The Night Before the Party

by Nels Hanson

The fried chicken crackled in the pan. The candied honey in the coffee can melted quickly without burning. The water in the bucket burner I'd used to warm baby bottles began to boil for the corn. The spotless kitchen gleamed, the table set. The stacked bowls and spoons for the ice cream stood ready on the drainboard. The percolator with fresh grounds waited for the black plug to go into the socket.

I looked out the window above the sink, the raisin harvest five days away and now the sky clear of the thunderheads that crossed the Valley all morning and piled high to the east against the Sierras.

The light had changed while I had been cooking. The heavy lawn chairs threw long shadows like scaffolding across the driveway. The Hollywood plum had darkened, its red-purplish leaves turning bluer. Suspended by a wire from a limb, the old dinner gong looked sooty, like a blackened, overturned metal plate.

The grating rasp of the knife against the grinder had ceased. I walked out onto the porch and saw the lit barnyard.

All was quiet, no leaf rustled, no crow or top-knotted quail called. In the strong last light Delmus' faded denim shone like burnished gold as he stood beside the grinder's great yellow wheel. The tandem disk with its rows of round blades like a dozen setting suns and beside it the bright green Oliver tractor with the orange terracer were parked forever beyond the glowing barn and the stalled blue pickup. The trash barrel by the peach tree was awash with light.

The catalpa, barn, the barn's running-horse weathervane, Delmus, his cap like a bronze helmet with lifted visor—

Everything was kindled and revealed by the lowering sun.

Delmus' long shadow stretched behind him on the straw-colored ground. He looked down at his knife for the hog and his party in the morning, his shadow looking down at its own three-foot sword, beside the complicated oval and framework shadow of the grinder.

"*Dinner,"* I called through the screen.

Delmus lifted his head, staring toward the house.

He frowned, maybe the sun was in his eyes. It had crossed the road again, rising and setting in the south now, the direction each vine row's terraced earth would lean so the picked grapes could catch the light in the mornings and late afternoons and let a soft rain run like water down a pitched roof.

What a simple, innocent, dangerous thing to do, to tend the vines all year until the grapes were yellow-sweet, then pick them and lay them on the ground to dry, in the wind, under the sun, the moon and stars!

From the corner of the porch, where the screen met the wall, I could see one of Mrs. Watkins' walnut trees. The trunks and branches blazed amber, the leaves lit and moving gently, all one way, like the blown fronds of a palm on some tropical isle, before they'd make a black tracery against an orange sky.

I went back into the kitchen and opened the oven. The biscuits glowed like 12 wheat-gold suns and I grasped the tin sheet with my glove, then tilted it, letting them slide into a basket.

I tonged the chicken onto the platter, covering the china's painted apples and pears. I took the potatoes off the burner, drained them, set the pot in the sink and used the masher so the Idahos made long grainy columns through the mesh. I added salt and pepper, mixed in butter and milk, tasted with my finger, just right, and put the cover back on the pot. I lifted the corn from the bubbling water and pushed off all but one of the stove's lit buttons.

The frying pan fizzled. I poured off the grease into a cardboard orange juice can, then stirred the chicken drippings, the flour and milk, until they turned creamy. The country gravy bubbled and using the wooden spoon I poured it into the squat oval pitcher like a green Aladdin's lamp.

I stepped from the kitchen and stood at the foot of the stairs.

"*Kate,"* I called, "*dinner's ready!"*

I spooned the golden honey into a saucer and pushed the steaming potatoes into a wooden bowl. I took all of my dinner and arranged it on the table, the gravy next to the potatoes, beside them the chicken, the biscuits in the center with the honey and butter, at the end of the table the sweet white corn.

From the porch, the sky looked like abalone shell, mother of pearl. The nightly jet crossed the horizon above the Coast Range and the sea, a burning needle pulling a gold thread. The contrail grew fluffy and frayed, fuzzy pink at the edges and then the silver dot was lost beyond the blue gums, the eucalyptus grove.

