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Nowhere Land

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

"Title"

Nowhere Land

written by

name

Andu Davidson

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion of the Carl Goodson Honors Program meets the criteria for acceptance and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

April 15, 1999

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Author's Note

This is not a finished manuscript.

Even after two years of work, I have not found the time to complete it. What follows is a book that is still in progress. It has a beginning and an end, but it has many grammatical errors and mistakes throughout. I don't have it all correct. Also, the writing style is still in flux. Some of the language and scenes will change.

When you're at the end of a story, it's not a draft, but it's not the final one.

Nowhere Land

Andy Davidson

by

May 12, 2020

Andy Davidson

Author's Note

This is not a finished manuscript.

Even after two semesters of work, I have not found the time to complete it. What follows is a book that is still in revision. It has a beginning and an end, but in between are numerous errors and oversights on my part, things I have yet to correct. Also, the content is not in its final form. Sentences will change. Characters will change.

What you're about to read is my second draft, but far from the final one.

Andy Davidson

May 12, 2000

PART ONE

I dedicate this to my parents.

• Only because of you can I accomplish anything.

PART ONE

HOME COMING

He's a real Nowhere Man,
Sitting in his Nowhere Land....
--the Beatles, "Nowhere Man"

-1-

The night before Sam Little's father returned home from prison, a fierce storm swept across the Arkansas Delta.

The distant rumble of thunder woke Sam fifteen minutes before midnight. He sat up in bed, wearing only a pair of cotton underwear. The fitted sheet beneath him clung to his back; his entire body was slick with sweat. Sam rubbed his eyes and shook his head, clearing away the sleep. Flimsy, homemade curtains waved about his open bedroom window, a welcome cool breeze cutting through the thick humidity that had hung in the air all evening. Lightning flickered in the swollen sky.

Sam had been dreaming, but he could not remember what. At nine-thirty, after tucking in his little brother, he lay down atop the sheets and tried futilely to drift off. He had tossed and turned for over an hour, kicking miserably at the bunched covers at his feet. When he awoke, the fourth day of June was only fifteen minutes away. Official summer would not begin for another three weeks, but Arkansas summer had arrived right on schedule. By last Memorial Day weekend, the days and nights had already become unmercifully hot.

In the bed across from Sam's, seven-year-old Malachi had plunged into sleep moments after Sam kissed him on the forehead and whispered good night in his ear. A resilient child, Mal could tolerate the hot, humid air much more than his twenty-two-year-old brother. Still, it was more than just the heat that had kept Sam awake, more than the itchy wetness at the base of his skull and the small of his back. It was the knowledge

that, tomorrow, he would see his father for the first time in twelve years, and he had no idea what he would say to him.

More thunder sounded, this time louder, closer.

Sam swung his legs onto the wooden floor and looked over at Malachi. The dark-haired little boy slept on his stomach in his Scooby-Doo underwear. His covers were thrown back like his big brother's. Twisted in a knot, they dangled off the side of the bed. In the glare of the lightning that followed the thunder, Mal flashed an electric blue; his torso beaded with sweat.

Sam stood, old bedsprings creaking beneath him. As he stepped over to the window, dusty floorboards groaned in the darkness. He leaned his upper body out the window, and the chilled wind struck his bare, damp skin. It felt good. As the storm drew closer, the humidity was dissipating and the air cooling. *Hailing somewhere*, Sam thought, taking a deep breath.

Mal turned his face toward the open window, sighing softly in his sleep. The wind toyed with a lock of his hair.

Sensing more than hearing his brother's movement, Sam pulled himself back inside. He watched Mal for a time, marveling at how the child could fall asleep so quickly and remain that way in this unbearable heat. Mal's chest swelled, delicate ribs showing beneath his skin. His tiny brown eyes rabbitted back and forth behind closed lids.

Is he dreaming? Sam wondered. *What do retarded children dream about?*

Mal had Down's Syndrome.

With his eyes closed in sleep, Mal almost looked like any normal seven-year-old. The slant of the eyes was not so obvious when they were shut. And in the dark, Sam could barely make out the way Mal's nose was pressed flat against his face, or the way his lips always parted slightly. His hands were unnaturally short, but just now they were hidden beneath his feather pillow. As he regarded his fragile, sweating brother's form, Sam felt only love for the child.

Sam crossed to the half-open bedroom door and eased through the crack, mindful of the squeaking hinges. There were no nightlights in the house (the Littles shaved every possible penny off the electric bill), so the five small rooms were steeped in darkness. What were definite shapes in the daylight became vague indefinables at night. Across from Sam and Mal's room was their mother's bedroom. Behind her closed door, Rebecca Little slept alone.

Not after tonight. Sam could hear her snoring softly.

The kitchen and dining area were one room. A square of blue lightning flashed in the narrow double-window over the metal kitchen sink. Careful not to bark his shin on the spindly telephone table to his right, Sam glimpsed in the glare the metal kitchen cabinets, a sink full of dirty dishes, and the half-empty salt-and-pepper shakers on the Formica table. The aluminum legs of the table's four padded chairs cast four thin shadows across the off-white, stained linoleum floor his mother had not mopped in over a year.

Everything went dark again, and he was in the living room, feeling his way along the paneling, walking slow, bare feet scrishing across the floor. He came to the front

door and opened it. The cool air gusted through the screen door and hit Sam in the face and chest, and he took a full breath of it for the second time that night.

On the porch, Sam peered out across the black Delta plain. Beyond the mailbox at the edge of the highway, all was darkness. The nightlight beside the house cast a circle of fluorescent light on the front yard and the short gravel driveway, but, outside the circle's boundaries, blackness sprawled. An inky obscurity blotted the landscape around the miniscule house and the youth standing on its rickety front porch. Only the intermittent flashes of lightning hinted at a world outside the pale blue circle, dispelling the ranks of the night long enough for Sam to see the stretching plains and the tree-lined horizon.

Thunder suddenly erupted in the heavens above.

Both Sam and the windows shook with the blast. The boards under his bare feet rattled. The wind picked up, gusting hard. Pipe wind chimes hanging from the porch eave flailed desperately. The once innocuous lightning which had flickered behind the clouds became dangerous streaks of angry electricity, arcing viciously toward the ground. A purple bolt ripped across the sky.

Folding his arms across his chest, backing away from the edge of the porch, Sam scanned the suddenly violent heavens for rain.

The hail came first. He heard it before he saw it. The first few stones struck the porch's tin roof with sharp *plunk-plunk-plunks*. A moment of stillness followed, and then a barrage of white, round, marble-sized missiles assailed the house and everything around it. Sam watched in fascination as hundreds of icy pebbles littered the fluorescent-blue-tinged grass.

Over the roar of the stones striking the tin roof, he heard a voice. “*Sam!*”

Mal.

“*SAM!*”

He rushed into the house, the wind hammering the screen door shut behind him. He cracked his left knee on the telephone table in the hall, and the old black phone clattered to the floor with a loud ding.

Mal sat up in bed, arms around his knees, knees drawn up to his chin. He had his face buried between them, a little ostrich with its head in the sand. When he heard Sam come in, he looked up with large, relieved eyes.

“Hey, hey,” Sam said, “It’s just a little storm, big guy.” He sat on the edge of the bed and put his arm around his brother.

Outside, the hail tapered off, but the thunder continued to rumble and the lightning to pulse. A few stones found their way into the bedroom and lay melting on the floor just inside the window. The curtains fluttered madly.

“Hate it,” Mal whispered, laying his head against Sam’s sweaty shoulder.

“Oh, come on.” Sam bent and picked up a melting stone. “Look at this. Do you know what this is?”

Mal shook his head, refusing to even look at the ice.

“This is...”

The hallway floorboards creaked. Rebecca Little stood in the bedroom door, her pink nightgown billowing around her thin frame in the breeze from the window. Her long, silver hair fluttered freely about her shoulders. “What’s all the racket? Why is the front door open and the telephone knocked on the floor?”

“Storm woke us,” Sam said. “I went out on the porch, Mal got scared, and I ran back in and knocked the phone off the table as I went by. I was going to pick it up, as soon as he went back to sleep.” He brushed a damp lock of hair out of Mal’s eyes.

Rebecca grunted and bent to pick up the phone, her long, bony fingers feeling in the dark. “All this commotion, people need to be asleep.” After replacing the telephone on its table and closing the front door, she stepped back into the boys’ doorway.

Mal was turning the hail stone in his hands, watching it melt, enjoying the cold feel of it.

“He needs to be in bed,” she said. “School’s not out yet, you know.”

“He’s going back in a second. He was just scared.”

“Nothin’ to be done about the weather. Storm like this, we’re all at the Lord’s mercy.”

“Mom, he’s only seven.”

Mal popped the piece of ice into his mouth.

“Our Lord is not limited by age, Sam.”

“It’s the middle of the night, Mom. Do we have to do this now?”

The abrupt silence that followed was as uncomfortable as the temperature had been earlier. In the darkness, Rebecca’s wide, shining eyes fixed on Sam. He saw the hurt in her gaze, and instantly he was sorry for what he said.

“Well, good night then, if that’s how you feel. I’ll see you in the morning. Don’t forget to say your prayers.” Returning to her room, Rebecca shut the door sharply.

Sighing, Sam stood and closed the bedroom window. The rain had begun to fall, fast and heavy. He was suddenly sure that the rain would only leave things hotter and

more uncomfortable than before. In the Delta, as in the Little family, things never seemed to take a turn for the better. He thought of his father's homecoming tomorrow. Twelve years.

"Tastes like ice," Mal chirped.

Sam ran a hand through the boy's hair. "It is ice, Scooby-Doo. You'd better get back to bed. We don't want Mom upset."

Too late, Sam.

Mal flopped happily back on the bed, his fear forgotten. In less than a minute, his eyes were closed, and he was asleep.

Sam lay down, but he did not sleep right away. Behind closed eyelids, he saw his mother, silhouetted in the doorway, face slack with hurt, a sprig of silver hair sticking out crookedly above her left ear. *Always with the Lord, she starts, always with Mal.* He saw Mal, playing with the hail, oblivious to the impatience Sam's tone had betrayed with their mother. *But she doesn't love him like she should, all the wrong reasons. Same old story, second verse, same as the first.* As his thoughts began to lose significance and he edged into dreamland, he saw other things. His homemade curtains tossing in the wind—*I was eight and she'd bought her that new Singer at Wong's.* The wind chimes swinging wildly on the porch—*a gift from Uncle Pete, dead of cancer.* He saw the endless darkness of the Delta at night—*loneliness.* Not long after, he allowed that darkness to envelop him, and he slept.

Outside, the rain washed the hail away and drenched the Arkansas farmlands. The clouds relieved themselves over the Delta, and even after the rain ceased, the lightning and thunder continued well into the early morning hours.

-2-

Dawn in the Delta. The sun yawned over the horizon, its rays stretching across a cloudless blue sky. Drops of dew caught orange light as they rolled off soybean leaves and corn husks. Irrigation ditches filled with the sun as it rose, its golden rays reflected in the rainwater. Mud puddles spotted the gravel county roads, their water too dirty to reflect anything. Beaded cobwebs sparkled in the knee-high roadside grass.

The town of Midland, population 1,100, slept peacefully. The two-lane blacktop that ran the length of town, state Highway 38, was devoid of traffic, and would be for at least another hour. Hall's Supermarket and the Napa Auto Parts store dozed across from the Planters' National Bank and the office of Frederick Moody, M.D. Behind the bank, the Hornet's Nest Tastee-Freeze was quiet, its doors closed for another four hours. The nearby high school sprawled sleepily from the ends of Elm to Oak streets. Just up Oak Street, the First Baptist Church stood at the edge of Downtown, surrounded by a hedge of late-blooming, pink azaleas.

Downtown, the barber pole outside Larry Ferguson's shop was still and dark. Next door, the police department rested quietly in its nook where the old train depot once was, back when the Union Pacific still ran the Midland route, before the rails were torn up in 1979. The town's one cruiser was parked out front, leaking transmission fluid. Across the street, Lee Wong stepped onto the sidewalk before his storefront and swept a pile of dirt and leaves into the gutter, leftovers from last night's downpour. Lee lived

with his wife and two children above their second-hand clothing store. He was the only non-farmer in Midland who rose with the sun.

Across the hump where the railroad tracks used to be, what the locals referred to as the Tracks, black residential areas slumbered peacefully. Outside the eastern city limit, inside their white, two-story farmhouse adjacent to the New Hope Baptist Church, the Reverend Moe Johnson and his wife Louise slept beneath a quilt that once belonged to Louise's grandmother. Across the Tracks, along Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and Roosevelt Avenues, the upper class white neighborhood called Midland Heights was silent. In these two-story houses with their automatic lawn sprinklers, bird baths, hanging ferns, and sunrooms, Midland's wealthy slept in large, roomy beds.

At the south end of town, sitting alone at the edge of a soybean field, was Homer McCaslin's Garage. Out in back of this squat, white, concrete building, old rubber tires were haphazardly stacked head-high, for sale at reasonable prices. Homer himself will not be in to open shop for another hour, he and many other Midlanders still a good half-hour from waking. Across the highway stood the Midland water tower, the morning sun casting its off-white paint a pinkish-orange.

Three miles north of Midland, County Road 286 snaked a gravel swath for several miles through a field of rice. Along this road, a mile off Highway 38, a five-room house sat forlornly. Its once-white paint was peeling, gray boards showing through in places like exposed bones. The front porch sagged. Wind chimes hung from the eaves. Behind the house was a field of Johnson grass and nettles, ending in a stand of pine trees. The yard was mostly grass, some hardpan. A tall nightlight jutted crookedly from the ground at one corner of the house. The mailbox stood at the edge of a muddy ditch parallel to the

county road. In gold reflector stickers, on its rust-flaked side, were the name and address: "Little, B. 111 St. Francis 286."

Dawn in the Delta. Stillness lay over the land like a blanket yet to be thrown back.

-3-

When Sam woke at half-past six that morning, a square of sunlight was shining on his little brother's empty bed. After the storm, sleep had been thin for Sam the rest of the night, and he woke feeling tired. He rooted around for some work clothes in the cedar trunk at the end of his bed, settling on a pair of oil-stained jeans and a blue, sleeveless tee-shirt.

In the bathroom, he ran some water in the cast-iron tub and placed his clothes on the toilet seat. As the bath filled, Sam examined himself in the cracked mirror of the medicine cabinet. His eyes were puffy from a restless night, dark circles beneath them. He touched his right index finger to an old acne scar on the tip of his chin, feeling the mark's familiar, rough texture. A bit of stubble grew around it, a few more dark bristles on his cheeks and upper lip, but nothing serious. He could get by today without shaving. In the ten years since he had begun to shave, Sam had never been able to grow a full moustache or a beard. His facial hair always grew in uneven spurts, here and there, like brush fires.

The tub was almost full when he finished brushing his teeth. As he bathed, Sam could hear and smell bacon frying in the kitchen.

When he had toweled off and dressed, he entered the kitchen and sat at the head of the table. Beside him, Mal was just finishing a bowl of Froot Loops. A fork, glass, and napkin had been set in Sam's place. The setting went back to Rebecca's days as a

waitress, when she had worked at the truckstop off I-40 in Forrest City. Before Mal came along. *Old habits die hard*, he thought.

His mother stood at the stove, ladling scrambled eggs and hot bacon onto a plate.

“Morning, Mom.”

Rebecca did not respond, only turned in an unusually brisk manner and set the food before him. Which meant she was still mad. As she opened the refrigerator and removed a carton of orange juice, Sam plucked a strip of bacon from his plate and munched it, rolling his eyes. Mal caught the expression, milk dribbling down his chin, and rolled his slanted eyes in mimic of his older brother. Then he turned the bowl up to his mouth and slurped the rest of the milk. Sam could not help grinning, but he did so behind his hand.

Rebecca thumped the child’s ear, and he quickly plopped the bowl back onto the table. “I taught you better manners,” she scolded. Stabbing a finger at Sam, “And, you, do we no longer need to ask the Lord’s blessing on the food we eat?” She set the orange-juice carton on the table and turned back to the stove.

Sam stopped chewing the bacon, watched his mother. She deftly moved the iron skillet from the burner to the sink and tipped it so that the grease would run into an empty Folgers coffee can. Once the skillet was empty and the tin can full, Rebecca capped the grease and dropped the skillet into a sink full of warm, soapy water. After setting the grease can inside a cabinet above her head, she began furiously scrubbing the skillet with a steel wool pad, her head bent to the task, shoulders hunched. She was already dressed for work, Sam noticed. Gray slacks, short-sleeve white shirt with “Hall’s” stamped on the back in red, and her nametag pinned to her left breast.

To Sam, Rebecca looked years beyond forty-five. He supposed that age was benevolent to some, brutal to others. Over the last twelve years, beginning the day after his father's sentencing, age had settled on Rebecca like dust on a shelf unused. She had been alone, frightened, and vulnerable, and the predator time had seized its opportunity to make short work of a once fairly attractive woman. Her inky, flowing hair had turned to a stringy, ash-colored mane. Her formerly soft skin had hardened, and her once strong posture had deteriorated to a woeful stoop. Heavy frown lines now creased a once-smooth brow.

"I'm sorry about last night," Sam said, pouring some juice in his glass. "I shouldn't have cut you off like I did."

She paused in her scrubbing and raised her head. In the sink, the water sloshed then became still. Soapsuds clung to her forearms. "Mal, bring me your bowl."

Mal scooted back from the table and took his empty bowl to his mother, offering it up in both hands, brown fawn's eyes gazing up at Rebecca. She took it from him, dropped it in the sink, and went back to scrubbing the skillet. Mal hopped away, swinging his arms in wide arcs. He skipped into the living room, out of sight.

The apology worked. "It's okay," Rebecca said, shutting off the water and turning to face Sam. As she spoke, she dried her hands with a dish towel. "You were right, it was late."

Sam nodded, forking some eggs. "Are you nervous about today?"

"Some. Are you?"

"Yeah." Sam chewed, shaking his head. "For the last twelve years, there's nothing. My last real memory of Dad is..." He paused, swallowed eggs.

"That night," Rebecca finished for him.

Before He nodded. A silence passed between the two of them, each anxious, each having known that this day was coming, looming.

"Are you getting off early today?" Sam asked.

"Yes. And did you talk to Mr. McCaslin about taking off at three instead of four?"

"Last week. No problem."

"Ezekiel and Annie should be here around five this afternoon. He's cooked the meat already, so all's he's got to do is bring it."

"What time do you think you'll be home?"

"Probably around four, Lord willing. After you pick Malachi up from school, take him to get his haircut. I'll leave from the store to go get your father."

Sam nodded, glancing at the wall clock beside the refrigerator. On its plastic face was the Crucifixion scene at sunset, three dark crosses before a blazing orange background. Fifteen minutes past seven. Last Wednesday, he told Homer he would be in an hour early today to make up for leaving at three. Which meant he was fifteen minutes late for work.

"Crap," he said.

Rebecca gave him a sharp look.

"I told Homer I'd be in early today, since I was leaving early. Can you drop Mal off at school for me?" Sam pushed back from the table, aluminum chair legs skidding across linoleum.

Rebecca sighed. "I reckon. Today's going to be oogie. I can feel it."

-4-

Homer McCaslin stood in the doorway of his shop. He adjusted his black, horn-rimmed glasses, watching through smudged lenses as Sam pulled his rust-patched, blue Ford pick-up into the gravel parking lot. The kid threw the truck in park and cut the engine. The belligerent vehicle promptly farted a backfire. Chuckling, Homer pulled a red and white handkerchief from the back pocket of his coveralls and mopped the sweat from his forehead. The forty-eight-year-old mechanic's black, curly hair was plastered to his scalp, and perspiration seeped from every pore, soaking through his heavy work clothes. Inside his engineer's boots, it felt as though something slimy was writhing about his socked feet. His athlete's foot would be inflamed by the end of the day, no doubt. *God help me not to have a stroke, too*, Homer thought.

Sam came up, walking fast.

"Forget somethin' this morning?" Homer called, lips parting in a smile, revealing a single yellow tooth jutting from his upper gums.

"I'm sorry, Homer," Sam said. "Today's gonna be one of those days." *Two apologies in one morning*, he thought, *and it's not even eight o'clock yet*.

"I'll bet," the mechanic laughed, unzipping his grease-spotted coveralls to mid-stomach and scratching his chest through his undershirt. "It's okay, son. I don't remember too many times over the last six years you come in late."

Sam smiled at the compliment and nodded his gratitude. Homer ambled into the office and sat down beneath his window-unit air conditioner. In the garage, Sam flipped a light switch just inside the door. Four fluorescent bulbs flickered to life overhead.

The garage was as familiar to Sam as his own home, and it was not much bigger. An unpleasant yet satisfying smell hung in the air, the scent of hard work and accomplished tasks. It was composed of various odors layered on top of one another: grease wafting up from the pit at Sam's feet; oil soaking the concrete floor; gasoline fumes lingering in the air; and sweat permeating everything else.

The garage could hold two vehicles at once. Wooden shelves lined the walls, brimming with plastic quart jugs of oil, air filters, hoses, belts, and rusted cans of freon. A red metal tool chest on rollers stood just to the right of the office door, the lowermost drawer half open, a new crescent wrench glinting in the fluorescent light. A years-old layer of dust coated everything. Around the rims of open oilcans, bottles of brake fluid, and on the tips of grease guns, the dust became a sticky, black grime.

Sam flipped the latches on the metal garage doors and heaved them open. They slid crankily along their tracks, rattling into place overhead. A flock of dust motes took to the air as sunlight poured into the room.

"It's too early to be this hot!" Homer called from inside the office. He sat behind his desk, fanning himself with the phone book while the air conditioner blasted behind him.

"It's not that hot yet," Sam replied, stepping into the office. "Besides, don't you remember what you told me a long time ago? 'It's hot, dirty work.'"

“Yeah,” Homer growled. “I remember. I remember being half-a-dozen years and one heart attack younger then, too.”

For the second time that morning, the mechanic wiped his brow with his handkerchief. He thought back to the first day he had laid eyes on Sam Little. It had been a hot June morning, like today, and the boy had been only sixteen, freckle-faced and pimply. He was scouring Midland for work. That had been the summer after Sam’s little brother was born. Zeke had moved out, and the family had needed money. After a day of searching without luck, as Sam cruised by the garage, he happened to see the “Help Wanted” sign in Homer’s window.

Homer eyed the pimply kid skeptically from behind his cluttered desk, scratching the grizzle beneath his chin and adjusting his glasses. Back then, he still chewed Red Man, before the tobacco robbed him of his teeth. Pausing occasionally to spit a brown stream of juice into a coffee can, he explained to Sam that it would be hot work, dirty work. He would not tolerate idleness, nor would he accept excuses for unfinished tasks.

Sam sat across from him, face fixed with a determination Homer had never seen in one so young, and nodded. “My Mom says idle hands are the devil’s work. I can do it, Mr. McCaslin.”

And he had. Homer, a respecter of hard work without complaints, took an instant shine to the boy. His tasks were hot and dirty as promised. Sam swept the garage’s concrete floor clean of muck, hosed away grease and other fluids, washed customers’ cars by hand, and kept the one restroom around the corner of the building spotlessly clean.

As the summer wore on, Homer began to notice that the boy sometimes watched him out of the corner of his eye, listening as he explained to customers about fan belts that needed changing, batteries that needed replacing, and alternators that needed rebuilding. Sam paid close attention when Homer changed oil and cleaned gas filters. By the middle of July, the kid worked up the guts to ask Homer if he would teach him how to be a mechanic. Homer agreed, if only for the amusement of it. But, after a few weeks, he realized how seriously the boy took the trade, and he accepted him as a permanent fixture at the station. When school started back in the fall, Sam continued to work weekends, and he worked every summer until he graduated. After that, he came to work for Homer full-time, and had been working full-time now for almost five years.

“Anybody coming in today, that we know of?” Sam asked.

“Mrs. Carter phoned me at home last night. Said her Buick’s makin’ that funny racket again, wants us to check it out. Could be it just needs some power steerin’ fluid. That’s what was wrong last time. Anyway, she should be in around one. Oh, and Moe Johnson, that black preacher with the barber shop across the Tracks, he’s bringin’ in his Oldsmobile around eleven-thirty, on his lunch break. Brake pad replacement.”

“Do we have any brake pads left?”

“They’re comin’ this afternoon, UPS. He’ll have to leave it overnight. I told him you’d give him a ride back to his business.”

“Sure. Why does the name ‘Moe Johnson’ sound familiar?”

“He ran for mayor last year. Came close to winnin’.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“Because Midland is sixty percent white and forty percent black. That’s why.”

“Oh. Right.”

Homer grinned. “When all these rich white folks round here found out a black man was runnin’ for mayor, they went door to door tryin’ to drum up support, askin’ all us poor whites who never vote to come on out and support John Hall.”

“I remember that. His daughter came to my house.” Sam shook his head. “Did you vote?”

“Damn straight. I voted for Moe Johnson.” Homer slapped his knee.

Sam laughed. “Were you just doing that for spite, or...?”

“No, no. I think it’s a damn shame he didn’t win. Woulda made a good mayor. The Reverend is a smart man, and he don’t let it go to his head. The blacks round here all respect him somethin’ fierce. You ask me, they got good reason to.” Homer’s face darkened. “But leave it to a few uppity whites to fix things the way they think they oughta be.”

Sam sighed. “Speaking of rich white folks, what time was Mrs. Carter coming in today?”

“One.”

“That Buick of hers has what, two-hundred-twenty, thirty thousand miles on it?”

“Two-hundred-twenty-nine-thousand, as of yesterday. She said it just rolled over.”

“Someone should tell her that all that money she got when she sold her late husband’s land could be used for a new car.”

“Won’t be me. She’s too good a customer.”

Sam pictured Mrs. Carter, beady black eyes peering through glasses thick as windshields, her gray hair tied in a tight bun atop her small head. She was in the shop just a week ago having two new tires put on that Buick. The car had no shocks, had not had any for a year; every time the old woman bounced across a pothole or accidentally rubbed the shoulder of the road, the front tires' steel wire frames gouged the rubber. Eventually, the steel wore through the tires, and last Thursday she came out of Dr. Moody's office to find both front tires flat. Sam and Homer both recommended new shocks rather than just new tires, but the poor rich widow did "not want to spend that kind of money." As Sam worked at replacing her tires, the old woman hovered over him and rattled nonstop. *This never would have happened if George had still been alive. He was always good with things. I guess your mother's proud to have a mechanic like you around the house. How are your brothers doing? Poor Mal, bless his heart. Is your father still in prison?*

"How about some music, kid?" Homer gestured at the small silver radio that sat on a shelf in the shop, between bottles of Quaker State 10W-30.

Sam fetched the radio. He placed it on Homer's desk, plugged it into an empty socket at the baseboard, and tuned it to the staticky KLAZ, "K-Laze, the station where you can while away the day with those golden oldies of yesteryear!" Sam got them each a can of Coca-Cola from the machine out front, then plopped down in a chair. He propped his feet on Homer's cluttered desk, the Dell Vikings rolling out "Come Go With Me."

"Word is, they're lettin' your pop out today," Homer said.

"Yeah." Sam took a sip of his Coke, unsure of what else to say.

“How long’s he been in for now?”

“Twelve years last month.”

Homer whistled appreciatively. “I’ll bet he’s ready to be out.”

Sam shrugged.

“How bout you? You ready for him to be out?”

For a full minute, Sam contemplated his answer. As he thought about how to respond, the only sounds in the office were the music on the radio and the drone of the laboring air conditioner.

Homer studied him, habitually running his tongue around his one tooth.

“I’m ready...for *something*. How’s that?”

Homer shrugged, raised his eyebrows. “That’s fine. Me, I’m ready for a nap.”

And he reared back in his chair, folded his arms behind his sweat-matted head, and dozed off. Within a few moments, his mouth hung ajar, and he was snoring loudly.

Sam smiled, shook his head in wonderment, and closed his own eyes. What could it hurt? He had not slept well last night, and Moe Johnson would not be in until 11:30. As he nodded off, his father’s face was smiling drunkenly at him from a rainy night twelve years before, when Sam had been ten years old and had watched a man die for the first and only time in his life.

The polite rap of knuckles against the office door woke Sam and Homer.

“Hope I didn’t catch you gentlemen at a bad time,” said a soft, friendly voice.

Sam instinctively dropped his feet from the desk, his half-finished Coke held loosely in his left hand. Homer was getting to his feet, mumbling something about business being slow this morning. On K-Laze, the Four Tops were singing about their “Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch.” Homer cut them off in mid-chorus, stabbing the radio’s power button.

Sam’s mouth felt stuffed with cotton. He took a swig of Coke and looked up at their first customer of the day.

Reverend Moe Johnson stood outside the door, a smile spread across his warm, grandfatherly face. He was tall, over six feet, with long arms and legs that looked as though they might have been inherited from former fieldworkers. His hair was cut close to his scalp, tinged with spots of gray near his temples. Behind his large and kind eyes shone intelligence and wisdom. He had a gentle, sonorous voice, but Sam suspected it was capable of rising to a powerful, booming pitch.

“How are you, Reverend?”

“I’m good, Mr. McCaslin. And yourself?”

“Would say I can’t complain, but it’s what I do most of the time, so I don’t reckon I’ll say it. Now, let’s see, you wanted us to look at your brake pads, that right?”

“Yes, sir. They’ve been grinding lately.”

“We’ll fix her up for you. Of course, I won’t have the parts until this afternoon, which means it’ll be tomorrow before I can get it done.”

“Oh, that’s fine, no problem. Like I said on the phone this morning, as long as I have it by three o’clock. I’ll need it then.”

“We can certainly do that. If I could get you to pull her into this first stall here.”

Reverend Johnson returned to his gray Oldsmobile and cranked it up. Sam directed the car into the garage. The vehicle inched forward, straddling the grease-pit. At Sam’s signal, Reverend Johnson applied the brake, and the car squealed painfully. Homer stuck a finger in his ear, squinching his eyes, and Sam took an involuntary step backward.

Stepping out of the car, Reverend Johnson shook his head. “I guess you see what I mean.”

“She’s a-hurtin’ all right,” Homer conceded. “But we’ll take care of that for you. Have her ready by one tomorrow afternoon.”

“That’ll be great.”

“I can give you a lift back to wherever you need to be, Reverend.” Sam gestured out the open garage door toward his truck.

“Is it Sam?” Reverend Johnson asked, holding out his hand.

Taking it firmly, he replied, “Yes, sir. Sam Little.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sam. I’ll need a lift back to my shop. I usually don’t take more than thirty minutes for lunch. Otherwise, I’d just walk back.”

“Walk!” Homer exclaimed, mopping sweat with his handkerchief. “It’s hotter’n hell out there, Reverend.”

Moe Johnson laughed. "Let's all hope we never have to find out."

As he and the Reverend slid into the cab of Sam's 1981 Ford pick-up, Sam realized for the first time in months how dirty the inside of the truck was. A thick layer of dust had collected on the dashboard, having blown in from his daily treks up and down the county road on which he lived. Crushed aluminum Coke and Pepsi cans littered the floorboard, along with a grease-spotted blue cloth and an empty can of WD-40. He also noticed that smell, common to all old pick-ups, a fuzzy mixture of dirt, gas, and vinyl. When was the last time he had noticed *that* smell?

Reverend Johnson buckled his seatbelt and rested his elbow on the windowsill. The aluminum cans clinked under his feet.

"I'm sorry about the mess in here, sir," Sam said quickly, his face flushing the color of the Coke cans in the floorboard. "I don't pay it much attention, usually, and..."

"Neither do I. Come to think of it, I hope you and Mr. McCaslin don't take a notion to look too closely in the backseat of *my* car."

Smiling, Sam turned the key in the ignition. The engine coughed, cleared its throat, and grumbled to life, a cloud of exhaust spewing from the tail pipe. His truck had the respiratory system of a chronic smoker. "Where's your shop at, sir?"

"Just across the Tracks, about a block past the car wash."

Sam drove past the supermarket and the bank, signaling right at Oak Street.

"Little," Reverend Johnson said conversationally. "Little. I know that name. Does your mother work at Hall's?"

"Yes, sir. She's a checker."

They passed the Hornet's Nest. The small parking lot was jammed with cars, men and women on their lunch breaks. A line half-a-dozen long was backed up between the four occupied picnic tables. A crowd of men sat at one table, wearing baseball caps and cowboy hats, drinking from Styrofoam cups and munching fat hamburgers held together by their wrappings. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, sat at another table, sharing a banana split. The Highway Department filled the third and fourth tables, men and women dressed in their orange vests and frayed blue jeans. In the window, an attractive young girl with short blond hair took people's orders. She glanced up, saw the passing blue pick-up, and waved.

Sam waved back. "That's Annie, my brother's wife. She just started there the first of this month."

"She seems like a cheerful person."

"Yeah, Annie's great."

"Your brother...an older brother?"

Sam nodded. "Ezekiel. But everybody calls him Zeke. Everybody except my mother, at least. She likes Biblical names. My younger brother's name is Malachi."

"Ah, I see. And you're Samuel, right?"

"No, sir. Samson. See, after Zeke was born, the doctors told my mother she wouldn't be able to have anymore children. Then, about six years later, I came along. There's a passage in the book of Judges..."

Reverend Johnson cut in. "'And the angel of the Lord appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not, but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son.' And she called him Samson, right?"

“Wow. That’s right. How did you know that verse?”

“Samson’s story is an old favorite among pastors-turned-barbers.”

Sam laughed. The man sitting beside him was easily seventy years old, perhaps seventy-five, but he possessed the keen memory and sharp wit of someone just entering the prime of his life.

“My mother was a bit fond of the Old Testament herself, Samson. What do you think Moe is short for?”

They passed through Downtown. Old storefronts in need of fresh paint stared forlornly at one another across the street. A few windows were soaped over, their buildings empty. The police station parking lot was empty, the tell-tale spot of transmission fluid shining with rainbow colors in the afternoon sun. In the display at Wong’s Department Store, a hand-lettered sign in bold black print proclaimed “Summer Sale: All Summer Clotheing Half Off.”

Sam noted the misspelling of “clothing.” He fondly pictured short, robust Mrs. Wong sitting at her dining table above the store, dutifully writing out the sign on a piece of cardboard with a felt magic marker. The Wong family had lived in Midland since the early 1900s. Lee Wong’s grandfather had immigrated to the Delta from China, along with an influx of various other ethnic groups—the French, Irish, Germans, Italians, Swiss, Lebanese, and Syrians. Sam had learned much about the family’s past from his frequent visits to the store; he bought his and Mal’s clothes there, and Mrs. Wong adored long conversations. They were good people, hard workers descended from immigrants who had braved prejudice and poverty to build lives in a hard land.

Sam's old Ford crossed the Tracks. Although the rails had long since been removed, a phantom shudder seemed to pass through the vehicle's axles, much like the imagined pain of a missing limb. Sam was entering a side of town he had consciously avoided for the past twelve years. It felt wrong for a Little to be within the boundaries of the black community.

Reverend Johnson, sensing Sam's discomfort, said, "You don't come over here much, I take it."

"No, I...I don't really know anybody."

The Reverend nodded, lifting his hand to a group of young men standing around a recently waxed red Mustang at the car wash. Two of them waved back. The other three narrowed their eyes at the passing truck. One pointed at Sam and said something to his friend beside him. The friend nodded slowly.

"Of course," Sam said, noticing their stares, "I'm sure most of the people on this side of town know me."

"I see."

"You know who I am, then?"

"I know who your father is, and I've heard a bit about your older brother. But that doesn't mean I know who you are."

Sam could not think of anything to say, so he remained silent.

"This is it, Sam," said Reverend Johnson, pointing to the left.

The barbershop sat on the side of the road, a gray gravel parking area in front. The building itself was small and quaint. Its white paint was either recently applied or extremely well protected. Sam guessed that it was well protected; Reverend Johnson

struck him as a man who did things right. Above the door, a professionally rendered sign read in barber-pole-patterned letters: “Moe’s.” Long, narrow wooden boxes lined the building on either side of the concrete steps, each filled with potting soil and brimming with red, blue, and purple impatiens.

Sam parked and let the engine run. As the Reverend got out, Sam asked, “Do you need me to pick you up tomorrow to get your car, sir?”

“No, no. My wife can bring me, but thanks for the offer.”

“Okay. We’ll have it ready for you by one tomorrow.”

“I can’t tell you what a relief it is to know a couple of good mechanics. It’s short notice, I know, but I’ve got to head into Memphis tomorrow. My granddaughter’s flying in from Los Angeles.”

“Los Angeles.” Sam marveled at how exotic the words sounded.

“I’ve got to pick her up, and I don’t want to be in Memphis and the brakes go out on me.”

“Yes, sir, I know what you mean. And the notice is no problem.”

“Thanks for the ride, Sam. I’ll see you tomorrow. Have a good night.”

“You, too, Reverend.”

It did not occur to Sam until he was back across the Tracks, passing the First Baptist Church and its blooming hedge of pink azaleas, that Reverend Johnson had wished him a good *night*, at a few minutes past noon.

Little did either the Reverend or Sam know that they would see each other again that very afternoon—no more than three hours after the boy had dropped the old preacher off at his barbershop.

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Half an hour later, as Sam searched for a bottle of transmission fluid on Homer's overflowing shelves, and Mrs. Carter searched for her car keys in her house on Jefferson Street, Zeke Little sat on the tailgate of a white truck ten miles outside of Midland, eating a ham sandwich. His wife had wrapped it in Saran-Wrap, along with half an apple and a bundle of potato sticks.

Zeke loved potato sticks. His father loved potato sticks; therefore, Zeke loved potato sticks. He loved them so much that he had Annie pack them in his lunch every day. She agreed to this on the condition that Zeke allow her to include the apple half, because he needed to "eat right," she said. Ever since, Zeke ate them incessantly. On the tailgate beside him, his black metal lunchbox was open, the apple tucked in a corner, still wrapped in plastic. Zeke was not nearly so crazy about apples as potato sticks, but Annie insisted. So, Zeke did not argue. He simply let her pack the apple half. What Annie did not know was that every day, when he had finished the sandwich and potato sticks, Zeke unwrapped the apple from its plastic, placed the wad of Saran-Wrap back in his lunch box, and ground the fruit to mush beneath his boot on the highway. When Zeke performed the ritual on the day his father returned home from prison, Buddy Brighton was also sitting beside him on the tailgate of the Highway Department pick-up, munching Lays potato chips and wiping the grease on his jeans.

"What do you do that for?" Buddy asked through a mouthful of crumbs.

"It's called compromise," Zeke responded, scraping the sole of his boot on the grass at the edge of the road.

No more than twenty yards away, a group of workers stood in the shadow of a tractor, eating sandwiches their own wives had packed for them. Their laughter drifted to Zeke on the breeze. Most of them were older than Zeke and Buddy, men in their forties, skin heavily lined with sun-creases from harsh years of outdoor labor.

"Compromise?" Buddy wadded his potato chip bag and thoughtlessly stuck it in Zeke's lunch box. He wore a sleeveless tee-shirt beneath his orange vest, proudly displaying the recently acquired tattoo on his left arm. A rattlesnake coiled up Buddy's arm. Its segmented tail rested on his wrist, and its head and mouth lay on his shoulder. The snake's jaws were distended as it swallowed a wide-eyed mouse. Scales of sweat glistened along the back of the blue-green serpent.

"Yeah, compromise." Zeke removed the potato chip wrapper from his box, tossed it at Buddy, and closed the pail. "It's a marriage thing. She wants to give me the apple, I let her. I don't want to eat the apple, I don't. Only I don't tell her I don't. This way, nobody gets hurt."

"Except the apple." Buddy hopped off the tailgate, chittering like a squirrel.

"I ever tell you what a screwed up laugh you've got?"

Buddy tossed his empty Lays bag into the bed of the truck, where it landed between two stacks of orange traffic cones. "Now, that hurt, Zeke."

Doug Owens, the work team's supervisor, lifted a bull-horn to his mouth. He stood with the veteran highway workers in the shade of the tractor. "Okay, guys. Break's over! Let's get this done so we can all go home on time today!" The men disbanded and

spread out to their posts, the flaggers taking stances at either end of the work area, the mowers climbing atop their tractors. Acrid smoke coughed from smokestacks as the drivers cranked up their machines.

Zeke and Buddy headed for their mowers, parked a few yards beyond the truck they had sat on for lunch. They wore hard hats, their hair sweaty and itchy beneath. Unlike Buddy, Zeke had a long dark mane that spilled from his hat down to his shoulders, curling up at the bottom. Buddy's hair was short and bristly, almost blond in color. Their faces were deeply tanned, but not creased by the sun like the faces of the workers who had been doing this for years.

"Hey," Buddy said, climbing into the seat of his tractor. "You wanna go over to the Trough tonight? We could call up Lane and Brandon, go ridin' around. Brandon's got that new truck."

Zeke mounted his machine as if it were a horse. Gripping the steering wheel like a saddle horn, he put his left foot on the perforated metal platform by the clutch, what would have been the stirrup, and hauled himself up, throwing his right leg over the gears and sliding smoothly into the padded foam saddle. "Can't tonight," he replied. "My dad's comin' home. We're havin' a family dinner."

Buddy was surprised. "Your old man's getting out?"

"Yeah. Paroled for good behavior."

Buddy huffed. "Good behavior? *Your* old man?"

"Believe it or not."

"How about that," Buddy mused, starting his mower and shifting into gear.

Zeke turned the silver key in its ignition, and the tractor growled to life. Zeke depressed the clutch and shifted into first gear. Giving a tug on the rusted lever at his right side, he lowered the mower's blades and let off the clutch. The machine lurched forward.

Zeke enjoyed mowing. He liked the grit of it, the churning dust, the clinking rocks caught by the spinning blades. The world drowned in the machine's mighty roar. He relished the enormous power that he sat astride, the tremendous bulk and vibration of the beast beneath him. So often his job was incredibly boring—standing before an impatient line of cars, flipping a “STOP” sign to “SLOW,” and soaking up dirty looks as cars sped by.

When Zeke was on a mower, he had uninterrupted time to think. That is not to say he thought about a great many important things, for he most often did not. His mind was usually occupied with simple concerns: what he wanted Annie to fix for dinner, how much beer was left in the fridge and when to buy some more, and where to go fishing or bar-hopping on the weekends with Buddy, Lane, and Brandon. Zeke was a what-when-where-and-how kind of guy. Very seldom did why trouble him.

As a cloud of dust billowed from beneath the spinning blades, Zeke thought about the last twelve years. He was anxious to see his father. The old man's absence was a fissure in Zeke's life. The first four years without him passed uneventfully. Three weeks after Bob Little's imprisonment, Zeke landed his job with the Highway Department. His income would help support Sam and his mother for the next four years.

Zeke remembered how, not long his twentieth birthday, the Bible salesman appeared and disappeared in their lives, as fast as an afternoon thundershower. Nine

months later, one cold December night, there was another cloudburst. Zeke's mother gave birth to the retard. The town assumed Rebecca had paid a conjugal visit to Forrest City's Federal prison back in the spring. Only Zeke, Bob, Sam, and the long-gone Bible salesman knew otherwise.

The retard was a screeching horror to Zeke. At night, behind Rebecca's closed bedroom door, the slant-eyed thing cried incessantly, stretching and straining its vocal cords as if it were protesting its unjust existence. His mother's face became sallow and haggard during the day. She slept very little. The only time the retard was not crying was when fifteen-year-old Sam held it. Its beady black eyes brightened at Sam's acne-covered face. The retard cooed at Sam. It disgusted Zeke to think that his younger brother could love such a worthless feature.

One night, after four months of the baby's tireless fretting and fussing, Zeke threw back the covers and stormed across the hall. He threw open his mother's bedroom door. She hunched over the crib, thrusting a bottle of milk at the child's howling mouth. It refused to take the milk. Some of it splashed on the baby's angry red cheeks. Zeke reached into the crib, seized the little monster in both hands, and shook it violently. The baby's cries rose to a fevered pitch, and Zeke thought he might have throttled it to silence had his mother not hauled him back.

"No!" she whispered fearfully. "No! He is our cross to bear! He is our cross to bear."

"He's *your* cross," Zeke said.

After that, he began saving his money, and within two months, he moved into a trailer on another county road, six miles away.

In his father's absence, Zeke had watched his family split. A chasm opened up beneath the three of them, and each was left standing on his or her separate islands of loneliness.

The birth of Malachi had caused the ground to finally rip apart, but it was not the first tremor to rock the Littles. Zeke remembered the night before the trial. He and Sam were in bed, tucked beneath the covers that chilly November night. Sam was ten. Zeke was sixteen. Both had lain awake for hours, each staring silently up at the ceiling. Zeke's thoughts flashed across his mind in a senseless parade of fear and anxiety. *Dad's going to jail, what about us? Who'll look after Mom? I should get a job. They said he was drunk. The judge is a nigger.* Zeke could only guess at what Sam was thinking as he lay in bed that night. Sam had seen the entire terrible event play out before him, the windshield of their father's maroon Monte Carlo the movie screen. Sam had a front row seat. Later, Zeke envied this.

For a time, the quiet in the room was as thick as the darkness. Sam was the first to finally speak. Zeke remembered the words of their brief conversation as vividly as he remembered the pounding of the judge's gavel in the crowded courtroom. It was this conversation that would be the first wedge their father's crime drove between the brothers. Sam's voice sounded weak and insignificant in the overwhelming blackness.

"Daddy did a bad thing," Sam said.

"No, he didn't," Zeke said immediately, angry.

"But..."

"He didn't do a bad thing. He just did a good thing bad."

"What do you mean?"

But Zeke said no more.

Before their father's sentencing, each of the boys spoke to him by phone. The old man's weary, defeated voice had croaked through the receiver in their ears the words:

"I'll see you boys in a bit. Take care of your mamma."

Zeke did not judge his father for his crime. For twelve years, Zeke had held fast to his belief that his father had merely "done a good thing bad." His father's crime was no more a crime in Zeke's eyes than was hitting a mindless possum or armadillo loafing about on the highway at night. But nobody should have a wreck and injure himself or his family in the process of making road kill of a stupid varmint. That was the "bad" in his father's "good thing."

He and Sam had never seen eye to eye on that. Sam had not immediately known what Zeke meant by his remark in the bedroom that night, but he eventually figured it out, Zeke was sure. His mother's religion had infected Sam to the point that the boy believed from an early age that his father's and brother's ways were evil. Zeke's father had sheltered him from his mother's fanaticism, bringing him up to recognize certain truths in a world of lies.

The old man had allowed Zeke his first taste of alcohol the day he turned thirteen; according to Bob Little, a boy's passage into his teens was the beginning of his passage into manhood. Zeke's first rite of that passage had been to finish a Budweiser in his father's presence.

But their father had not been able to shelter Sam from their mother. Sam came along unexpectedly, a medical miracle according to the doctors, and as such, Rebecca claimed him as her "gift from God." Zeke remembered the old man saying there was

something about the boy that made him “uneasy.” Sam had a way of looking at them that raised the hair on their necks. It was as if he knew something they did not. He never took an interest in hunting or fishing. He would check out books from the school library and bring them home. While Zeke and Bob were off camping or cleaning a kill in the back yard, Sam would be curled up on his bed reading some book. Once Zeke’s father tried to force him to help pull the hide off a dead deer, and Sam threw up all over the carcass. Zeke overheard his father tell Rebecca after that that it was unnatural for a boy to be so “damn weak, so damn womanish.”

Zeke and Sam had never really worked as brothers. And when the old man was sentenced to prison, the fissure between them widened.

Zeke lifted the blades off the ground and swung the tractor around on the highway. He crossed to the other side and lowered the mower, heading in the direction from which he had come. In the distance, he saw Buddy and the others pulling their tractors off the road. Everyone was regrouping at the white pick-up. Up and down the road, eddies of dust were settling.

Time to go home.

-7-

The United Parcel Service delivered the brake pads at 2:45, fifteen minutes before Sam left for the day.

Homer, who would not leave until five, set the rectangular cardboard box on his desk and sliced through the packaging tape with his Old Timer pocket knife.

“You starting it today?” Sam asked, tugging a grease-spotted rag from his back pocket and wiping transmission fluid from his hands.

Mrs. Carter was inching her massive Buick onto the highway just as the brown UPS van swung into the parking lot. Its right headlight almost clipped her right fender, and she raised a bony fist at the driver and honked her horn, spewing gravel as she accelerated away. Other than Moe Johnson, she had been their only customer that day. Sam’s ear still ached from the old woman’s ceaseless bending. From her late husband’s masterful knowledge of mechanics to the First Baptist Church’s upcoming chili contest, she had filled Sam’s ear with prattle while he had filled her car with transmission fluid.

“Probably not,” Homer replied. “It’s too hot. I’ll get it up on the rack, and we can start it tomorrow. Shouldn’t take long.”

On the wall outside, near the Coke machine, a fat, large-print thermometer pegged the temperature right at one-hundred degrees. The heat shimmered in translucent waves above the hood and roof of Sam’s pick-up.

“Don’t you need to be getting along, son?”

Sam glanced at Homer's wall clock, a far cry from the Crucifixion. A scantily clad female caressed the fender of a classic Corvette; Sam was uncertain of both her age and the year-model of the car. Her well-oiled curves were in relief to the well-waxed curves of the Corvette. She wore a yellow bikini; the car wore a yellow coat of paint. It was 2:55.

"Yeah, I do." Sam tossed the dirty rag into the garage.

As Sam left, Homer called after him, "Good luck tonight!"

The Midland elementary school was located across town from the high school, on the other side of the Tracks. Built in the late 1940s to be the Midland School for Negroes, it became an integrated elementary facility in 1964, and the all-white school became Midland High. Although Little Rock's Central High School had integrated seven years earlier, change was slower in coming to the small Delta towns.

Sam sat in his pick-up across the street and watched children flood out of the tan brick building and race to a line of idling school buses. They carried plastic lunch boxes, nylon backpacks, and armloads of books. The white children ran with white children, and black children ran with black children.

From the double doors at the school's entrance, Mal emerged with his special ed teacher, Mrs. Petty, a short, rotund woman with a pleasant, shiny face and orthopedic shoes. Every day she walked Mal outside, one hand gently but firmly on his shoulder. Mrs. Petty knew both Sam and Rebecca by sight although the majority of her dealings were with Sam. Rebecca had been present at Mal's enrollment at Midland Elementary two years ago, and once she had taken Mal home early when he was sick with a bug.

That had been the extent of her involvement in Mal's education. Like Sam, Rebecca worked until five, but unlike Sam, her employer did not condone employees leaving and returning, or employees' children running around the place of business—especially employees' *retarded* children, Sam secretly suspected. So, Sam dropped him off in the mornings on his way to work and took a few minutes off to pick him up in the afternoons. He always brought him back to the garage for the remaining couple of hours he had to work. Homer did not mind. Sam attended all of Mal's parent-teacher conferences, and he was faithfully present at all PTA meetings. For all purposes, as far as Mal and school were concerned, Sam *was* Mal's parent.

Mrs. Petty saw Sam and raised a hand. He waved back and stepped out of the truck. She guided Mal through jostling waves of scampering children, stopping at the edge of the road and saying something to him. Sam thought she was probably instructing him in her patient voice to look both ways before crossing the street. Mal's head swung back and forth in his sincere, exaggerated way. Once satisfied with the road's condition, the two of them proceeded across. Mal watched his feet, his tongue protruding slightly.

"Hey, big guy!" Sam called.

Mal looked up. A joyous grin spread across his simple countenance, and, before Mrs. Petty knew it, he had slipped her grasp and was running open-armed for his big brother.

Sam caught Mal and hugged him fiercely. After a few seconds, he pried him loose and kneeled, eye-level with the boy. "You have a good day at school?"

Mal's huge grin expanded even further, something anyone but Sam would have thought impossible.

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Petty. “Show Sam what you did today, Mal.”

