

## Chapter 12

### The End of What We Knew

All day Hartford Wilson's question to Senator Humphrey had nagged at me. Even as I sat down to dinner with Beverly and Jack, I again heard Hartford ask it. And once again, I waited on the Senator's answer, one that never came.

Jack sat in his high chair, stirring the tiny pieces of roast beef and mashed potatoes on his plate. I could have filled up, satisfied my hunger, just breathing in the rich aroma of Beverly's roast beef and gravy. She knew more ways than I could count to satisfy my multitude of hungers. After we finished dinner, I picked up our plates to carry them into the kitchen. Beverly put her hand on my arm, smiled and said, "It's a beautiful evening. You two take a walk. I'll do the dishes."

I gave Jack a piggyback ride to the end of the driveway and then across the narrow black-top road that marked the edge of our front yard. As we entered the open field beyond the road, the sun dropped below the horizon and the color of the sky began to shift from bright red to dark orange. Steep hillsides that extended to the horizon bound both sides of the wide field. Their middle sections had dark green thickets of rhododendrons dotted with balls of pink and white blooms. In the April twilight the blooms took on a golden cast. So did the pale blossoms of three crabapple trees along an old fence line to our right. Wild green onions and nubs of daisies, still a month from their first flowers, dotted the field.

I put Jack down. He laughed and his black curly hair bounced as he burst into a run towards a killdeer poking its beak into the fresh green growth of alfalfa. Jack's little footprints dropped behind him on the still damp earth – for a two year-old, he moved fast.

The air carried the sharp scent of fresh earth, of spring and new life. I called, “Hey Jack, take a deep breath.” He turned, waved to me and looked away. Jack had jumped into his own adventure.

While I watched Jack playing in the field, my thoughts returned to this morning at Bertha’s Place, to the fellows who gathered for coffee and our unexpected visitor. You’d have thought a man who wanted to be President of the United States would’ve had an answer for Hartford. Since the moment Hartford asked his question the Earth had rotated less than half a turn. But when I thought about all that had happened in our little town to give rise to Hartford’s question, it seemed like the Earth and I had traveled ten thousand turns, maybe even gone to Mars and back. How had it all happened? Right in front of everybody’s eyes? One day everything seemed to be here. So certain. Kettle as we knew it, old trees lining its brick streets, a good high school, well-cared for churches. A community. Then, puff, puff – poof! Like somebody struck a match to an old brush pile, the town we knew disappeared.

As Phil Buckingham and I had walked along Main Street this morning to meet the fellows for coffee, we passed the bronze plaque attached to the old brick building occupied by Bertha’s Place. Once again I stopped and stared at it. I liked the way the plaque’s polished letters raised above its tarnished green base and reflected the morning sun. I told Phil the plaque looked like a two-tone jewel, added character to the building’s weathered old red bricks. He nodded, but I could tell he felt he had to humor me. I knew the words on the plaque by heart, but couldn’t keep from reading them for what must have been the thousandth time.

This plaque marks the site of the town's first building,  
The Kettle Trading Post,  
erected in 1809.  
Incorporated as Kettle, Virginia, April 1, 1859.  
This memorial dedicated  
by Mayor Asa T. Baumgartner, April 1, 1909.

“Not the plaque again,” Phil complained as he pulled at my sleeve. “For God’s sake, Freddy,” he said, though he smiled when he spoke.

Just beyond the plaque the plate glass window of Bertha’s Place wore a light coat of fog on the inside due to last night’s sudden temperature drop. When we opened the old front door it creaked, as always, but Bertha refused to oil its hinges. She said the creaks helped her keep track of everyone’s comings and goings.

Hartford Wilson sat at a back table waving *Time* magazine at us. Pappy Roosevelt and Police Chief Arthur R. Tackett stood behind him. “By God, boys,” Hartford yelled at us, “read this. Kettle is on the map! Yessir. On the map. We’re famous throughout the U.S. of A.!”

William White Wallace walked into the restaurant right behind us, looked around and once again popped the question he always asked when he arrived, “What’re you boys doing here?” Phil, Hartford, and some friends had been meeting on weekday mornings at the restaurant for over thirty years. William White and I had the honor of being the group’s newest and youngest members. We joined the group only twelve years ago.

Phil, William White, and I seated ourselves in the chrome-plated chairs around Hartford’s table. We leaned back, folded our arms, and settled in to watch the action.

Hartford kept halfway standing and then plopping himself back into his chair as if somebody had shoved him down, like a slow-moving old Jack-in-the-box, his bald head all shiny, his eyes beaming and his face so full of a grin I thought it might split in two. He

wore what he called his favorite sweater, the old blue one with leather patches on the elbows, and one of the faded red shirts he'd worn ever since I'd known him. His smile made his face look younger than his seventy-plus years. Hartford lowered the magazine to the table, open to the article, and flattened its pages with his hand. Behind him Pappy Roosevelt and Chief Tackett stood and peered over his shoulder trying to read the article while Hartford kept distracting them with his arm-waving and bursts of comments.

"Dang it, Hartford, hold still!" Pappy Roosevelt said several times, but Hartford continued on his own path. Pappy Roosevelt's unruly hair stood on end and his coveralls had a generous covering of grass stains and mud, probably from his early morning slopping of his hogs. Pappy Roosevelt's lips silently formed the words of the article when he could see past Hartford long enough to read as much as a sentence. Chief Tackett stood to Hartford's right, his billed cap tilted forward, reading without lip movements but moving his head left and right, straining to keep his gaze on the page. The chief's bulging belly hung over his pistol belt and pulled against the buttons down the front of his shirt.

The aroma of fried bacon from Bertha's kitchen tempted me to order breakfast, even though Beverly, Jack, and I had just finished eggs, bacon, and toast. I told myself that if I got into a two-breakfast habit, I'd have the chief's belly in no time. No breakfast, I decided.

Phil slung his blue jacket on the back of his chair and dropped his maroon golfer's cap on the table. As usual, he'd parted his thinning gray hair on the left and combed it over in a failed attempt to cover the ever-growing bald spot on the top of his head. Bertha Benson, holding that damp rag that smelled of chlorine she always seemed to carry, stretched her large body across the entire width of the table as she wiped it. William

White had said more than once that in her uniform, Bertha looked more like a great blue whale than a woman who might try to have her way with one of us. He always laughed when he said it. Others had when they heard it the first time, long ago. Bertha's right hand moved across the surface of the table while her left hand pushed her curly salt-and-pepper hair away from her face.

William White leaned towards me and said in a half whisper – almost low enough to keep the others from hearing him, but not quite, “What’s going on, Freddy? You look different this morning.” He put on that sly, smart-aleck grin he knew bothered me to no end, and then he said loud enough for everyone within twenty feet to hear him, “What were you and Beverly up to last night?”

