

OUT ON THE EDGE OF VICTORIAN CIVILIZATION

by Dennis Hiatt

Dale's big, red GMC four-by-four blew a recapped tire three miles south of Frank James's ranch. Short, very fat, and now rather sad, Dale tilted his cowboy hat back and looked out the tinted windshield at the noonday sun. On his list of things to do today was: hire a replacement barmaid, fix spare tire, get steer skulls from Frank, and set up a no-smoking table in his bar. He sighed. Dale really didn't feel up to leaving the cool, air-conditioned cab. Frank James's rolling wheat fields stretched out for miles and miles in all directions, and they looked damn near as hot as his grill in the middle of the breakfast rush.

Wishing he had broke down and bought a mobile phone, Dale fished his sunglasses out of the glove box and turned off the GMC. He locked the truck and did some quick figuring. It was about three miles by road to the ranch house from where he had blown the tire. If he cut south-by-southwest, it might only be one or one-and-a-half. True, he couldn't see the house because of the gently rolling golden hills, but he had been there a couple hundred times in the last forty years, and he didn't figure he'd get lost twenty miles out of Pendleton.

Trudging up the first hill, while he was still in sight of the road and the big red GMC, Dale pulled his cowboy hat down tight and kind of felt like a star in a spaghetti western. At the top of the second hill, he looked back at the trail of broken wheat that led down the gentle

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slope and smiled; pleased he was moving right along. When he reached the top of the third low hill, Dale paused and scanned the horizon. Whoever called this land a sea of wheat -- and Dale could remember it said a time or two -- was a damn fool. The

land was a desert of wheat, and both he and it could use some water.

When Dale crested the sixth hill of golden wheat, he was sweating like a horse that's been rode hard and (like his mother used to say), as lost as any poor son-of-a-bitch that's strayed from the good book. Well...not truly lost. He could always follow the trail of trampled wheat back to his truck. But there was no water there, and his throat felt as dry and dusty as the wheat. He wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve and figured he had two more hills to go. If he didn't see the ranch house, he's turn around and go back to the truck.

At the top of the eighth small hill, he saw that the next hill rose like a mountain to the pale, white-blue sky. It was maybe a hundred feet higher than the hill he had just crested.

"Damn!" Dale cursed and spat. He doubted that he had walked this far since he was a kid. Staring at the great, golden hill, Dale wiped the sweat from his forehead and was vaguely sorry he had always laughed at joggers and such. The mild regret (not anchored in real sincerity) passed before he took his first heavy step down the hill through the waist-high, yellow wheat.

Sweating a salt river, his breath heaving like smoke from an old freight train, Dale topped the large hill and stopped dead in his tracks. Across the gently sloping valley of wheat was another hill as high as the one he had just climbed. Half way up its slope, however, the wheat stopped and a field of roses gone wild began. Shaking and short of breath from exertion, Dale stood stock-still and whispered, "I'll be dipped in sheep shit." He took off his dark glasses and took in

the two-and-a-half or three acres of red and

yellow roses in full bloom. "Double dipped...by God!" he spat Feeling like some kind of explorer, he trundled painfully down the hill, leaving a broken path of crushed wheat.

He found the trail into the thicket of roses easily and made his way with almost fresh vigor to the top of the hill. Spurred on by rose-perfumed air, Dale was nearly jogging when he hit the center of the hilltop. Two things were plain to him. This site was an abandoned homestead...and someone had to be watering the roses. Someone had been watering these roses for a long time, and that meant a well...and water.

Dale found the hand pump next to a pile of gray sun-bleached boards that must have been the original homestead. He pumped the handle, and cool clear water jettisoned out, into a trough that led to the field of roses. Dale drank deep. Slinging off his cowboy hat and pumping to beat the band, he buried his small plump head under the water.

