

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Whicker, Julia (2007) "Little Sadie," *Yalobusha Review*. Vol. 12 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol12/iss1/18>

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Julia Whicker

Little Sadie

They overtook him at Jericho. He'd walked from outside Thomasville, near to forty miles North. Lee Brown was down by the bridge. They surrounded him, two on either side and one above, on the bridge, with a shotgun. He heard their boots on the wet ground, a suck-suck that reminded him of hooves pulling up mud. No moon, no flashlight – but all the same he suddenly saw the men because he knew they were there, their outlines blacker than the air around them. One of them chewed wintergreen and it sparked between his teeth. The sheriff called, *Lee*, and it was not a question and Lee did not reply. The sheriff said, *We know you're down here. Got three men seen you camping out earlier today and the hound's led us right here, anyway. You try to run and James up there'll shoot and I'm not shitting you. You best walk out with your hands where I can see them, high as the sky.*

Then came the lights, arranged like a signal. The incandescent lanterns burst alight in the hands of all five men, and they shone around him and in that moment everything slowed to stop, and then the night was filled with the kind of wonderment experienced only by the lost. He saw. He did not hide. He stood there in his icy clothes and took a breath and nodded. The lanterns, white-blue, like the orbs over Brown Mountain he'd watched all his life from his grandfather's porch, hung around him in a strange ring, and the men could see him but he could not see them. His grandfather had called those lights ball-lightening, *nothing but nature's wonder*, he'd said, and Lee's grandmother said the lights were Indian souls slain in a battle before recorded time. Across the gorge, they were bright as headlights, and all his life, from his grandfather's porch and then his own, Lee had watched them ignite, rise, float, and fade.

But only since he killed Sadie did he *know* them. He killed her in the Hollow. Sadie's blood was redder than he'd thought possible, warm as bathwater. When it splashed on his trousers, he could hear it seeping through the denim and into his skin. After she died, he put her down her mother's well. He did say a prayer. He ran up Brown Mountain for three days, then the fear drove him back to Modessa, his wife. He was a murderer but not like Modessa—he was sorry.

Under the bridge at Jericho, the sheriff stepped into the light ring, his own clothes all but dry and his pants tucked into his boots, a large dog at his side, straining against his collar. The light shown behind them and they

looked like puppets – all limbs and unnatural motion. The sheriff cocked his head and waited for Lee to speak. When he did not, the sheriff swallowed his wintergreen and finally asked, *You Lee Brown?*

He nodded.

The sheriff said, *Well, look at you. Gone swimming?*

He'd come up under the bridge, which stretched like an arm over Lonely Crick, which itself opened and widened and eventually fed the Watuaga, and sank his skiff and stayed huddled there – he'd already been on the water for days. He removed a rotted beam near the higher part of the bank and hid in the space between the other beams and the earth. He slept in a little hole with the black beetles and the frogs, in the frost-crusting mud. He was as cold as he had ever been.

The first night, he killed a cottonmouth with the same gun he'd used to kill Sadie, but instead of shooting it, he crushed its skull with the gun's bone-inlaid handle. Lee ate the snake meat without cooking it, afraid his fire might be seen from above. He pulled the scaly skin off in strips and it felt like husking corn, it sounded just the same, it reminded him of his grandmother at the sink pulling the yellow-green leaves from corncobs and dropping them into a basket to be thrown into the hog's pen. The skin was bloody and he buried it a foot under ground so no animals would come to the scent, and he ate the snake meat and finally retched it up, although that was from nervousness because he'd heard men nearby, shouting and laughing, at midnight, probably a half-mile away over the little hill. Had to be the Ulson brothers, he hoped to God, them and their car under the cold sky outside Jericho because no bar or relative would have them when they got like this, as they often did in the winter when they had no work. There were three of them—twenty, twenty-two and twenty-four, blonde, red and black-haired respectively—and Lee liked them, had drunk with them, though he knew if they spotted him, they'd shoot him then and there, or if he was lucky, beat him and drag him half-dead to the sheriff.

