

Bring Your Legs with You

My brain is not wired for chess, so the Tuesdays me and my dad Gus got together he punked me good, game after game. "One move at a time," he told me. "Don't be counting your chickens." All that talk about calculating ten, fifteen plays ahead, Gus declared it crap. Be his guest, you're such a pistol. You're such a genius, you can calculate infinity? Because that's the number of plays is possible. It ain't like making doughnuts. "Go ahead, ace," he said to me. "Tell me where I'll be one play from now." Trouble was I bogged down on the board, and he took me apart.

Tonight he cooked linguini and tossed a seven-layer mile-high salad. He baked breads. Poured wine, a port, and me and Gus, the two of us in front of the TV we cheered on the Utah Jazz, loving their game, the many ways they embarrassed the showboating Lakers, all the time Gus talking about the years he was acquainted with the mobsters who ran Las Vegas when Grandpa Jersey owned one mortuary rather than the twenty Gus now let run themselves here in the city. Story I hadn't heard before was how Grandpa Jersey chewed cigarettes when the cops brought in a body they found in the desert, one that had been stewing there a week or two in a shallow grave. Tobacco killed the stench. Allowed him to breathe. Grandpa Jersey laid out the problem for an air conditioning guy named Phillips, who designed a system that pulled fresh air down across the body and out of the room. Phillips got rich. Grandpa Jersey caught his coattails and bought land cheap out near Red Rock and along Paradise Road. Turned nickels into gold.

Gus grabbed a bottle of wine, studied its label, mustered up a face, and said, "Portugal. Supposed to be what the gods imbibe." He set the bottle aside. Said, "Tommy, you want a real drink? Whiskey do you? Bourbon?" I shook him off. On the TV, the Jazz ran the Lakers dizzy, which is what you get when you think money can buy you what only busting your butt can do. Sports, at a pro level, is 99 percent mind. One percent agility. It's a given you're quick and strong. Question is: What's in your chest? Do you have the fire? Second question is: When your big guy thinks he's Aristotle, how far are you going in the playoffs? Gus poured himself bourbon, neat, and said, "You know this Brit calls himself Prince?"

I told him I saw the man box on HBO, Friday Night Fights.

Gus said, "What, and you didn't call?" He took me by the elbow and was walking me and him through his billiards room toward the backyard.

"How'd I know you'd want to see it?" I said. "It was close to one in the morning."

Gus said, "I'm old. I'm roaming the house all night."

I said, "The man backs up his mouth. Hits like a sledgehammer in the night."

"They say he's the second coming," Gus said.

"I got to admit he had me sitting up in my chair," I said. The ring-side announcers, a couple of poets in their own right, talked about fistic thunder in Prince's hands and a three-punch rhythm, left, left and right, equal weight and speed. He brought his legs with him blow after blow. The man was a headhunter bell to bell. A show and a half.

"A knockout?" Gus said.

"Right here." I showed Gus where Prince bopped the other fighter on the crown of his head. Where he thumped him. He stunned the guy, who was a lanky piece of barbed wire, a treacherous puncher from Scarborough, England, who was putting up a cockfight of his own. Threw darts himself.

Gus opened the slider to the patio. Stalled. He said, "Am I going to see you fight?"

I stepped aside and said, "You go ahead. I'll catch up with you. I need to see a gent about some land."

In the john off Gus's bedroom, I took a leak and went hunting for Gus's cocker spaniel, Vegas Vic. He came to Vic or Victory. He was standing on the bed in the guest room, perched at the foot of it, cal-

culating the distance he would need to travel to reach an ottoman shoved up against the baseboard for him to use. Vic was fifteen and wore sadness like an overcoat. He had seen that life was a carnival ride at its best. Gus got him as a puppy, one more dog sold out of a cardboard box on Fremont Street. Vic suffered from what the vet called paperfoot, which was the least of the problems the man had diagnosed over the years. There was a heart murmur. Vic had gone deaf in one ear. Lost teeth.

"Show me what you got," I said to the dog.

He blinked real slow. Baleful. Had a look in his eyes that said he had spent some of his nap time chatting with St. Peter and the message he was bringing back wasn't quite what we expected to hear. The other side didn't differ much from this side. You got flats on heavenly highways and the nectar of the gods soured if you left it out. Fruit rotted. Hearts got broken.

Vic made the big jump, came off the bed, hit the ottoman, stumbled, then righted the ship of himself, putting forward the effort the old make to get up from a sofa.

"You did it," I said.

He still had to get to the floor, so I airlifted him. Vic did his pins and needles walk down the hall, me at his side, the two of us pals. Outside, we took the flagstone steps to where Gus was sitting on a lounge chair by the pool. Gus tipped his head back and polished off his bourbon. Heard us behind him. He said, "You think you'd be on his list?"

It was clear to him I didn't catch his meaning. He was completing a conversation I hadn't followed.

"The Prince has a list," he said. "He's checking names off and knocking everyone out."

