



Chapter 1 - This Place

This place is like other places, but it is not. This place has a pool hall. This place has a church. This place has a cemetery. It has then most of the necessary things which would make it some sort of a town. It is no longer a town —at least, not the one that it was because it no longer has its factory. And, it no longer has its town constable. And it no longer has its daily trains; so it no longer has many visitors nor very many new neighbors.

Still, it does have a few saints left around but these are outnumbered by the sinners. And, it does have a lawyer; and it does have an undertaker; and it does have a minister.

And it still has a whore.

And it did have a doctor.

They call this place Black Hawk and they all know that it is dying. But, they don't know why this place is dying.

The abandoned train station is a dried bone which pierces the Illinois prairie. The business district is a starving herd of brick breathing its last sigh before collapse.

There once was an entire town here that its founders had named Black Hawk, Illinois. Now, there is only a road sign at the end of a county blacktopped road. But the sign only says, "Welcome to Black Hawk from the D n m."

The decay of the dwellings in this place progresses from the center of the town square which is intersected by the Santa Fe Railroad tracks. From this point, block by block, proud Victorians

give way to Populist cottages, to Sears Roebuck precuts, to Depression bungalows, to the soffit-less, story-and-a-halfs of the Rural Electrification days. The progression ends with these.

There are no brick-and-frame ranchers, no mid-century ultra-moderns and no Farmer Home Administration split foyers. It is as if construction in Black Hawk stopped in 1948. It is as if the rest of the country went on into 1949 and the Cold War and the Korean War and the War on Poverty and the Vietnam War and Iraq I and Iraq II and the Afghan War, while Black Hawk was caught up in 1948. For Black Hawk, this was the year the rest of the world changed. But after the changes of 1948, this place did not change again.

The people in this place still go to bed at night and never think to lock their doors. Some of them still “red-up” the table after meals. Some of them still ask, "Are you going WITH?" Some of them still sweat on a summer’s day while they lift the hundred pound bales of hay onto the wagons. Some of them still sweat in the tenth inning of daylong, softball tournaments.

Some of the people who live here on Summer nights, still sweat when the one in bed next to them feigns sleep rather than talk about the possibility that soon, another day would begin; a day that would not differ very much from all of the previous days.

Since 1948, a couple of the people have put bullets in their heads. Three were found hanging from nooses in their garages. A few just never woke up, even though their families claimed they had been healthy enough.

Today, December 21, 1972, the town’s doctor has just been found dead in his bed. He had been getting up in years; had outlived his wife; and was known to be going to Peoria to see a heart specialist for the past few years.

The sheriff’s deputy who drove up from the county seat, told the small crowd that had formed in the doorway to the doctor’s home office, that there were no signs of foul play. The deputy said it looked like the doctor had just died in his sleep of old age. The crowd nodded and walked away.

Then, Lester Almond and Wayne, Almond’s trainee, quietly closed the door to the doctor’s bedroom. Moments later, a gurney emerged from the house. A purple shroud covered a humanoid lump on the gurney. The undertaker and his trainee pushed the gurney into the rear compartment of the hearse.

As the undertaker drove away, leaving the trainee on the curb, from his peripheral field of vision, Wayne was certain that he saw his boss wiping tears from his cheek.