

The Country Doctor

GARDNER WAS DROWNING, AND STRANGERS were laying hands on the bones of my forebears. I felt obligated to see that liberties weren't taken with my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and other good, God-fearing ladies, so I put the business on auto pilot and made the drive as if on auto pilot myself.

I viewed the visit as a familial duty, not a sentimental journey. I hadn't been back to Gardner in twenty-five years. I'd always told myself that, with my grandparents dead and their house taken over by obscure cousins-removed, there was nothing to come back for. Soon there would be nothing to come back to. The dam was completed, the waters were rising. Gardner was drowning.

Once in the town, however, I couldn't simply drive to the cemetery. It wouldn't have taken two minutes. Wherever you were in a place the size of Gardner, you weren't far from anywhere else, and now, especially, everything was smaller and closer together than it had seemed when I was a kid. But I found that I had to drive down my grandparents' old street, had to stop in front of what had been their house. I sat with the motor running and stared disconsolately. Throughout my childhood, though I moved wherever the military took my father, my grandparents' house, a big, warm clapboard pile, had remained the center of the world, the universe—home. My earliest memories were of being in that house, surrounded by relatives, loved, safe. Now it sat waiting for the water. My grandfather had been a carpenter, among other things; I could see his shed in back. There had been a vegetable patch back there, too. My grandmother had shelled a lot of peas and snapped a lot of beans from it.

The other houses on the block had once been features of a familiar landscape. Now, curtainless windows gave most of them a look of stupid surprise. One was carefully boarded up, as if the owners fully intended to return. The house next to it looked agape and miserable. Paint hung from it in strips. The owners must have stopped bothering with upkeep when they heard about the dam; finally, they'd just walked away. All but one of the lawns on the block were overgrown. A handful of people still remained, the die-hard element, determined to hold out until the water lapped over their doorsteps, and to keep their yards looking nice in the meantime.

It was three blocks to the cemetery, long blocks for someone dragging an orthopedic shoe. Nevertheless, I told myself. Nevertheless. I turned off the motor, got out of the car. The sun was at zenith. There was no wind. A male chorus of cicadae sang of love's delights to prospective mates. The day felt and sounded exactly like all the summer days I'd spent in Gardner in my childhood. I put my hands in my pockets and started walking, slowly, stunned by the force of the memories crowding in on me. I remembered how my grandmother used to sit in a metal porch chair and, as she put it, have herself a little talk with Jesus while she snapped those beans. Sometimes she sang gospel songs.

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She only ever sang the melodies, but I had been to enough revival meetings to know the words to whatever she sang. Sometimes, hearing her, I'd stop my playing and sing the words while she hummed...

My eyes began to sting. Gardner was drowning.

Around the corner had lived Blanche, who was my grandmother's age and whose relation to me was, then and now, unclear. Someone lived there still—a green station wagon with a dinged-up fender sat in the driveway, and there were curtains in the windows—but Blanche herself was long dead, killed in an automobile accident. I'd liked her a lot. One summer, she had given me the empty coffee can in which I buried my grandmother's dead parakeet Petey. I knew exactly where I'd scooped out Petey's grave and wondered what I might find if I were to open it now. Nothing, probably—at most, a few crumbling shards of coffee-can rust. Tiny little bones dissolve in no time. On

the next block was the crumbling brick shell of Cobb's Corner Market, where I'd sometimes spent my entire weekly stipend, twenty-five cents, on comic books and a Coke. Dime comic books and nickel soft drinks—it had been that long ago, and it was all about to pass forever from sight and memory.

Drowning, drowning...

More vehicles were parked by the cemetery than there were in the whole town. I saw many opened graves—it could have been the day after Resurrection Day. At least a dozen people wearing old clothes were working among the headstones. I knew in a very broad way what these archeologists were supposed to be doing

here, and I did see individuals sifting dirt through screens or duck-walking around exhumed coffins with tape measures in their hands, but what I mostly saw looked like just a lot of hot, dirty shovel work with nothing scientific about it. I came upon two youngish men at the end of the first row of graves. On the ground between them was a new coffin. Its lid was open, and I saw that it was empty. One of the men nodded a hello at me.

