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What Bends Together Bends Apart

Frank paused on the back stoop and listened for the sound of his field hands waking up in their trailers. He sensed the whole world waited with him: the October moon poised on its back above the dark ash trees, the dawn a patient edge of apricot, his cabbage field pearly green. With the frost so thin and crystalline, the cabbage leaves seemed brushed with feathers as if Frank had worked all summer and fall to grow a flock of ghostly green which might at any moment startle and take flight. The cabbages stretched out, long, clean, straight, row after row, each thick-leaved head hiding a tight white heart, one hundred and fifty rows in all, each row over a quarter mile long stretching from the river to the highway. On mornings like this, in a mood like his, in the middle of a good cabbage harvest, Frank had to hold in his heart. He wanted to be humble but the beauty of his world could be overwhelming.

A light came on in the first double-wide. Jesse, his foreman, was awake. The four other trailers, lined up along the lane between the barn and his blueberry fields, were dark boxes in the gray dawn. By the end of the next week, when all the cabbages were tucked safely in the co-op's cooler, his seasonal workers would be off to the lettuce fields. Jesse would stay through the winter, working with Frank on the machinery, while Jesse's wife, Louisa, helped out in the house. Frank knew he couldn't make his living without Jesse and his crew. The cabbage he liked to grow—top quality two-and-a-half to three pounders, fresh market ones so crisp they squeaked when he rubbed them together—needed to be picked carefully, handled gently, stored properly. There were machines that could harvest cabbage faster but they gobbled up every head whether it was ready for harvest or not. The immature heads would grow soft in storage; the damaged ones would rot. The debris and dirt the machinery picked up caused even more problems. Experienced pickers like Jesse's crew could tell by the feel of a cabbage cupped in one hand whether it was ready for the knife or not.

Frank knew the assumptions people made about farmers like himself. The evening news exposed tomato growers in Florida and lettuce farmers in California. People boycotted food stores and picketed restaurants in protest of farmers who used migrant labor. The reproach of strangers didn't so much matter to Frank, but when he looked to the trailers alongside his lane, he often found himself wondering what wounds festered there, what words found their way across kitchen tables. Jesse and his crew knew the narrow profit margin he worked under. When all the loans were met, the

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bills paid, the repairs made, taxes settled, and wages dispersed, Frank's income in a good year was only a couple thousand more than Jesse's and Louisa's. Yet, even in a bad year when Frank had to bear the loss himself, the weight of his land, his house, his barn, machinery, and business kept him at a place of which Jesse and the others could only dream. No matter how much Frank thanked his workers, no matter how short or long he made the speech, how big the bonus check, how well he thought they were treated, he still felt uneasy, a little unclean, a co-conspirator. Sometimes in the middle of cabbage harvest, a remnant of a long ago dream would leak back into his brain: a band of stooped workers, backs permanently bent, knives flashing, were reciting a dire manifesto as ghostly white heads rose up out of the dirt. He could never quite hear what the heads squeaked back before the knives' work was done.

Frank buttoned his jacket and pushed his thick hands into his work gloves then walked across the frost-licked farmyard to the barn where his two draft horses stomped, steamy and impatient, in their stalls. By the time he'd finished his chores and let the horses out into the pasture, the lights in the second, third and fourth trailers were on. Jesse's two boys and their cousins huddled at the end of the driveway, stomping much like Frank's horses in anticipation of the day. The steam from their warm breath against the cold world and the sound of their laughter stirred up memories of Frank's own four children, the youngest one off to college only the month before.

It was on his way back to the house for breakfast that he noticed the strange car sitting cock-eyed in front of the fifth trailer. He wouldn't have picked it, a late model BMW, as a migrant's car. He glanced in the front seat—a wadded up T-shirt, fast food wrappers, pop cans—then in the back: a case of Corona and a soiled diaper. The windows of the fifth trailer were still dark. He would speak to Jesse after breakfast.

"Whose car is that?" His wife was standing at the kitchen window, draining a pan of macaroni into the sink and studying the fancy black car through the steam.

Frank eased off his boots in the back room. "Someone must have come in during the night."

"It's got funny license plates."

"New York," he said, turning on the kettle to make himself a cup of coffee.

She shook the pan and drained it again, keeping her eyes on what she called migrant row. Frank and Doris had met by chance thirty-two years before at his high school graduation party and married a year later, a week after hers. She was a busy, straightforward woman with plain clothes and plain tastes, curious about life in their family, on their farm and in their trailers, suspicious of anything outside her domain. While

Frank had turned reflective and occasionally melancholy at his last child leaving home, Doris had turned testy as if thirty years of guiding and guarding four children and organizing their lives, meals and laundry had left her with an excess of energy and a paucity of places to interfere. She'd taken to correcting those around her and Frank feared Jesse's boys bore the brunt of it.

"I could hear those boys all the way down the driveway this morning, chattering away like magpies. Don't they have any respect for people who might be sleeping in." Doris had never slept in a day in her life. She had risen soon after Frank and already had two pans of apple crisp in the oven and had started on the macaroni salad. "You should talk to those boys when they get home from school."

Frank was used to her list of shoulds: he should trade in his Farmall for a new air-conditioned John Deere; he should charge the migrants rent so they learned money management; he should plant squash as a late crop—that's what her father always did—not cabbages. He poured boiling water into his coffee cup then poured the rest into a bowl and stirred in a pouch of oatmeal. Cabbages were risky, especially late crop ones, and labor intensive. So much depended on timing and a good work crew. Fortunately this year August had stayed cool; September and October, warm. The first frost had not been a killing one, only enough to bring out the flavor, slow down the growth and keep the heads from splitting. Frank had found a new buyer with a better price for quality hand-picked fresh market cabbage. In their first pass through the field the week before, the mature heads were tight and dense, nice two to three pounders. By the end of this week the majority of the heads would be harvested and the seasonal workers would be on their way west. By the end of the next week Frank, Jesse and Louisa would have the field stripped.

