

Dave Boles  
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"THE THUNDERING TRA-LA-LAS"

The icy halogen glow from Travis McClintock's Jeep CJ burst through the cloak of a misty October dawn. The only sound was rubber thrashing against the virgin ribbon of blacktop that ran through the forest like a crick in an ancient's spine. The bisecting asphalt played host to spent leaves and dreary puddles of leftover rain. Pastel shades washed into the slate grey sky and shafts of white light had begun to prick through the screen of uniform maples. Rays of sun almost found their mark on abandoned rainwater, and attempted to illuminate the melange of earthy soot and speckled fallen twigs.

Inside the Jeep, Laney Archer, 17, rode alongside, while Travis McClintock, 16½, controlled the penetrating machine from his genuine leather bucket seat. The turquoise light from the instrument panel gave the cockpit an erotic shimmer. Travis clawed the sleep from his eyes, and Laney slept with knees to breast in a calm fetal position. He wondered at Laney. Travis ran his first finger across her forehead, and stroked a whisp of gold back to her temple.

Laney's form was tight, yet supple. She was easy to be around and even easier to look at. Dressed in a fading pink and violet sweatsuit...she belonged in the sunrise, not trapped in the dank womb with Travis.

He was lonely in the company of others. His dark eyes were stale and bloodshot. Travis used mystery as a shield to deflect caring blows by anyone. Laney, especially had concern thrown back in her face many a time.

Ahead, a platoon of deer hunters dragged a scalped carcass across the road. Travis slammed on his horn, laid on the accelerator and screamed at the early risers. "Murderers!" The hunters jumped

off the path, and a stray shot ricocheted in the woods. Laney woke to hear Travis scream again, "Lousy murderers!"

"Lord, Travis, my dream was loud enough, no need to go making me more jittery now." She slid up and looked backward at the hunters.

Travis shifted into fourth and glared at the deer hunters via his rear view mirror. Shifting focus, Travis' glare turned to concern as he ran his hand across his hair. He fingered a strand of silver.

"How long have these wheels been spinning?" Laney looked at him with stinging blue eyes punctuated with what looked like black doilies.

Travis yanked the hair from his scalp, and tossed it into the back. "Killing is intolerable. They were slaughtering animals that can't hurt anyone." He rubbed his new bald spot, and winced. "Besides, we're almost there. Time you woke up."

"Seems longer than it really is." Laney rested her head on the tinted window. "When was the last time you two saw one another?"

He stiffened, and stared at the dash. "I don't know. Really a long time." Travis fixed his eyes back to the bending road. "Why?"

"Lord, I see my grandad twice a year. Like a clock ticking away the seasons. Every 4th of July we go there and on Christ's birthday he comes to us."

"Will is an old man." Travis looked at himself in the mirror again. He ran his fingers over a small wrinkle in the corner of his eye. "He's old, that all." Travis drummed his fingers on the wheel.

She changed the subject. "You think I'd make a living as a model?" She struck a cheezy sideways pose and smiled. Travis kept drumming. "Mom left me some papers on this special school in Wisconsin. I was to eye them while she and Pops were gone."

"You don't have leaving in your mind?" Travis asked.

"Well, not exactly. Do you think I'm pleasing to look at?"

"I've known you since we were babes. I'm not rightly qualified. Besides, I'd be prejudiced. I seen you at your worst." He rolled down the window to get fresh air.

"You think I'm sorrowful." Laney stuck out her bottom lip and crossed her legs in a huff.

He braked hard and steered the Jeep onto a dirt road. "Don't ask me." Travis saw she was hurt. "You look fine." He wheezed and coughed up phlegm. "Hell, I'm feeling aged."

Laney had fire ablaze in her eyes. "You don't do that. You're not old!" She stabbed a lone finger at him, "When we were in The Thundering Tra-La-Las you were spunky." She was upset and now hurt even more. "You promised."

Travis defended his territory. "Operations make you age. I'm an old man." He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"You've turned to rock, Travis. Solid granite."

"I'm this way. That's it. Grey hair and a section of my insides in some trash bin. You got it, Laney. Good looks, smart, and even wise sometimes. But since they took Lance, and since the operation, I don't got anything but limits. You're stupid not to see that." He punched Jeep's headlamps off.

Laney had turned to stone. She spoke cautiously in a velvet whisper. "Sometimes I hear you moan late at night. I wish I could make you happy."

Over the hum of the engine, he moaned. "Just tell me I'll live forever." He shifted into fifth and the engine roared.

The Boyer Corrections Center was a sprawling cement block building on the outskirts of a swamp in the middle of nowhere. Room 18-D was cramped and entirely decorated in "rustic creme." Flies tugged at a rebel amber strip that hung above.

Roger Hastings was a personality counselor. His amber tweed sport coat matched his textured hair. He took his yellow pencil and massaged the eraser end against his bottom lip. "Lance," Roger checked the legal pad. "What are The Thundering Tra-La-Las?"

Lance Sheppard was 18 and an expert in theatrics. He froze a stare at Roger's rubbing pencil. Roger stopped, put the pencil behind his ear, and locked his hands behind his neck. He stared back.

Lance shoved up the sleeves on his canary nylon windbreaker. He opened his mouth, stopped, and grinned at Roger. Roger tapped his toe on the leg of the chair and continued the stare down.