“How’s it going?” I said.

“Well,” he said, “it is going.”

I gestured vaguely around. “These’re all my relatives.”

They looked at me as if I’d caught them doing something naughty.

“Well,” said the one who’d spoken before, “we’re taking real good care of everyone, Mister—”

“Riddle.”

The second man pointed away and said, “Most of the Riddle family’s still located over on that side.”

“Yes,” I said, “I know.” I did know; it was all coming back; I could have found the Riddles blindfolded, and the Riches and the Bassetts, too. I had seen both of my maternal grandfather’s parents buried here, then his wife, finally his own self. The first Riches and Bassetts had been laid to rest here in the 1850s; Riddles came along after the war, when a lot of ruined Southerners were moving around and resettling. Relatively speaking, the

concentration of Riddles wasn't great—

Riddles, it once was explained to me, tended to die young and tended also to have wanderlust. My father had been orphaned when he was barely into his teens, and members of his line had come to rest in odd places throughout the South, the West, and as far away as the Coral Sea. The first graveside service I'd attended in the Gardner cemetery was for a young cousin of mine, Kermit, who one summer day had succumbed to the fascination of a fallen power line. The last one was for my grandfather. I nodded at the new coffin. "Who's this for?"

"Whoever," one of the men said. "We try to keep everything together, even the

box somebody was buried in. Some of these old graves, though, you find a few splinters of wood and some rusty nails, nothing you could still call a coffin.”

“Is Doctor Taylor here?”

“He’s somewhere around here.” He looked about and nodded off toward the south end of the cemetery. “I think he’s over that way.”

“Thank you.” The two men seemed glad to see me walk on. When I was a child, I’d sometimes been sent to spend the summer with my grandparents. My grandmother and great-grandmother had visited this cemetery often. Between them they must have known seven out of every ten people buried here. They always brought flowers, and usually they

brought me. They'd move among the graves, place the flowers, murmur secrets to the dead or prayers to Jesus, murmur genealogy to me, life histories, accounts of untimely, often horrific, deaths—most of their anecdotes were imbued with pain and tragedy. Sometimes I was interested and listened. Sometimes I was bored, drowsy from the heat, and instead listened to the cicadae. The sound of those summers was one long insect song, cicadae and honey-bees by day, crickets and mosquitoes by night, punctuated by gospel-piano chords, hands clapping time, voices singing, “I’m gonna have a little talk with Jesus, I’m gonna tell Him all about my trouble...”

It kept coming back, coming back.

It came back as I passed Dr. Sweeny's headstone, which lay in the grass by the edge of the driveway. Nearby, a man wearing a faded plaid shirt was excavating the grave with a shovel. As headstones in this cemetery went, Dr. Sweeny's was pretty fancy, with some decorative cuts and a longer inscription than most. Dr. Chester Sweeny d. June 30, 1900

Erected in respectful memory by those he tended these 30 years Dr. Sweeny was the only doctor, the only Sweeny, and the only non-relative buried in the cemetery. I had been filled with dismay and disbelief the first time I saw his name on that stone. Until that moment,

I'd thought that doctors were immune to sickness and exempt from death. Mammaw, I said to my great-grandmother, whom I'd been trailing past the rows, what kind of a doctor dies, Mammaw? "Honey," she told me, "doctors die just like everybody else. Everybody's got to die. That's why the important thing in life's to be baptized in Jesus's name, so you'll go to heaven when you die." But why, I demanded, do people have to die? She didn't answer, just looked at the stone, and after what was probably only seconds but must have seemed like a whole minute or a full hour to an impatient child, she said, "Old Doc Sweeny. I went to his funeral. I was a girl then. I was nearly as young

then as you are now.” She was in her sixties when she told me this; naturally, I couldn’t think of her as a girl or imagine that she had ever been nearly as young as anybody. “I remember because everybody in the whole valley come for it, and then’s when I met your Pappaw for the first time. He didn’t want nothing to do with me then, but later, well, I changed his mind. But that day everybody come to pay respects to old Doc Sweeny.” Was he as old as you, Mammaw? “Doc Sweeny was as old as Methuselah. Why, my momma, that was your great-great-gran’maw Vannie Bassett, wasn’t even born when he come here. My own daddy made the box to bury him in and druv it here in his