William White's blonde hair had its little raised wave in front, just as it had ever since I'd known him, nearly twenty-five years. In the first grade, I used to tease him about that cowlick, among other things. I could make him cry in less than a minute. Could I still do it? Once William White became the owner of our local hardware and appliance store he took pride in wearing a necktie to work every day, but he never gave up his windbreaker for a suit jacket.

I gave him a sickly sweet grin and said, “So, stand up and comb your hair, Mr. Hardware Man. And when do you plan to start wearing a suit coat instead of that warm up jacket?” As soon as I said it, I wished I hadn't. After all, I wasn't exactly dressed up. I might be the owner and operator of Buckingham's Gulf Station and Garage, but with my same old blue work shirt and trousers starched to the nines I left myself wide open for one of William White's comebacks.

“About the time you learn your name.” He peered at the front of my shirt, “Let’s see,” he leaned towards the front of my shirt, peered at it, “Freddy, isn’t it?” William White grinned like he’d pulled a good one, but he’d used that line so many times before, I didn’t even bother answering. He enjoyed poking fun at the letters of my name, stitched in white thread above the left pocket of my shirt.

William White’s dumb and worn-out question hadn’t registered with me anyway. My thoughts lingered on the brass plaque and the Kettle Trading Post.

The summer before our freshman year at Kettle High School, William White and I had worked in a crew that dug up and replaced the sidewalk in front of Bertha’s Place, at the time named Miss Kettle’s Place. Some fellows with a jackhammer removed the old sidewalk. Then William White and I dug about a foot below it in order for some workmen to install proper drainage. During our digging, we unearthed two crusty silver spoons and three small flint arrowheads. William White yelled, “Holy moly! These things are important! Yessir, they bear witness to peaceful dealings between the Indians and the settlers around the Trading Post.”

During the fall term, for our ninth-grade social-science projects, we both wrote papers about our discovery. In early November, our discovered objects, “artifacts,” our teacher called them, and our theory about their meaning got some unexpected recognition in the *Kettle News Leader* during Kettle’s Annual Brotherhood Day, a local celebration of neighborliness towards Indians. In truth, the last of the Shawnee Indians left the area well over a hundred years ago. But still, the town enjoyed the yearly celebration and it seemed

to get everybody started down the road to Thanksgiving. Some folks even started buying Christmas presents.

William White sat back in his chair while Bertha wiped the table in front of him. “Thanks, Bertha,” he said, as if he owned the place. “Please serve these gentlemen and yours truly some of your delicious coffee. I’m buying today.” Bertha grinned at William White like he’d offered to buy the whole restaurant and make her a very wealthy woman.

About then the front door swung open and Whit Saunders, ramrod straight, head high, came in at a brisk pace with a copy of *Time* in his hand. He got only a couple of steps inside when he stopped, pushed his wide-brimmed hat back on his head and boomed, “OK, Bertha’s Place, wake up!” He held up the magazine. “Have a look at this, the April 5<sup>th</sup> nineteen and sixty edition of *Time* magazine.” William White held up his hand and Whit handed him the magazine.

Bertha made one more pass with her damp cloth across our table, “We know, Whit, we know. Hartford showed us.” Then she gave Whit a big smile. “And don’t you look just dandy in that photograph.”

Phil and I had already read the article – Phil had brought in his copy of *Time* with him earlier that morning when he stopped at the station to buy gas for his old work truck. I had to admit, the photo was pretty good. In it, Whit – dressed just like today, wide-brimmed hat, leather jacket, flannel shirt, and britches stuffed into his lace-up boots – stood on the front steps of the Bank of Kettle, shaking hands with Senator John F. Kennedy. The caption under the photo read, ‘On Kettle’s Main Street.’

Kennedy had come to Kettle ten days earlier on a sunny but windy and cool day in March. Two vans and three cars, one of them a big black Cadillac, with the senator and his campaign people rolled into town about nine forty-five that morning. The speech's time and date had been advertised in the *Kettle News Leader*, and for the past few days Main Street stores had signs in their windows announcing the senator's speech. Each sign had a hand-lettered note along its top, "JFK at 10 AM – Please come!"

Shortly before ten o'clock a crowd of maybe a hundred folks, including William White and me, milled around in front of the wide front steps of the red brick Bank of Kettle. People working for Senator Kennedy handed out buttons, "JFK in '60", and white straw hats with red, white, and blue hat-bands and 'Kennedy' printed in bold blue letters around the front of each hat. The clock hanging above the front steps of the bank chimed ten o'clock, and at the ring of the tenth chime Senator Kennedy's brother, Robert, bounded to the top step. He held up his hands to get everybody's attention, thanked us for coming and introduced his brother, who by then stood beside him. The brothers wore identical navy blue suits, white shirts, and neckties, yellow for Robert, bright red for Jack. During his introduction, Robert talked about the senator's WWII service as commander of a torpedo boat, PT-109, and his heroism after a Japanese destroyer rammed and sank the smaller boat. He ended with, "Jack Kennedy will bring new leadership to America," a phrase we heard a lot in later weeks. And every time we did, Whit would blurt out, "You heard it first, boys, right here in Kettle."

The wind tousled Senator Kennedy's thick head of brown hair while he spoke about "new frontiers" for our country. He kept his hands in the side pockets of his suit jacket during his speech, though a couple of times when he wanted to emphasize

something he took his right hand out of his coat pocket and pointed with his index finger. His speech couldn't have lasted more than fifteen minutes, but he left a mark on Kettle in that short time. We'd never heard "West Virginia" pronounced with an 'r' on the end of it.

After his speech the senator shook hands with a few people and posed for photos, including one with Whit. Then he and his brother hopped into the back seat of the black Cadillac. At the moment the car door slammed shut, the Bank of Kettle clock chimed ten thirty AM.

William White and I watched the Cadillac enter the four-lane, pick up speed, and head towards the Interstate. The other campaign cars and vans trailed along behind it. William White gave a half-hearted wave at the tail end of the caravan. "Wham, bam, thank you maam," he said and we laughed.

Whit pulled up a chair and sat down at our table. "Boys, I got to tell you, I may vote for that Senator Kennedy, even if he is a Catholic."

"I have always maintained you're a fair-minded man, Whit," William White said. Then he got a little grin on his face and added, "Those rumors of Kennedy installing a direct phone line between the White House and the Vatican are probably false."

The front door opened and Shufflehead Meadows, tall and skinny – lanky, folks called him – walked in. He stopped just inside the front door. His blond hair flopped into his eyes as he took off his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap and threw it across the room with a spin towards the chrome coat rack attached to the first booth, next to the counter. His cap spun around and secured itself to the top of the rack.

