

PLEASANT MEADOWS

The mammoth metal sign fronting the Four Wheeler University construction site blazes forth in seismic, jazzy red digital: RIDE SMART! RIDE FAST!! RIDE NOW!!! And directly below this in dancing, electric blue: APPROVED FOR PRISONER FURLOUGHS! AND WORK DETAILS!

FWU—YOUR PLACE FOR ATV COMPETITIVE TRAINING!

From inside his Dodge Ram extended cab, Bernie Sapp watches as the red letters fade out in the early morning grayness, with bright yellow kicking in, as four wheelers do feisty wheelies up and down the sign—and then, whammo, streaks of bold white shooting forth like rockets, a regular Fourth of July fireworks finale. And now the banner in flaming red:

REV 'EM UP! REV 'EM UP!! REV 'EM UP!!!

No one's revving up around here yet. FWU's still under construction, the steel girders of the ATV training school closed off with a ten-foot-high orange construction fence, with pallets of concrete blocks and red bricks all decked up inside the enclosure. A dozen or more bulldozers are herded up behind the orange fence like grazing rhinos. In the evenings, when Bernie's heading home from Pork Rite, he sees them raising hell back there, roaring and snorting behind the training school, the dust clouds flying.

He turns his attention to the windows of the three-story, red brick presidential mansion with the Grecian white columns. Vera's in there with her big boss man, Dick Columbus, nestled together under the covers, no doubt, just like their two motor vehicles hidden away and huddled together in that white, three-car garage attached to the mansion: Vera's red Mercury Tracer a tiny piece of

cherry candy up against her boss's giant red one—that brand new stretch Hummer.

Bernie tugs at his Pork Rite ball cap. So this is what it's come down to—him out here, them in there. *Well, now, you can't tell me it's not what I'm thinking. Because if I've ever been right about a thing, I'm right about this one.*

First, it was those late hours, with Vera popping in around nine or ten. He went along with that for a little bit, and then said to himself, *Enough is enough.* And to her: Why are you staying so late like this? This isn't some convenience store job, like before; you're not some average flunky behind the cash register—you're in the promotion office, for heaven's sake. Don't they keep regular hours out there? And Vera said, Oh, honey . . . we just get a-going, and wham bam, it's suddenly eight or nine o'clock. You lose time. Because there's so much to do—just a tremendous lot.

He didn't buy it.

Especially when those late hours turned into midnight—and after.

He'd be in bed by then, and he'd hear the kitchen door from the garage squeak open, her purse smack the table, a bunch of kitchen noises, and then he'd smell cigarette smoke. And then the stink of that pungent nail polish remover mixed with that smoke. After about an hour of stirring about, she'd stumble into their bedroom—all boozy. *I'm home, honey.* But she wouldn't actually go to bed. She'd sit up in bed with the night table lamp lit, smoking, drinking beer, reading *Cosmopolitan*, flipping pages, stopping to rub them between her fingers. Rubbing those slick pages slowly, deliberately, over and over, which about drove him bugnuts. *Will you quit with that?* he'd plead. *Will you turn off that damned light?* But even when she eventually flicked it off, he couldn't get back to sleep, not after being jerked wide awake in the dead of night. But what was it to her? She didn't have to get up until seven—if she got around to that, even—to get Red on the school bus. That was her thing—not his, though he wished he could be around to help his kid do things like that. But he was long gone by the time Red got up. A hog barn manager gets up at 4 a.m., in the pitch-dark, and he's on the road by five.

He said, *Look here. You just tell your boss there . . . Columbus—*

Dick, she said, *Dick.*

Okay, he said. *Dick. Whatever. Anyway, you tell him—* Then he came right out and said it. He was going to nip it in the bud right now, with no more screwing around. He said, *You having some kind of affair with this bozo, or what?*

Dead silence.

She flicked the light on. *Affair?* Her eyes went lead gray, her forehead wrinkling red. So . . . you think I'm having some dirty little affair. When all I'm doing is my *job?* She pushed at him, slapped at him. I told you, we're *busy.* Busy busy busy busy. Get it through your thick skull. We've got Wheeleroo!—

Yeah, sure. But what's with all the booze? You come home stewed to the gills every night.

