Red Rock Valley

O'Hare, four a.m., twenty-two degrees Fahrenheit. Donald Stone had hardly slept on the flight from Miami, but he chose the train, rather than a taxi. The train took two hours, a taxi twenty minutes, but his *per diem* covered cab fares, and he could make a little money with his expense report. Every penny counted. He was saving for his retirement—as a relatively youthful *pensionado* in Costa Rica.

He knew there was no such thing as paradise, but when Greg and he had gone there Costa Rica had seemed close. At least it had for Donald. Greg's appreciation of nature stopped with viewing sunsets from the balcony at the Hyatt, perhaps while sipping a *piña colada.* But Donald talked him into a canoe trip down the Rio Pacuar, with the argument that they had become so domesticated they needed an adventure they could talk about in their golden years. They tapped into their credit cards for a guide and canoe, and muddled their way, with their dubious Spanish, to the put-in.

The rapids were tame, or they might have drowned. Downstream ten miles they paddled into the stinking effluent of a coffee mill; the muck splashed up and seemed to invade everything in their craft. Filthy, high on caffeine, and cold, they made port in a low canyon, by calm water on a red rock shoal. They built a fire, then stripped and washed out their clothes and hung them to dry. For a while they lay together in the sun, resting.

Donald rose, at last, and drew on his stiffened clothing, but as he looked down on his sleeping partner felt alienated from him, as if their their life together was an accident, or that they each, for the other, had been less a choice than a capitulation. He turned, strode the rock

face, and looked upstream, past the wild undergrowth and the dazzling flowers and the palms sticking up like tall men in a crowd, toward the ramshackle mill. He thought of the creek in Arkansas, on his parents' farm—the place he liked most when he was a child.

The top of the shoal split and dropped down an animal path between two great boulders. Surely, Donald thought, no place on earth was unknown, but he felt something new here, and followed the trail as it wound, first narrow then wide, toward a spring clear as the one in Arkansas. He knelt to drink. The water was cool and invigorating, and he imagined that it was the stuff Ponce de Leon had looked for. Ah, *si!* In the dark green glade Mayans had camped, and after them, the clumsy Spaniards. They washed their jungle sores, drank the magic water, and grew young again.

Donald waded the water to a pool where bass darted among submerged red rocks. He looked out upon a valley where, instead of forest, bluish-green grass grew, stretching for five acres or so until it met the opposite face of rock. Like a sign, two white horses appeared on the red rock, and seemed to eye Donald over the distance, before they turned and fled.

He returned to the Pacuar, where Greg had awakened, and looked about impatiently. He was weary of their middle-aged adventure and wanted to embark immediately for the take-out, thinking they could return to the hotel, and a magnificent meal, that evening. They'd visit San Jose's famous orchid gardens in the morning, then catch their plane.

Donald never told Greg about the valley. He never told anyone. But he thought about the valley at every conference his company sent him to, and every time he rode the train. He thought of it now, eying the snow as it swirled down the Kennedy, and Chicago's back streets. These were the resting hours for the homeless, shifting trains through the night to escape the cold. Most slept, but a little woman at the end of the car had vomited all her insides over two seats, and the center aisle.

As the years passed, Donald sometimes wondered if he had truly seen the horses, or if he had imagined them out of a need to visualize perfection. But he came to think of the valley as the one place on earth where he could find peace. He'd live out his days in San Jose, eating wonderful food and mastering Spanish, making new friends in a place where your past didn't matter. When it was time to die, he'd travel to the valley, stretch out in the sun, and wait for the horses.

Donald got off at Washington, shouldering his baggage for the walk, like a portage, through the tunnel to the Howard Line. The odor of wine and urine was not so sharp this morning, and the haggard black man at the center of the tunnel, pounding out a rhythm on his conga drums, seemed brave and admirable, to be at his work so early. Donald stopped, shifted his luggage, and threw the drummer what change he had. The man smiled faintly, the nearest thing to a welcome Chicago ever offered.

Once upon a time, he'd enjoyed his work. He took cabs everywhere, ate at fine restaurants, and spent every penny of his *per diem*. He was a fine salesman, after all, and deserved his little rewards. But over time the hotel food all seemed stale, and even the quaint, ethnic restaurants lost their charm. Greg was sick, and couldn't come along any longer. Donald began to prefer Wendy's, or even to eat cold food in his room.

