SEEDS OF CHANGE

Stories by

Michael and Scott Braswell

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By Michael Braswell
and Scott Braswell

Cover image and design by
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Dedicated to the memory of Cleve and Henry, who taught a 15 year-old boy about race relations and how to drive a forklift in the summer of 1962

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Truth Teller

Two years ago, I saw the truth. Two years and fifteen minutes ago, I started speaking it.

My life hasn't been worth a damn since.

I always heard that the truth will make you free.

Free from what? I'll tell you what. In the span of two short years, I was freed from my career, my wife and daughter, and even from the lousy efficiency apartment I have been living in for the last two months. Hell yes, I'm free.

Free to take my last three hundred bucks and hit the open road in a worn-out Ford Taurus, 160,000 miles young. Free from everything that made my life what it was—everything that I wanted and worked for.

Two short years ago, on a cold Friday evening, I was nursing my third Sam Adams and bullshitting with the regular end-of-the-week-upper-management-wannabees for the *City Daily News*.

I was at the top of the mid-level career food chain where I toiled for my living. A Master of Arts degree in journalism and ten years of busting my ass had brought me to the edge of greatness and to Buddy's Bar on what turned out to be a cold day in hell.

As a hard-working assistant editor in charge of the sports and features sections, I was just a skip and jump and some well-placed ass kissing away from one of the two prized associate executive editors' slots. Given the inevitability of Ed McMann's impending retirement, that soon-to-be-vacant office with its own bathroom and big picture window had my name written all over it.

I had another advantage over the beer and bourbon swizzling reprobates I drank with during our Friday evening rituals. They had their eye on the same elusive prize that I did, but unlike them, I could actually write. Yeah, I was kicking ass and kissing ass— a lethal combination that pointed like a champion bird dog sitting on a covey of quail to the golden ring I was about to grab. A ring that would make me and mine proud and the envy of all the other yahoos at the *City Daily News*.

Trouble is, I drank one beer too many, and it was during that third beer that fate stepped in and punctured my balloon of ambition, laying waste to life as I knew it.

During that third beer I overheard Geraldine Stevens talking to the bartender about her sorry-ass husband. Several black eyes, a neck brace, and her son's increased bed wetting had lit a fire under her that only fear and loneliness kept in check. Enough was enough. Geraldine was ready to leave the worthless son-of-a-bitch she was married to and return to her parents in South Alabama. Trouble was, she was broke. As soon as she could put her hands on enough cash for two bus tickets, she and her son were heading south to freedom. At least that's what she told the bored bartender who was practicing the time-worn bartender's art of pretending to give a damn.

That's what she was telling him. But I knew better. The king-size gimlet she was sucking on was doing the talking for her and her boy. My guess was that she was at least a broken arm or preteen suicide attempt away from speaking for herself and acting like the mother she was pretending to be.

Yeah, I could see right through her. It was like I had known her all my life. And I didn't like what I saw. So be it. A

quick trip to the men's room to relieve myself and I would be on my way home to wife, Natalie, and my daughter, Natasha.

I even remember the sound of zipping up my Dockers and feeling the cold blast of air that hit me in the face as I stepped out to hail a cab on that armpit of a February night.

As I waved my arms to no avail, none other than Geraldine, the gimlet swizzler, exited the bar and sidled up next to me.

She stood too close for comfort and I didn't like the way she looked at me. It was like she wanted something. I stamped my feet against the cold and she just stood there looking at me as if she wanted to speak but was waiting for permission. When she finally spoke, I was thinking that sometimes strangers are best left strangers.

Unlike the I'll-tell-you-a-thing-or-two voice from inside the bar, she asked me in a child's uncertain whisper, "Will you help me get a cab?"

That's what she said, but what I heard through some strange cosmic filter of fate was, "Will you HELP ME?"

Not taking my eyes off her, I stepped back and *spoke*. I never do that— speak what I see.

The conversations of truth, as I see it, should stay where they belong— in one's head. But not this time. This time it *spoke* me.

Offering her the contents of my wallet, I said," Geraldine, you need to leave that worthless bastard and go home to your parents before you lose yourself. Or worse, your son's life."

Geraldine's jaw dropped and she looked as if she were about to reply. Instead, she snatched the money out of my

hand and hopped into the cab that had just pulled up as if on cue in some third-rate movie.

That's right. She took the money and got into the cab without so much as a thank you. Did she go home, retrieve her son, and take the next bus to Alabama?

Damned if I know.

All I recall is that for the first time I could remember, I spoke what I saw.

Holding my empty wallet, I walked home in the cold to the waiting warmth of Natalie's inquisition.

Although I stayed away from Buddy's Bar, it didn't seem to help calm my new-found affliction. The truth had me by the balls, and every time it squeezed, I spoke. I wanted to keep my thoughts to myself. But I was possessed by a clarity of insight I never imagined and an inability to remain silent. I could feel myself sinking ever deeper into the quicksand of opportunity.

Two months after my encounter with Geraldine, I elicited the same dumbfounded look of incredulity from my boss, Ned Jasper who— rumor had it— was about to appoint me associate editor.

The words rushed out, dragging my reluctant voice with them.

"Ned, we've been friends a long time, but I've got to tell you, screwing that journalism intern isn't worth your twenty-year marriage to Marge, not to mention the respect of your children."

Ned's response was to the point.

"Get out!"

As it turned out, his retort foretold a wider arc of response than I ever would have anticipated.

"Get out" not only referred to the immediacy of that embarrassing moment in his office, but also came to include the newspaper itself. Needless to say, I didn't get the promotion and soon-after found myself reassigned to the "eastern front" of newspaper work— reporting on city commission and board meetings.

The day I finally resigned, I tried to explain to Natalie that personal integrity was more important than a promotion or a particular kind of job. Her expression of disapproval fed the hidden part of me that agreed with her.

Six months and a series of unsuccessful interviews and substitute teaching assignments later, Natalie uttered what has become a refrain in my life. Between sips of orange juice, Natalie's mouth opened and Ned Jasper's voice seemed to speak through her early morning smoker's rasp. "Get out!" So I did.

I left it all behind, not willingly, but out of necessity.

Even Natasha shed no visible tears the day I left with suitcase in hand. The last sound I heard was a good riddance bark from Bobo, our cocker spaniel.

In short order, I went from writing for the newspaper to delivering newspapers. My pre-dawn route combined with education's constant need for inner city substitute teachers, afforded me the luxury of a well-worn efficiency on 10th Avenue and evening forays to Buddy's, where Mike, the bartender, offered me the same courtesy he had given to Geraldine a year earlier.

My friend, Sam Adams, was too rich for my current financial fortunes so I mingled with his more budget-minded kin and attempted to sort out what had become of my

existence. I told Mike that I was reasonably confident things couldn't get any worse.

I was wrong.

I struck up an ill-fated friendship with my landlord, Buck LePew. Buck apparently saw some semblance of the management potential in me that Ned and my former wife had given up on. In exchange for managing the eight-unit apartment house I resided in, I got to live rent-free.

A spark of my former self slowly began to re-emerge as I considered my prospects in the field of residential management. As I became more familiar with Buck's enterprise, I soon realized that some rocks should remain unturned. He had a clear pattern of compounding the misery of elderly tenants on fixed incomes by raising their rent and ignoring their pleas for repairs and basic service. Forcing such undesirables out of their apartments allowed the vacated units to be rented to higher paying young professionals.

Even as I tried to maintain control, I could feel that ugly entity known as a conscience beginning to awaken and take shape. It wouldn't be long before my tongue would begin to work its black magic.

I still remember the day Buck LePew, chewing nervously on a cigar stub, was held captive by the logic of truth's outpouring.

I had just finished an impressive oration that concluded by telling Buck that he was too good of a person to torture his elderly residents for nothing more than a little more filthy lucre. Not to mention that what he did to them, good or bad, would be returned to him ten-fold.

Buck LePew said two things in response to my well-intentioned query.

His first response was, “Who the hell do you think you are, some crazy-ass prophet?

Then he uttered those dreaded, oft-told words.

“Get out!”

I still remember the last moments I spent at Buck’s establishment. My bag was packed and positioned next to the door. I stood in the bathroom, looking out the window. I was lost in my thoughts. Not just in my thoughts. It was me that was lost. I had nowhere to go. I had nothing. I *was* nothing.

I peered out the frost-encrusted window and all I could see was a barren bush with a single branch reaching toward me. On the end of it was a single bud.

My wet face pressed against the glass.

It was a beautiful thing.

Rasheed's Ticket

The green vinyl sofa squeaked as Rasheed Smith shifted his weight in Mel Evans' office. Evans responded to the noise by glancing in the young man's direction, and then refocusing his attention on the inmate's folder and written request.

As Evans studied Rasheed's file, Rasheed examined the details of the caseworker's office for the umpteenth time while a small oscillating fan did its best to dispel the humidity of a midwestern summer. An orange shag carpet, Jimi Hendrix poster, oversized boom box, and lava lamp were the predominant features of Mel Evans' work environment, his "pad" as he liked to refer to it. Rasheed wondered to himself what the caseworker's real home must look like. Was it as funky as his office?

Two things were common knowledge among the brothers in the cellblock. First, that Mr. Evans was lost in the sixties and seventies. Second, that he wanted to be accepted by Black inmates. It was primarily the second reason that Rasheed had come to him with this particular request.

Mel Evans quietly folded the file and placed it upon the desk as Rasheed gazed absent-mindedly at the picture of Jimi Hendrix.

Evans smiled. "No one played guitar like Jimi. I'm convinced that *All Along the Watchtower* is the greatest rock song ever recorded."

Rasheed nodded. "Yes Sir, except that he didn't write it."

"What's that?"

"He didn't write it. Bob Dylan did."

"Had no idea. That's some Hendrix trivia lost on me."

"But you're right, though. He was something else with that guitar of his."

"Damn straight he was," Evans continued as he launched into his well-known version of how black music, from slave-inspired spirituals to current Rap and Hip Hop, had shaped and enriched the musical landscape of American culture.

Rasheed sighed and did as countless other inmates of color had done, trying his best to appear interested in the caseworker's timeworn soliloquy.

Satisfied that he had duly impressed Rasheed with his empathy and understanding of minorities, Mel Evans folded his hands and placed them on his desktop.

"First, Rasheed let me say that I'm really impressed with your progress. Last year, you had six write-ups for fighting. This year you only had one. And here you are graduating at the top of your class. Out of 21 student residents, you have the highest grade point average. I can't tell you how proud I am of you."

"Thank you, Sir."

"While your request is out of the ordinary, I can certainly understand why you would want your Momma to share your graduation experience with you."

Rasheed broke into a smile. "Yes Sir. She ain't never seen nothin' but trouble with me. This would show her another side. It would mean a lot to her and to me and…."

Caseworker Evans interrupted.

"I know it would. And I would love to help out. I really would. Trouble is I don't have any funds or resources to help

you get her here for the ceremony. I'm really sorry I can't help."

"Not even for a bus ticket?" Rasheed countered. "She could stay with her sister in Lincoln. All she would need is a round trip bus ticket."

Evans' silence accentuated Rasheed's disappointment.

"Tell you what. Let me check with Chaplin Stinson. I know he has a small rainy day fund for special needs. Maybe he can help you and your Momma out. Why don't you make an appointment with him next week? I'll put in a good word for you."

A hint of hope returned as Rasheed shook hands with the caseworker.

Corporal Smitty Hudson scooped a fresh pinch of Skoal from the round tin and placed it under his tongue as he watched Rasheed close the caseworker's door behind him. He had never really liked the young man walking toward him. On more than one occasion, Rasheed had been a real pain in the ass. And besides, he was black. Smitty's Granddaddy had believed in segregation. Even two generations removed, after a racial incident in his cell house, he would find himself reconsidering the wisdom of his Granddaddy's conviction.

"You ready to head back to your kitchen work assignment?"

"Yes Sir," Rasheed replied as he fell into step with the older man's slow walk.

"Evans' still got that picture of that hippie guitar player on his wall and that orange rug?"

"Yes Sir."

Corporal Hudson chuckled to himself and spit a stream of tobacco juice into the Styrofoam cup he carried in his right hand.

"That boy is a piece of work."

Talking to himself as much as to the Corporal, Rasheed responded, "That he is, Sir. That he is."

Chaplain Stinson was an earnest sort of man. A Methodist minister, he had pastored two small churches in Oklahoma before he was hired as Senior Chaplain for the State Prison. Although the title did appeal to him, he understood that he was not only the senior Chaplain, but the *only* Chaplain serving over 2000 resident inmates in a prison originally built for 1200. He was grateful for the Catholic and Lutheran volunteer Chaplains, and tolerant of the Muslim Cleric who held services once a month in the gym.

Chaplain Stinson's office was as calm and simple as Mel Evans' office was loud and gaudy. He personally found the institutional pale green color of his office and the chapel serene. A large bronze crucifix hung on the wall behind his desk. The Chaplain cared about the inmates in his charge in a serious, yet distant, sort of way. At the monthly meetings of the local ministerial association, he was fond of referring to the inmates as his "errant flock."

Other than a desk, an executive chair, and a computer hutch, the only other furniture was a single chair for visitors, positioned directly in front of his desk. Chaplain Stinson's office had a neat and austere look to it. It had a sense of order and authority. Amidst the chaos of prison life and all the anguish and darkness the residents brought with them, his

office and chapel were oases of clarity and certainty. While the authority of the criminal justice system had placed the residents in the State Prison, it was the higher authority— the Supreme Judge— that constituted his domain of concern. As he like to put it, he was not only concerned with correcting their misbehavior, but with their "eternal rehabilitation" as well.

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Sipping the steaming cup of Earl Grey tea, Chaplain Stinson carefully perused Rasheed Smith's file and written request. The young man had certainly made progress. There was no doubt about that. From aggression in the cell house to aggressively pursuing his education, it was an excellent example of sublimation. The Chaplain smiled to himself. His continuing studies in psychoanalysis were bearing fruit. His personal reflections were interrupted by Jerry, his inmate assistant.

"Chaplain, your three o'clock is here."

"Excellent, Jerry, send him in."

After Rasheed had seated himself, the Chaplain quietly observed him for a moment moments before he spoke.

"I've read your request and reviewed your file, Rasheed. And I must say I am impressed with the progress you have made."

"Yes Sir. Thank you, Sir," Rasheed responded with a mix of hope and consternation. "It's just that my Momma ain't never seen this side of me. She only seen what I was in the past— the bad part of me. She's scraped together all the money she can get her hands on and she can stay with her sister in Lincoln, so all she needs is fifty-five dollars to help pay for the

bus ticket. Mr. Evans said you had a special fund that might be able to help my Momma get to my graduation."

Chaplain Stinson folded his hands together and looked at Rasheed intently.

"It is true that I have access to a 'special needs' fund. Unfortunately, the balance of that account has been earmarked to handle expenses associated with the spring concert of the Singspirations. The men have been practicing all year and the townsfolk always give a generous love offering at the end of the concert. Those donations are essential to our Chapel music program. So, as much as I would like to help you and your mother, Rasheed, it wouldn't be fair to the choir members or townspeople. I'm truly sorry."

Rasheed said nothing. His disappointment was obvious. He could feel the anger of the "old" Rasheed boiling up in his belly as he rose to leave.

"Wait a minute, young man. Before you go, let's have a word of prayer. Tell you what, we will pray for a miracle. You know, God's in the miracle business!"

Rasheed bit his lip. "That's alright Chaplain, I don't really feel…"

"I insist!" Chaplain Stinson interrupted.

The Chaplain waxed eloquent for a few moments about miracles and faith while Rasheed bowed his head and counted the tiny colored squares on the rug beneath his feet to keep his composure.

Like before, Corporal Hudson was waiting to escort Rasheed back to the kitchen. As they walked down the long corridor, the correctional officer leisurely worked the toothpick between his teeth. "Those hamburgers at lunch had a lot of gristle in them."

Rasheed said nothing, counting the green floor tiles as the two of them proceeded toward their destination.

"Strike out again?

"Struck out again," Rasheed whispered.

Hudson retrieved the toothpick from his mouth and pushed it into his shirt pocket for later use.

"Well, one thing's for sure. Getting a piece of paper with a high school diploma on it is a sight better than all the papers you got with write-ups on 'em. And I ought to know, cause I signed quite a few myself."

"Guess so," Rasheed murmured to no one in particular.

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The keynote speaker for graduation day was the local high school principal who delivered an inspiring, if somewhat awkward, "grand accomplishments/new horizons" kind of message. The twenty-one graduates and their family members sat in metal folding chairs in the educational annex for the duration of the ceremony. The day was hot and the participants sweated together in a sea of smiles and pride.

Dressed in cap and gown, Rasheed was grinning from ear-to-ear as he received a plaque and special medallion for graduating first in his class.

After the ceremony, the reception tables beckoned the graduates, family members, and attending staff with sandwiches, cookies, and punch, courtesy of the prison kitchen workers. There was even a special cake honoring one of their own, Rasheed, for his accomplishment.

As everyone circled around the tables, Rasheed insisted that his Momma help him cut the first piece of cake while her sister, Verona, took their picture. That photograph would

become the most valued of personal artifacts belonging to Rasheed— a reminder of something positive to build his life around, a sign of possibilities, the hope of better times to come.

All the prison dignitaries were there. The Superintendent figured if he was going to show up and shake hands, so would every other professional who worked in the prison that he deemed relevant to such a high event. Caseworker Evans and Chaplain Stinson were among them. They stood among graduates and family members, smiling, sipping their punch, and doing their duty.

Chaplain Stinson was especially pleased to see that Rasheed's Mother was able to attend her son's graduation.

As Rasheed prepared to refill his Momma's cup with punch, the Chaplain called out to him.

"Rasheed."

Rasheed turned to the approaching Chaplain.

"Congratulations, son. I am so pleased that your mother was able to attend the ceremony."

"Yes Sir," Rasheed responded while refilling his Momma's cup.

"Remember our prayer that day in my office when everything looked so bleak? Events have a way of working out when we give God the credit and rely on His will. I believe your mother's presence here today is proof of that. Miracles can still happen. With God, the impossible becomes possible."

Rasheed's smile disappeared. He quietly looked at Chaplain Stinson before he spoke.

"Can't say much about miracles or what God had to do with it, but I guess I'd have to give any credit that was due to Corporal Hudson."

“Corporal Hudson?”

“Yeah, it was the Corporal who sent my Momma the bus ticket. He never said nothin’’ to me ’bout it. ’Course I thanked him when my Momma wrote me.”

The Chaplain was clearly surprised.

“I wonder why he did it? Of course, it’s wonderful that he did.”

“Don’t know. Me and the Corporal never got along that well. Guess you’d have to ask him,” Rasheed replied as he gathered up a chocolate chip cookie to go with the punch.

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Smitty Hudson knocked on Chaplain Stinson’s office door. He had come to retrieve a young inmate who had been placed on suicide watch.

The Chaplain opened the door and instructed the young inmate he had been counseling to wait in the reception area while he had a word with the Corporal.

Corporal Hudson closed the door behind him.

“What can I do for you, Chaplain?”

“Smitty, I wanted to tell you how impressed I am regarding your gesture of generosity concerning Rasheed and his mother last week.”

“Nothing to be impressed about.”

“I beg to differ,” the Chaplain replied. “But I must confess to some curiosity as to why you helped out? As I recall, Rasheed gave you a great deal of trouble last year. I believe I remember that he even took a swing at you when you were trying to break up a fight.”

“Truth is he took two swings, not one. He missed with the first one, but I caught a black eye with the second.”

Chaplain Stinson smiled, amazed. “And yet, with all the trouble he caused you, you still helped him.”

“Don’t understand the fuss, Chaplain. Rasheed’s done some bad things in his life. May do some more. But his schooling’s a good thing that also took some doing.”

“Still, the bus ticket for his mother came out of your own pocket,” the Chaplain said. “That’s certainly going the extra mile. What was your inspiration for such an impressive act of generosity?”

Smitty Hudson looked at the Chaplain as though he was confused.

“Can’t say as I’m getting your point. Like I said, the boy who was doing bad, done good. And his Momma deserved to see the good. Don’t know about no extra mile or inspiration. What I do know— it’s almost quittin’ time and I got to get that inmate back to the medical section.”

Smitty turned to retrieve his charge. “See you later, Chaplain.”

The Cracker Jack Gospel

His scarecrow-thin frame silhouetted by a dying sunset, seventeen-year-old Stanfield Huggins sprawled out in a close-cropped thatch of field grass, just beyond the pale reach of the only working headlight on his 1955 Chevy. A loaded .38-caliber pistol rested on his chest, and a sky full of stars, sparkling like flecks of rust in a moonshine still, filled his eyes.

An old sun-faded billboard advertisement for Chesterfield King Cigarettes loomed above him, its façade now serving as prime graffiti real estate for local spray can assassins.

Stanfield stood up slowly, struggling to maintain his balance, and retrieved a Mason jar half full of white grape juice from a pocket on his photographer's vest— a birthday gift from his uncle Lonnie, associate senior image consultant at Smilz 4 Less photo studio at the Baron Bend Mall outlet in nearby Ocala. Stanfield unscrewed the lid and stole two sips while walking toward the Chevy, its steady baritone rumble the only interruption in the evening's stillness.

Fireflies blinked in the cool autumn air and Stanfield traced a Sweet '73 insignia on the car's hood with his finger as he walked by. Decades earlier, the moniker had been hand-stenciled by Stanfield's father, Silas, who at one time indulged in a weekend ritual of challenging other muscle car gearheads for weekend beer. Though having a thicker wallet by night's end was always a welcome reward, the more immediate pay-off for Silas and the other local white-line junkies was distraction from the sticky summer malaise that could canvas and cocoon a small county like Laramie.

It was a widely held belief that in the era of Silas Huggins, nothing could touch the ’55 Chevy. Not Bigsby Tuffard’s ’69 Charger Supreme, not Charlie Leffler’s modified Mach I, not even Woodrow McIllvain’s Supercharged Camaro SS (though that particular matchup stirred up a hornet’s nest of debate for decades, from dive bars to fellowship halls).

Long after Silas retired the ’55 from the backroad racing circuit, Stanfield’s older brother, Reginald, added the coup de grace to the car’s mystique: a simulation of the Vietnam War’s Tet Offensive, staged on the Chevy’s sun-warped dashboard, using miniature green plastic army figurines. Though the installation earned Reginald lifetime revocation of all rights to drive the car, the elder Huggins ultimately left the miniature scene intact as a tribute to his eldest son, after he was killed during his second tour of duty in Iraq. Following Reginald’s death, Silas wanted little to do with the car—or, for that matter, his youngest son, Stanfield.

Taking one more sip from the Mason jar, Stanfield placed the container on the middle of the dashboard battlefield and slipped the pistol into one of his vest pockets. Across the road, the Three Kings Gas-N-Gulp—a family-owned outpost popular with teenage hotrodders and methamphetamine runners—rested on a curvy hip of Route 77, one of the area’s most infamously gnarled and ornery two-lane veins. The humble building looked like a model train set miniature against the high-rise backdrop of the Blue Ridge Mountains, now spackled with the comforting glow and blink of distant lights.

Stanfield’s shy disposition, stick-thin frame and premature male pattern baldness, which accelerated when he turned 16, ensured that his passage from puberty to young

manhood in a rough-hewn mountain farming community would be rife with every imaginable mode of psychological, physical, and social torment. And it followed him everywhere, from the doorstep of his home, to daily school bus rides, to the stale metal catacombs of the high school boys' locker room, where he had found himself, only hours earlier in the day, introduced to a brand new form of humiliation. A teenage brood, featuring a smattering of Napier Street Baptists' finest senior Youth Ambassadors, pinned Stanfield's naked wisp of a frame on the tile floor of the locker room shower and tattooed, with a makeshift kit, "Pigeon Shit Bombb Zone" on his bald pate.

The local artisan whose handiwork now graced Stanfield's crown was Simms Clearwater, a wiry, flame-haired juvenile hall regular and infamous schoolyard terrorist. This particular evening was Simms' debut weekend working the night shift solo at the Three Kings Gas-N-Gulp, and for Stanfield, that meant only one thing: Simms Clearwater had to die tonight.

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Stanfield slipped out of the Chevy's driver's side door, briskly made his way across the two-lane stretch and stumbled onto the Three Kings parking lot. The gravel crunch beneath his boots sounded off like miniature demolition explosives, and he turned to look back at his car, its idling engine grumble still audible from a distance. Nearing the storefront, his footsteps slowed to a creep, and he scanned with nervous eyes the old two-lane snaking off into the darkness, determining that the anonymity of his mission was secure. Picking up speed to a slow jog (made awkward by his prominent limp, a birth defect

doctors had never been able to rectify), Stanfield passed by Simms' mint green low-rider truck, its rear bumper bookended by two stickers that read "Draggin' ASSphalt Kustom Society."

He paused in front of the store entrance, his mouth dry and a hornet's nest hum ringing in his ears. He felt nausea climbing from his stomach to his throat. Gripping the store entrance door so tight that his fingers ached, Stanfield willed himself inside, a trio of bells signaling his arrival.

The store was filled with an eerie calm—only the random hiss of carbonation pumps nestled near the soda fountains punctured the silence. His heart beating jackhammer loud, Stanfield approached the end shelf of the store's magazine stand and gripped it with both hands, his chest heaving in short intense intervals. He noticed an issue of *Men's Health* magazine had been opened to a dog-eared page advertising male enhancement pills, and he startled himself by letting loose a muted snicker. Scanning an aisle of random shrink-wrapped offerings, Stanfield placed a hand on his increasingly nauseous stomach. Colors and contents began to blur and pulse.

