

Hank Williams' Cadillac



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Also by Richard Wall:

Evel Knievel and The Fat Elvis Diner

Five Pairs of Shorts

Fat Man Blues

It was my buddy Stu who came up with the idea.

My name's Vince, and when this story began Stu and me were 19 year-old high-school drop-outs and occasionally reformed stoners sharing a broke-down, drunk-leaning, leaky old double-wide on a third-world trailer-park in a small town in Nowhere, Texas.

Sometimes in life you don't know where you're headed until you reach a point where you lift your head and decide if that's where you want to be. Turns out we ended up in entry-level jobs at Walmart. That was two years ago.

Need I say more?

Notwithstanding our ongoing education from life and the internet - majoring in popular culture and low animal cunning - two years of the real world made us realise that maybe we should've made more of an effort at school.

As a fat man once said, "It is what it is."

It was late one Sunday evening, and Stu was getting mellow to quell the dread of another year-long week in retail, when he experienced a bong-inspired epiphany that he and I would join the US Marines. All we had to do, he said, was serve long enough to qualify for a college education, and then all our dreams would come true.

"Well, hell," I said. "That's random."

We had nothing to leave behind, Stu's mom was dead, and mine was in jail, partly for dealing in meth-amphetamines and Oxycontin, but mostly for trying to kill me (but that's a story for another day), and so we were raring to go, both of us excited to embark on this next stage of our lives.

Anyway, as a kind of last hurrah to civilian life we decided to set out to explore the back roads of the Texas boondocks and see if we could get some anecdotes under our

belts before the maelstrom that we knew would befall us at Boot Camp. We'd heard horror stories from "One-eyed Joe", an enigmatic Marine Corps veteran with a drink problem and a kickass record collection, who lived three trailers down from us.

Joe told us he was part Navajo, and wore a tattoo that said 'Semper Fi', and a USMC baseball cap that crowned a waist-length, silver-grey pony tail. He also wore a dime-sized puckered scar just below his right shoulder, and a patch over his left eye, both of which he told us he got in 1968 at a place called Khe San.

Joe said he'd always been lucky.

Once our enlistment day was finalized, we organized the road trip and set out in Stu's 30 year old, shit-box Honda Civic - he'd christened it "Brian", after Brian Wilson, because 'Little Honda' was his favourite Beach Boys song.

What can I say? When it comes to music, Stu is a borderline savant.

Anyhoo.

Day one passed without incident, culminating in a night spent first in a strip bar (thanks to a couple of forged IDs), and then in a dive bar next to a sleazy motel at a down-at-heel truck-stop, where Stu got lucky with a rinsed-out waitress called Irene.

We set off on day two, nursing weapons-grade hangovers. Around midday we'd passed the Cadillac Ranch on the I-40 just outside Amarillo. Stu slowed the car so we could pay homage to ten Cadillacs half-buried nose-deep in a field, and then informed me that the cars were positioned at an angle corresponding to that of the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt.

"No shit?" I said.

Once past the art installation, Stu found a country music station playing Johnny Cash back to back, whereupon he cranked up the music and buried his right foot. I fell asleep soon after.

When I woke up, we were driving in thick fog, immersed in a swirling cloud that coated the Honda in moisture that the windshield wipers struggled to clear. Soon after; the radio packed up, and then, crawling at ten miles per hour, the Honda suddenly lurched as the engine began making a clank-thump noise that sounded to me like a mechanical death rattle.

The car stumbled onwards, black exhaust-smoke staining the fog behind us.

"Shit," said Stu. "The temperature gauge is off the scale."

"How long's it been like that?" I said.

"Beats me, dude."

Great.

"We may as well keep it going," said Stu. "If we stop, we may not get it started again."

I had no argument with that and so we limped along for a while, wincing at the sound of mechanical carnage taking place deep inside the Honda's engine.

Eventually the fog began to disperse; thinning at first to reveal brief glimpses of a deserted Texas landscape, and then clearing completely as we approached a green road sign with serious gunshot wounds, and with defaced and weather-beaten writing that put me in mind of the last words of a dying man:

"Welcome to Rambling." It read.

