

Book Reviews

“Deck can write. In the *Land of The Story Tellers* he writes up a storm...and war, and festa, and...He writes with a seemingly infinite range of styles from sparse Hemingway to rococo—Faulkner and beyond. Amazingly, at least to me, he’s mastered them all. From this exceptional observation of details comes vivid and luminous images, and from the juxtaposition of these images he builds his stories.”

—John M. Del Vecchio

*The 13th Valley,
For The Sake of All Living Things,
Carry Me Home, The Bremer Detail,
Demise: A Novel of Race, Culture Wars, and Falling Darkness*

“Dolly Dagger is a story in *Land of The Story Tellers*. This is a tale of accuracy and truth. We endured the threat of injury and death every day. To survive and come home to a largely hostile population bred among us anger and a sense of revenge. The climate today is a 100% reversal of goodwill for veterans and support long overdue.”

Cpl. Aldo Martinelli

United States Marine Corps,
Tour of Vietnam 1967-1968

Note: Aldo was shot through the chest by an NVA sniper on April 19th of 1968, far north in Quang Tri Province. He survived from the love of his fellow Martines, the doctors and nurses at Chelsea Naval Hospital, and now lives in Florida with his wife Shelia and daughter Julie.

Dear Stephen,

“Thank you for your copy of the short story, *The Mexicans*, kindly inscribed. You know how I love to read! And thanks too for the engaging photo. President Bush joins me in sending our best wishes.”

—Laura Bush

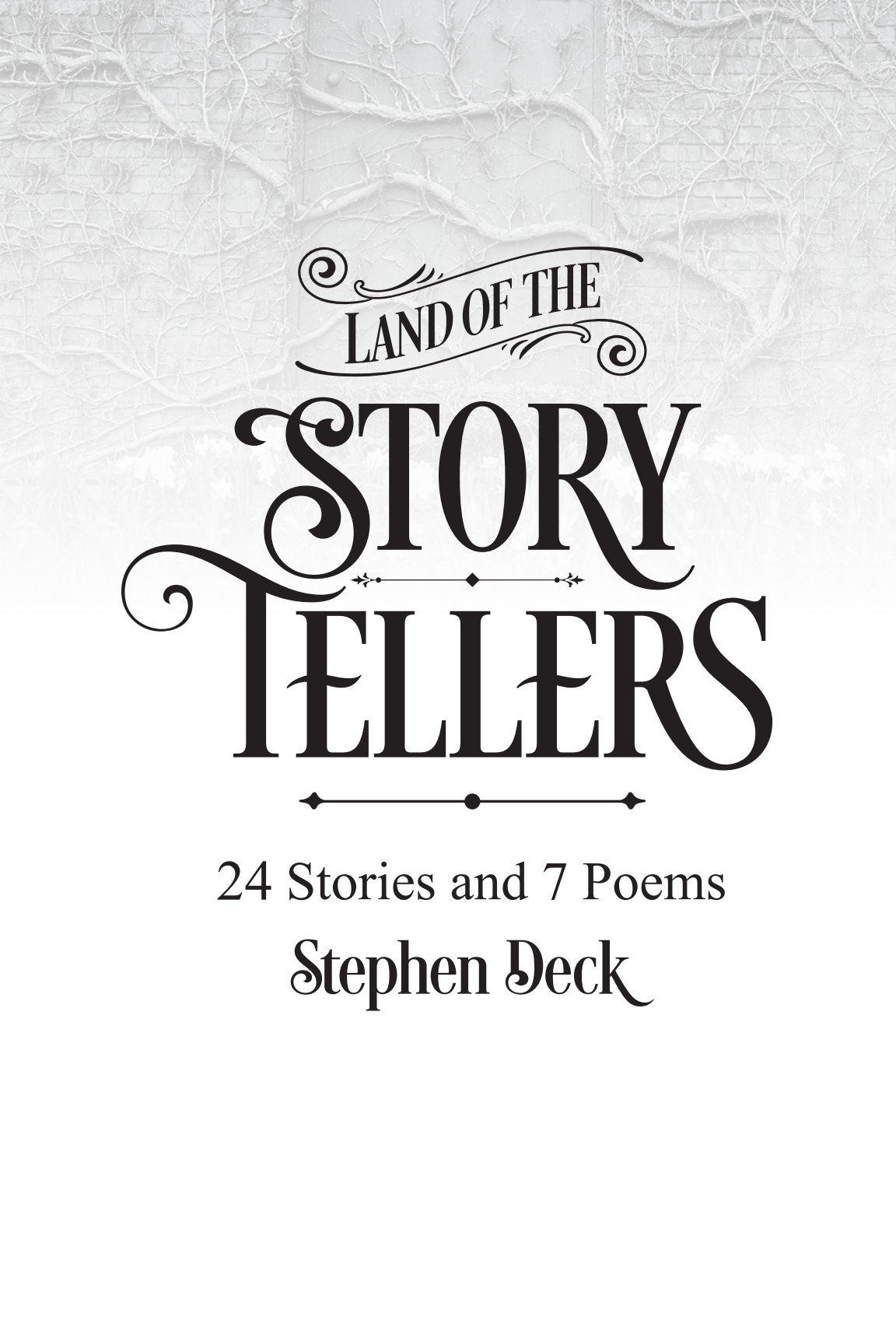
Note: *The Mexicans* is a story in *Land of The Story Tellers*.