Sadie may have been the daughter of a witch, but she was still a *woman*. If the Ulson brothers had never met Sadie, they would still have killed for her.

Lee crouched in the mud and listened to the voices, which floated across the low hill like woodsmoke, so faint he couldn't make out words, but whenever the sound intensified, a feeling of panic rose in him that was so rarefied, every part of him stopped, silent as a broken clock, and listened for the words he knew were inevitable: *What's that over there? You hear that?*

But they never came. A long hour later, he heard the sound of a girl laughing and he knew certainly it was the Ulsons drinking, not a search party, not anyone paying attention to anything other than themselves, and he felt his chest expand with relief, a flower opening, and he slipped into a half-sleep in which he dreamed a black nothing.

He'd gotten a child by Modessa when she was fourteen. They were

married, but still she ran away to a woman who lived in the Hollow, and the woman used one of her cooking knives to cut it out. It was said this woman was a master of the operation, that she did it quick and clean, that she could control the scarring. She always left a mark—her signature – running up the belly in the shape of one of the seventeen rivers of North Carolina. Any of them, she knew their shapes all by heart, but who knew how she chose which river for which girl? People said she had a *knowledge*, mysterious as the lights, and it ran through her like the Indian blood in her veins.

When Modessa returned, she told Lee she'd compared her stomach to an atlas in the Thomasville public library, and she now bore a scar shaped like the muddy Watauga. She showed him a crook in a bend of the wound and said that was where the Cherokee women washed their clothes a hundred years before. *And here's where the trout gather*, she said.

Lee took her into the bedroom and lightly traced his fingertip along both sides of the scar and she flinched. They lay in the lamplight on the quilt Modessa's grandmother had given them at their wedding. Modessa's face was stony. Lee touched her hair. *I don't care about no child*, he told her. She studied his face and he could tell she didn't believe him, but still, she slowly nodded.

More than anything, he wanted her to tell him why, but he didn't want to ask. But he was just happy she was back. He told himself that. He hadn't thought she'd come back.

Lee killed Sadie at the end of November, and spent the first three days afterward on long, low Brown Mountain, gazing at the sky that on clear evenings was banded as an Indian pot. That there was no commotion surprised him, even though he knew no one would look for him here because no one came here, no one, not even the medicine woman Mrs. Palace, the witch, because a body could *feel* the lights even when there weren't lit, could feel them around, invisible as a chigger buried under the skin. Lee hid up on a rocky thrust backed by a shallow crack that cut into the mountainside, where he slept on a moss flat, and he waited. Inside, it was warm and wet and he watched an emerald seep dripping onto the moss, where a blue mold had grown up even in the cold of November and seemed to glow faint in the dimness, and while he watched the water dripping down, he thought of the bright *whoosh* of Sadie's hair as she fell down the well, her canary-colored disappearance, and the sound her body made when she hit the water, how shallow it was, how he hadn't expected that, how the sound of her bones on the stone well-bottom would never leave him, a sound like a soft bag of flour hitting the pantry floor, a sound that was not terrible in itself but which became terrible to Lee and which he heard these last two nights before he slept, when he imagined the contortion of her body as she landed. He buried his face in his hands at night and wondered if they'd found her in the well and he hoped to God they had – he'd only put her there because he

hadn't known what to do, there in the yard outside Mrs. Palace's black house in the bright ache of the icy morning, Sadie bleeding from a hole the size of his thumb in her forehead, the blood like a slug at first and then, as it found its path, like a leaking faucet, steady as rain and he gasped and cupped his hand over the hole, and she was alive then, still, looking at him with startled brown eyes, and he'd thought incongruously for a long moment, *a brown-eyed blonde*, like his grandmother, and then his grandmother's face floated to the surface of his mind and she was as young as she was when he was a boy, and smiling like she'd never smiled in her life but at the same time Lee knew that smile was true, that she *had* smiled that way before, at someone, somewhere, but by that time, in Mrs. Palace's back yard, Lee's hand had filled with Sadie's blood and her head tipped back and she let out a sigh that sounded exactly like a life ending – long, peaceful, finite – and he shook her gently and asked, *Are you alive? Are you alive?*

He put her down the well. The last he saw of her was her hair flashing before she was so far down the hole she was nothing anymore, not a person, not a body, but a nothing that the world opened up and accepted like a mouthful of food and closed again, after, and it was like she'd never been there at all. As he turned away, he thought he'd heard Mrs. Palace at her back door, but he couldn't be sure because then he ran and hadn't looked back.