He exhaled deeply, wiped a patch of sweat from his brow and reached for a bag of Cracker Jacks, his brother Reginald's favorite snack.

When his brother was in Iraq, Stanfield would send him a monthly stash of Cracker Jack boxes— along with a narrated recording of the latest town news and gossip, and a stack of *Famous Monsters Of Filmland* magazines (a passion the two brothers shared in secret). Without fail, Reginald would send a return letter each month containing the prize from each Cracker Jack box. Stanfield kept every one of those

prizes— 25 in total— and stored them securely in the Chevy's glove compartment. Every single morning before school, he counted the small square treasures to make sure they were all present and untouched.

The task at hand abruptly shoved its way back to the front of his mind. Stanfield closed his eyes, his breathing now slightly more manageable. He settled his hand on the cool steel of the pistol, its bulk feeling heavier in his hand than he remembered. A dull throb commandeered his skull, and an intense series of quick, shallow breaths escaped his lungs. He gritted his teeth, slipped his trigger finger in place, and began to accelerate around the aisle-corner ice cooler display, his head a storm of feelings both fearful and enraged. But as he rounded the corner, he found his path obstructed by the long, crumpled frame of Simms Clearwater, slumped haphazardly like a ragdoll. His thick freckled arms, stained with cheap tattoos, were folded across his lap, and his back leaned awkwardly against a Trident Gum display rack. A thatch of mostly empty Budweiser bottles took up residence near his left hip. Others, with the labels peeled off, had either tipped over or rolled away, just outside his reach.

Stanfield stood frozen, his finger now sweating against the trigger, his aching knees a body's length from his intended target.

"My Daddy's dead," said Simms, his words a slurred whisper, tinged with a childlike cadence, his grief-smeared eyes slowly rolling side to side. "They told me he collapsed in the fruit aisle at the Piggly Wiggly half an hour ago."

Stanfield felt like he was separating from his body, only anchored to the moment by an ache growing in his grip.

"Betty Bivins had been talking to him," Simms continued, his raw eyes rolling over white. "She said he just stopped and looked at her for a second, and said, *'Well, ain't that something.'* Then she said he fell to the floor, spilling apples everywhere. Said they rolled all over the damn floor and just kept goin', kept rolling, and before they stopped, he was gone."

Shaking his head, Simms bit his lower lip so hard a trickle of blood began to form. A fresh flood of emotion rushed across his face.

"He don't even like apples," he said. "Nobody in my family does except for me. Ain't that something?"

Simms formed the shape of a gun with his right hand and pressed the barrel finger against his temple. "I swear to God, if you had a gun on you, I'd ask you to shoot me *right Goddamn now*," he said, his face distorted by grief.

Stanfield loosened his grip on the pistol in his pocket and interlocked his fingers on top of his head, his eyes squeezed shut. He could feel the newborn scabs taking shape on his scalp, as well as additional residue from the morning's brutal episode.

Making a feeble attempt to sit up, Simms wiped his face with his shirt sleeve and stretched for one of the few remaining open bottles of beer.

"My Daddy was a barber at the Cut & Dried shop on Bartlett Avenue," he said, "and he always cut my hair the first Saturday of every month." He took a deep pull from the bottle and rubbed the red-hued burr of his scalp, his words trailing off. "Do you know what the three stripes on the barber pole stand for?"

"No, I don't," Stanfield answered, his face colorless, his eyes now wide and wired.

"Each color means something different," Simms continued in a slurred monotone, as if repeating a pamphlet slogan he had been familiar with his whole life. "The red means blood, the blue represents a person's veins, and the white represents bandages used to wrap folks up when they get cut. My Daddy taught me that. I always thought my momma was the blue 'cause she gave us life. I was the red 'cause I always came home bloody from somethin' or another. But my Daddy was the white. He always cleaned the wounds and put everything back together again. But now . . ."

Simms slammed the back of his head against the display rack, his light blue eyes suddenly vacant and his lower jaw hanging open.

Stanfield stood quietly and began to open the box of Cracker Jacks he had been holding in his pocket. After a few short seconds of digging around the box's contents, he retrieved a thin, small square of paper. Holding it between his fingers, he carefully leaned forward and placed it at Simms' feet. Then he began a slow shuffle toward the exit door.

Simms, still bleary eyed, managed a few words between hoarse dry heaves of emotion.

"What's this?"

Stanfield turned back to look at Simms. He rubbed his eyes, exhausted.

"For a long time, it was what I used to stop the bleeding," he said. "But I think you need it more than me tonight. I'm sorry for your loss."

Stanfield walked back to the Chevy, its engine still idling steady and strong. He removed the pistol and slipped it

beneath the rear bench seat. Looking at the glove box, he paused for a moment before opening it. Inside was a small cedar box containing 25 neatly stacked Cracker Jack prizes. Stanfield counted each one of them, put the box back in the glove compartment, and felt his eyelids grow heavy to the V8 engine's lullaby hum.

The Mercy Seat

"That's right, Jethro. Day after tomorrow, you'll be ridin' that roller-coaster straight to hell!" Elroy Perkins shouted, raising his voice like an old-time evangelist preaching his last night at a dirt road revival. "And it'll be one hot ride." Of course, Elroy was no evangelist. He was the kind of man who made sport of disabled children and prison rape victims, and had no idea what joy or happiness felt like. The closest he came was a kind was a perverted pleasure in response to the pain and suffering of others, and the most genuine smile he could muster always ended up looking like a sneer.

The object of Elroy's tirade responded with a series of low moans and muffled sobs. Jethro curled up on his prison cot and tried to block out the taunts, but like all the other times, the ridicule seeped through the fingers that covered his ears and touched the fear deep within him. Elroy had his number.

Jethro's real name was Gerald. He was from the red clay hill country of North Georgia. Twenty-six years old and a petty criminal since he was fourteen, he'd been housed in Section D of the Row for seven years. His most recent incarceration resulted from an incident involving him and his two older cousins, Alvin and Earl. During a night of drinking and big talk, they had come upon a high school couple having a romantic interlude in the back seat of a Ford Taurus on Hollow Leg Ridge. With the boldness that only alcohol provides, Gerald and his cousins robbed the couple. When the boy, Lester Johnson, an All-State tight end for the local high school had resisted, they killed him and raped his girlfriend,

Wanda Jean, leaving her naked and delirious on a frigid October night. Gerald was the only one who received the death sentence, compliments of his cousins turning state's evidence and the inadequacy of his court appointed attorney.

Gerald was a follower, not a leader. He never initiated anything, but was always ready to go along for the ride. As evidenced by his numerous juvenile court appearances, he rarely knew where the ride was going. In fact, on the night in question, Gerald wet his pants at the sight of Wanda Jean being sexually assaulted by his cousins. He remained a virgin, although no one, especially the jury, believed him. Someone had to pay for the death of Lester and the rape of Wanda Jean, and Alvin and Earl elected Gerald. Barely able to read and burdened with an unmistakable hillbilly accent, Gerald had been renamed Jethro by his twelve fellow boarders on Section D of Death Row at the State Prison. Day after tomorrow, he was going to take that final ride, as Elroy had so cruelly put it. And for once, Gerald knew where the ride was going.

Elroy was Gerald's chief tormenter. Although Elroy was his birth name, he hated it. He wished his name was Elvis, like the King of Rock and Roll. Elroy saw himself as a ladies' man and a general all-around bad boy. He often addressed other men not by their given name but by the term Honcho, or Cacaos, or Chief. And Elroy was more than a little proud of the crude tattoo scrawled the length of his left forearm. It read Bad to the Bone, and few who knew him would disagree.

He had previously served twelve years for beating to death the man who had taken up with his former girlfriend. Three days after he was released from prison, he killed his ex-girlfriend and was sentenced to death. He had bragged before and after he killed her that "No woman leaves Elroy T. Perkins

and lives to tell about it." Of course, many had throughout Elroy's life, starting with his mother, Eunice, when he was six years old.

There had been other assaults in Elroy's past, both physical and sexual, that he had not been charged with— usually due to intimidation or dumb luck. Elroy's Grandmother had raised him and had been heard to say that Elroy himself was an assault on the human race. Her words were prophetic. Elroy rarely passed up an opportunity to insult or harass someone. When he wasn't targeting other inmates or the occasional correctional officer, he lay on his cot and sulked. While the other inmates had backed off hassling Gerald, who was too easy to target, Elroy had turned up the heat.

When a Death Row inmate was nearing his execution date, a strange kind of solidarity encompassed the other inmates. Even occasional words of encouragement could be heard coming from one cell or another in the long, hot nights leading up to the designated man's final walk. It was a reverent, unspoken tradition on Death Row— a kind of "don't speak ill of the one who is about to be dead." Of course, Elroy didn't observe traditions— especially ones that deprived him of the simple pleasures found in tormenting the doomed and the damned.

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Lost in his own thoughts, Sergeant J.T. Jones, a middle-aged man with a slight paunch and graying temples turned from the small window he was looking through and faced his night shift partner, Officer Ed Jenkins, who was clearly agitated.

"You think we ought to try to put a lid on that asshole Elroy?" asked Jenkins. "And maybe calm the kid down? Gerald's carrying-on is unsettling the other men. Things are getting a little dicey. The Doc's done given him all the meds he's gonna get until tomorrow."

Popping a fresh stick of chewing gum in his mouth, the man looked at Ed Jenkins and replied, "I'll see what I can do."

That's really how it all started. Up until that moment, Cleve Jefferson, known by many as Bishop, was just another inmate waiting on death in Section D.

Although most men on any death row are usually low-keyed to the point of being docile, there are always one or two Elroys to contend with. Sometimes the troublemakers are mentally ill, but there are others like Elroy who are just plain mean. Of course, the two types weren't mutually exclusive. One could be both mean and crazy.

The only way to deal with a primitive like Elroy was to make it clear to him that the pain you were going to cause him was substantially greater than the pleasure he was experiencing. For Elroy, it was the threat of having his one hour a day on the small, interior exercise yard taken away. To make sure he got the point, Sergeant J.T. Jones added the possibility that his canteen privileges would be suspended for a month. The threat of no Cokes, candy, or Little Debbie snack cakes drove Elroy pouting to his cot in the corner of his cell.

Elroy's bullshit was contained in short order. Gerald's fragile grasp on reality proved to be another matter. What Elroy had put in motion seemed to have taken on a life of its own as Gerald's moans turned to wailing and he curled up in a fetal position on the floor of his cell. Ed Jenkins was getting more than a little concerned. "What are we gonna do, Sarge?"

"I'm not sure, Ed," J.T. Jones answered. "One thing I do know is that if we wake Major Dawson from his evening nap at Central Control, there will be hell to pay. I think I'll take one more shot at trying to calm him down."

J.T. Jones tried to talk to Gerald in his most soothing voice, but his crying intensified and brought curses and shouts for quiet from the other inmates who were trying to sleep.

"All right son," J.T. said to himself as much as anyone else. "I guess I'll go wake up the Major."

As he walked down the corridor to his office, a voice called out from cell 11. "Sergeant Jones."

J.T. stopped and walked back to Bishop's cell.

A small, bald black man with long, gray sideburns looked at him intently. "I believe I could help the young man."

"And how would you do that?" J.T. asked, picking something out of his ear.

"Me and him have been talking a lot during the last few days. I've been praying for him and I believe he might listen to me."

"Thanks for your offer, Bishop, but I doubt Jethro would listen to anybody in his present state. And with what's facing him day after tomorrow, I can't say I blame him. Anyway, you're three cells down from him, not close enough to carry on much of a conversation."

Bishop sat down on his cot and smiled.

"Sergeant, I can't help you with the cell arrangements, but I can help you with Gerald. I call him by his real name, not Jethro."

J.T. looked at Bishop for a moment, then shook his head and walked back to his office.

"Good God! You can't be serious," Ed exclaimed. "We could be fired!"

"Not if you keep your mouth shut," J.T. replied, popping a fresh stick of gum in his mouth.

"If anything goes wrong, I'll take the blame."

"Damn straight you will!" Ed responded. "If the shit hits the fan, I'm deaf, dumb and blind."

As J.T. unlocked Bishop's cell door, he was amused that Bishop didn't seem to be surprised by his actions. With his tattered Bible in hand, Bishop proceeded to the chair J.T. had placed next to the condemned man's cell.

J.T. positioned himself where he could maintain a clear vision, while allowing Bishop and Gerald some measure of privacy. As Bishop pressed his face against the bars of Gerald's cell door, J.T. clearly heard only one word during his thirty-minute vigil.

"Gerald."

Even after all these years, J.T. was still amazed at the effect that one word had on the delirious young man. At the single utterance of his name, Gerald's body relaxed and he grew silent. Bishop said nothing, just sat and waited. From his vantage point, J.T. could see Gerald sit up within a few minutes of Bishop's greeting and crawl on his hands and knees toward the small, black man with the long gray sideburns. What followed were whispers that sounded like praying. First Bishop, then Gerald. Then Bishop passed his Bible through the bars to the young prisoner and they clasped hands in silence, simply looking at each other for a time. Finally, Bishop smiled at Gerald, rose to his feet and walked back to the front of his cell. Once J.T. had locked the door behind him, Bishop turned and looked at him with quiet approval.

"Thank you, Sergeant Jones."

Nodding his head, J.T. went to check on Gerald and found him curled up on his cot, his face pressed against Bishop's Bible. He looked up at the Sergeant for a moment, but said nothing and then closed his eyes.

Walking back to the office, Sergeant J.T. Jones experienced a strange sensation. He felt light-headed. Gerald's look had unsettled him, and he had the strange feeling that on that particular night it was Bishop, and not him, who was in control of his domain.

J.T. was grateful for the steaming cup of coffee Ed offered him.

Two days later, Jethro was executed.

Cleve Jefferson, who came to be known on death row as Bishop, never denied his guilt. He had been a small-time drug dealer who killed two rivals in a shoot-out. That act alone would not have put him on Death Row— even with the list of other crimes and drug related assaults on his rap sheet. Cleve's ticket to Death Row resulted from his accidental killing of Maria Lopez, a single mother with two young children who died at the same shoot-out.

During his first two years on the row, Cleve Jefferson had been an angry young man, ranting against a racist justice system and filing endless appeals. Then one day, without explanation, he gradually became less belligerent and less talkative. As he began to withdraw, Doc Hansen assumed he was experiencing the kind of depression typical for Death Row inmates and offered him antidepressants, which Cleve politely refused. Soon after that, he quit talking altogether.

For six months, Cleve said nothing. He slept, ate, and sat on the edge of his cot, staring at the picture of Maria Lopez

he had torn out of a newspaper. From time to time deep in the night, you could hear sobbing coming from his cell. Correctional officers on all three shifts pooled their money to see who would correctly guess the night Cleve Jefferson would take his own life.

On New Year's Day of his third year on Death Row, Cleve Jefferson began to talk again. Over the next two years, he collected and read a variety of religious and holy books, including the Bible, the Koran, the Ramayana, the Tao Te Ching, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and Black Elk Speaks. Although Cleve seemed to prefer the Bible, his "Grandmama's Book" as he referred to it, he read and studied a wide variety of religious and wisdom traditions. He also began to share his readings and thoughts with anyone on the row who would listen. Most didn't, but a few did. Those few seemed intrigued with what he had to say and began to refer to Cleve as Bishop. Over the years, everyone— officer and inmate alike— came to refer to him that way. Most of the officers figured Bishop had gone a little crazy, but accepted that the men on Death Row coped with their predicament in different ways as best they could.

The only non-inmate who would talk with Bishop about spiritual matters was a good-natured, young chaplain who seemed to genuinely enjoy their conversations. His two favorite expressions were *I go to three years of Seminary to become a Reverend and you go to death row and end up a Bishop* and I'll convert you to a Baptist yet. Each time Chaplain Smith uttered these phrases, Bishop's response was the same— a smile and a chuckle. Bishop had been on death row for ten years when he thanked Sergeant J.T. Jones for letting him talk to Gerald.

After that night, everything changed.

At first, the chats between Bishop and J.T. Jones would only last ten or fifteen minutes, usually in the wee hours of the morning while the other inmates were asleep and Jenkins was doing paperwork. Gradually, fifteen-minute chats evolved into one to two-hour conversations between two men, separated by prison bars, race and a lifetime of different experiences. Their conversations ranged from prison life to sports to religion or whatever else caught their fancy. J.T. would sit in a folding chair with his coffee cup and thermos and Bishop on the edge of his cot, finishing the last of the sweet potato pie J.T. had slipped him, compliments of Margie, J.T.'s wife of twenty years.

J.T. Jones was not a particularly sentimental man. He honored the obligatory birthdays and other holidays with friendly resolve. He wasn't against such occasions any more than he was against going to the Methodist church with his wife most Sunday mornings. Such traditions just didn't hold much appeal for him. J.T. seemed to find more solace walking in the woods on the family farm passed down from his Granddaddy to his Daddy, and then to him. Only the occasional bird in flight could hear him singing the hymns of his youth while he pole-fished from the banks of the old mill pond on the back side of the farm.

It wasn't so much that J.T. Jones was a simple man, just that his needs and wants were simple. He had driven the same pickup truck for the last twelve years and lived his life from the inside out. He was a careful and practical man, but also curious in a quiet sort of a way. And when a situation called for it, he was willing to go against convention and take a

chance. It was a mix of these three—curiosity, inwardness, and non-conformity—that drew J.T. to Bishop.

J.T.'s practical and careful nature required that he first review the file and background of the man who had come to be known as Bishop. The conclusion had been clear. Cleve Jefferson had become Bishop through some sort of gradual transformation, which was not that uncommon on Death Row. J.T. had witnessed several men experience genuine religious conversions when facing death. Getting one's house in order, seeking some sense of forgiveness for the harm that one has done, and looking for hope in a better life beyond the grave, were understandable to J.T. What was different about Bishop was that he didn't seem to follow any particular tradition. He didn't claim to be a Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, or Muslim. He simply referred to himself as "one of God's boys" when he conversed with other inmates. In fact, every morning, seven days a week, when breakfast was served, Bishop issued the same greeting to the residents of Death Row, Section D: "How are God's boys this morning?"

The responses to his daily query were varied, ranging from silence to complimentary replies, or expletive-laced retorts from inmates like Elroy. J.T. smiled as he recalled a particular breakfast exchange between Bishop and Elroy, who had awakened in a particularly foul mood.

"Damn God's boys and damn you, you no-account nigger!" snarled Elroy. "You were born a nigger and you'll die a nigger. A nigger is all you'll ever be."

After the course of profanities, which echoed from other inmates toward Elroy subsided, Bishop simply chuckled and responded in a clear, calm voice.

"You're more right than you know, Elroy. I was a nigger just as you are. We're all niggers until we sit in the mercy seat. It's only through the mercy seat that niggers like you and me can become men in this world and children of God."

Of course, Elroy didn't agree with Bishop's assessment and let him know in no uncertain terms before returning to his cot.

Eventually, the residents of Section D seemed to look forward to, rather than tolerate, Bishop's early morning greeting. J.T. and the other officers sensed a kind of respect and even affection on the part of the other inmates toward the old man.

Numerous helpings of sweet potato pie, cooked greens and homemade cornbread later, J.T. Jones finally got around to asking Bishop the questions he had been curious about for a long time.

Handing Bishop a fresh cup of coffee through the bars, J.T. paused before he spoke.

"Bishop, exactly what kind of religious man are you? You say you are one of God's boys, but what does that mean? You got all these books about different religions and such, but you've never said what your religion is— only that you are one of God's boys." J.T. stopped talking and took a long sip of his coffee.

"That's a pretty long question, Sergeant. Anything else?"

"Yeah, what's the 'mercy seat'?" J.T. asked, warming his hands on his coffee cup.

Bishop closed his eyes and sat quietly before answering. Finally, he spoke.

"I've read, prayed and meditated on the holy books of many faiths. The reason I keep coming back to the Bible is because it's my Grandmama's book. She called it the Good Book. To me, it's Grandmama's Book. She raised me for the first eight years of my life, before she died of the consumption. Sitting on her front porch in the late afternoon after she had returned from working in the fields, we would drink mason jars filled with strong, sweet tea. Every afternoon, Grandmama would read to me from the Good Book and tell me stories about Jesus and the Holy Ghost. Sometimes her stories would lift me up beyond the clouds and other times they'd scare the pure hell out of me. She was a small woman with a big faith that I didn't understand at the time." Bishop paused to take a sip of coffee.

"After all my praying, reading and studying, I can't really say I know all that much 'bout anything. What I can say is that I love the Jesus my Grandmama taught me about. I guess you could say that I think of myself as a Jesus Man who has a lot of friends and relatives from other faiths."

"Chaplain Smith, of course, doesn't agree," Bishop added, chuckling. "He says all my friends and relatives are going straight to hell."

Bishop drank the last of his coffee and smiled. "I like him. He's a young man with good intentions and a lot of back roads left to travel."

J.T. refilled Bishop's extend cup with coffee from his thermos. "Tell me about the mercy seat."

Bishop closed his eyes once again and grew quiet. J.T. sipped his coffee in silence and waited.

"When I was dealing drugs, violence was a way of life, nothing special. Intimidation, beatings and sexual assaults,

even murder, nothing special. And then the shooting, nothing new, except this time, I killed a single mother in the crossfire. Left two small children behind. I'd seen innocent people hurt, even killed, but never by my hand.

"From the time I saw her picture at the trial, I became affected in a way that's hard to explain. It's like I was haunted. I cut that dead woman's picture out of the newspaper and carried it with me. At night, I'd dream that my Grandmama was looking at me, tears streaming from her eyes. During the day, I found myself either looking at the picture of the woman that I killed or thinking about her two children.

"When I arrived here on Death Row, I taped Maria Lopez's picture on the wall at the end of my cot. Then I wrote my cousin, Angela, and asked her to send me my Grandmama's Bible. Felt like I was going crazy, staring at that picture of Maria Lopez all day and dreaming about my Grandmama all night.

"When my Grandmama's Good Book came in the mail, things began to change. As I began to read and to pray, I stopped dreaming about her. Then I quit talking and ate very little."

J.T. interjected, "We thought you were losing it. We had you on 24-hour suicide watch."

"All I was concerned about was the picture on my wall and the hot ball of pain that was filling up my insides. I felt like I couldn't breathe…like I was on fire. And then one night while I was looking at that photograph, that ball of fire exploded and buried me alive in its ashes."

A thin bead of sweat broke out on Bishop's forehead.

"I felt Maria's suffering as she drew her last breath. I felt the sorrow of her children losing their mother. I felt the

loss of her parents and friends. I even felt the pain of my own Mama abandoning me when I was a little boy. It was like I was responsible for everything bad that had happened to anybody and everybody. I couldn't bear it. I was drowning in a sea of sorrow. After there were no tears left for me to cry, I began to pray to the Lord Almighty for forgiveness— for deliverance from who I was and what I had become.

"Then the big change happened."

Bishop grew quiet once more as his eyes filled with tears. J.T. inquired softly, "What was the big change?"

In a choked voice, Bishop replied, "I finally got to sit in the mercy seat. I was crying, praying, meditating and looking at that picture. I don't know how long I had been at it. I had no sense of time. It was like I was outside of time. All I know is what happened next.

"As I looked at that picture, the face of Maria Lopez began to change into the face of a person I had never seen before. But I knew who it was. It was in the eyes. Not like the pictures on those funeral parlor fans. Different, like peeling off the skin to see what it hid. I'd been mistaking the peeling for the fruit. Those eyes were the fruit. It was Him.

"I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. Kept looking at that picture for I don't know how long. Then it changed back to the face of the woman I killed. That picture was like a magnet. Couldn't take my eyes off it. And then…Oh Lord… and then…the picture spoke to me. Maria Lopez's picture spoke to me." Once again, Bishop fell silent, his head bowed.

"What did it say?" J.T. asked in a hushed tone.

Bishop looked at J.T. a long time before speaking. "She said, 'I died so that you might live.'"

Neither man spoke for a long time, each lost in his own thoughts.

Finally, Bishop took a deep breath and dried his eyes with the back of his hand. “The mercy seat is about second chances—about being forgiven when forgiveness isn’t possible. Having your heart broken into a thousand pieces then opened up and made new again.”

“You got any of that coffee left?” Bishop queried with a weary smile.

Taking a swallow of the hot coffee, he continued, “If I’ve learned one thing from what I experienced, it’s that I don’t know much of anything. But— thank the Lord— I do know about the mercy seat.”

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Bishop’s appeals finally ran out. He had plenty of letters of support, including one from J.T. and Chaplain Smith. They weren’t asking for the moon, just that his sentence be commuted to life without parole, but it was an election year and everyone knows that mercy takes a back seat on election years.

The morning Bishop was transferred to the deathwatch cell, J.T. came in even though it was his day off. He came in to say goodbye. It was the last time they sat together, he in his folding chair and Bishop on the edge of his cot.

Bishop looked at him and smiled. “J.T., I guess this is it. It’s all she wrote for this ol’ world.”

No inmate had ever called J.T. by his first name, but on that morning, it seemed only natural. All J.T. could say in response was, “I guess so.”

He often wished his response had been more helpful, more encouraging, but that's all J.T. he said—"I guess so."

Then Bishop had a final request for him, a special favor to ask.

He wanted J.T. to make a promise to him.

"Promise me something."

"Promise you what?"

Reaching through the bars, Bishop gently placed his right hand on J.T.'s heart. "Promise me you'll remember that you're also one of God's boys."

J.T. couldn't speak. All he could do was nod his head.

After Bishop's death, J.T. received a package from Angela, Bishop's cousin. She wrote in a short note that Bishop had wanted him to have his Grandmama's Good Book.

