

6,400 words

## ASHES

by  
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Me and Rob both always said we didn't want a funeral like the ones we got drugged to—then picked up under the arms by some stupid uncle to make us look at a painted corpse in a coffin, big ham hands squeezing the air out of our chest so we'd think we was dying too, and we'd start crying, but not because we cared about Grandpa Enshaw who never liked us kids anyhow. Mother called us lucky, said when she was a kid they made her kiss the forehead of unpainted corpses turning green and already started to smell. But she never took us to another wake, and said when she died we should just cremate and bury her without a fuss. I figured Rob'd do the same with me, maybe not even bury, just throw my ashes in the garbage and good riddance. We never talked about it. Bet he never thought about it till he got what he always wanted—rid of me. Well, not rid of my ashes. They sat in a little plastic box on his closet shelf for a month or more.

Until he gets this bright idea. He goes to this art store—now that he's retired, he's drawing and painting again—near his place in Frisco and looks on the shelves till he finds half a dozen plastic cans, like Campbell soup cans but smaller. Then he asks the girl for burnt umber pigment and buys a little sack of this red brown powder.

Back home he mixes the powder into the ashes. Why? says Doris. To make them look like dirt, so no one will see what they are, because I think it's against the law. She asks him, want me to come along? He shakes his head, you sleep in, I'm leaving early. He's pouring the ashes—like brown sand now—into the cans. Doris smiles and says, just call if you need me to bail you out.

Next morning he's on the freeway by four o'clock to beat the commute traffic, with the cans and a bunch of carnations on the front seat of the car. Heading to Sacramento, where he used to say he'd never go again after my last heart attack when he sold Mother's house and put me in that home near him, like the place where we put Mother the year before she died, so I knew how it operated. I just stayed in my bed watching TV, ringing for the nurse whenever that nutty old woman wandered into my room saying I stole her dog. Or when the guy in the other bed, Chinaman only about fifty, been there ten years since his motorcycle crashed, tried jumping out the window again. Rob came by for a few minutes most every day. I saw more of him than I saw all the years since he went in the army, then settled in Frisco. We had nothing to talk about, just waiting for me to die, which took longer than we thought it would. Might have been quicker if he'd just left me alone at the house in Sacramento when I started falling and forgetting to eat.

That's where he drives first, the house on 49<sup>th</sup> Street that Rob sold so I could die slower and cleaner in a good rest home. Makes it in a little over an hour, before daylight. Even in the dark you can see the people who bought the house don't keep up the lawn like I did when I lived there with Mother, kept it pretty good after she died too, until I got too weak to do anything but hit 911. Yeah, I was okay with numbers and signs like STOP, and I could write my name. I got better with the phone after you could dial or punch numbers instead of saying them.

Rob wants to hit 49<sup>th</sup> Street in the dark because some of the neighbors still know him, still have his number to call in emergency, which one of them did after my last attack. And he doesn't want them to see what he's doing in case they don't want him dumping part of me there.

But they might not mind, pretty nice neighbors for thirty years, Mother said, before she died, so that makes it more than thirty years I lived in that house. After I got laid off at the winery, the neighbors let me cut their lawns and keep gardens neat. It took me a long time, and sometimes I'd be mowing late at night because I slept better in the day, in my LazyBoy chair, TV talking to me and never waiting for me talk back like people did. My mower was always going on the blink, and would sit there until Rob drove up and got it fixed, and sometimes I would cut down or pull out the wrong bush,

but nobody got really mad at me, they could see I worked hard, I did the best I could, slow, but so cheap that even by the hour I didn't cost them much. They even saved me their bottles and cans to pile up in the back yard till Rob came up and drove me to the scrap buyer. Mrs. Antonini used to bring me a plate of Thanksgiving turkey. Said I was a hard worker, always well-mannered, and minded my own business.

Even Miss Dove next door didn't get real upset about the bad thing I did right after Mother died. I guess I was lonely. Christ, an old man like you! Rob yelled and yelled, I can't understand! No, course not, he can't understand, him being married a couple of times and I never got closer to a woman than those magazines I keep in my bedroom. Because I can't read and I stutter sometimes, what's he think, I'm not a normal man just like him? Not that he ever asked, we don't talk about things like that. But I never peeked in any windows before, never again after she caught me. I never would do Miss Dove any harm. She knew. That's why she called Rob, not the police. He said he told her to call the police next time, and they'd put me in jail. All red and so ashamed you'd think he did it, not me. I had to laugh at how shook up Rob was, like I'd surprised him for the first time since I pushed him off a swing in the park when he was still smaller than me. It didn't hurt him.

