

Withhold Not Correction

a collection of Short Fiction

By

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ABSTRACT for

Withhold Not Correction
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This collection of short fiction explores the notion of correction centered in an attachment to the Proverbs 13-24 accounts involving discipline: restitution as punishment, restitution as loving response or as intended guidance. The stories take on the various forms and repercussions of correction. Each character encounters these in meaningful ways and at different times. Occasionally the characters exist as the acting agents of recompense and at other times the objects. The work is written in the Southern literary tradition: mostly local, working-class, and agrarian. They attempt to contend with the significance of faith, family, place, and the harsh realities of life involving cultural and generational shifts. The work hopes to encompass a modern existence in the American South without arriving at a caricatured representation.

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DEDICATION

In gratitude for the immeasurable blessing of studying and working at The School of Letters of The University of the South, of living with my family for five unique and dynamic summers, and of being challenged to consider my faith, profession and dreams more deeply, this work is dedicated to Dr. William A. Altermeier III.

Clive Bisbee and His '79 Pontiac

The air in the room was solid, stale, even with the windows in a full and constant August yawn. The frill of the curtains that she'd hung sometime yesterday made no movement from any natural source, and Clive Bisbee lay awake squinting hard against the idea of morning. The night had passed like most other Mississippi nights late in August, in heaves and rolls and tilts and sighs and pillow-turns to find any suggestion of cool, of release. This fretful rest droned over the oscillating click-click and turns of a fan whose whispers teased the sweat of backs and the soaked pits of groin and knees. A sheet, decades-thin, cleaved to skin hoping for its own airy release from the wet cotton press of bodies. Clive winced more out of expectation when a tiny foot connected with ribs and once to the chin. It was about all a man could take.

The alarm was a gentle beep cut off just before the crescendo. Bobbi Nell's thin hand nudged a thick shoulder. His coal eyes widened then narrowed. With the deep release of a heavy sigh, Clive sat up.

"Feel like breakfast?" Bobbi Nell whispered.

He made no reply, and she didn't wait for an answer. Bobbi Nell straightened the nightgown over her hips. The lace hem made swift swishes out of the bedroom.

Clive slid one hand under the child's neck as if putting on an expensive glove, the other hand under the boy's knees. Clive gently pushed him toward the safety of the wall, the head lolling off his palm. Once he had the boy positioned, he gave a simple tug at the damp hem of a tiny maroon shirt to correct the form of the bulldog from any unwanted wrinkles. In a slow swing Clive dropped his feet over the side of the bed, trying to move deliberately so as not to wake the boy. A black walnut rocker that his grandfather had made sat sentinel next to the bed. Clive's right hand choked the arm of it while the left worked at the mat of coarse black hair on his chest.

Sliding full into the chair Clive's stomach was telling him that he had too much to drink.

Bobbi Nell brought him a cup of coffee. Clive took the cup without looking at her. The creak of the rocker on the hardwood knifed then echoed from temple to temple. He could feel Bobbi Nell look over at the boy and he stopped. Bobbi Nell didn't want the rocker in the bedroom in the first place. She had petitioned for the rocker to be in the spare room which was sized well enough to one day be a nursery. Clive preferred the rocker right where it sat. He stared at how the bed was shoved up next to the wall now and the boy sleeping. The first couple of months had been difficult. The child would get scared and end up in the bed with them. They would fight about it and he would lose sleep, and they would fight about that. Eventually, it was more sleep to just let the boy in bed with them. The last month, Bobbi Nell had

got in the habit of putting the boy down in their bed after prayers and he hadn't said anything.

"You want toast too, 'case I can't get them biscuits right?"

"Better."

He pressed both palms into the arms of the rocker as if trying to force them through the floor, pulled up a dirty pair of blue jeans from the floor, then made his way to the kitchen. She moved the skillet from the front eye to the back, covered a wood bowl with an old towel and placed it back in the refrigerator.

"Eggs is ready."

The sun hadn't made it over the pines yet and the mercury on the thermometer outside the kitchen window was steady rising. Clive studied it as he ate. Late August in Mississippi meant the work day was a split shift. Clive left the house at ten to six and would be back around eleven. Most days he would take the extra hours at midday to get the mowing or hoeing done or to work on the car. To his mind, it was work needing done no matter when you did it: before work, after work, or right in the middle. Most nights he was home by eight or just after, the sun still full, the heat still on. The split shift didn't matter much to him, as long as he got his hours. He'd take forty-five, fifty if he could get it. It was all work.

When she heard the dull thrum of the Dodge and the slip of gravel in the drive, Bobbi Nell was standing at the sink. Clive parked down the drive a bit, in the shade of the pine. She watched him amble to the shed and collect the hoe that held the door ajar. His heavy boot toed the hoe with a rigid flip and it swung to his solid shoulder. He strode in a long heaviness that made him seem twenty years older than he was. Clive let the hoe drop from his shoulder and with it he tapped the grill of the lifeless '79 Pontiac that he'd bought for her to drive. He brought the hoe hard to the dry garden flesh when he looked down the row. She couldn't see his face but knew her work that morning had brought a scowl. She yelled to the boy to get his toys out of the floor. The boy scurried. Clive dropped a thermos in the sink when he came in.

"Hot today ain't it hon." She placed a couple of sandwiches wrapped in wax paper in his pail and put the others on a paper plate.

"Hot as yesterday." He washed his hands in the sink. "Hot as tomorrow."

"You going rest today aren't you?"

"Saw some weeds in them beans."

"I weeded them this morning."

Clive did not answer. He opened the sandwich and dosed the tomatoes with salt.

“You need to rest. It’s hot. You been going hard ten days now.” Bobbi Nell refilled Clive’s glass and the boy bounded in. “Taterbug, wash up. Time to eat.”

“You been a good boy for your momma?”

The boy didn’t answer. Clive swallowed hard, a bite that needed chewing.

“You been a good boy for your momma?”

Clive, his jaw solid and jutting, stared long at the boy, then cut his eyes at Bobbi Nell. The boy stood up in his seat and grabbed at a chip. Bobbi Nell slapped at his hand.

“Go wash up, your hands is filthy.”

“You need to teach that boy some manners.” Clive said it to the boy’s back as it turned down the hall.

“Why don’t you rest some today, Clive.”

Clive bit into his sandwich and wiped the mayonnaise from his lip with the back of his finger.

“Least stay indoors. If you ain’t gonna rest, you might could hang them pictures and cool off a bit.”

Clive grunted and rolled his eyes. There wasn’t a thing wrong with the pictures he had. He knew there’d be changes, but it was starting to feel like he was in someone else’s place.

The boy returned and jumped into the chair while he grabbed for a chip and knocked the bowl into Clive's glass. The glass tipped instantly. The paper plate in competition with half a BLT sopped at the sweet tea pooling on the Formica. "Damn it, boy!" Clive jumped up from the table spilling his chair to the floor and the boy didn't move. Arm still extended. The chip was suspended by the delicate fingers. His nails were dirty.

"Clean it up." The shout was directed at the boy.

"Here." Bobbi Nell held the towel out to Clive who made no offer for it.

Clive's shoulders were forward and his chin was set. His eyes narrowed and his teeth wrapped tightly around each word. "Clean it up."

The boy didn't move. Clive didn't move. They were as still as the sun, the wind, as still as all of Mississippi.

Looking down and beginning to wipe his jeans with a napkin he said, "I swear I ain't never seen a kid so damned backward."

"Clive, please don't." Bobbi Nell came around to the table and the boy slid back in his seat and tucked his chin. She moved the towel on the table top in smooth circles.

Clive threw his sandwich down to a new paper plate. "He that spareth the rod hateth his son...you must hate him, Bobbi? Your momma must hate you, boy. If you was mine I'd sure show you some love."

“Please don’t. He’s four. Four year olds spill things. Tell Clive you’re sorry, sweetie.”

The boy didn’t move.

“Now tell Clive you’re sorry.”

Without looking up the boy mouthed the words.

“There.” She flipped the towel into the sink and sat back down.

Clive took his plate and glass to the living room and sat down on the sofa.

The noon sun blistered the paneled wall in long bleached cracks of lines. He fished for the remote in the cushion. The TV lit up with cartoons. He changed it to the local daily report. Cotton down. Corn down. Soybeans down. Bobbi Nell inched the boy’s chair to her and patted his knee.

Clive woke with her next to him on the couch and the boy playing in the floor. A cartoon was running. His whole body jerked and tensed as he searched the paneled walls for a clock. Coming to, he grabbed at his watch.

“It’s only been twenty-five minutes.” Bobbi Nell touched his arm and he settled back in. “Why don’t you rest a bit more, you was sleeping hard.”

Clive straightened his leg. The wet denim was pinching under his knee.

“Somebody needs to get to them beans.”

“I’ll do em again tonight, now rest. It’s too hot.” She was fanning herself with a magazine.

“You’ll do em tonight.” He laughed a little as he said it.

“I’ll do the beans again tonight.” She pulled at her shirt and he noticed the sweat in delicate beads between her breasts.

“And I suppose you’ll get that car going too.”

“I ain’t got nowhere to be today.” She watched him work his fingers into a fist, then out, then to a fist again. “Besides, it’s too hot to get out much anyhow. Rest.”

Clive straightened his other leg.

“That’s it, get comfortable.”

“I am comfortable.” He kept working his hand in and out of a fist.

Bobbi Nell slid closer and leaned into him.

“It’s hot.” He moved his shoulder and Bobbi Nell pulled back a little.

“Why don’t you get comfortable, Clive. You need your rest.”

The boy played with an old fire engine on the floor in front of them. With her eyes on the back of her son’s head she inched again toward Clive and slid her hand

under his shirt. She found the belt buckle and felt the leather strap go limp. "You need your rest."

Clive angled his eyes to her now and she folded the buckle back careful not to let it rattle. She kissed his shoulder. "Clive," she traced the denim waist with a finger, "you really could use a rest."

Clive stared at the boy's head. He smirked.

"Take my boots off for me, boy."

The boy spun around looking first to his mother then to Clive then to her hand at Clive's waist. Bobbi Nell jerked back and slapped Clive's shoulder.

"Well." Clive snapped at the boy.

The boy looked at her. She nodded and he pulled at the boot. Clive pulled back and they made a game of it. The boy laughed and Bobbi Nell laughed. Clive relaxed the foot and the boy fell back laughing with the boot in his hands. Clive stuck his other boot in the boy's face. The boy pulled at it, it slid right off and the laughing ended.

"I could rest." Clive stood up and with his hard right hand grabbed the boy's head. The boy could lift only his eyes under the weight of the hand. Clive pushed the boy's head down to the shoulders, gave a gentle sideways push and the boy smiled. Clive walked down the hall. Bobbi Nell stood up and took the plate and glass to the kitchen.

“Bobbi, where’s that other shirt?”

Bobbi Nell put the mayonnaise and mustard in the fridge.

Clive called from the bedroom. “Where’s my damn shirt?”

She wiped the counter down and made down the hall. Over her shoulder she called to the boy. “Clive needs my help finding that shirt. I’ll be back in a minute.” She closed the bedroom door.

He was lying on the bed, hands behind his head with that smirk. She grinned. “I thought I could get you off your feet for a bit.” He sat up and pulled her arm. He groped and grunted and she covered his mouth with her hand. He bit her hand and she yelped. She cocked her head at him and her eyes grew wide.

“Damn it, Bobbi Nell, why can’t you leave my things alone. Where’d you put my shirt?” She rolled her eyes and he pulled her to him again. He lifted her shirt and she lifted his. His fingers were making marks on her stomach and shoulders and back. She tensed and stopped and looked up. She pulled her shirt back down and on her toes ran to the door and listened.

“What do you need, sweetie?”

Clive’s coal eyes narrowed. The boy’s muffled sounds came through the door. She cracked the door and peered around at the child’s eye level. “Why don’t you go play. Clive needs his rest. Soon as I find that shirt me and you’ll play. Okay?”

She closed the door and turned to him unbuttoning her pants. She stopped. She went back to the door. "What, honey?"

Clive popped the pillow with his forearm.

"I didn't hear you. What?" She looked at Clive while she talked to the boy. He was staring at her. "Another popsicle is fine. Be out in a minute. Now go play. Go out and play but stay in the yard." She waited for a few seconds then turned again to Clive. She rolled her eyes and then started to take off her pants. She did it slowly, looking at Clive. He stared at her hands, the tension falling when they worked the jeans past the hips. She climbed onto the bed, her soft thighs sliding up between his legs. She bit his ear. There were murmurs again behind the door and a light knock. Clive pushed past her, his jaw set. His socked feet slammed the floor. He jerked the door free. The boy ran when he saw Clive's coal narrow eyes and the jaw. Clive followed straight down the hall. Clive was shouting and the kid was out the door running. The boy jumped from the top step and ran. Clive opened the freezer door and slammed it, magnets and papers falling to the floor. From where he was hiding, the boy could see Clive in the doorway, shouting, the sun and the heat full in his face. He watched Clive throw the box of popsicles into the yard, and turn back inside. The glass of the outside light rattled in its cage against the violence of the door thrown shut. The boy hunkered in his spot, afraid to even breathe.

He could barely breathe. The heat. The wet. It was so hot he had to keep changing positions. He wanted out. It was just so hot. The air was closing just under his chin. He raised up for a breath, but found that all breaths were old breaths. His cheeks were on fire now. He wanted out. He tried to get out. She pulled him in again, the heat. The wet. The slipping of skin. With all the jerking and groping and gasping. His fingers ached. The all of him was soaked through. He wanted out. The fabric beneath him was marked with the body's wet heaviness. The jerks grew more furious and violent. The air closed just under his chin. His fingers ached as they clinched. It felt like his fingertips were bleeding. The jerking, the gasping, the groping. He desired release, for the calm that comes with one's own air. He wanted to somehow break the window to get at new air. He changed positions. She closed again around him, the heat. The wet. His mouth was dry and he coughed. His tongue felt cracked and dry of swelling. He noticed his arms had stopped forming beads. He moved to the carpet. Someone somewhere had said hot air rises. From the carpet his fingers pinched and his fingers pulled. Desperate for release. The cloth sunk damp and weighted. Heaviness took over. His strength was leaving him. The jerks tired, the gropes softened, the gasping quieted. He laid his head back. Then, without violence of any kind, it was over. His body and its joints limp.

She was frantic. She was screaming something down the hall and he could tell that something wasn't right.

"What's the matter?"

"Why was the doors locked? Did you lock the doors, Clive?"

Clive didn't say anything when she came in the room.

"You scared him."

"I got him a damn popsicle."

"You scared him, Clive, scared him awful."

"What time is it?"

"Did you lock the doors? Why did you lock the doors?" She was crying.

"I got to go to work."

"He's four, Clive. The doors was locked. You didn't have to scare him."

Clive pulled on his clothes and pushed past her.

"You didn't have to scare him." She was yelling and crying and punched at him.

"He's probably in the woods. Playing." Clive looked around the room, looked again at his watch, and made his way to the kitchen.

“Clive. Look at me. Did you lock the doors?” She was sobbing and having a hard time talking. Clive looked at her and then he opened the door squinting.

“He’s in the woods. Did you check the woods?”

“The woods, the shed, the garden. Jesus, I checked everywhere. It’s been over an hour. What do we do? Do we call the police?” She followed him to the truck.

“He’ll turn up. He’s fine.” Clive started the truck, and she stopped the door from closing. Clive tried to look her in the eye. “It’s only been...he’s in the woods, or over at Charley’s...”

“I called. I called Charley and Joanie and momma. He’s four. He wouldn’t do this, it’s been...” Her hands went to her face and choked the words.

“I got to go to work. He’s fine.”

“Clive, he’s four.” She stared up at him over her fingers. “Can you please help me think? Help me look. I’m scared something’s wrong. Bad wrong.”

Clive pressed his palms into his forehead then turned off the truck. His fingers tugged at the skin down his face. He climbed out of the truck and stood beside her. He pulled her to him. She sobbed and shook her head in his chest.

“You scared him.”

“Bobbi Nell, I just got up to get him the popsicle and he ran.”

She was breathing and crying heavy into his chest and punching with the back of both fists. They stood like that for a while with Clive looking past her across the place. "Let's see. What would make for a good hiding place if I was four years old?"

"Did you see where he was running to?"

"He just lit out. I didn't see him." And he looked again around the place.

Clive kissed her forehead and dug for his handkerchief. He handed it to her and started walking. Bobbi Nell stood there in slow shakes, staring at the gravel. Clive ran his fingers through his hair and pulled a little at the scalp.

"Why'd you lock the doors?" She watched Clive walk back up the drive. He stopped when he made it past the shed. He looked back to her then rushed forward and tried hard at the rear door of the Pontiac. He patted at his pockets for the keys and disappeared into the glare of the sun beating against the windshield.

Like Clive Bisbee the last few evenings, the sun was stooping over early but retiring at a slow pace. Clive grabbed a beer from the fridge and locked the kitchen door. He slid a chair to him and began to remove his boots. Two years earlier, he

would have gone to Cyrus Taller's Roadside until ten or eleven or would have at least spent the evening in the garden or under the hood of the Pontiac adding copious layers of grease to the blue-chalk and sawdust under the nails of his hands. He finished a can of beef stew and checked the news. With the Pontiac running and the garden tilled under and dead, he decided that the day was through. Clive labored through the dim bromidic quiet of his house to the bedroom. The work, the life, was beginning to take its toll. His idea of a man at thirty-three years did not include constant back pain and fire in the joints. Clive's mother said he was too much Bisbee to be anything other than the way he was. He hooked the thick strap with a thumb and shoved it over his shoulder. Thirty-three is too young for suspenders. He unbuttoned the green and red-checked flannel, removed it and slung it over the rocking chair. Leaning a bronzed and muscular forearm against the chiffarobe, he pulled his legs out of stiff denim. Little cakes of clay and mortar fell and split on the hardwood. His knees popped.

The bed creaked under his solid hands, and Clive pulled down a quilt and bed-sheet. The sheets were cool and had the feel of cleanliness over his skin. He imagined his shoulders pitched more these days to the ceiling, his sternum inched closer to spine. The weight off his heels felt good. All day Clive had shifted from heel to heel for relief. He lifted a foot and placed it atop the other. The heel dug tender into bone for a time, then he switched to allay the other. The ritual digs began with sharp alacrity and purpose but soon grew slack until his rest began to

resemble work and he turned off the lamp. It wasn't long before the world had followed suit and all was darkness.

The shot woke him immediately, and he knew it was real by the glass now pushing through his heels on the floor. His hand found the 12 gauge propped by the bedpost. Clive hoped that whoever it was hadn't seen him jump to his feet by the startle. He was bent nearly double trying to use the wide walnut back of the rocking chair as cover. Without moving his eyes from the maw that was once his window, he lifted the gun from its place and slowly pulled it to him. He listened. No engine. No footsteps. No whispers. No breath.

"I come for the car, Clive Bisbee."

There was a comfort only in knowing the voice. He knew she'd be calling on him, just not when. He figured it to be soon with her sentence sure to be about up. He expected a letter, a chance meeting at the gas station, a phone call. The expectation became a dun, itself acting as some sort of rightful punishment. Clive didn't answer. The gun was now across the thighs in his half stoop, barrel pointed to the wide pine baseboard. His forefinger found the curve of the trigger. She was flashing before him between the dances of curtain and remaining shreds of vinyl shade. She stood just out of the woods on the other side of the drive. The cotton of her dress hung limp, and her shotgun was aimed at the window.

"I know y'there, Clive. I seen you drive up."

"You shouldn't be here, Bobbi."

"I have every right to be here and you know it."

"Your rights to anything mine died a couple years ago."

"Bastard."

"It ain't going to do no good. You wanting it is sick is all. Sick. I should of sold the blame thing."

"It's as much mine to keep as yours to sell."

"Well, you can't have it. Not tonight. Not never." Clive took a deep, sighed breath but did not relax from his bent position. He had a clear shot, and he eased the barrel up.

"You gone shoot me, Clive? That what you gone do? I can see you, y' damn fool."

Some of the second shot tore into his left thigh, burning, and sent him reeling to the foot of the bed.

"You a two-bit mule, Clive Bisbee."

"I orhta shoot you dead. Right here. Right now." Clive winced as he pinched some of the shot out of his thigh.

“You shoot me dead, then everybody’d believe me and you can’t afford that. You ain’t gone shoot me.”

“Go home.” The words tripped out tiredly.

“This is the only home I got.”

Clive fired a shot just wide enough for her to feel it tearing the air. She didn’t move.

“You ain’t gone shoot me, Clive, and I ain’t gone scare with you shootin at me knowing you ain’t gone shoot me. Throw the keys out the window and I’ll get on.”

“You need to just get on, then, cause I ain’t letting you have it.”

