

Eating Jack Hooker's Cow

A real man realizes that he hates and is hated. Can you sense the fear and rage? It's eating America alive.

by Michael Paterniti

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Go with him. Go out into the feed yards with Jack Hooker. His daddy was a cattleman, he was a cattleman, his son today is a cattleman. Go out to the feed yards near Dodge City, Kansas, out into the stink of manure and the lowing slabs of cow, into the hot sun and rain and driving snow with Jack Hooker and know what it means to be a man.

First, a man looks like someone who's lived awhile. Looks like Jack Hooker. Has a neck like Jack Hooker's, the back of it all tanned and crosshatched. A man has hands like Jack Hooker's, callused but soft with pity on the rump of a steer he's sizing up for the slaughterhouse. He walks like Jack Hooker, with that same authority, that same plain movie-cowboy grandeur, his shoulders rolling slightly, his arms moving with the smooth swivel of his hips, his body blading through air as he crosses the parking lot of a motel. As if he might be there in body but always somewhere else, too—out in the yards, lost in an ocean of cattle.

See, a man like Jack Hooker looks on a heifer that stands twelve hundred pounds off the hoof and feels majesty. He shakes his hand on a deal that brings a new herd of a hundred head to his yard, and he feels grace. He sees God in a Black Angus that carries his meat in the flank. And he fights Satan himself when his cows go down with fescue, their tails, sometimes their feet, just falling off, littering the ground. What salvation is offered him here on earth, what afterlife, comes by seeing a glimmer of himself in a son who rises up in the yards like his daddy did.

And what everything comes down to for a real man like Jack Hooker is this one thing: America is a cow. It might sound funny if you're not from Jack Hooker's world, if you sit in

those city offices trying to figure out how to take a piece of Jack Hooker, how to tax him and strip him bare, but America is a cow. And that's how America got to be America and that's what America is and that's what America will always be.

But now, here's where it gets tricky. Used to be you had a yard full of cattle. You fed them up to a good weight and herded them onto pots, the trailers that take them to the slaughterhouse. Honest work by good people. But now in those slaughterhouses, you can't find many people wanting to do the job. Jack Hooker did it once. Wasn't pleasant, but he did it. But now it's the Mexicans and those Asiatics. All these yellow and orange and black people stunning the cow and hooking it and flensing its hide. All these yellow and orange and black fingers inside every Angus and Porter, cutting them open, scooping out the viscera in slimy piles, all these yellow and orange and black hands sawing these cows in two, crushing up the bones, vacuum-packing their parts for the country to eat. That smell, that rancid, stomach-churning smell of melting cow, used to be a good thing, as good as the smell of money, but now it smells foul. Comes down on Dodge City like human flesh gone bad.

And what eventually happens here is that these yellow and orange and black people get a good wage—maybe eight, ten dollars an hour—and save up. Wait ten years, bide their time. And in that time, Jack has become a different man. He's out of cattle now, in semiretirement. Buys a motel with his wife, Beverley. But everything goes squirrely in the late eighties, and Jack Hooker loses \$100,000 in one of those bad S&L deals. Loses their house, too. Broke and homeless, they answer an ad in the paper: a Dodge City motel looking for managers. The Astro Motel. On the business card, it reads, THE SPACE AGE MOTEL. Has a little astronaut on a couch watching TV. Twenty-eight dollars for a single. The parking lot is full every night. Full of beef-jerky salesmen and crop adjusters and windmill collectors. The Hookers live in two rooms behind the front desk.

And then come the Cambodians, or whatever the hell they are. They come around with cash saved from all those years in the slaughterhouse, and they buy the two motels on either side of Jack and Beverley Hooker. Suddenly, they are surrounded by gooks. And Jack and Bev, they just manage the

Astro Motel; but the gooks, they own the Thunderbird and Holiday motels. They gross more than \$300,000 a year.

So go with Jack Hooker now. At sunset. Out into the empty parking lot of the Astro Motel. Look to either side, at your neighbors. They're holding your money in their yellow fingers. They own a Jeep Grand Cherokee and an Acura Legend and three other cars, and you have only your old Buick. Can you feel something building? Can you feel what a man like Jack Hooker feels? Maybe the difference between you and a real man like Jack Hooker is that he will tell you what he hates; he will honor his hate and unleash it and understand that his hate will come back on him, understand that he, too, is hated. For a real man like Jack Hooker realizes that he hates and is hated. And then, with the lit motel signs flashing three in a row, tells you in so many words what he knows: Reckoning Day is coming. The gooks are eating his cow.

SO THIS IS YOUR NEW LIFE, JACK HOOKER'S LIFE:

BROKEN Coke machines and ice makers, broken Zenith TVs and GE air conditioners, broken Sylvania bulbs and Budweiser beer bottles smashed from the second-floor balcony last night by some wasted Mexicans, the jagged glass reflecting on the pool bottom. Just off the boat, says Jack Hooker in his gravelly drawl—you know how that goes. Then frowns. There's no special time when things break around here, they break all the time. Even now, things are breaking, and Jack Hooker's down on one knee, fixing them or picking them up.

