

THE OLD FOLKS

JAMES E. GUNN

Past president of the Science Fiction Writers of America, present teacher of SF at the University of Kansas - where he is also preparing a series of fascinating films to be used in teaching science fiction - James Gunn is a man of many parts. But he is first of all a powerful writer as can be seen in this glimpse of an American retirement paradise. Paradise?

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They had been traveling in the dusty car all day, the last few miles in the heat of the Florida summer. Not far behind were the Sunshine State Parkway, Orange Grove, and Winter Hope, but according to the road map the end of the trip was near.

John almost missed the sign that said, "Sunset Acres, Next Right," but the red Volkswagen slowed and turned and slowed again. Now another sign marked the beginning of the town proper: SUNSET ACRES, Restricted Senior Citizens, Minimum Age - 65, Maximum Speed - 20.

As the car passed the sign, the whine of the tires announced that the pavement had changed from concrete to brick.

Johnny bounced in the back seat, mingling the squeak of the springs with the music of the tires, and shouted above the engine's protest at second gear, "Mommy - Daddy, are we there yet? Are we there?"

His mother turned to look at him. The wind from the open window whipped her short hair. She smiled. "Soon now," she said. Her voice was excited, too.

They passed through a residential section where the white frame houses with their sharp roofs sat well back from the street, and the velvet lawns reached from red-brick sidewalks to broad porches that spread like skirts around two or three sides of the houses.

At each intersection the streets dipped to channel the rain water and to enforce the speed limit to 20 m.p.h. or slower. The names of the streets were chiseled into the curbs, and the incisions were painted black: Osage,

Cottonwood, Antelope, Meadowlark, Prairie...

The Volkswagen hummed along the brick streets, alone. The streets were empty, and so, it seemed, were the houses; the white-curtained windows stared senilely into the Florida sun, and the swings on the porches creaked in the Florida breeze, but the architecture and the town were all Kansas - and the Kansas of fifty years ago, at that.

Then they reached the square, and John pulled the car to a stop alongside the curb. Here was the center of town - a block of greensward edged with beds of pansies and petunias and geraniums. In the center of the square was a massive, two-story, red-brick building. A square tower reached even taller. The tower had a big clock set into its face. The heavy, black hands pointed at 3:32.

Stone steps marched up the front of the building toward oak doors twice the height of a man. Around the edges of the buildings were iron benches painted white. On the benches the old men sat in the sun, their eyes shut, their hands folded across canes.

From somewhere behind the brick building came the sound of a brass band - the full, rich mixture of trumpet and trombone and sousaphone, of tuba and tympani and big, bass drum.

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Unexpectedly, as they sat in the car looking at the scene out of another era and another land, a tall black shape rolled silently past them. John turned his head quickly to look at it. A thin cab in the middle sloped toward spoked wheels at each end, like the front ends of two cars stuck together. An old woman in a wide-brimmed hat sat upright beside the driver. From her high window she frowned at the little foreign car, and then her vehicle passed down the street.

"That was an old electric!" John said. "I didn't know they were making them again."

From the back seat Johnny said, "When are we going to get to Grammy's?"

"Soon," his mother said. "If you're going to ask the way to Buffalo Street, you'd better ask," she said to John. "It's too hot to sit here in the car."

John opened the door and extracted himself from the damp socket of the bucket seat. He stood for a moment beside the baked metal of the car and looked up each side of the street. The oomp-pah-pah of the band was louder now and the yeasty smell of baking bread dilated his nostrils, but the whole scene struck him as unreal somehow, as if this all were a stage setting and a man could walk behind the buildings and find that the backs were unpainted canvas and raw wood.

“Well?” Sally said.

John shook his head and walked around the front of the car. The first store sold hardware. In the small front window were crowbars and wooden-handled claw hammers and three kegs of blue nails; one of the kegs had a metal scoop stuck into the nails at the top. In one corner of the window was a hand mower, its handles varnished wood, its metal wheels and reel blue, except where the spokes had been touched with red and yellow paint and the curved reel had been sharpened to a silver line.

The interior of the store was dark; John could not tell whether anyone was inside.

Next to it was “Tyler’s General Store,” and John stepped inside onto sawdust. Before his eyes adjusted from the Sunshine State’s proudest asset, he smelled the pungent sawdust. The odor was mingled with others - the vinegar and spice of pickles and the ripeness of cheese and a sweet-sour smell that he could not identify.