wagon, and a man over to Dawson give this stone. Doc Sweeny was just as poor as everybody else and didn't have no money set aside. Seems like there never was so good a one as him again. He druv his buggy all over, day or night, rain or shine. Not like these doctors we got now. Poor as he was, too, he always had some candy and play-pretties for us littlens in his pockets. I remember him visiting my momma when she was sick, and when he was leaving, he give me a piece of peppermint candy and said, My child, my child. And I was a sassy thing then, just like you, didn't have no more manners'n a pig. Instead of thanking him for the candy, I just said, I ain't neither your child, “ and she had laughed

delightedly at the memory of her own devilishness. Thereafter, throughout the remaining summers of my childhood, Dr. Sweeny occupied a place in my mind as special as the one he occupied in the cemetery. I soon got over his being a dead doctor, but I remained impressed by his anomalous presence in what was effectively an outsized family plot. It suggested to me that he must have been, somehow, one of us. Even now, he had power to fascinate me. Gazing down at his stone, I found myself wondering exactly what he must have done, besides giving candy and cheap toys to children, to so endear himself. Mostly just be there, I guessed, when folks needed a sympathetic ear and a few sugar pills.

Doctors in Sweeny's day had done more nursing than actual doctoring. Much of the nursing was ineffectual, and most of the doctoring was downright savage. There was no Food and Drug Administration to look over a physician's shoulder as he dosed people with God only knew what. Maybe this particular country doctor had won his neighbors' trust and respect simply by not killing inordinate numbers of patients. I tore myself away, moved on, and found Dr. Taylor and a woman squatting in shade at the end of a row. He was strongly built, balding, with a sunburnt face. She had long, reddish-brown hair tied back in a ponytail and was covered with freckles everywhere

that I could see. A map of the graveyard was spread on the ground between them, with numbers and other marks scribbled all over it. None of the graves at this end of the row had been opened yet. I noticed four narrow, squarish stones set into the ground at the feet of two graves identified by a common headstone as those of John Hellman Rich and Julia Anne Rich.

“Doctor Taylor,” I said.

Both of them looked up, and I could tell from his expression that he didn’t recognize me. We had met only briefly, weeks before.

“Doug Riddle,” I said.

“Mister Riddle!” He stood quickly, brushed dirt off his hands, started to

offer to shake, pulled back suddenly. "I don't know if you want to shake hands with me. I've been rooting around in graves all day." He seemed genuinely flustered. He turned to the woman, who had risen with him. "Gertie, this is Doug Riddle. My associate, Gertrude Latham."

"I'm very pleased to meet you," she said. She seemed as ill at ease as he. She had a wonderful accent, German come through the heart of the Deep South.

"Finding out what you came to find out?" I said.

Taylor made an attempt at a smile. "In this line of work, you never know what you'll find out."

“Some people,” I said, meaning mainly my irrepressible Uncle G. A., “called this place Gardner Gardens.”

They looked uncertain, as if unsure they’d heard me right. He ventured to say, “Oh?”

“The planting ground,” I said, then shrugged. “Small-town black humor.”

“Ah. Yes.” Taylor smiled again, more feebly than before, and tried to make up the difference by adding a chuckle, with results that embarrassed everyone. My own smile began to hurt my mouth.

Gertrude Latham went for a save. She nodded toward Julia Anne Rich’s grave and said, “That headstone tells us a great deal about this young woman’s life. Do you know anything about her?”

I glanced at the dates on the stone. Julia Anne Rich had died, age twenty-two, before the turn of the century, when my great-grandparents were children. “I remember the name,” I said, “from when I used to come here as a kid. I thought Julia Anne was a nice name --” I gave Latham an apologetic look “—for a girl’s name. But I don’t know anything about her in particular.”

Latham nodded at the grave again. “Those are her babies there by her feet. Judging from the dates, she lost four of them in a row. The last one may have killed her.”

