

# **The Story of Haybaler**


**A Saga of Generations**

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## **Part I**

### **The Land**

The story begins with the land and every creature great and small that is fortunate enough to live there. From the cradle to the grave, all our relationships are like a great play, divinely supported by day and night, upon this *terra firma* which we call home. So the story is told...

Haybaler's family had lived on Acorn Ridge for so many generations that no one could remember how the land was originally purchased. And no one had ever seen a legal deed to prove rightful ownership of the land. Since early statehood the story was told that Haybaler's Great Great Grandfather Jedediah Stiles won those 40 acres of untamed hill country in a back room poker game. „He won it fair and square,” the locals always said in a deep Texas drawl. The story of that fateful poker game had become a local legend, which defined many lives.

How could that be true? Well, in those days a back room poker game on a Saturday night was a serious affair. Things would always start out in good spirits, with the men laughing and pouring each other shots of moonshine whiskey, but as the poker hands are dealt and played, there are inevitable winners and losers. Sometimes, when a man is liquored up, he wagers an entire week's worth of pay and suddenly loses it all. This can create scenes of dreadful anger and regret, as drunkenness overtakes civility and composure.

Down a country road outside Pleasanton, Texas the weekly poker game was always held in the back room of a derelict country bar, which the town's folk whimsically called, »The Country Club«. It was located just across the county line, a fact which gave people the idea that it was somehow outside the long arm of the law. Thus, lawless behavior was the norm. The building was neglected and sitting in the middle of a weed choked lot. It was a haphazard construction of weathered boards held together by rusty nails and gravity. The cedar shingles of the roof unerringly leaked with every thunderstorm. It was more of an old shack than a proper building, which made it perfect for the rough company that frequented the hill country bar. Preachers and lonely wives said The Country Club was a portal of hell, and those who frequented the place had traded their last vestiges of humanity for a gallon of moonshine whiskey. It was probably true.

On one fateful Saturday night at The Country Club, there were five men seated at the round card table and many others standing in the room watching the game. They were all drinking moonshine, and every man wore a pistol. Some holstered their gun, but others preferred to hang their weapon recklessly between blue jeans and a leather belt. After a while it became clear that winning and losing was no laughing matter. As the night wore on towards morning, the harsh cigar smoke became thick and the moon drifted low in the night sky. Any man that still had his wits about him would be thinking it was time to leave.

After many hours of hard drinking and playing poker it came down to the final hand of the game. The cards had been dealt and the bets had been placed. Laughter had been replaced by rough talk, their voices sounding like wild dogs growling in a dark den. The room had become uncomfortable with a suffocating summer heat and thick humidity. It's the kind of summer heat you cannot escape, as clothing sticks to your back with every move. Try as you may, the Texas heat finally overcomes the will to fight it. In this heat and humidity the stench of drunken men sweating alcohol out of every pore of their skin was overwhelming, to all except those who were too drunk to notice. You could hear the shuffling feet of the men that were standing, or left standing, as most of them were staggering drunk by this late hour, and some had fallen out. The men had become as derelict as the building they frequented.

Then, with unusual bravado, Jebediah Stiles threw a handful of gold coins on the center of the table to call the others and raise the bet. No one expected this to happen. However, it should have been no surprise, as Jebediah lived the life of a real cowboy, and he was not about to let this game slip away from his grasp. He always stood proud and tall, and he was a staunch example of the cowboy way. Nonetheless, there were startled expressions around the room at the sight of those gold coins. In a drunken stupor, one man's cigar dropped from his gaping mouth and had to be quickly stomped into ashes on the wood floor. The reckless ash from one hot cigar could have burned down the entire building, like so much kindling.

Those glittering gold coins, proudly thrown upon the table, were the prize heirloom of the Stiles' family. They were rumored to be Spanish gold coins stolen during the Spanish-American war. They say old Jebediah brought them back from his days as a member of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. Jebediah never spoke much of his fighting experience with the Rough Riders, except to say that the

Americans had won the war. Whether stolen or rightly owned, the gold coins were a war memorial of great value.

Every man in the room bristled with desire at the sight of those gold coins, tossed with a heavy crash onto the wooden poker table. At that moment they were like a den of drunken thieves, intent on stealing from one another, each one hiding behind the assumed safety of owning a gun. No one could imagine how much those gleaming gold coins were worth. Was Jebediah calling everyone's bluff with such a handsome wager? All the players folded then and there, except one, Mr. Samuel. Being a garrulous and insincere man, he could not stomach this unexpected trump. Rather than fold, he called Jebediah's hand by barking loudly in front of every man present, „I'll call those gold coins with my 40 acres on Acorn Ridge." He glared harshly at Jebediah, while a line of greasy chewing tobacco dripped from the corner of his stained mouth onto his sleeve. Nervously, he loosened his sweat stained collar.

There was a long, tense silence. None of those men had ever seen anything like this happen before. The stakes had never been this high. All eyes were on Jebediah and Mr. Samuel's cards. With fevered brows, the two men stared at each other with unforgiving intensity. His hands trembling, Mr. Samuel slowly laid his cards face up on the table revealing 2 pair, queens and aces. Old Jebediah grinned and calmly set his cards face up, as well. Mr. Samuel took a gasp of air when he saw his opponent's hand. Jebediah was holding a full house, a pair of deuces and triple nines.

The rest of the men pushed back from the table and waited. A moment like this could mean anything, including drawn guns. You could hear Mr. Samuel's coarse breath heaving through his clenched teeth. His eyes and face were fiery red, as if some devilish creature had suddenly inhabited his mind and body. A heavy sweat popped out of his furrowed brow and ran down the lines of his deeply grimaced face. Mr. Samuel's trembling hand slowly inched towards his holstered pistol.

At the last moment, Mr. Samuel slammed the table with his clenched fist and blasted the room with horrible cursing, the likes of which surely came from the depths of hell. His rage was so complete that spit and tobacco juice sprayed in every direction from his furious mouth. In that moment, extreme rage had overcome reason and he was like a wild animal that had become deranged and out of control. He could not back out of the deal, but he expressed his vile words openly, and without regret. Jumping up from his chair Mr. Samuel screamed in a violent voice, "You can have the land, but I'll be coming around to get my moonshine still before the next full moon!"

In terms of back room poker law, those 40 acres on Acorn Ridge now belonged to Jebediah Stiles. No one would ever dispute this, nor would they ever speak of it, save in hushed rumors. Jebediah Stiles and Mr. Samuel avoided speaking to one another for many years. Of course, Mr. Samuel never came to get his still, which had been hidden away in those pristine hills for decades. Mr. Samuel had used the property on Acorn Ridge as a concealed location to operate the still, but he had never actually lived on the land. Mr. Samuel let go of the land, but he was never able to let go of the resentment. His mind seethed with a desire for revenge.

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An exceptional property, the 40 acres on Acorn Ridge were as pretty as any in that neck of the woods. There was an abundance of oak trees and some blackberry bramble along the creek. The land seemed to be alive as the seasons changed throughout the years. The cycle of wildlife was a joy to behold, as various birds and critters came and went with the seasons. As winter released her frozen grip, a new birth seemed to reach upward towards the warming sun. In early spring, sentinel male Robins would arrive to stake a claim for a preferred territory, in hopes of luring a beautiful mate. At sunrise, birds of all variety sang the prettiest songs a man could ever hear. The beauty of the land and the attendant wildlife were enough to make the world forget all its worries and heartaches.

Jebediah moved onto the land later that summer and set about building a simple dwelling. It was a basic wood frame house, which he built on short stilts, to make a crawl space underneath. The house itself was small and the interior terse, but Jebediah added the luxury of both a front and a back porch. After all, from the porch you could see the land, and for a man like Jebediah it was the land that mattered. Next spring he would build a barn and repair the old back shed, which was down the hill. The back shed and the still went hand in hand, each one serving the purposes of the other.

Jebediah always said the interior of the house and all that goes with it is for women folk. Funny thing was he never understood all the attention he was getting from the women folk while he was building the house. Seemed like every girl in town was going out of her way to come by and say, „Hello!” Jebediah would stop his work to visit, and he especially liked it when a pretty young thing named Sally Mae would bring him lunch, all unexpected and the like. They would spend a good amount of time enjoying the simple fare under an apple tree, which grew in the open space that would soon be the front yard of the country house. They grew to enjoy each other’s company and the delightful times spent taking long walks along Sorghum Creek. Soon enough, they came to enjoy the immense pleasure of each other’s warm and loving embrace as they rolled together in the soft grass, which grew lush under a tall Cottonwood tree.

By the next spring, Jebediah and Sally Mae were getting hitched. They had become essential to each other’s happiness. They were already spending more time together, than apart. The wedding ceremony was held downtown, at the Pleasanton Christian Church. The preacher man made sure the proper marriage papers were signed and filed at the old County Court House. People from all over Atascosa County were in attendance. Everyone was dressed in their „Sunday go to meeting best,” as the locals called it. There was a brief ceremony where the preacher said the right words from the Good Book. Jebediah kissed his new bride and they were happily married, there and forever after.

Spontaneously, a joyous noise arose from all in attendance, filling the evening air. They all shared the bounty of good food from the abundant Earth, as a great feast of food and drink had been spread upon the table. Country singing and fiddle music played late into the night. It was as if they were all held in the enchanting glow of a beautiful waxing moon. Dancing and revelry filled every country soul as they enjoyed the bacchanal feast. Wanton pleasures were released in abundance and everyone present was smiling and laughing.

As the groom, Jebediah felt nervous and awkward, not knowing what to say to the others in attendance. Making small talk with other people was not his forte. His bride Sally Mae, on the other hand, was a radiant beauty with youthful eyes and a purposeful smile. She was every bit of 16 years old and perfectly comfortable with being the center of attention on this, her special night. As the wedding party went into full swing, jealous women folk whispered with poisoned tongues that Sally Mae was already with child. Unrepentant, the old wags would not be denied the hideous pleasure of their vicious gossip. Not that it mattered if Sally Mae was pregnant, from the moment she was married it was considered legitimate and fully acceptable. In fact, being heavy with child at the time of marriage was the norm rather than the exception, around Texas hill country.

## **Early Years**

Several generations later, Bill and Maddy Stiles gave birth to their first child, Hank, who would later come to be known by his nickname, Haybaler. The child was born on an autumn night, before winter had breathed the first frost upon the pumpkins. Crickets were signing in the grassy yard, bringing good luck to all who would listen. With the local midwife in attendance, Maddy had labored for many hours, to the point of total body exhaustion. Twilight had long ago faded into night and her labor was still progressing slowly. Maddy was nearing the point of collapsing into despondency and tears, but the midwife could now see the baby's head crowning. „Push hard now!” and, „Keep pushing!” was the midwife's stern command! Within moments the country house was filled with the cries of a newborn little boy, and Maddy was filled with overwhelming tears of joy. She was finally holding the child she had been longing to embrace. It seemed like the crickets had never enjoyed their singing as much as during that hour of joy and beholding.

For generations the Stiles' family had lived in the same wood frame house, which was originally built by old Jebediah Stiles. The land and its attendant structures had been handed down from first born son to first born son, for generations. They enjoyed a simple life, but only through working the land was their prosperity maintained. For these country folk, struggling through life had always been the unquestioned norm. There was never an expectation that life would be easy. Maddy used to say, „Toil and trouble have been my only friends.”

Haybaler's parents were poor people of poor ways. The convictions of their lifestyle were so ingrained that it was impossible to separate genetic traits from learned behaviors. Day after day, their life was something akin to an old phonograph record spinning around and around, with the needle stuck forever in the same groove. A simple back country life is all they had ever known, and they had no notion of changing to a different style of living. Nothing riled these country folk faster than to imply that they might change their ways, to doing things more like city people. „Nonsense!” they would quickly say to the notion of changing their way of life.

As day followed night, Haybaler grew from a towheaded boy into his teenage years. As a teenager he began to notice that the people in his community never

changed much. Haybaler took an interest in getting to know the town folk from Pleasanton and the surrounding countryside. He was forever curious about the way men and women behaved, or misbehaved as the case may be. For instance, Miss Anne had always been a midwife. She had assisted in the delivery of Haybaler, and many other souls in the hill country. Miss Anne had one child of her own, but people said the little girl never had a daddy. Then there was Cousin Jeremy, who had never worked a day in his life, and always lived with his parents. Even after Jeremy's parents died he continued to live in their old home. He mostly kept to himself and was not a friendly person. He lived on a welfare check and people whispered that he was touched.

Haybaler observed many other individuals as well. He understood that these hill country folk were people with seemingly separate lives, but he was forever curious about how they all interacted to make a whole community. In the midst of Haybaler's uncertainty and doubt about this community of country souls, he was relieved by the fact that they all looked similar when they smiled. And so, from an early age he became a student of observation. A lifetime of learning and experiences lay before him.

Being the oldest of five children, Haybaler had a tendency to be the caretaker of all of his younger siblings. There were many times when he would prepare a meal for the children, because Bill was nowhere to be found and Maddy was indisposed. You see, Maddy was prone to unpredictable changes of mood. At times she was irritable and stayed up for days on end, talking non-stop. And at other times she would go to her room and stay in bed for a week or more, withdrawn from everything around her and not wanting the world. We cannot leave out those terrible times when Maddy would drink. The children learned to run for cover and hide in the crawl space under the house when mama was in the throes of drunkenness. Typically, mama would drink until she passed out. The children knew this, so when things got quiet in the house, the children understood it was safe to come out from hiding, because the destructive tornado of mama's drunken wrath had passed. After all, children are not equipped to cope with a mother whose emotions are far flung across the shores of irrational behavior.

All Maddy's children looked the same, more or less, except for the youngest child, Little Johnny. There was an element of discord in that little one, born late in the marriage of Bill and Maddy Stiles. Surely alcohol had played a part, or was it just the case that the last child was left to fend for himself in so many ways. Bill and Maddy had lost interest in raising children by the time Little Johnny came along. Maddy said Little Johnny would just have to learn from the older kids, but he was always slow to learn. Late to the party, Little Johnny kept up with the other children as best he could.

Old Doc Roberts, Pleasanton's country doctor, said Little Johnny was born with infantile spasms, which Maddy denies to this day. If a seizure occurred, Maddy would hold him closely while he was shaking and drooling. After a while, the convulsions would subside and Little Johnny would fall asleep in his mother's arms. This confirmed Maddy's conviction that the child had been playing too hard and only needed to rest. Maddy could not accept that her youngest child was born with infantile spasms. He was just tired and needed to take a nap. Denying that the child had infantile spasms meant the child did not receive medication for his

seizure disorder. If asked about the child's shaking spells, Maddy would bristle and say, „He just got a little tired, that's all!“ Further inquiry unleashed a tempest of hostility from Maddy. Few would risk the peril of engaging in this battle, for there would be many wounds and no victory.

She was not an educated woman and she had no use for schooling or social refinements. She harbored a shameless hatred for rich folks and wasted no time expressing her feelings in that regard. Sometimes, well, oftentimes the bitter words were out of her mouth before any hint of shame or inhibition crossed her mind.

Maddy was a little frightening to behold. She was a sturdy woman, looking something like last season's pear, which had fallen from the tree on a hot summer's day. Having lain unattended in the grass for many days and nights, such a pear retains its basic shape, but looks quite leathery and wrinkled. It has become dehydrated and lost all flexibility. What was once a luscious piece of fruit had become a relic, a timepiece of nature's progression from youth into old age and decline. When the locals spoke of Maddy they would say, „She's been rode hard and put up wet.“ Or in a mean spirited way you might hear them say, „She's a tough old hide.“ What these remarks failed to reveal is that they secretly feared Maddy, as she was so unpredictable.

She always wore a bright print dress that was two sizes larger than would have looked natural hanging from her shoulders. Her shoes were worn out sandals, sadly beyond repair. Her arms and legs were all stringy muscle and drooping skin. Yet, her abdomen was protruding in an amazing way that seemed to defy gravity. The very fact that she could stand upright and remain balanced seemed unlikely. She felt the need for an oversized dress, to hide what most would consider an unsightly physical appearance. The most frightening thing about Maddy was her contorted facial grimace. Almost edentulous, she had one tooth that pointed upwards towards the sky and another that pointed down towards Mother Earth and below. Her broad grin was enough to strike fear in any man's heart. And when that raspy voice rang out in a chorus of cursing and menacing commands, even the minions of hell trembled in fear.

It was impossible for those that lived around her to understand why Maddy's mood changed from day to day. She could be as charming as the yellow rose of Texas on Tuesday, but meaner than a rattlesnake when you next saw her on Thursday. Late at night she could be heard yelling at Haybaler and the other children, especially if Bill was out back tending the still. This is not to say that Maddy was all bad. She loved her children and was nurturing towards them when she was feeling stable, which was most of the time. However, when her mood swings took over she was like a different person altogether. Living with her was a challenging situation, to say the least.

It was a patch work quilt of a family. The filial cloth was somehow held together by the tattered threads of generational loyalty and a shared respect for the magic of distilled spirits. You must understand this much. The old still behind the back shed made Atascosa County's best moonshine whiskey. Men came from miles around to buy a quart jar of that marvel of distillation. Though illegal, the old still was the main source of revenue for Bill and Maddy Stiles. It helped keep good food on the table for many generations of Haybaler's clan. So, the still and its crystal clear libation were neither all bad, nor were they all good.



## Jason

At a very young age Haybaler stumbled upon his father's moonshine still behind the back shed. The discovery happened one day while Haybaler and Winston, the faithful family dog were walking along one of the wooded trails on Acorn Ridge. The back shed and the still were hidden from sight of the main house. They were farther down the hill and into the woods, with no possible view from the main road. The still was near a level spot on Sorghum Creek, where the flowing water made a bend. At that spot, an old Cottonwood tree stood tall and the water eddied and gurgled into a deep pool. The clear running water was perfect for operating the still and making moonshine.

