

ROBERT REED

TO CHURCH WITH MR. MULTHIFORD

It was everybody's idea.

Or maybe it was nobody's.

Maybe it's that ideas drift in the air like gas, and beer and boredom worked on us to where we could catch hold of that particular notion. Sometimes I think that's what happens: Ideas are invisible clouds that get trapped inside people's heads. Different shaped heads trap different ones, which explains a helluva lot. Here in Pelican County we've got a lot of simple round heads, if you know what I mean. Here it pays to be perfectly average. And if you happen to get stuck with a fancy-shaped head -- one that catches goofy ideas -- then you'd best keep a hat on it.

If you know what I mean.

Habit is everything in this part of the world; nothing wants to change.

Our Saturday night habit was to go somewhere peaceful, like the cemetery, and drink beer. Which is what we were doing when the idea found us. Pat started things off, saying, "I'm bored."

Charlie belched and said, "Yeah, why don't we pull something?" A prank, he meant. Detergent in the town pool, trees dressed up with toilet paper. That's the sort of stuff we specialized in. But that night somehow felt different, and we couldn't get excited about ordinary shit.

We had ourselves another round of beers, and I stared up at the stars, feeling smaller than small; and finally, after clearing his throat of a big loud gob of something, Lester said, "I know. Let's make ourselves a crop circle."

Charlie belched again -- he's famous for his gassy sounds -- then reminded us, "It's been done."

Not by us, but he was right. Pelican County is famous for its crop circles, and everyone knew who made them.

Old Man Multhiford, I was thinking. And just like that I knew what we could do. The idea settled in my head, and I giggled, and I said, "Hey, let's make a circle out on Multhiford's place!"

Pat straightened, eyes getting big and round. "On his farm? Are you fucking serious?"

Multhiford put maybe half of the circles on his own land. That was common

knowledge. It was also known that he was insane and probably dangerous. If he spoke to you, he spoke about corn. His corn; all corn. I'd seen him talking on and on about its beauty and importance and how it was holy. Field of Loopy Dreams nonsense. Myself, I tried avoiding the man. If I saw him in town, I turned and slipped away. Even when my dad, the local Methodist minister, told me I was being rude. I didn't care. Madmen scare the piss out of me. Which is why our plan sounded fun, I suppose.

And the beer didn't hurt my mood, either.

"We aren't going to do it," Pat kept saying.

"Why not?" Charlie growled. "I like the plan!"

"Yeah," said Lester, "we'll put a circle in his own damned field. Nobody ever has."

"Who lived to tell it," Pat muttered. But it was three against one, no more need for debate. We loaded up Pat's old pickup with shovels and ropes and lengths of lumber. Lester rode with the tools. I sat between Pat and Charlie. Driving out into the country, the three of us talked about how to do it and do it fast -- how do you make a flattened circle in the middle of a corn field, in the dark, on a madman's property? --and it was Charlie who pointed out, "It doesn't have to be a circle. Is that some law? Why don't we mash down something simple, like a message? We can leave words in his corn."

"Take Me To Your Leader," Pat joked, laughing.

It seemed funny to them, and decided. To me words sounded a lot less pretty than a circle, but I knew they'd vote me down. That's why I didn't complain, riding quietly there between them.

Eventually we came to a low rise, barely worth noticing, and after that the ground started dropping, sliding into what used to be marshes. Past the next corner was Multhiford's land, and Pat killed the headlights, driving by moonlight, and all of us started looking for someplace to turn off and set to work.

The mood in the cab was getting a lot more serious. On both sides of us were enormous fields of corn, green oceans of the sun-fattened stalks. Another half mile ahead was Multhiford's farmhouse, set off the road in the only patch of trees on his section and a half. Where in all this nothing could we hide the pickup? Behind a little machine shed, we decided, and Pat parked and killed the engine, everyone taking a deep breath before climbing to earth.

I don't know much about corn -- I'm as urban as you get in Pelican County -- but Multhiford's corn looked particularly tall and happy, standing in all that rich black marsh soil, moving the way corn does at night. Big leaves were uncurling in the cooling air. Hundreds of acres were uncurling, and I stood off by myself, listening. I didn't hear the guys talking. I never noticed Charlie sneaking up

on me. Grabbing my arms, he said, "Boo."