The dark wall of massive trees broken by a few white trunks looked like the edge of the forest in "The Wizard of Oz," when Dorothy and the others ran out into the fields of poppies toward the Emerald City. The green-faced Witch of the East put Judy Garland and Bert Lahr and the dog to sleep, because they were mammals—the Bad Witch watched them in her crystal ball, before the Good Witch made it snow and woke them—

"*Delmus!"* I called.

He looked up, startled.

"*What?"*

"*Supper's ready!"*

"*I'm coming."* He dipped his head, starting across the barnyard in long strides.

Kate hadn't come down. The food cooled in six or seven slender, twisting spirals of steam, the first strands of a forming Mexican hurricane—or curving stairways, to a castle tower or the far surface of the earth . . . .

I sat at the table, gazing at the wallpaper, the farmhouse and red mill where the blue stream turned the high wheel, the 20 paddles wet and dripping. Once I had a dream that my unknown father—one of Dolly Mable's forgotten lovers—lived alone there, emptying sacks of gold kernels as the millstone turned on the grinding floor. I couldn't see him clearly—he wore a green bandanna across his face in the room filled with flour dust.

"*I heard Gus Emory had a heart attack*," Delmus had said an hour ago at the old

grinder.

The same farm and hill of wheat were repeated 50 times across the wall, each blue sky balanced by a yellow sun and two clouds.

"*Eckhart lost his place yesterday,"* Delmus had mumbled, staring down at the glinting knife.

A door slammed—I wondered if it were the white door to the wallpaper farmhouse, if its kitchen had the same wallpaper and the framed picture of the horses Delmus' father had clipped from a magazine. The grass reached up to their knees. Their heads bent down to graze the lush stems . . . .

Last September 10th I had counted the horses as I listened to the second storm ruining the raisins, not wanting to look out at the window at the rain falling in black bars. Twin hurricanes, tropical depressions, blew north from Mexico, *Charles* and *Belinda*.

Delmus drank in the living room, the emergency weather station blaring on and off with its red light flashing, the forecast a certain inch and a half, no wind, high pressure backed up from Reno to Kansas.

And three days later the grapes on trays left open to the rain swelled into frog bellies, the moldy stems turned canary yellow, before the fruit went dull black with botrytis. The raisins stuck to the tray paper, good only for cheap brandy or wood alcohol, $50 a ton.

"*And Red sold his new tractor to a dairy, took a big loss—"*

There were 53 horses. Had anyone else ever counted them? As it rained I had begun to give them names. Under the pine tree, shadows on their backs, Smoke and Blue and Rusty browsed. *How sweet the grass tasted!* I had whispered. *How green was my valley—*

"Something smells awfully good."

Delmus stood in the doorway, drying his hands on a towel.

"Would you get Kate?" I asked, without turning. "I want her to pour the milk."

"I'll pour it." Delmus swiveled and threw the towel back through the door into the porch.

"*Munson's throwing in the towel,"* I remembered.

In his dead father's cowboy boots, Delmus started for the refrigerator. He was too big for the kitchen.

"No," I said, "you sit down. Kate hasn't done a thing."

Delmus went into the living room. I heard him call Kate, then climb the first stairs and call again.

"She's coming," Delmus said. He stood back. "Boy, everything looks good."

"I hope it is. I made it kind of special. Just to break the routine."

“I see that,” Delmus said, surveying the table. “Look at that chicken.”

Kate looked pale, dressed in the same wrinkled t-shirt and long gauze skirt. Had she been crying, over Eddie Dodge? Again I saw the blonde teenager at the fogged window of Dolly Mable’s old car, when my mother appeared in May like magic, after 45 years, from Acacia . . . .

Kate’s face was puffy, pressed for hours against the sweaty pillow. She hadn’t combed her long light-auburn hair.

And still she was beautiful, far prettier than I had ever been, nearly as gorgeous as Dolly Mable in the old leather-framed picture on the night table upstairs, beside the silver monogrammed brush and mirror—*DM*—and the yellow volume called *The Book of Changes.*

“Kate, would you pour the milk?”

She opened the refrigerator, picked up the carton from the top shelf above the beer and cake and the halved watermelon for Delmus’ party.

“What did you do today?”

I had seen her only briefly before dinner, when she asked for a Mason jar.

