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Second Chances

by Douglas Unger

The two most abiding memories about Merle Richards might be his talk of guns and that he had ended up in Las Vegas. This would be how his daughter-in-law Grace—Kyle Richards' wife—summed up his time on earth. Kyle bristled every time, knowing his Dad had been more complex than that. He had lived a whole other story than in Las Vegas that Grace never even pretended to appreciate. On the other hand, wasn't some natural friction with the in-laws expected in a marriage?

Grace had been born and raised on Long Island, on wealthy Sands Point, a short train ride away from the sophistications of New York. She still considered her sixteen-year residency in the housing tracts under the photogenic sunsets of the Mojave desert and in the shadows of the spectacular light shows of the megaresorts to be a mere temporary condition—as if Kyle were ready to sell his construction business any minute and take them off properly back East. Back East there were actually four seasons in a year, and she wouldn't have to cup her mouth to the telephone and say to distant family and friends, lowering her voice, "Yes, you know, in Vegas..." her tone apologizing for the embarrassing oddities of some primitive culture in a foreign land. "Nothing stays here," she would say. "They blow it up when they're done. And in a place so notorious for its mobster history, can you believe you still can't find a decent pizza?"

Kyle long ago quit showing his irritation, and there were times when he wasn't sure if Grace might be right—that nobody really lived here, not in any rooted sense, certainly not the way he ever would have thought of himself as living, years ago, when he and his brother Jeb would stretch out for a rest in one of Merle's thorny hay fields in South Dakota. They blue-skied about what kind of futures they would make—which piece of short grass prairie they would add to the Richards family holdings, what kind of new steel barn and feed lot complete with Harvestore silo they would build in that gumbo bottom land by the best

sweet water for miles around; how they would improve their pastures with that new tri-grass and clover mix, switch over from raising sheep to much easier and more profitable cattle, planning how their place would gradually spread out as neighbors inevitably moved on or died off. Their land would be linked through their fraternal labors into one contiguous mammoth ranch so big no bank would dare bring it down. They'd go off to college to find wives, bring their wives back to the homeplace, raise their kids. The brothers would spell each other for two shopping trips a year over to the Twin Cities to keep their women happy—five days at most, no more—where they would eat out at restaurants, go to shows, get their fix of urban life. Then it would be back to that blessed nowhere of near limitless grasslands between Buffalo and Faith, where the Richards family would continue on a roll—this was the essence of their dream—just plain living on their own time, managing their lives like two brotherly kings.

That was before a draft board lottery number came up with Jeb. He returned from the last month of that lost war with a shattered spine from a fall out the door of a helicopter on which he'd been ordered to kick off fleeing refugees, so many of them clinging in dark human knots to the struts that the helicopter could barely lift up into the air. One of the refugees grabbed at Jeb's boot, and that was that—he fell. Jeb would be planted in a wheelchair and hooked up to a colostomy bag for the rest of his days. He came home just in time to watch Merle's third wife carry her suitcases out of their picturebook ranch house in the middle of nowhere. Jill was on her way to leaving him for a Presbyterian minister who had just moved into Buffalo. "A goddamned minister," his father said. "Some kind of Puritan! No man alive can live that one down."

Merle stood in the ranch house living room, simmering as he watched her lining up those suitcases in the gravel drive. Kyle saw it coming but was too far across the living room to stop him, when, on impulse, Merle pulled his custom grip 9mm Beretta out from under the couch cushions. He stepped onto the front stoop and started plugging Jill's suitcases full of holes. Jeb was close enough he could wheel into him from behind, knocking Merle's knees out from under him so he went sprawling into Jeb's lap. Kyle also jumped over and grabbed at his arm before Merle could swing the barrel enough to take the last shot left in the clip straight into his wife's cowering, cheating ass—which family legend had it Merle was surely meaning to do—so it was Jeb who had saved him from a prison term. Still, after that, nobody could save the ranch from Jill's lawyers, at least not on top of the already merciless pressure from the banks.