She wasn't fazed at all by that remark. She softened, though, got herself under control, and smiled. Honey, we top off a little after work, is all. Don't you like me a little tipsy? She nudged against him. *Might make me a little more sexy, a little more interested. Huh?*

But she wasn't interested in *him.* Whenever he tried anything at all, she complained of a headache, a backache, a side ache, a leg ache, a neck ache, an arm ache, a foot ache, a sore throat, a sore toe, a sore tongue—practically anything to drive him off.

He smokes, eyeing that red brick presidential mansion for any sign of activity, of life. No lights on. He flicks his cigarette; he's got the jitters. At night, when he tries to sleep, he has to continuously stretch his legs; he just can't get comfortable. Sometimes it's nearly two o'clock before he falls asleep. And then the alarm's blasting away with a jarring, metallic shrieking.

The clock in his truck reads 5:25. He's running late. He fiddles with his lunch sack, removes a potato chip.

He gets out of the truck, flicks his cigarette on the gravel drive, slams the door, and heads toward the front door, where the black rubber mat reads PRESIDENT FWU. He rings the bell.

Nothing. Nothing stirring in there.

He rings again.

He moves over to a ground-floor window close by, presses his face up against it, but all he can make out are the heavy gold drapes, pulled tight.

He heads around the garage, toward the back of the building, tromping on the grassy shoulder. Down Big Duck Road, a truck is gunning it his way, racking off, sputtering, belching. Bernie crouches behind a shrub. From here he can see, across the expanse of a football field, the new Rooster Correctional Facility under construction, and directly above it the silver moon hanging like a flipped coin in the blue-gray morning sky.

The truck lurches forth, rams on, wheezing, coughing, motor grumbling, a high-pitched whine squealing in the early morning stillness. Bernie waits until it's out of sight, then hurries around to the back of the mansion. There, situated fifty feet or so behind it, is that concrete pad with the copper-colored helicopter parked on it, a big bird owned by that big shot hidden away in this three-story mansion.

He checks the ground-floor windows. The drapes are pulled tight just as in front. He peers up at the second- and third-floor windows. No light anywhere, nothing emanating from any of the upstairs windows, nothing bleeding from any of the ground-floor ones. They must be sleeping it off—boozed-up in each other's arms.

He runs his hand against the hard brick. What a fortress here. He stands there for a while, staring at it, hearing only the twittering of birds from somewhere close by.

Back in his truck, he digs out, spitting rocks, pushing it hard down Big Duck Road, toward the Big Guy Food & Fuel.

It's what he looks forward to every morning, and this morning he needs it more than ever. Food, refreshment, enough to get geared up for the twelve-hour haul out at the hog barn, to get his battery boosted, to get that jump start. Two long johns, a Super Deluxe Big Guy coffee in a bright red Styrofoam cup with two creams, a pack of cigarettes, and two lottery tickets.

At least there's no line. Still, he almost wishes there

was because of that new hire, Glenna, a fat porker if he's ever seen one. He's come to loathe that woman in only two weeks' time. Because, for some reason, she's got him in her sights.

As soon as he yanks open the door, and steps in, she shouts out, "Hey, Bright Eyes!"

Bernie ignores this, busying himself in gathering up his stuff. But meanwhile he can feel her watching him. In a couple minutes, he's setting the red Super Deluxe Big Guy cup, filled with coffee (two creams, no sugar), down on the gray counter, with his two long johns, and he points behind her. "Give me some cigarettes there—a pack of Casual Extra Smooth."

"Oh, man, he is needing him some cigarettes," booms out Glenna, and she lets out a horsy laugh, with a long raspy cackle. She's a mountain of a woman, tall and big around, with a triple chin, and she bounces around, like a jolly bear to a dance tune. "He's needing him some *smokes!*"

Okay. That's enough. He'll go elsewhere from now on. Back to the Big Guy out on the strip, even though it's out of his way. He really doesn't need this today, he just doesn't need—

"Two packs just a-coming up," sings out Glenna, wheeling around. "Candy bar, chips, lottery ticket—somethin' else to go with that?"

"No—yeah." He almost forgot. "Two—two of . . . give me a Super Winner and a couple of those Dead Ringers."

"Super Winner and two Dead Ringers just a-coming up."

Bernie sticks them in his white Pork Rite work shirt pocket with *Bernie Sapp* stenciled on it in red. His shirt is different, unlike your common worker bee's. Because if you're a supervisor, you get your full name stenciled on it. If you're not—just your first name. And even on his blue Pork Rite ball cap there's his full name stenciled in red.