Kate dropped the milk, the whole half-gallon. I watched it happen, in slow motion, the carton hit and fall open on its side. “Tip it up, tip it up, don’t let it spill—”

She set it upright, after hours went by. She knelt in the pool of milk, her skirt bunched up.

“I’ll get a towel.” Delmus pushed back his chair.

“No, you two start eating.” I got up. “While the food’s still warm.”

Kate stared down at the white lake. Beads of cold milk glistened in her hair.

“What’s wrong, Kate? Are you sick?”

“I’m all right,” she said, glancing up. “I’ll clean it up. I dropped it.”

Kate held the carton and stood up, setting it on the drainboard. She came back from the porch with Delmus’ towel. “Not all of it spilled.”

“It’s all right. That’s fine. You sit down.”

Kate turned and dropped the towel in the sink. She dried the carton with a paper towel, then sat across from Delmus.

“You start, pass things around.” I went to the broom closet.

“You’ve got to be more careful,” Delmus said. “Did you help your mother today?”

“No, not today.”

“Yesterday?”

“I don’t know. I guess not.”

“Yes, you did,” I said, stepping back with the mop. “You made the spaghetti. It was good.”

Delmus looked across at Kate. She had her head down.

“Let’s eat this nice dinner Kyla made,” Delmus said.

I filled half the divided sink with water, looking for a moment out the window at the old dinner bell hanging from the limb. “*Ring, Ring,”* it called last year and the year before with the hard September rains.

I dipped the mop, then squeezed it nearly dry and pushed it back and forth across the floor erasing Kate’s white footprints like a ghost’s. I left it in the sink to soak with its handle in the air and washed my hands.

“Well—” I sat at the table. “How is everything?”

“Fine—” Delmus bent forward, his mouth full, a chicken leg in his hand. “Wonderful.”

“Good.” Kate sat with her fork stuck in her potatoes.

“Let me pass you the chicken. Kate, pass your mother the potatoes and gravy.”

I served myself, taking the plates from Kate. I took a bite of chicken.

“I forgot the milk—” As I said it, I saw Delmus and Kate look at me. They were smiling.

“That’s pretty good, Kyla,” Delmus said.

“Sometimes I think I’m losing my mind.” I raised a napkin to my mouth. How good it felt to joke with Delmus and Kate about spilled milk. Kate took the carton showing Hopalong Cassidy and his white horse Topper and filled my glass.

“That’s right,” said Delmus, “you put it in the glass, not on the floor. We’re not a bunch of cats.”

“We’re not?” Kate said.

“Our tongues aren’t made for lapping,” Delmus explained. “We don’t have the bristles to lift the liquid molecules.”

Kate giggled.

“Delmus,” I said, “it was an accident.”

I was giggling too.

“More chicken?” I asked Kate.

“Mom, I’m on a diet!”

“Sorry.”

I glanced at Delmus.

“How ’bout some honey for your biscuit?”

Kate nodded.

“Kate,” I asked, “are you old enough to remember the bear that ate the raisins?”

She shook her head. Her long reddish hair swung away from the scar. You could hardly see it now where Delmus had dropped her against the iron bedstead when she was three.

“He was walking the vine rows, eating one tray and then another. Came down from the mountains, didn’t he, Delmus?”

“He was in bear heaven,” Delmus said.

“Whatever happened?” I asked. “Did they catch him and put him in the Fresno Zoo?”

“Something like that.” Delmus raised a biscuit dipped in gravy. “Or put him in the circus.”

“No they didn’t,” I said.

But Delmus leaned toward Kate.

“You’ve got milk in your hair,” he said.

“Where? No I don’t.”

“Yes you do,” Delmus said, “right here.” He reached to brush a strand of her hair.

I felt myself begin to relax and enjoy the nice evening. With all the different food, except for the dressing and the chicken that would have been turkey, it was like a summer Thanksgiving or Christmas—

“Where’d you go in town today?” I asked Delmus, lifting my fork. We hadn’t had a chance to talk with the screeching sandstone grinder, just “*It can’t rain three years in a row,”* and “*Sure looked like it this morning.”*

“Here and there,” he said, almost cheerfully.