In a slow, monotone drawl, Lance explained. "A civic group. Since grade four The Thundering Tra-La-Las ruled 33rd and Keystone." Lance looked pleased and tore the snaps open down his jacket. A wind rattled the slats of a nearby Venetian blind.

"Tra-vis. La-nce. La-nastassia. Tra-La-Las. Right?" Lance nodded. "Who was in charge?"

Lance grew tired, and answered fast. "We shared and shoved. We were a team. And we were ferocious." A fly tore loose from the death strip.

Roger's eyebrows tweaked. "The Thundering Tra-La-Las sound anything but ferocious."

"Well, we were."

"Says here," Roger pointed to the folder, "That you haven't had

many close friends. Especially male."

His trigger pulled, Lance bolted out of his chair and turned from Roger. For the first time, the back of Lance's yellow windbreaker was revealed. "THE THUNDERING TRA-LA-LAs" was emblazoned in bright rainbow thread. Lance turned back to Roger, and verbally shot him in the head. "This place is a test tube, and I'm not gonna be your germ. I'm blowing this trap...and they'll have your ass for it, Hastings. I'm not taking any more abuse."

"Abuse!" Advancing the duel, Roger stalked Lance. "It's you!" He waved his pad wildly, the sheets went sailing. "This test tube didn't assault two little kids."

"Shut it off!" Lance screamed.

"For two years you've played James Dean games. It's your ass in the vice, and you're too moronic to see it is about to be sawed off."

Not hearing anything but the blood coarsing through his ears, Lance pummelled the wall with his fists. Blood spattered on the damaged plaster.

Travis peered out the Jeep's smoked glass, and saw the acreage of his grandpa Will's estate. "Used to come here every weekend almost."

"Let's scamper inside. The sky looks angry." Laney grabbed her bag from the back seat.

Travis went back in memory to a time when innocence wasn't forgotten. He saw Will's home as it was then; a castle where he was a spoiled crowned Prince. Returning to the present, the house looked plain. Cats chased evasive butterflies. A roto tiller stood stranded in the garden and fought off invading rust. The wooden lattice added

to the house as an afterthought was laced with thick ivy. Its frame was bent by time and the changing seasons. Travis' heart skipped. He saw the Christmas decorations put in their place of tradition even though Halloween had yet to pass. Giant electric candles guarded the porch, and the familiar fake wreath with plastic holly berries hung from coat wire in the window. And the lights. They hung year round and were only brought to light when something important was to happen. The lights were singing.

"Let's do it." Travis grabbed hold his duffel bag and rolled up his window. Before he stepped down to the dew, he snatched an opened box of Cracker Jacks from the Jeep's litter bag.

Travis sauntered up the rutted path with Laney in tow. They stopped at the foot of the green cement steps. Travis put a foot on the first step, and his toe rubbed off a few flecks of paint. He tossed the bag across his back and looked up at the silhouetted figure behind the screen of the front porch.

"Hullo Will. Uh, this is Laney. I told you she was coming."

The head moved behind the screen to get a better angle on Laney. His fists went to hips and he grunted a salutation. "Pleased. My joints say we're in for a cloudburst. You all better come in and huddle under shelter." The figure opened the wooden screen door and the spring rang out an objection. In the new pool of light from a partial sun and the color from the lights, Grandpa Will McClintock smiled.

Will was a hulking 6'9". A Boston Red Sox cap shaded his scalp, and a too small Little Chiefs T-shirt almost covered his pouting abdomen. Will hitched up his brown pants. Grass stains on the knees weren't disguised by the dark color. "We can play some hardball after

Mother Nature clears the playground of her children." Will cocked a glance at the overcast sky and nodded in agreement with himself.

"I can't since I was operated on. I have to take it easy from now..." He looked at Laney. "...until whenever."

Will tugged down the T-shirt to cover his exposed belly button, but the quest was futile. "My mind's been bending in all three tenses lately. I recall now." Will brightened. "I drew up some muffins. Come on in and we can watch the butter melt down the sides."

With an uneasy change of weight, Travis admitted, "Dad asked me to come here. I wanted you to know that up front."

Will stiffened and looked past Travis. "Maybe he had a reason." Will inhaled deeply and his exhale seemed to exhaust him. "My lungs can't hold enough wind to blow out a celebration candle. But I still have my dignity. That can carry me the last mile."

Travis held out the Cracker Jacks. "Here. The rest is for you. I left the prize." He made his lips into a weak smile.

The air had cleared as best it could back at the Boyer Center. Roger's designer shoes booted a plastic bottle cap across the floor. Lance's hands gripped the arms of his chair and his feet were glued to the linoleum. Blood droplets had begun to clot on his knuckles.

"I'm Auschwitz." Lance peeked at Roger out of the corner of his eye to look for a reaction; he got a quick one. Roger went behind his own chair and rested forearms on the supports. Lance continued, "It lives even though the power that created it is dead. No one should be forced to see Auschwitz, but it shouldn't be plowed under, neither. After power dies, the stuff it leaves behind becomes immortal." He licked his bloody knuckles. "I don't want to be plowed under."



Roger turned to the window, and made the blinds fall. Lance, tired of sitting, unglued his feet, stood and stretched. "I have to cop a piss."