They got through Greg's illness somehow, with not much help from either of their employers. As a couple it was a final humiliation, little assuaged by the few who came to his memorial. In the end, Donald wasn't a widower, but just an old bachelor—or, in the minds of his co-workers, an aging homosexual.

The new car was deserted and Donald closed his eyes briefly. The train rolled from underground into the stormy dawn, but he was out of the weather by six—home, it was called. Always a surprise to greet your former self, and discover he was a pig. But Donald had no

visitors and saw little point in housekeeping. He had sold his car, most of his furniture and dishes, and even his books, stripping down to the severest efficiency. He lived here not half the time, and anyhow decor had been Greg's department.

He turned up the thermostat and watered a spiky houseplant that was one of the few things that he still kept of Greg's, and that no amount of neglect had been sufficient to kill. He went through his mail—bills, frequent flier statements, catalogues. After his nap, he thought, he'd allow himself a small treat, and go out for Thai food.

His cell was for business, the land line for personal calls, but he so seldom had a message, even when gone for a week, that sometimes he forgot to check. Lately, he'd thought of ending the service. He'd put on Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requium* and settled into his recliner with an afghan when he noticed the blinking light.

"Donald . . . this is Mom. It's Saturday night, about ten, I guess, I'm at Lakeland General Hospital. We're staying at the Flamingo Motel. It's your father, Donald . . . he had a heart attack. I think he . . . the doctor, he's from some African country, he says it's very serious."

Donald called the motel and then the hospital but couldn't run her down. He pictured her, sleepless and frail, collapsed at the foot of his father's bed.

He left a message at work, then booked a flight to the other coast of Florida. And he took a taxi.

Long before, his parents held the usual hopes that Donald would find a nice girl and father children. Donald, too, had entertained the notion—down in Jonesboro, he'd gone for a while with a Brenda, a Mary, and an Arlene. Each was attractive enough, but Brenda and Arlene had been so bland that Donald could no longer separate them in his memory, although he'd seen

them through the years, when he returned for visits. He didn't suppose he'd have made them any more miserable than the men they married.

Mary, the only one of his ancient loves with a wit, had affectionately rejected Donald, complaining that his testosterone level was too low. "I thought that was what I wanted in a man," she said. "But it isn't."

Donald liked Mary; he'd have gone to dental school for her, and they could have built a house on one corner of the farm. Far better than what he had done, which was simply to drift. Well, he was a remote sort with men and women alike, and only Greg had been able to break through. It didn't have much to do with sex. I am asexual, Donald sometimes thought—like a character out of Henry James.

He hadn't seen his parents for seven years, but that was because of his father's disdain for Greg. Not for Greg himself so much, as the *fact* of Greg. His mother always kept in touch, and even stayed with them once, when she came to Chicago for a church conference. Greg was gravely courteous, fixing buckwheat cakes and sausages for her breakfast, because Donald told him this would please her.

Yet even if his father had been more accommodating, he wouldn't have visited often. The farm near Jonesboro had charm, but he had no old friends to see, and the martyr's religion his mother practiced tried his patience. More: when he went back he was forced to confront the fact he hadn't gone anywhere. If not a dentist for Mary, then why hadn't he become a teacher, a county engineer, even a farmer?

He might even have been like Orville Bledsoe—a quiet man who, as he grew older, Donald more and more admired. Bledsoe was a cheerful, wizened immigrant from Missouri who made his living pumping out septic tanks, but he sent three daughters through college. That was a life worth living, Donald thought. Never a lover, he could have been a devoted father.

He slept all the way to Tampa, then rented a small Toyota for the drive to Lakeland. He scarcely noticed North Tampa; it looked like Los Angeles, or Houston. But heading east, distracted as he was, he caught a flavor of the down-at-the-heels, cracker Florida his folks had been so fond of. Not so different, Donald suddenly realized, from my obsession with that valley in Costa Rica.

His father, Alvin, had somewhere got the idea that prosperous Arkansas farmers were required to go to Florida in the winter. He and Donald's mother would find some beat-up kitchenette left over from one of Florida's boom-and-bust cycles, then live for six weeks on mullet, dented canned food, and Ruskin tomatoes. For recreation they sought out flea markets and vintage attractions such as Weeki Wachi Springs or Parrot Jungle. There was church, of course, which Alvin tolerated in his old age. Sometimes, Alvin struck off inland in seach of abandoned farmsteads, and free tangerines.

