



### Thirteen

Edward walked Kara to The Gallows, then took Broad Street toward the south end and the garage. The high sun was bright \_ pleasantly warm to Edward, outright hot for the natives, who stood sweating at the bus stops or drove by closed up in air conditioning. Salsa and rap issued from some of the open vehicles and the windows of houses and apartments offered music gratis to the street. He liked the raucous bursts of melody and percussion which reminded him of the buskers and the lively street life of the CC, fresh in his memory this morning, and he started to whistle an old tune as he approached the white painted brick structure with its front yard jammed with cars right up to the stout wire fence. He anticipated some teasing from Hector because this was the first time he'd stayed all night at Kara's, and laughter from the other fellows in the garage. That would be all right, too, on a happy morning.

The bays of the garage were open in the heat, and Edward walked down the short drive to the back, where they stored more customer cars, a few junkers for parts, the dumpster and trash barrels, and a bench where the workers caught a quick smoke or ate the lunches they bought from the street vendor and the fast food shop. He had reached the stair up to the adjoining apartment, when the silence struck him. There should be the clank of tools on metal, the pneumatic whoosh of the tire machine, the clank of jacks, the sound of compressed air, or the rubbery bounce of a discarded tire on cement. No voices, either, only the salsa station favored by the staff, playing at top volume with an excitable gent yelling so fast in Old Spanish that he must have been paid by the word. All normal. Edward had his foot on the first step when he stopped. No, not normal. After years on the marsh, his hearing was acute, used to teasing out the sound of a hidden warbler from the ambient noise of the reeds, to detecting shifts in the wind, to picking up the distant sound of paddling or the creak of a solar. He heard a voice. Two. Half hidden under the radio. And where was Hombre, the guard dog who usually barked from his run at the back? Where were Carlos, Martin, and Hector, or, if they were inside, what were they doing?

With a sudden perception of trouble, Edward moved to the door that gave access from the work floor. He turned the handle carefully. *Muy especial!* cried the announcer over a burst of frenetic syncopation, then there was a thump, not the usual garage thump of rubber on cement or metal on rubber, but the sick, distinctive thump of something hard on flesh. Edward stepped inside.

They were over by the grease pit, two of them, wearing hats and dark glasses, and they had cornered Hector against the rack that held the motor oils and filters. One stood a little to the side with a stubby, black gun in his hand. The other was pounding Hector mercilessly.

“*Non sabe, non sabe,*” Hector gasped.

Another thump.

Edward looked around. A wrench, a grease gun. No good at this range. The compressor wasn't running for the paint sprayer, either. Then he saw the fire alarm, lifted the wrench, smashed the glass. He jerked the handle and dropped behind a cart loaded with trays of nuts, bolts, and washers, as a tremendous bang reverberated and a projectile whanged against the metal overhead. A shout and a crash below, the result of someone tumbling into the grease pit. Edward launched the cart, sending it bouncing and rattling across the empty floor into something tall, solid, and furiously angry. In the collision, the gun flew in the general direction of the order desk, before the man \_ Edward had only a glimpse of a white shirt, bare yellow arms, a black straw hat \_ picked himself up and scuttled toward the open bay of the garage. Edward straightened up, too surprised even for fear.

Someone was screaming from the grease pit, but not Hector. Hector had one eye swollen and his mouth was bleeding, but he was upright and on garage level and yelling, "*Vamos, vamos!*" He grabbed Edward's arm. "We gotta go *now*."

To the side door where Hector ran his hand over the rack and palmed a key. Screams still coming from the grease pit, followed now by shots that rang off the metal roof. A frantic sprint to the back down a congested row of cars. Key in the lock of a black Lexus; doors open. "Get in, *pronto*," said Hector. Edward inside. "Belt," said Hector, who had the car started and in gear and out onto the street and peeled around the corner, before they heard the distant sound of a fire engine. Down Maple to Wyllys with the massive Victorians set on their wide lawns, past the round construction of the Civic Center, cranes and earth movers in attendance, out onto the highway, slow, slow for a truck with a smashed windshield, cop car beside it, flashers going \_ Hector white faced, gripping the wheel \_ then over the bridge, across the river Edward loved, gulls in a raft near a little backwater, and out, fast, far faster than the city traffic, the river behind them, the world dissolving.

