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Written by James Lee Burke

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The Glass Rainbow

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chapter one

The room I had rented in an old part of Natchez seemed more reflective of New Orleans than a river town in Mississippi. The ventilated storm shutters were slatted with a pink glow, as soft and filtered and cool in color as the spring sunrise can be in the Garden District, the courtyard outside touched with mist off the river, the pastel walls deep in shadow and stained with lichen above the flower beds, the brick walkways smelling of damp stone and the wild spearmint that grew in green clusters between the bricks. I could see the shadows of banana trees moving on the window screens, the humidity condensing and threading along the fronds like veins in living tissue. I could hear a ship's horn blowing somewhere out on the river, a long hooting sound that was absorbed and muted inside the mist, thwarting its own purpose. A wood-bladed fan revolved slowly above my bed, the incandescence of the lightbulbs attached to it reduced to a dim yellow smudge inside frosted-glass shades that were fluted to resemble flowers. The wood floor and the garish wallpaper and the rain spots on the ceiling belonged to another era, one that was outside of time and unheedful of the demands of commerce. Perhaps as a reminder of that fact, the only clock in the room was a round windup mechanism that possessed neither a glass cover nor hands on its face.

There are moments in the Deep South when one wonders if he has not wakened to a sunrise in the spring of 1862. And in that moment, maybe one realizes with a guilty pang that he would not find such an event entirely unwelcome.

At midmorning, inside a pine-wooded depression not far from the Mississippi, I found the man I was looking for. His name was Jimmy Darl Thigpin, and the diminutive or boylike image his name suggested, as with many southern names, was egregiously misleading. He was a gunbull of the old school, the kind of man who was neither good nor bad, in the way that a firearm is neither good nor bad. He was the kind of man whom you treat with discretion and whose private frame of reference you do not probe. In some ways, Jimmy Darl Thigpin was the lawman all of us fear we might one day become.

He sat atop a quarter horse that was at least sixteen hands high, his back erect, a cut-down double-barrel twelve-gauge propped on his thigh, the saddle creaking under his weight. He wore a long-sleeved cotton shirt to protect his arms from mosquitoes, and a beat-up, tall-crown cowboy hat in the apparent belief that he could prevent a return of the skin cancer that had shriveled one side of his face. To my knowledge, in various stages of his forty-year career, he had killed five men, some inside the prison system, some outside, one in an argument over a woman in a bar.

His charges were all black men, each wearing big-stripe green-and-white convict jumpers and baggy pants, some wearing leather-cuffed ankle restraints. They were felling trees, chopping off the limbs for burning, stacking the trunks on a flatbed truck, the heat from the fire so intense it gave off no smoke.

When he saw me park on the road, he dismounted

and broke open the breech of his shotgun, cradling it over his left forearm, exposing the two shells in the chambers, effectively disarming his weapon. But in spite of his show of deference for my safety, there was no pleasure in his expression when he shook hands, and his eyes never left his charges.

'We appreciate your calling us, Cap,' I said. 'It looks like you're still running a tight ship.'

Then I thought about what I had just said. There are instances when the exigencies of your life or profession require that you ingratiate yourself with people who make you uncomfortable, not because of what they are but because you fear their approval and the possibility you are more like them than you are willing to accept. I kept believing that age would one day free me of that burden. But it never has.

My introspection was of no relevance. He seemed uncertain about the purpose of my visit to Mississippi, even though it was he who had contacted me about one of his charges. 'This is about those hookers that was killed over in your area?' he asked.

'I wouldn't necessarily call them that.'

'You're right, I shouldn't be speaking unkindly of the dead. The boy I was telling you about is over yonder. The one with the gold teeth.'

'Thanks for your help, Cap.'

Maybe my friend the gunbull wasn't all bad, I told myself. But sometimes when you think you're almost home free, that indeed redemption is working incrementally in all of us, you find you have set yourself up for another disappointment.

'His nickname is Git-It-and-Go,' Thigpin said.

'Sir?'

'Don't be feeling sorry for him. He could steal the stink off shit and not get the smell on his hands. If he

don't give you what you want, let me know and I'll slap a knot on his head.'

Jimmy Darl Thigpin opened a pouch of string tobacco and filled his jaw with it. He chewed slowly, his eyes hazy with a private thought or perhaps the pleasure the tobacco gave him. Then he realized I was watching him, and he grinned at the corner of his mouth to indicate he and I were members of the same club.

