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HERE ON THIS HILL

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing

The University of Mississippi

Jennifer J. Wilson

December 2011

ABSTRACT

Jolee Wilese is a young college student struggling to reconcile her life experiences in two different worlds: the world of a college community in the city of Babel, to which she commutes daily, and the world of her home community in a rural area of northern Mississippi. Past and present collide as she explores events and ideologies which have shaped her own identity and the identities of those around her, particularly her father who works in the city, farms at home, struggles with alcoholism and fears the nearness of an apocalyptic era. As the story unfolds, Jolee finds herself torn between two opposing worldviews—the worldview embodied by her home and community, and the worldview she finds herself immersed in as she works and attends school “in town.” Through a series of events both within and outside of her control, she faces a decision that may alter the course of her life.

DEDICATION

For Grandma, who understood about the rocks, sticks and leaves. For Mama, who loved me unconditionally and never gave up. And also for Deddy, whose image this work depicts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank a few of those persons who have helped me immeasurably in the development of this project, in many cases without realizing it. I would like to thank Profesora Elizabeth Contreras, who welcomed me into the foreign country of a university by demonstrating a teacher's love toward myself and other students in the midst of life's various adversities. I would like to thank Dr. Jay Watson who saw academic potential in an otherwise human wreck, and who wouldn't accept any less than my very best work. I would like to thank writers Janisse Ray and Jack Pendarvis for putting up with me in class, and for responding to my confusion, lack of direction and hard-headedness with gentle patience and constructive criticism. I would like to thank Dr. Mary Hayes for modeling what it means to be a single working-class woman and also a driven academic; I have great respect for any woman who can uproot from New Jersey and adapt to life in Mississippi as well as she has.

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Finally, I'd like to thank Deddy for his openness and honesty regarding his outlook on the world. He is probably the only man I know who has ever truly loved me—the only one who would have died for me, lived for me, killed for me, or jumped into a freezing river for me if I had needed him. I don't think most girls in this generation can say that about their daddies, and it means more to me than you know.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. BOYS AND FIRE.....	1
II. CITIES OF THE PLAIN.....	24
III. DOLLHOUSE.....	28
IV. GENESIS.....	35
V. GLOBALIZATION.....	77
VI. PLANETS	80
VII. YOUNG MEN AND HORSESHOES.....	84
VIII. LIFE OF BUCK.....	89
VITA.....	125

CHAPTER I
BOYS AND FIRE

The four-wheeler breathes at dark. Its pulse inside the walls and against the window glass is real enough that I can touch it. My fingers leave an imprint on the windowpane upstairs. It's cool, like creekwater. Deddy's had some drink tonight.

East of our house, bristled pine tops scrape the sky like needles on a stiff wire brush. They're separating the firmaments in a horizon line that's thin, and crooked as a dead snake. October's last dusk wind is a lost dove-widow, cooing and beating her wings against the tin roof. A red sun is smoldering over swollen, steel-wool hills for only a minute or two. Then Earth gapes her mouth and drags twilight into sheol, until all that's left is the color. Today was Friday.

Nobody's at the house; Mama, Hazel and Cricket—they're all out tonight, at the high school football game in Babel, shivering under knit blankets as our younger brother Jared trots into the arena. I'm gazing at the aura of those Babel stadium lights, west of here—a little to the left of where the sun disappeared. The city is waking up out there tonight, twinkling like a jarful of fireflies.

A ghost is clunking up the front porch steps in heavy rubber boots, bending to pet the old shepherd, turning the frigid door handle with stiff, pale fingers. The door opens with a groan as the four-wheeler on the lawn continues to snicker. Its voice along the walls is so palpable that even the mattress I'm sitting on seems undead. And then I hear him:

“Hey... Jolee?”

He hesitates before turning to walk out. He'd thought of something to say next. Then forgot it. Figured it didn't matter much anyhow. The front door sighs as she shuts herself behind him. He's

out there talking to his dogs.

Through the window, a buckskin Carhartt coat wears the body of a middle-aged man. A dirty John Deere cap with folded ear-warmers is fused to his head by two velcro fasteners who hold hands underneath a cigarette-colored beard. He keeps the brim of his cap pulled down like a welding mask to guard the eyes. When he bends, a gun belt loaded with .40 caliber Glock, a Blackberry, a GPS and a digital camera peep from beneath the curled bottom lip of his jacket. There's the sound of a heavy hand against the hollow of an old shepherd's side. He's saying: 'Hey, Boys. . .' in a voice that's soft and deep. Like Clint Eastwood's.

I'm sifting through four pairs of coveralls in search of the one that bears a sharpie-marked 'J' on the front chest pocket. Then I'm pulling that suit on one leg at a time over my T-shirt and pajama pants. I'm picking up a cheap neon-orange hat, and slipping on a pair of mud-crusting green Crocs. No socks. My gloves are hiding under a rag on the kitchen table, next to one of his pistols.

Buck's waiting for me on the front porch, thumping his tail against the wood, yawning and pulling his thick, tank-shaped body gradually to alert, front end first. He ain't as young as he used to be. Deddy's walking to his tool shed pretty curtly, and Big Dan's out there tearing away at an ugly piece of stick. When he sees our Man, he jacks up his ears and trots out to meet him: *Hey Rusty—look what I've got. I know you wish you had a stick like this one, but you can't have it. It's mine.*

Deddy smirks, grabbing Dan's slick tail and tugging on it. *Who's the boss, boy?*

"This here is my son Daniel," he says, bending only slightly at the hip, twisting his head over his shoulder like an owl in order to introduce the dog to me. "You'll have to forgive him—he is who he is, you know. Whatchu got there for me, Daniel? A stick?" He pauses. So does the dog. A stare-down. The dog wags his tail. Deddy reaches—and misses. Dan trots off undefeated.

"I tell you what, boy," Deddy says, calling after him. "That is a fine stick. Wish I had me a stick

like that. You've got a shor'nuff prize."

One last gaze. Everything out here worth seeing has been adorned in one of several shades of black-eyed purple, tekhelet blue and booze-brown. Way out there, a red laser-point pricks the sky; it's the radio tower on Highway 7. The one that winks at us every few seconds to remind Rusty that he's really only a few inches above the ugliness of things. Like a hawk perched on a telephone pole.

The four-wheeler's still idling on the front yard grass. It's getting impatient. Deddy lets the stick have its dog, and mounts.

"This is my little red pony," he says, too loud, patting his spirited gas-horse on the withers. Adjusting his cap like a motorcycle helmet. "You wanna ride?"

Past the edge of our yard, earth drops off like a pre-Columbus map of the universe. We're holding our thoughts for a second or two like two kids at the top of a wicked roller coaster. I'm watching over his shoulder as he thumbs the gas lever just past the point of no-return, and then the rest is mud and gravity. The trees shoot up as my stomach falls, and we're coasting fast into a gluey, rutted road. Mud slings off the front tires and slaps at my pants, but I'm holding on tight. The snot down my nose is already inching its way along the rim of my top lip, and I'm pressed against Deddy, knees at his thighs. The cold October air over his shoulders smells like Maker's Mark or Wild Turkey, and the hot pattering breath of the four-wheeler engine is licking my exposed ankles. The rutted road is a finite mess that spools its way through Mississippi hardwoods haunted by the coughs, the echoes and the jerky golden headlight of Deddy's 'Red Pony.' Every time a ground-knot jerks the wheel, my face bumps his coat and leaves a snot-spot. Buck and Dan are galloping ahead of us as the heat underneath my unbuttoned coveralls rapidly flies away. I'm wiping my nose with my sleeve and Deddy's shaking his head while he yells to the world: "I tell you what, them boys is some mighty fine

sons! If I could just teach 'em to open my electric fence gaps for me, they'd be perfect!"

When we reach the pasture at the foot of the hill, he slows down. The fence gap is my job tonight.

"Papaw used to have a call for his cows," he muses, tilting his head to one side and talking over the four-wheeler motor as we enter the Big Tree Field. "Calling cows is different than calling horses. You don't whistle for them. You make a soft, deep sound that comes from. . . . Well, I don't know where it comes from. From somewhere else."

He looks down and finds the key, turns the motor off. The headlight snuffs itself out, and then there's nothing. We sit for a moment, just letting the abyss kind of swallow us up. He looks up at the cold stars, taking a deep breath as he raises his arm, to cup one hand beside his mouth. I can barely see it.

"Whoo-oo-oo-oo-oo. . ." he calls, like an old hoot owl, so hard that I can feel the effort of his voice in the tightening of his upper back under the coat. "Come on, Girls!" he yells. "Come on down here and git you some candy." We wait for a few seconds, and then for a few seconds longer. Nothing.

"Whoo-oo-OO-OO-OO. . ." he calls again, so loud that I'm shrinking away from him in the seat.

"You feel kinda silly when you first try it," he says to the night sky. "It took me awhile to get it down to an art—to get it perfect. I used to think my Papaw sounded so silly when he called his cows with that sound, and the first time I tried it, I got way out here by myself where I figured nobody could hear me. And you know what? I felt stupid. But it works. It carries. You can hear this sound a mile away."

We listen. The dogs listen. Buck, the old shepherd, freezes with one foot slightly lifted, ears erect. Nothing. Not even a wind in the trees. Deddy stands up in the stirrups, cupping both hands at his face this time.

“WhOO-OO-OO-OO-OO!” he calls, as hard as he can. “Come on, Girls!”

And this time, the shepherd grunts. Cocks his head. Listens harder. Grunts again. *Humph*. An eerie rumble echoes in the woods all around us. Sounds like either a high wind or a low fire. Here they come.

“That’s right, Girls!” Deddy shouts, still straddling the four-wheeler seat. “Come on over here and get you some candy!” He turns around like a hoot owl again, looking at me. “These here are my girlfriends, Jolee,” he says. “And I’m their Sugar-Deddy.” He pulls a giant ziplock bag out of the small backpack tied to the front of his steed, and starts rattling it.

“That’s right, Girls. Come on over here and get you some candy. Come get you a little a’this. That’s right.”

By “candy” he means Range Cubes—thumb-sized pellets of compacted soybean grain, the color of dry dirt. Range Cubes taste good to cows. In less than a minute, we’re surrounded by heifer eyes, heifer necks, heifer noses and two-foot long heifer tongues, but I can’t see them. It’s too dark. A white-painted face suddenly appears among them, like a joker among batmen. That’s Q-Tip. She’s sniffing my exposed neck, tickling me with her chin whiskers. Big Boy appears next, an invisible presence pawing, stomping and pushing everyone else out of the way. But these girls are too smitten to leave Deddy. Big Boy finally shoves his 1,000 pounds onto the four-wheeler, shifting us to the left, butting me calmly with the crown of his head, reaching over my shoulder with a an invisible black neck that’s ice-solid, but covered in skin as soft as kneaded biscuit dough.

For a few seconds, here I am, breath to breath with a Black Angus monster almost ten times my size—but he’s gentle. Deddy pops a range pill into Big Boy’s mouth, then thumps him on the cheek with bare knuckles. “Hey Big Boy,” he says. “Give somebody else a turn. I reckon you could tump this four-wheeler over and kill us if you wanted to.” Deddy forgets sometimes what he has and hasn’t

taught me. Starts giving me instructions on how to properly feed a range cube to a cow.

“Here Jolee, take you a few pieces,” he says, “and hold them up one at a time like this. When she opens up, just pop it right in on top of her tongue as far back there as you can reach, so she won’t drop it.” Big Boy’s still hogging the front end of the four-wheeler, and in the back, the heifers are making out with my coverall sleeves and ponytail from behind.

“You know the vast majority of the human race ain’t much different than these cows,” he says, sort of serious. “You should watch ’em sometime—watch some of these people. They go with the flow, most people do. Easily influenced, easily led. They live for the crowd, wanna do what everybody else is doing. They eat, they sleep, they go to work during the day—some of them—and play around on weekends, or whatever. Everybody’s looking for a piece of candy. Something to make them happy. You give them that, give them a little something sweet, and they’ll follow you anywhere.”

I tell him if he feels that way, maybe he should start his own business sometime.

“Hey—that’s a great idea,” he says sarcastically. “In my next life, I think I’ll try that. I’m gonna invent the ‘New-American Human Range Cube,’ and sell it to people. . . .”

He rattles the bag and offers one to me.

Cow spit is slurpy and thick, like Neosporin on your forearm hairs. Neosporin with crumbs of cud in it. Cow snot is soupy and cool when it hits the air, like calamine lotion. I can’t see Pudd’nHead’s mouth in the dark, but I can feel her breath, her snot and her spit—she’s trying to suck my hand off. I hold a range cube in three fingers and caterpillar my arm among several snuffing wet noses, and when I find the mouth I’m looking for, I shove the cube in on top of a firm, warm tongue, as far back there as my clenched fist will go. She backs away a little, then coughs once. Swallows. Tries to push her way back to the front of the mob again. The rest are still all over us. I very gently wipe my arm off on the back of his coat.

“Y’all are some mighty good girlfriends,” he tells them, patting heads. “Some fine, purdy ole girls. But that’s enough now. I’ll stop back in again tomorrow.”

He cranks us back up, eases the gas, parts the waters, then eases it a little harder, scooting the rest of them out of the way. For a little while, they’re all trudging, then galloping along behind us, moo-ing hard. Darkness masks their bobbing heads again, all but Q-Tip. And then gradually, gradually, gradually, we’ve lost them somewhere behind.

Things down here seem to know what to do without Deddy telling them, like he was God and this was Genesis. Like he was Adam and this was Eden. Everything sort of works for a purpose here, at dark. On Monday morning, Deddy and me will have to go back down, back to the city. Back to being who we are when we’re not here. Back to being a part of that other world he wanted us to hide here from. Whatever happened out there this morning, to either one of us—none of it matters anymore tonight. Four o’clock today might as well have been four o’clock yesterday, or four o’clock the day before; it’s that far away from us now. The other world is far away as East is from West, as far as the Babel lights that twinkle on the horizon, as far as Deddy’s right arm is from his left as he vice-grips the four-wheeler handlebars and winds us through gothic, headlight-lit woods.

I don’t know who Deddy is when he’s not here. I don’t know who he was when he was out There only a couple of hours ago. But I know who he is tonight. He’s Deddy, and I’m holding onto him tight, breathing the worn-out scent of his Carhartt coat, breathing the cold October wind, breathing his whiskey. For a little while, he seems almost innocent, like a little boy with a fast new toy. He’s zigging, he’s zagging, he’s snaking his way along the Beulah Creek border, holding his mouth just right as we maneuver between tight tree trunks, low-reaching limbs and thick brier snares. He’s grinning on the inside right now. I can feel it.

We ride until we reach the edge of our living world, stopping at the Bend. At Wilese Bend. It's a 30-foot cliff-like bank that drops off into a pair of serpentine curves in the creek. He named it after us. The four-wheeler sighs as he gears down. And then she relaxes. For a moment, he doesn't say a word, doesn't move. He's watching the moonlight wiggle against the surface of the water below. A shuffle in the hard leaves, a putter and skid of paws against slick ground, and a colossal splash in the mirrored sliver-moon thirty feet below suggest that Dan has found a way down. Buck is waiting at the four-wheeler beside us.

Somewhere just beyond the tree line, coyotes go to howling at each other. First one, then three. Then five. They're ahead of us, in the woods just across the creek. Not too far away. We listen as six, or seven, or eight coyote howls move closer and closer and closer to one another, till eventually all become one. Howls become yelps, yelps become barks, barks become yips, and then silence. He dismounts and walks to the left, stopping only a few feet away with his fists in his pockets, his cap tilted towards the treetops above my head.

"They're purdy to listen to, ain't they," he whispers, looking my way. When his beard spreads out, I can tell he's smiling.

"Hey Jolee, what was it that Norman Maclean said one time about rivers?" he asks, looking over the edge while Dan plays in the water. "Waters haunt me," he muses, not realizing he's missed the quote. "Well," he says, before I have a chance to correct him, "waters haunt me, too. And dogs. I like dogs. Trees are pretty good. This place ain't nothing like Montana, or the Rocky Mountains, but I tell you, there's just something about boys and dogs, and woods and creeks—they go together like nothin' else I know of. Almost like that was how things was meant to be. Forever."

Like that was how things were meant to be.

“I climbed some stairs earlier today,” he says, deciding that the coyotes are done for the night. “And all I could hear was the cartilage in my knees grinding and crackling and wearing itself out so that my bones can all rub against each other.” He pulls his pants legs up so he can squat down and give me a listen.

Snap, crackle, pop-and-grind.

“You hear that?” he asks. I nod as he repeats the demonstration.

Snap, crackle, pop-and-grind. Sure enough.

“That’s what happens when you get old,” he says, still squatting. “Used to, I didn’t understand it when I was around old men who didn’t want to bend down or squat down or get down on the ground or climb over fences—but now I know why they didn’t want to. Because it *hurts*.” He shakes his head and pushes a few fingers firmly against the ground as he leans forward and hoists himself back up.

“I’m telling you, Jolee,” he says, “you need to jump every chance you get. Well, maybe you don’t need to jump every chance you get. . . but if you want to jump, you better do it now while you still can—because when you get my age, you won’t be able to.”

I see it coming. An attempt. He kind of hops up from the grass for about a fourth of a second, with his fists still in his pockets, chin down. Only a couple of centimeters. Then he shakes his head in disgust. It must have hurt.

“When I was a boy,” he says, “that’s all I ever did was jump. Never give it a thought. Pretty much everywhere I went, I was running and jumping—and I was good at it. I used to jump barb-wire fences flat-footed. I’m talking fences that were waist-high or better.” He holds one level hand up to his body, at a point just below the nipple line.

“And if I had a running start,” he says, “I could clear fences that were just a little above chest-high. When I was a boy, me and the other boys I ran with in Beulah, we never opened a gate, never crawled

under a fence, never climbed across a ditch—and we never thought about it. It never occurred to us. We jumped fences, jumped gullies, jumped off of dams and levees, and out of trees, and out of tree houses...hell we used to jump off of real houses, off of barns. Just seemed like the quickest way down. Boys are kinda stupid like that, you know. It really didn't matter; we jumped off of everything.

“And I never thought nothin' about it back then,” he says, “except every now and then when I was showing out and misjudged a jump—caught the toe of my shoe on the edge of a barb-wire fence or something. And then it ain't so fun anymore. Then you're crawling in the dirt on your hands and knees, feeling around in the grass for your breath while the other boys are standing there doubled-over, laughing at you, and secretly you're thinking '*Please don't laugh at me—I really do think that I am about to die, right here in front of everybody.*' And then you start imagining what they might think and what they might say about it if you really do die, right there on the ground in front of them, because you ain't got no air. You're fumbling around in the grass, trying to call your breath back to you, but it just won't come—”

He starts imitating himself, thirty years ago after a fall. He leans forward with a dumbstruck look on his face and starts making desperate, breathless noises, waving his hands out along an imaginary ground, squinting his eyes and letting his mouth fall open then closed—gasping for “breath” like a catfish out of water.

“And then finally,” he says, “Finally—it all comes back to you. You remember how to breathe again, but them boys are still laughing and making fun of you, and you don't want them to all think you're a . . . well, you know. . . so you get back up and act like it didn't happen. 'Oh, I didn't really fall just then. I didn't really almost die. That barb-wire fence is a cinch; I just wasn't trying very hard.' And you go right back to jumping again, just like it never happened. Boys are pretty much stupid like that. Especially when they're young and there's a bunch of them together.”

He cocks his head and looks sarcastically toward the stars, as his beard creases in a ‘why’d-I-ever-act-so-foolish’ kind of grin. He’s still shaking his head slowly, then sighs at himself.

“One time, when I was a grown boy,” he says, “in high school, maybe even in college—me and some of these boys from around here all went up to a dam we knew of outside of Beulah. This dam was the real thing; I don’t know how many feet up it was. And I didn’t know how many feet down it was, or even how deep the water was, or what was hidden just under the surface of the water—you don’t think about things like that when you’re a boy. A little beer helps. One of the boys I was with dared me to jump off, and I couldn’t be chicken, so I did. And I didn’t just jump . . . I dove off, to show them that I would. I’m lucky that the water wasn’t three feet deep. I’m lucky there wasn’t a damn tree stump or a stob sticking up with gnarled limbs that were hidden just underneath the surface—waiting to impale somebody. As it was, I dove kind of out, rather than straight down, and I hit that water wide open with my chest. It wasn’t a belly-flop; it wasn’t my stomach. It was my chest. And it hurt. Completely knocked the wind out of me. I really did think that I was gonna die that time. I don’t know how I ever made it to the bank, I don’t even remember being able to swim—because I couldn’t breathe. But somehow I made it to the side, without any oxygen, and laid there till I got my breath again. One of them other boys hollered down to me from up on top of the dam:

“‘Hey, Rusty—how was it?’

“I still couldn’t even talk yet, but I thought for a second, then smiled back up at them and nodded. Motioned them with my hand to come on down.

“ ‘Aww, it ain’t too bad,’ I finally yelled. ‘Come on down, Boys!’” He motions to them in his mind, with a raised arm. “And then I just sat there, watching them—every last one of them boys—dive off of that dam one at a time. And some of them landed awful, just awful; they hit the water worse than I did. One guy hit the water with his face; he came up choking and gasping for air.”

Daddy gives me an impression of this one poor boy by letting his eyes go blank and dropping his jaw. He starts taking short, choppy breaths like a woman in labor, then flinging his arms indiscriminately like he's drowning chicken.

"I layed over there, just laughing at him," he says. "I laughed at him, made fun of the way he looked when he hit the water, made wisecracks, pointed and hoo-ha'd. I thought it was pretty hilarious at the moment—and he could have been killed. I could have been killed. Any one of us could have been killed, or paralyzed from the neck down, or crippled for life. But that's boys for ya—boys at any age, especially when there's several of them together. They don't think a whole lot sometimes. Most of them don't grow up and grow out of it till they're about thirty-five—and some of them don't grow out of it even then. Some of them don't ever grow out of it."

He shrugs, then reaches for his flask again. Stands with his back to me while he takes a couple of swigs, then mounts his little red four-wheeler.

"You ready?"

I used to wake up sometimes at two or three in the morning, when I was a kid and we lived in the city. A telephone ring, Daddy's low voice muffled across the hallway in the dark. Nothing. A few seconds later, the bedroom lamp, and Mama's voice, thick and hoarse. Across the hall and through their half-open door, I watched his shadow wiggling against the carpet while he pulled his pants on. I watched as his pale bare arms lay the rifle case across the bed, temporarily, next to the gun belt and his pistol. She brought the bullet-proof vest out of the closet like a Spartan shield, and placed it beside them. Daddy was in a hurry. She tried not to say too much. She wanted to. She wanted to hold him; she wanted him to hold her. She wanted him to love her. But he didn't want to be loved much right now. Some nights he'd put one arm around her for half a second, and find her lips for less than that.

