

## LAST RESPECTS

A story by

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"Harry, are you crying?"

"What?"

"Are you crying? You are crying! Harry, sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. . .it's just sweat, Lois, it's an awfully hot day."

"Harry, I've never seen you cry before."

"I'm not. . ."

"Harry, you just sobbed!"

"No. . ."

"Please pull over. Please stop. You can't drive if you cry. How can you see?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You're crying. You're driving through Oklahoma and crying. There!--you just sobbed again. Please pull off at once."

"All right. For a minute. We want to make Amarillo by dark."

"Should I cut you a slice of cantaloupe?"

"Please. That'd be nice. It's this heat. This heat is. . .demoralizing."

"But why would heat make you cry, Harry?"

"Or maybe some pollen. . ."

"Harry, I've never even thought you could cry."

"Lois, stop. . .Awwwgh, if we sit here these trucks will blow us over. And that diesel smell is horrible."

"There's no use eating this cantaloupe until you finish crying. Finish crying first, Harry."

"Be quiet a moment, Lois, okay?"

"All right, sweetheart."

"Don't say anything. Don't ask me anything."

"No, dear. Cry. It's all right."

"I'm going to."

"And later you'll tell me why."

"I'm as surprised as you are, Lois," Harry said. "When I was nineteen I fell in love with a girl from Oklahoma. We were sophomores in school together. It was a long warm fall that year. We'd meet after class, go to all the games. One day she told me she'd have to miss the homecoming game because she was going home herself, but that I was not to worry and not to write. She'd be coming back soon. But she didn't. The next thing I knew, she was dead--a rare blood disease I finally found out. Until this morning I had never set foot in her state, but it had all been so long ago I had no reason to think that driving across

it would bother me in the least. Then we began to pass all those small towns. What happened is I kept imagining that one of those towns--or one of those farms--might have been hers, and in the beginning the feeling that gave me was almost pleasant, a little bittersweet really, like looking through an album of old school photos after everybody's become the one person they were destined to become. Then. . .I don't know what happened. The bottom fell out or I just got in over my head. It was as if all the towns were her town, all the farms, and I had nowhere to stand. . .I'm sorry, Lois. It's so pointless, so childish. I haven't thought about her in years and years."

"Was she in love with you?"

"I don't know. I believe so. She was nineteen too. She smiled a lot. She had a wonderful drawl. And this was her state. I think after a while I just forgot about the person she was and began to think of her as Oklahoma. It was a way of getting over her, I guess. That's been twenty-five years ago. Hasn't it?"

"But you're not over her, are you?"

"Maybe I'm not over Oklahoma."

"What was her name?"

"I don't know. I really can't remember. That's one of the things that went when the bottom fell out--one of the reasons I started crying."

"Or the town where she lived?"

"We've been through half the state and here's where it hit me the hardest. She could have lived anywhere. Maybe she lived there. You see what I mean?"

He raised his arm and pointed beyond his wife, past the elevated shoulder of the interstate, into the fields. At a distance of a half mile or so, cottonwoods shaded a small blue farmhouse, a red barn, a grain silo. There were beef cattle in an adjacent field. Last season's hay had been harvested in huge shaggy

loaves. Black-eyed Susans grew in among the fence rows, and the pale green of the cottonwoods and the rolling green of the pastureland and the yellow sunspots of the flower petals became flags, banners in the breeze, marking the spot. Here. It started here. It ended here. Or there. Or farther over there where on the horizon car dealer and fast-food signs grew on stilts out of a much greater clump of trees.

A caravan of trucks rocked their car, flung back waves of diesel exhaust.

"Well, we can't stay here," his wife said.

She asked her husband to stop at a nearby roadside park. They took the cooler to a shaded picnic table, and there she fed him slices of chilled cantaloupe, in between cuts smoothing out a map of the Great Plains states on the table. With the tip of the knife she traced their route along Interstate 40 to the point somewhere east of Oklahoma City she believed they had stopped. Then edging the knife-tip southward, she said, "We-wo-ka."

"You're asking if that's the town," her husband surmised, "if that rings a bell."

"Yes. We-wo-ka."

"No . "

"Caddo."

