

Why I Love Cheerwine (or What About Henry?)

In the neighborhood where Henry lived, automobiles were often put out to pasture in overgrown backyards, suspended over patches of sun-starved, brown grass, or higgledy-piggledy on one block or two, wherever they were left, staring abjectly into space like pensioners on a parkbench. They rarely moved, just stayed there like that, remembering the good old days, Henry thought, days of speed and love and shine, when all their parts worked (or when they had all their parts). Sometimes he touched them gently as he walked by, speaking softly to them, thinking it would help them to know someone cared. "Nice shine you have today," he said, letting his hand fall along the hood of a rusty old Buick from grille to windshield. "Take care of yourself."

Henry liked how one backyard lapped over another, making for a sense of community, if you will, where folk like him, harmless enough, could roam free, take shortcuts, and admire backyard additions from time to time. Today, like every day, he was taking the backyard beeline back from Elam, from the 7-11, where he went to buy a Cheerwine. Henry paused for a moment by the McCaffrey's garage and turned the bottle of Cheerwine up to the sky and took a long draw of the deep red liquid, letting it flood his mouth. Bringing it down again, he said "that's good. . . damn, that's good," making a mental note to check his supply when he got home.

He stopped and leaned down to pet the Griffin's dog, Bozo, a mixed lab-shepherd-terrier who badly needed a bath, his matted fur indecorously laying in tangles in multiple places. Grif had hit Bozo one time too many in the head with a rolled-up newspaper. "Poor Bozo. What's up today, Bozo?" And there he sat, looking up at Henry with his best nobody home look, tongue out, panting, eyes searching Henry's eyes for a response. "Aw, I know what you want, you rascal." Henry brought his Cheerwine bottle down and poured a bit into the dog's open mouth. Bozo lapped it greedily. "You the only dog I know likes Cheerwine, Bozo. You're smart. You're no dummy." Henry gave Bozo a pat, and another, stroking his head for a moment, and walked on across the Griffin's backyard, whistling a song to himself, something sprightly and hopeful, Bozo tagging along expectantly behind.

As he walked through the angle-high grass, Henry remembered Josie, Josie Griffin, the little blond-haired girl with the eyes that flashed and the downright foul mouth, that teaser Josie-miss-big-mouth Griffin. He could hear her now -- "Hennry, you retard, you nut-case, you weirdo. Don't you come near me, Henry, go on back home Henry -- yabbering and jabbering, just being a regular pest. But that was a long time ago, Henry thought, and Josie grew up and moved away, and when she came home on that rare occasion, driving her shiny convertible, she wouldn't even return Henry's waves or smiles. Oh, the heck with Josie Griffin, Henry thought to himself. And yet, he stopped for a moment, the wind catching the seat on Grif's rusted old swing-set, and he remembered Josie laughing there, just a little thing, as he pushed her higher and higher into the sky,

the sun catching her hair and making it shimmer, her yelling all the time faster, Henry, faster, and giggling on and on. Henry shook his head at that. "I'm getting old Bozo, just goin' on like that, remembering things. I'm going home."

As he turned the corner of Grif's house and made for the street, following the cracked front sidewalk of the house, Henry looked down the street to where it dead-ended in a vacant lot, the power plant barely visible through the woods, and his mind wandered again. He was on a sled this time, careening down an icy hill, with kids crying go, Henry, go. There was fire too, a big roaring bonfire, and just then Henry's head hurt and like a curtain dropping the day dream ended. He felt a wetness on this bare leg. . . "Bozo, go on home, boy! You can't be coming with me now." Well, maybe he was a little harsh, he thought. He got that way sometimes when his head hurt. A dejected Bozo started to slink away. "Aw, alright, one more sip." Henry sat down this time, sticking the bottle right in Bozo's mouth, him lapping up the drink. Then Henry took the bottle and poured it over Bozo's head. "I hereby baptize you Bozo Griffin, in the name of L.D. Peeler, Salisbury, and Carolina Beverage." The cherry liquid ran down Bozo's ears and into his face. His tongue lashed out, trying to catch every drop of it. "There, now it's official. You and me -- we're brothers now. Once a week, we'll break bread together, just like in church, you and me having bread and wine, Cheerwine. But you definitely ain't going to any church. Now, go on home."

Henry thought to himself that that Mr. L.D. Peeler must have been an unqualified genius. He read that Mr. L.D. Peeler invented Cheerwine right there in the basement of his grocery store. A man with a dream, that Mr. L.D. Peeler.