"Kiss?"

"Huh?"

"He don't wanta give poor old Glenna a little smacker this morning? He already tired of looking at these fat old smoochers?" Glenna puckers her thick red lips.

Damn, a man could get swallowed whole in there!

Bernie imagines them flapping against his head as he struggles to crawl out.

“Well, now, I’ll just bet that’s not true at all,” chimes up an old man right behind him. He’s got a deep brassy voice, and he’s wearing a Pioneer Seed cap. He grins at Bernie, working a toothpick between his lips.

“Thirteen seventy-one,” shouts Glenna. She lays a hand on the gray counter, waiting, grinning.

Bernie swipes his check card, punches in the PIN.

“Yeah, I’ll just bet that’s not true at all,” says the old man again.

“Oh, I don’t know,” says Glenna. “I don’t know—he don’t look too happy this morning. He pulling hisself a long, sad face. Let me see a happy face there, honey-bun. Come on, now . . . come on—”

Bernie rushes out. Then turns back. Suddenly, he’s got to urinate. And he knows he won’t make it all the way out there to the hog farm unless he urinates right now.

He heads for the restroom.

It’s locked. Somebody’s in there, and his need is growing. This is the thing with his bladder: it comes quick, that urge, and then you’d better—you damn well better—listen up.

He waits ten minutes. Keeps checking his cell phone for the time. Running late. He tries the door—still locked!

This means no one’s in there, and some bastard locked it on the way out. Damn! He must go get a key from Glenna. No choice. Damn!

The door flies open. Well, what the hell? An old man, looking past him, slinks out, and Bernie rushes in.

He unzips.

He waits. Ah, this was smart. You bet it was because if he’d waited any longer, there’d been all that pressure, and no place to pull off—this is smart all right.

The door is being tried. A knock. Two knocks.

“In a minute!” he yells back.

But now maybe he won’t be able to go. Now maybe . . . ah! Ah. A close one, but this time it’s okay. This time, there’s that solid stream, and he’s going to be a happier man for it.

“Have a great day!” shouts Glenna as he bolts out the glass door.

I don't have to put up with the likes of her, and I won't put up with it anymore! he says to himself once he gets inside his truck. *Why should I put up with it?* He sits on the lot, stuffing down a long john, sipping coffee, thinking: In the sum total of things, it's not worth even thinking about. And besides, maybe she won't last long.

He takes out the Super Winner and the two Dead Ringers, scratches out the metal gray areas.

Just like always—nothing. But then it's in the possibility of the thing. In the looking forward to it, the chance to win: to make a real haul of dough for once in your life. He could sure use it. Who couldn't?

Back on Big Duck Road. And now he's crossing over the interstate, then getting on Route H, heading east, cutting over the rolling green hills toward Pork Rite #37. His site is one of four on this road. It's the first one, ten miles up the road, so it's not a bad drive.

The sun's up by now, and he sips his coffee with pleasure, holding it in his right hand as he guides the steering wheel with his left, then lets loose of the wheel entirely, for a second—just a second—to flick on “Your First Stop for Country Western.” He puts the coffee in the cup holder, taps out a Casual Extra Smooth, lights up, takes a drag, and parks it in the ashtray. He takes up his coffee again. Sips. Ah—

Vera, his wife. Well, she won't get away with it. And that boss of hers, Dick-o Columbus, he won't get away with it either.

It happens to a lot of men. Sure, it does. But he'll put a stop to it. He should've known something like this was going to happen right off, but it got away from him. Early on, Bernie used to drop by FWU now and then, and Columbus would invite him in. “Bernie, Bernie, good to see you, my friend. Say, that little wife of yours is one major work hog—I do want to tell you. Hey, how about a beer or two?” And then they'd sit in the lounge on the second floor with all the mounted deer heads, moose heads, elk, you name it, and have a little chat over a couple cold ones. Columbus even got to buying Suds Chief, the Big Guy Best, Bernie's favorite beer in can or bottle. Back then, he