"No . "

"Here's a funny one--you should remember this. Stringtown."

"Stop."

"Stringtown?"

"No, look, Lois, I'm over it. I was nineteen years old. In a couple of hours we'll be in Texas. It is hot. That probably. . .weakened my defenses."

"Tecumseh? Calvin? Coalgate?"

"It's not like you to treat this as a joke."

"I'm not treating it as a joke. Tecumseh, Oklahoma. Calvin, Oklahoma. Coalgate, Oklahoma."

"No. I don't know."

"How about Antlers? How about Calera, Oklahoma?"

"She lived around a small town, a very small town. She would call herself a hick."

"Place called Boswell looks like the smallest I've got."

The trees in this roadside park had been planted not long ago and gave a thin and inconstant shade. In it Harry sat sweating and shaking his head.

His wife cut him a final slice of cold cantaloupe, holding it back until he raised his eyes to hers. His eyes were no longer red, but they ached at the center with a fine, precise weightiness. Hers were full of youthful animation. She offered him the cantaloupe whose aroma rose between them like the sweet wild scent of game.

"Twenty years. . ." Harry now ate while his wife spoke wonderingly, shaking her head. "In twenty years I've never seen you cry. For twenty years you've been faithful to me, haven't you, Harry?"

"You know I have."

"And you've been a good father, a good provider. Won't you admit to that?"

"I've tried."

"You've succeeded."

She smiled, the lips settling a moment later into the expression of an emerging--perhaps wise, perhaps fanciful--idea.

"I think we should find her," she said.

"Find her?" her husband repeated tonelessly.

"I think we should find the town she lived in. Then we should find the grave." She drew closer to him over the table, over the cantaloupe rind. "Yes," she warmed to the idea, "yes," she touched the heavy damp flesh of his forearm, three fingers, as though testing the degree of firmness or give, "so you'll know why you're crying."

"All of Oklahoma--" Harry began.

"No, so you won't be crying for all of Oklahoma. I don't want you crying for all of Oklahoma." Sweetly and quietly she added, "If you must cry I want you to cry for her."

"But we'll have to look over all of Oklahoma," her husband protested.

"That's what I mean."

"Maybe not," his wife intimated.

"This is our vacation, remember. This is our first vacation in years without the kids. Remember the Grand Canyon and the Painted Desert. Remember Las Vegas. You wanted to see the west."

"You couldn't get through Oklahoma," she reminded him.

"I will--don't you worry about that."

"Oklahoma is west enough for me right now."

His wife gave him a winning, complicitous smile. The land around the interstate reststop rolled off into valley, town and farm. White clouds hung on the heat of the sky like settlements themselves, reconfigured each time he raised his gaze. He gazed instead at his wife, Lois Ross, born Lois Coskins, sister to three, mother of four; he knew her vital data. Ohio girl, born and bred.

"Lois, you'll have to believe me," Harry said. "I can't even remember what she looked like right now. No face, no name, no town."

"It's this map," his wife decided summarily, folding it up. "This is for the whole Great Plains. We need one just for Oklahoma. A state map. We're in no hurry, but let's go get one of those."

"This is Little--Little, Oklahoma. Is that its real name?"

"That's it, lady, and that's the way it's stayed."

"It wasn't Little, was it, Harry?"

"No, she would not have lived around a place called 'Little.'"

"You're sure about that?"

"Yes, she was more. . . colorful, more assertive than 'Little,' Oklahoma.

Lois, this won't work."

"Sure it will. Look at all the dots on this map. We have to be patient and careful, that's all."

"Anything I can help you folks with?"

The gas station attendant was a fully-fleshed man and probably the station's owner. He stood behind his cash register rocking from heel to toe on his boots, his weight centered, spotlessly clean except for his hands which had dirt worked into the calluses. He looked richly fed on town jokes, town gossip, travelers' pleasantries, travelers' comical predicaments.

"We're looking for a town in Oklahoma I can't remember the name of," Harry said.

"Some place around here?"

"I can't even be sure of that. Some place in Oklahoma."

"Wheeeeew," the attendant blew a long whistling sigh, smiling to Lois for the mess her husband was in.

