

MARY ROSENBLUM

THE RAINMAKER

Mary Rosenblum is currently working on a mystery series set in Hood River, Oregon. The first novel Devil's Trumpet is due out in about six months.

Mary calls this new story an example of "American Magic Realism," but it seems to me we need a better term, something akin to "Southern Gothic" that could apply to stories of the Pacific Northwest (like the recent novels of Nina Hoffman and Jack Cady). Hmm, that's a bit of a stumper. Fortunately for us all we don't need labels to enjoy poignant stories like this one that explore classic American myths.

SO HE'S A FRAUD?" DAD SAID.

"Well, have you ever heard of a genuine rain-maker?" Uncle Kenny cut a neat triangle out of his stack of pancakes. "Sandy, I swear these could be Mom's hotcakes. I never could get 'em right."

"You'd say anything for a free breakfast, little brother." Mom ruffled his hair the way she does mine, and she flipped three more of the browned cakes onto a plate. "Better eat these, Donny, before your uncle talks me out of 'em. So how come you don't arrest this man, if he's a fraud? You're 'the Sheriff." She planted her hands on her hips. "It's a crime, cheating folks around here. Who has any money to waste, with the cattle market so bad?"

"We sure as hell don't." Dad pushed his chair back. "Got to check those heifers." He reached for his hat. "We're gonna run out of pasture in about two weeks," he said in a tired voice. "Guess I'll have to ship a bunch out, in spite of the beef prices. Once they start losing weight, I won't get squat for 'em anyhow."

"Hey, you could hire this rainmaker." Uncle Kenny speared the last sticky forkful of pancake and wiped the syrup from his plate with it.

"I kind of wish I could." Dad wasn't smiling. For a moment he held Uncle Kenny's narrow stare, then he turned away. My uncle shook his head.

"John sounds like he wants to get religion." He laughed.

Don't, Kenny." Morn was collecting dishes. "It's tough right now."

"It's always tough for him, isn't it? This rainmaker dude is slick." He changed the subject abruptly. "He doesn't promise anything. Not in writing, anyway. If folks want to be stupid and give him money, it's not a crime."

"He's trading on faith." Mom's face had gotten tight. "That's a sin, even if

it's not a crime."

"I sure agree with you." Uncle Kenny sighed, and kissed her as he got to his feet. "Wish you made the laws, Sis. So, Donny-boy." He grinned down at me. "You ready to ride?."

Mom was looking at me, and I had to say yes. I'd been just about willing to kill to ride with Uncle Kenny, sitting shotgun beside him as he tooled the green and white Sheriff's Department Jeep through the sage that was mostly what makes up Hamey County. Everybody liked Uncle Kenny. It used to make me feel real important, seeing how respectful everyone treated him. I licked my lips, trying to think of an excuse not to go. "Sure," I finally said, and pretended not to notice Mom's eyes get 'narrow.

"You'll make a good deputy, kid." He slapped me on the shoulder -hard enough to hurt. "Let's go."

Uncle Kenny put his sunglasses on when he got into the car. I didn't say much as we drove back into town. It was hot, and I had the window down all the way, but the July heat washed over me, making me hotter. There isn't much to Bums. The high school. A few streets on either side of highway 20. A lot of sage beyond that, in gray-green clumps. You got rocks, too, and dust the color of a buckskin mustang's hide. I saw a ghost in the distance, just walking through the sage. He was carrying a bucket.

I see them a lot -- the ghosts. Sometimes I think the desert preserves them, like it does the old homesteaders' cabins that are scattered all through the sage. Or maybe the ghosts are everywhere, but it's just easier to see them out here. I told my mom about them when I was six. She went in the bedroom and cried, after. I heard her through the door. I never talked about 'em after that. They don't pay us any attention anyway. I wonder if they even know we're here?

"You're sure talkative," Uncle Kenny spoke up. "Can't shut you up for a second. Something eating at you, Donny-boy?"

"No sir." I could feel his eyes on me, but I couldn't stop looking at the ghost.

"Maybe we need to talk," he said in a real quiet voice.

I sneaked a quick look at him then, and yeah he was looking at me. I stared at my twin faces in the mirrored surface of his glasses, and my stomach kind of folded in on itself, so I could feel the lump of the pancakes I'd eaten. Then his head jerked a little and he turned sharp without warning, so that I had to grab the door. We were pulling into the parking lot of the motel across the street from the high school, tires squealing. No siren.

This was Wednesday in late July. The lot should have been empty -too early in the day for the truckers to be stopping, or the folks passing through on their way to somewhere else. But it was full -- so full that Uncle Kenny pulled up behind two big Ford rigs slantwise, not even bothering to look for a parking

space. A green and orange patio umbrella stuck up over the crowd at the back of the lot, out where the asphalt left off and the sage began. Everybody was back there, crowding around like it was a booth at the county fair.