The convict's name was Elmore Latiolais. He came from a rural slum sixty miles northeast of New Iberia, where I was employed as a detective with the Iberia Parish Sheriff's Department. His facial features were Negroid, but his skin was the color of paste, covered with large moles as thick and irregular in shape as drops of mud, his wiry hair peroxided a bright gold. He was one of those recidivists whose lives are a testimony to institutional failure and the fact that for some people and situations there are no solutions.

We sat on a log in the shade, thirty yards from where his crew was working. The air was breathless and superheated inside the clearing, the trash fire red-hot at the center, the freshly cut pine limbs snapping instantly alight when they hit the flames. Elmore Latiolais was sweating heavily, his body wrapped in an odor that was like mildew and soapy water that had dried in his clothes.

'Why we got to talk here, man?' he said.

'I'm sorry I didn't bring an air-conditioned office with me,' I replied.

'They gonna make me for a snitch.'

'I drove a long way to talk with you, podna. Would you rather I leave?'

His eyes searched in space, his alternatives, his agenda, the pitiful issues of his life probably swimming

like dots in the heat waves warping off the fire.

'My sister was Bernadette, one of them seven girls that's been killed, that don't nobody care about,' he said.

'Captain Thigpin explained that.'

'My grandmother sent me the news article. It was from November of last year. My grandmother says ain't nothing been written about them since. The article says my sister and all them others was prostitutes.'

'Not exactly. But yeah, the article suggests that. What are you trying to tell me?'

'It ain't fair.'

'Not fair?'

'That's right. Calling my sister a prostitute. Nobody interested in the troot. All them girls just t'rown away like they was sacks of garbage.' He wiped his nose with the heel of his hand.

'You know who's behind their deaths?'

'Herman Stanga.'

'What do you base that on?'

'Herman Stanga tried to have me jooged when I was in Angola.'

'Herman Stanga is a pimp.'

'That's right.'

'You're telling me a pimp is mixed up with your sister's death but your sister was not a prostitute? Does that seem like a reasonable conclusion to you?'

He turned his face to mine. 'Where you been, man?'

I propped my hands on my knees, stiffening my arms, my expression blank, waiting for the balloon of anger in my chest to pass. 'You asked Captain Thigpin to call me. Why me and not somebody else?'

'My cousin tole me you was axing around about the girls. But I t'ink you got your head stuffed up your hole.'

'Forgive me if I'm losing patience with this conversation.'

'There's no money in selling cooze no more. Herman Stanga is into meth. You got to come to Mis'sippi and interview somebody on a road gang to find that out?'

I stood up, my gaze focused on neutral space. 'I have several photographs here I'd like you to look at. Tell me if you know any of these women.'

There were seven photos in my shirt pocket. I removed only six of them. He remained seated on the log and went through them one by one. None of the photos was a mug shot. They had been taken by friends or family members using cheap cameras and one-hour development services. The backdrops were in poor neighborhoods where the residents parked their cars in the yards and the litter in the rain ditches disappeared inside the weeds during the summer and was exposed again during the winter. Two of the victims were white, four were black. Some of them were pretty. All of them were young. None of them looked unhappy. None of them probably had any idea of the fate that awaited them.

'They all lived sout' of the tracks, didn't they?' he said.

'That's right. Do you recognize them?'

'No, I ain't seen none of them. You ain't shown me my sister's picture.'

I removed the seventh photo from my pocket and handed it to him. The girl in it had been seventeen when she died. She was last seen leaving a dollar store at four o'clock in the afternoon. She had a sweet, round face and was smiling in the photograph.

Elmore Latiolais cupped the photo in his palm. He stared at it for a long time, then shielded his eyes as

though avoiding the sun's glare. 'Can I keep it?' he said.

'Sorry,' I replied.

He nodded and returned the photo to me, his eyes moist, his gold Brillo pad of a haircut popping with sweat.

'You said you hadn't seen any of the other victims. How did you know they lived south of the tracks?' I said.

'That's what I mean when I say you got your head up your ass. If they lived nort' of the railroad track, y'all would be tearing the state of Lou'sana apart to get the man who killed them.'

Elmore Latiolais was not a likable man. In all probability, he had committed crimes that were worse in nature than those for which he had been punished. But the fact he considered Herman Stanga a cancer indicated, at least to me, that Elmore was still held together by the same glue as the rest of us. Herman Stanga was another matter. Herman Stanga was a man I hated, maybe less for what he was personally than what he represented, but I hated him just the same, to the degree that I did not want to be armed and alone with him.

