

End of the Road

A Novel

Nicholas Randall



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Water

Carson Williamson was cruising. Behind the wheel of his '82 Buick wagon, Carson was king of the open road: no traffic to contend with, gauges all under control, no weather on the horizon, no clutter on the wide-open landscape, no sound but for the engine, the wheels on the pavement and the hot wind in his very thin white hair. He wasn't early or late for anything because he had no appointments, no obligations or responsibilities, and he was loved but not missed because no one was expecting him. His bills were paid and accounts were balanced. He was warm, dry and well-fed. He had everything and nothing to look forward to, and he had time to think.

All afternoon Carson had been following the Humboldt River on I-80 across northern Nevada. In the middle of the Great Basin's high desert dryness, the Humboldt tracks in slow, graceful bends across wide vistas and between mountain ranges all the way from Elko County to near Fallon. In a land where moisture, much less actual rain, is cause for celebration, the Humboldt struggles bravely for nearly 300 miles before finally surrendering in the Humboldt Sink, an ignominious alkaline flat ending for such heroic effort. The Humboldt never makes it to the ocean, the rightful destination for all worthy rivers. Raided mercilessly by small towns and ranchers along the way, the Humboldt finally dies, trapped by sun, soil and topography, 250 miles short of its Pacific goal.

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The valley of the Humboldt is marked by a semi-green grass and brush swath through the brown, mostly barren earth tones of surrounding hills, canyons, mountains and plateaus. Even the few trees, mostly cottonwoods, adorning the banks of higher-up, canyon-protected feeder streams issuing from surrounding elevations, usually cannot find sufficiently agreeable conditions to grow close by the Humboldt. There are some, but you have to look for them.

Westward plodding wagon trains bound for California in the middle of the 19th century followed the Humboldt as if it were a highway. The California Trail, pioneered by the Bidwell-Bartleson Party to get around and beyond the Great Salt Lake to California faster than by the established, safer, more northerly route through Oregon, tracks the Humboldt like a double yellow line. It provided water, game, cattle forage and a comparatively pleasant thoroughfare through the vast wasteland of endless plateau and range after range of formidable mountains, a long, narrow oasis headed in the right direction.

Carson was thinking about those wagon trains as he paralleled the Humboldt steadily westward from Battle Mountain into the afternoon sun. He knew something about the history of the West, its native tribes, explorers and mountain men, and its gradual “opening” by white settlers, or invaders, depending on one’s point of view. Not just white anymore, either. Now there were all the colors of humankind’s rainbow who had found the American West and happily moved in.

The Buick climbed effortlessly up a gently curving rise that moved the sun temporarily off his windshield and onto the driver’s-side window, halfway down to let in the clean Nevada highway breeze. When he glanced to the left over the broad, almost-verdant linear depression indicating the riverbed, he could imagine a string of oxen-drawn wagons with families so driven by the promise of something better that they risked everything to plunge into the wilderness guided only by rumors. At this point in their odyssey, perhaps in late August or September, they were probably feeling good about their bet. They were cruising,

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too, maybe even relaxing a bit, moving a pace more slowly than they should have been with animals tired but holding up with enough to eat and drink. They would beat the odds, prove the relatives and stay-putter's wrong. They would win, and California would be their prize. They couldn't yet see the last great barrier, the Sierra Nevada, a wall with few cracks where tardy assault or an early snow blanket might shut them out, condemning many to extreme privation, loss of all their carefully shepherded possessions, or death. Carson knew the Sierras were there, and he understood that the clock was ticking, but he didn't know how to warn the pilgrims.

"I wonder how old Baron Humboldt, himself, would feel about all these wires and towns and fences and billboards and highways cluttering up his space?" he said to no one in particular. "Actually, he never even saw this country; it was Fremont's doing hanging this God-forsaken, miserable excuse for a river on the old German." Carson smiled; he loved this place.

Despite his grouching about the increasing scars of civilization, northern Nevada was still pretty much wide open, with little traffic, blue sky, clear air, hot in summer and cold in winter. This was the West, the real West, unlike L.A., or Vegas, or San Francisco or any city. When someone attempted to paint a picture of the West, it should be the land, not the people, that made it to canvas. Even in a modern painting where the view was often obscured by buildings and signs and pretty faces, the painter who understood the West always let the earth show through.