If this was archeology, I wasn’t impressed. I felt sure I could have deduced as much from the information

on the stones. Childbirth in the nineteenth century was perilous. I said, "There're more babies and mothers buried here than anything else. Lots of children's graves, too. Children used to die of everything. After World War Two, though, hardly anyone except old people got buried here. All the young people went into the service or moved to Evansville to work in the P-forty-seven factory. And they just never came back."

The two archeologists were staring at me. There was something like admiration in Taylor's expression. I felt a sheepish sort of pleasure and could not help smiling as he asked me, "Are you Gardner's official historian?"

I shook my head. "But there was a

time when I must've known the name on every last one of these headstones. I got to be a whiz at subtraction from figuring out by the dates how old people were when they died. And in the forties people did start going away and not coming back. My father went into the service and stayed in. And somebody in the family did go build P-forty-sevens, too. There were framed prints of the things hanging in a spare bedroom at my grandparents' house for years. Official prints, with the Republic Aircraft logo."

"Mister Riddle," Taylor said, "we could use your knowledge to interpret this site. I'd appreciate it if you'd consider letting us interview you sometime."

“You’d be what’s known in anthropology as an informant,” said Latham. Informant didn’t have the ring to it that official historian did, but I was flattered all the same. There’s little to compare with having people hang on everything you say. Anyway, I told myself, maybe Gardner was too small for a full-fledged historian. Nothing had ever happened here—nothing that mattered to anybody besides Riddles, Riches, and Bassetts, harvest time, tent meetings, weddings, funerals, somebody’s barn being raised or burning down. No one famous had ever come from Gardner, or to it, for that matter. And it struck me then, with unexpected and shaming clarity, that I’d never made

the effort to bring my own children or grandchildren to this place, that I should have been murmuring genealogy and tragic personal histories to them all their young lives, teaching them about family and the continuity of life. I should have been telling them, “Every one of your ancestors lived and suffered and sometimes all but swam up waterfalls like salmon to make sure you’d be here today and the family would continue and the thread be unbroken. They were brave and wonderful people, and if you don’t believe it, just look here at your great-aunt, your great-something Julia Anne, who lost four babies one right after another, which isn’t even a record, and it must’ve seemed to her like the worst

thing in the world to lose the first one but then she carried three more, suffered crushing loss every time, died a probably painful and possibly protracted death trying to deliver the last one--” And, “Doug,” my wife would’ve said by then, “Dad,” my daughter would’ve said by now, each with that same disapproving furrow between her eyebrows. I do get carried away at times. I blinked the thoughts away and looked at the two scientists. “So,” I said, “what’re you finding out?”

Latham said, “We never really know what we’ve found until we’ve finished an excavation and, uh, put all the pieces of the puzzle together.”

“Is there a puzzle here?”

She essayed a smile. It was the best smile any of us had managed thus far.

“There’s always a puzzle.”

“And you always find a solution?”

Her smile got even better. “This is what you’d call quick and dirty archeology. We have to excavate by shovel, get as much information out as we can, as fast as we can, and move on. We don’t have a lot of time. All we can do is figure out what the person was buried with and measure the bones. And we try to look for evidence of disease that would show up in the skeletal material.”

“Is there evidence of a lot of disease?”

Everything suddenly felt awkward

again. I could tell by the look she gave Taylor that she regretted her last statement.

I looked over my shoulder and saw Roy Rich's grave right where I'd left it decades before. "Here's a puzzle for you," I said. "What does this stone tell you about Roy Rich's life?"

Latham glanced at it. "He died at age fifteen."

"He was lucky to live that long," I said. "Or maybe not so lucky. I remember Roy. He was deformed. Not 'differently abled,' not even 'physically handicapped.'

Deformed. His sister Betty, too." I pointed to Betty's headstone, next to his. "She died at age twelve. Those two had

everything in the world wrong with them. I guess you'll see for yourself when you open the coffins."

The two scientists were silent. It was very hot, and sweat gleamed on Taylor's pate and beaded on Latham's forehead and upper lip. I felt slimy inside my clothing. The cicadae would not shut up.

At last, Taylor said, stiffly. "We'll write a report when we finish the excavation. If you like, I'll send you a copy."

