

BILL AND CARL

"Bill, I'm thirsty, hungry, and I need to take a leak."

"I was just thinking the same. There might be a place to stop ahead. We'll stop for the night here, maybe, if it looks okay."

The mist started up again as they drove down Broad Street, the fog closing in to engulf the trees and make them blend into the night. The result was bewitching in a Halloween way.

They talked about whether they should hide the car and sleep, drive on through this place, or stop at the hotel they just passed. In the wink of an eye they could have put Maple Grove behind them and continue up towards New Jersey, New York, and all points North.

"A bed would be nice, Bill."

"A bath"

"Yeah, a bath. And a meal would be real nice tonight. Mostly a bar. And a bed," Carl whimpered. He was tired of the front seat for sleeping. Whenever he looked at the back seat, Bill growled.

"Can't make up your mind? I want all of 'em."

They turned around and went back down Broad Street when the town hall clock chimed nine o'clock. They passed the Grove Hotel on the left and continued another two blocks

past a soda shop, Taylor's Mercantile and a bakery. Another block and then they turned left. One more street and they were at the river. Left again onto River Rd. One big square with the hotel and town square smack in the middle.

The river narrowed. There were homes along the river. Many were small and rundown. Some were across from the river and had long sweeping lawns. White fences made them look safe. Shutters blocked out storms. Maybe the river assaulted the homes in winter.

There was a dock behind a tack shop. Several dinghies and a few time worn fishing boats. On the other side of the dock was a swimming area, roped off. Beyond that, a picnic area. Stone cooking pits and benches with tables. A path led back up to the town square one street up to the left. The town hall looked impressive in the dark and fog, tall columns and portico. Street lamps illuminated the square and triangle of the building.

"I don't think this stinkin' town has a bar, Bill. This place gives me the creeps."

"Hell, you don't expect the fine folks of... where are we? Oh yea, Maple Grove, to come out and greet us on a rainy, foggy night, do ya, Carl? We'll find a bar somewhere."

They parked half way down the street between the river and hotel on the square.

Bill thought that if the police were looking for them, then he should not advertise by parking right outside the hotel.

Bill knew that old man Gunther was dead. He felt it in his heart. Carl couldn't care less whether he was dead or not. Bill's intellect ran deeper. He felt the police only a half step behind them. Now Gunther's death was just an open door for them to waltz through, an invitation to the county jail or that new electronic chair.

"Billy Boy, we can afford to stay the night. We're far enough from home now. Shit, this place is in the middle a nowhere. No one would find this place if they tried."

"Don't call me that, Carl, old chum, or I'll shoot you." Bill pointed the pistol at Carl.

Carl shrugged "I don't think you'd do that, Billy. Who'd you get to split the drivin'?"

"Shit. I don't need you, that's for sure." He calmed down as he stopped the car. "But it sure as hell wouldn't be as much fun without you. What the hell. We can afford the time in Maple Grove tonight, having put three days between them and us.

"We need gas, cigarettes, and more money anyway. Can't get any tonight, Billy Boy." Carl stripped his pockets. Nothing but corn kernels, a nickel and three pennies.

"I got about twenty. That won't take us to Boston let alone Canada."

"Don't I know it."

Canada seemed very far away.

Bill and Carl came up with a story about who they were, why they were in Maple Grove and where they were going. It was a reasonable story and had little about it to question. Just the same he drilled Carl on the particulars and made sure that Carl knew every detail.

They walked into the hotel, looked at the sleepy lobby. There were voices and noise from a hallway across from the desk, just past the closed coffee shop and newsstand. It smelled like old wallpaper and crackled novel pages. A man in a hat sat on a sofa reading a newspaper. A malnourished kitten shared the carpet with the man's feet.

Bill and Carl walked past the man and kitten, to the counter. A man behind the counter was reading a paper; the Maple Daily. After a minute of no reaction, Bill hit the bell. Three times. The man looked up in surprise. The man on the sofa reading the paper looked up. The kitten didn't budge.

"Hello, gents. Don't get many in at nine o'clock Thursdays."

"Guess you'll gladly take our money, though, huh?" Carl asked.

"That I would, son." He spun a registration book.

Bill Foster signed the guest register; George Newman. He was handed a key.

"Two Oh Three, up and to the right."

Carl tipped his hat. Bill took the key, tipped his hat.

The man looked at the floor, expected luggage. There was none. One measly rucksack and nothing more.