"You okay?"

It was not the right time to discuss his peculiar situation, and the weakness of one of his co-worker's children suggested an excuse. "I get car sick," Edward said.

“*Madre dios!*”

“Terribly.” In truth, he did feel very squeamish.

“Like my oldest,” said Hector. “But not when you drive, right?”

“I don’t drive,” said Edward.

“*Non*. Not possible.”

“Yes, possible. I don’t drive. We didn’t have a motor – a car.”

Hector gave him a strange look.

“What does it matter? You’re driving just fine.”

“I need you to bring the car back,” said Hector. “This is Señor Obrigon’s car. If it’s not back, *mucho problema. Mucho*.”

“So where are we going?”

“Willimantic. Good friends will help me disappear, if you return the car.”

They were in greenery, that was all Edward knew, with a stream of motors around them and, across a divider of grass and trees, another line of approaching motors. Hector might have asked him to fly.

“Watch,” said Hector, “watch what I do. This is an automatic, no worries about shifting. You turn the key, you drive, you stop, you park, you turn the key again. Yes?”

I’m dreaming, Edward thought. I am still at Kara’s; it is very early morning, and this is one of those weird, coherent dreams one sometimes has. “Yes,” he said.

“Right pedal for gas, yes? *Comprende?* And left for brake.” He touched it, slowing them for an instant, then back to the gas. “That’s it. You read the signs, you signal this way” \_ he showed Edward the lever on the steering wheel. “Wheel makes you go left or right, yes?”

Why, Edward wondered, did he keep falling into these miseries with Hector? Kara was happy with her theatrical group, and Dora seemed to have found appropriate skilled work, while he was living hand to mouth, exposed to all the ills and dangers of Ancient Hartford. This life was a dream, it was fundamentally a dream, and perhaps the two women had simply

dreamed good alternatives for themselves, while he, stumbling behind after Kara, had taken what came along. Maybe he could open the door now and step out and, instead of the dizzying ribbon of concrete, he'd be on a sidewalk somewhere or, better yet, setting off on a boat along a creek with his collecting gear and notebooks, doing the work he could do instead of driving virtually blind at enormous speed.

"You can do this?" Hector asked.

Edward hesitated. He did not think he could do this at all.

"You came in, a good thing, a kind thing. I am grateful, *mucho*, but now I have to leave."

Edward looked at him. "What will you do?"

"Further north or maybe out to the Midwest. I have a cousin there."

"I'm sorry."

"They might have killed me," Hector said. "Bad men. Don't go to work today. I'll call Jorge for you and explain."

Edward nodded, feeling increasingly queasy as Hector recounted the events of the morning \_ Hombre sick, maybe poisoned; Carlos sent to take him to the vet; Martin off as usual on a parts run, and then the soft footsteps at the back of the garage. Edward didn't ask for details, knowing too well how easy it was for illegals, hidden precariously in plain sight, to become enmeshed with the city's low life. He tried, instead, to focus on the steering wheel, on Hector's hands making slight adjustments, on the movement of his right foot from the gas to the brake and back.

*Imagine, he told himself, I have to imagine something familiar here, houses, trees, hills; this is the Highground, so hills. I'm seeing hills and trees and houses, probably houses.*

"Not far now," said Hector, "We're on the bypass."

Salvation came with that one word, for Edward suddenly remembered the Great Willimantic Bypass Race, a semi-legendary motor event, a last splurge of gasoline from around the time of the first Great Rising, an event commemorated \_ wait, commemorated by

