Heaven Lee and Other Stories from Caney Hollow

by

David Crane

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Something was wrong with my birth certificate. For as long as I could remember, I'd been Claude Edwin Taylor, son of Earl and Vera Spencer, and that had been good enough for everyone until now. My father called me Sonny from the get-go, and that's the only name anyone other than my family ever knew I had. I was fifty-two years old, and I'd spent my life working, studying, defending my country, and worrying about money, war, women, and taxes. And now, according to the Department of State, it appeared I'd never existed. Or more accurately, I soon learned, my existence had been incorrectly recorded. I felt like a man who'd eaten fried chicken every night for a half-century and then one evening, his regular waiter brings out a tossed salad and says, "I think you ought to skip the chicken and eat something healthy tonight." He might be right but, after fifty-two years, he'd better find a drumstick somewhere or
that salad bowl will end up in a bad place. You don't fiddle around with stuff that's worked for that long.

I would have never discovered anything was wrong if it hadn't been for Jill, my girlfriend of almost two years. Jill, a runner who liked to travel and run marathons, had trophies and T-shirts from places all over, and now she had a chance to run in Greece, the site of the original marathon. She had registered for the race, made the travel arrangements, and the only issues left were our passports. Hers would be no problem.

The letter I received from the government said, "We need your help in providing the necessary evidence of United States citizenship. The evidence you submitted is not acceptable for passport purposes because the birth was recorded more than one year after it occurred.

"I don't believe this crap," I said. "The state department doesn't believe I'm an American citizen. I've only lived in this country for five decades. I wonder what country they think I'm a citizen of."

"Let me see the letter," Jill said as she took the paper from my hand.

"I don't understand the problem," she said. "I don't think they're saying you're not a citizen. I think they just need some clarification."

"Well, it's an insult. I spent a year in Vietnam, and nobody worried about my citizenship then."

"What do they mean about your birth certificate being recorded too late?" Jill asked.

"I don't know what happened," I said. "I was adopted. I never knew my birth parents."

"I can't believe you've never told me this," she said. "We've been together two frigging years, and you never thought to tell me you were adopted?"

"It's not a big deal."
I told her how my birth mother abandoned me when I was a year old somewhere near Dothan -- in south Alabama, how I ended up in an orphanage and was adopted when I was two, how Earl and Vera brought me right home to Tennessee. At some point, my birth certificate was changed to eliminate any reference to my birth parents. On the public records, they were erased and replaced by the Spencers.

I knew it was important to Jill for me to get that passport and go with her to Greece. And to do that, I had to go to Montgomery where the Alabama Department of Public Health was headquartered. I lived in Caney Hollow, Tennessee, nearly three hundred miles away, but the lawyer I'd called told me I had to get the folks in public health to put a stamp on my birth certificate to certify I'd been born in Alabama. All adopted children of a certain age had altered birth certificates, apparently, and almost none of them contained any kind of accreditation.

We weren't out of town fifteen minutes when Jill began: "I always wondered why you didn't look anything like the rest of your family," she said. "Your mother and your sister are so short, and you're a tall guy. Your red hair's not a family mark, either."

"I looked out of place, all right," I said. "But kids don't worry about that kind of stuff."

"It's not just the height," she said. "You're different in other ways, too."

"Well, I'm sure I disappointed my mom and dad," I said. "Mamma wanted a preacher and Daddy wanted a ballplayer, and they got an engineer."

"You never went looking?"

"For what?" I said. "I had a home, didn't I?"

Jill gave me a funny look, not unlike the one she used whenever I told her I didn't want to go for a run. "But you were an athlete," she would insist, as if I was missing a crucial fact about my own past.
The lady in Montgomery understood my issue right away.

"There's still a few guys like you who have this problem. Have a seat and let me have your certificate. I'll be back in a few minutes."

When she returned, she handed me the document I had given her, only now it contained a stamp certifying that I had been born in Houston County, Alabama. So simple and so silly: somebody having to attest something we already knew.

At that moment, I felt something I had never felt before. Until then, I'd never cared to find out the identity of my birth parents. Even though I'd rarely thought about it, I'd always assumed that my birth mother had likely spent her life under a bridge or in a trailer park, doing tricks for the treat of the day. Only a woman like that could abandon her child. And who would want to meet her?

I'd spent some time playing baseball in the minor leagues, but Jill was wrong if she thought I'd been a dedicated athlete. I'd been hoping it would be my ticket out of Caney Hollow. Of course, I'd ended up back home, but I'd brought a little wisdom with me. For instance, standing in the courthouse, it seemed I was in a moment similar to that second in baseball where a hitter must decide whether to take a pitch or swing. This, I decided, was a hittable pitch.

"Is there any way I could see my original birth certificate?" I asked.

"I'll give you the request form. You may complete it here, but we'll only provide the original document by mail. It takes time to get your application approved."

Jill sent me a look, but my hand was already out.

Within twenty minutes I'd submitted the form, and Jill and I were back on the interstate, headed home.
Jill was on a six-mile training run, one of her short spurts when, a month later, the letter containing my *Certified Certificate of Live Birth* arrived from the Alabama Department of Public Health. I took it outside to the deck with a bottle of whiskey and a glass.

The new birth certificate, I saw, also had its gaps. Larry Allen Woods, seven pounds, six ounces, had been born to Charlene Blaise Woods in Dothan, Alabama. The side where the father's information belonged was blank, except for the line containing his name: *Unknown.* I didn't need a detective to figure out the rest. I was a child born to a whore. No wonder I could never become a preacher. The cause was official now: bad blood.

I could investigate further, but my gut said I'd taken this too far. This is what happens when a man surrenders to curiosity and refuses to be content, when a person feels like they have to know everything. You're better off remaining in the dark, knowing little and sharing nothing. No need to change your diet at this stage, I told myself, keep pounding the fried chicken.

But here's the thing: As I was sitting on the deck, a couple of purple martins landed inside a plastic gourd I had mounted on a pole. All our neighbors had built similar nests, and the martins would return from South America every spring and stay with us until fall. This species has a special relationship with humans. Even the Indians had built artificial nests to accommodate them. Legend had it that each purple martin would return to his particular summer home, his adopted station (and our neighbors were certain that, each spring, they welcomed back the same bird that had left the previous fall), but despite the pleasures of their summer visit, the purple martins would return without fail to their habitat in the Amazon. Watching the martins gave me a strange feeling, and, the next night at dinner, I told Jill.

"I called a buddy of mine," I went on, "a lawyer who handles domestic problems."

Jill raised her eyebrows. "You need a *divorce lawyer*?" she asked.
“Divorce attorneys use the best private investigators. I don't have time to track Charlene Woods down in Dothan, Alabama, and besides, if she’d gotten married and changed her name or moved far away or even died, I'd give up, not knowing what to do.”

“Sounds like you’re on a journey,” Jill said, and I could see she was worried, thinking no doubt of all the work she’d done to corral me into the trip to Greece, that the last thing her Sonny had ever wanted to do was go on some kind of quest to uncover his identity.

Within only a few days, I got a report with more information than I expected. The woman was alive and living in Dothan. It was out of my hands now. Suddenly I was a purple martin, and some old forgotten nest in Dothan, Alabama was calling to me.

Jill wouldn’t come. This, I realized, was a surprising kindness. She knew me well enough to know I was on my own trek and needed no one else’s voice in my head. I got into Dothan on a Friday night in August and found a Sleep Inn on the beltway. Sleep Inn. Ha. I didn’t get much that first night. I was up and out the door as soon as a decent hour arrived.

According to the detective's report, Charlene Woods had become Charlene Holiday, 77 Cleopatra Circle. The road I took led me through an old run-down industrial section, and for the longest time, I remained convinced that my destination would be a trailer park off a gravel road. It might not be a bad thing if it turned out that the old woman lived as I’d imagined. Perhaps I could park on the edge of the lot and view things from a distance, get a glance of the old slut and leave, my imagination vindicated and my curiosity satisfied. I would have seen a field of mud and not gotten muddy, I told myself.

Experience should have taught me that assumptions can mislead. Cleopatra Circle was in a neighborhood of homes that cost a lot more money than mine. My Ford Explorer didn't belong on these streets, and I knew I might get fined for parking a junk car amidst a row of BMW's.
Number 77 wasn't hard to find. The numbers stood out on the mailbox, partially covered with a pink Mandevilla vine, in front of a brick, two-story house, old-style with white columns. The lawn looked as good as any ballfield I'd seen, and I'd seen a slew throughout Tennessee. I began to wish I'd rented a pickup truck so I could pretend to be service tech looking for a broken furnace or washing machine. That way, I could feign to need directions, figure out if the old lady was still heartless, and leave. It was a coward's way, though, and I'd come a long way to find some answers.

I hadn't figured out an introduction, but I had to get my foot in the door and be certain I was at the right place. I decided I'd say I was tracking distant relatives. If she was disinterested, I could leave without provocation. If she was frail, I could tell her the truth and she might have a heart attack and die. Mamma's boy would have his revenge and walk away. I approached the doorbell.

After the second ring, a middle-aged woman, tall, thin, with fire-engine red hair answered the door. "I'm looking for Charlene Holiday, Charlene Woods," I began babbling. "I'm Larry Woods, from Tennessee, and I've traced some of my kin to this area. I think Charlene Woods may be a distant relative. If she is here, could I speak with her briefly? I promise this will only take a few minutes."

"My mother used to be Charlene Woods, but she's in no condition to speak to you," the woman said. "Besides, I don't know of any relatives in Tennessee."

I persisted. "I'd just like to see her and ask a question or two. I'll stay here on the porch."

The woman – Charlene's daughter, my sister! – looked me over. Although she was clearly still uncertain about me, her eyes seemed to lose some of their suspicion, and her stare became less intense.
"Well, "she said, "I can't say you don't look like one of mother's kin. Come on in." She
opened the door wider

"My mother can't talk, but you can see her."

She left me in the middle of a great room that was almost as big as the Caney Hollow
courthouse. The décor – all chintz and mahogany, china dogs and crystal candy dishes – was
superior to anything I'd ever seen, and I knew I wouldn't sit on anything unless I was asked. I
wasn't in a double-wide, no sir.

In a few minutes, the woman returned, pushing an old lady in a wheelchair. The woman
was boney and frail, with hair mostly gray, with a few tinges of red. Her eyes told me all I
needed to know about this encounter. They were open but saw nothing. I realized with a thud
there would be no meeting of the minds, no revenge, no answers.

"She has Alzheimer's," the woman said. "The disease has taken her most of her memory.
I'm her primary caregiver, and she hardly recognizes me. All you can do is look, and all she can
do is stare."

Stare we both did.

She had my nose. Or I had hers. And her long thin face. Eyebrows that peaked as if she
was ready to ask a question. Her eyes were a milky blue, but her daughter's, like mine, still had a
hint of what Jill called aquamarine. I knew, without a doubt, this was the woman who had borne
me and let me go. I only wanted to ask two questions: Why? Why had she given me away? And
who was Mr. Unknown? But she could never tell me, and I would never know unless her
daughter had been let in on the secret.

"Perhaps you could answer a couple of questions," I said.

"If they won't take long," she said. "I have errands to run, and a sitter will be here any
minute."
"Do you have any siblings?" I asked.

"No," the woman said.

"Did your mother ever mention anything about children from a previous marriage?"

"I don't feel comfortable, Mr. Woods, discussing my mother's life with a stranger."

"I understand," I said. "I know this is sensitive, but I only want to be certain I've found the right woman."

"All I can say, Mr. Woods, is my mother had a difficult life before she met my father. He was a proud man, and my mother did her best to conceal her previous life, mentioning only small pieces of her past even after he died. She felt some things should stay buried and done with."

Her words sounded firm and confident, but the secure look that had been on her face when I first saw her was gone. I could see the pieces in her mind begin to press together, forming possibilities constructed around a middle-aged man, tall, thin, red-haired, appearing on her mother's porch determined to learn more about a woman who used to be Charlene Woods. She could easily end the conversation and send me away, but I'd come too far to retreat. I had to find out how much this woman knew. Behind me, a car pulled into the drive. The sitter had arrived.

"Listen," I said. "You've been very kind, and I know I've got to go. But I'm pretty sure I'm a part of your mother's life from a long time ago, a part she probably wanted to hide and forget. You can't say I don't look the part, can you?"

"Are you really the one?" she asked as she hid her mouth with her hand.

"Perhaps we could meet later and figure this out?" I asked.

She stared at me some more, toting up more similarities, I'd guess, before finally agreeing, "I'll meet you at Applebee's, on the beltway. Around five."

"I'll be there," I said. "And from now on, you can call me Sonny."
I got to Applebee’s at five on the dot. My half-sister was seated alone at the far end of the bar, a half-empty bourbon and coke in front of her. My favorite drink. I ordered one of my own before I turned to her.

“Am I late?” I said.

She looked to me like a CEO or politician, dressed in a suit and black shoes with short, spiked heels. But it wasn't her clothes that I cared about. She had light, pale skin, red hair, those blue eyes, a tall frame, and I realized this was the first time I had ever sat at a table with someone others would suspect was my blood kin.

"Not at all," she said. "My name is Jackie, by the way. I realized that I hadn’t introduced myself back at the house. Mr...."

"Sonny," I interrupted as I watched her fingers fidget on her glass.

"Sonny," she half-smiled and shook her head. "Of course, your name is Sonny.

“So...my mother,” she began, and I could tell that once more, she was cataloguing our similarities, just as I had.


I told her about the birth certificate and how I had decided to pursue my birth mother. When I told her about my adoption, she asked if I'd had any problems growing up.

"No, for a while after I learned I was adopted, I was afraid of going back to an orphanage, every time I screwed up – which I did, often,” I said. “But my mother made me feel like I was her real son. I didn’t learn about the adoption until I was in the second grade, and if she hadn't been afraid that someone else would tell me, she likely would have never disclosed it. If it hadn't been for my father, I would have turned out to be a real mamma's boy."

"Tell me about your mother," I said.
"She's been known as Miss Charlie to everyone that knows her. She was never a spiritual or religious woman, but she's always been very proper, you know. During my childhood, at least. I didn't know for years what a turbulent life she led in her younger days. Her folks left her on her own at an early age, I think, and she was so pretty and wildly confident and restless as all get out. When she was just a kid, she fell in love with a ballplayer on the circuit and took off after him. I don't think her family even realized she was gone for a few weeks and then seem to have merely shrugged. Maybe, after the relationship went south, she wrote them. Maybe she asked for help and they ignored her. I don't know. I do know she had a tough time. Growing up, she was always telling me the terrible things that would happen to wayward girls, really overdoing it, like I couldn't figure out how this woman had such detailed knowledge of all the stuff she was warning me about."

"A year or so later, she came home, a different girl, it seems. Subdued and driven to find a stable life. She was still just a girl, rich with charm and sex appeal, and before long, she married a wealthy man who gave her more than she could ever have imagined. I've often wondered how much my father knew about her past. After he died, she eventually told me about you and how she let you go."

"Did she ever show any regret?" I asked.

"No, but understand these conversations were always incomplete. They were clearly painful, and I always got the feeling she was holding something back. Did someone force her to give you up? Did she think she could never come home with you? I don't know, but I'm certain she felt it was something she had to do, that giving you up was the best possible course."

"Why?" I asked.

"She was twenty years old and had come back to Dothan with no money and no boyfriend in sight. That would be a difficult situation for a young woman now. Imagine how
hard it must have been in those days. I don’t think she ever even told her family, other than an elderly aunt who took her in and, later, even introduced her to my own father. "

"Well, there is such a thing as consequences and responsibility. The only reason I’m here is because I got lucky and two fine people adopted me. Who was my father? Did she ever say?"

"All I know is he was that same minor league baseball player she fell for, passing through Dothan when his team was playing a few games here. I did some research and learned that Dothan used to have a team--Class D ball."

"Back in those days, there was a league called the Alabama-Florida League and lots of towns had teams," I said. “It was a way for young players to climb the ladder to the big leagues and play for some real money.”

Jackie gave me a look, but I wasn’t ready to tell her about my own ball-playing career. I wasn’t ready to own Miss Charlie’s wayward boyfriend as my father, even as I could imagine him arriving in Dothan, charming a pretty redhead into following him on the circuit – at least for a while.

"After my father died, Miss Charlie would sometimes turn on a baseball game and watch until she couldn’t stand it any longer. I once asked her why she even bothered but she never answered. You know what I think? I think her young fellow made it to major leagues, maybe became a coach, and she would see him on TV until the memory got too strong for her to watch."

"Funny thing," I said, after a pause. "All these years I’ve assumed my mother was lower than dirt. I’ve never blamed my father at all."

"Would it have made things better if you had?" she asked.

"I doubt it," I said. "But it helps to see another side."

