

# The Hard Edge of Things

I thought how strange it was to find myself after all these years back in downtown Temple, Texas, with no money on a Saturday afternoon, facing the hard edge of things and no choice about it. I'd hit the limit of what a body could do without a car. The public library closed half an hour ago, and they didn't allow sleeping anyway. I'd been to the park and watched clean-cut guys in shorts pushing their kids in the swings. I walked up one street and down another looking at the empty stores, whitewashed, boarded up. I remembered them when people still shopped there and air-conditioning was new and smelled funny and my mama would buy me a Coke at Mackey's Drug Store. I cupped my hand against the sun and looked through the plate glass where there used to be a department store. A single high-heeled shoe lay sideways on the carpet. I never felt so low.

I made up my mind that minute to walk out to the highway and get out of town, no matter how long it took or how hot it was. But I got stopped after a block by a big freight train passing through, slow as a dream. It had about a hundred cars, so I sat on the high curb to watch it go by. A guy on the other side of the street had the same idea, except he had a flask of peach brandy. He belched and I could smell it and hear it even over the rumble of the train. I read the contents on the sides of the cars: methanol, corn syrup, liquid petroleum gas, gravel. I looked away, up to the big grain silos, and thought how much it looked like Kansas or North Dakota. A black woman came up on the other side of the train, waiting to cross to my side. She wore shorts and a halter top and she had a baby in a stroller. Seeing her flash between the cars as they passed gave an effect like a series of still photos. She looked as hot as me standing there in the sun.

I thought about turning around and heading out South First Street to see the spot where my grandmother's house used to be, that big old house with stained-glass windows and a wide front porch. But just then the last car went by, and I decided I'd head out to the highway like I first planned. There wasn't any point in going to South First anyway, since they'd torn the house down to put in a Diamond Shamrock station and I knew that would only make me feel worse.

So I walked on, down the dusty streets, wondering when they stopped having cabooses on the ends of trains.