So began three years of fending off that final loss, years when the bottom dropped clear out of the grain and meat markets, the seasons marked by dwindling auction sales of almost everything they owned. Merle started raging off with increasing regularity in his pickup for twenty-eight hour drives across Wyoming and down into Utah then that

long straight shot through the empty desert to Las Vegas, Merle carrying with him whatever money he could scrape up, later on even borrowed money, like he didn't give a damn. Kyle and Jeb understood this, though they were resentful the old man never once invited them along. These Vegas escapes were never planned trips, almost always started in the middle of the night when Merle was at his worst with the messy tragedy of legal paperwork and unpayable bills piled all around him in his office in the back of the feed room. Besides, what else could the old man do to give him hope? And he didn't always lose. So, after the ranch was finally sold off, it seemed somehow logical that Las Vegas would be the place where Merle Richards chose to move. "Nothing a man needs to be ashamed of in Las Vegas," he would say. "You toss a chip out on the table, you're treated the same as anybody else. Nobody gives a damn where you come from, where you're going is all that counts. How about a place where a woman is discouraged from breast feeding in public yet it's perfectly legal for her to carry not one but *two* concealed weapons? There's not a single hour of the day or night when you can't get a cup of coffee and a shot of Jim Beam."

The story of how Merle had decided to move to Las Vegas would be told again and again at Grace's elegant dinner table set festively for the holidays with her Spode Butternut china and her Tiffany Audubon silverware—"turkey ware," Merle called it, pointing out the raised bird patterns to his grandkids just to get Grace's goat. The cutlery was arrayed in neat ranks and files on either side of his plate, and Grace would watch disdainfully as Merle's thick rancher's fingers awkwardly picked through its complexities before he just grabbed up the biggest knife and fork and gripped them in his fists. Before his grandkids were born and Grace prohibited gunplay in her house, Merle might even pull out the Beretta tucked in his belt and show it off. "It was either murder my third wife or move to Las Vegas," he'd sum up. This became his line about himself even to strangers, delivered dead pan, serious, "that's how I'm here," he'd say, then he'd break through the tension with a laugh and call for a round.

The dining room of Grace and Kyle's new house in the Anthem hills looked out through a high bay window at the incomparable gorgeous spill of lights over the valley floor below, a view resplendent with the colorful jewels of hotel towers on the Las Vegas strip. Grace always sat at the head, regally, with this spectacular view behind her, and Kyle could see her cringe as she looked them all over—the two Richards brothers with their barely presentable Dad—regarding them like the peasants they were, on each occasion an expression of surprise, as if she kept forgetting the kind of people she had married into. Her face would twist into a strained composure. She assumed the attitude of patient forbearance that was her custom around her in-laws—as if she were visiting royalty condescending to serve a holiday meal at a shelter for the homeless.

Jeb had little tolerance for this. He searched his ragged jean jacket covered with P.O.W.-M.I.A. and unit veterans' patches for little toys from casino gift shops he had brought over for Kyle's kids—Tommy and little Suze—rubber insects he'd toss in a handful on their plates to make them squeal, light-up yo-yos that could knock chips out of Grace's cherrywood table, dinosaur wind-up toys he'd aim straight into the butter dish. Jeb delighted in egging the kids on to whatever chaos he could. Merle and Jeb's talk at the table would be of point-spreads on next Sunday's NFL, which casinos had the best lines and most tolerable buffets. Then they'd turn to how many Clark County Commissioners were taking bribes on valley development, "goddamned corrupt Democrats," Merle would complain. Both topics would send Grace off to the kitchen at least twice to bang her pots around. After the meal, Merle invariably would take his youngest son aside and say, "Let's hope she don't act like she got barbed wire up her ass in your bed."