thought maybe this Dick Columbus guy wasn't too bad of a fellow. A bit full of himself, but he could sure keep the gab going. Seemed to have his nose into everything. Bernie sort of liked him. And he thought maybe knowing a man like Columbus—a real mover and shaker—might be pretty damned good for his career out at Pork Rite. It couldn't hurt, that's for sure. But that socializing stopped after a while because Vera put an end to it. She said, "He's going to think you're snooping on me. With you coming out there all the time. So stop with it—okay?" "All the time?" he said. He'd stopped by there maybe once a week. He thought, hell, she's being pretty stupid about this, and he went ahead and tried stopping in after work a couple times after that, but Columbus met him at the door, with that toothy smile of his, and said they were kind of busy right now. "What's up?" Columbus didn't act angry or anything; in fact, he acted pretty friendly, but Bernie could tell he didn't want him coming in. So Bernie didn't bother to stop by after a couple turndowns like that because, after all, if he wasn't welcome, why push it? And maybe he ought to respect his wife's space. But now when he looks back, he thinks, *There was my big mistake—that's where I screwed up big time.*

He crosses a one-lane creek bridge, then begins a long ascent up an immensely steep hill—it must be a forty-five degree grade.

The sun, now a ball of liquid white fire, perches at the top of the hill over the black thread of Route H, and the land rises toward it in green splendor. For Bernie, Route H is somewhere between heaven and hell. Winding its way over one splendid green hill to another, you can see it from three hills away, a good mile off, and sometimes you'd think you were in the midst of Eden itself, especially on a sunny May morning like this when the grass is laden with dew and the sun fills the land with such promise and hope. But H is horribly treacherous too, the narrow blacktop no wider than a cow path, and Bernie brakes at the top of each hill to avoid cows in the road, old farmers parking their pickups so they can lean over a fence and observe their stock, or—as the case is now—two hog trucks blasting over the hill bearing down on him, crowding the center.

Bernie hits the narrow dirt shoulder, barely avoiding

the ditch, lays on the horn, brakes hard, and skids. “My god!” he screams.

The hot Super Deluxe Big Guy spills all over his legs, all over the front seat and floor. He cries out.

Three long honks back.

He gets his truck righted, back on the road.

His legs scream with pain from the hot coffee. He gives them a tentative rub. He’ll have to check on this when he gets to his office. He’ll be okay. No long-term damage. Hell, though—that damned hog truck and those insane drivers!

The land levels out. To the right, there’s that huge lot scraped off for four-wheeling, where he and Vera pulled in one Saturday evening to watch the men booming around the trails, blasting up huge wheelie ramps, whamming down on the dirt, then going for the next one. Talk about riding hard—he’d never seen the like. Those men looked good enough to go competitive. He got jealous. Said he’d never ride that good. That was pure art.

He couldn’t take his eyes off those riders. Watching them tame those trails, pounding the hell out of the dirt.

Vera punched his arm. “You going to put money in on FWU, or not?”

He looked at her. I doubt it, he said. Riding’s one thing—investing’s another. I mean, he said, I might throw away a couple bucks on lottery tickets, but I don’t pitch ten thousand bucks at it. He started to go on, but they’d had that conversation enough. He’d stressed the point plenty that being a four wheeler enthusiast himself, that he liked the idea of FWU, but putting money in it?

Oh, you’re just so silly, she said, and lit a cigarette.

Up ahead is the turnoff to #37. The entrance sign, in huge red letters, announces:

PORK RITE

SITE #37 – PLEASANT MEADOWS

WE’RE MAKING A BIG DIFFERENCE IN PORK!

Bernie inserts his black PR#37 card, and the gate crossing arm lifts. He parks, gets out of the truck, then hoofs it down to the lagoon, where Big Oz is already getting into his canoe, his huge body causing the canoe to rock

and tip way over, splashing lagoon water all over the side. The heavy smell of ammonia fills the air. Now Oz sticks the paddle in, propels himself forward a couple canoe lengths, leans over, dips a long metal strainer into the water, like he's catching minnows. And in a few moments, he sits back up. Then shakes the strainer, up and down, up and down.

"Catch anything?"

"Nope." Oz shakes his head. His thick, dark hair hangs in his eyes like a horse's mane. He whips it back with a free hand. "Nope—nothing that counts much."

Oz pushes off. He lets loose in a full baritone:

You-hoo

Lovely Lake La Poo, I'm a-gonna fish yooooooooo.

Lovely Lake La Poo, I'm a-gonna fish yooooooooo.

