ABSTRACT

WILLIE T.'S FUNERAL AND OTHER STORIES

by Pamala Rachel Ewing

Willie T.'s Funeral and Other Stories is a collection of short stories set in the American South. Both thematically and stylistically, these stories participate in and experiment with the conventions of writing which make Southern fiction unique. Written with an ear for the oral tradition which underlies Southern storytelling, these short pieces value emotional impact over objective truth, and dabble in magical realism. While the characters in these stories must deal with the very real issues which arise from living in a society polarized by race and class, a sense of shared community arises from the community-centered narrative voice. At times, variations of the “trickster” figure, often employed in Southern African-American stories, struggle heroically against the odds. By exploring these aspects of life and writing in the American South, these stories enter the conversation begun by so many excellent writers of yore with a fresh voice and a unique perspective.
WILLIE T.'S FUNERAL AND OTHER STORIES

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Folks like to think they know the way that a story goes. What happened to Dorothea Lees? You ask them, and they’ll tell you this way—a beginning, a middle, and an end. They like to close things with the latest details—the way that she ended up, and where she lives now, and so forth. They don’t mean to lie to you. They believe that the ending is the end; they don’t realize the real way of things, that after a story stops, people go round and make up a start to match. Well. This is what everybody knows about the way Dorothea was born. Anne Lorraine latched on to Dorothea, as a name, all of a sudden in the hospital room. She’d been telling folks for weeks that her baby would be named Alexis, which was a trashy name if ever there was. But Dorothea it became, when Anne Lorraine strained in her birthing bed, her veins standing out on her slender neck and her pretty face in a sweat. Doro-THE-a, Doro-THE-a, she growled through her clenched teeth. Dorothea was her mother’s name. Perhaps, in the throes of her pain, it came to Anne Lorraine that she should honor her mother, who had also suffered much to bear her only child. Or perhaps she meant something different. No matter, for Anne Lorraine, the silly, spoiled thing, could keep to a decent name no longer than a decent man, and when they brought the baby back in to her, all fat cheeks and tiny, curling, pink shrimp toes, Anne Lorraine took the child in her trembling arms and cooed, “But she’ll go by Dixie!” There was no need to get anyone else’s opinion. Dixie’s grandparents had been dead for years, and mother and father were long divorced.

But Dixie, who after all, should know, never thought of that part mattering. Her story, like most all true ones, is only somewhere in the middle.

* * *

Something rather odd occurred at cotillion last night. That’s what Dixie would say, when the question came up at dinner, as she knew the question would. This too was Anne Lorraine at the core, because it was she who’d made the fuss about her daughter’s invitation. The aforementioned invitation came on a normal afternoon, when Dixie was, as usual, huddled on the rec room couch downstairs with a pillow clutched to her stomach. This was her recuperation time—the hour or so her body needed to recover from the stresses of the day and to relax for dinner. Her mama took recuperation, too, but she kept to the darkened living room, mostly, because her stress settled in her head, whereas Dixie’s was all in the gut. Hours of ignoring her shoving, hair-pulling, name-calling classmates left her nauseated and weak. Sometimes she only stared out the window, or napped on the fuzzy blue cushions. Sometimes she cried. That day, her
mother must have known the invitation was coming, because she got up to retrieve the mail when it arrived, and then she came straight down to see Dixie.

“Dixie, baby?” She said, peeking around the banister. “I’ve got something here for you.” She settled on the couch in a breath of White Shoulders perfume, and her hand on Dixie’s forehead was cool. “Sit up a minute, and look at this.”

In Dixie’s hand the envelope was heavy, her name etched deep in its buttercream surface in smooth swirls of elegant black. A real, formal invitation, one with a second envelope and a slip of tissue paper inside, just like the ones her mama got whenever Somebody married. At the very center was the card.

*The National League of Junior Cotillions*

*cordially invites Miss Dorothea Lees to become a part of our society*

*by attending our first meeting*

*at the First United Episcopal Church*

*on Friday, the sixth of October, two thousand and eight at seven o’clock*

Cotillion. The very word was dancing, was lovely girls in snow white dresses, going to the Winter Ball. Dixie had grown up with the photo of Anne Lorraine, standing tall in her white gown, with Grandma Lees tying her black sash just so. A slim, gleaming, ice nymph girl, just a few years shy of Debutante. Was she, Dixie, already so grown?

“This is where you’ll make friends, baby.” Her mama’s eyes had welled to brimming. She touched her daughter’s face again, this time with the back of her knuckles. “These are the girls and boys you should always have known.”

So, these were the promised children, the beautiful ones seen from afar, at church or the movie theatre. She should have known them, instead of knowing them, because of the school district rezoning laws which, according to her mother, made the oldest, stateliest homes in town part of the district which was, well, you know. Anne Lorraine broke into an audible sob, and hurried from the room.

*This is where you’ll make friends...* So her perfect mother had known, despite Dixie’s desperate pretending—her only daughter was an outcast. Had she heard what they said about Dixie’s daddy? Or why the park was named for Papa Lees? Dixie sat motionless on the couch, her face on fire with shame. Her mother knew. She knew; she knew. In the smoldering furnace of her heart, Dixie made herself her first serious vow. From now on, it would be different; they wanted her. They wanted her. From now on, it had to be.

And so here she was, on Saturday, the SEVENTH day of October. The night before, as almost always, her mama had been required to party for one occasion or another. Dixie had been disappointed, but not surprised, to see her old nanny Blake inside Anne Lorraine’s Mercedes, when the children walked out to the line of headlights waiting in the front circle drive. Saturdays, her mom slept late, but she generally emerged from bed for lunch, which she and Dixie ate together, sitting at the breakfast table. On this day, however, when Dixie came in from jumping rope she found the house in an uproar, with Anne Lorraine rummaging frantically through the fridge, and Blake
keeling before the hutch, surrounded by the dusty crystal. Mr. Ripley Knight was coming for dinner, and cotillion talk would have to wait.

You had to hand it to her mother, really, Dixie thought when she sat down. The woman knew how to put on dinner. She had spread out the best tablecloth—the one that Dixie’s grandma had embroidered, sewing tiny white stitches in by hand. From a little distance, all you could see was smooth, plain linen; the pattern only came out up close. Lovely, complicated circles, things that had taken patient labor. Atop the tablecloth was the good china—the not-holiday company china, with the thin gold inlay around the edges. Above them the chandelier had been unwrapped from its protective sheet; Dixie had had to crawl up on the table to make sure that it still sparkled. In the cool blue dining room Anne Lorraine sparkled as well. And why all the hullabaloo? Mr. Ripley was handsome enough, but not so dashing as Mr. Todd, who never got cooked for at all.

“He’s an author,” Anne Lorraine had said, shoving the beef tenderloin in the oven while Dixie rolled out the pie crust. As if that explained anything. At least Ripley knew enough to be appreciative, though his creativity left much to be desired. He smiled at them both over the steaming dishes.

“This looks wonderful, ladies,” he said.

“Oh, why thank you, Ripley! It’s nothing.” Dixie’s mama replied. “Won’t you do us the honor of giving the blessing?”

Dixie bowed, as a good child does, but she could not resist peeking up at the two of them through her lashes. Her mama sat, as always, like the dolls Dixie only sometimes played with, whose eyes swung open and shut because of a weight in their heads. Mr. Rip squinched his lids together in a way that was ridiculous. The grace went on and on and on.

“Dear heavenly Father, we come humbly before your throne this evening, thankful for many things. First and most importantly, Father, we thank you for the chance we have to kneel before you in prayer, for we know that we are sinful creatures, unworthy even to call you our Father…”

How could anyone blame the girl, if her mind wandered a little?

What’s cotillion? Mr. Rip would ask, as Dixie took a sip of water. Being a man, and old, he would not likely know these things.

Oh, you aren’t familiar with it? Dixie would say, with the proper surprise. Please forgive me, Mr. Rip! I just assumed that everybody knew! The National League of Junior Cotillion is a society dedicated to teaching children to learn to treat others with honor, dignity, and respect, for better relationships with family, friends, and associates, and also to teaching ballroom dance. This was the slogan imprinted on the first page of Dixie’s brand new Etiquette Guide. It captured the essence perfectly. But I just had to tell you, mama, what happened during our very first Fox Trot! Just guess who I had to dance with—you know the Thompsons? Their son? She wanted to tell about Brooks Thompson’s hand, the way that it had sweated in hers, and how he’d stepped nervously on her toes, every time Miss Florrie called out, Remember, boys, you are to lead! Dixie would laugh when she said it—as if she were an old hand at dancing, now, and Brooks were not Adonis, the beautiful glowing golden boy Aphrodite held naked in her arms, on the most often studied page of her mama’s heavy mythology book. She needn’t mention the way he’d touched her waist, with his Inspector Gadget limb, nor how he had stared over her head for the entire duration of the dance, and the girls had seen, and giggled.

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Her mama got bored with unnecessary details. *Can you imagine that, Mama? Poor thing, he was so clumsy!*

“Dixie! Where are your manners, young lady?” Her mother’s voice startled her. The grace must have ended at last, for Mr. Rip was holding a dish toward her, and her mother was scooping the green beans and pine nuts, careful not to drip any liquid. “Will you leave Mr. Ripley to hold sautéed carrots all night?” She smiled a warning smile. “And you have been spoken to.”

Dixie blushed.

“I apologize, Mr. Ripley,” she said. “What were you saying?”

“Don’t you mind, Dorothea! I’m sure I’m not worth listening to!” Mr. Rip laughed easily, and Dixie’s mama softened her smile, murmured “Nonsense!” over the beans. “I was only asking you, where would you guess the worst tornadoes happen, in these great states of ours? Let’s hear your top three picks.”

“He writes history,” her mama had said, a few hours earlier in the kitchen. “His latest book is on the big Tupelo tornado, the one in nineteen thirty-six. It’s a celebration of our town, on the sixtieth anniversary of the tragedy.”

“But doesn’t ninety-eight less thirty-six make sixty-tw—”

“These things take time, Dixie!” Her mother had said, frowning. “Do you think you can write a whole book in a day? You could make a Frisbee with a crust that thick.”

Should she guess the obvious choice? Doing so seemed somehow not quite right.

“I don’t know,” she said.

Anne Lorraine set the beans down firmly.

“Gracious, Dixie!” She said. “I’ll tell my guesses then! Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma.”

“Almost perfect,” Mr. Rip said. He was so happy he nearly chuckled. “Most people make similar guesses, and they’re right to think of Texas; it is, indeed the deadliest spot. But what people do not know, is that the second deadliest spot of all is right here in Northern Mississippi. You don’t get as many as some other folks, but when they do come through, watch out!” Mr. Ripley laughed and lifted his wine glass, as if he were making a toast.

“Well! I wouldn’t have thought so,” Anne Lorraine said, “though mother was always terrified, when the weather in fall or spring got too hot, and the wind blew in gusts that would bake a person. ‘Tornado weather,’ she called it. She never could get used to the idea of sirens—always thought it best to keep on her toes.”

The dishes had all made their rounds, counter-clockwise, of course. Anne Lorraine took up her salad fork, and Dixie and Ripley did the same.

“It’s interesting that you should mention that,” Ripley said. “It’s part of what makes this area so odd. Almost all of the country has tornadoes only in springtime. In fact, only Mississippi and Alabama are lucky enough to get what is called the second season, another time of powerful atmospheric disturbance, which ends in mid-December and begins,” he looked at Dixie’s mother steadily, “just about now.”

“Oh?” Anne Lorraine speared a bit of salad, let her eyes crinkle over the fork. In the pause Dixie took a breath, tried to make the words come out.

*You know what else is interesting? The oddest thing happened at cotillion...* Thank God she hadn’t spoken the first time. The mood was disaster, not dancing.
Alessandra Doder had a fit! This was not strictly true, though Alessandra had become upset, when Miss Florrie scolded the girls for giggling, Alessandra being the main one behind it. Miss Florrie had stalked the linoleum, talked about what would and would not behoove them, and Alessandra had steamed. She just fell right down in the floor! And then she was kicking, and screaming, and getting her new dress dirty. Here Dixie would pause, and take a sip from her water glass, and shake her head. I never saw a child act that way.

“And why does poor old Mississippi get such an awful beating?”

The moment had passed again. Dixie went back to her food, looking at Mr. Ripley as if the answer to her mother’s question was what she cared for most in life.

“It’s all in the geography,” Ripley said. “Where we are in relation to the Gulf, and having the clash of warm air from there, and cold air down from Canada, and the movement of the jet stream, coming in over the Rockies. But I don’t know so much, really.” He took a meditative bite, crunched and swallowed fast. He ate European style, not bothering to put down his knife and switch his fork to his right hand. Dixie was beginning to hate him. “No one does, to tell the truth.” He looked at Dixie and spoke loud and slow, as if she needed to read lips. “Would you believe that even scientists are stumped about what makes tornadoes?”

Dixie felt herself turning red again. What did the man think was wrong with her? Was there any way that they could start over?

Hello, Mr. Ripley, it’s a pleasure. How do you feel about ballroom dance? It can certainly be stressful! Take for instance what happened just last night...

Anne Lorraine opened her blue eyes, slackened her slim shoulders in disbelief.

“You’re kidding!” She said.

“No,” Mr. Ripley said. “It’s amazing, but it’s true. All anyone can say for certain is that it seems the hot air rising to the top of the incoming cold front sends huge tubes of air rolling horizontally over the earth.” He held out his pointer fingers and spun a circle above his plate. “Normally, these tubes are much too big for humans to see or feel. But sometimes—and this is what we don’t understand—something pulls an air tube vertical—” he lifted one elbow and turned the spin upright—“and makes it spiral very tightly. The result, of course, is disaster. In the nineteen thirty-six tornado, which, as you may remember me mentioning, is the subject of my newest project, over two hundred and thirty people were officially killed, out of a population of seven thousand. And those were only the white victims.”

“Those poor people,” Anne Lorraine said. She looked down at her dinner as if it were near to making her cry. “I think about them every time I see those trees outside.” She meant the huge oaks that lined the road, because they grew slanted from the ground, their massive trunks twisted in the way that the wind in thirty-six had blown them. Whenever the wind blew, now, the trees tapped slender fingers on the glass of Dixie’s bedroom window. Dixie liked them, because of her mama. Look, she’d said, when Dixie was small, pointing out the rough jumble of sidewalk where the oaks had pushed their way beneath the pavement, the roots stretching and swelling till the concrete snapped. Isn’t that pretty?

But Mr. Ripley had just upped the ante.

I just can’t imagine, Dixie might say, shaking her head with a sigh. Think about the children! How they must have suffered, and cried for wanting their parents back...
Could a jump possibly be made from here? Perhaps Alessandra had been truly ill. In her metal folding chair across the circle, Dixie had surely seen her perfect slender form go rigid; her pretty lips open in shock or pain. Pain was better. Before we knew it she was on the floor, flailing and shrieking like a banshee. Both adults would be looking at Dixie now, their hands lax on the silver. She would continue in a different tone, letting her smile sound through the words, and leaning in to tell a secret. And you know the most awful thing? She flung her legs around so much that she flashed the world her underpants!

Dixie! Her mother would say, already laughing along with her.

Dixie gathered up her courage. She would speak up; she would. Just as soon as one of them glanced her way.

“This side of Rankin Street, you know, escaped the worst of it, which is why you still have your beautiful home. But have you ever seen the photographs of what was left around here?”

“Oh, yes,” Anne Lorraine said. “And in fact, my grandfather talked about it often, the way he and my mother came outside and saw the other side of the street flattened. He said he could hear the neighbors crying, from the rubble of their houses. The rain was coming down like ice, but he could hear them through the pouring.” She took another sip of wine.

“Actually,” Mr. Ripley said, “I’ve come across your grandfather’s name in the research I’ve done. I believe I’ve read something of his heroism, in trying to save the injured. You know that the hospital was destroyed? They filled up churches with wounded people, put the worst cases—” He was stopped by a hiccup, and covered his mouth with his napkin. Anne Lorraine pretended not to notice.

“In the Lyric Theatre!” She said. “Granddad and one of his best friends hauled people down there on a blown down door, because the roads were impassable. Is it true that they operated on that stage?”

“It is,” Mr. Ripley said, recovering. “People I’ve interviewed say that the floor was slippery with blood.”

Dixie nearly gasped out loud. What kind of a thing was that to say, when they were trying to eat dinner? What had happened to her mother, that she should become suddenly bloodthirsty? Well! If it was violence they wanted, then Alessandra’s illness had spread! All around the circle, now, children lay kicking on the floor, screaming for their mamas or for God. Naturally I started for a phone, but before I could move the pain hit me, too. I cannot tell you what that agony was like, except to say that I hope and pray neither one of you ever experiences it.

“How anyone managed to help is beyond me,” Anne Lorraine said. “Won’t you have some more tenderloin? Please take some—we’ve got tons. How could a person overcome his shock, when disaster just came out of the blue?”

“Well, for me, it was just knowing that other people were counting on me. When I heard the other children crying, I knew I had to do something. Dixie lowered her eyes modestly, placing her knife and fork in the ‘finished’ position, parallel across the top right curve of her plate. She, in any case, was aware that one could not discuss heroism while stuffing one’s face.

Mr. Ripley had taken her mother up on the additional portions.
“I don’t know,” he said, cutting a large bite. “Storms like that—they do strange things. Both to people and the land.”

“What’s the strangest thing you’ve discovered?” Anne Lorraine’s voice had grown throaty and low, proving that the wine she’d downed could have a strange effect, too.

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe some of the stuff. More than one person I interviewed was with their family in an automobile, and the whole thing was lifted in the air and set back down without a scratch. A lady who I talked with doesn’t remember a thing, except for hearing her mother scream. The parents and other children were killed, but the lady was found hours later in a tree more than a mile away, with only minor cuts and bruises. People saw things like brooms stuck by the bristles in solid wood telephone poles, and glass bottles bent over but not broken.” Mr. Ripley paused to shovel in the last of the meat. “And every last drop of water was sucked clean out of Sweet Gum pond.”

“Well I never,” Anne Lorraine said. She was watching his every move, but she’d relaxed in her chair, leaning noticeably against the back. With one hand she traced the line of her collarbone, apparently lost in thought.

That’s nothing! Dixie screamed silently. Did you know that Florrie Anderson is an honest to God witch? She got so mad at all of us, she put us all under a spell! Dixie could describe it all, and much better than Ripley could describe his famous tornado. She had struggled to her feet, but found her legs were misbehaving, moving in a way they should not. She had tottered; she fell again. She looked down below her skirt and gasped. Her legs were hairy! Her legs were bony! Her legs bent backwards at the knee! And at the ends of them, instead of Dixie’s new stacked heel shoes, were two shiny black hooves, hard and split down the middle. The bright room was a mass of screaming, hooved children, their legs too new to hold their weight. But anybody can learn how to be an animal.

“Ripley,” Anne Lorraine was saying, “I’m sure I have some old letters of my grandmother’s from the thirties, if you’d like some more reading to do. Maybe you might see fit to put my granddaddy in the book? The name you’ve read so often is Clarence Logan Lees.”

Mr. Ripley shifted in his seat.

“That would be wonderful, I’m sure. Yes, Clarence Logan, of course. It was the Lees, of course, that was familiar.”

“Of course,” Anne Lorraine said. “I might need some help though, moving those boxes in the attic.”

God, the two of them were boring. Dixie’s story had become much too good for her to bother. In a minute Alessandra was wobbling toward the door! She’d made it only a few yards before her lovely face hit the linoleum, her thin body pulled down by the desperate. Brooks Thompson was stronger. He trampled several small bodies beneath his hooves before flying headlong into the wall, his legs tangled in a folding chair. Then Natalie was up, then Bill, and then a large number was galloping, panicked, about the room. But Miss Florrie wasn’t about to let anyone go so easy. Those doors were sealed tight. Trapped, the children had huddled in dumb groups, and Miss Florrie rushed at these, her microphone held like a whip in her hand, the torn cord cracking in the air. Her white French twist had come loose from its moorings; hair sprang from her skull in cotton tufts. I’ll have me some veal for dinner! She screamed, as a herd of children
broke and scattered, leaping clumsily over chairs to reform in another corner. Blood was streaming from Alessandra’s nose; her face and dress were smeared with it. *I’m too young to die!* She wailed, bloody hands clawing her cheeks. *And that’s when I thought of the windows! I ran right over to the center one and smashed my hoof clean through the glass.* ‘No! NO!’ I heard Miss Florrie shout. She knew that the jig was up. Outside the autumn night had been waiting, the grass cool as washed lettuce and smelling sharply of wild onions. *This way! This way!* Dixie had yelled, and the children came clip-clopping. With their new legs they could outrun Miss Florrie. She sprinted after the first wave of them, but once on the church lawn they dispersed, loping away into the bushes, melting in and out of trees. Miss Florrie ran one way, and then the next, but she could not catch a single child. In a few moments she collapsed, exhausted; she cried and ripped up grass in her fists. Around her the children formed a ring, their laughter silver in the black. They linked arms and danced together, whirling, whirling in the darkness.

“*Dixie!* What on earth has possessed you, child? I said, would you care for dessert?” Her mother’s question hung suspended. Both of them were looking at her, their mouths miraculously shut. What was it she had meant to say?

You know the oddest thing happened...
I was just thinking of the children...
I don’t like your pecan pie...

Dixie’s lips opened and closed, and opened and closed again. And then, she knew just what to do.

“Maaaaa-uuuuu-rrrrrr!” She mooed, straight into Mr. Ripley’s face. Anne Lorraine upset her wine glass, the purple stain splashing across the tablecloth.

“What in God’s name?” Mr. Ripley sputtered.

“Mmmwwweeeerrrrrr!” Dixie mooed again, trying to get the sound just right. She left the table at a gallop, stomping her feet all the way down the stairs.

* * *

So goes the real story of one Miss Dorothea Lees. She had her grandma’s nose, her mother’s eyes, and something else. And who in their right mind would try explaining a creature such as she?
In January of his eleventh year, the boy looked up from his habitual management of days to discover darkness, and cold; the rough feel of coat sleeve against his running nose, and the bone-snap of sticks underfoot as he followed the tall silhouette of his father away from the rusted red pick-up into a looming obscurity of trees. Inside the forest the air smelled of damp bark, made crisp by the chill of dead winter. Beneath his right hand the strap of his gun sling was soft with moisture; the boy dug his fingernails deep into the leather as he passed the gargoyle shapes of branches bowed and broken by a recent ice storm. The boy walked swiftly after the man, careful to keep the same distance between them. He had woken at three, this boy, snug beneath the clean sheets and blankets of his bed, half-sick with dread of the creaking floorboards which would mean his father’s rising. Half-sick with knowing how easy it would be to say I don’t want to; how the man would laugh, not surprised, and go on into the woods alone. For a long time they traveled this way, not speaking, the boy watching the back of his father’s head.