“The choice of words in *Land of The Story Tellers* are like brush strokes of an artist...they capture and engulf the reader into the expressions of great storytelling.

The author’s abilities to capture the essence of the environment and conduct the readership through the windows of time, sparks the imagination.

The story of May Rain is penned through a true event, the author fishing on Ashfield Lake. The tale ends— “Sometimes in fishing, the lessons go beyond deep waters and the catching of fish.” This story allowed me to reflect on many of my life lessons learned while fishing along my grandfather and memories made. Some books find us at just the right time.”

—Donald Wilda, wildlife artist



LAND OF THE

STORY
TELLERS

24 Stories and 7 Poems

Stephen Deck

Land of the Story Tellers

2nd Edition

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or locales is entirely coincidental. The story of *Texas Hardpan* is inspired by true events.

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Artwork by Stephen Deck

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Preface

The first story of this book was written long ago. It's one of my first short stories. Some of the earliest stories are *Field of Dreams*, *A Long Wait* and *May Rain*. The last short story in this collection under *Direct Object Formula*, was written during the past Christmas season. The tales in this book span twenty-five years of telling stories.

You will find many stories in this book. There is a story here for just about everybody. All readers that believe in God and mystery of the Holy Ghost — will love all of them. *First Steps* was designed to read a very simple story; something grade school children could grasp. Reading from the other hand, the story *When the Subject Matter Caught Up with Everything* was inspired from *Banal Story* by Ernest Hemingway. It's one of those choppy-whoppy stories you see around on rare occasions, with the company of several plots twisting and weaving around, a facet of many diamond faces twirling in your mind. I've got no favorites in this collection. All of them have brushed me against the superclusters of adventure; many strange things were revealed in dream-like worlds.

These stories were written in many places. I've converted my hotel room at the Mountainside Inn at Telluride, into a combination bachelor pad and boutique writer's station, and wrote stories necked up to the boxed canyons. Some were written on the second floor of the Stowe Inn, and down below they had a free breakfast nook and a long wooden bar for night drinking where I could slug down a few red wines. During those very casting of words, was when I inched behind a real man with a nasty scar running his cheek ordering a maple frosted doughnut — and that's where *Dolly Dagger* formed in my brain. I've written in a sagging-floor old white cottage of The Maples, dead summer months of Grand Isle, and sat on a stiff stool in stifling heat waves, beads of sweat pouring off the brows, wafts of cow manure drifting through the screens and electric fans beating the dead air. But it was here a precious vein of gold was stricken — *Land of The Story Tellers* was born inside that Vermont cottage. Always addicted to the pens, I once wrote for a solid week on a city park bench over inside Dearborn Park of Northridge, California. But most of this writing over all these years, was penned here at home, down in the cozy silence of my cabin-like station.