This middle week of cabbage harvest always had a certain gaiety to it. Doris, a better public cook than private one, fixed old-fashioned dishes—macaroni and cheese, goulash, sloppy joes, scalloped potatoes and ham—and she and Frank and the workers ate their noon meal together. At dusk Jesse would build a huge bonfire between Frank's house and the trailers and after supper all of them, moms, dads, kids, sometimes even Frank and Doris for a little while, pulled folding chairs into the fire's light. Friends of Jesse's, who were also staying year round, would stop in and say goodbye to those who were heading south and west.

Frank rinsed his dishes and took a second cup of coffee with him out to the field. "Morning," he called to his pickers who stood in a semicircle alongside the flatbed, taking turns sharpening their knives on a whetstone, waiting as Jesse hooked the trailer to the tractor. Frank studied the sky, the gray band of clouds, and the long rows of cabbage bending towards the

horizon. “Morning, Jesse, looks like another nice day.” He glanced down the lane. “Whose car is that by the last trailer?”

The crew shifted their feet in the dirt and glanced at one another while Jesse finished snapping on the chains then wiped his hands on a rag he kept in his back pocket. Frank felt an undercurrent, something he should know but would not be told. He knew better than try to pronounce the Spanish words he knew—words about farming and family life, sickness, machinery and INS regulations, words enough to make sense of things. His question about the car had brought something uneasy into the day. Jesse came around to Frank’s side of the tractor. “It belongs to a cousin of Rosaura’s.” Rosaura was his brother Thomas’s wife. “He and his family came in late last night. They need a place to stay a few days until they can go west with the others.” Jesse glanced down the lane towards the black car and fifth trailer.

Thomas, the louder of the two brothers, a little rougher, shook his head and made a comment. Frank caught only the last two words: “*mal fortunados*.” Bad what? Bad luck? Bad future?

Who lived in the fifth trailer—unlike the double-wides, it actually was a trailer, a twenty-foot Airstream that Frank and Doris had pulled to the Houghton Dam for family vacations when their kids were little—was left completely up to Jesse. If Jesse charged rent, it went into his pocket, not Frank’s. That was their agreement. Workers would move in and out all summer long and Jesse always knew them somehow: a cousin who was up for the blueberry season, a friend of the family who came to pick strawberries, a drifter whom the priest or the woman at the migrant center sent his way. The trailer was clean—Doris and Louisa saw to that each spring and fall—but it wasn’t very fancy, never meant for long-term family life.

“What’s the problem?” Frank was thinking about Thomas and the stir Thomas’s words had caused in the other workers.

Jesse climbed up onto the tractor. “He has a wife and child. They’ve come with nothing. He won’t be staying long, only a few days, and then he’ll be gone.” It was more explanation than answer, and Frank recognized it as Jesse’s gentle way of keeping Frank outside of life inside the trailers. Jesse started up the tractor. The workers—women first, men next, Frank last—fell in behind and Jesse led them out to the spot where the picking had stopped the day before.

The girl was sitting on the tailgate of Frank’s pickup when they came in for their midmorning break. She was a thin, flat-faced, white girl with a halo of white hair as short as dandelion fluff. She wore a faded sweatshirt, jeans and flip-flops. Frank didn’t see the Mexican lying stretched out in the bed of the truck until the man sat up at the sound of their voices. “*Amigos*,” the man called and jumped down, greeting and hugging the workers, kissing

them, men and women alike, in a way that seemed friendlier on his part than theirs. He was thirty-five, maybe forty years old, with tufts of short black hair knotted up on his head. He had a goofy, slinky look as if not quite all there, not mentally handicapped, Frank thought, but something else, something lower, deeper, was not quite right. He had on dressy slacks, cheap and wrinkled, and a black knit shirt that hugged the muscles across his chest and shoulders. The girl stayed on the tailgate, head down, and it wasn't until Frank came around behind the truck to get the water canteen that he saw the baby. It startled him, a tiny bundle wrapped in a dirty yellow blanket and lying on the hard metal ribs of the truck bed. Its face was small and red. Its tongue was working its way across its lips and the girl put her finger to its mouth, letting it suck on her knuckle. She lifted her head. "Ask him, Nado" she said to the Mexican, "you ask him." Frank opened the cab of his pickup and set down his knife and hat. "Nado, you promised," she called, her voice rising in complaint.

The stranger was gripping Jesse's hand and Frank knew enough Spanish to understand he was asking for work. Frank stayed out of who was hired and how many field hands were needed—that was Jesse's decision. This late in the season Jesse often took on a drifter or two. Field work didn't keep them long, only long enough to pay for a tank of gas, a night's lodging, so it surprised Frank when Jesse refused. It must have surprised the girl too because she dropped down off the tailgate, came around the side of the truck and took the matter up with Frank.

"You got to hire him. We been living out of our car for a week." Her eyes were sharp blue. She was smaller, maybe older than he first thought, could be sixteen, maybe seventeen. It was dawning on him that this girl and this middle-aged man were in some kind of relationship. "Nado told me this was God's country, that these people was family, he told me you was good men and take care of one another." Frank couldn't tell if it was a complaint against her husband, Jesse or him. Her eyes went out over his fields, his barn and farm equipment, his machine shed, his horses, and settled on his house and garage. "We need to get some groceries and enough gas to get to L.A. Nado's got a friend there." She must have sensed Frank's hesitancy. "A few days, what's a few days? Look at all them cabbages. Why can't you use another picker?" Put that way it seemed obvious.

Jesse frowned and in a voice loud enough so the girl and the other workers could hear told Frank that they couldn't hire him, that the man was an illegal and had forged documents. It was one of Frank's rules.

"Fuck the documents," said the girl.

Frank's head bobbed up, startled. The workers startled too at the word. No rough language, another Frank rule.

"*Controle a su mujer,*" Jesse said to the stranger who laughed and answered back, "*¿Quién puede controlar el viento?*"

“The law is the law. No papers, no work.” Jesse pulled his baseball cap down over his eyes. “Break time is over.”

“Then I’ll work,” the girl said, “I’m as American as they come.” Her eyes challenged Jesse then shifted to Frank. “You can’t deny me that.”

Frank glanced at the yellow bundle in the back of his truck then asked, “Have you ever picked cabbages?”

“I been picking stuff all my life—rice, lettuce, strawberries, cantaloupe. Nobody’s complained yet.” Her eyes were small and hard. “What’s the big deal? They’re just cabbages for God’s sake.”