The restroom was a blizzard. A blow drier howled, paper towels littered the sinks, and urinals tossed away bodily fluids in unison. Lance strutted to the mirror. He shot his reflection with a finger pistol and noticed a pair of legs underneath an enclosed stall. With a smile and the speed of a panther, Lance licked his knuckles and sucked on the lemony flavor. With a shove, Lance made the door of the stall fly inward, and it thumped against a young boy's knees. He smiled at the embarrassed youth and growled, "Sorry John. I didn't know you were entertaining your namesake." Lance grabbed the sliding handle and left a dazed John behind. He combed his sandy locks and shot the stall with another finger pistol. Lance cleared the mucus from his throat and spat on the tile.

The fireside table was laden with flatware and not much food. A boisterous thundershower ravaged outside. Will poured milk from a crystal flask, and passed a basket of muffins to Laney. She smiled and Will winked back. Travis stared out the window, mesmerized by the downpour.

"So, Miss Laney. How long have you known this developing white knight?" Will picked his teeth.

"Ever since I can recall. Best friends most of the day."

Travis' attention didn't turn to the conversation, but to a huge head of a stuffed deer. It was on a board nailed to a spot above the mantle. "How long has that been dead?" asked Travis.

Bran muffin firmly in mouth, Will looked at his prize deer. "My old man made me hunt it on my own. Filled the mouths of my family that same eve. That deer is proof of my scattering from boy to man. From the shade to the sunlight."

"How old were you?" Laney asked.

Will looked Travis deadeye. "About your age. What's your score now, boy?"

"Sixteen add half."

"Never hunted a deer, I wager. Quite a challenge for a boy."

"I don't believe in the slaughter of innocents." Travis drank his milk.

"There were mouths to fill." Will countered.

Travis was angry. "Anybody who is heartless to kill like that should be hung bein' it legal." Travis kept his eye on Will as he took the steak from the tines with flared front teeth. Laney lowered her head and listened.

Travis continued. "God, Will you are old and bitter. The lines run off your face and have cut you up into splinters of anger." Travis was about to cry.

"You're a little punk." Will shook his fork at Travis. "Your mother turned you into rank baby food. I bet you don't even fish!"

"Travis, maybe we should remember your condition." Laney cautioned.

Fed up, Travis threw his napkin onto his half-eaten beans and sliced into Will. "Listen, Gramps. I dreaded coming up here for years. You've created your own little butch cartoon strip, and you're the featured attraction!"

"Calm yourself." Laney was worried.

"If the world was run by punks like you, the Whinnies would be eating on this spot. Act the part. Show you're not afraid of killing." Will hissed. "Or of being killed."

Laney stepped in. "Please! This is to be a relaxed visit. You are both acting like ghouls and it is giving me the chills!"

They both settled down. Will calmly drank from his mug, but kept his sights on Travis. With a milk mustache he pricked Travis with one last barb. "I bet you don't have the stuff to chop wood."

Travis flipped his knife into the oak table and stormed to the back door in a flash of lightning and roar of thunder. He grabbed a red axe and swung it like the Babe. "You'll see, old man." Travis opened the back door and the elements crashed into the kitchen. He latched the door behind him and jumped over little running streams. Instantly, Will and Laney chased.

Wielding his razored weapon, Travis swung mighty, swooshing blows and tromped down the hill to the wood shed.

"Kid, get a raingear on!" Will called from behind.

"Travis! Don't strain your wound!" Laney slipped and slid her way down the hill. She and Will ended at the base of the hill in a tangle.

With ears deaf, Travis entered the tin wood shed and slid a heavy board across the door to lock out his pursuers. He began to fervently chop chunks of wood.

Assaulting the shed with a barrage of emotion and fists, Will and Laney called to the imprisoned Travis. They were soaking.

"Travis. Let us come in."

"Come on out, Boy!"

He continued to chop, and they continued to pound on the cage.

"It's his heart." Laney pulled her hood over her head and tied the strings.

"It's as steady as my ticker. By George, I worked every day of my existence and never acted this foolheaded." Laney hopelessly pushed on the door. Will tried pulling on the door, but it was solid.

Travis was dripping in sweat. His facial intensity did not match his physical actions. He was slowing. "I'll chop 'til I wilt." Travis wiped his eyes, but the salty current still poured down his face. He continued to chop.

Will stopped; he was coughing and his nose ran. Laney desperately jumped around the shed looking for an Achilles' heel. She found one. "Break a window!" She was pleading. "Make him stop, Willie."

Will grabbed his chest and gasped. "Goddamn. The window. I forgot about the Godamn window!" He raced to the woodpile, and yanked out a length of steel pipe. With perfect form, he pitched it through the window.

Travis' face was void of color. He was lost in a distant fog. The axe dropped, and his body fell to the dirt with it. He was on the ground, flinching and moaning like a wronged animal. Laney pried her way through the window frame.

Gushing rain belted the windows of the Boyer Center, and it was the bewitching hour. A blank steel blue door was silent. It punctuated the end of a sprawling row of identical doors.

The last door peeked open. Crouched, Lance Sheppard slipped his head into the hall and became blind in the night. He squirmed his way into the dark, and guided by his hands, plastered himself to the papered wall. After a few short, sideways shuffles, Lance came to the rectangled window.

Guarding the glass and stopping his escape was a padlocked set of bars; tall as stalagmites and wide as his neck. Lance elevated to tip-toes and reached his hand atop the sill. Fingertips groped for the pre-planted key...and when they came up dust,..he grew furious.

His nylon jacket rubbed against itself with a soft "zcsfhsh" as he reached again. At the pinnacle of his finger quest, a flash of lightning exploded and Lance became part of the window.