"Where the holy fuck is Rambling?" said Stu.

My iPhone said 'No Service', so I opened the glove compartment.

"What are you looking for?" said Stu.

"A road atlas?" I said.

"Dude, seriously?"

Just as we passed the road sign the Honda backfired, lurched once and then rolled silently to halt at the side of the road, steam erupting from beneath the hood like the passing of its soul.

D.R.T. Dead Right There.

Stu grunted. "Well, that's the end of this suit."

We got out of the car. Behind us, the road converged to a shimmering vanishing point. Ahead of us sprawled a handful of tired-looking buildings, the closest of which was a used car lot, about a fifty yards away and bedecked with sun-faded and wind-tattered red, white and blue bunting that hung limply in the still morning air.

"I've still got no service," I said. "Let's go see if we can use their phone to call Triple-A."

"Triple-what?" said Stu.

Stuffing the Honda's keys in the back pocket of his jeans, he gave me a shit-eating grin as he donned fake Oakley wraparounds (a dollar-ninety-nine from Walmart), and then patted me on the shoulder. "It's all good, bro'," he said. "Maybe they got a mechanic who can fix us up?"

"Good luck with that," I said.

We set off towards the used car lot, Stu leading the way. As we drew closer, he whistled.

"Holy shit," he said. "Those are some sweet, sweet rides."

He was right. Every single automobile in the lot was an American classic. Ford Model B Coupes, Chevrolets with gleaming fenders, Cadillacs with sweeping fins. It was a cornucopia of chrome and whitewall tires. All the cars were in mint condition and not one was made after 1967.

At the front of the pack was a powder blue 1952 Cadillac convertible with Alabama plates. The roof was down and as we approached, a large crow settled on the top of the windshield, flapped its wings a couple times, folded them and then tilted its head to one side, its beady eyes tracking us as we wandered around.

Stu checked out the license plate. "No way," he said.

"What?"

"This looks like Hank Williams' car."

"Hank Williams?" I said. "The country singer, Hank Williams? Your Cheatin' Heart and all that."

"Yeah."

"Are you serious?"

Stu took a breath. "I seen a picture of him sitting in a car just like this, and I recognise the license plate."

"Bullshit."

"Dude," he said. "How many powder blue Cadillac convertibles do you think were registered in Alabama in 1952?"

The crow lifted its wings and then settled, its head to one side, staring intently at Stu.

"That means nothing," I said.

Stu shook his head, grinning like a maniac.

"This is it, man. I'm telling you. This is Hank Williams' Cadillac."

"He ain't wrong," rasped the crow.

Stu and I did a comedy double-take and said, "What the fuck?" simultaneously.

"He ain't wrong."

The bird spoke with a sandpaper voice that put me in mind of Tom Waits after a night smoking Lucky Strikes.

Stu looked at me. "You heard that, right? Tell me you heard that."

"A talking bird," I said. "Well, shit just got weird."

The crow dipped its head a couple times, and then flapped its wings as it skittered for a few steps, lifted into the air, turned a 180, dropped back onto the windshield and then nodded towards the rear seat.

"Hank Williams croaked right there," it said.

Both Stu and I peered into the back of the Caddie. In the foot well lay a few beer cans and handwritten notes on scraps of paper.

"Mah associate is right."

Startled, I turned to see a tall, thin white man who looked about 60. He had thin, wispy hair, a white goatee, and wore a cream coloured suit that had seen better days. He was sweating profusely and wiped his face several times with a large white handkerchief.

"Somewhere near Oak Hill, West Virginia, Hank Williams took his last breath, right on that back seat."

"D.R.T." said the crow. "Dead Right There."

The old guy's shabby appearance, and measured, polite southern accent put me in mind of a plantation owner who was down on his luck. Yet the glittering hardness and intensity of gaze from his steely blue eyes as they locked onto mine, raised hairs on the back of my head.

He extended his hand. "They call me Bubba," he said. "And this here's my car lot."

My mind was still trying to process the talking bird, but I heard myself ask, "where exactly are we, sir?"

