

ROBERT MORGAN

THE WELCOME

Dutch had promised himself he would not cry when he got off the bus in Tompkinsville. He had not cried when he left Lena at the bus station almost three years before. And there was no reason for tears now: he was coming home.

He had felt his eyes get moist when he saw the blue chain of mountains to the west as the bus swung through the foothills. And when he swallowed there was something stiff behind his tongue. He had been softened by the months in the camp, but he would not let that show. He set his jaw, and felt the firmness of the fillings and crowns the army dentist had given him after he was released and returned to England.

The bus station in Tompkinsville had once been a dry goods store, and its false front loomed like a building in a western. The bus lurched into the parking lot and Dutch saw his daddy's pickup. It was a wonder Daddy had kept the truck running through the war, with tires and gasoline, spark plugs and everything else rationed. There was no one in the truck, which must mean Mama and Daddy were inside the station waiting. A crowd had gathered near the platform where the bus roared to a stop, but Dutch saw nobody he knew.

As he stood up in the aisle and took his duffel from the overhead rack Dutch's knees trembled. This was the moment he had waited for since parachuting out of the burning Liberator and finding himself somehow alive in a muddy German cabbage patch. Now that he was here he felt it was happening to someone else: he was just a spectator to his homecoming. He couldn't feel the elation, could only try to observe it in himself.

As he stepped out into the spring sunlight, the town looked both strange and familiar. The buildings on Main Street, the dime store, the brick movie theater, the courthouse with its silver dome, looked smaller than he remembered. Compared to

the churches he had seen in England and Germany, the steeple of the First Baptist Church looked like a toy.

There were hugs and clapping and yelps of joy as the boys came down the steps of the bus. A girl jumped up and down and screamed, "It's Ross, there he is. It's him." It took a second to see Mama and Daddy. They stood near the steps at the edge of the little crowd. Daddy waved to him and sunlight glinted on the lenses of his glasses. Mama had her hand over her mouth, as she always did when she was excited. Dutch made his way to them.

Mama wore the same black dress she had worn to church before the war, and the same hat that appeared to be made of black fish scales. Her hand pressed her lips as though holding in an outburst. Dutch set his face in a smile and lunged forward to hug her. He felt the brooch on the front of her dress press through his uniform like a thick medallion.

"Oh Dutch," Mama said and shook her head. It was all she could say.

"Where's Lena?" Dutch said.

"She's waiting for you," Daddy said. "There was no room in the truck." Daddy put a hand on Dutch's shoulder and they started walking toward the pickup. Mama took a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped her eyes.

"You look so pale," Mama said.

"I've gained ten pounds since March," Dutch said.

"Is that all your things?" Daddy said.

"This is it," Dutch said, and heaved the duffel bag into the bed of the pickup. "I was in a prison camp, not any place to get souvenirs."

"I'm so happy," Mama said as they climbed into the cab. "I prayed every night for you."

"I knew I would make it," Dutch said.

"We Garners are tough," Daddy said. He jerked the truck into gear and swung the steering wheel toward the street. Daddy had never really learned to drive well. He had bought the pickup when he was near sixty and driven it home without any lessons.

A sign stretched across Main Street in front of The Highland Hotel: WELCOME HOME OUR HEROES. Cars were driving up and down the street honking their horns and

people leaned out of car windows and shouted. Others standing on the sidewalks clapped.

"Boys have been coming home for the past two weeks," Daddy said. "There is going to be a ceremony at the courthouse at the end of the month."

"And some have not returned," Mama said. She dabbed at her eyes and held Dutch's arm below the shoulder.

Daddy pushed the button in the middle of the steering wheel and added the oogah-oogah of the pickup horn to the random chorus of honks and blasts.

"What happened to Bumgarners?" Dutch said. There was a gap in the row of buildings on Main as if a giant tooth had been pulled.

"Burned down last year," Daddy said. "They thought somebody must have set it."

At the south end of town they passed a lot with many colored pennants strung around it. A number of structures stood in a space that had been a field of weeds the last time Dutch had seen it. "What's all that?" he said.