“Never miss,” Shufflehead said with pride. “Hey, Whit, somebody told me you was famous. Howdja do that? Whut happened?”

Whit showed Shufflehead the photo. Shufflehead asked Bertha for a RC Cola, then sat down with us.

We talked about Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey, how much each of them wanted to win the West Virginia presidential primary, and the article in *Time*. Whit Saunders sounded a little awestruck when he said, “Boys, that *Time* article may be just the beginning of big things for West Virginia this year. I heard from my sister, who got it from a cousin who works at the public library in Huntington, that the *New York Times* is coverin’ our Democratic primary. Can you imagine that, the *New York Times*? She told my sister that before it’s all over, she wouldn’t be surprised if our election was reported by Walter Cronkite on the CBS News!”

“The way I figure it,” Phil commented, “the big-wig Democrats in New York and Chicago believe that if they can get West Virginia Democrats to vote for a Catholic like Kennedy, then they can get most anybody in the country to do it. There’s a game being played here and it goes far beyond us.”

Chief Tackett muttered, “That may be so, Phil. But game or no game, I got to tell you, that Kennedy’s too slick fer me.” Then his voice got louder, stronger. “Reminds me of that state road commissioner, the one what come here in fifty-two to speak at the ground-breaking cuttin’ ceremony for the four-lane. All decked out in his fancy white Sunday-go-to-meetin’ suit. Remember how he told us Kettle was entering a new era, and the four-lane would take us there? Now this Kennedy is sayin’ we’re headin’ into a new era, “new frontiers” he calls ’em, and he’ll take us there. The four-lane ain’t done nothin’

fer Kettle ‘cept tear up the patch. I ain’t so sure Kennedy will do any better. Though I must admit, Kennedy’s better lookin’ than the Commissioner.”

Chief Tackett’s mention of the ground-breaking ceremony for construction of the four-lane started a run of comments about the wide highway built through the center of Kettle in the early nineteen-fifties. Everybody called the road “the state’s victory trophy.” And then, right on the heels of the four-lane, came the Interstate highway – a one-two punch that sent our town reeling.

That’s when Bertha’s front door opened and a fellow I hadn’t seen before came in. He appeared to be about thirty and had neatly trimmed blonde hair. He wore khaki pants and a maroon nylon windbreaker with University of Minnesota in gold letters across its front. He walked over to Chief Tackett and held out his hand, “I’m Ralph Swenson, from Minneapolis. I’m looking for a place where Senator Humphrey could meet with some local folks and talk with them.”

The chief shook his hand. “I’m Chief Tackett, Ralph, and you done found the place you’re lookin’ for. Matter of fact, you’re standin’ in it,” the chief replied as he shook Ralph’s hand. “Ain’t no place better than here. Bertha’s Place is the heart of Kettle.”

Hartford looked up at Ralph, “Sit down, son. Have a cup of coffee.” Ralph pulled up a chair and shook hands with each of us as he introduced himself.

Ralph asked, “Is there a public phone nearby?” Bertha put a hot cup of coffee in front of him and pointed at the phone on the back wall beyond the end of the counter.

Ralph said, “I’ll be right back.”

When he returned Ralph took a sip from the steaming cup of coffee Bertha placed in front of him, then asked, “Kettle, now that’s an odd name for a town. Where’d it come from?”

William White jumped in before anyone could speak. “Right off the bat, Ralph, everybody asks about the name of our town. Well, in the early days there was a trading post here, built of virgin timber, right on this spot – Bertha’s Place. You’re the same as sitting in it. The old trading post was said to “always have the kettle on.” The owner, Cletus Ramsay, kept an iron kettle full of hot cider hanging in the fireplace. In time the trading post and the area around it came to be called Kettle. Daniel Boone used to come here, at least we think he did. In our town hall there is a painting of the trading post with ol’ Daniel standing in front of it. A sign above the front door says, ‘There are no strangers here.’ We still take pride in our hospitality.”

“Well, you’ve sure showed it to me,” Ralph said. “Thanks.”

Pappy Roosevelt said, “Ralph, we was just a talkin’ about how the West Virginia State Road Commission declared war on the town of Kettle and all the upset that followed. Maybe you, maybe even Senator Humphrey, would hanker to know of it.”

“That’s certainly the sort of thing the senator wants to learn about,” Ralph said eagerly. “Me too.”

Hartford took a sip of coffee, looked at Ralph, then puckered his lips and looked at the ceiling for a few seconds before he began to speak. “Nobody’s sure when the long struggle between the State Road Commission and the town of Kettle started, Ralph, though I once heard our former mayor, Raymond T. Baumgartner, say, ‘It was the date we got that first letter, June fourth, nineteen and forty-seven – the first shot in the West

Virginia State Road Commission's war on the town of Kettle.' In the letter, the State Road Commission asked the town of Kettle to change the angle parking along Main Street, also U.S. Highway 42, to parallel parking."

"I was there," I said, "when Mayor Baumgartner read the letter out loud to Town Council. I'll never forget how the mayor read it, real slow, and when he got to the end he had a twinge of sarcasm in his voice. 'This change,' the letter said, 'will reduce the periodic impediments to smooth egress and flow of commerce caused by angle parking adjacent to a major highway,' and bore the signature of the State Road Commissioner. Well, the mayor placed his thumbs under his suspenders, pushed his double chin forward and added, 'To the best of my knowledge nobody in Kettle has complained of temporary impediments to smooth egress and flow of commerce caused by angle parking.'"

Hartford gave a big belly laugh and slapped his right hand against his thigh. Everybody around the table joined in the laughter.

I continued, "I joined in the applause, along with others at the meeting, when Town Council voted down rejected the request. Unanimous vote."

"Remember the mayor's annual Fourth of July Celebration speech that year?" William White asked. "Mayor Baumgartner grinned from ear to ear when he told everybody how he and town council took on the State Road Commission. 'An example of democracy in action,' he said, 'us little fellows fighting against the powerful interests of big government, doing what's right for our town. And winning.'"

"You shoulda heard 'im, Ralph. It was downright inspirational," Pappy Roosevelt commented. He took a sip of his coffee. I always wondered how Pappy Roosevelt could

keep a wad of chewing tobacco in his mouth and at the same time drink coffee without swallowing the tobacco juice, but he did. Years of practice I guess.

“I wish I’d been there,” Ralph said.

Pappy Roosevelt wiped his lips with the back of his hand and then spoke in a firm voice, “Well, if it hadn’t been for ol’ Bill, Hiram Anderson’s horse, that new four-lane might never’ve happened. Maybe we’d still have Kettle the way it was.”

“Whut’d Bill do?” Shufflehead asked. “Whut happened?”