I said good-bye to Elmore Latiolais.

'You ain't gonna he'p out?' he said.

'You haven't told me anything that could be considered of investigative value.'

'Investigative value'? Yeah, I like them kind of words. Herman killed a cousin of mine ten years back. He give her a hotshot and blew her heart out. When he knowed I was onto him, he paid a guy to joog me. Y'all wasn't interested then, y'all ain't interested now.'

'I'm sorry for your loss,' I replied.

'Yeah,' he said.

*

Herman was one of those singular individuals for whom there is no adequate categorical description. He deliberately created addiction among his own people by giving what he called 'entrepreneurial start-up flake' to teenage dealers. He encouraged his rock queens to eat fried food so their extra weight would signal to their customers that they were AIDS-free. He pimped off his white girls to black johns and his black girls to white johns. If a perv who liked it rough got into the mix, that was just the way it flushed sometimes. 'Harry Truman integrated the United States Army. I'm taking multiculturalism and equal opportunity to a much higher level,' he liked to say.

By his own definition of himself, he was always rocking to his own rhythms, high on his own rebop and snap-crackle-and-pop, and didn't 'need to slam no gram to be what I am.' He had the face of a pixie, his mustache trimmed into tiny black wings on his upper lip, his eyes bright with innocent mischief, the harmless satyr peeking out of the bushes. His physique was hard and lean, his skin stretched tight on his bones and tendons like a meth addict's, though he used drugs rarely, and only for recreational purposes. He liked to kick off his clothes by the poolside, down to his white silk boxer shorts, and sunbathe on a floating air mattress in the middle of his swimming pool, wraparound Ray-Bans on his face, a frozen daiquiri balanced on his stomach, his sunblock trailing off the ends of his fingers, his phallus as pronounced as the wood figure on a sailing ship's prow. The neighbors complained because of the exposure to their children, but Herman literally gave them the finger, hiking it in the air whenever he saw them gazing at him from their windows. Herman Stanga was above convention. Herman Stanga was the iconoclast whose irreverence

had made him rich while the assets of his neighbors drained through a sinkhole called the recession of 2009.

He had acquired his home on Bayou Teche, a faux antebellum two-story brick structure with twin chimneys, from a black physician who signed over the property for a minimal sum and left town with his wife and children and was never heard from again. Maintenance of the house and grounds ended the day Herman moved in. The hollow wood pillars were eaten by termites. The ventilated green storm shutters hung askew on their hinges; the rain gutters were clogged with pine needles and bled rust down the window frames. The manicured St. Augustine lawn was destroyed by mold and weed infestation and chains of red-ant mounds. Herman's Dobermans dug holes in the flower beds and downloaded piles of dog shit on every square inch of dirt they could squat on.

Herman, like a Leonardo da Vinci in reverse, had turned his own home into an emblematic masterpiece of suburban decay.

I rang the chimes, but no one answered. When I walked around back, I saw him cleaning leaves and pine needles out of the pool with a long pole, wearing Speedos that exposed his crack and his pubic hair. He had the most peculiar coloration I had ever seen in a human being. It was like black ivory that someone had poured liquefied gold inside. The afternoon sun had already dipped behind the oak trees on the bayou, and his wet hair and the oily glaze on his skin seemed touched with fire. A chicken was turning on a rotisserie over a bed of charcoals, next to a glass-topped table that was inset with an umbrella. In the shade of the umbrella was a cooler packed with crushed ice and bottles of Mexican and German beer.

'It's my man RoboCop,' he said. 'Sit yourself down, my brother, and open yourself a beer.'

A striped robe like a Bedouin would wear hung over the back of a canvas chair. I picked it up and threw it at him. 'Put it on.'

'What for?'

'Your neighbor's kids are looking through the gate.'

'You're right, it's starting to cool off,' he said. He wrapped the robe around his midriff and tied it like a sarong, his chin tilted up into the breeze. The late sun's yellow glare on the bayou was like a match flame flaring just under the current. 'Want to take a swim? I got a suit might fit you.'

'I need you to look at some photos, Herman.'

'Them girls over in Jeff Davis Parish that got themselves killed?'

'Why would you think that?'

''Cause you always looking for a way to jam me up. 'Cause y'all ain't got nobody else to put it on.'