Bill and Carl walked past the carved wooden registration desk to a wide staircase that went up one floor and then turned right or left. They walked up and up again to the right.

Herbert Potter, the owner, didn't walk them to their room. A long hall. Rooms on both sides; 201, 203, 200, 202.

Bill worked the lock. It stuck, he twisted. Into a dark musty room; two beds along the left wall, bureau to the right, window straight ahead. Utilitarian but good enough. Flowered wallpaper.

"God I hate hotels."

"You kidding, Billy? This is great! Cat's meow, I tell ya."

They walked in and checked the place out. Bill unbuttoned his shirt, removed it and his shoes, lit a cigarette and lay down on the bed with a sigh. He crossed one leg over the other and put his arms up under his head. Carl washed and then did the same. They stretched out and had a quiet few minutes' time to unwind from the last few days.

Bill sat up. "Let's look for a bar and see if there's any food."

"Yeah, good idea."

They dressed. Downstairs back to the lobby, a sign along a hallway off the main lobby. Herbert Potter watched after them as they followed the sign. No particular reaction to the first two strangers in town in over a month and the first guests in the hotel in over three weeks. He yawned. Back to his reading about Maple Grove High, they had a serious lack of cash for schoolbooks. Kids might have to share. He clucked in disgust.

Bill and Carl found the hallway. Noise level rose as they got closer. A watering hole. Noisier and noisier. When they walked in, they realized why. The Grove bar was the hot spot of Maple Grove. It was more than busy. It was bustling. Men played cards. No empty barstools. Only one empty table in the corner. Curiosity glances made Carl look down at his shoes as they took the table in the back of the room. The lights were low and they were easily lost in a haze of cigarette and cigar smoke. One man smoked a pipe. The odor reeked through all the others. The man was tall and lanky, wore a black suit.

"It doesn't look like Maple Grove is doin' any better than the rest of the world, Bill. They're a bunch of old, used up men here. Hey, catch that guy with the pipe. If he don't look like the reaper walkin', I don't know who does."

"It don't matter, Carl. It just don't matter."

They ordered drinks and the only meal that they could get, chicken and potatoes. Bill didn't think he ever wanted to see a potato again but gobbled just the same. They ate in a mostly silence except for a moan here and belch there. Lit cigarettes; Lucky Strikes.

"I don't like it here, Bill. Let's hit the bakery and then get the hell out of here."

"Hold on Carl. It doesn't seem to me that there's all that many people here who would do that. Who do you think they'll go after?" He thumbed his own chest and turned the thumb onto Carl's chest.

"We'll do all right," Carl said through a mouth full of potato that he spat as he spoke. "It'll just take some thinkin' about. Tomorrow we'll get up, get gas and leave town. Tomorrow night we'll come back after it gets dark. But it will look as though we already left so no one will think it was us. We'll look at the bakery tomorrow morning and if it looks like it's loaded, we'll do it when we come back. After we leave in the morning, we'll find some place to hide the car and wait. Or better yet, maybe we'll just leave the car here and walk down to the river and up a little ways."

"Carl, sometimes you are dumber than a rat's ass. Listen, here's what we do. We have breakfast. We check out. We go to the bakery. You get rolls for the ride, I get cakes. Then we fill up on cigarettes and get gas. We leave. We find a spot and wait 'til about midnight. We don't leave

the car here. Anyone could walk up to it, know it don't belong to anyone and take it. Take it..."

"Bill, that's right. Gas the car up, leave but in someone else's car. Ditch the car. Take one, but take someone else's."

"No, Carl. Anyone who lives here knows who drives what car. Besides, if there's ten cars in this whole stinkin' town, there's a hundred. No, let's do it the way I said."

"Maybe midnight is too late around here. We better stick around to see if these jerks stay up all night or turn in by ten."

"Good idea. I think it'd be best if they're all asleep. It doesn't look like much happens around here."

"You jerk, we never worried about whether anyone was asleep at home, why should we here?"

"Bill, if they're all awake, don't you think it would wake the whole damn town up if they catch on to us?"

"No, I don't, and no one's going to catch on to us if you don't screw up the works. You're just getting spooked because old man Gunther heard us, Carl."

"Fine, do it your way. It's ten forty-five now and they're starting to leave already."

"Fine, let's get some sleep ourselves. If we're the last ones out a' here they'll know us too well."