Into his returning vision the faces swam first - the pale faces of the old people, framed in white hair, relieved from the anonymity of age only by the way in which bushy eyebrows sprouted or a mustache was trimmed or wrinkles carved the face. Then he saw the rest of the store and the old people. Some of them were sitting in scarred oak chairs with rounded backs near a black, potbellied stove. The room was cool; after a moment John realized that the stove was producing a cold breeze.

One old man with a drooping white mustache was leaning over from the barrel he sat on to cut a slice of cheese from the big wheel on the counter. A tall man with an apron over his shirt and trousers and his shirt sleeves hitched up with rubber bands came from behind the counter, moving his bald head with practiced ease among the dangling sausages.

“Son,” he said, “I reckon you lost your way. Made the wrong turn off the highway, I warrant. Heading for Winter Hope or beyond and mistook yourself. You just head back out how you come in and---”

“Is this Sunset Acres?” John said.

The old man with the yellow slice of cheese in his hand said in a thin voice, “Yep. No use thinking you can stay, though. Thirty-five or forty years too soon. That’s what!” His sudden laughter came out in a cackle.

The others joined in, like a superannuated Greek chorus, “Can’t stay!”

“I’m looking for Buffalo Street,” John said. “We’re going to visit the Plummers.” He paused and then added, “They’re my wife’s parents.”

The storekeeper tucked his thumbs into the straps of his apron. “That’s different. Everybody knows the Plummers. Three blocks north of the square. Can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” John said, nodding, and backed into the sunshine.

The interrupted murmur of conversation began again, broken briefly by laughter.

“Three blocks north of the square,” he said as he inserted himself back in the car.

He started the motor, shifted into first, and turned the corner. As he passed the general store he thought he saw white faces peering out of the darkness, but they might have been feather pillows hanging in the window.

In front of the town hall an old man jerked in his sleep as the car passed. Another opened his eyes and frowned. A third shook his cane in their general direction. Beyond, a thin woman in a lavender shawl was holding an old man by the shoulder as if to tell him that she was done with the shopping and it was time to go home.

“John, look!” Sally said, pointing out the window beside her.

To their right was an ice-cream parlor. Metal chairs and round tables with thin, wire legs were set in front of the store under a yellow awning. At one of the tables sat an elderly couple. The man sat straight in his chair like an army officer, his hair iron-gray and neatly parted, his eyebrows thick. He was keeping time to the music of the band with the cane in his right hand. His left hand held the hand of a little old woman in a black dress, who gazed at him as she sipped from the soda in front of her.

The music was louder here. Just to the north of the town hall, they could see now, was a bandstand with a conical roof. On the bandstand sat a half a dozen old men in uniforms, playing instruments. Another man in uniform stood in front of them, waving a baton. It was a moment before John realized what was wrong with the scene. The music was louder and richer than the half-dozen musicians could have produced.

But it was Johnny who pointed out the tape recorder beside the bandstand, "Just like Daddy's."

It turned out that Buffalo Street was not three blocks north of the square but three blocks south.

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The aging process had been kind to Mrs. Henry Plummer. She was a small woman, and the retreating years had left their detritus of fat, but the extra weight seemed no burden on her small bones and the cushioning beneath the skin kept it plump and unwrinkled. Her youthful complexion seemed strangely at odds with her blue-white curls. Her eyes, though, were unmistakably old. They were faded like a blue gingham dress.

They looked at Sally now, John thought, as if to say, "What I have seen you through, my dear, the colic and the boys, the measles and the mumps and the chickenpox and the boys, the frozen fingers and the skinned knees and the boys, the parties and the late hours and the boys... And now you come again to me, bringing this larger, distant boy that I do not like very much, who has taken you from me and treated you with crude familiarity, and you ask me to call him by his first name and consider him one of the family. It's too much."

When she spoke her voice was surprisingly small. "Henry," she said, a little girl in an old body, "don't stand there talking all day. Take in the bags! These children must be starved to death!"

Henry Plummer had grown thinner as his wife had filled out, as if she had grown fat at his expense. Plummer had been a junior executive, long after he had passed in age most of the senior executives, in a firm that manufactured games and toys, but a small inheritance and cautious investments in municipal bonds and life insurance had made possible his comfortable retirement.

