

JOHN KESSEL

EVERY ANGEL IS TERRIFYING

John Kessel's most recent novel is *Corrupting Dr. Nice*, and his most recent story collection is *The Pure Product*. Other current projects of his include an audio play produced by the Seeing Ear Theater (<http://www.scifi.com/set/originals>), and in serving as literary executor for the late Lawrence S. Rudner he edited the latter's last novel, *Memory's Tailor*.

A good man, Flannery O'Connor taught us, is hard to find. But where does one begin to look? Within...or beyond?

RAILROAD WATCHED BOBBY Lee grab the grandmother's body under the armpits and drag her up the other side of the ditch. "Whyn't you help him, Hiram," he said.

Hiram took off his coat, skidded down into the ditch after Bobby Lee, and got hold of the old lady's legs. Together he and Bobby Lee lugged her across the field toward the woods. Her broken blue hat was still pinned to her head, which lolled against Bobby Lee's shoulder. The woman's face grinned lopsidedly all the way into the shadow of the trees.

Railroad carried the cat over to the Studebaker. It occurred to him that he didn't know the cat's name, and now that the entire family was dead he never would. It was a calico, gray striped with a broad white face and an orange nose. "What's your name, puss-pussy," he whispered, scratching it behind the ears. The cat purred. One by one Railroad went round and rolled up the windows of the car. A fracture zigzagged across the windshield, and the front passenger's vent window was shattered. He stuffed Hiram's coat into the vent window hole. Then he put the cat inside the car and shut the door. The cat put its front paws up on the dashboard and, watching him, gave a pantomime meow.

Railroad pushed up his glasses and stared off toward the woodline where Bobby Lee and Hiram had taken the bodies. The place was hot and still, silence broken only by birdsong from somewhere up the embankment behind him. He squinted up into the cloudless sky. Only a couple of hours of sun left. He rubbed the spot on his shoulder where the grandmother had touched him. Somehow he had wrenched it when he jerked away from her.

The last thing the grandmother had said picked at him: "You're one of my own children." The old lady had looked familiar, but she didn't look anything like his mother. But maybe his father had sown some wild oats in the old days -- Railroad knew he had -- could the old lady have been his mother, for real? It would explain why the woman who had raised him, the sweetest of women, could have been saddled with a son as bad as he was.

The idea caught in his head. He wished he'd had the sense to ask the grandmother a few questions. The old woman might have been sent to tell him the truth.

When Hiram and Bobby Lee came back, they found Railroad leaning under the hood of the car.

"What we do now, boss?" Bobby Lee asked.

"Police could be here any minute," Hiram said. Blood was smeared on the leg of his khaki pants. "Somebody might of heard the shots."

Railroad pulled himself out from under the hood. "Onliest thing we got to worry about now, Hiram, is how we get this radiator to stop leaking. You find a tire iron and straighten out this here fan. Bobby Lee, you get the belt own the other car."

It took longer than the half hour Hiram had estimated to get the people's Studebaker back on the road. By the time they did it was twilight, and the red-dirt road was cast in the shadows of the pinewoods. They pushed the stolen Hudson they'd been driving off into the trees and got into the studebaker.

Railroad gripped the wheel of the car and they bounced down the dirt road toward the main highway. Hat pushed back on his head, Hiram went through the dead man's wallet, while in the back seat Bobby Lee had the cat on his lap and was scratching it under the chin. "Kitty-kitty-kitty-kitty-kitty," he murmured.

"Sixty-eight dollars," Hiram said. "With the twenty-two from the wife's purse, that makes ninety bucks." He turned around and handed a wad of bills to Bobby Lee. "Get rid of that damn eat," he said. "Want me to hold yours for you?" he asked Railroad.

Railroad reached over, took the bills, and stuffed them into the pocket of the yellow shirt with bright blue parrots that had belonged to the husband who'd been driving the car. Bailey Boy, the grandmother had called him. Railroad's shoulder twinged.