Interstate 80 awakened from its northwesterly drift and corrected back to the southwest toward Winnemucca and Lovelock. The Humboldt answered with a silent swing of its own. Unbroken miles of hot concrete pavement still lay in front of Carson before he could rest for the night in Sparks, the less-lit neighbor of Reno. He preferred Sparks as a friendlier, more relaxed venue for his casual gambling lay-overs. The tables and machines were no better, but their stewards and patrons seemed less compulsive, less desperate. It was often still a pathetic crowd of

alcoholics, ne'er-do-wells, sure-thingers, bored seniors and barely-twenties on the make, but in Sparks they seemed more at ease, not quite so close to the edge, more after fun than survival. Reno was big-time, hardcore, with mega-casinos orchestrating the extraction of one's dollars with a refined, more impersonal corporate calculator. Carson had liked Reno better when some of the light bulbs were out in the "Biggest Little City in the World" sign boastfully arching over Virginia Street. Now there was someone to replace the burned bulbs every day, and the dealers didn't smile as much when they took your money.

The drone of the Buick's V-8 was tuned to the landscape. When the highway climbed or descended, the pitch of the engine responded to more or less pressure from Carson's experienced right foot. He tried to keep his speed up around 70, but out on the desert there were cars, buses and even semis that regularly overtook him, passed, and vanished to an earlier arrival. Carson wasn't bothered by this as he might have been as a younger man. He no longer had the same urge to keep up, to pass, to be a little faster than his fellow motorists. At times he would still lock himself onto a speedier vehicle and let the front-runner pull him along by keeping up, but most of the time now he just found his own comfortable speed and ignored the fast lane. He wasn't in as much of a hurry, and he liked to pay more attention to the countryside than he used to. These sideways gazes drew nervous comment or even rebuke from any passenger who might be aboard, particularly if it was one of his children. But when he was by himself, he luxuriated in the freedom to go as fast or as slow as he wanted, to sightsee or not as he saw fit, to stop where and when he wanted without consultation or even consideration of others.

As the Humboldt gathered itself and dove into a narrow canyon, the highway plunged into a tunnel. The sudden darkness and change of temperature jerked Carson a little, and he sat up straighter in the seat. The danger out here on the open road was from letting a pleasant reverie turn into a fatal snooze, and Carson was ever vigilant to afternoon fatigue. As aware as he was of the physical hazards of falling asleep

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at the wheel and the potential danger to innocents, he was particularly wary of the hounding criticism from his family about how he shouldn't drive alone like this anymore, how easy it was to make a mistake, to fall asleep, to cause some terrible accident because of his stubbornness. If he were to have a mishap and by the grace of God survive, the hounding would reach such a crescendo that it might have him wishing he hadn't survived after all.

“To heck with them all,” he blurted defiantly as he exited the tunnel and slammed down the sun visor to shade his blinking eyes. He fumbled for his sunglasses as the road turned directly into the afternoon glare, and he struggled to focus on the road. With his left hand on the wheel, his right searched all over the seat next to him and down into the crack between the seats. Nothing. He turned his squint from the road and covered the same territory with his eyes to no avail. With a quick glance back at the road, he leaned forward and reached as best he could down in front of the passenger seat, groping around the floor for the missing glasses case. He stretched farther but in doing so pulled slightly on the steering wheel. The Buick began drifting onto the shoulder and kicking up gravel as his hand finally found the mark. He grabbed the case and righted himself in a lurch, barely in time to bring the Buick back into line with the pavement which had started into a leftward turn. A sharp, angry horn blast from behind focused his eyes on the rearview mirror where a Volvo driver was waving at him animatedly, either out of concern for Carson's safety or for that of his own windshield. Carson waved back and put on the sunglasses as the Volvo moved over to pass and sped by. Carson glued his eyes rigidly ahead and never caught the full intent of the other driver's gestures. He could feel his heart beating fast and sweat started to fog the sunglasses.