"Once upon a time I'd have been on it," I said. Prince boxed featherweight, which was where I did my amateur fighting. As a pro I moved up through the weight classes, and in the end, I retired from the ring holding two belts. Never lost. Not once. Thirty-one wins, twenty-nine by knockout. Now I roofed houses, not out of need, but for the love of a task physical enough to keep me sweaty and light-footed. My doing so made no sense to Gus. His argument was: *Who notices a roofer on the roof unless it leaks, and then you're only a noise?* He shakes his head at my walking away from the money, the fame, the celebrity.

"You'd've been the top of his list," Gus said.

I said, "Number one, number two, and number three."

"You'd've knocked his frigging head off."

I had enough of the boxer left in me to think so.

Gus in tonight's Bermudas and sandals was a disturbing picture. Beachcomber Gus. My dad was looking like he took a detour that was leading him too far out of his way. If he had been a sign he would have been missing some letters. Maybe the u from his name. Would be just G . . . s. I was growing up, he was Armani suits before Armani came to Las Vegas. I once saw Gus wear a white linen jacket and trousers and wide-brimmed Panama hat at a funeral. You could have used the shoes Gus bought as collateral on a loan. He wore nothing but silk ties a lady, one of those personal shoppers, chose for him.

"I'm thinking of a plan," he said. He was frisky, jittery, grinning, flashing his newly bought-and-paid-for choppers, teeth so white against his tan they made you think of death riding a tricycle. I pulled up a chair. Vic flopped on his side and rolled in the grass, wiggling himself around, cooling off. Gus said, "It's about your mother." Edna, she died seven months ago—cancer, quicker, sneakier, and more vicious than the worst scenario you can imagine or have ever read about. Ain't no words for what can happen to a body. If there is such a thing as a soul, cancer's got its number. Trust me. Edna was fifty-seven. She could have been a tree stump by the time she let go. Looked that bad.

I said, "You going to do something behind her back, is that it?"

"Not possible," Gus said. "Nobody got nothing past her dead or alive."

I could see he could use another drink, so I hoofed it up the steps and carried home the bourbon. Poured till he signaled stop. Halved his tumbler. He stared at the drink and said, "I met her mother's mother once and that was it."

Met was the wrong word. Our family drove to Ely, Nevada, in time to be told Edna's mother had just died in the hospital. I don't think I was in high school yet. An Indian girl named Naomi, chasing a dog down a hill, ran into Constance, my mother's mother, and broke her hip. Then Constance, the day she was to go home from the hospital, fell from her bed and rebroke it. She never was released. No one phoned Edna until after the second break. Too late, like I said.

We drove through the night, went straight to the hospital, and Constance was dead. Second time around on the hip, internal bleeding. Edna refused to stay for the funeral, and she didn't try to reach her family. Not even Gus ever learned what the trouble was, if it was a feud, who had offended who and in what way, how deep it ran. He never shook anybody's hand—not her dad's, not brothers' or sisters'. Not one of them. We had a couple of photos left was all.

"It's time to solve the mystery," Gus said.

Vic moseyed over to the pool, and I got up to keep him from toppling in. I turned on a hose and filled one of the bowls Gus kept on the patio. The dog wandered over, pawed at the water. Huffed off.

Gus said, "I'm going to Ely." He sipped his bourbon, said, "You up for it?"

"When?" I said.

Gus said, "What's wrong with right now, this minute?"

I walked Vic and his fleece pad next door to the Kimballs, good people and dog lovers. Gus located my sister, Ginger, at her fiancé's. Let her know she was on her own for a couple of days, and we were packed and gone by midnight. It was one dark ride up 93, a two-laner that took us through Alamo and Caliente. No moon sitting pretty in the blue-black sky, just Gus sawing logs.

Out of Pioche, on a long stretch, the sun appeared. Popped up and gave me a boost. I felt the way you do when you open the blinds in the morning after a sleep on your pal's couch. The desert lay to our left and right, gorgeous in its soft haze. Sagebrush, then a dry lake, and a range of mountains, different shades of blue and purple like a jigsaw puzzle. Middle of June and there was snow on a couple of peaks to the east. It could have been five miles or a thousand to the foothills.

"Obdurate," Gus, eyes slits, said. He was leaning for a slow look out the passenger's side window.

Sure, I thought. No pity. Hard hearted. But not only. You limit your vocabulary and you miss the beauty. You turn the desert's rigor ugly. You miss its point. You forget what resolute can mean.

Gus realigned himself and buzzed his seat up, then down. We were driving his Cadillac. "Coffee?" he said. We had a thermos in the

back. I pulled over, and we stood on the shoulder, the sun already burning color into the desert. Reds. Pinks. Yellows. The blue-green sage. Gus said, "Do you know how far?"

"Another hour," I said.

He filled our tin cups. "My plan runs out once we get there," he said. "Then we play it by ear." Up ahead, where the road cut through a ridge, five coyotes drifted toward the highway. Not more than fifty yards away. "Sweet Jesus," Gus said.