Forget the bullet holes in the lobby window—the Astro is a family place. American-owned. With two golden rules: (1) People want a clean room, and (2) People want a good bed. That's it. Built in 1965, when they set six metal beams thirty feet in the air, painted them blue, and hung a prefab, L-shaped motel from them. Today, there are still two scrunched-down stories and thirty-four rooms with alternating yellow and blue doors. An ode to another era, like some George Jetson space station, hovering just above the landlocked plain top of southwest Kansas.

And, oh, yeah, it's your life. You go to bed here; you wake up here. You eat here and make love here and may die here. Do you know what it's like to have ten thousand cows

passing in pots every day, rumbling up your spine, lowing in your dreams? After a while, it doesn't matter how clean your room is, doesn't matter how soft your bed is—it gets to you, gets to Jack Hooker sometimes, too. But you do your best with it, make a family of the people passing through. In the old days, they came because they wanted to visit Dodge, soak up the lore of Boot Hill and Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson, came to see what was once known as the Wickedest Little City of the West. Whores, gunfighters, gamblers. Used to be a monument to everything that made this country great. Home to cowboys. American cowboys. So many once that you could hardly part them with a horse.

But now things have changed. Cowboys are dead. What's left is the rednecks and the bankers and the outsiders. The clientele at the Astro isn't tourists so much anymore: They stay at the chain hotels—the Holiday Inn Express, the Super 8, the Best Western—all those big conglomerates. Now it's the blue-collar people and traveling salesmen who keep the Astro alive. And Dodge City is losing its white majority—a quarter of the town is already Hispanic. And then you've got your Asiatics and blacks. Most all of them here for the slaughterhouse work, though they're branching out, infiltrating everything. Especially the Asiatics. One day, they'll have the country club, too, be up there playing eighteen like they were born to it. Scares you, scares Jack Hooker. There are gangs and killings and kids sniffing gold spray paint—what's called spooking. There's a rumor that a pregnant woman will be shot soon, and she will have blond hair. And there's a law now against buying hogs and slaughtering them and hanging them from the trees in order to drain the blood. Do you know what it's like to drive around the corner and see dead hogs hanging in the trees? Different people, these Mexicans and Asiatics—crawling all over your world, closing you in. And the Cambodians—you can't help but wonder why they wander in front of your place all day long, eyeing you as they go.

Thankfully, your guests are mostly like you, helping make an island with you against the others. Occasionally, some will stick around—for a construction job out at the new Wal-Mart site or maybe doing time at the slaughterhouse, like the rare black man in 107, a night-shift manager. Bev Hooker calls

him my black man in 107 in the same way she'll say my construction crew in 117 and 119 or my British tourists in 120 or my Mexican gals when she refers to her cleaning staff, three women who speak very little English. To help them, Bev raises her voice and speaks slowly when asking for a cleaner toilet or a better-made bed.

And it almost goes without saying that Jack and Bev are two parts of a whole. Jack sometimes calls her Momma. Never felt the need to go looking after other women. Never once, in all those years on the road, buying cattle. Nights in Abilene or Wichita or Denver or Dallas or Shreveport. Out for a steak. Talking cows. A strong, proud man with a James Dean walk. Turned more than a few heads in his day, you can count on it. But just so lucky to have her. Ain't wanted another momma, he says. And Bev, she must have come straight up from a cornfield, born into this world with eyes like a clear twilight sky. That same blue. Some days, she might wear shell earrings and a shirt that looks like a big scallop. A prettier version of Shirley Booth. And her hair, swirled like cotton candy.

Some nights at sunset, Jack and Bev'll just sit out under the eaves of the front office, watching it all add up. People come and go. The woman in 106 is in the pool with her daughter, doesn't have a bathing suit, so wears her dress, soaked up to her armpits. A group of men shuffle around their pickup trucks in the parking lot. One brings a paper bag full of beer up to his room. Upstairs, there are a couple of windmill collectors: John and Johnny West, their real names, a father and son with their wives. On the road, looking for old farm windmills to buy and refurbish—and then do what with? Maybe keep around the yard. It's a dying thing, says Johnny, looking over at his wizened, fading father, who's nodding his head. We want to keep the old days alive.

Occasionally, some folks aren't so friendly. Like these two young troublemakers, two wire-rim liberals from Wisconsin who pull up in their VW van. When they ask Bev the price of a single, she tells them; then when they hem and hew, she brings the price down a bit—something she doesn't normally do. And still they take off, peeling out of the parking lot. Off to the Cambodian jungle, says Jack Hooker.

At night, Jack Hooker may sit behind the front desk, waiting for someone to need a room. He may sit and sit and sit. He may watch the cars picking up speed as they leave Dodge, off to somewhere better, maybe. Sensing they're on the final edge of town, somewhere between in-between and nowhere, the drivers just press a little harder on the gas pedal. Kind of shoot by in streams of red taillights out into endless fields of wheat.

IT IS EARLY IN THE MORNING NOW, OUT ON THE EDGE OF Dodge City. There is a woman, Bout Sinhpraseut. Follow her. Follow Bout Sinhpraseut up into the graveyard, under the cottonwoods. She's called Donna, but her real name is Bout Sinhpraseut. You can say it: boot sin-pra-sit. It's her name. She's not from Cambodia, as Bev and Jack think. She's from Laos—an entirely different country. Forty-two years old with four children, she left her home after America bombed it to rubble, after a civil war broke out, left it in 1981, fled seven days through the jungle with her family, then made her way to America. Now she owns the Thunderbird and Holiday motels in Dodge City, Kansas, on either side of the Astro Motel, her signs flickering nightly with NO VACANCY while the Astro is only half full. Follow her now. She is climbing a knoll in a graveyard with headstones that have come up like pearled tongues in the first sun. Everything is quiet here. Follow her to meet her God and know what it means to be an American.

