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The University of Southern Mississippi

COLLECTED SHORT STORIES

by

Arthur Ross Walton

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
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ABSTRACT

COLLECTED SHORT STORIES

by Arthur Ross Walton

May 2014

In this collection of short fiction, I draw upon the experience of growing up in a small southern town and my work as a researcher with the Center for Oral History to reach beyond the stereotypes and create a more accurate portrayal of life in Mississippi.

There are two central themes touched on in these stories. The first I call “Occupational Obsolescence” and delves into the tensions created when a person’s (or community’s) livelihood is taken away for reasons beyond their control. The second, “The Outsider Within,” considers the question of how a person can be a resident of a small town for many years and still be considered an outsider.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2003 BBC documentary *Searching for the Wrong-eyed Jesus*, Harry Crews discusses the importance of storytelling to the Southern experience. As the rotund Georgia writer gingerly shuffles past a '68 Chevy parked on the side of a dirt road, he recounts how he and his siblings, as children, would make up stories about the models pictured in the Sears & Roebuck catalog.

We just started to tell stories about the people, give them names, said where they was from. We'd turn over there and see this young girl standing pretty in a spring frock and say, "See this girl here? She's the daughter of this guy standing over here in front of these shotguns—see, that's her daddy. You know how come he's looking kind of stern like that? It's because this fellow over here in the green suit with the sharp creases in the pants, he's seeing this girl and he's doing her wrong."

He goes on to say that "Before it was over, we had everybody related, fighting and feuding."

Crews' narrative reminds me of my own early childhood. I remember sitting for hours on my grandmother's porch listening to family and friends recall events from long ago. These were not the made up stories of children, but the oral histories of the storytellers. Through these stories, I learned of people I would never meet and events I would never experience. It gave me a sense of belonging to something greater than the scope of my years. It instilled in me a sense of place and pride.

As I grew, I began to understand the importance placed on these oral histories and the connections of the people involved—both to each other and to the community. I

learned that some people in our very small town lived there for decades without ever really belonging. While we seemed to accept diversity, there were certain flags that had to be planted—certain groups to join, expected pastimes to indulge in, codes of conduct to be adhered to—in order to have standing and respect.

I don't know why this 'us and them' mentality is so important to the Southern psyche, but it has been my experience that when two Southerners meet for the first time, they might spend as long as half an hour trying to ferret out some hidden and distant connection with each other. Only after some small relationship is found—be it familial, educational, organizational, or religious—can the conversation move forward with any degree of satisfaction. These are the experiences that inspire my work.

When I decided to study writing, it was not with the idea of being a "Southern" writer, although there seemed no practical path of avoidance. Having lived my entire life here, the idea of trying to write about some other point on the globe seemed absurd. That said, I am certain that no other part of the country comes with more baggage than the South in general and Mississippi in particular.

Growing up in a small town in Mississippi in the sixties and seventies gave me a front row seat to the social upheaval and emotional turmoil of the times, but little understanding of the experience. Being a white Mississippian meant that the national popular culture that you respected didn't respect you. In fact, the rest of the country could be counted on to regard you with disdain and contempt, if not open hostility. It didn't matter if you didn't feel the way others around you felt—you bore the sins of willful ignorance and intolerance all the same. And perhaps that was the source of the "us and them" mentality. We weren't all the same, but we shared the same inescapable reputation.

I realized that if I wanted to be a good writer, I must develop a better understanding of what constitutes a good story and of what it truly means to be Southern.

It was this realization that led me to the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi in 2008. For someone interested in becoming a writer, the idea of having access to the collected stories of over 4,000 Mississippians from all walks of life was intriguing. I started as a volunteer and was soon hired as a student worker producing audio clips for a weekly public radio program called *Mississippi Moments*. Editing stories that might have taken the interviewee five minutes to tell into 50 second clips that were cohesive, natural sounding, and true to the original intent proved an invaluable exercise for it forced me to focus on those universal building blocks that constitute any story: character, setting, backstory, conflict, stakes, and resolution. It also helped me to look at Southerners as individuals and not stereotypes.

Searching for the Wrong-eyed Jesus does not challenge the stereotypical imagery associated with the South, it revels in it. The decrepit Impala Crews encounters on the side of that Georgia back road is there because the seedy-looking driver has stopped long enough to add a quart of oil to the engine. Nearby an ancient school bus rusts away, smothered by kudzu. A guy inexplicably wanders through the woods playing a banjo. It all seeks to reassure the viewer that “this is what you expect to see in the American South and so you shall.”

The imagery and stereotypical characters long associated with the South are observations made from a distance by outsiders and embraced by many Southerners who assume them to be true. And while a kernel of truth can be found in most stereotypes, I believe the ones associated with the South are an incomplete reflection of our culture at best, and at worst, a grievous distortion of reality

In the 1946 one act play *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*, Tennessee Williams' protagonist Jake burns down the cotton gin of his rival, Silva Vicarro, who works for an entity known as The Syndicate. Williams reimagined the story a few years later when he wrote the screenplay for Elia Kazan's *Baby Doll*.

Vicarro, nattily dressed in black like a mafia boss, was just one of several stereotypes the film offered its audience, but it is one of the few examples that I have found in literature of an immigrant in Mississippi. In reality, the ethnic composition of the population has always been much more complex than black and white. Whether it was Italians in the Delta, Croatians, Latvians, and Vietnamese on the Gulf Coast or Greeks in Hattiesburg, we didn't all look alike, sound alike, or share a common history.

This is not intended as a knock on Williams, but for me, the oral history of John Bassie of Cleveland, Mississippi, whose Italian family settled in the Delta, paints a far more interesting backdrop for a story when he describes how they would celebrate the Fourth of July:

After lunch, the more talented ones would break out the accordions and violins and the singing and storytelling would start. Have you ever heard *Adeste Fideles* and *Ave Maria* on the Fourth of July or sang *Lazy Mary*? The place where they gathered was in a pecan orchard on Delta Pines surrounded by 30 to 40 tenant farmers, mostly black. They would hear the music, smell the food, and start easing our way. The children would come first and then the adults. They would eat and join the singing. Some went home and got their guitars and harmonicas. Can you imagine accordions, violins, guitars, and harmonicas? Our songs [combined] with their Gospel and Blues. By midafternoon the road would be

lined with what we called wealthy plantation owners who never came for food or fun, just stayed on the road and listened.

These are the kinds of details that you generally don't get from most stories about the South, but I find to be a fascinating alternative because they are accurate, yet unexpected. Fiction that is more connected to the actual histories and perceptions of individuals can take old topics and events in fresh directions.

For example, the story *A Good Clean Burning*, which is written from the perspective of a highway patrolman assigned to escort Mississippi's infamous traveling electric chair from town to town, was based on the oral histories of Forrest County Sheriff Bud Grey and others. Grey's account of botched executions like the time they ran out of gas for the generator during the offing of one poor soul, was chilling to say the least. But it was the circus-like atmosphere surrounding these executions that really caught my attention. My own uncle used to tell the story of how he snuck in to witness one when the chair came to Mendenhall.

The title comes from a quote of the flamboyant executioner (from my hometown) who took pride in his efforts to give them a "good clean burning." I find the way he relished the spotlight to be as disturbing as the executions themselves. While my version of his spiel about the execution process is fabricated, it was true that he would always make an elaborate display of the equipment for his "talks" to groups of school children and others when he came to town and would end the presentation by asking for volunteers from the audience for a quick demonstration.

One thing that I decided early on was that I wanted my characters to go against the expected norms in some way—some surprising bit of business that would add richness to the reading experience. For example, the character Ray featured in three of

these stories is an English major who becomes a truck driver due to unforeseen circumstances. The idea of Ray lying in the sleeper of his truck reading David Foster Wallace appeals to me because it is not something one would expect to find in the parking lot of a truck stop.

Two recurring themes have emerged in my work during my time with the Center for Oral History. The first of these is the concept of occupation obsolescence—when the only way you know of providing for your family is no longer an option.

After the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, the Center received a substantial grant from the NOAA to conduct a two year project recording the oral histories of commercial fishermen and others directly affected by the oil spill. I was fascinated by the stories of these men who learned their trade from their fathers and grandfathers. The collection was such a trove of technical details and issues relating to the industry that I decided to use it to inform my story *Along the Back Bay*.

Chronologically the first of the Ray stories, *Back Bay* concerns Ray's teenage years when he is forced to move to Biloxi to live with his grandfather—a commercial fisherman—and takes place before certain traditional fishing practices were banned by the State of Mississippi. Ray and the reader are shown a way of life that many fishermen believe is dying. New laws enacted to protect coastal fisheries, combined with natural and man-made disasters, make a difficult and stressful occupation even more so.

For people defined by their occupation, having it taken from them through resource depletion, technological obsolescence or some other factor beyond their control can be devastating to individuals and communities alike. After the oil spill of 2010, when the government temporarily stopped Coastal fishing altogether, the Gulf Coast Vietnamese fishing community felt compelled to set up a suicide counseling center.

It is a theme that has resonance for me. In the story *Lenny*, the protagonist is a third generation railroad machinist during the transition from steam power to diesel electric. The resource material was the McComb Railroad Museum oral history project. Several people discussed how the rapid switch in the early 1950s to such a different means of locomotion left some of the most experienced employees of the state's largest maintenance facility as obsolete as the equipment they had spent a lifetime mastering. The people of McComb took great pride in the generational quality of the workforce. Working for the railroad was a good paying, stable career—one where sons wanted to follow in their fathers' footsteps. As changes in technology and the growth of interstate trucking led to downsizing, people saw a way of life they thought they could depend on slowly taken away.

Another story that is deeply rooted in South Mississippi work history is *Land of Affliction*. This is the first two chapters of a work-in-progress and shows where my work is currently taking me. No other industry had the impact on the southern half of the state as did logging. As North Mississippi was built on cotton, South Mississippi was built on pine lumber. It is accurate to say that most towns in this area were originally built as life support systems for sawmills.

In 1930 as the timber holdings played out and the Great Depression began, all but a couple of the lumber companies closed up and moved their equipment to the Northwest leaving many unable to find work. It would be twenty years before reforestation and the development of modern tree farming brought the industry back from the brink in Mississippi.

Another theme that I have enjoyed considering is one that I like to call "The Outsider Within." As mentioned earlier, it has been my experience that any given

Southern town at any one time has people who have lived there for years, yet never seem to fit in, somehow. They are viewed by others as outsiders. One that comes to mind is my dear, departed friend, Fannie Kyker.

Fannie was a lifelong resident of Hattiesburg. As a teenager, she was beautiful, educated and popular. By the time she died, she bore a decades-long reputation as the woman who kept her late husband's body in the back of her station wagon (even though she had never married). Known by the malicious nickname, Cat Woman, Fannie was an animal lover who often came to work with pet hair on her clothes. It was true that she was an eccentric and probably a hoarder, but she also sang in the church choir and took plate lunches from Christian Services to several shut-ins daily.

What interests me is the transition from accepted member of the community to outsider. I attempted to explore this idea of the "Outsider Within" in the story *Samson's Shadow*. Chronologically, this is the second of the Ray stories and takes place approximately twelve years after he departs his hometown of Tatum to live in Biloxi. When he leaves the military after ten years and comes home to go to college, he moves next door to Della O'Neal who came to town during WWII after marrying the son of one of Tatum's wealthiest businessmen. After her young husband is killed in a chemical fire, Della slowly makes the transition from socialite to recluse as rumors and nicknames are attached to her by the community that have no foundation in reality.

Twelve years gone from the town, Ray is also an outsider. At 28, he has a hard time relating to the undergrads that he meets in class, and the friends he knew from years ago have either moved on or are in the middle of raising families. In Della, Ray sees a kindred spirit and ultimately a mentor who inspires him to major in English. As someone

who tends to be withdrawn and doesn't make friends easily, Ray wants to help Della and defend her from the unfair attacks.

All of the stories in this volume take place in or are connected to the fictional town of Tatum, of the equally fictional Crosby County. As I began to draw upon the oral histories of real people for inspiration, I decided to follow the examples of Faulkner and Grisham and create a fictional setting so there would be no confusion between reality and imagination.

I chose names closely associated with the timber industry in South Mississippi. In *Land of Affliction*, the town is called Cloma because there were not one, but two women named Cloma in my hometown. In a story not included here entitled *The Politics of Marching*, which also takes place in Cloma, I give a rather lengthy story about how Tatum and Cloma were named after Joseph Manning's daughters in the same way that Captain William H. Hardy, who founded Hattiesburg and Laurel, named the two towns after his second wife and daughter. It seemed plausible enough, so I decided to keep it for *Affliction*.

Two last bits of business I would like to mention are the subjects of dialect and point of view. I have struggled to find the right balance in writing realistic dialogue that hints at a Southern dialect without resorting to phonetics. In her 1957 essay, "The Fiction Writer & His Country," Flannery O'Connor says of Southern writers: "In almost every hamlet you'll find at least one lady writing epics in Negro dialect."

I was reminded of that line recently when I read *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett which is written as a first person narrative of an African-American maid in the 1960s. It took several pages before I realized that Southerners are not really conscious of the dialects of those around them most of the time—only the words being spoken. So I have

not changed my mind about the decision to avoid trying to render a dialect and let readers add their own if they choose.

One thing I have changed of late is the decision to go from a first person to third person point of view. First person present usually seems to me a false present, and first person past sounds too far removed from the point of telling. So for now, I have decided to use third person past tense.

And now I give to you my collection. I see these, my flawed offspring, as postcards from the road—neglected mementos from a pleasant journey that I hope to continue long into the future. Thank you for reading.

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ALONG THE BACK BAY

My mother, Betty Robicheaux, came of age in the sixties and fully embraced the counter culture experience. She left Biloxi, Mississippi, when she turned 18 and headed to California. After eight months, she called her mama and asked for money to come home, she had seen enough.

She was not my actual mother. She had married my father, who was 15 years older than her when I was five, and set about the business of raising a family. But she never lost her hippie sensibility. She learned to macramé and decoupage. She grew herbs and flowers and she loved to read, a passion she insisted on passing on to me.

My father and I were both completely in love with her. I had never known my real mother; she dropped me off at my dad's house one day when I was six months old and never returned. When Betty came home with Dad that first time, I thought she was a princess. She had long flowing black hair, olive skin and clear blue eyes. She wore brightly-colored skirts and bangles. She rarely wore shoes and she always seemed to be dancing, even when she wasn't. The first time she took me in her arms and whispered, "I love you," she became Mom.

When I was fifteen, Mom was diagnosed with a brain tumor. It was eight months from the day they operated until she died. Every night, we would go and sit with her in the hospital. I used to feel like a caged animal sitting in her room, waiting for Death to come and release us all.

That spring, after she died, Dad and I hit the road. We drove up to Chicago and from there headed west via Route 66. He said that the only way to see America was two lanes at a time. "Interstates rob us of who we are," he would say. We stopped at every little roadside attraction. Anything with a sign and a souvenir stand was fair game.

At night we would check into the nearest motel. I kept my mind distracted by reading Louis L'Amour books and trying to learn to play chords on a guitar we picked up at a second hand store.

Our summer of freedom ended after my dad got his ass kicked outside the Holiday Inn lounge in Tulsa. He came stumbling back to the room with his face all bruised and cut up. It scared the piss out of me. You always think that your dad is invincible and once I realized that he wasn't, the road became a much scarier place. He went in the bathroom and ran the shower for a long time. I think he was crying. The next morning, we headed back to Tatum.

When we returned, Mom's family offered to take me for the rest of the summer so he could have some time to grieve. It came as a surprise to me that they would make such a gesture since we had stopped going down there to visit some five years prior.

When I told Dad I just wanted to sleep in my own bed after six weeks on the road, he said, "Working on your granddad's fishing boat for a month or so will make a man of you."

A couple of days later, Uncle Jimmie arrived to take me back to the homestead in Biloxi. I brought a suitcase, two paper grocery sacks of clothes, and the guitar. As we loaded my things into the back seat of his faded red '68 Mustang, he shouted, "Guitar Man" and would call me by no other name for years to come. As we drove away, Dad smiled and waved, then turned and walked back inside.

Jimmie's car smelled like the ashtray it was. Butts overflowed from every receptacle into piles on the floorboard. His skin was darkly tanned and leathery and his face was pocked with acne scars from his long-past youth. He wore a sleeveless tee shirt with cutoff denim shorts. Jimmie spoke with a thick Back Bay accent that sounded Cajun

to the untrained ear, substituting “dem” for “them” and adding “yeah” to the end of every question. It was an accent that my mother worked hard to lose.

As the AC no longer worked, we rode with the windows down. His long stringy brown hair looked like it was riding out a storm. I stared out of the window at the limited scenery, turning back only to answer the occasional question. It was hard to talk over the sound of rushing wind and Deep Purple on the eight track.

“You got a girlfriend, yeah?”

“No, not really.”

“That’s good. Them women is trouble.” He laughed and shook his head like this was some profound wisdom.

“Yeah, I guess.”

When I was very young, I remember that Mom would take me to Biloxi to see her parents once or twice a year, usually at Christmas time. Their last name was Robicheaux, but everyone on the Back Bay called them Mr. Mike and Miss Ida. They liked for me to call them Pops and Maw. I was their only grandchild because Uncle Jimmie never married. I was scared of Pops back then; he was barrel-chested, wore overalls, had a stubble beard, and tobacco stained teeth. He got drunk one Christmas and passed out under the tree on top of the presents. Maw was a small woman with a friendly smile, but there was a hardness there that made you know instinctively not to cross her. She was a devout Catholic and rarely missed mass. They were cordial to me when we’d come, but we didn’t seem to connect somehow and after the visits stopped I never thought to wonder why.

