

THE INHERITANCE

Gary A. White

David Reed squatted against the front wall of the living room and watched his breath float through the snow-brightened afternoon sun that slanted through the tall windows. His eyes followed the mist until it disappeared against the faded wallpaper across the room. There, between the stairwell door and the hall to the kitchen, was a large dark circle centered at eye level. The etching of the horses racing into the wind had hung there. He pulled his hand from the warmth of his pocket and sketched the round frame onto the pad that he balanced against his knees. The sketch was as the room was before the auction, as it was the last time he had seen the house.

He pushed his back up the wall and stretched. He moved to the space between the sun-filled windows and as he squatted again he studied the opposite wall. Not much on that one. He started with the crown molding and quickly put in the carved door frames for the dining room and closet. A fern stand had been between the doors and over that an oval picture of his grandfather in his doughboy uniform, all dark hair and eyes and a smile that softened the bony angles of his face. David had studied that picture every time he had visited his grandfather. He had grown up with the picture, and in a way he had grown into it. Last summer, before he left for Paris, David had stood with his mother and grandfather for a picture. In that photograph, the doughboy had traded his khakis for jeans and a teeshirt; the hair, the eyes and the smile were all young again.

The clicking of heels on the linoleum upstairs brought David's eyes to the cracked ceiling and he thought of his aunts and mother working to get the house ready for the new owner. He stood and stamped his tingling feet. One more wall and he would be finished. The discipline of his work in college and in Paris was paying off. Since he had been back home for the semester break he had sketched every room of the house and some of the exteriors. His grandfather died a month after David left for Paris and there had been no way he could have come home until now. He had missed the funeral and the auction, and found out about the farm finally being sold just as he came back to finish his schooling at the Art Institute. His family might be willing to sell out and forget their heritage, thought David, but he was taking something with him.

As he leaned back against the stairway wall he heard the voice of his Aunt Lois echoing down. ". . . so we thought we'd use our money to buy a trailer down in Arizona. The Parkers are down there now and we visited them last winter. They had everything all fixed up; they even painted the rocks in the yard green 'cause you can't grow grass it's so dry . . ." David swung the stairway door shut. "That's what's to become of all this," he thought as he sketched, "divided up seven ways to buy disposable housing in the desert." With dark heavy strokes he sketched in the two over-stuffed chairs that had flanked the front window with the floor lamp in the corner. He framed the door and hinted at the lace curtains that had hung in the window. His hands were getting cold and he could fill in the details back at school. He squinted at the dark patch on the wall by the door. What had been there? He remembered it as a wooden plaque from some fishing spot in Michigan. He tried to remember the name of the town; he had read it a thousand times while waiting for his parents to finish saying their good-byes. He could not remember it now. The memory was gone like his grandfather and the furniture and now the house and farm.

His mother's voice echoed down the stairwell, "David, you can go when you want. Aunt Rosie will bring me home."

David answered over his shoulder as he swung the door open again, "I don't know why you're bothering to clean. Bronson will rent the house to the first carload of 'billies that rolls in and when they've gutted the place, he'll bulldoze it." David was up and stomping his feet again. "It'll just be another acre in the Bronson Empire." He stuck his head in the doorway and

looked up at his mother. Her black hair was rippled with gray and her face was drawn tight in the shadowy hall. In a soft voice that did not echo she said, "Don't make this any harder than it is, David. Go on home." She turned and disappeared while the clicking of her shoes faded into the back of the house.

David tucked the sketch pad under his arm and hunched his shoulders into his coat. He headed through the kitchen for the back door. The high-ceilinged room was immense in its emptiness. The coldness now seemed a part of the room like the white enamel walls and the chrome cabinet handles, a coldness that heat would never drive out.

On the back porch, David held a glove in his teeth while he hunted for his car keys. When he had them in his hand, he started down the steps and looked across the back of the farm. The oak covered hills were a gray-red haze above the soft brown and white swirl of the fields.

He had not walked in the woods since he had come home. He stopped at the car and dropped the sketchbook inside. He walked past the barn that still smelled of long since sold livestock and through the hoof-pocked barnyard into the oak and stone-lined lane. The trees and stones were like a bridge that floated with the rising and falling of the white hills and the waves of brown stubble.

Ice crunched underfoot as he walked over the rutted ground. David was reminded of a thousand memories: of biking out from town, of summers and ponies, of nights and stars. He thought of his cousins and how they had played here at reunions and holidays. When the farm was gone, he knew they would scatter. Already he had heard there was fighting among the aunts and uncles about the money from the farm.

"Their greed has finished it off for the rest of us," he thought as he reached the first hill at the end of the lane. He heard the chugging of a tractor from over the next hill.

He walked to the crest and looked down on two of the Bronson boys hooking chains to a post in the property line fence. The boys had cut the fencing away from the post but the wire was still woven to the post by the wild grape and bittersweet vines that grew along the fence row. Mr. Bronson was supervising and shouting above the sound of the tractor.