"Let's go, Donny." Uncle Kenny threw off his seatbelt like he was mad. "Time to further your education."

Relieved, I scrambled out after, wondering if I could find someone I knew and get myself invited over for the afternoon. Uncle Kenny would buy that.

The crowd around the umbrella parted to let my uncle through, and I followed, looking hard for a face...any face. I saw a bunch of people I knew --Mr. Franke, who managed the Thriftway, and the lady who always worked the cash register at the Payless. No kids, though. Then I saw Mrs. Kramer, my English teacher. I stopped short, like I was skipping, g school, even though it was summer. It made me feel funny, seeing her there in blue jeans like anybody, with my uncle pushing past her.

"We see the world clearly, when we're children." A man's rich voice rose over the murmur of the crowd. It sounded like velvet feels and it sent shivers down my back. "When we're very young, we believe what we see. It's only as we grow up that we learn to doubt B to disbelieve the things that we once knew were real. When we were children, we knew we could summon the rain -- or wish it away."

"I don't remember making it rain." Mrs. Kramer spoke up in her late-homework tone and I craned my neck trying to see, because I bet that guy was cringing.

"Our yesterdays change to suit today's belief." The man sounded like he was smiling. "Haven't you ever listened to the arguments at a family reunion.* You don't really need me, but if you can't remember how to bring the rain yourselves, you can pay me to do it."

I forgot about Uncle Kenny and pushed forward, not even noticing who I was shouldering past. The man's words made me shiver again -inside this time, like taking too deep a breath of frosty winter air. I was waiting for Mrs. Kramer to cut him off at the knees, like she does when you tell her how the goat ate your homework, but she didn't say anything.

"You got a vendor permit, mister?" Uncle Kenny spoke quietly, but everybody stopped talking right away. He was like that. He could walk into a noisy bar and talk in a normal voice and everybody would shut up to hear him. "You got to have a permit to peddle stuff in this town." He stepped forward, and I could see the man now, squinting from the umbrella's shade. He didn't look like he sounded. He was small, kind of soft and pudgy, with a round sweating face and black hair that More would have wanted to neaten up. I was disappointed, I guess.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff." He spread his hands. "I didn't know I needed a permit to talk."

"Folks work hard for their money around here." My uncle hooked his thumbs in his

gun belt. "The government takes a big bite and maybe, if beef prices are high enough, we can pay the mortgage and feed our kids on what's left." He paused, looking around at the faces that surrounded him. Everybody had moved back a little, making a ring, like you do when there's a fight out behind the gym. "What you do should be against the law." He turned his attention back to the little man. "It isn't, but we don't have to put up with your slimy kind." He let his fingers curl loosely over the top of his holstered .44. The little man nodded at the gun, his lips pursed.

"Are you threatening to beat me up or shoot me?" he asked mildly.

The silence around us got real tight and I looked away, thinking of the winter night when I had watched through the steamed-up windshield as Uncle Kenny beat up this ranch hand who'd been starting a lot of ugly bar fights in town. "Sometimes you got to know the right language," he had said when he returned to the car. He had wiped the blood from his hands carefully on a towel he pulled from under his seat. "Jail doesn't scare his kind much. But now-- he'll mind his manners. I'm just tryin' to save him from knifing somebody one night, and getting himself a prison sentence for it."

I'd believed him. I watched my uncle's lips tighten.

"Tell you what," he said in a hard voice. "You're so sure you're God's messenger, Mister Rainmaker, let's make a little wager. You make it rain on my place, I'll pay triple your fee." He tilted his head slowly back to stare at the hot, hard sky. Not a cloud anywhere-- not even a wisp of cirrus. "It don't rain, then you move on and don't ever set foot in Hamey County again." He lowered his head, his eyes as hard as the sky. "You willing to put it on the line, Rainmaker?"

"Whatever you want." The man shrugged. "But I don't make rain. I just call it."

"How 'bout you call it right now?"

"I can start right now." The Rainmaker pursed his lips into a little frown. "It takes time for weather to happen. I don't do Hollywood special effects. We're talking a shift in the jet stream, cold fronts and warm fronts. Big masses of air and moisture. Takes time to move that much around."

"Yeah, got you." Uncle Kenny turned around slow, talking to the crowd now. "So if it rains sometime next Christmas, you did it?" He winked. "That's how it works?" People laughed, but the clear space got bigger around the umbrella and the little man. Only Ms. Kramer didn't move.

"I don't think my cows can wait till Christmas," someone said.

"It won't take that long." The man answered solemnly, as if Uncle Kenny had asked a real question. "Couple of days -- maybe four." He shrugged. "When it gets close, I'll let you know."

"And it'll rain right on my land, huh.? Just there?"

