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Quiet Game And Other Stories

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QUIET GAME AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

James M. Paige

December 2011

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ABSTRACT

This collection of short fiction ranges in length from the flash fiction form to the more traditional full-length short story. While the characters and settings vary from piece to piece, the tales in this collection largely represent the so-called "dangerous" vein of fiction, a convention that emphasizes immediacy of action, economy of language, and protagonists who are either willing or compelled by fate to pursue dubious (and sometimes even violent) ends.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents for all the years of love and support, to my friends for their encouragement and generosity, and to my professors and mentors for their patience and insight. Thank you.

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Quiet Game

"It's up to you, Sis," Alan says.

We stand near the corner of Lewis and Pine. Alan leans against the wall by the display window of Parkes Department Store. To his left, headless mannequins model winter coats. Wooden sleds dangle by twine rope from the ceiling. He flips down the hood of his parka.

I am swinging around a lamp post. My fingers slip, but I catch myself. I hope Alan doesn't see. I'm expecting him to change his mind, to send me home any minute, but he doesn't say anything. His eyes are closed.

I turn and look left then right, as far down Lewis as I can see. There's a taxi every now and then. The street lamps give a pale orange light, and the streets and sidewalks are glazed with rain.

"It's all the same to me," I say.

"We'll keep going," he says.

We cross Lewis Avenue. Alan shoves his hands into his pockets and starts to hum under his breath. I fold my arms tight across my chest and try to keep up. I'm wearing boots, and I can feel them scrub against the tops of my ankles.

The midtown places all are closed--the barbershop and the diner and Melvin's Shoe Shop, catty-corner across the way, where Mama used to take us to buy Buster Browns every Labor Day before school started. The windows are boarded and beards of ryegrass scruff wild along the sidewalk cracks.

To our left, we pass a stripped down Impala up on blocks, trunk popped, glass smashed out of every window. We pass a rusted ten-speed bicycle chained to a fire hydrant. We pass a trail of cardboard boxes folded flat and soaked with rain. They spread across the street from our sidewalk to a building stoop where a skinny bearded man wearing a pink wind-breaker sits on the top step and peels an apple with a pocket knife. His cargo pants are baggy, and his hair is pulled back into a pony tail. He looks up and smiles at me as he works the blade around the apple. He licks his lips, and I look away. The wind shifts and the air smells of rotten fish.

We're headed toward Hughes, a row of abandoned warehouses just off the riverfront. Alan works the night shift at the Food Lynx across town. He used to stop by Hughes on his way home then come in whacked out at four or five in the morning. Sometimes he made it to his room, and sometimes he would stop at my room, plop down on my bed and lie across my knees, laughing. I would pull the sheets up close to my chin and pray that Daddy wouldn't hear him down the hall. One time he did, and when he came into my room, he busted Alan's lip. Alan bled all over the patchwork quilt Mama made for my birthday.

Alan ran off. Mr. Collins, his supervisor at Food Lynx, found him sleeping one morning with his back to a sycamore tree along the riverwalk. He let Alan sleep on his couch for two weeks. After that, whenever Alan came home, he would sit across from me in the wicker chair I keep against the opposite wall. His jeans would be streaked with mud. He would just stare.

"Not much longer," Alan says.

I'm trying to remember everything he told me as we were leaving home. Eyes down. Steady pace. Look casual. Don't think, don't worry--do not let up. Don't get separated no matter what.

We veer left on Hughes and head south. The street is wide and ripped with pot holes. At the bottom of the hill, past the riverwalk, I can see little moonlit divots glistening, sliding along with the current. We're picking up speed. The alleys are narrow. We're looking side to side then moving on. I see a cloud drift out of an alleyway, see bloodshot eyes on the edge of shadows, see stoop-shouldered figures in flickers of orange.

"None of them," Alan says, and I nod. The wind's blowing into my face, and I'm squinting and gritting my teeth and reaching to wipe back tears.

A silver-haired woman hunches against the side of a building, cradling a baby against the cold. I look again. It's not a baby, but heads of browned lettuce wrapped in bolts of cloth. The woman wears a sundress over a pair of jogging pants, a grey woolen sweater, red Converse sneakers, and a baseball cap. She's rocking her bundle back and forth and singing about Snow White. I squeeze closer to Alan.

People fill both sides of the street the closer we get to the river. I feel eyes on us from every direction, but we keep pace. Alan's still checking the alleys.

A stocky gray-bearded man steps out in front of us, maybe fifteen or twenty yards ahead. He limps into the next alley.

Alan squeezes my wrist.

We wait a few seconds, then we start out behind him, cutting down the alley in steady strides. We see him again, bracing himself against the side of a building as he walks.

"Hey!" Alan says.

The man stops to look over his shoulder. His eyes are milky green. A fly buzzes around his mouth. He mumbles.

"We've got something for you," Alan says. "Something real good. Want to see?"

The man pauses a second, then turns to face us. A hunter green duffle bag drapes across his body. His right leg trembles as he steps closer, and his soles scrub through the gravel. He's got one hand shoved into his duffle bag the whole time.

"That's right," Alan says. "That's right. Come on." He whispers. I can smell the must, an ammonia smell that makes me sniffle. Alan grins down at me, and I try to smile back, but the smell is all around us, and I start coughing. The man mumbles again.

Alan's hands come out of his pockets. The first punch smashes into the man's jaw. He staggers back and catches himself against the wall. He pulls a blade from his duffle bag, but Alan is already on him. Alan punches him and drops him to his knees. The next punch puts him on the ground. His knife skitters through the gravel, out of reach.

Alan is on top of him now, swinging. The man is throwing up his arms, trying to block. Alan looks back at me and says, "Get you some!" and when he does, the man sneaks in a punch just below Alan's ribs.

Alan falls back, breathing hard, and I see the man crawling along the ground, reaching for his knife. I can't make myself move. The man is wrapping his fingers around the knife handle. Alan is back to his knees again. The man has his blade out in front of him now. He's bleeding from his mouth and nose, but he's struggling to his feet. Alan's got his hands up and his palms open. The man tucks an arm around his bag and backs away. He keeps his knife out and his eyes on Alan the whole time until he disappears around the corner.

Alan catches me staring at him.

"What were you gonna do?" he says. "Stand there and let him stab me?" I look off down at a spot a few feet away, where the old man's shoes dragged through the mud.

I've seen Alan mad before. He quit school last February. Carrier pigeons were the last thing he had learned about in history class. He got this idea that we could use a pigeon to get a message to Mama. He woke me up one night, told me to grab a pad and some pens, then he took me up to the roof. He had a cage full of pigeons and a ball of twine by a ledge that looked west toward the river.

I was sleepy, and I was grumpy, and I told him it would never work. I told him he was stupid for thinking it would. I expected him to grab me and shake me or yell at me or hit me. I almost wanted him to, but he didn't. He went over and took a pigeon from the cage, then with a penknife, jabbed a gash into its chest and sawed his way down. The bird thrashed and cooed and pecked. The others cooed and beat their wings against the bars. Alan tossed the bird over the ledge and let it fall to the sidewalk. He killed every pigeon in the cage.

Alan is on his feet again, brushing the mud from his knees. We're quiet for a while. I know he's going to take me back home, and I want to go, but Alan's been talking about this all week, saying we'll have all kinds of fun. I want to believe him.

"We'll find another one," he says at last, "but we've got to be careful. They're getting smart. Probably talking."

I nod.

We walk to the riverfront and turn left, up the walkway, toward the docks. Alan says patrol cars cruise this stretch most nights, but we don't see any. A barge eases downstream. Across the span, a freight train bleats then rumbles off. The rotten fish smell is worse than ever.

We take the walk slowly, passing sycamore trees in rows along the top of the bluff and empty benches in the glow of lamplight.

"No luck some nights," Alan says.

“It’s all right,” I tell him. The breeze is slowing down, and the air feels good. I squeeze close to Alan again anyway. He puts his arm around me.

The riverwalk takes a sharp dip from the top of the bluff down to the dock. The shadow of a tugboat floats out past the pier. An old skiff lies splintered in the high reeds along the bank. Daddy used to bring me here to fish some Saturday mornings while Mama made groceries uptown. Alan always went with Mama. To guard her, he said. Sometime in the afternoon, they’d come back in the pickup truck, pull up next to the walk, and blow the horn. Me and Daddy would grab our gear and jump in the back with our buckets and our poles. We’d huddle up together by the cab, and Mama would take off, paper sacks rattling in a snag of breeze.

“We’ll keep trying,” Alan says.

Up ahead, the walkway curves with the bend of the river, past a deck with benches and a pair of mounted binoculars painted army green. A woman with stringy blonde hair sits facing the water. She’s wearing a long grey duster and a black skull cap. She swings her feet. A dark-haired little boy sits playing in the grass a few feet behind her. Alan squeezes my shoulder.

“Go talk to her,” he says.

“What?” I say.

“Go talk to her. I’ll find you, I promise. Just keep her talking.”

“But--”

“You’ll see. Go on.”

I start toward the bench. The air is cold again, and my legs feel wobbly. I feel like they’ll blow away if there comes another wind. I’m taking short steps, heel-toe, trying not to make any noise, though I don’t know why. I see Alan to my left, out of the corner of my eye. He’s already crossed the street. He ducks into an alley out of the light. I keep walking.

I'm standing at the end of the bench, and the woman looks up at me, then quickly back at the little boy. "Jared, you okay, baby?" she says, and the little boy nods.

"Hey there," I say. "Mind if I sit down?"

She looks to me again.

"Go right ahead," she says.

The wooden slats on the bench are cold and press hard into my back and my thighs. I turn sideways toward her and prop my arm on the back of the bench.

"Out here by yourself?" she says.

I pause a second.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Keep calling me ma'am," she says, "and I'll start feeling old, and that's a whole other kind of trouble."

I laugh.

"What are you doing out here so late by yourself?" she says.

"Just walking."

"Well, you ought to have somebody with you. I wouldn't be out here myself if I had somewhere. You got anywhere?"

I shake my head.

"You need to find somewhere," she says. "A shelter, if you can. That's what we're trying to do."

"Yeah."

She smiles. She has a soft scent, like lilac. Her clothes still look pretty new. I'm leaning in closer, trying to feel her heat. Alan has circled around. He's coming toward the bench from behind.

"Been out here long?" I say.

"Second night," she says.

"What happened?"

"Things," she says.

"Oh."

Alan is coming closer. He's hunched low, stepping soft through the grass.

"You don't want to talk about it?" I say.

"Not really," she says.

The little boy looks up, and Alan smiles and waves. He raises a finger to his lip for the child to be quiet. The little boy smiles back.

"It's all right," I tell her.

She drops her head and starts to laugh.

"No, it's not," she says. "I'm sorry. It's just hard. You know?"

"Yeah," I say.

Alan waves the little boy closer then holds out his hand. The little boy gets up and runs over to him. They start away.

"I'll tell you one thing, though. Don't ever put all your hopes in a man," she says. She looks at me hard, like she's waiting for the words to sink in. Alan's holding the little boy's hand and leading him across the street into the alley.

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

“There you go again with this ma’am business,” she says.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. Never introduced myself anyway. My name’s Lucille.”

She holds out her hand.

“Mine’s Evelyn,” I say.

“Nice to meet you.”

She has a firm grip but soft, warm hands. She pulls away before I’m ready.

“And as for this little guy--” she says. She looks over her shoulder to where the little boy was sitting before. “Jared?” She’s up on her feet looking around. “Jared!” She looks down at me. “Did you see where Jared went?”

“No, I--”

But she’s already taking off. She runs past the walk and into the middle of the street. She’s looking left and right, trying to run everywhere at once. She screams for her little boy. She looks at me.

“Help me!” she says. I want to help, to tell her where to look at least, then let whatever happens happen, but I know I can’t.

“He might have run off toward the docks,” I say and point.

Lucille takes off running. I wait for her to get out of sight, then I cross the street and head the other way toward the alley where I saw Alan go with the boy.

I find them by a chain link fence behind the old garment factory. The little boy is sitting with his back to the wall. His legs are sprawled out, and his hands are at his side. He breathes slow and easy. His eyes are closed. Alan stands over him. He has his hands in his pockets.

"Quiet game," Alan whispers. I'm watching the boy and listening for Lucille. It's getting harder to breathe or swallow. "Guess he was tired."

"We've got to turn him loose," I say.

"Where did his mama go?"

"Took off toward the docks."

"We've got time then," Alan says.

"Alan..."

"Do not let up," he says.

"I know, but--"

"We're gonna have so much fun," he says. "Don't tell me you forgot."

"I didn't, but you should have seen his mama."

"You've got to do this with me."

"She went half crazy," I say.

"I don't have anybody else in the world," Alan says.

"He's a little boy."

"I love you, Sis."

The little boy is still asleep. Neither of us speaks for a moment, then Alan smiles and slips his hands out of his pockets. I'm shivering and waiting.

"You start," Alan says.

Any Kind of Gentlemen

I.

I guess you could think of me as some sort of counselor or, up in arms, your pal Christ with a shot of whiskey and concern. I don't know—it's how they set me up, and it's better, I find, to oblige. I'm nobody's daddy, though.

I live two blocks off the town square in an old A-frame my daddy's kin have occupied—hell, forever I think. I live there with my cocker spaniels Grace and Tippy but never kids. Never a wife. But my buddies are always dropping in, and so I can't buy or borrow a day of peace.

About 2 A.M. last Sunday, I woke to the sound of knocking on my wood door and screaming.

“Open this door!” said the voice. “You open this door now!”

Every word was slurring, then – BOOM BOOM BOOM! – pounding. In a second, I was up and on my feet at the side of my bed, groping around the floor for my robe.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!

“All right! I'm coming!” I said, as I hurried to the door. I threw it open, and there stood Kenneth J. Massey, Esquire, propped against the doorframe in a rumpled navy blue suit he must have been wearing at least two days straight. His tie hung loose around his neck and his shirt was unbuttoned three holes down and spotted here and there with spills. His chin was a bit lowered, and I could see the top of his head, where his thinning hair grew wild and white. His face was pink and whiskered and swollen and streaked with sweat. He was developing a paunch.

My best friend.

Ken has had it rough, I'll concede. His second wife threw him out last June, and he has since taken up living downtown in the little house where he keeps his law practice. It was a good move, he said—he couldn't beat the commute, and he was walking distance from my place now, but I see him less than I ever did, less than do the folks in town who are glad enough to report every indiscretion, like seeing him leave the package store with bulging paper sacks tucked under his arms, almost-hidden beneath a heavy coat any time of year. So I try to offer a little charity when I can.

"I knew you were in there, Arch Taylor," he said to me. "I knew you weren't anywhere but in this house." He was grinning, then he staggered forth to greet me, and I grabbed him by the shoulders.

"This late at night, I don't imagine I would be," I said. "Let's get you off your feet."

"Yes," he said. "Let's do that."

There's an old cloth davenport in the parlor, a place where I nap when there's nothing else in the world to do. Daddy bought the davenport years ago at Mom's request, and I have spent the better part of fifty years beating it in. I led Kenny to one end and took my usual seat at the other.

"What are you doing out so late?" I said, and Ken began to chuckle again. "Oh Lord, what is it?"

"Friend, I am here because I need your help, and I know that you will help me because I have known you all my life and it is your nature."

"What is it?" I said.

Kenny closed his eyes and lowered his head, drifting forward in his seat.

"Ken!" I said, grabbing his shoulder.

“Hmm?”

“You said you needed help.”

“Oh yes... you’re a good man, Taylor. I love you man. You know that.”

“Yes, I know. Thanks, I think? What do you need?”

“Always ready to help a friend.”

“Right.”

“Like Gandhi.”

“Kenny!”

"Sorry. Well, you know the town rummage sale? You know, the Ladies Auxiliary at First Presbyterian have it every year and—"

“I know,” I said. “But what does that have to do with me?”

“Hold on, boy, I’m getting there. Give me a minute. I’m just getting warm.”

“Oh...”

“You know how the ladies go around soliciting donations and merchandise? Can you believe that Peggy gave them my daddy’s walking stick?”

“You mean you left your daddy’s walking stick when you moved out?”

“Yes, but damn it, that’s not the point, you som’bitch! And as I recall, I didn’t exactly have time to make an inventory before I relocated.

Which was true. I remember well the night when Peggy kicked him out. Kenny called me from his mobile phone, and when I arrived, I found Peggy holding him at bay with a shotgun at the end of the driveway. She wore curlers and a carnation pink nightgown, and her slender arms gleamed silver in the moonlight. Apparently there had been a commotion because the neighbors stood in their own driveway, crouched behind their station wagon, trying to talk sense to Peggy,

but she paid them no mind. According to Ken, all she did the whole time was dare him to move. Knowing Peggy, nothing would have pleased her more. Discretion notwithstanding, Ken had been witnessed on several occasions in the company of a sixteen year old girl he had met one night at the downtown diner after work.

When I drove up, Peggy smiled at me as pleasant as you please and said, “Hey, Arch” like nothing out of the way was going on, and I said, “Hey, Peggy,” and Ken, who by then was beyond speech, climbed into the cab of my truck and we drove away. Peggy never let him back into that house again, and Ken had to rely on me and his other friends to fetch his things for him as Peggy saw fit. Peggy was nice enough to us, and we did what we could, but no one had said a thing about a walking stick.

“I’m sorry, man,” I said. “Do you know who bought the walking stick?”

“I do, at that,” said Ken. “One Harold Thompson.”

“Big Boy?” I said.

“I do believe that’s how his associates address him, but I find the name beneath my dignity.” Then he belched and settled lower in his seat.

Harold “Big Boy” Thompson was a mechanic for the city and he works in a shop downtown across the street from Kenny’s office. Big Boy was nearly seven feet tall and weighed over four hundred pounds. Every time you’d see him, he was wearing a pair of overalls over a floral-patterned silk shirt—beautiful shirts, if you notice that sort of thing—and a royal blue derby hat he ordered special from New Orleans. He was dark, even for a black man, the darkest man I’ve ever seen, so dark that he almost seemed to glow violet from beneath his skin.

At night, you could find him down in the Bottoms, drinking in shady bars and raising hell. It’s generally known that Big Boy slashed a half dozen men down at that bar with a razor—

but it's just as well-known that Big-Boy was a certified Master Gardener with a prize-winning orchid collection and whose beds of day-lilies and petunias are the envy of the community. On either count, I always saw fit to stay away from him.

Avoiding him was easy enough, until he started going with Peggy Massey, and then I saw him everywhere with her—at the grocer and along the square and even church, where Peggy invited him. One Sunday he even sang a solo with the choir's accompaniment, dressed in a shirt and tie and his finest overalls, his baritone voice rising rapturous to the rafters.

The town was briefly scandalized, none of which was lost on Kenny, whom I've heard several times snarl that goddamn nigger's bedding my wife under his breath on hearing Big Boy's name or seeing him in passage. And so Peggy had her revenge.

"If you know he bought the walking stick, try and see if he'll sell it back," I said.

"Tried that," Kenny said. "He won't sell. The arrogant som'bitch claims that he can't be bought. Says it's his bliss. It don't make no sense, Taylor. And then I have to look across Harrison Avenue every afternoon and see him grinning and standing around with his grease monkey buddies, leaning on my daddy's favorite cane."