They reached the place at earliest dawn, when the sun had just begun to whitewash the eastern horizon. The man stopped and waited on the boy, pulling a flask from the wide pocket on his Carharts and turning it up—one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three. Leaning backwards, the boy gazed up the trunk of the massive oak, contemplating the bare board platform high in the branches.

“Here,” the father said, pulling a Ziploc bag from another pocket. “Don’t forget this. Most important piece of equipment you got.”

He watched the boy take the bag, grinning over the red flush on his cheeks.

“Make sure your little pecker’s all the way in, now,” he added. “Bastards smell your piss from a good mile off.”

The boy took the bag, which he had forgotten, his eyes pricking with sudden hate. The father saw, and chuckled.

“What’s this now, Nancy? You wanna go home?”

Inside the thick armor of his boots and socks, the boy’s toes had begun to ache. God, but it was cold out here. Furious, he narrowed his eyes and wiped his nose on his coat sleeve, leaving a glistening trail of snot.

“No.”

His father grinned again, holding out the bottle.

“See if this will warm you up.”

The bitter sting made the boy choke and gag, but he gritted his teeth and swallowed. His father grinned again, slapping him hard on the shoulder.

“That’s the stuff. Remember, winter is good for a man. Gives him something to brace up against.”
The son of a bitch was right, it seemed. The boy felt himself bracing, his insides turning to steel while his mind floated up above. He handed the bottle back to his father, straightened up and tightened his grip on the gun sling. His father turned away, walking on toward his own tree stand, still chuckling to himself. *All right, motherfucker*, the boy thought. *All right.*

But all that was a long time past. Now the father in rough Carharts was dead, and the boy in the tree stand had vanished inside Mr. Randy Burrell, the man who sat, heavy-limed and hungover, in the parking lot of Northumberland Recovery. A whole other January, a lifetime away, but still colder than all hell. And Randy still hadn’t learned to care for the cold. On this Monday, the first one of the year, the Nashville streets floated with oily puddles, mirrors for a dull pewter sky. From the creaky, stained seat in his old Jeep, Randy watched them file in, his fellow drunks, the men with Skoal cans outlined on back pockets, the women with their coats clutched tight around their necks, their noses whipped red by the wind. Randy did not recall the boy in the woods, nor the cold metal of the gun, nor pine scent in pre-dawn winter. He did not recall the father’s razor grin. He did not recall, but even so—Randy looked at his large bony hands, still clutching the worn steering wheel. Randy drew himself up, and shut his eyes. This was the Monday after New Year’s weekend, a time to get down to business. All over the city today, he thought, people were turning to steel. It began in their hands, their hands that were shiny and hard beneath the skin. Steel hands flushing habits down the toilet, or tuning up neglected guitars. In an apartment across the Cumberland, a girl was painting on her smile, blood red against the grayness of the day. No more lost tips for her trips to the bathroom, no more numbing coolness coating the back of her throat, no more armor necessary. In the wealthy suburb of Brentwood, a businessman stood in his granite kitchen, deleting a number from his Blackberry while in another room his wife slept, curled up with her face to the wall. Randy’s wristwatch beeped the hour. Time to go. He got halfway to the door before the gorge rose in his throat; reflexively he leaned over the parking lot drain. For several moments he hung there, watching the hypnotic bob and swirl of a thousand cigarette butts. *All right.* He thought; but nothing came, and so he went on inside.

Randy opened the door to see Cyndi, the counselor, already presiding at the top of the circle.

“Randy!” she said, in her plump-mouse voice. “So happy you made it! We’ve just begun check-ins.”

Randy hustled to a seat, his mumbled apology stuck to his tongue. Goddamn that woman. Her look reminded him of his sister’s, when she’d fed the pet iguana of the neighbor boy she’d liked. In her heart, Randy’s sister had hated that iguana. Cyndi was a pretty, slightly stout woman, and perhaps she and Randy would have gotten along just fine, if only her breasts weren’t so damn big. But they were, and Cyndi didn’t like it—you could tell from the high-necked, neutral colored tops she always wore. Probably she’d been sensitive about it since junior high, when some pimply little asshole had tormented her at lunch. Well, Cyndi’s chest *was* noticeable, and of course on Randy’s very first day in outpatient, she had happened to look suddenly at him, right as he happened to be noticing. *I didn’t mean to stare at your tits!* He wanted to shout at her, but you couldn’t say things like that out loud to people, and anyway it was unlikely she’d ever have believed him. Due to his own junior high growth spurts, and the tattoos which
had seemed like a good idea in his twenties, Randy was a guy whom people felt they had to prove they weren’t afraid of. And the proving was never pleasant. Since that first day, Randy had thought it best to try not to look at Cyndi at all, though whether this strategy was helping or hurting things he couldn’t say. Now he gazed out the small window at the stray leaves of holly bushes, peeking forlornly over the sill at the stuffy warmth inside.

“As I was saying,” Geoff said, folding his skinny arms across his chest, “I might be doing a lot better if I got some support from someone who bothered to do the fucking laundry, so I could get to work and meetings.”

Randy’s muscles twitched. He hated Geoffrey, that obnoxious bastard, sitting there with his blue-jeaned legs spread wide, to prove how much space he claimed in the world. Beside him, his wife Carla sat with her own legs crossed so tight you couldn’t have wedged a dime between them. Silently she looked her husband over, her hatred calm and pale and cool, flat as the thin line of lips which bled pink into her mouth’s feathery wrinkles.

“Geoff, remember the rules, please,” Cyndi said, frowning from behind her square-frame glasses.

Geoff threw his hands toward the ceiling.

“Oh, right. Please forgive me,” he said. “For disrespecting all your delicate ears with my language.”

Randy shut his eyes again, trying hard to think of the steel-people, with their shiny shells gleaming just under the skin. The girl studying her face in the cracked bathroom mirror, the businessman with his forehead pressed to the cold window, listening to the coffee brew while his breath fogged the glass.

“Randy,” Cyndi said. “If you’re going to nap today, I’m afraid we’ll have to ask you to leave.”

Randy jumped, then passed a hand over his eyes.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” he said. “I was—”

“Thank you,” Cyndi said, cutting him off. “Now Geoff, I want you to name three things—without insulting Carla—name three things that you could do that would make it easier for her to get the laundry done.”

Geoff crossed his ankle over his knee.

“Well, if I knew how to make sitting on your ass any easier, I’d get right on that,” he said.

Randy wrapped his hands around the metal seat of his chair, struggling to keep his mind far away. He looked down at his own body—a mistake. On his gray sweatshirt, directly over the swell of his belly, was a stain, a dark brown smear. Probably ketchup, he thought, and suddenly the tide of irritation ebbed, and he was left stranded with a vision—a sad man some years past forty, eating McDonald’s in his recliner, dropping French fries on the clothes he rarely bothered to wash, falling asleep amid the leftovers he wadded up in greasy paper while across the room the television blared. Himself, just two nights previous. Randy exhaled noisily, and beside him the thin, tired man from England leaned back and whispered: “Good Lord, Man! You smell positively flammable.”

Randy did not hear him. It had been months, he realized, since he’d really looked in a mirror; since he’d allowed himself to take in the growing paunch around his middle, the gray frosting his whiskers. He was old. He mulled it over. He was old and fat and sad, and in the cold mornings he dressed alone, grabbing the first things he saw from the
bedroom floor. What right did he have to despise Geoff, or anyone else for that matter? He was nothing like the steel people. Hell, probably they weren’t even like themselves. In a week the waitress/cokehead would be holed up again in a restaurant stall, snorting bumps from her house key with her panties around her ankles, trying to avoid suspicion. In a week the businessman would be banging his whore again, while his wife tucked his daughter in at home. For the first time in that year, Randy cursed himself for screwing up the day he’d taken the gun in his mouth. Cyndi talked Geoff down, at least partially, from his high horse.

“Well, I guess I could help out some with Colton,” Geoff muttered, putting both feet on the ground again.

Colton, Randy knew, was the couple’s son. He was mentally handicapped. Carla continued staring at Geoff as if he were shit on carpet.

“Well!” Cyndi said, smiling brightly. “I’m sure you two can work some more on this problem in your family session. Now, does anyone else have something they need to say for check-in?”

She paused for half a second.

“Good! In that case, we’ll go ahead and get started. The theme for today is… Family Secrets.”

At this Cyndi pulled a stuffed pink elephant, round and sad-eyed, from her shoulder bag, and placed it in a chair beside her.

“In families of addiction there are often secrets, whether that secret is the addiction itself or another, underlying problem…”

Randy didn’t give a damn about secrets. Handle your business. That was his motto. No need to go telling the whole world about everything. As the holly leaves tapped against the glass, he let Cyndi’s voice fade away, and ran his mind over the idea of trying again, nudging at every angle of the thing, seeing how it could come out different, this time. And that’s what he was doing when Sharon edged into the room, twenty-three minutes late to her first outpatient session.

“Oh, you must be Sharon!” Cyndi exclaimed, rushing to take the woman’s hand.

The disruption irked Randy afresh. He lifted his head to glower—and then he couldn’t help but stare. Sharon was not beautiful, and the florescent lights did her no favors. On the sides of her mouth the lines cut deep, and the space between her brows was furrowed. Her brown hair was bound in a tight knot; around the temples Randy saw it could have stood a good washing. Her body was a chubby pear, soft bulges growing larger toward the bottom, and her stubby feet turned inward. But her arms—her arms were what got him. Sharon’s arms were lovely, shaped in curves and drifted with freckles, suffused with purple from walking coatless in the cold. Sharon’s arms, he realized, were like Donna’s, the freckles like those he’d traced with his fingers, the flesh plumped as hers had been, before the wear of years with him whittled her to wire jerky.

Donna’s arms had been bare, the summer night when she’d stood over their lit stove, illuminated by the yellow hood bulb, her body turned away in her sleeveless dress. By the refrigerator his hands were cold, an unopened beer numbing his fingers. The overhead light was off, and outside the sun had gone. He stood in the dark, smelling the sizzle of browning hamburger. The day had brought a cruel truth, a message from her body, inscribed in blood. She was not pregnant. She’d told him when he came home, after his end of the workday drink, with the same breath she’d used to say hello, and in
the same monotone. The appetite and the sudden weight had been only symptoms of her hope, humiliating to her now, and with a fork she stabbed the ground round viciously, mashing it against the pan. With every jab her tricep shook. More than anything he wanted to go to her, take the fork and kiss her from the elbow up, feeling the soft flesh of her inner arm on his lips. But he couldn’t do that anymore. No, there wouldn’t be any of that, because in the entryway, surprised by the news, he’d seen her search him with her dark doe-eyes. He’d seen, in her expression, the chasm opening between them—she’d read the guilty relief on his face. Now, in the meeting room, in the instant before Sharon moved to her chair, she looked up and met Randy’s gaze. He gasped to see Donna’s look in her, the same quality in her brown eyes, a something that slipped, knife-like, between the ribs. In that instant Randy knew that what he wanted most in the world was to throw himself at this ugly stranger, to kiss her arms like a holy relic.

The moment passed. Sharon hurried to the only empty seat, on the other side of the pink elephant.

“Like peas in a pod,” Geoff whispered, and the British man snickered. Sharon twisted her hands in her lap. Randy flexed his shoulders forward, leaned up and tapped Geoff on the knee.

“Say one more thing, Buddy,” he muttered. “One more thing and I’ll kick your ass.”

The British man snickered louder. Geoff flushed a mottled cherry.

“Listen, you son of a ----” he began.

“Gentlemen!” Cyndi’s voice cut in. “We have a newcomer today, so if you will please pay attention, we’re going to put the lesson on hold, so Sharon can tell us How She Got Here.”

She patted Sharon on the shoulder.

“It’s the way everyone starts their first day in the group,” she explained.

Sharon sighed, twisting and untwisting the hands in her lap. She had not looked up again.

“Well,” she said at last, “I guess I just couldn’t take Heaven’s Servants any longer.”

Cyndi nodded sympathetically.

“And what was Heaven’s Servants, honey? It’s all right; just tell us everything.” Sharon tried. She’d been living, she said, in a park in her town of Lyndenwood, Florida. In a way, she’d been happy there, watching the ducks quack and bob on the water, the way their bottoms turned up white whenever they stuck their heads down. She had thirty dollars with her, and so staying blitzed was a non-problem, and she was free to appreciate the finer things, like the way clouds were sometimes duck behinds in the sky, and to think about things she usually forgot, like her daughter, living in Chicago in the cold. Or somewhere far north, anyhow. But after five days Sharon’s cash was gone, and the clouds ganged up and rained on her. Another park miscreant sniffed around her too much, and she feared the sight of his bearded head, lurking in the trees nearby. And then the geese came, a whole flock of them, descending inexplicably while she slept. Sharon was terrified of geese, the awful hiss and snap of them, and had been ever since one had chased her, as a little girl, around the rim of a different pond, its huge wings extended and its thick body wobbling. The night the geese appeared, it had rained again, and huddled on her bench the next day Sharon had cried.
“And that’s when Muriel showed up,” she said. “Of course, right when I was crying.”

The woman Muriel, it seemed, had appeared before Sharon’s park bench as a vision of pressed white cotton, shining straight hair, and a bright flower face beneath a green umbrella. She’d come because of Sharon’s husband. Muriel and Len were Al-Anon friends. He’d introduced the women months ago, when Sharon walked in from a margarita-soaked lunch to find the hussy sipping tea with her husband at her kitchen table, her dirty dishes now sparkling clean and drying in the rack, carefully arranged, the way a housewife would leave them.

“She didn’t even say hello,” Sharon said bitterly. “She just looked at me like I was trash, and said we should go to Heaven’s Servants. I never would have agreed to it, but all I could remember was that concrete building outside town, with the roof I liked, made out of tin. I liked watching them build it, too, because of how fast they did it, everybody scurrying with wheelbarrows and paint. But that was stupid. I didn’t know anything about those people.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Carla said suddenly. “I know what it’s like to agree to anything, just to get out of where you are.”

Geoff opened his mouth, but Carla turned on him.

“Just shut up for once,” she hissed.

“Well,” Sharon said, shrugging her shoulders. “I should have known not to trust her.”

At Heaven’s Servants, in a stuffy, cinder-block room, a slender man with solemn spectacles had slid a written contract over an unvarnished desktop, his hand spread into a crippled spider on the page. Sharon’s signature, scrawled at the bottom, roped her into an eighteen-month contract—her labor in exchange for food and board. As it turned out, she lasted for five weeks.

“I didn’t plan on leaving,” she whispered, so quiet that Randy strained to hear. “That day, I was just cutting potatoes, like normal.”

Potatoes and corn, it seemed, were what the Servants ate. Every morning for breakfast. Every night for dinner. When they weren’t eating, they cleaned—the church and other Servants’ homes—or sang, or prayed, or copied the book of John by hand. All this and more had apparently been a part of the contract, the fine print Sharon hadn’t bothered with. She was not allowed to leave, and there were no phones in the building, although even if there had been, She’d had no one to call. She was tired, more tired than she’d ever been, and her only thoughts were of resting. Under the watchful eyes of three male Servants she washed and chopped, throwing the neat squares into pans for the oven. In the adjacent room the choir was practicing, Servants and other contracted workers singing devotional hymns together. They worked hard, and you could tell; at the chopping board Sharon was touched by the sound—clear, true a cappella notes drifting through the walls, sweet alleluias rising. Peace be still.

“It happened all at once,” she said, wondering. “That knife went through, just like I was butter.”

In the quiet circle she held up her hands, thick purplish scars Randy hadn’t noticed before mangling the pale skin. At the wrist you could tell that her bones were small, birdlike beneath her ample flesh. On the left the mark was longer, and sure, while the right scar twisted in a short diagonal.
“It was hard to hold on the second time,” she said.
In any case the second wound was superfluous; Sharon didn’t even have time to hear the other kitchen worker scream before she fainted in the blood spattered potatoes.
An old childhood buddy had suggested Northumberland. It was a psychiatric care facility, this friend explained, a recovery center for addiction, too. Stitched up in her hospital bed, Sharon had nodded, not caring. And so, a long car ride later, she arrived, to complete her recovery in Nashville.

“Now I live down the road,” she said. “In a half-way house.”
Her voice died away and she crossed her arms, folding back quickly into herself.
Randy did not understand the change taking place inside him. At the sight of those mangled limbs all he could think of was how nice it would be to take a walk with Sharon through her park, when the jonquils came up in late February, and the smallest trees—too young to see the late frosts coming—put forth tiny, hopeful buds. There, wrapped in coats on her old bench, he wanted to tell her the things he couldn’t tell anyone, like the way he still got drunk at the end of every month, just to grow enough balls to face the terror waiting in the coat closet, scattered atop abandoned Christmas lights. Randy’s closet floor was filled with mail. All month long, every day, he forced himself to open the rusting mailbox, to put a searching hand within the maw. For his sanity, however, he didn’t look at what he’d gotten but marched the lot of it inside, opened the closet, and tossed it in. Bills, summons, notifications—anything might come, Randy would say, and looking down at her hands, Sharon would nod, and he would continue.
Mail had done a lot to hurt Randy. When Donna’s father died the spring before, plagued with morphine nightmares in an Orlando hospice, he had looked helplessly at her crumpled face, the question mark of her prone body in bed, and told her that he couldn’t miss another day at Creighton Concrete. Earlier in the week a cookout had gotten out of hand, and after calling in sick for three days straight, he was worried for his job. Donna flew to the funeral alone. After she left, Randy saw the first letter, an official one from Creighton. At the sight of it, his stomach fell. He was fired—in his heart he knew. He couldn’t open the envelope, so instead, he went out and bought a pint, and for lunch he bought another. Over the next forty-eight hours, the voicemail recorded messages from Donna, her voice alternating between rage and grief, until on the third morning there was something else. In a half-stupor on the couch, he heard the voice of his old boss. Where the hell had he been, the message asked, and would he please not bother coming back? He barely remembered staggering to the kitchen, prying the letter from the plate where he’d left it, floating in syrup from his breakfast pancakes. Bits of it remained stuck fast to the china, and seeing them he thought vaguely that Donna would be angry. The letter, it turned out, was something about a change in his insurance plan. But it had gotten him fired, after all.

“We’re so glad you’re still here, Sharon,” Cyndi said. “Aren’t we all proud of Sharon, for being here with us today?”
The group shifted and murmured, nodding their heads.
“Hey Sharon,” Randy said. “Would you wanna hang out with me sometime?”
The group halted, confused.
“What the hell?” Geoff said, and the British man burst out laughing. Sharon lifted her head from her hands, half-glaring.
“You think you’re pretty funny?” She said.

Randy blinked.

“No,” he said. “I just want—”

‘RANDY!’ Cyndi said, recovering her voice. “This behavior is not in appropriate. You may apologize at once, or you may leave and not come back until you can follow the rules!”

Cyndi was breathing hard, almost carried to her feet by the outrage. Looking at her crimson face, Randy felt a sudden compunction. After all, she couldn’t have been more than thirty.

“All right,” he said amiably. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Sharon was still studying his face.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I don’t mind.”

Cyndi settled in her seat again, touching both hands to her temples.

“All right, Sharon,” she said, breathing deeply. “We know how you finally landed in the hospital. But I’d like you to think back a little more, back to the time before all that. When, in your mind, did things first start spiraling out of control?”

Sharon did not move her gaze from Randy’s eyes. She had had plenty of trouble from men; she knew better than to trust them with anything. And yet here she was, speaking to this one—this ugly, hulking, tattooed hick—telling him about her breakdown, and what had happened with her husband. Probably she was crazy, she reflected. But then, she’d gone ahead with much more reckless things.

And so. But there’s something else important about the hunting expedition the boy took with his father, in early January long ago. Huddled in his coat and coveralls, the boy waited for the man’s bright orange ball cap to bob away though the dim trunks. Then he began to load his gun, jerking up the bolt handle and pressing the rounds in. While he worked, he cursed to himself, the words escaping through his teeth in a long continuous hiss

“GoddamcoocksuckermotherfuckerIhopeyoudieyousonofabitchbastardjustgetcance randdiediediedie…”

The bolt handle went back in place with a click. As the sun began to filter through the skeleton branches, he dropped his rifle on the boards beside him and with stinging fingers snapped open the large jackknife he kept in his pocket. Still frowning, he eased off of his already aching tailbone and began hacking at the boards, at first gouging simple shapes and holes, then moving on to letters and words. While the few brave birds and squirrels began to chatter, complaining of the cold, Randy Burrell carved his name into the wood, followed by his age and the date. Then, he decided to take a moment to record, for posterity, his feelings about his father.

F...U...C... He began. But it was not to be.

Just as he got started on the “K,” a movement on the ground stilled the knife in his hand. There, stepping nimbly from the labyrinth of trunks he saw it, a buck, his black nose raised to sniff the air. It was young; he could tell. The horns couldn’t have stood more than eight inches from its head. But its lean body was straight and sure, the back-bending legs ready to spring, rocketing away through the forest. Slowly, the boy put down the knife. Slowly, he picked up his gun. This deer, he knew, was not a deer. This deer was a change, an initiation, a doorway to another world. This deer was a ceremony, in the quiet of the woods, warm blood sipped from a small cup, a reminder of the price of
life. This deer was his father marking the boy’s forehead with a red thumb—Randy Burrell; Larson Burrell’s son.

The buck stepped closer, lowered his head, and began grazing. Looking down his weapon, the boy watched the deer move into his line of fire. He watched the delicately stepping feet, the smooth lines of haunches and belly. The deer went on eating, unaware. The boy’s finger trembled on the trigger. His father’s hands were rough, with dirt caked around the short nail. The bullet would rip through the deer’s entrails, shredding muscle, splintering bone. A young male deer, alone in the woods. The boy could take him, if he wanted.

In the meeting room Sharon was speaking to Randy, the incantation of her voice calling up events in his mind’s eye as if he himself had borne witness to them. The Florida night had been waterlogged. Still air too thick for oxygen made Sharon gasp as she ran, and in her bursting chest her lungs burned. On the gravel road her feet plowed pebble showers, and her lumbering weight made her flight slow. Pants were a problem for her—it was hard to fit her raindrop shape—and looking at her from behind you could see that her shorts bunched in the center of her rear. Probably her neighbors laughed, or else bit their lips and turned away, letting the slats of their blinds drop quiet on the shameful scene. Doubtless many dialed the police. In a town sleepy-small as Lyndenwood, one just could not do what Sharon had done, raising unholy ruckus at 3 a.m., and hope to escape unpunished. Not, at least, if one was blind drunk, and hefty, and alone.