Every hour he spent crouched up on Brown Mountain he went over that moment, when he didn't look back, when he didn't turn to see if Mrs. Palace saw him pour her daughter down the well like a cup of water, and when the nights came he looked for the lights so he'd have something else to be afraid of.

They didn't come out until the third night. When they did, he understood why no one lived on Brown Mountain. The lights were like the crown of heaven, and sitting up on the ledge, he felt as though he were on the head of Jesus Christ, looking out from between the spokes of his halo, but it was terrifying, because the lights were not small as they looked from across the gorge, but great bright blue boulders of light that rained on him until he hid again in the crack in the mountainside, but they waited for him outside like looming faceless heads that still seemed, amazingly, without malice. But he had never in his life thought something so beautiful far away could be so awful up close.

Modessa had said something to him before, in the Hollow, the first time he'd come down and tried to bring her home. That was in September. Mrs. Palace fed him a supper of sweet potatoes and ruby red apples, which he ate with maple syrup, the way she presented them, the sweet potato slices piled in the center of the plate and surrounded on all sides by the little fleshy half-moons of fruit. She stood back a few moments, waiting to see if he'd eat, her chubby arms crossed over her breasts and her apron over them immaculate. She said to them both, *Fifteen minutes. She has chores.* Then

she left him alone with Modessa. They sat together at her table, Lee eating and Modessa watching, cradling her stomach the way she tended to when she was pregnant. Through the filmy yellow curtains, they watched the lights flicker up on the mountain. She sighed.

You got something to tell me, he asked, gesturing toward her lap.

Eat your supper, Lee. Ain't often she cooks a nice meal for a stranger. It's just 'cause you're my husband.

Don't feel like I am, he said. *You been gone nearly two months.*

Women been puttin' up with those antics since time begun. You can wait another month.

Only a month?

She shrugged. *Takes awhile to learn something like this. Women don't come every day, you know. Most of the time, I'm just doing housework for her.* She reached for his hand and held it a long time and then let go, and it was like she was releasing a wounded bird – she did it with reluctant duty and a look on her face that meant she hoped she'd see him again someday.

So you're a servant? What about my sons? What're they doing? Modessa said, *The boys is happy as can be. She's got a hundred grandkids running around here. The woman has twelve children herself. The youngest is that blonde girl. Have you ever heard of that? A blonde Indian?*

He said, *I miss you at home.*

She looked out the window again and made a motion that included the whole sky. The lights were bright that night, even this far down in the Hollow. Modessa was watching them and Lee was not sure she'd heard him. He tapped his fork on the tabletop. *What are you thinking?*

Modessa said, *They ain't Cherokee fighters. She told me. If they was warriors, they'd be red. Any fool knows that.*

She'd said that and cleared his plate and told him to go home, but she didn't tell him what they *were*, and when he was up on the mountain after killing Sadie, he knew Modessa was right. The lights weren't warriors. They were innocent and because of that they were terrifying.

Modessa had wanted to learn from the woman in the Hollow, Mrs. Palace, but Lee said no. No wife of his would make her living cutting out other men's children. She told him to go to hell, what did he know — she'd had more babies since her operation and she was still only nineteen: she'd paid in full for that first *mistake*, as he called it, that *miscarriage*. She came to Lee one summer night and stood in the doorway while he sat on the porch, as was his habit in the evenings, watching the gorge, waiting for the lights to tumble low, over and over themselves like kittens. That evening, the sky was wide and flat wintertime grey in that hour before darkness, even though it was July, and she came from the kitchen, aproned and sweaty, and said, *I got my rights. I done given you three, and I hate thinking of women out there like me, cept they ain't got husbands.* She wiped her forehead with the

back of her arm. *I want to do right in the world, Lee.*

He raised his eyebrows. *That strikes you as right? You are a cruel woman, ain't you?*

Would you marry a cruel woman?