At the first exit for Winnemucca, Carson pulled off to stretch and get something to drink. It had been less than a hundred miles since Battle Mountain where he had lunched, but he needed some coffee or a Coke, something to suck on for the final leg of the day. As the Buick eased

into the parking lot of a Dairy Queen, Carson felt unusually drained. Driving used to invigorate him, but this afternoon it had seemed more like a chore. The hard, desert miles felt less like the freedom he enjoyed so much than like hard, desert miles.

“Arrgh,” he moaned as he opened the heavy car door and put both feet on the ground, pausing momentarily before he could get up and walk. His knees hurt from the last couple days’ driving, and his shoulder twinged from the over-stretch in reaching for the sunglasses. He strolled stiffly up to the window under the “Orders” sign and leaned down to level his mouth with a conversation hole cut in the clear plastic. Years ago, he had measured out at 6’ 1”, quite tall for his generation, but now, by virtue of some proclamation he must have missed, he had lost some of his commanding height to shrinking bones or stooping posture or other geriatric nonsense. Although he didn’t have to bend so far, the bending came at greater cost.

“Coffee. Black coffee,” he barked a bit more gruffly than intended. The counter girl with her order pad backed up half a pace as she scribbled, and Carson quickly corrected his demeanor: “And do you have a place where an old man can pee?” he inquired with a pleading smile.

The girl smiled back and said, “Inside,” as she pointed with her pen to the empty, enclosed eating area.

When Carson emerged from the men’s room and approached the inside counter to pick up his drink, the girl informed him, “It’ll be just a minute; I had to put on a fresh pot. No one drinks coffee around here in the afternoon when it’s 102.”

Carson answered, “No hurry,” and wondered why he had ordered coffee in the first place. Habit, he guessed, and felt compelled to explain himself. “Hot coffee cools me down,” he offered in his best basso profundo, trying to impress, even though he hadn’t a clue why he said it. He followed quickly with, “And when it burns, it helps keep me awake.”

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She smiled again uncertainly, as if trying to cope with an awkward situation, and turned to consult with the rapidly dripping coffee maker in the back.

Carson wandered over to one of the tables where a newspaper lay in disarray. He picked up a section and immediately realized he couldn't read anything but the headlines because he had his sunglasses on instead of his bifocals. Rather than make the trip back out to the car, he chose to focus on the large, block-letter headlines and started squinting down the front page until he came to, "Water Bd. to Vote on New Homes."

As much change as had come to the West, some things remained the same, and scarcity of water was a constant. No matter how much water was pumped up, piped in, dammed up, re-channeled, recycled, allocated, rationed, or hoarded in the West, it would never be enough. Scarcity had always been a defining theme on the frontier, and scarcity of water, the foundation for life itself, was the issue that controlled all others. How this precious resource was used dictated the social, political and economic organization of every state west of the 100th meridian, the threshold line marking the limit beyond which average annual rainfall falls below 20 inches. Water was power. Wars were fought for land, gold, religion, cattle, women, heritage, pride or ways of life, but at the end of the day the bottom line was always how the outcome impacted access to water. Any victory without maintaining or improving one's water position was no victory at all. Any defeat which still protected the loser's water could be borne.

Carson understood the primacy of western water better than most. He had spent many good years working on the infrastructure to manage the West's most valuable resource, and now, at eighty-six, he looked back with pride on the civilization he had helped make possible. As he eyed the steaming coffee now sloshing toward him in Styrofoam, he was silently aware that it was infrastructure projects like those in his past that made this cup of coffee out on the high desert possible. The Winnemucca Water Board had no more important decision to make

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than to allow or disallow more houses and more people to strain their defining resource. Like most, the counter girl took water for coffee or dishwashing or the patch of grass out front for granted: one turned the tap and out it came, hot or cold. But Carson knew better, and he suddenly felt stronger, more relaxed, more self-assured in the insight his years had granted him. He understood water and the life and death struggle surrounding it. He had fought the fight over water with both man and nature, and the feeling he got when he thought back on those experiences was the closest thing to confident wisdom he ever achieved.

When Carson finally got up to leave, the counter girl was fully engaged chatting and laughing with two recently arrived teen-age boys. He had to interrupt by reaching between them to hand her the tab and money, including a dollar tip, saying, "Thanks for your trouble." All three turned their heads toward him for only the briefest of acknowledgements before returning to their own lives.