"Why not our south pasture?" I spoke up. "Grass'd sprout in a couple of days back there if it rained. Dad could put the heifers in instead of sellin' 'era." I looked at my uncle. "You don't have any cattle. You don't need the rain."

"Good idea." Hiram Belker, our neighbor to the east, spoke up from the crowd. "Maybe some of that there water'll land on my back forty." He guffawed -- was answered by more laughter.

"Why not?" Uncle Kenny slid his sunglasses into place and turned his shiny mirrored gaze on me. "Hell, do my poor brother-in-law a favor. We'll make it a public event. I'll put up a notice on the bulletin board in the Courthouse lobby when our wizard here decides the rain's comin'. We can party." He grinned around at the crowd. "Don't forget your umbrellas, folks."

He turned away and people turned with him, like he'd given an order. I looked to see if the Rainmaker was mad about that, but he just looked tired. He noticed me looking and gave me a small smile. I smiled back, wondering how he meant to do it, then flinched as my uncle's hand landed hard on my shoulder.

"How 'bout we go get a burger, Donny-boy? We can watch for the clouds to show up."

"It's kind of early for lunch." My voice sounded squeaky.

He opened his mouth to reply, but just then one of my uncle's' deputies tapped him on the shoulder. "Kenny? Ronny Carter just called in." He shook a Marlboro out of the squashed pack in his uniform pocket. "You'll never guess what he found out in the sage on his summer range-over by White Horse Creek? The Rojas kid's old beater Chevy."

"Is he sure it's Rojas's?" Uncle Kenny pushed his hat back on his head. "I thought he took off to Mexico to visit his mother, way back in November. Did he find a body.?"

"Nope." The deputy dragged on his cigarette and blew out a blue lungful of smoke. "Found the registration. Coyotes had all winter."

Uncle Kenny turned to me. "Let's go, Donny-boy."

"Excuse me." The Rainmaker had finished folding his umbrella. "I don't know my way around here." He brushed dust carefully from gray slacks that looked prissy alongside the jeans everybody else pretty much wore. "Perhaps your nephew could show me where you expect this to fall? Or are you free to escort me?"

"Sure," I said, before Uncle Kenny could say anything. "I'll show you."

Uncle Kenny just looked at me, long and hard, and then shrugged and spat. "Whatever you want, kid." He turned his back on us, and walked off with his

deputy.

The motel lot was almost empty now. The crowd had left a scatter of crumpled burger wrappers, pop cups, and cigarette butts to mark where it had been. I remembered our one trip to the beach, when I was eight --how the tide had left the same litter of dead seaweed, trash, and broken shells on the clean white sand. I'd found a dead seal, all bloated, with empty eye sockets and grinning yellow teeth. There were ghosts there, too-- harder to see, like shadows, but they were there.

"What's your name?" The Rainmaker was looking at me with this thoughtful sort of expression.

"Donald," I said.

"Dimitri." He offered me a pudgy hand and I shook it solemnly. Dimitri sounded foreign. Russian or something. "Saturday hours are precious ones," he went on. "Thank you for giving up a few of them for me. Here." He handed me the folded umbrella, nodded at a dusty blue Dodge Caravan parked on the far side of the lot.

It wasn't a good car for the desert. But when he opened the back, I saw camping gear, some canned stuff in a box, and a couple of five-gallon water jugs. Full. Okay, he wasn't stupid anyway. I got into the front seat beside him, wondering how he'd explain it when the rain didn't come. "What?" I said, when he just sat there staring at me.

"Your seatbelt."

I buckled it. Only Morn ever nagged me about the seatbelt. "Left on Highway Twenty," I said. "Take the first right after the gas station."

He turned the key, frowned as the engine sputtered. When it finally caught, he gunned it and pulled out of the motel lot. Clogged fuel injectors, I wanted to tell him. Pour some cleaner in the gas tank before you have to pay to get 'era fixed. "Turn here," I said, when we got to the track that led back to our spring pasture. I got the gate. A ghost was walking along the fence line as if he was checking the wire. He had a weathered face and wore tattered work pants held up by suspenders. I waited until he passed by before I unhooked the wire gate and pulled it aside.

When I climbed back into the front seat, the Rainmaker was staring at the place where the ghost had vanished. He looked at me, nodded, but didn't say anything more as we bounced slowly along the track. Something metal was rattling in the back. Pots and pans, sounded like.

"Do you really call the weather?" I licked my dry lips, wishing he'd go faster so we'd get a breeze. "Or are you a phony?"

"That's a refreshingly direct question." He chuckled. "Your uncle thinks I'm a

phony." We topped a rise and the Rainmaker halted the car. Turned off the engine and opened the door. "This feels like a good place," he said.