What I didn’t say, what I couldn’t even say to myself yet, was how all my hatred for my birth mother had evaporated. I knew what it was like to be restless and yearning. I knew, too,
what it felt like to move from that world into a more ordered one. You felt relief, maybe, but you also felt loss. In Miss Charlie’s case, she also likely felt real heartbreak, which only made her crave the ordered life more, anything to keep the pain away. Nah, I couldn’t say a word of this to the daughter she’d raised.

“What about you, Jackie?” I asked. “Surely you’ve had more things to do than research Miss Charlie’s old boyfriend.”

“I became the girl Miss Charlie wanted, followed the rules, became a psychologist, opened a practice, and married a doctor.”

“And?” I asked.

“You know what they say about doctors. Never be the first wife.”

“So you did all the right things and got screwed. How would a psychologist explain all of this?”

“I can’t. But I wonder if things would have changed for either of us if our roles had been reversed. Would we have turned out differently?”

“So we had no choice in our destinies?”

“We chose to follow our wills. We’ve got that in common.”

And what else? I could tell we were both wondering now.

“Are you a runner?” Jackie asked.

“Hell, no.”

“Good. My ex was a runner—drove me crazy. Everywhere we went he had to disappear for a couple of hours to do his runs.”

“Jill – my girlfriend – she runs. Really runs. Marathons. The training can get on your nerves,” I said. “But her running is why I’m here, you know.”

I told Jackie about Greece and the passport snafu that led me to her mother’s door
“Well, here’s to runners then,” Jackie toasted, raising her nearly empty glass. She was getting tipsy, and I could see her acknowledging that in the careful way she put her glass back on the table. But despite the drinks I’d had, I was clearer than ever.

"Do you want to see Miss Charlie again?" she asked as she began to gather herself to leave me.

"I doubt it. She can’t give me any answers, and I can’t see the woman you see. But one more thing: If she weren't sick, do you think Miss Charlie would have been glad to see me?"

Jackie paused, tilted her head, and truly considered my question. She shook her head, and my heart unexpectedly lurched with disappointment. But Jackie surprised me again.

"I can't answer that," she said. “When we would watch the games on TV, I was convinced she was a woman who couldn't decide about her past, whether to accept it or attempt to erase it.”

It was dark by then, and I’d had too much liquor and too much excitement to drive all the way back to Caney Hollow. The motel would do for another night, I decided, and so I set off, still reeling from the fact of Miss Charlie and the news Jackie had handed me. I was also, I realized, even more hammered than I’d previously thought. When, just before the beltway, I passed an empty baseball park lit only by a single security light, it seemed like a good place to sit and sober up before I called Jill. From the bleachers, I stared at the field. All of the bases were still in place.

When I was nineteen I played in the minor league down in Rocky Mount, trying hard to become good enough to play in the majors one day. I was never a good hitter, but I had wheels -- a term ballplayers use when a guy is fast and steals lots of bases. I remembered how I could tell
when the pitcher was about to make his move, how I would break for second base like a rocket bound for the moon.

The memory propelled me off the bleachers, straight onto first base. Despite the liquor, I realized I wasn't as good as I used to be, but I knew that, for just one time, I could be as good as I ever was. I broke for second base and my legs felt no different than they used to feel when I stole all those bases. As I neared second, I dove and did a hard belly slide onto the bag. I pronounced myself safe. Again and again, I played the game, dramatically succeeding at every base. I rolled over and felt the dirt on my shirt and pants. I placed my hand on my face, and it too was covered with infield dust, the dust of a traveled man. I looked up at the starry sky and felt good, yet small, and nothing more than part of a show that was being played on a big stage. It was a deep south Alabama sky that was on watch as I lay on the ground.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a flashing light from a police car stopped by the gate. Two policemen were walking toward me. They would ask my name, and why I was there. “Are you from around here?” they might say. “Do you have kin nearby?” I'd tell them I was a purple martin, just arrived from my adopted station and acting in a natural way.
I was twenty-six and living alone in a rented trailer outside Caney Hollow. A year before, my parents had decamped to Arizona, where my father could watch the major league baseball teams practice on the off-season and continue to feel the sting of my failure. My sister Eileen, still the golden child of the family, had gone along. As far as I know, I hadn’t been invited, and I wouldn’t have gone if I had been. I had no plan except to have no plan – my first mistake – and that’s how I landed in jail with Lunk, who did have plans enough for the pair of us. His first one was to steal a passel of White Crosses from his short-sighted, diet-addicted Aunt Sue and hide them in the shed behind my rented trailer. Needing the promise of a pick-me-up, I thoroughly approved. The truck, though – well, that hadn’t been part of the deal.

We’d managed only a few miles past the Caney Hollow town limits before the sheriff, Old Bones himself, pulled us over, and Lunk surprised the hell out of me by hanging his head
and saying, yessir, yessir, nosir, nosir. Less than an hour later, Bones’ deputy slammed the
holding cell door behind us. He was barely out of earshot, when I turned on Lunk.

"Damn it, Lunk, you should have told me that truck wasn't yours."

"Listen, Sonny. It doesn't make any difference. In fact,..." Lunk seemed to cheer up here.
the stolen truck might turn their attention from all the speed we stashed under the seat."

He was wrong about that, of course. Aunt’s Sue’s stash—at least a hundred White Horse
beauties—might be substantial enough to have us booked first as amphetamine distributors, and
secondly as car thieves. We learned this when we were moved later that morning into what felt
like more permanent quarters, a four-man cell at the other end of the jail.

Lunk barely got out his cheerful theory about the speed when one of our new cellmates,
Earl, nodded with what seemed like amused recognition.

"Sure, it will," he said.

"You guys are crazy driving a stolen truck around Caney Hollow like that," the other
cellmate—Floyd—pronounced.

"How do you know why we're here?" Lunk asked.

As he pointed to his cell mate, Earl said, "Floyd here is tight with the police chief. Just a
few minutes ago, while you all were getting processed, old Bones dropped by and told us that
company was coming—said you guys are our competitors. Floyd and I are distributors,
ourselves. But screw Bones, you know. This could develop into a real opportunity. When we all
get out we could merge our operations—expand our business."

"It's happened before," Lunk agreed, with good cheer.

I hadn't known Lunk very long and was surprised to learn, unlike for me, this wasn't his
first time in county lockup. Earl and Floyd were delighted to hear it. The three of them formed a
kind of brotherhood and immediately started gossiping, bandying about names of men they'd
met during previous spells in jail. For them, this turn of events was merely another chapter in the careers of three operators.

I won't say I'm a sensitive guy. Lord knows, I've spent enough time in locker rooms, but the exposed toilet by the cell wall troubled me. I knew the time would come when I'd have to take my turn on it but I needed to think about how I could share my private moments with three other men. I was determined to be undeterred but it wouldn't be easy. The bunk beneath me felt like concrete, and I had to bend my sore leg with the bad knee to avoid hitting the upper bunk.

"You all better just get your stories straight," Earl advised. "You might stand a chance then."

As soon as Earl and Floyd turned away to continue their card game, I squeezed Lunk's arm and whispered, "Where did you get that truck?"

"Dadeville," he said. "I went there with my aunt to get her eyes checked. She couldn't drive herself home after her eye examination and I agreed to be her chauffeur.

"On the way, we got stuck behind the mother of all school buses -- must have had twenty slow-ass kids getting off -- and while we're stuck there, I see we're beside an auto shop with lots of slick cars and trucks parked in the lot. No fence. No cameras. I notice this mechanic backing the truck out of the garage and parking it on the far edge of the lot. And I see that when he gets out, he does a double-take at the keys and yellow repair order in his hand, opens up the driver's door again, and when he emerges, he's empty-handed. I'm thinking, he's left the keys in the truck on purpose!

"The whole plan comes to me by the time we get to the doctor's office. Aunt Sue gets out, and I wait a little while, then call and tell the receptionist to tell Aunt Sue I'm having car trouble. Then I stash my old car in a grocery store parking lot a good ways down the road and hightail it back to the garage. The truck I want is still right where the mechanic left it, parked
well behind the garage, at least a hundred feet away. I wait until the next customer goes inside
the shop, and while everyone’s busy, hop in my new vehicle and drive right off the lot, boom!
Ten minutes later, I’ve got it parked behind your shed, and I’m hitching back up the road to pick
up my car. I caught a ride with a fellow, took me all the way back to the grocery store. It was the
easiest thing I’d ever done. Hell, I was only ten minutes late for Aunt Sue."

"She was standing on the corner outside the office. She couldn't see a thing with those
drops in her eyes. When we got to her place we went inside, I made her a cup of tea, and while
she was fussing with her milk and sugar, I filled up a sandwich bag with her magic tablets and
was on my way."

By now our cellmates were listening again, and Earl asked, "What were you going to do
with the truck?"

"Hide it in Sonny’s tractor shed and sell it as soon as I could," Lunk said. “But you know,
it was driving so well!”

"That’s where you made your big mistake," Earl said. "Always have a buyer before you
steal a vehicle." He smiled slyly and I could see that he thought of himself as a professional.

It was five o'clock now and apparently time for supper because Floyd was banging on the
cell door and hollering, "Where’s Mrs. Hoedunker and the baloney?"

“What’s for dinner?” Lunk asked, as if he were visiting old friends.

"Same thing we always have," Floyd said. "Baloney with gravy and light-bread. Except
on Sundays when the old lady will bring chicken wings and gizzards."

The police chief came down the hall and approached the cell. You could see how he’d
got his nickname. He was tall – even taller than me – and incredibly skinny, with pronounced
cheekbones and ears that spread like the wings on a hawk. His eyes were sunken and his face
reminded me of the old buccaneer symbol of the skull and cross-bones.
"Hey, Bones," Earl said. "Are those really your ribs or is that a herringbone suit you're wearing?"

"Listen up," Bones said. "Mrs. Hoedunker's on her way with supper. You clowns stay off the shitter and stay decent so she can bring the food in."

"Will we ever get something besides baloney?" Earl said.

"You're lucky to get anything," he said.

"Bones, addiction is an illness. We're sick men, you know," Earl said. "We need good nutrition."

When the chief left, Earl told us that, after weeks in county lock-up (weeks! I thought), he and Floyd had taken a liking to Mrs. Hoedunker. "At first she was just a big old lady bringing the meals," he said. "But now we've begun to think about her in a special way and dream about her when we're in our bunks at night. Just yesterday, when she handed Floyd his plate, he hinted to her that one day they might have a future."

The old lady was the same as Earl had described her, a big, middle-aged woman with a constant smile. While she distributed the plates, Bones supervising, she pointed to me and Lunk.

"Will these two be with us for a while?"

I'll admit I held my breath.

"I suspect they will," he said. "Stealing trucks and distributing speed will land you in our luxury hotel for a long time, maybe a ride downstate, too. It'll also get your picture in the crime section of the papers."

Earl said, "People can see your picture every day, Bones. It's on the label of every iodine bottle ever sold."

Earl and Floyd and Lunk laughed, even big Mrs. Hoedunker smiled, but I hung my head, grateful only that my parents wouldn't be around to peruse Caney Hollow's weekly paper.
That night, as we lay in our bunks I asked, "How did we end up here, Lunk? Just this morning things were going so good."

I thought a little more: "Or could have been," I corrected.

"Things aren't so bad now," he said. "Like Bones said--we're in a luxury hotel with three meals a day. No taxes. No bills. In a way this isn't so bad. You've got to change the way you think, Sonny boy."

I was irritated by his acceptance of our sorry state. "Just out of curiosity," I said, "have you ever been in a nice hotel, Lunk?"

"Once," he said. "I remember at check-out time the towels were so thick I could hardly close my suitcase." Guffaws sounded from the other bunks.

I turned my head and wondered out loud what all Earl and Floyd had done to land in jail, why they thought they were such experts.

Earl's voice mumbled, serious for once and low and intimate in the close cell, "Too many bad mistakes, Sonny. Too many bad mistakes."

A week later, a week filled with fried baloney and boasts and constipation, Lunk and I went before the judge. A lawyer jawed for us, and as Lunk couldn't raise a bond, he would have to stay in jail here until the trial, which might be months away. Because I had no previous record, I was placed on probation and released. It seemed a good time to make a few changes. I was three months behind on the trailer's rent, and the court costs had emptied out what little money I'd had left in a checking account. So I put the few clothes I had in a duffel bag and scoured the trailer, coming up with just shy of five dollars in loose change, the coins in my pocket constituting my entire wealth. Well, that and the bus ticket my sister had sent me a few weeks
back, a ticket that would take me well out of this town but straight back into the family. I could call my old girlfriend. She’d take me in – and take me to church, too. I tried to think back to the last time I felt happy, really happy, and thought of Cecil, always my best and only fallback. That was my second mistake.

When we were in high school, Cecil and I were the golden-haired boys on the baseball team, catting around together. We owned Caney Hollow and for a while could do no wrong. But then I got injured and hobbled away into one mistaken job after another. And Cecil’s girlfriend snapped him up and locked the door, imagining he’d be his own star without the likes of me to hold him back. When he flamed out, I heard she put him to work, building a life. She took over his daddy’s little farm when the old man died and sent Cecil out picking up handyman jobs. When I used to run with Cecil—go to bars and take some road trips together -- Faye seemed to know every detail, and she had made a fierce effort to keep us separated when they got married. She kept him so busy, he never got out much with me, and we fell out of touch. Didn’t mean we weren’t still the best of friends, I’d like to tell her.

Cecil and Faye lived on farm a dozen miles from the jail and, when I arrived, Faye was the only one there.

“Hello, Faye,” I said, “Is Cecil around?”

When we were in high school, Faye had been a stringy little dishwater blonde, always shadowing Cecil. She’d hardly say a word, but when Cecil called, she’d come running. Now
nearly ten years later, Faye had grown into a raw-boned, stoutly built woman who loved to boss people around. I guess the kind view might be that she’d come into her own. I found her terrifying and usually tried to avoid her when I spotted her around town.

“No, he’s off somewhere doing handy work. What are you doing here?”

“Just nearby. Thought I’d drop by and see how he’s getting along.”

I could tell she was suspicious. She eyed me up and down, but my less-than-shining appearance must have convinced her that I wasn’t a threat, that I hadn’t arrived to take her Cecil on for a bender at the old Roadhouse, because she pointed at the porch and told me to “Go sit,” as if I were an old dog she had to put up with. Even as I eased onto the porch swing to wait, I knew I’d never get approval from Faye to stay. Like most couples around Caney Hollow, Cecil was still a skinny, easy going man who took life as it came. He and Faye had gotten married after Cecil inherited the farm, and from the looks of the place, I knew who was running things. Cecil had never been a neat guy and would let things go until forced to clean up. The yard was trimmed and, at a distance, the farmhouse looked as if it was ready to go on the market. Faye’s footprint was everywhere.

I waited an hour before Cecil arrived in a pickup fitted with a metal toolbox and racks loaded with ladders. Surprised to see me, he said, “Where have you been, Sonny? I haven’t seen you for so long, I thought you’d left these parts. Didn’t your folks take off with Eileen?”

I spit it right out: “I’ve had a lot of stuff going on and got in a jam. I thought maybe you could help.”

“Let me guess, Sonny. You’re on the run and need a place to stay.”

“Not exactly on the run,” I said. “But the other part is true.”
He went inside and came out with a beer for me.

"Hang out here a bit," he said. "I'll go talk to Faye and see what I can do. She's kind of funny about stuff like this."

After about fifteen minutes, the front door opened quickly and Faye appeared with a steely look in her eyes. Cecil was behind her and said, "I told Faye you can help me with my odd jobs around town. I'm really behind on things and it's a blessing you came along when you did."

"The hell with that!" she said. "If he's staying here his ass is mine."

She went inside and returned with some pillows and bedding and directed me to a small camper that was parked about a hundred feet from the house. It hadn't been used in a while and the crickets had taken it over. It wasn't perfect but it beat sleeping on the ground or inside a jail.

At six the next morning, Faye rapped on the camper door and said breakfast was on the table at the farmhouse. As I finished eating she said, "You're going to wash windows today—inside and out. Do the upstairs first. The ladder is in the barn."

I scrubbed the windows until midday, when lunch was served. While I ate, Faye went upstairs and returned in a few minutes with a sour look on her face. "I don't know where you learned to wash windows but you must have slept through the lecture. Those windows are filthy. Not a damn one looks like it's had any soap or a rag on it. Now get your ass back up there and clean those windows."

When Cecil returned that afternoon he saw me on the ladder and whistled at the clean windows.

"You better knock off and have a beer," he said.

"You sure about that?" I said. "No offense, but that woman of yours is a driver."
“Come on,” he said. “I’ll take care of it.” He went inside and brought out a beer. “Supper won’t be ready for a couple of hours and I want to show you around. Get in the truck.”

We pulled onto a dirt road and drove about twenty minutes on a path that was almost impassable. Fallen branches and protruding tree roots gave our ride enough bounce that my head hit the cab ceiling repeatedly. Finally, when the truck could go no further, we got out and walked for another ten minutes until we reached a creek where Cecil pointed to several fruit jars that were partially submerged next to the bank. He retrieved the nearest and opened it.