“Did you see anybody you knew?”

“Not really.” Delmus shook his head. “Things are pretty quiet.”

Tonight I didn’t want to talk about the harvest and the picking on Wednesday, or about the deserted stores, their overhead fans spinning above the empty aisles, the faded strands of ribbon blowing out from the coolers.

But that wasn’t right. The stores would be full, with all the workers pouring into Lemas. Finally, the merchants would have a steady business.

“Did you get the battery?”

“No.”

“You didn’t?” He looked toward the porch.

“I forgot.”

That’s why Delmus had gone to town, to get the battery for the pickup. The car filled with dust when he drove through the field on the dirt alleyways.

“Where’d you go?” *99 Club*, I thought. *El Sombrero*.

“Rain insurance.”

How could I forget that? “You saw Kroeber?”

“It’s awfully high.” Delmus frowned, turning toward the sink. “It only covers half.”

“But you got it?”

“No,” Delmus said. “We’ll have to squeak by.”

“*One spin of the wheel,”* Delmus had said, lifting the squealing knife from the turning stone. “*Safer to go to Reno than make raisins—”*

“I thought we’d decided to buy it.” I put down the fork. Without insurance, the harvest would be ten times worse. Every cloud would make you shiver and turn toward the west, at night each branch bending in the wind would wake you up.

This morning I’d had the dream of the rain and flood and Kate and Dolly Mable and Eddie Dodge up on the spinning roof and when I woke the sky was almost black and I heard the rose trellis hit against the side of the house and thought, “It’s Kate.”

If it did rain, the insurance would bring as much as the low raisin price.

“It’s too high,” Delmus said, pushing back his plate. “It’s your profit. Anyway, we’d have to get another loan.”

“Why don’t we?” I didn’t want to talk about it now, but I was, it had started, over the good dinner I had made.

“We’re overextended,” Delmus said. “Just like everybody else.”

I hated the word “overextended,” like some long boom that would crack or tip over.

“The bank’s pulling back. Now they don’t like Reagan’s tight dollar so well. Bottom’s fallen out of land. Sixteen, down to 5,000 an acre, in two years?”

Delmus’ voice got higher, he lifted his brows, so he looked like the movie star who was funny when he got upset. He’d get angry if I told him so.

“Remember the day the Sikh in the yellow turban drove up in the El Dorado, offered me two million cash? I was crazy, we should have taken it.”

“And done what?”

“Gone fishing. Now it’s too late. It always hits the farmers first, like in ’27. Everything’s for sale, the bank’s swamped with land. They don’t want to lend anybody a dime.”

“Not even for insurance?” I said. “That’s ridiculous. It’s in their own interest—”

“That’s the magic word. Interest. You’d have to pay them twice. Baylor’s getting 15

percent on his T-bills."

"You're positive?"

"Baylor told me himself."

"No, about the rain insurance."

"That's what I heard," Delmus said, lifting his glass. "Trucks going to the dairies. Too many raisins, even with the rains. Low price, strong dollar. In Greece they get subsidies."

I didn't want to talk about politics, world economies, our conflicts with Western Europe. Or India, Indira Ghandi's murderous D-Day attack on the Sikhs' Golden Temple where Delmus said their Golden Book was read aloud 24 hours a day, forever—

"I'm sick of the bank. It was better when it was the Bank of Italy," Delmus said. "When I'm there I feel like I'm in Baylor's house."

"How many are getting insurance?"

"Some are, some aren't." He played with his napkin. "It's about half and half, from what I can tell."

"Who's getting it?"

"Will Otis is, Earl Green isn't."

Now I didn't want to get on Earl and his drinking, his divorce, Earl who never did anything right. I'd seen his scarlet face at the pickup's window as he honked and smiled, passing like some doomed underwater thing through the walnuts' shade. He'd be back in the morning, for Delmus' party—

"When's the deadline?"

"Monday."

"Let's you and I go to the bank," I said. "We'll have lunch in town. Then we'll drop by the hospital. I'll see about part-time, maybe full-time work. If it rains, the insurance'll protect our capital." Another word I hated. Baylor had *capital,* two and a half million, with no kids, Delmus his only living relative.