Like a cowboy out of a movie or something. He'd strap on the belt, tie his shoes, check the pistol, grab his keys and the vest and the rifle case and walk out.

I used to watch as she followed him barefooted, wearing a long t-shirt. I used to listen to the pattern of their footsteps up the hallway, his strides curt and definite, hers cautious and uncertain. Sometimes I could hold my breath for several seconds, chest pounding, listening for the front door to open. Sometimes I couldn't wait that long. Sometimes I bolted from bed at last, broke the quiet, sprinted up the hallway as fast as I could, just in time to catch him as he was walking through the door, or down the front walk.

"Deddy—Deddy, I love you!"

He never looked up when I said that. He'd stop if he had to, if I caught hold of his pants and wrapped my wiry body around his leg.

"Okay, I love you too," he'd whisper. A rehearsed response. Followed by a cold command: "Now go back to the porch."

"Be careful, Rusty," she'd tell him, her voice solemn as she pulled me away from him by the shoulders and held on tight. That was always the last thing she said. *Be careful, Rusty.*

He never answered. She'd stand on the front steps holding my shoulders, with the cool night air on our feet as we watched the bright gold letters on the back of his jacket shrink and then disappear as he opened the car door and ducked inside. Those letters were probably the first that I learned to read: P-O-L-I-C-E.

On happy occasions, he'd crank up the car and flash the blue lights for me. Not on nights like this. Mama and I would stand on the front steps watching. Watch until his taillights rounded the corner. And then he was gone.

Sometimes I'd ask if I could sleep with her after. Other times I went back to bed and stayed awake

as long as I could, watching her across the hall. Thinking about where Deddy was. Most nights Mama left the light on, and sat up in bed till almost daylight. Reading. Sometimes she turned off the light and turned on the television, rested on his side of the bed with her head on his pillow, under the sheets. Sometimes she got up and walked to the kitchen, where I heard the whistle of a hot kettle minutes later, or the snap-click-fizz-z-z of a Coca-Cola can. She never taught me to be afraid about it, or to wonder, or to worry. She never cried, never paced. Never talked about it. But even at that age, I think I just kind of knew. Saw it in the way she couldn't sleep well after. When I laid down in bed with my eyes closed tight, I used to pray to the God she'd taught me to pray to:

Dear God, please take care of My Deddy. Please tell him to be 'careful.'

But even after praying under my covers safe and tight, there was this one thought that wasn't even a thought, it was more of a feeling somewhere way, way down—and it just kept coming back to me, over and over again. I couldn't get rid of it. *What if tonight is the night*

Up the hill, in front of the old corn crib, he's built us a fire. Gathers up a few old cowfeed sacks and wads them up, pours a few ounces of gasoline and lights a match. He breathes out a cold cloud puff, looking West, and surveys the suburb lights far away. They twinkle along the horizon like an orbit full of faraway asteroids, or a meteor shower. There's a glitter for each of the houses. The treetops sheath them like curtains in the summertime. But every winter, here they are again. Every winter, here they are—plus four or five more.

“When I was a boy,” he says, “I used to come out here and stand at the top of this hill while I was out hunting with my dogs. I'd turn them loose and let them run, then I'd stand up here and listen. Wait for them to strike up the trail of something. And back then, even when I was a grown boy—

about your age—when I stood up here on this hill at dark, there was nothing. Nothing in any direction, as far as the eye could see. No houses. No towers. No lights. Babel was far, far off. And Beulah was that way, but it'd take you awhile to get there if you was walking after dark. You can't even imagine what that felt like, Jolee, to be up here like that, in the dark—in the real dark—and to literally be alone. This was a wilderness then, or at least I thought it was a wilderness. It seemed that way to me.”

He stretches out his arm and spreads his fingers over horizon and air when he talks about this place the way it was, or the way he remembered it was, years ago. He moves his hand like he's parting the Red Sea waters for me, and lifting them up. To show me what's buried.

“I've wandered through all them places, a many-a-time when I was a boy,” he says. “I knew every bend in the river, every hill, every holler, every tree, every old road and old barn and old sunk-in house that was still standing between here and town.

“Up there close to old Johnson Bend,” he says, “there were trees so big that couldn't nothing grow underneath them. They blotted the sun out. It wasn't anything like all these thick, tangled up woods you're familiar with. You could roam around in these woods freely—no brush, no branches, no briars to grab a hold of your pants' legs. Those trees were old-old, some of the last ones left that was here in the Beginning. And them woods was open—you'd be walking around in the shade even at midday. I wish you could feel what that felt like, Jolee. To wander around in woods like that. It was a quiet, weird feeling—like being in a church by yourself or something. I used to hunt squirrels in there when I was young. Them woods was full of squirrels. But all that's gone now. Somebody decided to cut them down, I guess.

“Now then I bet you I can count fifteen lights on the horizon tonight, out there towards Babel,” he says, aggravated. “And that's just the ones I can see; there's probably others out there that I can't

see. People are moving closer. There's nowhere else for them to go; the world's gettin' too populated. Things is bad all over, 'cept for here on this hill. And it's coming, Jolee. It's coming. And it'll catch up with us sooner or later. The world is a perfect chaos—a perfect chaos—it's mixed up, it's messed up, it's screwed-up, it's you-know-what-up, and it's as twisted and tangled and matted up as it can possibly be. At least that's my way of thinking. I don't know how it could get much worse out there than what it is now. All this stuff you read about that'll be going on in the End Times...we're there, baby. All the wickedness, and all the debauchery, all the evil—people raping and killing and stealing and having at each other, and all the sick perversions that you've never even thought of...we're there. That kinda stuff goes on nowadays, and it will come out here to get us too, if it can. We can't hide here from it forever. I drive to the end of my gravel driveway in the mornings, and there it is—right there at my mailbox. At my gate—just waiting for me to forget to lock the house one day or something. Waiting for an opportunity to come in and get us. We can't live up here in a little bubble forever, Jolee. Lightning will strike eventually. The world'll find us, sooner or later.”

He hesitates for a moment, breathing out a puff of cool dark air, shifting to another thought.

“Sometimes I think God put a dome over this hill,” he says. “Over this house, over this place. I almost think it was like he issued a command or something, and said: ‘Nah. All the evil things have to stay away from here, because this place is for Rusty. This is where Rusty's family lives, and it's protected. No bad things are allowed to come in and interfere. At least for a little while.’”

He stops there, and gets quiet. Squats down and prods the fire a little while he changes his mind. “I tell you, there's nothing quite like a fire,” he says, standing up. “For a boy anyway. It's a fascinating thing. I could watch one for hours, till morning, and not get tired of it. And I think a lot of men are the same way.”

It's hard to tell what he's thinking, what he's really thinking, even when he's standing right here

in front of me at the junction of warm and cold, light and dark. Even when he's had too much to drink. By day he wears fatherhood like a Carhartt coat, or a pair of coveralls. Nothing gets in and nothing gets out. Everything is covered, everything is shielded, everything is hidden, protected. By firelight the skin below his beard-line is visible every now and then, when he tilts his head at just the right angle. The skin along his cheekbones and below his eyebrows is overshadowed by the brim of his cap; when he stands in the firelight, it's the only part of him I see. He keeps his hands in his pockets. I'm poking a stick at the ground.

“Deddy, how many girls. . . how many women were you with before Mama.”

He smirks a little, shakes his head cleverly. *Ha ha.*

“Nice try, Jolee,” he says. Wryly. “I’ll never tell you.”

He studies the fire some more. Pulls his right hand out of his pocket and looks at it, makes a slow tight fist in the orange light. Then he stretches his stiff fingers. Wanders back.

“When I was a junior in college,” he says, “I had come home from class and put some soup on to cook. If left the stove-eye on high, and went to use the bathroom, then forgot about it. Started reading. When I got done washing my hands, I smelled something—and knew immediately what it was. I ran up the hall to the kitchen; the pot of soup was on fire. We didn’t have a fire extinguisher. I went to grab the pot, to get it off the eye, but when I did, the handle was scalding hot, and I flipped it over on myself. Hot grease poured out all over my hand—and the next thing I knew my hand was on fire. Went up in flames, just like that. I ran. I ran. I just ran. That’s the first thing you do when something like that happens; that’s your body’s natural reaction. I was on fire, so I ran.

“I made it all the way to the front door before I realized that my hand was still on fire. I had to put it out, and I don’t know why I thought about it—people burn to death because their bodies react and they don’t think. But as I was running through the front door I reached down and pulled up my

shirt, wrapped it over the hand and snuffed the fire out. And I was outside by this time, in the front yard, still running. When I got sense enough about me to look down, I peeled the shirt back off my hand, and when I did, all my skin came off with it. The skin was stuck to the shirt—like burnt saran wrap. Stunk like nothing you’ve ever smelled. Burnt *skin*. And there was my hand, with no skin left on it—I was looking at blood and tissue. Red and pink and white and black. So I just wrapped the hand back up with the shirt and kept running. My hand was still on fire, in my mind. Then all of a sudden, I realized that the stove eye was still on. I realized that the pot of fire I had dumped out on the kitchen floor was still dumped out on the kitchen floor, and that the trailer was probably on fire. So I stopped for a second, spun around, and ran back inside.

“When I got to the kitchen again, nothing looked the same. All that soup and grease had just stuck to wherever it landed and kept burning, and the dining room carpet was all on fire—that quick. They say an entire house can go up in less than three minutes, and I believe it. I couldn’t have been gone more than fifteen or twenty seconds, and in that amount of time, fire was everywhere. Luckily, I was still able to *think*. For whatever reason, my head just kinda came back to me, and I was able to figure out what to do. Water wouldn’t have worked. It was a grease fire. So I ran to the linen closet and grabbed a couple of quilts, draped them over the floor, then snuffed and stomped the fire out. It’s amazing what adrenaline can do for you in situations like that—it can make you panic to the point of killing yourself, or it can give you the strength and the focus you need to save your life and do some pretty amazing things. I literally stomped that fire out. Then carefully turned the stove eye off.

“After that I ran to the nearest house up the road—to Aunt Edna’s. I don’t know why, but she and Uncle Ray were both home, and when they saw me with my hand wrapped up, they didn’t even ask what happened. Ray ran and cranked up the car. I jumped in and I think she told somebody at the house to call my mama, and we took off. And my hand still felt like it was on fire, like it was still

burning. That's a crazy feeling, baby—pain that's out of this world, and no matter what you do, you can't get away from it. My shirt was still wrapped around my hand, and it was stuck to me, soaked in watery blood, shriveled up like a wet sheet.

“Mama and Deddy met us at the emergency room in Babel, and for some reason, they got to come back there with me. The doctors and nurses laid me out on a table, and it took everybody in the room to hold me down—I was still on fire. When they started to peel that shirt away, it felt like they were filleting me, and I went mad—I was fighting and kicking and screaming, and I remember shouting: *DON'T cut it off, DON'T cut it off! Don't cut my hand off!* I guess I was thinking they were gonna amputate it—and I was crazy. Then my Deddy was helping them hold me down; he was on top of me, straddling my chest, pinning my arms down at the elbows. Big tears were streaming down his cheeks, and I remember thinking that was the only time I had ever seen him cry. . . .”

Deddy looks away when he says that, up to the cold air, and closes his fingers, still feeling what it felt like. Still seeing his Deddy's tears.

“I never thought things would be right again,” he says, holding the afflicted hand closer to his face, spreading his fingers, curling them up. Spreading them again and turning the palm over, studying the backside and the knuckles. Studying the crevices in between his fingers, like a man who's been healed of leprosy. Both hands look pretty much the same to me. At least in the firelight.

They say Abraham stood on the hillside with the Lord when he looked out toward Sodom. She was a breathtaking city once, sparkling like a diamond necklace at the nape of the of the mountains bordering Canaan, overlooking a moonless Jordan plain.

“Deddy, do you really think that the world and most of the people in it are going to Hell. Do you really think that we are living near the End Times. Do you really think that.”

He doesn't flinch. He doesn't nod, or shake his head, or rub his beard or shift his weight or lift his flask. He just stands there, staring at me. Staring at the fire.

"The writing's pretty much on the wall," he says. "Rome is falling. They're just giving us a little fiddle music to keep us pacified along the way. If Obama gets elected—it's over for us. It's done. Hell, he could be the darn Anti-Christ, for all I know."

"Deddy, do you really think that."

"Yes, Jolee," he says. Sighing. Looking dead at me over the fire.

Yes Jolee. I really do think that.

I sit Indian-style a foot or two away from the dimming fire, with the warm of it on my face, and the cool of the stiff ground on my haunches. The cat appears from nowhere; he tiptoes over my thighs and curls up like an oven-baked cinnamon roll. Deddy and I look yonder toward an endless black dome, and beneath it, the city we'll go back to on Monday. He's numbering the fallen stars.

"Maybe there's still a few good people out there, Deddy—and that's why God hasn't destroyed it," I say. "Maybe there are still fifty, or a hundred and fifty, or a thousand and fifty. Ten thousand and fifty even. Maybe there are still a handful of good people still out there—and that's why He won't destroy it."

He prods the low flames with a stick, stirs up hot orange sparks. They float up and fly away like crimson dandelion feathers, dying in the cold black air.

"Maybe so," he says.

The stars won't last long enough; they'll recede back into the depths of the sky in a little while. In a few hours, the sliver-moon will go back to where she came from. And so will we. He cranks up the four-wheeler and I tell him I'll walk. The headlight suddenly casts aura and spirit onto the body of an invisible man, as the four-wheeler coughs and putters steadily up a gravel driveway toward home. The thin red glow of tail lights slither along blood-stained woods behind him, revealing for mere seconds a series of hand-woven tree trunks that weren't there before, and now are gone. They don't seem real.

The hard dirt I'm standing on and the cold dead grass I'm brushing off the legs of my coveralls are real enough. The sound of our fire hissing and cackling at my back, and the sound of the cat purring, the sound of Buck's paws pitter-pattering, pitter-pattering along the ground suggests that even the things I can't see anymore are still here. Buck pauses, then turns to watch me—I feel his eyes. The cat presses his face to my leg as hard as he can. *I'm still here.* When the sun comes up Monday morning, I'll go back down, back to Babel. Back to living among the rest of the living. But not tonight. The cat and I follow Buck and the fading sound of the four-wheeler over the length of the gravel driveway. Towards home.

Deddy's on his Blackberry when he parks the muddy four-wheeler and dismounts, wincing. Like maybe he's got that pain again, on the inside. I want to ask him *Deddy does your side still hurt?* But I don't.

"Okey-doke," he says finally, then presses a button and clips the phone back to his belt. Must have been Mama.

"Beulah lost to Babel—by seven points. Your mama's on her way in with your brother and the girls—they'll be home in thirty minutes."

The kitchen light was left on; I follow him up the porch steps where its glow meets the dark.

Buck lowers his head and wags his tail, and the cat tries to rub against Deddy's leg as he works his boots off. I watch him the way that they watch him, wondering again if he's told me the whole truth. Wonder if it's dark enough, if he's relaxed enough, if he's had enough Maker's Mark to stand in the window glow and pull his gloves off, pull his cap off, pull his Carhartt coat off and show me 'Rusty.' The Rusty he is, or the Rusty was he was before he dressed himself up into the sort of "father" he felt like we needed him to be.

"Deddy, how many women were there . . . how many were you *with* before Mama."

A deadness comes to his face this time, when he looks up at me. Looks like the hurt that comes to the face of a dog when it's been kicked by someone it loves. He isn't drunk enough.

"Does it really matter, baby?" he asks, with squinty eyes. He's staring at the top of my head. And when I can't answer, he asks again.

"Does it really matter that much to you, Jolee? Tell me why."

"It would mean the difference in knowing whether or not I'm living in a fantasy-land," I tell him, the best way I know how. "It would help me make sense of it. It would mean the difference in knowing. . . whether or not I'm living a lie."

Deddy do you think we're living a lie

He pauses with one hand on the door handle. Takes a few seconds to make up his mind.

"You're living in a fantasy-land," he says to the air. "This is a fantasy-land. But I don't think you're living a lie."

He hesitates again, rubs the back of his neck, and eventually opens the door and steps into the light, sock-footed. Trying to think if there's anything else.

"If what the Bible says is true. . . then you're not of this world, Jolee. And you never will be.

Most people don't have hills to come back to."

He steps inside. Muttered something over his shoulder. *Shut this door when you come in.* Buck raises his snout to meet my cold fingers in the limelight, and crouches at the brink of the threshold. Watching the place where he saw Deddy last. Cabinet doors are opening and closing inside, followed by the clinking of a soup pan and the growl of a can-opener.

What's for supper

CHAPTER II

CITIES OF THE PLAIN

When the sun comes up over the Mississippi River, it's like watching God open his eyes. And not being able to see what he's thinking. Black muddy water rolls slow as time, thick as molasses, while the early light meanders along the troughs and crests, never knowing what's beneath. The roads are almost empty now, except for the wanderers. A purple billboard bears only two giant words: JESUS SAVES. Underneath it, a man in ratty pants and a dark t-shirt is walking slowly up the sidewalk, with a yellow cap resting idly on his head, cocked to one side. Maybe he's got somebody in the world who loves him. Maybe he doesn't. Maybe he's out here at 5:45 in the morning still walking a long, long way back home tonight. Or maybe it's "home" that he's walking away from, a long, long way behind him. Or maybe it's neither. Maybe he doesn't have a home to walk back to. He raises a hand when I pass, and sort of looks up at me through the windshield.

Hey baby what's happenin'

On the radio at 5:54 am it's already a Sunday morning in Memphis. Brother Darrell Jones of Saint Joseph Grace Evangelical Church is preaching to any listeners who might still be out there, all alone in the world at dawn. He's talking about God. And about Jesus. And about Christians. And about sin. And about salvation. And about responsibility. He's reading from the book of Joshua.

“He is Holy, Holy, Holy,” the voiceover says. “God is Holy. It’s not just the way He acts—it’s the way He *is*. And to ask Him to be less than that in order to tolerate our sin is to ask Him to be something He cannot be. When we come to Him, drenched in our sin that we willingly hold onto, and ask Him to bless us, and ask Him to use us, and ask Him to help us, and to guide us, and to be with us—then we’ve asked Him to be something that He can’t. Sin is just as lethal in the life of the believer as it is in the life of the unbeliever. As Christians, we don’t grasp that. We focus so much on the love of God and the grace of God and the goodness of God—that we end up using those qualities against Him. We think that if we love Him, then sin is somehow not as bad. And we think that if we are mature in our belief, then we are somehow immune, and that we can touch sin a little bit, and it’s okay, we can flirt with it a little, and it’s okay—we can handle it. We think that sin is lethal to everybody else, but not to us. Not to us.

“They say that sin has its effects only on the sinner. I have no idea what sin they’re talking about. Sin always affects others. Entire families can suffer over the sin of just one person in that household. In the story we’re about to read, the entire nation of Israel suffered—over the sin of just one person.”

Sin. On the streets of Memphis in the early light, it’s hard to know if it really even exists. If all the people still sleeping warm in their beds tonight are really gonna wake up one of these days to fire and brimstone, and weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the full-on wrath of God raining down. As if they had really done something that bad.

At a stoplight all the liquor stores, and the grocery stores, and the gas stations, and clothing shops, and barber shops, and pawn shops, and law offices and dentist offices are

wearing steel bars over their windows and doors. And some of the brick walls and cement bridges have been decorated with graffiti, then painted over or washed off, then decorated with graffiti again. And the color of the air and the grass and the concrete looks dirty. *Have they really done something that bad*

Hazel asked him once, at a stoplight in front of the baseball stadium years ago in the city, “Deddy, what’s *saved*?”

She was maybe five or six.

He looked at her, then he looked at me in the rearview. And then he looked away for a while. Looked inside himself for a minute or two. Like ‘saved’ was something hard to understand.

Ahead of me the sign says ‘West Memphis-Arkansas.’ Underneath it rules the Mighty Mississippi—the one they write all the songs about. And the M-Bridge trusses are rushing faster than what it feels like I’m driving. *Whush, whush, whush, whush, whush.* Like my thoughts.

“Saved is when you reach a point where you can’t live with yourself anymore,” he said. “When you realize you’ve done some things that were real bad. . . *real* bad. But you can’t undo them or take them back.”

“Like being ugly to somebody?” she reasoned.

“Yeah, like being to somebody. And being ugly to your *self*. That’s what sin means—when you do something that you knew was wrong, deep down. In your heart. Or in your conscience. Or in your ‘soul’ if you wanna call it that. Something that you knew was wrong but

you did it anyway. And then when you get to a point where you can't stand to even look at yourself anymore, then you realize you need Jesus to come into your life and 'save' you. Save you from your own self. And then you pray to God and ask Jesus to come into your heart and save you from your sins, and to heal you, and forgive you, and make you a new person. And when it happens you get this feeling. . . it's hard to explain. But it's the Holy Spirit coming to live inside you. Some people say it's like having a heavy weight removed from your heart, and all of a sudden—you're free. The Bible says that when you ask Him to, God will put your sins as far away from him as the East is from the West. Which is pretty far. And when it happens, when He comes into your heart, it's like you feel this. . . peace. . . and almost a kind of excitement or joy. Paul in the Bible calls it a 'peace that transcends all understanding.' You're not trapped anymore by all those bad things you did. And then it's like you get to start all over again. Start a brand new life."

The great wide river is behind me now in the rearview, swimming further and further away.

"Welcome to Arkansas," the sign says.

CHAPTER III

DOLLHOUSE

Jeralinn's overhead blow-dryer is whirring over the round wide rollers in Astria's slick black hair. She has the August issue of *Jet* magazine draped over her caramel, crossed legs. She looks up every now and then when Jeralinn says something particularly profound, and smirks at me. *Don't believe anything she say*

"If you can live without one Jolee, wait as long as you can," Jeralinn suggests to the back of Kim McEwen's tilted head.

Outside, a sharp gleam of sunshine warms fresh rain-puddles across a parking lot in Babel. Inside, the sharp smell of a flat hair iron is rising with the steam over Kim's hair. Jeralinn is styling it.

"That's right, baby," Kim affirms. "They no good, most of the time. Boys, men, it don't matter—a man is a man is a man, and that's it. That's all they is to it."