The car shudders the wheels had been knocked out of kilter when it rolled. If he tried pushing past fifty, it would shake itself right off the road. Railroad felt the warm weight of his pistol inside his belt, against his belly. Bobby Lee hummed tunelessly in the back seat. Hiram was quiet, fidgeting, looking out at the dark trees. He tugged his battered coat out of the vent window, tried to shake some of the wrinkles out of it. "You oughtn't to use a man's coat without saying to him," he grumbled.

Bobby Lee spoke up. "He didn't want the cat to get away."

Hiram sneezed. "Will you throw that damn animal out the damn window?"

"She never hurt you none," Bobby Lee said.

Railroad said nothing. He had always imagined that the world was slightly unreal, that he was meant to be the citizen of some other place. His mind was a

box. Outside the box was that world of distraction, amusement, annoyance. Inside the box his real life went on, the struggle between what he knew and what he didn't know. He had a way of acting-- polite, detached-- because that way he wouldn't be bothered. When he was bothered, he got mad. When he got mad, bad things happened.

He had always been prey to remorse, but now he felt it more fully than he had since he was a boy. He hadn't paid enough attention. He'd pegged the old lady as a hypocrite and had gone back into his box, thinking her just another fool from that puppet world. But that moment of her touching him -- she'd wanted to comfort him. And he shot her.

What was it the old woman had said? "You could be honest if you'd only try Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time."

He knew she was only saying that to save her life. But that didn't mean it couldn't also be a message.

Outside the box, Hiram asked, "What was all that yammet yammet with the grandmother about Jesus? We doing all the killing while you yammer yammer."

"He did shoot the old lady," Bobby Lee said.

"And made us carry her off to the woods, when if he'd of waited she could of walked there like the others. We're the ones get blood on our clothes."

Railroad said quietly, "You don't like the way things are going, Son?"

Hiram twitched against the seat like he was itchy between the shoulder blades. "I ain't sayin' that. I just want out of this state."

"We going to Atlanta. In Atlanta we can get lost."

"Gonna get me a girl!" Bobby Lee said.

"They got more cops in Atlanta than the rest of the state put together," Hiram said. "In Florida "

Without taking his eyes off the road, Railroad snapped his right hand across the bridge of Hiram's nose. Hiram jerked, more startled than hurt, and his hat tumbled off into the back seat.

Bobby Lee laughed, and handed Hiram his hat.

IT WAS after 11:00 when they hit the outskirts of Atlanta. Railroad pulled into a diner, the Sweet Spot, red brick and an asbestos-shingled roof, the air smelling of cigarettes and pork barbecue. Hiram rubbed some dirt from the lot into the stain on his pants leg. Railroad unlocked the trunk and found the dead man's suitcase, full of clothes. He carried it in with them.

On the radio sitting on the shelf behind the counter, Kitty Wells sang "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels." Railroad studied the menu, front and back, and ordered biscuits and gravy. While they ate Bobby Lee ran on about girls, and Hiram sat sullenly smoking. Railroad could tell Hiram was getting ready to do something stupid. He didn't need either of them anymore. So after they finished eating, Railroad left the car keys on the table and took the suitcase into the men's room. He locked the door. He pulled his .38 out of his waistband, put it on the sink, and changed out of the too-tight dungarees into some of the dead husband's baggy trousers. He washed his face and hands. He cleaned his glasses on the tail of the parrot shirt, then tucked in the shirt. He stuck the .38 into the suitcase and came out again. Bobby Lee and Hiram were gone, and the car was no longer in the parking lot. The bill on the table, next to Hiram's still smoldering cigarette, was for six dollars and eighty cents.

Railroad sat in the booth drinking his coffee. In the window of the diner, near the door, a piece of cardboard had been taped up, saying, "WANTED: FRY COOK." When he was done with the coffee, he untaped the sign and headed to the register. After he paid the bill he handed the cashier the sign. "I'm your man," he said.

The cashier called the manager. "Mr. Cauthron, this man says he's a cook."