Sitting on his front porch, he looked at the book in his lap and smelled the supper Margie was cooking.

Opening the front screen door, Margie peered out at her husband. "Honey, what are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about this book, and that I'm grateful for you and the life I've had. But as grateful as I am, one thing is as certain as the sun setting over that grove of poplar trees. I miss my friend."

Thunder for Mally

Still clouds stitched a sky that burned a deep Chevy blue as Moses McCready plowed his 18-wheeled monster toward Lavonia. Moses believed that every road had its own distinct personality, and old Bloody 98, which split the state of Georgia right down the middle, was especially sinister. Its cracked face was haunted by the ghosts of burning tire tread and pockmarked by dips and gulleys that could scare the warranty off the most expensive radials.

A radio wire was wrapped around Moses' leg like a blacksnake dipped in Jeri Curl. He licked his lips in eager anticipation of the on-air antics of Prime Minister 66—the reclusive self-proclaimed Apostle of the Airwaves who hosted a closed-circuit radio talk show for truckers called Finger Lickin' Good.

Moses had once wanted the words "pride" and "prejudice" tattooed on each of his shoulders. He was inspired by Robert Mitchum's character in *Night of the Hunter* who had the words "Love" and "Hate" inscribed on his knuckles, but Moses preferred a place less seen by public eyes. He was never one to draw a lot of attention to himself. His shoulders—which his ex-wife once admiringly referred to as "the scales of justice"—seemed perfectly appropriate for grand abstractions.

Unfortunately, on a hot August night, an intoxicated Moses wandered into a Valdosta tattoo parlor and commenced to insult the multiple piercings of the owner and resident artist. Angered and blessed with the foresight to recognize a potentially diabolical opportunity, the artist inscribed Moses' shoulders with the words "prude" and "prejudiced" This act of skin art sabotage caused Moses much

embarrassment and resulted in his subsequent resignation from the esteemed Southeastern American Trucker's Association—The Wayward Rollers of Waskee-Gee.

Moses had reached for his radio dial to turn up the volume, laughing at the Prime Minister's throaty musings, when he realized that Marna Van's café would be rolling into view in a matter of moments. Choosing between the Prime Minister's verbal hailstorms and Marna's homemade banana pudding was always a struggle for Moses but *tonight,* Sissy Van's truck was at the café.

And Moses liked Sissy.

When he noticed her poorly parked vehicle gracing the grounds, he nearly flipped his truck careening into the parking lot. Sissy Van had the kind of slingshot smile that could blow your kneecaps out.

After hesitating at the door to adjust himself, Moses walked inside the café and took his hat off. Petulia Jackson occupied her usual corner—sucking down Cherry Cokes and cutting celebrity faces out of magazines. As Moses walked by, Petulia's black eyes seemed to get smaller and more round, like the barrels of a twenty-two. She never had to say anything to him. A look like that was enough.

Sissy appeared from behind the counter and unveiled one of those smiles. "You goin' racin' this weekend?" she asked.

"Yeah, tomorrow night," Moses replied, tracing his finger around the brim of his hat. "Got Ginger's ride in the truck."

Sissy looked puzzled. "Ginger Pervis?"

"Do you know another *man* named Ginger?"

A thin smile crawled across Sissy's face. "Awright

smarty. I didn't know he was out of prison."

"For the last month or so," Moses replied, lighting a Camel cigarette. "We'll see if he can keep it that way."

"You don't sound so sure."

"Well, sometimes the past ain't somethin' you just shake off your pant leg."

"We all make mistakes, Moses," she said, nodding at him and arching an eyebrow.

Moses put his hat back on and clasped his hands together. "Some of us make 'em. Others make an industry out of 'em."

Sissy shook her head and wiped her mouth with her wrist.

"This is for you," she said, putting a lid on a Styrofoam cup packed with pudding. Moses averted his eyes as she licked her fingers.

She wiped the excess pudding off another cup and handed the cup to him.

"And give this to your brother. Tell him not to be a stranger."

"Ginger don't like banana puddin'," Moses grunted.

"Well, then, I'm sure you can find some use for it," she said, smiling and patting his stomach. "What are you, about a forty-six now?"

"I'm a solid forty-two, honey."

"No, I didn't ask you your age, Moses. I was talking about your waist."

Moses chuckled and walked toward the door. "Why can't you be as funny as you are pretty? It's a rule, you know. The good-lookin' ones just don't have a sense of humor."

"Goodnight, funnyman," Sissy chuckled as he closed

the door.

Rain started to fall as Moses lumbered toward his truck, thinking about Sissy's pudding-spattered fingers. He gently rested one hand on his bulging stomach, tapping his own digits. Slipping another cigarette between his lips, he pulled his hat tightly over his head and looked up into the bruised black sky.

"Damn rain."

The waving arms of trees painted stripes like cell bars across Mally DeVaney's face as she looked out the window and watched the sun slide down the sky. She was a thin-boned child, with a small frame and large brown eyes that some people found unnerving. This was her favorite time of the day, and the evening had always brought comfort. She remembered the times her mother would hold her in a rocking chair on the front porch and sing her favorite hymns. But she was too old for all of that now. Eleven-year-olds don't sit in laps—especially eleven-year-old paraplegic girls who, from an early age, have felt the sting of staring eyes and poisoned words.

Built by her grandfather, Mally's wheelchair was designed as a replica of the "El Diablo," the demolition derby classic driven by her all-time favorite demolition derby driver—Ginger "Pink Eye" Pervis.

Flaming hearts and whiskey breath are what Mally remembered when she thought about her father telling stories late into the night about eye-witness accounts of Ginger Pervis' driving prowess and the unholy sounds that bellowed from beneath the hood of El Diablo. Mally's father said the

car's engine was so loud it would shake his belt buckle loose. She remembered listening to gasoline and whiskey-soaked tales and staring at her father's shoulder, tracing the flaming heart tattoo with her finger repeatedly until she drifted off to sleep.

Deep in the night, Mally used to awake to the sounds of her father serenading her from a tangle of tree limbs. After walking home from the late shift, he would often climb the big Weeping Willow near her bedroom window and softly sing to her until she fell back asleep. Sometimes he would blow smoke rings at her. She would count and see how long it took for them to shatter against the windowsill.

The tree leaves whispered outside the window as Mally thought back to the first time her father took her to a race. She remembered nervously wrapping the frayed hem of her dress around a rusty nail that sprouted crookedly from the cracked wood bleacher. She remembered the crowd's drunken chorus and the hoarse gargle of engines wailing as they ground metal into metal and kicked up clouds of dust. Mally would rest her head against her father's chest and feel the pulse of his heart quicken with every firecracker piston pop.

Mally carefully packed away those memories in a special place as she watched the tree's crooked arms wave at her. She imagined her father's spirit soaking their roots.

Mally's mother, Mel DeVaney, stood in the kitchen with a pile of hair stacked on her head and a cigarette sprouting from between her fingers. She watched her daughter at the window—her tiny lips muttering something to herself, breaths of wind gently lifting and lowering her long hair.

Mel rubbed the back of her neck and put out her

cigarette. "Miss M., these dirty dishes are calling your name."

"Momma, can we go to the race tonight?" Mally asked, still staring out the window.

Mel smiled and shook her head. "Honey, I know this is my only night off—*our* night—but wouldn't you rather go to the show, or the lake, or somethin'?"

Mally rubbed her nose and turned her chair toward her mother. A few of daylight's drying rays spilled across her lap and onto the floor. The look in her eyes was the answer.

Mel sighed and bit her lower lip. "Let me guess. The El Diablo is in town." A smile hopscotched across Mally's narrow face. "Awright. I guess that means we're all catching 'pink eye' tonight, huh?"

"Oh, yeah!" Mally answered, wheeling herself into the kitchen.

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Tonight, they were all gonna be at the Southlake Starlight Rally By The River.

Wiley Wiggins, a notorious driver/meat shop owner from Winston-Salem was expected to arrive in grand fashion. He would customarily tie meat-strung coat hangers onto his bumper before entering the stadium in hopes of attracting stray dogs. He always thought this made for a more grandiose entrance, although he often failed to attract even an occasional mongrel. The way Wiley saw it, even if it didn't work it would help fatten his legend. He also had a skull with bat wings mounted on his hood and he wore a cowboy hat down over his eyes. Eyes that few had ever seen. The brow of his hat curled down like a dead crow's talon and a string of bones would rattle when he walked. He had the words, "Oh,

Shit!" painted on his hood in bright red letters. When asked why, Wiggins' reply was always the same: "Because that's what they say when they see me comin'."

Another infamous character was The Grey Ghost, lured out of retirement just for this event. The Ghost wore white face paint and was given his title because no one ever saw him leave or arrive. For thirty-two years no one had ever heard him speak. But that had ended in Wilkesboro, NC when, then minutes before a race, the Ghost got locked in a Port-O-Potty. To make matters worse, someone had thrown in a rattlesnake just to make the situation a little more interesting. The perpetrator was never caught.

One of the crowd's favorites was T. "Hoppy" Hallahan, who had to move around each dirt track on a skateboard with a small lawnmower engine strapped on the tail.

According to rumor, his wife ran over him with his own car when she found out he had been sleeping around on her. Hallahan claimed he was mobbed in an alleyway. But considering that his hometown of Hartland had a population of two hundred thirty eight, most joked that there weren't enough people there to form an opinion, much less a shin-breaking mob. Besides, accounts of Elka Hallahan and her jealous rages were legendary and always find their way into midnight story-telling sessions or early morning bar confessions.

And then there was Ginger "Pink Eye" Pervis.

Ginger had spent the last six years of his life in the Georgia State Penitentiary, where the only racing he did was from his bed to the toilet. In prison, Ginger was nicknamed "Squirt Gun" because of his frequent bouts with dysentery. He had spent much of his youth in juvenile detention centers for

various acts of teenage terrorism. At fourteen he had been arrested for his impressive collection of basketball rims, which had reportedly been taken from over thirty driveways and playgrounds around the county, including two from the high school gymnasium on the eve of the regional championship. Ginger's father died when he was young and his mother suffered from emotional problems. It was hard enough for her to deal with her own situation much less monitor the hormone-warped antics of a juvenile delinquent. One day, on the eve of his twenty-third birthday, Ginger—wild eyed and juiced up on a bottle of Fighting Cock brand liquor—hijacked a neighborhood ice cream truck in the middle of the day and drove it into the Powell River. On the way to the truck's watery grave, Ginger also managed to swerve and hit the Chief of Police's prize-winning seventeen-year-old Pomeranian show dog. The truck got Ginger two years in prison. The dog got him four.

Though he secretly envied Ginger's rambunctious spirit, Moses resented his younger brother's lack of respect for their mother. Moses didn't even go to the trial.

Except for the dysentery and the development of a serious smoking habit, prison was good for Ginger. The silence was his therapist, advisor, and advocate for change, forcing him to think about the wreck his life had become and about his mother whose memory haunted him. Ginger cried once in prison. *Many prisoners would mock another inmate's expression of* grief, dismissing him as fearful or weak, but Ginger's crying carried a tone of genuine pain and sorrow. It was met with only silence and sounds of its own echoes. Sometimes at night, the moon would cast shadows on the ceiling of his room. They looked like continents crawling

across the concrete and Ginger would try to identify them before they slipped away.

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"Mac," Ginger Pervis yelled, pulling at a corner of his mustache, "I hate banana pudding, man. You know that."

"You're awful picky for a man who just got out of prison," Moses McCready snapped back, reaching into an old, rusted orange toolbox. "Besides, if you knew who made it, you'd probably want seconds."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Marna's."

Ginger carefully sealed the lid back on the cup. "Sissy workin'?"

Moses nodded and disappeared beneath the hood of El Diablo. Ginger's eyes glazed over and his mind sorted through old memories of a simpler time, a time he was finding increasingly difficult to remember. Pudding slid down the cup and dripped onto the floor.

"Hey, Mr. Pervis."

Ginger stared at the oil spots on the floor, lost in thought.

"Ginger."

"What?" he mumbled, shaking his head and readjusting his eyes.

His eyes blurred and he blinked again. A girl, small and still, was sitting in one of the strangest looking wheelchairs Ginger had ever seen.

He took one look into the girl's eyes and they swallowed him.

Ginger twisted the same corner of his mustache. "I like

your wheelchair," he said, hoping that didn't come out the wrong way.

"Thanks. It's the El Diablo. Well, not really. But kind of. My grandfather's version of it, anyway."

Ginger smiled and winced as he crouched down on his knees next to Mally. "You wanna see a blackbird fly?" he asked to her obvious confusion.

"OK."

"Alright, watch my eyebrows," Ginger directed, leaning in close to her face.

Ginger could move his eyes in a way that made his eyebrows move like flapping bird's wings. He once used this to charm the girls when he was a boy. These days the technique didn't exactly hold the same allure for the ladies. Of course, neither did being an ex-convict.

"Wow!" Mally gasped. "How come they do that!?"

"Hey, it's a talent, you know. Maybe I'm part bird or something," he said, trailing off and laughing softly.

"Sometimes I dream of flying like a bird," Mally said, nervously rubbing her nose, a habit her mother discouraged but couldn't stop. "Only I don't look like a bird in my dreams, except for big silver wings. Like on the hood of a Cadillac.

"I don't dream too much," Ginger said. "I wish I did though. You like Cadillacs?"

"They're O.K. Not loud enough."

"You like loud, huh?"

"My daddy used to take me to watch you drive. He said that one time you were so loud that you knocked this off," Mally said, pointing to an elaborate, chipped belt buckle she was wearing. A buckle that had the words *Takin' Care Of Business* on it.

"That's a mighty fine lookin' buckle you got there."

The piece looked outrageously large for her frail little body. Mally gripped her wheels with her little pale hands and turned toward the garage's exit. "Do you think you could do it again?" she asked, slowly wheeling away.

"Do what, honey?" Ginger said, pulling at his mustache.

"Make it *that* loud, again."

"How loud do you want it?" he whispered hoarsely as she rolled away.

"Like thunder," Mally answered. "Like God havin' a birthday party."

The little girl wheeled herself out of the garage. Ginger smiled and dropped his head, mouthing to himself the last few words Mally said to him. His gaze returned to the oil spots on the floor. They looked like continents.

"Mac," he called, twisting the corner of his mustache.

"Yeah."

"I need you to do something for me."

"I don't need to do anything. It's you who needs to do the doin'."

"What?"

"Quit pullin' on your mustache. It annoys the hell out of me."

"Oh, I'm sure it's not the only thing that annoys you ole boy."

"No, but it's way up on the list."

"Speaking of lists, you might want to cut some things off that grocery list," Ginger said, eyeing Moses' stomach suspiciously. "I'm gonna have to give your belly its own area code."

Moses' eyes twitched and the loose flesh on his soiled fingers constricted the heavy handle of a lug wrench. "You know, one time—a long, long time ago—when you were a little boy, I had a glimmer of hope for you. I bet the moment lasted twenty seconds, but it was twenty seconds of something I haven't seen since."

"And what was that?"

"You were sittin' under a tree in the backyard, pouring pellets into your air rifle—spilling most of them onto the grass, of course. Aw man, you were ready to shoot *something'*. No, no. You weren't about to come inside unless you were holding something that once had a heartbeat or left a red trail from the pines to the patio. But there you stood, for hours, with a big pout on your face 'cause nothing passed your way. And then—*this* was the moment. A little sparrow—couldn't have been more than a few inches tall. You could have fit it in the palms of your little dirty hands. It hobbled right in front of you, it's little wings all mangled and torn."

"Oh, you're lovin' this," Ginger said.

"What did you do when you saw that bird?"

"Moses, I've got a race . . . we've got a race to get ready . . . "

"What did you do?"

Ginger paused before answering the question. He breathed heavy and could almost smell the sweet summer pine of Kool-Aid Saturdays. The forgotten call of wind chimes.

"I cried," he mumbled, running a forefinger across his upper lip. "We got a damn race here, Mac."

Moses put the wrench down and ran a hand through the stray strands of his thinning hair. Backlit by a sole light bulb, they looked like stalks of milk wheat sprouting from a

lunar surface.

"Young Ginger Pervis. Champion of little broken things."

Ginger stared at the floor and watched the fading sun pull slivers of light across pools of oil.

Mel DeVaney rose to her feet with the rest of the crowd as Persy Higgins announced each driver over the intercom on loan from a local elementary school. Wiley Wiggins was a no-show. The word was that he was spending the night in jail for assaulting a man in his meat shop. According to derby-regular Lila Sturville, Wiley leapt over the counter and beat a man half to death with a frozen cube steak. What the unidentified man did to provoke such a gratuitous outburst from the volatile Wiggins was unknown.

Mally beat her tiny palms together with each driver introduction.

And then she heard it. The most delicious sound in the world.

The El Diablo was rolling towards the starting line, its black bulk arched and quivering with anticipation. Moonlight streaked the hood and ignited a flash that rattled the rims of Mally's big brown eyes. There, mounted on the hood of the El Diablo, was what looked like a shiny silver angel with her wings outstretched. Cadillac wings. Mally's mouth trembled and went numb. She stopped clapping and held her shaking hands together under her chin.

Ginger looked at her and revved the engine, igniting a chorus of screams from the crowd.

"Well, it looks like the Diablo means business tonight,

Miss M," the elder DeVaney said in a half yell. She ran her hand through her daughter's hair, her fingers anticipating every slope and bump on her skull. At that moment Mel DeVaney's words and the wailing engines and the drunken crowd chants were drowned out by a singular sound that held the rapturous attention of Mally DeVaney's eleven-year-old ears. A sound that shook the roots of willow trees.

A sound that made a black bird with silver wings fly.

Tin Spoke Parade

Through a torn strip in his screen door, on a night when silver sheets of rain fell heavy and hard as fists, LeeRon Free watched Alva King's only child, Critter, disappear forever. The fierce pounding of rain on metal roofs drowned out the sound, leaving only the sight of a police officer struggling with his footing as he tried to restrain Alva. Her housecoat was soiled by the mud and her eyes rolled back in her head as her arms desperately flailed about, reaching out for her son.

Bathed in a blue and red flicker of light, two other officers dragged Critter through the mud, his imposing frame stubborn and slippery.

Grabbing the rear bumper of the police car, Critter threw up twice, giving the two weary officers enough time to cuff the boy's thick wrists. One policeman finished restraining him while the other bent over to catch his breath and pick up his hat.

Looking through the slit screen, LeeRon turned his eyes and caught a glimpse of his son, Augustus, standing on the edge of the front porch steps. He stood there motionless, a spindly shadow, small against the rain, and watched the cruiser disappear into darkness, pulses of light fading in its wake. Augustus turned to look back at the screen door, his eyes meeting his father's through the torn slit.

"Police lights look pretty in the rain, Daddy."

The morning sun wiped the sky clean of clouds. Augustus sat on the only patch of grass decorating the front yard. The soft,

cool blades felt good against his bare legs. LeeRon watched his son through the tear in the screen door, his eyes still feeling the ache of flashing red and blue lights. The distance between him and his son was only a few feet, but what divided them was something more profound. LeeRon lit up a cigarette and observed his son hoisting up his socks above his kneecaps.

The socks. He never understood the socks. Long, thick, yellow wool socks. Augustus wore them almost every day.

"You look like a bumblebee with them socks, boy," LeeRon blurted out, a throaty laugh escaping his chest. "Ain't no black boy in his right mind wear them things, young 'un."

Augustus stood up and looked at his father, his eyes burning so far back in his head they seemed to disappear.

"Ain't no bumblebee," he said. "A hornet."

"A what?"

"Hornet. When a bumblebee sting you, it ain't nothin'. When a hornet sting you, you know you been stung."

A smile split LeeRon's broad face. He flicked the ashes from his cigarette and picked at the torn slit in the screen door.

"Today's the day, itn't it."

"Schwinn Stingray. Yalla. 26 inches. Ape hanger handlebars. And tassels on 'em. Red, white & blue. They come extra, but I had some money left, so I said, ‘put 'em on'."

Augustus never had much to say, but often when he'd talk it would come out in a fast heap, as if the words bandied together because they were afraid to step out alone. Augustus looked up at the sun and plucked at his hair.

"You got your money for Mr. Weston?"

"Yessir."

"You know what my daddy used to call money?"

"Nosir."

"Cooked greens."

Augustus smiled, patting his shorts pocket again. LeeRon smiled back. His eyes traced the contours of his son's face, and he thought about how thankful he was to watch in real time what he could only imagine until that crisp March morning, just months before, when he had watched the words "State Correctional Facility" disappear into the rearview mirror of his brother's Chrysler LeBaron. He still kept in his pocket a folded piece of toilet paper from the prison with two objectives written on it: Augustus and homemade cornbread. A three-year stint in the confines of brick and steel had wounded some things inside LeeRon Free, but not the memory of Augustus' smile. It was brighter than the sun. Brighter than yellow wool socks in the summertime. LeeRon hoped every time his son smiled, it would take in some of the slack between them. The memory of Augustus' mother was still fresh, and LeeRon knew he was going to have to sew up the wound stitch by stitch.

The elder Free's 38-year-old bones strained and ached as he sat down on his front steps, reminding him of the overtime he agreed to work at the cotton mill later that afternoon.

"C'mere, bumblebee, I want to show you something," LeeRon said, stealing a quick draw off his cigarette.

Augustus walked up the rotted wooden steps and sat down next to his father. A long blue car, loud muffled music thumping from the inside, rushed by in a blur, catching Augustus' attention.

"Hold out your hand," LeeRon asked, holding out his own hand as an example.

Augustus followed suit.

"You know how a bumblebee flies to the sky?"

"No sir."

"Like this, now hook your thumb around my thumb and do what I do." LeeRon put out his cigarette in an old can next to the stoop and began moving his hand like a flapping wing, his own thumb hooked around his son's. "Now you do it."

Augustus began moving his hand in the same motion, eventually getting in synch with his father's movements. The two sat in silence for a long moment.

"A little blackbird," LeeRon said, nodding his head and smiling.

Augustus smiled and mouthed his father's words without saying them, his eyes fixated on the motion of their hands.

"Be careful on your way to town, little man, alright?"

"Alright, Daddy."

"Maybe when you get back we'll go ridin' together."

Augustus nodded, hoisted up his socks, and stepped out onto the sidewalk, his ears perked in anticipation of a kick-stand squeak, his thoughts adrift on dirt roads, out there somewhere, awaiting adventure.

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In the summertime, Gracious Weston would sit on the old blue metal chair in front of her father's hardware store, Gracious Goodness, Inc., and wave at passersby. Sometimes they would wave back, but she liked it better when they honked their horns. Each time a driver obliged Gracious, she would clap her hands and look over her shoulder to see if her

father was watching. Sometimes he would toss a glance her way and unbox a hurried smile.

"Grace, stay away from the street," he commanded, his voice reedy but firm.

"I'm not at the road," Gracious countered, clutching her raggedy stuffed animal, a butterfly named July, whose age and origin were unknown.

"Listen to me, lil' miss—keep your fanny away from the road."

Gracious kicked her tiny legs against the chair's sunburned metal seat and tried to slip her arms through the old dress she was wearing. She'd often do this in moments of frustration. The dress she wore this morning was from an old clothes rack keeping company with a collection of other unwanteds waiting out their sentence in the back of her father's store.

Gracious watched the heat rise off the empty cracked curve of pavement that hooked around the corner of the store. She held her necklace, a long length of dental floss strung with Froot Loops, up to her nose.

She giggled as a stray summer breeze, unusual for that time of day, slipped through a gaggle of magnolia trees and bubbled under her dress. The wind whipped up with more ferocity, and Gracious covered her ears as a flock of motorcycles roared around the hooked curve like a swarm of growling black beetles sparkling under the sun.

Slipping off her shoes, Gracious stood up on the chair and clapped twelve times.

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Mint leaf patches edged the old dirt roads that sprouted from

downtown. Augustus let their scent fill his nostrils as he trudged along an old mud-caked sidewalk toward the hardware store.

Augustus liked to wear his socks up to his knees, and his left sock always seemed to retreat during the summer, scrolling itself down around his knobby ankles. It would frustrate him to no end, and he'd count the cracks in the sidewalk until it was time to kneel again and hoist up the yellow fabric.

A chorus of cicadas filled his ears as he stopped to look up at the sky. It was usually his tradition to seek out a few clouds, decide what kind of animals they were shaped like, and pretend they were having a conversation with each other. Once he imagined a rhinoceros engaged in a shouting contest with a salamander. But today, the sky was scraped clean by a blazing sun.

Feeling veins of sweat attempting to surface, Augustus reached to pull up his sock and scratch his knees. Across the street, the parking lot for the Spray 'n' Sprint car wash wore the sad Saturday morning crown of gutted beer cans and anonymous paper bags.

Augustus would sometimes spend evenings beneath dusk's last light watching the old businessmen wash their Cadillacs. Occasionally, they'd even let him help, rewarding him with a couple of coins.

Percy Threece owned both the Spray 'n' Sprint and the adjoining Wing-A-Ding chicken wing shack, a hot spot that romanced the lunch crowd. Augustus enjoyed sitting on the curb, popsicle in hand—pineapple flavored, preferably—and watch the parking slots fill with cars. He would read the plates on the back of the cars that spelled out names like POOKY and

T-DAWG.

"Now, now, little brown cow, where you been?" asked Percy Threece, emerging from behind a large trash barrel half eaten away by rust. "Haven't seen you for a long spell, youngblood."

Percy always carried a small transistor radio strapped on his wrist with a leather band branded with his initials, P.T.T. Tapping his white leather shoes on the pavement, he twiddled a dial until settling on a station he liked.