"He gone lie to you, baby, if you let him," Jeralinn continues. "He gone tell you he luv-v you, tell you he care about you. Tell you he wanna marry you, and buy you nice things, and take care of you, and treat you real good. But he don't love you—he don't even know what love is. He do know how to give you a baby though—and he'll try. You write that one down, girl—he gone try. And then you stuck with it, Jolee. You stuck in life forever. You get you a child, and that *is* your life, from now on. And you don't want that. You could get rid of it—but you don't wanna do that either, 'cause you so thankful that your mama didn't get rid of you. You get a baby inside you, and you know deep down that you love it, and you ain't gone kill it—you love

it and so you're willing to bring it into the world. I love every one of my babies now—don't get me wrong—Lord knows I love all my kids. But hold out as long as you can, Jolee. Don't mess with none of them boys. Just leave them all alone. You got plenty of time for all that. There's plenty of other things you need to do with your life while you still young, girl. You can mess with all them men folks when you're old, like me. Tell her, Astria.”

Astria looks at me and rolls her eyes, shakes her head.

“Don't believe nothing she say, Jolee. She just messing with your head. But she right on some of it, girl. You still got time.”

Jeralinn is Astria's favorite aunt. They favor in the face.

On the wall above the couch hangs a portrait depicting four dark women, each with different skin tones, different hair tones, different body types, sitting under hairdryers reading magazines with their bare, heel-tipped legs all crossed in the same direction. Underneath the painting is a caption that Jeralinn added herself, typed in dark, bold font:

BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL.

On the TV in the corner below a poster that says Campaign '08 Obama/Biden, we're glued to an episode of Judge Mathis, where a woman has gotten up claiming that she doesn't like black women, that most of them have been no good to her, and that most of her girlfriends and guyfriends are white, and that she now considers herself white. Everybody in the room starts to cackle at her a little bit. Everybody but me.

“There’s just one problem with that,” Judge Mathis tells the woman flatly. “From my perspective, and from anyone else’s. . .you are *Black*. And you’re always going to be Black. There’s no reason for shame—this is 2009, and we’ve moved past a lot of that. You should embrace yourself. Embrace who you are, embrace your ancestry. Embrace your Blackness.”

I swear Astria is laughing so hard she’s about to fall out of her chair. Jeralinn is laughing so hard she’s almost crying, and has to withhold the styling iron for a few seconds to wipe her eyes.

“Look at this lady. . .she done out of her mind,” Jeralinn says, pointing at the TV screen with the seething flat iron. “She think she white. Ha ha ha.”

“Can’t nobody be happy with who they are, Jeralinn,” Natasha is saying across the room now, as she leans Kim’s daughter Callou back into the sink for a wash. “Everybody got to be something different.”

The ladies get quiet after that, as Judge Mathis concludes his show and headlines for the upcoming noon Memphis news appear on-screen, followed by a commercial break. When Natasha finishes washing little Callou’s long, fuzzy hair, she sends her to Jeralinn for perming and styling. Jeralinn pulls the gown off of Kim and sets her free, then motions for the little girl to sit down.

“Was any of your people racist, Jolee,” she states and asks, wrapping the gown around Callou and never looking up. A couple of ladies reading *Ebony* in the corner glance up to see what I’ll say.

“Yeah,” I murmur. “A lot of them were.” The salon falls silent for a second, except for the sound of the comb Jeralinn is steadily pulling through Callou’s now half-straight black hair. But only for a second. Kim can tell it’s not something I really want to talk about.

“It’s okay,” Kim says quickly. “A lot of older people are. I work up at the VA hospital with these old people, and some of them are, some of them aren’t. You just learn to deal with it, whatever. There’s this one old man up there who will only let me work with him. The other nurse on my shift is black too, but he don’t like her. Calls her a nigger. But he likes me for some reason, and calls me by my name. It takes both of us to move him out of the bed sometimes, and he’ll say something under his breath to her, and she’ll get mad and be ready to walk out of the room, and I’ll be like ‘Hey girl it’s okay, I can handle him from here,’ and we just leave it at that. But there’s black men up there that are racist too. They don’t like the white nurses and only want us to work on them. But it’s our job. We gotta be nurses to everybody. And we gotta put up with shit like that—gotta treat everybody the same. You just have to learn not to let it bother you.”

“Well you know I be racist,” Jeralinn says grinning. “Jolee, I don’t let no white ladies come in here to get they hair cut. You the only one. You know that. Does that make you feel special?”

“Shut-up, Jeralinn,” Astria says, suddenly putting her *Jet* aside. “You making her get all red-faced now.”

“I guess that makes my place an *integrated* salon,” Jeralinn says, paying Astria no attention. “Probably the only one in town.”

“Or in the whole county,” Kim speculates.

“Shi-it. . . maybe the only one in the state,” Jeralinn adds. “Maybe I should put a ad in the paper sometime, Jolee, that says ‘Welcome to Dollhouse, the only integrated hair salon in Babel. Walk-ins welcome—but Crackers gotta go to the back door. . .’”

Kim McEwen almost spits up her Coke. Jeralinn really is cra-zy. She’s got the whole

salon grimacing with laughter. And I am redder than ever. Astria sees it, and in the midst of wiping her misty eyes, she points at me.

“Don’t believe nothing she say, Jolee,” Astria says, coughing. “You know she secretly like you. She all the time giving me shit, too.”

Little Callou is still watching the color of my face, and looking like she still has something on her mind.

“Do you tan, Jolee?” she finally asks. The older ladies grin quietly at her innocence.

I slide one sleeve up to reveal the ugly maroon skin on my left shoulder. “This is what happened on Saturday.”

Natashia has another woman’s head tilted back over the sink. They’re both making disgusted, painful faces.

“Girl, you look like you got a pepperoni stuck to your shoulder!” Jeralinn teases.

“It’ll probably peel off in a few days,” I tell them. “And then when I’m your age, I’ll have skin cancer.”

“Do you go to tanning beds and stuff,” one woman under the dryer asks. “What’s it like?”

“I used to,” I say. “It kind of feels a little bit like you’re. . . inside a really bright coffin. That’s what it’s shaped like. But then I started getting extra moles, and dark spots like right here on my stomach, and so I quit. They say it’s real bad for you. Mostly I get sunburns like this from working outside on the farm. I’ll probably get skin cancer from that, too, but at least it’s all natural.”

“Well, I used to lay in the tanning bed sometimes too,” Jeralinn jabs, showing Callou her thick brown arm. “See how dark I am?”

“You did not!” Callou says, folding her arms. All the ladies in the salon are laughing again.

“Jolee, ain’t no need for you to try to tan,” Natashia says. “You are beautiful the way you are. Don’t listen to her. You got something in you that makes you beautiful—from the inside. Something special. Don’t worry about what them other girls do, Jolee. You be who you *are*, and don’t pay no mind to what this lady say up in here. She crazy anyhow.”

Jeralinn shakes her head.

“You can’t escape who you are,” she says to me, gently painting white relaxer on Callou’s head. The little girl tries to turn when she sees me laughing, but Jeralinn vice-grips her neck and won’t allow it.

“Be still, baby,” she says. “Girl, you gone mess up what I done did.” The telephone rings and she grabs a paper towel and then the receiver. Tells whoever it is that she has an open appointment around 3:00 today. Then hangs up and returns to both Callou’s hair and me.

“Naw, baby—you is what you is,” she tells me, never looking up. “And you ain’t ever gone change it. Ain’t nothing to be ashamed of. My deddy was racist against white people. My husband was, too. That’s just the way they were. They weren’t gone do nothing to nobody, but they didn’t like the White man, and there wasn’t nothing nobody could do to change their minds. They were Black men, and they were proud to be Black men—they was proud of what they was. And you gotta be proud of what you is too, baby. Don’t go around trying to hide yourself. Ain’t nothing worse than somebody going round trying to act like they’re something else—a white girl trying to be Black, or a Black girl trying to be White. You’re *White*, baby, and that’s what you’re supposed to be. If you was raised with it, if your people was racist, you ain’t ever gone be completely rid of it, girl. You still gone have a little of that in you. But don’t worry about it.

Don't let it bother you and hold you down. You is what you is. Be proud of it, baby. Don't be ashamed."

Jeralinn is gently toweling the smooth, silky substance from Callou's now sleek black hair, and reaching for another set of rollers.

Baby yo' hair gone be smoothi-licious when I get done with it

CHAPTER IV

GENESIS

1

In the beginning was the smell of guns. All over the apartment. Handguns. In his bedroom, on the nightstand, in the chests-of-drawers underneath his clothes. On top of the bookshelf in the den. In the kitchen drawers. On the top shelf of the linen closet in the bathroom. In the glove box in the car. Both of them. Even a “baby” pistol that lived on top of the dryer next to the pants he’d worn the day before. Another one that lived in his fanny pack. Another one that stayed on the center of the dining room table—Mama used to cover it with an upside-down decorative bowl, placing a vase filled with flowers gently on top. He kept rifles in a metal cabinet in the den area, and in cases under his bed.

Sometimes at night he’d lift up the mattress where Hazel and I slept in the apartment den, and prop it against a wall. He’d drape an apple-green table cloth across the floor and turn the television on, sitting Indian-style as he pulled his pistols and rifles apart one at a time, piece by piece. He wouldn’t let us come near him while he was cleaning his guns.

“Don’t touch anything on the table cloth. And don’t touch the table cloth either,” he’d say in a low voice. So Hazel and I would lie on our stomachs on the carpet to watch him, resting our faces on our forearms, our elbows only inches away from the edge of the green table cloth and the pieces of Deddy’s handguns and rifles which were spread across it. The gun cleaner he used smelled almost like shoe polish, and the scent of it would rest on the walls and carpet for hours after, while Hazel and I were falling asleep. A hint of it would linger on his skin afterwards, even after he’d scrubbed his hands and arms. It was a scent I always associated with Deddy.

Superiority. The idea that we were better than, the idea that we were smarter than, the idea that we were cleaner than, the idea that we were more moral than. The idea that we were wheat among weeds, the idea that we were light among darkness. The idea that we were saved and they weren't. The idea that we were people of the light. By blood we were descended from generations of the people of God, and in the womb we overheard our ancestors teaching us the perspectives that their ancestors had taught them before.

We were born having already been taught that we were separate and distinct from the world. No beginning to the idea that people "out there" were not to be trusted. No beginning to the idea that many of them were actually wolves in sheep's clothing—children of the Devil who were only pretending to be the "other" children of God. No beginning to the idea that most of the people around us were going to Hell, and that some of them didn't have souls like we did. No beginning to the idea of White Supremacy. It was always there.

"This is what he looked like when I met him," she'd say with glowing cheeks, pulling the locket from underneath the collar of her blouse and opening it to show us a teeny picture of Rusty, standing in his police uniform with his forearms tucked behind his back. Straight-mouthed with a slight mustache, with a curious sort of humor in his eyes. She was twenty-six and an elementary schoolteacher in Babel when it happened. One day the kids had found a snake on the playground that looked poisonous, and so she had called the fire department for help. But the dispatcher radioed a nearby police officer instead.

"And the policeman they sent out to the playground was your Deddy," she'd say, as if he'd

appeared in her life almost magically, yet almost on purpose—as if in the greater scheme of things the moment of their meeting was somehow always meant to be.

“And then Deddy went out and killed that mean old snake,” Hazel would say, anticipating the grand finale.

“Yes, Hazel. He did.”

4

In the beginning we saw a woman lying across the bed with the door half-open in the afternoon. She was wearing a yellow sundress, stained with tears. She looked up from the pillow when I walked in, and had to pull sticky strands of long black hair away from her face in pieces. The red rim around her eyes made them shine aqua-teal, like water in a swimming pool.

“Does Deddy still love you, Mama?”

“Yes, Jolee.”

“Then why does he make you cry.”

“Deddies just do that to Mommies sometimes, baby.”

But why?

5

He needed the woods. Needed to be alone in them. Deddy.

Sometimes he'd take a dog with him, when he was hunting deer, or coons, or beavers or squirrels. He'd come back calmer.

He always ate by himself in the living room, in front of the TV. In silence. Mama said

that he just needed “quiet-time,” needed “space.” Away from us. I don’t remember ever learning not to bother him while he was eating. We just didn’t. Hazel and I watched him from the kitchen sometimes.

“Mama what’s Deddy thinking about?” Hazel whispered once. “Is he mad at the TV?”

“I don’t know, baby,” Mama said. “I don’t know.”

6

She used to rock me to sleep on Sunday summer afternoons. Grandma. To the soft, subtle creaking and squeaking of a handmade wooden rocking chair against the linoleum floor of the trailer, she’d tell me stories about her life back then, when times were different. When people were different. When she still lived in the old world, before there were cars, or electricity, or telephones, or very much money. When families grew their own food and made their own clothes and built their own houses and picked cotton to get wages from people who were well or better off, and when people mostly lived off the land, and got by. She used to tell stories about being a little girl in times that were “hard,” but in a place where people were “good” and she was happy.

She never talked about the present, or about the recent past—about what it was like when she married G.P., or what it was like to have been his wife, or to have been Deddy’s mother. She told stories only of childhood, and of the people and places she knew then. Sometimes she’d point as she talked of some of the experiences she’d had in that faraway and long-gone place, which was just right up the road from her trailer, a little ways down through them woods yonder. She was only in her forties.

And when she was finished, and when my eyelids were heavy in the bright summer afternoon

sun, when her chest was warm and her heart was beating soft against the side of my face under the cool of an old cranky air-conditioner G.P. had mounted against the trailer wall, she'd sing to me, slow and soft, a song describing what Heaven would someday be like:

*I am dwelling on a mountain, where a golden sun a-gleams
O'er a land of wondrous beauty—far exceeds my fondest dreams.
Where the air is pure eth-er-eal, laden with the breath of flowers
They are blooming by the fountain, 'neath the am-ar-an-thine bowers.*

*Is not this the land of Beulah? Blessed, blessed land of light
Where the flowers bloom for-e-ver . . .
And the sun is always bright?*

Lying with my ear beneath her breast, against the gentle rise and fall of her ribcage in subtle but distinct patterns as she sang of a place where a “golden sun a-gleams,” I remember thinking once that maybe this was where her ‘soul’ was—the place where her voice came from. ‘Soul’ was something I had heard about in the beginning and at Sunday school, but it was hard for me to make any sense of. I figured Grandma had one though, and that hers was way down deep inside. It was in the place where she sang of sunshine.

7

Late nights out at Grandma's trailer, G.P. had a bluegrass band. His brother Uncle Elmo “tickled” the banjo, his cousin Charles Costner fiddled, his friend Gail Whitman played the bass—and his wife was a good harmony singer. Some nights there'd be seven or eight guys crammed into the little den, playing dobros, mandolins, harmonicas, accordions and other instruments. G.P. sang lead and picked guitar. They rehearsed a lot of Bill Monroe numbers, and songs by Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers, the Carter family, Emmylou Harris, Dolly Parton and Ricky Skaggs. They performed at outdoor festivals and community events on weekends.

This was his *life*, he said. Grandma knew to tolerate and appreciate it, and aside from getting up to serve the men at her home with food and coca-colas, she'd sit on the couch with Cricket while Hazel and I rattled the trailer walls and floors with our buck-dancing. Some hot summer nights she'd drive us up to community centers, parks or pavilions in small towns where G.P.'s band was playing, and keep a hand on Cricket while Hazel and I buck-danced on the grass or dirt or cemented floors to the tune of G.P.'s picking and the old folks' clapping hands.

Deddy didn't want to be around much when G.P. and his band were "picking and grinning." Hazel once asked him why, and he never answered her, just shook his head a little. He didn't want to be around G.P. very much period. Even though some of the songs the band picked and grinned were gospel numbers.

8

They used to fight about the house. And about her looks. About her weight.

"Rusty, I just don't know how to please you," Mama said. "I try and I try and I try, but it's never good enough for you. You never let me go *anywhere*, or do anything. I would love to get out and socialize sometimes, and be around other people, but you don't ever want to. And then we've got all these kids."

"Baby, I'd take you places with me, if you looked like somebody I would want to take out and about. A lot of the guys I work with have wives, but they have wives who keep themselves up. And those women have kids too, some of them. But you know what the difference is? The difference is, they *care*. Some women care about keeping themselves up and being desirable. And if you really loved me, you'd care," he said. "If you really loved me, I'd come home in the evenings and we'd have us an almost normal life, instead of living like niggers. This house looks

like a nigger house, because you don't care enough to clean it up. Everywhere I look in here is disgusting. Every room, every corner, every day of my life is disgusting. And then when I look at you—your weight is disgusting. The way you just let yourself go and don't care disgusts me. The way you don't give a damn about yourself disgusts me.”

“Rusty, I have a job. And I have given birth to four of your kids. Doesn't that count for anything.”

She was 5'7” and about one hundred and fifty pounds back then. And the one statement left ringing in my ears some nights was the one Hazel and I just couldn't quite figure out:

The way you don't give a damn about yourself disgusts me

9

She used to tell stories about being a little girl, and about her Mother, who was in Heaven.

Mama did. Hazel asked her once:

“Mama, where were we before we were born? Where were we when you were a little girl?”

Mama said:

“You were up there in Heaven with God and Jesus, honey. You just don't remember.”

10

I don't know when I started hearing voices. Or when I started talking to them. When we closed our eyes to say our prayers at night, God was somewhere, and even though we couldn't see Him, we could talk to Him. And when we closed our eyes to pray, I could almost see Him. His face was vague, though.

When I was about four, I started picking up dead leaves, sticks and rocks who seemed human-like to me. I'd tuck them under my shirt and hide underneath Deddy's old boat in the far corner of the yard, sitting there sometimes for hours to give them voice, and to let them talk to one another. I did it for years, up through middle school. Mama didn't notice early on, but Hazel did. She used to get jealous and march outside demanding to know why I wanted to talk and play with dead leaves and rocks and sticks all the time, instead of playing with her. One afternoon I went inside for a spell, and came back out to find most of my playmates utterly destroyed. Hazel had found the hiding spot under Deddy's boat, and stomped them all the leaves and sticks to pieces. She was swinging on our gym set with a funny grin on her face, and when I confronted her, and she confessed.

So I started hitting her. She went running, and I went following, and Mama came out and called me off, then told Deddy about the incident as soon as he got home from work. Hazel had told them about the leaves, but I don't think her story made a whole lot of sense at the time. He whipped me anyway.

11

No beginning to the idea of Man's dominion over the earth and all things in it. God had created the Garden for Adam in the Beginning, and had given Adam authority over all things that lived in it. And God had created Eve for Adam, and had created her from Adam, and had created her for the purpose of filling Adam's need for companionship. And because Eve was created from Man and not from God, she had been the weaker one, the one who was more vulnerable to temptation, the one who had been more easily deceived by the Tempter, the one who gave in to Satan and who not only sinned first, but also caused Adam to sin, and therefore brought God's

punishment on the world. So as it turned out, God had designated Man as the dominant one in the Beginning for a reason. When God kicked them out of Eden, He said that woman's desire would be for Man—and that Man would rule over her. So that was just the way it was, the way that the Lord had meant for it to be.

And Adam was a White man, as far as we knew.

12

He used to beat dogs. I don't think there ever was a first time.

He hit Buck one afternoon at Grandma's trailer when our cousin Rayelynn and a couple of her friends from up the road had come over to play. Deddy did. And Buck was young and high-strung enough to react by cocking his head and curling his lips. And Deddy was mad enough to grab him up by the collar and hold him choking by the neck while he beat him with his one right hand. And Buck was gagging and wheezing and choking and pissing all over Deddy's belt loops and pant legs and shoes. And Deddy was hitting him even harder because of that. Then dropping him because of that. And Buck was squealing bloody murder and running under the pickup wheels to hide as best as he could. And Deddy was holding on to the driver's side door and swinging his leg underneath, kicking Buck's crumpled body over and over and over. And Buck squealed even louder and even louder and even louder, and finally took off running again. And Deddy picked up a rock and threw it, and picked up another rock and threw it. And picked up a big stick and ran after him and threw it. And Buck finally found safety underneath the trailer, where the crawl-in was too low and full of junk for Deddy to follow him.

And then Deddy stooped there at the edge of the trailer with his hands on his knees, breathing hard. Then stood and walked off. Rayelynn seemed alright, though she didn't say

much. But her other friends' eyes were pretty wide, and they said they didn't want to play outside with us anymore. They said they wanted to go home now. One of them started crying. And then suddenly, for whatever reason, I realized why.

"Hazel, I don't think their Deddies are the same as our Deddy," I whispered. She seemed confused by that thought.

13

"Don't you ever, ever, *ever* touch a gun," he said. "It will *kill* you. And even worse than that, if you ever, ever, *ever* touch a gun, I will know. And I will give you the whipping of your life. The worst whipping you have ever had, and the worst you ever will have. A whipping worse than anything you have ever imagined. I will wear you out."

His voice was something different when said that. Something base. Something dark and primal, void of love. Something ugly.

Hazel couldn't imagine the unimaginable at only four years old. But she tried.

"Deddy, will it be worse than the whipping you gave Jolee when she lied to you that time?"

Yes, it will be ten times worse than that.

"Deddy, will it be worse than what you did to Buck that time when he showed you his teeth?"

Yes, it will be ten times worse than even that.

"Oh."

I'm not sure that she could even count much higher than ten then, but the idea was that a whipping of this magnitude would be something more than what we could even fathom—a

demonstration of wrath unequalled since the Beginning, and never to be equaled again. Something worse than the fire and brimstone that fell on Sodom in the story. Something worse than the lake of burning sulfur, or the weeping and gnashing of teeth that the preacher said people would suffer through forever in Hell. He never did give a Whipping-of-Your-Life or a Wear-You-Out to either one of us, but it was a concept so bad that Hazel and I both felt pretty sure we didn't ever want to experience one.

14

No beginning to the idea that God would punish sins severely, even on earth, before a person ever went to Hell. The story of God raining down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah as a result of the people's wickedness, and the story of Jonah being swallowed by a Great Fish for disobeying what God had said were stories which supported the concept.

The idea that God was our heavenly 'Father' had a beginning—we learned it in Sunday School. Jesus was always calling God his 'Father.' One of the prayers they taught us began with 'Our Father, who art in Heaven.' The story they told us about the Prodigal Son was said to mean that God loved us the way a father loves a son, and the story itself was about a son who ran away but then came back to his 'Father.'

When Jonah sinned—which meant that he didn't do what God said and started acting bad—he got swallowed up by a whale. When the people in Sodom sinned—which meant that they weren't doing what God said and started acting really, really bad—they got swallowed up by fire and brimstone. When some of the Jews and Israelites sinned, they got taken over by the Egyptians and the Babylonians and the Romans. When Martin Luther sinned, he got knocked down by a bolt of lightning. God 'chastised' people he loved, and 'chastise' meant to punish. He punished people

he loved because he wanted them to act good and do good and be good. So that they wouldn't all hurt each other and kill each other, and so that everybody could live a better, happier life and go to Heaven when they died.