He shrugged.

She tossed up her hands. *You can't hear me, can you? There is girls in this world who can't do it, Lee. Who shouldn't have to. You got to understand that. Would you give a twelve-year-old girl a baby that her uncle, her brother—her father, for Christ's sake—got her with? You can't tell me you would.*

I don't pretend to have no answer for you. I'm only saying no wife of mine is going to get mixed up in it. Let that be the end of it. He stopped and almost said, *Please*, but at the last second he did not and then the second passed and he could not say it without begging and he would not beg her for anything. Then his was voice harder than he meant it to be. *And if that weren't bad enough, you know that woman is hell's own witch. There ain't no way a mortal woman could do what she does and not have killed a single soul.*

She pursed her lips and looked very beautiful doing it. *So now not killing a person puts you in league with the devil?*

Inside the house, the baby girl, Omila, began her crying which sounded like the squall of the sea, or the way Lee imagined the rush and cry of the ocean must sound. He had never seen it. Modessa hated the sound of her crying, but Lee never had, because it signified to him a place of majesty in the world, and then, after he grew to love his daughter, it signified the beating heart of her life against the thick chest of the world. He'd thought he loved his two sons, but they'd never seemed as small and vulnerable as his daughter, who was born early and with a caul, and after she was born and he held her in his arms that first time, he understood she needed his love, and more, that he needed hers.

He stood. *I'll see to her. You fix some coffee and sit yourself out here.* He patted the white wicker rocker, then raised his arm and moved it through the air. *Can you feel that heaviness? Look's like we'll be getting some rain.* He glanced at the door. *Did you see the bulb in the hallway's blowed? I just remembered. I'll get one from the store tomorrow.*

I ain't listening to you, said Modessa in a voice like a raincloud. That voice was what he called her stormy voice; he called her Chief Pouring-Rain, because she could soak him with doubt quick as a cloudburst could wet him down. Modessa was in some part Cherokee, like Mrs. Palace, but it was so far back and she was so bled clean of it, her hair light as string and her babies were all born towheaded. He hoped her wanting to learn from Mrs. Palace had more to do with reaching that part of herself she felt cut off from than it did with saving women from loveless motherhood. Somehow that seemed more understandable to him – her understanding her people, however distantly related she was.

She faced him and put her hands on her hips. *If I want to go down there*

and help her, I'm gonna. You'll just have to find yourself another wife if you don't like it. I'm taking the boys and Omila and we'll be gone out of your hair and your moral conscience.

He put his palm against her cheek, which was wet with a tear he hadn't seen her cry. He wondered if it was sweat. *You got to stop thinking of others,* he said after a long time. *You got all you need in the world here between me and the boys and Omila.*

Maybe you don't know what I need, she said.

He'd left her on the porch, where she sat until midnight, drinking coffee and then whiskey, and he put the children to bed himself, and to his surprise, they stayed there, sucking their thumbs and closing their eyes in the weak yellow glow from the small night light. He sat in the room until they fell asleep, and the boys, Monday and Caleb, snored lightly and Omila clutched at her baby bird, a ragdoll Modessa sewed up for her the year before. Lee left them and went to the porch again, where he stood in the door and watched Modessa watching the lights, and then the rain.

He knew she'd go to Mrs. Palace. He said to her back, *You know I love you.*

I do.

He said, *You love me?*

Oh darling, she said, and paused. *You give me them kids.*

He knew what she meant was *I love you*. What she said was the next best thing but still it hurt him that she couldn't say the words themselves, because the words were what he needed to hear. And so to hurt her back, he asked, *You even like your kids?* They'd both wondered about it, he was sure, but still the question seemed powerful when he said it out loud, like he'd guessed something about her she'd thought she'd hidden.