"Hey," I sputtered.

He handed me a length of pine and a dirty mess of hemp rope. "You make the F," he said. "That's your job."

"What F?" I asked.

"We took a vote. Take Me To Your Leader is too long." Probably true. "But if we make four big letters --"

"What?!" I snapped. I mean, I'm a minister's son. There are things I can sort of do, and things I can never do.

"But it won't take long," Charlie promised.

What started as clever vandalism was becoming something more ordinary, and if I was caught, no doubt about it, my punishment was going to verge on the Eternal.

The guys started walking off into the corn.

When I didn't go with them, it was Lester who got sent back. "All you do is the F," he argued, trying to sound reasonable. "Did Charlie even tell you what the letters were?"

"I figured U, C, and K," I said. Somehow innocence didn't sound like an excuse. "Unless you're going to spell farm or funk. Is that what we're doing here?"

Lester shook his head, disappointed with me. "If you want, stay with the truck." He showed me a smile. One day he's going to be a killer salesman. "If Multhiford shows, give us a couple warning honks."

For not, I was involved. And I didn't want to wait around for that old farmer. That's why I followed the others, carrying my board and rope up close to my body, walking between the rows of tall corn. We went a couple hundred yards into the field, then huddled, deciding how to do it. "We need it seen from the air," Charlie kept saying, sketching FUCK in the soil. "Hundred foot letters. Think they'll get noticed?"

Think they'll be easy? I thought. Cutting through the rows, I paced off what felt like the right distance, then turned and started pushing over three rows at once. I was using my pine board and my muscles, but the plants were sturdy, fighting me all the way. I kept getting tired, kept losing my breath. I'd have to stop and stand, my back aching, my ears humming, and after a few breaks like that, the others had moved out ahead of me, and I couldn't feel more alone.

What I was doing felt wrong. Plain, simple wrong. And that feeling is what made me tired, guilt having its way of sapping me. It wasn't particularly late, the moon mostly full and hanging in the east, shining through a silvery haze. The

air inside the corn was still, like a breath being held. It tasted thick and humid, full of living smells and weed killers. I was a town boy out where he didn't belong, all right. Turning, I tried to see the road, but all the world was corn, and I couldn't see anything but the silky tops and the stars, and the blackness between the stars, too.

Working again, I thought I heard an engine running. But when I stopped I couldn't hear anything but Charlie moving back along the big U he was building, pushing down more rows and never stopping. I was way, way behind. I made myself finish the stem of my F, then I turned and looked up, and just then I saw the sudden bright beam of a flashlight.

"Scared enough to piss your pants." I've read about it a hundred times, but I didn't think it was possible. Until then. I almost pissed mine, I'll tell you. Urine started trying to sneak right out of me.

Then I heard a crunching sound and a voice that didn't belong to any seventeen-year-old kid. "Stop right there," it said, deep and strong. "You boys stop."

It was astonishingly loud for not being a shout, and it had the wrong effect on us. We started to run. I heard Pat shout, "It's him!" and Charlie screamed, "He's got a gun!" Then the gun was fired. Playing it back in my head, I think Multhiford aimed at the moon. I know the shot passed over me, and I was running like a maniac, heading back along the rows of downed corn. My feet caught in the bent stalks. My head pitched forward. What I'd knocked down knocked me down now, and suddenly I took a big dive into the best farmland in the world.

I can't tell you how long I was down. Fear and the beer helped keep me on my belly; my heart was pounding hard enough that I wondered if Dad could hear it. The running sounds died away, which was good news. I kept still, praying to go unseen. Then Pat laid into the horn, begging me to hurry.

Multhiford answered with a second blast -- another tall one -- and I realized he was standing ten yards from me. Maybe less. Which was why I got up and ran again, picking a new direction. Tearing crosswise through the corn, I ran blind, getting no closer to the pickup for my trouble.

There were more honks, then the pickup coughed and accelerated, the guys having no choice but to leave me.