Mr. Cauthron was maybe thirty-five years old. His carrot red hair stood up in a pompadour like a rooster's comb, and a little belly swelled out over his belt. "What's your name?"

"Lloyd Bailey."

"Lloyd, what experience do you have?"

"I can cook anything on this here menu," Railroad said.

The manager took him back to the kitchen. "Stand aside, Shorty," the manager said to the tall black man at the griddle. "Fix me a Denver omelet," he said to Railroad.

Railroad washed his hands, put on an apron, broke two eggs into a bowl. He threw handfuls of chopped onion, green pepper, and diced ham into a skillet. When the onions were soft, he poured the beaten eggs over the ham and vegetables, added salt and cayenne pepper. When he slid the finished omelet onto a plate, the manager bent down over it as if he were inspecting the paint job on a used car. He straightened up. "Pay's thirty dollars a week. Be here at six in the morning."

Out in the lot Railroad set down his bag and looked around. Cicadas buzzed in the hot city night. Around the corner from the diner he'd noticed a big Victorian house with a sign on the porch, "Rooms for Rent." He was about to start walking when, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement by the trash barrel next to the chain link fence. He peered into the gloom and saw the cat trying to leap

up to the top to get at the garbage. He went over, held out his hand. The cat didn't run; it sniffed him, butted its head against his hand.

He picked it up, cradled it under his arm, and carried it and the bag to the rooming house. Under dense oaks, it was a big tan clapboard mansion with green shutters and hanging baskets of begonias on the porch, and a green porch swing. The thick oval leaded glass of the oak door was beveled around the edge, the brass of the handle dark with age.

The door was unlocked. His heart jumped a bit at the opportunity it presented; at the same time he wanted to warn the proprietor against such foolishness. Off to one side of the entrance was a little table with a doily, vase and dried flowers; on the other a sign beside a door said, "manager."

Railroad knocked. After a moment the door opened and a woman with the face of an angel opened it. She was not young, perhaps forty, with very white skin and blonde hair. She looked at him, smiled, saw the cat under his arm. "What a sweet animal," she said.

"I'd like a room," he said.

"I'm sorry. We don't cater to pets," the woman said, not unkindly.

"This here's no pet, Ma'm," Railroad said. "This here's my only friend in the world."

The landlady's name was Mrs. Graves. The room she rented him was twelve feet by twelve feet, with a single bed, a cherry veneer dresser, a wooden table and chair, a narrow closet, lace curtains on the window, and an old pineapple quilt on the bed. The air smelled sweet. On the wall opposite the bed was a picture in a dime store frame, of an empty rowboat floating in an angry gray ocean, the sky overcast, only a single shaft of sunlight in the distance from a sunset that was not in the picture.

The room cost ten dollars a week. Despite Mrs. Graves's role against pets, like magic she took a shine to Railroad's cat. It was almost as if she'd rented the room to the cat, with Railroad along for the ride. After some consideration, he named the cat Pleasure. She was the most affectionate animal he had ever seen. She wanted to be with him, even when he ignored her. She made him feel wanted; she made him nervous. Railroad fashioned a cat door in the window of his room so that Pleasure could go out and in whenever she wanted, and not be confined to the room when Railroad was at work.

The only other residents of the boarding house were Louise Parker, a school teacher, and Charles Foster, a lingerie salesman. Mrs. Graves cleaned Railroad's room once a week, swept the floors, alternated the quilt every other week with a second one done in a rose pattern that he remembered from his childhood. He worked at the diner from six in the morning, when Maisie, the cashier, unlocked, until Shorty took over at three in the afternoon. The counter girl was Betsy, and Service, a Negro boy, bussed tables and washed dishes. Railroad told them to

call him Bailey, and didn't talk much.

When he wasn't working, Railroad spent most of his time at the boarding house, or evenings in a small nearby park. Railroad would take the Bible from the drawer in the boarding house table, buy an afternoon newspaper, and carry them with him. Pleasure often followed him to the park. She would lunge after squirrels and shy away from dogs, hissing sideways. Cats liked to kill squirrels, and dogs liked to kill cats. But there was no sin in it. Pleasure would not go to hell, or heaven. Cats had no souls.