Then I remembered Dolly Mable upstairs in bed, dressed in the blue gown with the door closed tight, the fan blowing the clippings of Geraldine Ferraro that crackled like little fires along the wall, the red record on the phonograph playing "Mona Lisa" over and over. At her feet the purple dress stared with a hundred glinting eyes that she said were diamonds, Joaquin Murrietta's treasure.

I couldn't leave Kate alone with my mother.

"Let's think about it," Delmus answered, folding the napkin. "We don't have to decide tonight. I don't want to spoil supper."

But he just sat there, he didn't ask me to pass him more chicken.

"I was thinking this afternoon, about what good chicken your mother used to make," I said. While I cooked, for a moment I'd been half-sure Florence stood behind me, watching me test and turn the chicken legs.

“Yeah,” Delmus said, “she did.”

He looked down at his plate. The refrigerator’s motor began to hum. No one said anything.

“Did you get my shoes?” Kate asked. “I bet you forgot—”

“Last week you forgot my library book,” Delmus said.

“I know, I had it on the counter to check out. It had a boat on the cover. It was on the Rosicrucians, wasn’t it?”

“Lincoln’s dreams. The ‘Big D,’ Reagan said. D for Dallas. John Wilkes Booth was an actor, you know—”

Delmus stared intently at Kate and I remembered the deacon in my stepparents’ church, the crippled man who saw the devil, that’s what he called him. Big D. Something had happened and Dolly Mable had sent me away from the big busy house in Acacia, always men and women coming and going, to live with the Lawrences in Fresno.

“I’m sorry. What about my shoes?”

“They weren’t ready,” Delmus said, looking again toward the porch. “Next week.”

“I took them in two weeks ago!”

“What’s another week?” I said. “You’ve got plenty of shoes.”

Unless Kate was planning to leave in Dolly Mable’s old Cadillac, with Dolly’s one-day chauffeur from Acacia. Dolly had given Eddie Dodge the car I’d seen one evening, pulling slowly past the vineyard toward the blue gums.

Kate didn’t answer.

“There’s only one guy working there now,” Delmus said. “Everybody’s having their old ones repaired. He tried to sell me a pair of boots, Red Wings, half price. He wouldn’t let me go, kept pulling at my arm. Like Baylor. Like Baylor in an election year.”

“‘*Would you rather die in the gas chamber or the electric chair?*’” Kate mimicked Baylor, lifting her upper lip.

“Electric chair,” Delmus answered without hesitation. “It’s warm. In summer, I’d take the chamber, less static.”

“Nice and cool, like a wine cellar.”

“It wasn’t a good year.”

“Waiter, you’ll have to take it back.”

“I’m sorry. Bad diagnosis?”

“It’s not funny,” I said, “not funny at all.”

But I had to fight back a chuckle. “He’s an awful old man—”

"*Wood or copper?"* asked Kate.

"'*Copper,'"* Delmus answered, raising his brows, "'*I want a copper coffin!'"*

"'*Keeps the water out.'"*

"'*No slugs or worms.'"*

"'*I hate those things.'"*

"'*Not as bad as fish though, on those nature programs? The way their mouths, their lips open and shut, drinking water, breathing, whatever they do?'"*

"Stop it now—"

"'*Just staring at you,'"* Kate said, making her green eyes go narrow.

"'*Awful!'"* Delmus pursed his lips. "'*Why they do that?'"*

"'*It gets me right here, in my neck. Like this. Like gills.'"*

"'*Damn it, I'll never believe we come from a fish.'"*

"'*What's it called? That stuff on 'em?'"* Kate asked.

"Stop it," I said, "not over dinner."

"'*You know. That slick greeny—'"* Kate rubbed her fingers

But I was laughing, I couldn't help it.

"'*No Sir-eee, I sure as hell don't want it on me. Gladys doesn't either. She told me so.'"*

Now Delmus did look like the movie actor.

"'*We're gettin' the watertights, with the concrete liners.'"*

Jack Lemmon and he could have been twins. Ensign Pulver in "Mr. Roberts," with Henry Fonda and Cagney.