“Have a sip,” he said.

As soon as the top was removed the vapor hit me hard.

“Damn, Cecil. Are you a moonshiner?”

“Yep,” he said. “Amateur, though—only been operating for a year. Learned it from my grandfather who was a real pro. I know how to build the still and make the stuff, but I’m still learning the business side, figuring things out as I go. Faye doesn’t know it but this enterprise is paying our bills. Go on. Have a swallow.”

To my surprise, it was smooth, no burning in my throat or gut.

“So you’re no handyman—you come out here every day and make this stuff?”

“No, I am a handyman, but business gets slow sometimes. I’ll work in town a while and then I’ll go to the woods for a few days. Let’s just say I have a side business.”

“So the folks in town know you as a fix-it man and would never suspect you of anything, even if they found your still.”
"You got it," Cecil grinned. "None of this operation's on my property. But I'll tell you something, Sonny. Making whiskey is hard work. If you're a sorry-ass, you can't do it. You've got to haul and lift fifty pound bags of rye meal. The barrels, when they're filled with mash, weigh more than two men can lift. It requires muscle, know-how, and grit. The process takes several days, and you've got to monitor each stage. And then, after it's inside the jars, you've got to distribute it. That's my biggest problem now—the distribution."

"How so?"

"I don't like to do that, myself. It's the only part of the business that can't be done in the woods, so I've hired a couple of local boys to push it. They get paid commissions and a few jars for their own use."

"What's the problem?"

"The boys I use have disappeared, been gone for a couple of weeks now. Might have taken off. Might have got pinched. In any case, distribution has halted, and that's where you can help. I'll show you where to leave the stuff and pick up the payments."

"I've never done anything like this, Cecil. I'm an amateur, too."

"Well, you can stay around the house and work for Faye, or you can help me out. It's your call." He handed me a small jar of whiskey to carry back to the camper and said, "Have a taste tonight but hide the bottle so Faye can't find it."

I took that jar and was grateful for it.

On the way back to the farmhouse, I asked how he could pry me away from Faye.

"She seems to have a plan," I said.
“It won’t be easy but I’ll tell her I need you for a couple of days, tell her the handy work is getting backed up. Just give her another two or three days of work at the house, and she’ll settle down.”

We had supper, Faye barking out the next day’s orders, then I returned to the camper, opened the jar, and had a good long swallow. Cecil had told me it was 140 proof—almost pure alcohol—and to go easy on it. After a few sips more, I lay on the bed and fell asleep.

The following morning a splash of cold water on my head awakened me.

“Your breakfast is on the table,” Faye said. “Now get up and go into the kitchen and eat it. Then finish the windows.”

She waited until I moved, and then while I attempted to get out of the bed, she spotted my jar of moonshine.

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

Those high-school years roaming the county with Cecil hadn’t been for naught. The lie was ready on my tongue.

“I went for a walk near the road last night,” I said, “and a mile or so down that road, this fellow drove by and handed me a bottle—told me it was complimentary.”

“What fellow? What kind of car?”

I shrugged. “It was dark. I couldn’t see too well.”

“You lying son of a bitch. Nobody would believe that.”

“It’s true,” I said. “I was shocked, myself.”
Faye bit her lip. "Well, I’m not saying I believe you, but there is a moonshiner around here, keeping half of the men in Caney Hollow blacked out. Every once in a while Cecil comes home smelling like a still and drunk as a boiled owl. If our chief of police wasn’t such a moron, whoever is making that stuff would be in jail, and if they ever catch him, I’ll be the first one to give him a good kick in the nuts. Down the road, you say? What direction was he coming from?"

"Never mind that," I said. "I’d better get to work."

I lurched a little as I got to my feet and nearly fell into Faye’s arms. She steadied me, and close as she was, considered me with a new light in her eyes that made me even more nervous than if she’d caught me and Cecil red-handed at the still.

"You okay?" she asked, her voice newly gentle.

"Never better," I pretended, rushing despite a splitting head to get out the door, into the fresh air, and away from Faye.

Cecil laughed aloud when I told him Faye had caught me out and also fallen for one of my old sweet lies.

"Better do your drinking in the woods with me, I guess," he said.

Before supper, we went back to the woods again that day and the next, as Cecil tried to educate me on the ins and outs of his business. As we approached the still on the third evening, we could see the outline of two men standing nearby.

"I’ll be damned," said Cecil. "My distributors have returned."

I was just as surprised.

When they recognized me, Earl said, "Well, if it ain’t the truck thief’s little helper."
Floyd chimed in, “You get around, don’t you?”

“I see you boys know each other,” said Cecil. “That’s good. You guys can train Sonny so I won’t have a dry spell when you disappear again. Where have you two been the past few days?”

“In the lockup,” said Earl. “We got stopped while making deliveries and they searched the car. But don’t worry—we didn’t tell Bones nothing.”

“How did you get released so fast if you didn’t cut a deal with Bones?”

“I don’t understand it, Cecil. This morning the district attorney walked in and told Bones to let us go—never said why. Bones raised hell but he was overruled, and here were are—ready to go to work.”

“Shit, you frigging idiots! Don’t you see what’s happened?” said Cecil. “Everybody—get out of here and stay out until I invite you back.”

Before we could get to the truck, we heard movements in the bushes and were surrounded by a number of men with rifles and pistols. Bones was at the head of the group and already assuming credit for the bust. After we were taken into custody and our police car drove past Cecil’s house, I thought of Faye inside, cooking supper for us. I also thought about the windows that were finally clean and the floors I was supposed to scrub in the morning. I wondered who would turn over the weedy back garden patch she’d assigned me.

“My family comes home,” Lunk said, as we were led into the cells. “I was certain you guys would return.”

“Why’s that?” asked Earl.
“This morning the district attorney realized that Bones is an idiot. When he came into the cell and ordered you and Floyd to be released, it didn’t require much imagination to know you’d be tailed. Bones would never think of that.”

Cecil looked at Earl and Floyd and said, “How come you guys couldn’t figure that out?”

“We’re used to outsmarting Bones—not the DA,” Earl said.

Ms. Hoedunker arrived, rolling a cart with trays of food. “Here you go, honey,” she said, handing Lunk the first tray.

As she left, we couldn’t help but notice that Lunk had been given extra portions of everything, plus a slice of chocolate cake.

“Lunk, why do you get more than the rest of us?” asked Earl.

Lunk replied, “When a woman is forsaken, she’ll turn to another. You guys moved out and I’m the man of her attentions now.”

“You know, Sonny, you never did anything against the law,” said Cecil. “You never made the whiskey and never distributed it. As soon as they realize that, they’ll let you go. You could go back to the farm—keep things running while I’m in the lockup, help Faye run the place.”

I guess he was right, but I knew too, that if I stayed in the lockup, the worst job I’d land would be on a road-gang, cutting weeds and brush.

I nodded vaguely in his direction, but we weren’t old friends for nothing. He could tell I’d prefer the sling blade and reasonable supervision to what awaited me at his farm. Even he had to be thinking twice about going home one day. I had to warn him too about the punishment Faye had sworn to administer to the man who had been making the whiskey.
Both of us relaxed into our bunks.

“Well, here we sit,” Lunk observed. “A happy family. We may go our own directions, but we’ll wind up together. Makes you appreciate the things that we have in common.”

“What’s that?” Cecil asked.

I was ready. “Too many bad mistakes, my friend. Too many bad mistakes.”
My sister ran away with a guy from my hometown in the spring of 1971. My mother called one night that early April, weeping. Eileen, my parents had just learned, had been dating a man named Chuck Thompson, whose father owned a tavern and dance hall outside Caney Hollow, Tennessee for months. Nothing, it seemed, could be done. My twenty-two-year-old sister had fallen in love with a godless man my parents were duty-bound to despise. But what could be done? Although as Eileen’s younger brother, I knew the futility of my parents’ protests, I was bound to listen and offer whatever sympathy I could, which wasn’t much. I thought I knew more than Eileen and half-sided with my parents who were convinced she’d fallen for the devil. Of course, that was before I fell into an ill-advised romance of my own.

I’ll never forget that evening because it was my first night of my third year as a minor league baseball player in what would be a make-or-break season for me. Rocky Mount was A-level ball, and if I didn’t earn a promotion to the AA-level this season, I would be released. I’d
done okay my first two years in the minors, but this league would be more challenging. My career as a baseball player was on the line.

Opening night was in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and in the afternoon prior to the game, the season ticket holders had been invited onto the field to meet the players. Near the end of the gathering, a couple with a little girl approached and introduced themselves: Leon and Rhea. Leon owned a gun shop nearby and came to every game, he said.

“I love to talk baseball and history,” he said, confusingly.

Rhea extended a thin hand and said, “Yes, he does, hon, and this,” she nodded toward the little girl, “is Casey, our daughter.”

Leon and Rhea were in their late forties—maybe fifty. The girl, Casey, could have been no more than ten. I'm no matchmaker, but something about Leon and Rhea didn't feel right. Leon was short, with a black, unkempt beard and a beer-gut. His shorts and tee shirt were wrinkled and dirty, and he spit tobacco juice as he spoke. Rhea was tall with a trim waist. She had short, blonde hair with a square face and brown eyes. Her shorts were very short and far too tight.

Another couple stepped up, Joe and Lilly. As Joe shook my hand, he whispered, “Let me give you some advice. That Leon Stubbs is full of crap. Don’t believe anything he says, and be glad you’ll be on the field every night instead of sitting near him in the stands.”

He delivered this warning with a smile. I noticed a wide space where his front teeth used to be. Only his canines were visible. Before he’d turned around, I already had a name for him—Vampire Joe.

It turned out I wouldn't have the advantage Vampire Joe assumed. Rocky Mount's ball park was small – cozy – and because I played first base and was positioned close to the stands, I
could hear the fans clearly. By mid-game on the first night, Leon and Rhea were drunk, and Leon was babbling loudly about Napoleon when Vampire Joe rounded on him.

"You told us all about it last year, Leon. We don't want to hear it again!"

Leon's response, equally loud: "Hell, Joe, I never said most of the things I said."

After the game -- a loss, of course -- I called my mom to see if my sister had returned.

"Eileen is driving us to the edge of our sanity," she said. "I'm glad you're not here, Sonny, to witness these awful events."

I was glad I wasn’t there, too. I knew about the tavern Chuck’s father owned—a place called the Honky-Tonk Palace—where lots of rowdy people came and went. And I knew how it pained my parents to think Eileen might soon be connected with it.

After the home stand, the team left town for our first road trip, and I began to fully understand how Vampire Joe felt. I went ten days without listening to Leon, and even though the road crowd could be hostile, I’d rather put up with the enemy than listen to the mind-numbing stuff I heard shouted in Rocky Mount. After few road days, my interlude ended painfully. On our first night back, Leon lectured from the stands about tank battles between Patton and Rommel.

Once again, Vampire Joe finally had enough. By the sixth inning, he was on his seat, screaming.

"Stop, Leon. STOP. We all saw that film on TV last week."

The encounter was so dramatic and distracting I thought that would be the end of Leon’s lectures, but that’s the way it would be every night for the whole summer. The endless recounting of war stories—mostly inaccurate—were as much a part of each evening as the contest itself. As much as I tried to concentrate on the game, the voices from the stands formed a backdrop for my efforts. Before he got drunk, Leon would restrict his comments to the pause between pitches. After he was tanked, it made no difference. On occasion he would chew
tobacco and, on one particular play, I was attempting to field a ground ball when I heard him strangling on his chaw. I lost my focus and the ball went between my legs for an error. If that wasn’t enough—after the game—he said, “That ball went right through the wicket, Sonny. You’ve got to get your glove DOWN to make that play.”

In addition to war lectures, Leon was convinced he knew enough about baseball to give the players advice. Before one game, he told our starting pitcher how to pitch to our opponent’s cleanup hitter. “Bust him high and tight on the first pitch—knock him down! Then give him three straight curve balls knee-high and on the outside corner—boom, boom, boom—and you’ve got him.”

Because he was a paying fan and a season-ticket holder, we owed him respect. We didn’t tell him that if a pitcher could throw three straight curve balls, knee-high, and on the outside corner, he wouldn’t need to knock a batter down. For that matter, a player who could pitch like that wouldn’t be in Rocky Mount. But we let it go and allowed him to think he was a master at pitching.

I had two lives that season—one on the field, one off. On the field I was struggling. I’d gotten off to a good start hitting the ball, but by the first of May, I had tapered off. I’d always been a good fastball hitter, but here the pitchers were throwing some nasty off-speed stuff, and I couldn’t get my bat on it. It was the curves that would do me in.

Off the field, I was fine. I had met a Rocky Mount girl named Julie with whom I began to hang out when the team wasn’t on the road. She’d lived in town all her life but never attended the games. She was a year younger with short, brunette hair and silky white skin, and she was petite—maybe five-four, and no more than a hundred pounds. Julie had dark eyes and a constant smile, one that always made me feel accepted. Because she was taking classes at a junior college
and working part-time, we had limited nights together after my games concluded. One evening she surprised me by coming to a game. We were both unaware that the team's management had scheduled a stunt featuring Morgana, the kissing bandit. Shortly before the game began, the players were told that Morgana would leave the stands, enter the field, and kiss a player of her choice. None of us could understand an act where a woman disrupts a game by kissing a ball player.

At the top of the fifth inning we understood. A short, brown-haired woman with incredibly large breasts came through the security gate and made a gallant effort to run to the pitcher's mound and kiss our pitcher. The crowd was eating it up and, after her stunt ended, I could identify one voice over the others. Leon was leaning over the rail on the first row, yelling "Come to Daddy, big Mama, come to Daddy!" Julie's seat was near Leon's, and she had a look of horror at Morgana and one of disbelief as she watched Leon. Vampire Joe's head was in his hands.

Because she had been raised to be proper and had never attended the games, Julie didn't realize that what Morgana had done was an act.

"Why did that trashy-looking woman do something like that?" she asked. "Why couldn't the security guard stop her?"

I tried to explain, but she was as horrified by my life on the field as my parents were by Eileen's boyfriend's family tavern. She had seen enough. I'm sure she assumed we were all reprobates, because she left the park and refused to see me again.

The news from home was mixed. Chuck Thompson and my sister had returned to Caney Hollow. They were married and ready to assume control of the Honky-Tonk Palace. Chuck's father had retired and was moving to Florida. My parents were mad as hell about it, but at least
the suspense was over. Okay, I thought. With Julie gone and my sister back home, I’d have no distractions and could focus on my hitting.

My room was on the same street as the ballpark, only three blocks away. Some other ballplayers rented apartments nearby, and that worked well because most of us shared vehicles and living near the park had its advantages. Typically we arrived at the park around three for batting practice, and except for Sundays, we had free time until mid-afternoon. One morning, I awoke and saw Rhea strolling the sidewalk with a small Jack Russell dog on a leash. She wore those tight little shorts with a loose fitting top that tied in the front. Her shoes had slightly elevated heels that moved her down the street one hip at a time.

I got into my jeans and caught her before she reached the ball park.

"What brings you out this way so early? Do you live nearby?"

"I've been to Leon's shop and decided to have a walk. Our house isn't that far, though. You should come visit. In fact, if you can meet me here in the morning, I'll drive you there."

The next morning I was at the same spot when Rhea drove up and opened the passenger door. We hadn't driven all that far when she stopped the car.

"Get out, hon, walk through those shrubs, and you'll come to a little cottage. The door is unlocked. I'll be there in a minute."

A few moments later, I entered a small living room with a sofa, two cushioned chairs, a coffee table, and a TV on a wooden stand. There were no books or magazines—just trinkets, a china pitcher, and two table lamps. It felt cozy but a little shy of adequate living quarters for a couple and their daughter. Rhea walked in the door, went straight to the kitchen and, after a couple of minutes, returned with a pitcher of what should have been lemonade or ice tea.

"I love Bloody Marys in the morning," she said. "Why don’t you share one with me and tell me what you think of our Rocky Mount."
"I like it," I said, as I watched her pour. "It reminds me of my hometown a bit, but things seem more stable here and the people more settled, harder to rile up."

"How do you mean, hon?"

"Well, my sister just ran away and married a guy that my parents can't stand. It's a big mess and the whole town is speculating about it. I don't see stuff like that here."

"Ha," Rhea laughed, touching my knee as if I'd told a great joke.

I was amazed at how quickly her drink was gone. She poured another and after no more than ten minutes of chit-chat, we were locked into an embrace. I'd never expected anything like that, especially from a woman old enough to be my mother. And Rhea had a plan—not just for this moment, but for continuous assignations. Turned out that we were not in the main house where Leon and Rhea lived, but inside a fully furnished bungalow, surrounded by shrubs and hidden from street view.

"All of this property belongs to Leon's father," she said. "He built this little house for himself when Leon and I lost our home in foreclosure. Now he's in a nursing home so this little place is unoccupied—most of the time."