Refreshed and oddly happy, Dale pumped water to the roses until his plump, short fingers cramped and his arm hurt. It was only then he looked around and saw...less than a quarter of a mile away...the ranch house and outbuildings of the James's property. Dale hiked up his jeans. On swelling feet, he started down the far side with eyes fixed like gun sights on the James's house. Dale had made ten paces when he tripped and fell, stomach first, to the hard, baked ground. He had broken the fall with his hands, but he still had the air knocked out of him. Hurt, both in pride and in belly, he rolled over and saw that he had tripped over a gray, sandstone tombstone. "Goddamn!" he spat before he realized that he must be lying square on the grave. He tried to dust himself off, but his water-soaked cowboy shirt had turned the dust to mud. He sat up and stared at the tombstone. It read:

Buck James

1837-1888

RIP

"Damn! The poor son-of-a-bitch has been dead and gone.." (he had to think for a second) "a hundred and fifteen years!" Dale stood and tipped his hat to the tombstone. "Rest yourself in peace, Buck."

Dale had to hang out on the porch an hour before Frank pulled in from the field. Twenty minutes later, they had the back seat of Frank's old Toyota filled with sun-bleached steer skulls and were flying down the road to Pendleton. As they whizzed past the big, red GMC, Dale asked, "That your great-granddaddy buried out there?"

Without taking his eyes off the road, Frank nodded and took a chew off his plug of Red Man. "Yep, the old place is a helluva sight when you see her from the fields, ain't she?"

"Like a goddamn fairy land, or something," Dale nodded.

Frank chuckled and rubbed his hooked nose. "Ol' Buck fought Indians and drought...then died of the damn flu in the spring of '88."

Dale sat quietly for a while, thinking of Buck James and what a bleak life he must have had. Then he said, "I think it's right nice you kept the roses up."

Frank's sun-leathered face slipped loose a grin, and he glanced at Dale to see if he was putting him on. Dale was staring at the road. On his pink, round face was a look of honest wonder.

"Yep, ol' Granny James, Buck's daughter," Frank nodded, "She made quite a thing about those flowers. When she was an old, old woman, she used to say, 'Daddy come six thousand miles to die on the edge of Victorian civilization.'"

Dale just shook his head at the enormity of the thought and sighed.

Frank's smile softened, and he tilted his cowboy hat back. "Yep, the ol' girl was a hundred and three when she died. When she couldn't water them flowers anymore, Momma took it up...and when Momma couldn't handle that ol' pump, the job just sorta fell to me."

The men rode without speaking for ten miles. Then Dale sighed and said, "Damn if those aren't some tough roses to make it all those years out there, Frank."

Frank spat a wad of Red Man tobacco in the S&W coffee can he carried for a spittoon. "I reckon man and beast...and even flowers were tougher back then."

Dale idly watched a jogger heading out of town. She was young and skinny, and had long brown hair. The girl was pumping right along under the midday sun. Her face showed Dale that she was filled with grim purpose. Dale shook his head, "Who was it that said, 'only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun?'"

"I think that was on a record album back when we were kids," Frank laughed.

"Yeah," Dale nodded as his memory kicked in, "It was Joe Crocker."

"I always liked The Jefferson Airplane a helluva lot better," Frank nodded in agreement.

"Yeah," Dale chuckled, "If Grace Slick'd had a good set of knockers, I think I'd have fell in love with her."

Dale was in the back room of the Oasis, wiring light sockets into the eyeholes of the steer skulls when Lottie, the day-shift bartender, stuck her head and tits through the door.

Lottie Farrow was forty-seven and had worked for Dale for six years. The first five years she had asked Dale to bank her vacation pay and last year, she had taken her vacation in Portland and had a tit job. Lottie was a slim, fine looking woman. But Dale thought her breast implants were the worst case of overkill he had ever seen. Even though he had been sneaking looks at them for about a year, he was still a little in awe and often wondered how the hell a guy would approach those love peaks in bed.

"Dale, you got another woman here for the job. Want me to send her back?" Lottie's smirking eyes told Dale she was finding something a little too damn funny.

He hoped she was looking smug because some cowboy had just met her tits for the first time and couldn't close his jaw all the way. "Yeah, go right ahead, Lottie."

Dale was a little taken aback to see the skinny jogger with the long brown hair step through the door. She had changed into a man's tank top and old, washed-out, green army pants. Up close, she wasn't anything to write home about. She had a little button nose, shoulder-length brown hair, stone brown eyes, and a small mouth that looked ready for a fight. She wasn't wearing a brassiere, but

still, she wouldn't be what he'd call 'a draw'. What the hell, he thought, the job was only for two weeks while Lottie went on vacation. And the kind of people he wanted weren't exactly beating down his door for it.