"It's a very small town," Lois said, party to her husband's mess, the attendant's good-humored disbelief, "where a girl was born, brought up and died at the age of nineteen. A pretty girl. Wasn't she pretty, Harry?"

"Yes, pretty," Harry said, and for an instant his gaze went absent, his tone took a bit of a plunge. "Pretty as Oklahoma," he added.

"Very pretty," Lois said.

The attendant rocked back on his heels, looking out through his red-lettered window at the main street of Little, where the sun struck car-chrome and asphalt melted--grinning. He was being put on. He enjoyed that too. He enjoyed people. His philosophy was that sooner or later they always performed.

"Can't you help us?" Lois wondered.

"Ma'am, Oklahoma is full of small towns and those small towns are full of pretty girls."

"This one died when she was nineteen."

Harry made a sound, a groan of confusion, weariness, disapproval, or despair; it may have been a stifled sob. The station attendant shot him an instant's unamused glance, and another for his wife. Then he smiled.

"'Bout forty miles south of here there's a town called Happyland. That might be where she's at."

"Harry?" Lois said. "Happyland?"

"No. It's not funny," Harry said.

"I know it's not," Lois sympathized.



"Then maybe fifteen miles east of there there's one called Non--Non, Oklahoma. Folks like to joke about it because that really means some place that's not."

"Non, Harry?"

"Let's leave, Lois. Did we pay for the gas?"

"Gas is paid for," the attendant assured them.

"Did you pay for the map?" Harry asked his wife.

"Map's free."

They got back onto Interstate 40 going west, then within half an hour, at the exit for Shawnee, they got off. Moments later, they'd checked in at a Ramada Inn and gone to the two double beds. Harry lay on his in a state of exhaustion and powerlessness so vast it had as its image the wheatfields and cornfields of Oklahoma as they clung to the soft, edgeless roll of the land. He felt both boundless and pinned to that bed. For an instant he entertained the insight that identified that state of fixity and formlessness as death, then came back to the chemical sweetness of the room deodorizer, the driver's tension in his back, this busted leg of their trip, the curious interest his wife had taken in this long-forgotten sweetheart of his youth.

A bed away, more than just curious, deeply intrigued, his wife lay looking at him. She was trying to imagine the distance those tears of his had traveled, the depth out of which they had come, after twenty years of residual build-up, the residue, she assumed, twenty happy years had deposited on the one sad one her husband had known. She had not known that he'd known death. Both their families were long-lived. Their four parents still lived, their aunts and

uncles. Their brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. No stillbirths, as far as she knew, no miscarriages. They had four healthy adolescent children divided up among friends and grandparents so that their parents, these two, Harry and Lois, could take their trip. Yet over Oklahoma hung this cloud of death. Through which the sun shone, the grass, the wheat, the trees, the birds, animals, flowers, homes. It was a beautiful state. The cloud of death--like a perfectly pure solution--brought every speck of its beauty out, every sparkle. Was that what her husband was thinking? Was that his mood? Years ago, many pounds lighter, he'd been a boy of nineteen, lean, healthy, happy, and then suddenly washed in tears. He'd packed that boy away. How quickly he'd forgotten the girl and come to mourn Oklahoma, how easily Oklahoma had bled off into Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, and Arkansas--it touched them all.

She had taken out her map. With her fingernail on route 40, passing through Fort Smith, Henryetta, past miniscule Little, stopping near Shawnee, she'd called, Harry, very quietly, as though addressing a sleeper whose dream might shatter at the first worldly noise. Harry, she said, Lima, Harjo, Wye. She breathed soundlessly, then held her breath altogether. No, he whispered. Bowlegs, she smiled. Said, Bowlegs, Wolf, Maud. Then had to wait for travelers with kids to climb the staircase outside, pass down the corridor and get into their room before even hoping for an answer. She was about to repeat the names when Harry obliged her. No, he said, then, Try farther south, find the smallest. She came to the bold print of Ada, Oklahoma and skirted it. He said, I remember her drawl. One of her friends called her Tex. Lois studied the northern fringe of Texas. The looping Red River formed the state line. The mapmaker had given it a sort of intestinal thickness. Tucked down in those lazy thick loops were the towns.