Bobbi Nell fired again. Clive dropped behind the foot of the bed. The shot sank into the papered-over paneling just behind him. He army-crawled to the hall and crossed to the spare bedroom for the rifle. Clive limp-ran down the hall but stopped before entering the living room for fear that she could see him through the window of the kitchen. The leg felt as if it was splitting clean in two as he bent down and slid the shotgun across the carpet of the living room. He drew his breathing silent and waited, to let her reveal herself. She did. He heard the footfalls rustle and snap stick then turn to a soft swishing thud. The kind of swish and thud that would place her in the tall grass this side of the woods east of the garden. He waited for the crunch of gravel. None came. Maybe two years in jail had taught her something. He could end this if he could get to the kitchen door. He inched forward into the

opening. The shot sent shards of glass bouncing from the linoleum to the carpet just in front of him. She had learned something. She had always been a decent shot for a woman.

He heard more footsteps but no swish of tall grass. She was near the shed most likely. He needed her to freeze. If she was under the shed like he figured she was, she wouldn't be able to draw a line on him. He inched out from the hall, sighted the rifle, and pulled the trigger. Glass from the kitchen windows fell to the sink and his shot splintered the eave of the shed just above her head. He heard her drop to the ground, her feet back peddling to the safety of the shed. Clive slid around to the wall-side of the couch, grabbing the 9MM that he had stowed under it. Toting both guns and collecting the shotgun, he scurried over the linoleum of the little kitchen and backed against the cabinet at the kitchen door.

"Bobbi Nell, just go."

"I done told you, I aim to leave in that car."

"I don't see why you want it. I wouldn't if I was you."

"You wouldn't understand. You ain't never really loved nothing in all your miserable life."

"It's sick. You're sick, Bobbi, really sick. Go get someone to help you."

He lifted the shotgun and fired past her. There was the sound of blasts and rattling tin, soft metal, and breaking glass. Once the rifle and shotgun were spent he lifted the 9MM and continued at the Pontiac. The sound of lifeless metal groans, of iron piercing and locking iron, air escaping compression, and metal sinking to earth was echoed in her wails and sobs. Clive stopped shooting when he saw her lurching toward the car.

Cut It Where You Will

From the top of the fire tower and under the appropriate atmospheric conditions, Jayson Curtis could see for over ten miles. On a clear day he could see all the way to the power plant. The steps, all one hundred and sixty of them brought knowledge. Of course, from that height it isn't the knowledge of things that comes from vision or detail or definition. It is a knowledge of patterns and movements and use. He could see the roads void of their usual industry, the fields limited by streams or tree lines, and the forests conquerable, evidenced by civilization scraping at all sides and in all manners.

Jayson and his buddies still climb fire towers, and buildings, and trees at the stripper pits when they are fast on their way to being drunk. Jayson was the expert at this activity or any activity that required steel for brains or nerves. He was not ignorant, but that did not stop him from doing fool ignorant things. It was the rush, of course, and when he was honest with himself, the attention or notoriety or the fact that others wanted to be around him because they liked his kind of spontaneity. It made going on dates easy for him, he felt secure in the fact that he could press moments to see what energy would come of them, simply because it was expected.

At his prom night dinner at Boswell's, the only upscale diner in Verdin, and with LeAnne Boykins filling out a dress in front of him, he stood and rolled his top hat onto his head. LeAnne Boykins smiled in anticipation. He pointed his cane to

the ceiling and shouted above the small diner rattle of plates and forks and orders and conversation. "Come one, come all," with that he winked at LeAnne Boykins and she suppressed the urge to laugh out loud, "to observe the great illusionary tricks of Master Jay Amazing and his beautiful assistant...Trixie." He made Trixie stand, LeAnne Boykins sheepishly stood to the confused stares of all patrons. There was her dentist and his family, the real estate guy who was on the billboard out on 45, a few couples in their sixties or seventies and other kids from their high school dressed for the prom. Jayson had a way with all people. He could cover any inconvenience with his wit, charm, and charisma. He pulled from his pocket a deck of cards and asked an old man to pick a card, any card. The old man selected and studied one and put it back in the deck. He looked somewhat annoyed, but it seemed his wife was enjoying a break from an otherwise quiet dinner. Jayson noticed her and bumped up to her and said, "Pretty young lady, for my first trick I will cut and fan the deck, and I will then ask you to select a card, any card. But before I begin, I will ask you to look up my sleeves and down my pants for anything out of the ordinary." The old man slid both fists to the side of his plate. "Don't worry old timer," he said, "I was never in the Navy, so she's safe with me." He patted him on the shoulder. He would say things like that and everyone would ease up. Other folks would repeat what he said with no where near the same effect. He made a show of being shy when the old lady looked up his sleeves and he offered his backside to her to check the pockets there. LeAnne Boykins stood cross-legged, head tilted, fixed on him. The old lady picked a card after he cut and fanned the

deck. "Your card, sir?" The old man shook his head no and grinned. Jayson looked fiercely around the room. "Oh, well maybe our friend took it, when I wasn't looking." Jayson pointed at the old man, "And maybe you gave it to someone else, when I wasn't looking." Jayson brought the nervous energy in the room to a nice pitch then said, "Sir, where you in the Navy?" Everyone laughed. "And maybe you have a thing for younger women, fine looking younger women, like Trixie here. You took that card and handed it to Trixie while I was flirting with your woman, didn't you?"

The old man said, "I did no such thing."

Jayson turned sharply to his date, "Trixie, I thought we had something. I brought you here, to such a fine establishment, to confess my undying devotion to you, my one and only. I thought the last three weeks meant something," LeAnne Boykins was covering her mouth with her napkin and everyone was laughing, "I thought that night when we broke into the dentist's office and flossed each other was special." The dentist and his wife were roaring. "And now I find out that when you said that you were excited to be going with a senior, what you really meant was senior senior like octogenarian sailor senior. How long has this gone on?" Jayson was making a show of his depression and hurt, pausing to hold himself up on a chair, heartbroken. "You have his card don't you, Trixie? He gave you his two of spades, didn't he, that dirty old seaman?" LeAnne Boykins shook her head no and placed her arms behind her back. Everyone in the diner, including the waitstaff and hostess, was entranced in his performance. Jayson walked over to her and spun her

around and then went around to her front side and pushed her hips gently back to place her in the middle of the room. While he was pushing her he was making like he was hurt and saying “Why?” and “How could you do this to me?” and “Oh, why?” LeAnne Boykins was staring hard at him with her chin down and her eyes just below the lids. It was as intense a look as they had held. He stopped her with a slight pull of her hips back towards him. He looked to the old man, “Sailor, it’s time to face the music. I’m too damn patriotic to go getting into knock down dragouts with national heroes, but this fine thing is worth fighting for. Did you or did you not give your card, on the sly, to my girl Trixie?” The old man repeated, “I did no such thing.” Jayson spun Trixie around once real slow and shouted, “Stand to your feet, sailor.” The old man stood casually, at ease now. Jayson gestured for him to come closer to Trixie and he placed them together as if they were about to waltz. “You two deserve each other. No sense in hiding the truth. The truth is that you gave that card to Trixie as a sign of your devotion and she hid it, like a treasure, a little baby bird maybe, that needs protecting. Now, I’ll ask you one more time, and you need to think before you answer. I’m not afraid of a sailor when it comes to matters of the heart or dental hygiene. Did you give Trixie that card?”

The old man said, “No sir. I did not. I give it back to you to place in your deck there.”

“Liar. You sir, are a no good liar. How then can you explain this?” Jayson pulled them apart and spun Trixie around to show him the peak of a card just above

her dress line. "Take it, sailor, take your card and with it my heart." Jayson slumped to an empty seat next to the sailor's wife and buried his head in his arms at the back of the chair. The dining room erupted in applause as the old man pulled his card from LeAnne Boykin's dress shaking his head yes, indeed that was his card and shaking his head again in gentle admiration. Jayson looked up and started flirting with the sailor's wife in hushed tones and the entire place started laughing again. Jayson stood to his feet, kissed the old woman's cheek and shook the old man's hand and let him sit again at his seat. Jayson and LeAnne Boykins returned to their table and their meal. He looked around the room and just when the attention was back at their own dinners and conversations there, he stood again pulling LeAnne Boykins from her seat and led her once again to the sailor and his wife. He explained to the crowd that he had a second act and asked for Trixie's assistance. He put his top hat on the old woman and handed the old sailor the cane as he explained that he was going to remove the table cloth at such speed that all of the plates and glass and appropriate accoutrements would stand unscathed. He lifted the cloth and tugged gently, asked Trixie to stand closer, tugged gently again pulling the cloth taut. Then with one hard fast jerk he brought the sailor's plates, and silverware and drinks spilling to all four of them and the floor. The old man was moving quickly to keep the sauces and drinks from staining his clothes and LeAnne Boykins shrieked and was fighting the liquids from her dress and the old woman doing the same. "Thank you...Thank you." Jayson was bowing deeply and pulled LeAnne Boykins by the wrist. He threw three wrinkled twenties on the table. His white ruffles were

soaking in the deep reds of the wine the sailor had been drinking and what looked to be a chocolate desert the old woman had been working at. He was smiling and LeAnne Boykins was trying to keep up. He pulled her from the restaurant, and he picked her up like he was carrying her across some significant threshold and waddled down the sidewalk to the truck. After the half block trek she was laughing and had kissed his neck. He opened the rust-lined door of the truck and slid her down to her seat. He kissed her hard on the mouth while he climbed over her. She was laughing and falling over and trying to kiss him back. He plopped into his seat and ran his fingers through his hair. Jayson looked at her and grinned and said, "Well, Trixie, what do you have in mind for the third act?" She slid close to him and he placed an arm around her and one out of the door. He started the truck and peeled out and left the town square. Jayson laughed loudly when he felt the cool breeze of a Mississippi May Saturday night whipping her hair in his face.

The night air was near solid and no breeze of any kind made its way across the observation deck. Jayson had just shown up, shoved his way past the others and raced up the steps to the lookout where Sammy had pulled a cooler up. Jayson was laughing at him because what he was using was a bungee cord and creating a lot of effort for some beer. The group still below, Davis and them, belonged to a league of followers. Great friends in their own right but always at the heels. When one of them, and usually it was Gruber, took it upon himself to be the first to do something outlandish, Jayson felt it more as an act put on, instead of the natural flow of actions.

He felt, at times, as a master puppeteer or some kind of wizard, that his very presence could pull certain strings. Davis and Gruber were good for a few laughs, but it was always Jayson breaking the glass, lighting fuses or the one doing the talking.

Some of the others had invited some friends. Girls were starting to file out of Jeeps and trucks and there was a legitimate fire lane party starting. Davis gathered some wood for a fire, he was always wanting a fire. Sammy yelled down from the deck to leave enough alone for a bit and that a spotter would be back up in about two hours and wait till after then. Jayson leaned up against a rail.

“Dillbag, get the canopies out of my truck and go ahead and start setting them up.” Jayson had called Davis Dillbag since they were in elementary school. It started out as Dillbag Davis, but now it was mostly just Dillbag, or when he was acting like Davis’s mother, he’d say things like, “Davis Alexander Dillbag Stevens, get your hand off your pecker.” She never talked like that and it was probably what made it so funny.

Davis let the gate fall on the truck and he and some others started setting up the camouflage canopies and pulling the vehicles that they couldn’t cover in the growth of pine.

After about a half hour some of the girls were getting talkative and everyone was up on the deck. Some of the girls were either scared of the height or making a show of scared and there was the usual rounds of ribbing and picking and cussing.

Gruber was telling another story about his boss's old lady hitting on him and everyone was having a fine time. Jayson was flicking a lighter and was fidgeting with the broken instruments of the tower. On occasion, he could get like this and it seemed like the party always broke up soon after. Savannah Blake had been with him the last couple of months and was the one who came with him. She was a curvy brunette with a flair for the dramatic herself. For Jayson, he could see it going somewhere if he saw himself going somewhere, but for now he wasn't much for going.

"You want a drink?" Savannah wore a dress over some jeans tucked into some cowboy boots and Jayson was impressed that she climbed those steps so easily in them.

"Not just yet." Jayson was looking at the stunted flick of the lighter still while Gruber was laughing at himself telling his story. Everyone was smiling and waiting for a punch line or climax, but usually it was just a barrel laugh by Gruber then a shotgun gulp of his beer and a "Ah, shit" while he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Laughs still the same.

"What's got you, Jayson?" Jayson was bothered by how Savannah was growing tender the last couple of days.

"This is your world, ain't it?"

“What’s that?” She cut on the Coleman lamp even though there was a few more minutes of daylight and then the haze which Jayson preferred just before full dark.

“This is your world up here, ain’t it? Up here in the sky, looking out over the earth.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty.”

Jayson stared at the treeline, the sun just above it or to nothing in particular. He could feel Savannah’s eyes trying to read him. His mood, his temperament, his next movements. He pulled hard at the railing feeling its soft wood give.

“You’re funny. I think you need to have a couple of drinks.” Savannah slid a beer into his palm and walked back to the group laughing. He placed it on the rail.

“Yeah, it’s pretty up here.” Jayson looked out at how the twilight made some of the forested areas seem to grow beneath him like it was chewing back at society’s hold. He turned his back to Gruber wheezing and slapping at his back pocket telling about another time with Mrs. Davidson.

It was odd for Jayson that Gruber got a job with Davidson Towing and Wrecker, since early in high school they gave that man and his trucks some fits. Fitting though that Gruber was getting on with the man’s wife from time to time. More than once, after a couple of hard rains, they had broken into the lot behind the Quonset barn that was the office and took the wreckers on a joy ride and left them in

a ditch out in the county. Sammy had an uncle that worked there for a time and Jayson talked Sammy into stealing his keys when he got drunk. Jayson traded some beer to a clerk at the Tru-Value for copies of the set. Jayson found pleasure in a joke that brought on more jokes. Tow trucks needing a tow. He brought it up in class one time, "I'm glad, Miss Henry, that those seniors do stuff like that so that I now have a working knowledge of the irony you've been failing to get through to us." Now, irony like that seemed all around him. In the events now taking hold of his life. It was there a couple of years ago with LeAnne Boykins and her family, and Savannah Blake knowing him like she does. It was there below him in the very grid of the green earth.

Jayson pulled at the railing again with both arms hard and eased forward. Savannah came up next to him and bumped him with her hip sideways then kept walking around the rail of the deck. Jayson walked over to the cooler and started untying the bungee cord. Gruber and Sammy were laughing at other stories about folks sleeping around and telling about high school days and rumors about some of the teachers there. Jayson looped the grey cord. Bits of blue and orange threaded the grey cord like wayward flecks bumping into themselves. Davis was sitting next to where Jayson was standing now looping the cord. He looped and he looped and he did not look up. Davis took a final drag and made to flick a cigarette. He was arrested by the sight of the new made noose in Jayson hands.

"What'ya going to do with it?"

Jayson was steady working and didn't look up.

Gruber got to telling about coming up on a dog out at the woods behind his dad's place. It was caught in a snap trap made for coyotes that had been coming around. The dog was trying to bite its leg off to free itself. It was chewed to the bone in places around where it was clamped down. Gruber said he didn't have nothing to shoot it with so he decided to take off a shoe lace and tie his knife on a stick and stab it in the heart to put it out of its misery. Jayson lifted his head at the show of the story and snorted and then went back to working with the cord. Just another string that was being pulled was Jayson's thought and it made him sick. Jayson wanted the curtain lifted. Gruber went on with the telling. He said that he got the knife fixed on the stick and couldn't hardly get close enough to the dog and it was acting like a caged animal now let me tell you. He said he made one quick lurch and caught the beast in the side of the neck missing the heart altogether and was awashed in a spraying of blood that covered his face and shirt, he was spitting it out of his mouth.

"How close what?"

"How close to the dog were you?" Jayson went to the railing and got the beer, opened it and drank. The noose was still in his hand resting on his hip.

"Five, six, eight feet."

“Shit.” Jayson scowled at him and the group was beginning to dance eyes back to Gruber to check his reaction.

“What?”

“It wouldn’t of been like that. You’re full of shit.”

“A dog’ll bleed, now.”

“Shit.” And some of the others were starting to let in on Gruber a little too.

“Cut a throat any which way, and that bitch will bleed.” There was gravel in Gruber’s voice and Jayson walked around and stood against the railing behind him.

It was easy to get Dillbag or Sammy to gravel, but Gruber took the right timing. Usually when girls were around it was easier. The last time he got Gruber was a couple of years ago after just after graduation. Jayson and Davis were messing around with a dirt bike over at LeAnne Boykins’ house when she lived with her mom on Maple Street. They were out in the street riding wheelies and ramping when Gruber drove up after work. He was mad at something that had happened about not getting paid right and was carrying two beers in one hand and lighting a cigarette with the other. He tossed one to Davis and sat down on the curb to watch. LeAnne Boykins was standing there close to him with her little sister Marianne and a couple of other kids from down the street. Davis chugged the beer and started the bike to pull a wheelie. He held it past the light pole and said that Jayson couldn’t do no better. Jayson stood it up all the way to the stop sign and it looked like it might

be the end of it. Jayson gunned it back down the street and locked it sideways to skid and stop right at where Gruber's work-booted legs were crossed and resting. Gruber jumped to his feet and threw the can of beer he had just opened and hit Jayson in the ribs with it. Jayson turned laughing when he saw Gruber's hand go up and he grunted when it hit.

"Shit Fire!" Gruber two arm shoved Jayson backwards off the bike and Jayson just kept laughing while looking at the fresh scrape of his elbow and palm. Gruber stomped around the yard cursing and went and sat in his truck smoking. Davis got back on the bike and started doing some ramps again. Jayson said he could ramp it and put it in a wheelie in one bounce and come close a couple of times. Gruber got out and came back over.

"You red ass still, Grube?" Jayson was grinning, "I knew you'd move. You wasn't tight end for nothing, you panty sock."

Davis said, "panty sock," and laughed. Jayson would say things that other people wanted to repeat.

"You think you're always something."

"Come on, Gruber, let off it a little. Have some fun."

LeAnne Boykins' mother came out to the porch and called for Marianne and told some of the young ones they better get on.

"Let off a little steam." Jayson pushed the bike over to Gruber.

He looked funny with his big frame on the little bike. Gruber did a couple of wheelies and a couple of ramps. Jayson started goading him to hold a wheelie to the stop sign and Gruber held it practically straight up but could only take it to the light pole before he'd lose his balance. Mrs. Boykins came out and yelled again at Marianne that it was getting to be about her bed time and she needed to come in. Jayson grabbed on to her shoulders and yelled back that he was going to tuck her in and tell her a bed time story tonight and everyone thought it was funny because she was older than one needing all that. Mrs. Boykins threw her palm at Jayson and went back in the house.

“Ride her straight up again, panty sock.”

Gruber did like that again but slid off the back side and was running with it to keep it from falling. He didn't look too athletic running bow-legged in his boots.

“You look like the elephant riding on Fantasia.” Davis was laughing as he said it and it got everyone to laughing at Gruber again. Gruber mocked the laughter back at him and Jayson said, “Elephant sock, I bet you won't try to ramp it while riding a wheelie.”

“You damn right.” Gruber took the bike and throttled it hard at Jayson and skidded it right at him and Jayson moved the little girl to behind him. “Damn, Gruber.” Jayson got on the bike and carried a wheelie but missed the ramp then got one all the way the second try. Davis got on and did it the first try and they were all getting on Gruber to have a turn at it. Jayson was saying, “panty sock” and “elephant

sock” and “sock an elephant with your Gruber” and Davis was joining in. Gruber got on the bike and revved it hard and ramped it farther than anyone all night.

Jayson started a chant of “Wheelie ramp, panty sock,” and Gruber twisted his wrist and threw his head and shoulders back and the front wheel popped off the ground and turned to the side. One of his feet fell off the stump of a post and he was dragging the toe of his work boot. The scuffed leather toe of the boot tossed a few loose pebbles as a wake and the bike was vertical. He carried it half way up the ramp and lost the balance of the thing and it dipped downward and he jerked it back up. He succeeded in wresting it upright but the motion brought it off the side of the ramp. His wrist bent backward just trying to hold the thing but it excited the engine and when the back wheel found purchase on the street the bike whined into a collision with the little girl standing there watching. She was in a coma for a week and never really came through it. The Boykins family moved to Memphis for the care that it took to keep the girl alive.

From behind, Jayson noticed how the back of Gruber’s pant legs were noticeably eaten away in frays. Gruber finished his story about the dog being caught in the trap and the blood and cleaning himself of it. When the sound of a spotter plane could be made out for sure some of the girls who hadn’t partied there before started to get nervous. Davis sounded official and tried to calm them telling them that all they had to do was lean over the azimuth, make sure nothing reflective was

within four feet of the rail and that all the cars had been parked under enough brush, pine stand or the canopy to keep from being noticed. Savannah cut the lamp quick, and Jayson stood at the rail looking up for the plane and drinking his beer. When the light went out, it was near black at first but his eyes adjusted from color splotches on a dark canvas to recognizing muted shapes of a huddle around the fire finder.

