

The Night We Buried Road Dog

by Jack Cady

Jack Cady, F&SF, and Road Dog By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Jack Cady never looked like a stereotypical writer. He looked like a Pacific Northwest fisherman. He had an angular, weather-toughened face, which he accented with a beard but no mustache. His deep voice was authoritative, but his eyes were always kind.

And he was patient—oh, so very patient.

He had to be. When he sent me “The Night We Buried Road Dog,” he walked into the middle of a battle zone. I, the thirty-two-year-old new editor of *F&SF*, and Edward L. Ferman, the magazine’s former editor and the publisher who had hired me, were in the midst of a war.

I believe that novellas are the heart and soul of fantasy and science fiction at the short length. Ed didn’t like novellas at all—partly (mostly) because they cost so much and took up so much space in the magazine. Jack Cady’s “Road Dog,” which was how we referred to it in-house, was 30,000 words long—exactly half the length of an issue of the magazine.

I controlled content, but Ed controlled the purse strings. Every time I sent Ed a novella, I had to justify both the story’s length and its quality. Fortunately, I had an excellent track record. I edited a novella line for Pulphouse Publishing, the hardcover press I’d helped found, and most of the novellas in that line had been nominated for the major awards in the field.

I had an eye, and I knew it.

But Ed had different priorities. If we were going to publish novellas (and he wasn’t even certain of that), he wanted each novella to be worth the space it took in the magazine. In other words, it had to be better than every other story in the issue. Four to five times better, since it took the space of four to five stories. A novella from an unknown, like Jack Cady was in the sf field in those days, wouldn’t sell magazines, and so wasn’t worth

the money.

Valid arguments all. I've made similar ones when I've worn a publisher's hat. But "Road Dog" was something special—and I knew it.

"Road Dog" was one of the first novellas I received at *F&SF*. I loved the story. Ed hated it. So he sat on it—for months—while I fired off letters explaining the situation to Jack Cady, who graciously allowed me to champion his story because he wanted it in the pages of *F&SF*.

Eventually, Ed gave up. He had learned over the course of our working relationship that I could outlast him. (He didn't know how many letters I wrote to brilliant writers, asking to hang onto their novellas for another month.)

"Road Dog" became the cover story for the January 1993 issue.

Then the buzz started.... "Road Dog," reviewers said, was the story of the year. It won the Nebula and World Fantasy awards, among others (a few of them mainstream).

Fast forward to spring, 2008. Jack Cady—one of the kindest, most gentle souls I've ever met—is no longer with us. I haven't edited a word of someone else's fiction for more than eleven years.

Then Gordon Van Gelder, the publisher and editor of *F&SF*, sends me an email. Would I pick a story for the sixtieth anniversary that represented my tenure as editor?

Imagine my trepidation as I wrote back: *Would "The Night We Buried Road Dog" work? I realize it's very, very long.*

If Gordon had said no, I would have picked another story. A shorter story.... But Gordon didn't ask for another story. Instead, he said he had hoped I would pick "Road Dog." He felt it best represented my years at *F&SF*.

He wanted "Road Dog" for the very reason I did. Quite frankly, I believe "Road Dog" is one of the best stories I've ever

read, let alone had a small hand in.

How small was my hand? If I remember correctly, I never asked Jack for a revision. I'm not even sure the manuscript received much copyediting. All I did was recognize an excellent story and champion it before my publisher, whose considerations (money and space) differed from mine.

All of the credit for "Road Dog," however, goes to Jack Cady. Not just for his spectacular writing, but also for his patience.

I miss Jack. He will never write another new story—and that's a cause for sadness.

But he wrote some spectacular stories during his all-too-brief career.

Fortunately, we can share my favorite right here. Those of you who are reading "Road Dog" for the first time, enjoy.... Those of you who read it more than fifteen years ago, read it again. It's one of those rare stories that gets better with age.

* * * *

The Night We Buried Road Dog by Jack Cady

I.

Brother Jesse buried his '47 Hudson back in '61, and the roads got just that much more lonesome. Highway 2 across north Montana still wailed with engines as reservation cars blew past; and it lay like a tunnel of darkness before headlights of big rigs. Tandems pounded, and the smart crack of downshifts rapped across grassland as trucks swept past the bars at every crossroad. The state put up metal crosses to mark the sites of fatal accidents. Around the bars, those crosses sprouted like thickets.

That Hudson was named Miss Molly, and it logged 220,000 miles while never burning a clutch. Through the years, it wore into the respectable look that comes to old machinery. It was rough as a cob, cracked glass on one side, and primer over dents. It had the tough-and-ready look of a hunting hound about its business. I was a good deal younger then, but not so young that I was fearless. The burial had something to do with mystery,

and Brother Jesse did his burying at midnight.

Through fluke or foresight, Brother Jesse had got hold of eighty acres of rangeland that wasn't worth a shake. There wasn't enough of it to run stock, and you couldn't raise anything on it except a little hell. Jesse stuck an old house trailer out there, stacked hay around it for insulation in Montana winters, and hauled in just enough water to suit him. By the time his Hudson died, he was ready to go into trade.

"Jed," he told me the night of the burial, "I'm gonna make myself some history, despite this damn Democrat administration." Over beside the house trailer, the Hudson sat looking like it was about ready to get off the mark in a road race, but the poor thing was a goner. Moonlight sprang from between spring clouds, and to the westward the peaks of mountains glowed from snow and moonlight. Along Highway 2, some hot rock wound second gear on an old flathead Ford. You could hear the valves begin to float.

"Some little darlin' done stepped on that boy's balls," Jesse said about the driver. "I reckon that's why he's looking for a ditch." Jesse sighed and sounded sad. "At least we got a nice night. I couldn't stand a winter funeral."

"Road Dog?" I said about the driver of the Ford, which shows just how young I was at the time.

"It ain't The Dog," Jesse told me. "The Dog's a damn survivor."

You never knew where Brother Jesse got his stuff, and you never really knew if he was anybody's brother. The only time I asked, he said, "I come from a close-knit family such as your own," and that made no sense. My own father died when I was twelve, and my mother married again when I turned seventeen. She picked up and moved to Wisconsin.

No one even knew when, or how, Jesse got to Montana territory. We just looked up one day, and there he was, as natural as if he'd always been here, and maybe he always had.

His eighty acres began to fill up. Old printing presses stood gap-mouthed like spinsters holding conversation. A salvaged greenhouse served for storing dog food, engine parts, chromium hair dryers from 1930s beauty shops, dime-store pottery, blades for hay cutters, binder twine, an old gas-powered crosscut saw, seats from a school bus, and a bunch of other stuff not near as useful.

A couple of tabbies lived in that greenhouse, but the Big Cat stood outside. It was an old D6 bulldozer with a shovel, and Jesse stoked it up from time to time. Mostly it just sat there. In summers, it provided shade for Jesse's dogs: Potato was brown and fat and not too bright, while Chip was little and fuzzy. Sometimes they rode with Jesse, and sometimes stayed home. Me or Mike Tarbush fed them. When anything big happened, you could count on those two dogs to get underfoot. Except for me, they were the only ones who attended the funeral.

"If we gotta do it," Jesse said mournfully, "we gotta." He wound up the Cat, turned on the headlights, and headed for the grave site, which was an embankment overlooking Highway 2. Back in those days, Jesse's hair still shone black, and it was even blacker in the darkness. It dangled around a face that carried an Indian forehead and a Scotsman's nose. Denim stretched across most of the six feet of him, and he wasn't rangy; he was thin. He had feet to match his height, and his hands seemed bigger than his feet; but the man could skin a Cat.

I stood in moonlight and watched him work. A little puff of flame dwelt in the stack of the bulldozer. It flashed against the darkness of those distant mountains. It burbled hot in the cold spring moonlight. Jesse made rough cuts pretty quick, moved a lot of soil, then started getting delicate. He shaped and reshaped that grave. He carved a little from one side, backed the dozer, found his cut not satisfactory. He took a spoonful of earth to straighten things, then fussed with the grade leading into the grave. You could tell he wanted a slight elevation, so the Hudson's nose would be sniffing toward the road. Old Potato dog had a hound's ears but not a hound's good sense. He started baying at the moon.

It came to me that I was scared. Then it came to me that I was scared most of the time anyway. I was nineteen, and folks talked about having a war across the sea. I didn't want to hear about it. On top of the war talk, women were driving me crazy: the ones who said "no" and the ones who said "yes." It got downright mystifying just trying to figure out which was worse. At nineteen, it's hard to know how to act. There were whole weeks when I could pass myself off as a hellion, then something would go sour. I'd get hit by a streak of conscience and start acting like a missionary.

"Jed," Jesse told me from the seat of the dozer, "go rig a tow on Miss Molly." In the headlights the grave now looked like a garage dug into the side of that little slope. Brother Jesse eased the Cat back in there to fuss with the grade. I stepped slow toward the Hudson, wiggled under, and fetched the towing cable around the frame. Potato howled. Chip danced

like a fuzzy fury, and started chewing on my boot like he was trying to drag me from under the Hudson. I was on my back trying to kick Chip away and secure the cable. Then I like to died from fright.

Nothing else in the world sounds anywhere near like a Hudson starter. It's a combination of whine and clatter and growl. If I'd been dead a thousand years, you could stand me right up with a Hudson starter. There's threat in that sound. There's also the promise that things can get pretty rowdy, pretty quick.

The starter went off. The Hudson jiggled. In the one-half second it took to get from under that car, I thought of every bad thing I ever did in my life. I was headed for Hell, certain sure. By the time I was on my feet, there wasn't an ounce of blood showing anywhere on me. When the old folks say "white as a sheet," they're talking about a guy under a Hudson.

Brother Jesse climbed from the Cat and gave me a couple of shakes.

"She ain't dead," I stuttered. "The engine turned over. Miss Molly's still thinking speedy." From Highway 2 came the wail of Mike Tarbush's '48 Roadmaster. Mike loved and cussed that car. It always flattened out at around eighty.

"There's still some sap left in the batt'ry," Jesse said about the Hudson. "You probably caused a short." He dropped the cable around the hitch on the dozer. "Steer her," he said.

The steering wheel still felt alive, despite what Jesse said. I crouched behind the wheel as the Hudson got dragged toward the grave. Its brakes locked twice, but the towing cable held. The locked brakes caused the car to sideslip. Each time, Jesse cussed. Cold spring moonlight made the shadowed grave look like a cave of darkness.

The Hudson bided its time. We got it lined up, then pushed it backward into the grave. The hunched front fenders spread beside the snarly grille. The front bumper was the only thing about that car that still showed clean and uncluttered. I could swear Miss Molly moved in the darkness of the grave, about to come charging onto Highway 2. Then she seemed to make some kind of decision, and sort of settled down. Jesse gave the eulogy.

"This here car never did nothing bad," he said. "I must have seen a million crap crates, but this car wasn't one of them. She had a second gear like Hydra-Matic, and you could wind to seventy before you dropped to

third. There wasn't no top end to her—at least I never had the guts to find it. This here was a hundred-mile-an-hour car on a bad night, and God knows what on a good'n." From Highway 2, you could hear the purr of Matt Simons's '56 Dodge, five speeds, what with the overdrive, and Matt was scorching.

Potato howled long and mournful. Chip whined. Jesse scratched his head, trying to figure a way to end the eulogy. It came to him like a blessing. "I can't prove it," he said, "cause no one could. But I expect this car has passed The Road Dog maybe a couple of hundred times." He made like he was going to cross himself, then remembered he was Methodist. "Rest in peace," he said, and he said it with eyes full of tears. "There ain't that many who can comprehend The Dog." He climbed back on the Cat and began to fill the grave.

Next day, Jesse mounded the grave with real care, He erected a marker, although the marker was more like a little signboard:

1947-1961

Hudson coupe—"Molly"

220,023 miles on straight eight cylinder

Died of busted crankshaft

Beloved in the memory of

Jesse Still

Montana roads are long and lonesome, and Highway 2 is loneliest. You pick it up over on the Idaho border where the land is mountains. Bear and cougar still live pretty good, and beaver still build dams. The highway runs beside some pretty lakes. Canada is no more than a jump away; it hangs at your left shoulder when you're headed east.

And can you roll those mountains? Yes, yes. It's two-lane all the way across, and twisty in the hills. From Libby, you ride down to Kalispell, then pop back north. The hills last till the Blackfoot reservation. It's rangeland into Cut Bank, then to Havre. That's just about the center of the state.

Just let the engine howl from town to town. The road goes through a dozen, then swings south. And there you are at Glasgow and the river. By Wolf Point, you're in cropland, and it's flat from there until Chicago.

