SHORT STORY

A Rumor of Angels

Dale Bailey

illustration by **Nicolas Delort**

He lay restless in the dark, a boy on the precipice of manhood or a man freshly plunged over the other side, he couldn't say which and maybe it didn't matter. Change troubled him: a snake shedding its skin, a locust shucking its husk. He was fifteen years old. The crops withered in the fields that summer and savage winds scoured the land, rocking the old house to its rafters. His father's father had laid its foundations and cultivated the rich prairie in the first great wave of homesteaders to sweep westward, and it had come to the boy's father in his turn. Someday, he supposed, it would fall to him, motherless and alone, the only son of an only son.

That was a season of mysteries. Day after day, a slow tide of humanity streamed down the rutted track that ran not two hundred yards from the boy's door, driven alike by hope and despair. Before them California and the dream of a better life, behind them drought and devastation. Sometimes strangers tarried to talk with his father. *You might as well come along*, they told him. *The land's all played out. There's nothing here but waste*. His father just hooked his thumbs in his suspenders, hawked, and spat into the dust. *Come west*, they whispered then, a queer light coming into their faces, *we hear rumors of—*

Nonsense, the old man said, turning back to his fields. But the boy lingered, transfixed. They were strange tales he

heard. He couldn't countenance them. He was too much his father's son. Yet they fixed and fascinated him all the same, and now, as the wind hurled dust at his window and he plummeted toward sleep, his dreaming mind took them up anew.

His name was Tom Carver.

Rumors of angels trembled the air.

His feet decided for him, the day Tom left home.

It was nothing he had planned, nothing he would have said he wanted, though in that strange season—the third year of the drought—who could say for sure what anyone wanted? In the first year, the corn had produced a meager harvest. In the second year, the sheaves grew crisp and brown, and if you stripped back the ears, the kernels were scant and stunted. In the third year—

In the third year, disaster. The sun scorched the land into submission. Vast clouds of rolling dust swept out of the north, so thick that a man caught outside without a mask might well choke. In April, the storms came. In May, in June, in July. When the gale died, grit filmed every surface; you could draw your finger across a countertop and puzzle out your name. The boy and his father emerged to fields of bare stalks, tangled in parched ruin upon the plain. The boy's father hunkered down to crumble sere earth between his fingers. He kicked at the broken stalks. He cursed, and Tom, who had never heard his father curse, flinched as he had sometimes flinched at the silence that ruled that house.

Pap, Tom called him, just Pap:

Mulish and gaunt, with pale, appraising eyes, a fight-broken nose that had never been properly set (before Tom's time, though not so hard to imagine), and big hands, callused with labor, his knuckles scarred from fighting too with the recalcitrant, second-hand tractor against which he'd nursed a perpetual grievance since he'd purchased it somewhere (Tom never knew where), riding it home at dusk, belching blue smoke into a green evening sky a decade gone. He was a man of grievances, Tom's father, grievances against the tractor, against the sky when it withheld rain and when it poured forth a deluge, grievances against the earth itself.

Tote the water, he told Tom between the dust storms. Slop the pigs. Hoe the garden. And Tom toted water, slopped pigs, hoed the withered garden, imagining a mother almost beyond the reach of memory. With a kind of fatal obstinance, his father unclogged the tractor and plowed under the dead stalks. Soil that had once turned up black and moist under the blades lay itself in barren furrows upon the earth. In mid-July, a rare and narrow rain spat from the sky. The next day, they re-seeded. Sputtering, the tractor dragged the rusty planter across the dead land, spilling handfuls of corn from the buckets and covering them over in a single hypnotic motion. Ten yards alongside, Tom drove a plodding mule-drawn wagon loaded with bulging sacks of grain. When the buckets ran empty, he reined up and climbed down to refill them. It was hot work. It might never have rained it was so dry, and they had tied scratchy bandanas around their faces against the dust. They'd eaten two hours ago by the arc of the sun in the flat colorless sky, leaning in silence against the wagon and washing down gritty bologna sandwiches with the last of the cloudy water Tom had pumped up from the well in the baking dawn. Thirst clawed at his throat.

"Ain't it hot?" he said, heaving down a burlap sack the next time they stopped. He slit open the sack and tilted it clattering over the first of the buckets. "Ain't it hot, Pap?"

His father grunted.

"Let's go get a drink of water," Tom said.

"Reckon we'll finish this field first."

Squinting, Tom studied the prairie. He wiped a forearm across his brow, then dragged the bandana down around his neck. Five or six more passes by his calculations, another hour's work. It was like an oven out there. The mules stood sweating in the heat. They might as well have been burying stones for all the good it would do.

"We need to water the mules," he said, though he knew the mules had another hour of work in them.

His father said nothing, merely sat on the idling tractor and stared out across the field, to the fence line. Change worried Tom: snake and locust, shedding the husk of a former life. He was fifteen now.

Fifteen. And what he did next he did without thinking. He started walking. That's how simply it began—he started walking—with a few steps down the lane between the newly planted rows of corn. He just walked. The tractor backfired behind him as his father eased it into gear. The house, faraway against the enormous vault of sky, drew closer: a silhouette, stamped dimensionless and black against the horizon; a model, a toy; a house at last, the only house he'd ever known: the broken fence and the derelict barn where pigs rooted in the fruitless earth, the corroding pump where he bent to the lever until at last the pipe coughed and cleared its throat and spat a gout of water. A rusty stream guttered forth. Tom splashed his face. He drank deep from cupped palms, then deep again. Slaked at last, he started to walk. His feet carried him down the arid drive to the road, and without thought, but with a kind of distant awareness of his boots scuffing the dust and the whisper of the desiccated weeds that grew by the road and the faraway grumble of the tractor fading at last into silence behind him, Tom turned west.