The wood frame house had been in their family for four generations and had survived God knows how many hurricanes over the hundred-plus years of its existence.

White with blue shutters and a screened in front porch, it sat at the end of a long private road paved in oyster shells. When it was built, the Back Bay was quiet and unspoiled and even in the late seventies was largely undeveloped compared to today. The silhouettes of the pines against the red and purple sky reflected in the lapping water of the bay as we arrived that evening and brought an unexpected rush of memories. I remembered playing along the water's edge with a milk carton and Mom laughing at me when I would try to imitate the cry the loons made.

We sat around the kitchen table after dinner as was their custom. I stared at my plate and looked up occasionally to steal a glance at Doreen, the only new addition to this scene. Doreen had been living in foster care for seventeen years and with the Robicheauxs since she was fourteen. She had short dirty-blond hair, green eyes, and a nice figure. And while not beautiful, she exuded a confident sensuality that was equal parts bravado and innocence. It was soon obvious to me that she had Uncle Jimmie, some 25 years her senior, wrapped around her finger. He doted on her and it was likely her sole source of validation. Every time I tried to nonchalantly cast my eyes in her direction, she was looking straight at me. It didn't take Jimmie long to notice.

"Guitar Man!" He lit another Pall Mall and grinned as he reached over and grabbed my hand, holding it palm up. "So you got some soft hands there, yeah? You gone have some kind of fun out on the boat with me and Daddy!" He looked over at Doreen and she was nonplussed.

"Leave him be, Jimmie," Maw said.

"You're going to like fishing, boy," Pops said and gave me his best attempt at a kind smile. "Nothing like it, you'll see."

"I'm looking forward to it," I said, lying, and looked at Jimmie.

Later that evening after the dishes were cleared and he had gone home, I was sitting on the bed in the room that was to be mine for the next couple of months, playing around on the guitar when Doreen walked in and closed the door. As she sat down on the bed facing me, the old box springs complained loudly.

“You know any Stones songs?”

“Nah, just the basic chords, so far,” I said.

“I really like Mick Jagger.”

“I see that” I said looking at the over-sized concert tee she had put on. Soon she was telling me her life’s story. Foster homes, some bad, some good, liked it best here. She seemed nice; just someone who had had a lot of bad breaks.

Soon, Maw pushed the door open and stuck her head inside. “You two don’t stay up too late, now. We start early around here.” She said good night and left leaving the door open.

The next morning we were up and out by 4 am. I tried to sleep on the way to the boat, but couldn’t with Jimmie’s constant chatter about whatever inane shit he could think to ask me.

“You don’t know a sheepshead from a pogy, yeah?” I just looked at him. “Them’s fish, boy,” he said and slapped me on the knee. “Don’t you worry, we gone send you back to Tatum knowing all about it!”

I hadn’t seen Pop’s latest boat before that morning. It was a 38 foot wooden trawler named the Ida Claire. He had had it custom built by a man in Bayou La Batre. The white hull tinted orange in the light of dawn and it struck me as quite lovely. The knot in my gut began to relax and suddenly it seemed not such a bad way to spend the summer.

We boarded and cast off heading over to the next dock down to load up on several hundred gallons of fuel, several thousand pounds of ice, food, beer and 800 pounds of bait fish. Then it was off to open waters for the next three days. The twin diesel engines were powerful and it took me awhile to get my sea legs.

Jimmie took the wheel and changed course after talking with Pops. Pops had been on the radio with the processor and the order of the day was roe mullet. Jimmie knew just where to go. Say what you will, the man knew how to fish the Gulf. Pops sat me down and started explaining how a purse seine net worked, the placement of the yokers, how to haul in a full net, and what to do with the by-catch.

After about an hour, we heard Jimmie shout “Daddy!” We looked up as he pointed off to starboard. Pops nodded and stood up, scanning the horizon. He gestured to a point about a mile away.

“You see them birds circling?” I squinted and said I did. “Now look at how the water’s churning up under those birds. You see it?” I couldn’t, but nodded anyway.

“Them’s mullet, sure as you’re born.” Jimmie altered course again and throttled up. I grabbed the rail to keep my balance and shielded my eyes with my left hand for a better look. Pops opened a side box and pulled out a pair of gloves. “Here,” he said tossing them to me. “You’re going to need them.”

As we got closer to the school, I looked back at our wake just as a dolphin jumped across it. I looked back waiting for it to happen again, not really believing what I had seen, until I heard Pops shout, “Get ready, we’re about to start our run.”

I was excited. I didn’t know what the hell a roe mullet looked like, but I was damn ready to catch every one of them. Pops showed me the rhythm of feeding out the net as a team as Jimmie eased back on the throttle. Grab, lift, drop. Grab, lift, drop.

Making sure the net didn't tangle on its way into the water. We were making a gradual circle port to starboard. We completed the loop just as the last of the net went over the side.

Jimmie cut the throttle to idle, lit a cigarette, and looked back. "You gone see something now, Guitar Man," he said with a toothy grin. Pops nudged me in the ribs and I felt like part of a crew, like I belonged.

The hold and ice locker were opened, and I was handed a shovel. Pops and Jimmie began hauling in the draw rope, closing the bottom of the purse seine and pulling it close to the Ida Claire. Then they tied it up alongside, opened the net, and started scooping the fish out and tossing them into the hold as I kept shoveling ice after them. Shoveling ice until I thought my arms would fall off, it seemed we would never finish. I didn't know there were that many fish in the world.

"Who eats these things?" I said.

"Cats, mostly," Pops said.

There were several different processors, then. Each had their own products and customers. The cat food factories were the most dependable and the easiest to work with, but we fished for all of them. We caught redfish, drum, sheepshead, mullet, pogy (which I later learned was actually called "porgy"), and occasionally butterfish. I learned how to tell them apart and the techniques for catching them. For the ones that schooled, we would use the purse seine, but for others, we used gill nets, trammel nets, and cast nets. On the days there were no orders, we would put out crab pots, 150 at a time. The Gulf was full of blue crabs riding the tides from Louisiana to Alabama and Florida. I learned that the females were called sponge crabs because of the brown sponge-like crusts on their backs that held the eggs.

I ate like a king. Maw could cook anything we caught and believe it or not, my favorite was blackened mullet. Pops always set aside more than enough to feed our family and the neighbors, too.

One night when Uncle Jimmie was having dinner with us as he often did, he looked across the table and began nodding his head dramatically.

“I believe you getting bigger, Guitar Man. Fishing seems to agree with you, yeah.”

“I think he’s getting taller, too,” Pops said.

“More muscle and taller, too,” Jimmie said. “Going to make a man of you yet!”

“And so tan!” Doreen added.

Jimmie stopped nodding and looked at Doreen.

“What? I just said he’s getting tan,” she said and went back to eating.

Later that evening, as I stood in my room with my shirt off thinking about what was said, I was startled when Doreen’s hands slipped around my waist and up my chest before her chin came to rest on my shoulder.

“What you doing?” she said and began kissing my neck.

“Nothing,” I said, my heart pounding in my temple.

Doreen came around under my arm and then we were chest to chest. She was wearing a long t-shirt like she was dressed for bed. We kissed for a minute and then she took a step back. Her left hand cupped my cheek as she pressed her right index finger to her lips and then she was gone.



The nights we stayed out on the boat were the best. I’d lie back on the nets and look up at the sky. Everything looks bigger on the water. The clouds look taller, the

stars closer. Away from the lights of land, the constellations would take your breath away. Jimmie and Pops would drink beer and let me have a couple, too. Pops would tell stories about the war and learning to fish from his dad. His dad taught him how to make nets and crab pots by hand. He was a great story teller. He'd light up a Roi-Tan cigar and clear his throat and you knew he was about to start a new story. Him talking about his dad would make me think about my own. I would look at the stars and wonder what he was doing and if he would recognize me when I got back in the fall. When I would call him on the weekends, he sounded distracted and evasive about when I could come home.

One Friday night in August, Jimmie and Doreen had gone to see a movie at the drive-in, *Caddy Shack*, I think. I was watching TV with Pops and Maw when the phone rang. Maw usually heard from her sister Mavis on Friday nights—she walked into the kitchen to take the call so she wouldn't disturb us. After a few minutes, she walked back in the living room and looked at me with an expression I had never seen her make before, something akin to terror. Dad was dead.

Some of the details I didn't find out about until years later. One of his friends had gone to check on him because they were worried about the way he had been behaving since I left. They found him sitting in his recliner with his pistol on the floor.



After the funeral, we went to the house to gather up as much of my stuff as we could fit in the back of Pops' truck and then we were gone. I wouldn't see Tatum again until after I got out of the army. My parents died within four months of each other. I was so angry at Dad. He'd promised Mom that he would take care of me, but he couldn't even take care of himself.

Pops and Jimmie went out on the boat without me that week, so I sat in my room with the guitar in my lap, staring at the model truck I had received for my birthday. I thought about how great it would be to be a long haul truck driver. Having no one or nothing to tie you down in one place suddenly sounded pretty good to me. I thought about our road trip. I wondered if he had planned this whole thing out. Is that why we went cross-country on an apparent whim? Did he know he was going to kill himself?

Doreen slipped into my bed on the second night that week. I awoke just as it began get light outside to find her sleeping beside me propped up against the headboard with her arm around my shoulders as if she were trying to mother me. I lay there and looked at her for a minute and had just closed my eyes when I heard the door open. Maw and I looked at each other for what seemed like a long time before she quietly closed the door again.

The next week I went out on the boat again. Pops said it wasn't good to sit around and wallow in self-pity. He was right and it felt good to be out there again in the fresh air under a big sky. Doreen continued to slip into bed with me, but she always made sure to avoid getting caught again. Finally, we had sex. She climbed on top and rode me. I was terrified of getting caught because the bed springs were so noisy.

The next day, we left on a three day run looking for red fish and drum. I soon began to wonder if Pops and Maw had heard Doreen and me. How could they not? Jimmie didn't say two words to me the whole trip and wouldn't look me in the eye. If Pops was upset, he didn't show it. I felt bad, like I had betrayed Jimmie, but I didn't know what to say.

When we returned, Maw announced that Saturday was Doreen's eighteenth birthday and there would be a cookout. Jimmie decided to visit a bootlegger over in Kiln

to pick up some “appropriate party supplies.” For his part, Pops went boar hunting with a buddy and bagged a nice one. I had never been hunting before, so I declined the invitation to go. They skinned it in the backyard and iced it down to draw out the blood before packing it in salt. Pops and Jimmie stayed up Friday night roasting it on a spit and sipping Jimmie’s moonshine. I sat in my room for several hours trying to learn *Wild Horses*.

Saturday was a perfect August day. Maw took Doreen into town to get her hair and nails done and to go shopping. When they returned with arm loads of shopping bags at noon, they made beans, potato salad, and punch while we men set up a couple of folding tables and chairs. Then we pulled the pig from the fire pit as Doreen set up her record player on the porch and the party began.

Everyone ate their fill and Jimmie kept Doreen’s cup filled with spiked punch which she shared with me. He mixed them stronger as the afternoon wore on so that by early evening everyone was fairly drunk. Doreen was slurring her words and staggering as Jimmie insisted on dancing song after song with her.

When she finally refused to be pulled from her seat any longer, I played a very shaky version of *Wild Horses* and sang it as best I could. When I finished, Maw and Pops clapped as Doreen leaned over and began kissing me passionately. Jimmie responded by punching me hard on the side of the head, cutting Doreen’s lip and knocking me over backwards in my chair, the guitar hitting the grass with a musical thud. Doreen ran inside crying and Pops made Jimmie go home. The party was over.

The next day, after church, Pops made Uncle Jimmie and I scrub the boat for a couple of hours until Jimmie offered me a half-assed apology and I pretended to forgive him. When we got back, Doreen was gone. Maw didn’t offer much in the way of details.

She tried to hide it, but I know she shed a lot of tears over the next couple of weeks.

Doreen left a note under my pillow saying that she was going to New Orleans and that she would keep in touch. We didn't hear from her, however, for over a year. It took me a long time to forgive Jimmie for Doreen's departure, but I eventually realized that she had planned to leave anyway. I finished out my senior year in Biloxi and when I turned 18, I joined the army.

Pops passed away in 1995 and Maw, two years later. Uncle Jimmie is still at it, but since they outlawed commercial fin fishing in Mississippi, he's gone to shrimping and crabbing. In the winter, he harvests oysters. Several years ago he got married to a woman twenty years his junior and they seem happy. I've taken my family down there several times for the Blessing of the Fleet at the start of shrimp season. We attend Mass the Thursday before for the fishermen who have passed away at Saint Michaels on Point Cadet and light candles for Pops and Maw.

SAMSON'S SHADOW

I met Della O'Neal in June of 1985 when I returned to Tatum. After ten years of service, I left the Army with a small amount of money and no plans for the future. Any city would have sufficed; there was no reason to pick Tatum. With both of my parents dead, their home long since sold, my only remaining connection to the town was a handful of memories. Still, they were pleasant memories and it seemed like a good place to relax for a while and choose a new path.

I found a rental house I could afford in the old part of town on a quiet street that ended at an abandoned chemical plant. It was a brown stucco three-bedroom number with hardwood floors and the oldest looking window unit air conditioner I had ever seen. It had a prism-cut window in the front door that at a certain hour of the day, bathed the small living room in the light of a hundred rainbows. But the most remarkable feature of the little house, to me, was its neighbor: a weathered wooden monster of a mansion that, in its time, was surely one of Tatum's finest.

It didn't take long to unload the boxes containing the few things I had managed to hold onto during my time in the service, and then headed downtown in search of some furniture. Standing on Main Street in the midday sun, there didn't seem to be as many cars as there were when I used to go shopping with Mom. The number of empty storefronts was unexpected. The old couple at the used furniture store explained that all of the department stores had moved out to the mall years ago and many of the retail spaces had been converted to offices. I picked out a bed, a desk, a table with chairs, and a few other items.

The café where Dad and I used to eat on haircut Saturdays was still there and still had the same pictures on the walls with a few additions. The original owner's grandson

was behind the counter now and he remembered me from junior high. Salvador Trotter or Sal was the tallest guy in the seventh grade. He would sneak beer from the café cooler and I would pilfer my dad's cigarettes and we would meet up every Saturday morning underneath the railroad trestle to pool our resources. We would dig for crawfish on the banks of the river and try to get them to fight each other.

I sat at the white linoleum-topped counter in front of the grill and talked to Sal as he cooked. He used two steel spatulas at a time like his father had and his father, the original Salvador who had emigrated from Greece in the 1920s, had as well. Both hands were in constant motion as he talked to me over his shoulder: the left spatula scooping a large ball of ground beef from a clear-plastic box and dropping it with a splashing sizzle onto the steaming grill before slapping it flat into a crude patty. The right spatula then moving the patty to join the ranks of others along the grill's right edge before returning to the task of flipping and shifting; each spatula seemed to move of its own volition.

"I need a steak, medium well with onions, Sal," a young waitress with a blonde bob called out from further down the counter as she slipped an order pad into an apron pocket.

"You got it," Sal said. He reached over to the glass door cooler where more clear-plastic boxes were stacked and slid the lid back off the one that didn't have balls of raw beef inside. Fishing out a steak, he dropped it onto the center section of the grill and went back to flipping burgers. "So where are you living?"

"The corner house on Short 8th near the Samson's plant," I said.

"Old Samson's," Sal said. "You remember how bad that place used to stink in the summer?"

I did remember. Samson Chemical made turpentine from tree stumps. Like most towns in South Mississippi, Tatum had been a sawmill town until the 1930s by which time all of the virgin timber had been clear cut. Samson became the town's largest employer during the Great Depression by buying up the one thing not in short supply: stumps. The devil in the details had been the stench created by the cooking process. When the two towering white smokestacks so proudly emblazoned with giant blue S's began belching their noxious fumes, your only two choices were to close your windows or get used to it.

Sal set a plate of chili-cheese burgers and curly fries in front of me. I took a sip of my root beer and picked up one of the dripping burgers. "So that means you're living next door to Cat Woman," he said. "Have you seen her yet? You know she sleeps with her dead husband, right?" He laughed and shook his head. "At least that's what we were always told as kids."

"I don't remember," I said with a full mouth.

When I returned home, I dragged the furniture inside and spent the afternoon setting everything up. It being early June, there was still about an hour of sunlight left when I called it a day and adjourned to the back yard to relax and drink a beer. I set my folding lawn chair on the ten foot square concrete patio and surveyed the scene for the first time.

I've always believed you could learn much about a person's personality by looking at their back yard. The front yard will tell you how they want the world to see them, but the back yard is closer to the heart. What type of fencing and foliage did they select? Does it invite the world in or try to keep it out? Is it a playground for kids or for

adults? Is it a place to grow and build things or just relax and unwind? How many places to sit do you see?

Of course, my theory doesn't really work as well for renters. It takes time for a personality to shape a back yard. As I looked around, I thought about the original owner of this modest kingdom. Among the shrubs was the remains of a wire fence that was likely intended to contain a dog or small children. A dubious looking tool shed in the right back corner leaned about five degrees left of plumb. Next to that was a mostly-intact brick fire pit. The metal grill was in bad shape, but certainly serviceable. In the left corner of the yard were two large pecan trees that almost (but not quite) obscured the view of Samson's smokestacks that were now a brilliant reddish-purple in the setting sun.

I then turned my attention to the big white house. What had the realtor called it? The Bride of Samson; that was it. Was that where the Cat Woman lives, the one Sal mentioned? I had some vague memory of hearing the name, but not really.