Not alone. Not escape alone. The words lodged in Randy’s brain, the start of an idea’s blooming. Across the distance of the circle Sharon seemed to nod sadly. Yes, this would have been his moment. Randy Burrell’s moment to make his grand entrance—a knight in a shining ’93 Jeep. His lights topping the hill where she struggled would have engulfed her in despair, but before she could throw herself in the cherry oleander, as she did when the cops actually arrived, Randy’s truck would have been beside her, passenger door swung wide, and him shouting to for God’s sake get in while they still had a chance. It was the only possible moment for such intervention. Whiskey-bent at Elysian, her favorite dive, she’d have fought the man who tried to keep her from heading home, and once she felt that front door stop short on the bolt, when the bastard inside could see her keys hanging on the wall hook, plain as day, she’d have got hold of that garden hoe somehow. The picture window would be smashed, glass shards shattering her husband’s smooth complacency, as he lay licking his lips in the dark bedroom, thinking, that’ll teach her, and planning how he’d crow to his new Al-Anon “friends.” His anger burst jagged from the bone, when the pane exploded, tinkling on the hardwood, and his socked feet thundered down the hall. You could bet he opened the deadbolt, then. But when he tackled his wife on the dewy weeds, wrestled the hoe away, and split his knuckles on her screaming mouth, it wouldn’t have done to walk up and knock that fucker out, with one hard punch to the back of his skull. Sharon didn’t want her husband hit; the tremble in her voice, the red rim of her eyes betrayed her. She couldn’t blame him for being brainwashed. No, the road was the right time, after his shouting and her shrieks had roused the neighborhood, and porch lights spilled questions in the night. Len wasn’t inclined to hit his wife in front of witnesses, or else the consciousness of another’s judgment brought him back to himself. At any rate, he’d let her go, and the road had carried her from this chaos to the relative quiet of the city jail, waking up to a fat lip, a
black eye, and unfair assault charges on a concrete floor, after Al-Anon had destroyed the world.

“It was all because of them,” she whispered. “It was their fault Len turned on me. And then he got a restraining order, and then the Salvation Army said there wasn’t room. And then I went to the park.”

*But I wasn’t there!* Randy wanted to shout. *I wasn’t there!* *I couldn’t be!*

His stomach tightened with frustration. This couldn’t be the end, this procession of missed chances. This could not be the story of his life.

Sharon took a trembling breath and turned to Cyndi.

“I made them promise,” she said. “Before I came here. I made them promise that this place wasn’t A.A., or Al-Anon, or anything to do with them. I would say it all started with Al-Anon.”

For a moment Cyndi shut her eyes. Then she opened them, and smiled at Sharon.

“Okay,” she said. “We’ll talk more about this soon. Thank you for telling us how you feel. Now—” She glanced at her watch. “— I’d like to use the few minutes we have left to begin the lesson, so we have something to think about for tomorrow.”

Taking her large book, *Daily Reflections on Recovery*, from her shoulder bag, she looked around the circle.

“Geoff,” she said. “Will you please read us the thoughts for today?”

Geoff opened the book to the proper page and paused, looking down at the words.

“You know what?” He said, grinning. “I think Sharon should read for us today, since it’s her first time here.”

“Oh!” Cyndi was delighted. “Sharon, are you okay with that?”

Sharon took the volume, bound in leather like a Bible, and laid it gently in her sizable lap. Running a finger over the lines, she began to read, twisting her feet around the legs of her chair. Sensing her anxiety, Randy rubbed the lump on the back of his neck, a nervous habit. Sharon read a sentence and then stopped, her eyes staring wide at the words on the page, her finger still. On his neck Randy’s hand stopped moving, too, but remained touching the bump under his skin, the hovel where the bullet nested.

Randy’s own suicide had been Donna’s last straw. When she came home and found out about the letter, she’d been calmer than Randy had ever seen her, the pain only showing in the slow way she moved, and in the sagging of her face. Sitting on the edge of their coffee table, she’d leaned over her knees toward her bleary-eyed husband, lying drunk amongst the couch cushions, and her voice was gentle. She was going to her sister’s, she told him, and for a while that’s where she was going to stay. If and when he got himself together, he should call her. Not before. With a pillow hugged tight to his chest, Randy cried. For the first time in all their years together, his drunken tears hadn’t been enough to stop Donna. Lugging the suitcase she’d just brought in, she struggled out the door. At first he was sure that she’d be back, but by nightfall she was still gone, and by the next morning he was unspeakably alone, the rooms of their house wide and echoing. All that day, and the one following, Randy finally called his wife, desperately dialing her cell and her sister, praying that just once, he’d get an answer. He didn’t. And he kept on drinking.

This much he had told the group, and also about the bullet. During smoke break, he’d let them feel the lump, the women crying out how lucky he was, the men wiping their mouths and whispering *Damn*. But he hadn’t told them the worst part, the part that made
him know he’d deserved to die. Sitting back on the couch in his hazy stupor, turning the heavy pistol in his hands, Randy had wanted to get back at Donna—show her a thing or two about leaving. The space where she’d sat was now covered in trash, empty bottles and cigarette ash, pizza crust and other things. He pictured her walking through the door, seeing the mess and him slumped over the couch arm, brains splattered all over the wall behind him, dripping down the mirror she’d hung when they moved in. If it had been long enough, he’d smell, a sweetish sick scent of decay that she’d never, never blow out of her nostrils. The metal was cold inside his mouth, and when he trembled it clattered against his teeth, making them seem china fragile. For an eternity he sat there, counting down, and counting again, taking deep breaths, and leaning forward, and then not quite pulling the trigger, resettling his weight to have another go, readjusting his grip on the hilt.

In the forest the boy had bitten his lips, his mouth filled with the tin acridity of fear. Beneath his stocking cap his forehead sweated. The deer munched his grass intently.

In the den, Donna’s horrified face floated, the look of her eyes forever altered. Could he do it? Could he do it, really? With a strangled scream, Randy gave in. When his muscles loosed, the gun fired. The bullet blasted off the tip of the deer’s white tail. The bullet lodged in the back of Randy’s neck.

In the meeting room Sharon leaped to her feet, tumbling the Daily Reflections on the floor. With one hand to her mouth, she pointed at Cyndi. A low wail burst from her chest, and in an instant she bolted, out the door and down the hall, her cries growing fainter as she went. Cyndi looked like she’d been slapped. The room erupted with motion, people bouncing upright, and voices chattering excitedly. The Daily Reflections was still splayed on the linoleum. In a flash Randy scooped it up, let it fall open to the pages Cyndi’s bookmark split.

“Goddam you asshole!” he shouted at Geoff.

The bastard had given Sharon a passage from an Amanda Hoffstetter, proud member of Al-Anon. Randy hurled the book at Geoff’s forehead and raced out the door after Sharon. Now his long legs served him well, and when he hit the metal door through with she’d run the others were only just spilling into the hall, their voices urging him on faster.

He didn’t remember being shot, only that he hadn’t meant to do it. Going limp was what had saved him, the position of his body sending the bullet down, rather than up through the roof of his skull. Or so his doctor told him later, when she explained why the bullet was still there. It was millimeters from the spine. She’d also explained about him getting up, and walking through the yard out to the mailbox, and collapsing. A stranger had called 911. A suicide attempt required psychiatric care, and for Randy, Northumberland was the nearest option. He’d been in-patient for six months. Here, when he was well enough, he’d been given another letter, this one from Donna. In tiny, crawling script, in page after page, she told him how they’d called her, and how she’d come to see him, post-surgery, when he lay unconscious in the recovery room. For a long time, she’d held his hand, and for a long time she’d wept. She couldn’t do such a thing again; she hoped that he understood. He should be ready to hear from her lawyer. And she loved him, and was sorry. He’d spent six months inside Northumberland,
passively cooperative, a model among mental patients. Donna found herself a new job, and an apartment in North Carolina.

Sharon hadn’t made it nearly so far. In the open cold he saw. At the foot of the small hill, built to shed rain from the foundation, and thick with grass gone winter-brown, Sharon lay flat on her stomach in the mud, her soft arms hugging the earth. Oh Lord. Randy’s mind raced. What to do? Where would he have taken her, had he plucked her that night from the road? In his mind he saw a bright hotel room, with two soft beds clean, and tightly sheeted. In the bathroom the shower ran—she was in there, cleaning up. The television was on, and people were laughing, the studio audience for a show he didn’t know. He stood by the telephone, the receiver cradled in his ear, ordering pizza for them both.

When he reached her he dropped to his knees in the dirt.

“Come on, come on!” He said, shaking her. All the others were outside, now. Cyndi was pushing her way through the crowd.

“What are you doing?” She screamed, when she saw him. “Randy, get away from her!”

Randy brought his face close to Sharon’s ear.

“Get up, Sharon, please get up,” He shook her shoulder again, harder this time. “I can take us away from here.”

She lifted her head and looked at him, mud clumping her hair and the side of her face. A sudden smile curled the corners of her lips.

“But you don’t know me at all,” she said. She put her head back in the slop.

Cyndi was almost upon them, her chest bouncing as she ran. In the distance, Randy heard the sirens, coming to put Sharon back inside. It would be another ninety days for her, at least. Randy’s wet legs ached with cold. And all at once he knew the answer. Yanking the sweatshirt over his head, he spread it over her prone body, covered her lovely arms with the sleeves.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “It’s got ketchup on it.”

Cyndi barreled into him, sent him sprawling in the grass.

“Sharon, it’s okay!” She shouted, “Help is coming, just hang on!”

No one stopped Randy when he walked away, freezing in his thin t-shirt. Tonight, he would do some laundry; wear something clean up here, tomorrow.
Very likely, William Tecumseh wouldn’t have gone all at once the way he did, if it were not for the eccentricity of Ruby and Jeb Dempsey’s mama. Pamala Sheridan Dempsey was by all accounts the finest type of woman, but every year, about mid-May, she went crazy as a Bessie bug and could not care for children till September, when school started up again. It was the heat that got to her, people said, for the Sheridans never did take well to extremes. At any rate, the upshot was that Ruby Belle and Jebediah spent their summers with their daddy, Mac Dempsey, in his cabin beside Pickwick Lake—this after not hearing a peep from him in the nine months since they’d parted. The cabin was no grand affair. Mac worked, when he worked at all, down at Eastport Marina for a man named Jimmy Back-and-forth, so called because of his unvaried response to any irate boaters who happened by to find the place unattended. *I’ve been waiting here for help for a fucking half-hour!* They’d yell into Jimmy’s amiable face. *Well, you know, we’re back and forth*, he’d reply.

In a way, it was a lonely place for children, that lush land which had thrived upon the blood of Chickasaws, and Cherokees, and any number of Union and Confederate boys. The lake itself is lonely yet, despite the encroachment of builders; a person who sets out walking around its edges will travel just shy of five hundred miles before he gets back to where he started, most of those miles through open woods. At the time that Ruby and Jeb were children, Mac’s place, and old Miss Vernella Kent’s across the way, were the last houses in the thinly spread line of dwellings running the length of Eastport Marina Road. In a way, too, it was an odd sort of place, cluttered as it was with the vestiges of dying. The roads around Eastport sprouted homemade crosses like weeds, and Jeb’s desk drawer rolled with Civil War bullets he’d found in the woods. When Jimmy Back-and-forth’s son Charlie blew his brains out by the docks, they never did find all the teeth. So perhaps, it should come as no surprise that Ruby’s tenth summer at Eastport began with what happened to Willie T.

Miss Vernella was the first to know that some kind of death was near. The day had mellowed to late afternoon, which meant that the old woman was out on her front porch, dipping snuff in her recliner when the white Ford Taurus came around the bend, stirring up a cloud of fine red dust. It was still too hot for moving much; Pather the cat lay on her side in the shade next to the house, and in her pen Roosevelt the pig lolled snoozing in her mudhole, heedless of the flies that walked her. Miss Vernella spat contentedly in her cup. Up close, you could see the children’s Aunt Iva, gripping the wheel with her long pink nails, her sunglasses perched atop her head and her mouth pressed into a frown. Probably she minded the dirt. And here came Mac out to meet them, standing on the steps with his Budweiser. He pushed his John Deer cap to the back
of his head, and smiled, and rubbed a sleepy hand over his eyes. Miss Vernella spat again. Man’s mama must have seen a snake when she carried him, he weaved around so much. But it was the children who surprised her—how big they’d got! Ruby Belle still ran to her daddy, her red ponytail flying out behind her, but Jeb went right around to the trunk, to help his Aunt Iva with the suitcases. Miss Vernella felt suddenly uneasy. Something in the air was wrong. But what could possibly be wrong now? Mac ruffled the top of his daughter’s head, then led her back out to the car for her things. He held out a hand to Aunt Iva, who busied herself with wiping at the dirt caked on her bumper. And then Pather streaked into the house, a flash of black and something red. She’d had something in her mouth. A bird. Miss Vernella would never have allowed it to happen, if she hadn’t been so distracted. While she had sat noticing the children, Pather—that bad cat!—had noticed an unwary cardinal, pecking along the ground for seeds fallen from the purple feeder. She’d stalked him through the monkey grass, her black paws creeping closer, closer, while the cardinal enjoyed his dinner, pecking and hopping in the soft warm earth. Crouched on her belly, Pather had waited. And waited. And pounced. In an instant she had him, clamped securely in her jaws. This was when Miss Vernella saw her, hauling her fluttering catch inside.

“Pather!” Miss Vernella said, starting up from her chair. “You drop that poor thing this instant!”

In the kitchen, she saw that Pather had obliged, if only for the sport of it. The bird darted frantically about the room, and after him came Pather, clawing her way over furniture and bulldozing through shelves of trinkets. Miss Vernella ducked as the bird swooped straight for her, then grabbed a dishrag to swat at the cat. Before she could try, however, the cardinal slammed headfirst into the window and dropped, limp, into the sink. Pather was going too fast to stop; she skidded across the counter, claws scrabbling, and tumbled over the ledge to the floor. The impact had been loud and hard, and in the sink the bird was very still, but inside his breast Miss Venella felt a flutter, his heart a tiny eggbeater against her palm. Shutting a protesting Pather in the house, Miss Vernella went outside and set the bird carefully on the front porch ledge. In her pen, Roosevelt slept on. Iva’s Ford Taurus was still parked in Mac’s driveway. Miss Vernella felt a creeping chill. The bird hadn’t flown in on its own, it was true, but even so. A bird in the house meant only one thing. Miss Vernella spat in the grass.

* * *

What the old lady didn’t know was that even before the bird was out, Ruby had already spotted what was left of William Tecumseh in the wood-paneled wall. The hallway where she crouched was dim; but still Ruby could make out the wood pattern which had once composed Willie T.’s face, now scattered into so many rough knots and lines, like a word in a forgotten tongue. Ruby twisted her bare toes into dirty matted shag. From the kitchen she could hear Aunt Iva, talking, low, to her daddy. In the kitchen there was sunlight, and pans crusted with burned scrambled eggs. Aunt Iva was telling Daddy the rules, Mama’s rules for keeping Jeb and Ruby safe. You know about not wearing shoelaces, of course, and to go to Sonic, not McDonald’s, on account of the even syllables. It was the same, every year—Aunt Iva flicking her Virginia Slim Menthol in the nearest dirty glass, bearing up under Daddy’s smirk and reciting the phrases that only meant I’ll do anything for my baby sister, or look, kids, how much your mama loves
But in the hallway no one came to Ruby, nor explained that the word left by Willie T.’s face was *Azrael, Libitina,* or *Thanatos.* No one said, *you know, everything falls apart.*

And here was Willie T. Poor Willie. Fallen to pieces inside the wall where he stayed during daylight hours, for who ever heard of a monster prowling around in daytime? Pure foolishness, that was. Ruby felt her bones go floppy, as if she too might disintegrate. She plopped down on her hard green suitcase, her grubby hands clasped over her mouth. Once, on a summer long ago, she had wept bitterly over a litter of dead kittens, born in the dark recesses beneath Miss Vernella’s front porch and abandoned by Pather, gone off into the woods. That day, Miss Vernella had laid her wiry, liver-spotted hand on Ruby’s shoulder and spoken with a preacher’s tender finality. *It was bound to happen, child. You see, she knew it when she left. That’s nature, child. No stopping it.*

In the hallway Ruby was surprised, now, by the familiar ache within her. That time, it had been about kittens, sweet, blind-helpless things, with Pather’s black fur and pink tipped nose. But Willie T., after all, had been a terror. Ruby touched her fingers to the knots which had once been Willie T.’s savage eyes. *It was bound to happen…she knew.* Hadn’t Ruby known about Willie T.? Hadn’t some tiny part of her, last year, doubted the pursuing slice of his claws, even as she sprinted down the dark hallway, her arms and legs all turned to gooseflesh? Hadn’t she pretended, just a little, for Jeb? She slammed a sudden fist against the hard vinyl of her suitcase.

“No!” She whispered, aloud. “I was scared of him! I was!”

“Ruby! Where ya at, pumpkin?” She was startled by her father’s voice. The screen door slammed and he called again, this time from outside. “Ruby! Jeb! Come on say bye to your Aunt Iva! She’s just leaving!” Ruby pulled herself up and heaved her heavy suitcase into her room. Looking through the dirty windowpanes, she saw her big brother come walking up the path from the dock, a dirty garden spade in his hand. He’d already been looking for worms, for him and Daddy to use tomorrow. Good Jeb. Smart Jeb. In that moment Ruby loved him fiercely, her partner in triumph but more often in trouble, her playmate since before she could walk. But try as she might, she could not stop the new thought which rose slowly in her mind, setting her brother apart from her, mixing him up with a stranger. How long had he been pretending?

* * *

That night Ruby had a hard time sleeping. It took her a week or so, every year, to adjust to her creaky lake house bed, and she didn’t like it when her father left, creeping out to his Chevy a little while after Ruby and Jeb had retired. He had done this for several years, ever since he’d announced that he guessed Jeb was getting old enough to look after things. He always came back before morning, but while he was gone, the night noises were louder. Ruby flopped flat on her back her creaky bed, frowning at the ceiling. Jeb. What did he know? Certainly, he must have known about Willie T. first. Jeb had always known about Willie first. Ruby knew this in the way she knew that God had made the world, for Jeb was a namer of things, while things just sort of crept into Ruby’s consciousness and lodged there, solid as furniture. But knowing about Willie didn’t mean he was worth anything. Outside the cicadas raised their wing racket in a cacophony, a crescendo which built and died away. Ruby was angry at her brother. She
lay still and reveled in her anger. The evening had brought a trip to Sonic; in the parking lot the metal of the Chevy’s floorboards had tingled hot beneath her feet, and the setting sun dazzled on car hoods. Her French fries were as warm and salty as the shake she dipped them in was cold and sweet, and Jeb leaned up from the back seat to fiddle with the radio knobs above her daddy’s open beer can, sending a slow guitar twanging over the still air. Daddy leaned against the driver door, smoking. He’d said he didn’t much feel like a burger. Suddenly, from inside the restaurant there came a long-legged carhop with smooth-tanned skin, her dark hair pulled sleekly back and her smile like a silver moon. Ruby stopped what she was doing; her ice-cream covered fry hung aimlessly in the air. The carhop was lovely, lovelier even than the girls Ruby had seen in the Tishomingo High homecoming parade, waving from the backs of fancy cars. The cold ice cream dropping on her leg startled her. She looked down to wipe it somewhere, and when she looked up—wonder of wonders!—the beautiful girl was leaning in her daddy’s window, holding out her hand to be shaken. Hi, she said, I’m Salome. Wordlessly Ruby shook her hand, and then the girl laughed, and turned to Ruby’s father. The two of them talked like old friends. Ruby found herself devastated by the delicate lines of the girl’s chin and collar bone. Never had she so hated her round cheeks and red hair. I wanna work here when I grow up, she said, twisting around to look at Jeb. You’re a moron, he’d replied, igniting a tussle that got them both in trouble.

In Ruby’s room the whirring ceiling fan sent a pleasant breeze over her face, and outside the lake lapped quietly, smoothing the edges of the rocky shoreline. From the trees an owl called, and in Miss Vernella’s yard Roosevelt snorted in her pen. Ruby’s muscles relaxed; her mind slid on the darkness. What was her first memory of Willie? A rushing recollection placed her trembling in a slat of light, spilt into the hallway from an open bathroom door. Had the hall light never worked? At the end of the long passage there was Jeb, waiting, his freckled face drawn and anxious. Come on, Beetle! he said, using his pet name for her. Jump! Before her, closer than her brother, the light from her father’s empty room painted another safe zone on the floor. Ruby gauged the distance before her, readied her legs for the spring.

Mac’s Chevy crunched into the driveway. For a moment headlights blared into Ruby’s room, and then cut off with the engine. Ruby’s mind floated up, away from her half-dream. Had she made it? Willie could never get you in the light, she thought, unless you stepped in his territory. Then naturally you’d have to run, to the den or for a door. Willie T. could not open doors, though the claw marks on the bathroom one proved he’d tried. The bathroom door. Ruby’s mind broke the surface; she opened her eyes. How had she forgotten the door? It stood out in the hallway, big as life, slashes gouged deep in its blue-painted exterior, with shorter, stabbing hacks around the knob. Willie’s marks, but not Willie’s, for even at ten Ruby could see that the disintegration of Willie T. erased his past as well as his future. The night around her pushed close and breathless, until footsteps in the hallway sent relief coursing down her veins. Her daddy was home. But what was this she heard? From the wall her room shared with his there came a noise, a quiet giggle, followed by muffled voices. He was talking to someone in his bedroom. A woman. Ruby forgot about Willie T. She forgot about her anger at Jeb. For a time stared hard at the dim wall, listening. There was an odd sort of whimper, and then silence. This was absolutely too much. Quietly, Ruby slipped out of bed and into the hall. She padded swiftly to her brother’s room, her arms held straight out before her in
the mildewy blackness. Jeb lay facing away from her, his side moving gently beneath the sheets.

“Hey,” She whispered. “Are you awake?”
No answer. She tried again, this time shaking his bony shoulder.
“Hey, Jeb. I said, ‘Are you awake?’”
“Lemme lone,” he muttered, and did not stir.
Ruby sighed. There was no room on the twin mattress beside him; the foot would have to do. She clambered over his legs and curled herself, puppy-fashion, at his feet. Lulled by his nearness, her questions unhinged. She thought of Pather, prowling the woods outside Miss Vernella’s house, and of Roosevelt rooting at the latch of her pen.

“Gotcha!” Jeb seized her middle with both hands. For an instant all the world was void, and then she thudded down hard on the floor. Jeb stuffed his face in his pillow and snorted, punching the mattress. Ruby stood up rubbing her tailbone.

“I hate you!” she hissed, shoving him.
“Shhhhh!” he said. “Don’t be so loud! You don’t want Dad or that slut he’s got coming in here, do you?”
Ruby crawled back on the bed.
“Who is she?” she whispered. “What’s she doing here?”
“How do I know who she is? Just some slut, I guess. Dad brought her. I heard. They’re…you know.”
Ruby felt her face grow hot. She did know. Mostly.
“Well I don’t want her here!” she said, whining more than she’d intended.
Jeb moved closer to the wall, opening a space for her.
“Well, I don’t either,” he said.
Ruby settled down again to sleep, her thoughts rolling away like dropped marbles. She was almost gone when she remembered Willie.

“He, Jeb,” she whispered, elbowing him. “Who really made those marks, the ones on the bathroom door?”
But the boy was already drowsing.
“Gowan sleep now,” he mumbled, “Ain’t I always kept you safe?”
And in a moment both children dreamed.

