

Twenty-Four

On a night very like this one, twenty years earlier, he and Gil Bingaman had been cruising the countryside outside Columbus, Ohio, in the car David's parents had given him for his seventeenth birthday—his first set of wheels. They were going nowhere in particular, looking for nothing in particular. The car, the evening, the freedom of the road were like money found in the street, and they were spending it.

As the headlights probed the darkness ahead, David was silently reciting:

Tell me, Muse, about that wily man who wandered . . .

His junior year in high school had been dominated by a voyage taken around the Mediterranean more than two thousand years ago. Almost every morning for nine months he had set out on the wine-dark sea beside the adventure-hungry Odysseus—had heard the Sirens' song, had surrendered to the charms of Nausicaa, had driven a smoking stake into the eye of Polyphemus, and had returned to Ithaca to slaughter a houseful of freeloading suitors.

This tempest-ridden journey, made at a speed of thirty or forty lines a day through Homer's dawn-fresh Greek, was the high point of his educational career, leaving him only vaguely aware that a real-life tempest was blowing up in a teapot called Viet Nam. Not being a newspaper reader or a watcher of televised news, he had no reason to suppose it would occupy any more of his attention than the War of Jenkins' Ear—and had no way of knowing that the idyllic summer of 1966 would be the last of its kind for him.

Although he wouldn't have thought of it that way, he was ready for an idyll. Summer, for him, wasn't just a welcome break from the prep-school grind; it was R & R, an escape from a battlefield where victories were as punishing as defeats. David was one of those unlucky boys—ten years ahead of his peers in sophistication but incapable of winning anything but hatred for it because he was ten years behind them in savvy. He couldn't understand that, by sniggering over every occurrence of Homer's "rosy-fingered dawn," the boys were showing each other that their minds were in the gutter, where the minds of all real men should be. David sighed and rolled his eyes at their childishness—and marked himself a prig and a pansy. They liked to see him raise his hand in class. If he was right, they sneered; if he was wrong, they jeered.

Gil Bingaman found his classmates' determined loutishness as wearisome as David but had the sense to leave it alone. Although he slumped to minimize it, Gil at six feet two inches towered over most of his classmates—especially David, who still had two inches to go to reach his full height. His size alone (though he lacked the weight to go with it) had always guaranteed him a certain respect from his peers; they thought he was a loner when in fact he was just mortally shy—a condition brought on by gazing too long at his beaky, chinless face in the mirror.

Gil was the less assertive of the two but had the knack of leading from behind and generally managed to distract David from his more self-destructive impulses. It was a sort of mission for him. Until David, he'd never met anyone his own age who talked about things seriously, who felt strongly about things other than cars, sex, booze, and sports. He had the rather romantic notion that there was something special about David, that he was going to be important to the world—provided he managed to survive into adulthood. In spite of this, his manner toward David was far from deferential, and during the summer they could be counted on to have several bitter, never-speak-to-you-again battles, usually over some microscopic slight to David's feelings. It was an unspoken but inflexible rule (David's) that they had to take turns making overtures of peace afterwards, David calling one time to apologize for being too sensitive, Gil calling the next to apologize for not being sensitive enough.

This summer, so far, the car had a soothing effect on David's temper. It had been a characteristic choice for him: not one of Detroit's current crop of power monsters (which would have won him a measure of grudging admiration from his classmates), but a frugal little Honda, hardly bigger than a bathtub (which won him nothing but snickers). In just these few weeks, he'd grown dependent on it, not for transportation but for something he wouldn't have been able to name—something more than relaxation and less than enchantment. It fulfilled a need in him that others might meet poring over a stamp collection or walking in the woods or letting their hands wander aimlessly over a piano keyboard. Doing nothing was abhorrent to David's puritanical sensibilities, and he was too high-strung for idleness anyway. But driving, even just for the sake of driving, wasn't doing nothing;

fuel was being consumed, carburetor, spark plugs, and pistons were laboring away, and the odometer was busily accumulating miles, even though they were miles to nowhere.