"Howdy," he said and set the steer skull on the table.

The young woman stared at the skull for about ten seconds then shifted her cool, firm eyes to Dale. "I didn't see a non-smoking section out there."

Dale nodded, picked up the skull and screwed a red bulb in its left eye. "I got me a coupla non-smoking tables in the restaurant, but I haven't quite figured out where to put them in the bar." He looked back up as she sat in the chair next to him.

"It's the law, you know," she said, like she had studied the place on behalf of the Liquor Commission, but was kind enough to give him a chance to clean up his act before she turned him in.

She had gumption. He liked that. Even though she didn't seem to know much about people...or at least people and bars. Dale nodded and picked up another small red bulb. "I reckon I know the law, Miss."

"It's Ms." She picked up a wired steer skull, and before

Dale could figure out if he really wanted to give her the brush-off, she offered up a half smile and said, "I could wire these so they'd blink...if you'd like?"

"Yeah?" Dale blinked.

"It's no big thing," she shrugged, "I do all my own wiring."

"You ever tend bar?"

As she leaned near him, Dale was pleased to notice she didn't smell like a ranch hand.

"No. But I doubt tending a beer bar would be difficult to learn."

"No," he agreed, "It ain't real hard to learn." He laid the skull on the table and handed her his pliers. "You'd have to wear something with sleeves. I reckon hairy armpits would turn my customers off."

She shrugged and picked up the bleached skull. "No problem. It's your candy shop."

Dale rose and grabbed his cowboy hat. "I reckon you'll do. When you finish with the steers, get Lottie to show you around. When you figure you've got the hang of it, tell Lottie she can start her vacation early if she wants."

He was almost out the door when she said, "What about the no-smoking section?"

Dale pulled his black cowboy hat low on his forehead. "I'll be gettin' to it. I imagine we're a little slower with political laws out here in the west...Mizz."

She tapped the bare wires with black tape where they joined. "I'm from California."

Dale thought of Buck James's middle-aged daughter pumping water to her Daddy's roses in nineteen-oh-one and shook his head. "California hasn't been the west for maybe eighty years,

Mizz." He left before she could answer.

When Dale got back late that afternoon, the steer skulls were arranged in a geometric design over the river-rock fireplace and blinking as somberly and cheerful as the devil's herd on Christmas day. Two tables near the front window had small cardboard 'no smoking' signs on them. The tables next to them had large bowls of sunflower seeds and signs that read, 'Quitting Smoking Table'. Dale tossed back his head and laughed out loud. The girl, still in her tank top, grinned ever so slightly from behind the long oak bar.

"You done fine, Mizz."

She nodded. He turned and went back into the restaurant for a bite to eat.

Dale was working on his fourth cup of coffee and his second piece of apple pie a la mode, when Karen puffed out of the kitchen and headed straight for him. Dale sighed into his coffee. He liked his dumpy, little, evening cook. He had liked her since they'd thrown rocks at each other in grade school. But her eyes shone like a pair of headlights on high beam. It was Karen's famous you-done-fucked-up-this-time look.

Dale studied her stained apron where it stretched over her wide tummy. Then he grinned and joked, "Karen, I don't think you otta' be looking at your boss in that tone of voice."

"Dale," She crossed her arms over her full chest just like his ex-wife used to do when she was pissed off and said, "You seen the armpits on that Granola Bar you hired?"

His pudgy fingers fiddled with the fork. "I don't reckon I'm fully blind just yet."

"Well, even if you don't care about the Health Code, I'd kinda like to keep our A-rating." Karen's wide, poppy eyes made her look like one of those nasty, little rat-on-a-rope dogs Dale always had the urge to run over.

"Well..." he drawled, "If the Liquor Commission closes down the bar, I reckon you'll get to keep you're A-rating out here, Karen."

"Dammit to Hell Dale!" She slid into the booth across from him. "She'll make this place look like it's going to Hell in a hand basket."