An earshattering crack of thunder rattled the glass and Lance's nerves snapped. He jumped away from the window and in the process, knocked the secret key from the frame. It tinkled across the marble and Lance swore. Sizing up the back hole at his feet, Lance went to the floor on haunches to get the key. He cursed the night.

A light shot on at the opposite end of the hall! Lance's head jerked up, and his heart fell as he saw he left his door open. Roger Hastings came down the hall in bare feet. Lance's neck twitched.

"Lance?" Roger whispered. "I heard the thunder. Are you all right?" Roger crept to the door and his hand felt the wall of the vacant room for the switch. Sensing time running out, Lance almost got up and ran down the hall full blast.

Then it happened. A quick sliver of lightning hot as the sun flashed! Lance spied the key and Roger spied Lance on the other side of the hall.

"Lance. Get back in your room."

Lance struggled to insert the key. Roger hung onto Lance's jacket, and in trying to get a better grip, he ripped the nylon coat in the sleeve. Lance shrugged off Roger. "Click!" The lock was defeated and Lance shoved the bars open. Like a pro, Lance had the window yawning and rain flew into the Center. Roger grabbed Lance

again, and Lance angrily stabbed Roger in the eye with his elbow. The two were reeling. Roger from hitting his head on the waxed marble floor, and Lance from the 15 foot leap.

It was still night, but the storm had flown. Travis slept on a velveteen love seat. His calves hung over the edge, and twitched every time Laney brought her cool cloth across his forehead. Heavy walnut paneling encased Will's den and a bear head watched the action from above the wet bar. Will, in his underwear, walked in and stood at the foot of Travis' twitching legs.

"Boy never could control himself."

Laney touched Travis' cheek with the back of her hand. "He can't rile up like he used to. Calm is better. Doesn't anger his heart so."

"Don't know him like I used to." Will told her.

"He can't run. Well, he's not supposed to. He was a blue ribbon racer. He's not the impenetrable castle he once thought."

"Could be that's why he's been cool." Will said.

"He keeps raking up The Thundering Tra-La-Las as of late. Sometimes I think he wishes he could go back if only for a day."

Will wheezed and cleared his passages. He started toward the spiral staircase. "After years of looking back, I understand now that what's important isn't love, not happiness, not success, not the things I used to dream of...but the ability to endure." Again, he wheezed and a coughing fit took him. Will started up the stairs.

"You should remedy that quick. Could turn to infection."

Will ascended a few more steps. "Rain seeped into my marrow.

I'll be blue plate before the rooster hoots. I'm heading to sleep." Will looked at the slumbering Travis. "He'll be fine. 'Specially with a helper able as you. Tell Paul Bunyan goodnight for me." He stomped the rest of the way to his loft.

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The new morning was still. Lance had walked all night. His nylon jacket was sopping, and he was losing stuffing from the sleeve. He wiped his nose on his shoulder and walked through the middle of every puddle he could find.

Lance shook himself on the threshold of "Dooney's Trucks 'n' Foods." A smattering of greasy patrons stood and stared at the hapless teen. He gave them all his dirtiest look, shot them down with the finger pistol, and swung the door open while a dime store bell announced him.

An aproned strongman with "Dooney" stapled across his chest stood behind the black formica counter. Dooney chewed a stick of red licorice and picked sawdust from the hair on his arms.

Beer posters hung on every corner and a neon flashing light sold every cigarette message ever scripted. Clumps of truckers and foods posed in plywood booths. Some truckers dragged on pipes, others chewed their cud. The food just sat there.

"What you want, son?" Dooney asked Lance.

"Have to cop a piss." Lance told him.

The apron swung as the man shook his left thumb toward a slim opening behind the cash register. Lance shot Dooney with a finger pistol and strutted past the racks of nudie mags and slid his body

sideways through a slit in the drywall.

Lance saw a pair of legs under the stall. With guts in mouth, he went to the door, pushed it open and saw a tank reading the want ads. The man was shirtless, and his arms tatoored. The stubble on Lance's face stood at attention.

"Okay, pervy. Shut the door and scat on the same track you crawled in on." The man said without lowering the morning paper.

Lance slunk to the mirror. Hands shaking, he ran a comb through his tangled strands and shot himself in the head with a finger pistol.

Dooney threw a plate of mush to a hungry diner. Lance slipped back into the cafe and zipped his denims. Lance walked around the peeling paint and rotting asbestos to make himself comfy on the end stool. He lifted a pack of cigars from the wire holder and shoved them the width of the counter. Dooney rang up another's tab, then came to Lance.

"I'll take those smokes." Lance said.

"Let's see some I.D." Dooney gave him a hard time. "You don't look legal."

"I left it in another time." Lance explained, as he went for his wallet, "I got cigar money."

Dooney waved him back. "Don't sell to punks." He picked the cigars up by the clear plastic edge and put them home.

Dooney turned his back to Lance and filled another patron's cup with murky caffeine. Lance glared at the back of Dooney's head and tapped an off beat with his fingers. A dud next to him leaned over and joined Lance's tune with his spoon.

Lance drank from his water glass and made the water "gulp" down. The tapping man spoke. "What is it, huh? Some kind of kiddie group?"



The man looked at Lance's face. "All I knows is The Thundering Tra-La-Las ain't a part of this arm of the hillside."

