than you do him. You never told him mommies love daddies better than anybody else. But we talked it all out, didn't we, son?"

. . . got her attention that time, all right . . .
Out of the corner of his eye he noted the startled glance at him, at Danny, and back again, then the fork laid so quietly on her plate, the hands clasped together, tightly.

"I think Danny's a pretty bright boy." The voice was determinedly light. "He knows I love you best of all the daddies, and I love him best of all the little boys."

Abruptly she rose and walked toward the stove, but he moved quickly despite his size.

"Tell him the truth! You can sneak, and cheat, and lie to me, but not to Danny! Tell him—I'm your husband; you love me most of all. That's the way it has to be!"

Jeannie's glance slid beyond him for a moment, toward the boy.

"You can't measure unlike things, John. My love for you and my love for Danny are different; not more or less—only different."

Her head snapped sideways and an angry red welt appeared almost at once, but she made no sound.

"I didn't mean to slap so hard, but if you act like a child, you should expect to be treated like one. Now, tell Danny . . ."

But the boy was no longer in the kitchen, and during that moment's inattention Jeannie, too, had slipped away from him, out onto the back porch.

Frustrated, he stood behind the screen and taunted, "Walking out won't help—you can still hear me. What do you suppose the neighbors think, seeing you standing there, looking so silly?"

She walked on out into the yard. He watched, baffled for the moment.

. . . can't yell . . . she has to come back, no place to go . . .
Danny . . . reach her through Danny . . . that's the way . . .

He searched through the house, but the boy couldn't be found.

. . . doesn't matter . . . they'll be back . . . tired, awfully tired . . . bed looks good . . .

Dropping heavily across the bed, within minutes he was sound asleep.

The Bottle of Wine
Robert Beggs

Two hours outside of Las Vegas Maynard Winters realized he had never before felt so alone. It had been bad enough in Vegas without Ellen. He knew he should never have gone, but they had always stopped at the Dunes on their way to see the kids in Los Angeles. Ellen had been dead five months now, and somehow he thought Vegas could cast the same hypnotic spell even without her. He wanted to become a part of the lights, the noisy hysterical crowds, the laughter—something—anything. But he had stared into the
bright, multi-colored eyes of the city and been immune to them.

His big Buick sped along the deserted ribbon of road that tied
the desert together. His foot was joined to the accelerator. There
was no sound in his solitary world save the rhythmic thumping of
tires over the tar strips in the road and the roaring of air as the
vehicle rocketed through the the night.

A full moon plated the desert with silver and turned it into a
sea of hollow outlines. Cacti, like nocturnal worshippers, stretched
their grotesque arms to the lunar god. Tumbleweed and sagebrush
were but silver-white abstractions that gave dimension to the great
empty world through which Maynard Winters was speeding. A
speck of white grew out of the darkness until it became a road sign—
a brilliant white glare that disappeared at once. Los Angeles 160.

He looked down at the motionless red bar on his speedometer,
its tip holding steady just past the 90 mark. “Thank God there isn’t
any traffic. I should make L.A. by twelve.”

His thoughts bounced as uncontrollably as the little sphere that
rode the roulette wheel back at the Dunes. They came madly from
nowhere and ricocheted within him—reds and blacks—odds and
evens. The wheel would slow, the ball would clatter into a slot. “I
probably shouldn’t call Eddie when I get in. They’ll be in bed, and
Gladys wouldn’t like it if I woke the baby. The baby. My son’s baby.”

The wheel spun again. The ball whirled and danced and stopped.
“Oh, Ellen, how I miss you. I’m going to see our grandson . . . I
wish you were here. How we wanted this together.”

And then the pellet was launched into its crazy orbit again . . .
spin . . . stop. “I’ve got the wine, Ellen. Remember the wine?
It’s rosé, Gladys’ favorite. We always bring the wine . . .

Ever since Winters had pulled off onto the old highway outside
of Vegas, and night had drowned out the color of the desert, he had
become mesmerized by the monotony of his trip. Even his
thoughts—swiftly changing, sometimes fragmentary, incomplete, yet
ever-present—had become tiring companions. The big car, moving
so steadily, so silently, often seemed not to be moving at all. It hardly
needed a driver, and Winters had become part of his machine. The
absence of scenic diversion and the lack of physical activity had
lulled him into a stupor.

And now, suddenly, a light flashed red on the dashboard—it
crashed into his world, shook him from his trance and replaced his
tormenting boredom with alarm. Automatically he pulled his foot
from the accelerator and pumped the big machine to a stop, steering
it off the road onto the soft cushion of sand.