"Ummhmmm," he softly uttered, his lips tucked in, eyes squeezed shut and hips swinging back and forth. "There it is, youngblood—there—it—is—M-A-R-V-I-N. Some folks go Mr. Mayfield as the soul of soul. I go Mr. Gaye. Others loved it, but he lived it, you see. That's the difference."

Augustus unveiled a polite smile and reached down to pull up his sock. As usual, he had no idea what Percy was talking about.

"Scraped me up 'bout ten bucks worth of scratch this mornin', young Augustine, St. Augustine the Explorer," Percy said. "Last week I only got about five. You never know when you gonna find the good stuff. Life's funny like that, I guess. You don't tell it, it tell you!

"So where you headed?"

Augustus rubbed the back of his head and kicked a piece of gravel off the pavement. "Goin' downtown. To Gracious Goodness. Got me a bike on layaway and today's the day. A Schwinn 26 incher. A Stingray. Got a banana seat and handlebar tassels—red, blue, and white. Like the flag but without the stars."

Percy reached down to pick up a quarter off the pavement. It was still wet from last night's rain. "Guess what

year this is and you can keep it," he said.

Augustus squinted his eyes and clicked his teeth together several times before answering. "1967—the first year Schwinn made the Stingray. I'll go with that."

Percy looked at the coin intensely, the tip of his tongue peeking out from between tightly drawn lips. "Nope. But close enough."

He flipped the coin to Augustus, who snatched it from the air with his right hand, which both surprised and pleased him because he was left handed.

Percy wiped a dirt stain off his shoe, patted his sweating brow with a kerchief, and shuffled closer to where the boy was standing. Augustus could see dark-lined folds of skin that barricaded the old man's eyes.

"A bike huh?" Percy asked, patting his forehead with the kerchief again.

"Yessir. A Stingray. Yalla."

"Goodness, now. Yalla? Like them socks you got on?"

"Yessir. Kind of."

"Every time I see you St. Augustine, you got them yellow socks on. How come you don't wear no other color?"

"I don't like no other color."

"Fair enough, now youngblood, fair enough," Percy said, his words stuttered by soft laughter. "You a peculiar spoke, little man. We all spokes on the wheel, St. Augustine—you just sparkle a little more than most. You gonna give me a ride on that new bike of yours?"

Augustus skeptically cocked his head and scanned Percy's abundant midsection. "Think you can fit on my handlebars?"

Percy laughed out loud, the sounds cracked and raw

from a lifetime love affair with cigarettes. "Your daddy know you this funny?"

Augustus bit at his lower lip and tugged at a loose thread hanging off his shorts. The sun pulled his shadow across the pavement. "My Daddy don't really know me too much. Things different since Momma died."

Percy switched off his radio and kneeled beside Augustus, resting a hand on his tiny shoulder.

"Like you—like all of us—your daddy a spoke too, Augustus. He just beat up and bent a little. He's gonna need you to stand strong with him and keep that wheel rollin', alright?"

Augustus nodded once and looked back down at his shadow on the concrete.

Percy stood up and wiped his brow again.

Augustus pulled up his sock and waved goodbye.

"You the spoke that sparkles, baby boy," Percy yelled, watching the boy lope off toward the old sidewalk. "Keep that wheel turning."

The sun had its hot hand on Augustus' back, escorting him into town. He could see ghosts rise from the sweating pavement in the kind of summer haze that crept through towns on days like this, accompanied by the sounds of overworked air-conditioning units about to rattle off their hinges.

Grady Street was Augustus' favorite route to take when visiting the Weston's store. He looked at the yards with old cars left to rot in beds of pine needles that lined the lawns, tucked away and strangled by kudzu. Sparks of sunlight would reflect off their hood ornaments, popping like camera flashes. Augustus would blow kisses to the large houses and pretend

he was a movie star as he walked.

Up ahead in the distance, Augustus could see the hand-painted neon sign for Monk Theef's Rexall Pharmacy. He stopped to tie his shoe and picked up his pace a bit, his heartbeat pumping faster. He could almost smell the inside of the Weston's store, with its stacked bags of fertilizer cramped in the corners and the sound of the ceiling fans and the fresh peanut bin. In his mind, Augustus was feeling the fresh rubber bike tire tendrils between his fingers and watching those handlebar tassels flicker, blown by the tabletop fan Mr. Weston had put there just for the effect.

A cigarette dangling between his lips and a bottle of beer clutched in his hand, Monk Theef stepped outside his store and watched young Augustus stop in the middle of the street and pull at his sock. He smiled to himself and shook his head.

"Bumblebee boy, what brings you to my humble establishment this morning?"

Augustus walked up to the telephone pole in front of Monk's pharmacy and linked his arms around it. "I ain't no bumblebee," he answered. "I'm a hornet."

Monk snorted and stroked the tight cornrowed strands of hair draping over his shoulders. "Well now, you know, bumblebees fly close to the ground, close to the flowers, where the sweetness is. That's where I see you, young 'un. Not in no hornet's nest."

Augustus looked up the telephone pole, squinting his eyes at the sun. "You ever climb this pole?" he asked.

"Sometimes."

"Why you do that?"

"Don't know for sure." Monk put his cigarette out on

the pavement and took a swig from his near-empty bottle. "Guess when I'm up there, things look different."

Augustus' attention drifted down the street a couple of blocks where he could see Gracious Weston, keeping company with her chair in front of her father's store.

Peeking her head out of the dress in which she had cocooned herself, Gracious watched Augustus walking toward her and began to wave wildly. She leaped out of her chair, clutching her doll, and ran up to where the store's sidewalk met the road. She stopped and turned around to see if her father was looking, but he had disappeared to the back of the store.

"Hey Augustus," she said, her sweet south Georgia lilt welcoming, and her eight-year-old hands clapping together excitedly.

Augustus pointed at Gracious' ragdoll. "She need to be cleaned up," he said.

"July doesn't like baths," she replied, clutching the doll tight to her chest. "You want to hold her?"

Augustus was the only person Gracious would let hold July because she liked his soft hands and thought maybe her mother's hands would've felt like his.

Peeling off his shirt, Augustus took July in his arms, holding it like a baby, and dropped to his knees. He dabbled a corner of his shirt in a puddle of water next to the curb and began to wipe the patches of dirt off the doll's furry face. After a few more dabs he stood up, handed July back over to Gracious' anxious hands and slipped his shirt on.

"There, like new," he said. "A new July."

Gracious pressed the doll softly to her face as Augustus made his way into the store. Bundles of roofing shingles

leaned heavy against the walls. He could feel the subtle breaths pushed down from the whirring fan blades overhead. A couple of customers donning suspenders and caps pulled tight over their brows. sifted through bins of nails and bolts with thick farmers' hands, weighing the merchandise on hanging scales.

His heartbeat thumping and his palms sweating with anticipation, Augustus reached deep into his pocket and pulled out the money necessary for his final payment. He held the crinkled bills between his short, small fingers and walked towards Mr. Weston's cash register. While carefully laying the bills down on the counter next to the register, Augustus's attention got hijacked by the sight of clouds forming outside the store windows. Watching the shapeless puffs roll across the sky, he imagined a kangaroo riding on the back of a whale and smiled.

A few quiet moments ticked by and Augustus' attention was jostled away from the windowpane by the sound of someone whistling. He followed the sound and it led him back outside to the front of the store where Zimmery King stood, smiling and holding up Augustus' new bike.

Augustus tugged at his socks as he ran towards it. Schwinn. Stingray. Racing yellow. Tasseled handlebars.

"Today's the day," Zimmery said, rubbing his hand over the bicycle's seat, still covered by factory plastic. Gracious was clinging to her father's leg, bending her fingers in gentle waving motion at Augustus. "You ready to ride young man?!"

"Yessir."

"Well why don't you tie those shoelaces and climb on top this hotrod. Looks like rain's comin'. You better get goin' so your daddy don't worry."

Augustus thanked Zimmery and waved goodbye to Gracious.

"This bike will be your wings, young man," Zimmery said as Augustus tapped his feet against the pedals and mounted the seat. "Fly high, young 'un!"

Pushing off from the curb, Augustus adjusted his feet to the pedals. He could hear the rattle snap of the bike chain adjusting to the gearshift and the hum of new tire rubber spinning against concrete. His heart soared.

Augustus accelerated and jumped the sidewalk curb, pedaling onto the curvy stretch of road that hooked around the Weston's store.

Wearing a smile brighter than Christmas, Augustus closed his eyes and imagined himself flying in the clouds above everything. Above the police lights that gave his daddy headaches, above rusted tin roofs. Up in the clouds with the rhinoceros and the kangaroo and the whale. Up high and free.

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By the time LeeRon Free arrived at the corner block in front of Gracious Goodness, policemen had pushed most of the onlookers away, though the presence of their sadness lingered. A light rain had started to fall, and LeeRon was standing next to his son, lying still and broken on the concrete, his yellow socks tattered and torn.

Witnesses who watched the delivery truck round the bend, said the boy never had a chance.

Gracious Weston was sitting next to Augustus' body, his head resting in her lap. She was using a torn strip of her dress to delicately wipe the gravel and blood from his forehead. LeeRon kneeled down and held his son's hand. Wet

flashes of blue and red filled his eyes, changing places with each heartbeat.

Words and sounds were unable to battle their way from his throat as thunder boomed in mourning and retreated down the avenue. LeeRon hooked his thumb with his son's small hand and slowly moved his fingers together in the motion of a wing. An unexpected breeze blew through and lifted the red, white and blue tassel strands, still clutched by the boy's hand and carried them high into the pines across the street.

And for a few moments, a chorus of cicadas hushed in reverence.

Ballad of the Waffle House

LuLu, her large sleepy eyes a congregation of colors dominated by caramel and hazel, looked up and smiled at Neevis, the sight of that silver tooth always sparking sensations of delight and comfort. As was tradition when Neevis slipped in a Spanish phrase or two in conversation, LuLu reached for the well-worn English-to-Spanish dictionary that stayed sandwiched atop her table between a stack of comment cards and twin salt and pepper shakers. Every morning she found the book in the same place, and each time, there mysteriously appeared new bacon grease-stained notes and comments scribbled in the margins.

"*Mi pajarito bonita*," she whispered to herself, flipping through the pages.

Neevis smiled, dipped her left forefinger into a yellow dab of LuLu's fingerpaints, and delicately smudged the little girl's cheek.

"There, we need a little spot of sunshine on mornings like this, don't we?" she said, sliding a cleaning cloth from her right shoulder and, with patented efficiency and flair, cracking it like a bullwhip in Heston's direction.

He just shook his head without offering a verbal response, a coffee cup firmly planted to his lips.

LuLu turned to look out the window into the winter gray skies. Someone had etched "a band-aid for the hartbreak kid" into the window frost, and scraped a heart shape around it.

"They spelled 'heartbreak' wrong," she thought to herself.

LuLu's tiny feet, interlocked and clad in pink clogs, dangled above the floor and swung side to side to the loping rhythm of Sleepwalk by Santo & Johnny. Neevis claimed the outfit's drummer once stopped by the store one foggy night years ago to use the bathroom and accidentally locked himself in a stall. County Sheriff's deputy Raines Randis was notified of the incident, arrived on the scene as discreetly as possible, and made a diligent effort to free the musician, only to end up locking himself in the very same stall. That was the rumor, anyway.

A small, tattered piñata, constructed poorly to resemble what was supposed to be a winged horse, hung in a precarious state of suspension near the overhead air vent, faint gusts of conditioned air propelling its perilous flight. The ramshackle creation was the mascot for the Keeneland Fraternal Order Of The Pegasus, whose members held a "breakfast summit" the first Saturday of each month. Though Neevis didn't approve of the unsightly symbol's presence in the store, the group never failed to tip generously. In her book, that was good enough.

LuLu noticed sun-faded stripes of color in the crafted creature's wings and decided to emulate its guise with an interpretation of her own. She sopped her fingertips in the splotches of paint that had now spilled out of her dime store purse and onto her placemat, and traced three stripes – blue, red, yellow – on each of her cheeks. Startled by the muted thump of the washroom door swinging open, LuLu turned to see a man emerge, his apron stained by a panorama of morning demands, washroom scars, and other traces of minimum wage humility. He moved through the restaurant with brisk purpose, his stride unbroken, and his line of vision

locked on the floor. Wafting past LuLu like a ghost, he emptied himself out the front door without uttering a word.

As if snapped by an imaginary leash tethered to the man's belt, Lulu dropped her finger paints and slipped out of her booth in one swift motion, stumbling and losing her left shoe in the process. She caught the door with her tiny hands just before it closed, and felt the piercing uppercut of winter's rude salutation.

After a brief scouting mission, she found the man leaning against the restaurant's back-end loading dock, ashes growing from a cigarette wedged between his fingers, clouds circling the sky above his head like phantoms.

Her thin bones shivering, LuLu watched thick funnels of cigarette smoke, illuminated by the parking lot's pale lamplight, billow from the man's nostrils. Like the bull caricature painted on the window of Mertin's Five An' Dime downtown.

"*Toro*," she whispered to herself, her cautious steps carrying her to the edge of the man's long shadow.

"What?" he let out in a delivery that was switchblade short.

"Toro," she repeated, padding forward and tucking her hair behind her right ear. "It means "bull" in Spanish – *Española*. I learned that from Neevis. She teaches me a new word every day."

The man shook his head and took a long drag from his cigarette as LuLu moved another step closer.

"Daddy, I . . . "

"Don't call me that," he interrupted, his words cutting so quick and clean they left no blood behind.

She stood small and crooked in his shadow, her ears ringing, muting out the sounds of passing traffic in the distance.

He moved toward her and leaned in closer, his eyes all hard glass and hidden. In them, she could see her own reflection, warped and shapeless.

The man rubbed his scalp, toed an invisible line between himself and LuLu's feet, and turned away, pulling the last moments of life from his cigarette, the funnels from his nostrils continuing to billow, thick and ceaseless.

Eyes shut tight, he leaned back against the brick wall and looked up at the moon, its visage still obscured by a veil of clouds.

"Neevis will take you home tonight," he said, flicking a spark of ash onto the pavement. "Now hop back in the store and let me finish up my business here."

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Looking through a thin steam curtain rising from his coffee cup, Heston Golly took a deep sip and watched Lulu shuffle back in from the cold and slip her tiny frame into the far-side booth of Table 3. She paused for a moment, still and vacant eyed. Only her fingers were animated, twitching like out of tune keys on a player piano. The moment passed quickly, though, and she was back at work giving another freshly sculpted L-shaped waffle a syrupy baptism.

Heston tapped the countertop with his ring finger, just as he always did after finishing a meal, slipped on his cap and took one last sip of coffee before digging into his front pocket for his money clip.

LuLu lifted her head to catch a glimpse of the old man's slow waddle toward the cash register. She liked the clip-clop sound of his cowboy boots as he walked. Holding up her forefinger, she closed one eye and made a quiet click sound with her tongue, taking an imaginary snapshot of Heston. She repeated his cap moniker, *Muchacho*, to herself in a whisper, then retrieved her trusty paperback translator to determine the word's origin. "You'll have to pardon the hitch in my giddy-up, young 'un," Heston said, a quiet triplet of deep laughs escaping his throat. "That's what happens when you become a permanent resident of Old-Man's-Ville. You get to stumbling, bumbling, and tumbling."

Heston paused for a moment, slipped his denim covered money clip back into his pocket, and slid his aching frame into the booth on the other side of LuLu's table.

"You changing the face of the art world over here?" he asked, smiling and surveying her early morning creations. "They should call you the Waffle House Picasso."

LuLu smiled, put down her dictionary, and focused her concentration on Heston's thick knuckles. She leaned toward them and read aloud the faded blue numbers tattooed along their calloused ridges. "My daddy got numbers like that on his, too," she said.

Heston stretched his back and offered a faint smile.

"I figured he might be acquainted with such decorative accouterments," he added, reaching for the packet of Chesterfield Kings he kept in his coat pocket before remembering Neevis' authoritative no smoking sign, which hung eye-level next to the hat rack. It read: *We don't serve Black Lung here. Sorry. – Management."*

Without hesitation, LuLu began placing dabs of color on Heston's arthritic knuckles, each one awarded a different shade and hue.

"Daddy always keeps his hands in his pockets when we're around people so they don't see his marks," she said, still applying her color combinations with great care and concentration. "You know my daddy?"

"Well, we've never had an opportunity to exchange pleasantries," the old man answered, "but sometimes you can know what a person's bones are made of without sharing so much as a handshake."

"What are my bones made of?" LuLu asked, her eyes reviewing her first-ever knuckle art installation, thanks to Heston's cooperative amusement.

"Something stronger than what I carry in mine, I'd most certainly speculate," he answered, his flint-gray eyes noticing scattered bruises of varying shapes and sizes decorating her thin bare arms. She had made attempts to cover them up with self-rendered finger paintings of sunshine, flowers and butterflies, but these were sights not unfamiliar to Heston. Long ago, at different times in his life, he had both endured and inflicted similar handiwork. And in the bent and barb wired days of his youth, he spent ten years incarcerated for being unable to holster his angry hands.

Breathing deeply, Heston bowed his head and shut his eyes for a moment to, as he always put it, "let the ghost pass through the door notch."

He reached into the left breast pocket of his denim jacket and retrieved a frayed box of crayons, the corners torn and taped back together. Some of the colors were missing,

others were broken. A root beer scratch and sniff sticker shaped like the letter A decorated the back of the box.

He placed the box in front of LuLu.

"Think you can make some magic with these?" he asked.

"Who does the A stand for?" she inquired, investigating the box as a jeweler might appraise the value of a stone.

"Stands for someone who was about your age. Someone who was very special to me."

"What happened to her?"

"Well. I lost her to the Lord," Heston said after a slim moment of hesitation, cracks forming in his voice. "He surmised – and rightfully so – that I wasn't fit to take care of her at that time in my life."

LuLu nudged the old, weathered box across the table, back towards him.

"Well, maybe the Lord will give her back to you someday."

Heston smiled and tapped his ring finger against the table.

"I kind of feel like he already has. Tell you what. Why don't you hold on to these for me. I been carrying them around a long time, and sometimes things get real heavy if you carry 'em around long enough. Besides, I think I found the right person to make good use of them, don't you?"

Lulu smiled and shrugged.

"I want to show you something," he said, rolling up his sleeves. "See these here?"

He pulled back both sleeves revealing two identical tattoos, one on each of his forearms. They were shaped like chrome bird's wings, angular and detailed, as if cut from the

grill of a vintage automobile. Each wing hosted an illustrated hinge bolted to his arms.

Lulu reached to trace them with her fingers, her eyes full of electricity, having never seen such elaborate artistry.

"When I was about your Daddy's age, a long time ago, I got involved with some bad people," Heston said softly. "With bad people, you're liable to do some bad things. Well, I done some things I'm not proud of, and for a long time, I thought I was trapped, that it was over-and-out-the end-ville. Stuff like that. But an old man, a friend of mine, told me I had a way out. Said I had secret wings inside me, and they could take me anywhere I wanted to go if I believed in them."

Heston reached over and dipped his forefinger and middle finger into LuLu's blue paint palette and gently traced out the shape of bird wings on her tiny forearms.

"Now, I know I don't have your painterly eye," he said, a hollow cough ushered out with his words, "but to me, these carry the appearance of some pretty good lookin' bluebird wings. Nah, scratch that. We'll call 'em LuBird wings. What do you think about that?"

LuLu laughed out loud, her delight refusing to stay at room temperature.

"You ready to take flight?"

"Yessir."

"Well, I'm gonna pay Miss Neevis for that deelish breakfast, skippity-doo-da out of here, and bid your lovely self adieu. I want you to take what's in that crayon box and pretty up the world a bit, okay?"

"It's hard for me to keep it inside the lines," LuLu replied. "I'm not real good at that."

Heston shuffled back toward her, pulled his hat brim tight over his forehead, then bent down and placed his hands on his knees.

"Listen here. There ain't many things in this life worth a *damn* that's drawn in a straight line. Put your arms around the crooked things in this world and hold 'em tight. Promise me?"

"I promise."

Heston dropped three crisp bills clipped to a note for Neevis on the counter and walked toward the door, stopping a moment to tap his ring finger on the door handle and turn to LuLu.

"Keep those wings spread, LuBird. As wide as can be. Always."

LuLu watched the old man waddle out into the morning fog. She turned to look at the tattered, winged horse hanging from the ceiling, its stray strands of color slowly growing more vibrant with the coming dawn light. Eyes wide open, she looked at her painted forearms and imagined herself riding a papery-winged steed high over milky winter skies, hurtling toward a kingdom in the sun.

Sunday Biscuits

Mildred Percy stood at her open kitchen window, the one decorated with ceramic thimbles donated by her third-grade Sunday school class, and watched the parking lot lights across the street snuff out one by one.

It was getting late.

She walked to the kitchen screen door, one hand caked in Bisquick and the other holding a bottle of sorghum molasses she had removed from the antique cupboard. Her husband, Elmer, liked biscuits for supper on Sunday evenings. He would often joke to his six p.m. Sunday night congregation that the evening's sermon might be cut short because it was biscuit night.

Tonight, though, it was getting late. The clock was creeping past eight-thirty.

"Elmer!" It's close to suppertime," Mildred shouted in a voice so loud it surprised her.

Five minutes ticked by and still no sign of her husband. She looked out at the old oak tree in the backyard, its branches lifted by a late summer breeze, as if it were shrugging its shoulders, saying, "I don't know where he is either." Mildred smiled at that thought for a quick moment and returned her attention to her missing husband. She knew he'd grunt and groan if the biscuits and sorghum weren't on the table by the time her grandmother's clock struck five o'clock. She didn't mind it so much – the biscuits, that is, not the clock. She had always hated the sound that clock made.

Slamming the screen door behind her, Mildred hurried to the garden where she found Elmer, crumpled on the ground, his legs spread and his back against the old oak. He

was holding the gold office pen he always had clipped to his shirt pocket, the one she got him for Christmas, with his name engraved on it. His thumb was nervously clicking the pen.

"Mr. Percy, what in the world is going on with you. Those biscuits are gonna crawl back in the can if you don't come eat 'em!" Mildred arched her eyebrow in disapproval and placed her Bisquick-caked hand on her hip, just like her mother used to do. She hated when her mother did that.

"Something happened to me Milly," Elmer said in a soft voice, wiping at his eyes.

Mildred's wrinkled brow softened and she could feel her heartbeat begin to race. A warm breeze lifted the hair off her neck and carried with it the unmistakable scent of burning biscuits. She mourned them for a split second.

"Well, Lord have mercy, do I need to call Dr. Elsey, or 911?" she asked her husband.

Elmer shook his head and ran his hand through the tall grass beside him. He bit his lower lip, a lifelong nervous habit, the words in his throat falling apart before making their way to his mouth. He breathed deeply and watched clouds move across the sky. He thought for a moment about how he had never noticed the sky before.

Mildred hesitantly took his hand. He could feel her worry moving over him.

"What's going on with you, Elmer Percy?" she asked with soft urgency. "You want to come inside and talk about it? Those biscuits are…"

Elmer gave her hand a slight squeeze and looked up at her.

"I think I had a dream."

"A dream? What kind of a dream?"

Elmer sighed and ran his hand through the grass again. He shook his head slowly, watching the sun drop a couple of rungs down the sky.

"Don't know," he answered. "I took a rest here at the oak for a spell after checking on the garden. Must've dozed off. Can't say for sure what happened after that."

He picked a hand full of grass and let it get swept up by a wisp of evening breeze.

Mildred breathed deep and picked at the dried biscuit mix on her hand. Some of it had gotten in her watch and she drew her lips tight in mild frustration. She liked that watch.

"You want to tell me what you dreamed?" she asked, rubbing her forehead with her clean hand. A few moments passed without an answer, and Mildred sat down in a thatch of tall grass beside her husband. She could feel his hand shaking.

"I guess so," he finally responded. "I'm not sure you'll understand. I'm not sure I understand it myself. I must have been asleep, but I felt awake. More awake than usual. In the dream, I was standing in this crowd of all kinds of people--young, old, and folks our age. They were laughing and carryin' on, and dancing. They were dancing to that rock and roll fuss that I used to say was the devil's dance and the reason deaf people never had it so good."

Mildred let slip a slight smile.

"Well, you can bet your biscuits I wanted to leave that place as fast as I could," Elmer continued. "But even though I wanted to leave, my feet wouldn't move."

He reached down and touched his ankle. Mildred's eyes followed his hand.

"The people looked so happy and then I noticed they

were all looking at one person who was dancing and laughing with them. Then the person they were looking at looked at me, and…"

Mildred reached to touch her husband's temple, turned gray by two heart attacks, a wayward daughter, and a few bad breaks that could have gone either way.

"Milly, this sounds awful crazy," Elmer said, shaking his head. "I just . . ."

Elmer paused, his voice disappearing into a hoarse, almost childlike whisper. It was a rare moment of vulnerability, and for Mildred, it did not go unnoticed.

She sat still in the tall grass that swayed side to side in the dying dusk light, holding her husband's trembling hand. Her eyes traced its wrinkled lines and she thought about when those hands held their child for the first time. She thought of how they helped bury her mother when she passed away from liver cancer, and how they could also be swift and fierce.

"Tell me what happened," she said, watching tears streak her husband's cheeks.

Elmer breathed deep and turned his head away from his wife, wiping his face. "Well, the person looking back at me was him."

"Him who?"

Elmer's voice softened.

"Jesus."

Mildred stroked his thumb with her forefinger.

"At first I couldn't believe it," Elmer said, "but he was looking at me, drawing me into the laughter, even though I fought against it at first. Then he walked over to me and spoke only once."