Bubba winked. "You seen the road sign, son. This here's Rambling."

"Well, we're kinda lost," I said. "And our car's broke down. Can you maybe show us where are on a map?"

Bubba laughed once, and then gave a wink that made me shiver. "Oh, we ain't on no map, son."

"Well then, is there any place nearby that can take a look at our car?"

"All in good time, son," he said. "All in good time."

He turned to Stu. "I can see you are a man of discernment."

"That is one sick car, my man," said Stu.

"Interestin' choice of words."

Bubba gave another wink that walked over my grave.

"How much?" said Stu.

"Stu..." I began.

Bubba flashed me a look and then stepped between us.

"How much for what, son?" he said.

"This car," said Stu. "How much?"

"That depends, son. How bad do you want it?"

Stu shook his head. "It's a mighty fine automobile, an' I'm fairly certain I cain't afford it, but I'm kinda interested to know by how much."

I tried to step around to get to him, but Bubba placed a fatherly hand across Stu's shoulder and manoeuvred them both to a position that put their backs to me.

"Well," said Bubba. "In my experience, if you want something bad enough, then you'll find a way to afford it."

"You'll find a way," rasped the crow.

"Stu, we need to get going." I raised my voice, partly to get his attention, but mostly to hide the tremor of apprehension that hummed through my body.

I failed on both counts.

Bubba turned and gave me a terrible smile. "Son, your friend and I are in a business discussion, and besides, you ain't got a car. Where you gonna go? Now, we got a lotta fine automobiles in this lot, why don't you take a walk around and check 'em out?"

He turned his back on me and resumed inaudible muttering.

"Take a walk," rasped the crow.

Using up the last of my false bravado, I flipped the bird to the bird and then turned away. I reasoned that there was no way Stu was going to be able to afford to buy the Cadillac, so I may as well take a look around until he came to his senses.

I caught sight of an old car that looked to be from the 1920s. Up close it turned out to be an old Packard. Its square, wooden body looked like it belonged in a black and white gangster movie. Behind the Packard was a midnight blue Lincoln convertible with DC plates. Like the Caddie, the top

was down, and at 20 feet long it was a whale of a car, with three rows of seats.

As I wandered around the lot, distracted by thoughts of talking birds, something about the random collection of cars sparked a glimpse of recognition, something I couldn't put my finger on.

Whatever.

I looked around. Bubba and Stu were nowhere to be seen, and I was about to head towards an old Porsche that I had spotted, when I heard voices.

At the rear of the lot was a small, single-storey office-building that I hadn't noticed before. I walked across to it, and glanced through the open door. Bubba was standing over Stu, who was sitting at a cheap wooden desk, holding a fountain pen that leaked what looked like red ink onto a piece of paper in front of him.

"Don't worry about that, son," chuckled Bubba. "All we need is your signature."

Bubba looked up, caught me staring and gave a grin that froze my heart. For the briefest of moments, I swear that his eyes flashed red and his mouth widened to reveal sharp pointed teeth, and then I blinked and Bubba was back to normal.

Whatever normal was.

"Your buddy scratched his finger," he winked. "A little blood sure goes a long way."

Documents signed, Stu slid his chair backwards, and as he stood up I caught a glimpse of a few red spots on and around the flamboyant scrawl of his signature.

Stu licked the tip of his finger as he replaced the cap on the fountain pen, returned it to Bubba and then turned, his

shit-eating grin flashing wide as he spotted me. "I got it," he said. "I got Hank Williams' Cadillac."

Standing behind Stu, Bubba looked directly into my eyes, gave a smirk that almost made me shit my pants, and then picked up a sheaf of documents and a set of car keys and handed them to Stu.

Stu thanked him and then winked at me. "C'mon man," he said. "Let's get our stuff."

Putting his hand on my shoulder, Stu steered me out of the office, and once clear he leaned in close. "He's taking my Honda," he said. "Didn't even want to look at it." His eyes glittered. "My car, plus six-hundred bucks, and we're driving away in a Cadillac."