And I dropped from exhaustion, rolling onto my back and no fight left in me. I lay there looking up at the towering corn plants, telling myself to keep still and wait, marshaling my energies for the walk home. It was just a five-mile walk, I was thinking. I promised myself to cut down on my drinking and study hard in the fall, and all that. Then I heard a man walking through his corn. Coming closer. And just when I needed to be quiet, I got a piercing ache in my belly, and the ache wanted to move, demanding to be let out.

That's what I was doing when Multhiford found me.

Beer can be a bad idea, and what you catch you can also throw away. The farmer found me heaving and coughing, vomit under my face. He shone his flashlight on me, and I turned, aware of his gun and his lean little body. I thought he would kill me out of hand. I just assumed that crazy men don't have trouble committing murder.

Except he didn't shoot. All he did was say, "I know you."

I coughed again, no strength left in me.

Then he said, "Get up," and gave his shotgun a twirl. "And quit the running. I know exactly who you are."

Fame is fame, no matter where it happens.

Strangers know the famous person too well, and they don't know him at all. Like with my father, for example. He's been the Methodist minister for years, and he's considered to be the most Christian man in the county. He's got what a minister should have -- a pleasant wife and a good and pretty daughter -- but to make things fair, he's also got a half-wild son. I guess I'm some kind of test for Dad, and since my infractions are mostly tiny, I'm a test that he's passing. Maybe not in God's eyes, but at least in the local ones.

The town doesn't love Dad, but it admires him. Which is the harder trick, if you know Pelican City.

Yet Dad's not the perfect Christian everyone imagines. I won't claim he drinks or loves the ladies or puts on Mom's makeup and pumps. What I mean is that he has doubts. About God and himself, mostly. About the things people think ministers should trust in and accept with every Christian breath, every second of their eternal lives.

Early this summer I was reading in the den, and Dad came and sat, announcing, "I just saw Clarence Multhiford." He waited for half a beat, then added, "At Wal-Mart." As if that would help me understand why this was news. Then, after a long look, he said, "We talked. We had quite the conversation."

"About corn, I bet."

"Sometimes," Dad admitted. "He said that his crop is doing well, but Henshaw planted late and the Jacob brothers are sloppy.... "

That's Multhiford. He always has the good luck, and he always gives big advice. Which makes him about as popular as hailstones among our local seed-cap sect, I can tell you.

Dad gave me a stare, then said, "He asked about you."

"Who did?"

"Who are we talking about?"

I dropped my book, entirely surprised. "He doesn't even know me," I sputtered. Then, "What did the son-of-a-bitch say?"

Dad's soft face turned disapproving. "Now, John," he began. "Didn't we agree that in this house -- ?"

"What did Multhiford ask about me?"

"How you were doing in school and where you might go to college." Dad gave a little sigh and shrug. "He suggested one of the Big Ten schools--"

"He doesn't know me," I complained.

"If he did know you," said Dad, "he'd know that you'll be lucky to reach the community college in Lanksville." And with that he gave me his patented disappointed glare, reminding me of last year's grades. "As for his interest ... well, he's always had an eye for you."

"A what?"

"Don't you notice him watching?"

Me? Me? I didn't even want to think it.

"I know he comes to Sunday services now and again. He sits in the back and watches --"

"Not me! Not me!"

Grinning now, he said, "You have noticed, haven't you?"

Maybe, and maybe that's why I kept my distance from the madman. "Has he asked about me before?"

"Never," said Dad, without doubt.

I couldn't make sense of it. I didn't want to make sense of it. "Well, he's nuts. That's what that means."

Dad lifted his gaze, looking off into the distance. Then, with a certain care, he said, "I don't believe so. I know unbalanced people -- I've tried to console them, without much luck -- and I don't think Clarence resembles them very much."

I growled, thinking of those bright insane eyes staring at me. "Do sane men make circles in the middle of fields?"

"Does Mr. Multhiford do that?"

Of course he did. Everyone knew it.

"I believe in fungi," said Dad. "It attacks the stem, causing the plant to flatten." He spoke calmly, with all the authority of a gardener whose tomato plants died before August. "You know, there are old reports of circles. Older than him. Some date back to the 1890s."