The shed itself was small and the walls were made of local stone and moss covered mortar. It was a beautiful sight to behold, half covered by an outstanding growth of trumpet vines, with gnarly trunks, abundant dark green leaves and magnificent orange flowers, which bloomed all summer long. Bees and butterflies were forever drawn to the sweet nectar of the large blooms. A pair of antlers was gracefully affixed above the arched doorway of the small rectangular building. Standing inside the shed and peering through an open window, Haybaler was sometimes rewarded by the sighting of a white tailed doe and her fawns drinking from the refreshing pool. The idyllic beauty of this deep country land warmed Haybaler's heart.

At first Haybaler did not understand what he had found, but he was fascinated by the still and the bottles of sparkling liquid, kept high on the shelf in the old shed. There was row after row of Mason jars gleaming in the morning sunlight. Sometimes the bottles were neatly packed into boxes. And there were six heavy oak casks along one side of the shed, each with its own stand, which held the barrel and its contents a few feet off the floor. The sweet smell of wet oak permeated the room. Even as a young child he could see that the still and the Mason jars of clear liquid were important to his father. After all, he spent a lot of time and attention on those things. And sometimes men came to the house late at night to purchase the Mason jars filled with the secretive brew.

His father's moonshine was always available. If the demand for Bill's White Lightning was running high, his father would spend the next several days operating the still to make more moonshine. In this way Haybaler learned where his father had been when no one could find him for a few days. He was operating and guarding the clandestine still. This was a serious affair for Bill Stiles. Making moonshine whiskey was a stepwise process, which required a little knowledge and a fair amount of skill. Although there had never been a raid on the still, nonetheless, Haybaler's father always felt the need to keep his rifle handy.

Not surprisingly, Haybaler tried sipping the clear liquid at an early age. He quickly learned this was not like drinking water. The first swallow burned going down, and made him feel silly. He didn't like it and would not try it again. However, Haybaler's younger brother Jason liked the clear, hot liquid, a lot. He, too, had discovered the back shed and the still, which produced the amazing libation. Jason said drinking moonshine was like playing a game and having fun.

Surprisingly, Jason never got caught stealing a Mason jar or two from the back shed.

Initially, Jason enjoyed his secret game of drinking alcohol before going to school. As time passed, Jason noticed it was so much easier to be around other people after a drink of daddy's moonshine. It was especially easier to be around mama when she was having one of her yelling spells. It seemed like mama's angry words didn't hurt as much when he had imbibed in daddy's brew. He was thankful that the demigods of moonshine seemed to protect him from the wrathful words of his mother, which could wound so deeply.

Unfortunately, during Jason's teenage years his drinking escalated. He began to believe he could not navigate the usual activities of daily life without first having a drink. Jason reasoned that since mama and daddy drink, why shouldn't he? To Jason, it seemed like everyone was happier when they were drinking moonshine, at least on the surface. At some dimly defined point during his teenage years, he had sacrificed a piece of himself over to the demigods of distilled spirits, in exchange for having the pains of daily life temporarily assuaged.

The stage was set early on for Jason to become an alcoholic. Initially, he drank for fun. Later, he drank to avoid social anxiety and make uncomfortable feelings go away. Later still, he drank to keep from going through the agonies of alcohol withdrawal. Growing up, his means of coping with problems had always been alcohol. As he grew, Jason thought the problems in his life were so immense, that only the ebb and flow of the tide of distilled spirits would suffice to quiet the waves that were pounding the stormy shores of his suffering. As time went by, the blissful amnesia of the next drink became paramount to any other concern.

Jason's problems with alcohol peaked during his senior year of high school. Partying seemed harmless to Jason and his circle of friends. He had long ago lost the ability to ignore the craving for alcohol. On any given day the desperation for alcohol was felt on a deep and cellular level. His gut would ache for the next drink. With trembling hands he would pour the clear liquid from the Mason jar into the glass. Thus, Jason had become a practicing alcoholic even before finishing high school.

Jason had no idea what to do after graduation. There were no jobs to speak of in Pleasanton, Texas. Just before graduation day, the Army Recruiter had been in the high school auditorium talking with some of the students. The Recruiter made Army life sound pretty good. He said you got paid for being in the Army, and you got to travel too. Not knowing what else to do, Jason signed on the dotted line for his first tour of duty. Everyone was proud of Jason for signing up to serve his Country. He was proud to serve, but there was another reason driving his decision to join the Army. He would finally get out of the house and away from the frightening instability of his mother. He felt an anxious need to separate from her violent mood swings. He had lived for so many years with his mother's behavior alternating between yelling insults and withdrawing into absence. Nothing sounded better than to get away from her madness.

On the last day before shipping out, Jason said goodbye to all his family and friends, and promised them he would return home as soon as possible. The night before leaving, he had given a small engagement ring to his high school sweetheart, Charlene Samuel. At the going away celebration, she stood near her

friends beaming with excitement and showing off her new ring. Yet, at the same time she had tears in her eyes because Jason was shipping out to join the Army. Charlene's brother, Luke Samuel had signed up to join the Army, as well. Jason and Luke had been friends in high school. Though one year apart in age from each other, Luke had been held back a year in school, which caused Jason and Luke to graduate together in the same class. No one seemed to know if Luke was held back a year because he had been a rowdy boy, or perhaps a slow learner. Luke would tell you it was because he never much cared for school and learning from books. Thus, Charlene felt overwhelmed by a bewildering array of emotions. How could this be happening? How could both her brother and her fiancé be leaving to go to war on the same day?

At the bus station, Jason hugged his mama in a loving embrace that she would not soon forget. At that moment Jason felt both excited and wary about the future that lay before him. He could not know the things he would soon behold, as he had never heard of a place called Viet Nam.

## **Squirrel Hunting**

A sure rite of passage, Haybaler's father gave him a hunting rifle at the fledgling age of 8 years. It was a .22 caliber Winchester, which came complete with a soft case and a cleaning kit. At the local hardware store, Haybaler learned about choosing the right ammunition for hunting squirrels. Haybaler's father taught him gun safety and respect for the weapon. They would go out behind the barn for simple target practice, and it took quite a while for Haybaler to correct his aim and mark the target with regularity. Then further practice was needed to improve his aim with targets placed at a greater distance. After all, shooting straight and true is the hallmark of a successful squirrel hunter.

Together, father and son would awaken before dawn. Winston, the faithful family dog would soon lead them towards the object of their hunting desires. His tail wagged excitedly, as the hunt for squirrels was upon them. A rugged looking affair, decked out in camouflage that was none the worse for wear, they would leave the house full of energy and high hopes for a successful day in the autumn woods. Stepping off the back porch towards the wooded trail, with the crunching sounds of fallen leaves below their feet, they were certain to find companionship and adventure.

Winston instinctively knew how to hunt. As soon as Bill said, „Get Em!” old Winston would put his nose to the ground and start tracking the scent of a squirrel. In due time, he would run towards the base of a tree, knowing that a nut stasher was aloft. In his excitement, if Winston could have climbed that tree he would have, but Bill's command to sit would suffice to calm the restless canine from jumping up and down on the burly trunk. Trembling with anticipation, Winston would sit at the base of the tree, barely able to contain his urge to attack the chattering rodent. Winston could smell the squirrel, which triggered his most primitive instincts to survive by hunting and killing.

Bill and Haybaler would squat down on one knee, or if they were lucky they could sit on a fallen log and wait out the movement of a squirrel in the limbs

above. The crafty squirrel would inevitably play a game of hide and seek with the hunters. Likewise, the skillful hunters knew that only by means of stillness would they be able spot the movements of this wary trickster. If they were quite still and lucky enough to be downwind of the squirrel, they might get a quick glance at the elusive hoarder as he moved about the lofty canopy. Of course, the wily squirrel was planning his escape and would be gone in due haste. The chance at a good shot was here and gone in a moment, if it ever presented itself at all. It is no use trying to shoot a moving squirrel, because Bill and Haybaler had no desire to wound the critter. They were only happy with a clean shot that brought down the squirrel quickly.

Bill instructed Haybaler about the finer points of squirrel hunting. Holding perfectly still and breathing slowly were essential to outwitting a nervous squirrel. Haybaler held his .22 caliber rifle at the ready, hoping for a good shot. If luck is with the hunter, the unwitting squirrel will hold still momentarily as he curiously eyes the intruders upon his sovereign turf. This is the moment of opportunity for the hunter. Aiming the rifle at the squirrel and pulling off a clean shot, without the clever beast scurrying away in fear, is the goal. The hunter's success rate in this endeavor is typically low. Only the best hunters are able to kill a squirrel with a perfect shot through the squirrel's eye, thereby saving the best part of the meat for dinner.

Haybaler enjoyed every aspect of hunting with his father. Most of all he enjoyed listening to his father's hill country wisdom, whether he was talking about the nuances of squirrel hunting, the perennial plans for rebuilding the old barn or the techniques and knowledge needed to operate the still. Haybaler had a certain awe and respect for his father, which had started in early childhood. Times spent hunting with his father were especially precious. He admired many, but not all of his father's traits, and he endeavored to at least carry himself with the same penchant for manhood, which his father naturally possessed. So they walked in the woods talking about gun safety and how to improve one's marksmanship with target practice. Hitting a moving target was altogether another matter, of no great importance during squirrel season.

Suddenly, Winston got excited and with his nose scouring the ground he ran hurriedly towards a stand of Black Jack Oak. Winston's hair was in a ridge along his back and his tail was pointing straight up. Sure enough, in a final bounding leap Winston had treed a squirrel and was jumping up and down at the base of the trunk, frustrated that he could not chase the critter further up into the limbs. From his arboreal abode the squirrel was chattering excitedly and looking down at the primitive hunters. The cunning squirrel was hiding unseen on the far side of the tree. However, being curious to a fault, he would slink sideways around the trunk of the tall Oak to look upon the hunters, only to quickly hide again behind the bark of the rugged trunk. At that point a skillful technique was employed that only a squirrel hunter could appreciate. Bill made a half-circle gesture with his hand and quietly said, Go 'Round," to Winston. Then, by command Winston slowly turned about the base of the tree, while maintaining his gaze ever upward towards the bushy tailed varmint.

As Winston slowly circled the tree, the squirrel would move around the trunk, attempting to remain out of sight of the dog at all times. Moving away from the dog

around the trunk, the ever wary critter could evade being seen by his four legged predator. Of course, if all went as planned this would bring the squirrel into a perfect view of the hunter's aim. Sitting as still as night, as the squirrel practiced its canine evasion, the hunter slowly raised the barrel of his rifle to level his sights onto the elusive prey. This maneuver gave Haybaler the moment of opportunity he needed to carefully aim and pull off one good clean shot. As many times as not he would successfully bring down his scampering target. Much to Haybaler's amazement, his father had a very high hit rate when hunting squirrels. Haybaler aspired to be as good a shot as his father someday. „Keep practicing,” said with a smile, would be the encouraging words from Haybaler's dad.

On this occasion Haybaler made a clean kill of the unwitting prey. The squirrel fell as a dead weight out of the tree, deftly striking the leaf covered ground with a soft thud. Bill immediately said, “Fetch,” and Winston retrieved the prey from its final bed of autumn leaves, carrying the squirrel to Bill's feet. Then, in what seemed to be a tense moment between man and dog, Bill would sternly say, „Out,” while extending his right hand to receive the felled beast from Winston's quivering maw. After an apprehensive pause, the dog would reluctantly release the prey from his drooling jaws, followed by Bill giving Winston the highest praise and abundant stroking as a reward for such good hunting.

After being in the field for a good part of the day, father and son would return along the wooded path towards their humble home. As they walked and talked, Haybaler beamed with an inner radiance when his father put his brawny arm across his shoulders and said, “Son, you're doing well with the gun.” This meant so much more to Haybaler than improving his shooting skills. It meant his father accepted him and was proud of him, as well. Indeed, it was moments like these that made Haybaler feel like he was a worthy man.

As they approached the back porch of the house, Maddy would swing open the creaky screen door and impulsively say, „Did you get any?” Haybaler proudly held up his bulging satchel to reveal the hunter's spoils. „We got three today,” he said with a wide grin. To this end Maddy was wide eyed and happy as she could possibly be. Displaying the glee of a delighted child, she rushed towards Bill and Haybaler to receive the reward of the wooded hills. Stepping quickly back into the kitchen she quipped, „I'll have these cleaned and dressed in no time.” And almost in song she would ask, „Would you boys like these squirrel pan fried or stewed for dinner tonight?”

While Maddy worked in the kitchen, Bill and Haybaler set about cleaning their rifles and putting away their gear. After a while, the gamey aroma of the stew, made with seared squirrel meat, onions, potatoes, carrots, two bay leaves and other country spices, filled the air of their simple dwelling. Bill, Haybaler and the rest of the family were famished at the end of the day, and made even hungrier by the savory bouquet of the simmering stew. After an impossible time spent waiting for dinner, the entire clan would sit around the harvest table to enjoy a feast of corn bread, lima beans and squirrel stew. The spread looked like a wealth of goodness that would never end. The passel of children enjoyed either milk or tea with their meal, but Bill and Maddy always wanted a little moonshine to wash down the delicious fare set broadly upon the table before them. To have been in their presence is to have known their certain fulfillment.

## **The Wheat Harvest**

Haybaler was the type of person that might catch your attention for no particular reason. He was a lanky young man of commanding stature, and he was possessed of a long stride. Handsome to a fault, with wavy hair and a winsome smile, he was friendly and unassuming by nature. He smiled upon life and in return received the abundance of life in ample measure. And as he was to learn, this abundance was dressed in a variety of garments, some more appealing than others. Good or bad, Haybaler never stopped learning from these life experiences. He continued to enjoy observing and learning.

One thing was certain, he was not afraid of work. Starting as a spry 15 year old, he travelled north with the wheat harvest every summer. Starting in central Texas, the harvest crew would move from field to field, slaving their way north to the Canadian border. Haybaler worked the wheat harvest because of the alluring pull of money, and because his parents expected him to work. Perhaps it was an error of youth, but he enjoyed traveling and having new experiences as much as he enjoyed being paid for his labors.

For Haybaler, the wheat harvest started with saying goodbye to his family and his trusty Bay Hound, Winston, on the front porch of the family home. And without fail, Winston would be waiting on the front porch when he returned from his many months long journey. A faithful and loving companion until the end, Winston would jump up and down, twisting in circles of excitement when Haybaler strode up the porch steps at the end of the wheat harvest. The reunion of these fast companions was a sight to behold, with perhaps the most endearing moment being when Winston offered his favorite chew bone to Haybaler, as a gift of love and affection that comes from the depths of canine loyalty. In this way, the bond between a man and his dog was enacted at the deepest levels of shared respect. Truly, man and dog have helped each other survive and prosper for thousands of years. No less so the relationship between Haybaler and Winston.

During his early teens, Haybaler's job was to throw the bales of wheat straw hay onto a flatbed truck, where another worker stacked the bales into neat rows. It was back breaking work. When he turned 17 years of age he was promoted to operate the tractor, which pulled the hay baling machine, as it cut the wheat straw and pressed it into bales. This promotion was a rite of passage, and greatly appreciated by this teenage country boy. He stood proud and tall next to the harvest tractor, as he was now fully endorsed as being a machine operator. In recognition of this new found stature the other men started calling him, „Haybaler.”

There was a sweltering heat in the dusty wheat fields. The pitiless sun blazed overhead for hours on end. All day long the noisy Cicadas were singing to each other, urged on by the relentless summer heat. Looking towards the scorched fields from a distance, you could see billowing towers of dust slowly rising above the harvest machinery. To say that it was like working in an oven was an understatement. The stifling air and roiling dust made it very difficult to breathe. After each 16 hour day, Haybaler's skin was sun burned and caked with dirt and

sweat. The work left him bone tired and numb. Somehow, the sun and the heat made it difficult to think. At the end of the day he felt dazed, like he could barely raise his arms or take another step forward. He wondered if it was all worthwhile, but he did not dwell long on the futility of meaning. He just kept moving forward. The only respite came at dinner time. Ample food was provided by the Foreman and his wife. Haybaler and the other men would eat heartily and talk about owning land someday. After the evening meal the only thing he could think about was sleep, all the while knowing the next day started before sunrise.

On Saturday night the other men would go into town to spend their money on hard liquor and women. Haybaler stayed behind, preferring the succor of the prairie evening. He loved to gaze upon the summer sunset, painted with broad strokes of brilliant pastel colors, which peaked and faded as the sun breached the horizon. After laboring all week, what sweeter sound could there be than the lullaby of a whippoorwill singing to the cadence of the prairie breeze. Or best of all, to lie in bed and listen to the rolling thunder of a summer storm rumbling across the countryside, while the cooling rain released the most delightful aromas of wet grasses. In this summer evening muse, Haybaler would forget himself, remembering his home on Acorn Ridge, for which he longed to return.

The work crew labored seven days a week for as long as there were fields to cut. Payday came at the end of the week, but the money had little meaning for Haybaler, as there was no time for spending it. He just kept the money hidden away until he returned home at the end of the harvest. He saved the wages of his hard work all summer long and gave it to his mother when he returned home. He had no notion of doing anything else with the earnings. He knew she needed it more than he did, for there were many hungry mouths to feed at Bill and Maddy's table. The wheat harvest was Haybaler's only source of income during his young adult life. He did not work for wages during the other seasons of the year. During the rest of the year he was completing high school and taking care of the land. On his family's homestead there was a milk cow, a vegetable garden, a cranky mule and many daily chores that needed tending.

