

There was an excellent chance that Roger’s wallet contained nothing of value—no money, driver’s license, credit cards, membership cards of any kind, nothing more useful than perhaps an old condom. And Aggie almost asked, “What’s in it?” But he did not, because he knew that Roger would claim that his wallet was loaded with valuables.

“I gotta go get it,” he said.

“Are you sure?” Calvin asked.

“It’s got my money, license, credit cards, everything.”

“But the old man had a gun.”

“And when the sun comes up, the old man will find my wallet, call the sheriff, who’ll call the sheriff in Ford County, and we’ll be screwed. You’re pretty stupid, you know.”

“At least I didn’t lose my wallet.”

“He’s right,” Aggie said. “He’s gotta go get it.” It was noted by the other two that Aggie emphasized the “he” and said nothing about “we.”

“You’re not scared, are you, big boy?” Roger said to Calvin.

“I ain’t scared, ’cause I ain’t goin’ back.”

“I think you’re scared.”

“Knock it off,” Aggie said. “Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll wait until the old man has time to get back in bed, then we’ll ease down the road, get close to the house but not too close, stop the truck, then you can sneak down the driveway, find the wallet, and we’ll haul ass.”

“I’ll bet there’s nothin’ in the wallet,” Calvin said.

“And I’ll bet it’s got more cash than your wallet,” Roger shot back as he reached into the truck for another beer.

“Knock it off,” Aggie said again.

They stood beside the truck, sipping beer and watching the deserted highway in the distance, and after fifteen minutes that seemed like an hour they loaded up, with Roger in the back. A

quarter of a mile from the house, Aggie stopped the truck on a flat section of highway. He killed the engine so they could hear any approaching vehicle.

“Can’t you get closer?” Roger asked as he stood by the driver’s door.

“It’s just around that bend up there,” Aggie said. “Any closer, and he might hear us.”

The three stared at the dark highway. A half-moon came and went with the clouds. “You gotta gun?” Roger asked.

“I gotta gun,” Aggie said, “but you ain’t gettin’ it. Just sneak up to the house, and sneak back. No big deal. The old man’s asleep already.”

“You’re not scared, are you?” Calvin added helpfully.

“Hell no.” And with that, Roger disappeared into the darkness. Aggie restarted the truck and, with the lights off, quietly turned it around so that it was headed in the general direction of Memphis. He killed the engine again, and with both windows down they began their waiting.

“He’s had eight beers,” Calvin said softly. “Drunk as a skunk.”

“But he can hold his booze.”

“He’s had a lot of practice. Maybe the old man’ll get him this time.”

“That wouldn’t really bother me, but then we’d get caught.”

“Why, exactly, was he invited in the first place?”

“Shut up. We need to listen for traffic.”

Roger left the road when the mailbox was in sight. He jumped a ditch, then ducked low through a bean field next to the house. If the old man was still watching, his eyes would be on the driveway, right? Roger shrewdly decided he would sneak in from the rear. All lights were off. The little house was still and quiet. Not a creature was stirring. Through the shadows of the oak trees, Roger crept over the wet grass until he could see the Ford pickup. He paused behind a toolshed, caught his breath, and realized he needed to pee again. No, he said to himself, it had to wait. He was proud—he'd made it this far without a sound. Then he was terrified again—what the hell was he doing? He took a deep breath, then crouched low and continued on his mission. When the Ford was between him and the house, he fell to his hands and knees and began feeling his way through the pea gravel at the end of the driveway.

Roger moved slowly as the gravel crunched under him. He cursed when his hands became wet near the right front tire. When he touched his wallet, he smiled, then quickly stuck it in the right rear pocket of his jeans. He paused, breathed deeply, then began his silent retreat.

In the stillness, Mr. Buford Gates heard all sorts of noises, some real, some conjured up by the circumstances. The deer had the run of the place, and he thought that perhaps they were moving around again, looking for grass and

berries. Then he heard something different. He slowly stood from his hiding place on the side porch, raised his shotgun to the sky, and fired two shots at the moon just for the hell of it.

In the perfect calm of the late evening, the shots boomed through the air like howitzers, deadly blasts that echoed for miles.

Down the highway, not too far away, the sudden squealing of tires followed the gunfire, and to Buford, at least, the burning of rubber sounded precisely as it had just twenty minutes earlier directly in front of his house.

They're still around here, he said to himself.

Mrs. Gates opened the side door and said, "Buford!"

"I think they're still here," he said, reloading his Browning 16-gauge.

"Did you see them?"

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, maybe? What are you shootin' at?"

"Just get back inside, will you?"

The door slammed.

Roger was under the Ford pickup, holding his breath, clutching his groin, sweating profusely as he urgently tried to decide whether he should wrap himself around the transmission just inches above him or claw his way down through the pea gravel below him. But he didn't move. The sonic booms were still ringing in his ears. The squealing tires of his cowardly friends made him curse. He was afraid to breathe.

He heard the door open again and the woman say, "Here's a flashlight. Maybe you can see what you're shootin' at."

"Just get back inside and call the sheriff while you're at it."

The door slammed again as the woman was prattling on. A minute or so later she was back. "I called the sheriff's office. They said Dudley's out here somewhere on patrol."

"Fetch my truck keys," the man said. "I'll take a look on the highway."

"You can't drive at night."

"Just get me the damned keys."