David watched for a minute and was turning to go when Bronson spotted him and waved for him to come down. David almost turned anyway but the way Bronson was waving and yelling made him stop and start down the hill. He hung onto branches and saplings as he slid to the fence. Bronson walked towards him and from the tractor the boys waved. David couldn't remember their names, "They sure look like their older brothers," he thought. "They all have round blonde heads with red ears that stick out like bumps on a gourd."

"Hey David! You givin' them Frenchy girls a break?" Bronson yelled, though he was nearer David than the tractor now.

David moved back a step from Bronson's rush to the fence and answered, "Yeah, I'm home on break. I brought Mom out to help finish up the house."

"That's good, that's fine." Bronson leaned on a fence post ten feet away and shouted, "I just wanted to tell you, any time you wanna come out and visit the old place, you just come ahead." He turned and yelled back to the boys, "Get moving; it'll be dark soon." The tractor roared and the chain pulled tight, but the post did not move.

"Them old cedar posts is tough," Bronson yelled to David and over his shoulder, "hit it again."

"Yeah, we get this fence out of here and those rocks and trees out of the lane, I'll have an eighty acre field a half mile long 'tween my farm and this. That's the only way to farm these days." The fence jerked again and the chain slipped from the post. David thought of the lane plowed away and planted with crops and he took another step back. Bronson cursed his sons and turned back to David. "Tell your folks, I'll have that money to 'em before you go back to school."

"What?" David asked, still thinking of the half mile field.

"The money for the farm. Your folks was the first to settle on a price. I think some of the others wanted more, but your schoolin's mighty important to your folks and they wanted the

money quick. You tell 'em I'll have it before the week's out." The fence jerked again and this time the post came free smacking into the back of the tractor. The tail light shattered in a spray of red plastic and Bronson went raging back to the boys looking at the damage. After his first volley of curses, he called back to David, "You come back to the farm anytime, David. You gotta see that field!"

David walked from the fence absently brushing away branches and stepping over fallen logs. "Why didn't they tell me?" he asked himself. He remembered how proud his grandfather had been when he learned David was going away to school. That last time they were together they had joked about Paris and the "mamzelles" and the old doughboy had tried to teach the artist "Hinky Dinky Parley Vous" but they both ended up laughing so hard they couldn't sing. David stood on the hilly pasture at the back of the farm and looked toward the house and buildings. He thought of Paris, what it was to his art and what it was to his life. Both the farm and the trip had meant so much to him. It wasn't fair that one should cost the other.

He crossed the field and came to the remnants of a cellar cut into the side of the hill. The two stone walls were all that was left of a farmhouse. It had been one of four homesteads, twenty acre plots each, that the family farm had taken in over the years. "All one man could take care of in the early days," his grandfather had told him.

David and his grandfather had built a little fireplace out of the tumbled stones the summer his grandmother died. He came almost every day that summer. Sometimes they would walk back to this spot and cook over the fireplace and watch the sunset. They wouldn't head back until they heard the car horn that meant David's folks were there to visit for awhile and take him home. They probably only came to this spot a dozen times that summer but of all the things they did, David remembered the fireplace and the sunsets most of all.

He huddled against the wind and watched the sun dropping from behind the gray clouds that had filled the sky. As it edged into the white haze that floated above the wooded horizon, the sun became a perfect circle, a pink orange ball falling to the treetops below. The sun tinted the clouds now, gold and pink, like firelight on smoke.

David leaned his head against the stones. The sun was clear of the clouds now and hung just above the reach of the treetops. David kicked a stone from the piled rocks of the fireplace. He bent over and picked another stone and heaved it down the hill. He threw another after it. The sun hung motionless on the still branches of the treetops. Stone after stone, David threw as far down the hill as he could until the fireplace was scattered through the weeds and snow.

Exhausted, he sank back against the stone wall and closed his eyes. The wind rattled the dry oak leaves in the woods and he opened his eyes to see the sun still on the treetops. The wind gusted again and the trees swayed and the sun slipped behind them. He felt a sorrow filling him. The loss of a man, the loss of an era, the loss of a part of his life. The sadness welled in him until he sat up and shouted out loud, "It's too cold to cry!" He pulled himself up against the rocks. His eyes were watering and his face stinging from the cold. Through his blurring eyes, he saw the leaden branches breaking up the colors of the sunset like a stained glass window. He stood watching the sun burning behind the trees until the light fell to the ash of twilight.

He watched the yard lights come blinking on around the scattered farms as he brushed the snow from his jeans. He could go now. He had taken what belonged to him and it would be his for as long as he cared to have it. David put his hands in his coat pockets and brought his elbows close to his body. As he started in the direction of the dark buildings, the cold air echoed the sound of a car horn. He stopped to listen. The horn sounded again. David went on over the uneven ground to the ever closer sound of a car horn calling him home.