When Haybaler was in his early twenties it suddenly dawned upon him that he was being paid a pittance for his strenuous work on the wheat harvest. He realized that coming home at the end of summer with a total of a little over \$1,000.00 was an insult, rather than a reward. When it was all said and done he was being paid less than one dollar per hour for his back breaking work. He awakened to the fact that his labors were for the purpose of making money for the Foreman and his wife, and all else was secondary. Thereafter, he retired from working the wheat harvest and dedicated himself to caring for Acorn Ridge. Bittersweet was the reward of working the wheat harvest, better to till one's own soil than to labor on the property of another man.

## **Charlene**

Jason's high school sweetheart, Charlene Samuel pined away for his return from the war. She would stare longingly into her engagement ring, stroking the gleaming edges of the small diamond while recalling Jason's smiling face. She

thought of her older brother Luke as well, and wondered how he might be faring in the war.

As a toddler Charlene was raised by her mother, Betsy. It was a blissful time between mother and child filled with walks to the park and joyous laughter. Being pushed in the swing set by her mother was Charlene's singular delight. The relationship between Charlene and her mother seemed perfect. It was a relationship that fostered mutual love and respect. It seemed like this wonderful union of mother and child could go on forever. Unfortunately, the cruel hand of fate had other designs. Sadly, Charlene would not long know the presence of warmth and hugs from her loving mother.

It was a winter morning with a bitter cold wind from the northwest when Charlene's mother unexpectedly passed away. Suddenly overcome by an incapacitating headache, her symptoms quickly evolved into a devastating stroke. By the time Betsy's family got her to Doc Robert's office she had slipped into unconsciousness, never to awaken again. Charlene's mother was only 45 years old at the time of being delivered from this world. Doc Roberts consoled the family by saying that she died from the bursting of an aneurysm in her brain. The old country doctor told the assembled family members that their mother had been born with the aneurysm. He said she had died suddenly and had not suffered. The Samuel family consoled each other by saying their beloved Betsy was in a better place now.

Little could Charlene understand the reasons her mother had gone from this world. She kept asking her family, „When will mommy come back?“ Being an innocent child of 5, she could not understand the permanence of death. She really had no concept of death in the way that it was understood by the adults around her. She was inconsolable, hurt and angry at her mother for leaving her all alone. She cried rivers of tears demanding that her mother return, but her wish went unfulfilled.

Charlene and Luke's biological father was a man named Charles Samuel. He was an oilfield worker, who indulged in alcohol and gambling. He had no yearning for children and the thought of being a parent was completely foreign to him. Early on, when Betsy became pregnant, Charles Samuel promised to marry her, all the while becoming more distant and less involved. As a result, after the children were born, Charles Samuel was rarely present for them to have as a daddy. His attendance in their life was unpredictable. Charlene's experience of her father was of his long absences, punctuated by brief happy times when he would come visit her. Even after Charlene's mother died, her father made little effort to come see her. Charlene remembered the time her father brought her a bicycle, but he did not stay long enough to help her learn to ride it. He was just not available, and actually not capable of being a father to a young child. Many promises were made and broken, but her father remained as remote as ever.

Of necessity, Charlene and her brother Luke were raised by a variety of relatives, sadly not including their daddy. Charlene was primarily raised by her paternal grandmother, Mrs. Kate Samuel; while Luke was moved episodically from home to home, catch as catch can. Grandma Kate was a corpulent woman and a chain smoker. She had smoked 2 packs of cigarettes a day since her early teenage years. In fact, Charlene's memories of her grandmother always included a lit



cigarette and a room full of suffocating smoke. At times Grandma Kate was unknowingly smoking two cigarettes at once. She would sit at the kitchen table, talking away, not realizing that she had one cigarette burning in the ashtray and another cigarette between her fingers. She seemed to take great delight in lighting a cigarette and inhaling the first draw of the nicotine infusion, after which she would exhale a long, sinuous stream of smoke while grinning from ear to ear. It was hedonistic pleasure at its finest.

Grandma Kate was a vain woman, and her vanity was based solely upon a fabricated self-image, which she protected and upheld until her last breath. In vogue with her identity, Grandma Kate thought of smoking as a glamorous accessory. When she was smoking she secretly believed she was just like those Hollywood starlets she had seen in the movies. Everyone knows that in Hollywood all the movie stars drive around in a new Buick or a convertible Cadillac, while smoking elegant looking cigarettes. So, Grandma Kate thought smoking made her look stylish and desirable. At least in her mind it was so. Of course, this story was a ruse to disguise the fact that she was horribly addicted to nicotine.

After her mommy passed away, Charlene would cling to Grandma Kate. It was a natural response to feeling abandoned and alone. Clinging to Grandma Kate gave Charlene the immediate benefit of closeness, which soothed away her tears of loss and sadness. After all, it was very difficult for a small child to grieve for her lost mommy. There was a sort of clinging by Grandma Kate towards Charlene, as well. There was no doubt that Grandma Kate enjoyed the benefit of sharing Charlene's close company. Grandma Kate would hold Charlene and dramatically state, „No child should be made to suffer this way.”

As one might expect, there were untoward consequences to this arrangement. Beginning in early childhood and for many years thereafter, Charlene was exposed to Grandma Kate's cigarette smoke. At first Charlene would only cough when she was sitting on her grandmother's lap, due to the inevitable breathing of the choking fumes. When the cigarette stench irritated her, she would hop down to the floor and run off to play with the other children. However, as time went by her cough became more persistent and worrisome. Little Charlene would have coughing spells that lasted for quite some time. She would even awaken at night with persistent coughing.

As the symptoms were getting worse, Grandma Kate took the child to see old Doc Roberts. Working out of a small office in downtown Pleasanton, he had been the family physician for generations. Madge, his office secretary and nurse, kept the place as neat as a pin, and her record keeping was flawless. Best of all, Madge had a welcoming smile, which provided a measure of relief to suffering patients as they arrived for their assigned appointments. Truth be known, there were times when Madge had a greater healing impact on patients visiting the office than Doc Roberts. The salubrious effects of Madge's care giving as a nurse, was something that Doc Robert's would never quite comprehend, but the patients were glad for her nurturance and they looked forward to the next time they would see her.

After examining the child and listening to Grandma Kate describe Charlene's symptoms, Doc Roberts diagnosed Charlene as having Asthma. Doc Roberts said Charlene would need medication. He consoled them, stating there was no cure for Asthma, but the medications usually helped treat the symptoms. The strange

thing was, none of the typical Asthma medicines seemed to work for Charlene. Doc Roberts tried every Asthma medication he could find with Charlene, to no good end. Her coughing spells continued and even worsened. Finally, not knowing what else to do, Doc Roberts prescribed a purple cough syrup that contained codeine. Lo and behold, the purple cough syrup worked! Of course, this was to be expected, as codeine is one of the best cough suppressants known to modern medicine. The resolution of the cough was welcomed by all. However, the long term consequences of this treatment could not have been predicted by anyone at the time.

Little Charlene did not have Asthma. Her coughing was a direct result of chronic exposure to cigarette smoke. So the codeine laced cough syrup treated Charlene's symptoms, but the underlying cause was never addressed. The codeine, being a narcotic, would last for a few hours before wearing off. Curiously, when the codeine wore off, Charlene's cough might return quickly or it might not return for several days. As could have been easily predicted, whenever the cough returned Grandma Kate was quick to hold Charlene in her arms, while giving her soothing words and another dose of the cloying elixir. In this way Charlene unconsciously learned two things, both being the benefits of coughing. First, coughing always got Charlene the attention she was craving at the moment. After all, Grandma Kate could not ignore such a serious ailment, still believing the child had Asthma. Charlene's coughing was serious and needed immediate attention. Second, coughing invariably resulted in being given a spoonful of the glorious purple cough syrup, which meant being given a dose of codeine. Charlene learned to like the effects of the cough syrup, not realizing that she was growing accustomed to the sedating effects of a narcotic.

The coddling behaviors between Grandma Kate and Charlene went on for many years, unabated by any reasonable intervention. Old Doc Roberts kept blindly allowing refills of the syrupy cough medicine. Year after year, refill after refill, until „the purple cough medicine,“ became a house hold word. Charlene would ask for it by name. If Grandma Kate was busy and did not immediately respond to Charlene's request, the coughing would become persistent and louder, until Grandma Kate picked up Charlene and gave her the next dose. In retrospect, this is something unbelievable. A relationship of mutual dependency between Grandmother and child was fostered and encouraged. Charlene grew up thinking of herself as a sick person with a chronic ailment. There was an unconscious collusion between the treatment of the physical symptom of coughing and the emotional needs of the child. Charlene learned that whenever she felt bad, physically or emotionally, the codeine laced medicine was the trick to gain relief. Unfortunately, this easy way out from any form of distress effectively arrested Charlene's emotional development. She never learned to cope with problems.

When Charlene became a teenager, the depression which had been lurking under the surface since her mother died, became fully manifest. On a deep emotional level she always missed her mommy. Having grown past childhood, she fully realized that her mother would not be coming back. Yet, having that bit of logic did not prevent her from having a secret wish that her mommy would somehow return and rescue her from the unbearably suffocating life with Grandma Kate. Charlene's response to losing her mommy during childhood would be a life long struggle with depression. And, as if adding insult to injury, her

response to being raised by Grandma Kate would be a strong tendency towards relying on prescription medications as a convenient way to cope with even the slightest suffering or heartache.

One could speculate for many years and still wonder about Charlene's upbringing. How had such a sweet and innocent child turned out to be the embodiment of a pitiable life? Possibly, it was easiest to understand Charlene by realizing that after her mommy died she was mostly raised by Grandma Kate. The consequences of this upbringing were undeniable. It seemed to Charlene that no matter how hard she tried, she could not escape the dark clouds of depression, which always seemed to block the rays of sunlight. However, she had certainly learned that a dose of the revered purple cough medicine would make the bad feelings go away, at least for a while. Effectively, Charlene had become a drug addict during childhood.

Once she reached her early teens, Charlene went to see Doc Roberts on her own. Charlene openly talked with Doc Roberts about her new boyfriend, Jason Stiles. Old Doc Roberts was very helpful with giving her a prescription for birth control pills. When Charlene talked with Doc Roberts about her depression, he prescribed her Valium. Being an old country doctor, he was not well versed in the use of antidepressant medication, but he knew that even a single dose of Valium would give the patient a short term measure of relief from uncomfortable feelings. Once again, Charlene's symptoms were placated, but the underlying cause of her suffering was not addressed.

Charlene's girlfriends told her that the appointments with Doc Roberts should be kept a secret from Grandma Kate. These things were Charlene's private business. The other girls had learned from hard experience that their mothers would become furious if they learned about such things as late night meetings with a boyfriend, birth control pills or other medications. The mother's need to control, and the teenage daughter's need to escape that control is an archetypal theme, played out with intensity as teenage girls approach young adulthood.

Charlene's childhood and upbringing were in perfect concert with her biological development. During her teenage years she blossomed into a voluptuous beauty. She was buxom and had a well-defined hourglass figure. Her physical attractiveness was spellbinding for young men, and could create jealousy in women of all ages. Unexpectedly, Charlene discovered that being pretty and attracting the attention of young men was her brilliant talent. She could have had any number of guys in high school as her boyfriend. During her sophomore year she found herself very attracted to Jason Stiles. He was cute and easy to talk to. Not to mention that he seemed a little wild and frequently had the smell of whiskey on his breath. Among his peers he was the troubled bad boy that needed taming, which made him very exciting for Charlene. Within a matter of days, flirting with Jason became the most important part of going to school.

As time went by, the furtive romance between Charlene and Jason seemed to take on a life of its own. Jason had a driver's license and an early model Chevrolet, so Charlene would sneak out at night and meet Jason. Together, they would go parking out by Brown's Lake, enjoying the sensuous pleasures provided by alcohol and each other's embrace. As surely as one footstep follows another, Charlene found herself falling in love with Jason. It was a deep love that touched her to the

core. Her infatuation with Jason was all encompassing. The very sight of him in the school hallway sent chills of delight up and down her spine. One could best describe Charlene's infatuation as being held in a trancelike state. This trace was one part logic and three parts magic. It seemed that falling in love with Jason had carried her away from her emotional turmoil, at least for a while. Jason became the focus of her whole life. He became her everything.

Whether by fate or fiat, Charlene's love affair with Jason was happening just before his impulsive decision to join the Army. In stark contrast to her feelings of infatuation, Charlene could not tolerate the thought of Jason shipping out to join the Army. This tough reality infuriated her and left her feeling out of control. Her response to Jason's impending departure did not come from a place of cool logic. She secretly decided to stop taking her birth control pills. She reasoned that if she could not have Jason while he was away, perhaps she could have a likeness of him in the form of a child. This primitive wish had nothing to do with rational planning. A few weeks after Jason was in boot camp Charlene discovered, to her feigned surprise, that she was pregnant.

Can it ever be said that pregnancy is accidental? How can a woman act surprised when pregnancy occurs? Routinely, couples will declare that they have no idea how they got pregnant! When a man and woman discover there is a pregnancy at hand, it is as if they are both dazed and confused with disbelief! „How could this have happened?“ they chime in unison, as their proclaimed innocence of the event somehow validates their disbelief. They act as if they had never held each other tightly in the sexual embrace of torrid love making. Aye, but denial of the event does not change its realness.

The amount of planning and crafty intention that goes into a dating couple having intimate sexual contact for the first time is truly remarkable. These couples, especially the girls it seems, spend endless hours indulging in wanton fantasies and courtship rituals, with full awareness of setting the stage for their wishes to be fulfilled. Never underestimate the cunning designs of a young woman in pursuit of a desirable man. She will spend hours setting the trap, as it were, with flirting, seductive clothing and salacious makeup. Her body movements become lithe and erotic, designed to captivate the unending attention of her desired mate. He must become the bee drawn to the intoxicating flower. All the while, these girls will act as if nothing unusual is happening, at times seeming unconscious of their underlying drives.

These same girls are fond of saying they had no idea there would be the exciting culmination of this drama, with the acting out of sensual desires. Smiling, a young girl might say to her girlfriends, „I had no idea we would make love for the first time last night, I just thought we were going out to dinner together.“ Despite all the planning, by some tangled logic of the feminine mind, if the pleasure of sexual union happens in this „spontaneous“ fashion, as if by surprise, then it is romantic and not whorish.

With trembling hands and a beating heart, Charlene wrote a letter to Jason while he was still in boot camp. The letter revealed Charlene's pregnancy in touching words laden with excitement and expectation. Jason read the letter, at first not believing the words as they raced across the page. The news of Charlene's pregnancy left him feeling very anxious and almost panic stricken. In a word, he

was gripped with fear. How could this have happened and why now? How would he accept the responsibility of being a father, especially at this moment when he was facing the unknown events of fighting a war in Viet Nam? The news upset him and made him feel angry, and somewhat overwhelmed. Although perplexed and frightened, he was not a cruel person and he would not retaliate against Charlene. He was, after all, attracted to Charlene and after many midnight rendezvous he was beginning to care about her, and he missed her terribly. He struggled with a jumbled cascade of thoughts and emotions. And he was puzzled, because he thought she had been taking birth control pills.

Jason had joined the Army, because he thought it was the right thing to do. In keeping with the seriousness at hand, he wrote back to Charlene telling her that he was glad she was pregnant with his baby. He promised her that someday he would return from the war to take care of her and the new child. Jason told himself that he was 18 years old and it was time to grow up and take on all the responsibilities of being a man, but he still felt confused. It was impossible for him to say whether this was a call to duty, a deep caring, or acting out a form of attachment and longing. Such is the nature of thinking of an 18 year old man in boot camp, when placed in the midst of fear and ambiguity.

No sooner had Jason attained this resolve to do the right thing, than he became as worried as a man with a gallstone. Typically, a gallstone reminds the suffering patient of its presence on a daily basis, with a nagging, uncomfortable abdominal pain that is difficult to ignore. Worse still, at night the afflicted will suffer acute gallbladder attacks that are accompanied by nausea and vomiting. No amount of will power or prayer will cure the presence of a gallstone, but occasionally a lucky man will spontaneously pass the offending stone through his colon, whereby both the man and the gallstone attain freedom. To the bane of Jason's will, his untenable problems would not pass as capriciously as a gallstone.

## **Viet Nam**

For Jason, there was life before and life after, Viet Nam. This was so powerfully true for him, that it became one of the primary themes of his existence. He had great difficulty integrating these seemingly separate periods of his life. Try as he may, after returning home from the war he could not be the person he had once been. He no longer felt comfortable when he was around the back hills country folk, with whom he had grown from a small boy into a young man.

It seemed to Jason that no other person could begin to understand the deep emotional turmoil he was experiencing after returning home from the war. It was fair and accurate to say that he returned from Viet Nam a damaged man, suffering in his everyday life, and unable to hold a decent conversation with his kin folk, or anyone else for that matter. He was plagued by nightmares of the ghastly scenes of death and destruction, which he had experienced on the battle fields of war. At night, he frequently awakened from a nightmare screaming in terror. He always felt anxious and continued to use alcohol to medicate his deep emotional wounds.

How had this unfortunate transformation occurred? What had happened since he and Luke rode a Greyhound bus across the American landscape to their first

day at boot camp? Jason and Luke had become fast friends in boot camp, but were separated after basic training, each being assigned to a different squadron. Jason was assigned as an infantryman and marksman, while Luke was assigned as a door gunner on a helicopter gunship. They were not to fight together in this war, but fate would intervene in their meeting on the battlefield. Jason's personal transformation started in boot camp, where he became accustomed to Army life. It was certainly different from the civilian life he had known in and around Pleasanton, Texas. Basic training was intense, but brief. In a few short weeks he would be shipping out for Viet Nam, where matters would become much, much worse. In Viet Nam, Jason would experience a descent into darkness and chaos. He would experience firsthand the presence of hell.

