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Just Off Elysian Fields

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Just Off Elysian Fields

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Film, Theater, and Communication Arts Concentration in Creative Writing – Fiction

by

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Chapter 1- Antoine

I grip the shaky wheel of the old Continental. I think I’m driving alright, considering it’s been eight years. The air coming in the windows is warm, the pines blow past. I-55 seems to be the Continental’s element—steady and straight. I was worried when I first pulled it out onto Mazant as Ma waved, after the 31-year old Continental she let me borrow clunked real loud and nasty into gear and I pressed the gas but didn’t get anything back for a good second or two, and how the car squealed something fierce when I turned the wheel. But I know how it is. Starting’s tough sometimes.

I cross the Mississippi line around noon. A state trooper’s tucked into a stand of trees there in the median, and I’m doing seven over the limit. I pull my foot a little off the gas, and I get nervous. I have no idea what happens when an unlicensed ex-con who’s not supposed to leave Louisiana is pulled over in Mississippi. I pass him by and then look in the rearview. Nothing. Good. I need a beer, but I’m gonna wait. Yeah, I’m gonna wait. Just to drink something I take down some of that bitter, luke warm coffee I got back in Hammond. I put the cup down and try to focus on the road.

Doc knew something was happening, but I didn’t want to believe him. Just Saturday morning, nothing but three days ago, I found him drinking a brown-bagged 22-ouncer on our favorite bench on the promenade, looking out at the water. Those fire-breathing-dragon silk pajamas somebody gave him were all covered in dirt, and his corn rows were coming loose real bad. He didn’t look so good. He handed me a beer from a plastic bag without saying anything, and I sat down next to him without saying anything
either. Then he started talking just like that, just like always, still looking out at the river. Told me he woke up on Toulouse, there in the Quarter, half in the street and half on the sidewalk, the curb digging into his ribs.

“I woke up and found out I done pissed myself, Coozan. I ain’t done that since I was a littlin’, count on. And then, come to find out my bike was gone. C’mon, Coozan, you know damn well I don’t never forget to lock that bitch up,” he said.

“It happens, Doc,” I told him. Even though I was worried by what he said.

“It don’t happen to me!”

And he was right.

He took a big drink and he went on. Told me his red hat was crushed too. He started cussing and pulled himself off the pavement, and he started for the river just like he always did when he woke up, no matter where it was he woke up. The sun was just coming up over Algiers Point. He crossed Decatur, and he walked over the levee and then along the river down to the Governor Nicholls Street Wharf. The river was smooth, Doc told me, and the big gray sky it reflected made it look just like the mercury spilled from a broken thermometer. He listened to the water come all quiet against the bank for a minute, and he walked to the edge. Took off his slippers and peeled off his pajamas, on down to his drawers. Doc walked on into the Mississippi and swam out just about ten or fifteen feet, and he floated in that big old river of mercury, looking into the sky. He told me that floating there right then, he realized he was scared. He realized his time was running out.

“C’mon, Doc. You’re fine,” I said. I couldn’t think any other way. I looked at the river and took a drink from my beer. A big freighter slowly rolled upriver, and I realized I
was scared too. Scared of not having Doc. Not being able to talk to him, or to at least
know he’s out walking the streets somewhere being Doc. And yeah, I’m afraid I might
fall apart; sometimes I feel like he holds me together.

“Here… look in my eyes,” he said. He leaned over and opened his eyes real big,
and I looked into them. I realized I’d never looked into his eyes for more than a second or
so. While talking with him, I usually looked at him, and then looked again at Dauphine or
the river, wherever it was we were drinking, or not look at him at all. I saw that his irises
were milky and blue with age, and the whites were a deep brownish color, just a little
lighter than his skin. The folds around his eyes damn near covered them up completely.

“I don’t see nothing,” I lied.

“Got damnit, Antoine! I’m fixing to die. I can feel it.”

I turned back to the river and took another pull from my beer. I shivered, despite
the August heat, and I shiver now thinking about it, three days later. “You ain’t gonna
die, Doc,” I said at the time. “You ain’t gonna die.” And I guess despite my worry, I
believed it. Doc can’t die, I thought at the time. But there he was when I left town, laid up
back at Veterans to where he didn’t hardly have the energy to talk past a minute or two.

I realize I’m doing damn near ninety. I slow it down.

I got to remember.

I can’t fuck this up. I’ve fucked up near every damn thing I’ve ever had. But this,
I just can’t. I take another drink of truck stop coffee and put it back in the drink holder.

I think of the last thing Doc told me there on the river that morning. “Coozan,
listen here. I’mma go looking for my little girl. If I don’t find her before I…” He stopped
for a minute, and I thought about how in his mind that’s what Maybelle still was, a little
girl. She was twenty now, but he hadn’t seen her since she was five. All the stories he
told me over the years were of her as a little girl, until she was locked in our minds as just
that. “If I don’t find her, Coozan, I need you to go out there and make sure she alright.”
Not in all the four years I’d known him had I seen him so serious. “And… tell her about
me. Tell her good things, like how I tried to make people happy.”

“Allright, Doc,” I’d told him there on the river. And then yesterday morning I
found him laid out way over on Gallier Street damn near dead.

Taking the steering wheel with the inside of my thigh, I unfold the Mississippi
road map I just bought and lay it against the wheel. I study I-55. The towns shake as I run
my eyes up the paper interstate—McComb, Brookhaven, Jackson—as the Continental
tries to keep up on the pavement one.
Chapter 2- Doc

I don’t know where to start, Baby Maybelle, so I guess I’ll start with how I ended up in this here hospital bed and see what happens from there.

It happened just two nights ago. I was knocked out in my hammock in the courtyard off Dauphine, tired from searching for you all day, when I woke up feeling like something was pulling me. Not really pulling on me, not like my leg or nothing, more like it was pulling the insides of me.

Not knowing what it was all about, my body creaked and popped its way on up. All slow, ‘cause there’s no other way for me nowadays. I threw on my black tracksuit. Grabbed my 1-wood, slung my stethoscope around my neck, and got to getting, not knowing where I was being pulled. I just went, and I found myself turning and heading up Mandeville Street.

And then there I was, sweating and coughing my way on down St. Claude Avenue, using my club for a cane. Man, it was dead out there, seemed like I was the only motherfucker on earth. Like in them old Clint Eastwood movies when he rolls on into a town and there ain’t nothing around but rolling tumbleweeds and a horse or two, but except for tumbleweeds there were plastic bags, and instead of horses there were mean-ass street dogs with crazy eyes.

I tapped out my club on the busted up sidewalks, and I sweat and I coughed until I felt like I was liable to spit up a lung right there. But I kept on moving. You see, by the time I crossed them tracks putting me in the Ninth Ward, I started figuring things out. I
knew it had to do with that feeling I’d had lately, the one that told me I was about to die and had to set matters straight.

I crossed Louisa, Maybelle, and I’ll be damn if I didn’t see a forty ounce bottle fall right from the sky and explode onto the concrete in front of me. I stopped and raised my 1-wood into the air, ready to bust it up against somebody’s noggin, and I looked all around me, sucking in that smell of malt liquor. I was breathing real heavy-like, and I felt the club in my hands bob up and down above me. I didn’t see nobody. “Olde English 800” the sticker said on the sidewalk, broken glass all round it.

I dropped my club down and leaned on it, tried to gather my breath. Looked up into the big, black sky for a second. I’ll be damn, I thought. A forty raining down from the sky? If that ain’t a sign, I don’t know what is. That pulling feeling got worse, and I knew I had to keep moving.

I passed Bywater Hospital on my left, still closed up a year on since the storm, and I came up on Gallier Street. That’s when the pulling stopped, and right then I knew for sure what was going down.

And I was scared, Baby. I ain’t gonna lie.

I dropped my head and stared down Gallier, and man was it long and dark, seemed to just go on and on and then get swallowed up by that big black hanging over it. I hadn’t been down that street since that night fourteen years ago, that last night I seen you, and I know that’s why that big nothing at the end of Gallier made my legs go wobbly. But I had to move to keep from falling, so I took a deep breath and got to walking.
Only a couple houses on each block had folks living in them. Spray-painted markings from the storm on every house I passed. Drowned cars, weeds some places waist-high. The only sound was the tap-tapping of my club against broke-up Gallier. I crossed Marais, then Urquhart, gasping for air and sweat streaming down my face, on past Robertson and Claiborne.

I came up on Derbigny, and the tapping got slow. I crossed, and I went up to the second house on the right. You know the one. I went up to the abandoned, double-shotgun house and collapsed on the steps. I felt the black sky press down on my back and squeeze my lungs tight, and I fought for breath. I threw my club in the tiny piece of yard we used to have, I know you remember, with that grass you crawled on, the dirt you dug up and ate, what for I never knew… Still, I sometimes ate it with you, and somehow it tasted clean. Funny, right? Dirt being clean?

So right then I dug into that dirt and I put a handful into my mouth just like I would with you back in olden times. I chawed and chawed. I guess I was trying to somehow get back to that time, back to you, back to the beginning.

I remembered about how when you came out your momma you weren’t crying. You were quiet as can be, just looking around with those big, old eyes, taking everything in. Like you always would. Most littlin’s, seems like they wanna go right on back in, but it was like you were exactly where you wanted to be. And where you needed to be.

You were premature, ready to get out. Tiny, tiny. I held you in a single hand and looked down at you and couldn’t believe how beautiful you were. My hand was all big and rough and dumb, and you were all soft and happy and new.

Beautiful. Shining.
I didn’t hardly know what to do with you. Reckon I never figured it out neither.

You were just so... good, Maybelle. From the start. I remember other littlin’s would always want to come touch you. They just crawled up and put their hand on your face or your arm and look at you all amazed and shit. Grown folks too. They said you were special somehow, but they just couldn’t put their finger on what it was.

I remember back from when you could crawl you’d be in our little backyard, down with the ants. Close, count on. You wouldn’t bother them none, you’d just get down low and talk with them in that nonsense baby talk.

Then you were walking, and you worked your way all through that little yard. Bending low, talking, digging, listening. Reckon you knew every ant and worm and squirrel back there by name, Baby. Probably knew that coon that passed through every now and then too. And you weren’t scared of nothing. Once I even pulled you away from a big, black chicken snake. You’d gone up to that motherfucker and was petting it like it was a little bunny rabbit, count on. You started crying when I snatched you away, wanted to go back and keep talking with him I guess.

And you had that place you went to. That place that would just come to you when you didn’t know it would. You’d just be sitting or playing in the backyard and then you’d all the sudden be there. You wouldn’t be here anymore, but there. I remember the first time I saw it happen. You were just looking off into nothing and I said, “Maybelle... Baby Maybelle...” but you didn’t hear me. I called your name a few more times before coming and tapping you on your little shoulder. You looked up at me like I’d just woken you from sleep.
I asked you why you didn’t holler back to me, and you said, “I went away, Daddy.” I asked you where you went and you told me about that place. About how everything was all spread out and you could see forever, all the way out to the sun out on the horizon because there wasn’t hardly nothing but tall, yellow grass and sand. And a big, big river. Brown, you said, just like the Mississippi. And you told me that I was there in that place, your momma was there, and your brother Wil too. Sometimes your momma’s momma was even there, along with people—and this blew my mind, Baby—that you said you knew but didn’t know from here. Knew, but didn’t know from here, you said. Crazy shit for a five year old, Baby.

You said we lived in a hut made out of mud. And that we were always wearing some kind of cloth colored somehow with mud. Black, brown, and white designs all over it. Things like stars and fishbones, you told me.

“Were you scared over there?” I asked you.

“Naw, Daddy. It was nice,” you said.

And let me tell you something. All of it, the you being special and being able to go to that place in your mind, it all scared the shit out of me, Baby. I just didn’t understand how I could’ve played a part in making you.

To be honest, I was just always afraid I’d somehow fuck up. Make you not special no more.

And I was thinking about all this while I was outside our old place on Gallier, still chawing that dirt, Baby Maybelle, and I realized as I chawed that tears were falling down my face. But I just kept chawing. Kept chawing and crying there on that little piece of
yard, and I realized I was too late. I wasn’t gonna get back. That’s when my face hit the
ground and everything went black.
Chapter 3- Maybelle

The pines fly by, full of sun. The green and gold so bright you can even see it through the dark tint. There’s a break in the trees, and a field of cotton opens up, white, white. Little bolls of cotton fly every which way, wandering around in the breeze. They look like tiny clouds, and I try to imagine I’m flying in the clouds but can’t. I follow one of the cotton bolls with my eyes as it rises higher and higher, chase it as long as I can keep it straight from all the others, and do, until I lose it. Like it melts into the blue. Just like that, with no sound or nothing. There should’ve been the sound of a tiny bell or something.

I feel Cadillac’s hand on my thigh and I’m back. Back in his shiny gray car that he took me away from Elvin’s dead body in. His hand creeps in, and the cotton outside the windows is just cotton, not clouds. I look down at his big gray hand with its shiny gold watch moving its way up my dirty yellow sundress. The hand’s huge, and it’s almost like it’s its own thing not attached to nothing. Makes my stomach turn. I put my hand down to stop it, and it stops. The car slows down, and Cadillac’s hand disappears. I look out at the ditch running alongside the little country road.

The car pulls over just before a short bridge. There’s a little dirt path going through the trees, down to a creek. I can hear its shhhhhh. Cadillac’s door groans open, then slams shut. His steps crunch across the gravel. He stands all big beside my door, and the sun’s gone. I just look ahead. The cicadas buzz, rising and falling, I feel it in my skin. The sound reminds me of being little, sitting out on the stoop with Momma.
I open the door myself. He steps out the way while lighting a cigarette. I get out and walk across the gravel. I hear him follow me. The gravel hurts my feet, but then it turns into dirt, nice and cool. I walk down the path, toward the creek, with Cadillac just behind.

I’m under the trees, and under me, soft pine needles. The branches up there trap the sound of the creek, making it big. I walk along the bank, along the water, away from the bridge. Birds flash across the creek, faster than my eyes can follow.

I look back at Cadillac. He pulls his shirt up, shows me the gun tucked in his pants. “I’ll do you like I did your boyfriend if you try to run.”

I hear a rustling deeper in the forest, stop and turn around. I don’t see nothing, but I hear it again. There’s a big flapping of wings and birds scatter through the branches. I follow the rustling sound into the woods.

“Maybelle,” Cadillac says.

The sound moves, and I go where it goes, slapping branches out my way.

“Maybelle,” he says, louder.

Then the sound stops, and I stop too. I look around, but see nothing but trees. I realize my feet hurt. They’re all cut up.

I hear the sound again, and I turn just as a deer jumps over a fallen tree. It lands, all perfect, and runs away from where I stand, somehow running and jumping and weaving through the tiniest cracks in the forest. Like as if it was water. And then it’s gone.
One time Elvin told me about how things happen over and over again, but each time they happen they’re just a tiny bit different. I wonder how many different ways deer have run through the trees since the world started.

I hear Cadillac walk up, back by the creek. I think about running into the forest, like that deer, but I remember the gun. Anyways, I don’t know where I’d go. I walk back.

He stares at me and runs his hand across my face. I look at the creek. “Damn,” he says. “I bet you wouldn’t believe it, but I missed you ever since that day I left you by the river nearly a year ago.”

“Yeah, all bloody and beat up.”

“Forget about all that. Maybelle, you could learn to like me. Even love me, I know.” He runs his fingers through my hair, but they get stuck. He pulls them out.

He lifts my dress up and over me, and throws it down in the dirt. I feel sick, and I think about that deer running through the trees. The creek goes shhhhh.

I’m small and naked. He’s big and has his clothes on. He puts me against a tree, and I feel the pine bark against my back. He unbuckles, unzips his pants, and they fall down, along with his gun.

I grab my dress off the ground, kick the gun away, and I run.
Chapter 4- Antoine

The Continental’s running strong. I finish a stale, rubbery chicken and biscuit sandwich, and I toss the greasy wrapper in the back seat. I try to wash it out my mouth with some bad truck stop coffee, but it makes things worse. Damn, I want a cold beer.

The dying sun’s to my left, and bursts of golden light come in and out of the pines. The creased photograph of Doc’s little girl faces me from the back of the visor. It was taken a few years ago, so Maybelle’s around seventeen or eighteen. She’s sitting on some grass by the river, her arms wrapped around her knees. She’s real pretty, her hair done in corn-rows just like her Daddy likes to wear, and she’s in a blue dress. But she ain’t smiling. Just looking at the river.

I got the picture from her old neighbor Ozzie just this morning. Doc told me a man he’d met over in the Sixth Ward while hunting for clues about Maybelle would be coming with some info. A man I could trust, Doc said. And there the man was. Somewhere in his fifties, big and serious-looking.

After weaving through the streets all night on my Schwinn, I finally found Doc on Gallier in front of his old place. I’d gone to the hospital with Doc and stayed with him for a while, and I’d only gotten back to the apartment an hour or so before Ozzie came.

When he came in, Ozzie saw the empty beer cans lying around, the dishes piled up in the sink, and he saw the walls I’d painted top to bottom, side to side, with things that’d happened in my life—fishing with my daddy, street fighting as a teenager on St.
Claude, building my first cabinet, play-wrastling with Desha, and other things running all the way up to now. All in color.

“Where’s Doc?” Ozzie said, frowning.

“Hospital. He had a heart attack, but he’s holding on.”

He looked me up and down with the same skeptical expression he held as he looked at my apartment. My wife-beater, my worn-out Dickies, my three- or four-day stubble. I knew he thought I wasn’t up to looking for Maybelle.

“Listen, man. I’mma find her,” I said.

He kept standing there for a while, but something in the way I said what I said made him sit down on my couch.

“Just make sure of it,” he said. I could tell he really wasn’t sure about me, but I guess he knew I was the only person Doc had left. So there was just no way around it. I was the person who’d go looking for Maybelle.

That’s when he gave me the picture. Ozzie said she didn’t do much smiling since she lost her Momma, her brother too, years back. But he did say she liked being on the river. He could just tell by the way she looked at it. So every time he went fishing over there, he took her and she just sat and watched the water.

He told me some fella called Big Earl was the last person he knew to have seen Maybelle. Seems Maybelle, when the storm came, left the aunt she was living with since her grandmomma died, and caught a ride with this Big Earl. He was on his way to Memphis, but Big Earl told Ozzie that she disappeared at some gas station in Canton. Some gas station with a heart in the sign.
Right after Ozzie left, I took all Doc’s things, his hammock and his clothes, from the back courtyard and piled them up in my front room. Then I went to Mazant Street and told Momma I needed to borrow the car, came back and threw a bunch of clothes into a garbage bag along with grabbing my bat in case things got rough, and four hundred bucks cash I’d stashed away.

*

A few miles north of Jackson, I see a sign advertising a joint in Canton called Love’s Travel Stop. Sure enough, in place of the apostrophe in Love’s, there’s a big heart. When the exit comes up, I pull off.

Love’s is beaucoup busy. Once I’m in the AC-cool of the place, I stop and try to take everything in. I ain’t been around this many people in years, and it makes me nervous. Especially these family types, all soft and smiling. Grown ones and little ones, looking like they’ll always know the place they’re going to. It makes my hands shake, and I go to the fridge.

I pull out a sixteen-ouncer of Natural Light, crack it open, and chug down damn near half of it. It’s cold and good. I ain’t had a drink since this morning. A pale little girl with big eyes, nothing but ten or eleven, looks at me from a few fridge doors down. I turn to her. “I ain’t technically driving,” I say, and she smiles. I walk over to the counter.

I wait through a customer. The heavy-set blonde behind the counter has “Steve” tattooed in cursive across the side of her neck. The person in front of me leaves, and I walk up.
“Say, were you here round this time last year, when them folks were running from the storm? I’m looking for somebody,” I say. I throw a dollar down for my beer.

Steve’s girl or ex-girl says, “Naw, sweetheart. But Toni’s been here for a while.” She nods her head back toward a petite lady counting money at another register. Then she looks at my beer. “Sorry, but you cain’t have that beer out like that walking around the store.”

I guzzle it down and toss it in a nearby trashcan. “I understand,” I tell her. Wipe off my mouth with the back of my hand. I walk over to Toni, tell her I hear she was around during the storm.

“Sure was,” she says, flashing gold-capped canines.

I take Maybelle’s picture out my pocket and hand it over. I notice my hand’s shaking again. “You remember this girl? She’s my buddy’s daughter, see.”

She studies the photo, and she tells me there were so many people coming through back then, it’s hard to remember any one of them.

“Thanks anyways,” I say.

“Sorry I couldn’t help you,” Toni says as I turn away. I go back and grab another Natural Light from the fridge.

For I don’t know how long, I walk around Love’s and drink beer on the sly, thinking my way through the rows of camouflage hats, fan belts, candy, and motor oil, looking for anything that might lead me in any particular direction. The people whirl around me, going wherever it is they’re going, and I drink, and next thing I know I’ve had a good two or three since that first one.
I kill the beer I’m holding, toss it in the trash, and grab three more out the fridge. I go up to the counter, and Steve’s girl asks me how I enjoyed all those other ones I drank. I tell her they were alright and dig in my pocket. She smiles, looks around the store real quick, and only charges me for the ones on the counter. “Good luck finding your buddy’s girl,” she says. I thank her and go out to the car.

I sit back down in the back, and I take Maybelle out my pocket. I stare at her there on the river. “Where you at?” I say to her. She just keeps staring out at the river, looking all serious and knowing… all ancient, like she’s been around for thousands of years even though she’s in a 17-year old’s body.

I finish my beers there in the back seat of the Continental, in the Love’s parking lot.
Chapter 5- Doc

As for the man who found me over there on Gallier with a mouth full of mud, the man who’s coming for you, Baby Maybelle... I ain’t gonna lie.

Coozan’s a little shaky sometimes, but he’s a good man. Smart, too, and that’ll help him find you. Even went to college a few years before deciding to be a carpenter like his daddy was.

You don’t know Coozan, but he knows you. And that’s all that matters right now, count on. I met him four years back, you see. I’d strung my hammock up in the courtyard behind the house he lived in on Dauphine. Run-down joint, two story double shotgun cut in half sideways to where there were eight apartments. Got that? So I knew this chick Frida who lived in the front, but she was out of town. Come to think of it, she never came back all that time I stayed there. Anyway, I didn’t figure it’d make nobody no nevermind, so I set up. It was nice back there. *Beaucoup* banana trees, Maybelle, to where it felt like I was king of the motherfucking jungle. Only pain in my kingly ass was the crackheads who passed through sometimes and stole my shit.

Antoine was the first person I met after moving in. That first morning I was making coffee on my little traveling cookstove and saw I was plumb outta sugar. If you remember, I gotta sweet tooth, me (to where by the end I ain’t had no teeth at all). I remember there were some folks sitting down all quiet working in the courtyard next door sewing on some Mardi Gras Indian costumes, but they were working so hard I didn’t want to bother them. So I knocked on all the doors in the back there. Didn’t hear
nothing from nary one of them, so I tried all of them again. That second time, the one on the top left opened and hoo-wee, Maybelle, this man stood there who looked like he’d been pulled directly out the gutter, or the swamp, one. Thirty-something, about middling-height—real, real light-skinned dude, damn near a white boy. Not bad looking, I reckon he might’ve been a hit with the ladies back in the day. But the way he was kind of hunched over, his eyes all sunken in like potholes out the street, nose bent up from being broke so many times surely from street fights, and his damn-near-white boy hair all fucked up going every which way and ain’t shaved since who knows when, he looked like some old street dog that’d caught one too many beat-downs. He wore a wife beater and blue Dickiepants, which is nearly all he ever wears, both needing a good cleaning and both kinda falling off him all sad-like to where I reckoned they were used to being on a bigger, stronger body.

So I introduced myself and put out my hand. My hand stayed there for a while before he shook it. His hand was leathery and rough, and he had these bad scars across his knuckles. I asked him for some sugar. He looked around behind him, and I snuck a peek inside his apartment. There wasn’t a damn thing in there, Baby Maybelle, besides three or four empty whiskey bottles on the counter along with a dull yellow pencil with no signs anywhere of having being used, and a pot of old red beans and rice on the stove. A couple flies buzzing over it having themselves a ball. Another bottle of Beam stood there on the floor right next to the far wall, half-full. No couch… no TV, count on. No chairs even.

I asked his name, and he told me. He talked in this growl, the words sounding like they’d been trapped deep down somewhere inside dirt and rock since the first days of
menfolks or even before that. Like them words were sitting there all that time waiting for somebody to come and pull them out.

Anyways, he didn’t have no sugar, and I told him it wasn’t no problem. I told him Frida said it’d be alright if I used the courtyard for a bit (yeah, Baby Maybelle, I lied to the man). I asked him to have some coffee with me once I found some sugar, which made my lie feel better. But more than anything, I just wanted to see what’d made that man lock himself and his words up like that, what’d made his clothes start falling off him.

“Some other time,” he said about the coffee, and he closed the door.

But I ain’t trying to go off telling you all about Coozan. I’ll let him tell you his own self. Anyways, he’s a new man now. Sure is.
Chapter 6- Maybelle

I wake up on pine needles and cool earth. I hear the birds talking to each other. I open my eyes and see the trees rising high, high into the sky. Everything’s red, so the sun must’ve just come up. The trees, along with the sparrows flying through their branches, are all red. Me, I see I’m red too. And hungry. I ain’t eaten since yesterday morning.

I don’t know where I am. It looks like nowhere, which is fine by me. That means that Cadillac can’t find me. I get up and start walking away from the sun, figuring that’ll take me to the river. Morning away, evening toward, as long as you’re on this side. Once I get to the river, I’ll be able to figure things out.

After walking for just five or ten minutes, I see something struggling at the bottom of a tree next to a broken branch. I walk up closer and see it’s a hawk. He looks all surprised and scared. I understand. He’s supposed to be in the air, not on the ground. One of his wings looks busted, and it’s flopping against the dirt while the other wing is beating all wild in the air, not taking him anywhere. He’s trying so hard, and it makes me sad. I crouch down and the hawk tucks in his broken wing the best he can. He’s shaking. I put my hand out all slow, and he snaps at me. I try even more slow, but he snaps again.

I keep trying again and again, until he calms down. I touch his broken wing. It’s real soft, softer than I thought it’d be. I watch him look up into the red trees, at me, then back at the trees and then on past, where he’s supposed to be.

“What you see right now?” I ask him.
From the TV I know how strong hawks’ eyes are, how they can see tiny things like mice from way, way up high in the sky. I imagine how right now, from down here, he’s able to see all of even the smallest ants climbing up these trees, along with seeing the tiniest movement from every single pine needle on every branch. I think of him seeing all those things at the same time. The thought of it makes me dizzy and a little scared, but I don’t know why.

“You scared?” I ask him.

He beats his working wing and snaps at me again, and I pull back my hand. He turns his head and tries to move left, beating that one good wing like crazy and squirming around but not getting nowhere. I think he wants something. I look in the direction he’s looking, and I see something real small, moving in the brush a few feet away. I walk over and sweep away some dry pine needles, and underneath I find a baby mouse, covered with blood and dirt. I get down on my knees and look closer. It’s tiny and pink, bending and twisting. Big holes in its side, oozing blood bright red. It’s skin’s thin like paper, and I can see little blue veins running through its body. I can’t hardly see how it’s living, so small and weak like it is. Makes me wonder where its momma is.

I turn back to the hawk. He’s staring at the mouse, flapping his good wing all excited. I put the mouse in the palm of my hand. Its eyes are closed. Elvin once told me that a lot of animals can’t see for a while after they’re born. I can’t remember if I could when I came out of Momma, I don’t remember being born. But I do know babies look a lot like this mouse when they come on out. Covered in blood, scared and squirmy. Wondering where they’re at and what it’s all about.

Wanting to go back where they came from, back where it’s quiet.
I start to feel sick. I get up with the baby mouse wriggling around in my hand. I close my hand tighter, and the mouse feels squishy. I walk over to the hawk, its good wing still beating and beating and not getting him nowhere, and I stand over him. Then he goes quiet, looks up at me. The mouse squirming around in my hand, and all the red of the woods and the hawk, makes me feel even sicker. I lean over and feed the mouse to the hawk, but I can’t watch.
Chapter 7- Antoine

I’m stretched out in the back of the Continental. Everything is red with the morning sun, and my hands are shaking. I’d been dreaming about Desha again.

I was back in our shotgun house on Alvar, and I was looking for her like I often would when I got home from work. She always got in from nursing all day before I got home, and she sometimes hid when she heard me pull up in the Monte Carlo. Not out of fear, though. It was a game. One of her favorite spots was underneath our bed. She also liked to go to the corner of the living room, behind the couch. She got really good at hiding, and sometimes it took me a good ten or fifteen minutes to find her. Right when I thought she’d gone through every possible spot in that little house, she surprised me. In the closet behind all the clothes; underneath the kitchen sink; I even found her once on top of the refrigerator. And when I finally found her, she would be trying so hard to keep from laughing her eyes would be all full of tears.

But in my dream, it was easy to find her. She was right behind the kitchen door. She was laughing, and I hugged her and gave her a big kiss, like always. We lay down right there on the kitchen tiles, and I took her clothes off and she took off mine. I ran my fingertips up her smooth, brown body all slow as she lay there quiet and still. My eyes followed my fingertips and everything got all close and got real, real important. Like if I missed anything, the tiniest thing, then the whole damn lot—me, her, New Orleans and the world, the insects, the rivers, the sun and the moon, all the people in China and Mexico and everywhere else—they’d all just stop working.
With my eyes and fingers I studied that old scar on her right knee she got when she fell on the monkeybars as a kid, then I moved on to the soft slope of her thigh, the perfect ridge of her hipbone, the little rift between her breasts. Then I spent forever moving along her collarbone, and now in the remembering of my dream, my fingers running along that collarbone, I realize I’m remembering back then, to where I might be just filling things in, but I’m sure this is how I felt when I was inside my dream because that’s how it’d been in real life. That’s how it always was. Like how I felt so close that I was somehow inside her skin, like I melted into Desha and didn’t know the difference between me and her, where I stopped and she started. And she smiled that smile that held not a single bad thing within it.