Rob wasn't a bad brother, I guess. After Mother died, Edna and Harry sold their house and moved to Arizona, where they could live near their kids, in a better house than they could afford in California and plenty of money to spare. But the real reason was to get far away from me. After Mother died, Edna'd come to do my wash and take me to the dentist, still trying to tell me what to do. She'd make me mad and I'd say I'll kill you and start swinging, no, I never really tried to hit her anymore. But she said she had enough, been a good daughter and a good sister, and she was old and wanted peace and quiet and plenty of miles between her and me before she died.

So then Rob started driving up every month. He even got me some money, government disability, not charity, he said, not welfare. I was entitled to it after I got laid off at the winery and the unemployment ran out. Government turned me down, said I didn't have a new disability, and if I worked twenty-five years for Lawson, I must be able to do the same work for someone else. And that was right, but there wasn't no same work, never was, maybe. Rob got a lawyer who told him take me to some head shrinker,

and then made me go to court with him. He said, Listen, this doctor is going to say some things about you will make you mad, but you pay no attention, it's just to get you the money you got coming. And the doctor read a paper to the judge, full of long words that meant I was stupid and crazy, and Rob told the judge old man Lawson kept me on just out of a good heart, but when he died and a big land company bought the winery, they closed it and threw me out. Then the judge asked if I had anything to say, and I told him I wasn't crazy and I worked hard all my life, and didn't want welfare or any charity, and the words got scrambled up and stuck the way they do sometimes when I get mad and the same word keeps shooting out—along with a lot of spit—like a machine gun that's got to be emptied before I can get hold of the next word. So I just shut up and sat down, and after we left I told Rob I was sorry I got mad, and he said, No, it's okay, you did fine, and a week later the lawyer said I won my disability pay. I just put it in the bank so I'd never run through the money the way Mother did, so who's stupid? and kept on working for the neighbors and collecting scrap until I had my first heart attack and wasn't strong enough to do anything but walk a block to Elmer's Diner for the ham and eggs the doctor said would do me in, but at least they tasted good, not like the soup and mush and rice at the rest home.

Rob looks at the house and sees it's still dark. He looks up and down the block, then gets out with one of those little cans. Bends down like to tie his shoe, empties the ashes near a rose bush I planted at the curb, gets back up fast, hops in the car, drives off, like he's afraid Miss Dove will see him out her window.

Rob stopped hating me around the time Mother and me moved into the 49<sup>th</sup> Street house. That was when he got married again, and Doris came up with him and they took me out to lunch. First time I seen Doris, a schoolteacher, smart and not bad looking. Rob sat across from me in the booth. If looks could kill. I held the menu in front of me like I was reading it, and he said, ham and eggs for you, and I said, no, something else for a change, and he went all red. He was ashamed of me looking at the menu like a blind man, ashamed that, whatever I ordered, I didn't always get the food to my mouth. He always was, from the time we was little kids. Not just ashamed, I figure, afraid. Maybe it was in the family, maybe he was a little like me. Whenever he couldn't do something right off, he'd look at me, eyes all scared and mad, like saying, am I a moron too? That's what the

kids used to call me. Worse. But nothing wrong with Rob's head, he started a good business and got a schoolteacher wife on the second try, wasn't that enough? I guess not, because every mistake I made in front of her, he'd like to kill me. Until Doris took the menu and handed it to Rob, and said, let's read some choices, then smiled at me, trying to calm us both down. She was okay, but she was still a schoolteacher, and teachers used to look at me like they was thinking, moron, even if they didn't say it, so I never could smile back at her. I heard her one time asking Rob why I left school, why I didn't take special ed, and Rob saying if there was anything like special ed at the school in Oak Park when we was kids, he never heard of it, except the ungraded class where one time they put me with all the crazies, and that's why I ran away from school. But Doris was okay with me, so Rob stopped worrying she'd think he was stupid too.

Rob started acting more like my neighbors, not mad at me for breaking things and not being able to read, just nagging at me sometimes to change my clothes. I think he could see I got along with the neighbors and never was any trouble unless someone, like those kids up the street, hid my tools and called me retard (that's the word for moron now) and I went after them with a fence post. But when the police came, the other neighbors spoke up, and the cops bawled out the kids instead of me. So not only Rob changed since we was kids, but everyone changed little by little, and, like Mrs. Antonini's grandson told those mean kids, It's not cool to be mean to Charlie, see? But maybe it's because I got old, and kids are still mean to other kids they call retards.