I said, "You want to talk about obdurate."

They moved easy, relentless. Body fat 0 percent. Rangy and unyielding. They glided, loped, turned north. Try talking one out of its desire. Good luck. Creatures like that, if they got hungry enough, would, on the move, tear off a piece of their own chest or leg muscle and chew on it.

Gus said, "You don't see that every day."

Ely, Nevada, Gateway to the Great Basin National Park, the crossroads where US Highways 50, 93, and 6 met. We topped Connors Pass, swung through the grasslands and past Comin's Lake, and there it was. Our room at the Bristlecone Motel sat on us heavy as a root cellar. Gus showered and volunteered to locate some breakfast. He had put on fresh shorts and, this time, a Hawaiian shirt, a flora-and-fauna print to it.

Edna's family name was McCarty. Edna McCarty. Only one McCarty in the book, P. T.—Paul, Gus said, her father—and we found the address in five minutes, a one-story house on one of the avenues laid out into and along a hill. The houses on the low side dropped away so that you could see beyond them to Highway 93 running north to McGill. It was clear from where we parked in the street the McCartys hadn't replaced their roof in forty years. Shingles were missing. Others were curled, and the felt and wood showed through. The sidewalk in front was ragged, the slabs tilted, off-shot. Weeds grew in the cracks. There was a four-foot retaining wall running the length of the entire street. A set of steps led you to the McCartys' walkway. The handrail was plumber's pipe, galvanized, painted silver. The wall in front had been whitewashed. The house itself didn't match its surroundings. It was brick, the color of red wine, was the house you would see in a neighborhood crowded with trees. There

ought to have been shrubs and gooseberries surrounding it, rose bushes bordering the yard and in bloom. Maybe a dogwood. It had arched windows, an arched porch, arched doorway. Reality here was that the front yard was hardpan. Not one blade of grass. Not a tree. The driveway was gravel except for two narrow strips of concrete.

We reached the front door, and a man came around the side of the place. He was carrying a punch bowl. Had to be crystal. He was holding merchandise worth five thousand dollars, I was thinking. He could have been seventy given the way he moved, which was a little like he'd been forced out onto a diving board. His face said ninety—there was that much detail to it. Not a hair left on his head. No lips to speak of. Bitten eyes.

"What you peddling, gentlemen?" he said. He was dressed in a black suit I would have bet he wore for one hour in the 1950s, maybe to his own wedding half a century back.

Gus said, "We look like salesmen?" He swept a hand over his shorts, his Hawaiian shirt, his sandals.

"Peddlers come in all shapes and sizes," the man said. "You know as well as I do they say you don't judge a package by the package."

I said, "We're not selling anything."

"For sure you're not giving it away," he said. "No offense, but no one is." He crossed the yard and set the punch bowl on a porch chair. He had jammed a ladle into his back pocket. He set it inside the bowl. We followed, and he came at us to shake hands.

Gus said, "We're trying to find P. T. McCarty's."

"Art Worst," he said and we shook. "Worst of the Worsts is our joke," he said.

"Is this McCarty's place?" Gus said.

"Is," Worst said. He picked up the bowl and said, "Was." He started down the walk, stopped to punctuate what he was about to say. Said, "Surprising, isn't it, the turns life takes?"

We tagged along, Gus saying, "You've got our attention, Mr. Worst."

"Call me Worst," he said. We stalled at the top of the steps to the sidewalk. He handed the ladle to me and said, "You mind watching over this, if you're coming along?" It had been sliding around inside the bowl, making a racket. I took it, and he said, "This fine crystal is for the funeral. Mr. Luther McCarty's passing to the other side, which, I'm guessing is why you're on my doorstep."

Gus said, "We didn't know."

"I was thinking you're family," Worst said. He hustled as best he could down the steps, talking, telling us he was running late. "Hands to shake, babies to kiss," he said.

So Worst filled us in. Luther McCarty was P. T. McCarty's younger brother. There was an older sister named Emerald. P. T. died ten years ago. Prostate cancer he didn't have an inkling of until he was too late and one month from the grave. P. T.'s name was left in the phone book for privacy reasons.

"Whose privacy?" Gus said.

Worst said, "Patience. I'm getting there."

A year after P. T. died, Worst married his widow, a woman named Selma, who had been P. T.'s third or fourth wife, Worst wasn't recalling exactly, him and Selma both over seventy at the time, both of them still good in the feet and the head, pals more than anything else. She died, cancer again, the twentieth century's undertaker. Her passing left Worst alone in the house. "You know what they say," Worst said. "You live long enough, and, hell, your body's going to take matters into its own hands." So Selma died, and Worst stayed on. Luther McCarty came to live with him, fell off a ladder, broke his hip and never recovered, hip death—so the logic went—being a family curse.

"You lost me," Gus said.

"Point is," Worst said, "house is mine. I'm family by the law."