First, an American looks Laotian as much as an American looks Irish or Rwandan or wears a turban or won't eat Kansan hog for religious reasons or is quadriplegic. An American looks like Bout Sinhpraseut. Donna. A small woman with small hands and a mouth full of magnificently white teeth. Smiles like anything can be done, like a lighthouse of faith. Blinds you with it. And an American walks like Donna, in small, determined steps, with legs like pistons, driving her arms through the air, until she has covered a great distance by taking small steps. Walks this way when crossing the parking lot at the Thunderbird to clean rooms or heading up the highway past the Astro, under the suspicious eyes of Jack and Bev, to her other motel, the Holiday Motel, the cow-filled pots rumbling by at full tilt, spraying manure on the pavement at her feet. There in

body but always somewhere else, too. Up here in the graveyard, with her God.

See, Bout Sinhpraseut came to this country and became Donna. And her children became Jamie and Johnny, Amanda and Sue. Do you know what it's like to give up your name and take another? Here's what it's like: One day, you're called Tommy and you live in, say, Wichita or Minneapolis or Atlanta, and the next day you're in Vientiane, Laos, and the people around you are speaking in a duckquack rat-a-tat, calling you Inthaithiath. How do you even pronounce that? Only Donna's husband refused a new name, kept his old one—Boun. You can say it: boon. Once a French teacher in his home country, he finally gave up trying to learn English. After a while, just sat in his bedroom at night, watching Thai movies and reading Laotian books. My husband frightened, says Donna. He wake in morning and come out and say to me, How did we get here?

According to Donna, this is how: Leave your home in Laos, village called Champassak near Cambodian border, and go to Texas. You don't know anything can't figure out the first thing about this circus, America—so you learn everything from scratch. When you open your mouth, folks in big, silly hats look sideways at you, hear only a duck-quack rat-a-tat. Everyone who's not a cowboy is either Chinese or Vietcong. They don't look kindly on you, either, tell you to go back where you came from. You live in a little apartment. You're packed in pretty tight, all six of you. Everything is a circus. Your little kids are afraid of black people in the streets, come home from school shaking, don't wanna go back. Scare you, too. Ask neighbor, Are they human or animals? Neither, he says. Just niggers.

Nigger—what does that mean?

You may be a short person, but you still have a big heart. And seen trouble before. Seen your brother poisoned and killed by Buddhists back in Laos and had two friends blown up by land mines. Ran through jungle with communists firing at your back. You get your family out of Houston to Dodge City, and you go to slaughterhouse and work ten years. Hard work but good money. Husband work, too. Once he was a French teacher; now he scoops slime out of cows. Sometimes you're so

sick of seeing the insides of cows, you don't think you can ever see another one—but still you come back. Some days, you're so tired you can't stand, but you still rise the next morning. Back to the slaughterhouse. Back to whirring saw blades and sickening smell. The smell of melting cow bones you can't really eat for ten years with that smell on you all the time. Just go on bleary-eyed, like some kind of prizefighter, just keep taking those steps, working the arms. And you start saving, too. Buy gold jewelry. Round \$26,000 worth. That pretty good.

But now, here's where it gets tricky. You live in a trailer park around other recent immigrants—Vietnamese, Laotians, Chinese—and most of these people, they don't have bank accounts or insurance or anything like that. They work in the slaughterhouse and keep their money in twenty-four-carat-gold jewelry—hide it, like you, in the house. You're a little smarter, though, also have a bank account and some money stashed there. But then come home one day from work and the front door's open. Kids—Jamie and Johnny, Amanda and Sue—are tied up in the living room, and some men tie you up, too. They wave their guns and tell everyone to shut up and they take everything, all the gold, and then turn off the lights. They're gang members—Asian Pride or something, Vietnamese or Laotian, and even though you're one of them, they hate you because you work hard, because you're moving up. They take most of your ten years at the slaughterhouse, walk it right out the door for you. Take your American-citizenship papers, too. Do you know what it feels like to be left sitting in the dark, tied to your own chair, watching your life walk out the door? Have you ever seen your own kids tied up and crying, watched everything turn to rage?

And in this time, Donna becomes a different woman; something begins to build in her, too. Can you feel it? She begins to hate, because now she really knows she is hated. And somehow, it makes her that much more determined. Get up and go to work again and again and again. Nearly starts from scratch and prays for God to reveal himself to her. And one day, he does. He just comes to her. Seems like he seven feet tall, says Donna. Weigh three hundred pounds. Name is Dwayne. Dwayne Price. Big white man, drives a Continental. Donna's giant, her God. Owns the Countryside Manor trailer

park, where many of the Asians in Dodge City live, where Donna's family lives. Knows Donna's family, hears about its trouble. He's a big white man with a big car, in his early sixties, and he takes pity on Donna and tells her he's going to help her. He grosses about \$15,000 a month from the trailer park, owns a six-bedroom house, got five bathrooms in it, and a wife who's twenty years younger and three daughters—all of whom he claims don't love him. Buy them all new cars and they still don't love him. So, on sunbaked days, with the stench of cow poo pressing down on the grain elevators and woodframed houses of Dodge City, he cruises with Donna in his big Continental, a perpetual cigarette in his mouth, pricing out property. She has some money of her own for a down payment; he shows her how it all works. She buys the Thunderbird and then, with the first six months of income from that, buys the Holiday. Both of them are dumps, but they haven't met Donna yet. She knows how to clean.