Stephen King once revealed along the lines, that a writer must be willing to roll in the words. Read all the classics of literature — for here is buried the magic key that can move mountains in storytelling. This is all true: without the inspiration from Edgar Allan Poe, the novel of *Salem's Lot* would have never been fabricated under those dark curtains of horror. Edgar taught Stephen some fancy moves behind the scenes.

It seems looking back, that I've read a million books. Worn jackets right off books. I've read *After the Storm* no less than fifty times. There's a gripping meter and pace to that sea tale, that I

wanted for my toolbox. Ernest gave it with open arms to Stephen.

It's hard to pick a winner. There have been so many wonderful books and stories. My bookcase is full of them. But the most beautiful story I've ever read, was *The Story of Pandora* by Emilie Kip Baker.

In the first opening of the ornate chest, served with a soft-feeling cord of gold strands in a curious knot — which was delivered to Pandora by an old man who was none other than Mercury the messenger in disguise — a host of tiny creatures like brown-wing moths poured from the chest. The malicious little sprites were so numerous, they clouded Pandora and bit and stung the curious woman, and they hovered about her husband Epimetheus with the same nasty medicine. It was not, however, until later they realized the extent of Pandora's folly, for the little brown-winged creatures were all the spirits of evil that had never entered the earth. Some of their names were Pain and Sorrow; Pride and Jealousy; and Poverty and Hunger.

But in the second fondling of the ornate chest with carved figures that had faces which changed at each glance ... she heard a wee soft whisper in the chest, and it said, "Open, Pandora, please, please open and let me out." In spite of her blunder of turning free the host of evil beings, Pandora was curious to see what was begging so plaintively for freedom. So, with the consent of Epimetheus, she lifted the lid once more, and out fluttered a tiny little creature with beautiful gauzy wings. She flew straight to Pandora, then to Epimetheus, and upon her touch all their hurts were healed, and all their pain forgotten. The name of the gentle messenger was Hope. She had hidden in the chest, after hearing that Jupiter was sending so many ills to fret mankind. Hope knew that once the evil beings were set free, could never again be shut up in their narrow

prison of the chest; but wherever these evil spirits flew — even to the remotest corners of earth — Hope followed them and brought healing with her wings.

And that's why *The Story of Pandora* is the most beautiful story to me, because the world has the wings of Hope in the salient clouds, and even in the days when man neglects the altar of God, the virtue of Hope will still be remembered in the votive offering from the beds of suffering, and remedy against the bites and stings of the brown-wing sprites.

These are the necessary things learned from reading. They form the cartridge belts of silver bullets for the writer. In all these books and stories, these are the writers who had meaningful lessons and formed the author of this book:

Junior writing instructors, set premise between the margins. Maynard Hershorn out of *Winning* magazine, was one of the best short-story men in the business. He gave me tight sentence blocks, which are very useful in a street fight, when you want to pepper a reader with combinations. Willian Nack was a sportswriter out of *Sports Illustrated*, and he taught me about the proper formation of paragraph blocks. Mike Barnicle once covered Metro Regions in the *Boston Globe*, and what he revealed was the best stories are often told by beating the pavement of foot, and reporting from the ghetto blocks of Beantown. A ballpoint pen writing the journalism alive and breathing along the curb belts.

But the only newspaper man I ever loved, a frictionless kind of mellow guy born with midwestern charm out of Chamberlin, Illinois — was the best sportswriter who ever lived. His name was Bill Lyon, and he was the sensitive interloper who covered all the big cheese stuff out of the *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Bill Lyon had his way with words; and they rubbed off on you. Some of them still

live inside of me. There's not much room in the newspaper column, and he came at you right away with such a beautiful flourish of words. Take for instance the beginning of "Successful Seniors":

We begin with the basic premise of golf, the very bedrock upon which the sport is founded, and that is: This stupid game is impossible to play.

You got it, partner, agreed Lee Trevino, cheerful as usual. Once you understand that, it'll keep you from cutting your wrists.

Take for instance the opening bell of "Is Ryan Mellowing?"

In windbreaker, green shorts and white sneakers, Buddy Ryan showed up for his first official post-mortem of 1989 looking downright natty and nautical, almost as though he had just come in from a morning of sailing. He was ruddy and relaxed. But then the view from the bridge of his ship is all seashells and balloons and red sails in the sunset. For the moment, at least.