“You remember, Shuff,” Phil said with a small laugh, “It was late in the summer of forty-seven. There came ol’ Bill pulling Hiram’s wagon with crates of pigs stacked eight feet above the wagon’s bed, ropes cinching down the crates to the wagon, heading to the railroad station. Planned to ship the pigs to the market in Huntington. Hiram, Bill, and the load of pigs were on Maple Street, sitting at the stoplight. Miss Hattie McClintock sat directly behind them in her pride and joy, her nineteen and forty blue Ford sedan. When the light turned green and Hiram’s wagon didn’t move right away, Miss Hattie laid on her horn. That model Ford had a deep, hard-sounding horn. Well, it scared Bill and he burst forward into the intersection, then jerked a hard left turn on to Main Street, also U.S. Highway 42 – so hard the wagon went up on two wheels. Those big hogs rolled hard against the far side of their crates, shifting the wagon’s center of gravity, and the whole shebang toppled over, busting most of the crates. There was pigs running everywhere.”

“Don’t fergit that Mack truck,” Chief Tackett threw in.

Phil nodded his head and continued, “Ralph, right at that very moment a three-axle Mack truck pulling a big Pacific Intermountain Express trailer, a sixteen-wheeler,

came barreling down Highway 36. The truck headed into the intersection where Hiram had tipped over. The driver slammed on his brakes, the wheels locked and the rig jackknifed – then flipped over on its side. The P.I.E. trailer came down on top of Ol' Blue, Hiram's prize boar."

Chief Tackett pushed the bill of his cap back on his forehead and said, in a fed up tone of voice, "What a mess. A shame, too. Hiram told me Ol' Blue was the smartest hog he ever raised. That's sayin' a lot. Hogs are pretty dad-gummed intelligent."

"I ain't so sure that's true about Ol' Blue," Pappy Roosevelt said with a twinkle in his eye. "I know a thing or two about hogs. And a hog what couldn't figure out he should clear a path for a Mack truck ain't likely to be at the head of his class."

Everybody looked at Ralph for a second or two. When he broke into a big grin we laughed at Pappy Roosevelt's joke.

Phil continued, "I drove our wrecker over to the accident and pulled the tractor and trailer out of the intersection. Took nearly an hour." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Freddy here helped Hiram round up his pigs. The chief shoveled Ol' Blue off Main Street then began directing traffic. By the time we got everything moving again, traffic on Highway 42 had backed up outside of town for two miles in both directions."

Memories of the squealing pigs and what seemed to be two endless strings of cars and trucks had stuck with me. "Remember that big black Lincoln limousine at the end of the line of traffic?" I asked. "West Virginia license plate number one on the outside and the governor's wife on the inside. She glared out the rear window, her face all red and steamy."

"Yeah, she was late for a meeting in Huntington," Phil commented.

Ralph said, “Did that produce some fireworks?”

Hartford jumped in. “You bet, Ralph. Less than a week later town council got a right testy letter from the State Road Commission. It said, ‘The accident demonstrated the urgent need for changes in the flow of traffic through Kettle.’ Then there was another letter, and another.”

William White laughed, “The mayor told town council he wished to God both Hiram Anderson and the governor’s wife had stayed home that day.”

“Town Council said no to each of the letters, and then the requests turned to demands,” I said. “You would’ve enjoyed Town Council’s replies, Ralph. Each one matched the ever stronger words of the State Road Commission.” Ralph nodded. “I wondered how far they could ratchet up this thing. Our local paper, the *Kettle News Leader*, printed the State Road’s letters and town council’s replies side by side. I sent them to Beverly, who’s now my wife. She was studying at the university up in Morgantown.”

Hartford grinned, “Things heated up, all right. The very next week the paper carried an editorial praising Kettle’s elected officials for taking a hard line, standing up to the state.” Hartford paused and looked around the table, then added, “At the time I worried that members of town council might suffer shoulder sprains from all the self-administered back patting.” We laughed. Then Hartford got a mock serious expression on his face and added, “You boys try patting yourselves hard on the back. It’s not easy to do.” We laughed some more.

Pappy Roosevelt banged his fist on the table. “Laugh if you want. But them snakes in Charleston was up to no good. That long lull in the letters shoulda signaled that

somethin' was afoot. Next thing we knew the State Road snuck in and tore down our covered bridge." His voice rose, "Couldn't believe it. Ralph, one August morning in the summer of fifty-one they just come in with a wrecking crew and pulled down the old bridge over on Sour Apple River Road. Dang good covered bridge. Beams of virgin chestnut. Built in the eighteen and thirties. Told us we was better off with a steel bridge."

"You'd have thought they'd talk with you about what they were going to do," Ralph commented.

"Shoulda taught us those boys in Charleston couldn't be trusted," Whit observed.

"No," Phil added quietly, "it took a lawyer to teach us that."

"I was there," I said to Phil. "January of nineteen and fifty-two. Remember, you sent me to the meeting to ask town council for an extra garbage pickup?"

Phil nodded and I continued. "Ralph, there was a lawyer from the State Road Commission at the meeting. He was dressed all snappy in his dark blue suit, starched white shirt, and striped necktie. A far cry from our mayor and town council in their old sweaters and wrinkled gabardine pants." Phil and Hartford chuckled.

Hartford interrupted, "I was there, too, Freddy. That lawyer's briefcase was crammed with legal papers. He set it on the chair beside him and smiled at it like the briefcase was a child at a piano recital. When he did that I figured we were in for trouble."

"Well, Ralph," I continued, "when Mayor Baumgartner gave the lawyer a turn to speak, he held up some of the papers, then passed them over to the Mayor. Told everyone he came to the meeting to officially inform the town that the C&O Railroad had deeded the railroad tracks and the old railroad station in the center of Kettle, as well as the right

of way, to the state of West Virginia. 'Further,' he said, holding up a different bunch of papers, 'the State Road Commission is prepared to purchase, or use eminent domain legal proceedings to acquire as needed any and all property abutting U.S. Highway 42 through Kettle in order to upgrade the road to a four-lane highway.'

"The four-lane highway. That's when they done us in," Bertha said under her breath.

Ralph pointed out the front window towards the street. "The one that's out there now?"

"You got it," I said. "Then the lawyer spoke with an emphasis on each word. He read from a single sheet of paper that looked like an old letter." I quoted him as best I could remember his words. "This change will reduce the periodic impediments to smooth egress and flow of commerce caused by angle parking adjacent to a major highway."

The lawyer went on to describe a new one-mile stretch of four-lane highway that would replace most of U.S. Highway 42, Main Street, through Kettle and well beyond each end of town. "I couldn't believe what I heard, Ralph – a four-lane highway, smack through the middle of town." He told town council that the three blocks of Main Street in the business district would be protected, but separated from the new four-lane highway. Each end of Main Street would be connected to the new four-lane by short access streets.