The silence of the prairie rolled down over him. Some time later—how long Tom could not say—the choked rumble of an engine loomed up behind him. A battered truck jolted past, its cargo lashed under a ribbed tarpaulin. Tom swung himself up, worming his way deep into the labyrinth of scarred furniture, crates, and mothball-smelling cardboard boxes. Sunlight suffused the canopy with a crepuscular glow, and with the canvas fluttering overhead, he wondered for the first time what it was that he had done.

If you weren't careful, you could walk yourself right out of your life.

Tom's stomach woke before he did. Rich aromas crowded the air—corn bread, and salt pork simmering in pinto beans—and his dreaming mind conjured up a fleeting image of his mother, little more than a shadow on the threshold of memory. In the next instant, he was alert, or nearly so, back sprung and sore from the splintered planks of the truck bed. He thought of his father firing up the old tractor and wondered to what end his feet had brought him.

Hunger snaked him through the maze. He clambered over the tailgate and dropped to the ground. A fire snapped somewhere invisibly, bronzing the side of a neighboring truck, packed likewise with a teetering mass of household goods. Down the flickering alleyway between them—Tom could have stretched out his arms and lay his hands flat against either vehicle—he glimpsed a temporary encampment: two or three wagons and half again as many beat-up trucks and cars, parked nose in among a scattered grove of towering cottonwood and oak. In the rough circle between, a handful of children chased each other in some game impervious to adult logic, their clamor flitting in the dark. Their fathers here and there hunkered in circles, lean and grim, peering out from under their hats as they drew sticks through the dust or smoked hand-rolled cigarettes.

Tom made no move. He just stood in the shadows, staring the length of the narrowing lane and scheming how he might get some of the beans and corn bread to quiet his belly. He didn't see the boy—he couldn't have been more than five or six—until he heard the pent-up splash of urine—he could smell its pungent tang—just inside the shadows at the other end of the alley. Tom shrank into the dark. He might have passed unseen had his heel not caught a root, sending him staggering into the truck with a thump. The boy's stream halted abruptly as he gazed wide-eyed at Tom down the narrow alley between the trucks. Then he reeled away, his fly still unbuttoned, screaming, "Mommy, there's a man back there, there's *a man*—"

The clatter of spoon and cook pot, the rustle of skirts, a harried voice: "Now what are you going on about, Charles—"

"There's a man—"

Calmly: "There's no one there. You've just scared yourself, that's all—"

"There's A MAN—"

Tom might have made his escape then, but he couldn't bring himself to move, pinioned alike by panic—the boy wouldn't stop screaming—and hunger. A second later, the opportunity had passed. A woman's shadow loomed up in the narrow space between the trucks, her flyaway hair and thin face half-lit by the unseen fire. "See, there's nothing there at all," she was saying, and then her gaze fell upon Tom. "I see," she said, and then, calmly, to Charles, "Go fetch your father."

The boy stood there, unmoving.

"I said get your father," the woman snapped, and this time the boy darted away into the circle of light. Alone, they just stood there, Tom and the woman, she at her end of the alley, he at his. Finally, he worked up the spit to speak. "My name's Tom, ma'am. Tom Carver. I don't mean no harm. I'm just hungry that's all."

"We're all hungry, aren't we, Tom Carver," she said, and he could see the truth of it in her face, in her thin lips and in the bony orbit of her single visible eye, in the sharp jut of her cheekbone, edged by flame.

"You figure you'd find something to eat poking around back here?"

He said nothing.

"Answer me, now."

Tom saw the man at her back then, striding out of the light to drop a hand across her shoulder. "That's enough now, Lily," he said, a biggish man, six foot, maybe six-one, heavyset. "You head back over to the fire," he said, "Charlie's waiting," and just like that all the ferocity dropped out of the woman, the way wind will drop suddenly out of a billowing sheet, leaving it limp on the line. And Tom saw something else, too—it was maybe the first true insight of his adult life. He saw her ferocity for what it really was: terror at being out here on the road, under the sky, with no roof to call her own. Terror for her family, for the man she loved and the son she'd maybe longed for, only to see it all crumble into dust.

The woman—Lily—did as the man said. As she turned away the light fell across her face. She was younger than Tom had thought, and prettier, and tired. He didn't think he'd ever seen anyone who looked so tired.

The man leaned against the neighboring pickup, the heel of one boot resting on the running board. He glanced away

like Tom wasn't anything that concerned him at all. Taking a cigarette from behind his ear, he snapped a match alight on his thumbnail and smoked in silence. Tom could smell the smoke in the flickering yellow light.

"I seen you on the road back there," the man said at last. "You hook a ride in the bed of the truck?"

"Yes."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir," Tom said.

"What's your name?"

"Tom Carver, sir."

"You run away, Tom?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what'd you do that for?"

"I don't know," he said. But what he thought of was angels. Rumors of angels—westward, always westward, just beyond the nearest curving of the earth—trickling back, whisper by whisper, down the long migratory sweep of the continent.

Nonsense, the boy's father said inside his head.

The man snorted laughter. He drew on the cigarette. The brightening cherry cast into relief cragged features: deep-set eyes, a jaw blue with stubble. "Well, hell, son, who ever does?" He shook his head with another snort of laughter, fatalistic but not unkind.