Boun, Donna's husband, he's afraid of Dwayne's brilliance and his doctrines about money—how money spent becomes money earned, how risk turns to profit. But Donna, she has faith. She runs the Thunderbird; daughter Amanda runs the Holiday. Boun, he cuts the grass, moves heavy things. They are nervous and happy, and still they are hated. Sometimes, white folk drive in, then drive out when they see Donna at the desk: Some are vets, some maybe lost kids in Vietnam, some are militia members, some just feel like giving her the finger. There's a bullet hole in the lobby window here, too. When the hotels are full in the center of Dodge City, the desk clerks don't recommend Donna's motels. Dirty, they say. Try the American-owned place. Translation: Avoid the gooks.

Gook—what does it mean, anyway?

What eventually happens here is that Dwayne is stricken with cancer, and because he's more or less estranged from his own family and because he and Donna are now inseparable, Donna has him move into the Thunderbird with her family. Right into their living quarters, with its new shag rug and new TV and Wal-Mart art on the wall. But he doesn't just move in, he moves right into her bed. Everybody think I was girlfriend, but wasn't like that, Donna says now. I do anything to support family, but I don't sell body.

Dwayne Price sheds weight, goes downhill fast, has a terrible hacking cough. In Donna's mind, seven feet, three hundred pounds. But wasting away—250, 210, 170, 145, 120 pounds. She massages his great white back, sponges his wide white shoulders, feeds him when he loses strength. She curls onto the vast white suburb of his body and sleeps there, in his white light, in a cool white lane of sheets, so if he dies in his sleep, he dies with her arms around him, roped over his body knowing he was loved. Let his whole race mistreat her during the day; at night, she is here with Dwayne, whispering, dreaming up plans for the two of them to one day visit Laos. And what does Dwayne get from this? He gets to be a god. He gets love. He gets a dignified, deified death. And Donna? She draws power from him, or he gives it to her. And Boun himself knows this man is like no other man, knows this man has a special, otherworldly gift. He has taken them from the hell of the slaughterhouse, saved them from the cows, and delivered them to the Thunderbird—and Boun is, for once, less anxious. Yes, Dwayne is dying, but they are blessed. Boun stays in his own bedroom now, down the hall from Donna and Dwayne, watching Thai movies, colors flickering over his body in the dark. He puts a picture of Dwayne up on his Buddhist altar, where he lights incense each night.

And then Dwayne passes.

So follow Donna now, under the cottonwoods, to the grave of Dwayne Price. Listen to her talk to her God. About how the Mexican whore is two-timing her husband in 225. About how the ice-cream-truck driver in 220 took all the towels when he left. About the bikers who broke the framed print entitled "Afternoon Punting," of English ladies observing swans in an English park somewhere. Every little thing. Do you know what it's like to believe so deeply in something, in a race of people that most often hates you, in a country that is your country now and yet pulls up in your parking lot and flips you the bird? Maybe the difference between you and Donna is that she hates and understands that she is hated back. But more than that: She believes, too. She takes you to the graveyard, on a hill looking down on Dodge City, above the cows and the slaughterhouses and all the white people. This place where she goes every day to leave an offering of oranges or flowers at the

foot of this marble headstone that she rubs again and again, like it's Dwayne Price's white back.

MIDNIGHT ALONG WYATT EARP AVENUE—quasars of passing traffic, an occasional drunk stumbling along the shoulder. Stand in a place before Red's Cafe, near Iseman Mobile Homes, out on the edge, right before Dodge City turns back to a country of red dirt and wheat fields and feed yards again. Look across the street. See that stubby, thickly built man with muscular legs, wearing a weight belt and baseball cap, the one pedaling a mountain bike? Boun on a covert mission, on his way from the Thunderbird to the Holiday to check on daughter Amanda. But not just that: At the edge of the Astro parking lot, he teeters off into the dark shadow of a cement wall. Sits awhile on his bike, hand propped against the wall, feet on the pedals, counting. Can see Jack Hooker in the glassed-in lobby, but Jack Hooker can't see him. Jack Hooker is standing behind the desk, head down, reading something—a *National Geographic*. At this hour, in this light, Jack Hooker looks older than he is and younger, too. Boun never sleeps a night without knowing exactly how many cars are in the parking lot at the Astro Motel and reporting it back to Donna. The best way to beat your competition, said Dwayne Price, is to know your competition. Tonight's cars: Thunderbird, twenty; Astro, four. What more do you need to know?