Her eyes had lost most of their owl-from-hell look. But Dale wasn't fooled. He knew Karen had just seen that it wasn't getting her anyplace. The trouble was, he had to agree with Karen. The woman's armpits did look like shit. Dale closed his eyes and rubbed them. As Karen buzzed on about what Mary Beth Jackson had said... that the new barmaid caused nothing but trouble up at the Community College where she taught...and how old P. J. Peters had damn near swallowed his upper plate when he saw her hairy pits...Dale drew up a vision...a hill of wild roses surrounded by glowing, golden wheat. A young, stout woman in a flower-sack dress was pumping water to the roses. Dale knew the woman was named James and had unshaved armpits.

Dale opened his eyes and snapped, "Karen, did you ever stop to think that the HARD-working women that settled this god-forsaken land did it without shaving their armpits?"

Karen, as unused to being cut off as Dale's ex-wife, blinked at Dale like she had been pole-axed. Dale slid out of the leatherette booth, picked up his black cowboy hat and said firmly, "Karen, you're a damn good friend...and a damn good cook...and I've gave you a free hand in this here restaurant. But I reckon I know how I want to run my bar...and if it don't work...I reckon I can change it or live with it."

Blushing from her double chin to her dull, brown hair, the heavy, middle-aged cook stared up at him and grunted, "Yessir."

Dale grinned and swatted at her with his hat. "Now, none of that shit. Just cause we don't see eye to eye don't mean you can go and forget my Christian name."

With his cook glaring at his back, Dale lumbered back into his bar and looked around for Willy Allen, the big nightshift bartender. The new barmaid motioned to Dale.

"Willy called and said his oldest boy was in jail in Hermiston for assaulting an officer...and he had to bail him out." With a clean, white bar rag, she wiped the bar professionally. "He said he'd be back before ten."

Avoiding her armpits the way he ignored Lottie's breasts, Dale met her eyes and shook his head. "If they don't put that boy in the nut house, he'll drive Willy back to drinkin' yet." He glanced at his watch. "Punch out at seven, and I'll take over."

"I could use the money," she shrugged.

"Okay...draw me a short beer," Dale nodded.

She slid a glass of beer with a perfect head down the bar to him. Dale nodded his thanks and said, "Name's Dale."

"Mine's Comfort."

Dale looked up from the beer. "You're kidding!"

Comfort gifted him with a thin smile that seemed to say, 'spare me the jokes'. "It's an old family name."

Dale watched her carefully. "Your folks come across on the Mayflower, or somethin'?"

She emptied an ashtray and polished it. "Pretty close. I've got Puritan stock on both sides of the family." She put the gleaming ashtray in front of him. "Mother was stuck on that stuff. But it doesn't mean anything to me." A couple of construction workers bellied up to the bar. Comfort smiled professionally and nodded to them. She turned and, with a last look at Dale, said, "I'm not into the dead and buried. I'm into the here and now."

Dale nodded, drained his beer and left without looking back.

Miss Kitty, his cat, met Dale at the door and swarmed around his ankles. Dale petted Miss Kitty dispiritedly and locked the door behind him. He was in a terrible, blue funk and didn't have a clue as to why. After he fed his cat, he turned on the T.V. But, instead of watching it, he limped over to his picture window and stared out at the miles of bare, brown hills of cheat grass and sagebrush. Thirty miles to the north, in Hermiston, Willy was trying to get that boy of his out of the slammer. Ten miles past Hermiston, lay the deep, mile-wide Columbia River. Just over the Umatilla Bridge, the Horse Heaven Hills rose into the sky like great, brown skulls. This country he had been born into was sure as hell not a pretty country. And, Dale had to admit (at least to himself), it had its crime and its poverty and its share of just plain meanness. Willy's boy Aaron was either crazy or on drugs. Just last month, the police had picked up a thirteen-year-old girl for prostitution. Turned out that her grandfather, Jack Webster, the oldest brother of Ed Webster, an old boyhood friend of Dale's, had been molesting the baby for years.

What could a man say when confronted with sickness or evil of this

enormity? They'd let Jack out on bail after he had put up his ranch as collateral. The next day, his youngest son had found him face-down in a bowl of chocolate ice cream with the back of his head blasted all over the walls of the rec room. Because the ice cream and the cleaning kit for the old .30-06 was out, Bobby Poorman,

another old high-school friend, could pretend it was an accident and let Jack's family collect on the insurance.