The boy’s stunted fingers fumbled eagerly with the zipper of his backpack. He reached inside and produced a folded piece of white construction paper. He thrust it at Sam, beaming. Sam opened it and looked at it. Written in red crayon, in a large, sprawling script, were the words “MALACHI LITTLE.” They ambled across the top of the page, curving downward from left to right. Beneath were numbers, one through ten, written in blue. The writing was more than childish in style. It had a noble desperation to it; it appeared to be struggling to make itself readable.

“This is wonderful, Mal.” Sam touched his brother on the cheek. The boy’s face glowed with pride.

“As you know,” Mrs. Petty was saying, “Writing without copying has been the focus of our year-long project, and...”

“DID IT ALL BY MYSELF!” Mal ejaculated suddenly.

Mrs. Petty smiled, nodding vigorously.

Sam laughed hard.

“I almost cried today, Sam. If only you could have seen how happy he was with himself.” Mrs. Petty placed her hands on Mal’s shoulders and squeezed him lovingly.

“I do see it,” he said, standing. “Do you know what we’re gonna do, Mrs. Petty? We’re gonna put this on the refrigerator when we get home. We’ll show Mom and Aunt Annie—she’s coming over tonight. You can show her, too, Mal. Heck, we’ll show everybody!”

Mal clutched his paper in his hands and nodded vigorous approval of Sam’s idea. Mrs. Petty self-consciously covered her smile with a plump hand.

"I want to thank you, Mrs. Petty, for your patience and time."

"Oh," she said, blushing. "It's my job, Sam."

"Yeah, but you've brought him farther than he should be, according to the doctors."

"Doctors, pshaw! What do they know? Right, Mal?" She ruffled his hair.

"Right!" Mal grinned up at his teacher.

"Well, we should really be going. I've got to take him by Mr. Ferguson's and get him a haircut."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow, Mal." Mrs. Petty patted him on the back, said goodbye to Sam, and hurried across the road, just before the school buses began lumbering out of the parking lot.

As the brothers sat in the cab of the truck, waiting on the buses to pass, Sam asked Mal if he remembered what today was.

The boy cocked his head, chewed his lower lip, and said, "Saturday."

"No, it's Thursday. No school on Saturday, remember?"

Mal looked blankly at Sam, hands clutching his backpack in his lap.

"Anyway, what I meant was, do you remember what's special about today?"

"Uhhh..." He seemed to ponder the question heavily for a few seconds, then shook his head.

The last of the buses rumbled by, and Sam started the truck and pulled onto the road, heading for Downtown. On either side of Elementary Drive, abandoned storefronts stared emptily at one another. Torn, discolored awnings hung crookedly above boarded doors and windows. One building, the old feed store, was missing a portion of its roof.

The shingles had caved in long ago. Several display windows that had not been boarded were broken, jagged pieces of glass jutting upward like chipped, crooked teeth. Blue and red graffiti marred the wooden, rotting walls. "Crips." "Call Yolanda." An old, two-story brick building sat on the corner at the end of the street, across from the tracks. Faded black lettering across its front proclaimed it to have once been "The Royal Hotel." Now, one whole side was collapsed in a pile of rubble, the inside burned and blackened. Someone had cleverly scrawled across the door in florescent orange paint: "Vacancy."

Larry Ferguson's barbershop was a squat brick building, situated across from Wong's Department Store and adjacent to the police department. Behind it, where the railroad tracks once had run, patchy clumps of grass spurted out of the bald, brown earth, like sprigs of hair a myopic barber might have missed. In front of the shop, the red, white, and blue barber's pole was cryptically still.

Ferguson's shared the police department's paved parking lot. Recently applied, bright yellow strips of paint marked half-a-dozen parking boundaries between the two buildings. Under the lazy supervision of Officer Truman White, George Roman—who worked for St. Francis County Electric—had painted the markers just last Saturday, as part of his community service for an all-night drinking binge. Such infractions were relatively commonplace in Midland, and Police Chief David Wade usually turned a blind eye to such goings-on. However, in the recent case of Mr. Roman, Wade had been forced to drop the hammer. The inebriated electrician had driven his Chevy Sonoma off the highway and plowed through three hundred feet of a soybean field. The field had belonged to the mayor's brother-in-law, a disagreeable fellow with a penchant for raising

more than soybeans. Thus the parking lot of Ferguson's barbershop had new yellow lines, courtesy of the Midland PD and George Roman.

As Sam pulled in, he noticed that there were no cars in the parking lot.

"No stripy, Sam," Mal observed.

Sam noticed the dark pole and took a closer look at the barbershop. There were no lights on inside; a thin gloom hung like crepe paper behind the glass door. The big barber's chair was a misshapen shadow in the darkness. A sign with red, capital letters proclaimed the shop "CLOSED." Beneath this, taped to the inside of the glass, was a handwritten note, inked in a careful, precise script: "Due to Family Illness."

Sam's pick-up began to shudder as it idled in front of the empty shop.

"It *would* be today," he groaned.

"What's wrong with the stripy?" Mal asked with concern.

"It's not on today. Mr. Ferguson is closed." Sam's fingers tightened about the steering wheel. *What to do, what to do.*

"No haircut?"

Sam glanced at his brother. The boy's shaggy brown mop of hair hung over the tops of his ears. It lay thick against his forehead, reaching almost to his eyebrows.

Sam considered cutting it himself. Did his mother have any scissors for that kind of thing? He could not remember. She had long ago lost interest in keeping herself up, ever since their father had been arrested. Not once in the little-more-than-a-decade of Bob's imprisonment had Rebecca donned make-up.

It was determined that Mal would have a haircut a week ago, at supper. Over a steaming bowl of homemade vegetable soup, Rebecca had decreed that Malachi's

“mane” was to be “shorn.” He would “look presentable before his father” when he returned home. From behind a spoonful of soup, Sam had gently reminded Rebecca that Mal was not Bob Little’s son. Her reply had been fast, indisputable. “He will be.” Thus the haircut was a delicate and critical issue. It must be done, and it must be done right.

Sam’s options: cut it himself, or go to someone else.

The only someone else in Midland.

“No bubble gum?” Mal added apprehensively.

Sam sighed, shifted the truck into reverse, and backed out of the parking lot. He was a mechanic, not a barber.

“What about my haircut?”

“We’ll go somewhere else, big guy. I know somebody.”

As his old blue pick-up crossed the Tracks for the third time that day, Sam hoped he was not making a grave mistake.

One man sat awaiting a haircut at Moe's barbershop. Dressed in a charcoal gray suit and blue tie, Curtis Burns occupied a chair near the door, the *Forrest City Examiner* open before him. He solemnly perused the obituaries. Owner of Burns' Funeral Home, Curtis kept a close watch on his competition, the larger funeral homes in Forrest City. His greatest fear was finding the name of a black Midlander in the newspaper's cemetery and reading that his or her viewing would be held at Coleman's or Lowenstein's. Today, Curtis was happy, as there was not a single name he recognized. As he read, he absently tapped his foot in time to a soft blues number emanating from a radio somewhere in the shop.

Sitting beneath Moe's scissors, eighty-year-old Arliss James talked nonstop. The retired farmer and former field hand sat covered by a pinstriped smock. Rambling in his raspy, asthmatic voice, he spoke of the day's fair weather and of the previous night's violent thunderstorm. He talked politics, cursing that "no-good draft dodger Clinton" and that "tubby do-nothing Huckabee." He spewed scathing criticism at both Democrats and Republicans, occasionally scratching the salty stubble growing on his cheeks and chin.

Moe stood behind him, dressed in a white barber's shirt with his initials embroidered on the breast pocket, a half-smile gracing his grandfatherly features. Every three weeks, he listened patiently to his grouchiest customer's tireless tirades for the fifteen minutes it took to shear the man's hair. Years of service to the Lord and a lifetime of prayer had borne Moe what he believed to be one of the greatest and most useful fruits of the spirit: patience.

Behind his newspaper, Curtis Burns sat quietly, passively. He flipped a page, adjusted his gogglish pair of glasses, and shifted his attention from the dead to the funnies.

“Politicians is all crookeder than a country mile,” James was saying. “They supposed to be lookin’ out for you, but what they really lookin’ our for is their own self.”

“Amen,” Moe said obligingly. He snipped a sprig of white hair from James’s head and brushed it from his neck where it fell.

“One thing’s for sure,” James continued. “Ain’t no white politician round here interested in us black people. Sure woulda been a good thing if you’d won that election last year, Reverend.”

“Wasn’t meant to be, Arliss,” Moe replied, remembering how close the vote had been. John Hall, the owner of the local supermarket, had beat him by a dozen votes. So close.

“Police in this town,” James kept on, “They just look the other way when some buncha white boys go to stirrin’ up trouble. Last weekend, I called in a complaint on some rednecks...”

The bell over the shop door jingled, and Sam Little stepped inside. His eyes nervously swept the room as he held the door open for Mal, who peeked in from outside. At Sam’s urging, the boy hesitantly entered and slipped behind his brother, clinging to his waist, a finger coiled tightly around one of Sam’s belt loops.

Arliss James fell silent, and Curtis Burns peered around the edge of his paper. After a cursory glance, the mortician returned to his reading. James, however, remained quiet, his dark eyes fixed on Sam and his brother.

“Sam Little!” Moe said. “Come on in! I didn’t expect to see you again until tomorrow afternoon.”

“We found ourselves in a bit of a spot, and my little brother, well, he needs a haircut.” Sam stepped aside and placed a hand on Mal’s shoulder. He gently nudged him forward. Mal ducked his head.

“I can certainly take care of that.” Moe came around the barber’s chair holding his scissors. “Hello there, young sir. What’s your name?”

Mal tugged at one ear and studied the floor.

“This is Mal,” Sam said. “He’s not crazy about strangers.”

“Sure, he isn’t. Mal, I’m Moe. Did you come to get a haircut today?”

“Say, ‘yes sir,’” Sam coaxed.

Mal looked pleadingly up at Sam. *Do I have to?*

Suddenly James spoke, his raspy voice like dry leaves crunching underfoot.

“Little, Little.” He tasted the name, then abruptly made a sour face as if the word was rotten. “You Bob Little’s boy?” It was more an accusation than a question.

“Yes, sir,” Sam said.

Moe returned to James’s hair and snipped quickly.

Sam guided Mal to a chair across from Curtis Burns. Mal’s ragged sneakers skimmed the black-and-white tile floor; his short legs dangled doll-like from his chair. The sun slanted warmly into the room through two sets of Venetian blinds. Its rays lit upon the two brothers’ faces, and Mal squinted. Burns sat with his back to the light, a halo gleaming around the just-visible dome of his bald head. The sunlight made his newspaper translucent.

A dusty metal rack containing outdated copies of *Reader's Digest* and *Field & Stream* stood at the far end of the room. A black, tubular ash bin stood nearby, filled with day-old cigarette butts and the brown stump of a cigar. A fan turned rapidly overhead, and a window-unit air conditioner shot a steady stream of cool air across the room.

To Sam, however, the barbershop was stifling, hot. He felt out of place, uncomfortable. His presence across the tracks in this barbershop, especially on this day, seemed wrong. He had hoped the Reverend Johnson would have no customers when they arrived. He began to wish he had tried to cut Mal's hair himself. The wound his father's crime had left throbbled, and Sam prayed it would not be reopened here.

Arliss James picked at the scab. "You and your buddies drag up and down the road out by my place last weekend, boy? Make a stir?"

Sam shook his head. Sweat popped out on his neck. "Most likely that's my older brother, sir."

"Your brother?"

"Yes, sir. Zeke. He and his friends can get rowdy sometimes."

"Rowdy ain't the word for it. Last Saturday night, long about midnight, they were bout half-a-mile from my house, rippin' around in this big pick-up, squealin' tires. Once I heard gunshots. *Gunshots!*"

"Easy there, Arliss," Moe said softly, setting his scissors on the cluttered counter behind him and locating a brush. He whisked loose hair from the older man's shoulders and brushed it from behind his ears.

“Don’t know what they coulda been shootin’ at, less’n it was possums or deer. Or maybe road signs. Those redneck boys sometimes shoot at road signs, you know.”

Mal stared at the elderly black man. His tongue pushed out from between his lips, as it sometimes did when Mal’s mind glazed over.

“Don’t stare,” Sam whispered in his ear.

Mal’s tongue slipped back into his mouth. He glanced in the direction of Curtis Burns. The mortician was watching Mal over the top of his newspaper, and when he saw the boy look his way, he quickly bent his head back to the comics.

Sam listened as James described the truck he had seen last Saturday night: an off-white, muddy 4x4 Ford with mud flaps and no muffler. “It was that Little, ain’t no doubt,” James growled.

When Mal slunk out of his chair and tip-toed toward Curtis Burns, Sam did not notice. His attention, as Mal’s had been a moment before, was entirely on the old man in the barber’s chair.

“That boy’s got too much of his daddy in him,” James snarled.

Sam sputtered, “Well, Zeke, he’s just...”

“Arliss,” Moe said. “The boy can’t help what his brother or father did.”

The older man ignored the barber. He had picked the scab from the wound, and now, he would pour salt on it. He narrowed his eyes, drew an arthritis-gnarled hand from beneath the smock, and stabbed a crooked finger at Sam. “How much of him do *you* have in you, boy?”

Sam had no idea what to say.

Mal stood before the wall of newspaper that hid Curtis Burns' face, watching the man's polished Wingtip tap in time to the radio. Slowly, he looked up and reached his stubby index finger toward the paper. Just as he touched it, the newspaper folded, and Mal found himself staring into the goggled, granite face of the mortician. He froze, finger still extended. His slanted eyes widened with surprise.

From behind a lens as thick as an ash tray, Curtis Burns winked at Mal.

The boy did not respond.

Curtis tilted his head forward and shot his false teeth out.

It was a trick he had perfected over the years. It broke the ice with nervous youngsters who came to his funeral home with their parents. His grandchildren were fond of it, too. They would flock around him and beg him to "pop his choppers," and he would oblige, shoving his dentures from his mouth with his tongue so that they jutted precariously from his lips, a pink outcropping.

When Mal saw the black man's bright pink and yellow teeth pop out, he stumbled back, snatching his finger to his chest. As if he feared the teeth would snap it off. He tottered backward to his chair.

Curtis retracted his dentures and flashed a toothy smile at the boy.

Moe, who was trimming James's sideburns with an electric razor, saw what happened, and he smiled along with the mortician.

Sam's light green eyes were locked with James's dark browns.

Moe clicked off the electric razor and saw that Sam's face bore a lost, flustered expression. James seemed coolly satisfied, however, the proverbial cat that swallowed the proverbial canary.

Mal clamored back into his padded chair, and Sam broke eye contact with the old man. "What are you doing?" he asked the boy.

Mal said nothing, only pointed at Burns with the same tentative finger he had extended a moment ago. Sam gazed across the barbershop, saw only a pair of gray suit pants and dark hands holding open the *Examiner*.

"What is it?"

Mal bared his teeth, making an effort to stick out his lower jaw in an imitation of Burns. There was a gap where he had recently lost his right canine, and a puzzled smile crossed Sam's face.

Moe removed the smock from James and shook out the hair it had caught. Dressed in a plaid shirt, suspenders, and faded khaki pants, the eighty-year-old man stood creakily to his feet. He ran a hand over his shorn head and fished in a pants pocket with the other. He produced a crumpled ten and a few shreds of pocket lint, all of which he handed to Moe. The barber made change, returning three dollars to James. He tossed the lint into the pile of hair on the floor.

Sauntering to the door, James stuffed the bills in his shirt pocket. The bell over the door jingled as he opened it. He had put one foot outside when he paused, turned, and cast a sideways glance at Sam.

"Your daddy was a mean one," he rasped.

Sam swallowed.

"And your brother turned out the same."

Sam's mouth was dry.

"How you reckon you'll end up?"

“Go on, now, Arliss,” Moe called. He brushed a few scraps of hair from the seat of the barber’s chair. “I’ll see you Sunday.”

James disappeared out the door, scowling. The bell jingled behind him.

“I’m sorry about that, Sam.” Moe shook his head. “I’ve never met a man with a bigger chip on his shoulder.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Johnson. He didn’t say anything I hadn’t already figured myself.”

Moe regarded Sam for a moment, then nodded. “You ready for yours, Curt?”

Curtis Burns lowered his newspaper. “I think I’ll let the youngster go ahead. I’ve still got the sports section.” He winked at Mal again.

“Okay. Who’s first?” Moe gestured invitingly to the chair.

“It’s just Mal today.”

“Oh, now, you wouldn’t be afraid of a haircut, would you, *Samson*?”

Sam laughed. “No, sir, it’s just that Mr. Ferguson cut mine two weeks ago.”

Moe noticed that Sam’s chestnut hair was indeed not quite long enough to be cut just yet; it looked as if it was just beginning to grow back out. The youth had shiny, healthy hair. He combed it straight down, and, from the looks of it, he never used hair spray. Moe reached behind his chair and produced a booster seat for Mal. As he placed the booster in the chair, he had an odd thought. *This is the first time I’ve ever done this for a white child.* White or black made little difference to Moe, but this was somewhat of a historical moment in the annals of Moe’s Barbershop.

Mal had to be led to the chair, and Sam picked him up and placed him in the seat. No sooner had his bottom touched the booster than the little boy was wriggling back down. Sam took his arm and explained to him that Mr. Johnson—Moe—was not going

to hurt him, just like Mr. Ferguson never hurt him. Still, Mal would not have it. He snatched his arm away from Sam. Moe interceded by offering the child a piece of bubble gum to chew while he got his hair cut, and then, after it was all over, he could have another.

The barber had found Mal's weakness—bubble gum. After unwrapping his first piece and greedily popping it into his mouth, he crawled back into the chair and sat obediently. Moe snipped away. Sam sat in the chair nearest Mal, close by in case he became antsy. But the longer Mal sat in the chair, the more he relaxed. Sam listened as the barber-preacher told his little brother Bible stories. In his sonorous voice, Moe talked about Jonah in the belly of the fish and the ordeal of Daniel in the lions' den. He also touched on the plight of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. Mal liked the tales, especially the last. The exotic, tongue-twisting names enthralled him. Old Testament stories for a boy with an Old Testament name.

"They were all in places they didn't really want to be," Moe was saying. "Just like you."

Mal worked hard on his bubble gum, smacking, listening.

Moe gathered a final bit of hair in the front, snipped it with a flourish, and spun the chair around to face the wall-size mirror behind them. Mal's eyes bulged at the sudden motion. They grew even larger when he found his own face staring at him. Moe reached into a jar on the counter and fished out three pieces of bubble gum. "But, in the end, being in those places paid off. Each was rewarded for his faith." With that, he dropped the gum into Mal's hand.

Mal's hair was cut summertime short. Moe had parted it handsomely. It was probably the best haircut Mal had ever received, certainly better than the perfunctory whacking Mr. Ferguson always administered. It was neatly trimmed just over his ears and even on both sides. The back was blocked smoothly, as if Moe had used a ruler.

Moe swept away the hair-speckled cover. He brushed Mal's neck and behind his ears. When he swished the bristles lightly across the boy's face, Mal giggled, scrunching up his nose.

Sam handed Moe a five and two ones from his wallet, and Mal hopped down. He bent his head forward and vigorously raked his hands through his hair; a torrent of loose strands poured onto the checkered tile floor.

"We really appreciate this, Mr. Johnson."

"I'm glad I could help out, son. I hope you won't let Arliss James scare you from coming back." Moe put the money into an old Roi-Tan cigar box that set next to the bubble gum jar.

"Oh, no. I've heard that kind of thing lots of times, off and on over the last twelve years. You'd think I'd be used to it by now." Sam turned his attention to Mal, who was opening the first of his three new pieces of bubble gum. Mal shoved the pink pellet into his mouth with the wad already there. His cheek bulged. Sam said, "You ready to head home, big guy?"

"Really, Sam, I am sorry you had to hear it here."

Sam tried a sheepish grin and shrugged. It didn't feel believable. Moe's concerned face said it wasn't.

"Home," Mal responded through a mouthful of gum.

"Thanks again, Mr. Johnson."

"Sure, sure. You boys come back. And I'll see you tomorrow at one, Sam."

"You bet."

The bell over the door jingled in the wake of their departure.

At ten minutes to four, Sam and Mal arrived home. Parked near the house, at the head of the gravel drive, was their mother's white, wood-paneled station wagon. The front door was open, the living room shadowy beyond the mesh of the screen door.

"Dad's home," Sam said to Mal. He cut the engine, and the silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the mechanical ticks and whirs from beneath the truck's hood.

-9-

The last time Sam saw his father, Bob Little was being led out of a county courtroom in an orange jump suit. The bailiff made his way down the center aisle, a few steps in back of Sam's father, prodding the man forward. His wrists were locked together with a pair of shiny silver handcuffs, his hands pressed tightly together at his chest. His eyes were closed. His head tilted down slightly, his jet black, unwashed hair slick and gleaming in the fluorescent light. He had a crooked nose and large nostrils that flared when he breathed. On his left temple, an old scar stood out plainly, cutting a downward swath through his long sideburn. His chin and jaw were covered by a tangled growth of black beard. Anyone who did not know Bob Little might have assumed he was praying as he left the courtroom that day, with his closed eyes and coupled hands beneath his heart. Everyone who did know Bob Little knew better.

Sam watched from his seat on a front-row bench, sandwiched between his crying mother and scowling brother. The courtroom doors swung wide, and the bailiff marched his father through them to a waiting sheriff's car. A few reporters had been on hand to cover the trial—overweight, balding men from the *Forrest City Examiner* and surrounding papers—but none waited on the steps with microphones or video cameras. It had been a low-profile case, attracting only a scattering of an audience and a few measly columns of print. Bob Little disappeared from the life he had led, and his presence was missed only by a few friends and his family.

Except Sam. Sam never really missed him. Certainly he missed having a father, but it never saddened him that Bob Little was not there to be his father.

While Rebecca sat in the courtroom with tears running down her face and Zeke sat grinding his teeth, Sam sat with a blank expression and only one feeling: relief. As the courtroom doors closed on his father's slumped, thin frame, it burst upon him like a sudden gust of hot wind in the winter. No more of the old man's harsh words or terrifying rants. No more painfully long stares of disapproval across the dinner table, no more apathetic glances at his report card. No more paling in comparison to Zeke in his father's eyes.

Later, however, when the bad dreams began and Sam found himself reliving that terrible evening each night in bed, he forgot about his relief. His grades dropped, and he stopped looking to the only person from whom he had ever sought approval—his mother. Things began to fall apart for Sam, and he was miserable. He wished that his father had never gone to jail, that things were as they were before. He thought he could live with that old disapproval and lack of interest, with Zeke's taunts of *sissy* and *Momma's boy*, if only the dreams would stop. Horrible nightmare visions of dark, rainy parking lots and neon lights.

Then Mal came along, and the dreams did stop.

Sam took his little brother by the hand, and they entered the house. The living room was empty. The thirteen-inch Montgomery Ward television was dark in the far corner, staring vacantly at the unoccupied sofa and recliner from its scarred oak end table. Both bedroom doors were shut. Sam could see his mother in the kitchen, standing at the counter, grating a cabbage head.

“We’re home,” he announced. Rebecca’s bedroom door was cracked, he noticed. He saw a dark shape on the bed, lying on its side.

Rebecca turned at Sam’s voice, cabbage-spattered grater in hand, and smiled when she saw Mal’s haircut. “Look at you!” she exclaimed. “Mr. Ferguson did a good job, didn’t he?”

“It wasn’t Mr. Ferguson,” Sam said. “He’s out of town.”

“Oh? So who did it?”

“Reverend Johnson. Moe Johnson.”

She frowned. “That *black* barber?”

Sam nodded. “But his hair looks great, doesn’t it?”

Turning back to her cabbage, Rebecca said no more on the subject. “Daddy’s in the bedroom, napping. We’ve been home long enough for me to start the slaw. You got a letter today. On the table.”

Sam saw an envelope on the table, propped between the salt and pepper shakers. He felt a buzz of excitement at the familiar scrawl of blue ink: sharp, staggered letters, some capitalized, some not. There was no return address in the upper left corner, but the postage stamp revealed the letter’s place of origin to be Nevada. It had to be from Marcus. No one else butchered penmanship as well as he. And if there was anyone in Nevada—or any place outside of Midland—that Sam was likely to know, it was Marcus.

He picked up the letter and was about to tear it open when he suddenly thought better of it. His mother had never approved of his friendship with Marcus; she had always thought him a bad influence on Sam. Rather than rip it out and read the letter in her presence, he decided to go out on the porch.

“You should go in and say hello to Daddy,” Rebecca said, dropping the grater in the sink.

Sam felt something roll over in his stomach. “Isn’t he asleep?”

“Just dozing. He says he’s still a light sleeper.”

Sam tucked the envelope in his back pocket and started reluctantly for the bedroom door. Mal had wandered into the living room and was watching Sesame Street on channel nine, one of two channels the Littles received. Sam could hear the melancholy monotone of Mr. Snuffaluffagus as he related his woes to his feathered pal, Big Bird. His mother’s—and now his father’s—bedroom door loomed over him, the crack revealing Bob Little’s curled legs and socked feet.

“Whatsa matter, Snuffy?”

“Well, Bird, I’m afraid my new friend won’t like me...”

Sam nudged open the door, his sweaty palm slick against the brass knob. His father was absolutely still. The old mattress sagged beneath his weight, straining against its springs, almost touching the floor in the middle.

“Dad?” The word echoed in Sam’s head, as if spoken in an empty cavern rather than a cramped bedroom.

Bob Little snorted, then settled into a long, slow snore.

Sam retreated gratefully, gingerly pulling the door to behind him.

“Did you even speak to him?” Rebecca leaned against the kitchen counter, holding a mayonnaise-covered spoon with shreds of carrot and cabbage clinging to it.

“He was snoring,” Sam replied.

They heard the crunch of tires on gravel, followed by two short horn blasts.

“That’ll be your brother.” Rebecca returned to mixing her slaw.

Sam went out on the front porch.

Zeke was getting out of his truck, a package wrapped in tin-foil tucked under his left arm. He wore a checkered, short-sleeve button-up shirt and faded blue jeans. His usually sandpapery face was clean-shaven, and his snakeskin boots had been shined so that the scales glistened.

Annie Little slammed the squalling passenger’s door and emerged from behind the truck, radiant in a bright yellow sun-dress, her golden hair tied in a pony tail. She carried a glass tray piled high with chocolate chip cookies, covered in Saran Wrap.

“Hi, Sam,” she greeted, coming up the porch steps. “I hope you’re hungry for cookies.” Her smile was sunny and genuine.

“Girl don’t know how to make a small batch,” Zeke said, following Annie. He stopped on the porch by Sam and chucked him on the shoulder with his free hand. “How you, little bro? Where’s the old man?”

“Inside, sleeping.”

“Sleepin’? Somebody better wake him up, cause I’m hungry, know what I mean?” Laughing, Zeke followed his wife inside.

Sam stood on the porch for a moment, aware not for the first time that day that his life as he had known it for the past twelve years was over. He stared silently at the flat green farmland and the flat blue sky. What he saw was not open space, but walls that towered about him. They had always been there, fixed and permanent. And now, he sensed them closing in, shrinking around him. He retreated into the house.

Zeke was in the kitchen with Annie and Rebecca, unwrapping the tin foil from the pan in which he had placed the barbecued meat. He had smoked ribs and chicken yesterday afternoon through last night, finishing up just as the first purple thunderheads had begun building in the West. The pan was full, and as Zeke wadded the foil and tossed it in the trash, Rebecca slid the tray into the oven to warm it for dinner.

The family meal had been her idea—a reunion of sorts once Bob returned home; the entire family would be gathered around one table, reunited. It was a noble notion, Sam thought, but he was unsure how it would turn out. Zeke had never cared for Mal, and one never knew what he might say about the child. Then there was Annie, who loved Mal almost as fiercely as Sam. Although Rebecca had never said as much, Sam was sure that his mother's feelings about Annie were taut gossamer, tolerance stretched to the point of breaking. She smiled too much to suit Rebecca and wore dresses too short—like the yellow one today. Adding to Sam's unease was the fact that Annie had never met Bob Little; he had been in prison eleven years when she and his oldest son were married. Sam's final concern was his father. Had he changed? Or was he still the same brute he used to be? How would he react to Mal?

Supper was on the table a scant fifteen minutes after Zeke and Annie's arrival. Rebecca retrieved her mother's hand-sewn tablecloth from an upper shelf in her closet and spread it over the Formica-topped table. The cloth was antique white, with embroidered ivy curling along its edges. The dishes were stoneware, white with brown trim. Most of the plates were chipped, some on their rims, others on their bottoms. Annie helped her mother-in-law set the food out: ribs and chicken, cole slaw, baked

beans, and a heaping bowl of potato salad. Rebecca poured sweetened iced tea into five glasses, milk in a sixth for Mal.

Sam fetched his little brother from in front of the television—*Reading Rainbow*—and led him into the kitchen, his hand on Mal's shoulder. Zeke and Annie waited behind their chairs. Rebecca removed her apron and disappeared into the bedroom. The four stood in silence, watching the hallway. Sam could hear the Crucifixion clock ticking off the seconds.

A floorboard creaked.

Annie put a hand to her chest.

Bob Little entered the kitchen, clad in blue Big Smith overalls. His feet were still shoeless, one sock tight about its foot, the other lolling loosely an inch beyond his toes. His face was sallow, with sharper edges and more refined ridges than Sam remembered. His chin had a more prominent shape to it, his jaw line more discernible. His overalls, an old pair he had no doubt found in his closet, hung loosely in all the wrong places. Prison had shrunk him almost unrecognizable. His hair remained the dark walnut shade Sam remembered, only now streaked with bright slivers of silver. His deep-set eyes darted from person to person. The fire that had once burned behind them—a fire stoked by liquor and anger—had smoldered. Bob Little's eyes flicked to Malachi, where they stayed for what seemed a very long time.

Mal returned the stare, chewing his left thumbnail.

Even though Sam's tongue felt like a wet bunch of cotton stuck to the roof of his mouth, he managed to say, "Welcome home, Dad."

Bob's eyes seized upon his younger son, searched for some sign of feeling behind the words, found none, and looked away. He made his way toward the chair at the head of the table.

"Yeah, Pop," Zeke chimed in, seating himself. "It's good to have you back."

Annie remained standing, her face flushing. Zeke had forgotten—or possibly refused—to pull out her chair. Just as she was about to seat herself, Sam did it for her.

"Thank you, sir," Annie said, sitting down and smiling up at her brother-in-law.

"Sorry, babe," Zeke mumbled.

Rebecca gestured at Annie. "Daddy, this is Ezekiel's wife, Annie. I told you about her the last time I came up to see you. She's been with us for about a year now."

Annie offered a lovely smile and extended her delicate hand toward Bob. "It's very nice to finally meet you, Mr. Little."

Bob flicked a sideways glance her way and nodded almost imperceptibly, but he made no move to accept her hand. She quickly drew it back to her lap and locked it within her other one.

"Well," Rebecca continued, "Let's turn thanks."

"Right, before it all gets cold." Zeke laughed. "I'm hungry."

"With that irreverent attitude you may choke, Ezekiel Little."

"Oh, Momma..."

"Don't you 'oh Momma' me. Be respectful. We're talking to God."

Zeke sulked.

"Dear, would you like to say grace today?"

"No," Bob replied flatly.

Rebecca's face reddened. "Uh, Sam, then you ask the blessing."

Everyone but Bob and Mal bowed their heads and shut their eyes.

"I wanna say it!" Mal suddenly exclaimed.

Heads popped up and eyes popped open.

"Hush, Malachi," Rebecca scolded. "Go ahead, Sam."

"I wanna ask it!" Mal kicked the table leg, jarring the silverware and dishes.

Rebecca's eyes narrowed. "No. Behave."

"Yes!"

Sam tried to still his little brother with a hand on his shoulder, but Mal just shrugged him off. Annie wrung her hands in her lap, and Zeke leaned back in his chair, smirking.

Rebecca pointed her finger at Mal. "I said no. You don't know anything about prayer," she said firmly.

"You'd be surprised, Mom," Sam said, and immediately wished he had not.

"Bedtime prayers!" Rebecca snorted. "This is a prayer of thanksgiving, one that has to come from the *heart*, from an understanding of God's grace and mercy! Not from nursery rhymes."

"*I wanna do it!*"

Bob spoke. "Why don't you just let him do it?"

Every head turned to him, and Zeke's smirk faltered. Bob sat with his elbows propped on the table, hands interlaced, and when he bowed his own head, everyone else followed.

Rebecca kept her piercing gaze on Mal right until he began to speak. Only then did she close her eyes.

“Dear Jesus...” he began. He paused, opened his eyes, and looked around the table, making sure that he had everybody’s ears. All eyes but his were closed, every head bowed. He then burst forth with: “Good food, good meat, good God, let’s eat!”

Sam bit his lower lip hard to keep his laughter in.

Annie discreetly covered a smile with her hand.

Rebecca’s eyes shot open wide, and her lips pressed together in a thin line.

“Amen,” Zeke said and reached for the potato salad.

A silence settled over the table, as napkins were unfolded, bowls were passed, and meat was forked. After everybody had helped themselves to the food, each began eating in the uncomfortable quiet. Rebecca pushed her tiny portions around with her fork, occasionally taking a bite. Sam chewed and kept one eye on Mal at all times; once, he jabbed him in the ribs when he began sculpting his potato salad into a mountain. While Annie nibbled at a drumstick, Zeke gnawed a rib, tearing the meat from the bone and sucking the gristle. Bob ate slowly, mechanically, one forkful after another of slaw, then potatoes, followed by a bite of meat.

Zeke made the first awkward attempt at conversation through a mouthful of slaw.

“I bet you were ready for some real food, weren’t you, Pop?”

Bob glanced up at his son, but he did not answer.

“I can imagine what prison food must have been like.”

“No,” Bob said softly. “You can’t.”

“Pretty bad, huh?”

Silence.

“Well, it couldn’t of been no worse than Annie’s cookin’.” He laughed.

The sound reminded Sam of a jackass braying.

Annie smiled and shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

Sam could not stand his brother when he said things like that—which was most of the time.

“Ain’t too many places around here to get good food no more,” Zeke continued.

“What with the Hornet’s Nest goin’ over to niggers and all.”

Bob flinched, but no one noticed.

“Ain’t that right, baby?”

Eyes on her plate, Annie shrugged, her face red with embarrassment. “I don’t think our food’s gotten any worse. LaShunda’s momma—she’s our new manager...LaShunda, not her momma—she taught her to cook pretty good, I think.”

“You see, there’s the first problem, right there,” Zeke said, his voice rising.

“Namin’ their kids all these names like Shawakanee, LaKeesha, or LaShunda, or some damn thing.”

“Zeke,” Rebecca said softly, “You’re at the table.”

“I know I’m at the table, Momma, but it’s the truth. They name ‘em all kinds-uh crazy things. Somethin’ to do with African roots they claim. I say, send ‘em all back over to Africa and let ‘em name their kids whatever the hell they want to, long as they do it over there. This is America, ain’t no Africa-America.”

“Why don’t you stop it, Zeke?” Sam said, setting aside his fork, his appetite gone.

“Was anybody talkin’ to you, little brother?” he snapped.

“Was anybody talking to *you*?” Bob said suddenly.

Zeke gaped at his father, a forkful of slaw halfway to his mouth.

For several minutes, everyone but Sam ate in silence. He merely stared at the diminished lump of potato salad on his plate, imagining that whatever filled Zeke’s head could not have much more substance to it.

“All’s I’m sayin’,” Zeke said finally, “Is that I wouldn’t name *my* child anything like that. I’d pick somethin’ more...American. Like John.” There was an odd, playful tone in his voice.

Rebecca caught it and cocked her head.

“Or if it was a girl...what’d we say if it was a girl, honey?”

Once again, Annie’s face flushed red. But this time, her eyes changed as well; they sparkled. “Amanda.”

“That’s right. John Robert or Amanda Rebecca Little.”

Rebecca clasped her hands over her breast.

Sam looked away from his potato salad and regarded Annie, a smile slowly spreading across his face. For the moment, he had forgotten about his brother’s senseless tirade. “You’re kidding,” he said.

She shook her head, her lovely, straw-colored hair swishing.

“Momma, Pop,” Zeke said, grinning like a Cheshire Cat. “You’re gonna be grandparents.”

“How long?” Sam asked breathlessly.

“Two months,” Annie answered, smiling.

Rebecca, who was beaming almost as brightly as her daughter-in-law, reached across the table and grasped Annie's hand. She squeezed it so tightly that Annie felt a brief flare of pain, and all her joy was swept away and replaced by an illogical revulsion at the hot pressure of Rebecca's grasp. But this passed, and Annie smiled again.

"Let's pray," Rebecca said suddenly, "And thank God for this miracle."

It surprised everyone but Annie. The idea seemed to please her. Sam and Zeke, however, barely had time for the statement to register before Rebecca ducked her head and launched into a fervent prayer. The two brothers exchanged uneasy glances while Rebecca beseeched God to "bless the child that was growing within this other child's womb, to bless it with a healthy development and a successful delivery." At first, her voice was strong and charged with emotion, but gradually, it began to soften. Soon it seemed she was nearing the conclusion of her prayer. But Rebecca suddenly clamped Annie's hand painfully again, and the prayer took a whole new direction. Rebecca began to beg for the salvation of "all the sinful, lawless, Christless heathens who think the gift of procreation is a mere joy of the flesh." Her words grew feverish, flowed faster, and finally spewed from her mouth rapid-fire.

That feeling of revulsion struck Annie once more. Rebecca's hand was hot, and the heat was the sickly kind that came baking off infected limbs that would eventually need amputating.

As Rebecca reached the climax of her prayer, her words tapered away to incoherent mumbles. Finally, she was merely moving her lips, her silent admonitions slipping out and finding their way to heaven.

Bob stood up abruptly, his chair squalling across the linoleum. "I don't feel good. I'm gonna lie down."

The children sat stunned, both by Rebecca's prayer and Bob's sudden departure.

Only Mal was oblivious to the scene. He played in his food with his fingers. Sam caught him building a castle with his potato salad, and he took the boy to the sink to wash his hands. He did not fuss or scold. He simply led Mal by the arm, lifted him onto the counter, and turned the faucet over his fingers. Cool water gushed over Mal's hand, and he squealed with delight. At the table, Annie finished her food, and Zeke wore a dark expression on his face. His brow was furrowed in thought, his eyes fixed on the hall into which his father had fled. Rebecca's head was bowed, and her lips were moving once again, muted words spilling over them.

Less than half-an-hour later, after Annie had helped her mother-in-law wash and dry the dishes, she and Zeke left. While Zeke waited in his truck, revving the engine, Annie said goodnight, giving Rebecca, Sam, and Mal each a hug before hurrying out to the rumbling vehicle.

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Mal's bedtime was 9:30. Sam helped him undress and brush his teeth, then put him to bed. He fell asleep and slept as he had last night and every night this summer—in his underwear, atop the bedcovers. Sam considered going to bed himself. His father had not emerged from his bedroom since he left the table. Now, the door was not even cracked, as it had been that afternoon. There seemed to be no good reason for staying up. Sam was no fan of television, and there would be nothing worth watching on either of the two channels they received. So he removed his tee-shirt and laid it across the cedar chest at the foot of his bed, intending to lie down and sleep away the night's ugliness. After unzipping his jeans, he reached behind his waist to lower them, and his palm brushed the envelope he had jammed in his rear pocket that afternoon. Marcus. He had almost forgotten him.

Shirtless, Sam took the flashlight from beneath the kitchen sink and stole onto the porch to read the letter. Darkness had overtaken the Delta around 8:45 that evening. The electric hum of the nightlight at the edge of the yard mingled with the songs of the crickets and the grasshoppers. Sam sat in the swing, rocking gently. A breeze rustled the wind chimes near his head.

Inside Marcus's envelope was a neatly folded sheet of yellow paper, torn from a legal pad and covered with writing on both sides. Sam held the page in one hand, the flashlight in the other, and began to read.

June 1, 1999

Dear Sam,

Sorry I haven't sent a postcard, but so far, I haven't stayed in one place long enough to buy one. If I had mailed one from St. Louis, I would have been in Kansas City by the time you got it. If I'd bought one at Yellowstone, you'd have been reading it as I crossed the Grand Canyon. Anyway, you get the idea. Moving constantly, that's me.

Just now I'm in a comfortable job at a little diner outside Reno, Nevada. Washing dishes. Lot of truckers come through here, like that place your mother used to work at out by the interstate. A greasy spoon, but there's nothing else. My money ran out somewhere around Salt Lake City. Didn't realize it until I got here—where one is constantly reminded of

the need for (and in my case lack of) money.

But it's not all bad. There's a waitress here, name's Sandy. She shares my love of Hemingway. Imagine that—a waitress in a dusty truck stop at the edge of the desert, spends her breaks smoking and reading from a ragged copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*. She reminds me of the girl from high school with the overbite. What was her name? Helen? Ellen?

Helena, thought Sam with a smile, *Helena Baker*. He continued reading.

Anyway, the two of us have some common ground we can talk on. She's the first person I've met in all this time who genuinely seems to think what I'm doing is good. In fact, she said if she had the "internal motivation," she might do something similar one day. I've considered inviting her to go with me when I leave (after my next paycheck rolls in).

I won't ask you how life in Midland is because a) you couldn't answer because I didn't include a return address, and b) I doubt it's changed enough to justify an answer. Everything's probably still as flat as Coach Tidwell's chest, and I figure my parents still hate each other, which doesn't really make me so sad any more. It's like I left all that behind me when I hit the highway. Sometimes, when it's night, and the only things on the road are me and the eyes of animals shining in the headlights, I think about you, pal. Wish you were with me. You were the only friend I ever had in Midland. But I know why you didn't come, and I respect that. I hope Mal's doing fine.

I'm writing this on my break, with a pen on loan from Sandy, and my ten minutes are almost up. Dishes are starting to

pile, and the owner's been shooting me dirty looks for about a minute. I may be back that way someday. If so, you can be sure I'll look you up. If it's not too much trouble, could you look in on my parents sometime? Some part of me still cares, I guess.

Your friend,

Marcus

Sam folded the letter and closed his eyes, listening for the scritch of Marcus's pen over the bustle of a restaurant kitchen—clanging pots, clinking dishes, sizzling meat.

Marcus Bishop had left home a year ago.

In junior high, during the hellish years of his awkward adolescence, Sam was somewhat of a social outcast. His father was a criminal, and his brother was a well-known troublemaker. He had no money, and he wore second-hand clothes his mother bought for him at Wong's. On and off throughout his teens, Sam was subject to violent acne eruptions, many of which left scars, like the one he had been examining that morning on his chin in front of the bathroom mirror. He was not a nerd. He was not a dork or a geek. To most of the students and faculty at Midland High, he was not anything. A shadow in the hallway, a passing wind. A name on a roll and some disembodied voice that answered, "Present," each morning.

In the spring semester of his junior year, in Greer Thompson's upper-level English course, Sam met Marcus Bishop, another shadow. Marcus had transferred from a small school in a barely incorporated South-Arkansas community called Fountain Hill. His father, Burt Bishop, was a prison guard and had been transferred to the federal penitentiary near Forrest City, where Sam's own father was imprisoned.

Silver-haired Greer Thompson had assigned the class Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, and each student prepared a paper focusing on one particular theme in the novel. Sam wrote what he considered a wordy, muddled mess, drawing heavily on outside sources—old textbooks checked out of the library, their crinkled yellow pages only a few turns away from dust. On the day the rough draft was due, Thompson paired students for peer revision. He paired Sam with Marcus.

Tall, lanky Marcus pulled his desk alongside Sam's and mumbled, "Be honest."

Sam smiled, handed him his paper, and replied, "You, too."

Sam thought his own paper was boring. He had written about the similarities between the lives of Hemingway and his main character, Lieutenant Frederic Henry. Both were injured in the war, both fell in love with the nurse that cared for them, and both drank heavily. It was a pure research paper, as dull as an old, open pocketknife Sam once found in the mud behind their house. Marcus's paper, however, was as sharp as a switchblade.

Now, sitting on the porch, all Sam could remember of the paper were its title and its opening line: "The Things We Lose"; "Life is loss." Sam recalled a powerful sense of honesty from the paper, a strong sense of truth. Upon finishing it that day in class, he was compelled to say to Marcus: "I haven't seen my Dad in nine years."

Marcus seemed startled at first. Then he asked in his deep, soft voice, "He leave home?"

"Not exactly," Sam said. "He's in jail. Involuntary manslaughter."

"That must be tough."

"Not so much now, as it was at first. You get used to not having people around."

"Oh." Marcus hesitated. Sam's six pages of pure research lay in front of him on the scarred desktop. "My dad is a prison guard," he said after a minute.

"Where at?"

"Tucker Federal, at Forrest City."

"That's where Dad's at."

"Do you go see him often?"

"I never go. My Mom does, once every two weeks."

"Why don't you go?"

"I don't really want to see him."

"Oh," Marcus said for the second time.

Over the next few weeks, the two would find much more to talk about, from Hemingway to Helena Baker's overbite to graduation. And Greer Thompson, Sam noticed, watched the two of them from time to time with a satisfied smile on his face.

Rocking in the porch swing, Sam reread two lines in the letter.

If it's not too much trouble, could you
look in on my parents from time to time?
Some part of me still cares, I guess.

Marcus's father, Burt Bishop, was a guard at Tucker Federal Penitentiary in Forrest City. In the two years Sam and Marcus ran together, Sam saw him no more than half-a-dozen times. But those few times etched a permanent picture of Burt Bishop into Sam's memory. Like Marcus, he was tall, but he was not skinny. His arms were thick and sinewy tree trunks. His chest and stomach were a mountain range of muscle. Sam once told Marcus that his father had more hills than the entire Delta.

Only once did Sam see him dressed in his guard's uniform. One afternoon, as Sam and Marcus sat on the tailgate of Sam's pick-up outside the Bishop's house trailer on Sweetgum Circle, Burt Bishop emerged from the trailer on his way to work. His uniform was a second skin stretched taut over his massive frame. His blue shirt-sleeves were rolled up to display his intimidating biceps. A shiny black baton dangled by his side. For a second, Sam considered asking Mr. Bishop if he knew who his father was. Then he was suddenly afraid Bishop might say yes, and Sam might look at him and know that he had used that black baton on his father. According to Marcus's stories, his father used the baton on inmates fairly regularly.

Marcus also confided that the Bishop household was run with the cold efficiency of a prison block. Meals were set on the table at the same time every day. If there had been a bell or a whistle in the house, Marcus claimed, it would have rung or blown each evening at seven, summoning the men to the table. When shelves went undusted or beds unmade, Burt Bishop became angrily reprimanded his wife and son. And he regulated everything that Marcus did outside the house—where he went, who he was with, and how long he was gone.

Marcus's mother, Mattie Bishop, was a short, stocky, red-faced woman who always seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Her eyes flicked from one place to the next constantly, and she chain-smoked. She was not intimidated by her husband, only frazzled. She stood up to Burt Bishop; and, according to Marcus, the two had some hellacious shouting bouts. But his father never hit her. Perhaps that was because he knew that with one good punch, he might take her head off, and then he would be no different than what he kept behind locked bars for a living.

If it's not too much trouble, could you look in on my parents sometime? Some part of me still cares, I guess.

For those two lines, and those two lines alone, Sam was glad that Marcus had not included a return address on his envelope. This kept Sam from having to write his friend and tell him that his father had been dead for four months, the victim of a knifing within the penitentiary. His mother had moved out of the house trailer, and was now living with another man in an apartment in town.

"Life is loss," Sam whispered on the dark porch.

Marcus might return to Midland one day, Sam supposed. His friend would discover the truth then, and it would be better that way. When Sam had learned of Burt Bishop's death, he had cried for Marcus. He had shed tears of sympathy for his friend, a friend who, the day following graduation, had set out in his rust-brown El Camino for a better place than this. He had offered Sam the passenger's seat; and only Mal, who was two at the time and had not yet learned to walk, had kept him from leaving. Without Sam, all Mal would have had was an overzealous mother who saw him as her cross to

bear, not her son. No, he could not abandon his little brother to that, and Marcus had understood and respected his decision.

Then Marcus had driven away, disappearing into the heat-shimmering distance of Highway 38, saying nothing to his parents.

"I miss you, pal," Sam said, his words lost upon the indifferent night. "It's so lonely here."

The swing's chain groaned softly. Sam leaned his head against it and closed his eyes. He dozed off. When he woke an hour later, he was facing the dark and empty Delta; and, for a brief moment, he did not realize he had opened his eyes.

Yawning, he stood up and went inside to bed.

-11-

Sam had lived in Midland all his life, and in those twenty-two years, no one had ever invited him over for dinner. So, when Reverend Moe Johnson came to pick up his car at Homer's Garage the next day, and invited Sam and Mal to eat supper with his family that night, Sam was struck absolutely speechless.

It was 1:00 sharp when Reverend Johnson's wife dropped him at the garage.

Homer tugged at the seat of his pants as he came around from behind his desk. In his left hand was the key to the Reverend's gray Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight. He placed it in the preacher's palm and directed him into the shop, where Sam was just capping the lid on a bottle of wiper fluid. After thanking Moe for his business, Homer returned to his chair behind his desk, in front of the blasting air conditioner.

"Morning, Sam," Moe said warmly.

"Good morning, sir." Sam gestured at the car. "She's ready. Even put in some wiper fluid for you."

"Good deal. I greatly appreciate it. Tell me, did your mother like your little brother's haircut?"

"Oh, yes, sir. She was real pleased with it."

"Good, good. So, these brakes are trustworthy again?"

"Yes, sir. I helped do the work. We got you new pads and fresh brake fluid. Should be good for at least another forty, fifty thousand miles."

"I'm not sure if this car'll ever see another fifty. But it's good to know if it doesn't, it won't be because the brakes failed, right?" Moe opened the driver's door.

"That's right. You have a good day, Reverend." Sam headed for the cool of Homer's air conditioner.

"Sam!"

"Yes, sir?" Sam stopped, almost into the office.

"I feel bad about the way you were treated yesterday in my shop."

Sam began to shake his head. "Oh, no, it's..."

"Now, it's not all right. And I feel like I should make it up to you."

"Reverend Johnson, I..."

"Tell me, son, do you like pork chops?"

"Uh...well, honestly, we don't get them much around my house, so, I don't guess I could really say I've had them enough to have developed a taste for them. But, I guess, yeah, sure, pork chops are okay. Why?"

"The wife is cookin' pork chops tonight. They're my granddaughter's favorite. I thought you and your little brother—Mal—might want to join us for supper."

Moe's offer had knotted Sam's tongue. "Uh, I, well, it doesn't seem, that that would be, I don't know, very...well, you with company and all, we'd most likely be in the way, and..."

"Nonsense," Moe said, shaking his head. "I want you to come. You could meet my granddaughter; she's about your age. She's from Los Angeles, a whole other world compared to the Delta."

Thinking of how his father and brother might react to his having dinner with a black family, Sam almost declined. But a rare opportunity was before him to meet new people, to expand the borders of his own small world. Later, it would occur to Sam that the one-word answer he gave Moe was the beginning of all his troubles. "Sure," he said.

"Great. I'll tell Louise you're coming. Meantime, I need to be getting on. Julie's plane'll be touching down at Memphis in about an hour. Why don't you and your brother come round about seven-thirty tonight?"

"We'll be there, sir."

Moe seemed pleased as he drove away.

When Sam arrived to pick Mal up from school that afternoon, his little brother emerged from the building with Mrs. Petty, carrying a big sheet of glossy paper. At the truck, Mrs. Petty told Mal to have a safe summer before trotting away. Mal climbed into the seat beside Sam and thrust the paper at him.

It was a finger painting, Sam saw. A blue stick-figure man stood in the center of the paper. His face was entirely black. Half-a-dozen fat red lines stretched from the top of the page to the bottom.

"Who is this, Mal?" Sam asked, handing back the drawing.

"Bad!" Mal chirped, grinning.

Sam frowned. "No, it's good. But who is it?"

"Bad!"

Sam studied the picture. Blue on the body, like clothes. The red bars, like a cell. Suddenly Sam remembered that his father had been wearing blue overalls at dinner last night. "Mal, do you mean Dad?"