The next stop is the cemetery. It's barely light, and the big iron gates are closed, but we aren't going inside, just around the driveway circle in front, where ashes are buried in little rows along the edge, with names cut into little stones, like graves of dead cats. Rob picks up his bunch of carnations, takes three out of it, then puts one of those little cans in his pocket and gets out of the car, looks around, then finds the three little stones. When Mother died, Edna picked out the plot for her ashes, and two more next to it, one for herself and one for Harry, and told her kids, when we die, send our ashes back from Arizona.

Rob bends over Mother's stone and makes as if to clean it off with a handkerchief, in case anyone is in the cemetery office, where a night light is still burning. Then he puts one carnation on each little stone. While he is putting down a flower with

one hand, he is spilling ashes out of the can with the other. When he spills some ashes around Edna's stone, he sort of chokes back a laugh, like he's thinking Mother and Edna and Harry would be screaming bloody murder because the last thing they wanted, specially Edna, was any part of me to follow her to the grave.

Now Rob gets back in the car and heads east, out the freeway, watching all the signs. No trouble finding the old entry road, it's marked now, a big old wooden vat on its side with a fancy copper sign—Old Mills Winery. Next to it is Old Man Lawson's little house turned into—Rob shakes his head and reads out loud—Old Rascal's Bar and Grill.

That's all that's left. Used to take me half an hour to walk from the bus stop to the first out building. All that open land, vineyards and all, gone, covered with offices and shops, apartments over them. Went up so fast, like weeds, like mushrooms after the rain. Rob keeps shaking his head.

Twenty-five years I worked for Old Man Lawson, cleaning out wine vats like that big one they keep in front for show. But it was Dad first got hired. After his real estate and other businesses went under, and that woman—which one, Irma?—took off with the couple hundred left in the bank, he got a job here temporary as night watchman, just to have a place to stay. The guy Mother was living with wouldn't have me, so Dad had to take me with him to the winery.

Old Man Lawson gave us a broken down cottage behind the storage tank shed, and I helped Dad fix it up a little. Lawson didn't like Dad much. Dad would yell at me for breaking a tool or knocking into a barrel, or spilling the sludge I scraped out, and if Lawson heard him, he'd come right up to his chest and tell him, back off, You swing at Charlie, you gonna have to swing at me, and my left is still pretty good. Lawson started off a boxer when he was young, a middle-weight, trained and fought for a few years around Sacramento. His nose and one ear was all spread out and puffy and he couldn't hear out of that ear. Lots of scars too, and one eye that didn't close right. Dad said he had a few good matches, got his picture in the sports section and a lot of money bet on him, then got battered in the head by some South American. Never was the same, couldn't keep his balance. Went to work at his father's winery, then took over when the old man died.

Dad would tell Old Man Lawson I was getting big and more crazy and he was afraid of me. And it was true sometimes I got so mad I was off my head, maybe. But Lawson blamed Dad for setting me off. Then one time things really got wild—Dad being pretty drunk or he wouldn't have grabbed a knife. Lawson fired him, threw him out. Dad didn't care. He was ready to go up and start his mining operation again anyway, but didn't want me along. And Lawson told me I could stay, because I was a hard worker, and always did my best for folks who treated me right and didn't need high school for the work at the winery, I'd always have work and a place to sleep there. He said that right in front of Dad. And Dad walked off saying, yeah, Lawson, you been hit in the head enough so you and Charlie are just right for each other.

Mother said for once Dad got it right. Not that Lawson was a moron and couldn't read and broke things, but he had been hurt real bad. They told him he'd be rich and famous, and he worked and trained to do something big, then they let him get hurt, let him lose everything. So he had feelings for the loser, that's what Mother said when she moved into the cottage with me. Lawson said, sure, she could come, because she lost the apartment over that bar near Oak Park, when the hospital laid off some of the cleaners. She found another part time cleaning job, took the bus into town, and I was cleaning vats all day, so I didn't get on her nerves too much. She was a sociable woman, always had friends, still had boyfriends she'd go and stay with for a while until they had a fight and then she was back again at the cottage, where she said she got lonely, so Edna or one of her friends would pick her up sometimes and they'd go to a show.