Mizz Kitty butted and purred at Dale's ankles almost to the rhythm of the game-show music whispering from the TV. Dale looked west where the sun was beginning to set and thought about how some things never change. This was the same sunset his daddy had seen when he got off work at the Pendleton Lumber Mill in 1953. In the morning, it would be the same sunrise that always found his mother at the kitchen table with a cup of sweet tea reading the Good Book. Dale's mother had often read to him from the Good Book after he'd finished his chores and before she had started breakfast. It was funny. Now that he thought about it, Dale couldn't remember a single word she had read him. He could quote the Twenty-third Psalm. But somehow he doubted that his mother had ever offered up the Twenty-third with his sugar and cream-heavy coffee.

Dale went to sleep that night in his recliner, watching a bad movie about some fashion-model girl who no one wanted to take seriously. He dreamed miles of roses...old women...and the desert reclaiming the land. He woke at three a.m. to the sound of the national anthem. He was sore all over and went straight to bed without taking a bath.

At six a.m. on the dot, Dale was in the Oasis waiting for his eggs and pancakes. Billy Ray Kessel sat with him, drinking coffee. Billy Ray's peter-built baseball cap was pulled down nearly over his big, brown Spaniel eyes. "I hear you hired yourself that trouble-making chick from the Community College," he said.

Dale shrugged and looked toward the kitchen. Billy Ray was a lot easier to take after breakfast.

Billy Ray tilted his hat back and lit up a Camel. Watching the gray smoke drift up and toward the exhaust fan over the door, he said in his hangdog voice, "My boy told me she's a holy terror if you don't see eye-to-eye with her."

It just grated on Dale how Billy Ray would piss around a thing and never come out and say it until you begged him to. "Billy Ray, he sighed, "I reckon if I only hired people that saw eye-to-eye with me, you an' me'd be the only ones working here," he grinned.

Mary Beth, Billy Ray's kid sister, slung Dale's breakfast in front of him and hurried off to another table with her arms full of hot plates. Billy Ray looked mournfully at Dale's huge order of pancakes and eggs and sighed. He didn't have to pay for coffee in the Oasis. But he had had too many hard words this month with Mary Beth to expect a quick refill. He also knew, from painful experience, that Dale didn't like his chow interrupted. For his part, Dale figured there was no way he could string his breakfast out until Billy Ray had to leave for work. "Okay, Billy Ray, let's just cut to the chase scene. What does that dope smokin' punk-rocker boy of yours got to say?"

Billy Ray's mouth turned sadder and a touch mean at the corners. "Now Dale, you know right well that Jim only smokes a little pot. And that stuff ain't no worse for ya than the beer you sell here."

Dale nodded and wolfed down a full quarter of a pancake. "Could even be better," Billy Ray contended, rather hurt.

"Cut to the chase," Dale nodded and mumbled.

"Well...I guess she ain't no ax murderer or nothin'...but she loves

filing sexual-harassment suits...and got some kids to work for her for damn near free to get this recycling center going."

Dale waited. When Billy Ray didn't go on, he asked, "That's it?"

Billy Ray tried to catch his sister's eye as she disappeared into the kitchen. "Ain't it enough?"

Dale, angry because he had been suckered into Billy Ray's pointless foolishness again, slammed down his fork. "Damn you, Billy Ray! If that's all you got to tell me, let me eat my damn breakfast in peace!"

Billy Ray pulled his baseball cap down to his eyes. With a hurt, angry edge to his voice that was surprisingly out of character, he said, "Well, Dale, it ain't your boy who's worked two months for a hundred and sixteen dollars...and it ain't your boy who's runnin' around with holes in his shoes and bummin' you damn near every day for money you just ain't got and..."

Dale picked up his fork. Billy Ray shut up. They looked unhappily at each other for a long second. Finally, Dale said, "I got me about five hundred dollars of yard work and paint scrapin' to do out at my place. If a kid worked at it hard, he'd make himself about seven dollars an hour. If he screwed off, it'd be more like three. You tell Jim to come talk to me around noon if he thinks he's up to it."

Stung, Billy Ray spat, "We don't need no fuckin' charity in my..."

"IF," People turned to eye Dale, so he lowered his voice, "If you think I'm talkin' charity...if you think this ain't real work... you just drag your sour ol' ass off a little early and swing by my place."