Enos, Oklahoma, she said, Enos, she repeated silently to herself, searching through her mind's eye for the figure of the girl her husband might have known from there. She saw Shirley Jones leaning on a cornstalk and a musical, apple-cheeked Gordon MacRae riding down the rows. She smiled, nothing lost, mildly disappointed with herself but--only human--deserving a bit of fun. This was their vacation. Not Enos, Harry said. Willis then, she said. Harry said, She had strong straight bones but not one of them stuck out. That's not Willis. That's. . .something else, and he faltered, his voice falling around him in an unmanly swoon. Then, Jesus! he caught himself, and she heard the springs jump. He shook, reacquiring vigor. What the hell are we doing here! With a fine, tightly compassed panic her finger sought the line of the Red River. Kemp, she said, holding him off. Yuba. Gay, she said, and struck him between the eyes as she crowed it a second time, quietly, Gay, Oklahoma! It knocked him back onto the bed. Overwrought, unprepared, in that instant he saw her, but before he knew enough to record the sight she was gone. The after-image was of size and space where something clearly female had stood, fashioned with a series of fresh rough cuts, the hair sunnily-thatched. The mouth made an exuberant round. He still saw the teeth and the tongue. Not Gay, he said. Gay is not the word.

He always slept later than she. She brought up styrofoam cups of coffee. She parted the curtains just enough to let the sun of another June day in. On the window-side table flanked by two thinly-cushioned armchairs she had already spread the map. Her husband sat up in bed.

"Yesterday," she said, "we were like kids playing detective, and like kids we forgot the first rule of good detectiveship. We tried to stand at the scene of the crime itself, right at the center, but in order to see what was at our backs we had to keep spinning around. We got dizzy. Dizzy from too much detective work is a pretty good way to describe what happened to us yesterday, don't you think?"

She spoke with a poised, matter-of-fact, not-unkind enunciation, which, like the coffee, she passed on to him. Answer accordingly, she seemed to be saying, how's this for a sensible tone.

"And the heat," her husband said.

"You cried yesterday, Harry. That was our first clue."

". . .the heat. . ." he muttered lamely.

"No, we know better than that. No use starting at the beginning again." Legs crossed she sipped from her coffee. She seemed to be waiting until Harry sipped from his. To please her he did, and surprised at himself caught a bit of her crispness, a bit of her collected air. "You cried," she continued, "because you couldn't make it across Oklahoma. You couldn't make it across Oklahoma because here, you said, a teenage love of yours had died. Am I right so far? Clarity in these matters helps."

Her husband assented.

"Because here is where we're forced to speculate a bit. In self-defense, to enable yourself to enjoy our marriage and children and reasonably happy twenty years together you blanked out this girl's town, you blanked out her name and face, and more or less gave her all of Oklahoma. She became Oklahoma, which was fine, as long as you didn't venture near the place. But once you did it was as if you had to move from east to west, north to south,

across her entire body. You thought she had died, and she had, but in your mind she had taken on the beauty and vitality of all this."

Here, with a theatrical gesture, Lois pulled the curtains back to their full extent. White light flooded the room. Behind the glare arced the blue sky, and inside the arc hung the billowy clouds.

"She had come back to life," his wife declared authoritatively, "she had come enormously and beautifully back to life," permitting her voice a small oratorical swell, "and you had missed her. You had settled for me, and I couldn't compete with her--with that." Where she might have jabbed spitefully toward the expanse beyond the motel window, she offered it to him, palm up, and smiled. "That was when you cried. We sometimes get a taste of our missed opportunities, and yours were too sweet to stand. You cried and I fed you cantaloupe." She rose now to close the curtains. At the edge of the streaming swath of light she allowed to enter she sat back down. "I think," she concluded, "we had better find that grave."

He had no argument. Beyond the light he sought his wife's face, found its oval, the brittle graying line of the head of hair. From memory he filled in the rest.

"How?" he asked.

"I know the name of the town," she disclosed.

"Will I recognize it?"

"You already have."

"I don't understand."

"For two hours I've sat here with this map watching you sleep. Every fifteen seconds or so I named a town, very quietly so that you wouldn't wake up. You chose the one, you repeated it and then you moaned. You made a good choice, I think."