"Made by flying saucers," I snapped.

"Have you heard Mr. Multhiford ever mention UFOs?"

How could I? I didn't have conversations with him, and I wasn't going to start now. "He makes the circles," I maintained. "People have seen him doing it."

"People see him driving at night, yes. They find him watching their fields, I agree. But nobody has ever caught him flattening anyone's crop." Dad shook his head. "It's got to be a fungus."

"That loves his farm best?"

"He has the perfect soil and the best hybrids. You see? It's just a matter of chance."

I'd had enough. I stood and asked, "Why should Multhiford care about me? I'll go to college, or I won't, and it's not his business."

Dad seemed to agree, but his voice trailed off before it got started. He sighed, glanced at his open hands, then sighed again. "I'm jealous of the man."

"Of who?"

"You know who." He looked straight at me. "Really, of all the people I know ... I don't know anyone happier than Clarence Multhiford "

"He's crazy, Dad. Lead-poisoned nuts."

"Fine. Maybe that's the answer." Dad looked up at the ceiling, then asked both of us, "Can you imagine anything more terrible? Two human beings hope a third human is mentally ill, and why? Because he's too happy and too different for their tastes."

He gave me a sad little smile. Dad's got one of those faces that aren't real comfortable with happiness.

"Isn't that a horrible way to think?" he asked me. "Can't you feel even a little shame, John?"

"I know exactly who you are," Multhiford warned me. He didn't sound like a particularly happy man, but then again, he didn't sound angry, either. I saw the

big double-barreled shotgun in one hand, then his flashlight found my eyes, blinding me. "Stand on up, John. Please."

He did recognize me. One hope was dashed.

"What were you boys doing? Why'd you hurt my corn that way?"

I swallowed, stood. Trying to talk, I discovered that my voice had abandoned me.

"What were you doing in my field, John?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "I mean, I didn't hurt much.... "

"Didn't you?" He stepped closer, the glare of his light hiding his face. But I could see him by memory, the face lean and hard and red from the sun, crazy eyes burning in the middle of it. I could smell him, his earth and corn mixed together with his unwashed bachelorhood. First with his light, then his gun, he pointed off into the distance. "Why don't we walk to the road, John? You can lead. And please, don't hurt my corn anymore."

My legs felt heavy, mired in an invisible syrup.

The madman stayed behind me. "What would your father think if he knew you were here? Would he be proud of you?"

I tried to come up with something smart to say, but the best I could do was squeak, "Probably not."

"Maybe we should go tell him."

My legs stopped moving. For that instant, I'd rather have been shot dead than have Dad know what had happened.

"Let's make a deal," said Multhiford. "I won't press charges. I won't even mention this to anyone. We'll settle up tonight, and you'll be free and clear."

That sounded wonderful, for about two seconds. Then I imagined all kinds of debt-settling horrors, and I started walking again, breathing faster, picking up my pace.

"Like how?" I muttered.

"You can do some work for me."

"Tonight?"

"You don't look busy," he replied, his voice smiling. I could hear the smile in it, which made me angry. He was holding a gun at my back and feeling happy, which wasn't fair. "I need some heavy things moved, John, and I'd appreciate the help."

"My friends know I'm here," I blurted out. "If anything happens... "

"I understand." He didn't sound crazy. He sounded as if he genuinely understood everything, as if he was full of wisdom. Coming up beside me, walking on the other side of a green wall of cornstalks, he promised, "I'll have you home in time for early service."

Shit, it was Sunday morning, wasn't it? Glancing at my watch, I saw that it was past midnight. Even if I escaped now, I couldn't beat my one A.M. curfew.

But there wasn't any escape. Side by side, we stepped from the corn, the air turning cool and dry. I could breathe easier. Sounds felt sharper. Multhiford broke open his shotgun, two empty shells flying. He hadn't reloaded after firing at the moon, and realizing it made me feel even more defeated. Moonlight showed me that face that I remembered, the smile too big and happy, and his baling-wire body was dressed in ordinary farmer's clothes -- jeans and comfortable boots and a simple shirt. "My truck's down this way." We walked together, him carrying his shotgun broken open, and after a little while he said, "It's a perfect night."