He could not shake the habits of a lifetime; his face bore the wry expression of a man who expects the worst and receives it. He said little

and when he spoke it was usually to protest. "Well, I guess I'm not the one holding them up," he said, but he stooped for the bags.

John moved quickly to reach the bags first. "I'll get them, Dad," he said. The word "Dad" came out as if it were fitted with rusty hooks. He had never known what to call Henry Plummer. His own father had died when he was a small child, and his mother had died when he was in college; but he could not find in himself any filial affection for Plummer. He disliked the coyness of "Dad," but it was better than the stiffness of "Mr. Plummer" or the false camaraderie of "Henry."

With Mrs. Plummer the problem had not been so great. John recalled a joke from the book he had edited recently for the paperback publishing firm that employed him. "For the first year I said, 'Hey, you!' and then I called her 'Grandma.'"

He straightened with the scuffed suitcases, looking helplessly at Sally for a moment and then apologetically at Plummer. "I guess you've carried your share of luggage already."

"He's perfectly fit," Mrs. Plummer said.

Sally looked only at Johnny. Sally was small and dark-haired and pretty, and John loved her and her whims - "a whim of iron," they called her firm conviction that she knew the right thing to do at any time, in any situation - but when she was around her mother John saw reflected in her behavior all the traits that he found irritating in the old woman. Sometime, perhaps, she would even be plump like her mother, but now it did not seem likely. She ran after Johnny fourteen hours a day.

She held the hand of her four-year-old, her face flushed, her eyes bright with pride. "I guess you see how he's grown, Mother. Ten pounds since you saw him last Christmas. And three inches taller. Give your grandmother a kiss, Johnny. A big kiss for Granny. He's been talking all the way from New York about coming to visit Grammy - and Granddad, too, of course. I can't imagine what makes him act so shy now. Usually he isn't. Not even with strangers. Give Grammy a great big kiss."

"Well," Mrs. Plummer said, "you must be starved. Come on in. I've got a ham on the stove, and we'll have sandwiches and coffee. And, Johnny, I've got something for you. A box of chocolates, all your own."

"Oh, Mother!" Sally said. "Not just before lunch. He won't eat a bite."

Johnny jumped up and down. He pulled his hand free from his mother's and ran to Mrs. Plummer. "Candy! Candy!" he shouted. He gave Mrs. Plummer a big, wet kiss.

John stood at the living room window listening to the whisper of the air conditioning and looking out at the Florida evening. He could see Johnny playing in the pile of sand his thoughtful grandparents had had dumped in the back yard. It had been a relief to be alone with his wife, but now the heavy silence of disagreement hung in the air between them. He had wanted to leave, to return to New York, and she would not even consider the possibility.

He had massed all his arguments, all his uneasiness, about this strange, nightmarish town, about how he felt unwanted, about how it disliked them, and Sally had found his words first amusing and then disagreeable. For her Sunset Acres was an arcadia for the aged. Her reaction was strongly influenced by that glimpse of the old couple at the ice-cream parlor.

John had always found in her a kind of Walt Disney sentimentality, but it had never disturbed him before. He turned and made one last effort. "Besides, your parents don't even want us here. We've been here only a couple of hours and already they've left us to go to some meeting."

"It's their monthly town hall meeting," Sally said. "They have an obligation to attend. It's part of their self-government or something."

"Oh, hell," John said, turning back to the window. He looked from left to right and back again. "Johnny's gone."

He ran to the back door and fumbled with it for a moment. Then it opened, and he was in the back yard. After the sterile chill of the house, the air outside seemed ripe with warm black earth and green things springing through the soil. The sandpile was empty; there was no place for the boy to hide among the colorful Florida shrubs which hid the back yard of the house behind and had colorful names he could never remember.

John ran around the corner of the house. He reached the porch just as Sally came through the front door.

"There he is," Sally cried out.

"Johnny!" John shouted.

The four-year-old had started across the street. He turned and looked back at them. "Grammy," he said.

John heard him clearly.

The car slipped into the scene like a shadow, silent, unsuspected. John saw it out of the corner of his eye. Later he thought that it must have turned the nearby corner, or perhaps it came out of a driveway. In the moment before the accident, he saw that the old woman in the wide-brimmed hat was driving the car herself. He saw her head turn toward Johnny, and he saw the upright electric turn sharply toward the child.

The front fender hit Johnny and threw him toward the sidewalk. John looked incredulously at the old woman. She smiled at him, and then the car was gone down the street.