One night at home, Henry pulled out the 1999 Rand McNally Road Atlas and found Salisbury, North Carolina. It took him awhile. He remembered looking at the small dot on the map that was supposed to be Salisbury for a long, long time, with all the squiggly red, blue, and black lines going through and around it. It was beautiful, and confusing too. He couldn't figure out why such a famous place would be so small. He imagined Mr. L.D. Peeler's house. Must be a big one, Henry thought, with a Cheerwine drink machine in every room, little ladies in gray outfits with aprons on bringing a bottle of the red ambrosia (his Mama's term, not his own) out whenever you wanted it, whenever you called. Yes, Mr. Henry, they'd say, if he visited. Two drinks Mr. Henry? Yes, certainly Mr. Henry, as many as you want Mr. Henry. Henry imagined Mr. L.D. Peele, still working away in the basement, perfecting the already perfect formula for Cheerwine. He'd say "Come on in Henry. Can you hold that Henry? Glad you could come, Henry, really glad you. . ."

"You plannin' on moving in?"

"Huh -- oh, hello Grif. Just messing with Bozo. That's a good dog you got there." Henry looked up to see his neighbor Vince Griffith, staring down at him, his undershirt riding up on his fat belly, a cigarette drooping from his mouth.

"Ain't worth a lick, Henry. And stop giving him that Cheerwine. Bad for his teeth."

"Nah, it ain't bad for his teeth, Grif. Good for fleas, too."

"You're crazy, Henry. You get on home. I got things to do and I gotta give this dog a bath. He's got something sticky all over him."

"Yeah, OK Grif. Be seeing you."

Henry stood up and walked on down the steps, whistling to himself, something sprightly and hopeful, with just a touch of melancholy, mumbling under his breath, "Crazy? I'd rather be crazy than a slob." It was rhythmic, the song, his arm swinging the now-empty Cheerwine bottle back and forth in time, back and forth, his feet slapping pavement now, as he headed for home.

As he turned into the drive of his house, Henry stopped whistling and started singing. He sang hymns, mostly, and today he thought to himself that given his newly formed bond with Bozo, "Blest Be the Ties That Bind" would be appropriate. The song had the additional reputation of being his Mama's favorite hymn, particularly that verse about "When we asunder part, it gives us inward pain, but we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again." He didn't know what "asunder" meant, but it didn't sound good. He stopped to check his mailbox and, finding nothing, he broke into song, his pure tenor voice ringing out. When he reached "and hope to meet again," he felt his throat tighten and he sang softer, and then he stopped just short of the door. There, pinned to the door, was a manilla envelope. He pulled it off the screen where it was attached with Scotch tape, turned it over and looked at its front. "Department of Social Services," it said, in the corner, and there, right in the middle, it said "HENRY DAVID ASKEW." The back of the letter was sealed up tight, with an extra piece of tape over the flap.

Henry raised the envelope to his nose and took a good whiff. "Hmmm. Smells important." He imagined an office somewhere with a man leaning confidently back in his desk chair with a good looking secretary, like Josie Griffin, maybe, writing down what he said, just like in the old Perry Mason reruns. He grimaced. That made him worried, thinking about lawyers and courtrooms and big impenetrable books stacked up on the desks and men arguing over things he didn't understand, long strings of words punctuated by a "Henry" here and a "Henry" there. "Just my luck it's some lawyer," he said out loud. He stuffed the envelope in the pocket of his shorts and opened the screen door and front door, letting the screen door make a whack-whack-whack on the doorpost as he dropped it.

He never tired of walking into his house, from outside to inside. He always marveled at how different it was inside from how it was outside, and how he even *felt* different inside. Outside it's hot, inside it's cool; outside he smelled mown grass and hot steamy asphalt, inside he smelled an old smell, slightly musty, and yet somehow reassuring. Henry remembered the time he got the tape measure and measured and figured out that the walls were only around 12 inches thick, and he marveled that such differences could exist within 12 inches of each other. He shook his head and smiled. "I got too much time on my hands, Sam, too much time," as he reached down and plucked his elderly tabby cat from the den chair, stroking its fur, eliciting a gravelly vibrato of a purr. Walking to the fireplace mantle, he pulled the empty Cheerwine bottle out of his pocket and added it to the row of bottles already there. There were Cheerwine bottles on the

mantle, stacked in cases in the corner, filling the basement downstairs, and lining his bedroom wall. Henry gave up counting them, though sometimes he tried to, just for something to do.