Billy Ray shrugged. But he stopped looking pissed. "Dale,

You're sure as hell an asshole when someone gets between you and your grub."

"I reckon I am at that Billy Ray." The men smiled weakly and uncomfortably at each other and went back to their food and cigarettes.

Dale couldn't really afford the money. But he figured it was the kind of thing ol' Buck James would have done, and there sure as hell wasn't enough of his kind of man to go around in this day and age.

Dale was waiting at the bar with a cup of coffee when Comfort walked in at ten to open the bar. She had her hair in a French braid and was dressed in jeans and a man's white dress shirt. She seemed tense as he showed her how to get the place ready for business. When he was finished, he told her she could order lunch anytime she wanted. But she had to take it in the bar and keep waiting on customers. She would, he made sure she understood, be paid an extra half an hour for her lunchtime. She told him that she had brought her own food and left it in the walk-in. Dale said okay. He'd tack on four fifty a day extra every time she didn't eat at the Oasis. With that, he thought she seemed to relax a bit.

Dale hung around for about an hour, drinking coffee and watching her work. Then, he drove out to his place and made a list of jobs and what he figured each one was worth. He came up with seven things that needed done. The work added up to six hundred and thirty seven dollars. The boy could do all or just one. He could bust his butt or screw off. Dale had to admit, he figured that Billy Ray's boy would pick one or two of the easiest and then go blow the money on dope. Pulling into the Oasis parking lot, Dale chuckled out loud. If the boy had any gumption, he'd get the work done quicker than shit and use the money to go into the pot business himself. Even in times as bad as these, people always had money for booze and such.

At eleven-fifteen, Dale spotted Billy Ray's boy in a booth in the back of the restaurant. He was sitting with a washed-out, little blonde girl who was dressed in neon pink shorts and blouse. The girl reminded Dale of a freshly painted fingernail. He shook his head and, coffee cup in hand, padded his three hundred and three pounds into the restaurant. Up close Dale saw that Jim was wearing a black tank-top shirt with the picture of some scary rock-and-roll band, and black nylon pants. He couldn't see the kid's shoes. But he reckoned they did have holes in them. Dale stuck out his pudgy hand. "Nice to see you, Jim!"

"Yeah, same here, Mr. Dick." He nodded to the girl who was real pretty up close. "This is Camille."

"Nice to meet you, Miss." Dale offered his hand to the girl who took it like it was dirty and looked at his vast stomach like it was catching.

Dale felt himself blush. To cover his hurt and embarrassment, he said heartily, "Why don't you folks have a Coke or some coffee on the house?"

The girl blushed as red as Dale and said, "Thanks, but I gotta go now."

Dale nodded, and when she popped out of the red leatherette booth, he slid into it. Where she had been sitting was warm and smelled real nice. Dale and Jim watched her leave. When she got to the door, Camille turned. Holding on to the doorknob, she smiled, bright and embarrassed and, said, "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Dick."

"Likewise," Dale grinned and nodded and turned back to Jim. "That's a right nice young lady you got there, Jim. Now, what'll it be...a soda or coffee?"

Jim shook his head. "I wasn't planning on staying very long, Mr. Dick."

"Okay...I got me some work I need done." Dale handed him the list. "Look them over...and if you don't think the price is right, we can talk about it."

Dale watched the boy read the list. "You can get started anytime you want...and do any or everything there." Jim's eyes moved slowly from line to line. His tan face was straightforward and had none of the sly sadness that owned his father's face. "Uh...I'd be pleased to throw in lunch...if you want."

Jim looked up. "Yeah?"

Dale nodded. "Back door's unlocked. Help yourself to the fridge."

"This looks okay to me, Mr. Dick...But I was wonderin' if you'd mind if Camille helped me out."

Dale waved a plump hand in the air. "Whatever pulls your trigger's fine by me, Jim."

"Dale," Comfort tapped him on one round shoulder, "A beer person's here...and he requires more money than I have in the till."

"Hi, Ms Greene," Jim said, pleased to see his ex-teacher.

"Hello Jim. Are you a friend of Dale's?"

"No," he spun the list on the table. "Just going to do some work for him."