"Not much charity on the road these days. You must be like to starving by now."

Tom's voice cracked. He hated himself for it. "Yes, sir."

"You aiming to steal something?"

"Pap taught me better than that."

The man sighed and straightened. He exhaled a stream of smoke from his nostrils and ground his cigarette under his boot. "Well, I reckon we can spare a bowl of beans, anyway," he said. "C'mon, now."

The woman was angry. She ladled Tom's beans into a cracked porcelain bowl in clattering and resentful silence, but the man—his name was Frank Overton—didn't seem to notice. He leaned against the truck's fender and spooned beans into his mouth, staring into the darkening circle where the children had lately begun to drift back to their parents, and their own sparse meals, and sleep. But Charlie didn't sleep. He huddled under a blanket and stared at Tom, wide-eyed, clutching a tarnished silver chain in his fist.

The woman—Tom supposed he ought to think of her as Mrs. Overton—sat by the boy, caressing his hair and lulling him into sleep. The woman wouldn't look at Tom. She curled herself against the boy's back, and after a time she too slept. A fingernail paring of moon entangled itself in the cottonwood trees.

Overton wiped out the dishes with a rag and stacked them in the cab of the truck. Afterward, he resumed his place against the fender and smoked.

He didn't look at Tom, but he didn't seem to mind him either.

Finally Tom worked up the courage to speak. "Where are you heading?"

Overton took his time answering. "West," he said finally.

"Everybody's going west."

"Nowhere else to go."

"You got a job waiting?"

Overton laughed without looking at him. "No. Picking peas maybe."

Tom was silent after that. He moved closer to the dying fire. He wanted to lay down, but he was afraid to. The moon hove up out of the trees and climbed the ladder of the sky. Finally, Tom stretched out. Overton didn't say anything.

Tom lay awake for a long time, staring into the flames and thinking of Pap, wondering if he too was sleepless on this first night with his son walked away into the blazing afternoon, wondering too when he would give up on the farm—or if he ever would—and drift west, another ripple in that relentless tide sweeping across the prairies. Somewhere in the night he drifted off, and Frank Overton threw a rough woolen blanket over him. Curled up against the fire like that, Tom looked like a child, not the man he was striving to become.

Overton prodded Tom awake with a boot in the gray dawn. He surfaced out of a dream of his mother: her voice a soft contrast to her work-roughened hands, nothing more. Not much of a dream at all really, he thought as he sipped a cup of strong coffee Mrs. Overton had boiled and strained—still clattering with unspoken fury—over the fire. That was it for breakfast, coffee—even Charlie had some. As for Tom, Overton had passed him a cup without expression, as though he had done so a thousand times in the past.

Camps broke gradually around them. People packed up, huddling to horse trade a bag of dried beans here, a sack of flour there, whatever could best be spared for whatever was most needed. Children once again chased through the chaos, but Charlie clung to his mother, staring at Tom, always watchful. One by one the families departed, bouncing through the trees into the field beyond and finally into the narrow path that passed for a road.

Overton seemed to be in no hurry, though. He drank a second cup of the thick coffee and smoked in silence while his wife packed up the camp, slamming pots, rattling spoons. Then, he set about stowing their gear in the bed of the truck. Tom lugged boxes to him. Overton secured each one among

the furniture and cartons that he'd roped there long ago—the boy couldn't guess how long—when wind and dust and drought had stolen away his livelihood, compelling him on this quixotic odyssey across the continent, where talk of work and angels drifted listlessly, forever unfulfilled.

"Thank you," Tom told them, the work done. "I'm sorry if I scared you. I never aimed to steal nothing."

"I reckon we could spare a bowl of beans," Overton said.

That was all.

Tom turned away and hiked back to the road. He could feel Charlie staring after him until he turned west. The sun bludgeoned him, and it not yet ten o'clock. Overton's truck rumbled to life, its springs complaining as it lurched over the field into the road. Tom moved aside to let it pass. It jounced to a stop beside him.

"You know how to drive?" Overton said, his elbow cocked on the window ledge. Tom met Lily Overton's eyes. They were a pale blue in the sunlight. She turned away and stared straight ahead, pressing her lips into a thin white line. Charlie leaned forward from his place between his parents to stare at the boy.

"Yes, sir," Tom said.

Frank Overton nodded at the truck bed. "Climb aboard," he said.

The rhythms of the road never changed. The creak of the worn suspension as the truck rocked over each new hummock. The stink of sweat in the cab as the sun mounted the sky and set fire to the stained cloth interior. Charlie's everyday litany of complaint: *It's hot* and *I'm thirsty* and most of all *Are we there yet*? as though there were anywhere to get to except another stretch of featureless prairie or the next stand of cottonwood trees.

What for Tom had the allure of novelty had for Overton passed beyond tedium into something close to despair. Every mile of road the same road, every town the same town: a handful of buildings blasted clean of paint by three years of windblown grit, where he stopped to refuel the truck from his hoard of ever-diminishing cash and cast about for work where a hundred men had in the last week or so cast about before him. Occasionally, Overton was lucky: a storekeeper needed an extra hand organizing the back room or a widow needed firewood chopped and stacked by the door. More often, he was not. The little work he did find mostly paid barter. Money—when it could be had—was a rare and precious thing.