He walked away from me and stopped right on the edge of the slope. A pronghorn lifted her head from the sage, eyed us for a second, then trotted slowly away, her white sides flashing in the scorching sun. I wiped my face on my sleeve. I swear the Rainmaker wasn't even sweating. He stood there, looking like he was standing on a city street, just staring out at the sage and rock and dust that stretched to the horizon. This time of year, dry as it was, there wasn't any grass left to speak of. Just sage, and greasewood, and rabbit brush.

I got out, too, thinking that this was stupid, that this guy was a scare, and he'd wave his hands around, and then sneak off when nobody was looking. And I realized I was thinking all this in my uncle's voice. So I quit. And just listened to the desert. It talks, you know. Real quiet-- the sound of dust sifting against rock, and wind whispering through sage stems, sand shifting under a mule deer's hoof or a jackrabbit's paws. It doesn't notice us much. I told More about that, too. Once. She didn't cry, but it bothered her. I could tell.

The Rainmaker stood there in the blazing sun, arms at his sides, just staring into space with this kind of distant look on his face. And for a moment...just a few seconds, I guess...I felt something. It was like the air got solid. I don't mean I couldn't breathe or anything. But it was like I could feel it -- the air, could feel the clouds in it, hung up and leaking on the Cascade Mountains, could feel the cool dampness beyond them where all that water evaporating from the summer ocean was pushing inward. And I could feel...a weak spot. Where that nice damp air could push our way.

A ground squirrel scuttled over my toes. I jumped back, startled, and lost the feeling. Figured I'd just imagined it. I kicked a shower of dust after the vanished critter. Looked up to see the Rainmaker smiling at me.

"Tomorrow evening" he said, like he was agreeing with me. "We were lucky -- finding that weakening in the high pressure ridge."

I nodded and swallowed. Because his eyes were older even than old Mr. Long's, and he was a hundred and two, The Rainmaker looked out over Dad's pasture again, and now he just looked sad. "It's tough to believe in what you see," he said softly. "When everyone knows it can't be true. Come on. I'll take you home."

I shivered, and didn't answer him as I got back into the car. He drove me back down the track, and then up the main driveway to our house. And it wasn't until I had gotten out at the front door and he was driving away that I realized I'd never told him where I lived.

THE SKY WAS CLEAR that night, with just a sliver of a moon, and the Milky Way swept a white path across the sky, so clear that you could believe that it was a road, like in the old Indian tales, where you could ride a horse up it, right up into that sky.

"Hey, it's gonna rain tomorrow." Uncle Kenny had dropped by for dinner, like he did just about every night. "Can't you tell?"

"I'd sure take it, if it came." Dad popped another beer. "Hell, I'd pay the man." He helped himself to a slice of meat loaf with a grunt. "Pass me the potatoes, will you, Sandy?"

"Did I tell you we found the Rojas kid's car?" Uncle Kenny said. "Back along White Horse Creek." He reached for the meat loaf. "I guess the coyotes cleaned things up."

"Julio?" Mom paused, the steaming bowl of potatoes in her hand. "He went back to Oaxaca. To visit his mother."

"Guess not?" Uncle Kenny forked meatloaf onto his plate. "Drug deal gone bad, is my guess."

"No!"

"Don't kid yourself, Sandy." My uncle chewed, reached for his beer. "He was selling. Everybody knew it."

Hard to believe." Dad tilted his beer can to his lips. "He was a hard worker, that kid. Worth his pay-- and that's rare enough these days. Kids don't know how to work anymore. They grow up and figure that an hour with a shovel'll kill 'em." He looked at Mom. "You gonna hold onto those all night?"

Mom looked down at the bowl in her hands. With a jerky movement, she set it in front of Dad. Then she carried her untouched plate into the kitchen. Uncle Kenny finished his dinner and went over to click through the TV channels. Dad opened another beer. I slipped out of the house and walked up the rise behind the barn. You could see over toward the spring range from up here. Julio used to sit on a rock that stuck out over the dry wash behind the barn and play his guitar. He taught me chords. He told me how it was, growing up in Mexico. I told him about the ghosts once. He told me that his family had a party for the dead every year --that they're around. Same as us. I was about to go back to the house when I spotted a ghost walking along the lip of the wash. It disappeared near the rock where Julio used to sit. Early in the spring, I found some withered flowers on that rock. I went back to the house where Mom shoved a too-big piece of apple pie at me and didn't ask me where I'd been.

"Sky cloudin' up yet? Smellin' rain in the air.?" Uncle Kenny laughed and forked pie into his mouth, but the look he gave me stung like the flick of a quirt.

I told Mom I was tired, and went on up to bed.

"He's in love," I heard Uncle Kenny say as I climbed the stairs.. "He's got all the signs."

I got onto the bed, but it was still hot up here, even with the fan on. I turned the light off and just lay on top of my sheets in my T-shirt and shorts. When I heard Mom's footsteps on the stairs, I realized I'd been waiting for her to come up. I pulled the sheet over me and sat up in the dark.