"He smiled like a daddy giving a kid a piece of candy and added, 'Of course, Main Street will continue to be connected to the old streets leading into the residential part of Kettle.' But he told us the railroad tracks through the center of town, the old railroad station, fire station, flagpole and World War Two memorial, as well as the wide

grassy mall on either side of the tracks, would go. Homes along Main Street on both ends of town would lose most of their front yards and shade trees.”

Hartford said in a loud voice, “If I’d been a younger man, I think I would’ve punched him in the nose.”

“After the meeting, when I got home my wife, Beverly, said, ‘Freddy, you look like you’re in shock. What happened?’

“The next issue of the *Kettle News Leader* ran the headline, ‘Kettle under attack,’ Hartford said. “Each week the paper carried follow-up stories on our attempts to stop the four-lane. But the war was over.”

“I’ll never forget the ground-breaking ceremony for the four-lane,” Bertha said. Her face got red as she spoke. “There was that commissioner in his white suit, words pouring out of his mouth like oil on troubled water. Reminded me of the snake oil salesman that came to town when I was a kid. ‘A new era for Kettle,’ he said in his speech. Then Mayor Raymond T. Baumgartner walked up to the microphone. Remember what he said?”

We nodded our heads, except for Shufflehead, who asked, “Whut’d he say, Bertha?”

“Honey, it was short and sweet. Words to remember. The mayor put his right hand around the microphone’s stand and stood there real quiet-like. He had shed his suit jacket and wore bright green suspenders over his white shirt. Raymond’s face drooped. Maybe he just wanted to take a good look at folks. Or maybe he wanted us to take a good look at him and remember he’d decided not to run for re-election, I don’t know. Between him, his dad and his granddad, a Baumgartner had been mayor of Kettle for nearly fifty

years. Everybody got quiet, expecting a Fourth of July-type of speech. The mayor slowly said these words, 'God works in unseen ways.' He stopped and stared at the crowd. Just stared at us. We stared back at him. Then the mayor spoke five words I'll carry with me to my grave, 'So too does the devil.' Then he turned and walked away from the microphone." Bertha paused and looked around the table.

She continued, "The commissioner shook the mayor's hand and gave him a big smile, 'Truer words were never spoken, Mr. Mayor. None truer, indeed.'" Bertha looked down at her coffee cup, and then at us, "'None truer, indeed,' can you imagine that?"

With a twinge of admiration in his voice, Pappy Roosevelt said, "Ralph, it warn't two hours 'til them boys from the State Road was puttin' scaffolding up around the building." The admiration disappeared. "Then the next mornin', bright and early, they started tearin' the shingles off'n the roof."

I said, "A crowd lined up along the sidewalk in front of the General Store and watched the wrecking crew begin to work on the old railroad station. I stood beside Mrs. Gertrude Gruber, leaning on her cane. She must have been about seventy-five then, not long before she passed away. Her eyes held a steady gaze on the old station and tears ran down her cheeks. 'It was always our center,' she said, 'I wonder what will go next.'"

Memories from earlier times, images of life on our old brick Main Street, different than the one that's outside Bertha's front door today, passed through my thoughts – walking along, meeting and talking with folks like Albert Newcomb; the Kettle High homecoming parade in forty-seven when Cricket Hobson put the red bandanna around her neck; hard goods unloaded from freight cars, and then tobacco,

hogs and cattle loaded into the cars; Western Union telegrams about men wounded or killed in the war.

Hartford spoke quietly, “Gertrude Gruber was born here not long after the railroad station was built. Her daddy had deeded the right of way to the C&O Railroad for the tracks, then divided his farm into lots for the home sites and businesses that became Kettle. Didn’t surprise me none that she died not long after they tore the old station down. Maybe she had a premonition of what the four-lane would do to our town. Didn’t want to stick around for it. Sometimes I wonder if I should.”

“Ralph, that was the summer town council give away the store,” Whit said, anger rising in his voice.

“Sorry to hear it,” Ralph replied.

Phil added, “Seemed like once Raymond decided to step down as mayor, everything began to fall apart. Can’t blame him for stepping down, he’d done the job for nearly fifteen years. I didn’t always agree with him, but by golly he kept town council on track.”

“Ralph, here’s something about government doing harm you can pass along to Senator Humphrey,” Hartford said excitedly. “Early in July of fifty-four, the Kettle town council surprised everybody by voting to adopt a program set up by the governor to widen streets in small towns around the state. ‘Good for commerce,’ the governor said in a newspaper article. Town council voted to widen three of Kettle’s oldest and prettiest, not to mention shadiest, streets. Mayor Baumgartner was the only ‘no’ vote.”

Hartford said in an intense, but sad voice, “One of the councilmen said to the Mayor, ‘Raymond, it’s like the commissioner told us at the groundbreaking ceremony,

we're entering a new era. The wider streets will be a blessing to Kettle – they'll give us smooth and speedy driving through town.'

"The mayor asked, 'Does town council understand that most of the maple and elm trees along those streets will be removed?'

"Another councilman answered, 'We'll grow new trees, Raymond, they'll just be set back a ways.' Around the table the other councilmen nodded. One added, 'While they're growing, Kettle's commerce and trade will grow too. New era, Raymond. We're goin' places.'"

No one spoke. Then Ralph said in a soft voice, "I'll pass all this along to Senator Humphrey. I know he'll be interested."

After another period of silence, Hartford looked over at Bertha and raised his cup.

Bertha nodded. "OK, Hartford. Anybody else want refills? How about you, Ralph?"

We held our cups a couple of inches above the table, Ralph too. Shufflehead raised his RC bottle higher than our cups and gave Bertha a big grin. Bertha brought fresh coffee and an RC to the table. After she had served everybody she good-naturedly tousled Shufflehead's hair then sat down again.

A lull settled over the table. Maybe, like me, everybody's thoughts had returned to what the town used to be compared to today. I tried not to think about the old days too much. Each time I did Beverly told me I looked like I had the hang-dog blues. She said I should spend my time thinking about positive things, like our new home and our little boy, Jack – about the future. But sometimes I couldn't do it.

Hartford put two spoonfuls of sugar in his fresh cup of steaming black coffee and said, “We didn’t know it at the time, Ralph, but the worst was yet to come.”

Everybody nodded.

“What happened?” Ralph asked.

Phil answered him. “I’ll never forget the morning I opened my *Herald Dispatch*, that’s a Huntington newspaper, and read the story.” Phil’s voice reflected the surprise he must have felt then. “September of fifty-four, just when I thought things had settled down, they announced the Interstate highway was coming to town.”

William White spoke up. “I’d read about the Interstate. President Eisenhower said it was to move troops and all of us, if necessary, to defend our country. Never occurred to me an Interstate would come right through Kettle. Anyway, if we needed to defend ourselves we’d take to the woods, not the highways.”