Frank looked out over the field. That’s all they were—cabbages.

“They keep food on our table,” said Jesse, “and clothes on our backs—you pick them, you respect them.” He reached over the side of the truck for a tool belt. “Here’s a knife, keep it sharp. You lose it, you pay for it. We start at eight and work until dusk. The shipment goes out on Friday. You get paid Saturday.”

“Can we stay in the trailer?”

“As long as you keep it clean. Any damage comes out of your paycheck.”

“How much do I get paid?”

“Depends on how much we get for the cabbage. Day workers get minimum wage, then everyone gets a bonus if it’s a full load, fresh market grade A and delivered on time.”

The yellow bundle worried Frank. It lay so still, eyes open, unmoving. “Who’ll take care of the baby?” he asked.

“Fortunado,” said the girl. She buckled on the knife and waded out into the cabbages.

Jesse put her to work packing the fifty-pound cartons, saying her hands needed to learn the feel of mature heads before she took a knife to them. “Hold this,” Louisa, Jesse’s wife, said and passed a fat green head into the girl’s hands. “Good solid head, feel how heavy and thick. A head looks big or small—doesn’t mean it’s ready or not. We go by feel. What’s not picked today grows some more tomorrow.”

“That’s heavy.” The girl started to tip it back into Louisa’s hands.

“Dense,” said Louisa, refusing it. “Listen with your hands, listen all the way inside its heart. If it’s not ready, it won’t keep. Put it there.” She pointed at a packing carton. “See how clean we pick? No sticks, no dirt, no damaged leaves. We pick clean, you keep them clean, eighteen to twenty-two to a box, you keep count.” The girl shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The ground between the rows was still damp and cold from the frost and curled up around the sides of her flip-flops. “You drop one, we can’t ship it, so be careful. Don’t you have any shoes?”

The girl, as if it was too obvious a question to answer, looked down at the carton of cabbages then ahead twenty feet to where the two circles

of workers were slicing off cabbages, trimming off the outer leaves and setting the tight round heads back on top of the rows. A half-filled carton sat three rows over.

Jesse took a piece of corrugated cardboard off the trailer and folded it open into a box. "We work fast," he said, "the longer the cabbages set out in the sun, the more apt they are to wilt." He grabbed another cardboard flat and folded open a lid. "When Louisa goes in to fix lunch, I'll send someone else to help you."

"Where do I put the boxes?"

"Leave them right there between the rows. Someone will come back, check them and load them on the trailer."

Frank worked a little ways ahead, watching as the girl wove back and forth between the trailer, the cartons and the workers, listening as the women peppered her with questions and she gave out bits and pieces of her life. The baby was seven weeks old and colicky, and they'd come from New York where Nado had been making good money as a dancer in a club in the Poconos. When the club went bankrupt they decided to head someplace warmer: Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Hollywood. They were only stopping here until they could get there. Nado had a friend whose brother danced in the movies and could get him a job. "A regular Fred Astaire," said Thomas and all the workers laughed, but the girl insisted, "That's right, I seen him dance. You won't be laughing when we're millionaires."

By noon, when they broke for lunch, they had finished the second sweep of the first twenty rows and Frank had stacked the cartons in the refrigerated trailer that stood alongside the field. Doris and Louisa had lunch set out on a long table in the garage. Even though the two women spoke cheerfully enough to one another and the crew, Frank could tell by the firm line of his wife's lips and the way she refused to look at him that she was irritated. He scrubbed his hands at the sink in the garage and tried to think of what he had done. The men washed up behind him and went first through the line, taking large helpings of macaroni and cheese, baked beans, gelatin and dessert, then sat on folding chairs in the garage or outside on the ground under the maple tree. The women filled their plates and found places at the picnic table.

The girl's eyes had grown big at the sight of the food and when she found out it wasn't only for workers, she went into the trailer and came back with the baby and the sleepy-eyed man. He piled his plate full with food and found a seat with the women while the girl filled the baby's bottle from the milk jug at the end of the table. Putting the bundle on the ground, she brushed up a pile of leaves and propped the bottle there so the child could drink. She went back for her food then sat cross-legged next to the bundle. She ate quickly and when she came back with seconds, Frank asked, "What's your baby's name?"

The girl looked at him in a sudden sharp way as if she suspected more than friendliness behind the question. "Don," she said.

"Don?" He thought he hadn't heard right, such an old fashioned name for a girl to chose.

"Yeah, Don," her eyes settled for a moment on the infant, "so he always gets respect, like Don Pedro, Don Juan, like Don Diego de la Vega, you know, like in the movie." She glanced at Frank and then at the back of the man at the picnic table. "Kind of a joke, Don—like everyone will be saying 'Sir' to him."

"Oh," said Frank. The bundle seemed to be disappearing in the leaves, its mouth barely moving on the nipple. The bottle seemed no emptier than before.

A few of the men stood and stretched, went back for seconds; others moved off to the driveway to light their cigarettes. The girl finished off her second plate before Frank was half finished. "Are them Percherons?" she asked studying the horses and saying, "I thought so," when Frank nodded. "My grandma down in Louisiana used to have a white pony and I would ride him like the wind." She set down her plate and jiggled the bottle in the baby's mouth. "But that was when I was little," she added as if it was a lifetime ago. "How come you have work horses instead of riding ones?"

Frank's mind fumbled, unable to name why, and the girl didn't wait for an answer. Instead she pointed towards the trailer they were staying in. "There ain't no TV in there," she said, not so much in complaint as in a statement of fact, a clarification, as if once Frank knew about the problem it would be fixed, "but there's plenty of hot water." She pushed herself up from the ground and walked to where the men stood smoking.

The child stayed very still, eyes narrowed into slits. When Frank looked closely, he could see the infant's pupils moving ever so slowly back and forth. The bottle had slipped from its mouth and the nipple pressed against its cheek so that drop of milk hung there. Frank felt an urge to wipe it away, to pick up the baby and tuck it in the crook of his arm. It had been years since he'd cradled a child so small, not since his youngest daughter he was sure. Back then babies had been a mystery of feeding, changing, and crying which only Doris could solve, a bundle of do's and don'ts. This one seemed empty, a shell as fragile as the leaves around him. Frank could picture the girl's parents and her grandmother living down the road from one another in small, unpainted houses with lots of lawn ornaments and patches of crabgrass and petunias dotting their yards. On October mornings like this the grandma must look out into her pasture, see that white pony knee-high in star thistle and think of her little girl.