For me those years at the winery were the best. I didn't have to talk to anyone but Lawson and Mother when she was home. If she started yelling at me for spilling my food or something, I just walked out to do some of the odd jobs always waiting to be done, and keeping out tramps—by then they was hippies—that would wander in and camp and shit near the vines. Edna would come by after work, after she'd stopped at a bar with her friends, and then Mother would yell at her and Edna would yell at me. Rob almost never came, he was living in Frisco and making his own life. Dad's mining operation failed, just like the one before, and we heard he was sick and Mother said he'd moved in with some fool woman who was taking care of him, which was fine because Mother said she sure wouldn't do it. I could see, as the years went by, that Mother was getting more and

more lonely, and scrubbing floors was getting harder, so she was getting more and more short with me.

One time we had a real fight. I don't think I hit her, but when I get really mad, I don't know—I scared her anyhow, and that time Lawson stepped in. He took me for a walk, and he said you don't want to be too hard on your folks. They both came from families who was somebody till your granddad lost the mill. Getting poor don't bring out the best in folks, believe you me. They should of worked it out, but who's to judge, and breaking up in the depression was as hard on them as it was on you, because they lost a lot of hope, and they had you kids to worry about. Look at it this way, a lot of folks in those bad times would of put you away someplace; back in those days they could of left you at Napa. When he said that, I got that old chill I used to feel when the kids would call me names and say, you belong in the asylum, in Napa. Then I'd get in trouble trying to scare them off, the way I was scared they'd get someone to lock me up. Lawson kept talking, don't forget, they kept you, first with your mother, then with your father, one way or another they kept a family, sort of, crazy as they are sometimes. Most families are. Then he smiled, and his bad eye almost closed up. In fact, he says, I figure most men I know are crazier than you are, Charlie.

By now it's light, and Rob has to be real sly with the ashes. He puts cans in both pockets, and walks around looking at the big upturned vat, like admiring how they polished it up and put on brass wheels that didn't really belong on it, and that big sign. He slips his arm in between spokes of a wheel and pours some ashes right smack in the middle of all that polished lumber. Then he walks away, slow and casual, into the open space between some office buildings, people walking in and out, Rob looking at an old oak tree, trying to figure out if that's the tree where I stood waiting for the bus before they built the bus stop down the street, and that's gone too. Maybe. Maybe not. Close enough, he thinks, and turns around, looks up at the sky, throws ashes behind him like splashing water on the tree trunk, then sneaks the can back into his pocket and walks fast to the car. I'm glad he spilled two cans here. This was a good place for me. Best home I ever had. Best home for Mother too until she could move back into town, to a real house on a street with neighbors.

And I guess as bad as Dad was—and nobody, not Mother, or Rob or me had a good word for him—when he died he left us that old piece of land. Mother said, only reason he hung onto it was he couldn't get nothing by selling it, but by the time he died, that land, like everything in California, was worth enough for Mother to buy the little house on 49<sup>th</sup> Street so we weren't put out on the street when Old Man Lawson died.

Now Rob is driving back into town, finds the street near where the old trolley line ended by wild bushes and grass, a pool with fish in it, and the big rock that slanted up from the ground, taller than us, where Rob and I would run up the side of the rock and jump off, and yell Geronimo, and fly into the tall grass. He stops the car and looks lost, checks the street sign again. It's all changed. No trolley tracks. No pool. No wild grass. It's a park, lawn and trees, a big clubhouse, and he's thinking, where in hell is the rock? There it is, off to the side of the clubhouse, looks smaller. Some kind of paving stones around it, so if some kid tries to jump off it now, he'll probably crack his head.

Rob reaches for the door handle, then stops. There's a bunch of kids in the park, ought to be in school by this time, but they don't look like they're going anywhere, just hanging out there. Rob remembers how we could almost smell they're looking for trouble, and we'd stay away if there was too many, but that would be at night after dark, not in broad daylight. And they would only give you trouble if you was a kid, not a grown man. But now it's different, a couple of them are looking his way, like they might just come right across the street, beat up on Rob and take his wallet, even take the car. Everything's different from when we used to jump off the rock.

So Rob pretends not to notice, starts the car, easy and casual, and drives around the corner to the other side of the park. And he gets out and empties one of the cans under an oak tree. Shrugs, like to say, that has to be good enough. Sure. Fine. Get back in the car, Rob, before they see you over here.