Next morning came much too soon. The sun in Bill's eyes woke him. He was on his belly, one arm wrapped up in the

pillow, the other behind his back. A thin line of drool puddle on the pillow. Took a second or two to remember where he was. Could have been home or at his Aunt Lil's, his kid brother's room or down the shore at the dive motel his mom took them to once. All the same; sun coming in through Venetian blinds that weren't all that sparkling clean. A fine layer of dust on an end table. Bureau and a faded mirror with etched flowers in the corners. A doily on the bureau and their keys, a pocketknife, some change, a rubber band, cigarettes and a package of match sticks.

Bill rolled his stiff body over noisy springs and hauled his hulk out of bed. Sat up and rubbed his head. He still got a stiff one in the morning. Today was no exception. Standing up, he skulked to the head, walked in tandem to Carl snoring. Step, snore, shuffle, pig grunt.

An hour later, clean and dressed, they went down to the lobby. The man from last night was gone. A fat lady with gray hair was behind the counter. She looked at the strangers for the longest moment.

The other guests in the hotel right then were a couple on their way to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon; they were from Maple Grove. The wedding had been last Sunday night and they hadn't left yet. There were a few looking for antiques down from New York and several men from Trenton on their way to Atlanta for some revivalist convention. All told, the

hotel was more busy than normal, the more she thought about it.

Come September the place would be bustling, depression or no, with folks haunting around the flea markets and auctions. More auctions than what used to be; people getting shoved out of farms and such.

Her husband had told her about the two men when he come in late last night. He thought that they were from New Jersey, Trenton probably. She looked at them as if she thought they thought she was still young and pretty.

"What can I do for you today?"

"Checking out," Bill said.

Carl ran his hands through damp hair.

"My but that's a short stay. Just passin' through?"

"Hm," Bill fished for a wallet. "How much?"

"Four dollars fifty. Two of you, you know."

Bill laid the cash on the counter and turned away.

"You fellas come back again soon, hear? We like having travelers."

Bill turned to her and nodded.

A coffee shop was just across the lobby, next to a newsstand. The man in the hat from last night was on the sofa again, reading his newspaper again. Only thing was, the cat was absent.

Coffee and egg smell as they passed through the entrance of the coffee shop. Five tables to the left,

covering the wall of windows to the street and a counter to the right. Eight seats at the counter out of a dozen were empty. Four tables were available.

On the counter was a three tier covered tray with slices of pie. At each stool, a set-up and dispenser for napkins, sugar, salt and pepper.

Bill walked to the third table on the left and sat. Carl followed.

"I'll be right back," Bill said, and he got up.

Carl watched him leave.

Bill went to the newsstand. The woman behind the registration desk was gone. He lifted yesterday's Daily, tossed a nickel on the counter. It skittered to the floor. *Let it stay ...let them come after me. Now that would be a real yuck*, he thought. When he got back, Carl was already drinking a cup of coffee.

A waitress came by with a cup for Bill. She greeted them pleasantly and took their order. Bill watched her walk away.

She pushed the door to the kitchen with her hip.

"Praise the lord for new faces in Maple Grove. The blonde isn't bad looking, either. The one with the dark straggly hair is squirrelly, but who cares"

A cook was scrambling eggs. "Chile, you always lookin' for what Maple Grove don't have. If you'd look in your own

back yard maybe someone would even like your own ugly fat face."

She laughed and tilted her hips at him, piling plates of food high along her arm. "With the likes of what you spend your time with down in Frenchtown, I'd say I get the better deal."

Bill saw her come back from the kitchen, arms loaded, using her hips to swing the door again. He went back to his newspaper and coffee.

Bill scanned for news from the rest of the world, Philadelphia in particular. There was nothing.

A girl walked past the coffee shop. Carl leered. He watched as she entered the hotel and went to talk with the fat lady by the newsstand. He stopped drinking his coffee in mid gulp.

He could not hear their words but he could see her face, her lovely hair, her eyes, and her pretty dress. He watched her greet the lady warmly and look through magazines. She chose one and continued to speak with the woman. Carl, at that moment, saw Natalie Tucker and wanted her more than anything or anyone before in his life.

Bill caught Carl's stare, followed it. His eyes rested on Natalie.

"Well, what have we here, Carl, old boy? Love at first sight? And isn't she a sight to behold?"

"Un huh, that she is Billy Boy, that she is."

"Now, you forget it, Carl, we're leavin' here today and she isn't in the plans, you hear me?" His face hardened, his jaw worked.

"I just want to see where she belongs is all, Bill. You get the car gassed up and I'll just take a stroll down this street and see where she goes. I'll meet you back here in half an hour."