Nado laughed, still lounging at the picnic table, entertaining the women with a story about a flamenco contest, a rooster and a wet woman—those

were the words Frank could catch. His arms and back were well-muscled, his waist trim. When he turned his head to laugh again, Frank could see the lines on his face and the folds in his neck, marks of an older man. The three women laughed with him and Jesse's cousin, a single-mother, laughed loudest.

"Lunch is over," Louisa called from the garage. She collected up the serving spoons and loaded the bowls and platters onto a tray. Doris added a bowl to the pile. Louisa hustled to the picnic table and took the dirty paper plates and cups away from the women and Nado. "Lunch time is over," she said again, hurrying them along back to the cabbage, "Jesse wants you back to work." Nado laughed and tried to take Louisa's hand, playfully scolding her, saying something about women's work and working the women, which from the way Louisa scowled and the other women giggled Frank took to be both clever and rude.

The stranger stood and stretched up onto his tiptoes, arms extended, a dancer's move, then noticed Frank watching him and sitting close to the baby. "*Señor*," he said with a nod as he picked up the baby and carried it back inside.

"Don't just sit there." Doris stood over Frank, dirty paper plates trembling in her hands. "You have to do something. A girl her age, a man his age, it's illegal. I'm sure it is." Frank scrambled to his feet, surprised by the savageness of her voice. She set the plates on the picnic table and swiped at the crumbs with her dishcloth, glancing around at him, making sure Frank knew she was talking to him. "What brought them here, that's what I'd like to know. They've got nothing but the clothes on their backs and the dirt in their pockets. Did you see her? She's feeding that baby milk from a jug. She has no idea how to care for that child."

"She's just a child herself," he apologized.

Doris shook the crumbs out into the grass. "That's the whole point of what I'm saying."

Frank looked out across the cabbage field at the slow-moving tractor, the empty flatbed, the stooped backs of his workers, the severed heads, the decimated stalks. Suddenly the harvest seemed a loss, not a gain.

Thomas found the first damaged head. He brought it to Frank and Jesse bottom side up. The soft white web-like mold made a spot the size of a quarter. The leaf tissue around the spot was watery and transparent. Thomas folded back the damaged outer leaves, exposing layer upon layer of soft, wet issue.

"White mold," said Jesse.

"Bad luck," said Thomas. He and the other workers glanced towards the fifth trailer where Nado sat on a trailer step dozing in the sunshine. The baby lay on a sofa cushion at his feet.

Frank looked up the unharvested rows for signs of wilting; the mold couldn't have appeared over lunch. Maybe it was an isolated spore. He pulled out the whole plant from which Thomas had cut the damaged head. He and Jesse inspected the plants on both sides of where the infected one had grown and, even though they looked healthy, pulled out those plants too, roots and all, just to be safe. If spores had touched them, white mold would spread through the carton they were packed in. Jesse brought a gunny sack from the trailer and they put the damaged plants in it and twisted it shut. Frank wasn't too concerned—one damaged head might not mean anything—but that night when Jesse lit the bonfire, Frank threw all of the rot, sack and all, into the flames.

Frank was surprised when he opened the barn door to find the light on, even more surprised to find the girl brushing down his two draft horses. She stood between them and must not have heard the door creak open for she was talking to the animals, calling them imaginary names and talking of the journeys the three of them might take together. "We'll ride to the end of the rainbow," he heard her say. Her fingers found a snarl and gently pulled it apart. "You, Giddy-up, will be my trusted steed and you, Giddy-down, will carry all my gowns and gold."

Frank, embarrassed, back away but not before the girl spied him and stopped her playing. "Your horses had a bunch of cockleburrs in their mane. Hope you don't mind me brushing them."

"No, that's fine." The horses moved to the gate at the sound of his voice and the girl moved with them, a yoke between two giants. "I thought you would be tired from working in the field," Frank said. The closest horse nuzzled his hand.

"There's nothing to do in that trailer." She stroked the brush under the horse's neck. "Are these two brothers? They look exactly alike."

"Twins, a perfectly matched pair." It wasn't only conformation and color that paired them. As young colts, even before they'd felt a harness, each responded to how the other moved, matching stride to stride, as if what they most needed to know—how to move in harmony—had been bred or born into them. He didn't tell her how rare such a perfectly matched pair was and how he had happened by, the right buyer with the right money at the right time. A woman at his church had said, "Must be God's will," but he wouldn't go that far. "Luke here," he touched the horse the girl was brushing, "is about ten minutes older."

"What's this one's name?" She touched the shoulder of the other horse.

"Gabriel."

She made a face.

"They were named after a pair of draft horses my grandpa had."

“Oh,” she paused and thought for a moment, “that makes sense. Can I sit on them?”

“They’re just yearlings, not ready for that yet. I’ve been getting them used to things—the feel of the bit and bridle, the weight of the harness on their backs, the feel of the reins across their haunches.” Frank pulled off the string from a bale of hay. The horses moved to their manger and stomped impatiently. The girl moved with them, a hand on each shoulder, waiting while Frank brought in the hay. He picked up a shovel to clean out the stall while she stayed with the animals, wrapping her arms around their necks and whispering play things.