The next couple of hours sailed past. Other than battling the glare and a nagging worry about the worn condition of his left rear tire, Carson was in fine spirits. The coffee, its remnants now stone cold in his console cup holder, had done the trick; he was wide awake. The Buick purred relentlessly over the miles toward Reno/Sparks, highway signs counting down the distance like a NASA launch routine. He sometimes picked up a radio station, mostly country music with DJs who clearly preferred to hear themselves prattle more than the music they were supposed to play, but when they faded behind a ridge, Carson killed the static and was content to listen to the wind.

Missouri

Carson was returning home to northern California with mixed emotions after two weeks visiting his daughter Susan's family in Missouri. He had gone east at Susan's urging, giving in to her persistent fussing that his grandchildren were not seeing enough of their grandfather. Unspoken was her own desire to see her father, whom she worried about ceaselessly now that her mother, Edith, was gone from a stroke two years ago.

"How are you doing, Dad?" Susan fretted in pestering phone calls, leaving short, innocuous messages when she couldn't reach him and sending handwritten notes for good measure when Carson's answering machine failed to bring a response. "Are you eating okay and taking the pills you're supposed to? Do you like your new doctor at Kaiser?"

Susan tried everything she could think of to break through her father's gradually thickening protective coating of non-communication. It was not enough that both her brothers, Hank and Willie D., lived within fifteen minutes of their father in northern California and according to them were in more or less regular contact with him. Susan, a nurse by training and disposition, needed the reassurance that only personal examination could provide.

Yet when Carson finally got to Kansas City, Susan's teenage kids, Rachel and Charlie, hardly had time for him. They were pleasant enough and affectionate with continual pecks on the cheek or pate, but they had

their own agendas for the summer and were not about to be slowed down by talking with Grandpa, except around the obligatory dinner table.

“Thanks for dinner, Mom,” said Rachel as she cleared Carson’s and her own dishes to the kitchen sink. “Grandpa, I’m headed over to my friend Linda’s house to listen to her new CD. I’ll be back late, so maybe we can catch up more tomorrow, okay?”

By the time Carson finished swallowing a sip of coffee and cleared his throat, his answer, “Sure, that’ll be fine,” was interrupted by the screen door’s “bang” behind Rachel’s full-throttle exit.

Despite differences in priorities Carson’s stay had been a success, if one can measure such things on a quantifiable scale of positive or negative. There was lots of laughter and stories about old times, like when nine-year old Susan had tripped while chasing Willie D., four years younger, and fallen face-flat into a neighbor’s fish pond. Teenage children never tired of reveling in their parent’s youthful foibles. There was serious talk about politics, investments and market trends, and Susan’s modestly successful stockbroker husband, Riley, had actually listened once when Carson started speaking about his own experience in the market. But it had been a fleeting moment, casually dismissed with, “Well, I guess conditions are mostly different today than they were back then, aren’t they, Dad?”

Rather than say, “No,” and be seen as disagreeable, Carson let it pass.

There had been plenty of photo-album thumbing and new snaps for more albums in the future. There were moist eyes and hesitant breathing when Edith’s thin, irrepressible smile was framed next to Carson’s at this gathering or that, or was caught snuggling one of their babies or grandbabies, or brightened the panorama at some National Park. But along with the good, Midwestern family food and Susan’s pampering, there had been an unsettling undercurrent that hadn’t let Carson relax one hundred percent. He wasn’t sure if it was him, or maybe the foreign surroundings, or maybe the fast-paced life-style of a modern family, but

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he could never quite let his guard down. Even with the kids, the talk was too fast, the commentary too glib, the relationships too shallow to let Carson feel comfortable.

He had expected Susan to nag about the Buick. She had not wanted him to drive all the way to Kansas City and practically forbade him to do so. But the airplane ticket she asked her travel agent to send to her father had been returned unopened with a barely recognizable “Refused” scrawled on the envelope. The letter carrier who tried to deliver the ticket to Carson’s home had explained that he couldn’t really refuse a first-class letter, no matter the contents. Carson, however, knew exactly what was in it and launched such an indignant fusillade that the poor postman wisely chose not to get involved and meekly accepted back the now-tattered envelope.