"I dreamed I was taking a test," Harry suddenly recalled. "I was sitting in a room full of students and all of them were being allowed to write out their answers, but I was being examined orally. They were embarrassing questions--questions about shoplifting and masturbation and all sorts of typical adolescent brutalities--and the examiners kept changing. My jaw felt muscle-bound and my mouth wouldn't work. Finally I broke down and cried. Then all the examiners and my fellow students filed out, like in a procession."

"Was I an examiner?" his wife asked.

"No, I don't believe so."

"Let me be one now."

"I can barely see you in that light."

"Listen, Harry. I'll name you five towns. I want you to choose her town again."

He nodded at her to go ahead. Could she see him? It occurred to him that in spite of the coffee he might still be asleep, in fact, more deeply asleep than ever. Asleep, dreaming of a clear-headed awakening, the day fully underway and the light a radiance he'd come back to after a long night of abasing himself with shadows.

From a list written on the back of a Ramada Inn envelope she read:

"Bray, Oklahoma."

"Clarita, Oklahoma."

"Amber, Oklahoma."

"Gene Autry, Oklahoma."

"Nido, Oklahoma."

He stared at her, the light a dazzling veil, just her height when she stood to it.

"Nido," he repeated in a hush. "Nido," he wondered out loud.

"It's a Spanish word," she told him. "I went downstairs and asked until I found someone who spoke Spanish. It means 'nest.'"

"Nest?"

"Nest," she nodded. "That's where you'll find her."

"You're positive?"

She stepped through that veil of light and into the overcast margin at the head of his bed. She came quickly, like a nurse, he thought, tired of pampering her patient, determined to set him homeopathically back on his feet. Her overexposed face was now dark. "Yes, positive," she said.

He wasn't.

To Wye, Pearson, Asher. Route 39 to 3E South, and Konowa, Byng, Stonewall, Tupelo, Wapanucka. Route 48 now, and Clear Boggy Creek, unboggily bright. Everything shone. The clouds, the grass, the long flowing stalks of corn. The hides of cows, their willow-ringed ponds. The sun-dappled paint on the houses, the lines of wash. A dog. If he looked closely, a very small child. Then the distances, the wheat fields blowing bluegreen in the morning breeze. Scattered throughout those fields he saw thickets of dense green scrub oak marking the sinkholes, and nearby, along the edges, up the first few feet of the rows, poppy petals, tissue-thin and an unclotted red, freshly fallen to the ground. Everything--he drove while his wife read off the routes and towns--gave back an inaugural newness and shine. The very air, the air had a rain-cleansed luster that may have come from the tear-cleansed luster behind his eyes since no rain had fallen--but it didn't matter. It was what he saw. They'd exchanged the elevated monotony of the interstate for the two-lane state and

county roads. Those roads obeyed the undulations in the land. It was what he desired and feared. Farther and farther south and those undulations overtook him like a drug.

"It's not fair to the children," he voiced his doubts.

"The children wouldn't understand," his wife assured him.

"I mean the time away from them was supposed to be time we took for ourselves. That was how we justified it. It was to be our second honeymoon--our trip west."

"You're slowing down, Harry," his wife said. "Don't slow down."

"We misrepresented it."

"We didn't know. No one knew about Oklahoma. I don't think you even knew."

"We'll have to explain it to them. We'll have to account for ourselves."

"They wouldn't understand, Harry. Imagine them sitting in the back seat right now. What would happen. . .to your mood, Harry? They'd look out the window and see cows and horses and barns and corn. What do you see?"

"Cows and horses and barns and corn."

"What do you really see?"

"I see her."

"Of course you do."

"I feel guilty. I can't help it."

"Of course you can't"

Outside of a colony of grain elevators and a mainstreet of stores called Kenefic, she navigated them onto their narrowest road yet, 22 west. It was so slender-shouldered that crops grew up to the asphalt on both sides. They might have been riding down a wheat-furrow, a corn-row. The wind from their passage blew cowlicks in the wheat and blew the green corn leaves and



blew from the long, moist, tufted tassel the smell of corn, powerful and rank, more animal than vegetable, vastly overstated like the wastage that accompanies the one successful procreating seed. He nearly swooned. His driving grew wobbly. This, his wife said to steady him, to aim him as straight as the uncurving road, is her country. And that, she said, as the corn field ended and a pasture provided a vista, is her town.