"I'd close the blinds, Ken," I said.

"Again, not the point, Taylor." He was beginning to sober up just a bit and his eyes took on an intensity that scared me, a fanatic luminescence that made me look to the floor and shiver ever so.

"How do you want me to help you?" I said.

"I aim to confront him. I aim to face up to him like a man and take back my daddy's cane."

"Are you out of your fool mind? That man will beat your ass."

Kenny reached inside his jacket and produced a revolver, a Civil War revolver I had seen displayed on the wall in his office. Kenny's father had acquired the gun some years ago in an auction in the Bottoms one Friday afternoon.

"Fire in the hole!" Kenny said and aimed the barrel level with my chest.

"Are you crazy?" I screamed and dived to the floor. Kenny laughed long and loud at my expense; he laughed until tears ran down his face and his chest rattled with coughs.

"Get on up from there," he said once he'd caught his breath. "I won't shoot you just yet, I reckon."

"What the hell are you planning on doing with that gun?"

"Just leveling the field a bit."

"As an officer of the court, maybe you can tell me a little about robbery and murder," I said, struggling to my feet.

"Murder committed in the course of a robbery—a capital offense in our fair state, but I don't plan on murdering him outright, and I wouldn't call it robbery either. The cane never stopped being mine."

"Then what are you planning to do exactly?"

"I'm going to give him one more chance to do right by me, and if he doesn't, I will take it as an affront to my honor. Then I will challenge him to a duel."

"A duel?"

"Yes, and if you are any kind of gentleman, you will consent to be my second. It'll be fair. He's bound to have a gun, and I will give him just enough time to find it, then I'll blast him straight to hell. Or he'll blast me—it doesn't matter. All you have to do is come along and bear witness."

“But a duel? Over a walking stick?”

“It’s about more than that,” he said to me, “and it’s about more than my wife, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Then what is it about?” I said.

“Being alive, man. Living.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Since my wife found out about that little girl, my life hasn’t been worth half a cuss. I’m kicked out of my house, some guy’s sleeping with my wife whenever he pleases, and they’re not even trying to hide it, and I can’t even get my daddy’s cane back. Don’t you see? That ain’t living—that ain’t even being a man.

“I see,” I said. But I didn’t.

“There was a time when being alive meant something, Taylor. We play it safe now. Too much civility. Too much caution. I don’t know. What am I protecting anyway? The chance to live out of my office? Watch that gorilla make a mockery of my life?” He stood carefully and began to pace the parlor, then stopped and faced me. “But when you face up to it, when you piss in the wind and say whatever, when everything is there to be lost—and you just may lose it—you’re living and you know what’s real.”

“Kenny?” I said.

“Yes?”

“You’re a drunk—and you read too many books. Truth is, you’re going to get yourself killed—maybe all three of us—with your foolishness. Now you’re welcome to bed down here and sleep it off. We can even talk it over tomorrow if you’d like, but—“

“It’s not that easy, Taylor. You know that. I’ve been thinking this over a long time, drunk and sober, and it doesn’t make any difference. I’m going out there tonight. Now will you drive me down there and bear witness?”

I would like to say I was thinking it over, but I wasn’t. There was nothing to consider. This was the worst idea I had ever heard.

“Taylor?” he said. “Remember... if you’re any kind of gentleman...”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Let me go get dressed.”

“Much obliged,” he said. “I’ll wait here in the parlor.”

II.

It was a long drive out to Big Boy’s house. The Thompsons owned a large tract of land for years, but Big Boy, the youngest of eight children and the youngest of fifteen grandchildren was the only one who stayed behind to tend it. The rest went urban, moved north, or both, and Big Boy couldn’t help resenting the fact that he was left behind while they, in turn, could never entirely respect him for (as they saw it) not having the courage to leave.

I remember hearing tell of one afternoon when his oldest sister Minnie Mae came down from Sandusky, Ohio to visit, and Big Boy met her at the diner during his lunch hour, and there they were: Big Boy in his grease-stained overalls and Minnie Mae in her traveling suit and acquired manners, and she looks across the table and says, “I don’t see how you take it, slumming around with these rednecks. A young man like you ought to get out and live. See something. Do something. My god, that old farm is just a piece of property, a tract of land. It’s not a womb!” And Big Boy rose without a word and walked out of the diner, and Minnie Mae

finished the rest of her tour alone. Big Boy stayed away from the diner for three full months, and he wouldn't speak to his sister for a good six years.

Kenny was quiet most of the drive out. At one point, I looked over and spied him fingering the revolver in his coat with quivering hands, gazing out into the night, at that endless moving picture of nothing, sucking us ever deeper into it at sixty miles per hour. Kenny may have been meditating on the deed he was planning to do or was about to have done to him, or maybe he was reflecting on things past, I don't know. I did figure that living was in some way on his mind, so I looked over at him and decided to help him along.

"Was it worth it, Kenny?" I said.

"Was what worth it?"

"The girl, the young one, I mean. As I see it, we wouldn't be here right now if you hadn't--"

"I know." He looked over at me, grimacing like I'd hit him in the stomach.

"I'm just saying... you'd still have your wife, your house, your daddy's walking stick, and Big Boy Thompson wouldn't even matter."

"He'd be completely inconsequential, and in a relative way, so would you—asleep in bed, far from sight and mind, safe and secure and snoring away."

"Right."

"I don't rightly know," he said. "But then I don't know if anything is ever worth it in a way I can measure, in a way that counts. The last twenty years of my life, maybe more, have all felt like a mistake. You know?" And I nodded. "So that's where I am right now," he said, "and that's where you are too, if this sort of thing doesn't keep you awake at night every once and again."

I drove on, and we both were quiet then. I couldn't help remembering when Kenny and me were boys riding somewhere together in his truck or mine, and we would talk, but nothing at all like this, and I felt all at once like I was running fast toward the edge of something, so fast that I couldn't stop. Thirty-five years were gone at once, and though I could account for the time, the years felt like someone else's time that I'd just heard about, or like I had stepped away and dreamt it all in a night and was awake again, much older and with nothing save the semi-assurance that maybe I was not ruining it all, as I judged Kenny had. But even there I wasn't sure any more.

You always know when you're getting close to the Thompson place. All at once, the pavement gives way to red clay, and the road winds looping through the hills, and at last there is a clearing, a vast expanse where day-lilies red and gold bend in endless sway to the horizon. In the midst of it all stands a plain brick house at the end of a gravel driveway and a weather-beaten shed out back.

There were other houses on the Thompsons' land at one time, homes of Big Boy's forebearers, houses that were falling in until he had them cleared away at last. There wasn't a neighbor in sight, not a light and not a sound save from Big Boy's house. It occurred to me that a man this far out at an hour like this had might as well be the last thing left in the universe—he was alone like I had never imagined alone.

We turned off the road and into the driveway, but halfway to the house, Kenny grabbed my arm and said, "Here! Stop here!" in a fierce whisper, so I pulled to a stop. "Kill the engine!" he said, "and for god's sake, don't slam the door."

"What does it matter if he knows we're here?" I said. "You're challenging him outright to that duel, aren't you?"

“If it comes to that, sure. But I don’t want him lying in wait.”

“I thought you didn’t care if you lived.”

“I don’t,” Kenny said. “But I don’t want to die that way. Where’s the joy in that?”

I shrugged.

“Get on out of the truck, Taylor,” he said. “You don’t understand anything.”

We closed our doors and crept closer to the house. There was a single light on in a front room and the appearance of movement back and forth behind the curtained window, a massive quick-moving silhouette.

“He’s awake,” I said. “I see him moving.” Kenny reached into his coat and fingered the revolver again. We walked up to the porch, but as I reached for the doorbell, Kenny slapped my hand away.

“What?” I said.

“Not yet.”

“What’s the problem now?”

“How do I look?” he said.

“What the hell?” I said.

“Style, Taylor. It’s all about style. How are we going to want to remember this? I want to remember that I looked fetching.”

I sighed. “You’re never going to look fetching, but can we ring the bell now anyway?”

“Go for it.”

The doorbell sounded a low, grinding kind of buzz, then we heard Big Boy’s footfalls slapping across the floor as he approached, shaking the floor as he walked. Slowly the door came open, and there before us stood Big Boy Thompson—naked.

“Evening, gentlemen,” he whispered. “What can I do for you?”

For a moment, we were stunned. I tried to focus on his face, afraid to look elsewhere. His face was ashen and tired-looking, and his eyes were swollen and red as if he had been crying. His hair was nappy and tangled.

“I... m-my w-walking stick,” said Kenny.

“Beg pardon?” Big Boy said.

“Could we come in?” I said. “If it isn’t too much trouble.”

Big Boy stood aside, and I walked in with Kenny, who was agape and half-stumbling and surely wondering, as I was, what was the meaning of what we had found. We would have sat down but the whole front room was trashed with books and papers and magazines, soda bottles and half eaten cans of ravioli. Furthermore, there was no place to sit, no chairs, no sofa, nothing, just a Big Boy sized clearing in the middle of the room and the path he’d cut by walking.

“Sorry about the mess, gentlemen,” Big Boy said. He slipped past us and resumed his spot in the floor. “I’d ask you to sit, but I threw out all my living room furniture last week.”

“Why would you do that?” I said.

“It wasn’t pretty anymore,” he said. “No joy, and I don’t much have visitors. It didn’t mean nothing no more, so it stopped being furniture.” His words were just above a whisper now—and slow, as if every syllable was a struggle unto itself.

Kenny opened his mouth like he was about to speak then stopped short. “Mmhmm,” was all he said, then he cleared his throat.

“Did one of you say something about a walking stick?” said Big Boy.

“It was me!” Kenny said. “You know it was me, you som’bitch! We have already discussed it before. You have my daddy’s walking stick, and I want it back!”

“Oh yes. I have that walking stick,” said Big Boy, then his focus lapsed and he stared off into the distance somewhere—at what, we did not know, so Kenny went on, struggling to summon some style majestic.

“We’ve come to honor you like men,” said Kenny, his voice high-pitched and wavering, “but understand that there are just two options available to you now. You can give me back that walking stick or you can duel with us to the death.” Kenny, pomp-pumped and pride-swaggered, lavished in that moment, while I couldn’t help but wonder how this confrontation had become an “us” proposition, but Big Boy did not notice either way, or if he did, he did not care because all he did was tip his head back, his eyes closed and his face poised skyward as if speaking to the Master.

“Beautiful walking stick,” he said. “Bliss I said it was, but even that is all used up, and now it’s just a chord of wood. The thrill is all the way gone, and there is not a thing of beauty left anywhere anymore.” Then he started crying again.

Kenny and I looked one to the other and back to our man, for neither of us had bet on this, and I wondered even in that moment where it all fit in Kenny’s mind and in his grand conceit of style.

“So... so I can have the walking stick?” he said, and Big Boy pointed over his shoulder toward the back of the house.

“Bathroom,” he said, “leaning against the sink.”

Kenny hurried to retrieve the cane, and when he emerged, he tried to smile, but plainly he was not satisfied, for there was no winning, just getting, and we might have done that in any number of ways.

“I’m glad we could reach an understanding,” said Kenny, trying again so hard to sound noble, though he could hardly hide his relief. “We’ll be seeing you.”

Big Boy didn’t acknowledge him. He commenced a fit of sobbing, and as Kenny drew near, his cane firmly in hand, I reached into his jacket, took out the revolver, aimed, and shot Big Boy twice through the chest.

Kenny again stood unbelieving, and I handed the revolver back to him.

“Let’s go,” I said, “but calmly—we’ll want to remember leaving with dignity when we look back on this night.” A blank, Kenny followed me into the night, down the gravel road, and to the pickup truck. The scene was no less quiet, no less eerie, no less lonely, but I was relieved to find the world still there, for it was a beautiful night for a backwoods drive, a beautiful night to lie bleeding on the floor.

“What the hell did you kill him for?” said Kenny as we drove off.

“I needed action,” I said, “and there was too much talk. The picture, as I saw it, all was leaning too much one way, and I could not stand it—no one could. And you saw the man. It was the reasonable and humane thing to do.”

“But I had the walking stick. There was no reason to kill him.”

“Maybe not to you,” said I, “and maybe not to me either, but maybe still there was, somewhere, and I was just an instrument, like a paint brush or an ink pen or a hammer.”

Then Kenny said nothing, and I said nothing, but I was fever electrified and nigh primed to keep going—to drive and drive a million miles then get out and run a million more if need be, till my heart exploded and my soul spilled spirit everywhere. I didn’t believe either of us gave a damn for consequence because really there never is any.

“In a way, you made things right for me, but we’ll have to see what happens,” said Ken.

“You’re welcome.”

“And maybe later on today, I’ll give that little girl a call.”

“She’s pretty,” was my reply.

From the Gods Like Rain

There had been no rain in Bangraadi for weeks, and the high-wind dust that fired through the grass and through the reeds in the ditches along the sides of the roads scratched a whisk in the air. To the east, the bluffs held back the sun for a time, but by midday, the blaze filled the sky, and the hours remaining, on the streets and on the balconies, became fits and starts of waiting. West of the city, twenty miles or more into the brush, the villagers of Malii were gathered by family at the meeting ground, a flat bare space between the grass roofed huts that framed the southern border of the village and the field rows, to discuss the harvest. They spoke in whispers, and the children, who usually ran playing, stood huddled to themselves at a far corner of the grounds, solemn miniatures of their elders.

Khalim waited at his mother's side, scanning faces in the crowd. They were faces he had known for as long as he could remember, but they were objects in the background now, obstructions. He stood on the tips of his toes. He craned his neck to the left, to the right, and back again--nothing.

"I wish you would be still," his mother said.

Khalim settled to his feet. He brushed sweat away from his forehead with the back of his hand. His father had been dead for six weeks, bitten by a boomslang in the field, and since Khalim was fourteen years old, it was his duty to speak for the family, if the need arose. He tried to be calm.

At the fore of the crowd, the village council emerged, seven gray-haired men wearing sweeping tunics of red and gold. They assumed their places, though they made no effort to quiet

the crowd. They looked on, faces glistening in the sun, waiting. A final wave of chatter surged through the crowd, then all were quiet. Khalim looked over his shoulder, but again nothing.

The leader of the council came forward to speak. He was a short, stoop-shouldered man named Nadhim, whom everyone knew to have been a great hunter in his youth.

"Brothers, sisters," he began, "as you know, these are hard times. The sun shows no mercy, and the clouds give no relief. The skies refuse our prayers. If we wait much longer, there may be no harvest at all this season."

Khalim looked to his mother then over his shoulder.

"Still, there may be hope," Nadhim said, "for our brother Tafiti has approached us with an idea that may save us. Brother Tafiti, will you come forward?"

A lanky man not yet thirty stepped forth from the crowd and took his place beside Nadhim. When he was a teenager, years ago, Tafiti had left the village to study at the university. When the missionaries left, he returned to run the schoolhouse north of the village. This day, he wore a collared shirt, trousers, and leather shoes. The cuffs of his sleeves had begun to fray, and his pants were threadbare in patches and dusted with sand, but he was proud of his clothes, and he stood with his shoulders back and his head high.

"Good afternoon," he began, enunciating each word. He paused to look at the crowd, then to Nadhim, who nodded his approval. "It is clear," he continued, "that if the land will not give us water and if the skies will not send us rain, that we must bring water to the land ourselves. There is a lake only a few miles from here. With a little labor and a little time, we might solve our troubles for good."

Khalim sensed movement behind him. As he turned around, he found himself staring into the chest of the warrior Tiifu and his wife Radhi.

"Good day, young Khalim," said Tiifu.

"Good day," Khalim said, clearing his throat as he did.

Radhi smiled and nodded at Khalim.

"Have your daughters come along with you?" said Khalim.

"You mean Almari especially?" said Radhi.

Khalim smiled and lowered his chin.

"They all are here," Tiifu said, "but I believe Almari is over there talking to her friends."

"Good luck trying to tear her away from them," Radhi said.

Khalim's mother turned to speak to Tiifu and Radhi. Khalim craned around again, looking over the crowd. Almari stood with her arms crossed, whispering in a group of girls. He couldn't bring himself to walk over, but Khalim waited and watched, looking for the slightest change since he saw her two weeks ago. There had been no word but from her youngest sister who told him only that Almari had been ill the morning before.

"--which would be fine, if only I could get my son to pay attention," said Khalim's mother, as she pinched him on the arm. He startled. "The man of my house can't seem to stop watching the girls."

Khalim smiled again nervously and turned to watch the proceedings.

"We were all that age once," said Radhi.

"This is true," said Khalim's mother, "and really he does nicely. I could never make it without him, with his father gone."

"He will be a fine man," Tiifu said.

Up front, Tafiti was about to take questions from the crowd when an old man called Okeyo, who lived alone in a shaggy hut along the edge of the village, hurried forth, leaning all the while on a cane, staggering as he went. His voice crowed over the audience.

"Foolishness! All of it!" he said. "Don't you know that there were droughts before? That there were others who thought they were smarter than the gods? Building. Bringing water. Irrigation. They tried it before, in their day. You weren't there, but I was. One afternoon there came a storm in the middle of it all. Lightning struck six of them dead, and the rest of them took cover where they could and left their tools scattered like bones over the ground. No one can beat the gods. We are fools to try."

"What, then, do you suggest?" said Tafiti. "That we do nothing? That we wait for our harvest to blow away in the wind, when there are tools and there are methods to prevent it?"

"You may have learned a lot of things away at your school," the old man said, "but they can't teach you the things I've seen. The gods are angry, and until we make right, there will be no rain, and there is nothing your notions or your machines can do about it."

Tafiti turned again to the crowd. "Surely we cannot listen to what he is saying. It is superstition, nothing more."

"Nothing more?" said the old man. "Would you deny the gods?"

The gathering was a-stir. There were discussions, within families, between families, that fell just short of quarrels, and Nadhim himself stepped back to consult with the rest of the council, who looked on, unsure themselves of what to do.

Khalim looked again to Almari, who by then was standing with her sisters. A trembling arose in Khalim, a fear that struck sharply, like those moments when he found himself missing his father and wondering if there were anything or anyone in the universe that would protect him

again. It was a fear he had known since the night Almari came crying to him, roughly three weeks after they had wandered off together one evening and spent the next few minutes fumbling, one body over one another, in a sage patch.

Nadhim stepped away from the council and spoke out to the crowd, calling them to order. "Brothers! Sisters!" he said. "Brothers!" The crowd came to a hush, and Nadhim, looking to the old man, said, "What can we do to please the gods?"

"I cannot believe this," Tafiti said.

"You will keep your counsel, Brother Tafiti," Nadhim said. "Okeyo is right. We cannot deny the gods. Please continue," he said to the old man.

"Somewhere there is blight in our village, someone who has brought shame upon us. We must show the gods that we are sorry and that we are sincere. We must remove the blight, and we must repent."

"Senile raving!" said Tafiti. "You must not listen!"

But it was too late. The gathering turned upon itself.

You stole my from grain bin.

You killed my goat.

You looked at my wife.

A scuffle broke out in the middle of the grounds. Two brothers were separated. The elder brother had drawn his blade. The council pleaded in unison. The villagers calmed themselves but gradually, and the air remained uneasy.

"Accusing one another will get us nowhere," said Nadhim.

"It is true," the old man said. "The guilty among us must confess. It is the only way."