Then he drives a couple of blocks, slower past the hardware store, but not stopping—still a hardware store—where we stayed weekends in rooms above with Mother, when she was working long hours, and she got the orphanage to take us Monday to Friday.

Yeah, that was the next stop, Sacramento Children's Home, still a fancy sign, another round driveway like the cemetery, and a building like those pictures of old

England. Rob looks up at the window of the small boys dorm where he stayed. I was down the hall in the big boys dorm when I ran away again because I hated working in the laundry. Now that whole building is full of files and paper, and the real orphanage is behind, cottages in a big field, and the kids don't do any work. Separate cottages would of been worse for me because they can't watch all the cottages all the time, and those other kids could really be mean to me if nobody watched them, and besides, I wasn't going to work in that laundry.

But Rob liked the orphanage. The ladies who lived in there in those days, a couple of them really liked Rob because he did all his chores better than some of the big kids, and minded the ladies, and liked the regular mealtimes and school hours and work times and sleep hours, knowing just what to do and when to do it, and when he finished his chores would just hide in the corner under the stairs and read. One time he asked one of the ladies why the orphanages in the books he read were so terrible, not like the Sacramento Children's Home. And she told him back a long time ago they were maybe like that in England, but she hoped they never would be again. Rob drew a picture of her once and gave it to her on Mother's Day. After he left the orphanage, he went to see her every year until she died

He stays here a long time and talks to a couple of the boys, and to the coach who's out on the field with them. He tells the coach, a really young guy who nods and yawns, how it used to be at the orphanage. And when he leaves, he spills some ashes, out near the driveway, in front of the old building, under a bare magnolia tree that's just starting to bud. He spills them more for him than for me because he had five or six good years here before he got too old and they put him out to foster care in some Mormon family that just wanted free labor. That time, for a change, he was the one who run away and made Mother let him move into her room over the bar, to sleep there before school and after his job until he went into the army.

Back in the car, Rob stops at a take-out place, drives off chewing on a sandwich. Drives and drives. Dad used to drive us up these roads and read the names, like he had to make us remember, this road is named for the Mormon Immigrant Trail your great grandfather followed, and this turnoff, see, is named for our family, the Enshaw Mill Road, and then he'd always say how big his father and his grandfather was in lumber.

Rob slows down, turns off the main highway, goes a little ways, then turns around and goes back to the highway. He's looking for the cutting platform, which was still there when we was kids, but that's gone too.

For the next few miles, nothing but the little trees planted after the good lumber was cut down, and a lot of big houses in between, all the way to Placerville, where he drives right through, with a sour look on his face because of the way it's duded up like a movie western for the tourists, straight through to the Oddfellows Cemetery

This is a real cemetery, small and ragged and old, right on the edge of town, chain link fence around it, what for? no lock on the gate. Rob sticks a can in his pocket, picks up the flowers that are left on the seat, and gets out of the car. No need to hide what he's doing. No one there, dusty weeds in dry dirt and headstones pitched every which way, or fallen over on their face so you can't read who they were supposed to make you remember. Right smack in the middle, a small bunch of fresh bluebells and zinnias, bright orange, fresh, like someone came in here just a few minutes ago. One stubborn bunch of flowers, to warn Placerville Real Estate, don't cover this over with another motel, not yet. Rob knows where to look, spreads the weeds to find the little border of white bricks around six or seven stones. Enshaw family plot. He wipes off a stone that's tilting almost to touch a big, tall granite cross. He nods, yeah, the tilting one has Dad's name on it. That big cross might be a grandmother, Rob's not sure. Not sure about the others either, wasn't curious enough to ask until Dad died and it was too late. He clears a little space for the flowers, then takes his time pouring out a circle of ashes around all the stones that might be family even if we never knew them.

In the car again, up on the highway, crawling along, he slows down at a turnoff, goes down a side road, then back on the highway again. Turns off, back on again. He's lost, keep going this way, and he'll run out of gas. On and off the highway, mumbling all the names. Mead Road, Fir Trail, Roda Pass, turning onto each one, going a half-mile, turning around, back on the highway again. Goldstrike Lane, Muletrain Way, Old Grove Circle. Some of the names sound familiar, like when we was real little and Mother and Dad were still together and they took us for rides, almost run off the road by lumber trucks in those days.

Blackberry Stream. He turns out and heads up Blackberry Stream Lane.