She laughed into her coffee cup. *I'm a better mother than my ma was to me, that's for sure. Don't tell me I don't like my own children.*

The next night, when he came home from the hardware store, she was gone and so were the children, and in her place by the sink was a note. *Come down and visit awhile. Maybe you'll even learn something.*

Lee knew who Sadie Palace was. The truth was he thought she was a pretty girl. She walked to town three times a week no matter the weather, with her boots laced up her mid-calves and her dress hanging like a curtain over the quiet shape of her body. She was a year or two younger than his wife. She spoke infrequently. She wore blue, always – he was never able to determine if she always wore the same dress, or several of the same pattern. He waited on her when she came into the hardware store and bought things for her mother. Washers. Nails. Axe heads. She placed everything in a brown paper bag with string handles and nodded to him when he said good morning. She nodded again when he said *Have a nice day, Miss Sadie*. Once he saw her nodding to a man on the street who helped her retrieve apples

that spilled from her bag when the paper bottom split.

A month before he killed her, when his wife had been gone three months, Sadie came into the store wrapped in a dark blue felt coat and bright white scarf. It was only October. It was not cold. But she pushed her scarf down around her chin and exposed her lips, which were flushed with blood, cleared her throat and asked him, *You got any good knives?* Her voice was brassier than he'd imagined, too harsh for her sparrow-face.

Knives?

Yeah. I need the sharpest knife you got. She tried not to meet his eyes, but she couldn't help herself and he was glad.

Like, hunting knives? he asked.

Anything. Ours are all too dull.

Why don't you sharpen the ones you got?

Ma's givin' it as a gift. Not that it's any of your business. She put her bag down on the plank floor and wiped her nose. He was much taller than Sadie, and from where he stood, he could see into her bag – corn, potatoes, flour. She caught him looking and kicked the bag beneath the counter. Her ankle beneath the leather of the boot was slim as Modessa's.

He straightened and faced her squarely. *This is for my wife, ain't it?*

Sadie blinked. *It's not my business, Mr. Brown.*

He was surprised she knew his name. Something inside him dropped into his feet and he wanted to reach across the polished wooden counter and take her hand. He said, *It is so your business. You live in that house, don't you?*

She took a step backward. *I don't got nothing to do with whatever your wife is doing.*

Is she finished learning? Is she doing one alone? Is that why your Ma is giving her a knife?

Sadie narrowed her eyes. *I don't know what you're talking about.*

Tell me. Then he did take her hand, and she stared at him and at the hand as though his skin on hers burned, or else she pinked from excitement. He could not tell. But she did not take her hand away.

Mr. Brown—

I got a right to know what my wife's doing down at your house.

She paused. Finally she said, *I know you do.*

He waited.

But I can't tell you. It's a secret. She ain't even showed me.

He knew she was telling the truth. Of course she was. She wanted to learn and no one would teach her – he heard the bitterness in her voice. Still, he kept her hand pressed between his palms. He said, *She will soon.*

Sadie nodded and continued to nod. She said, *Your wife's a strong girl.*

He laughed then and let her go and she couldn't help glancing at the place where he'd touched her. She placed the hand in her pocket quickly, as though it were a stolen piece of candy. Lee said, *Harper'll show you where the knives are.*

And then he shouted for Harper, the skinny boy who helped him mornings. Harper appeared, annoyed until he saw Sadie in her blue coat, and led her right over to the rack of blades.

Lee thought that from behind, Sadie was a dead ringer for Modessa.

The second time he went to get his wife was right after that. Mrs. Palace answered the door with her hair in a braid and a half-peeled apple in her hand. Her hair was so long it grazed the backs of her thighs, and when she turned to show him in, he watched it swish like a clock pendulum. As they went down the short, dark hallway, Mrs. Palace said cheerfully, *You're wasting your time here.*

No I ain't.