"Who will confess?" Nadhim said to the crowd. "Who will suffer himself to save the village from its affliction?"

The villagers looked, one to the other, in silence.

Khalim glanced again at Almari. Their eyes met but briefly before she looked away. Khalim felt more than anything a desire to run, not as he had when he was younger or even in flight for one day, but for all days, scattering dust and waiting behind him forever. He was scarcely sure himself that he had spoken after he raised his hand, as he had so many times in school, and said, "It's me."

"Who has spoken?" said Nadhim.

And someone said, "The young Khalim."

Khalim's mother struck him and cried out, "He is a child. He doesn't know what he is talking about." Still, the council called him forth, and when Khalim rose again from the dust and started away, his mother grabbed at his clothing and swore and fought with her last to stop him, before Tiifu and another man took hold of her.

"It must be done," said Tiifu.

The crowd parted to let Khalim pass. He stopped just short of Nadhim, and the old man said to him, "What have you done?" Khalim looked down.

"I have lain with a girl," he replied.

"What girl?" said Nadhim.

Khalim said nothing.

Someone in the crowd spoke Almari's name, and when Nadhim ordered that she be brought forth, there were screams from her sisters.

"It's a lie!" said Radhi. "It can't be true! She's my baby."

Almari turned to run, but hands restrained her and led her forth. Tiifu started after his daughter, but he too was restrained and reminded, "It must be done."

"Were you married?" Nadhim said.

"No," Khalim said.

"Were you promised?"

"No."

Khalim and Almira once more exchanged glances but neither spoke again.

"Then we have no choice," the old man said.

They were led to a spot at the southern end of the village--a sacred place, the old man said, though no one could remember why it was sacred anymore--and at the council's demand, as prescribed by the old man, a half dozen warriors took up spears and thrust them into the bodies of the teens, who fell where they stood. For Khalim, death came quickly, but for Almari, who lay writhing and gurgling in the sand, death came at last at the hands of her father, who, with tears and with great trembling, smashed her skull with a large stone. He turned away from the others and started back toward the village.

Satisfied that the work was done, the old man said, "There is nothing left to do but pray," and so they did, falling to their knees and offering repentance until at last the council adjourned the meeting.

That night, Khalim's mother lay sobbing alone in her hut, while across the way Radhi and her daughters made tearful work of the evening chores. Tiifu wandered back and forth across the meeting grounds, pausing every once in a while at length to gaze up at the sky. Otherwise, there was a perfect peace that evening, and the village was content again to wait for rain.

An Encounter at the Edge of the Hollow

Drive out past the outskirts of Bayou St. Clair, down Road 417, where the main highway has quit a half-mile back, and you will find Calypso Lane, a narrow hardpan stretch beat smooth by the grind of ages, winding deep into the woods. Push the issue very far, and you will find that the old dirt road narrows further still, as if squeezed in from either side by the high-reed shoulders and the ditches that section off the traffic from the marshy strips of lawn that slosh up to the stilt-raised shotgun houses lining the way.

Near the end of the lane, there rests a wide-bodied old model camper abandoned in a grove of pine trees. A man whom everyone knew as Bobby Ray lived there, a lanky man who stood over six feet tall, with a mop of black hair and a pallor broken only by the patches of red along his cheeks and by the flecks of enflamed skin and stubble beneath his chin. He wore a camouflage duster, the sleeves of which were frayed threadbare, a pair of cut-off denim shorts, and a ratty pair of Converse sneakers. This ensemble he wore without exception, regardless of the time of year, and the few people who dared to venture close to him attested that you could smell on Bobby Ray an odor of sweat and spoiled milk and a hint of the very loam of Calypso Lane. He was twenty-three years old.

No one really knew where he came from, only that he wandered into town one afternoon and walked into the Downtown Diner and had a seat in the far corner by the windows. No waitresses went near and no diners, so Bobby Ray sat there with his head down and his eyes fixed on the tabletop in front of him, waiting. Finally, Sheriff MacShane, who had stopped by to

have his usual lunch, went over and questioned him and, getting hardly a response, then asked him to leave. Bobby Ray took out walking toward the edge of town.

It was that same evening that Bobby Ray happened upon Calypso Lane. He might have walked on out of the parish were the hour not so late, but as it happened, Bobby Ray decided to try a dirt road path in the hopes of finding some congenial place to pass the night, but to no avail. Every house had shut itself away against the night. He pressed on. By chance, he saw a streak of metal in the gleam of moonlight, the camper he would make his home.

Bobby Ray survived by doing odd jobs for people along Calypso Lane for a man named Beau Priester, a widower and handyman who lived about a quarter mile away in one of the better houses along the road. Work was never steady though, so Bobby Ray sometimes spent his days stalking the woods around his camper or grappling in the narrow creek that fed into the marsh.

One evening, as Bobby Ray returned from such an outing with a flathead catfish under his arm, he saw the sketchy outline of a stoop-shouldered woman in the distance, carrying a shoulder bag as she ambled down the center of the road. He stopped and watched after her a long while. He watched her walk from the stretch that ran in front of his camper to the grove of trees that marked the edge of Calypso Lane and farther--until she was small, until she was smaller still, until she was nothing at all.

So it was for many evenings--Bobby Ray would watch the old lady pass from afar, always on her way back home, wherever that may be, as if she were returning from town, having walked the whole way. One evening, especially late, as Bobby Ray walked home from Priester's, he heard a faint voice call out to him through the dusk. He turned to see the old lady gaining on him, not twenty paces behind.

"Hey there," Bobby Ray called out, but the old lady said nothing as she walked on. She stared straight ahead, gazing through Bobby Ray it seemed, before she stopped just short of him.

"You need some work?" she said. The old lady was barely five feet tall with a slender build. Her face was etched with wrinkles many years deep, but Bobby Ray could tell she had been a beauty once. Her skin was pale, though not excessively so. Her cheeks were lightly rouged, and her thin lips pressed together and curled back into a smile. Her sky blue eyes were alert, direct, penetrating. She wore a flowered sundress, a wide-brimmed straw hat, and a string of pearls around her neck.

"I know you do," she continued. "I've seen you grappling down at the creek when you ain't working at Beau Priester's. That ain't no way for a man to get by."

"No ma'am," Bobby Ray said and looked down. "I do what I can."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. I just know there's a better way, if you're interested."

"I am, ma'am."

"Well, if you want, I've got some work I could use a young fella like you to do. Little jobs, you know. I'll pay you a little, and I'll feed you too. All you've gotta do is meet me out at my place tomorrow night, and we'll arrange it."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm easy to find. You just keep walking on out this lane, all the way to the end."

"Then what?" said Bobby Ray.

"Then you keep going," the old lady said. "You'll find me. You can't miss the place. Come tomorrow, sometime around sunset, and I'll fix you some dinner, and we'll talk. So you'll meet me then?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow evening then."

The old lady started off.

"Ma'am?" Bobby Ray said. The old lady stopped and turned to face him again.

"Yes?"

"We never traded names," said Bobby Ray.

"No need," said the old lady. "I know who you are, Bobby Ray. That's all that matters."

She started away again.

The next evening found Bobby Ray en route to the old lady's place. Keep going, she had told him, and so he did, crossing from the end of Calypso Lane to the threshold of the marsh and onward. He went on this way for thirty yards or more, wading knee-deep through the bog. All around him as he stepped, mosquitoes and gnats alit in the fetid air. He held his arms out at his sides for balance as he staggered along. If it were true that he couldn't miss the old lady's place, Bobby Ray had no idea how he had managed to miss it all this time or how he managed to miss it now that he was looking for it.

Then, through the haze of distant foxfire, he saw the old lady's house, a cottage bungalow that seemed to rise from the steam of the bayou. Bobby Ray gritted his teeth and lunged forward. Soon he was standing at the edge of the old lady's property. She came out to greet him.

"I don't know how you manage to get here, ma'am," said Bobby Ray.

The old lady chuckled. Before Bobby Ray had a chance to say anything else, she had him by the arm and was ushering him toward the front door.

"You came here like I asked you to," the old lady said, "so now I'm gonna give you some supper. It's a good thing too. You must be the poorest thing I ever seen." Her fingers needled into Bobby Ray's arm.

She led him into a tidy parlor, where he waited while she finished getting supper ready. In the center of the room there was a leather davenport with matching straight-back wooden chairs to either side, but Bobby Ray was still dripping wet and afraid to sit down anywhere, so he waited by the mantle over the hearth. The room was otherwise bare, he noted, free of momentos or bric-a-brac, free of any personal touches at all. The old lady kept a spotless house, or so it seemed, and Bobby Ray wondered how she might feel about him dripping marsh water along her hardwood floor, though she hadn't said anything about it, nor had she offered him a towel.

By the time the old lady called him in for supper, Bobby Ray had dried considerably, and he had a seat at a small table off to the side of the kitchenette. It was a simple spread--a white and yellowed chequered table cloth, a metal pan heaped with beans, rice, a hunk of stewed beef, and a thick slice of cornbread, a single fork, and a mason jar three-quarters filled with lemonade. Bobby Ray slipped out of his duster and looked over his shoulder.

"Ain't you gonna join me, ma'am?" he said.

"I'll sit with you a while, but I'm not hungry," the old lady replied, but she didn't sit down. She stood in the open floor space of the kitchen, watching Bobby Ray eat. He finished the first plate fast, but was ashamed to ask for more, so he sat still, staring down at his pan. The old lady hurried over and took up the pan, and, without a word, gave him a second helping. By the time he'd finished the second plate, Bobby Ray had taken his fill, but he didn't stop the old lady from replenishing his plate once more. He didn't know when he might see food again, and he enjoyed

watching her stir about the kitchen. There was a deliberate air about her movements, even as she hurried about, fussing over him.

As Bobby Ray finished the third plate of food, he pushed the pan away and finished his lemonade. The old lady came and took the plate away and offered him dessert, but Bobby Ray rubbed his belly, laughed, and said no thanks.

The old lady finally sat at the tiny table, across from Bobby Ray.

"I reckon it's time we got down to business," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"As you can tell, I have a small place here, so there's not too much I'll ever need for you to do. I only have a little bit of yard to cut, hardly any flowers to tend to. It's light work, and really I don't care if you do it every week or every two weeks or whatever suits you."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But there is one job in particular I'd like for you to do, and if this is going to work out between us, you've got to promise me you'll do it and that you'll do it right. You promise?"

"Yes, ma'am, I promise."

"I'm taking you at your word, Bobby Ray."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll do anything you say."

"Alright, then. I want you to kill Beau Priester."

"Say what, ma'am?"

"You heard me," the old lady said. Her eyes were focused. "I want you to kill Beau Priester."

"But I don't... I mean, why?"

" Bobby Ray, I'm going to tell you a story that ought to make it a little easier for you to understand. The first thing you ought to know is that this land here wasn't always flooded. There was a time when you could walk from the end of Calypso Lane clear out to the woods at the edge of Cooley Township."

"No kidding?"

"Just as sure as I'm sitting here. Anyway, there was plans to cut a road through here, right over Calypso Lane, and the parish was going to lay that road all the way out to Cooley. Narrow as Calypso is, they'd have had to take just about all of everybody's property to make a road fit to drive on, and the parish was actually ready to pay everybody off. Beau Priester was just itching to move away from here. "

Bobby Ray reared back in his chair. He raised a hand to his stubbly chin.

"You look like you got to study that one, huh?" the old lady said.

"Why don't he move?" said Bobby Ray.

"Ain't got the money. He might strut around like he's lord out here, but that's 'cause nobody else got anything either. That house was his daddy's house, and as you know, he builds on it, fixes on it here and there, but if he ever had the money, he'd leave."

"What happened to the road?"

"One person didn't want to sell out her land."

"Who was that?" Bobby Ray said.

"Me," the old lady replied.

"Why didn't you want to sell?"

"You've got to understand, it's different when you're old. It's hard to just pick up and move around. And they wanted that road to run right through here, right where you and me are

sitting right now. Can you imagine it? So I said no. Must have said no a dozen times or more. Then they were talking about eminent domain or some nonsense. I just didn't move. And what were they going to do? Throw an old woman out into the streets?"

"Maybe," said Bobby Ray.

The old lady smirked.

"So what happened?" Bobby Ray said.

"Eventually, they just gave up. Found a different way, a better stretch. Even up there off Calypso, where it's a little bit higher up, it's practically swamp once you get too far from the lane. You know that. Putting a big road out here didn't make no sense anyway."

"But what does Beau Priester have to do with it?"

The old lady laughed. "Priester was mad about that, boy. He was hot, you better believe it. Remember, that road was his way out of here."

"What did he do?"

"I'm getting there. Give me a minute. First let me tell you, Priester was a young man back then. Used to work up at the dam for the Corps of Engineers."

"Really?"

"He don't talk about it. Probably never would. He's too proud. They fired him."

"Why?"

"In the middle of the night, he sneaked back up there and opened the flood gates. Flooded this whole hollow that night. He did it to get back at me for not moving off my land. I know he did. Of course, the Corps backed him up. Said it was an accident. Said they didn't know how it happened, but everybody else knew, and Priester got fired anyway. He's been doing jackleg carpentry ever since."

"I had no idea."

"You should've been here that night, Bobby Ray. The water just kept coming, right up into my windows, and there wasn't a thing even the Lord himself could do to make it stop."

Bobby Ray leaned forward, staring across the table.

"Looks like your house came out of it okay, though. Looks like you did too."

The old lady shook her head and brushed back a tear.

"I want Beau Priester dead," she said. "I don't want you to kill him quick. I want him to see you coming, and I want him to know that you ain't gonna stop. I want him to know what it's like."

Bobby Ray leaned back in his chair again.

"Ma'am, I don't think I can do that," he said.

"Why not?" said the old lady. "Killing's about the easiest thing a man can do."

"I just can't do it. I ain't never killed nobody in my life."

"So help me, Bobby Ray, you gave me your word that you would do anything for me. Ain't you even half a man? Or maybe the folks around here got it right."

Bobby Ray looked up.

"Oh? You didn't know? The folks say you're like some wild hog running around. Think I'm lying? I'm up and down this lane all the time and all around town too. Beau Priester's one of the main ones. Oh sure, he'll smile in your face, but has he ever took you into his house and fed you? You ain't nothing to him but an animal."

Bobby Ray bit his bottom lip. He rocked back and forth in his chair.

"Still ain't satisfied?" the old lady said. "Well, you don't have to do nothing for me. Just get out of my house."

Bobby Ray stopped rocking. He sat staring at the old lady.

"Didn't you hear me? I said get out. There's nothing I can do for a man who can't keep his word to me. And after I've had you here in my home and fed you and took an interest in you when nobody else in this parish would? Go on. I suspect outdoors is about the only place fit for you."

Bobby Ray's face and arms burned red, but he said nothing. He stood and left, making his way through the old lady's front yard and back through the marsh that led to the end of Calypso Lane. When Bobby Ray turned to look back, the house was lost in the steam.

The next week was hard for Bobby Ray. He managed to steer clear of the old lady, but there was no food. Twice Bobby Ray walked up to Beau Priester's house looking for work, and both times Priester turned him away. When at last he asked Priester for a bite to eat, Priester said, "I'm sorry, Bobby Ray. You know this isn't a cafe. You know how we deal." Then he flashed Bobby Ray his usual grin.

By the fourth day, Bobby Ray was back at the creek grappling, but without any luck. A snapping turtle nipped his hand soon after he arrived, and just before dark, he barely escaped a cottonmouth that came out of the water and lunged at his arm. A stronger Bobby Ray might have fought back, might have grabbed a limb and beaten the snake to death, but weakened by hunger, all Bobby Ray could do was stumble backward, skittering along on his elbows.

By the evening of the fifth day, Bobby Ray lay on the floor of his camper. He had been hungry before, but never quite this hungry. His stomach burned, and his arms and legs felt too heavy to move.

Just before nightfall, Bobby Ray heard a knock at the door, a feeble rhythmic rapping. "I must be losing my mind," he thought. He went to speak, but found his mouth parched and his throat raspy and sore. Getting up was no use either. The door pushed open, and to his surprise, Bobby Ray found himself staring at the silhouette of the old lady.

"Ain't you gonna invite me in?" she said as she went closer.

Bobby Ray groaned and turned away on his belly.

"Be that way, if you want," the old lady said, "but you need to eat something. Here. Turn over. I got something for you."

Bobby Ray turned again to face the old lady. She was carrying a basket on her arm, and when she knelt next to Bobby Ray, he could smell the fried chicken she had brought along.

"Now I'm gonna make you an offer one more time," the old lady said. "I fried you a whole plate of chicken, and you can have it, but you know you have a job to do for me."

Bobby just stared at her.

"Don't be a fool, Bobby Ray. You've seen what Priester will do for you. You've seen what the whole world will do for you. I'm the only one who cares either way if you live or die. I'm the only one who's done a thing to see about you. Now you do this one thing for me, you hear?"

Bobby Ray nodded, and the old lady took the plate of chicken from the basket and set it next to him on the floor. Next she took out a quart-size jar of water, a handful of napkins, and a slice of cake wrapped in cellophane. Then she stood to leave. She left the basket at Bobby Ray's side.

"Don't eat too fast," she said, "and make sure you drink some water first. Oh, and one more thing. I expect that job to be done by this time tomorrow."

The old lady left and closed the door behind her. Bobby Ray waited a moment, listening in case the old lady returned, but she didn't. Bobby Ray unscrewed the lid from the jar of water and took a long drink, then he took a drumstick from the plate and began to eat. As he did, he noticed the faintest gleam of light reflected from inside the basket. He craned his neck to look inside. It was a hammer.

The next morning Bobby Ray was standing in Priester's front yard. It was not long after sunrise. Priester was already out back running a table saw. Bobby Ray veered left, walking the narrow space between the hedges and the wall. He was careful to stay low as he went. He gripped the hammer in his left hand. He stopped at the wall's edge, and crouching behind a hedge, he watched Beau Priester and waited.

Priester was sixty-five years old, broad-chested with short, slender legs. His belly bulged over his belt. He was cutting a sheet of plywood he had balanced on a table top. He was struggling to push it straight.

Bobby Ray took a moment to steady himself, then he rose and went closer. Priester stopped the saw mid-cut and glanced up.

"Well, hey there, Bobby Ray," he said. "I'm glad to see you. I know I told you I wouldn't need you this week, but I could sure use some help right now. I'll pay you for a half-day if you could help me finish up out here. Catch hold of that board, will you?"

Bobby Ray said nothing. He tried to block Priester's voice from his mind.

"Bobby Ray? You hear me?" Priester said, but Bobby Ray marched on, the hammer hidden behind his back until he was within reach. As Bobby Ray raised the hammer, Priester said "my God" and threw his arm up. He managed to catch Bobby Ray's arm as he brought the

hammer down, and the two men struggled. They knocked over the table saw, and the plywood fell into the mud. Twice Bobby Ray came close to getting his arm free, but Priester held on. At last, Priester's legs began to buckle. His labored breaths gave way to wheezing, and Bobby Ray pushed, knocking Priester backward to the ground. Bobby Ray was on him fast, slamming his knees into Priester's belly, as he pounced. Priester grunted, turned his head, and threw his hands up, but Bobby Ray brought the hammer down square into Priester's temple--and again and again. Priester's arms fell limp and his body went still. Bobby Ray hit him one last time then lay the hammer aside. He turned away from Priester's body and leaned forward to catch his breath. He trembled. His palms sank into the mud.