"Excuse me." Dale pulled his heavy body out of the booth and went into the bar to see if the Bud man was trying to overload him again.

When he got back, Comfort was holding the list, and the cold-cop look he had seen in her eyes that first day was back. "Have you ever heard of minimum wage?"

For a second, Dale was so surprised he didn't know what the hell to say. Dale looked to Jim who looked as embarrassed as the devil and wouldn't meet his eyes. Finally, he said, "I reckon I've had maybe seventy-odd people work for me off and on over the years, and not a one of them has ever claimed I cheated them."

"Let's not sidestep the issue..." Comfort quipped.

"This is a small town, Mizz," Dale cut her off, "If a man cheats you, the word gets out real quick. And besides, what you are lookin' at is what is called contract work. And," Dale's soft face froze hard, "From what I hear, you ain't no one to be talkin' about slave labor."

"That was an ecological co-op, Mister! And I used up all my savings and had to ask my parents for money to keep it viable as long as it was," Comfort snapped, her eyes misting over.

Shaking and pale with anger, Dale said, "You got customers waiting for beers in there. And I'd take it kindly if you'd get back there and wait on them...Mizz Greene."

Shaking herself, Comfort wheeled and marched to the bar. Jim coughed and said in a small voice, "Mr. Dick?"

"What son?" Dale said, unable to stop staring bullets at the skinny woman behind his long oak bar.

"People have been slashing her tires and tossin' paint on her truck, Sir."

"What?!" Dale's head bobbed around. "Just `cause she was recycling newspapers and old cans, and not payin' you kids diddly?"

"Nossir," the boy shook his head with earnest vigor, "It was probably because she's been getting the women that worked at the recycling center to stand up for their rights."

Women? Dale thought and then realized the boy meant girls. "People sliced that ol' girls tires `cause she got...women to ask for equal pay and such? Jim, I don't hardly believe that."

"Ms Greene got a couple of women to file sexual-harassment suits...and then there was Deana Fleming..."

"That was the Fleming girl that was raped last month?"

There were six Fleming girls, and Dale didn't even try to keep them straight.

"Yessir." Jim turned a little red at the neck. "Deana had been datin' Fred Angell...and well...one night," Jim's blush came full grown, but he met Dale's eyes, "Fred didn't have a rubber... and Deana didn't want to...so...well...Ms. Greene made her call the cops."

Dale shook his head and looked back at Comfort who now looked like she might start crying. "I get the picture, Jim." Dale could see in his mind the little Fleming girl in the back seat of a car, crying. And that damn Angell boy slapping her around like his dad, John Angell,

used to beat on his wife until she up and left him after the youngest kid was out of school.

Dale shook his head again and turned back to Jim who was grinning from ear to ear. Dale arched his eyebrows, and Jim said,

"Ms. Greene taught a course on Waste Capitalism...and she would show slides. One of the slides had these guys like J.P. Morgan...and she'd flash it and say, 'These men are responsible for these women.' And then she'd flash ten or so slides of staving Third-World women on the screen..."

Dale dipped his head slightly to encourage the kid to finish.

"Well sir...it just dawned on me that the capitalists were all...big men...who looked a lot...like you," Jim petered out, a shade embarrassed.

Dale stared straight at the boy for a second, and then burst out laughing. "I'll be dipped in sheep shit! If I don't look out, she'll be wantin' more than a buck a day, now won't she?"

Jim didn't think Dale was funny. But he chuckled politely and said, "I'm gonna go check it out now, if you don't mind, Mr. Dick."

"Go ahead on, Jim...and remember what I said about lunch."

After Jim left, Dale took one last look at Comfort. She was working the lunch crowd like nothing had happened. He slapped on his cowboy hat and made his way out the door into the ninety-five degree Pendleton day.

Dale drove straight out to Frank James's place and parked his big,

red GMC truck in the shade of the weather-beaten barn. Up on the Rose Hill, Dale pumped water until both his arms ached and he thought he'd pass out from sunstroke. Dale ended the irrigation by burying his head under the pump and pumping the cool water over it. Then he sat as cross-legged as he could get on a pile of boards, breathing in the roses and gazing out over the endless hills of golden wheat...and talking to Buck James's grave for over an hour about how the world was going to hell in a hand basket.