Behind the desk back at the Thunderbird, fifty yards from where Jack Hooker stands reading his *National Geographic*, Donna is sitting behind her own reception desk watching *Married...with Children* reruns on TV. I like Al Bundy she says. Like a lot. Funny funny things come out of his mouth. The laugh track laughs incessantly. Donna laughs, taking her cue from the laugh track. Those teeth—blinding. Now wait here awhile and laugh with Donna. Wait until a man eventually comes in—got a swabby head of white hair and bloodshot eyes—and says he was a friend of Dwayne Price's and Donna's eyes light up. Can remember this man, a peanut salesman? Something like that, right? Vending machine, he says. Chuckles, Snickers, Kit Kats. It's after midnight, but at the Thunderbird the night is its own day, has its own constant neon bloom of light—people come at all hours, for all reasons—and

Donna doesn't sleep that much anyway, not since Dwayne died. Miss him, says Dwayne's friend. He had a good heart.

Donna nods, pulls out a photo album. Hundreds and hundreds of pictures of Dwayne, in various stages of wasting away, a man in the stunned process of some final realization. I'm going to die. Even now, Donna keeps pairs of his oversize underwear piled in her bedroom drawers. Keeps his baseball cap and socks. Leaves offerings to him on Boun's altar. She is wearing one of his blue short-sleeved shirts now, comes down to her knees. Every night in the last year of his life, they slept together but didn't sleep together: Two people with apparently nothing in common went down into some river running beneath all of this stumbling, cursed, warring humanity and became one thing—not yellow or white or black or orange but just one pure thing. Donna didn't try to possess Dwayne Price's death—that was his alone. And Dwayne—he couldn't possess the other Donna, the one named Bout Sinhpraseut, the woman who led her family through the jungles of Laos with communists shooting at her back. And neither of them tried. They just were. Donna helped Dwayne Price die, and Dwayne Price just showed her how to be an American.

So this is your life, Donna's life: sheets and towels and dirty toilets. Money, always money. Worry about kids. One daughter been hurt by her Vietnamese husband. When it comes to him, won't even acknowledge that word: husband. Errands. Every three weeks, fifty new towels from Wal-Mart. Sheets and dirty toilets. Fuss over kids. Count money. Have Boun replace air conditioner in 218. Bring food to another dying man in 223, the one who stands behind his curtains, glassy-eyed, staring out all day, every day. Going to die in that room. Worry about kids. Other daughter, the one off to university this fall, going to marry a Mexican who stayed at Thunderbird. Why Mexican? Then give thanks in the graveyard, near the cottonwoods. Thanks to Dwayne Price. Remember where you were before him, where you're going after him.

Sometime, we get poor people here, says Donna. It rain, it snow. We give free room, some food. We get help when we were down. If people ring bell at 3:00 or 4:00 A.M., I get up and smile. I tell them prices. They come and say they were next door and Jack said, Don't ring our bell if you aren't going to

stay. He grouchy. That not way to do business. She shakes her head, dissatisfied. Astro used to get good business, not so good now. We on the way up, she says. They going down.

LISTEN TO HER. LISTEN TO BEV HOOKER tell what happened and hear what she's really saying, beneath the words.

Seems there's been a disturbance in the night at the Astro Motel, and Bev is still flustered. See, she usually goes to bed around 10:00 P.M., then wakes before 6:00 A.M. to handle the early shift. Jack, he gets up when he wants but then handles the late-night. Still, he'll turn in around 1:00 A.M., and then if he hears the doorbell ring, or if Nikki, their sweet Australian shepherd with half-rotten teeth, starts barking, he'll get up and go out to see who's there. Problem is, Jack's a little hard-of-hearing, confides Bev in a whisper. And the dog's deaf, too. So it's Bev Hooker who often answers the door, huddled in her bathrobe, out of the daze and blindness of sleep, her swirled perm of sandy curls a bit lopsided, opening the door to whoever comes off the highway, opening it to whatever they want from her. And they always want something.

Well, last night, late, the bell rings, and Bev stumbles from bed, puts on her robe, goes to the door, and sees some Asiatic guy jes grinnin' away. They look at each other for a moment from either side of the glass, and she could tell he was a kook. She thinks about calling 911, reaches back and puts her hand on the phone. The Asiatic on the other side, jes grinnin' away. Wearing some kind of pea-green jacket. And something makes her open the door. Reach up and draw back the dead bolt. Don't know why. Not usually such a risk taker, but it isn't natural for someone to be at the door jes grinnin' like a kook, especially an Asiatic. Puts his foot inside, says he is selling wind chimes. Wind chimes? You come back in the day then we'll talk. Said it sharply then a couple more times before he got her drift. She bolted the door again and went back and lay awake in bed. She looks kind of shell-shocked remembering it now, the morning after, and scared, too, as if it's a hopeless thing ever to try to understand the deep strangeness of the Asiatic people. Makes you shudder to think what he really had in mind.

So, standing in the air-conditioned lobby of the Astro Motel with Bev Hooker this sweltering morning, have you really heard her story? What she's telling you is that it's a war out here, on the edge. She's telling you that someone is schlepping around Dodge City at 3:00 A.M., selling wind chimes or pretending to sell wind chimes with the idea of making money—one way or the other. Money—that's what everything gets reduced to. That's what everyone's fighting for out here. And when it comes to money Bev says, no one can be trusted. Not even her own kind. We had white girls in here helping us clean once, she says. Big, fat white girls. They don't work. They'll try to cheat you. That's why we have Mexicans now.