Frank woke in the night to the sound of rain on his roof. He listened for the distant sound of thunder warning him of more to come but all he could hear was the rain’s steady tap and the wash of water through his gutters. He told himself to go back to sleep, that there was nothing he could do about rain, that the clouds would pass over by morning. He thought of the white mold spreading, then his wife and the way she had spooned out the girl’s troubles as he had sat on the edge of the bed, taking off his socks and shirt, getting ready for sleep. “She knows tricks a girl shouldn’t know,” Doris had said. She’d gotten her information from Louisa who’d gotten it from Thomas’s wife, Rosaura, whose sister was married to Fortunado’s cousin. Doris had the whole scoop: his full name was Fortunado Guillermo Navarrez, although he went by other names too, and they had just come from upstate New York where he’d lost his job as a male stripper—the health department had shut down the club’s kitchen and it lost all its customers. She’d had the baby seven weeks ago and Nado had met her the fall before when he and some of the family were working the rice yards down in Louisiana just after he’d lost a job on a cruise ship that caught fire on its first voyage out. A cousin had gotten him onto the rice crew but he only stayed long enough to get the girl in trouble, attract a flock of redwing blackbirds and leave the relatives hopping mad. Nado and the girl had to leave New York in a hurry too with nothing—no clothes, no crib for the baby, no food, no suitcases—not that they’d ever had much to start with. Louisa had been inside the trailer and the girl wasn’t much of a housekeeper, not that it mattered living on the road the way they did. And she wasn’t much of a mother either. “But that’s pretty obvious,” Doris had said, buttoning up her pajama top and moving around to her side of the bed. “You’ve got to do something, Frank. It’s shameless. Rosaura says he’s close to forty. The girl claims she’s sixteen but we don’t believe it, more like fourteen or fifteen.” She pulled back the bed covers and he thought he saw her shudder. “The things he must make her do in that trailer out there.”

She stirred in the bed next to him and he shifted in response, settling the small of his back against her hip and listening to the sound of the rain. He thought of Jesse—he, too, would be awake, listening to the rain—and then the girl. It occurred to him how she should come and live with him and Doris. They could adopt her or become her foster parents. He thought of the hollow-eyed baby in its dirty blanket, how that poor thing could come too. They could buy it a crib and one of those jumpy-seats—his own kids always liked those—and his wife could fix up their oldest son's room as a nursery again. He thought of his wife's harsh words and after a while, when the shushings of the rain had washed them from his head, he rolled over and softly whispered the girl's name in his wife's ear, "Lilly." Then, half-wish, half-prayer, he added, "Lilly loves you."

The next morning was cool and damp, so soggy not a drop could evaporate. Water dripped off trees, left a film along the leaves of cabbages and turned the dirt between the rows slick and black. The whole world looked washed in gray: gray sky, gray barn, gray horses. A light was on in Jesse's trailer as Frank walked to the barn so he stopped and knocked. Jesse had already been out to check the field—the south section was covered with puddles. They would wait for it to drain, go out midmorning and eat lunch later than usual. The girl was already in the barn when Frank got there, wrapped in a horse blanket and curled up on a bed of hay bales. He guessed she had slept there all night and, haunted by his wife's words, found himself relieved. There was a soft mewing, like Frank's feeble old barn cat, and following the sound he found the baby wedged against an oat bag. It mewed again and the girl sat up, blinking, rubbing her face with her hands. She patted the baby, then tried to satisfy it with her knuckle. Her eyes were puffy and dark; her mouth, a thin frown line. Gone was the horse dreamer of the night before.

Frank shook the water off his hat. "It's too wet to work. You might as well go back to sleep."

The girl scowled. "Can't." The baby fussed, turning away from her hand. The girl slumped and Frank thought for a moment that she was going to lie back down, but she shifted her weight and tried patting the baby again. "I got to get to town to get some stuff for Donnie. Diapers, wipes. Louisa said maybe if I give him some rice cereal or baby food he might not cry so much."

"Do you need some milk?"

"I got some but he don't take to it, leaves his poop all runny."

Frank thought of his wife's criticisms and said, "Our kids stayed on formula for a long time. Maybe he'd like that."

"Yea, formula, I could get some formula."

Frank opened the grain bin and measured out oats and vitamins into Luke's bucket. He felt her eyes watching him. "Do you want to feed Luke?"

he asked, setting down one bucket and picking up another. He shoved the scoop into the grain and gave it a shake to level it off.

“Nah,” she looked away from him to where the horses stood. “Jesse said payday ain’t till Saturday, but I thought you might pay me for what I did yesterday—,” she let the idea hang there between them—already Frank was thinking he would just give her some money—then she finished, “cause you are the boss of him.”

Frank set the scoop down, took out his wallet and two twenties appeared. It was all he had except for a couple of singles. “Take this,” he said, “as a gift. You don’t have to pay me back.” He thought of the cost of disposable diapers, formula, a gallon of gas and gave her the singles too.

“Thanks,” the bills disappeared in her fist, “that’s nice of you.” There was a bit of a smile.

“Babies are expensive.” He felt fatherly. “I want you to take good care of that little boy.”

“Oh, I will.”

“I remember when my oldest son was born,” he measured out another scoop of grain, “we had just gotten this farm from my dad and hadn’t even had our first crop of blueberries yet, that’s all we grew back then except some sweet corn and tomatoes that Doris sold at a little stand out front.” He smiled at the memory. The girl slipped down from the bale and shifted her weight from one foot to the other, as if eager to get going. She picked up the child. “You take off now,” he said, “as wet as it is we won’t be out in the field until midmorning.”

He followed her to the barn door and watched her go into trailer and come out a few minutes later without the baby. She started the car. He thought she might look towards him and wave, but driving took her full attention. Sitting forward on the seat, stretching for the gas pedal, she steered back and forth, a little erratically, a little too fast through the mud and puddles, out to the highway.

Around noon it occurred to Frank that she wasn’t coming back. His pants were wet up to his knees and his sleeves wet up to his shoulders. He and the others had been out in the field for over an hour and he found himself watching the highway each time a black car breezed into view and each time it breezed out again. He pictured her on the expressway, bouncing on the seat, singing along to the jumbled-up lyrics of some hard rock song. Forty bucks would buy a tank of gas. She’d get six, seven, maybe eight hours away—Pittsburgh? Iowa City? someplace south of Indianapolis? He pictured Fortunado asleep in the back of the trailer, not even realizing she was gone, the baby tired of whimpering, silent, slit-eyed, mummified in yellow cloth. He’d never seen the child’s arms or legs. Did it have hair? He couldn’t remember. What was the shape of its face? The color of its

skin? His eyes? All Frank could remember were the half-opened lids, the small pink tongue feeling its way along thin purplish lips.