Stu's grin stretched wider. "He even took a check for the six hundred and said he's gonna fuel her up and she'll be ready by the time we get our stuff together."

I gave a half-hearted return to his fist-bump and followed him back towards his now previous car. My mind raced as I struggled to catch up with what had happened, words scrambling in my head as I attempted to give voice to the serious concern that I felt.

In the end the best I could come up with was a bad feeling that some heavy shit was about to go down.

Another shiver ran through me. I looked back over my shoulder, Bubba remained by the door of the office, his steel blue eyes locked onto me like a laser-sight.

I turned back and ran a little to catch up with Stu.

"What happened back there?" I said.

Stu sucked on his bleeding finger. "What do you mean?"

"How did you cut your finger?"

He thought for a moment. "You know? That was some weird shit. The dude gave me a fancy pen and as I took the cap off, something scratched my finger. It was like it hit an artery." He paused, and then grinned. "Bubba said he didn't expect me to sign it blood."

A spoonful of vomit hit the back of my mouth and then burned down my throat.

"What about before?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," I said. "When Bubba was showing you the car, he blocked me out and I heard him saying something, and..."

The words died on my lips. Saying them out loud made me feel stupid.

Stu shrugged. "After you walked away, we talked about the car. He said that it was meant for me, that I was meant to drive it." Stu grinned. "At first I thought it was pure salesman BS, but then I kinda believed him, the car IS meant for me. It all kinda makes sense."

"Sense?" I said. "We chance upon a car lot in Christ knows where, run by Colonel Sanders, who convinces you that you're meant to be driving a '52 Cadillac. Putting aside the matter of a fucking crow with a voice like throat cancer, in what dimension does any of this shit make any kind of sense?"

"Always with the negativity," said Stu. "But that's what I'm talking about. Bubba told me I deserve this car. With all the shit I've had to put up with, he said that it's only right that I get something back."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "It's all good, Bro'," he winked. "I got me a car, it's as big as a whale and we're about to set sail. Chill out, man, these are some righteous wheels, and we can road trip in style, now. Just think of the

panties that are gonna drop when we roll into town driving this bad boy."

"Stu," I said. "Have you ever heard the phrase, 'if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is?'"

"No, I have not," he said. "Have you ever heard the phrase, 'my buddy is acting like a prissy little bitch because I secured the used-car deal of the century.'?"

"The deal of a lifetime," rasped the crow.

Startled, both Stu and I spun around to see the crow observing us from the vantage point of Bubba's left shoulder.

Insanely, I wondered if the bird had ever shit down Bubba's back, and I had to bite my cheeks to quell hysterical laughter.

Ignoring me, Bubba smiled at Stu. "The Cadillac is good to go," he said. "Thought I'd come and help y'all with your bags."

A few minutes later we were heading out of the car lot. As we reached the exit, I saw Bubba start the Honda and drive it towards the entrance. Stu sounded the horn, gunned the engine, and gave a rebel yell as he swung the Caddie out onto the road, the big ol' car twerking on its springs before straightening, and then leaping forward with a V8 roar as Stu gave it the juice.

"Oh MAN, listen to that motor." Stu cupped his groin. "Yeah baby, we gonna get us some serious poon-TANG with this m'fucker. Know'm sayin?"

Now that we were driving away from Bubba I felt myself begin to relax.

"This is indeed," I said. "One righteous automobile."

It didn't take long to blow out of the other side of town, and soon we were out in the Texas desert, barreling down a nowhere road that was straighter than a preacher and longer than a memory. Apart from distant hills, there were no landmarks, road signs or any sign of life. Just an asphalt scar bisecting miles of Texas scrubland.

Stu frowned and began to shift in his seat. "Something's sticking in my ass," he said.

Just as I was about give an obvious reply, Stu leaned to one side, slid his hand into the back pocket of his jeans and produced the keys to the Honda.

For the second time that day we both said, "What the fuck?"

"I thought you only had one set of keys?" I said.

"I do," said Stu.

"Then how did Bubba start the Honda?"