"That's Billy Joe Williams's new outfit," Daddy' said. "He's got a hotdog stand and a miniature golf course. And he sells used cars and real estate."

"That's what he did instead of going to the army," Mama said.

"He has one leg shorter than the other," Dutch said. "Everybody knows that."

"Didn't stop him from making money," Mama said.

"Lonzo has to work today," Daddy said. "The cotton mill wouldn't let him off."

"They'll be laying off hands soon," Mama said.

"Just when returning boys need jobs," Daddy said.

"Don't worry about me," Dutch said. "I have almost two years' pay they saved for me."

"I'll fatten you up," Mama said.

They drove by the big pine trees in Flat Rock and passed Fletcher's store. Everything was just as Dutch remembered it, except it had shrunk. He had thought every day while he was in the camp of this ride back from town. Dutch knew his happiness must be so strong he could not feel it. Instead he felt little spurts and squeaks of joy that spilled from the overload of exhilaration.

They passed Ansell's garage where Dutch had worked one summer before the war.

"I talked to Roy the other day," Daddy said. "He said they would make every effort to give you your old job."

"I'm in no hurry," Dutch said.

"You need some rest," Mama said, "before you even think of going back to work."

"I'm rested," Dutch said. "I've had nothing to do but rest for six weeks."

"You need to get over what they done to you," Daddy said.

"I know they starved you," Mama said.

"They didn't feed us on T-bone steak and gravy," Dutch said.

"What did they give you?" Mama said. They drove past the brick schoolhouse. It was recess time and children were playing around the swings and slide. Children had been playing there the day he left for the army.

"They fed us potato peelings," Dutch said. "And sometimes cabbage soup."

"No wonder you lost weight," Mama said.

"It's a good thing we won the war," Daddy said.

Beyond the school they passed the cotton mill with its chainlink fence around the warehouse and front office. Steam climbed from the window of the mercerizing room, and Dutch thought he could smell the chemical dampness inside, though it was probably just his imagination. Before the war Dutch had wondered if he would ever get out of the mercerizing room. In the camp he had wondered if he would ever get back to it.

"Did they hurt you over there?" Daddy said.

"Now don't start that," Mama said. "Dutch is trying to forget all that."

"Nobody got hurt if they didn't try to escape," Dutch said.

As they passed Leland's Lunchroom, Dutch saw Hendrix standing outside by his Ford roadster. Daddy hit the pickup horn twice and Hendrix waved and reached inside the roadster and tapped the horn. Hendrix was only three years older than Dutch,

but he had been turned down by the army because of a trick knee.

“People are glad to see you,” Mama said.

“Not as glad as I am to see them,” Dutch said.

As they approached Davis’s filling station Dutch noticed a number of cars in front. The yard looked like a used car lot. There was a sign over the gas pumps, a long sign made of cloth and fluttering in the breeze.

“Has Davis gone into the car business?” Dutch said.

“Look at the sign,” Mama said.

Dutch saw the “WEL” at the left side of the banner, and knew it said “WELCOME HOME DUTCH.” His heart kicked in his chest and something turned strange in his gut, like a funny bone had been hit. He felt as if his skin was turning silver.

And then he saw there were people in each of the cars and trucks. There was Ed Jones in his old Model-A and Jack Gordon in his pickup. There was Adger Eggar in his black Chevrolet and Bill Johnson in the little Ford with the rumble seat. They all waved and horns began beeping and howling and oogah-oogahing.

“You mean they were all waiting for us?” Dutch said.

“No, they was waiting for the Fourth of July,” Daddy said.

“They heard you was coming home,” Mama said.

“They should all be at work,” Dutch said.

“Don’t you know, it’s Saturday?” Mama said.

Daddy pounded the horn and Dutch waved to his friends in the cars. “Ain’t you going to stop?” he said.

“Why do that?” Daddy said and grinned.

Dutch looked back and saw the cars and trucks at the filling station begin to pull into the highway behind Daddy’s pickup. Daddy slowed down and the vehicles formed a line behind them. Their lights were on and all the horns were sounding. Dutch swallowed. “This is like a funeral procession,” he said.

“More like a victory parade,” Daddy said.