'Nobody else has talked to you?'

'There ain't been no ink on those girls in four months. What's that tell you?'

'You have to explain it to me. I'm not that smart.'

'Give me them pictures,' he said, ignoring my statement, his hand upturned.

This time it was I who ignored Herman. I laid the photos one by one on the glass tabletop. He waited patiently, an amused light playing in his face.

'Do I know them? *No*. Have I ever seen them? *No*. Would they be of interest to me? *No*. Why's that, you ax? 'Cause they're country girls with a serious case of ugly. Don't look at me like that.'

'Who do you think might have murdered them?'

'It ain't a pimp. A pimp don't murder his stable. Check out their families. They probably been killing

each other.' He glanced at his watch. It was gold and had a black face inset with tiny red stones. 'I got people coming over. We t'rew wit' this?'

The underwater lights in his swimming pool had just clicked on, creating a sky-blue clarity in the water that was so pristine I could see the silvery glint of a dime at the bottom of the deep end. Banana trees and a magnificent magnolia tree hung over the spiked fence that surrounded the pool. Potted plants bursting with flowers shaded his deck chairs and filled the air with a fragrance that was heavier than perfume.

'Your home is a study in contradictions. Your yard is carpeted with dog shit, and your house is being eaten to the foundation by termites. But your pool area is snipped right out of *Southern Living*. I don't get it.'

'The uptown nigger who built this place wanted to be a character in *Gone Wit' the Wind*. Except Whitey on the bayou don't got no need for niggers pretending they're white people. So I give them a real nigger to weep and moan about. I own t'ree rentals, a condo in Lake Charles, and a beach house in Panama City, but I use this house to wipe my ass on. Every day I'm here, the value of my neighbors' property goes down. Guess who they gonna end up selling their houses to? That is, if I'm in the market for more houses.

'Know why there ain't been no media coverage on them girls for four months? Nobody cares. This is still Lou'sana, Robo Man. Black or white, it don't matter – if you got money, people will take your ten-inch on their knees. If you ain't got money, they'll cut it off.'

'I think I'll let myself out.'

'Yeah, fuck you, too, man.'

'Say again?'

'Everyt'ing I tole you is true. But you cain't deal wit' it. And that's *your* problem, motherfucker. It ain't mine.'

*

I lived with my wife, Molly, who was a former Catholic nun, in a modest frame house with a peaked tin roof among live oaks and pecan trees and slash pines and windmill palms on East Main, a half block from the famous plantation home known as The Shadows. There was rust on the roof and in the rain gutters, and it turned orange and purple in the late-afternoon sunset. Our lot was one acre in size and part of a historical alluvial floodplain that sloped down to Bayou Teche. The topographical contour of the land along the bayou had never been altered, and as a consequence, even though we were located close to the water, the houses in our neighborhood never flooded, even during the worst of hurricanes. Equally important for one who lives in the tropics, our house stayed in deep shade most of the day, and by the front walk, where we got full sun, our camellias and hibiscus stayed in bloom almost year-round, and in the spring our azaleas powdered the lawn with petals that looked like pink confetti.

It was a fine house in which to live, cool in the summer and warm in the winter, the ceiling-high windows outfitted with ventilated storm shutters, our new veranda a grand place to sit in wood rockers among our potted plants and house pets.

Alafair, our adopted daughter, had graduated from Reed College with a degree in psychology, and now had taken off one semester from Stanford Law School to rewrite a novel she had been working on for three years. She had graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Reed and was carrying a 3.9 GPA at Stanford. She was a good writer, too. I had no doubts about the level of professional success that awaited her, regardless of the field she entered. My concern for Alafair's well-being was much more immediate and without any solution

that I could see. In this case, the specific name of the concern was Kermit Abelard, the first man I believed Alafair was actually serious about.

'He's coming over here? *Now?*' I said.

I had just come home from work and had parked my pickup under the porte cochere. She was sitting in the rocker on the veranda, wearing a flowery sundress and white shoes, her skin dark with tan, her Indian-black hair burned brown on the tips. 'What do you have against him, Dave?'

'He's too old for you.'

'He's thirty-three. He calls it his crucifixion year.'

'I forgot. He's also grandiose.'

'Give it a rest, big guy.'

'Is the convict coming with him?'