"I'm sure it'd be much too technical for me. Tell me something about my ancestors that I can go home and tell my wife."

Taylor looked about as unhappy as any human being I'd seen lately. Latham

looked as if she were trying to wish somebody away—me, of course. The more ill at ease they became, the pushier I felt. Maybe it was the gene for devilishness, handed down from Mammaw.

“It doesn’t necessarily have to be something nice,” I said, “if that’s what’s holding you back. Nothing you tell me can be any more horrible than some of the things Granny and Mammaw told me.” I looked over the rows. A truck pulled away from the gate, bearing some of my dead away to strange soil. “Doctor Taylor, when we met last month, you said this ground’s full of history, and this was a one-time-only chance to get at it.”

“Yes,” he said, slowly—warily, I thought. “Yes, I did say that.”

“This is the last time I’ll ever see this place. Living or dead, everyone’s being scattered. I know it’s true I’ll be able to visit my relatives’ new graves over in Dawson, but they’ll be, they’ll seem out of place over there. This is where my grandparents and great-grandparents were buried. This little spot in the road was their home. It was my home, too, for a while. Next year, it’ll all be gone, the whole valley’ll be under water. It’ll be like Gardner never existed. So please indulge me. I’m not going to gum up the works for you, I really don’t want to be in your way or bother you a lot, but I need ... I need to carry away everything

from here that I can this time.”

“We try,” Taylor said, “we try very hard to be careful of the feelings of living relatives of the people we exhume. It’s been my experience that relatives shouldn’t, well, watch. And that despite what they say, they don’t really want to know everything.”

“Look. There’re a few chicken thieves buried here. There’s even supposed to be a horse thief. And one of my cousins stabbed her husband with a big sharp kitchen knife when he beat up on the kids. He isn’t buried here, but the point is, I don’t have many illusions about my family. I’ll try not to be shocked by anything you tell me.”

He manifestly wasn’t convinced. “It’s

not illusions I'm talking about. I'm talking more along the lines of--" he couldn't look at me now, so he compelled me not to look at him by pointing down at his map of the cemetery—"grislier facts. Most people don't find it pleasant to contemplate, ah, physical abnormality."

Pleasant or no, I almost said, I contemplate it with every step. I could've gone on, mentioned my children's and grandchildren's congenital problems, too. I did say, "I'm not squeamish, either."

He gave me an okay-but-I-warned-you look. "There's evidence of pretty high incidences of birth defects, of bone disorders. Many of them are kind of

gruesome and unusual.”

If he was expecting me to flinch, he was disappointed. If I was supposed to react strongly in any way, I failed. The only reaction I noticed in myself was some kind of inward shrug, meaning, approximately, Sure, of course, so what? In a community like Gardner, with no medical facilities and not even a resident doctor since Dr. Sweeny, there had been no avoiding the raw proof that flesh is weak, treacherous stuff. The maimed, the hideously diseased, and the genetic misfires had at all times been at least semi-present and semi-visible.

I said, “Unusual how?”

He exhaled a soft, exasperated sound and said to Latham, “Gertie, would you

please take Mister Riddle over to where Dan and Greg are working and ... show him.”

She almost managed to conceal her distress at finding herself appointed tour-guide. Anger fl ashed in her blue eyes, but she answered, “Sure, Bob.”

We walked past the rows. Up ahead, I could see two men kneeling beside an open grave.

“Doctor Taylor,” I said, “seems to think I’m made of glass.”

“Please try to understand. Working in recent graveyards is about the least pleasant job there is in archeology. It’s very sensitive and very stressful, actually.”

One of the archeologists kneeling by

the grave was writing in a notebook. The other poked at the contents of a coffin, yellow bones, disintegrating remnants of a dress. They smiled when they saw Latham, went blank when they saw me. Introductions were made: the man with the notebook was Greg, the one doing the poking, Dan. They received the news that I was a relative without cheering. Latham looked down at the bones and said, "Is this one of the—is this one?"

"Yep," said Dan. "Would you please show Mister Riddle what you've got here?"

Both of the men regarded me doubtfully for a second, and then Dan said,

"Okay. Well, sir. Know anything

about human anatomy?”