“Kind of like Deddy whipping us?” Hazel asked one time in Sunday school. The answer we got from the Sunday school teacher was a puzzled look, and a ‘yes.’

Early on, I must have associated some of God's qualities in the Sunday school lessons with some of Deddy's. And Hazel must have, too. God was our Father, the person who we came from, the person who made us, the person who gave us our bluish-green eyes, our honey-colored hair, our pale and sometimes sun-tanned arms, legs, hands and feet. And so was Deddy. We knew that Deddy loved us just as much as God did—if not even more. But we also knew how Deddy dealt with sins.

15

I got in trouble a lot for hitting other kids on the kindergarten playground. And for not wanting to play with them. For wanting to play by myself. One time I got in trouble for hitting a girl who'd been ugly to my rocks and leaves, and when the teachers asked me to tell the little girl who'd been ugly to my rocks and leaves that I was sorry, I refused. Which got me put on the fence.

Apparently, the lead teacher didn't feel very sorry either when she gave the little girl permission to walk over to the secret place in the back corner of the playground where all my playthings had been carefully hidden, and watched as the little girl stomped them right in front of me, pushing them under the fence with her shoes. When I panicked and tried to tell the teacher that the little girl was stomping all of my sticks and leaves, she instructed me to go out to the swings or the monkey bars with the other kids and play ‘normal.’

When the teacher told Mama about the incident, Mama tried to explain that Jolee was under a

lot of stress right now because her Deddy was away at training so that he could get hired higher up in Babel with the police department, and have a better job. She said it's been hard for Jolee not to have her Deddy at home very much, and that it was causing her to act out in a lot of different ways.

16

In Sunday sermons, the Devil was *real*.

“He is alive and well in the world,” the preacherman said. “And has been around here a long, long time. He’s very skilled at what he does, and he’s older and smarter and wiser than we are—wiser in the ways of the world. He will use any means to tempt and confuse a person. He is waiting to devour all unsuspecting and unrepentant people. He is a Tempter. He is the great Tempter. He tempted even our Lord, for forty days and forty nights in the desert. He is the Enemy, he is the Destroyer, he is the Deceiver, he is the Evil One. The Bible says he is a liar, and calls him the ‘Father of Lies.’ He whispers his lies in our ears in order to bring as many as he can down to death and eternal damnation. He was once an angel himself, but now is fallen. He exalted himself and believed that he was greater than God, and thus fell from God’s grace willingly. And he wants to take as many of us down with him as he can.”

Hazel and Cricket and Jared and me would all sit lined up on the pew in between Mama and Deddy on Sunday mornings, occupying ourselves with Sunday School coloring books and crayons.

“And there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth on that day,” he said. “Jesus told us that ‘wide is the gate, and broad is the path that leads to destruction, and many will enter through it. But narrow is the path and narrow is the gate that leads to life, and only a few will find it.’ Look for the narrow gate—and make sure that your name is written in the Book of Life. Because that

day will be un-bearable for many, many people in this world.”

He said God didn't really want to send any one of us to a place like that—because he loved us. But that He really would send people to a place like that if they did not repent and accept Jesus. Hell was real, and it was also forever, and ever, and ever. The preacherman said 'forever' was a longer than any of us were even capable of imagining.

Hazel had been alive for maybe about four years, and asked me once if 'forever' was about how long Papaw had been alive. I told her that I was pretty sure 'forever' was as long as God had been alive. And God was probably an old, old man with white wavy hair by now. Just like Papaw.

17

Deddy used to go out early in the mornings on weekends when we stayed at Grandma's trailer, to help Papaw in the garden. Papaw was one of the main characters in most of Grandma's stories about the old world, she remembered growing up in them woods back yonder, which was where he still lived. But he was a young man then, she said. And was as good of a man as she had ever known. She said that too. He didn't drive a car or even have one, just lived in a house he'd built himself way back years ago, and kept an old draft horse and a little tractor for getting around in, and for working in his garden. He kept a few chickens and pigs and cows on a few acres of land that one of Grandma's uncles had left to him, and that was how he lived with Nanny—who Grandma called 'Mama.' He didn't have any teeth, and I asked him about that once. He said it was because he'd pulled them all out with a pair of pliers. Grandma explained later that he'd never been to a dentist, and whenever a tooth had gone rotten, pliers was just a way for Papaw to take care of things himself.

He used to walk his and Nanny's clothes over to Grandma's trailer sometimes in a wheelbarrow, so that she could wash them in her washing machine. On hot summer afternoons, he'd come inside the door for a minute just to visit with her, talking about people they knew, and about the weather. His eyes glowed as blue as his overalls in the afternoon light, as he lifted his straw hat to wipe the sweat from his face with a rag. And before he'd go to leave, she'd tell him, "Bye, Deddy. I love you."

I remember thinking it was funny to hear her say that.

18

*Will the Circle be un-broken? By and by, Lord, by and by
There's a better home a-waiting; in the sky, Lord, in the sky.*

Early on, I confused the lyrics of a church song "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" with the lyrics of Journey's radio version of "Wheel in the Sky," since the words "wheel" and "will" were pronounced the same by most of the people I knew.

Heaven was a difficult concept, but it was a real place. It was a place where all the Christians were going someday, whenever Jesus came back to get us. It was a place where many of Mama's folks already were, and where many of G.P.'s and Grandma's folks already were, alongside all our ancestors and next-of-kin. They were up there with God and Jesus, the songs said, in a place with high mountains and green valleys, and clear, peaceful waters, and sun shining down on ancient trees, pretty little flowers, and paths of purest gold.

Hazel and Cricket and I had never seen mountains before, but on the Discovery channel

we'd seen shows about this place far away called "Montana," and the name of it meant "mountain." Brad Pitt and Robert Redford fished out there a lot and rode horses—we saw it on TV. And so that was what we figured Heaven must be like: a place with mountains, trees, rocks, rivers, and horses. With a great big fiery wheel turning and burning up above them in the sky.

19

Grandma understood about the voices in my head. And about the rocks and sticks and leaves. She used to watch me out the window, on sunny summer afternoons when we stayed at her trailer. I was never satisfied playing games or watching TV with Hazel and Cricket. I wanted to go outside to be with my playthings.

Whenever Hazel got jealous, and came out wanting to know why I liked my rocks and sticks and leaves more than I liked her, Grandma would settle the argument by luring her back inside to eat ice cream or watch a favorite movie. One afternoon when Grandma let me out, I went to my secret hiding place and found all my nature things trampled to pieces. Hazel had found them. When I ran in and grabbed her, Grandma came running and pulled me off of her, suggesting that maybe a dog had done it instead, and knowing full-well that this wasn't the truth. Hazel got away with it that time, but afterwards, Grandma found me a big green bucket with a lid, so that every afternoon when I was finished playing with the things I'd gathered, I could seal them up and carry them way back into the woods to hide them in some place "safe."

Some afternoons when I was out in the yard at the edge of the woods talking to the leaves all by myself, I looked up and saw Grandma watching me out the kitchen window—and quickly diverting her face and body as if she hadn't noticed me at all. I knew she knew. But she never said a word about it to anyone.

He was a night animal. And so was I. And he recognized that about me—they all did—but still somehow felt that the rules made in the Beginning had been made to be enforced. Early to bed and early to rise.

Not enough room in Grandma's bed for all of us kids to sleep beside her. Jared had arrived in our lives by that time. I was the oldest, so at bedtime, she'd make me a pallet on the floor as the younger three snuggled up under her mattress covers. Then she'd turn the lights out and tell stories again about days gone by, in that world that was just right out yonder in them woods when she was a little girl.

Those nights were hot inside the trailer. So hot that I would lay on top of the sheets on my pallet, rather than underneath them. And even then, my feet would be too warm and tingly for me to be able to close my eyes. I'd lay there on the floor below them while she told stories to the ceiling in the dark. But after her voice had faded to whispers, and after her heavy breathing had synchronized to Hazel and Cricket and Jared's, I'd watch the faint flickers of light playing games of dim and bright against the hallway walls outside the open bedroom door. The TV was on.

Late nights at Grandma's trailer after all the bluegrass boys had left, G.P. used to sit up by himself watching CNN. Unamused. And after I was sure that Grandma was asleep, I'd ease off of my pallet and creep up to the den where he was. He looked like John Wayne, G.P. did. Big heavy-set man with a distinctive nose and deep voice. And his was my first view of the world out "there." Out there where all the bad people were.

He watched late night news, Johnny Carson, *M.A.S.H.* and *Cheers* reruns, replays of *Larry King Live*, Westerns starring Clint Eastwood, and anything else that came on before or after. He hated CNN for some reason, but watched it anyway.

“Don’t always believe everything you see, babe,” he told me once, when he felt like I was old enough to remember it. “Or believe what you hear, or what you read either. This ‘news’ that we get on TV and in newspapers—this ‘history’ that they teach in their college books now—it ain’t always for real. There’s some truth to it. But they make up a lot of things too. They tell it the way they want to tell it, in order to influence your opinion and make you think and believe a certain way. They say the news is unbiased—well they are *liars*. They are lying to you when they say that. There’s an agenda to this whole thing, see. Li-ber-als, and Dem-o-crats, and Jews have controlled my television for a long time, and they’ve done a lot of damage through it. They like to teach my kids and grandkids with it.

“But don’t let them teach you nothing—y’hear me? ‘Cause they’re gonna present things the way they want you to perceive it, according to their side and their point of view. They have fooled a helluva lot of people through that little black box right there, and they will continue to fool a helluva lot more. But not me. I done lived in this ole world awhile, babe. Ha ha. I done seen some things the way they were, and the way they are. I done seen people for what they are. And this ole world ain’t like the way they show it here on my TV screen. Don’t never trust nothing they tell you on TV, or in some of these textbooks at school, babe. It’s prop-o-gan-da.”

I remember wondering at a very young age what that word *prop-o-gan-da* meant.

We knew Him, or knew of Him, in the beginning. Mama had a set of old Sunday school books at the house. Sometimes she’d read them to us, and other times we’d picture-read them to ourselves, filling in the details with our own imaginations. His image differed a little from book to book, portrait to portrait, but for the most part Jesus was a white man with long, wavy brown hair,

a soft face and beard, and kind blue eyes. He was always wearing loose clothes and healing the sick and helping the fishermen and telling stories to the little kids. We sang songs about Him as early as we sang songs about the ABC's or the number system. He was like Big Bird, or Kermit the Frog, or Michael J. Fox, or Vanna White, or Ronald Reagan—just somebody we saw everywhere and always felt like we knew. At night when we prayed with Mama, we used to tell Jesus 'thank you' for everybody we could think of, including the people on *Wheel of Fortune* and *Family Ties*. There was never a 'beginning' to Jesus—never a time when He wasn't. He was older than Deddy, and older than G.P., and even older than Papaw. And they had always been there.

In Mama's Sunday school books, and on wall-posters and paintings at any church we visited, pretty much all the other biblical characters looked like Hazel and me, unless specifically noted. Noah, Moses, Abraham, Jacob and all the patriarchs looked like us, and so did John, Peter, Paul and all the apostles—they were white people like us. The Ethiopian that Paul converted one time was the only Black man in the Bible that we knew of. Even the African Queen of Sheba had long, black hair—but in the book she had pale skin and light eyes. Chinese guys like Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee must not have been invented yet, I figured. And though we never actually saw any pictures of God at home or in Sunday school, it made sense that God was a God who looked like us—based on the story-book pictures of everyone else. A White God.

22

She kept a copy of *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein on the shelf in the bathroom. Grandma did. It was one of her favorite books. Hazel and I used to run to the back of the house and get it, and beg her to read it to us, when we were too young to read it ourselves. Somewhere

around second grade, when I was old enough to begin to understand how words and sentences were actually depictions of thoughts that had been created in somebody else's mind, I started reading the book myself and trying to get inside the Boy's mind, and the Tree's mind, and the mind of this one abstract other character who seemingly was somehow involved. I started trying to get inside the Author's mind. What was he thinking? And where was he while the Boy and the Tree were having their goings-on? And who was the little boy—was it him, or was it somebody else? And was he kind of like God—the Author—since he was the one who created the words in the first place?

Grandma had never spent any time at the very back of the book when she was reading it to Hazel and me; whenever she finished the story, she closed up the story. But on the very last page of the book there was a picture of a man's face, which was kind of scary looking. And he was looking dead at me every time I turned back there to where he was. He had eyes like black-eyed peas, and a balding head, and crooked teeth, and a beard that was grey and curly. I showed Hazel his picture at the back of the book once, and she didn't want to look at him because she said he looked really mean and ugly—and he wasn't smiling. When I was old enough to read that book by myself, over and over and over, I paused at the end every time to study the man's dark face. And I was just as perplexed as he seemed to be.

Shel Silverstein was a Black man. Sort of.

23

A guy who looked like Jesus stopped at the gas pump at the general store when I was six or seven. He was probably twenty-six or twenty-seven. Young people didn't come through Beulah much, unless they were related to somebody. But this one was just passing through. He had long

hair, and wore it loose. Rough, honey-colored tresses hanging just an inch or two below his shoulder blades. Light eyes, light face. A thin beard. Loose T-shirt and baggy jeans. He walked a little differently, and seemed to have a certain breeze-like calm about him. Just like Jesus.

They eyed him, and thought bad things. He pumped his gas and then walked in and nodded to the store owner, who nodded back straight-faced, just enough to “be polite” even though he didn’t really want to be polite. He nodded to them and they didn’t nod back. He ambled to the back and pulled out a Mellow Yellow, then ambled to the front and picked up an Almond Joy and a bag of chips, which were same items that Deddy and me had walked in there for. When he stepped up to the counter, he said a few words to the store owner. ‘Nice weather out there today,’ and such. But the store owner didn’t have a whole lot he wanted to say, at least at that moment. After the guy who looked like Jesus walked out of the store, the other men at one of the side tables laid their cards:

“Times are changing, ain’t they?” one man at the card table mused.

“Yep. Sure enough,” the store owner said.

“I seen his car tag out there, says ‘Washington’ state,” another man at the card table said.

“Must be one of them damn Li-ber-als. A dope-head hippie who went to ‘college’ out there somewhere.”

“They’re everywhere, ain’t they?” Deddy said. “He must have come down here to try to ‘teach’ us a little something. Try to make my country a ‘better’ place.”

“Yeah, must have,” the store owner said. “Seems like there’s more and more of them coming through here all the time. It’s getting scary when ya think about it. I see more an’ more of the younger ones like that, smoking dope and dragging their pants and wearin their shirts in a mess, not combing their hair. If times keep on a’changing like this, in another twenty years that’s

all there'll be.”

“Till some of us finally get fed up with it, and go out and start putting some bullets in some heads. To keep the numbers down,” Deddy mused.

“Yeah, I hear you man,” the store owner said.

Y'all have a good day now

24

“A woman like that has got something wrong with her on the inside,” G.P. said as I sat on his lap late one night, watching a documentary about an American woman doing Peace Corps service for school children somewhere in Africa. She wasn't fixed-up real pretty like Farrah Fawcett or Reba McIntyre, but she didn't seem worried about that. She was pale like us, but plain-clothed, plain-faced, and plain serious. When talking to the interviewer, she was direct, determined, and angry—but also sincere. G.P. could tell I was fascinated, and he didn't like it.

“People who go out and do stuff like that have got problems inwardly,” he continued. “That's how come they feel such a strong need to go out and try to help the poor and things like that. She's probably done some really bad things in her life—and now she's trying to make up for them by helping all these other people. She was probably a whore early on, but then got all used up. . . hell, she probably got pregnant and had an abortion or something. And now she can't live with herself anymore. That's how come she's over there in Africa working at orphanages and schools with all those kids, trying to 'save the children.' Sure, she's trying to save all them kids. But she's also trying to save herself. But no matter what she does, no matter how hard she tries, it's still there—and it's always there. The past don't go away just because you've done something

good to make up for it. Sometimes the past don't ever go away, Jolee. So she's out there right now trying to save herself, but she can't."

"Save herself from what, G.P.?" I asked. 'Saved' was such a difficult concept to understand.

"Save herself from herself, babe," he answered quietly. Flipping the channel.

25

Mama sent me and Hazel to stay at Robbie Piccolo's house one afternoon, not long after we'd moved into a house in the city. Robbie's older sister Marissa was in fifth grade, and she told us she had a boyfriend. She was listening to M.C. Hammer in her room, and Vanilla Ice. When she changed the tape, there was a woman's voice. I asked who she was.

They couldn't believe it.

"You don't know who Madonna is? How do you not know her?" Robbie asked.

"You've seen her before—or heard her music before—you just don't know it," Marissa said. This was a problem that had to be resolved immediately. So Marissa showed me the cassette tape cover, and Robbie dug through a stack of his mother's old *People* magazines. There was an article in one of them devoted specifically to a slender woman with bright blonde hair and nice, pretty clothes.

"When I grow up, I want to get a gold tooth like hers," Marissa said. "She's so pretty."

"Isn't she. . . *mental*?" Robbie asked.

"No, she's not *mental*, Robbie," Marissa corrected. "She's *demented*."

"Does that mean she has mental problems?" Robbie asked.

"No, it just means she does bad things sometimes."

“I bet she has a new boyfriend,” Robbie said.

I studied the pictures of Madonna in Marissa’s magazine. She was so beautiful. Beautiful like many of the other ladies throughout the pages, standing on red carpets in sparkling, colorful dresses. Someday I wanted to look like that. Someday I wanted to be “beautiful.” So that I could have new boyfriends, too.

26

One night after bedtime I heard a familiar voice coming from the television in the living room. I knew who it was. And so I ran up the hall to see. Daddy already angry when I peeped through the closed hallway doors—not at me. At something else.

“Deddy—that’s Madonna,” I said.

“You don’t need to watch this,” he answered, without ever removing his eyes from the screen. “She’s a piece of crap. She sold her soul for fame and fortune—and it looks like she’s got it. For right now. How do you know her?”

“Robbie’s sister Marissa wants to get a gold tooth like hers sometime.”

“Well, you’re not to listen to any of her music—even if your friends are listening to her. Tell them that your Deddy said you can’t. She is full of lies. She’s a . . .”

I thought for a long time about the meaning of the last word he used, and lay awake that night wondering what it meant:

Whore.

Every so often they kept mentioning that word *Jews* in Sunday school, and it almost always shared a sentence or a paragraph which included the definition “God’s people.” One day a Sunday school teacher talked about how Jesus opened up salvation to the Gentiles, so that all of us could be saved. I wasn’t sure what she meant by “all of us.” Since we had always been taught that we were God’s people, and the Bible said that David and Abraham were God’s people, and God’s people were Jews . . . then weren’t we the Jews? Who were the Gen-tiles? This was confusing.

“No, we’re not Jews,” the Sunday school teacher said out loud to the class, when I asked her about it. “We’re Gentiles.”

“Well, she may be Jewish,” one of the other Sunday school teachers suggested, looking down at me.

“Sweetie, is your mom or your dad a Jew?”

I didn’t know.

“Well, have your parents ever told you that you are Jewish?”

I didn’t know. They all had such puzzled looks on their faces. The other kids just wanted to get on with the story.

“Well, you better ask your parents whether you are Jewish or not” one of the teachers finally said. “We’re not sure.”

“I will ask my Deddy then,” I told them. “He is really smart. He knows.”

When Mrs. Mac taught us about the Civil War, and she said the American soldiers in the Union were fighting against the Confederate rebels to end slavery. The North was good and the

South was bad, the textbook said. So naturally, I assumed that we had fought on the good side. When she asked the class what side Mississippi had been on during the War, and then colored in a map on the board, I couldn't understand why she categorized us as part of the losing team, and why Mississippi wasn't colored in on the American side.

“But Mrs. Mac, I thought we won the War. I thought we were Americans.”

“No, Mississippi lost in the war, honey,” she said. “The North won. The Union won. And people on both sides were Americans. It's just that some states didn't want to be part of America anymore. But those states lost, and the Union won, and so because of that, Mississippi was part of America again.”

She said some of my people might have been Americans fighting for the North, but probably most of them were Confederates fighting for the South. She said Civil War history could sometimes be a touchy subject for people in Mississippi. She said I would have to ask my Mama or Deddy what side our folks had been on.

29

Yoc-o-nah. That was how we knew them. Liberals. Those who sometimes looked like us, but weren't us. Children of the Devil, G.P. said. Sent down here to mislead or to “educate” us. To teach us a “better” way. A Black or a His-pan-ic or a Mex-i-can was one of them, automatically. But they knew better than to come around. A white woman who dated a Black or a His-pan-ic or a Mex-i-can was one of them, automatically. And usually she knew better than to come around. A white woman who wore cut-offs or tight, low-cut shirts, or who had tattoos or extra piercings was one of them. A white man who wore his hair real long or wore his beard real long or wore his T-shirts real long and his pants real low was also one of them. But other than

that, the signs and symptoms were oftentimes more subtle.

The river that ran through Beulah was the same one that ran round the far edge of G.P.'s farm through the woods. I'd never seen the name of it spelled, but had heard it called all my life: *Yoc-o-knee* or sometimes simply *Yock-nee*. Nobody knew what the name meant, but the old people said it was an Indian name from wa-ay on back. Anybody passing through who pronounced the name of the river with a "nah" sound at the end probably never realized the mistake, never realized that in one single syllable, they'd given up any chance of passing themselves off as one of us, or as just another common lower-middle class white Baptist who maybe had some relatives in the area. The "nah" sound at the end of that word gave it away that he or she *ain't from around here, must be one of them Liberals. Probably read the name of that river in a college book somewhere.*

30

She used to take us with her to the cemetery on the hill outside of Beulah, where all her folks were buried. Grandma. It was important to honor their memory by placing flowers on the graves. And it was important to watch for snakes. And it was important not to walk over the places where their bodies were buried—to walk behind or to the side of the grave-markers rather than in front of them, so as not to trample over the dead. The idea then was that their souls were sleeping, waiting for Jesus to come back—because at the End of things, they would all rise up again and go up to meet Him in the sky. At the End of things, the dead in Christ would rise first, and then the living would see the Son of Man coming in the clouds, and start to float up there hand-in-hand with all the others. Deddy used to say that this was how come all graves in all cemeteries pretty much anywhere were set facing the East. Because that was the direction supposedly that Jesus would be

coming back from—that He’d rise like the morning sun for all the nations to see.