*   *   *

In the morning, Jeb Dempsey wouldn’t have a thing to do with breakfast. Ruby knew it was because of the fishing. She’d woken at sunup to find Jeb dressed and sitting still on the edge of the bed, the box of earthworms he’d dug in his lap. They both heard the steps, creaking down the hallway, but only Ruby darted up after the screen door creaked shut, racing to her window to get a look at who was leaving. Even through the glass she could smell the freshness of morning-wet earth, and in the gray dawn the woman’s slender frame and cascading hair looked as if she belonged always walking at first light, in the clean blooming of the world. A fairy princess in crotch-high cut-offs. A wood nymph in her Daddy’s wifebeater. Salome. The word formed in Ruby’s mind well before the woman turned to crawl in the truck, showing the curve of her perfect face. The Chevy’s engine broke the spell of morning. Mac Dempsey pulled away down Eastport Marina Road with no idea of what he left in his wake, a daughter swayed by
something like love, and gripped with something like hate. She returned to her brother’s room to find him still sitting on his bed, a muscle working in his jaw.

“I’m sure he’ll be back, Jeb,” she said.

But two hours later, he still wasn’t. Ruby went into the kitchen. In the freezer, behind the vodka, was a pack of frozen Eggos. She took out two and put them in the toaster. Jeb went out through the back door and let the screen slam. She found him squatting in the red dirt, feeding doodle bugs. This was something he did methodically, pinching up small, black ants between his thumb and index finger, and dropping them, alive, into the traps. Ruby hated to see it. She sidled up and knelt beside him, holding out a toasted Eggo on a paper towel. He stared at the doodle bug hole until she laid it on the ground. Inside the hole, a lone ant struggled desperately at the sandy slope, fighting to make it over the rim. Each time, after he gained a few steps, the crumbly walls of the hole gave way beneath his feet, tumbling him closer to the bottom where the doodlebug waited, burrowed out of sight under the earth. For a full minute Ruby stood it, and then a particularly long fall made her gasp.

“Oh God please help him, Jeb!”

She tugged at his elbow.

“You’re so stupid!” he shouted. He shook her off and shoved her, sprawling, across the dirt. He stood and kicked ferociously at the sand, burying both predator and prey. Ruby burst into a wail.

“Don’t you follow me!” he said, and stalked down the path toward the water.

For a moment Ruby sniffled, crouched beside the vanished hole. Then she shook the dirt off Jeb’s Eggo and ate it, crunching through the remaining granules. Now what was she supposed to do? Briefly, she considered heading down to the marina to look for the baby rattlers. The baby rattlers were in a wooden box inside Jimmy’s store, with a sign that said Caution! Baby Rattles! Open at Your Own Risk! Usually, a stranger couldn’t resist, and when he or she slowly lifted the hinged lid, Jimmy would warn, Careful! You don’t want to get bit now! The stranger would peek in and say Oh! And Jimmy and whoever else was there got to shout with laughing, because in the box there were bright colored baby toys. At the marina, too, there were turtles. Bunches of turtles clustered by the docks, sunning themselves on wide, flat stones. If you crept, quietly, down close to the lake, you could yell turtle soup! and watch them all shoot away in the water. But neither one of these things was fun without Jeb. Ruby stood and wiped her hands on her shorts, then headed across the road to Miss Vernella’s.

* * *

Miss Vernella was baking. In the yellow kitchen she rolled out pie crust, the pale glob of dough spreading over her floured wax paper in a circle, tissue-fine. At the old oak table Ruby sat watching, kicking her heels against the legs of her chair. Miss Vernella moved the pin as if it were a part of her, an extra appendage grown from the ends of her wiry hands, but tougher, unscored by the deep seams where flour settled, white and dry, criss-crossing palm and knuckle. On the stove a pot of sweet potatoes boiled, the lid rattling a cheerful accompaniment to the thud and roll of the pin, the old woman bending and straightening in a peaceful sort of dance. Tomorrow afternoon, Ruby knew, the finished pie would crown the table at the First Baptist fellowship potluck,
a vision spiced sweet and golden brown, cut in the center with a neat ‘x,’ and ringed with perfectly scalloped edges. Miss Vernella was known for her pies. The congregation would eat every crumb, but still there would be a treat for Ruby. Today, when the crust was made, the old woman would ball up the scraps, and roll them paper thin again, and cover them with butter and sugar, and sprinkle them with cinnamon. Then Ruby could cut out cookies. Any of the metal shapes that jingled in the cookie drawer would do; crust cookies baked into sweet crisps that held even the most delicate lines. Since most of the cutters were for Halloween or Christmas, however, Ruby generally made cats and trees. A pack of Pathers hiding in the woods. Wild shadows and the smell of pine. Babies dying under the porch. Ruby sighed.

Miss Vernella squinted at her, her grey eyes ice-bright in her creased face.

“Stop fretting about your brother, child,” she said. “He’s too ornery not to come out all right. Just like his daddy, that one.”

Ruby felt the hair rise along her arms. She hadn’t known she was thinking about Jeb, but of course there he was, right at the center of things. He was underneath Willie T. Looking at Miss Vernella, Ruby remembered that pies were not the only thing she was known for. Once, in a suffocating July heat, Ruby had been surprised by a knock on Miss Vernella’s door, and more surprised still at the visitor admitted, a sickly pale, hugely pregnant girl, her hands clasped beneath her belly and beads of sweat standing out on her face. I’m Emma Lawson, she’d said, hesitating. My granny is Iona Bruce? She told me to come and see you... Miss Vernella smiled, baring her tobacco yellowed teeth. Why, just so, child, she replied. You take after Iona, around the eyes. Have a seat and I’ll fix you right up. Emma eased herself down at the table and closed her eyes.

Sometime later, Miss Vernella brought out a powder on a blue china plate, a pepper mixture ground to the finest dust. She told Emma what to do. They leaned close over the plate, faces only inches apart. The old woman began to blow, her long, steady breath sending a cloud of powder into the young woman’s face. Emma inhaled as Miss Vernella blew, and for a horrible moment they seemed connected, the girl’s head bend back and her nostrils flared, her palms planted flat down on either side of the plate. Ruby was frightened, and then it was over, and the girl was coughing and gagging into the dishtowel Miss Vernella had given her. Before Emma left, she traded Miss Vernella two dollars for a pair of sharp, bright scissors. To cut the labor pain, Miss Vernella explained to Ruby, as the young woman heaved her belly back inside her creaking Oldsmobile. She’ll put them under her pillow, tonight when the pepper takes effect. That’s what my mother did for me. Of course, that was before everybody went to the hospital. Ruby watched the Oldsmobile disappear around the bend. Did it work? she asked, amazed. If it did, child, then God bless the woman that ain’t got some!

The pie crust could get no thinner. Deftly Miss Vernella folded it in quarters, then lifted it and set it in the pie pan, unfolding it without a single tear. Ruby released the breath she didn’t know she’d held. It was horrible, really, to think how cruelly things were opened, like a mother torn in childbirth, or the deer Miss Vernella had often helped her daddy butcher, slitting them from chin to anus right out on the front lawn. Mac brought over the deer to share, but also because he liked the help. Miss Vernella, he always said, could butcher like a man. In the kitchen she trimmed the excess dough from the pie pan, pressing it together in a new ball.
“Come on over here and roll out this dough,” she said to Ruby. “I reckon I’m getting too old to roll out dough for a big girl like you.”

Ruby was astonished, but she took the wooden pin in her hands. It was heavier than she expected, and more difficult to wield, but Miss Vernella showed her how to flour it, and the wax paper, again, and soon she and the old woman worked together in the bright kitchen. Ruby let her troubles flatten as the dough smoothed under her pressure. Likely Miss Vernella was right. The old woman must know all about boys and men and their ways; she had raised four of them and outlived two. The remaining sons lived in Iuka, now, some ten miles away as the crow would fly. But Miss Vernella refused to leave the water. It was as close as she could get to her home, she said, the tiny town of Springdale which no longer existed, thanks to F.D.R. and his New Deal. It was her favorite story to tell, though still she made Ruby beg to hear, the one about 1933, when the Tennessee Valley Authority began their plans to stop up the rolling Tennessee, and the government gave the people of Springdale, Mississippi what they deemed a fair sum for their homes and land, and filled up their valley like a bathtub. The water crept up and up and up! Miss Vernella would say, when Ruby convinced her. And the animals and birds went on ahead, because it spread slower than molasses. And the whole time my mother cried, to think of her house filling up with water, and all the things people left there floating away or sinking. And then, in 1938, it was over, and nobody cried for Springdale anymore, because there wasn’t any sense in it.

The pin stuck to Ruby’s dough, tearing a large hole in the circle.

“It’s all right,” Miss Vernella said, bustling over to help. “You’ll get the knack of it soon enough. Oh, yes, I do know boys,” she continued, as if they’d been talking about it all along. “And I know that Jebediah Dempsey. He takes things hard, that brother of yours, but he don’t want anybody making it any easier. You know it, too, if you’d just think. That dough looks about right, girl. Help yourself to the butter when you’re ready.”

Back at her task, Ruby thought hard about her brother, calling up the freckled pattern of his face, the darkness of his large eyes. Close to her elbow, Miss Vernella poured the sweet potato filling into the crust, and under the table Pather stretched her body in a sunny spot of tile. And then, a memory. A chilly November morning, years ago, walking to elementary school with Jeb. On the dead, grassy lawns a thick frost glittered, when Ruby breathed she smelled the sharpness of coming winter. It must have been nearly Thanksgiving. At the street crossing the whistling policeman beckoned; Jeb took her by the hand and led her past the waiting cars, their rumbling exhalations puffing white into the blue late autumn sky. Entering the schoolyard, they passed beneath the giant horseapple tree, old horseapples rotting amidst the roots, knobbly green orbs poking from shed brown leaves. Come recess, the children would race down to roll them, fast, beneath oncoming cars, cheering when a wheel squashed one flat.

Hey, Ruby! A voice called. She looked back to see her friend Herbert Phelps, running toward them with his backpack bumping. Whadya bring for lunch today? Leggos? Leggos were what her mama had packed the day before, in a rare wintertime slip, demolishing the elaborate castle Jeb had built in the den. Herbert jumped and bobbed, just out of arm’s reach. My mama says your mama’s crazy! He shouted. Yeah, crazy like a fox! Ruby did not know exactly what the phrase meant, nor where she might have heard it before. She did not know why she’d said it now, except that it seemed to
her to be a sort of defense of her mother. She did not know what had happened when Jeb
knocked her to the ground. Don’t you TALK about her that way! He said, kicking her
shoe. Don’t you ever say that about her again! Ruby looked up at the clear blue sky,
swaying between the still skeleton of the bare horseapple tree.

In an instant the scene was gone. Ruby stood back in the kitchen, the
uncooperative dough before her. Later, Miss Vernella pulled weeds in her garden, and
Ruby, stuffed full with cookies, went to sleep on the front porch recliner, Pather curled
purring in her lap. She woke to see her father’s Chevy in the driveway. Behind her, over
the lake, the sun was sinking low into the trees, and over the road the first lightning bugs
flashed. Miss Vernella was not near. Ruby stood and went across the road.

* * *

Of course Salome was there. Huddled on the couch in Ruby’s old bathrobe, her
hair falling around her face. Ruby’s heart pounded, but she felt no shock. Perhaps she
had even come looking for her.

“Well hi there,” Salome said, smiling.

In the lamplight her eyes were large and glassy. Ruby thought of a china doll,
tossed in the corner of some closet. She hadn’t gotten the robe tied very well. It gaped
open to the waist, showing one of her round breasts. Ruby felt something like light shoot
through her. Salome noticed her discomfort.

“Do you mind that I borrowed your robe? I can put it back if you—oh!” She saw
the gap and pulled the robe closed. “I’m sorry. Are you looking for your daddy? He’s
sleeping.”

“Okay.”

Ruby hesitated. Should she go to her room, or back outside? Should she pretend
to talk to her father?

“But I could use some company,” Salome said. “Want to come and sit with me?”
She seemed hopeful, and shy, and her hair was like a shampoo ad. Before Ruby
knew it she was settled on the couch, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. The coffee
table, she noticed, was littered with beer cans, and a wine glass, and little balls of wadded
tinfoil. Up close, Salome smelled like perfume and like smoke; Ruby inhaled her and felt
dizzy.

“Do you mind that I borrowed your robe? I can put it back if you don’t want me
to wear it. Or are you hungry, or something, since your daddy’s been gone?”
Salome twisted her hands together, suddenly distressed. Ruby was frightened.
She patted the young woman’s shoulder.

“No, it’s okay,” she said soothingly. “Me and Jeb are used to finding our own
meals.”

Salome stopped wringing her hands. She reached out and touched Ruby’s hair,
brushing it behind her ear. The girl went rigid at the spine, her breath frozen in her lungs.
What new thing was opening now, or was something piling up around her? Ruby had no
time to think.

“What a pretty thing you are,” Salome said. “You know, when I was a little girl, I
wanted hair just this color. Ruby-Belle, Ruby-Belle,” she sang, giggling. “What do you
do around here all day, Miss Belle of Rubies Red?”
What did she do? Ruby didn’t know. She felt slightly sick inside, the way that she had last summer at the fair, after her fifth time on the tilt-a-whirl. But never had anyone been so lovely as Salome on the couch.

“I hang out with Jeb, mostly,” she whispered.

“Well, that’s nice,” Salome said, “but don’t you have any girl friends?”

Ruby shook her head. No.

“Oh! You poor thing!”

For a trembling moment Ruby thought Salome might wring her hands again, but then her face grew bright and happy.

“I know,” she said, smiling brilliantly. “We can play dress up! You’ll see!”

Salome wobbled to her feet, and disappeared down the hall. There was nothing to do but follow.

* * *

Two hours later, Ruby sat transfixed by the strange face in the bathroom mirror. Salome leaned in beside her, pale and disheveled, smiling her silver moon smile.

“Perfect,” she whispered.

Charlie Daniels wailed from the dusty radio Salome had plugged in by the sink. *Mississippi...you’ll be on my mind...* Outside, the thick, hot night was velvet black, and spangled with a thousand dizzy stars. Ruby could only nod.

Salome had washed Ruby’s hair, kneeling beside her on the grimy tile, pulsing her fingers to a country tune, and singing softly to herself. When this was done, she’d blown it dry, smoothing it with a round, bristly brush like a bushy sort of porcupine. (Like the one Ruby’s mama used. But Ruby didn’t want to think about her mama.) Next had come the burning pull of hot rollers, and Salome giggling *Bombs away!* before a cloud of hairspray enveloped them both. When the music picked up, so did the young woman. She fluttered in and out of the bathroom, out of her head with new ideas. She dressed Ruby in her own pale pink slip, and found old Mardi Gras beads for her neck. She hung paper clips from Ruby’s unpierced ears, and lined and fringed her eyes in black. When Ruby got a good look at herself, she’d been blushed and glossed to perfection.

The radio twanged out a new song—the first notes of Brooks and Dunn’s “Boot-Scootin’ Boogie.” Salome rushed to crank the volume.

“What are you waitin’ on, Ruby Belle?” She called. “Come on, let’s go *dancing!*”

In the den she shouted and laughed like a child. Again and again she twirled Ruby around, until the girl saw nothing but swirling lights. Brooks and Dunn blasted through the cabin: *HEEL, TOE, DOE-SE-DOE, COME ON BABY LET’S GOOOOOO BOOT-SCOOTIN’!* Ruby was giggling, too, knocking into the couch and chairs. She hit the coffee table and fell down, struggling through a mini-avalanche of beer cans and foil balls. But Salome dragged her to her feet again, the robe falling almost clean off of her. And of course that’s how Jeb found them.

“What. The. *Fuck?*” He said from the kitchen door. His baby sister turned towards him, smiling, her face painted up like something between a prostitute and a clown. “Ruby, what’s—” His voice was lost in the blaring music. *Cadillac, Black*
JACK, BABY MEET ME OUT BACK, WE’RE GONNA BOOGIE! He walked over and took her by the hand, but she jerked away, her harlequin face crumpling.

“No!” she said. “We’re having fun!”

Salome found this hilarious. She doubled over, and for the first time Jeb saw that she was half naked beneath her flowing hair. Fury flooded him like burning quicksilver. He grabbed the woman’s arm so that she yelped, jerking her toward the door.

“Get out! Get out! Get Out!” he shouted.

Ruby began to howl. Salome fell to the floor, shrieking, and Jeb dragged her over the carpet.

“What. The. FUCK?”

Mac Dempsey stood blinking in the hall entrance. He saw Salome on the floor, his son yanking her by one thin arm. In an instant he tackled Jeb, slamming him to the floor in a crash that shook the house. For a second they tussled in the beer cans, and then Mac’s fist thudded against Jeb’s jaw, and the boy twitched, and lay still.

“Nonono...” Salome had both hands twisted in her hair. She lunged at the coffee table, knocking more trash to the floor. She came up with Mac’s car keys.

“Goddam it, Salome!” Mac shouted. “Wait!”

But she was already out the door. On the carpet, Jeb began to moan. Mac thundered into the kitchen, grabbed something from a clattering drawer.

“Don’t leave, Daddy!” Ruby cried.

She followed her father outside, getting there just in time to see him drive the object, hard, into the Chevy’s balding front tire. Later, she would find out that it had been an ice pick. Salome cranked the Chevy and squealed backwards, throwing gravel. She didn’t know about the ice pick, though probably it wouldn’t have mattered. Ruby screamed again when the truck left the road, and then the night shattered with the crunch of glass and bending metal, and a sharper, brighter squeal—the death cry of Roosevelt, killed on impact in her pen.

Miss Vernella came out in her dressing gown, a can of Skoal bulging in the pocket.

“Oh, Lord have mercy,” she sighed.

Mac extricated a hysterical Salome from the truck. She had knocked her pretty nose on the steering wheel, and dark blood ran over her mouth and chin, dripping down on Ruby’s robe. Jeb appeared in the open doorway. He walked out to the road rubbing his jaw. For a moment everything was quiet, save for Salome’s muffled sobs.

“Well, Mac,” Miss Vernella said. “How about we get these children—all three of them—” She glared. “Cleaned up and put to bed. And then you can help me with this mess. Unless, of course, you’d like to have the sheriff.”

Mac looked tired. His shoulders drooped.

“Well...yes ma’am,” he said.

* * *

When Ruby awoke it was early afternoon. In the gloomy hallway she paused to press an ear to her father’s door. He was in there, snoring. But in Jeb’s room the bed stood empty. Ruby wandered outside to the edge of the yard, where dandelions grew thick along the roadside. She felt curiously hollowed, as if her insides were nothing but
bubbles. Ahead of her the road rolled out, vanishing around the bend. Perhaps she should run away.

“This is a nothing place,” she said aloud.

Why would anyone stay beside this lake? They wouldn’t, she decided, unless everywhere else was nothing, too. All around the trees stood quiet. The sky had not a single cloud. Perhaps she was already dead.

“Ruby!”

She jumped at the sound of her name. Miss Vernella was coming across the grass, a plate of sandwiches in her hand.

“What are you doing, child? Go on and take your brother some lunch. Poor boy hasn’t eaten all day and here you stand, staring at the sky.”

“But I don’t know where he—” Ruby began.

“Down at the water, girl! Where else? Now hurry up and hop to it.”

Ruby felt slightly annoyed. As if this were any time to make her think about sandwiches! She clenched her fist all the way down the path. And then she saw her brother, a lone figure sitting small on the shore. Her hand relaxed, but the fist balled up in her throat. She drew close and crouched beside him, as she had at the doodle bug hole.

“I brought you some sandwiches,” she said. “Miss Vernella sent them down.”

For a long while Jeb said nothing. Together they sat and looked at the lake, two mournful freckled, red-haired children, feeling the sun burn warm on their skin. The lake was blinding in the cloudless day. Out in its center wave runners played, bouncing back and forth over the wake of passing speedboats. The boats were full of laughing people; their shouts echoed against the red clay bluffs.

“You know, I heard you,” Jeb said at last, still squinting out over the water. “The other night when you asked about the door. Daddy made those marks with his hunting knife. Mama was inside the bathroom. He’d just found out that she was leaving. You were too little to remember.”

“I know it, Jeb,” Ruby said, choking back a sob. “I don’t need to remember. I know. And oh my God poor Willie T.!”

She burst into tears. Jeb moved over and threw his arm around her shoulders, letting her feel that he was crying, too. The day was broiling and Ruby’s head ached, and beneath her the unforgiving gravel bit meanly into her rear. She had never been so miserable.

“Come on, Beetle,” Jeb said after a time. “We might as well go on and eat.”

Ruby wiped her streaming nose.

“I’m not hungry,” she said, and then realized that she was. She bit into a sandwich with relish, but after a moment her chewing slowed. She looked at Jeb, and saw him staring, wide-eyed, at the meat in between his pieces of bread. The juicy taste in their mouths was unmistakable. Pork chop, pulled off the bone. Jeb’s bite was already in his throat. He swallowed in spite of himself.

“No,” Ruby breathed through her full mouth. “She couldn’t have!”

And then Jeb began to laugh. He lay back on the beach and howled, turning his face up toward the sun. Ruby spat her bite out on the rocky sand. New tears standing in her eyes, she began to giggle, too.

“You know what we should do?” Jake said, when they’d thrown the sandwiches to the fish. “We should have Willie T. a funeral.”

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“Really?”
“Yeah! Come on, it’ll be fun. We can dig him a grave, and make him a cross, and then we can both preach him something. If you want we can even get flowers.”
The old bounce was creeping back in Jeb’s voice. Ruby grinned.
“Okay, but I get first preach,” she said.
Prologue

“What’s that, Daddy?” Walter said. He pointed one chubby hand toward the windshield, his brown eyes looking round question marks. The question made Eli jump. For the past thirty minutes the child had been quiet, perched on the low van console, working on a pack of animal crackers—owls and cows and hippos and dogs—which he gnawed one by one into tiny, gruesome bits, mashing their soggy remains into his overalls and face. His pink apple cheeks were drifted with crumbs. Eli squinted. Far away on a coming slope, a dark spot formed, hulking, up from the pavement, gathering itself from the dark shimmer of August heat which receded down U.S. 78, rolling on toward Memphis. The buzzard. Eli had seen it earlier, circling; waiting for something on the pavement to die. But that was hours ago. A tiny worm of fear stirred deep in his mind. He gave himself a mental shake. *Get it together!* Of course it wasn’t the same bird.

“Nothin’ but a buzzard,” he replied, readjusting his damp grip on Big Blue’s steering wheel. Beside him, his wife nodded in her seat, her dark blonde hair drooping in her face. He checked the rear view. On the van’s back bench Kate stretched her small body flat, hummed and kicked tan toes at the ceiling. *See? Everything is fine. You’re fine until central Arkansas.*

By now the buzzard was outlined clearly against the blue metal horizon. He bent his body to peck at something, a muddled something in the road. *Of course, once you reach the Diamond Crater...* Buzzards went after death, and things that could not survive. Sometimes, they did more. Once in the Arkansas back country, Eli had seen a group of buzzards kill a neighbor’s calf, just born. Surrounding him where he bawled on the pasture, they had gone for the eyes, flapping and jabbing with their beaks. By the fence Eli had screamed, shaking the lines of barbed wire, the red dirt road yawning, empty, away in both directions.