Sitting down in a brown recliner, he situated himself so as to cover the rip in the seat of the chair. He made a mental note that he needed to get that fixed, though he couldn't figure out how to get it fixed. Leaning back, Sam rolling on his back, eyes closed, he took the envelope out of his pocket and laid it on the table next to the recliner, smoothing it out where it was wrinkled. "HENRY DAVID ASKEW," it said, and "Department of Social Services." He leaned back, closing his eyes, and before long his chest was rising, and falling, rising, and falling, Sam oblivious to his motion, Henry's arms dropping to his sides languidly, a slight snore starting, the rays of sun streaming through the back door window getting longer and longer until they were gone, darkness wrapping Henry's house, a darkness with only a sliver of a moon.

Mr. Askew, can you stand up please?"

Henry quickly rose to his feet -- too quickly, maybe, because his legs felt quivery, like jello, and for a minute he thought he'd fall. Looking down at his feet, he realized to his surprise that he had no shoes, and his lily white feet stuck out of the ends of his pants legs. Looking up he saw an enormous podium about 20 feet away from him, only much, much higher than him. There was a person behind the podium who had no face, just an enormous mouth on a white sphere, like the

face had been erased, and sounds were emanating from it, angry sounds. And he scared Henry.

"Is there something the matter, Mr. Askew? Are you listening to me?"

Henry's head began to throb. He put his hands on each side of his head to try and stop the pounding. Looking down as he did it, he noticed the table he was seated at was like those you find in a preschool, and his chair the kind little kids sit in as they play with puzzles and color, the kind Mrs. Holshouser had in her room at the Center.

Mr. Askew? MR. ASKEW?

Henry looked up, and when he did he saw Cheerwine bottles, no kidding, cases and cases of bottles flying past him and that mouth, that enormous mouth shouting something that sounded like gibberish at him, all the time getting bigger and bigger. He felt hands on him, squeezing him, shaking him, hurting him.

"No, leave me alone. Leave me alone. He began to struggle to get free, thrashing around wildly. "I won't go. I won't. You can't make me. . ."

Henry woke to find himself in complete darkness. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. Listening, he thought he heard a clock ticking loudly, only he realized it was his heart beating out an exaggerated rhythm. He was breathing heavy, his chest heaving, his body drenched with sweat. Sam was oblivious, still

asleep in his lap. "Oh, Sam, that was a doozie, a real bad dream." Sam twitched a bit, enjoying some nocturnal feline fantasy. Henry wondered what kind of things cats dreamed of beyond the usual mice, food, climbing trees, being chased. Whatever they dreamed, it couldn't be as crazy as the things he dreamed. At least that's what he figured.

Carefully laying Sam on the sofa, he walked into the kitchen, turned on the light and opened the bread drawer. He unwrapped the bread and laid two slices Merita Enriched Bread on the counter. Reaching for the Jiffy peanut butter, he unscrewed the lid and, with a dull knife, began to spread big globs of it on a piece of the bread. He felt his body calming as he began normal routines, leaving the dream somewhere back there. Henry thought to himself that peanut butter must be one of the finest foods ever developed. "It'll stick to your insides," Henry's mother used to say. Henry smiled at that. He figured he could eat peanut butter sandwiches for every meal, and sometimes he did. He tried to interest Sam in peanut butter, but he wouldn't touch the stuff. In that uppity cat way he merely sniffed at it and walked away with a disinterested amble as if he was saying "I can't believe you eat such stuff, Henry. It's beneath me." Henry liked Sam OK, he guessed, but for an animal that was supposed to be intelligent, he figured he sure was dumb. Any person, and beast, who didn't like peanut butter and Cheerwine *must* not be too smart.

Finishing his sandwich, he opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a new bottle of Cheerwine. For a moment, he just looked at the row upon row of Cheerwine bottles lining the shelves, and he felt better, secure, just knowing that

he wouldn't run out anytime soon. "I suspect in Salisbury everybody's got all the Cheerwine they need," Henry thought. Why Henry imagined a swimming pool filled with the bubbly red liquid, and him on a float in the midst of it. He liked thinking about such things. He called it his "L.D. Peele" moment, because he imagined that Mr. Peele lived that way, and inventor that he was, he for sure was busy developing other uses for Cheerwine.