The family settled into a routine of gathering together mainly for holiday or occasional Sunday meals. Kyle wished they could be closer than this, but he was busy with work, and Grace would only put up with so much. Kyle would think back to that day he helped move Merle and Jeb into their used doublewide in the Sunrise Trailer Park over by Stewart and Lamb—what Merle and Jeb together could afford, in the only park in town that would take a dog that weighed over twenty pounds. He measured the steps front and back, made runs for plywood, built two switch-back ramps covered in Astroturf for Jeb's wheelchair, all the while understanding, without his father or brother saying a word, that it would be the two of them living there together, scraping along on Jeb's V.A. disability and Merle's early, thus reduced, Social Security checks. Their life plan was to hit the craps tables and lunch buffets every day, live like there was no tomorrow—which, after three generations of sweat and toil building up the stock and fields Merle had finally lost, Kyle guessed there really wasn't anymore.

Kyle was odd man out. He had the grades to get into college. A last-minute wrestling scholarship offer would pay part of his freight to Syracuse University—a place back East he had only heard of vaguely during winters listening to basketball games on his car radio. He and Merle humped a few sticks of battered ranch furniture out of the U-haul into the doublewide while Jeb wheeled around outside in the heat, trying to get his young sheepdog he'd named "Sinner" used to a leash. As they unpacked, they could hear Jeb calling out there, "Sinner! Good boy, Sinner! Heel, Sinner!"

Merle and Kyle set up the two TVs on their stands and a gun rack in each bedroom—every rifle in them loaded, on Merle's insistence—then Kyle installed handicap rails in the bathroom for Jeb. Pictures seemed too crowded on the walls—mostly of Jeb and Kyle in various stages of growing up, in grade school, at 4-H with fat lambs, at their high school graduations, Jeb in his dress army uniform, Merle's cracked photo from

the Navy in World War II. And there was that one in the hallway of their mother, Ruth, when she was young, with a curly 40's perm, before she married Merle and he moved her out to the ranch where their kids were born. Even then she was a scared-looking woman, Kyle thought, her wide gray eyes starting to one side of the frame as if the cattle truck that would years later T-bone her car and wipe her off the planet was already barreling toward her from that direction.

As a last touch, Merle asked Kyle to pound a few nails into the flimsy fake oak paneling in the living area over the couch. He hung up his old square-bladed irrigation shovel with its handle shiny from use—like a kind of gleaming, utilitarian sculpture—his one reminder any of them had ever worked the land. “I’ll look at that old shovel and know I’ve hung it up,” Merle said. “That’s it now, damnit. We’re done. Let’s get over to the Golden Nugget before they switch over to the dinner price.”

In downtown Las Vegas, Kyle left them behind—the old man pushing his elder son in a wheelchair over that broad sidewalk in the white hot breath of desert heat amid the honky-tonk daytime party Glitter Gulch was in those days before they covered Fremont Street over with a mammoth high-tech light show and messed it up with cheap souvenir booths, popcorn stands, and recorded noise. “It’s either cowboy paradise or a perfect vision of hell, take your pick,” Jeb said.

After following them downtown in the old Plymouth Valiant he and Merle had fixed up for his long drive East, Kyle decided against joining them for the buffet—not wanting to face such long highway miles loaded down with all that ballast. Merle shook his hand, once, roughly, as was his way. “Some of us get a chance in this life and some of us don’t,” he said. “Wish us luck now. Let’s all come up winners.”

Kyle waved goodbye as his father and brother rolled on into the welcoming air-conditioned promise of the buffet at the Golden Nugget, his old man bumping Jeb’s wheelchair through the wide entryway onto the plush carpet, a little American flag tied to an old whip car antennae Jeb had fastened to his wheelchair puffing up with a blast of cool air. They vanished into the clanking and ringing of the slot machines amid milling people, the craps and card tables stretching off all around them like a glimmering mirage of fertile green fields.

Kyle often wondered now: had his father been happy with him? Had he done “right enough”—that old saying of Merle’s when he was satisfied? He wasn’t sure. He couldn’t remember even what his Dad’s last words had been to him, unless they were something like, “Maybe I’ll go for the over-under on the Broncos next Sunday, what do you think?” He knew Kyle didn’t gamble and could only shrug. His Dad had been unhappy with Grace, considered her a stuck up prig, which she was, though to be fair to her, she was aware enough of this fault in herself to work at it with her in-laws, and who didn’t have faults? Besides which,

how could a man who bragged about nearly murdering his third wife be taken seriously for his opinions on marriage?