“What’s he eating, Daddy?” Walter said.

Eli had a sudden vision—his adult self writhing on the asphalt. Again and again the bird plunged and feinted, fluttering just out of reach of his swinging, flailing knuckles, coming in with a precise thrust. No. He took a steadying breath. It was only the strain of the hours in the car, the anxiety of the past few days. *Oh, and the fact that you’re dead.* His foot spasmed on the gas. Big Blue shot forward, and then slowed, rocking Walter’s head backwards. Shari stirred and drew herself upright.

“Oh, I’m sure it’s just a little boy. Family probably tossed him out, for leaving his toys around.” Eli’s grin stretched his features too wide. His skin shone with sweat.
Walter giggled uncertainly. Shari reached out a sleepy, patting hand and whacked him gently on his nose and shoulder.

“That’s not true, baby,” she said.

You’re dead! You’re dead! You’re dead! You’re dead! Eli struggled with the panic hammering from cobalt sky. The buzzard had followed him. It had stalked him for years. It was the reason he smoked his nighttime cigarettes dead center of the porch light circle, the rustling that kept him awake, nights, staring at the bedroom door. But this, here, today, was wrong. Eli Mauldin might be the walking dead. But he wasn’t carrion till Arkansas.

“Are we gonna hit him, Daddy?” This was Kate. She had crept from the back bench to push her face up by his shoulder.

“No.” Eli said slowly. “We’re not. Ain’t nobody dying today.”

“He’s getting pretty close,” Shari said. She glanced at her two children, their faces riveted to the road. “Maybe we should slow down, Eli.”

“A buzzard knows to move, Shari!”

A car in the left lane glinted over the coming hill crest and whooshed right by the buzzard, which did not flinch. Eli frowned. The buzzard was five hundred feet away, then three hundred, then two.

“Please don’t kill him, Daddy!” Kate cried.

“That. Damn. Thing. Will. Move!” Eli said. He slumped forward over Big Blue’s wheel, his eyes narrowed on the nemesis. He pushed his foot down on the accelerator.

“Eli!” Shari screamed as Big Blue bore down.

“Daddy!” Kate shouted, clapping her hands to her face.

“Biiiiiiiiiiiiird!” Walter wailed.

The buzzard lifted his head; his beady eyes bore into Eli’s. Move motherfucker. Move. Move. Inside Eli’s head the van was silent, his family’s screams frozen, Münch-like, in the air. Moments like this are made for revelations, for seeing your whole life laid bare. Blood rushed in Eli’s ears; he felt his existence measured out in heartbeats—the spaced, vital, dual pulse—one part the immediate steps toward downfall, one part something else, and quieter, the gentle, prodding, squeeze of atria. And all of it, somehow, adding up to only this: the bright white of the circle about his wrist, the naked skin where his watch once rested.

Three Days Before

Eli jounced into his washed-out gravel drive well after supper time. His shirt was limp and stained with sweat; his suit pants wrinkled from the time he’d spent crouching on the bathroom floor in Baker’s Bridge road. It was the last day he’d pretend to look for a job. He sat for a moment inside Big Blue, windows down, waiting, soaking in the night. Listen, his mother had told him, once, her thin face pressed against the screen door, right next to the fat moths settled there for the yellow kitchen light. What a racket the dark here makes. That had been in Arkansas. Mississippi was even louder. Now, in the surrounding trees, cicadas clung bulge-eyed to the bark, beating wings into a frenzy you wouldn’t think came from bugs. In the uncut lawn the crickets chimed in, and the fat knobble-faced toads, hopping and slipping on stones and mud. Eli’s wife was leaving him. He knew. There was no way to hide what had happened to the watch. He slid from the van at last, but his steps toward the house were slow. Self-
hatred rose bitter in the back of his mouth. Fucking moron. Why hadn’t he just stabbed Reeder, since he’d thrown it all to hell? He should’ve just walked right back in the bar and stabbed that fat turd in the fucking throat. His tears made the world blur; he wiped them hard with the back of his hand. Before he opened the front door, he stopped to look in through the den window, to see the family he was losing.

But, lo! What was this? Inside the cluttered den were presents. Presents wrapped in sparkly paper, and topped with repurposed Christmas bows; three presents stacked up around Kate, and one being ripped to shreds in her lap. Eli stood rooted to the spot. Her birthday. He had forgotten. Despite all Shari’s nagging. The magnitude of this circumstance took a moment to sink in; his grin spread slowly from ear to ear.

Oh, sweet Jesus. Oh, thank you. Eli moved back from the window and leaned against the vinyl house paneling. He breathed in the smell of honeysuckle. He had forgotten it completely!
“Yessss!” he whispered. He pumped one fist into the sky. But there was no time to waste. He leaped up the porch stairs in a single bounce.

“Where’s my big girl?” he sang out, bursting into the den.
“Daddy!” Kate cried.
She ran to his open arms, and he scooped her in a giant hug.
“How old is my big girl today? Just about thirty now, ain’tcha?” He tugged at one ear, and then the other as she giggled uncontrollably. Walter had wrapped himself, squid-like, around his father’s legs. Shari stopped a few feet away, her arms crossed.

“What’s going on, Eli?” she said.
The trace of tears still sparkled in his eyes. Her face trembled between fury and worry. He untangled himself from the children and took her by the shoulders.

“Shari, I’ve been thinking,” he said. “I think we could use a break.”
“What are you talking about?” her dark eyes narrowed.
“I’m talking vacation,” he said. “A week or more just away from it all. We got the van before Walter was born, and we’ve never left the county since.”

He ruffled Kate’s brown bob.
“How’d you like a trip for your birthday?”
Shari flushed like an eggplant.
“Goddamn it, Eli,” she said through her teeth. “What are you doing? You don’t even have a job! How can we—”

“Shar, the watch isn’t broken. I pawned it.”
“No!” she gasped. “You didn’t! I didn’t really want—I mean—”
She was having trouble breathing.
“When I said that it would help us, I didn’t think you’d really—”
“No, no, no,” he said, touching her stricken face. Oh shit. He hadn’t thought that she would cry. “It’s not because of that. I just really think we need this, Shari. I got enough to stay somewhere cheap, plus a little bit to help tide us over. We could let Kate pick the place. Please, baby. Just say yes.”

He watched her look past his shoulder, at the stack of dishes in the kitchen, the laundry piled high on the recliner. The places where she’d sat and cried, in the long, pointless routine of days. Beside them, Kate waited, her eyes wide and her breath held.

“All right,” she said at last. “I need till Friday to get ready.”
Till Friday was something Eli could handle. He kissed her loudly on the forehead.

“All right!” he said. “That’s what I’m talking about! Hey, birthday girl,” he smiled down at Kate. “Where would you like to go best?”

He stepped back, waiting to hear the beach, the only place Kate had ever visited. She had been a kindergartner then; by the quiet waves of the Mississippi Sound Shari had showed her how to make witch castles, dripping wet sand through her fingers. It was the happiest they’d ever been. Now, with its miles of floating blackjack tables, Biloxi was salvation. And then something happened which made Eli wish he’d paid more attention to his daughter’s birthday, and which number, exactly, this was. She looked at the tan line on his wrist.

“I wanna go hunt for diamonds, Daddy,” she said. “To visit where you grew up.”

“Oh, Kate!” Shari clapped her hands. “That’s perfect!” She looked at Eli. “We’ve never been back to Arkansas, and you’ve been wanting to go for so long! We can even visit the cemetery!”

Eli opened his mouth, then shut it. Somewhere above the tin roof, the buzzard turned on his wing, and circled.

**Summertime 1991**

Eli saw her, sun-brown and bare, lissome in a white bikini, her feet shifting in the dirt at the foot of the hardpacked scramble leading up to the top of the falls. It was summertime at Lake Tusculum; down in Waterfall Cove the boats packed in, rusted flat-bottoms and ramshackle pontoons, sleek ski-craft and houseboats, so close they rubbed shoulders, squeaking on the rubber bumpers. It was music and full coolers, and sun-sparkle on warm water. It was people from three counties, drawn by the falls’ siren call, come down to the water; come down and play. *Come beer-drinkers, pot-smokers, all; you of the burned glass and wakeful dawns, you of the nights with field grass swishing, faces lit by bonfires. You who know the pressure of humid heat, and sticky roads that lead nowhere. Come down and forget a while.*

In five years that girl who danced with her arms held up would nod away on her stained linoleum, while her baby daughter slept in the hammock outside. In five years that boy would snort his Ole Miss law degree right up his nose; that pretty one would put a rifle in his mouth. And Shari? Shari stood at the edge of the path, ready to clamber up the steep grade and look out over the raucous, chanting crowd (*jumpjumpjumpjump!*); to feel the rush of water in her body, and the dizzy distance in her knees; to curl her toes against the solid rock, to shut her eyes—and then to leap. Shari knew, even then, that there are many different ways to die. The drop into space was long—*one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three*—and the shore was formed in so that you had to get a good, strong push-off, if you hoped to make the deeps. It was a chance, every time. Standing, hesitating, at the bottom, Shari would have thought about the girls from the year before, who had teased each other near the jumping-edge. The wet, gray rock, a flip-flop slip, two screams, one splash, and that was that; they fished the body out, a snapped neck and a lungful of water. Shari would think *it’s a few every year.* Shari would think, *why be afraid?*

*Why be afraid?* But Eli was. He watched her from his friend’s boat, his stomach churning. He had never seen her before. He had known her since always. She was a part
of something which had escaped him, a story he couldn’t quite recall. Some moon he had
seen a long time ago, when the moon through his window terrified.

“Hey, where you goin’?” Reeder shouted, when Eli jumped lightly from the
boat’s end, a whiskey bottle in his hand. Reeder’s boat was important. Weed didn’t walk
into town, after all, and some folks knew how to appreciate. There wasn’t any need to
mention these things. The new boat greeted Eli with claps on the back. He passed the
bottle and moved on, drawn in by her gravity. He made it all the way to the shallows
without touching the murky, oil-shimmering water, where countless people lowered
themselves, every now and then when nature called. Of course, on the last stretch the
thing could not be helped. Eli hopped along the sucking clay with his left hand high
above his head, holding the whiskey aloft. She watched him struggle from the water.

“What—are you—doing here?” he gasped.

God, what an opener.

She stared at him, amazed.

“I live in Kosciusko,” she said. “I’ve come here my whole life. And you?”

Her eyes were lakes all by themselves, too dark to see what lay along the bottom.

“I’m not from around,” he said. “But—”

“But what?”

“But I think I came here to find you.”

She giggled. Eli blushed. Behind them, someone’s boat boomed bass, and the
growing crowd cheered. He hid his face in a long pull from the whiskey, then wiped his
mouth and nodded toward the falls.

“You goin’ up?”

“I hadn’t decided,” she said. “You gonna drink all that courage yourself?”

Her mouth curved upward in a slow grin, and finally Eli laughed, his nervousness
catching in his nose in a snort that he hoped the music hid, as she tilted the liquor to her
lips. She handed the bottle back to him, her eyes catching on the glint of the watch where
it snagged the sun. She grabbed his hand and turned his wrist to look.

“Why’d you wear that thing out here? It’s gonna be ru—”

“Atta boy, Eli! Get after it, son!”

Reeder and his buddy stood watching on the houseboat. The buddy lifted his
hands to his mouth, let out a long wolf howl. Reeder doubled over with laughing.

“Oh,” she said, “I get it. You’re with them.”

She threw his hand back at him.

“Always gotta show it off,” she said, turning toward the path.

The afternoon dazzle made a glare in Eli’s brain. He felt her slipping away from
him; he felt himself already a corpse, tangled in weeds on the lake floor, fish-eaten and
forgotten. He drew a deep breath and stepped back as if offended.

“You better watch that mouth,” he said. “This is my great-granddaddy’s watch,
passed down to my granddaddy, and then my father, and then me. Don’t you think it’s
safer on my wrist than with those dumbasses?”

She looked at him, searching.

“Liar,” she said.

“Fuck that.”

He stepped closer. She stood her ground.

“You think you know everything, just from looking at somebody?” He shook his
head, spat emphatically on the ground. “Look one more time. You see these little
Diamonds here? The ones around the edge? Those came from my great-grandpa’s land. Don’t you know about the Diamond Crater, in Arkansas, and the Mauldins who lived there?”

She shook her head, slowly. Her eyes were locked in line with his.

“Well, I’m Eli Mauldin, and I’ll tell you about it sometime. My family wasn’t shit for holding on to land or money, but they held on to this watch, and you know why?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“Because,” he paused for breath. “Because a diamond is part of the earth. It’s part of what makes us, and it’s a part of something bigger, and more than us.”

Wait. Stop. Shut up. He had stoked the fire too high; the words boiled out in spite of him.

“It takes millions of lifetimes to make them…I guess I’d say they’re part of God, if you want to look at it that way. I keep this to keep a piece of that.”

He finished and stood awkwardly, his hands hanging at his sides. He stood that way a year or more, held up by the judgment of her eyes. At last the earth swung back around; she took his hand in her own again.

“Look,” she said. “Let me hold it for you. You go on up there; show them what you’re made of. Then you can stand down here and watch me.”

There was time for one deep breath. Eli shivered as he dropped the watch into her hands.

Kate’s Birthday, Before Supper

Here was something that could not be true—Eli in his business suit, crouched in the wooded ditch outside his local Piggly-Wiggly. He did not want to be there. He thought about running away. The overgrown drain where he lurked, waiting, at the edge of the parking lot was fairly swarming with mosquitoes; they bit his arms and face and neck; they whined endlessly in his ears. The heat was unbearable. Sweat tickled down Eli’s chest and back, and in his hand the switchblade was slimy. Only his gut was cold, with an icy nausea that set his teeth to chattering. He tried to hold still the best he could, but the bugs and sweat kept his skinny body jumping like a harassed lemur in the underbrush. What in God’s name was he doing? It was impossible, yet here he was, squatting miserably in a ditch, the most nervous mugger who ever lived. He’d almost decided to go when the solution to his problems came strolling out the door, a small, chubby woman in pink sandals, her cart piled high with stuffed paper bags and her shoulder weighed down with a mammoth purse. Once, in a bright department store, he’d seen Shari touch a purse like that, stroking her nail-bitten fingers over the leather in a kind of furtive reverence. A purse was the first thing he’d meant to buy her, just as soon as he won big with Big Dirck. Of course, all that was over now. Now, he just had to focus on getting the watch back. Eli stepped out between the cars just as Pinkie was lifting her bags into the trunk of her Maxima. At first she didn’t see him. She just went right on putting those bags in, while Eli stood uncomfortably, holding the shaking knife out from his middle. It was too late for stopping. He shifted his feet and licked his lips.

“Um, excuse me, Ma’am?” He took a step closer. “Ma’am? I’m gonna need your wallet.”

Now she saw him, all right. Old Pinks backed away from her car with a pitiful, scared puppy snivel.
“No, no, it’s all right—” Forgetting the knife in his hand, Eli took two steps after her. And then the woman found her voice, and split the summer air with an unholy shriek like nothing he had heard before. It jolted through him like lightning.

“Oh shit!” he shouted, and sprinted for the ditch. He scrambled up a short embankment and kept going, branches slapping him in the face as behind him the woman continued to scream.

He wouldn’t stop till the door of the Shell bathroom locked behind him on Baker’s Bridge road.

*The Time of the Southern Baptists*

More than anything he wanted to eat the catfish. Bursting through the sediment of more than twenty years, the longing returned in a rush of smell, the scent of fish bubbling crispy in the fryer. His own fish had soaked grease spots in his Chinet plate, and beneath the crust of golden batter he knew the white meat flaked tender enough to spork away from the bone. And yet the damn preacher was still yapping.

“Well, Eli Mauldin of Arkansas, what brings you over to Southaven?”

The old man leaned both elbows on the table, grinning a big shit-eating grin at Eli. All around the two of them, the folding tables lined up in rows—hundreds of smiling, eating people, comb-overs and comfy, freckled chests. Why didn’t the guy go talk to *them*? For an instant Eli considered telling the real story. He’d deliver it like a sermon, pacing the top of his long table, treading cornbread and fish bones. *Well, brethren,* he’d say, looking down and then up into their vacant faces, *I have a three point lesson for you today. The first point is that God doesn’t like it when you take things from a man who played you in Russian roulette in the back room of a bar. Especially not after he’s lost. Every time you do that, brethren, you crucify Jesus all over again. The second point, brethren, is that sometimes then again it’s all right, if all you want is the life he’s done with, and which he didn’t appreciate, and which he rubbed in your face, every time he came over to screw your mother.*

Across the room the silent faces nodded. A few old ladies made notes on their bulletins.

*It’s Genesis 27, brethren. Think of Jacob and his brother Esau. It’s finders-keepers on a birthright. But the final point I have for you is that some people won’t see it like that. It might be best to follow Jacob’s lead, and get out of Dodge in a hurry.*

*Amen!* The congregation shouted.

But no, it wouldn’t do. If nothing else, it was wrong to shock a preacher, especially when you’d crashed his church fish fry. Eli gave the grin back and said what he’d been saying ever since he arrived in town.

“Well, I came on down here for a job at the new Toyota plant; try to save up some money, maybe, for a junior college. My folks are still in Arkansas.”

The preacher gave a slow nod of understanding, making his mouth into a knowing *ah, yes* shape. This was the standard response; so many people had come in for the plant that everybody was bored of it.

“Well, son, let me ask you this: do you know Jesus our Lord and Savior?”

“Well yes,” Eli said, “you might say so. I’m Southern Baptist, born and raised. Went to a church a lot like this one every time the doors opened up. I expect to see you again next Sunday.”
He made a show of grabbing the Real Lemon juice and giving his rapidly cooling fish a squirt. The preacher slapped the table, making Eli jump.

“Thank the Lord!” he almost shouted. “Then I just have one more question for you,” he said. “Do you know about our inner-city Memphis ministry, that we’re taking donations for?”

Eli sighed.

“No sir, I hadn’t heard about it, but I’m sure you do good work,” he said.

“Oh, we do,” the preacher replied, nodding thoughtfully. “Especially for the children, though it seems always to be a struggle, the need is so great. We do what we can, though, we do what we can. The flock knows that each one should give as the heart purposes, and we lay up our treasures in heaven.”

He looked pointedly at Eli’s watch.

“Do you know, son, where you’ve layed up your treasures today?”

Eli leaned over his Chinet, a seraphic smile on his face. A path of light had spread before him, golden and sacred—the way to the catfish heaven, drawn out in the brochure map of Diamond Crater State Park, the one he’d once kept behind the couch, after his mother’s Park Ranger stopped coming by.

“Why, yes sir,” he said, “I do. And I also have faith that the Lord will provide. It’s something else that comes from my family. Perhaps you’ve heard the story of Arkansas Diamond John?”

The preacher squinted his eyes.

“That does sound familiar,” he said. “Although I’m not sure I recollect completely…”

“Well, Diamond John was my grandfather’s father. He was a farmer on one hundred and sixty acres of burned-out land.”

Eli laid a hand on the preacher’s coat sleeve.

“Can you imagine?” he said. “A wife and children to support, and flat broke. Living on a farm of weeds and bare dirt.” He shook his head sadly. “I tell you, I might have given up. But old John Mauldin was rich in faith. He went out onto his bare fields, and you know what he did? He prostrated himself before the Lord. Got right down on his hands and knees and just crawled over the ground, calling upon the Savior. And then—then he saw something glimmering, sparkling there down in the dirt.”

Eli gave the preacher’s arm a pat, then leaned back from the table, smiling a satisfied smile. The preacher leaned forward.

“You don’t mean it was a—?”

“Oh yes,” Eli said. “It was. A diamond more than a carat big. Old John couldn’t believe it. He jumped right on his donkey to go tell his wife, and then he saw another one. Turned out the whole one hundred sixty acres had ‘em, though of course most weren’t as good.”

The preacher leaned farther over the table, his mouth slack and his wire-rims flashing.

“And you say this is your family’s land?”

“Oh,” Eli said. “Not now. Old John still couldn’t make a living off it, so he sold it. And then—” Eli sighed sadly. “—his faith got the best of him.”

“What do you mean?”
“Well, he lost all the money, you know. Investment schemes and such. He died flat broke again, ‘cept for this watch, but he didn’t regret a thing.”

He grinned again.

“When I get to feeling bad about living in the car and all, and worried this job won’t come through, I just look at this watch, and remind myself to keep the faith, and where real treasures are laid up.”

The preacher looked a little dizzy. He stood up from the table and shook hands.

“Well, happy to have you here, son. Enjoy your dinner.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m sure I will.”

The first savory light sporkful crunched in Eli’s mouth, and then he saw her there, an angel, strutting down through the tables with an armload of paper towel rolls, their edges fluttering about her like plumage. An earthy, embodied angel, with sweat stains from the stuffy kitchen darkening the cotton print under her arms. Eli’s mouth was awash in juices; she moved to the slow sound of his chewing in his ears. 

*Don’t mind me,* her pink lips shaped out, as she held her Bounty rolls toward a table. *Don’t mind me,* with a smile that made sure that—oh!—everybody did.

“Thank you,” a young man said reverently, when she offered Eli’s table the towels. “Praise Jesus.”

She blushed, pretending not to notice. But before she turned away she glanced at Eli with a smile. He swallowed, wanting to call out to her. But in the bob of an Adam’s apple she was gone. Eli sat breathing heavily, staring at the space where she had been. He did not dream he would forget her, before that day at the falls. In the morning, he left Southaven for good.

*Kate’s Birthday, Lunch Time*

In Spanky McGee’s it had all seemed clear.

“I got to get the damn thing back,” he’d said to Reeder, blowing out smoke. “I got to get it back *today,* or Shari will know I fell off the wagon again.”

Reeder swayed on his stool, shut one eye and looked at Eli.

“You mean she don’t know?” he said. “Hell, man, you’re here every poker night!” Behind the bar Dawn let out a cackle. She had on a tight pink shirt which featured sparkly silver writing on the chest. *My face is here,* it said, with an arrow pointing up. She sat Eli down a fresh whiskey.

“Yeah, well, I don’t lose then, asshole,” Eli said.