I almost hate to tell about this road, because easterners may want to come and visit. Then they'll do something dumb at a blind entry. The state will erect more metal crosses. Enough folks die up here already. And it's sure no place for rice grinders, or tacky Swedish station wagons, or high-priced German crap crates. This was always a V-8 road, and V-12 if you had 'em. In the old, old days there were even a few V-16s up here. The top end on those things came when friction stripped the tires from too much speed.

Speed or not, brakes sure sounded as cars passed Miss Molly's grave. Pickup trucks fishtailed as men snapped them to the shoulder. The men would sit in their trucks for a minute, scratching their heads like they couldn't believe what they'd just seen. Then they'd climb from the truck, walk back to the grave, and read the marker. About half of them would start holding their sides. One guy even rolled around on the ground, he was laughing so much.

"These old boys are laughing now," Brother Jesse told me, "but I predict a change in attitude. I reckon they'll come around before first snowfall."

With his car dead, Jesse had to find a set of wheels. He swapped an old hay rake and a gang of discs for a '49 Chevrolet.

"It wouldn't pull the doorknob off a cathouse," he told me. "It's just to get around in while I shop."

The whole deal was going to take some time. Knowing Jesse, I figured he'd go through half a dozen trades before finding something comfortable. And I was right.

He first showed up in an old Packard hearse that once belonged to a funeral home in Billings. He'd swapped the Chev for the hearse, plus a gilt-covered coffin so gaudy it wouldn't fit anybody but a radio preacher. He swapped the hearse to Sam Winder, who aimed to use it for hunting trips. Sam's dogs wouldn't go anywhere near the thing. Sam opened all the windows and the back door, then took the hearse up to speed trying to blow out all the ghosts. The dogs still wouldn't go near it. Sam said, "To hell with it," and pushed it into a ravine. Every rabbit and fox and varmint in that ravine came bailing out, and nobody has gone in there ever since.

Jesse traded the coffin to Old Man Jefferson, who parked the thing in his woodshed. Jefferson was supposed to be on his last legs, but figured

he wasn't ever, never, going to die if his poor body knew it would be buried in that monstrosity. It worked for several years, too, until a bad winter came along, and he split it up for firewood. But we still remember him.

Jesse came out of those trades with a '47 Pontiac and a Model T. He sold the Model T to a collector, then traded the Pontiac and forty bales of hay for a '53 Studebaker. He swapped the Studebaker for a ratty pickup and all the equipment in a restaurant that went bust. He peddled the equipment to some other poor fellow who was hell-bent to go bust in the restaurant business. Then he traded the pickup for a motorcycle, plus a '51 Plymouth that would just about get out of its own way. By the time he peddled both of them, he had his pockets full of cash and was riding shanks' mare.

"Jed," he told me, "let's you and me go to the big city." He was pretty happy, but I remembered how scared I'd been at the funeral. I admit to being skittish.

From the center of north Montana, there weren't a championship lot of big cities. West was Seattle, which was sort of rainy and mythological. North was Winnipeg, a cow town. South was Salt Lake City. To the east....

"The hell with it," Brother Jesse said. "We'll go to Minneapolis."

It was about a thousand miles. Maybe fifteen hours, what with the roads. You could sail Montana and North Dakota, but those Minnesota cops were humorless.

I was shoving a sweet old '53 DeSoto. It had a good bit under the bonnet, but the suspension would make a grown man cry. It was a beautiful beast, though. Once you got up to speed, that front end would track like a cat. The upholstery was like brand-new. The radio worked. There wasn't a scratch or ding on it. I had myself a banker's car, and there I was, only nineteen.

"We may want to loiter," Jesse told me. "Plan on a couple of overnights."

I had a job, but told myself that I was due for a vacation; and so screw it. Brother Jesse put down food for the tabbies and whistled up the dogs. Potato hopped into the back seat in his large, dumb way. He looked expectant. Chip sort of hesitated. He made a couple of jumps straight up, then backed down and started barking. Jesse scooped him up and shoved him in with old Potato dog.

“The upholstery,” I hollered. It was the first time I ever stood up to Jesse.

Jesse got an old piece of tarp to put under the dogs. “Pee, and you’re a goner,” he told Potato.

We drove steady through the early-summer morning. The DeSoto hung in around eighty, which was no more than you’d want, considering the suspension. Rangeland gave way to cropland. The radio plugged away with western music, beef prices, and an occasional preacher saying, “Grace” and “Gimmie.” Highway 2 rolled straight ahead, sometimes rising gradual, so that cars appeared like rapid-running spooks out of the blind entries. There’d be a little flash of sunlight from a windshield. Then a car would appear over the rise, and usually it was wailing.

We came across a hell of a wreck just beyond Havre. A new Mercury station wagon rolled about fifteen times across the landscape. There were two nice-dressed people and two children. Not one of them ever stood a chance. They rattled like dice in a drum. I didn’t want to see what I was looking at.

Bad wrecks always made me sick, but not sick to puking. That would not have been manly. I prayed for those people under my breath and got all shaky. We pulled into a crossroads bar for a sandwich and a beer. The dogs hopped out. Plenty of hubcaps were nailed on the wall of the bar. We took a couple of them down and filled them with water from an outside tap. The dogs drank and peed.

“I’ve attended a couple myself,” Brother Jesse said about the wreck. “Drove a Terraplane off a bridge back in ‘53. Damn near drowned.” Jesse wasn’t about to admit to feeling bad. He just turned thoughtful.

“This here is a big territory,” he said to no one in particular, “But you can get across her if you hustle. I reckon that Merc was loaded wrong, or blew a tire.” Beyond the windows of the bar, eight metal crosses lined the highway. Somebody had tied red plastic roses on one of them. Another one had plastic violets and forget-me-nots.

We lingered a little. Jesse talked to the guy at the bar, and I ran a rack at the pool table. Then Jesse bought a six-pack while I headed for the can. Since it was still early in the day, the can was clean; all the last night’s pee and spit mopped from the floor. Somebody had just painted the walls. There wasn’t a thing written on them, except that Road Dog had signed in.

Road Dog

How are things in Glocca Mora?

His script was spidery and perfect, like an artist who drew a signature. I touched the paint, and it was still tacky. We had missed The Dog by only a few minutes.

* * * *

Road Dog was like Jesse in a way. Nobody could say exactly when he first showed up, but one day he was there. We started seeing the name "Road Dog" written in what Matt Simons called "a fine Spencerian hand." There was always a message attached, and Matt called them "cryptic." The signature and messages flashed from the walls of cans in bars, truck stops, and roadside cafés through four states.

We didn't know Road Dog's route at first. Most guys were tied to work or home or laziness. In a year or two, though, Road Dog's trail got mapped. His fine hand showed up all along Highway 2, trailed east into North Dakota, dropped south through South Dakota, then ran back west across Wyoming. He popped north through Missoula and climbed the state until he connected with Highway 2 again. Road Dog, whoever he was, ran a constant square of road that covered roughly two thousand miles.

Sam Winder claimed Road Dog was a Communist who taught social studies at U. of Montana. "Because," Sam claimed, "that kind of writing comes from Europe. That writing ain't U.S.A."

Mike Tarbush figured Road Dog was a retired cartoonist from a newspaper. He figured nobody could spot The Dog because The Dog slipped past us in a Nash, or some other old-granny car.

Brother Jesse suggested that Road Dog was a truck driver, or maybe a gypsy, but sounded like he knew better.

Matt Simons supposed Road Dog was a traveling salesman with a flair for advertising. Matt based his notion on one of the cryptic messages:

Road Dog

Ringling Bros. Barnum and Toothpaste

I didn't figure anything, Road Dog stood in my imagination as the heart and soul of Highway 2. When night was deep and engines blazed, I could hang over the wheel and run down that tunnel of two-lane into the night.

The nighttime road is different than any other thing. Ghosts rise around the metal crosses, and ghosts hitchhike along the wide berm. All the mysteries of the world seem normal after dark. If imagination shows dead thumbs aching for a ride, those dead folk only prove the hot and spermy goodness of life. I'd overtake some taillights, grab the other lane, and blow doors off some party-goer who tried to stay out of the ditches. A man can sing and cuss and pray. The miles fill with dreams of power, and women, and happy, happy times.

Road Dog seemed part of that romance. He was the very soul of mystery, a guy who looked at the dark heart of the road and still flew free enough to make jokes and write that fine hand.

In daytime it was different, though. When I saw Road Dog signed in on the wall of that can, it just seemed like a real bad sign.

The guy who owned the bar had seen no one. He claimed he'd been in the back room putting bottles in his cold case. The Dog had come and gone like a spirit.

Jesse and I stood in the parking lot outside the bar. Sunlight lay earthy and hot across the new crops. A little puff of dust rose from a side road. It advanced real slow, so you could tell it was a farm tractor. All around us meadowlarks and tanagers were whooping it up.

"We'll likely pass him," Jesse said, "if we crowd a little." Jesse pretended he didn't care, but anyone would. We loaded the dogs, and even hung the hubcaps back up where we got them, because it was what a gentleman would do. The DeSoto acted as eager as any DeSoto could. We pushed the top end, which was eighty-nine, and maybe ninety-two downhill. At that speed, brakes don't give you much, so you'd better trust your steering and your tires.

If we passed The Dog we didn't know it. He might have parked in one of the towns, and of course we dropped a lot of revs passing through towns, that being neighborly. What with a little loafing, some pee stops, and general fooling around, we did not hit Minneapolis until a little after midnight. When we checked into a motel on the strip, Potato was sleepy and grumpy. Chip looked relieved.

“Don’t fall in love with that bed,” Jesse told me. “Some damn salesman is out there waitin’ to do us in. It pays to start early.”

Car shopping with Jesse turned out as fascinating as anybody could expect. At 7:00 a.m. we cruised the lots. Cars stood in silent rows like advertising men lined up for group pictures. It being Minneapolis, we saw a lot of high-priced iron. Cadillacs and Packards and Lincolns sat beside Buick convertibles, hemi Chryslers, and Corvettes (“Nice Cars,” Jesse said about the Corvettes, “but no room to ‘em. You couldn’t carry more than one sack of feed.”). Hudsons and Studebakers hunched along the back rows. On one lot was something called “Classic Lane.” A Model A stood beside a ‘37 International pickup. A ‘29 Cord sat like a tombstone, which it was, because it had no engine. But, glory be, beside the Cord nestled a ‘39 LaSalle coupe just sparkling with threat. That LaSalle might have snookered Jesse, except something highly talented sat buried deep in the lot.

It was the last of the fast and elegant Lincolns, a ‘54 coupe as snarly as any man could want. The ‘53 model had taken the Mexican Road Race. The ‘54 was a refinement. After that the marque went downhill. It started building cars for businessmen and rich grannies.

Jesse walked round and round the Lincoln, which looked like it was used to being cherished. Matchless and scratchless, it was a little less than fire-engine red, with a white roof and a grille that could shrug off a cow. That Linc was a solid set of fixings. Jesse got soft lights in his eyes. This was no Miss Molly, but this was Miss somebody. There were a lot of crap crates running out there, but this Linc wasn’t one of them.

“You prob’ly can’t even get parts for the damn thing,” Jesse murmured, and you could tell he was already scrapping with a salesman. He turned his back on the Lincoln. “We’ll catch a bite to eat,” he said. “This may take a couple days.”

I felt sort of bubbly. “The Dog ain’t gonna like this,” I told Jesse.

“The Dog is gonna love it,” he said. “Me and The Dog knows that road.”

By the time the car lots opened at 9:00 a.m., Jesse had a trader’s light in his eyes. About all that needs saying is that never before or since did I ever see a used-car salesman cry.

The poor fellow never had a chance. He stood in his car lot most of

the day while me and Jesse went through every car lot on the strip. We waved to him from a sweet little '57 Cad, and we cruised past real smooth in a mama-san '56 Imperial. We kicked tires on anything sturdy while he was watching, and we never even got to his lot until fifteen minutes before closing. Jesse and I climbed from my DeSoto. Potato and Chip tailed after us.

"I always know when I get to Minneapolis," Jesse said to me, but loud enough the salesman could just about hear. "My woman wants to lay a farmer, and my dogs start pukin'." When we got within easy hearing range, Jesse's voice got humble. "I expect this fella can help a cowboy in a fix."

I followed, experiencing considerable admiration. In two sentences, Jesse had his man confused.

Potato was dumb enough that he trotted right up to the Lincoln. Chip sat and panted, pretending indifference. Then he ambled over to a ragged-out Pontiac and peed on the tire. "I must be missing something," Jesse said to the salesman, "because that dog has himself a dandy nose." He looked at the Pontiac. "This thing got an engine?"