“Get over here, Jayson.” There was gravel back at Gruber’s voice.

Jayson did not move and the plane was loud and low and near. Gruber bumped Savannah’s arm when he turned to grab at Jayson and the lamp flickered. The plane sounded as if it was directly above them. The huddle cursed collectively and all was black again for a second. The plane was by them and some of the huddle was peeling off and some were saying stay put because it sounded like it was banking to look again. Davis ordered for everyone to stay still and not to move and Gruber was trying to find Jayson in the bodies. He yelled and ordered and called him names and the huddle was over the table when it was sure that the plane was coming back. The concussion of air made it seem that the plane had skimmed the top of the tower and after it passed there was the scuffle of bodies on the wood deck. When the sound of the plane grew faint Savannah flipped the lamp on. Jayson had Gruber locked by his wild hair with the noose pulled taut choking him. Jayson was laughing and saying, “Don’t look full at him or you’ll turn to stone,” and Gruber was turning blue. Jayson was stumbling with Gruber’s big body holding the cord behind

his back with one hand and the other one fully extended holding the head as if he was showing a great prize to everybody. Gruber's struggle of breaths was scaring some of the girls and Savannah yelled for Jayson to just quit. Jayson let up and Gruber sank to the wooden deck, his torso and arms crashing the cooler and breaking the lid off it clean. He rubbed at his neck coughing. Most everyone cleared out pretty fast heading down the stairs leaving Davis and Sammy cleaning up and Savannah tending to Gruber. Jayson threw the spoiled cooler off the deck and picked up the noosed cord and began loosening it. He tied one end on to one of the corner posts of the structure. The sound of truck doors opening and closing and engines coming to life brought a sudden energy to Jayson. Savannah glared at him and he shrugged his shoulders. The sound of a helicopter brought Gruber to his feet and scurrying down the stairs.

"Come on Jayson." Savannah sounded tired.

"They'll follow the cars leaving out. Might as well stay right here."

"Why do you always have to be right?" Savannah did not wait for Jayson and carried the light with her down the steps, her heels just clipping each step.

The high powered beam of the helicopter was swinging in small arcs that made the deep greens of the forest below glow emerald at the fringe of the lighted spaces. The helicopter's staccato barks were near and Jayson was on top of the tower's roof. He had managed to pull himself from the observation deck up to the roof and the bungee cord wrapped around his ankles.

“You’re all beautiful, like an emerald city.”

After the yell he made no other noise and spread his arms wide. The dive was the beauty of patterned movement and the industry of use. His back was arched and his midsection was pushing the air in front of him to the earth. Even in the white flashes of the helicopter spotlight he was bronze and toned, the sides of his open shirt rippling beside and behind him. The earth rushed to meet him and the arc was carrying him back into the metal cage of the staircase.

Rain for the Righteous

Each row a hurdle. Each row a cliff. Eldon Coady hadn't noticed the heat when he started out across the field, leaving the boy there in the fence row. At eighty-four Coady struggled under the sun. The day had started cool like the snake-side of a rock but had since turned. The adrenaline had all but passed. Coady assumed the charge would last until he was at least half the trek back to the house. This predicament wouldn't have been much to Coady or the boy ten years ago. The last decade had brought something harsh to the both of them, rounding them soft and hard of breath. The boy, now near fifty, had showed signs of this for a while, but in the last six years had gone down quickly. The doctors brought a label two decades ago to something Coady had suspicioned long before. The boy had MS and was confined to a motorized wheelchair that was now stuck in the fence that they had been trying to remove in the cool of the morning. It was now near noon and Eldon Coady was walking the two and half miles back to the barn to fetch the tractor, leaving his boy in the also-stuck Kawasaki Mule under a shade he had fashioned from torn burlap. They had propositioned to take down the bulk of the quarter mile of fence in the morning but hadn't even cleared four rod of it.

Traveling the lane was his first choice but now he was cutting across the field and very near the thicket that comes to at the edge of the garden, a full acre and a half from the barn and the tractor. For most of his life he had counted his loss as

gain, his trials blessing. His eighty-four years were suddenly now harsh like fresh nagging whelps. His joints, his back, the sun. The time it took to pace himself through the rows became a rude lesson in some sort of sinner's math. A stride, a stride, a stutter, a lift of bone that weighted itself with each step. The rain earlier in the week was complicating this equation. The mud compounded the sum of it all. Eighty-plus years of misfortune were adding up to this day, to each booted stride. And the fool yield brought a fire at his throat, cutting off the breath. Coady tried to keep the handkerchief at his brow. He didn't want to take the time to stop, roll it, and tie it knowing that the time it would take to provide for a personal reprieve could add to his son's suffering. The sun was already too much on him, and he feared the boy couldn't stand it much longer than it was going to take.

Coady knew he would have to rest at the rock at the crick and he didn't plan to be short of moving until then. Each step was crucial, he was careful to stride over every one of the corn stalk stubs stout enough to punch a tire. For Coady, it meant a rolled ankle, a hard fall and with blood already made too thin. The sting of sweat was the sting of hornets at the corners of his eyes and caused his vision to blur. Coady stopped half a step to wipe the sweat and gauge the distance to the thicket. Roughly three tenths of a mile left, at most. A third of a mile was a little less than six hundred yards. Each row was the standard thirty inches from the next, nearly a yard apart. He was taking two steps and a stutter per row. 1200 more steps, thereabouts, and he could rest his neck before he started the same fixed intensity on the thicket. The thicket with its looming roots, briars, uneven patches and ravine lie

in wait. Just maybe the angel of death had enough sense to work in the shade. Coady knew the terrain was not the course for his frame and age but the sun and its heat left no other viable option. Coady was bent to keep the day from laying down on his boy. This was not the first time that he had petitioned against the boy's death. A grassfire had come near taking the boy and the barn. Coady never knew what it was to suffer much. He thought he did when he was young, but advanced years and real loss bring clarity to comfort and strife. The boy's reticence and the MS and lately a handful of peculiarities had Coady up most nights studying on the worth of baptism for a man whose boy commits suicide. The cost of salvation. The math of God seemed broken, incomplete. He wanted to figure on something permanent for the boy, but it felt like water.

The sting of sweat was now in his hands and thigh where the skin was surely broken. He hadn't stopped to check the thigh but the pant clung to flesh. With a quick glance it didn't appear soaked through with blood so he hoped it just sweat. The pain in the thigh was from trying to push the wheelchair to find purchase. The boy had been working the wire into a roll from his seat in the chair, while Coady pulled the staples from the posts. Coady had seen that he was getting close to the slick of the bank with each bump of the control. The boy was holding the wire on the right side out away of the chair while he nudged the control with the back of his left wrist. "You better watch that," he had said meaning how close he was to sliding down the bank into the fence and the boy just grimaced like he would. The boy wrist-bumped the controller and the chair lurched forward. The wheels slipped.

“You’ll bury it if you ain’t careful, or you’ll end up down here with me. Then we’ll be in a fix.”

“Ah.”

“You’ll bury it.”

The boy moved the controller and the wheels slipped.

“You’re wearing that spot thin a traction now back off it.”

The boy twisted the roll of barbed wire in his bare hands. The calluses on the boy’s hands had extended from the birth of his fingers across the pad to the wrist on account of the chair before this motorized one. It was not the first time he had watched his son with painful admiration. The boy knew no quit, he knew no tire and it’d likely be the end of him. He had always been stout even as a child, a source of pride for Coady. The pride was still there but had morphed into an entity unknown to him to allow for the pain. With the now constant rearing of MS, Coady was trying to forget the boy at fifty he had expected. There is a sadness in watching a once-stout man, especially one being your son, attempt anything.

Work was different at eighty-four and with a son in a wheel chair. The days were shorter in product but longer in toil. Sleep came like the work, in fits, if it came at all. They were still able to work the place, the two of them, as they were. In the Fall, they had painted the road sides of the horse barn. Coady had welded a chair to a metal pallet he made from some scraps he had laying on the place. He robbed the

Dodge of its seatbelt and rigged it to the chair. Coady hadn't laughed with the boy as much as he did when he lifted him up with the forks of the Massey Ferguson. The boy used the extension roller and would signal if the dizzy spells got too much. They worked. The two of them, together, methodical, productive, thankful for sweat again. For as long as Coady could remember the boy was soaked through with sweat. He'd barely stop for meals or anything else. He was always working and when he wasn't working he was doing the planning for working. The offering envelopes were for making lists. He'd come out of the restroom at Karl's Kit-A-Korner with a new way to do an old thing. He'd spend most Sundays at the plant manager's farm in an arrangement to avoid the day shift so he could farm. Even at fifty-three and in a wheelchair he still preferred sweat. Over the past winter they had painted all twenty two gates, moving the livestock accordingly, and hauling each gate one by one to the equipment barn for faster drying. The boy still worked his own sheep and managed to keep the frontage of the 240 acres mowed and weed-eated. All done differently than before but all done.

It was the boy's ethic that had them out this morning in the first place. The mine had finally made an offer that Coady thought agreeable and by the size of the contract gave them no need for the hassle that comes with dairy cows. They sold off the last of them in March and could take down the fence to maximize the lease on the crop. Bob Cushing could farm twenty acres of pasture and another lineal acre or better without the fence in places. Coady agreed that they might as well get the extra cash from the place before the mine gave a notice of leave. The two of them

had put the fence in and maintained it all these years, who better than them to take it out. It was only work and both were willing. Twenty rod of fence had been removed before the rain set in near a week ago. Coady had decided to lay out another day and a half hoping the sun had been enough to get back at it and thought better than to try this morning, but the boy insisted.

“Now back off it. You’re gittin too close.”

“I’m almost to it now.”

“You’re slippin and slidin, so close to losing it that we about in it, the both of us.”

“Ah.”

“You better stop and pull her up a bit and re-position your buggy. Always in a blame hurry.”

“I’m watching.”

“Oh you ain’t either. In a blame hurry with everything you ever done.”

The boy continued to roll the wire, nudging the chair forward in its slip slide jerks. Coady stopped pulling the staples from the posts altogether and was watching the slip of the tires. The boy was head down, fixed on the barbed wire in his hands. An occasional prick of softer flesh and a grimace but steady work. Coady

grabbed his cane and started up the bank. He could at least help hold the chair where it was. The boy nudged the controller, the chair jerked.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to get up there and hold that chair there in place because you won’t listen.”

“If you come up here then I won’t have nothing to roll.”

“Well then you better listen, you’re putting us both out of a job.”

“Cushing will be setting late corn next week.”

“I don’t know if it’s worth it.”

“One point one million is more than one million on my calculator, every day.”

The boy bumped the control and the chair jerked. The slope-side tire slipped and Coady tried to lunge to hold the chair in place. Coady’s reach actually provided the chair a push and the boy’s instinctive try at the control slid the chair ass-first-sideways and nearly made it to topple over. The chair and the boy rebalanced in a quarter turn with its back to the lane. Coady lost his grip and fell to his knees.

“Now,” was all Coady could say as useless as everything. He threw the pliers to the ground and with the cane made his way to his feet. The boy tried at the controller and the wheels spun.

“Back off it. You’ll bury it. Wait till I can give a push.”

Coady put his backside to the chair and steadied himself with the cane before looping it over the arm of the chair. When Coady said to, the boy pushed the lever. The wheels spun, Coady grunted and the chair slid back even further nearly sending Coady down the bank and into the fence. The support of the seatback had caught Coady across the thigh, and he was sure it was gashed. He grabbed the cane and pulled himself up the bank to the Kawasaki Mule. The cool chirp of the morning was beginning to vanish. He could feel the vapor rising from the earth beneath him. The wet morning now with the heat felt as if it was gathering just under his chin. Coady fumed at the boy for taking the tow chain out of the cargo bed of the Mule and searched for something to pull the chair. The boy was starting to climb out when Coady noticed. He yelled for him to just stay put. That he didn't want no son of his disrespecting him twice in two minutes, and fainting there in the fence would only cause more problems than they had the mustard to deal with. The boy settled back in the seat and rolled up the slack of the barbed wire.

As Coady crossed the final row of stubbed stalk he wiped his brow then folded his head back as far as it would go releasing some of the tension. He agreed that he wouldn't slow again except to pass over or around a downed tree or stump, or rattler, or anything else causing dire caution or attention. Coady felt his throat closing even in the shade the treeline was now throwing. The tall grass of the irrigation ditch was no place for him without his Bowie or a machete. It was the being ill-prepared that brought most of the frustration. He had planned for the boy's stubbornness, their squabbles over the best ways to do the work, but he hadn't done

a good job of planning for the boy's fool headedness. There weren't many days that he felt his age. Today he felt like he was even showing it. He was watching himself from the view of an eagle, and he looked tired. He looked tragic, like he was starring in some bad western, so tragic that if it was another man it would be near comedy.

The ditch was passed without incident and Coady continued into the thicket moving sticks, briars, and small limbs of saplings with the cane. The cool of the under-brush began to bring a new energy and purpose. In roughly thirty minutes he would be at the garden, in the house to fill a thermos of water, to wet some rags and on to the barn. The rest at the crick would be short he told himself but he needed to take one, needed a splash of water. Coady had left both thermoses for the boy fearing the dizzy spells that came in great waves with any amount of heat. The boy had said it felt as if he was in an ocean storm when it got like that. Coady never challenged it even though the boy hadn't as much as been out on the lake for more than an hour.

It had been years since Coady had been in these woods, even so close to the house, years since he had taken a walk in any woods. A decade or two earlier and this wood wasn't enough to go walking in and now it spread before him like forty years. The last time he sat on that rock at the crick was after Evelyn died. It wasn't so much to rest then but to grieve or whatever you call it when a man watches his wife wither to nothing right along with his chances of proving himself a man worth serving for so long. The cancer was as slow and steady as the work it took to make

the place. He had hoped that her passing would bring relief, but when the end came it felt continually sudden. Forty three years was a lot to end in one beep on a screen.

Coady and Evelyn had moved into the house in '41. It wasn't fit for living then. The first two years was enough to drive Evelyn crazy keeping the little one from eating the termites. She'd said she seen them all during the day and felt them inside her skull at night. By the grace of God they finally got them turned. In the years that followed two barns had burned and were re-built, the grassfire and all the day to day trouble of home-making. Coady would go off for stretches at a time to Paducah or Memphis to a factory or mill or farm for the extra work. But that was the way it was then, you did what you could and you did without, and you made do.

Sticks cracked under the cane and boots, and the birds chirped. The soft ripple of the crick ahead made him miss Evelyn's hands. He wasn't sure just why. Those hands had known industry, had been purpled by peas, nicked and sliced for a pauper's meal of potatoes and bread, had held tools not shaped for women. Those hands had never known a Sunday splash in this creek. He had driven her as hard as the mules he had owned, forced her to work and she had worked. He wished now that she would have begged for a dinner in town. Even in the quiet of the evening, she would mend his shirts or overalls while he sipped his tea in the rocker, resting from his day's labor, forcing more work upon her. He knew it the second that beep went to a line and not a second before, and he felt responsible for it. If anyone deserved a million dollars it was Evelyn. Coady kicked the rock when he came to it.

He wanted the crick to be a river and he wanted to be a stone. He wanted to be in a river that carried stones.

He was more than half way. He hoped that the boy was comfortable and still under some kind of shade. For the last two years he found himself worrying about the boy at night, up the road a quarter of a mile in his trailer all alone. The eight years before he had labored to keep Evelyn comfortable in her dying. Comfort was about all he could provide for the boy before he left him alone under the sun. He wondered how much comfort mattered in that final second. It probably only mattered to those left behind doing the living. Eighty four years had fashioned him as weak as this crick.

Coady had pulled the burlap sacks from the stowage compartment on the Mule and folded them lengthwise in thirds and tied them together to form a makeshift rope.

“Going to be long enough?”

“Guess we’ll see.” Coady tied a slip knot at the end around the hitch of the Mule so that it would tighten against itself and walked toward the boy in the chair.

“Aint going to be enough is it?” The boy’s softness was showing through his shirt.

“Maybe just enough.” Coady steadied himself against the chair careful not to put any weight on it on the high side. He looped a section of it around the frame of the chair just enough to tie off. The first pull did nothing but unknot the burlap strands from where they were tied together in the middle. Coady retied it using a double knot which shortened the length and changed the angle at which he would have to pull. This caused great concern and the concern was realized when the Mule began to lose traction itself by the odd angle. They talked it over and decided to come from the other side but that only caused the chair to spin back a quarter so that it was parallel with the fence row but just as immobile. They decided to try once more at the previous angle which caused the Mule to slip again in the torn up slop of the earth and they abandoned the now frayed and torn burlap rope altogether. The boy offered to crawl up the embankment to lighten the load, but the exertion that it would take the both of them to accomplish that feat – to dismount the chair, to safely lower to the ground, and to then climb would be too much according to Coady. An easier way could be found for the industrious. He told the boy to clip off three ten foot sections of the barbed wire. Coady began weaving the strands together. The pricks of barbs brought drops of blood to his finger tips and palms.

When he finished the braid he said, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” Coady wanted to quiz the boy of the scripture but saw his answer in the blank look that followed. He suddenly knew that he had spent years teaching the boy all of the wrong things. Coady fixed the new barbed tow rope to the Mule and

the chair and positioned for the pull. The chair jerked but the angle was again wrong. Coady backed the Mule to the edge of the embankment. He re-worked the tow and stepped hard on the accelerator. The chair jerked hard and nearly turned over. When he realized the danger of it for the boy, he let up. The wheels of the Mule slipped and slid and it too was down in the mire. Spinning and flinging mud. Coady cursed the mine for not coming up with an agreeable contract six months sooner when his grandson was still around.

“You got your phone?” Coady did not look at his son.

The boy patted his pockets even though he knew he didn’t have it. “Who you going to call?”

“Don’t know. Reed, I guess, or Etherton, they the only numbers I know. What numbers you got in it?”

“I left it at the house.”

“Now, why did you leave it at the house?”

“Cause you was with me.”

“I’ve told you to have that thing at hand always. In your condition.”

“What’s Reed going to do from Nashville? Ain’t nobody around anyways.”

“Well, I guess we could’ve called the sheriff or somebody to find us some help.” Coady looked back at his boy. Both were drenched from the effort and the sun.

“We can try to push one or the other out, probably the chair’s lighter.”

“You ain’t pushing nothing. You’re sitting right there. I ain’t going to have you fall out.”

“Well.”

“Well nothing.” Coady was always stern with the boy and his word was final. It was only recently that the boy felt equal, in openly challenging. It was a comfort formed from infirmity.

“I reckon I can try once.”

“You will not. You’re trouble enough.” Coady didn’t mean for it to take on such weight, and could tell by his son’s lack of response that he heard more in it. He didn’t know how to apologize without sounding as if that was exactly what he meant. So he said nothing and the boy said nothing.

Coady tapped the ground a couple of times with the cane to find something solid then put his weight into it and slid from the Mule.

“Undo your lapbelt. Let’s get you to the Mule.”

“Dad, it’ll take you two hours to walk that far.”

“I don’t see what else we can do. Does us no good to be both sitting here telling stories of what we should have done.”

Coady put his arm about the boy’s waist and steadied him to his feet. The boy had said that the feet felt a hundred pounds each and that the most of him felt balanced way above them on circus legs. Top heavy he always said. I feel top heavy. The step down from the chair nearly unbalanced both of them but the cane in the boy’s hand now brought some stability. They shuffled for a couple of feet and Coady could tell from the wincing that the boy was already getting sick on the dizziness. He stopped, allowing the boy to gain some sort of equilibrium.

“It’s best if we just keep going and get it over with.”

Coady complied and drug the boy the rest of the way. They both were breathing heavy and sat in the front of the Mule wiping the sweat. Coady pulled himself up the bank again to retrieve the water. He took a short swig and tossed both jugs down to the boy.

“You better take one with you.” The boy made to toss one back.

“I’ll get water at the crick. You’ll need all of that and more before I can get back.”

Coady wasn’t across the lane yet until the boy had started the Mule and was giving it full throttle whipping the steering wheel back and forth. He turned back and yelled at the boy to get his attention.

“Put the belt on.” The boy couldn’t hear him, and Coady shook his head.

The engine continued to rev and the wheels continued to slip. Always in a hurry, in everything he done. Coady picked up the burlap and unfurled the biggest portions. The boy stopped trying the Mule when he noticed Coady back at his side fixing the burlap to the post-hole diggers and the seatback on the other side.

“There. There’s some sort of shade. Put the belt on and rest a bit. You’ll have time enough for that racket.”

The rock at the crick was smaller than he remembered. He steadied his upper body against his arms locked against his knees. He was feeling pretty limber and knew the stiffness would be a while in getting through. He didn’t want to convince the muscles to stiffness by too long a rest and knew he should get up soon. He looked at his watch for the first time since setting out from the boy. It had taken him nearly ten minutes longer to get to this point than he figured. He arched his back with a fist at his back and raised the other arm against his head to push the neck in the other direction for a while. No more than two minutes later he slid from the rock to kneel at the edge of the crick. He balanced himself as best he could and cupped some of the brackish water.