It crushes my heart that Bill Lyon is not around, so he could have read my collection of stories, let alone sign the book's jacket. I've got a good feeling about everything, one of those premonitions where you hear cannon fire in the cloud banks and see a flash of pink in the Tabernacle of words, that he would have been pleased.

Some of my Senior writing instructors were novelists. Take for instance when Vardis Fisher saddled up rugged Samson John Minard, and brushed me across the virtues of courage, fortitude, and mercy for the weak and defenseless in *Mountain Man*. Take the time Russell Annabel penned two sourdoughs on an Alaskan shale buttress, with buckhorn sights on the ribs of a mountain goat, loafing in the immaculate sunbath of white snow fields. Take the efforts from the sweltering jungles of Vietnam, when John DelVecchio wrote *The 13th Valley*. A writer with very little experience, who persevered to write the blockbuster where conflict is steeped in meticulous realism and seeping with philosophic

musings. This effort was monumental, and the two sentences that always stayed with me were: *We think ourselves into war. The antecedents are in our minds.*

Cormack McCarthy was never my writing instructor. Done plumb missed the lessons. Watched the movie. My favorite movie. Them damn Cohen brothers. So damn good. But I've read the sheriff's prologue in *No Country for Old Men* maybe three or four times. Four times. Wasn't it somethin' though when McCarthy necked up those two nasty nouns of gas and chamber in the first sentence? Jesus Christ Almighty Man. They jacked you in place didn't they though. You could already feel the doom-soaked prose rising from the Texas southwest plains, long before Llewellyn Moss tries to dump a pronghorn squinting down through a Unerlt telescopic sight, let alone when you stumbled on the drug deal gone bad with all the dead bodies, large dog gutshot and dead, the desert floor riddled with brass shell casings and coagulated blood everyplace; the tin sides of the desert rigs walked with the linear tracing of automatic weapons, all the tires shot flat; and over there in the golden sands a shotgun with a pistol grip and twenty-round drum magazine. Jesus Christ Almighty. .00 Buck is one thing. But no kinds of fancy moves will save your hide when sprayed with that kind of firepower. There's no rolls on the dice for that medicine.

Those are the kinds of things I learned in Senior Writing III. There were other voices on the podium, but through much time and suffering, many of their names escape. But thinking back now I recall the rhyme and meter sewn under my rough and tumble hide, from William Carlos Williams, Archibald MacLeish, and Walt Whitman.

Things got real pinched on the top floor of Master Writing Instruction. Three figures which had risen to the symbolic creams

of perfection. The best short story men who ever lived.

You should have seen and heard what Edgar Allan Poe told me up inside the chamber, behind the black velvet curtains, and thus gloomy hall, shut out from the morning moon and sun and tabernacle of blue sky; and it was here with gangs of flambeau burning with the ghastly lights falling across Poe's face, where I needed to pull back because the wild colors of stained-glass windows had painted such a multitude of colors extreme on his countenance. But what he told me was priceless.

Nope. Sorry. Can't leak or won't be telling. Poe made me swear on a stack. Must have been six or seven bibles. Seven bibles. And if you saw the glints in his eye in the reveal, the candlelight falling on his black eyes ... you wouldn't talk either.

Stephen Crane taught me to paint with strokes of colours, and write pointed sentences with vivid and explosive prose, where the reader is witness to symbolic grids and jabbed with specks and flashes of tumultuous forces.

It must be said, nevertheless, that Stephen Crane's thought process in the sentence blocks is singular in his masterful construction, and students could stand on their heads for years with copy-cat pens, but never find that shifting meter where the reader feels a constant patter as if stricken by hail.

Ernest Hemingway had the most influence on this writer. He revealed all the things you must know about in telling stories. Write in short declarative sentences. Use riffs of one-syllable words. Listen very close to what you heard in the café, but only write what was really important. The things that grabbed you. Don't tell the reader everything, only what they need to know. The dialogue moving as sunken logs through the subject matter, is very powerful in story telling too.

The Lord was my salvation. He provided the writer's gifts.