I had to remind myself that I was assigned to Rocky Mount to play baseball, to develop my skills to a level where I could play in the major leagues. That was my sole purpose, but I'd never beat a deal like this. It became every morning's business. Leon left the main house at eight and I'd meet Rhea at the chalet at nine. She had lots of stories about Rocky Mount and the people who attended the games, but she never talked about Leon.

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My sister called to say she and Chuck Thompson would be passing through on a Monday morning. They were headed to Savannah, and even though Rocky Mount was not on the direct
path to their destination, she thought it would be an opportunity for a get-together. I was fine with it. I'd get a chance to meet the ass-hole that drove my parents crazy.

Baseball is a game of streaks. A hitter can get on a roll and every pitch looks as big as a watermelon. He hits everything—the heaters, the wicked curves, and the sliders that look like fastballs but break at the last moment. On the other hand, when a player is going badly, nothing works. Hitting the ball hard is useless—it will be go straight to a defender who will catch it or throw it to first base off the bounce.

I'd been on a bad streak for a while, and the Sunday game before my sister arrived was the worst. I struck out my first three trips to the plate. It was called the hat trick—a term borrowed from ice hockey—meaning I had fanned three times. When a player did that, he was given a top-hat by his teammates and required to wear it in the locker room until the next game. Thinking that would be the worst of it, I had no fear as I struck out for the fourth time. When the game ended and I left the dugout, I was presented an enormous, Mexican-styled hat.

One of my teammates said, “You just won the golden sombrero. It’s yours for a week.”

It was the worst embarrassment—wearing that tacky, extravagant fedora in front of the team.

I didn’t sleep well that night, and when my sister and Chuck arrived the following morning, I was a wreck. Eileen introduced us saying she wanted us to get off to a good start.

Chuck, more of a gentleman than he had any right to be, stepped forward and offered his hand.

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “You know you’re a celebrity back home, the local boy on his way to the major leagues.”

“We’ll see about that,” I said.
“Everyone in Caney Hollow is so proud of you,” Eileen said. “I wish you would call more often, let us know how you’re doing.”

“It’s a stressful job, Eileen. Sometimes, you just can’t talk about it.”

“Is the ball park nearby?” asked Chuck.

“Three blocks down the street,” I said.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“My shoes aren’t good for walking,” Eileen said. “Go ahead and have a look, and I’ll chat with Sonny.”

As soon as Chuck was out the door, I asked, “What made you run off and get married the way you did? You drove our parents crazy.”

“Well, think about it, Sonny. I was in love with a man they despised. He asked me to marry him. I suppose I could have stuck around and tried to get everyone reconciled and in a lovely mood as the wedding approached. I guess I could have endured the whining and crying and preaching and all of the carrying on that Mama and Daddy would have done. Hell, I guess I could have let them select my husband—saved me a lot of time and trouble. Look, Sonny—long story short—we all have our principles but, principles or not, people have to do what they gotta do.”

I had nothing else to say. Eileen was right. There was no way she and Chuck could have had a normal wedding.

Chuck returned from his walk, and as they left, he gripped my hand and said, “Come by the Honky-Tonk Palace when the ball season’s done and hang out with us. The beer will be on the house and you’ll be the main attraction. You’re welcome any time.”
The following morning, I was back at Rhea’s bungalow. As we lay together and talked, she spoke about Leon for the first time.

“The stuff I’ve put up with for almost twenty years – well, you can’t imagine. I swear one day soon I’m going to leave this hell-hole!”

“And go where?” I asked.

“I’ve hit the wall, Sonny,” she said, by way of an answer. “And when that happens, you can’t keep going.”

It turned out to be a lesson I would never forget. When a woman tells you she’s fed up and leaving, she means it. The next day, Rhea was gone.

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After Rhea missed an entire home stand and with Leon offering no suitable explanation, it was obvious to everyone that something was amiss. Casey continued to come, at first gradually shuffling into the seat beside Leon where Rhea usually sat. Before long, she gave that up and spent each game roaming behind the stands or leaning against the back entry wall as if waiting for this stage of her life to end. Meanwhile, Leon kept up his routine -- drunk by mid-game and teaching history to everyone within earshot. The night prior to our last road trip was the worst. It had been a rainy day, and the crowd was sparse and mostly silent. Because the park was almost empty, every sound, no matter how faint, echoed across the stadium. This was the night Leon chose to bring a harmonica to the park and play the only song he knew, the theme song for the Oscar Meyer Weiners’ commercial. His first rendition was funny, and the second playing was permissible, but after that, unbearably annoying. I couldn’t focus, and I began to hope Vampire Joe would stick that damn harp up Leon’s ass. I even wished he would stop playing the jingle
and resume his belted-out history lectures. By the third inning, one prayer had been answered.

Vampire Joe had had enough.

"Look, Leon—I'm tired of listening to this crap. It's EVERY DAMN NIGHT. There's not many games left, and damn it, I'm going to watch them in peace. I might have to whip your ass, but I'll do it and a lot of folks around here will thank me."

I heard the whole thing as clearly as if I had been sitting in the stands. Everyone did.

There was only one security guy on duty that night, and he was on his feet, approaching the two men. Seeing him coming, Lilly pulled Vampire Joe away, and they departed, along with the others in the first base section. Only Leon remained. Casey was moving about the stadium, anticipating where the next foul ball would land. She seemed unaware that her father had come close to getting the crap beaten out of him. With no one beside him to hear his music or receive his lectures, Leon turned quiet.

It was another miserable game for me. My batting average was approaching the .200 mark, which meant I was averaging a base hit every five at-bats. I had thought Rhea's absence would permit me to re-focus on my hitting, but it seemed to have the opposite effect. My teammates understood my anxiety and took me to a beer joint where one of our coaches told me, "Sonny, you never realized that there are two kinds of curves—a regular one and a motherfucker."

"Bullshit," I said.

"No kidding. You see—a regular curve has a lot of spin on it and you can recognize it real early. It breaks down a little bit, and out. But, your motherfucker—that's different. It comes in harder and looks like a fastball. Then all of a sudden the ball takes a steep dive, drops right into the catcher's mitt-- and before you know it--IT'S MOTHERFUCKING STRIKE THREE!"
"Coach, you’re a bit late with that. If you’d told me that back in April I’d be having a decent summer."

Eileen, I could see, had found a curve ball she could handle. I got the motherfucker.

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The rift between Leon and Vampire Joe came to an awful end on a steamy night with only two games left. I heard a commotion and saw the umpire stop the game. As I ran out of the dugout with the other players, every uniformed fellow in the park seemed to be running toward the section where Leon sat. There had been a fight, and four security guards were pulling a seething Vampire Joe off of a man who certainly had to be Leon. People were holding their faces. A few were crying. An ambulance was summoned.

Lilly cried profusely and hugged little Casey as they walked toward the exit. The game was cancelled, and like the other players, I wanted to shower and leave the locker room as quickly as possible.

The next morning, all of the news was bad. The season finale was a day game, and upon my arrival, I learned that Leon had numerous stab wounds and was barely alive. Then my manager called me into his office and closed the door.

“Sonny, I suspect you know what I’ve got to say. Every young man that comes through Rocky Mount wants to make it to the major leagues, but that’s not possible. The front office no longer feels that you’re suited for a career in professional baseball. The bat’s just not there. As players move up the ladder, the pitchers get nastier. The fastballs will look like aspirins. They’ll throw a slider when you’re certain the heat is coming. If you struggle at this level, a promotion to AA-ball makes no sense.” I received my final pay check and was told I could leave without suiting up for the game.
It was a bubble-burst moment. I’d been so good in high school and in the rookie leagues that I’d never thought about getting cut and not playing ball. I’d worked through injuries and practiced non-stop. Playing ball was all I had ever done and, as I left the park, numbness set into my brain. The west-bound bus for Raleigh and on to Tennessee would be leaving that afternoon, but it would leave without me.

Most people wouldn’t understand my next move. I wanted to see Leon before I left Rocky Mount. I needed to say good-bye to somebody. All summer long, Leon would have been the last guy I wanted to see on my way out of town. But five months is a long time when you’re twenty. You don’t sell a house where you’ve lived a long time and move out on the fly. You walk through every room, give everything a final look, and gently close the door for the last time.

I found the only hospital in town. Leon was in critical care, asleep, and lying on his back with his chest and mid-section bandaged heavily. I stood over him and thought how stupid the whole thing was. I’d seen enough craziness over the summer and, at that moment, I just wanted everyone to be steady and whole.

I still had my apartment, so I spent the night there and returned to the hospital in the morning. Leon was awake but so weak he couldn’t speak. I shook his hand, and he smiled. I told him I’d been released and was done with baseball. I could see he wasn’t pleased, and I realized I shouldn’t have told him.

"I'll come back," I said. "I'll look you up next summer and we'll catch a game together. I'll visit Rocky Mount often."

The next morning he was unconscious and the nurse said he had a staph infection. "It's not uncommon for wounds like his. The doctors are doing all they can."

I knew what it meant. I stood over him and watched him breathe. I was certain I was the only visitor he’d had. Children were denied entrance to critical care, and I knew little Casey
hadn't seen him. Five months ago, I'd never met this man. For more than two months, I'd been sleeping with his wife. I hoped he never knew that. It was the first time in my young life that I'd ever paused to question my own goodness. It was only after I returned to my room that I faced the truth about myself. I realized I had no regret with what I'd done with Rhea. I just didn't want Leon to know about it. Without a doubt I'd gone to the dogs, but not wanting to hurt someone should count for something.

Leon died that night and I stayed for the burial. A lady from social services brought Casey in a frumpy navy hand-me-down dress that made her look like a ten-year-old widow. The whole thing was done at graveside and took only twenty minutes. Not a tear was shed. I have to say I don't know what's sadder, an ending where everyone's crying, no one's crying, or no one notices as you slip off the field and out of town.
A man from the Tennessee Board of Corrections telephoned and told me my father had died.

Jill, hearing my half of the conversation, said, "He’s gone, isn’t he, Sonny?"

For decades, even before we’d married twenty-four years ago, she had known what I’d known: one day my father would die in prison and I’d get the call.

"Yep, I’ve got forty-eight hours to claim the body or they’ll bury him a Potter’s field."

"What can you do?" she asked. "You’ll have to bring him back to Caney Hollow, and how can you?"

Jill was right. Caney Hollow, the small town where I’d grown up was about forty miles from Nashville, spitting distance from the prison where my father had lived for the past thirty years, but four hundred miles away from Birmingham where Jill and I lived. No point in bringing him back here. Yet my mother, step-father, and sister still lived in Caney Hollow, and if I brought the old man back to them, I’d never see another welcome mat in the Volunteer state.
Jill hugged me and said, “I’ll help you get through this. Why don’t you go out on the deck and I’ll pour you some wine? You can relax and think about what you want to do.”

She’d always been like that -- there when I needed her, no matter how difficult the challenge. Even now, her own mother was ill with blood sugar issues, and hospitalization seemed inevitable, yet I was the focus of her attention.

“Do you want me to call the kids?” she asked.

“I guess so,” I said. The truth was the kids wouldn’t care. The old man had never been a real grandfather to them. He’d been in the lock-up up all their lives. I had taken the kids to visit my father only five times, mostly when they were small. Once they were older, they always had better things to do, and none of them wanted to relive those awkward explanations when their friends asked where they had gone for the weekend.

It was different for me. Except for time spent in the army, I’d visit my father every year. He seemed to accept whatever came his way, and while he listened to me unspool the events of my life, even now, I can only recall two visits when he spoke much of himself.

One year Pop was denied visitation privileges for attacking a prison doctor who mismanaged the anesthetic during his colonoscopy. Pop woke up mid-procedure and proceeded to have a tug of war with the doctor that ended up with a Pop’s fist on the doctor’s jaw”

“It wasn’t my fault,” my father told me, “the quack allowed me to wake up too soon.”

Another time he asked me if I’d ever had seen Madonna. An odd question, I thought, because by then Madonna had more or less slipped out of the limelight. I wondered what stirred his interest in her.

“She was in a movie on TV,” he said. “Boy, wouldn’t you like a woman like that?”

“Well, she’s very attractive,” I said. “But where are you going with this?”
“That gal reminds me a lot of Heaven Lee,” he said. “She could make you do things, I’d guess.”

Later, it occurred to me that was the only time my father ever spoke of the circumstances that led to a life sentence without parole.

Before he went to prison, my father sold insurance, and every Friday, he’d drive up to Nashville to visit the central office and see his city clients. About a year before he went to jail, when I was twelve, he also began to spend every Friday night in the city. Unusual, but not really suspicious. Sometimes, my mother told us, he had to go out with clients, and even she didn’t want him to risk an alcohol-fueled drive late at night back to Caney Hollow. None of my family suspected Pop was doing more that selling insurance in Nashville until it was too late, until the phone rang one Saturday morning, and there it was: my mom’s best friend, a hair-dresser named Jewell, saying how sorry she was.

“What do you mean?” my mother asked.

Then: “This can’t be true, Earl would never hurt anyone.”

She called out, “Sonny, turn on the radio onto the local station. They’ll give the news in a few minutes.”

It was ten until nine, and my mother sat in my father’s chair at the dining table and held her face in her hands in a way I’d never seen her do. Everything seemed to shift at that moment. The light grayed, and I thought how ugly that metal table was. I couldn’t help staring at the picture of two fighting sparrows that hung on the wall behind my mother’s seat. Maybe for the first time in my life, I wondered why anyone would put such a horrible image in plain view. It seemed to me as if all this time the picture had been illustrating the truth behind my parents’ marriage. They may not have squabbled when he was home, but underneath, a battle must have
been at play, and only now could I see how cruel it was to make such a thing visible for all to see. Whatever my father had done, I decided...well, maybe he'd had no choice.

The short version of the story was that Earl Spencer, a thirty-five-year-old insurance salesman from Caney Hollow, had been arrested for killing a policeman and another man the previous night outside Printer's Alley in downtown Nashville. How, my mother kept asking. Why? But soon even she saw how the pieces seemed to fit. Back in those days, insurance agents collected the premiums on the policies they wrote, and many carried guns. Pop took a pistol with him most everywhere. My mom couldn't bring herself to tell me the specifics but others, such as my best friend, Dakin Phillips, thought it was the best story ever.

"Your dad was in love with Heaven Lee," he said.

Heaven Lee: the most famous stripper in Nashville. Her show, at the French Poodle Room in the heart of Printer's Alley, was advertised in the sports section of the *Nashville Tennessean*. Every Friday, the paper would include a caricature of her, emphasizing her huge breasts and her shapely legs. Unlike the local girls who worked the truck stops, Heaven Lee was a professional who used balloons and fold-out fans to tease the crowd. Sometimes, while gazing at the ad, I'd dream of seeing her myself, knowing it would be a few years before I could convince the doorkeeper that I was of proper age to see the show.

"Your dad was a VIP Club member at the French Poodle Room, "Dakin told me. Those guys can go backstage and spend time with the dancers after each show. He must have spent every Friday night with her."

Apparently, Dakin had it right. The papers said my father had become obsessed with a stripper and had begun to demand her attention once her act was complete. On his last night as a free man, a drunken patron challenged him for the diva's attentions. The security guard pushed
them outside and into the street where a policeman was walking his beat, not seeing the pistol in my love-deranged father’s hand.

We survived, despite the town gossip and an ever-present feeling of guilt that took over my mother, sister, and me. My mother was furious at my father and everyone else, even the victims’ families. They, at least, didn’t have to live with the shame. Then, after a couple of years, my mother found an evangelical preacher named Ronnie and married him, gradually elevating our family out of the gossip gutter. Despite the marriage, she remained obsessed with my father’s infidelity and spoke of it often. One day she was on the phone with Jewell, and I overheard her saying, “I’m so glad they locked that snake up. I would never allow any man to touch me after he’d put his hands on that skank.” Over the next six years, I heard that conversation a thousand times. My father, the snake. She never talked about it when Ronnie was home but, as soon as he left, she’d call a friend and get started. She couldn’t leave it be. In a way, her ongoing complaints kept Pop there with her in Caney Hollow, although she would kill me if she heard me say so. Jill had heard my mother’s rant on one of our first visits together, and watching my pained expression, had hastened to reassure me once we were alone that I was clearly nothing like my father. Still, she seemed relieved that he was well out of the picture with not a chance of influencing my own behavior. We ‘d driven back to Birmingham that night, both feeling as if we’d left the old shame there in Caney Hollow for good.

By the time Jill came out onto the deck, a glass of wine in hand, I’d decided.

“You’ll have some explaining to do with your mom and sister,” she said. “More than one tongue will be set wagging up there.”
She offered to go with me, but I persuaded her to stay near her mother. I could almost see the anxiety rising away from her. I have to admit I was equally relieved. Lately, after listening to unnecessary gossip from my depressed sister, my mother had been hinting to Jill that my own business travel might not be above-board, and I was glad that thread at least would be missing from whatever confrontation was ahead.