We followed the hill down a couple of streets, Worst talking a blue streak. Gus told him he had married Edna, P. T.'s daughter. We reached a stretched-out, flat building, looked like the low-rent place you'd sell insurance from, the building that might house the post office temporarily, where you'd go for a notary. Across the front were Venetian blinds hung in elongated windows. Worst handed Gus the crystal and unlocked the door. He took the bowl back and stepped aside for us to go ahead. It was freezing inside. One hundred on the dirt out front. Sixty in here. Worst said, "I'm thinking I didn't know Edna."

"Edna McCarty," Gus said.

Worst said, "Isn't a name I recall."

Inside, at one end of a hall was a casket, a pot of carnations at the foot of it, yellow day lilies near the head. There was a banner that said *Luther "Luke" McCarty/God Rest His Soul*. In a corner was a Yamaha keyboard, not quite a piano, but the kind of music maker you see in some family's rec room. It had foot pedals. A short boxy

speaker sat on each side of it on the floor. A padded bench was waiting for the musician. Worst placed the punch bowl at one end of a long table, next to a box of Dixie cups. I laid the ladle by it, heard Worst say to Gus, "She sister? niece? what?"

"Edna was my wife," Gus said. "P. T.'s daughter, like I said. Constance was her mother."

Worst said, "First wife? Second?"

"I thought there was only one," Gus said.

"None of it rings a bell," Worst said. "Except P. T.'s name." He shifted paper napkins so they were next to the bowl. They were blood red. Worst said, "It's all in one day we'll be doing the ceremony. We got the viewing starting at five, and then we load Luther up and it's ten minutes to the cemetery. I'm saying five words at the grave site and that's all the service there will be. You're welcome, the two of you, if you'd like to come along." He laid out silverware, saying, "Luther's dying wish was to be under the ground within forty-eight hours. It was all he asked for, a pine box and quick burying, and I'm killing myself to oblige."

Gus talked to Worst, and I wandered outside. Across the street, there was a garage sale going on. A woman holding a papillon was sitting in the shade of a tree, the pair of them on one of those plastic chairs you buy at gas stations, the kind you stack. This one dark green. She had covered three card tables with knickknacks. Clothes hung on hangers along the edges. There was a row of vacuums next to her. There were floor lamps. She was selling a mower she hadn't bothered to hose off. It was caked in grass and mud. An extension cord snaked out of a window of her house and plugged into a fan at her back. It stood tall and rotated 180 degrees. On an end table at her elbow was a CB walkie talkie, its antennae extended.

She called to me. Said, "You family?"

I walked toward her. "You know the McCartys?" I said.

She was wearing wrap-around sunglasses, the lenses big as the ears on her dog. Her clothes made me think of a garden of sunflowers, one badly watered. She wore a scarf for a hat and had on her feet wrap-around shoes that fit like bandages. I waited until I had crossed the street, until I'd gotten the squint out of my eyes, and I said, "Edna McCarty was my mother."

The woman had white paper dots stuck to the backs of her hands. Prices on them, \$4, \$.50, \$5, \$6.50. She saw me staring and said, "It's how I keep track of what I sell and whether or not I've removed the price if it's a gift wrap." She pointed at a paper sack full of jewelry boxes, most of them white, some gray.

I said, "Did you know Edna?"

"If Edna was your mother," she said, "then that would make that other gentleman the gangster she went off to marry, if he's your father, I mean, and I'm thinking he is because I seen bits and pieces of him in you from where I'm sitting."

"Sharp eyes," I said.

She said, "The way you put your shoulders is one example." She showed me what she meant, and I recognized me and Gus in the way she held herself. The woman said, "She flew the coop still wet behind the ears."

This, of course, was not the story I'd been raised on. The gangster part had to be small-town foolishness. Was stupid gossip. The story I knew was Gus met Edna in Las Vegas at a Frank Sinatra show on the Strip. A man named Lenny Shafer introduced them, rubbed his hands together like that matchmaker he was being, and said, "I hear wedding bells." Their courtship was flowers and Perry Como songs, was long and slow and romantic. It involved boating on Lake Mead, and they loved the movies.

I said, "The gentleman is my father. I'm Tommy Rooke, and he's Gus. If he's a gangster, you've got a scoop."

"I'm just saying what was being talked around, and we're going back thirty, forty years, or so." She licked a finger and held it up. Testing the wind. She said, "Maybe not so long as that." She said, "i. e. God." Said, "Tick tock. God's lips to your ears. Throw away the key." And she did. She zippered up her mouth, locked her lips and tossed the key over her shoulder.

"That's one sorry-ass way to run a funeral," Gus said. We'd gotten back to the car, and he had the air conditioning on high. Gus slapped his dark glasses to his face. He said, "Let's find some decent clothes."

I said, "We're going to the burial?"

"There's got to be some family there, right?"

I said, "The woman running the garage sale tells me the word in Ely is that Edna ran off and married a gangster."

"Me?" he said.

"She tells me so."

We pulled out, Gus saying, "She could have. Who knows. Anything can happen in this world. She never told me one word about her life before we met. That subject was off limits, completely, no negotiation."