Reviewing their lives, Kyle couldn't help but be irritated that Grace never expressed any happiness or even comfort with the idea that they had landed in Las Vegas and even prospered here. After their romance as students at S.U. and her wealthy parents staged such an elegant wedding at the Little Church Around The Corner in New York—the same church where her parents had married then Grace's Dad had stepped onto and easily succeeded at the conservative ladder-climbing of investment banking on Wall Street—Grace maybe naturally expected a similar pattern to their own lives, that Kyle might take his S.U. business degree and accept a leg up into the three-piece-suited world of young corporate insiders in New York whose sole ambition was money and its swiftest possible accumulation. Grace should have known that wasn't for Kyle—how choked and stifled he felt in that crowd. He had little talent for schmoozing at lunches in Manhattan trading contacts and tips, courting fund managers and fat cats, and he was no good at all at fast-talking sales pitches over the telephone. He was no salesman, never would be, didn't have the knack or the required capacity to tell lies. He lost three jobs. He failed, it was that simple.

Grace also failed, in her own way—picking up an M.A. in English at N.Y.U. then not able to do much with it but manage a book store in the West Village that went suddenly bankrupt when the owner was diagnosed with lung cancer. He cleaned out the accounts behind her back and took off for Tahiti, stiffing distributors and publishers out of three seasons worth of invoices. Grace was left with the nightmare of getting herself out of the lawsuits, and—though none of it was her fault—she still ended up smeared with a reputation as a deadbeat.

That winter, snow piled high in the city streets, breaking records, locking New Yorkers into a grim dreary survival mode of slogging icily through the gray freezing mornings then down into the stale air of the subways, barely able to make it to work. Then it was back again through the wind-whipped nights, bundled up like Siberian refugees, clutching wet bags of groceries to their chests. Between jobs, Kyle and Grace hid out, depressed, feeling luckless in their trendy, one-bedroom apartment in Chelsea. “Thousands a month for a space no bigger than six lambing pens with a tacked-on kitchen the size of your average closet,” Kyle later described it, “and us eating nothing but pasta until it was coming out our ears.” They soon quit being able to make rent without the “ultimate humiliation” of Grace having to ask her banker Dad for monthly loans. Truth was, they both had failed.

Still, what neither one of them would say anything about except by glancing at each other in a conspiratorial ebullience of a shared secret whenever either one was telling their story at a dinner party with friends—charging these tales of their dark days in New York with an erotic energy anyone listening would pick up on and not know why—

some of their best memories as a young couple were of those winter nights and days spent in bed. Grace fixed her hair, made herself up, put on one of her gauzy negligees cut like an exotic dancer's. She spread out clean sheets, made them tight with hospital corners, lit a row of candles, poured cheap jug wine into her Steuben crystal. Then she propped herself up on a big mound of goose down pillows and posed there on their bed like what she really was—a Long Island princess waiting to be pulled off her throne. Kyle understood that this royal posing by Grace represented an essence of his first attraction to her—she was the girl who displayed a promise of wealth and possibility and that urban life that had been sold to him and every other country boy since he became aware there was some other world beyond the dust and silage and manure of where he had been born. And what other fantasy did the culture offer a tough farm boy to project himself into after his cropland blew away than those glossy urban glamor shots of anorexic women hungry with lust spread all over the magazine racks, movie, and TV screens—all gazing out at him as if what they truly desired was to be messed up first then royally screwed?