Boot camp had been extreme in its own way, but overall fairly easy for Jason. Growing up in the hill country, Jason was accustomed to long days filled with exhausting physical labor. As he expected, boot camp was regimented and the Drill Sergeant was loud and overbearing. In fact, it seemed like the Drill Sergeant was a chronically angry man. There was no sense in talking to him, as asking him questions acted as a trigger that only served to make him angrier. The food was half edible and tasteless, but there was plenty of it to go around. Jason made easy buddies with the other young recruits. He and his friends would drink cheap whiskey whenever they had the chance, and they always looked forward to getting a pass to go into town on a Saturday night. Those were high times when the Army boys came into town, all big balls and liquored up. Women found them exciting to be around, and they could not stop smiling as fantasies whirled quickly through their girlish minds. There is just something about a man in uniform.

In a few short weeks Jason was shipping out to Saigon. He liked being assigned as an infantryman. In fact, he had been singled out as a marksman during training drills in boot camp. He was skilled with a rifle before joining the Army, because he had gone hunting with his father and brothers so many times. Not to mention the hours of target practice out on the land, shooting Coke cans and the like. He understood gun safety and the business end of a rifle. He also had some experience with stalking an elusive buck, or waiting for prey by holding as still as night in a camouflaged blind.

What Jason could not have known was the immense psychological burden of killing other human beings within the pretense of war. Unfortunately, in boot camp there was no preparation for the bloodied quagmire of the killing fields. He was provided a marksman's rifle equipped with a high powered scope. The rifle had a very long range and was incredibly accurate. Laden with gear and ammunition, he was primed to be a killing machine. The only thing missing was the lasting disconnect from emotion, which was expedient to accomplishing the unspeakable.

He had only been in Viet Nam for a few days when his squadron was repositioned via helicopter transport, to a location near the Cambodian border. The encampment was filled with the noise of Huey's making their distinctive chopping sound as they flew in soldiers and supplies. The reverberating sound was like the heartbeat of a giant dragonfly, coming and going from the base camp. Jason sensed an undeniable air of tense excitement in the bivouac and there was talk of Viet Cong soldiers in the area.

Jason's first encounter with the gripping intensity of war was night patrol on his first foray in the field. He was geared up and ready to go with the other men in his detachment. Stepping out from his camp's position he quickly realized that raw experience would be his closest companion and his greatest teacher. Deep into the night they progressed, as a waning moon set slowly into the West. Thick jungle underbrush hindered every step, while rivulets of sweat ran down his neck and back. He and the other men slogged through rotten marshes until their boots were nothing but wet leather tied to their feet. They had been moving forward in this way for many hours without a break. Doubt found its way into Jason's mind. Where was he? Did the Field Sargent or any of the other soldiers know how to get back to camp? What was the objective of this night patrol?

Something seemed wrong. His heart was pounding and he felt very uneasy. Suddenly, the hair stood up on the back of his neck. Without warning, a shot rang out from somewhere in front of his patrol. He and the others hit the ground and waited. The Field Sargent yelled out, „Keep down!“ He heard a man cry out loudly in pain. A Viet Cong sniper's bullet had found its mark. The cries of the wounded soldier sent fear into every pore of Jason's body. His pulse was pounding in his ears. He had fallen into muddy slim, but reflexively he kept his gun out of the water. Drilled into muscle memory at boot camp, he knew that if a soldier is to survive, his weapon must survive first. He was face down in the black mud, overcome by waves of gut wrenching fear. At that moment, Jason clenched his teeth and made a determined choice to move forward and kill enemy soldiers, if that is what it took to survive this wretched night.

He pulled up courage from a place deep inside himself that he had never known. In that extreme moment something happened inside that transformed human fear into animal instincts. It was as if a switch had been flipped, turning him away from wanting to run, towards wanting to fight the enemy. The hardened edge of needing to kill the enemy to survive had awakened. His determination was unwavering. In that moment he became incredibly focused. Every muscle in his body became taught with anticipation of the task at hand. In the darkness Jason saw a small movement in a tree about 150 yards ahead of his group. He instantly knew that it was a sniper positioned about half way up in the limbs of a tall tree. He made note of the exact spot where he had seen the slight movement and readied himself.

Lying belly down on the ground he cradled the marksman's rifle and felt reassured. With surgical precision he steadied the high powered scope towards the inevitable target. Out of chaos, his mind became totally focused on correctly aiming his rifle. He inhaled deeply and removed the safety latch from the gun. Exhaling, he slowly squeezed the delicate trigger. The shot rang out into the dark night and Jason felt a strong kick from the butt of the rifle, shoving him deeper into the black mud. All the while, Jason kept his unwavering gaze on that spot in the tree, which stood like a frightening tower above his fellowmen. It was no surprise to Jason, to hear the cracking of tree limbs, as the target of his rifle's aim fell deftly as a dark shape, towards the accepting ground. There was a dull thud as the felled enemy hit the ground, followed by a great silence.

By this time the moon had set. Darkness had now descended upon darkness. The men waited motionless for what seemed like past forever. With aching bodies

and weary minds they waited, not knowing if another sniper was in the trees. Finally, the first rays of daybreak shown as a dim rose colored glow on the Eastern horizon. Just then the Field Sargent yelled out, „Fall back!” ordering the men to retreat from their position. Apparently the Field Sargent, who was the most experienced man in the group, knew that it was safe to move back towards their encampment. The infantry detachment had not lost a man that night. One soldier had been hit by the sniper’s bullet. Luckily, for that young man it was a through and through wound to the thigh. Though limping and in pain, the wounded soldier was still able to walk and move with the group back towards camp, being supported by a fellow soldier at each arm. For others in this misshapen war the wounds of the battlefield would be far more devastating.

After returning to camp the men were far past exhaustion and ready for sleep. The Field Sargent approached Jason with a wry smile on his face and asked, „Where did you learn to shoot like that?” Jason pawed the ground with one foot and said something about hunting squirrels in the woods back home. It was obvious that Jason had earned the Field Sargent’s respect, which was a great relief. He and the others were exhausted and famished. He was able to eat a little with his fellow soldiers before retiring to his assigned tent. Relieved of his heavy gear, lying on his Army cot seemed like heaven and felt safe. However, Jason’s brain was turning over and over the events of the night before, as if a movie was projecting the events on a screen in his mind. He could not turn off the movie, as it continued to play on and on. He remembered having a small bottle of cheap whiskey in his locker, which helped him fall into the release of sleep, restless though it may be.

After this experience Jason became vigilant of everything that moved around him. It seemed like his brain and senses were on high alert at all times. It became crystal clear to him that life and limb were at stake. Mission after mission, the task at hand was basic survival, which he approached with both self-confidence and dread. As if that were not enough, his mental and emotional states were further complicated by the feeling of having darkness inside his chest. This was something that Jason had never experienced in the past. At various times during the day and especially at night, Jason could not shake the uncomfortable feeling of darkness within the center of his chest. It felt like a black emptiness. Within the feeling of emptiness was something both gruesome and frightening. It was a place that he wanted to avoid, yet there was no means of escape. Jason could no more escape that hideous feeling than he could flee his own shadow at high Noon.

He would awaken at night held in the grip of an intense fear. The nightmares of war seemed to be getting worse with time. He realized that the empty feeling in his chest was actually a feeling of dread and strangulation in his heart. No amount of alcohol could make those bad feelings go away. In Jason’s heart it felt like his very soul was being ripped and shaken by the grip of some dark hand, which was reaching up from a hellish realm to rob him of feeling at ease. Try as he may, Jason had a hard time shaking off that dark hand.

As time went by, Jason came to see that the entire stage of the war, with all its bombings, napalm and widespread scenes of carnage and terror, was encompassed by the same darkness that clutched so tightly to his chest. It was as if a black smoke had risen up from a hellish realm, escaping through the cracks in



the Earth to permeate the atmosphere and strangle the life force out of everything in its dominion. A demonic force had reached up from hell and was holding the entire country in its merciless grip. Jason and everything around him was relentlessly strangled by the same cruel black smoke, which when inhaled made it forever difficult to breathe freely again. He was losing the will to move such poisonous air in and out of his lungs. Jason realized there could be no winners in this war, save that obscene darkness, which had infected and overcome all those within its reach. Thus, Jason had learned that by the killing of even one man the whole world is forever changed.

## **Luke**

Luke had joined the Army at the same time as Jason, and they had shipped out on the same Greyhound bus from Pleasanton to Fort Ord. They had been casual friends in high school, and sharing the experiences of basic training drew them closer together, in what seemed to be an unspoken brotherly instinct to survive. And they were always drinking buddies when venturing into town to visit the Seaside Tavern. On those occasions, Luke was more drawn to flirting with the girls, while Jason was more inclined towards ordering another beer. In either case, the relief from fear and worry was temporary and gladly received.

After eight short weeks of boot camp they were separated by the needs of advanced training. Luke was to become a door gunner on a helicopter gunship and Jason would train as a marksman with the infantry. It seemed that growing up in the country, which afforded many opportunities for hunting with a rifle, had covertly prepared both young men to become warriors. Opportunity and fate are sometimes intertwined in a way that only becomes discernible after events have become history. And so it came to pass that the seriousness and finality of war would be thrust upon them, in ways young warriors cannot imagine.

Although they did not fight together in the same squadron, Luke and Jason were destined to meet in Viet Nam. Oftentimes, when Jason and his squadron were being deployed on a mission, they would be transported via helicopter to a remote location. On one such occasion, as Jason and his squadron were loading into the belly of a Huey, he recognized his high school friend seated at the position of the door gunner, casually leaning on his minigun.

„Luke!” he cried in unexpected joy. Luke looked up in surprise and grinned widely at the sight of Jason. In the midst of a sea of men in khaki and gear, they stood gazing at each other in wonder and amazement. „How have you been, man?” Jason asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet with excitement. „I’m alright, as long as I can keep sitting behind this minigun and shooting gooks!” Luke exclaimed, while patting the top of the high speed machine gun mounted to the floor of the helicopter. „Man that is one powerful looking gun!” Jason replied. „I hear Charlene is pregnant and about to have the baby!” Luke said, smiling broadly. „Yep, I can’t wait to get home and see my son!” Jason beamed with pride.

They were both proud of their accomplishments as soldiers. Jason had many stories to tell of his successes as a marksman. Likewise, Luke was wild with stories about mowing down Viet Cong soldiers with his high speed machine gun.

He said the number of Viet Cong soldiers he had killed was beyond counting. He got a little excited, like getting an adrenaline rush, when talking about the missions and the scores of enemy killed. Being soldiers, neither of them ever knew the objective of a mission until they were underway. At the last minute they would be told the objective was to seek out and destroy an enemy bunker on a certain hill, or to burn down an enemy stronghold, which to their eyes was indiscernible from the straw huts in any other mountain village.

Soldiers have no time for remorse or doubt. They are face to face with death every day, and they must fight to stay alive. Throughout their ranks, soldiers believe they are doing the right thing for God and Country. However, truth be known they spend little time thinking about the purpose or reasons for the war. The only things they need to know are what they are told to do and when to do it. They quickly learn to respond to the voice of a Field Sargent and complain about the strenuous work. When they are in the field it is all about winning or losing, living or dying. They blame the enemy for everything that is wrong in the world, and they are more than willing, in fact eager to kill enemy soldiers. The enemy becomes like unwholesome vermin that must be eradicated. And with each enemy soldier killed, the day of victory and returning home gets a little closer.

At home, watching the news of the war on television, most Americans do not understand the soldier's thrill and bravado, experienced as part of a successful killing spree. Only a warrior in the glorious midst of victorious battle can understand this primal accomplishment, which makes him feel like he is standing a foot taller and that much closer to total triumph over the enemy. Within the pretext of war the primitive urge to kill is unleashed and encouraged. Hideous scenes of bloody death and mangled bodies become the norm for soldiers fighting on the ground. What is considered correct behavior on the killing fields would not be considered correct in any other context of life. In fact, warlike behaviors are condemned in every other setting of human experience. For humanity, the irony of war cannot be easily reconciled. After all, what other animal besides mankind kills so many members of its own species?

The Huey slowly lifted off the ground with a thundering noise and a calamity of dust and debris. It seemed like the Earth and the surrounding air gave a great heave and pushed the helicopter skyward. The men in the belly of the Huey settled in for the transport. Luke and the opposite door gunner kept a watchful eye on the countryside below. Helicopters were essential to the war effort in terms of moving troops and providing aerial support to soldiers already on the ground. Unfortunately, helicopters were notoriously vulnerable to enemy attack. Even simple enemy rifle fire could bring down a large helicopter if a bullet pierced a strategic point in the engine or otherwise defeated the metal bird from flying. Many helicopter gunships were lost during the Viet Nam war. A helicopter crash was always catastrophic and not a survivable event.

Jason and the other men in his squadron were being transported by four Hueys flying in tandem. As they approached the drop off area, Luke fired several bursts of machine gun fire into a group of trees where he thought he had seen movement. There was no return fire, so the choppers slowed to a standstill in midair, and then slowly lowered to the ground, onto a clearing just past the group of trees. The choppers were extremely vulnerable at this point, like sitting ducks in a pond, so

they kept their engines running and blades turning at idle speed. The soldiers came pouring out of the belly of each helicopter, with their heads held low and running for cover. Having accomplished the transport it was best for the choppers to drop off the men and leave the area as quickly as possible. All four Hueys were now powering up and slowly lifting off the ground. At about 8 to 10 feet off the ground the enormous choppers turned 180 degrees on their center axes like graceful dragonflies, and headed back in the direction from which they had arrived.

At that moment there was a volley of machine gun fire from the group of trees just ahead of the choppers, which were gaining altitude with a great roaring of engines at full throttle and blades spinning furiously. The choppers were being ambushed by a small group of Viet Cong soldiers hidden in the trees. As the choppers cleared the trees, the rearmost bird took a heavy beating from an AK-47 to its tail section. The rear rotary blade was damaged, causing the great metal bird to lurch and roll forward. No longer in control, the tail end of the chopper swung wildly around its center axis before losing all ability to stay aloft. The helicopter had actually started to crack up and break apart before it ever hit the ground. Finally, gravity took its toll and pulled the broken machine to the ground with a great crashing force. The momentum of the impact caused the ground to shake, as the remaining fuel in the ruptured tanks exploded in a massive fireball. At that moment, hell had exploded on the surface of the Earth.

The chopper had crashed into the group of trees from which it had received enemy fire. There was smoke and the smell of fuel everywhere. Jason and some of the other men ran towards the burning debris, which moments earlier had been a glorious bird lifting away from the shackles of gravity, only to return to Earth's hold in a terrifying crash of metal and exploding fuel. By an irony of fate, the Viet Cong soldiers that had fired upon the helicopter were smashed to destruction by the crashing of the Huey and the ensuing explosion. The helicopter had crashed into the spot where the enemy had been hiding. The Viet Cong soldiers were the immediate victims of their own violence. For them, the razor's edge of cause and effect cut quickly through.

Jason sensed the worst as he ran towards the wreckage. He found Luke's body, which was lying remarkably intact about 50 feet from the main part of the carnage. His body had been thrown with tremendous force from the chopper as it spun around uncontrollably before the final crash. Jason rushed up to his friend and held his hand. He saw that Luke was bleeding about his head. There were rivulets of blood coursing down his face from his cracked helmet. Luke's eyes were open as he took his last few agonizing breaths. Jason could see that Luke was not looking at him. Rather, he was looking into a space that is far beyond this broken world. Finally, after a few moments that lasted an eternity, Luke's eyes closed and his breathing slowly faded away into a whisper and disappeared. Luke had gone to a place of light and the peace that passes understanding. Jason knew that his friend had died.

At that moment Jason felt at once shocked, terrified and violently angry. He wanted to smash the butt of his rifle into the ground over and over again. His thoughts became black and he was reeling inside. In his mind the dark hand from hell had reached up from depths of depravity to grab his friend's helicopter and

pull it crashing down to Earth. The senseless loss of Luke's life before Jason's eyes made him feel crazy with rage. When would all this killing end? Had the entire world gone mad? Did it matter what happened anymore? Is the meaning of life so weighed down by suffering and grave disaster?

As Jason looked up from Luke's silent body he could only see a world that was held tightly in the grip of a dark and menacing force. Soldiers rushed about rendering first aid to men that were mortally wounded, while black smoke rose like whirling devils into the rancorous air. The Earth cried long rivers of blood for each man slain, regardless of their nationality. The world of life had been replaced by a sordid scene of devastation and death. On the battle field, light had descended into darkness. At that moment it seemed to Jason that the devious force from hell was winning the war, while every man, woman, child, and the soldiers from both sides of the conflict were the losers. There was no freedom or escape from this hellish nightmare, only the resolve to kill the enemy, but would more killing release Jason and the rest of the world from the hideous presence of darkness that was stalking the land? Or was it more likely that by killing again and again, the cruel and hellish power would only be strengthened? Chaos reigned on the battlefield, and within Jason's heart and mind there was no resting place.

Jason sank to his knees and his body erupted into uncontrolled sobbing. He bent down and clutched Luke's lifeless body, burying his face in Luke's chest. He knew full well that he could not bring his friend back to life, but that did not stop him from wishing that Luke would suddenly return. Jason had seen too much. By an act of grace he wept and grieved for himself, his lost comrade, and for the whole world. If he had not wept, he would have broken down completely and never been able to return to sanity. Such are the wages of war.

## **Part II**

### **The Crossroads**

Shortly after Jason had gone away to boot camp, Charlene discovered she was pregnant with Jason's child. Although the morning sickness was a little rough to go through, she was excited about being pregnant. She was wearing Jason's engagement ring, so she had no problem telling Grandma Kate she was expecting a child. She was equally elated to share the news with Jason's parents, Bill and Maddy Stiles. In fact, she wanted to share the wonderful news with everyone.