“Now what the Hell’s the matter?” he shouted out loud. The
temperature warning light answered his question, and he switched
off the ignition. “Well, let’s see if there’s anything we can do,
Winters,” he mumbled as he grabbed the flashlight from the glove
compartment. The sound of his own voice soothed him. He dis-
covered that the hose from the radiator had become disconnected
and the coolant was lost. It would have been insignificant had he been anywhere else than on a deserted highway, in the middle of the desert at night. Now the whole car could have blown apart and it wouldn't have inconvenienced him a bit more.

For a long time he sat in the car trying to think of a solution. He had given up any hope of another car coming by. He had seen only one since he had left Vegas. Occasionally the Buick would pop and creak as its hot metal cooled in the desert night and made Winters think of his auxiliary water bag empty in his trunk. Why couldn't he have thought about it in Vegas when he had stopped for gas? His road map told him Paradise, California, was less than ten miles ahead, but he though it best if he took the hike in the morning. He pulled his coat up around him and tried to doze off. For a while he watched the hands on the dashboard clock. Each minute they clicked off was like an hour.

"Hello! You all right in there?"

Winters opened his eyes. The night was with him yet and his world was still rendered in black and silver. His heart pounded its way into his throat and he spun toward the voice.

"Need any help?" it crackled. There was a figure peering down at him from a horse-drawn wagon.

Winters forced a reply. "Oh! Hello—no, I'm all right. I must have dozed off—I didn't hear you come up."

"Well, just thought I'd ask. Didn't mean to trouble you none. Git up, Feller." The wagon started away.

"Wait! Wait a moment. I do need help. Do you have some water?"

"Got a canteen if ya need a drink."

"No. No, I'm afraid that won't do. I need it for my car. How far are you going?"

"To town. If yer buggy's broke down, you kin ride on in with me."

Winters' eyes had become accustomed to the darkness of the desert night and now he could make out the features of his visitor. It was a small woman, balanced like a rag doll on the tattered seat of a buckboard. She seemed to be held in place by the moonlight, nothing more. He accepted her offer. "Thanks. Thanks very much. I'll take my suitcase if there's room—in case I have to stay over." He grabbed the leather bag, locked the car and climbed up onto the seat of the old wagon.

"Git up." The woman shook the reins, and the buckboard jerked gently forward and bumped up onto the highway. Winters turned and placed his suitcase in the back, and as he settled as comfortably as he could on the hard seat, he studied his rescuer. She was an old woman, but he could not even guess how old. Her eyes were set deep and tied into place with wrinkles. There seemed to be no flesh, just skin like leather dried in countless suns. Her lips were folded in over toothless gums and her chin jutted out like the bow of an
ancient ship. She sat hunched over, abundantly draped in colorless remnants of faded fabric. He could not tell how tall or small she was, nor where her arms and legs should connect. For all the world she was but a bundle of rags with a head and hands and feet. Then he realized he was staring and he turned away.

"Don't see many new folks out this way since they opened the new road." The old woman turned toward Winters and deep in her eyes there was moonlight. "What brings ya into these parts and who are ya, if you don't mind my askin'?”

"No. No, I don't mind at all. My name is Winters. I live in Phoenix and I'm on my way to see my new grandson in Los Angeles. Lucky for me you came along. I thought I was going to have to spend the night in the car. Do you live nearby?"

Her eyes seemed to smile. "I got me a little place on a hill close by to Paradise."

Winters settled back and turned his eyes toward the old horse that pulled the buckboard slowly through the darkness. If he had ever had any apprehension about the journey with this strange woman, it was gone now. The wagon rocked gently on its tired springs. The wooden wheels creaked and squeaked a hypnotic lullaby and the rhythmic clacking of hoofs on the concrete road cast a tranquil spell.

"May I ask your name?"

"Ginny," she replied. "My real name's Virginia Belle, but nobody never calls me that. My old man, he used to call me Gin on account of he knew how I hated it. My old man, he was mean."

The old woman turned toward Winters and began to unburden her soul. "My old man—his name was Ben—he's dead now, but when he was livin' he was mean—real mean. He's probably givin' the devil himself a problem right now. Ben used to beat me, Mr. Winters. He'd like to a killed me more'n a few times. It was the liquor that done it to him. It seemed like he was always drunk. He run the saloon in Paradise for years. Hard to remember how many, it was so long ago. I reckon Ben he put more in him than he sold and then when he'd get real bad he'd take to whippin' me. I couldn't of took it much longer, but then he died. He died drunk."

Winters looked into her face. It was an old face, a tired face. The desert moon painted it silver. He tried, but could not think of anything to say. He was fascinated by her and extremely sorry for her.

"I was fifteen when Ben and me got married, and I reckon it was the happiest day in my life. It was an escape. He took me off the ranch. I used to live on a ranch up north in the valley. We didn't have nothin' up there. My paw—he was my step paw—he worked us kids half to death trying to get by on that place. My brothers was older'n me and they run away. They never come back. Then Ben come along and married me and took me away. Yeah, he took me away. He helped me escape—right to the saloon."
The bundle of rags moved. It seemed to be falling over. A bony arm stretched down and reached beneath the seat. Virginia Belle brought forth a small basket and placed it between them. "Got me some supper. Nothin' much, just some cheese and some bread. The nights work on a body's appetite. You're gonna have some, ain't ya?"