"Dad." Mal nodded, as if that were the word he had been saying all along.

"It's a good drawing." Sam handed it back to Mal, unnerved by the boy's word mix-up. He changed the subject. "Hey, you remember the man who cut your hair yesterday?"

Mal nodded.

"You liked him, right?"

Mal nodded again.

"You want to go have dinner with him and his family tonight?"

Mal nodded one last time, his blank expression never changing.

The brothers stopped by Hall's Supermarket to tell their mother they would not be eating dinner at home. Rebecca was about to empty a roll of quarters into her cash register when Sam told her where they would be eating.

"Where?" she asked sharply, her back to Sam, the register open.

"Moe Johnson's. The barber who cut Mal's hair."

Rebecca whacked the roll of quarters against the drawer, snapping it neatly in two. The change spilled out into the register. "I don't like it."

"Mom, it would be rude not to go."

"And what about your father?" Rebecca turned to face Sam. "He just got home yesterday. You'd rather eat dinner with some black man?"

"To be honest, dinners with Dad don't look to be such great things."

“You hold that tongue!”

At Sam’s side, Mal fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot.

“I’ve never been invited to somebody’s house for dinner before. I’d like to go.”

Rebecca sighed and threw up her arms. “So go, then. I can’t stop you. You’re over twenty-one. I don’t even know why you bother to tell me.”

“I just wanted you to know.” Sam turned to go, taking his brother by the hand.

As they left, Rebecca called after them, “You just remember this, Samson Little: While you’re eating with a black family tonight, your own family who hasn’t been together in twelve years will be sitting at home eating by themselves!”

Her words stung, but Sam did not look back.

-12-

At half past seven that evening, Sam and Mal stood on the doorstep of the Johnsons' residence. A screened-in porch jutted from the face of the white, two-story farmhouse, looking out upon a long gravel driveway. Sam placed one hand on his brother's shoulder and knocked firmly on the wooden screen door with the other. While Mal tugged irritably at his shirt collar, Sam took in the property.

Tufts of purple and blue impatiens lined either side of the concrete walk leading up to the steps. A lone oak tree shaded one end of the house in summer-evening shadow. From a low branch dangled a tire swing on a frayed rope. A short distance from the house, New Hope Baptist Church stood at the edge of a cotton field, tinted vermilion in the waning sunlight.

Sam gave himself and Mal a once-over, adjusting his brother's shirt collar. Mal had tugged it until he had managed to turn it up crooked in the back. He wore a checkered, short-sleeve button-up shirt Sam had purchased on his birthday last year; the little boy's belly poked insistently at it. He and Sam both wore jeans. Mal's high-top sneakers were cinched tight. Sam wore tennis shoes as well, a white pair he had polished for the occasion. His shirt was faded denim, long-sleeved. Sam had rolled the sleeves up to his elbows.

The front door opened, and Moe stepped onto the porch, wearing a short sleeve shirt and slacks held up by red suspenders. A pipe was clinched between his teeth. "Hi, Sam. Hi, Mal. Glad you fellas could make it. Come on in."

As he passed the old preacher, Sam caught a pleasant whiff of tobacco and fabric softener.

Sam kept his hand on Mal's shoulder as they entered the house. A foyer branched left to the living room and right to the dining room. Sam saw in the living room several large bookshelves, each brimming with hardbacks and paperbacks just as precariously as Homer's garage shelves spilled tools and spare parts. He could not see a television anywhere. Two brown, wing-backed chairs sat at angles before a brick fireplace. It looked cozy and inviting. To the right of the foyer, a long walnut table and a matching walnut china cabinet occupied the dining room. Directly across from the front door, carpeted stairs led up out of sight, to what was most likely the bedrooms and bathroom.

"Nice to see you again, son." Moe shook Sam's hand. He touched Mal on the nose. "I hope you both brought your appetites."

"This must be Sam and Mal," said a new voice from the dining room.

A rotund woman in an apron entered the foyer. She took Sam's hand and shook it warmly. "I'm Louise Johnson, honey. This one's better half." She elbowed Moe, who grunted pleasantly, removing his pipe from his mouth and rubbing his ribs.

"Sam Little, ma'am. Nice to meet you. And this is Mal." He presented Mal to Louise, nudging him forward. Mal attempted retreat, but Sam held him firmly in place.

"Oh, ain't you adorable, child, God bless you. He's shy, isn't he?" Louise pinched his cheek between her plump fingers.

Mal stared wide-eyed.

"Where's Julie, Mother?" asked Moe.

“She’s in the kitchen, watchin’ the bread. Ya’ll come on back and meet Julie. Come on, now.”

Sam and Mal followed obediently, Moe behind them. Louise led them through the dining room and into the expansive kitchen. Sam could not help thinking how small his mother’s kitchen was compared to this. An island counter stood in the center of the floor, above which dangled pots and pans of all shapes and sizes. The right wall was lined with overhead oak cabinets, and beneath these were a tile countertop and stainless steel sink with a garbage disposal. The largest refrigerator Sam had ever seen took up the left wall along with a bulky electric stove.

Kneeling before the stove, peering into the open oven, was a slender girl about Sam’s age. She, like Louise, wore an apron; and, as she reached an arm into the oven, a blue mitten on her hand, Sam noticed that her skin was much lighter than Moe’s or Louise’s. He thought of postcards his friend Marcus had sent from Florida, with pictures of the beach. The light sand washed by the waves and made dark. This was the color of this girl’s skin. Her long, dark hair spilled about her shoulders and obscured her face. She withdrew a smoking tray of twelve blackened dinner rolls, kicked the oven door shut, and slid the tray onto the island countertop. As she removed her oven-mitt, she poked at one of the rolls. It was stuck to the pan.

“Oh, did you put them on the top shelf, sweetie?” Louise asked.

The young girl turned, opening her mouth to speak, then saw Sam and Mal, and promptly closed it. Her eyes fixed momentarily on Sam.

Sam drew in a sudden breath when her dark eyes found him. He had never been under the gaze of anything so beautiful in his life. Her slightly angular, enchanting eyes

betrayed Asian blood. Her cheekbones were high and prominent, and her jaw and chin were sculpted finely. She had a sharp nose and delicate lips. She was exotic, not of the Delta.

“Yeah, I...” She wiped her hands on her apron. “I never do learn.”

Louise grinned broadly, wrapping an arm around the girl’s tiny waist and hugging her close. “Boys, this here is our Julie. She’s our beautiful granddaughter, visiting from that terrible heathen place in California called Los Angeles.”

Julie flushed. “Oh, Grandma.”

“Sam Little. And this is my brother, uh...” Sam shook his head. For a moment, he felt on the verge of panic; he could not remember his brother’s name. It started with an M—*those eyes*. Last book in the Old Testament—*she’s smiling now, get it together*.

“Malachi.” Sam snapped his fingers, nodding. “Yeah, Malachi. Mal.”

“What a nice name,” Julie said with a grin. “Pleased to meet you both.”

“You, you too,” Sam managed, his own face glowing red.

Moe clapped him on the back. “You boys want to sit in the living room while they finish getting supper on the table?”

Sam nodded, feeling like a drowning man who had just been thrown a life preserver. He and Mal followed Moe into the living room, leaving the two women to their kitchen tasks. Sam sat in one of the wing-backed chairs, and Mal perched on his knee. Moe stood by the fireplace, puffing leisurely on his pipe, one hand in the pocket of his slacks. He noticed Sam’s eyes roving over the bulging bookshelves, and he removed his pipe.

“You read much, Sam?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I don’t have many books myself, but every now and then I go over to the high school library. They still let me check them out.”

“Any favorite authors?”

“A friend of mine was always partial to Hemingway. I like him.”

“I’ve got a few of his books here, somewhere. I’m more of a Mark Twain fan, myself. You ever read Twain? *Huck Finn* or *Tom Sawyer*?”

“I read *Huck Finn* in high school. My friend and I talked about running away like Huck. Only we were gonna hit the highway in his El Camino, instead of rafting down the Mississippi.”

“And why didn’t you?”

“He did. I stayed.”

“That so?”

Sam ruffled Mal’s hair. “I could never leave this guy.”

Moe nodded, placing his pipe between his teeth.

Sam noticed an old RCA record player on a small table beside the other wing-backed chair. Records were stacked in a hutch beneath the table. From where Sam sat, he could not read any of the labels.

“Are you a record collector, Reverend?”

“Call me Moe.” Moe removed his pipe and exhaled a puff of smoke. “I’m a blues lover. Always have been. Those are old records I’ve bought over the years. Sonny Boy Williamson, Muddy Waters. They used to play over at a little joint in Helena called The Hole in the Wall, back in the thirties and forties. Ain’t nothing better than Delta blues.”

“Delta blues?”

“Well, there’s two kinds. There’s Delta blues and city blues. You got your smoky nightclubs in Memphis and Chicago, and you got your open tents in Arkansas. When I was a boy, we’d sometimes go to a traveling blues show, sit out in a field under a canvas tent. Wasn’t any electricity out there, no microphones or lights. Just a few gasoline lanterns and some mighty fine voices.”

Sam thought of the blues music he had heard in the background of Moe’s barbershop yesterday. The singer had a low, gruff voice, perfect for humming and mourning the hardships of life.

“There’s a radio show that broadcasts out of Helena, been going on now for about fifty-eight years—‘King Biscuit Time Blues Hour.’ I listen every day about noon. Louise’s been after me to get one of those CD players and start collecting that way. But to me, the blues ain’t the blues unless it’s played on a scratchy record.”

Sam laughed.

“It’s an old man’s hobby, I reckon. What about you, son? You got a hobby?”

“Just reading.”

“That’s as decent a hobby as they come.”

Dishes clinked in the dining room. Julie was setting the table, placing the silverware neatly on white cloth napkins beside the plates. Sam watched her; she slipped gracefully between the chairs, brushing absently at her hair. As she headed back to the kitchen, she glanced toward the living room, and Sam quickly looked away.

A moment later, Louise called out from the kitchen, “Supper’s on the table.” Sam urged Mal off his lap, and Moe gestured for them to go on ahead. They entered the

dining room, and the smell of hot food assaulted Sam's nostrils. His stomach growled at the sight of steaming mashed potatoes, fried pork chops, and homemade macaroni and cheese.

They all took a seat, the Johnson women across from the Littles, Moe at the head of the table.

Sam placed his napkin in his lap and did the same for Mal. His little brother stared up at him, confusion on his face. He reached for the napkin and started to remove it from across his leg. Sam closed his hand around his little brother's arm, squeezing gently. Mal let go of the napkin.

Moe folded his hands in preparation for the prayer. "Let's offer thanks," he said.

They all bowed their heads.

Mal launched into the litany he had recited at supper the previous night. "Good food, good meat, g--"

Sam kicked him under the table.

Across from Sam, Julie opened her eyes and flashed a smile at the little boy.

"Our heavenly Father," Moe intoned. "We thank you for this food, and ask your blessings on this meal. Bless the ones who prepared it and the families of those represented at this table. Forgive us where we fail you in your service, Lord. In Christ's name, amen."

"Amen," Louise and Julie said in unison.

"Men," Mal added forcefully.

"Bless your heart, child," Louise said. "Have some macaroni." She passed the steaming dish to Sam.

When all the food had made its rounds, the conversation began. Again, Sam could not help noticing the vast difference between the atmosphere tonight and that of his own family at dinner last night. He received a sense of warmth and kindness from the Johnsons. Despite the generous portions of hot food and the wealth of words exchanged, there seemed to be a weightless quality to the meal. There were no forbidding clouds of the past hanging over the table, only the clear sky of the present.

“That was a nasty storm the other night,” Louise was saying.

“We should be thankful,” Moe said. “We’ll be lucky to get any rain the rest of the summer.”

“Does it rain much in California, Julie?” Louise asked her granddaughter.

“On and off,” she answered. “But it’s mostly sunshine.”

Her voice mesmerized Sam. Most of the female voices he had heard in his life were either coarse or meek. Julie’s was neither. It was even and gentle, a perfect blend of self-assurance and courtesy.

“Julie just graduated from college,” Moe said. “UCLA. An English major. Sam was telling me he likes to read a bit himself.”

“What do you read?” Julie asked, looking straight at Sam.

Sam, caught in the middle of cutting a pork chop, shrugged sheepishly. “I really don’t read that much. Just whatever I can find at the high-school library. Some of Ernest Hemingway’s books. They’ve only got one or two.”

“Mr. Seuss!” Mal added.

“Mal loves Dr. Seuss.”

“I like Dr. Seuss, too,” Julie said with a smile.

“Who is the librarian at the high school now, Sam?” Moe asked.

“Mrs. Washburn.”

“Has she been there long?”

“Ever since I was in the seventh grade.”

“I only ask because, lately, a lot of teachers have been leaving. Tom Sanders was in about a week ago for a shave, and he told me that earlier in the year, after spring break, the board had to find three replacements. Which isn’t an easy thing to do in mid-semester.”

“Why are they leaving?” Julie asked.

“Tom said it was the kids. He says they’re getting out of hand, bringing guns and knives to school, threatening the faculty. Some have been caught with drugs, too.”

Julie huffed. “Sounds to me like they just don’t have any entertainment around here.” She looked at Sam. “What *do* people do for fun around here?”

“You want the whole list, or just what’s legal?”

Moe laughed. Louise quickly interjected, “Lord have mercy, just what’s legal!”

“Let’s see,” Sam said, thinking. “There’s milk shakes and burgers at the Hornet’s Nest, Friday night football games in the fall, Coke floats and hot dogs at the Hornet’s Nest, fishing over at Horseshoe Lake, or ice cream in a cone or cup at the Hornet’s Nest.”

“Which of those do you prefer?” Julie asked from behind her glass of tea. “Or do you pick from the illegal list?”

Sam blushed and shook his head. “I don’t have a lot of free time. I work and look after Mal mostly. On Saturdays, I might take Mal over to a matinee movie in Forrest City. He likes that.”

Moe chuckled. "Julie's a city girl. She isn't used to the quiet country life. But we're gonna work on that, aren't we, Mother?"

"Sure enough," Louise replied.

Julie cocked a wary eyebrow. She and Sam exchanged grins.

The five of them ate dessert on the porch. Louise served homemade ice cream in red plastic cups. As the sun melted rapidly into the dark horizon, they sat in comfortable silence and enjoyed their melting ice cream. Moe and Louise swayed gently in the porch swing. Sam and Julie sat in rocking chairs, and Mal perched on the front steps, milk running down his chin. In the bushes around the house, and in the ditch out by the road, crickets and bullfrogs began their nightly concert.

"Oh, mercy!" Louise rubbed her belly.

"It was mighty good, dear," Moe said, patting her on the shoulder. "Mighty good."

"Yes, ma'am, it was," Sam agreed, empty ice cream cup in hand.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it." Louise got to her feet, collecting her husband's cup and sliding it into her own. "Julie, I reckon you and me oughta head inside, work on these dishes."

Mal's head whipped round, ice cream smeared on his chin. "Wanna help!"

Sam was surprised. Mal never warmed to strangers this quickly. Perhaps Louise's ice cream had won him over, as had Moe's bubble gum at the barbershop.

"Oh no, hon, I wouldn't dream of it. You just sit right there and enjoy your dessert. We'll take care of it."

"No! Wanna help!"

“Mal!” Sam scolded. “Be nice.”

Mal flung his half-full cup into the flower bed alongside the walk. Melted ice cream spattered the impatiens.

Sam jumped up and snatched the cup off the ground. “I’m sorry, ma’am. He likes to help out at home. Mom lets him dry.”

“If he wants to help...” Julie offered, shrugging.

“Sure, okay,” Louise sighed. “Come on, honey. I’ll take that cup, Sam. Are you finished with yours? Thank you, sweetie.”

Mal leapt into the house behind Julie and Louise, one shoelace untied.

Before the door closed, Sam heard Louise say, “Bless your heart, child.”

A few quiet moments passed between the youth and the preacher. Moe withdrew his pipe from his back pocket and lit it. The brief match-flare cast his mouth and thin white mustache in a warm orange glow. Beyond the porch, the darkness was bright with the songs of the night. An occasional car flashed by on the highway.

“It was really nice of you to invite us, sir,” Sam said finally.

“It’s the least I could do, after the way Arliss treated you yesterday.”

“He’s right, you know. My brother and his friends do make a stir. And Zeke does have a lot of my Dad in him.”

“Well, Sam, I tell you, the black folks round here are a little uneasy right now. And it’s not just because your brother likes to ride around late at night. You can’t judge Arliss on how he acted in there. He’s really a decent man. He’s just a little more rattled than the rest of us, since your brother’s been out his way.”

“What’s everyone upset for?”

"I'll show you."

Moe went inside the house. When he reappeared, he held out to Sam a piece of paper with black printing on it. Then he reached inside the door and flipped on the porch light. A swarm of moths materialized almost instantly and batted about the hundred-watt bulb as Sam read the paper.

Stapled to the sheet with the printing, in the upper left corner, was a rectangular yellow slip of paper. The words "HALL PASS" were stamped on its face, and beneath these were blanks for the carrier's name and destination. In the blank beside the word "Name" was written in block capitals: "HANK REEVES."

Sam frowned, lifting the hall pass to read what was beneath it.

TIRED OF BEING LED ASTRAY?

THEN JOIN THE F.O.L.D.!!

The United States government is rotten. In today's sick society, decent upstanding members of the WHITE RACE have no say in how our country is run. Washington D.C. is a haven for liberal politicians who promote anti-white affirmative action legislation, guaranteeing better jobs and education for minorities such as the blacks, jews, and homosexuals. In America today, no self-respecting WHITE PERSON can find work without having to worry about losing it to some minority group.

The government works for big business, buying foreign products and shrinking the number of U.S. production jobs in exchange for cheap labor. The government runs so inefficiently and wastes so much that over-taxation is the result.

Millions of non-whites overrun our country's borders every year, and the government does nothing to stop them. As blacks and other non-whites move into your neighborhood, crime rates soar, and once-proud WHITE neighborhoods become slums. Our people exist in fear behind locked doors.

WHITE CHILDREN begin acting like blacks and become social degenerates, as they are so far removed from their proud Aryan heritage. WHITE YOUTHS take blacks and other non-whites as their role models. WHITE ARYAN GIRLS degrade themselves by mixing races and dating blacks and other non-whites, feeling pressure by the jew-controlled media to be "politically correct."

If America continues this way, it will lose its place as a world power. Our country is going downhill because of minorities. Just turn on your jew tube and see what color 90% of the criminals are. Do you really want a nigger family moving in next door? Would you like to change the system? Do you want to make a difference? Are you tired of America's minority-controlled government leading you astray?

Then join the F.O.L.D. (Fathers of Liberated Democracy). We are a new organization, whose purpose is to liberate our great democracy from the shackles of the nigger-jew conspiracy! We promote a new kind of freedom— one where decent, law-abiding WHITE CITIZENS can rest assured that jobs will be there when they need them, and that their WHITE CHILDREN can walk safely through their neighborhoods at night, and be proud of who they are, and

never feel compelled by media-driven pressure to pollute their lineage with the seed of inferiority.

We want you, the WHITE MAJORITY! A recruiting session will be coming to your town on June 12! So come and join the ranks of the new freedom fighters, the Fathers of Liberated Democracy!

For more information contact: George H. Shepherd,
Rt.3 Box 78, Helena, AR. Zip code.

When Sam had finished reading, Moe said, "These were thrown out in yards last Saturday night."

"All over town?" Sam asked.

"I reckon. Whoever did it tied the papers to rocks and threw them. A few folks lost windows on account of it. Of course, those that did lived over here, across the Tracks."

"Did anybody see anything?"

"No. It was done in the early hours of the morning."

Sam examined the yellow hall pass. "I know this name, Hank Reeves. But I can't place it."

"He's a junior in high school, a white boy. His daddy owns that butane company at the edge of town."

"What does he have to do with this?"

"Three months ago, in the school cafeteria, four black classmates overheard Hank make some crack about Adolf Hitler having the right idea, only he should have been a general for the South in the Civil War. After lunch, in his fifth period class, Hank had to

go to the bathroom, and the teacher gave him a hall pass and let him go. When he walked in the toilet, the four boys were in there, sharing a marijuana cigarette.

“When Hank didn’t come back after about ten minutes, his teacher started to worry. She went across the hall and asked Coach Myers to walk down and see about him. So the coach goes to the boys’ room, opens the door, and finds Hank Reeves laid out on the floor, blood all over his face and clothes, smeared on the tiles around him. They really worked him over good.” Moe shook his head somberly and peered out toward the highway.

“He spent the night at the hospital in Forrest City. He had some busted ribs, a broken nose, and a fair share of nasty bruises. When he got out, he didn’t waste any time turning in the four who’d done it. They were expelled for the rest of the year, and I hear Hank’s daddy has got them up on charges now.”

“You think he’s behind the flyers?”

“I doubt it. There’s too much organization here for a kid like Hank. I think it’s someone using what happened to him to stir up trouble.”

Sam thought about Zeke. He was a thirty-year-old teenager, no doubt, but Sam could not remember his ever mentioning a group called the F.O.L.D., or any racist organization. Their father, avowed racist that he was, had always frowned upon such groups. He said they were made up of men too scared to stand up openly for what they believed in. “I don’t need a sheet to hate niggers,” Bob Little once said.

As if he were reading Sam’s mind, Moe said, “Now, I don’t think your brother has anything to do with this. Don’t get me wrong.”

“No, sir.”

“But I feel I should tell you, because this has happened right at the time your daddy’s come home.”

What had the Reverend said yesterday? *Good luck tonight?* “How did you...”

“Things get around, son. What I’m saying is a lot of folks round here don’t see your daddy’s getting out as a good sign. Personally, I think it’s just bad timing. But with this F.O.L.D. mess going on, I thought you should know.”

“Thanks for that, Mr. Johnson.”

“Moe.”

“Moe,” Sam repeated hesitantly. “I keep forgetting.”

The old preacher grinned, leaned toward Sam, and clapped him on the shoulder.

After a moment’s silence, Sam said, “I hate to part from good company, but I guess we’d better be on our way. I need to go round up Mal.”

Moe stood, his knees creaking with the porch swing. “I sure am glad you came tonight. It makes me feel better, after Arliss James said what he did.”

“I don’t let that kind of stuff get to me.”

“That’s good,” Moe said, and he opened the front door and gestured for Sam to enter.

In the kitchen, Louise was rinsing the last plate under the faucet. Mal stood expectantly beside her, clutching a dishtowel in his unnaturally short hands. Julie was on the other side of her grandmother, placing a set of glass bowls in the overhead cabinet. As Sam stepped into the kitchen, Louise turned off the faucet.

“You about ready to go, big guy?” Sam asked.

Mal turned in Sam's direction. He did not see Louise handing him the plate, and since Louise was occupied with unplugging the sink drain, she did not see him look away. She let go of the plate, thinking Mal had taken it, as he had all the others. The plate crashed at Mal's feet, shattering into several large fragments and a handful of tiny shards.

"Oh, Mal!" Sam cried, rushing forward.

The boy was startled by the commotion, and he took a few wary steps backward.

"Watch yourself, honey," cautioned Louise, pulling Mal close to her, so he would not step in the mess.

"I'm so sorry," Sam was saying over and over. He knelt and began picking up the pieces.

Julie fetched the broom and dustpan. She wordlessly placed her hand on Sam's shoulder. Nervous and embarrassed as he was, he jumped. His right hand involuntarily clenched a ceramic shard. Sam hissed as his index finger sliced open.

"The boy has done cut himself," Louise said.

Sam dropped the pieces into Julie's dustpan, one small ceramic sliver edged in blood.

"Julie, take Sam back and get him some peroxide and a bandage," Louise said.

"I'll clean this up."

"Is it bad, Sam?" asked Moe.

"No, no, it's okay."

"Come with me," Julie said, motioning for him to follow.

They made their way up the stairs, the carpeted steps creaking beneath them. The bathroom was the first door to the right. Julie flipped on the light switch as she entered. Sam stood in the doorway, his bleeding finger cupped in his hand. Opening the mirror above the wide marble basin of the sink, Julie produced a brown bottle of hydrogen peroxide.

"Give me your hand," she said. Sam extended his hand, and Julie held it over the sink and poured the peroxide onto the cut.

The liquid was cool against his skin, but Julie's fingers around his wrist were warm. The cut sizzled and foamed, but Sam felt only her touch.

"There should be some Band-Aids here somewhere. I haven't really been here long enough to know where everything's at." Julie opened drawers and riffled through their contents, turning up Q-tips, combs, toothpaste, floss, and an empty denture holder, but no Band-Aids.

"It's okay," Sam said, unable to look at anything but her. "I think it's stopped now."

"Oh." Julie peered at the cut.

"It's not so bad. It was more blood than anything."

"Blood fascinates me," she said in a low voice, unconsciously cradling his finger beneath her own.

"Why?" Sam breathed, his heart suddenly racing.

"It's life. As long as it's moving in us, we're moving out here. But if it ever stops, or gets out of us..."

She was close enough that Sam could smell her. He remembered a blooming yellow rose bush his mother had planted outside his and Mal's bedroom window two springs ago. Sometimes late at night, or early in the mornings, he had lain awake and tried to smell the brightly colored flowers. He usually could not; but, every now and then, when a breeze would push through the window, it would bring the roses' sweet scent with it.

Sam realized he was staring at her, but he could not help himself. Julie looked up at him, and he could not look away.

"You're staring," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, I..." But he still could not stop.

"Did you find the peroxide?" came Louise's voice from the doorway.

Sam looked away quickly, pretending to inspect his cut.

"Yes," Julie said. "But we can't find the Band-Aids."

"Oh, I forgot. They're in the hall closet." Louise turned to go find them.

"No, no, that's okay," Sam said. "Really, it's stopped."

Downstairs, Moe had fetched Mal another cup of ice cream and was sitting with him at the dining room table. When the boy heard the stairs creaking, he abandoned his red cup and spoon and rushed to the foyer. He stood silently at the foot of the stairs, round face turned up expectantly. Sam showed him his finger when he got to the bottom. Mal, satisfied that the injury was not severe, returned to his ice cream.

The Johnsons followed the two brothers out to Sam's truck. Louise gathered Mal to her and squeezed him against her. "I'm glad to have met you, precious." She turned to Sam and pinched his cheek. "You too, sweetie."

Sam blushed. "It was nice to have met you, ma'am. Dinner was delicious."

"Aw, go on, now, before you give me the big head."

Moe shook Sam's hand. "Don't be a stranger, now."

"I won't, sir."

"Hey, we're having dinner on the ground after church Sunday. You're welcome to join us. Isn't that right, Mother?"

"Oh, Lord, yes! You come on, and bring this beautiful boy. We'll have more good-tastin' food than you can shake a stick at." She leaned close to Sam and whispered behind her hand, "We may even have some decent preachin', too."

"I heard that," Moe said.

"We might just do that, eh, Mal?"

Julie stepped forward and offered her hand. "I enjoyed meeting you, Sam."

Sam took her hand rather clumsily. "You, too," he replied.

"Bye, Mal." Julie ruffled the little boy's hair.

"Bye," he said, climbing into the cab of the truck.

Sam got in himself. As the Ford rambled down the drive toward the highway, he extended one arm through his window and waved briefly. Yawning, Mal mimicked him.

Mal was asleep when they got home, and Sam carried him inside. It was 9:30, and the house was strangely silent. Every room was dark, with the exception of his parents' bedroom. A thin line of light shone through the crack at the bottom of the door. No sound came from within.

After Sam put Mal to bed, he went out and sat on the porch. The wind chimes stirred restlessly. He recalled the smell of the roses outside his window, but he did not

think of the bush on which they grew. The frost had killed it last winter. Rather, Sam thought of Julie staring unabashedly back at him, the cool water running over his finger. Her warm touch. He shuddered. Sam glanced at the cut, rubbing it with his thumb.

It was after midnight when he finally went to bed.

-13-

At three o'clock in the morning, Annie Little was watching her husband stumble up the front steps of their house trailer. Clad in her nightgown, she stood at the living room window, peering out the parted curtain. On the third step, Zeke dropped his keys, and they bounced off the concrete into the dark grass nearby. As he bent over to search for them, Annie turned on the outside light and opened the front door. Zeke glanced up. Her arms were folded across her chest, her lower lip trembling.

He had come home drunk perhaps half-a-dozen times since their wedding last July. Annie never failed to cry, never failed to worry. Usually he made it inside on his own and found her sitting in the gold recliner, plucking Kleenex from the box on the scarred coffee table. Tonight, however, she had been watching for him. It was the first time he had come home drunk since she became pregnant.

"Hey, baby," he slurred through a drunken leer.

"Look at you," she breathed, opening the screen door. "Come inside."

"Dropped my keys." He bent back to the grass.

Annie joined him, crawling on her hands and knees on the ground, ever conscious of the life growing within her. She ran her fingers over the soft carpet of grass at the edge of the trailer. Her feet were bare; she could feel stickers prickling against her toes. Zeke huffed breathlessly beside her, his long hair hanging in his face. Her thumb brushed something cold. She saw the gleaming tip of his truck key.

"I found them."

Zeke did not answer. He sat slumped against the concrete steps, legs spread-eagle before him. His chin lay on his chest, and he was breathing heavily.

“Zeke?” Annie crawled over to him and lifted his head.

He grinned foolishly at her from beneath the bill of his red baseball cap. “I ever tell you...how...beautiful you are?” he huffed.

“Yes. Yes, you’ve told me. I just wish you’d remember to do it when you’re sober.” Annie got one arm under his and helped him to his feet. She led him up the steps. Twice, the heel of his boot crunched her toes, but she only grimaced and heaved him toward the door. Once inside, he staggered toward the couch.

“No, no! The bed, Zeke!” But it was too late. Annie threw up her arms as he collapsed onto the cushions of their daisy-patterned sofa. He lay semi-conscious while she tugged at his boots. The left one came off easily, and she placed it at the foot of the couch. But the right one was trouble, as always. “I swear, I think your right foot’s bigger than your left,” she muttered, yanking fiercely. After several futile pulls, she groaned and sat back on the edge of the coffee table. “Why do you do this to me?” she said, on the verge of tears.

“Do what to you?” he responded sluggishly.

“Go out and leave me alone all night, then come in like this.”

He blinked.

“I don’t know where you are or what you’re doing! I’m scared you’ve run that truck of yours up under a train or something!”

“You tellin’ me what to do?” Zeke tried to sit up and flopped backward.

“Look at you. You can’t even sit up.”

Suddenly his left hand shot out and gripped her right forearm with alarming strength. "It's my house, my truck. I'll do what I want. Got that?"

Annie tried to jerk her arm free, but Zeke held tight. His dirty fingernails dug into her flesh. Tears brimmed in her eyes. "Let go! You're hurting me!"

"I'll hurt you. Show you what hurt is..." His grip loosened. As he eyes slipped shut, his hand fell away.

Annie left him there on the couch all night, fully dressed save for one mud-caked boot. She went into the bathroom to look at her arm. Five tiny, bloody crescents marked the skin just above her wrist. After swabbing them with alcohol, she got in bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. She lay on her side, staring at the moon through a slit in the window blinds. It was a silver sliver, shaped like the fingernail grooves on her arm.

Annie rolled onto her back.

In the living room, Zeke began to snore.

Excerpt from Julie Johnson's Journal

Dated: Friday, June 7th

From L.A. to Memphis to Midland. What a trip.

Been to Midland twice and can't remember either time. I was two and four.

Good to see Grandma and Papaw again.

The Delta is an unsettling place. A ghost landscape, lonely and desolate.

Overwhelmingly flat fields of cotton, rice, and soybeans. Distant towering concrete processing plants, fuzzy mirages on the hazy horizon. On the sides of the road: houses with leprosy, empty, gutted, rotting, overgrown with vines and weeds. Kudzu overruns telephone poles, grain silos, rusting farm equipment. Long walking-stick irrigation systems spit fine mists of water on crops.

Wealth and poverty and next-door neighbors. Brick mansions loom over the landscape like terrible overseers, frowning down upon shanties cowering in their shadows.

Occasional spots of beauty in this place of sadness: the sun cracking the clouds and lighting upon a soybean leaf, a farmer's tractor whipping up a dust cloud on a distant hill.

Still, can't imagine living here, as my grandparents do. It's so lonely.

Equally lonely rooms in my cavernous house in the hills, though. For at least another week, until Mom and Dad return. Can I handle a week here? My mother's

mother's death leaves no great emptiness in my life. Still, only graduation kept me here. Would have gone. Wanted to.

Dad's idea instead of Vietnam: Midland, Arkansas.

Tomorrow I'm going exploring. See the town, the people.

Sam Little. My first local. He was taller than me, but not by much. A head of dark brown hair and shy, intelligent eyes. A little scar on his chin, maybe from acne, and his hands are rough. Papaw said he was a mechanic. A mechanic that reads Hemingway. Intriguing.

Maybe I'll see him again. In a town this small, I think the odds are pretty good.

-14-

An insistent pounding woke Sam the next morning. It was coming from overhead, a constant *rap-rap-rap*, cracking down from the ceiling. As he usually slept late on Saturdays, Sam tried at first to roll over and bury his head beneath his pillow. But the noise continued, only muffled. It thudded inside his head until he could stand no more. He threw back the covers, snatched on some jeans and shoes, and went outside to investigate. He noticed, as he left the room, that Mal's bed was empty.

It was another warm day, inching toward hot. A few wispy white clouds were stretched like gossamer across the sky. Sam squinted in the harsh sunlight as he stepped barefooted onto the porch. The banging continued, from somewhere above and behind him. Mal stood in the front yard in his underwear, head turned up toward the roof, face glazed over. At his feet, a yellow, dirt-crusting Tonka truck lay forgotten on its side.

"What's the noise?" Sam asked, standing beside Mal and following his line of vision.

On the roof, Bob Little sat with his legs apart, wearing a pair of faded jeans and a holey tee-shirt. He held a hammer with a blue rubber handle. He ran an arm across his brow, wiping away his sweat. When he saw Sam with Mal below, he set the hammer aside and met the brothers' gazes. After a moment, he pointed at Mal and said, "Does he always stare at people like that?"

"No," Sam replied. "Only strangers."

Bob nodded and resumed hammering.

entire “What are you doing?” Sam called.

planks “Tacking shingles back down the storm blew loose.”

“Anything I can do to help? It’s my day off.”

Bob stopped hammering once again. “Yard needs mowing. I can’t get the damn mower to start. You know about that stuff, don’t you?”

“I’ll look at it,” Sam said. “Mal, get inside. Get some clothes on.”

The lawnmower was in the small, rusted metal shed behind the house. As Sam wrenched open the door, three fat daddy-longlegs scuttled backward out of the invading sunlight. The lawnmower was wedged between a tin washtub and a stack of broken clay flowerpots. It was a push-model, a junker his mother had bought six years ago at a garage sale. Homer had helped Sam fix it, and it had run fine for about four years. On and off over the last two, however, it had become cantankerous, leaking fluids like a belligerent old man who peed the bed and laughed as his children cleaned up the mess. Sam checked the oil and gas, then turned the mower over on its side and inspected the blade and undercarriage. Lastly, he checked the air filter, and found the problem. It was as black as a smoker’s lung, covered with bits of grass and grime. He took the filter inside the house and washed it in the sink, rinsing out as much of the muck as he could. After he had replaced the filter in the mower, he gripped the handle of the machine and yanked the starter cord. The engine hacked out a black cloud of smoke and fell quiet. After several more yanks, it finally caught and came half heartedly to life.

Sam mowed around the edge of the house, enjoying the sweet smell of the freshly cut grass. He thought of ripe watermelons, split open in late summer. Once his father had brought home a fat Black Diamond from the watermelon festival at Hope, and the

entire family had sat on the porch that evening eating it, dripping juice onto the dusty planks and spitting seeds over the rail.

The drone of the lawnmower drowned out Bob's hammering. Sam entered the front yard, cutting a swath toward the ditch. Mal was still standing in his underwear, staring up at Bob. Sam yelled at the boy over the buzz of the mower and pointed at the house. He mouthed the word "inside" and watched Mal scurry for the front door. Fifteen minutes later, after Sam had shorn away a good portion of the yard, Mal reemerged in a pair of shorts and an Elmo T-shirt. His shoelaces were untied. He sat in the dirt, playing with his Tonka truck.

Rebecca had left for the grocery store around eight that morning, and Sam and Mal were alone with Bob. There had been very few occasions on which Sam and his father had been alone together. Most of the time, such happenings were by chance more than by plan. A prime example was that terrible night twelve years ago. But Sam remembered one weekend, when Zeke was hunting with a friend, that his father had taken him fishing on Little Big Bayou.

They borrowed a twelve-foot aluminum boat from one of Bob's friends and drove to a narrow bridge overlooking the muddy bayou. They put the boat in and floated downstream. Bob made Sam wear a dirty orange life jacket that smelled like fish. The water was thick like milk, the color of cocoa. Cypress trees jutted from the steep banks, their gnarled roots exposed and knotted together. The trees formed a canopy, and the further downstream they drifted, the darker it became.

"Look there, son," Bob had said suddenly, pointing toward the bank.

A long, menacing snake slid into the bayou and glided toward the boat. Bob took his oar in hand. When the snake sidled near the bow, Bob brought the oar down on its flat head, and the snake spiraled underwater. At the same time, Sam's cane fishing pole jumped in his hand. The line went taut. He looked at his father with what must have been an expression of dumb surprise, because he remembered Bob yelling, "Well, pull her in, son! Pull her in!"

Sam's catch broke the surface of the water in a flurry of foam and bubbles, a slick gray catfish. As he wrestled it in, he heard his father exclaim, "God Almighty!" Sam turned and saw Bob hauling in one of his own, this one twice the size of Sam's. And that was when Sam saw the snakes. They appeared from everywhere along the banks, slithering out into the murky water—water rattlers, moccasins, and cottonmouths.

"Dad?"

Bob did not hear; he had removed his catch and baited again, and now, a second fish had snagged his line. As he removed his own fish, Sam kept a wary eye on the snakes. There were two dozen, easily. "Dad! They're coming toward the boat!"

Bob Little looked around and saw what his son was seeing. He swung his oar at the water and let out a war cry, fishing pole in one hand, paddle in the other. Sam laughed in spite of his fear, and he too snatched up a paddle and began slapping the water. Snakes ducked under all around them.

Sam heard a plunk. A dark blue snake had fallen from a tree into the boat, between Sam and Bob. It writhed on the metal. Bob crushed its head with his oar. Somehow, in the midst of all the excitement, they managed to keep fishing, and every time their bait hit the water, Sam and his dad quickly pulled in a flouncing catfish. The

snakes began to give the boat a wide berth, but they never completely disappeared. At any given time, Sam might see one slink past his bobbing cork or shoot lightning-fast beneath the water.

They caught two dozen catfish that day, and they feasted when they returned home. At supper, Sam basked in the glowing praise of his father, as Bob recounted how the boy had “whacked hell outta them devils, just like his old man.” It was the only time in his life that Sam remembered receiving the man’s approval.

The mower snagged a rock and flung it at Sam. He felt its sting through his jeans as it bounced off his shin. He grimaced and continued mowing, sweat beading on his bare skin.

-15-

At eleven-thirty, Julie was pedaling down the highway on her bicycle, clad in a pair of black biker shorts with a neon green stripe, a gray sports-bra, and a white tank top. She was heading into town to explore.

She awoke at 10:15 to an empty house. Moe had gone to the barbershop, and Louise was at the church, helping the other women of the Hostess Committee set up tables and chairs beneath a canvas tent for tomorrow's dinner on the ground. Julie showered and dressed, ate a bagel for breakfast, and removed her bicycle from the roof of her grandfather's Oldsmobile. It was a metallic silver Schwinn, a ten-speed. She called it Speedy. Her parents had bought it as a high-school-graduation present, knowing it would come in handy her freshman year at UCLA.

As she pedaled down the rough, uneven highway, she took in her surroundings. Low, junky houses littered the roadside. Scattered in some yards were various broken toys and cracked lawn ornaments. Swing sets stood forlornly in too-tall grass. Clotheslines strung with fresh linen swayed in the late-morning breeze.

Julie entered the city limits, gliding past her grandfather's barbershop. As she neared the car wash, she saw a red Mustang parked in one of the stalls. Four young men lounged against the car. One wore a brightly colored leather jacket and dark sunglasses; a gold chain glinted around his neck. Julie felt his and his friends' eyes upon her. One of them whistled. Another called out something vulgar. She pedaled faster, realizing for the first time how few clothes she was wearing.

She crossed the tracks, coasting right onto Main Street. A tall, lanky police officer stood outside the police department, peering under the open hood of a cruiser. Julie let her eyes linger on him, not noticing as she veered toward the center of the road. A small pick-up suddenly whizzed by, hauling a trailer loaded with round bales of hay. The driver honked twice, shaking his fist and mouthing something at Julie as he blew past.

“Ever heard of right-of-way?” she yelled, coming to a stop. “Jerk.” She planted her tennis shoes on the ground and reached for her water bottle. As she took a long drink, a shop across the street caught her eye. “Wong’s Department Store,” read the hand-painted sign above the door. The cracked display window was filled with cardboard signs proclaiming sales and discounts. Curious, Julie walked her bike across the street and propped it against the building.

A bell over the door jingled as she entered. The air inside the shop was musty. It smelled of old leather and mothballs. Tables filled the floor space, stacked high with neatly folded shirts and pants. A smaller table in the back was devoted entirely to men’s and women’s underclothes, another one beside it to children’s. A round, pleasant-faced Chinese woman greeted Julie with a smile and a nod from behind the cash register. A man stood on a stepladder behind her, hanging cowboy hats on pegboard. He turned and also offered a smile.

Julie browsed about the tiny shop, pausing at a dusty curio cabinet in the rear. It stood in a corner, filled with various ceramics and porcelains. A light inside the cabinet shone down on each delicate piece. There were animals of all sorts: dogs, cats, rabbits, wolves, bears, and even a penguin. There were also clowns, some with umbrellas, some

with accordions, and some with balloons. One clown in particular caught Julie's attention; there was no other like it in the case. He was two inches high, with a sad, lonely face. His red shoes were scuffed, and his big toe protruded through the end of his right shoe. On his shoulder was a blue handkerchief-bundle, tied to a stick. He wore an orange bowler.

"You want I show him to you?"

Julie jumped. Mrs. Wong stood beside her, smiling, her hands clasped at her chest. "Well, I..."

"I get him out for you."

"Okay."

Mrs. Wong unlocked the cabinet and removed the clown. Julie handled the porcelain figurine delicately, turning him over in her hands. Etched on the bottom were an unreadable signature and a date. "1978." The clown was twenty-one years old—her age.

"You like?"

"He's wonderful. How much?"

"For you, two dollars."

"You're kidding."

Mrs. Wong shook her head, still smiling. Julie handed her the clown and followed her back to the cash register. While Mrs. Wong wrapped the figurine in newspaper, Julie reached discreetly into her bra and pulled out a folded five-dollar bill. She had tucked it there at the last minute before leaving the house.

"You not live around here, yes?"

"Is it that obvious?"

Mrs. Wong's smile spread. "Oh, yes. We know most people who come in here, but I never see you before."

"My name is Julie Johnson. I'm staying with my grandparents."

"Who are grandparents?"

"Moe and Louise Johnson."

"Oh, yes! Lee?" She turned to her husband, who stepped down from the ladder.

"Yes?"

"This girl is granddaughter of Moe and Louise Johnson."

"Oh!" Lee Wong offered his hand to Julie. They shook. "You are visiting?"

"From California."

"Arkansas must be quite a change for you, yes?" Lee's English was considerably better than his wife's.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you met anybody else here in town?"

"Only two people. You may know them—Sam and Malachi Little?"

"Oh, of course, of course. Good boys, both. They shop here sometimes."

Mrs. Wong joined the conversation. "Sam, yes. He buy clothes for his little brother. He have a good heart." Her seemingly permanent smile suddenly disappeared.

"Not like older brother."

"Older brother?" Julie did not remember Sam mentioning an older brother at dinner last night.

"*An jing!*" Lee snapped at his wife. "You should not be gossiping."

Julie awkwardly presented Mrs. Wong the five-dollar bill, and the woman's face brightened immediately. She handed Julie three dollars' change and her newspaper-wrapped clown in a plastic bag.

"It was nice meeting you," Lee said. "Tell your grandfather I said hello."

"I will, and it was nice meeting you, too."

"Goodbye!" Mrs. Wong waved as Julie left the shop.

She pedaled over to Maple Street, the plastic bag dangling from her handlebars. Julie glanced down Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt Avenues as she passed. Lawn sprinklers chattered in a few yards, soaking the grass. At the corner of Roosevelt, a white-haired woman kneeling by a flowerbed cast Julie a malicious look, gripping a spade tightly in her gloved hand. Julie returned the stare as long as she dared.

She turned onto Highway 38 and rode past Dr. Moody's office and Planters' National Bank. Behind the bank, she could see the crowded Hornet's Nest Drive-in. Men in orange vests and helmets sat at the tables, munching burgers and sipping drinks. *Shakes and floats*, Julie thought, and smiled. She reached the city limits just past George Reeves' butane company. She crossed the street and headed back the way she had come. She passed the Napa Auto Parts store and coasted into the parking lot of Hall's Supermarket. She stopped and took a sip of water. The liquid was unbearably hot. Grimacing, Julie poured it onto the pavement and pushed her bike to the storefront. Inside the supermarket, she found a cold drink box with bottles of Mountain Spring water and took one to the register. Only one checker was open—number three.

She waited patiently behind an elderly white lady and her shopping cart piled with groceries. The checker was painfully thin, a middle-aged woman with a heavily lined

face. Her hair was stringy and silver. It might have been pretty had the woman cared to keep it up. Her name tag read, "Rebecca."

"How are you today, Mrs. Kennedy?" she asked the elderly customer.

"I'm good, I suppose," answered Mrs. Kennedy, making out a check with a trembling hand.

Julie noticed how deftly the checker swept the old woman's items across the barcode scanner. Her fingers were long and slender, but also a bit crooked, like talons.

"How is Mr. Kennedy?"

"Oh, he's still alive, and believe me, that's enough." Mrs. Kennedy giggled.

"How is your husband, dearie? Is he happy to be home?"

"He's adjusting."

"Well, we're praying for you, Rebecca Little." Mrs. Kennedy placed a liver-spotted hand over Rebecca's.

Little? Julie wondered.

"How are your boys doing?"

Rebecca pulled her hand away and swept a jar of pickles across the scanner.

"They're good. Sam stays busy working. And my older boy, Zeke, is about to be a father." Rebecca smiled.

Sam's mother. Julie shook her head in disbelief. *Small towns.*

"Oh, and that means you'll be a grandmother! How wonderful."

Rebecca nodded, color rising in her cheeks. A young man in a red apron and bow tie appeared and began sacking Mrs. Kennedy's groceries.

"Won't the ladies in our prayer circle be pleased to hear!"

"I'm sure they will." Rebecca punched up Mrs. Kennedy's total and slipped her check in the drawer. "You have a nice day, now." She handed her the receipt.

"Oh, I will. You too, dearie."

Rebecca's head was turned from Julie as she watched Mrs. Kennedy lead the young man and her buggy out the automatic doors. A ghost of a smile and a hint of color still lingered on her face, but Julie saw them both disappear when Rebecca turned and regarded her.

Julie tried a smile. "Hi."

"Is that all?" Rebecca asked, pointing at the bottle of water.

"Yes." Julie handed it to her.

Rebecca swiped it. "One-ninety."

Julie reached into her sports bra.

Rebecca's left eyebrow arced.

As Julie handed Rebecca two dollars, she said, "By any chance, are you Sam Little's mother?"

The cash drawer slid open and dinged, but Rebecca's hand and the money did not go in. She paused, the crinkled dollar-bills hovering over the open drawer. "Do I know you?"

"I'm Julie Johnson. I met Sam last night, at my grandparents' house. I was going to ask you how his finger was. He cut it." She smiled again.

"He told me about dinner at the Johnsons," Rebecca said cautiously. "But he didn't say anything about cutting his finger. Or anything about you, for that matter." Her eyes roamed disapprovingly over Julie.

Julie's skin crawled, and she thought: *Why didn't he tell her?*

Rebecca slapped a dime onto the counter. "Your change."

Julie nodded, embarrassed. She swiped up the dime and left quickly, not looking back, but feeling the cold, intense stare of Rebecca Little. She was unable to shake that feeling even when she had pedaled back onto the highway and was headed home. The woman's eyes had slithered over her like a snake's tongue, sensing her, sizing her up as if she were about to devour her. It occurred to her as she rode past her grandfather's barbershop for the second time that day that perhaps Sam had not told his mother he had met her in order to avoid such a glare.

"What an ugly place," Julie said to herself, looking out over the broad soybean fields and squat, ramshackle houses. Midland was the middle of nowhere.

For no real reason, she pedaled faster.

-16-

As the evening sun waned, Sam and Bob sat on the porch sipping lemonade Rebecca had made that morning and left in the refrigerator. It was terribly bitter, and they grimaced with each swallow.

“Your mother never could make lemonade worth much,” Bob said.

Mal was playing in the front yard, loading mown grass into his yellow dump truck. His face, hands, and the seat of his shorts were covered in dirt.

“Who was his father?” Bob asked.

Sam’s face slackened with surprise. “Mom never told you?”

“Not really. She said it didn’t matter. She and the Lord knew.”

“Does it matter?”

“Not really.”

“His name was Harmon T. Evans,” Sam said at once. “He was a Bible salesman. Mom met him at the truck stop where she was waiting tables, out on I-40. He was on the road, on a sales trip.”

Bob said nothing. He watched Mal with his dark blue eyes, turning his lemonade glass in his hands.

“He must have talked her up some, impressed her with what he knew about what he was selling. I guess she thought he was a kindred spirit. When her shift ended that night, she brought him home.” Sam paused. “She was lonely.”

Bob’s face betrayed no emotion.

“I was almost asleep when they came in. I never actually saw him, only heard him through the door. He had a voice like a Northerner. Sounded like a salesman, sure of himself, sure of his product. In the morning, I found Mom crying at the kitchen table. And he was gone.”

Bob took a sip of lemonade, his face contorting. Then he said, “I don’t blame her.”

Sam regarded his father in the fading sunlight. Twelve years ago, if Bob Little had discovered his wife having an affair, he would have downed a pint of Wild Turkey and beaten her bloody with the empty bottle. There was something different about him now. He possessed a strange self-control. His words were measured and few. Sam had not heard him say one foolish or crass thing since he had returned home. And he had not mentioned liquor.

“What was prison like?” Sam suddenly asked.

Bob did not answer for a long time. He rocked slowly in his rocking chair, watching Mal play. Finally, he uttered one word, a word that broke Sam out in gooseflesh. “Integrated,” he said.

At that moment, before Sam could reply, Rebecca’s white station wagon pulled into the driveway. She got out and opened the back door. Mal jumped up and ran toward his mother, arms open for a hug. Instead of a hug, Rebecca planted a brown bag of groceries in the boy’s open arms. He staggered a bit, turned, and took the sack into the house.

“Sam, come help me, please,” Rebecca called.

Sam carried two bags, and Rebecca toted the last one. As they made their way inside, Sam asked his mother from behind a protruding stalk of celery, "Are you working evenings next week?"

"Why?"

"Someone has to watch Mal during the day. Dad'll start work, and I'll be at work."

"Annie can keep him."

"Don't you think it would be better if he spent time with you?"

"Better for who?" Rebecca said flatly.

Outside, Bob sipped his bad lemonade. The glass was still half full ten minutes after Rebecca arrived, when Zeke's mud-crust-ed pick-up pulled into the drive. Bob watched his older son as he stepped out of the truck. Dressed in his work clothes, he carried a bundle wrapped in butcher's paper. Zeke reminded Bob of himself when he was thirty. When he was sentenced to prison, Bob had only been twelve years older than Zeke was now. *What's in your future, son?* Bob wondered.