The responses from Grandma Kate and Jason's parents could not have been more opposed. Charlene expected Grandma Kate to be joyous at the revelation of her pregnancy. Instead, Grandma Kate was unsettled and reactive. Grandma Kate had never said anything rude about Jason until now, but once her tongue was unhinged there seemed to be no end to the condemnation and rejection of Jason and his clan. Years of resentment and bitterness stepped forth into the room. „How can you be pregnant with that boy's baby?" Grandma Kate remarked with

rejection and disgust in her voice. „Don't you know that the Samuel and Stiles' families are not alike?" And worse yet, „If I had known you were dating a boy from the Stiles' family, I would have done something about it!" Charlene's feelings were deeply hurt by these comments. „I love Jason and I'm wearing his engagement ring," Charlene responded with tears welling up in her eyes. She held forward her left hand for Grandma Kate to see the gleaming engagement ring. The ring was yet another surprise, which Grandma Kate had not encountered. The sight of the engagement ring brought a surprised look to Grandma Kate's face, which quickly turned into an expression of meanness and anger.

„I guess no one ever told you about the Stiles family stealing 40 acres on Acorn Ridge from my Great Grandpa Samuel, all those years ago." The indignation and pain was no longer hidden in Grandma Kate's voice, as she also shed tears. However, for Grandma Kate the shedding of tears was not to be confused with an expression of sorrow or grieving. Grandma Kate's tears were a thinly veiled expression of her underlying rage. The tears were only a meager attempt at maintaining control and civility, as what lay beneath was years of hatred and loathing. It was as if the full repository of the Samuel family's anger about the fate of those 40 acres had been unleashed in the form of Grandma Kate's outburst.

Charlene was incensed by Grandma Kate's vilifying remarks. Her tears had reached a full torrent and there was no holding back her next comment. „I don't care what you say, I am having Jason's baby!" And, „You're not my real mom anyway!" Finally, and without thinking about the consequences of heated remarks, Charlene exclaimed, „All I ever wanted was my real mom. I've always hated you and wanted you to go away!" Despondent and hurt, Charlene turned away from Grandma Kate and lamented, „I wish my real mom was here today." At this point Charlene broke down into full sobbing that rocked her whole body. Grandma Kate simply walked out of the room, wanting nothing more than to smoke a cigarette. A cigarette would be the perfect means of calming frayed nerves as well as expressing the underlying rage, which seethed within her. However, no amount of nicotine would quell the vengeful thoughts that were fermenting in her mind.

By the next day Charlene had composed herself enough that she was able to pay a visit to Acorn Ridge. It was Sunday, and she wanted to tell Jason's parents about the engagement ring and being heavy with Jason's child. Charlene was a little fearful that Jason's parents would be upset, but she sensed that she would find acceptance, rather than rejection. After driving the distance to Acorn Ridge, she walked up the driveway and timidly knocked on the front door of Jason's family home.

Bill and Maddy both appeared at the door simultaneously. Maddy smiled and said, „Well hello Charlene," and, „What brings you out for a visit?" Charlene politely asked if she could come inside for just a few minutes of their time. Of course, Bill and Maddy welcomed Charlene into the living room of their home. Seated together on the sofa, Charlene showed Maddy the engagement ring, which she had affectionately worn since the day before Jason shipped out to boot camp. „Oh my!" Maddy said with the most delightful smile. She lightly held Charlene's left hand while gazing at the ring given by her son, Jason. Charlene blushed with shyness and looked slightly away from Maddy. Grappling for words she quietly

spoke, „There is something else I want to tell you.” She squirmed in her seat with embarrassment and after a long pause said, „I’m pregnant with Jason’s baby.” Maddy was speechless, but so overjoyed that her encompassing arms were suddenly flung around Charlene in a wonderful hug. „This is great news! I’m so happy now!” Maddy exclaimed, brimming with excitement as she bounced slightly on the sofa.

All the while, Bill had been sitting across the room in his easy chair, somewhat bewildered by all the news, but not upset in any way. He had always been amazed at the way women folk relate to one another. He considered the whole of, „women talk,” as being somewhat puzzling and illogical. Over the years, he had become accepting of the ways of women. And after all, Maddy was such a good cook!

While sharing this joyous moment, Charlene became emotional and a little tearful. She related the story from the day before, of how Grandma Kate had been so cruel and rejecting at the news. It was clear that the painful barb from Grandma Kate’s searing comments was still embedded in Charlene’s skin. Charlene was vulnerable now and had to ask the hardest question, „I really don’t want to live with Grandma Kate anymore. Can I stay here, at your house for a while?” Charlene felt self-conscious and a little desperate in asking the question. Her voice quaked and she was visibly trembling.

Bill had been silent until now. He cast a quick glance at Maddy and said, „Yes, you are welcome in our house. If Jason gave you his ring and you are carrying his child, then our house is your house.” Charlene looked up with a smile of relief and delight. „Oh, thank you so much. You are so kind to me,” her words flowed freely. She was finally at ease, knowing that being pregnant would require a lot of emotional and financial support. And she appropriately said, „I will not be a burden and I will do my share of the work around the house.” In Texas hill country it is typical for a pregnant bride, or bride to be, to move into the home of her husband’s family. However, in this case there would be no dowry, and no sure settlement of the ill will that existed between the embittered Samuel and Stiles clans. Their generational feud had been caused by holding a bitter grudge over the ownership of a piece of property on Acorn Ridge. It was a loathing, which had persisted for decades, with no clear resolution in sight.

To Bill and Maddy it felt like the natural thing to do, and it would be wonderful to have Charlene help Little Johnny with bathing, dressing and other daily activities. He was always slow to learn and needed a guiding hand throughout the day. Through this activity, Charlene came to understand that by helping Little Johnny accomplish the daily tasks of his life, there was a good feeling about giving to others. At the same time, caring for Little Johnny caused her to think about her unborn child. She was certain it was a little boy now growing within her womb. Her love for the unborn son was blossoming, as well. And there was the unexpected benefit of needing less Valium. Somehow the combination of moving out of Grandma Kate’s house and becoming focused on the care of others, relieved her of the habit of clinging to her personal worries. Charlene became so busy with helping Little Johnny and her unborn son, she literally forgot about reaching for the next Valium every time she felt uncomfortable or anxious. Caring for others in an appropriate manner was helping Charlene have a new found sense of self-

esteem. She was learning that to give love is to receive love. She felt bright and alive and could not wait for the birth of her baby.

Haybaler had been sitting at the kitchen table enjoying a glass of iced tea during Charlene's visit. He was out of sight from the living room, but within easy earshot of the conversation. None of what he heard really surprised him. The fact that Charlene was pregnant with Jason's baby was a little startling, but actually made him feel happy for Jason. In fact, Charlene's visit set him to thinking about his brother Jason, and how he might be fairing in the battlefields of war. He missed Jason's company and feared for his life, yearning on end for his safe return home. And to think, Jason was fighting in Viet Nam knowing Charlene was pregnant with his baby back in Texas hill country! Finally, Haybaler stood up from the table and walked into the living room, asking, „Would you like a glass of tea, Charlene?“ Together, under the roof of the Stiles' family home, they would await the return of warriors, and the birth of a child, to be named Levi.

## **Returning Home**

Jason's tour of duty was ending at about the same time as the conclusion of the Viet Nam conflict. As Jason and the other soldiers were returning home many questions remained unanswered. Was it all worthwhile? Were the South Vietnamese people liberated? Had America protected a country from communist invasion? Had the American way of life been protected, as the politicians kept saying? Was the monumental suffering and loss of life necessary?

Jason was a changed person by the time he was returning home from the war. He did not feel the same emotionally and his thoughts about life were much different now. He had witnessed too much carnage and death. He had many personal problems to deal with, such as vivid flashbacks of the terrified screaming of women and children, which he heard as clearly as if they were occurring in the present moment. The flashbacks were like a nightmarish movie that would not stop playing within the theater of his mind. He was over vigilant and his basic trust of other people had been damaged, but he kept thinking that somehow getting back to Charlene would help him with his immense personal pain. He hoped that Charlene would listen to him and somehow understand things that are difficult for anyone to comprehend. He sensed that transitioning back into civilian life would be a painful struggle. Nothing was the same. Everything had changed.

Like Jason, America had changed because of the war. During those tumultuous war years, many younger people became wary of authority and government. There was a growing awareness of social inequality, which was insidiously undermining the foundation of American life. The disparity between rich and poor seemed more apparent everywhere you looked. Hand in hand with more poverty, there seemed to be less hope that an individual with sufficient drive could achieve the America Dream. In fact, the notion of what constitutes the American Dream had been changed by the war. The American Dream was now more about basic survival in daily life, and less about growth and prosperity. Keep up or be left behind, might be the motto of post Viet Nam life in America. And, adding to these long term social problems, the American family unit was being undermined as parents spent

more time away from home earning wages, which left little time for being present with their children. Day by day, it seemed that the forces of hope and light were being snuffed out by an increasing presence of greed, and darkness. America was not what it used to be.

The period of adjustment was particularly heartbreaking for the soldiers returning home from the battlefield. Nothing had prepared these men for the harsh reality of returning as strangers, out of sync with the norm of civilian life. It was a discovery they had not expected. After the welcoming parade and the glory of handshakes, these former soldiers were left to their own designs, both to survive in a changed economy and to fend for themselves in healing the emotional wounds of war. It was especially painful for these men to realize that they were at times shunned and avoided, as if the majority of civilians thought they had done something wrong for fighting in an unpopular war. They were not treated as war heroes, more likely they were looked down upon as misfits and killers, somehow unfit to mingle with the rest of society.

Jason returned to Pleasanton and immediately felt the open arms of Charlene, as they held each other in a warm and lasting embrace. They had both pined away for so long, waiting for this wonderful moment. Hiding behind Charlene was a 2 year old boy, Levi. The shy towheaded boy was Jason's son that he had never seen. Peering from behind his mother's dress, Levi looked at Jason with a mixture of awe and trepidation. „Levi this is your daddy!” Charlene remarked with zeal. Sensing Levi's reluctance as only a mother can, Charlene picked him up and held him as a means of introducing him to Jason. Levi buried his face in Charlene's breast, a little afraid to look towards Jason. Slowly, but surely, Levi started to make eye contact with Jason. It would not be long before Levi would be Jason's dotting companion throughout each day. Likewise, it was not long before Jason relished hearing his son call out those precious words, „Daddy! Daddy!” Those words became the light in Jason's heart. As Levi clamored to be held in his father's arms, so Jason looked forward to holding his young son. They became inseparable.

As the days went steadily by, it was not Charlene that sustained the thread of hope that Jason so desperately needed. Jason tried talking to Charlene about his experiences in the war, and the terrifying nightmares, but she could not really comprehend the enormity of what Jason was trying to convey. And, after all, she was still grieving the loss of her brother Luke in the fatal helicopter crash. She just wanted Jason to be her husband and the father of her child. She held him and told him how much she loved him, but her ability to sooth his wounds of war were otherwise limited. Though a little disappointed, Jason did not blame Charlene for her lack of empathy. After all, she was not a therapist. She was his wife and Levi's mother.

As the days passed by, Jason saw that when he spent more time with little Levi, there would be less inclination to ruminate about the darkness that had followed him home from Viet Nam. Jason did not speak to his son about the horrible memories of blood stained massacre. Nor did he mention the monstrous dark hand of fear and hatred that would sometimes still appear in his heart and mind. Without speaking of these things to a toddler, Jason's wounds were none the less relieved and soothed by spending time with Levi. Their relationship was reciprocal,



father to son and son to father, to be sure. And it was more than that, too. Their relationship was mutually beneficial and healing. Levi was healing from missing his daddy while he was away for so long. Similarly, Jason was healing by being in the presence of Levi's beautiful smile and clear blue eyes. When they looked at each other there was an instant recognition of mutual love and respect.

However, there was one aspect of Jason's life that was not improving with time. When least expected, the dark and monstrous presence, which had come to haunt him during the war, would still appear in his thoughts from time to time. And the feeling of having that dark fist strangling the very heart within his chest was more than he could endure. At times he was gripped by terror and despair. The worst part of it was the recurring nightmares of slaughter and annihilation. In these dreams Jason would be walking through the fields of war, surrounded by mangled, charred and half dead bodies that were moaning and crying out in pain. Jason would bolt out of sleep into a frightening awareness that the menacing presence of fear and terror had followed him home from Viet Nam. At its worst it felt like a demonic force that was lurking in dark shadows, waiting to take advantage of his weaknesses.

He tried drinking to dispel the darkness, hoping the effects of alcohol would numb the painful memories and stop the flashbacks. However, Jason soon realized that drinking alcohol whipped the demons into hideous frenzy. While intoxicated, his inner demons rose up and took on a life of their own, threatening to destroy his mental stability. Jason tried drinking more alcohol than usual in the hopes that somehow a drunken stupor would quell the savage beasts within him. However, to Jason's dismay this caused the energies of fear and self-loathing to burn like a wildfire, threatening to destroy everything in its path. In fact, if Jason drank past a certain point, his darkest thoughts would appear as a horrible apparition of suicide, offering its devastating solution.

He was spiraling downward and he was desperately in need of help. He made contact with the VA Hospital in San Antonio, Texas. Jason was anxious to rid himself of the dark and malicious enemy that still gripped his heart and mind so tightly. In moments of weakness, he wondered if he was actually haunted by a hideous minion from hell that had possessed him in the battlefields of Viet Nam. „No, that could not be true.” he told himself, but doubt was his constant companion. At times he felt that his mind might be breaking down, and if that happened he would finally and completely succumb to the evil wraith lurking inside him. He remembered the moment when he almost fell apart as Luke lay slain on the battlefield. Now that he was home, would he finally breakdown into mental chaos and never return to sanity?

Jason was greatly concerned that the evil influence of the dark specter was becoming an omnipresent force in his current life, as it had been in Viet Nam. He vividly remembered how it seemed like the menacing grip of the hellish hand had encompassed the entire landscape of the war, bringing down an entire country in its reign of terror and utter depravity. At times, he was having a difficult time distinguishing between the reality of understanding these feelings as symptoms of his severe emotional anguish, and on the other hand, believing in the reality of having a dark and gruesome influence from one of the minions of hell living inside his chest. His ability to distinguish between basic reality and displaced delusion

had become tenuous. Was suicide the only solution to eradicating the evil monster that seemed to be living inside him?

Jason had decided to seek professional help. He drove to San Antonio to keep his initial appointment with the VA psychiatrist, Dr. Franz. During the session Jason was revealing of his symptoms, especially his trouble with nightmares and poor sleep. However, he was not as open regarding the use of alcohol as a failed attempt at self-medication. Nor was he immediately revealing of his fragile hold on reality and the belief that there may be an actual demon living inside his heart. After all, he did not want the psychiatrist to think he was crazy! Jason was, however, basically honest in answering the questions posed by Dr. Franz. And to a very important question, he responded, „Yes, I have occasionally had thoughts of suicide.”

Sensing the anguish and despair in Jason’s voice, Dr. Franz became especially concerned about Jason’s suicidal ruminations. His next question to Jason was like an arrow sent singing through the air, unerringly aimed at the center of the intended target. Dr. Franz simply asked Jason why he had not yet committed suicide. „What prevents you from taking your own life?” Dr. Franz inquired. Jason responded quite honestly that his love for Levi, his 2 year old son, was the reason he would never commit suicide. His desire to continue living with Levi, and everything that meant was the antidote to any suicidal impulses. Essentially, suicide would mean separation from Levi, and this was the most unbearable and impossible idea for Jason. His love for Levi and his interest in Levi’s well-being would surmount all obstacles. Jason needed to be Levi’s father, for Levi’s sake. He loved Levi dearly.

Dr. Franz was pleased at Jason’s resolve to go on living because of his loving attachment to his son, because it showed that Jason’s core drive was towards life and not death. Dr. Franz prescribed an antidepressant to Jason and asked him to return for a follow-up appointment in one week. Thus, a therapeutic relationship, based on trust and openness was beginning to take shape. Both doctor and patient felt hopeful that the inherent forces of basic goodness would prevail over the darkness that had threatened to snuff out the candle of Jason’s light. It was time for that candle to shine with a steady flame, instead of flickering weakly, as if on the verge of being extinguished.

Within Jason an epic battle was being fought. The great battle was enacted as the beatific forces of light and love, were pitted against the malevolent forces of deceit and dark hate. This battle was enacted on the killing fields of Viet Nam, and within Jason as an individual. Jason fought for his survival during the war on every battlefield, holding onto the hope that he would prevail and return to the loving arms of his wife and child. What he had not expected was that after he returned home, there would be an equally difficult battle for survival, in which his heart and mind became the theater of war. The most difficult part for Jason was distinguishing what was real in his life, as opposed to an unreal sense that the darkness of the killing fields was about to engulf his inner being, in the same way it had overwhelmed him during the war. Jason struggled, knowing the emotional pain and mental agony was real, and he told himself the monstrous specter of darkness was not real, or was it? He was still plagued with doubt.

He was like a patient with a high fever. When a patient has a fever he knows he is ill and in need of help from a doctor. If the fever becomes intense, a point is breached where the patient becomes delirious and has difficulty distinguishing between reality and delusion, but he may still be aware that he is very ill and in dire need of medicinal treatment. If the fever becomes even higher, it may further erode the patency of the patient's mind, whereby he is robbed of the insight that he is ill and needing help. A fever can drop a healthy man to his knees and if it progresses unchecked the outcome can be devastating, to the point of threatening total ruin of one's grip on reality. At its worst, a high fever causes a strong man to succumb to delirium and death. Such was Jason's plight.