"He's terrible," I said, "just terrible—"

"No, Kyla, let's be fair," Delmus said seriously. "Baylor's a wonderful human being, an extraordinary individual, really one in a million if you stop to think. In fact, he asked me the other day if I thought they'd raise a statue to him in town, at the pioneer park, after he passed on."

"Who's going to do that?"

"He will. When he owns the place. I told him he should build it himself, use the stones he already has."

Baylor traded for the Indian stones each brave had carried, long and wide and shaped like a penis to guard against dysfunction—he had a whole collection, he was always trying to show Delmus his latest find.

“You couldn’t ask for a more perfect portrait,” Delmus said.

“The Way It Was” was the name of Baylor’s weekly newspaper column. At the mailbox Mrs. Watkins asked about Dolly Mable’s blue car and the boy who had brought her. Again she’d mentioned Kate’s red dress she’d found the day before, out by the road, she said. Her matched Dobermans stood guard at her side and I knew they’d pulled the scarlet cotton from the line.

“For a minute I was plum sure it was that killer,” Watkins said. “This Standpipe Strangler. The dirty dog is still on the loose—”

“Why doesn’t Baylor give us some money?” Kate asked. She spooned more mashed potatoes onto her plate. “I thought he was rich.”

Baylor had lost his hearing when he was kicked by a horse. *Which one? Smoky?* I gazed at the horses on the wall. The blue horse with black mane bent its neck to eat the grass in the picture.

“Rich as Midas, but he’s taking it with him. He’s invented a new kind of wallet.”

“Come on, stop now,” I said, turning from the horses.

“It’s not calf or pigskin, but thin tissue from a sheep’s ear, the inside, real tender, like human skin,” Delmus went on. “It’s almost invisible, the way the atoms are. It’s quite a discovery.”

“Sounds fascinating,” Kate answered.

“A wallet that can slip from one world to the next? Sherman, if you think he’s rich now, wait till you see him on the other side.”

“I see now, Mr. Peabody,” Kate said.

“The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show,” hosted by the moose and flying squirrel—Kate and Delmus used to watch the cartoon about the smart dog who wore glasses and was a scientist, and his boy, the young assistant who ran the time machine. *Sherman, set the Way Back. What year, Mr. Peabody?* Kate and he would laugh and play the parts.

“Why didn’t you get the Red Wings?” I watched Delmus touch his ear. “You need a pair.”

“A statue doesn’t do him justice. Baylor belongs next to Reagan, on Mt. Rushmore.”

“Delmus—”

“I can wear the ones I got on,” he said, wiping his mouth.

“Forty-year-old cowboy boots with high heels? You’ll trip getting on and off the tractor.”

“I’ve got insurance. I told you what Hawkins said, at the Farmer’s Market? ‘Are you a farmer?’ the lady asked. ‘I used to be,’ he said. ‘Now I’m just a clown.’ I’m worth more dead than alive.”

“Don’t say that,” I said. “Not even joking.”

This week Richard Burton had the fatal stroke, Elizabeth Taylor all distraught, dressed in black. The farmer's gunshot in front of the farmer's wife, in Lynnville—

"You could wear sandals," Kate said. "You could grow a beard."

"Wear an ankh?"

"What's that?"

"It's Egyptian. A symbol of immortality. Like the phoenix, or a butterfly. Chrysalis, Christ? A cross with a loop." He drew it in the air with his finger. "Isis. Like the symbol for the egg."

"Oh," Kate said.

"We could start growing marijuana," Delmus offered, grinning. "Some pot. That's what a couple of guys by the river started doing."

"Delmus," I said again.

The timer went off on the stove and I got up to turn it off. It was almost nine.

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked. "Is that all you're going to eat?" Two leg bones, a half-eaten biscuit and a corncob lay on his plate.

"I guess so."

"You worked all afternoon," I said.

"Sharpening the knife, fiddling with the old grinder," Delmus said. "Goofing off."

"You want coffee? Ice cream?"

"We have ice cream?" Kate asked.

"Chocolate."

"I'll get myself some."

I turned to Delmus. "Ice cream?"