"Hey, Pop. You been workin' outside today?" Zeke sat in the chair Sam had vacated.

"Your brother and me."

"Yard looks good. I was just on my way home, thought I'd stop by. I got some deer meat from Jimmy Walker today, figured I'd share the wealth."

"Deer in June?"

"He hit a buck with his car out near the lake. He'd gone fishin' and hadn't caught a thing." Zeke laughed. "Tom Burke asked him, said, 'Jimmy, don't you know it ain't

deer season?' Said Jimmy just looked at him, said, 'Tom, I didn't *try* to hit it.' He decided he'd just keep the meat since he don't have no car insurance. Figured he'd better get *some*thin' out of the deal, you know. Tom gave me what Jimmy gave him, cause-uh his cholesterol or somethin'. I thought y'all might want some."

"Sounds good." Bob sipped lemonade.

"You're gonna be workin' for Jimmy, startin' Monday, right? Your old job?"

"Yeah."

"I went by there last week. He's got all kinds of new rigs with all sorts of gadgets and stuff on 'em. Ain't nothin' like it used to be. Things change. Course, old Jimmy, he ain't changed. People stay the same, but things change."

"Some people change," Bob said.

Zeke eyed his father suspiciously.

"Then again," Bob said, taking a drink, "Some people don't change. After twelve years, your mother still makes awful lemonade."

Inside, Sam was helping Rebecca put up groceries. Mal sat at the kitchen table, an Animals-of-Africa coloring book open before him. A tattered box of sixteen Crayolas lay on its side by the book, crayons spilling out.

"I met somebody today," Rebecca said, handing Sam a can of green beans.

"Who?" He slid the beans into the cabinet over his head.

"The Johnsons' granddaughter."

"Oh?" Sam's defenses went up.

"Yes. Why didn't you mention her?"

"It didn't occur to me," Sam said, reaching for a can of mixed vegetables.

"She asked me about your finger. Said you cut it. How did that happen?"

"A broken plate." Sam folded an empty paper sack. "Did you put the meat up?"

"Don't change the subject. Why have you been keeping things from me?"

"*What?*"

"Your Daddy ain't been home two days, and what are you doing? You're off eating supper with black people, instead of your own family! And now you've got some black girl who dresses like a harlot asking about you in public!" Rebecca stabbed a crooked finger in Sam's face. Spittle caught on the corners of her mouth. "You be wary, Samson Little! What's pleasing to the eye is damning to the soul!"

"Mom, you've got it all..."

"I know what I'm saying," she hissed. "For the sake of your family, you stay away from this girl!"

Suddenly Zeke walked into the kitchen. "What girl?"

"Zeke!" Rebecca exclaimed, clapping a hand to her chest. "Where did you come from?"

"Just came by to give you some deer meat. Jimmy Walker hit a buck with his car." Zeke passed the package to Rebecca, who scuttled it into the freezer. Scratching his day-old stubble, he cast an appraising glance at Sam and grinned wryly.

It was a grin Sam had seen all too often growing up. It was the same malevolent grin through which Zeke had told Sam that his first puppy had not simply run away, but had been crushed to death beneath the wheels of their mother's station wagon as she was backing out for work. It was the same grin that had preceded painful punches and

countless humiliations. And now, through his little-brother-lick-my-boot grin, Zeke said, “You got a girlfriend, Sam?”

“No,” Sam said, feeling his cheeks redden.

“Come on,” Zeke prodded, poking Sam in the ribs. “Who is she?”

“Nobody, really.”

Rebecca purposefully slammed the freezer door.

“Julie!” Mal cried.

Zeke turned slowly, his grin spreading to a full-blown leer. “What’s that, Mal?”

Sam looked pleadingly at his little brother.

Mal sifted through his crayons, frowning. He seized a brown Crayola between his thumb and index finger and held it out to Zeke. “Julie!”

“Huh?” Zeke’s leer slipped a notch.

“Julie!” Mal waved the brown color.

Rebecca snatched the crayon out of Mal’s hand. She snapped it in two pieces and tossed them in the trash. After a bewildered moment, Mal sniffed back tears. “Don’t even start that,” Rebecca snapped. “You’ve got other colors.”

Zeke looked from his mother to Sam. His leer vanished. “What’s he saying, anyway?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rebecca said. “Sam’s not having anything else to do with her.”

“I didn’t say that,” Sam said quietly.

“Who is Julie?” Zeke asked his mother, no longer amused but confused.

“Ask your brother!” Rebecca spat, throwing up her arms. “Ask *him* who Julie is! He may tell you she’s just a girl he met yesterday, but what he won’t tell you is that she’s *black*! Skin the color of a mud puddle!”

“Why are you doing this?” Sam said.

As Zeke slowly realized what his mother had said, he curled his hands into tight fists. When he spoke, he kept his eyes on the linoleum. “You been messin’ around with some *black* girl, little brother?”

“I haven’t been doing anything,” Sam said quickly. He thought of lovely Julie, standing in the checkout line at Hall’s Supermarket, subjected to his mother’s bug-under-a-glass stare. Defiantly, he added, “But so what if I had been?”

Zeke’s eyes whipped from the floor to Sam. “What?”

“I said so what if I was messing around with ‘some *black* girl.’ What difference...”

Zeke hit Sam across the face. Sam never saw it coming, and he was still speaking when his brother’s knuckles smashed his cheek against his teeth. Zeke hit him hard enough to rock him backward. Sam ran his tongue along the wall of his cheek, and it came away laced with the coppery taste of blood. He gripped the edge of the sink behind him and stared angrily at his older brother. His knuckles whitened.

Zeke stood before Sam with a hurt expression on his face, as if *he* had been hit. Then he turned and slowly walked out of the house.

Rebecca stood by Mal, who sat with tears welling in his wide eyes. “Sam, are you...” She moved toward him, hands spread in a helpless gesture.

“Leave me alone,” he said, shaking his head. The left side of his face glowed bright red. Sam went to the table and sat down beside Mal. He picked up a blue crayon and began coloring a wildebeest in his little brother’s coloring book. After a moment, Mal’s tears subsided, and he grabbed a red crayon and joined in, coloring a zebra on the opposite page.

Rebecca filled a plastic cup with water and stood with her back to Sam and Mal, drinking slowly, staring vacantly out the small window above the sink.

Bob entered the kitchen, empty lemonade glass in hand. “Why did Zeke tear out of here so fast?”

Rebecca shrugged, not bothering to turn around. Sam and Mal remained quiet, coloring. Bob studied the boys closely for a moment. Then he turned and went back out. He sat in his rocking chair on the porch until the sun had dissolved completely into night. Once or twice, he slapped at mosquitoes on his arms.

-17-

Night in the Delta. A scattering of nightlights dotted the landscape, fluorescent decorations on a quilt of darkness. The moon shone fat and full, surrounded by a sky festooned with stars.

Several miles outside of Midland, amid acres and acres of spindly, dry corn, a four-room shanty stood on a bald patch of earth. A light filled one window, the ghostly glow of a television reflected in its panes. Inside, Arliss James sat in a tattered recliner, watching "The Tonight Show" and eating potted meat on saltine crackers. Every other cracker he passed down to his German Shepherd, Bones, who lay alongside the recliner, panting through a doggish grin. Since potted meat gave Bones gas, Arliss knew he would later regret sharing the snack with his pet. But Bones was his only company out here in the cornfield; and, for this reason, Arliss figured he could tolerate the inevitable, awful smell of a few rancid dog farts.

The cornfield had been in his family for two generations. His grandfather left it to his father, having purchased it from a white man who had decided to try his luck in the meat-packing industry of Chicago. The family was never large enough to work the field alone, so Arliss's grandfather decided to rent out the land. Thus the James family owned a substantial amount of farmland without ever actually farming it. After Arliss's father was run over by a train while working as a foreman for Union Pacific, Arliss inherited the cornfield. He had always planned to leave it to his children, but his twin sons, Charles and Clarence, were killed in Vietnam. Their bodies arrived home in black, flag-draped

caskets, three weeks apart from one another. As Arliss and his wife lowered Clarence into the ground one rainy Sunday afternoon, he realized that his family's legacy was over. He and Constance were both too old to have any more children. Less than a year after Clarence's funeral, Connie took breast cancer. She survived her first bout with it, but six years ago, in January, she found another lump and died in March. Two years ago, Arliss bought Bones for both a watchdog and companion. Last April, he decided to rent the field out one more year and then move with his dog to Boise and live with his widowed sister, Margaret.

On "The Tonight Show," Jay Leno berated Bill Clinton. The audience roared laughter. Arliss belched, feeling the potted meat and crackers burning in his chest. Bones woofed approvingly. *Good one*, he seemed to say through his broad canine grin.

"Didn't feel too good," Arliss muttered, rubbing his chest.

Bones stood and padded to the front door. He stuck his nose in the crack between the bottom and the floor and snuffed. He looked over his shoulder at Arliss and whined.

"Huh?" Arliss shifted in his chair and regarded his dog. "What, already?"

Bones barked, wagging his tail.

Arliss dropped the recliner's foot-rest and shoved himself out of the chair, cracker crumbs spilling down his shirt and onto the carpet. He shuffled over to the door and threw the dead bolt. Bones's bushy tail flagged happily back and forth. "Just don't wander off again."

Bones scampered out the open door, down the porch steps, and into the corn. He padded between rows of dry stalks, nose to the ground. Suddenly he stopped. His ears pricked, and his nose searched the air. A moment later, he growled low in his throat.

His dark brown eyes shining in the moonlight, the German Shepherd trotted quickly back toward the house.

While Arliss and Bones had been enjoying their evening meal before the T.V., two very different companions had been making their way through several beers in the neighboring cornfield. Not far from Arliss's house, Zeke Little and Buddy Brighton sat on the tailgate of Zeke's pick-up, an ice chest of Budweiser between them.

It was Buddy's idea to drive out to the field. He had seen it as they were racing up and down the highway in front of Arliss's land a few nights ago.

"What did we come out here for again?" Zeke asked, pulling a fresh beer from the ice and popping it open.

"Because it's quiet," Buddy answered, drawing his switchblade. He flicked it open and started down a row of corn, perusing the stalks.

"What are you doing?" Zeke called.

Buddy seized two healthy ears of corn and slashed them from their stalks. He laid them on the truck's tailgate and stripped the husks from them. He tossed the yellow ears into the ditch and scraped the clingy silks out of the husks. Closing his knife and sliding it into his pocket, he presented Zeke with a corn husk.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with this?" he said, already halfway through his beer.

"Watch me." Buddy reached into another pocket and produced a small plastic bag bulging with marijuana. Flattening out his corn husk on the tailgate, he placed some of the narcotic on top of it. After offering the open bag to Zeke, who took it greedily, he

rolled the husk tight around the marijuana, held it up to his mouth, and grinned at his friend. Zeke laughed at Buddy, who stood there by his pick-up with a goofy expression on his face and an absurdly long joint between his fingers.

“What?” Buddy said, still grinning.

“Well, it’s different.” Zeke shook his head, staring amusedly at his corn husk and the open bag of weed. He set his beer on the tailgate and tried to roll his own corn-joint, but he had some trouble getting it to stay together. When he finally got his up to his mouth, the marijuana was hanging like moss out the end of the husk.

Smoking the corn-joints was even more hilarious. When Buddy lit his, the end flared up. Zeke jumped, a wad of marijuana spilling out the poorly rolled end of his husk. The flame licked at Buddy’s nose, and he almost spit the joint out. Once it settled to a soft orange glow, it burned quickly. Zeke fumbled the marijuana back into his husk, jamming it in with his index finger. Buddy lit it for him, and the two perched contentedly on the tailgate.

“Where did you come up with this?” Zeke asked, sucking the smoke into his lungs.

“A guy in the joint told me he and his brothers used to do it. Grew their own stash and smoked it in corn husks cause they couldn’t afford cigarette paper.”

“A guy in the joint told you how to make a joint?”

Buddy laughed his high-pitched weasel laugh, nodding vigorously.

“What was it like?”

“What?”

“The joint. You never talk about it.”

The humor went out of Buddy's face. He stared at the ground, his eyes blank and far away. "It's not much to talk about. It ain't a good place to be."

"You don't seem any different," Zeke said thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you come out the same. You been out now, what, six months? You seem like the same guy you was before."

Buddy took a drag on his corn-joint. Zeke might have laughed at the absurdity of the way it looked, his friend toking on a giant rolled corn husk. But something about Buddy's face in the faint glow of the tip kept his own face straight. There was something unsettling in his eyes, something haunting. Through a cloud of smoke, Buddy said, "I ain't completely the same. Nobody *ever* goes in and comes out completely the same."

"The old man sure ain't the same," Zeke replied.

"I'm telling you. There's stuff happens on the inside that people just don't wanna know about. Stuff that can ruin some men. You lose everything—your pride, your dignity. Everything."

"You seen Sally since you got out?"

"Talked to her last night. She sent me a letter while I was in the joint. I ever tell you? On her eighteenth birthday, she sent it to me, telling me when I got out, me and her'd hook up. 'Screw my old man,' she said. Hell, I say screw her, you know?"

"That's what got you sent to jail the first time, Buddy."

"I asked her how old she was that night. I ever tell you that?"

"No. What'd she say?"

"Old enough."

Zeke laughed, his eyes watering. "Not quite."

Buddy blew a smoke ring. "Nope. Two years, statutory rape. Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am."

"Ain't it her brother them niggers beat up a couple weeks ago?"

"Yeah. Hank."

"How's he doin'?"

"Better," Buddy said.

"Damn niggers." Zeke spat a wad of phlegm. "Coons think they can get away with anything."

"Yep. But I met a guy in prison who wants to change that," Buddy said.

"Who?"

"George Shepherd. Pretty normal lookin' guy, you wouldn't see him in a crowd. Only two things strange about him. He had pale skin. I'm talkin' white. And he had these big hands with really long fingers. He was finishin' out a three-year stretch for assault. I heard him in the yard one day, givin' this speech over in a corner, wavin' his big hands around like some kind of preacher. Only he was talkin' about the niggers and the Jews, how they steal white people's jobs and take over the government. And what he said was makin' sense, you know?"

"He said when he got out he was startin' a new group, kind of like the KKK but smaller. At the end of his speech, he said anyone interested in joinin' should come and talk to him. So, I did. I never met anybody like this guy. He was smart. I could see it behind his eyes. I told him I didn't know about joinin' any group, but I knew where he was comin' from."

Zeke nodded.

“So when Sally come to me two weeks ago and said a buncha niggers beat up Hank, first thing I thought of was Shepherd. He’d been released a month before, so I looked him up in Helena. When I told him about Hank, he said he wanted to hold a recruiting session here in Midland, spread around some flyers. He sent down a couple of boys and I went with ‘em, throwin’ out the papers all over town.”

“That was you?” Zeke asked. He had seen a couple of the flyers tacked to telephone poles in town. “How come you didn’t tell me?”

“Shepherd said to keep it quiet, not go braggin’ about what we done. So, we kept it quiet.”

“Damn niggers,” Zeke muttered.

“What?”

“I went by the folks’ today to drop off some deer meat and walked in on Momma and Sam, arguin’ over some girl. Come to find out it’s a black girl.”

“No way.” Buddy’s jaw dropped.

“Yeah.”

“Sam’s messin’ around with a black? Must be one helluva looker.”

Zeke sent a hard look his friend’s way. “There’s no such thing as a good-lookin’ nigger.”

Buddy blinked and took a drag on his joint.

Zeke reached into the ice chest and removed an entire six-pack of beer. He set it on the tailgate. For a time, there was only silence between him and Buddy as they smoked and drank. They went through a six-pack and fished out another; the ice was

beginning to melt. They threw their empty cans on the ground. After five beers, Zeke rubbed his temples; his head was throbbing. He started to see double.

“Things in my family getting outta hand.” Zeke threw his corn-joint to the ground.

Nearby, the corn rustled. A flashlight beam knifed through the stalks. Zeke and Buddy exchanged surprised glances. Before they had time to hop from the tailgate and make for the cab, a dark growling shape burst from the field and ran at them. Zeke and Buddy scrambled backward into the bed of the truck.

Arliss emerged from the corn in time to see Bones leap onto the tailgate. In one hand he held his flashlight, in the other his shotgun. “Bones, heel, boy! Heel!”

Bones ceased his barking and leapt nimbly from the tailgate, padding to his master’s side. He sat and regarded the two strangers.

Arliss leveled his gun at the trespassers cowering in the back of their pick-up. The gun was a double-barrel Remington, an old family relic. He shined the light in their faces. Scattered at his feet were their crushed beer cans. He kicked one, scowling.

“You fellas are trespassin’ on private property. But I reckon you already knew that.”

“We ain’t done no harm, old man,” Buddy said.

“You shut up, boy. You been throwin’ your beer cans in my ditch, slashin’ my corn. Looks like you been smokin’ something too.”

“You got somethin’ to say about that?” Zeke growled.

“You watch that lip, sonny. You mouth off too much I’m liable to fertilize my field with your guts.” Arliss hefted the gun.

"I ain't your son, old man."

"No, you ain't. I know who *your* father is."

Zeke's eyes narrowed. "How's that, old man?"

"Think I don't recognize your truck? Same one that's been tearin' up and down the road and night. You're Zeke Little, Bob Little's boy. And you're just like your father. Stupid and full of hate for anything that ain't your color."

"You don't talk about my father," Zeke hissed. "You don't know him."

"I know his kind."

Zeke surged forward, his fists balled.

Bones leapt snarling at the tailgate. Zeke scuttled backward.

"You wouldn't be so much without that damn dog!" Buddy yelled, stabbing a finger at Arliss.

"I'd be enough," Arliss replied, cocking both barrels of the shotgun. "Now, get off my land. And don't ever come back."

For a handful of seconds, Zeke and Buddy held their ground in the back of the truck. Zeke and Arliss faced off in the glare of the old man's flashlight. Buddy's eyes flicked from one to the other. Bones sat attentively at the tailgate, ears perked and eyes locked on the two strange men.

At last, a terrible grin spread across Zeke's face, and he said, "This isn't over, old man. You remember that. No nigger coon and his nigger coon dog are gonna bad-mouth my family and get away with it. Not while I'm livin'."

"Which won't be much longer if you don't get," Arliss said through gritted teeth.

Zeke only continued to smile as he and Buddy climbed into the cab of the truck. The behemoth vehicle roared to life, chewing up earth beneath its spinning tires and spitting meaty clods at Arliss and Bones.

They watched the pick-up until its taillights disappeared onto the highway. Bones sat by his master's side and whined unhappily.

"I know what you mean, fella," Arliss said. He eased the shotgun's twin hammers back to their original positions. Overhead, the full moon beamed down on the black man and his dog, casting each in a pale glow. Arliss cracked open the shotgun, intending to remove the shells and pocket them. His fingers slid into the barrels, encountering only cold metal, no shells. Frowning, Arliss hefted the open gun up to the light. Through the twin barrels he could see two small circles of moonlight, gleaming where the shells should have been. Suddenly Arliss's legs were weak and trembly, and he had to sit down on the ground beside Bones. He broke out in a cold sweat.

The German Shepherd whined at his master.

"Oh, Bones, I'm getting old," Arliss said. "I just forgot 'em. We left the house in such a hurry."

Bones nuzzled Arliss and began licking his cheek.

"But I had you with me, right?" Arliss rubbed his dog's head.

When the strength had come back to his legs, Arliss stood, and he and Bones made their slow, careful way back to the house by flashlight.

-18-

On Sunday, Sam woke a full hour before his mother and dressed for church. He had decided yesterday evening, after the pain of Zeke's punch had faded, that he and Mal would accept Moe's invitation to church. They usually attended Shady Grove Baptist with Rebecca; but, after yesterday's unpleasantness, Sam felt no desire to go to church with his mother. He had told her so later Saturday night.

"I don't think Mal and I will be going with you to church tomorrow, Mom," he had said.

"And why not?" she had answered in a tone as sharp as kitchen knives.

But Sam had not replied, nor had he said where they would be attending.

Rebecca had fumed a while and asked him again several times. Finally, she had given in to his silence.

Once he had bathed and slipped into his good jeans and long-sleeve shirt, Sam shook Mal awake. The bleary-eyed little boy got up and shuffled into the bathroom. Sam helped him bathe, and once he was dressed, the two headed off in the pick-up for New Hope Baptist Church.

The white matchbox building stood solidly against the blue morning sky, its steeple the tallest feature of the flat landscape. An expansive orange tent had been set up in the grass nearby, beneath the shade of a modest oak tree. A dozen long tables crowded with chairs waited under the canvas. Churchgoers had parked their cars at crooked angles on the church's front lawn.

When Sam and Mal arrived, a few last people were trickling into the church. They were dressed in bright, vibrant colors—reds, blues, and yellows—their skin dark. Sam was suddenly nervous, as when he had entered the barbershop two days ago.

Sam held Mal's hand. At the church door, an usher's smile faltered when he saw the pair coming up the steps. Sam noticed this, and he felt something give inside him, groaning as an old rotten board underfoot. He wanted to turn around and go home. Then the usher's smile reappeared, twice its previous size.

"Good morning, young sirs," he said, quite friendly. "Welcome to New Hope."

"Thank you," Sam said self-consciously, taking a program and stepping inside.

Sam could hear the church's air-conditioner laboring against both the summer heat and the sheer number of warm bodies in the building. The pews were packed full. He and Mal found a space on the back row, squeezing in on the end. Stained-glass windows filtered sunlight into the crowded sanctuary. Ceiling fans swirled overhead. As he gazed across the room, Sam noticed a few black women flapping paper fans emblazoned with the profile of a white, blond, blue-eyed Jesus. He saw a host of foreign faces. A handful of these were staring at him—some with curiosity, others with what he imagined was contempt. Suddenly he felt a strong, warm hand on his shoulder.

"I didn't know if you fellas would make it," Moe said. He looked different in a charcoal suit and blue tie. He looked more like a preacher than a grandfather.

"I'm still not sure we have," Sam replied with an uncertain grin.

"You have, no doubt about that. And I'm glad."

"Thank you."

Organ music bloomed in the air.

"I'd better be getting up there," Moe said, straightening his tie. "We'll talk after the service, okay?"

Sam nodded. Moe made his way to the front.

As Moe took his seat on a wooden bench behind the pulpit, the congregation quieted, and the choir shuffled into the sanctuary. The music director—a balding man with a thick beard—stepped before the group, his back to the congregation. With a flourish of his arms, he commenced the worship service.

Mal's favorite part of the service that day was the singing. When the choir sang, the boy sat with alert eyes and ears. When the congregation stood to sing, Mal insisted he be allowed to hold his own hymnal. He clutched it in his small hands and warbled out nonsense lyrics. Twice, an older couple in front of Mal and Sam turned and cast disapproving glances at the boy. On both occasions, Sam placed a protective arm around his brother's shoulders. *He's making a joyful noise*, Sam thought.

The singing continued much longer than the singing at Sam's church, but he barely noticed. At Shady Grove, Sam never sang out. He never felt moved to. Mal always out did him, as Mal out did everybody at Shady Grove. The dead congregation rarely opened their mouths. They were dead. When Moe's church sang, however, it sang loudly and well. The choir's faces were aglow with spirit, and the congregation's arms were lifted in praise. Sam sang out with the rest and allowed the prayerful melodies and upbeat spirituals to lift him up.

Almost an hour later, when Moe stepped to the pulpit, he seemed taller. His shoulders seemed wider, his hands broader. He carried himself powerfully, standing before his congregation with the dignity of Moses on Mount Sinai, about to hand down

the Ten Commandments to the Israelites. He carefully placed his black leather Bible on the podium and opened it to a marked passage. He kept his eyes on the book, moving them slowly over the text. Abruptly, they closed. The preacher tilted his head forward and remained so for a handful of seconds. When his eyes flashed open, they fixed on the crowd, filled with a presence not his own.

“The Lord our God,” Moe boomed, “Commands us to love one another.”

“Amen,” came a voice from the crowd.

“And we can only love one another, because God loves us.”

“That’s right,” someone called out.

“Listen as I read verses seven and eight of the fourth chapter of John. ‘Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.’” Moe looked up from the Bible and pierced the congregation with a stare. “‘For God is love,’” he repeated.

“Now, following up to that, you got verses twenty and twenty-one. Hear this, friends. ‘If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar, for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.’ The Lord our God commands us to love one another.”

Moe’s words echoed in the church. Silence was heavy.

“One thing I want you to hear today is that God loves you. And if we fully understand that, and if we love God in return, we’re going to love others as He does. Christians should love each other not out of any sense of obligation to God, but because

of the spontaneous overflow of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God loves us. We love others because God is in us. You can't have one without the other, you see.

“But don't make this mistake. Don't think God's love for us and our love for others are anything alike. Because they're not. You can spit on God, curse God, and He still loves you. His love isn't anything like our love. And do you know what? I'm glad. Because if His love were like our love, we'd be in trouble. Our love is polluted, imperfect. Conditional.”

As Moe spoke, his voice steadily rose in pitch and volume. His words climbed faster and faster, spurred on by the momentum of his spirit. “Loving one another isn't easy for us humans. We're fickle, shifty. We can love someone today, hate him tomorrow. Or maybe we never did love him. Because his skin's a different color. Because his language is different. His blood, his words, they don't suit us. Look at what man's fickle love did to Jesus Christ. Man was in awe of him one day, watching him work miracles, praising him as he healed people with his hands. The next day, those hands were nailed with spikes to a beam of wood, as our Lord and Savior was hoisted up between two thieves to bleed out and die. You see, man changes. He changes loyalties, he changes love. But praise the Lord, my brothers and sisters, God NEVER CHANGES!”

Moe paused, gripping the pulpit.

“And if we aren't anchored to His foundation, the winds that blow can blow us away. Who is it in this room today who's going find out next week that she has cancer? Who is it, next week, that will have a relative or a loved one killed? It could be any of us. And it will be each one of us. Someday. Are you prepared for that? Are you loving God

as you should? Are you loving others as you should? Life is too short to go through it filled with anger, bitterness. Hatred of your fellow man. Life is too short, and eternity is too long, my friends. God wants to live in us so that we might live better. John chapter 3, verse twenty-four, tells us, 'He that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him.' Dwell in him. Dwell in God's love."

Curtis Burns delivered a solemn benediction, and the service was dismissed. Sam and Mal waited for the crowd to thin. When a little more than half the congregation had squeezed out, the brothers joined the exodus. Moe stood in the grass at the foot of the steps, shaking hands. When Sam and Mal reached the preacher, Mal would not shake Moe's hand. He hid behind Sam's leg, casting wide and wary eyes up at the old man.

"Looks like I scared him," Moe said, taking Sam's hand but regarding Mal.

"He just saw a different side of you. Like me."

"I hope that's good."

"You're an amazing preacher, sir. I hope you'll understand if I call you 'Reverend' instead of 'Moe.'"

Moe laughed, clapping Sam on the back. "Don't make too much of it, now, hear?" He gestured toward the tent where a line of people was already forming. "Are you and your brother staying for dinner?"

"Well..."

"Come on and stay. It's potluck, and we've got some good cooks in this church. Louise and Julie are over there serving. They'll fix you boys right up."

"We would, but..."

"Mal, do you like hot dogs? We've got hot dogs with mustard."

Mal peeped out from behind his brother's leg, fingers hooked in Sam's belt loops. He looked from Moe to the tent then back to Sam, gazing up at him expectantly.

Sam sighed. "What do you say, big guy? Go or stay?"

"Stay!" Mal answered immediately. "Hot dogs! Hot dogs! Hot dogs!"

"He loves hot dogs," Sam said in a what-can-I-do-about-it tone. He and Mal walked over and joined the food line. They waited, the hot sun bearing down on them. As sweat oozed from his scalp and slid down his face, Sam grew more and more uncomfortable. He knew people were staring at them, and he began to imagine what they were thinking.

Who are those white boys?

Why did they come here?

Do they know the preacher?

That's not Bob Little's son, is it?

It took an agonizing ten minutes to reach the serving table inside the tent. Sam picked up a paper plate for Mal; he had no intentions of eating something himself. He wanted the child to have his hot dogs and be satisfied so that they could leave. A row of middle-to-older aged women stood behind the table in their Sunday best with tongs, serving knives, and spoons, ladling portions of steaming food onto people's plates. Sam scanned the many casserole dishes and Tupperware containers for plain hot dogs, finally spotting them near the end of the table. By the time the boys reached them, Mal's plate had accumulated a helping of green beans and macaroni and cheese.

"How many?" asked the server.

Sam looked at Mal. The boy held up five fingers. "One," Sam answered.

The last station at the table belonged to Louise and Julie. They were providing beverages—tea and lemonade. Julie shoveled ice into plastic cups from a nearby ice chest and passed them off to Louise, who poured them full and placed them on the table where passersby could pick one up. Louise spied Sam and his brother and beamed at them.

“Praise the Lord, you came. Julie! Julie, look who’s here!”

Julie paused in the process of scooping ice into a cup. When she saw Sam and Mal, she let the ice chest’s lid drop shut and walked over to the table. She absently wiped the water from her hand on her blue dress. Sam realized that she was by far the youngest server, as well as the prettiest. But behind the table did not suit her. She seemed out of place among the mothers and grandmothers and their containers of pinto beans, fried chicken, and squash casserole.

“We didn’t think you boys would make it, did we, Julie?” Louise fluttered her fingers at Mal, who returned the gesture, a sunny grin on his face.

“Do you want tea or lemonade?” Julie asked.

“Which one, Mal?”

Mal stabbed a finger at a cup of tea. Julie glanced at Sam, who nodded and placed the cup in Mal’s outstretched hands. He squeezed the drink too hard, and tea gushed over the rim and ran down the side. Mal giggled.

“Thanks, Julie,” Sam said.

“You boys enjoy your lunch,” Louise said.

and left Sam and Mal moved away from the table. Sam looked around the tent. There were any number of empty seats, as half the space had yet to be filled. "Where do you want to sit, big guy?"

Mal gazed about. With the exception of his eyes, ticking like a minute hand, his face was as still as a clock's. Yet behind the boy's bland expression, Sam knew the gears and mechanisms of his simple mind were turning. Suddenly the clock struck, and Mal's face lit up. He thrust a finger at the oak tree outside the tent and cried, "Squirrel!"

Sam was confused. He looked to where his brother was pointing and saw a gray squirrel perched on one of the tree's lower limbs. It sat with its tail curled parasol-like over its head, tiny bright eyes watching the crowd. "That's great, buddy, but where do you want to sit?"

"Squirrel," Mal said quite logically, handing Sam his tea.

"What?" It suddenly dawned on Sam what his little brother wanted. "No, no. We're not sitting out there. Let's just..." But it was too late. The boy was moving, and Sam had to go after him. He wound his way through the mass of churchgoers, feeling horribly conspicuous. Ahead, Mal darted between the legs of an elderly man. It happened before the old man knew it, and he whirled in time to see the little boy dash out of the tent. Sam almost collided with the man himself, side-stepping at the last minute and bumping into a woman. Cold tea sloshed onto Sam's hand.

"I'm sorry," Sam mumbled. "Excuse me."

He emerged into the sunlight. Mal stood beneath the oak, gazing up at the squirrel. Sam, more embarrassed than he ever remembered being, sat down on the grass

and leaned back against the tree. The serving line had moved into the tent now.

Everyone was either inside eating or inside being served.

“Come on,” Sam said. “You can look at the squirrel while you eat.”

Mal plopped down beside his big brother, took his plate in his lap, and picked up his hot dog. He took an enormous bite and grinned at Sam through a mouthful of bread and meat. A dab of mustard hung from the tip of his nose. Unable to help himself, Sam laughed.

Julie had seen Mal’s flight outside, and she had watched Sam as he followed him out and sat with him under the tree. She noticed that Sam did not have a plate or a drink for himself, and she mentioned this to her grandmother.

“What?” Louise exclaimed. “I never even noticed. Well, he needs to eat. You can fix him one and take it to him.”

“What would he want?”

“Young fellas like Sam, it doesn’t much matter. He’ll eat whatever you bring him. Why don’t you fix your plate too and go out and eat with him? Poor dear looks embarrassed.”

“He does look a bit...” Julie searched for the word. “Vulnerable.”

Sam never saw Julie coming. He was tugging Mal’s shirt sleeve, trying to turn the boy’s attention from the squirrel to his half-eaten hot dog.

“Hey,” she said from behind.

He turned, startled. Julie stood smiling down at him, a plastic cup in each hand, a food-filled paper plate balanced on each cup. “Thought you might be hungry. Mind if I eat with you?”

"Am I eating?" Sam asked through a spreading grin.

"You are now." Julie handed him his plate and sat down on the grass beside him. Her blue dress ballooned around her. She could have been a rare flower growing in the shade of the tree. "Tea or lemonade?"

"Tea, I guess," Sam said, taking the offered cup.

A scattering of faces under the tent regarded the three youths skeptically.

"How did you know I like fried chicken?" Sam asked, picking up a drumstick.

"I figured all you southern boys like fried chicken. Isn't it the cornerstone of all home cooking?"

"Pretty much." Sam laughed.

"I'm not used to all this home-cooked food. At school, we either ate out or stuck something in the microwave. And at home my parents never have time to cook. So far, the regular meals have been the best thing about southern life." She took a bite of her own drumstick.

"Your grandpa is an amazing preacher," Sam said.

"Everything about him is amazing."

"How long are you staying?"

"I'm not really sure. Until I hear from my parents. They're out of the country on family business."

"Out of the *country*?"

"My mom is originally from South Vietnam, and on the day of my graduation, she found out her mother had passed away. So Mom and Dad flew over there."

"I'm sorry."

“I really didn’t know my mother’s mother that well. I don’t remember ever seeing her. But she and Mom were pretty close.”

“And that’s why you’re here? So you won’t be home alone?”

“Mostly. I think my grandmother’s death got me to thinking about things. If you can spend time with your family, you should. Every day is a gift.”

“You’re right.”

Suddenly Mal burped.

“Mal!” Sam scolded. “Manners!”

Julie laughed. “Hey, there’s more room out than in, huh, Mal?”

The little boy looked solemnly at her.

“Top this,” Julie said. She took a long swig of lemonade followed by several short, fast breaths. Then she opened her mouth, and a horrendous belch erupted from deep in her throat.

Mal clapped his hands and laughed with delight.

Sam gaped at her.

“What?” she asked through her own laughter, covering her mouth with her hand.

“More out than in,” Mal interjected.

Then Sam joined in the laughter, and the three of them sat laughing in the shade of the oak. For once, Sam forgot about the stares of the church members; although, now, there were quite a few more.

As Sam and Julie ate their lunches, talking of inconsequential things, Mal crumbled up a bit of hot dog bun and set it at the base of the tree for the squirrel, which was still perched on the tree’s lowermost branch, watching the people from beneath the

fuzzy umbrella of its tail. The creature's dark, wet eyes never left the little boy as he stepped away from the bread crumbs and sat back down in the grass. Mal watched the squirrel, and it watched him, but it did not move from the crook of the branch. At last, Mal grew impatient with the animal, and he gathered a handful of tiny pebbles to throw at it. When he drew back the first stone, the squirrel bolted. It scampered up the trunk and disappeared behind the summer-green leaves. Mal dropped the pebbles.

Gradually, the churchgoers began to leave. The hostess-committee women went from table to table collecting paper plates and cups and tossing them into black garbage bags. A circle of deacons stood outside the tent, talking and smoking. Moe stood with them, shirt-sleeves rolled up and suit-jacket slung over his shoulder.

Sam and Mal helped clean up. They carried metal folding chairs and stacked them in the basement of the church. Sam assisted some of the men in taking down the tables and stacking them on Curtis Burns' pick-up truck. Apparently, they were on loan from the funeral home. By the time all this had been accomplished, the heat had taken its toll. Few words were exchanged between the workers; they could not spare the breath. As Sam tucked in the metal legs of the last table, he heard someone say, "Julie, honey, empty that ice chest, will you?"

Four women, including Julie, stood at the far end of the tent. They were emptying and stacking Tupperware containers that had not been claimed. Julie's hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat. She opened and tilted the ice chest she had been filling cups from earlier. A great deal more water than ice poured onto the ground. Sighing, she closed the chest. Almost as an afterthought, she bent and picked up a piece of ice.

Closing her eyes, she rubbed the ice across her forehead and cheeks, then down her neck.

The melting ice left glistening veins of water on her smooth skin.

Sam knew that he was staring, but he was helpless to look away.

Then she opened her eyes and looked right at him.

He immediately ducked his head, feeling his face flood red. He fumbled the table leg down, secured it, and hauled the table outside. Moe helped him load it onto Curtis Burns' truck.

"Thanks for your help, Sam," Moe said, closing the tailgate. "It really means something that you stayed. I wish I had church members half as dedicated as you."

"No problem, Reverend," Sam replied. "Have you seen my brother by any chance?" Sam had not seen Mal since they had hauled the last of the folding chairs down into the basement.

"I think I saw him with Louise, heading over to the house not too long ago." Moe squinted at his nearby house in the afternoon sun. "Yeah, here they come now." He pointed.

Sam saw Mal and Louise approaching, strolling along hand in hand. Mal carried a red plastic cup. Every few steps he would tilt it up and drink from it. When the two distant figures saw Sam and Moe watching them, they waved.

"Little angel wanted to know if I still had any ice cream from the other night," Louise said when they arrived at the truck.

"You tell Mrs. Johnson 'thank you'?" Sam asked, touching his brother's cheek affectionately.

"Oh, of course he did, God bless him." Louise jerked a thumb at her husband.

"And did *he* tell *you* 'thank you' for all your help today?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You were sure appreciated. We need more members like you."

"That's what I said," Moe commented.

Sam fished his keys out of his pocket. "You ready to go home, big guy?"

Without a word, Mal ran for Sam's Ford, which was parked near the road. This morning, cars had cluttered the church's front lawn. Now, the grassy lot was almost empty.

Sam shook Moe's hand. "I'll be seeing you, Reverend."

"Keep in touch, son."

"Goodbye, ma'am."

"God bless, Sam." Louise squeezed his hand.

Sam was halfway to his truck when he heard someone call his name. He stopped and turned. Julie was trotting bare-footed across the grass.

"You're leaving?" she said when she reached him.

"We were on our way."

"Will I see you again?"

The question struck Sam as the cold wind had struck his bare chest on the night of the storm. It shocked him. A girl had never asked him such a thing before. He struggled for words but came up wanting.

"After all, you're the only person in town that I know."

Sam suddenly knew what to say. Just as the cold wind had first shocked him then invigorated him, so did her words. "What are you doing tomorrow night?" he asked.

"Not much of anything. Why?"

"When I said the other night that I didn't have time for much fun myself, I wasn't telling the whole truth. There is this one thing I like to do sometimes at night, if the weather's right."

"Oh, really?" Julie cocked an eyebrow. "Is it legal?"

Sam smiled. "Yeah. But it's not something I can tell you about. You just have to experience it yourself."

"Doesn't sound legal. How intriguing."

"Tomorrow's supposed to be a good night for it. Would you like to come along?"

"How could I possibly not? You've got me hooked."

"Good. Pick you up at eight?"

"Pick me up in your pick-up?" Julie smiled.

"Huh? Oh, right." He laughed, his face flushing. "I should get home. I'll see you tomorrow."

"At eight." Julie waved at Mal, who sat in the cab of the truck.

Mal waved back, barely visible behind the dashboard. Sam got in his truck, started it up, and drove away. He gave a final wave to Julie as he pulled onto the highway. She watched him go, a sunny smile on her lovely face.

Nearby, Moe and Louise stood side by side, taking in the scene. Moe placed an arm around his wife's waist and whispered in her ear, "Did you see that?"

"Mmm-hmm," Louise responded wistfully, laying her head on Moe's shoulder.

“What was that?” Moe’s voice was tinged with concern.

Louise raised her head and flashed her husband a wry grin. “You mean you don’t remember?”

Slowly, Moe nodded. “That’s what I thought it was.”

Excerpt from Julie Johnson's Journal

Dated Sunday, June 9th

Have to write this down. All a mess in my mind.

If I had let Sam get in his truck and drive away, if I hadn't cornered him, he would have never asked me out. Does that mean I wanted him to ask me?

What's he feeling right now? White Southern male in a small Southern town about to be seen socially with a black female.

He's nice. Quiet and polite. There's something beneath his calm exterior all but bursting at the seams, something bottled up inside him. I saw it in his eyes today, the way he kept casting glances at the people staring at us while we ate. He's afraid of something, and there's more to it than a white guy feeling out of place at a black church. His past? I don't know.

I saw him noticing me with the ice chest. I felt his eyes before I even opened mine. Nothing strange about it, nothing unsettling. Yesterday, the boys at the car wash eyeing me as I rode past, *that* was unsettling. There's a difference between eyeing and noticing. Sam was noticing. A person's eyes don't crawl over your body so much as they brush it, lingering lightly. It felt...nice.

Nice.

How? Annie thought.

She sat on the toilet in the darkness of the bathroom. The tile-patterned linoleum was cool against her bare feet. Her shorts and underwear were bunched around her ankles. She cradled her belly as another shard of pain sliced through it. Squinting her eyes shut and biting her lower lip, Annie prayed silently, *Oh please God, make it stop, please.* After a moment, it did, and she began to cry again.

How did this happen? As the fresh tears fell, she dabbed them away with a wad of toilet paper. Her cheeks were red and raw from the wiping and the crying.

Around 4:45, Annie began preparing dinner for Zeke—spaghetti and meatballs. She set the meal on the table at 5:15. Zeke should have been home by five, but he was not. When an hour of chewing her fingernails had passed, she called Zeke's supervisor at the highway department, Doug Owens. According to Mr. Owens, Zeke had left work with Buddy Brighton at 4:30. No one knew where the two friends had gone.

Zeke still had not come home when Sam telephoned at seven o'clock. Sam wanted to know if Annie could keep Mal the next night for a couple of hours. He had a date. She was excited. She laughed and teased him. When she asked who it was, he said, "No one you'd know. Just a girl I met who's gonna be in town a few days." She said, "Of course, I'll keep him." Since school was out for the summer, Rebecca was working evenings to keep Mal during the day, and Bob would be tired from his first day on his new job. Also, Sam was not entirely certain Mal and Bob were comfortable enough with one another yet to spend time alone together. Annie understood that, and

she was more than happy to baby-sit her nephew-in-law. Before she hung up, she asked Sam if he had seen Zeke. He had not.

Mal.

Children.

John Robert if it's a boy, Amanda Rebecca if it's a girl.

When Zeke finally arrived home, it was ten after eight. Annie was dozing in the recliner, legs curled beneath her, a V.C. Andrews paperback spread face down on her thigh. The rattle of keys in the door jarred her awake, and she glanced at the wall clock.

The door flew open. Zeke rushed inside and down the hall, toward their bedroom. She barely had time to put her feet on the floor before he disappeared. A smell lingered after he was gone, a sour mixture of beer and something else. Something she had never smelled on him before. Something wild and animal.

She found him in the bathroom, washing dried blood from his forearms. Annie gasped at the sight of him. In addition to the red spatters on his arms, there were dark crimson splotches on his jeans and T-shirt. A once-white bar of Ivory was now pink between his hands, and he scrubbed it furiously up and down his arms. The blood came off in red rivers, flowing into the dull yellow sink basin.

"Zeke? Are you hurt? Zeke?" Her voice was panicked. At first, she thought the blood was his. It covered his boots and clothes. There was a maddeningly delicate, round drop beneath his left eye—like a beauty mark.

"It's not mine," he muttered, scrubbing. The blood was mostly gone from his arms, which were beginning to turn pink as he continued rubbing and dousing them under the steaming hot water.

“What?” She moved toward him, reaching out.

He shoved her away. She stumbled backward and almost fell.

“Baby, what do you mean?” There were tears in her eyes.

“I mean it’s not my blood.” He shut off the water and snatched a hand-towel from a shelf above the toilet.

“B-but, if it’s not yours, then...w-whose is it?”

“Nobody’s,” he mumbled, drying his hands.

Suddenly, Annie noticed his skinning knife attached to his belt. The leather sheath was crusted with dried blood. “What did you do?” she whispered, staring at him with dawning horror.

“*What did you say?*” Rage flared in his eyes. He began twisting the hand towel into a tight rope.

“*I said what did you do?*” she yelled, tears streaking her face.

He came at her, swinging the towel. She tottered, bumped into the half-open bathroom door, turned, and ran. She felt the tip of the towel whip down her back as she dashed into the hall. Close behind her came the heavy, muffled thud of Zeke’s boots on the hallway carpet.

“COME HERE!” he roared.

Annie did not know where she was running. She only knew she could not let herself be caught. She risked a glance over her shoulder, gasped as Zeke snatched at her shirt, and ran straight into the kitchen table. She bounced off a chair and went spinning onto the floor, sliding up against the refrigerator door on her backside.

The tightly wound towel struck her across the cheek. Annie cried out.

Zeke loomed over her, stretching the towel between his strong hands.

Annie cupped her cheek and sobbed.

“Shut up.”

She could not.

He whipped the towel across her other cheek, snapping her head round.

“Shut up.”

She stifled her sobs, cowering on the floor before her blood-stained husband.

“Now, you listen to me. Don’t you ever question me like that again, do you understand? What I do is my business, you got that?”

Annie bit her lip, wrapping her arms around her knees.

“You hear me, Annie?”

Now, sitting on the toilet, seized by another terrible cramp, listening to him snore in the bedroom next door, Annie wondered why she did not simply say, “Yes, I hear you,” or “Yes, I’ll never question you again.” Perhaps if she had, things would have been different. Perhaps if she had, she would not be sitting here now, enduring the worst pain she had ever felt in her life.

“B-bastard,” she stammered, rubbing the reddening welts on her cheeks.

The towel dropped to the floor. Zeke’s facial expression never changed. There might have been some transformation in his eyes, some malevolent flicker, but Annie did not remember it. What she did remember was being hauled to her feet by the throat, his hand clamped vice-like about her neck. He held her against the refrigerator with one arm and drew back the other, balling his fist. The blow struck her hard on her cheekbone, just beneath her left eye. Brilliant pain-blossoms bloomed before her, and she slumped to the

floor. As she lay curled on her side, blackness seeped into the edges of her vision. Zeke spent the rest of his anger in a savage, unthinking, booted kick to her stomach.

Annie thought it might almost be over. The pain had subsided now.

When she woke up twenty minutes later, there was something warm and wet running down her leg. Annie crawled from the kitchen to the bathroom, too weak to stand. Through the bedroom door, she saw that Zeke had collapsed on the bed. His discarded, bloody clothes lay in a heap on the floor.

There were no tears left inside her. She had cried until her insides felt sprung, and she supposed they were. She could feel the last of her baby, now, warm and slick against her skin, sliding into the toilet. Annie flushed, and in the midst of the commode's swirling gurgle, she heard Zeke snort and moan in his sleep.

-20-

On Sunday nights, Arliss James drove twenty miles to the Interstate Truck Stop and treated himself to steak and eggs. He always sat in the same red vinyl booth in the rear of the restaurant. He smoked Camels and eyed the customers while waiting on his order. Sometimes, when he had a quarter to spare, he would drop it in the restaurant's old jukebox and select a soulful tune by Muddy Waters or Pinetop Perkins. When his steak and eggs arrived, courtesy of a pudgy waitress named Chloe, he would grind his cigarette butt in the ashtray and tuck his paper napkin into the neck of his shirt. It was always the same routine, every Sunday night. When he finished eating, he withdrew a crinkled paper sack from his pocket and placed the steak's bone in it for Bones. Then he smoked one last cigarette at the table, paid his ticket, and left.

On the Sunday night Annie Little lost her baby, Arliss James returned home from the Interstate Truck Stop at 8:45. As Annie was crawling on her hands and knees toward the bathroom, Arliss was pulling into his driveway in his rattletrap pick-up. Corn stalks gleamed in the glare of his headlights. The house was a dark shape at the end of the long drive. The sun had almost entirely disappeared. The sky was a deep blue trimmed with lingering ribbons of gold and pink.

As he neared the house, Arliss found it odd that Bones did not run out to greet him. Usually, whenever Arliss returned home on Sundays, the dog ran circles around the truck, barking excitedly. With tail-wagging enthusiasm, Bones had come to expect his weekend T-bone treat. Arliss first thought he might be out in the fields, chasing rabbits

or birds. Then he saw him on the porch, asleep on his side at the top of the steps. Arliss shrugged. The brakes of his old pick-up squealed shrilly as he came to a stop in front of the house. He cut the engine and headlights, got out, and slammed the door.

“Hey, fella!” Arliss whistled and patted his legs.

Bones still lay unmoving.

“Got your dinner!” He pulled the sack from his back pocket and withdrew the T-bone. “You want it, boy?”

Bones did not stir.

“Boy?” Arliss knelt on the uppermost step and ran his hand along the dog’s torso. He encountered something wet, and he pulled his hand away slick. In the now complete darkness, he could not make out the substance on his palm and fingers, but he knew what it felt like. It was syrupy, sticky. Arliss dropped the T-bone and ran back to his truck. He had no porch light, so he opened the driver’s door and yanked on his headlights. What he saw in the sudden bright glare dropped him to his knees beside the truck.

Bones lay dead on the porch, covered in his own blood. His throat had been slit. His fur was matted and shiny. An almost-black lake of the fluid had gathered beneath the German shepherd and spread across the dusty planks of the floor. Some of it had dripped off the edges of the porch. Some of it had run down the steps and dried in crimson tributaries on the concrete. Across the front of the house, scrawled with Bones’s blood, in ragged letters, was a single word: NIGGER.

In the harsh beams of his truck’s headlights, Arliss filled his lungs with air and let out a long, hoarse cry. It carried over the vast, lonely cornfield; and, as it died away, the first of the night stars came out.

-21-

At ten after midnight, Bob Little woke from a nightmare. His eyes snapped open to the black of the bedroom. His breath came in ragged hitches. Sweat soaked the sheet and pillowcase beneath him. At first, he thought he was in his cell. Then, as his mind cleared and the dream's unpleasant aftereffects dissipated, he remembered that he was home.

Home. With his family.

Rebecca and Sam.

And Zeke.

No, not Zeke. He had his own place now.

In his dream, it had been raining, like that night. Drumming rain. Then the sudden sounds of breaking glass and crunching metal. A horrible, high-pitched scream. Sam's ten-year-old face, turned up uncomprehendingly from the passenger's seat.

Bob shuddered.

Rebecca rolled over in her sleep.

He closed his eyes. *I'm home*, he thought. *Home*. Not long after thinking this, he drifted back to sleep.

PART TWO

SAMSON GOES DOWN TO TIMNAH....

Samson went down to Timnah, and saw there a young Philistine woman.

When he returned, he said to his father and his mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife."

His father and mother replied, "Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines for a wife?"

But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me. She's the right one for me."

--Judges 14: 1-3

-1-

In the summer, Mondays were the busiest day of the week at Homer's Garage. A constant stream of cars and customers flowed in and out of the shop. Sometimes the stream surged; sometimes it trickled. Either way, one of the garage's two stalls was always occupied. Sam and Homer worked ceaselessly, breaking only for lunch. They survived the summer Mondays by draping wet rags around their necks and turning up the radio, which was ever tuned to KLAZ—the oldies station. They changed oil and serviced transmissions to the beats of Marvin Gaye, the Four Tops, the Temptations, Aretha Franklin, Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, the Four Seasons, Credence Clearwater Revival, Neil Diamond, and more. The music always kept the atmosphere in the garage light, despite the heavy workload.

On the Monday following Sam's attendance at New Hope Baptist Church, Homer noticed that the boy seemed detached. He saw a difference in the way Sam approached his work—distractedly, paying no attention to details. The boy had been moving sluggishly since his arrival at eight that morning, but Homer had said nothing. Everyone got off to a slow start now and then. At first Homer tried to ignore Sam's stupor, mistakenly thinking it would pass.