She cried a lot, over some of her lost loved ones. Grandma did. And when we asked her about this, she’d describe them to us—what they’d looked like and had been like when they were young in the old world she’d grown up in. They’d look and be that way again someday, she said. Near the middle of the cemetery stood several gravestones with American flags beside them. She said these were the graves of high school boys she remembered looking up to when she was a little girl. One day a heavy pickup from “out there” had rolled into Beulah, to pick some of the able-bodied 18-year-olds from their community. They all loaded up onto the bed of the pickup, and as it began to roll away, she watched her grandmother run along behind it as fast as she could, weeping for her youngest son who’d just graduated from high school, and begging him not to go. She’d had a dream that he wouldn’t come back.

Grandma said that sometimes a hearse from “out there” would come back, bearing the body of a Beulah boy who’d been lost in the War that was going on far away in some places they’d either heard or hadn’t heard of, but since the muddy roads wouldn’t allow for car travel, someone from the community would have to hitch up a mule and wagon to travel several miles up to the paved road to meet the army men, who wouldn’t even let the families see the bodies. So the boy would be remembered the way he was on the day he’d climbed on back of that pickup to ride away from them forever.

On the far north corner of the cemetery were three cock-eyed markers, lined up in a row. She said these belonged to her first cousins, who’d been sucked up into a tornado at a young age. Their mother, her aunt, had lost three children in one single moment when the twister passed over and blew a tree down into the house, killing the oldest daughter instantly and pinning her body to the floor, and sucking up three others. The body of the youngest boy was found mangled in a tree, and

the oldest daughter was found lying facedown in a flooded field, stripped naked. The oldest son was also sucked up, and was the only one who survived. Was found in the same flooded field and woke up not knowing where he was—his body beaten and bruised so bad from the hail that when people saw him standing in the distance, they mistook him for a nigger at first sight.

She was afraid of niggers. A few were buried up at the north end of the cemetery, from back in the early days. One afternoon a car pulled up, and several black people got out to mourn their dead. They nodded, but never spoke to us. She grabbed Cricket's and Jared's hands and whispered for me and Hazel to hurry up and get into the car.

31

I don't remember the first time I heard that word; it was there in the beginning. But I do remember first time I said it in public. I was an after-school Girl Scouts program when I was in about the second or third grade. One of the other girls had brought a cassette tape with songs about the multiplication tables; she'd gotten it from her older sister. So somebody plugged in a boombox, cranked up the volume, and suddenly all the kids started jumping and dancing and shaking around. They were rapping their 4's and 8's. The troop leaders and mothers who were there seemed fine with it, but I sat down in the corner and wouldn't dance. A couple of the girls came over and started pulling on my arms wanting me to get out and dance with them, but I wouldn't do it. And then several of the others came over and tried to get me to dance with them, and I wouldn't do it. And finally, I said out loud in front of them all:

“My Deddy doesn't let me listen to nigger music.”

And suddenly all the other girls seemed so confused. And both of the troop leaders and all

of the mothers who were present seemed simply mortified. Their faces were as serious as Shel Silverstein's. A couple of them pulled me aside into the kitchen area while the other girls continued rapping their 5's and 10's, and started asking a lot of questions.

"Jolee, where did you hear that word." *My Deddy says it a lot.*

"Jolee, do you know what that word means?" *It means Black people.*

"Jolee, why did you say that?" *I don't know.*

"Jolee, do you know that that word can hurt people's feelings?" *I don't know.*

The troop leaders and mothers present looked at each other in such a way that I couldn't tell whether they were mad, or sad, or frustrated, or just disappointed. One of the ones questioning me was a White Li-ber-al, and the other was a Black Mother whose daughter was the only black girl in the group—and her eyes never left me the whole time they were talking.

"How should we handle this?" the White Liberal said under her breath. "Should we make her go apologize?"

The Black Mother shook her head 'no.' "Just let me sit here and talk to her a minute," she said. And when the other woman nodded and turned to continue supervising the other kids, she motioned for me to climb up onto her lap. Which was kind of scary.

"So you're name is Jolee," she said.

"Yes ma'am."

"And you're Mama works up at the school, right?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Well Jolee, my name is Peggy. And I want you to listen to what I am about to tell you."

"Yes ma'am." She could have told me anything.

"Listen to me, Jolee," she said. "Just because you hear your Deddy use that word, that

doesn't mean you need to use it. Hear me? 'Cause some things that people say about each other just aren't the truth, and they aren't nice. Baby, there are some words that we just don't say up in here. Because they hurt other people's feelings. You have feelings, don't you?"

I nodded yes. Which was definitely the right thing to do.

"Well good," she said. "So you know what I'm talking about. How would you like it if I said something that hurt your feelings—something that made you mad, or made you cry. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

I shook my head no. Which was, again, the right thing to do.

"Well you see, baby, when you say a word like what you just said, it hurts people's feelings. It hurts my feelings, and it hurts some of those other kids' feelings too. Now, I know you a good girl, Jolee. You're not bad. I can see that about you. You gotta good heart in you, right here, Jolee. You gotta good heart in you. I can tell. "

She gently picked up one of my hands and placed it against my chest.

"And you've got a good mind, right up here Jolee. I can tell that too." She took the same hand and folded down a few of the fingers, and took my index finger and tapped it to my forehead.

"So you need to use those two things when you talking to people," she said. "You need to use your head to think about what you say when you say it, and then use your heart to understand how other people feel." She took my tapping hand and moved it to her own bosom, so that I could feel her heart.

"You see, I got a heart right here in me too, Jolee," she said. "And that's what I use to tell about people—about whether they good o' bad. And I know that you a good girl, Jolee. You ain't bad. So don't say any bad things like that no more. You hear me?"

Still straight-faced, she wrapped her arms around my nervous shoulders and gave me a hug.

“You a good girl, baby,” she whispered. “So stay good, aight?”

Yes ma’am

32

I finally asked Deddy what ‘soul’ was. I’d heard him say that Madonna had sold hers, which was how come she was a ‘whore.’ G.P. had said that he didn’t think very many niggers had souls, or Asians or Indians either one—how else could you explain them torturing people back in the old days the way they did? Deddy had to think about it for a few minutes.

“Your soul is that part of you that’s on the inside,” he said. “The part of you that nobody else can see. You know on the outside, you have hands and feet and skin. But on the inside is you—the real you. The real *Jolee*. Some people think your soul is up here, in your brain,” he explained, tapping his temple with one finger. “But it’s more than that. Your conscience—that’s part of it, when you have a feeling that you’ve done something right or something wrong. And your thoughts—everything you think about—that’s part of it, too. But really your soul is in here,” he said, making a stroking movement with his fingers, up and down his chest area. “Some people call it the heart. You know when you pray to God, you bow your head and you fold your hands and you get down on your knees beside the bed? Well, when you do that, you’re not praying with the outside-Jolee. You’re praying with the inside-Jolee. That’s how come you’re supposed to close your eyes. So that you can look into the inside-Jolee. That’s your soul.”

“But how do you sell it then, Deddy—if it’s inside of you? I thought you said nobody can see it.”

“That’s just a saying,” he answered. “See, sometimes people want something so bad, they’re willing to do anything to get it. Even bad things. Eventually—if they want something bad

enough—they'll sell their souls, sell who they are on the inside in order to get whatever it is they want on the outside. And usually they sell who they are on the outside, too. Don't ever sell your soul, Jolee. Don't ever trade away who you are, 'cause there's nothin in the world that's worth it. Your soul is the most valuable thing you've got or you'll ever have. It's you."

"But Deddy how come nobody can see it? The doctor can't open you up and pull it out?"

"No, doctors can't pull it out. It's just there. Nobody else can see it but you, Jolee. And God. And me. I can see it a little bit."

Sometimes I could just look at him and ask a question. Seemed like he somehow always already knew what I was thinking.

But how come you can see it, Deddy—and nobody else?

I don't remember asking him that one out loud. But I remember him smiling anyway.

"Because I'm your Deddy," he said, winking. "I see you."

33

He got mad when I asked him my question from Sunday school. And when he answered, it was the first time I remember hearing the words *A-ry-an*, *An-glo-Sax-on*, *White Suprem-a-cist*, *Sand-Nigger*, *Whop* and *Blood-suckin-leech* used all at once. But I was told not to repeat any of those words to anybody. I was kind of confused by the word "leech" because it was the same word Grandma used when she talked about playing barefoot in the creek as a kid, and getting some kind of painful snail-ish sort of a thing stuck in her foot. Apparently, we weren't Jews.

34

He was never meant for domestic life. And he was never gonna be. He knew that about himself, G.P. They didn't really love each other anymore, and didn't have a whole lot to do with one another, him and Grandma. But they were married. And God had said that 'married' was for always. So they lived with each other, and coped with one another, and tried to make the best of things, each according to his or her own.

On weekends when we were at Grandma's trailer and G.P. was out late at night playing bluegrass shows, I still couldn't sleep. So I'd ease out of the pallet and tiptoe up the hall and wait for him in the kitchen in the dark, borrowing a notepad and pen from underneath the roll-a-dial telephone in the dining room to write things with, under the faint glow of a nightlight she'd left plugged into the wall. At twelve or one or two a.m., it was too risky to open a back door that might creak in order to go out into the woods to find my bucket of sticks and rocks and leaves. I was never afraid of the dark, or of the cold, or of the spirits, or of the Alone that was out there. Just of Deddy.

At 3:12 or 3:24 or 3:48 a.m., a pair of headlights would find rest against the living room wall where Grandma hung the pictures of all our next-of-kin. And when it disappeared, footsteps would find solace against the gravel and the grass and the brick steps at the front door of the trailer, and the door would open quietly to reveal his silhouette in the dark, holding a black guitar case. He always seemed happy to see me waiting. I used to watch him break the night by opening the refrigerator door and peering deep within. I used to listen to him break the night by closing the microwave door and punching buttons. And afterwards, sometimes long afterwards, I used to watch and listen to him break the night by pulling his guitar from its case one last time, and sitting on the edge of the couch by himself to play softly, quietly, in the hours of dark that were still left.

He used to pick a tune and sing a song called "Rank Strangers," about a man wandering

back to the home of his childhood and finding everyone gone. And he picked another one called “Wildwood Flower.” No words. He told me once that there were words, but he didn’t know them. He said the song was about a wildwood flower that was left standing by itself all alone in the woods. He knew I liked that one, and so a lot of nights, when he’d see me creeping up the hall in the dark, he’d play it just for me.

I remember thinking one night, again, that this must be what *soul* was. It was the part of Grandma that whispered stories to the dark, about characters in her life who were no more. It was the part of Deddy that only Buck knew as they walked the woods, whenever he reached down softly to touch an ear or a cheek. But for G.P., soul was the part that came out only in the early hours of morning when he was in the quiet of the den in the trailer. It was the part that used his fingers to create gentle sounds on an acoustic guitar at 4 a.m., when nobody but me was there to hear. And soul was also the part of some other person out there who had written the words to some of the songs G.P. was singing. A song about coming home to a place only to find that everyone you knew had left you and gone to Heaven. And a song about a wildwood flower that was standing out in the woods all by itself, pale and alone.

35

One time at a big bluegrass festival where G.P. was playing, Hazel spotted something unusual among the crowd.

“Grandma, is that a *black* man?” she asked. Grandma nodded. We weren’t the only ones staring. Other people were too.

“Them niggers think they need to be a part of everything nowadays,” G.P. said. “But it’s that

little blonde woman standing next to him that I can't understand. She might have been a decent-looking girl at one point in time, but she's ruined now. She's a lower human being than even what he is—and there ain't no coming back. Won't nobody ever want her again.”

Next to the black man stood a heavy-set, pale and freckled girl who was perhaps in her mid-twenties. Her hair was long and permed, and had been bleached blonde for the most part. The roots were as ash-black and oily as her heavy-looking eyelids. She was wearing long, sparkly earrings.

I can't remember now if it was Hazel or me who asked G.P. why nobody would ever want her again. A word from his answer is imprinted forever on the image of that girl's face in my mind.

Nigger-lover

36

I stayed in at recess for three days in a row to work on it. And Mrs. Mac couldn't understand that. The assignment had been to write a story about what happened after the story she'd read to us about John Henry had ended. I was writing that sequel, from the lead heroine's point of view. At the end of writing time that day when I told her I wasn't finished, she never pressured me for time. And when I told her in the afternoon that I still wasn't finished, she let me stay in at recess. And stay in again at recess. And stay in again at recess. She kept reading the work I had done at the end of each day, looking puzzled, and asking questions.

“Where did you learn to do this, Jolee?”

I didn't know.

“Where did you learn to use these quotation marks?” she asked. “We haven't learned these

yet. I haven't taught them. Where did you learn to use these, Jolee?"

I didn't know.

"I just look at the way it looks in a book when I read it," I finally told her. "When people talk to each other in the story, it has those marks."

"Your story only had to be a paragraph sweetheart," she said. "About four or five sentences. This is four or five pages, Jolee."

"I'm not finished with it yet, Mrs. Mac."

"That's okay, baby. Just keep working on it as long as you need to, and let me have it when you're finished."

Yes ma'am.

37

I was hoping that she wouldn't tell Mama. But somehow I kinda figured she would. I saw it on their faces when Mama came to pick me up. They looked at her and told her something with just a look, and then they all suddenly looked back over at me. And Mama had the same big eyes that the white troop leader had worn earlier. And then they discussed it. "I will talk to her about it tonight," Mama said. "And it will never happen again." And then she reached out and put a hand on Peggy's arm. Peggy's face and body language didn't seem to reciprocate.

On the way home, Mama tried to explain to me again why we didn't need to say that word in front of people.

"Jolee, I know your Deddy uses that word a lot, but that doesn't mean that you need to use it. I can get in big trouble if people start hearing my child say things like that. What your Deddy says

in our house about Black people or about any people needs to stay at our house, because you will get in trouble and I will get in trouble if you say things like that in school. There are some good Black people out there, just like Peggy who you just met, and those are not the people that your Deddy is talking about when he says things. But it is still not okay for you to say that word. And if I hear of you saying it again, I will tell your Deddy.”

She told my Deddy anyway.

38

Up late one night watching TV with G.P., a documentary piece about the Civil Rights movement ran on CNN. I pointed to the screen and told him, “That’s Dr. Martin Luther King. We learned about him in school.”

He lifted the remote and lowered the volume.

“What you didn’t see,” he said, “Is what was going on right before this footage was taken. Right before them people had the hoses turned on them. And right after that nigger-preacher spoke. The cameras didn’t wanna show you the whole story, see. But I lived that part of history. I was there. And if I had had it to live over, I woulda carried a rifle with me and got up on one of them rooftops in the background. I wouldn’t a took out ole Mr. King there. Naw. The one I’d’ve took out first woulda been the white fella there in the long hair—see him? The one holding hands and marching alongside the rest of them.

“You see, babe, a nigger can’t help it he’s a nigger. He was born that way. That’s what he is. And so naturally, he’s gotta fight for his own kind. And a Jew can’t help it he’s a Jew, either. He was born that way; that’s what he is. And so naturally, he’s gotta fight for his own kind. But a

White Lib-er-al is a traitor to his own people, Jolee. And he ain't worth nothing to nobody. He's already turned his back on his own kind, but guess what—these other people are only gonna stand up for him as long as they feel like he's benefitting their cause. They ain't gonna stick up for him forever. Because he ain't one of *their* people—and they know that—but he doesn't. Do you see? No matter what he does—he'll always be what he is. He'll always be *White*. Why he feels a need to go fight for them other people is something I will never understand.

“Don't never turn your back on your own people, Jolee,” he said. “Listen to me. Because your people is who you *are*. And they're the only ones in this world who are gonna stick up for you, when it comes right down to it. You are White. You're people was Con-fed-er-ate—they died fighting against some of these Liberal Yankees, and you need to be proud of that. I don't care what they teach you in books. I don't care what they teach you in school. Don't you never forget what I'm telling you right here, right now: A nigger is a nigger, and a Jew is a Jew, but a White Li-ber-al is a traitor to his own people. And he's a worthless human being. And when they get done using him for their purposes, they'll cut him loose, but then if he has already betrayed his own, then there's no home left for him to go back to. There ain't no place left for him in this whole wide world if he betrays his own people, see.”

He seemed so angry, and there was a part of me that wanted to ask, “But why . . . ?”

And so I finally did ask why.

“Because this is the real world, babe,” he said. “I've lived this place for a while now, and I know how it works. Don't never turn your back on your people, Jolee. You hear me? No matter what happens. Don't never turn your back on your own people. Because that is *who you are*. . . .”

I could hear them through the bedroom door, and was getting nervous:

“Rusty, she doesn’t need to be saying stuff like that at school. She could get in all kinds of trouble—and I can get in lots of trouble if people hear my child talking that way. She probably doesn’t need to hear you saying it anymore. She probably doesn’t need to hear you say a lot of things anymore. I don’t want her to ruin the good grades and good reputation she’s got with all of her teachers just because she repeats some of the things she hears you say.”

And then there was talk about pulling us out of school. So that we could move out to the farm and just go to school at home. So that we could learn the right way, from a Christian standpoint. And also learn about some of the real things in life, such as how to grow things and live more self-sufficiently. And then there was talk about how much money that would take—and Rusty we can’t get by with only one of us having a job. We need both salaries.

And then there was his version of things to me:

“Jolee, don’t ever let me catch you repeating things I say outside this house anymore, do you hear me? Used to, it wouldn’t have mattered as much as it does now. We’re living in a different time, Li-ber-als are running society and they want everybody to just all hold hands, and intermarry with one another, and all get along. They don’t realize that no matter what you do, people can’t get along. We’re different, and we’re different for a reason. If God had meant for us to all get along, he wouldn’t have split us up at the Tower of Babel.

“Your people were Ar-y-an, Jolee. Your people were Anglo-Saxon. And that’s what we are. That’s what *you* are. And Niggers ain’t the same as us. Jews ain’t the same as us, either. Or Mexicans. Or Indians. Or Arabs. Or Orientals. And so it burns me up when they try to teach my kids in school that we’re all the same, and that we need to all just get along and be

friends with each other. Makes me furious. Used to, it didn't matter if you called it like it was. You could say what you wanted to say back in the day. But it ain't like that anymore, and there ain't nothing I can do about it.

“But your Mama is right. You don't need to be repeating any of my views outside of here. Not at school, not at church, not at Girl Scouts, not anywhere. Because we're living in a society where it's not okay to think that way anymore. If you get caught saying things in public that ain't 'ko-sher,' it'll not only get you in trouble, but it can get us in trouble. Your Mama would lose her job if she said something like that out in front of people at work. I could lose my job if I said something like that at work. So if I hear of you saying things out like that again at school or anywhere else, I'll whip you.”

Lesson learned.

40

One night I rode with G.P. to a bluegrass festival where he was performing. In the band that was playing before his, a girl who looked only a few years older than me came up to the microphone to sing a song with her deddy, who was the banjo-picker. And when they started to play, I suddenly recognized the song. They were playing G.P.'s song, “Wildwood Flower,” and it had actual words. The girl was singing them. I tugged on G.P.'s shirtsleeve, and we listened as she sang:

*I will dance, I will sing, and my heart shall be gay;
I will charm every heart; in each ground I will sway.
When I woke from my dreaming, my idol's play,
All portion and love had all flown away.
Oh, he taught me to love him and promised to love*

*And to cherish me over all others above.
How my heart is now wandering, no misery can tell—
He's left me no warning, no words of farewell.
Oh, he taught me to love him and called me his flower
That was blooming to cheer him through life's dreary hour
How I long to see him and regret the dark hour—
He's gone and neglected this pale wildwood flower.*

I wasn't sure, but I asked G.P. if there was both a girl and a flower that were left standing in the woods all alone. He said yes. So then I asked him where was her husband, or her deddy, and why did they leave her in the woods by herself? He said the song didn't say. I asked him did he think that her husband or her deddy or her grandpa would be coming back to find her soon. He said her deddy and her grandpa probably would. I asked him if I got lost out in the woods while I was picking a flower, would him and my Deddy come out there to find me?

"You know we would, baby," he said. "Your Deddy loves you. And so do I."

There was something about a young girl and flower standing all alone in the woods that suddenly seemed so sad.

CHAPTER V
GLOBALIZATION

After work and in class, we're reading an academic article on globalization. And talking about what it means. "Everybody is connected now," a student is saying.

"Not everybody," I say.

"It depends on how you look at it," the professor interjects. "Does everyone in Mississippi have a cell phone, and everyone around the world?"

"No," we say, collectively.

"But how many places in the world have cell phone service? How many populated places in the world have cell phone service, or some kind of access to other populated places in the world?"

"Not all . . . but most," is the final consensus.

"Are there places which are untouched and unconnected to the rest of the planet?" she asks. "Are there places which remain completely unaffected by things that happen elsewhere on the planet?"

Someone seems to think there's a tribe in the Amazon that's really remote and hasn't been touched.

So the professor asks us again, "But is it still possible for any group of people to remain unaffected by things occurring elsewhere in the planet? Is it possible that this group of people in the Amazon is unaffected when an airplane flies overhead? Is it possible that this group of people is unaffected by climate change, or air pollution, or water pollution, or damage to the

ozone layer which is being caused by everyone else in places far away?”

The unanimous vote is ‘no.’ Not anymore. She nods.

“And so how does this affect things?” she asks. “How does it affect everyone in the world if no one in the world can remain completely unaffected by everyone else any longer? Does the level of interconnectedness that exists globally nowadays make the world a different place somehow?”

It makes the world a different place because we are all dependent on one another, they say. It makes the world a different place because we are now interdependent on one another.

“And so how does this affect your own worldviews?” she asks. And they share. They share about that one word I am taught to hate almost as much, if not more, than the word ‘liberal.’ *Tolerance*. Acceptance of all people, all cultures, all belief systems, all ways of living and doing and being. And whatever else the word suggests. The other students talk as if they believe that a level of peace among all nations and peoples can become a reality. In our lifetimes.

Normally I don’t say anything. How could they know—how could they ever know—what it is to live in my other world, where he sees in his mind as an eminent reality of world chaos, famine, disease, war and death? How could they ever know that in my other world, he sees a peace which, when it comes, will only be the pretense of peace, a fake smile to last for only an hour upon the face of the earth, erupting sooner rather than later into an Armageddon? Normally I don’t say anything.

“Not everyone . . .” I mumble. “There are people out there—more than you think—who don’t want to be interconnected, who don’t like the direction things are going. There are people out there who aren’t on board with any of this.”

“With any of what?” the professor asks.

“With any of the things we’re talking about,” I say, realizing now that if I describe my perspective too openly, I’m potentially opening myself to an attack. May as well sum it up nicely. “There are people who don’t want to be interconnected, or interdependent, or dependent, or even cooperative with the rest of the world for their survival.”

A pause in the room. But no attack. She responds to me well.