"You talked some about it?"

"Your mother was an incomprehensible woman."

"But you would have known."

"You'd think so."

Gus bought himself some duds, downtown, Ely, Nevada. Slacks a goat would have worn only if it didn't have any say at all. We did our best at Penny's and had an afternoon to kill before the service, so it was back to the McCarty home. No one answered our knock, and Gus walked right in. It was like we stepped into one of those boxes they use to ship bottles. Rooms the size of cells. You wanted to move so you didn't touch the walls. Off the short hallway entry to the left was a kitchen. A squat table, one of those with bowed legs and the chrome sides, that style that's popular again, was shoved into and squared up with a corner. No way could you have sat across from someone. You had to sit kitty-corner. There was a napkin dispenser, like you see in cafes. Salt and pepper shakers, cat motif. The floor was linoleum, acid green mostly, but the tiles speckled like a bird's egg, and white squares here and there, no pattern to them, replacements. To the right was a dinky family room. The floor was hardwood, ancient oiled six-inch-wide planks. There had been water damage near the window. Dead center on an oval rug sat two ladder-back chairs facing a thirteen-inch TV on a crate. It was hooked up to cable. The chairs looked like contestants. On top of the TV lay a hammer, a few nails next to its head. I wandered over to a cluster of photos. My best guess was they were all of Worst—Worst as a kid, Worst in his twenties, Worst middle-aged, Worst somewhere around fifty, where they stopped. The grouping formed a square.

I found Gus in one of the two bedrooms. It was empty, except for a cot, and was not much bigger than a walk-in closet. A window

looked out onto the backyard, which was narrow like an alley, like it was here only to shuttle you from yard to yard. Its dirt looked hard as concrete. There was a T-bar clothes line. No wire or cord to clothes-pin things to. Straight back, the yard ended at a cinder block fence, ten- maybe fifteen-feet high. It had been painted white and patched. A crack—a scar—zigzagged down it. One block had fallen and broken. Two heavy-duty poles were angled into the ground and wedged into the wall. To keep it from collapsing was my guess. You could see there was lettering under the paint. A big window on the other side of the room framed the neighbor's garage.

Gus said, "So you wake up every morning, and you see what I'm looking at. What do you do?"

"You die a little," I said.

"You're fifteen. You're sixteen. You're seventeen."

"You're staring at your future."

"Like there is one. Like you have any choices."

I said, "The garage-sale lady says mom flew the coop."

"With a gangster."

I said, "There's a door that must lead to a downstairs."

"Cellar," he said. "They call it a cellar."

Then there was nothing to say. This was where my mother grew up. She had a couple of brothers. Gus knew one of their names. Clint. Clint McCarty. Sounded like a gun fighter. There had been a baby sister who died. We think there were two other sisters. The next bedroom we located had a brass bed in it. There were a couple of throw rugs on the floor and a chest of drawers in a corner. Clothes in the closet. Worst's, we figured. We couldn't get the door to the cellar open. There was beer in the refrigerator, and we took a couple. Gus set a five-dollar bill on the rack inside. We stood at the kitchen sink, and a square window showed us Ely, Nevada. We could see a drive-in movie screen alongside the highway to McGill.

Gus said, "I don't know when she left."

I wasn't sure what he meant.

"She could have been fifteen years old," Gus said. "She could have been twenty."

I said, "I'd have left at ten."

"It's creepy, isn't it?" Gus said.

"It's hard to imagine it being livable, even in its prime. Every minute you'd be within three feet of someone else."

"You think it sounds like much of a family?"

I had no idea. Shrugged so.

"It's no kind of a family," Gus said. He turned his back to the window. I did too. We could see the two chairs in the living room. Heartless. Forsaken. "She graduated from high school," Gus said. "I know that. But I don't know where. She was in Las Vegas a long time before I met her."

"The garage sale lady might know," I said. "You got to be a certain age to leave to marry a gangster."

Gus polished off his beer and opened the cupboard below the sink. Cleaning supplies, but no waste basket. He set his bottle on the counter. "I don't want to know," he said. He looked directly at me—first time since we walked in—and he said, "Do you?"

"It doesn't really matter," I said. "You had your life, the two of you." I set my bottle next to Gus's. Said, "Was there ever a day when she wasn't smiling?"

"She slept in that room and woke up to that wall. There's no question about it," Gus said, and he headed for the front door. Just like that, he was leaving. I heard him say, "You see what I saw? Fucking cinder block wall shoved in your face every fucking morning you wake up?"

I caught up with him out front. He was glaring at the house and was beat up around the eyes. Had gone eleven rounds of a twelve-round bout, and in three minutes, if he could stay on his feet, if he could keep from hitting the mat, he would be decisioned. That was what he had to look forward to. His one hope was to counterpunch, was to walk the other guy into a big left hand. To cut him off and time a knockout blow. Only the other guy was too smart. He had nine, maybe ten rounds in the bank, so he was hitting and stepping out. He wasn't even showing Gus his face.