When Carson finally arrived after a four-day drive, he was humble about the worry he had caused everyone but unrepentant about his decision. And when he turned back west at the end of his stay, there had been plenty of, “I wish you weren’t going to drive.” laments mixed with the, “Have a good trip” exhortations.

Carson tried to calm the angst with, “Don’t you worry about me; the Buick knows the way. I’m just along for the ride.” He knew his macho act didn’t play for anyone over twelve, but he wasn’t about to change it.

The entire time he was there with Susan, Riley and the kids, Carson couldn’t escape the ugly feeling that they were circling, like predators, slowly and carefully circling. No one thing anyone said or did justified this harsh assessment of his own flesh and blood, yet there it was, always in the background.

“How are you feeling this morning?’ sounds pretty innocent,” he thought to himself while out walking one sunny afternoon in Susan’s suburban neighborhood. “Then why can’t I get rid of this gut-gnawing sense that someone is marking the days until I’m not feeling so well? Why do I feel this way?” he puzzled. “It’s unfair and mean-spirited; I should be ashamed to feel this way.”

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But the feeling didn't go away, wouldn't go away. In his current state of mind, "How are your investments doing?" sounded less like genuine interest or conversation and more like circling than it should have. "How's the real estate market in California these days?" was slipped in edge-wise just to include him in the conversation, right? Or was it more measuring, assessing, a calculation of when it would happen and how much would be left on the bones when it did.

"Well, phooey!" he had said out loud, but the tree-lined street didn't comment, neither on the substance nor on the outdated expletive, even after he spat on the sidewalk for emphasis.

Susan and Riley were doing okay financially as far as Carson could tell. They both worked on salary, had a nice suburban-American house and two cars, three if you counted Charlie's jalopy. Susan was an RN with some seniority at the county medical center, and Riley's job as a money-manager seemed stable as long as markets didn't crash. They weren't getting rich, but they didn't appear to be falling behind either. Braces were on the kids thanks to Susan's good, union dental benefits, and Riley had established a college fund for the kids to which Carson had contributed over the years at Christmas time. Financially, everything seemed fine, so why the third degree?

"I'm buying both Apple and Microsoft these days," Riley announced to Carson. "What about you, Dad? Are you getting into high tech companies, too?"

"I've got some IBM, but that's about enough high tech for me. I still believe in basic industry leaders, like GE, Alcoa and Boeing. These are companies that have stood the test of time with solid earnings. I'm not persuaded that today's hot, new companies with high-flying PE ratios will last. Seems more like a fad or a bubble to me," said Carson, "just like the inflated housing prices that are bringing down those over-extended savings and loan outfits. Besides, my new home has most of my money."

"Well, that may be fine for now," answered Riley, caught up in the moment, "but aren't you concerned you are falling behind? I mean, if

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smart investing in stocks is giving us growth of 8 or 9% a year, how can you live with 4 to 5% in real estate? Ten or twenty years from now that will amount to a pretty substantial difference in your assets.”

“Ten or twenty years from now is not what I’m currently focused on,” said Carson acidly. “More like ten or twenty days, don’t you think? In fact, I may blow my entire savings in Nevada on the way home!”

He was mildly sorry for this last comment, a sarcastic rebuke which left Riley with a wounded look, but Carson felt better to have his feelings out in the open. He didn’t earn a lot from his modest investments, but he didn’t spend a lot, either. This was by choice and habit rather than by necessity. He had been a young man during the Depression, and that shaped his consuming habits for life. Even when he had it, it was better to save it. No telling what might be coming next. He liked his old Buick with 120,000 on the odometer. It was reliable, and it suited him. He had by now more or less accepted the new, small, retirement community condo where he had moved after Edith passed away. With coaxing, he had sold the suburban Pasadena family house he had built with his own two hands forty-two years before, where he and Edith had reared their three children and where Edith had passed away. If he had come to terms with his current circumstances, why shouldn’t his offspring be comfortable, as well, and leave him alone?

