

STEVE McQUEEN

First thing I did, I jacked out of there. I moved briskly to the car carrying the duffel bag slightly unzipped, the ankle gun sliding around on top of the cash. The little .32 mostly a charm now, like a rabbit's foot. The feeling beginning to build you never have big enough lead or powder beneath it.

I backed around slow but left the lot in a hurry, taking the frontage road at fifty and slipped onto a county road the first chance I got. It was a wide-open farm road heading south. I punched it to seventy and let her pick up speed and eased my hold on the steering wheel. Breathing free once more and deeply at last. Along with the rush had come this need to focus and I ran the glass down and let the breeze brush my hair and listened to the bugs in the fields and felt the first humid wave of morning wash over. Trees, brush, green everywhere. Ground fog crawling into gullies, drinking the earth. Small birds flying low and liking it. Everything waking beneath a golden promise.

"Why not? You might live another day yourself," I

said.

Driving fast on a county road heading south--out of sight yet parallel to the interstate. The scenery flowing by at speed, reminding me of all the fun I missed since Charlie stepped off. The drives in the country to remember. The drives to nowhere letting the mind flow where it will, rolling down a ribbon of stone. Just remembering like it was only yesterday that Charlie called to say hello. My one good buddy. And Evelyn, my other pal and life was good and we had all arrived and parked on High Street in the sun. Only now it was someone else's spot at the curb and the street no longer High Street, more like Die Street and you never saw it coming.

"I saw it. So here we are."

So here we are--a fistful of air for cards. Take a peek, lucky. You always did like games of chance. See what the wind blew your way.

"Uh-uh. I ain't gonna play that game right now."

Instead I drove on and fast but all the while I was formulating. If the game runs linear there is *a priori* a next move. Don't matter its knight or pawn, just move the piece and make it lethal. What it was, I'd got over dodging around with these guys. What I wanted now was to act.

I pulled off the road the first chance I got, a junction store that backed onto a field of alfalfa. A crossroads in farm America with two gas pumps rising from an ocean of gravel and a swale of weeds sprung up around the cement island. Wherever there wasn't gravel there was weeds.

Up two wooden steps and beside the door a solitary cane-backed chair sat empty, inviting, lolling on the faded gray wooden porch of the station. It was leaned against a

pale red pop machine they'd plugged in out front to bait the loungers--keep 'em from hanging around inside, messing with the trade.

Where the front door yawned open a golden-haired dog lay half in half out of the entry, asleep but for a single eyebrow arched in a kind of house dog omniscience. Flick went the ear and again, just so. Warm sun pooled nearby, heating the gray boards, fixing to climb the gold dog's belly.

Toward the fence line hoppers were clicking and flitting about, jazzed up in a heat rising fast now with the hour; to the near side a pair of cottonwoods were embraced in a palsied trembling while below them a pay phone loitered within the cool, languorous shade they cast. The pay phone door hung open to a pensive gray receiver dangling on a silver cord, pushed round its circle by a breeze. While all around there came this frenzy of bugs flying everywhere in haste through the heat. And a buzzing, buzzing, buzzing sound.

I piled from the car and made my way to the pay phone. For some odd reason I tucked the big 9mm into the waistband of my jeans, the polo shirt pulled out for cover--Joe College with a real hard one. And I was wearing shades, too, the Hollywood kind. I looked like Steve McQueen but was feeling more sort of pissy, like Genghis Khan. What it was, I was sick and tired of running from these guys.

I needed to make a call and dug a quarter quick from the coin pocket, thumbed it into the slot and listened as it trickled down--reminding me of an hourglass and the sand whirring through and the course of our lives. Like golden thread wove into time, all of it vanishing into the fabric.

Just standing at a crossroads the whole gone world

spread away and no end to that and never would be and it gave me a kind of flinch. A shiver of remorse for all the endings that never would, the beginnings that never had--so that I told myself there could be no better time. And with that notion there came an almost dizzy feeling, but I went ahead and dialed anyway and that saved me I guess--if anything ever does.