There was no town, he knew it the second he entered its one shaded street. There was no house, not one of those old white Victorians with wrap-around verandas, not one of those small slumping clapboards, patchy with screens. No stores, no church, no movie-house, no dentist's and doctor's offices, no hotel for visitors, no jail. No mainstreet. He pulled over so that his wife could inquire the way to the cemetery, and there were no townspeople of hers to talk to, just men and women, boys and girls. The one his wife had chosen was an over-fed girl who held by the fist a sullen, tow-headed boy, and neither the mother nor son, the sister nor brother, stepped out from behind their anonymous flesh to become neighbors of hers. The town--three or four blocks of short sandy store-buildings, trucks, cars, wires, hanging signs, cracked pavement and sun--howled desolate white noise in his ears.

There was no cemetery. His wife directed him to it. Just north of town it stood on the only thing thereabouts resembling a hill. He drove to its highest point and got out. This was Nido, Oklahoma, and out there, through notches in the surrounding bushes and trees, was more, a lot more, of that undulating, tawny-spotted, glistening-green countryside. In that instant, while his wife went to find the caretaker and bring him back so that her love-stricken husband could hear what he had to say, Harry felt the first grazing touch of a breeze blowing back from that countryside. It found his temples and eyelids, broke off and traced a ringlet of coolness around the heavy aging area under his chin.

He trembled. Remotely, as at a distance of twenty-five years, he groaned. Then the breeze embraced him, blowing up richly and broadly from all that he saw below. She was in it. She visited him in places he'd never been visited before, her movements as agile as the flashes of fish. He stood in her, a bath the size of her state. What glory! he thought, what love! Then, abruptly, without apology, it was over. In the sudden, pore-prickling heat he felt the flesh sag over his knees.

"Maybe this man can help us," his wife aroused him, and true to her word she'd brought the cemetery's caretaker with her. Behind him her husband Harry now saw the graves.

"My wife shouldn't have bothered you," he apologized.

"No bother," the caretaker said, but Harry could see that it had been. The man had a clipped, business-like manner about him, frustrated now with no business to transact. Harry and his wife Lois were not business. One look at them and the man could tell that.

"I'm afraid we've wasted your time."

"Your wife said you'd come a long way."

"Ohio," Harry said.

"Don't expect you folks will be passing through Nido again. Every so often you see someone new here. You never see 'em twice. You've come to find a grave." The man stated his question, saved Harry the ordeal of the answer. He wondered just what this sour-faced caretaker did: groundskept certainly; drove off pranksters and vandals; stood against fire, flood, famine and drought; dug the graves and filled them, sealed them with a stone.

Ran a tight ship.

The transcendental thanklessness of caring for the dead! Not a trace of that inspiring breeze was left him. Harry stood in an air pocket, a dead space,

a thickening mortal soup. "We're not sure. This may not be the town," he managed.

"Nido, Oklahoma," the caretaker said.

"Yes, I know," Harry said.

"Been here fifty years. I know what goes on down there and I know what goes on up on this hill." He followed this tight-lipped boast with an even tighter-lipped show of generosity. "Here's your chance," he said.

"Twenty-five years ago," Harry began, "I knew a girl. . .an Oklahoma girl. ." then failed. From the caretaker's eyes, flat like small tarnished coins, he turned to the fields. One after another--wheat, grasslands, cows, and corn--they carried him to the horizon where he placed the side of his fist against his pouring brow and searched his mind: wheat, grasslands, cows and corn--Who was she? Where had she gone? Would she be gone for good? He heard his wife Lois say:

"She came from a small Oklahoma town, that we're sure of."

Then the caretaker, "Oklahoma's full of small towns."

Lois, "This one was probably located somewhere near Texas."

The caretaker, "Quite of few of 'em are."

Lois, "This girl was pretty."

The caretaker, "Pretty girls all over. Oklahoma's got its share."

Lois, "And she died young. She was only nineteen years old."

The caretaker, "The pretty ones always do."

Lois, "My husband believes she lived in Nido."