I said nothing.

"Perfect, perfect, perfect," he was saying.

I didn't offer any opinions.

"They'll come tonight, John." He took a deep breath, then said, "In a little while. Soon."

I looked at my feet, watching them move on the graveled road.

"Who's coming, John? Who do I mean?"

We reached his pickup -- a big new Chevy; a rich farmer's toy -- and I heard myself answering him. "Aliens in a flying hubcap," I said.

Multhiford looked at me, and he laughed, telling me, "How much you know is so close to zero, son." He shook his narrow head, enjoying himself. "So close we might as well call it nothing. And how do you like that ?"

Here's a certain book in the Pelican City library. I've never checked it out; I sneak it into a back corner, reading it when no one will notice. It's about crop circles, and it's got pictures from around the world. Half a dozen pictures show local circles, always from the air and mostly on Multhiford's land. I won't admit it to anyone, but I like looking at them. I don't believe in UFOs. Aliens have better places to be, I think. It's just that the circles and the other marks are kind of pretty, obvious and orderly against the bright green crops. I've even secretly admired Multhiford for his skill, working by moonlight, or less light, working by himself and making Pelican County into the crop circle capital of this hemisphere.

"Investigators" come through every spring and summer -- wrong-looking, wrong-sounding people from California and the shadows of Stonehenge. It's not enough to say that we watch them with a certain suspicion. But to his credit, Multhiford won't have anything to do with them. I know this: If he was making circles and acting as a tour guide, then I think something bad would have happened to him long ago. If you know what I mean. I mean, if you keep your oddness inside the family, all is fine. But ask the world to watch, and the locals won't be so patient.

That library book barely mentions Multhiford. Just a quick paragraph saying that one farm has more circles than the others, and its owner --unnamed -- has the best yields of any local farmer.

Year in, year out.

I've read that part twenty times, in secret, and honest to God, it never occurred to me just what that means.

We pulled off the county road, driving up to Multhiford's farmhouse. It was normal at a distance, tall and angular with the usual shade trees huddled around it. But the legends made me expect more, and sure enough, it wasn't long before I was noticing the statues.

The old farmer built them out of car parts, lumber and crap from the local landfill. Nobody knew just why. No two were the same, but they all looked like weird corn, leaves oddly shaped and cobs oversized and their stalks twisted every which way. It was just like I'd heard, down to the general spookiness. I watched the statues watch me as we drove past, and I halfway expected them to pick up and move. To chase me, maybe.

Multhiford put us in reverse, backing in between two metal buildings.

We climbed down. I found myself staring at a stack of concrete blocks and chunks, rusted fingers of rebar sticking out here and there.

The tailgate dropped with a powerful crash. Multhiford told me, "I want you to fill it for me. Agreed?"

I picked up a little chunk and threw it in. It hit the plastic liner with a thunderous boom.

"Here," he said, "use these."

Work gloves fell at my feet. Putting them on, I smelled their owner on leather. I set to work, throwing in half a dozen blocks before I noticed the voice, quiet and steady and almost sane. Except the words themselves were anything but sane.

"People didn't domesticate corn," he said. "If you think about it."

I'd rather not, thank you.

"It's corn and the other crops that did the domesticating. They took wandering hunters and made them into farmers. They tamed a scarce ape and made it civilized." A pause, then he asked, "Why, John? Why did corn and wheat and the rest of them do it?"

I didn't think I was listening, but I stopped and looked at him, trying to find some kind of answer.

The farmer was standing safely off to one side, shaking his head. "Look at the world from the corn's eyes. It finds an ape to enslave. We serve it by plowing the ground and caring for it. We bring water, manure, and propagate its children for it. And the corn rewards us with food and wealth." He paused, taking a big breath. "Farming makes cities possible. Cities make armies possible. And the armies marched off to conquer new lands to plow and plant." Another pause, then he added, "For a tropical grass with no certain parent -- a bastard, that's what corn is -- it sure has done awfully well for itself. Don't you think?"

If someone had asked what I'd be doing tonight, I wouldn't have pictured myself flinging concrete and suffering through a loopy history lesson.