The house was a wooden two-story Southern Colonial style with a half-hipped roof. It sat on a raised red brick foundation. Square wooden pillars on brick pedestals extended around three sides to support a massive wrap-around platform that doubled as covering for the carport, front porch and screened-in side porch, and as an open veranda on the second floor with decorative wrought-iron railing. Additional pillars on the veranda supported two higher platforms that sheltered the front and side access doors. Fifty people could easily fit on the veranda. Everything about the design said, "Welcome."

The grounds seemed to echo that sentiment. In contrast to my house's intimate backyard, "The Bride" sat in the middle of four manicured acres bordered by short black iron fencing that seemed chosen more for its unobtrusive design than for security. An

ivy-covered archway framed a simple gate at the beginning of a wide sidewalk leading to the front steps. Large oak trees provided shade for a semi-circle of concrete benches on the far side yard and a substantial gazebo sat in the back. Unlike the lawn, the house and gazebo had not been maintained. Much of the white paint had peeled away exposing the yellow pine to the elements and several of the fish scale roofing tiles were missing.

As I looked at the gazebo, a large orange cat crawled from underneath and began making its way across the yard towards the street.

I guess that *is* the Cat Woman's house, I thought. As if on cue, the side door swung open and a tall big-boned woman in a blue print dress and straw hat emerged, walked down the four concrete steps and began striding purposefully towards me, the screen door slamming behind. At the sound of the door, the cat on an intercept course with the woman, jumped skyward, spun around, and dashed back to its hiding place.

"Are you the new neighbor?" the woman called out while still some distance away. She was closing fast and by the time I stood up and walked to meet her at the fence, she was waiting.

"Yes, my name is Ray."

"There have been far too many college students occupying that house for me to remember all your names," she said. "And all they ever want to do is carry-on all hours of the day and night, drinking and carousing and anything other than what their poor parents sent them here for. Let this serve as your one and only notice that civil disturbances will not be tolerated."

Over her shoulder I noted the cat had resumed its trip. "Actually, I'm not a college student. I just got out of the army and I don't know what my plans are yet," I said.

“Well, I recommend college,” she said. “A good education is essential. But what I said still goes. I support our men in uniform, but I remember WWII: soldiers raising Cain like there was no tomorrow!” And with that, she turned to go. The cat picked up its pace in response.

“Is that your cat?” I asked.

“Certainly not,” she said, turning back. “I detest cats.”

“Then I guess you’re not the one they call Cat Woman.”

She glared at me with a look that almost glowed in the fading light. “I’ve been informed that certain members of this community have hung that moniker on me. People like that are the reason I shall be returning to Memphis as soon as is possible. Good evening.”

A couple of days later, I was sitting outside reading a book I had picked up at the library, when I saw her again. It was a beautiful June morning, mild and sunny with no gnats or mosquitoes. The birds were singing, the coffee was close by and I was reading a paperback I picked up at the drugstore.

After an hour or so, I heard a rattling noise from down the street. A wizened old black man with stooped shoulders was pushing a dusty, red high-backed mower. He wore new overalls and a red flannel shirt. Sitting on the deck of the mower was a metal gas can. He walked with his head down looking neither left nor right. When he came to the Bride, he turned up the driveway. After he had gone a few feet, he set the can down and mopped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. Untying a cord from the handle bar, he slowly wrapped it around the top of the engine before setting the throttle. He gave the cord a mighty tug, almost falling over backwards. The mower sputtered and then

nothing. Slowly and deliberately he wrapped the cord around the top of the engine and tried again; still, nothing.

After several more attempts, I began to think the old guy might have a stroke and fall out soon. If he doesn't get it started this time, I'm going over there, I thought. The guardian angel of old yard men finally took pity, apparently, and the mower roared to life. After two passes around the yard, the front door opened and Della appeared: different dress, same hat. She went and stood by the path he had cut on his previous passes and waited. He kept his eyes directly in front of the mower, never looking up, nor left, nor right, but 50 feet before he reached her, he made a sudden right turn and started on a new path. She rushed to intercept him and began pointing to various places around the yard. He didn't shut off the mower, instead cupping a hand to his ear and nodding his head. Finally, after of minute of trying to talk over the noise, she pointed to the mower and put her hands on her hips. The old man shook his head. Again, she pointed to the mower and again he shook his head. Della reached over and flipped the throttle. The mower died with a shudder. The old man visibly sighed. Della began pointing about the yard again, this time I could hear her barking orders, while he dutifully nodded, never looking at where she was pointing. Then she turned and strode back to the house, slamming the door behind her. The old guy wiped his brow, shook his head, and resumed the mower starting ritual. A few minutes later, she emerged again with what appeared to be a jar of ice water. Setting the jar on the edge of the porch, she went back inside and didn't come out until it was time to pay for services rendered.

For the next week or so, I left the house only for the occasional trip to the store or the library. From the vantage point of my favorite reading spot, I gradually became familiar with Della's daily schedule. It wasn't that I was so keenly interested in her

comings and goings, but I guess that being fresh out of the military where everything is done at an appointed time had made me sensitive to the rigidity of her world.

From 7 am until 8 am, she worked in the yard: pulling weeds from a small garden, filling bird feeders, watering the grass. She would wear a blue jumper, big cotton gloves and knee pads. Finally, she would disappear around back and return with a small white bowl that she placed beside the gazebo after looking around as if to see if anyone was watching. I could feel the weight of her gaze on me as I hid my face behind my book. Only after she retired to the house again, would the orange cat appear to empty the contents of the bowl.

At 10 sharp, Della would walk down to the front gate to check the ivy obscured mailbox, looking through a usually sizable stack on the way back.

At 11, she would exit the side door wearing a dress and matching floppy hat, make a big production of locking the door and climb into the white '59 Apache panel van that sat in the carport. The straight six would roar to life with a belch of white smoke and then she would be gone until after lunch. What time she returned was the only variable; sometimes she'd be back by 2 pm, sometimes not until after 3 or 4 pm. If it was after 3 pm, I could count on her unloading a grocery bag from the back of the Chevy and then odds were good I wouldn't see her until the next day.

We never spoke or acknowledged each other for two or three weeks, until one morning when I looked outside while waiting for the coffee to finish brewing and was quite startled to see that overnight, someone had written on the side of her house in black spray paint "Cat Woman" and on the side of the van "Cat Mobile." On the back of the van was a crudely rendered outline of a cat head.

By the time I got dressed and poured myself a cup of coffee, Della was outside with a bucket and brush trying to scrub the paint from the van with no luck. I walked outside and crossed the yard, stepping over the fence.

“Good morning,” I called to announce my approach so as not to scare her. She spun around, her eyes red and puffy, and glared at me.

“Just look at this mess! Why? Why would someone do such a thing?” she said and then waited for an answer to what I first thought was a rhetorical question.

“I don’t know, ma’am. I guess some kids are just plain mean,” I said.

She turned back to the van and began scrubbing again. “How am I supposed to make my rounds like this?”

“Well, there’s enough wax on that finish that you can probably clean it off with rubbing compound, but the writing on the house will have to be painted over,” I said. “It should be easy, if we do it quickly. I can run to store and pick up what we need, no problem.”

She looked at me for a few moments, like she was mulling it over and then her expression relaxed a bit. “Would you do that for me? I’d be happy to pay you.”

“Hey, what are neighbors for?”

“I’m Della O’Neal,” she said and held out her hand.

“I’m Ray Moody.”



Two days later, I was sitting in my back yard once more with my head buried in a book when Della presented herself at the fence.

“It looks like you made a clean spot,” she said.

“Pardon?”

She pointed to the side of the house where I had painted over the graffiti. “I hadn’t realized how bad the old girl looked,” she said in a friendly tone that seemed strange coming from her mouth. “I think I’m going to have to paint the whole house now.” She waited two beats. “You game? I’d gladly pay you for your time.”

Now, the last the thing I wanted to do over the summer was paint a house. The plan was that I would remain a man of leisure until the fall or until such time as the money got tight.

“I don’t know...” I said looking over the house. “That’s a pretty big job. Shouldn’t you hire a painter?”

“Oh no! I’ve never met a painter that wasn’t an alcoholic and completely undependable. The last one I hired took six months and still didn’t finish the job. No, I’ll take disciplined over experienced any day of the week,” she said.

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

In the end, I decided to help her because I was getting bored with my routine and some extra money couldn’t hurt. We rode to the hardware store together in her Apache to pick out paint and supplies. The van, built like a tank, banged and rattled over every bump. It was empty except for a wooden rack that was strapped to one side. “I deliver boxed lunches from the shelter to the shut-ins of our church,” she explained.

Della expected me to be at her house each day at 7 am sharp. I had figured on doing the job alone, but she was with me every step of the way. With her blue jumper, straw hat, and cotton gloves, she would scrape old paint until her face was red and dripping sweat, all the while telling me stories about her life.

“My mother, by comparison, was the secretary of the Huguenot Society in Memphis. We would host the most marvelous luncheons at our home on Beaumont

Street. Governor Vardaman, after he left office, came up from Mississippi once and gave a talk on the future of race relations.”

I learned that Della and her husband, a chemist, had moved to Tatum as newlyweds during the Depression after he landed a job with Samson.

“Jobs were so scarce then,” she said. “We were thrilled that he was able to find work in his chosen profession. And I was doubly thrilled when we found this house so close to the plant and at such a bargain price. I envisioned the grand parties that I would have in my beautiful home.” She snorted in disgust. “Of course, I didn’t know about the smell. Who wants to attend a garden party where the air smells like rotten eggs? It was so embarrassing. We tried to make the best of it. I mean in those days, people were standing in line for soup not a mile away, so who was I to complain about a little bad odor? Walter said he liked the smell. ‘Smells like money, to me,’ he’d say. Two years later, he died in an explosion while working in the lab.”

One day, Della asked me, “I see you reading all the time. What do you like to read?”

“Detective stories, mostly,” I said. She wrinkled her nose.

“You know, I taught English Literature at the college for 25 years. You should broaden your horizons when it comes to reading. Come inside and peruse my books when we finish up, today; see if something catches your eye. There’s a big world beyond Dashiell Hammett, you know.”

“You sound like my mother,” I said.

“Smart woman,” she said and laughed.

We wrapped up about 3 pm that day. I went home to get cleaned up and then returned. It was a little exciting to finally get the chance to see the inside of the house. I

really didn't know what to expect: would there be dusty stacks of old magazines, peeling wallpaper and a dead husband in the basement? Or would it be like something out of an issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*, circa. 1929?

The reality of the house was somewhere in between the two extremes of my imagination. The wallpaper and furnishings were old, but well preserved and she was obviously not a hoarder. The hardwood floors shined with a soft glow and there was no dust to be found. There was a fireplace in the living room with a large mantel sporting a mantel clock and several small statuettes. An unpainted piece of plywood had been nailed over the fireplace opening.

Double glass doors led from the living room to the library and although I had expected an English teacher to have an impressive collection, the number of books crammed into the shelving on every wall from floor to ceiling and in every corner was still surprising.

She began by giving me a tour of the collection, pointing out favorite anthologies, books on literary criticism, and favorite authors. Then she picked out a book of short stories by Chekov and said, "Here, try a couple these and we'll discuss them in a few days." Throughout the month of July, this was our routine: paint during the morning, break for lunch while she made her rounds, and spend the afternoon drinking coffee and discussing literature. It was comfortable and made me happy knowing that I was pursuing something that had been such a passion for my mother. I began to think that this might be a possible career path and decided to give college a try. Della helped me with the paperwork and the first week of August I registered for four freshmen classes.

On the Sunday before the first day of class, I was returning home from Biloxi after visiting my grandparents when I came upon a shirtless guy sitting on a stool by the

side of the road playing a blue drum. He had long red hair that seemed to flash as he thrashed his head around in the late afternoon sun. As I approached, he spun a drumstick around his thumb and touched the tip of it to his forehead as if to salute me. I pulled over.

“Dude, what are you doing?” I said as I walked through the switch grass back to where he still sat.

“Trying to get somewhere,” he said. He had impish features, green eyes, and a moustache that looked pasted on his young face. Freckles fought to maintain dominance on his sunburned skin.

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

“North,” he said. “Can you give me a lift?”

“Sure, why not,” I said. He threw several boxes and garbage bags into the back of my truck and jumped in.

“You’ve got a crazy way of hitchhiking,” I said as we passed a sign that read “Tatum 15 miles.”

“It worked didn’t it?” he said as he fired a cigarette off a gold Zippo. Then he held out his hand. “My name’s Otis Alexander. People call me Toad.”

“I’m Ray.”

I told Toad that he could spend a couple of days on my couch. He told me that he wanted to go to Nashville to get work as a studio musician while he looked for something more permanent.

We arrived at my house and unloaded his things which didn’t amount to much: drums and green canvas duffel bag. On the last trip in, he looked over at the Bride and said, “Holy hell, man! You live next door to the Adams Family!”

“That’s Della’s place. I’ve been painting that house this summer.”

“Really, you need any help? My dad’s a painter. I’ve helped him since I was little,” he said.

“Maybe...I’ll introduce you to her tomorrow.”

The next morning, I let Toad sleep while I made coffee and got dressed. At 7 am, I shook him awake. “Hey, time to get up. Come meet Della.”

Toad looked startled like he didn’t know where he was for a moment. He picked up his watch and squinted at it. “Jesus, it’s early!”

He stumbled, still shirtless, after me with a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other, nearly tripping over the fence. Stella was on her knees in the backyard pulling up a tomato vine.

“Good morning, Della,” I said.

“Good morning,” she said over her shoulder.

“Good morning,” Toad said. “Folks call me Toad.” Della looked around and eyed him up and down.

“I’m sure they do,” she said and turned back to her work. Toad gave me a look.

“Della, Otis here is looking for a few days of work while he’s in town. I thought maybe he could help me with some of the high stuff. His dad’s a painter.”

“Chip off the old block, huh?” she said. “Well, if you’re willing to vouch for him, Ray, I guess we can try it for a day or two and see how it goes.”

True to his word, Toad did know his way around a paint brush and things began to progress much faster. He could climb the tall aluminum ladder effortlessly and cut in around the windows without the need for masking tape. Even Della seemed impressed.

I soon had less time to spend with Della in the evenings as Toad kept pestering me to go out after work. We went to a place that Sal told me about called Sammy's Ice House. Unlike me, Toad made new friends with ease. He was like a cruise ship director or something and was soon hosting after hours parties at "our" house. It was at one of these parties that he introduced me to a pretty blond co-ed named Alice.

"You're a freshman too?" she asked. "Aren't you a little old to be a freshman?"

"I spent ten years in the army after high school," I said.

"What's your major?" she said.

"I'm going to be an English professor," I said and thought about Della. When did I make that decision? "What's yours?"

"Don't know yet, Ray Moody," she smiled. "I'll let you know."

We made plans to go out as Toad sat down at the drums and started banging away, obviously wasted. I wondered if Della could hear him.

The next morning, I was late getting to Della's and Toad was a no-show. Della and the old yard man were sitting on the edge of the front porch with a pile of pecans he had just picked up between them. Over the summer, I had learned that the old man's name was Cephas and everyone called him Sugar. He was taking the pecans, two at a time, in his boney fist and squeezing them until they cracked. Then he would pass one to Della and eat one himself.

"Sorry I'm late," I said. "I overslept."

"Quite the hoo-ha y'all had last night," Della said tartly. "It seems your painter friend is a bad influence. And right at the start of your first semester, too. I've seen a lot of freshmen flunk out in my time, Ray. You'd better have a care."

“If you let that old devil ride, he’s soon gone want to drive,” Sugar said with the first smile I’d ever seen cross his face. Della laughed.

“I hear you loud and clear,” I said.

“See that you do,” she said. “As I told you before, I will have peace and quiet.”

When Toad came over two hours later, Della warned him about making noise and that he had better watch himself or he’d be gone quick. He was having none of it.

“What are *you* going to do about it?” he asked with a smile and a wink.

“I own every house on this street, little man,” she said, walking off. “What do you *think* I’m going to do about it?”



The battle lines were now clearly drawn and I was trapped in no-man’s land. A couple of days later, I stayed home and studied while Toad went out. Around midnight he came home with a carload of people I didn’t know. He was soon playing the drums to a song on the radio.

“Screw Morticia Adams!” he yelled at the walls like he was hoping his words would reach her. “Screw you, Cat Woman! Y’all know that’s what they call her don’t you? Cat Woman! Keeps her dead husband upstairs like in that movie, what was it called?”

“Shut up, Toad,” I said.

“Oh that’s right, that’s your girlfriend,” he said. “Hey, everybody...”

Just then, there was a knock on the door. It was a policeman telling us the party was over. “You’re on thin ice, Toad,” I said after everybody left.

“Whatever,” he said as he lay on the couch and covered his eyes with the crook of his arm.

“You’ve got a lot of attitude for somebody that’s not paying rent,” I said.

“Screw you, asshole,” he said. I sprinted to the couch, grabbed him by the collar and started punching him in the head. After he broke free of my grip, he ran out the door and didn’t come back for the rest of the night.

The next day, when Della got ready to leave to make her rounds, one of her tires was flat.

“I want him out, Ray,” she said as I jacked up the Apache.

“I’ll tell him today,” I said, but later that afternoon, as I was working at Della’s, a red station wagon pulled up at my house and from the passenger side Toad got out and went in the house without looking in my direction. In a couple trips, he and the driver, some black-headed kid I didn’t recognize, loaded up everything and were gone.