The Nugget

Both pleasant and unsettling thoughts accompanied Carson to the outskirts of Sparks by 6:30 pm. The sun had finally abated, hidden behind the bulk of Mt. Rose, but the late summer sky was still light, and the dry, 4,400-foot air was hot as it blew in through the driver's-side window. He exited I-80 at what passed for the center of town and began looking for a place to stay. Shunning the high-rise Nugget as too fancy, he poked down the main commercial street for more modest accommodations. The Nugget might get his gambling dollars, but he saw no reason to pay double for a few hours of sleep. He turned in at the first likely acceptable motel, the Westward Inn, "Vacancy" emblazoned in red neon beneath the big blue and yellow corporate logo sign, and stopped under a faux porte-cochere to check out the rate, whether or not they had cable TV, and if they still had a non-smoking room.

If Edith, his traveling companion for fifty-one years, had been with him on this cross-country drive, no such guess work would have been necessary. "No, no, Carson, not here," she would have said. "Their rate is \$10 higher than others down the street. Look for El Rancho Sparks or Comfort Corner; that's where we can get the AAA discount."

Edith would have already read through the Automobile Club guidebook and selected Sparks' best values according to features, rates and discounts, each candidate to be investigated visually in a quick drive-by, with the winner emerging based on location and curb-appeal.

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That's the way they had always done it, but with Edith gone now Carson took pot-luck.

The Westward Inn was on the edge of a construction zone, as downtown Sparks appeared to be undergoing a renaissance in 1991. The city fathers must have tired of their second-class status next to Reno and were making a bid to attract a larger share of the gamblers, conventioners, sportsmen and tourists who fueled the local economy. Public dollars were going into tearing up and re-organizing downtown streets, planting green median strips, and installing new, old-fashioned street lamp fixtures and fire hydrants. Private investment was matching public spending with face-lifts for tired, old buildings, and new construction was replacing the too-tired or ramshackle. The mammoth Nugget was gathering a better class of low-rise neighbors around its knees. The bums, winos and street people Carson remembered from his last visit to Sparks a few years ago had been hustled into the background, replaced by throngs of bussed-in seniors and foreign tourists who plowed through the redevelopment chaos looking for the right casino with that lucky machine.

“Hurry up, Arthur, it's almost eight o'clock, and we've hardly been anywhere yet,” brayed an older woman over her shoulder as she bustled past Carson toward the next swinging casino front door, her thinly smiling partner gamely trying to keep up.

Carson moved easily with the early Wednesday evening crowd, a senior like most at this hour, yet apart. Even after showering and changing, he still felt a little less showy, less needful than his fellows on the sidewalk. Though most had no idea where they were going, buzzing in and out of one casino to the next, the crowd seemed to have more determination in their collective stride than Carson. He was ambling, not so much out of weariness as with a reflective posture. He would be glad to get home to his own space at the end of one more day of westward driving, but only for long enough to re-charge and get ready to set out again. He was searching, as he imagined those around him were searching,

but he saw himself as very different from the throng, who seemed hurried, driven to have a good time, hours ticking away until their bus was scheduled to leave and return them to reality in Sacramento, Oakland or San Francisco. Like kids at Disneyland who always know when the park closes, these revelers were intent on scoring a maximum on the fun meter before their time ran out. Even if they spent all their money, it was all right as long as they had a good time. In fact, unless they spent all their money, right down to loose change, they would roll home for three or four hours on the bus despairing that their one last quarter might have hit the big one, the jackpot to change their lives.

Carson saw himself as above the amateur instincts of this crowd. It wasn't that he was older than most, which at eighty-six he was, or that he was unshaven in a sea of Aqua Velva and wore jeans instead of polyester, it was more that he was here for a different, less intentional reason, just passing through on the way home. He felt quieter, calmer on the surface but perhaps more conflicted underneath.

Carson followed a woman with flaming red-orange hair through the swinging glass door into the Nugget's casino. He had tried to reach quickly around her to push open the heavy door for her, but she had taken no notice and charged forward oblivious. The casino's shouting, ringing, whirring, clanking conversation was in full voice, although not yet at the pitch it would reach closer to midnight. Weaving down crooked aisles designed more to slow passers-by than to facilitate transit, Carson headed for John's Oyster Bar where he knew he could get some good soup. Most gaming tables were open at this hour, but many chairs were still empty. Banks of hungry slots stood at attention, ready to swallow naivete in precious few gulps.