You-hoo

Oz lets out a big laugh.

Bernie laughs too and watches him paddling out farther, stopping to strain, then paddling on toward the center of the ten-acre sewage lagoon. He begins climbing the grassy slope up toward Barn A.

Inside the long corrugated tin building, big floor fans roar away on both ends. Deena and Brandon are power hosing down the sow stalls, Deena on the north end, Brandon on the south. Deena motions wildly at him. "Hey, come over here!" He can barely hear her over the loud fans.

"Yo," Brandon says. He shoots the pressure hose at the concrete slats, and Sow #3 grunts away from the blast of water. Hog manure slides into the drain, disappears.

"Come over here!" Deena yells.

He makes his way slowly—there's no big hurry on this one.

"What?"

"What'd your wife say?"

Bernie doesn't answer, just looks at her.

"What'd your wife say?"

"About what?"

"Oh, you know. About investing"

Bernie gives her a look.

"You didn't ast her?"

"No."

“Well, come on, you ast her. Like I said, maybe I wanna invest in that dealie. Not a lot—I don’t have a lot. But if it pays the way they say it does—” Deena finishes power hosing down Sow #31’s stall, then moves on to Sow #30’s. “Bigger’n any bank pays, at least that’s what they been giving out. But that’s just the newspaper and the radio. I want it straight from the horse’s mouth.” She grins big, with a mouthful of rotten teeth. Bernie’s been wondering if she’s on meth, being so skeletal and sick looking, but she’s passed every one of her drug tests. Still, though.

“You got money in it yourself, don’t you?”

He refuses to answer this question, just stares at her.

Deena frowns. “Well, you *ast* your wife, anyways. Please. For me?”

He nods. Only he’s not going to. He’s not asking Vera anything about investing in that thing. Because he’s not investing in it, that’s for sure, and he doesn’t want to talk about it or even think about it. Because he can’t separate it anymore from her and that prick Columbus.

Bernie heads to his office, makes coffee in his tall silver pot, and settles down to record-keeping. He rubs his legs. They’re really sore from that scalding hot coffee. He locks the door, closes the window blinds, unbuckles, pulls down his jeans—takes a close look. Just as he suspected, they’re fire-engine red. He pulls up his jeans, buckles up, unlocks the door, opens the window blinds, and settles down to work. Might need to put some sort of salve on those legs if they don’t look any better when he gets home.

Pretty soon he’ll duck out to the parking lot, settle back in his truck, prop his feet up on the dashboard, and have a long, long smoke. He fiddles with his two Hog Man of the Month brass sow paperweights. This spring he won them for his Clean Rite System, for keeping the lagoon clean of debris. Two Hog Mans, and he’s got a good shot at Hog Man #3 if things go right, and maybe, down the road, even that Chamber of Commerce Success Breeds Success Award. Hey, if you do the work, right? And if you set your sights high enough, right?

Bernie parts the blinds, looks down the hill—where he spots Oz out in the canoe toward the center of the lagoon. The gray sky with billowing white clouds, like someone

had loaded it with huge handfuls of cotton, seems to weigh down over him.

Oz works away in his canoe, paddling out further.

It's strange about Oz, how he didn't want a rowboat. Said the canoe reminded him of canoeing up there in Wisconsin where he grew up, where he did a lot of fishing. We was always out on that lake, Oz told him. Huh? Bernie said. But this is a hog lagoon—not a lake. I mean, you've got a lake of manure you're dealing with here, not some nice blue lake to fish on. Oz said yeah, that's right, but still yet, he'd go for that canoe way over a rowboat because it had a nice feel to it. Well, suit yourself, said Bernie. And Oz did. They soon stopped calling it "the lagoon" and started calling it Lake La Poo—and had a big laugh about it. And then Oz got to calling it *Lovely Lake La Poo* and started singing that song of his. And Bernie got Hog Man of the Month twice in a row for his Clean Rite, but of late he's been feeling a bit guilty about those awards since, to be fair, Oz should get most of the credit because he's the one who gets out in that canoe and does all the dirty work. Ten whole acres of it. It takes him several hours a day, three times a week, to do the rigorous monitoring called for by Clean Rite.

Bernie shakes his head. There's Oz down there right now, batting at something—flies, most likely—and then stooping to dip that strainer into the stinky lagoon water.