Phil continued, “The newspaper told us exactly what would happen, and today it’s history. Just like they said, that big highway swings in a wide arc on the north side of Kettle following the ridgeline of Tucker’s Point.”

“Another government program to do good. Lots of nice homes near Tucker’s Point was tore down to clear the right of way,” Chief Tackett added. “Damn shame. Tell Senator Humphrey that, Ralph. Damn shame.”

“I’m sorry,” Ralph said.

Momma had called Grandma and Grandpa Lemley the morning the story about the Interstate appeared in the newspaper. Grandpa told her that as soon as Grandma read the paper she began to cry and went out for a walk across the hill. He said he remembered a

survey team coming through his alfalfa field nearly a year earlier. After he saw the map of the new road in the paper he figured their home would be squarely in the Interstate's path. Momma burst into tears and handed the phone to Daddy.

When Momma told me about her conversation with Grandpa I couldn't believe it – Grandma and Grandpa's place, with its view across the valley, gone? Even as I thought about it I could smell the sweet aroma of the fields of clover, just beyond the alfalfa. My Daddy had grown up there, played, then worked, in those fields. Me too. I felt like my insides had gone into a free fall. My times at the old place flashed through my thoughts. Climbing in the barn. Picking apples. Sitting on the porch and looking across the valley. The attic I loved to explore. All gone.

“Then a few weeks later they told us the rest of the story, Ralph,” Whit added. “The new four-lane would be extended in order to serve as an access road from Kettle to the Interstate. Whole neighborhoods between the two roads would have to go in order to complete the connection.”

Hartford Wilson stared at his cup of coffee and spoke softly, as if he was talking to it, not us. “They had it planned all the time – the four-lane and the Interstate. But they never told us. Raymond Baumgartner had it right, the Devil works in unseen ways. When them State Road people just up and demolished the old covered bridge, we should have figured they couldn't be trusted. We loved that bridge.” Hartford sipped his coffee and then looked around the table, “Yessir, we got us a new bridge, new roads and wide streets. These days a fellow can get to and through Kettle in a snap. But I wonder, is there any reason to stop?”

Pappy Roosevelt said, “Henry Ford. It was him what started it – him and his infernal assembly lines.”

Phil said quietly, “Maybe so. It’s easy to point the finger of blame, Pappy Roosevelt. It is for me too.” Then his eyes darkened and he raised his voice a couple of notches, “What’s hard is to look in the mirror and wonder, ‘Did I have a hand in it?’ Most everybody has a car, some families have two of ’em. You drive a truck, Pappy Roosevelt. Me too. And nobody wants to get slowed down by traffic. Sure, I had a hand in it. We all did.”

Hartford piped in, “You wouldn’t know this, Ralph, but my Pop owned the first automobile in Kettle, a Ford, in nineteen aught nine,” Hartford had a touch of pride in his voice. “I remember the day he brought it home. Mom and Pop liked the car so much that when my baby brother was born they named him Ford.”

Hartford continued with enthusiasm, “Cars took Kettle by storm, Ralph. Folks sold property to get money to buy ’em. In nineteen and fourteen dealers right here in Kettle sold Fords, Maxwells, and Overlands. The ads in *The Kettle News Leader* made everybody want a car. Maxwell claimed to be ‘The car that laughs at hills.’ Ford said you could operate their car for two cents a mile. A Ford cost around four hundred dollars, Overlands a thousand – probably why they went out of business.”

“In nineteen and twenty my Daddy built a gasoline station and garage,” Phil said. “It wasn’t the first one in Kettle, but it’s lasted the longest.” Phil put his hand on my shoulder, “Now with my retirement, Freddy here has got all the headaches of an owner.”

The day Phil announced his retirement, a Tuesday in the spring of nineteen and fifty-six, two big events had happened. Late in the morning Beverly returned from a visit to Doc Simonton's office and phoned me all excited "I'm pregnant!" I nearly dropped the phone. Doc told Beverly that she and our little child looked healthy. That evening we drove to Charleston for a special celebration dinner. Beverly's blue eyes sparkled with radiance from deep within her.

After we went to bed we held each other so tight I didn't know which would happen first – my arms would break or my heart would burst with love. Later I put my ear against Beverly's stomach and rested my head there. I laughed and told her I thought I heard a voice say "Mom." As her tummy warmed my cheek I thought about our baby forming in there. Later I woke up in that position.

The second event came after lunch. Phil said he'd decided to retire, and offered me a way to buy the business out of its earnings. Phil's announcement and offer surprised me, but then I recalled how over the past couple of years he'd asked me to take on more and more responsibility – to the point that sometimes he didn't come in for a day or two. Beverly and I talked about Phil's offer every evening for a week. The opportunity excited us, but the financial risk caused us to hold back.

We decided to do it. I talked with Phil and folks at the bank. Once we had the paperwork finished, at age twenty-six I became the new owner of Buckingham's. Though calling me the owner had to be an overstatement. I had a mortgage on the business and hoped to someday own it. The day I signed the papers Momma and Daddy drove into Buckingham's and filled their car with gas. Daddy shook my hand and Momma gave me a big hug. Before they left I cleaned their windshield and checked the oil. One quart low.

Now, sitting in Bertha's Place with Ralph and the boys, I turned to Phil and said, "Once I became the owner of a business, I must have become a good credit risk. Not long afterwards, Beverly and I bought the old Poindexter home on Elm Street."

Hartford said, "I always liked that place. White frame, two stories. Big yard and shade trees. Nice. At least it was back then."

I turned to Ralph. "We looked forward to raising our children there, Ralph, but in no time I wondered if we'd made a good decision. After town council's new program of what amounted to exchanging our shady streets for wider thoroughfares, lots of folks around town began to put their homes up for sale, move out. The people who bought their homes often came from out of town."

"That must have been hard for you, for everyone," Ralph said.

Whit chimed in, "Wasn't long before town council had to hire a full-time night policeman, what with all the noise and rowdiness around Kettle after dark. How's that for a government program, Ralph?"

Many nights Beverly and I lay awake wondering what all the changes in Kettle would hold for our kids, us too. Sometimes one of us would touch the other in the special way that signaled we wanted to make love. One morning we talked about it and realized we made love just to settle ourselves enough to be able to sleep – different than the passion that'd been part of our lovemaking in the past. It troubled us.

Suddenly the front door of Bertha's Place swung open. A tall fellow in a bright red windbreaker stuck his head in and yelled, "Hey, folks, can somebody tell me how to get to the Piggly Wiggly supermarket?"

Chief Tackett never looked up, just said in a loud, firm, and level voice, “Take a left at the stop light, drive within the speed limit for a half-mile, take a right at the caution light, proceed forward about two hundred yards, then hit the accelerator. You’ll crash into the cash registers at the Piggly Wiggly.” Then the chief looked up at him and smiled, “I’d suggest you stop at about a hundred and eighty yards.”