"Johnny!" Sally screamed. Already she was in the street the boy's head cradled in her lap. She hugged him and then pushed him away to look blindly into his face and then hugged him again, rocking him in her arms, crying.

John found himself beside her, kneeling. He pried the boy away from her. Johnny's eyes were closed. His face was pale, but John couldn't find any blood. He lifted the boy's eyelids. The pupils seemed dilated. Johnny did not stir.

"What's the matter with him?" Sally screamed at John. "He's going to die, isn't he?"

"I don't know. Let me think! Let's get him into the house."

"You aren't supposed to move people who've been in an accident!"

"We can't leave him here to be run over by someone else."

John picked up his son gently and walked to the house. He lowered the boy onto the quilt in the front bedroom and looked down at him for a moment. The boy was breathing raggedly. He moaned. His hand twitched. "I've got to get a doctor," John said. "Where's the telephone?"

Sally stared at him as if she hadn't heard. John turned away and looked in the living room. An antique apparatus on a wooden frame was attached to one wall. He picked up the receiver and cranked the handle vigorously. "Hello!" he said. "Hello!" No answer.

He returned to the bedroom. Sally was still standing beside the bed. "What a lousy town!" he said. "No telephone service!" Sally looked at him. She blinked.

"I'll have to go to town," John said. "You stay with Johnny. Keep him warm. Put cold compresses on his head." They might not help Johnny, he thought, but they would keep Sally quiet.

She nodded and headed toward the bathroom.

When he got to the car, it refused to start. After a few futile attempts, he gave up, knowing he had flooded the motor. He ran back to the house. Sally looked up at him, calmer now that her hands were busy.

"I'm going to run," he told her. "I might see that woman and be unable to resist the impulse to smash into her."

"Don't talk crazy," Sally said. "It was just an accident."

"It was no accident," John said. "I'll be back with a doctor as soon as I can find one."

John ran down the brick sidewalks until his throat burned and then walked for a few steps before breaking once more into a run. By then the square was in sight. The sun had plunged into the Gulf of Mexico, and the town was filled with silence and shadows. The storefronts were dark. There was no light anywhere in the square.

The first store was a butcher shop. Hams hung in the windows, and plucked chickens, naked and scrawny, dangled by cords around their yellow feet. John thought he smelled sawdust and blood. He remembered Johnny and felt sick.

Next was a clothing store with two wide windows under the name "Emporium." In the windows were stiff, waxen dummies in black suits and high, starched collars; in lace and parasols. Then came a narrow door; on its window were printed the words, "Saunders and Jones, Attorneys at Law." The window framed dark steps.

Beside it was a print shop-piles of paper pads in the window, white, yellow, pink, blue; reams of paper in dusty wrappers; faded invitations and personal cards; and behind them the lurking shapes of printing presses and racks of type.

John passed a narrow bookstore with books stacked high in the window and ranged in ranks into the darkness. Then came a restaurant; a light in the back revealed scattered tables with checkered cloths. He pounded at the door, making a shocking racket in the silence of the square, but no one came.

Kitty-corner across the street, he saw the place and recognized it by the tall, intricately shaped bottles of colored water in the window and the fancy jar hanging from chains. He ran across the brick street and beat on the door with his fist. There was no response. He kicked it, but the drug store remained silent and dark. Only the echoes answered his summons, and they soon died away.

Next to the drug store was another dark door. The words printed across the window in it said, "Joseph M. Bronson, M.D." And underneath, "Geriatrics Only."

John knocked, sure it was useless, wondering, "Why is the town locked up? Where is everybody?" And then he remembered the meeting. That's where everyone was, at the meeting the Plummers couldn't miss. No one could miss the meeting. Everyone had to be there, apparently, even the telephone operator. But where was it being held?

Of course. Where else would a town meeting be held? In the town hall.

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He ran across the street once more and up the wide steps. He pulled open one of the heavy doors and stepped into a hall with tall ceilings. Stairways led up on either side, but light came through a pair of doors ahead. He heard a babble of voices. John walked toward the doors, feeling the slick oak floors under his feet, smelling the public toilet odors of old urine and disinfectant.

He stopped for a moment at the doors to peer between them, hoping to see the Plummers, hoping they were close enough to signal without disturbing the others. The old people would be startled if he burst in among them. There would be confusion and explanations, accusations perhaps. He needed a doctor, not an argument.