Daddy turned off at the Green River Road, and the train of cars followed. The valley echoed and trees appeared to shiver with the sound of the horns, doubling and tripling and answering each other. There was no one in the yard of Lena’s house.

Maybe she was in one of the cars behind, though Dutch had not seen her Daddy's green Dodge.

"Look at the thrift in Ophelia's yard," Mama said. Thrift cushioned the bank above the road like luminous colorful pillows. The thrift was even brighter than Dutch remembered it. Lena's mama had always grown the most impressive thrift in the valley.

The bin of the sandpump stood like a roofless barn on the river bank below the road. The structure looked awkward and ugly on its poles where trucks backed underneath to take on loads of sand.

"The sandpump looks deserted," Dutch said.

"Construction had to stop during the war," Daddy said. "They'll be pumping sand again now."

Cattle stood in the pasture above Riley's house, grazing and ignoring the racket of the line of cars. But a horse bounded across the lower pasture, spooked by the noise. A rooster sat on the fence behind Riley's barn, its neck feathers flashing in the sunlight.

"Looks like Riley has more cows than ever," Dutch said.

"The government paid him to produce milk," Daddy said. "He got a contract to sell milk to the army base in Greenville."

There were more cars parked in the churchyard. Dutch saw Alvin Green's pickup there, and Robin Oakes in his strip-down. They hit their horns as Daddy's pickup passed. The church needed a coat of paint. In places the white had scaled off the steeple, showing patches of weathered wood.

"Is everybody out in their cars today?" Dutch said.

"We'll just have to see," Mama said.

Beyond the church it was less than a quarter of a mile to their driveway. Dutch saw the weeds and broomsedge had been trimmed around the entrance. The white wagon wheel Daddy had placed by the mailbox had lost most of its paint. The tracks of the driveway were deeper, and the grass in the middle taller than he remembered.

As the pickup bounced on the ruts Dutch saw there were already several cars in the yard. One was Lena's daddy's green Dodge, and there was a Studebaker he didn't recognize.

As soon as the pickup stopped he saw Lena standing by the steps going up to the front porch. She stood with her hands

in front of her, palms pressed together. She looked slimmer than he remembered. But she had always been slim, even looked frail at times. It depended on the way she stood, and how tanned her face was.

Dutch was out of the truck as soon as Daddy stopped. He skipped and then paused, stepped slowly toward Lena. This was the moment he had been waiting for for three years. Lying on the cold planks in the prison barracks he had visualized this meeting so many times it was memorized. But the event was unfolding beyond his control. He was watching it happen to another person.

"Hello, Lena," he said. She waited, as if expecting him to say more.

He took her hands, and then dropped them as he spread his arms. Dutch hugged her, knowing all those in cars stopped along the road were watching. He saw himself embracing her and heard himself say, "Long time no see."

When he pressed his cheek against Lena's he felt a warm tear crush between their skin.

"You never answered my letters," Lena said.

"What letters?" He stepped back and held her hands.

"I wrote you at least once a month," Lena said, pretending to be stern.

"I never got any letters," Dutch said. "The Germans must have thrown them away."

"I sent you a cake, too," Lena said, "at Christmas."

"I bet the Germans eat it up," Dutch said.

"Or the Red Cross eat it up themselves," Lena's daddy said. Dutch turned and shook hands with him.

"Welcome home," Mr. Allison said.

"I feel like it's somebody else coming home," Dutch said.

"Who else would it be?" Mr. Allison said.

"Somebody else with my name," Dutch said.

Everyone who arrived brought a plate of something. Lydia Green walked up the driveway carrying a casserole dish of banana pudding, and John Coleman brought a gallon jar of iced tea. There were platters of fried chicken and creamed potatoes, sliced picnic ham and quivering bowls of Jell-O with pieces of fruit suspended inside.

Dutch's cousin Everett, who had served in the coastal artillery, came out of the house carrying a chair in either hand.

"Let me help you," Dutch said.

"You old son of a gun," Everett said. "Did you bring me a German Luger?"

