

Ewing Campbell

LAST RITES

The strand lies long and narrow, at least six miles long but no more than a half mile across at its widest point, which is next to the port. To the south across the port is the city; to the north, the causeway. On both sides there is water, the bay to the east, the back bay to the west. In the soft light reflecting from clouds high in the sky, the strand appears deserted.

No, there are still families that have not left. They are loading their cars.

The shore and the bay are divided by a wide band of muddy sea floor, but this uncommon feature is softened by the glow of light reflecting from clouds high in the sky.

Within a darkened room an old man lies very still upon a bed. It is difficult to make out his features. By his side, another is leaning over him. Perhaps he is a priest, although it is possible that he is only the doctor. Whichever he is, he says to the old man, "That is no sin. You do what you have to." The boy stands unnoticed in the darkened corner. He does not cry; he only watches, his hair wet, a blanket wrapped about him.

The strand lies long and narrow and forms an angle. Its base extends along the port while its perpendicular line lies parallel to the coast and divides the plane. In the corner of the angle, the widest point of the strand, the streets of North Beach are deserted, the houses abandoned.

Light comes through a broken slat in the Venetian blind as the voice from the radio drones monotonously on. It lies, a single bar, upon the floor near the opposite wall. The man turns off the radio and goes to the door, looking out at the afternoon.

Rays from the setting sun are reflecting off clouds high in the sky,

throwing a soft, glowing light over the . . .

"What is it, F.J.?"

He does not answer. Outside, he watches his neighbors finish loading their cars and leave.

"Are the Ashfords gone?"

"They just left."

"And what about the crews from the offshore rigs? Aren't they coming in?"

"The boat went out this morning and picked them up."

He turns away from the door and looks toward the woman who sits at the table.

"Maybe you better go to Beth's."

"And you? You won't go?"

"No, but maybe you and Billy should."

His expression is thoughtful but does not show any signs of anxiety. Neither is it relaxed; it reflects an air of preoccupation as if held by some fixed idea. His is the face of one who works outside, brown, creased by the elements. Her face—its expression—is the opposite, anxious, questioning, perhaps a little frightened.

"Why don't we all go to Beth's, F.J.?"

"Someone's got to look after the house."

"What could you do, F.J.? You couldn't do anything if you stayed."

"I could try. You two go on to your sister's."

"No, not if you won't," she says.

Reeves suddenly looks about the room, then at his wife.

"Where's the boy?"

"He's down at the beach."

"Get him back here."

"He's not in the water, F.J. Let him be."

He again turns on the radio and returns to the door, looking out at the sun as it continues to set. Inside, the sunlight shines nearer the wall. The radio plays soft music, and his wife waits.

"Your grandfather left in 1919, F.J. Why won't you?"

"Yes, he left and lost everything. And he never forgot it."

"That was before they built the seawall though."

"The seawall won't help on the beach."

"Didn't the radio say it was going in somewhere up the coast?"

"Port Arthur. If it doesn't change course."

"When will you put up the shutters?" she asks.

"Not till morning, but get Billy up here anyway."

"He's all right, F.J. Leave him alone."

Reeves looks at her without speaking.

She does not return his look; instead she looks at the table. Then she rises, saying, "Okay, if it bothers you that much I'll get him."

"It bothers me that much."

She goes out and Reeves turns back to the front door. All along the beach the houses are boarded up, abandoned. Not a single automobile is to be seen in the street that runs parallel to the water. The boats have been pulled high onto land, turned over and staked to the ground. Out in the water, the boy is caught by the undercurrent and pulled under. He emerges farther out, struggling, but is again pulled under. The old man is swimming to him with strong sure strokes. Again the boy comes up, but the old man has him now. No, it was then. Sometime before, perhaps in 1919. Yet the water is calm; not a ripple is seen, only the band of muddy sea floor and the old man returning to shore with the boy.

A voice interrupts the music, goes on monotonously for a while, then the music resumes. Behind him, the light coming through the broken slat has left the floor and moved up the wall. Despite the apparent desolation a car slowly turns the corner and approaches.

There is a design painted on the side of the door, a derrick, black and simple, centered on an oval of mint green. The company name is circumscribed, above and below, inside the border of the oval. The first two short words, above, are divided by the derrick, while the longer last word, below, forms its base.

The car stops in front of the cottage and the driver gets out.

As Reeves lets the screen door slap shut and walks toward him, the man says, "Looks like everyone's cleared out but you."

Reeves looks along the street but does not speak. Across the sand, the woman is walking toward the boy, who is facing the water. She is just about to reach him. Except for the woman and boy the beach is deserted. It is a clean beach, unmarked by piers, and with only a gradual slope to the sea. Beyond the shore the water is green and calm, without the faintest ripple, although it is withdrawn from the shore, exposing a wide band of muddy sea floor. There is no impression of flow or ebb, only the obvious evidence that something has sucked the

water out from shore.

"Well, they got them all off and in okay."

"I know," Reeves answers.

The man takes off his coat and puts it through the open car window, placing it on the back of the seat. He then removes a logbook from the seat and turns back to Reeves.

"You ready to go to work?"

"No, not now."

The man opens the book and moves his finger down the page.