"What did he say?" Mildred asked, her hand now

resting still on top of her husband's.

"He said, 'where's Mildred?'"

Mildred withdrew her hand from his and slipped it into her pocket.

"Before I could say anything, he took my hand and we began to dance. I couldn't believe it. I felt like a little boy, like when I used to dance with my mother in her kitchen. It's like he reached in, dusted off that memory, and made it new again. There I was dancing with Jesus, and I found myself laughing and singing with him and the others."

Elmer paused a moment, biting down softly on his lower lip. "Then Jesus stopped dancing even though the others continued. He looked at me in a different way."

Elmer's words trailed off and a sudden, unfamiliar sadness overcame him.

Mildred patted his hand.

"His eyes changed. I became afraid. I didn't want to look but I knew I had to. Can't explain why. I just knew."

"What did his eyes look like," Mildred asked.

Elmer's face crinkled in thought.

"They were burning," he said, "like the last embers of a fire glowing around the edges but dark in the center. They were death's eyes. Even though I looked away, they looked through me, probin' around into places I had forgotten. Hidden places. But there he was, his eyes like searchlights, seeing everything I couldn't hide. I tell you, I've never been so ashamed and scared in my life. No matter how tight I held on, those eyes pulled every piece of darkness out of me and set it right down in front of me, then switched on the spotlight. Like the time my father beat me when I was twelve with a leather harness 'cause I had lied to him. He said he was beating the

devil out of me, but it hurt so bad that ever since, I felt that anything good had to hurt, that sometimes you had to deny and even hurt the body to save the soul. Like the time I whipped Julie when she was fifteen after I caught her drinking beer with her friends."

Elmer breathed deeply and wiped his brow with his shirt sleeve. Leaning his head back against the old oak tree, he continued. "And there was the time after we were engaged, I sneaked over to Embreeville to see an old girlfriend."

Elmer paused, anticipating a reaction, but was met with only silence.

"I never told you about that and I'm sorry. I'm not that kind of man, and I know you know that. But in that dream, I felt like death had a hold of my belt loops."

As his words burrowed through her ears, Mildred looked at the fading sun in the. Her grief hung still in the air like stale laundry on a line.

They both fell silent for a while. An evening breeze picked up and rustled the leaves above them. The moon traded places with the sun.

Mildred put her hands in her pockets and stood up. The tall grass fell against her ankles.

"Mildred, I looked into his eyes and my heart broke in two."

Tears rolled down Elmer's cheeks as his voice cracked and dropped to a whisper. "Then his eyes changed again. I was bathed in the look of those eyes like a newborn baby."

The moon blinked in between clouds passing across the sky and Mildred closed her eyes in its light. "Oven light," she thought.

She looked at her hands. They were swollen and sore.

Putting her hands back in her pockets, Mildred started off through the tall grass back toward the kitchen door. Elmer turned to look in her direction. He counted silently each step she made.

She stopped and turned to look back at him.

"I'll put some more biscuits in the oven," she said. "Come help me set the table."

Special of the Week

"It's cold as a witch's teat out there," Jimmy "Fastball" Burns exclaimed as he bustled through the main entrance of Everybody Rides used car lot, passing out cheeseburgers, fries, and steaming cups of coffee.

"I ain't never seen a cold spell like this in the middle of December."

"You got that right!" agreed Sam Jenkins, also known as Sam "Batboy" Jenkins.

Buzz "Homerun" Renfro took a sip of coffee. "Why don't you two yahoos shut up and pass me some fries before they get cold."

J.J. "Coach" Moran, the manager, looked at the three salesmen with mild disgust, the way a father would look at his rambunctious children. "Why don't all three of you quiet down so I can finish this here book on Joe DiMaggio, the greatest baseball player who ever lived."

Everybody Rides was the budget used car lot of the mega-dealership, King of the Road Jaguar, Chrysler, Dodge, Kia, Daewoo. In automobile sales, this was the bottom of the barrel. The good used cars were on display in a paved lot adjoining the new car dealership. Everybody Rides was located two blocks from the other lots. King of the Road owner, Wild Bill Hancock, didn't want a car lot that proudly displayed in bright red letters under its name—NOTHING OVER $3995 and YOUR JOB IS YOUR CREDIT— to be too closely associated with the classier side of his business. As an added punishment, Everybody Rides had to stay open until 10 p.m. while the rest of the dealership closed at 9:00 p.m.

If an outside observer were to come to the conclusion that Coach had a thing for baseball, he or she would be right on the money.

He had coached Little League baseball for over thirty years and never had a winning season. But to hear him tell it, he had always been one hit or pitch away from baseball glory.

The only sounds in the office that evening were the four men inhaling their supper as they chewed, gulped, and belched their way down to the last French fry. Each man had his own story of what brought him to this place. Coach had successfully managed the upscale used car lot for ten years before he punched out an opposing Little League coach who happened to be the cousin of Wild Bill Hancock. The others were exiled to Everybody Rides for different reasons, and in keeping with his passion for baseball, Coach had given each of his "players" a nickname.

Jimmy "Fastball" Burns had been the leading Dodge truck salesman for three years in a row. Nobody knew more about pickup trucks than he did, and nobody could close a truck sale as quickly. Unfortunately, Fastball decided to celebrate his third divorce by driving off in a brand new loaded Dodge Club Cab that he hadn't cleared with the manager. With a fifth of Jim Beam riding shotgun, he totaled both the truck and his sales career.

Sam "Batboy" Jenkins was a wiry fellow with nervous eyes. Coach had given him that name because, as he frequently reminded him, "Boy, you ain't even in the game. You can't score if you don't get to the plate." Coach used to call him Third String, but after three consecutive months at the bottom of the sales ladder, demoted him to Batboy.

Sam was the only one of the four men who had never been married. He had allegedly had only two dates, and one didn't count—the occasion of his senior prom when he paid his next-door neighbor, Debbie Ann Muskgrove twenty dollars to accompany him. Rumor had it that he offered to pay her another five dollars for a goodnight kiss. The truth was that Debbie Ann told Sam the only part of her he could kiss for five dollars was her ass.

Before Buzz "Homerun" Renfro was exiled to Everybody Rides, he was the leading salesman at King of the Road for three years running. Then he hit a homerun of a different sort with Wild Bill Hancock's personal secretary at the annual office Christmas party who also turned out to be Wild Bill's secret Santa.

Coach was married to his second wife. Fastball was, as he liked to put it, currently "playing the field. Buzz, also divorced, was heavily involved with Darlene, a former dancer with Sand and Sun Cruise Lines. She was presently employed as senior nail technician for The New You Salon.

Buzz and Darlene had been together for more than a year and, although he had told no one, he was planning to pop the question on New Year's Eve.

Leaning back in an office chair with his feet propped up on his desk, Buzz fingered the gold-plated money clip in his left front pocket that secured the five one hundred dollar bills he had saved to buy Darlene's engagement ring. He smiled in anticipation of her excitement. No one could get as excited as Darlene. Buzz's daydream was abruptly interrupted by the grating voice of Fastball.

"Customer on the lot. It's your turn, Renfro," he bellowed.

Buzz lit a Marlboro Light and peered out the office window into the cold, black December night. Who would be looking for a used car at 8:45 on a cold Saturday night? Blowing a spiral of smoke rings toward the ceiling, Buzz said, "Why don't we give them a few minutes to see if they are really serious."

Without taking his eyes off the page he was reading, Coach took charge of the situation. "Batter up, Buzz. Get your ass out there and into scoring position. Batboy, you're in the on-deck circle."

Batboy grinned at Buzz. "I done taken a peek, Homerun. I can tell from here, she ain't much to look at and more'n likely she ain't got no money. Them two kids means she ain't got no man, which means she ain't got no money, which means you ain't gonna make no money. Comprendes, amigo?"

Buzz blew another series of smoke rings toward the door. "Two things, Batboy. First, I'm not your amigo, and second, can you Comprendes that?"

Zipping up his parka, Buzz ground out the remnants of his cigarette in the ashtray, closed the door behind him, and stepped out into the cold night.

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Agnes was cold. Not just from the threadbare parka she was wearing, but cold deep inside, down in her bones. She felt like her heart was almost frozen shut— like it was barely beating. The only thing on this freezing December night that gave her any warmth was her son, Kenny, and her daughter, Sonja. And they gave her just enough to keep her going a while longer. Ten years seemed like a lifetime ago when she up and

married their father, a truck driver twenty years her senior. They met at the small mountain top café where she had worked as a waitress. Harold had promised her the good life, but what he had given her was too many years of misery. He finally left her and the children two years ago with unpaid bills and no goodbyes.

Agnes wasn't a woman given to bitterness, she was just tired. Somehow, having Kenny and Sonja made the misery worth the trouble. At eight and six, they were still young enough to make up the difference between the poverty and hopelessness with a few well-practiced dreams, the most recent being what Santa Claus might bring them. At least, Sonja had that dream. Agnes wasn't sure about Kenny. He acted happy enough, but she had seen the sad, uncertain look in his eyes when he thought she wasn't paying attention.

Working two jobs, one at a nursing home and the other at Taco Bell, didn't provide much of a life. They had been evicted from their apartment for unpaid rent three days after her truck had been repossessed. Agnes had no illusions about her chances of getting the salesman walking towards her to sell her a car for a fifty-dollar down payment, but fifty dollars was all she had.

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"How do you do, Ma'am? You gotta a couple of fine-looking children. Name's Buzz Renfro. What can I do for you?"

Agnes looked at the salesman for several moments before she spoke. "Mr. Renfro, my name's Agnes Davis and these here are my children, Kenny and Sonja. We are in great need of a reliable vehicle."

"Yes ma'am. Well, you've come to the right place because reliable is our middle name. Every vehicle we sell has undergone a 21-point inspection."

"Mama," Sonja interrupted, "I'm hungry!"

"Hush Sonja, we'll get something to eat when we finish our business with Mr. Renfro."

Dropping her head at the tone of reprimand in Agnes's voice, Sonja buried her face in Kenny's jacket.

"Tell you what kids, how 'bout candy bars and cokes on me while your mother and I check out the cars," Buzz offered, pulling three one dollar bills out of his pocket.

"I couldn't let you do that, Mr. Renfro," Agnes protested.

"I ain't hungry anyway," Kenny added, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his denim jacket.

"Well, I am," Sonja exclaimed, peering from behind the folds of her brother's jacket.

"Hey, I insist," Buzz responded. "Besides, you'll be warm inside. Ask for a Mr. Moran when you get inside. He'll show you where the goodies are."

Agnes relented and Kenny took the three dollars and Sonja by the hand and proceeded toward the office. Buzz lit another cigarette as he and Agnes stood watching the vapor trail of Kenny and Sonja's breathing as they made their way toward food and warmth.

"Now, Mrs. Davis, what would you like to look at? We only have about an hour until we close."

Agnes' eyes escorted her children into the office. "Mr. Renfro, I'm going to be honest with you. I'm in desperate need of a vehicle. I have two children, two jobs— if I can come up

with transportation— nowhere to live, and fifty dollars in my right coat pocket."

Buzz took a deep draw from his cigarette before he spoke.

"Ma'am, please don't take this the wrong way, but it sounds to me like you need a lot more help than just a vehicle— at least more help than I can give you. You need to get hold of some area churches or the Human Services Department or something like that. Besides, the cheapest vehicle on our lot requires a down payment of several hundred dollars. Maybe you ought to call your family."

Agnes turned her head slightly to compose herself. "No offense taken, Mr. Renfro. Don't have no family, but I'll figure something out."

She took a deep breath and extended her hand. "I want to thank you for the kindness you showed my children. I'll be fetchin' them now."

"Well, Ma'am, at least let me get you a hot cup of coffee."

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary," Agnes replied as she walked toward the office, leaving Buzz to ponder the crisp night air.

"Hellfire," Buzz muttered to himself. "Why do I always have to get the hard-luck customers? Life's tough for *everybody*."

He could see Kenny's and Sonja's faces peering out of the office window as their mother approached them and thought to himself, *Where will they go? What'll happen to them? What does it matter to me? It don't.*

All Buzz had on his mind was the wad of cash in his pocket and Darlene. He popped a piece of chewing gum into

his mouth and pretended to check the cars on the lot. He also pretended it would be less embarrassing for Agnes and her kids if he waited until they left.

Buzz watched as Agnes and her children made their way across the car lot toward the bus stop on the corner. As they started to cross the street, Sonja turned and waved to him and shouted, "Hey Mister! Thank you for the candy. I hope you have a Merry Christmas!"

It was at that precise moment that Buzz Renfro went temporarily insane.

He might as well have been hit by a meteor from outer space. The gold-plated money clip in his pants pocket seemed to turn white hot. He felt dizzy, his knees buckled slightly, and even with the chill of the night air, he could feel a bead of sweat break out on his forehead.

Somewhere between Sonja's "Merry" and "Christmas," something— some great mystery traveling faster than the speed of light—had penetrated Buzz Renfro and knocked him senseless. In that moment, the fake gold nugget ring on his right hand ceased to exist. Even the image of Darlene became little more than a dancing shadow. Buzz was pulled out of himself into a place he had never been before. It was as if he was having an out of body experience, observing himself running toward Agnes and her two children who were standing under the streetlight, waiting on the rest of their lives.

As he ran, his mind was saying stop, but his legs weren't listening.

When he caught up with them, Buzz bent over and grabbed his knees, breathing heavily.

“Mr. Renfro, are you all right?” Buzz took a deep breath, sucking the cold air into his lungs. “Yes ma’am, I believe I am. It just occurred to me that we might have a vehicle suitable to your needs.”

“But I told you, I only have….”

Buzz interrupted her, “I forgot to tell you about the special of the week. If you could use a 1992 minivan, you could drive it away tonight for no down payment and one hundred and twenty-five dollars a month.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Agnes’ eyes widened.

“Say yes, Mama. Say yes!” Sonja exclaimed, jumping up and down as Kenny looked on silently.

“Yes,” Agnes said, her face freed up by the hint of a smile, the first she had felt in weeks.

Agnes with her coffee and Kenny and Sonja with their hot chocolate waited in the customer lounge while Buzz filled out the paperwork.

Batboy shook his head. “I would’ve bet a month’s pay that lady wouldn’t have two cents to her name. Can’t believe she’s got the cash for the down payment.”

“Well, believe it,” Buzz replied as he signed the last of the finance forms.

Draining the last of his coffee, Coach looked solemnly at Buzz and cleared his throat. “Well, Homerun, it wasn’t one of our better units— certainly not of home-run caliber, but I will give you an infield hit.”

Buzz handed Agnes the keys. Even Kenny seemed excited. Not like Sonja, but at least pleased. Looking at the keys in her hand, Agnes didn’t say anything. Instead, she put her arms around Buzz and placed her head on his chest. He didn’t know what else to do so he hugged her.

As the minivan left the lot of Everybody Rides, all Buzz could see was the smiling face of Sonja pressed against the rear glass window. Her smile went right through him. His fingers grazed the empty money clip. It wasn't hot anymore. And he knew Darlene probably wouldn't be coming down his chimney on Christmas Eve.

Opening a fresh pack of cigarettes, Buzz looked up at the glittering stars and said to no one in particular, "Merry 'hotdamn' Christmas."

When Jesus Came to the Cracker Barrel

It was another bustling Cracker Barrel Tuesday morning. Four friends shuffled in out of the cold toward the round table in the corner where they had met for breakfast each week, going on thirty years strong. Tammy met them as she always did with hellos and hot coffee.

Although their given names were Lee, Craig, Adrian, and Calvin, they often relied on the nicknames they had tagged each other with—Shades, White Shoes, Prof and Killer— as they bantered back and forth. It was always open season for a little ribbing until Killer restored order by leading them in "The Prayer of the Holy Spirit," followed by a brief blessing for the food that would soon be set before them. Sports talk, news of the day, and a joke or two, were followed by prayer concerns as they ate.

Tammy had just refilled their coffee cups when a fellow approached the table and introduced himself. "Hi guys. Name's Jess. Mind if I join you?"

There was a moment of awkward silence as the four compadres looked the stranger over. He appeared to be in his mid-forties. He wore a sweatshirt hoodie. His work jeans were well-worn as were his hiking boots. His weathered face and dark brown eyes were framed by a salt and pepper beard, and he wore a Red Cross baseball hat that had seen better days.

"Have a seat, Jess," Shades said, followed by different versions of "sit down and join us" from the other three men.

"What would you like to eat?" Prof inquired, rising from his chair. "I'll go find Tammy."

The stranger smiled and motioned for him to sit down. “Thanks anyway, but a cup of coffee will do me just fine when Tammy comes back around.”

Momentary silence returned, broken by White Shoes introducing himself. “I’m Adrian.”

Pointing to the others, he continued. “He’s Craig and Lee’s to your right, and Calvin’s to your left. “Is there anything we can do for you?”

Tammy handed Jess a steaming cup of coffee. Thanking her, he took a sip and smiled. “Just a little conversation will do for now. I saw you folks over here having a good time and thought I might sit with you for a spell.”

“We’re glad to have you join us,” Craig chimed in, “but I’m not sure if hanging out with this bunch will do anything for your reputation.”

Jess laughed. “I like hanging out with folks and meeting all kinds of people in all kinds of places, even those with suspect reputations. You might say it’s kind of a hobby of mine. I couldn’t help but overhear you calling Adrian White Shoes. That’s a nickname I’ve never heard before.”

“It comes from when he played college football,” Calvin replied.

Adrian shifted in his chair. “I was a wide receiver. Although I wasn’t that fast, I had pretty good hands when it came to catching the football.”

“I recall that wasn’t the only thing you had pretty good hands with,” Lee chimed in to the laughter of the others.

“What about you?” Calvin asked. “Do you have any nicknames your friends ever tagged you with?”

“Quite a few, actually,” Jess replied, “Some good and some bad.”

"I'm on the road a lot so I meet a lot of folks," he continued, taking another sip of coffee.

"You a long-haul truck driver?" Craig inquired.

Jess held his cup out to Tammy who was making another round for refills. "No, driving big semis is not for me. Guess you could say if I'm anything, I'm a long-haul construction worker."

Craig took a bite of hash brown casserole and looked up. "What kind of construction?"

"Carpentry," Jess replied.

Lee sopped up the last of the gravy with what was left of his biscuit. "That's a good skill. Our church mission trips depended on good carpenters. We found out the hard way that not everyone who thinks he is a good carpenter is, in fact, a good carpenter."

Jess laughed. "You got that right. Mission trips are a good way to help folks in need. I've always been partial to them myself. And sometimes, a good hammer is hard to find."

He pushed his chair back. "Fellows, I need to hit the john. Be back in a few minutes."

The four friends watched Jess walk toward the bathroom.

Calvin looked at his three friends. "Something's going on here. I'm not sure what it is. I'm not even sure I want to know what it is."

Craig leaned forward. "I'm feeling uneasy myself."

"Actually, fellows, I would like to get up and leave, but at the same time, for some strange reason, I feel like I have to stay for a bit more," Lee replied.

Adrian nodded in agreement. “I feel the same way the rest of you do. When he comes back, we can chat with him a few more minutes and then ease on out.”

“Good idea,” Lee responded. “Truth is, I do have an appointment at the Chevy dealership to get my wife’s car serviced.”

When Jess returned, he sat down and looked at the men. “I want you boys to know that I really appreciate your hospitality.” When he told them he had picked up the check for their breakfast, they all assured him that wasn’t necessary.

He looked at them and smiled. “I am happy to buy your breakfast and I’ve enjoyed our time together.”

“But . . .,” Craig began.

Jess waved his protest off. “Don’t worry about it. I am used to paying folks’ bills.”

Jess paused and looked intently at each man. Reaching into the pocket of his sweatshirt, he pulled out four folded pieces of paper.

“Adrian, Craig, Lee, and Calvin, I do have need of your help. I know you are good men and that you care about others. And I know that what I am about to say to you is going to make you feel uneasy, even a bit strange. All I ask is that you hear me out.”

Handing each of them a note, he continued. “I know each of you in a way that you may find difficult to understand. Each of these notes is personal. Each one reveals something that you have never told anyone. I want you to read them now.”

The apprehension on the four friends’ faces was palpable as they read what Jess had written to each of them.

Lee and Adrian's hands trembled as they laid their notes on the table. A thin bead of sweat broke out on the forehead of Craig, and Calvin rubbed his eyes as he placed the note in his shirt pocket.

"Who are you?" Calvin asked Jess.

Jess sighed and smiled. "I think you may already know, or at least suspect."

Rubbing his beard, he continued. "I am aware that what you are feeling right now is unsettling, maybe even a bit frightening. You would probably like to get up and leave. Although you are free to do that, I hope you won't. I hope you will hear what I have to say before deciding whether to help me or not?"

"What is that you want?" Lee interjected.

Jess leaned forward. "It will require you to have faith in what you profess to believe, and in me. I need you to leave everything behind for a few weeks. Your families and whatever you are doing, and meet me at a designated locale in Telford to go on a mission trip."

The four men looked at each other, no less confused than before.

Finally, Calvin spoke. "How long will this mission trip last, and why us?"

"It will last as long as it needs to last. I have chosen you for good reasons, reasons you do not understand, reasons that will require you to choose to go with me or remain behind."

"What you are telling us reminds me a lot of the parable of the rich young ruler," Calvin continued.

Jess leaned back in his chair. "You four are rich indeed, in ways you aren't even aware of, including what you can

become. But no, Calvin, I'm not asking any of you to do what the rich young ruler was instructed to do."

"What would be required?" Lee replied.

Jess touched Lee's arm. "I'm not asking you to give up your money, possessions, or families. What I am asking the four of you to give up is your time for a few weeks, and follow me on a mission trip that will help countless people, as well as provide you with a blessing unlike any joy you have ever experienced in your lives before."

Several more moments of silence passed before Jess spoke.

"I won't ask for your decision right now. You can think and pray about it. Talk it over with each other. The note I gave each of you has the date, time and directions to a barn in Telford. It will be the one with the neon cross over the entrance. I will have chairs arranged with your names on them."

As the men rose from the table, Adrian asked Jess how many were needed for the mission trip.

Jess zipped up his sweatshirt. "A total of twelve. Two from your group and ten others."

Looking at the four friends, he smiled and tipped his hat. "God bless."

Then he walked away.

Stray Dogs

Simpsey curled his tongue around a swarm of profanities and launched them toward Laney Mack. The words would burrow into the ears of an occasional passerby and become the spark for the next morning's barber and beauty shop gossip. But their fangs and fury would not move Laney, whose ears had endured much worse in his sixteen years from men with sharper tongues and harder fists.

"Son, you throw that, and the only lights you gonna see this Christmas are the spinning blue kind," Simpsey said, shifting his weight, his thick fingers rhythmically tapping The Educator's hull.

"Seen 'em before, mister," Laney said, scratching his hip. "Seen 'em plenty. I'll be right here waitin'."

Laney sat down on the curb. He could feel his tailbone ache, still sore from a childhood incident. He rolled his left jean leg up to match his right and looked across the street. A young dog— its coat a patchwork of frayed fur and bare skin— stared back at him with eyes of two different colors, one a blue tint, the other black as pitch. Aware of Laney's presence, the dog quivered and paused. His starving skin was drawn over ribs that pushed through the sides of his body, bending and bowing like prison bars made of bone.

Simpsey could feel his anger, scaly and swelling, turning over inside him. He took a firm hold of The Educator and pointed it toward Laney through the hole in his window.

"Do you want me to come out there and show you what I do to dogs like that— dogs like *you*— that come around here and stir up a fuss," he shouted.

Minnie placed her hand on Simpsey's and grazed it with her thumb. She gently removed The Educator from his hand and replaced it with a telephone receiver.

"No need for you two to be sharing the backseat of Hallis' cruiser," she said.

Unblinking and still, Laney scanned the fractured storefront window: the gold Joy To The World banner draped beneath the Bicentennial Christmas Blowout sign, the fake snowy setting with the rosy-cheeked wax figurine family of carolers on display. He quickly turned his attention to the face of Simpsey Cook, pulpy and enraged, his lips in a snarl, barbed words continuing to fire out of his mouth from behind the cracked glass.

But Laney heard nothing, not a sound. He only saw, in those fractured shards, the reflection of Simpsey Cook, and the faces of other men he had known— men of hard hands and hurtful words.

Tears began to well up in Laney's eyes, and in one swift movement, he scooped up the half brick resting at his feet, and with every ounce of energy in his slight sixteen-year-old frame, hurled it at what was left of Simpsey Cook's storefront window.

SMASH!

Laney wiped his throwing hand on his jeans and picked a broken flower off the curb. He looked at it for a moment, grazed the delicate, white velvet texture of its remaining petal with his finger, and sat down on the curb cross-legged. As a crop of flashing blue lights grew closer on the horizon, Laney closed his eyes and exhaled in a long, deep sigh beneath the sunset's dying glow.

The gold trim on Sergeant Hallis Rivers' nametag flashed like a lightbulb in the late evening sun. He carefully slipped a set of handcuffs around Laney's slim wrists and noticed the ghosts of bruises and burns decorating his young forearms.

Rivers' sigh went undetected by Laney's ears as the young man slid his spindly frame into the backseat of the cruiser. A police radio crackled and popped. A series of anonymous voices blurted out random numbers and street names.

The cruiser's engine wheezed to life, and the sound of a dying fanbelt introduced itself.

"Buckle up, young'n," Rivers asked, doing his best to suppress a chronic cough that had haunted him since late autumn. "S'cuse me. Got a midget in my throat."

Laney reached for the belt buckle, its metal casing scalding to the touch. Something was etched on the chrome siding of the buckle, but Laney couldn't make out the words.