Dutch had brought gifts for Mama and Daddy and Lena, but they were in his duffel bag, and he could not bring them out until the other guests were gone. "I wasn't near any souvenir shops," he said.

Mama brought a tablecloth from the house and spread it on the grass under the oak tree. The ground in the yard was swept clean of pebbles and acorns. People said Mama kept her yard neat as the kitchen table.

"I'm glad to see the end of rationing," Johnny Carlisle said as they set the dishes and bowls on the white cloth.

"Now that the war is over, the depression will come back," John Coleman said.

"Don't say that," Lena's daddy said. "This is a happy day."

"Our years of trial are not ended just because the war is over," John said.

"Don't be such a sad sack," Mrs. Coleman said. "What will Dutch think, after two years as a prisoner?"

"Dutch will know he's back among his own complaining kin," John said.

"I'm just glad to see my folks," Dutch said, "and to not have a fence around me."

He looked at Lena. They had not been exactly engaged when he left, but they had had an understanding. Lena had been only sixteen then. Dutch wasn't sure what he would say to her when they were alone. It was clear everyone expected him to marry her. And it was what he had planned in the camp. But he had no idea how he would ask her.

"I think it's time to eat," Daddy said, after the plates and silverware had been placed on a bench beside the tablecloth. "Let Deacon Green lead us in prayer."

The men took off their hats. Dutch removed his overseas cap. He had not heard anyone pray since MacAbee the tailgunner used to lead in prayer in the camp. MacAbee planned to be a minister when he got home and he held services in one of

the barracks every Sunday morning. MacAbee didn't really know how to preach, but he had a torn Bible he read from and a good many boys attended the services because there was nothing much to do.

"Oh Lord, we want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts for sparing Brother Dutch from the harm of war and returning him to those who love him. We know that you who see the fall of a sparrow will look after all . . ."

While the deacon was praying Dutch heard a car door slam down by the road. He opened his eyes to a squint and saw Roger Jarvis get out of his pickup truck. Roger was always a practical joker. At Christmas he threw firecrackers in people's yards, and once at prayer meeting on Halloween he had dropped a cherry bomb in the stove at church.

Roger took something out of the bed of his truck that looked like an ammunition belt. Dutch saw the flare of a match.

"Go with Dutch and bless him as he takes up his life again," Deacon Green was saying. The first firecracker sounded like a bark, but then the others went off in drum rolls and machine-gun bursts. The firecrackers must have been of different sizes for some yelped and others boomed. Roger lit another string and threw it on the lawn below the picnic. Everyone forgot Deacon Green's grace.

"Brother Roger has his own way of giving thanks," the deacon said, and they all laughed. Smoke from the firecrackers drifted up the hill under the oaks.

"Roger likes to enter in a cloud of glory," Steve Jeter said.

"With a hundred and twenty-one gun salute," Ed Jones said.

"I've noticed draft dodgers like to be loud," Lena's mother said.

"Shhhh," said Lena.

Mama brought a jar of lemonade from the house, and Lena handed Dutch a cup. Someone passed him a plate with fried chicken and potato salad on it. It was only when he looked at the chicken, at the crisp greasy skin, that he knew he wasn't hungry. His stomach felt like a question mark.

"You must be starved," Lena said, "after that long bus ride."

Dutch wished he was doing something else. He wasn't sure what. He wished no one had been there when he got home. He wished he could have arrived secretly and taken off his uniform and put on work clothes. He wished he was out in the mountains fishing. He wished he could go sit on the side of the mountain and look out over the valley. In the camp he had often thought of a place where he used to rest, while hunting squirrels. It was a pit his great-grandpa had dug, looking for zircons. Under October leaves it was a kind of shelf to sit on and watch the trees. He wished he could just go up there and rest under the quiet woods.

Dutch stuck a fork into the potato salad and brought it to his mouth. He could not refuse to eat after all the work these neighbors had gone to to fix the picnic. They assumed he had to be hungry, and he must not disappoint them. He chewed the cold diced potato and took a bite of the chicken leg. Lena had remembered that he preferred dark meat.

"What do you think of this Truman?" Deacon Green said to him.

"I never heard of Truman till I was brought back to England," Dutch said.

