

Excerpt from Dog Horse Rat:

[pp 49-53]

They stopped at the body shop on the mountain road where Mickey's cousin worked, pestered him for a while, shot the breeze. They picked up some beer, went by the high school and watched the majorettes, baton twirlers, whatever they called themselves, in the parking lot in front of the school, practicing for the Sunday game. The girls had bright-colored flags which they whirled, threw up in the air, and caught, one leg back, a hand on the hip. Half the time they dropped them. The rain had turned into a mist, and the flags looked wet and heavy. It was cold, their hands were red, and they wore thick tights under their little skirts.

Neither Royal nor Mickey said anything. They sat in the car, which smelled of rust and oil, and watched as if it was a show put on for them. The girls were small, young-looking. They didn't interest Royal much, though you always picked one out and thought about it. That was automatic.

He held the six-packs between his feet on a heap of snow chains. Mickey was big and red-faced, mostly

silent. He drank steadily. Royal was already warm and felt a buzz beginning. The girls and their flags were bright in the rainy air.

Mickey did not say a word about the Corbin killing, showed no interest in the subject. He let Royal pay for the gas and beer and whenever they stopped to eat but didn't comment on the fact that his friend had more money than usual.

They drove upriver to the power dam, took the car out on the dam itself, which you could do, and stopped. They looked at the lake on one side, the low white tumbling river on the other, and drank their beer. The rain had picked up again, and its needles drove steadily into the metal-colored water. There were black-looking evergreens on either shore, picked out here and there with white. What were they, the naked, thin, white trees? He lived here, ought to know the names. At the far west end of the lake was the place called Four Corners, just visible from the dam. It had been in the trees, but the rise of the artificial lake revealed it to the world. Just about everyone in it was named White or Austin, both families distantly related to Royal's on his father's

side, something no one bragged about much. They'd intermarried over the years, and they had various physical and mental problems, more or less mild ones, that were passed from generation to generation. None of them went to school beyond eighth grade. They grew corn and potatoes, did odd jobs to survive, and hitched or walked into Whitehouse Village to the feed and seed or grocery with their food stamps and a little cash to buy the day's supply of food and heating oil or kerosene. They carried their ragged children to save their shoes but also because they didn't like them to mix with the town children.

Royal gazed down the lake's length. The Austins and Whites were family too. He didn't mind the idea so much right now. He imagined he could feel the Austin blood and bone in him. They were thieves along with everything else, helped themselves to anything that didn't require work or money to haul away, got their names into the Arrests Record in the Bradford paper every other day. Some called them gypsies. It was strange, but it comforted him now, the thought of this particular shared blood.

The owner of the body shop where Mickey's

cousin worked was also a farrier. He'd done jobs for the Corbins, shoeing their horses. In winter he worked at a harness track in Pennsylvania, but he was back now for the holiday. He had come into the shop from his house. "It's a damned sin," he'd said, because he thought the boys were talking about the local killing and it was on his mind. "They were good people. I was up there any number of times, did their show horses. They always come down and talked--the mother did--come down and talked to me. They didn't put on airs. I didn't know the boy, but I read in the paper where it said he went to college at the age of fifteen. He was smart. I was out there the start of this past summer for their horses. You just can't believe it, a thing like this happening."

He went on about it. No one else said anything, as if it embarrassed them.

Now, sitting in the Nova with Mickey, power lines singing overhead, the crows calling, it came to Royal why the thought of the blood comforted him. It was because of what the blacksmith said about the boy. That he was smart. Here was what it was: You were what you were born and not responsible.

He tried to fix the thought, which kept sliding away because of the beer. He did not use the name in his mind, but he thought: That boy was what he was, a boy genius call him, at age fifteen, whatever it was. Royal was what he was. Exactly. No more and no less. You couldn't change it. It was as natural as the difference between the kinds of trees, as natural as the leaves they put out and dropped. You did what you did because of blood.

It was in the blood and the bone, and you were not responsible.

They came back the long way on the far side of the lake, and Hagy turned into the sand drag track, which was in Sunrise, ten miles south of Whitehouse. It was closed for the winter, the saloon boarded up. He pushed the Nova's grilleless nose through the wooden gate that was barring the way, broke the light chain, and drove out onto the oil-dark yellow sand without a word. This was how he was going to show his drinking. It didn't bother Royal. Mickey drove the track a few times at normal speed, then accelerated and did some turns at nearly ninety. He did stops at high speed, hitting the brakes suddenly and locking

the wheels left or right so that the car skidded and spun into the banks of sand, tilted up a little, then banged hard. It made Royal yell, opened him up so that he shouted with laughter, but Hagy was quiet about it, as if it was a job to do. The track was soft with rain, so it wasn't too dangerous. He took a few more turns, then, when he felt right with it, nodded and began to push the car with its rebuilt engine harder, taking the turns with care at the tight ends of the track where the sand was plowed deep, swinging out, cutting close, but not slowing much. They pretended they were in a race, passing other cars, getting a split second's edge, Royal narrating it like a TV announcer.

He felt good in the speeding car beside his friend. He decided Mickey Hagy knew what had happened, all about it, and didn't care, that what the farmboy was saying in his way was that it was all right with him, whatever fell. It was all right because of blood.