The prison was located in the northeast corner of Tennessee, over four hundred miles from Birmingham, a mind-numbing trip that I usually merely endured. This time, I fell into a reverie almost immediately, recalling my own experience with the woman who had caused my father’s downfall.

It was perhaps inevitable that I’d want to see her. Our senior year in high school, Dakin and I skipped school one Friday, lied to our girlfriends about needing to buy new baseball gloves for the upcoming season, and drove to Nashville. We’d done a good job with our fake IDs, and at seven-thirty that evening, we gained admission to Heaven Lee’s show. We didn’t know that a portion of the act involved members of the audience, and Heaven Lee had instructed her assistants to select two naïve-looking guys and seat them on the front row. Dakin and I were simply giddy to have landed such prime seats.

At eight o’clock, the big speakers on stage boomed out Billy Porters’ *Luck Be a Lady*, and she entered the stage in an oversized cape with a mask over her eyes. Her hair was piled tightly on top, and her stiletto heels made her ass move in exaggerated motion. She had a cane in her hand and thrust it left and right to the beat of the song. At first, it seemed a hokey act, exaggerated and slow. After a few minutes, she took off the cape, and the parts of her body
Dakin and I wanted to see were covered with small balloons. We were frustrated until one of the balloons shook loose and rose to the ceiling. Another came loose and floated away.

Toward the end of the act, she came near the crowd, pointed to Dakin and me, and summoned us upon the stage. The audience behind us, knowing no doubt what was coming, began yelling and demanding that we go. We had no choice, and as soon as we ascended the steps, she leaned in and whispered, "Ready to help me, boys?"

I froze. She smiled, thrust her chin toward me and said, "Allez-vous m’aider? S’il vous plait?" I didn’t know any French. She handed a pin to me and one to Dakin and whispered, "When I lunge at you, burst a balloon—any one you like."

_The Stripper_ began to play on the sound system, and Heaven Lee began dancing around the stage, stopping near us at intervals where she would thrust and we would pop a balloon. The crowd behind us bellowed with each pop. Her huge breasts were becoming exposed and were so close I could put my face in her cleavage. As more balloons burst, it seemed doubtful that she wore any clothing at all.

We punctured all of the balloons, and she stood on stage dressed only in a mask, stilettos, and a G-string. I was aware that she would quickly be gone and my eyes memorized as much of her body as possible. The caricature had come alive and I was living my dream.

Later Dakin and I met two girls at a hamburger joint and gave them a long ride home.

My mother, I realized, wasn’t all wrong about me.

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At the prison, I signed for Pop’s corpse, saw it delivered into the hearse, and followed it back to Caney Hollow. After the funeral arrangements were made, I called my sister and told her
I was dropping by. Like my mother, my sister had never quite recovered from our family shame. She wouldn’t visit or talk about Pop, and when she wrongly suspected her first husband—another town outcast whose folks owned the edge-of-town tavern—of an affair, she left him anyway, declaring his infidelity was just a matter of time. She soon took up with the one fellow in Caney Hollow she thought no one else would want: Roy “Fat Daddy” Holland, the town dog-catcher. I remember when I told my father that Eileen would marry Fat-Daddy, Pop went wild with rage and said, “I’ve already killed two men, and that fat bastard would be the third if I could get out of here for a day. Roy Holland doesn’t have the brains of a chicken. He’ll come home every night smelling like dog shit. You’ve got to stop this, Sonny.” But Eileen knew what she wanted, or at least she thought she did.

She came to the door wearing one of Roy’s oversized fleece shirts. The prison had informed her of Pop’s death, too, and of course she knew I was there to discuss the funeral. She had a disgusted look on her face and said nothing, just swung the door open for me and walked away into the kitchen.

“Well, hello, Eileen,” I said. “It’s good to see you, too.”

Roy was lying on the sofa watching TV wearing a sweatshirt, too tight in the arms.

“Hey Sonny,” he said without getting up. “There’s some beer in the fridge. Grab a couple and sit down.”

He whispered, “Eileen’s ass is frosted ‘cause she thinks you’re gonna bury your old man here. Your mama and Ronnie won’t like it, either.”

He paused and said, “Long time, “You don’t come around much.”

“Nah, just staying busy. Too much to do, I guess.”

“Hell, I can tell you about busy. You ought to have a job like mine. My job is a lot more stressful than people think,” my brother-in-law said. “Headaches and responsibilities. Just last
week a big, stray hound escaped from the control truck and I had to spend the better part of the week driving around town with my head out the window, asking everybody if they'd seen the dog. Ordinary folks don't realize how smart dogs are. Dogs know when that door is locked and, if it's not, they'll be gone faster than a fart in the wind. I've been having to lift weights to keep in shape."

He winked at me as if his last sentence were a code I'd understand.

By now, Eileen had heard all she could stand. She came into the room and said, "Sonny, all I can say is whatever you're doing, do it fast and get out of town – and don't mark the grave. We don't need any reminders."

"All that was a long time ago," I said. "Pop's gone now. Can't we just bury him and move on?"

"You don't have to live here, Sonny, and see people that know what our father did. You know, I don't think what he did ever bothered you at all."

Roy snorted at something on the TV. That felt like a good enough answer, I thought. I grinned, and Eileen said, "Just go, Sonny. You'll do what you do."

And so I would, I decided.

I buried Pop the next day – just me, a part-time preacher, and the grave-diggers. At least the weather was good. I don't know what's the saddest – a funeral filled with mourners or one with none at all. By the time, we were done, it was almost noon, and I walked without thinking to the Caney Hollow Diner on Main Street. I used to count my nickels to be able to eat there with friends in high school. It seemed such a fine place. Now, it felt small and familiar. The waitress, who was serving all the tables by herself, swept by so quickly at first, I barely had time to
register she was an old high school girlfriend of mine. To her credit, she did only the slightest of
double-takes before she grabbed the coffeepot and poured me a cup.

"Sonny," she said.

"Pretty Linda," I said.

I told about the funeral, and she recalled the killings and how Pop was sentenced to
prison. "A tough time. Maybe we can talk in a little while," she said. "Things will get quiet after
lunch."

By one-fifteen, we were walking together down the street to Caney Hollow’s version of a
back street, the pool hall with no windows. Hardly anyone else was in the place. Two men
playing, the bartender half-asleep. Linda ordered a margarita. I got a bourbon and coke. And we
took them to a back corner table.

"This town is no bigger than it used to be," she said. "You should be glad you got out of
here."

"Would you leave if you could?" I asked.

"Well, Sonny, my husband is not a high achiever, I work long hours to pay the bills, and
now -- ta da! -- my sixteen-year-old daughter is pregnant."

After we poured down our second glass, she said, "You know -- everybody in this town
thinks your step-father rescued you and your sister from depravity. They all say -- if it weren’t for
Ronnie and his preaching, you and Eileen would have turned out like your father."

"Are you kidding?" I asked.

"Nope, that’s what they think. You have to admit it looks that way whether it’s true or
not. Bet your Mom’s not too happy about the funeral here."

"She won’t be."
“She doesn’t know? Geez, Sonny. You have to tell her, you know. What a day she’s going to have! What with your step-father’s doing a revival at the tabernacle tonight. It’s the first time he’s going to handle snakes, and the whole town’s making a big deal out of it.”

“Say what!” I said.

“It’s the truth,” she said. “My mother said he visited some church in Kentucky where they handle rattlesnakes and drink poison, and he became convinced he had to do that here to keep up.”

“Hell, Rennie’s eighty frigging years old,” I said.

“And still charging ahead,” Linda grinned.

I ordered another round. “You ought to get away for a while,” I said, leaning in. “Nobody can do the same thing every day without going crazy.”

“How can I get away?” she said.

“Well, if you’re up for it, I can help. I come through here often on my way to Nashville. We could go to the entertainment district and have us a nice time.”

“You don’t have to go to the city for fun. Heck, there’s a little place about ten miles from here with good food and dancing.”

“Thompson’s Honky-Tonk Palace,” I said.

“That’s it!” Linda said. She’d completely forgotten my sister’s first failed marriage, I could see.

“Can you get out of the house tonight?” I asked. “Seven. We’ll meet at the diner?”

Linda smiled, but shrugged. “We’ll see,” she said. “I’ve got responsibilities, you know.”

“Sure you do,” I grinned, one hand on hers

“How did everything go?” Jill asked.
“Well, I buried Pop, my sister’s pissed off, and I never saw my mother. Nothing I didn’t expect. How’s your mom?”

“She’s in the hospital. I was there most of last night. I’ll be glad when you get back. I need you with me, and I want to help you get through this thing with your dad.”

“Can you spare me one more night?” I asked. “I might try to see Mom and Ronnie. Ronnie’s having a revival tonight, and I’ve heard he’s gonna handle some snakes.”

“Handle snakes!” she said. “That’s crazy!”

“I know,” I said.

“Well, go ahead and stay the night. You don’t get up that way often, and you should take your time.”

In my absence from Caney Hollow, a new motel had been built out on the highway, one of those chains. I checked in, noted the location of the ice machine, took a shower, and decided to take a little nap, confident that I had everything figured out. I lay on my back and, as I stared at the stained ceiling tiles, I remembered a book on my bedside table back home. A family wandered upon a farmer and asked him about his land. The farmer replied that he only had a few acres but it kept him busy, and he was never confronted with boredom and vice. The farmer sold the land to the family and they settled down, planted a garden, and stayed out of trouble.

“I guess I need to plant a damn garden,” I said to myself as I drifted off.

I woke up just before six, my cell phone ringing beside me on the pillow.

“My daughter’s sick – throwing up – and I need to stay with her,” Linda said, her voice strained and distant. “She’s real scared.”

Someone is, I said to myself.

“Another time then. You take care,” I said aloud, but Linda had already disconnected.
It was nearly seven when I pulled into the parking lot of the Mt. Zion Tabernacle of Redemption’s gravel lot beside the pickup trucks and few vans. The sanctuary was already filled, and I had to stand in the back with other late arrivals. Up front, Ronnie slumped behind the podium on an elegant throne-like chair, and I could see my mother too, perched in a front row aisle seat. Her gray hair was longer than I’d last seen it and pinned back in a kind of bob-knot. The choir sang a few songs, and a couple of men in the audience began jumping around and talking gibberish.

“Filled with the spirit,” a man next to me remarked approvingly.

By seven-thirty, a small, screened cage was brought in from a side door. I couldn’t see what was inside but I knew. As Ronnie stood up to face the crowd, my mother bent forward and placed her head in her hands. The crate was placed on a pedestal on the stage, and I could see that the cage door was on the top, attached to one side by hinges, which would allow Ronnie to reach inside and grab the serpent. I was pretty sure my mother was crying. Except for the two men speaking in tongues, the crowd had been silent to this point. Ronnie’s legs wobbled as he arose from his seat, and even from a distance, it was clear his eyes betrayed a kind of unconsciousness. When he opened the door to the cage, everyone but my mother stood up and began to whisper. It was the second time in my life that I’d seen her sitting in a chair, unable to do more than hold her head – and weeping.

Ronnie had never been much of a step-father, but he was my mother’s companion. I moved from the back of the sanctuary to where he stood so fast the crowd must have thought I was part of the ceremony. I saw inside the enclosure where the snake lay coiled, waiting for an intrusion to provoke its leap, walked to the side of the cage where the door was attached, placed my hand behind the door, and slammed it onto the cage as quickly as I could. The snake lunged
at the door as it connected with the top of the crate, and I could hear its hiss and commotion. I secured the door with the sliding latch and pulled Ronnie away. He never looked at me. I expected him to resist or protest in some fashion but he submitted without a word. I helped my mother to her feet, and I led her and Ronnie straight down the aisle, through the standing group at the back, out of the church, and into my car.

All the while, a clatter sounded in my head. It may have been the crowd behind us, clamoring for a spectacle, but I felt like I had taken my fist and smashed that revolting picture of those fighting sparrows my mother had kept over her old dining table. It didn’t matter that she’d put the picture away after she and Ronnie married. At that moment, I felt released. It wasn’t just that I’d rescued Ronnie and so saved my mother from another bout of heartache. I’d been the good man, her son, and banished the bad man, my father, Earl.

It would have been a fairy tale to say that everything was okay between me and my mother from that night forward. In the car, Ronnie had remained silent while my mother quietly wept. At the house, she recovered enough to ask about Jill and the kids and cluck about Jill’s mother. We drank coffee in the living room, the three of us. Then while an exhausted Ronnie dozed in his chair, I led my mother into the kitchen.

“I buried Pop this morning in the cemetery. Eileen didn’t want me to tell you but you’d find out soon enough. It was just me and a preacher and the grave-diggers. I don’t want to embarrass you, but I couldn’t allow Pop to be buried at the prison.”

She didn’t protest or complain. For that matter, I couldn’t tell if she was sad or thankful that I had intervened at the church.

“Well?” I said. “Say something, Mom.”
She gazed at me as if she were seeing me for the first time, and to my surprise, patted my cheek and repeated Eileen's words.

"You think you saved us all, don't you? Well that's just fine. You'll do just want you want, won't you," she said. "And I guess that's all you can do."

For a moment, I wasn't sure she was talking to me. It seemed to me that she I thought I was someone else, maybe even my father, and that she was in some small way finally forgiving him. Or maybe she was forgiving me. I thought of Heaven Lee and Linda and a string of girlfriends over the years. I thought again of the book by my bedside table and I wanted to know precisely what the old farmer had in mind when he spoke of the garden and boredom and vice. Ronnie would probably say we're all born rotten, and unless we cultivate the farm every day, we'll end up as reprobates. Jill would likely say we start out good, and we'll remain that way if we try hard and appreciate what we have.

My circle of knowledge was getting smaller, it seemed, and maybe that was okay. I knew Jill and my two kids would be waiting for me at the hospital, and I knew too that I would be glad to see them. And tomorrow I would go back to work, keeping busy.
I once rented an old house in a small community near Birmingham called Pleasant Grove, the old Pleasant Grove, before a tornado destroyed much of the town and drove away most of the survivors. My boss had given me six months to get a new branch office up and running. I arrived in late October, and he'd promised that come April, I'd be home again in Nashville.

Jill and I had gotten engaged only a month earlier, but the bonus he offered would go a long way toward the wedding she wanted.

The house I rented was one of four on Tin Box Lane, nothing more than a short alley that ran from the Baptist Church to pasture land at the end. Of the four houses, one was set apart, a kind of farmhouse; one was a single-story rambler; and two – including my temporary rental -- were nearly identical bungalows, not exactly in disrepair but worn and simple. Each had a narrow driveway and a low-slung front porch, framed by dusty plantings and a weedy patch of
front lawn. Boxes on a grid. The house wasn’t much of a place, but I didn’t care. It came furnished, and all I had to do was take a couple of trips to the car to haul my suitcases and a few groceries from the car. On my last round, I noticed a young girl landing a bicycle in the yard next door, and I waved. Before I knew it she was in my driveway, skipping a rope and watching me as I closed the car trunk.

"You moving in?" she asked.

"Yup, I’m Sonny."

"Well, I’m Taylor," she said. "Named after my great-grandfather, a navy captain in a war a long time ago."

"On the winning side, I hope," I said. Then noticing her frown, "Taylor’s a good name, isn’t it?"

"Not for a girl." she said. "But my mom says it fits me."

"Why’s that?" I asked, but instead of answering she let loose a volley of questions that sound something like barking orders.

Where’d I come from, what did I do, and why had I moved out here to the middle of nowhere where no one new came ever.

"Now, wait a minute," I grinned. "I grew up in the middle of nowhere, a small place called Caney Hollow. Pleasant Grove seems pretty dang cosmopolitan in comparison. You’re lucky to live in a small town."

"Yeah, but you don’t live in Caney Hollow now, do you?"

"Nope, I’ve lived in Nashville since college."

"And you’re not about to stay here, are you?"

She got me again.

"I’m here on business," I said. "Six months, tops."
"Married?" she asked.

"For now I am a one-man show."

"Dating anyone?"

"Put your square wheels on," I said, finally. "Are you always like this?"

"Okay, forget it," she said. She looked me over, and her Naval Captain ancestor was back, tallying everything from my old sweatshirt and jeans to my new state-of-the-art running shoes as if assessing the next tactical move.

"I know your type," she said

My type. You’d think the kid had been hanging around speakeasies since birth, assessing the male of the species. I squinted at her, trying to assess her age. She was still skipping rope as we spoke, languidly like an older girl might work a cigarette. She was likely around twelve, possibly thirteen, tall and slim in her jeans and prettier than I remembered the girls when I was her age. Her hair was sporty with bangs and two, short dog-ears in the back. Her eyes were strong and penetrating—windows to a dynamic force that demanded attention and denied resistance.

"My type?" I said. "How old are you?"