"Got one in Starr Country. Your old stomping grounds."

Reeves nods.

"What about it? You want on?"

"Later, after this is over."

The man takes a pen from his shirt pocket and circles something, then tosses the book through the open window. Turning back to Reeves, he unknits his tie and loosens his collar. The tie has indistinct purple threads running through it, and completely untied, it hangs loosely on the front of his white shirt.

"Not anyone sick, is there? Maria? The boy?"

"No."

"If there is we can see that they're moved to a safe place."

"No one's sick, Walt."

"How come you're not getting out then, like the others?"

"I'm staying with my house."

"I thought the beach was to be evacuated."

"It is," Reeves answers. "I'll be staying just the same."

"It's your business, but this will be the first to go if she hits."

"It's supposed to go in at Port Arthur."

"True, but you'd be safer away from the coast. I need you in Starr County. Why don't you pack up the wife and boy and go with me?"

"Being safe won't help my house."

"Neither will staying, F.J., and you have to earn a living too. That's also your responsibility."

"I'll take care of things myself."

The bow of a tanker, low in the water, appears just past the point and grows larger as it emerges from the port. The sun is reflecting from the glass panes on the bridge but no points of sunlight are caught by the water, which is east of the strand, for the water is perfectly still. Yet

the almost white sand is illuminated in the sun's soft, oblique rays. Beyond the sand, on the motionless water, the tanker now begins to grow smaller, receding, going outward toward the offshore wells just visible on the horizon.

"Another one leaving without unloading. No one wants to get caught here when it comes," the man says. His expression is thoughtful, anxious. "Even the refineries are preparing for the worst."

On the near edge of the empty space, side by side, the woman and the boy are still standing. They are looking across the wide band dividing shore from sea, their heads following the boy's arm as it stretches outward, then swings upward, describing an arc that sweeps across the sky and back toward the shore.

"This place was wiped out in 1919, you know."

"I know. My grandfather was here then."

"You see? He stayed and look what it got him."

"That's why I'm staying."

"Because he did?"

"Yes."

The man looks silently at Reeves and lifts his hand to his brow, brushing at something unseen. He lets his hand fall to his shirt and begins to search his pockets by first patting the right one, then crossing to the left, and unable to locate his objective, he gives up the search altogether. When Reeves offers him a cigarette, he declines. So this is not what he is looking for. In apparent disregard for the lost item, he squats on his heels, taking up a stick, and begins drawing in the sand. It is only when he stops to speak again that the stick is moved, revealing a clearly inscribed pattern circumscribing a blank center. The pattern is oval in design. With four quick stokes, he fills the center with a structure resembling a derrick.

"F.J., we need you to help bring in that well."

Reeves does not speak.

"After all, it's not like you're running out on anything. Whether you're here or not won't make the slightest difference."

Still Reeves is silent.

"Well, at least consider Maria and the boy. You can't put them through something like this."

"They can go to her sister's," Reeves says, "but I'm staying."

The man again stares at Reeves. Finally he looks away, drops the

stick, and picks up a handful of sand, letting it trickle through his fingers until only a small amount remains in his upturned hand. Sifting through what is left with his thumb, he flicks off all but a few grains. There is an awkward pause as they both look at the remaining sand.

The man reaches out, thumb extended, and starts to speak, but Reeves stops him.

"No, don't bother, Walt. I can handle everything."

"That's your final word?"

"Yes."

The man stands up, produces a handkerchief, and wipes his hands.

"When this is over, I'll contact you. Sometimes it's better to take a little help, F.J."

He goes around the car and stops at the door. He seems about to speak, but does not. At last, he gets in and drives off. Reeves watches the car move away; then he turns toward the cottage, slipping his hands into his pockets. The woman and the boy have left the edge of the exposed mud and are walking back. Behind them, where they have walked, two lines extend to the empty space. The tanker has disappeared. The water, the beach, the street are all deserted. Reaching the front door, Reeves stops and takes a coil of rope from a peg on the outside wall. It is weather faded and stiff from disuse and the salt air. He carries it inside and places it on the table; then taking a paper sack of ten-penny nails, he transfers the contents to a waterproof bag. While he is doing this, his wife comes in with the boy.

"Was that Walt Hansen?" she asks.

Reeves looks at the boy.

"Yes."

"He has a job for you?"

"Yes, they've got one in Starr County. He wanted us all to go."

"What did you say?"

"I told him I was staying."

"Oh."

"Are we going to ride it out?" the boy asks.

"There probably won't be anything to ride out, Billy. I hope you weren't planning a swim."

The boy shakes his head. "The water's kind of strange looking, but guess what happened while I was down on the beach."

"What was that?"

"You know all those pelicans and cranes?"

"Yes."

"They just all took off and headed inland. There must have been a million. It looked like all the birds in the world filling the sky."

"Must have been some sight."

"I wish you could have seen it."

"F.J.," the woman says, "look at the sunset. I've never seen one like it before."

She has gone to the door and is looking out toward the west. The man and the boy join her. Rays of the setting sun are reflecting from clouds high in the sky, throwing soft, glowing light over the deserted strand.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Mrs. Reeves murmurs.

"My grandfather called it a brick-dust sky."

"Oh?"

"Yes. But that was another time."