Then I woke up and it was just me, and I was in the Love’s parking lot with my hands shaking. I put Maybelle’s picture back in my front pocket. I pull out my wallet and count the money inside, just to have something to think about. I got three hundred fourteen dollars left from my latest cabinet and shelf gigs. After that, there’s nothing left. Not even rent.

As I work my way out of the car, empty cans clang in the floorboard. I go into Love’s, grab a sausage sandwich from the fridge, heat it in the microwave, and sit down in a booth. I notice a big map of Mississippi on the wall next to me going nearly from the floor to the ceiling. I find Canton, there close to the center of the state. Then I study everything around it. Towns called Kosciusko, Philadelphia in the East… Tupelo, Holly Springs in the North… But she wouldn’t have gone North, I guess, as she could’ve done that with Big Earl… Grenada back toward the center… What was she looking for?… Belzoni in the West… Why’d she get out here?… Greenville further west…
And when I get to Greenville my eyes stop moving because there’s no more west to go, not in Mississippi at least. I stare at the blue line snaking its way between Mississippi and Louisiana, jawing away at that chalky biscuit with a rubbery sausage stuffed inside, and I think about how that blue’s not anywhere near the color of the Mississippi. I also think about something else. I think about what Ozzie, Maybelle’s old neighbor, said about Maybelle and the river. About how she just sat there and watched it while he fished.

I say out loud, “The river,” without even knowing I was gonna.

It’s as good a guess as any. I study the map, looking for the most direct route to that blue line. After I figure that out, I look across the river and see right there, over in Arkansas, a particular county’s name.

Desha.

That’s where her people, and her name, came from. Where she visited as a kid, before her grandma died. She said she remembered it being real pretty. She said there was something about the big old sky, the cotton, and the ruined buildings. Like another world altogether, one everybody’d forgot about.

I hear her daddy sold his corner store and moved back there after Desha was killed. I imagine he just couldn’t bear being in New Orleans any more.

I didn’t know I was so close. I get up, throw away the greasy sandwich wrapper, and grab a sixer of Natural Light. I pay for it and head to the car.

The Continental roars up Highway 16. Two beers in, I’ve only seen three other cars. Pretty much all there is to see is cotton. Fluffy and white and bursting from its buds. It even sprawls across the road in places. In the far distance, beyond the cotton fields, are
pines. Every now and then there’ll be a little house or a trailer right off the highway. A woman in a sundress mows the lawn. Kids jump on a trampoline. A man in overalls works on a car under an oak tree, the top half of his body swallowed up by the engine. They wave as I go past, even the man in the overalls from under the hood. I wave back.

*

I was twenty-two, so this was back in ’90. It was hot out, and I just got off work. Still had my tape measure clipped to my belt. Me and my buddy Jimmy, who moved to Texas years ago, were drinking on his porch over on Spain when we ran out of beer. When I reached the corner store I always went to when visiting Jimmy, a sign on the door told they’d be back in five minutes. I walked down St. Claude a few blocks until I found an open corner store. Qwik Stop was the name, and four men sat on milk crates out front, drinking Mad Dog under a handwritten “No Loitering” sign without talking. The store was on the ground level of a two-story house, and it had no windows besides the one in the door.

I walked in, the bell above the door jangled, and when the young lady behind the counter looked up, I locked eyes with her and I couldn’t move my feet. Her bright, bright eyes and smooth, coal-black skin shone in the sun I brought in.

But it was the smile that did it, that made me stand there with the door hanging wide. That smile, there was nothing to be found but goodness there. That’s what I thought…. a strange thought, but that’s what it was. And I stood there, holding the door
open like a fool, and then her face changed. Her smile left, and her eyes widened like she’d seen a ghost. I seemed to be that ghost. I didn’t know what that meant.

A huge voice from somewhere in the back boomed out, “The infernal fire seems to be upon us! The door! Close the door!”

I closed the door, but I forgot why I was there. The young lady turned to a customer. She looked all confused, staring at the man at the counter and then down at his bag of chips like she didn’t hardly know what they were. I didn’t know what it was all about.

She was startled by the sound of the big man’s voice: “Come help me with this here box, Baby.”

“Uh… Coming, Daddy,” she said, and she rang up the man’s chips. Took his money, gave him his change, then she disappeared from view. I was in a daze. Only when I leaned on a garbage can for support and heard the beer and ice sloshing around inside, did I remember what I came for. I dug my hand in the ice and pulled out four sixteeners. I held them against my chest as I walked across to the counter. I dropped one, and I looked around to see if anybody noticed. I went back over to the garbage can, tucked the dropped beer into the ice, and grabbed another.

That voice again. “Bruh,” it said. The voice turned into this little brother walking up to the counter with a scowl on his face. I don’t know how that voice came out that body. “You dropped that can of beer. I heard it hit the floor. Now you ain’t gonna deal falsely with me are you? Bible tell us not to deal falsely.”

I said nothing, just pulled the dropped beer back out of the ice, and put it on the
counter. I peeked behind the meat and cheese display as I placed two bucks in front of the man. The man must’ve followed my eyes in the direction of his daughter, who was slicing roast beef.

“Don’t even think about it, white boy,” he said. He knew I wasn’t no white boy. He was trying to play me, that’s all. It was one of the many things I’d end up in fights for over the years. Growing up, I pretty much always had the lightest skin of any dudes at school.

I grabbed my change, and I took my beer. I wanted to say something, but didn’t. Best keep cool, as I was gonna try and holler at his daughter.

“But Jesus still loves you,” the little man said as I left the store, bell clanging.

I got back to Jimmy’s, and we drank on his porch until nine or ten, but all the while I couldn’t get the Qwik Mart girl out of my mind. I went back to my house that night, and I couldn’t sleep. I tossed and turned, and it was the same every damn night. During the few snatches of sleep I was able to have, I had the same dream. And every time it started beautiful. I was with the St. Claude Qwik Mart girl, and we ran through this meadow, holding hands and laughing. Gallivanting, right. I picked flowers and put them in her hair, all that. It would always be like this, and I really felt like I was there, there on the meadow. Then we’d sit down and share a humongous table with a red-and-white-checked tablecloth stacked high with hundreds, no, thousands, of blazing red crawfish just for me and the St. Claude Qwik Stop girl, and everything would be so damn perfect, until he came. Her daddy would come howling Bible verses from the forest and stomping through the flowers in the meadow and knocking over the table, spilling the crawfish all over the grass. More than that, a big andouille sausage would somehow end
up in his hand and he’d come running after me, raising the sausage high above his head and flailing it back and forth. Every time, I woke up with the same words ringing in my ears:

“Don’t even think about it, white boy.”

*

After a week of sleepless nights, I decided it was time.

It was a nice Saturday, mild and sunny, and I walked down St. Claude Avenue, ready to see the Qwik Stop girl with the bright, shining eyes. Folks sat in lawn chairs in the grassy neutral ground between the double lanes on St. Claude. They laughed and drank beer. Keith Sweat’s “Gonna Make You Sweat” blared out of a parked Cadillac’s open windows.

I left my house with a spring in my step, but as I walked down the Avenue my feet went heavier and heavier. I was thinking about what the bright-eyed girl’s daddy told me a week ago, and I was thinking about my dream. My pace slowed, and by the time I came up on the Mad Dog men sitting on milk crates outside the Qwik Stop, I was damn near paralyzed.

I figured some drink would help me drum up some swagger, so I went up to the men and asked if one of them wouldn’t mind lending me a swig.

“You know they got beaucoup of this shit for sale inside this store, right?” the Mad Dog man with the thick glasses said as he slowly ran a pick through his gray beard. The pick had no effect.
“C’mon, coozan, I just need a swig.” I pleaded.

“Gimme a dime,” the Mad Dog man said.

I dug into my pockets. I was trying my best to hide that I had several coins. I searched for the thick, smooth edge of a nickel, found one, and pulled it out. “That’s all I got, man,” I said.

“Five cent different from ten cent,” he said as he lodged his pick in his beard, pulled off his glasses, and began to clean the inch-thick lenses with a rag he’d pulled out of his pocket. The other Mad Dog men nodded, said nothing, and then drank from their bottles in near perfect harmony.

I pulled out another nickel from my pocket and gave it to the man. He held up the bottle. I grabbed it, took a big drink, and handed it back. I walked to the entrance of the Qwik Stop, and I swung the door open.

The bell clanged, and I entered. No one was behind the counter. I took three steps into the store and the door closed behind me. I stood there, similar to my last trip. I hadn’t concocted a plan beyond walking in, and I had no idea what to do now that I entered the store. I looked around, but didn’t see the girl.

“Can I help you?” said the father from somewhere in the back. “What you need? Beer?” the man said once he was behind the counter. He pointed to the trash cans filled with ice right next to me and then to the fridge lining the far wall.

“Uh,” I said. Uh. I walked toward the beer, having for the moment lost my will. Not seeing the girl there behind the counter confused me, went against how it was all supposed to be. As I walked, I gazed all dumb at the walls. Nailed onto the cheap wood-paneling were frame after frame of Christian-minded quotations and references set on a
background of sunsets, mountains, or oceans. I stopped and looked closely, however, at one in particular. The picture was of a single set of footprints along a beach. The brief story underneath was entitled “Footprints,” and it told of a man’s dream, one where he walks down the beach with Jesus. The man looks behind him at his journey through life, scenes of which flash through the sky, and he notices that, in really tough years, only one set of footprints shows in the sand. The man asks Jesus why this is and Jesus replies, “The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you.”

I liked the story, especially the idea of someone physically carrying another. Sometimes it’s like that. Then I realized I needed another drink. I reached the fridge and opened it. The cool air hit my body like a wall. I was hot and edgy, and the blast of cold air calmed me. I stood there, basking.

I closed the door, knowing the loud little man would soon start yelling at me if I didn’t. Right then I heard the bell clang.

“Hey, Daddy,” I heard her say.

“Hey, Baby.”

I was fixed where I was in the back of the store. I kind of hoped that by not moving I’d be nonexistent. With her not being where she was supposed to be from the onset, I had no idea how to make something out of any other scenario. I just wanted to leave and regroup.

I heard the girl go quickly through the store and out the back, and shortly thereafter I heard some footfalls on the ceiling above me. Not more than a minute later I heard her coming again through the back door.
“Just had to get my Bible, Daddy. I’ll see you at the church for five.” My Bible.

Church for five.

“Alright now.”

The bell rang.

I opened the fridge, looked at the beer, and then at the milk on the bottom shelf. I grabbed a gallon and closed the door.

“Where’s the beer, chief?” the man said to me as I placed the gallon on the counter.

“Been off the beer for a while.”

“Didn’t you come in here last week?”

“Nah, never been up in here. Must of been somebody else.”

*

I went to the Qwik Stop every day after work. For the first week or so I’d give a dime to the leader of the Mad Dog men and take a swig from his bottle before I went in, until after a week or two the man just started letting me take a drink for free. I went in with my back straight and my head up, and every time walked out feeling smaller than I was when I walked in. My head a little lower, my back a little bent, holding something I didn’t need. Saltines. Spam. Mustard, which I didn’t even like. I still hadn’t spoken to her. The few times I saw her there, her daddy was never far away, and I could feel the man’s eyes burning holes into me. Still, I was certain that me and his daughter had exchanged more than a few meaningful looks. But that’s all.
In the meantime I was reading the Bible. After working on cabinets and shelves during the day, I read nearly all night, every night. I dusted off my old Sunday School copy and, after only a few weeks, had read the whole thing. I remembered a lot of the stories from when I was a kid, like Daniel and the lion’s den and Jonah and the whale. As for the New Testament, as a kid I liked Jesus. Not as Jesus, let’s say, but just as this scruffy dude who walked around in sandals and did good shit for people. I liked him especially after reading the story of Mary Magdelene, and hearing one of the older boys in Sunday School say that she was “ho.” See, by the age of eight or nine I knew who the half-naked ladies were that I saw walking down St. Claude Avenue either real quick or real slow (never in between), often stopping to talk with dudes in parked cars with the windows rolled down. I ended up fascinated in this famous, much loved man whose body I saw splayed out on crosses all through the streets and avenues of my world. A man who, from what I gathered, seemed to have as much love and respect for those fast/slow, street-talking women as for anybody else. Lepers even.

* *

One Friday evening I walked into the Qwik Stop and found no one inside. I walked over to the fridge, opened it, and grabbed a gallon of milk, which I actually needed. I heard someone enter from the back, behind the counter. It couldn’t be the daddy, the back door didn’t slam shut all hard. I closed the door and just stood there. My stomach fluttered, and my knees shook.

“Can I help you?” I heard her say behind me.
“Uh… no, everything’s alright,” I said. I turned around, and I walked down the aisle, toward the counter, marking the items that lined my path: ketchup, Bunny Bread, peanut butter, honey. I placed the gallon on the counter. I heard nothing from the back of the store, and nothing in the living space above. My knees strengthened, and the fluttering cooled down.

“Milk all you getting?” she said.

I glanced back down the aisle I’d just passed through, gathered myself, and turned back around. I pointed to the milk and looked back at her. I thought of something I read.

“Well, looks like now all I need is a little honey and everything’ll be alright.” I was surprised I said it, but I was still able to look her dead in the eyes with a little smirk on my face. She smiled and rolled her eyes. “Sorry, not my best material. Gotta take that one back to the workshop,” I said, smiling back.

“How about we get together and talk about it some time?” Elbow to counter. I was quaking inside.

“Is your honey-talk around the Bible, or something else altogether?” she said.

My knees calmed.

“C’mon, now. I’m just talking about honey. I ain’t talking about God telling Moses about Israel from a burning bush. What you talking about?” I walked back to grab a jar of honey.

“How about we get together and talk about it some time?” Elbow to counter. I was quaking inside.

She smiled, rolled her eyes again.

“Listen,” I said. “Yeah, it’s you I really wanna talk about.”
“You think I don’t know that?” She looked toward the back door then turned back to me and said, “Alright. How about we meet somewhere else, though?”

“What about that bench in front of Douglass High at six tomorrow night?”

“OK,” she replied, smiling.

“I’m Antoine. What’s your name?”

“Desha.”

The name seriously rang a bell, but I didn’t know why.

*

I was sitting under the oaks outside Douglass High School, wringing my hands with my elbows propped on my knees, when Desha walked up that evening. She was wearing a blue summer dress that, as I told her later, near knocked me clean off the bench. I was wearing a light blue short-sleeve button-down with gray slacks, and I was uncomfortable as hell. I was sweating despite the fact it was only in the lower seventies. I stood up when she arrived. “Hey there,” I said, and put out my hand.

“Hey there back,” she replied, and she ignored my hand and hugged me. I was a little shocked, and returned the hug like a block of wood. I told her I was thinking about going to the Quarter for dinner, and she said cool, she hadn’t been there in a while. I told her I hadn’t either.

We walked to the Monte Carlo, and I went around to open the door for her. The big door groaned open, and she sat down. When I saw her pull her legs into the car, I swung the door closed. I heard a crunch, and my heart sank. I opened the door back, and I
found that I’d crushed her purse. I was terrified, and I looked at Desha’s face. She was
doing the opposite of what I expected her to be doing, the opposite of what my mother
would have done, or any other woman I’d dated or any woman I’d thought I’d ever
encounter in my life. She was laughing.

I told her I was sorry. Then I started laughing too. Still laughing, Desha looked in
her purse for broken things. She pulled out her mirror and opened it up.

She smiled and said, “Ah, good. See, now I’m five times as beautiful. I know, I
know, it’s hard to believe it was possible.” She played with her hair, making glamorous
poses and what not, looking into the broken mirror at her five selves.

“Yeah, yeah. Funny stuff,” I said. “Now just pull that purse all the way in so we
can get moving.” I closed the door, grinning like a little school boy.

We went to Felix’s over on Iberville. I’d gone there with my family as a kid, and I
remembered liking their crawfish etouffee. We sat in a booth. I was feeling more relaxed.
We looked at our menus, and a man put some bread on our table. “What you thinking?” I
asked.

“I feel like something baked,” she said.

I looked around the joint faking like I was real worried, and I said, “We gotta get
closer to an AC, then.”

Desha laughed. “That’s terrible.”

“Hey, I got a giggle, and that’s all I wanted. If I wanted a full-on belly laugh, I’d
of tried harder. I know what I’m doing.”
“Maybe it wasn’t all that bad. Or then again, maybe…” She couldn’t hardly hold back from laughing as she grabbed a little container of butter and tossed it on my plate. “I’m just buttering you up.”

“Aw, that’s even worse than mine.” I smiled as he watched her nearly doubling over in laughter. “Now that’s terrible. We might have to just start clean over now.”

“No thanks, I don’t want my purse crushed again.”

“Ohhhh. You’re a barrel of laughs over there, you know that?”

“Yes.”

Our laughing died out slow, slow, and our eyes locked. Damn, she was beautiful.

For the first time I realized I recognized her from somewhere.

“Sir, ma’am?” a waiter said, and I snapped out of it. We gave our orders, and I took a big drink of water. I held off on ordering beers because I figured she wasn’t much of a drinker. Turns out I was right.

I asked her what she did besides help her daddy out at the store, and she told me she was in school for nursing. Said she’d always wanted to be a nurse. That’s what her momma was before she passed several years before. I told her I was sorry. I didn’t tell her I knew exactly what losing a parent was like.

She asked me what my work was.

“I’m a carpenter,” I told her.

“Cool. You like doing it?”

“Yeah, I reckon I do. And it pays the bills.”

“What you like about it?”

“Huh. I never really stopped and thought about it,” I said. “But I guess I’d say I
like how I can step into a room, or onto a site, and there’s a big nothing. Just a pile of wood, a saw, hammer and nails and what not. And I just get at it, going, going, not even thinking really, just gliding through, and at the end of the day or the week or whatever, there’s something there that wasn’t there before. I can step back and look at it. And people can even use it. It’s kind of crazy to me, really.”

“Kind of like magic. You make something appear where before there was nothing.”

“Yeah, like that.”

Damn. A magician. She sure knew how to make things, and people, seem more beautiful than they really were.

“Desha. I bet a lot of fellas try to ask you out at the store. Why you say yes when I asked you?”

She’d been smiling, but she stopped. She took a drink of water, like she wanted to make sure what she was about to say came out just the way it needed to come out. She put the glass down.

“Because of the chickens, Antoine. Because of the chickens falling from the sky.”

And that was it. That’s why I recalled her name.

“I’ll be damn,” I said.
The woods, the dirt, and me, we ain’t red no more. Everything’s turned gray. It happened slow, without me noticing. But here it is.

I hear a car out there somewhere. That woosh sound that a bad listener could get mixed up with the wind, that sound that doesn’t always like to tell you where it’s coming from. I walk toward the sound, I think.

The sound goes quiet, and after a while I see an empty road through the pines. I make sure I’m good and hidden. I look around. There’s nothing but road and pines until everything breaks open a little ways up on the right, and all the sudden the road’s got nothing but cotton fields on both sides. The car sound’s good and gone. I see a sign in the distance, past where things open up, and I walk toward it. I stay close to the trees, then close to the cotton stalks thigh-high and fluffy white.

On the sign I see the number 1, in a white circle surrounded by black. Alright then.

I see the levee way on the other side of the highway. I keep walking in the direction of the sign just because that’s the way I’d gotten started going. There’s food that way just as likely as the other. I pass the sign, and I think about that afternoon Elvin and I went up this road nearly a year ago.

It was a few weeks after the storm. I’d seen the word STAR on a patch on his oil-stained blue jumpsuit, and when I got out the hospital I didn’t have anywhere to go, and one of the nurses was nice enough to drive me to the STAR. It turned out to be a gas
station outside Rosedale, close to where the hospital was. When I got out the nurse’s car, Elvin saw me and smiled. This was the first time I’d seen him real good. Scraggly beard, big rough hands, and kind eyes. Somewhere late in his twenties, a little younger than Momma was when she was killed. He was handsome, in a kind of country way. I asked him if he knew any places I could stay around there, and he said he had an extra bedroom. I could stay there, he told me.

During the ride to his trailer after he finished work he was quiet. He just sat there behind the wheel. And with him being all silent, he was different from the Elvin of all those nights next to my hospital bed after he’d found me down by the river. There in that bed, all that time my mind and my ears were working but nothing else was, he’d tell stories about his people, and about all the animals and the fish, the river and the woods of his world. But maybe all that talking had just been him trying to bring me back into living, and now I was back he was gonna let me be for a while.

I looked out the window and watched the cotton fields pass along the sides of the road as I sat in the big seat of Elvin’s pickup. Every now and then there was an old beat-up house or trailer, tucked under some trees. Or there was a dirt road that didn’t seem to go nowhere, but at the same time seemed to go on forever. Some of the houses, you couldn’t tell whether or not somebody lived there, or if nobody did, how long it’d been since they left. I saw empty porch swings and chairs looking like they could still be warm, with words from folks’ talking still floating there waiting for ears to catch them.

I remember how riding in that truck, being surrounded by all those nowhere-going dirt roads and ghost houses, it seemed like time out here had gotten all mixed up. Or
maybe that it had its own kind of time. When I first got up here two weeks before, I didn’t notice it. Too many things were wrastling around in my head.

Finally I felt like talking, so I did.

“Anybody living in these here houses?” I said, and I turned to Elvin. He swerved to miss a dead possum, its bright, sparkly red innards spilling out onto the highway.

“Naw, I don’t reckon so. I never seen nobody outside any of ‘em.”

Both of us went quiet again, and we didn’t say nothing else for a mile or two.

Then Elvin said, “But I’ll tell you what. Every now and then when I look on some of these here porches I know the chairs are in different places than when I went past the time before.”

I thought about that for a while, then I looked out at the woods in the distance. I thought about somebody from Elvin’s stories. One of his people from way back, his great-great-grandaddy. His name was Elvin too, and he cleared out the swamps years and years ago, cutting through all the trees and the gators and snakes and all with a machete so they could plant cotton here.

“You think your great-great-grandaddy is still out here somewhere cutting through these trees?”

He smiled.

“I knew you were awake all that time, Little One.” He lit a cigarette. Newport, just like Momma smoked. He took a drag, and said, “Sometimes I do. Sometimes, especially in the middle of the night, I could swear I hear him out there somewhere, cussing up a storm.”
The wind whistled through the crack between the window and the top of his door. He tapped his cigarette on the top edge of the window, and ash flew.

As I walk along the cotton fields, my feet feel the warm of the dirt. A hawk swoops down and perches on a telephone pole. I’d like to imagine it’s the one I fed that little mouse to this morning, but that’s impossible. I don’t think he’ll ever fly again.

I remember how hungry I am. I hear a car from way off, and I duck into the fields to wait it out. Lie down in between the stalks on the warm, crumbly earth. Still, my heart gets to beating heavy. I’m scared it might be Cadillac or one of his friends.

It ain’t. It’s a police car, but I don’t want to have nothing to do with them. I ain’t never seen them do nothing back in New Orleans but talk big and mean, and take people away. And sometimes those people they took away, like they did Momma that time, didn’t come back for a long while. Or they never came back at all.

The car passes, and I wait. I get up and come out the cotton. I look at the levee way out across the highway. There ain’t no food around right now, but I know where I can get some water. Even if Elvin did tell me that folks upstream—folks who don’t understand the river because they don’t ever just sit by and watch it—were always putting bad things into it to where it was bad for drinking. I cross the highway and walk through the cotton on the other side.

I climb the levee, through the yellow weeds waist-high, and the river opens up in front of me. The river’s like a mirror of the sky. Huge and gray, to where it seems like
gray is all there is in the world. I can’t even find the sun because the gray ate it up. I walk
down through the weeds buzzing with dragonflies, onto the rocks that knock and wobble
and groan as I go over them. I crouch down and put my hands in the water, lift the water
up to my mouth. It tastes warm and good. I have some more handfuls, and I go back over
the levee.

I walk along the highway for maybe an hour or two, ducking into the cotton every
time a car passes, until I see a little white house on the other side of the road. A giant oak
tree hangs over it from behind, and behind that a dried out field stretches back to some
woods. I think the house is abandoned. I cross the highway and walk down the short dirt
driveway. Stop close to the bottom of the steps leading to the porch and holler out from
the bottom of the porch steps, “Say, anybody there?”

I don’t hear nothing, so I walk onto the porch. The wood fusses underneath me. A
swing hangs from the porch’s ceiling.

“Hello?” I say.

I knock on the door but don’t hear nothing inside. The door handle twists, but the
door won’t move. I slam my body into it, and it gives, making a sound like the wood was
just now getting split for the first time.

The front room’s empty except for a wooden chair with a missing leg in the
corner. I walk into the kitchen, and the floor creaks with every step. I try the faucet just to
see, but nothing comes out. I open the overhead cabinets and find a container of oats, the
colors all faded. Grab it and look inside. There’s a little bit of oats left in there, but there
are tiny black bugs digging through. I try the bottom cabinets. The second one down, I
find two cans of green peas.
In the sink there’s two spoons and a rusty knife, and I use the knife to punch through the top of a can of peas. Pry it open with a spoon. I upend the can and pour the peas into me, the water inside streaming down the corners of my mouth. I do the same with the other one. A big black spider looks down from the corner above me. His web’s full, full. Tiny legs, heads, and arms that used to be parts of living, breathing things float up there in space.

I go into the bedroom. The walls are white with some patches of green and black mold. In the middle of the room is a bed frame without a bed. Nothing but metal. It’s white, like the room. I open the closet door and find a bunch of clothes hangers on the floor, along with an old, rusty baby walker.

I roll the baby walker out, and its wheels make a screeching sound as they spin and don’t spin across the wood floor. I bend down and push the walker in circles around myself.

I roll it through the kitchen, the front room, and on out to the porch. I put it by the swing and sit down. Look out at the rows of tired, crumbling soil and yellowed weeds on the other side of the quiet highway. With the tips of my toes on the floor, I’m barely able to push the swing back and forth. But I do. And it groans as I swing there with that walker at my feet.

* 

Night comes. I leave the porch and go into the bedroom. Step over the bedrail and lay down inside that skeleton of a bed, on the bare wood floor.
I wake up in the night, my body itching, feeling like I’m trapped. I try to go back to sleep, but I can’t. I just lie there. Then, just because I feel like it even though I don’t know why, I get up in the moonlight and lift up the rail of the bed and turn the frame on its side. It don’t weigh that much, and I drag the entire thing toward the door. It scrapes across the floor, through the bedroom door and across the kitchen, scuffing up the dirty tiles even worse than they already are. I jerk the frame through the open back door, and into the night.

It makes a racket as it falls down the steps, on down to the ground, and then it goes quiet. I haul it over to the big oak. The bed’s legs claw through the dirt, like it don’t wanna go, and I got to really pull hard. Under the tree I let go of it, stand up and catch my breath. Get inside and lie down. It’s nothing but dirt, with just a few patches of soft grass poking through. I still can’t sleep, and I get up and walk around the front of the house. Once again, not really knowing what I’m doing. I go up to the porch and grab that rusty baby walker and go back. Put the walker down next to the bed and lie down on the dirt. The ground’s cool to my back. I stare up at the branches. They’re just a tiny bit blacker than the black behind them.
The Continental’s windshield is smeared over with dead mosquitoes and streaks of pinkish blood. A cop car’s set up right behind the “Yazoo City, Gateway to the Delta” sign. I sense him eying me as I pass by, but I’m going two under. I look in the rearview, nothing doing. I reach over across the seat, grab one of the three left from that sixer I got back in Canton and pop it open. I drink, and I drive around Yazoo City.

It’s not really a city. Should be called Yazoo Town. Beaucoup empty store fronts and weedy lots, a few big fancy mansions but a whole bunch more run-down shacks. A painted-up main street trying to ignore everything around it. It doesn’t take long to try every gas station and restaurant with Maybelle’s picture.

“It’s been a year,” a few of them say. “Sorry, I can’t even hardly remember yesterday,” one guy tells me. No luck.

By five I’m drinking coffee and shoveling scrambled eggs and hash browns in my mouth at a diner called Stub’s. The place is pretty empty, to where most all you can hear is the cars swooshing by on the highway outside. I’d already asked the waitresses about Maybelle, along with the cooks and a young couple in a booth—the man in a green, mesh John Deere cap and the girl with a blue shirt showing a wolf howling at the moon. I drink a couple more cups of coffee and throw ten bucks on the table. On my way out I ask Donna, my young waitress, where people spend time in the evenings. She glances me up and down, looking confused.

“Sorry, but you mean for white folks or black folks?” she says. Her face goes red.
In New Orleans, people see and hear me, watch the way I walk, and consider me black without asking. I guess in other places it ain’t as easy for folks.

“No problem. How about both?”

“Weegie’s, then, for blacks. Rick’s for whites.”

I get directions to each joint, and I thank her.

She can’t figure out what to do with me. I move for the door, and she asks, “If you don’t mind me asking, what are you?”

“Damn near everything,” I say and leave out.

*

It was a year or so after we’d started dating, and Desha and I were sitting on the bank of the river. It was warm and night was coming on, making the sky steady turn that peach color that drowns the stars. I lay my head down in Desha’s lap, and I asked her to tell me the story of the chickens. I wanted to know the story from her side.