Then the caretaker, taking his leave, "Your husband can be my guest."

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He walked the graves with his wife. Most were marked with stones of gray granite, and as they moved down the first row they paused before each to read the inscriptions. At the end of the row, before they looped back, Lois that saw that her dispirited husband would never last if they stopped at each of the graves, so with a steady pace and a resolute selectivity she began to lead him past those not to their purpose. In that way they failed to honor the remains of the elderly-dead, the infant-dead, the dead-in-their-prime, the dead-in-the-slough-of-middle-age, the hastened-decay-of-the-dissolute-dead, the dead-in-the-nation's-wars. Lois led him past the broad-shouldered monuments of the rich, ostentatiously engraved, and past the simple slabs of the poor. As they had stood in life so they stood in death--on this hill rested the tonnage of Nido's forfeited wealth--but she barely remarked on that. She was steering her husband through. Like a sunning snake they lay loop on coiling loop and were somewhere near the cemetery's center when they came to the dead-in-the-first-breathless-flush-of-life.

There, in a cautionary whisper she alerted her husband. "We're here, Harry. This is where we start. Do you want to go ahead?"

With a sudden misgiving, as though she'd brought him here only to bid farewell, she watched her heavy-hearted husband nod.

Then read: "Sally Jean Livingston. Born 1945. Died 1965. We miss her. Our days are dark. May our loss be God's glorious gain."

"Harry?"

She watched him shake his head.

Then: "Holly Anne Armstrong. Born 1921. Died 1939. Gone is the laughter, gone the bright smiles. We miss you sweetheart, the family you left. We shall never be the same."

Then: "Rebecca Young Summers. Born 1899. Died 1916. You leave behind your grieving parents, your brother and sister. From spring you raced to winter and the cold, cold sorrow is ours."

Then: "Lucy Bliss Todd. Born 1954. Died 1972. We weep so that the angels may rejoice. Take her, dear God, as the most precious gift we can give."

"Harry?"

Insensibly, it seemed, he shook his head.

She kept him now at her side. The row extended, uncoiled and stretched out. If they hoped to complete it before they were forced to lie down themselves she could only read the names.

"Mary Lou Fields."

"Emily Appleton."

"Susana Wells."

"Nancy Brooks."

"Rosemarie Miller."

"Elizabeth Olmstead."

"Hope Bryant."

Then only half of those:

"Dorothy."

"Missie."

"Kate."

"Amy ."

"Melanie."

"Phyllis."

"Claire."

The cadence in her step had come into her voice and with it, finally, came anger. She found herself pronouncing each name with a mournful and

measured defiance, calling to account the unaccountable, accusing the defense of the indefensible, but it was like spitting into the wind. There was no beginning or end to this wind, not this one, which rose off the farmlands of Oklahoma and blew insatiably over this hill.

A wry smile tightened her lips. Were these Nido's nestlings or those kicked out of the nest? Where, please, had the Mother Bird gone?

"Katherine Lee Lovejoy," she read.

Beside her her husband released a single groan, quiet and mindful, as though in deference to the dead. His eyes, like two large hanging pools, filled up with tears.

"That's her, isn't it, Harry?" she said.

He stood there motionless, earth pulling at his legs, buttocks, belly, chest, arms, face and long-lobed ears. Undoing his already humid shirt and pants. Unlacing his shoes.

She read: "Born 1938. Died 1957. Kathy, dear, don't be sad. In life you made each day our pleasure. In death you show us to our proper home. Be brave, obedient, generous, busy and glad. Be you, Kathy, many times over and many times grander than this poor flesh allowed you to be. We shall meet you in the heavens by and by."

She looked back at her husband. His entire face now was streaming wet. "Is that sweat or tears, Harry?" she asked, but didn't have to. She knew it was both.

"This is the one--this Kathy Lovejoy--isn't it, Harry?" she whispered again.

He'd begun to heave, his knees to tremble. With great effort and even greater reluctance, she thought, he shook his head.

"But you're crying. Why are you crying then?" she asked him.

"There're just so many of them, Lois," he said at last, each word a near-sob, barely intelligible, best understood as a tiny outpouring to water the grass on the graves. "There're just so many more than I ever thought."