"The old empires thrived so long as they cared for their crops. You must know that from school, John. Greece. Rome. The Soviet Union. All failed as farmers; all succumbed. That's how our crops punish us when we can't keep them happy."

I paused in my work, telling myself that the pile was getting smaller.

"You don't believe me," said Multhiford. Then he gave a big laugh, asking, "Do I take care of my corn, or does the corn take care of Old Man Multhiford?"

I looked at the shiny new pickup, then out at the perfect rows of lush green grass. Suspecting a trick, I said, "I don't know."

"The ancients worshipped their crops," he offered. "Are we smarter, or are we less aware? Maybe what's happened, John, is that we're so thoroughly enslaved that we can't even see the obvious anymore."

With a half-block of concrete in my hands, I gave a silly shout. "I'm nobody's slave!"

"You don't eat?" He laughed again. "Well, maybe not. I can't claim to have seen you at your supper table."

I threw the half-block on the pile, watching it roll and catch.

"Do you think much about the future, John?"

I wished he'd quit saying my name. I said, "Sometimes," and wished I hadn't. I started flinging concrete like someone possessed, grunting and groaning, making

my arms and shoulders start to burn.

But Multhiford spoke with a big voice, no way to ignore him. "In the future," he said, "think what we'll do for our corn. Today, this minute, scientists are learning how to change its genetics, giving it extra ears and nitrogen nodules, then fancy leaves to suck up every drop of sunlight. We'll make it grow faster. It'll be tougher. We'll give it new jobs. Making medicines. Human hormones. Fancy clean fuels." He paused, then let out a big sigh. "You're a bright young man. I can tell that for myself."

I didn't respond, but I could feel his compliment worming into me.

"What I'm saying -- listen, John -- is that life will get richer for the corn. And for people, too. In a few centuries, both of us will be living on Mars and the moons of Jupiter. Eventually, what with our birthrate--who knows? Somewhere someone will get rid of farmers, leaving the corn to care for itself. Simple minds grafted into their stalks, say. And just imagine if billions of plants were to start linking minds, improving themselves however they want --"

"Corn's stupid!" I shouted, with a panicked inflexibility. The block in my hands fell free, landing against my foot. But I didn't grimace or hop around, telling Multhiford, "Stupid, stupid! And we're in charge! We eat it, for Christ sake. It doesn't eat us."

He shrugged as if to tell me my words didn't matter.

And I doubted myself, for that instant.

"Imagine the far future," he said, "and the day we meet aliens rather like ourselves. What do we give in trade, John? Our crops would be valuable. A multitude of uses, designed for a multitude of worlds. Think of how many green worlds might welcome our corn."

My anger started seeping out of me. I couldn't keep hold of it.

"Corn has spread over this planet. Why not across the galaxy?"

Not once, never, had such a loopy idea gotten inside my skull.

"Corn prospers, carried along by commerce and conquest." He said it, then paused. Then he gave a big dramatic sigh before asking, "Who survives the next billion years, John? Human beings, arrogant and blind, or the adaptable crops that we tend?"

I said, "We do," out of instinct.

"You know this, do you?"

I said, "You're insane. That's what I know."

I'd been thinking it all night, but finally saying it did nothing. I must have thought the words would be like thunder in a clear sky, the old man left shaking. Except his only reaction was to smile. And the clear sky swallowed up my words, leaving everything still and quiet.

I couldn't stand the silence. I picked up a huge block of concrete, getting ready to heave it.

"No need," said the smiling madman. "That's enough now."

At last! I dropped the block and peeled off the gloves, wiping the sweat from my hands.

But Multhiford said, "Just a minute. Now I want you up in the bed and throwing it all back down. Put everything in the same pile again."

"What?" I blurted. "That doesn't make sense."

Shaking his head, he asked, "Does spelling a dirty word in my field make sense?" He was laughing louder than ever, telling me, "You're being punished, John. Remember. Pointless is the point in being punished."

I wondered if running away would help.

"Put the gloves back on, John."

I did as I was told, flexing my hands, listening to the creaky old leather and thinking, just for that little instant, that this was what I deserved.