"Let the boy eat," Lena's daddy said. "He don't have no interest in politics."

"Polly who?" Dutch said, and everybody laughed.

"Bet the Germans didn't give you no fried chicken," Roger said and punched Dutch with a mock blow on the shoulder.

"No fried chicken and no Co-colas," Dutch said.

"We'll soon fatten you up," Lena's mama said.

"New potatoes will be in soon," Mama said.

Dutch was not only not hungry. He was a little sick at his stomach. He had ridden the bus all night and only slept in snatches. But he wasn't sleepy. He just wished he could be alone. He hadn't even gotten into the house since he arrived. His duffel bag lay on the ground by the path to the back porch. He wished he could walk to the edge of the yard and stand in the woods and try to feel like he was really here.

"Did you like the looks of them frauleins?" Mitchell Jones said.

"What a question," Roger said.

“What frauleins?” Dutch said. “I didn’t see any frauleins in the prison camp.”

“How about some coleslaw?” Mama said.

“Just a second,” Dutch said. He saw what he had to do to get away for a few moments. He had not gone to the toilet since he got off the bus. He edged toward the pumphouse and put his plate on the pumphouse roof. As soon as people saw he was headed toward the outhouse they pretended to ignore him. All eyes turned back to their plates.

Daddy had mowed the back yard with the push mower, and the path was a sunken trail with bare spots where grass had not covered the flagstones. The toilet was out of sight around the edge of the smokehouse. Dutch noticed his fishing pole still resting on nails under the eave of the smokehouse where he had left it three springs ago.

When he reached the toilet Dutch looked back to see if anyone had followed him. No one was in sight. Instead of going into the outhouse he stepped past the little weathered building toward the hogpen. He had forgotten the particular stench of the hogpen, and the smell blossomed against his face in the bright air. The scent was so foul it was almost sweet: manure and rotten mud and fungus, and putrid water.

“Ooof,” the pig said behind the planks, expecting some slop poured down the chute. Three pigs had been raised and fattened and killed since he left, but this one sounded and smelled like the shoat that had been there when he was drafted. The stink of the hogpen was the realest thing Dutch had encountered since getting off the bus. He almost felt like himself smelling it.

Dutch skirted the lush, giant weeds around the hogpen and slipped into the edge of the woods. A crow heckled from the top of an oak tree. A spider web was strung between two saplings. Dutch pissed on the web until the strands looked decorated with amber beads.

After buttoning his pants Dutch stood listening to the breeze in the trees above him. He thought he heard a hawk whistle. But there were too many voices from the back yard for him to be sure. He thought he could hear the falls over on Cabin Creek, but it might have been a truck on the highway a mile away.

As soon as Dutch stepped out of the woods he saw Roger and Mitchell standing by the outhouse. “There you are,”

Roger said. "We wondered if you had fell through the hole." He pulled a pint bottle from his hip pocket.

"We thought you might be a little dry," Mitchell said.

"After your long bus ride," Roger said.

Dutch took the bottle and unscrewed the top. The scent of the whiskey was the fumes of very ripe fruit in a cellar. It was cheap rye and he took a long swallow with his eyes closed. The dram burned his throat so fiercely tears sprang into his eyes. But as the liquid sank into his belly he felt the world get lighter. The sunlight was a little brighter.

"Good stuff," he said, and handed the bottle back to Roger.

"We figured you might want to celebrate with something stronger than iced tea," Mitchell said.

"There is more where this come from," Roger said.

"I know where there's a whiskey spring up on Pinnacle," Mitchell said.

"A whiskey spring?" Dutch said.

"Sure, the liquor just flows out of the mountain clear and ninety proof."

"Like hell," Dutch said.

"Let's drive up there and we'll show you," Roger said.

When Dutch got back to the picnic Mama handed him a plate with banana pudding and coconut cake on it. They had always been his two favorite desserts. Dutch took the plate and thanked Mama. But he wasn't hungry for sweet things. The drink had made him feel lighter. He only wanted another drink.

"Would you like some coffee?" Lena said. She was holding a pot she must have brought from the kitchen. A tray of cups had been set on the bench.