Kyle more than obliged Grace in these fantasies that bordered on the rapine, even rough, the way she later admitted she imagined him to be ever since she first watched him on a wrestling mat taking his opponent down with a hard fall then pinning him in an NCAA competition at the Carrier Dome. They were shy, at first, in expressing these desires to one another. Grace acted on their first date as if she merely deigned to go out with him from a missionary sense of generosity to the lower castes—as though she might tutor him in the ways of the privileged, talking to him of art museums, trendy books, which wine went with what entrée at the expensive restaurant she was insisting on paying for with her father's credit card. She talked and talked, too quickly, too much. Grace was a talker when she was nervous. Kyle responded with instinctive moves. In slow stages, he reached for her leg underneath the table. He let her feel the strength in his hands. When the check came, he stood up—a foot taller than the waiter—and tossed a roll of cash on the table with a cowboy bravado that said he would brook no arguments. Outside, Grace tried to get him to take her share of the bill, struggling to press money into his coat while Kyle was scraping the ice off the windshield of her bright orange Saab. He turned suddenly, pulled her head back by her hair. He planted a long kiss on her mouth that took her breath away. He was surprised at his roughness with her. He let her go, her mouth opening and closing like she wanted to say something more but she was speechless. "That sure stopped you talking," he said, as if apologizing, then they both laughed.

They were total opposites, and, in the way of this, they fell in love. Later, spending those dark jobless nights together in New York stripped them of any further hesitation. What they discovered about each other became more or less their rhythm from then on—Grace preferred Kyle

unshaven, sweaty, unwashed from work or looking for work, talking obscenities into her ears. She arranged their bedroom like a gauzy stage set from the Arabian Nights. He would enter it like a pirate carrying off his prize. As their love games deepened, pushed to an edge just short of pain, Kyle was still uneasy about their role-playing—it felt against his nature, somehow. Then he made peace with it as what his wife desired—not lovemaking so much as him kidnapping her then subjecting her to a kind of gently controlled beating.

Kyle wondered if this evolution in their married life had something to do with their move that Spring to Las Vegas—though Grace at first believed it was just for a visit to see Merle and Jeb, a well-deserved break from their hardest year so they could regroup and try it once more back East. Not that there was any reason to think so, still, Kyle just naturally associated the two life developments. Wasn't Las Vegas the place where anything goes? Open to all comers? Welcome to all kinds?

Not really—Kyle knew this was just hype from the ad agencies and Convention Authority. What drew people to live here was something else. Las Vegas was the best place in America for second chances. Losers were welcomed here. And America sorely needed such a place. More than half of all married couples split up in ruinous divorces, workers were being laid off from jobs at plants and factories by the thousands, four out of five small businesses went belly up, nine out of ten farmers lost their farms, three out of every twenty professionals failed at their practices or, worse, lost their licenses in other states. People were going bankrupt and getting stripped of everything with increasing frequency. The untold truth of America was that for every success story it was possible to find five-fold testimonies of people who had failed. If Las Vegas didn't exist already, the country would have had to invent it all over again just to relieve the pressure. Merle was right when he claimed that in Las Vegas it didn't matter what a person had been so much as what he was heading toward. It was simple casino logic and the very essence of gaming that, with each new bet placed, the past ceased to exist, it was the future that counted. Las Vegas was a city that had invented itself only by its own improbable vision for the future.

With a stake from his brother, Kyle and Grace rented a battered two-bedroom in the Sunrise Trailer Park near Merle and Jeb. "Impossible," Grace's Mom said when she found out, but they weren't there long. In the normal course of moving around town—asking a few tired-looking guys at Paddy's Pub who were just getting off work—Kyle landed a job punching a nail gun for a framing contractor busy tossing up cheap stucco tract homes in the scorpion and rattlesnake infested hard pan that stretched off into the Northwest of the Las Vegas valley.

In those days of the boom, almost anyone with an able body could find work, and it took little enough ambition on Kyle's part to figure out he would be good at putting together his own crews. The trick in such a transient place was to develop an instinct for picking the kind of guys

willing to work who would stay on for long enough. Kyle knew such men just by the expressions on their faces—he had seen it on his own face—that darkly troubled tiredness of the guy just barely making it here from someplace else, fully meaning to climb up out of defeat, powered by the earnestness of knowing he had less than a quarter tank of gas left in his car. And so at first it was three guys, then eight, then twelve, then finally up to sixty under Kyle's supervision knocking out stick frames one after another like stapling big cardboard boxes together and bolting them to concrete slab after slab after slab, the worst part of it the dizzying, exhausting heat in the summer months when their bodies evaporated out more water than they could keep down. His expanding crews subcontracted out in The Lakes then in Summerlin then Green Valley then Sun City then in the more luxurious tracts that gradually crawled and grew southeast into the black rock hills on the other side of which was the craggy slope down into Boulder City and the sapphire blue of Lake Mead.