\_ by a bicycle and foot race, that was it. Every year on this very stretch. He'd read descriptions, and it now seemed to him that he'd been brought as a boy, a small boy, to one of the really big race meetings. He remembered crowds on a sunny day, clapping and shouting behind the ropes; the much patched pavement shimmering in the heat with bare yellow spots where the weeds and grass had been carefully removed. Vendors, of course, wearing their high, distinctive hats, selling cakes, fruit, dried fish on little sticks, and lemon drinks. Musicians were playing, and there were jugglers and clowns and even actors, mounting little plays on stages before the tents. He remembered the runners with their flashing legs, their chests and faces gleaming with sweat, before it was time for the packs of cyclists in their bright silks to tear down the road, their derailleurs whirring as they free wheeled into the hairpin turns. Here. *I've been here*, he thought, *I just need to remember, to look*. And sure enough, though the close packed little houses lining the stretch were gone, replaced by trees only occasionally broken by the cleared ground of a farm, there was the double line of cement, up hill and down, but straight, mostly straight, rare here for roads, and ending, he was sure it did, in a hair pin turn that would be banked with blocks of marsh hay on race days to protect the cyclists. He began to feel better as the ribbon of gray, green, blue, and white resolved itself into something like a normal landscape.

“They hold the races here,” he said without thinking. “Or used to.”

“Yeah?” Hector asked. “You would build up some speed on this stretch.” He began talking about auto racing in Sonora and about some famous Mexican street racers. He knew how to set up a sweet running car for the street. “Not this one, though. You drive this one carefully, not a scratch,” he joked.

Edward could see Hector really did not believe that he was ignorant of motors.

They went off an exit ramp, before Edward could confirm the sharp turn at the bypass end and drove onto a commercial strip. “What do they do here?”

“Used to be mills,” said Hector. “Lots of industry. Not much now.”

This wasn't helpful, and Edward felt the queasiness returning, until Hector began proudly pointing out various little Mexican owned businesses, notable for the green, white, and red flags crossed with the stars and stripes. "Americans are lazy," he remarked. "Mexicans know how to work. Give us a couple generations, this place'll be big."

Edward smiled painfully. It was true that the Highlands were destined to pick up population, but now the Risings came back into his mind. Even with serious floods within living memory, the Great Rising had been only another school topic. The world was the way it was, and all that really mattered was the present, the people one knew, the pleasures and problems of the moment. *This is why people come back strange*, he thought. *One knows too much, one sees too many people one knows are doomed, or their children are doomed, or their grandchildren, and things better left abstract become real.*

"Here we are," said Hector, pulling into the side drive of a yellow wooden building with two stories and two apartments. "You'll know what to do."

Edward realized that Hector had been giving him more advice and instructions about the car \_ all wasted; he remembered nothing.

Hector's friends came out, three stocky men wearing low slung jeans, work boots, and worn t-shirts. They had flat brown faces and straight black hair underneath their billed trucker's caps. After shaking hands with Hector, they greeted Edward warmly, patting him on the back, telling him he had been a *bueno amigo*, a *valiente hombre*. Edward's eyes kept sliding back to the black Lexus \_ if only they knew how much more courage he would need for *that*. But like Hector, they could not conceive of an ignorance-based fear of motors, and it was essential, they all agreed, that the car be returned. But not by them.

Once they were all inside the yellow house with cans of beer in their hands and cigarettes going, Edward learned that this was a turf matter, involving the gang that Hector \_ and by extension Edward, too, \_ had become entangled with through the garage. Apparently the Kings were cutting into another gang's territory in some way involving motors and the

auto business. More than that Edward was better off not knowing, but after years of Resurrectors and smugglers, he felt he got the picture.

All that afternoon, Hector and his friends sat around congenially. They sent out for a meal of fried chicken, and as they cracked open a few more beers, Edward grew more and more uneasy and disoriented. Yes, they were hard workers, but without much sense of urgency, loitering through the afternoon without any plan while he missed work and his life went to pot. The sky was beginning to darken in the east when Hector abruptly stood up to embrace Edward and clap him on the back. "Time to go," he said. "Rush hour is over."

Edward realized they had been waiting to give him an easier drive into the city. He asked them to back the car out onto the street for him and get it pointed in the right direction. This request made the others hesitate for the first time, and, his face anxious, Hector ran through all the directions again, while Edward nodded without paying entire attention. He was thinking that he had to imagine doing this, that he had to get the road side to solidify, that he had to think himself managing one of the solars in especially tricky water conditions.