Bobby Ray felt weak. His heart beat fast, and he couldn't stop panting. He wanted to get away more than anything else, to forget about Priester, but he knew he couldn't leave Priester's body out in the open.

There was a gully toward the edge of the property, a bushy ravine where Bobby Ray and Priester had disposed of refuse any number of times. Bobby stood then crouched again by Priester's body. He hooked his arms underneath Priester's shoulders then lifted him slightly, dragging him backward toward the ravine. The walk was hardly fifty yards, but Bobby Ray made slow work of the job. Twice along the way, he turned his head to dry heave, but the fear that any moment someone might come along kept him moving. When he reached the ravine, he lay Priester's body down again and rolled him over the edge. The body fell heavy, breaking branches then landing with a squishing thud.

On trembling legs, Bobby Ray sprinted back to the main yard. He righted the table saw and lay the sheet of plywood back atop the saw again. He found a shovel in Priester's tool-shed and began to fill in the divots he and Priester had made during the struggle. When he was

finished, Bobby Ray put the shovel away, picked up the hammer and started off down Calypso Lane again. The road was quiet, and the sun was warm against his shoulders by then. Still he couldn't remember a time when he looked forward to getting home to his camper again so much.

Bobby Ray woke to the glare of sunlight through the window of his camper. It was late in the afternoon, and the air was musty and thick again with mosquitoes. Bobby Ray sat up and yawned. The morning seemed like a long time ago, so long ago that for a moment Bobby Ray had almost forgotten. Then he looked across the room and saw the blood-streaked hammer and the mud on his shoes.

For the longest time, Bobby Ray lay worrying, wondering if anyone had seen him after all, wondering if there were something he had left behind by mistake. He imagined Priester's body, face down at the bottom of the ravine, and he wondered how long it would take for someone to notice he was missing.

Bobby rose and took a piece of cloth from the pocket of his duster and began cleaning the hammer. As he did, there came a knock from the door. Bobby Ray froze. The door pushed open, and again it was the old lady wearing a sundress and toting a shoulder bag on her arm.

"Don't you ever answer your door?" she said.

"Don't ever have company," Bobby Ray replied. "Till lately." He resumed cleaning the hammer.

"Aww. What's wrong, baby? You look down in the mouth. I came to congratulate you and to invite you over to dinner. You did good work today."

Bobby Ray dropped the hammer.

"I went by and did a little inspecting, you know," the old lady said. "That was a good idea you had, throwing him down that ravine. I don't think many people would remember that ravine is back there, much less think to look down there for a body." She chuckled.

"Did anyone see you over at Priester's?" Bobby Ray said.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," the old lady said. "You about done with that hammer?"

"I guess."

"You guess? You ought to sound a little surer of yourself than that. Give me that hammer. I'll take care of it."

Bobby Ray handed over the hammer.

"What are you going to do with it?" he said.

"I'm going to put it in this basket," the old lady said, stooping to pick up the basket from the night before, "and I'm going to take it back home with me, where nobody will think a thing about it. Are you gonna come with me to dinner?"

"No ma'am. I'm not very hungry."

"That's all right. You will be."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Tell me one thing, Bobby Ray."

"What's that?"

"Was he scared? Priester, I mean."

"Yes, ma'am."

"How scared was he?"

"I ain't never seen a man that scared in my life," said Bobby Ray. The old lady began to laugh. Bobby Ray felt weak again and slumped against the wall.

"That's good, child. Very good," said the old lady. "I may have to get you to do another job for me sometime soon."

"Another job?"

"Oh, yes. You did great with this one."

Bobby Ray began to shake his head.

"Oh, no," he said. "No, ma'am. I can't do this again. I just can't."

"You can," the old lady said, "and you will." The smile left her face. Bobby Ray looked up. "What are you thinking, boy? You killed the man you worked for, the only man around here that would give you any work, sorry though he was. I know what you did, and I'm the only one at this point who cares either way about keeping you alive. Oh, you're mine now, child. You'll do whatever I tell you."

Bobby Ray sank lower against the wall.

"You rest yourself this evening," the old lady said, "then come on over for supper. Me and you have a lot of business to tend to. You hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Bobby Ray.

The old lady smiled again and left.

Bobby Ray did not go to the old lady's house that night, nor did he go the following day or the next. Instead, he found himself on the porch of Lyle Daughtry, a man for whom he and Priester had done some work several times before. More importantly to Bobby Ray, Lyle Daughtry was a long-time elder at the Greater Faith Ministry, the nearest church to Bobby Ray, the only church he might easily reach on foot.

Daughtry was a short man with a slight build. He was at least eighty years old, balding, and though his house was hardly more than a shack, he always looked as if he were in the middle of changing out of one suit and into another. This is how Bobby Ray found him that morning. Daughtry was out on the porch wearing an open-collared white shirt and a pair of navy blue suit pants, no socks or shoes, sitting in his rocking chair.

Daughtry was spooked to see Bobby Ray coming up the sidewalk to his porch. Bobby Ray had never come around without Priester.

Bobby Ray resisted the urge to ask Daughtry for some food, but he did ask if they could talk inside. The older man declined and offered Bobby Ray the other chair on the porch.

"We can talk just as well out here, son," Daughtry said.

Bobby Ray spent the whole time looking up and down the lane out of the corner of his eye, watching for any sign of the old lady, and Daughtry spent the entire time carefully watching him.

"What's on your mind, son?" Daughtry said.

Bobby Ray sat still and quiet for a long time before he spoke. It was a windy day, and Bobby Ray looked out past the houses across the lane and into the distance, where a strong breeze played through the tops of the cypress trees.

"What do you do when something's got a hold of you?" he said finally.

"When something's got a hold of you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You mean like drugs?"

"No, sir."

"Drink?"

"No, sir, nothing like that."

"Then what is it, son?"

"Hard to say. Just something that won't turn me loose. Something I can't get free of."

"Mmhmm," Daughtry said. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his forehead. "You haven't gotten yourself into some kind of trouble, have you?"

"No, sir. Not yet."

"Yet, you say?"

"I want to do what's right, honest I do, but I can't ever seem to get a break."

"A break?" Daughtry said. "Son, what makes you think you're entitled to a break? See, the first thing you've got to do is stop feeling sorry for yourself and--"

"You don't understand," said Bobby Ray.

"Well, maybe I don't. But then, you haven't given me much to go on."

"No, sir."

"Well, let's go back to what you said, then. All I can say is that if something had a hold on me, the first question I'd ask myself is if it was doing me good or not."

"What if it ain't that easy?"

Daughtry sighed and put his handkerchief away.

"Then I'd ask myself if it was putting my soul in jeopardy--period," Daughtry said. "All that matters is your soul, boy. If your soul is free, then nothing else can tie you down. You understand?"

"I'm trying to," said Bobby Ray.

"I tell you what. We're having a revival out at Greater Faith. Why don't you come on out? What about tonight? Maybe we can start finding you some answers."

"I don't have any clothes."

"You don't need any fancy clothes, son. Just come on out. Remember what I said. All that matters is your soul."

"Yes, sir," Bobby Ray said. Then he stood to leave. He again resisted the urge to ask for something to eat. Instead, he staggered off down the path again toward home.

That evening Bobby Ray walked to the Greater Faith Ministries in the shade of dusk. After every step, he listened for the steady cadence of the old lady striding along behind him, gaining on him, but he heard nothing but a chorus of crickets or the croak of a far-off bullfrog, lonely and forlorn.

Bobby Ray had never been much of a church-goer, had in fact never been to church and had never seen much need. He had no idea what he might find that night or even what he hoped to find. Still, the image of Priester's body at the bottom of the ravine stayed with him, came to him more fully now, with a clarity that far exceeded that of dreams or memory. He wondered if he would ever again find peace.

He arrived to find the night's service in full sway. The building itself was a tiny white-washed structure forged of wood, but the sanctuary was filled to capacity with worshippers. The choir sang, and the congregation was on its feet, clapping, dancing, arms raised. Bobby Ray stood for a long while at the back door. For the moment, it was easy to lose himself in that roar of rapture, in that fever trance, and slowly he felt the strain of the preceding week, of the many years, fall away. He longed to hurl himself into the throng, to be lifted, carried away. He would do anything in that moment, he felt--he would strip away his clothes, his flesh, the world as he knew it, anything to be free.

The music softened, the minister made his altar call, and from the pews a dozen worshippers or more came forward for prayer. Bobby Ray lingered for a while where he stood, caught between the wilderness he knew and the dream of salvation.

"Would there be anyone," the minister said, "anyone who would surrender themselves this night in the name of God?" Bobby Ray went forward, down the center aisle, his legs quivering and his arms outstretched. Only as he made his way past the crowd and to the front of the sanctuary did he see the old lady waiting for him at the altar, basket in hand.

Bobby Ray felt himself screaming, though he heard no sound. The choir rose again to full crescendo, and he was lost even to himself. No one seemed to notice or care.

Boy and Girl Games Like Coupling

Glen meets me at the overpass over Highway 9, just after sunset. She's wearing a pink tank top and a pair of jeans. I'm sitting on top of a cinder block by the guard rail. There's one for her too. She puts her handbag down and sits next to me.

We've been together for six months now. I didn't know we were together, but she says so, and it's too much trouble to fuss about. I had known of Glen since second grade, but we had never talked. Then one day she and her boyfriend Terry got into a fight in homeroom. I watched the whole thing from my desk in the back of the room. Glen broke up with Terry and spent the rest of the day crying. That afternoon, I saw her walking home from school, out on Toliver Road, about two miles from her parents' house. I knew that Terry usually drove her home, so I pulled my truck next to her on the shoulder and rolled down the window. Her cheeks were flushed and she was panting.

"Want a ride?" I said to her. She spent a minute looking me over, looking like she was trying to place me, then she opened the door and climbed in.

"Thanks," she said.

"I could have run you over just as easy," I said.

She laughed.

Things are pretty good most of the time. Fucking? Oh yeah. And she brings me food home from her job. Sometimes she gives me money for weed, but she doesn't know it. She really needs to be more careful with her purse.

Lately she's been acting strange, talking about wanting me to meet her family, wondering why I spend so much time here at the overpass. It was her idea to come along.

We're way up high. I stand and look over the rail. I'm straining through the dark for something, anything. Glen is talking about her family again, and I can't think.

"I know you don't know my mother yet, but when you do, you'll understand," she says. "I'm not saying I want you to hate her, but I don't see how you couldn't, at least at first. Don't get me wrong--I want you to like everyone, if you can but..."

The wind is cold. Glen asks me for my jacket. I'm shivering and leaning closer against the rail now. The rail is still a little warm from the afternoon sun. I grit my teeth.

"You don't have to meet them all at once," she's saying. "I know how you are about people."

We're quiet for a while. I'm glad. Glen knows everything and she's always telling you about it.

"You know, I just don't understand," she says. "I mean, I want to understand, but I don't see why you like it up here. It's so... lonely."

"It's peaceful," I say. "Usually."

"Yeah, but don't you wish you were doing something else?"

"Nothing else to do."

"You could call me," she says.

She calls me at all hours of the night. Most times I just hold the phone up to my ear and let her talk. She goes on for hours. "I get so lonely sometimes," she told me once. "I feel like I don't have nobody at all sometimes, except you. Why don't you ever call me?"

I never liked phones. And knowing Glen is like falling into the middle of something all the time.

"My dad would like you, I think," she says. "He's got his quiet ways too. Loves to shoot. He says he'll take you hunting when you meet him. Says he can't believe you've never been."

I don't say anything. I feel her eyes on me. I feel her hand on my shoulder. She moves closer, puts her arm around my waist. Her breath is warm against my ear.

"I tell him you're too gentle. Baby, I just know my family's gonna love you," she says.

"Sure," I say. I put my arm around her. I hear nothing but her breathing, my breathing.

Soon there are headlights cresting the hill, far off, and I say "just a minute" and pull away from Glen. I'm leaning over the rail again, looking out. The lights are growing, haloed. It's a pickup truck, I think, going 35, maybe 40.

"Baby, is something wrong?" she says.

I don't say anything. I back off the rail. I'm stooping now, feeling around through the darkness. I hook my fingers through the holes in my cinder block, and I'm lifting it, pushing up with my legs.

"We going so soon?" she says.

"Something like that," I say, and I wobble closer to the rail. I balance the cinder block along the edge. I'm reckoning time. The truck comes closer. I turn and smile.

"We better hurry up and get yours lifted," I say. "It won't be much longer now."

Glen is just looking at me.

"Let's go," I say.

"Stop playing," she says.

"Who's playing?"

"You're not really--"

"I am," I say.

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" she says.

I look back to the road. Glen makes a grab for the cinder block. I block her with my body. She's screaming now and reaching around me, trying to grab the cinder block again. She gets a grip, but I pry her fingers loose and push the cinder block over the edge. I hear the screech of tires. I hear my cinder block crash and break against the pavement. I hear the truck drive on, to a point. Then I hear the crunch of gravel as the truck veers onto the shoulder.

Glen is staring at me again, not saying anything. I grin, and she backs away.

"What's wrong, baby?" I say to her. "Don't you understand?"

She says nothing.

"I bet you're right, come to think of it," I say. "I bet your folks would love me. I'm so gentle. I'm so sweet."

"Stop it," she says, her voice just above a whisper.

"Let's get married," I say. "Let's have babies and drop them off this overpass."

"Please," she says. She's crying. "Please, just stop..."

I'm laughing now.

"You've gotta love the whole of the man," I say. "Gotta love him all the way."

Then I hear footsteps crunching through the high grass leading up to the overpass. I hear two men's voices--angry voices. One of them pumps a shotgun, and they keep coming, creeping their way up the slope.

I turn and run, from what exactly I'm not sure any more, but I'm laughing harder all the time. The soles of my tennis shoes go slapping across the pavement, then I run up deep into the

woods, cutting down the old dirt road towards the fish camp. Glen is right behind me all the way.

Running like hell.

Some Kind of Voodoo

Ziney Mae Brewster was not yet ready to leave things alone--not with Junior over in Shreveport raising all kinds of hell with God-knows-who, and not with Brick, the only husband she had ever had, taking up with another woman across the street. It was more than anyone should have to bear, she thought, and about as much as she could stand.

That was how she explained it one Saturday morning when Roberta stopped by on her way over to Fifth Street to make groceries and caught Ziney Mae staring daydreamy out of the kitchen window, past the hedges and the front lawn beyond overgrown, across the street to Brick, who was walking behind a reel-spinning mower because Sadie Geautreux liked her grass cut that way. He was wearing a white linen shirt Ziney Mae remembered buying him, and he had the legs of his khaki trousers tucked into calf-length black rubber boots. She didn't notice when Roberta jiggled the latch from the laundry room door to let herself in, or when Roberta said "hey girl" as she walked in, or when she took her usual mug from the dishrack and began helping herself to the coffee on the stovetop. Even as Roberta finished her coffee, Ziney Mae kept staring, her eyes following Brick back and forth across Sadie Geautreux's yard, while she stood with her arms crossed, tapping her foot.

Roberta brought her mug to the sink. She was looking over the top of Ziney Mae's head at Brick, just as Old Man Taylor went peddling by, bound for Fifth Street, a pink satchel hanging over his shoulder and a sack full of apricots in the basket at the front of his bicycle. He threw up his hand, and Roberta waved back, and that's when Ziney Mae sighed and said, "It's more than I should have to bear, and about as much as I can stand, Lord Jesus."

Roberta reached around and began rinsing her mug. "I don't see what you keep worrying around for," she said. "That no 'count nigger."

She pulled Ziney Mae away from the window. They sat together in silence for what felt like the longest time, hearing the seconds swish away between the tick-tocks from the Felix the Cat wall clock, eyes and tail in unison stroke.

Roberta had advised a dozen or more times to forget about Brick. She had gone to Sadie Geautreux herself and told her to find her own man. She had dug her nails into Brick's neck at a Piggly Wiggly checkout, then whipped him savagely up side the head with a bag of kaiser rolls. She had mentioned a guy named Bobby Ray who lived in a camper out on Calypso Lane and who could lose Brick at the sink of a bog for two thousand dollars, maybe forever.

But it wasn't so easy. Thinking had set in on Ziney Mae's mind--Brick in the walls and in snatches of dreams and in the steam rising from every pot. He'd run off before, but he had never stayed away this long.

Ziney Mae could see nothing special about Sadie Geautreux, and she had tried her best to find the appeal. Sadie had light skin and a clear complexion, but nothing spectacular. Her long slim figure was more like a boy's than the figure of any grown woman she knew about. She had a flat face, dull grey eyes, and stringy hair that curled like rat tails to the base of her neck. She wore trousers and button-down shirts like a man's. Every woman on Roosevelt Avenue knew she'd starve before she'd learn to properly cook.

Ziney Mae would pause at mirrors now, her hands taking tight the curves of her thighs, or the tip of a finger resting on her full lips. She would mark the heave of her bosom, the silk of her dark, dark skin. She couldn't understand why a man would quit her for Sadie Geautreux, lest it

was the work of the devil himself, lest it was goophered spooknanny conjuring. This too kept her awake some nights.

"I think Sadie's hexed my Brick," said Ziney Mae.

"Not this again," Roberta said.

"I don't care what you say. It's the only thing that makes sense to me."

"It don't make sense at all."

The phone rang on the wall across the room. Ziney Mae sighed and started away.

"I wouldn't put nothing past her," she said over her shoulder. She took the phone down off the hook. "Hello?"

It was Junior.

"Baby, how you been? I haven't heard from you since I don't know when."

Junior was sorry.

"Thought you'd put your mama down for a minute there," Ziney Mae said.

"Tell him to bring his narrow ass back home," Roberta said. "There ain't nothing over there for him but trouble."

Ziney Mae turned and lifted a finger to her lips.

"I don't care," Roberta said. "He needs to hear."

Junior thought Miss Roberta should mind her own damned business.

"Watch your mouth," said Ziney Mae.

"What'd he say?" Roberta said. "I'll knock his teeth down his throat."

"Hush up, Roberta!"

Junior needed money. Bad. Something about his woman, her cousin, and Oöstan's Palace of Fritters & Flapjacks. No, the ponies don't run no more, and no he wasn't dealing yet. But if he could hold that money...

"Okay, okay, how much do you need?" Ziney Mae said.

Junior thought three large might be nice.

"Boy, you must be out of your mind."

"I'd send him just enough for a Happy Meal and a bus ticket," Roberta said.

Junior heard this.

"I'll see what I can do baby, okay?" said Ziney Mae. "I'm going over to wire it right now. Western Union, like always."

Junior thanked her but thought Miss Roberta had better watch her back. He hung up.

"Junior sends his love," said Ziney Mae.

"Don't you send that boy any more money," Roberta said.

"He's my boy, Roberta. You heading over to Fifth Street? I'll catch a ride, if you're going."

"Yeah, I guess so. Gotta make groceries."

"They've got a Western Union inside the Piggly Wiggly," Ziney Mae said. "I just need to slip something decent on and get my purse."

Roberta started toward the laundry room. "I'll be out in the car waiting," she said.

"I won't be long."