Lance set his glass down and swirled his finger in the water rings he had made. "You can find out first hand. Some day, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but some day the three of us will be back. We'll come here. And then we'll show you just what we are."

The man shook his head and Lance took another gulp. Dooney gave the hanging TV power, and a wild boxing match was tuned in. Everyone but Lance watched the man in the dark trunks get the hell beat out of him. With the media distraction, Lance swiveled his stool, grabbed three packs of cigars, a lighter, and walked out the door. He stuffed the thefted prizes down his pants. The bell dinged, and the outside bums spat chew into Dixie cups. Lance booted a "Dooney's Trucks 'n' Foods" trash can across the gravel parking lot. Wrappers and flies were evicted.

Lance stood in his garbage memorial, dug out a cigar, and flicked the lighter to fire behind the cup of his hand. Smoke rose from his orafices and he inhaled the glorious smoke. He shot a final finger pistol at the people from Dooney's. He exhaled a white cloud of smoke between his teeth and grunted, "Bango!" Lance turned on his heel and kicked the remaining garbage out of his way.

City signs and powerlines were lost in a sidelong blur. The only mar on the morning was the damp earth and the salty passenger in the Jeep CJ. Laney piloted the machine and a tense, yet rested, Travis sat parallel. Laney shifted, and the gears ground.

"Clutch in! Clutch in! Damn, you are ruining this mobile."

Sweat dripped off Travis' chin. "Keep your mind on shifting."

"If you hadn't begun that tirade with Willie last night, you could've driven." Laney stated. "Now the cart must push the horse." She turned on the windshield wipers to rid the glass of leaves.

"You'll run down the rubber." Travis pointed to the wipers and whined. "Wait 'til you have water to run those."

Laney stopped the swishers and massaged her fingers into her left temple. "Will and me had a nice talk last night. He's a real fine person."

Travis ignored her. "Had this dream last night. Could be one of them visions. Got during my chopping wood time."

"What about?" She asked.

"The three of us were back. We were ringing and running from old man Rivers. Clear as yesterday's news."

"With Lance lockered away in Boyer, it must've been a dream." She bit her bottom lip and downshifted for a stop sign. The gears ground. "Uh, oh. Clutch...in."

His teeth ground, but Travis' tongue stayed calm. He positioned the rear view mirror to face him, while Laney signaled for a left turn. She almost made a smooth shift.

Travis smoothed his hair back, and spotted another grey hair. He plucked it from it's follicle with a grand wince. Then he pinched the flabby skin across his neck. His Adam's apple stuck out.

"We're almost home. Everything will get straight. It shouldn't take much time at all." She managed a smile.

Travis looked at his palms. "Everything has it's time. Now or then." He wrinkled his features in the mirror. "Will's time is up. So's mine."

The Jeep sped up and was shifted into high gear nary a whimper.

Laney wheeled the CJ into the McClintock drive. The house was two story stone trimmed in a shimmering blue. The two climbed the wooden deck and Travis spied a note tagged to the door handle. It read: "Visiting the Cartwrights. Hope you had a good time with Dad. Love, Mom and your Father."

Travis made a sour face at the note. He turned to Laney. "They'll be gone for days." Travis looked at her with a sensuous eye. "Might as well stay here while they're away." Travis turned gentleman, held the door for her and once inside he tossed the baggage on a rocking chair.

The drapes were the outstanding attraction in the living room. As a child, Travis has lost hours chasing butterflies. To this day they still fascinated him. The drapes had countless butterflies punched in them. The butterflies were made out of little holes, and when sunlight stretched through them, the pattern lepidoptera would dance around the room.

Travis collapsed on the couch. Laney went to the kitchen. "I'll stir up some ice coffee. Then we can discuss in private."

His eyelids fell. The sun butterflies flitted across his lashes to the beat of ice cubes striking glass in the kitchen.

Knuckles met the door's screen. Travis' eyes flew open, and darted to the sound. A fist pounded! Travis, sleepily opened the door. He found a stiletto man outlined in black by the blazing sun.

"Stand clear." The man said.

"I don't think you have the right place." Travis started to close the door. The threatening tone of the man stopped him.

"McClintock, my blood is thick, my temper short. I have to cop a piss. Let me in."

"Jesus..." Travis knew who it was. Lance pushed past him and stood on the deep pile carpet with muddied feet. "Lance," Travis was bewildered, "You actually made it."

Lance was an animal; unshaven, grizzly, and freed from one shackle only to run into a tighter one. In the dim butterfly light Lance and Travis stared at each other's faces aged by four years.

"How?" Travis asked.

Lance grinned, and the edges of his lips went white. "Can't cage a Sheppard." He wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I'm hitting the john." Lance went into the bathroom and locked the door.

Surrounded by excited butterflies, Travis looked four years younger. Laney waltzed in with two glasses of ice coffee and cookies. "Here's the drinks. I spotted those special cookies you like in the below cabinet."

He took the coffee and placed it against his neck.

"Whats going on?" Laney put the tray down.

"He's back." Travis ran his fingers over his thumbs. "He is back."

Laney froze. She knew who was back. Her eyes bulged. Her nostrils flared as she caught an almost forgotten scent. "It can't be. He's been put away. His parents moved away. He wouldn't come back here."

"Lance, is loose!" Travis tried to be thrilled.

Laney turned limp...defeated. She brought the coffee to her lips, but couldn't bring herself to sip. She listened as the bathroom door "clicked" open.