We all conversed for the best part of an hour. Jesse refused to even look at the Lincoln. He sounded real serious about the LaSalle, to the point of running it around a couple of blocks. It was a darling. It had ceramic-covered manifolds to protect against heat and rust. It packed a long-stroke V-8 with enough torque to bite rubber in second gear. My DeSoto was a pretty thing, but until that LaSalle I never realized that my car was a total pussycat. When we left the lot, the salesman looked sad. He was late for supper.

"Stay with what you've got," Jesse told me as he climbed in my DeSoto. "The clock has run out on that LaSalle. Let a collector have it. I hate it when something good dies for lack of parts."

I wondered if he was thinking of Miss Molly.

"Because," Jesse said, and kicked the tire on a silly little Volkswagen, "the great, good cars are dying. I blame it on the Germans."

Next day we bought the Lincoln and made the salesman feel like one proud pup. He figured he foisted something off on Jesse that Jesse didn't want. He was so stuck on himself that he forgot that he had asked a thousand dollars, and come away with \$550. He even forgot that his eyes were swollen, and that maybe he crapped his pants.

We went for a test drive, but only after Jesse and I crawled around under the Linc. A little body lead lumped in the left rear fender, but the front end stood sound. Nobody had pumped any sawdust into the differential. We found no water in the oil, or oil in the water. The salesman stood around, admiring his shoeshine. He was one of those easterners who can't help talking down to people, especially when he's trying to be nice. I swear he wore a white tie with little red ducks on it. That Minnesota sunlight made his red hair blond and his face pop with freckles.

Jesse drove real quiet until he found an interesting stretch of road. The salesman sat beside him. Me and Potato and Chip hunkered in the backseat. Chip looked sort of nauseated, but Potato was pretty happy.

"I'm afraid," Jesse said, regretful, "that this thing is gonna turn out to be a howler. A fella gets a few years on him, and he don't want a screamy car." Brother Jesse couldn't have been much more than thirty, but he tugged on his nose and ears like he was ancient. "I sure hope," he said, real mournful, "that nobody stuck a boot in any of these here tires." Then he poured on some coal.

There was a most satisfying screech. That Linc took out like a roadrunner in heat. The salesman's head snapped backward, and his shoulders dug into the seat. Potato gave a happy, happy woof and stuck his nose out the open window. I felt like yelling, "Hosanna," but knew enough to keep my big mouth shut. The Linc shrugged off a couple of cars that were conservatively motoring. It wheeled past a hay truck as the tires started humming. The salesman's freckles began to stand up like warts while the airstream howled. Old Potato kept his nose sticking through the open window, and the wind kept drying it. Potato was so damn dumb he tried to lick it wet while his nose stayed in the airstream. His tongue blew sideways.

"It ain't nothing but speed," Jesse complained. "Look at this here steering." He juggled the wheel considerable, which at ninety got even more considerable. The salesman's tie blew straight backward. The little red ducks matched his freckles. "Jee-sus-Chee-sus," he said. "Eight hundred, and slow down." He braced himself against the dash.

When it hit the century mark, the Linc developed a little float in the front end. I expect all of us were thinking about the tires.

You could tell Jesse was jubilant, The Linc still had some pedal left.

"I'm gettin' old," Jesse hollered above the wind. "This ain't no car for

an old man.”

“Seven hundred,” the salesman said. “And Mother of God, slow it down.”

“Five-fifty,” Jesse told him, and dug the pedal down one more notch.

“You got it,” the salesman hollered. His face twisted up real teary. Then Potato got all grateful and started licking the guy on the back of the neck.

So Jesse cut the speed and bought the Linc. He did it diplomatic, pretending he was sorry he'd made the offer. That was kind of him. After all, the guy was nothing but a used-car salesman.

* * * *

We did a second night in that motel. The Linc and DeSoto sat in an all-night filling station. Lube, oil change, and wash, because we were riding high. Jesse had a heap of money left over. In the morning, we got new jeans and shirts, so as to ride along like gentlemen.

“We'll go back through South Dakota,” Jesse told me. “There's a place I've heard about.”

“What are we looking for?”

“We're checking on The Dog,” Jesse told me, and would say no more.

We eased west to Bowman, just under the North Dakota line. Jesse sort of leaned into it, just taking joy from the whole occasion. I followed along as best the DeSoto could. Potato rode with Jesse, and Chip sat on the front seat beside me. Chip seemed rather easier in his mind.

A roadside café hunkered among tall trees. It didn't even have a neon sign. Real old-fashioned.

“I heard of this place all my life,” Jesse said as he climbed from the Linc. “This here is the only outhouse in the world with a guest registry.” He headed toward the rear of the café.

I tailed along, and Jesse, he was right. It was a palatial privy built like a little cottage. The men's side was a three-holer. There was enough room

for a stand-up desk. On the desk was one of those old-fashioned business ledgers like you used to see in banks.

“They’re supposed to have a slew of these inside,” Jesse said about the register as he flipped pages. “All the way back to the early days.”

Some spirit of politeness seemed to take over when you picked up that register. There was hardly any bad talk. I read a few entries:

* * * *

On this site, May 16th, 1961, James John Johnson (John-John)
cussed hell out of his truck.

* * * *

I came, I saw, I kinda liked it.—Bill Samuels, Tulsa

* * * *

This place *does* know squat.—Pauley Smith, Ogden

* * * *

This South Dakota ain’t so bad,

but I sure got the blues,

I’m working in Tacoma,

‘cause my kids all need new shoes.—Sad George

* * * *

Brother Jesse flipped through the pages. “I’m even told,” he said, “that Teddy Roosevelt crapped here. This is a fine old place.” He sort of hummed as he flipped. “Uh, huh,” he said, “The Dog done made his pee spot.” He pointed to a page:

Road Dog

Run and run as fast as you can

you can’t catch me—I’m the Gingerbread Man.

Jesse just grinned. "He's sorta upping the ante, ain't he? You reckon this is getting serious?" Jesse acted like he knew what he was talking about, but I sure didn't.

* * * *

II.

We didn't know, as we headed home, that Jesse's graveyard business was about to take off. That wouldn't change him, though. He'd almost always had a hundred dollars in his jeans anyway, and was usually a happy man. What changed him was Road Dog and Miss Molly.

The trouble started a while after we crossed the Montana line. Jesse ran ahead in the Lincoln, and I tagged behind in my DeSoto. We drove Highway 2 into a western sunset. It was one of those magic summers where rain sweeps in from British Columbia just regular enough to keep things growing. Rabbits get fat and foolish, and foxes put on weight. Rattlesnakes come out of ditches to cross the sun-hot road. It's not sporting to run over their middles. You have to take them in the head. Redwings perch on fence posts, and magpies flash black and white from the berm, where they scavenge road kills.

We saw a hell of a wreck just after Wolf Point. A guy in an old Kaiser came over the back of a rise and ran under a tanker truck that burned. Smoke rose black as a plume of crows, and we saw it five miles away. By the time we got there, the truck driver stood in the middle of the road, all white and shaking. The guy in the Kaiser sat behind the wheel. It was fearful to see how fast fire can work, and just terrifying to see bones hanging over a steering wheel. I remember thinking the guy no doubt died before any fire started, and we were feeling more than he was.

That didn't help. I said a prayer under my breath. The truck driver wasn't to blame, but he took it hard as a Presbyterian. Jesse tried to comfort him, without much luck. The road melted and stank and began to burn. Nobody was drinking, but it was certain sure we were all more sober than we'd ever been in our lives. Two deputies showed up. Cars drifted in easy, because of the smoke. In a couple of hours there were probably twenty cars lined up on either side of the wreck.

"He must of been asleep or drunk," Jesse said about the driver of the Kaiser. "How in hell can a man run under a tanker truck?"

When the cops reopened the road, night hovered over the plains. Nobody cared to run much over sixty, even beneath a bright moon. It seemed like a night to be superstitious, a night when there was a deer or pronghorn out there just ready to jump into your headlights. It wasn't a good night to drink, or shoot pool, or mess around in strange bars. It was a time for being home with your woman, if you had one.

On most nights, ghosts do not show up beside the metal crosses, and they sure don't show up in owl light. Ghosts stand out on the darkest, moonless nights, and only then when bars are closed and the only thing open is the road.

I never gave it a thought. I chased Jesse's taillights, which on that Lincoln were broad, up-and-down slashes in the dark. Chip sat beside me, sad and solemn. I rubbed his ears to perk him, but he just laid down and snuffled. Chip was sensitive. He knew I felt bad over that wreck.

The first ghost showed up on the left berm and fizzled before the headlights. It was a lady ghost, and a pretty old one, judging from her long white hair and long white dress. She flicked on and off in just a flash, so maybe it was a road dream. Chip was so depressed he didn't even notice, and Jesse didn't, either. His steering and his brakes didn't wave to me.

Everything stayed straight for another ten miles, then a whole peck of ghosts stood on the right berm. A bundle of crosses shone all silvery white in the headlights. The ghosts melted into each other. You couldn't tell how many, but you could tell they were expectant. They looked like people lined up for a picture show. Jesse never gave a sign he saw them. I told myself to get straight. We hadn't had much sleep in the past two nights, and did some drinking the night before. We'd rolled near two thousand miles.

Admonishing seemed to work. Another twenty minutes passed, maybe thirty, and nothing happened. Wind chased through the open windows of the DeSoto, and the radio gave mostly static. I kicked off my boots because that helps you stay awake, the bottoms of the feet being sensitive. Then a single ghost showed up on the right-hand berm, and boy-howdy.

Why anybody would laugh while being dead has got to be a puzzle. This ghost was tall, with Indian hair like Jesse's, and I could swear he looked like Jesse, the spitting image. This ghost was jolly. He clapped his hands and danced. Then he gave me the old road sign for "roll 'em," his hand circling in the air as he danced. The headlights penetrated him, showed tall grass solid at the roadside, and instead of legs he stood on a

column of mist. Still, he was dancing.

It wasn't road dreams. It was hallucination. The nighttime road just fills with things seen or partly seen. When too much scary stuff happens, it's time to pull her over.

I couldn't do it, though. Suppose I pulled over, and suppose it wasn't hallucination? I recall thinking that a man don't ordinarily care for preachers until he needs one. It seemed like me and Jesse were riding through the Book of Revelations. I dropped my speed, then flicked my lights a couple times. Jesse paid it no attention, and then Chip got peculiar.

He didn't bark; he chirped. He stood up on the front seat, looking out the back window, and his paws trembled. He shivered, chirped, shivered, and went chirp, chirp, chirp. Headlights in back of us were closing fast.

I've been closed on plenty of times by guys looking for a ditch. Headlights have jumped out of night and fog and mist when nobody should be pushing forty. I've been overtaken by drunks and suiciders. No set of headlights ever came as fast as the ones that began to wink in the mirrors. This Highway 2 is a quick, quick road, but it's not the salt flats of Utah. The crazy man behind me was trying to set a new land speed record.

Never confuse an idiot. I stayed off the brakes and coasted, taking off speed and signaling my way onto the berm. The racer could have my share of the road. I didn't want any part of that boy's troubles. Jesse kept pulling away as I slowed. It seemed like he didn't even see the lights. Chip chirped, then sort of rolled down on the floorboards and cried.

For ninety seconds, I feared being dead. For one second, I figured it already happened. Wind banged the DeSoto sideways. Wind whooped, the way it does in winter. The headlights blew past. What showed was the curve of a Hudson fender—the kind of curve you'd recognize if you'd been dead a million years—and what showed was the little, squinchy shapes of a Hudson's taillights; and what showed was the slanty doorpost like a nail running kitty-corner; and what showed was slivers of reflection from cracked glass on the rider's side; and what sounded was the drumbeat of a straight-eight engine whanging like a locomotive gone wild; the thrump, bumpa, thrum of a crankshaft whipping in its bed. The slaunch-forward form of Miss Molly wailed, and showers of sparks blew from the tailpipe as Miss Molly rocketed.

Chip was not the only one howling. My voice rose high as the howl of Miss Molly. We all sang it out together, while Jesse cruised three, maybe

four miles ahead. It wasn't two minutes before Miss Molly swept past that Linc like it was foundationed in cement. Sparks showered like the Fourth of July, and Jesse's brake lights looked pale beside the fireworks. The Linc staggered against wind as Jesse headed for the berm. Wind smashed against my DeSoto.

Miss Molly's taillights danced as she did a jig up the road, and then they winked into darkness as Miss Molly topped a rise, or disappeared. The night went darker than dark. A cloud scudded out of nowhere and blocked the moon.

Alongside the road the dancing ghost showed up in my headlights, and I could swear it was Jesse. He laughed like at a good joke, but he gave the old road sign for "slow it down," his hand palm down like he was patting an invisible pup. It seemed sound advice, and I blamed near liked him. After Miss Molly, a happy ghost seemed downright companionable.