"Maybe later," Dutch said. He didn't want any coffee to counteract the lift the rye had given him. He wondered if Lena could smell the drink on him. She had once said she would never marry a man who drank. Maybe she would not recognize the scent of the rye. Lena would expect him to go back to her house after the picnic, to sit on the porch and talk, or maybe go for a walk down by the river. He didn't want to be alone with her just yet. He didn't know what he would say to her.

There was an explosion nearby that washed over the crowd and out to the rim of the mountains, then returned as an echo. Dutch almost dropped the plate with pudding and cake on it. Everybody looked downhill and saw Roger standing beside his pickup holding a shotgun pointed to the sky. He fired again, and the blast jolted the air.

"This is like Christmas," Lena's mama said.

"It's better than Christmas," Lena said.

"Hey, Dutch, let's go for a ride," Roger called.

"Let's go up on Pinnacle," Mitchell said and winked.

"You don't want to go now," Daddy said and looked around at all the guests.

"I just want to see the valley," Dutch said.

"He wants to see if the old valley is still there," Lena's daddy said. "I can understand that."

"You can go later," Mama said.

Dutch set the plate down on the bench. He had to get away. He couldn't say anything more to the crowd standing around the yard. Riding with Roger and Mitchell up the valley to Pinnacle was as good an excuse as any to escape the crowd.

"We'll be back in a jiffy," Dutch said over his shoulder. He didn't really look at Lena. He didn't want to see the look of disappointment or confusion on her face. If he didn't look at her, he wouldn't have to respond.

Several boys followed him down to Roger's pickup. Roger and Mitchell and Dutch got into the cab and Adger and Hendrix and Ed Jones and Jack Gordon climbed into the bed. "Whooopee," Adger called out and banged on the roof as they started.

"Yiiiiipee!" Ed Jones yodeled. That was the way the boys acted when they won a game for the cotton mill baseball team. Mitchell reached out the window and slammed the outside of the door like a drum. "We're going to have us some fun, now old Dutch is back," he said.

The bottle was passed between those in the cab and then handed out the window to those standing in the bed. The second drink tasted even sweeter to Dutch, and he felt the extra illumination in his veins.

"Say, Dutch, did you get any over there?" Mitchell said.

"In prison camp?" Dutch said.

"We heard they had Russian girl prisoners," Roger said.

"That must have been another camp," Dutch said.

"You wouldn't lie to us," Mitchell said.

"Only woman I seen in all those months was the colonel's wife," Dutch said. "She weighed about three hundred pounds."

The truck rumbled on the bridge over Cabin Creek. "How's fishing been?" Dutch said.

"The trout have been on strike, waiting for you to come back," Roger said.

"Roger don't know how to fish except with dynamite," Mitchell said.

"At least I don't use a tow sack for a sein net," Roger said.

Most of the fields along the creek had been plowed and many had been planted in corn. They passed a patch where last year's stubble and corn stalks sparkled in the sun. "Looks like Corbin ain't planted yet," Dutch said.

"Only thing Corbin is planting is the graveyard," Roger said. "He died last fall."

"And his boy Mark?"

"Mark is still in the Pacific."

The Corbin house looked deserted. Grass and weeds grew up to the level of the porch.

"I still can't believe I'm back," Dutch said.

"Maybe you ain't," Roger said. "Maybe somebody else come in your place."

The bottle was handed back into the cab, but it was empty. "Thanks a lot," Mitchell shouted and tossed the dead soldier out the window.

"Look under the seat," Roger said.

"Old Roger always goes prepared," Mitchell said, "like a good Boy Scout." He reached beneath and pulled out a quart mason jar. "Look at this, my children, look at this," he said.

When Dutch put his lips to the rim of the jar, he could tell from the oily roily look how powerful the corn liquor was. The jolting of the truck made beads rise to the surface. "This ain't liquor, this is airplane fuel," Dutch said.

"Don't I save the best for my buddies," Roger said.

As the moonshine sank into him Dutch felt a great weight shift within, independent of the way his body moved. It was the shift of intoxication, as if great masses were trading sides in his head.