"Not only that," said Stu. "How the fuck did he start the Honda? I mean, that engine was dead, man."

We drove on in silence, and then Stu said, "He must have had a master key or something, and maybe a car dealer's trick to get the engine going."

I could tell that Stu believed that about as much as I did, but in the absence of an explanation I gave a non-committal grunt. Better to leave it there.

After a few more miles of silence, Stu slapped the rim of the steering wheel. "Man, where the hell are we?"

I checked my phone. Still no service.

"Beats the hell outta me," I said. "Just gotta keep going that way, I guess."

"Anything on the radio?"

I shrugged, twisted the chrome knob on the radio, and shook my head at the static hissing from the speaker as I punched all the preset station buttons and wound the tuning needle from left to right and back again.

"Nope," I said.

I switched off the radio, and then idly ran my fingers along the chrome trim and across the walnut panel. As I pushed the latch on the glove compartment, the lid dropped down and a plastic object skittered towards me.

"What the hell's that?" said Stu.

I picked it up. "Looks like an eight-track," I said.

"Do what now?"

"An eight-track cartridge," I said. "Used to play music in the days before cassettes, CDs or iTunes."

"No shit? Who's on it?"

I turned the cartridge over, it was well-worn, the faded label barely legible. "Looks like a Hank Williams album," I said.

"Hank Williams, you say? Would that be THE Hank Williams? Erstwhile owner of this fine automobile? Defence rests, your Honor. Well, what are you waiting for? Put it on, my man."

Now, I could have sworn it wasn't there when we first got in the car, but beneath the dashboard hung a bulky Motorola eight-track cartridge player. Switching it and the radio on, I pushed the cartridge into the slot. The hissing ceased and the hypnotic pedal steel and rhythm guitar intro to 'Rambling Man' burst out of the speakers.

For three and a half minutes, Stu and I were entranced by Hank Williams' melancholic voice singing about how the sound of a freight train gives him itchy feet. The song finished, and after a brief pause, started again.

"Must be on repeat," said Stu. "Put it on shuffle, let's see what else is on there."

"It's a tape," I said. "It just plays, there's no shuffle. You can't even fast forward."

The song repeated three more times before we both had enough and I switched it off.

"Man, where ARE we?"

The road continued to stretch ahead of us, the landscape unchanged.

"You know," said Stu. "Since we left Rambling, we ain't seen no road signs, or buildings, or cars or people."

I was about to reply when in the distance, what looked like a small wooden cross, planted by the side of the road, came into view. As we drew closer, it became clear that the cross was the first of six signs, painted red with white lettering, spaced at intervals of about a hundred yards, and which, when read in sequence made up a message.

Six more miles/you took the bait/signed in blood/accept your fate/enjoy the ride/Burma Shave

"Burma Shave?" said Stu. "Like in the Tom Waits' song?"

"It was an old advertising campaign," I said. "For shaving cream. They used to put up signs just like that along the road. I wonder what 'six more miles' means?"

"To the graveyard," said Stu.

"What?"

"Six more miles to the graveyard, it's a Hank Williams song."

He paused. "And I signed in blood, what the fuck does that mean?"

I turned to Stu. "It probably means nothing," I said.

He pointed ahead. "There's some more signs."

The Cadillac slowed as we approached them, Stu reading the words.

Too late now/too late to weep/you are the company/that you keep/enjoy the ride/Burma Shave

"Man, this is fucked up."

"It's just some old saying," I said. "They probably used it because it scans across the signs."

"Maybe." Stu didn't sound convinced, or look any less scared.

"Holy shit."

Stu's eye's widened. I looked out of the windshield to see the horizon filled by a bank of black storm clouds that rolled and tumbled towards us, releasing a curtain of rain that drew steam from the hot asphalt.

The Caddie skidded to a halt. The torrential rain sounding like a standing ovation as it raced towards us. Stu stabbed a button and we heard the reassuring purr as the powered roof unfolded and closed over us just as the first fat raindrops hit the windshield and then pelted the roof with a sound like gravel pouring onto a tin roof.

Stu shook his head. "Where the fuck did this come from?"