The clouds stayed low across the field, hanging in huge rolls of gray and blue. The air was damp and cool, and when the workers came in for lunch, they first changed into dry clothes and clean socks. Doris and Louisa had set up enough folding tables and chairs in the garage to get everyone out of the damp. As the workers assembled and after Frank had blessed the meal, the women brought out bowls of coleslaw, loaves of garlic bread and big pans of hot lasagna. Nado must have been watching out a window because as soon as the workers lined up at the food table, he emerged, carrying an open-topped cardboard box with the words "This Side Up" and an arrow stamped on two sides. He set it at the edge of the garage door and, all smiley and talky, oblivious to the sullen faces around him, found a place in line.

Frank could smell it and didn't have to look to know what was inside. The man who sat closest to the box began to wave his hand in front of his nose. The others made faces and complained about the smell. Louisa, her face set in a scowl, went to where Nado was spooning coleslaw and began scolding him in Spanish about the way the baby was being treated. Fortunado's answer was a goofy smile and a long excuse.

"What'd he say?" Frank asked Jesse.

"That diapers can't be made from thin air and his wife has gone to the store to get some, he says he can't help it if she's slow."

This answer or perhaps his cavalier attitude made Louisa even angrier. "Stupido," she said and marched into her house, soon returning with a bucket of soapy water, paper towels, clean rags and safety pins. She pushed the box with her foot to a nearby trash can and ordered Nado to get the baby some clean clothes. She unwrapped the bundle, wiped away as much soil as she could with the blanket, then dumped the box, the blanket, the foul diaper and all the clothes into the trash. She wiped him clean, and then, holding the baby at arms length, she carried him to the bucket and dipped him up to his chin in soapy water. "You dirty little baby," she said roughly then repeated it, her voice softening, "dirty bambino, what kind of father you have that do this to you?"

All the women gathered around, Doris too, their faces flickering between sympathy and outrage. Louisa lifted him out, inspected him and dipped him in again. She cupped her hand and brought the warm soapy water up over the child's dark hair, then carefully wet the edge of a rag and wiped his face and eyes and the mucus from his nose.

"You're going to need some clean rinse water," said Doris.

Louisa lifted the baby high while Doris dumped the dirty water on the lawn and went inside to get more. The child hung midair, arms and legs knotted up, not braced against the cold air the way Frank expected he

would be. The women, especially the grandma and Rosaura, were shaking their heads, muttering that something wasn't quite right with the child but Frank couldn't make out what. Then the door to the fifth trailer opened and the women's anger flowed again. Fortunado had brought out clothes no cleaner than the others.

Louisa rinsed the baby in the clean water then wrapped him in a big terry cloth towel. Rosaura came back from her trailer with a pile of doll clothes and an afghan blanket in a laundry basket. The women sorted through the pieces, deciding on a long blue nightie and yellow booties. Louisa set the baby on the table, opened the towel, quickly swaddled him in a triple set of clean rags, dressed him and wrapped him in the afghan. The baby's eyes were wide brown spots, his mouth opening and closing in silent exclamation. Frank saw Doris glance out the open garage door then touch Louisa's shoulder and lean over and say something. He glanced out the door. The girl was back. She was reaching into the back of her car, pulling out shopping bags, oblivious to the faces hard-set against her. As she walked closer, shopping bags bumping around her legs, Frank could see her eagerness melt and the wariness return to her face.

"Lunch time's over," said Jesse. He stood up. "Let's get back to the field." Most of the men stood but didn't move. The women stayed seated, a fierce semicircle around the baby.

The girl looked at Fortunado, then saw the baby on the table in front of Louisa. "I got some diapers." She pulled out a big package of disposables. A fat-cheeked Gerbie smiled from the plastic wrapper. "And some wipes and a blanket and pacifier." She placed the items on the table around the baby, a peace offering. "And, I got him this." It was a stuffed bear, twice as big as the baby, all floppy and furry white with a red bow around its neck. "Look, Donny, here's Big Bear. He's come to play with you." She lowered the stuffed animal, shaking it, engulfing the baby's body in a mat of white fur.

Frank saw his wife's eyes narrow, saw the other women exchange looks.

"You better diaper him," said Louisa, "before he pees through those clean clothes and Rosaura's good afghan."

"I will," said the girl lifting her chin as if all along that had been her plan. "And I bought him some baby food." She set the jars out one at a time on the table beside him. "Some peas and beans and apricots."

There was another stir. Fortunado kept his eyes down, pushing his food onto his fork with his finger.

"How about some formula," said Doris, "did you ever think that babies might need formula?"

The girl snatched the child up from the table, shucking off the afghan and clumping the new blanket up around him. "I got some of that," she

said, her voice sounding more defensive than convincing. She piled her purchases back in the bags with her free hand then took off for her trailer.

The women murmured. The grandmother crossed herself. Doris came to the serving table where Frank was standing and spoke not very softly as she folded the tinfoil back around the food. "Frank, you have got to do something."

He felt Doris's scorn, the eyes of the women, the solemn faces of the men watching him and he wanted to say, What? What do you want me to do? Send them away? Not let her work? Instead he put on his seed cap. "Let's get back to work."

He was ahead of the others, a third of the way down the row, when he grasped a cabbage and right away his fingers told him it was infected. Slicing off the head into his hand, he turned it over and felt his heart fall. The bottom three layers of leaves were slimy, covered with white cottony mold. He rolled it into the gully, felt the next head and found that one infected too. The further north they moved in the field, the more the white mold flourished. By nightfall Frank was beginning to understand the full extent of the damage. So were Jesse and the other workers. Frank could no longer in good conscience sell any of them as top market fresh; they'd have to salvage what they could and sell them for processing at half the price. Instead of packing them in cartons, the pickers rolled the damaged heads into the gullies between the rows and left them there overnight. That night around the bonfire, even the children were subdued; everyone turned in early. Bad luck had come to the farm and not one of them, not even Frank, could say how long it would stay.