Things returned to normal after that, more or less; we finished the house about a week after Toad’s departure. I was busy with classes and dating Alice, but I still made time in the afternoons for Della. We would sit in the library or the screened-in porch if the weather was nice and talk about whatever I was reading at the time. She also taught me some fundamental skills like research techniques and how to write a thesis statement.

It was Halloween weekend that I was awakened by sirens at 2 am. I walked outside to see the gazebo completely engulfed in flames. The yellow pine used to construct it burned like lighter knot and produced an unbelievable amount of heat. The firemen kept dousing the Bride and surrounding area to keep the fire contained.

Della stood alone at the edge of the yard in a checkered robe and slippers looking small and frail against the backdrop of flames, hand to her mouth. I walked over and put my arm around her and she sobbed. The little bowl next to the gazebo shimmered in the light and heat; I knew what she was thinking, but didn’t say anything.

Later, after the fire was out and everyone was gone, Della said, “I think I just want to go to sleep now and deal with all of this in the morning.” I said goodnight and went back to bed. As I lay there wondering how the fire could have started, I could hear her through my open window calling softly for the cat. The smell of smoke was the last thing I remembered before drifting off.

It was three days before the cat appeared unharmed sitting on a pile of charred wood. When I knocked on Della’s door tell her the news she said, “Like I care about that old cat!” Of course, after I walked back to my house and looked out of the window, there she was bringing him a bowl of food. While the cat ate, she billed and cooed, “Oh you poor thing, you poor, poor thing. Were you scared?” and so forth.

It was the first warm day in March of the following year that Della didn’t come to the door when I knocked. After a couple of days, I called the police and when they broke in they found her dead in bed, an apparent heart attack.

She had no family, but there was a huge turnout for her funeral, mostly people connected with her church, but beyond that the mayor and half of the city council showed up. The newspaper printed pictures of her taken with her husband in front of the house shortly after they moved in.

The Bride of Samson she willed to the church. It was put on the market and snapped up by a young couple and has since become a centerpiece of the downtown revitalization campaign. I was surprised to learn that she willed the house I lived in to me, as well as the one next door, along with all of her books. I fed the old orange cat until it died and still try to keep fresh cut flowers on her grave.

LIKE PRUITT

I sit on the picnic table in the smoking area outside Sammy's Ice House. The oak and pecan trees are waking up again and the new leaves look bright and waxy in the yellow light. Brandi, a secretary, sits smoking in a metal lawn chair as she files her nails. Clyde, the part-time bartender, opens the flyer-covered glass door holding two plastic buckets. "Hey Ray, if you bring me some ice, your first beer is on Sammy."

"This has got to be the only bar in town that works on the barter system," I say.

"Hey, you don't want to help, forget it."

"Shit, hand them here." Who am I to scoff at free beer?



I used to know this guy named Toad who liked to say, "I feel more like I do right now than I did a while ago."



Brandi sits beside me at the bar, waiting for her man, Kent, to arrive. Kent is a car salesman from Iowa. The two of them met at Sammy's eight years ago and moved in together three years later. When we met, she was a cutie, with pixie-like features and blond hair. Now, not so much.

"Did Cindy change her mind about letting the kids go out on the road with you?" she says.

"Hell no! She's still pissed that I ever became a truck driver in the first place."

"Why did you become a driver? Weren't you in school when we met?"

"Yeah, English major."

"So, why?"

“Because I had a wife and two babies to support. The day I brought them home from the hospital, I looked in the classifieds for a new job. There were six ads for companies that needed drivers, but no one needed any verbs conjugated.”



Here is a dream that haunts me occasionally. In it, I have been hired by Gene Simmons to play trumpet for Kiss. He positions me off to one side and hands me a tiny silver trumpet with a picture of Roy Rogers etched into the bell. Below the picture is Roy’s official signature. I know it is official because it says so.

“Where is the sheet music?” I ask.

“There is none.”

“How will I know when it’s time for me to play?”

“You’ll know,” he says, walking away.



The day Cindy and I met, I was wiping down tables in the cafeteria as part of a work-study program. She came walking in with some of her Chi Omega sisters looking every bit the southern sorority girl with long, tanned legs, and blonde hair. They gathered around the table I was working on, waiting for me to finish, so I moved on to the next one. “Hey, you missed a spot,” she said.

“Hey, I don’t care,” I said.

Later that week, she came up to me in the library and struck up a conversation. To this day, I don’t know why. I guess she wasn’t used to anyone talking to her like that. She says she felt sorry for me. That’s probably true.



On the weekends I'm home, my neighbor Karl likes to come outside and drink beer in his underwear and talk to me while I wash my truck. Fat, pasty, and bald, he's quite the eye candy, so he likes to show off for the co-eds across the street.

He always says the same thing. "Man, that is one beautiful rig."

"Thanks, Karl."

I love my truck. It's a 2005 Kenworth conventional with a double sleeper, a newer version of the truck Claude Akins drove in the TV series *Movin' On*. Claude played Sonny Pruitt, the no-nonsense gypsy trucker who travelled across the nation kicking asses and helping those in need. Frank Converse played his college educated sidekick, Will. They made a great team.

In 1975, everyone in America owned a CB radio, including my dad, the TV repairman. On vacations, we would listen to the truck drivers talk about where the smokies were. They would say things like "I'm gonna do it to it like Pruitt." We would laugh when we heard that. My father's CB handle was "Too Loose Le Truck."

That Christmas, I got a model kit that was an exact replica of Sonny Pruitt's truck. I was going to take it to the hospital to show it to my mom, but she died before I could finish it.

It took me eight years after my first driving job to save up the down payment for my own truck. The day I brought it home, Cindy left me.



I picked up a load in Gulfport and am heading up to St. Louis. I'm hoping to see my boys when I pass through Memphis. They turn 13 next week. Cindy moved up there in February with her new husband Steve. He's a corporate attorney Cindy used to temp

for when we were still married. They were probably fooling around back then, but I'm not bitter about it, much.



North Mississippi is in full bloom, a world of green leaves, blue skies, and yellow pollen. I bet Cindy's allergies are giving her hell, right now. The thought of it makes me smile. The CB crackles on.

"Sonny boy, you got your ears on, come back?"

"Yeah, ten-roger, who's this?" I say.

"Well, this is the Okie Dokie, good buddy. Wall to wall and tree top tall! I thought that was you. Where you headed, come back?"

I look in my side mirror and catch a glimpse of Okie's chromed out red and white cab-over pulling a cattle trailer. "I'm headed to Big M and then on to Arch City. How about you, come on?" I say.

"I'm heading to the Big Easy and then over to the Armadillo, come back," he replies.

"Well, how's it looking over your shoulder there, Okie?" I ask.

"Clean and green, buddy buddy all the way to Big M! How about you?"

Even with all of the advances in radar detectors, the citizens band radio is still the trucker's best friend when it comes to making time without getting caught. And there is a kind of poetry to this coarse vernacular. The familiar and oft repeated phrases provide a comfort in the solitary life of the long-haul trucker.

I think back over the past hundred miles and try to remember if I have seen any speed traps. "Saw a smokie taking pictures above Raymond, other than that she's a cherry, come on," I reply.

“Well, that sounds mighty fine there, Sonny boy. All the good numbers to you and we’ll catch you on the flip flop,” Okie says.

“Back at you, buddy. You do it to it like Pruitt used to do it and we’ll do the same. This *is* the Sonny boy, ten-ten and listening in!” I say.

“Roger that!”



This is my first time to see Cindy and Steve’s house. Not quite as big as the one she grew up in, it’s still damn impressive. It’s a two story white colonial with a circular driveway and tennis courts off to one side. The lawn is landscaped and manicured. Cindy flies out of the front door before I can even get out of the cab. She is wearing a tight tee-shirt and it’s obvious she’s gotten a boob job.

“What the hell, Ray? You can’t bring that stupid truck into this neighborhood, it’s against the rules!” she says. “What will the neighbors think? This isn’t Tatum, asshole!”

“Glad to see you, too, Cindy. Where are my boys?”

“They’ve gone camping with their father. It’s Spring Break here. Why didn’t you call?”

“I did call, twice. You don’t return messages. And I’m still their father!”

“Oh yeah, some father. Always gone or drinking beer at Sammy’s!”

“Gone trying earn a living! We can’t all get rich sucking the corporate tit, Cindy!”

“We can’t always. Wait. What?” She starts laughing in spite of herself. “Where did you get *that shit*?”

Now I'm laughing. "I don't know. Heard it somewhere, I guess," I say. "You going to invite me in, or what?"

"Or what! Come on, you can stay for a minute, but then you've got to get that thing out of here," she says.

"Hang on, I've got the boys some presents."

Cindy makes coffee while I watch her from a kitchen chair. She wears a white tennis outfit. She is tanned, toned, and her blonde hair is held in a ponytail by a white scrunchie. "Steve buy you those new titties?"

"Yes, he did. Eat your heart out," she says.

"Don't you have a maid to make coffee and such? Surely, Steve doesn't expect his trophy wife to do manual labor."

"We do, as a matter of fact. Her name is Louise and she helps with the housework and looks after the boys," she says. "I gave her the day off, so I can have some 'me' time."

"Tell me, Cindy. Now that you're living the life you always wanted. Why did you ever waste your time with a guy like me?" I say. She gives me a look that starts as a scowl and dissolves into something that resembles pity.

"When we met, Ray, you looked good. Fresh out of the army, all buffed up and cute. And you were older and more mature. And you were on track to becoming a college professor. That appealed to me, or it did at the time." She looks over her shoulder and smiles, then turns away again. "You want to stay for lunch?"

After lunch, Cindy gives me a tour of the house. It is impressive, more than I could ever hope to afford. Over their king-sized bed is a painting of Cindy, reclining, in the nude.

“Steve paint that?”

She laughs. “No, I had it commissioned as an anniversary present.”

“What do the boys think about it?”

“They think it’s gross.”

“You’d think Steve wouldn’t need a painting if he has the real thing.”

“You’d think,” she says and walks out.

“You should give it to me,” I say.

Back in the kitchen, Cindy starts to clear away the dishes. “About time for you to hit the road, isn’t it?”

“Don’t you miss me at all?” I ask.

“I have to admit, I miss the sex, sometimes,” she says as she rinses off a plate. “I mean, it’s good with Steve, but it’s just not the same.”

I spring out of the chair and in two steps, I’m behind her. I snake my arms around her waist and bury my face in her neck. Her hair smells like lavender. “Is this what you miss?” I whisper and bite her ear.

“Ray! Ray, stop it! No!” she says, but she doesn’t push away. I slide my hand up and cup her breasts. They feel strange. She moans and it’s on.



When the boys were six, I took them and Cindy with me on a run out to Arizona. It was not much of a vacation, but it was all I could afford.

Sometimes, Will and Cody took turns sitting in Cindy’s lap and looking out the window while the other rode in the sleeper. Other times, they both rode in the sleeper and watched cartoons. I was so happy to have them all with me for a change. Cindy was miserable.

At a truck stop east of Phoenix, Cody wandered off after we ate as Cindy and I argued about where to spend the night. By the time we found him asleep in the truck, a half hour later, Cindy was in hysterics. That was the last time they rode with me.



“So are you going to let Will and Cody come with me on the road this summer?” I ask when we’re back in the driveway.

“Hell, no!”

“Come on, Cindy, just for a week. I just want them to see a little of my world before they get too old to care.”

“What world is that, Ray? The world of truckstop whores and meth? I want them to aim a little higher than you did. I want them to be somebody!”

“Cindy, please. You’re breaking my heart here.” I put my hands on her shoulders. “Please?” I say. “They’re my sons, too. I did the best I could.”

She looks at me and softens. “I’ll think about it, Ray. That’s all I can say, right now. I’ll think about it.”



I’m parked for the night at the Gateway City Truck Center, south of St. Louis just off the interstate. I’ve had a shower and a hot meal. In the morning, I’ll drop my load and dead-head back to Tatum.

Now, I’m in the sleeper reading *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace. He’s my second favorite writer and the second to off himself. The first was Hunter S. Thompson. Why isn’t being a great writer enough for these guys?



I had the dream again, last night. Except this time it was a harmonica. Weird.



It's Friday night and I'm sitting in Sammy's, nursing a beer. Sammy is behind the bar. It's the first time I've seen him in a while and he looks like hell. He had bypass surgery a few years back. Usually, he's pretty chatty, but tonight he's just sitting and staring up at the TV.

There's only one other customer in the place, so far, a young hottie shooting pool, by herself. She has long dark and curly hair. Her complexion is dusky and her eyelids seem heavy; bedroom eyes, I guess you'd call it. The little black dress is short and when she bends over to make a shot, it rides up.

"Hoochie mama," I say. Sammy looks up, follows my gaze, and frowns.

"June, come here!" he snaps.

"Yes, Daddy," she says. I feel my face flush as she walks around the bar.

"Ray, this is my youngest. June, this is Ray Nobles," he says.

She holds out her hand. "Nice to meet you, babe," she says then turns and walks back to the pool table without waiting for my reply.

"So why have I never met this one?" I ask.

"She's been living with her mother in Jackson. Since she dropped out of college, she's done nothing but hang out and get into trouble. So, I'm letting her stay with me for a while and work the bar some."



The weekend comes and that means it time to wash the truck. Karl waits for me in a folding beach chair by the property line. Property lines become blurred in the avenues, anyway, where most of the houses look the same. Nearly all are tile-covered,

post-war, three bedroom boxes. They remind me of that song, "Little Boxes". Mine is tan, Karl's yellow. His beer cooler is red. My truck is green, just like Sonny's.

"So how was your week?" Karl says, handing me a beer.

"Fine" I say, popping the top. "Saw the old lady this week."

"How's Miss Cindy doing?"

"New house and a new set of store-bought boobs."

"Oh yeah?" Karl grins. "How do they look?"

"How do you think they look? Damn good."



When I walk into Sammy's, I see June behind the bar and no Sammy. "What's shaking, baby cakes?" she says as I sit down.

"Bud, sweetie," I say and turn to see what's on the tube. I watch two quarters of a football game before I realize that I don't know the score or even who's playing.

A few stools down sits Walter Hodges. Walter is a 60 year old part-time painter and full-time alcoholic with bad knees, bad back, and bad everything else. He and June are talking in low tones about something. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a pill bottle and sets it on the bar. June picks it up and reads the label. She gives it a shake and smiles before she palms it. Now she walks across the bar to the stockroom and opens the door. Standing just inside the stockroom she gives Walter a nod and he shuffles his way over to her and shuts the door behind him.

Fifteen minutes later, the door opens and Walter emerges, grinning from ear to ear.



I have never considered myself good looking or anything close to a ladies' man. I do seem to have a knack for attracting the wrong kind of women, however. Cindy pointed this out to me, one night, after peeling one of her drunken sorority sisters off me during a party.

“Oh my god, you are such a whore magnet,” she said. She never trusted me. I think that was the real reason she objected to me being a long haul trucker. But, I never cheated on her in all the time we were married.



By closing time, it's just me and June. I'm pretty buzzed, but she looks down right fucked up. “So why did you become a truck driver, Daddy?” she says.

“Something to do, I guess.”

“I know something you can do,” she says.

“What's that?”

“Take me home.”

Soon, we're at my house, sitting on the couch. “I want you, Big Daddy,” she says. She pulls off her dress and immediately falls asleep. She looks damn good; all over tan with an assortment of tattoos. Below her navel is a tattoo of a tarantula. I cover her with a blanket and go to bed.

A couple of hours later, I wake up to the sound of the smoke detector. When I open the door to the front part of the house, I find the living room and kitchen full of smoke. June is sitting on the couch, passed out with her eyes open. On the gas stove, I find one burner on high. Sitting on the burner is my green ceramic soup mug with two pieces of burnt French bread in it. I turn off the burner, open a window, and carry her back to my bed where I can keep an eye on her.



I'm at Wal-Mart loading up on groceries, mostly things I can take on the road with me; granola bars, beef jerky, sodas, and stuff like that. In the DVD aisle, I strike gold. It's the *Movin' On* box set. Oh, yeah!

Back home, I notice my cell phone is flashing. It's Cindy, she says for me to call her at this number when I get this. So I call.

"You stupid son of a bitch!" she says

"What?"

"Steve knows!"

"How would Steve know? Did you say something?"

"He says he's got us on video!" she says.

"How could he have us on video? That doesn't make any sense."

"I don't know!" She's crying now. "He says he wants a divorce! What am I going to do?"

"Come back to Tatum, baby. Load up the boys and come home. You're always welcome here." I say.

"Fuck you!" *Click.*



I'm sitting at the bar, talking to Sammy when I hear June say, "Hey Daddy." I turn around and smile.

"Hey, yourself," I say, but I see she is looking at Sammy. When I turn back, Sammy is giving me the stink eye.

"I've got pancreatic cancer," he says, later. "Advanced."

"So now what?"

“I don’t know. I want to go somewhere, get out of this town. I don’t want to just sit here and wait to die.”

“I’m hauling a load to Tampa in the morning,” I say. “I could sure use the company, if you’re interested.” Sammy scratches his chin and looks around.

“Yeah, I think I’d like that.”



When I drive my truck by Sammy’s house to pick him up, June answers the door. Her eyes are red like she’s been crying. “Hey, Big Daddy,” she whispers.

“Daddy, Ray is here,” she says. As we walk out of the door, she kisses us each on the cheek. “Y’all be careful.”

When I get to the freight depot in Gulfport, they haven’t loaded my trailer so it’s a three hour wait until I can hook up and go. After we finally get on the road, we listen to the radio and Sammy looks out of the window of the cab as the miles tick by. There’s little conversation. Not much to be said, I guess.