Reeder nodded, burping inside his mouth. Eli thought about punching him, the red nose crunching in a warm blood spray. Pathetic, washed-up drunk. He’d been like that ever since he got out of jail. Eli had known—he’d *known*—better than to listen to him. But he’d come in the bar that night, excited, seeming almost like himself again, the old Reeder who kept an ear to the ground. It was a sure thing, he said. His cousin Ben lived in Memphis; he’d heard it from the man himself. Clay Johnson would lose to the Daytona Beach Bad Boy, Kevin Mittnick, in the WBF fight in two days time. The news had set Eli’s head to spinning. Clay Johnson was favored, five to one. *Five to one.* Half a thousand dollars for every hundred bet. Eli was not the man he used to be, either. He was fired again and rent was due. At night Shari spread the papers on the floor, shoring up a pile of coupons between her family and disaster, pinching pennies while the debt deepened. He’d made the call to Big Dirk, all on his own. *Listen, man, I’m good for it.*
If I lose, I'll come see you on Sunday. Won't even wait until the weekend's ended. Eli twisted the wedding ring on his hand. How much? Five thousand dollars.

“You know what? Fuck a watch,” Reeder said. His breath reeked of stale beer and smoke; he stank like the carpet beneath the pool tables. “I’m sick of it. I said fuck a watch, you hear? You know what I’d do with a watch?” He was talking for the whole bar now. Eli downed the drink and signaled for the check. “I’d take that sucker straight on down to the pawn shop, get me some money, and go buy a nice shirt.” The other regulars were looking, a horseshoe of solemn yellow faces in the gloom. “Then me and my nice shirt would go right over to the Dollar General and walk out with all the ladies’ beautifiers. Sell them door to door, you hear? At fifty cents a pop. That way, everything you sell? Pure profit.”

The bar was still laughing when Eli walked out into the sun. What would he do? He had no plans, save for letting a plan come to him, the way that plans sometimes did. Meandering over towards Big Blue, he came upon Reeder’s rusted Jeep, parked sideways across two spaces. That Jeep which had once been a high in itself, flying along the Mississippi backroads, holding onto curves with two wheels. He touched three fingertips to the hot metal. He thought of Reeder’s wobbling cheeks, as he sat laughing on his stool, of Big Dirk’s beaked nose and small, glittering eyes as he took Eli’s watch away, that Tuesday in the cement garage of the job he’d just lost. How’s Shari doing these days, Eli? Maybe she could help me find my money, if I stop by sometime you’re out. From nowhere a breeze picked up, flinging parking lot grit in Eli’s eyes and nose.

“Goddamn it!” he shouted, clenching his fists. He reared back and kicked the Jeep door for all he was worth. And again. And again. Whole side bashed in, he stopped, panting over his bent knees. And then he remembered the switchblade, gleaming virginal beneath Reeder’s seat. He’d seen it not long ago. All four of Reeder’s windows were down; in a flash both he and the knife were gone.

When Eli Took His Turn

At the bottom there was Shari again, though it hadn’t been her at all; Shari on a hot spring day, a typical, sweltering, April day, when the air was weed-fresh and the earth steaming. On the playground at Rankin elementary, the children worked up a sweat in the dusty pebbles, scrambling over painted metal and wood. But Eli was not with the others. He was with the little blonde girl, inside the bushes at the playground’s edge. The pretty little girl from Miss Beacham’s homeroom, the one who did careful flips on the long metal bar, her long tangles trailing in the dirt. The one who wore Umbros beneath her dresses, so that she could hang upside down like a bat until her limbs ached and her head was dizzy. The one who had tagged him, that day, though nobody else was playing, and led him into the leafy Euonymus, where the children had worn dirt trails in a secret, winding knot. Whose idea had it been to play the game they ended up playing? No matter, for here he was, holding his t-shirt up and looking over the white curve of his stomach down his shorts, the blonde girl peering in beside him. She looked for a long, silent minute, frowning in the dappled light. Eli began to feel uneasy. He let his shorts snap back in place.

Okay,” he said, louder than he meant to. “Your turn.”

“I don’t want to play any more,” she said.
Eli felt a weight fall from his limbs; the sudden lightness made him confused. Was he relieved? Or cheated?

“But you have to!” he said. “I went, so you have to go. That’s the rules.”

She crossed her arms and huffed.

“Who says?”

Eli’s mouth dropped open.

“Who says? Everybody!”

She plunked down in the dirt.

“Well I’m not going,” she said. “Unless you find me a four-leaf. That’s the rules now. I called it.”

Eli considered. The schoolyard was made of red clay, clumped with hairy sprouts of monkey grass. No one had ever found a four-leaf there. He felt an ache spread in his throat. Folded and angry on the ground, she seemed farther away than a star. How could he say to her, your breath is like warm peanut butter; please come back over and stand close? The world is big and hateful; we could have a secret, you and me.

“Who cares about a four-leaf?” he said, instead, scoffing at her. “My yard is covered in them, anyway. I can bring you five tomorrow.”

“That’s a lie,” she said with finality. “Ain’t nobody got a yard full of four-leafs.”

“I do,” he said. “They start right at the edge of the porch steps, and go all the way out to the road.”

Describing the clover, he could almost see it, a lush carpet ready to roll in, good luck to take with him, everywhere. Yes, a yard full of four-leafs. Of course he had one. He did.

“If I don’t bring you five four-leafs tomorrow,” he said, “I’ll rub poison oak all over.”

Poison oak! That decided it. The little blonde girl stood up from the dirt, brushing her skirt off as if that would clean it.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll go.”

Epilogue

Well, of course Big Blue plowed over the buzzard at upwards of seventy miles per hour. It was a big bird, even for a buzzard; the whack and bump clacked Eli’s teeth together. The children’s screams were deafening. Eli guided the van off an exit ramp and into the nearest McDonald’s lot. Walter huddled in Shari’s lap, his eyes squeezed shut and his wailing mouth open. Kate buried her face in her mother’s neck and sobbed. Shari looked at her husband.

“I just want you to know,” he said, “that I looked for those clovers. I looked for hours, Shari, I did. I—”

Eli was crying, too, his hands still wrapped around the steering wheel.

“I looked for them, and then when I couldn’t find them I went down and got the poison oak. I was sick for a week, Shari; my eyes were swollen shut.”

Shari leaned her head back against the seat and raised her eyes to the ceiling.

“Oh Jesus God,” she said.

The children and Eli went on with their crying. Inside the McDonald’s, customers put down their fries to stare at the blood smeared on the dented grill, the black feathers caught in metal.
Looking back, of course, it would be obvious to Avery that the events surrounding Mr. Snickers’s first death that May—he was a cat, after all—had been set in motion more than eight months before. That was the fall when Avery felt too large for her skin, when all over her body her dermis pulled tight and itchy over muscle and bone. In Biology class with Nicolette and Kendall, Avery was learning things. At first, when the shriveling plants still sweltered beneath the sun, boiling, by midday, in the moist air that would not rain, Avery learned about ecosystems, examining typed crisp pages which featured black arrows connecting grass to a gazelle, and the gazelle to a lion, and the lion to dirt particles. Humans ate the whole circle, sometimes, from plants back to the dirt they grew in. At night, Avery dreamed of herself among the arrows, her face whirling around to gobble everything, blood and leaves coating her chin, until she went up in a cloud of blowflies. Poof. She woke herself with the sound of her voice, talking or crying out in the darkness. Sometimes her mother was there, holding cool palms to the sides of her face, and crooning. More often, she woke alone.

The days grew shorter, and winter came on. Mississippi never slept, curled away under a blank snow; all season the bony trees muttered through leaves too stubborn to fall, and long, brown grass nodded in the rain. By chilly November the students were memorizing body systems, staring at brightly colored drawings of organs—purple for colon, green for spleen, the blue and red fisted heart. The human digestive system is six to nine meters long! Avery’s thick textbook said. Your circulatory system, if formed into a single thread, would stretch some sixty thousand miles! Avery watched people she saw, wondering over the spaces they held inside; people at gas stations with ugly, dough-ball babies, or walking in Wal-Mart with black-bottomed bare feet. The town of Verona was about two miles across, any way you drove it. There’s no life here, Regina, Avery’s father had said, before heading off to New Orleans. He’d only made it to Meridian before he turned around, rented a house across town from Avery, and went back to drinking. The town of Verona was the world. By December Avery had nightmares of looking for splinters down close to her bones, digging, digging with a long, sharp fork. Sometimes, the maddening tingle in her limbs drove her out to the big magnolia, hidden behind the garage, where she hung by her hands from one of the thick branches, kicking her legs into a fury until she dropped, exhausted, on the ground. Other times, she despised herself for behaving like a child. It was no wonder, really, that people often tired of her—Kendall and Nicolette. Her father. When the feeling got too strong, she snuck back into the closet for one of her mother’s Klonopin. At fourteen, she’d been
taking them two years. It was one of the secrets she knew by spring she’d never tell. That, and the way she felt about Belinda.

2.

Avery was already awake when Kendall paged her on that morning in May. In her bare feet she stood tip-toe on her bathroom tile, her head shut away from view by the two hinged sides of her mirror, the doors to the cabinet behind. Inside the space she’d made, her big face—awfully disconnected from her body—glared back at her in three directions from the three panes of glass. She shut her eyes, and grimaced, then opened them and felt her heart bound at the tri-headed monster she saw. *Making Cerberus,* she called it, ever since, at eleven, she’d made the smart kids’ class called Challenge, where they’d spent six weeks on mythology. The buzz of her pager, shrill in the morning-quiet house, made her smack her forehead against the mirror.

*13*91191191191

Star thirteen was code for Kendall; the other numbers spoke for themselves. Kendall picked up immediately.

“Oh Avery. Oh my God,” She said.

The news spilled out of her in a burst of sobs—Mr. Snickers was dead. She had found him only a few moments before. Avery leaned against the sink, her hand on her mouth.

“Oh, Kendall,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

She was. Poor Mr. Snickers, with his poor pink nose! *But.* But Kendall had called her (*her!*) first; not Nicolette, whom she fought and loved. Kendall clenched her teeth and moaned, keening from somewhere in her gut. Horrified, Avery smashed her thought.

“Please, Kendall. Oh please don’t.”

Then Avery was crying, too; crying for Mr. Snickers, for the warm little body now cold, and for the pain of Kendall.

“I can’t do it, Avery,” Kendall said, finally. “I just can’t deal with this.” She took a deep breath. “I need your help to fix it.”

“To—to fix it?”

Down the hall, Avery’s mother was up, clattering among the cereal bowls. Avery frowned. She felt stupid, too tired to think. Could it really be only yesterday that she’d discovered Belinda, crouching in the tiny teacher’s restroom? She twisted the phone cord around her index finger, until the tip of it puffed tight and dark purple. Belinda had not recognized her, had looked in her face like a terrified animal. With effort, Avery shoved Belinda back behind her mental door, back to the place where she belonged.

“What do you mean, fix it?” she said.

Kendall sighed.

“Please, Avery. I can’t explain right now. I just need your help tonight—yours and Nicolette’s. Just please be here after supper.”

“Of course I’ll be there.”

Deep in thought, Avery ambled to the kitchen, her feet silent on the hardwood. The smell of salty frying fat made her stomach rumble. Her mother had decided against cereal. At the stove in the Saturday sunshine, in the long white t-shirt she always wore for sleeping, she hummed and pushed sizzling strips of bacon with her spatula. The sight
of her made Avery’s throat ache. When she was small, her mother had made up stories
for her, stupid little things about whatever Avery had lost, or outgrown. Her favorite
green sweater was just what some other little girl wanted for her birthday. The bear she’d
lost hitched a ride to LA. What would a mother say, for Kendall? In the night, Mr.
Snickers arose, and stretched, and sniffed, and turned round to see his old home of a
body still lying, curled and warm, next to the girl Kendall. Well! This was something
new! The night air was cool and strange against his bare-naked soul, and he huddled
next to Kendall’s feet, frightened. But then, through the closed window pane, the smells
and sounds of summer midnight drifted, and Mr. Snickers thought of scurrying field mice,
their black eyes shining in the moonlight; of the fat, low flapping bats, and himself
sweeping swift as wind through the grass. It was the ancient siren song, old as the first
breath of the world—the call of Earth to Lucifer, the summoning of deep to deep. Mr.
Snickers rose in answer. Somehow, suddenly, he knew the old barrier of glass and
screen would trouble him no longer. With a flick of his ghostly tail he leaped to the
windowsill. Then he was through it, and then he was gone…

But Avery didn’t believe stories like that anymore. And anyway they were too
dumb to say aloud. Her mother saw her in the doorway and smiled.

“You want some bacon, hon? I’ll make some extra crispy for you.”

In the mornings, now, her mother fluttered around her like a soft-winged moth. In
the evenings, when she walked in from Kendall’s, her mother was taciturn and aloof,
disapproval swinging in a flail about her head. Avery crept miserably to bed, too afraid
of the stink of Kendall’s Aunt Pinkie’s beer on her breath to sit down and watch a late
night movie. Her mother did not care for Kendall. She would not likely understand her
daughter’s obligations.

“No, thank you, Avery said, turning quickly for the pantry. I think I’ll just have
some Chex.”

3.

Belinda was the only one who didn’t seem to care when Kendall defied Mrs.
Butts, the Biology teacher. But then, nothing much seemed to faze Belinda. Even as a
little child, she’d existed in the world of school like a boulder in a dust devil, stolid and
dull. She was harmless, and much persecuted, and Avery abhorred her—her fat rolls and
her scaly elbows, the way she breathed loudly, through her mouth, and the smudgy
glasses that reflected your own face back to you. Once, in the third grade, Avery had
been part of a group of children who taunted Belinda when she sat on the ground at
recess, running forward to poke at her rear end with sticks, where the back of her pants
gaped low. Belinda swung around once to yell at them, but then she’d hunkered down
and ignored it until a teacher strode, furious, from the shade of the red brick building, and
Avery had been ashamed, and hated Belinda even more. After that, she’d begun
pretending that Belinda did not exist, and every year, since that one, Belinda’s girth had
grown, smothering whatever remained of the weak-willed girl within her. In Mrs. Butts’s
class, at the end of the year, Belinda did not even look at Kendall, as Kendall slowly
wound her long limbs around the metal poles of her desk.

“Kendall. Jacobs.” Mrs. Butts said. “Unless you have a doctor’s note excusing
you from this assignment, then you are required to complete it.”
Behind Mrs. Butts, Avery waved her arms. *Just come on!* She mouthed. *I’ll do it!*

Over by the lab tables, where the other students gathered, a tiny piglet lay, curled and gray, on each dissecting pan. Kendall refused eye contact with Avery.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Mrs. Butts purplish face. “It’s against mine and my family’s religion to mutilate animals.”

“Oh?” Mrs. Butts smiled. “And what religion is that, pray? Tell me, and you’ll be excused.”

From across the room a few people giggled. Kendall glared, twining herself even more tightly in her seat.

“You’ve got lipstick on your teeth,” she said.

Mrs. Butts turned abruptly, plowing straight into Avery.

“I’m sorry,” Avery said, scrambling up from the tile. But Mrs. Butts swept on into the hall. Avery turned to Kendall.

“What’s with you?” she said. “You helped Aunt Pinkie kill a chicken just last week.”

Outside, she could hear Mrs. Butts clickety-clacking briskly down the hall, headed for the staff bathroom that Avery herself favored, it being the least frequented. At the lab tables, students had begun to form obediently into groups of four, moving away from Belinda. Kendall regarded Avery coolly.

“So? I don’t feel like doing this,” she said. “You’d better go grab Nicolette, unless you want to be stuck with Belinda.”

Avery looked over at Nicolette. Kendall was right; there were several boys hovering.

“You’re sure you’re taking a zero? It’s the test grade for the whole unit.”

“Yes, mother,” Kendall smirked. “I’m sure.”

4.

Now, Avery watched as Kendall hulked along her back lawn like a hunchback, spray painting a thick white arc into the plush carpet of green. In the melting sherbet twilight her witch-black hair was almost blue—she’d dyed every sandy blonde strand by lunchtime. Avery and Nicolette were supposed to be helping. Instead they stood, doubtful, at the edge of the woods.

“Like mother, like daughter,” Nicolette whispered.

After Kendall’s father died, her mama had gone bonkers, piling all his clothes on their bed, and burrowing down to sleep in them, night after night, and dressing in them, every morning. For two years, she’d gone around town in shirts that ballooned past her knees, and jeans that drug the ground behind her, held up around the armpits by a belt she’d punctured with an ice pick. Making a spectacle, both Avery’s mother and Kendall’s Aunt Pinkie still called it, though they meant different things by that. *Why, she up and wore that man’s clothes to the funeral!* Aunt Pinkie would add proudly, sloshing her beer can high in the air. *Went clunking right up to the gravesite in that man’s steel-toe work boots, raggedy as a sheep in the rain!* When she forgot to feed herself, Kendall’s mother was taken away to Whitfield, leaving her baby girl behind her. To hear Aunt Pinkie or Avery’s mother go on about it, you’d have thought that it was yesterday.

“Yeah, maybe,” Avery said. “Or maybe not.”
Kendall’s mama’s spectacle was not the only part of her father’s death that people discussed. *Man never could learn not to hang ’round them drunkards,* Aunt Pinkie would say, some evenings on the porch when she was about six Budweisers deep. *No,* Kendall’s Uncle Bop would reply, folding both lips tight against his teeth. *But he’d have gone, anyway, Pinkie. You knew it was his time.* Aunt Pinkie knew everyone’s times. She could read it in the palm of the hand, though she didn’t tell the customers who came to see her, pushing through the back room doorway of tinkling silver beads. Nor would she tell Nicolette, or Avery. *People need help with livin’,* she’d said. *They get through the other part just fine.* She’d meant never to tell Kendall. But one night she’d had too much Southern Comfort and caught her niece up by the hands, and bawled, and Kendall had pried it out of her. After that, Aunt Pinkie hadn’t been allowed to have any more Southern Comfort at the house, and Kendall had spent every day knowing she’d die suddenly at thirty-four. There was no telling, really, what else that Kendall knew.

“Whatever,” Nicolette said. “If this would work then where’s her dad? *Ouch!*” She swatted at her bare knee, leaving a dark smear of bug guts and bright red blood. Mosquitoes loved Nicolette. They had to. With her plump curves and pouting face, she was like a caramel sucked to a round dollop. Sometimes even Kendall bit her, gently, on her upper arm.

“Kendall,” she called, scratching at her leg, “do we have to do this tonight? Snicks will still be good tom—I mean,” she blushed and hurried on. “The new moon will last a couple more nights.”

Kendall kept moving, her tall form casting a shadow even longer and thinner than she was. Avery looked at her and tried not to think of the soft weight in the large shoebox she’d brought, or what else might be inside the old blue backpack she’d tossed near it on the ground. She also wished, deep down inside, that the current undertaking had not been what Kendall had in mind when she’d asked for help. But a real friend was a friend through everything.

“What can I do, Kendall?” she said.

“Thank you, Avery, for being helpful,” Kendall said. “Could you get that brown paper sack out of my bag for me?”

“Well, *excuse* me,” Nicolette said. “I just thought you might feel better with a little distraction. And I happen to know that the Swamp Kids are cooking out.”

Kendall straightened, wiping the hair out of her face with the back of her hand. In one motion she reached into her pocket and then lobbed something small and glinting at Nicolette’s head.

“Hey, Nic!” she yelled. “Think fast!” Nicolette squealed. The object bounced harmlessly off her shoulder, coming to rest in the grass. Avery, now with paper sack in tow, scooped it up to have a look. It was a small pill bottle, green plastic instead of the usual brown. Where had she seen a bottle like that before? Inside were two small, fluffy nuggets of weed, the kind of quality only the Swamp Kids had.

“See?” Kendall said. “I already got the best part of them for you. And I promised we’d meet them, after.”

Nicolette pushed out her bottom lip and studied her cuticles. Kendall had gone back to spraying, plowing right through the cucumbers she loved to eat, in the hottest
summer months, carrying them around everywhere and slicing them with a pocketknife. The white circle was almost complete.

“In case you were wondering,” she said from behind her curtain of hair, “nobody tried to bring my dad back this way because he’s a person. People’s souls go to heaven. Cats’ souls stay here, because they’re demons, just like geckos and snakes. You can tell it by their eyes.”

“That’s not all I can tell,” Nicolette said. But she was not about to sulk—as if she were worried about being the Swamp Kids’ favorite! She settled herself on the grass. “All right, Johnetta-on-the-spot,” she said. “Let’s see what you’ve got there.”

5.

The Swamp Kids (*homo sapien-aquaticus*) were part of a particular breed of young male plentiful throughout northern Mississippi—the backwoods hippy. This type of boy—distinguishable by his ragtag clothing and long dreadlocks; generosity with homegrown weed; friendly, cloying body odor; and disconcerting roving hands—did not generally attend school after the age of thirteen, and nobody seemed to much care. The Verona colony originated mostly from trailers and a few old concrete geodesic domes in close proximity to Little Bear creek; the same creek that, about a mile upstream, ran through the woods back of Kendall’s house. Since forever, Avery had seen them as through a window pane, their lives and hers running parallel to each other, all around the tiny town. This year, for the first time, they’d begun meeting the girls at the creek, and sharing with them. Avery had taken up pot easily, which delighted an annoyingly surprised Kendall. But Avery liked smoking, the way it made the tiny specificities of creek and woods and breathing, pulsing body seem to jump joyously in on her. And she liked the Swamp Kids, too, liked sitting with them on rocks in the sunshine, liked their jokes and their nimble fingers, when they rolled joints easily and tight.

What’s up, Sphinx? They’d say to her, making fun of her quiet watchfulness. She thought they’d be part of her life for some time, because of the Nicolette and Kendall.

The Swamp Kids chased after Kendall and Nicolette, for completely different reasons. Kendall was at ease with them. She learned to handle weed and pick guitar, her pretty, bare face frowning with concentration, and her wild blonde hair yanked back in a knot. She wore old wife-beaters and t-shirts, and she went splashing in the creek with them, trying to catch crawdads. She was meaner than all hell. *You have nice hair,* Moses had said to her, only a few days before Mr. Snickers died. He reached out to touch a few tumbling wisps. *Like corn silk.* Kendall stiffened and jerked backwards. *Yeah,* she said. *I do. Could you not wipe your fucking filthy hands in it?* At school, the boys disliked Kendall; they banded together and insulted her. But the Swamp Kids only laughed, and pinched her, and thought up interesting things to show her, in order to abate her fury.

Nicolette was something else. She lined her eyes in black liquid, and sprayed her auburn curls stiff. In her sundresses and sparkly flip-flops, she sat well up on the creek bank, and whenever the bunch decided to meet up for a round of spotlight, Nicolette could always be found hiding, with one Kid or another, in the tiny rock crevice many yards back in the woods.

Avery looked expectantly at Kendall, the first few times Nicolette emerged into the flashlight’s glare with her clothes and hair disheveled, blushing and breathless with laughter. But Kendall only sighed, and brushed the mossy dirt from Nicolette’s back as
they walked up from the creek together. *She can't help it,* she said, later, to Avery on the porch. *It's not like what she did in lab, somehow.*

6.

Kendall was satisfied with the circle. She capped the spray paint and shoved it back in her bag. Then she held out a brown paper sack toward Avery.

“Here,” she said, shaking the sack. “These have to be distanced evenly, in five spots around the outside of the circle.”