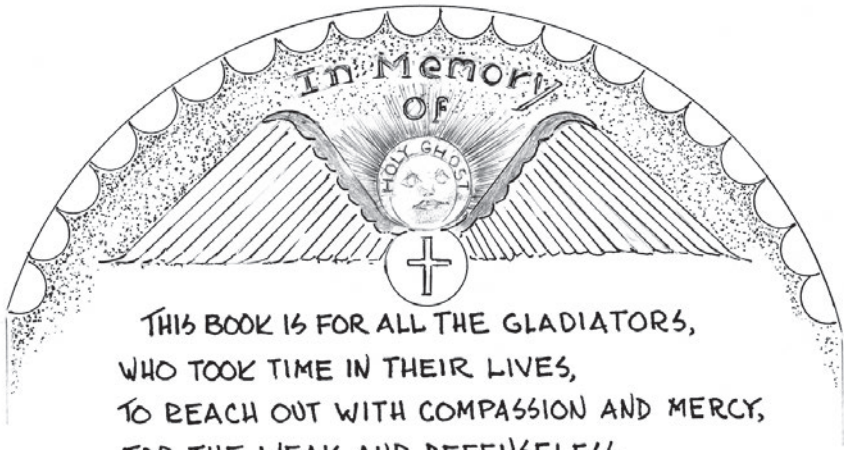
But it was the writing instructors stricken above, who sailed sparks from their die grinders and cut open my gut chamber, fussed around and hard wired the planetary drive gears, then stitched me back up for combat with husky rivets swedged with blows of ball peen hammers. And let me be perfectly clear, that without their pivotal groom and calibration jobs, I would never have been able to pen the collection of stories here to follow.

The best way to read these stories, is one by one. The way they have fallen on the pages. Treat them as a box of chocolates. There is no room here for jumpy fellows, nervous types, or speed readers. Read slowly; feel the words. Let the syntax and pictorial language complete its work. Goals here are to rise emotions.

It's time to snuggle up in an easy chair, under the yellow glow of arc lights. Lace up your well-oiled boots, slip on a honed Buck belt knife with a razor edge, and above all pack a liquid-filled Silva compass.

We are embarking on far places in *Land of The Story Tellers*. These are stories with hands-on approach to subject matter and spun in the timeless themes of courage in the face of defeat and personal triumph. I dare exclaim in these stores here stricken, if I'm not greatly mistaken, the assembly of readers will be more well-rounded and with a good deal of their souls nudged back straight into position.

Stephen Deck
2021



THIS BOOK IS FOR ALL THE GLADIATORS,
WHO TOOK TIME IN THEIR LIVES,
TO REACH OUT WITH COMPASSION AND MERCY,
FOR THE WEAK AND DEFENSELESS ...

AND THOSE WHO DIED INSIDE,
FROM PERSECUTION'S CHAINS,
SHACKLED BY GOSSIP IN SLANDER'S NAME ...

AND FOR THOSE WHO SIMPLY,
DIED TOO YOUNG ...



YE WHO read are still among the living; but I who write shall have long since gone my way into the region of shadows. For indeed strange things shall happen, and secret things be known, and many centuries shall pass away, ere these memorials be seen of men. And, when seen, there will be some to disbelieve, and some to doubt, and yet a few who will find much to ponder upon in the characters here graven with a stylus of iron.

The year had been a year of terror, and of feelings more intense than terror for which there is no name upon the earth. For many prodigies and signs had taken place, and far and wide, over sea and land, the black wings of the Pestilence were spread abroad. To those, nevertheless, cunning in the stars, it was not unknown that the heavens wore an aspect of ill; and to me, the Greek Oinos, among others, it was evident that now had arrived the alternation of that seven hundred and ninety-fourth year when, at the entrance of Aries, the planet Jupiter is conjoined with the red ring of the terrible Saturnus. The peculiar spirit of the skies, if I mistake not greatly, made itself manifest, not only in the physical orb of the earth, but in the souls, imaginations, and meditations of mankind.