The sun sets in my mirrors as we pass through Pensacola. Shortly after I make the connection from I-10 to I-75 south, near Lake City, Florida, Sammy comes to life and says, “Here, take this next exit and go left, okay?”

“Why, what’s wrong?” I say.

“Nothing’s wrong, I just want to see something. Please?” he says.

“Sure, man,” I say. It’s ten o’clock already and I’m not planning on going much farther tonight, anyway. The small exit sign reads “Parkerville.” I go about a mile on the two lane highway and he tells me to take a right. After a hundred yards or so, he has me turn right again and park it.

Sammy slowly climbs down out of the cab and starts walking. I get out and follow. In the light of a full moon on a cloudless night, I can see the remains of a small brick schoolhouse. Off to the left, where he's headed, is a set of bleachers covered over by Kudzu vines. The grass on the field is waist high and only one goal post is left standing. I hang back by the bleachers as Sammy wades out in the grass to what must have been the fifty yard line. He stands there for a long time with one hand over his mouth, his head down. I watch his shoulders shake and think about Toad's funeral.



The day I met Toad Alexander, he was sitting on the side of the highway, five miles south of Tatum, in the summer sun, playing a drum. He was wearing cut-offs and a pair of aviators with long wavy red hair and a chestnut tan. As I drove by in my '67 pickup, he stuck out a long boney thumb and grinned. As soon as I pulled to the shoulder, he started tossing drums, cymbals, and garbage bags in the back. Then, he climbed inside after bowing to me while twirling a drumstick in each hand like a majorette.

"What the hell are you doing, dude?" I said.

"Nobody was stopping, so I thought I'd give it a try. And it worked, too," he said.

"Yeah, I guess it did. So where are you going?"

"Nashville."



The next morning, we hit the Waffle House and head for Tampa. The sun is shining and the temperature is mild, so we ride with the windows down. It's a good day to drive.

We make the terminal in Tampa and drop the trailer by noon, so after shooting the breeze with Jerry, the receiving manager, it's time to turn around and head back. I get the impression that Sammy is in no hurry to get home so I take Hwy 98 instead of the interstate.

Along the way, I'm looking for something for us to do; make a memory of some sort. Just east of Carrabelle, I see a sign for Big Smitty's Alligator Farm and Gift Shop Emporium. So I pull in. Big Smitty's is located behind Wanda's Fruit Stand and Quick Stop. "You want some fruit?" Sammy asks.

"Nah, I've always wanted to see an alligator farm," I say. Sammy looks at the painted sign of a large black man in overalls, holding an alligator in a full-nelson.

"You're kidding, right?"

Inside the Quick Stop, Sammy searches for a restroom while I buy a couple of quarts of beer and a disposable camera. "So does Big Smitty wrestle the alligators every day?" I ask the old gal behind the counter.

"Every day he's here," she says. "He's got another place up in Sopchoppy. His boy wrestles them when he's up there. It's a good show, you ought to see him."



I let Toad stay with me in the house I was renting near the school. It was 1987 and I had been out of the army for less than a year. It was a old house with high ceilings and a high floor space to furniture ratio. I figured the addition of a drum set in the living room would raise the cool factor of the place exponentially. We were going to start a band as soon as I learned to play bass.

It soon became apparent to me that there wasn't anything that Toad would not attempt at least once including anything that could be drunk, eaten, smoked, snorted,

ridden, or whatever. Usually, all you had to say was “Hey Toad, I bet you won’t” and odds were, you’d be wrong.



Big Smitty’s is a long, narrow cinder block box painted pink with crudely drawn pictures of alligators, lions, and snakes. It stands in front of an 8’ wooden privacy fence.

A dark haired girl, maybe thirteen, sits at a card table, selling tickets. She is wearing turquoise jewelry over a yellow I Survived Big Smitty’s tee shirt. She eyes our beers. “Next show starts in 15 minutes,” she says. “Please visit our gift shop.”

Past the fence, is a row of cyclone cages with a small black bear, a bobcat, and a couple of deer. Cyclone fencing surrounds a shallow concrete lined pool housing a single alligator, about 12 feet in length. It looks to be well-fed and completely unconcerned. On a fence post is a locked wooden box with TIPS burned into each side.

Sammy and I wander around the compound for few minutes. There are a dozen or so other people waiting for the show including five kids wearing college garb and two elderly couples.

“When are you going to get one of those digital cameras?” Sammy asks as I unwrap the disposable.

“I have one on my phone and it sucks,” I say. “I like these. You don’t have to worry about losing them.”

“My name is Daryl,” a barrel-chested young man in overalls announces as he exits the gift shop. Everyone turns to look and the kids immediately begin pointing phones and video recorders at Daryl. “My daddy, Big Smitty, is a full-blooded Seminole Indian. He taught me everything I know about alligator wrestling.”

“So where is he?” asks a boy wearing a “Duke” shirt. Daryl removes his hat and looks solemnly at the sky. After someone chuckles, he smiles and puts his hat back on.

“Big Smitty is off looking for more gators to wrestle,” he says. “Old Bocephus, here, just ain’t enough of a challenge for him, anymore.” Daryl picks up a small wooden dowel leaning against the fence and hops over into the pen. Putting the stick between his teeth, he walks up behind Bocephus and grabs him by the tail. He pulls him backwards out of the water and onto the grass. Bocephus lifts his head, but puts up no struggle. Daryl straddles the alligator’s back and leaning forward, wraps his hands around the animal’s snout. Then, sitting up, he forces its head back against his chest. Taking the stick out of his mouth, he tilts his head down, clamping the snout under his chin and extends his arms straight out in one rapid movement. Feeble applause follows.

“I call this next trick, a Florida Faceoff,” Daryl says. “Because if it doesn’t work, my face will come right off the front of my head.” He taps on the snout with the stick until it opens up. Forcing the jaws wide apart, he tilts his head down until his face is fully in the gator’s mouth. Again, he extends his arms. This time the applause is sincere.

Now he jumps off Bocephus and stands in front of him. Tapping the snout with the stick, he forces open the jaws. They remain open. Daryl sticks his hand in the mouth and leaves it there for a few seconds. Then, he taps the gator’s tongue with his fingertips and snatches his hand out as the jaws snap shut with a resounding clack.

Again and again, he does this, playing to the audience until finally, he is not fast enough and his fingers are trapped. Daryl slaps the snout until the gator releases its grip. He switches hands and continues the show as blood runs down the stick. After a few minutes, he finishes, takes a bow, and reminds us that “Tipping” is not a river in China. The people clap and drift to the gift shop.

The ticket girl is waiting for Daryl at a picnic table with a gallon jug of bleach and a plastic bag. He sits down opposite her and holds out his hand to reveal two deep gashes. She pours bleach on the wounds without saying a word. Daryl hisses and looks away. She removes a suture kit from the bag and begins to stitch them up.

“Dude, that is sick,” the kid in the “Duke” shirt says as he records the impromptu operation. “Mind if I post this to Youtube?”

Daryl grins. “That’s cool, make sure you include Pro Alligator Wrestling Federation in the title.”

“Well, that was different,” Sammy says as we walk into the gift shop. He buys a shirt for June and we head out again.



By late afternoon, we’re back in Tatum. I drop Sammy off at the bar and head home. When I get there, I see Cindy and the boys sitting in lawn chairs next to Karl. Karl is drinking a beer and grinning like a rat. He’s got a wet spot on his shirt and I wonder if that’s beer or drool.

As I look at Cindy and think about the contrast between her surroundings here and those in Memphis, I can’t help but feel badly for her. But, those feelings are false compared to what I feel when I look at my sons and marvel at the men they are rapidly becoming. I wish Dad could see them.

Will and Cody walk up and hug me, tentatively, after I jump down from the cab. “Daddy, can I sit in your truck?” Cody says. I look at Cindy and smile, but all she can manage is a grimace.

“Sure thing, chicken wing,” I say. I start to give him a boost up and then realize he doesn’t need one. I feel Cindy touch my arm.

“Ray, this is only temporary.” she says.

“Isn’t everything?” I say.

LENNY

I didn't expect the impact of seeing all of these old photographs again. Frankly, I didn't want to come today, but Andrea insisted. That's her, over there by the punch bowl. We've been married so long, I've lost track. Don't let her frail looks fool you, that woman is made of grade eight steel. At this point, it's just a contest to see who can outlive the other one for final bragging rights. And I'm not going anywhere.

When the lady from the museum planning committee called, asking if I had any pictures of the old railroad maintenance shop, I asked her how many boxes she wanted? I only worked there ten years before becoming a full-time photographer. So yeah, I have a few.

My father, Leonard Watson, the second, worked for the railroad just like his father. Dad, or Junior as he was called, was an air-brake foreman and Granddad was the roundhouse foreman until he retired. And I had uncles and cousins on both sides that worked there. After the timber business dried up in the thirties, the Great Southern Maintenance Yard became the main source of employment in Tatum. It was the largest of its kind in three states and could do a complete rebuild of anything from a caboose, to the biggest locomotive on the line. And we didn't order parts, either. We made them, in house. That was always a point of pride. Looking back, I guess that a lot of prestige came with working there.

The only person that didn't want me to become a machinist was me, Lenny the third, and I didn't have a say in the matter. I worked there all through high school as a cleanup boy and general flunky. When I graduated in '39, the only thing that changed was the time I was expected to arrive each morning. And I was given the lofty title of apprentice.

They've really done a terrific job of renovating the old station. The wood floor of the baggage room never looked this good when the place was in full swing. All the molding is so ornate, too, especially for a room that the public was never intended to see. Things were built with pride, then. It's like the designers knew that someday, it would matter. I guess this is that day.

I see a lot of my photos, newly framed on freshly painted walls. It gives them an air of respectability they never enjoyed when I showed them to Dad. Back then, they were a waste of time and money. After all, why preserve something that was always going to be around? Foolishness...

I feel Andrea's eyes on me as I move around looking at this and that. Yep, caught you, didn't I? She's pretending to pay attention to Mrs. Weingarten, now. Oh, look at that. That's a shot of the air room. There's Dad and Mr. Eldridge Hanson, the head machinist. Good Lord, that's Casper Meeks standing behind them. So okay, there were two people that didn't want me to be a machinist; Casper was the other one.

Casper Meeks was journeyman already when I became an apprentice. I think he resented me for having an "easy in" to the job. I don't know what it was, but he gave me grief every chance he got.

Meeks was a short red headed fellow. He sort of shuffled when he walked because of a club foot. Nobody liked Casper much because he had a nasty habit of sneaking up on people and in a machine shop that could be dangerous. He was married with a baby and looking to get ahead quickly. His way of doing that was to suck up to management as much as possible.

I remember one time, when I was learning to make bushings on the milling machine, Casper came by to check on how I was doing. I had done about 20 of them. He picked up one from the box and put the caliper to it.

“Mister Hanson, I wish you would look at this. Lenny here has gotten the outer diameter wrong on every one of these. Complete waste of time,” he said. Eldridge looked up from the wheel lathe, obviously annoyed at being disturbed.

“Aren’t you supposed to be supervising him?” Eldridge said.

“Yes sir.”

“And it took you that long to notice?” he said and turned his attention back to the lathe. After Casper shuffled off to the round house, Eldridge came over and showed me what I was doing wrong. Casper looks so young in this shot.

My first camera was a Rolleiflex twin-lens I bought second hand. I had been interested in photography since I was a kid. I would spend hours looking through the back issues of *Life* and imagine myself as a famous photojournalist, going to exotic places and winning Pulitzer Prizes.

Dad thought it was a waste of money, but as long as it was my money, there was nothing much he could say about it. It made even less sense to him that I wanted to take pictures of trains and the yard. “Why take pictures of dirty, sweaty men? And trains, who wants to look at pictures of trains? You work around them all day and you want to come home and look at pictures of them? Foolishness!”

My father lived for railroading. I remember as a little boy, Mr. Hanson would come over and drink beer with Dad out in his tool shed and talk shop. When Westinghouse introduced the air brake system, they tried to figure out how it worked. They thought it worked on air pressure, but later, when he went to air brake school, Dad

came back and reported that it actually worked by vacuum. If the system connecting hose lost its vacuum, the brakes on each car deployed automatically.

His only interest other than trains was finches. My dad raised finches and never talked about it. He just did. When asked why, he would say “man’s got to do something.” So that’s what I told him when he asked me why take pictures of trains. “Man’s got to do something.” That was one of the few times I remember making my father laugh. The truth was hard to explain, but I think that the steam was my muse. Steam as a force of nature is violent and dangerous. The pressure in the boilers was enormous and if the water level in one was allowed to drop too low, the resulting explosion could level buildings. Being scalded to death was also a possibility.

I would walk into the round house sometimes and look at all the locomotives, each in its own cave like a nest of dragons, waiting for their time to come roaring and billowing from the dim light of the ring of soot-covered windows high above; released into the light of day.



At the end of my second year as an apprentice, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and just like that, we were at war. Like most of the boys in Tatum, I went down and enlisted. Within a couple of weeks, I was up at Camp Shelby. When the sergeant asked me what I did in civilian life, I told him that I was a machinist apprentice.

“Would you be interested in doing that in the army?” he asked.

“Sure, I guess so,” I said. It turned out to be a good decision. I went to an ordinance company in North Carolina. They trained me, but most of what I needed to know, I learned working for Eldridge. When my training was complete, they made me a staff sergeant and sent us to England. We crossed the channel about eight weeks after D-

day and then they gave us our truck. It was nice, like a machine shop on wheels and it was heated, which came in handy on those winter nights when the temperature dropped below zero. If I had turned down the chance to be a machinist, I would have probably been freezing my tail off in a foxhole, instead.

While I was over there, I met a fellow by the name of Guy Havard who was a fairly well-known photographer. Guy had a lot of his pictures published in *Life* and *Star and Stripes* during the war. He was short and bald with a hook nose. And he smoked non-stop, lighting one off the other, smoking them down until you thought his lip was surely on fire; smoke curling around his aviators as he peered into the viewfinder. I could never decide if he was fearless or crazy or both because he didn't think twice about standing up in the middle of a firefight to get a better angle.

The work he was doing seemed so much more exciting than mine. I'm not complaining, mind you, I did my part for the effort. Once, as we were preparing to cross the Rhine, a captain from an artillery company came to me with a problem. The traverse mechanisms in the big 105MM Howitzers were jamming up in the sub-zero temperatures rendering them useless. A screw gear made of a soft metal was to blame. I had to design a specially threaded tap to back the broken screws out so they could be replaced. I gave the tap to the captain and sent him on his way. Later that day, a general pulls up in a jeep holding that tap in front of him like a sacred relic as he walked towards me. He said, "Is this yours?"

"Yes sir," I said.

"Well, keep it handy and don't lose it. It's worth its weight in gold." He said, "You hear that?" The big guns were pounding in the distance, softening up the defenses on the other side of the river.

“Yes sir,” I said, grinning.

“Well, if it wasn’t for this, you wouldn’t be hearing that,” he said.

Our company was supposedly awarded a bronze star for that, but I never saw it.



“You’re grinning like a Cheshire cat,” Andrea says in my ear.

“I suppose that could be true,” I say.

“I’ve very proud of you, sweetie,” she says. I love that woman.

I met Andrea a couple of months after I got home from the war. She was 17 and working the counter at Walgreens where I used to drop off my film for developing. She remembered me, but I couldn’t say the same. I did have enough sense to ask her out, though and we started dating.

Great Southern was more than generous about taking me back. They counted my time in the army toward my apprenticeship thereby qualifying me to become a journeyman. They also decided to send me to air-brake school in New Orleans since my dad was getting close to retirement age.

Casper Meeks was now the shop safety inspector, which rubbed a few folks the wrong way since he was still considered to be the biggest hazard we had. Casper had stayed on the job during the war, having pulled a 4F because of his foot. With so many men gone, jokers like him had little competition for promotions and a lot of guys returned to their old jobs to find former slackers now in charge.

I didn’t care much about Meeks one way or another; I was 25 and cocky. I had filled out in the service and had an intentional swagger when I walked that said I had everything figured out. Truth was, I didn’t know what I wanted to do. The new job paid a great deal more that I had ever made, but I still felt like I was missing out. I kept seeing

Guy Havard's work almost weekly and it kept me thinking about the future and what I really wanted to do. The pictures that he took of the death camps affected me deeply and hardened my resolve that one day I would be a professional photographer. On the other hand, as things began to get serious with Andrea, I knew I would need all the money I could get, and she would never sit still if I went running all over the world like Guy.

Look at this. I had forgotten about this one entirely. This was taken in 1949 at Eldridge Hanson's retirement party. As I continued to work for Great Southern, I began to do some work on the side as a photographer. I did weddings and so forth, but most of my work was done for the company. Anytime a safety record was reached, they would call me to take pictures to put in the newspapers. Also, birthday and retirement parties were popular too. They asked me on a few occasions to take pictures of derailments and other accidents to be sent to the home office for legal purposes. Some of those were too gruesome for words.

Andrea and I had gotten hitched in '47 and since she was expecting our first, the extra money helped.

Talk of diesel-electric locomotives began to be spoken of in whispered tones in '46. Most of the old timers like Eldridge and my dad didn't even want to talk about it. It was like questioning the virgin birth, just plain foolishness.