When he and Evelyn first bought the place he had to work the back forty with a team of mules. There wasn’t a roadway built to suit, and it was quicker just to come through the thicket. He had made a bridge out of an old pig barn but still had to blindfold the mules one at a time to get them across.

Coady pulled up his pant leg and saw the blood on his sock and knew the gash was more significant than he thought. He thought better to wash it in the crick and rolled his neck a couple of times before forcing himself on. The bridge had been rebuilt when the boy was in high school with better material, albeit another used barn, but sturdier still, enough to carry the Massey Ferguson even though it was rarely used for that purpose. The bridge build had been the first time that he noticed something peculiar with the boy.

By age three the boy was with him all day and he didn't mind it much. Evelyn had one less at her ankles to worry about. It wasn't long that Coady found the boy could be entertained with a block of wood and some nails. The boy was smart at nailing, enough to impress everyone that came calling. At seventeen and stouter than most full grown men, the boy nearly built the bridge himself. Benny Figg and his boy come to help one day and Coady had been bragging about the boy's nailing when he started to notice every so often the boy would bend one. He first thought it was because the boy was in such a hurry and the Figgs gave him a time about it, but now Coady could see it all adding up. In his twenties, the boy would complain his face was numb or his feet freezing through the night, the dizzy spells leaving him drunk walking. He refused to see the doctor and it steadily worsened. From what he'd studied Coady saw that there wasn't no curing and you never knew what causes it to come on like it does, but surely they could have slowed it and got ten more years of real life. He knew something was wrong when the boy was in high school and didn't do much of anything about it. All of those years lay to waste.

Coady made ten minutes quicker work of the rest of the thicket and the full sun brought a peculiar relief. Relief now that it was the full sun in his own garden. The sun had surely been pressing hard on the boy all afternoon. The boy had been at sea for too long. Hard to tell what a bull-headed boy would do with a choice like that, a choice between sicknesses, between a fire and a flame. The boy was a bull if he'd seen one. He'd seen more than one hung-up in a fence, and every last one of them bought his blood in fury. The boy had purchased his fury outright, especially since the diagnosis, but a good bit of it was natural, born to him, a sin of generations. Coady recognized it early.

The grassfire had started near the road as best Coady could tell. Maybe a piece of glass bringing the brittle grass to flame, maybe just the heat. Evelyn and the girls were in the house but the boy, probably six or seven then, was in the lot behind the barn tending the pigs. Coady saw it spreading quick and heading for the barn. He yelled for the boy to get the hose but the length wouldn't reach. Coady yelled for him to keep spraying the grass in front of him with the hose and not to stop. He could tell the boy was struggling from the heat. Coady had made enough noise that Evelyn and the girls had run from the house with buckets of water. They formed a team running buckets with the oldest at the well steadily pumping. He and Evelyn were soaking some burlap sacks and slapping at the grass just in front of the flames. When Coady was a teenager his father had lost a barn because he was trying to beat down the flames. Coady learned then it was best to just keep lapping at what grass was left. The smoke was getting to the boy and Coady kept yelling for him to cover

his mouth and nose with his shirt, but the boy was steady spraying and not hearing a word. His eyes were set in a red stare. His little jaw was set like a man's and he was choking the hose in a rage. He was sobbing and he didn't know it and wiping his eyes with quick head jerks to his shoulders. Coady was shouting to pull the shirt neck up over his face. Evelyn was shouting too and the girls, but the boy was steady working and crying and coughing until Coady felt sure enough to run and get him. The boy was in the bed for five days. The first night he thought he lost him.

A couple weeks back the boy had started doing some queer things. Things that require math of a sort Coady had never figured. Nothing came to a right sum. First, the boy got a notion to clean all the guns. After cleaning all of his at the trailer he came to the house. With the diligence of a red ant the boy went at it. Coady watched from the kitchen. The oiled rag was delicate smoothing over each part as if it was made of silver or fine china. The boy was slow and meticulous, inspecting each angle with a quiet reverence. The boy's fingers were those of a blind man, reading each gun of its age and maker. Coady came to the trailer the next day and caught him on the phone with the insurance man. At the end of that week the boy began complaining about the grass on the levee and how it'd be hell on a man in short pants. Coady had told him to leave it be until the ground dried up some. The boy pressed and pressed.

"You know any man that wears short pants around here, do you?"

"Them snakes'll be in there something dreadful."

“Well, it sure as fire ain’t no work for a cripple on an old tractor.”

“You wouldn’t of said nothing, wouldn’t of thought nothing ten years ago. I would of done it and it’d been done and you wouldn’t have thought nothing of it.”

“Ten years ago you would of waited til it was dry. You wouldn’t of been so ansy to get at something.”

“I ain’t ansy.”

“If I wasn’t smarter about it, I’d say you’re looking for an accident.”

“It needs done.”

The tractor wouldn’t start and he didn’t have time to put it on a charger. He was mad that he didn’t think of the truck before trying the tractor or even when he was in the house filling up the water jug and soaking the towels. He went to the garage and nearly pulled away without making sure he had a chain.

He was in the garage two weeks back when he heard the tractor headed down the road to the lake. At first he thought it was Etherton clearing some brush or something and didn’t think much of it. But the sound of the tractor was too dull to be none but his own. Coady climbed in the truck. The chickens squawked and fluttered out of the way. It was the first nice day in a week, but even the sunshine seemed to glower and the boy on the tractor ahead of him looked caught in a

shadow. He sped past the boy and cut the truck to block him. The boy was wearing church clothes and wouldn't look full at him. He was just staring past him or through him. Coady stayed in the truck and let it idle. After some time like that, Coady staring, not knowing what to say or what to do, the boy stuck like that in a shadow, looking like he did, wearing someone else's fine clothes. Coady had been afraid to get out of the truck, afraid to remain in it. The boy just stared forward, in a purchased fury. Tears were falling from his chin and Coady was sure the boy had no idea. Without breaking the red stare the boy cut the engine of the tractor and Coady the engine of the truck.

Coady tore out of the drive and spilled some of the water down the front of him as he tried for a sip. Water was mixing with the sweat in his eyes and he kept looking at the clock hoping it would peel backwards, or at least freeze. He turned off the radio and was yelling full at himself for being greedy. For educating his children in all of the wrong things and in all of the wrong ways. How the misfortune of years was supposed to be his fortune and how it sure didn't feel like nothing but Hell. How all of that infinite, desperate math was now coming to solid numbers with solid signs and a tangible reality. It was the math of stones in rivers. Compounded by a fool's greed. Greed for a couple thousand when you already have a million and the love of money being the root of evil, and teaching your children a love for the root of all evil, the root of evil now raining down on him and his boy in the form of sunshine, unbearable, unrelenting, dizzying sunshine. It was the rain on the just and the unjust alike and which was he?

The glare of the sun trapped in the cracks of old leather, the smell of drying mud, the sting of hornets returned at his eyes as he cornered the truck into the lane. He was yelling full out at himself and pounding the steering wheel with his fist. He could see the Mule ahead and the chair and not the boy.

The fire at his throat returned to fight the sting of hornets and he could see the Mule and the chair and that the boy had made some progress.

Brass Tacks

Woodrow Wells had driven the stretch from Memphis to Jackson twice in the last month and was sure that this would be the last in quite some time. The corridor had grown complacent in its commercial interests and had the look of being swallowed by its once grand notions. I-55 was an easy drive but, like his oldest son, was beginning to lack some real moxie. Thomas had not been properly leveraged. Thoughts took shape like that now that Wells was over seventy. Over sixty was like over fifty. Over seventy and things changed. The last four years he couldn't drive through Batesville without thinking about caskets, polished and final. Natural course of events he should think of caskets. A course as inevitable as driving to your grown son's three thousand square foot home on Memorial weekend to draw up terms for taking over his mortgage.

The economy, the lack of safe and benevolent alternatives, whatever it was that had led to this had come as silent and quick as a garden snake. He hoped the bite of it be of similar toxicity. "It'll amount to nothing, he's a smart boy," was what his wife, Leona, had measured as casual as sugars to morning coffee. Wells didn't want to involve his wife in business, but since this business involved family and their bank account, he felt it appropriate to tell her. He had been teaching her lately to manage the accounts in case something happened. He didn't want her at the mercy of others and she, with the right instruction, was a quick study. Besides, she

was a good deal more astute with the internet than he, and he knew she would notice the large sums debited from a bank in Jackson. He didn't want her to think he was supporting a lady friend down there. Transparency won out.

The only other person Wells had told was his best friend, Tom Cotham. Tom Cotham, whom he'd known since high school, had gone to college at Southwestern and had become a preacher after fifteen years of selling investments. They talked about the precision and the precarious nature of business dealings with friends or family. Wells wanted to help but understood the potential costs of aiding or withholding. Tom Cotham wanted to know what his new business manager thought of the deal, and Wells told him that all she knew was that they were helping. She didn't know the particulars quite yet, in all reality he didn't know them either. Cotham had told him to be firm and make sure that the boy was responsible for some form of remuneration and that if you act as a charity then that's what you'll be, and you'll never help him out of the bigger fix and to think of John David. Right, right. He told him that these are delicate conversations and that you need to make sure that you don't crush him. He needs to feel that he's a man and that he can get out of this from making his own choices. The last thing he said was to play up the fact that he's coming up with solutions where he doesn't have to do anything drastic, as drastic as this feels to you, quell that for the time being, play up that it's real smart and that you're sure glad he came to you with this when he did. Real, real smart. He's a good kid, smart, and he'll make it.

Wells slipped past the gate house with a friendly wave to the keeper. Wells had once recognized the gated community as something to boast about. It was advertised in fine magazines like *Southern Living* and *Architectural Digest*. As he maneuvered his '91 Lincoln through the subdivision, he wondered how many of these other lawns and pools were the beneficiaries of more modest lawns and the dreams of pools of an older generation. He turned into a driveway lined in cedar and parked in a cutout of the cobble stone circle. Wells stiff-armed the door of the car to aid himself after the long drive's stiffness. Leona was busying herself with bags that were gifts. When she walked to the front steps she was admiring the flowers in bloom. Picture perfect, like a magazine. It was a beautiful house and under other circumstances it could be seen as exquisite. The sight brought about the need for a deep sigh or a shake of the head, but Wells fought it back just in case Thomas was looking out of the window. Woodrow Wilson Wells hadn't had a house note in twenty years.

Thomas descended the steps, kissed his mother and took the bags from his father's shoulders. Leona gave her son a hug, and Wells admired how she could let on that nothing was ever happening.

"Where's Holly and the boys?"

Thomas told her that Holly was cooking and the boys wanted to see some friends after being gone all semester. Leona huffed and dismissed herself to help Holly in the kitchen with a peck on her son's cheek.

"How was the drive?"

"Pleasantly boring." Wells started up the broad brick steps.

"Would you like some tea? Soda? Wine? Beer?"

"Just a glass of ice will do. We brought our own." Wells lifted a slightly worn briefcase as if he might be offering the contents. Wells saw his son's back stiffen. This was going to be hard for Thomas, feeling exposed in new ways. There were certain bad turns ahead.

"I thought that we could eat dinner, relax a little first before we talk shop. You're hungry aren't you?"

Wells lifted the briefcase again. He thought that bringing his own whiskey and a couple of sandwiches and snacks in the briefcase might do more to teach a lesson than any words he would have. Leona had said it was fool crazy to think that, but who was she to stop a crazy fool from doing fool crazy things.

Thomas disappeared as soon as they made it into the house. The vestibule was immaculate and Wells wondered if the cleaning woman had been released. Knowing Holly, she hadn't. Wells regretted the thought and did his best to retire such thoughts the rest of the evening.

Wells was in the den when Thomas came from the kitchen with a tumbler and ice and a fresh tumbler of his own. He took account of the gold line of the tumbler and Thomas's creased shorts and crisp button-down. He had been sizing up the entire room, the rug, a decorative piece of ironwork on the wall and the painting over the mantle, the mantle itself of cut stone, the lamps, couches and credenza. What did all of this cost? Was all this here just weeks ago? And what could be gotten for it?

"Did you watch the Cardinals last night?" Thomas had the blush of drink, and Wells wondered if whiskey was how he was coping.

"No. Cotham and I went to the Redbirds game. I saw the score in the paper." Wells peered at his son over his tumbler. Thomas still looked tan and fit, like the older version of the college tennis player that he once was. The only thing slack on him was the eyes. They looked small and dull. Thomas lifted his chin with a distinct heaviness when he positioned himself in the chair opposite his father. Wells made a show of pulling a carrot from a zip lock bag from the briefcase. "Playing in a tournament this weekend?"

He hadn't initially intended the question to achieve an air of suspicion, but Wells didn't mind the awkwardness, reveled in it really. It had been years since he

had anything close to authenticity with his sons. Thomas seemed afraid to even speak. Casual conversation was now laced with something sinister.

“I’m only playing at the country club now.” After a long silence Thomas took a drink and said to the glass, “Dad, did you say anything to John David?”

Wells had bailed John David, his youngest son, out of trouble countless times before. It occurred so often early on that it had lost its formality. He was determined to prevent that dreadfulness with Thomas. Wells didn’t answer right away believing that discomfort can, at times, be quite healthy. And health was the issue here, true health, one irrespective of a lifestyle that breeds anything unhealthy. Unhealthy as maintaining exotic looking flowers in the yard, a pool, a hundred pound piece of iron hanging on the wall and three TVs all as big as a table.

“Did I tell you all the times that I helped him?”

“Did you?”

Wells responded with a harrumph that he hoped sounded final. Frankly he couldn’t remember if he had shared everything or not, but how would Thomas know the difference. He wanted him to feel safe. In a gentle smile he said to Thomas, “What time is John David getting here?”

“His email just said that he would be here Friday night...he thought.”

The two visits Wells had made earlier in the month were cordial, conversational, simple. Thomas had asked Wells to come down the first weekend in

May to attend a father-son benefit that the company hosted. He had hinted at some underlying issues with the company but nothing personal. Wells could tell something was eating at his son, but just assumed the pace was getting to him. The second visit started with a phone call asking for advice. Thomas had told him that the company was reorganizing because of the loss of Mertrex. He had managed that account for twelve years and was surprised that the company had even kept him on. He felt personally responsible for the loss. The only thing that saved his chin was that Mertrex raved about his work on the way out. Thomas thought that it actually might be the best time to leave the company. Wells offered to drive down and talk about this in person which was comfort to Thomas. In less than two weeks from the first visit, Wells was again in the den with a tumbler of whiskey. Thomas shared with his father that the company restructured everything including pay and some benefit packages. He would have been okay if it wasn't for the boys' tuition and his recent real-estate ventures with John David. He knew he should've waited for some stability, but he was just trying to help. He asked his broker to try to quietly sell, but no one was buying. Besides they really were good pieces and in ten years they're sure to double after the rebound. Wells had rushed through his thoughts. It was a brainstorm of quick fixes. His son's eyes had gone to glass when he had mentioned pulling the boys out at semester. That would be the last straw, both agreed. You can take away some of their now but not a stitch of their future. Wells agreed to pay the mortgage this month as sort of a loan that they would iron out later when they both had time to think.

Thomas's glass stare a couple of weeks ago had darkened and seemed to be permanent now. Wells decided to limit his interaction to short, direct, business-like answers until after they ate in which he would limit his interactions to short, direct, business-like questions and answers. The room was silent except for the hum of the fireplace. The arrangement of the fake gas log troubled Wells, and he couldn't take his eyes from it. He had never seen a real fire shaped so grotesquely perfect. All fire but no burn.

Holly rang a small hand bell. Thomas apologized with his eyes and a wry smile fell on both their faces.

"Save your sandwich for tomorrow. Come eat." Thomas patted his father's shoulder and helped him to his feet. For a moment the tension was cut. Wells placed a small silver flask back in his briefcase. He moved the zip loc bags around on a clean yellow legal pad.

"Smells fantastic, Holly. Always does." Wells gave her a hug then stood behind his chair taking in the full spread before him.

"Thomas got four duck last weekend in Missouri." She sounded as if Thomas had a routine of fighting the wilds for its spoils. Wells nodded at the bird, knowing that even though the luxury may not have been purchased at the market this

morning, it came with a high price. The flight to Kansas City or St. Louis or wherever he actually was supposed to be on that business trip, the rental car needed for schmoozing whomever it was who really shot the bird, the shells, the license that would most likely be used the one time, the liquor, the meals, the liquor, the lady bars if that client had the inclination, the liquor. He regretted ever encouraging his son to get an MBA. The cost of that thing was becoming sinful.

“John Rothstien, Mertrex guy - now with a start-up in St. Louis, had me up to meet some of their exec. Might be a possibility for me there.”

Wells lifted his eyebrows. They all began to seat themselves.

“I can’t believe Hunter chose a girl over us tonight. Where’d you say Jake went off to? To church?” Leona smiled.

“He’s with some friends at a concert in Little Rock. He’ll be back tomorrow.” Holly was matter of fact.

“I asked Thomas to have them find something to do. They haven’t told them anything yet.” Wells was direct, business-like.

“Well, I’ve waited five months to see them, I guess I can wait another day.” Leona’s smile was stiff but present.

Thomas began to lift his fork when he caught himself. “Let’s say grace. Dad?”

“Your house.”

Thomas's voice was as automatic as the prayer.

"Are those candle holders new, Holly? They look heavy."

The dinner was a continued collision of Leona mentioning and admiring expensive things that didn't sound expensive until they were uttered aloud at the table in front of the man who was paying the three thousand dollar a month mortgage payment. Thomas seemed to be numbing himself of the dinner, the conversation, the situation. His eyes would make their way to the surface every couple of minutes, but mostly they remained frozen, lifeless at the bottom of some river.

"Thomas, do you remember the time that I took you and John David to see the Globe Trotters? You couldn't have been more than six and John David three." Wells went on with the story not waiting for a response but judging Thomas for one. He wanted to be careful with how he told it so that it didn't come across as a sermon.

"Seven and five. Only two years difference." Leona patted Wells on the hand grinning. Thomas looked up from a dessert plate that Holly had placed there a few minutes before. It had not been touched.

Wells moved his hand and glared at his wife. She should know that he was up to something. He knew exactly when they were born.

“Thomas was seven and John David was five. Only two years difference, dear.”

“John David is twenty years younger.” He wiped his mouth. He felt Holly watching him. “This is delicious.” He winked at her and smiled, wiping his mouth again. “Only thing that would add to it would be some coffee.” Leona seemed to catch on and started clearing the dishes and plates. Holly retreated to the kitchen to start the coffee.

“You were seven then, was it Birmingham?” He acted as if he needed more help with the accuracy of the telling.

“Birmingham.”

“We were young then and didn’t have much, but I wanted the two of you to experience the show. The Harlem Globetrotters. Those negroes were some real showmen. I think you two ate more cotton candy and drank more soda than you had in your entire life leading up to that. I worked two months of Saturdays to pay for all that. It was worth it too, to see you boys light up like that.”

Thomas didn’t say anything. Wells knew it came over like a hand on the shoulder, and decided it was better that way than anything dishonest. “I prayed hard for more work, and I got it. The Lord provides.”

Leona came back in to clear more dishes and suggested they move to the den. The sound of a car door broke the frozen air, and Thomas looked to the door. There

was a light knock and the door opened. John David, tan and wearing flip flops, stepped into the vestibule and placed a backpack on the marble floor.

“John David! Have you eaten? There’s plenty. I’m sorry. We didn’t know what time you’d be here...we went ahead.” Holly led the group to the door.

“This place is nice. Wow.” John David was looking around.

A guttural “thanks” was all Thomas could muster.

“Wow. Really nice. A lot nicer than the place you had in Pearl and that place was nice.”

“Are you alone? Where’s Amy?” Leona was now hugging the waist of her youngest son.

“Amy’s not with me.”

Leona, nor anyone else, pried further nor asked for clarification. Holly went to the kitchen and prepared a plate. Talk of weather and the changes all along the gulf dominated the conversation where Thomas picked at his desert and John David finished a rushed meal.

“I want to see this house.” John David rose from his chair.

“Well, we’re sort of remodeling some of it, so really you’re seeing what there is to see.” Thomas arched his back and sounded exhausted. Holly chirped, “Upstairs is a wreck and kind of a construction zone right now.”

“Whatever. I live in a broom closet compared to this place.”

“Actually, John David, let me show you to your accommodations for the evening, and then I’ll show you and Leona the gardens. You’ll be staying down in Hunter’s room. I figured you’d want to be down here since you never get to see them.” Holly led John David down the stairs talking about the boys and school and asking about Texas and his work off the coast. Leona began clearing the dishes. Wells followed Thomas to the den.

“Time for the grease to hit the griddle, huh. Is Hunter due back sometime soon?”

“I told Hunter that he could stay over at a friend’s after his date.”