She opened a cloth.

He started to say no, but then he realized it would not be right to refuse. "I was getting a bit hungry. It sounds good to me." An idea came to him and he said, "I have some wine in my suitcase. Would you have some with me? It's imported from France. I was bringing it to my son and his wife, but I'd like to share it with you."

"I'd like that, Mr. Winters." She gave him a toothless grin.

He reached around and opened his suitcase and pulled from it a thermos and the bottle of wine. From the thermos he removed the plastic cups that served as its lid. The pocket-knife he had carried for years on his key chain yielded a cork screw and he proceeded to open the bottle. Virginia Belle watched his every movement.

The trip to Paradise took a little over two hours, but Winters never once looked at his watch. He was captivated by the old woman and her stories. They were tragic stories and he was moved by them. He looked up and saw the moon had drifted high in the black desert sky, and he watched a wisp of cloud diffuse it and disappear.

"We're almost into town," she said. "I'll leave you off at Willy's. He owns the fillin' station." A house was silhouetted against the moon and Winters realized they had reached the end of their trip.

He raised his cup. "A toast to you, Virginia Belle, and my thanks for happening by when I needed you." As he took a sip, the wagon lurched. A wheel had hit a stone—and wine spilled on his jacket. He tried to brush the liquid away.

"Here, use this." The old woman stretched a white handkerchief toward him.

"It's too nice," he said, when he held it and found it was delicate lace.

"Don't matter none. Over yonder is Willy's place. She pointed across the street to a descript structure with a solitary pump standing watch in front like a sentry. "He lives around back and I reckon you're gonna have to wake him up." The buckboard rolled up to the drive. "Whoa, whoa there, Feller."

Winters climbed down and lifted his case from the back. "Thank you. Thank you, again, Virginia Belle. I couldn't have made it without you."

She looked straight into his eyes and said, almost in a whisper, "Thank you, Mr. Winters." She shook the reins. "Git up," and the wagon rolled away into the darkness.

Waking Willy wasn't an easy task. After pounding on the door for many long, frustrating minutes, Winters began to think he wasn't even home. He tried to laugh at his predicament. "If Paul Revere had this much trouble getting the Minutemen out of bed, we'd still
be a colony." Eventually a light came on somewhere within the old structure and a few moments later the door banged open.

"What's goin' on?" A short, fat, very rumpled man, rubbing his eyes with greasy fists, peered out.

"I've had motor trouble about ten miles outside of town. My radiator hose. . . ."

"Listen, Mister, it's almost one o'clock. I ain't driving out of town tonight—not for nobody. If you want, you can stay at my brother's down the road and we'll go after your car in the mornin'. He's got a couple of cabins over there, and I'll call him and tell him you're comin'." Willy, the filling station man, was in no mood to argue.

"Thanks, I'll do that and I'll . . . ."

"Three houses down on your right." The door slammed shut. Winters had no choice but to head toward a cabin and a night's sleep.

It was nearly ten o'clock the next morning when he returned to the filling station. The world was totally different. The sun was big and hot and burned down from a washed out sky. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but gently rolling, sandy emptiness.

"Howdy." A voice called to him from the dark shadows of the station's only bay. A fat, very rumpled man emerged, wiping his eyes with greasy fists. "You the feller that came by last night?"

Winters wondered if the man was still sleepy. "Yes, I am. Can you take me to get my car? I'm sure there's nothing seriously wrong with it. The radiator hose merely came loose."

"Hop in." The fat man pointed across the drive to an old tow truck parked next to a faded, hand-lettered sign that read, "Willy's last gas."

"I'll get a can of water. I'm going for a while," he called to someone inside.

On the trip out the mechanic spoke first. "Sorry about last night, Mister, but it was just one of those damned days when nothin' goes right. My wife was sick all day, and if I wasn't inside tryin' to take care of her, somebody'd pull up and want something."

"I didn't see any traffic on that road last night. None at all," Winters said.

"Can't understand that, Mister. Three or four trucks went by last night, between eleven and twelve. And a couple of cars. A truck going to L.A. stopped at my place about 11:15 and needed some water. Just when I got back to sleep some guy in one of them foreign cars woke me up for gas. That was probably the reason I wasn't too friendly when you came by."

Winters wondered if there might be another road. "I didn't see one car other than mine on that highway from the time I left Nevada. Why, if it hadn't been for that old woman in the wagon who picked me up, I'd probably still be walking into town. And we rode right down the highway, so if any cars came by, I'm sure I would have seen them."
“What did you say, Mister? Who picked you up?” Willy braked the truck to a stop.