Sitting back down in the brown recliner, his eyes rested once again on the envelope. He set his Cheerwine on it. "Do you mind if I use you for a coaster, Department of Social Services?, he said out loud to no one in particular. Sam looked up at him from where he reclined on the sofa. Henry thought t to himself that it'd been a long time since anything good came to him in a white envelope. There was a time when bills came to him, papers with numbers on them that confused him. He'd stare at them, not knowing what to do. Then the lady from the DSS, Mrs. Hightower, came and grabbed them all up off the kitchen table where they were littered and took them all away. He never saw one again. No one else wrote him. Occasionally he'd get a catalog. He liked to look at the pictures.

Sighing heavily, he reached for the letter, tore the end off, and pulled the letter out, carefully unfolding it and laying it in his lap. As he read, the words began swimming off the page -- words like "inform," "terminate," "move," "no choice," and that last phrase, "must reluctantly . . . institutionalize you." He

couldn't focus. He put the paper down in his lap, and laid his head back in the chair, remembering green walls and locked doors and his mother crying.

Bridgette kicked the tire of her red 82 Mustang convertible. "Damn car. I shoulda rented one back in Charlotte. This one is a piece of junk, you hear that, a piece of junk!" With that she kicked the tire again, only she missed and hit the fender, scuffing her red pumps. "Now look at that," she said to herself, muttering a few other obscenities under her breath, glaring at the car, hands on her hips. Looking up, she saw a sign, a green, cheery looking sign with flowers on it, announcing "Welcome to Rose Gardens, Rose Capital of the Southeast." Very creative, she thought. Very, very creative. Probably one dinky flower shop and now it's the "rose capital of the southeast." Sure it is.

Not a car in sight, either. Reaching in and taking her Louis Viutton knock-off purse and the keys from the ignition, she slammed the passenger side door, rattling the car with the impact, and, throwing the purse over her shoulder and tossing her platinum blond hair back, she began walking down the side of the road. The shoulder was still damp from the showers the day before, so when she looked down at her feet she saw the red shoes were taking on mud. Bending over she pulled them off and in her best overhand backyard softball throw pitched them into the front seat of the car, deciding to proceed on barefoot.

It had been one helluva day, Bridgette thought. When she got to work that morning at the Renovare Spa and Hair Salon, she'd no more come through the

door than Carmen, the owner, told her to pack her things up and get out. She was fired. Right then. She had a screaming fit right there in front of the customers, calling Carmen every mean and evil name she could summon up, until she saw Ms. Deitweiler's three-year old grand-baby come out from behind her mother and tell Carmen to "go to hell." That brought her up short. Where, after all, would a three-year old be getting such language? She managed to get her things out of the Renovare Spa and Hair Salon only to trip over the curb on her way out to the car, spilling all her beauty products and skinning her knee. And now this. She lit out from town for a drive to clear her head, only to have the thing quit on her outside of the metropolis of Rose Gardens. What kind of name for a town is that, anyway, Bridgette thought. "I'm SO MAD," she said out loud. A crow on the Rose Gardens sign looked at her as she passed. "What are you looking at? Mind your own business!" Stooping, she scooped up a rock and threw it at the eavesdropping bird. With a *ping* the rock bounced off the sign, the crow fluttering away, due west, in the direction of town.

She began to sweat, trickles of water running uncomfortably down her back in the 90 degree heat. Dropping her pace a bit, she pulled off her maroon colored jacket, leaving her in a white tank top and tight, low-cut Calvin Klein jeans, her best. She figured she'd attract some attention, dressed as she was, then reconsidered, given the *kind* of attention she might attract in these parts. It was a moot point, anyway, because she was alone, alone on the road with nothing but row upon row of corn stretching as far as she could see in both directions.

Her feet hurt too. Tossing the shoes was probably not a wise move on her part. She considered returning to the car but seeing that it was far behind her now, she decided to press on toward town. What was that her Mama once said? -- "Honey, you ain't got the sense God gave an orangutan, but you got the looks." After barely graduating from high school, Bridgette enrolled in the Laurinburg School of Cosmetology, figuring that working at a salon would keep in touch with the latests fashions, and from there it would be a short move to modeling and then acting. Because *that* was her goal -- acting. Maybe "Desperate Housewives," or "Sex in the City," figuring that she'd had some training in both these already.