She didn't turn on the light, and she didn't say anything, but I felt the edge of the bed sink. For a while we both just sat there. The air was thick with heat up here, and for a moment, I felt it again --clouds, rain, wind -- like a giant quilt that was constantly changing, shifting, moving above us. "Uncle Kenny's a good Sheriff, right?" The words sort of came out on their own. I didn't mean to say anything, hoped she'd let it pass.

"Yes, he is." She brushed the hair off my forehead, like she did when I was sick. "Julio didn't do it, you know.* Sell drugs. He was so lonely." Her voice faltered. "He was in love with a girl in Oaxaca. He made up songs for her on his guitar. What's wrong, Donny?" She had her hand under my chin now, so that I couldn't look away from her. "What happened between you and Kenny?"

I swallowed, but the words had balled up in my throat. I could only shake my head, glad it was dark.

"This is a hard place to live." She stood up. "He's a good man, Donny, even if he has to be hard, at times. Justice means everything to him. That's why he's good for the county."

I didn't have anything to say to that. She took her hand away after a while, and stood up without saying anything more. I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling for along time after she went downstairs. I heard my uncle drive away in his county Jeep, I heard my parents come upstairs to bed. Dad stumbled on the stairs and it sounded like he fell. Mom said something in the tone she uses when a cow is having trouble calving. I waited until their door closed, then I got up and went to the window. It was cool outside now, and the stars still glittered. But as I leaned over the sill into the night, I could feel the distant rain pressing against the air, pushing at it. It was on its way.

I waked before the sun was up and left the house just as it got light. The eastern sky had gone pink and soft gray as I followed the wash down across the east pasture. When it rained, the steep-sided little canyon filled up with water. Fast. My dad and I had had to ride out in a freak storm one spring, to move cattle out from where they'd holed up in the bottom, before it flooded. I remember that afternoon real well --lightning breaking across the sky in blue forks, rain falling in stinging sheets, the homes snorting and trying to bolt. The cattle milled in the shelter of the willow brush in the bottom, not wanting to move. Uncle Kenny had showed up on his rangy black mustang to help, still in uniform because he was on duty. The three of us had finally gotten the twenty or so cows and calves started up the bank -- just as a wave of brown water had come foaming down the bed. It had caught my pony, and he had reared, bellydeep in an instant. I knew we were goners. But then Uncle Kenny had grabbed the reins and hauled us both out of the flood. "Too cold for swimrain'," he'd said, and laughed.

I left the wash and climbed the slope, squinting at the first blaze of sun above the distant horizon. I stopped to get my breath on the ridge. Down below, near the highway fence, a dusty blue Dodge Caravan was parked by a crooked juniper. The Rainmaker was sitting on a little folding stool beside the car, a steaming mug in his hand. He smiled and nodded as I reached him, and stood up as if he'd been waiting for me to show. "You can tell me the good place for breakfast," he said.

The good place, he'd said. I thought about that. "The Spur," I said.

The parking lot was crowded. The Rainmaker didn't say anything as he parked at the edge of the lot. He turned off the engine and started to open the door.

"Can I do it?" I said. My voice sounded too loud, or too soft, I wasn't sure which.

"Do what?" He didn't turn around to look at me.

"Call the rain." I swallowed. "I can feel it coming. It's gonna get here soon."

"Tonight." He still didn't look at me. I thought he'd be glad, but his shoulders drooped, the way Mom's did when Dad had to take out the loan to pay the feed bills. "Yes." He went quiet again for a minute. "You can do it. But once you do -- you don't live in the same world with everybody else anymore. Think about that." He opened the door suddenly, letting in a gust of hot dusty wind. Got out.

I wanted to ask him more -- lots more -- but he wasn't going to answer me, so I didn't say anything as we went inside. It was crowded. The booths and formica-topped tables were mostly full and cigarette smoke drifted beneath the wagon-wheel lights with their yellow globes. It felt like evening instead of bright morning. And it got quiet while the waitress hustled us over to a table. I recognized a couple of faces from the motel parking lot yesterday. And Uncle Kenny was there-- drinking coffee in his regular booth by the door where he could see the whole room. He was sitting with one of his deputies, and I could feel him looking at me as I walked past like I hadn't seen him.

I sat down with my back to him and stared at the typed menu in its plastic sleeve. The words didn't make any sense, but I wasn't hungry anyway. "Can I have coffee, please.?" I asked the impatient waitress. "And a cinnamon roll."

The Rainmaker ordered the breakfast special -- steak and eggs with hashbrowns and toast. He looked up as the waitress bustled away and Uncle Kenny took her place. "Good morning, Sheriff." He smiled a bland, ' kind of tired smile.

"It ain't raining." Uncle Kenny pulled a chair out with a scrape that sounded way too loud in the utter silence that now filled the room. "So you chose up sides, huh, kid?"