“Not much more than the foot bone’s connected to the ankle bone.” I hadn’t intended to call anyone’s attention to my mismatched shoes, but Dan was the least-stiff person I’d met so far. He just nodded and turned to the bones and began speaking very easily. It was refreshing.

“I won’t make this technical,” he said, “and I’ll skip the small stuff. Um, the long bones in your hand, how long’d you say they are?”

I glanced at the back of my hand. “Three, four inches.”

“Close enough.” He directed my attention to the remains inside the coffin and pointed out an array of bones as long

as cigars. “These are the same bones, and there’re the fingers. As you can see, it’s a pretty extraordinarily oversized hand.”

It was almost an understatement. Whoever the dead girl or woman was—I looked for the name, but glare on the stone obscured it—she must have looked as if she had an oar up her sleeve.

“Typically,” Dan went on, “congenital problems left the door open for all sorts of other problems. She must’ve been in pain her whole life. She was about eighteen or twenty when she died. Most of the others’ve been much younger.”

“There’re really a lot of skeletons like this one?”

“Yep.” He watched me carefully now.

“Awful lot of ‘em.” “Enough to make you wonder,” said the other man, Greg, “if the local drinking water isn’t spiked with uranium dust or thalidomide or something.”

Latham shot him a thoroughly dismayed look. Greg cleared his throat and examined a page in his notebook very, very carefully.

“Actually,” I said, “my family’s probably just dangerously inbred.”

Latham and the two men seemed not to know how to take that remark. I let them twist in the wind, stared down at the tormented bones, thought, Roy Rich, Betty...I had sometimes glimpsed them through the half-open doors of their back bedrooms when my grandmother visited

their mother and hauled me along. My cousin Dorsey would nowadays be called "learning-disabled." Aunt Jean was

"movement-impaired." Several of her lower vertebrae were fused together; walking, standing, even sitting, all were torture for her. Once, I eavesdropped fascinatedly on a morbid conversation about her back and hip and knee problems and strange calcium spurs the doctor didn't know what to make of. Once, I was appointed to help her down the aisle at a revival meeting, at a pace glacial and excruciating even for me. The valley resounded with preaching on hot summer nights, and every household brought forth its lame, afflicted, dying,

and sent them forward to be healed by faith. Summer after summer, I saw the lines of pain deepen around my aunt's mouth. I saw the microcephalic and the acromegalic, saw the man whose body appeared to be collapsing telescope-fashion, the man with the tumor that sat on the side of his neck like a second head, the woman with calves like some pachyderm's, the girl who was one great angry strawberry mark, saw it all and became inured to it. Faith never healed anyone, but no one ever lost faith. DNA had let us down, but Jesus would yet lift us up.

I was jarred out of this reverie as Dr. Taylor strode up in a hurry. He had a frown on his face and appeared not to

notice me. "Gertie," he said, "Rita's got something we better take a look at."

He turned without waiting to see if she followed. She hurried after him, and after a moment's hesitation I went lugging after her. Two men and a woman with her nose painted white stood over a warped coffin. One of the men held the lid like a surfboard. We looked down, and Latham said, "My God," mah Gott. Lying in the coffin was the apparently preserved body of an elderly man in a dirty funeral suit. Lying in the grass by the edge of the driveway was Dr. Chester Sweeny's headstone. I heard a roaring in my head.

The white-nosed woman, Rita, couldn't contain herself. She said, "It's

not a cadaver!”

Latham asked, “What do you mean?”

“I’m saving this isn’t a dead, embalmed body here! It’s not a body at all!”

Rita pointed to the side of the elderly man’s face. I peered and saw some sort of crease or seam under the jawline. It had come loose beneath one ear, and a flap of skin, if it was skin, was turned down there, exposing smooth white bone, if it was bone.

“Check it out,” said Rita, and used her thumb to push up an eyelid and show us a startlingly realistic fake eye set in a grimy socket. Then she pinched the loose flap of skin between her thumb and forefinger and pulled. It came off easily,

exposing a bony tri-lobed bulb with openings that couldn't have been for eyes or any other familiar organ. Where the jaw ought to have been was a complicated prosthetic jaw complete with upper and lower rows of teeth and a fake tongue. Nobody spoke for at least half a minute.