With that thought she began to walk faster. The thought of sex and housewifing made her think of Vinny Torella and their brief but torrid marriage. Torrid in more ways than one. They broke things. They fought. They yelled. They made up. They broke things. They fought. And that was just during the first week of the marriage. After three months of marital discord, they were both exhausted. Vinny moved into the trailer with his brother Pete, leaving Bridgette alone in the Spring Street apartment, the one above the Benson's garage. After the breakup, her days alternated between work at Renovare Beauty Parlor and Spa, and hanging out with her best friend Lily, drinking Cheerwine at Franklin Drug's soda shop, a true relic that place.

"Honey, don't worry about Vinny. He's a bum, a real jerk," said Lily. "You can do better." And yet her breakup with Vinny was the first crack in her plan to take on Hollywood, the first indication that she was not in complete control of her future. And now this. She had no job, no car, and no husband. Bridgette

stopped for moment, catching her breath. Looking back down the blacktop, she could barely see her car now. Turning back to face town, tears pooled in her eyes. "Get a grip, girl," she said aloud. Get over it. Putting her head down, she took a deep breath and marched on toward town.

After a few more minutes of steady walking, she saw the green standard issue City Limits sign: Rose Gardens. Beyond that, she saw a Texaco gas station, right on the edge of a short strip of shops -- many vacant, some closed this early. A couple of greasy looking guys were milling around, one sitting on a bench in front of the open door of the station, another hosing down the lot. Bridgette walked up to the one on the bench. He watched her approach. When she got closer, she saw that he was probably 40ish, with slicked back hair, a toothpick in his mouth, and greasy dungarees. He looked up. "Well," he said. "Well now," he said again. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm Bridgette, Bridgette. . . uh. . . Renovare. And I've got a problem."

"What kinda name is that?"

"It's French," said Brigette. "That's R-E-N-O-V-A-R-E. Renovare."

Brigette didn't know why she did that -- lie, that is. She found that she did it a lot, and about the most trivial of matters. But, come to think of it, she did like the way it sounded. Ren-o-vare. She could just see it on a movie marquee, or in the credits running at the end of the TV series: "BRIGETTE RENOVARE."

"Well now. I could tell you weren't from these parts, anyway. Name's J.D. And that's Squirt," he said, pointing to a scrappy blond-headed fellow still washing the driveway with the hose. "Now, what's the problem?"

"My car. It quit on me about two miles down the road. I walked. I had to. I don't know what happened. It just quit."

"Well, just sit down. I'll hook it up and bring it in. We'll check it out." And with that, J.D. stood up, slowly stretched, and walked in a stumbling gait toward the aging tow truck located at the corner of the lot. Without turning, he yelled "Hey, how will I know the car?"

"It's red, a red convertible."

Again, without turning, J.D. raised his hand to acknowledge her, mumbling under his breath, "Figures."

She sat down, leaning her head back against the shop window, closing her eyes for a few moments just to rest her mind. But she couldn't. At this rate, she wouldn't reach Salisbury before dark. Heck, she wasn't sure when she'd make it. She'd have to call Francine. Francine was the only kin she had nearby, as she was an only child. Francine was always telling her to come for a visit. Now was as good a time as any, she figured, what with all her troubles it was time to get out of town for awhile.

Francine used to visit her when she was young, and Brigitte recalled fighting her, tooth and nail, over the slightest of things. They were like that -- fast

friends one minute, sworn enemies the next. She remembered her puckish expression and short fat legs, always trailing her when they were running around the farm. But Francine was smart. She got the brains. She went to college. She got brains, and I got looks, Brigitte said to herself, looking down at her wrinkled shirt, wet with sweat. "Only it ain't doing me much good today," she said out loud.

"What ain't doing you no good?"

"Huh?" She turned to see Squirt standing in the door of the office, drinking a soda, smiling at her. "Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. I just meant I don't have time for this." Squirt looked vaguely familiar and was possibly fairly handsome underneath all the grease.

"J.D.'ll fix you up. He's the best mechanic in Rose Gardens."

"Yeah, the only mechanic in Rose Gardens."

"That too."

"So, what kind of name is that -- Renovare?"

Brigitte just rolled her eyes and put her head in her hands.

While Henry slept fitfully, his legs splayed over the bed where he had fallen in his clothes, momentous things were happening in the world outside.

Sam was perched on the window sill outside Henry's room, ears alert, eyes flashing the moon's suggestive glow. In his cat-sized soul, Sam could feel it -- the change coming on, something wafting in on the breeze, a blanket of otherworldly change, not evil but altogether mysterious. Sam sniffed at the air, whiskers twitching, intuitively sensing an inarticulable, slight seismic shift in space and time.