Lance turned the corner, stroked his chin, and faced off against Laney and Travis. He took Travis' coffee, gulped it down and gave it back. He stared at Laney. "You've grown up front."

She started to cover, but stopped. "You still have the jacket."

"Nmm. Bought a new one. More up to times."

"I like it." Travis felt the embroidery on back. "I really do."

"We'll get new ones for you two. The old denim ones will work for now."

Laney sat down. "I don't know where mine is hiding."

"You'll find it." Lance told her.

"I know where mine is." Travis sheepishly hugged Lance. "God, it is fine to have you back."

They all stared at the carpet. The butterflies danced in the silence.

Lance ended the off moment. "Let's hit the Club." He shoved the sleeves up on his jacket.

Laney held up her hand as if to slow the inevitable. "It poured God's tears last night."

Travis asked Lance. "What do you think?" He took a dainty bite from a cookie.

Lance too, picked up a cookie and devoured half before answering. "We can make it fine."

"Maybe we can show off like old times?" Travis looked at Lance and Laney alternately.

"It's all in the plan," Lance drooled, "The Thundering Tra-La-Las will reign Kings on 33rd and Keystone again."

"Like Phoenix!" Travis exclaimed between bites of cookie, "Rising from our ashes to conquer. To take what was ours." Travis

screamed. "To live again!"

Lance seized the opportunity and Travis' hand. They bent down and began circling in low tones. They chanted The Thundering Tra-La-La Creed: "Us as one. We three will never grow old, and will forever be true not to ourselves...but to each other."

The dynamic duo yanked Laney into their circle and waved like idiots. "Travis! (his hand shot up). Lance! (his joined Travis'). Lanastassia! (they grabbed her hand, and forced it erect with theirs). Over and over the boys chanted, on every syllable the three turned in a strict circle, stomping their feet as if their shouts weren't enough.

"Thun-deer-iing!" They shouted, "Traa! Laaa!! Lasss!!!" The floor shook with pounding energy and the butterflies fled. Travis and Lance were out of control. They were flapping like lame birds in flight.

High noon. The three were marching as if on their own Bataan Death March. Lance stopped the rest, and flipped mud from his soles. Travis' Club jacket was faded and the stitching on the back was fluffy with wear. It looked plain. Too small for his shoulders, he walked all bunched up like an ape, with arms swinging and stomach inhaled.

Laney's jacket was just like Travis' except hers had no sleeves. She looked tough and her collar was upturned and met the hairline on the back of her neck. Her hair was pulled back into several perfect ponytails.

On the grassy knoll, Lance spoke to his troops. "Okay. Okay. The Club is over that yonder crest."

"It may not be safe." Laney said. "The police locked it up..."

Travis stepped on her words. "Nobody's used it since." He glared at Laney. "We can get in through the window."

Lance started the trek again and his two Corps members tagged behind. One by one they disappeared over the crest. Before Laney plunged over, she took one last glance back. With a graceful step, she too, vanished.

The three formed a semi-circle around the trunk of a wide cottonwood. They stared up at their old treehouse and strands of cotton floated down and lit on their lashes.

"It's not as big as I remember." Lance seemed disappointed.

"I'm going up." Travis grabbed the lowest branch on a leap.

"You shouldn't." Laney reached to pull him back, but Lance cut her off.

"He'll do it." Lance told her with confidence.

With difficulty, Travis scratched and heaved his way up to the treehouse window.

Lance motioned skyward. "Step lively, Lanastassia."

"Laney. You little spook."

He glowered and his eyebrows turned to his nose. "You'll always be Lanastassia."

She took his hand. "Go back. You're not ready for this. Please Lance."

He removed her clenched fingers. "I set myself free. I don't expect an embrace."

Travis poked his torso out of the treehouse window. "I'm up. Let's get it on." He popped back inside."

"On the way!" She called up. Laney became serious with Lance. "Can't you see it's all condemned? The denim is ragged and worthless. We can't wear the past no matter how much we suck in. It's not going to fit like it used to."

"Climb it." Lance growled.

"He thinks he's an old man. All you're doing is feeding off his memory." She was on a tear. "He doesn't need another parasite."

Lance crossed his arms and fell against the bark. "You haven't changed Lanastassia. Sure you've grown up front and rounded in the back...but you never did fit in. Never belonged. But Travis wanted you in. I could care less what you think. You can go to hell." He shoved her aside and vaulted to the treehouse like a gazelle jumping over a carcass. Laney rubbed the place where she was attacked and did the same to the tree.

Travis was on his side in a cob-web infested Army cot. He was taking a wrist pulse. Lance dragged himself over the edge, and Laney slid in behind him. They all soaked in past memories.

Rotting wood stunk with months of dormancy. Many floorboard slats no longer were a part of the whole. Branches had taken over where the roof let off. Empty milk crates and spent pop cans decorated the shanty. A lone candle was cold. "The Thundering Tra-La-Las" was painted in tempera and stuck on a wall with paste.

From the shadows, James Dean hung on rusty crucifixion nails. He was decked out in the same denim jacket that Laney and Travis wore. The poster shivered to try and tear itself free. James stared at the three with animal eyes. A lighted cigarette quivered from between his smirking lips. His black and white was aged in yellow.



Lance made the candle hot and Laney dusted off a crate and tested her weight before resting her aching legs. Lance produced the cigars from his jacket pocket. With them came lint and the dirty pocket lining from his canary coat. He passed Laney and Travis their own un-opened pack.