She lay her hand on my head, looked out into the river, and said, “Well, seems you climbed—“

“Nah,” I said. “Start from the beginning.”

“Alright then.”

*
“Desha Baby, we gotta gather the chickens,” she told me her momma said while her momma lay in bed, looking out the window. Desha was thirteen. Thing was, they didn’t have any chickens. Never did. And outside that window wasn’t a farm. In fact, the only thing her momma could see out there was the house next door’s peeling blue paint across the narrow alleyway. The rusty top rail of a chain-link fence.

Her momma did have chickens when she was a little girl back in White Hall, Alabama, though. In fact, her daddy was a chicken farmer until a tornado came one night and swept all the chickens away. Her momma didn’t talk much about back then, not even before she got sick. When she asked her daddy, all he told her about how things were after the night of that tornado, up until her momma met him in New Orleans fourteen years before and they made Desha, was that “things were really hard for her family.”

“We don’t have chickens, Momma. That’s from when you were a little girl,” she said, and her momma said, “Oh.” This was how it was every day when she got home from school. The way it had been, coming on two years.

She guessed that out that window her momma saw a big blue sky over red dirt, like she would as a kid. Back in White Hall, maybe. To try and bring her back into the world, back to New Orleans and being a momma, Desha told her about what she learned in school each day. She figured all that stuff that somehow had left her head just needed to be put back in, and once it was all back in there her momma would go back to being who she was. Sometimes things leaked out all over again, but Desha’d just start over.

Her momma asked questions. Things like “Why does a lizard’s tail keep squiggling after it’s broken off?” when Desha was studying reptiles or “Where did all the
Indians go?” when she was studying Manifest Destiny. If Desha didn’t know an answer, she’d go to the library the next day and find out.

Even though she heard her daddy crying in the bathroom every now and then when she walked by, he said what was happening to her momma was God’s will. But Desha didn’t understand why God would want her momma, who before was so smart and strong and proud, to stay in bed talking about chickens.

*

Desha was in the front row of Ms. Allen’s seventh grade Science class, the dark-skinned girl with butterfly barettes. Or flowers, one.

I remember.

I came in the middle of the year and sat in the back. I had sad eyes, she said. The word was that I’d been thrown out of my last school, which was true. Desha remembered I couldn’t sit my butt down for more than five minutes. A few times I just got up and went for the door, and Ms. Allen said something like, “Antoine, where you going, Baby?”

“Home,” I said back.

As I walked right on out, Ms. Allen said something that Desha guessed I thought was really nothing. I wouldn’t come back for days, she remembered. Her friend Sheila heard her momma say my daddy was dying from drinking a hole into his stomach. It was true.
Desha told me she couldn’t leave even if she wanted to. And if she even had the thought she right then saw her momma lying there looking out the window and talking about chickens, and she stayed right there in her seat. Back to listening to Ms. Allen, back to stuffing her head up near to bursting with Plymouth Rock, golgi apparatuses, and mixed operations. Because her momma needed all those things back in her head.

A few weeks after I arrived Ms. Allen was talking about tornadoes. Instantly Desha thought about her momma, and how she wasn’t sure if she’d be able to talk with her about Science today. Ms. Allen showed us slides diagramming how a tornado worked, slides of where tornadoes liked to be, and slides of houses ripped to shreds. Desha wondered if the people living in those houses had any chickens.

“Tornadoes can get up to 300 miles per hour and reach as wide as two miles,” Ms. Allen said at one point. To get her mind off her momma and chickens, she turned around to see if I was impressed. She told me she wanted me to be because she didn’t want me to walk out again. But I wasn’t impressed. In fact, I was looking out the window, tapping my foot. I looked like a caged animal she said—a wolf. She figured this would be one of the days I left, but for some reason I didn’t. Next time she checked I was drawing with a bright yellow pencil. I was frowning, and it looked like my teeth were clenched.

After the last bell, I stayed in my seat drawing like I hadn’t heard. My pencil had been driven down to a nub, and everybody was gone except for me and Desha. She said all the sudden I realized she was there, looking at me. I stared back at her like I’d seen her for the first time ever. Maybe I had, she thought.

But she was wrong, I told her.
I grabbed the paper on my desk, crumpled it up, and made for the door, throwing the paper in the trashcan on my way out.

When Desha looked into the trash, my paper was still stretching itself out from the ball I made of it. It looked like a flower in bloom, she said, and she reached down and pulled it out, watched it open a little more there in her hand until it quit. She straightened it out.

The first thing that came to her mind was how good my drawing was. How she could make everything out. The bottom of the blue-lined paper, turned sideways so the lines went up and down, was covered in broken wood, all jagged-edged and raw-looking, along with things that used to be inside houses—a toilet, a bathtub, a table with no legs. And people. Three of them, and it looked like they were drowning in the wood. Two boys, a big one and a little one, and a woman. The little boy and the woman looked scared. The bigger boy, he was something other than scared, but she couldn’t tell what it was. She knew he was me. His eyes were dark and far away.

*

That afternoon her momma watched the sky peeling away from itself, eating the blackberry sno-ball Desha had gotten her from Miss Lisa’s stand two doors down. Blackberry was her momma’s favorite.

She stared at her momma. She was still beautiful, and Desha made sure of it. She braided her hair herself every week. Her momma had already reminded her about the chickens, and she’d already reminded her momma they didn’t have any.
Desha decided to go ahead and tell her what she learned about tornadoes.

“The funnel is what goes from the clouds to the ground,” she told her a few sentences in. Her momma’s eyes hadn’t left the window, and she hadn’t asked any questions all that time. That was peculiar.

“Momma,” Desha said.

Her momma had stopped eating from her sno-ball.

“Momma.”

Desha stopped talking about tornadoes.

*

It was a gray morning a week or so later, and this boy Ricky said something about my daddy on the schoolyard. Desha didn’t hear it, but she just knew because she saw me punch him right there with no talking. Clean knocked him out, dark red blood running from Ricky’s nose onto the five square on the hopscotch court. Pooling. Ricky’s friends jumped in, and I was swinging wild, giving out some good licks. A boy would rush in and catch one to the stomach and keel over, another would get one to the jaw and disappear into the howling crowd, but Ricky’s boys kept coming and I had no boys to come for me and I got lost somewhere inside the heart of the circle. Gobbled up, she said. Then it seemed like all that circle was was sharp elbows coming up and fists dropping down and it made Desha’s belly hurt and her breathing go fast. She saw one of the boy’s knuckles come up red and then every knuckle after that came out red too, like inside that circle was a bucket of paint. I was a bucket of red paint.
She put her hands over her ears, took a deep, deep breath, and she screamed as loud as she possibly could.

Everybody, including Ricky’s boys, stopped to look where the screaming came from. Everything was still, frozen. And Desha watched something move real slow out there inside all that stillness, and that something was me. I pushed myself from the concrete. Holding my nose and trailing blood, I limped over to the chain link fence that surrounded the yard and climbed on over.

“A Antoine,” she thought she heard herself shout. But the voice was Ms. Brown the aide’s, not hers. She’d only thought my name.

I barely turned my head, just for a second, she said, and she imagined I turned it because of her thinking, not because of Ms. Brown’s yelling. I walked on across St. Claude Avenue, disappearing behind the passing cars.

A few weeks passed, and her momma got worse. “Gather the chickens, Desha,” her momma said when she went into her and her daddy’s bedroom, and that would be it for her talking. Desha lay down beside her and tell her about convection or robber barons or compound-complex sentences, but her momma would just look out the window without asking any questions.

Desha missed her questions. She missed answering them for her.

She stopped going to recess and went to the library instead so she’d have more things to say, so she could just open her mouth and isotopes and ions, polyhedra, the taiga
and Sherman tanks would come pouring out with no stopping. To where Desha could
answer all the questions her momma would ask if she could, and to where she could put
back any of the stuff that leaked out from times before.

Her daddy worked more hours at his corner store. When he was home, Desha
heard him crying in the bathroom more often. If they ran into each other as he came out
she’d see his eyes were blazing red, but he’d act like she couldn’t have heard. Desha
acted like that too.

* 

I didn’t come to school all that time, and then I did. My nose was crooked and light green
ringed my eyes. My daddy had died.

She wrote me a letter during lunch, and she tucked it under my notebook as we all
came back into class. It told me how sorry she was, and it told me her name. And to make
sure I knew what girl the name went with, she wrote underneath her signature, “The dark-
skinned girl with yellow butterfly baretes.”

After school she went to the public library there on Alvar before going back home
to her momma. She had the librarian bring Taber’s Cyclopedia Medical Dictionary over
to the table, her table, for her like he had so many times before. The book was green and
giant, so giant she couldn’t carry it herself, and it made a big thump when the librarian
lay it down. It was illustrated too. She was using the book, along with the Diagnostic and
Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a big yellow one, to try and figure out what’s
wrong with her momma. The doctors said her momma had a stroke but didn’t explain
why she was talking about chickens, so Desha took things into her own hands. She had some theories, but her daddy would never tell them to the doctors. “Leave it to them and to God,” he said. Desha thought that was a whole lot of people to leave things up to.

But Desha wasn’t there for her momma that day. She opened that big green thing up, and she looked all through stomach after stomach, the ins and outs of them. The mucosa and submucosa and the rugae, and she looked at how sure enough drinking could tear on in, burn bright red into the bubble gum pink, burn yellow and even black. She guessed inside my daddy’s stomach it’d gone black, and she knew it hurt, she knew it hurt. Stomachs aren’t supposed to go black, she said. Desha closed the big green book up, and she told the librarian she was done. Walking back home, she held her belly tight. It didn’t feel too good.

At the end of the next day, she found a note in her backpack as everyone filed out of class. She didn’t even know how I got it in there, but I did. She unfolded it. “Desha,” it read, “Thanks.” Then, “Antoine.” She looked up at the last few people walking out. I wasn’t one of them.

* 

She wrote me again. She asked me how I was doing. Like the other time, she put it underneath my notebook on the way back in from recess time.

Again, by the end of the day I had somehow got into her backpack, and again, I’d left before she found the note inside. She opened it up and read.

“OK,” it said. Along with, “How are YOU?”
She stared at the big block letters: Y... O... U. That meant her. Her heart got to beating real heavy. Palpitating, even. Then she realized she didn’t know the answer to the question. Didn’t hardly know what it meant.

That evening after sitting with her momma—and she admitted she went kind of fast, even skipping over linear functions altogether—she went into her room and sat down at her desk. She grabbed a pencil out her pencil holder. She set down a stack of lined paper, and she put her big pink eraser and little blue sharpener right alongside it.

She told me everything.

Eleven and three-quarter pages, front and back. She talked about her momma, the peeling blue wall, Daddy’s bathroom-crying, the giant green and yellow books on Alvar, Alabama, dementia, blackberry sno-balls from Miss Lisa’s two doors down, and chickens swept up by tornadoes. Things she hadn’t told anybody else, but she guessed things that just couldn’t sit there inside her any more.

She woke up to her daddy’s knocking with her cheek pressed against paper. She could feel the words she’d stamped in there. The sun was coming into her window, and she sat up and signed her name. Funny thing is, she said, she didn’t even know if she ended up answering my question.

“You did,” I told her.

She didn’t get a letter back at the end of the day, even though she tucked it under my notebook first thing in the morning. She rummaged through her backpack looking for a letter but there was nothing there. She took everything out, put it back in, and did it again. Nothing.

And I wasn’t there the next day. Or the one after that.
“Desha Baby, we gotta gather the chickens,” her momma said a few weeks after I disappeared.

“Yeah, Momma,” Desha said. She didn’t even know why. She looked out the window at the big blue peeling sky. She realized she was tired.

She told her momma about me. She told her about how missing me made her feel like she had a hole in her stomach, and she asked her momma what was happening to her.

Her momma didn’t say anything. They just sat there looking out the window.

*

Desha heard I went to some other school, but nobody knew the one. She thought about me. She thought about me a lot, she said, to where she had trouble paying attention when her teachers talked and when she studied in the library for her momma. She had less to teach her momma in the evenings. She felt she was doing bad at her job, and what her momma lost wasn’t being put back in.

*

It was a sunny afternoon. She’d been lying in bed with her momma for an hour or two. She really didn’t know how long for sure. She’d told her momma she’d gather the chickens, and she’d told her what she had to tell about supernovas and the Civil Rights Movement.
She heard something on the roof, real faint. She couldn’t make out what it was, and she looked up, like how people look up when they hear something on the roof as if they could see up there. Her momma gasped. Desha turned to her. Her momma’s eyes were all lit up, and Desha followed them to the window.

Fluffy white feathers fell from the sky. They drifted down, all quiet and soft, and they kept coming, more and more of them.

And then came a chicken. An honest-to-God chicken dropped from the sky. It flapped its wings like crazy, leaving little white feathers flying, and it struggled to stay up in the air until it found the top of that chain link fence and perched. Another chicken fell and then another, all flapping their little chicken wings and sending those little white feathers flying. Desha turned back to her momma.

She was smiling. Desha couldn’t remember the last time her momma did that.

She heard steps up above, then she heard the front gate rattle. It sounded like somebody’s foot setting down on top of it, and then she heard the sound of feet falling from a height onto pavement.

Running feet beat the sidewalk, got quieter and quieter and were gone.

* 

There on the river that evening, my head in her lap, Desha asked me why I didn’t ever come back.

“‘Cause you were so good,” I told her. “And I was so bad.”
She bent over and kissed me. “That’s silly, Baby,” she said. “There’s so much good in you. Always has been.”


Weegie’s, the black folks’ club, is dark and smoky. The Isleys’ “Voyage to Atlantis” plays real loud on the speakers, and I set up on a red, padded stool. It’s sticky and the vinyl is split, foam all busting out. I order a draft beer and pull Maybelle’s worn photo out of my back pocket. Set it on the bar in front of me.

I ask the bartender and anybody else who comes by, but nobody recognizes her. I drink and wait for more people come in. And they do, and I show the picture and do my “Back during the storm… it’s my buddy’s little girl,” and they shake their heads, say something like “Naw, Baby, I ain’t seen her” or “Sorry, man.” The beer’s ice cold, and I can’t stop drinking it and all the while the music gets louder along with the people and the laughing and the glasses clanging. The smoke grows thicker. I get up and snake through the crowd, keep passing that photograph over and getting it right back, and I keep hearing those Sorrys and keep drinking and telling my story, until I’ve talked to most everybody in the joint and then, I bump into a pretty little lady with bright red lipstick wearing a shiny black dress stressing curves I can’t hardly believe. The name “Larry” tattooed real big across her left breast. Across the other, rolling dice showing sixes. She smiles, and I say, “Name’s Antoine” and I feel like I’m swaying but maybe I’m not. I show her Maybelle and tell her the story. She takes the picture and studies it, shakes her head and says, “Sorry, Baby. But you’re still cute. I’m Charlene.”
I take Maybelle back, put her in my pocket. A man bumps me from behind while he’s dancing, right into Charlene’s warm softness, and I’m alright with that. I take her to the bar to get us some beers. I’m really drunk and we dance and I mistakenly call her Desha a few times. I imagine all she hears is the sh and doesn’t notice. I rub her sides with my hands while “Nightshift” by the Commodores plays real loud. I feel the bass in her hips.

“You’re the only real woman in here,” I yell into her ear and mean it, but I don’t think I’m talking to her. I’m getting confused, I pull her closer, look at everything except her eyes.

“Desha,” I say again.

She smiles, and I grab her little hand and take her outside into the night. We go around back, and she leans against the brick wall and hikes her dress up a little. I scoot in, run my shaky hand up her thigh, and she shivers.

And I have that feeling, the one where I think I might spin away into the dark and never be heard from again. My head whirls. I put my arms around Desharlene and squeeze real tight, and I hear her hard breaths in my ear and feel her whole warm body against mine and I squeeze tighter, try to be here, stay here, not spin away. I need her here too, but I feel her squirming.

“Desharlene… Desh…”

I puke all down her back.

She pushes me away, picks her purse up from the ground, and beats me with it. She’s got some really heavy stuff in there. I fall against the brick wall, collapse onto the dirt. She keeps on hammering away with that purse, and all I can do is put up my hands.
While she’s beating me I watch the black of her dress shining in the moonlight, and I notice also a tattoo on the inside of her bicep as it cranes down on me time after time after time. In big flowery cursive, it reads “Romans 3:23.”

She disappears around the corner, and I stay there. Sitting on the dirt with my back to the brick wall. Looks like I’m not making it to Rick’s.

I get up and stumble over to the Continental, hop in the back seat.

Look up at the ceiling.

I think of being right here in this back seat on the way back from Manchac swamp the last time we went.

I was twelve, and the sky was heavy and gray. Daddy had a friend named Joe out in Manchac and we went a few times a year. Joe’s family and us would all hop in Joe’s boat and go out crabbing. We brought the crabs back in, boiled them, and threw them all blazing orange on a big, wooden table on the bank of the swamp, under the hanging cypresses.

Daddy was pretty sick by then. I remember cracking the first crab open that afternoon and pulling out the scalding hot pieces of flesh. I ripped off a leg, cracked it and sucked out the meat, then pulled off a claw. All the sudden I felt real sick. Right then it hit me that this would be the last time we’d go out to the swamp. And more than that, that’s when I somehow knew Daddy was going to die soon.

With that claw in my hand, unable to eat, I knew I was about to cry. To try and think of something else I studied the crab in my hands real close. The way its armor fit together like a puzzle, the way the thorny legs swiveled around in their loose joints. Everything seemed exactly like it needed to be, so perfect. At one point while I was
studying the crab I caught Daddy eying me. I could see tears welling up in his eyes, and the way he looked at me, I realize now, he must’ve been trying to squeeze my image into his mind, as if the more he did, the greater the chance he’d take it with him when he left. I couldn’t handle my father’s eyes right then, they said too much, and I turned from him and looked at a gator floating just a little ways out. As everyone else ate, I just sat there and watched that gator. That prehistoric black spine, slicing all silent through the black water. I decided right then I wanted to bring a gator ashore and wrestle it. I didn’t, and I don’t know to this day, why that was.

After everyone was finished, I grabbed a crab off the table, took my fishing rod and walked down the bank, carrying a big empty feeling in my chest and throat. My eyes still set heavy in my skull, wanting to pour. I also got a length of rope that was hanging on Joe’s fence. My little brother Al, and Joe’s kid Danny, who was around my age but real slow, followed me. I liked Danny. He didn’t say much of nothing, but he was real kind and smiled a lot.

Once we were pretty far down the bank, I hooked the crab on the end of my line and threw it out. There were two gators, each three feet long or so I guessed, on the other side of the swamp. After several tosses, one of them came for the crab, and I hooked him. He was heavy, real heavy, but dead weight. He didn’t hardly pull back at all, like he was just letting me drag him on over. I didn’t understand it. I kept on reeling him in, closer and closer to the grassy bank. It got to where it was just a few yards away, and Al ran. I felt the thumping of his feet under me grow lighter and then disappear. Danny was laughing like crazy and pointing and jumping up and down.

“Antoine’s got a gator! Antoine’s got a gator!” he hollered out.
The gator kept getting closer. So close I could see its individual scales. I was scared and sick, about to throw up, but I kept cranking that reel. There was something pushing me I just couldn’t make sense out of. His tail swayed all lazy back and forth a few times, his first movement since I hooked him, and a chill went down my spine. He was so damn calm, it didn’t make sense. The rope was closer to Danny, and I told him to toss it over so it’d be ready to clamp down the gator’s snout when I brought him up. The gator was now only three or four feet away, and Danny laughed and screamed and jumped on, and I realized the gator was much bigger than I’d thought, more like five or six feet, much bigger than me. My eyes grew wide and my heart was ready to burst, but I kept reeling.

The gator’s snout reached the bank, and inside me, rising up from my feet, I felt the ground shake. Suddenly the rod jerked from my hand, and I saw it in another’s, and I saw the arm attached to the hand, which was Daddy’s, and Daddy snapped the line and threw the rod down and picked me up. Yelled in my face. That sweet, sour smell of an alcoholic’s breath hit me like a cloud, and Daddy’s fingers dug deep into my arms. I didn’t hear what Daddy was saying as my legs dangled there in space. Instead I watched the gator disappear back into the murk. It was then I turned to Daddy, who’d stopped talking, and whose face was full of terror.

I said real quiet, almost whispering, “It don’t matter anyway if that gator would’ve ate me. Soon you’ll be dead and wouldn’t have known the difference.”

I felt terrible for saying it. I still do. He dropped me back down, shocked, and I ran back to Joe’s house, leaving him standing on the bank. He came back five or ten
minutes later, but he didn’t say anything else for that last little bit of time we stayed, besides goodbye.

On the drive back to New Orleans, too, Daddy didn’t say anything. Me and Al were in the back seat, and while we drove along I-10 I looked out at Lake Ponchartrain. I couldn’t see the other side, and it seemed endless. Just the gray of the water and the gray of the sky above it, with some razor-thin line in between.

All the sudden I felt like I was suffocating. I wondered how everything stayed where it was and kept that line, why everything down here didn’t just spill out into the gray above, and how everything above, the heavy gray sky and the moon, the planets and the stars, didn’t fall in and crush everything below. Really, what keeps that line from breaking?

Terrified and heaving for breath, I jumped up and wrapped my arms around Daddy’s chest as he drove and squeezed as tightly as my twelve-year old arms could. I tucke...
I ain’t feeling so good today, Maybelle. I want to tell you some things.

Look here. When I was young I couldn’t hardly make it from one end of St. Claude to the other without getting into trouble. The Avenue was like a circle that I followed round and round, hustling and drinking and carrying on and starting it all over again because I didn’t really know what my place was in the world and being there running that circle made me forget that shit for a minute. I don’t know why it is, but I’ve always felt like that, like there’d been a mistake when that little sperm that was me came out my daddy, your granddaddy—a Chicago pool hustler who stopped through the Ninth Ward long enough to lay with my momma but then got shot down in a Gulfport pool hall before I came to be—and so that little pool hustling sperm swam all through my momma’s dark nooks and crannies, aimless, see, rambling around in the dark just like the man I came out of, and it, I, wasn’t meant to find no light, no place where life was made. Not then, I don’t think. Either way, I’ve just always felt like I was put in the wrong time and place.

So I just walked that circle, round and round St. Claude and round and round the Ninth Ward, and over time I guess it just started wearing on me. One day, I was twenty-five, and I was talking outside the corner store about how I was feeling with Project—he had him a way with words and sometimes I talked with him about things that were on my mind—and he told me it was the condition of all black men to be in “a state of suspension.” That’s what he called it, a state of suspension. I told him that made sense to
me, as before I got kicked out of Nicholls High I’d been suspended from school more
times than I could remember, but he said it was something else too. Like the black man
didn’t have no real place here. Like he’d been taken from Africa all that time back and
put in this place that wasn’t his and never would be. Later that day I went into the library
over on Alvar and grabbed the big Webster’s dictionary to get more clarification and it
said suspend means to put on hold. So according to Project the black man is put on hold.
He’s stuck, not moving one way or the other, just hanging there in the space between.
Back in Africa he was moving things his own way, he had direction, count on. Here it’s
different. Other folks are always trying to tell him how to move.

So I left the Alvar Library that sunny afternoon with all that stuff on my mind and
I just started walking. I had an itch, see. I walked all over this town, from the river to the
lake and back again, not knowing where I was going, just thinking about being
suspended. Finally, I came up on Elysian Fields and St. Claude, sweating like a fool, and
looked around me at all the people and cars going here and there, and I got all confused. I
felt lost, even though I’d been on that corner thousands of times. But it wasn’t a
direction-lost, like a damn, Where’s Marais Street at, but a big-lost, like a damn, Who
and where the hell am I and who are these motherfuckers around me. And the only thing
I could think to do was to lay down right there on the concrete. That’s right. So that’s
what I did, and I looked up at the sky. I saw folks in the corner of my eye walk on by,
heard cars and trucks pass. Things just kept on moving around me. I must’ve fallen
asleep because when I woke up the sun was down. I got up and started for my house.
During my walk I passed a recruitment station. Vietnam was on, see. The next morning I
went in and volunteered.
Look here. So one day, about five months into my tour, me and my company raided this village in the jungle. It was raining like a motherfucker, Baby Maybelle.

We caught some fire when we rolled up, bullets flying all around. I was scared as hell, only been there a few weeks. I was scared more’n a lot of them kids that was fighting, even though I wasn’t as young as some of those other cats.

But so them bullets was flying all over the damn place, and we was running toward that shit! No lie. I looked at the brother beside me, name of Wilson. Dreamy motherfucker, always talking about his girl back in Tallulah.

Wilson looked like I felt, scared shitless, and for some reason I felt better for a second. Then Wilson caught a bullet in the neck. His blood splattered all over my face, and I stopped and stood there, wiping that blood off and then looking at it there on my hand.

I hadn’t seen nothing like that before, Maybelle. I was a lover not a fighter. I might have a dude fight me over a girl back on St. Claude, but with my fists, not a gun. So I stared at that blood on my hand, even with all the bullets flying. Lead coming sideways, rain coming down. I watched the rain wash Wilson’s blood clean off my hand, and just like that, it was gone.

And I said, “Damn.” I didn’t know what else to say or think. That man from Tallulah’s body was all laid out in the tall grass, looking like a big dummy. Face down, and his right arm had gone clean back around across the back of his neck. Looked like somebody was underneath, hugging him.

I knew Wilson’s last thought was about his girl.
So I was standing there thinking about Tallulah Wilson and how he was thinking about his girl back home when he died, count on, and some motherfucker pushed me from behind and yelled, “Move motherfucker!” And I was back in Vietnam in the rain again, and I ran toward them bullets. Them bitches have this hissing sound when they flying past you, count on.

Then after while the hissing stopped. When I got to the village I looked down at the weight in my hand. It was my bitch ass gun. While I was running I’d forgotten I had the motherfucker.

So them boys in my company were burning up all them huts in the village. Them village folk—and it was nothing but womenfolk, the menfolk all dead except for some old cats—were screaming and crying. Still raining, too. Old and young, all screaming and hollering, sounding like the whole motherfucking world was screaming and hollering, count on. Old, wrinkly ladies walking up to big old country white boys and beating on their big old country chests.

I covered up my ears and tried to think about walking down St. Claude on a sunny day. Grabbing a sno-ball, strawberry, and just sitting down with a nice lady. Talking her up and then catching a matinee on Canal.

But that didn’t work past a second or two. Some white boy hollered at me from one of the last reed huts they ain’t burned. White boy by the name of Smith, but everybody called him Okie for all the Smiths running around.

So this cat Okie was alright. He’d been in Nam for a long ass time, and he’d told me some shit that helped me along the way. Shit like how to take care of my boots.
“Freeman, come check this out,” Okie hollered. He waved me over. Rain was popping the top of my helmet, and all them womenfolk were still screaming. I walked over, because like I said, I thought Okie was alright. I got to this hut, and Okie led me inside.

So I go inside this hut and there’s a naked, scared Vietnamese girl in the middle of the hut. Covered in sweat. She was surrounded by a bunch of white boys from the company. The sergeant was there too. They had her tied down and her mouth gagged. One of the white boys took my gun when I went in, and I knew shit had gone real bad. The girl looked at me when I came in. She was beautiful, and she reminded me of my baby sister, your Aunt Emelda, like her around sixteen or so. And it made me think about what my sister must have been doing right then. It was summertime, so she must have been swimming. So I saw my little sister swimming in a pool smiling and laughing. Then I noticed that the little girl had something stuck between her legs.

I looked closer, and saw it was a motherfucking flare gun.

One of these white boys stuck a flare projector up in this little girl’s womenparts, Baby Maybelle, and the trigger was pulled back.

I looked around at all their faces, and I saw they was looking right back at me. I looked at Okie, but I couldn’t read his face. He had this same little grin the others had, but underneath I think he was scared as hell. The rain was still popping on the top of that hut, and the womenfolk was still screaming outside. We was all sweating buckets up in there. Then the sergeant said, “Freeman.”

“Get down and pull that trigger.”
“Fuck that,” I told him. “Matter fact, we need to leave this little girl alone. Already done killed her daddy, her brother, who knows who else.”

I didn’t know where that came from, scared as I was. The men laughed, and the sergeant was still laughing when he nodded to Okie, and I heard a click behind him. Maybe Okie wasn’t alright, I thought. “Call the captain,” I said.

“Cap’s dead,” the sergeant told me and he nodded again at Okie. and Okie pistol-whipped me in the back of the head. I fell to my hands and knees, right between the girl’s legs. Staring at the flare gun with the trigger pulled back.

“Snap that trigger, Freeman.”

I looked around at Okie, and I saw the gun shaking in his hand. I knew that gun wouldn’t be firing shit. Sergeant must have known the same thing, because then I heard a click come from his direction.

“How I know Captain’s dead,” I said. Sergeant smiled and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a dog tag attached to a bloody chain and threw it my way. It hovered in the air for what seemed to me forever, that rain popping on the roof overhead and those screams outside and that sweat running down my face, and it dropped down in front of me with a quick jangle. I picked it up. “Edmonds,” it read, “David L,” and the captain was dead, and I was the loneliest motherfucker on earth.

I thought about my sister again, down in that dirt on my hands and knees.

I got up to leave, but the sergeant fired a shot that grazed my head.

That shit stung, Maybelle. I knew he wasn’t gonna waste no more bullets on my black ass less they was inside my black ass. So there I was on my hands and knees. No place to go. And I ain’t gonna lie, I cried like a little bitch.
Finally, I pulled that trigger and ran the fuck out that hut, Maybelle.