Carson stayed his course to John's and found an empty stool at the end of the counter/bar. The aroma of chowder, cioppino and fresh bread brought a warm smile to his face as he sat down and reached for a menu. He concentrated and recalled that he hadn't eaten anything since Battle Mountain; he was famished. A friendly, attractive, middle-aged

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Asian woman flashed a big smile from behind the counter where she was preparing a salad and said, "Something to drink?"

Carson smiled back and said, "Coffee...no, wait, how 'bout a beer?"

"Sure, what kind? I've got Miller, Coors, Bud, Beck's, Dos Equis..."

"Miller!" Carson interrupted. "Too many choices these days. Miller is fine with me. I remember when you were lucky to have two beers to choose from. Now it's like taking a short-term memory test every time you walk into a bar."

"You're right," she answered conspiratorially, "but they want us to give the whole list anyway, something about being 'professional' and 'making a good impression on the customer.' Baloney! Most people just want a beer."

They both laughed as she turned and headed for the kitchen, wiping her wet hands on a not-quite white apron that protected her HMS Pinafore blue and white sailor outfit. The salad she had been preparing was enormous. It looked like a whole head of lettuce, opened like a blossom on a huge platter and covered with various vegetables, sliced eggs and sea creatures. Balanced precariously on one side was a small silver cup of dressing and on the other a couple of lemon wedges.

"Thanks," Carson said as the woman returned with a beer bottle and glass and placed them before him. "That looks like a whole garden. Is it for one person?"

"Number 49: Crab Louie," she answered, "But no one ever finishes the whole thing; they just eat the crab."

Her pronunciation of the consonant ending of the final word was cut short as was common with many Asian non-native speakers of English, causing the 'b' to slide lazily into 'p.' Carson resisted the wagish, mildly racist remark he might have made as a younger, fraternity man when he considered himself a wit. Instead, he offered, "What a waste. People just don't appreciate what they've got today."

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“I know,” she said. “I grew up when my parents were sometimes concerned about us having enough to eat. Here we use food for decoration. There are still lots of hungry people in this world.”

“Not so far from here, either,” Carson answered grimly. He hesitated a moment, then ordered his oyster pan roast.

“I’ll bring you some warm, fresh French bread, too, if you promise to eat it,” she said, wagging her finger at him, and they both laughed.

Carson sipped his beer and nibbled the bread while waiting for his oyster-filled soup. The background noise in the busy restaurant and slightly more distant clamor of the casino laid down a soft carpet of Muzak for his thoughts. Tomorrow night he would be home, at least to where he now called home. He had moved to Santa Rosa in Sonoma County after Edith died to be closer to his two sons and half of his grandchildren. The other half, in Missouri with Susan and her irritating husband, were close enough. Although he had lived in his two-bedroom retirement community condo for more than a year now, it still didn’t feel entirely like home. His things were there, but his heart and memories were still 400 miles south in southern California where he’d been born, grew up and lived continuously for the last fifty years.

Carson liked people, to be around them, to talk and joke with them, but not to get too close or get involved. He never made a lot of friends on his own during his lifetime; it was always Edith who had dragged or cajoled him away from his comfort zone around the house and yard and out into society. Edith initiated the trips to back-to-school night and the light opera. Edith invited over the church social group for Bible study or potluck dinner, although Carson would make it to church most Sunday mornings with family or without. Everyone liked Carson because he was intelligent and quiet and would listen to their endless stories attentively. You could bring problems to Carson, and he was always able to come up with something sympathetic to say, although he was much better at actually solving the problems of things rather than of people. There wasn’t a faucet, door lock or electrical switch he couldn’t

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fix, but when Edith asked him to speak to the boys about not picking on their sister, Carson remembered the furnace filters needed changing. It wasn't that he would refuse to do something; it was that he sometimes had other, more important things to do.

The pan roast was excellent, and he sopped up the last bit with a final bite of bread, making a point of calling his clean bowl to the attention of his server as she scurried past with two hot platters of fish-and-chips.

"Good job," she called over her shoulder. "Now you can have dessert!"