Carl started to get up and Bill caught his arm.

"Don't you even think about her. You'll screw it all up with your nose sniffin' around her. No way. You stay right where you are."

Carl sat down hard and looked Bill square in the eyes.

"I'm not messin' anything up. I just want to look. You get the car ready and I'll walk down to the bakery and back. That's all. It has to get done anyway. Give me some money for the stuff we need and I'll come back to the hotel in a half hour. Now give me some money."

"Fine but I'm warning you, don't you mess with her. It's trouble. I'll be ready in a half hour. No more."

Carl flew. Bill finished his coffee, got the check, paid the two dollars and winked at the waitress on the way out.

Her face turned bright red as she scooped up the tip from the table.

Natalie had gone into the Grove Hotel to find another magazine. She heard that there was a new movie coming out with Clark Gable. It was about the Civil War and she just loved Clark Gable.

When she dressed that morning, she put on her coolest dress. It was almost worn through, she had worn it so much this summer already. Her best friend Anna had promised that if she wore it one more time, that the seams would just fall open and Natalie would then be the laughing stock of Maple Grove. Natalie's mother was going to make a new dress for her but today, there was nothing else cool enough to wear. Walking back to the store, she prayed that she wouldn't pass Anna, who might very well instigate the laughing stock threat.

She went into the store. "Mamma! Missus Potter saw two strangers in town last night."

Mama wasn't listening. She was recounting the cash in the drawer for the day to come. It hadn't changed since yesterday, since no one came in after Mr. Miller.

Natalie went behind the oak counter and opened the magazine to read the story of the new Civil War movie when she noticed a man pass in front of the store.

"Mama that must be one of them!" I'll bet he's down from New York, looking for someone for that new movie! Oh I'll just have to tell Anna when I see her!"

"Hush now, Natalie. That's crazy. Why would someone come here from New York? Don't you think there's enough people there to make movies? He's probably just another Bible salesman and he'll come in here trying to sell us more Bibles that we don't need. We already have six of them on the shelf over there," She took a deep breath and continued. "and not one of them sold since the last salesman got one over on us."

Natalie sighed. "Seven, mama. Seven Bibles. I guess you're right. Sure would have been fun though, wouldn't it have, Mama?"

She continued to read, did not notice that the man outside, Carl, had watched her through the edge of the window.

Carl watched the way Natalie walked, watched the way that her dress molded to her back, to her legs. He watched her dark hair swing. Her arms matched her walk. He watched her go into the store. The door closed behind her with the tinkling of a bell. He passed the store and turned back to look into the window. He watched her go behind the counter and speak to the old lady inside.

He licked his lips. They dried out half an hour ago, the minute he saw her. He did a slow pirouette and went into the bakery next door. The first thing he felt was an immediate cooling. Ceiling fan and tile floor.

A man of about fifty or so walked through a curtain from beyond the store, wiping flour off of his hands onto an apron.

Carl thought of Gunther, although this man looked nothing like him. He was slight of build and no more than five-foot-six.

"Good day to you, sir. What can I get for you?"

"Um, I'm not sure yet. I haven't looked yet."

"Well, you just take your time, son. Just take your time. You just passing through or giving our town a look see?"

"Just passing through. Give me six of those rolls and three of those cakes."

"Fine, just fine. I hope you like it here. Maple Grove is a nice place. We have nice fine folks here. And nice girls here, too. A man could find a nice wife here in Maple Grove."

As Carl paid, he dropped a coin. "Now where did that go?" He bent over, searched the tile.

The baker came around, joined his search.

Carl stretched to his full height and looked over the large counter to the cash drawer. He did a mental count and quickly bent back down, took coins out of his pocket, placed a dime on the floor. "Well look there, it was right under my foot the whole time." He gave a grunted chuckle. "Must be half blind."

"Well no harm done, son. Don't you worry about it at all. It's my pleasure to help a newcomer in town. Say, did you have a chance to go next door yet?"

Next door. The girl. "Nope, haven't."

"Well, there's a fine young lady what helps to run the place and I'm sure you two would be a fine match. Of course since you're just passing through I guess getting married wouldn't be of any interest to you just now, would it? Shame, though, Natalie sure is a fine young lady."

Natalie, so her name is Natalie. Natalie. Natalie. Beautiful Natalie.

"Sorry mister, I'm just passin' through. Heading to Baltimore. I wonder, though, does Natalie know that you're trying to get her hitched off? Are you related? You must be an uncle or something. Am I right? I'm right, aren't I?" He winked at the old man then smiled.