Reluctantly, she answered, "Thirteen—I’ll be fourteen real soon."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, almost-fourteen Taylor," I said, hoisting my suitcase and heading for the porch. "I'll see you around.

Taylor ignored my pointed goodbye and, instead, peered into a box I’d taken out of the car trunk and left next to my car. Swinging her rope, she assessed my belonging.

"You got a chess board," she said.

"And a heavy box to carry," I said, hoisted it on my hip and nodding another goodbye. She followed me to the porch steps.
“See ya,” I called over my shoulder before her foot could hit the stairs.

"Yeah, okay," she said. I closed the door behind me, she was still in the driveway, skipping slowly, her eyes pinned on the house. I waited a little while, getting the lay of the land from the bedroom window before I went back to unpacking. From there I could look around Tin Box Lane. A ladder was leaning against the house across the street. I took this as a good sign. At least someone was taking care of a house here. Taylor lasted a half-hour, idling around before she vanished back into the house next door.

The branch office was located near the interstate about ten miles away. It was an easy drive and work uncomplicated, and within a week, I had a routine, moving from task to task, knocking out one problem after another. By six, I was usually home. Sometimes, I’d get a run in. More often, I’d start working the can opener on a can of chili and popping open a beer, waiting for an evening call from the girl I was seeing in Nashville, Jill. One afternoon, I came home earlier than usual and noticed a man sitting in a lawn chair on the rooftop of the single story rambler across the street. I realized the ladder I’d noticed earlier leaning against the house wasn’t there for repairs or painting but a kind of recreation. The man saw me and waved for me to approach him.

As I neared his house I could see him wearing sunglasses, sitting in a chaise lounge, and drinking beer. He had taken his shirt off in honor of the unseasonably warm fall day.

“Hey,” he called down. “Got your six-o’clock-beer right here, Buddy, if you want, join me.”

As I stood on the ground by his ladder, the man looked down on me and said, “No girls around to pester you, just old Fugs. C’mon, then. You okay?”
"Fine, so far," I said. "You're the only neighbor I've met except for the young girl next door."

"Uh, huh, her," he said. "A smart-mouthed little wench, ain't she? One day, some guy will teach her to keep her saucy little trap zipped up. Now, climb up the ladder and have a brewski."

I made my way up and sat down on a beach chair. He opened me a beer and said, "Welcome to the palace."

"What were you saying about the girl?" I asked.

"Her daddy's been gone a long time and her mother never says anything—just comes home from work every day and waits for her boyfriend. You know what they say about a divorced woman."

"What's that?" I said.

Fugs waved his hand as if clearing the air around him. He snorted. "The kid takes care of herself—comes home from school, rides around on her bicycle, and meddles in everybody's business."

"So you just stay up here and watch the neighborhood, right?"

"Before you came along, a couple rented your place. The pregnant wife—a sad looking woman. Money problems, a lot of fighting. That little girlfriend of yours taking notes. Yup, ain't much goes on that old Fugs don't see."

"Well, it's not a big street," I said. "What about the farmhouse at the end of the road?"

At the end of the street, next to the pasture, is an old widow-woman with a bad heart and worrisome as hell. She's tight with her money and complains all the time. I look in on her and drive her around on Sundays."

"That sounds more than friendly," I said.

"You know what they say about a widow-woman."
I downed the end of the beer and stood.

"Groceries in the car," I said.

"Next time you come, bring some beer and climb up here. I'm always on the lookout. Big or small, from this roof--the Fugs sees all. You probably want to keep that in mind," he said with something approaching a cackle.

Somehow I made it back into my house without turning around to see if he really was watching my every move.

Taylor was waiting on the back step outside my kitchen. I didn't notice her until after I'd put away my meager groceries and opened another beer.

"You've been talking to that crazy old man," she said. "My mom says he's a gigolo. He gets money from the old woman down the street and, lots of times, he goes to her house and spends the day. By the time everyone else gets home from work, he's back on the roof, watching us all and acting like a sicko."

As she spoke, Taylor looked me over again, shaking her head, "I thought you might be a jock when you moved in--those fancy sneakers you had on--but you're a geek, Sonny."

"What?"

"Khaki pants, loafers. That stuff went out a long time ago."

"Hey, my customers aren't thirteen years old--jumping rope and riding bicycles."

She squinted and said, "I think you'll be fine, but you'll need some work. "Yeah, I think I can use you."

I felt a strange jolt as if she really might have a plan for me.

"So," she said, "the chess board. Do you play?"

"Of course," I said. "I wouldn't be toting it around if I didn't, would I?"

"How did you learn? "
I grinned, "My high school baseball coach."

"Your coach! So you are a jock?" Taylor said.

She squinted her eyes at me, as if about to make another pronunciation. Thankfully, just then the phone rang: Jill's evening call.

"Got to go, kiddo," I said, holding open the kitchen door for her. "My girlfriend's waiting on me."

The following Saturday as I was about to begin my jog, Taylor appeared again, blowing bubbles from a wand in the grassy area next to my drive.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Waiting on my mom and her boyfriend to get dressed," she said. "We're going to the library and find instructions on chess."

"You're playing chess now?"

"Not yet. I'm the only person in my class that can't. They have a chess club that meets on Saturdays, and every Monday all they do is talk about their games."

"And you kind of feel left out?"

"Hell, no," she said. "Last thing I want is to join a club. But there's a tournament coming up, and I want to win it and teach them a lesson."

"You can't learn chess from a book," I said, watching her shoulders drop. "You've got to have someone show you the moves and actually play the game over and over again."

"Okay then," she said. "Six o'clock Monday, Sonny--your kitchen table. We'll use your board." She skipped away, throwing one satisfied look over her shoulder, before I could fully realize how she'd played me and protest.
As I turned to begin my run, I saw Fugs on his roof. He'd been watching us, and waved as I ran toward the intersection. I could guess what he was thinking.

I was an hour late getting home on Monday, having gone to supper with a fellow from the Pleasant Grove office, and Taylor was sitting on my front porch in the dark. She hardly waited for me to unlock the door and flick on the porch light before she was pulling out my chessboard and pulling out all the pieces from the box.

"Let's get going," she said. "I told one of them I would kick their asses."

"Well, I suppose there's nothing like a little pressure to keep us motivated. Does your mom know I'm teaching you over here?" I asked.

"Forget about her," she said. "She's spending the night at her boyfriend's place."

"That's not what I asked."

Taylor sighed. "Relax. She doesn't care. She buys groceries and sometimes cooks dinner. She does the laundry on weekends. I walk to school every morning and come home in the afternoon. That's how we do. Now, where do I put these horses?"

I told her the names and moves of all the pieces. After an hour, we practiced some opening strategies. "Always remember, Taylor, that chess requires strategy. The best players have a plan and they never make a move unless it will help them realize their goal. Think you can remember that?"

"I've got it, Sonny. I know how every piece moves."

When our lesson ended, I turned off the porch light and she walked to her house in the dark. Without the light, Fugs would be unable to see her. At first I thought it was a good move, but after she was gone I reconsidered. I should have kept the light on so that if he had noticed her
arriving on my porch, he would also see Taylor return home. I needed a little work in the strategy department myself.

“You think that’s a good idea?” Jill said, when I told her about the chess lessons.

“I’ll keep the blinds up,” I joked.

“Be careful, Sonny,” she said. “People can get all kinds of notions.”

Jill made me promise me to keep the lessons short and contained to once a week, but it didn’t take long for me to break that promise. Taylor was a hungry student, demanding daily lessons, and the strategic element came natural for her. By the time March came, the tournament only weeks away, she was winning most of our games. I was overmatched, amazed at her ability to manipulate me with guile and awed by the way she could plot a series of moves and advances that would result in my demise. Taylor had had another birthday, and I had the bakery decorate a cake as a chess board and also bought her an electronic game board with settings that could be adjusted to any skill level. Things were moving along well at the office, and chances were I wouldn't be around when the tournament was played, but I'd taken on a responsibility to get her prepared. She could take on anyone in that chess club, but I knew she’d have to keep practicing after I was gone. I went next door to drop off my birthday gifts and was met at the door by Taylor’s mother, who clearly hadn’t a clue about Taylor’s quest.

“You’re the guy from next door? You’ve been teaching Taylor? Teaching her what?”

She eyed the bakery box and the wrapped gift in my hands.

“I’ll take those,” she said and shut the door behind me.

Jill didn’t like the sound of Taylor’s mother at all. I had to put off my next lesson with Taylor to finalize my transition at the office and by the time the weekend arrived, I found I was ready to go. Jill decided she’d come down and help me pack, and I picked her up from the airport
Saturday morning. Taylor was on my porch with her jump-rope when Jill and I arrived back at the house. I could tell something was wrong. She pointedly ignored Jill.

“You’re leaving,” she said.

“Yup, you want the old TV?”

“Mama says I can’t have more lessons.”

“You’re as ready as you can be,” I said. “You don’t need me. I gave you the toughest board I could find but, if you want to be as good as Bobby Fischer, you’re on your own. You know who that is? A world champion. Remember the name.”

I was having a conversation with myself.

“Don’t bother to call, Sonny,” Taylor said, as if sprung to her feet and rode away on her bicycle until she vanished.

The following day I picked up Jill at the airport and brought her to the house. Just as I’d moved in, I moved out in a few minutes. Taylor sat in silence on her front porch, watching while I packed the car. As I started the engine and waved, she folded her arms and looked away.

In May, the tornado came and destroyed much of Pleasant Grove. On the news accounts the police were shown restricting access and enforcing a curfew on the residents that the storm had spared. There were lots of pictures but I couldn’t recognize Tin Box Lane in the flattened landscape. I called the office and asked around, but no one there knew anything about the folks in Tin Box Lane. It was as if the entire place had simply been folded up and put away.

I returned to Pleasant Grove ten years later. The branch office I’d started became a top performer and a milestone celebration was planned. I reached the city limits on a Friday afternoon and drove through the center of town. Most of the community had not been rebuilt.
There were vacant lots where houses once stood, marked only by concrete drives and porch steps—reminders of what once were vibrant neighborhoods.

I found Tin Box Lane but nothing was the same. The street was empty except for a new pre-fab house where Fugs' house had stood. As I turned in, I could see a man on top of the fabricated home, drinking beer and gazing at me.

"Damn, Fugs, that big storm didn't get you, huh?"

He hesitated until he recognized me and said, "Well, if it ain't the Nashville boy that was lovey-dovey with the little saucy-mouthed girl."

"Hell, Fugs, she was thirteen years old, for Chrissakes."

"Come up here and have a beer," he said. "Look at my new place. I've got permanent seating now. Before the tornado I had temporary chairs, but these are welded to the roof, part of the structure."

I climbed up and he tossed me a beer. "I didn't do like the folks that took the insurance money and ran. I stayed and rebuilt, better and stronger than before."

"You've rebuilt the palace, alright," I said. "Looks like a big leap forward."

"Things turned out all right I guess," he said. "But we both lost our women-friends."

I asked him about the tornado, and he explained that it destroyed every house on the street.

"The insurance company paid me enough to rebuild this tin box and I made suitable modifications," he said.

The old woman down the street had been evacuated, then got sick and died, he said. Her family found me scavenging and called the law and tried to have me sent to the big house, saying I'd done this and that. But I still got my insurance money and made my life a success."
I asked him about the others and he explained that the couple on the corner perished in their home, my old rental too had been flattened.

"What about Taylor?" I managed.

"That little gal was at the school that night, playing in some kind of tournament. When the storm came, everyone got put in lockdown and had to spend the night there. Her mother and the boyfriend stayed home and got blown to smithereens. Kid went into care."

He read the dismay and relief on my face.

“Oh, but she turned out all right, you know. Had a plan all along, it seemed. She graduated here, top of her class, gave a speech about strategies, her personal strategy. Paper published it and all. Not the first time that little loudmouth’s picture was in the news. She’s just finished up law school, I hear. Better watch out. She’s the kind of gal that will sue the boots off a fellow."

“Say,” I said, “you don’t know if she won that tournament, do you?”

“The one during the storm?” Fugs exclaimed. “Hell, no! They had to call that one off, but I think she got some prize or trophy and, yeah, her smug mug in the paper that time, too.”

Now I was grinning.

I knew then that Taylor might not have won the tournament, but I knew too that she was on her way to winning the game.
Pumpsie Green

I was thirty-three years old when I gave my life savings to Lester Bowman, an old army buddy I hadn't seen in ten years. Except for what was in my pocket, that $4,500 was all the money I had. I'd been living in an abandoned forest ranger shack on the edge of the woods near Caney Hollow, Tennessee, and no doubt it would be a while before I'd see that much money again.

No one except for my sister and her husband Roy, the town dog-catcher, cared what I did with my money. And they wouldn't have cared except that I'd promised to buy the one bedroom trailer they lived in, a transaction that would permit them to move up in the world and buy a double-wide with two bedrooms and two baths. Roy was making more than minimum wage these days, and he and my sister had ambitions. After I gave my money away, I had to drive my Ford Pinto to their trailer and tell them the deal was off. My sister got so mad she nearly kicked the trash can to the moon, and it took everything Roy could do to get her quiet. He pointed a shaking finger at me and said, "Listen Sonny, this here is why you don't have a pot to piss in."
You can’t manage money. A million dollars could fall into your lap today, and by tomorrow you wouldn’t have shit.”

I could understand why folks might think that way. I’d made a habit of blowing chances, first at playing professional baseball and then at managing my former brother-in-law’s dance club on the edge of Caney Hollow. Two years in the army had failed to transform me, and in the ten years since, nothing I’d done amounted to a thing. Then my mother died and left me $2,500. Miraculously, I managed to save another couple of thousand, squirreling away dollars when I wasn’t on a bender or in the lockup. Now, every scrap was gone. Most folks would think it crazy to give that kind of money to Saint Peter, let alone a guy like Lester Bowman. But I’d spent some time with Lester, and my gut told me I’d done the right thing.

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I first met Lester on a military flight into Cam Ranh Bay. On the long trip from Anchorage, I learned that he was part Creek Indian from Boley, Oklahoma.

“I’ve heard of Boley,” I said.

I reached for my wallet and pulled out a baseball card featuring the picture of an obscure player. I’d been twelve years old when my father bought the card, and even though I ended up with hundreds of cards over the years, I’d kept this one in my wallet because it was my first. Lester grinned when he saw it.

“Pumpsie Green,” he nodded, “the only celebrity ever from Boley.”

The card must have impressed him because Lester saved it the first night we were in Vietnam. After we arrived, we stayed in holding barracks until we completed orientation and were assigned to permanent units. With time on our hands, we wandered into a barbeque going on between our barracks and the base perimeter, five hundred yards away. The veteran guys
ignored the new arrivals and did as they pleased. It was a big party, nothing like I’d expected on
my first day in the country.

“Is it me, Lester, or is everyone drunk?”

“Except for the perimeter guards the whole bunch is stoned,” he said.

And soon I was, too.

The next morning Lester handed my wallet to me.

“You were pretty wasted last night,” he said. “I couldn’t save your money but I held on to
Pumpsie Green.”

Most fellows wouldn’t have bothered. I was grateful and glad, too, when Lester and I
were assigned together to the lower quadrant of South Vietnam, which included the Mekong
Delta. A helicopter brought us to a base camp on the shore of the South China Sea where we
were issued weapons and sent to a two-day orientation. We were foot soldiers—infantrymen
whose job was to patrol areas of known insurgency, make contact with the enemy, and kill or
capture him.

To supplement the orientation process, every soldier had to learn the lingo. ARVN, or the
Army of the Republic of Vietnam, were the good guys. They fought alongside the Americans
against the Viet Cong, or VC, who were the enemy, local insurgents trying to overthrow the
government. A popular nickname for the VC was Charley. We had to find Charley and kill him.
Lastly, the United States was known as the World. None of us could wait to leave Vietnam and
get back to the World.

When I think of Lester, three days stand out in my mind, and of them, two were bad. The
first of the bad days occurred about four months after we were in the country. Our company had
done its share of patrols, and each of us had spent time listening for the enemy outside the base
perimeter. We had begun to sustain casualties from snipers, and we relied on ARVN for intelligence as to the whereabouts of the attackers. One afternoon our second lieutenant, a guy named Dan Mackey, told us we had a lead on the snipers. Our platoon’s mission was to enter the area where Charley was hiding and eliminate the problem that evening. Night probes and patrols were the worst, but due to the way an insurgency works, they were necessary.

We left camp in darkness and approached a small area of unusually high ground where there were three wooden huts. Two of the huts were dark, but there were moving beams of light in the third – a sign of flashlights, which insurgents typically carried on the trails and in the tunnels as they moved in the darkness. We felt confident our intelligence had been right, and so Mackey split us up. Half the platoon would fall back and cut off any escape, while the rest, including me and Lester and two guys from Texas we called the Del Rio boys, would engage the enemy.