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of movement. A Gray-haired old man was making his way down the aisle with a check in his hand. As he reached the cash register, he vanished.

"I'm talkin' to you, kid." My uncle's tone pulled my head back around like he'd tied a string to my jaw. "Your mom know you're here?"

I nodded, wondering who the old man had been, why he walked here, and made myself meet my uncle's eyes. She loves you. The words started swelling inside me like bread dough. Do you know that? That she loves you? More than me. More than Dad, even. Little brother.

"Easy," the Rainmaker murmured. Like I'd spoken out loud.

Uncle Kenny looked away-- at the wall, with its pictures of bronc and bull riders, Warm Springs Indians on rough-coated Paints riding beside cowgirls with satin shirts, spangles, and silver-mounted tack in rodeo parades. "So when's the show.*" He pushed his chair back, talking to the Rainmaker like he'd forgotten I was there. "When do we get our rain.?" He was talking loud and everybody in the place was listening to him. "Hey, we're spending the money. We want to be there when the curtain goes up."

"It'll probably rain tonight." The Rainmaker leaned back a little as the waitress plunked the big oval platter with his steak and eggs down in front of him, set down the smaller plate piled with toast, and whipped the coffee pot over his cup. She didn't fill mine, gave me a dirty look like I was drinking whiskey and not coffee as she paraded away.

"You don't sound too sure." Uncle winked around the restaurant, got chuckles and skeptical grunts on cue.

"No." The Rainmaker cut a precise rectangle of steak. "Nothing is certain in real life." He placed the meat neatly in his mouth.

Uncle Kenny snorted and turned his back. "I'll come wait with you tonight." He didn't look back as he strode across the restaurant. "You all are invited, too." He gave the room one last grin that seemed to focus on every person there. Got a couple of hoots in reply. "It's my party. Take the gate just west of the Highway Motel...north side of the highway. Look for my rig on the road. And bring your umbrellas." Chuckling, he pushed through the door. I heard his car start up outside.

The Rainmaker didn't seem to notice the stares as he ate his breakfast. They made me want to crawl under the table, but I sat up straight and turned my empty cup around and around, wishing the waitress would give me more coffee. Finally he was done and we got up to go. When the cashier told us he was \$1.50 short, he looked up at her so sharp she flinched. "He never got his cinnamon roll," he said, with a nod in my direction.

He had noticed, and not said anything.

I wasn't sure if I was pissed or not.

WE DROVE BACK out to the dry wash where we sat in the shade of a twisted juniper, watching its shadow creep across the ground. Waiting for the rain, I guess. The flowers on the rock had blown away a long time ago. "You wore going to tell me," I said. "How to do it."

"I never said that." The Rainmaker gave me a severe look. "It's not something you can teach. So you have decided to stop being a part of the human race?"

"You're human." I tossed a pebble at a fence lizard basking under a clump of bittergrass, watched it scuttle indignantly away. I tossed another when he didn't say anything. I kept remembering the way people had looked at him in the restaurant. "It's just because you're a stranger in town." The words didn't sound very convincing.

"You better tell your mother where you are." He crossed his arms on his knees. "She's worrying."

I got up, dusting off my jeans. Because she was. Movement flickered across the draw. The ghost again. You can't see them very well in the bright sun. I don't think it really shines on them, or even through them. The light sort of covers them up instead. This one sat on the shelf of rock where the flowers had been. The Rainmaker noticed him, too. He looked at me and raised one eyebrow, but I turned my back on him and ran up the side of the wash, and all the way home, so that I came into the kitchen soaked with sweat.

Mom met me with her fists on her hips, face stiff with anger, as if I'd skipped my chores. "Kenny told me where you were." Her voice trembled. "You go straight to your room, young man."

"Why?" I blurted out the word, angry myself, now. "What's wrong with having breakfast with..." I couldn't remember his name. "With the Rainmaker," I finished lamely.

"He's a fraud." She got angrier. "Where are your brains?"

"He's not a fraud."

"He's a crook. Cheating people."

"Who has he cheated, huh? You tell me who."

"Kenny said..."

"You always believe Uncle Kenny." I was yelling now. "Uncle Kenny is so damn perfect. You won't believe me, but anything he says..."

She slapped me.

For a moment I stared at her, face burning where her palm had struck, the sudden silence ringing in my ears. Then I turned and ran out of the kitchen, pounding up the stairs to my room. I slammed the door, and threw myself down on the bed. Mad at her. Mad at myself. Because a part of me had wanted her to tell me for sure that he was a fraud.

I lay on the bed, waiting for her to come upstairs, watching the sun move across the cloudless sky and sweating in the still heat of the upstairs. What if it didn't rain? I wasn't sure how I'd feel about that -- or maybe I just didn't want to know. But she didn't come upstairs, and that hurt, too. And I guess I fell asleep after a while, because it was dark when I woke up, and Mom was setting a tray on my desk.