They both chuckled, but she was so busy now that she had no more time for chitchat. Instead, Carson nursed his beer for a while longer, watching the salads, appetizers, pan roasts and stews being made. Oysters, shrimp, crabs, clams and mussels were everywhere blended with delicious sauces and creams and combined with rice, potatoes, eggs, bread, lettuce and other vegetables. It was a festive performance of color, texture, taste and smell played out in overdrive by an experienced staff of preparers who chattered their way through the evening in at least two languages Carson couldn't make out. Observing that a waiting line had formed at the entrance, Carson reluctantly stirred to leave. He looked around for his server and couldn't immediately find her. Finally, he flagged down another of the Pinafore's crew and asked, "I haven't seen my waitress or some time. Can you find her for me?"

"Oh, she's probably on break now. Do you need your check? I'll get it for you."

"Yes, thanks," he said covering his disappointment. He had hoped to thank her for making his supper more agreeable with her conversation. Denied the pleasure of offering a compliment, but well-fed and well-satisfied with the experience, Carson got up, stretched and strolled to the cashier to pay his tab.

Outside John's on the casino floor the action had picked up since he had gone in for dinner, and the din had increased proportionately.

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He now had to jostle his way through crowded aisles past fuller tables. It wasn't gridlock yet, but it was a summer evening. As he was negotiating his way between two rows of slots, a loud metallic clatter like the spilling of hundreds of coins came from just out of sight in front of him. It wasn't the deep "clunk, clunk, clunk" of coins falling into the pay-out bucket of a machine, but more like a cascading of silver pieces onto the carpeted floor, which is exactly what had happened. The shriek that followed was not one of jackpot joy, but rather the terror of shocking loss. A mad scramble was on, and Carson found himself in the midst of stools tipping over and elbows flying as people stooped or dove to the floor to scoop up as much of the runaway loot as they could.

"My money, my money!" came in a screeching, angry cry from an elderly Chinese woman, whose once-full plastic bucket of cartwheels was now upside-down on the floor. Hot tears streamed down her face in shock and exasperation as she bent to pick it and some of the coins up.

Carson started to bend over, too, to pick up a silver dollar at his feet when he was butted from behind by someone and fell to the floor on his hands and knees among the gleaners. Unhurt, he found himself with his fingers on or near several of the loose coins. He grabbed what he could among flailing arms and legs, but the moment was over in a flash as security guards rushed up to stem the tide crowding in. The Chinese lady continued to wail as some of the younger, more agile players who had been first to the floor skulked off with their booty. One young man was stopped and verbally roused by the guards, but he claimed to have won his pockets full fair and square. Others, male and female, young and old, of every clothing style and ethnic description, just melted away, invisible to everyone but themselves.

Carson picked himself up and approached the grieving victim who was being consoled by a knot of family or friends. Strangers filed past with words of quiet sympathy lest the unappeased God of Misfortune should turn his ugly face on them. A few people offered back some of the run-away coins, but the woman's bucket remained mostly

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empty. Carson held out two fists full of silver cartwheels and let them fall into the bucket. Then he reached into one of his jeans pockets and pulled out a few more which he added to the total.

“I’m still quicker than some,” he said, slightly embarrassed by the old woman’s confused yet grateful gaze. “Sorry, I couldn’t do more,” he stammered, as he shoved his hands into his pockets and moved off into the crowd.

Carson headed for a dice table where he stood watching others play with his heart still pounding, feeling light-headed and a little confused, himself. He tried to reconstruct what had just happened, but he couldn’t remember if he had intentionally tried to help the old woman, or if it had just turned out that way. He remembered lots of hands fighting for the coins, but he couldn’t see his own. Everyone was grabbing, and he guessed he was, too, but he just couldn’t make sense of it all. He could have been hurt; after all, he wasn’t a spring chicken. But he never did feel in danger during the tumult, and he even thought he might have been having fun down there on his hands and knees. It was a quick, fierce, grabbing competition, as fast and base and mean as competition gets, close to the animal level which scrambling for hard, cold, dirty cash brings out in some people. And Carson had won his share, maybe more, competing with young punks and seniors twenty years his junior. He felt silently proud of his performance. The fact that he had given back all that he had earned down on the floor was inconsequential; no other thought had even crossed his mind. The point he dwelled on was that he had won. He had done something. He could still perform. He had been useful, and through the haze of lights, loud noise and adrenaline, Carson felt great.