It was in spring of '48 that the company asked me as the air-brake inspector to help evaluate the new diesel-electric switch engine that was due to arrive the following week. The Tatum switch yard had 35 steam-powered 200 class switch engines. A switch engine is a small locomotive that pushes and pulls cars around the yard organizing them into trains for the big engines to haul away to their destinations. As with all steam engines, they worked on a two-day rotation. An eight hour shift was followed by a cool-

down period. Next, they had to have their fire boxes shoveled out and cleaned, the boiler had to be inspected, along with brakes, lubrication system, and a host of other things just to prepare it to work another shift on the third day.

The new engine needed only fifteen minutes between shifts, just time enough to refill the diesel tanks, and check the play in the brakes. Then it was ready for another crew. It was amazing. When I got back to the shop, I saw Eldridge cleaning up his tool bench like he always did at a quarter 'til five every day. I was in a great mood as I locked up my own tool box.

“That new switch engine is something to see, Mr. Hanson,” I said. “It really has it over steam.” Eldridge spun around, his face was red.

“Your father has worked on steam his whole life just like his father did. You should have more respect for steam” he said.

“I know, but it looks like diesel is the way it's going,” I said.

“You're an ungrateful little shit for saying that!” he stammered and walked out.

That's when I realized what it meant for men like Eldridge—men who were too old to start over with a new technology. Everything they knew, everything they were good at didn't matter anymore. Their way of life had remained largely unchanged for so long and suddenly it was all being swept away by a future of nuclear bombs and diesel and interstate highways. They were left with nothing to do, but retire.

So that's what they did, one by one, party by party. They got a gold watch and some cake and a lot of handshakes by co-workers who were either counting the days until it was their turn or thankful that they could be retrained.

It didn't take long either. Within two months, three of the new diesel-electric switch engines took over the work of the thirty-five steam powered ones. Within a

couple years, just about all of the steam locomotives, those big beautiful dragons, some less than two years old, were cut up and sold for scrap.

They offered to send me to school to be trained and certified in the new technologies, but I talked it over with Andrea and she said that I should follow my heart and open my own studio. Dad had retired to his finches just like Eldridge retired to his cabin, but they still got together and fished and drank beer and talked shop. When I finally got the nerve to tell him I was leaving the company to go into business for myself, all he did was shrug his shoulders and say, “Man’s got to do something.” He passed in 1969. Before they closed the coffin for the final time, I slipped his caliper in his coat pocket.

Seven years after that, they closed the maintenance yard completely and moved the operations to Jackson. I had been out of the business for twenty years by then, but it still hurt my heart to see it go.

Oh good Lord, that’s Casper Meeks over there talking to Andrea. His Parkinson’s has gotten really bad. Is he crying? This is going to be hard to get through.

“Casper! How are you my old friend?”

A GOOD CLEAN BURNING

Mississippi Highway Patrolman, Justin Bailey stands in the back of Courtroom One of the Horton County courthouse and listens to the State Executioner address a group of local school children and reporters. As escort for the state's portable electric chair, he has heard Jimmy Pinney deliver this same spiel so many times in the past year that he knows it by heart.

“Manufactured by the Bolt Electrical Manufacturing Company of Memphis, Tennessee, this custom-built dispenser of ultimate justice is the very model of modern engineering. Note the built-in safety lock on the main switch to prevent premature discharge. If you were to look inside the truck, you would see an International Harvester UD9 25,000 Watt, 230 Volt 3-phase direct-coupled generator. Power is transferred from the UD9 via these industrial grade cables to the transformer rack which is divided into two separate circuits. The first circuit increases the voltage provided to between 1500 to 2300 volts of alternating current. Known as the high side, it is designed to deliver a brief, but intense jolt. The second circuit raises the voltage to between 300 to 1000 volts of alternating current. Known as the low side, it is intended to give the condemned a less intensive, yet more sustained shock.”

At this point, the men in the crowd begin nodding their heads knowingly, while the women shake theirs in horror. The reporters scribble in their notepads and the children whisper and elbow one another. Pinney continues.

“After the intended is placed securely in the chair and the electrodes are attached to his head and left calf, the system is powered up. The exact voltages for each circuit are selected from a chart, scientifically devised by the National Prison Association and based on the subject's body weight and mass. These rheostats are set accordingly and when the

word is given, a three part process is initiated. First, the safety lock is disengaged and the main switch is pulled firmly to the high side where it is allowed to remain for exactly eight seconds. This shocks the brain into unconsciousness. Next, the main switch is pulled firmly to the low side where it is allowed to remain for exactly twenty seconds. This stops the heart and the nervous system, effectively causing all life functions to cease. And finally, the main switch is returned to the high side for eight more seconds for good measure. Afterwards, the main switch is returned to the off position and upon my signal, the attending physician checks the newly departed's vital signs. It is quick, painless, and in the hands of a professional like myself, foolproof.”

At this point, a question and answer period ensues. As always, Pinney ends the show by offering a demonstration and asking for a volunteer. “How about you, little boy, or you, madam?” which gets a good laugh.



Justin Bailey joined the Mississippi Highway Patrol in the winter of 1939. MHP had been formed the year before and most of the so-called highways were just gravel roads maintained by the state. His patrol car, a '38 Ford, had no heater and only a one-way radio; if they called and wanted a response, he had to find a phone.

It was Justin's wife, Sadie, that suggested he apply. He had played football for State as a defensive tackle and majored in Law Enforcement. His dream was to work for the FBI.

After training, Justin was assigned to District Seven in South Mississippi and the couple moved to Tatum. It was a nice little town. They bought a small house on Quaney Circle near downtown and joined the Methodist Church. In the evenings when he was off, they liked to sit on the front porch in their matching white rockers from Sears and

listen to the sound of the trains mixed with the rhythm of creaking wood beneath their feet. The couple planted a small garden out back and built a chicken coop.

In the spring of 1940, his supervisor informed him that he was being assigned to escort duty. In addition to his regular shifts, Justin would be accompanying politicians and visiting dignitaries as they traveled around the state. Because of his size, he was a natural choice. It sounded like an easy job, so he agreed. He didn't realize that it also meant he would be providing escort for the State Executioner and the new portable electric chair, as needed.

When Sunflower County allowed the state to build the penitentiary there, they stipulated that executions continue to be carried out in the county of conviction. The Mississippi Department of Corrections, in an effort to find a more humane execution method than hanging, had hit on the idea of a portable chair. It would be housed in Tatum.

The first time Justin saw the chair was the first really nice day in April. He was told to meet Jimmy Pinney the Executioner, at the garage for a six city press junket to show off the state's new toy to the voters. The rig consisted of a twelve foot converted delivery truck with a large industrial generator mounted inside, a seven foot tall rack with all of the controls and gauges, and the chair, itself. Made of heavy varnished oak with thick leather straps at the arms, waist and feet, it looked to Justin like something out of a state fair horror show.

Pinney was a sight to behold. Short and thin, he had jug ears and a shock of jet black hair cut high and tight. He was always dressed to the nines in a wide lapel wool suit and polka dot tie. The guys around the station soon came up with all manner of nicknames for him: Skinny Pinney, Dr. Shocks, Killer Watts, Professor Lightning, or just

The Professor. Justin called him Doc and soon grew to like the curious little man who took such pride in having a job that few people would want. As they rode together for the first time, Justin asked him why he became an executioner.

“It is an age old and honorable profession. I do not consider myself a violent person for I do not select the men I send to the next life. I am but the right arm of justice for the state and a merciful man. I take pride in my job because it is the merciful thing to do. For thousands of years, the condemned have hoped for, even prayed for, an executioner who cares. Whether that meant taking the time to put an extra sharp edge on the blade or making sure that the rope was the right length or even that the kindling was dry, a merciful executioner could shorten the suffering one endured during a forced exit from this life,” he said.



Justin’s hand trembles as he lights his cigarette, so he cups the Zippo with both hands hoping none of the people filing past him out of the courtroom will notice. He has knots in his stomach as he thinks about tonight’s execution.



The first time the chair was used was on a man convicted of killing his wife in the township of McPhail, a man named Billy Rae Moody. They rolled into town at lunchtime and backed the truck up onto the courthouse lawn. With help from a couple of trustees, they carted the chair and rack into the courtroom and ran the cables through a window out to the truck. You would have thought the circus had come to town. After the set up was completed, a group of kids from the high school filed into the courtroom and some newspaper men took pictures while Pinney gave his talk. He warned them to

stay in school and be law abiding citizens so they'd never have to meet him professionally.

Justin and Pinney had dinner with the mayor, the sheriff, and some local businessmen at the hotel. The pair was informed over dessert that a lottery had been held to allow fifty people inside to watch. When the time came, it looked to Justin like a lot more than fifty as it was standing room only. Afterwards, Pinney was quoted in the paper as saying Moody had died "with tears in his eyes for the efficient care I took to give him a good clean burning."

Justin soon learned that there was no such thing as a clean burning. Even the best ride in the chair was a gruesome spectacle. He was only supposed to be an escort to make sure that the family and friends of the condemned did no harm to the Professor or the equipment, but he was often called on to shave a head or leg or worse: help stuff cotton up the poor bastard's ass so he wouldn't shit himself. Justin didn't like spending time around these men because he didn't want to get to know them. It's hard not to feel sorry for someone, anyone, that was about to die in such a manner; no matter what they had done.

The worst part however was the smell: burning ozone combined with burning flesh and hair. And someone always vomited. Reports started filtering back that it would take a week or better to air out a courtroom after an electrocution. Sadie would make Justin undress and bathe as soon as he came home. She said she could smell it on his uniform.

Witnessing these executions took an emotional toll on Justin. Riding home in the truck late at night with Pinney, he would look out into the darkness and try not to remember what he had just seen. He chain smoked and gripped the seat to keep his hands

from shaking. By contrast, Pinney would seem buoyant; often humming a tune or making small talk.

After a while, Justin began to have nightmares where he was strapped in the chair and suffocating under that black hood, the stench in his nostrils. He would wake up gasping for air and race to the toilet to throw up or just dry heave uncontrollably. Sadie said he needed to talk to the Captain about it. Justin was afraid the guys would think he was soft, but he told her he would when the time was right. In the meantime, he would save the extra money he earned to build a nest egg for their future family.

Adding pressure to the situation was Sadie's father. Over Christmas dinner, he informed Justin that he considered capital punishment to be state sanctioned murder which made Justin an accessory. Also, since most of the men being put to death were Negroes, it amounted to a state sanctioned lynching worthy of the Klan, but not a civilized society.



Shit, it doesn't matter if it's a white man or a nigger, Justin thinks as his father-in-law's words slip back into his thoughts. Guilty is guilty. He crushes the butt under his black leather shoe and walks outside to get some air. Few people are out in the midday sun. He walks back over to Sheriff Brown's office.

Sheriff Oscar Brown and his wife, Viola have an apartment in back. Viola is a small scrappy woman with black hair. They told him earlier this morning about the day that Benge Thompson, the condemned came to town.

"It was right after the Fourth of July and I was letting Oscar sleep late. I had got up to see about getting the prisoners breakfast and I heard this racket out front. There was a man outside hollering and banging on the door, so I ran to see what was the matter.

It was Tillman Bean and he said, “Go get Oscar, quick!” Well, I looked past Tillman and walking down the street toward the courthouse was this big niggra man holding a human head up high over his head and he’s just covered in blood and mumbling something. I ran and woke Oscar up and told him what was happening, so he pulls on his clothes and reaches for his gun, but puts it back cause...”

“Well, cause there had been a sheriff shot the week before out in Texas by a crazy man that over-powered him and took his gun,” Oscar said.

“You know how strong crazy people are—they’ve got super-human strength!” Viola said.

“So I told Viola to call my deputy, Larry, to meet me at the courthouse and bring the twisters,” Oscar said. Justin chuckled at that because a twister is a really old style restraint that consists of one cuff with a t-handle that twists the cuff tighter and tighter on the arm and can bring any man to their knees. They’d long since been outlawed, but some of these old time lawmen kept them around for “special occasions.”

“When I got to the courthouse, I followed the trail of blood right into the courtroom and there he was standing in front of the prosecutors table and got the head propped up on the table and he’s talking to it and he’s saying ‘I finally got justice. I finally got justice.’ I look at the head and I suddenly realize that it belongs to Judge Price! Brought the Judge’s head right to his own courtroom! Can you believe it?”

“Did he come along peacefully?” Justin asked.

“I should say not!” Viola said.

“I thought he was. He kept looking at the head and mumbling, but once Larry got the twisters on him, it was like he came out of a trance and flew into a rage. With his free

hand, he tips the head over and pulls a knife out of the neck! Can you believe it? Out of the neck!”

“The neck!” Viola said.

“He slashes at me and cuts me a good one, right across here,” he said and pointed under his left arm.

“It took twenty-two stitches!” Viola said.

“Fortunately, Tillman came running in with a piece of two by four and bashed him over the back of the head and that was all she wrote.”

“So why kill the Judge? Obviously, it wasn’t random or he wouldn’t have brought the head to the courtroom. Did Judge Price sentence him or some family member to do time?”

“No, it was because he—,” Viola said.

“It was because he’s a homicidal maniac!” Oscar interrupted and gave his wife a look. She stood up and started to clear the table of dishes.

“So why didn’t they just sentence him to Whitfield?” Justin said.

“Because he killed a sitting judge and almost killed a sheriff,” Oscar said. “You don’t do that and go sit in a rubber room. You get the chair.”

Now the sheriff sits alone at his desk as Justin walks through the door. An oscillating fan over his shoulder, the only relief from the August sun, rattles the metal blinds intermittently.

“So tell me about the deal with that Conrad fellow,” the sheriff says. Justin walks over to the coffee pot and pours a cup before taking a seat in the metal chair beside the desk.

“That was a real mess,” Justin says and blows across the hot liquid.



Justin had tried to resign from escort duty after the Conrad execution. It was his twelfth in just over a year. The nightmares were becoming more frequent, now, and he began bringing a fresh uniform to change into afterwards, out of consideration for Sadie.

Arnold Conrad had been convicted in Lawrence County of capital murder for the kidnapping and killing of a schoolgirl and his appeals had run out. There had been a lot of coverage in the press and people were crawling all over each other for the chance to get inside to watch him fry. Having followed the trial in the papers like everyone else, Justin had no sympathy for the man; justice would be served.

Pinney had become quite the celebrity by then. There had even been a write up about him in *Life* and a photo of him standing next to the chair with his hand on the switch and a caption that read, "The sure fired hand of justice." He loved the attention. If the job had taken any emotional toll on him, he never let it show.

The execution was scheduled for midnight and Justin was asked to shave Conrad's head. Conrad was young, about 19. He looked older in the papers and Justin was taken by surprise when he saw him in person. The boy seemed calm and rather unfazed by the prospect of dying.

"You smoke?" he asked as Justin stood behind him with the electric clippers Pinney kept in his prep box.

"Yeah, you need one?" Justin said.

"No, I don't smoke. They gave me a whole carton of Lucky Strikes. They're over there if you want them," he said.

"You sure?"

"No point in starting now," he said and laughed.

“Thanks,” Justin said as the locks of brown hair fell around his shoes.

After Justin finished with his head, he slit Conrad’s left pant leg and pulled it up far enough to shave the hair from his calf. The jailhouse chaplain arrived about then, so Justin packed up the box and took it out to the truck along with the carton of smokes.

For the rest of the night until it was time, he sat on the back bumper and watched the growing crowd. People were caught trying to pry open a window of the courthouse so they could sneak inside to watch. A man was selling hotdogs and hamburgers from a concessions wagon and another stood on a crate preaching about the end of days.

At a quarter ‘til midnight, Pinney fired up the generator. Then they pulled the door down and locked it, just in case. Justin told the deputy assigned to assist him to guard the truck and the cables and then went inside to help escort the prisoner from the basement holding cells up to the courtroom.

Conrad looked much more somber now, like the reality of what was about to happen was starting to set in. After he was strapped in, the sentence was read and he was offered the chance to speak. “I’m sorry for what I done and the hurt that I caused. Please forgive me,” he said.

“Burn in Hell,” somebody shouted from the back of the courtroom and then silence fell on the room as Pinney strapped the skull cap under his chin and put the hood over his head. Then he strapped the ankle cuff to the left leg and took his place at the controls. He took the stopwatch that hung from his neck in his right hand and released the safety from the master switch. After checking the meters once more, he gave a solemn nod to the court officer. The court officer asked the clerk if the Governor had called and she said no. He looked at the courtroom clock which read 12:01 and then nodded to Pinney. Pinney pulled the switch as his thumb started the stopwatch and

Conrad began to convulse as the first wisps of smoke appeared around his head. Several people gasped.

After eight seconds, Pinney pushed the switch to the opposite side as he alternated his gaze from the stopwatch to the meters to Conrad who was smoking in earnest now, but after ten seconds, he stopped shaking. Something was wrong. Pinney and Justin looked at each other; the generator had stopped. For the first since Justin had met him, Pinney looked scared. Conrad began to scream. They ran for the truck.

When they got there, the deputy was still keeping watch and nothing appeared to have been tampered with. Justin fumbled for the key and when he got the lock off and threw open the door, the generator looked fine. Pinney checked the fuel and it had plenty. The generator had a diesel engine, the kind you started with gas and then switched over to diesel. Pinney poured in some gas and hit the starter, but it wouldn't fire. Justin could hear screaming from the open window. He grabbed a screwdriver from the toolbox and released the fuel line from under the filter and nothing came out so he released the line from the top of the filter and diesel poured out which meant a clogged filter. Pinney handed him another filter from the parts bin and Justin put it on as fast as he could.

Fifteen minutes passed from the time the generator stopped until they got back inside. Conrad was crying and begging to be released. "I can't breathe!" he kept shouting. "Oh God!" Justin's mind flashed back to his nightmare.