Rivers adjusted the rearview mirror, ceremonially tapped twice the Jesus air freshener wrapped around the radio dial, and glanced at Laney, whose pale blue eyes dammed up a sadness and suffering shared by a hundred other boys before him who had warmed that seat.

"Not much of a way for a young man to spend Christmas, huh?" Rivers said, adjusting the rearview again. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen," Laney answered in a voice small and quiet, "and spare change."

"Well, I take it that spreading holiday cheer wasn't exactly your motivation for throwing a brick through Mr.

Cook's window," Rivers said, again trying to keep his nagging cough in check.

"I just wanted a place to stay," Laney said, placing his hand on the belt buckle, which was much cooler now. "Figured jail would be safe and warm. Quiet."

Rivers pulled up to a stoplight and threw the cruiser in park.

"C'mere, you don't need those," he said, motioning for Laney's handcuffs.

Laney rubbed his freed wrists and looked out the window as the light turned green. A little girl wearing a red Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer bulb on her nose waved at him from the passenger side window of a pink Mary Kay Cosmetics car, her windy hair all braids and bows. He waved back.

Laney listened to Rivers warble official speak into a walkie talkie, and recognized a few random words: boy, lost, vandalism, grass stains. Rivers hung up the receiver and looked at the rearview mirror.

"I'm gonna take you into the station for the evening until we get some things squared away, alright?" he said calmly. "We'll have a cot for you to sleep on, and a couple of roommates for the evening. Henry Bells— don't even get me started on that boy—and Reverend Sugars Mandrell, who always volunteers to keep watch over the flock on Christmas Eve. It ain't the Beverly Hills Deluxe, but it'll do. And my wife Evangeline sends in some fine tastin' grub every year, so maybe you'll get a plate full. Sound okay?"

Laney nodded and held his hand up to his nose. He could still smell the flower's fragrant scent.

Rivers looked at the boy again in the rearview mirror. A part of him wondered how many more like him he'd see in the coming years. Another part wondered how much longer he'd be able to take it.

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Inside the Lunsford County Jail, a tabletop Christmas tree, draped in silver tinsel, blinked blue, red, green and purple, and cozied up to a pot of coffee, the steam still rising from its lid like ghosts. A woman's slow molasses croon crackled from a small red radio perched atop the warden's desk and drifted down a warmly lit hallway, its walls decorated with children's Christmas drawings.

Laney's hands were wrapped around two cell bars, and he looked between them to see the drawings. One showed a boy with his arms wrapped around members of his family. An orange sun flowered behind them. The image would not shake loose of him.

"I used to draw like that."

Laney turned to see where the words were coming from.

An old black man, dressed in a black pinstripe suit adorned with a yellow flower pin, smiled at him.

"Except I drew them on automobile hoods, water towers, and bathroom stalls," he continued. "I was about your age, too. Just as scrawny."

The holding room's other resident, splayed out on his cot with one boot-covered foot and one bare, remained still, the rising and falling of his chest indicating a state of temporary hibernation.

The old man smiled at Laney, removed his hat, and began tapping his red leather shoes on the floor.

"Where you from, Little King?" he asked.

Laney paused and hesitantly shook his head, not knowing to whom the old man was referring.

"You know who Elvis is?" Laney nodded.

"You kinda look like him," the old man said, picking at the frayed interior of his hat, "so I'ma call you Li'l King."

"I once saw Elvis shoppin' for a Burmese killifish at Jonah Stu's pet store downtown," said the man on the cot said, slowly waking. He stretched his arms toward the ceiling and slipping his Uni-Oil '76 cap snug over his head. "Never liked Elvis, though. More of a Stones man."

The cap's bill was pulled down over the man's brow, so Laney couldn't see his eyes, but he noticed that he had no front teeth.

"So why you in here, King?" the old man continued. "Your momma know where you are?"

Laney glanced between the bars again and looked at the drawings on the wall.

"My momma's gone."

The old man nodded slowly, tapping his foot again to some mystery rhythm playing in his head.

"Your Daddy gone too?"

Laney hesitated a moment before answering.

"Might as well be," he said, running his hand through his makeshift pompadour.

"I see," the old man softly trailed off. "So why you here?"

"I needed a place to stay," Laney answered, slowly slipping off his leather jacket. "To sleep."

The man on the cot flicked up the bill on his cap, revealing a look of disbelief.

Sugars Mandrell stepped toward Laney until they were face to face. He tapped his red leather shoes on the floor three times.

"Young man, I'm lookin' at you, and I'm hearin' the words tiptoe out of your mouth, and I'm *knowin'* you're looking for more than just a place to stay and sleep."

Laney could see his own reflection in the old man's eyes. They were fathomless but comforting.

"I see a stray dog in you, son," Sugars continued. "It's in every man standing in this room. You, me, even Henry Bells over there. The thing about a stray is this: they always movin' from one doorstep to the next. Always movin', always searchin', always hungry."

Sugars moved his face closer to Laney, his eyes growing wider.

"I know you're scared, Little King, and I know you're hungry, but sooner or later you got to be still and *eat*."

Henry Bells sat up from his former reclining position and rested his chin on his knee.

"What'd you do to get yourself in this predicament?" he asked.

"I threw a brick through a store window," Laney answered.

"Which store?"

"Cook's Dimestore Dream."

Sugars shook his head and slipped his hat back on while Henry exploded in laughter.

"They ought to give you the key to the city, son," Henry said through hoarse waves of laughter, wiping his brow with

his forearm. “As far as I’m concerned, you’ve already done your community service.”

Laney removed his leather jacket and looked at Henry. “How’d you get in here?”

Henry slipped off his cap and ran his hands through his thinning, black hair. Two lambchop-sized sideburns crept down the sides of his face and connected to a handlebar mustache prematurely peppered with flecks of gray.

“Well, I realize this ain’t exactly the appropriate yuletide tale for this evening,” he said, “but I woke up early this morning in the middle of that unpaved access road that intersects Cynthiana. I was messed up, to be honest. Just tore up. The headache, the bruises from a couple of unfriendly dalliances from the prior evening. I was on my back and opened my right hand. There was a note all scrunched up. It read ‘look in your back left jeans pocket for a Christmas surprise.’ The knuckles on my left hand were still busted, but I shoved it into my back left pocket and pulled out a little zip lock bag with two of my front teeth inside.

Henry flashed a huge gap-toothed grin. Sugars and Laney both laughed.

“That’s my story young man. Public intoxication was my ticket to these deluxe accommodations I share with you tonight.”

Sugars shook his head.

“What did you do with your teeth,” Laney asked, his smile unable to come undone.

“I sent ’em to my stepfather, wrapped up in a bow all nice and pretty. Slipped a note inside that read ‘*Somebody else got to me before you did— Merry Christmas.*’”

They all laughed until the sound of Hallis Rivers' 1964 Udelia High class ring repeatedly tick-tacking against one of the cell bars interrupted them.

"Alright gentlemen," he said, slipping three paper boxes through a slot in the cell door, "Evangeline wanted to make sure all overnight residents went to bed this Christmas Eve on a full stomach, so here are the goods. Ham sandwiches, homemade biscuits, chocolate chip and pecan cookies. Got a quart of sweet tea to wash it down, too."

A chorus of thank you's chimed out to meet the Warden's generosity.

"What's this, the third Christmas Eve in a row Henry?" Hallis asked, cocking an eyebrow. "We gonna have to officially christen this the Henry Bells Holding Tank #3?"

"It's Evangeline's fault," he answered, smiling. "Her cooking's too damn good. It drive a man to a life of crime."

After Rivers wished them all a Merry Christmas and left, Sugars poured three even cups of sweet tea and asked if Henry and Laney would stand with him to say a prayer before dinner.

As the three men stood together, arms interlocked and heads bowed, Laney opened one eye and looked again through the cell bars at to the drawing of the family, their faces smiling, their arms wrapped around each other. He felt a squeeze from Sugar's hand.

"Lord, may these stray sons finally find their way, be at peace, and eat," he said, finishing up his prayer. "Though I am here tonight as a shepherd, I am also one of the flock. Amen."

Sugars removed the yellow flower from his coat and pinned it on Laney's leather jacket.

“Every stray dog needs a place to be still and belong,” the old man said. “Tonight, Little King, you among family.”

Laney smiled slightly as his gaze moved from the warmth in the elderly man's eyes to the Christmas drawing outside the jail cell. The crude, crayon image of what looked like a boy wrapping his arms around his family gave Laney a strange feeling, like when a thunderstorm sometimes cracks the sky open on a sunny summer day.

Biting into one of Evangeline’s biscuits, Laney squinted his eyes to read the words inscribed on the bottom of the drawing. He squinted harder, his eyes reaching out like hands from between the bars. He squinted until his head hurt, but the words were just out of reach.

Amnesia of the Heart

All these fru-fru snacks—sesame sticks, snow peas and pine nuts. How about some old-fashioned, all-American snacks? Have they passed a law against serving plain old salted peanuts?" Jack Hamilton said more to himself than anyone else as he sat nursing his second bourbon and water at the bar in the Holiday Inn just off the I-85 exit near Greenville.

The green, silk floor plants and artfully placed strands of white Christmas lights framed the Generations Bistro and Bar. The bartender positioned herself as far away as possible from Jack Hamilton, pretending to dry wine glasses that were already dry. She had seen his kind before—retired, lonely men who felt entitled to rerun their Nick at Nite life stories for the price of several bourbons. The Christmas season brought them out in full force. Separated from her husband after one year of marriage and facing a psychology final in the morning was enough stress for Sylvia. She would keep him supplied with bourbon and fru-fru snacks, but nothing else.

A cold rush of December burst into the tiny bar as a middle-aged, heavy-set man made his way to the counter and removed his parka.

"How 'bout a Bud Lite, Ma'am?"

"Coming right up," Sylvia replied as she reached into the cooler.

"You want some party mix?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not?"

The sound of dulcimer inspired Christmas music wafted into the bar from the restaurant. Jack turned toward the stranger. "How's the traffic?"

"Busy."

The two men drank in silence, serenaded by dulcimers and the sounds of interstate traffic as Sylvia hid behind a newspaper.

Jack turned again to the stranger.

"Let me buy you a drink."

"Sure, why not," the man answered, extending his hand in appreciation. "Thanks."

"How bout a Bud Lite for my friend and another Jimmy Beam and water for me, Missy?"

"Coming right up. Would you like some more fru-fru—I mean party mix?" Sylvia offered, her face turning slightly crimson.

Jack's brow crinkled slightly in amusement. "Yeah. And you had it right the first time. Give us another helping of fru-fru."

The two men tipped their glasses to each other and continued drinking while Sylvia placed their glasses in the dishwasher, grateful that the new customer had taken the pressure off her for conversation. From dulcimers to Zamfir's pan flute, the Christmas music continued to make its way from the restaurant in muted and muffled tones.

"Where you headed?" Jack inquired as he searched his dish for an elusive peanut.

"I'm going south for Christmas. Down to Hotlanta. How about you?"

"Guess I'll stay around here. Got a condo not too far from here."

The stranger seemed to be warming up to his libation benefactor, much to the relief of Sylvia.

"Don't much like to be alone at Christmas. Going to my brother's and his family. Me and my wife split up last year.

Been married ten years when she up and ran off with the plumber. Always thought jokes about wives and plumbers were pretty funny 'til my wife ran off with one."

"Sorry to hear about that," Jack replied, taking a long pull from his bourbon and water.

"Yeah, me too. Whole thing caught me by surprise. My job took me on the road a lot. Every time I came home, there'd be another plumbing problem that needed fixin. Never suspected a thing. The house was two years old. That's what we always worked toward— to have a new house of our own. We got the house and the plumber got my wife. Guess I got the best damn plumbing in my neighborhood. How stupid is that?"

Jack lit a cigarette. "We all got plenty of stupid in us. Here I am sitting in a bar, drinking and eating fru-fru party mix two days before Christmas while my daughter wonders why I won't spend Christmas with her, my two granddaughters, Susie and Edie, and her husband, Ed."

"Ed must be a jerk."

"No, Ed's okay. He's been a good husband and provider. I couldn't ask for a better son-in-law."

"I don't get it," the stranger said, reaching for the party mix. "What about your wife? Maybe she and Ed don't get along too well. Hope he's not a plumber."

Jack chuckled softly. "No, Ed's no plumber. He's in insurance. Fact is, my wife died six years ago of cancer." Jack's drinking companion stopped eating.

"Sorry to hear that."

"That's alright. It was hard to lose her, but when you see someone suffer like she did…."

Jack looked away and cleared his throat.

Returning to his drink, he looked at Sylvia, still hiding behind the newspaper.

"Missy, how 'bout another round for me and…."

"Name's Tom McElroy," the stranger interrupted, extending his hand. "I'll buy the next round."

"Well, thank you kindly, Tom," Jack replied, extending his own.

"I'm Jack Hamilton."

The drinks arrived with more party mix.

"Don't mean to pry Jack, but for the life of me, I can't figure out why you're not with your daughter and her family eating turkey and dressing instead of drinking Jim Beam and eating party mix with me. I mean, I wish I had a daughter like that. Me and my wife never had kids. I love my brother and his family, but being an Uncle ain't like being a Daddy."

"You got a point Tom. It's my own fault. Strange as it sounds, I just don't feel that comfortable at my daughter's."

With the confidence that three Bud Lites can bring, Tom pressed Jack a bit further.

"Why don't you feel comfortable? Sounds pretty comfortable to me."

Jack took another swallow of his bourbon.

"Truth is, I don't know my daughter all that well. I retired from the FBI ten years ago. My wife pretty much raised her. I put my work first. Thought I was doing it for my family, but that was only partly true. I was as married to the Bureau as I was to Jill and Hope."

Jack swirled his drink with a swizzle stick and continued. "Hope was a beautiful baby. I remember when I brought her and her mother home from the hospital. What a day it was. I remember Jill and me taking her to her first day

of school. Got to attend one or two dance recitals, but missed most of them due to work. I was on assignment in D.C. when she went to her first prom, but the pictures turned out great. Likewise, her high school graduation. Me and Jill did make it to her college graduation, but work kept me from a lot of the stuff in between. Then she and Ed got married. She was a beautiful bride. I cried like a baby when I gave her away. I was glad none of my bureau buddies saw me. None of them could make the wedding. Then she and Ed had Susie and little Edie."

Jack looked away again and rubbed his left eye as Tom looked down at the party mix dish.

"Every year since Jill died, Hope asks me to come up for Thanksgiving and stay through Christmas. And every year, I promise to do it, and I mean to. After a few days I always end up leaving and coming home. I start feeling out-of-place a day or two after Thanksgiving. I love my daughter, but in a way, I don't know her. I've got some good memories, but in between those memories are a lifetime of empty gaps. She and Ed still invite me each year, but I can hear it in their voices. They know I won't stay. I feel guilty about the whole thing. I made my bed and I guess I'll have to lie in it."

Jack grew silent, lost in his spent opportunities. Even Sylvia, peeking from behind her newspaper found herself drawn into Jack's predicament. Tom said nothing as he chewed on a toothpick and stared at a snow pea laying on the counter.

Taking the toothpick from his mouth, Tom looked at his newfound acquaintance.

"Jack, you know a person can change beds. My wife sure did. She didn't give me a chance to make up the gaps. Or if she did, I was too dumb to notice. Can't do nothing 'bout the

gaps of the past, but you also got some good memories to build on. Ain't like your daughter's holding those gaps against you. I know it ain't easy, but none of us got forever to make things right. And maybe you can't even if you try. Question is, are you running from your chances or toward 'em?"

Jack felt his neck stiffen up. He didn't particularly like what he heard, but if thirty years at the Bureau taught him one thing, it was to listen, to pay attention before he reacted.

"You got a point, Tom, but it's two days before Christmas. They wouldn't be expecting me. They probably have other plans. They'd probably have a heart attack if I showed up on their doorstep Christmas Eve."

"Maybe that's the kind of heart attack they're wishing for this Christmas," Tom replied, smiling as he got up from the bar and placed a five-dollar tip on the counter. "I got to be getting on to Hotlanta. My folks'll be expecting me."

"I need to get going too," Jack responded, rising from his stool.

"Merry Christmas, Missy."

"Merry Christmas, fellows. You both drive safe now," Sylvia replied as she scooped the tip money into her apron.

The two men shook hands outside the bar and wished each other a happy holiday.

"Tom, if you ever get this way again, look me up. I'm in the phone book."

"I might just take you up on that," Tom replied. "You gonna call her?"

Jack looked at Tom and smiled. "Don't know. Maybe."

With a wave of his hand, Tom was gone. Jack watched his taillights disappear into the cold, December night. It was

beginning to snow as Jack zipped his parka all the way up to his chin.

Climbing into his Ford pick-up, Jack lit a cigarette and looked at the cell phone lying on the seat next to him. He cranked up the truck, exhaled a plume of smoke, and whispered, “Reach out and touch someone.”

As Is

Tommy Wills' dream was always the same, locked away deep, somewhere beneath stacks of faded denim jeans in the attic and an ashtray full of hairpins.

It would begin with a summer Saturday evening. The bathroom window cracked open. The old yellow curtain, the one she never liked, cresting and falling again.

She would let him choose the music, and he'd almost always pull out an old scratched 45 of Gram Parsons' Brass Buttons.

She loved the popping sound when the needle first hit the record. She liked that better than the song itself.

Then she would sit, perched on a stool in front of the old sink, mouthing the words, waiting for him.

Moving toward her, he'd walk as slow as he could, spirits in the old wood floor stirring, alerting them both to each footstep. He always wanted to keep the moment alive for as long as possible.

She would let him pull out her hairpins, one by one, and he'd count each one, laying them gently on the towel shelf. Sometimes he'd pull out the old ukulele that had been hibernating in her mother's attic, the one decorated with jewels from gumball machines. And she would laugh, or roll her eyes, or make up words and sing along.

He would look at her feet while washing her hair and smile at the V-shaped tan lines where she had been wearing flip-flops in the garden.

She would laugh and say, "See it through, Tommy. Stay on course and see it through."

He would dry her off, then wrap her up in an apricot-colored towel, the one with the Corvette Stingray parked in front of a palm tree, the one they got that weekend it rained at the beach.

Then he would lean against the doorway and watch her walk around the hallway corner to the bedroom. She would always turn and smile just before disappearing, and he'd count each footprint left in her wake on the floor.

And then she would be gone.

———

"Wake up sunshine. Break's over. There's a new shipment of Jr. Miss thong sandals with your name on it that's ready to be unloaded and stored in the stockroom."

Tommy lifted his head off his desk and slowly peeled his eyes open, his right hand still wrapped around a Styrofoam coffee cup, wisps of steam drifting from its top.

Ford Fennel, Tommy's 23-year-old assistant manager at the On The Good Foot Shoe Shack, was hovering over him, eyebrows arched and finger tapping against a gold-plated Swiss Army watch.

"Hey listen, I need to cut out a bit early today," Ford said, wiping off his Get On The Good Foot sales award pin, which he always wore, even after hours. "Would you mind wrapping up the paperwork, honcho? I've got some business to tend to."

Tommy took a deep breath, sipped his coffee and glanced over at a small corkboard covered in Polaroid photos of employees. Half of them were of Ford posing with various family automobiles, and more than a few had been artistically manipulated by mischievous co-workers wielding Sharpie

pens. It was widely known, at least within the confines of The Good Foot, that Ford's parents had named their six children after automobile brand names. Anytime this fact was brought up in conversation among employees, someone would crack, "Which one is Yugo?" or "Is the younger sister named Hyundai, or is that the older sister?" And on and on.

Tommy rubbed his eyes and took a sip of his coffee before standing up.

"Yeah, I can take care of that for you," said Tommy.

"That'd be outstanding."

"Before you leave, though, I'd like to clarify a few things about my history, and perhaps kick a bit of wisdom your way, if you don't mind," Tommy said.

Ford, looked at his watch, irritated, and exhaled a deep breath. "Sure. Shoot."

"For the record, the reason I'm wearing this lovely ankle bracelet here," Tommy said, lifting his khaki pant leg and pointing at the GPS tracking device wrapped around his ankle, "is between me and my parole officer, and it involves neither the rape of someone, nor murder by crowbar."

Ford stood still as a stone, his jaw slack, his eyes frozen wide open. He slowly began reaching for the breakroom door to exit.

"Oh, and Ford ..."

"Yessir."

"If I ever hear again of you passing off your conspiracy theories as fact concerning why I'm wearing this lovely accessory, I'll find a reason to have a matching one on my other ankle. Clear?"

"As a bell, sir."

———

Jim “Dandy” James had only been working as a salesman at The Good Foot for four months, but he was already a legend. Dressed immaculately in a suit (even on casual Fridays), Dandy would handpick customers on which to work his self-described “mojitsu” persuasion technique he claimed to have picked up during a dubious tenure in the Orient. He even carried his own personalized Brannock foot measuring device.

In the month of April alone, he convinced 131 customers that orange suede clogs were the harbingers of a “nower-than-now” Dutch-influenced fashion wave that was still “top secret” in Milan.”

The kid was *that* good.

Tommy always tried to guess which color combination Dandy would assemble for the day’s seduction, and this time he was on the money: Khaki linen suit, chocolate and white duotone loafers. He looked sharp as a guillotine and could jaw so well that area car salesmen were known to come in and buy a cheap pair of Adidas just to hijack some of his game.

“Feelin’ it today, Tommy boy, rollin’ thunder!” Dandy spoke in a singsong voice, waltzing into the store.

He pulled out a single stick of Juicy Fruit gum from his inside coat pocket, tore it in half, placed one half in his mouth and the unopened piece on the cashier’s counter.

“TomTom, visualize with me,” he directed from behind the checkout counter, his eyes closed and arms extended out like a televangelist during sweeps week. “Athletic department, third aisle, second shelf. Blonde mother of two. Blue New Balance with Pink trim. Full Retail. A wink and a giggle. Sold, three minutes tops.”

Dandy then shimmied his hands and shot both forefingers toward the more upscale women's shoes selection.

"I see a Steve Madden limited edition boho-stiletto set walking out of here in about five … wait," he said, hesitating. "Scratch that. Gimme the Madden bohos, and gimme an additional pair of eggplant-colored aqua socks for the lady at 9 o'clock. By the time the flavor is gone in the gum I'm chewing, it'll be D-U-N, done."

Tommy shook his head and clapped his hands. "The Dandy do right," he said, smiling. "Make the magic happen, son."

"Yes sir, where you headed?"

"Dinnertime. Gonna sample some fine Food Court cuisine and see if I can fatten up this stunning specimen," Tommy answered, patting his generous midsection. "Figured an extra-large order of fried won tons will do the trick."

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Tommy grasped the escalator's handrail and began his descent, his fingers tapping in rhythm to the cover version of a cover version of some forgotten song trickling out of the shopping center's speaker system. He looked at the faces of those riding in the opposite direction. Some looked familiar, and most wore what he called "the mall mask"— an expression that's a combination of impatience, anxiety, boredom, and frustration.

"Ah, so many choices," Tommy whispered to himself, scanning the Food Court's neon and candy-colored marquees beckoning hungry stomachs. "And so many ways to make your arteries explode."

But he knew which one he'd choose. The same one he always chose—Asian Au Go-Go. At the same time, 6:15 p.m. sharp. For the same reason. Celia Skye was the manager, and provided the best dinner companionship he'd had in a long time.

Tommy and Celia eased their chairs up to a rare empty table, and that unmistakable Mall Buzz—consisting of pubescent chatter, scattershot laughter, screaming babies and innumerable parental pleas—all wrapped up in a white noise casserole, fell deaf on their ears.

It was just the two of them and two Moo Goo Gai Pan combo specials, on the house.

Celia tested the heat of the sauce with her index finger and noticed Tommy's tie selection for the day.

"A bolo tie today, huh?," she said, scooping a fork full of food in her mouth. "Looks sharp, Texas Pete."

Tommy smiled, shaking his head. "My grandfather gave me a collection of these ties when I was a kid. He had a whole wall devoted to 'em. Used to just stand in his room in the summertime and look at them hanging there, shimmering in the light. Got one for each state. Today is North Dakota's moment in the sun."

"I'm impressed."

"I'm repressed."

Celia laughed out loud, nearly spilling her Coke.

"What is that, a 98 ouncer?" Tommy asked, "They should outfit that thing with a diving board."

"Noooo, it's only a 32 ouncer."

"Oh, *only* a 32 ouncer. That's a sugar O.D. waiting to happen."

Celia smiled and picked at her food a moment. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Shoot.”

“For weeks, we’ve been gathering at this table together, you and I, and I’m looking at that wedding ring on your finger. And I take it that, from the direction our conversation has been flowing here, you’re not married— am I right?”

“That’s true.”

“So, may I ask why you still wear the ring?”

Tommy pulled his straw out of his cup lid and poked at the lukewarm remnants of his Moo Goo Gai Pan. The dinner rush was beginning to fade a bit.

“My wife passed away five years ago next week. Cancer.”

Celia shook her head, tucking her hair behind her ears. “I’m so sorry.”

Tommy carefully pushed his plate aside and held up his left hand.

“She made this ring for me. She was an artisan— stained glass, pottery. A real hands-on type,” Tommy continued, putting the straw back in his cup. “After she passed, I went out of my mind, pretty much. The usual TV Movie Of The Week-type stuff. Heavy drinking, lost the big job, lost the house. Lost it all. Thank God we didn’t have kids.”

Celia crumpled her napkin and placed it on her near-empty plate of food as Tommy continued.