We were about twenty yards away behind some underbrush, lying on the ground, when our ARVN interpreter called out for those inside to surrender and come out. Quickly the doors opened, and four men came out firing and running toward the low ground on the other side. We opened fire and drove them toward the other half of our platoon where the engagement ended quickly, with all of the enemy killed. Lieutenant Mackey told me and Lester and the Del Rio boys to secure the huts while he joined the others to see if they had taken any casualties. We crawled toward the huts where, as soon as we got close enough, we tossed grenades into the open doors. After they went off, we stood up and examined the interior of the structures. There was no one inside. Lester and I were following the Del Rio boys toward the low ground when Lester turned and pointed toward the outer edge of the underbrush and said, “There’s somebody over there.”
With little moonlight, we could only make out an outline of a figure seemingly attempting to circle back to the path we had taken from the base camp.

“Come on, Lester,” I said. “We can’t let anyone escape.”

Lester and I raised our M-16’s, and I yelled, “Dung lai,” the Vietnamese phrase for halt. A chase ensued, and to our surprise, the figure stayed on the path instead of taking cover in the underbrush. Lester and I were gaining quickly and after a minute or so, stopped and emptied our clips. When the figure fell, we ran down the path, Lester pulled out a small pocket flashlight, and we examined the corpse: Vietnamese girl, no older than twelve.

“Sweet Jesus, Lester—look what we’ve done.”

“Let’s go,” he said. But by now, the Del Rio boys were behind us and saw the body.

“Lester and I just clipped a Vietnamese girl,” I said. “We thought she was one of the snipers attempting to escape the huts.”

“We’ve got to tell Mackey, so he can put it in his report,” said one of the Del Rio boys. “He won’t give a shit. It’ll just add to the body count.”

“Some Vietnamese family will give a shit,” I said.

“That’s what money is for,” he replied. “Mackey will tell the battalion commander, and the girl’s family will get paid. And that’ll be the end of it. You think this hasn’t happened before?”

Our buddy was right. No one in our platoon missed a beat or acted as if anything was wrong. Mackey released a report saying the sniper problem had been resolved. He applied to our battalion commander for citations.

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The second day I remember occurred a week after the Vietnamese girl was killed. This was my favorite because Lester revealed more of himself in a few minutes than he’d told me in four months.

Lester was an introvert. There were few things he’d talk about, and he’d never expressed his feelings, not even after the girl was killed. By now Nixon had begun troop withdrawals and the latest pullout had hit the river patrols pretty hard. Orders came down from battalion that our company would ride patrols on the Mekong River. Lester and I were assigned to a small patrol boat that belonged to the Riverenes, a combination of Army and Navy personnel who guarded the inland waterways. On this particular night, waves of F-4 Phantoms and B-52’s were flying overhead, heading north and up river.

“This doesn’t look good, Lester,” I said. “This isn’t going to be a normal patrol. Something’s going on up upstream.”

It was dark when Lester and I boarded the boat with four sailors from the floating base down river. The Navy guys would handle the big canon and the navigation, while Lester and I would man the machine guns. We slowly sailed upstream from My Tho, and we could see the fires and tracer rounds as Cobra helicopters joined the fight at least two miles upstream. As best I could figure, signal intelligence had located a squad of Viet Cong near the river. The job of our vessel was to intercept any enemy boat traffic should they escape the air assault.

We were in the middle of a river as big as the Mississippi at its widest point. In the dark, reflections from the tracer rounds and the explosions lit up the surface of the water. The waves, splashing against the hull, reminded me of the ferry across the Cumberland River back in the World. Lester and I sat behind the machine guns, watching the outline of banana trees along the shore in the darkness.

“I don’t want to get involved in this,” Lester said.
“We won’t have to if those Cobra gunships do their job,” I said.

“I’ve seen enough. It’s the same old thing day-in, day-out, night-in, and night-out. There’s no way we’re going to win this war,” he said.

“Well, I think Nixon would be happy with a draw. He’s says he’s going to bring us all home and turn everything over to ARVN. We know how that’ll turn out.”

The choppers kept coming, and the sky and the water upstream were lit up with flashes of tracers and dazzling reflections on the waves.

“You know, Lester, this sounds corny but I keep thinking—when I was that girl’s age I was collecting baseball cards and trading with my friends. What was she doing there? You think maybe she was helping the damn VC? Maybe she was a messenger or an informant. Maybe this—maybe that. Maybe, maybe, maybe.”

“We killed some snipers that night, too. You can’t forget that,” he said.

Lester gazed across the river and placed his chin on hand grip of the machine gun. “You know Pumpsie Green left Boley and he’s never been back,” he said.

“No kidding,” I said. I thought he still lived there.”

“Nah, his family high-tailed it off to California not long after he was born. Can’t say that I blame them. I’d leave too if I could.”

“So you might move away?”

“Well, I’ve got two choices,” he said. “Stay in the army and fight some other war, or go back home and be an Indian again.”

“You’ve got family there, right?”

“I have a grandmother on a reservation nearby. My mother ran off when I was small, and my father is in prison for armed robbery.”

“You don’t even have a girlfriend back there?” I asked.
“No. I'll never have one,” he said. “I couldn't make anyone happy.”

If it had been anyone else, the conversation would just be beginning but not for Lester. At that point it was up to him—he could talk more if he wanted. He didn’t and wouldn’t.

I began to shiver. It was 80 degrees, but it had been 115 earlier that day. The choppers and the jets had pulled out of the fight, and all we could see up the river were fires. The water was quiet. Without the tracer rounds, the sky became dark, the war extinguished, and we came out from behind the machine guns and sat together at the stern. The moonlight was the only reflection on the big river now. Our area of patrol did not extend to the spot that was bombed, and the boat pilot turned us around and headed back toward the floating base down river. The splash of the water and the low hum of the boat engine discouraged us from speaking. We could see narrow estuaries along our sides where banana leaves—some eight or ten feet long—formed canopies over the water. In places they seemed to pose as our boat passed in their presence, and it felt like we were being watched, something else to make me feel cold. I was glad Lester was there beside me.

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The third day I remember was the one Lester got hurt. After we had spent about eight months in the country, we were included in the troop withdrawals. But instead of going home, we were sent to Thailand where we were assigned to an air base at Udon Thani. Our job there was to guard the air base—no patrols, no search and destroy, and no shooting unless the base came under attack. It wasn’t a bad place to spend our last four months of duty.

While on a weekend pass, I’d made acquaintance with a prostitute in Udon named Nuet. She told me about a monkey village fifty or so miles away and said she would take me there and Lester, too. I told Lester about it and he said, “What in the hell is a monkey village?”
“It’s a place not far where monkeys live together—a kind of communal living. I’d like to see it and we can take some pictures and kill some time. Nuet will bargain for us and get a cheap taxi.”

Lester was okay with it and Nuet found us a cab early the next morning. In less than an hour, we arrived in a village that had not been awake very long. Few people were stirring as Nuet led us onto a side street that ended at another kind of village: straw huts lined in a single row behind a corresponding row of trees, some of which had ropes hanging from their limbs.

“There must be a hundred monkeys here,” Lester said.

“Orangutans,” I said.

Many moved inside the huts while others hung in the trees, swinging on branches. A few sat on the ground, plucking insects from the fur of their companions.

Nuet explained that this was an extended clan with well-established boundaries. The monkeys cooperated with one another to secure food and protect themselves from predators. She warned us not to go inside the monkey village and not to eat anything in sight of the monkeys, because the males were aggressive and strong and would attack intruders.

We watched the monkeys and saw several mothers with their children huddled together having a meal. The mothers would give what looked like berries or nuts to their children. If any one of us were to approach the edge of the village, the mothers would stand up and scream until we retreated. Nuet explained that people of the local Thai village had fed the monkeys in order to protect the village crops and property. She told us some locals even prayed to a monkey shrine in order to receive protection from spirits or to be cured of disease. The locals respected the monkeys and wouldn’t violate their space.

The whole scene began to get to me. I plucked two small bananas from one of the trees on the edge of the village, ate one, and put the other in my hip pocket. As I finished the banana, Lester and I decided to take a few steps inside the monkeys' territory. We'd only moved a few feet inside the perimeter when I felt the banana and my billfold snatched from my pocket, and I was pushed hard to the ground. A massive orangutan stood over me, the contents of my pocket in his hand.

Before I could get up, Lester charged the animal, “He's got your wallet! He's got Pumpsie Green!”

The big monkey grabbed Lester by the arm, lifted him, and slung him about like a doll. After a few additional slings, I heard a pop and I knew Lester's arm and shoulder had separated at the socket. By now Lester was screaming, and I was in the fray, trying to free him from the animal's grasp. The monkey hit me in the face with the hand that still held my wallet, and before I felt the cartilage in my nose break, I was back on the ground, blood gushing from my nostrils.

The orangutan slung Lester against a tree a few more times before he released his grip and lurched away. I could see the bone from Lester's upper arm protruding through the skin. I yelled for Nuet to find our taxi driver, and, by the time I'd dragged Lester into the vehicle, he was unconscious. I told Nuet to tell the driver I'd pay double if he could make the air base in half hour or less.

When we arrived at the base gate, the military police summoned an ambulance and the two of us were taken to the hospital. There we were separated. That night, Lester was airlifted to a hospital in the Philippines, on his way back to the World. That was the last I saw of him until he showed up in Caney Hollow ten years later. ***
Lester found me one chilly afternoon in spring. I was bent over the engine of my Ford Pinto when I heard a vehicle approaching on the gravel road leading to my ranger shack. When the rusty pickup truck stopped, a one-armed man and a chubby Vietnamese woman got out and approached me. I barely looked up, assuming a couple members of the Covenant Church were back again, attempting to initiate yet another useless discussion about my soul. I waited for the "Good day to you, sir," but instead heard a familiar drawl.

"What do you say, Sonny boy?" the man said.

All I could say was "God Almighty!"

Lester said, "This is my wife, Hang."

I took her hand and introduced myself.

In broken English she said, "I know. Lester told me about you."

"So, I guess I was easy to find?" I asked.

"The hardest part was finding Caney Hollow," he said. "I knew you'd still be here."

As we talked, Hang exclaimed at a kitten that had come out of the woods a few days ago, a little gray tabby with a bewildered look on his face that prompted me to name him Clarence. I'd fed him and allowed him stay with me at night in the shack. He would stay close to me when I was outside now, as well. Hang seemed amused that strangers did not intimidate Clarence. She began to scratch his furry head and ears.

"So what's the plan?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "We just got married last week and need to find work. We could go to the reservation back in Oklahoma, but I hate to think we can't do any better than that."

I showed my guests around the shack and apologized that I had no place for them to sleep that night.
"No problem," said Lester. "Show me the cheapest motel in town, and I’ll see if I can afford it."

This was a different Lester than the one I remembered from the war. This newer version seemed happy and more extroverted. Whereas the old Lester was a private man, the guy in front of me enjoyed conversation and wanted me to know about his life. At least he didn’t drive all the way here to merely sit down and say nothing.

Hang told Lester she would enjoy walking to a creek not far from the shack and playing with Clarence while we were gone. She buttoned up her jacket and set off with the kitten tucked into the crook of her arm.

“She okay here?” I asked Lester, as we got in his truck to head into Caney Hollow.

“Oh, yeah, she likes being on her own,” he said. “I think she even feels safer alone than she does with me. You know how we met? She was walking on Interstate 40 near Shawnee when I picked her up. She’d been hitchhiking from somewhere in Arkansas where a boyfriend had gotten drunk and beaten her up. Before that she’d had to leave her husband, a soldier who’d brought her to the world and then abused her. As far as she was concerned, the USA was one bad guy after another. Why she trusted me, I don’t know. But so far, things have been good for us.”

“I remember that night on the Mekong when you decided you’d given up on finding a woman,” I said. “Good to know some things can change.”

“We’re an odd pair—a one-armed man and a Vietnamese woman. I can’t do much, and her English is so bad, she can’t find much work. I get a disability check, but it doesn’t go far you know. We’ve got each other. I hate to tell her that might be all we’ll ever have.”

Maybe Roy was right. Maybe I am a sap. Maybe Lester and Hang knew I’d be an easy target and a pushover for a syrupy story. Like I said on the Mekong that night ten years ago,
things always seem to come down to *maybe this, maybe that*. The next afternoon, I drove to the bank and gave Lester all my money.

I was broke now, and knew I would take a good while to save enough money to buy my sister's trailer. I also knew I didn't much care. I could do like Pumpsie Green and high-tail it to California and greener pastures. Then again, Lester would never find me if I left Caney Hollow. When he and Hang left, Lester said he would write and maybe send me a replacement card of Pumpsie Green.

"They don't cost that much, and there's plenty of them in the flea markets around Boley, if we head back there, I'll find you one."

I couldn't tell Lester that buying me another baseball card was useless, that only the original one had been important. And that, like a good many things in my life, the card, like the boy who carried it to Vietnam, was long gone and would never be back.
When I was thirteen, I rode to New Orleans from Caney Hollow with my cousin, Vernon, and his buddy, a guy called Scooterbritches. They played football for Ole Miss and were on their way to the Sugar Bowl to play Arkansas on New Year's Day, 1963. It was a trip that almost didn't happen because of the race riots on campus. The governor of Mississippi and others of influence had tried to prevent a young black man from enrolling at the university, and the violence got so bad that Kennedy had to send troops. The soldiers had camped on the field where the football team practiced, making it difficult for the team to prepare for their games. But the team overcame the craziness, finished the season undefeated, and were rewarded with an invitation to the Bowl game. Rather than use public transportation, the players decided to use their travel allowances to share rides in their own vehicles. Vernon owned an old army jeep, the kind made by Willys, with the canvas top, the fold-down windshield, and the removable side
doors. He'd bought it from an army surplus store in Nashville and drove it the whole time he was at the university. The journey to New Orleans would be the first time I'd ridden in the jeep for more than ten minutes, the first time, in fact, I'd been out of Caney Hollow.

On the morning of our journey, I overheard Scooterbritches ask my cousin, "Are we really taking that squirt with us?"

"My aunt thinks the trip will be educational for the little fart," Vernon said. "She thinks when we're not practicing football and we're out of sight of the coaches, we'll get in trouble. But with the kid with us, we'll be hanging around museums and exhibits.

I wasn't an invited passenger, you see, but meant to be a kind of miniature chaperone. That didn't faze Vernon.

"Don't worry, as far as Sonny's concerned," he went on, "we may as well be on a spaceship, headed for Mars. He just wants in on the action. I'll keep him out of the way. He'll figure out pretty soon that we're going south."

Scooterbritches hooted. "You bet we are," he said.

Most of the trip followed the old Natchez Trace through Civil War battlefields and Indian burial grounds. My parents had asked my cousin to pause there and there show me the war monuments and the memorial to Meriwether Lewis. To a thirteen-year-old, the route was uncommonly eerie, a narrow, two-lane road winding through dense forests and hay fields. I enjoyed the spookiness, recalling from my history class the olden times when buffalo traveled the route as a path to salt licks and how the Indians used it as a trading route. The entire route was protected as part of the national park service, and the surrounding terrain was undeveloped, retaining the character of a land from hundreds of years ago. As we travelled the highway, I imagined the Indians and the soldiers--Red-coats, Yankees, and Confederates--as they made their
way under the same live oak trees and over the same streams that surrounded me and the two older boys in the jeep. At night, the outline of the limbs that extended over the highway formed likenesses of otherworld spirits who observed the passage of the people below. I felt the creepiness of pondering what it would be like to be a ghost, to not be alive. Yet at the same time, I was exhilarated, as if I myself was coming to life as we went south.

Vernon and Scooterbritches, true to their intentions, managed to sneak in more than historical sites. I'd always admired my cousin's ball-playing, but now marveled at his ease around a bottle or a couple of girls, and Vernon rewarded my frank admiration by treating me more and more like a friend along for the ride, instead of a pipsqueak cousin, sent along to cramp his style. By the time I crawled out of the jeep back at my parents' house, I felt like a different version of myself, one I wanted to cultivate, the kind of fellow who could take to the open road and embrace life wherever he found it.

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A few years later, when I was sixteen, Vernon and Scooterbritches left Caney Hollow to play pro ball in Canada. Before he left for Saskatchewan, in what felt like a solemn act of trust, Vernon handed me the keys and title to the jeep. Because it was old, I had to really work to keep the jeep in working condition. Something was always wearing out. I mowed yards after school and did landscape work and managed to earn enough money to keep the jeep running. The most expensive thing to replace was the rotting canvas top. The first year I had the jeep, I had to drive with a leak in the roof. The hole was over the passenger seat, and it didn't much bother me, but my girlfriends didn't like it, especially when the other guys they could date were driving Mustangs and Camaros. Linda Morgan was the only girl who didn't mind. She would pull herself
into the seat, prop her knees on the dash, and never complain. One weekend, she sewed up the hole, and when she finished she said, "We ought to give this girl a name. Let's call her Betsy."