Gus took a long hard breath. "You spit in the ocean," he said. "End of story." We took the steps to the street. Gus fired up the Caddy and said, "This is a nightmare. This is a one hell of a goose chase."

Like Gus said, our plan ended when we got to Ely. We rolled dice from that point on. We still had a couple of hours before the service. A sign told us the Railroad Museum was open, but the door was locked. We ate Mexican and shot pool at the Outpost Bar, nine ball,

Gus on my turf, and I took him for fifty bucks, trapped him, as pay-back for our chess games, in a niggling battle of safeties, me kicking the ball two, three times off the rail shot after shot until I ended his misery with an impossible massé, curling the cue ball around the six and dumping the three in a side pocket. Skill? Sure. But the make required luck you understood you would some day have to pay for. The gods don't give it away. I ran the table out. Cruising Ely took us twenty minutes. Waves of heat shimmered above the intersections, and the day was fry-your-brains hot.

At five, we drove over to the building Worst had taken us to. The garage sale was still going strong. There was a family picking through the clothes, and a guy in a dusty Jeep was pulling out, a floor lamp next to him in the passenger's seat, belted in. He was wearing a do-rag and a nose ring. I waved to the lady running the sale.

"You sure you don't want to talk to her?" I said to Gus.

"Maybe rough her up," he said.

Inside it was like a wedding reception. The crystal bowl was bubbling, some kind of pink punch. There were paper plates and those Dixie cups. Finger sandwiches and cookies that had red and green fruit bits stuck to them. Leftovers from last Christmas was my guess. A woman was playing the keyboard. Loud. Obnoxious as hell. "Rock of Ages," and stuff like that. You had to pick up your voice to talk.

Worst met us at the door. "Please," he said, "sign the book." We did, and he said, "Luther would appreciate your presence." There were three names above ours. No McCartys. We were probably it, as far as the family was concerned. Worst escorted us toward the refreshments. A man and a woman sat at a table, and two boys were running wild, were racing tin cars across the floor. The man wore a mustache, thin, like in the movies forty years ago. Sign of a personality defect to my way of thinking. They turned out to be Worst's people.

"Eat up," Worst said to us. "Waste not, want not."

I said, "Is there family coming?"

"There's been no communication," he said.

"Which means?" I said.

He said, "What it means."

Gus said, "Did you know P. T.'s family at all?"

"The one wife, Selma," he said. "We was—I told you—married."

"Besides her, I mean," Gus said.

"There was me and Selma. Then there was me and Luther, and we didn't pry after each other. Your business was your business. Where would snooping get us? Can you tell me?"

"You didn't talk about family?"

Worst said, "I can't say we did."

"Selma have any children?"

"Never laid eyes on any."

"We're not after you for anything," Gus said. He tried to square himself up to Worst, to cut down on the man's constant two-step. Gus needed to look him in the eye. He said, "We don't want jack from you, Mr. Worst."

Worst said, "You don't, then you're a rare bird for sure. You're a first." He dipped himself a drink and said, "Ain't one thing you can get your hands on even if you hired yourselves a lawyer."

Gus moved closer, and I sort of got between them, was afraid of him lowering himself into that peekaboo squat he had been working on and letting one fly. I could hear him breathing at my back—puff, puff, puff, like he was rowing a boat.

"House, land and mineral rights is in my name," Worst said.

Gus said, "You hear me?"

Worst cupped a hand behind his ear and said, "I'm old but I ain't deaf, dumb or stupid."

"Jesus," Gus said.

I took his arm and walked him over to where we grabbed paper plates and a couple of sandwiches. Tuna fish and white bread. The crust had been cut away. The music got inside your head and made you want to find a cave. Gus and I wandered over to the casket, and there was Edna's father's brother. Screwed up as he was in his coffin I saw her in him. Particularly the cheeks and the set of the eyes. Me, I think you see relatives in distant blood, in kin, in the brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, more than you see the parents themselves in the children. Gus said, "Could be anyone." He settled his plate on a table and said, "I'm telling you this is no way to run a funeral." He reset Luther's tie, a stiff K-Mart piece of cloth, diamond shapes on it.

The door opened behind us and let a triangle of light in. The heat followed, rolled in. A tall couple met Worst, and he hugged the woman. The man shook his hand. No way to hear over the music what they were saying.

I said to Gus, "Family?"

"Not likely," Gus said. He looked over at Worst and said to me, "Was there a family or just the rumor of one?" He circled me. "If there is anyone, they're not coming," he said, and he stepped us away from the coffin, saying, "You saw that house. Would you bother with it if you'd ever lived there?"

I checked the signatures on our way out. LeRoy and Stella Brown. Gus got the Caddie's door unlocked, and we heard the garage sale lady. She whooped, like she was hollering down a horse. She got to her feet and walked her papillon half way across the road. She said, "Hold on," and she bent and gathered in the dog. She was carrying her walkie-talkie and had to do some juggling. The dog yapped, lifted one foot, then the other one. We waited for the woman to reach us. The dots on her hands had grown to about fifteen or twenty. She had had a good day. She said to me, "I couldn't get your face out of my mind." She breathed hard, short and insistent, and I reached for the dog. It growled. "She bites the hand that feeds her," the woman said. "Don't be offended."