Pinney hurriedly checked the meters and threw the switch to the high side without bothering to check the stopwatch. Justin watched Pinney counting to himself before shifting to the low side. After it was finally over and the doctor had declared Conrad dead, women were crying and at least two people had thrown up. After the room was

cleared, Pinney slumped down in a chair and put his head in his hands. They rode home in silence; Pinney looked like a beaten man.



Sheriff Brown leans back in his seat and whistles when Justin finishes his story. “I sure hope we don’t have any mishaps like that tonight.”

“Not likely,” Justin says. “Doc took the whole thing as a personal failure. He won’t let it happen again.”

Later that evening, Justin walks over to the jail to help escort the prisoner. Bengé Thompson’s head has already been shaved smooth and an old black preacher reads scriptures to him from outside the holding cell. Bengé looks up for a second and goes back to staring at the floor. Justin sits with the Sheriff and his two deputies and watches them play gin rummy. He occasionally hears Bengé humming quietly to himself.

The execution has been scheduled for 8:00 pm. At about 7:45 pm, Justin hears the generator crank over and a cheer rises up from the crowd gathered outside.

The phone rings and startles Justin. The Sheriff picks it, says a few words and hangs up again.

“They’re ready for us,” he says.

They walk to the courthouse with the Sheriff on one side of Bengé and Justin on the other. The two deputies, each cradling a shotgun, escort them; one in front and one behind. The crowd cheers and boos alternately and shouts obscenities.

“Hey boy, you know how much juice it takes to kill a crazy spook?” a young man standing on a courthouse column pedestal yells at Bengé. “About a JIG-a-watt!”
Laughter erupts from the crowd.

“Clear the sidewalk!” Justin barks with his right hand on his holstered pistol’s grip, and the path opens wide.

Inside the packed courtroom, Pinney stands by the chair wearing a leather apron over his suit; the stopwatch hangs from his neck.

Benge’s eyes search the balcony, where all of the blacks are sitting. After he is strapped in, the court officer begins reading.

“Benjamin Harold Thompson, you have been found guilty of murder in the first degree by Horton County and the State of Mississippi and sentenced to be electrocuted until you are dead, forthwith. Do you have any last words?”

Benge smiles sadly as the crowd leans forward to listen.

“I finally got justice,” Benge says.

“Mister Executioner, you may proceed.”

Pinney threads the thick copper electrode through the eyelet in the top of the hood before pulling it down over Benge’s head. Benge begins screaming and straining against the leather straps. Pinney appears flustered as he tries to connect the cable to the electrode.

Justin hears singing. He looks up to the balcony and sees a young woman is now standing and singing to Benge. Benge stops struggling and seems to relax.

“Come ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore...”

Pinney looks up at the woman for a second and goes back to work. He attaches the cable and threads on the large brass wing nut onto the electrode. The crowd split their attention between Benge and the woman.

“Jesus, ready stands to save you, full of pity, love and power...”

Pinney attaches the lower cable to the leg cuff and threads on another shiny wing nut.

“Come ye weary, heavy laden, lost and ruined by the fall...”

Pinney takes his place at the console and flips the breaker switch to begin charging the circuit capacitors. Outside, the generator’s RPMs dip under the load and then slowly rise. The two panel meter needles begin to move to the right. Justin looks at the phone on the wall.

“If you tarry ‘til you’re better, you will never come at all...”

Pinney looks at the court officer, who nods at him. He pulls the master switch toward him. Bengé begins to convulse. Justin watches as tears stream down the young woman’s face.

“I will arise and go to Jesus, He will embrace me in his arms...”

Pinney jams the master switch to the low side.

“In the arms of my dear savior, oh there are ten thousand charms.”

LAND OF AFFLICTION (PART ONE)

Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house." And the name of the second he called Ephraim: "For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction."

Cloma, Mississippi, June 1919

His name was Oliver, which he hated and his mother called him Ollie, which he hated more. Uncle Delbert had nicknamed him Tiger, because of his bright red hair and he liked that, but he had had no success so far in convincing anyone else to follow suit. And on this bright and cool June morning, he walked the clay path beside the tracks that connected the sawmill to the town—past a field of pine stumps and saw grass that waved gently in the breeze.

Oliver had been checking his rabbit snares. His pant legs and shoes were wet from the dew that would soon evaporate along with the fog that had settled into the hollows overnight. As the breeze raised goose bumps on his arms, it brought a tease of lavender mixed with wood smoke from the incinerator that fired the steam engines powering the mill.

Uncle Delbert ran the engines. Thanks to him, Oliver was an authority on how everything at the mill operated. He would sneak over when he could and watch from behind the millwright's shack as the men at the log pond, shirtless and sinewy, shiny black in the sun, bobbed and balanced on the floating timbers. They used long sticks with metal hooks to feed the logs onto the conveyor that transported them high in the air to the saw carriage.

Oliver wanted to ride that carriage someday like the block setters who positioned the logs for cutting. Theirs was the most dangerous job. They communicated with the

sawyer through hand signals over the screams of the giant band saw—a spinning ribbon of steel that could shatter in an instant, sending shrapnel flying in all directions. The carriage would creep forward as the blade took another slice down the length of the log. As it neared the end, you could see the setters grab the rail and brace themselves as the carriage shot back forty feet to the starting point in just under two seconds. It was so much more exciting than his father's job as the mill's bookkeeper—he could watch them for hours.

The hiss and whine beckoned him, even now, through the trees. But there was no time this morning, for Oliver was already expected at the post office where his grandfather worked. As postmaster and staff of one, Oliver's grandfather was the only federal employee in the tiny town of Cloma. Indeed, it could be said that of the town's 1000 or so permanent residents (excluding the drifters and miscreants that populated the company's logging camp), nearly all the men and even some of the women worked for the Manning Timber Company. As with many such towns in South Mississippi, it was built by the company, for the company. The largest store, the company commissary (called the robbisary by Uncle Delbert), didn't even accept cash money; they only accepted the scrip with which Manning paid his employees at the end of the month. If a man wanted cash, say for a shopping trip to Tatum, he had to go see one of the money changers who would happily buy his scrip for a healthy fee. Oliver's father derived nearly half of his income from buying scrip and selling it back to the company in this fashion.

As Oliver entered the town along the tracks, he was flanked by Cloma's three distinct sections: on his left were the nicer homes where the mill's executives, managers, and buyers lived—his side of the tracks. To the right were the simple, but decent houses

of the mill workers: the sawyers, wrights, engineers, filers, etc. That was where Uncle Delbert lived with Aunt Patty, his mom's sister. Behind that was the Negro section, by far the largest. Those houses were shabby by comparison to his own, but still nicer than the tar paper shacks of the logging camp.

The path widened at this point and became a street—still dirt, but more even and maintained. Oliver quickened his pace as he passed his own house, a white Victorian with blue shutters and four rockers on the porch. He hoped his mother didn't spot him and come out to scold him for staying in the woods too long. It was unlikely since she was in bed with one of her headaches, but you just never knew when she might look out of the window. The headaches were "real pounders" and kept her incapacitated for up to three days, sometimes. When he was not in school, his father would send him to the post office to stay with Granddad so she could "have some peace." That was okay because Granddad kept a stash of pulp magazines and candy in the back room that was their shared secret. The candy came from the commissary and the magazines via mail order. With titles like *Argosy*, *The Popular Magazine*, and *True Detectives*, they featured provocative and sensational cover art depicting the often lurid and violent adventure stories inside. When Oliver would walk through the post office door, he didn't have to ask, the expression on Granddad's face told him whether or not a new issue had arrived on the morning train.

A sharp steam whistle sounded once and the mill fell silent. It was 10 o'clock and time to change the saw blade. Oliver approached the main part of Cloma now which consisted of the depot, commissary, the white church, an alterations shop, doctor's office, mill office, post office, city hall, and a few small businesses (although outside merchants

were generally frowned upon by old Mr. Manning as these cut into the company's bottom line).

Oliver slipped in the back door of the post office so as not to call attention to his late arrival. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light of the back room, he could hear voices coming from up front.

"Now Patty, that's no way to be talking about your own sister's husband," Granddad said.

"Poppa, that's *why* I'm saying it; because he *is* family or at least supposed to be family," came Aunt Patty's voice. "You don't try to make money off of family. It ain't right! We've been saving for this trip for six months now and he wants us to pay him twenty percent for cashing in Delbert's scrip. Twenty percent! It ain't right, Poppa, and don't say it is!"

Oliver could make out the sort table before him now and the bank of mail boxes on the far wall. A bin of empty mail bags was under the table and he could see that the morning sort had been completed. He turned to walk to the office to check the stash and knocked over the three legged stool that normally stood beside the table. Oliver winced and froze in place.

"Oliver, is that you?" called Granddad.

"Yes sir," he said and walked to the front. On the other side of the counter stood Aunt Patty; dry auburn hair peeking from beneath her favorite yellow bonnet. The smile on her round face didn't match the tone of voice he'd heard seconds before and only the single small cloud of an arched eyebrow blemished her sunny countenance.

"Good morning, Oliver dear," she said. "How are you this morning?"

“Fine,” he said sheepishly and allowed his eyes to wander over the array of stamps and supplies under the counter.

“Catch any rabbits this morning?” Granddad asked. Unlike his daughter, Melvin Joyce was tall and gaunt with a crooked nose that made his face look slightly askew when viewed straight on. He wore a pressed white tab collar shirt with black bow tie and sleeve garters befitting his position and an official postman’s hat atop his remaining hair—gray with only an echo of its once red brilliance.

“No sir, something’s getting my bait but for the life of me I can’t figure out why there’s nothing in the nooses when I get there. It’s been two weeks now!” Oliver was usually at a loss for something to say until you got him talking about trapping, so that was what Melvin usually led with.

“Maybe something is getting to the traps before you,” Aunt Patty said. “You should be careful about going into those woods alone. You might run up on a black bear or a bobcat; never know what you’ll meet out there.”

“Now Patty, quit trying to scare the boy,” Melvin said. “You aren’t afraid of bears are you, Oliver?”

“No sir!” he said and mostly that was true, but not entirely.

The mill whistle blew again signifying that the new blade was ready and the sounds of work resumed.

“Well, let me get on back to house and get dinner ready. I haven’t even decided what we’re having for supper tonight, but you’re welcome to come eat with us, Poppa,” Patty said. “That reminds me, Oliver, how is your mama feeling? Any better?”

“Yes, ma’am, she said she’s feeling some better,” Oliver said.

“You tell her that if she don’t feel like cooking to send you over close to suppertime and I’ll give you some stew or whatever to carry back. There’ll be plenty,” she said and turned to go. “And don’t forget what we talked about, Poppa.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Melvin said and watched her until the door closed. He turned solemnly to Oliver. “Never have daughters if you can help it,” he said and winked. “Now let’s see if anything came in today’s mail.”

They walked back to the small Post Master’s office and Oliver took his usual seat next to the potbelly stove in the corner. The dark wood floor had a high gloss compared to the rest of the work area thanks to Melvin’s habit of waxing it on the third Saturday of each month. The wooden desk in the center of the room was always neat and sparsely adorned with an inbox and a carousel of rubber stamps that Oliver liked to spin. A single window with rollup shade behind the desk provided enough light to read on most days and there was a coal oil lamp mounted on the wall for when it didn’t.

Melvin opened the bottom drawer of the desk and removed two Manila envelopes and a Mason jar containing rock candy. He slid the envelopes across the desk towards Oliver, who tore open the top one without bothering to read the return address as Melvin fished out two pieces from the jar. Moments later each had one of the pulps in hand, taking turns reading the story titles aloud; their words slurred by the candy.

“*The Case of the Disappearing Train*,” Melvin said, ominously and held up the magazine for Oliver to admire the illustration.

“*Rex Rider and the Palomino Kid*,” Oliver read. “There could be only one man left standing in this bloody duel to the death!”

“Oh, sounds good,” Melvin said. It was then that Oliver noticed something new in the office—a long box wrapped in brown parcel paper tied with string and propped against the wall beside the window.

“What’s that, Granddad?” Oliver said and pointed. Melvin looked around at the box like he’d never noticed it before.

“Hmmm, I wonder,” he said and went back to flipping pages

“Is it my present?” Oliver asked sitting up straighter.

“Present? Why would you be getting presents in June? It’s not Christmas,” Melvin said. “The Case of the Mysterious Package,” he said and chuckled.

“My *birthday* present! Saturday is my birthday! Is it my *birthday* present?”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out Saturday, won’t we?”

Before Oliver could answer, he was interrupted by the sound of men shouting and banging.

“Hey Doc, Open up!” “Doctor Roberts!” “We got a man injured!”

Standing, Melvin opened the center desk drawer and removed the key to Doctor Roberts’ office before spitting his candy into the waste basket. “Stay here,” he said and walked out. Oliver waited until he heard the door slam and ran up front to watch from the window. Two black men supported another between them, what remained of his right hand was wrapped in a bloody shirt and held up by the man to his right. All three were so covered in blood, it looked as though they’d been sprayed with it; so much that Oliver was sure he could smell it through the open window. The man groaned loudly and rolled his head from side to side. That was a good sign, he was still awake.

It wasn’t the first time Oliver had witnessed such a scene or even the fifth. Spending time next door to the doctor’s office in a sawmill town meant having a front

row ticket to a cavalcade of death and dismemberment to shame any state fair sideshow. It was said that over in Tatum, every third man you met on the street was missing a body part of some kind.

These men looked to be loggers with their canvas pants, tall leather boots, and suspenders. Sawmill men didn't wear suspenders and Oliver didn't recognize any of their faces, which meant they were from the camp. But it was unusual for a logger to come in mangled because they cut with long two-man saws called crosscut saws. No, loggers usually got crushed under the massive pines being harvested—some as wide as six feet. They rarely survived the trip into town.

Behind the three men trailed a younger white man, with blond hair. He too was dressed like a logger, but his clothes looked newer and cleaner. He had no blood stains. Melvin held the door open for the men and looked back towards the post office as if he knew Oliver was watching. Oliver ducked back out of sight. Only the white man remained outside and after pacing the length of the porch a couple of times, he pulled a pouch from his shirt pocket and began to roll a cigarette. After it was rolled and lit he resumed pacing, muttering to himself all the while.

Doctor Roberts was a full head taller than Granddad and made his rounds on the largest bicycle Oliver had ever seen. Even so, Doc's heels firmly touched the ground when he sat on the seat. There was a small basket between the handlebars for his "pill bag." He came riding up just as the man tossed his butt off the porch. The two men exchanged words and Doc Roberts went inside and shut the door, leaving the man to continue his pacing.

Now that Doc was here, Oliver decided he had better go back to the office before Melvin returned. He had just gotten seated when he heard the door open and close again.

Oliver picked up his magazine and pretended to read. Melvin looked pale as he sat down with a loud sigh. Leaning back in his chair, he looked at Oliver who met his gaze.

“Oliver, promise me you’ll never work in the timber business. There’s no rougher way to earn a living under the sun than logging,” he said.

“What happened?” Oliver asked.

“That boy was bent over wrapping a skidder cable around a log and the operator pulled the lever too soon and dragged him and the log some forty yards before the fingers came off.” Then he added, “I shouldn’t have told you that so don’t tell your mother. I just want you to understand what a dangerous life these folks lead and for what? Fifteen cents an hour! You can do better; I know you can. You’re smart.”

Oliver shuddered at the image. “I will Granddad, I promise.”

“Well, I need a smoke after all that,” Melvin said and got up to retrieve his cob and tobacco pouch from the top of the filing cabinet. Oliver returned his attention to the magazine as Melvin loaded a bowl. He soon became aware of men’s voices outside the window.

“I *know* you done it on purpose, you ain’t fooling nobody!”

“You watch your tongue, boy, you don’t talk to *me* like that!”

Oliver stood and craned his neck one way and then the other trying to see who was speaking. It was one of the black men that had carried the injured one and the white man who stayed on the porch. The black man was older with greying hair and beard, but was much larger than the younger man. The young man appeared cocky now, not worried like before—arms folded, chest thrust out.

When Oliver looked, Granddad was signaling for him to sit down and then placed a finger to his lips. Melvin quietly took his seat, slid open the center drawer, and removed a box of matches.

“Effie told me you done lost ten dollars to him playing cards and you don’t want to pay up now,” the black man said.

“I ain’t paid him on account of he cheats, but that ain’t got nothing to do with it. I gave the signal cause he slapped the log.”

“If you didn’t do it on purpose then why you didn’t signal stop when everybody was hollering at you? If that big log had rolled over on top of him, it’d done kilt him! How he gone make a living now?”

“That’s not my problem!”

“Oh, it’s gone be your problem when I get done talking to the boss man. See if it ain’t!”

“You better keep your goddamn mouth shut, nigger!” his voice breaking as he got louder.

Melvin struck a match and fired the load of tobacco, a white cloud of smoke drifted out of the window.

“We gone see what we gone see,” the black man said, his voice sounding farther away. Suddenly, the white man’s face: flushed red, eye’s wild appeared at the window looking directly at Oliver. Fear shot through him like a bullet as their gazes locked. Melvin, unaware, tamped the cherry of his pipe and reached for another match. Then, just as quickly the man was gone and only a vague sense of dread and the sweet smell of Granddad’s pipe remained.

On Friday morning Gloria Gullledge abandoned her sickbed and came down to join her husband and son for breakfast. Oliver watched his mother descend the stairs, blonde hair up in a loose bun, wearing an ankle-length blue skirt with matching sailor blouse, black boots, and belt. He guessed the outfit was new. New clothes always brightened her mood.