Multhiford said nothing during the unloading. He leaned against one of his metal buildings, his face dark against the moonlit metal wall. It was nearly three in the morning when I finished. I said, "Done," and he came over, giving the bed an examination, then pointing. "Missed some pieces."

I tossed them overhand onto the pile. Except the last bit, which I threw out into the field of stupid corn.

"And sweep it clean, too."

He gave me a blunt straw broom, then climbed into the cab. I did a rush job and jumped in the other side, thinking I was going home. I was already planning what to tell the guys, including embellishments.

Multhiford's legend was going to grow, I'd decided. The night was looking worthwhile, thinking about my own little future.

We drove maybe fifty feet, then stopped.

"What do you think of my friend?"

We were parked in front of a phony cornstalk. I was close enough to touch it. I couldn't help but stare at the thing.

"What do you think?" he repeated.

It had a cob that wasn't a cob. It was made from bits of smooth glass, each bit looking more like an eye than a kernel. The plant itself was painted black, and some kind of wiring was sewn into the stalk. Its roots weren't roots, either. They looked like worms or muscular tendrils. Scrap plastic and pounded metal had been shaped to make it seem that the plant was moving, walking on its roots. And its leaves were thick and wrong-shaped, reminding me of stubby arms.

A lot of arms, I was thinking.

"I wish I'd done a better job," said the old farmer. "I wish I was a stronger artist."

Except it wasn't bad. I mean, forced to look, I had a real feeling for the thing. I was impressed enough that I almost said so, catching my tongue just as we started rolling again.

Multhiford didn't bother with headlights. He had us on the county road, keeping it slow. Toward town, but never fast. I could see the town's lights in the distance, and I watched the field passing on my right. There wasn't any better corn in the world, I was thinking. Madman or not, Multhiford always planted the best hybrid, always on the perfect days, and all at once I was thinking about him and his noise about the future ... thinking my own crazy thoughts ... and I realized we were coasting, the farmer's boot off the pedal and him asking, "What if people could travel in time? I don't know how. Maybe we'd have to hammer together some dead stars, or build some wormhole do-dad. But what if we could?"

I wouldn't look at him. I made up my mind, watching the field, staring out at the blurring rows.

"People might visit our hunting ancestors and thank them. Pay homage, we could. It would be a religious event, and we'd select only our finest, holiest pilgrims for the honor."

I didn't look at him, but my resolve was slipping. The rows were crawling past as we ground to a halt. I felt my heart pounding, not fast but each beat like an explosion.

"Our finest pilgrims," he said again.

It wasn't a light that I saw over the field. It had no color and made no shadows, and it didn't even have a real shape that I can name. But inside it were motions, energies. Without deciding to move, I opened my door and jumped down, gravel crunching under me. Then with a calm dry voice, Multhiford said, "Go on." He reached clear over to touch me, saying, "They're expecting you. Hurry on."

I ran. Before I could get scared, I shot across the roadside ditch and into the field. I wasn't even running, it was more like flying, everything dreamy and slow. Leaves slapped my face. I lost sight of my target. Then, just when I thought I was lost, I felt a presence, electric and close, and the air tasted of comet soils and perfect manures, working machinery and some kind of vibrant, tireless life.

The ground under me was covered with gently flattened cornstalks.

For the third time in a night, I fell; and when I tried to get up I had hands grabbing at me, holding me down while voices sang, speaking just to me. The voices knew my name. There wasn't anything they didn't know about me. From the ends of time they told me as much, then whispered, "Be at ease." A million pilgrim voices sang, "John, be at ease."

I tried to obey, roots swirling past my nose.

Stalks of every color, thick and thin, crowded around me, leaving no room for air.

I tried speaking.

Before I could, they said, "Quiet. Quiet, quiet."

I kept perfectly silent.

Then they broke into a shared song, dry leathery leaf-limbs rolling me onto my back, giving me a larger view. The pilgrims were tall, too tall to measure, stretching into a sky full of messy colors and countless stars and swift bright ships of no particular shape; and the song deafened me, cutting through my saturated brain; and finally, after a million years of listening, my eyes closed and I fell asleep. Or unconscious. Or maybe, just for a moment, I died.