The world was full of stupid people like Bobby Lee and Hiram, who lied to themselves and killed without knowing why. Life was a prison. Turn to the right, it was a wall. Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor. And Railroad had taken out his imprisonment on others; he was not deceived in his own behavior.

Railroad did not believe in sin, but somehow he felt it. Still, he was not a dog or a cat, he was a man. You're one of my own children. There was no reason why he had to kill people. He only wished he'd never have to deal with any Hiram and Bobby Lees anymore. He gazed across the park at the Ipana toothpaste sign painted on the wall of the Piggly Wiggly. Whiter than white. Pleasure crouched at the end of the bench, her haunches twitching as she watched a finch hop across the sidewalk.

Railroad picked her up, rubbed his cheek against her whiskers. "Pleasure, I'll tell you what," he whispered. "Let's make us a deal. You save me from Bobby Lee and Hiram, and I'll never kill anybody again."

The cat looked at him with its clear yellow eyes.

Railroad sighed. He put the cat down. He leaned back on the bench and opened the newspaper. Beneath the fold on the front page he read,

ESCAPED CONVICTS KILLED IN WRECK

VALDOSTA -- Two escaped convicts and an unidentified female passenger were killed Tuesday when the late model stolen automobile they were driving struck a bridge abutment while being pursued by State Police.

The deceased convicts, Hiram Leroy Burgert, 31, and Bobby Lee Ross, 21, escaped June 23 while being transported to the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane for psychological evaluation. A third escapee, Ronald Reuel Pickens, 47, is still at large.

THE LUNCH RUSH was petering out. There were two people at the counter and four booths were occupied, and Railroad had set a BLT and an order of fried chicken with collards up on the shelf when Maisie came back into the kitchen and called the manager. "Police wants to talk to you, Mr. C."

Railroad peeked out from behind the row of hanging order slips. A man in a suit

sat at the counter, sipping sweet tea. Cauthron went out to talk to him.

"Two castaways on a raft," Betsy called to Railroad.

The man spoke with Cauthron for a few minutes, showed him a photograph. Cauthron shook his head, nodded, shook his head again. They laughed. Railroad eyed the back door of the diner, but turned back to the grill. By the time he had the toast up and the eggs fried, the man was gone. Cauthron stepped back to his office without saying anything.

At the end of the shift he pulled Railroad aside. "Lloyd," he said. "I need to speak with you."

Railroad followed him into the cubbyhole he called his office. Cauthron sat behind the cluttered metal desk and picked up a letter from the top layer of trash. "I just got this here note from Social Security saying that number you gave is not valid." He looked up at Railroad, his china blue eyes unreadable.

Railroad took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He didn't say anything.

"I suppose it's just some mixup," Cauthron said. "Same as that business with the detective this afternoon. Don't you worry about it."

"Thank you, Mr. Cauthron."

"One other thing, before you go, Lloyd. Did I say your salary was thirty a week? I meant twenty-five. That okay with you?"

"Whatever you say, Mr. Cauthron."

"And I think, in order to encourage trade, we'll start opening at five. I'd like you to pick up the extra hour. Starting Monday."

"Railroad nodded. "Is that all?"

"That's it, Lloyd." Cauthron seemed suddenly to enjoy calling Railroad "Lloyd," rolling the name over his tongue and watching for his reaction. "Thanks for being such a Christian employee."

Railroad went back to his room in the rooming house. Pleasure mewed for him, and when he sat on the bed, hopped into his lap. But Railroad just stared at the picture of the rowboat on the opposite wall. After a while the cat hopped onto the window sill and out through her door onto the roof.

Only a crazy person would use the knowledge that a man was a murderer in order to cheat that man out of his pay. How could he know that Railroad wouldn't kill him, or run away, or do both?