Avery opened the sack carefully, but the fading sun cast a deep shadow inside. She knelt on the ground beside Nicolette and shook the contents out on the grass. Nicolette could not contain herself. She left off picking her cuticles and leaned over the objects. There, nesting on the lawn, was a bundle of bright red feathers, tied together with string, a cinnamon stick, a chicken bone, a swatch of blonde hair—Kendall’s hair before this morning, and a stone like a huge drop of murky water, the insides catching and flashing with blue.

“Oh!” Nicolette grabbed the stone and held it up to the light.

“It’s like a soul,” Avery said, then blushed.

But Kendall was pleased.

“I know,” she said. “Isn’t it pretty? It’s a talisman, for protection. I mean, they all are, but that’s the best kind right there. Labradorite. Pinkie sells them.”

“Protection, huh?” Nicolette grinned. “Must have been the kind of protection Belinda believed in, to land her in the spot she’s in.”

Avery gathered up the bone, the hair, the feathers, and the cinnamon. She felt suddenly energized, anxious that things should go just right.

“How did you say to put them?”

“Just space them out,” Kendall said. “The idea is that if you drew a star inside the circle, each point would get a talisman.”

Nicolette dropped the labradorite.

“You mean we’re making a *pentagram*?” she said. “What kind of satanic bullshit is this?”

Avery continued arranging the talismans.

*What do you care if you don’t believe it?* she wanted to ask. But who said such things to Nicolette besides Kendall? She retrieved the dropped labradorite, while Kendall stared at Nicolette, amazed.

“We’re *summoning a succubus,*” she said. “What did you think it’d be like? Look, you don’t have to do anything once she’s here. I’m just gonna ask her to bring Snickers back, that’s all.”

“Well,” Nicolette said. “I know if I were a succubus I wouldn’t take time from my night to come all the way up here, resurrecting people’s cats, just because they asked me.” She scratched at her elbow, where a mosquito had gotten away with his crimes.

“So how about you go ahead and tell us—what’s in it for her?”

Avery paused.

“Oh for God’s sake!” Kendall clenched her fists. “What’s it to you if I make a trade? It’s my soul, not yours.”

“Oh my God,” Nicolette said.
“Nicolette,” Kendall said. “I need to know. Are you going to help me or not?”

Avery was alarmed to hear the tears in her voice. Kendall did not usually cry in front of Nicolette. “She’s going to figure out a way, anyway,” she said. Perhaps the spell could be made to work with two?

“All right,” Nicolette said. “Don’t get all mushy about it. I guess I’ve always helped you.”

“Good,” Kendall said, wiping her eyes. “Good.”

She pulled two last things out of the almost empty bag. A bundle of three tall, black candles, and a travel size container of OFF.

“Well, then, I guess you’ll be needing this,” Kendall said, rolling the OFF across the grass.

“You mean you had this the whole time?” Nicolette stared at Kendall, then giggled. She loved things like that. “You bitch!”

“Well,” Kendall said, giggling back. “I didn’t want to use up all my bug spray, saving your hide for nothing.”

The last bright colors were fading from the sky. Avery had the talismans arranged in perfect pentagram position. On the far side of the bag the shoebox waited, pale and heavy with Mr. Snickers’s soft corpse. Avery felt perspiration bead on her forehead and neck.

“Shouldn’t we get going?” she said.

7.

In Biology lab, that December day, Avery made a big production over getting her latex gloves and goggles on. Her fright had come on suddenly, a cool dread blooming in her stomach when Nicolette clasped both her hands over her mouth and turned to Harris MacElroy.

“Oh Harris!” she said in mock horror. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t even know you and Belinda were expecting!”

He looked her over, a grin already forming on his face. Only the Swamp Kids seemed to know how to ignore Nicolette, and Harris MacElroy and Chuck Sparks were the farthest thing from a Swamp Kid Verona had to offer, with clear eyes and apple-bright smiles, Polo shirts and soccer teams. They never paused by Nicolette, in the chaotic lunchroom arena, nor bothered with Avery at all. It’s Kendall’s fault, Nicolette said. But Avery wasn’t so sure. Now, at any rate, Avery was too preoccupied to worry over Chuck or Harris. On the table, the pig waited, his four legs tied in a spread position with string looped under the dissection pan. Chuck and Harris had tied him. They were trusting Avery to make the right cuts. Use your fingers to probe the chest area, the lab instruction sheet said. Feel down the sternum to the spot where it ends above the diaphragm. This is where you will make the first incision. Under Avery’s hand the pig’s ribcage was frail as green sapling stems, so undeveloped it would be cut with scissors. His belly was pale and smooth. Her scalpel hovered in the air, trembling.

“Christ!” Nicolette said, elbowing Avery to the side. “Just let me!”

Avery looked up in surprise. Unlike her, the conscientious student, or Kendall, who either destroyed the curve or failed in a glorious flood of zeros, Nicolette was known
for her skill at eking by with as little effort as possible. Yet here she was, slicing the pig’s belly in an upside down “v,” carrying her incisions all the way to the pan.

“Oh, sick!” Harris said, when, first three cuts done, Nicolette pulled the flaps of skin back like doors, pinning them firmly to the pan. Avery had to agree. In front of her was the large, brownish liver, the coiled grey clump of intestines. The stench of formaldehyde set her head to buzzing. Nicolette grinned back at Harris, then took up the scissors to snip open the chest. For the first time Avery noticed that her friend had on fresh lip gloss, and the necklace that fell down into the top of her cleavage. Someone had remembered there would be group work today. Her gloved hands were slick with pig juice, and she stood with her back arched. Harris and Chuck leaned close to her, mixing their breath with hers. Avery did not know where to look.

“Why, excellent job, Nicolette!”
Mrs. Butts had bustled up, checking on the group’s progress.
“Avery, you make sure you don’t miss this!” She stuck her fingers in the pig’s abdomen, pulling the intestines aside. “See? There are the kidneys right back there. And if you lift up the liver—there—you’ll see the gall bladder underneath, right next to where the umbilical vein came in.”
“Awesome. Thanks Mrs. B.”
Mrs. Butts moved away, and Avery sighed her relief. Now, surely, it would be over. There was a checkmark next to all the organs on the lab sheet—nothing to do but go back to their desks.

And that’s when Nicolette cut out the eye. She plunged the scalpel in around the sealed lid, then popped the eye out on the flat of the blade, where it sat, milky blue and horrid.

“Here you go,” she said to Chuck, presenting it to him.
Chuck drew back, laughing.
“Oh, sick!” he said again, glancing in Mrs. Butts direction. She was pointing out the gall bladder to Belinda’s group, or rather, the three students Belinda stood behind, staring at her shoes.

“Hey!” Harris said. “Get the feet!”
Nicolette complied, pressing down hard on the scissors to cut through the knee. When she had trouble, she picked up the scalpel again, and sawed. Avery backed away from the table, a gag rising in her throat. She did not notice Kendall watching from her desk across the room.

“The ears! The ears!” Harris said. Nicolette sliced through the boneless folds and tossed one, low, at Chuck. In the aisle, Kendall got to her feet. Chuck threw the ear back at Nicolette, and then she went for the tiny, rubber stamp of a snout.

“SLUT!”
Kendall’s shout put the room on pause. She charged Nicolette like a football player. Caught off balance, the larger girl never had a chance. She hit the floor with an oomph, the breath rushing from her lungs. Her scalpel skittered away on the tiles.

“Hey, fight!” someone shouted. A crowd surged to surround the two girls, pushing Avery to the side.

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!”
“You stupid slut! You stupid slut!”
Kendall’s howls rose above the chanting. Nicolette was making a strange noise, a squealing moan in the back of her throat. Avery stooped low, and through a gap in legs she saw why. On the floor Nicolette twisted and heaved her body, trying vainly to shake Kendall from atop her chest. Kendall was smashing something, hard, against Nicolette’s closed and glossy mouth—the snout.

“You—stupid—fucking—slut!” Kendall was still screaming when Mr. Garrett, the English teacher, forced his way through the crowd and dragged her off.

Mrs. Butts pulled Nicolette upright, clucking and brushing the hair out of her face.

“Are you all right? Are you all right?” she asked, her voice tender.

Nicolette looked at her, and then up at the crowd, silent now, and awed. She leaned forward and threw up in her lap. In the chaos of aftermath, Avery saw something that would come back to haunt her—big, fat, slow Belinda, standing by the mutilated piglet, her chin wobbling against her neck.

8.

The cloud above, Avery thought, looked just like a balloon manatee escaped from Macy’s day. Not that she could see it all that well anymore. With the help of the three black candles, Kendall had rolled the joint, breaking up the pot atop Mr. Snickers’s shoebox casket, which she held gently on her folded legs. Now, their bodies laid out in a wide “y,” the girls were relaxing and centering, getting ready for the task at hand. Up the lawn, the house was dark. Aunt Pinkie had gone to bingo; Uncle Bop sipped beer and watched T.V. in the shadows. The joint glowed bright as a firefly overhead, passing from hand to hand in the gloom.

“Spend a moment thinking about the thing that is distracting you,” Kendall said. “Say it out loud. Cast it from you.”

She inhaled deeply from the joint.

“I’m glad I’m dying at thirty-four,” she said. “So I’ll never be the only one who knew me when I was young.”

Nicolette sighed.

“Every man will wind up hating me,” she said. “Because I love all of them so much.”

Avery took the joint from Kendall.

“It was me who found Belinda,” she said. “I hit her leg with the door when I walked in.”

A brief pause fell over the group. Above them the stars had woken up. The balloon manatee was gone.

“I knew that it was you, Avery,” Kendall said. “You could see it in your face when the ambulance people came. And I know you like that bathroom. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Because she was so close to me. Because her dress was pulled up over her knees, and her huge thighs were open to let the baby out. Because she looked at me, and because she panted like an animal. Avery shuddered.

“I don’t know.”

“Did she say anything?” Nicolette asked.

“No.”

“Oh. I thought it might be true what they said, that she told who the father was.”
“Well, Avery said she didn’t,” Kendall said. “We’re supposed to be casting out bad energy.”

The girls settled back down in the cool grass. Nicolette flicked the tiny roach away into the cucumbers.

“All right,” Kendall said. “Join hands. Now, visualize the circle around us, protecting us, and consecrating us. We are set apart from all others. We are one with something more.”

Avery felt both girls’ hands tighten around her own. She shut her eyes and imagined the three of them floating in the air, the circle an unholy ring of fire, rotating around them.

“All right,” Kendall whispered. “Now summon!”

“GAAAAAAAAAAHHH!” A diabolical cry split the night, scattering Avery’s vision in cinders.

“What the—” she heard Nicolette scream, and then something wet exploded on her chest. Around the outside of the ring, not one but three shapes were dancing, hurling round objects at the girls. Avery wiped at the wet spot on her chest, and her fingers touched something limp and rubbery—the remains of an exploded water balloon.

“You goddam hippies!” Kendall shrieked.

The darkness burst into a swirl of bodies, screaming, and laughter. Avery scrambled to her feet. A Swamp Kid swung her in the air, and she caught a whiff of campfire, body odor, and whiskey.

“What are you crazy girls doing?” a voice called. There was more hooting and laughter. “Hey, no, seriously. Everybody stop minute.”

The Swamp Kid named Crazy Nate stepped close, pointing to the last remaining candle.

“What are you all doing to Kendall’s cat?”

Nicolette stopped screaming. Moses and Smitty stopped jumping. Avery felt her mouth drop open. In the faltering circle of light, the shoebox lay turned on its side, the lid knocked a few feet away. In between the two pieces was Mr. Snickers, blinking and struggling to his feet.

“Kendall!” Nicolette gasped. “You said that he was dead!” She turned to the mystified Swamp Kids. “It was a ceremony for him,” she said. “Because he died.”

Mr. Snickers meowed weakly, staggering off toward the trees.

“What did you do to him?” Crazy Nate repeated.

All eyes fastened on Kendall.

“I wasn’t hurting him!” Kendall said. Her voice rose. “It was only his tranquilizers—the ones he gets from the vet for trips!”

Still nobody moved.

“I just wanted to prove that I—that we could!” Kendall said. She looked at the group of blank faces, then took a step toward Avery. “Avery, I just wanted us to believe…”

Smitty and Moses exchanged a glance. Almost at once, they burst out laughing. Kendall’s shoulders sagged. She spun on her heel and marched off toward the looming square house.

“Girls,” Crazy Nate said. He gave Nicolette a little push. “You can’t find no better crazy than that.”
Avery stared at the place Kendall had been. Inside of herself she felt something
tremble. “Kendall, wait!” she called.
“Get away from me,” the voice came back.
Avery stumbled into the woods.
“Here, kittykittykitty,” she said. The thick air made her throat burn, whistling
through her windpipe. “Please, Snickers! Please come back!”
“Um, what are you doing now?” Nicolette said. The last candle was sputtering
out. Her body had blended with the forms of the Kids in the blackness. “Let that psycho
find her own drugged cat.”
Avery whirled to face the group.
“You don’t understand,” she said, her voice shaking. Her ears had begun to ring.
She shouted over the noise. “You just don’t get it at all! She did it because—because—”
Avery’s brain fumbled for words, but all she came up with were images. A flash of
Kendall’s mother, smiling vacantly in her dead husband’s clothes. Avery’s own father,
drinking in his rundown house. Nicolette in the dark hole, a Swamp Kid fumbling at the
button of her jeans. Belinda, sprawled horribly in the bathroom. Oh Belinda, how long
did you wait, closed up in there and suffering? Avery’s breath was coming in hitches.
“—she wanted all of us to have something. A story that—something that—” She
grabbed at the air and shook her fist. “Just something!”
“Well,” Moses said. “I guess you’re right. That doesn’t make any sense to me at
all. Come on, Nicolette, you with us tonight?”
Avery walked deeper into the woods. For a moment Nicolette hesitated.
“She won’t thank you for it, you know.”
“No,” Avery said. “I don’t guess she will.”
Before Netta’s call, on the day of the Miracle, Joycie Adcock hadn’t thought about Elvis. Not that this was that unusual. Lots of people went months and even whole years without thinking of him, even in Tupelo, Mississippi, where he was born. For Tupelonians, Elvis held no mystery. The story was common enough, after all, once you scraped off the sequins—a poor Mississippi boy full of his own hell and equipped with the stubbornness and dramatic flair it takes to go out with the whole world—with any whole world—watching. In Tupelo, people let poor Elvis be, generally speaking. But on January 8th of every year the town made an exception, holding their very own Elvis Presley birthday soiree at his birthplace. This was mostly for tourists, come on the bus down from Graceland, but some of the locals always got out, if only to have something to do. One of these people was Netta Lorraine, who attended with her son, Clivey, every January, sure as clockwork. She had been talking about it for weeks.

To be fair, Joycie had reason to be preoccupied. The feud with Sherwood Shepherd, Jr. had been carrying on for over four months, and today Joycie had laid a trap. On the doorknob, the envelope balanced lightly, a white flag showing snow-bright against the red door. *Greene Exterminators*, it said across the front, in the careful swirls of Joycie’s hand. A perfect decoy of surrender, a fabulously falsified victor’s prize. Joycie felt like a spider. Her dumpy body shook with glee.

But how had such a thing begun? It was troubling, to say the least. From her post in the guest bathroom, kneeling on the toilet lid and peeking at the porch through yellow curtains, Joycie pondered the situation for the hundredth time, one plump hand twisting the ends of her smooth bob. Once, Sherwood had not been a terror, but only a gangly, buck-toothed young man, the grown-up version of the buck-toothed boy who’d gone to Lawhon Elementary with her Trevor. She’d had him in Sunday school when he was three, a toddler who pushed Play-doh into his nostrils. She had also watched him walk the stage at Trevor’s high school graduation, smiling his awful smile at the crowd. Had he discovered the way she felt about his teeth? The toilet lid made Joycie’s shins ache. Outside, the trees swayed and shivered in the wind. Above them the sky was gray, the clouds downy fat pillows piled close. What if he’d noticed, even as a child, the way she tried too hard not to look at his mouth? When Sherwood was three she’d had nightmares about him; in the endless halls of a dream labyrinth he’d chased her, his teeth grown to the size of dominoes and snapping close to her ankles. What kind of a woman thought that way? She swayed backwards on her perch, almost going for the envelope. But no! The first aggression had been his—without her action, he might never stop. Joycie was a life-long Greene customer, on a loose schedule for sprayings every month, and the lunacy
of Sherwood had gone far too long unchecked, already. And he was coming, any minute now.

When the phone rang she almost fell off the toilet. It was Netta, digging up Elvis.

*   *   *

In the very early morning Rabbit slept heavy, and when he slept, he dreamed of water. Of water falling into water, cold rain splashing in Presley Lake. The rain thundered over the marina, pounding the roof where pigeons sheltered, their feathers fluffed chubby atop wooden rafters, and frightened heads pulled in. In Rabbit’s dreams rain poured on shoreline, dropping in chilly sheets on trees, driving winter brown leaves into the ground, so deep that pulling one up by its stem would leave a leaf print in the sandy mud, or tear central veins from the rotting edges. The rain beat the Earth-scent from the dirt, a smell of ground and grass and of something old, old; soil made of things long dead.

At five the steel door to the hallway swung open.

“Chow! Cho-ow! Chowtime! Up and at ‘em, gentlemen!” The guards’ voices rang loud against the concrete. Rabbit joined the others in a shuffling line, stepped forward with palms up to receive a lukewarm breakfast tray. The inmates ate at steel tables in the room’s center, sitting on steel benches, and staring at blank walls. T.V. wouldn’t be on till later, when, with a little neck craning, they could watch all the programs they wanted on channel 30, the only station that came in. The Earth-scent stayed in Rabbit’s nose until the shower scalded it away, water so hot that men stepped backward to lather soap in their hair, and gritted their teeth to rinse themselves. It had been a while since Rabbit felt the rain on his skin.

In a way, it was Rabbit’s birthday, too; he was seventeen weeks of age. Before that, he’d been Trevor Adcock, the hard-living son of Joycie and the late Preston Adcock. Rabbit’s birth had murdered Trevor, and Rabbit had eaten the remains. Trevor had had it coming, anyhow. He just didn’t know the rules. He’d strolled into the pod nervous as hell, not knowing whether to look at the faces that turned to watch from bunks close to the walls. He was a tough man in a bar fight, and he’d been in the drunk tank a time or two. But this was something else entirely. In his stomach the acid was already churning. He hadn’t noticed the two red lines on the floor.

“Git your ass on the right side, Adcock!” The pot-bellied guard behind him shouted, and the room erupted with whistles and cheers. The pod wasn’t over crowded at the moment; Trevor found an empty bottom bunk in the corner. He sat down on it and stared at the cement floor, at the lines of red paint snaking between the beds and tables, running over to the bathroom area, where naked metal toilets crouched behind a five foot cinderblock wall. The backs of the toilets were joined to two metal sinks, so that the entire thing made one enormous steel piece. Further down a ways there were two showers, also inside cinderblocks. At least there was a goddamn shower curtain.

On account of an earlier fistfight, the men of Trevor’s pod were on lockdown—nobody allowed up from his bed. This was good for Trevor, in a way. Nobody getting up meant nobody coming over to test him. In a way, it was bad for him, too. The acid in his stomach soon troubled his intestines, and his gut swelled with gassy pain. No doubt about it, he desperately had to shit. It would happen right fucking now. The pod was
almost completely silent, devoid of the eternal shouting and card-playing Rabbit would come to expect, evenings. How could he possibly bring himself to go take a dump in front of 15 other men, behind a wall so low they could still see his head? People talked with each other from their bunks all night, while Trevor lay awake, and suffering.

In the morning he thought he had a chance. The men lined up to get their breakfast trays, and sat down with them at the metal tables, a decent distance from the toilets. Maybe he could go while they were busy. Maybe if he didn’t, he’d go in his bunk. So Trevor made his fatal mistake.

“I know he ain’t doin’ what it looks like he’s doin’,” a man called Country said, loud enough for Trevor to hear.

“Motherfucker is shitting while we’re trying to eat,” said another. “He’s gonna get his ass kicked for that.” More voices chimed in, agreeing.

Fuck. How the hell was he supposed to know? It didn’t even smell, anyway. He’d flushed quickly to make sure. He walked the red line in a hurry, back to his bunk, his muscles tensed for the reckoning.

When it came, it wasn’t at all how he’d expected. The morning passed without incident, and Trevor waited for his turn with the shower. He stayed in a few moments after he was really done, letting the hot steam drape about his body, and savoring his time alone behind the curtain. How would he live through years of this? The water swished and swirled into the drain, an empty pipe hole straight to nothing. He wondered how people in jail killed themselves. He shut off the water, and reached for his towel and clothes. His hand touched only cool cement. They were gone.

Trevor never told anyone about that walk to his bunk; he wouldn’t have even if he’d survived. The shouting could be heard all over the jail. In other pods, on other floors, men stopped what they were doing and looked up, heads cocked to hear the racket.

“Look at that ass! I wanna fuck that!”

Shouts of laughter and applause.

“What’s that twig? Your fucking dick?”

“Hey boy, what the fuck’s on your ass?” They had seen his birthmark, a small maroon splotch of skin at the top of his tailbone. The shelter of his bunk stretched farther and farther away.

“What the fuck is that? A rabbit tail? Hey Rabbit, walk your fat ass over here.”

Rabbit reached the bunk to find his jumpsuit tossed across the mattress. Just as he pulled it on, he felt someone pinch his right butt cheek. He reacted without thinking, swung around and punched Shoebox as hard as he could in the jaw. The man staggered backwards and then sat down on the concrete, the whole place roaring louder still. When the guards rushed in, Rabbit was in bed. Shoebox knew better than to snitch. The punch raised the others’ opinions considerably. Hygiene spoke from the next bunk down.

“Hey man, don’t worry. It gets better in here.”

“Hell, it don’t make a fuck,” Rabbit replied.

It didn’t.

* * *

For her part, Netta hated rain. She, too, was spending some time in the dark. She lay flat on her back in her vast bed, staring up where her wallpaper ivy melted into the
gloom of the ceiling. Why had her life come to this? Outside, the dreary cold was too much to be borne; she’d closed her blinds against the day. On the carpet beside the dresser, a CD player emitted soft sounds of the ocean, to drown out the patter of rain if it came. Netta was sure the clouds would open. She had always been depressed, given, even as a girl, to waves of overwhelming despair. Mostly it was the past that hurt her, time slip-slippering through her busy fingers, a loss so constantly pervasive it was cooked into the spices of her dinners, and baked within the layers of her cakes. Every year, every occasion was filled with an aching grief for its predecessor, as well as grief over the waste of grieving. For Netta saw the problems with her paradigm clearly, an awareness which made her all the more miserable.

Netta twisted to her side, reached out and smoothed a hand across the cool surface of her husband’s pillow. Where was Talton, in this weather? Off in the wilderness, that was where. Sitting in a tree like a crazy person. What did it matter that he’d only killed three does this year? As if the man lived on venison!