Sunburned, but refreshed, Dale lumbered back to his truck and drove home. Jim and Camille were out in the back lot on his big riding mower. Dale didn't think it was safe to have two people on it. But he reflected that, together, they weighed less than he did, and he had used it plenty of times.

Dale saw with satisfaction that the kids had made lunch and cleaned up after themselves. He gobbled down three thick ham sandwiches and a half-gallon of milk. Leaving the dishes to soak in the sink, he went and took a long cool shower.

As Dale was buttoning his blue work shirt, he noticed his bed was made up a little neater than he had made it. He pulled the sheets back and, sure enough, there was a large, dark stain. "Damn that boy!" he sputtered. It turned his stomach to think he might have laid on those filthy sheets. The smell of the kids' sex evoked anger and disgust in him. Dale flopped in a straight-back chair and pulled on his cowboy boots in a fury.

He was heading out the front door to tell those damn kids they were ten damn kinds of rude when the phone rang. Cursing, he reversed course and snatched it up. "Yes!"

There was a slight pause, then Mary Beth said, "Dale, you'd better get down here fast. Your new barmaid has called the cops."

"Dammit to Hell! I'm on my way." He slapped the receiver down and ran to his truck. In the last six months, he had had eight bar fights where the cops had had to be called. The Oregon Liquor Control Commission had told him flat out, if he didn't clean up the Oasis, they'd close it down. Since most of his trouble had been on weekends, Dale had hired Big Willy to bartend nights. Willy was probably the only man in town nearly everyone was more or less afraid of because, back when Willy had been a drinking man, his hobby had been getting good and hammered, then going around and

beating the living shit out of people. One night, after Dale had eighty-sixed him, Willy had come storming into the Oasis, looking for trouble, and Dale had blindsided him with an axe handle. Big

Willy and short, fat Dale had been pretty fair friends after that. Dale flew through the bar's front door and saw in an instant what the problem was. Ed Watson was sitting at a no-smoking table, puffing away on one of his pathetic home-rolled cigarettes. Normally, little Ed was one of the nicest guys you could care to meet. But he had lost his job, and last month, his unemployment had run out. Dale had heard that Ed was living in his car, and the food stamp people couldn't do a thing for him because he didn't have an address. Ed's face was a swamp of anger and hurt. Comfort glared at him from behind the bar. Dale bellied up to the bar and said in a low voice. "You draw me a pitcher of beer, and give me two glasses, if you couldj...Mizz." Still glaring, Comfort served him the beer without saying a word.

"Thank you. Now, you get on the phone and call the police and tell them we done got things under full control." Dale picked up the pitcher and an ashtray and hissed quietly, "Now...Mizz Greene." When she didn't move, Dale picked up the pitcher and waddled over to Ed's table. He eased himself into a chair and poured them both a glass of golden beer. Sliding the ashtray to Ed, he picked up the 'No Smoking' sign and laid it on a table that was within easy reach. Ed's

eyes shone bright with satisfaction, and he managed to nod his thanks. But his hand was trembling, and he looked like he didn't trust himself to speak. Comfort tossed her apron on the bar and said "Fuck all of you reactionary assholes." Dale nodded to little Ed. "You got to excuse me. It looks like I got a bar to tend."

Ed smiled back shyly and nodded. "Go ahead on, ol' son...and thanks for the beer."

The big, Indian Patrolman, Bill Sitting Dog, laughed until he cried when Dale told him why he had been summoned. He was still chuckling when he wandered out of the bar to see if he could nail a few speeders on the Interstate. Around four, Lottie came in and helped herself to a cup of coffee. She just sat on a stool, smoking her long, white cigarettes and grinning at Dale until he asked how she was enjoying her vacation. "Pretty fair." She smiled, sly and pleased. Waiting for Lottie to make some smart-ass remark about her replacement, or lack thereof, Dale let his gaze drift over her vast breasts. When she just kept grinning and didn't say anything, Dale raised his eyes to meet hers and said, "You know, Lottie darling, if I ever get married again, I sure as hell hope my ol' lady's got a set of headlights like yours." Lottie tossed back her head and laughed a sweet little-girl laugh. "Well Dale, you ol' Honey Pie you, if she don't, I can tell her where to get them."