"I brought your dinner up." She turned on the light and straightened, pushing wisps of hair back from her forehead. "It must be ninety up here. Why didn't you turn on the fan?" She snapped on the old box fan, her fingers brisk and impatient on the switch. The sudden gust of air felt cool on my face, and I imagined for a second that I could smell rain, the way the animals can.

"Your uncle went down to where that...man is camped." More sounded uneasy. "He's worried that a lot of people might show up. That they might get...rowdy."

"They'll come because he told 'era to." I didn't look at her. "They'll beat up the Rainmaker. Because he wants them to."

"No."

"Don't you get it, Mom?." I leaned forward, but she wouldn't look at me. "People always do what he wants 'em to do."

"Don't talk about your uncle like that." But she said it mechanically, in a dull tone without anger. "We couldn't make it without him. I couldn't make it." She got to her feet and walked out of the room.

I went over to the window, a fist squeezing my stomach until I thought I'd be sick. To the west -- in the direction of the distant ocean -the stars ended in a band of pure darkness above the horizon. I felt the fist in my stomach loosen a hair, fixed my eyes on a small pair of dim stars. They vanished. A twinkling yellow star above them vanished a moment later. "Mom," I called out. "Clouds."

She came back to stand silently beside me at the window. I heard her swallow. '

"Let's go down there," she said softly. "Your dad was going to haul the heifers to auction tomorrow."

We went downstairs together, tiptoeing through the living room, where my dad snored on the sofa, one hand loosely curled around a can of beer. I had never heard him snore before. His face looked soft and flushed. "Dad?" I stopped.

"He's all right." Mom's face was as still as a winter pond before a flight of geese lands. "He's just drunk." Her voice was without inflection.

I had never seen my father drunk. But I remembered his uncertain tread on the stairs every night, and her tone as she coaxed him to bed.

I thought Mom would take the truck, but she walked into the sage, as sure in the faint moonlight as if she came this way every day. I stumbled after her, tripping over sage stems and clumps of grass. I didn't catch up with her until she had reached the lip of the wash. The Rainmaker's camp was visible in the light from a single propane lantern. At least a dozen men milled in a loose circle around him. I recognized Uncle Kenny. He wasn't in his uniform. Suddenly he stepped forward, one hand closing on the front of the Rainmaker's shirt, lifting him onto his toes.

"You think we're a bunch of dumb cowboys, don't you?" His voice came to me on the wind, edged with violence. "We'll just grin and shuffle our feet and hand over our money to you, 'cause you're so smart, and we're just dumb hicks."

The men around them growled and shuffled forward, as if they were puppets, and he'd yanked all their strings at once. I took a step forward, caught my toe in a sage stem, and fell flat on my face. Eyes full of grit, I struggled to my knees, spitting dust. I knew what was going to happen -could see it, like on a movie screen. My face was wet and I wiped it on my sleeve. Crying, I thought, as I staggered to my feet. I'm not crying.

"Kenny!" Mom's voice was shrill and strange, and down below, my uncle paused, his fist drawn back, his other hand clutching the Rainmaker's shirt front. He looked up at her.

More water hit my face. Cold water. I looked up and laughed.

It was raining.

The stars had vanished, and the rain came down all at once, like someone had upended a cosmic bucket. It pounded on the dry ground and made the sage shiver. Below, the bunched, angry men were milling like nervous cattle. Uncle Kenny still held the Rainmaker by the shirt, but he had lowered his hand. My mom was running down to him, her wet hair plastered to her head. She looked like a kid and I realized suddenly how old my dad was. One of the men whooped, and somebody pounded on the Rainmaker's back.

By the time I got down to the Rainmaker's camp, I was soaked to the skin and muddy. People were still hanging around. I knew who they were. All of them. They were watching the first streams of brown water run down the bottom of the wash. I looked up at the rock shelf where I found the flowers, and yeah, the ghost was there, standing on the very edge. And it was really dark, but I could see him better than I ever had before --like there was a spotlight shining on him.

Julio Rojas.

He looked sad. I looked at my mom, and she was staring at that rock, too, but she didn't see him. She had her hands pressed tight against her chest, like she hurt inside. And Uncle Kenny was looking at her, too. Water was starting to fill the wash, brown and foamy as chocolate,, pouring down into the low land across the highway. When I looked again, Julio had gone from his rock, and I thought about the flowers, and my more running down through the sage like she knew the way.

And I could feel the water, like I'd felt the rain. I guess it was rain -only on the ground now, and not in the sky. And if it ran down the east side of the draw, it would cut away a lot of the dirt beneath the rock shelf. I took a step away from everyone, staring at that chocolate flood, feeling it like it was a wet rope sliding through my hands, and I didn't really think about it, I just started to pull.