The talk around the campfires never changed either—if you could call it talk at all. It was mostly silence, the strangled, inarticulate silence of men who had no words to convey their anguish, who had neither the gift for tears nor the grace of hope. Deft hands rolled cigarettes when tobacco was to be had. Grimy handbills passed from man to man, advertisements for peach pickers in the orchards of California, or pea pickers, or apple pickers, menial farm work for men who had once owned farms themselves, foreclosed, barren, snowed under by dust—seasonal work and even that a chance. But nothing permanent, nothing where a man could sink roots, build a house, raise a family. Only the eternal road before them.

And sometimes, late at night, when the women had bedded down the children and were themselves drifting off, sometimes a bottle would make the rounds and the talk turn strange. *They say angels have been seen to the west,* a man would say, and another scoffing, *There are no angels.*

North and west of here, another man would say, *I had it from my brother who had it from a man in Littleton who had it from a man he'd worked with as a ranch hand*, as though this chain of whispers across the middle west constituted some kind of evidence or truth.

There never were no angels anyway.

Aggrieved: *I had it from a man from Texas who'd had it from a preacher hisself, and why would he lie?*

They say, they say, they say. The news came third hand, fourth, or fifth, or more; no one could testify to the evidence of his own eyes. *Great winged monsters, they say*, and *they never stay for long* and the more devout among them *messengers from the Lord* and this required no abjuration, for God had perished in the dust, in the wind-torn wheat and in those smudged handbills that fluttered across the prairie. God? God had perished in their hearts. As for Overton, he held his counsel and when the bottle came round he took his sip and lit another cigarette, his face expressionless as a slab of stone. Tom, who had no voice in these deliberations, hovered on the periphery of the circle, and listened with a kind of wonder to the men and their cramped debate.

Talked out, the bottle empty, the men drifted back to their own camps. Tom followed Overton to their fire. Overton seemed to need no sleep. He was leaning against the truck smoking when the boy nodded off; he was awake when the boy awakened.

"You find what you were looking for yet?" he asked one night from his place against the fender, and when Tom didn't—couldn't—answer, he said, "Maybe it's the walking that matters." Tom had realized that much anyway, that he wasn't walking away from anything and maybe never had been: he loved Pap in the only way the old man had allowed, a constricted, stunted kind of love, but love all the same. Not a night went by that the boy didn't think of the

old man grieving, sitting at the kitchen table maybe, tracing out by oil light the names in the family Bible that neither he nor the boy had the words to read. Not a night went by that he did not wonder where his feet had deposited him, and where they might yet lead him still. Not a night that he didn't wonder what future it was he was walking into, what hungers he had still to assuage, what thirsts to slake. Not a night that he didn't blink back tears.

If he noticed, Frank Overton never let on.

"My brother seen an angel once," Overton one night volunteered. "The beauty of it killed him."

But it was late by then, and maybe Tom only dreamed it.

The rutted path spilled into a narrow road. Overton took the wheel most afternoons, relegating Tom to the canopied bed, where he reclined in the yellow heat, rocked to sleep by the swaying of the ancient truck. More and more often Charlie joined him there, that tarnished silver chain clutched in his fist.

"What is it?" Tom asked one afternoon.

"Mama's necklace," the boy said, unfolding his grubby fist to reveal the locket secreted there. "She gave it to me so she'd always be with me." He pried it open and handed it to Tom. In the dim light under the tarp, the photo inside was hard to see: the shadow of a woman's face, featureless and gray. Tom returned the locket and closed the boy's fist around it.

"It's beautiful," he said, laying back, and the boy lay back with him, burrowing his head into the crook of Tom's shoulder, the both of them dozing the afternoon away.

Lily didn't like it—Overton could read it in the set of her mouth (Tom could, too)—but Charlie wouldn't have it any other way. "Why'd you leave home, Tom?" he would ask sleepily, and Tom, not knowing why, too drowsy to answer, could only murmur, "I don't know," but Pap hove up in his dreams, and he felt sorrow like a fist squeeze his heart. He woke to hunker down at the tailgate, steady himself with one hand around the nearest spar, and stare back at all the long miles he'd come. And for what? He knew only an aching discontent. The body had its own imperatives, the soul its discontents.

Gas grew harder to find, work harder still. Sometimes they were stranded for days before they could move on. The camps doubled in size, and Tom, used to life on the farm, felt cramped and uneasy. He wasn't the only one: he could see the tension in Lily Overton's face. The lines bracketing her mouth deepened. Her rare smiles (and there had been none for him) grew rarer still. Tom, sensing that the Overtons were hard up against it now, began to think of moving on. He didn't want to be a burden.

Yet something held him back: Charlie too had developed wandering feet. It scared his mother, Tom could tell. It scared her to be alone while Overton foraged the camp for beans and ham and gasoline and maybe a caged chicken or two—whatever could be had in trade to make it for another day. It scared her when Charlie slipped away, swept up by the packs of half-feral children that roamed the camps.

"I'll find him," Tom said. "I'll keep an eye on him."

A hot, dry afternoon, that was, and Tom had been out gathering wood when the boy disappeared. When he returned, dumping a load of kindling by the truck, Lily was in a panic, teary eyed, her mending dangling forgotten from one hand. She looked up in surprise when he said it and a fleeting expression—what it was, he couldn't say—passed across her face. Tom fetched the boy, and so, without a word between them, it was decided: he would stay. After that, Tom spent his days in camp with the boy, improvising games or contriving rollicking yarns about their fellow refugees (who knew he had so many words bottled up inside him?) while Lily went about her chores. They ate at dusk. Soon afterward, Charlie would doze off, locket in his fist. Lily, exhausted, most nights fell asleep beside him.