Everybody around the table grinned. Shufflehead gave a big laugh and said, “That’s a good’n chief.”

The man stared at us for a few seconds then muttered, “Thanks,” and shut the door.

“Yessir, Ralph,” Hartford said in a sarcastic voice, “we got a Piggly Wiggly market and a new town center. Sure done a lot for Kettle. Just look up and down our empty Main Street.” He took a sip of coffee.

The chief spoke in a quiet, exasperated voice, “You’d’ve thought town council coulda figured it out.” He looked towards Ralph. “After the four-lane opened in fifty-four, everybody started complaining to me and town council.” He raised the loudness of his voice a notch. “No place to park on Main Street so they could do their shopping. And all town council did was argue. A couple of councilmen wanted to tear down a building or two and put a parking lot in the middle of our old downtown. Another one had a hair-brained scheme to restrict traffic – sell parking passes for downtown Kettle. In the middle of it all a feller from Huntington come in, bought ten acres of cornfields on the east side of town, filled in some of the low-lying bottom land and put in a bunch of stores with a big parking lot. He named it the Kettle Town Center.”

“I’ve often wondered why in tarnation didn’t somebody stop it?” Pappy Roosevelt asked.

Phil answered, “You know why, Pappy Roosevelt. We don’t have zoning in Kettle. All we’ve got is deed restrictions to keep colored folks from buying homes here. If you want to put a business, even a commercial outhouse, anywhere in town you can do it, as long as it’s legal.” He looked at Ralph. “By the summer of fifty-seven, Ralph, we had a second downtown called Town Center.”

Shufflehead’s face beamed. “I like that big sign out in front of it, next to the four-lane – a kettle with steam pouring out of it. How’d anybody think that one up?”

The Kettle Town Center, a single-story ribbon of stores with a huge asphalt parking lot, had a Piggly Wiggly supermarket on one end, a Big Hammer hardware store on the other end, and assorted small businesses in between. Before the Piggly Wiggly opened, most folks in town had heard about supermarkets but few had ever shopped in one.

“We didn’t see it comin’, Ralph,” Whit said softly. “After the new stores opened, the old downtown stores continued to do business just like they had in the past. A year later Gruber’s Department Store went out of business. Then Hartford here decided to retire and closed Wilson’s Dry Goods. Before long all the stores in our old downtown had closed. There’s no way you would know this, Ralph, but Gruber’s and Wilson’s had been fixtures in Kettle forever. Gruber’s had been there since before the turn of the century. When I pass down Main Street and look at those empty buildings I feel like old friends have died.”

“It was about time for me to retire anyway,” Hartford reflected. “The new Town Center may have pushed me forward a year or two. My wife says we should be grateful, it’s nice to have more time together.”

Chief Tackett’s voice carried a combination of relief and sadness, “A bunch of small shops finally moved into some of the empty buildings on Main Street – greeting cards, hand-made jewelry, and leather products, that sort of thing. But they last about as long as a kernel of popcorn in hot oil.”

Shufflehead said with some enthusiasm, “I like the name of that new barbershop on the first floor of the old Gruber’s Department Store, ‘The Hairport.’”

“That’s where the grocery department at Gruber’s used to be, Shufflehead. We’ve moved a big step towards the modern age,” Hartford said with a wince.

“One thing strikes me about those new shops,” William White said reflectively. “The signs on the storefronts are all hand-lettered. It’s a known fact in schools of business that a hand-lettered sign on a store is a sign of uncertainty, likely failure.”

“Tell ‘im whut come next, Hartford,” Shufflehead suggested.

“OK. I guess we have to talk about it sooner or later.” He paused and looked at Ralph, then said in a low voice, “Ralph, they came in and took away Kettle High School.”

Ralph looked down at his coffee.

Hartford’s words caused a sinking feeling in my stomach. The *Kettle News Leader* broke the news in nineteen and fifty-seven, not long after the birth of our son, Jackson. The *News Leader* reported that the county Board of Education would close Kettle High and build a regional high school. The new school would serve the towns of

Kettle and Tipple, our archrival in football and basketball, as well as in spelling bees and the world series of math. The new school would be located halfway between the two towns, about ten miles north of Kettle.

Ralph spoke softly, “That must have been hard on the town.”

I replied, “At the time I didn’t know which was worse – our kids going to school with kids from Tipple, or Kettle without Kettle High School. But I knew this – closing Kettle High would cut the heart out of our town.”

Out of me, too. Jack wouldn’t go to Kettle High School, most likely would never know a place that had meant so much to me. I wanted to believe the newspaper’s story had no truth to it. But I knew James Garfield wouldn’t report that kind of news without first checking the facts.

I said, “I tried to find some good in the board’s decision, maybe more advanced subjects for the kids or a better football team. But whatever I came up with couldn’t offset the loss I felt. Still feel. The afternoon of the day we learned about the closing, on my way home I ran a stop sign. Nearly had an accident.”

When Beverly heard the news she broke down in tears. That’s the day we decided to sell our home. On the positive side, that very night our lovemaking improved. We soon bought a ranch-style house still under construction in a new development about three miles west of Kettle. Later Beverly and I had a big fight over a choice of kitchen appliances – she wanted avocado green, I wanted harvest gold.

On moving day my insides got all wrenched up into knots. Living outside of Kettle? Hard to believe. I’d been born in Kettle. Momma and Daddy too, so had my

grandparents. The world had come to life for me in Kettle – the place where I marked my boundaries, my accomplishments. A place that marked me. When I stood on the streets of Kettle and looked at the hills around town, I felt comforted by their broad shoulders, soft colors. I could tell the time of day by changes in the light on the hills. Move out of Kettle? I'd move away from a part of myself.

That day I went back and forth from our old place to our new home, each trip moving parts of our past, our belongings, from a life we knew to one we didn't know. And each trip through Kettle loosed a flood of memories, seemed to take hours. At the same time, when I looked at the treeless streets and the old downtown, or the shell of it that remained, I knew my memories reflected a place that had passed on.

After we loaded the moving truck with the last of our furniture, Beverly walked up to me with Jack in her arms. She pulled the three of us together in a big hug and said, "The move will be good for you. For Jack and me too." Then she gave me a warm and lingering kiss.

Bertha's round "Drink RC Cola" clock hanging beside the doorway to the kitchen showed nearly ten o'clock. "Well, folks," I said, "Phil's got plenty of time to sit and talk, but I've got to get back to work. Nice meeting you, Ralph."

I pushed my chair away from the table as a dusty blue four-door Chevrolet parked in front of the restaurant.