“So one night, after celebrating my grief— *yet again*— I drove my 1987 Mercury Cougar into the broadside of a parked car. Two young ladies were inside, gussied up for an evening out. The impact of my car killed the girl in the

passenger side. Michelle Dubois. 20 years old. Economics major at Georgia Tech. On the verge of everything.

"Such a beautiful girl," his voice trailed off . . .

"I was sentenced to five years in prison. Michelle's family, understandably, wanted my throat slit in front of the television cameras. My friends turned into ghosts. But I did the time, and here I am, an ex-convict salesman, fourth best in the bunch, for The Good Foot, with a boss half my age and this lovely little fashion accessory.

Tommy lifted his left pant leg to reveal a black, belt-like strap just above his ankle.

"It's a GPS tracking device. A Global Positioning Satellite tracks my every move and reports to my probation officer. Very James Bond, huh?"

Celia wiped her hands on her napkin and reached to graze the strap with her finger.

"Is it heavy?"

"Was at first, but you get used to it. Thought I might debut it at the beach this summer, start a new fashion trend."

"I'd love to see that," Celia answered, laughing. "Next stop: the runways of Par-eeee!"

Tommy and Cecilia both laughed out loud, the Food Court's buzz now a post-dinner rush hum.

"So, anyway, the only connection to her I had left was this ring, which the boys in blue slipped into a little Ziplock bag for safekeeping while I was in prison. And when I was released, it was the first thing I saw that reminded me of the life I had outside with her. It's all I have left."

Celia leaned in toward Tommy and tucked her hair behind both ears.

"I think you have a little more left than you realize," she said.

A faint smile cracked across Tommy's face. He reached to pull his pant leg down over the strap strangling his ankle.

"No, don't," Celia said, waving his hand away from his pant leg. "Leave it as is."

Tommy paused for a moment and looked at Celia. He thought about her voice. It was warm and cozy as a lap.

Celia took a long sip of coffee, and Tommy watched a wisp of steam rise from its lid, smeared with lipstick.

She unfolded one of the crumpled napkins on her dinner plate, pulled out a pen and began writing.

"Do you think about her often," she asked, still writing.

"She's always there," he said, "kind of like a loose shoestring that keeps clicking against the floor when you walk."

Celia folded the napkin neatly, removed a hairpin from her tangle of brown curls, and clipped the napkin onto Tommy's bolo tie.

"You been walking in those shoes a long time, Tommy," she said, standing up. "Maybe it's about time for a new pair."

Tommy unfolded the napkin. It read: "Wanted: Tall ex-convict. Brown eyes, bald. Bad taste in ties. Will take him as is. If interested, call Celia at 770.881.3224."

After carefully folding the napkin and slipping it in his shirt pocket, Tommy held Celia's hairpin up to the light and smiled.

"770.881.3224," he repeated to himself, over and over, humming the numbers as if they were words in the melody of a song he thought he had forgotten to sing.

Seeds of Change

"Why not, Mother? Why not?"

Missy Simerly's complaint was vivid and compelling, colored by an independent streak and the ache of childhood friendship.

"Don't take that tone with me," Eunice Simerly replied as she rubbed Jergens body lotion onto her arms. "You are twelve years old, young lady. Old enough to end your tomboy ways. It's time for you to start acting like a young lady."

Missy balled up her fists in frustration. "Why can't Nellie come play with me like she used to? Why can't Naomi bring her on Saturdays when she comes to do the ironing?"

Eunice pursed her lips. "Your playing days with Nellie are over. Nellie's a good girl and her mother is a good woman, but we live in difficult times. One day you will understand. Not today, but one day you will …" Missy's mother's voice trailed off as the screen door creaked open to show Naomi Jones standing there.

"Ironing's done and Sunday's pie is warming on the stove."

"Oh my, Naomi," Eunice gasped. I didn't realize what time it is. Are you ready for me to drive you home?"

"Yessum, I 'spect so," Naomi replied, offering a sideways nod to Missy.

Eunice massaged the last of the lotion into the palms of her hands. "Okie dokie then. And Naomi . . . "

"Yessum?"

"Don't forget to take that leftover chicken from last night's supper home with you."

Naomi fetched her hat and coat from the broom closet. “Yessum. Thank you.”

Eunice picked up her purse and car keys from the hallway antique table. “Oh, you are most welcome. The chicken fricassee you prepared is one of Ed’s favorites. I trust it will be just as tasty for you and Marvin once it’s warmed up.”

Missy stood on the front porch and watched her mother’s station wagon back out of the driveway with Naomi sitting in the back seat. A thought floated through her mind: “back seat of the bus, back seat of the station wagon.” There was a sameness to back seat traditions. It was what she was used to, the way things had always been as far as she knew.

Mose, the yard man, looked up from the rose bush he was trimming. “Young’un, you be alright?”

“I guess so, Mose. The world is mighty strange.”

Mose loosened up the red kerchief that he wore around his neck and wiped the sweat from his face. “You’ll be okay, child. The Lord will work it all out in his own good time.”

Missy Simerly, through no fault of her own, was caught in the throes of major change. Her best friend, Nellie, was the first Negro girl to integrate the school Missy attended.

She overheard her father tell her mother while reading the latest headlines from the local newspaper, “My dear, the natural order is being challenged.” Eunice Simerly reminded her husband that Reverend Ernest Bosco had told her last week after Sunday Services that such change was not Biblical, but was the Devil’s temptation. Besides, he had it on good authority that M.L. King, Jr. was a communist.

August Simerly folded the newspaper he had been reading and looked at his wife.

"I wouldn't put too much stock in what Ernie Bosco says. As I recall, last year he claimed to have a visitation by the Angel Gabriel while fishing on the Flint River.

"Well, he is our preacher," Eunice retorted.

Her husband offered her a wisp of a smile. "That he is. But it helps to remember that all Reverends aren't created equal."

Eunice pushed her point. "A man of God is a man of God."

August reached for his pipe. "Perhaps, but most men of God I know don't prefer a jigger of Four Roses in their afternoon coffee."

Lighting his pipe, he continued. "All I'm saying is that just because the order we are accustomed to may be natural to us, doesn't mean it's natural to others."

"You mean the Negroes?"

"Yep, that's what I mean. In any event, Bob Dylan's right. 'The times, they are a-changin', and maybe, it's time that they did."

Eunice rose from her chair and smoothed out her skirt. "Well, I can't believe you are listening to the likes of him. Anyway, I heard he was a Communist too."

Her husband laughed. "Is it possible that anyone who doesn't see things your way is a Communist?"

The attic fan pushed the linen curtains, creating a breeze in Missy's room. Laying on her bed, she thought about Nellie. They had played together since they were five. Every Saturday, Naomi brought Nellie with her when she came to clean house

and cook the evening meal for Missy's family. Once, when Missy's younger brother JT called Naomi a nigger because she wouldn't let him have another cookie, her father found out about it and gave JT what folks down South referred to as a "whupping." Although she was only 12, Missy possessed a keen sense of observation. She was glad her parents weren't prejudiced like some of the other people she knew. But still, there was something going on that made her feel uneasy. As she lay there, her mind wandered back to years past and the games she and Nellie played together.

They played everything from hopscotch, to checkers, to dolls. Less frequently, they played Missy's favorites, horseshoes and the basketball game of "horse." They were good memories for the most part, but as her memory pulled back more layers, Missy pondered the more subtle, nuanced responses Nellie relied on in their childhood games. While Missy had no doubt their affection for each other was genuine, she had to admit that Nellie almost always played second fiddle to her, deferring to her wishes even when they tended to be selfish or demanding. Looking more closely into her past, Missy recognized the polite shadow that fell across Nellie's face when she felt she was being treated unfairly, or the slight arch of her eyebrow that signaled some hint of hidden anger even as a practiced smile pursed her lips. Now, Missy saw those same subtle cues and responses each morning Nellie walked the gauntlet past the white students' stares and whispers into the school that didn't want her.

Tomorrow would be another day at school, a day like most other school days, but not for Nellie.

———

Recess was a welcome break from the monotony of Elvin Elrod's Civics class. Reading from his precisely typed notes with the cadence of a funeral home director, he would occasionally peer over his horn-rimmed glasses and proclaim, "Any questions?" followed immediately by "Well, then," as he continued reading aloud to himself.

Missy, Nancy, and Rose Marie were playing jump rope when she heard Dickie Lee Jones' whine of a voice state with an air of false bravado, "You ain't welcome around here. You and your kind need to go back to Africa where you belong."

Picking up the jump rope, Missy walked over to the small group of ne'er-do-wells gathered around the picnic table where Nellie was staring at the pages of her Civics book. Her shadowed face was straining at practiced politeness. Stu Esom giggled nervously, but then Stu was known to giggle from time to time for no reason at all.

Looking around at his audience was a new experience for Dickie Lee, a kind of first-time attention that was focused on him alone. Turning back to Nellie, his whine quickly morphed into his best attempt at a growl. "Did you hear me, Nigger?"

Missy could feel the heat rising in her face. Nancy noted her friend's reddening cheeks and whispered to Rose-Marie, "Uh oh. Fire in the hole. We best step back."

Every kid there, was aware that when provoked, Missy could display a bit of temper. When faced with adverse circumstances, Missy Simerly often chose fight over flight.

Missy stepped forward. "Dickie Lee Jones, if you know what's good for you, leave Nellie alone."

Dickie looked at the others for some sign of support before turning back to Missy. “What are you, some kind of Nigger lover?”

All eyes shifted from Dickie Lee to Missy, waiting to see what would happen next.

“Nellie Mae Johnson is my friend. If that makes me a Nigger lover, then so be it,” Missy replied, her voice rising.

The small assortment of befuddled sixth graders issued forth a collective gasp as their eyes asked the question: Was Missy with them and their parents or did she stand with the unwelcome intruder sitting at the picnic table?

Unsure of what his next move should be, Dickie Lee Jones made the wrong choice. Wanting to cash in on the attention he was getting, he went nose-to-nose with Missy and spewed forth, “then why don’t you go back to Africa with her and her bunch?”

No one present could clearly recollect the order of what happened next. All they could remember was that before Dickie Lee could finish sounding out the last word “bunch” for effect, Missy Simerly began to whip him with the jump rope she had wrapped around her right hand. She pummeled him with the wooden handles, busting his lip and catching his left eye with a strike that would have made Lash LaRue proud. To make matters worse, boys weren’t supposed to hit girls, which further handicapped Dickie. Stunned by the ferocity of Missy’s surprise attack, he went into full retreat mode, running for his life toward the safety of Miss Edna Fogelburg, the recess supervisor. The bloodied sight of Dickie caused Edna to drop the apple she was nibbling on in horror.

After directing Dickie Lee to the school nurse, she huffed and hustled over to the scene of the assault. Snatching

the jump rope from Missy's hand, Edna chortled, "Young lady, you are in a world of trouble! Off you go to the principal's office. I will be right behind you."

The befuddled group of sixth graders stared at the unfolding scene in silence. Missy stole a quick glance toward Nellie as she made her way to the administrative office. The shadows disappeared from Nellie's face for a fleeting moment before she returned to her book.

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Little was said on the ride home from school. Daddy drove and Mother bemoaned the actions of her errant, misguided daughter with a nonverbal guttural expression of "Mmm . . . mmm . . ." But once they got inside, the inquisition began.

Missy's father sat down in his chair and folded his hands in his lap while his wife paced to and fro, gesturing with her hands as she spoke. Missy sat in the old rocking chair.

"Ed Simerly, what are you going to do about our daughter? If this keeps up, she is going to be the death of me. We won't be able to show our faces in town or in church. And good Lord, of all the children to get into a fracas with, she picks on Dickie Lee Jones whose mother is President of the Garden Club. I won't be able to look Matilda in the eye, but that probably won't matter, because she will most likely never speak to me again!"

Eunice slumped down on the sofa and held her head in her hands, talking as much to herself as to her husband. "I've tried. Lord knows I've tried to raise her to be a lady. I've told her it's time to give up her tomboy habits. No matter what, she continues to defy me and go her own way. I've prayed about it until I'm blue in the face. I don't know what else to do."

Missy stopped the rocking chair. “Dickie Lee was calling Nellie names. He was bullying her, and no one did anything about it. And . . . “

Eunice Simerly interrupted her daughter in mid-sentence. “That’s not your concern. You need to stay out of this integration mess.”

“But . . .,” Missy tried to interject.

“No buts about it,” her mother replied. “I should have never let Naomi bring her to play with you in the first place. All it’s done is cause trouble and embarrassment.”

Missy stared at her balled-up fists and began rocking again, the rhythmic creak signaling the rising of her temperature.

“Well, Ed, are you going to sit there like a bump on a log or be the man of the house?”

Ed looked at his daughter, then at his wife. “I thought I would let you finish before I spoke. Are you through?”

Eunice looked at Ed with fire in her eyes. “Yes, I am through!”

“Okay then,” Ed replied. “As the man of the house, Missy, I have to say that I am disappointed that you couldn’t control your temper. That it resulted in you being sent home.”

Eunice pointed at her daughter. “Do you hear that, young lady? Do you hear that?”

Ed cleared his throat. “However, . . . “

Eunice’s eyes grew wide. “However what?”

Casting a warning glance his wife’s way, Ed continued. “However, Nellie is your friend and it’s not a bad thing to stand up for your friends, preferably without resorting to violence. Fighting and such never really solves anything.”

Missy's mother rose from the sofa in a huff and left the room.

Her father's expression softened. "Are you all right, my rambunctious young daughter?"

Missy stopped rocking. "I guess so. I know I'm supposed to be sorry about what I did to Dickie Lee, but you and I both know that I'm not."

Her father stood up from his chair and winked at his daughter. "Sometimes the truth hurts. I bet those jump rope handles left a mark. How about I make us some hot chocolate?"

———

Missy sensed more than understood that a kind of precarious, tense balance existed in her home, the balance between her high-strung "what will the neighbors think" mother and her low-keyed "discipline with a wink" father. Their relationship brought her an uneasy reassurance tinged with the anxiety such tension engenders. It added to the mix of confusion and chaos of the world changing beneath her feet, straining a twelve-year-old girl's imagination of what had always been and what was yet to come.

Hunched over on the garden bench lost in thought, Missy didn't notice Mose approaching with his garden hoe.

Mose kneeled down beside her. "Child, what be troublin' you?"

Missy shrugged her shoulders. "Mose, I don't what to make of things anymore. Lately, I can't seem to stay out of trouble."

"No doubt 'bout that," Mose replied with a smile. "Troubles do come our way. Question is, what do we do we

they arrive on our doorstep? 'Course, only the Good Lord knows how and when it end."

Missy rubbed her eye. "If it *will* end. Will it end, Mose?"

"Sure 'nuff, it will. All things pass in time, the good and the bad. You too young to understand, but you different than most folks. You be seed corn."

Missy looked puzzled. "What's seed corn?"

Mose looked at Missy before speaking. "You be one of the special ones, Miss Missy. The seed corn special like you. All crops depend on it. The people depend on it. If anyone eats the seed corn, folks starve. So folks protect it. There future depend on it. You and your kind be the future. What you see going on now will soon be the past."

Missy placed her hand on Mose's knee. "Sounds nice, but I'm not sure I understand. All I know is that I'm tired. I'm tired of getting into trouble, of upsetting my mother . . . but I can't seem to help it . . . especially the way they treat Nellie at school. Most of the teachers ignore her. Not Mrs. Frazier, our English teacher. She's nice to Nellie. But not the others. And the students, even some of my friends, are worse. They laugh at her and call her names."

Mose rose to his feet and picked up his hoe. "I hear 'bout you and the Jones boy. They say you gave him a sure 'nuff whippin'."

Missy shook her head. "When I get mad, sometimes I can't seem to stay put. My parents say I don't have enough self-discipline. Maybe I don't. But I don't like bullies. When Dickie Lee got on Nellie's case, I told him to stop."

Rolling himself a cigarette, Mose looked at Missy. "And when he didn't?"

"When he didn't, he went nose-to-nose with me," Missy replied. "I don't like folks getting in my face. I guess that's when I took to the jump rope."

Mose lit his cigarette. "So, how about now, young'un? That be in your past. Tomorrow be a new day. . . can be a good day at school for you."

Missy's countenance turned serious. "That depends."

"Depends on what, Child?"

Missy looked at Mose. "Depends on what happens when I sit with Nellie tomorrow at lunchtime. She shouldn't have to eat alone. Maybe, I'll bring my jump rope with me."

Mittie Lee's Revenge

In those days, Black women who lived in the Deep South were at the bottom of things.

There was no lower place to go.

Their men shuffled, bowed and scraped before Jim Crow laws and Klansmen masquerading as God-fearing Christians. They sharecropped and tenant-farmed a spare existence while their wives raised White folks' children. They "yes-bossed" their way through back-breaking work, poor pay, and the demeaning leer and chatter of White men who thought themselves superior to the ones they exploited for profit and amusement.

Black men ate their anger and buried it deep in the ache of their toil and restless minds.

When the day's labor was done and they returned to the tin roof shanties they called home, their anger came alive, rising from ashes of long-held grievance. The only ones they could safely take it out on were their wives and children.

Mittie Lee was such a person. A simple, kind, God-fearing woman who worked as a maid for a White middle-class family, she had the misfortune of being married to a man named James.

Spared from working in the fields or cotton gin, James was the colored barber who serviced colored town. On weekends, he was also a mean drunk. Bootleg whiskey sold out of the backdoor of the Paradise funeral home fueled his Saturday night carousing with friends and strangers alike at the Harlem Two-Spot. Male or female, it didn't matter as long as they had access to a jug of whiskey.

James, like the rest of the men stumbling toward home in a midnight drunken parade, didn't take kindly to a woman's

questions, admonishment, or amorous rejection. In his shanty, *he* was "the Man," not some White "cracker" he had to "step and fetch" for the other five days of the week. He did what he wanted and took what he wanted.

Sunday mornings brought brief reprieve while women hid their scars in church, longing to cross over the deep river into a promised land's campground. But on Saturday nights, women like Mittie Lee bowed in broken and bruised futility before their men's impotent rage.

One Saturday night, something changed.

Mittie Lee heard a commotion on the front porch. She found James lying there in an incoherent heap. His alcoholic stupor left him unable to stand or remember where he had been or who he had been with. Mittie Lee had never seen him so drunk.

As was her habit, she helped him get into bed and prayed for the strength to endure when a light clicked on in her troubled spirit. She went inside, put her hand on the Bible and prayed, "Lord, forgive me for what I am about to do."

She fetched a stout rope from the shed and tied her comatose husband securely to the bed frame. Perusing the stack of firewood on the back porch, Mittie Lee selected a seasoned stout stick of hickory. Standing over James, she paused for a moment, feeling a wave of panic washing over her. Where violence was concerned, she had always been on the receiving, never the giving end.

Taking a deep breath, she took the hickory in both hands and raised it above her head and struck James. After the first blow, her hands grew steady and resolute, raining down blow after blow on her husband who cried for relief. She

wasn't sure she could stop until she heard God say, "Don't kill him. Don't kill James." So, she didn't.

Mittie Lee drank a glass or water and rested a spell before untying her husband. She returned the rope to the shed and the hickory to the wood stack. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she felt the breath of freedom wash over her. She thanked the good Lord for that feeling, something she had never felt before. And she thanked Him for staying her hand short of beating James to death, even though she had no doubt he deserved it.

James groaned and moaned his way into the following morning.

Mittie Lee brought him a cup of coffee.

He rubbed his left eye almost swollen shut. "Woman, what happened to me?"

Mittie Lee sat in the chair next to the bed and mopped his bruised face with a wet rag. "Can't say for sure. I heard a commotion out front and found you on the porch. Whoever left you there was long gone. Looks like you mighta' got the worst of it. Maybe some of those Harlem Two-Spot hooligans jumped you."

Mittie Lee rose and looked down at James. "You poor thing. I can't believe they did that to you. You stay in bed while I go fry you up some eggs and fatback."

She put on her apron and sidled up to the stove. Looking out of her kitchen window, Mittie Lee smiled.

The Way Back

Rounding a wide curve, Archie Jones noticed a man lying on the shoulder of the road. Everyone knew this was a rough county with a high crime rate. The local tavern, Boozers and Brawlers, lived up to its name, especially with underage teenage boys buying beer out of the back door and mill workers drinking their way through weekly paychecks.

A month ago, Rayfield Granger, the retired high school principal, was having trouble late one evening changing a flat tire when he got bushwhacked by three teenage boys in a Jeep. They roughed him up and stole his wallet and cellphone.

A man couldn't be too careful in Witchacaw County after dark.

He pulled his truck over and rolled down his window.

"You all right, fellow?"

The man groaned.

"Tell you what. I'll go get some help."

Instead, Archie called what passed for 911 in that godforsaken county. The line was busy so he left a voice mail and continued on his way.

Twenty minutes later, Reverend Tobias Andrews, in a hurry to get home from his weekly hospital visits, drove by without even noticing the injured man. As did Missy Davis, Marketing Director for Eden Garden Senior Living, who followed several minutes later.

Mateo Lopez always drove the backroad two-lane highways at night when he traveled home to visit his parents in Mexico. After six months of landscaping, roofing and construction, he

was flush with cash—enough to pay off the mortgage on his parent's small bungalow in a village not far from La Paz.

Like the others, Mateo caught sight of the man in distress. Pulling his truck to a stop, he reached for his flashlight. The man lying in front of his truck was most likely either dead or injured. A bicycle and an army backpack that had seen better days lay on the ground nearby.

Making the sign of the cross, Mateo got down on one knee and gently squeezed the man's shoulder. "Amigo, you okay?'

The old man groaned, "Are you the law? I don't want no law."

"No law. You need help?"

Turning over to face his potential benefactor, a grizzled shadow of a man said, "What's your name?"

"Mateo."

"Mateo—what kind of name is that?"

"Mexico," Mateo replied.

Raising up on his elbow, "Name's George, and I reckon I could use a hand in getting my stuff together."

"You got blood round you eye. Any broken bones?"

George rubbed his arms. "Don't think so."

Mateo rose to his feet. "You wait here. I get first-aid kit from truck."

After patching George up, Mateo suggested they get something to eat at an all-night diner just down the road.

George zipped up the remnants of his army jacket. "I ain't too hungry. Besides, them teenage boys took my disability check when they jumped me."

The old man extended his hand to Mateo. "I do thank you for stopping to help me, but I'll just look for a campsite on down the road somewhere private."

Mateo took George's hand in both of his. "First, we eat. On me. What you say?"

Stroking his beard, George peered at Mateo. "Why would you do that? You don't even know me."

"Why not?" Mateo smiled. You need help so I give help."

George thought for a minute. "Well, then OK."

As Mateo put the bike in the bed of his truck, he noticed George winced every time he took a step. When they pulled into the gravel parking lot of the It'll Do Motel and Diner, to Mateo's eye things looked better than expected. The occupants of an old RV, a station wagon, and two pick-up trucks were eating inside the diner.

Working their way through greasy cheeseburgers and fries, Mateo and George said little until the apple pie and vanilla ice cream arrived.

Swallowing the last of his sweet tea, Mateo gave his belly a satisfied pat. "Mucho better. George, what you do on road? Where you go?"

Taking a bite of pie, George's eyes narrowed. "I keep on the move. Nowhere in particular. After getting out of the Army, I mostly like to stay to myself."

Mateo wiped his hands on a paper napkin. "Where you serve?

"Here and there," George replied taking a sip of coffee, "but in Afghanistan."

Mateo leaned forward. "My brother was in Afghanistan."

Looking out the window into the night, George put his coffee cup down. “I did three tours. The last one got the best of me. After I caught that load of shrapnel, I had enough. Uncle Sam agreed and put me out to pasture with a medical discharge.”

George took another sip of coffee. “Trouble was, I couldn’t find my way back. The man who came home wasn’t the man who left. In the end, my wife left me along with our daughter.”

“Sorry to hear that. Sorry for your loss. Sorry for your troubles.”

The waitress came by with more coffee and sweet tea.

Blowing on the hot coffee, George looked at Mateo with the hint of a crooked grin. “Maybe I’m like the one Ralph Stanley sings about in *A Man of Constant Sorrow*. What about you? What’s your story?”

Mateo leaned back. “Mama and Papa live in Mexico. I got an older brother who served in Army. He come back to Mexico. Runs . . . what you say . . . plumbing business in La Paz with wife and six children. I work in States. Help out familia.”

George nodded as he took the last bite of his pie. Pushing his plate to the side, he straightened his camo baseball cap. “I guess it’s about time for us to say our goodbyes and be on our way.”

Mateo nodded. “I go to baño, then we say adiós.”

The two men breathed in the night air as they went to retrieve George’s bicycle and backpack from the truck.

Standing under the flickering neon sign with the “n” missing in Diner, they shook hands.

"Here, amigo" Mateo said, placing a key and envelope in George's hand. "You need rest and money for food."

George stared at the room key and envelope. "I can't take this money. Your family needs it. Anyway, why are you doing all this? Like I said before, you don't even know me."

Mateo looked George in the eye. "Maybe I do. Maybe there was a time when I couldn't find my way back. Anyway, this is what my Catholic mama would want me to do."

"What about your own wife and children? A young man like you is bound to have family responsibilities."

Mateo grew quiet. "No esposa. No niño or niña. I'm . . . what you Americanos say? Gay."

Georged squinted. "You got papers?"

Looking at his truck, Mateo replied, "I know backroads."

George shook his head. "A gay illegal Mexican immigrant helps a washed-out Army veteran down on his luck. Go figure."

Matteo smiled. "Maybe truth stranger than fiction."

"Maybe," George replied.

Reaching out, he drew Mateo close and whispered, "Even if I have lost my faith in the Almighty, all I can say is 'God bless you.'"