"Shitfire," said Jesse, and that's all he said for the first five minutes after I pulled in behind him. I climbed from the DeSoto and walked to the Linc. Old Potato dog sprawled on the seat in a dead faint, and Jesse rubbed his ears trying to warm him back to consciousness. Jesse sat over the wheel like a man who had just met Jesus. His hand touched gentle on Potato's ears, and his voice sounded reverent. Brother Jesse's conversion wasn't going to last, but at the time it was just beautiful. He had the lights of salvation in his eyes, and his skinny shoulders weren't shaking too much. "I miss my c'har," he muttered finally, and blinked. He wasn't going to cry if he could help. "She's trying to tell me something," he whispered. "Let's find a bar. Miss Molly's in car heaven, certain sure."

We pulled away, found a bar, and parked. We drank some beer and slept across the car seats. Nobody wanted to go back on that road.

* * * *

When we woke to a morning hot and clear, Potato's fur had turned white. It didn't seem to bother him much, but, for the rest of his life, he was a lot more thoughtful.

"Looks like mashed Potato," Jesse said, but he wasn't talking a whole lot. We drove home like a couple of old ladies. Guys came scorching past, cussing at our granny speed. We figured they could get mad and stay mad, or get mad and get over it. We made it back to Jesse's place about two in the afternoon.

A couple of things happened quick. Jesse parked beside his house trailer, and the front end fell out of the Lincoln. The right side went down, thump, and the right front tire sagged. Jesse turned even whiter than me, and I was bloodless. We had posted over a hundred miles an hour in that thing. Somehow, when we crawled around underneath inspecting it, we missed something. My shoulders and legs shook so hard I could barely get out of the DeSoto. Chip was polite. He just yelped with happiness about being home, but he didn't trot across my lap as we climbed from the car.

Nobody could trust their legs. Jesse climbed out of the Linc and leaned against it. You could see him chewing over all the possibilities, then arriving at the only one that made sense. Some hammer mechanic bolted that front end together with no locknut, no cotter pin, no lock washer, no lock nothin'. He just wrenched down a plain old nut, and the nut worked loose.

"Miss Molly knew," Jesse whispered. "That's what she was trying to tell." He felt a lot better the minute he said it. Color came back to his face. He peered around the corner of the house trailer, looking toward Miss Molly's grave.

Mike Tarbush was over there with his '48 Roadmaster. Matt Simons stood beside him, and Matt's '56 Dodge sat beside the Roadmaster, looking smug; which that model Dodge always did.

"I figger," Brother Jesse whispered, "that we should keep shut about last night. Word would just get around that we were alkies." He pulled himself together, arranged his face like a horse trying to grin, and walked toward the Roadmaster.

Mike Tarbush was a man in mourning. He sat on the fat trunk of that Buick and gazed off toward the mountains. Mike wore extra large of everything, and still looked stout. He sported a thick red mustache to make up for his bald bead. From time to time he bragged about his criminal record, which amounted to three days in jail for assaulting a pool table. He threw it through a bar window.

Now his mustache drooped, and Mike seemed small inside his clothes. The hood of the Roadmaster gaped open. Under that hood things couldn't be worse. The poor thing had thrown a rod into the next county.

Jesse looked under the hood and tsked. "I know what you're going through," he said to Mike. He kind of petted the Roadmaster. "I always figured Betty Lou would last a century. What happened?"

There's no call to tell about a grown man blubbering, and especially not one who can heave pool tables. Mike finally got straight enough to tell the story.

"We was chasing The Dog," he said. "At least I think so. Three nights ago over to Kalispell. This Golden Hawk blew past me sittin'." Mike watched the distant mountains like he'd seen a miracle, or else like he was expecting one to happen. "That sonovabitch shore can drive," he whispered in disbelief. "Blown out by a damn Studebaker."

"But a very swift Studebaker," Matt Simons said. Matt is as small as Mike is large, and Matt is educated. Even so, he's set his share of fence posts. He looks like an algebra teacher, but not as delicate.

"Betty Lou went on up past her flat spot," Mike whispered. "She was tryin'. We had ninety on the clock, and The Dog left us sitting." He patted the Roadmaster. "I reckon she died of a broken heart."

"We got three kinds of funerals," Jesse said, and he was sympathetic. "We got the no-frills type, the regular type, and the extra special. The extra special comes with flowers." He said it with a straight face, and Mike took it that way. He bought the extra special, and that was sixty-five dollars.

Mike put up a nice marker:

1948-1961

Roadmaster two-door-Betty Lou

Gone to Glory while chasing The Dog

She was the best friend of Mike Tarbush

Brother Jesse worked on the Lincoln until the front end tracked rock solid. He named it Sue Ellen, but not Miss Sue Ellen, there being no way to know if Miss Molly was jealous. When we examined Miss Molly's grave, the soil seemed rumpiled. Wildflowers, which Jesse sowed on the grave, bloomed in midsummer. I couldn't get it out of my head that Miss Molly was still alive, and maybe Jesse couldn't either.

Jesse explained about the Lincoln's name. "Sue Ellen is a lady I knew in Pocatello. I expect she misses me." He said it hopeful, like he didn't really believe it.

It looked to me like Jesse was brooding. Night usually found him in town, but sometimes he disappeared. When he was around, he drove real calm and always got home before midnight. The wildness hadn't come out of Jesse, but he had it on a tight rein. He claimed he dreamed of Miss Molly. Jesse was working something out.

And so was I, awake or dreaming. Thoughts of The Road Dog filled my nights, and so did thoughts of the dancing ghost. As summer deepened, restlessness took me wailing under moonlight. The road unreeled before my headlights like a magic line that pointed to places under a warm sun where ladies laughed and fell in love. Something went wrong, though. During that summer the ladies stopped being dreams and became only imagination. When I told Jesse, he claimed I was just growing up. I wished for once Jesse was wrong. I wished for a lot of things, and one of the wishes came true. It was Mike Tarbush, not me, who got in the next tangle with Miss Molly.

Mike rode in from Billings, where he'd been car shopping. He showed up at Jesse's place on Sunday afternoon. Montana lay restful. Birds hunkered on wires, or called from high grass. Highway 2 ran watery with sunlight, deserted as a road ever could be. When Mike rolled a '56 Merc up beside the Linc, it looked like Old Home Week at a Ford dealership.

"I got to look at something," Mike said when he climbed from the Mercury. He sort of plodded over to Miss Molly's grave and hovered. Light breezes blew the wildflowers sideways. Mike looked like a bear trying to shake confusion from its head. He walked to the Roadmaster's grave. New grass sprouted reddish green. "I was sober," Mike said. "Most Saturday nights, maybe I ain't, but I was sober as a deputy."

For a while nobody said anything. Potato sat glowing and white and thoughtful. Chip slept in the sun beside one of the tabbies. Then Chip woke up. He turned around three times and dashed to hide under the bulldozer.

"Now, tell me I ain't crazy," Mike said. He perched on the front fender of the Merc, which was blue and white and adventuresome. "Name of Judith," he said about the Merc. "A real lady." He swabbed sweat from his bald head. "I got blown out by Betty Lou and Miss Molly. That sound reasonable?" He swabbed some more sweat and looked at the graves, which looked like little speed bumps on the prairie. "Nope," he answered himself, "that don't sound reasonable a-tall."

"Something's wrong with your Mercury," Jesse said, real quiet. "You

got a bad tire, or a hydraulic line about to blow, or something screwy in the steering.”

He made Mike swear not to breathe a word. Then he told about Miss Molly and about the front end of the Lincoln. When the story got over, Mike looked like a halfback hit by a twelve-man line.

“Don’t drive another inch,” Jesse said. “Not until we find what’s wrong.”

“That car already cracked a hundred,” Mike whispered. “I bought it special to chase one sumbitch in a Studebaker.” He looked toward Betty Lou’s grave. “The Dog did that.”

The three of us went through that Merc like men panning gold. The trouble was so obvious we missed it for two hours while the engine cooled. Then Jesse caught it. The fuel filter rubbed its underside against the valve cover. When Jesse touched it, the filter collapsed. Gasoline spilled on the engine and the spark plugs. That Merc was getting set to catch on fire.

“I got to wonder if The Dog did it,” Jesse said about Betty Lou after Mike drove away. “I wonder if The Road Dog is the Studebaker type.”

* * * *

Nights started to get serious, but any lonesomeness on that road was only in a man’s head. As summer stretched past its longest days, and sunsets started earlier, ghosts rose beside crosses before daylight hardly left the land. We drove to work and back, drove to town and back. My job was steady at a filling station, but it asked day after day of the same old thing. We never did any serious wrenching; no engine rebuilds or transmissions, just tune-ups and flat tires. I dearly wanted to meet a nice lady, but no woman in her right mind would mess with a pump jockey.

Nights were different, though. I figured I was going crazy, and Jesse and Mike were worse. Jesse finally got his situation worked out. He claimed Miss Molly was protecting him. Jesse and Mike took the Linc and the Merc on long runs, just wringing the howl out of those cars. Some nights, they’d flash past me at speed no sane man would try in darkness. Jesse was never a real big drinker, and Mike stopped altogether. They were too busy playing road games. It got so the state cop never tried to chase them. He just dropped past Jesse’s place next day and passed out tickets.

The dancing ghost danced in my dreams, both asleep and driving.

When daylight left the land, I passed metal crosses and remembered some of the wrecks.

Three crosses stood on one side of the railroad track, and four crosses on the other side. The three happened when some Canadian cowboys lost a race with a train. It was too awful to remember, but on most nights those guys stood looking down the tracks with startled eyes.

The four crosses happened when one-third of the senior class of '59 hit that grade too fast on prom night. They rolled a damned old Chevrolet. More bodies by Fisher. Now the two girls stood in their long dresses, looking wistful. The two boys pretended that none of it meant nothin'.

Farther out the road, things had happened before my time. An Indian ghost most often stood beside the ghost of a deer. In another place a chubby old rancher looked real picky and angry.

The dancing ghost continued unpredictable. All the other ghosts stood beside their crosses, but the dancing ghost showed up anywhere he wanted, anytime he wanted. I'd slow the DeSoto as he came into my lights, and he was the spitting image of Jesse.

"I don't want to hear about it," Jesse said when I tried to tell him. "I'm on a roll. I'm even gettin' famous."

He was right about that. People up and down the line joked about Jesse and his graveyard business.

"It's the very best kind of advertising," he told me. "We'll see more action before snow flies."

"You won't see snow fly," I told him, standing up to him a second time. "Unless you slow down and pay attention."

"I've looked at heaps more road than you," he told me, "and seeing things is just part of the night. That nighttime road is different."

"This is starting to happen at last light."

"I don't see no ghosts," he told me, and he was lying. "Except Miss Molly once or twice." He wouldn't say anything more.

And Jesse was right. As summer ran on, more graves showed up near Miss Molly. A man named Mcguire turned up with a '41 Cad.

1941-1961

Fleetwood Coupe-Annie

304,018 miles on flathead V-8

She was the luck of the Irishman

Pat Mcguire

And Sam Winder buried his '47 Packard.

1947-1961

Packard 2-door-Lois Lane

Super Buddy of Sam Winder

Up Up and Away

And Pete Johansen buried his pickup.

1946-1961

Ford pickup—Gertrude

211,000 miles give or take

Never a screamer

but a good pulling truck.

Pete Johansen put up many a days work with her.

Montana roads are long and lonesome, and along the high line is lonesomest of all. From Saskatchewan to Texas, nothing stands tall enough to break the wind that begins to blow cold and clear toward late October. Rains sob away toward the Middle West, and grass turns goldish amber. Rattlesnakes move to high ground, where they will winter. Every creature on God's plains begins to fat up against the winter. Soon it's going to be thirty below and the wind blowing.

Four-wheel-drive weather. Internationals and Fords, with Dodge

crummy wagons in the hills; cars and trucks will line up beside houses, garages, sheds, with electric wires leading from plugs to radiators and blocks. They look like packs of nursing pups. Work will slow, then stop, New work turns to accounting for the weather. Fuel, emergency generators, hay-bale insulation. Horses and cattle and deer look fuzzy beneath thick coats. Check your battery. If your rig won't start, and you're two miles from home, she won't die—but you might.

School buses creep from stop to stop, and bundled kids look like colorful little bears trotting through late-afternoon light. Snowy owls come floating in from northward, while folks go to church on Sunday against the time when there's some better amusement. Men hang around town, because home is either empty or crowded, depending on if you're married. Folks sit before television, watching the funny, goofy, unreal world where everybody plays at being sexy and naked, even when they're not.

And, nineteen years old is lonesome, too. And work is lonesome when nobody much cares for you.