Before descending into the grease pit to perform his first lube job that morning, the mechanic flicked on his radio and twisted its volume knob to maximum. While greasing the undercarriage of John Hall's Cadillac, he tapped his foot and sang along under his breath with Buddy Holly about "Peggy Sue." By the time Homer finished the

lube job, Aretha Franklin was demanding “Respect.” He emerged from the pit in time to see Sam slam the hood of the elementary-school librarian’s brown Toyota. A tow-truck had brought in Lester Martin’s car half an hour ago. The flustered, fidgety librarian was on his way to a lunch with friends in Forrest City when “the infernal contraption went kaput” on him. Homer did not particularly like Lester Martin. He was a podgy feminine man with round spectacles and beady eyes, and he often used big, incomprehensible words. Homer, who had dropped out of school in the eighth grade, had no use for such men—if they could be called men. For all their big words, such men were often completely ignorant about fixing a flat tire or cleaning a carburetor.

“You get Mr. Martin’s new battery installed?” Homer called over the music.

Sam nodded, sliding behind the Toyota’s steering wheel. He turned the key, and nothing happened. Not a sound. He looked blankly at Homer.

“What is it?”

“Don’t know. It won’t start.”

“Pop the hood.” After Sam had done so, Homer raised it and peered into the car’s innards. He inspected the battery and found that the cables had not been connected. Sam had simply placed the battery into the car and thought his task finished. Frowning, Homer motioned at his protégé to come and see. “You want to explain this one?”

Sam said nothing, only shook his head, red with embarrassment.

“In six years, this is the first time you’ve ever done this. Everything okay?”

Sam was touched by the concern in Homer’s voice. Homer could tell it in the boy’s eyes. But he did not open himself up at that point. It was later, around 10:30, as the Four Seasons were squealing out “Big Girls Don’t Cry,” that Sam finally said what

was on his mind. Homer was patching a tire when he heard a loud metallic crash. He whirled and saw Sam standing over the scattered contents of a toolbox. The boy had been fetching it from a top shelf and had dropped it. Crescent wrenches, screwdrivers and odd-sized nuts and bolts had flown everywhere when the metal chest hit the concrete floor. Sam knelt by the mess and began scooping it up.

“You okay?” Homer asked.

“Fine. I guess I’ve got sticky fingers today.”

“Then come over here and stick this patch on this tire.”

“Ha-ha.”

A moment’s quiet—as much quiet as one expects in a garage—passed between the two. Homer affixed the patch to the hole in the tire, and Sam cleaned up his spill. As he closed the toolbox and slid it carefully back onto the shelf overhead, Sam said, “Homer, do you remember your first date?”

Homer cocked his head. “I remember my first divorce,” he replied after a minute, rolling the tire up against the wall.

“Was that your first wife?”

“As far as I know, kid.”

“How did you meet her?”

“I was at a casino in Vicksburg, Mississippi. She loaned me five bucks for the slot machines. It was love at first jackpot.”

“Were you nervous?”

"I was too drunk to be nervous. Hell, with a little help from Jack Daniels, I was plumb-damn courageous." He grinned a snaggle-toothed grin. "What's this all about, son? You got a girl?"

"A date. Tonight."

"And this is your first? You're twenty-two, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, be yourself. She's bound to like that. If she don't, what does she know, right?"

Sam smiled.

"So?" Homer raised his eyebrows.

"So, what?"

"So, you gonna tell me who it is, or do I have to beat it out of you with a tire-iron?"

"Oh, it's no one you know."

"No one I know? Boy, I've serviced near about every man and woman's car in this here town, so don't be tellin' me I won't know who it is. Now, who is she?"

"She's not from here."

"An out-of-towner, huh? She got a name?"

"Of course. Her name's Julie."

"Julie...?"

Sam sighed. It was no use. Homer would never relent. "Johnson. Julie Johnson."

The older mechanic's eyes grew large behind their Coke-bottle lenses. "You mean Julie Johnson, the Reverend Johnson's granddaughter? The one he needed the brakes on his car fixed for?"

"That's her."

"The *black* Reverend Johnson?"

"There's only one."

Homer whistled appreciatively. "I'll give you this, boy, you got guts. But have you thought about how you may be playin' with fire? What with your brother and your pop?"

"It's all I've been able to think about today."

"Well, I ain't got nothin' against blacks and whites mixin', you know that. But there's lots of folks round here that do."

"I know."

"You be careful, kid."

"I will."

"I hope she's worth it."

"I don't know, but I have a feeling she is."

Outside, a gray Oldsmobile turned off the highway and sidled up to the garage. Homer squinted through the sun-glare on the vehicle's windshield and saw Reverend Moe Johnson sitting behind the wheel. Homer thought, *Speak of the...* and stopped. He considered how he would have finished that thought and chuckled.

Sam watched Moe get out of the car and approach, also struck by the Reverend's uncanny timing. The old preacher lifted a hand in greeting. He wore his white barber's shirt, so Sam assumed he had come from work.

"Hello, Reverend," greeted Homer. "How's them new brakes workin' out for you?"

"Oh, fine, just fine. Good morning, Sam."

"Morning, sir."

"What can we do for you, Reverend?"

"I was hoping I might have a word with Sam, if you can spare him for a minute?"

Sam's eyebrows lifted. He wondered if this had to do with Julie and tonight.

"Sure, sure," Homer said, clapping his young coworker on the back. "He's a hard worker, a good kid. Real trustworthy, you know? I'd trust my own daughter with him, if I had one. Yeah, I reckon I could give him a minute." He winked at Sam.

Sam was red with embarrassment, but he knew from the uncomprehending look on Moe's face that the old preacher was not here to talk about Julie. The two of them walked outside into the warm sunlight. Homer lingered in the garage, tossing empty oil jugs into a rubber trashcan.

"What is it, Reverend?"

"Sam, Arliss James called me late last night, around one in the morning. Said someone had killed his dog and left it on his porch for him to find."

"What?"

“Now, he sounded like he’d been drinking, so I don’t know. But he said someone cut the dog’s throat and wrote a one-word message in its blood on the front of his house. It said, ‘Nigger.’”

Sam shook his head. “That’s awful. But I don’t understand. What does this have to do with me?”

“Arliss ran your brother and his friend out of his corn field the other night, and he says he heard Zeke threaten the dog. He thinks Zeke and that Buddy Brighton fellow did it.”

Sam’s stomach churned.

“Arliss told me he was going to the police this morning.”

“This happened last night?” Sam’s words were distant echoes in the cavern of his head.

“Yes.” Moe gazed down the long, straight highway that led out of Midland. Abruptly he returned his eyes to Sam. “This is *bad*, Sam. Even if Zeke didn’t do it, it’s bound to stir up trouble between whites and blacks. I’m telling you this because I know Zeke is your brother, and you love him, regardless of what he’s done. As far as the police are concerned, I don’t think anything will come of this with Arliss’s dog. There’s no real evidence.” He sighed and shook his head. “And that’s bound to stir things up even more. I just thought you should know this.”

Sam nodded.

Moe said he had to get back to work.

Sam nodded again.

As the old preacher pulled onto the highway, Sam stood in the sun, thinking about what the Reverend had told him. How could he find out if Zeke had done this? Annie would know.

From the garage doorway, Homer stood half in shadow, curiously regarding his young coworker. After a moment, he turned and went back to patching his tire, mopping the back of his neck with his oily handkerchief. "I hope you know what you're getting yourself into, boy," the mechanic muttered under his breath. "I sure hope you do."

-2-

Sam asked Homer for an extended lunch break that day. He drove over to the Hornet's Nest, expecting to find Annie at work. She was not. LaShaunda, her co-worker, told him she had phoned in sick that morning. According to LaShaunda, this was strange, as Annie never missed work. Sam's first thought was, *Morning sickness*. He drove out past Sweetgum Circle and turned down a gravel county road, not too far from where he turned off every day to get to his own home. After a mile or so, he pulled into a sandy driveway flanked by cheerful black-eyed-Susan flowers. A blue mailbox by the ditch read "E. Little" in gold reflector letters. Zeke and Annie's house-trailer was dark brown with off white trim, ugly in spite of the pretty wild flowers that carpeted the grass around it. The trailer rested at the edge of a sprawling cotton field, flanked by two scrawny crabapple trees Annie had planted that spring. Parked near the front steps was Annie's little green hatchback Pinto.

At first, after Sam knocked on the door, there was no answer.

At least two minutes passed before the door opened. Annie stood tentatively in the doorway, wrapped in her bathrobe. Her hair was all corkscrewed, her face pale. She *looked* sick. And what was that dark spot on her cheek? Sam thought it might be a shadow cast by the half-open door.

"Sam?" She was startled to see him.

"Hi, Annie. Hate to barge in on you. I wanted to talk to you, and you weren't at work. LaShaunda said you were sick."

“Yeah, I’m not feeling too good. Some kind of stomach thing.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. Um, if it’s not a bother, could I come in?”

Annie shook her head, edging the door forward. Sam could only see half her face.

“I’m really sick, Sam. I don’t want you to catch this.”

“Is it okay if I just stand out here then? It’s about Zeke.”

She froze. Her already pale face turned a death-like pallor.

“Do you know where he was last night?”

“I...I’m not sure. Out with Buddy, I think.” She bit a fingernail. “Why?”

“Someone’s accused him of being up to no good, and it may involve the police.”

The half of her face Sam could see went slack. Fear and recognition flashed in her one visible blue eye. “Oh God, no. He *did* do something.”

“Annie? Are you okay?”

She shook her head. “You might as well come in, Sam.” She opened the door.

Inside the trailer, he stepped toward the living room as Annie closed the door.

When he turned to face her, he saw that the shadow on her cheek was no shadow. It was a ghastly bruise, an ugly purple monstrosity that had swollen the entire left side of her face.

“I slipped in the shower,” she said unconvincingly, trying a smile, wincing when she did.

“Dr. Moody should look at that,” Sam said.

Annie met his eyes and shook her head.

Sam clenched his fists at his sides. “What happened last night? What did you mean, ‘he *did* do something’?”

Annie crossed to the kitchen and reached into an overhead cabinet. Sam was startled when she drew out a package of cigarettes from behind a sugar canister. She fumbled one out, trembling. Lighting it on the gas stove, Annie took a drag, coughed, and laughed bitterly. “Zeke hated that I smoked when we first met. He made me stop. But I need it now.”

“It can’t be good for the baby,” Sam said softly.

Annie laughed her bitter, humorless laugh again.

“What is it, Annie? What happened?”

“I got so scared at first,” she whispered, leaning against the refrigerator. A gray tendril of smoke curled up from the cigarette between her fingers. “When I saw it, I thought it was his.”

“What?”

“The blood.” She abruptly disappeared into the hallway and reemerged with a pair of blue jeans in her arms, which she presented to Sam. “I couldn’t get it all out.”

There were faded splotches all over the pants, darkest around the knees and shins. Sam ran his fingers over the fabric.

“He came in smelling like something wild, like some kind of animal.” Annie drew on her cigarette and exhaled smoke. “It made me think of my Daddy. Did you know my parents were farmers, Sam? They were. When I was little, I used to watch Daddy slaughter hogs. Every year when it came killing time, Daddy would fill the trough, and the pigs would start out into the yard. Only Daddy would have my Momma throw the gate after the first one got out, so no more could come in. I don’t know if that’s how everybody does it, but that’s how my folks did it. I ain’t saying they were good

farmers. Just farmers.” She took another drag on her cigarette and shook her head. “The poor dumb pig. It never saw my Daddy coming. While its nose was buried in the slop, he would come up behind it with his sledgehammer. With all his strength, he would raise the hammer and bring it down on the pig’s back, usually snapping it like a stick. Why he didn’t hit it in the head, I don’t know. He never shot it because he didn’t want to waste the shells. When it fell over and went to kicking and squealing, he would jam his knife way down into its neck. Then he would yank the knife across and open up the pig’s throat. Sometimes the hog died quickly. Sometimes it didn’t. The way Zeke looked and smelled last night was how my Daddy used to look and smell when it didn’t.”

“He really did it,” Sam murmured, thinking of Moe’s story about Arliss James’s dog.

“Did what? Whose is it, Sam? What did he do?” Annie stubbed her cigarette out in the sink.

Sam told her what Moe Johnson had told him that morning. He told her of Arliss James running Zeke and Buddy out of the cornfield, of Arliss James finding his mutilated dog, and of Arliss James planning to go to the police. As he talked, Annie’s lower lip quivered, and her eyes trickled. By the time he finished, she was crying heavily.

Sam hugged her, and she hugged him back viciously. “Shhh,” he comforted. “It’s all right. It’s all right.”

“N-no,” she sobbed, burying her swollen face against his chest. “No, it’s not. You don’t know, Sam, you don’t know how not all right it is.”

Sam placed his hand against the back of her head, holding her. “How often does he do it?” he asked quietly.

“W-whenever he’s b-been drinking a lot, or when I do something he doesn’t like.”

She sniffed back tears, pulling away from Sam and wiping her face with the sleeve of her robe. “Seems like lately all the time. I never imagined, Sam. I never imagined.”

“Leave him, Annie. Get out of it.”

“I can’t. He’d try to kill me, Sam. He’s threatened it before.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Besides, he’s said he’s sorry. Told me this morning. He said he would change.”

“And you believe that?”

“No. But if you knew where I came from—if you knew my parents—you’d know that leaving here and going back there would be a step in the wrong direction.”

“And what happens when one day you can’t call in sick, because you can’t lift a hand to dial the number? Think about your baby, Annie.”

Annie began to cry again. The tears spilled down her cheeks, leaving glistening wet tracks on her pasty and purple flesh.

“What did I say?” Sam asked, holding her close once more.

“The baby...” she sobbed.

“What?”

“Not anymore...there isn’t any....”

“Stop,” Sam interrupted. He held Annie at arm’s length and stared hard into her wet, aching eyes. “Did he...?”

Annie nodded, her face contorting as she tried to hold back a pressing deluge of tears.

“My brother did that? To you?”

“Please, promise me you won’t say anything to him, Sam, because if he finds out that you know, then he’ll hurt me even worse.”

“God. How can I promise that, Annie?”

“Promise,” she pleaded.

“Look at your face!” Sam cried. Then, in almost a whisper, “Look what he did to your face.”

Annie took one of his hands in both of hers, squeezing it gently. Sam was aware for the first time how small and delicate her fingers were. “Promise me, please. Please.”

Sam shook his head, wanting to cry himself. They stood there in silence, her eyes turned up helplessly and hopefully to him. It was a long time before he answered. As he spoke, he felt the warmth of her hands and knew he was making a mistake. “All right. For now, I’ll keep quiet. But if he hurts you again...”

Annie leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Thank you, Sam. You’ve been so kind to me this past year.”

“You’re family, Annie. You’re family.”

“Am I still going to get to baby-sit Mal tonight?” There was a lift in her voice.

“I don’t think you should, as bad as you feel.”

“No, no, please, I want to keep him. I love that little guy.”

“What about Zeke?”

“I’ll take Mal to a movie in Forrest City. Zeke won’t be around him.”

“I’m not sure you’re up to this...”

“I’ll be fine, Sam. You don’t know how much it means to have someone who worries about you. Just knowing someone cares...”

“If you need me, you call me.” Sam squeezed her hand.

“I will,” Annie said. “Count on it.”

From the doorway, she watched Sam leave. He pulled his pick-up onto the gravel road, lifting a reassuring hand in her direction. Annie waved back. She closed the door and returned to the kitchen, where she lit a candle to clear the air of the smell of cigarette smoke. She sat at the table and watched the candle flicker, trying to ignore the dull throb in her jaw and the cold emptiness in her stomach. She stared at the tiny flame for a long time. At one point, she wondered what might become of the pain in her face and belly if she stuck her finger into the fire. Perhaps the pain would go away. She reached toward the candle, extending a trembling index finger.

But it won't go away for good, she thought abruptly. She drew her hand back. And that's what I need, isn't it? To make it go away for good? End it forever?

Annie bit her fingernail, then blew out the candle.

-3-

Arliss James arrived at the Midland Police Department at ten o'clock that morning, and he was made to wait until twelve to see Chief David Wade. When he walked into the lobby, clad in day-old clothes and smelling faintly of liquor, the chief's beefy, pasty white secretary stopped typing on her electric Smith-Corona and assessed him through a pair of reading glasses perched low on her nose. She sat behind a cluttered desk, her fat fingers poised over the typewriter's humming keys. A dust-coated nameplate on the front of the desk read "Janice Helms." Arliss took one look at her and wanted to shove that nameplate right down her throat. She eyed him as if he were a cockroach scuttling toward her across the green-tiled floor.

"Can I help you?" Janice Helms asked. Her lips were caked with shiny red lipstick. When she spoke, Arliss noted there was a smear of the stuff on one of her upper front teeth.

"Yes, ma'am. I need to see the chief."

"I'm sorry, he's not in at the moment. He's out of the office, but he should be back in thirty minutes. If you'd like to come back..."

"I'll wait here." Arliss gestured at a bank of black padded chairs along the far wall.

"Of course, I *say* thirty minutes, but it could be upwards of an hour or more..."

"I'll wait," Arliss said again, sitting down.

“Suit yourself.” Janice Helms pursed her lips and swiveled back to her typewriter.

Arliss hunched forward, wringing his wrinkled hands between his knees. He had not been thinking clearly since last night. He had buried Bones in back of the house and washed the blood from the porch with a bucket of soapy water. After changing clothes, he drove into Midland and bought a pint bottle of Wild Turkey from Allen’s liquor store. He remembered calling Reverend Johnson around eleven o’clock, but the rest of the night was fuzzy. Arliss woke up at seven that morning in the cab of his pick-up, disheveled and disoriented. The whiskey bottle lay empty on the seat beside him. He was parked somewhere along the edge of his cornfield, straddling the ditch between it and the highway.

Now, as he sat in the police department, his mind was finally beginning to focus. His hangover had almost left him. He began to think about what he would tell Chief Wade. Glancing at a wall clock overhead, Arliss saw that it was 10:12. The ticking of the clock’s second hand was barely audible over the clatter of Janice Helms’ electric typewriter. Arliss rubbed his temples and planned what he would say.

When he next looked at the clock, it read 10:40. The chief’s thirty minutes were almost up. *He should be back any minute now*, Arliss thought. Another fifteen minutes stretched by, however, and Wade still did not show.

“Excuse me, ma’am?”

Janice Helms looked up sharply. “Yes?”

“You said Chief Wade would be back in how long?”

“I didn’t say,” she answered, turning her attention back to scribbling on the legal pad. “There’s really no telling, you know.”

“I’ll wait,” Arliss mumbled.

He thought about Bones, lying in his own blood on the front porch. The dog had loved Spam and peanut butter sandwiches. Arliss had spoiled him.

He thought about Connie, lying withered and still beneath white sheets in a white hospital room. His wife had loved knitting; before she found the second lump, she had been making a scarf for her young nephew in Boise. Arliss had adored her.

He thought about Clarence and Charles, lying in flag-draped coffins six feet under the surface of the Midland colored cemetery. His sons had believed in their country and had fought to preserve freedom. Arliss had hated them for it.

His thoughts rambled, and time passed. He was jarred from his stupor when Chief David Wade walked through the front doors. The man was big. There was no other word that Arliss could think of to describe him. His beige uniform was stretched tight around his bulging body. He had an enormous gut and thick, meaty arms. His face resembled a bulldog’s, complete with sagging jowls and dopey brown eyes. The top of his head was bald; what little hair he had grew thinly above each ear. He entered the police department carrying a brown paper bag.

Arliss glanced at the wall clock. 11:56. Had it really been an hour since he last looked?

“Ms. Helms,” Wade said, setting the brown bag on her desk. “I stopped by Hall’s and picked up some sweet potatoes. I was hoping you might make me one of your famous sweet potato pies sometime this week.”

“Oh, Mr. Wade, they’re not so famous.” Janice Helms blushed and fiddled with her necklace.

“Well, they’re famous enough for me. Lord knows, my wife can’t make ‘em as good as you.” He laughed, and the entire bulk of him quaked under his uniform. He stopped suddenly, however, when he noticed Arliss. He cast his dopey eyes over the wrinkled black man sitting in the padded chair. When he spoke, he spoke in a low voice, certain Arliss could not hear him. “What’s this, Ms. Helms?”

“Oh, this gentleman has been waiting to see you.”

“That a fact? I’ll see him directly then. First, I’ve got a phone call to make. You remember what I said about that pie, now, hear?”

“Yes, sir.” Janice Helms giggled girlishly, twirling her necklace between her thick digits. When she noticed Arliss staring at her, she abruptly cleared her throat and said, “He’ll be with you in one moment.”

Arliss wondered if the necklace would snap before he finished strangling her with it.

Another ten minutes passed. Finally, Chief Wade stepped to his half-open office door and beckoned at Arliss. The old man stood slowly, his knees popping from sitting so long. He entered the narrow, windowless room and stood before Wade’s cluttered desk. From the wall behind the desk, the head of a large buck deer gazed emptily down upon craggy mountains of piled papers and blank police forms. Its horns were strung with cobwebs.

Wade sat down and leaned back in his chair. “I got a few minutes before my wife brings my lunch, so tell me what’s wrong this time, Arliss. Crows been stealing your corn?”

Arliss clenched and unclenched his fists. “No, sir.” He gestured to one of the two straight-backed wooden chairs in front of Wade’s desk. “You mind if I sit?”

“Help yourself.”

Arliss sat down. “No, ain’t much corn in my field worth stealin’. Unless you’re young and stupid. Full of meanness.”

“I don’t follow you, Arliss.”

“Them same boys I told you about last week that was draggin’ up and down the road—that Zeke Little and his no-good friend—they was in my corn field a couple of nights past. Strippin’ the silks off ears and smoking them.”

Wade chuckled.

“You think that’s funny?” Arliss said quietly. “They was trespassin’.”

“I just ain’t never heard of nobody ever sneaking into a corn field just to steal and smoke silks. Now, if you want to press charges for trespassing...”

“That ain’t why I’m here.”

“Oh? Why are...”

There was a knock at the door. Janice Helms stuck her head in and held up a tin lunch pail and thermos. “Your wife just brought these for you,” she cooed.

Wade thanked her, took the pail and thermos, set them on his desk, and began opening the lunch box. “Let’s see what I got today.” He withdrew a sandwich wrapped

in a paper towel. He slipped two fingers between the bread and inspected its contents. “Egg salad. This sure does look good.”

Arliss did not answer. He only stared as the chief of police uncapped his thermos, poured some coffee in the lid, and took a bite of his egg salad sandwich. A large blob of egg and mayonnaise dripped from between the bread and landed on Wade’s black tie. He grunted, plucked it from his chest, and popped it in his mouth. “Now,” he said through a mouthful of mush, “Where were we?”

“I was tellin’ you why I’m here.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“I’m here to tell you Zeke Little and Buddy Brighton killed my dog.”

Wade stopped chewing. “What?”

“They cut his throat and left him on my porch for me to find.”

Wade swallowed and put his sandwich down.

“Then they wrote ‘nigger’ on the front of my house in my dog’s blood.”

Wade sighed, folding his hands across his enormous stomach. “What makes you think it was them?”

“Cause I ran them outta my cornfield just a day before, and I heard one—I think it was that Brighton boy—say I wouldn’t be much without my dog. They threatened him.”

“So, you didn’t actually see them do it?”

“No, but I know it was them! I heard Zeke Little tell me it wasn’t over! Said he’d get even with me for runnin’ the two of them off!”

“Did you bury the dog? Clean up the blood?”

“What do you mean? Of course I did. I ain’t about to let my dog just lay out for the buzzards.”

“Then you’ve destroyed all the physical evidence, Arliss. I can’t go arrest two boys on just your accusation. I’m sorry about your dog, but...”

“Don’t you tell me sorry. You go get those bastards and you bring ’em to jail!”

“I’ll ask you to watch your language and tone of voice in my office. Now, I won’t deny Zeke and Buddy have been known to raise a ruckus, but I can’t question them on simple suspicion. It’d be harassment, Arliss.”

Arliss simmered with anger. He stabbed an arthritic, crooked finger at the police chief and said, “If it was some white man’s dog got killed by some niggers, they’d be done thrown in jail. And when the lynch mob came to carry ’em off, you’d likely let them take ’em.”

Wade’s sagging, bulldog face flared red. “Get outta my office!” he boomed.

Arliss could feel his entire body quaking with fury and frustration. He stood on trembling legs, yanked open the office door, and headed across the reception area. Janice Helms watched him go, her painted mouth open in an astonished “O.” Wade followed Arliss, shaking a thick finger at the old man’s back and breathing heavily.

“And don’t you come back here making trouble for no one else!”

Arliss turned. “No, sir. If I aim to make trouble, I won’t come back here to do it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” snarled Wade, gulping air. His huge frame heaved with exasperation. His face was the color of a hot coal.

“It means, what Zeke Little said is right, chief. This ain’t over yet.” And Arliss James walked out of the Midland Police Department, leaving behind a bewildered secretary and a breathless chief of police.

-4-

Wispy, red-tinted clouds stretched languidly across the sky. Through the living room window, Julie watched as evening gave way to dusk. She stood behind slightly parted curtains, dressed in jeans and a blue T-shirt. She glanced anxiously from the driveway to her wristwatch.

Moe sat in his wing-backed chair, scanning the *Democrat-Gazette*. He held the newspaper in front of his face, not wanting Julie to see his strained expression. Like Julie, he was anxious, but it was not a pleasant anxiety. His granddaughter was black, and Sam Little was white. Moe had no personal problem with the situation, but Julie was an outsider in Midland and Sam was the son of a racist criminal. Their being together was potentially dangerous. He had told Julie about Arliss's dog, but he had not told her that Arliss suspected Sam's brother of the crime. The release of Bob Little, the scattering of the F.O.L.D. flyers, and the killing of Arliss's dog were nasty purple storm clouds gathering on the horizon. And at present, the air in Midland was ominously still. Moe was afraid that Sam and Julie were the first faint rumblings of thunder.

Louise stood in the dining room, watching her granddaughter with a small, knowing smile. Julie inspected her reflection in the windowpane, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. She was beautiful. Louise thought of the day Julie's father had come home from the war. He had emerged from the plane at Memphis International with a skinny, olive-skinned Vietnamese girl on his arm. He had introduced her as his wife. Louise and Moe had been shocked, not as much by the girl's Vietnamese blood as by

their son's negligence to mention her in his letters. He wanted it to be a surprise, he had said. *Will you ever surprise your parents, Julie?* Louise wondered. What would they think if they knew she was going out with Sam? *But this is different*, Louise quickly reminded herself. *She isn't getting married. She's making a new friend.*

"He's here," Julie said suddenly.

Moe folded his paper and called her over. "I want you to be careful tonight. I trust Sam completely. I believe he's a good boy. But the water's a bit muddy in Midland right now. I told you about Arliss James's dog."

Julie nodded gravely.

Moe smiled. He stood and kissed her on the cheek. "Just be careful. And have a good time."

"I will, Papaw. Thanks." She hugged him, met Louise in the foyer and kissed her, and then disappeared out the front door.

Moe and Louise watched through the screen door as Julie met Sam halfway between the house and his truck. Sam waved briefly at the Johnsons then followed Julie to the pick-up. He opened her door for her, and she climbed in. After the truck had pulled onto the highway, Moe looked over at his wife.

"Is it right...*safe*...for us to condone this?" he asked. "Because you know, there are people, both black and white, that won't like this."

"I really don't think it matters, dear. It ain't none of nobody else's business to begin with."

"I know that, I just...." Moe sighed. "She doesn't know this place. She doesn't know how mean it can be."

“I’m not sure that’s a bad thing,” Louise said, fixing her eyes on her husband.

“How can we seriously talk about bridging the gap between whites and blacks and keep these two kids apart?”

Moe shook his head.

“They’re everything we’ve always hoped for in this town, Moe.”

“But she didn’t come out here to be a part of that. She came here to spend time with us, not to be part of our little attempts at social reform.”

“We aren’t the ones who decided she’d go out with this boy. She made that choice herself.”

Sighing, Moe nodded. “I just don’t want anything bad to happen.”

“Neither do I.” Louise wrapped her arm around her husband’s waist.

Moe hugged his wife back and said, “But I don’t think it matters what we want.”

Once inside the truck, Sam apologized for being late.

“Oh, that’s okay,” Julie said.

“My sister-in-law, she was having some trouble getting her car started,” he explained. “She was taking Mal to the movies tonight in Forrest City, and that’s no place to break down. I made sure the car was running all right before I left.”

“It must be handy having a mechanic in the family.”

“Not one in yours?”

“Nope. So, where are we going?”

“That’s still a secret.”

“How intriguing.”

Sam laughed. “Not really. You may be disappointed when we get there. I haven’t been in almost a year myself.”

“In-teresting,” Julie said. Outside her window, amber farmlands glided by, cast a warm glow by the setting sun. “You know, the air out here is so clear. I can smell a thousand different things when the wind blows, it seems.”

“So you like it out here?”

“Mostly, yeah, I guess.”

“You don’t sound too sure.”

“Well, I feel like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. I keep wanting to say, ‘I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto.’ Which is really weird, because all this flat farmland is probably exactly what Kansas looks like, and L.A. is probably more like Oz.”

Sam laughed.

“I’m babbling, aren’t I? Listen to me babble.”

An awkward silence settled between them. Sam abruptly slowed and flicked on his blinker. He turned onto a paved drive that led to a modest brick home about a hundred yards off the highway. In the waning daylight, Julie glimpsed the name “Thompson” chiseled into a stone mailbox pedestal. A white-haired man sat in a rocking chair on the front porch. When he saw the truck, he raised a hand in greeting.

“Where are we?” Julie asked as Sam pulled alongside the house and parked.

“There’s someone I want you to meet. And where we’re going is out behind his house.”

“Oh. Okay.”

As they approached, the white-haired man stood and slipped his hands into his pockets. Dressed in a flannel cotton shirt and jeans, he was tall and lanky. He had a painfully sharp nose which was somewhat dulled by his merry, inquisitive eyes. His cheekbones jutted out prominently. Julie's first thought upon seeing him up close was: *I'm about to meet Ichabod Crane.*

"Well, hello!" he sang out in a sonorous voice.

That can't be what Ichabod Crane sounds like, thought Julie.

"Hi, Mr. Thompson. How are you?"

"I'm fair, Samson. How bout yourself?"

"Not bad."

"How's your family?"

"Fair." Sam laughed uneasily. He gestured to Julie. "Mr. Thompson, this is the girl from out of town. Julie Johnson, meet Greer Thompson, my high school English teacher."

"Pleased to meet you," Greer said, shaking her hand.

His hands were soft, unlike her grandfather's rough barber hands. He had a single callus on his right middle finger, where one might hold a pencil. His right thumbnail was purple, as if he had slammed it in a door or struck it with a hammer. "Nice to meet you, sir."

"Samson told me on the phone you're an English major. I forget where."

"UCLA."

"Right, right."

"This is the guy who got me interested in Hemingway," Sam said.

Greer nodded. "The class read *A Farewell to Arms*. Afterward, I showed Samson *The Sun Also Rises*. At the time, I thought he could identify with the lost generation. He seemed rather aimless." Greer chuckled.

"I still feel that way sometimes," Sam said sheepishly.

"Nonsense." Greer looked at Julie. "Don't let this guy sell himself short to you. He's worth a lot more than the price he puts up in the window."

"I'll remember that," Julie said, smiling wanly at Sam.

"We should be getting on back there, I guess." Sam pointed toward the corner of the house.

"Oh, that's right," said Greer, turning to go inside. "Enjoy yourselves. I'll talk to you later, Sam."

"Yes, sir. And thanks for letting us do this."

"You're quite welcome. It was nice to have met you, Julie."

Julie, who had been lost in her own curiosity, barely managed a "You, too" before Greer Thompson disappeared into his house.

Twilight had draped across the Delta like a thin dark veil. As they rounded the corner of the house, heading into the backyard, Sam turned to Julie and said, "Um, you'll want to close your eyes."

Julie raised an eyebrow and smiled with amusement.

"Trust me. Close your eyes."

"Sure. Why not?" She closed her eyes.

His hand tentatively closed around hers, and he led her along. She could hear the grass scrishing beneath her tennis shoes, ever aware of the gentle pressing of his palm against hers.

“Mr. Thompson told me about this field behind his house in high school,” Sam said.

How surreal, Julie thought. Listening to a disembodied voice, walking along with my eyes closed, holding a white boy’s hand in back of an old school teacher’s house.

“Yeah?”

“I haven’t been here in a while, but I used to come all the time. There are two reasons why I like it so much.”

“What are those?”

“You’ll see. Now is the best time for the first one, at twilight.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You will.” Sam stopped walking, and Julie bumped up against him. “No peeking yet. There’s a tree stump here, nice and flat. You can sit on it.”

Julie stepped backward. Her calves abruptly encountered something rough and hard, and she slowly sat down. She could hear the crickets and other night creatures singing all around her. “Can I look yet?”

“Give it a second.”

“What *is* this, Sam?”

He sat down beside her on the stump. “Now. Open your eyes.”

Julie did. She gasped.

Night was almost upon them, but the grassy field before them was alive with light. Hundreds of tiny phosphorescent pinpoints floated in the semi-dark, glowing and gliding gracefully. Some pulsed brighter than others, some softer. Julie had never seen anything more beautiful in her life. She felt like a child caught up in a magical dream, surrounded by a multitude of flying fairies. They wafted enchantingly about the wide-open field. Julie wondered briefly if this was where the stars ascended from after the sun went down.

“Fireflies,” she breathed. “They’re amazing.”

“Lightning bugs,” Sam said. “And they’re just the opening act.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just follow me.” He stood. “Step where I step. And watch for holes. There’s some deep ones out here that could turn an ankle pretty easy.” He started forward.

Julie stood and followed along, keeping her eyes on the ground. The world had gone completely dark now, and Julie had to strain to see where she was stepping. She wondered what Sam meant by the fireflies—*lightning bugs*—being the “opening act.” The glowing insects radiated all around them, casting patches of grass and dirt in gentle yellow light. A big one drifted lazily by Julie’s face, and she stopped to follow it with her eyes. Sam did not see her pause, and he kept walking. When she realized she had fallen behind, Julie started and moved forward quickly. Just as she reached Sam, her sneaker went into a hole up to her ankle. She stumbled, her breath rushing out in an “*Ooof!*”

Sam turned and caught her just as she wobbled into him. “You okay?” He supported her for a moment before realizing that she was close enough for him to smell her hair. It reminded him of strawberries. He stepped back, dropping his hands.

“Yes.” Her voice sounded distant to her own ears. “Wasn’t watching, I guess.”

“We’re through walking, anyway. This is where we need to be.”

“For what?”

“Well, to get the full effect, you have to close your eyes again. And lie down on your back.”

“Okay.” Julie closed her eyes and sat down on the ground. As she lay back on the grass, she was surprised at how soft it was, almost like a feather pillow. She kept her eyes closed, sensing Sam lying down beside her.

“On the count of three, open,” he said. “1...2...3.”

Julie opened her eyes for the second time that night; and, also for the second time, she was in absolute awe of what she beheld. An infinite black sky filled her vision. She saw nothing but a dark velvet backdrop upon which glistened millions—*billions*—of stars. They lit the heavens and were reflected in the dark pupils of Julie’s mesmerized eyes.

“What do you think?” Sam asked, folding his hands across his chest.

“I think I’ve never really seen them until now.”

“What do you mean?”

“In the city, it’s usually impossible to see the stars through the smog.”

“That’s a shame.” There was a genuine sadness in his voice.

“Do you look at them often?”

“Whenever I can. They remind me how big the world is, and how small mine is.”

“Yeah, but it’s not the size of your world that counts. It’s how you live in it.”

“Do you see those three right there?” Sam pointed. “The ones in a straight line, on top of one another?”

“Yeah.”

“The first time I ever noticed them was the night I graduated high school. I remember looking up at those three perfect stars and thinking there must be some reason behind it all. Nothing could be so beautiful without a plan.”

“A plan?”

“God. Do you believe in God?”

“I suppose so.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“I’m as sure as the next person.”

They both were quiet for a time, each gazing up at the heavens, working through their own thoughts on what to say next, or how to say it. Finally, it was Sam who spoke first. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No. You have two brothers, right? Mal and...?”

“Zeke. He’s my older brother.”

“What’s he like? Do I get to meet him?”

“No,” Sam said a bit too quickly.

Julie looked away from the sky and regarded Sam. She could barely make out his face in the darkness, but what little she could see appeared drawn and troubled.

“Zeke is not a very nice guy,” he said.

“Saturday, I stopped by Wongs’ Department Store downtown. When I mentioned that I knew you, Mrs. Wong nodded and said you were a ‘good boy.’ She started to say something else, something about your brother, I think. But Mr. Wong cut her off.”

Sam nodded. “Mr. Wong would never say it, but I think my family makes him nervous.”

“Why is that?”

Sam did not answer immediately.

“I’m sorry,” Julie said. “That’s not really any of my business, is it?”

“No, no. It’s okay.” Sam paused, collecting his thoughts. “One time, before Dad went to prison, he and Zeke went to Mr. Wong’s store to buy some camouflage. It was duck season, and they were going over to Stuttgart to spend the weekend hunting. They had been drinking when they came into the store, and Mr. Wong refused to serve them. My Dad cussed him, called him all kinds of terrible things. But words weren’t enough for Zeke. He pulled over a rack of clothes, scattered them all over the floor.” Sam nervously ran a hand through his hair. “I only know about that because I heard them later laughing about it.”

“The Wongs seem like nice people,” Julie said awkwardly.

“They’re the best.”

“I met your Mom at the grocery store Saturday.”

Sam grinned. “Yeah, I know. She told me.”

“I don’t think I made too favorable an impression on her.”

“You didn’t.”

They both laughed.

“Mom means well,” Sam said. “She just forgets that I don’t think like my Dad and my brother.”

“My being black and your being white won’t go over well with them, I take it.”

“Definitely not with Zeke. I’m not so sure about my Dad, though. He’s different than he used to be. There’s a...a quietness about him that wasn’t there before. A calm.”

“How long was he away?”

“Twelve years.”

Julie was unable to comprehend it. Twelve years. For the Littles, the time must have seemed as unending as the void in which Sam’s three stars glimmered. She imagined her own father imprisoned for over a decade and shuddered.

“It’s nice talking to someone about it,” Sam said. “I haven’t had anyone to talk to in a long time.”

Julie nodded. “You want to know what I really think about this place?”

“Yeah.”

“I think it’s one of the loneliest places I’ve ever seen.”

“What do you mean?”

“Saturday, when I was riding my bike out of town, I stopped on the side of the road to get this rock out of my shoe. I happened to look around and noticed that there was no movement at all. No cars, no people, not even any wind. Just me, my bike, a deserted farmhouse, and hundreds of acres of flatness.”

“I know the feeling,” Sam said.

“A line from this old Beatles song popped into my head. Do you remember the one called ‘Nowhere Man’? How it went?” Julie sang the line. “‘He’s a real nowhere man, sitting in his Nowhere Land.’”

“I think I’ve heard it on the oldies station Homer listens to at work.”

“It seemed so fitting. ‘Nowhere Land.’”

“You know, I’ve lived here all my life, and all my life I’ve tried to come up with a way to express how I’ve felt about the place. Now, thanks to you, Julie Johnson, I have a way. In just two words. That’s better than I could’ve ever done.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank the Fab Four.”

Sam smiled. “You know what I wish?”

“What?”

“I wish people could be more like Mal.”

“Why?”

“Mal has no bad thoughts about himself or others.” Sam paused, thinking. “Mom thinks he’s her punishment, just because she had him out of marriage and he turned out to be retarded. To her, he’s some kind of eternal reminder of her sin. Her cross to bear. But not to me. Personally, I think Mal’s as close to God as man will ever be.”

“In his innocence?”

“I don’t know how to say it, exactly. But when Mal looks at a person, whether black or white, you know he’s not thinking anything bad. He’s just thinking, taking them in. He sees the difference between black and white...” Sam thought about Mal holding up the brown crayon and saying, *Julie!* He laughed. “Yeah, he definitely sees a person’s

color. But whether it's a black person, white person, red person, or even a green person, the color makes no difference to him. And I think that's how God sees people."

"God?"

"Sure. God sees color. Otherwise, why would He have made so many different ones? I think He finds all those colors beautiful. Only He doesn't love any one any more than the other."

Julie smiled fondly at Sam. "You're an overwhelming person, Sam Little. Do you know that?"

He grinned sheepishly, shook his head, and turned his attention back to the sky. They lay quietly for a time, gazing up at the countless stars.

"And what about hate?" Julie asked abruptly. "How does that fit in with God?"

Sam thought a while before answering. "I don't know," he finally said.

Suddenly, a bright fleck of light shot across the sky. Its sparkling wake lingered a microsecond then dissolved into the night.

Julie sat up and pointed. "Did you see that? A shooting star!"

"There goes another one," Sam said, pointing.

Julie held her hands to her chest. "Wow. I've never actually seen one before. There was one for each of us. Don't people typically wish on shooting stars?"

"Yeah," laughed Sam. "But it doesn't work. At least, it hasn't yet."

Julie looked down at him, grinning. "And what have you wished for before?"

"Different things, different times. Once, my senior year in high school, that Dawn Campbell the homecoming queen might notice me, Mr. Nobody, maybe float into my bedroom window one night. That didn't happen. Once that Zeke would stop

drinking so much. That never came true. And once that I could leave this place with a friend of mine. So far, I've got nothing I asked for."

"Well, I've never done it, so I'm going to at least try. If you're not going to use your star, can I have it?"

"Sure."

Julie closed her eyes.

Sam admired the shape of her profile in the starlight, her lovely face upturned to the sky.

Julie opened her eyes.

"Well?" Sam asked.

"I can't tell," she answered. "If I do, they may not come true."

"Oh. Well, better safe than sorry." Sam laced his hands behind his neck.

"That's right," said Julie, and she lay back on the grass.

It was almost eleven o'clock when Sam and Julie left Greer Thompson's field. When Sam dropped Julie off, he walked her to the front door. The light inside the Johnsons' living room window was burning steadfastly. Julie was certain that her grandfather was sitting in his wing-backed chair and smoking his pipe, awaiting her safe return.

Sam stopped at the porch steps. "Thanks for going tonight," he said.

"I had a lot of fun."

"I'm glad. I was worried you might be a bit bored, being from the big city."

"I was never bored, not for one minute."

"Good."

“Maybe we could do something else this week.”

“Yeah, okay. Sure.”

“I should go in. Papaw’s probably up waiting on me.”

“Right. I’ve got to pick up Mal at Annie’s. So....”

“Goodnight, Sam.” Julie leaned forward and planted a quick, soft kiss on his left cheek.

Sam blinked. Julie had already entered the house and waved good-bye when he thought to whisper a befuddled “Goodnight.” He turned shakily toward his truck, took a halting step, looked over his shoulder at the lit living room window, and saw Julie peering out at him. A broad smile suddenly spread across his face.

Sam walked back to his truck on feet that never touched the ground.

-5-

“Did you have a nice time?” Moe asked, marking his page in the Bible and closing the book.

“I had a wonderful time,” Julie said, stepping away from the window. She kicked off her shoes, dropped onto the sofa, and curled her legs beneath her. “What are you reading?”

“Oh, I was preparing for Wednesday night prayer meeting.” Moe patted the black, leather-bound Bible. “Looking for something pertinent. I thought maybe a passage from Romans. I think the congregation could stand to hear a little bit about all things working together for good.”

“How come?”

“Word has a way of spreading in Midland like wildfire. I figure by tomorrow there won’t be a man, woman, or child in our church that hasn’t heard of Arliss James’s predicament. They’re apt to be unsettled.”

“Have you heard anything else from Mr. James?”

“I’ve been trying to call him and can’t get an answer. He said he was going to the police this morning. I wonder how that went.”

Julie could see the worry in her grandfather’s eyes. Usually vibrant, they were now dim and far away. “Is there a lot of violence here?”

“No. Not as much you’d think.” Moe sighed. “Roots of prejudice run deep in Midland, though, both on white and black trees.”

Julie nodded, thinking of Saturday. A farmer pulling a trailer of hay had almost run her over. An old woman with a garden spade had shot her a nasty look. And Rebecca Little had looked at her as if she were a repellent insect. "Do you think Sam and I being seen together will cause a problem?"

Moe did not answer immediately. He interlaced his hands and rested his chin on them, thinking. Finally, he said, "I hope not. Some people won't like it for sure. But the ones that have a problem with it won't do anything but grumble amongst themselves. Only..." He hesitated.

"What?"

"I'd steer clear of Sam's brother and father."

"Sam said tonight he sensed something different about his father. He thinks prison changed him, I think."

Moe shrugged. "If that's true, Sam may have gained a father. Which means Zeke may have lost one. And that could make him do something very foolish, given that boy's reputation for foolishness."

"What crime did Sam's father commit?"

"The sentence the judge handed down was involuntary manslaughter. He hit a teenager with his car. A black boy named Lloyd Elkins. His mother goes to our church."

"Has Zeke ever been in trouble with the police?"

Moe shook his head. "Not that I know of. In Midland, every white man is friendly with every other white man. Police Chief David Wade is no exception. Zeke and his buddies are known for tearing up and down the streets late at night, drinking, raising all manner of Cain, even shooting up road signs and playing chicken with

oncoming cars. Once, someone threw a cinder block through the storefront window of Wong's. Wade never caught who did it, but a lot of us around here believe he knew who it was."

"Those poor people."

"So you see why I say steer clear of Zeke Little."

Julie nodded.

"Curtis Burns told me Sunday afternoon that a lot of folks are convinced Zeke had a hand in throwing out those F.O.L.D. flyers. I'm not so sure about that."

"F.O.L.D.?" Julie knew nothing about the flyers.

"Some racist organization, like the KKK. The flyers said there would be a recruiting session right here in Midland on June 12. Which is this Saturday."

"Are you worried it's for real?"

"Concerned, let's say." Moe smiled and patted his Bible. "But I have faith that all things do work together for the good of those who are called according to His purpose."

Julie abruptly yawned. "Is Grandma in bed?"

"She went around ten o'clock."

"I think I'll retire for the night myself."

"Okay. I'll be up reading for a while yet."

Julie picked up her shoes and kissed her grandfather on his cheek as she passed.

"Goodnight, Papaw."

"Goodnight, child. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself tonight."

Julie padded upstairs, tennis shoes in hand.

Moe reopened his Bible to the marked passage in Romans. He removed his pipe and pouch of tobacco from his shirt pocket. After packing in the tobacco, he tore a match from a booklet on the coffee table and deftly struck it with his thumbnail. While he smoked, he took up reading silently where he had left off. Verses thirty-five and thirty-six of chapter eight:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

Moe shuddered, the hair prickling on the back of his neck. He removed his pipe and read the next two verses aloud, comforted by the sound of his voice in the cavernous silence of the house. "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." His neck hair flattened out. "Amen," he whispered. "Amen."

-6-

The next morning, at breakfast, Bob Little sat across from Sam and Mal, eating pancakes doused in maple syrup. Sam ate corn flakes, and Mal was munching a Pop Tart. Bob cut away a spongy section from the stack, forked it, swirled it in brown ooze, and said, "I want you to go with me to a cookout."

Sam glanced up from his cereal. "What?"

"Tonight. Jimmy Walker, my boss, has invited me to a barbecue. I was hoping you would go with me."

"Dad..."

"The last few days at work have been awful, Sam. Jimmy has me driving a forklift, helping load grain onto trucks. It's all I do all day long. I'm fifty-four years old and that's what I do. I go from here to there, push a button, and go back and start all over again. This is how my life has ended up." He set aside his fork, pancakes still skewered and dripping syrup. "I'm surrounded by kids, *babies*, with more responsibilities than me."

"Is no one still there who was there twelve years ago?" Sam asked.

"Only Jimmy. I've been eating lunch with him. But I don't..." Bob shook his head. "I don't feel *right* around him anymore."

"Is he different?"

"No. That's just it. I look at his face with its extra wrinkles and a few more broken blood vessels and he still pretty much looks like the guy I used to know. His

voice is the same. Hair's still parted in the same place. He even talks about the same things." Bob carried his plate to the kitchen counter and set it by the sink. "I'm the one who's different."

"How?"

Mal paid them no attention. He was engrossed in the colorful candy sprinkles on his Pop Tart.

"I can't talk about those old things with Jimmy anymore. Or with Zeke. I try not to even think about them. I don't know your mother anymore. I don't know you. I'm not too sure I know myself."

Rebecca breezed into the kitchen, her long house dress souging about her legs. She never ate breakfast with her family. Rather, she prepared the meal then readied herself for the day, bathing, dressing, and praying—all in the amount of time it took Sam to finish off his corn flakes and Mal to gobble down two strawberry Pop Tarts. But, today, she noticed Sam had not finished his cereal. And Bob was standing by the kitchen sink with a vacant, stricken countenance. Only Mal appeared normal, plucking candy sprinkles from his pastries and popping them into his mouth.

"What's wrong, Daddy?" Rebecca reached for his shoulder.

Bob shrugged away, shaking his head. Her splayed, hooked fingers lying gently on his shoulder chilled him, as if she were a hawk or some other carnivorous bird lovingly caressing its prey before digging in its talons and trapping it. "I'm going to be late for work," he said.

Rebecca stood by and watched wordlessly as he plucked his metal lunch pail from the top of the refrigerator and situated a yellow "Walker Supply Co." cap on his head. On his way out, Bob paused behind Sam and said, "Will you go with me?"

Sam nodded, pushing his spoon around in a now soggy bowl of mush.

Bob left.

Mal, meanwhile, was rounding up the last pastry crumb on his plate. He licked his finger, stabbed the crumb with it, and stuck his finger in his mouth. Then he made a big show of rubbing his belly and sighing. In her brusque manner, Rebecca rolled her eyes and snatched up his plate.

-7-

Jimmy Walker lived in a one-story brick house on Sweetgum Circle. When Sam and Bob arrived at 6:30 that evening, the concrete driveway was crowded with half-a-dozen pick-ups. Sam immediately recognized Zeke's monstrous, mud-spattered vehicle. The trucks' owners, including Zeke, were gathered around a smoking grill on the front lawn. Three of them clutched beer cans nestled snugly in foam coolers. From a truck stereo came the unmistakable twang of Alan Jackson, singing about the muddy water of the Chattahoochee River. Sighing, Sam pulled onto the grassy shoulder, along the edge of the drainage ditch. Bob eyed the group. From the lawn, Zeke saw them and waved.

"I don't know these people," Bob said.

Zeke met them between Sam's pick-up and the house. With one hand he clapped his father on the back. In the other hand, he gripped a crumpled beer can. "Hey, Pop!"

"Son. Where's Jimmy?"

"He's inside. Bringin' out another batch of ribs." Zeke appraised his brother, his infamous, condescending grin breaking across his face. "Well, well. You decided to come?"

"I'm here," Sam said.

"No shit." Zeke swallowed a draught of liquor in one fast, fluid motion. "Pop, you want a beer? I would ask you, Sam, but you don't drink."

"I don't want anything," Bob replied flatly.

"BOB LITTLE!" barreled a deep voice.

The three Littles turned in unison to see Jimmy Walker emerge onto his front porch. It had been years since Sam had seen the man, and he appeared to have gained at least a hundred pounds. He wore a white apron splashed with barbecue sauce and carried a pan of uncooked pork ribs. His stomach bulged and strained against the fabric, his red, puffy face smeared with sweat. He had forearms like ham-hocks, pink and heavy. As he made his way down the steps, his breath came in labored little wheezes. Sam thought the man's heart must have been beating on borrowed time.

"Come on over here, Bob. You know everybody, right? The boys from work?" Jimmy waded into the group and slapped the ribs onto the grill. They sizzled, the pit beneath them spitting sparks and hissing as the grease dropped down.

Sam hung behind Bob. Aside from his brother, he—like his father—did not know any of the people present. They were roughly his age, maybe one or two a few years younger. Their sunburned faces were hard beneath the bills of their caps. They stared at Sam with unabashed suspicion and disapproval. One chewed compulsively on a toothpick, sliding it from corner to corner of his mouth with his tongue. Another of the group frequently spat a stream of tobacco juice onto the grass, leaning forward so not to splatter his scuffed boots. Sam looked at the ground, but he could feel their eyes crawling over him, agonizingly slowly, like five pairs of fat black spiders.