Harder still for Bev to look at Donna and her people so many of them over there—and not think of their greed, too, how they out-American the Americans almost, but playing the whole thing kind of dirty, by different rules: doing all the work themselves to cut costs, taking food right out of the mouths of white folk. What kind of neighbor is that? Started when they put those signs out. Before that, why, Bev Hooker talked to Donna. Donna would come over at first, sometimes bring cookies. Realized the Astro charged \$28 for a single. Then, according to Jack and Bev Hooker, put that sign out. SINGLE, \$26.95. See two signs now: one at the Holiday and one at the Thunderbird. False advertising, declares Bev. Draw people off the road, then say the cheap rooms are already full. Before that, yes, they spoke, though Bev confesses she didn't know Donna's last name, has so many vowels you don't know what it is. (You can say it: sin-pra-sit.) Now they don't speak at all. After Donna put her signs up. Jack Hooker went right out and put up his own sign: AMERICAN OWNED. Donna retaliated by buying a bunch of American flags, put them up everywhere. But I think we're having the last laugh, says Bev confidently. The wind out here just rips 'em right up, and she's wasting a lot of money.

Now picture Bev Hooker in bed just after her encounter with the Asiatic. It's five minutes past three in the morning. She is a good woman, a woman full of the earth itself, who a moment ago was sleeping soundly and is now wide awake and jittery. She is listening for a bump or a bang or a window being

forced open, but all she hears is something distant and indistinct—maybe the lowing cows in Jack’s dreams. And still, she is afraid, feels hunted. It’s hard to know what drives certain folk, what chemicals are inside people. Occasionally you find syringes in the next-morning rooms of the Astro. And there are people out there right now spooking and shooting bullets at one another. There are people next door—your neighbors—who’d sooner devour you than bring you cookies anymore. Somehow, they’ve entered the same bloodstream that keeps you alive.

So have you really listened to Bev Hooker’s story? Have you figured out what she’s really trying to tell you, herself? There’s an Asiatic selling wind chimes at 3:00 A.M. out on the darkest edge of Dodge City, where the streetlights end, and no one, no one at all, can be trusted anymore. But what scares someone like Bev Hooker, what scares someone like you most, is this: Maybe the person you can trust least of all is yourself. See, when the Asiatic rang at the door jes grinnin’ like a kook, you pushed back the dead bolt, and then you—you yourself—let him in.

DONNA, BEHIND THE RECEPTION DESK, IN Dwayne Price’s tennis shirt, the headlights off Wyatt Earp Avenue flooding the Thunderbird lobby with pale white light, then emptying again, the colors and the things of the room—the oversize blue couch, the bubbling aquarium full of tiger and vacuum fish—resuming their prior lives. Donna sits here now, will be sitting here this winter and spring and fall, as the pots rumble into town, ten thousand cows a day to the slaughterhouse, even as the wheat grows and is shattered and threshed and made into bread and bought at the store. To make bologna sandwiches—to put some hog between Wonder bread—for Donna’s family. This place—this beautiful Thunderbird Motel—is home.

Wasn’t at first. Was a pit, a bug-infested hole, cockroaches the size of your pinkie, crawling on your body at night. Dirty White folk sold it for \$225,000. They angry, says Donna. Went belly-up. They never show us how to do nothing—how to register people, how to clean. They leave one day, lock the door, and go to Oklahoma. Had to spray the place for months to get rid of the roaches. Then Donna was full of

sudden doom, thinking: It all a mistake. No matter what, we end up back in the slaughterhouse. No matter how hard we try, we live the rest of our lives inside the cow. But Dwayne, he just holds everyone steady. The pool fills with litter and red dirt every day. Fill it in, says Dwayne. Save on insurance, too. The gospel. Shows them how, one small step at a time. Work the arms. Clean the toilets. Get up and do it again.

Very hard at first. The former owner's daughter is still in town, works the night shift at another motel. When the rooms are full, she recommends the Astro Motel. Locally owned, she says, a nice white woman works there—Bev. We get lots of bad reports back from the other one, the Thunderbird. Dirty. When Donna hears this, her smile fades, anger rises, clouding her face. She big woman, fat, short, go with black guy, she says. Let's say compared to young girls, she not so pretty. She pretty ugly... Everyone have dirty words for me. Say my motel is dirty. Bev and Jack, they grouchy and old. Everyone say, Don't stay at Holiday or Thunderbird, but people come here and see how clean. People come here and say they saw sign next door—AMERICAN OWNED. Then ask, Are they American? If so, why need sign?

That's what boggles Donna. She's an American citizen, and she owns the Thunderbird. It's American-owned, right? No, not even close. See what's happening here? Can you feel something building? Make someone feel dirty and eventually they're going to outclean you. Tell them they're not like you and they will become you. Put up a sign that says you're American and they'll already have a sign up that says we are, too: SINGLE, \$26.95.

Out-American the Americans. Start with nothing and eventually you have a Trinitron TV and a new gold shag rug. You have a Jeep Grand Cherokee and an Acura Legend and a twin-cab Ford pickup truck. And yet something keeps you up at night. You're an American in Dodge City, grossing more than \$300,000 a year from two motels, and you can't sleep. In the graveyard, talk to Dwayne about it. What's eating you? What? It's this: Frightened for your kids. Frightened even to let them go up to town. Gangs and kids spooking. Kids up there right now with gold-flecked nostrils, crazy-eyed, like they're from some long-lost tribe of the world. A Laotian just broke out of

the county jail—in for killing another Asian. Tomorrow, they'll find him hiding under a trailer home, two snake eyes staring from the dark. Out at the slaughterhouse some years ago, three Asians were shot and killed in the parking lot with a .380, killed by another Asian over a four-dollar gambling debt.