"It's just a storm," I said. "It'll pass over us."

"That ain't just no storm," he said. "Look at the size of that mother-fucking cloud."

I'd never seen Stu spooked like that. I slid across the bench seat and put my arm around his trembling shoulders. "Take it easy, man, I said. "It's just a dumb old sign and a rainstorm. Hell, we're gonna be US Marines, bro. Two weeks into Boot Camp this is gonna seem like good times."

He seemed to calm down. "I guess," was all he said.

Stu put the Caddie in gear, and with the wipers barely keeping up with the onslaught of rain, we set off slowly along the road.

We drove in silence, and then I caught Stu staring intently at the dashboard.

"What's up?" I said.

"I'm watching the odometer," he said. "We're about two miles away."

"Away from where?"

Stu shrugged. "From whatever was six miles away from that sign."

Stu frowned, and then sniffed. "Eww, gross. Have you unloaded? That stinks."

I gagged as an unholy stench filled the car. "Dude," I said. "That was not me."

Rain hit the side of my face as I dropped the window to let in some air. It helped, but not much.

I felt the car slow and looked over at Stu. He had one hand holding his nose, his eyes lifting and dropping as he checked first the road ahead and then the odometer.

The Caddie pulled over and rolled to a halt.

"Why are you stopping?" I said.

"I'm not," said Stu. "The car's driving itself, look."

He stamped on the throttle, mashing it to the floor several times. It made no difference, the Caddie's engine idled briefly and then the glorious V8 rumble lapsed into silence.

"Way to go, Stuart," I said. "You broke two cars in one day."

Stu flipped the bird as rain continued to batter the car, the heavy clouds closing in, reducing visibility outside to only a few feet.

The stench grew stronger, now a foul taste soiling the back of my mouth. I gagged again, and then heard something move behind me. Stu heard it too, we both turned to look back and screamed in perfect unison with a thunderclap as a flash of lightning illuminated the body of a man slumped across the rear seat.

The man shuffled to sit upright; his features hidden in the shadow of a battered Stetson hat, his skeletal form draped in what looked like the tattered remains of an ornate country and western stage costume.

Another lightning flash obliterated the shadows. The man looked around and then leaned back into the seat as if to get comfortable. Pausing for a second, he crossed his legs, raised a finger and tipped the Stetson to reveal desiccated skin stretched over the prominent cheekbones of a once-handsome face now gaunt with decomposition.

A thousand miles away, I heard Stu scream again as the man scratched his thin, pointed nose, cleared his throat with a sound like a coffin lid being prised open, and then parted his thin lips in a macabre smile.

"Howdy boys," he said. "My name's Hank Williams. Now, which one of y'all bought my car?"

I choked back a gasp as the fetid breath carrying his words washed over me. Over the sound of the rain I heard a retch followed by liquid splatter and turned to see Stu leaning over the door like a seasick passenger, his body convulsing in a post-vomit shudder.

Hank Williams winked at me. "That can happen," he said. "Now start the car and drive about a hundred feet and turn into them gates up ahead."

I stared at Stu, and Stu stared at me until Hank Williams broke the spell.

"Well go on, goddamit," he said. "They'll all be here soon."

Stu's hand shook as he fumbled and then turned the key. The V8 rumble reintroducing a brief sense of normality as the Cadillac moved forwards.

I looked over my shoulder just in time to see Hank Williams press a finger against the side of his nose and snort a bloated maggot from his right nostril.

"Who-all's going to be here, sir?" My voice sounded small.

Hank Williams sniffed, paused, and then said, "The rest of 'em."

"Rest of who?" I said.

"All in good time, son," said Hank Williams. "All in good time."

I felt the Cadillac sway as it turned to the right, and then straightened to glide beneath a huge wrought-iron archway

that stood at least twenty feet high, topped in large, ornate letters that spelled two words:

Rambling Cemetery

"Rambling?" I said, "We've been driving for like hours and we're still in Rambling? How big is this place?"

"Oh, Rambling ain't a place, son," said Hank Williams. "Not as such, you could say it's an existence, an actuality."