When Roberta was out of sight, Ziney Mae went back to the window. Brick had taken off his shirt and was using it to sop sweat from his chest and arms. Ziney Mae bit her lip and started back to her bedroom.

Cars lined far along both sides of Fifth Street. Roberta turned in at the corner of Fifth and Doxy, where a gaggle of white-bearded men sat sunning in straight-back chairs outside Clayton's Barbershop. Across the street, boys played Wiffle ball in an empty lot where Clement Washeteria used to be, and farther down, a drift of comers and goers trickled through the record shop. There were street vendors hard-selling over the hum and flip-flopped trumping by of the crowd, peddling books and remedies, watches and snow cones, pots & pans and day-trip Sundays to salvation. Old Man Taylor went cruising by on his bike again, his apricots gone and his satchel riding up front. At the end of the block, the Kingdom Hall Jehovah's Witnesses were running a fish fry. Piggly Wiggly lay just ahead.

Roberta rode the turn slowly, missing the pothole at the front of the drive. Ziney Mae was fumbling inside her purse, rooting for the last C-note she'd see for a time. The lot was packed, so Roberta circled around, eyes keen for moving cars and opening spaces.

"You know, she hasn't been to church in a coon's age," said Ziney Mae, "and nobody knows where she goes most days. Don't work anywhere in town I ever knew of."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Sadie Geautreux."

"Oh lord..."

"What? Do you know what she does?"

"No, and I don't want to know," Roberta said.

"But that's just it. Nobody knows. Nobody I talk to, anyway. You know what Gulf Thompson told me one time?"

"Can't even imagine."

"He said he passed Sadie's Buick headed out Road 306 on his way back from the mill a couple weeks ago. She was throwing up dust and everything."

"So?"

"Ain't nothing out there! What would she be in such a hurry to get to?"

"She probably got people out there or something."

"To go see that late in the evening?"

Maybe Brick was keeping her busy that day, Roberta thought.

"Hell, I don't know," she said.

"You know who is out there."

"Miss Tallulah?"

"Don't even tell me I'm crazy."

Miss Tallulah ran a fortune telling salon out of her front parlor, out past the Simmons Paper Mill on 306, but people said she knew a great deal more. When Lula Dawes Simpkins' border collie bit her in her back yard one afternoon, the dog took ill and died within the week. Then Lula Dawes Simpkins' husband. Then Lula Dawes Simpkins. There were politicians and preachers and school marms. There was strength and power and influence. And then there was Miss Tallulah.

"I won't tell you," Roberta said. "It's already a fact."

Tired of circling, tired of burning gas belch by putt-putting belch from the tail pipe of her Nova, Roberta parked at the end of a row and decided to wait. She had the air on high and the radio up loud. Mitty Collier had a talk with her man last night and was singing all about it.

Ziney Mae started crying.

"Girl, what's your problem?" Roberta said.

"Me and Brick used to dance to this song all the time."

Roberta sighed and pulled into a handicapped space.

"We crippled today, Ziney Mae. That means we gotta get on the good foot and hurry on out of there."

"We used to twirl around the living room till the sun come up."

"I know, Ziney Mae," Roberta said. "Let's go."

Ziney Mae went straight to the Western Union in the customer service island at the front of the store. Cartons of Lucky Strikes, Kools, and Pall-Malls were stashed behind the counter on high shelves.

The attendant behind the counter was a short round-faced girl named Addie Washington. She kept her hair up in platts, and the morning she had spent grinding beef and sawing hamhocks in the back had streaked her smock crimson.

"Miss Ziney, how you doing this morning?" she said.

"Doing fine, just need to wire a few dollars."

"Junior?"

"Right."

"When's he coming back, or is he?"

"Oh, I don't know, Addie, one of these days. When he feels like it, I guess."

"Gals sure were crazy about him."

"Takes after his daddy," Ziney Mae said. "Now about this wire--"

"Can't say I blame them," Addie said. She was leaning over the counter now. "He sure was handsome."

"Yeah, he didn't have much trouble finding himself a girl over in Shreveport."

Addie leaned back.

"You say you had a wire to send, Miss Ziney?"

"Just some money for Junior."

"Right. How's Mr. Brick doing, by the way? Don't see him in here much these days..."

Across the way, Roberta had grabbed a buggy and started on her list. First was the fresh produce section, where Roberta picked through a bin of turnip roots on sale for 37 cents a pound. The greens themselves were bound in twine. Roberta chose the fullest bunch and dropped them into her buggy. She cut fast through the rest of her list, cereal, Pet milk, turkey necks, her buggy weaving through waves of blank-faced shoppers zombie staggering down the aisles. She met up at last with Ziney Mae in the frozen food section, where she stood eyeing bags of field peas and rocking back and forth on her heels.

"Get the money sent?" Roberta said.

Ziney Mae turned and nodded.

"Did you need to get anything?"

"Not especially."

"Oh good. Ready to get out of here?"

"Might as well."

With a clear view of the entrance, they started down the aisle toward register 3, which was open with no waiting.

"Hurry up, girl," Roberta said. "We got a shot at three right now."

Ziney Mae stopped short.

"Girl didn't you hear me?" Roberta said.

"Look," Ziney Mae said.

Miss Tallulah had just walked in. She was tall & slender with straight silver hair that reached down to her waist. She wore a flowered peach sun dress and a white wide-brimmed straw hat trimmed with daisies. Her white pumps were polished to a gleam. A boy named Jason Dunwell stood at her side, a lanky, lumbering, slow-witted boy from deep out in the country. Every Saturday morning, he made the two-mile walk down 306 to Miss Tallulah's in his overalls and sledge boots, then changed into the pin-striped suit she'd bought for him to drive her to the store in her big red Cadillac.

People stepped to the side when she passed, giving her a halo of clearance as she passed. No one met her glance. She slipped around the side, toward the produce, Ziney Mae watching her all the way.

"Come on," Roberta said, but up ahead, a short stocky woman turned her buggy into checkout 3; four other women followed. "Damn it, Ziney Mae, we had that checkout."

"Might as well walk around a bit and wait," said Ziney Mae.

"You can do what you want, but I'm getting in line."

But she didn't. Ziney Mae kept her eye on Miss Tallulah, trailing her around the store from a distance. Roberta followed with the buggy. Miss Tallulah strolled along as if she didn't notice, pointing here and there to Jason, who was quick to retrieve whatever she whimsied--a loaf of Wonder bread, a jar of pickled eggs, a wheel of hoop cheese in a red rind. When Miss Tallulah reached the meat counter, Ziney Mae stood peering around the edge of the condiments aisle, her face flanked by jars of sauerkraut. Roberta nudged the buggy into her hip.

"Will you come on so we can go?"

Ziney Mae turned and lifted a finger to her lips.

"Ziney Mae, so help me, if they tow my car..." She nudged her with the buggy again.

"Come on!"

Miss Tallulah turned to look over her shoulder. Ziney Mae ducked low.

"Okay, okay, fine," she whispered.

They doubled back down the aisle, slowly at first. Halfway, they picked up speed, then they broke into a jog. They cut a sharp left up the main throughway and got in line at checkout 1. Ziney Mae was breathing hard. Roberta hunched over with her hand on her hip.

"Why, hello there, ladies."

Rosalee McDowell, the pastor's wife, waited just ahead of them in line with a basket full of groceries. She wore a soft floral-print dress, and her hair was wrapped with a silk scarf. Roberta stood up straight and smoothed down her dress.

"Morning, Sister McDowell," said Roberta. "How you doing?"

"Yeah, how are you and the Reverend?" Ziney Mae said.

Reverend McDowell had taken to drinking corn whiskey and had missed the last two Sundays due to "illness." The first Sunday they had taken up a love offering--the next Sunday, Deacon Frierson suggested that they turn his chair around in the pulpit and pawn his robes.

"Oh, we'll do," Rosalee McDowell said. "I'm making it, of course, and I do believe the Reverend is coming around to himself again."

"Praise the Lord," said Roberta.

"Will we see him tomorrow morning?" Ziney Mae said. Roberta cleared her throat.

"Not just yet," said Rosalee McDowell, "but soon. Do keep us in your prayers."

"We'll do just that," Roberta said.

"Seems like the devil is everywhere these days."

"Amen," Roberta said.

It was Rosalee McDowell's turn in line then.

"Well, you ladies take care now," she said. "I'll see you by and by."

"All right, Sister McDowell," Roberta said.

Rosalee McDowell turned to start loading her groceries onto the conveyor belt. Ziney Mae looked back for Miss Tallulah but didn't see her anywhere. Roberta whispered "let's go" through clenched teeth, as she moved her buggy over to checkout 2.

"I thought you were in a hurry," Ziney Mae said.

"Some moves are worth a little time."

As they left the market, Ziney Mae checked over her shoulder one last time for Miss Tallulah but didn't see her anywhere.

Ziney Mae called Roberta after church Sunday evening. Roberta had slipped into her house-robe and was lying around on the couch, a plate of chicken and dumplings on the end table and a Cardinals game on the radio. She hated to get up.

"Hello?"

"Roberta, I need you to run me somewhere."

"Girl, we were just at the market yesterday. I'm trying to eat supper."

"Nothing like that."

"What is it then? You sick?"

Ziney Mae was quiet a minute. Hoot Gibson hurled a strike for the Redbirds. There was static then the tick-tock of Ziney Mae's clock in the kitchen.

"You there?"

"I need you to run me out 306."

"Ziney--"

"I've got to do it. Ain't no other way. I've got to see Miss Tallulah."

"If she did help Sadie Geautreux get your man, what makes you think she'll help you get him back?"

Ziney Mae stood at the window again. Sadie's Buick had pulled up in the driveway across the street. Brick had been driving. He got out, walked around, and opened Sadie's door for her. She stood, put her arms around him, and kissed him on the cheek. They went inside.

"I don't suppose there's anyway I can convince you how crazy you are," Roberta said.

"If you don't take me, I'll walk," said Ziney Mae.

"Let me finish eating then. I'll be over in about an hour."

"Could you bring your purse?"

"I told you not to send that boy your money."

"You know I'll pay you back."

There was a pause.

"An hour, Ziney Mae."

Roberta went back to her supper. Ziney Mae held her place at the window. The front porch light went off across the street.

The ride out to Road 306 was long and dusty. There had been hardly any rain in the parish for weeks, and the St. Clair River neared its lowest recorded stage. Miss Tallulah's place was around a blind curve, and were it not for the yellow sign with the big red handprint and

cursive script spelling out "Miss Tallulah's," they might have missed her place altogether. They turned and bounced their way along a snaking oyster-shell driveway.

Her house was a double shotgun, with potted plants hanging from hooks all along the front porch. The bulb over the front door was still lit, and there was an ashtray out on the bench swing. Ziney Mae had pleaded with Roberta to come in with her, and now neither of them wanted to knock. Roberta finally did, feebly at first, then far too loud for Ziney Mae's comfort, and in a moment the door creaked open and they faced Miss Tallulah.

She seemed smaller somehow at so close a distance and older. They could make out the lines across her forehead and at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Her neck had begun to wither, and her eyes were a milky blue. She wore a house-robe over satin pajamas, and her hair was up in curlers.

"Sorry, gals," Miss Tallulah said. "I work by appointment only these days, and I'm closed for the evening." She started to shut the door, but Ziney Mae shoved her foot in the crack.

"Miss Tallulah, it's an emergency. Please," she said. "I'll give you anything you want."

Roberta went closer and pinched her arm. "Don't get crazy," she whispered.

"An emergency?" Miss Tallulah said. She squinted at Ziney Mae now. "You might have mentioned that yesterday at the market when you was following me around."

"I'm real sorry about that," Ziney Mae said. "I didn't know how to go up to you at the store."

"Seems nobody do." She stood aside. "You can come on in if your nose is clean."

She led them to a round table in her parlor, where they sat in metal folding chairs across from Miss Tallulah's recliner. It was a spare, tiny wood-paneled room with maps from around the world pinned up over every wall. There was a bookcase and a leather-cushioned bench across the

room, and at Miss Tallulah's side, she kept a low stack of occult titles, her tarot deck, and her astrolabe.

"What's your pleasure?" Miss Tallulah said. "Fortune, tarot, horoscope..."

"I want my man back," Ziney Mae said.

"A man, yes. I hear this all the time, but what am I supposed to do about it?"

Ziney Mae looked to Roberta, who leaned back with her arms folded.

"She thinks you bewitched her Brick for Sadie Geautreux, and she wants you to undo it."

Miss Tallulah started laughing.

"You came all the way out here for that?" she said. "I can offer advice, I can tell you the stars, but bewitchin'?"

Ziney Mae teared over and her lip began to tremble.

"You're just protecting Sadie Geautreux!" she said.

"Baby, I wouldn't help somebody take your man. That wouldn't be right."

"You did it just as sure as this world!"

"Baby, you talking about magic. What do you think I am? A voodoo priestess?" Miss Tallulah laughed again, and even Roberta had uncrossed her arms and begun to chuckle.

Ziney Mae leaned over the table.

"I'll say one thing for you," she said. "Once you're bought, you stay bought."

Miss Tallulah stopped laughing.

"Bought?" she said.

"She's all tore up over Brick," Roberta said. "She didn't mean no harm."

"Bought?" Miss Tallulah said again.

Ziney Mae sat back and commenced to weeping.

"When is your man's birthday?" Miss Tallulah said.

"June seventeenth, I believe," said Roberta quickly. "That right, Ziney Mae?"

"Your man is a Gemini," Miss Tallulah said. "The curse of every Gemini is two loves."

Ziney Mae looked up.

Miss Tallulah shook her head. "You townfolks strut around, acting like you too good to speak, gawking and gossiping and carrying on, but you can sure come down here when you need something."

Ziney Mae went on weeping.

"And you have the nerve to say I'm bought?" Miss Tallulah continued.

Ziney Mae had begun to quiver.

"Easy now," Roberta said, putting an arm around her shoulder.

"I'll tell you what," Miss Tallulah said. "That one was for free, baby. Now get your corn-fed ass out of my parlor."

Ziney Mae lunged across the table, clutching at the old woman's throat. Miss Tallulah fell to the floor. Roberta grabbed Ziney Mae by the arms and held her back.

"You hexed my man just as sure as this world!"

"Get that crazy bitch out of here!"

"I'm not going nowhere till you give me something! You can't do me like this!"

Roberta had wrestled Ziney Mae down, but Ziney Mae was worming herself out of her grasp and reaching again at Miss Tallulah. Miss Tallulah backed against her chair and grabbed behind her stack of books on the floor. She pulled out a .22-caliber pistol and aimed it dead level at Ziney Mae, who stopped short.

"I'm telling you one last time to get out of my house," Miss Tallulah said. Her hand trembled, but her voice was soft. "Don't even think about coming back here."

Roberta and Ziney Mae were on their feet again. Miss Tallulah rose slowly, keeping her aim on them the whole while. She followed them out to the porch and down the stairs, and as Roberta and Ziney Mae reached the Nova, Miss Tallulah said, "You'll suffer much more than a man for this, child. That's not Tallulah speaking to you. That's God."

They climbed into the car, and Roberta took off, circling around then speeding down the driveway, back to the road. Miss Tallulah stood watching, waiting till their tail lights vanished into the glen of cypress.

They were quiet the whole way back to town. Only when Roberta had turned at the slant-leaning sliver of green sign that marked Roosevelt Avenue did she say to Ziney Mae, "You all right?" But there was no reply.

She pulled into Ziney Mae's carport and followed her into the kitchen. Ziney Mae started a fresh pot of coffee on the stove. For a while, they sat at the table, neither of them saying a word, then the phone rang, and Ziney Mae rose to answer.

"Tend to that coffee, will you?" she said. "Hello?"

It was Junior again.

"Did you get the wire?"

He did.

"Good. Baby, your mama's had a long day. I'd better let you go."

Miss Roberta might still consider watching her back, Junior thought.

Ziney Mae laughed. "Okay, then. Goodnight, son. I love you."

She hung up.

Roberta moved the coffee over.

"He get the money?"

"Yeah, got the wire last night."

"Well, that's something to be grateful for, I guess."

"Yeah."

"So do you still think Miss Tallulah hexed your man?"

Ziney Mae thought for a minute and said, "I don't know. Could just as easily have done it as not, the way I see it."

The porch light came on across the street again, and Brick walked out to Sadie Geautreux's Buick, putting on his jacket as he went. He climbed in and backed down the driveway, speeding off toward town.

"Ain't that peculiar?" Roberta said.

"Ain't it though?"

Ziney Mae went back to the window.

Old Man Taylor went peddling by, back toward home this time, with a new bag of apricots. He threw up his hand, and Ziney Mae waved back.

"So what now?" Roberta said.

"I don't know," said Ziney Mae. "Just have to wait and see, I guess."

X, Y, and Z

"You here for Watts?" said Y. He wore a suit and tie.

X wore cargo shorts and a mesh tank top. "Yeah?" he said. He walked over, sandals clapping across the patio.

"Good. All we need now is--"

"He's coming," said X. "Got caught up."

"Another one?"

"Wouldn't say."

"Good man," Y said. "I wouldn't either."

They shook hands across the table and sat. The patio looked across the rear parking lot to a gully choked with kudzu. The lunchtime crowd had cleared out, but they could still hear cars breezing by the front of the café, heading uptown. At the edge of the lot, a pit bull crouched near the foot of a dumpster and tore into a fallen bag.

"Watts came back from Cozumel," Y said.

"I drove by his house again last night," X said.

"Red Jag?"

"Something like that."

"He bought it used, you know." Y laughed. "Of course, he didn't want anyone else to know."

X wouldn't even smile.

"Yeah..." Y cleared his throat and folded his hands. "So what's your line?"

"Line?"

"What do you do?"

"This, that."

"Like your friend?"

X looked down at his place mat.

"Can I get you gentleman anything? Maybe something to drink?" The waitress, Marie, was a short, slender blonde, maybe twenty. She wore jeans and a tight red polo shirt with "Fever's" stitched in cursive high to the left, just beneath her nametag. She lay two menus on the table.

Y brushed back his silver eye brows with the tip of his pinky.

"Coke," X said.

"Could you bring me a sweet tea with lemon, Miss Marie?" Y said.

"I'll be right back with your drinks," she said. She left.

"No," X said, "and he's not my friend."

"Beg pardon? Oh! Sorry, I didn't mean--"

"It's fine." X reached down to rub the back of his ankle. "What do you do?"

"I work with Watts, remember?"

"Right, but what do you do?"

"Marketing. To think, I might have sold you that shirt."

"I don't think so," X replied. "Colored fella did that."

"You know what I'm talking about. Don't you read papers? Watch television?"

"When I can stand it."

"Then I'd wager one of my ads got you to buy something--one way or another."

X sat up and turned in his chair to watch the lot. The pit bull had ripped a large hambone loose from the bag and was dragging it away to a patch of grass by the edge of the kudzu.

"Here you go," Marie said, setting their glasses down. "Do you know what you want to order yet?"

"We're still waiting on somebody," X said.

"But if there's any more of you back there," said Y, "we'll have two to tide us over."

"How sweet," Marie said. "I'll be back in a bit to check on you gentlemen. Just let me know if you need anything."

Y turned in his chair to watch her hurry back inside.

"He's here," said X, nodding toward the lot.