She made a face that feigned exasperation. Kermit Abelard, whose family at one time had owned almost half of St. Mary Parish, could not be accused of decadence or living on his family name. He had gone to acting school in New York and had published three novels, one of which had been adapted as a film. He had worked in the oil field when he could have been playing tennis and fishing for marlin in the Keys. Unfortunately, his egalitarian attitudes sometimes required others to pay a price, as was the case when he encouraged the entire crew on his drilling rig to join the union and got them and himself fired. Two years past, he had managed to work a parole from the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville for a celebrity convict author, a man who had been in and out of reformatories and jails since he was sixteen.

'Have you read *The Green Cage*?' Alafair asked.

'I have. I got it from the library. I didn't buy it.'

'You don't think it's a brilliant piece of writing?'

'Yeah, it is, for reasons the author and his admirers don't seem to understand.'

She wasn't taking the bait, so I slogged on. 'It's a great look inside the mind of a sociopath and narcissist and manipulator. Count the number of times the pronouns "I," "me," "mine," and "myself" appear in each paragraph.'

'Somebody must have liked it. Robbie was a finalist in the National Book Awards.'

'Robbie?'

'Argue with someone else, Dave.'

I looked out at the evening traffic, at the birds gathering in the trees against a mauve-colored sunset. 'Want to go for a run?' I said.

'I'm going to the park with Kermit. He's reading the revision I did on the last chapter in my novel.'

I went inside the house. Molly had left a note on the kitchen table to the effect she was in Lafayette and would bring supper home. I changed into my gym shorts and a T-shirt and my running shoes, and in the backyard, under the supervision of our warrior cat, Snuggs, and our elderly raccoon, Tripod, I did fifty push-ups with my feet propped on a picnic bench, five reps of sixty-pound curls, three reps of military presses, and one hundred stomach crunches. It was cool and warm at the same time inside the shade of the trees, and the wind was blowing through the bamboo that separated our property from the next-door neighbor's, and wisteria was blooming in big blue and lavender clumps on the side of her garage. I had almost forgotten my worries regarding Alafair and her willingness to trust people she shouldn't; then I heard Kermit Abelard's black Saab convertible pull into the driveway and a car door open and close. I did not hear it open and close and then open and close

again. Which meant Kermit Abelard did not get out of his vehicle and approach the gallery and walk Alafair back to the car and open the car door for her. In my view, no one could accuse Kermit Abelard of going out of his way to be a gentleman.

I walked to the edge of the backyard so I could see through the porte cochere into the front. Kermit was backing into the street, the top down on his convertible, the dappled shade sliding off the hand-waxed surfaces, as though the cooling of the day and the attenuation of the light had been arranged especially for him. Alafair sat next to him on the rolled-leather seat. In back was a man whose face I had seen only on the flap of a book jacket.

I jogged down East Main, under the canopy of live oaks that spanned the entirety of the street, past The Shadows and the bed-and-breakfast that had been the residence of the plantation's overseer, past the massive old brick post office and the Evangeline Theater, across the drawbridge at Burke Street and into City Park, where people were barbecuing under the shelters along the bayou and high school kids were playing a work-up softball game on the ball diamond.

I jogged for four miles, circling twice through the park. At the end of the second lap I hit it hard toward home, my blood oxygenated now, my breath coming regular, my heart strong, the sweaty glaze on my skin a reminder that once in a while you're allowed to reclaim a libidinal moment or two from your youth. Then I saw Kermit Abelard's Saab parked by the tin pavilion, checkered cloth and newspapers spread on a table, a mound of boiled crawfish and artichokes and corn on the cob piled in the center.

I didn't want to stop, but Alafair and her friends Kermit Abelard and the convict-author whose name

was Robert Weingart had seen me, and now Alafair was waving, her face full of joy and pride. I tried to shine her on, to pretend I was committed to my run and couldn't stop. But under what circumstances do you embarrass your daughter in front of her companions, or indulge your enmity toward them at her expense? Or pass her by when perhaps she needs your presence for reasons she may not be able to acknowledge, even to herself?

I slowed to a walk, wiping my face with the towel I carried.

Kermit was a stocky man of medium height, with vascular, short arms and a cleft in his chin. He was built more like a dockhand than a descendant of local aristocracy. The top of his shirt was unbuttoned, his tanned, smooth skin exposed for others to look at. He had wide, square hands and fingers that were blunt on the tips. They were the hands of a workingman, but incongruously, the red stone of a Kappa Sigma ring twinkled on his finger.