Dr. Franz understood that Jason was in a precarious situation, like a patient with a high fever needing immediate intervention. Therapy and antidepressants take time, but Jason was in a perilous condition and above all else there was no room for him to get worse. Knowing this, Dr. Franz warned Jason against using alcohol, as it would make his symptoms worse. Jason had sensed this already, but hearing the doctor's prohibition against drinking, fortified him with the resolve he needed to actually put down the bottle. Jason had begun to experience the marvel of therapy, which can be like a soothing poultice, healing the wounds of weariness and war. In between therapy appointments, he would imagine hearing Dr. Franz's comforting voice telling him to remain calm, and reminding him that alcohol would only make matters worse. He also reminisced on Dr. Franz's approving smile. Somehow, the healing process of therapy was beginning to work.

Jason felt relieved that recovery was a possibility. He was able to trust Dr. Franz and was hopeful that the doctor could somehow save him from the cruel darkness that threatened to destroy him. Instead of thinking about drinking, Jason thought about Dr. Franz and the things he had said. He always looked forward to the respite of the next appointment with Dr. Franz. Receiving Dr. Franz approval was of utmost importance. Jason felt he would do almost anything to gain his approving glance. Seeking his psychiatrist approval went hand in hand with Jason's realization that visitations from the dark minion of fear were reduced by drinking less. The battle against the wrathful hand of hatred would not be won by consuming more alcohol. It would be won by drinking less and continuing in the process of therapy. He was beginning to feel a slowly improving sense of well-being and a decreased presence of the darkness in his chest. He no longer felt emotionally decimated. The wounds within his heart were beginning to heal.

For Jason, the healing process of therapy continued for a number of years. As time went by, he was more able to talk about the nightmarish events of the war. He had witnessed too much bloodshed and death. When Jason had returned from the killing fields he thought it inappropriate to speak of the massacres he had witnessed. However, slowly and within the containment of therapy with Dr. Franz, he was able to recount the murderous events of the killing fields. This served as a potent relief valve for Jason, a way of letting go of thoughts and memories that are really too dreadful to hold. As time and healing progressed, he was able to smile again and have periods of time when he was not obsessed with the notion that he was inhabited by a dark wraith from the portal of hell. His mind was feeling sound again, which was wondrous because it freed him to give love and attention to

Charlene and Levi. In fact, it seemed like the entire family unit was getting better as a result of his successful work in therapy.

## **The Golden Fleece**

During one therapy session, Dr. Franz asked Jason if he was familiar with the story of Jason and the Argonauts, from Greek mythology. Jason replied, „No.” He had never delved into the study of Greek mythology. Dr. Franz went on to briefly explain that in the ancient story, a hero named Jason had been on a long and arduous journey to find the Golden Fleece. If he was successful in his quest, he would return home with the Golden Fleece, offering it as a gift for the king. Dr. Franz asked Jason if this story might resonate with something inside him. Furthermore, Dr. Franz asked what the Golden Fleece might symbolically represent. Jason was perplexed and had no answer to Dr. Franz’s questions. Dr. Franz asked him to think about the story in between therapy sessions.

During this period of time Jason continued to struggle with conflicted emotions. Memories from the war were especially difficult. He was, at times, overwhelmed with intrusive mental images of Vietnamese men, women and children that were moaning and dying. In Jason’s mind there were unending scenes of fiery landscapes, charred corpses and unimaginable suffering. Jason could hear the sounds of gunshots, bombs and crying people, as if they were immediately real and happening in this very moment. His knee jerk reaction to these difficult feelings was to push them down as quickly as they arose. This was a learned response from very early in his life. This, combined with his long history of using alcohol to cope with all types of difficulties, had placed him in the untenable position of being powerless to move forward in his life. However, he had great hope that therapy with Dr. Franz would intervene, and he would learn a new way of living.

He thought about the story of the Golden Fleece for many weeks, but remained puzzled about the meaning of it all. Certainly, it seemed that Dr. Franz was drawing upon the ancient mythical story of Jason the hero in search of the Golden Fleece, because he was also named Jason. Similar to Jason the ancient hero, he had endured a long and harrowing journey, fraught with many hardships. Try as he may, that was as far as he could get with understanding how a mythical story from antiquity could possibly relate to his present life. He was encouraged by Dr. Franz to work on understanding the riddle of finding the Golden Fleece. He went to bed one night pondering the story of an ancient warrior that had gone on a very difficult journey, overcoming many hardships, on a quest for the beautiful Golden Fleece.

Early the next morning, he awakened suddenly from a deep sleep, remembering scenes of his dream world, enacted from the depths of unconscious memory. In the dream, Jason was wearing the rustic robes of a warrior, and he was equipped with helmet, shield and sword. His loins were girded for battle. He was struggling to ascend a steep mountain beset with many obstacles. The rocky slopes gave no sure foothold and the path before him was beset with treacherous ravines. Writhing snakes were about his feet, and the winding path was plagued with dark

and frightening shadows. Within the shadows were very troubling forms and faces. In one shadow, he saw the image of his father, who seemed distant and unreachable. Farther up the rocky path he saw the face of his mother, who shrieked at him like a witch in a drunken rage. Behind another shadow there were impish looking creatures inviting him to drink copious amounts of alcohol. A few more steps and he was beset with dancing skeletons, which reached out to grab Jason's robe, as their intention was to pull Jason into their realm of soulless depravity. Jason struggled forward despite the unending obstacles. Farther along, as each step up the mountain path became more arduous, in the shadowy mists he saw the image of Luke, lying slain and lifeless on the battlefield of war. This image was particularly difficult for Jason to behold. He wanted to turn and run away.

Jason wanted to quit climbing this frightening path, but something deep within him seemed to be urging him onward, despite the terrifying obstacles. Near the summit of the mountain he came face to face with a monstrous giant. Dark looking and horrible to behold, the animal beast stood taller than Jason and was swinging a long sword. The barbaric giant was intent on destroying Jason at that very moment. Instinctively, matching strength and endurance, he engaged the giant before him in a courageous battle of survival. An epic battle ensued with Jason pitted against the dreadful beast, each wielding a strong sword intent on destroying the other. Blow after crashing blow, the battle waged on for what seemed like hours. The crashing of shields and swords made a deafening noise, louder than thunder erupting from the heavens above. Jason's will wavered for one moment, and at that instant the giant's sword grazed his right shoulder, drawing a rivulet of scarlet blood. Still, the battle for life or death raged on and on, appearing to have no end.

Abruptly, Jason realized that he has been wounded and blood was coursing down his right arm. The sight of his own blood strengthened his resolve, and in the midst of the dream, Jason stood very still and asked himself, „What is this goliath intent on killing me this day?“ The giant stood before him with the long sword raised high into the air, as if ready to yield the final blow to Jason's brow. He looked without fear into the monster's eyes and was amazed by what he saw. In disbelief, Jason stood motionless, transfixed by gazing deeply into the eyes of the frightening giant, which began to reveal an uncanny likeness to himself. With no clear answer in mind, he asked himself, „What is this horrific beast standing before me, looking as if it is a mirror image of my own likeness?“ Though panting with fear and near exhaustion, Jason took a deep breath and stared deeply into the monster's eyes. Suddenly, a curious thing happened. The animal beast became powerless. He was no longer able to yield his terrifying sword when held within the calm discernment of Jason's gaze. The giant's sword dropped from his hands, shattering into a thousand pieces as it struck the rocks at Jason's feet.

At that moment, Jason was fearless and calmly gazed upon the hideous brute. The goliath that was once intent on killing him was now seen for what it really was; an apparition of Jason's fears. Gradually, the monster began to weaken. In his dream world the most amazing thing happened, the gigantic beast began to fade and disappear before the presence of Jason's calm regard. In a moment of pure wonder, as the horrible giant disappeared into nothingness, a Golden Fleece

appeared in the space where the monster had stood, finally dropping to the ground at Jason's feet as the horrible apparition vanished from view. There lay the precious Golden Fleece, resplendent in all its glorious beauty. Jason reached forward and grasped the Golden Fleece with both hands. He flung the beautiful Golden Fleece over his shoulders, wearing it as a robe of valor and victory. The robe radiated a golden countenance, which now accompanied him as a light of peace, protection and wisdom.

At that moment he was overwhelmed by a wave of compassion, both for the hideous monster and for himself. He had seen the animal beast for what he really was, a vision of a looming giant, manifesting as a terrible creature that existed outside himself. In truth, the menacing enemy was a projection of unwanted parts of his own psyche. Victory over the murderous beast, by acceptance of it as part of his whole person, was an unexpected realization. Jason would have never believed this was possible, except that it was the reality of his own experience. Once again, he had become the victorious warrior, but on a different battlefield.

At the next therapy session with his psychiatrist, he described the amazing dream. Dr. Franz was delighted to hear the potent story from Jason's unconscious dream world. Jason was rather proud of himself for being able to tell the dream story to his psychiatrist, knowing that it was like handing him a great prize. Dr. Franz was nearly speechless upon hearing his patient calmly reveal the immense tension within the dream, and its resolution by slaying the giant beast. Even more exciting for Dr. Franz was the patient's nascent understanding of the dream's symbolism.

The colossal giant threatening to kill Jason had been seen as having a keen likeness to Jason himself. And when Jason calmly faced the beast it became powerless. The beast within, which he had struggled with for so long, had never been real. It was a phantom created from the dispossessed pieces of his personal psyche. Jason could now see that the more he pushed down the painful emotions within himself, the more powerful the inner monster had become. He had also learned that if the inner beast was not feared, but rather accepted and understood, it had no power over him. By calmly facing the monstrous brute with the eye of discernment and empathy, he had effectively slain the animal beast within.

Dr. Franz took the interpretation of the dream one step further. He asked Jason, „And what is the symbolic meaning of the Golden Fleece, which suddenly lay at your feet after you had slain the mighty giant?“ Jason paused. He took a deep breath and said, „It is a great prize and I want to give it to you, as a gift for helping me so much.“ It warmed Dr. Franz's heart to hear these words, but he knew one more step was needed. So he asked, „What symbolism could be here, that a threatening giant is slain and magically becomes the Golden Fleece lying at your feet, especially considering that you have seen the true nature of the beast.“ Jason startled a bit and caught his breath. Could this be true? The Golden Fleece is „I,“ when I am whole and undivided. The very notion of this was startling. By conquering the beast within, Jason had regained the very core of his own being. Realizing this as truth, tears began to flow. Jason wept for himself in a way that was unfamiliar, and at the same time curiously healing. After the river of tears had washed clean the windows of his soul, he felt whole and strong again. He felt a

little taller and more at ease with himself. What had once been overwhelming was now transformed into an inner realization of his native strength and ability. And it felt like he was still wearing the inner countenance of the radiant Golden Fleece, which was really the core of his own being.

Jason and Dr. Franz sat quietly for a few moments. It would take time for him to fully digest and integrate this new found realization. This new found awareness was more than a mere intellectual understanding. He had discovered the lost part of himself, with which he could once again say, „I am whole.“ Somehow this awakening was like stepping into his heart and his body in a way that was remembered from long ago in his life. Jason felt like he filled out his frame and he was finally present in his own body. The darkness, which had occupied his chest for so long was absent, and he could breathe freely again. He felt alive and possessed of a golden glow, which shown from within.

Trusting Dr. Franz and the process of therapy, allowed the oracle of Greek mythology to step forth into Jason’s dream world to show how an ancient warrior struggled with an arduous task towards regaining wholeness. Finally, as a modern soldier, Jason experienced his inner battle and the insight, which overcomes the hideous beast within as a path towards healing. Few there have been that fully realized the truth of the Golden Fleece and how it can be regained. The oracle anticipates the conquering of the animal beast, but she cannot foretell the actual thrill of victory when it occurs.

## **The Deed**

Since the argument with Charlene, Grandma Kate had not let go of the sulfuric anger, which fumed within her being. She felt no remorse for the abusive language she had unleashed on her granddaughter. Furthermore, the fact that Charlene had moved out of her house to live with the Stiles’ family, surely added to the river of resentment that was roiling inside her. She felt a need to exact a certain revenge on all of them. It mattered not to her if a vengeful motive was right or wrong, as an inner tsunami of rage had swept her past moral decency.

For Grandma Kate, the generational conflict over who was the rightful owner of Acorn Ridge became like a pustule on the back of an angry sow. This sow lived in a filthy sty where a pandemonium of bestial debauchery was the norm. As the sow aged, the farmer had to remove her from the other swine, as she had become vile and was regularly biting the other pigs. The farmer knew better than to entertain an idea of the old sow learning to behave herself around the other animals. Punishing her would only make her meaner. To make matters worse, when isolated from the other pigs, she developed a dreadful habit of biting the metal bars of her enclosure, sometimes causing her mouth to bleed profusely.

This mean spirited sow had developed a pustule on middle of her back. It was an irritant, but because of its location between her shoulder blades she could not reach it with her vicious snout, to bite the swollen skin. Consequently, it grew and festered into a horrible boil. The farmer knew of the infection, but dared not get close enough to treat the lesion, for fear of being fiercely bitten in his attempt to help the beast. A year passed, until the day when the boil contained so much

internal pressure and pus that it spontaneously burst open. The sow shrieked with pain at the moment of the rupturing of the abscess. Pus and blood oozed out of the wound, spilling over her dirt encrusted back. She kicked and bit the metal bars of her pen from the painful lancing of the wound, which had been made worse by the wanting of time.

The bursting of the abscess eventually provided relief from the pressure and pain to the sow's back. However, the condition had gone untreated for so long that a chronic wound was now the undesired result. Much to the farmer's dismay, no amount of hosing down or antibiotic feed seemed to result in a final healing of the lesion. It continued to produce a revolting drainage that was as horrible to smell as it has to behold. The farmer remained vexed about putting the sow down. After all, she had had been such a good breeder, back in the day.

Such was the nature of Grandma Kate's anger, which had gone untreated for so many years. Her inner rage had insidiously declined towards a state of indolent pain, and was now beyond healing. Grandma Kate's lifelong stubbornness and smoldering hatred had returned the reward of unrelenting emotional turmoil. The tabula rasa of her childhood innocence had long ago been replaced with a wretched anger and chronic emotional scars. The nature of Grandma Kate's loathing for the Stiles' clan was spiteful and unforgiving. Unfortunately, Grandma Kate was not a woman of keen insight. She could not see that her unforgiving resentment was a double edged sword that cut her own emotional flesh, each time she rose to yield the cutting edge of malicious words against the Stiles' family name.

In a moment of devious undertaking, Grandma Kate decided to visit the Atascosa County Courthouse to search for a deed to the 40 acres of disputed land. A deed, if it existed, would be so old that it would hold dubious legal authority, but that was no matter of importance for her. She wanted to prove who rightly owned Acorn Ridge, once and for all. No cost was too high in her pursuit of this revenge. She paid the clerk the extra fee for doing a thorough search for the old deed to the property, which she coveted for all the wrong reasons. Even at that time, the clerk duly informed Grandma Kate that the deed was so old that it was probably originally filed at the old log cabin courthouse, which was now only a relic for gawking tourists. Furthermore, it might take some time to locate such a timeworn document, as all the papers from the old courthouse had been relegated to a storage facility many years ago. Grandma Kate gritted her teeth and was satisfied to wait.

Weeks later Grandma Kate received a call from the courthouse clerk. An old deed had been retrieved and a copy was ready for her. The clerk was quick to point out that the document was quite faded and appeared incomplete. There was no notary stamp, as is required by modern standards. It appeared to the clerk that this was a dubiously granted deed. Grandma Kate was delighted at the news and paid no attention to the doubts being casts upon the authenticity of the document. She hastened down to the courthouse to retrieve the means of her vindictive desires.

Bursting with pride and ambition, Grandma Kate wasted no time in proceeding out to Acorn Ridge, document in hand. Not being there by invitation, she parked her car on the dusty country road and walked the short distance up the hill to the



Stiles' family home. She strode up the steps of the porch as if she already owned the place and promptly knocked on the front door. She waited in expectation, for what seemed like a very long moment, while the summer heat surrounded her. Sweat was beginning to form on her brow. In the trees, the rise and fall of the cicadas' loud chirping melody, rang out as a backdrop of music to the drama that was about to unfold.

Haybaler answered the knocking by opening the door and glancing outward. His eye brows raised in surprise at the person he found waiting on the front porch. Maddy stood in the center of the living room behind him. Before Haybaler could utter a proper greeting Grandma Kate launched into her debate. „I have the legal deed to this property from the county courthouse!” she exclaimed, while shaking the document in Haybaler's face. The anger in her quavering voice was apparent. Her breathing took on a hissing quality, not unlike a pit viper which had been unexpectedly disturbed. Her appearance had suddenly changed, and to Haybaler she appeared like a cobra, coiled and ready to strike. The sight of her standing there, with flared hood, forked tongue and venomous fangs, was enough to strike dread into the heart of most mortals.

Maddy stepped across the threshold of the doorway onto the porch, pushing her way through until she stood a little in front of Haybaler. She was now face to face with Grandma Kate. „I'd like to see that paper,” Maddy said with indignation in her voice. The tension between Maddy and Grandma Kate was quickly building to a fevered pitch. In the full light of day, Maddy could also see that Grandma Kate was like a poisonous cobra, coiled and ready to strike. In fact, she was spitting venom with every hissing breath. Then, all hell broke loose. Maddy attempted to grab the paper from Grandma Kate's hand, but was denied as Grandma Kate suddenly pulled the document back from her reach. At that moment, Maddy's rage was triggered. As the heat of defensive anger rose up from the depths of Maddy's stout body, she became like an enraged mongoose charging out of its burrow to confront an attacking cobra. A mongoose defending its family does not know fear. Thus, had Maddy been transformed by extreme contempt and brutal instinct.

Haybaler stood and observed in awe as a fearless battle for survival ensued. He was reminded from his readings about nature, that the only animal capable of taking down a cobra is a mongoose. There in front of Haybaler stood the mortal enemies ready to do battle to the death. Grandma Kate looked undeniably like a cobra, coiled and ready to strike. And Maddy with her stout body, appeared like a ferocious mongoose poised for the bitter attack, enraged that her peaceful domicile had been disturbed by the serpentine intruder. The summer heat swirled around these two bitter enemies, as the chorus of cicadas continuously cried their shrill song from the mists of ancient memory, for all to hear.