"I guess not. By the way, did Briggs ever call, about the raisin bins?"

"No." We looked at one another. Then I felt his glance slide past me.

"You feel all right?"

"It's the grinder." He lifted a palm over his right ear. "I've got a ringing, like somebody's hitting the dinner bell."

His shirt sleeve slipped down and I could see the old burn stamped on the inside of his arm, the first three numbers of the raised scar: **097.** The piece of hot metal from Brawley's exploded bomber had scorched him, clinging, deeply searing the skin after snapping the bone. I had bandaged the numbers, later felt their imprint against my side at night as we lay together in the darkened white room of the Veterans' Hospital.

In the morning I could hear doves outside the window, mourning doves cooing as the sun came up. I knew that soon I'd see you again, in your white uniform with your

hair tucked up under your cap. I remembered last night, when you took it down and it was all around you. I tried to make the sun go down, so you and I would be together again. The world is so strange outside your arms.

The note was hard to read, because his right arm was burned. That's why Delmus wore long-sleeved shirts, even in summer, the way Kate left her hair long, hanging forward, to cover the crescent line at her cheek.

The way I'd told Delmus and Kate and Mrs. Watkins that my mother's name was Mrs. Grayson—

"You need to go to bed early," I said quickly. "Tomorrow's a big day."

"Aaron Winters is coming tomorrow," Delmus said. "Did I tell you?"

"No, you didn't. How is he?" He'd been like a father to Delmus, he and Larry Jones, after Delmus' father had died. Aaron inducted Delmus into the Masons Delmus didn't go to anymore, because Baylor was one. "Is he still looking for oil?"

"Still doodle-bugging. He's got a lease—where, I don't know. Don't tell anybody. He made me promise not to say a word. All hush hush. He wants me to come in with him, says this time it's a sure thing."

"You saw him in town?"

"Outside the insurance office. He was getting liability insurance before they drill the well."

But Delmus had said he hadn't seen anyone today, except for Wes who told him Eckhart had gone broke, that Gus Emory had the heart attack. Martha was taking over the harvest.

"God I'm tired." He put his face into his hands, his elbows resting on the table. "Three years tired. That damned Briggs."

"At least it's not so hot."

"No, it's generally cool when it rains."

"Let me get you some coffee. Maybe you should go look for oil. After all these years, Aaron's bound to hit."

"You think so?" Delmus said through his fingers. "He could sure find water."

"No," I said, "I guess not." I plugged in the percolator.

"Why not?" Delmus dropped his hands. "Edgar Cayce did. Kyla, did you know if you drilled a well in L.A., straight through the center of the Earth, it would come out in Perth, Australia? They thought he was nuts, that Mormon guy in the 1800s? He said the plates would fit together, like pieces of a puzzle. Pangea, that's what it was called. The first continent. And you know, Sutter was angry when they found the gold in '48, it was '48, not '49."

Delmus scratched his forehead.

"Come to think of it, it was really '42. Francisco Lopes went to pick some wild onions for his wife. He found the gold just under the ground, at the foot of the Gold Oak."

He talked that way in his sleep, to another person who wasn't there. Kate and I

glanced at each other and looked away. Delmus rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. "Yep, he could sure find water. Just like Endicott Lowell could ride a horse—"

"And Larry found the guns," I said softly. "The pearl handles."

"But not the gold," Delmus said, "he couldn't find Murrietta's treasure."

I turned to Kate. "Did you do any knitting today?"

Kate shook her head, looking down at her bowl.

"I read 'Cyrano de Bergerac.'"

I said, amazed at myself as I heard my words coming out, "Isn't that the one about the man with the long nose, like Pinocchio?"

Kate stared at me, she blew out air as she started to laugh in disbelief. I hadn't meant that—it was a tragic story, about love unrequited, unrecognized. "*While I was below in the shadows, others climbed up to kiss the sweet rose."* I had wept at the movie, starring Jose Ferrer, the singer Rosemary Clooney's unfaithful husband—at the end when he was dying and the shadows made a cross in the courtyard of the nunnery. Kate was reading books for college.

"What did you want with the jar you borrowed?"

"I put a rose in it." She lifted the spoon of ice cream.