"Spark 'em. I got a great fix on these." He grinned.

Travis unwound the cellophane and gnawed the end of his smoke. Laney did the same.

For a moment they all smoked and listened to the branches scrape against their house. Finally, Lance spoke. "We put The Thundering Tra-La-Las back on the map. We do it in two spectacles."

Travis coughed, and waved Laney back down. "I'm lightheaded from the climb." He motioned to Lance. "Go on."

"First, a roundball match with the neighborhood. Then, an event that'll cool the rest."

Travis' heart sank. "I don't play much anymore." He dashed his ash.

Lance shrugged it off and blew smoke. "You'll do it. Then, the ruby for the crown." Lance exhaled. "We stage a caper." Lance talked to James Dean. "Hoofing it up, I stopped off at a grease sponge. We are going to cause Dooney's Trucks 'n' Foods to fail."

"Fail?" Travis put his cigar out in a soup can.

"Blow it up!" Lance put the smoke in the corner of his mouth. "Bango!"

Travis itched his knee. "I don't think I got it yet."

"Here's the wave." Lance spit out the window. "We take Dooney's up in fire with one last flex of The Thundering Tra-La-La's fist. We'll make 33rd and Keystone a mark on every map."

"Marked in blood." Laney said. "Have you gone entirely?"

"Yeah, well I kinda had in mind, something like ring and run."

Travis crushed a pop can, and Lance ignored him.

Lance towered above Laney. He went to his knees and made the lighter flash. With sweat dripping, he whispered. "One big fire for miles..."

Travis was confused. "We don't know them. That'd be a slaughter."

As Lance got up to stretch, his knees cracked. "The slaughter of innocents is the price of immortality." Lance went to the window and climbed halfway out. "I'll go set the perverts for the basketball kill." He spoke in a soothing pitch. "One last one. Then everything will be as it was. Just one. Bango!" Lance swung his leg over the frame and stood on a wavering branch. He swayed in the wind and peeked in the Club. "You know, it's always been my dream." He stroked his chin. "To become immortal, and then die." He shot them a happy finger pistol, and mouthed another "Bango" without losing his cigar.

After Lance was gone, Travis' head dropped. Laney tossed her cigars at the immortal and sneering James Dean.

The outdoor cement basketball court was steaming with heat. The backboards were worn sheet metal and the nets were chain. The opposing team consisted of Cramer, Rightside and Stump. They were practicing shooting the lights out. Lance pranced along the baseline and tried to memorize every offensive move. Away from the action in a faraway corner, stood Laney and Travis in their Club jackets and shorts.

"Travis, we can go home. You can't carry your pain plus Lance's anger." She looked for a response, but Lance interrupted and set the game plan.

"Let's put these punks away fast. The event closes it's pumps at 5:00pm." Lance locked his arms around Laney and Travis. "All is cool. Travis, you take the monster, Rightside. He's fast and'll slam your face if you're not smart. Lanastassia, play Stump close, he'll dart if you don't keep him pinned. I got Cramer in my back pocket." He herded them to the top of the key. The Thundering Tra-La-Las seemed ancient to the 14 year olds that stood across the line.

"We're armed and vile, Sheppard." Cramer leered. "Let's see who can stuff this leather in the hole."

"Goin' up yours, Cramer." Lance pointed out his rules. "Half court possession. First to five wins." He pushed everyone into positions.

"We gonna put you six under." Lamented Rightside.

"Let's see them play like men." Stump threw the ball to Laney and she caught it.

"I'm of the better gender." She bounced the ball with two hands.

"All can't be fags, then." said Rightside.

Lance took him by the arm. "Save your shots for the game." He punched Rightside in the arm, and the monster lost balance for a second. Lance warned him. "Don't push me, Dads."

The game started. Cramer tossed an alley-oop to Rightside. He jammed it down the net. Travis never moved.

"We started, McClintock." Lance called.

"It's been a long time. Maybe I could sit out, Lance."

Lance ignored him, and tried to block the quick inbounds pass

from Cramer. But Cramer got a bullet off to Stump. Cramer crossed, and Lance plowed into him.

"Foul!" Cried Cramer.

"You dim. I never touched you." Lance picked up the ball and bounce passed it to Laney. "Our ball."

Cramer threw his arms in disgust, but didn't argue. Laney threw the ball like a girl. Her leg kicked back and Rightside easily intercepted the feeble throw in. He baseballed it to Stump and the score stood 2-0 against the Club players.

Lance scooped up the ball and instead of giving it back to Cramer, he slammed it into Travis' chest. Travis fell in a heap. Lance nabbed hold of Travis' shirt, and in pulling him back up, he ripped Travis' shirt apart.

A bisecting pink scar ran down Travis' chest. Everyone looked right at it.

"Who sliced you?" Stump was interested.

Travis explained. "I had Rheumatic Fever when I was a punk. It made my valves brittle and old, so they replaced a couple."

"And he should take it easy." Laney added.

"Damn ugly scar." Cramer shook his head and felt sorry for himself.

"Let's go. You're fine now." Lance gave Travis a filthy look.

Travis picked the spinning ball up and handed it to Cramer.

"It's your out."

"Hey, you all can have the ball." Rightside offered. "We'll play the big 'D' for a time."

"We'll play by the law." Lance pushed Cramer out of bounds and gave Travis another dirty look.