Lucky for Cauthron that Railroad had made his deal with Pleasure. But now he

didn't know what to do. If the old lady's message was from God, then maybe this was his first test. Nobody said being good was supposed to be easy. Nobody said, just because Railroad was turning to good, everybody he met forever after would be good. Railroad had asked Pleasure to save him from Bobby Lee and Hiram, not Mr. Cauthron.

He needed guidance. He slid open the drawer of the table. Beside the Bible was his .38. He flipped open the cylinder, checked to see that all the chambers were loaded, then put it back into the drawer. He took out the Bible and opened it at random.

The first verse his eyes fell on was from Deuteronomy: "These you may eat of all that are in the waters: you may eat all that have fins and scales. And whatever does not have fins and scales you shall not eat."

There was a knock at the door. Railroad looked up. "Yes?"

"Mr. Bailey?" It was Mrs. Graves. "I thought you might like some tea."

Keeping his finger in the Bible to mark his page, Railroad got up and opened the door. Mrs. Graves stood there with a couple of tall glasses, beaded with sweat, on a tray.

"That's mighty kind of you, Miz Graves. Would you like to come in?"

"Thank you, Mr. Bailey." She set the tray down on the table, gave him a glass. It was like nectar. "Is it sweet enough?"

"It's perfect, ma'm."

She wore a yellow print dress with little flowers on it. Her every movement showed a calm he had not seen in a woman before, and her gray eyes exuded compassion, as if to say, I know who you are but that doesn't matter.

They sat down, he on the bed, she on the chair. She saw the Bible in his hand. "I find many words of comfort in the Bible."

"I can't say as I find much comfort in it, ma'm. Too many bloody deeds."

"But many acts of goodness."

"You said a true word."

"Sometimes I wish I could live in the world of goodness." She smiled. "But this world is good enough."

Did she really think that? "Since Eve ate the apple, ma'm, it's a world of good and evil. How can goodness make up for the bad? That's a mystery to me."

She sipped her tea. "Of course it's a mystery. That's the point."

"The point is, something's always after you, deserve it or not."

"What a sad thought, Mr. Bailey."

"Yes'm. From minute to minute, we fade away. Only way to get to heaven is to die."

AFTER MRS. GRAVES left he sat thinking about her beautiful face. Like an angel. Nice titties, too.

He would marry her. He would settle down, like the grandmother said. But he would have to get an engagement ring. If he'd been thinking, he could have taken the grandmother's ring-- but how was he supposed to know when he'd killed her that he was going to fall in love so soon?

He opened the dresser, felt among the dead man's clothes until he found the sock, pulled out his savings. It was only forty-three dollars.

The only help for it was to ask Pleasure. Railroad paced the room. It was a long time, and Railroad began to worry, before the cat came back. The cat slipped silently through her door, lay down on the table, simple as you please, in the wedge of sunlight coming in the window. Railroad got down on his knees, his face level with the table top. The cat went "Mrrph?" and raised its head. Railroad gazed into her steady eyes.

"Pleasure," he said. "I need to get an engagement ring, and I don't have enough money. Get one for me."

The cat watched him.

He waited for some sign. Nothing happened.

Then, like a dam bursting, a flood of confidence flowed into him. He knew what he would do.

The next morning he walked down to the Sweet Spot whistling. He spent much of his shift imagining when and how he would ask Mrs. Graves for her hand. Maybe on the porch swing, on Saturday night? Or at breakfast some morning? He could leave the ring next to his plate and she would find it, with his note, when clearing the table. Or he could come down to her room in the middle of the night, and he'd ram himself into her in the darkness, make her whimper, then lay the perfect diamond on her breast.

At the end of the shift he took a beefsteak from the diner's refrigerator as an offering to Pleasure. But when he entered his room the cat was not there. He left the meat wrapped in butcher paper in the kitchen downstairs, then went back up and changed into Bailey Boy's baggy suit. At the corner he took the bus downtown and walked into the first jewelry store he saw. He made the woman show him several diamond engagement rings. Then the phone rang, and when the woman

went to answer it he pocketed a ring and walked out. No clerk in her right mind should be so careless, but it went exactly as he had imagined it. As easy as breathing.