She's done learning what I have to teach her. Everything else is practice. She ain't leaving til I know she's done practiced enough. And no telling when that'll be, so you best stop your pestering.

Don't tell me what to do, woman, Lee said.

Then they were in the small sitting room, where Modessa knitted with the children at her feet. The balls of yarn overflowed a basket by her chair, yellow and brown and orange and red, the colors of the fall leaves. Lee looked the room up and down, small as it was – fireplace on the east wall, embers glowing weak inside it, giving no heat, but the house was warm enough, anyhow. Warm with all the bodies. He heard other people moving in different rooms, their laughter and deep murmurs, then gramophone music rolling around a room upstairs like a ball. The window to the west showed Brown Mountain, bruise-blue in the dusk. His wife seemed comfortable in her straight-backed wicker chair. She looked markedly heavier than when she'd left, but Lee welcomed this because Modessa had always been so thin her bones poked through her dresses, her collarbone raised against her clothing like a ceiling's frame-beam. She smiled at him. He smiled back. And the house smelled entirely like pie, a deep brown smell – cinnamon and spices and internal heat. Lee took a deep breath.

But Mrs. Palace stood at his back. He felt her. She did not move until she received some predetermined but invisible signal from Modessa that she might go, and this angered Lee until he wanted to kick back with his heel and catch the old woman in the shin. But she was gone, and by then Monday and Caleb had run up to him in the doorway, their twiggy brown arms ringing him like two delicate belts, but Omila clung to Modessa's chair-leg, her face a mysterious combination of trust and revulsion. Modessa nudged her. *There's Daddy, Mila. Go give him a hug.*

But Omila did nothing. Her pale hair parted in the center like Lee's did, no matter how often Modessa brushed it to the side and pinned it – that white stripe down the middle of her head ran up her scalp like a road into the distance. Modessa nudged her again. *Go on, baby.*

Then she went to him and he picked her up and held her. She smelled

like herself, her baby-self that smelled of hot milk-breath and talc, but now she also smelled of this house, this mapley place. He smelled it strongest by her throat when he bent his head forward to kiss her, the same syrupy scent he remembered from that plate of sweet potatoes. To his surprise, she kissed him back, a fairy peck, polite and faint, but he hoisted her higher and smiled widely. *You're already bigger*, he said. *Look at you. You're a lady already.*

She nodded.

While Lee held her, he looked over her shoulder at Modessa and said, *I come to take you back home.*

You're wasting your breath, then. I ain't leaving til she says I can go.

I know you done one already. That daughter of hers come into the shop and bought you a knife just the other day.

Modessa looked quickly at Monday and Caleb, standing by Lee's knees, and said, *You boys take Mila and go outside. We're talking, here.*

It's cold outside, Monday said.

I said go, she said. Lee put Omila in Caleb's arms and she clung to him like a possum, her eyes fixed on Modessa, until the three of them disappeared down the hall.

Then his wife said, *Listen to me, Lee Brown. You can just stop your meddling. I told you I was staying here til I finished what I come to do. Now, you're setting a bad example for your children, too. If I tell them you're letting me work down here, they believe me. They're kids – they believe anything we say. But when you come roaring in here every other month telling me I just got to come home with you this instant, it makes us both look bad.*

You think my wife running out on me doesn't make me look bad?

That's all you care about? You lookin' bad?

He crossed his arms. *No. I told you what I care about, and it's that my wife is—*

Don't even say it, she said. *You got no right to say nothing. You're just lonely. Think about this. If I come home with you now, I ain't never gonna be happy. I want to do something with myself.*

He went forward into the room and knelt by her chair. *You're pregnant, ain't you. I can see it.* He tapped her boot. *Listen, Modessa, I know you ain't happy. I know you think this is gonna make you happy – doing whatever you think you're doing for the world by learning this witchy voodoo shit—*

It ain't voodoo! Her face strained while she swallowed her anger. *It ain't—it ain't voodoo, Lee. Mrs. Palace knew my great-grandma, they was part of the same tribe or village or what-have-you, when Mrs. Palace was a young girl. She says I got a right to learn what my people knew hundreds and thousands of years back. She says I—*