Blackberry Stream. That's what he's looking for, but his face shows he don't expect to find it, not anymore, not here with all these fancy houses and fences with old wagon wheels somebody must have bought at Placerville Antiques, and skinny red leaf maples that never grew here back in those days, and—he slams on the brakes. There it is. The old red barn, still standing there, kind of leaning, all worn and saggy, like the one on the calendar he bought once just to remind him. Still here, just the same, except with the big doors wide open he can see a Mercedes parked in it.

It takes him a while to get out of the car. He's sitting there thinking about that summer Dad took both of us, and we stayed here till school started up again. Whoever built that big house fifty feet off to the side kept the broken-down barn, parked their fancy car in it.

Rob puts the last can in his pocket, gets out of the car, standing between the barn and house, looking at one, then the other. Mother was strict about good manners, so I know he'll go to the house and knock on the door first. It opens up, and both the wife and husband stand there, white hair, scrawny old folks, older than Rob, older than me. They look surprised, then worried, then curious after Rob tells them he spent the summer here, slept in that barn when he was twelve or thirteen, the best summer of his life, and he never thought he'd find it standing, and he wants to thank them for keeping it. By that time they're smiling, Come in, do come in, and they make Rob go in front of them. Tile floor, windows all up and down instead of walls so it's like you're outside, white rugs that Rob steps around like he's afraid to fall into little puddles, satin covered furniture not sat on, like a store window. Rob brushes off the seat of his pants, just like he's a kid again, before he sits down. Not a bad idea, after crawling around the old graveyard. They sit looking out at the trees and gardens and the other houses, and Rob tells him there was nothing here that summer, just open land for dairy cows after all the forest was clear-cut, and then the cows gone because the war come and all the men went in the army or down to the shipyards. Rob points out the window. Right there? where that other house is? a stream lined with wild blackberries, so thick you couldn't see the stream till you went through them. And the old folks nod, they've been in California long enough to know how wild blackberries grew everywhere, people always fighting them, cutting them down, and they just come back thicker.

Rob tells them how Dad brought us up here, with sacks of beans and rice and flour. Took us to the stream to show us how to pan for gold, and we even got a nugget or two, you still could in them days. Rob forgets to say how I was always dropping the pan, and he would have to jump in the water to get it. He says how he liked to swim in the stream, nothing about how I was afraid of the water and just sat on the bank throwing rocks at him. Or how we picked blackberries, didn't tell them how I'd get all torn up and bloody from the thorns and he'd have to wind rags around my hands. And how Dad taught us to catch frogs, and then rigged up a big oil can over stones to make an oven and a grate, just outside the barn, and he'd bake blackberry cobbler, and we'd have beans and rice and frog legs and blackberry cobbler every night, and then sleep out, or in the barn if it got too cold. Maybe he'll tell about the time I wandered off to take a pee and they had to spend the next morning hunting for me because I got lost. But he doesn't say anything like that, just says he had a big brother. He keeps smiling, and the old couple keeps smiling, and then they start to tell how they found this place when they retired and built this house and been here twenty-five years already, not expecting to live so long, and their kids and grandkids all far away. You could see they was lonely and wanted Rob to stay and stay talking about how Blackberry Stream used to look. And part of his smile at them is being polite, and part of it is just letting his mind wander in the old times.

After a while, they stop and take a breath, and Rob stands up and says he has to go, and if they don't mind he'll take a walk around the barn before he leaves. They offer to take him through the barn, but he says he can manage alone if it's all right with them, and they sort of look at each other, then nod, and say they understand and, anyhow, she—the old man means his wife—has a bit of trouble walking anyway. They go as far as the front door with Rob, and he thanks them and waves, and they wave back, and then he waves one more time and goes into the barn, through the big open doorway, into the dark around the Mercedes, still no window openings except that little slit in the roof up over the loft where a shaft of sunlight slants all the way down to the south wall at the corner where we used to sleep because it stayed warm half the night. Rob heads for that wall, that patch of sunlight. He takes out the can, bends over, shakes out a cloud of brown ashes, careful and slow, like the way he used to spread out our blankets at night.

When the can is empty, he stands up straight, staring at that patch of sunlight, like it cuts right through the wall, and he can see all the way to Blackberry Stream, like it was still there. Damned if he hasn't got a tear running down his cheek.

He wipes off the tear, puts the can in his pocket, says, so long, Charlie. Then he turns around and walks out the big barn door, stops, blinks at the sun for a minute, heads for the road. He stops one more time, like he's waiting for me to catch up. Then he starts moving, gets into the car. And I let him go.