They passed Mountain Valley Baptist Church and Dutch saw the paint on its steeple was cracked and scaling. "Has everybody forgot how to paint?" he said.

"Where could you get any paint?" Mitchell said.

"Paint all went to army barracks and ships and government hospitals," Roger said.

"I'll paint the church," Dutch said, "now that I'm home."

"Maybe they will make you a deacon," Roger said.

A blast roared in the back of the truck. One of the boys had fired Roger's shotgun. "Put that thing down," Roger yelled out the window.

"Hendrix was shooting at a bumblebee," Adger called.

Dutch heard himself laugh. It was all so funny he couldn't resist laughing. He couldn't remember what had been said, but he knew it was funny as hell. Mitchell handed him the fruit jar again.

"If I keep drinking this stuff I'm going to be drunk," he said.

"A man's got to do what a man's got to do," Mitchell said and giggled.

"A man has a right to wet his whistle," Dutch said.

"Wet his whistle and his pizzle," Roger said. Roger swung the pickup onto a smaller dirt road and they began to climb a steep ridge. The ruts were rocky and full of potholes. The truck bounced and lurched, and limbs swished on the windshield. There were yells in the back. Dutch's right shoulder crashed into Mitchell and his left shoulder hit Roger.

"Yiiipee!" Adger called in the back.

Roger shifted into low on a switchback, and the truck spun and bucked on gravel. Sourwood limbs leaned across the road and slapped the windshield.

"Slow down," Ed Jones called. "This ain't no rodeo."

"Throw their asses off," Mitchell said and chuckled.

Dutch found he was laughing again. He must have been laughing all along.

"Maybe we'll see a bear up here," Roger said.

"If we see a bear we'll offer it a drink," Mitchell said.

"What if it don't drink," Dutch said.

"Any bear that don't drink ain't fit company," Mitchell said.

When they came out on top of the mountain and Roger stopped the truck, Dutch did not even notice the view until Mitchell opened the door. There were mountains rolling away to the edge of the world on every side.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the pinnacle of Pinnacle," Roger said.

Those in the back of the truck jumped off the tailgate. A great boulder stood beside the road and they scrambled to its top. Mitchell passed the jar around.

"I hear Brother Dutch is going to preach for us," Ed said.

"Only if the spirit moves me," Dutch said.

"We could take up a collection," Jack said.

"Looks like something is on fire," Hendrix said and pointed to a twisted column of smoke to the west. The valleys and ridges below them progressed in steps from brown and new green to darker green to hazy blue. The far peaks of Pisgah were almost lavender.

"Must be a house burning," Roger said.

"Or maybe just a big brush pile," Mitchell said.

"Look at the new road to Brevard," Jack said. Where he pointed Dutch saw a strand of red clay partly hidden by trees.

Directly below them a small lake sparkled like a sapphire among trees.

"Bet I can throw a rock into the lake," Adger said. He picked up a rock from the road and hurled it hard as he could into the air beneath them. The rock disappeared into the trees on the steep ridge below.

"That's the lake the new Florida people built," Hendrix said.

"Bet I can roll a rock into the lake," Ed said.

"The hell you preach," Mitchell said.

There were dozens of rocks that had been bulldozed out of the road lying on the shoulder. Most were flat and gritty with red dirt.

"Watch this," Hendrix said. He stood a rock up on its side and gave it a push. The rough wheel wobbled and almost

fell over, but as it gathered speed on the steep bank below it gained stability and stayed upright. As it accelerated the rock bounced and blurred and disappeared into the trees below. But they could hear it skipping on the leaves and banging on saplings. A hollow sound told them it had hit a tree. They listened like hunters do to their hounds far out in the woods. A crash told them the rock had hit a boulder far below.

"That ain't nothing," Adger said. He grabbed a bigger rock out of the dirt of the shoulder and rolled it to the lip as though pushing a calf. With a shove he let it go over the edge. But the rock had a flat place on one side and instead of rolling it just flopped over.

They all clapped. "You really showed us," Mitchell said.

Adger grabbed the rock again and set it upright. This time the rock took off and continued to roll until it disappeared into the brush below them.