And so Kyle's business grew as the city grew. He followed certain rules—never get too big, never be too greedy, no matter the pressure, don't ever go so fast as to leave behind mistakes; finally and above all, never pretend to be anything more than what you are. He believed this last rule was a key to the way the whole city was growing up around him, though it was also the Las Vegas paradox. With so many faux themed resorts rising up on the strip and becoming emblematic of the place—a scale-model Eiffel Tower over a plasterboard Paris, a stage set façade of the New York skyline, robot pirate ships, gas powered volcanoes, indoor canals complete with singing gondoliers, and on and on with so much more, all of it with such patent-medicine fakeness and over-layering of designs so baroque and busy they clashed beyond any human capacity to take them in all at once—paradoxically, for all this fakeness, Las Vegas never pretended to be anything other than what it was. Even its gambling was thoroughly honest—odds were published and easily available for any slot machine and table game, all anybody had to do was ask for them on a casino floor. Las Vegas made no claim at offering anything real. With its hoopla of advertising, its chaos of fantasies, its games of chance, Las Vegas promised just exactly what it delivered—nothing less, little more. It was a city of representations. Underneath them, Las Vegas was the most honest city on earth.

Gradually—something he would never brag about—Kyle took on this sense of civic pride and vision of place as the city grew around him. He put in ten and twelve hour days, season after season, working with Richards Construction's ever growing crews spitting out their millions of nails in a moving assembly-line of strenuous labor and knuckle-scraping toil, putting up what amounted to the same half dozen basic designs of ranch or two story structures that spread out in a monotonous simulacrae across a desert wasteland busy transforming itself into real estate and dreams. Kyle cut deals with real estate agents to get in on

these developments. He moved Grace into them one after another—six houses in their first fifteen years—seeding in the grass, planting palm trees, digging the swimming pools, laying up the brick barbecues, then just when a neighborhood was finally looking lived in and shedding its dustblown newness with green lawns and streets full of kids, he sold the house for half more than what he paid for it and he and Grace moved again.

In Las Vegas, people rarely stayed in one place. This phenomenon was difficult for Grace to explain at first, “Yes, you know, in Vegas,” she’d try to justify to her Mom, who was concerned about the stability of the kids. Grace would shut that up by getting her Dad on the phone to talk equity investments, pitched to him as though they were still putting together a stake big enough that they could move comfortably back to New York. Grace handled their money. Despite her tendency to go off and spend too much on what she always called “the best” in all she bought, she was good at managing money—far better than Kyle with his business degree. And Grace wasn’t one to stay at home just mothering Tommy and Suze for very long either, preferring to keep current in her field by teaching at least two classes a semester at the new Community College in Henderson. “Poetry for the huddled masses,” she called her courses. “Half these students claim not to know what a poem is much less ever to have truly read one. Can that really be? Two or three in every class pull down six-figure salaries serving cocktails or tending bar. A valet parker in this town makes more than a junior stock broker in New York. So what use is poetry? In Vegas, this is the challenge.”

Kyle heard it all, usually in bed, Grace musing her way toward her renewed sense of mission. “Somebody needs to represent real culture here,” she’d say. Then she’d prop up a book in her lap and read poems to Kyle—he considered himself an educated reader, but contemporary poetry seemed increasingly senseless to him, words arranged not in stanzas but scattered like shotgun pellets all over the page. But he was glad enough just to listen to the happy tone of Grace’s voice singing out the disattached sounds in her breathy way—like a ringing of just slightly off-key wind chimes—refreshing, lulling him to sleep after his long days out pounding nails with his crews in hellish heat, after he and Grace had put the kids to bed under the humming breezes of the central air conditioning, after he had done his briganding duty as a husband by busting into her palace bedroom in his dusty work boots, roughing her up a little as she desired, carrying her off and away.