A black jeep pulled into a space along the first row. A lanky, bearded man with long brown hair stepped from the driver's side and closed the door gently. He stood a moment, rubbing his hands together and looking around. He wore shades.

"That him?" said Y.

"Yeah."

"Hey! Up here, bud!" Y said, waving his arms.

X yanked Y's arm down and grabbed him by the throat. "Are you stupid or something?"

"Sorry," gasped Y.

"Don't you ever do that again."

"I won't! I won't!"

X let go and leaned back. Z shoved his hands into the pockets of his camo duster and limped toward the porch.

"What's his deal?" said Y.

"Beats me."

"Do you think he--"

"Just shut up, all right? Can you do that? Just keep your mouth shut."

Y fished a pack of Morleys and a lighter from the inner pocket of his coat. He lifted a quivering flame to the tip of his cig and drew deep. "Care for one?" he said, as he blew.

X ignored him.

"Bet you guys thought I wasn't coming," Z said, as he topped the concrete steps. He grimaced on the last.

"We know how it is," said X. "You all right, bud?"

Z caught hold of the railing and leaned back. He took off his shades. "I fell, doing a job on Calypso Lane a couple Sundays back. Caught myself, but I came down funny on my ankle. He lifted his left foot and shook it out. "I really need to get to church more."

X laughed.

Z looked Y over. "This the cat?" he said.

"Yep," said X.

"Where are my manners?" Y said. He stood and offered his hand. "The name's--"

"Whoa, hold up, man," said Z. "We don't need no names."

"That's for damned sure," said X.

Z sat next to X.

Marie came back with another menu under her arm. "Here you go sir," she said, handing a menu to Z. "What will you have to drink?"

"You got any Natty Light?" said Z.

"No sir."

"What do you got?"

"Bud, Bud Light, Miller, Heine--"

"Just bring me a Bud," Z said. "Two Buds."

"Two Buds, yes sir. And do you gentlemen know what you'll be eating?"

"None for me," said Z.

"Same," said X.

"Well, I'll have a tuna melt on wheat," said Y. He stubbed out his cig in the ashtray.

"Alrighty," said Marie. "I'll have that tuna melt out in jiff." She took away the menus.

"Don't you guys want something to eat?" said Y. "I'm springing."

They ignored him.

"Found a perch," said Z. "A good one. Clean vista."

"Yeah?" X said.

"That's how we used to set it up, man. Ghilly, creep, peep. Saw his car out front."

"Was it a red Jag?" said Y.

"What did I tell you?" X said.

Y looked down at his hands.

"Yeah," said Z. "Saw it last night and the night before and the night before that. Guy cuts a regular pattern all right. To the minute."

"Wouldn't know it from his work," said Y.

Z shook his head. "Where'd you find this cat again?"

"A Sears-Roebuck catalog," said X. "He was right there on the page, trying to sell me a sweater."

Z laughed. Y bit his lip and reached for another smoke.

"He's cool, though," X said. "All in."

"I bet," said Z.

"I work with Watts," said Y.

"No kidding?" said Z.

"Yeah, we're ad men," Y said, leaning forward. "I might have sold you that jacket."

Z smiled and reached inside his left pocket. He pulled out two sleeves of BC powder and took them both straight. "I don't think so friend," he said.

Marie walked up and set two Buds down in front of Z. He downed the first immediately then wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Sir, your sandwich will be out in a minute. Anything I can get anyone?"

X shook his head no.

"I think that will do it," said Y.

"One more Bud," Z said, "when you bring his sandwich."

"Coming right out," said Marie. She took the empty bottle away.

"Sweet girl," said Z.

"Sweet all over," said Y. "I saw her first." He laughed. Alone.

"You fellas decide which one of you is sporting eyes?" Z said.

"He doesn't know," said X.

"What don't I know?" said Y.

"It doesn't matter," said X.

"It's how I work," said Z.

"I'll do it," said X.

"Maybe I want to," said Y. "I mean, depending on what it is..."

"If I gotta work solo--" said Z.

"You ain't gotta work solo," said X.

"I just want to know what it is," said Y.

"And I just got this bum knee and everything," Z said.

"I know," said X, "but I don't see how that--"

"If someone would just tell me what's going on!" said Y.

"Shut up!" X said.

Y reached for another Morley. Z finished his other Bud.

"I'm not going solo," Z said. "That's all I'm saying."

"I said I was willing," said Y. "Whatever it is."

"Peepers, man!" said Z. "Every time out! No other way to do it!"

X sighed and drank deep from his Coke.

Marie came back with Y's tuna melt and another Bud for Z. Across the lot, the pit bull lay napping in front of the dumpster.

"Is there anything else I can get you?"

No one spoke.

Marie put down the check. "I'll just leave this here. I'll be checking on you. Thanks for coming to Fever's."

Y put out his cig and began to nibble his sandwich. Z guzzled his beer.

"Fine," said X. "We'll all go. We'll all just fucking go."

Z put down his empty bottle and belched. "Platoon!"

"I think she liked me, y'all," said Y. He took a sip of tea. "Ya'll think?"

Somebody made my wife! Somebody made my wife!

The thought was with him all the time, sunning up and down the days, X tearing crazy, coming apart. He hadn't met Watts, hadn't even seen him face to face, but by chance he saw a red Jaguar convertible backing out of X's driveway, speeding off down Shelton Drive. X found his wife Lorraine lying naked on the couch, asleep to the hum and glow of soap operas, undespairing in the belief that X would not be home from work for hours. She hadn't heard him walk in. X had taken off the afternoon to treat her to a matinee and to concede at long last--"okay, so we'll buy a dog."

He beat her half to death with a socket wrench from his tool belt and left her bleeding on the living room floor. Then he jumped in his Cougar to go find Watts.

He would not find Watts that afternoon, but he went driving every evening after work, cruising every posted roadway and marking a city map with a yellow highlighter to chart his progress, until he found the red Jaguar parked in a driveway in front of a white-washed A-frame bungalow. He returned the next three evenings to make sure the car belonged there then began running his own surveillance. Once he was satisfied, he decided that J. Randall Watts of 12 Tuscadero Boulevard would have to die. That was seven months ago.

The team left Fever's, X on foot and Y by cab. Z got back in his jeep and drove to a bar off the West End, where he ate peanuts and drank soda water with lime to get primed for his objective. They met again some hours later in front of a cypress tree off the back walk in Vandovere Park, a section near-abandoned to a bog.

X had changed into a black jump suit, Y into a blue wind suit, and Z had somehow lost his shirt along the way--still he wore his camo duster and a pair of jeans.

X wore a pair of binoculars around his neck. Z was empty-handed.

"I've got means," said Z.

"This wind suit is a premium nylon blend," said Y. "Breathes like you wouldn't believe. The beauty is I look like a real jogger too."

"You've got means?" said X. "What does that even mean?"

"Ghilly. Creep. Peep," said Z. "A turtle don't send his head out venturing in a sandstorm."

X screwed up his face, lips parted, eyebrows furrowed.

"I don't look like the sort of guy who could kill anything, do I?" said Y. "Of course not. That's an asset, you see. I sell folks the dream of a harmless stud. That's marketing."

"By and by, I believe I'll invite you to go to church with me," Z said. "We still don't need no names, though."

X shoved his hands into his pockets and started away.

"Where you going?" said Y.

Z held his arms outstretched, his hands pushed together to make a triangle. "Sight, boy! The eye and the air are all that matter."

X turned back. "I seem to be the only one who gives a good goddamn whether we get Watts or not."

"Prima donna," said Z. He set his sights further afield.

"Now you wait just a minute," Y said. "What happened to all in?"

"Beats the hell out of me," said X.

"I'm here," said Y. "This man's here too. We're all in."

"Bitch a personal tragedy," said Z.

"I may not know much about this," said Y, "but I do know I'm just about tired of you acting like you're the only one around here with any sense."

X clenched a fist and stood toe to toe with Y. "You keep your fucking mouth shut, like I told you before," he said.

"Boy's warming up," said Z. "Tea kettle, man! Wooooo!"

"Or what?" said Y. "You're going to hit me? Go right ahead. Me and this man can walk, and you can do it all yourself. Am I right?"

"I need cheddar," Z said.

X and Y both looked his way.

"Just sayin'..." he said.

"I've got half a mind to kill your ass then beat Watts to death with your carcass," X said to Y. He turned to spit in the grass. "I been thinking about it too long, though. Don't wanna mess anything up. That's why we got this man right here." He nodded at Z.

"It's better than love," Z said.

"And remember," X said, "you got your reasons too."

"I know I have my reasons," Y replied, "but that still doesn't excuse the way you've been acting, now does it?"

"What do you want me to do?" said X. "Cry about it?"

"Raggin'," said Z. "Y'all hug and make up." He was sighting a far off little boy chasing a squirrel around a fountain.

"When we're finished," X said, "you don't have to have a thing else to do with either one of us ever again."

"Jesus says come on down, though," said Z.

Y said nothing a while.

"Look, I'm sorry, all right?" said X. "Sorry, sorry, sorry, motherfucker."

"The lamb would want us to forgive," Z said. He had just obliterated the squirrel and the little boy in his mind.

"All in?" said X.

Y sighed. "All in."

"Good."

"I know, right?" Y replied. "That's what we call a hard sell."

Hiring Y had been a bad move. It hadn't been the worst move Dietrich & Mansfield Clothiers had ever made, but Y had never really paid off. Thirty years sky-watching for something like a good idea, but never was there any weather--and Jesus were there bad ideas.

Ski-Acadiana

Handi-Holiday Blow-Out

Mitten Madness

Did the man lack motivation? No. Did the man lack invention? No. Did the man lack industry? No. Did the man lack talent? All indications were that the die was cast, that Y's fate blew flats in the slush piles of a half-dozen guidance counselors who had all failed him in their turns--or at the hands of one who had hated him more than all the others could conceive. Y had, for his part, cultivated a genius for inadequacy, a forever falling-short that occasioned his every do and try. Women, friends, style, "cool"--zeroes.

On the wan side of fifty, Y had gone blitz and was jacking for the rafters, but to no avail. Then somehow he had a single sensible idea, an idea that in no way reeked of strain or smacked of despair: Casual Slacks for the Grindstone, cut-rate for Labor Day.

Excited that his work might take at last the upswing he had so long needed, he talked to all and sundry--including Watts, who sat the whole while with his feet propped on his desk and his back turned, while he sipped his coffee and read his paper and thought far away thoughts about X's wife.

Later that afternoon, as Y sat at his own desk, putting the final touches on his proposal, Watts stepped out to get some air, a walk that took him down the corridor to the office of his supervisor--who liked even the rough idea of Casual Slacks for the Grindstone, secondhand. Watts gained a promotion in the deal. No one would ever remember a word Y said about his own idea. It was a few days later, as Y walked out to his car, when he decided that J. Randall Watts, junior ad executive and first class jackhole, would have to die--if only Y could meet the right people.

"Vista, vista, vista," Z was saying.

The sidewalk swept sprinting down the final hill that bottomed out through the dusk to meet the fringe of Watts' cove.

"Flood zone," Y remarked.

They edged around the cove, careful to hedge the shadows. An embankment rose from behind another A-frame opposite Watts'--at the top, behind a ridge of red clay flanked by blue mist shrubs, Z had stashed the rifle and his scope in a black canvas bag.

"Eyes," he said, as he crouched.

X looked out through his binoculars. "The curtains are wide open."

"What do you see?" said Y.

"He's sitting in his easy chair," X said.

Watts was reared back in his recliner. He wore a sky-blue terry cloth robe over his pajamas. He nibbled pretzels from a ceramic bowl on the card table next to him. He was watching a rerun of Suddenly Susan.

"Let me see," said Y.

"Back way the hell off," X said to Y.

Z adjusted his sights. "Place."

X licked his lips. "Gut," he said.

"You sure?" Z said. "I can take the headshot too."

"No, no--gut," said X. "Son of a bitch made my wife."

"This isn't fair, you know," said Y. "I put down the lion's share. I bought lunch."

"Heart's there too," said Z.

"I want him to know," said X.

"All in," Y said, but no one listened.

Z took a breath and locked in. "Wind?"

"Just pull the trigger," X said.

"Wind?" said Z.

X sighed. "None."

"God's gonna trouble the water," said Z under his breath.

I could have been a stand-up guy, thought Z aloud to himself in sonorous tones, on streets and on sidewalks or when strolling through the market on a Saturday, till to himself was everyone--eyes wide, wide berth, sidelong, staring.

There were trips and tunnels and crashes of light, rainbeats on sprawling draping fronds of palms, skulls hissing steam out of the night. Everybody on fire, man, but tee-hee-hee, you can't catch me--ghilly, creep, peep. Flash forward.

Easing in and out of places, Z, in his duster, coveted relief, sought armistice, begged absolution. I could have been a stand-up guy, he thought aloud, as if in hearing, God might see a need to go and make it so, and so make lies of years. A house, a wife, a baby, and a wheel of cheese--but the greatest of these is cheddar, he thought, till everything was out of reach.

He tried and eeked along for ages, ends of months slipping past his reach, landscapes never quite in focus. And then one night, Z was huddled at the end of a bar, cornered by some raving guy who knew some guy and another guy who wouldn't do. The raving guy was rifling through his cargo shorts and whispering mad how easy a mark it would be, if Z had the tools, and all the while Z was thinking, if it be thy will, Jehovah, that I should only scratch my mark in the sand with the barrel of my carbine and lay down low a score, a round a go, let it stand.

All he wanted was a house, a wife, a baby, and a wheel of cheese, but forsaking one to pot the rest, he'd leave the cheddar by, were it his choice, and be a stand-up guy.

But it was too late, he knew.

The moon was hung.

The doors of the church were closed and closed forever.

It didn't matter whether he made the shot at all.

And These Were Built Upon the Sand

The heat was worse than they expected, but it was dark and cool inside the bodega, where the whirl of fans in the windows drowned out the conversations and the clicks of billiard balls across the room. They sat. The wife turned away from the husband to powder her face in the beige compact she kept in her purse and to dab at the sweat that pearly along her forehead and along the corners of her mouth with a napkin she lifted from the bar.

“What will you have?” said the bartender.

“Cerveza,” said the husband. “Whatever you keep on tap. Honey?”

The wife looked over her shoulder.

“What do you want to drink?” the husband said.

The bartender stood with his arms propped on the bar.

“Nothing,” she said then looked back to her compact.

“Bring her a tonic water, if you have it,” the husband said. “She takes lime.”

“Sí, Señor,” the bartender said. He moved to the tap.

“Ask him,” said the wife.

“I will,” the husband said, “as soon as he’s finished with our drinks.”

“Don’t forget.”

The bartender set a mug of beer down on a coaster in front of the husband then a glass of tonic water in front of the wife. The wife lifted the glass to her nose, sniffed, then put the glass aside. The bartender watched her.

“Excuse me,” said the husband, “but is there a phone here we might use?”

“I am sorry, Señor. There is no phone,” said the bartender.

“Oh, then I wonder if you could tell me where to find a tow truck,” the husband said.

“Our car—” He paused to glance at his wife, who, having taken the lime slice from the rim of her glass, sat sucking the juice. “Our car,” he continued, “is stuck in a ditch.”

“Will it start?” the bartender said.

“Oh yes,” said the husband. “We just need to get it out.”

“He doesn’t know that,” said the wife, laying her lime slice down on the counter, “but the car was running fine until he wrecked it.”

“I didn’t wreck anything,” the husband said.

“Did you or did you not run the car off the road?” said the wife.

The husband lifted the mug to his lips and drained it at once.

The bartender squinted and rubbed his chin. “I don’t know where you could find a tow truck,” he said, “but I do know a man who might pull your car free with a team of mules.”

“Where can we find him?” said the husband.

“He has a little place just off the main road, out past where Doña Rosa’s farm used to be. Garza is his name.” The bartender watched the wife again. She had taken another napkin, folded it lengthwise, wet it with tonic water, and lay it over her eyelids.

“Thank you very much,” the husband said. “How much do I owe you?”

The bartender told him, and the husband paid.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” said the bartender.

“No, thank you,” the husband said.

The wife leaned forward and let the napkin fall into her hands.

“Recovered, have we?” said the husband.

“That will depend,” said the wife, “on what this Garza will have to say.”

The husband sighed. “Will you finish your water so we can go?”

“I never started,” said the wife. She stood, secured her purse, then started toward the entrance, leaving the husband by the bar buttoning his linen jacket. He caught up with her just outside the door.

The heat was no better, and the wind had picked up from the west, dusting the air with the grit of burnt clay. They walked through the center of town, past abandoned sandwich boards and storefront windows boarded shut. Afar, rows of shanty tenements stacked high into the sun-baked knolls that hemmed in the village from the north. They went quickly at first, taking the sidewalk in long strides, then the main street opened up onto a narrow road with high brush shoulders. Their pace slowed.

The wife stopped to brush dust from the front of her dress. The husband rubbed his calves and the backs of his ankles, which burned from the tops of his leather shoes.

“Are you all right?” the husband said.

“I wondered to myself just now if I could ever manage to have more fun,” the wife said.

Two days earlier, they took their vows at a chapel in Westwick, where the husband was a tenured professor in Pan-American Studies at the city college and where the wife had been an assistant manager at a delicatessen until the month before. After the reception, they left for Puerto Cerrana, despite the longstanding objections of the wife, who had never traveled and who would have rather not gone anywhere than drive to Mexico in a jeep. But the husband was writing a book, and he wanted to see the countryside, the genuine real estate he called it. The husband paid for the trip himself.

As they pattered along a narrow road that led to the foot of a hill, the husband, excited to see what he considered a genuine town at last, reached to take a sip of water from the canteen he had bought at a camping store the night before the wedding. The canteen slipped from his fingers, turning over in his lap. Before the wife could grab for the wheel, the husband sent the car careening from the road into a ditch.

“How are we going to recognize Garza’s place?” the wife said.

“The bartender said it is just past Doña Rosa’s farm,” the husband said.

“As if you’ve been.”

The husband shrugged. “I assume it’s a big place, and the next place—”

“You assume?”

“It’s all I have,” said the husband.

“I know the feeling well,” said the wife.

They walked on for the better part of an hour before they began to crest a hill. When they reached the top, they could see all around them rows of withered cornstalks torched by the sun.

The husband said, “This must be Doña Rosa’s farm.”

“There’s no telling how far these corn rows go,” said the wife.

“But it is all downhill,” the husband said. “The worst is behind us.”

There was a break in the rows of corn after a quarter mile and a clay path that led to a clearing where a plain wooden structure not much larger than a tool shed stood. To the side, two burrows were tethered to a post next to a water trough.

“I believe we have found Garza,” the husband said, as he looked around.

“Well, let’s get this over with,” said the wife. “I’m ready to get back to the hotel and have a shower.”

They went closer. The burrows' hooves had beaten smooth a path to Garza's bungalow, as had the wheels of his cart. A single woodblock step led to the threshold of his front door. The husband mounted the step and knocked. The sound of children playing was muted beyond the door, giggles and the slaps of footfalls across the floor, then a gruff "come in"—the husky voice of a mature male.

The husband leaned against the door, pushing it open. The wife squeezed past him and into the living room. There were two wooden chairs opposite one another, and in the center, a low table fronting an old sofa grimed with dust. Garza sat with his left leg propped on the table and his arms sprawled across the back of the sofa.