Ralph looked out the restaurant's plate glass window. He got excited and said, "Hang on a minute, Freddy. There's somebody I'd like you to meet."

Senator Hubert Humphrey stepped out of the car. He and the driver walked into Bertha's Place. Ralph greeted them and shook hands. He asked Bertha to please serve them some coffee. Senator Humphrey introduced himself to everybody and shook hands with us. He and his friend wore no suit coats and the sleeves of their white shirts were rolled up to their elbows. Senator Humphrey insisted we call him Hubert, and we did, but to me he continued to be Senator Humphrey. Though, with his rumpled shirt, chubby oval face, and warm smile, if you overlooked his Minnesota accent you might mistake the Senator for somebody from Kettle. He introduced his friend, Orville Freeman, who looked to be about Hubert's age. Orville combed his hair with a straight part on the left side and wore round horn-rimmed glasses. A few weeks later *Time* magazine mentioned Orville's title, Governor of Minnesota.

Senator Humphrey gave us a big smile and said, "Coffee's on me." He and Orville sat down and Bertha refilled everybody's cups. She brought Shufflehead a fresh RC Cola, looked at Senator Humphrey and asked, "This OK, Hubert?"

He grinned, "Sure."

After the senator had been introduced to Pappy Roosevelt, he called him "Pappy." Pappy Roosevelt gave Senator Humphrey a wide tobacco-stained smile.

We had a little chit-chat comparing our weather to the weather this time of the year up in Minnesota, and then Senator Humphrey looked around the table. In a serious tone of voice said, "I'm glad you got to meet Ralph, he's a good listener and will fill me in on your conversation." He paused and looked around the table. "But let me ask you folks a question. What kinds of issues should the next president of the United States address in order to help towns like Kettle?"

“I reckon we’ve never been asked that,” Hartford answered. “Until you and Senator Kennedy came along, the last candidate for president to visit Kettle was William Jennings Bryan in aught eight. He gave a speech from the rear platform of his train, right beside the old railroad station that once sat directly across the street from this restaurant. He talked a lot but he didn’t ask any questions.”

Hartford paused for a moment and looked squarely at Senator Humphrey. “But when I think about your question, Senator, ...er... Hubert, I think we need to figure out how to recover what we’ve been telling Ralph about, what we’ve lost.”

Senator Humphrey raised his eyebrows and glanced over at Ralph. Orville asked, “What did you lose?”

Hartford spoke at a slow pace. “Until not long ago, Orville, Hubert, Kettle was a sleepy little town, just a spot on the map, but it was a place we loved. We conducted business with one another, went to school and church together, and cared for each other. One day, without so much as a ‘howdy’, the State Road Commission slipped in and tore down our old covered bridge, over a hundred years old and solid as a rock.” Hartford went on to describe how the state dropped a four-lane highway into the middle of town, then gave town council a bundle of money to cut down our shade trees and widen our streets.

“Don’t fergit the Interstate, Hart,” Pappy Roosevelt said. Hartford described how the Interstate caused homes to be torn down and sealed off one side of town.

Pappy Roosevelt interrupted, “And tell Hubert about how the new Town Center went up, and all the old businesses on Main Street went down, families started movin’ out.”

“Now we got theft, vandalism, and a night policeman,” Whit said.

Hartford continued, “And to cap it all off, one morning we sat down to breakfast, opened our newspapers and learned that the Board of Education had voted to close Kettle High School. What do you think would happen to the little towns in Minnesota, Hubert, if you took the high schools outta them?”

Senator Humphrey nodded.

After a pause in the conversation, Bertha spoke. “Well boys, you too, Hubert, Orville, maybe this’s as good a time as any to tell you my bad news. With all the old stores on Main Street gone, my business has dropped off to near nothing – and has stayed there for a long time. Some days I don’t make enough money to pay the light bill. Six months ago I started looking for somebody to buy the place. I offered to darn near give it away. But no takers. As much as I enjoy your company, boys, I’m too old and too poor to do full-time charity work. In a few weeks I’m going to close the restaurant.”

Whit Saunders’ mouth fell open. He lived alone, came here every day. Every evening, too. William White sat speechless, wide-eyed. Pappy Roosevelt reached into his back pocket, pulled out a plug of chewing tobacco, bit off a chunk and began to chew.

Phil Buckingham’s face dropped into a sad expression. “Bertha, you’ve been...this place has been...part of Kettle...our lives.”

“Boys,” Bertha replied with tears in her eyes, “you’ve been part of my life too. But walk out the front door – look at the empty buildings up and down Main Street. I can’t make ends meet.”

Hartford turned towards Senator Humphrey. His voice sounded like it did when, years ago, he taught our junior high boys’ Sunday school class. “Hubert, this restaurant

sits on the site of the first building in this territory, the Kettle Trading Post. Bertha and the owners before her have served hospitality, good food and drink for a hundred and fifty years. Here's where our town began, came to life. The life of every dad-goned person who ever lived in Kettle has been touched by this place."

I didn't know if I should speak my mind, but decided to jump in. "Hubert, I read that you were once the mayor of Minneapolis." My voice quivered. "Maybe you can understand how a little town like Kettle is sort of like a person. It has a heart, it lives and breathes." I paused for a few seconds to collect my thoughts. Senator Humphrey took a sip of his coffee but kept his gaze on me. "And if you rip out the heart of a town, even in the name of progress, life can't be pumped in any more. We're losing Kettle – it may already be gone."

Nobody spoke. Hartford cleared his throat and leaned forward, his elbows on the table. He put both hands around his coffee cup and bowed his head, shoulders slumped. Then he looked up at Senator Humphrey, who looked squarely at him. In a soft voice Hartford asked, "If you're elected president, Hubert, can you help us get our town back?"

Jack trotted across the field towards me waving his little arms. Behind him the horizon glowed a fading pink under a ribbon of pastel blue. The dark of night rushed across the sky from the east.

"Come on, buddy, let's go home."

"Go."

I smiled and knelt. "Hey, you've really got that g sound!"

Jack grinned and threw his arms around my neck, "Pig-gy back?"

After we tucked Jack into bed Beverly and I walked outside, stood in our back yard under a dome of bright stars. The crisp moist air held a faint scent of apple blossoms. I put my arm around Beverly's waist.

She whispered, "It's like the sky is filled with jewels."

After a moment I said, "When I was a kid, sometimes at night I'd hike up Tucker's Point, about where the Interstate now comes through Kettle. Half-way up the mountain the lights of the town would spread out below me. I'd think about how all the lives in Kettle were in those twinkles of light. I'd wonder if, on other nights, I'd be in the twinkles that somebody else looked down on."

Beverly leaned into me, we kissed.

"Then I'd climb all the way to the top. Kettle would become a bright spot in a sea of darkness – and beyond Kettle other bright spots would glow."