Everyone rushed to seize a rock and set it rolling. Dutch found a rock that was more a triangle than a wheel, but after several tries he got it to roll away. He found a rock the size of a suitcase and made it spin and soar. He dug out a rock that was almost round as a ball and sent it down the steep slope. He was clearing off the top of the mountain. It was satisfying to get rid of all the rocks in sight, as if he was putting the world in order.

"We will bomb the lake," Ed shouted. The woods rang and shivered below them. The scattered avalanche of rocks shook trees and broke saplings far down the mountainside.

"Bombs away," Roger shouted.

Dutch dug out bigger rocks and smaller rocks. He got dusty and sweaty, and he scraped a knuckle so it bled. The whiskey made him as hot as if it was midsummer. He worked further down the road to locate better rocks. This was the best welcome yet.

Hendrix and Adger found a rock so big it took both of them to set it upright. They shoved it off and the rock lurched sideways and staggered. Hendrix gave it a big push and it rolled over Adger's foot.

"Hell!" Adger screamed, "you trying to break my leg?"

"Your damn foot's too big," Hendrix said.

Adger's face was pale and sweaty. "I didn't go to hurt you," he said.

Hendrix dusted his hands off and wiped them on his pants. "You should have sense enough to get your foot out of the way," he said, so calm all the friendliness had gone out of his voice.

"You should have sense enough not to push a damn rock over on me," Adger said. He limped closer to Hendrix, his hands on his hips.

"Ain't you got brains enough to see where a rock is going?" Hendrix said. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve. All the others had stopped rolling rocks.

"You been riding my ass all day," Adger said. "You been riding my ass since Dutch got home."

"Nobody is riding your skinny ass," Hendrix said.

"Are you showing out for Dutch?" Adger said. He shoved Hendrix's chest.

"I don't need to show out for Dutch," Hendrix said.

"Are you afraid you won't be such a big boy around here, now that Dutch is back, and Lena will go out with him?" Adger said.

"That's enough of that," Roger said. All the boys gathered around the two who were facing each other.

"If you had tits we could see you was a girl," Hendrix said.

Adger's fist caught him on the chin before he had finished the sentence. Hendrix staggered back, braced himself, and lunged for Adger. They went rolling and grunting down the bank into the brush. The others stood on the bank watching them clawing and kicking among the briars.

"You shit-sucking coward," Hendrix yelled as he emerged on top. He kicked at Adger in the weeds, staggered back, and kicked him again.

"Stop it!" Roger yelled. "Stop it, or I'll leave you all to walk home."

Adger stumbled to his feet and faced Hendrix. Blood ran from their noses and mouths, and from cuts on their arms. They were so exhausted they could hardly stand. Both crawled back up the bank into the road. Dutch had seen them fight many times before. The fight made him feel he had almost not been away. Now that the anger had gushed away in their fight, both looked a little embarrassed.

"Have you been dating Lena?" Dutch said to Hendrix.

"Hell no," Hendrix said. "I just drove her home from a basketball game once is all."

Dutch dropped to the ground and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. He loosened his tie and saw his hands were dirty and there was dust and blood on his uniform. His shoes which had been polished like brown mirrors were scuffed and covered with dust.

The others flopped down on the bank of the road and Roger passed around the jar until it was empty. Now that he was sweaty and dirty Dutch felt a lot more like himself. But he was suddenly so tired he could hardly sit upright.

"Man, we can have some fun, now old Dutch is home," Hendrix said.

Dutch looked out over the long valley below. He could see as far as Asheville. A smokestack wrote a black scrawl on the horizon.

"Everything is going to be different, now the war is over," Mitchell said.

"You mean people will have three eyes and talk with their assholes?" Roger said.

"What's different about that?" Hendrix said.

"I mean it won't never be the same," Mitchell said.

"I feel the same," Adger said.

"That's because you ain't been nowhere," Jack said.

Dutch wished he could just go to sleep. The momentum had gone out of the day. He wished he didn't have to go back to the house. He knew Mama and Daddy and Lena would be mad because he had left the picnic. He didn't know what he wanted to say to Lena. He wished he could just be by himself. ☹