Wells clipped open the hinges on the briefcase and lifted the legal pad. Thomas pulled a leather armchair closer to his father who was seated on the couch and preparing to use the coffee table as a work space.

“First off, I want to say that we all can get in a bind from time to time and the Lord will provide a way for you. It was real smart of you to come to me when you did. Real smart. I’ve told your mother that we are helping, but she doesn’t know any particulars and she doesn’t have to.”

Thomas was blank as he listened. His eyes seemed to be going back to the depths. Wells paused and realized that he would probably have to just keep talking until he got to some questions.

“I am not interested in helping you simply because you need help. I aim to help you so that you don’t need further help.”

Thomas looked up, “What does that mean?”

“I mean that I want to really help. I can see that I haven’t done a very good job of showing you real priorities and that I may have led you to believe in things that are ephemeral.”

“Ephemeral.” Thomas was staring at the yellow legal pad.

“I hadn’t really noticed the way you live before.”

Thomas looked at his father then back at the legal pad.

“You are on a path to ruin. I worked hard. Everybody worked hard back then. There were times when it shouldn’t have worked out, but something would happen all of a sudden. A call for overtime or someone needing some extra work done. That was the Lord providing for those of us living the right way.”

Thomas was like stone.

“You can tell a man’s right standing by the way he spends his money.”

Thomas stood up and began walking from the room. Wells leaned back into the couch and thought he had lost him. Thomas stopped before fully exiting the room, turned back in, and moved a plant that was holding one of the doors open. He

closed the glassed double doors to the den. Thomas pulled at the sides of his cheeks and sighed.

“You have something to say?”

Thomas looked at his father. It was a solid stare that showed that he was mired in a deep but controlled fury.

“Son, if you have something to say, then say it. I’m too old to go covering things over, shying away from the truth.”

Thomas didn’t move, and he held his locked gaze on his father. “There is no overtime that I can work. I’m salaried. At half of what I made five months ago.” Thomas eased his shoulders down and took a drink from his glass. Wells started to scratch on the legal pad.

“Well, how much is that?”

“About a hundred and ten.”

One hundred and ten thousand was more than Wells had made in the entire 60’s and up to about ’73. He couldn’t imagine how someone could make that much money and need help of any sort. He had the feeling that he had not been a very good father. “That’s a little over nine a month. Where is all that going?”

“Well, as you know now, three to mortgage. There’s two in auto including insurance. One in the real estate with John David, another one for the boys counting

all the miscellaneous plus tuition, and utilities and food and travel and house stuff and insurance, the country club, phones, credit cards...that kind of stuff.”

Wells was scratching fast in pencil on his pad and pulling out the calculator. He sighed when he finished. “Is that two in auto for all four cars?”

“Just mine and Holly’s. We paid the boys’ off last year.”

“Sell Holly’s.”

Thomas was silent.

“What’s she need a car for? She doesn’t work.”

Thomas took a deep breath. “She works. A lot. She just doesn’t make money.”

“She plays at working.”

Thomas was silent and staring past his father. His lips moved, but the rest of him was expressionless. “People would know...if we start selling things that they can see. Holly’s actually sold some things on Ebay lately to cover some.”

“And what’s so bad about people knowing that a smart man is making smart decisions.”

“I’m trying to get a better job. If my lifestyle changes recognizably, there’s no way that I’ll be hired for what I’m worth.”

“What are you worth? What’s a man worth today?”

“You know what I mean. I won’t be hired for what I was making.”

“Well who in Jackson or all of Mississippi can afford to pay you what you was once making?” It was business-like. It was direct.

“Well, Rothstein might be able to get me close. He’s not in Mississippi, but he said that I might be able to work from home.”

“Rothstein’ll get you close to Hell. Is he as Jewish as he sounds?”

“You’re going to have to change the way you speak. Things have changed a lot in this world since you were in the workforce.”

“You’re right about that. Back then public schools, used cars, a neighborhood house, and one piece of real estate could make a hundred and ten thousand work for a guy for well more than a year.” Wells meant what he said, he just didn’t mean to say it. Not yet.

“Look, I’ll just go to the bank. It’ll be easier on everyone.”

“You can’t borrow your way out of debt, son. Can’t do it. The bank don’t love you, don’t care that you’re smart and in a fix.”

“Well, I just don’t know if this is a good idea anymore.”

“Brass tacks. Let’s stopping dancing and start talking brass tacks. I’ll give you a better deal than any bank.”

“I’m not looking for a deal.”

“Well, I came down here to help, and I’m not leaving till we both are convinced that I’ve done that.”

“Okay, so...brass tacks.”

“I’ll pay the mortgage for a six month term. That’s a loan of...,” Wells was using the calculator and the legal pad drawing over the figures two or three times, “eighteen thousand and with a rate of two percent. I’ll carry that amount payable by you at a monthly rate of three hundred for sixty months. The sixty-first month will be the accrued interest amount of \$360. That’ll give you time to sell the house.”

“Sell the house?”

“That’s stipulation number one.”

“I can’t. I told you I don’t want to do anything that will show.”

“Show what ? That you need help?”

Thomas did not answer and that became his answer.

“Well, there has got to be some neighborhoods, real neighborhoods around here that could account for your ego but at the same time account for your check book.”

“My ego.”

“Your pride. And you know what cometh next.”

“You get ugly when you get the upper hand.”

There was a clamor at the front door and that’s when Thomas noticed blue flashing lights.

“What in the Hell?” Thomas rose and flew out of the den. Wells rose and followed. John David and the women came from around the side of the house. John David had a slight grin on his face.

The police officer was polite and remarkably calm and that helped the adults. John David slipped behind Thomas and went back into the house. Hunter was standing behind the police officer, head down, fifteen and with a smirk on his face. The officer explained that there had been some calls about noise. Routine stuff really, but two cars responded and the second car spotted some kids running through the backyards. This obviously led to some initial excitement by the responding officers. The police officer had been the first responder and went into the house where he found this young man and a young lady in a closet, half-dressed. No real problem there. The problem was the marijuana and paraphernalia in the room.

“Now, we searched them and they had nothing on their persons, of course, they didn’t have much on their persons...” the officer chuckled at his joke.

Thomas was standing with his arms crossed and was staring at his boy. Holly was holding on to his elbow. Holly had a look of tired exasperation on her face. Wells gestured for Leona to go back inside. He followed her back in the house, and they took a seat in the formal. Wells left the door ajar and John David was listening from the couch of the den intermittently studying his father's notes on the legal pad.

"Your son explained that he and the young lady were neither the owners nor users of the drugs or paraphernalia in the room and I have no reason to believe that he is being anything other than honest. Although I haven't run any field tests. The young lady did admit that she was there with your son of her own will. Now, I will say that he was rather free with his speech at first but has since wised up after I explained a few things to him."

"Hunter.....Hunter." Holly was saying his name as if she held authority and shame in the same breath.

"Anything you need to add, son?" Thomas still had a fierce stare and his arms crossed.

Hunter looked up and the smirk collapsed and his eyes were solidly fixed on his father's, "No, sir."

"We normally would've taken him in and sorted it out there, but we have another boy who confessed to the narcotics and your son told us who you were. We thank you and everyone over at Connor and Associates for your contributions to this

city. If Hunter stays at home for the night, the next couple of nights and if he don't do nothing to see us while he's here on break, then we can proceed without any need for further action."

The police officer finished explaining the process and apologized for the inconvenience. Thomas ordered the boy inside to his room and said to the officer that he'd be right back. Holly thanked the officer and stood just inside the door. Wells and Leona were still seated in the formal on a couch they had never sat on before and tried to be absent. Wells watched his oldest son's chagrin as if it was his own with John David. He watched him pass by the formal and go upstairs and then return. Wells noticed the checkbook in his hand.

"Thank you....Officer...?"

"Davidson. Neal Davidson."

"Thank you, Officer Davidson, you have been more than fair, and I just want to say thank you by making another donation to your Bikes for Tykes drive. We appreciate your work for the kids." Thomas handed the check to the officer.

"Tear it up." Wells had come to the door, all business.

"Sir?" The officer had half-turned to his cruiser but stopped at the directive.

"Tear it up." Wells had a deep scowl.

"Dad, stay out of...no, don't tear it up."

“If he don’t tear it up, I’m leaving and I’m taking my checkbook with me.”

The officer had turned back around to face Thomas, “This isn’t really necessary, I can just...”

“No, you’ll take that check. This is none of his business.”

“You made it my business.”

The officer tried to hand the check back to Thomas, but he wouldn’t take it.

“Here, how about you keep this check and if you still want to donate later, then just mail it. Okay? All this isn’t necessary. Just keep your boy in for a couple of days.” Thomas still wouldn’t take the check, and the officer placed it on the brick pillar at the bottom of the steps and retreated to his cruiser.

“Dad, you have no right.”

Wells looked Thomas in the blank of his eyes. He turned sharply from the top of the brick steps, collected Leona from the formal and headed up the stairs.

He walked the long hall wondering which of the doors led to his luggage. He assumed that it was the second door on the right where he had spent the night the last two times he had come to Jackson. He opened the door and the empty clean wood stretched from wall to wall. Moonlight glinted the tacks in the strips near the baseboard. A powdered residue of the carpet pad shone in dull amber patches. The walls were as bare as the floor. Wells and Leona inspected the other rooms on that

end of the hall. All three rooms had the same brilliant empty space. The room at the end of the hall on the west side was Thomas and Holly's and the one across from it was a library. Wells tried the library door and entered. There was an air mattress on the floor with an alarm clock plugged into the wall. No desk, no books on the shelves, void of his luggage.

"Your bags are in our room. We wanted you to stay in our room."

Wells turned and Thomas was standing in the door. Leona eased over, wrapped an arm around her son and leaned her head into his shoulder. Wells brushed past the pair and across the hall.

"I'm sorry, Thomas." Leona pulled her son's cheek to her lips and her hand dropped down his side and she took hold of his hand.

"Dad."

Wells did not answer. The bedroom seemed bare and sparse even though it retained most of its adornments. A double bed was framed by indentions in the carpet that were king-sized and sleigh-shaped. At the corner of the bed were a set of towels and wash cloths resting on top of two bleach-white robes. Wells pushed them to the floor and picked up both suitcases. Thomas was standing in the doorway and wouldn't let him by.

"Get out of my way, son."

"No." Thomas was solid. He looked young and strong and athletic.

“Move.”

“No, dad, I’m not letting you leave. Not like this.”

“It’s a mistake. It’s the same one that I made with your brother.”

Thomas made a quarter turn with his body, and Wells stepped into the hall with both suitcases. Wells could see Leona standing in the Library across the hall and she was small in the middle of it. Down the hall, John David was peering into each room. He took his time inspecting each with his backpack on his shoulder and his father’s briefcase in his hand.

More Trouble Than The Living

Blunt force trauma was the phrase used in the paper. Second episode of such in the past five months, the newspaper man said, called it an *episode*. World of fire, people is crazy, to fire with the lot of them.

The chemical tub swallowed the final bilge of evidence, residue of the day's work refurbishing furniture for Stinnett Keller. Stinnett watched as the concluding gurgle buoyed a profusion of flecks. Reds, browns and blacks, yellows, once-whites. A color bouquet vased in a liquid brown-orange. Stinnett flipped the vacuum switch and closed the gates to all of the hoses save the mobile arm. He had installed the mobile arm on a swivel rig to reach the majority of the shop floor. Most of the stationary equipment had their own gates and he tried to use the hand-helds near one of the bench grates to keep the dust down. But it's a shop. You're going to get dust. Hard to do the finish work with dust. A couple more months of jobs and he'll have enough saved up for the finish room he had intended when he converted the barn to a shop six years ago. Refurbishing is slow going and not to make a man rich, but one can make enough if he finds the steady work. Stinnett was good by his customers and they knew it. He hoped to hope that the word would spread sooner than later. He didn't mind the rough building, satisfying custom furniture orders, and it was more money than the restoration work since the Mennonites were a forty-five-minute drive and at least a quarter dollar for every one of those minutes

higher. But there was something for him in the restoration work. It was a puzzle, and he was a man of puzzles. To take an old piece, to touch it, to cover it with your eyes, the nicks, the cuts, the grooves and to figure what made them. To listen to it tell its story in those marks, to understand it in a way that won't alter it when the something new is added. The something new to be added is always something vitally old.

Stinnett flipped the vacuum off and was startled to see the lights going and the hat at the door. He had missed the signal somehow and flipped the switch to turn off the red flash of lights.

"You bring any business with you?" Stinnett yelled at the man under the hat but made no offer at letting him in.

"Keller, I need to talk to you about some things." The man in the hat had produced a thick brown thud of a spit between the words *some* and *things*. Stinnett cringed at the sound of tobacco hitting the concrete pad by the door. Stinnett wondered just what kind of chew-spit-worthy things could concern him with the law.

"Least you could do is keep a man's place how you found it."

"What in God's name are you talking about, Keller?" The man tipped his hat to scratch at his forehead with the back of his hand.

"You got a warrant, sheriff?" Stinnett spit in his sink before the word *sheriff*.

“No, Keller. I ain’t. Just came to talk is all.”

“You can take that hose there around the side and leave a man’s place as you found it.”

“You ain’t going to talk?”

“You got a warrant?”

“I need some help is all.”

“I ain’t in the help business.”

“That is partly my concern here today, Stinnett. Now open this door here and let’s talk like men.”

“I talk to men, sheriff, when they come calling.”

“I ain’t got nothing to go on with these blunt force episodes and I need some help is all.”

Episodes. What kind of conspiracy comes at the world with that word. Blunt force *episodes*. *Episodes* of blunt force. Stinnett busied himself with the cleaning of the shop acting as if the sheriff and his conspiracy of words was not outside his shop door.

“I need some help is all.”

“You got a clock, a chair, a desk and I might could help you. But it seems you asking for a kind of help I wouldn’t know much about.”

“You and I both knows that’s a lie.”

“That hose’ll reach easy. Just see that you roll it back up before you leave.”

The sound of the splatter on the pad made him like fire and it was near more than he could bear to hold it in. He didn’t move till he heard the door of the Bronco and the clamor of rock beneath its tires.

Stinnett rolled up the hose before setting the alarms and locking the door to the shop. The patch between the house and shop was eighty yards up the hill and lighted by three utility poles he had put in when he bought the place. Stinnett Keller knew that folks talked of his peculiarities pretty regular. His alarms and lights, but what they didn’t realize was that he walked that patch at the very least four times a day, somedays with four jobs of cash in his pocket not to mention a barn-now-shop containing his life savings in equipment. He didn’t ask for anything from anyone, especially respect when none was due, but he knew the kind of people in this county and the trouble a man’ll go to kill himself or those standing in his way. Meth and the like will reduce good people to events such as these. These so called episodes had to be over dope he was sure, at some level, in some way. He was resolved to keep from buying his own business back bit by bit from the pawn shops in Winchester or the flea markets on the mountain.

“What’d Barney Fife want?” Elaine McClatchey was drying the last of the dishes.

“To talk, he says.”

“About what?”

“Help, he says.”

“Notice you didn’t let him in the shop this time.”

“Didn’t bring no business of mine with him. He didn’t have no warrant neither.”

“You something else, Stinnett Keller. You is something else.”

Stinnett washed his hands. Elaine flipped him on the side with the tip of the towel and slipped a renegade auburn streak back over the ear to her graying hair. She smiled and he smiled and they ate their meal before lighting the fire and reading. It had become their ritual and Stinnett enjoyed the intimate simplicity that he had with her. He was accustomed to days of silence and expected such in a relationship. He hadn’t expected to find it in Morgan Springs. Elaine McClatchey was a welcome enigma, and Stinnett Keller was as happy as he figured he could possibly be.

The morning work, when the dust was down, was the stain or color work. Stinnett would carry the pieces outside to what he called “the tent” before he did any sweeping or cutting. The tent was a room made of canvas floor and walls to keep the dust and dirt out but it didn’t do much for the bugs. The stain room he was saving to build would be a boon in more ways than one. Climate controlled and virtually insect-free, he could do the staining and coloring as needed and not have to wait till mornings. It could cut days in half he figured, at least a third, which could lead to him taking on five or six more pieces a week. Five or six pieces, especially if from the right customer, could be over a thousand dollars on the high side, three, four hundred minimum.

The red lights flashed and the alarm made its sound and Stinnett flipped the switch. The bed of Buster Dix’s Silverado and trailer was a heap of junk. Buster Dix did most of his own rehab work but would bring the antiques, the finer things that turned the bigger dollar to Stinnett. Stinnett knew to take good care of Buster’s work because it was more than regular. To be doing another restoration man’s work was the best kind of advertising, and he was happy to get it.

Stinnett disarmed the alarm and unlatched the door.

“Morning, Stinnett.” Buster was carrying a 19th century Davenport writing desk that was missing half of the decorative trim, a real treasure.

“I can see the trim, any other needs for her?”

“The thing about this one is the hidden drop in the box. It’s jammed some sort of way. Don’t think it’s got anything in it. Paper if anything, but I cain’t get to it no way. Like to have it functional if a man could figure it out. I got this table leg here too. Go ahead and strip her blond while you’re doing the desk. I’ll do some additional distress and the finish myself.”

“I’ll take a look at that drawer. When you like to have her?”

“I was talking to a guy from Atlanta about the desk yesterday, and he seemed real interested. Said he’d like to come an take a look on Friday if he could. I told him I’d give him a call back today. The table leg ain’t no kind of rush, get to it when you can.”

“Friday’s cutting it close. I got a china cabinet for Nancy Grace, a picture frame, that clock there, a couple other knick knacks and this jewry box for Spencer all this week.”

“Didn’t know you was still doing work for him?”

“I’m still doing work.”

“Spencer’s a rat and you know it.”

“A man brings me a piece and wants her fixed up, I fix her up.”

“You might could be more selective of the pieces you take on.”

"I go being selective with the piece because she comes from a certain man and I end up selective with the heat or the cold or the water or the cable."

"The world ain't that simple."

"It is to me. Today, it is. Plain and simple."

"I need to tell the man about Friday. That desk gonna be too much on you?"

"Friday'll work but I'm going to have to charge extra."

"Extra. Damn, Stinnett, I ain't got much grease left since it don't seem I'll be shipping it."

"I wouldn't normally charge it and you know it."

"You doing it cause you know I'm in a pinch and got no choice but to agree."

"Well if you feel that way about my business, I hate to hear what vermin name you call me when you're dealing with the rat yourself."

"Now what do you mean by that?"

"I got to bump one of these already on my shelf to get yours done by Friday and don't like going back on my word unless I take off some on their bill. Has nothing to do with whether Buster Dix is in a fix or not."

"How much for your trouble?"

"Fifty for the desk, add twenty for a rush fee, ten for the leg."

“Fifty for the job and ten for the trouble.”

“My word is worth more than that ten dollars, Buster. Fifty and fifteen and final.”

“Fifty and fifteen and I’ll be here what time Thursday evening?”

“Make it about seven.”

Stinnett waited until the trailer had crossed the sensor and flipped the switch to set the alarm. He placed the writer’s desk in by the chemical tub for the morning and tossed the table leg on the back bench. The phone rang and it was Elaine asking what time he wanted lunch. Stinnett told her now because he hadn’t even got started good yet and needed to work later now. Elaine was the sole reason he kept any sort of regular hours and he was grateful to have something near a routine. The routine of Elaine pulled him out of some trouble, and he knew it kept him out of a good deal of more these past five years.

Stinnett had moved to Morgan Springs nine years ago from West Tennessee, which is nowhere near Memphis even though it is the area immediately surrounding it. He grew up in Humboldt, joined the Army, went to Vietnam, got married to a woman married to Tunica, got divorced, severely maimed a boyfriend of hers, did some time not for the attack but for an event involving drugs, then moved to Morgan Springs when he got out. It was three years here before he established any sort of business and about that time is when Sheriff Jacob Ellis came to the shop the first

time. It ended badly. The sheriff had a suspicion that Stinnett was selling drugs out of his shop. Stinnett's explanations about the alarms, the fluorescent lights at odd hours of the night, the bulk purchases of chemicals, his past, his clientele and his work didn't satisfy the sheriff. The sheriff said he'd be back and was periodically over the next year. Stinnett grew less and less civil and found confidence in his own knowledge of innocence and guilt and municipal entities.

The phone was ringing by the blue lights flashing. Stinnett pressed his knee to the rig he set up to trip the power bar of the planer. He didn't want to let go of a board no matter how comfortable he'd become with it especially when some was five dollars a board foot or better. He removed his earmuffs and made his way to the phone on the wall.

"Stinnett Keller."

"Stinnett. Spencer. Got a coat rack I need stripped. When you going to have time?"

Stinnett didn't really want to take on more work, but since it was just stripping, he could set up a chemical bath in about ten minutes and let it soak or spray it if it needed while he was doing the china cabinet for Nancy Grace.