Garza was a short, balding man with sallow skin and a bushy moustache. He wore a sweat-stained shirt, unbuttoned so that the husband and the wife could see his paunch of a belly and the tufts of hair matted along his chest. The children, two boys aged three and five, stopped and went to stand next to their grandfather.

"Go outside and play," Garza said softly, and the boys obeyed. "What can I do for you?" he said to the husband and the wife.

"My husband crashed our car in a ditch," said the wife.

Garza chuckled.

"We wondered if you could help us pull the car out," the husband said.

"We were told you have some mules," the wife said.

Garza frowned. "They're burrows," he said.

"Beg pardon?" said the husband.

"They're burrows," Garza said, "not mules."

"We're sorry," said the husband. "We didn't know."

"I don't suspect you would," said Garza.

The wife began to tap her foot.

"We would be happy to pay you," said the husband.

"Oh, would you?" Garza said.

"Yes, whatever you want," the husband said.

Garza laughed again. The husband and the wife looked at one another.

"You can afford to give me whatever I want?" Garza said. "That must be nice. You think your money can solve everything, don't you?"

"Not everything," said the wife, "but surely it could buy us some service."

"Service?" Garza said. He shook his head.

"What my wife means is that when someone, such as yourself, is kind, it is good to be able to repay him. You understand."

"I do," Garza said, "but I'm afraid I cannot help you. Someone must watch the babies, and with this leg, I can barely walk, much less drive the burrows." The husband and the wife had not noticed, but Garza's ankle and bare foot were red and swollen.

"Scorpions," said Garza. "They are everywhere."

"You could let us borrow the mules," the wife said. "We could drive them into town ourselves."

"Yes!" said the husband. "We would still pay you, of course, and we would make sure you get them back."

"Burrows," Garza said. "They are burrows, and how would you return them to me?"

"However you like," the wife said.

"We could drive them back," the husband said. "I could drive your cart, and my wife can follow me in the car."

"And you will lead my burrows as carefully as you've driven your car?" Garza said. "No."

"Then we'll buy your burrows and your cart," said the wife. "All of it, okay? We just want to get out of here. Don't you understand?"

"Too well," said Garza. "I am sorry, but I cannot do without my burrows. At any price."

"But how are we supposed to get out of here?" the wife said. "Don't you care?"

"I am sorry," Garza said again.

"Of course you don't care," the wife said. "All you care about are your damned mules!"

"We should go now," the husband said, taking the wife by her arm. She wrenched away from him and left through the front door.

"We thank you for your time," the husband said to Garza. He turned to follow the wife into the yard. She had stopped halfway down the path, looking out at the main road.

"Are we ready?" the husband said, as he approached.

The wife said nothing as they started away again.

"We could try somewhere else farther down the road," the husband said. "We're bound to find someone who can help us."

"Are we?" said the wife.

"Don't you think we should try?" the husband said.

"I don't care what you do any more," said the wife. For this she was immediately sorry, but at that moment, she could imagine no way of saying so.

They turned back onto the road toward town. To the west, the sun slipped beyond the edges of the far away bluffs. The wind had shifted and for the time retained the slightest chill.

The husband and the wife paced themselves against the dusk that grew over the valley. They were silent all the way.

By the time they reached the bodega, the sky was black, and inside the room was vacant except for the bartender and a young man who shot pool at a nearby table. The husband and the wife sat again at the bar.

"My friends, you have returned," the bartender said. "Did you have any luck with your car?" The husband shook his head.

"I am sorry," the bartender said then. "Surely there will be someone who can help you. Maybe tomorrow? Will you have something to drink, Señor? Cerveza?"

"Please," said the husband.

"Señora?"

The wife shook her head.

The bartender turned and poured a beer for the husband, which he finished at once.

"Would you like another?" the bartender said.

The husband looked over at the wife. She looked back.

"I would," the husband said. "Very much."

The wife turned away. "What are we going to do?" she said.

"I thought you didn't care," said the husband.

"I'm serious," said the wife.

The bartender placed another beer in front of the husband, who nodded his thanks and began again to drink.

"How are we going to get back to our hotel?" the wife said.

The husband finished his drink then gestured to the bartender to bring another.

"More?" said the bartender.

"If you will," the husband said.

"Of course." The bartender brought another beer.

The young man shooting pool alone caught the husband's eye. The husband took his beer and went closer to the table.

"Señor," the young man said as he looked up from his shot. He was short, slender, hardly twenty years old. He wore a coarse white shirt and khaki trousers with the legs rolled halfway up to his knees and a pair of red open-toed sandals he had most likely found somewhere.

The husband smiled. His face tingled. He lifted his free hand to his bottom lip, pawing as if he might find the next words waiting somewhere in his mouth. The young man lined up his next shot. He played the seven ball to the nearest corner, missing off the cushion by an inch. The ball stopped just short of the pocket.

"Do you want to play?" he said.

"I'm not much good," said the husband.

"As you can see, I'm not much good either. I'll rack. You can break, if you want."

The husband drank then set the empty mug on the edge of the table.

"All right," he said.

The wife had turned all the way around on her stool and crossed her legs.

"Are you sure," the bartender said from behind, "that there is nothing I have that might interest you?" He was propped against the bar again, leaning close. The wife's eyes never left her husband, who by then had taken a cue stick from the wall, chalked it, and steadied himself to break.

"Beer," said the wife, "whatever he's been having."

"Sí," the bartender said, but he lingered. He could smell the wife's perfume, the way it mixed with her sweat and with the clay scent that was everywhere in the air. "Lime, Señora?"

"Just the beer," the wife said, and the bartender backed away.

The husband missed wildly with his break then staggered, clutching the table.

"It's been a long time," he said.

"Have another shot," the young man said. "It is just a friendly game."

The wife began to swing her foot back and forth. She folded her arms and leaned back against the bar. The bartender returned with her beer. He placed it next to her arm, but she ignored it.

On his next try, the husband broke cleanly, and the purple-striped twelve dropped into a corner pocket.

"You are better than you say," the young man said. "I will have to watch out for you."

The wife swung her foot faster. The bartender resumed his place behind the wife.

Faltering slightly, the husband found his way to the cue ball and took aim at the eleven ball across the table. He felt warm and relaxed. The wife shifted her weight on the stool and re-crossed her legs. The husband was aware again of her presence. When he glanced up, the wife was lurching forward, staring. He looked back to the table and tried to steady himself.

"I don't suppose you have a car?" he said to the young man.

"A car?" the young man said. "I don't even know anyone with a car. Don't you know that if I had a car, I would be anywhere else?"

The husband nodded. The wife looked on. The bartender paid no attention. He was examining the wife's auburn hair, which fell in loose curls to her shoulders.

"That is too bad," the husband said. "You see, our car is stuck in a ditch out on the main road. I could have paid you for a ride back to Puerto Cerrana. My wife wants to get back in the worst way." He tried again to focus on his shot, but he felt the wife's eyes on him again.

"Or else we could have played for stakes," he said at last.

"How do you mean?" said the young man.

"If you had the car, I could have played you for it."

"Ah yes," the young man said. "We can still play for stakes, if you want to."

"It's better for me that we don't," the husband said. He missed his shot on the eleven. The young man bent over to look more closely at the table.

"If I'd had the car," he said, "what would you have wagered?"

The wife cleared her throat, and the husband knew that he should leave the table and go back to the bar. "I would have wagered my wife," he said, "if you would have had her. But that wouldn't be fair to you, would it?"

The young man forced a grin. He noticed that the wife was looking on.

"You are a funny man," he said.

"Am I?" said the husband. "Could I wager my wife? Who would want her?"

The bartender stood erect now. He watched the husband.

"Señor," the young man said, "Maybe you should--"

"Maybe I should what?" the husband said. "I'll tell you what you should do: never get married. I tried it once, a couple days ago. I'd rather have a car."

The young man looked around as if he had no idea what to do.

The husband began to laugh. He laughed until his stomach ached, until he was bent over the table, until he had collapsed onto the floor and his knees folded into his chest. He knew that

when he managed to compose himself, that when he stood and looked around the room, his wife would be gone and that he would have to chase her into the night. Just how far he would have to go would depend on how long he would manage to stay there on the floor, how fast the anger and the hurt would drive her steps, and how convincingly he would manage to plead with her, if he would. He knew that he would spend the rest of their honeymoon, as he had all afternoon, trying to make everything right, and then who knew for how long? Thirty, forty, fifty years?

When he calmed himself at last, when he stood and dusted himself off, when he turned again to face the bar, the wife was still sitting there on her stool, just staring.

Flood

The first day is not so bad. The water is no higher than the tops of our shoes, and though there is no sunlight, we are content with candles. We do not sleep.

On the second day, our parents still have not come home, so we move from our bedrooms to the living room, where we can watch for headlights coming up the driveway. My little sister Emily spends the afternoon lying next to me on the sofa in her pink fleece jumper. I stroke her hair.

My brother Zane, who is thirteen years old, sits on the back of Dad's recliner. He has pulled back just enough of the curtain to make room for his face. His nose is pushed to the glass, and his eyes are keen for motion. He wears a plaid flannel shirt and jeans. He holds the shotgun Dad bought him for his eleventh birthday across his lap. I tell Zane that if anyone tries to get in, we might hear splashing before we see anything.

Emily starts to cry, and Zane tells her to shut up. I wish he wouldn't. When Emily is quiet, I hear something skittering across the roof. It's getting colder.

By the third day, I stop expecting our parents to come home, and though he doesn't say so, I think Zane feels the same. Emily sits on the kitchen countertop, playing with the Fruit Loops I put out for her breakfast. I talk to her, try to play games with her. I have tied plastic trash bags around her legs to keep them dry and around my legs and around Zane's legs, though he

didn't want me to. The water rises as high as my knees, and our candles are burning low. There is still no sun, but there is a loud thud on the roof when we try to sleep.

By the fourth day, our candles have burned down. Emily wakes up screaming, and I wade across the living room to find her. I trip over the coffee table and fall into the water. I come up coughing. My mouth tastes like metal, and my nostrils burn. The water reaches up to my thighs.

I follow Emily's voice. I tell her not to worry, that I'm coming, but I'm shivering, and it's getting harder to move. I pass the doorway into the kitchen, feeling my way and telling her I'm here. She screams until I'm there with my arms around her, whispering.

"What was it?" I say. She heard something crawling around the countertop. I pick her up and back away toward the center of the kitchen. I step on something soft and hear a scream.

Someone punches me in the back.

"Watch where you're going." It's Zane.

"You dumb bastard," I say. "Have you been standing there the whole time?"

"Ain't no telling," he says, then sloshes off toward the living room.

By the fifth day, the water is chest-high, so the living room is no good for sleeping. Emily and I have moved to our parents' bedroom, where there's a chiffoier high enough for her to sit on and stay dry and where I can perch next to her. I have doubled trash bags around my waist and around my chest. My fingers are going numb. Things of ours are floating around in the water--photographs, magazines, toys, books. I run into them when I move around. I've heard nothing from Zane. I am afraid to sleep.

On the sixth day, I hear whimpering. I call out to Zane, and the whimpering stops, but there is no answer. I wade out into the hallway. I hear crying to my left now, a few feet away. I wade closer. "Zane?"

He mumbles, and I say, "Speak up."

"I'm sorry for before."

"It's okay, bud." I tell him.

"I can't feel my feet no more."

I lean him against the wall. "We've got to get to the attic," I say. "We've got dry clothes up there and some quilts, if we can find them."

There is a ladder propped in the farthest corner of our parents' room, and as I'm dragging it back into the hallway, I try to remember where the attic door swings from the ceiling. It takes me five or six tries to find the door. I grasp the wooden ball at the end of the pull-string. The attic ladder swings down and splashes.

"We're gonna make it, Zane," I say.

On the seventh day, we are huddled in the attic. It's a cramped space with a plank floor and a window that looks onto the front yard. We're wrapped in quilts. I keep my hands tucked close to my body.

Earlier I'd gone down to look for food. Zane followed me to get his shotgun. I couldn't open the refrigerator door, but I grabbed a few cans from the cupboard over the sink. The water was rising faster. It was as high as our necks.

We still hear thuds on the roof. Emily trembles and slides closer. I can feel Zane flinching a few feet away. Water seeps through the planks. Emily tries to stand but topples onto me.

“Zane,” I say, “the water’s coming up through the floor,” but he doesn’t reply. There is an explosion and a flash of light then. Emily shrieks. There is nothing more to say to Zane.

Soon the water is as high as my chin. I try to hold Emily above the waterline, but my arms tire. We press against the window. I wonder if I can break the glass and if that would do any good. I can see a light flickering way off, and I try to imagine swimming there, but I know it’s too far away. I wonder if we could wait for the water to freeze then walk there across the ice, but I doubt that we or the flame will last.

Safety

We were deep in the woods. My brother Clayton and I carried rifles in bags over our shoulders. Adeline carried our supplies in a knapsack. The wind blew cold against my face and against my fingers and against the tips of my ears. My boots crunched into the frost.

We would hunt from a blind that Clay and my daddy had built a few years back. Wooden legs supported the platform and lifted the floor to shoulder height. Oak rails surrounded the deck. Clay had draped camo netting and beards of moss over the side of each rail. A steel ladder fastened to the rear of the structure led to the top, where Clay had posted chairs. The deck overlooked a trail that ran through a pine grove.

Clay had hunted these woods since he was eight years old and had tagged a buck every year since, except that last season. I had not fired a gun in three years. I had liked the woods once, had liked to stalk around with Clay and Daddy, but Daddy was dead, and I hadn't gone out with Clay since he'd been home from his tour of duty. I wouldn't have gone that day either, but for Adeline. She had told Clay to invite me along.

I had dated Adeline myself until she quit me for my brother. There was no fight, no real break-up. She just stayed away from the house. Her mama held my calls and took messages from time to time. Adeline never called back, and Clay never mentioned her to me. Neither did anyone else. We all just talked around it. But Clay was always gone away from the house--with her, I knew.

When Clay invited me, I didn't know why he had, but I couldn't say no. I didn't want them thinking I cared. When I said yes, Clay nodded, said "good," and left me at the dining room table where I had been studying that evening. We didn't talk again until the day of the hunt.

The morning went slowly. Every once in a while, there was rustling far off but nothing else. Around noon, the three of us went down. We built a fire, roasted pecans, and ate jerky. We drank water from a canteen we passed around. When we were done, I sat with my back to a tree and pulled my knees up close to my chin.

"What's on your mind?" said Adeline.

"Not much," I said.

"You're concentrating mighty hard."

Clay was quiet himself.

"And what are you thinking about?" Adeline said to him.

"Was thinking about a patch of cypress trees I know of, past the clearing, north of here," he said. "I had some luck up there one time. Shot two bucks that day."

"No kidding?" Adeline said.

"That was a good day. Good season. Can't buy even a shot for nothing now. They've been hauling all that timber up Toliver Road. Scaring everything away."

"That's two miles off, at least," I said.

Clay cut his eyes over to me. "You'd be surprised."

"I'm with Jude," said Adeline. "That seems like a long way off to be scaring away the deer."

Clay shook his head. "Don't know why I'd expect either one of you to know anything."

"Hey!" said Adeline.

"I'm just funning you."

"Mmhmm."

"Maybe."

Adeline punched Clay in the leg.

He took her hand. "I might head over there if I don't have any luck here."

"But baby, I thought we were having a good enough time right here," Adeline said.

"I have to give myself a chance."

"Does it really matter?"

Clay let go of Adeline's hand. "I don't aim to get shut out. That may not matter to you, but it matters a whole hell of a lot to me."

"Sorry," said Adeline.

"How are things over at the beauty parlor?" I said quickly.

Clay sighed.

"Oh, crazy," said Adeline.

"What's been going on?"

"Well, Miss Betty came in yesterday. Had everybody all upset."

"What happened?" I said.

"Said Mama did her hair wrong. Said the color was wrong and the cut--"

"Oh no."

"Mmhmm. Said Mama was downright incompetent."

"What did your mama say?"

"She didn't have to say much. Remember big Gladys with the mole? Well, by the time she was done sweeping, she'd had enough of Miss Betty, let me tell you. She grabbed her up by those bony little shoulders and shoved her out into the yard. Can you imagine it?"

Clay stood and stretched. He tossed his shells onto the fire.

"What did Miss Betty do then?" I said.

"Left, of course."

"Guess you won't be seeing her around any more."

"Oh, we will. I mean, where else would she go?"

I laughed. "Guess you have a point."

"Clay? You okay, babe?"

Clay had already started back up the ladder. "Just fine," he said over his shoulder, "except maybe for y'all scaring away half of creation with your racket."

"Silly," Adeline said. "You want us to come up with you?"

Clay kept climbing.

Adeline folded her arms and stared down at her feet. Neither of us spoke for a while. I chewed the last of my jerky and watched the fire die down.

"You know, every time we come out here, it's the same thing," said Adeline. She spoke just above a whisper.

I leaned closer. "What was that?"

"His damned streak. All he cares about these days is getting a tag."

"Yeah."

"Gets lonely out here," she said. "I get tired of doing all the talking."

I blew on my hands and rubbed them together. "Why do you go with him?"

She looked up and smiled at me. "I ask myself the same thing sometimes."

Sometimes I still missed Adeline. Late at night, after she knew our folks had gone to sleep, she would call me, and she would keep on gabbing till she had talked the sun up. Mostly I just listened. I would lie in bed, on my side, with the phone up to my ear and the sheets pulled over my head, like a tent. With Adeline, I never had to worry about the darkness, and when she quit me, the hardest part had been not having anybody to talk to at night.

"We probably ought to go back up," she said. "Wouldn't want to scare off the other half of creation down here, now would we?"

"Guess not." I stood and kicked dirt over what was left of the fire. Adeline went up the ladder, and I soon followed.

We found Clay at the top. His rifle was at his side, and he was looking out through his binoculars. Hunting had always been easy for Clay. He always knew where to go, how to stalk. Daddy was always bragging about Clay's kills to his friends. When we were younger, Clay would take me out sometimes, put me through my paces, show me what to do. I just liked to watch him shoot. I could never believe how smooth and how natural he was with a gun. I had seen a change in him, though--since before Adeline, since before Daddy. He came back home, and nothing was ever fun any more. Now we hardly talked at all.

The afternoon was just as slow as the morning. I gave up on hunting and leaned back in my chair. Every once in a while, Adeline tried talking, but Clay would clear his throat or look back at her, until finally she too sank back into her chair and crossed her arms.

"I bet Jude wouldn't ignore me just to hunt," she said.

"Well, why don't you ask him to take you back then?" Clay said. "I think he's just about fool enough to do it."

"Clay! I was joking."

"Seems like the whole hunt is a joke to everybody but me."

"I'm sorry! That's no reason to be mean, though. Especially to Jude."

"Oh, I am sick to damned death of hearing about Jude. It's 'Jude this' or 'Jude that' all the time. It's your damned fault he's even here." Clay stood, took up his rifle, and started down the ladder.

"Where are you going?" Adeline said after him.

"Hunting. At last."

Then he was gone.

Adeline turned to me. "Are you all right?"

I felt my heart whomping inside me--not fast, just hard. My fingers curved around the stock of my rifle.