We were a threesome the fall of our senior year – Linda, Betsy, and me – but around the holidays, Linda began to get serious, assuming, even insisting that we attend college together.

"I don't know," I said. "You're going to a church school and, if I have a good spring playing baseball, I could get drafted by the pros. I think my ticket out of Caney Hollow is playing professional baseball—not going to college."

Fortunately, I figured it right. I had a good spring, got drafted, and went to the minor leagues. The day after graduation, I packed a suitcase with my summer clothes and loaded it onto Betsy's cargo bin. Along with my custom bat and twenty dollars from my mother, I drove the jeep out of Caney Hollow and onto the southbound route to the rookie league.

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The jeep and I spent two summers in the minor leagues. I survived a short, bad marriage to an older woman from Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and afterward, Betsy and I kept going, making our way to Nashville, where I learned to sell real estate and began to make some money. No one had much good to say about Betsy. The man who owned my agency finally took me aside.

"Sonny," he said, "you've got to get something respectable. People won't do business with someone driving a piece of shit like that."

It was the same story when I married Jill. We settled into a neighborhood of old houses near the Belle Meade Mansion. Our street was dotted with BMW's and Porsches. Even Jill was driving a Volvo.

"That jeep is an eyesore," she said. "If you must keep it, Sonny, park it out of sight."
On Jill’s insistence, I bought a car like hers, but I’d still get Betsy out of the garage on weekends to drive the back roads to Caney Hollow, imagining on that brief journey that I was really going south again.

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Once Jill and I settled down, it seemed like things would never change. I kept my head down, and Jill and I raised a daughter who studied theater and flew off to a job in Manhattan straight out of college. The morning after she left, I noticed a tall, skinny black man struggling to saw a limb from a neighbor's tree. I jogged across the street and said, "Can I help you with that?"

"I could use a hand."

"I'm Sonny."

"Floyd Carter," he replied.

When he spoke, I noticed the fellow hardly had any teeth. He was strong and wiry -- probably six feet two, maybe 160 pounds. His shoes were old and caked with dirt. His pants were baggy and appeared to have been bought for a larger man. His belt could almost wrap around him twice.

His saw was on the ground, and I said, "Why don't you pull the limb as low as you can and I'll saw it."

After we got the limb down, I noticed my neighbor watching us from his front window. I waved, and he came out the door.

"I didn't budget this as a two-man job," he joked.

"Give you a deal," I said. "I'll take my compensation in beer."

He went back into the house and returned with a bottle of beer for each of us and a handful of bills he slipped to Floyd, who kept working, gathering the debris in a messy pile, before disappearing around the corner. My neighbor and I retreated to his porch with our beers. After
two Budweisers, I was ready for Betsy and our weekend spree. I waved my goodbye to my
neighbor, got Betsy out of the garage, and eased her down the driveway into the street, top down
and doors removed. Before I could pull away, Floyd approached and asked for a ride.
Home, he told me, was in the housing projects on the other side of the river in northeast
Nashville. Too far to walk, he added.

"How did you get here?" I asked

"Took the bus."

"Get in," I said.

"I like this thing," he said, referring to Betsy. "She feels good."

I asked him if he was from Nashville.

"All my life," he said. "My mamma worked most of her life in an old building near the
end of Fourth Avenue. I have a sister in Louisiana but the rest of my family lives here."

As we approached a liquor store downtown, Floyd asked me to pull into the lot.

"I need some refreshments," he said. "If you wouldn't mind."

After a minute or so, Floyd came out of the store and said he was short on change.

"If you'll let me have a twenty now, I'll mow your yard next week," he said.

I liked mowing my own yard and was pretty sure Floyd was gaming me, but I gave him a
twenty. He returned with a small bottle of whiskey and two bags of Cheetos. We crossed the
river and came to the projects where he got out. He winked at me as he crossed in front of the car
as if we had just shared a joke together. I doubted I'd ever see him again.

Joke was on me. Floyd began to show up every week. He needed money for his power
bill. Another time he was short of bus fare. A dentist needed to be paid before one of Floyd's last
rotten teeth could be pulled. I didn't believe Floyd's stories, but I liked him because he didn't
answer to anyone and seemed completely comfortable in his own skin. I'd always open the door to him, and we'd sit out on the front porch. I'd give him enough to get by. Pretty soon, he was a regular visitor to the block.

A couple of neighbors became upset. One, a lawyer, sent an e-mail to everyone on our block warning that a thief was frequenting the neighborhood. He posted a picture in an attachment, labeled with Floyd’s name. The last line of the message said, "Call the police if you see this man in our neighborhood." The picture didn't look like Floyd, and I was certain that it was, in fact, someone else. Apparently no one else recognized Floyd from the photograph either, because no one turned him in. When the policeman who worked our neighborhood drove by, I flagged him down to ask him about my new friend.

"Oh, Floyd's okay on an odd job or two, but he prefers to live by his wits," he said. "Giving him money only encourages his deviant behavior."

Deviant or not, the warnings didn't keep him away. He borrowed one of my older lawn mowers one Saturday morning, and as he was wheeling it out of the garage, he eyed the jeep.

"You don't drive it much, do you?" he said.

"My boss doesn't want it around the office," I said. "The wife and neighbors don't like it, either. Besides, it needs a lot of work."

Betsy did need some work. The top needed to be replaced, again. She needed a tune-up and new brakes. Jill had gotten upset when I told her that I wanted to buy new tires. "You should donate that piece of junk to the Salvation Army and get a tax deduction," she'd said. "C'mon, now, Sonny. You're a middle-aged man driving a vehicle made for a kid."

"You know," Floyd said now. "My boney ass would fit that driver's seat like a glove."

"I'm going to truck driver school," he announced. "I'll have some money when I start driving the big rigs. When I do, I'll buy that jeep."
"Sure," I said. "Let me know how that works out."

And he did. Floyd kept coming around the next few weeks asking for money to go to a trucker school on the north side, supposedly on the highway toward Kentucky. He said he'd gotten a grant to cover his tuition. All he needed was food money. Rent money. Bus money. Of course, I had my doubts about his story but I wanted to believe him. It was worth a shot, and I gave him a few dollars.

After that, Floyd would stop by less regularly, mostly to bring me updates on his progress. One time he said, "I can shift the gears on the big diesels, now." The next time it was, "We're learning to back fifty-five foot trailers into the docks." One weekend he surprised me when he asked to take Betsy for a drive.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said.

"I'll only be gone an hour," he told me. "I've got a surprise for you."

For all I knew that could be the last time I saw Betsy. Hell, I thought, maybe this was fate's way of ridding my neighborhood of its only eyesore. If Floyd stole the jeep, everyone around me would be happy, and Jill and I could finally park both Volvos in the garage. She was right, I guessed. I was a middle-aged man, and it was time to act like it -- stop mowing my own yard and, instead of squiring Betsy around on the weekends, start playing golf and drinking up-market liquor at Belle Meade. Maybe I'd even become the kind of husband who would go to church events with Jill on Sunday afternoons. The thought made my hands tighten on Betsy's keys, but gradually I released them to Floyd.

"Okay," I said. "Don't run over anybody. See you in an hour."

Floyd left, and I went inside and told Jill what I had done.

"I hope he steals it," she said. "That's probably the only way we'll ever be rid of that piece of shit."
I went onto my deck and poured some bourbon. As I drank I thought about the man I would become if the jeep was gone. I was half-drunk when Floyd pulled up in Betsy.

"What do you think?" he asked.

It took me a few addled minutes to notice the jeep was sporting four new tires.

"Where did you get these," I asked.

"I bought 'em from a Guatemalan guy," Floyd grinned. "I've been making some money with your mower, and I've been saving some of the cash you've been giving me. Go for a drive?"

I got in the jeep and told Floyd to drive to his apartment. The liquor was buzzing me, and I started thinking about fixing up my girl some more. Block by block, I came back to myself.

"I think I'll paint her," I grinned. "I've let her get rusty on the sides."

"I know a guy who can do that," Floyd said.

"She's leaking anti-freeze. I'll get a new radiator," I continued.

"I can install it," he said.

As we approached downtown, I realized I should eat something. We passed a diner near the old Ryman Auditorium in the honky-tonk section, and I told Floyd to park.

After we sat down in the diner, I decided to order two pork chop specials.

"I can't eat no pork chops," Floyd said.

"How come?" I asked.

"I ain't got enough teeth."

"Damn, Floyd, no wonder you're so scrawny."

"Hey," he said. "I may be scrawny but I can still go."

With that he jumped up, crouched into a boxer's stance, and began throwing left hooks and right crosses into the air. I saw a fat, big-framed waitress headed our way.

"Sit down, Floyd, before we get thrown out," I told him.
"We don't allow any carrying on like that in here," the big waitress said while chewing hard on a wad of gum.

"We ain't bothering nobody," Floyd told her.

"You're bothering me," the big woman said. "And I'm not afraid of you."

The diner became silent.

"Let's go, Floyd," I said, scrambling out of the booth.

He followed without a word, but when we were near the door, Floyd turned and began throwing more punches into the air.

As the waitress began to walk toward him, Floyd gave her a stare and yelled, "I ain't afraid of you either. I've fought heavyweights, you know."

Down the street, we found a place called Tootie's where I ordered two cheese omelets and we listened to the jukebox while waiting for our dinner.

"How old are you, Floyd?"

"I'll be fifty-four next month," he said.

"I'm one year older," I said. "Are you really learning to drive the big rigs?"

"I'm going every day," he said. "I get off the bus half a mile from the school, and I stay until noon. I've only got two more weeks until I graduate. You gonna come to the ceremony?"

"Sure, I'll come."

"You always cut your grass. How come you don't let me do it?"

"I enjoy yard work," I said "I grew up mowing yards. Honestly, I like it better than what I'm doing for a living, but you can't make any money cutting grass."

"Rich people pay more than you think to have their yards cut," he said. "If we bought a big-time mower -- the kind the city uses -- and put it on a trailer and hitched it to your jeep, we could make some good money."
"I don't know," I said.

"I ain't foolin" he said.

"What about your truck-driving career?" I asked.

"We'd do this on the side," he said. "When we get more customers, we'll expand and hire some Mexicans."

After our meal, we left for Floyd's apartment. It felt good to be back in the driver's seat—almost sober, but happy again.

"We need to buy a radio for this jeep," Floyd said. "Except I ain't listening to any of that twang music them honky-tonk joints are always playin'."

"What do you mean 'we'," I asked.

"We—as in partners. We're going into the landscaping business."

"I don't know if Betsy wants to pull a trailer at her age. She's older than we are, you know."

He patted the dashboard. "Betsy can still go, too, but she does need a radio."

After I dropped Floyd off, I drove across Nashville, I passed Printers Alley, an area of country music bars and adult entertainment and recalled my high school days when my buddies and I would sneak into the French Poodle Room, the most famous strip joint in the alley. It was long gone by now but I found a dive bar where a local college band was on stage. I needed another drink before I put Betsy in the garage and embarked on listening to what Jill had done at the Episcopal Women's meeting.

I hadn't done this in a while, and I was surprised that the college boys could play a honky-tonk fiddle and a steel guitar so well. I remembered the old days at the Ryman Auditorium and how the music sounded on the radio back in Caney Hollow. Each time the guitar
squealed, the sensation felt stronger. It was a sensation that could make a man crazy and want something he shouldn’t have. At break time I asked the guitar player about his plans.

"I'd like to be good enough to do this all my life," he said. "I'm a business major at the university but music is my thing."

As the band cranked up again, I began to think: A big-time mower would cost us at least four thousand dollars. A trailer might be another thousand. The trimmers wouldn't be cheap. Throw in a trailer hitch for Betsy and a radio, and we'd be looking at six grand, minimum, and probably more. I knew lots of guys, colleagues and clients, who paid good money to have their yard work done. But would they pay me?

And then came a crazy thought. What if I cut their lawns for free? Then they would understand. I would only be working as a hobby, a leisure pursuit and more fitting for a man at my station in life. But, how would I sell that nonsense to Floyd?

I knew something was wrong with my thinking. Jill would never understand and I couldn't blame her. I was a salesman, making good money, sitting in a dive, drinking whiskey, and contemplating spending a wad of money on landscaping equipment to be pulled around town on a trailer, attached to a beat-up jeep, driven by a roustabout I had known for six months, I thought about Linda Morgan and how she'd probably gone to college and become successful. I wondered what she would have made of Floyd’s plan. She’d loved Betsy and would be delighted that I still owned her. I should have never let Linda go.

The last song I heard as I left the bar was a twangy number called *Poor Fool* and I sat back down. I wasn't drunk but one more shot would have been too many, and I was good at knowing when to quit. I put a twenty in the tip jar and told the guitar player to fuck business school.
The Dream was alive. Floyd and I formed our corporation, and I bought the trailer and the mowing equipment. Floyd kept coming up with more stuff to buy.

"We got to have gas cans. We need a big thermos for water. A magnetic sign for Betsy. Uniforms."

"What in hell do we need uniforms for?" I asked.

"We're not a couple of drifters looking for work. We're professionals, now," he said. "We got to look like it."

"Ain't it strange how success changes a man," I told him. "And speaking of changes, you've got to get some teeth. You can't do this kind of work eating raw eggs and potted meat all the time."

"I'd turn into Arnold Schwarzenegger if I could eat a whole pork chop," he said.

Of course, Jill found out. After she calculated the money I had spent, she kicked the trashcan off our deck so hard it could have landed on the moon. She'd had plans to spend a month with our daughter, who was performing in a play in Manhattan. Now, she implied she might just stay up there for good.

"Look, Jill -- there's no reason to lose your mind," I said. "I'm only helping a guy that's down on his luck, and I'm doing something I enjoy, too. What's so wrong with that?"

"What's wrong is you think only about yourself," she said. "It's our money you're throwing around. At one point we were a team, living like our kind of people are supposed to live. Somehow, you've become the kind of man I always pitied -- the kind who refuses to see that he can't just do whatever he wants. You want to be like this Floyd character -- a man without purpose and any meaningful place in society. Some kind of shadow. What we've built together is real, and I'm not going to allow you, in a fit of delusion, to destroy it."
It wasn't like we were broke; it was a matter of how much was enough. I guessed Jill wanted us to leave our daughter enough money to stifle Gloria Vanderbilt. As for me, I wouldn't mind buying a new pool table and fixing Betsy up but, other than that, I didn't want anything. I didn't want Jill to leave, but I suppose I had it coming, and I was about to say so. Give in and let go. Divvy up the spoils and run. A strange kind of euphoria began running through me. Then Jill trained her gaze on me and said, "Sonny, when -- and if -- I get back from New York, all of this has to be gone: the Jeep, the trailer, and that guy--Floyd!"

Floyd and I had finagled one big customer, a company that operated a group of outlet stores near the interstate. Twenty acres to cut every two weeks and fifteen hundred bucks each time. Our mower was big enough that we could do the job in one day. Jill's ultimatum slipped into the back of my mind. Within a week, smaller jobs were coming along, and we began to make some real money, working every weekend.

Floyd bought Betsy a new timing belt and new brakes. I bought her new seats and a paint job. A new transmission eased the stress of pulling the trailer. She got her radio. Floyd had stopped mentioning trucker school graduation. He spent every day mowing yards. I had wondered when he would give up the lie and admit it was merely a ruse to get my money. It was well past his graduation date and he'd never said another word about it.

Jill was still in New York when the weather turned cool and the grass cutting slowed down. Floyd, with pockets full of our new earnings, planned a trip to New Orleans to visit his sister. He wanted to drive Betsy. He would be gone for two weeks.

"I don't know, Floyd. Two weeks is a long time."

"There ain't much grass to cut now," he said. "You won't need her for a while."
"I never know when I'll need Betsy," I said. "I might get a call to mow some weeds. I'll think about it and let you know."

I didn't want to do it. The thought of Floyd and Betsy together in New Orleans was enough to make the governor of Louisiana shit in his Sunday britches. That night, as I lay in bed, I thought of Jill and my daughter in New York. I remembered the steel guitar player in the dive bar and the twang of his music. The memory of the vibrations shook me, and I looked out the window toward the garage where Betsy was parked. Without thinking I went outside in my underwear and unlocked the garage door. I found the spare ignition key I kept hidden behind the light switch and cranked Betsy up. I drove her to the curb in front of the house and parked. Fuck the damn neighbors. Betsy might be gone tomorrow but, for at least one night, she could sleep in view of everyone. The next morning was Sunday and when Floyd showed up, my bags were packed and stuffed behind Betsy's passenger seat.

"I knew you were going," he grinned. "You can't fool me. Drive me to my place and pick up my bag."

Once more I wasn't an invited passenger on a road trip—this was Floyd's expedition—but I was already imagining the blackened outline of live oak branches and envisioning the ghosts of the Indians and soldiers as they watched us pass through the night. This time, I knew they were nothing more than spectators, watching me going south.