The next morning clouds still hung low. The sun was but a blurry streak of gray. The air was still and heavy, so damp that Frank could feel it on his face. Charmed by dry warm October days, he'd waited two weeks too long to begin the harvest. Even when he couldn't see them, the spores had been there waiting for the right wind, temperature and humidity. By the time he made the third pass next week head rot would have spread across the entire field. As he made his way to the barn he thought ahead to all the severed heads rolling in the gullies, the fungal leaves, the spores multiplying, turning ribs to soft tissue, the mold spreading its webbed fingers until it reached each heart, the spore's raisin-like fruit turning hard and black, dropping into his soil, until the earth itself was contaminated. To take care of it properly, he'd have to take all twenty acres out of rotation and plant something else—corn, wheat, rye—for the next four years. What was implied was that he hadn't been caring for things properly, that he hadn't been cleaning up the fields as well as he should have after previous harvests, that he hadn't been keeping weeds under control, that he hadn't paid enough attention to nutrient content and done a proper job of preventative spraying, that given the gift of dry September weather, he'd held out for bigger heads, more profit.

He wasn't in the best of moods as he walked back to the house for breakfast. He would have to call Scott Hansen at the co-op and tell him he could only fill two-thirds of his fresh market contract and pay the penalty for backing out. About half of what was left could go immediately to the processing plant and the rest he would have to burn.

Doris was on the phone in the kitchen, and when he came in the back door, she hung up and started in again, chopping her food, complaining about the undocumented man, the working mother, the hungry child. "What mother buys her baby a giant bear, a white one no less? That thing will get dirty in no time. What's a bear like that cost, ten or fifteen dollars? You'd think they had all the money in the world."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"And where'd she get that money, huh? Louisa told me they had absolutely nothing when they got here, that she was begging Jesse to pay her early and he wouldn't. So she goes into town and come back loaded with stuff. Where'd she get the money, that's what I'd like to know."

"Leave her alone, Doris, she's just a girl."

"That's right!" His wife looked at him sharply. "A girl her age, a guy his age, it's illegal, I know it is."

"I said I don't want to hear about it." He turned away, out of the kitchen, out to where his desk and the co-op number sat in the dining room. Her voice followed him, "It's illegal, whether she wants it or not, it's illegal."

He dialed the number and kept his mind on cabbage counts, legal contracts, tons and half tons, Grade A, Grade B, price per pound, until he worked out a deal with the broker to give him enough to pay Jesse and the crew their base wages and almost cover the cost of the transplants, fertilizer and herbicide. He avoided Doris, skipped breakfast and went right out to the refrigerated truck where he spent the morning restacking cartons, opening every third box, flipping over random heads to make sure that the ones they'd already packed weren't turning transparent.

When he came out of the trailer, chilled, his face flushed from moving boxes, his big hands numb from the cold, the clouds had swept east and gathered into a low white fringe above the pines. The sun hung cock-eyed in the sky. He could see Doris and Louisa in the garage, setting up for lunch. Fortunado was already sitting at the picnic table, a bundle of blue before him. Jesse was out in the field, climbing down from the tractor—there seemed to be more heads in the spaces between the rows than on top of the rows. The girl and the other women were working by the tractor, stripping damaged leaves off infected heads, throwing the salvaged hearts into crates for processing. The rest of the crew was strung out across the field, straddling the rows or stooped over, the curve of each back repeating the curve of the earth and the sky. He heard Jesse's call that it was lunch time. The crew stretched and started back to the barn, then Jesse

called out Frank's name and pointed. The workers stood, eyes fixed on a tan sedan that was turning in the driveway. It circled the farmyard and stopped, nose to the highway. A police car followed it in. Frank glanced at the picnic table. Fortunado was gone.

Frank recognized the INS agent who was driving the tan car—a thin, serious young man who could be quietly intimidating. He was new to the county and even his name, Officer Brambel, suggested the snarl of government regulations that trailed him. He had come around during blueberry season and made the whole crew line up, even Jesse whose family had been in America long before Frank's ever was. One by one, Brambel had inspected their driver's licenses, social security cards, green cards and work permits, asking questions intended to foul them up. The agent who was with him today—maybe Latino, maybe Mexican—had a pair of binoculars to her eyes and was studying the faces coming in from the field. The two of them waited behind the open doors of their car as Frank crossed the driveway, their eyes taking in everything—the women in the garage, the food, the picnic tables, the trailers, the men and women in the field, even Frank—as if the slightest detail might contained a clue. The police officer had pulled up behind the black BMW and was calling in the license plate numbers on his car radio.

Brambel stepped to where Frank had stopped halfway between the two cars. "Hello, Mr. Bauer," his voice was as cool as the day, as formal as Frank's rows, "we received a tip that an illegal by the name of Fortunado Navarrez, a k a Lucky Navarrez, a k a Hernado Guillermo, is staying here." His eyes stayed on Frank's face. "Do you know where he is?"

"No," he could answer honestly.

"You have no idea where he is at?"

"No." Frank tucked his hands in his pockets and turned slightly as Jesse and the others came across the driveway. The girl glanced towards the trailer and the garage, looking for Fortunado, then she found the baby on the picnic table and glanced away.

Officer Brambel directed the pickers to move in behind Frank. "Hello, gentlemen, ladies. I don't think we will need your IDs today. We're looking for a friend of yours, Fortunado Navarrez."

The female agent repeated his words in Spanish then, eyeing the girl, asked, "How old are you?"

"I don't have to say anything." The girl's voice was defiant, but she kept her eyes down, focused on a patch of dirt beyond the driveway, trying not to look in the direction of her trailer or the baby.

"I heard you have little baby, a boy. Tell me about that. How old is he? Who's the father?"

The girl didn't answer, didn't move. The female agent turned towards the others, studying them, waiting like Brambel waited, for one of them

to feel the pressure and speak. Then the police officer called and motioned the agents to join him. The two agents listened to him, heads bobbing, as the officer pointed at the black car.

"I don't know which one of you called him in," the girl said softly, looking from Frank to Jesse to the others, "but you better pray the *migra* don't get him."

The police officer walked over to Frank. The agents backed him up. "Mr. Bauer," he was a short, big-chested man whose hands seemed to hang naturally at the height of his holster, "do you know where Mr. Navarrez is hiding?"

"No, sir. He was sitting at that table and disappeared when you drove in." A state trooper was a whole different story from an INS agent.