I ran through that rain, away from the girl’s screams. My uniform and my boots got all heavy with rain as I ran into the jungle’s shadows, where I got stuck in its black mud.

All the rest of them years I was over there I was wilding out, count on. Every time they needed somebody to do some crazy ass shit, that was me. Go into the jungle in the middle of the night looking for trouble, that was me. Crawl around in them tunnels, that was me. You see Maybelle, I couldn’t get that little girl’s face out my mind.

I thought about how they would’ve killed me if I hadn’t done it. I went down into the tunnels, into the underground, and think of nothing but that. I wondered whether they would’ve done it themselves if they’d killed me. I couldn’t come to a conclusion, but the one thing I couldn’t get out my head is the thought that maybe they wouldn’t have. And that’s what I thought the whole time as I went through the tunnels, what I couldn’t get out my head there in the dark and the heat, sweating buckets to where my eyes stung, the smell of dirt so strong it stayed in my nose even when I was above ground. All that time I thought about all the kids the girl would’ve had, how she wouldn’t have hurt nobody, and how she would’ve just gone around the village smiling and always making people happy. Then I thought about myself, and about what I would’ve done once I got back to New Orleans. I knew I’d just be back on St. Claude and chasing after womenfolk and getting into fights with their men. Maybe get a little job or something. So when I thought, “But they would’ve killed me,” that shit made me feel worse. That’s why I stayed underground as much as I could, going through those tunnels that went for miles and miles and miles. I
felt like I was going deeper and deeper into myself, and I thought maybe there I’d find something I needed. Or maybe something I’d lost.

Other folks thought I was crazy, being as tall as I was and libel to get stuck. Sometimes I did get stuck, but I always wiggled my way out, or scratched and clawed and dug with my hands, sometimes to where they bled. The thing is, I felt I needed to be down there.

Sometimes folks would try to disturb me. Viet Cong folk.

And I killed nearly every one of them I ran into. I started running a number in my head of folks I killed, Baby. Watched it get bigger and bigger, and then I thought about the branches running off of them, the sad littlin’s and the women and the mommas and daddies, even the littlin’s not born yet and won’t ever have a chance to run and jump and play and then there were the branches coming off of them too, until there was this big old tree of sad folks and dead folks and souls of folks never born rising high, high until it took over the sky inside my head… and then I thought that pretty little girl would’ve had maybe 3, 4, 5 children, and 3, 4, 5 children more for each of them, and you throw in the folks she would’ve made happy just walking around being pretty, carrying water and bathing in streams and what not… The two numbers, the ones I killed along with the branches running from them, and the ones that girl would’ve made happy, started getting farther and farther apart. This big gap between my badness and her goodness got bigger every day, and the world steady got darker and darker because of my place in it and the girl’s place being gone.

When I came back up they pat me on the back and I heard things like “Good job, Freeman,” or “Dead gook’s a good gook.” I didn’t know what to think about that. I didn’t
have any ill will against these folks I killed, I just wanted to be down there by myself so I could think, and then these men came through there shooting and making a fuss.

So I threw lead at them bitches for disturbing my solitude. One time I ran into a fella tucked into this little duck off inside one of them tunnels, just sitting there Indian style. He had a pistol pointed right at me. I don’t know what was going through this fella’s head, but I guess he saw something in the look on my face. I think he figured out that I was just trying to do the same thing he was trying to do—think real deep, in the quiet—so he let me pass on by. Either way, when I heard them fools talking bout “Good job” after I killed one of these cats, I really just wanted to take my ass back down into the ground. Not to kill more folks. Just to be back in the dark and the quiet again. If I was the one who caught some lead, it didn’t make me no nevermind.

Then they was talking bout the war ending. I had forgot that shit was possible, thought I was just living my life.

And I thought about the idea of suddenly realizing there was another life you could be living, one you didn’t know existed, another life that you could just slip on into like you’re putting on a suit. Then I thought about how maybe before you slipped into that other life there was something you had to get done.

I got back to New Orleans a few months after the war ended, and I found things way different from when I left. I felt like I was a few steps back from everything. My momma would say something and I heard it a minute later, or my baby sister would hug me and I felt it an hour later. Like that.

I was tore up by the fact I couldn’t hear my momma talk when she was doing the talking and couldn’t feel my baby sister’s hugs while she was doing the hugging. I lived
like that, watching my life from a distance, for ten or twelve years. Then I got married, and me and your momma had you. I thought that might answer things, might bring me back into the world, because having a wife and children are the things a man’s supposed to do. But the whole time I wasn’t all the way there.

I loved you, Maybelle, don’t misunderstand me. I did. I do. But back then, like I said, it was like I was a few steps away from myself. Something wasn’t letting me be close to my own life. Close to you.

And then Fay, your momma, tried to kill me. Stuck me eleven times with a kitchen knife, count on. So… I sat, crumpled up on the kitchen floor, and I remember you coming over and wrapping your little arms around my neck and us crying together. Then Fay took you away, and I just watched all that blood drain out onto them kitchen tiles. We had them black-and-white checkers in the kitchen, you remember, and I watched my blood swallow up tile after tile, take over the black, the white, the black… I watched it go further and further, and I realized I wanted it to just keep on going. Take over the whole damn kitchen floor. I was getting all weak, but I remember thinking about how that blood was me, Charles Freeman, and there I was, spilling across the tiles. Further and further away. About that time I realized I was pissing myself. And, mind you, I was still crying. So there were all these things coming out of me, Baby Maybelle, to where I wasn’t no more than some old, sorry sack of blood, tears, and piss that somebody’d poked a hole in, just spilling out everything that it’d been holding inside itself. And Maybelle, as I thought about all these things flowing out of me I’ll be damn if I didn’t feel somehow relieved. No lie, I wanted all that stuff to just keep on draining out. But the thing is, and I’ve
thought about it a lot… I don’t think it was that I wanted to die. I think I just wanted to
start over.

At some point I fell asleep. I woke up in Charity Hospital with my momma standing over me smiling.

I said, “Momma.”

And she said, “Charles.”

And I heard her right as she said it, not a minute or even a second later. This made me happy.

“I done some bad things over there, Momma.”

Momma already knew what I was talking about, in the way mommas just know things. She told me, “Charles, listen. Them things you done, them things you seen over there…

“Look in my eyes, Baby.” And I looked in her eyes. “Them things ain’t real, no matter what it was. You ain’t had no business over there in the first place. Whatever you saw, whatever you did. That wasn’t you seeing and doing it.”

“So who was it, Momma?”

“Somebody else.”

“So who’s laying here right now?”

Right then, I felt my momma grab my hand, and then I felt my momma’s cheek, all warm to my touch. “Momma’s little baby,” she said, and that’s how I felt. I felt like I could start new. The warmth of her hand spread through my whole body, and while my hand was on her cheek, it was like she all the sudden yanked me out the dark of the tunnels. I was there, in that hospital bed holding my momma’s cheek and nowhere else.
And I cried. I thought of what Project said before I left about being suspended, about hanging there on hold, and I thought, Hell, if I’m just hanging here in space I might as well be whatever the hell I want to be. Forget Africa and forget America.

Crazy thing is, my momma caught a heart attack two weeks later, while I was still in Charity. Fucked me up, Maybelle. Right when I found out, I jerked out all them tubes they’d stuck in me, all the ones running on out to machines and bags, and I snuck out that hospital in them hospital pajamas with my ass half hanging out and everything, and I caught the bus to our house over on Gallier. My car was gone but I didn’t give a damn, it actually worked into the plan, see, helped me understand, along with my momma dying and me losing all that blood and sweat and piss and tears that came out of me when your momma stabbed me, that I had to let go of all the things that made up Charles Freeman.

I went in the house and that motherfucker stank, count on. Ain’t nobody cleaned it, and my blood… or maybe I should say Charles Freeman’s blood… was still all up on the kitchen floor. Flies all buzzing everywhere. My momma’s funeral wasn’t for a few days, but I went in the closet and dusted off Charles’s nice blue suit, put it on, put on his dress shoes too. Figured he wouldn’t mind me borrowing them until I got something else. I walked out that door for good with those clothes on my back, and I wore that suit until it wasn’t hardly nothing but a bunch of threads holding onto each other for dear life and when it finally quit that was the last thing of Charles Freeman’s I claimed. I left with thirty-seven dollars and fifty-two cents in my pocket.

I went to my momma’s service, hugged my sister who’d come over from California where she’d moved, one last time, and I been living on the streets ever since. Living on veteran’s checks and performing for folks over in the Quarter, trying to make
people feel good. That’s why I called myself Doc. And I tried to be as far away as
possible from Charles Freeman, from that person who’d made so many people feel bad.

I sometimes thought I was really free. But here in this sick bed, I know that this
whole time I never was. Not once.
Chapter 11- Maybelle

To eat the oats I gotta pour it on the table and pick out the little black bugs. I try to get every one, but it’s hard. They’re smarter than they look. I know I don’t get every one, and I imagine the tiny things going into me, down my throat, and into my stomach. Must be dark, dark inside me. I think about what it must be like to be one of them, in the middle of eating oats and then all the sudden being ate up your own self, and then being nothing. I wonder where it is inside me they start being nothing.

After eating, I grab an old empty coffee can off the counter. I go to the door, wait to make sure I don’t hear no cars, then go out into the sun. I walk across the highway. Through bursting cotton fields beaucoup white, then over the levee and through the woods to the river.

I go out into the river knee-deep and my feet sink into the soft, warm mud. It swallows up my feet, feels good. I scoop the can in the brown water and pour the water down my throat. I’m thirsty and the water goes down the sides of my mouth, my neck, on down my dress and back into the river. Goes back where it came from, disappears into all the rest.

On the way back I hear a car coming, and I duck into the cotton. This ain’t that weird, as cars come by every now and then. What’s weird is how the car seems to be slowing down, the tires’ singing going from high to low. I crouch lower into the cotton. It’s Cadillac.
I drop and press my body down tight onto the dirt. I feel my heart pounding against it. I dig my face in, too. It’s rough, but still cool from night. The car slows more, and I see it in my mind. The fancy wheels, the tinted windows, the shiny, gold Cadillac ornament, and the man with the shiny, gold teeth inside.

I hear the car creeping by, and I try to make myself into dirt.

Finally, he passes. The sound of the tires goes high again until it turns into nothing. Still, I wait a few minutes there in the dirt before crossing the highway. Think about how I’m going to have to really be careful. I always gotta be listening.

I get on my back in the bed frame under the oak. To get my mind off Cadillac, I think about Elvin. About a year ago or so when I first met him and how he told me stories in the hospital after he got off work.

Those smart folks in the hospital would talk about me like I wasn’t even there. Words flying around my head like nervous sparrows. I still hadn’t opened my eyes because I didn’t want to, but still.

“She was found by a man fishing on the river.”

“Severe blood loss.”

Their words flew around, and I started remembering pieces of what happened. How I was feeling like nothing, riding on a big leather car seat. The man driving, his neck and fingers sparkled with gold, he was like nothing. And me sitting there with no Momma, no Wil, no Maw-Maw, no nobody, and them saying New Orleans is underwater so Governor Nicholls must be too, all that’s left was nothing.

And I remembered how I’d been with that man for maybe a few days or so and his name was Cadillac. I felt like nothing and he’d been nice, until the time he wasn’t.
The time he pulled onto some side road through cotton fields and the car kicked up dust. Dust was everywhere. And then there was the river, big and brown and quiet. Tall green grass swaying lazy in the breeze. We got out the car and he was telling me to stay with him, that he cared for me, but I didn’t care for him. At the time I didn’t care for nothing. I just wanted to stay by the river in the quiet to figure things out, and he started hitting me.

I crawled down to the rocks, to the river. I heard Cadillac’s car start up and drive off, and I watched the red coming out of me mix with the brown water. I went to sleep.

A man’s big arms picked me up from the rocks, and I floated through the air. I smelled gasoline and fish on his clothes, then I smelled pine. I heard him say in a country voice, “You ain’t gonna die, Little One. Oh hell no, you ain’t gonna die.”

And I remember waking up and hearing that voice again that night. Right off, I liked him. He talked with me, even though my eyes were closed. Told me all sorts of things. Things about him and his people from back in the day and the world around them and all how they’d work and play and fish inside that world. Or he told me about little things like the pretty sunset he saw the day before and how it compared to the one before that, or the time he found a raccoon sleeping all peaceful in his kitchen cabinet. When I woke up to the nervous sparrow-people talking about me, I fell back asleep, but when the country voice spoke with me, I could stay awake. It was like the voice was holding my hand and bringing me back into the world, slow and careful as I needed.

Over time I figured out that the name that went with the voice was Elvin, because a lot of times he was a character in his stories and he talked about people talking to him. They said, “You ain’t lying, Elvin,” or “Alright then, Elvin,” or “Elvin, I’ll be damn.”
One night Elvin talked about his great granddaddy, who was also named Elvin, just like his daddy before him.

“Everybody else gone up to Chicago, my grandmomma’d tell me. She told me that was back when rich folks found out that machines were better than people. Even though Great Grandaddy Elvin’s daddy, my great, great granddaddy, nearly broke his back chopping away trees with a dull axe, fighting off alligators, snakes, and spiders, and draining that mosquito-infested swamp out this whole area with his crew, all the sudden a machine was better than him. Great Grandaddy Elvin’s daddy didn’t forget, Little One. Until he died, the pain in his back was always reminding him of his years working in the swamp, getting nearly swallowed up by all the black mud. He remembered how the rays of light would bust through the cypress branches and gather in his axe, and he chopped and chopped for less than a dollar a day. It made Elvin’s daddy feel bad while he was doing it, because he knew that every time he dropped his axe it was like he was dropping it on his own throat. Well that’s how my grandmomma told it, anyways. Elvin’s daddy knew he and all the people that looked like him would end up working that land for next to nothing, picking that cotton the white folks’d end up growing there. Along with that, he felt bad because he was killing all them trees and chasing off all them critters. Critters whose mommas and papas had lived there, along with those critters’ mommas and papas before them way on back into time.”

Elvin stopped, and I heard him shift in his chair. “Say, Little One. If you need to ask any questions along the way you just holler now, hear?”

I didn’t need to ask any questions.

“Alright then,” he said.
I noticed that Elvin had started calling his great granddaddy just plain Elvin, like himself. So when he talked about his great granddaddy, inside my head I saw the Elvin I’d made from that little piece I saw when I snuck a peek one time while I knew he wasn’t looking. Blue jump suit and scraggly beard. Handsome in a country kind of way.

And I saw Great Grandaddy Elvin’s world as I listened to Elvin’s voice. The words turned into shiny machines, and then those shiny machines took people’s jobs and the words were people and they got on a train to Chicago and waved to the people who stayed. Great Grandaddy Elvin was waving too, but he wasn’t on the train. He wanted to stay in Mississippi, in the place his father made with his axe that stole light and the place his momma still lived at. He stayed even though there were no jobs for people, only jobs for machines. He did odd jobs in town, just enough to feed him and Ida, his wife, and their five children.

They were still happy, even though the only thing they had worth anything was a pig. Before Elvin’s daddy finally finished fighting off snakes, alligators, swamps, white men, black men, and imaginary men, and then beat a little cotton out of the land he stole the light out of, and later felt like he had fought off all the things and people and cotton that he could until he felt relatively satisfied and died, he left Elvin one thing: a pig called Bob. Elvin’s daddy had a feeling he was gonna die one afternoon and walked the pig over to Elvin’s house. I listened as the voice of the Elvin sitting there in the chair and telling the story, the Now Elvin, turned into a growl.

“Got damn, take this got damn worthless pig and do something with it. Best thing’d be to kill it, sell it, get some money. Get outta this got forsaken place, got damnit…”
After he gave that pig over to his son, he walked back to his own house and died. In my head I watched a man that looked like an old version of Now Elvin, also wearing an oil-stained blue jump suit, but all faded, lay on his bed and never get up again. But the Elvin from back then didn’t want to leave. The odd jobs started dying out when the waving people left on those trains, until they disappeared altogether. Elvin and Ida started to look at Bob with hungry eyes, but they knew he was the last thing they had worth anything. “Let’s wait a little while,” Ida would say. She was good at helping Elvin think. As for the few black folks left, they just kept on going north, but Elvin and Ida decided to stay it out, at least until Elvin’s momma and Ida’s folks passed. Then one Friday, word got to Elvin that Theo Jones was going to Chicago, which meant that he’d be leaving his job at Hopkins’ feed store. This was Elvin’s chance.

He got his sparkly white shoes called wingtips out the closet, the ones Ida’s folks got for Elvin one Christmas and he’d only worn once in those twelve years (at his father’s funeral). When his daddy had first seen them so many years before he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Elvin from Now went into that growl again. “Got damn Elvin, they’s the finest got damn sparkly things I ever did see in my whole got damn life… Got damn…”

And then Back Then Elvin was back in his house getting ready to shine his sparkly white shoes. He used an old rag from out of the kitchen. And the way I heard it, the rag was so full of holes it was like it was more hole than rag, and what was there was stained all with blood, oil, and other things that came out of animals and machines. And here it was shining something so beautiful, I thought at the time. That’s something. Elvin spit on the outer side of his sparkly white right shoe, wiped it, spit and wiped, and he spit
and wiped. He moved slow, slow all the way around until he got to the other side, until he was left with what he knew was the most beautiful sparkly white right shoe anybody had ever seen. He went to the kitchen and held it up to Ida. She said the exact same thing that Elvin had just thought, so Elvin knew it must be the truth.

I heard Now Elvin walk over to the sink, fill up a cup with water, and take a drink. “I’m a little parched, Little One. Excuse me,” he said. He sat back down in the chair beside my bed. I heard the chair make a fuss.

He went on. “So, like I was saying…”

And the words became Elvin shining the sparkly white left shoe, just like he did the right, and then he put both shoes on top of the dresser. He put a blanket over the shoes so no dust would get on them while he put his Sunday suit on. Elvin figured it was alright that his Sunday suit was a little tired-looking at the cuffs, because when Mr.Hopkins first saw him walk into his store, Elvin knew that all he was going to see was his beautiful sparkly white shoes, and give him the job right then and there. In my head Elvin took off his blue jump suit and then put on his blue Sunday suit and blue tie, and then he put his white shoes inside a bag from where he’d take them and put them on his feet about half a block away from Hopkins’ store. Not only to keep the shoes from getting dirty, but also because they hurt Elvin’s feet. “Truth be told,” Now Elvin said, “they pinched a bit.” He put on his working shoes for the walk to town. Elvin kissed Ida and each one of their five children square on the forehead, and he walked into the sunlight.

Elvin always loved the walk into town. The cotton fields on each side of the road made him smile and think of his momma and the things she would tell him when he was little, back before the machines. Now Elvin tried to sound like Back Then Elvin’s
momma, and I really thought I heard Elvin’s momma talking real light and sweet about the cotton fields: “See them clouds, Lil’ Elvin? That’s what they is, clouds, as far as the eye can see. That’s why we used to spend all our days up inside of them, because that’s where we is here on earth, and that’s where we gonna be when we gone off of this earth. We just hopping from cloud to cloud, Lil’ Elvin. Just keep that smile on your face and keep your thoughts on them clouds, Lil’ Elvin...”

Elvin from back then watched the cotton bolls blow across the road, and a bunch of butterflies came out of nowhere, or so Now Elvin’s grandmomma told him and he told me. And Back Then Elvin smiled at the cotton bolls and butterflies and sunshine all coming together into his little place in the world. He walked down the road and then it was to me like he wasn’t walking anymore but floating, floating down the middle of that road with his sparkly white shoes safe in his bag and thinking about his momma.

Elvin heard somebody running up behind him, and I watched his feet come back down to the ground. He turned around and saw little Jonah Hopkins running after butterflies with a net. The little boy yelled out, “C’mon you damn flying cockroaches!” He caught one right before he came up on Elvin and was in the middle of putting it in a mason jar when Elvin said, “Hey, Jonah, what you doing out here?”

Jonah ain’t said nothing. He showed his new catch to Elvin, put it into the jar, and closed the lid with a nasty little smile on his face. Elvin noticed there weren’t any holes in the lid and this no-holed jar made me sad, and Elvin, all nervous, said just what I was thinking: “Young Jonah, that butterfly gonna die if you don’t punch some holes in that lid!”
Jonah ignored him. Elvin started to say it again, but then he thought about how he was on his way to ask this little boy’s daddy for a job. He looked from Jonah to the butterfly. The butterfly’s fluttering wings worked slower and slower and slower, and I, through Elvin, looked back at the little boy’s greedy eyes and thought about how it must have been like those eyes were sucking in all that life that the butterfly was breathing out. The fluttering wings stopped altogether, and I became scared for Elvin.

Once in town, Elvin stopped a short way from Hopkins' store and took a minute to put on his sparkly white shoes. When he opened the bag, I saw a near blinding light spring out from the bag’s innards, even though Now Elvin didn’t say nothing about that. But when Back Then Elvin put on the sparkly shoes, I saw them lose that blinding light. I tried to bring it back, to make them sparkle brighter because I knew how important it all was, but something kept them from doing it. And I knew what it was. It was because Elvin’s head was full of dead butterflies.

Elvin’s short walk to the big white building seemed to last for days. Even though he was right there, the building crept away from him, I even heard it scrape against the ground. Along with that, the building grew bigger and bigger. I looked up at that big old building with Elvin, and I felt his pinched feet inside those now-not-so-sparkly shoes. Now Elvin told me that after Back Then Elvin’s meeting with Jonah Hopkins, his mood changed, but I already knew that. Back Then Elvin finally caught up with the store, which was big, big by then, and he thought about what he and the family might do if he didn’t get the job. He went up to the door, and with those dead butterflies in his head, Elvin went in and left the sunlight behind.
Inside the front of Hopkins’ store, there was nothing but white folks. The black folks were in the back, working. Once they heard the door close, everybody in the front looked away from whatever it was they were looking at before and looked straight at Elvin. But really, they didn’t look at him, but at his shoes. And right then, there was a big explosion of laughter that made the floor shake under Elvin’s feet. Really. And I watched him brace himself on the front counter as his knees gave out under him. The explosion changed into a rumble, and then Mr. Hopkins, who was behind the counter and had been growing bigger and bigger with each laugh until his head nearly hit the roof and he looked down at Elvin and, his big face blood red and his eyes just like his son’s as the boy watched those butterfly wings grow slow and then quit flapping, managed to stop laughing just enough to spit out, “What the hell are them on your feet, boy?”

Elvin went smaller and smaller, until his head hardly went up to the top of the counter, and then he got even smaller and I imagined tiny Elvin inside a jar with no holes and he couldn’t breathe and I gave him tiny wings that shot out from the back of his Sunday suit but I’d forgotten they wouldn’t help but still when the wings came they tried and tried but couldn’t flap and Elvin looked from inside that jar at all those laughing faces and he didn’t understand, he didn’t understand. Elvin was in his jar and couldn’t breathe, and he shrunk until he was almost nothing. He tried to get his legs working, but they didn’t want to. Finally he somehow found the strength to turn around and face the door. The jar left my head, I couldn’t stand it anymore, but Elvin was still small and from down where he was, the door shot up toward the sky to where he couldn’t hardly see the top. Elvin was surprised when the huge door gave to his tiny hand, and he left the store. I made the sun shine extra bright. I knew Elvin needed that.
And as Elvin walked back to his house with the fields on each side of him, I needed him to be big again, so I made it happen. But now Elvin told me that as Back Then Elvin walked back to his house this time, the cotton fields left him confused. The voices of his momma and his daddy were getting mixed up.

“Cloud to cloud, Lil’ Elvin, cloud to cloud...Got damnit boy, don’t take no shit from nobody. You gotta take what’s your’n and beat your troubles back with a axe, a fist, or anything else that gets things out your way, got damnit... Hopping from cloud to cloud, Lil’ Elvin, just remember...Got damnit...”

Now Elvin’s voice stopped. I waited there in that hospital bed, wanting to hear more; I wanted the voice to keep doing what it was doing. So much of Great Granddaddy Elvin’s story hurt, just like with some of Elvin’s other stories, but at least hurt was something I could feel. I hadn’t felt much since Momma was killed and Wil ran off. That’s a long time. And almost always after Elvin told a story that hurt, he told a story that felt good. Up and down, always up and down. Sometimes I imagined Elvin’s voice as a boat, carrying me, safe and sound, across some big, stormy sea.

“There’s a little more to Great Grandaddy Elvin’s story, but I’ll tell you that later, Little One,” Elvin said that evening. He stayed sitting there for a while, and then he left.

I never wanted him to leave.
I roll riverbound up Highway 16, through the Delta National Forest. Pines rise high on both sides of the two-lane road, starting just a few yards off the shoulder and running deep, deep out to who knows where. Their smell is thick.

A big antlered buck bolts out of the woods to my left and runs across the highway in front of me. I slam the brakes, the tires screech and it seems like I might miss him, but the right corner of the car clips him on the hindquarters. The headlight shatters and metal bends and I’m thrown into the steering wheel, my head barely missing the windshield. The buck’s hindside swivels left and his antlers swing down and hard right.

I fall back into the seat and I turn, watch the buck limp for a few gallops and after a few more work it out until he’s righted and he hops into the pines with no sound.

He jumps and weaves his way through the trees, and it’s so damn beautiful it makes me sad. Not sad because I hit him, it looks like he’ll be fine. But sad in that same old way, the way I can’t look at something beautiful and true without at the same time thinking about how every single moment I’m watching it, its getting closer and closer to its end. Closer to being nothing.

The buck is now a distant flash of light brown, smaller and smaller as he goes in and out of view, broke into pieces of forever-changing size by the trees, and I can’t really explain how it happens but all the sudden he’s gone, like the last little tree-cut dregs of him drained into some tiny hole in the middle of the forest.
I stare at that space for a good while, trying to find that hole, but it’s lost. I face the highway and press the gas.

Me and my boy Jimmy walked down St. Claude Ave one evening, sun going down making everything all gold. We weren’t but fifteen or so, feeling good because we’d scored some Thunderbird over at a corner store on Elysian Fields. Folks sat on lawn chairs in the grassy neutral ground between the double lanes of the Avenue, laughing and drinking beer. Lionel Richie’s “All Night Long” blared out of a parked Cadillac’s open windows. We crossed Mandeville, and we heard this big ruckus coming out from between two abandoned buildings. The sound of metal beating hard against metal, and a bunch of angry cussing.

“Goddamnit, fuck you! I’ll learn you bitch ass motherfucker!” and what not. We peeked into the alleyway, and we found this little wild-eyed dude with a dirty wifebeater, raggedy jeans and only one shoe on, laying into an old stove with an aluminum bat. I mean really laying into it. The whole thing was all dented up, and bent, twisted metal and broken dials lay all around. The man just kept beating on that thing and cussing at it, and me and my boy Jimmy stood there, watched, and passed the bottle of Thunderbird back and forth.

After a while the man stopped beating on the stove and looked over at us. Hung the bat to his side. He didn’t say anything, just looked at us all serious. Not mean, just serious, and then he raised up that bat toward me and Jimmy. We looked at each other and walked into the alley. I took the bat from the man and handed him the Thunderbird. He took a swig and handed it over to Jimmy. And then I plumb went to town on that
stove, laying into it every which way. I felt it all through my body every time it landed, blood flooding all through me and into the bat. It felt good. Jimmy and the man leaned against the wall and slid on down. They sat there and watched me lay into that oven and passed the bottle back and forth.

I got winded. I stepped over to the wall behind me, slid down and sat next to the man and my boy Jimmy. I lay the bat down beside me. The man’s bare foot was hard and scaly.

None of us said anything, we just drank and stared at the wall. At the time I thought, as I had before while getting drunk in alleyways off St. Claude, about how it seemed like Thunderbird, maybe more than any other booze, made everybody somehow the same.

I took another pull from the Thunderbird, passed it to the man. Said, “That your stove, man?”

The man’s eyes kept on the wall. “Nah,” he said. “I was walking by and just kind of found it sitting here.”

I nodded.

The man drank. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“And the bat? Where’s it from?”

“Don’t know. Just woke up one morning while back, holding it in my hand. Been carrying it around ever since, fucking shit up.” He took another drink, passed the bottle on to Jimmy. The man continued.

I was pretty drunk by then, and all these questions ran through my head. A bat, I wondered, come out of nowhere into a man’s hand? Why was it put there? What was he
supposed to do with it? I looked at the wrecked stove. Was the man here just to destroy things? And he ain’t got control over it? I really felt for the guy.

I tipped the bottle of Thunderbird back, but there was only a sip left. I turned to the Destroyer, which is what he was. I was about to ask him my questions, but figured he wouldn’t’ve known the answers his own self.

“Say, thanks for letting me beat the shit outta that stove with you,” I said. Me and Jimmy slid back up the wall. Jimmy nodded to the Destroyer, and the Destroyer nodded back. The Destroyer looked over to me, and I had a strange thought. I imagined one morning when the Destroyer would wake up and the bat would be gone. I thought about how maybe then he could stop destroying. I liked the thought of that.

The Destroyer’s eyes went back to the wall, and we left him like that. Looking all burdened with thought.

A few nights after me and Jimmy’d left the Destroyer in the alley, I left out the back door about three or so.

St. Claude was quiet. Not much noise besides a car whooshing by every so often, or somebody hollering out a name from somewhere out there in the dark. I passed the shotgun houses, the tire shop with its homemade signs, and the glass store fronts showing nothing inside. A prostitute leaned into an open car window, talking low, and a few more blocks down a drunk was knocked out on the sidewalk. I crossed Spain Street, came up on The Destroyer’s alleyway.