It was on this night, sitting beside Gil in a relaxed silence and driving nowhere, that he first realized how deeply satisfying it would be to stay on this road forever, to never turn back—to renounce achievement and the self-imposed pressure to achieve, to abandon the thrust to get somewhere. To purify himself of the very concept of *destination*.

No, not exactly that. To seek an uncommon destination: A road.

A certain road. A road that doesn't lead to just another road, just another town, just another house, just another shop, just another factory.

A road that leads nowhere.

Having conceived it, David euphorically embraced it. Something as desirable as this couldn't exist only in the mind; it had to exist in fact. He wanted it to exist in fact, and, without his consciously willing it, his foot bore down on the accelerator.

Gil looked at him curiously.

Encapsulated in darkness, they were traveling south on Western Road, the glow of the city at their backs, the lesser glow of Rickenbacker Air Force Base at their left. At the junction of 762, David turned right, toward Commercial Point and Orient. Without taking his eyes from the road unfolding beneath the headlights, he said: "There is a road that leads nowhere."

Gil looked around doubtfully. "You mean out here?"

"Somewhere," David answered darkly.

Gil frowned. "All roads lead *somewhere*."

"Not this one."

"Unless. . . . You mean an unfinished road? A road that never got to where it was going?"

David shook his head. "This one gets to where it's going, which is nowhere."

Gil grappled with this in silence for a while. "You mean someone *deliberately* built a road that goes nowhere?"

"Oh, don't be so goddamned prosaic," David snapped.

"Ah," Gil sighed, and slumped back in his seat. He knew where he was now. David was in one of his I-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud moods. All the same . . . *a road that leads nowhere*. . . . "Sounds sort of neat," he observed. "A road that goes on forever, getting nowhere."

David grunted and turned right into a gravel road.

"I'll bet this is private."

"It isn't," David said definitely.

A few minutes later, the gravel dead-ended at another paved road, and Gil carefully suppressed the comment that came to mind.

David turned right.

"This just leads to Shadeville, I'd say."

"Shadeville's further north." As if defying him, the highway curved northward, and David grimly followed it. "You notice no one lives out here," he said after a couple of miles.

"Come on, David."

Nevertheless, except for the glow of the city on the horizon, now ahead of them, the landscape was surprisingly devoid of life and lights.

Suddenly David jammed on the brakes. "What the hell was *that*?"

"What the hell was what?"

Turning around in his seat to look through the rear window, David backed the car up a hundred yards to the opening of another road off to the right.

"Shee-it," Gil crowed gleefully. "It's the road to Oz!"

David nodded. "Except that the bricks aren't yellow." He pulled the wheel over and turned in.

"I've never seen a brick road anywhere around here," Gil said. "Have you?"

"No. It must be old."

"Old, old, old."

David soon discovered that, although the road seemed to be in good shape, any speed above twenty miles an hour produced a bone-rattling vibration inside the car. As they crept along, a full moon rose at their left to illuminate the bleak flatland around them. It was like an unthinkably vast, abandoned airfield.

"This must have *belonged* to someone," Gil said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . someone must have had a *plan* for all this. A factory that was supposed to be built, a mine—*something*. It's obviously not being farmed or anything."

“So?”

“I mean, somebody must have bought all this a long time ago, built this road, and. . .”

“And?”

“I don’t know. Died. Lost interest. Ran out of money.”

David shrugged, wishing Gil would shut up, wishing he were alone. The road curved eastward and the land soon began to swell into low hills.

“Must be getting close to the Scioto,” Gil observed. David nodded.

When it happened, a few minutes later, it was like a silent explosion: too many events compressed into too short a time.

They both saw her at the same moment: a woman standing motionless on the crest of a bank to their left. Silhouetted black against the moon, she might have been a statue except for her shoulder-length hair and her dress, stirring in the breeze. Hands at her sides, she stood looking out over the road as if waiting for a visitor to appear on the distant horizon.