Latham looked at Rita and then at Taylor, whose frown deepened when he saw me. I said,

“What,” and then, “Why did, why would someone bury this,” and couldn't think of a suitable noun.

I had to settle for gesturing.

“Prosthetics,” Rita said. “The whole thing's goddamn prosthetics. Feel it,” and first Taylor, then Latham, and finally

I knelt beside the coffin. I touched the right cheek. It felt gritty but ... I pulled my hand away quickly.

Rita looked about wildly and said, "Now what is that stuff?"

Latham said, "It feels like," and stopped and shook her head perplexedly.

"Fleshlike," murmured Taylor, barely audibly.

Rita nodded vehemently. "So what kind of stuff is it, Bob?"

"I don't know. Some plastic, I don't know."

"This grave was dug and filled in nineteen hundred," Rita said, "and no one touched it until it was opened today. I know because Gil and I opened it ourselves, and we'd've known if it'd

been disturbed. This thing was in the ground ever since it was put in the ground, back when nobody, nobody, could make plastic like this. “

“Rita,” Latham said, “just calm down and—”

“Calm down? Gertie, nobody can make goddamn plastic like this now!”

Everybody was quiet again for a time. I looked around a circle of red sweaty faces. Taylor said to Rita, in a strangled voice, “What’s under the clothes?”

Rita carefully opened the coat and the shirt, exposing a dirty but otherwise normal-looking human torso. It was an old man’s torso, flabby, loose-skinned, fish-belly white. Wiry hair grew in tufts around the nipples and furred the skin.

Rita touched the belly gingerly, pinched up a fold, and, wide-eyed, peeled it right off like skin off a hard-boiled egg. The inner surface had many small fittings and trailed strands of wire as fine as spider web. Within the exposed cavity, where a ribcage ought to have been, was a structure like a curved piece of painted iron lawn furniture. Someone muttered, "What in the hell--" Maybe it was me, though I am not a swearing man. Rita started to touch the structure, but her hand trembled, and she pulled it back. She looked around, gray-faced, and said, "Too weird for me. Bob. Just too goddamn weird. I'm sorry."

Taylor touched the bulb carefully, then the chest structure.

“Doctor,” I said, “what’re we looking at?”

“Well, obviously, some kind of articulated skeleton, but—”

“Is it, is this more—what, some birth defect, bone disease, what?” I was panting now, my heart was bursting out of my chest.

Taylor worried his lower lip with his teeth. “No disease in the world twists ribs into latticework. Whatever this thing is, it looks like it was supposed to grow this way. I don’t even think it’s bone. It feels almost like ... I don’t know. Coral.”

“Coral?”

“Something.”

“Jesus, Jesus Christ,” and I pushed

myself up. Latham looked after me and”
asked if I was all right; I barely heard
her.

The roaring in my head was louder
now, and I staggered away, ran as only
lame men run, disjointedly, agonizedly,
until I found myself standing shaking
before my grandparents’ common
headstone. I sat down on the ground
between their graves to let my breathing
slow and my heart stop racing, stared at
the stone, tried to draw some comfort,
some something, from the inscription.
Beloved in memory, Ralph Riddle, Mary
Riddle. All I could think of, however,
was furry pale plastic skin draped from
Rita’s fingers, the bony white bulb
inside the headpiece, the false tongue in

the false mouth.

“Are you all right, Mister Riddle?”

I started. Gertrude Latham had followed me and was hovering concernedly.

“Just an anxiety attack.” I punctuated the remark with a bark of mirthless laughter. “I’ll be back in a moment.” She choked on a reply to that, so I said it for her. “You think I shouldn’t go back?”

She all but wrung her hands. “If you people are playing practical jokes—”

“We would never, ever, play jokes!”
“Somebody’s up to something here!

If this is some kind of, of stunt, you, Taylor, the historical commission, none of you will ever see the end of trouble. I can promise you that.”

“What do you think we’d possibly gain from a stunt?” she demanded hotly.

“Money, publicity, I don’t know.”