That's what keeps you up at night. Almost helps to have a job like this, behind the desk at the Thunderbird Motel. People coming and going. Late, a white man from Ohio stops in with his son. Driving America on summer vacation—New Orleans, Big Bend, all over. Stopped in next door at the Astro, but prices are a little higher over there, will take a room here. Donna likes talking, talks to them. Pots rumble outside the window. When it comes out that Donna's from Laos, the man tells the story of some Cambodians in his Ohio town. The Tran family. Don't speak English, but they came to Thanksgiving dinner. Before eating, someone stood up and told the story of the Pilgrims: how they came on the Mayflower, nine weeks at sea, arrived starving and homeless and learned to grow corn and pumpkin from the Indians. The story was translated for Mr. Tran, and when he heard it, he smiled and exclaimed delightedly, Ah, you're boat people, too!

When Donna hears this, she breaks out giggling, flashes a big smile. Seems as if a great weight has been momentarily lifted from her shoulders. That right, she says, shaking her head, slapping the counter. We all boat people here, isn't that right?

DRIVE WITH JACK HOOKER. AWAY FROM the Astro Motel. Away from Dodge City and the stench of a town stuck between a slab of meat and a frying pan. Forget the broken Coke machine, the futile phone calls to the distributor. Forget about the million little decisions, ones that led to each room being outfitted with, say the electric-pink Astro Motel flyswatters that read, **YOU'RE ON TARGET WITH US...KILLS 25 PERCENT MORE FLIES.** Leave it all and drive. Drive until you've driven beyond yourself. Into the heart of something else. Wheat fields and John Deere 9500 combines—all of it giving way to cows. To the amazing throw of feed yards across the plains, to the sharply cut pens and four

thousand head of snorting, farting cattle. And the thing buried beneath it all, the secret of it.

On the way, look out at the wheat—a late-spring freeze and above-average rain have delayed the harvest. But these fields are a week away, golden and waving in a breeze. Their beauty fills Jack Hooker with a flicker of sadness. No such thing as the American Dream anymore, he says. You used to do business on your honor and good name. You could spend half a life building your good name, and the IRS takes it away. You know the story about the ten Indians? Then there were nine, eight, seven....There's no American Dream left.

See, before you had anything, you had the Indians—the Kiowa, Comanche, Arapaho, and Sioux—and then the cowboys turned it all into America, made this country great. After that, you had the railroads and the bankers and then the feed yards and the slaughterhouses. If there were differences, it wasn't about skin color. But see how it's changed now? America, the thing itself, is in bed with all the special interests and the conglomerates and the outsiders. In bed with people like Donna. Rather help her than its own kind. Look at these Asiatics in Dodge City: Got their Asiatic restaurants and markets, got their own pool hall, their own gangs. Drive Japanese cars. Damn shame.

Remember a day at the Astro three years ago, when a big Continental pulled in bearing Dwayne and Donna. Dwayne rolled down the window and asked how much for the motel. Owner was there, said \$450,000. Can have it if you can afford it. But didn't really take kindly to the idea of a white man and his Asiatic buying the Astro. Window went up, and they left. Then Dwayne Price helped her buy the other two places—\$550,000 for both of them—and went for the Astro's jugular. Sold out his own people. That's the difference between Dwayne Price and Jack Hooker: Never occurred to Jack Hooker to sell out his people. Suspicion is that Dwayne Price was keeping Donna as his girlfriend and worked out some underhanded deal for her, and now Donna doesn't pay taxes. When Dwayne Price died, the joke was that he died because he knew the authorities were closing in.

Still, do you know how it feels to have a hundred years on this land, a hundred years of Hookers buried in this ground,

then have it taken from you, just ripped away by people who washed up yesterday? Makes you feel sick powerless. Feel like an Indian, on a reservation somewhere. No American Dream left. Jack, at the steering wheel, ponders a moment, wheat blurring in his side window. Been thinking about joining the Peace Corps, he says. Know much more than some college kid. Go to South America, out on the pampas there. Could teach them a thing or two about cattle. Wouldn't get near the Asiatics, though. Wouldn't share information with them. The Cambodians and their kind are worthless. First, there's too many of them: one in three people of the world. Second, don't like jungles.

As soon as the yards appear as soon as cows materialize on the horizon—Jack Hooker lets go. Seems as if a great weight has been lifted from his shoulders, exhales. His son walks out to meet you. Wears brown cowboy boots and a collared button-down and Wrangler jeans. Uncanny. Looks a bit like Bev in the face, but everything else is Jack. Father and son both stand with their elbows slightly cocked, both have slight paunches that place equal pressure on the buttons of their shirts, both have pens in their left breast pockets, and both have the same sunstroked, grooved skin on the back of their neck that shows an honest day's work. Except that the son may be a bit broader across the chest and has a full head of silver hair, you feel as if you're looking at Jack Hooker twenty-five years ago. Walks with a slight swivel of the hips, carries himself like a man. Out in the yard, lost in a sea of cattle.