David braked the car, turned off the engine, and opened the door.

“Where the fuck are *you* going?” Gil demanded.

David climbed out of the car and looked up. The woman turned away and leisurely began to descend the far side of the bank. As David crossed the road, Gil leaned across the seat and said, “David, for Christ’s sake!” When this didn’t stop him, he scrambled out and grabbed his arm.

“Get away,” David told him.

“Stop it, David. For Christ’s sake.” David pulled his arm free and started across the shoulder to the bank. “Come on, David. *Knock it off!*”

The embankment was steeper than it looked from the road, and David had to attack it on hands and knees, grabbing bunches of weeds to hoist himself up. He was near the crest when Gil managed to get a hand on his ankle to drag him back. He twisted around and gave a kick that sent Gil crashing down into the weeds. Then he pulled himself to the top and stood up, expecting . . . something—a vision, a portent, a prodigy.

The ground fell away, ridge after ridge, to a distant line of trees that marked the river. In the valley at his feet, all chilly silver and black, nothing moved. Then, as he watched, a shadow stirred in the darkness at the base of the next ridge and slowly ascended to the crest to stand once again silhouetted against the moon. For half a minute she stood motionless. He was sure she hadn’t turned around to face him; if she had, he’d have noticed the shift in outline. She just stood there, looking ahead at the moon, waiting. Then she started forward again and gradually disappeared behind the hill, as if sinking into the ground.

It was the last sight he had of her.

An hour later David slid back down the embankment to the car, where Gil sat in the driver’s seat, tapping the horn every minute or so. He walked to the passenger side and got in without a word.

Gil studied his face for a moment. “Do you want me to drive?”

When David nodded, he started the engine and put the car into gear; he’d already turned it around, hoping at the very least to avoid an argument about where they were going. He ran the speedometer up to twenty-five and, when their teeth started rattling, slacked off to twenty.

“Well?” he said at last.

“Well what?”

“Did you . . . see her?”

“Yes. Once.”

“Well, then what?”

David shrugged and looked out of his window.

“Come on, David. What the fuck happened?”

“Nothing happened. I saw her. I followed her for a mile or so. And then . . . that’s all. I lost her.”

Gil drove in silence for a while, fighting the urge to bear down on the accelerator. “You know that was a fucking stupid thing to do, don’t you?”

David asked why, genuinely in the dark.

“Jesus, you are so goddamned naive! Tracking down a lone woman in the country after dark? What did you think you were going to do if you caught up with her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Shit. What would *she* have done if you’d caught up with her? She could have blown your fucking head off and nobody would have said boo to her.”

“True. But she wasn’t going to blow my head off.”

“No? What was she going to do then? Take you home and feed you cookies and milk, for

Christ's sake?"

"I don't know."

"Shit. And you know you fucking *kicked* me?"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You could've broken my goddamned *collarbone*."

"I said I'm sorry."

David's tone made it clear that this was as much as Gil was going to get, so he let it go at that.

For the rest of the summer and during the next school year—the last they were to spend together—neither of them ever mentioned the night they'd spent foolishly looking for a road they both knew didn't exist. Two or three times David went out alone to retrace their route, but the sequence of turns he'd taken that night must have become muddled in his memory, because he never managed to find the entrance to the brick road again.

In the years ahead he had things to think about that were far more pressing, and in the end he came to half-believe that he'd dreamed or imagined the whole uncanny episode.

Twenty-Five

As he drove in the predawn darkness, turning at random into the winter-scarred gravel roads of Ellis County, Kansas, deliberately getting lost, David mused about that night and that road that leads nowhere. On the surface, it was of course a childish and romantic fancy. Bob Gaines or Ellen— maybe even Tim—would laugh at it. But he knew what he meant by it, and they didn't: *Human experience can never be definitively mapped. There is no map that shows all the roads.*

The schools, of course, teach otherwise. Not only have all the roads been mapped, they know where all roads lead: to the marketplace. The marketplace is the hub, the heartland of human experience; working, getting ahead, accumulating wealth and power is all there is, is what life is all about. They teach this because they exist to teach it; they've become dedicated tools of the marketplace, their function to supply ready workers—workers conditioned to believe that there are no roads to explore except the ones shown on the schools' map, conditioned to believe that any road that doesn't lead to the marketplace is by definition *a road that leads nowhere*.