“Some nice old woman came by in a buckboard. She said she was going to Paradise and asked if I needed help. Her name was Belle—Virginia Belle, I believe.” Willy’s look of alarm began to bother Winters. “Why? Is anything wrong?”

Willy swung the truck around and pulled off onto a gravel road that led back into some hills. For a while he let Winters’ question go unanswered. “Mister, I’m going” to tell you about Paradise. The old, original town don’t exist no more. It used to be a minin’ town back in the 1800’s, but the ore didn’t last long and everybody left. For a long time it was a ghost town and then, a couple of years ago—no, musta been more’n that—maybe five or six—well, anyway, a fire wiped it out. Now there’s nothin’ there at all. Oh, maybe a few chimneys, but that’s it.”

Maynard Winters looked across the sandy nothingness and felt the heat burning through the very roof of the truck. “That’s interesting, but how . . .”

“Mister, over that rise was the main street of Paradise. And on the main drag there was a saloon. As the story goes, it was a rough place. Well, a gal got gunned down one day by a drunken miner. Her name was Virginia Belle Miller.

“Was it the grandmother of the woman I saw?” Winters asked.

“Mister, that was the woman you rode into town with. There’s a little more to the legend. It seems that the Miller gal lived a hard life. I mean to tell you, nobody was good to her. Her old man was a drunk that beat her. As a kid she lived with folks that wasn’t hers that whipped her. Story has it that her ghost still rides these parts at night looking for somebody to be nice to her before she can rest in peace.” Willy opened the door and stepped down from the truck. “C’mere a minute.” He waved to his customer. Winters followed silently as Willy took him over a sandy rise to a stone-studded plot of ground not visible from the truck. It was the old Paradise cemetery. “Look at that one,” Willy said, pointing to a weatherbeaten, sandstone marker.

Winters stooped to examine the barely legible epitaph. “Here lies Virginia Belle Miller—B. 1819—D. 1879.” Something shiny in the weeds behind the stone caught the morning sun. He pushed the weeds apart and saw the empty wine bottle. The label on the bottle said, “France—Rosé.” He stood up slowly and looked at Willy, his mind filled with countless questions he knew he would never ask.

“Mister,” Willy said, as they started back to the truck, “last night you rode into town with a ghost.”

An hour later Maynard Winters was on his way to Los Angeles. Willy’s words remained with him. Could he actually have seen a ghost—talked with a ghost? It had to be some sort of a dream—something unreal. A bit of moisture rolled from his forehead. He
knew the perspiration was not from the heat alone. He reached into his pocket for his handkerchief. The one he pulled out was of delicate white lace.

The Resolution

David Dawson

Jamie didn’t cry—brave boys were not supposed to cry. Besides, he was a big boy now. Sure he was a big boy. He had not cried, had he? That proved he was a big boy—and brave. From now on, he would not cry at all. Never again.

Jamie kicked an old tin can with the toe of his scuffed, brown shoe. It clattered up in front of him, turned, and skidded into the gutter with its red label flapping. Jamie wished the can were his third grade teacher. That’s what he would do to her. Even make her flabby red cheeks shake like the red label when he kicked her hard, so hard she would fall into the gutter. And there she would stay with all the dirt just like the can.

A dog bounded from behind a brownstone house and began to bark viciously. Its teeth were bared and sharp, and its coat was a dirty yellow.

“Shut up, dog!” Jamie shouted. He reached down, grabbed the tin can, and threw it with a wild swing of his arm. As if aimed, the can struck squarely on the nose of the dog which yelped and ran back behind the house.

“Dumb dog. Stupid mutt,” Jamie yelled after the fleeing dirty yellow tail. “Bet you don’t bark at me anymore. Dumb dog,” he stated with final victory.

Jamie walked on for another block until he came to the big rock at the corner of Mr. Harrison’s yard. Mr. Harrison’s rock was supposed to be very old. Even older than Mr. Harrison. And Mr. Harrison was very old. He had white hair and a face like dried leather. Jamie dropped his books to the ground and jumped on the rock.

“I am a king,” he proclaimed as he stood straight and tall with his hands on his hips.

“Hey, kid, get off that rock!” shouted Mr. Harrison from the yard. “Ain’t one of you kids that’s got any respect fer a landmark!” Jamie jumped from the rock and bundled up his books.

“Git, I tells ya,” Mr. Harrison growled.

Sneaky old man probably was hiding. Probably was behind that big bush all the time. Old Harrison always chased kids. Some of the kids said he was crazy. And some of them said he was just a dirty old man, because he was the oldest man in town.

“Chase me, Harrison,” Jamie commanded, turning around after running a half a block. Walking backwards he chanted, “Harrison won’t chase me. Harrison won’t chase me.” That will show him.

Just then the overcast cast sky finally decided to let loose its all-