"I like that in a dog," I said.

She said, "You're Tommy Rooke."

"Like I told you."

"Well I didn't put the name to the face."

"No reason for you to."

"My husband, Errol," she said, "he got cable just so we could watch the fights. He was a boy who grewed up in New Jersey."

Gus said to her, "Tommy tells me you knew Edna."

She shifted the dog. Got a grip on it, about lost the walkie-talkie doing so, said, "I knew her business was all. The way it is in a small town."

"She left to marry a gangster?" Gus said.

"They say she did."

"Did this gangster have a name?" Gus said.

She said, "Tommy here tells me you're the gangster."

"I'm the one she married."

"What kind of a gangster are you?"

Gus said, "Only in my heart."

"Edna was a fighter," the woman said to me. "She wanted what she wanted. You had to know she was that kind of girl. She had a mouth on her." She released the dog on the dirt, and it was dancing

right away. Too hot. The woman looked directly at me, and she said, "My husband said you had murder in your hands before you quit fighting."

I said, "I'd put it another way." We were walking with her back to her chair.

She said, "You got it from Edna." She stooped for the barking dog and said, "She was, like I said, a fighter. She had pluck. That's where you got it. My husband says you fight with what's inside you." Her walkie talkie squawked. "That'll be Errol," she said. "The husband," and she pointed toward the house. There he was, a face in a window, looking like one of those photos on a T-shirt. Errol pulled a curtain back and talked into his own walkie-talkie. We didn't hear him on this end. The woman said to me, "He forgets to push the button." She shook her head, sad, like the world wasn't as difficult as Errol made it. She said, "After you drove off, he was telling me if you came back to the funeral to see if you would shake his hand. He wanted you to understand it would be an honor."

I said, "It would be my pleasure."

She got on the walkie-talkie. Said, "Errol?" There was a squawk. "Errol?" she said.

"Over," Errol said.

"Over my ass, Errol."

"Ten-four."

She said to him, "The man says it would be a pleasure."

We had all of us sought out the shade, Gus examining some pottery on a table. Errol said something I couldn't make out. Then the woman said to me, "You'll have to go over there. He don't come out. Hasn't for twenty-three years now."

I looked at the window. Couldn't see Errol. I said, "Over there?"

"If you would."

I followed a rock path to the door, then crossed to the window, careful of a square plot of marigolds. The window came open—I heard it more than I saw how—and out shot Errol's hand. Felt like I put my buck worth of quarters in one of those fortune-teller games. "Errol?" I said, and I accepted his shake. "I'm pleased to meet you," I said.

Nothing. Not a word. His hand was a big as his face, and it was dry. I think he had clapped talc on. He let go of my hand and the window came down.

Errol's wife—I'd gotten back to the street—she said, "He can talk. He just don't, much."

Gus's dad, Grandpa Jersey, he met Jack Dempsey in the hallway to a restroom in a cafe somewhere in Montana. They stepped aside for each other, and then Grandpa Jersey recognized Dempsey and said, "Holy shit" and stuck out his hand. Dempsey shook it, kicked the door open, and walked out.

There you had it. Holy shit.

What more do you want? What more is there to say?

"Errol says you never ducked anyone," Errol's wife said to me. She was wrapping an ashtray in tissue paper, one from the Copper Queen Hotel and Casino. She had stuck the price to her wrist. Seventy-five cents. Gus paid for it. She said, "He says you took on all comers. He tells me he's proud of you."

I said, "You tell him how good it was to meet him."

She said, "You can count on it."

Me and Gus, a more stubborn pair of competitive personalities you'll never sit down to dinner with, so come midnight, the two of us in our tiny room here in Ely, and we got into a nit-picking quarrel about what looks easy to do but isn't if you try it. Gus, to my way of thinking, was being small minded, so I fed the pot, neither of us quitting until we were all-in, raising and re-raising, double popping. Our one-upmanship was the result of a TV ad for tonight's upcoming movie, *Rio Bravo*, John Waynesday, Turner Classic Westerns on TNT, the Duke himself one-arm cocking a Winchester rifle, butt over barrel and then back again, and Gus saying, "That's harder than you think it looks."

We had the set on mute, it being halftime of the basketball game we located, the Jazz again, taking on Sacramento and its gang of nit-wits, and we didn't want to listen to the ex-jocks, to hear how the has-beens know what some guy is thinking when he bricks a free throw or doesn't run his lane on the fast break, like having played the sport at that level gives them the right to another man's brain.

"My bet is it's a stunt double," I said.

Gus said, "To cock a rifle right in front of your eyes?"

"Everybody with legs can see it's special effects."

"What, a stunt arm?"

"You know what I mean."