* * * *

Before winter set in, I got it in my head to run The Road Dog's route. It was September. Winter would close us down pretty quick. The trip would be a luxury. What with room rent, and gas, and eating out, it was payday to payday with me. Still, one payday would account for gas and sandwiches. I could sleep across the seat. I hocked a Marlin .30-.30 to Jesse for twenty bucks. He seemed happy with my notion. He even went into the greenhouse and came out with an arctic sleeping bag.

"In case things get vigorous," he said, and grinned. "Now get on out there and bite The Dog."

It was a happy time. Dreams of ladies sort of set themselves to one side as I cruised across the eternal land. I came to love the land that autumn, in a way that maybe ranchers do. The land stopped being something that a road ran across. Canadian honkers came winging in vees from the north. The great Montana sky stood easy as eagles. When I'd pull over and cut the engine, sounds of grasshoppers mixed with birdcalls. Once, a wild turkey, as smart as any domestic turkey is dumb, talked to himself and paid me not the least mind.

The Dog showed up right away. In a café in Malta:

Road Dog

“It was all a hideous mistake.”

Christopher Columbus

In a bar in Tampico:

Road Dog

Who’s afraid of the big bad Woof?

In another bar in Culbertson:

Road Dog

Go East, young man, go East

I rolled Williston and dropped south through North Dakota. The Dog’s trail disappeared until Watford City, where it showed up in the can of a filling station:

Road Dog

Atlantis and Sargasso

Full fathom five thy brother lies

And in a joint in Grassy Butte:

Road Dog

Ain’t Misbehavin’

That morning in Grassy Butte, I woke to a sunrise where the land lay bathed in rose and blue. Silhouettes of grazing deer mixed with silhouettes of cattle. They herded together peaceful as a dream of having your own place, your own woman, and you working hard; and her glad to see you coming home.

In Bowman, The Dog showed up in a nice restaurant:

Road Dog

The Katzenjammer Kids minus one

Ghosts did not show up along the road, but the road stayed the same. I tangled with a bathtub Hudson, a '53, outside of Spearfish in South Dakota. I chased him into Wyoming like being dragged on a string. The guy played with me for twenty miles, then got bored. He shoved more coal in the stoker and purely flew out of sight.

Sheridan was a nice town back in those days, just nice and friendly; plus, I started to get sick of the way I smelled. In early afternoon, I found a five-dollar motel with a shower. That gave me the afternoon, the evening, and next morning if it seemed right. I spiffed up, put on a good shirt, slicked down my hair, and felt just fine.

The streets lay dusty and lazy. Ranchers' pickups stood all dented and work-worn before bars, and an old Indian sat on hay bales in the back of one of them. He wore a flop hat, and he seemed like the eyes and heart of the prairie. He looked at me like I was a splendid puppy that might someday amount to something. It seemed okay when he did it.

I hung around a soda fountain at the five-and-dime because a girl smiled. She was just beautiful. A little horsey-faced, but with sun-blond hair, and with hands long-fingered and gentle. There wasn't a chance of talking, because she stood behind the counter for ladies' underwear. I pretended to myself that she looked sad when I left.

It got on to late afternoon. Sunlight drifted in between buildings, and shadows overreached the streets. Everything was normal, and then everything got scary.

I was just poking along, looking in store windows, checking the show at the movie house, when, ahead of me, Jesse walked toward a Golden Hawk. He was maybe a block and a half away, but it was Jesse, sure as God made sunshine. It was a Golden Hawk. There was no way of mistaking that car. Hawks were high-priced sets of wheels, and Studebaker never sold that many.

I yelled and ran. Jesse waited beside the car, looking sort of puzzled. When I pulled up beside him, he grinned.

"It's happening again," he said, and his voice sounded amused, but not mean. Sunlight made his face reddish, but shadow put his legs and feet in darkness. "You believe me to be a gentleman named Jesse Still." Behind him, shadows of buildings told that night was on its way. Sunset happens quick on the prairies.

And I said, “Jesse, what in the hell are you doing in Sheridan?”

And he said, “Young man, you are not looking at Jesse Still.” He said it quiet and polite, and he thought he had a point. His voice was smooth and cultured, so he sure didn’t sound like Jesse. His hair hung combed out, and he wore clothes that never came from a dry goods. His jeans were soft looking and expensive. His boots were tooled. They kind of glowed in the dusk. The Golden Hawk didn’t have a dust speck on it, and the interior had never carried a tool, or a car part, or a sack of feed. It just sparkled. I almost believed him, and then I didn’t.

“You’re fooling with me.”

“On the contrary,” he said, real soft. “Jesse Still is fooling with me, although he doesn’t mean to. We’ve never met.” He didn’t exactly look nervous, but he looked impatient. He climbed in the Stude and started the engine. It purred like racing tune. “This is a large and awfully complex world,” he said, “and Mr. Still will probably tell you the same. I’ve been told we look like brothers.”

I wanted to say more, but he waved real friendly and pulled away. The flat and racy back end of the Hawk reflected one slash of sunlight, then rolled into shadow. If I’d had a hot car, I’d have gone out hunting him. It wouldn’t have done a lick of good, but doing something would be better than doing nothing.

I stood sort of shaking and amazed. Life had just changed somehow, and it wasn’t going to change back. There wasn’t a thing in the world to do, so I went to get some supper.

The Dog had signed in at the café:

Road Dog

The Bobbsey Twins Attend The Motor Races

And—I sat chewing roast beef and mashed potatoes.

And—I saw how the guy in the Hawk might be lying, and that Jesse was a twin.

And—I finally saw what a chancy, dicey world this was, because without meaning to, exactly, and without even knowing it was happening, I

had just run up against The Road Dog.

* * * *

It was a night of dreams. Dreams wouldn't let me go. The dancing ghost tried to tell me Jesse was triplets. The ghosts among the crosses begged rides into nowhere, rides down the long tunnel of night that ran past lands of dreams, but never turned off to those lands. It all came back: the crazy summer, the running, running, running behind the howl of engines. The Road Dog drawled with Jesse's voice, and then The Dog spoke cultured. The girl at the five-and-dime held out a gentle hand, then pulled it back. I dreamed of a hundred roadside joints, bars, cafés, old-fashioned filling stations with grease pits. I dreamed of winter wind, and the dark, dark days of winter; and of nights when you hunch in your room because it's a chore too big to bundle up and go outside.

I woke to an early dawn and slurped coffee at the bakery, which kept open because they had to make morning doughnuts. The land lay all around me, but it had nothing to say. I counted my money and figured miles.

I climbed in the DeSoto, thinking I had never got around to giving it a name. The road unreeled toward the west. It ended in Seattle, where I sold my car. Everybody said there was going to be a war, and I wasn't doing anything anyway. I joined the Navy.

* * * *

III.

What with him burying cars and raising hell, Jesse never wrote to me in summer. He was surely faithful in winter, though. He wrote long letters printed in a clumsy hand. He tried to cheer me up, and so did Matt Simons.

The Navy sent me to boot camp and diesel school, then to a motor pool in San Diego. I worked there three and a half years, sometimes even working on ships if the ships weren't going anywhere. A sunny land and smiling ladies lay all about, but the ladies mostly fell in love by ten at night and got over it by dawn. Women in the bars were younger and prettier than back home. There was enough clap to go around.

"The business is growing like jimsonweed," Jesse wrote toward Christmas of '62. "I buried fourteen cars this summer, and one of them was a Kraut." He wrote a whole page about his morals. It didn't seem right to

stick a crap crate in the ground beside real cars. At the same time, it was bad business not to. He opened a special corner of the cemetery, and pretended it was exclusive for foreign iron.

“And Mike Tarbush got to drinking,” he wrote. “I’m sad to say we planted Judith.”

Mike never had a minute’s trouble with that Merc. Judith behaved like a perfect lady until Mike turned upside down. He backed across a parking lot at night, rather hasty, and drove backward up the guy wire of a power pole. It was the only rollover wreck in history that happened at twenty miles an hour.

“Mike can’t stop discussing it,” Jesse wrote. “He’s never caught The Dog, neither, but he ain’t stopped trying. He wheeled in here in a beefed-up ‘57 Olds called Sally. It goes like stink and looks like a Hereford.”

Home seemed far away, though it couldn’t have been more than thirty-six hours by road for a man willing to hang over the wheel. I wanted to take a leave and drive home, but knew it better not happen. Once I got there, I’d likely stay.

“George Pierson at the feed store says he’s going to file a paternity suit against Potato,” Jesse wrote. “The pups are cute, and there’s a family resemblance.”

It came to me then why I was homesick. I surely missed the land, but even more I missed the people. Back home, folks were important enough that you knew their names. When somebody got messed up or killed, you felt sorry. In California, nobody knew nobody. They just swept up broken glass and moved right along. I should have meshed right in. I had made my rating and was pushing a rich man’s car, a ‘57 hemi Chrysler, but never felt it fit.

“Don’t pay it any mind,” Jesse wrote when I told about meeting Road Dog. “I’ve heard about a guy who looks the same as me. Sometimes stuff like that happens.”

And that was all he ever did say.

Nineteen sixty-three ended happy and hopeful. Matt Simons wrote a letter. Sam Winder bought a big Christmas card, and everybody signed it with little messages. Even my old boss at the filling station signed, “Merry Xmas, Jed—Keep It Between The Fence Posts.” My boss didn’t hold it

against me that I left. In Montana a guy is supposed to be free to find out what he's all about.

Christmas of '63 saw Jesse pleased as a bee in clover. A lady named Sarah moved in with him. She waitressed at the café, and Jesse's letter ran pretty short. He'd put twenty-three cars under that year, and bought more acreage. He ordered a genuine marble gravestone for Miss Molly. "Sue Ellen is a real darling," Jesse wrote about the Linc. "That marker like to weighed a ton. We just about bent a back axle bringing it from the railroad."

From Christmas of '63 to January of '64 was just a few days, but they marked an awful downturn for Jesse. His letter was more real to me than all the diesels in San Diego.

He drew black borders all around the pages. The letter started out okay, but went downhill. "Sarah moved out and into a rented room," he wrote. "I reckon I was just too much to handle." He didn't explain, but I did my own reckoning. I could imagine that it was Jesse, plus two cats and two dogs, trying to get into a ten-wide-fifty trailer, that got to Sarah. "I think she misses me," he wrote, "but I expect she'll have to bear it."

Then the letter got just awful.

"A pack of wolves came through from Canada," Jesse wrote. "They picked off old Potato like a berry from a bush. Me and Mike found tracks, and a little blood in the snow."

I sat in the summery dayroom surrounded by sailors shooting pool and playing Ping-Pong. I imagined the snow and ice of home. I imagined old Potato nosing around in his dumb and happy way, looking for rabbits or lifting his leg. Maybe he even wagged his tail when that first wolf came into view. I sat blinking tears, ready to bawl over a dog, and then I did, and to hell with it.

The world was changing, and it wouldn't change back. I put in for sea duty one more time, and the chief warrant who ramrodded that motor pool turned it down again. He claimed we kept the world safe by wrenching engines.

* * * *

"The '62 Dodge is emerging as the car of choice for people in a hurry." Matt Simons wrote that in February '64, knowing I'd understand that

nobody could tell which cars would be treasured until they had a year or two on them. "It's an extreme winter," he wrote, "and it's taking its toll on many of us. Mike has now learned not to punch a policeman. He's doing ten days. Sam Winder managed to roll a Jeep, and neither he nor I can figure out how a man can roll a Jeep. Sam has a broken arm, and lost two toes to frost. He was trapped under the wreck. It took a while to pull him out. Brother Jesse is in the darkest sort of mood. He comes and goes in an irregular manner, but the Linc sits outside the pool hall on most days.

"And for myself," Matt wrote, "I think, come summer, I'll drop some revs. My flaming youth seems to be giving way to other interests. A young woman named Nancy started teaching at the school. Until now, I thought I was a confirmed bachelor."

A postcard came the end of February. The postmark said "Cheyenne, Wyoming," way down in the southeast corner of the state. It was written fancy. Nobody could mistake that fine, spidery hand. It read:

Road Dog

Run and run as fast as he can,

He can't find who is the Gingerbread Man

The picture on the card had been taken from an airplane. It showed an oval racetrack where cars chased each other round and round. I couldn't figure why Jesse sent it, but it had to be Jesse. Then it came to me that Jesse was The Road Dog. Then it came to me that he wasn't. The Road Dog was too slick. He wrote real delicate, and Jesse only printed real clumsy. On the other hand, The Road Dog didn't know me from Adam's off ox. Somehow it had to be Jesse.

"We got snow nut deep to a tall palm tree," Jesse wrote at about the same time, "and Chip is failing. He's off his feed. He don't even tease the kitties. Chip just can't seem to stop mourning."