The door slammed again. Roger tried wiggling in reverse, but the pea gravel made too much noise. He tried wiggling forward, in the direction of their voices, but again there was too much shuffling and crunching. So he decided to wait. If the pickup started in reverse, he would wait until the last possible second, grab the front bumper as it moved above him, and get himself dragged a few feet until he could bolt and sprint through the darkness. If the old man saw him, it would take several seconds for him to stop, get his gun, get out, and give chase. By then, Roger would be lost in the woods. It was a plan, and it just might work. On the other hand, he could get crushed by the tires, dragged down the highway, or just plain shot.

Buford left the side porch and began searching with his flashlight. From the door, Mrs. Gates yelled, "I hid your keys. You can't drive at night."

Atta girl, thought Roger.

“You’d better get me those damned keys.”

“I hid them.”

Buford was mumbling in the darkness.

The Dodge raced for several frantic miles before Aggie finally slowed somewhat, then said, “You know we have to go back.”

“Why?”

“If he got hit, we have to explain what happened and take care of the details.”

“I hope he got hit, and if he did, then he can’t talk. If he can’t talk, he can’t squeal on us. Let’s get to Memphis.”

“No.” Aggie turned around, and they drove in silence until they reached the same country lane where they had stopped before. Close to a fence row, they sat on the hood and contemplated what to do next. Before long, they heard a siren, then saw the blue lights pass by quickly on the highway.

“If the ambulance is next, then we’re in big trouble,” Aggie said.

“So is Roger.”

When Roger heard the siren, he panicked. But as it grew closer, he realized it would conceal some of the noise his escape would need. He found a rock, squirmed to the side of the truck, and flung it in the general direction of the house. It hit something, causing Mr. Gates to say, “What’s that?” and to run back to the side porch. Roger slithered like a snake from under the truck, through the fresh urine he’d left earlier,

through the wet grass, and all the way to an oak tree just as Dudley the deputy came roaring onto the scene. He hit his brakes and turned violently into the driveway, slinging gravel and sending dust. The commotion saved Roger. Mr. and Mrs. Gates ran out to meet Dudley while Roger eased deeper into the darkness. Within seconds he was behind a line of shrubs, then past an old barn, then lost in a bean field. Half an hour passed.

Aggie said, "I think we just go back to the house, and tell 'em ever'thang. That way we'll know if he's okay."

Calvin said, "But won't they charge us with resistin' arrest, and probably drunk drivin' on top of that?"

"So what do you suggest?"

"The deputy's probably gone now. No ambulance means Roger's okay, wherever he is. I'll bet he's hidin' somewhere. I say we make one pass by the house, take a good look, then get on to Memphis."

"It's worth a try."

They found Roger beside the road, walking with a limp, headed to Memphis. After a few harsh words by all three, they decided to carry on. Roger took his middle position; Calvin had the door. They drove ten minutes before anyone said another word. All eyes were straight ahead. All three were angry, fuming.

Roger's face was scratched and bloody. He reeked of sweat and urine, and his clothes were

covered with dirt and mud. After a few miles, Calvin rolled down his window, and after a few more miles Roger said, “Why don’t you roll up that window?”

“We need fresh air,” Calvin explained.

They stopped for another six-pack to settle their nerves, and after a few drinks Calvin asked, “Did he shoot at you?”

“I don’t know,” Roger said. “I never saw him.”

“It sounded like a cannon.”

“You should’ve heard it where I was.”

At that, Aggie and Calvin became amused and began laughing. Roger, his nerves settled, found their laughter contagious, and soon all three were hooting at the old man with the gun and the wife who hid his truck keys and probably saved Roger’s life. And the thought of Dudley the deputy still flying up and down the highway with his blue lights on made them laugh even harder.

Aggie was sticking to the back roads, and when one of them intersected Highway 78 near Memphis, they raced onto the entrance ramp and joined the traffic on the four-lane.

“There’s a truck stop just ahead,” Roger said. “I need to wash up.”

Inside, he bought a NASCAR T-shirt and a cap, then scrubbed his face and hands in the men’s room. When he returned to the truck, Aggie and Calvin were impressed with the changes. They raced off again, close to the bright lights now. It was almost 10:00 p.m.

The billboards grew larger, brighter, and closer together, and though the boys had not mentioned the Desperado in an hour, they suddenly remembered the place when they were confronted with a sizzling image of a young woman ready to burst out of what little clothing she was wearing. Her name was Tiffany, and she smirked down at the traffic from a huge billboard that advertised the Desperado, a Gentlemen's Club, with the hottest strippers in the entire South. The Dodge slowed appreciably.

Her legs seemed a mile long, and bare, and her skimpy sheer costume was obviously designed to be shed in a moment's notice. She had teased blond hair, thick red lips, and eyes that absolutely smoldered. The very possibility that she might be working just a few miles up the road, and that they could stop by and see her in the flesh, well, it was all overwhelming.

For a few minutes there was not a word as the Dodge regained its speed. Finally, Aggie said, "I reckon we'd better get to the hospital. Bailey might be dead by now."

It was the first mention of Bailey in hours.

"The hospital's open all night," Roger said. "Never closes. Whatta you thank they do, shut down at night and make ever'body go home?" To show his support, Calvin found this humorous and joined in with a hearty horselaugh.

"So ya'll want to stop by the Desperado?" Aggie asked, playing along.