"Jude?"

"I'm fine."

Adeline dragged her chair across the floor planks. I didn't want her sitting next to me, but I couldn't move. She slid closer. I was breathing harder.

"It's all my fault," she said.

"No. It's not." I was trying to breathe like normal. Trying to quiet the whomping in my chest.

"It really is," she said. She reached to hug me. My whole body tensed. She held back for a second then leaned into me again and squeezed tighter. My hand slipped from the stock of my rifle. I turned in, toward her. She got out of her chair and sat in my lap. I put my arms around her

waist. She put her head against my shoulder and draped an arm across my chest. She shivered. I held her closer. I felt her settling into me.

We stayed that way a while. The sun was slipping past the tops of the trees. The whomping in my chest went away. My breaths were deep and easy, but I was thinking of Clay the whole time, listening for the clank of boots coming up the ladder.

Adeline stirred. I reached over and brushed her bangs back. She was looking up at me.

"What are you thinking about?" she said.

I didn't even want to think.

"It's just me and you."

"Not much," I said.

"Oh, come on."

"Why are you always asking folks what they're thinking?"

She laughed. "Cause I want to know, that's why! Never seemed to bother you before. You always liked it when I asked you questions."

"I know."

"When I'd talk to you."

"I know," I said.

"Well, then..."

We were quiet again. I heard scratching out in the brush, then the wind as it gusted over our blind.

"What happened?" I said at last.

Adeline sat upright. "What do you mean?"

"To us."

She paused. "I don't know."

"Did I do something?"

"No."

"Then why?"

She sighed.

"You and Clay could never talk the way we do," I said.

"We talk."

"But like we did?"

"We talk." She had moved away from me, out to the edge of my knee. She was looking out past the rail.

"Whatever you didn't like, I can change," I said. "I mean, I would change anything."

"I couldn't ask you to do that." She looked back at me. "And I can't start bouncing back and forth between you and Clay. Wouldn't be right."

"I don't care. It's not like Clay ever cared."

"He cares."

"Not that I can see."

Adeline sighed again and leaned back into me. "Then what about me?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"You could never trust me all the way again. You'd always wonder if I was going to leave you, and when Clay comes around, you'll always remember how I quit you for him."

"I forgive you."

"You'd be a fool to forget, though."

I wanted to speak but couldn't think of anything to say.

"Let's go find Clay and get out of here," Adeline said. "I wish we had never come." She stood, grabbed the knapsack, and threw it over her shoulder.

I kept my seat.

"Come on, Jude. It's getting late."

I grabbed my rifle and started to load it into the bag.

"Better leave it out."

"Okay." I handed the bag to Adeline. We started down the ladder.

"I'm really sorry," she said.

"It's fine."

We took out walking toward the cypress patch Clay had mentioned. The woods were lit with the glow of dusk, and all around us, shadows shifted over beds of leaves and pine needles. I was listening all the time for Clay. The woods were getting thicker. Briars tore at my britches and at the tops of my boots. I stopped to scratch the top of my ankle.

"Clay would've made better time than this," I said. "No telling how far he's gotten."

Adeline put her head back and screamed for Clay, but there was no answer, just the report of echoes and a murder of crows beating their wings as they breezed overhead. We walked on. About a quarter mile farther, the woods opened onto a clearing. There were stars out, and the sky was the lightest shade of violet.

"Look!" Adeline whispered. She grabbed my arm and pointed in the distance. The silhouette of a buck rose, cresting a hill, quartered away. "Too bad Clay isn't here. You gonna try?"

"It's no good," I said. "The shot's over a hill."

"You're just gonna leave him?"

"We'll wait and see what he does. Let's just keep still."

"All right."

I thought about Clay and how he always seemed to know where to be. He was somewhere close around--I could feel it, and I could see him in my head, gun ready, teeth clenched, waiting for a broadside shot. Just waiting on that turn. Another season, another kill.

"He's so still," Adeline said. "Just perfect. You could paint him if you wanted to. Oh, come on, Jude. You might not get a better shot."

Slow and easy, I raised my rifle and reached to adjust my sights. As I did, I saw the slightest movement way off. I focused in. There was Clay, hidden in a patch of brush. His gun was ready.

"Clay will just die when he sees you got a buck."

I could kill him, I thought. I could kill him, and nothing else would matter again--not that afternoon, not the last few weeks, not the last sixteen years. I set my sights, placing the crosshairs on a spot high up Clay's back, left of center. I imagined the round ripping through his heart. I imagined Clay clutching at the explosion in his chest, then pitching forward into the brush. I fingered the trigger. I could hardly breathe.

"Good luck," Adeline said.

The shot crackled through the clearing. It was like the sound of splitting wood. In the distance, the buck fell, and Clay leapt from his spot, whooping a cheer. I let my rifle slip to my side, unfired.

"Oh my god!" Adeline said. "Clay? Is that Clay?" Then she ran the fifty yards or more to meet him. Clay lifted her by the waist and spun her around. I just stood looking on.

"Where did you come from?" she said. "You must have come out of nowhere, baby!"

I couldn't hear what Clay was saying, but I could see the glints of white from his teeth. He put his arm around Adeline's shoulder. They turned and started up the hill. I reached down, secured the safety on my gun, and followed.

I Think Mama Made You a Turkey

I.

“Did you want to drive?” Marie said, but her brother Jason said nothing. He only stared ahead into the traffic that lined bumper to bumper before them, bending off endlessly toward the horizon. With both hands, he held a styrofoam cup filled with coffee. It was a nervous, herky-jerky ride. Jason sipped coffee to stay awake, but he guarded above all against spilling even a drop onto his new pair of khakis or onto the polo shirt Marie had bought him last week.

“I might have,” Jason said, “but my nerves, and of course my license expired months ago. Do you think they would renew it?”

“I don’t see why they wouldn’t.”

“You really think so? Maybe I could get a job too.”

“I bet you could.”

“I’m going to spill this coffee. I just know I will.”

The last few weeks had felt a lot like being too careful, like tip-toeing along the edge of the room where a very large dog was sleeping on the sofa with a human femur clenched between his teeth—no, the last few months felt like wanting a glass of water in the middle of a crowded subway car—no, the last few months felt like screaming as hard as he could for as long as he could inside his head, then trying to make the ringing make sense.

Marie kept looking over, smiling a smile from dreams he’d had, traces of dreams he could never quite remember, dreams from which he woke up screaming, and even then, he couldn’t help wondering whether the road were about to fall away or whether Marie’s Ford

Explorer would plummet burning to the bottom of an ashtray on the nightstand in some scuzzed motel room where he had passed out before. She was smiling like wanting to believe he was there, like not quite believing, like wanting to touch him but being scared to, though she hugged him on the front porch of Hemley's Rehabilitation Center an hour ago because that's what sisters do, and she was too scared not to.

"You know, Marie, it's Saturday," said Jason, "and Mom and Dad, they--"

"They want to see you, Jason."

"But they didn't come."

"Well, it is Saturday."

Jason settled back into his seat and sipped his coffee down. Soon they made the edge of town, made the mouth of the bottleneck, made the city skyline disappear behind them. Home was another half-hour away.

Maybe he could find a job...

He's gonna get a job—his father said. I'm not paying his way so he can just sit at home all day and chill. He can go back on the streets for that.

But he's sick—his mother said.

Jason's sick. Jason's tired.

Jason used to find receipts in the parking lot, make lists in his mind of things to steal, then steal them and return them the next day with the receipt. Cash, spoons, needle, fix, roll-back Shakespeare's bleeding. College was the best six years of his life.

The half-hour whiled itself away. Marie was never gone but she was getting slick now. She was watching him from the corner of her eye—he felt this from the corner of his—registering any sign of anything strange, like those little sensors that register movement from across the room.

tall, pretty, brunette, slender, walking symbol soccer mom in training...

Jason liked her like that. Remembered her like that. Hated her like that once, not long ago. Pant suits she'd sewn herself and long straight hair—knitting, cooking for Grandma when she fell sick that once, when he was away in school getting wasted. Remembering Grandma through a haze of amber, hating Marie for being good, for being there.

"You really think I can find a job?" said Jason. They were pulling into the driveway, past the picket fence, past the yellow wooden red-splotched rooster mailbox, past the St. Augustine grass cropped close with a John Deere riding mower, right up to the porch—high concrete steps, the time-blackened straw welcome mat, the white oak porch swing flanked by ferns.

Marie looked over and said, "I think Mama made you a turkey."

II.

Their parents met them at the door, hugged them both, even Dad this once, then all four of them sat in the living room to talk. Marie and Jason sat together on the couch, while Mama and Daddy sat across from one another in matching straight-back chairs. Mama leaned forward, dead intent; Daddy reared back in his recliner, crossed his legs, and lit a cigarette. They always sat across the room from each other no matter what. To Marie, it felt like safety, even now, but to Jason? His parents had never beaten him, never even yelled much, even when he might have

deserved it, but Jason was always a little afraid from the back of his mind, screaming at traces of dreams he could never remember.

“So, baby, how are you feeling?” Mama said.

“I’m fine,” said Jason, “and you?” and Mama looked across the way to Daddy who blew smoke through his nose and snorted.

“How they treat you?” Daddy said.

“I’m sorry, what?” What do you--”

“How did they treat you? Good?”

“Oh. Yeah. They were fine. Very nice.”

“They have a lovely place,” said Marie. “Beautiful. Nice yard, crepe myrtles lining the driveway, a big old style house, you know.”

“Oh yeah,” said Jason. “You really should have been there.”

Dad cleared his throat.

“I wish you would have brought the baby,” Mama said.

“I thought about it,” said Marie. “I really did, but Terry was too tired to come, and he didn’t want me taking the baby. He worries, you know.” She glanced Jason from the corner of her eye. “About everything.”

“I don’t believe I ever saw her,” Jason said.

“Him,” said Daddy.

“They named the baby Daryl after your father,” Mama said.

“Oh.” Jason couldn’t remember the baby being born.

“The next one gets his name, though,” said Marie. “Even if it’s a girl. Terry insists. Poor child!” Then she laughed, and Mama laughed, and Daddy laughed, and Jason shifted in his seat

and wondered how people thought about names for babies not yet born, not yet conceived, and he wondered what Marie would do if he burned her with a spoon, and then the others all were done laughing, Jason laughed himself, and Mama and Daddy looked one to the other then across the way to Marie who shrugged.

“You feeling all right, son?” Daddy said.

“Yes sir.”

“They get you cleaned up?”

“I hope so.”

“You think you gonna find a job?”

“I hope.”

“Jason and I were just talking about that on the way over here,” said Marie. “Weren’t we Jason?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh?” Daddy said.

“He wants to work, I know he does, but he’s worried no one will hire him, I think. I told him he worries too much.”

“Hmm. Well, I think a guy with an English degree should teach English. And he could live here as long as he’s working and staying clean.”

“I’d never pass the background check,” Jason said.

“You never know what’ll happen until you try,” said Daddy.

“I don’t know if I even want to. I mean all those people, and--”

“Don’t you want to work, son?”

“Yes, but--”

“Sometimes you have to take what you can find. But you don’t kill off your options.”

Marie nodded agreement. “You’ll find something, I know. Teaching is good work, though.”

“It’s what he ought to do,” Daddy said. “No question.”

"Have you eaten anything yet?" Mama said. "I bet you're starving. I bet you both are."

"I know I am," said Marie. "I was telling Jason you made him a turkey."

"Oh yes. I baked it up with stuffing, and I roasted those little potatoes he used to like and..."

Every night in rehab had been the same. Lights off, TV off, lying on his back, staring into the space above him, watching shifting glints of light play along the ceiling. Empty lonely nights, trying to lie perfectly still in the hopes that he could sink into the mattress or dissolve into a pile of dust and blow away. There was nothing everywhere, it felt like, and he was hungry for something all the time and feeling his gut like a pulsing wound that tingled with every breath, and the only thing he'd ever known that could make it all go away was getting loaded, and that was the one thing they took away.

Maybe it wasn't too late yet to burn Marie with a spoon or with the end of one of Daddy's cigarettes. Maybe he could burn all three of them, with a blow torch if he could find one. Thirty days of rehab was far too long, but thirty days of rehab was nothing too, and everybody said that love was all he really needed to get clean, that love was enough to save the world--but the world was full of lies.

Still, A Mercy

The Hire leaned with his back to the refrigerator. He was eating a banana through the mouth hole of his ski mask. "I wouldn't, if I were you, Sir," he said.

The Homeowner sat at the head of the dining room table across the way. He had a stack of papers in front of him and a mahogany cane on the floor at his side. The Hire had caught him reaching. Now the Homeowner sat up straight. "Fuck your mother."

The Hire finished his banana, wadded up the peel, and crammed it into his jeans pocket. "I wouldn't do that either, to tell you the truth."

"The fuck?"

"You may not like it, but the way I see it, Sir, I'm doing you a solid, if you get my meaning. I mean, I could have done you anywhere. In your garden. In your easy chair--"

The Homeowner reached again.

"Ey!" said the Hire.

The Homeowner sat up straight.

"I could have done you last Tuesday, when you were getting out of that El Dorado in front of the Bob Evans. You remember that? I bet you do." The Hire started laughing. "Looked like you were going to the club. Thought you were cool. Thought you were style. Thought you could make you some time with a young bitch."

The Homeowner leaned forward, trembling as he tried to stand.

"That was a dick thing to say. Entirely unprofessional. Lousy job. I'm sorry, Sir. But as your spiritual adviser, I do whole-heartedly suggest that you sit your ass down." The Hire slipped the pistol from his holster.

"What the hell kind of difference does it make?"

"I don't know, to be honest. Maybe it doesn't. Guess that depends on you. Would you rather die in bed or on a roller coaster? Eating a rack of ribs or breaking a pile of rocks? At church--or with your pants down around your ankles, skull-fucking the bull terrier from across the street?" The Hire picked a ball of lint from the sleeve of his sweatshirt and shoved that into his jeans pocket too.

The Homeowner gave no reply.

"Who can know, man, who can know? But I'll ask you this: are you ready to die right now at the dining room table?"

The Homeowner leaned back into his seat. The Hire slipped the pistol back into his holster.

"As I was saying, you ought to be grateful. At least this way you'll know. You can make some peace. Say a prayer or two. Get a couple things right. There's time. Did you ever go to church? Not to be too personal--"

"Who sent you?" said the Homeowner. "Who the fuck sent you?"

"It doesn't really matter, does it, Sir? I mean, what would you do if I told you?"

The Homeowner shook his head.

"You know, a man ought to know who wants him dead. That's about the most important thing a man can know, as I see it. In my experience, most people have no idea at all."

"What are they paying you? I don't care how much it is--I'll pay you double to leave me alone."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Sir," said the Hire. "How would I know you could cover it?"

"I can! Whatever it is! I swear to God I'll find the money."

The Hire yawned. "Even if you could, it wouldn't be right. I already took half upfront. An honest man stays bought once he's bought. You should have known that yourself."

The Homeowner raised his fingers to a wispy white tuft just above his ear. His lips were parted.

"I should just go ahead and do this," said the Hire. "We're wasting time. Did you have any other questions, Sir?"

"Double, I told you! No, triple! I'll pay you triple, I swear to God. I won't tell anybody!"

"Do you need a minute to pray?"

"Please!"

The Hire checked his watch. "It's getting late. Did you want to do this here?"

The Homeowner lurched forward again and grabbed his cane. As he stood, the Hire drew his pistol and fired from the hip. The first shot struck the center of the Homeowner's chest. The second struck toward the center of his forehead, just above the bridge of his nose. The Homeowner staggered then collapsed to the floor.

The Hire stood a minute, listening. Silence, save for the long running hum of the refrigerator behind him. He holstered his pistol again then pulled his sweatshirt down to conceal it.

"He had a nice garden," the Hire said. "Petunias. Daffodils. I would have rather done it there." Then he turned to leave.

VITA

Academic Background

Bachelor of Arts, University of Mississippi, McDonnell-Barksdale Honors College
Magna Cum Laude
University, MS 2003
Concentrations: English and Mathematics

- Gifted Minorities Fellowship, The Graduate School (University of Mississippi), 2008-2011
- Barksdale Scholarship (McDonnell-Barksdale Honors College), 1999-2003
- Barnard Scholarship (National Merit, University of Mississippi), 1999-2003
- Mississippi Eminent Scholars Grant, 1999-2003

Professional Experience

Adjunct Instructor, University of Mississippi, Center for Writing and Rhetoric, 2011- Present
instructor of record for four sections of freshman writing; enrollment for each course was 20-23 students

Graduate Instructor, University of Mississippi, Department of English, 2008-2011

- instructor of record for four sections of Freshman composition; enrollment for each course was 20-25 students
- worked as a consultant in the University Writing Center

Graduate Editor, University of Mississippi, University Writing Center 2010-2011

reviewed graduate theses, dissertations, and seminar papers for ELL and ESL students, as well as for native English speakers

English Instructor, Meridian Public Schools, 2004-2008

- instructor of record for sophomore, junior, and senior level English at Meridian

High School; course load was seven sections per semester; enrollment for each course was 20-25 students

- test-prep mentor for Mississippi's Subject Area Testing Program

Writing Consultant, University of Mississippi, University Writing Center, 2001-2003

- worked as an undergraduate tutor, counseling with students to help them plan/edit/revise academic papers, statements of purpose, grant applications, etc.
- led student orientations, developed and conducted presentations on various writing topics

Teaching Experience

University of Mississippi, 2009 - 2011

Courses Instructed:

- *Writing 101* -- a freshman writing course stressing rhetorical skills across multiple modes of communication
- *English 101* -- a freshman composition course stressing rhetorical skills, grammar/mechanics, and reading, with applications to real-world writing
- *English 102* -- a freshman composition course stressing rhetorical skills, grammar/mechanics, and reading, with an introduction to analysis in academic writing

Meridian High School, 2004-2008

Courses Instructed:

- *Sophomore English* -- an introduction to world literature, with an emphasis on writing and language skills for the state's subject area testing program
- *Junior English* -- an introduction to American literature, with an emphasis on literary conventions and writing
- *Senior English* -- an introduction to British literature, with an emphasis on literary conventions and writing

Service

Community Writing Center Outreach Project, University Writing Center, 2010-2011
volunteered as a consultant in the Oxford-Lafayette County Public library (on behalf of the University Writing Center), helping patrons from the community with writing needs including grants, resumes, job applications, and personal writing

Extended Days Enrichment, Meridian High School, 2005-2008
taught English language skills and tutored in a daily after-school program designed to help remediate struggling students at Meridian High School

Leap Frog Volunteer, Oxford-Lafayette County Community, 1999-2003
tutored and served as an enrichment volunteer for an after-school program designed to help potentially "at-risk" 1st and 2nd grade students in Oxford Public Schools and Lafayette County Schools

Publications

Quiet Game and Other Stories (Master's Thesis), 2011

On the Shoulders of Martians (Honors Thesis), 2003

"By Proxy" (short story), *Hyperbole Magazine*, Spring 2002

Various News Articles, *The Daily Mississippian*, 1999-2001

Professional and Academic Memberships/Organizations

- National Society of Collegiate Scholars
- Golden Key Honor Society
- Phi Kappa Phi Collegiate Honor Society
- Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society
- Mississippi Writers' Guild