"Isn't the rose in the apple family?" I said to Delmus. "Or does the apple belong to the rose family? I can't remember which."

The other night, asleep, Delmus had mentioned roses. And bees, I remembered now.

God is a rose and the angels are bees . . . Then "Sweet Naomi—"

Delmus didn't answer, he was looking at his palm. Jack Lemmon was in the movie about the alcoholics—"Days of Wine and Roses."

"Kate?"

"Beats me," Kate said, glaring at me with Mrs. Grayson's emerald eyes.

But 17 years ago, in the hospital in Lemas, I had held her to my breast, whispering, "*Oh, welcome, I'm so glad you're finally here,"* never thinking of Dolly Mable, of the purple dress with the faded rhinestones or the swarm of butterflies stitched to her gown's upturned Chinese collar, their colored wings lifted to escape the stifling room.

The clock on the stove clicked, all the little timers and dials like the wall of clocks at the airport in Fresno that showed the times around the world. This instant, in New York, in the dark the Statue of Liberty stood deserted, her framework naked and exposed, her torch taken down. Each night they showed the picture on the intro to the CBS News.

A car honked as it passed the house, a guest for tomorrow's harvest party, the long day's final note.

"I think we all need to have a little talk—" I began.

Delmus held up the long blade, sighting along it, the black rawhide handle to his

narrowed eye.

Walter Rhodes' butchering knife looked strange in the kitchen, away from its dusty drawer in the barn. The sharp edge reflected the overhead light.

Ten days ago, in Lynville, when the bank foreclosed the raisin farmer had shot himself in the kitchen with his wife looking on.

"*I heard it through the grapevine,"* went the song from the TV commercial of the dancing raisins—Marvin Gaye's father killed the singer with a gun April Fools' Day.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Delmus murmured.

He stared along the knife, as if he looked at the moon through a telescope.

I got up and went to the sink. I wrung the mop and drained the dirty water, then rinsed the sink with soap. I reached for the percolator.

"Delmus, do you want coffee?"

He looked up blindly.

"*Coffee,"* I said, as if he'd forgot English.

"No. Thanks. I think I'll sit out on the porch for a while."

He stood and carried his chair from the kitchen I looked at Kate and followed Delmus through the door.

He sat close to the screen in the dark, the knife in one hand, staring out at the barnyard as if it were already morning. Yelling and waving bottles and beer cans drunk broke men filled the yard and Delmus paraded in the middle of them, with the biggest bottle, laughing and dancing around the poor pig hanging from the A-frames.

The barnyard was empty, just the grinder and the white barn rising from the cool darkness, then the corral and the pen and I saw the blaze on the horse's forehead, the doomed pig's two white stripes.

"Nobody talks around here anymore—"

I waited for him to answer, "*Nobody listens, everyone's asleep,"* but he didn't turn or say a word, he just set the sharpened knife on the sill. I watched his shadowed profile still as a dark statue.

"*Sherman, set the Way Back."*

"*What year, Mr. Peabody?"*

"*That time Kyla and Delmus were happy—"*

The wind blew, I heard the catalpa leaves. I stepped into the kitchen.

Kate had finished her ice cream and cleared the dishes, sliding the scraps into the trash. It was almost full.

	“Did you separate it out, for the pig?” “*I’ll do it—”* She jerked up the plastic bag, turning and quickly crossing the porch in bare feet, slamming the screen door as she raced in a white blur toward the dark and the rustling catalpa’s blooms winking white in the sea wind— Like Murrietta’s diamonds in the dress Dolly Mable said she would wear to the party in the morning—

Nels Hanson has worked as a farmer, teacher, and contract writer/editor and earned degrees from UC Santa Cruz and the University of Montana. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation’s James D. Phelan Award and a citation in its Joseph Henry Jackson competition. Stories have appeared in *Antioch Review, Texas Review, Black Warrior Review, Southeast Review, Montreal Review, Long Story, Short Story, SNReview*, and other journals. “Now the River’s in You,” a 2010 short story which appeared in *Ruminate Magazine*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Hanson lives with his wife, Vicki, on the Central Coast of California.