After dark, the camp grew tense with frustration. Pressure hung in the air, palpable as smoke. Men drank with purpose now—somebody always seemed to have a bottle—and conversations had a way of turning ugly. There were always rumors of work. And there were always fleeting glimpses of angels on the road, men dead of beauty and despair. More than once, when the talk grew heated, Frank Overton laid a hand across Tom's shoulder and steered him back to camp. Tom laid himself by the dying embers, and Overton took up his accustomed place against the fender of the truck and smoked.

"Tell me about your brother's angel," Tom said one night.

"It was an angel of death that took him," Overton responded, and after that Tom didn't ask any more.

On the day that followed they made it another sixty miles. In the dark, over a spare meal of pinto beans and jugged water, Charlie said, "Don't you have no mother, Tom?"

"Hush. You shouldn't ask such questions, Charles," Lily Overton said.

"Tom doesn't have to answer if he doesn't want to, Lil," Overton said. He set aside his bowl and began methodically to roll a cigarette, creasing the paper, spilling in a wisp of tobacco, and twisting it, thumb and forefinger, into a cylinder. He moistened the gum and sealed the cigarette and put it behind his ear. His eyes glinted in the firelight.

"No, I don't mind," Tom said. He was silent for a long moment. "I had a mother, Charlie. It was a long time ago. I don't remember her very well."

"What was she like?"

"Well," Tom said. He could feel the blood pulsing at his temple. He summoned to mind what he could of her: that arc of cheekbone, the touch of her hand, the sound of her voice as she read him Bible stories before bed—

And here was something new. Bible stories. Her ringing schoolteacher's voice (that much he knew; she'd been a schoolteacher once) reciting the words to him as he huddled under a pile of quilts, his breath steaming in the prairie winter night. The oil lamp threw looming shadows around the room. Her voice was steady in the black cold. And recalling (or imagining) it, Tom thought of the elaborate tales he unwound for Charlie—was this her gift to him, this spendthrift flow of words?—and wondered where recollections ended and imagination began, and how to draw the line between.

"Well," he said, "she was very beautiful, my mother. She was tall and she had blond hair, and blue eyes—just the color of your mother's eyes," he said, and across the campfire, for reasons he didn't fully understand, he sought those eyes.

Lily Overton regarded him without expression.

Now, warming to his subject: "She used to read me stories at night."

"What kind of stories, Tom?"

"Bible stories." He cast about in his memory. "Remember the story about the angel coming to announce the birth of our Lord?"

"Mama says there are no angels."

"Maybe there were a long time ago."

Again he flicked his gaze at Lily Overton.

"Well, I never saw one," Charlie announced. And then: "What was your mother's name?"

"Olivia," Tom said. "But everybody called her Livy."

"Where is she?"

Lily tousled Charlie's hair. "I think that's enough for tonight, little man."

Overton scratched alight a match and put fire to his cigarette. "Let the boy talk, Lil."

Tom hesitated. The fire crackled, shooting sparks into the dark sky. He looked at Lily, then at Charlie.

"She died."

Charlie considered this soberly. "What did she die of?"

"Fever," Tom said, but what he thought was, *It was an angel of death that took her.*

"Maybe my mama could be your mother," Charlie said.

Lily Overton cleared her throat briskly. "And that really is enough." She glared at her husband. "Take him to pee, Frank. Make sure we haven't taken in any other stowaways."

Overton pitched his cigarette into the fire. "C'mon, Charlie," he said, climbing to his feet. Together, they disappeared into the shadows beside the truck, the boy already fumbling with his fly. Lily busied herself with the dishes. Porcelain rang against porcelain. The shards of a bowl rolled into the fire. Lily put down its surviving sister. Tom could see the divot carved in its lip. He looked up at her, her lips a gash in her narrow face.

"What did you have to go and tell him that for? Death and angels. What kind of notions are you trying to fill my boy's head with?"

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't you think he has enough to carry, and him just six years old, without having to worry about his parents dying?"

"I said—"

"I know what you said."

Tom gazed at the broken bowl in the coals, already streaked with soot.

"He trusts you," Lily said.

"I know. I didn't mean—"

"I'm glad I'm not your mother," Lily snapped, and then Charlie and his father came striding back into the little clearing where they had pitched their camp, and it was like she and the boy had never spoken—like he wasn't there at all. She enfolded the child in her arms, and when he pointed at the broken bowl in the fire, she merely smiled. "Mama had an accident, didn't she? Now come on, let's get to bed."

That night, Tom didn't walk the camp with Overton. He bedded down instead, and when tears came, he turned his back to the fire, his muscles taut with the effort of holding them back. As for Lily Overton, she watched him sleepless through the flames where the shards of the bowl slowly blackened. The rigid line of his shoulders bespoke his tears, but she did nothing to comfort him—could think of nothing to do and did not anyway wish to comfort him. Yet when her sleep came at last, it was fretful and uneasy.

None of them slept well that moonless night. Not Lily and not her boy, who dreamed his own mother's death. Not Tom, who had never known the color of his mother's eyes. And not Frank Overton either, who returned to camp late, propped himself against the truck for a final smoke before sleep, and studied the boy with his own deep thoughts, slow as silted rivers, and dreamed, when he dreamed at all, of the reckoning of angels.