"Be safe," he said to Hector, "smooth water." That was not what people said here, but it was on his tongue before he realized. Then Hector's thin, taut face was at the window, saying good-bye, and Edward felt a brief, poignant sorrow. He raised his hand, released the brake as he'd been shown, and moved the gear to drive. The Lexus was beginning to move when he remembered to look, saw motors approaching, stabbed the brake, stalled the car. A rueful smile at Hector. Then he ran through the drill again and got properly into the street.

He braked for the first light too soon and too violently, and at the second, too lightly and too late, but by some confluence of grace and luck, he negotiated the main street and got himself up onto the bypass, wide and blessedly nearly empty of traffic. True, he was unclear about how fast he should go. Forty seemed very quick to him, but when three cars and a truck screamed by him, he realized this was not as fast as was needed. Cautiously up to fifty, which, when the bypass ended, seemed way too fast for the many entering and leaving cars, the

sudden turns, the winding road. He settled for thirty-five, ignoring the angry motorists who hovered inches from the back of Señor Obrigon's car and roared past him whenever there was the slightest break in the oncoming traffic.

At first Edward responded by swinging wildly to his right, sending the wheels of the black Lexus jouncing onto the shoulder so that he thought more than once the car would leave the road altogether. *Imagine*, he kept saying to himself. *Imagine the road is water, all smooth. Go gently on the wheel.* A certain desperate inventiveness and the favor of the water gods got him to the interstate, where it was clear neither thirty-five nor fifty was going to be quick enough, and he was again tempted by the idea that all was illusion, that what he did made no difference, that he could stop or leave the road or smash into another motor and be left no worse off. But then he remembered Hector's swollen, bleeding face, and the sound of metal meeting flesh and knew he could not risk the experiment.

*Think instead of SurferKlub outings, of a board rigged with a sail, of speeding before the wind, of flying into the low red sun.* The window on the driver's side was open and the rush of air with his increased speed aided the illusion of flying across the water miraculously shimmering ahead of him. He touched the brake nervously, knowing this was not a motor for liquid, but the other cars surged forward and, however distinct the water was, the cars never left dry land. An optical illusion, heat borne, one he could use. He was on the water, running a solar full out, a storm behind him, wind whistling around his ears, motors with their fumes long gone, trucks vanished, the CC and the dike appearing like a mirage from the marshland. He was there, he was almost there, he could smell the brackish waters of the marsh, hear a heron overhead in the evening sky, feel the way the solar shuddered in a sudden current or a strong cross wind: home. Suddenly red lights in front of him, a horn behind. Edward hit the gas, saw the lights racing back toward him and found the brake, halting with a swerve and a jounce just inches from the rear fender of a sizeable white truck embellished with a design of colossal cabbages, green beans, and strawberries. He wasn't home; he was almost at the bridge to Ancient Hartford and there was some sort of tie up.

As if aware of his uncertainties, the car sat juddering and shaking like an overheated animal. When they were finally able to crawl forward a few yards, the engine stalled. Restart, hitch forward. It was an accident, he saw at last, with two of the sinister-looking troopers with the shiny boots and broad brimmed hats directing traffic. Edward hoped they would not ask for documents and was again tempted by the sight of the river. He could step out of the car, dodge around the other motors and head straight for the water, for the river and the willows he could see along the bank. In his nervousness about the troopers, he was distracted from his struggles with the car, and he was free of the tie up and racing across the bridge before he realized he was unclear about his route.

Instant nausea. The guard rails wavered, even the river seemed alien, caught as it was between the towers lining both banks. He followed the traffic, too uncertain of his steering to switch lanes, and found himself at a traffic light off the interstate. He glanced away from the road to the list of streets he had copied down at Hector's dictation \_ Wylyys, that's what he was looking for. He missed one turn and had to circle a block, narrowly missing a cyclist and cutting off another car at a light. He was on the verge of stopping, just stopping, when he saw the white towers of the hospital, and, after many false starts and a wrong turn onto a one way street \_ as a pedestrian, he had scarcely noticed such restrictions \_ he found himself on Maple Street in light traffic, the world solid, the car reasonably responsive, though he had some problems with smooth braking and was inclined to go over the edge of curbs on turns. Not bad, though, and he was beginning to see the appeal of motors when he turned onto the street with the garage. Two blocks, just two blocks; he slowed down instinctively, fearful of jeopardizing his almost certain success, and spotted the yellow tape festooned on the fence and across the drive before he signaled to turn in. What was this?