“But is it possible now, Jolee,” she asks again, “for anyone to be truly untouched and unaffected by everyone else? Even if a person wants to be—is it possible? Is it possible to be unconnected, and un-dependent, and un-cooperative on any other human beings throughout the world?”

“No,” I say. And she wants us to contemplate one of the former questions again.

So how does this interconnectedness make our world a different place

CHAPTER VI

PLANETS

“When I was in my early 20s, just out of college,” he says, “I biked across the country with a group of guys . . . We left from New York and biked all the way across the states to Seattle.” Of an afternoon, Dr. Braseth comes to the gym to walk on the treadmill and use the weight machines. I’m on shift after class, wiping down the equipment.

“From that experience I learned some things about this country, and about myself, that have been invaluable—it was one of the highlights of my life. I’d do it again, if I could. But I have a son now; he’s moving into his early teens, and he needs me. I’ve got a wife, and a house, and a job, and responsibilities that don’t make it impossible, but definitely make it harder to just take off and embark on something like that again. If you ever get a chance to head out to the Northwest, you really should Jolee. We’d seen over half the country, but when we got to western Wyoming, and moved up into Montana and crossed over into Idaho and eventually into Washington, we traveled through some of the most beautiful, unbelievable places I have ever seen.

“It’s never too late. Especially at your age. At my age, I’d do it again—and I may still do it again. But if I could rewind right now and be where you are, you don’t realize it, but there are no limits. No rules as far as how you have to live your life. You’re only young once, and if there are things in life that you want to do and experience, now is the time—before responsibilities move in that might prevent you from it, or make it harder to do some of the

things you wanna do. Don't ever be afraid to step out and experience something new. If you live long enough, you'll discover things about yourself that you never knew were there."

"I can't," I tell him. "I'd love to go do something like that. But I don't have any money. My folks would be absolutely furious, mainly my dad. And if I left, I'd have to have a way to live. You don't understand, Dr. Braseth. I wasn't raised . . . like you. My people aren't the same as you. For me to leave it would be real, real bad."

He shakes his head.

"You'll find in life that it doesn't take as much money as you think to live," he says. "You've got to be willing to let some parts of you go, but you'd be amazed Jolee. You can live on very little, if you need to."

I keep doing what I'm doing. Spraying and wiping down a recumbent bike on the row in front of his treadmill.

"Are you considering grad school?" he asks. "You should apply to grad school somewhere out West. There are fellowships and teaching assistantships available at a lot of schools, and if you needed to, you could take out a student loan."

"I've never taken out any loans. They're just not part of our way of thinking, the way I was raised. I try to pay for things up front as much as I can, work and pay for the things I need. That's just the way I'm expected to live."

"Well I'm not gonna tell you how to manage your finances," he says. "That's not my business. But let me ask you something. What is it that *you* wanna do in life, Jolee? What are you doing here—why did you decide to come to college?"

I know the answer to his question. It's vague and distant nowadays. But real nonetheless.

“Ever since I was a kid, I always wanted to be a writer. Teaching fits me too. It’s good for me, and I don’t know, I feel like I’m pretty good at it. All I’ve ever wanted out of life was to be a writer, and a teacher.”

“What do you write about?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Life. People. Things I see and experience.”

“Have you ever been outside of the South?” he asks.

“Not really. Only twice. We never traveled much when I was growing up. And when I graduated from high school, my dad asked us if there was any place we really, really wanted to go. We told him we wanted to go to Yellowstone. It was a place we’d always read about. So he rented a van and took us. Then took us to Glacier Park too.”

“Did you meet any of the locals while you were out there—did you have a chance to meet people?”

“No, not really. We pretty much stayed in the van, and at the hotels, and hiked the trails. Stopped and ate at a few places. He didn’t let us wander around too much; we pretty much had to stay together as a family.”

“Oh,” he says, musing. “And have you written about it?”

I shake my head.

“There wasn’t much to write about it that hasn’t already been written,” I say. “Lots of people have written about Yellowstone and Glacier. People who are from there and have been there a lot longer than I was. But if there was one place that I’d like to go, it would be out West. It was beautiful. But I could never go and live out in a place like that. I don’t know anything about winter, and I’d have to save some money to get there, and then get a job. And my dad would be absolutely furious. Probably God, too.”

He nods, not knowing what else to do or say.

“Well whatever it is that you wanna do in life,” he offers finally, “you’re only gonna be young once. And I’m gonna tell you something. A secret I have learned. It doesn’t happen very often, but every once in a while, once or twice or maybe a handful of times in your life, for just a few seconds, all the planets will all line up for you, Jolee. And when they do, be ready. When that one rare, perfect opportunity suddenly appears for just a few seconds in your life, don’t be afraid to take it.”

There’s something haunting in his voice when he draws that final analogy.

Yes, sir. I will try

CHAPTER VII

YOUNG MEN AND HORSESHOES

It's still light out when I pull up. The sky behind them is hazy and golden, like a Long Island iced tea. They are out in his old roommate's backyard holding beers and playing horseshoes. A handful of twenty-something-year-old boys with nothing to lose, nothing to gain, and nothing better to do on a warm Friday night. They are all wearing caps to keep the mosquitoes off their shorn heads, and spraying OFF over their bare arms, hairy legs, cargo shorts and tan, flip-flopped feet.

The images and logos on their T-shirts are worth half a thousand words. One reads: YOU KNOW YOU WANT ME, in big pink and red letters above an image of a cute little droopy-eyed pup. Another one reads: *Try It. You might like It* below an image of a bottle of beer, a pack of cigarettes and a bright golden lollipop. Another one depicts a photo of a popular casino somewhere; with the motto *Licker in the Front. Poker in the Rear* in black on white. One simply reads *Intramural Champions* with the name of our college underneath. And the one that everyone is else stopping to read says *Top Ten Things That Make My Dick Hard*, above a Ten-Commandment-style list.

I get out of my pickup with a homemade German chocolate cake, and don't really know what to do with myself. The twenty-something year-old boys are out in the yard being boys, and their twenty-something-year-old girlfriends are sitting on lawn chairs and open tailgates, sucking on longnecks and sipping glasses of wine. They're wearing sexy halter-tops and cut-offs, and

denim skirts and many-colored cotton dresses, nicely fitted. They're posing like models from *Cosmo* or *Vogue* magazine, swinging their smooth, tan legs to keep the mosquitoes away, and gently swatting them off of their bare sun-kissed arms. They're running their fingernails casually through perfectly styled and sprayed hair, highlighted in shades of auburn, honey, mahogany brown and lemon-yellow. They're glancing down every few seconds at ankle bracelets that match their tattoos, and toenails that match their garments. They're talking about their Men, and sorting out their life plans.

“Well, He has one more year of PT school, and then after that, if everything works out, He wants to move to L.A., so that's probably where I will go.”

“Well, I think He pretty much is happy with his job here, and I have one more semester left in health sciences, so when I get out I will probably see about getting a job at the hospital—I have some connections. And we will probably move in together in the fall, just depending on how things go.”

They're so beautiful, these girls. And so rich, so refined. And so well-dressed, well-groomed, well-presented. And well-off. They're everything I could ever want to be, and more than I could ever dream of being. *God, for just once in my life, someday I want to know what it feels like to look like that. To know what it feels like to be a real woman, with some man out there who wants me. To be able to show up for a block party on a summer night, and be beautiful to somebody, just for once. Without having to worry about anything else*

“He-y Jolee, glad you made it!” one of the guys is saying from way over at the other end of the yard. “Have you ever played horseshoes before?” Guess he noticed that I looked needy. “Well, come here,” he says. “We'll show you how.”

I'm here by myself, in a pair of blue jeans that I pulled from a clearance rack at JC

Penney's, using last month's paycheck. I'm here by myself in a school T-shirt that I got for free by filling out a survey for a student in the psychology department.

"There's some beer over here in this cooler," one of the other guys suggests, "and some Jack and Captain Morgan in the kitchen. Help yourself."

I give them a weak, hesitant smile.

"Well that's okay," one of them says. "There's also some bottled water in that cooler over there. Are you serious. . . you mean you have never played horseshoes before?"

A couple of them are grinning and chuckling already.

"Dude, she's from back there in the sticks, you know. . . where she's from, they actually use the horseshoes. They don't play with them in her hometown. Come on over here, Jolee. You can learn from us—we'll teach you how. Come on."

He won't even look at me. Him. He turns away when I step up to play horseshoes with one of the others. And acts as if he has better things to do right now.

And then they start giving me lessons on the general object of the game, and the point system, correct form. *At least a few of these guys are glad that I came*

Later in the evening at about dark, they're grilling out, and watching a Braves game. And some of the other girls have brought Him good-bye cards and good-luck cards and We-Wish-You-All-the-Best cards, and He's reading them. And before everyone fills their paper plates, someone proposes a toast, and starts making predictions about His future. He's leaving in a couple of days to take a big new job in Baltimore, and they're wishing him well. And then someone pulls out a camera, and starts flashing people. And now she's making her move. It's important that they take a few pictures together. Her.

After dinner, she's sitting on the arm of his recliner, and sliding into his lap, and moving

one hand gently behind his neck as she whispers something good in one of his ears, getting a smile. She's beautiful tonight, wearing a tight, silky red strapless blouse and a pair of Abercrombie blue jeans. Her hair and eyes are the same color as mine, beneath make-up as neat and clean as Drew Barrymore's on a CoverGirl commercial. She carefully draws a little imaginary picture across his chest with one of her fingernails, and talks across the living room to some of the other guys and girls about her plans. Says she's working for a telemarketing company right now, but she's only got sophomore standing and will be a junior next year.

"But I might transfer to a school out in Baltimore in the fall—we'll see what happens," she says. He doesn't respond. And then she suddenly notices me.

"And what about you, Jolee?" she asks. "What are your plans?"

I tell her I'll be graduating at the end of the summer, and that I've sent some applications out for grad school, but my family lives on a farm out there close to Beulah, and so probably the right thing to do is stay there and try to find a job locally. She smiles sweetly, and nods her head. He rolls his eyes.

And I would give anything to be her right now. To be free to lean my body up against his body, and to have his eyes looking down at my silky red shirt. To be free to run my fingernails along his skin wherever I wanted to, and to know that as soon as everyone else leaves here tonight, we'd be tiptoeing back to his room so he could fuck the living color out of me. To know what that even felt like.

Later that night everyone's watching MTV, and I'm sick of watching Her. I'm sick of being here. It's more than I can take without crying. She doesn't know him the way I knew him. She'll never love him the way that I loved him. But she's able to give him what I couldn't give him. And apparently that's enough. I get up to walk out and begin to tell everyone I have to get

up early tomorrow, and good-night. And suddenly He realizes I'm here. As I reach for my purse and jacket at the door, He finds an excuse to get up, and to come over and bid me a good-bye.

"Jolee, wait a minute." The first words He's said to me all night. She follows, and strokes his arm. Eyes me like a curious yard dog. He's had a few beers.

"Jolee, were you gonna leave here without even saying 'good-bye' to me."

"Yes," I say, matter-of-factly. "Yes, I was."

"Well hey. . . he-y. Take care of yourself. Okay?" He's pulling me to him with the arm she isn't on. I shrug, and look away.

"Hey, it was nice to meet you," she says. "You should Facebook me sometime."

Really I would prefer to kill her with my bare hands.

Out on the front lawn a sun-burned red moon is rising a few yards up from the treeline, grimacing like a jack-o-lantern at warm dark stars. Seems so ugly in life to leave things unsaid. Even uglier not to say good-bye. I open my pickup door and turn on the ignition and flip on the lights. But can't just leave like that. On a piece of carefully torn notepad paper from the glove box, I jot a note neatly:

For what it's worth, you meant a lot to me. I won't forget ya. If you ever need anything or just feel lonely and need someone to talk to, holla. I'm happy for you, and will miss you more than you know. I wish you all the best in life.

Love,

Jolee

I lift the handle and open the passenger door of his unlocked pickup, tucking the note under his packed suitcase on the seat. He'll find it when he gets to where he's going. And throw it away.

CHAPTER VIII

LIFE OF BUCK

The moon is blood red tonight on the drive home. And unsettled. Ugly as the inside of me. She watches from a distance of a few hundred yards, tiptoeing steadily backwards as I move along the gravel road at thirty-five miles per hour. I pull over finally, to scream. And scream. And scream. To bang the dashboard. To rest my face against a steering wheel as sticky and wet as my hot skin. To open the door and wretch at last. Then to pull the bottom of my shirt up to my face and wipe my eyes, mouth and nose clean enough to crank back up and crawl down the gravel driveway. To go home.

The porch light is still on. Buck has dragged crooked blood streaks up the front steps. He's lying across the welcome rug in pain; he can't move his hind legs anymore. His back feet are cut to pieces and scraped raw, with little fragments of muddy gravel and grass stuck between the toes. Hip dysplasia. He lifts his head to meet my petting fingers, and tries feebly to wag his tail. It's too much to look at.

Lights out inside the house. He's sitting back in the recliner, facing a black TV screen. Deddy. An empty whiskey glass on the floor beneath the arm. *Must be asleep.*

I try to move quietly.

"Sometimes, I feel. . . like a pet tiger," he says to the moon out there.

"An animal on a leash. A lion in a cage. A hyena at a petting zoo. A 'tame' wild animal. Just pretending to be nice so all the little kids can pet him."

“What Deddy?” It’s the only question I know to ask. I can’t see his face.

“You know. . . I’m ‘Dad’ to you,” he says, rocking himself backward and forward in the recliner, slowly.

“Yep, that’s right. *Dad*. Because it’s what I’m supposed to be. Every kid needs to have a deddy, right? So I guess that’s what I am. But that’s not the real me. That’s not the *real* Rusty. Real Me is something else. Someone else. You’ve never met ‘Rusty,’ baby—not Real Rusty. And you never will. He’s a nice guy sometimes. But mostly, he’s an animal. Just trying his best to coexist in a domesticated life.”

The moon has crept to the corner of the window now, where he can see her face. She’s still as red tear-stained me. Hell of a night.

“That dog out there on my porch is gonna need a bullet soon. I ain’t gonna watch him drag his legs all over my yard, getting his feet all cut-up and not even feeling it. Ain’t no telling what kind of pain he’s got on the inside from all that.”

“Yeah, Deddy. I know.” He turns his head to face me in the dark.

“You see, Jolee. . . there’s a part of me, and of any man, that’s as base as that damn dog out there. Same thoughts. Same needs. Same instincts. Food. Shelter. Sex. Survival. And basically the same desires: chasing stuff, hunting stuff, killing stuff, screwing stuff. Anything for a thrill. That’s pretty much what he thinks about, everyday. And that’s pretty much what I think about—everyday. That’s what a man is, Jolee. He’s an animal. So whenever you get out in the world and start dealing with some of these boys and men, and whenever one of them comes up and starts talking to you, I want you to close your eyes and picture in your mind that dog on my porch out there. When you’re talking to a boy, I want you to see in your mind that dog, because that’s what a man is, on the inside. He’s just been trained over the years to try to conform to the rules of society.

To try to pretend, in front of you, that he's nicer than what he really is."

He turns to face the window again. To face the night sky.

"You know, that's as red of a moon as I've ever seen," he says.

"Yeah, Deddy. I know. Me too."

He hasn't noticed that my voice is quivering.

"It makes me think about what the Bible says about the End Times," he says. "About how the Sun will go out eventually, and the Moon will turn to blood. And then the End will come. I think when the moon comes up red like this, it's kind of like a reminder. A little reminder that one of these days, it's coming."

"He's with a whore tonight Deddy," I say in a low voice, trying not to cry again.

"What?"

"He's with a whore."

"Who?"

He turns to look at me again in the dark. And this time, he sees. And pauses before answering.

"It ain't the end of the world, baby," he says finally, shaking his head. "Believe me, there's lots of worse things out there. Whoever he is—he's had a lot of them like her. You think she's the first? Well, she probably ain't the last, either. Especially if he's your age. What, do you think he'll 'marry' her or something?"

"If she got pregnant, he probably would. And she's the type that would do something like that on purpose, Deddy. Just to catch him."

"And what do you care?" he asks. "Just let him have her."

"I love him, Deddy," I whisper, shuddering. "I loved him more than she ever would or could

or will. I know him, Deddy—I've known him for years, and she doesn't know him at all." Tears coming. I stand there hoping he can't see them in the dark.

"I didn't give it up to him, Deddy. I was a good girl—just like you taught me. I loved him, but I wouldn't give it up. . . and now he doesn't want me anymore."

He sits with his head craned for a moment, staring. Then gently uses one foot to swivel the recliner to face me. And starts laughing, cackling. Grimacing like the blood-red moon out the window behind him.

"Ha, ha. Hell. You don't even know what 'lu-uv' is, baby. You think you 'lu-uv' some boy out there? Or that he ever loved you? There ain't no such thing as love, Jolee. Not between men and women anyway. This is real life. Your Deddy loves you, you can count on that much. But out there—there ain't no such thing as love. You're getting a taste of it tonight. Only this time, you got lucky. Think about that other poor girl. She thinks she knows what she's doing. She thinks she 'knows' him, and that she can get him to love her. But she doesn't know him. And hell baby, neither do you. And neither do either one of you—and neither one of you ever will. You don't ever know a person, Jolee. Remember that. And especially a guy. At most, you've only seen fifteen or twenty percent of him. Just the parts of him that he wanted you to see."

"I don't know what to even say or do, Deddy," I whisper, wiping my nose. "They're at his house having sex right now tonight. And she'll get him, or one of these other guys—good guys, Deddy. Decent, average, normal American guys. She'll get whoever she wants because she *can*. She'll get who she wants because she can give them whatever she wants, and whatever they want. And I wouldn't even know what to do or how to do it."

"Well hell, I recommend just watch and learn, baby. Watch and see how this one turns out. He probably doesn't love her. This'll pass. He'll hang around for a few months, and then when he

gets tired of her, he'll move on to something better. Just let her have him, baby. Let him do his thing, and move on."

"But Deddy how can I?" I ask, crying harder. "All my life I've been a 'good' girl, just like you taught me. And nobody wants me because of that. Nobody wants a girl they're gonna have to train, Deddy—that's what a damn dog is for. And I'm supposed to save myself and keep myself pure for God? I'm supposed to save myself for my husband? What if my husband doesn't have to save himself for me, Deddy? What if I may not ever even have a husband, because of what I am? What if them kinda times don't even exist anymore, Deddy? What if them kinda Christians don't even exist anymore? What if the world that you're still living in doesn't exist anymore? What if the world that *we* are still living in doesn't exist anymore, Deddy, and what if it never even did exist to start with? What if all of this—all of it—is just something we've created for ourselves."

He's not laughing now.

"Is that what you think, Jolee?" he asks. "That you're living in a world that doesn't exist? That you've got to save yourself for 'God' and for your 'husband'—and for your Deddy? Hell, no! Go on out there then, why don't you—go on out there and have sex with this guy, Jolee. If he'll even take you! Try it and see. Lay up under him like that other girl is doing right now tonight, lay there wondering whether or not he really does love you, or whether or not he's looking around at some of these other girls, or whether or not you might be pregnant. Try out those feelings for awhile.

"This ain't got nothing to do with 'God,' Jolee. This ain't got shit to do with God. Ain't got shit to do with your future 'husband' either, because you're right—you may not have one. What it has got to do with though, is *Jolee*. Does Jolee want to have to worry about getting pregnant and having to either have a baby by herself or get an abortion? Does Jolee want to have to lay there on

a mattress with some guy breathing hard on top of her, wondering if he's really planning to stick around? Does Jolee want to have to have this same exact conversation with her Deddy again, six months from now, about a guy she loves who has decided to run off with another woman, only this time, after Jolee has done slept with him? Does Jolee want to come crying back to her Deddy after some boy has done got what he wanted, and moved on? Because that's what would've happened if you had given it up to him, sweetheart. This is real life, Jolee. This is the real game. So wake up and get used to it."

He swivels again, to wander away toward the sky.

"You don't know how lucky you really are, Jolee," he says. "Maybe this is it. Maybe he is the one or she is the one, and maybe they'll stay together for a while. Maybe they'll last. But chances are, they won't last. She'll just come out of it with a few more pounds added to her pack, a little more weight to carry. One more scar on her soul to try to heal, or to cover up. And it's not worth it, Jolee. I promise you. Girls like her. . . she may seem happy. And she may actually be happy—for a little while. But after this is over and he breaks it off, she'll have to live with herself again. And chances are, she's probably not very happy with herself, on the inside. Chances are, she's hollow, ugly, and empty. Chances are that she may go through the rest of her life that way. Or she may get pregnant, and have an abortion, or have a baby that she has to raise all by herself, or get married and get divorced, and then have to work two or three jobs to take care of a bunch of kids. Then she might not ever be happy."

"I might not ever be happy either, Deddy," I whisper in the dark. "Living like this. I'm hollow on the inside, too. And so are you. Hollow just the same as anybody else. We just try to call it something different."

"Well at least when you lay down in your bed tonight," he says quietly, "you'll be able to

live with yourself. A lot of people can't." He's talking to the moon again, her face as red as mine, but turning paler now.

"You'll get used to it," he says flatly. "This ain't Heaven, baby. This is Earth. And it might as well be a living Hell. Welcome to Planet Earth, Jolee. It's not too far from Hell."

In the morning, we walk down. The sun comes up again and life starts over. The cicadas start over. The crickets start over. The doves start over. We start over. My head aches. My eyes are burning. My face is swollen. But it's gone now. Feels as far away as the tree lines stretching out west of here. In the city I drove home from last night, this morning maybe he is waking up somewhere. Next to her. But it's over for them now, too. Like the wind that winds itself gently through my long, damp hair. It's gone.

No four-wheeler today. Deddy gave us shovels to carry, and Jared is wearing his, casually over bare brown shoulders. I'm balancing mine, carefully over one shoulder, lever-style. Deddy is holding his low at the hip, rifle-style. And Buck is trotting crooked alongside him, back feet trailing awkwardly along the ground.

Down by the pond and by the Big Tree, the one that Papaw used to climb when he was a boy, the one that Deddy used to climb when he was a boy, the one that Jared and me used to climb when we were young—that's where we're going. Down by the Big Tree that's been there as long as anyone knows, and now rests against the earth forever. It fell in a thunderstorm last year. Deddy chooses the spot, and breaks dirt.

"I don't know where he was happiest," he says. "But he loved the water. Always wanted to swim. I used to sit here under this tree and watch him sometimes."

“Deddy, do you reckon there’s a place in heaven for dogs,” Jared asks. “That they can get to come in with their people and be saved.”