Zeke wandered over to the garage, where an open cooler packed with ice and beer was set on the concrete.

Jimmy pointed at Sam with a meat fork. "My God, son, you've grown since I last laid eyes on you!"

So have you, Sam thought, flashing Jimmy a *Shucks-You-Really-Think-So?* grin.

“How do you think I felt last Thursday when I saw him for the first time in twelve years?” Bob ran his hand through Sam’s hair.

Surprised, Sam straightened his tousled hair. He briefly forgot about the arachnid eyes creeping over him. It was a common fatherly gesture, yet such an uncommon display of affection for Bob Little. In that instant, all Sam knew or cared about was that his father approved of him—like that day of fishing on Little Big Bayou. For the first time in twelve years, Sam felt like somebody’s son.

Jimmy turned the ribs and doused them with fresh barbecue sauce. Flames spurted through the grill, licking greedily at the meat.

Zeke returned from the garage with a fresh beer in hand. In the meantime, the five spiders had scuttled away and spun a web near the drive. They knotted together around the truck from which the country music emanated. Sam watched them. Tobacco Juice climbed into the cab. He pointed at the radio and speakers then waved his arms in exaggerated loops. The others listened with their heads cocked, arms folded across their chests or hands stuffed into the pockets of their jeans. They nodded occasionally, almost always at the same time. Sam could not see their faces, but he could imagine their expressions: wide-eyed and empty with awe.

Jimmy talked about work, and Bob listened. Only Bob did not listen with mindless admiration. His face betrayed one emotion: discontentment. While Jimmy droned on about rice and grain storage and transport, unhappiness dripped from Bob’s face like the fat falling through the grill. His eyes went bleary, and his mouth sagged at the corners.

Shut up! Sam wanted to cry. *Can't you see what you're doing to him? He hates working for you! You're draining him.*

The ribs hissed as Jimmy poked them with his fork. "I don't know, Bob," he said. "When it's all said and done, we may be run out on a rail."

"What are you talking about?" Bob asked.

Sam thought he heard something in his father's voice that sounded suspiciously like hope.

"Riceland's thinking about expanding, maybe building something out this way. They get some silos out here, maybe build a little distribution center or a small plant, our poor little piss-ant business could be thrown out with the wash, and all of us'll wind up without pots to pee in."

"Wouldn't that be a shame," Zeke said, swigging his beer.

The front door of the house opened, and a middle-aged woman in a T-shirt and shorts shuffled outside, barefooted. A little boy, no more than two years old, straddled her left hip, sucking an orange Popsicle. The woman's dark hair was tied in a bun. A cigarette dangled from her lips, wobbling up and down as she spoke. "You want the pan for them ribs?"

"Sure thing, honey-bunch."

After the food had been arranged on the kitchen table, the nine men were called in and given a paper plate and plastic fork by Jimmy's wife. Each filed through and heaped his plate with barbecue and potato salad—all but Sam and Bob. They took only enough to be polite. Jimmy directed everybody into the backyard, where they sat in aluminum chairs arranged in a semi-circle. Sam could see the faces of the others across from him,

and they saw him. He was extremely uncomfortable, and he only picked at his food—a rib, one meager helping of potato salad, and a soggy roll. It occurred to him that Bob's first welcome-home supper had been barbecue, and now he was having it again. Sam glanced at his father and saw that he too was barely eating. Zeke sat directly across from Sam, stuffing the food into his mouth, sometimes not even bothering to use his fork in the potato salad; rather, he would dip in a rib and scoop up a yellow wad of the stuff, sucking off it and whatever bit of meat was beneath it. In the grass by his chair was a freshly popped beer can. How many did that make? Three since Sam and Bob had arrived?

After the meal, as conversation began to lag with the sun, Sam began to shift anxiously in his chair. Bob had not said anything in a long time, and Jimmy and the arachnids had glazed over. They sat in a kind of gluttonous stupor, having stuffed themselves with beer and barbecue to near bursting. Food-stained paper plates littered the grass in the center of the circle. It was not long before Sam noticed that Zeke was staring at him, his narrowed eyes peering snake-like from beneath the bill of his baseball cap. There was something frightening in his brother's face, something terrible and dark.

"What is it?" Sam asked abruptly.

His voice startled the others out of their daze.

Bob, who had noticed Zeke staring, looked apprehensively from his younger son to his older son.

"How come you didn't eat with the rest of us?" Zeke slurred.

He's way beyond drunk, Sam thought with a twinge of fear. "What do you mean? I ate."

"No, you didn't. Ain't no plate of yours in that pile."

Sam glanced down. His plate was under his chair, where he had placed it. It held an unfinished helping of potato salad and one rib bone. A few morsels of meat still clung to the bone. He had managed to eat the butter-drenched roll, but only out of an ingrained sense of politeness to the poor middle-aged woman who was Jimmy Walker's wife. "Just because I didn't toss it on the pile..."

"You shut your hole!" Zeke barked ferociously. "I ain't talkin' about where you put your plate. You can put it where the sun don't shine, for all I care. What I'm talkin' about is how you show up here with Pop and strut around like you're better than all the rest of us."

"Zeke," Bob warned. "You're drunk."

"And what about you, Pop? Why ain't *you* drunk?" Zeke's fevered rage fell to a pathetic whimper. "You never used to refuse no beer. We used to drink together. *Together.*"

Sam felt an inkling of pity for his brother. Twelve years ago, Zeke had lost his father. Now, Bob's return was proving to be another loss for Zeke, salt heaped into the wound of the past. His brother had felt the first bitter sting when Bob had reprimanded him at dinner last Thursday for ridiculing Annie's black co-worker because of her name. Tonight, all of Zeke's expectations—his hopes for things being as before—were drowned in a burning cascade of disappointment. Bob had refused to drink with him. All was lost. But then Sam remembered the sting of Zeke's knuckles against his cheek that day in the kitchen. He remembered Annie's story of how Zeke came in drenched in blood and smelling of something wild and animal. And lastly, he remembered the terrible purple color of Annie's delicate jaw.

“I told you people change, son.”

“Don’t you call me son!” Zeke cried, crunching his beer can and throwing it at Bob.

Bob let the aluminum can bounce off his chest.

Zeke surged from his chair and strode toward him, kicking through the litter of paper plates and plastic cups.

Bob sat with his hands firmly gripping the arms of his lawn chair, his feet planted in the grass. He gazed placidly at his furious son, unflinching.

While the others sat in mute fascination, Sam jumped from his chair and stood his ground between Zeke and his father. Zeke never slowed. Barreling forward with the momentum of a fast-moving midnight train, he reached out with one arm, intending to swat his little brother aside. Sam seized Zeke’s arm at the elbow and heaved his older brother backward. The derailed Zeke staggered and lost his footing in the scattered trash. He hit the ground and sat still, a drunken, dumbfounded expression on his face, all the fury jarred out of him.

“Stop this,” Sam said evenly.

Zeke shook his head to clear it. “You’ve turned him against me. My own brother, turned my father against me. You and your sissified, nigger-lovin’ ways.”

“Do you have something to say, Zeke? If you do, then by God spit it out.”

“You’ve betrayed our family!”

“*What* family?” Sam cried. “Stop kidding yourself! This has *never* been a family! Not even before Dad was in prison. Even back then, it was always just the two of you—hunting, fishing, drinking. Talking about how much you hated anybody who

wasn't like you. While Mom and I were in church three times a week praying for your souls, you were both out bar-hopping and doing God-knows-what. We never did anything together as a family. And now we have that chance. And *you're* the one who's screwing it up for us. So who is betraying who?"

Bob sat in stunned silence.

Zeke clamored to his feet, slipping briefly on Styrofoam plates. "I know what's right and wrong," he slurred. "And it is *wrong* to mix with someone who ain't your kind. Like that nigger preacher's daughter."

"How did you know who she is?"

Zeke did not answer. Rather, he brushed the dirt from the seat of his pants and grinned malignly.

"Did Mom tell you? Is that how?" Sam knew without a doubt the answer was yes. Rebecca had been furious that he had kept Julie from her. The fact that Zeke knew who Julie was frightened Sam. What would he do? Would he do anything? Sam thought of how Moe had described Arliss's dog, its throat splayed open, blood splashed all over the porch. *I can use this*, Sam suddenly realized, *to keep him from hurting her*. "You know right and wrong, huh? Well, Zeke, then why don't you tell me about Arliss James's dog?"

Zeke ducked as if Sam had actually taken a swing at him. "I don't know what you mean," he murmured. "Arliss who?"

"Don't know anything about that, huh? Okay, well how about this one? Annie's face." Sam glared at his brother, his promise to Annie to keep quiet forgotten. "Is what you did to her face right or wrong?"

“That’s none of your business.” There was a sudden sober anger in Zeke’s voice.

“Neither is who I ‘mix’ with any of yours,” Sam replied coldly. “Although if I find out you’ve hit her again, that’s something I’m going to *make* my business.”

Bob stood up and put a hand on Sam’s arm. “Let’s go, son,” he whispered.

“We ain’t talkin’ about Annie here,” Zeke asserted, stepping nose-to-nose with Sam.

“No,” Sam replied. “We’re through talking.” He pushed past his brother, past the sour odors of beer and sweat that radiated from him. Bob followed close behind Sam, turning at the edge of the house and calling out to Zeke, “Go home, son. Sleep it off.”

Jimmy Walker approached Zeke, his round face wet with sweat. Ringlets of strawberry-colored hair were plastered to his temples and forehead, and his grizzly red beard was knotted and damp. “Zeke, let me give you a ride....”

“Get offa me!” Zeke shoved past Jimmy and staggered toward the driveway. He reached his pick-up in time to see Sam’s taillights wink out around the curve of Sweetgum Circle. He climbed into the cab of his monstrous truck, ground through the gears drunkenly, found reverse, and tore backward onto the road. It took him several seconds to find first, and when he let off the clutch, the truck bucked and surged like an enraged bull out of its stall. He roared into the night, certain that he was not going home, but uncertain as to where he would arrive.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the girl?” Bob asked once they had turned onto the highway. “I heard about her Sunday night from your mother. She was on her knees by the bed for almost three hours praying for you.”

Sam gripped the steering wheel with both hands, wringing it anxiously. Warm air rushed in through the open windows.

“Is it because she’s black?”

Sam did not answer. He could see his father’s face in the dark, lit ghostly green by the soft glow of the dash lights. Bob’s expression was expectant, open.

“Were you afraid I’d react like Zeke?”

Sam’s palms ground against the vinyl steering wheel.

“God, your brother reminds me of me when I was his age.” Bob gazed out the window at the night-veiled Delta. “That was twenty years ago. Seems like it should only be about eight.”

“I *wanted* to tell you about her,” Sam said suddenly.

Bob regarded his son quietly.

“I...I just didn’t know how...how to talk to you.”

The silence stretched out for what seemed to Sam forever, as endless as the soybean and cotton fields that surrounded them. The only sounds were the familiar knocks and rattles of Sam’s truck and the lulling hum of the highway. After an eternity of two or three minutes, Bob said, “I’m sorry for how it was before, Sam.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were right—what you said to Zeke tonight. We never were a family.”

“There were times when we almost were.” Sam turned onto county road 286, the gravel popping and crunching beneath his tires. “It’s not too late to try again, is it?”

Bob said nothing.

Not long after, Sam pulled into the Littles' rutted driveway and parked alongside Rebecca's wood-paneled station wagon. Glinting in Sam's headlights, Mal's yellow Tonka truck was parked at the foot of the porch steps. Sam stared at it for a moment, the pick-up's engine idling.

"Sam?"

Sam shook his head and smiled. "I was just thinking how all the family cars are parked here now." He cut the engine.

"Except Zeke's."

"But he's got his own house to park his at."

"You didn't say 'all the family that lives in this house.' You just said 'all the family.' Zeke may not live here, but he's still family."

"Right." Sam did not sound pleased by this.

"What did you mean about Annie's face tonight? And who is Arliss James?"

Sam mentally cursed himself. He should have kept his mouth shut. He had promised Annie. "I wasn't supposed to say anything. Now I've probably caused her more trouble." He sighed. "Zeke hit her."

"I figured."

"Her cheek was bruised and swollen. But that's not all."

"Oh?"

"No. He hit her a second time, in the stomach, and she...she lost the baby."

Bob put a tired hand to his temple and closed his eyes. "Damn that boy." He bit his lower lip and shook his head fiercely. "No, no. Damn me, for making him the way he is. Damn me to hell."

“But he was never this way until now. It’s like something’s snapped. He’s out of control.” Sam quickly recounted the story of Reverend Johnson’s visit and Arliss James’s dog. He ended by telling of his visit to Annie—discovering her battered condition and the bloody condition in which Zeke had returned home.

“Others shouldn’t have to pay for my wrongs,” Bob said. “But that’s not the way in this world, is it?”

“I guess not,” Sam replied.

“It’s enough to make you old. Let’s go on inside for now. Maybe we can sort all this mess out tomorrow. Things usually look brighter in the daylight.”

Sam nodded, removed his keys from the ignition, and reached for the door handle. He paused, fingertips curling around the metal latch. “You don’t think Zeke will do anything crazy tonight, do you?”

Bob considered this for a moment before shaking his head. “He was too drunk. He most likely passed out on Jimmy’s couch. I can’t see him doing anything or going anywhere but home.”

“To Annie,” Sam added ominously.

Bob made as if he were about to say something else, perhaps some words of comfort for Sam. However, he abruptly closed his mouth, likely realizing that no words of comfort would suffice. Father and son regarded one another silently for a space of about five seconds, each communicating their fears and feelings of helplessness. Then, together, they got out of the truck and went into the house, where Rebecca was reading her Bible in the living room and Mal was lying on the floor with his *Animals of Africa* coloring book, coloring a giraffe purple.

Table 100: The 100 Best Books of 2010

As they heaved the chest of old-fashioned leather, the feelings changed in the strong light, as if they were on the side of the road. The chest was now open, and the books were slipping in. The light was deep, and the chest was now open. When a light came out of the chest, he felt the chest in his hand. He was looking for a way to say when he was in the chest, and he was in the chest. They looked with delight at the chest, and he looked at the chest. If you could see the chest, you could see the chest. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open.

If you could see the chest, you could see the chest. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open.

He looked down the street, and he looked down the street. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open. The chest was now open, and the chest was now open.

-8-

Zeke did not go home to Annie.

At first, he cruised the streets of Midland aimlessly, sometimes driving in the wrong lane, sometimes driving on the sidewalk. Sometimes he drove agonizingly slowly, inching along as he fought to keep from passing out behind the wheel. When a fresh clutch of drunken anger seized him, he drove dangerously fast. He was driving in such a way when he ran over the blue mailbox in front of the high school. Zeke cackled with delight as the rectangular bin bounced off his bumper and spun across the road. It spat envelopes like busted teeth and banged to a stop against the curb in front of Superintendent Whitmore's house. Zeke imagined it was Sam's nigger he had just run down.

It was this thought that directed him across the tracks and out of Midland's corporate limits to Moe Johnson's house. He took the driveway corner too soon and plowed over a tin mailbox on a wooden post. Zeke cheered and whooped. *Zeke two, mailboxes zero.*

He sped down the drive and slammed on his brakes at the last possible moment, the two-story house rushing toward him, filling his windshield. The truck stopped halfway up the concrete walkway, the right-front tire digging a trench through one of Louise's flowerbeds. Zeke's dusty wake caught up with him and billowed around the truck. The monstrous vehicle's headlights sliced through the murky cloud, bathing the front of the house in bright, blinding light.

Zeke tumbled out of the truck, ramming the horn twice with his fist.

The front door opened and Moe stepped calmly onto the porch, dressed in slacks, an undershirt, and red suspenders that hung loose at his waist. A pair of reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. Gathering up the suspenders and shrugging his way into them, Moe asked, "Can I help you?" He casually hooked his thumbs in the suspenders, sounding for all the world like a man speaking to a traveling encyclopedia salesman rather than a drunken, angry redneck.

"I've come for your whore, old man!" Zeke yelled, tottering about in the yard like an unsure child taking its first feeble steps.

"I'm afraid I don't know who you're talking about," Moe called back.

"That a fact?"

"That's a fact. See, I have upwards of about two-dozen whores. If you want a particular one, you got to be specific."

"Oh, I see. You're a funny nigger, is that it?"

"That's pretty much it, yes."

"How about I get my deer knife outta my glove compartment? We'll see how funny y'are then, won't we?"

"Now, take it easy, son. Don't go getting ahead of yourself. Not all us niggers have dogs you can carve up, you know."

Zeke bared his teeth and snarled, much like a dog himself. "You may not got no dog, old man, but you got that whore. And I got my knife."

"And I've got my father's old Smith & Wesson." Moe reached into his pocket and pulled out a gleaming black revolver.

Fear streaked across Zeke's face then disappeared, fast as lightning. He grinned a stupid, toothy grin and pointed at the weapon. "Aw, that old thing wouldn't fire. You'd just as likely take your hand off as shoot me if you were to pull the trigger." He paused and added lyrically, "Nigger."

"Get in your truck and leave, Zeke Little." Moe cocked the gun. "Or one of us may wind up in the hospital before this is over."

Zeke's eyes blinked rapidly. He wobbled about on unsteady feet before leaning against his truck for support. Finally, he inched backward toward the driver's door. "Before this is over, old man, one of us may wind up in a worse place than the hospital."

"I hope not," Moe said quietly. "But if it comes to that, know I'll protect my family. No matter what."

"You'll protect your family, huh? Well, so will I, Reverend. So will I." And Zeke crawled into the cab of his truck, cranked the ignition, and pealed out in reverse. The massive tires chewed up great clods of grass and dirt and spat them out. Zeke ignored the driveway, tearing across the grassy expanse between the house and the highway. He hit the ditch and bounced onto the road, fishtailing wildly.

Moe kept his thumb on the hammer and eased back the revolver's trigger. Louise and Julie rushed onto the porch. They had been watching from behind the living room window, peeping out the curtain. Louise put an arm around her husband's shoulders. Julie stared after the disappearing taillights of Zeke's truck.

Moe put a hand to his chest and took several long, deep breaths.

"That was Sam's *brother*?" Julie turned to her grandparents. "That?"

"I'm afraid so, hon," Louise said, putting her free arm around Julie.

“I never thought I’d need this thing,” Moe said under his breath, hefting the revolver in his hand. “I never thought I’d need it.” He looked helplessly at his wife.

Louise turned to Julie. “Sweetie, could you go in and fix us some nice hot tea? How about that?”

“I think we could use it,” Julie agreed, going inside.

Moe sat down in the swing. He had the look of a man in shock, a man who has just been belted in the stomach and is slowly regaining his wind. He cradled the gun with both hands in his lap. Louise sidled up next to him and nuzzled him, running a hand through his silver hair. “What is it, sweetheart?” she coaxed.

“Where is my faith, Louise? Where is my faith? I went out to face a drunken man and instead of taking the Lord, I took a rusted antique that might have very well crippled me if I had tried to fire it. It would have served me right if the damn thing had blown up in my face.”

“You were doing what you thought you needed to do, Moe. That’s all. You were protecting your family.”

“But I can’t do that alone. I can’t do anything alone. I, I didn’t even think.”

Louise stroked his arm lovingly, trailing her fingers lightly from his elbow to his wrist. “Maybe we should tell Julie she shouldn’t see Sam Little anymore.”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to. That’s not the way to change things, to run.”

“We have to stop thinking about change, Moe, and start thinking about our family. Zeke Little is like a mad dog, and you can’t trust a mad dog.”

“But Sam...”

“We can’t rely on Sam to protect her. You said it yourself. We can’t even rely on ourselves to protect her. We can’t depend on anyone but God.”

“And what if God doesn’t want them to be kept apart? Have you thought of that, Louise? If *that’s* the case, then who are we to stand in the way of God’s will?”

“Lord help us,” Louise breathed. She shook her head. “It’s her decision, I reckon.”

“Yes. And it’s our place to have faith.”

“All things work together, right?” Louise removed the gun from her husband’s hand and placed his arm around her.

“That’s right. All things.” Moe set the revolver on the floor.

As Julie poured the tea inside, wondering herself if she should have anything else to do with Sam Little, Moe and Louise held one another on the porch and listened to the crickets’ nightly serenade.

Annie was reading V.C. Andrews when she heard the distant roar of Zeke’s truck. She was sitting in her favorite recliner with her feet tucked under her, open book in hand and a bowl of popcorn on the end table beside the chair. She had just put a handful of popcorn into her mouth and started the last chapter when she heard an engine revving. There was nothing unusual in that she could hear him before he arrived; that mufflerless truck of his insisted on announcing its presence like a schoolyard bully. However, there was something different about the way the truck sounded this time. It sounded confused and angry, as if it did not know which gear it wanted and was highly annoyed. As the

noise grew steadily closer, Annie thought of an enraged, wounded bear crashing through dense underbrush.

She put aside her book and went to the front door. As she opened it, the truck burst into sight, careening off the road and roaring into the yard. It trampled wildflowers and tore tire-trenches in the grass as it charged toward the house. Annie stood motionless in the doorway, unable to move or breathe. She could see Zeke through the windshield, slumped in the seat and lolling about, a digesting morsel in the transparent belly of the beast. When Annie saw that the truck was not going to stop, that it would strike the house-trailer near her bedroom, she threw open the door and leapt down the steps.

The truck hit the trailer with a time-stopping horrendous crunch. Glass shattered and metal shrieked. Annie yelped and dropped to the grass. She heard an unearthly, terrifying groan that seemed to fill the world, and she clapped her hands over her ears.

It was over in less than five seconds.

Annie uncovered her ears to a tranquil summer night. She got shakily to her feet and stared numbly at Zeke's truck. It was buried nose-first in the side of their home. There was a small rip in the trailer's metal wall. Bright pink tufts of insulation protruded like spilled intestines.

She was slow to react, staring wonderingly at the wreckage. The hood of Zeke's truck was crumpled like an accordion. Did he survive? How could he have? She could not see him. Was he alive or dead? Whatever the answer, was it good or bad for her? *Am I a terrible person?* she thought miserably.

Annie heard a low moaning from inside the cab of the truck, and her paralysis snapped.

“Zeke? Zeke, are you alive?” She ran to the truck. Zeke was slumped over the steering wheel, groaning. Annie reached in through the shattered window and gently pushed him back against the seat. Blood trickled from a cut above his eye, and there was a large red welt across his forehead where he had struck the steering wheel. Amazingly, he was wearing his seatbelt. Annie could not remember him ever donning a seatbelt when he was sober, much less drunk. She yanked on the driver’s door. It was jammed. Adrenaline coursing through her, she unbuckled his seatbelt and gripped him under both arms. With a savage cry of determination, she hauled Zeke from the wrecked cab of his truck through the window. She managed to drag him a few yards into the lawn before collapsing. She hit the ground on her butt, and Zeke flopped back against her.

Annie sat there, cradling her husband, looking at her home.

The trailer sat crookedly on its cinder block foundation. Where Zeke’s truck had hit resembled a crunched aluminum can. She realized that the otherworldly groan she had heard had been the entire trailer shifting from the force of the impact.

Zeke’s eyes fluttered briefly.

Annie glanced down and placed a hand on his cheek.

He opened his eyes and rolled them up at her.

“You’re okay,” she said without much relief, the words leaving a bad taste in her mouth. She mechanically stroked his cheek, and when her fingers brushed against his sandpapery stubble, she understood the implications of her words. *You’re okay. Your beard will continue to grow, and in the morning you’ll wake up to shave it, a little bit sore, a lot hung over. By some miracle or curse of God, you’ll wake up in the morning.* “You just had an accident, but you’re okay. You’re okay.”

Zeke's head swiveled toward the trailer. Before slipping into unconsciousness, he blinked and breathed one sluggish, stupid word: "Oops."

Annie cradled his head in her lap and cried.

-9-

On Wednesday morning, Julie paid a visit to Sam at Homer's Garage.

At 10:30, Homer stood outside, sweating through his thick coveralls and cussing the Coke machine. The garage door was open, and Sam was sweeping a half-week's accumulation of discarded customer receipts and dirt into a pile. He hummed along with Chubby Checker and "The Twist," half-listening to the radio and half-listening to Homer spout obscenities at the vending machine. The machine refused to cough up Homer's fifty cents, no matter how much or how hard he banged on it. He was already frustrated that he had to put money into a machine that he owned; he had misplaced the key sometime yesterday afternoon.

Sam heard a "God forsaken old whore!" followed by a loud wham and smiled to himself, knowing the tiny silver key was most likely buried somewhere in the paper rubble strewn across Homer's desk. On Sam's advice, for ten minutes that morning, Homer had ransacked every drawer and rummaged through every pile, and still he had come up empty-handed. Finally, with a loud, vulgar exclamation that had sounded in the enclosed office like a rifle shot, the disgruntled mechanic had fished fifty cents out of his cash register and stormed outside, muttering under his breath. A moment later, after Sam had flicked on the radio and begun sweeping, he had heard the first of many long and colorful strings of curses.

"Do you remember when'," Sam sang, pushing his broom in time with the music, "Things were really hummin'?"

“Gimmee my change, you son-of-a-motherless sow!”

“Come on let’s twist again, twistin’ time is here!” Sam shook the broom with the song’s last beat. As the KLAZ announcer returned and began a fevered advertisement for a car dealership in Forrest City, Sam went to fetch the dustpan from inside the office. Another violent series of kicks and grunts ended in abrupt silence. As Sam returned to the garage, he saw Homer approaching, wiping the sweat from his wrinkled brow with a grease-spotted rag.

“Did you get it?” Sam asked, sweeping up the dust.

“You see me drinkin’ anything?” Homer hooked a frustrated thumb over his shoulder. “Looks like you got company. Thought I’d give it up till the lady left.”

Sam looked past Homer and saw Julie stepping out of her grandfather’s gray Oldsmobile. She was alone. Wearing jeans and a plain white T-shirt, she was radiant in the morning sunlight. However, her face appeared troubled. Her eyes squinted against the sun, her brow furrowed, her lips pressed together tightly, grimly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her, setting aside his broom.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked.

Inside the office, Homer cranked the air conditioner and put his feet up on his desk. On the radio, John Fogarty of Credence Clearwater Revival was proclaiming, “I ain’t no fortunate son!”

“It’s pretty obvious,” Sam replied. “Let’s go outside.” They walked out of the gloomy garage into the sunlight.

Julie toyed anxiously with a heart-shaped ring on her left middle finger. She did not speak until she had gathered her thoughts. What she finally said to Sam, her face upturned to his, was, "Maybe we shouldn't do anything else together while I'm here."

"What are you talking about?" Something inside Sam's chest plummeted and landed like a lead weight in his stomach.

"Your brother showed up at my grandparents' house last night."

"*What?* When?"

"Around nine-thirty. He had been drinking."

"So he didn't go home after all," Sam said to himself.

"Come again?"

"Sorry, just thinking out loud. My Dad's boss had a barbecue and invited a bunch of workers over. Zeke got invited because he was my Dad's son. Dad asked me to go with him, so I went. There was a lot of drinking, but Zeke hit it the heaviest. He and I got into an argument. When Dad and I left, he was fuming mad and three sheets to the wind to boot."

"What was the argument about?" Her even tone of voice and raised eyebrows suggested she already knew.

"Well," Sam stammered, "You know, big brother and little brother stuff."

"Was it over me?"

"Julie, look..."

"Just tell me, yes or no."

"Yes."

Julie nodded. “I was reading in the living room when he showed up. Papaw was upstairs, changing clothes, and Grandma was in the kitchen. He blew the horn and came out of his truck yelling. Papaw went onto the porch, and we watched from the living room window. My grandfather had to point an old rusty pistol at him before he would leave.” Julie’s voice began to tremble. “He threatened me, Sam. He called me a...a...” She broke off, shaking her head. “It doesn’t matter what he said, just that he said it.”

“I’m so sorry, Julie.” Sam stepped forward awkwardly, wanting to hug her and comfort her as he had Annie. But, of course, he knew that Julie was not Annie—Annie was family—and he stopped short. Still, Julie did not take a step back. She stood less than six inches from Sam, close enough for him to catch the scent of rose petals.

“It’s not your fault.” A lock of midnight hair dropped over her ear, and she absently brushed it back. “But you see why I say we should go our separate ways, right?”

“No,” Sam said immediately. “No, I don’t see why.”

Julie sighed. “I’ve come between you and your family, Sam. Surely you realize that. And now, I’m afraid for *my* family. Your brother—no offense—is crazy.”

“My brother was drunk. That’s nothing he hasn’t been before.” *And you believe that?* demanded a shrill inner voice. *You know she’s right. Zeke is one or two cans short of a six-pack, always has been.* The voice was quiet for a moment, considering, and then it blurted out with triumph, *Of course! You want to be with her! And you’ll say anything to make sure of that, won’t you? Even at the expense of her and her family’s safety!* Sam recognized this voice; it was his mother. His overprotective mother. “No,” he said.

“No what?” Julie asked, a puzzled expression on her face.

“No, you haven’t come between me and my family. I don’t care what Zeke or my mother says. I enjoy being with you.”

Julie regarded him quietly, her brown eyes penetrating deep into his green. She said, “I talked to Grandma this morning, asked her what I should do. She said it was my choice, that I should follow my heart. Does that sound corny or what?”

“It sounds right.”

“What do *you* want, Sam? I’ll be packing up and heading back to California in a week or so. It’s you who has to live with whatever we decide.”

Sam looked around him, taking in the garage; the flat farmland beyond it; and the distant, squat, square buildings of Midland. It was all so small-time, so country-bumpkin, so redneck and restrictive. It was his life, and it was not that much. Here, standing before him, was an exotic flower that would bloom in his life for only a brief time. Julie was everything Midland was not, everything Sam dreamed of knowing and experiencing. Once, not long after high school graduation, he had stood in his driveway and watched his best friend disappear in a battered brown El Camino pick-up. He could have left Midland with Marcus Bishop, could have forsaken Mal, could have left behind the bitter old Bible-thumper his mother was becoming in his father’s absence. But he did not. And now, after four years of static existence and an occasional day of regret tinged with pangs of longing for something more, Sam saw before him Julie. God, she was so beautiful. And his brother and mother were so very ugly.

“So, it’s really your decision, Sam, not mine,” the flower was saying. “What’s it going to be? What do you want to do?”

Sam smiled, slowly and surely. "I want to take you to the lake for a picnic tomorrow."

Julie smiled back, helpless not to. The optimism behind his boyish grin was infectious. If Moe had been witness to the scene, those ominous clouds of his would have parted briefly, and a glowing ray of sunshine would have cracked down from heaven. "Are you certain that's what you want?"

"Yes," said Sam, and he was. Even later that summer, after the clouds had poured out their storm and left a path of destruction in his life, Sam did not regret his certainty. At the present, there was only that ray of sunshine, and in the days and weeks ahead, that sunshine would prove sufficient.

The lake was Horseshoe Lake, about thirty miles east of Midland, close enough to the Mississippi border that one could see a towering casino behind a stand of trees on the horizon. It was visible from anywhere on the lake, an ugly steel, glass, and concrete structure that jutted unnaturally from the landscape, as unpleasing to look at as a broken bone poking through the skin. On Thursday, two days before the scheduled F.O.L.D. rally in Midland and one day before Annie Little would run away from her husband, Sam, Julie, and Mal drove along the western edge of the lake in Sam's pick-up, scouting for a nice spot to have their picnic. It was the first of three days both Sam and Julie would never forget as long as they lived.

The road surrounding the lake was gravel, fraught with potholes and narrow wooden bridges that shuddered each time Sam's truck thumped across them. Julie and Mal were sitting lakeside, watching out the window for a clearing. Most of the bank was

tangled with bushes. Swarms of mosquitoes hovered busily and forbiddingly in places. With the windows down, the three could hear their high-pitched humming, even over the rough crunch of the gravel beneath the tires. Trees lined both sides of the road, unusual for the Delta. The sun filtered through them, casting gloomy shadows across the road.

“It’s not such a bad place,” Sam said a little too defensively.

“I didn’t say anything,” Julie replied, smiling.

“Snake!” cried Mal. He pointed ahead.

Through Sam’s cracked windshield, the three of them spotted an enormously long snake shooting across the road. The sun danced lightly on its blue-black scales as it disappeared into the bushes.

“Snake, snake, snake, snake, snake, snake, *snake!*” Mal clapped.

“I’m glad *someone’s* happy about it,” muttered Sam.

Julie laughed, covering her mouth with her hand.

They found a spot about a mile down from where they saw the snake. A narrow road branched off toward the water, leading to a flat, grassy area where boats could be put in. Sam parked under the shade of a weeping willow. Mal, who had earlier been insistent about being allowed to hold the picnic basket, thrust it at Julie and clamored around her. He jumped out of the truck and hit the ground running.

“Mal, don’t run off! Hold up a second!” Sam scrambled out of the truck and ran after the boy. “Hey!” He caught him at the edge of a copse of trees, grabbing hold of his elbow. “Slow down, big guy. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Snake huntin’! Gonna get me a snake!”

“Oh, no. Uh-uh, buddy. Not today. Come on back over here.” Sam led him back to the grassy clearing. “You don’t play around with snakes. If one bit you, it might be poisonous, and then you’d wind up in the hospital or the cemetery. And if I let that happen, I wouldn’t be long winding up in one or the other myself.”

Julie was spreading a red-and-white-checkered blanket on the grass. “This blanket is perfect. It’s a real picnic blanket. Grandma found it stuck back on the top shelf of her bedroom closet.”

“That basket is pretty nifty, too,” Sam said.

And it was. A hand-woven wicker basket, it had a sturdy handle in the middle and two flaps on either side that opened for storage. One side was lined with plastic, like an ice chest. Here Julie had packed three Cokes in ice before leaving for the lake. For food, she had wrapped two tuna sandwiches for her and Sam and a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich for Mal in Saran Wrap. As an afterthought, she had also tucked into the basket three apples from Louise’s fruit bowl on the dining room table.

They each took a seat on the blanket, and Julie passed out the drinks and sandwiches. Mal gobbled his greedily, while Sam and Julie ate at a more leisurely pace. It was six o’clock, and the summer sun was still strong in the faded denim sky. The edge of the lake was covered by a blanket of blooming lily pads. Once a fishing boat buzzed by, and its wake came rolling into shore, undulating beneath the pads and rocking them gently. Sam chewed his sandwich and listened as the small waves lapped against the bank, washing around the many cypress stobs that jutted from the wet earth. When the angry drone of the boat’s motor had died away, silence returned and settled around the three picnickers, stilling the lily pads and calming the water.

“This isn’t half bad, Sam,” Julie said wistfully.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “I don’t usually care for tuna, but this....” He stopped. She was covering her mouth and shaking, trying to hold in the laughter so she wouldn’t spray chewed food all over everything.

“What?” he said innocently.

“I didn’t mean the sandwich,” she managed, swallowing then letting loose with the laughter.

“Oh,” he said, puzzled. “Well, then, what *did* you mean?”

“I meant this,” she said, waving her arm around her head, gesturing expansively at their surroundings. “All this, you know. The lake. The quiet. Nature.”

“Ohhh,” he said. “Nature, right. But you’ve got to admit, the tuna’s good, too.” He flashed her a lopsided grin.

Julie returned the grin, nodding. “I guess so. I’m no connoisseur of tuna, but I guess so.”

“Good tuna,” Mal agreed, holding up his peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich.

This set Julie to laughing again, and Sam joined in. They laughed until their stomachs hurt, and Mal giggled delightedly along with them. When the fit had passed, Sam and Julie lay back on their elbows, stretching their legs out in front of them. Mal had gobbled half his sandwich, and he was about to stuff in the remaining half when something caught his attention.

A flock of five ducks swam along the edge of the lake, their heads swiveling curiously toward the picnickers, their orange feet paddling steadily. The green-headed male in the lead took one look at them and faced back straight ahead with disinterest.

The brown females swimming behind him, however, showed more interest. While the two directly in back of the mallard continued after him, the two bringing up the rear lingered. One honked what seemed like a greeting, and the other whipped its head round and chewed at the feathers beneath its wing.

Mal watched them intently.

“They’re not even afraid,” whispered Julie, touching Sam on the arm.

Her fingers were warm against his skin. “Maybe they’re hungry.” He tapped Mal on the shoulder. “You want to feed them?”

The female who had honked earlier honked again, more urgently, as if to demand, *Hurry it up, will you?*

“Are they pois’nous?” Mal whispered.

Sam smiled and shook his head. “Not hardly, big guy. Just pinch off a piece of bread and toss it at them. But no big movements. You don’t want to scare them.”

Mal tore off a tiny piece of crust, drew back his abnormally short arm, and hurled the bread with a grunt. It plopped into the water before the talkative one. She plucked at it, tossed her head back, and swallowed it in one fast gulp.

Julie applauded, and Mal grinned excitedly. “Again?” he asked Sam.

“Sure.”

This time he tore off a larger chunk of bread with a smear of peanut butter on it. The quiet duck caught this one before it ever touched the water, snatching it out of mid-air. Mal clapped and cheered. Startled by the sudden noise, she paddled away in pursuit of the mallard and the others. The talkative duck turned and started slowly after her,

honking her disapproval. *You silly duck*, she seemed to be quacking, *it's just a little boy on the bank, nothing to be afraid of.*

Mal, upset by the ducks' sudden departure, jumped to his feet and ran to the water's edge. What happened next was a gracious gesture on Mal's part, but it was not well met by the unsuspecting, quacking duck. Hoping to entice her to stay, Mal lobbed the remainder of his sandwich at her. The half-eaten peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich splatted in the water behind the duck, and she shot forward like a speedboat, fluttering her wings and honking furiously.

Julie felt both sympathy and amusement. She gripped Sam's arm a little tighter, and he glanced at her. She was smiling, her eyes fixed lovingly on Mal.

Slump-shouldered, Mal wandered back to the picnic blanket and flopped down.

"I guess ducks just aren't crazy about peanut butter and jelly," Sam consoled.

Mal did not respond, only plucked at the blanket dejectedly.

"Hey, Mal." Julie reached into the picnic basket. "Do you like apples?"

The little boy looked at Julie and nodded, the disappointment disappearing from his face. After removing the apple from the basket, Julie polished it briskly on her shirttail and presented it to Mal. He seized it with both hands, the ducks now forgotten.

As Mal bit into the fruit, Julie realized that her fingers were still draped lightly across Sam's arm. She hastily removed them. He glanced down where they had been and then looked at her. She would not meet his eye; a barely discernible flush glowed in her cheeks. He let his gaze linger on her for a moment, wondering what she was thinking, trying to think of something to say. Then Mal tapped his shoulder.

"What is it, big guy?"

“Can I feed those birds?” Mal was standing, apple in one hand, pointing with the other. Two fat black crows hopped about near the edge of the clearing, pecking at the charred remains of a campfire, scavenging for scraps among the ashes.

“You can try, but they may not be as friendly as the ducks.”

Mal headed off toward the crows.

“And watch for broken glass!” Sam called.

“He’s absolutely precious,” Julie said.

“He’s the best thing in my life.”

“The two of you are really close, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been by his side ever since he was born.”

“I think that’s wonderful.” A thoughtful smile suddenly spread across Julie’s face. After a moment, she said, “You’re a puzzle to me, you know.”

Sam laughed. “How is that?”

“A white southern male who works at a garage and drives a pick-up, by all stereotypical standards, should not be interested in watching fireflies and stars, feeding ducks peanut butter, or reading Ernest Hemingway.”

“I’ve never put much stock in stereotypes.”

“I wouldn’t imagine you would, would you?”

The two regarded each other quietly for a handful of seconds, searching one another’s faces for some betrayal of emotion, some hint of what the other might be feeling. Sam met her eyes and held them, and he suddenly felt a fluttery sensation in his stomach, like the beating wings of a caged bird desperate for release. He sensed a similar feeling within Julie. He could almost hear the thrashing of her bird as it too flew against

its confinement. But then she looked away, down at her lap. The bird in Sam's stomach settled miserably, resting its wings against its sides in defeat.

"Do you know the word *decorum*, Sam?"

Sam shook his head.

"It means whatever is fitting or appropriate. In literature, it refers to whatever is appropriate to a genre. For example, in tragedy, there is always death or loss. In an epic, there is always a hero. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Well, there's *decorum* in life, too. Certain situations or circumstances are handled in specific ways. Let's see, what's a good example? You're a mechanic, right? Okay. You wouldn't use a screwdriver to fix a flat tire, would you? No, you'd use a jack and a...a whatchamacallit."

"Tire iron."

"Right. Certain things are appropriate at certain times for certain situations. Others are not. Are you following me?" Julie sounded nervous.

"I'm following you, but I'm not sure where we're going."

"That's just it. Neither am I." She sighed. Then, unexpectedly, she reached out and grasped both of Sam's hands. Holding them gently but firmly, she spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. "When I came out here, my only intention was to spend time with my grandparents. I never thought I would be spending time with a person my age who happened to be a white male. A surprisingly wonderful white male."

Sam smiled and opened his mouth to speak.

"No, no. Let me finish." Julie pressed her left index finger against Sam's lips.

The bird in his stomach surged against its bars, flapping its wings furiously.

“I decided to spend some time with this white male, not giving much thought to what the consequences of my actions might be. I disregarded the fact that I was in the South, that I was in a town already troubled by racial tensions. And because of that, because I was careless, I endangered my grandparents and myself. I even endangered you.”

The bird had fallen silent and still. Sam sat with his hands in Julie’s, speechless. He felt oddly distant from himself, detached. A wave of unreality washed over him. He thought crazily of Guy Smiley on *Sesame Street* thrusting a microphone in a muppet’s face and crying, “This is your life!” It did not feel like Sam Little’s life at that moment. And it certainly did not feel like anything to shout or celebrate about.

“What I’m saying is that I’ve come to a decision. I’ve thought about this ever since Zeke showed up the night before last, and the only way I can think of to solve the problem of me and you is for there to be no me and you.”

“That’s what you want?” Sam said quietly.

“Of course not.” She squeezed Sam’s hands. “But it’s how it has to be. It’s this situation’s *decorum*. It’s what’s appropriate.”

“For who?”

“For everybody.”

“You don’t even know how I feel. You haven’t even asked me.”

“I know. I thought it would be easier for me to say what I had to say if I didn’t know. I guess I was hoping you’d make it really easy on me and say, ‘Huh? What are you talking about? I don’t feel that way about you.’”

"You know better," Sam said, touching her cheek.

She nodded.

"Want to know what I think?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I say to hell with what is *decorum* for everybody else. My brother is mean, no doubt about it. But that makes him something to be pitied, not something to be feared."

"You sound like my grandfather. You have faith that everything's going to work out for some greater good."

"Maybe. Maybe not. But I do know that what I feel for you is bigger than my brother, bigger than this narrow-minded town, bigger than all of this Nowhere Land around us. When I'm with you, Julie, I feel like I'm *somewhere*. Like I have something that is my own, and it's pure and good, no matter what the rest of the world says or thinks."

"Sam...." She looked as if she might cry.

"Do you know what I thought the first time I saw you?" Sam asked.

She shook her head. A tear spilled over the precipice of her eye and rolled down her cheek.

Sam wiped it away and said, "I looked at you and saw something too beautiful for this place."

Julie leaned forward and put her arms around Sam. She hugged him close, holding him tightly as if he might slip away from her. Sam took in the intoxicating rose-petal scent of her. He could feel her ear pressed against his, her hair brushing lightly against his cheek. He placed his hands on her shoulders, returning the hug. He felt her

head turn, and then her voice and breath were in his ear, impossibly warm and cool at the same time. Her words and the gentle caress of their air set the bird in his stomach to fluttering madly. “Thank you,” she whispered. “It’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

She leaned back, almost as if she were pulling away. But Sam kept his hands on her shoulders, holding her close. They looked into each other’s eyes for what seemed an infinite space of time. Julie’s face filled Sam’s view. He could see the hundreds of pores of her light-dark skin, the upward curl of her eyelashes. All the while the bird beat furiously against its cage. And finally, when Sam thought he saw acceptance flicker in Julie’s eyes, the cage door burst open and the bird soared upward.

They kissed. The bird climbed on the wind of Sam’s fear and excitement, rising from his stomach into his chest and spreading its wings gloriously there. It continued on, circumnavigating his air-filled lungs and rapidly beating heart, finding a brief perch on the back of his tongue, and finally thrusting itself out his open mouth to freedom.

Sam pulled away first.

Julie hugged him again. “You’re trembling,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said.

“It’s okay,” Julie replied. She leaned away and grinned crookedly at Sam. In her best sultry, southern tone, she cooed, “You know, I ain’t never kissed no white boy before.”

Sam smiled uneasily. “I’ve never kissed a girl before. *Any* girl.”

Julie embraced him once again. “It was wonderful.”

“This is the only *decorum* we should be worried about,” Sam said suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what’s fitting for the two of us. And no one else.”

Julie closed her eyes and held Sam. He held her back. There was an unbearably long passage of time in which she said nothing, and Sam feared her original decision to go their separate ways would stand. Then, as a sudden cool breeze wafted off the water and through the trees, Julie said, “Okay. I’ll have faith too.”

For Sam, at that instant, the world became brighter and louder. He saw rays of sunlight slanting lazily between trees and lighting brilliantly on the grass in the clearing. He marveled at the pale green underbellies of the leaves on the trees. He heard birds chirping and the busy rapping of a woodpecker. Somewhere on the lake a fish—most likely a bass—smacked the surface of the water heavily.

“SAM JULIE! SAM JULIE!”

Mal’s hoarse, croaky cry startled the two apart. Sam was on his feet and sprinting. Mal should have been at the edge of the clearing, where the crows had been nosing around the campfire. But now both the crows and Sam’s brother were gone. Lying atop the burned pile, between two charred sticks, was Mal’s bright red apple with two bites in its side. The edges of the soft white fruit had turned brown.

“Mal, where are you?”

“SAM JULIE! SAM JULIE!”

Sam ran into the woods, ducking low-hanging limbs and dodging briar bushes.

“Talk to me, big guy!”

“Tell us where you are, Mal!” Julie was three yards behind Sam, whirling around, looking in all directions.

“Do you see him?” Sam asked, pushing his way further into the tangled undergrowth.

“Yes,” Julie replied unexpectedly. “He’s right over there, at the edge of the water.” She pointed.

Sam peered through the trees and immediately spotted Mal’s bright yellow T-shirt. The little boy stood with his back to the woods, staring down at the ground. He was no more than fifteen feet from the edge of the clearing, and the briars and brambles were not near as thick around him as they were around Sam and Julie. The two shared a sigh of relief, and then they made their careful way through the knotted undergrowth.

“*SAM JULIE!*” Mal cried again, oblivious to their approach.

“We’re here, we’re here,” Sam said.

Mal turned, a startled expression on his face.

“Did you not hear us yelling?” Julie asked.

He shook his head.

“He does that sometimes,” Sam explained. “When one thing grabs his attention, he tunes out everything else. It’s like some kind of trance. He doesn’t hear us calling him, but he does hear himself calling us. This wouldn’t be a problem if he *wouldn’t wander off.*” The emphasis was lost on Mal. He was engrossed with whatever lay at his feet. Sam spread his arms in a what-can-you-do gesture.

“What’s all the fuss about?” Julie asked.

Mal pointed at the ground and stepped aside.

It was a dead bird, a cardinal. The small creature lay on its back, its legs thrust stiffly skyward. Its bright red feathers were crusted with a darker red. Dried tributaries

of blood ran from its tiny nostrils. The bird's eyes stared up empty. One wing was flush against its side; the other was bent at a horribly unnatural angle. A string of ants trickled from beneath the cardinal's tail feathers.

Sam suspected that if he were to flip it over, he would see hundreds of ants in the same shape as the dead, broken bird. *Decorum*, he thought and shivered.

"What do you think killed it?" Julie asked.

"No telling. You didn't touch it, did you, Mal?"

Mal shook his head. "Yuck!"

"Let's get back to the clearing," Julie said, echoing Sam's thoughts.

"Yeah. We'll be eaten up with ticks and redbugs." Sam picked Mal up and carried him on his hip so the thorns and stickers would not scratch him.

The three of them returned to the picnic blanket, and Sam and Julie ate their apples. Sam offered Mal half of his, but the little boy only made a face. He had lost interest in apples when the crows refused the pieces he tossed at them. Dropping the worthless apple, he had followed the birds into the woods. They had led him to the cardinal, a veritable feast when compared to scraps of fruit. But, annoyed by Mal's intrusiveness, the temperamental crows had ultimately flown away squawking, abandoning their find.

Later that evening, as the sun began to hang low in the western sky, the three picnickers packed up and left the lake. By the time Sam dropped Julie off, the sky had turned a fiery orange, speckled with electric blue clouds. Sam did not get out of the truck. Julie walked around to his window, leaned in, and kissed him lightly on the lips.

"Thank you for a wonderful day," she said.

“No kidding,” Sam replied.

Mal wormed his way into Sam’s lap, squeezing between him and the steering wheel. “Now me!”

“What?” Julie asked.

“I think he wants a kiss,” Sam said.

Mal puckered up his lips.

Julie kissed him on the forehead and touched his nose with her finger. “I’ll see you boys later.”

“Bye, Julie,” Mal said through a broad, sunny grin.

Julie waved as she walked up the porch steps. Sam watched her until she disappeared inside. He turned to Mal, who sat beside him, still grinning happily.

“I know how you feel, big guy,” Sam said, shifting into reverse. “I know how you feel.”

As Sam turned the truck onto the highway, Mal’s stomach growled.

“You still hungry?”

Mal nodded, rubbing his belly.

“Yeah, my tuna’s pretty much gone, too. What say we stop by the Hornets’ Nest on the way home? Maybe grab a cheeseburger and a big chocolate milkshake?”

“Yea!” Mal bounced up and down in the seat.

Sam laughed. The kid loved cheeseburgers.

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It was almost dark when they arrived home, their stomachs full. Mal hopped up the porch steps, taking them two at a time. His arms were tucked at his sides like wings, and he flapped them and quacked with each hop. Sam could not muster the energy to hop, or quack for that matter. Not after a sweltering day's work, a momentous picnic, and a greasy Nest burger and large chocolate shake. He was tired, and all he wanted to do was go inside, kick back, and relax. He thought nothing of the darkened house to which they were returning. Rebecca was at work, on the night shift at the grocery store so she could be home with Mal during the day. Bob would be home from work at any time. A teenage coworker picked him up in the mornings and dropped him off in the evenings. A stipulation of Bob's parole, handed down by the judge who had sentenced him twelve years ago, was that he could not drive an automobile or obtain a driver's license for a period of six months.

Sam unlocked the door, and Mal dashed into the dark house, still quacking. Sliding his fingers along the wood paneling just inside and to the right of the doorway, Sam flicked on the overhead living room light.

Rebecca sat in her rocking chair, hands folded primly in her lap, staring at him.

Sam jumped, dropping his keys.

Mal stood in the center of the living room, flapping his makeshift wings. When he saw his mother, he stopped suddenly. Opening his arms, he ran to Rebecca.

"Mommy! I'm a duck! Quack quack! Quack quack!" He tried to climb into her lap.

She roughly pushed him away, never taking her eyes off Sam. They were as hard and cold as the hail that had fallen through Sam and Mal's window a week ago. Mal made another awkward attempt at climbing into her lap, quacking still, and this time she cuffed him across the ear. "Get away!" she hissed.

Mal ran to Sam and threw his arms around his waist, burying his face in his big brother's stomach and sniffing quietly. Sam rubbed a consoling hand across Mal's back, returning his mother's fierce stare. "Why did you do that?"

"Where have you been?"

"At the lake," Sam said without hesitation. "Why aren't you at work?"

"Don't you take that tone with *me*, young man!" Rebecca pushed herself out of the chair so hard that it slammed against the wall. She crossed the floor space between her and her sons with murderous speed and stabbed a bony finger in Sam's face. "Your father told me Tuesday night what happened between you and your brother at that cookout. I didn't say anything yesterday before I left for work because I had hoped you would finally see the foolishness of what you're doing, and because your father asked me not too. He said you had had enough fighting for one day."