"Nah, go on. It's just a lot of the men folk have left here looking for work. Like you, I guess. And it's a real shame, that it is."

"Don't feel too bad about it. I might a seen a beautiful young pearly this morning in the hotel lobby. If that's her, she won't be without someone for too long. She's the marrying kind of girl. Know what I mean?"

His eyes sparkled but not in the kind way the baker might have hoped for. His brow creased and he snapped out of it as he bagged the goods.

Natalie, Natalie. Carl was struck through and through and the ages of their love could be glimpsed in his mind to the exclusion of all else, all in an instant. Their imagined life together evolved, the potential too great to miss, even in his admittedly meager mind. Then it faded, slipped away. It would never come to pass. A jewel as rare and soft as Natalie would never

A stab in his heart. His eyes dimmed, the sparkle vaporized in tandem with the image of Natalie by his side, their imaginary family nestled between them. His life might have been different! Stab of reality bit hard and turned bitter, even though he was not the smartest of men, that he knew, that he felt.

A darkness in him soured his eyes from green to brown. His eyes became blank, empty sockets filled with eyes that saw nothing but the here and now. Possibility washed away. Pupils constricted, cold and vicious.

"And believe me old man, if I was in the market for a wife, it would not be in a small hick town like this. I come from New York, the big city, and no way on God's green earth would I ever settle for a country bumpkin like that."

The old man's face changed, sank, hardened. "Yeah, I've heard that many times before, son. Only stings for a second. Funny though, you don't sound like New York. More like Jersey--Cape May or Camden."

"Ain't you the smart one then," Carl said. He grabbed his bag.

"We don't want to be holding you up from your day. That will be eighty cents, please. Thank You. You have a nice trip to Baltimore and don't forget to stop back on your way home."

Baltimore, had he said Baltimore? Stupid. "Thanks old man, but I ain't comin' back."

He left, turned right and walked past Taylor's Mercantile, past Natalie and past what might have been.

He walked back to the hotel, not sure how long he had been and figuring that Bill might have finished his errands also. He saw Bill in front of the hotel and they turned around and walked back down toward the town square.

There, they took a seat on a bench. Carl hopped up and perched on the back of the bench, lit a Lucky Strike.

"Hey Carl, how many people have looked at you like you're from Jippip? I don't think that there're too many people who come through here. Do you?"

"Nah, this stinkin' place still gives me the creeps. The old man in the bakery was trying to get me married off to little miss pretty face. Remember the girl? Seems all the good guys left town and there ain't nobody left. Anyway, the bakery has about ten dollars in it! Maybe even twelve. That's enough to last us awhile, Billy boy."

"Yeah, I guess it'll do. I was hoping for thirty to fifty, Carl. We got a long ride and I would just as soon not have to stop again. I have a feeling the law is right behind us."

Bill sighed and Carl looked behind them. Bill shook his head and rolled his eyes. *Dumber than a rat's ass.* "I have a few bucks left. Let's go into Taylor's over there and see what stuff we can get. I gassed the car up and she's ready to go."

Carl jumped off the bench. "Ain't that a pip. Now I can really see what my Natalie looks like, close up and in the front. Let's go."

"How'd you know her name, Carl?"

"The old man baker told me. Funny, that old man." He scratched his head just thinking about him

It was ten-thirteen in the morning. They stepped on their cigarette butts and walked back across the square. A few people were nearby. They looked at the men as they walked across the street, pulled children closer. A squirrel skittered away, back up the tree. Birds fled the invaded branches. Clouds left shade patches on the sidewalk and grass.

They entered the store, stood in the entrance and looked around. So much stuff! The strong pungent smell of polish and wood. It smelled clean but old, very old. Years of polish.

Bill's immediate reaction was darkness. A fleeting instinct, but he liked the place just the same, thought maybe it burned in a strange way that maybe it was like his own childhood bedroom melted away.

Natalie looked up from her movie gossip and almost jumped off the stool that she was sitting on behind the counter.

Carl made a quick beeline to the counter. "Good Morning, Miss."

"Oh pardon me, good morning, sir!" A blush rose to her cheeks. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Carl looked right into her deep brown eyes and said nothing, just looked. A flush to his face. "No, Mam. We're just in need of a few things to help us on our way. You sure do have some pretty eyes."

Radar. Blanche heard that one, turned and came through the curtain, hard as nails.