All in all, he thought, it was a good life, what they had built here together. Kyle only wished that Grace would admit to how good it was and quit apologizing for the place in that dismissive tone, “Yes, you know, in Vegas...”

He had to leave the room every time. He scolded her about it, “Why can’t you admit that we live here? That this is our home?”

“Why do you keep moving us?” she asked. “There must be something here that makes people feel they can’t possibly be staying.”

“Damn it, Grace, we’re happy here!”

“I love it when you get mad like this,” was all she said.

As much as for Grace to accept their lives, Kyle also wished his brother Jeb could find some happiness, could make a better life. He had tried to get Jeb in on his business, move him into a real house, get him more involved with people. But Jeb persisted stubbornly staying just where he was, taking care of Merle, both of them getting stuck in their same old patterns. After a while, Kyle realized that—save for the occasional holiday or Sunday dinner and the times he dropped the kids off to visit—he hardly saw his father and brother anymore. Kyle began not to see them in other ways too, as if thinking of his brother and father in a kind of blur among all the rest of the numerous but seldom noted in this town—not unlike blackjack slowpokes to catch on to the next turn in the deal, slot junkies left wishing they’d cashed out when, bingo players holding unfilled cards—the ones who crawled back and forth through the six lane traffic jams in the parade of fortune who found it ever more difficult to raise up their spirits with hope, sitting there frustrated in their cars, totaling up their losses in their heads while waiting for their lane to inch a few feet forward and the next day to bring them more of the same, the same, the same, the same. Jeb was among the ones who had never moved. And if Jeb wouldn’t move—or couldn’t move—Kyle wished his brother at least could have better settled in and come to terms.

Three days before Christmas, Jeb called from Desert Springs Hospital. “He sat down on the couch to watch TV after his shower like he always did. He said his elbow hurt. Then Dad turned blue and that was it. Gone. Paramedics tried to revive him but no dice,” he said.

After Kyle got off the phone, as he was pulling on his clothes to drive off to the hospital, Grace said, “Let’s not wake the kids with this. They just finished wrapping Merle’s gifts. They’ll be up all night.” Then, as if she recognized how cold she sounded, she said, “I’m sorry. But it’s not as though this is unexpected.”

Later, as Kyle was dragging Merle’s old stinking couch out into the side yard of that falling-apart doublewide—the couch spooked Jeb, as if he could still see Merle sitting on it, dead—Jeb let loose about how they had lived. “You don’t understand, Kyle, how it’s been for me. Like a full time job, setting a clock to get up and go with him to the casinos to play his wrong way dice—you know, gambling on the losers, doubling up his bets on the ‘no pass’ line until a table just went cold and all the players went away. He’d wheel me into line for the lunch buffets or use his comp coupons at the coffee shops. Afternoons, it was sitting around with him nursing beers at the sports books. Watching him flirt with the cocktail

waitresses. Listening to his same old jokes. Every day. Day in, day out. Worse than work, me having to slip him cash at the end of most months to keep staking him. Think about it Kyle, how damned oppressive all that's been. Twenty some odd years since we left the homeplace. Is that any kind of life?"

Kyle didn't say anything about the other things he knew they did—weekly rides out into the desert with their rifles to shoot targets, and that time they took Tommy and Suze to fire a machine gun at the Desert Arms Emporium on Tropicana, where Merle often traded. Grace had had a fit about that one, "Does your Dad really think it's educational to put an automatic weapon in the hands of an eight-year-old?" Then after Suze told her grandma, Grace was on the phone again, "Yes, you know, Mom, in Vegas..."

And Merle and Jeb had occasional escapades with those flim-flam exotic dancers advertised in lewd pamphlets "direct to your room" all over town that they'd call up when Merle was especially flush from a banner day at the tables, after one of which Grace wouldn't let Kyle drop the kids off unsupervised at her in-laws for almost a year. "Both of them? Not just Tommy, but Suze, too? Watching Jeb paint a screaming eagle across some cheap dancer's naked breasts? And your Dad saying it was all just harmless fun? Do you realize almost anyplace else they could get arrested for this? Kyle?"