It was dreams that drove the Overtons, as dreams had driven their forebears across the vast expanse of the continent—dreams of a better life, nightmares of the life they'd left behind. It had all crumbled in their hands, and if salvation glimmered before them like a mirage, always just beyond their grasp, the past forever ran them down. So much loss

already behind them. So much terror of loss still to come that they closed their hearts against him. Overton tried not to love this boy he'd taken in, for better or worse, impulsively and against his wife's objections. Lily would not let herself say his name. Even Charlie's love had a fierce intensity, as if Tom might any moment disappear, evanescent as the air.

It was angels—their own better angels—that drew them on as far as they could go: to surrender up to Tom the warmth of their fire, a meager portion of their already paltry rations, a pittance of the affection that hammered upon the sealed valves of their attention. The future was a mystery they were always plunging into, back sore and weary in their sweat-darkened clothes, masked against the ever-present dust.

"Tell me more about your mother," Charlie said, and so, as they sprawled together in the bed of the truck, perspiring in the heat, Tom told him—of the flowers his mother had cultivated in front of the house and the vegetable garden she had cultivated in back, of the way the earth bloomed underneath her fingers, bringing some rare beauty into the world. "Tell me the stories she told you," Charlie said, clutching his chain, and so Tom summoned them to life in the dead air, mysterious tales gleaned not from those his mother had read at his bedside (there had been no tales, or if there had been he could not recall them) but, with more imagination than accuracy, from the color plates bound into the family Bible—the wave-pitched ark and David with his sling and the terrible angel come to announce the miraculous birth that would redeem the fallen world.

"Do you believe in angels?" Charlie asked.

"I don't know," Tom said, and then Charlie slept.

The truck jolted and the load creaked around them. Charlie began gently to snore, and Tom lay still, brooding over memories of Pap and the mother his half-imagined tales had summoned into the dusky air. Tom was dozing himself when Charlie stirred and flung an arm across his chest, spilling the chain from his open palm. Tom reached out to retrieve it. He held it at arm's length, watching the chain unwind itself, the locket sparking in the dimness. He eased out from under the boy. Charlie whimpered in his sleep and Tom smoothed the hair from the boy's damp forehead. Then he slipped out to the tailgate of the truck and propped himself against the wooden slats that anchored the fluttering tarp. With the full sun of midday upon his face, Tom pried the locket open. Here in the light, the photo was clearer. Lily Overton—a rare and smiling Lily Overton he had not known before and could hardly have imagined ever existed—gazed up at him from within. He could not say how long he sat there like that, only that the truck braking and pulling off the road startled him back into himself. In the gloom under the wind-snapped tarp, Charlie stirred to wakefulness.

"Tom?"

"I'm right here, Charlie," Tom said, thumbing closed the boy's locket and slipping it into the pocket of his trousers.

The truck shuddered to a stop. Tom swung himself over the tailgate into a howling chaos of wind. As he reached up for Charlie, Overton appeared beside him. "In the cab!" he cried over the wind. "Get in the cab!" Without thinking, without pausing to ask why, Tom hurried the boy before him and lifted Charlie into the truck. Lily Overton huddled against the passenger-side door. Tom snatched a glance over his shoulder. Wind whipped out of the east, driving before it a billowing cloud of black earth that towered a mile into the sky. Grit lashed at Tom's eyes. He could taste it in his throat and clogging his nostrils, yet still he stared back at the oncoming cloud with a kind of paralyzed horror. He might have stood there until it rolled over him had Overton not shoved him hard—Tom cracked his head a glancing blow on the doorframe—into the cab. Overton followed, struggling to slam the door against the wind. The truck rocked with the impact.

The storm hurtled down upon them. The world beyond the windows disappeared into darkness. Fingers of wind scrabbled at the crevices around windows and doors. Dust swirled in the air. Half-blinded, Tom dragged his bandana over his mouth and nose. Powder settled on his face and hands, working its way stinging into his eyes and between his lips, where it tasted gritty on his tongue. The contained stink of unwashed bodies filled the air. The battering ram of the wind shrieked as it hurled itself against the truck. Charlie wept and huddled against Tom, burying his face in the boy's ribs and gripping his fingers until the pressure made them ache. And through all the long storm—fifteen minutes? An hour? It felt like longer, it felt like forever—the locket burned in Tom's pocket like a flaming heart.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the storm blew itself out. One by one, they stumbled forth. A stark wasteland met their eyes, gray and flat as far as the eye could see. A diamond of sunlight flashed from the metal carcass of another truck, maybe a mile in the distance. Otherwise, nothing. Looking out across the waste, Tom imagined Pap, doggedly seeding a desert earth that had once thronged with stalks of succulent green corn, as if somehow, through sheer blind determination, he could summon it all back: the land that had withered beneath his feet, the wife buried beneath the weathered wooden cross in the backyard, the son he had lost. Recalling it, Tom fingered the silver oval in his front pocket, and a knot welled up in his throat. He rubbed

burning grit from his eyes and surveyed the truck's wreckage: metal dimpled with a thousand tiny pits, tires half-buried in sand, tarp torn and dangling from a broken spar.

"What now, Frank?" Lily Overton said, her voice rising. "What now?"

And Tom saw Charlie digging in his pocket for comfort.

Frank Overton spat brown dust. "Same as always, Lil. We push on."

Laughing humorlessly, she turned away.