SHADOW - A PARABLE

-By Edgar Allan Poe



The Old Lady

The old lady in her black coat, curious grey plastic bonnet tied under her chin, came along the trampled edge of the parking lot on a winter morning, and the weak sun peeked on a horizon where gliding pale streams of basest clouds mingled; the rags of time hung on the old lady.

The old lady was still good size. She was still over six feet tall, ninety-six years, and still driving. Her dark blue Rambler was necked in a stall which provided the shortest distance and the flattest ground for her black boxy shoes, and the faded blue skin of the automobile was dented here and there, and both fenders had been in brushes. Twinkling in the faint rays of sun, were white beads of a rosary chaplet hanging off the rear mirror; the silver cross dangled and twirled in the Rambler's speed.

Confrontation assembled — a flight of eight stairs challenged the old lady's access into the Soldiers' Home. She'd been that route countless times, the steep river of concrete steps. This figure in the habiliment of black, was on no account a strange face on the premise. She'd been a volunteer who tended on soldiers for 37 years

now, an ordeal which began out of loneliness after her husband died of a massive heart attack in night sleep.

Warning chants of one-way conversation was rising under her breath, which came with the four walls of living alone, “Down with the good, up with the bad... Down with the good, up with the bad.” Her meter of words was parrot-like, as if recited on several occasions from Q-card stock.

The furrows of her finger bones were deep hollows of fields that had seen many of harvest, felt the soft touch of love, and as she tugged herself up the black handrails of cold steel, a spray of blue veins ran hither and tither across her backhand. “Down with the good, up with the bad.” The old lady put her good leg down — steady, oh how very steady! — and then dragged the bad knee and worn joints up and over the cornice. This practice had considerably worn the shoe leather. The black top grains of the cowhide were now a battle worn grey along the arch. She was too old for polishing shoes, and her vanity had been enveloped with dignity and sagacious conduct in part of frail bones. She once quizzed the chaplain inside the Soldiers’ Home on these things.

“Why did I live so long?”

“To set examples,” said the chaplain. His face did not change in the reveal. He’d pressed her shoulder down with a firm assurance. A spark had been seen across her grey eyes.

The old lady crested the eighth stair. She entered through the double glass door trailing her bad leg and wood cane, and into the tempest of figures and voices. It had been a full week since she heard conversation. Voice carried well in her home, but they were the company of television and radio stations. She checked herself against the spilling of mumbled words and waded into the stream of figures.

The old lady tried desperately to break into conversation. Frequently she seemed about to address people, her mouth on the edge of words.

She spun like a bear reared under the golden nectar of a honey tree, wheeling in her black coat, arms with fur cuffs sweeping the crowd, wide-eyed trying to manufacture a smile that would draw somebody in close enough so they could be cornered for exchange.

But the floor was in gear, there was a bustle in the crowd, and many in foot traffic knew her reputation as a talker. These people were on pinched time and were holding back emotions for their loved old soldiers on higher floors. Three nurses were spilling their weekend into the crowd, speaking loud enough across the lobby so nobody missed any of the fine details, walking brisk toward their duty stations in white pump shoes and sky-blue scrubs. Even the hunched men in wheelchairs rolled past, cupping the big wheels with fast jabs of their ancient hands, gliding swiftly over the tiles and past the woman.

At last, however, the old lady spotted two suitable victims for conversation. The pair of lovely young women were at the sign-in book. All volunteers needed to sign the book, and at that point attached their name badge for proper address from the old soldiers. They were well-dressed on this Sunday morning, and one of them was an over-strawberry blonde who was wearing a stunning peach blouse with a pleated chest and long puffy sleeves that were well-ironed into fashion of a full-rigged schooner with sails set. They seemed to have plenty of time, and with timid smiles and all giggles, were carrying on exceedingly polite conversation across the counter with a telephone operator.

The old lady nestled in close and looked over their shoulder. Her height was advantageous in this observation, and the girls had

not detected her presence. The old lady listened to them for quite some time. Their zest brought an impulse out from the old lady, and she suddenly exclaimed off her lips,

“Excuse me... but do you know anybody who travels over the mountain? I’m getting too old for driving myself.”

The two girls spun and looked up at those large eyes turned down on them.

“I’m willing to pitch in a few dollars for gasoline.”