Cramer threw it to Stump. Accidentally on purpose, Stump bobbed the wobbly pass and let Laney recover the ball. Overjoyed, she lolly passed it to Travis. Travis didn't dribble. He gave the ball to Rightside and watched Lance make his cut down the lane. The game stopped.

Lance ran to Travis, and shouted inches away from his ear. "You're not even trying!"

"I told you I couldn't no more." He felt his scar with gentle fingers.

Lost for words, Lance creamed the basketball into the cement.

"Watch the ball, jerk." Cramer said as he closed in on the descending leather.

"Maybe we can play another day." Laney suggested.

"No!" Lance was frothing. "I can't do it alone. We're not supposed to lose!" His hands crushed against his head. Attempting to smooth the eternally rough, Laney did the wrong thing and patted Lance on the back.

"We tried." She said.

Lance exploded. "Don't! Touch me." He slapped her to the ground. Instantly, Cramer, Rightside and Stump pounced on Lance and brought him down. Travis stood dazed. Laney felt her cheek. It was burning.

"Knock it down." Rightside pulled Lance's arm and twisted it.

"Pick on me, swine." Stump sat on Lance's legs.

Lance churned. "C'mon you tart. I'll show you how it's gonna be."

Sirens blasted! A police cruiser riffled up the curb and laid a

black patch of rubber on the court. Assisted by a hefty officer, Roger Hastings emerged from the blue and gold. His eye was purple and swollen.

Rightside scampered away, while Cramer and Stump brought the escapee to his feet, in defeat.

Lance was shocked to see Roger. Like a guilty child, he spoke in a squeaky voice. "I got things to do." The officer closed wrist clamps on Lance. Travis was silent. Laney dusted herself, straightened her jacket and stood tall.

Cramer talked at Roger. "Almost too late. Not a cool scene."

Lance knew he had been betrayed, and was silent.

"He is a crazy cracker." Stump snickered.

"Let's go home." Roger moved Lance along. "Your slate is smooth, Cramer."

"Just get them psychos off the court." Cramer joked.

Lance stopped still in front of Travis. "I'll be back, babe. Remember. Bango!" He tried to shoot his patented finger pistol at him, but the handcuffs would not allow it. Roger pushed Lance into the cruiser. Lance snuck his head out, and screamed. "You can't cage a Sheppard!" The cruiser left in a cloud of blue exhaust.

Cramer and Stump began to shoot again. Travis walked in the opposite direction of the setting sun. Laney felt her cheek, took off her Thundering Tra-La-La jacket, and laid it to rest on the cement.

# # # # # # #

Travis had been out most of the night. His hair was dotted with

grease and his Thundering Tra-La-La jacket had become a second skin. He climbed the steps to Laney's home. It was early in the morning, and for a moment he considered leaving. Three weak snaps of the wrist announced him.

She opened up dressed in shorts and her father's long sleeved pin striped shirt. Her hair was twisted in a bun and her cheek was light blue. A scab had formed on a small cut line on her lip.

"I meant to stop. I've been out all night." Travis told her.

"I only have a few minutes." She stood rigid and unsympathetic.

Travis took an eternity to speak. He did so in a slow drawl, "Will died of pneumonia last night."

"I'm sorry." She warmed, and turned off the porch light.

"How are you?"

"Scared. Tired. Real tired. Mom and Pops went up this morning."

"I could mix some breakfast if you're interested."

The two ate buttered toast and drank hot tea.

"I think you should go. Maybe you'll understand later." Laney took a chunk out of her toast.

"He was old. Seeing him dead isn't how I want to remember. Dead is too much." Travis drank and smiled at Laney. His look quickly turned to concern. "Lord, your lip. You hurt anyplace else?"

"Bloodied lip, swollen cheek and bruised ego. Nothing I can't heal independently."

"It wasn't supposed to be like this. I should've stopped him."

"Out of reach, but not out of memory." She tried to smile but her scab cut her off.

He slid his wrought iron chair backwards and peeled his Club jacket from his back. "Thanks for the toast and stuff. I need to roll." He went to the door and hung onto the knob. ..

Laney followed. "I got accepted at Wisconsin. A few more pieces of packed luggage, and I'll be modeling big time."

"Not you too?" Travis was crushed, but he understood. "I gather everybody grows away. Everybody gets wrinkled." He couldn't look her square in the eye. "Never told you this before, Laney. Reason mainly I'd run red every time I tried." He opened the door to get fresh air. "But I would've been pleased to grow aged with you. Could be that's it. Taking care of beauty once you're compatible. Make certain that as the leaves turn, wrinkles sprout from happiness than pain." He grew hot, and the morning breeze cooled him.

Laney ran her fingertips over his forearm. "That was special." She brushed his hair back to the temples. "What are you going to do?"

"Go running. I start tomorrow after lunch." Travis' chest rose.

"Running..." Laney stammered.

"No more excuses. No more restrictions."

She marked his cheek with lipstick. He blushed again and rubbed the lip prints away. He stepped to the lawn.

"Reckon I'll be wiping tears all day if I don't watch myself." Laney stopped a tear with the heel of her hand.



As if hearing his words for the first time, Travis blinked in slow motion and resolved, "He was an old man."

"He was." She didn't know what else to say. Neither did he. Before Laney pushed the door closed, she reminded him. "You be cautious now."

Dragging his Club jacket, Travis walked the long mile home.

THE END