"Kind of a full shelf this week, but if it's just the stripping any day'll work for me. When you need it back?"

“I’ll be back through Thursday next week sometime.”

“Yeah. I can do her by then no problem.”

“See you in the morning then. I spect around 8:30. My box done?”

“It will be.”

Stinnett wrote down on his ledger *Tom Spencer Tuesday May 12 Thursday
May 21 Coat Rack.*

Stinnett picked up the weekly and sat at one of the stools in McCammon’s Blue American, a newsstand like your daddy’s newsstand, complete with fountain service and still allowing smoking indoors. Its acrid tinge of ink and nicotine and the burn at the back of a throat after more than a ten minute stay was welcome to Stinnett. He’d quit smoking while in jail as a matter of commerce and frugality. He came in for coffee on Tuesdays when the Weekly comes out. In all reality it comes out Monday evening but doesn’t make the mail run in most parts of the county until Tuesday. Bo McCammon, sole proprietor, was wiping the counter although no one had been in except for Stinnett. The bell above the door rattled when Brother Benny Figg entered. Brother Benny flipped a cigarette butt to Main Street before his body swollen with callings, pitch-ins and ice cream socials made its full entry.

“Blessed morning to you.”

“Morning.” McCammon began to pour a dense stream of coffee into a chipped brown mug and slid it to Brother Benny. Stinnett did not respond but continued to read from the paper.

“Morning, Stinnett. How’s the trade fit for a Savior today?” Brother Benny never missed an opportunity.

Without looking up Stinnett said, “Same as tomorrow, I suppose.”

“Well now, thank you, Brother Keller for the encouragement. A man who knows the Lord’s blessing in each day’s provision.”

Again Stinnett continued to read his paper. There was more on the *episodes*, and he was more interested at present in old news than the good news.

“What’s the Herald-Ledger deem worthy this week of the darker ink?” Brother Benny was relentless, a trait that Stinnett actually admired in him. Fearless. Pretense all but gone. A man of purpose, transparent and willing to walk or talk a mile or better to find something in you to speak of and consequently pray for.

Stinnett glanced over the headlines without responding.

“Paper says they still investigating,” McCammon interjected.

“That so? Any new developments?” Brother Benny asked Stinnett.

“Said nothing about TBI, so I suppose Jake is over polishing his magnifying glass.” McCammon chuckled at his own joke expecting the others to join. Brother Benny didn’t bite and Stinnett turned the page.

“Who’d do away with Faye Corson?” McCammon’s expression was of pain as if someone had just punched him in the kidney.

“Not sure it’s a who. I spect it’s more of a what. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness on high. Had little to do with Faye Corson or Angeline Thomas?”

“A peach she was. Faye Corson. Who in they right mind?”

“A mind unfettered of Christ is fertile ground for all sorts of wickedness.”

“Wish the wicked’d keep the wickedness to the wicked.”

“Wickedness of that kind is just a step or two from the wicked in us all. Unspeakable wickedness. Without the sanctified blood of Jesus, you, and me for that matter, are capable of the very same things done to Faye Corson, peach as she was.” Bo McCammon refilled the pastor’s mug and offered Stinnett. Stinnett raised his palm. “So, any new developments?” Brother Benny rocked his great mass again in a question posed to Stinnett and again Stinnett didn’t respond. “You are a man of great conviction Stinnett Keller, real perseverance. The church needs men like you.”

“I had it with Christians ever since that betrayal *episode*.” He looked deep into his mug at the word. The bell above the door rattled.

“Morning, Jake.” McCammon poured coffee into a Styrofoam cup and set it on the counter.

“Gentlemen. Bo.” Sheriff Ellis picked a weekly from the stack and patted Brother Benny on the shoulder with it before rolling into a swivel stool.

“You have been mighty busy. Thanks for working so hard, Sheriff. You and your staff have our prayers.” Brother Benny offered a wink. It was sincere, there was no doubt of that even though his staff consisted of Kenny Robinson to do youth and music and Edith Parchman as reception. Stinnett appreciated Brother Benny’s ability to thank people for doing what they already knew to do and never received a thank you for. A simple phrase that went a thousand times further than the courage it took to utter.

“Keep praying. I need all the help I can get on this one, Pastor.” The Sheriff swiveled to look at Stinnett. Stinnett slid two singles across the counter and made his way to the door. The sheriff stood upright and followed out the door into the rising heat of the morning. This brought a terse silence to the remaining in the newsstand, an awkwardness that forced even the Pastor to swivel toward the street and watch through the display window.

“I need to know some things. I got some ideas but I don’t have, maybe, the experiences that some others might have.” The sheriff pulled a pouch from his back pocket.

Stinnett climbed into his truck as the sheriff set his coffee down on the hood. The sheriff returned the pouch and wiped his lip. Stinnett stared hard at the cup on the hood of the truck. There was a long silence and Stinnett knew a return to some ounce of civility was in order.

“Just what experiences are you meaning?”

“Stinnett, you ain’t a suspect...Hell, no one is, or everyone is, I don’t know. I’m at my end here and I don’t like it. He did it clean. Twice. Faye Corson and now Angeline and I ain’t got nothing. No crime scene, no weapon, no motive, no suspect, no nothing.”

“Just what makes you think I got any experiences then? You’re the law.”

“Damn it, Stinnett. You’re smart. You know things that Franklin County folk don’t know to know. I sit in my office and look at those pictures of those two bludgeoned naked women and where they was found. It’s clean. All I got is where they was found and pictures of two bludgeoned naked women. Two women who are a helluva lot more trouble dead than they ever thought to be living.”

“Well, I don’t see how I can help.” Stinnett started the truck, “I got work waiting.” The coffee sloshed near over the lip from the waking violence of metal on metal.

“I called around on you back then, Stinnett. I know I came at you pretty hard at first. I was wrong, I think. You’ve been a good citizen it seems, and I’m willing to let go whatever did or didn’t happen six years ago. I ain’t about to call TBI just yet and have their team move in here to stare at the same pictures for six months that I been staring at all the while this guy takes out someone else, my wife, my daughter, maybe Elaine, God knows who. They know less than I do about these people around here. To be this clean it has to be a local. Has to be a local.”

“Well, sheriff, I don’t see how I can help. Now, I got to get.” Stinnett shifted into reverse and the sheriff grabbed the cup before it spilled to the ground.

McCammon and Brother Benny were frozen watching the interchange half expecting an old fashioned shootout. Everyone knew there was something more to know about Stinnett. Everyone knew the skeletons around here have their way of making rattle eventually.

“You think Jake thinks he done it?”

Brother Benny wiped his forehead and cheek with a handkerchief and followed the swagger of Sheriff Ellis across the street into the old Service Merchandise storefront that now housed the City Hall.

“Jake thinks he done it, don’t he?”

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against the rulers of the darkness.”

The seven miles back to the shop felt like two, and he worked furiously for an hour before the lights flashed red. Spencer dropped off the coat rack and Stinnett made the preparations. He pulled the lever that opened a hand-made recess in the center of the chemical tub to create a sort of soak tray. He carried the China cabinet for Nancy Grace from the back room storage and removed the back of the cabinet. Stinnett straddled the coat rack, the table leg, and a couple of other items he had needing stripped in the tray with the cabinet. He would need the scraper wand he’d fashioned from the termite man’s refuse. The work on the cabinet was steady until the two staccato segments of blue lights signaling lunch from Elaine. He turned off the pump to the chemical wand and left the items there to soak in the product left in the tray.

“How’s your morning?”

“Ellis thinks I done it?”

“Thinks you done what?” She knew, “How do you know he thinks you done it?”

“Just the way he was looking through me like he was seeing something.”

“Well.” Elaine set the sandwich in front of him at the table. Stinnett appreciated the fact that she had more to ask but didn’t. They ate in silence and after they were finished Elaine moved to the couch and read the paper.

“What time you want dinner?”

“I think I’ll make another sandwich and carry it down there.”

“Okay. Just call if you want something more. I can walk it down so you don’t have to stop till you’re ready.”

“No, I don’t need bothered any more than I have been today.”

Stinnett went to the back bedroom before leaving the house. He strode his patch to the barn. He made to unlock the door then pivoted and got in the truck and drove off. Elaine was shocked to hear the rattle of the Dodge and folded the paper to her lips. From the softness of the couch, she watched the truck enter the roadway.

The burn of the cigarette was a welcome burn, like family. He held it in deep and the road was overhung in Cypress all the way to the reservoir. Stinnett parked at the end of what looked like just a lane but turned out to be an old boat access. It had been used by others but he could tell not by many. It was six years of driving around out here and he was glad to have found a public place that was as close to

solely his. Stinnett reread today's article in his mind. What about this makes an easy connection to him? Ellis had mentioned him smart. No trace. Clean. He said a *he* had done it. Kept referring to a *he*. Was that an assumed *he* or a *he* based on some sort of forensics? Angle of the blow? Impact readings? Two women. Found at the reservoir. Was it the reservoir? Was it that easy? Couldn't be. Half Franklin County and Coffee County both come here regular. Blunt force trauma. No weapon found nor identified. Could be a club, a bat, anything solid with some heft. No crime scene. No DNA, the time in the water made sure of that. So what makes this such an easy connection? Experiences. What did Ellis mean by that? Experience with what? The blunt force? These *episodes* of blunt force. The word made him angry, like all fire. Blunt force episodes. Episodes of blunt force, a conspiracy of words, a conspiracy of worlds full of words in need of restoration. Stinnett crumpled the pack of Winstons and tossed it into the tangled brush. He pounded the steering wheel. He pounded the dash. The sound of a boat and its revelry seemed to sober him and he leaned out of the window and spat at the paper and cellophane in a slow crawl back to its original shape. He opened the door, snatched the rumpled mass and tossed it to the floorboard. What made Stinnett Keller an easy target of this, he thought. He had to move. He started the truck and eased it down the lane back to the main road.

The voice seemed thicker, older over the machine.

“Elaine, I know you’re there. I know that Stinnet’s out somewheres. I have a warrant and I need you to produce a key to the shop by the time we get there.”

“Elaine, I have a warrant. John Parks from TBI will be with me. I ain’t coming to arrest no one. I just need to have a look around the shop. I know Stinnett’s pretty particular and I don’t want to upset too much of it really, if I don’t have to. Now, have the key out and we’ll all be civil about this here.”

Elaine was buried in the corner of the couch, her head bent to her knees under the paper.

The sun was hiding behind the Cypress cover and jumping at him in the clipped intervals of the tree line. Stinnett’s heart was racing and beads of sweat were beginning to form at his graying temples. Experience. Episodes. Tragic really. All connected to him so easily. Complicit in the conspiracy. Complicit in the workings of principalities, of powers of darkness on high. Angeline Thomas. Faye Corson and who’d do away with her, peach as she was? Ellis and his chaw-spit logic. Blunt force episodes. Episodes of blunt force such as these. Experiences. Knowing things that Franklin County folk don’t know to know. Blunt force trauma. Connected to Stinnett Keller in some way.

Stinnett slammed on the brakes. He punched the wheel. He punched the dash then floored the truck for home.

Stinnett flung open the door to the shop and the alarm sounded. He raced to the chemical tub, putting on a small apron of tools. He pulled the trouble light from the peg board wall and hung it over the tub. He seized the magnifying goggles from off the peg board too. He slid the desk to the other side of the tub and leaned in. Stinnett scanned the tray, the coat rack, the table leg, the other items in various degrees of submersion. Each with its paint and varnish in layers, in a state of bubbled death coming to bubbled life. He pushed a limp mass of paint some of which an obvious recent application. The ease of stripping freshly painted pieces. How it falls from the work like well-cooked meat from bone. Tender with its history, its stories to tell of life and supple death. The alarm blared on and the red lights flashed. Blunt force experience. Experience in episodes of blunt force trauma. He kicked the stool from under him and fell to all fours. Stinnett pulled the five gallon bucket with the chemical hose pump to him unaware of the siren and the blue and red flashing lights. He pulled a pair of tweezers from the apron and repositioned the goggles. The strainer was full of detritus of all sorts familiar. Mostly paint in its various composition. The solidity or lack thereof signaled its life's-cling to wood measured in weeks, months, years or decades. Brittle sticks. He moved aside shards, flecks, a penny, a paper clip, all mossed in a milk soup of age

antique. The tweezer tip pierced a loose leaf of what had to be week-old paint like it was grilled salmon. How he knew things that others didn't. His experiences. His episodes of wickedness, unspeakable wickedness. Of principalities. The red lights. The blue lights. The sirens. He studied the puzzle of the strained mass. Coiled near the edge and clinging to the mesh was a long black strand he pinched and pulled free. Stinnett pulled a zip lock from the box in the drawer and put the hair in it and took the bag to the safe. He cut all of the lights and sirens and headed to the house.

Stinnett thought she was asleep there on the couch and passed by her to the bedroom for his gun. Blunt force trauma and the instrument of death was in his strip basin. Ellis thinks he done it, probably building the story around town by now. A coat rack, a table leg both stripped of any evidence now to have outed what was done. Buster Dix. Tom Spencer. Stinnett Keller. All the same to Jake Ellis as long as one of them is made to have done it.

He didn't hear her leave and it bothered him that he could be slipping like that. The paper was folded over the sofa arm and the front door was open. Stinnett needed out for a few days, but didn't want to leave that hair in his safe.

The shop seemed void of any workings of life. It had been his lifeblood, his livelihood, but as he entered it the air was chill and empty. Stinnett removed the board that hid the safe and spun the dial. He held the bag with the long hair up to the light above him. The sound of the chaw-splatter on the floor made him like fire and it was near more than he could bear to hold it in. A clean cut man with a black

vinyl jacket was standing next to Sheriff Ellis. The deputy behind him, a gun drawn.

“What you got there, Stinnett?” Stinnett wanted to believe in the episodes that

Brother Benny had mentioned. Episodes of grace, of righteousness, of salvation.

The only one that felt of any real weight, was the one of Christ. When the deputy fired, Stinnett was grabbing for the table leg in the basin.

Thanksgiving

Diane had a choice to make about her father. Even without the current situation, she had always chosen to be thankful that his insults and jokes were aimed at her mom or Misty and not her. This, as a result, had only made her feel guilty and cheapened the thankfulness part. Things will never be the same. She had said this many times in the last two weeks and now kept repeating it to herself on the drive over to her parent's house for Thanksgiving dinner. She had cried about it to Stephen. When she told him she couldn't go, he snapped and threatened her. The drive was silent.

The Thanksgiving dinners before had been holidays. Diane thought it might have even approached what she imagined to be a British understanding of the word. There was a collective intentionality in avoiding truth – for the Harpers the truth was entrails constantly spilling. Thanksgiving had held a feigned import, a ceremony, a falsity that had brought a strange stability to her world. Her plate, their plates, heaping with peas and beans and sweet potatoes brought serenity, brought a full respite from him, silent at the end of the table elbows shoved into the arms of his chair, forearms steadily working the fork to his face. She would stare at the green heaps and find solace in the fact that their leaves had swiped red at her wrists in the July sun. She could taste the thick rich loam, refulgent and robust - the only thing healthy on that five acres just outside of the Verdun city limits. She would take

walks in those manicured rows with each bite, dumb that a man yielding such chaos could produce anything close to order.

Misty, Diane's younger sister, and her family always arrived first. Diane would have to enter the house to an already-set table and most of the food prepared. They all would act like everything was normal, but when she wasn't looking they would make their eyes at each other like they do.

The van stopped in front of the red brick ranch and behind Misty's SUV. Diane looked at Stephen as he pushed the shifter to park and took a deep breath. She glanced quickly at Gracie, three this coming January, asleep in the car seat. Diane, although she knew better, had left Gracie with her father when her sitter backed out last minute about a month ago. Diane made no move to get out.

"Well," Stephen said in another sigh.

"Well, what?"

"We getting out or what?"

Diane didn't answer and looked out of her window. The ranch was a photograph of itself, unchanged for as long as she could remember. Past the house was the acre garden in its late autumn layer of death. Her father burned the garden after the first good fall of the oak, pecan, and poplars that littered the front yard. An otherwise picturesque lot, today it seemed vapid and stained.

Stephen pushed hard on the steering wheel with both hands, lifted a beer that he had propped between his legs, drained it and reached for a replacement from the partial case in the floor behind him.

“I’ll stay here, so she can get her nap out. You know how she is.” Diane continued to stare at the burnt earth.

“Damn it, Diane.”

“I can’t do it, not yet.”

“You’re as stubborn as he is.” Stephen sighed.

Diane didn’t respond.

“You really think your dad would do that? Come on, kids hear things...they say things.”

Diane was fighting back tears, “Two-year olds don’t hear that, they don’t know to say that.”

“She wouldn’t have said it if you wouldn’t have asked her.”

“I can’t, Stephen? I can’t.”

“This is stupid.” The crisp pop of the beer opening sent a spray that Stephen licked from his forefinger. “Every one of you is nuts.”

Stephen grabbed the case from the floor and shoved open the van door. He slammed it shut, and Diane looked quickly to Gracie. Stephen rounded the corner of the house and passed in front of the house and headed to the garage where her father and brother-in-law were sure to be. The case was brushing against his leg as he walked.

The tap on the window startled her. The fingernails were too long and too pink for a woman so old.

“Can we not do this?” Diane’s mother, with her stiff bangs, leaned to the window.

Diane was sickened at how thin her mother looked. Her mother placed her hands on her hips.

“Honey, what are you doing? I would like to see my baby.” Diane’s mother peered into the back of the van. Diane stared past her mother at the garden. “You just going to sit in there all day?”

Diane didn’t respond. After some time, her mother crossed her arms. “This is crazy. Baby, we’ve been through this.” Diane’s mother turned to the house and took a few steps but returned with a fury to the van. “She’s my grandbaby too. Did you consider that? Do you know what you’re doing to me?”

Diane buried her head in her hands and began to rub her temples.

“Say something.”

Diane looked up to her mother. Her mother’s eyes that she once thought blue were actually a dead gray color, “Are you sick? You look thin.”

“Well, nice to see you too.”

“Are you eating?” Diane’s blank stare forced her mother to look away.

“Let’s talk about this later.” Diane’s mother uncrossed her arms.

“I don’t want to talk anymore.”

Diane locked the door to the van when she saw her mother move toward Gracie’s door.

“What are you doing?” Her mother’s expression was the expression a mother gives to a daughter who has lost all trust in her mother and the mother knows full well that it is the appropriate response but tries to recognize the daughter’s actions as shameful and offensive.

“I’m not stepping foot in that house.”

“He’s Gracie’s Poppie, your daughter’s Poppie.”

“He can still be Gracie’s Poppie with her and me in this van, which I feel is a gift on my part after what he’s done, but he doesn’t have to be anything to me, including host. Let me make that plain enough.”

“So you’re going to sit in the van? Is that your solution?”

Diane didn’t answer.

“Well you don’t have to punish everybody. What did you tell Gracie?”

“I told her the same thing I told you I was going to tell her. That I didn’t feel like being around people who made me feel icky and Poppie made me feel icky some times too, and if Poppie made her feel like that again or she was scared that he was going to...that she didn’t have to be around him.”

“Don’t do this, not today. Not on Thanksgiving.”

Nothing. Diane said nothing. She thought nothing. She felt nothing.

“Not today. Please not today.”

Diane stared at her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know to, Diane. We’ve been through this.”

“She’s two, mom. It’s sick.”

“You’re right. She’s two. You don’t even know that anything happened.”

The garage door came up and Stephen came bursting from beneath it. She could see her dad leaning against his Camaro with its hood up. Stephen saw her and her mom on the outside of the van and Misty looking out of the living room window. And he threw his can against the brick wall of the house and it erupted. And he marched to the van, yelling at her to get her ass out of the van and he was carrying the case the whole time bumping against his leg and Diane could see how it was lighter already. Diane watched him grab at the keys in his pocket and the van unlocked and she locked it and he pushed the button again and it unlocked and she locked it. He was tugging at the handle of Gracie's door and cursing and her mom had run back to the house with her face behind her long pink nails. He unlocked and she locked and he punched the door below the window and Gracie woke and was crying. And he clicked the remote and Diane didn't get it locked in time and he flung it open and unbuckled Gracie and took her right in.

After a time, Misty came out and spoke and brought some water and said she understood how it felt and was real sorry and wished they could get beyond it all. Diane wanted to tell her that only death could move beyond Hell and all she ever wanted was the truth from him and until she got it, she'd just be right here in this minivan.

Misty said, "But it's Thanksgiving."

Diane knew that it was more the hope in the saying of it than in the knowledge of any actual truths that it held for even Misty. After no response from Diane, Misty returned to the house shaking her head and crying.

Inside they all sat around the kitchen table; Gracie was locked in a high chair, crying for her mother.

“Mommy should be here any minute.” Stephen tried to put a bib on the child. “Why don’t we give thanks, and maybe by then she’ll be in.”

Diane was cursing them watching through the window at Gracie scream and flail. She dug in her purse for her keys.