Thank you, Dad, Sam thought.

"You were already gone this morning when your father told me you and Mal were going to the lake this afternoon. When you came in and picked up Mal after you got off today, I kept my mouth shut and waited to see if you would say anything about it to me yourself. Of course, you didn't. And now I want to know why. Why didn't you tell me yourself?"

Sam remained silent.

“You don’t want to say? Well, that’s okay. I think I already know the answer. You were with that girl today, weren’t you? That *black* girl.” She grimaced when she said “black,” as if the word actually tasted sour. “And you didn’t want me to know about it.”

“Of course I didn’t want you to know about it,” Sam said evenly.

“Because you know it’s wrong. You *know* you’re doing wrong and you’re ashamed. Ashamed because you’re tearing your family apart.”

“Oh, when are you going to wake up, Mom? Pull the wool from over your eyes and look around.” Sam laughed bitterly as he told his mother what he had told Zeke Tuesday night. “What tore this family apart was Dad coming home. We’ve been on the verge of it ever since he left. You had your affair...”

“How dare you bring that up to me!”

“...And Zeke abandoned us for it. Then you crawled into this shell of perverted Christianity, where God punishes women with retarded children. Now Dad’s home, and he isn’t the redneck role model Zeke remembers, and that makes him mad. It also makes him mad that his younger brother is having something to do with black people, with *niggers* from across the tracks! And it just plain pisses you off that I’m not kowtowing to your every wish. You’re furious because you can’t control me.” Sam’s breathing was fast and heavy, and his eyes were narrowed in anger. “If you haven’t noticed, Mom, Dad doesn’t care that I’m spending my time with Julie. Julie, that’s right. She has a name. She’s not just some black girl.”

Rebecca’s lower lip trembled. “But your brother...”

“...Is a fool. Plain and simple. Frankly, I don’t understand why you’re so eager to take his side on this. Have you forgotten how quick he ran out on us—on *you*—when you got pregnant with Mal?”

“Sam, what you’re doing, being with this girl, is *wrong!*”

“In whose eyes? Yours? Zeke’s?”

“God’s!” she cried, stamping her foot and clenching her fists.

Sam stood silent for a moment. Mal hugged him fiercely. Sam could feel the little boy’s heart beating against him. “God’s. Do you really believe that?”

“As the Lord Jesus sits on His holy throne in heaven.”

“If that is true, then who would want to believe in such a God?” Sam asked quietly.

Rebecca’s eyes flashed fire. “Don’t you blaspheme! Not in my house!”

“What you believe is not God’s way. You’re wrong.”

“I am going to pray for you, Sam.”

“I can’t believe that after seeing what that kind of hatred did to Dad, how it drove him to drinking, even to *killing*, that you would stand before me and say he was right. That black people are less than we are, simply because they’re black. After all those years of him chasing you around the kitchen with a belt or an empty bottle, after all the humiliation and bruises, you’re still filled with the same poison that infected him.”

“But it ain’t right for their kind to mix with our kind!” Rebecca cried desperately. “Especially when it causes such terrible trouble.”

“I love you, Mom. I’ll never stop loving you. But you’re wrong.”

“Sam, think of your brother, your *family*,” she pleaded. The ice in her eyes had melted, and now it brimmed in the form of tears.

Sam kneeled before Mal and said, “Why don’t you get your coloring book and go into the kitchen and color? I’ll be there in a little while to help you.” Mal did not protest. He turned and headed obediently for the kitchen, giving Rebecca a wide berth.

“I’ll tell you something about my brother,” Sam said, placing both hands firmly on his mother’s shoulders. “But first, do you remember that morning Dad came home hung over, the time he couldn’t even stand up? He’d been in Memphis all night before, bar hopping with Jimmy Walker.”

Rebecca nodded, a tear spilling down her face.

“Do you remember how you helped him into bed, undressed him and put a hot cloth on his head? How you had me bring the bowl of warm water and set it beside him?”

“You were seven.”

“That’s right. And you remember what he did that night when he woke up?”

“Yes.” Her voice was tiny and far away.

“He didn’t like the way dinner tasted.”

“It was soup,” Rebecca said. “I fixed him vegetable soup because I thought it would be easy on his stomach.”

“He threw his bowl across the kitchen, lifted the soup pot off the stove, dumped it in the floor, and put his fist in your stomach. Zeke and I were sitting at the table, helpless. All we could do was watch while he beat you, right in front of us.” Sam’s voice cracked.

Rebecca was crying freely now. Sam hugged her to him. “When I think about how we both felt, so helpless and terrified, I can’t imagine how Zeke could grow up and do even worse to his wife.”

Rebecca looked up at Sam, her face stricken. “Annie?”

“Her stomach. He...he hit her across the jaw and then kicked her in the stomach. She lost her baby.”

“Oh no, no, no,” Rebecca sobbed.

“And this is your son, Mom. My brother. The one you’re worried that I’m hurting, that I’m driving away.”

“I’m sorry, Sam. I’m so, so sorry.”

“I think of my family all the time. Everything I do, I do out of love for my family. I take care of Mal, I work to help pay bills, I went with Dad to that stupid cookout. Zeke is the one you should be begging to think of his family, Mom.” Sam held her and ran a soothing hand over her head as she cried against his chest. For the first time, he realized that he was taller than his mother. “Julie is special to me. I can’t help how I feel about her, and I don’t know that I would if I could. I’ve never felt something like this before, and I don’t want to lose it because of my cruel, selfish brother.”

Rebecca stepped back, wiping the tears from her eyes and cheeks. She brushed a dangling lock of Sam’s hair away from his forehead, the maternal equivalent of Bob’s ruffling his hair at the cookout. “Your father changed his ways over time,” she said. “Maybe your brother will, too.”

“Thank you, Mom.” Sam kissed her on the forehead. “Thank you.”

Outside, a horn sounded, the perfunctory see-you-tomorrow honk of Bob Little's ride as it pulled away. Seconds later the door opened, and Bob entered the house, dressed in denim overalls and carrying his black metal lunchbox. He shut the door and turned. When he saw Rebecca's tear-reddened face, he looked questioningly at Sam.

"I told her about Annie and Zeke," he said.

"Oh." Bob set his lunchbox on the couch. His hands were trembling.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked.

"There's something I have to do. I've been meaning to do it ever since I got home last week, but I've been putting it off." Bob was anxious, fidgety. He reminded Sam of how Mal got when he had to go to the bathroom really badly. "It's been on my mind all day today at work, and I've got to do it now, before I lose my nerve and never get it back."

"What is it?" Rebecca asked.

"Will you drive me?" Bob asked Sam, already turning back to the door.

"Uh, sure." Sam still held his keys in his hands. He followed his father onto the porch.

"Where are you going?" Rebecca called after them, stepping to the screen.

"We'll be back later," Bob answered without answering.

She stood at the screen, watching her husband and son pull out of the driveway in Sam's pick-up. The sky was inky black, starless.

From the kitchen, Mal called out, "Sam?"

"Mommy's coming, sweetheart," Rebecca called back, turning away from the darkness and closing the door. "Mommy's coming."

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“Why wasn’t your mother at work?” Bob asked as the truck bounced along the gravel road toward Highway 38.

“She was upset that Mal and I left this afternoon without telling her where we were going. She said I was trying to hide something from her.”

“Weren’t you?”

Bob said nothing.

Sam slowed as they reached the highway. “Which way?”

“Take the road that goes toward Forrest City. I forget the number.”

“Five?”

“I guess. It’s been a long time since I been that way.”

“Where are we going?”

Bob did not seem to have heard the question. “Maybe you should go see your brother tomorrow.”

“I’ve thought about that, but I’m not so sure it’ll work. Julie said he showed up at the Johnsons’ house Tuesday night. He yelled out some mean things. The reverend had to run him off with a pistol.”

Bob said nothing. He did not speak again until they arrived at their destination.

Sam was accustomed to the silences. Bob’s withdrawal into them was a physical thing, like a turtle pulling itself into its shell. He folded his arms across his chest, pressed himself up against the door, and stared vacantly out the window. And the silence rolled

on with the miles. Sam had been driving for almost fifteen minutes, still with no idea of where they were going. He was preparing to break the quiet and ask again where they were headed, when Bob said, "Slow down."

Sam took his foot off the gas and touched the brake. He glanced out the windows and saw nothing but blackness.

"Do you have a flashlight in here?" Bob said, reaching for the glove compartment.

"Under the seat."

After retrieving the flashlight, Bob pointed to the left. "There's your turn. The gravel road."

Gravel road is an overstatement, Sam thought, turning. *More like a rocky path.* The headlights illuminated a short stretch of dirt, strewn with rocks and overgrown with weeds and field grass. Up ahead, the drive ended at a black, wrought iron gate flanked by two crumbling brick columns and a rusted chain link fence.

"What is this place?" Sam asked, and then he saw.

Set into the right column of bricks was a concrete plaque. It read in black, routed letters: "Peaceful Prairie Cemetery."

"Here is good," Bob said.

Sam parked and cut the engine, switching off the headlights. Night enveloped them. He and his father could have been the only two people in the world, enclosed in a womb of absolute darkness. Sam wondered if this was what it was like for whoever was buried in Peaceful Prairie Cemetery. Then, from somewhere in the night came the faint bark of a hound, someone's hunting dog. *Not Bones, though*, Sam thought and shivered.

A chilling litany from some half-forgotten ghost story whisked through his mind: *Bloody bones, bloody bones.*

“Come with me, Sam.” Bob opened his door. It squalled in the dark like a banshee.

Sam followed his father into the graveyard, walking close, ever aware of the infinite blackness beyond the small circle of orange light cast by the Black & Decker.

“What are we doing here?” he asked.

“Searching.” Bob shined the light from tombstone to tombstone. They were crude, cheap slabs of unpolished granite. Some appeared to have been poured out of concrete. Embedded in these were tiny brown pebbles much like the ones that littered the drive up to the cemetery gate. Most of the markers leaned forward like stooped old men or were sunken in the ground like sickly, bed-ridden cancer patients. Names were chiseled finely into some, coarsely into others. There were only names and dates, never any Bible verses or pictures of angels, never a “Beloved Husband” or “Loving Wife.” The only marker that bore such a moniker jutted crookedly from the ground at the very back of the cemetery. It was an arched granite tombstone, narrow and lean, with a crack down the middle, running from top to bottom. The lettering was done well, etched into the stone by a professional hand.

Sam and Bob came to it after ten minutes of “searching.” Sam had known immediately whose grave they were “searching” for, and they had not found it among the others. As Bob flashed the circle of light on the small, crooked tombstone, Sam knew what the name would be. It was a name he had heard in countless nightmares, a name he

had strived for twelve years to bury within the basement of his mind. Now, he was standing over the actual grave of the person that buried name belonged to.

The marker read: "Lloyd Elkins. November 3, 1968 – September 12, 1987."

Below this, unique to all tombstones in Peaceful Prairie Cemetery, was an additional piece of information: "Beloved Son."

"Hello, Lloyd," Bob said conversationally. "It's been a while."

A chill raced down Sam's spine. *Goose just walked over my grave*, he thought.

Bob reached out and placed a tremulous hand on the tombstone. He trailed his fingers across the rough, grainy texture, lingering over the split. The crack ran neatly through the space between "Lloyd" and "Elkins," severed the hyphen between the dates, and disappeared into the dirt.

"How much of that night do you remember, Sam?" Bob asked without looking up. "How much of September 12, 1987, do you remember?"

"Everything," Sam replied, his mouth suddenly dry. "The rain, the smell of beer in the car, the music. I remember everything."

And he remembered.

The rain drums ceaselessly on the old Monte Carlo's roof. He sits in the leather passenger seat, watching the world wash in and out through the windshield. Water sheets down the glass, tinted pink and blue and green by the bright neon lights. From somewhere ahead, out of the rainy night, comes the distant, lonely twang of George Jones singing "She Thinks I Still Care."

He cannot see much. His eyes barely clear the top of the dashboard; it is such a big, wide dash. He knows they have stopped at a place that is not quite a restaurant and not quite a bar. Through the side windows, he can see a little better, and there are dozens of other cars parked around them. His father is inside. He has said he will only be a minute, he has to see a man in here.

*They have been to a camp on the Mississippi River, where Dad's buddy from work is staying and fishing for a week. He has not enjoyed the day, the company of his father's friends with their sweaty faces, big bellies, and beer breath. They poke his ribs and say stupid things like, "Boy, you're a growin'," or "Hell, Bob, this kid's a reed," all the time blowing their hot, smelly breath in his face. He would have much rather been with Mom at the church quilt-a-thon or riding his bicycle or reading *The Hardy Boys*. But Dad rarely asks him to do things with him.*

So, he sits in the car, seatbelt still buckled, waiting. It has been a long day, and his eyes are growing heavy. The metallic thumping of the rain on the roof and its slow sliding down the windshield have a hypnotic effect on him, and he dozes off. Time passes.

He is startled awake by the driver's door wrenching open. Dad crawls in, reeking of liquor. He has a wild look about him, soaked to the skin, his hair plastered to his pale white skull in dark ringlets. As his father jams his key into the ignition and the car roars to life, he feels his first tinge of fear. Something is terribly wrong with Dad.

The windshield wipers toss back the curtain of water, and he can see—just barely, it's such a big dash—a row of cars and a neon-lit building. The pink, blue, and green sign on the front of the building reads "The Trough," and there is a pink neon pig

sticking his smiling face into a trough over and over again. His last pleasant thought of that day and the days to come is of that pig. It looks a little like Wilbur in Charlotte's Web.

A young black man exits the building, a brown paper sack held over his head. About the age of Zeke, he wears a red T-Shirt emblazoned with Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids, blue jeans, and white Nike sneakers. Pummeled by the rain, he jogs down the walk and pauses at the edge of the parking lot, as if he can't remember where he's parked. Then, with an absent nod of his head, he starts into the lot.

The Monte Carlo suddenly surges forward.

"Dad?" he asks in a small, uncertain voice.

Dad does not hear. He whirls the big steering wheel around and gooses the accelerator.

He has never been able to see completely over the dashboard, and this has always annoyed him. It makes him feel like such a baby, even though he's ten years old. But now, he does not want to see. For once in his life, he is grateful that he is short for his age. This way, he cannot see the surprised look on the black man's face that his imaginative child's mind will later create in his nightmares. He cannot see how he tries to run and slips in the rain, how he skitters backward.

But he can hear. He hears the engine roar, the heavy thud.

Then the Monte Carlo slams into another car, and he is hurled forward and yanked backward by his seatbelt. There is a horrible shriek of metal and exploding glass, only it is not the Monte Carlo's glass that has exploded. A momentary stillness elapses, broken only by the steady sound of the drumming rain. Then another sound, high-pitched

and warbled, rises into the wet night. It is the sound of the young black man screaming. He sounds as if he is drowning. And it is over almost as soon as it begins, tapering away to nothing.

His chest burns painfully. His father has passed out or been knocked unconscious; he cannot tell which. If there is even a difference. He unbuckles his seatbelt and leans up to look over the dash. He has to see. He has to.

He wishes he had not.

The young black man is dead, pinned between the grill of the Monte Carlo and the rear of a blue Volkswagen Beetle. His upper body is slumped forward on the hood of the Monte Carlo, his arms splayed out on either side and glittering with beads of water. A stream of blood runs from beneath his face, washing down the fender, diluted pink by the rain.

He begins to cry, softly at first. By the time strangers come and take him from the car, he is sobbing, confused and frightened. As a lady who smells like cigarettes carries him into the Trough, his tears mix with the ceaseless rain that splatters upon his cheeks and inside his open mouth. And his cries begin to sound terribly like the young black man's dying scream.

“What did he do to you?” Sam asked. There was no bitterness or hatred in his voice. Only curiosity. “What no one else knows, not even Mom or Zeke, is that there was nothing involuntary about what you did that night. Was there?”

Bob shook his head.

“The judge ruled involuntary manslaughter because you were drunk, and there were no witnesses that saw the two of you arguing or fighting in the roadhouse. Nobody even saw you together. So what happened?”

“I met him in the bathroom,” Bob said. “It was really just bad timing on his part.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told you that night I had to see a man inside. I never said why. It was for money.”

“Money”

It was then that the words began. More words than Sam had heard his father speak in his entire life. They started slow at first, like water trickling through a crack in a dam. Eventually, they exploded out of Bob in a great rush, sweeping over Sam and the lonely graveyard, flooding the night. “Tom Davenport. He owned the place and one like it in Memphis. Still does, I guess, unless somebody’s killed him. I had spent a little too much time with Jimmy across the river, gambling at joints in Memphis and Helena. We fell in with a couple of guys at poker. I was in deep, Sam. Way over my head. Over five grand.

“Jimmy told me this Davenport had helped him out before, so I decided to give it a shot. He took one look at me when I walked in his office, saw I wasn’t good for the money, and told me to hit the road.

“I went out front to the bar and got drunk. You were sitting in the car all that time, by yourself.” Bob put a hand to his forehead then moved it to his right temple, kneading the flesh there for a moment, as if all this talking gave him a headache. “When I finally decided to leave, I had to go take a leak first. So I go into the can, and there’s

this..this black kid in there, combing his hair at the sink. Lloyd. ‘What’s up, my man?’ he says to me. ‘You look like you gonna need a designated driver.’ I told him to piss off. ‘Hey, be cool, man,’ he says. ‘I’ll do it for twenty. Give you a ride anywhere you need to go, one flat rate. What you say?’

“Now, I’ve thought about this a long time, Sam. For almost twelve years I’ve thought about it, and I still don’t know any other way to describe what happened in my mind than to say I just snapped. I snapped like a twig. There I was, in debt five thousand big ones, and this black kid in a men’s room is scamming me for twenty dollars. ‘You think I’d give a nigger a nickel to save his sorry life?’ I said to Lloyd. ‘Get out of my way.’ And I started out. Maybe if he hadn’t said anything back, just kept his mouth shut, I wouldn’t have gone out to the car and waited for him. I wouldn’t have run him down and crushed the life right out of him. But he had to say, ‘Stupid redneck honky, what do I care if your drunk ass has a wreck and kills yourself?’” Bob shook his head. “When I saw him walk out right after me, into the rain, I thought to myself, *I’ll make you care.*”

In the distance, the hound dog was barking again. Sam read aloud the inscription on the tombstone: “Beloved Son.”

“Lloyd just wanted to help. And I killed him for it.”

“Nobody ever came around trying to collect a debt,” Sam said.

“No,” Bob replied. “They wouldn’t have. I didn’t lose to honest men. Bad men, Sam. Bad men who knew other bad men who were serving time in the same place I was.”

Sam shuddered.

“They got their money’s worth out of me. The first two years were hell.” Bob paused in thought. “Do you remember that fishing trip to the bayou we took? The one where we caught all those catfish, but we had to keep whacking away the snakes?”

Sam nodded vigorously. It had been just last Saturday when he thought of it.

“You asked me what prison was like. It’s different for everybody, but for me, that’s what it was like. Except it was no damn fun. I had to keep the snakes away, and they were coming from all sides. Whoever those men were, they had the money and the time to make my life hell for two solid years.”

“Jeez.”

“I don’t think I would have survived it, if it hadn’t been for Butch.”

“Butch?”

A ghostly smile passed across Bob’s face. “My self-appointed guardian angel. He was in for armed robbery, finishing out the last ten years of a twenty-year sentence. He’d had his eye on me even before the beatings started. Enormous black man, arms as thick as tree trunks. Scared the bejeezus out of me the first time he came up to me in the yard. Said he knew what I’d done, killing that boy. I’d just gotten out of the infirmary, had been in there two weeks with a broken nose and busted up head. I figured I was about to go back, maybe for good this time. But he just turned and wandered off. The next time I saw him, he saved my life.

“It would have been the last time they cornered me, I’m sure of that. I was in the shower when it happened. They came up from the woodshop, slipped in while I wasn’t looking. There were five of them, two black, one a Mexican, the other two white. There I stood, naked as the day I was born, no dignity, an old man surrounded by five thugs. I

took a lotta punches before Butch showed up. I still don't know how he knew to come, or where to come to, but he came just the same. I was bleeding, maybe even crying, begging them to stop. And then he was there. Pulling them off of me and tossing them like rag dolls. He smashed one's head into the porcelain tile. I think it was the Mexican. I remember that because I remember the sound the tile made when it shattered. Butch didn't come out untouched, though. We both spent time in the infirmary, although he got out long before I did.

"It was hard for me. A black man who knew what I had done and still he saved me like that. Every fiber in me resisted his friendship, pushed him away. Even after what he had done for me. Somewhere along the line, over those ten years, I finally gave in. I think it was when he gave me that birthday present. I came in one day and found a small package wrapped in toilet paper on my bed. It was a Bible, an old copy of the King James Bible. When I said something to him about it, Butch just looked at me and said, 'You read that book, Bob.' I asked him why the Bible. He just grinned and said, 'It helps in these places to have faith in something.'

"Something I've learned is that Butch wasn't just talking about prisons when he said 'these places.' 'These places' is everywhere. I don't know how much faith I have, but I've read enough in that book to know I'm sorry for what I did." Bob knelt by the tombstone. "Oh God, Sam. I'm so sorry. How do I tell this boy that? How?" He dropped the flashlight to the ground and began to cry.

Sam knelt beside his father and placed an arm around his shoulders. Sobs wracked Bob's entire body. He shook and cried, unable to control the grief that poured out of him. "How do I tell him I'm sorry for murdering him?"

“You already have,” Sam answered. “By coming here, you’ve said all you need to say.”

After several minutes, Bob regained his composure. This man who had been so silent over the last week—even the last twelve years—had just expunged the contents of his weary soul to his son in a dark Delta cemetery. The torrent of emotion was slow in subsiding, but it gradually calmed. Bob sniffed and uttered a short, clipped laugh.

“What is it?” Sam asked, removing his arm from around his father’s shoulders.

“I forgot a shovel,” Bob said.

His words did not immediately register in Sam’s mind. “Come again?”

“A shovel. I should have brought one.”

“Why,” Sam asked slowly, “Do we need a shovel?”

Bob reached into the front pocket of his overalls and shined the flashlight on the object he withdrew. It was a tiny silver key, attached to a glinting chain that could easily be slipped around the neck.

“What is that for?” Sam asked, clearly puzzled.

“The day before Butch was to be paroled, we strolled around the yard together one last time. I imagine it was something to see, that enormous black man and little white man, walking side-by-side, hands in our pockets as if we didn’t have a care in the world. Of course, I knew it would likely be the last time I’d ever see him again. I guess he was thinking the same thing. So, I asked him. That question that had been itching at the back of my mind for almost ten years. ‘Why me?’ I said. ‘Why did you pick me?’ Butch just looked at me and smiled. He was missing his two front teeth, had been ever since that day in the shower. ‘I thought you’d get around to that sooner or later,’ he said,

reaching into his pocket. He cast an eye around, making sure no guard was watching, and slipped me this key. He said, 'When you get outta here, Bob, you go to the grave of that boy you killed. You dig behind the tombstone till you find a metal box that fits this here key. Then you open it, and you'll have your answer.' I just about could have knocked his head off for that. But then he said, 'And when you have it, you get to livin your life, and put the past in the past. That's were some things need to stay.' Then he winked at me. That huge, massive man winked at me. 'And have faith,' he finished. All I could think of to do was say thank you, and shake his hand. And that was it. He left the next day, and I haven't heard from him since."

"How would he have known where Lloyd Elkins was buried?" Sam asked.

"I don't know. But let's see if we can find that box."

Bob and Sam kneeled behind the tombstone and began scraping away dirt with their hands. The soil was loose, as if it had been turned not so long ago. It was Sam whose fingers first encountered something hard and cold.

"I think I've got it," he said. He felt along the object, found its edge, curled his fingers beneath it, and pulled. What came up was a blue tin box, no larger than a child-size shoebox.

Sam held the flashlight while Bob brushed the box clear of dirt and inserted the key. It turned easily enough, considering there was a good amount of dirt clogging the keyhole and no doubt the locking mechanism itself.

"Hold the light closer," Bob said, opening the box.

Inside was a single, folded piece of paper.

Sam glanced at his father, whose expression was unreadable outside the flashlight's orange circle of light.

Bob opened the paper. A few lines were scrawled in black ink. The penmanship was poor, the letters large and childlike. Sam and Bob read silently.

Bob,

Ain't nothing happens by chance. God puts us just where he wants us to be at just the right time. Usually, a man got to make a choice once he gets there. I'm in here for the same reason you in here. We both made bad choices. But the Lord put us together in jail, and I didn't aim to disappoint him again, so I decided to be a friend to you.

Somehow, I think it's what Lloyd would have done if he'd been in my place. He was the best of us brothers. Kindest, smartest. None of us other four much liked him for it. He was always good to Momma, something I can't say I was.

Sure, I could have killed you when I learned who you was. But I know that more death ain't no kind of answer to anything. So now that we both out of our cages, let's see if we can't find the answer to our pain in the lifes we left behind.

Butch

Sam could not believe his eyes. "Do you think it's true?"

Bob did not answer immediately. He was thankful for the darkness, thankful Sam could not see the tears brimming in his eyes. He had cried enough for one night. When he thought he could speak without his voice quivering, he said, "Yes. It's true."

How is that possible? Sam wondered. "What are the chances?"

"It wasn't a chance," Bob replied, standing up. "And I can say that with faith."

Sam nodded, and the two walked back to his pick-up by flashlight.

Excerpt from Julie Johnson's Journal

Dated Thursday, June 13th,

This can't be love.

Infatuation is a better word.

Yet when I'm with him, I feel it's more. I feel as if I'm with somebody who—despite all contrary evidence—has the world pegged for what it really is. I lie beneath stars or sit on the bank of a lake with Sam and see everything as he wants me to: unspoiled by man's badness. I know he knows better. This is only the way he *wants* to see the world. The way Mal sees it.

I have to be practical. Different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, different lifestyles, different socio-economic status, different everything.

Watch yourself, Julie. Don't be silly. It's not love, just infatuation. And out here in the Delta, this kind of infatuation is dangerous. Remember that.

PART THREE

HOW IT ALL CAME OUT

As I walk this land of broken dreams,
I have visions of many things.
Happiness is just an illusion,
Filled with sadness and confusion.

What becomes of the broken-hearted,
Who had love that's now departed?
I know I've got to find
Some kind of peace of mind, baby....

--Smokey Robinson and the Miracles
"What Becomes of the Broken Hearted"

-1-

On Friday morning, Moe's Barbershop was at its busiest. At half past nine, barely an hour after the shop's doors opened, the waiting area was almost full. Near the magazine stand, a heavy-set woman sagged in her padded chair, scowling at her two small children, a boy and a girl, as they rifled carelessly through old copies of *National Geographic* and *Reader's Digest*. In the chair next to the woman, a teenage boy picked absently at a pimple on his chin as he waited his turn. Sitting patiently near the door were Lee Wong and his gangly boy John, the only non-African-Americans in the barbershop.

Even though Moe had cut his hair only a week ago, Curtis Burns occupied one of the seats, his entire upper body lost behind an open newspaper. Moe cut Curtis's hair once every three weeks, and the two were old friends. Their professions frequently crossed paths—the preacher and the funeral home director. Curtis occasionally stopped by the barbershop when his own work was slow. Sometimes he came to talk, other times to read. He always brought the paper, always sat in the same seat. And even though he often appeared absorbed only in the printed news, Curtis always kept one ear cocked to whatever conversation was drifting around the barbershop.

Currently, the topic of discussion was the F.O.L.D. rally scheduled for tomorrow. The floor was held by a broad-shouldered, stern-faced black man. Tom Sanders sat tall and rigid in the barber's chair, unflinching beneath the rapid metallic whisk of Moe's scissors. A former drill sergeant for the marines, Sanders was a member of the Midland school board, the *only* African-American member. Beneath the pinstriped smock draped

over his torso, he clenched the arms of the chair in frustration. "None of this mess would be happening if not for Hank Reeves. A little pop-off white boy opens his mouth when he oughta keep it shut, and now this—an old man's dead dog and racist rallies."

"I'm not so sure Arliss James's dog has anything to do with the F.O.L.D.," Moe said quietly.

"Oh, it does," Sanders replied matter-of-factly. "You can bet your bottom dollar they're connected somehow."

Moe said nothing.

"There's been a lot of little coincidences around Midland lately," Sanders ventured.

Curtis Burns shifted in his chair, lowering his newspaper and leveling his gaze at the school-board member. He listened expectantly.

Sanders remained quiet for a handful of seconds, as if waiting for someone to prompt him with a "Such as...?" No one did, and he finally continued. "You've got Hank Reeves, who gets himself worked over for shooting off his mouth. Then these flyers are spread around a couple of weeks later, right before old Bob Little gets out of jail, who has been in prison for the murder of Carla Elkins' youngest boy."

"Involuntary manslaughter," Moe corrected. "That isn't murder, Tom."

"Whatever. Carla's boy is dead, no matter how you call it. And Little is responsible.

"Next thing is Arliss James's dog. It turns up dead on the front porch, its throat cut, a bloody message left on the wall for poor old Arliss. How is Arliss, by the way?"

"Ain't nobody seen or heard from him," Curtis Burns said.

“Since when?” Sanders asked, clearly surprised.

“Since the morning he told me he was going to the police,” said Moe. “Would’ve been Monday, I reckon.”

“Hope the old fella’s all right.”

“He’ll probably turn up in a day or two,” Moe said, even though he was not entirely sure. Arliss was fond of the bottle, had been ever since his wife died, but he never stayed out on long binges. Frankly, Moe was beginning to worry about the old man.

“I know what my aunt would have said about all these coincidences,” Curtis said.

“Your aunt?” Sanders raised his eyebrows.

“She was a voodoo priestess down in New Orleans. You remember I told you about her, Moe?”

Moe allowed himself a small smile and nodded, remembering one October afternoon a year past when Curtis had called to say his aunt in Louisiana had passed away. Curtis was driving down for the funeral. He had wanted Moe to pray with him before he left, and they had done so over the phone. “It’s a strange place I’m heading for,” Curtis had said. “Strange people with even stranger ways. They’re all my mother’s side of the family.”

“What would she have said?” Sanders asked, leaning forward in the barber’s chair.

“Bad juju,” Curtis replied. “That’s what she would have said. Bad juju.”

“Well, whatever you call it,” Moe said, finishing off Sanders’ hair with a brisk snip, “I don’t believe Bob Little is a part of it.”

“And why is that?” asked Sanders.

“I have it on good authority he’s not the same man he was.” Moe brushed the hair from Sanders’ shoulders and unsnapped the smock from behind his neck.

“That authority wouldn’t be your granddaughter, would it?”

Moe gathered the hair-littered smock together and whisked it off Sanders. Shaking it out, he said, “What’s your meaning, Tom?”

“Nothing, nothing. I just figured that’s who you were talking about. Since she’s been seeing Bob Little’s son.”

“And you think there’s a problem with that?”

“No, no. No problem. It’s just that I don’t know how much I’d trust a Little.”

Curtis Burns dismissed Sanders with a brief wave. “Sam’s a good boy. Why, he helped us put up those chairs and tables last Sunday after church. And he sure does seem to look out for that little fella who tags along with him.”

“That’s right,” Moe said.

Sanders shrugged and stood up from the chair, brushing at his pants. He removed his wallet, drew a five-dollar bill, and handed it to Moe. “I’m sure he’s a fine boy. But what you need to remember, Reverend, is that in Midland, it’s dangerous to be a black girl hanging around with a white boy. Dangerous for everybody involved.” Sanders tucked his wallet back into his pants and sauntered toward the door.

“Next,” Moe called.

As Lee Wong nudged the shy John out of his seat, Tom Sanders turned and said from the shop’s doorway: “It’s getting so around here, it’s dangerous just to be a black man and own a dog.”

-2-

Buddy Brighton leaned against the fender of the white Highway Department pick-up, a banana-flavored Moon Pie in hand. He chewed silently, watching his best friend angrily pick bits of shredded lettuce out of a ham and cheese sandwich and fling them to the ground. Buddy swallowed and took another placid bite of his lunch.

The Highway Department was doing bridgework today. Buddy and Zeke had been stationed at opposite ends of the work site, each armed with a two-sided sign that read "STOP" on one face and "SLOW" on the other. They relayed vehicles through the work area, communicating via walkie-talkies. For ten minutes now, the workers had been on lunch break. They lounged about the equipment and vehicles, eating out of paper bags or Styrofoam containers.

The asphalt around Zeke's boots was littered with light green strips of lettuce and a few blobs of mayonnaise. Zeke finally removed the top slice of bread, inspected the sandwich's insides, grumbled disgustedly, and tossed the entire mess into the grassy roadside ditch.

"Not hungry?" Buddy asked through a mouthful of Moon Pie.

"She knows I hate that stuff," Zeke snarled. "But she piles it on regardless."

"Why don't you fix your own lunch?"

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"I'm just tryin' to be helpful," Buddy replied, unfazed by Zeke's rancor.

"You want to help me? Tell me what's wrong with my family."

“What do you mean?”

“I think they’ve all gone crazy.” Zeke kicked a rock, sent it skittering across the road.

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“Whoever Pop is now, he ain’t the man he used to be. He’s changed. Prison’s brainwashed him or somethin’.”

“I’ve seen it before,” Buddy mused.

“Sam just loves it, too. He was always jealous of how close me and Pop were, and now he’s Pop’s favorite. Plus he’s got this black girl to throw in my face. *My* brother, out with some nigger.” Zeke removed his red cap and wiped at the sweat on his brow. Stitched on the cap’s front was a grease-stained Confederate flag. “Mom, hell, she’s *always* been crazy. Nothing new there, but now all the rest of them are losin’ it.”

Buddy finished off his Moon Pie and tossed the wrapper into the ditch with Zeke’s sandwich.

“Annie’s turnin’ against me, too.”

“No way.”

“She thinks I should ‘talk’ to my brother, try to ‘work things out.’” Zeke balled his fists and shook his head. “I’m losing my family, and there’s not a thing I can do about it.”

Buddy was silent, almost pensive. His brow was furrowed. “You could just get a new one,” he said at last.

“Huh? A new what?”

“A new family.”

“What are you sayin’?”

“The F.O.L.D. rally tomorrow. I can introduce you to Shepherd. He’ll welcome you into the organization.”

“I don’t know about all that. I’ve never been much on organizations.”

“It’s perfect, Zeke. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

“Does it cost anything?”

“No, no. You just show up and sign up. Shepherd knows me, so I can call ahead today and arrange for you to meet him tomorrow.”

“Why would I do this, Buddy?”

“Because you’d be a part of a family that understands where you’re comin’ from. You might even be able to do somethin’ about that nigger.”

“What do you mean?”

Buddy glanced around before stepping closer to Zeke. He spoke in a low voice.

“The F.O.L.D. has ways of takin’ care of problems.”

“So do I, Buddy,” Zeke said darkly.

“Yeah, but can you do it and not get caught?”

He did a good thing bad, Zeke thought suddenly. He let himself get caught.

“Maybe. Maybe not. We got away with that old man’s dog.”

“Doing a dog’s one thing, Zeke. But a dead person—even if it is a nigger—isn’t something even fat old David Wade would overlook.”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t seem to be much difference to me between a dead dog and a dead nigger.”

“You know better,” Buddy replied.

Sighing, Zeke closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. "I've got headaches all the time now. Ever since I ran the truck into the trailer earlier this week. They come and go about as often as Sam used to bang in and out of the screen door when he was little. Which was all the time."

"Did you ever go see Doc Moody?"

"No. And don't be a nag on it like Annie."

"I ain't."

"I haven't slept well since that night. I have these dreams, terrible dreams, mostly about Pop and Sam. There's this one that keeps comin' back, where they're both sittin' across from me in lawn chairs, like at Jimmy's cookout. Only this time there's a bonfire between us, and when Sam pushes me, I go backward into the fire. He starts laughin', and I wake up burnin' and screamin'."

"That's messed up, man."

"I'm messed up." Zeke swallowed. "I bought a pistol. Did I tell you that?"

Buddy shook his head.

"Annie don't know about it. I keep it loaded in the closet, in a wooden box. A .357. Every day that goes by, I find myself wantin' to use it on that nigger girl more and more. And I wish I could go back and kill that Elkins boy myself, so Pop wouldn't have to go to jail for it, so he wouldn't have to come home a complete stranger."

"What if I could guarantee you that that nigger girl could be taken care of without so much as a finger pointed in your direction?"

"How is that?" Zeke met Buddy's eyes and held them.

“Come to the rally tomorrow. You’ll meet some other people with the same problems you got, man. I swear.”

After a moment, Zeke nodded. He would come.

“LITTLE! BRIGHTON! BREAK’S OVER!” Their supervisor Doug Owens stood about fifty yards away, waving his tanned arms and hooking his thumbs over his shoulders in the direction of the work site.

“So you’ll do it?” Buddy asked as they walked back to the work area.

“Yeah. What do I got to lose?”

“Not your family.”

“No,” Zeke said quietly. “They’re already gone.”

-3-

Sam watched the sunset with his father from the front porch that evening while Mal played in the yard. It was 8:30, and they sat in rocking chairs with their stomachs full. Rebecca had made a meatloaf and left it in the oven before going to work. Sam, Bob, and Mal had eaten a quiet dinner together. The sun was bending low in the West when the three Littles had stepped outside, and now, it was almost completely vanished from the sky. A few dwindling pools of red-orange light shimmered against the coming night. Sam called Mal onto the porch. The little boy crawled into his lap, sweaty and filmed with dirt. Bob looked as if he might be dozing.

It would have been a perfect scene, the Little men rocking on the porch. However, Sam was troubled. His thoughts were on Zeke. Before dinner, but after Rebecca left for work, Sam had driven to his older brother's trailer with the intention of following Bob's advice. "Maybe you should talk to your brother," he had said the night before. It seemed like a reasonable thing to do, a good idea. Only Zeke would not see him. Annie had answered the door, dressed in black warm-up pants and a T-shirt.

"Now is not a good time, Sam," she had whispered, casting a nervous glance over her shoulder.

Immediately Sam knew something was wrong. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine."

And Sam saw that she was. The bruise on her cheek had faded considerably, and there were no fresh ones that Sam could see. "So what's up?"

“Now is just not....”

“TELL HIM I DON’T WANT TO SEE HIM!” came Zeke’s voice, loud and angry.

“Zeke?” Sam called.

Annie put her index finger to Sam’s lips, shaking her head and repeatedly mouthing, “No.”

Sam brushed her hand away from his mouth, perturbed. “Zeke, we need to talk.”

“I AIN’T GOT NOTHIN’ TO SAY TO YOU!”

“Come on, Zeke. I’m your brother.”

“I AIN’T GOT NO BROTHER NO MORE! I WON’T HAVE A BROTHER WHO SHAMES MY FAMILY NAME!”

Sam seethed, clenching and unclenching his fists. “I don’t want this, Zeke,” he called through gritted teeth.

“YEAH, WELL, YOU GOT IT! WHETHER YOU WANT IT OR NOT! NOW, GET OUTTA HERE, SAM! *DO YOU HEAR ME?* GET OUTTA HERE!”

“You’d really better go, Sam,” Annie said helplessly. “I’m so sorry.” And she closed the door in his face.

Sam held Mal in his lap, rocking him gently. Bob began to snore softly. Not for the first time in his life, Sam surveyed the dark and featureless Delta and longed for something more. He thought of Julie, of that strange and foreign land called California to which she would soon be returning. He was not sure when she was leaving, but he wished briefly that he was going with her. *Or anywhere but here*, he thought. But the weight of his brother on his lap reminded him how selfish such thinking was. If only

Marcus had decided to leave earlier, before Mal was born. Of course, then Sam would not have graduated high school, but at least he would have been free of this wide-open prison. He felt trapped, trapped by his brother's ignorance and his father's past. Somehow, Julie was the key to his freedom. Sam knew this. And that she had entered his life now, at this time of change, only fueled his certainty. Sam did not believe in coincidences.

He heard the approach of a car on the gravel road. In the distance, he saw two tiny round headlights peering out of a churning dust cloud. Through the veil of night, he did not recognize the vehicle until it slowed and turned into the driveway. It was small and dark, a hatchback. Annie's Pinto. *Something's happened*, Sam thought and got to his feet. He carefully shifted Mal into the rocking chair.

The Pinto's engine died, and the driver's door squalled open. Annie practically lunged from the car and ran for the porch. She clamored up the steps and fell into Sam's arms, sobbing.

He staggered backward, surprised. She was still wearing the sweat pants and T-shirt from earlier that evening.

In his rocking chair, Bob started awake. He shook his head and squinted at his son and daughter-in-law. "Sam, what's going on?"

"I don't know. Annie? Annie?"

She buried her face at the base of his throat and continued to cry.

"She just showed up." Her entire body was quaking. *She's scared*, Sam thought. Fear had seized her in its jaws and was shaking her viciously.

"Shhhh." Sam stroked her hair. "Shhhh. It's okay. It's okay."

“Let’s get her inside.” Bob opened the door.

“Dad, could you get Mal and bring him in?”

Bob hesitated, regarded the slumbering child. He bent over Mal and started to pick him up from beneath the arms. He stopped short and looked up at Sam with a puzzled expression on his face. “How do I...?”

“Get him under his bottom and around his back.” Sam watched from the doorway, Annie no longer crying but still hugging him tightly. Bob gingerly scooped Mal into his arms, his face drawn with concentration. Mal’s head lolled backward, and Bob was quick to support it with his hand.

They went inside.

While Bob took Mal to his room, Sam guided Annie to the couch and sat her down. “You want a glass of water or something, Annie?”

Her eyes red and puffy, her cheeks streaked with tears, she nodded vacantly. Her face was slack, devoid of expression, and still she shook.

In the kitchen, Sam quickly fetched a glass and filled it at the faucet. When he returned, Bob was sitting beside Annie on the couch. Despite the warm summer evening, he had draped a red and blue afghan over her. As she slowly sipped the tap water, her shaking gradually began to subside.

“What do you think it was?” Sam asked his father.

“Something put the fear of God into this girl.”

“N-n-not G-g-god,” Annie managed through chattering teeth.

“What, Annie?” Sam kneeled before her and leaned close. “What did you say?”

“N-not God. The d-devil.” Annie closed her eyes and expelled a weary, heavy sigh. Then she opened her eyes and said, “He’s the devil.”

“Who?” Bob asked.

Sam already knew the answer.

“Zeke.” She bit her lip, fighting a fresh onslaught of tears.

“You’re okay, now, Annie,” Sam said, patting her hand. “Just calm down and take your time with this. You’re safe here, and everything’s going to be okay.”

“I don’t feel safe,” she said. “I need one of my cigarettes.”

“What happened?” Bob asked.

“It wasn’t long after you left today, Sam,” Annie began, tightly gripping her half-empty glass of water between both hands. “He had been home from work about an hour when you showed up, I guess. He came in all quiet and withdrawn, didn’t say much when I asked him what he wanted for dinner. Just mumbled something. So, I decided to fix pork chops. You know how Zeke likes pork chops. I thought it might cheer him up.” Annie shook her head.

“I had just started cooking when he came into the kitchen and wanted to know where the Tylenol was. He’s had these headaches ever since the accident the other night. I told him the bottle was in the medicine cabinet in our bathroom, on the second shelf. He said no it wasn’t, he’d already looked there. Well, I knew it was, so I went and looked myself. Sure enough, there it was, right behind the Pepto-Bismol, just facing the wrong direction. He just...just flew into a rage. He raked all the bottles and everything out of the cabinet onto the floor, yelling about how nobody respects him, not even me, and all the time I was crying, ‘What did I do? What did I do?’” Annie took a sip of

water, accidentally dribbling some down her chin. "Look at me, I'm such a klutz," she muttered, wiping away the water with the palm of her hand.

"It's okay," Sam said, squeezing her wrist.

"When you knocked on the door, he had just taken some Tylenol and sat down in the living room. Right after you left, Sam, I...I went to him and told him he shouldn't be like that to you. Whatever the problem was, it wasn't worth losing a brother over. That's what I said, that it wasn't worth it. Then he said, in this quiet, mean voice, 'What do you know about anything?'"

"I just backed away, like a scared mouse, just backed away. But he wanted an answer, and I couldn't give him one. He came at me, grabbed me by the arm and twisted it round behind my back. It hurt so much. Not as much as when he kicked my stomach, but it still hurt something awful. He was bending over me, hissing in my ear that I didn't know anything, that I was just a stupid...a stupid...I can't say it." She began to cry again. "I can't say the words he used."

Bob put an arm around her, and she leaned against him.

Sam kept his hand on her wrist.

After several moments, she continued through her tears. "I...I thought he was going to break my arm, so I grabbed for the nearest thing I could find, which happened to be the blender pitcher. I got my fingers around it and swung it back against his head. I hit his nose. He yelled and let me go, and oh it was so good to have the pain let up in my arm. And it felt good to know now he was the one hurting. I kept hold of the pitcher and told him not to touch me again, or I'd make him sorry. He was through hurting me." She snorted a humorless laugh. "Shows what I knew. Wow, a cigarette would be good now."

“Sorry, Annie,” Sam said, smiling as best he could. “No smokers here.”

“I’m not much of one, you know,” she said, almost returning the smile. “I’m not much on self-defense, either. Zeke reached round behind him, snatched up one of our wooden table chairs, and threw it at me. It knocked me down, stunned me, I guess. I must’ve lain there for two or three minutes. It gave him enough time to disappear into the bedroom and reappear with just about the biggest gun in the world.”

Sam’s stomach turned at the thought of Zeke wielding a gun.

“What kind of gun?” Bob asked. “A hunting rifle? Shotgun?”

“No, no. One of those handguns, a pistol. The big ones. Three...three....”

“Three-fifty-seven magnum,” Bob finished for her.

Annie nodded. “I didn’t even know he had it. He yanked me up by the hair and threw me back against the kitchen sink. Then, he...he put the gun under my chin.” She shuddered. “And he told me...told me that tomorrow he was going to get a new family. Tomorrow he was going to join the F.O.L.D., whatever that is.”

Sam and Bob exchanged a knowing glance.

“‘And what use will you be then?’ he asked me. Then he cocked the pistol.”

“Oh, God,” Sam breathed.

“I looked into his eyes, Sam, and I knew I was going to die. I knew that in another second I would be dead. Then, he blinked, shook his head, and mumbled something under his breath.”

“What was it?” Sam asked.

“I...I’m not sure. But I think he said, ‘Can’t do a good thing bad.’”

Sam’s brow furrowed. It sounded familiar. Where had he heard it before?

“Anyway, he let me go then, and he uncocked the gun. As soon as he backed away, I ran. And he didn’t even try to stop me. He had this look in his eyes like he was someplace far away, somewhere where I didn’t matter to him anymore.”

“How much had he had to drink?” Bob asked.

Annie looked at her father-in-law sharply, her eyes suddenly wide with fear.

“That’s the scariest part of all,” she whispered. “He was completely sober.”

“He’d had nothing?” Sam asked incredulously.

“Not a drop.”

Bob helped Annie to her feet. “You should get some rest.”

“But he’ll come looking for her here,” Sam said suddenly. “And if he was sober earlier and did this, imagine what he’ll do when he’s had time to get drunk.”

“Where else is she going to go, Sam?”

Annie looked from Bob to her brother-in-law.

“I have an idea,” Sam replied.

-4-

At 9:15, Moe Johnson's phone rang. He sat in his favorite chair in the living room, reading from a tattered paperback copy of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. Louise was dozing on the couch, her head slumped forward on her chest. Julie curled up beside her, writing in her daily journal. So completely quiet was the house that the cordless phone's electronic twitter startled each of them. Moe glanced over his shoulder toward the kitchen, where the phone was mounted on the wall. Julie's writing hand jerked as she made an "m," and Louise's head snapped up off her chest.

"I'll get it," Moe said, setting his book face-down on the arm of the chair. He shuffled into the kitchen in his socked feet, his square reading glass still perched precariously on the end of his nose. The phone rang again, and Moe stole it from its cradle and hit the Talk button. "Johnson residence."

"Reverend Johnson?"

The filtered voice sounded familiar. "This is he. Who is this?"

"Sam Little, sir."

"Oh! Well, mercy sakes, son, I didn't catch your voice. How are you?"

"I've been better, sir. I'm calling because I've got a bit of a problem, and I was hoping you might be able to help."

"Anything I can do, Sam. Anything I can do. What's the problem?"

Julie's ears pricked up at the mention of Sam's name. She closed her journal, uncurled her feet from beneath her, and sat on the edge of the cushion. She glanced at

Louise, who had also taken a sudden interest in the conversation. She too had scooted to the edge of her seat. Moe did not speak for what seemed a very long time; rather, he listened to Sam, his expression growing dour. As the phone call stretched on, granddaughter and grandmother realized that something was wrong.

“He did *what*?” Moe suddenly said.

Julie and Louise shared a fretful look.

“Oh, good Lord.” Moe put a hand to his forehead.

Louise bowed her head and closed her eyes, praying silently. Julie wondered what she was praying for, exactly.

“Yes. Bring her on over.” Moe listened for a moment then shook his head. “No, don’t worry about that. Just come on. All right. Goodbye.” He hung up the phone and stared at it silently.

“Papaw?” Julie stood. “What’s wrong?”

Shaking his head, Moe shuffled slowly back into the living room. “Louise, do we have any clean spare sheets?”

“Of course.”

“You’ll need to change out Julie’s bed then. We’re going to have a visitor tonight. Julie, you don’t mind sleeping with your grandmother, do you? I can sleep down here on the couch.”

“I can sleep on the couch,” Julie said. “Who’s coming?”

“What’s going on, Moe?” Louise was standing as well, now, wringing her hands. Sighing, rubbing his forehead again, Moe told them everything Sam had said.

Annie huddled tightly in her corner of the cab of Sam's pick-up, her seatbelt fastened and pulled as snugly around her tiny frame as she could make it. She kept a nervous watch out the windows, eyes flitting about the night. Downtown Midland was dark and deserted. A stray cat padded along the sidewalk in front of Wong's Department Store, a dead mouse clutched in its jaws. As they passed, the cat veered into an alleyway. Annie kept a wary eye on that alley. It was as if she expected her enraged husband to materialize from the darkness and come flying at the truck like a creature from some horror novel and rip her away from Sam's protection. With unsteady hands, she tried to pull her seatbelt tighter.

"You're gonna cut off the circulation," Sam said.

Annie said nothing, only looked at him helplessly with her large frightened eyes.

"You can't go back, you know. Not now."

"I...I know."

"Have you thought about what you'll do?"

"No." She chewed a thumbnail. "He's going to that F.O.L.D. thing tomorrow. I thought I might go back while he was gone and get some stuff."

"That's a good idea."

They left town and edged into the deeper darkness of the open Delta.

"But I don't want to go alone."

"I've got Saturdays off. I'll go with you. What do you need to get?"

“Just some clothes, I guess. And my grandmother’s rocking chair. I should get that. There’s really nothing else I care about. He can have the rest of it. But I want that rocking chair.”

“Whatever you want, get it while you have the chance.”

“Could we put the chair in your truck?”

Nodding, Sam slowed and signaled a right turn. “We’re here.” They could see the Johnsons’ porch light burning.

“I’m nervous about this.”

“I know. But these are good people, Annie. The best. Trust me.”

“I do.”

Louise opened the door before Sam and Annie had even started up the porch steps. She pulled Sam to her and hugged him tightly, whispering “Good to see you, boy,” in his ear. Annie thought the woman resembled a great black mother bear. And when Louise turned from Sam and enfolded her in those strong arms too, Annie felt a sudden sweet relief. Over the last few days, her soul had been twirling into an ever-tightening spiral. And now, in Louise’s warm and sturdy arms, all the pent up pain and frustration let go simultaneously. Annie almost went limp in the older woman’s embrace, so great was her relief. As her cheek pressed against Louise’s shoulder, Annie caught the faint and oddly comforting scent of cinnamon.