He said, *You're what? One-hundredth Indian? And you want to become some medicine woman?*

She stood. *Just leave. You're never gonna understand. My great-grandmother was all Cherokee. Mrs. Palace says I got the healing spirit.*

He clenched his fists. *Woman! You're running me into the ground!*
She shook her head, reached up and brushed away a strand of his hair. Her fingers sent a shiver down the knobs of his spine as plain as the first time she ever touched him, the night before their wedding, when he made love to her on the hill behind her parents' house. She was then only thirteen and he was twenty, and no girl had ever touched him but Modessa smoothed a piece of his hair between shaky fingers and confessed she was afraid of the coming night, that she just wanted it over with so she could love her wedding day the way a girl was meant to. And he was afraid but he couldn't tell her that – he knew she thought he'd made love before, many times with many girls and so he nodded and pretended to pull her dress up the way he thought a man who knew his way around would pull up a dress – like pulling the petals off a rose, delicate but deliberate, appreciating the beauty while commanding it. He took her underwear down and stared at that little brownish bit of hair, face to face with it, and felt himself swell up and he couldn't help but turn his eyes away, he was so ashamed of how hard he wanted to look at that place. Then she cupped his hand between her legs and asked, *Is it not enough?*

Now, in Mrs. Palace's house, she brushed his hair away just as she had when she'd asked *Will you make love to me now?* but this time she said, *You're running yourself into the ground, Lee. No one's chasing you.*

He went home alone, again.

Because truly, he understood, the second his *before* finger pressed the trigger, that the woman he'd shoot was not Modessa. He'd come down a final time, to bring her back. He brought the .44 smokeless. And his foot crushed a dry leaf at the same moment he raised the gun, and the blonde woman turned from the well, and there was only the soft brown of Sadie's eyes, and looking at her there across the little yard, he knew he'd shoot her and not Modessa, and at the same time, he felt the weight of that decision. It was enough. She'd been drawing water. She was bent nearly double, pouring the water from the metal pail into the larger basin she'd carry back into Mrs. Palace's house, and her hair was just a half-inch longer than Modessa's, her shoulders a fraction more slender than his wife's. She was not who he meant to kill, but she was, and after he shot her, a feeling not unlike relief crashed through him.

Three days after, at home, Modessa met him at the door. *Where've you been? I been back days. I was making you a pie. You're not gonna believe this – they're saying somebody murdered—*

But then she'd seen his face – dirty, without color. She'd seen the gun. She took a step away from him and spread her hands. *Everybody's been saying it was some crazy Indian.*

He said nothing.

Her hands shook and she pretended to wipe them on her apron. Then

she swallowed and hardened her face. *But I came back, Lee.*

The basket she prepared for his flight was filled with breads and canned fruits she'd learned to make from Mrs. Palace. He waited outside, under her rose bushes, while she wrapped bread and biscuits and cookies and packed the basket with magical efficiency – rows on rows of slow-spoiling food – no meat, nothing fresh. He watched her moving through the window, and he was surprised at how calm he felt, how he loved her hands with such an urgency as she placed a jar of jelly into the cloth folds, and he wanted to hold them to his lips and kiss her goodbye. He wanted to say, *It was a mistake.*

He was in the boat at the river when she came outside to hand the basket to him, but he couldn't say why he pulled her in. Because she was there? Because she was his. Because he missed the first time. Because he loved her. Because she was the mother of his children. Because she had a map on her belly. Because he'd killed a woman for her. Because of a thousand reasons, none of them and every single one true.

After she smashed her lip against the board seat, he held the gun on her.