'Come meet Robert, Mr. Robicheaux,' he said.

'I'm pretty overheated. I'd better not get too close to you guys,' I said.

Robert Weingart was sitting on top of the wood table, smiling good-naturedly, his alpine-booted feet planted solidly on the bench. He had fine cheekbones, a small mouth, and dark hair that was clipped neatly and wet-combed with a part that created a straight gray line through his scalp. His eyes were hazel and elongated, his cheeks slightly sunken. His hands were relaxed on his knees, his fingers tapered, like a pianist's. He conveyed the sense that he was a man with no hidden agenda, with no repressed tensions or problems of conscience. He seemed to be a man at peace with the world.

But it was the lack of balance or uniformity in his physiognomy that bothered me. He didn't blink, the way screen actors never blink. His mouth was too small, too quick to smile, his jaw too thin for the size of his cranium. His eyes stayed fastened brightly on mine. I kept waiting for him to blink. But he didn't.

'Looks like you've been pouring it on,' he said.

'Not really.'

'I thought your speed was pretty impressive.'

'Have I seen you in the movies?'

'I don't think so.'

'You remind me of an actor. I can't call his name to mind.'

'No, I'm just a scribbler.' He got up from the table, extending his hand. 'Rob Weingart. It's a pleasure to meet you.'

'It's not Robbie?'

'Just call me Rob if you like.'

His handshake was boneless, unthreatening, cool and dry to the touch. There was a white shine on his teeth. He picked up a peeled crawfish and put it in his mouth, his cheekbones working slowly, his gaze never leaving my face. He touched at his lips with a paper napkin, his expression as benign as the weather was temperate, a bit like a man thinking of a private joke. 'Is there something on your mind I can help you with?' he asked.

'I got it. It wasn't an actor. You remind me of Chet Baker,' I said.

'The musician?'

'That's right. A tragic one, at that. His addictions ate him alive. You like jazz, Mr. Weingart? Have you done any professional performing? I'm sure I've seen you in a professional capacity.'

'Let me fix you a plate, Mr. Robicheaux,' Kermit said.

'No, I never was a performer,' Robert Weingart said. 'Why would you think that?'

'I just admire people who can teach themselves not to blink. When a person doesn't blink, you can't read his thoughts. All you see is one undecipherable expression. It's like staring into electrified silk.'

'That's quite an image,' he said to Kermit. 'One of us ought to borrow that and give Mr. Robicheaux a footnote.'

'You can just take it and use it in any fashion you choose. It's free,' I said.

Kermit Abelard touched my forearm with a loaded paper plate.

'No, thanks,' I said. 'I'd better get back on my run.'

'You're a police officer,' Robert Weingart said.

'Alafair told you?'

'Usually I can spot a police officer. It used to be part of my curriculum vitae. But in this case I think your daughter told me. I'm almost sure of it.'

'You think? But you don't know?'

Alafair's face was burning.

'Is my plate ready? I could eat a whale,' Robert Weingart said, looking around, suppressing his amusement at the situation that swirled about him.

'I can't believe you. Why didn't you punch him in the face while you were at it?' Alafair said to me after she returned home.

'That's a possibility,' I replied.

'What did he do? The man was just sitting there.'

'He's a mainline recidivist, Alf. Don't be taken in.'

'Don't call me that stupid name. How can you know somebody five seconds and make judgments like that?'

'Anybody who's con-wise can spot a dude like that five blocks away.'

'The real problem is you always want to control other people. Instead of being honest about your own self-centered agenda, you go after Kermit's friend.'

'You're right, I don't know him.'

'Why do you blame Kermit for what his family may have done? It's not fair to him, Dave, and it's not fair to me.'

'There's no "may have done" about it. The Abelards are dictators. If they had their way, we'd all be doing their grunt work for minimum wage, if that.'

'So what? That doesn't mean Kermit is like the rest of his family. John and Robert Kennedy weren't like their father.'

'What's with you two? I could hear you all the way out in the driveway,' Molly said, coming through the back door, both arms loaded with groceries.

'Ask Dave, if you can get him to pull his head out of his ass,' Alafair said.

'That's the second time someone has said that to me today. The other person was a meltdown on a road gang in Mississippi.'

Molly tried to make it to the counter with the grocery bags. But it was too late. One of them caved, and most of our delicatessen supper splattered on the linoleum.

That's when Clete Purcel tapped on the back screen. 'Am I interrupting anything?' he said.