“And you must be Annie,” Louise said, stroking Annie’s hair.

“Yes ma’am,” Annie whispered, feeling fresh tears sting her eyes.

“My name’s Louise. Would you like a cup of hot apple cider, Annie?”

“That would be great.” Annie wiped her eyes.

“Moe’s in the living room, Sam. He wants to talk at you for a minute.”

They all went inside, and as Louise led Annie toward the kitchen, Sam entered the living room. Moe stood at the bookshelf, hands in his pockets, pipe jutting from his mouth. He did not appear to notice Sam. He was scanning the shelves, examining each frayed paperback’s spine. Sam was about to announce himself when Moe suddenly said, “You said you’d read *Huck Finn*, right, Sam?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I can’t seem to find my copy. Do you remember how Huck says helping free Jim is a sin, and he’ll go straight to hell for it?”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve read it, Reverend.”

“It’s probably been even longer since I’ve read it. But I remember. Of course, the irony of Huck’s situation was that helping Jim was anything but a sin. He just didn’t know any better.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want to help you, Sam. I want to help Annie. But it’s dangerous.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s dangerous for my own family. It places them in harm’s way, you see. Understand, I mean no disrespect when I say what I’m about to say. But your brother is crazy.”

“I know that.”

“Then you must also understand that, as a husband and a grandfather, I do not want to endanger my loved ones.”

“Yes.”

“But as a minister, as a man of God, I am bound to help you in any way I can. To do any less would be to deny my Lord.”

“I don’t know what to say, sir.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Like Huck, I’m faced with the choice of doing what the world deems unwise or doing what my heart deems right. And like Huck, I’m willing to take a risk and follow my heart on this one.”

“You’re a good man, Reverend Johnson.” Sam stepped forward and offered his hand to the old preacher. “Thank you.”

Moe gripped Sam’s hand in both of his. “It’s not me, son. Always remember that. It’s not me. It’s faith.”

“My Dad said something about faith just last night.”

“Faith in what?”

“Some greater plan, maybe. Everything happens for a reason.”

“All things work together.” Moe nodded. “There are no coincidences.”

“I’m beginning to think that way myself,” Sam replied. “Is Julie around?”

“She’s upstairs, making Annie’s bed. Go on up, if you like. I’m going in here and meet this young lady.” Moe removed his pipe, tendrils of smoke curling from his mouth and nostrils.

As Moe headed for the kitchen, Sam started upstairs then paused, his hand on the banister. “Sir?”

Moe turned.

“I...” Sam suddenly did not know what to say. His gratitude was infinitely larger than the two one-syllable words that had almost once again spilled from his mouth.

“I hear you, son. And you’re welcome.” Moe gestured at the ceiling. “Now, get on upstairs and say hello, why don’t you?”

Sam did.

Excerpt from Julie Johnson's Journal

Dated Friday, June 14th

I'm sleeping on the couch tonight, or trying to anyway. Woke up from a bad dream just now. I don't know what it was. It's sweated out of me and soaking my pillow. No breeze through the downstairs windows, not like in my room. Sam's sister-in-law has my bed.

A terrible mess Annie's in. An abusive husband and parents she doesn't feel she can turn to for help. "It's like I married my Daddy," she told me after Sam left tonight.

"Do you know what you're going to do?" I asked. We were sitting on the edge of my bed.

She just shook her head. Such pretty golden hair, like fine straw. "Guess I'll go tomorrow and get my stuff while he ain't there."

Sam told me the plan when he came upstairs. I asked her if she minded my lending a hand.

"You don't have to do that," she said.

Her good cheek was to me, a soft apricot color. But all I could see was that grotesque yellow stain on the other side of her face. She jumped when I took her hand.

"I would like to help tomorrow, Annie."

She didn't say a word, just nodded, eyes brimming with gratefulness.

A strange situation for me. What began as a trip to visit my grandparents in Arkansas has turned into...into something I never imagined. It's unreal. Drunken abusive husbands and racist organization rallies. And in the middle of it all: Sam.

I kissed him. He kissed me.

Tomorrow frightens me. I feel as if I'm standing in the eye of some storm swirling unseen around me, and any moment, I could slip into the maelstrom and be swallowed. And all I can think is he kissed me, I kissed him.

As if I've never been kissed before. But *he* never has. And he chose me.

Now, I'm in the calm. But I have a feeling about tomorrow. A terrible feeling that tomorrow the storm will sweep me up. And Sam, and Annie, and Zeke. We will all be tumbling helpless in the wind, and who knows who will land and who will never set foot on earth again.

I hope I'm wrong.

Lord, let me be wrong.

-6-

Saturday did not dawn but slunk into daylight. A few scant rays of sunshine broke through the slate gray sky early in the morning, but the breaks in the clouds soon swelled shut, hiding away the light. The sky grew purple with impending rain. In the West thunderheads gathered and began to grumble. Midland was quiet, apprehensive. Backyard clotheslines hung motionless in the hot, still air. Children playing outside were called in by nervous mothers beckoning from back porches. Precious little traffic occupied the city streets.

Homer McCaslin stood outside his garage, unlocking the Coke machine to swipe a Dr. Pepper. He found the key in the back corner of a drawer in his desk the day before, hiding beneath a handful of wing-nuts and a half-eaten Snicker's bar. As he opened the machine, he glanced skyward, thinking he would not see much business that day thanks to the weather. He suddenly heard a distant rumble that was not thunder. Stepping back, Dr. Pepper in hand, Homer peered toward where the highway met the horizon. He first mistook the approaching something to be heat waves shimmering over the pavement, but the daylight was too dull for that. Whatever it was, it glinted under the gray sky. Homer heard the rumble again. This time the mechanic recognized it as the sound of a revving engine. After adjusting his glasses, he popped the ring on his Dr. Pepper and leaned against the building, drinking, watching, and waiting.

It was ten o'clock when the F.O.L.D. convoy of pick-ups, motorcycles, and one silver Airstream trailer rolled into Midland. The vehicles came slowly, adorned with confederate flags that flapped lazily, tied to antennae and draped on doors. The lead pick-up, a shining red behemoth, prowled along the pavement like a jungle cat, its diesel engine growling. It straddled the yellow center line, claiming the road as its swath of territory. Attached to its grill was a banner emblazoned with a leering skull. The skull's eye sockets were not empty as they should have been; rather, out of the black holes burned tiny twin points of devilish light, lending the dead, stripped face a grim spark of life. Two Harley Davidsons flanked the truck, their engines rising to frenzied roars then dropping suddenly to low, menacing snarls. The riders sat solidly astride the motorcycles, their biceps flexing as they worked the gas with sweaty hands. Two more mud-spattered pick-ups followed closely behind. Attached to the second was the Airstream, a shiny silver bullet draped with red, white, and blue banners reading "Fathers of Liberated Democracy." The trailer seemed to generate its own light in the absence of the morning sun, its gleaming reflective surface cast purple by the darkening sky.

Homer McCaslin watched the convoy roll by, swishing Dr. Pepper in his mouth. *A bunch of fancied-up rednecks, looks like to me*, he thought. The convoy turned into the parking lot of Hall's Grocery Store. Shaking his head, Homer turned and entered the cool of his air-conditioned office. "Maybe they'll all have car trouble," he mumbled.

Louise Johnson sat in her gray Oldsmobile outside the Napa auto parts store, watching the F.O.L.D. set up its recruiting session in the parking lot of Hall's. The motorcyclists—*Bikers*, Louise thought, *The ones with tattoos are called bikers*—went about removing a

folding table and folding chairs from the back of the red pick-up. The Airstream was parked near the edge of the lot, where the pavement crumbled away into waist-high grass. Two men emerged from each of the three pick-ups. All were young, broad-shouldered, and stout, their skin deeply tanned. Long dark hair draped down their backs and hung in greasy ringlets above their eyes. They had the look of men who had worked outside since adolescence, their bronze skins stretched tight over sculpted musculatures. To Louise, they all looked alike, clay foot soldiers fashioned from the same mold. All except one. Their leader. The driver of the red pick-up was a middle-aged man with a pale complexion and hair shorn military short. He wore jeans and a blue plaid shirt. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of dark sunglasses, and his face was deeply lined. He was not big like the others, but he was not small. He had no scars, no tattoos, no distinguishing features except his closely cropped hair. Yet there was something about him that inexplicably drew Louise's eyes to him. He moved with the graceful assurance of a curious tiger. As he padded slowly from man to man, directing how to set up the chairs and gesturing with his arms, he appeared possessed by a fierce hunger, yet he also seemed calm in the certainty that soon his hunger would be satiated.

A shiver slinked down Louise's spine. She glanced at her wristwatch. Ten minutes after ten. She wondered how long it would be before Zeke showed up. The pay telephone she would use to call the kids when he arrived was less than twenty feet away, just to the right of the Napa store's entrance.

On the western horizon, the building cloud bank issued a deep, ominous peel of thunder. The storm was on its way.

Sam, Julie, and Annie waited for Louise's call on the couch in the living room of the Johnson residence. Moe had left for the barbershop a short while ago, admonishing them over and over to be careful. Julie had kissed him lightly on the cheek and said, "Don't worry, Papaw." But he had left worried, all the same.

To be honest, Julie was a little worried herself.

Thunder rumbled outside.

"That's the second time in half an hour," Sam said, glancing at the grandfather clock that stood in the hallway, its heavy pendulum swinging monotonously. Half past ten.

"What if it rains?" Annie asked, glancing out the window. "I don't want my Grandma's rocker to get wet."

"I've got a tarp behind the seat," Sam replied. "We can tie that over it."

Annie wrung her hands anxiously.

"He may not even go with the weather like it is," Sam ventured.

"He'll go," Annie said immediately. "He *has* to." She said this with all the grim determination of a rock climber scaling a sheer cliff, halfway up the face, with no choice but to press on toward the top.

Julie placed her hand on Sam's arm. "What if—"

The phone rang in the kitchen.

Both Julie and Annie jumped.

Sam scampered to it and answered at the end of the second ring. He listened for a moment, nodded, said, "Thanks, Mrs. Johnson," and hung up. When he returned to the

living room, the girls were standing. Julie held Annie's hand reassuringly. "He's there," Sam said. "We should get to it."

Annie took a deep breath and said, "I'm ready."

Sam nodded, and they left the Johnsons' residence in his pick-up.

-7-

Buddy Brighton was just waking up as Louise Johnson was dialing her own number from the pay phone outside the Napa Auto Parts store.

Buddy lived six miles down the road from Zeke in a ramshackle house that was as old as his father and grandfather's ages combined. In fact, his grandfather had most likely built the house. Buddy was not sure of this, but it seemed a plausible notion. He had lived in the house with his father all his life. When Buddy had finished his stretch for statutory rape, he had returned home from prison to discover his father dead of cirrhosis and buried in a pauper's cemetery near Marianna. A letter came from the county clerk's office two days after Buddy arrived home. Enclosed in a large manila envelope was a copy of the death certificate and the old man's extremely short will. Eldridge Brighton had left the three-room rotting shanty and an inheritance of sixty-five dollars to Buddy, fifty of which the county had used to buy the pine box the old man was buried in. Upon opening the envelope and discovering his father's death, Buddy's only comment had been, "No wonder he didn't visit more often."

When he woke that Saturday, he opened his eyes to a world hazed with hang-over. Dressed only in a pair of jeans, he rolled out of bed and crawled across the creaking wooden floor to the toilet, which was located in the far corner of the bedroom. It was separated from the rest of the room only by a mildewed brown shower curtain, which Buddy never bothered to use. Moaning, he hoisted himself up to the toilet bowl, hung his head over the stained porcelain, and waited to see if he would throw up. A few

dry heaves later, he managed to get to his feet and stumble out of the room and into the kitchen.

Buddy opened all the cabinets, searching for a clean bowl to have some cereal in. When he could not find one, he simply poked around in the dirty dishes piled in the sink. He found a bowl near the bottom, brushed off a few crumbs, rinsed it with water, and plopped down at his aluminum table. An open box of Cap'n Crunch sat in the middle of the table, and Buddy poured his breakfast from this, ignoring the stream of black ants flowing over the table and up the captain's grinning countenance. He ate the cereal dry as always, plucking the peanut-butter flavored puffs out of the bowl with his fingers. As he munched away at breakfast, a small but persistent spark began to flicker in the back of his mind, something he was supposed to have done today. Today was Saturday. There was something happening, something he was supposed to be at. What?

As he poured another bowl of cereal, he glanced at the whiskery captain's grandfatherly face. Buddy wondered what the hell he was the captain of, anyway? *Leads the peanut butter brigade or some friggin' thing. Leads. Leader.* Suddenly he remembered where he was supposed to be, and that he should have been there half an hour ago. "Shit!" he exclaimed, dropping the Cap'n Crunch. Cereal spilled out and rolled off the table onto the floor.

Buddy scrambled to find his boots and shirt. Zeke was expecting him to be there. More important, *George* was expecting him to be there. And George was not someone Buddy was eager to disappoint.

It was 10:40 when Buddy's faded red and gray Trans Am tore out of the yard for the F.O.L.D. rally.

Zeke was among the first of no more than a half-a-dozen locals to arrive. He parked his truck in front of the grocery store and walked unsurely toward the folding chairs and table. He had wanted to come here, *needed* to come here. And now that he was here, he was no longer sure what he wanted or needed. He looked around for Buddy but did not see him anywhere. A podium with a microphone had been set up atop the table, and behind it stood a pale man wearing dark sunglasses. He looked like a vampire, his skin as white as Ivory soap, his hair as short, dark, and coarse as bristles on a wire brush. The man was absorbed in several pages of handwritten notes. Somehow, Zeke knew this was the man Buddy had told him about, the one he needed to see.

Wiping his sweaty palms on his blue jeans and straightening his cap on his head, Zeke approached the man at a cautious pace. He did not notice the two men Louise Johnson had thought of as bikers sweeping toward him, their palms extended outward. One seized his arm, halting him, and the other wagged his finger in Zeke's face. Both men smelled strongly of body odor and cigarette smoke.

"That's far enough, pard," said the one clutching Zeke's arm.

"Don't be so overprotective, boys," said the pale man behind the podium. His voice was airy and raspy, like the rustle of leaves beneath a slithering snake's belly. "I'm sure this fella only means to shake my hand. Isn't that right, fella?" The vampire offered his hand, and Zeke felt compelled to take it, much as he suddenly did not want to. It was, however, surprisingly warm, with a firm grip. "I'm George Shepherd. And who might you be?"

"Zeke Little."

“Ezekiel Little? Buddy’s *compadre*?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Buddy’s not here yet, but he told me all about you when we last talked. Said you were looking for something. What are you looking for, Ezekiel?” The vampire grinned, flashing a mouthful of nicotine-yellowed teeth.

“I reckon I need a new family,” Zeke said, feeling strangely drowsy in the mid-morning humidity. *What’s behind those sunglasses?* he wondered. *Empty black holes,* said a voice inside him.

“You’ve come to the right place, my son,” said Shepherd, as if he were in the business of supplying new families. “I’m going to be giving a little talk here later, but if you’d like, we can step into my air-conditioned office and shoot the breeze. What do you say?”

Zeke nodded. He followed Shepherd toward the silver Airstream, feeling strangely detached from his own body. He felt as if his head were floating like a balloon suspended from his shoulders by a string. And when Shepherd opened the trailer’s door and gestured with his yellow grin for him to enter, Zeke had a sudden fear that he was about to sell his soul to a most shrewd devil. But it made little difference now, since he seemed to have nothing else to lose. No family, no dignity. Zeke entered the cool dark of the Airstream, and Shepherd stepped in behind him and closed the door.

Julie helped Sam secure Annie’s grandmother’s rocking chair in the back of his truck. They tied it down with a rope and then wrapped the blue canvas tarp around it to keep it

dry if the rain should start before they finished moving Annie out. Julie hopped out of the back of the pick-up, rubbing at her arms where the prickly rope had scratched her.

“Where’s she going to go?” she asked Sam as they reentered the trailer.

“I don’t know. Not back to her parents, I don’t think. She really doesn’t have anywhere.”

In her bedroom, Annie was hurriedly tossing clothes into an open suitcase on her bed. First she went through her chest-of-drawers, which contained most of her underwear, night clothes, T-shirts, and shorts. Then she moved to her closet, gathering together large armfuls of dresses and blouses and depositing them on her bed.

“Can I help?” Julie asked from the doorway.

Annie did not hear. She swept back and forth between the closet and bed, transferring bundles of clothes from one place to the other.

“Can I help?” Julie asked again, a little more loudly.

Annie stopped. She was breathing heavily, almost perspiring. She brushed a tendril of straw-colored hair away from the corner of her mouth and nodded. “There’s a box of plastic trash bags under the sink in the kitchen. You could get those for me to put this stuff in. It ain’t all gonna fit in the suitcase.”

“Okay.” Julie left the doorway and headed for the kitchen.

Annie put a trembling hand to her forehead, closed her eyes, and took a deep, long breath. As she expelled the air from her lungs, she felt the fear inside her loosen just a bit. It was a small relief, but relief nonetheless. When she returned to removing clothes from the closet, she did not feel as frantic as before.

She stood on her tip-toes and ran a hand along the shelf inside the closet. She encountered a pair of pumps she had not worn since she and Zeke had married. Zeke was not the churchgoing type, and in Midland, church was the only occasion on which one could play dress up. At least that's how Annie had always thought of it. As a child, she had been dressed by her mother in extravagant feminine outfits for church, outfits that made Annie appear more like a porcelain doll than a little girl. This was undoubtedly done to counteract the devilish tomboy in her that ran rampant six days out of seven, a characteristic that Annie's mother had loathed. Annie remembered standing transfixed in front of her mother's full-length mirror when she was forced to put on the girly dresses. The change in her was absolute; she did not so much as even resemble the same person. So dressing up every Sunday became a game to Annie. How much not like herself could she possibly make herself appear? Even after she outgrew being a tomboy, she still thought of dressing up as a silly and amusing practice. But Zeke was not the churchgoing type, and it had been a long time since she had played the game.

She removed the pumps from the shelf, and in doing so her fingers brushed across a wooden box. Annie frowned. Dropping the shoes on the floor, she reached to the back of the shelf with both hands and picked up the box. It was heavy. She set it down on the floor, knelt before it, and examined it. The wood was glossy and slick, well-polished. There were brass clasps on the front that popped open when Annie pushed the buttons beside them. She opened the box and gasped. The gun that had been in her mouth less than twenty-four hours ago lay before her, nestled in red velvet lining. Annie touched it, ran her fingers along the cold gleaming metal. It was death. *This is how death feels*, she thought.

"I can't find the bags, Annie." Julie, back in the doorway.

Annie slapped the box shut and shoved it to the back of the closet. Pumps in hand, she stood upright and closed the closet door. "That's okay, Julie. I'll get them."

"Are you okay?" Julie asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Just nerves I guess."

"Sam's putting your bookshelf and books in the truck. Is there anything else from the den that goes?"

"My goldfish. He's on the end table by the couch, but I'll get him. When I get this stuff bagged up, will you help me take it out?"

"Sure."

Outside, Sam was rearranging the tarp so that it would cover both the rocking chair and the small wooden bookshelf that had held all of Annie's paperback books, chiefly her V.C. Andrews collection. The books themselves Sam had placed in the floorboard of the truck. Once he had retied the tarp, he jumped out of the pick-up and went back into the house.

He did not notice the red and gray Trans Am crawling slowly past the house, its driver peering suspiciously out the window.

Inside the Airstream, Zeke sat in an uncomfortable recliner across from George Shepherd, who leaned casually against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. He had removed his sunglasses, and there were indeed eyes behind them, merry, twinkling, inviting eyes. The only light came from outside, slanting in through the half-open blinds.

The air-conditioner pulsed and hummed on the ceiling, condensation dripping from its vent onto the carpet. The air inside the trailer was frigid, like a mausoleum.

“Buddy tells me you’re having trouble with your brother,” Shepherd said conversationally.

Zeke nodded.

“What exactly is the nature of the trouble?”

“He’s got him a nigger whore.”

“Really?”

“She’s a mixed breed, I think. Got some slant in her. From California.”

“A mongrel.”

Zeke nodded again.

“It’s always a sad thing to see a perfectly good white boy waste the vitality of youth on such spawn.”

“Yessir. I told him it ain’t right.”

“What about your father? He just got out of prison, true?”

“Yeah. I used to think I could trust him, but he ain’t the same no more. He’s turned out just like Sam.”

“Your wife?”

“She’s against me, too. Got a lip on her the size of Texas. Always wantin’ to know my business. Babysittin’ that idiot boy so’s Sam can run around with his whore.”

“I believe the good book teaches wives should submit to their husbands, don’t you?”

“I heard tell of that.”

“What else do you know about the good book, Zeke?”

Zeke removed his hand and wrung it in his hands. “Not too much. My Momma, she knows a great deal of it, but not much of it ever rubbed off on me.”

“I see.” Shepherd smiled in the dim light. “Do you know the origin of your name? Ezekiel?”

“I know it’s one of the books in the New Testament.”

Shepherd’s smile widened malevolently. “Old Testament, actually. Ezekiel was a prophet, called by God in a glorious vision to set in order a rebellious house. You see, Zeke, Ezekiel hated the despicable practices of his people. He became the messenger of God’s wrath.”

Zeke became very still and listened closely.

“‘Son of man thou dwellest in a rebellious house, which have eyes to see and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they *are* a rebellious house.’ You, Zeke, like the prophet you were named for, are living in a rebellious house, one that does not see the error of its ways. ‘But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you.’”

“I don’t understand,” Zeke said.

“You will in time, son. In time. Did you know that for all his prophesying, for all his service, Ezekiel lost his wife? That’s right. The Lord said: ‘Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead.’ So, you see, Zeke, the prophet for whom you are named lost his loved one in the service of his belief. But so *great* was his belief, that he overcame his loss and carried on. As you must now do. You

must now consider your family—father, brother, and wife—dead to you. And you must not mourn them.”

Zeke swallowed, his mouth having gone dry. He thought of his mother, who had long since been dead to him in a way. Ever since the traveling Bible salesman had entered their life and left his contaminated seed in Rebecca’s belly, Zeke had thought of his mother as a traitor, something vile and reprehensible. His hope for resolving the pain had been invested in his father’s parole, and that hope had been slowly strangled by Bob’s silences. Annie had seen the blood on him that night and turned against him. In his mind, Zeke considered what he had done to that old nigger’s dog as heroic, an act of justice. And Sam? He and Sam had never gotten along, but now the boy was fouling the family waters with a dark-skinned pollutant. In contrast to the cold air in the trailer, Zeke felt a red-hot fire blaze within the bellows of his being. He clenched his hat in his fists, gritted his teeth, and snarled, “To hell with them. They’re all dead and gone to me.”

Shepherd stepped forward and set a hand on Zeke’s shoulder. It was father-like and comforting. ““Do not be afraid, though briers and thorns are all around you, and you live among scorpions.’ There is solace and comfort here. Our arms are open to you, son. We welcome you into our family, into our F.O.L.D. You can sign up outside, before God and everybody. How about it?” He clapped Zeke on the back.

Zeke nodded and stood, no longer thinking of Shepherd as a shrewd devil but a ministering angel. He opened the door and stepped out into the dull daylight.

In the short time Zeke had spent inside the Airstream, the crowd had grown considerably. A few of the folding chairs were occupied by locals, among them Hank Reeves and his sister Sally. Across the street, in the parking lot of Dr. Moody’s office, a

group of about a dozen black citizens both young and old had gathered. Among them Zeke recognized the black preacher, Moe Johnson. He stood quietly with his hands in his pockets. For an instant, Zeke met the old man's gaze, and the preacher actually lifted a hand in greeting. Zeke huffed and flew the old fart the bird in reply. A few of the onlookers across the street held poster board signs that read, "Racists Go Home" and "Stop the Hate." One grinning male teenager stood apart from the crowd, holding a sign that proclaimed in great black letters, "JESUS WAS BLACK!" A handful of teens huddled behind him, snickering and egging him on.

While Shepherd headed for the podium, Zeke ambled over to Hank and Sally, keeping his eye on the crowd across the street.

"Looks like someone turned the monkeys loose from the Memphis Zoo over there, don't it?" Hank sang out, spitting a stream of snuff onto the pavement.

"Where's Buddy?" asked Sally, chomping a wad of bubblegum. Her red hair was tied in ridiculous pigtails, Zeke noticed.

"He oughta be here by now," Hank said to Zeke. "Hope he shows. I gotta thank him. I feel kinda special, knowin' this is all happenin' cause-uh me."

A city police cruiser and a St. Francis County deputy sheriff's car rolled by on the highway and pulled into the Hall's lot. They parked a respectable distance from the rally, near the vending machines outside the supermarket entrance. Zeke recognized Chief David Wade as his bulk emerged from the city car. The deputy that stepped out of the county car was much leaner and more solid than the Midland chief of police. Wade immediately went to the vending machine and deposited sixty cents for a bag of peanuts.

The deputy sheriff, however, leaned back against his cruiser, folded his muscular arms across his chest, and regarded the goings-on with a cool, steady gaze.

“There’s Buddy!” Sally suddenly exclaimed, leaping from her chair.

Zeke saw his friend’s Trans Am pulling off the highway. He followed the jubilant Sally over to the car. As Buddy got out, Sally leapt at him, locking her legs around his waist and pushing her mouth against his. He did not return the kiss. Instead, he shoved her away and hissed, “Not now, girl.” Sally stamped her foot and pouted.

“You’re late,” Zeke said.

“I overslept. Listen, man, there’s somethin’ you oughta know. When I passed your place on the way out, your brother’s truck was out front and he was loadin’ furniture and stuff into the back.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah. Him and that black girl.”

“*She* was there, in *my* house?”

“That’s right. Is Annie movin’ out or somethin’?”

But Zeke did not hear the question. He was already on his way to his truck, walking fast and furiously.

“What’s going on?” Sally asked Buddy.

Buddy did not respond, only watched his friend speed out of the parking lot.

The deputy sheriff followed the truck with a thoughtful gaze until it disappeared from sight. Then he returned his eyes to the rally, where George Shepherd was beginning his speech, flanked by his biker bodyguards.

“What’s wrong with Zeke?” Sally persisted.

“Shut up,” Buddy snapped.

“Fine, be that way.” Sally sauntered back to her seat by Hank, her hips swishing back and forth beneath her tight, blue-jean cut-offs.

After a second’s hesitation, Buddy followed.

When Moe Johnson saw Zeke speed away from the rally, he knew something was terribly wrong. He had no doubt that he was heading home, that Zeke knew they were trying to move Annie out. And the most terrible aspect of it all was that there was absolutely nothing Moe could do to warn them. He had walked here from his barbershop across town. In the time it would take him to get back to his car, Zeke would have already reached his house.

“Oh Lord, watch over them,” Moe prayed aloud. “Keep them safe from harm.”

In the heavens above, thunder shook, and lightning spread like prairie fire across the sky.

At that instant, Moe was certain that God had heard him, but he was not at all sure of the answer.

Sam carried out the last bag of clothes and laid it with the others in the bed of his pick-up. *Hope we make it before it rains*, he thought, remembering the violent storm that had swept across the Delta almost a week and a half ago. It had hailed that night, the night before his father came home. And now, as another storm approached, he was helping his sister-in-law leave her home. "It's for the best," he muttered to himself, packing the clothes down tightly.

Inside, Annie was gathering up a few last items and slipping them into her handbag. Toiletry items from the bathroom, her Pillsbury Doughboy salt-and-pepper shakers from the kitchen. Here was her mother's little antique ceramic squirrel, there a 5X10 picture of her tomboy self sitting astride a horse. Random artifacts leapt out at her from every shelf, nook, and cranny, and she wanted to stuff them all into her bag. But she did not have the time nor the room.

Julie leaned against the kitchen sink, watching Annie with indescribable pity.

Sam stood by the picture window in the den, hands tucked in his pockets.

"Well," Annie breathed, "I guess this is it. All except Bartholomew." She picked up the goldfish bowl from the end table and held it up to her face, peering through the thick glass at the orange fish swirling inside. "You wanna take a trip, baby? Huh?"

"Oh no," Sam moaned.

Annie and Julie looked to him.

"Oh no, no, no." His face was ashen.

At first, Annie did not understand. Then she saw out the picture window, and she immediately felt her stomach drop to her knees.

“What is it?” Julie asked, taking a few halting steps toward them.

“Zeke,” Sam said, moving toward the front door. “He just pulled up.”

George Shepherd’s speech was in full swing. His raspy voice carried over the parking lot, across the highway, and into the crowd of black onlookers. Moe Johnson stood apart from the others, his head bent in prayer. Despite the preacher’s efforts, the unnerving voice of the F.O.L.D.’s leader was difficult to tune out. Moe kept losing his concentration, forgetting what he was praying.

“The trouble with white Americans today is that they’ve forgotten that this country wasn’t founded for everybody! It was founded by white people FOR WHITE PEOPLE!”

Moe opened his eyes for a moment.

A bright red Mustang with darkly tinted windows drove by slowly, rap music booming from its system. A few of the F.O.L.D. members cast aggravated glances over their shoulders. Chief Wade kept his eye on the Mustang. The deputy sheriff ignored the car completely. After a few seconds, the Mustang sped away, its engine revving angrily.

Moe was about to close his eyes in prayer once more when he saw a familiar truck pull into the grocery store parking lot. It was a faded green, sputtering Dodge patched with rust, a Dodge Moe had seen at his barbershop a week ago last Thursday. No one even noticed it as it labored into a space facing the highway. Moe could not make out the face of the man inside through the thick web of cracks in the windshield, but he knew

Sam tried to stop Zeke at the door, but his older brother shoved him backward into the den.

“What the hell is this, Sam?” Zeke demanded. “You bring that nigger into my house?”

“Zeke, no,” Annie protested, still holding Bartholomew the goldfish.

“And you, you little slut. You’re gonna get yours. Just as soon as I throw this bitch out.” Zeke stalked past Annie toward Julie, who stood firmly in front of the kitchen sink, terrified but trying desperately to hide it.

Suddenly Annie moved after her husband, raised the goldfish bowl over her head, and brought it down hard where Zeke’s neck joined his spinal cord. Water sloshed out of the bowl. Zeke cried out in pain, stumbling forward.

Sam pulled Annie back and stepped between them. “Listen, Zeke, just let us walk out that door and be on our way. That’s it. You’ll never have to worry with us again.”

“The hell I will!” Zeke charged, slamming into Sam with all his weight and driving him to the carpet. He sat atop his little brother and pelted him with punches. Sam blocked them as best he could. Several blows landed painfully on his ribs, each impact driving the breath from his lungs a little more.

Annie set Bartholomew on the kitchen table and fled into the bedroom.

Julie ransacked kitchen drawers for a hefty weapon. In the third drawer she ran across a meat mallet and seized it.

Zeke's fist struck Sam's jaw solidly, whipping his head round. The black edges of unconsciousness seeped into the corners of his vision. He could taste blood, as if he had a penny tucked in his cheek. The older brother stood over the younger brother's beaten form and placed his boot on Sam's chest. Zeke applied pressure, grinning ruefully.

Julie went at Zeke quickly with the mallet, aiming for the back of his head. She missed, however, and the blow glanced off his left shoulder. Nevertheless, Zeke howled in surprise and staggered away from Sam, clutching the shoulder. When he turned and saw Julie standing a few feet away with the mallet clenched tightly in both hands, the grin returned to his face.

"You gonna hit me, nigger girl?" he taunted.

"If I'm not mistaken that's what I just did," Julie retorted.

"That?" Zeke shook his head. "Nah. That was just a little love tap. Come on. Show me what you really got." He stepped toward her.

Julie turned and ran.

Zeke leapt after her and seized her about the waist, enveloping her like a great boa constrictor. The air was being squeezed from her body. She could feel his hot, sour breath in her ear as he whispered, "I never been this close to a nigger girl before." Then he licked her ear. "I can taste your stink."

Julie screamed.

And suddenly Zeke was off her, and she was slumping forward against the refrigerator, her weak legs buckling. She half-turned, gasping for air, in time to see Sam hurl his older brother against the den wall. A framed wedding portrait of Zeke and Annie

crashed to the floor, the glass breaking into large, sharp wedges. Zeke recovered quickly, rushing Sam and once again driving him to the floor. His knee somehow landed in Sam's stomach, driving the breath from his body and immobilizing him. While Sam lay gasping for air, Zeke seized a kitchen chair. Standing over his brother, Zeke lifted the chair above his head, its legs brushing the ceiling.

"You should have listened to me, Sam!" Zeke cried, his breath coming in ragged hitches. His muscles tensed as he prepared to bring the chair smashing down.

Thunder suddenly boomed within the trailer, and Zeke pitched forward.

A gout of warm red blood showered Sam, splattering his T-shirt and face.

There was a dull thud as Zeke struck the carpet.

"What?" Sam managed to gasp, still short of breath. He rubbed at the moist red stuff on his face, his fingers coming away smeared and sticky with it. "What? *What?*"

In the kitchen, Julie sat huddled on the floor in front of the refrigerator, hands covering her ears. A few feet away, Annie lay slumped against the wall, conscious but dazed. On the floor by her left hand was Zeke's gleaming silver .357 Magnum. A long smoky tongue licked the air from the mouth of the barrel.

Sam scampered toward his brother. Zeke lay face down, unmoving. The blood was spreading from beneath his stomach, soaking darkly into the beige carpet. There was a gaping entrance wound in the small of his back, coursing crimson. Sam was calling out something, something to God, then yelling his brother's name. He turned Zeke over as carefully as possible, resting his head in his lap. Now Sam's arms were glistening red to the elbows. He screamed for Julie to call 911. Zeke began to twitch.

“Hang on, brother, hang on,” Sam whispered, holding Zeke’s head. “You were right, Zeke, you were right. I should have listened to you. I should have listened to you. I should have listened to you, big brother, I should have listened to you.”

Julie dialed 911. As she punched in the numbers, she realized that she could not hear anything out of her left ear, so she switched the receiver to the right. When the dispatcher answered, Julie realized that she had no idea what to say.

The first person in the grocery store parking lot to see Arliss James approaching with his shotgun was George Shepherd. He stopped in mid-sentence. Everyone else saw Arliss when they turned to see what Shepherd was looking at.

Chief David Wade dropped his bag of peanuts and fumbled out his pistol. The deputy sheriff drew his gun smoothly and advanced cautiously on the rally area. Wade followed a shaky step behind, his hands slippery with sweat and peanut oil as they attempted to grip the handle of his .38 service revolver.

“Buddy Brighton!” roared Arliss, bringing up the shotgun.

The few people seated around Buddy scattered so quickly that their metal chairs tottered, and one actually toppled and hit the pavement with a sharp clank. Hank and Sally Reeves skittered away with the rest, Sally’s green eyes big and round with excitement and fear.

Buddy sat locked in his seat with fear.

“FREEZE!” called the deputy sheriff. “DROP YOUR WEAPON!”

Arliss did not seem to hear him.

“James, you damned old fool, what do you think you’re doing?” Wade yelled, bringing his pistol to bare on Arliss.

Arliss raised the shotgun. “I know it was you, Buddy Brighton! You and Zeke Little! You killed my dog!” Arliss’s voice cracked. His eyes were bloodshot and wet with tears. He was exhausted and drunk. He had not slept in two days and had been

drinking Wild Turkey for five days, storing up the many quarts of courage he knew this day would require. “Why’d you have to go and do a mean thing like that?”

“SIR, I WON’T TELL YOU AGAIN! DROP YOUR WEAPON!”

Now, Arliss was barely whispering. Even Buddy could not make out the words. The old man seemed to be speaking to himself more than anybody else. “He was a good dog, never done nothin’ to nobody. Didn’t deserve no killin’.” And Arliss raised the shotgun.

The deputy shot Arliss in the leg, knowing perfectly well that there was no need to kill the old man. He was so weak and drunk that a fly landing on him might send him reeling to the ground. So, the deputy shot Arliss in the right calf as opposed to the chest or head.

Chief Wade, however, never considered shooting to wound. He took aim for Arliss’s heart and fired a split second after the deputy.

Arliss barely had time to register the grazing bullet that offset his balance before the second slug slammed into his sternum and sent him sprawling to the pavement. His shotgun, the one that had been empty the night he and Bones had run Zeke and Buddy off, fell beside him.

Moe Johnson was running toward the parking lot.

The deputy holstered his pistol and crouched over Arliss. “Geez,” he sighed, feeling the neck for a pulse and finding none. Using a handkerchief, he picked up the shotgun by its stock.

Moe knelt on the ground by Arliss. He squeezed his eyes shut at the sight of the hole in the old man’s chest and bit his knuckles, stifling the cry of rage and despair that

had risen suddenly in his throat. Moe leaned over the body and gently caressed the old man's rough face, tracing his finger over the deep crevices in Arliss's cheek. The vast gulf separating life from death can be crossed in the blink of an eye, and Arliss had just made that incredible journey. It made little sense to Moe, that such a great distance could be traversed in such a short time.

"Get on back away from there, now," barked Wade, gesturing at Moe.

"You just *try* to back me away," Moe said through clenched teeth. He leaned protectively over the body. "This man is dead because of you, and I'll be damned if I'll give way to you."

"Now, see here, Reverend—"

"No!" Moe shot to his feet. "*You* see here! He came to you. He told you what happened, and he told you who did it. And you did nothing. Now, in my book that makes you about as useless a human being as God ever gave breath. So don't you tell me to back away."

"Excuse me, Chief," said the deputy sheriff.

Wade and Moe looked at him.

The bewildered deputy held up Arliss's shotgun. He had cracked it open, and both chambers were empty.

"But, where are the shells?"

"There weren't any, sir."

Moe knelt by Arliss once again. He began reciting the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

"No shells? That's ridiculous."

“...Hallowed be thy name....”

“Ridiculous or not, there are no shells, sir.”

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...”

“What was he thinking?”

“...On earth as it is in heaven.”

“Maybe he just forgot, sir.”

“Give us this day, our daily bread...”

“Forgot?”

“...And forgive us our trespasses...”

“It’s possible. He seemed pretty drunk.”

“...As we forgive those who trespass against us. Amen.”

Thunder rumbled overhead, and the first fat drops of rain began to fall.

The storm broke and lasted most of the day. Heavy rain pummeled Midland and the surrounding Delta, flooding crops and washing out dirt roads. Never had so much rain fallen so fast. Around five o'clock, however, the deluge subsided, and the clouds parted. The sun shined and washed the land in light, setting the water-speckled soy and rice fields aglitter. Steam seeped up from asphalt, and the air was hot and moist. There would not be another rain in the Arkansas Delta for two months. Crops would wilt and die after the earth absorbed the prolific amount of water that had fallen that fateful Saturday.

Zeke died in the ambulance on the way to St. Francis County Medical Center. The Littles had a quiet graveside service on Tuesday at Shady Grove Baptist Cemetery, Rebecca's church. Bob held his sobbing wife close as the pastor intoned the twenty-third Psalm. Sam and Mal stood hand-in-hand, both dressed in new second hand suits and ties they had purchased at Wong's.

Julie did not attend Arliss James's funeral on Wednesday. Her grandfather preached, offering testimony to the good man Arliss had been, warning the congregation to never let their anger consume them as he had his. The entire community turned out for the service at New Hope. They packed the pews and lined the walls, trailing out the open doors and down the front steps.

It took the police almost an entire week to sort out the mess. The investigators first refused to believe that Zeke's death and Arliss's death were not related, given the

connection between the two men. But when everybody's stories kept lining up and there were no loopholes, the police had nowhere else to turn but to coincidence. Separate incidents linked by chance.

Except Moe knew the two deaths were anything but coincidence. He did not presume to know how they were connected, for who can presume to know the mind of God? But he knew they were not freak occurrences. "There ain't nothin' happens for no reason," his father used to say. It was this line of thought that kept him awake several nights, finally prompting him to go see the one person who might offer some insight into why things had happened as they had: Sam.

They sat on Sam's front porch a week after the Saturday of the F.O.L.D. rally, drinking Rebecca's terrible lemonade and watching the sun go down.

"I can't explain it, Reverend," Sam said. "In fact, I was hoping you could."

"It's funny the way God thinks. We can't ever really get inside his head, you know, and even if we could, we'd never be able to handle it. I've got a feeling our heads would pop like ticks if we knew even a speck of what the Almighty knows."

"That makes sense, but it doesn't make sense of this."

"I'm not sure anything ever will, Sam. It's just how it all came out."

Sam sipped his lemonade and grimaced. "When Mal and I bought our suits at Wong's for the funeral, Mrs. Wong told me it made her 'sorry for us' to hear of Zeke's death. She didn't say it made her sorry for Zeke."

Moe said nothing.

“I feel sorry for him. Even after everything he did, after all the pain he put others through.” Sam rubbed absently at his jaw, where the faint trace of a bruise was still visible.

“How’s Annie?”

“The court’s pushing her through the system pretty fast. Public defender seems to think he can get her a light sentence in this mental health home for abused women. It’s better than jail.”

“Julie’s going home day after tomorrow,” Moe remarked. “She wants to see you, but she’s afraid this is all somehow her fault.”

“I hope she understands why I haven’t come around,” Sam said.

“She knows you need some time. I just don’t want her to go home with this all on her shoulders. She can’t handle something like this.”

“I’ll come see her tomorrow.”

“I’m glad,” Moe said, taking a final sip of lemonade. He tried not to flinch, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

Sam smiled. “It’s not that great, is it?”

Moe laughed, shaking his head. “I guess I’d better be getting on.” He stood up. “You say you’ll be around tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Stay for dinner?”

“I don’t think so. Just long enough to say good-bye.”

Moe nodded in understanding, a sad expression on his face. The preacher seemed to have aged ten years since Sam last saw him. As Moe drove away in his Oldsmobile,

Sam tried one last sip of lemonade. It was terribly bitter, as he expected. Tossing the glass's contents over the porch railing, he stood up and went inside.

The storm was over, and all that was left was to pick up the pieces.

Excerpt From Julie Johnson's Journal

Dated Sunday, June 23rd

Going home tomorrow.

Know none of this is my fault, but I am the cause of it. There is a difference, isn't there, in being the one at fault and the one to cause the trouble?

I held Sam at the hospital while he cried. I never would have guessed he had so many tears for Zeke. "Why did it have to end in anger?" he kept asking. Then he would collapse into fresh sobs, and it was all I could do to hold on to him so he wouldn't run away.

I miss you, Mom and Dad.

I'm coming home tomorrow.

Leaving Nowhere Land.

-12-

On the eve of Julie's departure, Sam knocked on the Johnsons' door with a mayonnaise jar wrapped in a T-shirt tucked under his arm. Louise greeted him, hugged him, called up to Julie that Sam was here, and told him to go on up. As he made his way up the stairs, he could hear the mayonnaise jar tinkling under the cloth. He found Julie in her bedroom, packing her suitcase.

"Hi," he said, rapping on the open door.

"Hey!" She smiled her beautiful smile and gestured for him to enter. "What is that?"

"A surprise for you," he said casually. Sam nodded at the open suitcase on her bed. "When do you leave tomorrow?"

"My flight's out of Memphis at 9:30 in the morning."

"Wow. Early."

"Yeah," she said slowly, almost apologetically. "I figure the earlier the better."

"You're really ready to leave then, aren't you?"

Julie nodded.

"Listen, I don't want to make this any harder than it already is. I just..."

She crossed the distance between them and placed her index finger over his lips, silencing him. Then she kissed him lightly, letting her lips linger on his, so that the tips of their noses brushed. "I'll never forget you, Sam Little," she whispered.

“I won’t forget you, Julie.” His heart was skipping wildly, like an erratic stone upon the glassy surface of a lake.

“It’s best this way though, Sam.”

Sam set the mayonnaise jar on the floor and took her hands in his. “Sometimes bad things happen. They just *happen*. A bad thing happened here. A couple of bad things. But a very good thing also happened here. And I don’t regret one minute of it.”

“Thank you,” Julie breathed.

“Now, let me show you your surprise, and then I’ll go.”

“Okay.”

“Turn out the lights.”

Julie raised her eyebrows. “What is it with you and the dark?”

“Trust me.”

“I do.” Julie crossed to the light switch and closed her door to keep out the hall light. “Ready?”

“Hit it.”

The room plunged into darkness. Julie suddenly felt a girlish urge to giggle. She put her hand over her mouth but could not fully stifle it. The laughter squeaked out of her.

“What’s so funny?” Sam asked.

“Nothing. What are you doing over there?”

Suddenly the center of the floor was lit with a soft yellow glow. As Sam unwrapped the T-shirt, Julie saw that the mayonnaise jar was filled with fireflies. They crawled up the sides and tinked against the glass, tiny specks of living lightning.

“I thought you might like a souvenir,” Sam said, grinning in the glow.

“They’re beautiful. But will they live?”

“The lid has holes punched in it. I’d give them a day. You might want to release them in the morning before you leave.”

“I will. Thank you, Sam.” Julie embraced him. “For everything.”

They stood together like that for a time, enfolded in one another’s arms, lit dimly and softly by the fireflies. Sam took one last deep breath of Julie, one last scent of the rose. Then he kissed her on her forehead and said goodbye.

After he left, Julie sat on her bed, cradled the fireflies in her lap, and cried.

Time passed.

For Sam the days once again became routine. He went to work in the mornings at Homer's Garage, listened to oldies, worked on cars, and shot the bull with Homer on breaks. In the evenings, he went home to a quiet house.

Rebecca grew more and more silent as the weeks wore on, until finally she stopped speaking almost altogether. She prayed constantly, walking from room to room with her eyes half-shut and her lips working over words as Catholics might work over a rosary. Sometimes Sam and Bob would sit on the porch at night and talk about why she would not talk. Bob thought it was Zeke. Sam thought he was probably right. One day Sam realized that he could not remember his mother ever being truly happy. There were moments, of course, as when Annie had announced her pregnancy. But these were fleeting, not the kind of permanent happiness Sam was thinking of. He supposed it had never been there. At first, her silences unnerved him and prompted him to ask her what was wrong. But the answer to that was always more silence. So, he just asked his father, and they speculated together as to what the answer might be. Finally, her not speaking became another part of the Littles' daily routine, just like Mal's eating Pop Tarts for breakfast or Bob's shaving every other day.

Sam enjoyed this newfound gift of conversation with his father. They talked about matters of consequence and about matters of insignificance. Sam hooked Bob on reading, starting him out with Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Sam

was reading *Life on the Mississippi* at the same time, learning about Twain's youth as an apprentice to a steamboat pilot. He and his father would discuss what they read, always talking literature by the waning light of the day. Bob rarely talked about prison. The few times Sam did hear him mention it were in passing, as if it were a relic one might run across in an old attic trunk when cleaning house and then comment on its history. It seemed to have very little place in his life anymore.

Sam kept in touch with Moe Johnson. He took Mal in for a haircut every three weeks. Inevitably on these visits, while the barber-preacher was talking, Sam would think longingly on Julie. He missed her extraordinary beauty, her light and airy laughter, her exotic otherworldliness. He asked about her each time he visited, and each time he heard a grandfather's glowing report. He never heard the things he wanted to hear: whether she was seeing anybody, whether she still wore her hair shoulder-length, whether she still possessed her amazing ability to belch.

The summer ended, and Mal started back to school in September. Eventually, Sam stopped asking about Julie when he took Mal in for his haircut. He even briefly considered going back to Larry Ferguson's barbershop, because being around Moe hurt too much. He wanted Julie, and he thought she had forgotten him.

Then one day he received a package from her. This was in late September, when the days were beginning to get shorter. It came by U.P.S., a small box wrapped in brown paper. It contained a letter and a tiny porcelain clown who looked like a traveling hobo, with his clothes tied in a bundle on a stick slung over his shoulder.

Sam read the letter on the front porch.

Dearest Sam,

I apologize for not having written sooner, but my life has changed dramatically since I left Arkansas. I have been caught up in the tumult of graduate school this past month, and I spent most of the summer writing. Unpacking my heart with words, as Shakespeare might say. I have written a book—no big thing, just a small novel about a small town and the people who live there. Apparently, someone thinks it's worth something, because it's going to be published around Christmas. I'm very excited.

There has not been a day that I do not think fondly of you, Sam. Sometimes at night I lie awake, wondering what my life might have been like if I had known you under other circumstances. If you had been a student at UCLA and we had met there, or if I had grown up in Midland and known you in high school. But the truth is we are from different worlds, and while those worlds were obviously meant to intersect, they were never meant to intertwine.

My main character in my book is based on you. He's quiet, a little shy, thoughtful. Completely charming at his best, irresistibly adorable at his worst. When I remember that first night we spent together under the stars, I do not immediately see the stars or the fireflies. I picture your face, innocent and full of wonder at the universe and its creatures. You have a good spirit, Sam Little.

Enclosed is a homesick clown I picked up at Wong's Department Store. I decided to send him back because he doesn't belong in California. Even though he'd tied his clothes in a bundle and wanted to travel, I think he realized that he was in the wrong place. He misses Arkansas. So, I entrust him into your care.

Always remember, Sam: A place is not bad in and of itself. There are many Nowhere Lands out there, but the only reason they're nowhere is because we don't think of them as somewhere.

Love,

Julie

When Bob Little came home from work that evening, he found Sam sitting quietly on the porch, rocking with Julie's letter in one hand and the clown in the other. Mal was playing with his Tonka toys in the yard, scooping dirt into the dump truck with his sneaker. Sam watched his little brother but did not really see him. His eyes were as vacant as the rice field across the road, so Bob asked, "What's wrong?"

"Huh?" Sam said, blinking.

"You looked like you were out of it."

"Oh. Just thinking."

Bob took a seat in the rocker beside Sam. "About what?"

"My life."

"Who's the letter from?"

"Julie Johnson."

“Oh,” Bob said. He did not speak much of what happened that summer. Bob had tried to put it behind him, just as he had tried to put one rainy night and twelve long years behind him.

“When you were in prison, did you ever know a guard by the name of Burt Bishop?”

Bob scratched his chin. “Seems familiar. Although, I can’t be sure.”

“I knew his son, Marcus, in high school. He was a friend. One day Marcus decided to up and leave, just head out in his beat-up old car.”

“That right?”

“Yeah. He was tired of this place. Tired of Midland and all that nothing that he thought was here. He wanted me to go with him, but I didn’t. I couldn’t leave Mom and Mal.” Sam smiled as his little brother dumped a load of dirt into his shoe. “I got a letter from him right before you came home. He’s still traveling, in Nevada, now.”

“That doesn’t sound half bad,” Bob mused.

“No. But one day Marcus is going to come home and learn that while he was gone, his father was murdered, and his mother found a new man.”

Bob said nothing.

“I was thinking about how all those years while you were in prison, I wanted to leave this place. I wanted to get out, go somewhere, anywhere but here. But I don’t feel that way anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have a family that I love.”

Bob regarded his son for a time, watching his beautiful face cast orange by the sinking sun. "For some people, everything is somewhere else," he said. "But for some of us, everything is here."

And that makes this somewhere, Sam thought.

In the yard, Mal laughed with joy and clapped his hands as he sent his dump truck flying along with a shove.

That night, Sam and Mal slept with the window open, and a light breeze ruffled the homemade curtains. Both boys lay atop their covers, Mal in his Scooby-Doo underwear and Sam in his shorts.

Sam dreamed. He and Julie were walking in a wide-open field at night, and there were millions of fireflies, so many that it seemed like day. Mal ran circles around them, cupping dozens of the glowing bugs in his hands and then releasing them, each time giggling his delight. Zeke was there, his arm around Annie. Her stomach was swollen with the baby that was due at any time. And in the distance, standing on the horizon by the white rose bush that had once grown outside Sam's bedroom window, were Moe and Louise and Bob and Rebecca. Bob was swatting at fireflies, and Rebecca was praying for Annie's child. Louise's hands were clasped over her heart, and Moe was smoking his pipe, dressed in his white barber's shirt.

Sometime after midnight, when the dream had long since faded, Sam woke briefly and thought he caught the faint scent of roses drifting in through the window on the night air.