"Tommy, Tommy, he's in front of your face," Gus said. "The Duke, he was doing that back then when they couldn't do a film what they can now. Nobody was trying to fool you. He had to do it for real. A little practice and I could."

So I countered with the everyday, with the down to earth, with what I told Gus was real life harder than it looked if he or the mouse in his pocket dared take a shot at it, which was shingling around a mid-roof chimney, flashing and counterflashing one, a subject whose real purpose was to irk Gus, him, as I said, not understanding how a boxer could quit at the top and take jobs roofing houses.

"Flashing is no picnic," I said.

"Tommy, Tommy," he said. He threw left and right jabs from where he sat. "But, Tommy," he said. "Tommy Gun. Tommy rot." He punched. "Rat-a-tat-tat," he said. He threw an upper cut. Said, "Fighting is an honorable profession, Tommy."

Result was we ended up on our feet where he liked us to be, me showing Gus how hard it is to be the boss inside the ropes and how easy you got to make it look. Gus now in khaki shorts and a bowling shirt, gray mostly but a butter-yellow yoke, black piping, bowling pins embroidered between his shoulder blades, a ball hitting them, the pins flying. He was wearing those thick sandals you see on college kids, no socks. He set his fists the way I had shown him a hundred times, Floyd-Patterson peekaboo style.

"Don't let me in," I said. I redrew that invisible line between us. I said, "I'm coming in your house. The doorway's yours. You own it." I came at him, said, "You letting me through?" He jabbed, and I tapped him on the chin. "You hang your head out there, I'll knock it into October," I said.

He retreated, all defense, covering up. Not bad footwork. He achieved a good angle.

I said, "Don't allow me to put it together. I throw, you break it up."

He let go an uppercut. Rotated his shoulder, turned his hips. Spun on his toe.

"Protect that handsomeness," I said.

He took stock from behind his fists. Squinted. Gave me his scowl.

"You come through the doorjamb, don't retreat," I said. "Don't be wiping your shoes off, all polite. I'll murder you. You come through

the door throwing, you keep coming. Put it together yourself. Come on in and turn the room upside down. You don't need no warrant."

"You got to be in it to win it," Gus said. Huffing, puffing. Gus was over sixty. Unyielding as hickory and just as hard-nosed. "Fighting dumb's okay," he said, his breathing choppy. "But fighting without fire's not." He snapped a left I took on the chin. It landed, and he did a mule's version of the hallelujah shuffle. He threw his hands up. Jitterbugged. His nose whistled. "Whew," he said, and he dropped his arms, plopped into a wingbacked, saying, "Whose house is it?"

I said, "You tell me."

He said, "Who's the boss?"

I said, "Who *is* the boss?"

He said, "The one who throws or the one who catches?"

I said, "The one who catches?"

He said, "The one who throws."

We sat through *Rio Bravo*. Midnight, and the credits were running. "Plan C," Gus said. "We wing it."

I said, "We had a plan B?"

He said, "Somewhere in all this it got lost."

Plan C was basic. We got some sleep.

"You'll slap me if I ever get another bright idea?" Gus said.

I said, "You bet."

I woke around five. No Gus. Not in his bed. Not outside.

McCarty's.

I left the car in the parking lot and walked. Ely was a ghost town this early. The sun, just up, yellowed the air. I never think about birds—who does?—but today, there they were. You couldn't ignore them. They had their commentary.

Gus stood in McCarty's back yard. He was staring at that wall. Challenging it. He spotted me and said, "You wake up every morning and this is what you see."

I said, "You don't know for sure, Gus."

But he did, and so did I.

We looked at the window of the room Edna slept in, and there was Worst squared-up in its frame. He wasn't more than ten feet from us. The house was his. The yard was his. We were trespassing.

I don't even know what a mouth harp is or how they work but it hit me that the man ought to be playing one.

Gus turned to the wall. He said, "Tommy, it's seven months now, and it's like I made Edna up." He was shaking. He said, "Did she live?"

"Without a doubt," I said.

"Jesus, Tommy," Gus said, "if I made her up, did I put this wall here? And the gangster? Did I add the gangster to the mix?"

I said, "Gus, be logical," and he said, "I am, Tommy. I am. You see, that's just it. I am. I can't touch her. It don't matter what I do, I can't touch her. You want proof she existed. I can't give you proof. You going to tell me you had your own eyes, and she fed you, and all that other stuff she did. That ain't proof."

Remember, this was a mortician talking.

He said, "Photographs? Might as well eat bullshit for breakfast for all a photograph can really mean."

I reached for my dad, and he put up his dukes there in McCarty's back yard. Over Gus's shoulder, there was Worst like a store dummy in the window. Gus dipped into the peekaboo I taught him and said to me, "I'm coming through the door."

I said, "My door?"

"All yours," he said. "I'm coming in."

I said, "Gus, don't stop to wipe your feet."

He said, "Polite's out the window, the baby with the bath water."

"This is ten rounds of hell."

"Ten rounds of bloody hell."