Once, when Donald was ten, his father and he waded a swamp and cut three cypress knees. That wasn't legal any more. It wasn't approved of even when crackers were king. Back in Jonesboro, his father boiled away the bark, dried the knees, and made lamps. The lamps were a low art, a stolen art, and after a while Donald wished that they could be restored to the swamp. Even so, the lore of it all had provided good moments with his father.

"He was so skilled with tools," Donald announced, as he drew into the hospital parking lot.

He checked in at the nurse's station and saw the doctor—a tall, grave Kenyan he could barely understand—the one time he would. "Alvin does not like the catheter. He fights, and he is a very old man."

"He was never in a hospital. Will he get through this?"

The doctor shrugged almost contemptuously and then caught himself, as if, in the past, he'd been criticized for his insensitivity. He shook his head. "What we can, we do."

So, Donald thought. My father is a dead man, and that is why I am here.

His mother sat crumpled, like a pile of laundry, but without her presence, Donald would not have known that this naked, emaciated old man was his father. Alvin Stone's eyes were closed. His hands kept traveling down to yank at the yellowish catheter—hovering, pulling back. Greg fought the same battle. The enemy was not death, but plastic tubing.

The walls were off-white, and bare; a curtain separated them from an old woman who stared at them vaguely. Across from Alvin's bed, placed so that he must have memorized every detail these past three days, was a painting of a generic Florida scene: live oaks draped with Spanish moss, and a lake, a setting sun, behind them.

Donald grasped his mother's shoulder. "Have you eaten, Mom?"

"Donald! You—"

His job was to remain calm. That poor soul on the bed was dying, but it was his mother who needed to be shielded. She'd grieve, and contend with endless, narrowing loneliness. Soon, perhaps, Donald would be driving down to Jonesboro for her funeral.

"He's been asking for you."

"Can he . . . hear me?"

Incredibly, the old man sat up. His eyes were fierce, startling Donald: they held the same fury as Greg's toward the end. His hand hovered above the catheter again, then reached weakly for the wadded-up sheet in a gesture of modesty.

"Dad?"

"Alvin?" Donald's mother stood quickly and grasped the bed rail. "Alvin? It's Donald!"

"Jesus Christ, I know that."

"Come to take you home, Dad."

"Naw." He fell back and studied the ceiling. "Thinkin' of Yellowstone."

"Yellowstone . . . National Park?"

"Mom and I—"

"My mother. Eileen. Your wife."

"Listen! We drove *out* there."

"Five years ago," Donald's mother said. "He means—"

"Naw, naw, naw. Donnie was eight. You don't remember."

"Yes, I do, Dad. You didn't even have to reserve a campsite back then. Just us and the bears. We went fishing."

"They pulled the fish out of the lake there and plopped it right in the hot spring. How they cooked it."

"The Indians," Donald murmured.

"You liked them campin' trips, Donnie."

"Let's go camping, Dad."

The old man closed his eyes. He didn't speak for a long time.

"He has diabetes," Donald's mother, Eileen, whispered. "We didn't know. He'll be on a very restricted diet."

"This!"

"Alvin—" His mother reached into the air, but didn't touch the old man.

"I bought four quarts of oil and a filter."

"Oh, Alvin."

"Donnie knows how—"

"I can change it, Dad. Sure."

"You *do* it," he said, his last word for Donald or anyone.

Alvin Stone fell back into sleep, and his heart-rate seemed steady, so Donald checked in with the nurse and then chaperoned his mother to the cafeteria. She had half of a Cuban sandwich and pecked at a jello salad. Donald ate what the hospital's food service was pleased to call key lime pie.

"Did you have a good winter down here? Before—?"

She grew angry. "We should never have come. He's been sick; he couldn't drive. And Florida's *changed."*

"If he should die, Mom. Have you—?"

"He won't die."

"Even—even if he's laid up for a while, can you—?"

"Could you drive us home?"

"Sure."

"This must be strange for you. You and Greg . . . we haven't been a family in so long."

He sighed. "Always a family, Mom."

"We've been talking about selling the farm. Jonesboro's grown right next door; it's worth money. Oh, it's just a *shame,* all the little farms disappearing."

"It is. And it's not like life in the city is so grand. Hard to understand, really, what people see in it."

She brightened. "You could have the farm if you wanted it, Donald. Your father—he'd like that."