The room was filled with wooden folding chairs placed neatly in rows, with a wide aisle in the middle and a narrower one on either side. From the

backs of the chairs hung shawls and canes. The room had for John the unreal quality of an etching, perhaps because all the backs of the heads that he saw were silver and gray, here and there accented with tints of blue or green.

At the front of the room was a walnut rostrum on a raised platform. Behind the rostrum stood the old man Sally had pointed out in the ice-cream parlor. He stood as straight as he had sat.

The room buzzed as if it had a voice of its own, and the voice rose and fell, faded and returned, the way it does in a dream. One should be able to understand it, one had to understand it, but one couldn't quite make out the words.

The old man banged on the rostrum with a wooden gavel; the gavel had a small silver plate attached to its head. "Everyone will have his chance to be heard," he said. It was like an order. The buzz faded away. "Meanwhile we will speak one at a time, and in a proper manner, first being recognized by the chair.

"Just one moment, Mr. Samuelson.

"For many years the public press has allowed its columns to bleed over the voting age. 'If a boy of eighteen is old enough to die for his country, he is old enough to vote for its legislators,' the sentimentalists have written.

"Nonsense. It takes no intelligence to die. Any idiot can do it. Surviving takes brains. Men of eighteen aren't even old enough to take orders properly, and until a man can take orders he can't give them.

"Mrs. Richards, I have the floor. When I have finished I will recognize each of you in turn."

John started to push through the doors and announce the emergency to the entire group, but something about the stillness of the audience paralyzed his decision. He stood there, his hand on the door, his eyes searching for the Plummers.

"Let me finish," the old man at the rostrum said. "Only when a man has attained true maturity - fifty is the earliest date for the start of this time of life - does he begin to identify the important things in life. At this age, the realization comes to him, if it ever comes, that the individual has the right to protect and preserve the property that he has accumulated by his own hard

work, and, in the protection of this right, the state stands between the individual and mob rule in Washington. Upon these eternal values we take our stand: the individual, his property, and state's rights. Else our civilization, and everything in it of value, will perish."

The light faded from his eyes, and the gavel which had been raised in his hand like a saber sank to the rostrum. "Mr. Samuelson."

In the front of the room a man stood up. He was small and bald except for two small tufts of hair above his ears. "I have heard what you said, and I understand what you said because you said it before. It is all very well to talk of the rights of the individual to protect his property, but how can he protect his property when the government taxes and taxes and taxes - state governments as well as Washington? I say, 'Let the government give us four exemptions instead of two.' "

A cracked voice in the back of the room said, "Let them cut out taxes altogether for senior citizens!"

"Yes!"

"No!"

A small, thin woman got up in the middle of the audience. "Four hundred dollars a month for every man and woman over sixty-five!" she said flatly. "Why shouldn't we have it? Didn't we build this country? Let the government give us back a little of what they have taken away. Besides, think of the money it would put into circulation."

"You have not been recognized, Mrs. Richards," the Chairman said, "and I declare you out of order and the Townsendites as well. What you are advocating is socialism, more government not less."

"Reds!" someone shouted. "Commies!" said someone else. "That's not true!" said a woman near the door. "It's only fair," shouted an old man, nodding vigorously. Canes and crutches were waved in the air, a hundred Excaliburs and no Arthur. John glanced behind him to see if the way was clear for retreat in case real violence broke out.

"Sally!" he exclaimed, discovering her behind him. "What are you doing here! Where's Johnny?"

"He's in the car. He woke up. He seemed all right. I thought I'd better find you. Then we'd be closer to the doctor. I looked all over. What are you

doing here?"

John rubbed his forehead. "I don't know. I was looking for a doctor. Something's going on here. I don't know what it is, but I don't like it."

"What's going on?"

Sally tried to push past him, but John grabbed her arm. "Don't go in there!"

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The Chairman's gavel finally brought order out of confusion. "We are senior citizens, not young hoodlums!" he admonished them. "We can disagree without forgetting our dignity and our common interests, Mrs. Johnson."

A woman stood up at the right beside one of the tall windows that now framed the night. She was a stout woman with gray hair pulled back into a bun. "It seems to me, Colonel, that we are getting far from the subject of this meeting - indeed, the subject of all our meetings - and that is what we are going to do about the young people who are taking over everything and pushing us out. As many of you know, I have no prejudices about young people. Some of my best friends are young people, and, although I cannot name my children among them, for they are ingrates, I bear my son and my two daughters no ill will."