It was dark in there. From the sidewalk, I could see the crumpled white of the stove. Somewhere out in the distance, closer to the river, a woman screamed. I walked into the alleyway, and my eyes adjusted. I could make out the Destroyer, laid out against
the wall on the left side. I thought about how the woman out by the river hadn’t screamed again. He was asleep, but I could tell he had a good grip on the bat.

As quiet as I could, I crept over and knelt down next to him. My heart quickened. I closed my right hand around the head of the bat, and I swear I could feel the Destroyer’s pulse run through. With the fingers of my left I tried to pry off his grip. It was like a vise, but I kept on. I felt the bat trying to move, and the Destroyer sat up but before he could even open his eyes something clicked inside me and without even thinking I punched him square in the face with my left. While he fell out he unclenched his hand, and I slipped the bat right on out.

* *

I pull into Chuck’s Dairy Bar in Rolling Fork round noon, hungry as hell. I order two catfish sandwiches and a beer. Sit down in a booth and pull Maybelle out my pocket. She’s in bad shape, all creased. I smooth her out and put her on the table. Look at her sitting there still on the river.

I pick up one of the sandwiches, pull out the toothpick, and peel back the paper full of grease to where you can just about see clean through. I take a bite. It’s tender, juicy, pulled from the fryer right on time, with a buttered and toasted bun. I pull it away from me and just look at it. Damn, that’s good.

There’s a decent crowd, half the wooden booths are filled. Country white folks and country black folks, sometimes sitting in the same booth. I finish my sandwiches and hit the booths with the photo, and get the same thing I got in Yazoo.
Then I go up to the girls behind the counter. Hand over the photo.

“Naw, baby,” says one, “Sorry,” says the other. The second one glances behind her to the kitchen, then back to me. “I’mma holler at Tyrone, hear. That boy got a memory like a computer, especially when it comes to pretty girls.” She disappears into the kitchen.

I watch her through the window, behind the burger and fries waiting to be called.

“Who is she?” the girl left behind says, flashing gold-capped canines. ANGELA, her nametag says. She has this deep, black-lacquered skin that carries the shine of the sun. Beautiful.

“A buddy’s little girl.” I look out the window. I’m working on being able to look people in the eye again, but it’s hard. “Say, can I get another beer?”

She walks to the fridge and grabs me another and says, “When’s the last time you seen her?”

I crack the beer open and take a drink. “I ain’t never seen her, besides that picture.”

“When’s the last time your buddy seen her?”

“Fifteen years or so.”

Angela smiles, then looks at the cars passing down the highway outside. She squints as a turning car’s windshield goes ablaze. I watch her face light up, then go dark again.

“It’s like a fairy tale or something,” she says.

The other girl comes out the kitchen, followed by a young fella wearing a hairnet and a dirty white apron. He looks real serious. He holds Maybelle’s photo in his hand.
“I remember this girl,” he says. “Few days after the storm.”

A chill runs up my back. I’ll be damn, maybe I was right about the river.

“What you remember?” I say.

“Everything.” He looks at me for a minute, sizing me up. “What she to you?”

“Buddy’s little girl. He’s real sick, and I told him I’d find her.”

He stays looking. I take a drink.

“Alright then,” he says. “Tell the truth, I was studying on her. She had this yellow
dress on. She was real pretty, if you don’t mind me saying…” One of the girls clears her
throat. “I mean, but, she looked real sad. She was alone when I saw her, it was like she
just appeared out of nowhere. I usually keep an eye on what’s going on out here while
I’m cooking. You know, looking at who’s coming in and out. And it was like she was all
the sudden just standing there at the counter.”

“Was she with somebody?” Big drink.

“Hold up. So she got her money out and looked up to Lisa. That’s who was
working at the time.” He walks over and places his hand on the far register. “Right here.
So Lisa come over and give me pretty girl’s order, and I, real loud-like to get her
attention, you know, called it out.

‘Catfish sandwich and fries for the pretty girl!’”

I figure from what I know, and from the picture, that she must’ve looked up
and then looked right back down again at the counter.

“Still looking all sad,” Tyrone told me.

He says right then he decided to find a minute to go talk to her. Her order came up
and she sat down at one of them big booths. Hunched over her food, eating like a bird. I
see it; I know how it is to eat like that. Like it doesn’t matter what it is you’re putting there in that hole of a mouth; like it didn’t really matter whether or not you even put it there in the first place.

“Man, that dog wasn’t hunting. That pretty girl…”

“Maybelle,” I said.

“Maybelle. Sitting by her own self like that, looking all lonely. I felt like all the menfolk of the world were being disgraced…”

Tyrone, a deep frown on his face, freezes with his mouth wide open as a customer walks up and says, “Those my burger and fries?” Not-Angela walks over, grabs the burger and fries out of the window, and hands them to the customer.

“Sorry about that,” Not-Angela says. I look at her nametag: SANDRA.

Tyrone lays back in. He says he flew through his orders to catch some time to talk to Maybelle. It was lunch time so it was pretty busy, but he finally found an opening and ripped off his apron. Threw it aside and slammed through the door to go out there and talk to her, but by the time he got out she was gone. He turned and saw her walking out the door. He walked over, opened the door, and saw her to his left, walking around the front of a parked gray Cadillac with a gold hood ornament and windows tinted dark, dark. Engine running.

That’s when the window slid down just a few inches. “I don’t know what it was, but I just felt like that girl shouldn’t have been getting into that car. I stepped up. Like I said, I don’t know why. And from that crack in the window… and I know this sounds crazy, but… It really was like all I could see was sunglasses and shiny gold. Gold shining from what, I don’t know. There wasn’t nary sun in there with that tint so black. Mine and
Maybelle’s eyes met across the roof just before she got in the car and man, she looked sad. Then I heard something tapping against the steering wheel from inside the car. I looked in and saw fingers all full of gold rings, and then I saw that they were wrapped around a pistol. Right when Maybelle opened the door, the pistol disappeared and the dude’s window rolled up. Like he didn’t want her to know about it.

“The manager popped out the door and yelled that orders were up, and I was all discombobulated. Didn’t know what the hell to do. I guess there wasn’t much I could do.”

I ask Tyrone what happened then.

“Old boy drove off. They pulled onto Maple and I’m pretty damn sure I saw ‘em take a right way on down yonder on Martin Luther King before losing them.” He points down the road, and swings his arm to the right.

“Where’s that go?” I say.

“North, up 16. Turns into 1 and goes up the river.

“But listen here, man. I ain’t done. I ran back in and caught up on the line as quick as I could so I wouldn’t be out a job, then first minute I had called the cops. Told ‘em all I knew, that a shady dude with a gun in a gray Cadillac drove off with a pretty girl in a yellow dress. Man, so many people was coming in and out at that time because of the hurricane, I doubt they even bothered to send anybody out.”

I’d stayed looking out at the highway. I turn to Tyrone. “That all?”

“Hell no. After my shift ended, about three or so, I headed up north and drove all around looking for that Cadillac. Hollandale, Leland... up to Greenville. Man, I even went all the way up to Rosedale and Cleveland. And there a lot more gray Cadillacs out there
than you think. I tailed all of ‘em until I was sure it wasn’t them. Didn’t so much know what I was gonna do if I found ‘em, but I guess that’s the romantic’s way. I reckon I was just gonna sneak up and take her and hopefully not end up throwing too much lead around. I pack heat myself, you see…”

“Oh Lord,” Angela says, rolling her eyes.

“Anyway, nothing ended up happening. I ain’t find her. I didn’t get back here until early morning. There was something about that girl, about your Maybelle, and that look she had. It just made me have to try. Like right then nothing else mattered.”

“Excuse me. I been waiting here for a good long minute. Can I order, please?” a round blond woman says by the other register. Sandra walks over and takes the woman’s order.

“What’s your name, man?” Tyrone says.

“Antoine.”

“Antoine, man, I went out damn near every other day to go looking for that gray Cadillac. But after a month or so, I figured I had to give up. And now a year gone by and I ain’t seen her or the Cadillac since.”

Sandra puts the woman’s order up at the top of the window. Tyrone grabs the note pad from Angela’s hand and takes the pen out her hair. He writes his name and number down. “Here’s my cell number.” We shake hands. “Anything you need, holler.”

“Thanks, Tyrone. Thanks Angela, Sandra.”

I rush out the door, hit the pay phone right outside. I put the coins in and call the hospital, tell the operator Doc’s room number. It rings a few times and picks up.

“Doc here.” He doesn’t sound so good. His voice is slow and weak.
“Doc. I got a lead. It’s a year old, but at least it’s something. Seems Maybelle came through Rolling Fork and then went north with some dude in a Caddy. I’mma head that way.”

He doesn’t say anything for a second. I hear him sniffling. “That’s good, Coozan. That’s real good.”

“You okay, Doc?”

“Listen, Coozan. I need you to find her. I’m falling off, feel my brain getting all slow and tired, and most times it’s like there’s nothing in there but the sound of the river flowing and the feeling of floating, but it ain’t good floating, no, I’ve gone way, way off from Guv Nicholls Street Wharf, Coozan… way off to I don’t know where.

“And the only times a little thought comes, it’s something about Baby Maybelle. Like just now, I was thinking about how she used to climb this big old oak tree behind the house on Gallier. She’d started being able to climb it only a few months before that last night. I remember I’d come in from work, and I’d go back and find her at the top of that big-ass thing. She was way on up there, Coozan. And she’d holler down to me, ‘Hey Daddy, look at me!’ and I’d smile up and wave and say, ‘I see you, Baby, I see you.’”

He’s outright crying. I just listen. See what he’s telling me.

“Then her momma’d yell and yell from inside, talking about how Maybelle needed to come down from there and how I needed to stop egging her on and what not… The thing was, Coozan, I understood how she ended up at the top of that tree, high up in the sky. I understood how when she figured out she could grab hold of one of them low branches, she right then wanted to grab the next one up, and the one after that. See, that made sense to me.
“But her momma always thought that down on the ground, close to her people, was where everything was safe. And Coozan, after all this time, I realize her momma was right. I messed up, Coozan. I messed up real bad. I’m the one that went off up into the clouds, leaving little Maybelle behind. Down in the dirt.”

“Doc. I’m going to find her,” I say. I don’t know what else I could say.

Doc’s crying trails off until I hear the click of the phone going dead.

I hop in the Continental. Head for Highway 1, thinking of Doc at the bottom of that tree, alone, looking up at his little girl.

*

First time I met Doc was nearly a year after I got out of OPP. Must’ve been ‘02.

I fell asleep on the tiles after puking up a storm. Blood and bile was spewing out of me and into the toilet all the night before.

Desha visited me again. Watched me. Like always when she visited, she was wearing that pretty little cotton dress I liked. Baby blue. And also like always, she didn’t say anything. That night she just sat there on the tiles and watched me puke my guts up with no expression. But I was on to her. I knew that blank face. That face said she was disappointed, and it made me embarrassed, as it always had.

She disappeared right before my face hit the tiles.

My head was killing me. My throat felt raked out. Raw. I tried to ignore the knocking and finally it stopped. But it came again a few minutes later and wouldn’t go away. I climbed the toilet to get myself up and stumbled over to the door. I opened it, and
bright, too bright light came flooding in, nearly blinding me. Once I could see, I saw this
tall old man in a dirty black track suit standing there. Stray gray hairs shot out all crazy
from his beard and his untended corn rows. He had a big toothless smile.

“Help a nigga out with some sugar, count on,” he said in a big baritone.

“Huh?”

“Excuse me. The name’s Doc.”

He put his hand out, and I shook it without thinking. I noticed that the tip of his
index finger was missing.

“I’m your new neighbor. Just moved in, matter fact. You see Frida’s a friend of
mine. You know, Frida… she lives in the front. Well, at least she used to live there, I
ain’t talked to her in a while. Anyway, I’m gonna be living here in the back.” He pointed
down into the courtyard, where he’d set a hammock up between two trees. “She said
while back it’d be fine.”

“Oh, nah, I don’t know Frida,” I said. He laughed. I didn’t know what about. But I
remember the laugh being huge and real.

“Alright then. What’s that you said your name was?”

“I didn’t. Name’s Antoine.” My face felt tight against the sun, and Doc was tiring
me.

“Well, listen, Coozan. I was gonna heat up some coffee on my little cook stove
back here, and realized I was plumb outta sugar. Got some?”

I looked back in the apartment, even though I knew I didn’t have any sugar.

I turned back. “Nah,” I said.

“Alright then. Well when I find some, you wanna join me for some coffee?”
“Nah. Thanks. I gotta…”

“I respect that, count on. Well it was nice meeting you.”

I reckon he interrupted so I wouldn’t have to tell the lie I was struggling to find. I
actually appreciated that. I watched him take a few steps and then turn back to face me,
all excited.

“Say, how about when you get a chance you come and see one of my shows? I’m
a entertainer, count on.” His voice had gotten real low, serious. “I entertain folks. You
can catch me on Bourbon and Toulouse most any night. Some days, too.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said, with no intention of seeing a damn thing besides
the bottom of a whiskey bottle to get rid of the splitting headache I had.

Doc smiled all toothless. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

As he went down the steps, I looked over at my neighbors in the courtyard on the
other side of the banana trees to the left. They sat around a big table and quietly sewed
colorful beads into feathered Mardi Gras Indian costumes. Almost in unison, they turned
to Doc and nodded.

I stared at Doc for a second, and I closed the door.

*

The next time I saw him was a few days later. I was leaving to do a little cabinet job for a
friend of the family’s. Getting those little jobs here and there was how I was making rent
and staying good on booze and red beans. Barely.
It was spring, and that March wind was blowing hard. The oaks were rushing and the banana leaves were slapping up against each other. I closed the door, using my left hand to stay my right enough to put the key in to lock up. Don’t ask me how I was working carpentry during that time, liable to saw my hand off. But I gotta tell you, something happens when I’m working wood, to where things calm down and just plain stop shaking.

I went down the stairs, and I saw Doc clean knocked out in his hammock, a paperback copy of *Shogun* face down against his chest. Good, I thought. I got down to the courtyard and made real quick and quiet for the alleyway, but before I made it I heard behind me, “Say! Where you off to, Coozan!”

I stopped but didn’t turn around. I thought about just keeping on, but before I knew it I heard the groan of the hammock’s ropes and the falling of the book. Behind me I heard a few steps, a pause, several steps more, and then I felt a small, flat, circular object pressed against the center of my back. It stayed there.

“Hm,” I heard behind me.

Doc came around in front of me. He was wearing a stethoscope, and he pressed it up against my chest. He was silent as he listened in, his eyebrows all furrowed while he looked out at nothing in particular. “Hm,” he repeated.

I was irritated, but I didn’t think it right to offend a crazy old man. He finally pulled the stethoscope from my heart and placed it to his own mouth. He whispered into the piece of metal, but I couldn’t hear what he was saying. Then he put it back on my chest and waited. Looked out into nothing again. All serious, nodding his head. “Hm… hm…”
“Listen, I…” I said, but Doc shushed me. Suddenly he let out that huge laugh and hollered, “Damn, you ain’t lying, nigga!”

Then he got serious again. The conversation went on like this for another five minutes.

When he was finished, he looked at me and said, “Your heart’s pissed like a motherfucker, Coozan.”

“No shit,” I said. Ready to get the hell out of that courtyard.

“Yeah, Coozan. Count on that. He said things’re all stopped up in there.”

“Listen, man. I got this job I gotta get to…”

He slapped me. The crazy old man fucking slapped me in the face. I was too shocked to respond.

He grabbed my arm and put his face right up into mine. His breath smelled like Daddy’s. Liquor-sweet.

“Listen, youngblood. I been studying you trying to die up there ever since I been here. I know what trying to die look like.” He stopped, looked me up and down, turned and spat. “Stop being a little bitch, count on.”

Neither of us said anything for a while.

And he laughed. He let go my arm and laughed until he was bent double and holding his stomach, nearly keeling over right there on the concrete. Then he staggered over to the alleyway and out of view.

I didn’t hear the end of that laugh until it died under the sound of cars passing on Elysian Fields.
As I walk, the pine needles crunch under my bare feet. I’ve left the house behind. I stay away from the highway for now, though. There’s a breeze, and the trees sway all lazy above me, make a swishing sound as the wind runs through. The sunlight beaming down through the trees shifts, and the cicadas sing loud, loud. The river is out to my left, I can’t see it behind all the trees. The levee is to my right, it I can see through the trees if I try.

I come across a tall, dark pine with a line running all the way down where the bark’s been stripped off clean. Underneath the bark is bright yellow. Must’ve been struck by lightning. I go up and smell it, fill my nose with that deep, deep pine smell coming out of that yellow. I get back to walking.

A ways on, I see a person, a little boy, laid out on the forest floor, face up. I get closer and see he’s around nine or ten, and his eyes are closed. He’s wearing dirty jeans, and he doesn’t have a shirt on. Pine needles stick out here and there from his messed-up afro. His skinny arms are spread out, and in one hand he has a BB rifle and in the other he’s got a string with two dead squirrels tied to the end. The trees rush and bright patches of sunlight move back and forth across his body. I tap his leg with my foot. A little harder. I bend down, say, “Hey.” Shake him by the shoulder. I even slap his face, but nothing happens. I think for just a second about taking his squirrels, being hungry as I am, but I can’t. I sit down against a pine to wait until he gets up, try to keep from looking at those squirrels.
The sun’s falling, the woods light purple, when I hear a woman calling out from the direction of the levee. I can barely hear it, the words are far away and small. “Little Bear! It’s getting late!”

I look at the little boy. He opens his eyes, looks over at me.

“Hey,” I say. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” he says. He looks over at his squirrels, probably to make sure they’re still there. “I fall asleep sometimes. Can’t help it.” He sits up and yells toward the levee, his voice real big all the sudden to where I don’t know how it fit inside him. “Sun ain’t full down yet, Momma!”

A few seconds later his momma, way in the distance, tells him he’s got half an hour.

“Okay!” he yells back.

“My name’s Maybelle,” I say. “You must be Little Bear.”

“Yeah.”

He rubs his eyes, looks me up and down. “Where you come from?” he asks.

“Around Rosedale.”

He nods, like I’d told him something he needed to hear. He stands and lays his gun, and the squirrels, back down on the dirt. “I’m gonna skin these here. You wanna get a fire going?”

“Sure,” I say, and I slide up the tree. Go looking for wood.

A while later I drop my armload of sticks next to Little Bear, who’s kneeling down. He’s got one of the squirrels skinned, and he pushes a stick into its mouth, shoves
it through. All this bothered me the first few times I watched Elvin do it after we went squirrel hunting, but I guess I got used to it.

Flies buzz around a bright red pile of squirrel insides a few feet away. He plants the stick with the squirrel on it into the dirt, and he reaches in his pocket and pulls out a lighter. Hands it to me.

I work on a fire, starting with the kindling, and Little Bear skins the other squirrel.

The brown fur comes off like a sock, showing the pink of the squirrel. “Where you going?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, and hearing myself say it makes me sad, reminds me that I don’t know where I’m going to go, what I’m going to do. The kindling starts catching, and I add some wood. Little Bear pushes a stick through the second squirrel, glowing a little from the fire. He sticks it in the dirt next to the other one.

He looks toward the levee, then he turns to me. “I gotta go in. Look here, you can stay at my house if you want. Momma and Daddy wouldn’t mind.” He stands, walks over and picks up his BB rifle.

I think about it for a second. “Naw, that’s alright. I like it here in the woods.”

“Alright then. Well if you change your mind, there’s three houses on the other side of the levee, spaced out with cotton fields in between. We’re the blue one on the left.” He nods toward the squirrels. “You know what to do with them there?”

“Oh.”

He walks toward the levee. He glows fire-yellow, but less and less, until he’s ate up altogether by the blue of night.

I pull one of the sticks out the ground and put the squirrel over the fire.
I was nine, around Little Bear’s age, when they let Momma out of prison in the fall. It’d been four years since she tried to kill Daddy because he threw me across the kitchen floor. He didn’t mean to, but Momma didn’t care.

“Hug your daddy, Maybelle,” she said right after. “Because you ain’t never gonna see that nigga again.” Daddy was all full of holes Momma made with the kitchen knife, and the blood draining out those holes was making him tired. I walked up and put my arms around him. When he’d come in the house all mad a minute before from a machine at work eating up the tip of his finger, he was big, big, like his head would hit the ceiling. But then he was all crumpled up and sad and small. Me and Daddy cried there on the kitchen floor, then Momma pulled me away, told me to pack a bag, and called 911.

“Listen,” she told them. Then she went on about how she stabbed Daddy, and how she told him way on back if he ever hurt me she’d kill him. She told them he’d thrown me across the floor like a “sack of common potatoes,” which I guess was true, but I know he’d just sort of forgot about himself. So she told the 911 folks she grabbed the kitchen knife laying there on the counter and started digging into Daddy. Me, I remember flying across the floor all scared and then all the sudden Momma’s knife was going in and out of Daddy and me yelling stop, stop, stop, Momma, but it was like she couldn’t hear and then she could. And she told the 911 folks about that, too. How the world had gone red for a minute and then out of nowhere she heard her baby Maybelle and she thought about if she killed Daddy she wouldn’t be able to be with me no more. She wasn’t gonna lie, though, she said. She stuck him one more time. Figured it wouldn’t hurt
nothing. Anyway, she told them, that’s the way it was. She told them not to worry about hunting her down like a dog, just come on and get her so she could get back to me.

Maw-Maw came and got me, and the policemen came and got Momma. Me, Maw-Maw, and Wil, my 16-year-old brother from another Daddy, would go visit her most every week. When Momma, with that orange suit swallowing up her body, would go back and that big old door would bang shut, Maw-Maw’d say she was going back to talk with Jesus. That made sense to me.

When she got out we all lived together in Maw-Maw’s house on Governor Nicholls Street. I loved having Momma back around. Those four years she was gone Wil and Maw-Maw took good care of me, but I still felt sometimes like the ground underneath me was moving around too much. Momma, when she came back, made the ground stop moving again. Like me, Momma liked to sit on the stoop and watch the world go by. When she got back from looking for and not finding work all day, we sat and talked as everything went from yellow to orange, and red to purple.

Sometimes Wil would sit with us, but when night came he’d walk out there into the dark. Then I’d wake up in the morning and he’d be there in the other bed. Momma never hollered at Wil for staying out because he still got good grades around the corner at Clark High. “He my knight in shining armor,” she said. See, Momma told me how while she was pregnant with Wil she saw this movie with them knights and their horses and pretty ladies over in England. Ivanhoe was the name of the movie, and the hero, Momma said, was a “bad nigga” who cut up any “sorry-ass nigga” who crossed him. This Ivanhoe, whose real name was Wilfred of Ivanhoe, had this shield with an oak tree on it with its roots hanging out. Momma told me this was because he was lost, and he was
trying to find his way home. Momma liked that man Ivanhoe, and she had a deep, deep feeling that he and the baby in her stomach had some type of “mysterious connection,” so she called Wil Wilfred, like Wilfred of Ivanhoe. But Wil was Wilfred of the Sixth Ward. Some nights I lay in bed thinking Wil was gone because he was out riding a horse around and saving folks. His armor shining all blue in the night, as if he somehow carried the moon inside of him.

Most evenings I talked more than Momma. She listened and smoked, nodded her head and went, *mmhm*, and asked questions. She flicked her cigarette stubs onto the curb, and the stubs smoked for a while and then didn’t. They made a half-ring around the drain until a big rain came and washed them down.

Momma grew up in Maw-Maw’s house, and she knew everybody around. She knew Mr. McGee, the big, nice old man across the street with a voice like God’s and who carried rocks and dirt and things around town in his dumptruck. His son Dwayne, who was always smiling even though he had a bad leg that he dragged around like it didn’t have nothing to do with him; Willie the Brand New Man, who walked the Sixth Ward with a different thing for sale every time you saw him, saying “Brand new Nikes, two dollars,” or “Brand new television, ten dollars,” you never knew what it would be; and old Mr. Anderson, who was always playing his saxophone two doors down. She knew them all. She knew Miss Lena, too.

Miss Lena made me sad. One afternoon Miss Lena came by the stoop with a yellow flower. She was an old lady, like Maw-Maw, but a lot of times it was like she was a little girl. She’d walk down the middle of Guv Nicholls and cry, or she’d sing songs, mostly Whitney Houston. Then sometimes, in the middle of the night, I woke up to her
screaming out some word I couldn’t understand, over and over again. The screams would start real loud and sharp to where I felt them all up inside my body, and then Miss Lena’s screams went quieter and quieter until they got lost inside those nothing sounds of night. Other times Miss Lena was close to normal, like that afternoon she gave that yellow flower to Momma. She had a big smile on her face, and her hand shook as she handed it over, and the flower shook too.

“Yellow,” Momma said. “I always loved that color. It don’t tell nobody nothing but, ‘Hey, listen niggas, look at me. I’m bright and happy and y’all should be too. Yellow don’t bother nobody, it just trying to get by and make motherfuckers happy.”

“Momma.”

“My bad, baby.”

I never liked cursing. It was always hard for me to separate words from the things they were talking about. Like when Momma said MF… well, I didn’t like what came into my head.

Miss Lena said to Momma, “Listen here, Fay baby. Now on, I’ll get you a yellow flower every time I pass that big white folks’ garden on Esplanade.”

“Alright, Miss Lena. I’d appreciate that.”

Miss Lena walked off just like that. Like a kid would do. No “Alright then” or “I’ll be hollering at you later.” Momma handed the flower over to me. I smelled it and held it up, studied it. I spun it around real slow. Behind the flower, I saw Miss Lena cross the street and walk up to Silent Man on Mr. McGee’s porch. Silent Man was Mr. McGee’s other son besides Dwayne. He’d sit on that porch all day and smoke while Mr.
McGee was working, and by the time his Daddy got in he’d be gone. I never knew why they called him Silent Man. He didn’t talk much, but he talked. Just real soft.

Silent Man and Miss Lena traded hands, like they did. She left the porch and walked into the run-down abandoned shotgun house next door to Mr. McGee’s. I called it the green house, because vines covered the whole roof and fell down over the house’s sides, almost touching the ground. The windows were all broken and the front door was gone, so you could see the vines even inside. Crawling up the walls, like the earth was trying to take the house back. The floor was covered with dirty clothes and blankets, crumpled-up newspaper, beer cans in brown bags. Broken wood.

Miss Lena came out the house different from when she’d gone in. Her eyes were all big and she looked lost. She walked right in front our house. I said Hi but she walked on past like I wasn’t even there, although I knew I was. I said Hi again, louder, but Momma put her hand on my arm and I knew that meant let Miss Lena go on.

I’d seen Miss Lena like this before, and it always made me sad. Wil had told me what the stuff Silent Man put in Miss Lena’s hand was, and just told me to stay far away as possible from the stuff, but that didn’t tell me nothing, really.

“Momma, what goes on in that house?”

She lit a cigarette, took it in, and blew out beaucoup smoke. Slow. I spun the flower in my hand.

Then she said, “People killing theyselves.”

“Even Miss Lena?”

“Listen, baby. Miss Lena had a rough life. Lost her onliest son, shot and killed right in front of her. Right there on the corner.” Momma pointed to Roman and Guv
Nicholls, then took another drag from her cigarette. “She’s lost pretty much everything else too.”

I looked over at the green house, then at Silent Man, in his sunglasses. He waved to me and smiled, but it made me feel dirty and my hand wouldn’t move. The sky went all heavy and felt like it was pressing down on me.

I got up and ran inside to put the flower in some water.

*

Over the next few months, Momma looked for jobs all over New Orleans. She went to grocery stores, dollar stores, and restaurants all over town. Every place she went they said they’d keep her in mind, but Momma must’ve just stayed sitting there in their mind without them doing anything about it because they never called. Either way, it got to where we were eating red beans and rice or PB&J just about every dinner. Me, Maw-Maw, and Wil were just making it before Momma came back, and now we were barely doing that. Near every night I’d lie in bed with my stomach feeling all tight and like a bunch of rocks were turning round inside it. I wouldn’t say anything to Momma, though.

One day I asked her if she knew where Daddy was. I thought maybe he could help. But also, I missed him. I really missed him.

“Get that man out your head, Baby,” she said. I didn’t ask again. But I never got Daddy out my head like Momma wanted.

One afternoon I walked through the front room, headed outside, and I heard Momma talking out on the stoop to somebody. I got closer and recognized the low,
w h i s p e r y  v o i c e  o f  S i l e n t  M a n .  I  s t o p p e d  a n d  l i s t e n e d .  I  c o u l d n ’ t  h e a r  w h a t  h e  w a s  s a y i n g ,  b u t  I  c o u l d  h e a r  M o m m a .  S h e  w a s  a l w a y s  l o u d .  

“ T h e y  l o o k  a t  m y  p a p e r s ,  g o  h m ,  a n d  l o o k  m e  u p  a n d  d o w n .  A l l  s t a r i n g  a t  m y  t a t t o o s  a n d  s h i t .  M a n ,  i t ’ s  b i t c h .  A n d  t h e n  t h e  s c h o o l  b o a r d  s a i d  I  c o u l d n ’ t  w o r k  i n  n o  c a f e t e r i a s  l i k e  I  u s e d  t o ,  s a i d  w i t h  m y  r e c o r d  I  c o u l d n ’ t  b e  a r o u n d  t h e  c h i l d r e n .  W h a t  k i n d  o f  s h i t  i s  t h a t ?  M a n ,  m a k e  m e  w a n n a . . .  I  d o n ’ t  k n o w ,  m a n .  I  d o n ’ t  k n o w . ”

I  o p e n e d  t h e  d o o r .  S i l e n t  M a n  l o o k e d  u p  a t  m e  a n d  s m i l e d .  H i s  g o l d  t e e t h  c a u g h t  s u n ,  a n d  I  l o o k e d  a w a y .  