The rain stopped as we passed through the arch, the clouds rolling away into the distance and leaving behind a freshly scrubbed blue sky.

"Drop the hood, son," said Hank Williams. "Let's get us some fresh air around here."

Stu stopped the Cadillac, dropped the hood and then rolled forwards. The world was quiet save for the sound of the V8 and the crunch of tires on a tree-lined gravel track that stretched ahead for what looked like a quarter of a mile.

Hank Williams leaned forwards. "Up yonder, the track opens out to a big ol' circle. Like a lollipop on a stick. Imagine it's a clock and we're driving up from the six. I want y'all to park at the twelve, facing back this way. You got that, son?"

Stu nodded, his face ashen.

Hank Williams relaxed back into the seat until Stu finished manoeuvring and the car was pointed at the archway.

"Switch off the engine, son."

Stu turned the key and the Cadillac fell silent. In the back, Hank Williams hummed a tune that collapsed into a racking cough and ended with something being spat out of the car and hitting the gravel with a sound that will live with me forever.

"Here they come," said Hank Williams.

I looked up as a procession of automobiles turned into the cemetery and made their way slowly towards us, and it took me few seconds to realise that all the cars came from Bubba's car lot.

The old Packard led the way, driving counter-clockwise around the circle, stopping in front of us, and then reversing to park about ten feet to our right.

"Bessie Smith," mumbled Stu. "1937, on Highway 61, between Memphis, Tennessee and Clarksdale, Mississippi."

I looked sideways, Stu was slumped low against the back of the bench seat, and locked into a classic thousand-yard stare.

"You OK, buddy?" I said.

"James Dean," said Stu. "1955, Cholame, California."

"Do what now?"

"James Dean," he said. "Crashed at the junction of California State Route 46 (former 466) and California State Route 41."

I looked out just in time to see a Porsche 550 Spyder, reversing to park on the other side of the Packard.

After that came a 1966 Buick Electra, which reversed next to the Porsche.

"Jayne Mansfield," said Stu. "1967, Ringlet's Bridge, between New Orleans and Slidell, Louisiana."

Next to the Buick came a 1937 Cord Phaeton.

Slumped even lower in his seat, Stu stared at the steering wheel, his lower jaw slack, a pool of saliva building up behind his lip.

"Tom Mix," he said, saliva drooling down his chin. "1940, Highway 80, Arizona."

A 1950 Oldsmobile 88 pulled in.

Almost catatonic, Stu grunted, "Jackson Pollock. 1956, Springs, New York."

The final car was the midnight blue Lincoln convertible. As it too took its place, Stu's eyelids fluttered, his voice a faint whisper.

"November 29, 1963, Dallas, Texas. Hail to the Chief," he said.

"Time to go, boys," said Hank Williams, the Cadillac rocking gently as he climbed out.

"Go where?" I said.

Hank Williams walked around to the driver's door. "Well son," he said. "Things are gonna change, and we're a-gonna leave."

He placed his hand on Stu's shoulder. "And this'n, he's comin' with us."

I heard doors slamming and the scuffling of feet.

"He's not going anywhere," I shouted. "Get your fucking hands off of him."

"It's meant to be, son," said Hank Williams. "He signed in blood."

I lunged towards Stu, but a strong hand grabbed my arm and pulled me back. I looked up to see a man smiling down at me, he turned slightly as I tried to pull away and I saw that on the right side of his head was missing, the gaping hole revealing an empty brain cavity.

As I began to scream, the man smiled and then spoke with high-class Boston accent.

"It's meant to be, son," he said. "Time to say goodbye."

"Hail to the Chief," giggled Stu, as Hank Williams helped him out of the car.

"Leave him alone," I shouted. "Let him go."

"Your friend's going to be just fine," said the man. "It won't be long now."

He released his grip on my arm, and then turned to follow Hank Williams.

"It's meant to be, sugar." I turned to see a one-armed black lady wearing a floral dress and a cloche hat. She had a kindly smile as she took my hand. "You friend gotta go now," she said. "Like the fat man said, 'it is what it is, and it ain't no more'n that.'"