“There’s no money in archeology, Mister Riddle,” she said, biting off the words. “Certainly not in this kind of archeology! You think we do this to get rich, to be on television?”

I was about to snap back, but then I saw that she was really angry, too, as angry as I was, maybe angrier. I got a hold on myself and said, in as reasonable a voice as I could manage, “What is that thing?”

“It’s not a joke!”

“Well, it’s something, and it doesn’t belong. If it’s not a joke and not a box full of junk and not human—and it sure

isn't human, or any animal, vegetable, mineral I've ever seen or heard about -
-”

“I'm sure there's a logical explanation,” she said, obviously not convinced herself. “We'll be able to find out more when we get the ... remains to the lab.”

“Yeah? And how long will that take?”

“We'll have to get all kinds of permission. It's going to be very complicated. Anything you could tell us about this Doctor Sweeny could be very important.”

“Doc Sweeny,” I said, and had to pause to clear my throat loudly. My voice was lined with wet sand. “Doc Sweeny was the only doctor here for

thirty years. My great-grandmother was at his funeral. She told me once the whole valley showed up to pay last respects. I don't know any more than what she told me and what's on his stone. He came here after the War Between the States. He died at the turn of the century."

She didn't say anything for several seconds. Then: "Where did he come from?"

"How would I know? Who knows if he ever said?"

"All right," she said, "then why did he come here?" "Everybody's got to go somewhere."

"But why here? We're not talking about your standard-issue nineteenth-

century country doctor. We're talking about...God, I don't know what we're talking about. A guy with plastic skin, latticework for ribs. A skull like, like ____”

She couldn't find the right word, if there was a right word, and the sentence hung unfinished in the air between us until I said, “A skull like something. And a face like nothing. Those bones back there are the bones of a --”

“A Martian, for all anybody knows.” She was embarrassed to have said that, and I was embarrassed to have heard her say it. I couldn't look at her again for several seconds, until I heard her suck in a breath like a sob and say, “Whatever he was, nobody caught on to him in thirty

years. Thirty years! What was he doing here all that time?"

"Driving around the countryside in his buggy. Dispensing solicitude, advice, and placebos."

"No, what was he really doing? Gardner's small, isolated, even backward."

I could only nod. The roads hadn't been paved until the 1920s. There hadn't been plumbing and electricity in all the homes until the 1950s.

"There's no money to be made here," she went on, "and never has been." I nodded again.

"So why," she began, and hesitated.

"Maybe he was stranded. Maybe the place just suited him."

She appeared to mull that over for a moment, then nodded. “Who’d’ve bothered, who’d’ve been able, to check anybody’s background in a place like this in eighteen seventy? Why else except that a doctor, someone claiming to be a doctor and willing to settle here, would’ve seemed like a godsend? He could’ve given them anything he wanted to give them and called it medicine.”

I heard the roaring in my head again. I thought of my grandmother, breaking snap beans and humming. Are you washed in the blood? I murmured, “Or candy.”

“What?” The roaring in my head rose in pitch and blended into the incessant twirring of the cicadae. I thought

suddenly that I knew the words to that song--it was a song of the need to obey the biological imperative; Keep your genetic material in circulation, the chorus went—and I suddenly felt cold and feverish. I said, “What if,” and then on second thought knew I could never go on and say what if Doc Sweeny had come to small, isolated, manageable Gardner from God knew where and become one of its citizens in order to become one with its citizens and had been accepted by them though the flesh of their children ever after twisted itself into knots trying to reject the alien matter he somehow had bequeathed to them, and those children, those who survived, had gone out into the world to pass along

that same alien stuff to their children in turn, and--So I said no more, only lurched past Gertrude Latham, and if she called after

me, I didn't hear her. I wanted to be away from her and away from here, in my car, speeding away homeward with the radio turned way up and wind roaring past the open window. The waters could not close over Gardner soon enough to suit me. I didn't stop moving until I was through the cemetery gate, and then only because I put my bad foot in a shallow hole hidden in the grass and went down on one knee. The stab of pain in my leg and hip was so intense that I believed for a moment I was going to black out. Gasping, I dug

my fingers into the earth, gripped it desperately. Maybe I was going to be sick anyway.