In that instant the two girls had braced their hands on the sign-in book and stared at the figure that loomed them. The old lady had arrested their attention. For the two girls saw in her wisdom and thick skins of resilience of those who have lived through war.

They seemed about to exchange a smile with the stranger, but suddenly checked against it and froze up. The lonesome countenance of the old lady had zapped their halo of babyhood. The girls could see the miles on her face, the wrinkles on her baby-soft cheeks patted down with rouge powder, and the varnish of fire-engine red lipstick across her wide lips. The red really popped her face in the bath of window light.

“I’m sorry,” said the young lady in the pleated peach blouse.

“I’m so sorry... but I’m driving my father’s car. We are not allowed over the mountain.”

“Coming over the mountain can be dangerous business. The guardrails are a menace, and there’s no telling what could happen on ice. Your father has done well in his guidance.”

The ages tried desperately to claw at the edge of a congenial offering. It crossed the mind of the closest girl to grab her wrist with mercy, but when she saw the sad eyes and blue veins with a shrunken wrist, she imagined how cold the old lady’s blood must run, and that the sensation of casket people might be running under

her skin. So she patted the fur cuff. The other girl in the window light, gave a symbolic peace sign. Both girls finally gave a smile, but they were sensitive smiles, on the edge of personal sorrow.

“I’d be willing to walk to the school bus stop,” pressed the old lady. “They have a wonderful green bench under cover, and I could wait for my ride.”

“I don’t know anybody,” said the strawberry blonde with a rueful face.

Silence engulfed the atmosphere. The telephone operator was measuring all their faces. Although yellow sun streamed through the window glass, a dark shadow of disappointment fell across the old lady’s face. It was almost like another year suddenly slipped away from her.

“Don’t you?” mustered the old lady. Her voice had risen into a state of despair.

“Well, no, ma’am,” softly replied one girl’s tender heart, “I don’t know a soul who crosses the mountain.”

The girls finished signing in the large book on the blue lines and fastened their name tags. They were white name tags with Roman letters. Their names were Giselle and Valentina. No personal information had been divulged between the baptism of conversation. The old lady’s eyes were poor for reading under scrutiny; she averted the name plates and pinched back on her wanton imagination for any reveal.

Then the girl sheepishly continued as those precariously walking the cornice of a ledge — “But if you give me your number and address, I may find someone in my travels, and if so, I will certainly let you know of it.”

The girl produced a stock of card and with a blue inked pen, and wrote down what came out of the old lady’s mouth.

“My, you have fine penmanship.” The old lady had taken miniature bear steps toward the girls and snuggled up tight. The girls could see a new light around the old lady, and her jowls were casting a baby smile.

“Thank you so much!” She gave the girls a thumbs up, but the grip of arthritis had arrested her thumb in the anti-aircraft position; nevertheless, the message sailed clean.

The old lady opened her coin purse. The girls pulled back slightly from a tip. She procured three hard candy. They were holiday candy with red and white marble. She plopped one each with the girls, then expertly unwrapped the plastic jacket with her long bookkeeper fingers, and pushed the candy past her lips of fire engine red.

Then the old lady wheeled and disappeared into the crowd. Sunday mass in the chapel had just broke, and a vast sea of men in wheelchairs and holding themselves with canes, visitors and loved ones alike, formed tight waves of figures as they moved with haste toward the free coffee and doughnuts up in the canteen.

Having flung her black coat with a soldier-like move across the sofa, she could be seen through the gauze of people, loading the old soldiers in wheelchairs on the elevator. At her size of over six feet, she was marked well in the tide, and with her good leg and bad leg she sailed the men inside with vast spurts of energy.

The next week the old lady waited across the mountain, down in the pinched valley inside her small brick house. She waited all through the day in the silence for the telephone to ring, and with the spark of hope of those living on the edge, waited for the mail. But there had been no takers, and nobody offered.

The telephone remained dead — Oh! So dead that she checked for dial tones several times in the clock’s circuit — and there had

been no mail from good Samaritans who would cross the mountain, even though she had offered the bonus of gasoline money.