The sound of the van crashing into the Camaro brought them all to the front lawn. Diane opened the van door and tumbled out. She tripped through the browning Bermuda to the garden. The yard gave way to brittle crunches. Diane started running. She ran through November, and the long dead winter, and she wanted buds beneath her and late April. She imagined that she could feel the burning of flesh just above the ankles from broad velvety bushes of bean. She couldn’t stop running, wanting to feel the weight of her legs. She dreamed of ground, soft beneath her, wet and spaced evenly for all manner of crop. She wanted the earth to pull at her shoes then fall in clumps. She prayed for a family of corn to capture her, to seize her with their leaf arms, biting and burning and stinging.

Memory Care

The twenty-five miles from Verdin to Amory was all pine, fragrant and full, every mile with a history hanging in the sway and balance of the thick boughs. Supple in its silent glory. That's how Jean Anne Cotter wanted it to be anyway. It was all pine when she was a child. Most everything, like pine, stood taller back then, truer, but closer to earth somehow too. A closeness that comes from the ability to touch or climb or feel its grip, the tackiness, the grim, smooth stretches. All things, the pine, the pace, the people felt close and of earth but somehow aligned for an ascension to Heaven. The loggers had taken their shares at will and left before the laws provided for reclamation and stiff penalties if no efforts taken. The twenty five miles with the stumps and gas stations and clumps of trailers and trash is a mere ghost of itself, and it disgusts Jean Anne three days a week. She makes the drive after work on Mondays, Wednesdays (like today), and on Saturday mornings. Her mother, Clara, is a full-time resident at Morningside Well Living Centers LLC and a patient in their Memory Care program. It seems to Jean Anne that her older brother, Wellington Carter Cotter, takes little interest in his mother except the interest she'll leave him, which is nearly everything, save the farm in Verdin. Jean Anne lives there on the old farm, had never really moved out. Now in her late fifties, she stands to gain something that she already has.

“Evening Miss Jean Anne. Miss Clara’s in the lounge by the piano, Mr. Bobby come early tonight.” The nurse winked and was supporting an old man in a blue cotton sweater as they shuffled down the walk.

Jean Anne nodded thanks and addressed the old man in the blue sweater. “Good night for a stroll isn’t it, Mr. Rudolph.” The old man continued to chew on his tongue.

Morningside Well Living Centers LLC is, according to the brochure and website, staffed by the most sophisticated and friendly folks a family could hope for in Northeast Mississippi. Jean Anne enjoys that it is so close to home, both homes as a matter of fact. The farm is the short drive from Verdin and Morningside Well Living Centers LLC happens to be only three blocks from Cypress Grove, the estate just off the square in Amory which her daddy had bought two weeks before he died. All their married life Clara Carter (the Amory Carters) Cotter had begged her husband, John Thomas Cotter (the Verdin Cotters), to move back to the city when things got too tough to manage. Mr. Cotter didn’t know just when she was meaning, but was gracious enough to acquiesce when he saw that he was surely going to die before her and soon. He wanted her happy in his suffering. Mr. Cotter knew the Christmas giddiness that lay masked in Clara’s characteristic stoicism when he told her of the acquisition. She had looked away from him and said, “Well if you think it best, Mr. Cotter. We have many considerations just now, and I know you to be most frugal.”

Cypress Grove was the second most desirable plot in town just across Main Street from the Carter House and Estate which consequently was Clara's childhood home and naturally the most desirable. When Clara passes, Wellington will get Cypress Grove and is already managing all accounts including the fabric company handed down to him from his maternal grandfather, Carter Family Cotton and Fabric. A month after Mr. Cotter died Wellington had sold Cotter and Sons, the cotton plantation and warehouses that his paternal grandfather had started and passed on through his father.

Jean Anne isn't sure that Morningside Well Living Centers LLC's Memory Care program was all that her momma needed and had told her brother so. Being the eldest and the only son, not to mention power of attorney, Wellington has final say. In the early sixties, a year after he graduated from Samford, Wellington married Lena Gardner (of the Birmingham Gardners). Jean Anne was thirteen at the time. Lena became like a daughter to Clara. She paraded her around the social clubs of Verdin, Amory and Aberdeen when the newlyweds came to town.

Clara Carter Cotter resembles a statue seated in the front row of the lounge. She has perfect posture with one ankle tucked neatly behind the other, knees touching and her right palm perching the left wrist. The lounge had been transformed into a makeshift chapel with the folding chairs in rows and a couple of small couches forming a back row for those that require it. Clara does not require it. She is sure that the back row will be filled with Edgar Sanger and his tobacco stained

shirts and meaty, shoeless grandkids or some other rabble from the community.

Jean Anne says hello to a few of the residents and notices Mr. Bobby bent over and fumbling with the sheets of music in the piano seat. Mr. Bobby was nearly Clara's age but still with most of his faculties. Most people say he is a sweet, sweet man.

"Good evening, momma." Clara is seated on the front row. Jean Anne leans in and pecks Clara's cheek as she settles next to her on the front row. Clara shifts slightly trying not to be rude. She makes sure not to touch the wetness off the cheek until she is sure the woman isn't looking. She might feign eyelash trouble or tuck a stray hair behind her ear at a more appropriate time.

"I've never been anyone's momma." Clara purses her lips.

"Good evening, Mr. Bobby." Mr. Bobby turns and waves from behind the piano with a smile and mouthed hello.

"How was your day today? Did you take a walk? We should walk after the service."

Clara straightens her already stiff back and stares ahead and does not turn to her visitor.

"The lilies are in bloom at the farm, have you any here?"

Clara looks to the picture hanging on the wall above the piano and seems to study every plant in it for a lily. She has heard this voice before somewhere. Maybe at the supermarket or a dream, a dream involving a farm, dreadful heat, and dirt. An

obscene amount of dirt. Dirt on dishes and windows and yards made entirely of it.

The voice comes again and she sees a dirt yard of lilies.

“I spoke with Wellington last night and he mentioned that he’d try to come for Mother’s Day.”

Clara looked sharply at Jean Anne wondering how this frumpy woman knows her son. Surely not a mutual association. Not her Wellington. Wellington is in Birmingham now working as a stock broker married to one of the Gardners. Maybe that’s how she knows him or she knows him through all of Lena’s social work.

Mr. Bobby starts playing softly on the keys to loosen his hands. The arthritis is beginning to give him considerable trouble especially on Wednesdays when he plays then has to rest for a bit and then play again, like today. Clara feels calmed by the sounds of the piano like sinking into a bath. She had a fine tub in her house. She can’t recall exactly what happened to the double-slipped tub or the house for that matter. She remembers giving her son baths in the tub. It was always the finest white, the entire room was the finest of white, and she had made them keep it that way. She despised the filth of bathrooms and wanted hers to always feel as expensive as the rest of the house. It was noticed too, by those that came for clubs or parties. It was always the finest of white, especially when the boy was a baby playing there in the clean cast iron. Why did he marry a girl so young? She remembers that being a trouble and it is becoming a trouble for her again that she can’t quite solve and then it is gone. Mr. Bobby is limbered enough now and asks if

Clara has a special request. He asks her by name and it startles her at first that so many know her by name, but she is a Carter and she guesses that's how he knows her, how they all know her.

“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.” The definitive tone of her own voice surprises her a little because that was not the song she was thinking of. It just came to her that it should be played first before any others. Mr. Bobby begins and gives a little smile to Jean Anne.

This is the ritual on Wednesdays and Wednesdays are the best days. Jean Anne feels that there is more Memory Care in Mr. Bobby and Wednesday church service than in any other activity at Morningside Well Living Centers LLC and that more investment should be made in its clinical merits. The Guided Art and Craft, which is a kind of play therapy, and even the Field Trips of Significant Personal History don't seem to accomplish as much on a consistent basis. Jean Anne had mentioned that to Wellington, and he had said that it was all part of their approach to therapy. Why would they still have a Wednesday service otherwise, especially with the lawsuits the way they are today. Wellington had always been smart. Clara had said that the smartest thing that he ever did was marry Lena Gardner from Birmingham, she was like a daughter Lena was.

The third verse of *Holy, Holy, Holy*, when they sing about the darkness hiding Thee, is when Jean Anne feels the strange comfort of misunderstanding. That is what she tries telling herself on the drives to Amory but only now feels, that it is all a

misunderstanding until she is found or when she finds herself. She feels hidden in a way that is akin to the Lord God Almighty being hidden, and this choral reminder comes like the peace that passes understanding. There is peace in revelation. All of this is a simple misunderstanding masked by the eye of sinful man. Clara always requests this song first, and it is a great comfort to Jean Anne. She never goes without being amazed at the regularity of Clara's selection. It was some time, maybe a couple of months, before Mr. Bobby mentioned that something like this usually happens with the ones with All-Timer's, that is what Mr. Bobby and some of the staff call Alzheimer's. Still more interesting to Mr. Bobby is that it is hymn #1 in the 1956 Baptist Hymnal. Clara Carter Cotter was a good Southern Baptist. Clara will make her initial request and will vary slightly in the next two or three. By the start of the regular service she will pat Jean Anne's knee with her pinky or give a scolding glance when Jean Anne rumples paper or makes for her purse. These are all signs of darkness fading and comfort for Jean Anne. On a really good day Clara will whisper for her to shut her mouth or she'll move Jean Anne's hair off her shoulder with a heavy sigh. The regular service consists of three songs led by Eddie Edwards, a resident, and a short lesson by Brother Daryl Hodge, from Calvary Baptist, then one more song – a resident request – and the benediction.

Mr. Bobby provides a short instrumental as Brother Daryl waddles to the pulpit, which is a planter box turned upside down on a side table. He never goes more than ten minutes and then leaves abruptly hefting himself down the center aisle wiping his forehead and neckline. He has only ten minutes to make it to Bible

Study at his church. Jean Anne likes him well enough but hates that he has to leave and never speaks more than the ten minutes. She had petitioned the director of Morningside Well Living Centers LLC to find another pastor that can stay longer. Mr. Applewhite had said that in the interest of the residents, he always calls them residents, that it was best to keep as much stability as possible in all staff and supplementary staff and that Brother Daryl had been serving them for over eleven years now, all out of the goodness of Christian charity.

The final Amen is like a dirge to Jean Anne. It brings sadness. It brings the darkness, and she reminds herself that it is a misunderstanding and that is all.

Clara stands and pats both thighs with a grin and makes like she is clapping and says, "Bobby Donaldson, your playing is just splendid, just splendid."

Mr. Bobby bows and says, "Why thank you, Clara Carter, but not as splendid as you look."

Clara blushes and giggles and grins behind her fingertips lightly touching her lips and pats her thighs again and turns to Jean Anne. On the good nights, the truly spiritual nights, Clara's eyes will glint and glitter and dance for a few minutes. She will look to Jean Anne with what seems to be something like familiarity.

"So glad you could make the drive, did Wellington come?" She grabs Jean Anne's hand and squeezes it as she looks around the room for her son. She begins to look lost, the darkness creeps up around the pupils. She becomes more and more

confused, unsure of the people in the room and the rows of chairs. Jean Anne knows now to remain silent and lets her slip back easily. It had been hard on them both before. Painful and dark.

Early on Jean Anne tried desperately to prolong the glint and glitter in Clara's eyes by pulling up names and dates and places, anything that might keep the spark. One night it was a mistake to say the date of her daddy's death. Clara had stood stock still and circling a pointer in the palm of her other hand as if she were scribing the date over and over in the palm of her hand and she mentioned having lunch with Miller Newton on the very same day and a conversation about whether it was unchristian to burn the body rather than bury. There had been other mistakes.

"Wellington, I really think you should come Saturday. I think momma, mother would really enjoy seeing you. She does better when you're here."

"She sounded fine Tuesday evening. We spoke for nearly ten minutes." Wellington sounds as if he is speaking near the phone. Jean Anne snarls on her end of the phone.

"Did she speak with you or did you speak to her?"

"We spoke. We talked about Morningside, the company and some needed maintenance on Cypress Grove."

"Well, I think you should come. It would be good to have you there."

“I have to work.”

“It’s her outing of significant personal history. She’ll spend part of the morning at Cypress Grove and then for lunch they are taking her to Wilde Ivy’s.”

“You’re going to have to reschedule.”

Jean Anne wanted to respond but said nothing.

“She wanted the tile work done as soon as possible, so I hired some Mexicans and they’ll be there all weekend.”

“Wellington, you are incorrigible. You knew this was her Saturday.”

“She sounded adamant. The last I want is to have mother upset in her condition. Besides those Mexicans are tough to pin down for long, and there is a tremendous amount of work to be done.”

The drive on Saturdays seems faster to Jean Anne for some reason. It could be the morning light playing through the pine. Or maybe she just feels more alive, more awake instead of when she comes from work. The mornings are usually better for Clara too. When she was living at Cypress Grove, Jean Anne would sometimes stay over and make her breakfast and it was delightful. Clara would discuss her time as a little girl growing up right there across the street. Playing on the swing in a yellow dress with a blue satin sash, just like a picture. Miles and Miller Newton

would walk by on their way to see the Anderson girls. She'd tell that Miller, the older one, would always keep looking back and she'd keep swinging never looking over at him but she could tell he was looking back at her. Miller was the older one, almost ten year older. She'd giggle and pat Jean Anne on the hand. She'd say what a time it was in those days. The parties and the boys calling and her Daddy shoing them off except for Daniel Packard, he was son of Lewis Packard President of the bank, and Miller, and of course your father. When the mornings grew more distant and cold with less talking and more dark stares, Jean Anne knew Clara needed more structure and help. Jean Anne moved in for a few months, but those months were painful. She would wake and find Clara coming in the door fully dressed and with make up to go to a ball. She'd ask Clara where she went off too and Clara would stare at her. Clara would giggle and say she didn't know if she went at all and Jean Anne would check the car for signs of use. Some mornings the car door would still be open, others you couldn't lay a hand on the hood like it had been run all night, and still others you'd feel a heat that you couldn't be certain if it was the heat from use or the heat from the thought of use and wondering just how long she had been seated in the car or standing there in the doorway.

"Wellington Cotter, please."

"One moment ma'am. May I say who's calling?"

"No ma'am."

“Oh. Okay. One moment.”

“Wellington Cotter.” Wellington’s voice had the training of his mother and her kind. Like his mother, he would say Cotter in a way that sounded like Carter with a slim, if sizeable at all, variance in pronunciation.

“Why do you answer when all you know is it’s a woman on the line?”

“I’ve got a client on the other line. What is it that you need?”

“We need to talk. Momma needs more care than I can provide.”

“I’m busy right now and I really want to give this topic the attention it deserves, especially when it concerns the welfare of mother. Let me call you back in about an hour.”

“Wellington, there’s no client on the other line and you’re not going to call me back, so let’s get something talked out here and now.”

“I am very busy. You don’t know the pressures, the burdens of running two companies.”

“I know burden, Wellington, as well as you or anybody. Momma needs care around the clock. I think she has Alzheimer’s.”

“Oh, don’t you think you’re over-reacting a little. She’s old. Older folks tend to forget things. What, did she forget a doctor’s appointment this time?”

“It’s getting dangerous. She’s in need of supervision. Constant supervision.”

“Aren’t you providing that? You’re there with her, aren’t you?”

“She’s up at all hours. I work too, you know. I would never sleep.”

“You don’t have to.”

“This is not about me. This is about your mother. She needs a home or a facility or something.”

“And how much will a home, a facility, or a something cost?” Wellington is like his mother in most ways, but in this manner he is John Thomas Cotter made over. He never spends his own money although has more of it than Solomon. He doesn’t have hobbies. He doesn’t travel much, certainly not the two and half hours home, and he only spends a dollar when he knows certain it will bring him three.

Jean Anne greets Mr. Rudolph whose tongue is white this morning and Jean Anne feels that she won’t be seeing him much more.

“Morning, momma.” Jean Anne finds Clara in her room dressed and sitting on the side of the bed facing the door.

“Oh, you made it in. How was the drive?” Clara takes Jean Anne’s head in her hands and looks at her and smiles. She gives her a slight hug and tight wink of one eye and clasps her around the wrist with one hand after it has slid down from the elbow.

Jean Anne would say lovely just lovely when Clara was like this and they would make their way to the van if it was her Saturday for an outing or they'd walk down the street if it was nice out. Some Saturdays Jean Anne would try her own outings of significant personal history and take her downtown where she had arranged for brunch with Miss Lula or Miss Pilkington or on over to walk the grounds of the Carter Estate. The Browns own it now and are sensitive, agreeable people.

The van is parked outside of the welcome center where Charley the driver is waiting. Clara will say, "Charley, have you met my daughter in law, Lena?" then, "She's a certain treasure and real treasure," and "Like my own daughter." Jean Anne will remind herself that it is just a misunderstanding. She will never say, "Charley, have you met my daughter, Jean Anne."

"Our itinerary has changed some, Miss Clara, but I promise to show you a good trip."

"You always do, Charley. Where are we going today?"

"We going on a house tour today, Miss Clara, some of the finest homes here in Amory."

"Oh, that sounds nice. Say, have you met my Lena?"

Charley is always good at saying nice to meet you or the pleasure is all mine each time. Charley is good with Miss Clara and Jean Anne appreciates that. Charley also provides custodial help and all of the residents seem to recognize him.

“We are going to Cypress Grove today, but we can’t go in because they are doing some work today. But we’ll drive on over there. Beautiful day for a trip. Did you notice the birds this morning?” Charley is good about waiting for a sign of recognition before referring to Cypress Grove as Clara’s. He also says that bringing up the sights and sounds of nature seems to have a great effect, some reason the doctors can’t explain. Charley has read as much on Alzheimer’s as anyone working for Morningside Well Living Centers LLC. His wife passed away four years ago and had been in the Memory Care program for ten years.

Cypress Grove is a work zone. There are men everywhere and the van really has little room to maneuver between the pines and the various trucks lining the drive. Landscapers seem to be in every bed. There are men on scaffolding at the main entrance and the sound of a wet saw is shrill. Clara giggles after she says, “Those darkies are as busy as bees.” And when she sees Charley in the front seat she says, “These here seem to appreciate the fruits of industry.” She nods as she says it, like it’s a compliment. As they pull back on to Main Street, Jean Anne looks back to Cypress Grove and all of the men working. The driveway provided no significant memory care for her and she couldn’t see how it would for Clara either. Jean Anne had never seen it like that and was certain Clara hadn’t either. Jean Anne thinks she

sees Wellington step from a black Lexus in the driveway and shake hands with a man in a hard hat. She hasn't seen him in almost a year and has no idea what he is driving anymore. Just then they pass the old Newton house and Clara snaps her head to Jean Anne and opens her mouth to say something but she remains frozen, mouth agape.

“Charley, since we didn't get to see much of Cypress Grove today, do you think we can see the Carter Estate?”

“Naw, Miss Jean Anne, we can't see the Carter Estate, but we might could see the Brown House. Let me make a call.” Charley pulls his radio from the dash.

“Right. The Brown House is lovely, momma, just lovely. You'll really enjoy it.”

Clara snaps her head again to Jean Anne and says nothing again. The van pulls around the square and Charley points out certain places naming them the names of Clara's youth and she says lovely, just lovely. He gets a call back on the radio, and he turns the van around and back on to Main Street.

It is a risk taking Clara to her childhood home because it has changed so much since her parents died. It sold once for a sizeable sum to a movie producer from New York who grew up in Tupelo. The movie producer made some nice restorations but altered the landscape to appease his partner. When he grew tired of his partner, he grew tire of the place and sold it to the current owners, the

Browns. The Browns are originally from Aberdeen and know the history of the place and have done a fine job of getting the grounds close to how the Carters had it, but they've kept the pool and had to cut down the Oak by the main entrance after a storm last year. Currently, their son and his family are living with them because of the economy and there are children's toys and laptops and other gadgets lying about that make it difficult to see the place as it was.

When they enter the gates, Jean Anne gets chills. The sun is coming out of a cloud over head and the manor lights up like a dream. The house glows and Jean Anne wishes the storm hadn't taken the Oak. She looks to Clara's eyes and the clouds are breaking apart. Jean Anne sees the twitch. Clara's eyes are darting back and forth across the yard and she says lovely, just lovely, like a dream I've had, and Jean Anne starts to nod. Jean Anne grows nervous with a peace that begins to pass the misunderstanding. Clara touches Jean Anne on the knee with her pinky to keep them from knocking. Jean Anne looks again to Clara's eyes and sees the scowl there. Jean Anne is nervous and says it's just lovely isn't it momma.

"I've never been anyone's momma."

Charley knows to remain silent and to drive slowly. Clara tips her head back in a smile when she sees a swing hanging from a smaller oak near the road.