I had bad premonitions. Chip was sensitive. I feared he wouldn't be around by the time I got back home, and my fear proved right. Chip held off until the first warm sun of spring, and then he died while napping in the shade of the bulldozer. When Jesse sent a quick note telling me, I felt pretty bad, but had been expecting it. Chip had a good heart. I figured now he was with Potato, romping in the hills somewhere. I knew that was a bunch of crap, but that's just the way I chose to figure it.

* * * *

They say a man can get used to anything, but maybe some can't. Day after day, and week after week, California weather nagged. Sometimes a puny little dab of weather dribbled in from the Pacific, and people hollered it was storming. Sometimes temperatures dropped toward the fifties, and people trotted around in thick sweaters and coats. It was almost a relief when that happened, because everybody put on their shirts. In three years, I'd seen more woman skin than a normal man sees in a lifetime, and more tattoos on men. The chief warrant at the motor pool had the only tattoo in the world called "worm's-eye view of a pig's butt in the moonlight."

In autumn '64, with one more year to pull, I took a two-week leave and headed north just chasing weather. It showed up first in Oregon with rain, and more in Washington. I got hassled on the Canadian border by a distressful little guy who thought, what with the war, that I wanted political asylum.

I chased on up to Calgary, where matters got chill and wholesome. Wind worked through the mountains like it wanted to drive me south toward home. Elk and moose and porcupines went about their business. Red-tailed hawks circled. I slid on over to Edmonton, chased on east to Saskatoon, then dropped south through the Dakotas. In Williston, I had a terrible want to cut and run for home, but didn't dare.

The Road Dog showed up all over the place, but the messages were getting strange. At a bar in Amidon:

Road Dog

Taking Kentucky Windage

At a hamburger joint in Belle Fourche:

Road Dog

Chasing his tail

At a restaurant in Redbird:

Road Dog

Flea and flee as much as we can

We'll soon find who is the Gingerbread Man

In a poolroom in Fort Collins:

Road Dog

Home home on derange

Road Dog, or Jesse, was too far south. The Dog had never showed up in Colorado before. At least, nobody ever heard of such.

My leave was running out. There was nothing to do except sit over the wheel. I dropped on south to Albuquerque, hung a right, and headed back to the big city. All along the road, I chewed a dreadful fear for Jesse. Something bad was happening, and that didn't seem fair, because something good went on between me and the Chrysler. We reached an understanding. The Chrysler came alive and began to hum. All that poor car had ever needed was to look at road. It had been raised among traffic and poodles, but needed long sight distances and bears.

* * * *

When I got back, there seemed no way out of writing a letter to Matt Simons, even if it was borrowing trouble. It took evening after evening of gnawing the end of a pencil, I hated to tell about Miss Molly, and about the dancing ghost, and about my fears for Jesse. A man is supposed to keep his problems to himself.

At the same time, Matt was educated. Maybe he could give Jesse a hand if he knew all of it. The letter came out pretty thick. I mailed it thinking Matt wasn't likely to answer real soon. Autumn deepened to winter back home, and everybody would be busy.

So I worked and waited. There was an old White Mustang with a fifth wheel left over from the last war. It was a lean and hungry-looking animal, and slightly marvelous. I overhauled the engine, then dropped the tranny and adapted a ten-speed Roadranger. When I got that truck running smooth as a Baptist's mouth, the Navy surveyed it and sold it for scrap.

"Ghost cars are a tradition," Matt wrote toward the back of October, "and I'd be hard-pressed to say they are not real. I recall being passed by an Auburn boat tail about 3:00 a.m. on a summer day. That happened ten years ago. I was about your age, which means there was not an Auburn boat tail in all of Montana. That car died in the early thirties.

“And we all hear stories of huge old headlights overtaking in the mist, stories of Mercers and Duesenbergs and Bugattis. I try to believe the stories are true, because, in a way, it would be a shame if they were not.

“The same for road ghosts. I’ve never seen a ghost who looked like Jesse. The ghosts I’ve seen might not have been ghosts. To paraphrase an expert, they may have been a trapped beer belch, an undigested hamburger, or blowing mist. On the other hand, maybe not. They certainly seemed real at the time.

“As for Jesse—we have a problem here. In a way, we’ve had it for a long while, but only since last winter have matters become solemn. Then your letter arrives, and matters become mysterious. Jesse has—or had—a twin brother. One night when we were carousing, he told me that, but he also said his brother was dead. Then he swore me to a silence I must now break.”

Matt went on to say that I must never, never say anything. He figured something was going on between brothers. He figured it must run deep.

“There is something uncanny about twins,” Matt wrote. “What great matters are joined in the womb? When twins enter the world, they learn and grow the way all of us do; but some communication (or communion) surely happens before birth. A clash between brothers is a terrible thing. A clash between twins may spell tragedy.”

Matt went on to tell how Jesse was going over the edge with road games, only the games stayed close to home. All during the summer, Jesse would head out, roll fifty or a hundred miles, and come home scorching like drawn by a string. Matt guessed the postcard I’d gotten from Jesse in February was part of the game, and it was the last time Jesse had been very far from home. Matt figured Jesse used tracing paper to imitate The Road Dog’s writing. He also figured Road Dog had to be Jesse’s brother.

“It’s obvious,” Matt wrote, “that Jesse’s brother is still alive, and is only metaphorically dead to Jesse. There are look-alikes in this world, but you have reported identical twins.”

Matt told how Jesse drove so crazy, even Mike would not run with him. That was bad enough, but it seemed the graveyard had sort of moved in on Jesse’s mind. That graveyard was no longer just something to do. Jesse swapped around until he came up with a tractor and mower. Three times

that summer, he trimmed the graveyard and straightened the markers. He dusted and polished Miss Molly's headstone.

"It's past being a joke," Matt wrote, "or a sentimental indulgence. Jesse no longer drinks, and no longer hells around in a general way. He either runs or tends the cemetery. I've seen other men search for a ditch, but never in such bizarre fashion."

Jesse had been seen on his knees, praying before Miss Molly's grave.

"Or perhaps he was praying for himself, or for Chip," Matt wrote. "Chip is buried beside Miss Molly. The graveyard has to be seen to be believed. Who would ever think so many machines would be so dear to so many men?"

Then Matt went on to say he was going to "inquire in various places" that winter. "There are ways to trace Jesse's brother," Matt wrote, "and I am very good at that sort of research." He said it was about the only thing he could still do for Jesse.

"Because," Matt wrote, "I seem to have fallen in love with a romantic. Nancy wants a June wedding. I look forward to another winter alone, but it will be an easy wait. Nancy is rather old-fashioned, and I find that I'm old-fashioned as well. I will never regret my years spent helling around, but am glad they are now in the past."

Back home, winter deepened. At Christmas a long letter came from Jesse, and some of it made sense. "I put eighteen cars under this summer. Business fell off because I lost my hustle. You got to scooch around a good bit, or you don't make contacts. I may start advertising.

"And the tabbies took off. I forgot to slop them regular, so now they're mousing in a barn on Jimmy Come Lately Road. Mike says I ought to get another dog, but my heart isn't in it."

Then the letter went into plans for the cemetery. Jesse talked some grand ideas. He thought a nice wrought-iron gate might be showy, and bring in business. He thought of finding a truck that would haul "deceased" cars. "On the other hand," he wrote, "if a guy don't care enough to find a tow, maybe I don't want to plant his iron." He went on for a good while about morals, but a lawyer couldn't understand it. He seemed to be saying something about respect for Miss Molly, and Betty Lou, and Judith. "Sue Ellen is a real hummer," he wrote about the Linc. "She's got two hundred

thousand I know about, plus whatever went on before.”

Which meant Jesse was piling up about seventy thousand miles a year, and that didn't seem too bad. Truck drivers put up a hundred thousand. Of course, they make a living at it.

Then the letter got so crazy it was hard to credit.

“I got The Road Dog figured out. There's two little kids. Their mama reads to them, and they play tag. The one that don't get caught gets to be the Gingerbread Man. This all come together because I ran across a bunch of kids down on the Colorado line. I was down that way to call on a lady I once knew, but she moved, and I said what the hell, and hung around a few days, and that's what clued me to The Dog. The kids were at a Sunday-school picnic, and I was napping across the car seat. Then a preacher's wife came over and saw I wasn't drunk, but the preacher was there, too, and they invited me. I eased over to the picnic, and everybody made me welcome. Anyway, those kids were playing, and I heard the gingerbread business, and I figured The Dog is from Colorado.”

The last page of the letter was just as scary. Jesse took kids' crayons and drew the front ends of the Linc and Miss Molly. There was a tail that was probably Potato's sticking out from behind the picture of Miss Molly, and everything was centered around the picture of a marker that said “R.I.P. Road Dog.”

But—there weren't any little kids. Jesse had not been to Colorado. Jesse had been tending that graveyard, and staying close to home. Jesse played make-believe, or else Matt Simons lied; and there was no reason for Matt to lie. Something bad, bad wrong was going on with Jesse.

There was no help for it. I did my time and wrote a letter every month or six weeks pretending everything was normal. I wrote about what we'd do when I got home, and about the Chrysler. Maybe that didn't make much sense, but Jesse was important to me. He was a big part of what I remembered about home.

At the end of April, a postcard came, this time from Havre. “The Dog is after me. I feel it.” It was just a plain old postcard. No picture.

Matt wrote in May, mostly his own plans. He busied himself building a couple of rooms onto his place. “Nancy and I do not want a family right away,” he wrote, “but someday we will.” He wrote a bubbly letter with a feel of springtime to it.

“I almost forgot my main reason for writing,” the letter said. “Jesse comes from around Boulder, Colorado. His parents are long dead, ironically in a car wreck. His mother was a schoolteacher, his father a librarian. Those people, who lived such quiet lives, somehow produced a hellion like Jesse, and Jesse’s brother. That’s the factual side of the matter.

“The human side is so complex it will not commit to paper. In fact, I do not trust what I know. When you get home next fall, we’ll discuss it.”

The letter made me sad and mad. Sad because I wasn’t getting married, and mad because Matt didn’t think I’d keep my mouth shut. Then I thought better of it. Matt didn’t trust himself. I did what any gentleman would do, and sent him and Nancy a nice gravy boat for the wedding.

In late July, Jesse sent another postcard. “He’s after me; I’m after him. If I ain’t around when you get back, don’t fret. Stuff happens. It’s just a matter of chasing road.”

Summer rolled on. The Navy released “nonessential personnel” in spite of the war. I put four years in the outfit and got called nonessential. Days choked past like a rig with fouled injectors. One good thing happened. My old boss moved his station to the outskirts of town and started an IH dealership. He straight out wrote how he needed a diesel mechanic. I felt hopeful thoughts, and dark ones.

In September, I became a veteran who qualified for an overseas ribbon, because of work on ships that later on went somewhere. Now I could join the Legion post back home, which was maybe the payoff. They had the best pool table in the county.

“Gents,” I said to the boys at the motor pool, “it’s been a distinct by-God pleasure enjoying your company, and don’t never come to Montana, ‘cause she’s a heartbreaker.” The Chrysler and me lit out like a kyoodle of pups.

It would have been easier to run to Salt Lake, then climb the map to Havre, but notions pushed. I slid east to Las Cruces, then popped north to Boulder with the idea of tracing Jesse. The Chrysler hummed and chewed up road. When I got to Boulder, the notion turned hopeless. There were too many people. I didn’t even know where to start asking.

It’s no big job to fool yourself. Above Boulder, it came to me how I’d been pointing for Sheridan all along, and not even Sheridan. I pointed

toward a girl who smiled at me four years ago.

I found her working at a hardware, and she wasn't wearing any rings. I blushed around a little bit, then got out of there to catch my breath. I thought of how Jesse took whatever time was needed when he bought the Linc. It looked like this would take a while.

My pockets were crowded with mustering-out pay and money for unused leave. I camped in a ten-dollar motel. It took three days to get acquainted, then we went to a show and supper afterward. Her name was Linda. Her father was a Mormon. That meant a year of courting, but it's not all that far from north Montana to Sheridan.

I had to get home and get employed, which would make the Mormon happy. On Saturday afternoon Linda and I went back to the same old movie, but this time we held hands. Before going home, she kissed me once, real gentle. That made up for those hard times in San Diego. It let me know I was back with my own people.

I drove downtown all fired up with visions. It was way too early for bed, and I cared nothing for a beer. A run-down café sat on the outskirts. I figured pie and coffee.

The Dog had signed in. His writing showed faint, like the wall had been scrubbed. Newer stuff scabbled over it.

Road Dog

Tweedledum and Tweedledee

Lonely pups as pups can be

For each other had to wait

Down beside the churchyard gate.