This had been no big surprise to the old lady, for the calendar on the wall in the kitchen revealed the whole story — episodes of check marks in the day boxes had made runs on 157 days straight, where nobody had checked on her. It was hard to kid yourself with that kind of evidence.

Time had hardened the old lady, as she'd kept herself in the bounds of her singular reality inside the small brick house. Loneliness in many ways, had become her Red Badge of Courage.

On the grey and silent afternoon of Friday, a huge storm engulfed the mountain. They closed the mountain pass. A gang of yellow sawhorses sealed the road, and two smoke pots sent a pother of raven smoke into the sea of white flakes.

That night in the kitchen, the old lady was into a Boston crème doughnut, its crown laced with chocolate frosting. It was six days old. She'd warmed it inside her toaster oven. She ate very slowly, and opened her mouth wide, and some of the frosting was on her lips. Under the yellow glow of her table lamp, she sipped on black tea and licked back in the sweet chocolate.

It was a Soldiers' Home doughnut. The head cook had given her a dozen. The donations from the bakeries across the village had been generous, and after everyone filled their belly, a surplus with hundreds of doughnuts remained.

The head cook knew well of the old lady's sweet tooth. He'd seen her around for many years now, the old lady who volunteered in the blue battered Rambler, who never missed and was reliable as time. So free doughnuts were really nothing.

The old lady pushed in the last of the doughnut and slugged down the last of her second cup of tea. She took the last look out

the window. It was very dark, the snow twirling down through the rock maples, and a clutch of sparrows was huddled on the porch's cove against the ominous whispers of the storm. Then she retreated to bed.

On the wall of her bedroom in close quarters to the bed post, was a favorite poem of the old lady. It had been there a long time. The poem had been a favorite of her husband too. A warm glow from the electric flambeau cast a yellow ray across the plaque; but on this evening the old lady did not pass an eye over the poem. She was more anxious of an ancient calling, to snuggle under the home-spun love of the colorful quilt, and brace herself against the storm.

Just before she killed the switch, the voice of the Medieval Morning Poem seemed to call across the chamber; there was a desperation in the response of frequency:

*Jesu Lord, blyssed thou be,
For all this nyght thou hast me kepe,
From the fend and his poste,
Whether I wake or that I slepe.*

The old lady wiggled her toes. She was on her back with ankles crossed, and had retired with a silk evening gown. It was shell pink in colour, and ran the length of her calves. The satisfaction of eating chocolate doughnuts was still with her, an inner peace in the storm, and the old lady fell sound to sleep.

That evening the telephone rang. The ringing came long and sharp across the kitchen.

There was urgency in the night call, and the tintinnabulations of peal carried into the parlor. Then a sudden hush fell over the chamber, and the clock's perforce of ticking carried into

the night, and the refrigerator's motor hummed in the silence.

Well into morning, the telephone rang again. The storm had stopped in the late night, and sun was streaming through the eastern window of the bedroom. The phone rang a long cry. What seemed only minutes past, the crying of rings resumed, and made challenge to the prior sequence of dings.

But there was no answer, and a sea of silence returned in the chambers. The old lady had died in the night. She was still on her back, with both hands crossed over her chest. Outside a million diamonds of fresh powder sparkled in the sun, and below the blue sky in the looming rock maples, a pair of cardinals sat angel-like on the limbs. They perched in silence over the glitter of immaculate whiteness, and basked in the field of yellow sun bath.

On mountain's crest, they'd pulled the sawhorses of construction yellow, and snuffed the smoke pots. The snow plow operators had shoved back the banks. Sanding operations were completed, and the roadbed had been captured. Automobiles streamed over the summit. A vendor was selling coffee from a road stand on the shoulder, and was doing quite well in attendance.

Way across the mountain, down in the hamlets, a figure had just finished shoveling of walks and stairs. They'd rested the red shovel against the clapboards, stomped their snow boots on the threshold, and entered the home where a fireplace was banked with cherry coals.

But there was still a conscience that hung above the figure. It had hovered about through the storm. They picked up the receiver, and dialed that same number on the white card stock fixed to the cork board with a blue-head thumb tack. The phone on the other end was ringing loud and clear. Valentina and Giselle had carried through with the word.