But they're wrong. What happened to him that night outside Columbus wasn't on their map— wasn't on any map. And it didn't happen because he'd been driving on an old abandoned brick road. It happened because—for an hour or two—he'd *thrown away the map*.

The road that leads nowhere isn't a road of asphalt or gravel or brick. It's an interior road, and he was on it again, at last.

* * * * *

At the café in Gove, where he stopped for breakfast, they looked at him as if he'd stepped off a spaceship. He nodded amiably, because in a sense he had. Having wolfed down a plate of eggs, sausage, and hash browns, he ordered another, which raised his waitress's eyebrows. He thought of telling her he'd just escaped from prison, but decided this might be expecting a bit too much of the rural sense of humor. An old man in spotless coveralls—evidently the local daredevil—nodded to the car outside and asked if it was a Mercedes. David told him it was a Volvo, and the old man chuckled gamely, to show he knew his leg was being pulled.

Forty miles west of Gove the gravel road became a paved road for ten miles, turned back into a gravel road, and then after another ten miles merged with U.S. 40. He turned onto it with relief, glad to have a break from fighting the dust, ruts, and potholes.

Cranking down the window and resting an elbow across it, he was at ease, if not exactly at peace. He could feel the waters of guilt and remorse rocking massively behind the thin membrane of self control he'd thrown up to contain them, but there was no point in tasting them now. They would drain away if he left them alone, and in a year or two he could take the membrane down and see how bitter the residue was.

For now, he would simply drive.

He was in sight of Mount Sunflower, and the road was rising toward the Colorado border when two figures stood up hopefully in the dust at the side of the road. Without turning his head (and

admitting he'd seen them), he took in a scrawny Hispanic man and boy, both dressed in shabby jeans and work shirts. He shrugged and pulled off onto the shoulder. Watching in the rearview mirror, he saw them strolling forward in no hurry at all, and he mentally cursed them for wasting his time. He smiled grimly and shook his head at the stubbornness of old habits. He had no deadlines to meet now.

The two of them shuffled up, nodded at him incuriously, and without a word settled themselves in the front seat, the boy in the middle.

"Don't you even want to know where I'm going?" David asked humorously.

"Goin' west, unh?" the man said. The bones under his leathery skin looked as sharp as knives, but his eyes were dull, as if he found little in life to interest him. It was an ageless, alien face, and David wasn't sure whether he was the boy's father or grandfather.

"Going west," David agreed and pulled back onto the highway. He glanced down at the boy beside him. Although he was three or four years younger than Tim, there was nothing boyish about him; his round, smooth face belonged to someone who had seen the world and wasn't impressed. He was staring ahead with bored eyes, his hands folded bonelessly in his lap.

Suddenly David was annoyed with himself. He remembered now that half the reason he hated picking up hitchhikers was that he always felt vaguely and irrationally obliged to entertain them, and these two were sitting there like lumps.

"Where are you headed?" he asked, hoping to hear that they'd be getting off at the next town up the road.

"Las Vegas," the man said tonelessly.

David stared at him, astounded. Las Vegas! What on earth was this grubby pair going to do in Las Vegas? Then he remembered that there's more than one Las Vegas.

"You mean in New Mexico?"

The man turned to him with a dark, wounded look. "I mean Las Vegas in Nevada."

"Ah," David said.

A few minutes later, still looking out of his window, the man said, "You should come too."

"Me?" David laughed. "Why should I go to Las Vegas?"

Man and boy exchanged an amused look. "Toney says so."

David blinked from one to the other; since entering the car, the boy hadn't uttered a single word.

"Why does he say that?"