She also turned and walked towards Hank Williams, who had led Stu to the centre of the circle, quickly surrounded by the occupants of the vehicles.

The crow landed on the windshield, "Time to go," it rasped. "It's meant to be."

"Go fuck yourself," I said.

"Aww now, there's no need to be like that, son," Bubba appeared from nowhere, stood by the door and leaned into the Cadillac. "It ain't nothin' personal," he said. "Yo' friend gotta come with us, and you gotta go back."

"Back where?"

"From whence you came, son," he said. "From whence you came."

"What about Stu?"

"Like I said, he's comin' with us."

"To where?"

"To where we're going, which ain't for you to know."

He paused. "Things are gonna change, son. And you're gonna leave."

"I want to know where you're taking Stu," I said.

"We ain't takin' him nowhere. He comin' with us, on account of it's his time."

Bubba snapped his fingers.

The crow attacked before I had chance to react. I heard the flap of a wingbeat, felt talons rip at my flesh and then my eye erupted in a red mist. The noise was deafening, the crow screaming continuously as it attacked, and then lifted just out of reach before dive-bombing me again and again, from different directions and with a disorienting ferocity as it slashed, pecked and pummeled me.

I scrabbled for the door handle, fell out of the car, and grazed my hands as I scuttled across the gravel, stooping low as I tried to protect my head and neck from the frenzied aerial assault.

And then it stopped.

I heard a lonesome "screeee", and saw a golden eagle circling high above me.

For a second all was still, and then the crow came in fast from the left, hitting the side of my head like missile. As I tried to fight it off, I saw the eagle's wings fold and then I lost balance, tripped over and everything went black.

I don't know how long I was out but when I came to, the cemetery was empty. Staggering to my feet, I swayed a little

before my head cleared and then took stock. All the cars were gone and no one was around. I was alone, the back of my hands were cut to ribbons, my face felt sore and I could taste blood in my mouth. A few feet away a large black feather, its quill stained with congealed blood, ruffled in the light breeze.

I began to walk, crunching footsteps into the gravel as I headed out of the cemetery. When I reached the archway, I turned right and continued walking. The sun was low over the horizon and my shadow lengthened as I tramped along the side of the road.

After about a mile or so I came upon another bunch of signs.

All things pass/all hardships end/respect the memory/of
your friend/enjoy the ride/Burma Shave

At the side of the road, a golden eagle stood over a black, feathered carcass. As I approached, it lifted its wings, flexed a huge talon, gripped the remains of the crow and lifted majestically into the air. I watched it until it disappeared and then I turned and watched the sky catch fire as the sun kissed the horizon. Overwhelmed with exhaustion, I lay down beneath the Burma Shave sign.

I woke up hooked up to a machine in a hospital just outside Amarillo. The first thing the nurse told me was that I'd been in a coma for six weeks.

The second thing she told me was that Stu was dead. Apparently we were going at better 'n eighty miles an hour when the Honda blew a tire. An eyewitness said the car rolled about a dozen times before it left the road. Stu died instantly, and I'm told it took firefighters an hour to cut me

out of the wreckage. They said the crash had shut the interstate for a whole day and made the TV news.

I was in hospital for another two weeks. On the day of my discharge, "One-eyed Joe" turned up to fetch me. Turns out, he'd phoned around all the hospitals in the area, and then called every day to check how I was.

When I thanked him, he smiled gently. "Semper Fi," he whispered.

As we drove back in his old Chevy pick-up, two good eyes between us, Joe told me that on the day it happened, he'd seen us in a dream and had woken up to find himself gripping the remains of a dead crow.

Said his fingers were locked with cramp.

Said they hurt for days.

Said he's been sober ever since.

I have no memory of the crash, and while I refuse to think about, or imagine the manner of his death, Stu is never far away from my thoughts.

In my version of events he's still somewhere out there, driving the back-roads of Texas, the hood down, wearing fake Oakley wraparounds, bopping his fingers on the steering wheel of Hank Williams' Cadillac.

The End