He'd paddled a night up the river with Modessa and her stomach which was a map, and they nearly froze because it was full winter and they were heading slightly north and the river was iced at the edges and lacy as his mama's doilies, like rivers Lee had heard about in Canada which froze solid as table-tops. And the jacket he'd worn when he killed Sadie was not enough, not if he was going to live outside. Modessa hadn't brought him a warmer one – to punish him, he was certain. She sat at the other end of the rowboat in her heaviest winter coat, ignoring him, holding one hand up to her broken nose, fingering the dried blood that colored the fold of skin between her nostrils and lip. He said to her one night, *Come on, doll, let me wear that just a minute or two*, but still she ignored him, her hair stuck to her neck and face like wet thread, and she was miserable and drowned-looking.

The rain fell all night. She finally jumped from the boat at the Thomasville dock, and he'd caught her arm a half-second too late – he yanked it back with a snap and she yelled, but she was gone, disappeared beneath the black-purple water, and Lee was left standing in the boat, stock-still with his gun aimed at the hole in the water. He held the gun level for an unthinking minute, until he heard a splash and saw her hauling herself onto the dock. In the moonlight, her clothes clung to her hips and stomach and thighs and he looked at her and knew then she was pregnant again. He called *Modessa! Where're you going?*

You know where I'm going, she said. She turned her head so far around without moving any other part of her body that she looked spineless. She met his eyes with her own, and they were angry as he'd never seen them before, not when he'd arrived at the house and told her, not when he snatched her wrist instead of the bundle of food she'd prepared for his escape, not when he pulled her into the boat and she fell over the bench seat

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and smashed her face into the wooden floor. The anger hovered in the air between them over the water like a poison-cloud.

Lee swallowed. *You're gonna freeze before you even get there. I'm taking the chance.*

He still had the gun aimed at the water but he couldn't make himself raise it to fire. She smiled again. He thought she smiled. He said, *Modessa, don't.*

But she was gone down the dock.

Down beneath the dock, he heard the Thomasville city bell ringing, and he knew she'd told. She'd told them he was headed upstream, he was sure, so he hid right under their noses, and when the men trooped down to look for him, their lanterns poking holes in the dark like bayonets, he held his breath and even his eyes shut, like a child, like his blindness would keep them blind, as well. He'd stopped shivering, his blood hot with dread and a curious excitement that tingled in his arms and legs but not his stomach. He did not think once about what would happen if they caught him.

The sheriff and his deputies weren't quiet. They shouted to each other, they shot their lantern-lights into the water, into the sky, into the trees. But not under the dock. He'd sunk the skiff and crouched there, the water so high he hugged a dock-post under the water so he wouldn't make noise treading water. They muttered obscenities and scuffed around, looking for his boat, he thought. Then, after only a few minutes, the sheriff shouted, *Oh, come on, he ain't here. Took his boat too, means he's still on the water. Else we got to look for the boat up on land or at the bottom of the river, in which case he's tryin' to trick us. What do you reckon?*

A man, the deputy, probably, standing right above Lee on the planks, said quietly, *I don't know. I'm thinking if the girl got away, he knew she'd tell, so maybe he's doing something just so we get off on the wrong track.*

'S what I said, said the sheriff. *Tryin' to trick us.*

Yeah, said the deputy, uncertain. His heavy boots sounded over Lee like the bell before, tolling and portentous. Lee needed breath but didn't dare move. Something in the deputy's voice was solemn, pastor-like, Jesus-grave, and Lee knew instantly he was a much greater man than the sheriff, whom everyone knew wasn't a great man at all, who from his tone was treating this hunt like a glad excuse to pull every Thomasville County policeman out of bed and send him wading upriver. The sheriff said, *We need the hound out here.*

Another man, off to the left, rummaging in the ankle-deep foliage, said, *Forget that, Sheriff, I say we just smoke the fucker out. You know he's here somewhere. All we need is a little fire, scare him shitless. Voila, we're out of here by sun-up.*

The deputy said, *Too wet to burn anything right now.*

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The sheriff nodded. *He's right. Anyway, James, come on. We can't be burning the dock for one man. We'll find him. Ain't a green inch of this valley and mountain I don't know. You run on back to the station and get Satchmo. He's been a long time without somebody to chase.*