"Cause you got the nine . . . strokes. I guess that'd be the word in English: *strokes*."

"I don't understand."

"You got the nine strokes of luck."

"And what's that mean?"

The man laughed softly. "It means . . . for nine times you can't miss, can't lose."

"I see," David said, smiling. "And Toney told you this?"

He nodded.

"And how does he know?"

The two grinned at each other as if sharing a private joke. Then, still grinning, the man looked up and said, "You married, unh?"

Warily, David said he was.

"Your wife . . . she ever complain about a certain little thing?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," David replied stiffly.

The man lifted a slender brown hand and tapped the side of his nose meaningfully.

David flushed.

"Sure. You got a certain smell, unh? Even I noticed it a little when we got in the car."

"You can get out and walk if it bothers you."

The man laughed delightedly. "Hey, don' get mad, man. This a very special smell. It comes out of the nine openings in your body. You can't help it."

In childhood, David had gotten used to taking two baths a day. If he didn't, his mother complained that he smelled like a wet sheepdog. A minor crisis had occurred on the second day of his honeymoon when Ellen, mortified, had asked him if he wouldn't mind taking a shower before they made love. He'd subsequently asked a few doctors about it, but none had found the problem interesting enough to pursue.

"That's okay," the man went on. "It'll go 'way when you use up the nine strokes."

David made a face and went on driving.

"Don' believe me, unh?" He elbowed the boy in the ribs. "Hey, Toney, he don' believe me."

The boy looked up at David with a sort of shy leer. "Juan's right. When the luck's gone, the smell'll be gone."

His jaw clenched angrily, David said nothing. He was wondering how he was going to get rid of these two and wishing he had the nerve to just pull over and put them out. As if sensing his hostility, the man called Juan turned his attention to the increasingly barren landscape outside, and the boy stared without interest at the road ahead.

David's anger drained away, and he began to relax as the silence continued through Cheyenne Wells, First View, Kit Carson, and Wild Horse. At Aroya he stopped for gas. Inside the station he saw a refrigerator stocked with plastic-wrapped ready-made sandwiches, and, unappetizing as they looked, his mouth was awash with saliva. He bought two and then—cursing himself as a fool—four more, which he shoved at the old man without a word. Juan turned them around in his hand as if unable to make out what they were, then looked up with an amazed grin.

"Hey, man, that's nice."

David grunted, knowing there was nothing nice about it. He could abandon his wife and son but was just too goddamned squeamish to eat a sandwich in front of a pair of strangers who hadn't the slightest claim on his generosity.

Three quarters of an hour later they joined Interstate 70, and Juan pointed out slyly that this was the fastest way to Las Vegas.

"I'm not going to Las Vegas."

"Unh. Where you goin' then?"

"I don't know. Maybe up into the mountains."

The old man guffawed incredulously. "You wanna go up into the mountains?"

"Why is that so funny?"

"Still winter up there, man. Freeze your ass."

David shrugged, and his teeth chattered as he tried to stifle a sudden, overwhelming yawn. The man glanced at him and asked if he was getting tired.

"I'm all right."

"I can drive for a while if you want. I'm a good driver."

"I'm all right," David repeated grimly, but his eyelids felt like leaden shutters that were going to slide down millimeter by millimeter no matter how much resistance he offered. Thinking about it, he realized that, except for two brief breaks, he'd been at the wheel for nine hours straight—after only three or four hours of sleep. The idea of a nap on the back seat was almost irresistibly tempting.

He yawned again and, when his jaw snapped shut, saw a laminated card being thrust under his nose.

"Look. I got a driver's license an' everything."

David hesitated, knowing it was insane to turn the car over to this complete stranger. He glanced down at the boy to see what he thought of it. As if on cue, Toney said, "He's a good driver, mister. Really." He spoke with such authority that David wondered groggily if he'd underestimated his age.

Gratefully acknowledging defeat, he pulled over, crawled into the back seat, and was asleep so quickly that he didn't even feel the car turn back onto the highway.