“ H e y  B a b y , ”  M o m m a  s a i d .  I ’ d  n e v e r  s e e n  S i l e n t  M a n  b y  t h e  s t o o p ,  a n d  h e  a n d  M o m m a  l o o k e d  s t r a n g e  t o g e t h e r .  M o m m a  w a s  l i t t l e .  N o t h i n g  b u t  l i g h t  b r o w n  s k i n ,  c o r n  r o w s ,  a n d  b o n e s ,  n e x t  t o  S i l e n t  M a n .  H e  w a s  d a r k  a n d  h e a v y .  L i k e  a  b i g  o l d  b e a r .  H e  c o u l d  s w a l l o w  M o m m a  u p  i f  h e  w a n t e d .  

“ W e l l ,  t h i n k  a b o u t  w h a t  w e  t a l k e d  a b o u t , ”  h e  s a i d .  T h e y  s l a p p e d  h a n d s ,  a n d  h e  w a l k e d  b a c k  t o  M r .  M c G e e ’ s  h o u s e  a n d  w e n t  i n s i d e .  

I  s a t  d o w n  n e x t  t o  M o m m a  a n d  a s k e d  h e r  w h a t  S i l e n t  M a n  w a s  t a l k i n g  a b o u t .  H e ’ d  g i v e n  m e  t h a t  d i r t y  f e e l i n g  a g a i n .  

“ N o t h i n g ,  B a b y , ”  s h e  s a i d .  

I  a l w a y s  k n e w  M o m m a ’ s  w o r d s  w e r e  r e a l  t h i n g s  I  c o u l d  p u t  i n  m y  h e a d  a n d  j u s t  l e a v e  t h e m  b e .  K n o w  t h e y  w o u l d n ’ t  n e v e r  c h a n g e .  “ N o t h i n g ”  p u t  a  b i g  b l a n k  i n  m y  m i n d  b e c a u s e  i t  w a s  n o t h i n g ,  a n d  t h a t  m a d e  m e  f e e l  b e t t e r .  A n d  “ B a b y , ”  t h e  w a y  M o m m a  s a i d  i t  t o  m e ,  m e a n t  m e ,  M a y b e l l e ,  a n d  I  f e l t  l i k e  I  w a s  m e ,  a n d  t h e r e  I  w a s .  

I  d i d n ’ t  a s k  M o m m a  a n y t h i n g  e l s e .  S h e  j u s t  s m o k e d  h e r  c i g a r e t t e  a n d  s e e m e d  t o  b e  t h i n k i n g  r e a l  h a r d .  M r .  A n d e r s o n  s t a r t e d  p l a y i n g  h i s  s a x  r e a l  s a d  a n d  s l o w .  

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“Mrs. Anderson sick again,” I said.

“How you know, Baby?”

“Just listen, Momma.”

And we listened. A silvery pigeon flew out of the green house’s front door. I hoped Momma saw it too, but I didn’t want to interrupt Mr. Anderson’s song.

Momma turned to me. “Why you ain’t wanna talk to other children, Baby?” She didn’t look mad, just worried.

“What you mean?”

“Your teacher called. Said all you wanted to do was draw and write stories, and that you don’t never play with other kids.”

Miss Lena walked past. She was singing “I Will Always Love You.” It made me sad because I figured she was singing it to her son. Whenever she sang “I Wanna Dance with Somebody” it was to anybody, but that made me sad too. Momma took a drag and watched Miss Lena turn the corner on North Roman.

“I ain’t got nothing to say to the other children. They always be hitting on each other and calling each other all kinds of names.”

“Well Baby, that ain’t much different from how it is once you grow up. You just gotta find your place in all of it. Like me, I still talk to folks and laugh with ‘em. But the whole time I know a lot of these niggas just as well jack me of my last cent if need be.”

“I don’t think people are like that, Momma.”

“But that’s how it is, Baby.”

“It ain’t them, the real them, doing those bad things,” I told her.

“Where they at then?”
“I don’t know. Maybe down by the river, or sitting on somebody’s porch, smiling in the shade. Just somewhere else, doing good stuff.”

“Well, then. So how they get put back together again?”

I didn’t see that coming. I looked across the street at Mr. McGee’s other son Dwayne, sitting in his chair on the porch. He was asleep, and his bad leg was swung over to the side like he wanted to pass it on to somebody, to get rid of it.

I thought about when Momma tried to kill Daddy, and how she wasn’t Momma no more. Even after she stopped stabbing him, her eyes were all hard like those stray dogs’ when they’re fighting over a chicken bone. Daddy’s blood was splattered all over her shirt and her face, and I looked and I just couldn’t see Momma nowhere underneath the blood. At the time I was scared that she’d never come back. She just stood there with those stray dog eyes and that knife still as the earth we walk on while me and Daddy held each other in that pool of blood. But then when she came over and pulled me from Daddy her hand was all soft and warm like it always was when she touched me. She said, “C’mon, Baby,” and I knew she was Momma again. The real Momma. Like when she touched me she came back from wherever it was she went to.

“Maybe folks just need to be reminded who they is,” I said.

* 

Two nights later I heard a knock on the door. Momma was back in the kitchen with Maw-Maw, so I went to open it. Silent Man was standing at the bottom of the stoop, smiling. I wanted to close the door right on back. Instead I yelled back to Momma. She came to the
front door, and the two of them went into the front bedroom, where Wil and I slept. They closed the door, but I put my ear up to the keyhole.

Momma talked to Silent Man the way she’d talk to me when she wanted to make sure I was paying attention. Words like big old stones falling on the ground. “Listen, man. I’m just gonna do this for a minute. Just until we back on our feet. And I ain’t dealing with no motherfuckers I been knowing all my life.”

I looked at Momma through the keyhole, especially at her eyes, and worried that I saw that person who almost killed Daddy, that I saw a little piece of that not-Momma covered in blood. She lit a cigarette, and Silent Man had this little grin on his face, but because I couldn’t see his eyes behind the sunglasses I couldn’t read the little grin. I imagined his eyes, though, and they looked like the black, black eyes of them crows that swoop down from the wires and snatch things when people ain’t paying attention.

“Damn, Fay, to make money you can’t be caring about who you deal with,” Silent Man said in that scratchy whisper.

“I don’t give a fuck, Silent. That’s the way it’s gonna be.” I looked into the keyhole and saw Silent Man pull a squashed brown paper bag out of his front pocket. He put the bag on the bed, my bed, in between Momma and him. Momma snatched it up right after it hit the bed, and for some reason she looked toward the keyhole.

She went red when she saw me. I didn’t turn, I was glad she saw me. She turned back to Silent Man.

I told myself that Momma’d told me it was nothing. Baby. And I tried to believe it.
Momma looked down at the crumpled-up bag in her hand. “I’m only doing this shit for a minute,” she said.

*

That night I lay in bed, thinking. My room was blue, all full of moon. Wil was out. Momma was sleeping on the couch in the front room, and Maw-Maw was asleep too, in her room between my and Wil’s room and the kitchen in the back.

I thought about Momma. I tried to believe it was all nothing, like she said. But sometimes we’re wrong. Even Momma. Maybe she didn’t see what I saw, maybe she didn’t recognize Silent Man’s crow-eyes behind them sunglasses. I started getting scared, so I tried to think about other things, like Wil. I imagined Wil riding out there in the Sixth Ward, tried to make myself hear the clop, clop of his blue horse’s hoofs. Out there doing good. Then I saw his shield with the big oak with its roots just hanging there in space, but then he and his blue horse disappeared from out my head. They were running, and then they were gone.

I pulled off the covers and got out of bed. Real quiet-like. I grabbed the yellow dress I’d worn that day from off the floor and threw it on. Put on my shoes. I tiptoed over to the door and turned the knob. I opened the door real slow, and I peeked around it at Momma on the couch. I slipped on through, closed the door back, and went up to the front door. Momma turned and the springs groaned, but she was still sleeping. I unlocked the door, opened it, and slipped through. I closed it back soft and easy.
From the top of the stoop, I looked up and down Guv Nicholls. There was no one around. It was quiet, besides somewhere way, way out there where a dog barked. But it couldn’t have been talking about me. I went down the steps and ran across the street, crouched behind Mr. McGee’s dumptruck. I looked up at the green house.

A black cat ran down the green house’s steps all silent and slick like ink spilled out a pen, and went across the sidewalk. Disappeared into the gutter. No sound came from inside the green house. I stood, looked both ways up and down Guv Nicholls again, and walked up. The porch was covered in crushed beer cans and white plastic bags, and it smelled like pee. The boards under my feet creaked while I walked across. Once I went through the door everything smelled like dirt, but deep, dark dirt like you’d find from digging. There were dark vines crawling down from the ceiling, running every which way down all the walls like the veins in Momma’s arms. If you looked real close they were green too. Somewhere way out there in the blue, that same dog barked.

I went on to the second room. Nearly the whole roof over the room had fallen in, and thick vines fell down into the room all the way to the floor. Through the hole in the roof I saw bookoo stars. Nine or ten, even.

A board groaned in the corner farthest from me, but I couldn’t see much for the dark and the vines. I saw something move. I thought about running, but didn’t.

I walked slow, around the vines, and I saw somebody tucked into the corner with their arms wrapped around their knees. My heart knocked all hard against my chest, but I wanted to be strong. I was strong. Like a shiny knight. I pushed the vines aside to see better, and found Miss Lena. Her whole body was shaking, and her eyes were all big and scared. Scared of what, I didn’t know. She looked straight at me, but even though I was
only a few feet away I could tell that inside of them eyes she was having trouble finding me, who I was. She didn’t say anything, and neither did I.

The dog barked. That same one, like it was the only dog left in the world. I looked up into the hole in the roof, out where that lonesome dog was calling out. I saw the stars hanging there. I looked back down to Miss Lena, and I said what came into my head.

“You remember who you is?” I said.

She didn’t answer, and I took a step closer. I put my hand out to her. Maybe I could bring Miss Lena back to herself like I did to Momma after she tried to kill Daddy. She looked up at me, her face all lit up in the blue moonlight, and my hand floated there in the space between us. A little smile passed her face, like she might’ve realized who I was, then disappeared. She took my hand, and I squeezed. She started crying.

“I mean, you remember who you really is?”

She dropped her head. I went up to her, let go of her hand, and pulled her against my stomach. Her bushy hair smelled like cigarettes and dirt. She shook real heavy while I held her close, and the front of my dress went wet with tears.

All the sudden her body jerked, and she pushed me away. She dried her cheeks with the backs of her hands, and took some deep breaths. I took a few steps back.

Then she spoke. Her voice was real low and scratchy. She sounded mad, but I didn’t know why. “You don’t understand, little girl. I ain’t nobody.” She pushed herself up from the floor and stood up all trembling, balancing herself on the wall. Her face had gone mean. Wild. I couldn’t hardly see any Miss Lena in there. I took a few more steps back.
She started walking over, beating away the vines. Her whole body was blue. She kept coming and I kept on backing up, until she jumped toward me. I ran for the door. She tripped on a board and fell behind me, and I ran out the house and hid underneath Mr. McGee’s dumptruck.

When she came out, she was all hunched over and limping. It made me sad. She went down the steps, across the sidewalk, and out onto the street. She limped on down the middle of Guv Nicholls, past North Roman toward Claiborne.

I lay down, my back on the street. Those rocks were turning in my stomach again.

I thought about Miss Lena. About her son, too. I wondered what he’d been like, and I wondered if he’d lived if Miss Lena’d still be going into the green house. And then I thought about Momma, and Silent Man’s crumpled bag, and about how Momma’s wrong this time. There’s gotta be something else. Like one of them men who’d been keeping Momma in their mind, they were gonna call, I knew it. And those rocks in my stomach would stop turning and Momma wouldn’t mess with no crumpled bags and everything might, would, be okay, right? But thinking about crumpled bags made my mind go back to Miss Lena, and I thought about whether she’d remember herself or just keep on forgetting, and I didn’t know what to think about all that but knew there was something about all of it that didn’t make no sense and, I knew too, somehow, it just wasn’t right. Naw, naw, it wasn’t right, and then it was like my head was all full of hornets, thoughts and feelings buzzing around and crossing each other up to where I couldn’t grab hold of any one of them. When I tried to catch one, it got lost in all the ruckus. I got confused, and angry, because things just weren’t making sense, and the
hormets just got louder to where I didn’t know what to do with them, but I knew I
couldn’t just keep lying there.

I got out from under Mr. McGee’s dumptruck and looked down Guv Nicholls,
toward Claiborne. Miss Lena had disappeared. I turned to the green house, the hormets
buzzing all in my skin, all through my body, along with them stomach rocks still turning,
and I just stood there and watched the green house with all the buzzing and turning and
confusion going on inside me, until the green house and what was going on inside my
body somehow got all scrambled up, and I found myself walking up to Mr. McGee’s
porch, where I always saw Silent Man sitting and smoking, and that’s when I realized
what was happening, what I was gonna do.

I jumped back off the porch and ran over to the green house, up the steps, across
the porch, and I was inside that smell of dirt, deep-down-in-the-earth dirt. I grabbed all
the broken-up wood scattered over the floor, and I threw it in a pile in a corner of the
front room. I pulled Silent Man’s lighter from my pocket, flicked it back with my thumb
like I saw Momma do, and tried to light a piece of wood. It wouldn’t take, so I gathered
some old yellowy newspaper laying there on the floor, crumpled it up and stuffed it in the
pile of wood and lit it. Brown bags, more newspaper, anything I could find, I stuffed it in
and lit it. The pile smoked for a while and then some of the wood caught fire. Then more
and more caught, and the yellow and blue started to crawl up the wall.

I stopped and watched. The heat of it was on my skin, and I felt big.

I heard a board creak behind me. I turned and saw Momma standing in the
doorway, flickering in the light. I got scared, but her face told me she wasn’t mad.

“C’mon, Baby,” she said. And I came.
Momma pulled me close and squeezed, and I squeezed her back. Tight, tight. She ran her hand over my head, and I listened to the thump of her heart. It beat hard and fast. I was sorry that that was because of me. She let me go and took my hand, said we needed to get inside and call 911 so Mr. McGee’s house didn’t catch fire too.

While Momma and I walked back across Guv Nicholls I saw somebody a block down, walking the other way from us all fast. Turning their head from side to side, looking. I could tell by the limp that it was Miss Lena. I showed Momma.

Me and Momma watched Miss Lena as we crossed the street. Watched while Miss Lena looked. And looked. And as I watched her look, something started creeping into my head. Something I couldn’t put my finger on at first, but then that thing started spreading, making the world go darker in my head like another night inside of night, and then it hit me. I didn’t feel big no more, but small and empty. I started to cry.

Momma squeezed my hand tighter.
Chapter 14- Antoine

It was a week or so after that night Doc slapped me in the face. The night he told me my heart was stopped up and pissed off. I was stumbling down Dauphine in the middle of the night, and I went over to a 24-hour joint on St. Claude to grab a stick of butter for some red beans. Nobody was out, it was real quiet, and I was drunk as hell. I turned down the alleyway leading back to the apartment, using the wall on my left for support. That cold stick of butter in my right hand. No bag. I just threw a dollar bill on the counter and walked out. When I was about mid-way down the alley, I heard some shuffling behind me. I turned and saw three dudes walking real quick my way, nothing more than shadows.

“Gimme your wallet, motherfucker,” one of them said. He didn’t know I didn’t have any money on me after that stick of butter, let alone a wallet to keep it in.

I didn’t run. I never did like running. I spun around and clocked the first one in the jaw, the butter squishing in my hand. I’m lucky it landed, as otherwise I would’ve lost my balance and fell. I knocked him flat, but his boys stepped over him and kept coming. I gave my left a try, but hit the concrete wall instead. It hurt like a bitch, and that’s when the second dude caught me in the stomach. I bent over and he gave me a good undercut square in the jaw. I was swinging pretty wild, but still landing my share. Then the third came in, and all the sudden it was like fists were everywhere. Flying this way and that, coming down from above, up from the ground. I got a few in, Lord knows who or what it was I hit, but mostly I was taking. Kidney… temple… gut, and then the first one got back
in on it too, and that’s when I started realizing I was in a really bad spot. Blood, mostly mine I think, was spraying against the wall and onto that pavement I found myself looking at more and more, but I kept fighting somehow.

That’s when I heard heavy footsteps coming from the other side of the alleyway, from the back, and then I heard something whipping through the air and looked up and saw a flash of silver, followed by the sound of hard things knocking against each other… wood against skull, I’d come to find out… and one of the shadows fell out and the others cursed and those fists slowed and I heard more of that sound of wood raining down on bone and muscle, but somehow not raining down on me. My head was down, but I glanced up at that silver flashing through the air and that’s when I saw the piece of wood on the end of that silver rod, and I thought, I’ll be damn, a golf club… then the shadows were gone except for the one knocked out, and I collapsed. The whole world smelled like concrete, butter, and blood.

* 

It took me three weeks to recover. One evening, after finishing my first job since that meeting in the alley, I finally went to see one of Doc’s shows. I owed him big time, and I thought seeing his show might be a start.

He was on Bourbon and Toulouse. A band in one of the corner bars was playing Al Green when I walked up. Doc had on turquoise scrubs and had his stethoscope around his neck. In his hand was his 1-wood. The one he used to beat those dudes in the alley. Over the course of the song he sang into the club like a microphone, played it like a
guitar, and twirled it around like a baton. He even rode it like a horse. Nobody gave him any money, but he hadn’t put out a hat or anything to suggest it, either. He never did it for money, I found out. As he would say, “I’m an entertainer. I aim to entertain. To make folks happy, count on.” And by judging the way he worked during his shows, this was vital.

In between lines, “I’m so tired of being alone…,” Doc talked to passersby: “How y’all doing tonight? Where y’all from? Oh, all these beautiful ladies out here, I’m feeling sexy tonight!” And then he went right back into his Al Green: “Hey, Hey, Hey, I’m crying tears, all the through the years…”

Tourists stopped to watch, drank from their gigantic draft beers, and then moved on, a lot of them with looks of either pity or confusion. But others danced with him for a song or two with drunk, happy smiles on their faces.

I stayed there leaning against the wall and drinking as the gold sunlight died out, the neon took over, and Doc kept on dancing. The buzz of Bourbon was full on by then: the beat of the karaoke bars, the Lucky Dog vendors, strip clubs with their near naked door girls fishing for customers, shouting, the smell of vomit and urine, and teenage girls crumpling into the arms of barrel-chested strangers. All of this, and a sweaty, drunk old man singing into a golf club. During breaks Doc would come over and join me. He didn’t say anything about that night he probably saved my life. He just told me stories, and I listened. Stories like how he lost the tip of his finger.

He’d raised up his right index finger to show me the missing top half I noticed when I first met him. “See that, Coozan? Lost that shit at the cement factory over in the Ninth Ward.” He took a swig from his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his
hand, then looked out at Bourbon. “And I was supposed to of lost more than that. Listen here…” He lay his beer on the pavement.

“So that bitch ass machine had my finger just like this…” He had his arm out straight and downward and shook it like his finger was stuck in a machine. “And it was eating up my finger, count on, trying to take the rest of me. I’m telling you that thing was dying to put an end to your boy Charles Freeman here, count on,” he continued, his body by then shaking as well.

“I thought I done met my match and started talking to My Boy God, count on. I didn’t know what to do, Coozan, I thought it was the end of me, until I figured out the only thing that could stop that machine from taking me, the only thing that was big and bad and tough enough to stop that motherfucker…”

Doc’s body was trembling like crazy, his face all twisted up and his eyes all crossed in put-on suffering. He made like he was unzipping his pants and pointed his groin over toward the invisible machine.

“The only thing that could stop that machine was… my dick! I stuck it in there and that bitch ass machine stopped just like that... and I pulled my finger out that motherfucker!” He doubled over and fell to the sidewalk, laughing hysterically. And I’ll be damn if I didn’t laugh too as I watched that old man writhing on the pavement, to where it hurt the hell out of my ribs. It was a long, long time since I’d laughed, and I felt something open up inside me just a little bit.

But there was something else I noticed about Doc that night. I saw that underneath all the laughing and trying to make other folks laugh, there was something sad there. Something he’d lost. He wasn’t laughing just to laugh, but to keep from crying,
like those old blues singers say. It was like he made another world because he wasn’t
happy with the one he was given. That was something I could understand.

By three or so Doc was passed out against the wall next to me. People walked
over his long legs, and some laughed at him as they passed. I guess that made sense, as
all they saw was a passed out old man in doctor’s scrubs. Still, I didn’t like their
laughing.

At some point I got up to go to bed. I tried to wake Doc up, but he just shrugged
me off.

“Let me sleep, let me…”

* 

A few nights later as I rounded the corner to get some more Beam, I ran into Doc coming
the other way up the alley. He was wet, wearing nothing but a speedo and flip flops, and
he had a towel thrown across his shoulder. In one hand he held a white plastic bag full of
16-oz. Natural Lights, and in the other a single in a brown paper bag.

“Hey, Coozan!” he said to me. He stopped in the middle of the narrow alleyway,
so I couldn’t move. He took a big pull from his beer, and wiped his mouth with the crook
of his arm. I saw what must have been a dozen scars from what appeared to be stab
wounds in Doc’s stomach. He said, “Hoo-wee, had me a good swim, count on. River was
beautiful, looking like My Boy God done threwed a million shining jewels up in there.”

“You swim in the river?”
“Yes, indeed! Most every day over by the Governor Nicholls Street Wharf. Good for my hygiene and my constitution, count on.”

Doc stayed fixed in the middle of the alley and looked at me with his eyes all lit up, I guess in anticipation of what I was going to say. In the meantime I was just waiting to move down the alleyway. Doc took a drink while he waited.

“Listen, Coozan. Sit down and drink some cold beer with me.”

“I don’t think so, man.” I glanced over at the unblocked alleyway on the other side of the building.

“C’mon, just one.” He raised the bag of beers up to my face and shook it. He smiled all big.

“Just one. After that, I gotta go to the store.” I felt like I’d really let the old man down if I didn’t.

“Alright then, Coozan.” He held the bag out to me, and I grabbed a beer. Inside the bag was also a used bar of soap. I noticed my hand wasn’t shaking as bad as usual, and there weren’t ants underneath my skin. I had better days every now and then, and it seemed like that day was one of them. Doc finished his beer. He tossed the empty can toward a big garbage can in the back corner of the courtyard and missed. It clanked on the broken concrete. While Doc ducked behind a banana tree to change into his track suit, I sat in one of the plastic chairs in the middle of the courtyard and opened my beer. Doc lay his damp speedo on a low tree branch to dry and then joined me. He ran his hands over the entire track suit. “Always gotta keep your game tight, Coozan. Threads, mind, walk, talk, it’s all connected. Don’t never let none of these fools on the street see you
slipping,” he said. He sat down, surveyed the courtyard. Some banana leaves slapped together from a gust of wind.

He grabbed a beer from the bag, cracked it open and drank. He looked at me and said, “Why you killing yourself, youngblood.”

His question didn’t surprise me, I knew he’d ask it at some point. “Beause this whole thing is just a big old joke,” I told him.

Doc laughed. “Damn right, Coozan! And what of it?’’

“Yeah, but this shit ain’t funny. We’re on the wrong side of the joke. And somebody’s laughing at us.” He listened intently, took a drink.

“Well why don’t you laugh with ‘em?”

“Nah, man. Some shit’s too serious to laugh about.”

“Alright then, let’s talk about some of that serious shit.”

He said nothing for a while, just looked around. Listening to the rustling banana leaves, maybe.

I still don’t know to this day why I felt like telling him. I hadn’t told anyone the entire story up until then.

But I told him, and he listened.

* 

Desha puked early one morning. This was about six years after we got married, I told Doc. She didn’t make it to the bathroom, so she did it right there on the hardwood floor. It was yellow and biley. I was happy, because I figured it meant she was finally pregnant,
but at the same time I was surprised. I’d never seen her vomit. She never drank, and she never got sick. I was surprised that something so ugly, and so violent, could come out of her. Like I half expected tiny rainbows and unicorns to come flying out instead.

We were trying to make a baby all that time, and it hadn’t worked out. We went to different doctors, the whole nine yards. We really wanted a kid.

We had this heavy-set obstetrician with slicked-back hair. I didn’t like him moving his big, hairy hands over Desha’s stomach, but I guess that was his job.

The second time we went, he did a sonogram. The slick-haired doctor put that jelly on Desha’s stomach and moved the camera all around, and me and her watched the screen. It was beaucoup dark there inside Desha. Nothing but shadows on shadows, like the swamp at night.

At one point he stopped and steadied the camera. He smiled and pointed at the screen. I couldn’t see much. Everything was shimmering, coming in and going out of focus. But when I leaned in closer, I saw what he was getting at.

“Twins,” he said.

Sure enough, I made out two hazy gray bodies that weren’t even bodies yet. It looked like they weren’t all the way here, but at the same time like they weren’t really elsewhere either. Something about that made me a little uneasy, but I didn’t tell Desha. We held hands tight, tight. Kept staring at that screen.
A week or so after the sonogram, Desha’s daddy drove her home after they had dinner over at her family’s place. Even from back in the kitchen I heard the car doors slam all loud, and I could tell they were arguing. I went up to the front room.

“I’m telling you it was him,” Mr. Jackson said.

“Couldn’t’ve been. He don’t drink no more, Daddy.”

Desha always thought I was better than I was. Her daddy must’ve seen me come out of Larry’s Bar that night Desha took a late shift at the hospital. What’re the chances. And I only had three or four beers, anyway.

“Hm. Even had that yellow tape measure still on his belt. It was him, alright.”

I pressed my ear against the door. All I heard was the heavy thumping of my heart and that quiet rushing sound you find in doors’ insides. No sound out there from Desha, though. When Desha and I first started dating, my drinking was a real problem. There were a few times when I came home from bars loud and angry. I said things I didn’t mean and broke lamps and tables. She said the next time it happened she’d leave me. A week or so after she said that, I was on my way out one night and told her I was going to visit my momma. She could tell where I was really going, and she looked dead at me as I had my hand on the door knob.

“Stay here with me, Antoine,” she said. “Stay here.”

At that moment I realized how stupid I would be to leave. I stayed, and that was it. I couldn’t lose Desha. And the night Mr. Jackson saw me coming out of Larry’s was the first time since then, so many years before, that I had a drink. I’d just been feeling nervous. Thinking about it now, I might’ve been afraid that things were just going too well or something.
I wanted to prove Mr. Jackson wrong so damn bad. I wasn’t a drunk. I was busting my ass, running around town doing as many cabinet and shelving jobs as I could. And Desha was nursing full-time, so we were doing all right, throwing money into savings, trying to add on to our little house on Alvar. And twins on the way.

I heard Desha walk toward the door. Still, she hadn’t said anything.

“It was him, Desha,” Mr. Jackson said one more time.

I crept back to the kitchen. Quiet as I could, feeling small, small.

* *

Two months into the pregnancy, Desha was lying on her back, her shirt pulled up to just beneath her breasts. “Today,” the doctor said, “We should be able to see the twins with greater detail.”

I had that uneasy feeling again as he squirted that gel onto her stomach and pressed the camera down. I got jittery. The doctor asked her questions about how she was feeling and such, and she told him she’d been fine. The doctor hummed as he looked at the monitor. I was hunched over, gripping my knees and tapping my foot. Looking for babies.

“Hm,” the doctor said.

I sat up. “What? What’s wrong?” The doctor didn’t say anything. He slid the camera around Desha’s stomach, trying to get other angles, and I wanted so bad right then to know how to do what that man was doing, wanted to somehow have the wisdom to see inside Desha instead of this slick-haired man.
“Hm,” he went again.

“What?” I said, getting impatient.

“One moment, please,” he said, all calm. He kept on moving the camera around Desha’s stomach.

Right then I realized he was trying to get something out of that camera he knew wasn’t in it. I started to sweat.

“I can only find one of them,” the doctor finally told us, calm, calm. “Yes, this happens sometimes. One of a set of twins will basically absorb the other. Maybe it’s bigger, maybe there are not enough nutrients for both of them, for instance. Survival, you understand.”

“You’re telling me one of the twins has basically ate up the other one?” I asked, my fingernails digging into my knees.

“Come back in another month and we’ll know more,” the doctor said while holding out his hand, meaning the appointment was done.

“That’s it?” I asked, staring at the blank screen. Blood throbbed all thick through my head. The doctor’s hand just hung there. I saw stars, and I closed my eyes for a few seconds. I breathed, thought about that little thing being ate up by that bigger thing and how it just didn’t make sense, and about how I really shouldn’t punch that doctor in the eye, shouldn’t even cuss him out because that wouldn’t do anything, but damn, where does the feeling go? I breathed real deep one more time, opened my eyes, and the stars died slow. I shook the man’s hand. Firm. Took me a while to let go. He moved his hand to Desha’s shoulder, shook it in a That’s too bad, kiddo kind of way, and went out the door.
When we got home we went inside. We lay on the bed, still, Desha’s tiny body cupped inside mine. She was crying. I put my hand on her stomach. I thought about that big dark world inside that little space and all the fucked-up things going on in there.

I felt her warmth inside of me, but I felt like I just couldn’t squeeze her tight enough.

Doc cracked open two beers. I almost forgot he was there. I got lost inside my story, and I was surprised. He handed me one of the beers. “Go on, Coozan. Go on,” he said. And I went on.