She paused for a deep breath. "We must not let the young people get the upper hand. We must find ways of insuring that we get from them the proper respect for our age and our experience. The best way to do this, I believe, is to keep them in suspense about the property - the one thing about us they still value - how much there is and what will become of it. Myself, I pretend that there is at least two or three times as much. When I am visiting one of them, I leave my check book lying carelessly about - the one that has the very large and false balance. And I let them overhear me make an appointment to see a lawyer. What do I have to see a lawyer about, they think, except my will?"

"Actually I have written my will once and for all, leaving my property to the Good Samaritan Rest Home for the Aged, and I do not intend to change it. But I worry that some clever young lawyer will find a way to break the will. They're always doing that when you disinherit someone."

"Mrs. Johnson," the Colonel said, "you have a whole town full of friends who will testify that you always have been in full possession of your

faculties, if it ever should come to that, God forbid! Mrs. Fredericks?"

"Nasty old woman," Sally muttered. "Where are Mother and Father? I don't see them. I don't think they're here at all."

"Sh-h-h!"

"I'm leaving my money to my cat," said a bent old woman with a hearing aid in her ear. "I'm just sorry I won't get to see their faces."

The Colonel smiled at her as he nodded her back to her seat at the left front. Then he recognized a man sitting in the front row. "Mr. Saunders."

The man who arose was short, straight, and precise. "I would like to remind these ladies of the services of our legal aid department. We have had good luck in constructing un-unbreakable legal documents. A word of caution, however - the more far-fetched the legatee, though to be sure the more satisfying, the more likely the breaking of the will. There is only one certain way to prevent property from falling into the hands of those who have neither worked for it nor merited it - and that is to spend it.

"Personally, I am determined to spend on the good life every cent that I accumulated in a long and - you will pardon my lack of humility - distinguished career at the bar."

"Your personal life is your own concern, Mr. Saunders," the Colonel said, "but I must tell you, sir, that we are aware of how you spend your money and your time away from here. I do not recommend it to others nor do I approve of your presenting it to us as worthy of emulation. Indeed, I think you do our cause damage."

Mr. Saunders had not resumed his seat. He bowed and continued, "Each to his own tastes - I cite an effective method for keeping the younger generation in check. There are other ways of disposing of property irretrievably." He sat down.

John pulled Sally back from the doors. "Go to the car," he said. "Get out of here. Go back to the house and get our bags packed. Quick!"

"Mrs. Plummer?" the Colonel said.

Sally pulled away from John.

The familiar figure stood up at the front of the room. Now John could

identify beside her the gray head of Henry Plummer, turned now toward the plump face of his wife.

“We all remember,” Mrs. Plummer said calmly, “what a trial children are. What we may forget is that our children have children. I do my best not to let my daughter forget the torments she inflicted upon me when she was a child. We hide these things from them. We conceal the bitterness. They seldom suspect. And we take our revenge, if we are wise, by encouraging their children to be just as great a trial to their parents. We give them candy before meals. We encourage them to talk back to their parents. We build up their infant egos so that they will stand up for their childish rights. When their parents try to punish them, we stand between the child and the punishment. Fellow senior citizens, this is our revenge: that their parents will be as miserable as we were.”

“Mother! No!” Sally cried out.

The words and the youthful voice that spoke them rippled the audience like a stone tossed into a pond. Faces turned toward the back of the meeting room, faces with wrinkles and white hair and faded eyes, faces searching, near-sighted, faces disturbed, faces beginning to fear and to hate. Among them was one face John knew well, a face that had dissembled malice and masqueraded malevolence as devotion.

“Do as I told you!” John said violently. “Get out of here!”

For once in her life, Sally did as she was told. She ran down the hall, pushed her way through the big front doors, and was gone. John looked for something with which to bar the doors to the meeting room, but the hall was bare. He was turning back to the doors when he saw an oak cane in the corner. He caught it up and slipped it through the handles. Then he put his shoulder against the doors.

In the meeting room the gathering emotion was beginning to whip thin blood into a simulation of youthful vigor, and treble voices began to deepen as they shouted encouragement at those nearest the doors. “A spy!”

“Was it a woman?”

“A girl.”

“Let me get my hands on her!”