I woke when someone shook me.

It was Mr. Multhiford's hand on my shoulder, and it was his voice saying, "Almost morning, John."

I smelled normal green corn. The farmer above me was framed by the brightening sky. Three times I tried to sit up, then he helped me with my fourth try, bringing me to my feet.

"Some evening," was his verdict. "Wouldn't you agree?"

I couldn't even speak.

"I've been where you were," he confessed. "Once. Just once." He let those words work on me for a moment, then added, "Believe me. All you need is one time."

"But why?" I managed, making my parched throat work.

"Why us ?" A big shrug, then he said, "They like us. With me, they get a damned fine farmer who keeps their secrets. With you? They see someone who's going to do something good for them. I don't know what exactly. I don't know when. But they told me about you --"

"Told you?"

"Years and years ago," he said, laughing again. "They tell you something once, believe me, you remember."

"What else did they tell you?"

"Next year is dry, and there's an early frost. For instance." He looked off into the distance, then added, "In twelve years, plus a few weeks, my heart gives out and I die."

"You know that?" I whispered.

He shrugged his shoulders as if saying, "So what?" Then he pointed, asking, "Do you see that bent stalk over there, John? Well, you and I both know it's real. It exists. It occupies a place and doesn't need us touching it to make it what it is."

"I guess not "

"Look back through time, and there's the past. There's me planting my corn, and you drinking beer with your pals. It's every instant of our lives, good and not, and lives like that can't be killed. Not by heart attacks, at least." He gave me a big wink, then added, "That's the best thing they ever told me, John. We're always here, always living this life." A big happy smile, and he said, "So do it right. Live as though you'll always live it, because you will be. Because that's just the way these things are."

We rode into town without talking, nothing worthwhile left to say.

Early risers saw us together, and they stared. When we pulled up in front of my house, Dad practically exploded from the front door, and when I climbed down he screamed at me and hugged me and gave me a sloppy wet kiss on the cheek. He'd just gotten off the phone with Charlie. He thought he knew the story. "I'm so furious with you," he told me, never looking happier. Then he glanced at Mr. Multhiford, saying, "Something awful might have happened." But he showed no malice toward the farmer, either. And then Mr. Multhiford drove away, without so much as a goodbye wave, and I was left to suffer a couple more hugs, then the unrestrained affections of my sister and weepy mom.

They thought they knew. Vandalism. Gunfire. And I was missing, presumed wounded. Maybe dead.

Feeling halfway dead, I went inside to eat and shower and put on some good clothes. Dad left for early service. I made it to the eleven o'clock service, finding the guys waiting for me on the front lawn. It was Charlie who told me that they'd just come from Multhiford's, and did I know there was a new circle?

I gave a little nod and the beginnings of a smile.

"He caught you and made you pound it out," said Charlie.

"Is that what happened?" asked Lester.

"I bet it is," said Pat.

We were all dressed for church, standing in a knot, watching people streaming inside. After a few seconds, I said, "That's it exactly. He made me pound it out."

"How's he make them?" Charlie wanted to know. "With boards and rope? Like we figured?"

"Yeah," I told them. "We were right."

"So now we know," Charlie declared, almost as happy as Dad. "It makes last night worth it, huh? Getting shot at. Being chased. We sure as hell worried about you, let me tell you."

I didn't say anything.

"After church," he said, "come over to my place. Help us finish off last night's beer."

Lester and Pat made agreeable sounds, punching me in the arm.

I still hadn't answered when Dad came outside, heading straight for me. The guys scattered in something just short of panic. Oh, well. From where I was standing I could see the edge of town, green fields stretching around the world; and just then, just for a moment, little snatches of the future became clear in my head. I saw myself in college. I saw myself grown up, changing the shapes of living molecules. Making new kinds of corn....

To the corn, I'm famous.

"This afternoon," said Dad, "We'll discuss your punishment."

I blinked and turned toward him, saying, "Fine."

Then he hugged me hard once again. For a long time. People were watching, but I didn't care. I stood there and took it, only squirming a little bit, and I even came close to admitting how good that hug -- and everything -- felt just then.

Know what I mean?