Charlie though, Charlie was not so strong. "Mama," he said, "my locket, it's gone—"

"Oh, Charlie, honey," Lily said, kneeling to look him in the eye. She gripped his shoulders, drew him into her embrace, and scanned the sea of dust that stretched lone and level as far as she could see; she imagined her son staggering through the wind that had swept down upon them to carry it all away—everything they had ever loved or dreamed of—and she knew that Frank was right: the only thing to do was move forward into the bleak mystery of the future. You moved on. There was nothing else to do.

And Tom? Listening, he flushed, knowing that this was his opportunity to return the necklace. Yet there was something in him that could not surrender it, not now and maybe never, not even to this boy he had come to love as he would have loved the brother he'd never had. There was something in Lily Overton's smile, something in her eyes, gazing up at him from the tiny portrait, that gave him hope, a reason to go on, to keep following the path his feet had laid out for him.

Lily mended the tarp while Overton and Tom repaired the spar that had held it taut and Charlie grieved the loss of that lone, precious thing that his mother had given him to clasp and comfort him through the long prairie nights. Light faded from the sky. Trucks crept past, grim men unsmiling at their wheels, and they did not stop to help, for what help could anyone provide when even the land itself had been stripped clean of sanctuary? Then the hard business of dislodging the truck from the sand. Lily took the wheel, goosing the accelerator. Charlie watched as the boy and the man took places at the rear, shoulder to metal, and rocked the battered vehicle in its ruts until at last they worked it free.

Tom stumbled to his knees when it gave and fishtailed onto the road, where runners of dust snaked across the packed earth. Frank Overton laughed and clapped him on the back. Tom wiped sweat from his forehead. He wound the necklace in his pocket about his probing fingers.

It was full dark by then.

They camped alone, huddled around a niggardly fire Overton built from wood he had stored away against such a day. Charlie wept himself to sleep, and the boy lay long awake as the fire burned itself into embers. When even Overton slept, he dug from his pocket once again the silver chain and wound it tight around his hand. With a dirt-encrusted thumbnail, he pried open the tarnished locket and squinted down at the tiny photograph there, which he could not see in the darkness except with his mind's eye. At last, tucking the locket away, he slept, unaware that he was not the only one awake.

Lily Overton, curled close against the fire with her arm tucked around her boy, had watched him through slitted eyes slip the chain from his pocket. She'd seen its dull glimmer by the glow of the dying fire, and had known it for what it was, or had anyway suspected, and felt course through her something stronger—something stranger—than the resentment alone that should by all rights have been hers: a sorrow deep as rivers that she had lived to see such a world that had such children in it.

Lily never spoke of it, not even to Overton. Why the boy should want the locket, she could not say; but her own child looked upon him with such boundless adoration that she would not deny him that light in an otherwise dark and hopeless season. So she held her peace, and when he slipped free the locket in the late morning hours to stare down into the portrait which by the dying embers he could not see but only imagine, she watched with half-lidded eyes and wondered. By day, for Charlie's sake, she managed to keep things as they had been between them—distant, known but unnamed.

Time slipped on in the eternal rhythm of the road—seventy-five miles at a stretch, a hundred on a good day, as much as the wheezing old truck could bear—three days, four, five, she could not say how many. Only the talk of the men around their midnight fires changed. Angels were on every lip now, luring them onward, and Tom felt once again that familiar itching in his feet. Yet something held him back, something he dared not speak aloud even in the privacy of his own mind: a sense of something impending, like the crackle of air in the moments before a storm. So he was not surprised when it happened. None of them were surprised, not truly: it had the sense of something long ordained, an inescapable doom that had all along been hurtling toward them.

For Overton, at the wheel that afternoon, it began as thickening traffic. He gained upon the truck in front of him until they were creeping along, hood to bumper, and the car a mile or more behind them closed the distance. Overton glanced at his wife, squinted through smoke at the

windshield, took a long last drag, and pitched his cigarette out the window. Soon they were barely moving at all. And then they weren't. That was how it began for Tom and Charlie—with the long, slow swing of gravity as the truck braked to a stop, stirring them to wakefulness. They hunkered down at the wooden tailgate, splinters digging into their fingers, and stared out at the sunlit afternoon: cars and trucks piled high with the salvage of a hundred broken lives, idling by the dozen in the hard-packed dirt road or parked helter-skelter along the weedy shoulders or abandoned altogether in the fields beyond. Sunlight flashed off metal, the smell of exhaust hung in the air, and where there should have been noise—the blat of horns, the cries of frustrated drivers—an eerie silence prevailed. Men stood in the crook of open doors, looking west into the baking sky. Women stood beside them, hands slanted across their eyes. Somewhere a child was saying, over and over, in a whisper that carried in all that endless silence, "What is it, Mother? What is it?" And even here the great migration near ceased. Staring soon gave way to walking: entire families, small children clutching at their mothers' hands, every one of them silent and entranced, blank faces turned to the sky as they wound among the cars, the noon sun bleaching the world of color. There was no hurry—no one ran or cried aloud. There was only a blind imperative, as if in this, like so many other things, they had no choice.

Overton turned off the engine and met Tom and Charlie as they came around the truck. "What is it, Tom?" the boy said. "What is it?"

But Tom, if he heard the boy at all, did not respond. He only gazed at the horizon, where dark specks hurtled upward into a porcelain sky. It could not be, Tom thought, so much his father's son. But his feet had a mind of their own. Overton, standing by the open door of the truck, took his shoulder—

"Tom," he said.