“The season ends in days,” he’d said, when she’d asked him to go with her. He’d looked up from the chicken-fried steak she’d made him—from the sweet potatoes and lima beans and four-layer gelatin salad—in complete astonishment. If Netta had been a violent woman, she’d have hurled a big, quivering scoop of gelatin straight at his pop-eyed face. As it was, she only slammed up from the table and stomped wrathfully over to the warm oven, Talton’s eyes growing still rounder as he watched. She stomped back with an apple pie in her hands. She banged it down on the table before him.

“I made pie!” she hissed.

Talton chewed chicken-fried steak long and slow before he swallowed. The pie was a thing of beauty, its crust rolled paper-thin and delicately scalloped along the edges, the smell of apples and sugary cinnamon bubbling from the star of careful vents on its surface. Perfection. Hands balled in fists, Netta waited. Talton’s face broke into a sudden smile. He grabbed his dirty knife and cut out an extra hearty slice, nudging it right in on top of his sweet potatoes.

“Smells great, honey,” he’d said, and stuck another forkful of dinner in his mouth. This was beyond the pale. Netta burst into sobs and ran to the bedroom, where she stayed. Talton had slept on the couch.

There had been a time when Netta had meant more than a doe to Talton, a creature he only wanted to kill and then eviscerate out in front of the garage, drenching the yard with the foul stench of scent glands and steaming copper smell of blood. Once, Talton had hated to see her sad. He’d do Elvis for her, in times like these, bursting into their bedroom with a broom microphone, gyrating his hips as he sang “Hound Dog,” or crooning a tuneless “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” He knew how much she loved Elvis. Now, Talton threw gutted deer carcasses over the basketball goal to drain, coming out hours later to hose away the gore, a filthy red-brown stream running off down the driveway. It had been thirty years since he did any dancing.

But Clivey had always stayed on her side. People said Elvis had a strange thing with his mama, but Netta knew what it was to love a child with all the full strength of the soul. In her bedroom, she clawed the pillow to her chest and twisted over to stare at the blinds. Long after Talton had let the bedroom door stay closed, Clivey would tiptoe into the room, pausing every few steps to whisper, Mommy? She’d never turned over to greet him, had let him walk all the way to the bedside.
What’s wrong, Mommy? he would say, shaking at her shoulder with his child’s hand.

Nothing, baby, she’d whisper back, reaching to touch his cheek. Nothing your sweet face can’t fix. And every year they’d gone to Elvis’s birthday, every year since Clivey was a toddler. And now he wouldn’t come home from Oxford.

“I’ve got stuff to do here, Mom,” he’d said when she pointed out that Ole Miss was not in session, would not be in session, in fact, for a whole other week. It was a girl; Netta could smell it on him. There was girl all over that boy. Probably he’d marry her, too, and the girl would know that Netta resented her, just as Clivey knew she resented his age, and why would they want to bring their children here, to a dried up old woman who made them feel guilty for growing? Time for Netta suddenly telescoped, extending from the spaces in her window blinds into mile after mile of empty space, days as blank as the January sky, empty boxes rolling across the calendar, a film about nothing, her life. She was desperate. She reached for the phone.

* * *

That morning, Rabbit watched a man go crazy. The man’s name was Muddy Waters, a riff on the striking likeness he bore to the common North American catfish. His eyes sat far apart on his head, so that he seemed to see the world in two different slices. His lips were thin, and long, and pursed, and his chin sloped down into his neck. The name was apt in more ways, too, for catfish are also dangerous, with sharp fins that can cut a body, if the fish is driven to it, or takes it in his head to be aggressive. Left to grow as they will in the muck of lake bottoms, catfish can become monsters. That day, Muddy Waters beat Dominic almost to death.

Dominic was a skinny nineteen year-old with a big man’s attitude. At breakfast, he wanted to make a trade.

“I got hash browns for a juice,” he said.

Someone held out their small carton of orange juice.

“What the fuck, man?” Dominic said. He’d meant to say I have a juice for hash browns. “Why the fuck are you handin’ me that shit?”

“Cause that’s what you fucking asked for, shithead.” Others seconded this statement.

“Fuck you assholes,” Dominic said. “I know what I fucking asked for. Fucking cocksuckers! Don’t fucking talk to me!” He fell back to eating in a huff, muttering to himself between bites. Across from him, Muddy was thirsty. He pushed his hash browns toward Dominic.

“Hey man, lemme get that juice.”

“Fuck you, freak show. Ain’t nobody getting my goddamn juice!”

This was when Muddy Waters went crazy. It must have been a long time coming, with all the abuse he took. Dominic was only a catalyst, his words the final drops that made some straining dam collapse. Glancing up from his own hash browns, Rabbit saw it happen. Muddy’s eyes rolled back in his head for a moment, and his large body shuddered. When he spoke again he seemed almost sad.
“Why’s everybody gotta fuck with Muddy?” he asked. Dominic eyed him uneasily. Muddy Waters stood up from his seat, leaned far over Dominic’s tray. “Why’s everybody gotta fuck with Muddy?” He repeated.

Now, Dominic saw the awful looseness of the man’s face, slack in the jaw and about the eyes. Muddy had let himself go.

“Come on man I—”

“Why’s everybody gotta fuck with Muddy?” This time he screamed, and Dominic wilted in his chair. He slid his juice across the table, hoped that it was over now. It wasn’t. Muddy Waters had been part of work release, before he got fired for making guards nervous. Somehow, he’d managed to keep his heavy black work boots. Rabbit watched him go to his bunk and lace them, the whole pod eating on, not caring. Dominic was just standing up when Muddy’s boot hit his skull with a thump. He fell from the bench, then staggered upright. He tried to get away. Now things were interesting. Men stood on the benches to get a better view. Muddy caught Dominic by the toilets. An uppercut sent him reeling backwards; his head bounced off the concrete wall and he stumbled to his feet again. He didn’t seem to see the pod anymore. He went to the sink as if to wash, and the men at the tables burst out laughing. Muddy punched Dominic’s head again, and the younger man collapsed. Rabbit looked to the steel door for the guards. Surely they’d come in? But they didn’t. Muddy sat on top of Dominic, beating his face in and screaming.

“Why’s—every—body—gotta—fuck with—Muddy?”

Dominic’s body was limp, hands not trying to deflect the blows. Rabbit saw the blood on his crunched face. Finally the guards appeared, blasting pepper spray at Muddy, who began writhing on the floor, still crying his question. They had to carry Dominic out. Muddy, people said, would get half a year in the hole. Rabbit went back to his bunk.

* * *

Joycie heard the noise before the phone got close to her ear, a high, desperate cry, like a kitten shut in a closet. Joycie sighed, twisting one hand into her hip.

“Hey Netta! What’s wrong?” She detoured into the dining room on her way back to the toilet, a vantage point from which to better see the road. Empty.

“It’s Clivey,” Netta wailed. “He’s gone up to Oxford to stay!” She played with the folds of her white plush blanket, pleating and unpleating them with her long fingers. In the thin light her knuckles stood out sharply, skin stretched tight over knotted bone. Dusty old crypt-keeper hands. She flapped her free one in the air.

A low rumble reached Joycie’s ears. A truck! She lurched toward the window, saw a red pick-up glide by. Damn.

“But Clivey went to college last year, honey,” she said kindly. “Remember?” Netta flung the plush pleats away, irritated.

“Of course I remember!” She said. “What kind of an idiot forgets a thing like that? Don’t you even know what day it is?”

“Thursday…” Joycie said, her voice trailing away. Somewhere close a dog barked furiously. Where in God’s name was he? She had seen his vehicle, big as life, parked outside Deleena Frasier’s up the road. She’d been driving home from morning
grocery shopping. She’d burned rubber getting back, taking the sharp curve at a speed which sent groceries rolling all over her trunk, a rubble of soup cans and winter pale oranges. Now she had him—she knew! She just hadn’t known how long he’d be.

“Joycie, what are you doing?”

Netta sat up amidst her pillows.

“I’m waiting for Sherwood Shepherd, Jr. He’s coming. And I’ve set a trap for him.”

“How could you?” Netta flopped backwards once more. “How could you be thinking of that when it’s the eighth and you just heard about Clivey?”

Netta should have been there, the first time Sherwood showed up unannounced. Then she’d have understood. Joycie had answered the door that day with a pink towel turbaned on her head, and soapy water dripping in her eyes. He’d launched right into an explanatory spiel—I was just in the neighborhood and since it’s just about time—.

Joycie had tried to be nice about it. She took a deep breath, and let him in to spray; she tried to sit at the kitchen table with the crossword. But on the coffee table there were the T.V. dinner trays that she’d been eating for a week, licked clean and stacked into a pile (Slob). The cat’s litter box was full of poop (Selfish), and in her room her bed wasn’t made (Lazy). The crossword clues were incomprehensible, strange little marks across the page. Suddenly, Joycie went rigid with horror. In the bathroom, by the toilet (Oh God!), there was an open book face down on the floor. This could not be tolerated. She leaped up from the table, tore a Hefty bag from the roll in the pantry, and raced down the hall after Sherwood. For the rest of his visit, she followed him, swooping down upon misplaced items and stuffing them all into the garbage sack. By the time he left Joycie was sweating, her skin scorched by what he must think of her. Her turban had long since fallen, and her hair was dried at crazy angles, sticking out all over her scalp like brushweed.

“Would you mind calling a few minutes beforehand next time, Sherwood?” She asked him as she wrote out the check. “That’s what they always did before, and I sure did appreciate those few minutes notice!” Joycie felt like putting her head in the oven. She gave Sherwood her best smile.

“Yes ma’am, Miss Joycie, of course I will,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to bother you.”

“It’s his birthday,” Netta was saying now. “And Clivey won’t come home to go with me, and Talton lives out in the woods—” She shut her mouth tight, hating the whine she heard. Why couldn’t she say what it was she meant? In the silence the ocean sounded, recorded waves washing and washing away at the shore, salt sea rubbing the earth to bones.

Still the road outside Joycie’s house was empty. Joycie resigned herself.

“Don’t cry, honey,” she said. “Why don’t you and me head on down there together?”

Joycie left by the back door. She looked once, wistfully, at the envelope sitting on the doorknob, its white surface a bright question mark.

Netta felt the world’s color drain back. She dragged her thin body to the bathroom, and washed the hot tears from her face. Inside her closet things were even brighter. A rainbow hung there just for her—dresses and shirts of every hue. She’d forgotten how much she loved her clothes. She ran her hand across a length of them,
setting all the shapes to dancing. Under her breath she hummed “Don’t Be Cruel.” It was fortunate that she’d thought to call Joycie. Poor thing had had trouble enough lately, God knew. Didn’t even make it to church anymore. She needed to get out of the house. A slight frown creased Netta’s forehead again. Poor, poor Joycie—it was all too bad, really. Yes, Netta had helped her, calling her.

* * *

When Joycie arrived at Netta’s, she found that her friend had donned an emerald dress with matching heels, topped off by a cherry red jacket and a new sympathetic attitude.

“Well you can’t be surprised at anything from those people,” she said, to let Joycie know she understood. ‘Those people’ were the Shermans for, about twelve months ago, Colleen Sherman had humiliated her entire family by actually filming her daughter-in-law in labor and, what’s more, purposely playing the tape when it came her turn to host the Fifth Sunday Devotional at her house after church. Poor Mrs. Reverend Strickland had cried. Joycie had been amused, in a horrified kind of way. It was a mixed company, after all.

“How many times has he done it?” Netta asked. Joycie explained it all as if she hadn’t done so before. Well, almost all of it. She got through the first and second offenses okay, events so similar that Joycie had thought about déjà vu, living them. Even the third was mostly true—all the stuff about her pulling in her driveway to find Sherwood already spraying outside, his feet trampling all over her chrysanthemums, and how he’d turned and waved at her, smiling. What Joycie didn’t mention was this, only this: Ford Greene’s voice on her telephone, when she’d called him after Sherwood left.

“Greene Exterminators,” he’d said, and then “Oh, hi Joycie!” This with the gentle cheer reserved for cancer patients, or someone else for whom life has become tragedy. Just who did Ford think he was, anyway, that her existence was something to feel sorry about? His wife had left him for their dry cleaner! Joycie was mad about Sherwood, and Ford Greene made her furious. She felt the blood rush fast to her head. Her kitchen wobbled as if balanced on a pin.

“What can I do to help you today?”

“Well tell you what you can do,” Joycie said. “You can teach Sherwood Sherman some goddamn decency!” She didn’t know what else she’d shouted—didn’t like to think of it much, after. By the time she laid the trap, she’d pushed it from her memory almost completely. In the car her mind blinked, skipped like Netta’s Oceanic Calm CD.

“And then—then the fourth time—” And she was off and running again. “The fourth time, of course, he called me. And then he didn’t show up! All day! Just didn’t come by at all. Next day, same thing. And then he shows up the day after! No call!”

Netta shook her head, her expression grave. She’d stopped listening, a little. They had pulled on to Elvis Presley Drive, and already parked cars lined the roadsides.

* * *

Rabbit didn’t remember much about how Trevor got in trouble. The sun had come up, that terrible day, on an unplanned stretch of freedom. New weed was late
getting into town, which meant that for once, Trevor could turn off his cell phone. Not that he moved serious weight, anyhow, only a little to get by. Still, people wanting smoke could get pissy. Trevor woke early, feeling hopeful. He went downstairs and rinsed out his coffee pot. While the beans brewed, he went back up for a morphine patch.

Trevor’s morphine was not illegal; he’d gotten the prescription for slipped discs in his spine. Problem was, his doctor kept prescribing. And a morphine habit, he discovered, was a hard thing for a man’s willpower to kick. He’d put patches on earlier every day, for quite a number of days. Somehow, when he’d sold the final bit of shake from his latest pound of weed, he’d come up four hundred dollars short. Trevor poured a cup of coffee, careful with his favorite blue mug. He drifted out to sit on his front porch, where his recliner offered a pretty view. He left the cup to cool on the counter, and the coffee maker to burn itself out by the stove.

Had it not been an early fall Sunday, or had his house not sat atop a steep hill, all might have been well in Trevor’s world. Sunday, though, meant a NASCAR race, with drivers vying for a spot in the Chase to the Cup. And NASCAR for Trevor meant drinking. He remembered stumbling back inside when he noticed that it was afternoon. He remembered tasting his first whiskey sip, from the bottle he kept in his barren pantry. This explained why he remembered no more, after the stock cars roared to life. (“Gentlemen, start your engines!” he’d shouted, along with whoever kicked off the race.) It didn’t, however, explain anything else, like why Trevor woke up inside a cell, his nose crusty with blood and his eyes black. Or why the policemen hated him so, screaming curses when he asked, “What happened?” Or why Officer Jerome Powell, husband and father of three, had snapped his neck in Trevor’s front yard.

On channel 30 a lipsticked anchorwoman said this: Sad news from Tupelo tonight, where an officer has died in the line of duty. Police say Officer Jerome Powell died after a struggle with twenty-eight year-old Trevor Wilson Adcock at his East Tupelo home. Powell and his partner, Officer Bradley Helms, were attempting to arrest Adcock on a charge of disturbing the peace, when a fight broke out between the men. Adcock allegedly shoved Powell, who was knocked off the porch. Powell was taken to North Mississippi Medical Center, where he died of a neck injury. In the courtroom, the District Attorney said words like monstrous, and disregard for human life. Trevor sat dumbstruck in the defendant’s chair, unable to move or even to think. Over the railing, in the public benches, his mother sat folded against her knees, clutching her Bible to her chest. Her face was completely blank.

* * *

Elvis’s birthday remembrance had to move in shifts. In the parking lot of the park grounds, huge tour buses sat deserted, and the grounds swarmed with persons foreign to the soil. Only around ten attendees could fit inside the tiny house at once. The others amused themselves, milling about, chatting and walking to admire the Memorial Fountain, with its many shooting streams, and the new statue of The King as a boy, posed with his very first guitar, and the 1940’s car which wasn’t his, but which could have been. It being the right kind and all.

When they’d exhausted these possibilities, and the wandering park paths held no more attractions, Joycie and Netta joined the thick line of people, waiting before the
memorial chapel. Inside, the crowd was singing gospel, all the great old hymns loved by
their Hillbilly Cat. Every fifteen minutes or so, a park employee read aloud facts about
Elvis’s life, and the attendees said the Lord’s Prayer together, and another group of ten
was escorted to the birthplace door, while the same number filed into the chapel. The
room was packed to the gills with people, as the women had known it would be. Had it
been summer, Joycie reflected, they’d all have suffocated to death. Then they could meet
The King in person. There was standing room only by the wooden pews, tiny straight-
backed things with nary a cushion; the way Elvis’s own church pews would have been,
given the woefully broke congregation. Joycie’s brain called up a quotation from an
Elvis fan website, words which had set the town afire with self-righteous indignation.
Tupelo, the author claimed, was a “dirt-poor” town in “barren Northern Mississippi,” a
place where everybody went to church “to escape their unending misery.” To escape
unending misery! Wedging herself in the pew behind Netta, Joycie let out a giggle.
Netta glanced back and frowned at her.

The chapel was beautiful, if not comfy. A large, vibrant stained glass window, a
departure from the Presley’s stark Pentecostal tradition, took up the better part of one
wall, an intricate mural featuring the cross and depictions of important Elvis locales.
Singing, Netta felt herself uplifted, though many around her stumbled through the words.
The group sang “Abide with Me,” and “How Great Thou Art;” “Send the Light” and, of
course, “Amazing Grace.” The notes traveled from Netta’s throat in a clean arc, pulling
the faltering ones along. Surely Joycie shared in this buoyant peace.

Joycie wasn’t singing. She was done with church, she’d said last fall, and she’d
meant it. Silently, she picked fuzz from her sweater; she inspected the back of the lady in
front of her, the way you could see where her tight bra dug in. The stuffy room was like
her daddy’s church, where she’d listened to his sermons as a little girl. What do you
praise Him for this morning? He’d asked his flock almost every Sunday. I praise God
Sherwood Shepherd’s a moron. That’s what Joycie would say today. The thought made
her want to laugh again. If Sherwood hadn’t been so dumb, she never would have gotten
the call from Greene’s, saying he’d put that last check she wrote in the washer with his
pants, and could she please write him a new one? And she couldn’t have said Well yes, I
will, but I’d prefer to give it to him directly. She’d known, instinctively, what he would
try—a hunch which was confirmed for sure when she saw the truck in the Frasiers’ drive.
Damned fool was going to show up with no call. Well, she’d show him a thing or two.
The envelope she’d left was standard letter size, and gave off every appearance of
containing a payment. Inside was a slip of plain paper. Dear Sherwood, it said. Things
are just so hectic with me these days that I don’t have even a minute to spare! Please
call me when you’d like to pick up your check, and I’ll work in a time to wait for you—I
want to be sure you get it safely!

Beside her, Netta had gotten off key. Joycie wished she wouldn’t sing so loud.
But soon enough the service ended, and Joycie and Netta were moving again, headed out
of the chapel for the birthplace.

*    *    *

The first time one sees the Presley house, one exclaims over how very small it is.
It is a standard two-room shotgun home, so called because you could stand in the front
door and shoot a shotgun straight out the back, though why someone would do this, no one knows. From the front porch one steps directly into the kitchen, creaking on the old brown-patterned linoleum. For both Joycie and Netta the room was familiar, but strangers ooohed and aaahed over the low wooden ceiling, the brick fireplace and the heavy cast-iron stove. Netta watched them reach their fingers toward the tiny wooden table. They didn’t seem to care that the furniture wasn’t really his. That nothing in the place was real, save the foundation and walls and ceiling, the skeleton structure Vernon Presley had pulled from the earth with his hands. Within the depths of Netta’s belly, her bad feeling sprouted anew. She pushed from the kitchen to the bedroom door, Joycie trailing at her heels.

In the bedroom, things were worse. Netta stared at the velvet rope, guarding the pretending metal-framed bed. In the corner was an antique rocker, the upholstered kind that moves on a glide. The walls were papered with old-fashioned flowers. Would Elvis have recognized his house? What about Vernon, who made it? And what about wild Gladys Love, who had borne twin babies there, only one of them alive? It struck Netta that the house was empty. She had not thought so before. What had it meant, coming here? What did it mean about her bringing Clivey? Gladys, before she passed, was afraid of what had happened to her son, of the people cheering him to death. Now the people plodded through the corpse of the home they’d shared, holding hands and speaking softly, or crying, as if they knew anything. Netta felt herself shrinking away. Where, God, was her solace now? Where on earth might a weary soul rest? She cast her woe heavenward in a prayer. And that’s when she had The Miracle.

Joycie was staring out the back window, wondering where the outhouse had gone. She started at her friend’s first scream, turned to see Netta hurl herself to the floorboards, toppling the velvet rope. She dug her fingers down into a crack, came up with something invisible. Netta! Joycie wanted to shout, but she could not speak the name. Netta rocked backwards on her knees, held a closed fist high above her head.

“It’s his! It’s his!” Netta shouted. “Oh God, oh God, I just know it! It’s Elvis’s toenail and I’ve found it!” The floor had left dust on her emerald dress. Her face was twisted to something Joycie didn’t know. The tourists gathered around her, excited. Staff workers sprang from unseen corners. Above the buzzing commotion, Netta’s voice still shrieked. “It was left here! For me, for me!” Joycie had to get away. She walked past her friend and the jabbering people, past the outside strollers and the empty tour buses. She was going to find out about Sherwood.

She knew he’d been there before she pulled in. The envelope was stuck to the door proper. It came off with a stretch of gum. Joycie gasped. She hadn’t planned for this. Her hands shook as she plucked out the note. Dear Miss Joycie, it said. Thanks for the phone call to my boss! You can shove your money up your ass. I’m quitting. Because of cunts like you.

The words knocked the air from Joycie’s chest. She tried to muster up her anger, but the last church Sunday surged into her mind, rising up from the tomb of her forgetting to grip her hard by the throat. The preacher saying feed my sheep, and her driving early supper to her baby boy, who she knew was in some kind of trouble. He’d not been living
right for some time, but Joycie was certain this was different. She’d gone for Connie’s Fried Chicken, his favorite. The bucket was warm in her passenger seat. He hadn’t recognized her, her boy; he’d stumbled and fallen into things, grabbed the bucket, and hurled it down. He reeked of whiskey, it was true, but Joycie didn’t understand until she saw the patch on his shoulder. He’d told her he was out of them.

“Trevor!”

Joycie Adcock was scared. She knew what happened, mixing drugs and drink. She’d grabbed for the whiskey bottle, but he’d swatted her away.

“Don’t you touch that! You bitch! You cunt!”

In the car again, Joycie had cried. She pulled over just down the road from his house. What could she do to help her boy? Phone in hand, she hesitated. He’d left a red print on her forearm. What if she didn’t, and he died?

Now, on her porch, she dropped the letter, walked to the yard with her hands hanging down. She hadn’t meant to! She hadn’t! She tilted her head back to face the clouds, and her mouth opened in a wail, an empty syllable floating to the sky.