Jesus, Kyle thought, at least the old man got to see his grandkids. Not that this had been much of a life for Jeb—Kyle understood that his brother had done the obligatory duty as a son to Merle, filling in with him in ways Kyle never could have, he wouldn't have had the patience, as if still making up somehow for the old man's loss. Jeb's twenty-two years in Las Vegas must have felt more like a sentence to house arrest than any life of his own.

That night, after driving Jeb back home from Desert Springs, Kyle watched him pushing restlessly back and forth across the carpet worn deep with ruts from his wheelchair, streaks and patches stained with gun oil and engine grease from when Merle used to set up repair projects on the coffee table in front of the TV in the evenings. Kyle noted the stainless steel dog dish still in its place by the refrigerator—gleaming there like a silver dollar—left in its spot after Jeb's dog died of old age. Jeb's face was pasty and pale, showing a bluish veneer of skin kept too long out of the sun. His eyes were red rimmed, hollow looking, unable to focus, as if still staring off into blinking lights on casino floors.

"So... what do you think you'll do now?" Kyle asked.

"Get that damned shovel off the wall," Jeb said.

Kyle hunted through drawers to find a hammer, then he stood in the empty space where the couch had been and bent back the nails holding up Merle's old irrigation shovel—even through the greasy dust and cobwebs clinging to it, he felt the slick wear on the handle, how its weight balanced familiarly in his hands. He could see again all those

dawns out in the fields, the way they grew up, the three of them laboring together in the irrigation ditches piling dirt on the canvas dams amid the storms of deer flies and mosquitoes, directing glistening streams of water out onto their newly planted fields. The memory was something solid after what they had been through—the grim disorienting paperwork filled out at the emergency room amid the hurt people and their families lining up in pain, and the shock of seeing Merle’s death written there in black and white. In the space for “Disposition of the Body,” Jeb scrawled, “Palm Mortuary, your basic burn,” then signed his name while still clutching a plastic tie bag containing Merle’s watch and keys. After all that, the shovel’s weight felt grounding somehow, and comforting, like the voice of a friend. Kyle was a little reluctant to let it go.

Jeb reached for the shovel and balanced it across his lap. Kyle followed as Jeb awkwardly jockeyed his wheelchair and the shovel out onto the back steps, metal parts banging angrily into the flimsy frame of the trailer door. For a minute, the two brothers braced themselves at the top of the porch ramp.

“You could move in with us,” Kyle said.

“Grace would never put up with me,” Jeb said.

“We could make it work,” Kyle said.

“Forget it,” Jeb said. “Besides, I might like the chance to live on my own.”

Kyle shivered, not so much with the chill of the desert night as with the weather of grief Jeb wheeled around everywhere with him, something the events of this night only deepened. Change seemed promised now. Still, nothing could really change for Jeb. He wouldn’t move. He would wheel himself four blocks down the avenue from the trailerpark to the supermarket shopping center and fill his lap with his daily needs, then he’d wheel himself back home—there and back again, two times a day, as he had been doing for years. He’d hole up, alone in his bitterness in front of the television, day in, day out, with the only difference that he would hardly get out at all now that Merle was gone. He was stuck here. And Jeb would stay stuck here. Kyle would ask himself if he could have managed things for his brother differently, and how much of his brother’s condition was really his fault. He would keep searching through his memories looking for that one crucial moment when he might have intervened to avoid the future he saw spread out before them now—for Jeb mainly filled with loss and regret, and for himself ever wondering why. Why did so few achieve all the success while the others were left stranded out in the desert? Why?

They waited there on the porch landing a long time, it seemed, just breathing in the chill night air. Red aircraft warning lights on the Hilton tower blinked in the distance; a low winter cloud cover lay painted with a vivid orange glow vibrating up from the simmering cauldron of the city. Jeb gripped the shovel, hefting it to his shoulder like a clumsy spear. He flung it off into the night with a primitive cry.