Bill collected supplies. A blanket, a box of matches, cigarettes, a knife, an empty glass bottle, bottles of pop, a coffee pot and a bag of coffee.

He hadn't quite finished when Blanche went behind the counter next to Natalie. She put her arm around her daughter's shoulders. "We've been told that before, Mister. Don't you pay no mind to this little girl. Are you ready to ring up then?" Her face held no smile.

Blanche sized them up with no hint of compromise in her manner toward them. *Another Bible salesman. No doubt about it. Look at the two of them. This one like a weasel with cold eyes. That one not quite handsome. Like a fox. Two Bible salesmen. The only thing worse than one Bible salesman is two in the same room.*

Blanche's only major blunder in her life had been one such gentleman seventeen years ago. One such charming man going from Philadelphia to New York who'd decided to stay in Maple Grove. Of course, he changed his mind but Natalie had already been made of them. But not again, no sir! Over her dead body would she let the same thing happen to Natalie.

Bill brought his overloaded arms to the counter and dumped everything, nudged Carl aside. He smiled.

"Any chance I might get some sugar that we might have coffee later in the day on our ride?"

Blanche stared at Bill. *He's a cool one, ain't he?*

"Natalie honey, go and get a small tin to put the sugar in." She never took her eyes from Bill's, met his stare eye for eye, challenge-to-challenge, threat to threat.

"Sure, mama."

Natalie knew that tone in Blanche's voice. She'd only heard it once before, when Daniel McGrady had taken her to his senior prom at the Grove Hotel Ballroom last May. "You have her home by ten, Dan McGrady, not one minute later or you won't make it to see Independence Day."

Natalie looked at the two strangers carefully, discreetly, and almost secretively as she scooped sugar into the tin. She liked Carl better of the two. He was charming. She was more attracted to Bill. Taller, blond, stronger built; he looked like he could take care of anything . . . or anyone.

She looked up at her mama, who watched the three of them like a hawk surveying prey. Her mama's eyes held fast. Weighed an empty tin and then the tin with the sugar in it. Put a lid on it. Add up the items on the counter. "Will there be anything else?"

"No that covers it. Oh, maybe a spoon would help."

Natalie got one and added it to the other items.

"That comes to two dollars and fourteen cents, please."

Bill scooped bills and coins from his pocket and let them flip onto the counter. Natalie operated the cash register. It was an old National 592 model, Bill's favorite for cracking, wham--no sale! Ding--open! The drawer opened as the bell clanged.

The drawer was full of ones and fives and there was even a twenty. He hadn't seen that since his great uncle gave his mom two twenties the year his dad left. She let Bill hold one, look at it front and back, at the script and the background, looking all spider webbed in delicate lace design, and of course the picture of Jackson, his hair waving.

For Blanche the drawer was the appearance of success, especially in the hard lean years since Charles died. He had left her a nice nest egg and she insisted on having the same amount of money every day in the drawer as they always had in the good years. Twenty ones, ten fives, one ten and one twenty.

Those were the years when Natalie was a baby. The store was busy all day long. Everyone in town would stop by. Sometimes they were so busy that they would not even have time to restock the shelves or have lunch. That was what Blanche loved her store to be, busy and successful. Well, if it couldn't be, at least it could look like it was. Anyone who came in had to see all the money she was making. Why, just look at that drawer, it was jam-packed. That money was everything Blanche had left.

Bill tallied and Carl flinched.

Natalie packed everything into a box.

Carl looked right at her. "Bye, pretty girl." He turned to Blanche, tipped his hat and nodded, "Mam."

Bill said thank you. They left. The door closed with a tinkle of the bell.

Blanche sighed. "Whew, I'm glad that's done with. Natalie, sweep up after the coffee that spilled. And don't you think twice about that trash what just left."

"Oh mama, they were just being nice. It must be lonely taking a long trip like that. Exciting, too. Maybe someday we'll take a trip, mama. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"No, it most certainly would not. You go looking for adventure and you know what you find? Trouble, that's all. Just trouble. Now let's get on with it."

Bill and Carl walked past the hotel, turned right at the corner and went the half block to their stolen car. Bill put the box in the back seat with the corn. The car smelled of corn, tobacco, heat and sweat. They got into the car, turned it around in the parking area and went to River Road. They turned left and drove two blocks up further, past the picnic area. Bill pulled the car to the side of the road.

They looked at each other, thinking of money, robbery and in Carl's case, Natalie Tucker.