He shook his head ritually, but stopped. In Costa Rica, he might enjoy living again. His life would be new. In Costa Rica you could find hidden valleys, while Jonesboro held no mysteries. Even so, he found himself tempted. "I'll think about it. You—"

"You wouldn't have to farm. You could sell off a little chunk of land for houses and live like a king. You have this fantasy, that place down in South America, but Donald, you won't know a soul there."

He could keep peacocks and goats, species as odd as he was, and he could raise some good tomatoes, which you couldn't buy in the city. He had ten vigorous years, still, and his expenses would be minimal. Of course, if he had livestock, he couldn't really travel, but perhaps he'd traveled enough.

"The grass is never greener, Donald. Look at your father, always coming to Florida, never finding what he wanted."

"Mom," he said, trying again to prepare her. "I know you and Dad had a good life on the farm—"

"We had a *real* life," she said, dry-eyed. "Your father was faithful. There was always plenty to eat. But he wasn't . . . a Christian man, Donald."

Donald nodded abruptly. He didn't want to hurt this old woman. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"And he was mean to you, Donald."

He slid back from the table. His lack of sleep had caught up with him, and he fought off an unseemly yawn. "Not mean, exactly. He never really said *anything.* He just couldn't take it in, Greg and me."

She nodded. "'My own son,' he said. 'My only son.'"

"It's so long ago, Mom."

"I'm sad for you, Donald. You're a *good* man. If you only—"

Patience, he thought. Patience.

"—had Jesus in your life. You don't want to . . . *die,* oh Donald you don't want to go through eternity—"

Over the intercom, right on cue, eternity summoned them to the bedside of Alvin Stone.

"He can still hear you," the nurse, a Jamaican woman, whispered. "Talk to him. Tell him you love him."

"I love you, Alvin," Eileen said. "Donald and I are here. You're going to a better place."

What was the best advice, Donald wondered, for a man experiencing his last seconds? Pointless, harmful, to say what he truly thought, that sheer nothingness was a better place than a hospital bed. His father lay motionless, but there was the color of life about him, still, even though his heartbeat was fading, and his breathing indiscernible. His mother fell back to her chair as if some force propelled her. She cried softly.

Donald took his father's wrist. He could have told him he loved him; he had told Greg that. He spied a Western novel on the bed stand, and thought that if there had been anything romantic in Alvin Stone's nature, any longing to escape from his hard and mundane life, it had been in how he'd loved the West. His mother was a little wrong. Alvin Stone came to Florida, but he longed for the West. The fabled West of mountain peaks and glorious sunsets.

"There's a man on a horse," Donald said, and as he spoke a deep cold passed beneath his fingers, out of his father's hand and through his wrist. "He's an old soldier, looking for the place where he grew up. He's tired, he's fought in a hundred campaigns, and now all he wants is peace.

"Nothing looks the same to him at first. The soldier scouts with his horse all day long. Finally, late in the afternoon, he finds the trail he's looking for."

The cold spread up his father's arm. Donald stared at the old man's lips but they didn't move; they were blue. His eyelids were still. Maybe he could hear.

"The trail climbs a mountain. It's a faint trail and part of the way the soldier travels over rock. All he can do is follow the chinks in the granite that the Kiowa made many years ago.

"But he remembers where he's going now. He leads his horse over the crest and follows a draw down between two sheer, red cliffs. The sun is setting, and it catches the red rock, and makes it glow. From one of the cliffs a spring flows. The soldier stoops to drink: it's sweet water."

The cold traveled through his father's shoulder and perhaps found his heart. The nurse had come to the foot of the bed, but Donald wasn't watching the monitor.

"The soldier follows the stream and comes into a beautiful valley. There are tall pines, and trout in the stream, and a meadow full of blue-green grass. Far off, wild horses run. The soldier dismounts his horse, and sets her free to join the *remuda.* He walks through the grass and sits with his back against a big pine. 'I will make a garden here,' he says. 'I will build a house.'"

The nurse nodded. Donald put his arm around his mother and escorted her into the corridor.

"He's so sick," Eileen said.

"He's gone, Mom."

"Oh," she said. "Oh."

Nurses ran in and out of his father's room with a theatrical commotion. His mother and he sat on white plastic chairs. After a while he took a call from the Kenyan doctor, but could not understand what the man said.

Donald wanted to believe that his voice had reached his father's brain before the cold had. And he would have told him one more thing if he could have. He'd have told him that he changed the oil, and drove his mother home to Jonesboro.