The café sort of slumbered. Several old men lined the counter. Four young gearheads sat at a table and talked fuel injection. The old men yawned and put up with it. Faded pictures of old racing cars hung along the walls. The young guys sat beneath a picture of the Bluebird. That car held the land speed record of 301.29 m.p.h. This was a racer's café, and had been for a long, long time.

The waitress was graying and motherly. She tsked and tished over

the old men as much as she did the young ones. Her eyes held that long-distance prairie look, a look knowing wind and fire and hard times, stuff that either breaks people or leaves them wise. Matt Simons might get that look in another twenty years. I tried to imagine Linda when she became the waitress's age, and it wasn't bad imagining.

Pictures of quarter-mile cars hung back of the counter, and pictures of street machines hung on each side of the door. Fifties hot rods scorched beside worked-up stockers. Some mighty rowdy iron crowded that wall. One picture showed a Golden Hawk. I walked over, and in one corner was the name "Still"—written in The Road Dog's hand. It shouldn't have been scary.

I went back to the counter shaking. A nice-looking old gent nursed coffee. His hands wore knuckles busted by a thousand slipped wrenches. Grease was worked in deep around his eyes, the way it gets after years and years when no soap made will touch it. You could tell he'd been a steady man. His eyes were clear as a kid.

"Mister," I said, "and beg pardon for bothering you. Do you know anything about that Studebaker?" I pointed to the wall.

"You ain't bothering me," he said, "but I'll tell you when you do." He tapped the side of his head like trying to ease a gear in place, then he started talking engine specs on the Stude.

"I mean the man who owns it."

The old man probably liked my haircut, which was short. He liked it that I was raised right. Young guys don't always pay old men much mind.

"You still ain't bothering me." He turned to the waitress. "Sue," he said, "has Johnny Still been in?"

She turned from cleaning the pie case, and she looked toward the young guys like she feared for them. You could tell she was no big fan of engines. "It's been the better part of a year, maybe more." She looked down the line of old men. "I was fretting about him just the other day...." She let it hang. Nobody said anything. "He comes and goes so quiet, you might miss him."

"I don't miss him a hell of a lot," one of the young guys said. The guy looked like a duck, and had a voice like a sparrow. His fingernails were too clean. That proved something.

“Because Johnny blew you out,” another young guy said. “Johnny always blew you out.”

“Because he’s crazy,” the first guy said. “There’s noisy crazy and quiet crazy. The guy is a spook.”

“He’s going through something,” the waitress said, and said it kind. “Johnny’s taken a lot of loss. He’s the type who grieves.” She looked at me like she expected an explanation.

“I’m friends with his brother,” I told her. “Maybe Johnny and his brother don’t get along.”

The old man looked at me rather strange. “You go back quite a ways,” he told me. “Jesse’s been dead a good long time.”

I thought I’d pass out. My hands started shaking, and my legs felt too weak to stand. Beyond the window of the café, red light came from a neon sign, and inside the café everybody sat quiet, waiting to see if I was crazy, too. I sort of picked at my pie. One of the young guys moved real uneasy. He loafed toward the door, maybe figuring he’d need a shotgun. The other three young ones looked confused.

“No offense,” I said to the old man, “but Jesse Still is alive. Up on the high line. We run together.”

“Jesse Still drove a damn old Hudson Terraplane into the South Platte River in spring of ‘52, maybe ‘53.” The old man said it real quiet. “He popped a tire when not real sober.”

“Which is why Johnny doesn’t drink,” the waitress said. “At least, I expect that’s the reason.”

“And now you are bothering me.” The old man looked to the waitress, and she was as full of questions as he was.

Nobody ever felt more hopeless or scared. These folks had no reason to tell this kind of yarn. “Jesse is sort of roughhouse.” My voice was only whispering. It wouldn’t make enough sound. “Jesse made his reputation helling around.”

“You’ve got that part right,” the old man told me, “and, youngster, I don’t give a tinker’s damn if you believe me or not, but Jesse Still is dead.”

I saw what it had to be, but seeing isn't always believing. "Thank you, mister," I whispered to the old man, "and thank you, ma'am," to the waitress. Then I hauled out of there leaving them with something to discuss.

* * * *

A terrible fear rolled with me, because of Jesse's last postcard. He said he might not be home, and now that could mean more than it said. The Chrysler bettered its reputation, and we just flew. From the Montana line to Shelby is eight hours on a clear day. You can wail it in seven, or maybe six and a half if a deer doesn't tangle with your front end. I was afraid, and confused, and getting mad. Me and Linda were just to the point of hoping for an understanding, and now I was going to get killed running over a porcupine or into a heifer. The Chrysler blazed like a hound on a hot scent. At eighty the pedal kept wanting to dig deep and really howl.

The nighttime road yells danger. Shadows crawl over everything. What jumps into your headlights may be real, and may be not. Metal crosses hold little clusters of dark flowers on their arms, and the land rolls out beneath the moon. Buttes stand like great ships anchored in the plains, and riverbeds run like dry ink. Come spring, they'll flow; but in September, all flow is in the road.

The dancing ghost picked me up on Highway 3 outside Comanche, but this time he wasn't dancing. He stood on the berm, and no mist tied him in place. He gave the old road sign for "roll 'em." Beyond Columbia, he showed up again. His mouth moved like he was yelling me along, and his face twisted with as much fear as my own.

That gave me reason to hope. I'd never known Jesse to be afraid like that, so maybe there was a mistake. Maybe the dancing ghost wasn't the ghost of Jesse. I hung over the wheel and forced myself to think of Linda. When I thought of her, I couldn't bring myself to get crazy. Highway 3 is not much of a road, but that's no bother. I can drive anything with wheels over any road ever made. The dancing ghost kept showing up and beckoning, telling me to scorch. I told myself the damn ghost had no judgment, or he wouldn't be a ghost in the first place.

That didn't keep me from pushing faster, but it wasn't fast enough to satisfy the roadside. They came out of the mist, or out of the ditches; crowds and clusters of ghosts standing pale beneath a weak moon. Some of them gossiped with each other. Some stood yelling me along. Maybe

there was sense to it, but I had my hands full. If they were trying to help, they sure weren't doing it. They just made me get my back up, and think of dropping revs.

Maybe the ghosts held a meeting and studied out the problem. They could see a clear road, but I couldn't. The dancing ghost showed up on Highway 12 and gave me "thumbs up" for a clear road. I didn't believe a word of it, and then I really didn't believe what showed in my mirrors. Headlights closed like I was standing. My feelings said that all of this had happened before; except, last time, there was only one set of headlights.

It was Miss Molly and Betty Lou that brought me home. Miss Molly overtook, sweeping past with a lane change smooth and sober as an Adventist. The high, slaunch-forward form of Miss Molly thrummed with business. She wasn't blowing sparks or showing off. She wasn't playing Gingerbread Man or tag.

Betty Lou came alongside so I could see who she was, then Betty Lou laid back a half mile. If we ran into a claim-jumping deputy, he'd have to chase her first; and more luck to him. Her headlights hovered back there like angels.

Miss Molly settled down a mile ahead of the Chrysler and stayed at that distance, no matter how hard I pressed. Twice before Great Falls, she spotted trouble, and her squinchy little brake lights hauled me down. Once it was an animal, and once it was busted road surface. Miss Molly and Betty Lou dropped me off before Great Falls, and picked me back up the minute I cleared town.

We ran the night like rockets. The roadside lay deserted. The dancing ghost stayed out of it, and so did the others. That let me concentrate, which proved a blessing. At those speeds, a man don't have time to do deep thinking. The road rolls past, the hours roll, but you've got a racer's mind. No matter how tired you should be, you don't get tired until it's over.

I chased a ghost car northward while a fingernail moon moved across the sky. In deepest night the land turned silver. At speed, you don't think, but you do have time to feel. The farther north we pushed, the more my feelings went to despair. Maybe Miss Molly thought the same, but everybody did all they could.

The Chrysler was a howler, and Lord knows where the top end lay. I buried the needle. Even accounting for speedometer error, we burned along in the low half of the second century. We made Highway 2 and

Shelby around three in the morning, then hung a left. In just about no time, I rolled home. Betty Lou dropped back and faded. Miss Molly blew sparks and purely flew out of sight. The sparks meant something. Maybe Miss Molly was still hopeful. Or maybe she knew we were too late.

* * * *

Beneath that thin moon, mounded graves looked like dark surf across the acreage. No lights burned in the trailer, and the Linc showed nowhere. Even under the scant light, you could see snowy tops of mountains, and the perfectly straight markers standing at the head of each grave. A tent, big enough to hold a small revival, stood not far from the trailer. In my headlights a sign on the tent read "Chapel." I fetched a flashlight from the glove box.

A dozen folding chairs stood in the chapel, and a podium served as an altar. Jesse had rigged up two sets of candles, so I lit some. Matt Simons had written that the graveyard had to be seen to be believed. Hanging on one side of the tent was a sign reading "Shrine," and all along that side hung road maps, and pictures of cars, and pictures of men standing beside their cars. There was a special display of odometers, with little cards beneath them: "330,938 miles"; "407,000 miles"; "half a million miles, more or less." These were the championship cars, the all-time best at piling up road, and those odometers would make even a married man feel lonesome. You couldn't look at them without thinking of empty roads and empty nights.

Even with darkness spreading across the cemetery, nothing felt worse than the inside of the tent. I could believe that Jesse took it serious, and had tried to make it nice, but couldn't believe anyone else would buy it.

The night was not too late for owls, and nearly silent wings swept past as I left the tent. I walked to Miss Molly's grave, half-expecting ghostly headlights. Two small markers stood beside a real fine marble headstone.

* * * *

Potato

Happy-go-sloppy and good

Rest in Peace Wherever You Are

* * * *

Chip

A dandy little sidekicker

Running with Potato

* * * *

From a distance, I could see piled dirt where the dozer had dug new graves. I stepped cautious toward the dozer, not knowing why, but knowing it had to happen.

Two graves stood open like little garages, and the front ends of the Linc and the Hawk poked out. The Linc's front bumper shone spotless, but the rest of the Linc looked tough and experienced. Dents and dings crowded the sides, and cracked glass starred the windows.

The Hawk stood sparkly, ready to come roaring from the grave. Its glass shone washed and clean before my flashlight. I thought of what I heard in Sheridan, and thought of the first time I'd seen the Hawk. It hadn't changed. The Hawk looked like it had just been driven off a showroom floor.

Nobody in his right mind would want to look in those two cars, but it wasn't a matter of "want." Jesse, or Johnny—if that's who it was—had to be here someplace. It was certain sure he needed help. When I looked, the Hawk sat empty. My flashlight poked against the glass of the Linc. Jesse lay there, taking his last nap across a car seat. His long black hair had turned gray. He had always been thin, but now he was skin and bones. Too many miles, and no time to eat. Creases around his eyes came from looking at road, but now the creases were deep like an old man's. His eyes showed that he was dead. They were open only a little bit, but open enough.

I couldn't stand to be alone with such a sight. In less than fifteen minutes, I stood banging on Matt Simons's door. Matt finally answered, and Nancy showed up behind him. She was in her robe. She stood taller than Matt, and sleepier. She looked blond and Swedish. Matt didn't know whether to be mad or glad. Then I got my story pieced together, and he really woke up.

"Dr. Jekyll has finally dealt with Mr. Hyde," he said in a low voice to Nancy. "Or maybe the other way around." To me, he said, "That may be a

bad joke, but it's not ill meant." He went to get dressed. "Call Mike," he said to me. "Drunk or sober, I want him there."

Nancy showed me the phone. Then she went to the bedroom to talk with Matt. I could hear him soothing her fears. When Mike answered, he was sleepy and sober, but he woke up stampeding.

Deep night and a thin moon is a perfect time for ghosts, but none showed up as Matt rode with me back to the graveyard. The Chrysler loafed. There was no need for hurry.

I told Matt what I'd learned in Sheridan.

"That matches what I heard," he said, "and we have two mysteries. The first mystery is interesting, but it's no longer important. Was John Still pretending to be Jesse Still, or was Jesse pretending to be John?"

"If Jesse drove into a river in '53, then it has to be John." I didn't like what I said, because Jesse was real. The best actor in the world couldn't pretend that well. My sorrow choked me, but I wasn't ashamed.

Matt seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "We don't know how long the game went on," he said real quiet. "We never will know. John could have been playing at being Jesse way back in '53."

That got things tangled, and I felt resentful. Things were complicated enough. Me and Matt had just lost a friend, and now Matt was talking like that was the least interesting part.

"Makes no difference whether he was John or Jesse," I told Matt. "He was Jesse when he died. He's laying across the seat in Jesse's car. Figure it any way you want, but we're talking about Jesse."