Nowhere close to park. Edward drove around the block and then again, in the other direction in order to seize a parking spot on the opposite side of the street. He got out, his legs trembling with strain and his shirt soaked with sweat. *Police Line, Do Not Cross* was repeated in thick black letters down the length of the tape. Of course, the shots, the man

screaming from the grease pit, who knows what else? Edward knew that he could hardly leave the car on the street. But while the back would be locked, he could pull into the drive, indicating to those who knew such things that Señor Obrigon's black Lexus was under the protection of powerful forces best appeased. The sliding gate had been left as usual partially open to allow access to the apartment and to Juan-Jesús, who did mysterious bits of business in the office after hours.

Edward crossed the street and slid the gate back a few feet, then a few feet more \_ that seemed right. Back to the car, which he now saw was under observation by a couple of women on a second story porch, by a gaggle of knowing looking kids on skateboards and chopper bikes hitched up like a bad pair of pants, and by a phlegmatic gent with a dark face and a six pack, surveying the world from his front step. Edward gave them a wave and a smile which he hoped was convincing before restarting the car. His angle was wrong, that was the first thing. The only parking space had been almost directly across from the drive, and, though in theory Edward knew motors could back up, he felt reluctant to put his knowledge into practice. Round the block again, the shorter way this time, so that he was approaching from the garage side of the road. All good, no oncoming traffic, so he'd be able to swing out wide, as he now saw was going to be needed, to clear the posts.

He misjudged the gap and the angle the first time. There was nothing for it but to risk the R on the gear box and slide back into the street. A horn somewhere nearby caused Edward to throw the gear back into drive just as a boy balanced on the rear wheel of his bike zoomed across the sidewalk in front of him. Edward lifted his foot, missed the brake, jerked the wheel; there was a clank on the left fender as it touched the rear of the bike and spun the boy howling onto the cement, followed by a violent scraping and crunching as the car's whole right quarter panel made contact with the post and the fence. Trailing a length of police tape, the Lexus rolled forward well into the drive before Edward got it stopped. He turned the key, threw open the door, felt the car rolling, and with a frantic grab, found the brake.

“Are you all right?” he called to the boy, who had a nasty scrape on one bare calf. He’d gotten his bike upright, ready to leave \_ and probably would have \_ if the neighbors, who, Edward was sure, had kept their ears closed during the mysterious noises of the morning, had not suddenly turned officious. *Carlos will have to see a doctor. He might have broken something. Where was the insurance card? And your license?* This to Edward. *Anyone can see you can’t drive. And, most ominously, Isn’t that Señor Obrigon’s car?*

Edward defended himself as vigorously as he could, while Carlos, a light brown skinned boy with eyes between blue and green and long thick, starlet’s eyelashes, put on an increasingly pathetic look and allowed the women to fuss over his scraped leg. *I was going so slowly. Everyone on the street could see I was trying to pull in \_ you were all watching. You saw the boy came right in front of me.* The volume rose all round; content to be the center of attention, the treacherous Carlos began to snivel, and things had progressed as far as threats to summon the police, before Edward had the inspiration to say he would go get his license. He had left it in his jacket. “Yes, yes, all the documents,” he said.

“Insurance card?” the six pack owner asked. “Better bring your insurance card.”

Edward assured them that he would. He locked the car, keys inside, as he went by. “See, I’m not going any where.” A smile back to them. He ignored another length of warning tape to climb the stair to the second floor, stripped a third tape off the door and entered the apartment. He grabbed the heavy plastic carrier that he had brought for his extra pants and shirts, stuck his toothbrush, comb and sandals on top, lifted a paperback copy of *Petersen’s Field Guide to Eastern Birds*, and after a quick look around, went straight to the toilet window and pulled out the screen. There was just a three or four foot drop to a shed roof below, and Edward figured that, while the neighbors were watching the stair, he could get himself a few blocks away and out of sight.