The End Is Near

From a pigeon's vantage point high atop the Mercantile Bank, the mass of people scurrying along the avenue below looked like the tide of some great ocean. There is a certain rhythm and symmetry to the movement of people going to work.

The early morning cadence was quicker and more stiff-legged than the evening quitting time promenade.

Why did they walk that way?

Perhaps their slightly desperate gait was motivated by a fear of being late and the heavy-lidded glances of disapproval that would be sure to follow. Other travelers in the urgent parade may have had a driving desire to be the early bird that gets the worm or at least hold onto the part of the worm they had. The edge they pursued was driven by a caffeine fortified staccato march toward the challenges that lay before them.

Amid this swirl of humanity stood an old man with a sign. The cardboard attached to a broom handle stated the message in large red letters: *Repent! The End is Near!*

The sign bearer was tall and gaunt with a long, meticulously groomed white beard. He wore a faded red plaid flannel shirt, blue jeans that had seen better days, and white patent leather loafers. Perched on his head was a greasy baseball cap with an American flag pinned one side and a silver cross pinned on the other. His angular face framed deep-set clear blue eyes.

The current of men and women swept past him without so much as a glance.

Across the street, three well-dressed men in their thirties sat in a café and sipped the remnants of their Starbucks and observed the old man.

The first man said, “He’s got to be crazy, standing in the middle of the business district with that goofy sign. Somebody ought to call the police.”

The second man replied, “He may be a little off, but I doubt he’s dangerous. He probably just wants some attention.” The third man said nothing and continued to sip his coffee.

The first man turned to him.

“Bill, what do think? Is the old man crazy dangerous or crazy harmless?”

“Maybe neither.”

“Neither,” the second man queried. “What kind of answer is that?”

Bill drained the last of his coffee and tossed his cup in the trash can.

“Maybe he knows something we don’t.”

All three men chuckled at the thought of it.

“Maybe, I’ll go ask him.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. That old man may pull a knife on you. You know how unpredictable those kinds of people are.”

The second man chimed in, “He may even hit you with his sign.”

The first and second man laughed, but stopped when they realized Bill was serious.

Bill turned to his two companions. “Did you notice the first word on his sign?”

"You mean 'repent'?" The second man replied.

Bill took a sip of his coffee. "That's the word."

"So what?" interjected the first man.

Bill put his coffee cup down and looked at the two men sitting across from him. "I've been thinking a lot lately about what it is that we do for a living. What it means to work for a hedge fund on Wall Street. We've made a ton of money. Our investors haven't been so fortunate. They've lost a lot of their money. Some have lost everything."

The second man looked at the first, then back at Bill. "Welcome to the world of finance. You place your bets and take your chances. You know as well as me that derivatives are a complex and sophisticated financial instrument. Sometimes it can be hard …"

"Cut the bullshit," Bill interrupted. "No matter how you dress it up, it still boils down to the fact that we sold bad debt to good clients whose only mistake was to trust us."

"We did nothing illegal," the first man chimed in. "So what if we made a lot of money. The guys at the top made a lot more. We explained the terms and risks to our clients. We put it all in writing."

"Explained it my ass," Bill replied. He could feel his face turning red. "How can we explain something we don't even understand. Hell, Albert Einstein couldn't decipher the fine print in our client's contracts."

The second man shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Bill, what's gotten into you? We all got record bonuses last year. It's not our fault that the investments went south. We

followed the lead of the firm's senior partners. If anyone did, they were the ones that dropped the ball."

Bill drained the last of his coffee and placed his cup on the table. "I'll tell you what's gotten into me. It's called conscience, and for the most part it's extinct on Wall Street. Maybe always has been. When I look at that old man's sign across the street, it's easy enough to believe that we have plenty to repent of."

The second man turned to Bill. "Speak for yourself, I'm just doing my job and supporting my family, all legal and above board.

"Maybe legal, but hardly above board," Bill replied with more than a hint of sarcasm.

Bill's companions slid their chairs back and stood up.

"Come on Bill, we'll be late for work. It's Friday, you'll feel better after a long weekend."

As the two men crossed the street, they realized Bill had turned toward the old man with the sign.

"Pardon me, Mister."

The old man turned to the sound of Bill's voice.

"I'd like to know why you are standing here with that sign?"

"What's your name, son?"

"Bill."

"Well, my name's Henry. Nice to meet you, Bill."

"To answer your question, I'm fishing for souls."

"Fishing for souls? What kind of answer is that?"

"It's the only answer I've got. I'm fishing for souls and this here sign is my bait."

Bill rubbed his chin.

"So you don't really believe what your sign says is true?"

"Young friend, I don't believe it to be true, I *know* it to be true."

"How can you know something like that."

"I just do."

"Sounds like a crock to me."

The old man said nothing.

"The sign says repent."

"That's right."

"What am I supposed to repent of?"

"Whatever you need to repent of?"

"That's not much of an answer."

The old man pulled a toothpick out of his shirt pocket and placed in the corner of his mouth.

"I agree, it's not much of an answer, but it's enough.

"Enough for what?"

"Enough to get you moving to where you need to go."

"Well, Henry, my friends were wrong about you. You're not crazy, but I must say you don't make much sense."

"I'm not here to make sense."

Bill turned to leave, then stopped and looked into the old man's eyes.

"What's the point of repenting if the end is near and it's all over anyway. What difference does it make?"

"Question is, my young friend, what difference does it make to you?"

Bill looked at Henry then at a flock of pigeons swooping toward a high perch across the street. "I guess I'm not sure."

Henry pulled a pack of chewing gum from his shirt pocket and handed a stick to Bill. "Try a piece of Juicy Fruit.

It'll put a touch of sweet on the bad taste you're feeling inside you."

Bill popped the gum in his mouth.

Henry reached out and placed a hand on Bill's shoulder. "What's troubling you, son? What sorrow's got hold of you?"

Bill stared down at the sidewalk. "I got a big decision to make. Maybe the biggest of my life."

He looked up. "I don't know why I'm telling you. I shouldn't."

Henry gently gave Bill's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "That's your call. Little choices along the path lead each of us to a place where a big decision is headed our way."

"I know," Bill replied, the strain clearly showing in his face. "I've made a lot of money with the firm I work for. Some of it questionable. I mean, it's legal and all according to our corporate attorney, but our investors have gotten hurt— some even ruined— by the products we sold them."

Bill paused, pondering if he should say anything else.

Henry waved at a passerby and turned back to Bill. "Legal don't necessarily make something right. Sometimes it does. Other times, legal covers a lot of darkness and hurt, makes folks feel better about something they should feel bad about."

Bill pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "Yeah, it seems like what's left of my conscience has finally caught up with me. A fellow from the Justice Department wants me to testify against one of our senior partners. They aren't after me, or so they say, but apparently have something on him. They want me to do the right thing and help them. The right thing

will cost me my job and the income my wife and daughter depend on. That's a hell of a price to pay."

"True enough," Henry replied. "That said, you don't seem too happy with the price you been paying."

"Paying for what?"

Henry flipped his toothpick into the trash can he was leaning on. "Sounds to me like you been paying a right heavy price for your lack of self-respect. Or your soul for that matter. You reckon your family would rather have all of you or just the part you been showing them?"

Bill ran his hand through his hair. "Good question. Good question with a hard answer. That's what I noticed about your sign. If I repent and testify, the end is near. It will be over for me. We will have to make some hard changes and put a lot behind us— friends, standard of living, and God knows what else."

Henry looked at Bill. "You know what you need to do and God knows what else. Like I said before, it's your call."

Bill offered his hand to Henry. "I thank you for your time. I've got an appointment to keep. My life's about to end as I've known it." Bill turned to walk away.

"There's one more thing, Bill," Henry shouted.

"What's that?" Bill replied, looking back over his shoulder.

Henry's blue eyes danced and the corner of his mouth formed the hint of a smile. "The end is near, but so is the beginning."

Ticket to Ride

The neon sign over the entrance of the Blue Light Diner flickered red, white, and blue. Inside, a smattering of late-night regulars were sitting at the counter eating Ned's 24 hour breakfast special—three eggs, crispy hashbrowns, bacon or sausage, biscuits and gravy, plus what was billed as the bottomless cup of coffee. A half-dozen other customers sat in red vinyl duct-taped booths munching double cheeseburgers with a side of "kitchen sink fries." Ned—owner, chief cook, and occasional bottle washer—had in a former life been Chief Deputy for the Henrietta Sheriff's Department.

Sitting in the corner booth were Ed Raskin and Jimmy O'Toole, two state troopers fresh off their shifts.

"Can't complain tonight," said Jimmy. "No rain or snow or drunk drivers. Three speeding tickets and a broke-down Winnebago belonging to a family from Ohio on their way to Dollywood. That's pretty much it. How 'bout you, compadre?"

Ed swirled the last of his French fries in the jalapeno ranch dipping sauce and popped it into his mouth.

"It was okay. A couple of traffic stops. Had to call a tow truck for old man McGilicutty and his broke-down Studebaker Commander."

Jimmy laughed. "Is he still trying to drive that thing?"

Ed cocked an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

"I heard he had the engine rebuilt three times. The transmission more than that."

"You boys need a refill?" Ned queried. "Just brewed a fresh pot."

"Thanks, Ned," Ed replied, holding out his empty mug.

Looking across the table at his friend, Ed shook his head. "I'd have to say Mr. McGilcutty's vehicle is definitely a "more than that" kind of ride. It stays in the shop more than it stays on the road. Of course, that could be a good thing for the other drivers."

Jimmy laughed again and threw a concerned glance his friend's way.

"I've known you for a long time, Ed. Something seems to be on your mind."

Ed sipped his coffee in silence before responding.

"Strange thing happened around dusk this evening. I pulled over a fellow who was speeding."

"Nothing strange about that," Jimmy interjected.

Finishing the last of his coffee, Ed continued. "The strange part was how I handled the situation. Or maybe, how the situation handled me. Although his license and registration checked out, there was something about the guy. He looked a mess."

Jimmy leaned forward. "Maybe he was a head case. Did he look like he was off his rocker?"

"No. He looked sad. When he turned to give me his license and registration, he looked like he had been crying."

Ed leaned back and folded his arms. "Normally, I would have given him a ticket and sent him on his way."

"Normally!" Jimmy replied. "Everybody knows when it comes to tickets you are the man! You are known wide and far as the Ticket Master! Three years running, you've won the annual ticket trophy, writing more tickets than anyone. No one's even a close second!"

"That may be, but for some reason I can't explain, I handed him back his license and registration and asked him to slow it down a notch or two. He looked at me and nodded. Then, believe it or not, I put my hand on his shoulder and told him to hang in there. Then I sent him on his way."

Jimmy grinned at Ed. "You did what? You touched him? You're getting soft, my friend. Do you want to be a state trooper or a social worker?"

Ed shrugged and smiled. "Maybe it had something to do with the egg salad sandwich Mary made me for lunch. Anyway, I guess everybody needs a break now and then."

"How about giving me a break and picking up the check? Jimmy said, rising from the booth.

"Sorry buddy, my break for the day has already been taken."

Twelve Months Later

Ray Andrews sat with his wife, Sara, on the back porch of their home watching the sun drop behind the mountains.

"Do you remember what it was like a year ago?"

Sara took his hand and smiled. "Yes. It was a dark time, but somehow, we got through it and you really like your new job, not to mention your recent promotion and raise."

Ray looked to the horizon. "I never told you, but today is a kind of anniversary for me."

Sara looked puzzled. "Anniversary? What kind of anniversary?"

"That was the day I thought I was getting a promotion, but instead got fired."

Sara squeezed her husband's hand. "I remember."

Ray breathed in the evening air. “Anyway, besides getting fired, our 401k had taken a major hit and the medical bills were coming due for our baby’s surgery. My credit card was maxed out and I couldn’t even get a short-term loan.”

Ray folded his hands. “The only thing I had left was my life insurance policy. I couldn’t take care of you, but it could, so I decided . . .”

“Decided what,” Sara replied with a hint of alarm.

“I had decided to take my life. Just drive the car off the ridge at Big Ben Loop.”

Sara began to rub Ray’s arm. “Thank God, you didn’t.”

“I didn’t because of a state trooper.”

“A state trooper?”

“He pulled me over for speeding. I expected to get a ticket. At that point, I didn’t really care. Then a strange thing happened. He didn’t charge me. Stranger still, he put his hand on my shoulder. I felt something move from him to me when he touched me. I can’t really explain it, but somehow, he saved me.”

Ray took Sara’s hand and kissed it. “He told me to hang in there. So, I did.”

Cinderella's Slipper

Niles Norris read over his notes as the precariously perched air conditioner in his office window serenaded him with gasps and groans. Niles smiled to himself and looked up from his case file at his noisy companion exhaling what passed for cool air. "Mr. Frigidaire, I think you and me both may be on our last legs."

A year away from retirement, he had been a school counselor for more than 30 years, experiencing everything from angry parents and cut-throat politicians to despondent students- including a suicide attempt and three drug overdoses last year, as well as a school shooting in 2010. Niles had survived it all, even the occasional personal threats and lawsuits brought against him and the principal for helping remove one of their students from an abusive home environment.

Remembering what Ed Lambert told him at last year's high school counselor's conference, he laughed to himself. "Niles, we live and work in the wild west of raging hormones and high-octane testosterone."

Leaning back in his duct-taped office chair, he took a long, deep breath and slowly exhaled. With all the ups and downs, he wouldn't have changed a thing. It was all part of a whole, a purpose that he had given his life to. Looking at his watch, he muttered to himself, "Anna, where are you?" As if on cue, Anna appeared in his doorway.

Anna Stephens was a senior. The daughter of a local probation officer, she was bright, outgoing, and popular. She also had a unique streak of compassion that was unusual for someone her age. He wished more students were like Anna.

Plopping down in the chair across from Niles, Anna dropped her backpack on the floor.

"I'm already exhausted and the day is only half over."

Niles smiled. "You are definitely a busy young lady."

Folding her arms across her chest, Anna looked at her counselor. "You know Agnes Dawson?"

Niles nodded.

"I've done my best to be a friend to her, but I'm finally hitting a wall. I can't get her to connect with anyone else but me."

Anna leaned forward. "I've been sitting with Agnes at lunch since she transferred here at the beginning of the term. Although she gets on my nerves sometimes, I hate to see her sitting by herself. And I hear the snickers from the other girls. I'm guessing she does too. It's like she keeps to herself and says nothing—even when a teacher calls on her in class. But when I sit down at the table she becomes a chatterbox. I can hardly get a word in edgewise."

Niles shrugged. "Maybe, she has a lot to say. Maybe she has been saving it up for someone who will listen."

Anna shook her head. "Well, Mr. Norris, it does get tiresome. To make matters worse, all she seems to want to do is fantasize about one thing or another—like she is waiting for some kind of prince to ride in on a white horse and carry her off."

"Sounds like the Cinderella story," Niles replied.

"I guess," Anna sighed. "Like she's waiting for a Prince to put a magic slipper on her foot."

Niles looked at Anna for a moment before responding. "Not exactly. Maybe, maybe not."

"Maybe not what?"

"My guess is Agnes isn't really looking for a Prince," he replied. "She's looking for a slipper—something that fits. Every time you eat lunch with her, she gets to wear a magic slipper for the hour you two spend together. Like it or not, I think maybe you're the magic slipper."

Anna's shoulders slumped. "I don't want to be anyone's magic slipper."

Niles looked at Anna. "Then why do it?"

"Like I said, because I don't like seeing her sitting there by herself, left out and alone. It doesn't feel right."

The two of them sat in silence.

Finally, Anna grabbed her backpack and looked at the counselor. "I thought maybe talking to you might make me feel better, that you might have some good advice to help me not feel so different from most of the other students. But you haven't been much help."

Niles looked out his window, then back at Anna. "Actually, I do have some words of wisdom for you."

"What are they?"

"Get used to it."

"Get used to it?"

"That's right," Niles continued. "Anna, my dear, you're an old soul with a big heart. The good news is that you are going to make a genuine difference in the lives of others. The bad news is that it's going to hurt sometimes, especially when you come to understand that folks like you will always be in the minority. But there is some more good news: a small group of truthful, committed, and caring people can still make a big difference in the world around them. They are the only ones who ever have."

Anna rose to leave the counselor's office. "Get used to it?"

Walking down the hallway to her next class, she whispered to herself. "Easier said than done."

Cherokee Purple

Everett lost Marie in the deep winter of 1996. Her yellow Volkswagen convertible was parked where she left it the last time she was able to drive.

He still followed the same routine they had shared each morning. Coffee and toast on the back porch after they inspected and watered their tomato plants. The same each evening, followed by a single glass of rosé and reminiscing before dinner.

They had tried different varieties of tomatoes—Brandywine, Early Girl, and several others, but Marie's favorite was Cherokee Purple. They came across it at a vegetable stand in the Smoky Mountains. She loved the deep maroon color, rich aroma and old-fashioned sweet-to-the-tongue taste. She was even intrigued by its history, how it was originally grown and cultivated by Cherokee Indians.

He sat down in a rickety wicker chair that had seen better days. Everett smiled to himself. *So have I, for that matter*. He observed the tomatoes that he had patiently nurtured, the ones that were full and ripe. Different contours and sizes, each with its own nuanced qualities if one looked closely enough. Like people, all from the same family, but each demonstrating a unique feature that made them who they were.

Each season his back porch harvest came in, Everett would review the candidates and dub one "Marie's best." The special one would be carefully selected as the one he felt his late wife would have chosen. His criteria were subjective, but also specific. A smooth, unblemished skin nice to the touch.

Shapely with a rich, seductive maroon color offering an invitation to taste.

He had his eye on a particular Cherokee Purple that looked almost regal compared to the rest of its kin. Full of color and well rounded, its beauty drew him in. Everett leaned back in his chair and picked up his coffee cup, remembering that sometimes looks can be deceiving. Sometimes what's on the outside doesn't match up with what's on the inside. Draining the last of his coffee, he rose and plucked the winner from its vine. That evening after his glass of rosé, the tale would be told. "Marie's best" would be sacrificed on the altar of a carefully, even reverently, prepared tomato sandwich.

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After bathing it in cool water, Everett held the Cherokee Purple in his hands admiring the curve of its shape one last time.

Laying it on the cutting board, he sliced two thick, perfectly proportioned wedges and placed them on freshly baked dark rye bread liberally coated with mayonnaise. A pinch of salt and pepper and the deed was done.

Everett pondered the sandwich he had made, a culinary creation in memory of Marie, wishing she was there to share it with him.

Would the Cherokee Purple taste as good as it looked?

He hoped so.

Closing his eyes, he raised the sandwich to his mouth, savoring each bite, chewing slowly as its juices ran down his chin.

Marie had never tasted better.

Midnight at the Healing Touch

The neon Open sign flickered out as Madge O'Doherty turned to Nadine and Tiffany.

"Tonight was a long one—longer than usual. I could use a drink about now. How about you two?"

Nadine stretched and rubbed the back of her neck. "How about two or three?"

"How about the whole bottle?" Tiffany replied with a laugh.

Looking at the card table set up in the right corner of the waiting room of The Healing Touch Day Spa, Madge commented to her compatriots, "Looks like the wives left us a nice spread. Chips and dip, a plate of wings, and a baking tin of brownies."

Nadine held up a bottle. "No rot-gut wine tonight. You've moved us up to a fine blue-collar bottle of Yellow Tail."

Madge laughed. "One of the wives left it for us. I think it was Devin's wife, Melissa. Anyway, we earned it. It was a full house tonight."

The three women pulled their chairs around the table, and after pouring the Merlot, settled down to plates of potato chips, French onion dip, barbeque wings, and brownies.

It had indeed been a long night. For the last six months, one night a week after the regular workday was finished, Madge, Nadine, and Tiffany gave massages to war veterans suffering from PTSD and other ailments.

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It started the day Madge overheard two of the wives talking in the checkout line at Food City. They were at their wit's end

with their husbands' drinking, insomnia, nightmares and depression. Outside in the parking lot, one of the women, Jenny, was parked next to Madge unloading groceries. After a brief introduction, Madge got to the point.

"Jenny, I can't rightly explain what I'm going to offer you, but maybe it has something to do with my best friend's cousin taking his life after he returned from Iraq. But listening to you and your friends inside, I got this strange kind of urge that I need to do something. So, I'm offering to work out an arrangement for you and your friends to bring in your husbands one night a week for a therapeutic massage. Maybe it could help them sleep or feel more relaxed. Maybe not. But I am willing to . . ."

Jenny studied Madge's face, looking for an angle. "We're pretty strapped for cash. How much would it cost?"

"Not the regular rate. Whatever you can afford," Madge replied.

That's how it started. One night a week, five thirty 'til whoever showed up was taken care of. After six months, a strange kind of community emerged. While their husbands were getting worked on by Madge, Nadine, and Tiffany, Jenny and her friends formed their own kind of support group. First it was brownies, cookies, pie and coffee. Within a month, coffee was replaced by wine, chips and dip . . . and a cup of Joe for the drive home. Jenny always made sure there was food and wine left for the Healing Touch team to unwind with after they left.

At first, most of the men were reluctant to participate and one, Missy's husband, dropped out after the second session. And there was Mary Lou's fiancée, Ted, who was banished for pointing to his apparent erection under the sheet

and saying to Tiffany, "Why don't you massage that?" The rest of the men settled into the routine, receiving deep tissue, trigger point, shiatsu and Swedish massages while Jenny and the girls caught up with each other in the lounge.

Nadine refilled her tumbler with Merlot. "Girls, this has been quite a ride. Sometimes I can't tell whether I'm a massage therapist, a counselor, or a priest."

Dipping a kettle chip into the French onion dip, Madge smiled. "Sometimes we're all three."

Tiffany nibbled on a brownie. "Tonight, Teri's husband, Bert, started sobbing. He apologized, but I told him it was okay—that shiatsu often results in clients crying."

"Of course, that's not exactly true," Madge replied, reaching for another chip.

Nadine turned up her wine glass and smacked her lips. "So what? We're just getting a taste of what these guys have been through, and it can get more than a little dark. We're massage therapists, not psychotherapists. I once took a class at the community college that taught us there is a fine line between mind and body."

"Maybe we're a little psychotherapist and a whole lot massage therapist," Tiffany added.

"Or maybe we're more like pyscho-massage therapists," Nadine chimed in.

Madge raised her glass. "I'll drink to that. The three pyscho-massage therapists.'"

The three women raised their glasses and drank.

Nadine lit a cigarette. "You know, I'm mighty young to be a grandmother. "

"Not that young," Madge added with a chuckle.

"I'm glad to help, but these boys are getting to me," Nadine continued. "I've even started smoking again. Ralph and Jewel didn't show up this week, but last week he told me about how when he was a Tank Commander in Iraq and went through villages they had overrun, there would be dead and burned bodies lying in the streets."

Tiffany put down her half-eaten brownie. "Don't they train them for that sort of thing?"

Nadine blew a smoke ring. "I'm sure they do, but I guess it can still get to you. Ralph told me about the same nightmare he keeps having. He rounds a corner in a village they have just taken and there are the heads of three dead children lying in the street looking at him. It's just their heads, but their eyes are blinking and their lips are moving. He's not sure, but he thinks they are whispering, 'Why?'"

Stubbing out her cigarette, she looked at Madge and Tiffany and shook her head. "Sweat broke out on his forehead and his right hand began to tremble. I had him get back on the table, and worked on him for another thirty minutes to calm him down."

"And there was poor Jerry who lost both his legs," Tiffany said, looking down at her hands. "He told me there were days he wakes up and can still feel them . . . until he looks down and sees they are gone. He never cried out loud, but I could see him wipe his eyes when he didn't think I was looking. The last thing he said to me before he and Priscilla moved in with her parents in Louisiana, was that he never imagined not being able to do for himself."

The three women grew quiet.

Finally, Madge broke the silence. "I haven't mentioned it to you two, but I worked Jenny in for a session last week

while Ned was at work. They are having a pretty rough time of it."

Madge poured the three of them the last of the Merlot.

Nadine lit another cigarette. "Tell Jenny that next week she needs to bring a bigger bottle of vino—better yet, Jack Daniels. If we're going to work on their guys until midnight, we're gonna need more incentive, 'cause we're definitely not getting any overtime pay."

"Not even minimum wage," Tiffany added.

Madge looked at her two friends. "I don't say it often enough, but I couldn't do this without you two. I know when all's said and done, working on these men doesn't amount to much more than gas money. I…"

Nadine interrupted her in mid-sentence. "Good Lord, Madge. You know we aren't doing this for the money. We're doing it for these veterans and their poor wives and children. We can damn well sacrifice one night a week after what they and their families have been through."

"I know, I know," Madge responded.

Folding her hands in her lap, Tiffany spoke up. "I'm here for my cousin, Jarvis, who didn't make it back from the first Iraq war. I can still hear him laugh. He had the best kind of laugh. From down deep in his belly, the kind that could fill a room and make people smile just hearing it."

Once more silence, each woman lost in her thoughts.

Finally, Madge sighed. "Ladies, it's time to turn out the lights. Tonight, this party's over."

Nadine stubbed out her cigarette and massaged her left hand with her right. "I believe these here hands have lost their healing touch. They are all healed out."

Tiffany rose from her chair and began collecting the trash from their night's labor. "Tell you what, Granny. I'll work for you tomorrow so you can rest those hands for the weekend."

"Much appreciated, Tiff. In that case, I'll have a nightcap with ol' Jack when I get home—and I don't mean my husband, Jack."

Madge reached out to Nadine and Tiffany. "Group hug?"

Wrapping their arms around each other, they rocked back and forth and replied in unison, "Group hug."

About the Authors

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