"You're right," Matt said. "Also, you're wrong. We're talking about someone who was both." Matt sat quiet for a minute, figuring things out. I told myself it was just as well that he'd married a schoolteacher. "Assume, for the sake of argument," he said, "that John was playing Jesse in '53. John drove into the river, and people believed they were burying Jesse."

"Or, for the sake of argument, assume that it was Jesse in '53. In that case the game started with John's grief. Either way the game ran for many years." Matt was getting at something, but he always has to go roundabout.

"After years, John, or Jesse, disappeared. There was only a man who

was both John and Jesse. That's the reason it makes no difference who died in '53."

Matt looked through the car window into the darkness like he expected to discover something important. "This is a long and lonesome country," he said. "The biggest mystery is: why? The answer may lie in the mystery of twins, or it may be as simple as a man reaching into the past for happy memories. At any rate, one brother dies, and the survivor keeps his brother alive by living his brother's life, as well as his own. Think of the planning, the elaborate schemes, the near self-deception. Think of how often the roles shifted. A time must have arrived when that lonely man could not even remember who he was."

The answer was easy, and I saw it. Jesse, or John, chased the road to find something they'd lost on the road. They lost their parents and each other. I didn't say a damn word. Matt was making me mad, but I worked at forgiving him. He was handling his own grief, and maybe he didn't have a better way.

"And so he invented The Road Dog," Matt said. "That kept the personalities separate. The Road Dog was a metaphor to make him proud. Perhaps it might confuse some of the ladies, but there isn't a man ever born who wouldn't understand it."

I remembered long nights and long roads. I couldn't fault his reasoning.

"At the same time," Matt said, "the metaphor served the twins. They could play road games with the innocence of children, maybe even replay memories of a time when their parents were alive and the world seemed warm. John played The Road Dog, and Jesse chased; and, by God, so did the rest of us. It was a magnificent metaphor."

"If it was that blamed snappy," I said, "how come it fell to pieces? For the past year, it seems like Jesse's been running away from The Dog."

"The metaphor began to take over. The twins began to defend against each other," Matt said. "I've been watching it all along, but couldn't understand what was happening. John Still was trying to take over Jesse, and Jesse was trying to take over John."

"It worked for a long time," I said, "and then it didn't work. What's the kicker?"

“Our own belief,” Matt said. “We all believed in The Road Dog. When all of us believed, John was forced to become stronger.”

“And Jesse fought him off?”

“Successfully,” Matt said. “All this year, when Jesse came firing out of town, rolling fifty miles, and firing back, I thought it was Jesse’s problem. Now I see that John was trying to get free, get back on the road, and Jesse was dragging him back. This was a struggle between real men, maybe titans in the oldest sense, but certainly not imitations.”

“It was a guy handling his problems.”

“That’s an easy answer. We can’t know what went on with John,” Matt said, “but we know some of what went on with Jesse. He tried to love a woman, Sarah, and failed. He lost his dogs—which doesn’t sound like much, unless your dogs are all you have. Jesse fought defeat by building his other metaphor, which was that damned cemetery.” Matt’s voice got husky. He’d been holding in his sorrow, but his sorrow started coming through. It made me feel better about him.

“I think the cemetery was Jesse’s way of answering John, or denying that he was vulnerable. He needed a symbol. He tried to protect his loves and couldn’t. He couldn’t even protect his love for his brother. That cemetery is the last bastion of Jesse’s love.” Matt looked like he was going to cry, and I felt the same.

“Cars can’t hurt you,” Matt said. “Only bad driving hurts you. The cemetery is a symbol for protecting one of the few loves you can protect. That’s not saying anything bad about Jesse. That’s saying something with sadness for all of us.”

I slowed to pull onto Jesse’s place. Mike’s Olds sat by the trailer. Lights were on in the trailer, but no other lights showed anywhere.

“Men build all kinds of worlds in order to defeat fear and loneliness,” Matt said. “We give and take as we build those worlds. One must wonder how much Jesse, and John, gave in order to take the little that they got.”

We climbed from the Chrysler as autumn wind moved across the graveyard and felt its way toward my bones. The moon lighted faces of grave markers, but not enough that you could read them. Mike had the bulldozer warming up. It stood and pattered, and darkness felt best, and Mike knew it. The headlights were off. Far away on Highway 2, an engine

wound tight and squalling, and it seemed like echoes of engines whispered among the graves. Mike stood huge as a grizzly.

“I’ve shot horses that looked healthier than you two guys,” he said, but said it sort of husky.

Matt motioned toward the bulldozer. “This is illegal.”

“Nobody ever claimed it wasn’t.” Mike was ready to fight if a fight was needed. “Anybody who don’t like it can turn around and walk.”

“I like it,” Matt said. “It’s fitting and proper. But if we’re caught, there’s hell to pay.”

“I like most everything and everybody,” Mike said, “except the government. They paw a man to death while he’s alive, then keep pawing his corpse. I’m saving Jesse a little trouble.”

“They like to know that he’s dead and what killed him.”

“Sorrow killed him,” Mike said. “Let it go at that.”

Jesse killed himself, timing his tiredness and starvation just right, but I was willing to let it go, and Matt was, too.

“We’ll go along with you,” Matt said. “But they’ll sell this place for taxes. Somebody will start digging sometime.”

“Not for years and years. It’s deeded to me, Jesse fixed up papers. They’re on the kitchen table.” Mike turned toward the trailer. “We’re going to do this right, and there’s not much time.”

We found a blanket and a quilt in the trailer. Mike opened a kitchen drawer and pulled out snapshots. Some looked pretty new, and some were faded: a man and woman in old-fashioned clothes, a picture of two young boys in Sunday suits, pictures of cars and road signs, and pictures of two women who were maybe Sue Ellen and Sarah. Mike piled them like a deck of cards, snapped a rubber band around them, and checked the trailer. He picked up a pair of pale yellow sunglasses that some racers use for night driving. “You guys see anything else?”

“His dogs,” Matt said. “He had pictures of his dogs.”

We found them, under a pillow, and it didn’t pay to think why they were

there. Then we went to the Linc and wrapped Jesse real careful in the blanket. We spread the quilt over him, and laid his stuff on the floor beside the accelerator. Then Mike remembered something. He half unwrapped Jesse, went through his pockets, then wrapped him back up. He took Jesse's keys and left them hanging in the ignition.

The three of us stood beside the Linc, and Matt cleared his throat.

"It's my place to say it," Mike told him. "This was my best friend." Mike took off his cap. Moonlight lay thin on his bald head.

"A lot of preachers will be glad this man is gone, and that's one good thing you can say for him. He drove nice people crazy. This man was a hellion, pure and simple; but what folks don't understand is, hellions have their place. They put everything on the line over nothing very much. Most guys worry so much about dying, they never do any living. Jesse was so alive with living, he never gave dying any thought. This man would roll ninety just to get to a bar before it closed." Mike kind of choked up and stopped to listen. From the graveyard came the echoes, of engines, and from Highway 2 rose the thrum of a straight-eight crankshaft whipping in its bed. Dim light covered the graveyard, like a hundred sets of parking lights and not the moon.

"This man kept adventure alive, when, everyplace else, it's dying. There was nothing ever smug or safe about this man. If he had fears, he laughed. This man never hit a woman or crossed a friend. He did tie the can on Betty Lou one night, but can't be blamed. It was really The Dog who did that one. Jesse never had a problem until he climbed into that Studebaker." So Mike had known all along. At least Mike knew something.

"I could always run even with Jesse," Mike said, "but I never could beat The Dog. The Dog could clear any track. And in a damn Studebaker."

"But a very swift Studebaker," Matt muttered, like a Holy Roller answering the preacher.

"Bored and stroked and rowdy," Mike said, "and you can say the same for Jesse. Let that be the final word. Amen."

* * * *

IV.

A little spark of flame dwelt at the stack of the dozer, and distant

mountains lay whitecapped and prophesied winter. Mike filled the graves quick. Matt got rakes and a shovel. I helped him mound the graves with only moonlight to go on, while Mike went to the trailer. He made coffee.

“Drink up and git,” Mike told us when he poured the coffee. “Jesse’s got some friends who need to visit, and it will be morning pretty quick.”

“Let them,” Matt said. “We’re no hindrance.”

“You’re a smart man,” Mike told Matt, “but your smartness makes you dumb. You started to hinder the night you stopped driving beyond your headlights.” Mike didn’t know how to say it kind, so he said it rough. His red mustache and bald head made him look like a pirate in a picture.

“You’re saying that I’m getting old.” Matt has known Mike long enough not to take offense.

“Me, too,” Mike said, “but not that old. When you get old, you stop seeing them. Then you want to stop seeing them. You get afraid for your hide.”

“You stop imagining?”

“Shitfire,” Mike said, “you stop seeing. Imagination is something you use when you don’t have eyes.” He pulled a cigar out of his shirt pocket and was chewing it before he ever got it lit. “Ghosts have lost it all. Maybe they’re the ones the Lord didn’t love well enough. If you see them, but ain’t one, maybe you’re important.”

Matt mulled that, and so did I. We’ve both wailed a lot of road for some sort of reason.

“They’re kind of rough,” Matt said about ghosts. “They hitch rides, but don’t want ‘em. I’ve stopped for them and got laughed at. They fool themselves, or maybe they don’t.”

“It’s a young man’s game,” Matt said.

“It’s a game guys got to play. Jesse played the whole deck. He was who he was, whenever he was it. That’s the key. That’s the reason you slug cops when you gotta. It looks like Jesse died old, but he lived young longer than most. That’s the real mystery. How does a fella keep going?”

“Before we leave,” I said, “how long did you know that Jesse was The

Dog?"

"Maybe a year and a half. About the time he started running crazy."

"And never said a word?"

Mike looked at me like something you'd wipe off your boot. "Learn to ride your own fence," he told me. "It was Jesse's business." Then he felt sorry for being rough. "Besides," he said, "we were having fun. I expect that's all over now."

Matt followed me to the Chrysler. We left the cemetery, feeling tired and mournful. I shoved the car onto Highway 2, heading toward Matt's place.

"Wring it out once for old times?"

"Putter along," Matt said. "I just entered the putter stage of life, and may as well practice doing it."

In my mirrors a stream of headlights showed, then vanished one by one as cars turned into the graveyard. The moon had left the sky. Over toward South Dakota was a suggestion of first faint morning light. Mounded graves lay at my elbow, and so did Canada. On my left the road south ran fine and fast as a man can go. Mist rose from the roadside ditches, and maybe there was movement in the mist, maybe not.

* * * *

There's little more to tell. Through fall and winter and spring and summer, I drove to Sheridan. The Mormon turned out to be a pretty good man, for a Mormon. I kept at it, and drove through another autumn and another winter. Linda got convinced. We got married in the spring, and I expected trouble. Married people are supposed to fight, but nothing like that ever happened. We just worked hard, got our own place in a few years, and Linda birthed two girls. That disappointed the Mormon, but was a relief to me.

And in those seasons of driving, when the roads were good for twenty miles an hour in the snow, or eighty under sun, the road stood empty except for a couple times. Miss Molly showed up once early on to say a bridge was out. She might have showed up another time. Squinchy little taillights winked one night when it was late and I was highballing. Some guy jackknifed a Freightliner, and his trailer lay across the road.

But I saw no other ghosts. I'd like to say that I saw the twins, John and Jesse, standing by the road, giving the high sign or dancing, but it never happened.

I did think of Jesse, though, and thought of one more thing. If Matt was right, then I saw how Jesse had to die before I got home. He had to, because I believed in Road Dog. My belief would have been just enough to bring John forward, and that would have been fatal, too. If either one of them became too strong, they both of them lost. So Jesse had to do it.

The graveyard sank beneath the weather. Mike tended it for a while, but lost interest. Weather swept the mounds flat. Weed-covered markers tumbled to decay and dust, so that only one marble headstone stands solid beside Highway 2. The marker doesn't bend before the winter winds, nor does the little stone that me and Mike and Matt put there. It lays flat against the ground. You have to know where to look:

Road Dog

1931-1965

2 Million miles, more or less

Run and run as fast as we can

We never can catch the Gingerbread Man

And now even the great good cars are dead, or most of them. What with gas prices and wars and rumors of wars, the cars these days are all suspensions. They'll corner like a cat, but don't have the scratch of a cat; and maybe that's a good thing. The state posts fewer crosses.

Still, there are some howlers left out there, and some guys are still howling. I lie in bed of nights and listen to the scorch of engines along Highway 2. I hear them claw the darkness, stretching lonesome at the sky, scating across the eternal land; younger guys running as young guys must; chasing each other, or chasing the land of dreams, or chasing into ghostland while hoping it ain't true—guys running into darkness chasing each other, or chasing something—chasing road.