That night he had a dream. He was alone with Mrs. Graves, and she was making love to him. But as he moved against her, he felt the skin of her full breast deflate and wrinkle beneath his hand, and he found he was making love to the dead grandmother, her face grinning the same vacant grin it had when Hiram and Bobby Lee hauled her into the woods.

Railroad woke in terror. Pleasure was sitting on his chest, her face an inch from his, purring loud as a diesel. He snatched the cat up in both hands and hurled her across the room. She hit the wall with a thump, then fell to the floor, claws skittering on the hardwood. She scuttled for the window, through the door onto the porch roof.

It took him ten minutes for his heart to slow down, and then he could not sleep.

Someone is always after you. That day in the diner, when Railroad was taking a break, sitting on a stool in front of the window fan sipping some ice water, Cauthron came out of the office and put his hand on his shoulder, the one that still hurt occasionally. "Hot work, ain't it boy?"

"Yessir." Railroad was ten or twelve years older than Cauthron.

"What is this world coming to?" Maisie said to nobody in particular. She had the newspaper open on the counter and was scanning the headlines. "You read what it says here about some man robbing a diamond ring right out from under the nose of the clerk at Merriam's Jewelry."

"I saw that already," Mr. Cauthron said. And after a moment, "White fellow, wasn't it?"

"It was," sighed Maisie. "Must be some trash from the backwoods. Some of those poor people have not had the benefit of a Christian upbringing."

"They'll catch him. Men like that always get caught." Cauthron leaned in the doorway of his office, arms crossed above his belly. "Maisie," Cauthron said. "Did I tell you Lloyd here is the best short order cook we've had in here since 1947 The best white short order cook."

"I heard you say that."

"I mean, makes you wonder where he was before he came here. Was he short order cooking all round Atlanta? Seems like we would of heard, don't it? Come to think, Lloyd never told me much about where he was before he showed up that day. He ever say much to you, Maisie?"

"Can't say as I recall."

"You can't recall because he hasn't. What you say, Lloyd? Why is that?"

"No time for conversation, Mr. Cauthron."

"No time for conversation? You carrying some resentment, Lloyd? We ain't paying you enough?"

"I didn't say that."

"Because, if you don't like it here, I'd be unhappy to lose the best white short order cook I had since 1947."

Railroad put down his empty glass and slipped on his paper hat. "I can't afford to lose this job. And, you don't mind my saying, Mr. Cauthron, you'd come to regret it if I was forced to leave."

"Weren't you listening, Lloyd? Isn't that what I just said?"

"Yes, you did. Now maybe we ought to quit bothering Maisie with our talk and get back to work."

"I like a man that enjoys his job," Cauthron said, slapping Railroad on the shoulder again. "I'd have to be suicidal to make a good worker like you leave. Do I look suicidal, Lloyd?"

"No, you don't look suicidal, Mr. Cauthron."

"I see Pleasure all the time going down the block to pick at the trash by the Sweet Spot," Mrs. Graves told him as they sat on the front porch swing that evening. "That cat could get hurt if you let it out so much. That is a busy street."

Foster had gone to a ball game, and Louise Parker was visiting her sister in Chattanooga, so they were alone. It was the opportunity Railroad had been waiting for.

"I don't want to keep her a prisoner," he said. The chain of the swing creaked as they rocked slowly back and forth. He could smell her lilac perfume. The curve of her thigh beneath her print dress caught the light from the front room coming through the window.

"You're a man who has spent much time alone, aren't you," she said. "So mysterious."

He had his hand in his pocket, the ring in his fingers. He hesitated. A couple walking down the sidewalk nodded at them. He couldn't do it out here, where the world might see. "Mrs. Graves, would you come up to my room? I have something I need to show you."

She did not hesitate. "I hope there's nothing wrong."

"No, ma'm. Just something I'd like to rearrange."