He shakes his head. “No, I don’t reckon they do,” he says. “Bible says ‘Dust to dust.’ Dust to dust. Dust to goddamn dust. And sometimes, I think us humans might as well be ‘dust to dust’ too, because we’re a damn mess. Y’all don’t know.”

In an hour, my hands are sweaty and blistered against the wood handle of the shovel, and Deddy’s lifting his cowboy hat and wiping his face with open flap of his unbuttoned cotton shirt. Jared’s back is glistening above the dampening the waist of his cargo shorts. Buck has dragged himself into the shade of one of the Big Tree’s broken limbs, and has lain down on a pallet of cool, mounded earth. Eyes on Deddy always.

“Do you know I saved his life one time,” Deddy volunteers, pausing to wipe his face with the open flap of his cotton shirt. “I never told anybody, because I didn’t want him to feel bad about it. You know how a dog is supposed to jump in and save a human’s life if he needs to? Well, it sorta happened in reverse. When he was young and a little higher-strung, me and him was out walking in the woods, and when we come to the river, he wanted to swim. We was up on a steep bank, probably about thirty feet up. And down there in the middle of the water, there was a little place sticking up that had some grass and leaves and sticks on it—like a little island. He took a running start and jumped off the bank like a cannonball. He was about to have hisself a good ole time.

“But it was a high drop. And German Shepherds are big dogs. And when he jumped in, he aimed for that little island in mid-river. Only it wasn’t an island. It was just a floating pile of sticks and leaves. When he hit the water, he was jumping from so high that he went way down under. And when he finally popped back up, he’d done accidentally sucked in a bunch of water.

His coat was thick; it was weighing him down. He was swimming for that little island in the middle, trying to climb up and catch his breath. But as he was climbing, that island was just sinking right underneath him. And then he was getting tangled up in them leaves and sticks and stuff on an island that was no longer there. And then he was going under, under, under.

“Well, when he come back up the last time, he realized that he’d been tricked, but it was too late. He was drowning. He was panicking. His body didn’t have enough air, and his lungs had too much water, and his winter coat was sinking him even more. And suddenly, it occurred to me: *God damnit, I have done lost that dog.*”

He shakes his head, looking away for a few seconds to visualize the scenario. Then he looks at Buck, an old shepherd dog who has now curled himself up in the cool of the fresh dirt Jared and Deddy and me are shoveling as we dig his grave today.

Reckon if he remembers this story

“So I took off running and yelling along the top of that high bank,” Deddy says. “I had lost dogs to drowning before, and it always happens fast. I was trying to get him to swim back toward the bank—towards me. And he still had sense enough that he heard my voice, and started swimming my way just as hard as he could. But the bank was real slick, and it was almost straight up, pretty near vertical. And even though he was clawing and climbing, he couldn’t get up. He couldn’t even break free of the water. And so I started running further downstream, and he started swimming further downstream, both of us trying to find another spot. But there wasn’t no other spot. And his body was starting to wear out. And the current was starting to pull him away.

“Finally I started pointing to a place on the other side where it was steep, but not quite as steep, and there was an old dead tree that had been felled into the water, which I thought maybe he could climb up. But he’d done nearly lost his mind, and wasn’t seeing where I was pointing. He

was a loyal dog and was trying to come back up the bank to me.

“They say with humans—I’ve had to save a drowning human before—and the rule is that you are never supposed to compromise your own life. Because a drowning person is not human anymore. A drowning person is thinking *survival, survival, survival*, and nothing else matters at that point. They can pull you down with them if you aren’t careful, and then you end up with two dead people instead of just one. Well, the dog was at that point. He was drowning, and he knew he was drowning. He was thinking *survival, survival, survival*, and he’d realized that if he went under just one more time, he wasn’t gonna come back up. Ever.”

A subtle breeze moves from the surface of Deddy’s pond to my face. He’s wiping his face with a red handkerchief from his pocket, and passing the handkerchief to Jared.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” he says. “I didn’t love that dog. He was young, but I wasn’t young, and I had done had plenty of good dogs in my lifetime. And I had done seen a lot of bad things in my lifetime, too, and had seen a lot of bad things happen to good dogs. So it was all the same to me. If I had lost him, I could have gone out and got me another dog. But to watch him *fight*. . .” He shakes his head, digging again.

“That dog was determined to make it,” he says. “But he wasn’t gonna make it. And for some reason, all of a sudden, I did something really stupid: I ran and jumped off that damn thirty-foot drop straight into the river with that drowning dog.” He grins a little.

“As soon as I hit the freezing water,” he says, “I realized what an idiot I was, because I had not even thought to take off my heavy boots and coat—and now they were sinking me. And now, I was down there trying save a stupid-ass young dog who had been hot-blooded and ignorant enough to have jumped himself into a mess, and now I might lose my life too, trying to save him. I remember thinking that somebody would eventually notice that Rusty was missing, and then

they'd come out and find both of our bodies several miles downstream where we'd washed up against the bank together. All because of a young stupid-ass dog and an older, even stupider-ass man jumping in after him.

“Well anyway, there I was. And he seen me, and the life came back to his eyes, and he started swimming towards me just as hard as he could. I knew that if he tried to climb up in my arms or on top of my shoulders, we'd both go under and drown for sure. So I started swimming across the river to that fallen tree on the other side, and I figured that if he loved and trusted me enough, well, he'd follow me over there. And he did. It was a huge dead tree. It had been down for a long time and was just as slick as the bank above, and it was perfectly round. Once he seen what I was wanting him to do, he tried to climb it, but he couldn't climb it. And I'm telling you, this dog was less than a minute away from death—he was drowning.

“I knew that if I climbed up first and reached back down for him, I was liable to end up falling back down into the water on top of him. Then we'd both be in the same shape or worse. So instead of me climbing up first, I reached and grabbed that dog by the neck, and then by the throat, and I just knew that he was gonna bite me. When a dog gets truly desperate, when the survival instinct kicks in, it don't matter how good of a dog he is, or how well he knows you. He'll bite.

“But he didn't bite. I guess he either knew enough or was too far gone enough that he really did trust me. The tree was too big for me to be able to heft him up on top. But I swear, I grabbed that dog by the throat and heaved him up as high as I possibly could—knowing that if it didn't work the first time, there wasn't gonna be a second time. I was gonna have to save myself at this point. But that dog had *fight*. And when I gave him a start, he grabbed ahold of that tree with not only his claws but with his *teeth*, and climbed himself up there the rest of the way. And he was shaking, he was scared, he was cold, and he still couldn't breathe. But when I started up that tree

behind him, one of my boots slipped, and I fell back down into the water again. He seen that, and as I started trying to climb myself up there a second time, that dog reached down and grabbed the neck of my coat with his teeth and literally pulled me up the rest of the way. He actually left a bruise and a few teeth marks on my shoulder from that.

“And you know, that was funny to me. In all my travels, I’d never had anything like that happen before. If he hadn’t have been there, I probably woulda still made it up that tree, eventually. But he did his part. He didn’t run off the second that I saved him, either. He turned around and pulled me out too. He didn’t truly save my life, and in fact, I was still so mad when I caught my breath that I told him what he already knew—that it was his damn fault that we both had just almost died, and that if he ever did something like that again, this was the first and last time I was ever gonna jump in a river to save his ass.

“But after it was over, and we were both now freezing to death, we found a way to climb up the bank on the other side, and walked downstream a good ways until we found a place to climb back down and wade across to our original side. I was cussing that dog the whole time. And he was just creeping alongside me with his tail between his legs. But when we got back to the four-wheeler, all shivers, he looked up at me and told me that he was really, really sorry. And for whatever reason, I told him that forgave him, and told him that he was my friend. And I made him promise that if ever in our adventures, we were to encounter a wild boar, or a cougar or a bear, that I expected him to remember this moment, and to man-up and take one for me. And he nodded his head and told me that he would.”

He surveys the hole and offers no criticism. That’s how Jared and I know that we’re almost finished. “As far as I’m concerned, that’s what ‘love’ is,” Deddy whispers, meeting eyes with Buck again. “It’s as base and primal and primitive as this dog who stuck with me when we was

both drowning. Loyalty. A lot of humans don't have that anymore. Most people in the world are just looking out for themselves these days. We're too evolved now, I guess."

We're getting deeper. Somewhere between three and four feet down. When the hole is deep enough, and wide enough, and clean enough, he stops and ponders. Rests his shovel at his side for a moment, then turns, and starts walking back up our hill. "There's something not right about digging a grave," he says to no one. "For anybody. How come it had to be dust to dust anyway?" Buck pulls himself up and follows, dragging his back legs across the surface of the earth we've dug, and leaving an imprint behind him.

Why couldn't it be wind to wind, or water to water, or sky to sky

It ain't no wind tonight. Me and Jared are sitting on the porch steps under a little black sky covered in rashes of pale deer lice, waiting to hear the familiar echoes of a hard crack, and to close our eyes and try to imagine what it must have looked like when Deddy shot him—Buck dead and blood everywhere under a canopy pitch black woods, and Deddy laying him in the ground in the even blacker darkness of the hole we dug today, then walking off and leaving him there in the earth alone.

"Jolee do you think dogs get to go to Heaven," Jared asks the night air. For the second time today. I shake my head.

"Naw. Bible says they go back to the dirt when they die. Just like Deddy says. So I guess that's the way it is."

He thinks for a minute or two, as Dan walks up and rests his head against my lap.

"Well I guess they can't get saved," Jared muses, "because they can't believe in Jesus."

The air outside is thick and hot. The katydids, the whippoorwills, and the doves and the

pond frogs and the coyotes are all lonely out there tonight, calling. Calling for something, something, something. I wonder if they don't know what.

“What do you think about Deddy,” Jared asks. “Do you think he really does have a relationship with Jesus? Do you think he really is saved.”

We sit and wait some more. Still no crack.

“You know, I went and talked to a preacher man and his wife in the city not long ago, needing help with some things that were on my mind. Somehow it came up—I said something about Deddy that made them look at me funny. And then they wanted to know all about him. Wanted to know if I thought he really was saved.”

“Well, what'd you tell them?” he asks. Still no sound in the woods below.

“I told them that I thought so.”

Jared stands up and walks down into the yard. Picks up a stick and starts twiddling with it. Just to have something else to do.

“But do you really think he does believe in Jesus?” he asks. “Or do you think he just pretends to, for our sake. So that we will all live right.”

“It's been a lot on my mind,” I tell him. “Deddy was the one who led me to get saved—that's what I finally explained to the preacherman and his wife. I told them that I knew Deddy really did love me, that he was the only man I had ever known who really would die for me, or live for me, or kill for me if I ever needed him to. I told them I knew that Deddy was *real*, that he would never knowingly lie to me, and that he'd always tell me the straight-out truth as best as he knew. And that he was the one who had led me to get saved, when I was younger.”

“What'd you say to him? To Deddy I mean, when you were younger and you wanted to get saved.”

“I asked him did he *really* believe that there was a God—and how did he know? And I asked him did he really believe that a person could have a ‘personal’ relationship with Jesus, like all those videos and preachers were saying. And he said yes. Then explained it to me as best as he knew.”

“Well what happened to him then,” Jared asks. “Why ain’t he like that now.”

I shrug my shoulders and stare up at the stars. “I don’t know, Jared. I swear I just don’t know.”

No gunshot. We wait.

“Well do you think it’s like the Baptists say,” Jared offers finally. “Do you think that once you’re saved, you’re always saved? That if you really are saved—it’s permanent? Something that lasts forever, no matter what?”

I rub Dan’s ears as he sniffs underneath my armpit.

“I think so. That’s what I told the preacherman. I know that he was before. So I think he still is now—he’s just not the same as he was.”

“Do you ever wonder what it would be like,” Jared asks, “if some of the people we know and love down here don’t get to go. To Heaven I mean. What if in the End, some of the people we know and love don’t make it. Bible says a lot of people won’t.”

I shake my head.

“If Deddy doesn’t make it, I will personally tell God that I am not coming in There,” I say. “I will tell God that to His face, if I need to. I’m not going up There without y’all, Jared. Or without Deddy either.”

We fall quiet again. Dan raises his head to look, to see. And then lowers it again.

“Jolee, do you remember that night when we stayed awake out on the grass until early in the

morning, in the freezing cold, just so we could look up and see a meteor shower—and how beautiful that was.”

“Yeah. I remember.”

“Do you remember how a few days later we went to the revival meeting one night and I convinced Cricket to get up with me and go up the aisle to get saved?”

“Yeah, I remember that, too.”

“Well Jolee you never knew it, but it was you who led me to that. Back then when I was young and I had bad thoughts or tough questions, I was afraid to go to Deddy. So I went to you. I could tell you had something different in you, and I figured what was different was that you were saved. If a preacherman was to ask me now who it was that led me to salvation, well I’d tell him it was my older sister Jolee.”

Movement in the grass, down the hill. Dan raises his head and keeps it raised. Then starts to bark. Then runs down the steps and out into the yard. Then slows down, lowers his head, wags his tail. A two-legged figure blacker than the night approaches.

“Did you do it, Deddy?” Jared calls out to the dark.

No answer. Deddy keeps walking. Around to the back of the house. Dan follows. And then from way behind, another movement in the grass. Another two-legged figure, climbing across the yard. Panting. Pulling his useless back legs along behind him, brown blood splotches marking his path. An old dog, following his man.

He couldn’ do it

That night I dream of a tower of Babel. Of climbing stairs and escalators rebuilt by the generations of the world. And of windows, and of looking out of windows to see what could be

seen of humankind throughout the ages. With each added flight a breathless glance, and with each added window, another view from higher, and higher, and higher. And there are the lights of the city, down below. The lights of our city. The lights of Babel. And a little ways off from it, there's the teeny light of our little farmhouse on Deddy's wooded hill somewhere far away, getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller. And there's the pinprick flicker of Deddy's little red four-wheeler, not even visible anymore. As I climb stairs and ride escalators higher, and higher, and higher, the reach of the city lights seem to creep wider, and wider, and wider. They're melting like butter over a pancake universe. And he's just sitting, on a hill down there, on his four-wheeler. Watching.

In the morning he takes his shower, combs his hair, brushes his teeth. In the morning he pulls his pant legs on one at a time, stands in the mirror with circles under his eyes and ties his tie, makes his breakfast, brews his coffee. Then sits down at the kitchen table and turns on Fox News.

"What's your school schedule like this week. And your work schedule," he says. "I'm taking Buck to the vet tomorrow to get it done."

"I'll take off tomorrow afternoon, Deddy. I get out of class at 2:30 and I can find somebody to cover for me at work for a few hours. I wanna be there when it happens."

"It's not what you think it is, baby. This ain't no Hallmark film."

"I know Deddy."

"No. You don't know. You ain't got a damn clue."

"I've worked at a vet clinic before. I've seen a few things."

"And you still ain't got a damn clue, baby. It ain't what you think it is, Jolee. This ain't the type of story you can write stories about. This ain't a made-for-TV movie where the boy goes

out and builds a pine box and his Deddy stands beside him and says, ‘Son. . . I love you,’ and there’s a big lesson to be learned at the end. No. This is real life, baby. They’ll give him a shot, and then he’ll die.” He’s searching the table now, for a plastic container full of blood pressure pills.

“And when an animal dies,” he says, “it’s the same as when a human dies. The body relaxes. It’s uglier than what you’re thinking. He’ll have an unnatural look on his face. The lights’ll go out in his eyes. All the ticks and fleas will start to evacuate, along with anything else that he was holding in his system. He’ll shit himself. And that’s pretty much all there is to it. There’s no ‘greater lesson’ to be learned. No stories to write. It’s not what you think it is, baby.”

“Yeah, Deddy. I know. But I want to be there.”

He shakes his head. Pops a blood pressure pill. Chases it with his mug.

“I’ve shot a lot of things in my life,” he says. “When I was a boy I used to shoot things all the time. That’s what testosterone will do for ya. Makes you wanna hunt things, shoot things, kill things. You name it, I’ve shot it. I’ve shot horses when I needed to, and cows, and cats, and pretty much any kind of wildlife. It wasn’t ever fun to shoot a dog, but I did it when I needed to. And I’ve had some good dogs in my life. But I’ve also had them get distemper, and be wandering around the yard half crazy and blind. I’ve had them get rabies. I’ve had them get kicked in the head by horses to the point of brain damage and no chance of recovery. I’ve had them get caught in beaver traps with a broke leg or a broke hip, to the point that they weren’t gonna heal. I’ve shot a lotta good dogs in my lifetime. But I couldn’t shoot this one. And I don’t know why.”

“Don’t worry about it, Deddy. You don’t have to shoot stuff to be a man. I don’t think any less of you. It’s okay.”

“I guess I’m getting weaker in my old age,” he muses. “That dog out there is as good of a

friend as I've ever had."

I've got rollers in my hair, and heels on. Some nice make-up and a pair of earrings Hazel got me for Christmas.

"Where you going to church at these days," he asks.

"Just at that new place in Babel. You know, the one they just opened up a little ways off the highway."

"What kind of church is it. What do they teach?"

"It's non-denominational, Deddy. They're calling it a 'Bible' church. And that's pretty much what it is. They basically just sing some songs when you go in, and then they have four rotating speakers, and each week one of them opens up to a passage in the Bible and reads from it and delivers a message for 45 minutes or so. And then they lead a prayer and everybody goes home. You wouldn't believe it if you walked in there, Deddy. People come there from all different backgrounds and all different walks of life. And it's something to see—that many different kinds of people all worshipping in the same place."

"That's scary, baby. Sounds pretty 'new age' and liberal to me."

"It's a good church, Deddy."

"Well don't get your hopes up too much, Jolee. I don't like you going to a church like that. Because you see, they're probably mixing in all kinds of weird teachings, just to throw you off-base. People out there have gotten into all kinds of crazy, scary stuff by joining up with some of these 'new' churches. What do you think they can offer you that the Baptist church up here in Beulah can't? Why can't you just go right up here to the church in Beulah? I know there ain't much young people there, but they're right on the mark. They're worshipping God. Don't forget who you are, Jolee. Do you hear me? You ain't a 'non-denominational' Christian. You was

raised Southern Baptist, and that's what you are."

"I won't forget, Deddy. I love you."

My purse is in the living room, alongside a children's edition of the NIV Bible he gave me for my birthday when I was young and we lived in the city. Jared's finishing his breakfast on the coffee table over a scene from *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, the scene where "Boy" has been shot by one of the Yankees and is looking to Clint Eastwood with wild and scared eyes.

"There's something I gotta tell ya . . ." Boy says. "I'm scared of dying, Josey."

As I pass through the front door and step carefully over a dying dog, Deddy's voice comes softly from the kitchen, far away:

Have a good day today, Jolee

On the drive home, there's time to think. Time to see it again, the world out There. On a Sunday morning, coffee was brewing in the lobby as the people filed in from all directions, all the districts of Babel. Scott and Juice were handing out fliers to families, to singles, to old people, to young people, to clean people, to dirty people, to black people, to white people, to brown people. To the poor and to the rich alike.

Music was emanating from the walls and ceiling of a big open room. Drums. A tambourine. Acoustic guitars. And voices. People standing in T-shirts and torn blue jeans on a makeshift stage. Women and girls standing in cotton summer dresses, arms over purses. Men and boys standing in starched shirts untucked, hands cramped in pockets, singing in low voices the words printed across a power point projection against a wall. Blacks and whites standing together on the front row. Huge Hispanic families filling up sections behind them. A mother and father of Asian descent on the row in front of me near the back, bending down to listen as their young son

and daughter whisper something important. Their voices singing all in unison, upward to a God unseen:

*Everyone needs compassion, a love that's never failing
Let mer-cy fall on me
Everyone needs forgiveness, the kindness of a savior
Now I sur-render . . .*

*So take me as you find me, all of my fears and failures
Come heal my life a-gain
I give my life to follow, everything I believe in
Now I sur-ren-der . . . I sur-ren-der*

*My Sav-iour, He can move the moun-tains
My God is mighty to save
He is mighty to sa-a-ve . . .
For-ev-er, Author of salvation
He rose and conquered the grave
Je-sus con-querred the gra-a-ve . . .*

I ask. I seek. I knock. But the doors to some of the things I need most right now in life are not open to me. The door to “out there” isn’t open, and I don’t know how to open it. From the back of the room, on a folding chair in the very farthest corner, I watch them. A young musician steps humbly toward a microphone in center stage as people’s voices begin to fall, and as the instruments fade away. He asks of every one of them, in a low voice, to honor just one request:
Let us pray.

And I watch this time. It has been long since I have watched. In early childhood, they taught us not to watch, but rather, to bow our heads. In early adolescence, I questioned why. In early adulthood, I understood why. But today I hurt too much to close my eyes and look inside. Today I hurt too much to close my eyes and let Him look inside of me. I don’t want either of us to look inside of me right now. Right now where it hurts.

I seek the form of a young man somewhere in that crowd, a beauty unequaled by the

images of clear mountain streams running along the wall. And there he is. Up there, on the far end of the third row from the front. I am tear-stained today, and hollow, and pale, and sunken. Alone in this world. But he isn't. Next to him is a small athletic-looking girl, with long, honey-blonde hair, reaching a few gentle fingers toward the inside of his arm, leaning in to whisper something she notices about the service—as soon as the prayer leader says “Amen.” As if she knows she's what he wants.

She isn't the same as me on the inside. She's able to have what I can't have, able to be what I can't be, able to touch what I am able to admire only from a distance. She's able to experience the world “out there” in any way she pleases. Does she even realize it? Does she ever even think about it? Does she ever watch him the way I watch him, does she ever want him the way I want him—or does she simply just want a boyfriend who she thinks will love her well? Is she even evolved enough to have even considered any of these things—or is she simply a typical All-American Neanderthal Beauty, living a Southern belle's best dream. Fucking whoever she pleases on the basis of pure instinct, then riding to church with the guy on Sundays.

I'll never know.

“Ma'am, is everything okay?”

A fair-skinned usher with curly hair and a kind voice turns toward me as I head for the ladies' room. He can't be much older than me. And he looks so sad. He means well.

“Thank you for asking,” I tell him. “I'll be alright. In my whole life I've never walked out of a service before, but I don't think I can worship today. Don't you see?”

Maybe that answer will be enough. Maybe he won't ask any more questions.

“Hey, it's okay, Miss. If you need help, if you need someone to talk to, or if you need someone to pray with you, that's what we're here for. I don't know what your problems are. But I

do know Jesus. And He saves.”

“I’ve been saved now for years,” I whisper. “But sometimes life is still real, real bad.”

“Well, I hope things work out for you, ma’am. Jesus loves you. And so do I.”