The first wave hit the doors. John was knocked off balance. He

pushed himself forward again, and again the surge of bodies against the other side forced him back. He dug in his feet and shoved. A sound of commotion added to the shouting in the meeting room. John heard something - or someone - fall.

The next time he was forced from the doors the cane bent. Again he pushed the doors shut; the cane straightened. At the same moment he felt a sharp pain across his back. He looked back. The Colonel was behind him, breathing hard, the glow of combat in his eyes and the cane in his hand upraised for another blow, like the hand of Abraham over Isaac.

John stepped back. In his hand he found the cane that had been thrust through the door handles. He raised it over his head as the Colonel struck again. The blow fell upon the cane. The Colonel drew back his cane and swung once more, and again his blow was parried, more by accident than skill. Then the doors burst open, and the wild old bodies were upon them.

John caught brief glimpses of flying white hair and ripped lace and spectacles worn awry. Canes and crutches were raised above him. He smelled lavender and bay rum mingled with the sweet-sour odor of sweat. He heard shrill voices, like the voices of children, cry out curses and maledictions, and he felt upon various parts of his body the blows of feeble fists, their bones scarcely padded, doing perhaps more damage to themselves than to him, though it seemed sufficient.

He went down quickly. Rather too quickly, he thought dazedly as he lay upon the floor, curled into a fetal position to avoid the stamping feet and kicks and makeshift clubs.

He kept waiting for it to be over, for consciousness to leave him, but most of the blows missed him, and in the confusion and the milling about, the object of the hatred was lost. John saw a corridor that led between bodies and legs through the doors that opened into the meeting room. He crawled by inches toward the room; eventually he found himself among the chairs. The commotion was behind him.

Cautiously he peered over the top of a fallen chair. He saw what he had overlooked before - a door behind the rostrum. It stood open to the night. That was how the Colonel, with instinctive strategy, had come up behind him, he thought, and he crept toward it and down the narrow steps behind the town hall.

For a moment he stood in the darkness assessing his injuries. He

was surprised: they were few, none serious. Perhaps tomorrow he would find bruises enough and a lump here and there and perhaps even a broken rib or two, but now there was only a little pain. He started to run.

He had been running in the darkness for a long time, not certain he was running in the right direction, not sure he knew what the right direction was, when a dark shape coasted up behind him. He dodged instinctively before he recognized the sound of the motor.

“John!” It was a voice he knew. “John?”

The Volkswagen was running without lights. John caught the door handle. The door came open. The car stopped. “Move over,” he said, out of breath. Sally climbed over the gear shift, and John slid into the bucket seat. He released the hand brake and pushed hard on the accelerator. The car plunged forward.

Only when they reached the highway did John speak again. “Is Johnny all right?”

“I think so,” Sally said. “But he’s got to see a doctor.”

“We’ll find a doctor in Orange Grove.”

“A young one.”

John wiped his nose on the back of his hand and looked at it. His hand was smeared with blood. “Damn!”

She pressed a tissue into his hand. “Was it bad?”

“Incredible!” He laughed harshly and said it again in a different tone. “Incredible. What a day! And what a night! But it’s over. And a lot of other things are over.”

Johnny was crying in the back seat.

“What do you mean?” Sally asked. “Hush, Johnny, it’s going to be all right.”

“Grammy!” Johnny moaned.

“The letters. Presents for people who don’t need anything. Worrying about what mother’s going to think...”

The car slowed as John looked back toward the peaceful town of Sunset Acres, sleeping now in the Florida night, and remembered the wide lawns and the broad porches, the brick streets and the slow time, and the old folks. "All over," he said again.

Johnny still was crying.

"Shut up, Johnny!" he said between his teeth and immediately felt guilty.

"John!" Sally said. "We mustn't ever be like that toward our son."

She wasn't referring just to what he had said, John knew. He glanced back toward the small figure huddled in the back seat. It wasn't over, he thought; it was beginning. "It's over," he said again, as if he could convince himself by repetition. Sally was silent. "Why don't you say something?" John asked.

"I keep thinking about how it used to be," she said. "He's my father. She's my mother. How can anything change that? You can't expect me to hate my own father and mother?"

It wasn't over. It would never be over. Even though the children sometimes escaped, the old folks always won: the children grew up, the young people became old folks.

The car speeded up and rushed through the night, the headlights carving a corridor through the darkness, a corridor that kept closing behind them. The corridor still was there, as real in back as it was revealing in front, and it could never be closed.