He opened the door for her and followed her up the stairs. The clock in the hall ticked loudly. He opened the door to his room and ushered her in, closed the door behind them. When she turned to face him he fell to his knees.

He held up the ring in both hands, his offering. "Miz Graves, I want you to marry me."

She looked at him kindly, her expression calm. The silence stretched. She reached out; he thought she was going to take the ring, but instead she touched his wrist. "I can't marry you, Mr. Bailey."

"Why not?"

"Why, I hardly know you."

Railroad felt dizzy. "You could some time."

"I'll never marry again, Mr. Bailey. It's not you."

Not him. It was never him, had never been him. His knees hurt from the hardwood floor. He looked at the ring, lowered his hands, clasped it in his fist. She moved her hand from his wrist to his shoulder, squeezed it. A knife of pain ran down his arm. Without standing, he punched Mrs. Graves in the stomach.

She gasped and fell back onto the bed. He was on her in a second, one hand over her mouth while he ripped her dress open from the neck. She struggled, and he pulled the pistol out from behind his back and held it to her head. She lay still.

"Don't you stop me, now," he muttered. He tugged his pants down and did what he wanted.

How ladylike it was of her to keep so silent.

Much later, lying on the bed, eyes dreamily focused on the light fixture in the center of the ceiling, it came to him what had bothered him about the grandmother. She had ignored the fact that she was going to die. "She would of been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life," he'd told Bobby Lee. And that was true. But then, for that last moment, she became a good woman. The reason was that, once Railroad convinced her she was going to die, she could forget about it. In the end, when she reached out to him, there was no thought in her mind about death, about the fact that he had killed her son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren and was soon going to kill her. All she wanted was to comfort him. She didn't even care if he couldn't be comforted. She was living in that exact instant, with no memory of the past or regard for the future, out of the instinct of her soul and nothing else.

Like the cat. Pleasure lived that way all the time. The cat didn't know about Jesus' sacrifice, about angels and devils. That cat looked at him and saw what was there.

He raised himself on his elbows. Mrs. Graves lay very still beside him, her blond hair spread across the pineapple quilt. He felt her neck for a pulse.

It was dark night now: the whine of insects in the oaks outside the window, the rush of traffic on the cross street, drifted in on the hot air. Quietly, Railroad slipped out into the hall and down to Foster's room. He put his ear to the door and heard no sound. He came back to his own room, wrapped Mrs. Graves in the quilt and, as silently as he could, dragged her into his closet. He closed the door.

Railroad heard purring, and saw Pleasure sitting on the table, watching. "God damn you. God damn you to hell," he said to the cat, but before he could grab her, the calico had darted out the window.

HE FIGURED IT OUT. The idea of marrying Mrs. Graves had been only a stage in the subtle revenge being taken on him by the dead grandmother, through the cat. The wishes Pleasure had granted were the bait, the nightmare had been a warning. But he hadn't listened.

He rubbed his sore shoulder. The old lady's gesture, like a mustardseed, had grown to be a great crow-filled tree in Railroad's heart.

A good trick the devil had played on him. Now, no matter how he reformed himself, he could not get rid of what he had done.

It was hot and still, not a breath of air, as if the world were being smothered in a fever blanket. A milk-white sky. The kitchen of the Sweet Spot was hot as the furnace of Hell; beneath his shirt Railroad's sweat ran down to slick the warm pistol slid into his belt. Railroad was fixing a stack of buttermilk pancakes when the detective walked in.

The detective walked over to the counter and sat down on one of the stools. Maisie was not at the counter; she was probably in the ladies' room. The detective took a look around, then plucked a menu from behind the napkin holder in front of him and started reading. On the radio Hank Williams was singing "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry."

Quietly, Railroad untied his apron and slipped out of the back door. In the alley near the trash barrels he looked out over the lot. He was about to hop the chain link fence when he saw Cauthron's car stopped at the light on the corner.

Railroad pulled out his pistol, crouched behind a barrel and aimed at the space in the lot where Cauthron usually parked. He felt something bump against his leg.