At the moment when both women were about to engage in a punishing battle, Charlene appeared at the door holding little Levi. Grandma Kate had never seen the little toddler, as Charlene had moved into the Stiles' home before the birth of the child. She had been yearning to see Levi, and her arms ached to hold him. She was plagued by feelings of separation from Levi. And now the very sight of him completely disarmed her. Her shoulders dropped and she wanted nothing more at that moment than to welcome Levi in her arms. Tears began to well up in her eyes,

as the sight of Levi reminded her of her grandson Luke, whom she had lost in the war. Luke, after all, would have been Levi's uncle.

Charlene walked farther onto the porch and looked squarely at Grandma Kate, not forgetting the resentment she held from her childhood years. For the first time in Charlene's life she felt she had the upper hand with Grandma Kate. Charlene stood tall and forcefully said, „The Stiles' family has taken me in as one of their own.” And, „You know these people have been homesteading this property for many generations. If you try to take this land from them using that worthless deed, I'll make certain you never see this little child again.” Charlene's tone to Grandma Kate was convincing and she meant every word she said. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that she would follow through with her intention. Levi was the trump card in this grand game of human aspirations. He remained calmly poised in his mother's arms, oblivious to the tortured world of the adults.

In the summer heat the cicadas sang on and on, as they bore witness to the saga unfolding before them on the front porch of the Stiles' family home. In the eyes of cicadas this drama was nothing new. The battle for land and ownership between warring clans was as old as time on Earth. Creatures large and small were in a constant battle for land, sustenance and the privilege to reproduce and raise young. No less so for cicadas, as their survival was dependent on the certain necessities of food and water, and they lived in fear of wasps, birds and other predators. Yet, this foreboding never stopped them from singing their rapturous summer song, in an outspoken cadence that intrigued those who listened closely.

Suddenly, the truth of Charlene's words stuck Grandma Kate's heart, like a bell ringing true when the striker finds its mark. Without knowing how to act at that moment, Grandma Kate's body relaxed and the faded deed dropped from her hand onto the wooden planks of the country porch. Surprisingly, Grandma Kate had not become angrier at that moment. In fact, her defenses had dropped away as she was spellbound by the sight of the child. More potent than Charlene's words, Grandma Kate was transformed by viewing Levi. Somehow, in a way that can never be explained with words, seeing little Levi was a medicinal salve that instantly soothed the wounded grieving for her lost grandson, Luke.

Maddy could see that Grandma Kate was no longer the threatening viper that had stood before her just moments ago. Likewise, Maddy no longer felt the need to be like an angry mongoose ready to kill its perceived enemy. Haybaler stood in amazement of this entire drama as it had played itself out on the center stage of his front porch. He thought for a moment that Grandma Kate and Maddy were going to kill each other in a frenetic battle for a piece of land and basic survival. When to his surprise, the appearance of Levi quelled the savage beasts within the warring parties and brought equanimity to these actors on life's stage. Stunned and with mouth slightly agape, Haybaler continued to watch the drama of generations unfold before his eyes.

There was a long moment of silence. Even the cadence of the cicada's summer song had taken an interlude. To everyone's surprise Levi held out his arms towards Grandma Kate in a gesture of wanting to be held by her. Tears of joy and release poured forth from Grandma Kate. Charlene leaned forward and gave the child into Grandma Kate's open arms. No one knew what to say. They all stood in amazement at the innocence of a child, and sensed the healing power of

compassion for the long suffering of others. Levi had shown them a ray of hope, where before only the dark shadows of generational hatred and conceit had been known.

Haybaler would have never imagined what happened next, in this grand play unfolding on the front porch of his family home. Maddy, observing Grandma Kate holding Levi, spontaneously said, „Kate, will you come inside my kitchen and we'll all have a glass of tea.” Grandma Kate was completely disarmed by the question. Still holding Levi, she innocently said, „Oh yes, please.” While the kitchen ceiling fan turned methodically in rhythm with the humming of its electric motor, they all drank iced tea around the long harvest table. The centerpiece of the table was a large glass pitcher, filled with iced tea and wet with little rivulets of condensation. There was fresh baked bread and newly churned butter on the table, as well. They all enjoyed the fragrant brew, and each other's company, while delighting in Levi's presence. With the pouring of each glass of the delicious libation, the anger and resentment of generations evaporated, like so much moisture disappearing from the surface of a glass of iced tea on a hot summer day. There was laughter and joy in abundance. A truce was reached when all agreed there was not a battle to be won. Rather, there was a great healing to be experienced. Unity was the goal desired by all. The homesteaders would stay on the land and Grandma Kate would be able to enjoy Levi as one of her own kin.

This was the fullness desired by all. These were simple country folk and their agreement was stronger than any papers drawn up by big city attorneys. To one another, their words were like gold, as were the intentions in their hearts. Central to this agreement was Levi, whose childlike presence had an unseen influence that subtly brightens those lucky enough to behold him. One wishes to drink again from that fountain of childhood innocence and grace.

It was getting on towards evening and a breeze was showing in the rustling tree leaves outdoors. The primordial incantation of the cicadas was waning towards sunset. Once again, the chorus of their singing had been the witnesses of ages. A sudden gust of dusty wind moved across the yard and dutifully blew the old deed off the front porch and into the countryside. The crumpled paper was tossed about by the forces of nature, across fence posts and pasture, in a way that can only be understood as an act of natural intervention. The faded document was never to be seen again. How often in this weary world has the wrathful hand of resentment and hatred been quelled by the breaking of bread and taking of tea?

## **Cutting Firewood**

The harsh grip of winter's cold embrace cannot be taken lightly. Firewood must be cut and stacked before winter breathes her cold air over the land. It would be treacherous to attempt cutting firewood after an ice storm covered everything in its path with inches of frozen rain. Although beautiful to admire when covered in sparkling ice, the frozen woods are perilous and unforgiving. Man's vulnerability to nature's will is quickly revealed if great care is not taken during winter.

Autumn was Haybaler's favorite time of year and cutting wood for the fire was one of his favorite activities. He felt completely at ease in the woods. Walking at a

leisurely pace, he spent considerable time looking for the right tree to cut asunder. As he traveled deeper into the woods, he would pause to run his calloused palm across the rough bark of an oak tree, as if to somehow commune with the arboreal spirit. He took pride in being a good steward of the land. Choosing a tree for cutting was a thoughtful process, with preserving the land and its wildlife as the primary goals. He felt great reverence and respect for Acorn Ridge and all of nature.

He had learned that cutting down a tree was only the first time he was warmed by the wood. Tremendous energy was spent in the hours it took to fell an oak tree. Throwing the limbs and lengths of trunk onto the cart was enough to break a sweat, as well. Once the roughly cut wood had been hauled back to the barn, it was still necessary to cut the various pieces to the proper length to fit into the woodstove. For this task, a large handled axe would be used. Blow by heavy blow, the logs were quartered into usable firewood. At long last, in the depth of winter Haybaler would enjoy the sublime warmth of the crackling wood fire within the cast iron hearth. He savored every step of this wood cutting path, whereby he gained warmth for the body and the soul. There was nothing else in his life that could substitute for the feeling of wholeness that accompanied the work of cutting firewood for winter. Thus, the joys of working the land ran deep.

Cutting down a tree is the first step in long process that culminates in finding refuge next to the radiant heat of a properly tended hearth. After Haybaler carefully picked the correct trees and cut them to the ground, the next step involved hauling the dense weight of the wood back home. This was a considerable task and there was only one way to get it done. His father owned a cantankerous old mule named Sugar. She had considerable strength and a lack of good sense, which made her perfect for pulling a cart. His father used to say, „Sugar is a fine mule, but you have to hit her with a board to get her started.”

Haybaler knew that Sugar could only do a couple of things. Mostly, she could eat large amounts of hay, stand still for hours, make manure and walk in a straight line. Other tasks were of great difficulty for Sugar and likewise of great frustration for any human lucky enough to ever work with her. Of course, we cannot leave out that she had a particular talent for being stubborn. Her stalwart nature was the bane of many good men. Through Sugar, Haybaler learned that the relationship between man and mule was an unending source of trouble and fascination.

On first glance, one would surmise that Sugar was an unmoving beast. She was larger than life and her hide smelled like rank sweat. She was not graced with a notion of cleanliness. And she had the amazing ability to stand unyielding in one spot for long periods of time. In the distance you might see her standing next to a fence row, and in an hour or so, when you next glanced her way, she would be standing in the exact same position. During these long spells of repose you might notice a shifting of her cumbersome weight from one hind quarter to the other. No other movement could be discerned from a distance.

This is not to say that there weren't other important things going on. Venturing closer to the fence row, you would quickly see that Sugar was plagued by a horde of biting flies. Her skin was almost constantly twitching as she tried to shake off the relentless enemy. Or, she would stomp one hoof, which caused a momentous

swarm of the winged pests to circle above her heavy torso. Her slender tail would regularly swat at the harassing flies as they moved from shoulder, to flank, to all other locations on her body. Between the mule and the flies there was an unending battle of wills. It was the plight of the mule to be tortured by the unending irritation of the menacing insects, as they swarmed in waves over her dusty hide. It was the plight of the flies that their unending activity and hellish desire would never result in fulfillment, as the desire of flies is beyond redemption.

Her stubbornness is legendary. Sugar had the uncanny ability to become rooted in one spot when you most wanted her to move forward, or otherwise help with some chore. It seemed like she knew exactly what you wanted her to do, and that became the last thing she was going to do, come hell or high water. No amount of tugging on her lead rope or pushing her from side to side would cause her to budge from that one spot, to which she had become so firmly fixed. Sugar remained true to her kin in that regard, her obstinate behavior was enough to make other mules proud.

From childhood, cowboys and cowgirls are trained to avoid the south end of a mule. The consequences of such an error could be severe. As stubborn and unyielding as a mule can be, you should never attempt standing behind a mule to push her forward. Typically, strenuous efforts at pushing a mule from behind gained no traction. It is an exercise in futility. Moreover, for some unlucky souls that had attempted to push a mule from behind, the end result had been the sudden and unexpected lifting of the mule's tail, followed by a torrent of ripe gas and manure. The shocked expression on the face of that unlucky person is beyond words. Worse yet, when pushing from behind, there have been more than a few misguided souls that have directly experienced how it feels to be kicked by a mule. Some lessons in life are better avoided.

Even more unbelievable was Sugar's ability to cooperate when you least expected her helpfulness. On a sunny day when Haybaler was doing a few chores around the barn or in the garden, which were not begging the help of a mule, Sugar would walk up to him and lower her head, as if asking for the halter and lead rope to be willingly placed upon her. At that moment most would feel perplexed, as man and mule looked at each other in stunned disbelief. It is the same puzzled feeling that occurs when gazing into the deep heavens on a clear and starry night, save one difference. Unlike the regal heavens above, Sugar would break her spell binding enchantment and walk away if a carrot was not quickly produced as a reward for her politeness.

Many cowboys had an idea to ride Sugar, but it was best to exercise great caution, as she had never been properly broken to the feel of a saddle. Although typically an unmoving beast, she would shift around and act spooky at the sight of a cowboy walking towards her with a saddle. Many a man had become overly confident when Sugar held still for a few moments as she was saddled up to ride. The end result of this folly was predictable. Attempts at riding Sugar had been a perfect failure for many brave cowboys that had owned her. With unflinching grace, she had thrown each man to the ground, where he lay bruised and cursing. Moreover, she did not learn or change her behavior as a result of the cruel punishments these former riders would heap upon her, for being harshly thrown down to the unyielding Earth. Pain followed pain, but to no avail. Rather, for her

stubbornness and lack of respect, Sugar had been traded many times. By the time it came to this end, she was usually traded for about enough moonshine whiskey to make the cowboy's aches and pains of being thrown to the hard ground go away for one night. As the story goes, Sugar gave her many owners' two joys. Initially, there was the joy of purchasing her at such a cheap price, followed by the joyous relief of selling her without regret to the next hapless cowboy.

She could be stubborn and unyielding for months on end. However, Sugar would do almost anything for food. This point of knowledge was to Haybaler's great advantage. With a feed bag of sweet grain strapped to her head, he had just enough time to get the full harness around her sturdy frame, followed by hitching her to the rusty farm cart. This was no small task, as Haybaler had a limited amount of time to secure the mule with all her riggings to the makeshift wagon. Sugar remained patient, as she had grown accustomed to this request. Food was a fair trade for pulling a cart.

Once the leather harness and cart were firmly set upon Sugar's frame, Haybaler walked step by step in front of her, lead rope in hand, moving slowly forward into the oak covered woods. With Sugar's notoriety in mind, he had no trouble leading her by a rope, rather than trying to ride her. Sugar followed cordially, and seemed unmindful of the cart which now followed her every step. Her lumbering body swayed with a graceful rhythm only known to horses and mules. If she became stubborn and stopped walking, she would be offered a carrot. You see, Haybaler kept a pocket full of carrots as he led Sugar deeper into the woods. It wasn't so much that Sugar was being a good mule by following Haybaler as he held the lead rope, she followed dutifully because she could smell the carrots in his pocket.

In short measure, it was only a few yards to where a newly cut tree lay strewn upon the ground in a frenzy of wood chips and limbs. The sharp smell of the freshly cut timber filled the autumn air. With an hour or so of hard work, most of the wood had been thrown upon the old cart. Sugar paid little attention to any of Haybaler's activities. She stood motionless and appeared to be waiting for the moment when she would be lead back to the barn, frequently turning her head in that direction. There is little doubt that she pined away for the freshly thrown hay that was waiting in her stall. In fact, you will never see Sugar move faster than when she is returning to her beloved stall and the treasure trove of hay that awaits her return.

Time passes quickly when doing work in the woods. Haybaler noticed that the sun had moved a good ways across the autumn sky. After a short, but satisfying break, the wood was ready to be hauled away in the heavy laden cart. The broad tree stump would be left in the silence of the woods, to remain as a quiet reminder of a life that had once stood tall.

The cart was a phenomenon of back woods ingenuity. It was the bed of a GMC pickup truck, with the supporting metal frame protruding forward in a crude fashion. Sugar's heavy leather harness was lashed about her from front to rear, and cinched tightly under her belly. Then, the harness was securely strapped and buckled to the protruding metal frame of the cart. It was a poor man's contraption to be sure, but a splendid sight to behold. It was a marvel of backwoods ingenuity

and function. As man and mule began their journey back to the barn, the cart's creaking axle complained about the heaviness of the load.

Haybaler was walking ahead of Sugar holding the lead rope and feeling quite gratified with a good day's work. As he turned the final bend of the short journey, the barn came into view, about 50 yards ahead from where he stood. Two steps farther and Sugar caught sight of the barn. Jerking her head up suddenly and making a loud whinny, she bolted forward in a full run, making a beeline for the barn door. The lead rope was violently torn from Haybaler's hand, but he leapt to safety just as the heavy laden cart was accelerating past him. Startled into action, Haybaler ran after Sugar in a vain attempt to halt her progress. „Stop! Stop!” Haybaler screamed at the top of his lungs, but no amount of yelling and cursing had any effect. Sugar was running in a dead heat for the barn and her beloved hay. Over the years, she had been broken of some bad habits, but running towards the barn at the end of the day was still Sugar's claim to infamy. Haybaler ran after her as best he could, but he was no match for her speed. Logs and limbs were knocked about and hurled from the cart. The cart itself seemed to be in flight as it bounced along behind Sugar. Haybaler's heart was beating out of his chest as he ran and yelled repeatedly at Sugar to stop.

As Sugar approached the barn door, her momentum slowed just enough that she could make a slight hop over the threshold of the door, as she was accustomed to doing. Sugar had successfully accomplished this maneuver hundreds of times, save for this instance, because there was one crucial difference. She was still pulling the cart, which retained most of its heavy burden of firewood, jostled and a bit dangerous looking throughout this high speed calamity. Sugar cleared the threshold with aplomb, followed by a great crashing sound as the cart struck both sides of the barn door at full speed. Unfortunately, the cart was wider than the door. Haybaler looked on in disbelief as the cart collided with full force into the wooden framework of the barn door. The noise of metal and wood crashing together was mixed with the sight of boards and dust flying through the air in a great explosion. The huge wooden barn swayed perilously at the impact, but remained upright.

In a moment it was over. Haybaler ran up to the scene of devastation as the dust was settling. There before his eyes was Sugar suspended in midair, with her feet dangling about 6 inches off the floor of the barn. As she had leapt over the threshold, the old cart had struck the both sides of the barn door with a ferocious impact. The sides of the cart had come to rest, crushed and immobilized within the structure of the barn door. Incredibly, the cart and its heavy burden of firewood had become a fulcrum that held Sugar suspended in midair, lashed as she was to the protruding frame of the cart. Haybaler and the mule were both astonished. He was speechless at the sight of the wreckage and debris, not to mention the sight of his mule dangling from the leather lashings of the harness and the cart. Sugar, on the other hand, was equally startled as she stared unflinchingly at the fresh hay, which was lying in wait, just a few feet in front of her in her stall.

Without thinking, Haybaler began removing the logs and limbs from the cart, one by one. Slowly but surely, as the weight was removed from the cart, the fulcrum lowered Sugar's ponderous body slowly to the barn floor. Finally, she

stood with all four hooves on the ground, steadily gazing at the hay in her stall. Her ears were laid back in irritation, because she was tired of waiting for her dinner. Haybaler entered the barn and obligingly released her from the leather bindings. Sugar shook the dust off her hide and walked gracefully into her stall to enjoy her bounty of hay, as if nothing unusual had ever happened. Cursing under his breath, Haybaler surveyed the damages in pained disbelief. On Acorn Ridge a day's work is never finished.