In Henry's dream there was Josie Griffin again, laughing, blond hair flapping in the wind as Henry chased her round and round her house, and then, there was Josie chasing him round the house, him running in his stumbling clumsy way, only when he looked back he saw it wasn't Josie at all but a white coated, stern Mrs. Hightower who had him by the collar, saying "Take these, Henry, now, you'll feel better, Henry," with Henry trying to pull away only to find he was paralyzed, unable to move away. "Now, now, Henry," said Mrs. Hightower.

Henry woke to find himself alone in the dark, his hands clenched, his breathing labored. He said two words: "God. Help." It took a moment before he even realized that he had said them aloud, the sound of his own voice seeming to echo off the bare walls of the bedroom. 5:15 read the clock. Henry lifted the window shade and rested his nose on the cool glass of the window pane. Two yellowish cat eyes stared back, startling him until he realized it was Sam -- Sam the mystic, the seer, the cat who knew all but said little. That was what Henry's Mama used to say. "Mama, what's 'mystic' mean?" he'd say. And she'd just say, "Special, Henry, just special. Sort of like you, Henry." Henry never did quite

make the connection between himself -- a pale-skinned two legged being, and Sam, a furry four legged creature much given to sleeping and eating. And yet when he looked in Sam's eyes, he knew what to do. Then he knew what he *had* to do.

Standing up, Henry switched on the light and quickly dressed -- jeans, t-shirt, comfortable shoes. Then he reached for his backpack and stuffed in an extra change of clothes. Finally, he reached up to the top of his chest of drawers and carefully brought down a wooden box, handmade just for him. Opening it, he pulled out all the money inside, counting about \$400.00 and stuffing it in his pocket. It was a large part of what Henry had saved from the check he received each month.

Turning off the light, Henry walked down the hall, noticing in the moonlight each and every picture on the walls, as if he'd never seen them before. There was the family photo: Mother, Father (who he did not know), and himself, all smiling awkwardly against a fake forest backdrop. He paused for a moment and looked at his mother smiling, and he smiled. "I have to go now," he thought. "Time's a'wastin'."

Opening the front door, he let the screen shut behind him, this time letting it shut slowly. He jumped the three steps from the porch in one stride and brushed against the ankle high grass as he strode for the road. Looking back, he saw Sam sitting on the porch now, watching him, wise cat eyes. "Sam, I'm going. You'll be OK now." Sam just turned and walked away. Of course he'd be OK.

It was about 20 minutes later when J.D. rolled into the driveway with the red convertible, front wheels raised off the ground as it were begging God for mercy. Bringing it to a stop, J.D. jumped down from the cab, walked around the wrecker, and flipped the lever letting the car slowly return to earth. He spat on the ground and shook he head. Brigitte knew that couldn't be good.

In a few minutes he had the vehicle unhitched and, along with Squirt's help, pushed it the remaining few feet into the single bay of the garage. Then J.D. turned and walked slowly over to Brigitte, head down, chewing a toothpick as he went.

"It's gonna take awhile. Needs a new transmission."

How long is awhile?," said Brigitte.

"Three, four, maybe five days."

"Now what am I supposed to do?" Brigitte just glared at him. She thought I'm stuck in this hick town with very little money, and no way out. "Damn."

"Don't get mad at me, lady. I can't help it. . . . So you want me to work on it?"

"Of course I do. What else can I do?" Brigitte stood up and looked down Main Street. You have a motel here?

"Well, not a proper motel, but Thelma Burgaw rents some rooms. You can try her."

"How do I find her?"

"You see that building that says "God's Holy Tabernacle Church of the Second Coming."

"The what?"

"The church right there."

"That's a church?"

"People say so. I haven't been. You go right at that corner, and at the end of the block her house'll be on the right. You can't miss it. There's a sign that says "Thelma's Boarding House." Thelma's a good cook, and she's cheap."

"Thanks." Brigitte walked over to the car, reached into the back seat, and retrieved her red shoes from where they landed from her throw. Then she popped the trunk, pulled her suitcase out, and, straightening her shirt began walking toward the street, rolling he suitcase behind her.

"Hey. . . you want a ride over there?"

"No, I'll walk. Just fix the car, OK?"

J.D. just waved her off. He sat down on the single step of the entrance to the office of the station, and lit a cigarette, taking slow draws of it and exhaling even slower.