I told him a few nights later I dreamed I was a bullfighter. I came across some bullfighting on cable that night, maybe that’s why. In my dream, Desha sat on the first row of the stands. As always, she was beautiful. She had a giant red rose in her hair, and she wore a tight black dress. What a dime, man. The bullring was packed, a lone trumpet blared, and the air was drunk on the smell of roses.

I wore a blue matador outfit, its gold thread sparkling bright in the Spanish sun. I watched as the first three fighters downed each bull without much effort. They were damn good, and it made me a little nervous. Each one of them, after wearing the bull down, killed his animal with a single blow with the sword, straight down the spine. And each time, the crowd roared, and roses fell like red rain down onto the center of the ring. My outfit felt real tight, and I started to sweat.

It was my turn. With my cape, I taunted the bull. I worked him for what seemed an eternity, but I couldn’t break him down. He still bucked and bucked, fresh as when he first came out. I was sweating like mad by this time, wiping my brow again and again under the blazing sun, which sprawled across the entire sky. No blue to be seen. I was
nervous and scared, but tried to hide it, of course. I looked for Desha, my beautiful black Spanish maiden, in the stands. She looked worried, and this just made me more nervous.

Exhausted, I had my sword brought out to me. I circled the bull, my chest all puffed out, peacocking like them matadors do, but inside I was quivering. I circled and circled. The bull came for me, and I stuck my sword in his back, let go. The sword swayed back and forth for a few seconds, and then fell to the dirt all useless. I picked it up, and I circled again. I was nearly blinded by the salty sweat that poured into my eyes and by that sun that somehow bled across the whole sky, and things seemed to slow down. I noticed how the lather on the bull’s coat made it shine beautiful-black in the sun, and how the red of the blood streaming down its flanks was redder than any red I ever saw. Impossible red. Dream red.

I stuck the sword in again, with the same result. The sword stayed in for a few seconds, barely planted in the bull’s flesh and wobbling wild, and then it fell to the ground. The crowd got restless, and cries of “You’re not a bullfighter, you’re a butcher!” were all around, along with “Go home!” But I kept on trying, and the bull steady grew weaker. After half a dozen more tries, the sword finally stayed in for five or six seconds but then went free when the bull made a strong buck and flew into the crowd to mad shrieks. The crowd booed me. I looked over for Desha, but she was gone.

Something broke in me. I kept circling and stabbing the bull, but it seemed I couldn’t end its life. It seemed to go on forever; me circling around and forever striking with my worthless stabs of the sword from the outside into the bull, the circle’s inside, and forever missing the mark. The bull’s bright dream-red blood pooled on the dirt and sloshed under us. Why did I keep on? Why didn’t I just stop and let the thing live? I
didn’t know. I did, but didn’t, have my will, in that way it happens in dreams. I failed
time after time, but kept on stabbing the bull. At this point the bull could hardly stand. He
sniffed the air, maybe for roses I thought, and then he started to make a final charge but
collapsed. He was dead. I ran into the tunnel with everyone booing and hissing. As I
made it into the tunnel’s dark, I woke up, breathing heavy and bathed in sweat.

All frantic, I reached across the bed for Desha, as I must’ve drifted from her over
the course of my sleep. I moved over and wrapped her in my arms.

After a while I got up from bed. I walked back to the kitchen closet, where I’d
stashed a pint of Beam. I unscrewed the top, took a couple swigs. Put it back. I sat there
at the kitchen table until sun-up, thinking.

And trying to keep from going back to that pint.

*

The next time we went to the doctor, Desha got on the table and pulled up her shirt. It had
been a month since we found out about the baby eating its brother or sister. I actually felt
disgust toward the baby, like it knew what it was doing.

The doctor squirted that jelly on Desha’s stomach and moved the camera. I looked
at Desha’s face and goddamn it was beautiful. Those bright, bright eyes, bright as suns,
looking at that screen, inside her own beautiful self where somehow all those ugly things
were happening.

“Hm,” the doctor said.
Just like last time. And I thought about what *Hm* meant and that damn piece of plastic slid across Desha’s stomach and again that man was out looking for something in that world of things that seemed only half-there.

Why can’t we ever just *know*? Know things are here and nowhere else?

The man said what I already figured out.

“*There’s nothing there.*”

*#

The Saturday after that last trip to the doctor, we went down to Grand Isle. I didn’t feel like going. Didn’t feel like doing a damn thing. But Desha talked about how we should get out of town. We should get some air, she said.

The sky was heavy, dark gray, and we set up on the sand. I spent the first hour or so just sitting and listening to the sound of the waves while Desha made a sand castle. She did it with no emotion at all.

I watched her for a while, then I stared at the blue horizon. Back to Desha. Going from those two things, the big blue and Desha in the sand, made my stomach turn. The Gulf was so damn huge, and Desha so small. That’s what I thought, and then I thought about how smaller than Desha even was the baby that ate its sibling, its sibling who was smaller still. And I started feeling like I did that day as a kid, that day I looked out into Lake Ponchartrain and how huge it was and got dizzy, terrified. Felt like I was gonna spin off into nothing.
I got up, grabbed my duffel bag with my swimming trunks and a fifth of Beam inside, and I went to the rest room. I took a few swigs, stashed the fifth on a high window sill.

I went back and joined Desha on the shore, and she put her hand on my back. Her hand was warm. The earth went steady, I knew where I was. I looked at her. The sun was in my eyes, and everything was afire, but I could still barely make out her face. She smiled, but the smile slowly faded. I looked down, and I busied myself with the sand castle. When her hand left my back, the space it left felt cold.

“Antoine,” she said.

“Yeah.” Waves crashed in behind her, drifted back.

“Nothing.”

Over the course of the day, every time I thought about that far horizon I had that dizzy feeling again. And whenever I felt that, I went over to the rest area for a drink. By sundown that fifth was near empty.

I’ll never know what it was Desha was about to say.

The heavy gray sky steady turned to black, and Desha caught a nice-sized speckled trout out on the pier. I’d had no luck myself. She raised the squirming fish up over the wooden rails, even cracking a little smile, and for a second I forgot about babies eating each other, forgot about babies being lost to the dark. But then I saw her eyes mist up like she was about to cry, like that little moment of happiness had somehow made her sad. I wanted to make her not be sad anymore. I had to make her not be sad anymore.

She swung the fish over and it flopped all wild on the planks, slid around at our feet. I stepped to Desha and tried to kiss her, but she turned her head out to the Gulf.
My hands started to shake, I didn’t know what to do. I heard the trout flopping against the planks, and I let go of Desha and got down on my knees to unhook it. The fish gasped, desperate for air. The hook, which it had near swallowed, wasn’t coming out. The trout quit moving altogether for a few seconds, just sucking air in and out. I dug deeper into its throat, the two sharp canine teeth on its upper jaw scraping across my hand, and the fish revived and squirmed like crazy, slapping its tail hard against the wood. I looked into its eye. It seemed about to burst from its socket in terror.

I pulled my hand out, and I punched the fish in the head with all my might. Again and again. Bones crunched and caved under my fist, and a halo of blood grew underneath the fish’s head. It took in a few last weak breaths, so weak you could hardly see the wrecked jaws trying to work, and then the fish stopped gasping. When I finally stopped, I saw that the handful of fishermen on the pier were staring at me, my wifebeater all speckled with fish blood. Panting, I raised my scale- and blood-covered fist again and got ready to deal the trout another blow, but my arm was stayed by Desha’s soft voice.

“It’s dead, baby,” she said.

My arm dropped to my side. “Okay,” I said, still staring down at the fish.

I got up. The feel of the fish’s crushed head didn’t leave my hand. I tried to shake it off, but it stayed.

“Let’s go,” Desha said.

I left the broken, bloodied fish on the planks, and we walked down the pier. Desha said she wanted the car keys.

I told her I would drive, that I was good. I was good. The keys jangled in my pocket. Heavy.
I stopped and turned around. Out in the Gulf, the line had broken. The black above and the black below bled into one thing.

Near Golden Meadow, about thirty miles north of Grand Isle, I made a bad turn into a gas station. An 18-wheeler ran square into the passenger side of the Monte Carlo.

I woke up to find Desha’s mangled body beside me, her legs and arms bent and twisted into ways my head couldn’t make sense of. Her face, which had turned from the oncoming truck and was fixed directly at me, had somehow been left untouched. I moved her hair from her face and, as I had on the pier, kissed her lips.

But her lips gave me nothing back, and I pulled away.

I screamed and howled and tried to get out of the car, but I was jammed in. It must’ve taken them hours to saw me out. The whole time I screamed and kicked. Punched my fists into the roof until it was covered in my own blood.

I showed Doc the scars on my knuckles from that night.

“I see. So you’re still trapped in that car,” he said.

“I guess that’s one way to look at it.”

“But listen. I think there’s something in you that wants to get out of it. Other than by drinking yourself to death, that is. Like a couple weeks back. What was it made you fight them fellas off? If you wanted to die, why not just let ‘em finish you off?”

I told him I’d thought about that. Thought about it a lot. Specifically, I thought about how when those dudes really started to lay into me I saw this tiny light somewhere
deep, deep inside my head, like I was thinking it, but then again it was like it existed way before I could think it or way before I could think period, or before I was even here in the world. It was just there, this little light, and while they were at it that light started dimming to where it seemed like it might go out. But my fists were flying and the light didn’t die and then when you came with your golf club, knocking heads, the tiny light got brighter and brighter until finally I was laid out on the pavement. Soon the light dimmed back out, but it wasn’t like it was gone, I could just tell, more like it was safe again, way back somewhere in the dark of my mind.

“You reckon that light was your life, Coozan?

“I don’t think so. Like I said, I think it’d been around longer than that.”

I finished that last beer. I looked up into the night sky, and I realized I hadn’t looked into the sky, really looked into the sky, for five years. Among the stars breaking through the haze, I focused on one that seemed brighter than the others.

I went back to a feeling, back to a night a few weeks after I saw Daddy fall while playing catch and figured out something was wrong. Me and Daddy were in the backyard, and he pointed up at a star and said, “When you look at that star, you’re looking at that star as it was thousands of years ago. It takes that long for the light to reach us.” He was always telling me things like that.

I was eight at the time, and I remembered suddenly feeling sick. What he told me stole my breath; I couldn’t get the image of him falling in the yard weeks before out my head. I couldn’t speak for a while, then I said, “So Daddy… does that mean it sees us as we… as we are thousands of years from now?” This thought terrified me, as I imagined that star looking out at a world that me and Daddy had left a long, long time before. I
couldn’t put a picture in my mind of what that world would look like. I could only imagine dark, and the dizziness came. I cried.

Daddy kneeled down and looked in my eyes. He wiped the tears off my cheeks.

“No, Antoine. It sees us the way we see it. As we were beaucoup years ago.”

That made me feel better. “So… we’re on the way, then? We’re coming?”

“Yeah. That’s right. Everything’s coming together. Dinosaurs and volcanoes, ice ages and wars, people getting together, breaking apart, and coming back together again… It’s all getting ready for you and me to meet up.”

Thinking about that night, I smiled as I sat there in the courtyard. I remembered how Daddy’s touch and his words stopped me from spinning off.

Dinosaurs, volcanoes, wars, people coming together, breaking apart, and coming back together again.

And there I was.

I saw that Doc had gone and I hadn’t noticed. He must’ve seen me thinking through things, wanted to leave me be. I got up and climbed the stairs to my apartment, forgetting why I left so many hours before. I opened my door and turned on the light. The white of the walls near blinded me after being in the dark for so long. I walked over to the counter, thinking only of the sole possession the person who lived there before me had left behind. I often ran across it and moved it without thinking, and then ran across it again. I didn’t see it on the counter, the last place I remembered seeing it, and I looked on the floor. Sure enough, there it was: a single, dull yellow pencil. I grabbed the knife Ma gave me when I got out, and, battling some slight shakes, I shaved the pencil down to a sharp tip.
I didn’t have any paper, so I just started where my eyes ended up. For some reason, that was the bottom left of the front door. I kneeled down, and using my left hand to help steady my right, I drew me and Daddy looking at the stars from our backyard. The drawing was a little wobbly, from the shakes and from me not drawing for more than twenty years, but you could tell we were happy. “Everything’s coming together,” a speech bubble coming from Daddy said, and the kid me stared up into the sky in awe. Drawing it woke something up in me, and I felt urged to go on. To see, maybe, how I ended up in that courtyard talking to Doc and then looking at the stars.

I found the memory of the night with Daddy under the stars took me back still deeper: to the time Daddy fell in the back yard. And I drew it again and again and again, trying to get it right. Erasing and changing a hand position here, a facial expression there, just like I did as a kid, when I’d lock myself in my room and by drawing try to make sense out of things I’d lived through but couldn’t understand all the way. Like why Daddy died, or why Momma started drinking all the sudden when she hadn’t before, like Daddy’d passed the bottle on to her like a baton. When Daddy died it was like some big old giant had picked up our house, with me and Momma and little brother Al inside, and shook the house up real good and then set it down. And when that big old giant put the house back down, everything was all mixed up. Not the furniture, but us living inside of it. Momma all the sudden was like a little girl, my brother was like a little baby again, and I came to find out I was a full-grown man at nine years old. Seems all the sudden I was the one doing the cooking, the cleaning, and even the putting Al, and sometimes Momma, to bed. So I got to drawing everything. It was like everything was going so fast and loud I wanted to back up and slow everything down. I wanted to stop and look at
things real close. Along with that, I think I must’ve felt like through reproducing an event as perfectly as possible it would be absolutely driven into my memory and I wouldn’t ever forget it. The beautiful things would be in there, always, and I was able to carry them with me whatever I did, wherever I went, and it would be like I never lost them. And the ugly things… I carried them, too, and my memory of them would be so perfect that I’d always be ready for them, I’d see them coming and prevent their happening ever again.

I pushed my way through hundreds of barely different variations of when Daddy fell. With my shaky hand grinding the graphite into the surface of the door, I was trying to shake something out of the image, and I found myself losing track of myself and time. The force of my drawing kept dulling the pencil, and I kept using the knife to sharpen it. After several hours, I found my shakes had somehow eased, but my pencil was near down to a nub. By the time the sun had come up, I felt I had it right.

I fell asleep right there on the floor.

* *

I woke up to Doc knocking at around eleven. “Coozan,” I heard from the other side of the door. I reached up and twisted the knob, opened the door. Doc came in and saw what was left of my pencil, more metal left than wood. The eraser was gone. He handed a beer down to me. I stayed on the floor, leaned against the cabinets. “Looks like you didn’t make it to the store last night. Figure you’ll need this to calm them shakes you gonna be
having for a little while yet.” He looked me dead in the eye. “Listen, you ain’t gonna be
drinking whiskey no more, Coozan.”

I said nothing. Something was making me listen to the crazy old man.

Doc saw my drawings on the bottom of the door. He leaned down to look closer.

“*Hm.* Alright then. You going down into the tunnels, count on.” I understood what he
was saying. He stood back up, opened the refrigerator, and placed three sixteen ouncers
on the top tray. “This all you gonna drink for now, count on. You work today?”

“Nah. Not until tomorrow.”

“What you eat?”

“Red beans and rice. Zatarain’s.” I cracked open a beer, took a drink.

“You got to keep working. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Sure enough, he was back ten minutes later. I hadn’t even closed the door. Doc
put a bag full of several boxes of Zatarain’s on the counter. “I’ll be back this evening,” he
told me. He left, and I got up to make some beans and rice. While pulling out a box of
Zatarain’s, I felt two things in the bag besides the food. I pulled them out and lay them on
the table: a box of yellow pencils, and a sharpener.
I feel the warm of the sun on my face. I smell something cooking. Oatmeal. I open my eyes and sit up, see Little Bear on his haunches, stirring a pot that’s set right atop a campfire. Again, he’s not wearing a shirt, and again, pine needles shoot out from his hair. His BB gun lays on the dirt beside him.

“Breakfast time, Maybelle,” he says.

“Good morning.” I get up and walk over to the fire, set down on my haunches too. He pulls the spoon out, blows on the oatmeal, and eats it. He looks up into the trees for a second, thinking maybe, and pulls a plastic bag of brown sugar out his pocket. Pours some into the pot and stirs.

“Why they call you Little Bear?”

He pulls the spoon out and tastes again. He looks into the trees, nods his head. “Because I came out of Momma with a big old bushy head of hair. And because I sleep a lot. Always have, Momma and Daddy say. Along with that, I’m always dreaming I’m a bear. Walking around on four legs and looking for food, all that. I’ve even been hunted. Run away from folks trying to kill me, my big old bear heart thumping like crazy. A couple times I been shot. Hurts real, real bad, Maybelle. That’s why I practice my shooting so much, to where I can always get me a head shot and kill them squirrels first try. Because I know what it feels like.”

He pulls the pot off the fire and pours it into two bowls sitting on the fire’s edge. He hands me one, along with one of two spoons he took from his pocket. “My daddy says
that with all my sleeping and bear-dreaming maybe I’m really a bear who’s always dreaming he’s a person.”

I smile, and right then feel kind of bad about it. I try to get my mind away from that feeling. “I like that idea, Little Bear. But what would that mean that I am?”

Even though I’m still full of those squirrels from last night, I eat the oatmeal. Now that there’s food around, I can’t help but have it. And it’s good.

“Well, do you ever dream you’re something else?” he asks.

I finish a bite of oatmeal, wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “I don’t dream. At least not when I’m sleeping.” I look at the fire and tell Little Bear about how I’ve gone to that yellow-grassy place by a river where all my family is. And I tell him about a night a year or so after Momma was killed. The night I woke up and saw a man standing at the foot of my bed. A little man, bare-chested, and black, black. He wore these shorts like diapers made out of animal skin, and he had a fishing net slung over his shoulder. His body shone in the moonlight. He didn’t scare me. There was something about him that made me feel real comfortable, maybe because right when I saw him I recognized him. He was the fisherman I saw the times I went back to that place, the one who threw the spinning net. While he stood there he didn’t have an expression on his face, and he didn’t say nothing. It was more like I felt what he was trying to tell me, and what he tried to tell me was that I was safe. He stood there for maybe a minute and then he walked toward the back of the house. While he walked he got more and more hazy until by the time he got to Maw-Maw’s door he wasn’t there at all. Like he’d just turned into night.
When I turn from the fire to Little Bear I find him lying down on his side. His bowl is overturned, and his oatmeal’s all spilled on the ground beside him.

“Little Bear,” I say. But then I remember nothing in the world will wake him up until his momma calls for him.

I feel like I have to move. And that I have to stay in the woods, away from people, for a little while. I finish my oatmeal and put the bowl next to the fire. I look at the BB rifle next to Little Bear. I think about how it would be bad to take it, but at the same time I think he’d be OK with it, that he’d understand I need it more than him right now. He probably has other ones anyway.

I stand up, walk over, and grab the gun off the ground. I imagine myself giving it back to him at the blue house over the levee after I have things figured out. Thinking that makes me feel better. I reach into his pocket and pull the knife out. Grab the lighter out the other. I put them into one of the pockets in my dress.

“Sorry, Little Bear,” I say. I walk away from his sleeping body.

I climb the levee and out to the left, just like Little Bear said, is a blue house in the middle of some cotton fields. A little dirt road leads to it from Highway 1 and an oak tree hangs over it. I lock the picture in my head, and I walk back down into the trees.

A ways on, I come onto a dead butterfly covered with ants. They nearly got the whole butterfly covered to where you can’t hardly find any butterfly there. Looks like a butterfly made out of ants.

One of the ants crawls up my foot. I bend down and stick my finger out, let it climb on. It crawls across my fingers. I pick it up with my other hand, careful not to hurt it, and put it with its friends. I follow it until it’s lost in all the others.
I remember telling Wil one evening on the stoop how I’d like to be an ant.

“Because I’d be close to everything,” I told him. “Everything would be realer, brighter, bigger. The cicadas even louder. And everything would fill my body up to where it was near bursting. But it wouldn’t.”

Wil smiled real big. “That’s nice, Maybelle. Maybe you right.”

Some boys over on the corner of Guv Nicholls and Roman were talking in low voices.

Wil said, “Problem is, Maybelle, wouldn’t bad things be bigger too? Wouldn’t it be easy to get crushed?”

This was a few months after I tried to burn down the green house, and what he said made more sense than it would’ve before that happened. I started to understand how big bad things can get. Still, I didn’t want to answer.

He put his big arm around me and pulled me close. “Don’t worry, Maybelle. Wouldn’t nobody step on you long as I’m around.”

We stayed like that, not talking, while the sun disappeared behind the green house. The front room of the green house was gone, just a few pieces of black wood left pointing toward the sky, not holding anything up anymore. You could look straight into the second room where the vines poured in through the roof, which had somehow stayed hanging over it.

Folks had found other green houses.

I knew why I had a new pair of shoes. I knew why Momma was always bringing home chicken from Man Chu’s instead of us having canned tuna or red beans and rice
every night. But it didn’t feel right. I never did wear those shoes, and I only ate that Man Chu’s when I was really, really hungry.

A few nights later Momma and I were watching TV when this show came on about these fish out in the sea. When the manfish wanted to be with a womanfish he went and sucked himself up onto her with his mouth. The thing was, the manfish would get stuck there. On the womanfish’s side, or on her belly, wherever he stuck himself onto. And he just stayed there. And I’ll tell you what. The whole time, the womanfish was sucking that manfish’s insides out. Heart, brain, everything. To where by the end, the manfish didn’t have nothing inside him no more. He was just like some useless extra arm or leg dangling off that womanfish, hanging there all dumb for no reason. And sometimes on one womanfish there were a whole bunch of manfish hanging up off of her.

While I was watching this I looked over at Momma. She had a cigarette smoking away in her hand, and she looked amazed. “Ain’t that some shit, Baby Maybelle. Ain’t that some shit,” she said. And yeah, I thought it was, but I was also thinking about something altogether different. I was thinking about how Momma was like that womanfish. I saw how folks on that stuff she was selling would lose their minds to where they weren’t themselves no more. To where they weren’t *nothing* no more, just like those manfish. And it was Momma who was helping them get like that.

Momma started sleeping with me a lot of nights. It got to where she always wanted me to be real close to her all the time. Even more than before. I wondered why this was, and it worried me a little, but I also liked it. A lot of nights we’d just lay and talk nearly through the whole night about everything in the world, especially the pretty little things most people forgot to talk about.
The night we watched those crazy fish on TV, we lay in my bed facing up to the ceiling. The room was blue with moonlight.

I turned to Momma. She was blue, like the room. I watched her take a drag of her cigarette. The ash burned orange and disappeared. “Momma, I don’t like this stuff you’re doing,” I said.

She stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray next to her and faced me. Ran her hand over my head. “Maybelle, I can’t explain all this to you. It’d be hard for you to understand. All I can say is that every time I do this it hurts me too. But every time I give somebody some of this shit I gotta think about how it’s putting food in you, Wil’s, and Maw-Maw’s bellies.”

“But momma, things wasn’t that bad before. I don’t need no new shoes, I don’t need nothing…” I started to cry.

She pulled me closer, stroked my head. “Listen, Baby, just let me save us up some money and I’ll stop. Okay, baby?”

I calmed. “Momma. You gotta promise me.”

“Alright, baby. I promise.” A dog barked.

“Silent Man’s mad at you, huh. I ain’t seen him talking to you much lately.” A different man was coming around with the brown bags.

“Hm.” Momma turned to the ceiling for a second, then back to me. She started telling me about how things were hard for folks and there weren’t many options out there. She felt that, so she knocked a dollar or two off when she could see somebody had it bad, like they got one shoe on and that one all scratched up and ain’t got no laces, or folks
scratching their neck so bad it’d started bleeding. Things like that. She figured that’s why
more folks were going to her than Silent Man.

Momma turned to the nightstand and got a cigarette from the pack. Her face
glowed in the lighter’s flame and then went back into the blue.

“Maybelle Baby, you can’t imagine what it’s like sometimes out on these streets,
and I hope you never do. That’s why I’m doing this shit, so you won’t have to know. For
example, some of these wimmens, ones only got on a little strip of fabric for a skirt and
another little strip for a top, ones you can see coming a mile down the Guv, walking
around on high heels even on these potholed streets about to break they ankles, looking
all wobbly, got babies at home with no daddies… they got it hard, baby. I knock a dollar
or two off for them, too. You see, wimmens especially got it hard. I got a little bit a brain
and a little bit of heart. I’m small, but I’m tough. But I ain’t got a big old booty like
Unique, say, or nice white girl hair like Sasha. So they trick, and I hustle. But I cut ‘em a
break when they come and get some shit because I know it’s hard out there.”

I took it all in, then I said, “So what do I do?”

“What you mean, Maybelle?”

“I mean, what do I have? You smart and tough, so you do what you do. Unique
got a big booty and do what she do and Sasha got nice hair so she do what she do. What
do I have? What can I do with it?”

Outside, Miss Lena walked by singing Whitney Houston at the top of her lungs,
“I’m saving all my love for you… Saving all my love… for you!” Then she yelled,
“That’s right all y’all niggas out there… All my love… Say, anybody out there wanna
fuck this fine old bitch here?! Five dollars!” Things went quiet again. The same dog from earlier barked twice in the distance.

Momma looked at me. “School, baby, you go to school. You smart, you see things other folks don’t see.”

“School ain’t done nothing for nobody around here, momma.”

“Well, this ain’t the only place on earth, baby. This a big city, and a big world.”

“School ain’t done nothing for you.”

“Well, I couldn’t finish it and see. I got throwed out John Mac before I could finish. I was in eleventh grade. Almost done.”

“Why you get throwed out momma?”

The ash from her cigarette glowed bright, bright orange in the blue and disappeared.

”For beating a girl with the leg off a chair.”

“What happened? Where that chair leg came from?”

“Just kind of found myself holding it. It’s hard to explain. Like I woke up standing there, and this girl was laying there on the floor, her face all fucked up and full of blood. Blood even running out onto the tiles.”

I knew how Momma must’ve looked when it happened. I’d seen that face. Once. Momma told me that one of that girl’s eyes was swollen shut, and the other one looked up at her, scared as can be. Shaking. Momma remembered looking from the girl, then over at the chair leg in her hand. One of them metal ones. It had that girl’s blood all over it, patches of hair all stuck there. It was dead silent in that classroom, everybody just
looking at her. Mr. Batiste had his hand around her other arm, and she figured that’s what
woke her up, stopped her from doing worse.

Momma started telling me about Mr. Batiste. Said he was a good man. Them children wouldn’t pay no attention to hardly any other teachers at that school, yelling at them, cussing them out, but them children listened to Mr. Batiste. Big old thug boys who were robbing stores at night wouldn’t even say a peep while Mr. Batiste was talking. He talked about the way bodies worked, like on the inside. The little things inside plants and inside us that make it so we can breathe and walk and talk.

She told me about the day they looked inside a little baby pig. Mr. Batiste came over to Momma’s table and showed her that little baby pig’s stomach and little lungs. And even its little heart.

“Maybelle, that little heart was so pretty,” she said. “It looked like ours, but tiny. I held it in the palm of my hand, Maybelle. Right there.” Her cigarette stuck between her fingers, Momma pointed into her other palm, as if a tiny pig heart had stayed there ever since.

I looked into Momma’s palm in the blue moonlight. Smoke seemed to rise right from her open hand. I almost thought I might actually find a pig’s heart there, but there was none. Momma kept on talking, and I looked back at her.

“I felt real special holding that little heart in my hand, it was like the world went real big for a minute, Maybelle. I just stood there and looked at it. I’ll never forget.”

“So what happened with the girl?”

“Oh yeah.”
She told me Mr. Batiste checked on the girl lying there on the floor. She was alive. He told a student to run over and tell the office what happened, and then he went over to Momma, real quiet and calm-like. He was always so calm, she said. So he touched her back with his hand real soft and waited until she came back into the world. And she did, just like that. Momma figured he knew she’d gotten out of her whatever it was that’d gotten into her, like whatever it was she just needed to let loose onto that poor girl and now it was done. She couldn’t even much remember what it was the girl did. Momma dropped the chair leg and it made this clanky sound when it hit the floor. As Mr. Batiste walked her out the room, a bunch of people poured in and tended to the girl. As he walked her out she said she suddenly felt real bad. Not for the girl, really, not right then, but because she broke Mr. Batiste’s chair and disturbed his class.

She told him, “Mr. Batiste, I’m sorry I broke your chair. And I’m sorry I messed your classroom all up. Your classroom’s supposed to be nice and quiet so you can keep telling us all about how things work.”

He just looked over at her and nodded his head real soft-like. She was pretty sure she even saw his eyes get watery.

“Man, to see such a big old strong man like that come close to crying. That got me, Maybelle,” she said. She took a drag from her cigarette and lay it in the ashtray. She went on.

“And that was it for school. I had Wil about a year later. I had been doing good too. Teachers would tell me I had potential. That’s what they’d always be telling me. I always remember that word: potential.”

“What it mean?”
“It mean right now you ain’t got much going on. But you gonna do things later. Big things, but you just need time. And maybe other things. Like people telling you you got potential.”

“Were they right? I mean, you gonna do big things later, momma?”

“Well, baby. This is later.”

I looked at Momma, thought for a second, then said, “Naw, momma, later ain’t come yet.”

* *

Wil had been sleeping in the kitchen for months. He moved the La-Z-Boy back there from the front room, and that’s where he slept. He told me he liked it because sitting down while sleeping meant he could be closer to standing up and being able to do things whenever he woke up. But that didn’t sound right to me.

I saw the gun for the first time, tucked in Wil’s waistband, late one night when I got up to get some water. Wil always seemed to have his eyes only half-closed when he slept; I said he looked like a zombie from the movies. After a few seconds of me standing there that night Wil opened his eyes all the way and saw me staring at him. He jerked his wifebeater down over the gun. “What you doing up, Maybelle?”