"Miller Newton." Clara doesn't know why she says this name, but she says it two more times. She looks to the black man driving the van and asks him his name. He says my name's Charley and how do you do. She says oh yes, Charley, you drove

for us for quite some time now, I'm sorry I didn't recognize you in that shirt. Where is your coat? You always wear a coat. Jean Anne squirms and leans forward on the seat back in front of her. Clara says sit back dear, like a lady and sighs. Jean Anne fidgets and squirms some more. Clara raps her on the thigh, pulls a compact mirror from her purse and touches up her lipstick. The van comes to a rest at the front door and Charley goes to the side door to open it for them. Jean Anne does not move. Well go on Clara says nudging Jean Anne with her purse don't be shy, he's just a nigger. Not the only one you've seen. Jean Anne does her best to hop out of the van and run off a little way. Clara snaps at her and points to the ground beside her. Jean Anne sees that Clara is foggy but piecing a dream together. The yard appears green and lush but for some reason not how she wants it to look green and lush. Clara stops and looks out over the yard at the door while Charley pretends to unlock the door. He opens it and stands just inside. Jean Anne feels drunk and happy but a little sick to her stomach.

Inside the house Clara hands Charley her sweater and her purse, and he takes them. She walks to the staircase and begins to climb. She stops about a third of the way up and yells at Jean Anne to get out of those filthy rags and put on something decent, that her father will be home any minute and he'll want to see his daughter and not some stray cat. Jean Anne will hide in the curve of the stair and watch her mother through the mirror. Her mother will sway her hips as she moves another third up the stair then pause. She'll look again to the yard now as it is from the

window above the door. She'll look at the swing and a slight smile will come to her lips. She'll mouth "Mrs. Clara Newton" and lean back against the curved wall.

On really good days, she will make it all of the way up the stair. She will mutter to herself. She'll shout obscenities and other such nastiness to the Browns who always stand at either side of the double doors to the master suite. She will yell again at Jean Anne from the room and begin to remove her blouse at the vanity desk. She will pull a letter from the drawer and trace with her finger his signature. Jean Anne will enter the room and she'll stash the letter quickly in the drawer. She'll shout and spill the chair and grab Jean Anne by the ear and complain of the grit now on her hands and she'll push the child out of the room and curse the help for not doing the jobs they are now getting paid to do. She'll slam the doors closed and after a minute begin to cry because she is in a house she doesn't know with her blouse off and Charley will knock at the door saying, Miss Clara it's me Miss Clara it's Charley, and she'll say she doesn't know a Charley that is a nigger, that she knows he's a nigger by his nigger voice, and Charley will say it's me Miss Clara it's me Miss Clara it's Charley, and he'll open the door, and she'll wail and climb up in the bed shouting there's a nigger after me can you hear me can anyone hear me, and Charley will say it's me Miss Clara it's me Charley, and she'll scream and Charley will come in the room slowly pushing open the door, and she'll scream and cry and hide in the covers, and Charley will sit on the end of the bed all gentle and stroke the covers over her leg, and she'll shiver and shake and she'll drink the glass of water on the side table when she gets calmed down not seeing any of them in the room, and she'll

repair the blouse to her body and move to the window and for ten minutes or more she'll stand there just staring out the window at the swing at the corner of the lovely lush green lawn.

The Scarlet Thread

Brother Daryl Hodge didn't whoop once during the singing. His right hand choked the lip of the piano and his left hand pressed firmly into his knee to pull himself up off the pew. The left leg drug at the crimson carpet a little longer than usual as he waddled to the pulpit. It felt like minutes staring there at nothing in particular. The closed Bible. The wood of the pulpit. The sweat streaks on the glass buoyed in a ring at its base. He looked up a couple of times but the words didn't seem to fit. He took a short drink and winced the water down. If she'd closed at two, like he'd been saying all this time, ain't nothing would of happened. But then again, it would probably would of happened, somewhere. Seemed destined to happen to those kind of folk. It wasn't right. There wasn't nothing right about it. Not one right thing at all. Something had to be woefully serious for a man to do that. A man would have to be awfully torn up with that woman. A man? A coward is what he was, nothing but a coward to do that to her. But she wasn't no angel. That woman. She gave the grunt all he could handle, with his red baseball cap. Daryl pulled a clean white kerchief from his pocket and balled it in his fist. And he'd helped that woman in a way. Not knowing just why. Not knowing just how. Not knowing if it was right to help her. Not knowing what it would lead to, not knowing from where it came. But when you see a woman in that condition, in that kind a mess, a man's obliged to help her. It's a set toward righteousness any way you look at it. Those men had surely got caught and lawful judgment is sure to come, and a greater judgment sure to follow. For he comes to judge the quick and the dead. Daryl looked up, a few of his people swaying slightly in the silence with their eyes

closed. His back was a thousand pricks that felt of fire inches deep. His calf throbbed and felt as if it were made of concrete beneath the bandage.

Brother Daryl Hodge had tried to leave the shop by one thirty that Wednesday, two at the latest, to prepare and rest some before heading to the church. Hodge Hardware and Supply was one block off the town square on Front Street. The store, dim even at midday, contained a full row of metal shelves running the center length. Wood bins containing an assortment of building materials, some that looked far from new, sat on the shelves. On the wall opposite the counter was a mirror hung just above wood shelving that had at one time been painted white. When she wasn't cleaning or straightening, Patricia Lewis sat in a gray faux-leather office chair behind the counter. Sometimes, in deep thought over a puzzle or the paper, Patricia would pick at the dirt yellow foam bulging from the cracks in the seat. For going on nine years, Daryl had asked Patricia to lock up no later than two on Wednesdays but knew that she never would.

Patricia, two rows from the back, was unfamiliar. She was looking around the room. Daryl was trying not to notice the things that she had to be noticing, a gross and unfair appraisal. Men with the occasional shout – “tell it Brother” and “yes”, the women fanning themselves, the children squirming for comfort and being flicked on the ear and he could feel her silence.

He opened his Bible by lifting up on the legal pad. The pages stuck to his fingers. He flipped them back and forth. He took another sip from the water and wiped his forehead, cheeks and neck.

“Turn with me, good people, to Joshua and chapter two.”

The kerchief moved about his face, forehead and neck. Mostly Daryl tried to keep it balled in his thick fist. And when it wasn't pounding the Bible or the blond wood of the pulpit it would occasionally jump and wave out over the congregation. The water was gone and he was slowing down. He knew Patricia could see the hurt, the hurt beyond the kind of hurt that caused him to prop against the piano to get the weight off the short white left leg. And when he got to telling of Rahab, the scarlet thread, and the contract with those men, he watched her fix her hazel eyes upon the deep crimson of the baptistry curtains that seemed to curl, to braid in the shadows and folds.

Daryl pulled an office door, nearly too narrow for his frame, behind him and flicked the light switch with the corner of a legal-size pad of paper extending from his Bible. His penciled notes for the night's study scratched the margins in all directions.

"It's five til." Daryl extended a thick Baptist pointer at her.

For the first two months of Wednesdays that Patricia worked for him she forgot all about locking up early, so she said. Daryl had been quick to point out that all of Verdin, Mississippi would see the good pastor barrel-chested over the congregation damning those *living of the world* to an everlasting fiery torment while his storefront and till accepted all-comers. Daryl refrained from mentioning that Terry had never bucked his two-o'clock directive and most times left when he did. Patricia was Terry's widow. She came to work for Daryl because without Terry, she needed a job. Continuing to ignore closing early, things had come to a pass. They had it out, and she felt justified. He was using a version of the Sabbath argument that she found faulty on account of the Bible only mentioning one day

of rest, his fishing every Saturday, and she sure wasn't no slave to his master. Besides, he couldn't make up the four hours that she needed, and she didn't feel right about him just paying her for hours she didn't work. Early on, he simply scheduled the Harrison girl Wednesdays, but when the AutoZone opened in Amory and business slowed, he had no choice. Patricia was his only employee, and a good one on all accounts except this one.

His swish of work pant was steady between the heavy footfalls. The thicker sole of his left shoe was torn some at the toe on account of it dragging slightly with each stride. His shoulders dipped substantially and rocked from side to side when he walked.

Patricia was working a crossword and did not look up.

Daryl stopped beside her and waited. He made a small clucking sound from the side of his mouth at her, smiled, and shook his head. He moved on toward the storefront. Patricia looked up at him then went back to her puzzle. He reached the end of the counter and turned back.

"Got a friend name of Ruth I'd like you to meet tonight." He pulled the thin cloth from his pocket and wiped his forehead.

"My granny's name was Naomi."

"And I'm sure your granny was a fine woman."

"She cussed a blue streak and spit tobacco."

Daryl chuckled like the good country pastor that he was. He was thoroughly impressed yet confused by Patricia's knowledge of the Word, and was at odds with what he

understood to be her more recent convictions. Patricia, to his knowledge, hadn't been to a church since Terry died, and thought it would do her some good. The door chime rang and his eyes moved to a young woman entering the store.

“Well, I got to be getting on.”

“Surprised you still here.”

Daryl looked at his watch then back at the interloper.

“Why don't you come on out tonight, make sure I get it right about Ruth.” Daryl always invited. Patricia always declined. Daryl stood at the end of the counter watching the young woman in the mirror. The young woman who entered the store was not from Verdin and that was certain. She was moving in a jerked waltz, nervous like some sort of bird. She was fingering items and returning them to their bins without even a good once-over.

“Can we help you ma'am?” Daryl's voice boomed through the store, and he studied the mirror. The woman moved briskly behind the metal shelves in front of him still picking up items and returning them. Her eyes, moving rapidly in their sockets, searched the shelves.

“Just lookin.” The young woman's hair was in corn rows that ended in vermilion extensions with white beads halfway down her boney brown back. She wore no bra beneath a faded purple halter, and her thinness made her almost like a man. Her red slacks, bleached pink in places, formed her frame and bunched behind the tongues of her black high top shoes. Her heels barely touched the floor when she walked and at that pace made her seem to trip across the wood floor.

“Looking for something in particular?” Daryl had seen this type in here before, coming off or in need of a fix. He’d been held up a couple of times in twenty seven years, but never by a woman.

“Just lookin.”

Patricia had stood up and was watching the woman and watching Daryl watch the woman. The young woman was now at the back of the store across from the office. Daryl heaved his way back down the counter and stood next to Patricia. He placed the Bible on the counter and leaned heavy over it on both fists. His breaths were loud, even when he brought the cloth to his upper lip.

“You need to be getting, Daryl.”

“I got a few more minutes yet.”

The young woman was squatted in the rear corner and lifting a thick tow chain from the bin. “You got a smaller size?” The woman’s voice was deeper than Daryl would have imagined.

“All we got left is in those bins, hon.” Patricia was tracing the metal edge of the counter with her pencil. “You go on now. Hard to keep a saint when they’s waiting.” She patted his solid shoulder.

He whispered back to her behind the kerchief, “Ain’t no one ‘just a looking’ for that kind of chain.”

“Oh, go on now.”

The young woman tried to double the chain and lugged it to the counter.

“This be all, darling?” Patricia tapped at the cash register.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Eighteen even. You need a grab hook for that?”

“No’m.” The woman heaved the chain to the counter and dug in her front pockets. She looked to the door. Daryl picked up the Bible.

“If you broke down somewhere you going to need a grab hook.” Daryl was louder than he had been before, and breaths came quickly between the words.

The woman didn’t say anything. She was patting at her chest with one hand and her back pockets with the other. She kept looking to the door.

“You got ten feet a chain there. If you ain’t towing, just what are you aiming at?” Daryl started his rock back down the counter to get between the woman and the door. He rounded the end of the counter and wiped his forehead. The woman was still patting her body for payment.

“I got the rest of it here.” A few crumpled bills were on the counter next to a lighter. The woman was kneeling and squeezing her pant leg. The door chimed and two black men entered the store. Daryl looked at his watch. He wiped his forehead.

“Can we help you?” Daryl’s volume was nearly the fever pitch of one of his sermons.

The first one in the door smiled wryly behind a straw. The thicker one behind said, “Just looking.” Just looking. The one in front didn’t say anything and was steady chewing on the straw. He was about six foot even by the marking on the door frame. The one that talked was about five eight. The tall one wore shorts that hung below the waist exposing a pair of athletic shorts and boxers. His frame was wiry but muscular under a white tank top and a single gold chain. He looked in charge somehow like a pimp or a dealer. The shorter one, surely the grunt, had a mustache and goatee trimmed thin and letters tattooed above his knuckles, unintelligible script on his arms. He wore over-sized jeans that were dark denim and a clean red Yankees ball cap, new-looking with all the stickers on it. Daryl couldn’t stand the major league ball caps that didn’t fit the colors of the team. The Yankees were navy blue not this sinful over-ripe tomato red. Wasn’t nothing sacred anymore. Daryl didn’t move and his heavy breathing quickened. He looked again to his watch. The woman was fidgeting and not looking at the men. She was slowly gathering the chain in her fingers as if it were made of glass. The men paused for a few seconds. The grunt circled a shelving unit near the front by the door. Daryl watched the mirror for the movements of the other, the pimp dealer, down the center aisle. They were doing like the woman and fingering items just for show. He was looking for every detail to help a report and was glad that he had taken the deposit at lunch. He labored to get back to the counter and beside Patricia glancing every other step to the mirror. With there now being three of them, two of them men, he figured they could have the door. He was too old to fight two men and probably wouldn’t last.

The woman was digging at the ankle of her shoe and pulled forth a sizable fold of cash. Daryl expected the paying was also just for show. She peeled a twenty and handed it

to Patricia. The woman was twirling the white beads between her fingers as Patricia made change. What were the odds that three blacks would come in the shop on the same day at the same time? The woman pulled the chain to her chest and sagged a little under it. With all the weight on the front side she looked like she was going to topple right over. They was going to chain the door. Daryl looked to see if one of the men was carrying a padlock. He searched their waistlines and socks, what he could see of them. The pimp dealer was moving slower than the grunt and the grunt had to keep circling that front corner of the store to keep the distance between them. The woman took a couple of steps and one of the chain ends fell to the floor. Daryl wiped his forehead and leaned in front of Patricia, but she shoved him back out of her way. The woman bent to collect the chain but dropped the other end. She doubled it over again and tried to lift it. A couple of steps and she lost control of it.

“Why don’t you help this lady out to her car, Daryl?”

Daryl looked at his watch. “How about she get one of her friends here to help.”

“What makes you think, they’s my friends?” She was making progress under the weight. The pimp dealer was smiling again.

“You even got a car?”

“Help the poor woman, Brother Daryl.” Patricia snapped at him and saying Brother shoved him toward the door. The kerchief was balled in his fist and he brought it to his lip and forehead between his heavy breaths.

“I don’t need no help from yo brother. Thank you just the same.” She nodded to Patricia.

Daryl looked to the mirror as he rocked to the door. The pimp dealer was rounding the metal shelf directly behind the woman and the grunt was moving along the window toward the door. All three were making their way, quickly now, to the door for something. Daryl decided that if he made it to the door before one of them did then they couldn’t chain it shut. He didn’t know what he’d do necessarily if this thing opened up, and he didn’t like them between Patricia and him. The grunt slid out of the store and the bell made a heavy clang. Daryl could see the grunt was reaching into the passenger seat of a gray Chevy Malibu, late 90’s. Daryl made his way to the door to open it for the woman. She glanced quickly at the grunt through the glass of the door. She looked over her shoulder once but continued on. Daryl’s meaty palm pressed the door open for her. He was clean out of breath now and nearly gagging on the thick July air.

“Sure I can’t get that for you, Miss? Y’all must be in quite a fix.” Daryl backed up against the door to hold it open. He tapped his leg lightly with the balled kerchief.

The woman didn’t answer him but she stared solidly into his eyes then looked quickly again over her shoulder. The pimp dealer was closing in on her. Once she made it through the threshold she dropped one end of the chain and drug it on the sidewalk holding about three feet of it in a swag between her hands. Daryl saw her glance through the store window for the dealer. He hadn’t been held up but there was still obvious gravity to the situation. Nothing was adding up and it made him feel guilty, complicit in something deeper than what was before him. He thought for sure that all three of the blacks was together on

something, but now it was obvious the two men was after her. He didn't know exactly why, but he decided to step outside and let the door close. He shifted his weight onto the short left leg standing in front of the door. The woman continued her crisp tip-toed walk, the chain rattling, and made her way down the sidewalk away from the grunt and the car. Daryl drew his breath in when the grunt passed in front of him after the girl. Daryl didn't see a car in the direction the woman was going. The tail link of the chain was popping off the concrete and scattered little pebbles to each side. The door bumped against his heel and the thick sole and Daryl turned his head to the pimp dealer. The dealer's eyes kept shifting to the woman as he cursed and shouted. Daryl decided to make like he was having a coughing fit and bent over and leaned into the door with his large frame. The dealer was pressing hard into it against Daryl's backside and cursing. Daryl hoped Patricia had dialed the police by now and was safe either in the office or crouched behind the counter. It just a few strides the grunt had nearly caught up to the woman. In his left hand was a baseball bat, but only it was a small one, about a foot or so and thick, probably three inches in diameter. It was the type that Daryl's daddy had made to keep beneath the seat of the truck. The grunt made a couple of stuttered skips and stepped on the tail of the tow chain. She must have been expecting it because she stopped without much of a jerk and swung the length she was holding. It connected with his mouth and he doubled over spitting blood and feeling at his nose and teeth. She dropped the chain and started out running. Daryl put his weight back into the door and the dealer was cursing. Daryl felt the cool air of the shop hit his back when he heard the breaking of glass. A few jagged shards went down the back of Daryl's shirt. He felt them pierce into him when the dealer brought his shoulder hard into Daryl's back. The dealer's shove was more than Daryl could take, and he toppled to the concrete.

The door swung open and caught the fat of his calf. He could feel sharp pricks and stings of glass at his shoulders and the blood mixing with sweat down the back of his leg. Daryl tried to climb to all fours. Daryl was having trouble seeing what was in front of him, but he could see enough to make out a handgun held stiff and close to the side of the baggy pant. The grunt had caught up to the woman and pulled her down by the red extensions. Some of the curls had come out in his hand, white beads bouncing on the sidewalk and rolling onto the street. She cried out when the club made contact with her legs. Daryl heard sirens in the distance and the whumps of the club. His chest tightened with the ching-lump-ching-lump-ching of the dealer wrapping the woman's legs in chain. Both men picked her up and slid her into the back seat of the car. Patricia was helping Daryl to his feet when the car sped in reverse and the transmission fell heavy into gear. The pavement screamed beneath the spin of tires, smoke rolled, and for an instant the car was stuck in the pavement. The woman was trying to head butt and bite the grunt. He met her attempts with blows from the club. In an instant the car caught up to its escape and was gone. A police car rounded the corner up the street at the square and came blazing down the street.

Daryl knew there was sound all around him, but none of it seemed at the right speed. There was surely a siren and the concussive whirr of the squad car's pursuit. Patricia was saying something, probably things like, "Daryl, Daryl, God-a-mighty." And "God, that woman, that woman." Daryl was shaking his head and holding the kerchief to his lips. He could feel the sand and particles on his hands and chin. His chest was rising in heaves and he couldn't slow his breathing. Another squad car shot past them in a blare void of the appropriate noise to Daryl, like it was a couple of streets over, another pulled up to the storefront. A deputy helped Patricia pull Daryl to his feet. Daryl remained bent over and

pulled at the pant leg to expose the calf. He hadn't noticed the whiteness of the leg before and was embarrassed by the dimpled softness of it. Patricia was helping him. Daryl fingered the blood from the whiteness of his leg and sinking into the sock. He was trying to push the pant back down to the sole, thicker there near the palm of her hand. The deputy returned to the car and flipped the siren off but kept the lights turning. When the deputy returned and could attend to Daryl, Patricia ran inside. The deputy asked questions and Daryl responded as best as he could recollect. After a while the deputy left. Daryl's breathing was close to its normal heaviness and he strode inside to the counter. Patricia had gone to the back room. Daryl stared through the jagged glass of the door to the scarlet strands of the woman's hair blowing in the street.

"You're going to be okay." Patricia's statement caught him off guard and he turned sharply to her. He hadn't realized that she was already at his side, having returned from the back with the medical kit and a bowl of water. "Let's get you fixed up." She was so definitive, so much more than he.

Patricia knelt down and lifted the pant again. Daryl winced as she dipped the cloth into a bowl and lightly dabbed at the gash. She was wiping above and below it in light mild arcs. A graying strand of her once-auburn hair fell in front of her nose and she blew it to the side. It fell back to its annoyance and she blew at it again. Daryl watched her tan ring-less left hand pat the cloth at the white softness. She blew at the strand again. Daryl's chest began to heave and his thick right palm cradled her chin and pulled it up to him as his left Baptist pointer pushed the strand back over her ear. It was then that he noticed her slow steady tears. They did not stop when he held her to him. They did not stop as she swept the

sidewalk clean of the debris. He could see the tear-streaked cheeks when she bent over. She had to use the back of her hand to wipe her eyes so that her fingers could keep the wavy red strands in the pan that was full of glass and rock and beads and sand.