“Well, don’t you look like a shiny penny,” Bradford Gullledge said looking up from his plate of ham and eggs.

“Why, thank you, kind sir,” she said with a slight curtsy and flourish of the shirt. “Isn’t it just too clever? It arrived Tuesday, but I didn’t even feel like trying it on until today. These tops are all the rage in New York this season.”

Bradford didn’t bother asking the price. The 45-year-old accountant was tight with a dollar, but he did allow her a generous clothing allowance. It was good for a man with aspirations to have a stylish wife.

Gloria sat down at the table and, smiling at Oliver, took his hand. “Hello, sweet boy. Have you missed mama this week? She’s missed you.” Oliver had seen his mother every day. He would come and sit quietly by her bed in the dark in case she needed anything like a damp washcloth or a glass of water. But whenever she recovered and was back to her normal self, Gloria always acted like she had just returned from a long trip.

“Yes, Mama,” he said softly looking at his plate.

There was another reason for Oliver’s mother to be in a good mood today. It was the maid’s first day on the job. Gloria had pleaded to Bradford for several months for help with the cooking and cleaning. After the last bout of “headaches” he finally relented. Mary Pearl Hosey had come highly recommended by the Manning’s maid,

Kate. When Gloria found out that Mary Pearl had worked as a housekeeper in New York, the search was over and no other candidate would suffice.

“How’s the food?” she asked her husband.

“Best breakfast I’ve ever eaten,” Bradford said.

“Don’t be mean,” she said. “Oh, Mary Pearl! Are you in there?”

Mary Pearl’s face appeared in the small window on the kitchen door a second before she pushed it open carrying a cup and saucer in one hand and a silver coffee pot in the other. She wore a simple black dress with white trim; her hair held back by a white kerchief. Petite in face and figure, she move gracefully and quickly to place the cup before Gloria.

“I am so sorry, Miss Gloria! If I had known you was coming down to eat this morning, I would have had it waiting on you.”

“Nonsense dear! Even I didn’t know until I woke up,” Gloria said. “Now, let’s have a look at you. How does that dress fit?”

Mary took a step back and spun around with a grin. “Fits just fine, thank-you.”

“And you look lovely in it. Are you finding everything, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am, no worries. How do you like your eggs?”

“Just toast for me today.”

“I’ll have it right out,” Mary said and turned to go. The spring-loaded door swung shut behind her.

Gloria turned her attention back to Oliver. “Ollie, love, have you decided what kind of cake you want for your birthday?”

“Chocolate,” Oliver said with no hesitation.

“Did you have to ask?” Bradford said.

“I guess I didn’t,” Gloria said. “Oh, I’m riding with Sarah and Janelle over to Tatum this morning. They have a new bakery there that everyone is just raving about.”

“Sounds expensive,” Bradford said.

“Speaking of expensive, have you seen Sarah’s new car? It’s wonderful! They call it an Oldsmobile 34. Clifton ordered it for her for their anniversary and it arrived last week. It’s just the prettiest shade of red you ever saw and so fast. She let me drive it around their house and it’s much easier to drive than your old Model T. You should think about trading up, considering how much you’re back and forth between here and the main office.”

“The Model T’s suspension is far better suited for the driving conditions in this part of the world. You mark my words, that city car won’t last a year in the Piney Woods,” Bradford said.

“Still, I think you should be driving a car befitting your position,” Gloria said.

“You know where I’m putting our money, now. Luxuries can wait. We have a unique opportunity and I intend to make the most of it,” Bradford said in a tone that said he didn’t want to discuss the matter further.

For the past year, Bradford Gullede had been quietly buying up small tracts of cutover land in the surrounding counties for as little as 50 cents an acre. Since the timber boom began in the late 1800s, northern speculators had been buying up the virgin pine forests in South Mississippi, clear-cutting the trees and selling off the land.

“My husband, the King of Stumps,” Gloria said. “What are you going to do with all that useless bottom land? Are you going to become a farmer at your age?”

“Stumps can be used to make turpentine and pine oil,” he said. “And trees grow back. And do you know what mineral rights are?”

“Can’t say that I do,” she said pleasantly. “Where is that girl with my toast?”

“Just don’t go telling anybody about what I’m doing? Okay? Please?”

“Trust me, I won’t,” she said. “I sure wouldn’t want everyone to know that my poor husband has lost his mind. Mary Pearl?”



After his mother and father left the house, Oliver went to the kitchen to find some suitable bait. Mary Pearl was standing at the sink washing dishes.

“Hello, Little Mister,” she said over her shoulder. “What you got planned for today?” Oliver opened the wooden vegetable keeper and removed a carrot.

“I’m fixing to go check my snares,” he said. “Uncle Delbert gives me 50 cents for every rabbit I bring him.”

“Is that right? My daddy taught me how to make a rabbit snare when I was a little girl. You ever eat rabbit stew?”

“Uh huh, Aunt Patty makes it, sometimes,” Oliver said. He pulled a chair away from the kitchen table and sat down. “Mama said you’re from New York. Did you catch rabbits up there?”

“No, I’m *from* New Augusta. I moved with my husband to New York City during the war so he could work a factory job.

“Where is he?”

“He died.”

“How come?”

“He got in a fight with another man,” she said and paused like she looking at something through the window.

“What about?” he said and sniffed the carrot.

“Who knows? Lord, that man was always fighting about something. ‘Can’t whup the world’, I used to say. ‘ Show can try,’ he’d say back.” She went back to washing.

“My cousin Dewey died in the war,” Oliver said. “He got gassed. Aunt Patty still cries about it sometimes.”

“Sometimes, that’s all you can do is cry, Little Mister. Sometimes that’s all any of us can do.”

“I’ll be twelve tomorrow,” Oliver said. Mary Pearl turned around to face him holding a soapy plate and smiled warmly.

“Well, I guess you are a little mister, then,” she said.



Boiler No. 6 had been down for a week by the time a new pressure relief valve arrived from Chicago. The planer mill engine only required one boiler, but if anything happened to No. 5 in the interim, the first European order since the end of the war would be in jeopardy of missing its ship-by date. The company would then have to rely on the Tatum mill to pick up the slack and they were already operating around the clock to fill their own orders. Delbert was thankful that the Cloma mill only had the one 12 hour shift. If his equipment had to go nonstop, it would be more than he could handle.

Delbert Barrett never considered himself an engineer although that was his job title. He had come to the Piney Woods from his home in Pennsylvania at the age of 19 in 1896. The son of a machinist, Delbert had worked for the Lackawanna Lumber Company of Scranton pulling a saw as part of a seventy man logging crew. He was 6’6” and 279 pounds of pure muscle by his seventeenth birthday. The crew liked his friendly, no nonsense attitude and everyone agreed that he “pulled a good saw.”

Shortly after his arrival at Manning's Cross Creek logging camp an incident occurred that would establish Delbert's reputation within the company. It was the custom of the logging crew to haze new men by ignoring their requests for food at the table each morning. The new man would be seated at the end of the long plank table and everyone would dig in, talking loudly, and devouring everything before them as quickly as possible.

"Please pass the eggs," the new man would say or "Please pass the grits," but to no avail. All that would be available to him would be what was within reach and the crew made sure that that didn't amount to much. How long this went on depended largely on how the man reacted.

On the third day of this treatment, Delbert decided that he had had enough. The next morning, he put his pistol in his coat pocket and went to breakfast. One of the crew nudged another as he walked into the cook tent and took the only available chair at the end of the table.

"Please pass the ham," Delbert said evenly. No one turned their heads or acknowledged his presence. Delbert sighed loudly before rising. Pulling the pistol from his pocket, he stepped up on his chair and then up onto the table and began walking to the other end. The crew stared in shocked silence as he walked the length of the table, bent down and picked up the plate of ham before returning to his seat. "Please pass the biscuits," he said.

The next day when a couple of the men complained about the "young upstart" to Papa Manning, the old man slapped his knee, threw back his head, and cut loose with a belly laugh.

“That’s the man I want to be the new crew chief,” Papa said as he stroked his long grey beard and two days later, Delbert had a new job title.



As he compared the new relief valve to the old one, Delbert heard a familiar voice behind him.

“Good morning, Delbert,” George Clifton said from the doorway of the boiler room. Delbert briefly turned and squinted up at the diminutive form silhouetted by the sun.

“Morning, George,” Delbert said returning to his work. Delbert didn’t have much use for George Clifton. The two men had been saw partners for a time years ago before George left the company to become an independent logging contractor. After the younger Manning had taken over the company and switched to using powered skidders instead of the traditional oxen teams, George had returned to the company as a section chief—in charge of inspecting the logging train’s main line and dummy spurs. He spent most of his time riding up and down the tracks in his motorized section car sipping from a bottle of corn liquor that he kept under the seat. Since seeing the movie *Birth of a Nation* a few years earlier, George had become the local leader of the Ku Klux Klan and was always trying to recruit Delbert. As the grandson of a Pennsylvania preacher, Delbert got along just fine with Negroes and had no interest in the group.

“Guess you heard about that nigger what got his fingers ripped off on Tuesday, huh?” George said.

“Yeah, I heard about it,” Delbert said.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” George said with a sneer. “I heard he’s one of them New Orleans niggers, you know.”

During the war, while many of the company's young white workers were serving "over there," a large group of blacks left to find factory jobs up North. To make up for the labor shortage, the company was forced to travel to New Orleans to find workers. The two hundred black men that rode back on that chartered train with the recruiters were not interested in adhering to any local code of conduct and thought nothing of speaking their minds. After the war, returning soldiers were beside themselves to find such men in positions traditionally held by whites. A seething anger festered just below the surface now and everyone knew it was only a matter of time before the dam broke.

"Now they're trying to say it was my boy's fault," George said. "Said he gave the signal to the operator too soon on purpose. Hell, it ain't Clyde's fault if the boy ain't got better sense than to get wrapped up in the cable. If you want to blame somebody, blame Junior Manning for bringing in those damn skidders in the first place. You know I'm right! Ever since he took over and brought in those Yankee investors, the company's been going to hell. A skidder kills everything between the tree and tracks—it don't care! They're logging like there's no tomorrow. It ain't like when you and I were out there with the old man. We took care to protect the little trees so our jobs would be here in the future. Not Junior and not these bastards! They want a quick dollar and to hell with everybody else!"

Delbert finished threading the safety valve onto the pipe and paused to wipe the sweat from his face with a rag. He looked back at George leaning against the parts bin.

"I agree that skidders are hard on the land, but George, Junior Manning saved this company after the Tatum mill burned in '16. Between the war and the fire, we're lucky to have a job at all," Delbert said. "I don't blame him for bringing in outside money to rebuild. You remember the rumors? The hand wringing that went on? Everybody was

convinced that all those jobs were going to be lost and to be honest, I wouldn't have blamed the Mannings if they *had* shut it down. Because I don't know if you've gotten out to the woods lately, but careful or not, someday they're going to run out of trees. There's just too many folks in the lumber business around here and only so much land to cut from. So the smart thing to do might have been to just scale back and ride it out here in Cloma. But what did they do? They replaced that old mill with a bigger one made out of concrete and steel. They showed a level of commitment that I for one didn't expect, but do appreciate."

"Do you appreciate the fact that they're keeping all these New Orleans niggers even though the war's over and our boys are sitting around wondering where their jobs went?" George said and slapped the lid of the bin. "They brought'em up here on a train, why can't they take'em back on the same train what brung'em?"

George looked around as if to check for any listeners and leaned in. "That's why you need to join up with us, Delbert. Cause if we don't take care of our best interests, ain't nobody else going to and you know I'm right. We're having a meeting at the hotel on Saturday and if you know what's good for you, you'll be there."

Delbert finished tightening the valve fitting and stood to face George—the pipe wrench still clenched in a meaty fist. "George, are you threatening me?"

George's eyes widened and he took a step back. "Threatening you?" he said with a hurt look on his face. "No Delbert, I wouldn't think of such a thing. I'm just saying that *we* are the only ones looking out for your best interests and that's why you should be standing with us."

"Hey Delbert?"

Delbert looked up to see his assistant Billy Holbrook standing in the doorway. Billy was a skinny kid with curly brown hair and an honest, friendly face that looked closer to 16 years than the 19 he claimed. Thank God, Delbert thought.

“Yeah, Billy,” he said.

“Mr. Meyer told me to come tell you that the hog sounds like it’s about to shake itself apart again,” Billy said. The hog was a large chipper that turned bark and scrap wood into fuel to fire the boilers.

“Did you check speed indicator?” Delbert said.

Billy hesitated and then said, “Yeah.”

“All right, tell him I’ll be there in a few minutes,” Delbert said. “But if I get over there and find that somebody’s been messing with the controller again, I’m gonna readjust *you*, you hear me?”

Billy grinned, “Yes sir!”

“He’s a good kid,” George said after he was gone. “He’s coming to the meeting on Saturday—you should too.”

“He *is* a good kid,” Delbert said. “And you best leave him alone. He don’t need you telling him who to hate in this world, that’s for damn sure.”

George smiled and turned to go. “You’re going to need us one day, Delbert—mark my words,” he said over his shoulder.

“In a pig’s eye, you little bastard,” Delbert said under his breath.



It had rained all Saturday morning. Lunch was over and before Oliver was a chocolate layer cake with twelve burning candles. Seated around the table were Aunt

Patty and Uncle Delbert, Granddad, Gloria, and Bradford. Mary Pearl looked on from a distance.

“What’d you wish for Tiger?” Delbert said as Oliver blew out the candles.

“Don’t tell him, Ollie dear, or it won’t come true,” Gloria said.

“I wished I could open my presents now,” Oliver said.

“Where is your friend, Rudy today?” Patty said. “I’d have thought for sure he’d be here for chocolate cake.”

“Bradford wanted today to be just for family,” Gloria said.

“I didn’t want the parents to feel obligated to spend their money on a bunch of frivolous things the boy doesn’t need,” Bradford said.

“Well, wasn’t that thoughtful,” Patty said looking at Delbert.

“Yes, it was,” Gloria said. “Mary Pearl, we’re ready to serve the cake now.”

“Yes, Miss Gloria.”

“Isn’t it nice that you have someone to help you with the housework now,” Patty said as she watched Mary Pearl slice and plate the cake.

“Yes, it is,” Gloria said. “You work so hard, Patty. Delbert should hire some help for you, too.”

“Oh, I like doing for Delbert and...,” Patty said and then stopped as her eyes cut to the picture of Dewey that hung on the staircase wall with the other family photos. “I like doing housework. A maid for me would be one of those frivolous things you mentioned.”

Oliver studied Mary Pearl’s face as she placed the first piece of cake in front of him. The corners of her mouth tightened as she avoided his gaze.

“Tell them about y’all’s trip,” Melvin said.

“Yes Patty, tell us,” Gloria said. “Washington, wasn’t it?”

Delbert put his hand over Patty’s hand that tightly gripped the edge of the lace-covered table and gave it a squeeze. “That’s right,” he said. “We haven’t been since they put up his permanent marker.”

“It’s such a shame that you have to go so far to visit his grave,” Gloria said.

“Yes, but it’s a real honor for him to be buried at Arlington,” Bradford said.

“When are you going?”

“That depends on how long it takes to save up,” Patty said.

“And how soon I can get some time off,” Delbert added.

“Don’t worry about that, Delbert,” Bradford said. “I’ll make sure you can get away whenever you’re ready to go.”

“We can go a lot sooner if you help us out with the exchange,” Patty said.

“Unfortunately, they only give me 80 cents on the dollar for scrip,” Bradford said.

“So I’m already giving you what it costs me.”

“Is that right?” Patty said picking up her fork and smiled, sort of. “Well I guess we’ll go when we can go.”

“What say you open my present first, Oliver,” Melvin said rising from the table.

Oliver had finished his cake before the adults had barely touched theirs.

“Gracious, sweetie! You inhaled that!” Gloria said. “Did you even taste it?”

“Yes ma’am. It was really good!” Oliver said scooting back his chair and walking around to the presents at the other end of the table. The gift from Granddad was the largest box of the three. Oliver quickly tore through the white paper wrapping. The long green box read Winchester 1903 22 caliber Automatic Repeating Rifle. Oliver gasped. Gloria also gasped and looked at Bradford who remained expressionless. Uncle Delbert

grinned and Aunt Patty smiled as she watched her sister's reaction. Oliver removed the lid and peered reverently at the shiny black barrel and walnut stock nestled in a bed of oily brown paper, unsure what to do next. He looked up at Granddad—eyes wild, face flushed.

“It’s just like the one we saw in the catalog!” he said.

“Oh, Papa,” Gloria said shaking her head slowly, her gaze transfixed on the rifle as though it might fire at any second. “I don’t know. He’s so young.”

“Nonsense,” Melvin said. “I got my first one when I was ten.”

“He’s safer in the woods with a gun than without,” Patty said.

“Well, it’s a good brand,” Bradford said. “It must have set you back a piece. You really shouldn’t have, Melvin.”

“I got a good price on it,” Melvin said. “Besides, spoiling your grandchildren is one of life’s rewards.”

Delbert got up from the table and walked around behind Oliver. Reaching into the box, he picked up the rifle with an air of calm assurance and turned it over in his hands as he examined it from all sides. Then he pointed it at the crown molding and looked down the sights.

“Don’t you worry,” he said to Gloria as he laid it back in the box. “I’ll teach him everything he needs to know to handle it safely.” He put a hand on Oliver’s thin shoulder. “That’s a deadly weapon, Tiger. Don’t ever forget that,” he said.

“I won’t,” Oliver said solemnly. “I promise.”

Gloria rested her elbows on the table and massaged her temples. “I feel a headache coming on.”