Nearly a third of America's meat comes from southwest Kansas, says Jack Hooker. Now, a hundred years ago, maybe five million head come through Dodge City in as little as a decade. Part of the natural Santa Fe Trail. Old cowboys drove the cattle slow so the cows wouldn't lose weight, then loaded them on the railroad and sent them east for slaughter. Today, they leave on pots, go right from this yard, past the Astro Motel, to the slaughterhouse. Look at the country now, says Jack Hooker. The beautiful part is that it's still so strong, still so full of grass. You know why? Do you know the secret? Deep down in the earth, there's water running under all this. The Ogallala Aquifer. See, it starts with water, all this clear water running beneath the earth from South Dakota to Texas. Beneath

rock and sand and gravel, millions and millions of gallons' worth. Running of its own sweet will.

Jack Hooker's son is the man who goes to Texas and Kentucky and wherever else and buys these animals—British Whites and Herefords, Charolais and Simmentals and Black Angus. Huge, lowing creatures. Twelve hundred pounds off the hoof. Some of them have the face of Christ himself. Drink seven gallons of clear water a day, eat corn and hay. Creatures of habit. Like us. Pick out a spot in the yard and never leave it. Pick a place at the trough to eat and always come back to it. Rub up against the same exact cows every day. Get in their way and you might take a horn. Some of the cattle get sold to the Japanese. Those folks have a slightly different standard for their meat, says Jack Hooker's son. Like theirs with a little more fat. Sometimes they come over to Kansas, to the yards, and handpick the ones they want, cameras looped around their necks. They're the picture-takingest people, says Jack Hooker's son, chuckling at the thought.

In the late afternoon, go up to the ridge with Jack Hooker and his son. On a rise to the edge of the yard. Blinding sun and blackflies, but they don't seem to touch the Hookers. They just stand there, the two of them, looking down on it all. Have you ever looked on miles and miles of cattle in a setting cast in orange light? Four thousand of them. Big, lumbering, beautiful things—mentality of a five-year-old. Have you ever seen the way the light plays on a herd, the way clouds come rolling in from California, and every one of them turns a different color? Looks like a museum painting of the Old West. Something behind glass.

Purdy, purdy sight, says Jack Hooker

That's right, says his son. They're breathing in unison, and then Jack looks at you looking at the cows, then looks back at the cows himself and says to no one in particular, Don't get more real than that, does it?

IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY AT THE ASTRO motel. Bev's black man had a visit from his wife and child, or girlfriend and child, or whatever they are, and the three of them frolicked in the pool to escape the 100 degree heat. The white man in 109 saw them out there splashing around and came in and said to

Bev Hooker, I see you let your help in the pool. Thought this was an American place. Both Bev and Jack know they have a problem now—they can't afford to offend their few paying customers—and Bev has suggested that they raise her black man's rates if he's going to have outsiders come visit and use the pool. It's only fair, right? Or am I prejudiced? she wonders. Don't think I am, but am I? Problem is this, says Jack settling her: You let one in, then they just keep coming. Most colored folk make a lot of noise, he says. But now this man, he's a good man.

Sent Bev to bed with tornado warnings on the radio. Told her they'd work it all out tomorrow. Sleep well, Momma, he said. Now he's on the night watch. If someone comes in at midnight, one o'clock in the morning, he'll open the door and give him a bed. It won't matter what race or color, won't matter what he thinks about him in the bright noon of day, because he knows what it's like to be tired, knows what it's like to be without shelter on a stormy night. There are dead hogs hanging in the trees; there are kids spooking. When guests come through the front door of the Astro Motel, Jack Hooker will hand them the keys to one of his rooms and welcome them. Whoever they are, they'll sleep under the same roof as Jack Hooker tonight.

But no one comes. Wind starts up and blows the rain sideways, so fierce it feels like some kind of Old Testament storm. Cars keep passing, but no one stops. On their way to other motels. The bullet holes in the window have pooled with darkness now, and everything reflects back. Can't see the outside world, just hear it roaring. Look at Jack Hooker now, in the haunted lobby of the Astro Motel. Can you see him looking at himself? Do you see what he sees? Just a man—a man who hates and knows he is hated—turned ashen in the lobby light, standing with his callused hands at his side, waiting and watching.

Behind the desk back at the Thunderbird, Donna registers a trucker, a short, speedy white guy, and hands him the keys to 228. Clean room, she says, smiling. If you have problem, you come back and talk to me. Got ice machine right over there, too. You sleep well, okay? Al Bundy is on TV, and Donna laughs with the laugh track. She is wearing another one of Dwayne Price's short-sleeved shirts. Kids in bed. Boun in his

room, watching a movie. Look at this weather, she says excitedly. Tonight, I bet we full.

She comes around to the front of the desk and tidies. Puts away the photo albums of His image. Goes to the aquarium, where she begins to feed the fish. Look at this woman Donna. She is now on her tiptoes, reaching her hand into a tank full of tiger and vacuum fish. Can you see her? Clear water flows somewhere in the earth beneath her feet, and she has her hand in the aquarium, among the psychedelic fish, so that part of her is in the water, too. Can you feel how cool it is? Can you see how clear? Outside, the wind is ripping her American flags, and there are more cars pulling into her parking lot, an endless wave of refugees washing out of the storm tonight. Look at Donna, Bout Sinhpraseut. She is smiling, feeding the fish. There are people with money coming to her door. She lets them in.