—and for a heartbeat they stood like that, man and boy. Overton's words echoed inside Tom's head—*It was an angel of death that took him*—and an instant of blank horror seized him. Charlie hugged his waist, weeping. Even Lily gazed at him across the hood of the truck. And then the horror passed.

"Don't," Overton said. "Please, Tom, wait—"

"I have to, don't you see?"

"We'll go together, then," Overton said, as if he'd known it would come to this in the end, and so they did, the four of them, wending their way through the maze of cars, struck dumb with an irresistible compulsion to see it, to know it for themselves, angels of death or angels of light or no angels at all. Others walked beside them, men and women, their faces haggard with care, and children, too, boys on the very precipice of manhood (or already plunged over the other side), and girls ripening into the fullness of their bodies at last, silent, their expressionless faces turned to the sky, where ever-clearer the dark specks resolved themselves into human figures flung up into the vault of heaven. Their boots scuffed the earth. Their breath labored in their lungs. Their tongues moistened chapped lips, and somewhere a woman—no, two women, or three, or more—wept. Charlie clung to Tom's hand as they ranged ahead. Overton and Lily followed, and what thoughts came into their minds—if any thoughts at all—none of them could say: only the relentless magnetism of the west and a blind, white roar inside their heads.

Gradually, the snarled traffic fell behind them. The throb of abandoned engines faded. The stench of gas dissipated. They emerged into a belt of treeless prairie, windswept and hot. Beyond it, a crowd had gathered, a ragged crescent a hundred strong or more, Tom couldn't say for sure. More people than he'd ever seen in one place anyway, as though three or four or ten of the gypsy encampments had piled in on top of one another, all of them silent, all of them staring blankly ahead. Tom shrugged his way among them, the boy clutching his leg now, and they parted to let him pass, until at last he drew up against the far edge. If the Overtons followed he did not know and did not think to care.

Upward they looked, upward every one, heads craned slack-jawed to the sky, their faces blank as eggs, scrubbed free of kindness or humanity, except that some of them were weeping. Beyond them—twenty feet or thirty, maybe more—a great crevasse had cloven the prairie. Tom could hardly imagine the agony of stone, the mighty crack of earth as the continent tore itself asunder. Two or three vehicles, doors flung open to the air, stood askew upon the plain where they must have slammed on the brakes when the earth split and the road crumbled and plunged into the abyss.

Tom might have paused there—it was like a great hand had scrawled an invisible line in the dust beyond which few dared venture—yet something drew him on. He could feel it beating in his breast, this blind imperative, he could feel it itching in his restless feet. Kneeling, he peeled Charlie from his leg. Looking up, he saw that the Overtons had drawn close behind him.

"Go to your mother now, Charlie," he said, and the boy snatched at him, and drew Tom close against him.

"I won't," he sobbed. "Not you, too," and once again Overton's words echoed in Tom's mind: *It was an angel of death that took him.*

"Go," Tom said, standing to thrust the boy away.

"I won't, I won't let you go."

And Tom: "Go, I hate you. I hate you, don't you see?"

The boy reeled, sobbing, and Tom stood. He met Lily Overton's pale blue eyes and turned away and the chasm drew him in, thirty feet, and twenty, and there he paused, gathering his courage. A great wind, smelling of dry and ancient stone, shrieked out of the frigid heart of the planet. It flattened his pants against his legs and pressed his shirt rippling against his torso. It tore off his cap. Tom watched it spin into the heavens.

And now, looking the length of the crevasse, he saw other lone sojourners approach the pit. Some fled back to the safety of the crowd. Still others hesitated as he had and crept closer, step by cautious step. And still others—three, no four, five, six, and more, how they fixed and fascinated him—stepped to the edge, hesitated, and hurled themselves into the abyss. The wind flung them skyward in silence, their bodies tumbling in silent apotheosis, smaller and smaller until they ceased to be human at all, ceased even to be dark specks against the bone-colored canopy of heaven. His hand crept into his pocket and seized the necklace. He felt the terrible gravity of the pit, and found that somehow—his feet would have their way—he stood at the crumbling lip of the void. Wind scoured his face and tore at his clothes, and a fierce longing sprang up within him: to leap out into the screaming air, to step out of this hard, dry world and let it take him up into the mysteries beyond—

Then a voice came to him, a woman's voice, a thin and paltry thing in that screaming wind—

"Charlie!"

Tom snatched a glance over his shoulder and saw the boy wrench free of his mother's grip and hurtle toward him. He crashed into Tom, seizing his leg, and for a moment Tom thought that they were both going to stagger over the edge, no longer bound to earth, and plunge forever into the sky. An awful image possessed him—of Charlie's terror-stricken face as that cold, howling wind tore him away from Tom's grasping fingers and sent them spinning skyward, each to their separate heaven. What he thought of then was dozing away those lazy afternoons in the truck, with the small boy's sweaty head on his shoulder. What he thought of was that spendthrift flow of words, his mother's sole gift to him, and his gift alone to Charlie, wrested by imagination from the colored plates in the family Bible. What he thought of was angels.

Tom dragged the boy away from the abyss—three feet, six, ten, and more—and, kneeling before him, dug out the locket. He pressed it into Charlie's open palm, the silver chain whipping upright in the wind, and closed the small fingers about it. Then, step by step, Tom Carver's feet carried him away from the abyss, beyond the reach of that shrieking wind, to Charlie's waiting parents. Lily Overton went down on her knees to accept the boy into her embrace. She hooked her chin over his frail shoulder, and met Tom's eyes.

"Tom," she said.