"Where'd he stay?"

"In that trailer." Frank nodded towards the Airstream.

The officer was writing down Frank's answers on a notepad. "Did he work here?"

"No, sir."

"Did you know he was in the United States illegally?"

If he lied, his workers would know he lied. "Yes, sir."

The officer studied him as if reflecting on what he had heard and who Frank was. "I've called in a K-9 unit and requested a search warrant. We're going to have to search all the trailers and your house and barns." He made it sound like nasty business, like something Frank would want to avoid if he could.

Officer Brambel interrupted. "If you gave us your permission, Mr. Bauer, we could start right now with the Airstream."

Frank thought of the tiny trailer, how dark and cramped the kitchen was. They would check the broom closet, the cupboard under the sink, and under the bed. They would expect to see a mess of dirty dishes in the sink, clothes and trash all around, but all they would find would be a white bear, diapers, baby food, a passthrough place for people who had nothing, made do with anything, and sooner or later bumped up against everything.

"We better wait for the warrant," said the trooper. "If he's in there, he's not going any place soon."

Frank glanced towards the fifth trailer, then looked towards the garage. Doris and Louisa were standing by the food table, their eyes shifting from the agents to the officer to the black car. When Doris saw Frank looking at her, she quickly looked down and turned back to setting out lunch. Frank saw Louisa look at Jesse and then look at the car.

Officer Brambel frowned, glanced at the workers and the girl. "Well, then, while we're waiting, we'll work our way down the trailers, look in the windows, check things out. You never know what kind of stuff we just might see." The workers' faces shift ever so slightly; even Frank recognized

it as a threat. "It'd be a lot easier if you told us where he was." Brambel studied the faces then motioned for his companion to follow. They walked along the front of Jesse's trailer, looking in the windows and then the two of them went around the back.

The police officer turned back to Frank. "Mr. Bauer, is that the suspect's car?"

"Yes, sir." Frank tried not to look at it.

"It's stolen. It belongs to a State Supreme Court judge in upstate New York who is not happy about his car disappearing. I've called a tow truck."

Something must have given it away—a look or maybe the fact that, like Frank, nobody looked, but the officer sensed something. He glanced over his shoulder at the car then tucked his pad back in his breast pocket. He crouched down, hand at his holster, and moved carefully up alongside the car, then had the rear door open, Nado hauled out by the ankles and hung spread eagle across the back fender. "Brambel," the officer yelled and the agents reappeared. Fortunado hugged the fender, talking Spanish as fast as he could, explaining himself, shaking his head at the Spanish officer's questions, saying that he'd borrowed the car from a friend, that he didn't know it was stolen.

"Okay, all of you," Brambel shooed away the crowd, "get on with what you were doing."

Frank found himself trembling. He could see his wife there, serving, spooning, smugly setting out the meal. The other workers moved towards the garage. Jesse and the girl didn't move.

"Lunch time." Jesse touched Frank's arm.

"I'm not hungry. I'm going out to the barn." He silently willed the girl to pick up the blue bundle and follow him. "Lilly, you okay?"

The girl's face was hard and inscrutable, then changed to disgust as she watched the trooper guide her husband into the back of the patrol car. She shook her head. "What kind of a dumb ass hides in a stolen car?" She walked across the lawn to the garage, filled her plate and, picking up the bundle on the way, disappeared into her trailer.

Frank spent the next few hours, banging around in the tools and bins in his barn, having conversations with his horses that he knew he'd never have with Doris in person. He would accuse her of calling immigration and she would deny it. She would act offended that he would even ask such a thing. He would say that she'd been wrong, that she'd sinned against that girl. She would say that it didn't matter, that whoever had done it had done the girl a favor. It could have been Louisa, or one of the other women. He practiced words: traitor, snitch, do-gooder. He would talk to Doris and together they would enroll the girl in the local high school, get the baby into a good pediatrician and then into daycare. There were

special programs to help teenage mothers get job training and care for their kids. She could move into Thomas and Rosaura's house when they left for California. Frank himself would take her down to Social Services and get her signed up—his taxes paid for all sorts of programs that could help out kids in trouble. He carried on all afternoon to his horses, and when he chased them back to the south pasture and joined Jesse and the others in the field, he meant to talk to the girl but she wasn't there. He hacked away at the cabbages, watching her trailer for signs of life.

By the time dusk came he and the others were bent over the rows at the far end of the field. Seen in the last light of day, the land behind them seemed a battlefield scattered with white heads; the unpicked rows ahead, their hearts still hidden, were a dark and brooding plain. As Frank stooped, picking one more cabbage, he heard a murmur rise up in his workers.

The girl was three-quarters of the way down his driveway, walking towards the road, the blue bundle cradled in one arm, the white bear clamped tightly under the other. Frank knew he should stand up and move. Jesse started up the tractor and a low rhythmic chugging pulsed through the gloom. The crew put away their knives. A car went past on the highway, then a semi, their taillights spots of red in the gray air. As the girl reached the road, she turned and put out her thumb at the sound of each approaching motorist. A car whizzed by, another car, a pickup truck. Frank thought to stand and call her name but he found himself rooted, unable to move, a soldier caught missing in action among a scattering of heads and hearts, dumbstruck, watching the girl march out of view, watching for a flash of brake lights, a sign that a kinder, finer world might for one moment stop.

Jesse had the tractor almost back to the barn. The workers were strung out in a line behind him as if being pulled back to supper, to bed, to rites of everyday life within the trailers. As they disappeared into the dusk Frank felt the tug. He stood and walked the row back towards the barn. A light was on in his kitchen. Doris was moving back and forth between sink, stove, refrigerator, table, setting out supper, aligning plates and forks and spoons and knives and lives. He kept his eyes on the ground—it was a bright chance, gone, two worlds bending back away from one another. He swung open the south door of the barn and searched the pasture for his horses. The sky was navy blue, clear, cold. Only a thin strip of gray topped the tree line. With the cloud cover gone the frost would be a killing one. He called out his horses' names, "Luke! Gabriel!" He heard the team then saw them moving side by side against the dark trees, trotting towards him, two snorting steeds, matched and matching, pulling the night in behind them.