It was Pleasure. "Don't you cross me now," Railroad whispered, pushing the animal away.

The cat came back, put her front paws up on his thigh, purring.

"Damn you! You owe me, you little demon!" he hissed. He let the gun drop, looked down at the cat.

Pleasure looked up at him. "Miaow?"

"What do you want! You want me to stop, do you? Then make it go away. Make it so I never killed nobody."

Nothing happened. It was just a fucking animal. In a rage, he dropped the gun and seized the cat in both hands. She twisted in his grasp, hissing.

"You know what it's like to hurt in your heart?." Railroad tore open his shirt and pressed Pleasure against his chest. "Feel it! Feel it beating there!" Pleasure squirmed and clawed, hatching his chest with a web of scratches. "You owe me! You owe me!" Railroad was shouting now. "Make it go away!"

Pleasure finally twisted out of his grasp. The cat fell, rolled, and scurried away, running right under Cauthron's car as it pulled into the lot. With a little bump, the cat's left front tire ran over her.

Cauthron jerked the car to a halt. Pleasure howled, still alive, writhing, trying to drag herself away on her front paws. Her back was broken. Railroad looked at the fence, looked back.

He ran over to Pleasure and knelt down. Cauthron got out of the car. Railroad tried to pick up the cat, but she hissed and bit him. Her sides fluttered with rapid breathing. Her eyes clouded. She rested her head on the gravel.

Railroad had trouble breathing. He looked up from his crouch to see that Maisie and some customers had come out of the diner. Among them was the detective.

"I didn't mean to do that, Lloyd," Cauthron said. "It just ran out in front of me." He paused a moment. "Jesus Christ, Lloyd, what happened to your chest?"

Railroad picked up the cat in his bloody hands. "Nobody ever gets away with nothing," he said. "I'm ready to go now."

"Go where?"

"Back to prison."

"What are you talking about?"

"Me and Hiram and Bobby Lee killed all those folks in the woods and took their car. This was their cat."

"What people?"

"Bailey Boy and his mother and his wife and his kids and his baby."

The detective pushed back his hat and scratched his head. "You all best come in here and we'll talk this thing over."

They went into the diner. Railroad would not let them take Pleasure from him until they gave him a corrugated cardboard box to put the body in. Maisie brought him a towel to wipe his hands, and Railroad told the detective, whose name was Vernon Scott Shaw, all about the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, and the hearse-like Hudson, and the family they'd murdered in the backwoods. Mostly he talked about the grandmother and the cat. Shaw sat there and listened soberly. At the end he folded up his notebook and said, "That's quite a story, Mr. Bailey. But we caught the people who did that killing, and it ain't you."

"What do you mean? I know what I done."

"Another thing, you don't think I'd know if there was some murderer loose from the penitentiary? There isn't anyone escaped."

"What were you doing in here last week, asking questions?"

"I was having myself some pancakes and coffee."

"I didn't make this up."

"So you say. But seems to me, Mr. Bailey, you been standing over a hot stove too long."

Railroad didn't say anything. He felt as if his heart was about to break.

Mr. Cauthron told him he might just as well take the morning off and get some rest. He would man the griddle himself. Railroad got unsteadily to his feet, took the box containing Pleasure's body, and tucked it under his arm. He walked out of the diner.

He went back to the boarding house. He climbed the steps. Mr. Foster was in the front room reading the newspaper. "Morning, Bailey," he said. "What you got there?"

"My cat got killed."

"No! Sorry to hear that."

"You seen Miz Graves this morning?" he asked.

"Not yet."

Railroad climbed the stairs, walked slowly down the hall to his room. He entered. Dust motes danced in the sunlight coming through the window. The ocean rowboat was no darker than it had been the day before. He set the dead cat down next to the Bible on the table. The pineapple quilt was no longer on the bed; now it was the rose. He reached into his pocket and felt the engagement ring.

The closet door was closed. He went to it, put his hand on the doorknob. He turned it and opened the door.