A thin stream welled over a low berm of silt and stones from last winter's floods, pushed a small rock out of the way. I was sweating. The rock tumbled down the slope and more water welled after it, pushing more stones out of the way, dissolving the dirt. Then, suddenly, the berm gave way and was gone as if it had never been. The flood divided, sweeping now along the steep east wall of the wash, eating away the dirt below the shelf.

Uncle Kenny stepped up beside me, not noticing me, his eyes on that dissolving bank. His shoulders were hunched and his hands clenched into fists. The rock shelf tilted and wavered, and I heard him take a fast, short breath.

It tilted some more, slid very slowly into the churning water, smashing flat the sparse willow stems that lined the sides. Something showed in the hole left in the bank. Something not dirt colored. "Look!" I pointed. "Over there, along the bank."

I guess a couple of people looked, because someone broke away from the crowd and walked along the lip of the wash, hat pulled down against the still-steady rain, water soaking his shirt and jeans. Mr. Walker. Owner of the Bar Double D. He stopped above the light-colored object and stepped quickly back. "It's a body," he yelled to us. "My God. Someone was buried here."

Everybody went running over, boots splashing through the water, a half dozen tall shapes in wet clothes and pulled down hats. My uncle didn't go. Neither did my mom. They were both looking at me. "It's Julio," I said. My mom's face didn't change, but she made a small sound, like a hurt animal.

"I was sleeping over the night he disappeared." My uncle spoke up in that slow, lazy drawl he uses when he breaks up a fight. "Remember, Sandy?" He turned to her, smiling a little, his hand on her shoulder. "Dave and I got to drinking and I slept on the sofa. After we put Dave to bed."

I could feel his words turning solid in the air, reaching back over the weeks to change yesterday. I could feel my mom's relief as she started to nod. "No," I

said. "You left. Dad watched to after you were gone." And I had sneaked out, because the moon was full, and I couldn't sleep.

"Donny...., More whispered. "Don't."

Uncle Kenny had saved me when the flood caught my pony. He helped us a lot. When Dad was drunk. We couldn't make it without him. I couldn't make it. I heard my Mother's voice. Words took shape in my throat, stuck there like fish bones: Oh yeah, I remember now. You slept over. Sorry, Uncle Kenny.

The Rainmaker was looking at me, and he looked sad. Julio had taught me how to chord on his old, battered guitar. He had laughed, and missed the girl he had loved. Up on the bank, two of the ranchers were bending over Julio Rojas's body. I couldn't look at Mom "I saw you," I said to my uncle. "I was up in the sage."

For a moment, my uncle stared at me, his face all edges, as if the flesh had eroded away, leaving nothing but bone. "You're dreaming, kid. I was in the house, asleep, when he took off. Ask your mom." His laugh sounded like something breaking. "You're the crazy kid who sees ghosts and talks to the damn desert. Who's gonna believe you?"

She had told him. I couldn't look at her, wondering who else he had told, chuckling about it over a beer maybe, in the Spur at night. The rain was running into my eyes, but I didn't try to wipe my face, just stood there waiting for her to agree with him. Because I was only a crazy kid who saw ghosts, and back home, Dad had passed out, and there were the cattle to deal with. The ranch.

"He's not crazy, Ken." More spoke softly. "And he's right." Her voice sounded empty and cold. "You left. I remember because...I had a hard time getting Dave up the stairs by myself that night."

For a long moment, my uncle and my more stared at each other. Then my uncle turned away and slogged back toward the road. Only the Rainmaker saw him go. He was looking at me, standing hatless in the rain, his face as round and calm as the moon.

"Donny?" My mother's voice trembled. "Julio used to play his guitar for me." She closed her eyes briefly as we heard Uncle Kenny's car start. "He was so young and full of hope. He was a poet -- he made those songs up himself. That's all that happened between us. I swear it."

I nodded, but I couldn't speak. There wasn't anything inside of me. Just night and rain. After a moment Morn turned away. I watched her trudge toward the road after Uncle Kenny. You couldn't cross the wash anymore. She would have to take the long way home-- back to the empty house where my dad snored on the sofa. I flinched as the Rainmaker put a hand on my shoulder.

"I have to," I said. "Don't I?"

He squeezed my shoulder. "I'll make you some tea," he said, and his voice

sounded as old as the desert. Sad. Two of the ranchers went running back to their parked cars. To find the Sheriff? I wondered. "No, thank you," I said politely. "Mom's waiting for me."

And she was -- up on the road -- hugging herself in the pouring rain. She straightened as I got close. "Are you going to go with him?" she asked softly.

I shook my head. "I used to. listen to Julio play, too," I said. "He was really good. We'll have to tell someone."

She nodded once, eyes closed, then opened them and smiled at me. "We will." Then she reached for my hand, and as we walked along the road to our driveway together, the rain began to diminish to a slow, steady shower.