## **First Love**

A word or two is in order to understand the complexities of Haybaler's social development. Of course he grew up within the Stiles' family unit, and he was afforded the richness of education attained from growing up on a working farm. He went to school in Pleasanton and was one of a small percentage of students that actually graduated from high school. He even went on to attend junior college for a few semesters, which if for no other purpose, left him with a fondness for reading and gaining knowledge about the world around him.

He was painfully shy during his teenage years. He tried smoking cigarettes behind the gym with the other boys, because he wanted to look tough and be accepted by his peers. Truth was he could never really inhale the acrid smoke without coughing. Add to that his disbelief that anyone could actually enjoy such a nasty habit, and it was evident that he was not to become a smoker. Even at a young age, he could discern that those youthful friends, who were most easily getting hooked on cigarettes, were the same ones that were getting into trouble for truancy and other misdemeanors. Getting into trouble with the law was not his cup of tea.

Upon reflection, it seemed to Haybaler that some of his friends and acquaintances were born under a bad sign. Or, as it would be said in Texas hill country, „There is trouble written all over them.” Dark clouds followed them everywhere. Even in high school, he could sense that some of his peers were in for a long and difficult life. It was not that he was wishing poorly upon them. Rather, He seemed to have been born with a natural gift of insight into people and their behaviors. Many years passed before he would understand if this gift was a blessing or a curse, because having intuition into people and their behaviors caused him dismay, as often as not.

During his freshman year of junior college he experienced his first romantic relationship. In retrospect, it was an intense case of infatuation, the likes of which were unknown to this simple country boy. He felt that the stars from heaven had fallen from above to form a beautiful halo around the crown of his beloved. She appeared to him as the most attractive and curvaceous woman on Earth. The very sight of her would send his heart and mind into a fantastic dream world, where he imagined all types of wonderful attributes about his beloved. At long last, it seemed like she would be the fulfiller of his deepest hidden needs.

This being his first indulgence into the world of romantic endeavors, he falsely assumed that he was experiencing true love. He did not think otherwise, as his feelings for her had overwhelmed rational thought, and carried him deep into



irrational idealization of the beloved. He had not yet developed the insight, that what he perceived as his lover's beautiful attributes were really only the projections of his deeply personal unfulfilled desires. Little did Haybaler know, he was standing on the edge of the cliff of infatuation, without looking to see what was waiting in the shadows below. It turns out that no one was at the ready, waiting to catch the falling lover before he crashed painfully into to rocky crags at the base of the ravine.

The object of his desires was a girl from Poteet, Texas named Crissy. As she had gone to high school in the neighboring town of Poteet, Haybaler had not known her previous to their meeting in junior college. In many ways she was his new discovery. The intensity of his feelings for her was increased with each date night, during which they both enjoyed the peaks of sexual fulfillment, afforded to those young lovers who so easily throw caution to the wind. He had fallen so deeply in love with her that it seemed he had ceded his will over to her, as the sole giver of pleasure and acceptance in his life. He was not at all his usual self. It seemed her power over him reigned supreme. His feelings about himself hung on her every word. Good or bad emotions were triggered and relieved by her slightest acceptance or hint of rejection. He ignored the red flags, which occasionally showed up in this relationship, such as a rational fear of what would happen to him should she ever coldly reject him. His obsession with her was so complete, that rational thoughts about her and the relationship had faded into the background.

What he did not know, and could not have known about Crissy, was that she was the slut of Poteet High School. So much so, that she had garnered the nickname, »Sticky Buns«. She had been known by this nickname for as long as anyone could remember. The nickname was crass, but fitting. She had the dubious reputation of sleeping with boy after boy after boy. For her, the thrill of the next conquest superseded any emotional commitment to a single male. The excitement of acting out the persona of „the bad girl,“ was her utmost goal. When confronted with the nickname »Sticky Buns«, by a jealous female classmate in the girl's room, she would immediately launch into a rant about how men found her hot and sexy. More than one cat fight had resulted from such taunting, with both sides throwing lipstick and make-up cases in a wicked attack that was more wounding of feelings than flesh.

Poor Haybaler, had he but known the truth about his perceived beloved. He was only five weeks into his love affair with Crissy when he saw her walking down the hallway at the junior college, obviously flirting with some other guy. He was shocked into disbelief. A wave of fear and nausea overcame him. She feigned ignorance when asked about the other man, but it was the beginning of the end for Haybaler and Crissy's romance. At first, not wanting to believe what he had seen, he became even more obsessed with Crissy and her every movement. He could not stop thinking about her, nor could he sleep at night due to tossing and turning with worry. The final blow came when she declined the opportunity to go out with him the next weekend. She became upset at his persistent questioning about the other guy, to the point that she indignantly said, „You are just so suffocating. I need my space.“ Haybaler was as speechless as if she had physically slapped his face.

Now deeply wounded, he was thrown off the sheer incline of the cliff of infatuation, crashing into the pitiless rocks of harsh reality, which were lurking in the shadows below. Unending emotional pain and anguish were his new found companions. He thought to himself, „So, this is what falling in love means. You crash into a deep pit of despair and painful suffering, with no means of rescue or escape!” Reality had never been as painful as it was for the next few weeks. Being abandoned by Crissy was like being shipwrecked on a desolate shore, with no way home. He was alone and no one was throwing out a life raft to save the lonely castaway. On an emotional level, he felt like he was dying. He was fragile and would choke back tears if he witnessed Crissy at the junior college, vamping with her new found friend.

Then an amazing thing happened. The next time Haybaler was at the junior college for class, he saw Crissy seductively flirting with yet a different male. In a flash of insight he saw her in a different light than before. Suddenly, he saw her without the rose colored glasses of infatuation obscuring his view. His obsessive thinking about her evaporated as quickly as the morning dew, which disappears when exposed to the revealing rays of the morning sunlight. In reality, she was the living persona of a girl acting out the drama of being the village tramp. Incredibly, she no longer looked pretty to him, and it was sad to see her displaying all the tawdry make-up and too tight clothing. Suddenly, she looked plump in all the wrong places. Haybaler could see that her drama and chaos was all just exaggerated attention seeking behaviors, from a person with deep, but undiscovered, childhood wounds. He hoped it was okay for his own painful grieving to be cut short by an appreciation, rather an insight, of Crissy as she really was. The scales of unquestioning love had fallen from his shipwrecked eyes, and he could now see the true light of day. This sailor had tried to navigate his ship in the waters of love, but he had run aground and become stranded. Surely, the tides had changed, and by seeing reality his ship was loosened from its entrapment on an irrational shore. He was free again to sail in the waters of reason and insight. At that moment he heaved a great sigh of relief, and knew that he would survive the emotional catastrophe of infatuation, veiled as undying love.

From this brief, but intense period of emotional chaos, Haybaler became more cautious with his feelings towards the fairer sex. Certainly, he retained the sexual curiosity of youth, and he was unerringly attracted to a beautiful woman, whenever and wherever he saw one. However, his approach to coquettish women had become not unlike one who has been burned by a hot stove. Caution is quick to intervene as soon as the heat of the stove is perceived, lest one be burned so painfully again. It had been an agonizing retreat, but he was the wiser for it.

## **A Passing**

As is common in the South, wearing bib overalls was the call of the day. No one could say how many decades had passed since Haybaler had been seen wearing anything other than this, his usual attire. Only the passing of seasons created an exception to his clothing monotony. Every country boy knows that bib overalls are suitable in any season. In winter, the addition of a denim jacket was all that is

needed to break the ill effects of a cold wind. And in the stifling heat and humidity of summer, a tee shirt and other undergarments became optional attire. Bib overalls are exceptionally suited to work or play. They can be worn while using the tractor to pull stumps out of the farmer's field. And as soon as not, they could also be worn into town when gathering supplies at the tack and feed store. Add to this the fact that bib overalls only need to be washed about once per week, and you will quickly understand the allure of this hill country fashion.

Bib overalls are the picture of simplicity and ease. And to be sure, they are not the picture of refinement and affectation. Seeing Haybaler in bib overalls, one might make a hasty judgment about him being a country bumpkin, but this was not the case. He was prone to reflection on life and he endeavored to understand those around him. A thoughtful and well-read fellow, he was above all a lover of nature. Some would call him a loner, but he strove to break the habit of isolating from others. As the years passed he had become more comfortable with being in the company of hill country folk. One of his greatest accomplishments was to start from being an awkward teenager, who regularly avoided social interactions, to becoming an adult, who was perfectly comfortable and conversational with the people surrounding him. He had reached a point where it was easy to talk with others, and he looked forward to the joys of socializing.

He continued to live on Acorn Ridge as an adult, which was somewhat expected due to the fact that he was the first born son and would inherit the farm when his father passed. For many years he made extra money by using his skills as a handyman and mechanic. Growing up on the farm meant learning how to change a tire on a tractor at a young age. In fact, he could repair or rebuild every mechanical aspect of a farm tractor without too much trouble. He had a knack for fixing things that were broken, and he took pride in the vast collection of tools and implements that were at his disposal. Having the right tools for the job goes hand in hand with living on a working farm. As time went by, he became known far and wide as the man to call if a tractor needed repair. This means of employment afforded him the gratification of restoring the broken machine, as well as the pleasure of interacting with various people far and wide.

A tractor is one of the most reliable and necessary pieces of equipment that a farmer owns. The diesel engine will dutifully start, even on the coldest morning. Equipped with various attachments, it can do all measure of heavy work that would be impossible for any single man to accomplish. A small army of workers and many days of toil and suffering, would not accomplish the work that a tractor can do in a day and a half. Every farmer loves the deep rumbling sound of an idling tractor, as well as the steady hum of the engine when it accelerates to working speed. The predictability of a working tractor gives comfort to farmers far and wide, as if all were well in the world, until the tractor unexpectedly breaks down. Then, to the farmer it seems that the entire world has come to a grinding halt. In his mind if the tractor has broken, then everything is broken. He is panic stricken until the tractor is fixed and working again. So, there is one caveat to owning a farm tractor, a problem which every farmer dreads until the time of its arrival. He secretly knows that this bastion of reliability will break down at the worst possible time, and at the most inaccessible location. Many stories are told of tractors breaking down when spring seeds need to be planted or fall crops need to

harvested. So for Haybaler, being able to make a repair call, on short notice and at the location of the mechanical catastrophe, was as valuable a skill as any. And, in this way Haybaler was able to supplement the lifestyle he and his family enjoyed on Acorn Ridge.

His family was never completely self-sufficient by living solely off the land. The property was a rocky plot of Earth and did not lend itself well to grazing cattle or growing wheat, but there were other ways to make use of the fertility of the soil. They had an expansive vegetable garden and rows of fruit trees, from which an abundance of food was obtained. Hunting White Tailed Deer, Wild Turkey and other game provided a suitable supply of meat for the table. Of course, Bill Stiles continued to make moonshine whiskey, operating the old still from time to time. However, with the passing of years, there was less calling for moonshine. Nowadays, men mostly drank cheap bourbon or vodka, which was easily accessible from the corner liquor store. So, revenue from the still had steadily declined. This was not at all an unfortunate development, in Haybaler's opinion. As the calling for moonshine had declined, simultaneously the consumption of alcohol by his relatives had decreased. He hated to see them drink themselves into ruin, and he was quite pleased when they were drinking less.

Haybaler had experienced much during his years of living on Acorn Ridge. He had witnessed the town's folk acting out the various dramas, which they called their lives. He was taken aback by noticing the differences in those that had pronounced problems with drinking, compared to those that were mostly free from the sinister effects of long term alcohol abuse. What a difference sobriety can make in a person's life. He observed it all with great interest. From his reading of books, he had garnished many pearls of wisdom and a reflective attitude towards the vagaries of this fleeting life, which passes quickly by, like so many pages falling from a calendar. When the painful awareness of the vexing human predicament became too much of a burden, he would always retreat into the woods and his deepening understanding of the world of nature.

Being a great student of nature he had studied the life history of most of the local flora and fauna surrounding him. He was particularly fascinated by the life cycle of cicadas. He had learned that it was only the males that sang out their boastful song during the hottest summer months. Haybaler considered it a very good day when he was fortunate enough to observe a nymph that had just crawled out from its primal sleep in the good Earth, to ascend a rugged tree trunk. Half way up the tree, the larval creature would anchor itself firmly, and then a break would occur along the midline of its humped back. Very slowly, a mature cicada would emerge from the larval shell to dry its nascent wings and body in the morning air. Left behind, the tan colored exoskeleton would remain affixed to the tree trunk, while the adult form of the cicada began its period of life on Earth, intent on the necessities of feeding, breeding and avoiding predators. Thus, Haybaler imagined the urgency of instincts that drove the male's impassioned cries throughout the long, hot days of summer.

Being a thoughtful fellow, he would lean against the trunk of the old apple tree that dignified the front yard of his country home to ponder the nature of life. On a beautiful autumn day, his reveries would be interrupted by the migration of Monarch Butterflies as they journeyed southward. They fluttered so beautifully

above him on their sojourn to the Southern Hemisphere. He would consider the various forms assumed by a butterfly and be filled with awe. This marvelous creature changes physical form; from egg, to caterpillar, to chrysalis, and finally to adult butterfly, and the cycle continues endlessly for generations of time. Haybaler would be caught in a muse about the metamorphosis of Monarch Butterflies, and wonder if people go through a more subtle metamorphosis during their lifetimes. As a person, could becoming an adult and attaining wisdom be understood as a metamorphosis of sorts? For Haybaler, some questions remained unanswered.

It was getting into late autumn when an unexpected freeze severely damaged the vegetation of the garden. Haybaler was surprised at how the morning hoarfrost had wrecked such a devastating blow to the leafy foliage that had previously surrounded the pumpkins and other squash. Clearly, it was time to harvest the remaining vegetables and turn under the remnants of stems and leaves, which now lay strewn about the ground like lifeless brown ghosts. He promptly strode to the barn looking for a spade to turn under the wilted stems and leaves, thereby returning Earth to Earth. He looked high and low for the spade. It was not hanging in its usual spot, nor was it hiding in other locations. He worriedly searched, as a missing tool was one of the things that made him feel mildly panicked. After all, a garden tool does not just get up and walk away of its own accord! Perturbed, but not angry, he continued to look about for the missing implement. He would not rest until the errant tool was located.

He finally decided to find his father and ask him if he had seen the garden spade recently. Haybaler walked down the hill towards the back shed, expecting to find his father minding the still. He did not immediately see his father, so he glanced towards the backside of the shed, where the woodpile was stacked. Haybaler gasped as he witnessed his father splayed motionless upon the ground next to the woodpile, with the missing spade laying haphazard in the midst of chopped weeds and dirt. There lying face up was his father, not breathing and quite pale. Haybaler's shock and dismay at finding his father's lifeless body was sudden and overwhelming. Bewildered and panicked, the range and confusion of feelings that swept over him at that moment were unmanageable. The old man was down and the space around him was quiet. His father was not cursing under his breath, which was his usual demeanor. Haybaler leaned forward on one knee above his father and experienced for the first time a depth of silence that he had never known. There was no denying that the old man had never looked so peaceful, as he then looked in death.

He felt a choking sensation around his throat as tears welled up in his eyes. Crying was not an experience familiar to him. His chest heaved, and with a great movement of air an uncontrolled sobbing was heard throughout the surrounding woods. In response to this grieving the woods became quiet. The usual din of bird calls and squirrel chatter was stilled in a moment of reverence for the dearly departed. Haybaler did not hold back the flow of heartfelt grieving, which overwhelmed him so suddenly. He felt completely overwhelmed and did not know what to do. He loved his father dearly, and now he was gone?

The good dog Winston had been by Bill's side, whimpering in an attempt to somehow revive his master. His faithful dog had maintained the vigil for hours, but could not restore the big man. As Haybaler cried over his father's body,

Winston licked his hand, as if to console the pain of human loss and suffering, in a manner that only a faithful dog could provide. Haybaler returned the warm gesture by petting Winston in the most endearing and loving way possible. Eye to eye, Haybaler and Winston shared a moment of knowing and mutual acceptance.

Just as the tears began to subside, Haybaler experienced an unexpected moment of peace and clarity. He perceived the gurgling of the stream and the slight rustling of leaves in the breeze, as if they were new and vibrant sounds never experienced before. It was as if the window of perceiving Reality as it really is, had swung open to reveal a deeper beauty, where the perceiver and the perceived become unified. For that one moment, he observed the surrounding woods and himself as part of a larger and more vibrant, Presence. He would never be able to describe that experience with words, but he felt subtly strengthened with a deeper understanding of Life. He wondered if this moment of Presence, was like the clarity of repose to which the deceased return. It was a comforting thought.

Haybaler had not expected his father to die of a heart attack at such a young age. The big man was only 67 years old on that fateful day. He collapsed while working to clear overgrown weeds along the woodpile, on the backside of the shed. The wearing of years and the pull of gravity had taken its inevitable toll upon Bill Stiles' frame. His youthful posture gave way to a forward slouching of the shoulders, as if he could no longer bear the weight of this weary world. With each tired step it seemed as if the burden of his life increased.

These were Haybaler's thoughts as he lifted his father's heavy body and slowly walked towards the family home. As he held his father in his arms, he looked up and saw the old Cottonwood tree that had graced a beautiful spot on Sorghum Creek for many generations. The aged branches were filled with Red Winged Blackbirds singing their blissful song of life, upwards towards the heavens. At that moment, Haybaler sensed that his father had somehow been delivered upwards unto God's divine pasture. On Earth, his father had once enjoyed the flowing melody of Sorghum Creek, and he now perceived the river of light and sound, which flows from God's home. Intuitively, Haybaler knew the appearance of death is only a hiatus in the grand play, which takes place on this Earth. And the beloved land is the stage where the dramas of life are portrayed upon the screen of nature's Presence.