He’s standing outside the corn crib alongside the driveway when I come home, wearing a cowboy hat and an unbuttoned cotton shirt, bearing his pale hairy stomach and his brown hairy collarbone and chest. Deddy. It’s funny what the sun can do to a person. He’s saying something, and looking back over his shoulder. Buck is lying against the outer crib wall listening actively. And there’s something beautiful about that. A Man and his Dog. A Dog and his Man.

I stop and get out of my pickup in a summer dress and heels, just to see what he’s up to. To say ‘hello’ again.

“You look nice,” he says. “Don’t get dirty out here.”

“Thanks, Deddy.”

“You gonna be around this afternoon? There’s a lot of work to be done.”

“I’ve got more homework than you could even imagine,” I mumble. “I’ll probably be up all night.”

“Well you may have to start skipping out on some of these church visits then,” he says. “So you can get your schoolwork done on Sunday mornings, and get to bed at a reasonable hour.”

“I know Deddy.”

“You’re still chasing that boy, aren’t you? The one you was telling me about the other night.”

“I have to know, Deddy. I have to know how it turns out. He’s leaving soon, he took a job somewhere else, so it’s over anyway. But I need to see. I’m trying to understand.”

He shakes his head.

“There ain’t nothing to understand, baby,” he says. “Nothing to even be understood. I’m not saying any of this because it makes me feel good, but give it up, Jolee. Because what you’re looking for ain’t out there for you to find.”

“You don’t know what it is that I’m looking for, Deddy.”

“Yeah I do,” he says. “And it ain’t out there, baby. I feel bad sometimes, for telling you the truth. Or at least the truth the way I see it. Some girls’ daddies keep a smile on their face and say ‘Oh yes, sweetheart, some day you are gonna find you a man who *loves* you, and who will always love you. But I’d feel guilty if I told you something like that. I’d feel like I had built your hopes up, only for you to realize later that what I had told you was a god damn lie. And I couldn’t live with myself if I did that. I couldn’t live with knowing I had told you something that wasn’t true.”

“I know that, Deddy. And thank you. I know you’ll always tell me the truth.” I am talking in a low voice now, trying not to cry anymore.

“Well, go get some of your homework done then. And don’t work too hard. Take you a break sometime this afternoon, and take a pistol and one of these dogs out there with you if you want to, and go for a walk. It’s a really fine day today.”

“I will, Deddy.”

In the rearview, Buck is feebly wagging a broken tail as Deddy bends to stroke his forehead. He’s talking about something again, and the dog is listening faithfully. *As good of a friend as he’s ever had*

It’s gonna be a long night tonight.

Monday comes, and walks off. I drive to Babel and go to school but not to work, then come home way too early as the sun shines hard against those far-off hills out yonder. He told me to be here at three.

His truck's here. Buck's waiting for him on the front porch. Waiting for what? He doesn't know. An old, moldy and unused kennel is lying open on the grass. Recently sprayed clean by the water hose lying next to it.

He lowers his head and looks up at Deddy, trying hard to wag a tail that just won't wag anymore today. *I'm so sorry, Rusty*

"There was something for you in the mail today from Colorado," Deddy says, handing me an envelope. "How was class?" He never knows quite how to ask, or what to say to me every day when I come home from it, what to say when we talk about that other place where we both live in the world.

"Class was good today," I tell him. "One of my history classes is about the Civil War. The professor gave one of the best lectures today that I've ever heard, and he titled it, 'On Seeing the Elephant.' He based it on his own research of what men on both sides reported experiencing when they went into some of the battles for the first time."

"Them Liberals can't get enough of talking about wars can they?" he asks. "And about telling us how we all need to just lay down our guns and be nice to one another from now on. They just can't understand it, can they? About why countries have to have wars sometimes to keep places like China or Iraq from taking over and cutting us all to pieces. But wait a minute, you said this one was about the Civil War. So I'm sure you've learned a lot of good stuff about them great Yankee carpetbaggers who came in here and took over all of your bad, evil ancestors. All these good Yankees like your professor who came down here out of the goodness of their hearts just to straighten things up."

"I thought it was a good lecture today, Deddy. He favors the North, but he talks about both sides. I actually like this professor a lot."

"But I promise you, he's a far-left Liberal, baby—if you were to get to know him."

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“I know so,” he says, and we both fall quiet.

In my hand, the envelope.

“What’s that letter about,” he asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, it says it’s from the University of Colorado or something.”

“I don’t know what it is, Deddy.”

My pulse elevates. Even as I say it.

The late afternoon sun is growing warmer, and longer. Long like our shadows against the back of the vet clinic in Babel.

“Summer’s just around the corner, feels like,” Dr. Sutherland muses. “Unusual for it to still be this hot this early in the season—and this late in the day.”

Deddy nods. “Yep, I hear ya, man. The older I get, the more sensitive I am to the heat, seems like. Can’t work outside in it as long or as hard as I used to, without getting wore out.”

They talk over it—over him. Two white men leaned against the tailgate and side of a pickup, squinting, wiping their brows when they speak of the weather, nodding when they speak of sports, muttering and shaking their heads when they speak of politics and the ways of their worlds. An old German shepherd dog sits up straight in the back of a pickup, eyes fixed on the one man he knows. Deddy. And the good doctor looks toward me, and raises the real question at last:

“Y’all ready to get this over with?”

I hesitate. Deddy answers.

“Yeah. Here he is.”

“Well hold on,” Dr. Sutherland says. “Give me a minute. You don’t have to bring him inside. Just leave him here in your truck. I can bring the shot out here.”

Just like that. Doc Sutherland steps into the clinic through the back door momentarily, and Deddy mumbles something to his dog, then something to me.

“Jolee, you don’t have to watch this. You can go inside and sit in the clinic. Or take a walk across the street for a little while. Or sit in the cab and read your mail or something.”

I shake my head. “No, Deddy. I’m right here.”

Dr. Sutherland emerges holding two injections in one hand, and a muzzle in the other.

“Here put this on him, Rusty. I’m sure he won’t bite or anything, but I’ve learned not to take my chances with big dogs.”

Deddy nods and does what he’s told, looking at me. “Why don’t you go ahead and get in the cab, Jolee,” he says.

“This first one’s no big deal,” says Dr. Sutherland. “She can watch. It’s just a sedative. We’ll give it to him, and then give it a couple of minutes to kick in. It won’t knock him out or anything—it’ll just make him relax.”

“Get in the cab, Jolee.”

In a moment I am on my knees on the truck seat facing backward, like a child, watching through the back windshield as two men stand talking about the weather again, or about sports, or about politics, as Buck’s head gradually tilts to one side, then sinks lower, and lower, and lower. He breathes and slobbers on the floor of the truck bed a little, but doesn’t allow his head to drop completely. His tongue is hanging at a funny angle. His jowls are sagging too low. His lower eyelids are drooping. His breathing becomes slower, calmer. Shallower. He’s watching Deddy.

As the men continue to talk, Dr. Sutherland removes the protective cap on the second injection, reaches gently underneath the dog's chest and nudges him to lean to one side against the pickup. Buck's body complies, but his eyes remain on our Deddy. The good doctor aims the needle for the heart, lines it up carefully, then very quickly gives a sharp thrust, and in that very instant I wince and close my eyes. Deddy doesn't. I open my eyes again, and the dog sighs. Deddy doesn't. I turn my face away for a few precious seconds. Deddy doesn't. And when I am able to watch again, the Dr. Sutherland has brought out a stethoscope, and is moving it gently toward several checkpoints beneath the front leg of an old dog now lying on his side against the floor of the pickup, eyes still on Deddy. The doctor shakes his head twice. Then removes the stethoscope from his ears and nods. *He's gone.*

A tear has escaped below one of Deddy's dark sunglasses lenses, and he doesn't know what else to do. So he offers Dr. Sutherland a handshake, and through the glass I can see him ask, "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing today," the doctor says.

"Thank you."

On my lap in a pickup in the back parking lot of a vet clinic in Babel, an open letter says "Dear Jolee Wilese . . . we are pleased to offer you an opportunity for graduate study in the M.F.A. program at our institution . . . please contact us within 14 days to accept this invitation or request to have this opportunity passed to another candidate . . ."

On a blanket on the bed of a pickup in the side mirror, Buck lies sleeping as Deddy opens the door on the driver's side. He pulls into a gas station across the street to fill up. And in a few minutes, we're gone.

On the road to home, he turns the radio on low for a little while, then turns it off. Then sits quiet for a few minutes. Then tries to ask about the letter again, as best he can.

“They trying to recruit you to come to their school?”

Not the right time to talk about it. But it’s as good as any. Buck is dead today. And Deddy’s calm now, for a little while. *Maybe it’s worth a try*

“It says I’ve been accepted into the writing program at their grad school. It’s a good writing program—it’s nationally known. It says I have 14 days to reply back.”

“What are you doing, baby,” he says. “They ain’t nothing out there in Colorado for you.”

A sarcastic tone.

“Deddy, all I want. . . all I have ever wanted, was to be a writer. And to be a teacher. A good writer, and a good teacher. It’s who I am, it’s what I am. It’s me. It’s what I’ve always wanted—what I’ve always felt like my calling in life was, my purpose, what God made me for. I don’t fit in very well out there, Deddy. I don’t fit in very well with other people, because I’m different than they are, and I think they notice it sometimes. But I’m also different from you too, Deddy. Don’t you see?”

He rests his left elbow on the ledge of the door, touches his bristled chin with a few fingers. Rests his right hand on his thigh and guides the steering wheel gently.

“You ain’t gonna find it, baby,” he says in a low voice. “It ain’t out there for you to find. You’re right, Jolee. You are different. We are different. We’re living in the End Times, we’re living in wicked times, and you ain’t gonna fit in with them out there. It’s almost like. . . you’re a nigger in the 1920s. And you wanna play professional baseball. You’re a nigger in the 1920s and you wanna play baseball. But it don’t matter how good you are. It don’t matter if you can

consistently hit the ball clean out of the park, or pitch like lightning, or run the bases like nobody's ever seen. When you show up at the field for team tryouts, you're *black*. And you think they're not gonna notice?

“You can't hide who you are, Jolee. 'Cause it's you. You can't hide what you look like on the inside any more than a Black man can hide what he looks like on the outside. It's who you are, and you can't change it. I'm telling ya, baby—with the times that we're livin in right now, Jackie Robinson had a better chance of being a famous baseball player than you do of bein a famous writer. And he was just one of probably millions of young black men out there in them days who wanted to play. He was probably one of a million good black players who didn't make it. Because it wasn't meant to happen for them, see. Because for a black man to play baseball in the 1920s, it wasn't enough for him to be just as good as the whites. It wasn't enough for him to be better than the whites. It wasn't even enough for him to be better than the other blacks. No, baby. For a black man to play baseball in the 1920s, he had to be better than the very best. He had to be the very best. He had to be so good that he stood out not just head and shoulders above the rest of them—he had to stand out waist-high above the rest of them. Because the times that he was living in were against him.

“Jolee, I love you and you know that. But I'm trying to be honest with you, baby. Don't be thinking of all these big dreams, and then get disappointed when you don't make it. Because Jackie Robinson had better chances of playing professional baseball than what you have of being a professional writer right now. And you're not the only one. I bet there are other girls out there like you—good conservative Christian girls who like to write things in their spare time. But baby, you ain't gonna make it out there. You were born into the wrong place and time.”

It's time for me to speak now.

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted, Deddy. And you don’t know that—you don’t know that there isn’t a chance. What if I was to move away for a little while, and go to a school out there somewhere, where they could teach me to write well? Where they could take my own natural strengths and help me make something out of them, and help me to make something out of my *self*. What if I could fill out this paperwork, or get on the phone with somebody out there at this school and tell them that I accept this opportunity, and just give it a try? What if I am that one in a million, Deddy? But instead of doing something about it, I end up going through my whole life without ever knowing, without ever even going out there to see.”

“You don’t know what it is that you’re talking about, Jolee,” he says. “There’s monsters out there. And they’re waiting to devour you. They’re waiting for you to step out and step away from where it’s safe, waiting for you to walk into a snare, so they can grab you and suck you and choke the life out of you. It ain’t what you think it is out there, baby. You might go out there to this big school with all these big ideas and big plans, but I promise ya—it ain’t what you’re thinking. You could be out there living in an apartment somewhere by yourself, thinking about being a good writer. And in the meantime, somebody else is sitting in his car watching you walk in and out of your house. And he’s thinking about being a good *rapist*, or a good robber, or a good serial killer. Or while you’re out there going to school to be a good writer, your teachers are all out there trying to be a good Liberals. Trying to think of how many ways they can poison society by teaching students like you all kinds of bad ideas.

“It ain’t what you think it is out there, Jolee. Why don’t you just go out here somewhere local and get a teaching certificate and be a middle school or high school teacher here? Why don’t you go work somewhere around here to change lives? And then in your spare time in the summers, you can still write yourself some poetry, or some short stories or whatever. And live a

good life. Live a safe life.

“Go ahead and call these people back, Jolee—and tell them you ain’t coming. Or just don’t call them back at all. Because it ain’t what you think. There’s all kinds of miseries out there that you’ve never even thought of.”

He pulls in front of the house and turns the ignition off.

“I think I’m gonna need a drink,” he says. “Hold on.”

I lower the tailgate of the pickup and sit down to wait. Dan comes over quietly and raises himself up on his hind legs next to me, holding to the to the edge of the tailgate with his front paws to peek inside, twitching his nostrils. Nobody told him we were laying Buck in the ground today, but now he knows. He senses it. Buck rests in the bed of the pickup a few feet away, with his back to us, but it feels to me as if any minute, maybe he’ll draw a breath. Maybe his ribcage will rise and fall. Maybe he’ll flick an ear as a mosquito buzzes across his face.

Dan and I both keep silent watch till Deddy gets back. And nothing moves. Even the world around us seems too still. The doves, and the crickets, and the whippoorwills and the pond frogs have seemingly all ceased for just a little while—waiting for Deddy to come back—and me and Dan are the only ones alive until we hear his footsteps approaching.

“Dan, get out of that truck,” he says. And life resumes.

Earth sighs at the foot of the hill, sending a cool breeze across our faces. Soft shadows traverse broken dirt in straight lines. There are three of us. Deddy lifts the body up with a blanket, folding it gently over the head, ears and face. The eyes are clear and dreamy now, glazed only a little, as if Buck were waking up from a cool springtime nap. We’re standing at the hole we dug

here ourselves the day before yesterday here at the foot of this hill, next the Big Tree that fell last year and the pond where Buck used to swim. Deddy lowers him gently into the rough, torn ground. Buck's eyes are calm and distant now. Deddy speaks to them.

“It ain't right,” he whispers. “Ain't nothing right about this place. This wasn't Heaven, boy. This was Earth. And this is where it all ends up. It ain't what it's supposed to be. But it's what it *is*. You were good to me. I want you to know that. And I'm so sorry, boy. I want you to know that too. We must've lost our privileges somewhere back yonder in Eden, and we never did find a way to get them back. And we just can't live forever in this place, boy. Not down here, god dammit. We just can't live forever.”

God damn it.

He folds the last corner of the blanket over the eyes, and stands up. Hands me one of the shovels as he turns to take a bite out of the high, pillowy mound where an old dog curled up to rest and left an imprint while we were digging, the day before yesterday. Deddy shovels around that spot, till the very last. Now we remove the mound a scoopful at a time to cover up the deep, rigid hole where an old dog has curled himself up to rest for today. And for tomorrow too.

Ten minutes, and it's done. Deddy covers the grave with a few large sandstones from the bank of the pond, to keep the coyotes from digging, and there ain't nothing else to be said. Which is awkward. So he says something anyway.

“You know, I don't wanna be embalmed,” he says.

“Me neither, Deddy.”

“I just wanna be stuck in the ground, the same as my ancestors were,” he continues. “But now it's a state law that you have to be embalmed. I've thought about what if I just made us our

own little family cemetery out here, and if I died, or someone else close to us died, we could just bury them out here, where home was. Like they did in the old days. But I guess you can't do nothing like that anymore. There'd have to be some lawyers involved. And some land rights. And some money. We're such a socialist country now that they'll find any way they can for us to all be equal, to be buried in a socialized sort of way, according to a set standard, with a number on a tombstone in a perfectly lined-up row of other tombstones, in a big open lot full of other perfectly lined-up rows of tombstones. Everybody buried the same."

He fiddles with his shovel, and looks away.

"Someday, Jolee. . . someday I was thinking maybe we really could fix us a little family cemetery right here above the pond. Just up on that other hill there. People in generations to come could pass through and see that Rusty was here. Rusty, and his wife, and his kids, and his dogs—this was their home, and this was their family. They were *here*. And in the End when Jesus comes back, we'll still be here. Together. And we can all go up There together, to wherever it is that we're going. To some place up there in the sky."

We climb into the pickup, and he starts up the hill.

"Deddy do you remember how you used to go out and buy us Chinese food from our favorite restaurant on Saturday nights when we lived in the city? And how you'd rent us a good movie, and let us put towels down on the floor of the den with our fried rice and wontons and Mountain Dew's so we could watch TV. And then afterwards you'd let Jared and me stay up late and eat popcorn and ice cream while we watched scary movies or sci-fi shows on TNT. And Jared always promised me that if I let him stay up late to watch scary movies, that he wouldn't have any bad dreams or get scared. But he always did get scared, and he'd get in the bed with me afterwards. Back then when he used to get scared at night, I used to tell him that if any monsters came, you

and Buck would be there to protect us. It made him feel better.”

He looks away again. Far away. I can't see his eyes through his sunglasses. But he smiles weakly.

“That was a long time ago,” he says in a low voice. “Sometimes it's hard to believe that any of that ever even happened. Y'all were so young then. I was so young. That was a different life, Jolee. And it's gone.”

“Deddy if we had a stayed there, do you think things would have been any different? Do you think we would have been any different? Would you have been any different, Deddy—if we had stayed.”

He purses his lips, and shakes his head. Sits there. And shakes his head again.

“Buck was good to me,” he says. “He always listened to me when I talked. And some nights, he was all I had to talk to. Whenever I came home in the evenings, or if I was out here somewhere by myself, he'd say to me ‘He-y, Rusty, what are we doing tonight?’ And it didn't matter. He was gonna go with me regardless. He was loyal. He was faithful. And that's more than what I can say for most of the humans I know. Some nights it was just me and him. Out riding the four-wheeler in them cold trees, under the moon. Just us two. Them were some good nights, sometimes. He made me *happy*. And you know, I think I made him happy, too.”

Up the hill, he turns the ignition off.

“If some of them Muslims can have 77 virgins waiting for them when they get up There, well, I reckon I can have a dog or two waiting up yonder for me. We'd step out of the feast and celebration once in a while to go down and check on the cows, and we'd go coon-hunting together some nights. That's what I want. It's what would make me happiest.”

He gets out of the pickup and starts toward the shed. Toward the four-wheeler.

“I need another drink,” he says. “I’m going down yonder to feed my cows.”

“Alright Deddy.”

The sunlight is fading over the treeline, and in a few minutes, the breath of the four-wheeler is following behind it.

The front porch is naked tonight. The moonlit yard is naked. Dan feels naked, too; he’s not sitting by the porch steps like he’s supposed to. He’s standing out on the grass far off by himself, looking down towards the pond.

I go upstairs and lie down in bed, eyes closed and wide awake, listening to Buck’s voice in my mind. Far away from here, down in the river bottoms, a coyote yips at last, and others follow. But Buck’s voice won’t be joining them this time, and it never will again. My ears are naked, too.

I close my eyes again and see them walking together in the dark. Man and Dog. Dog and Man. The air filled with moths and mosquitoes over their heads is the color of my eyes, and the sky is dark, and the wind settling just a little cooler on their faces, and Deddy is musing about something out loud.

“Boy, that wind sure feels good, don’t it?”

And Buck wags his tail in humble agreement as he trots along the gravel driveway that his Man made, and moves just within reach of Deddy’s left hand, lifting his head for a touch of affirmation as both disappear into a whirl of soft black and the noise of a million crickets, pond frogs, doves, and cicadas. Those were some good nights, back then.

And He was happy.

VITA

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Teaching Experience

Creative Writing & Composition Instructor – Upward Bound Summer 2011
Salish Kootenai College, Pablo, Montana

Developmental English Composition Instructor Winter and Spring 2011
Salish Kootenai College, Pablo, Montana

Liberal Arts Elective Instructor / Community Service Leader Summer 2010
Upward Bound Program at Montana Tech, Butte, Montana

Graduate Assistant/Writing Tutor, I.M.A.G.E. Program (Increasing Minority Spring 2009
Access to Graduate Education), Vardaman Hall, University of Mississippi

Instructor of English Composition, University of Mississippi Summers 2007-2008

Writing and Research Interests: Native American Studies, Latin American Studies, Jewish Studies,
Creative Non-Fiction, Fiction, Poetry and Film Studies.

Related Professional Experience

Montana Campus Corps Team Leader August 2010 – June 2011
Salish Kootenai College, Pablo, Montana

Montana Campus Corps Service-Learning Team Leader August 2009 - 2010
Montana Tech, Butte, Montana

English & Writing Tutor, Upward Bound Program, Anaconda High School Fall 2009
Anaconda, Montana

Fitness Center Graduate Assistant, Thomas N. Turner Center 2006-2008
Department of Campus Recreation, University of Mississippi

Writing Tutor, Office of Student-Athlete Support, University of Mississippi Spring 2008

Honors and Awards

William F. Winter Student Scholar at the Natchez Literary and Cinema Convention Natchez, Mississippi	2009
Southern Literary Festival, Student Division 1 st -place in Creative Nonfiction Clinton, Mississippi	2005
Virginia Morgan Award for Outstanding Undergraduate Achievement University of Mississippi	2004
Evans Harrington Creative Writing Scholarship, University of Mississippi	2004

Academic & Community Service

Assistant Coach, 10-Sticks Youth Lacrosse League of the Flathead Reservation Salish Kootenai College, Pablo, Montana	Spring 2011
Co-Organizer and facilitator of MLK Week Diversity Fair Salish Kootenai College, Pablo, Montana	Winter 2011
Resume and Cover Letter Writing Workshop Presenter, TRIO Days Upward Bound Program at Montana Tech, Butte Montana	Spring 2010
Life-and-Job Skills Workshop facilitator Reintegrating Youthful Offenders, Galen, Montana	Fall 2009 - Spring 2010
After-School Program Reading & Writing Tutor Legion Oasis, Butte, Montana	Fall 2009 - Spring 2010
Group Exercise & Healthy Lifestyles Instructor Boys & Girls Club of Oxford, Oxford, Mississippi	Summer 2009
2009 Creative Arts Fair Fiction Writing Competition Judge, Oxford High School Oxford, Mississippi	Spring 2009