I thought of the first time I saw a dead body. Me and Wil heard the shots from inside, then a few minutes later we heard wailing and screaming. We went outside and found the body of that man called Anthony laid flopped over on the curb of the Guv like a old bag of trash. His white T-shirt gleaming in the sun, but that dark red spreading
through the white until the white was nearly gone. And I thought about Wil’s face there instead of Anthony’s. I knew some line out there in the world had been crossed, a line that split up the people who were safe and the people who weren’t. I wondered what it was that put people on one side or the other. Somehow, we made it onto the wrong side, and I was scared.

“Come here, Maybelle.” Wil leaned over and placed the gun on the kitchen table, and I sat on his lap. “Lil’ sis, things got a little crazy. But don’t worry. All this gonna end soon and things’ll be normal again.”

“That’s what momma said a long while back.”

“Really, Maybelle. Just you wait, things gonna cool down.”

“How you gonna know when it’s time to stop?”

“Hm. We’ll know it’s time when it’s time.”

“I’m twelve now Wil, and y’all still be acting like I’m a little baby. That’s the answer you’d give a little child. Not a twelve year old like me.”

“Maybelle, you can’t understand what’s going on, you…”

“But I do understand, Wil. Y’all selling that stuff that make people forget who they is and where they come from and who they people is. Y’all selling that stuff they go into all these broke down houses to use, the stuff that be killing Miss Lena. And y’all ain’t right for that.”

“Listen. First of all, I ain’t selling it to nobody. Don’t want nothing to do with it. In fact, Momma wouldn’t even let me if I tried. You know why I’m back here in this chair? Why I got this gun here? It’s to protect you, Maw-Maw, and Momma. That’s why I’m here. I don’t even keep the gun with me when I leave out. Second of all, Momma’s
only doing it because won’t nobody give her a job. And me bussing tables in the quarter and Maw-Maw’s checks coming in every month ain’t cutting it. And then, Maybelle, wouldn’t somebody else be selling that stuff if Momma wasn’t?”

“No. That ain’t it, Wil. You know it. Y’all ain’t got no business being mixed up in this. You and momma different. Momma told me once you was named after a knight. Momma told me you gonna save people one day. And Momma, when she was in school, teachers was always telling her she had potential. That mean…”

“I know what it mean, Maybelle.” He hugged me tightly and brushed the tears from my cheeks.

“What I’m saying is that y’all different. Y’all different.”

“I understand, Maybelle. Wait. Just wait.”

I fell into Wil’s chest. “Wil… you don’t understand! You… you a knight, a big, beautiful knight! And momma got… she got…” I couldn’t go on.

I heard the shuffle of Maw-Maw’s slippers scraping her bedroom floor all slow and heading toward the kitchen. Wil grabbed the gun off the table, tucked it back into his waistband, and covered it with his shirt. He turned to me and ran his thumb underneath each of my eyes.

I thought again about Anthony lying on the curb of Roman and his white-then-red shirt and he turned into Wil, and I looked in Wil’s eyes. I went up inside them and got lost in there, things went black, and all the sudden I felt warm sand on my bare feet. I saw me and Wil, but not here, there in a place with tall, yellow grass. The wind blew soft and the grass swayed slow, the sky was blue. Me and Wil laughed and played. Momma was there, and Daddy, and they were smiling. We were all covered in stars and fish bones.
Other folks were there too, but they were in and out my head quicker than I could grab hold them and I don’t know if I even knew them, at least this time, here.

And there was a river. *That* river, and the tall yellow grass and the sand, and I realized I was in that place I’d go as a little girl, when Daddy said he’d look in my eyes and I’d be gone. I hadn’t been to that place since then, since Momma stabbed Daddy and Daddy went who knows where. The river was just like it was back then. Big and brown, just like this one here. In the distance there was a long, skinny canoe, and on the canoe a bare-chested man threw out a net and it hung there over the water, spinning in circles…

Maw-Maw’s voice jerked me back. “What y’all carrying on in the middle of the night for?” she said.

It took me a second to return. When I did, I put my arms around Wil and squeezed. I had a really bad feeling. *Why was I going back to that place now?* I wondered.

Wil said, “Aw, Maw-Maw, we was just playing.”

“I don’t like that kinda playing at this hour,” she said. She shuffled back into her room and closed the door.

“Can I sleep here with you?” I said.

“Yeah, Maybelle.”

That place I went, it was a place where we were on the safe side of the line. But we weren’t there any more, and I was scared for us.

Early that morning, I woke up when Wil got up for work. Before falling back to sleep, I saw him put the gun on top of the kitchen cabinets.
For some reason, I thought about how somewhere out there that fisherman’s net was still hanging there over that big river. Spinning.

* *

Weeks later, Me and Momma sat together on the couch watching television on a Wednesday night. Maw-Maw was still at church, and Wil hadn’t gotten back home from work. On the TV screen, an older white woman asked questions to a younger white woman. They seemed to think what they were talking about was really, really important. The older one asked the younger one, “Did you or the president worry about somebody coming in and finding you?” The younger woman giggled, nodded her head with a big smile on her face and said, “Yes.” I thought the young one looked like a talking toy doll.

Momma took a drag from her cigarette and shook her head. “Aw, Maybelle Baby, see how this go? Most powerfulest man in this whole wide world, running around back alleys like a old slobbering dog. All for this little giggling school girl. Ain’t that some shit?”

I smiled. “Yeah, that’s something, Momma.” I grabbed my glass of water from the coffee table, took a drink, and put it back down. I lay back and watched the two ladies talk. After a while Momma fell asleep with a smoking cigarette still in her lips. I leaned over and took it out, stubbed it out in an ashtray on the coffee table. I got up to fill her water back up. When I opened the door going from Maw-Maw’s room to the kitchen, I heard a pounding on the door, and I saw the knob jiggling around. I could tell the
pounding wasn’t from a hand, but from an entire body. A big body. I turned around and called out, trying hard to make sure whoever it was outside couldn’t hear.

“Momma… momma.” I could barely hear myself over the woman talking with the doll girl in the front room, even with two rooms separating us: “Why did you want people to know?...”

The pounding stopped. I started for the front room when the pounding suddenly came back, this time stronger, like the door was going to come right off the hinges. I looked up at the top of the cabinets, at the back door, and back at the top of the cabinets. I put a chair next to the counter, climbed the chair and stood on the countertop. I ran my hand along the top of the cabinets and dust fell down into my eyes. The pounding continued and I knew the door couldn’t take much more. I found the gun, grabbed it, and jumped down onto the kitchen floor just as the back door busted open. I pointed the gun at the shadow standing in the doorway. The big piece of black metal shook heavy in my hands.

The huge, shadowy figure came all slow into the light of the kitchen. It was Silent Man. He smiled and said to me quietly while catching his breath, “Hey Maybelle… I’m just passing through.” He stood there, huge and gasping for air there in the light, while I, with my knees about to give out, tried my best to steady the gun with both hands. I heard the doll girl in the front room: “The whole subject of the dress has been one of those topics…”

Silent Man went over to the sink, grabbed a glass off the counter, and filled it with water. I kept the gun on him, but he acted like he didn’t even notice. He put the glass to
his lips, and I watched his Adam’s apple bob up and down as he drank the water in one big drink. He put the glass down on the counter all quiet, and let out a sigh.

I was trembling real bad, and the gun was near wobbling around in my hands.

“Why you crying, Maybelle?” He walked over, every step making the kitchen floor shake, and he placed his giant hand on my head. The gun right there against his chest. He pinched my cheek real light and then walked toward the front of the house. I turned, keeping the gun on him, and watched as he went through the door into the front room and closed it behind him.

I stood there frozen, in the doorway, tears streaming down my face and the gun wobbling around in my hands, and I tried to keep it aimed at the closed door.

“A lot of things have been said about me…” said the doll girl, as I dropped my arm and the gun pointed toward the floor. It’d gotten heavier and heavier in my hand to where I couldn’t hold it no more. Finally it dropped down to the ground.

Then I heard myself saying, almost without knowing I was saying it, “But Momma, later ain’t come yet. No momma, later ain’t here. Remember, you got potential, Momma, and that’s something… That’s something…”

I heard the first shot, and I fell to the floor.

*

Early the next morning, after only a few hours of bad, bad sleep, I woke up in Maw-Maw’s bed to the sound of more gunfire. Five shots, right outside on Guv Nicholls. The
shots stole my breath, and I tried to call out for Momma but then remembered. And the remembering was like it was happening all over again, and I cried.

I had a good idea whose running feet I heard growing quieter and quieter outside, and my world went smaller and smaller with each step, until the running feet were gone. Why. Why, Momma, did you have to always be your hard self when you’re really soft inside? Why people have to be so many people at the same time? Why can’t people just be who they is and be safe and that’s that? I felt Maw-Maw’s warmth come from behind and close up around me, and I felt the thump of her heart against my back. Being me’s got me tired, Momma.

Miss Lena’s voice cut through the silence outside. “Silent Man dead! Silent Man dead!”

I lay there until Maw-Maw got up and walked toward the front. I followed. Maw-Maw opened the door and I looked at her cut out from the light outside. I went and stood beside her on the top of the steps, and I watched the people surround the big body lying in front of Mr. McGee’s house. I saw Silent Man’s eyes, wide open, staring all dumb into the sky above, and I saw how the blood pooled around his chest. Then I saw Dwayne come out on Mr. McGee’s porch, and he saw me. We talked with our eyes, and we had nothing but sad things to say. Mr. McGee came out, and he looked down at his little boy’s body. I felt sad for him, and I felt sad for the world. The people, the street, the birds, and the sky. They were all just different kinds of one big sad. Mr. McGee slowly crossed Governor Nicholls, and the street went silent. He stood over Silent Man, looked down at his body and the pool of blood surrounding him, and then he looked up at me.
He didn’t say nothing, just walked across Guv Nicholls to me and put his hand on my head and kept it there. It felt heavy, real. I wanted it to stay there. I looked up at him and cried, and he cried too. He pulled his heavy, sad hand from my head and turned around. I almost told him not to go away, but I didn’t.

I went inside. Back to the kitchen, and I climbed up onto the counter. I ran my hand across the top of the cabinets, where I put back the gun after being woke up by Maw-Maw’s screams the night before. Just like I thought, the gun wasn’t there. Instead, I found a folded piece of notebook paper. I dropped down onto the kitchen floor and unfolded it. It said:

LITTLE ANT. LET NO ONE CRUSH YOU.
I catch up with Highway 1 and follow the river. Just as it’s been ever since I left the interstate behind, I’m surrounded by cotton fields in bloom. Hardly any other cars, hardly any change. Every now and then, I pass a dry, brown field of unused land, or a lone house or trailer resting under the shade of an oak or an elm. When it seems somebody might be home I stop and talk if they’re there to be talked to, try and see if they by chance saw or heard something about Maybelle. But more often than not, nobody’s there. Despite the coke bottle on the porch, or the old tennis shoes at the foot of the steps with laces all splayed out, ready to tie on and walk to the river in. Of the few people who appear out of these hot, flat cottonlands, no one has seen Maybelle, or a gray Cadillac like the one Tyrone described.

The evening comes and the sky darkens. Ahead, a band of vultures picks at the bright red innards of something fresh-trampled and spilled across the highway. As I come on them, they hurry their work, grabbing what they can before slapping their black wings into the air and lifting all slow from the bloody concrete. The last vulture to leave picks at the broken animal and glances all nervous at the big blue ruckus rolling toward him, picks and glances some more, and then he rips away at something rubbery. That something snaps, and the vulture’s free and flaps all heavy with that scrap of meat over rows of crumbly earth, but he won’t rise. He drops it, and climbs up into the sky.
I swerve to miss the carcass, which must’ve been a medium brown dog. I don’t know where he could’ve come from, I haven’t seen a house for miles. Shiny green flies swarm, just as the vultures had before.

I hear a loud pop, followed by the sound of torn rubber flopping against pavement, then the grating of metal on concrete underneath me as the car goes lopsided.

I pull over, step outside. Shredded rubber surrounds the naked metal rim. I go back and pop the trunk. Jack, but no tire. And around me, nothing but the usual cottonfields, and the levee about a hundred yards out. I pull out my Mississippi map and see through judging by a nearby mile marker the closest town’s Hollandale, over a dozen miles away.

I stand by the Continental for half an hour, but no cars pass. There’s no way I’d find a tire at this hour anyway. I’ll just sit by the river for a while, and come back and sleep in the car. Start out early tomorrow morning.

On the other side of the levee, the river opens up. The sun’s falling into the trees on the other side, and its orange is all broken up, scattered across the river. The river churns and twists, moves on down to the Gulf. I sit down and watch while the pieces of orange grow fewer and fewer.

I think of one of those many nights with Desha on the river. We were snuggled up on a quilt over on the Lower Ninth Ward levee, right there where Maybelle’s sitting in her picture. Surrounded by grass. Desha was beautiful in that orange light. She was always so damn beautiful.

I told her about how my daddy would say every second the river’s a completely different thing, completely new. He talked about how it’ll never be the same again, to
where it ain’t right that that one word, river, tries to hold all those different things together.

Desha looked at me and smiled, her eyes shining. “But ain’t that the way with everything, though? Us too?”

I hear a rumble down the levee road. I turn and see a beat up pickup truck trailed by a cloud of dust. I stand up as it nears. An old man with a grizzled beard and a scowl sits behind the wheel. He stops in front of me, and he spits on the ground near my foot. He says nothing, just looks me up and down. He’s missing his left arm, the sleeve pinned back at the shoulder. “Hey there,” I say. “Blew a tire, and I was just taking in the river.”

“Getting dark,” the old man says. He glances down at the highway and the Continental. He looks dissatisfied. Sighs.

“Yeah. Say, you know where I could get a tire?”

He looks at the river. “I might have a extra that’d fit enough to get you to Greenville tomorrow morn. I live a piece up the road.”

“I’d appreciate it.” I walk around the truck, get in, and we set off. A wooden ball’s been rigged onto the steering wheel, and the old man’s single hand is wrapped around it. The truck snails along the levee road, gravel crunching underneath. It turns off the levee, creaking and moaning its way down as if it was made entirely out of tired, rusty springs. I look back into the bed and see a white plastic bucket with two gray catfish tails peeking out.

He turns back around as we pull up to Highway 1 and stop. The old man looks both ways and says, “You ate?”

“Nah.” The wooden ball turns left, and we follow.
“I’m gonna fry this here fish up, we’ll eat it, and we’ll double back and fix that there tire. But let me make it clear, boy. It ain’t you. It’s my Christian composition for what I’m doing all this here.”

“Alright then,” I say, watching the Continental grow smaller in my side view mirror.

We steady pick up speed, and the tires whine. We say nothing. On each side, the cotton fields sprawl out around us. The endless bolls, exploded from their green casings, have turned evening purple.

“Name’s Antoine,” I say.

“Amos,” he says, not turning.

“Harvest time coming, huh?”

“It’s here now.”

A long ten minutes later, the wooden ball turns left again, and we swing onto a short dirt driveway leading up to a small house that’s purple, yet I assume white by day, like the cotton. No tree covers it, and there aren’t any other houses within eye shot. The front door’s open, and the screen door’s closed. We get out of the truck, and the old man puts the bucket with the fish on the porch.

An old woman’s voice comes from inside the house. “Amos? That you?”

“Yeah, woman. Who else it gonna be,” the old man replies while walking back to the truck.

I hear the woman inside, mumbling to herself. Or maybe to God.

The old man grabs his fishing rod and lays it against the porch. “C’mon, boy,” he says to me, and I come on. He grabs the bucket and swings open the screen door. It
screeches. I walk behind him up the steps and into the front room. A ragged rope rug lays beneath a chipped wooden coffee table with a big white doily sitting atop it. The old man disappears into the kitchen, and I hear a shuffling to my left. It’s the woman. She’s tiny and hunched over; the way she collapses in on herself makes it like she’s trying to make herself seem even tinier. Roly-poly-like. Out of sight. She’s wringing her hands as we catch eyes.

Her eyes are dim, and they dart around all nervous. She takes a few steps closer and squints. It looks like she’s coming out of a fog, or either into one, and she gasps. She shuffles over to me with her arms outstretched. She kisses me on the cheek and hugs me.

“Oh, it’s been too long,” she says. I don’t know what she’s talking about. She leads me up to the couch and I sit down. She scoots down next to me and holds my hand, strokes it with her other hand.

The old man rummages around in the kitchen. A pot falls and the old man mumbles a curse. “Where you been, Baby?” the woman says, the top of her hand roped with green and purple. Her face is lit up waiting for my answer. She scoots closer, and I’m in a cloud of old lady perfume. I’m tired from the driving, the heat, the looking, and, maybe more than anything, the talking to strangers, and the woman’s crazy questions aren’t what I’m looking for right now.

“New Orleans,” I say, hoping everything’ll come together and make sense. It seems important to do it this way. Like I’d set the world off its rocker somehow if I didn’t.

I look around the little living room. The old folks’ knick-knacks, the porcelain figures, the dolls, the picture of Jesus’s face looking skyward and pure, another of Jesus
holding a lamb and a light shining from his whole body, and finally another of him as a baby in his mother’s arms, his and her head lit up. The old woman’s hand pats away at mine, and I can feel her beaming face locked on me as I look at Jesus and Mary.

“That’s nice,” she says.

I look at the family pictures lining another wall. In black and white I see the old man as a young man, with two arms and a smile. Then another picture, the black not so black and the white so bright it nearly bleeds from the print, the young old man with his arms, two, wrapped around the young old woman standing upright. Not roly-poly-like, and not with wringing hands.

In the picture she’s holding a baby. Here, now, I feel the woman’s hands tremble. I look at her, her brows furrowed. That old lady perfume fog again.

“Yeah, it’s nice,” I say, talking about New Orleans. Her face goes back bright. The sound of a knife scraping across a whetstone comes from the kitchen, along with muffled curses.

“I think you’d like it down there,” I say. The old woman turns back to me and bounces up and down on the couch like a little girl, smiling.

I scan the other family pictures, and there it is. A large photo, I reckon from a prom sometime in the 80’s, shows a tuxedoed and pimpled young man with feathered hair and a wispy moustache standing beside a young lady with a thick-rouged face and a big hopey smile. He looks nothing like me, but I guess she needs me to be him right now. I wonder where he is.

The woman faces the picture. She says, “Yeah, Baby. That was a nice night. You were so excited, remember? You tripped on the way out to your car, dropped Sue’s
corsage on the ground. It was white, I know you remember, and you picked off the dirt piece by little piece making sure not to hurt that pretty, pretty flower.” She draws her hands from mine and acts like she’s taking dirt off a flower. I keep looking at the wall, and I see pictures of the son as a boy, crawling across the floor and later riding a shiny bike, and then older, in camouflage holding a hunting rifle, his proud two-armed father beside him. But there aren’t any pictures of the old woman’s son as an adult.

The woman returns her hands. “How is Sue by the way?” she says.

I look at the woman’s face. Newspaper crinkles in the kitchen, and one of those catfish flops on the floor. I realize the boy must be dead.

“Sue’s good,” I say. That catfish was swimming in the river just hours ago.

“What you doing down there in New Orleans?”

“I work carpentry.”

“Oh, Baby, you always were good with fixing things. Like that time you fixed the toilet when you were nothing but nine.”

I laugh, all nervous. “Yeah, yeah, well that wasn’t nothing.”

“And humble too. Always was.” Newspaper shifts and crinkles on the other side of the wall, the old man’s cussing gets louder. The floor trembles from his heavy footfalls, and the old woman looks in the direction of the sounds and turns back to me.

“Go help your daddy, Jesse. I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

“Yes’m.” I get up and find the old man on his right knee with a catfish pinned to the floor underneath his left foot. The dead fish slips around as he attempts to stick a filet knife into its underside with his one hand. I take a step closer but stop.

“Don’t need your help, boy. Done this so many damn times…”
And sure enough, the man pierces into the fish and runs the knife through the slick white of its underside. Guts spill out onto the newspaper.

“See,” he says.

I watch the blood, and all what’d been sealed darkly inside that fish, come out into the light of the kitchen. I return to the old woman, sit down.

“And Sue? What’s she doing down there?” she says.

“She’s good too. She’s just looking after the kids.”

“Oh, that’s so nice.”

“Yeah.”

“How old are they?” She tightens her grip.

“They’re… the girl’s fourteen and the boy’s eighteen. Jesse Jr. just graduated, and he’s going on to college. LSU. He’s even trying out for football.” The woman’s face brims over with happiness. I imagine she’s watching Jesse Jr. running his way down the sideline in purple and gold, leaving leaping opponents’ bodies behind. Desha and I saw the same things in our dreaming heads for years.

“And the girl?”

“She’s real, real smart. She wants to be a scientist.”

Tears come from her eyes, and she smiles brightly. “I’m just so proud of you, Baby.”

The old man coughs up something from deep down dark inside him. I turn to the sound and quickly back to the old woman. “You wanna go for a walk?”

“That would be nice, Jesse. Are these slippers okay?”
“Yeah, they’re good.” I lead the old woman to the door. I glance over at the old man hunched over in the kitchen, managing to extract a filet from one of the catfish with his one hand and two feet. He seems unaware of the world beyond that catfish.

Me and the old woman, her arm looped through mine, walk in the dark along the stand of trees lining the levee, near the house. I tell her about Jesse’s life. How he built an addition to the house with hammer and nails, how he taught Jesse Jr. how to fish, and how he and Sue help their daughter with homework every night. I lay it on, and I don’t even know if what I’m doing is right. I imagine the old woman wouldn’t be surprised if me and her all the sudden grew wings and flew off into the night sky. Around us, lightning bugs glow and crickets chirp, the river churns, and I think about what it must be like being dead. Really dead. Not come close, like when I was trying to drink myself there. I mean there. I look into the old woman’s eyes and the way she so damn desperately wants me to be her son, and be here, that she’s made it so, and death seems like a nasty, nasty thing. See, I’m that boy, but he’s dead. And I look in her eyes and feel the hole he left in the world because I am that hole.

She holds on tight. Maybe he’s not dead.

And so maybe Desha isn’t dead either. Not all the way. Maybe dead is just one word trying to hold together too many things.

I hear the old man stomping out onto the porch. “Catfish!” he hollers. Me and the old woman walk back to the house. All that blood’s off the kitchen floor. The old woman doesn’t let me go until we sit down at the table.

My second catfish meal for the day, which doesn’t bother me. The old woman watches me eat and says nothing. Time after time she hands me the paper towel roll.
“Wipe your chin, Baby,” she says, and I do. She refills my water after every single drink I take. The old man scowls.

    Finally he lays down a piece of catfish he’d been working on, turns to her and says, “Iona, Honey, you know that ain’t…”

    But he stops when he sees the way she looks at me, and for the rest of the meal he says nothing. In fact, I think I see the old man’s scowl soften, just a bit, over the course of the silent meal we all share.

    Once we finish, the old man gets up. “Alright, I’m gonna get that old tire from the back. Boy, you ready to go?” The old woman turns to me, looking frightened.

    “Why don’t you stay the night, Baby?”

    I look up at the old man, who stares at his wife. I can see deep, deep love and care for the woman in the man’s face.

    “Uh, naw, Ma. I think it’s time I go on back. Sue’s expecting me.” I stand up and walk over to the old woman, who also stands. The old man goes out the screen door.

    “Baby, I understand. Well you come on back soon, okay?” We hug each other tight, the screen door slaps back in place.

    “I will, Momma.” We let go of each other and I walk to the door, open it. I hear the rumble of a tire being dropped into the truck bed. I go down the stairs, and the old woman stays on the porch. She waves.

    The old man gets in the truck and starts the engine. The lights cut on and the woman shields her eyes with her other hand. I get in and wave out the window. The truck moves and the lights pull free of the old woman, leaving her in the dark.

    As we pull away, I can just barely make out her waving hand until it disappears.
We drive in silence back down Highway 1, toward the Continental. I look toward the river, unseen behind the levee.

The old man’s pickup pulls over to the left, right in front of the Continental. We get out, but the old man keeps the lights on. He walks back to the bed and yanks out the tire as I take the jack and tire iron out of the trunk. The job only takes us ten minutes or so, and we work in silence. I throw the bad tire in the trunk, as well as the iron and jack. The old man swings open the door of his truck, but then turns around and stands.

“Don’t even worry about that tire, hear? Don’t reckon I need it.”

I walk over and put my hand out. “Sure?”

“Yeah.” He grabs my hand and shakes it firmly.

“Thanks, Amos.”

“Yep.”

He climbs into his truck and closes the door. I start to ask him something but stop. He pulls the truck into gear and rolls up a bit, starting a U-turn, but stops.

“Nineteen years old, boy,” he says without turning his gaze from the road. “Knife fight in a Greenville bar. All kinds of blood, over a girl. Over that girl in the picture…”

The old man’s head begins to fall, and I step up to the truck, but the tires spin in the gravel. The headlights swing across the green levee as he pulls a U-turn. I watch the two red dots disappear down the highway, and I look up into the sky.

Never in my life have I seen so many stars.

I get in the back seat of the Continental. Roll the windows down, lay on my back, and prop up my legs. Maybelle’s close. I have a feeling.

I realize I’d forgotten to drink. I’ll be damn.
Maybe that word—Antoine—isn’t big enough to hold all it’s trying to describe.
A squirrel sits up and chaws on a nut under an elm tree. It’s afternoon, and the sky’s gone gray with clouds. I’ve been walking through the forest all day, and my stomach’s rumbling again. I set the squirrel in the sights of Little Bear’s BB gun. I think of Little Bear’s dreams, about how he always tries to get a head shot, and I try to do the same.

I pull the trigger and the squirrel twists and turns on the dirt. I didn’t get it. I pump the gun and squeeze the trigger again, and he stops moving altogether. I walk over and pick him up, apologize. His still black eyes say nothing back.

I take him over to the river, to a little patch of sand, and skin him, run a stick through and roast him over a fire. Wait with the river spread out in front of me and the woods to my back.

At one point I look up and see something ain’t ever seen before. The sky’s like a big gray blanket hanging over everything, but that’s normal. The thing is, there’s this long, skinny rip in it, to where you can see the bright, bright blue behind the gray. Like somebody’s ripped right through. I just stare at it, hardly believing, while my squirrel roasts.

I finish my squirrel as the sky turns dark. After I’m done I go the few steps down to the river, my feet sinking into the soft sand, and I bend and take in beaucoup handfuls of water. It’s full of sand my feet kicked up, but I drink it anyway. Feel the grit go down inside me.
I’m tired from the day’s walking, and I lay down on the sand. Think about that bright blue break in the clouds, try not to think about how much I miss my people.

*

In the middle of the night, branches snap and the forest floor rustles in the woods by the river. Little feet thump. And I hear all the tiny, busy worlds underneath the rocks wake up along with all the other night creatures, big and small. The raccoons, the owls and their hoo-hooing, the possums and the hawks, and all. They all howl, flap, and scurry until the forest is just this one huge, wild thing. A little ways into the forest, something silver flashes in the moonlight. The first thing I think of is Wil, of him slashing through the forest with his sword, but I don’t see or hear no horse, and then I see a man shadow attached to the flashing silver going through, disappearing in and out of the tree shadows, but it’s not Wil. This man shadow walks different, like a wild creature, like a man made out of forest, not made out of city, and he’s cutting through the woods with a long blade that shines with moonlight, I see him then I don’t, I see him and then I don’t. Little animals run from the man shadow’s path, and night birds fly through breaks in the forest and into the sky to where they turn into night itself and I can only see them when they cover the stars.

And inside me, as I watch and listen, is a forest too. Inside me ants crawl and rocks shake, coons run and night birds fly. But I ain’t scared. Now I recognize the shadow man. Slicing through with his big knife made of moon, he says, just loud enough for me to hear, “Got damn, cutting and killing and draining and never satisfied, got
damn… *All these little things running ‘way from me, look at this. This ain’t the way, this ain’t the way, got damnit…”*

“Great, Great granddaddy Elvin!” I yell out.

The ruckus stops, and I see him look my way. His frown turns into a smile. He stands there for a good minute, just staring at me as the woods calm down. He raises his hand and waves real slow, and I wave back. Then his hand falls, and he gets right back to cutting and cussing his way deeper into the howling and cracking woods and finally disappears until I can’t hear him anymore.

The night goes quiet again.

*\

Early one evening me and Elvin were out fishing in a little pond close to his trailer. We did that a lot. After he got off work, after I stopped working in the garden. I didn’t know nothing about gardening when they let me out the hospital a month or so before, but Elvin taught me. “I love how the dirt feel,” I told him one morning. “I can tell it ain’t going nowhere. And when I’m in it, I feel like I ain’t going nowhere neither. I like that.” All day I was in that garden, wearing Elvin’s old overalls. Had to roll the legs way, way up. At the end of every day, the overalls would be covered in dirt, and every night I scrubbed them down, watched that brown water spin down the drain of the washtub.

That evening there was life everywhere. Dragonflies and bees, and just under the water hundreds, thousands of minnows darting around together, like as if they were one thing. I remember I saw a bright red bird I hadn’t ever seen before, and Elvin told me it
was a cardinal. He said it was a man, because the women cardinals were brown. The man birds wanted to show off. He was always telling me things like that.

Night fell, and something I saw made me get up out my lawn chair and walk to the edge of the pond. I looked back at Elvin. In the moonlight I could see his eyes smiling, but he didn’t say nothing. I turned back. It was a single tree that, I could swear, was filled with light, and the light itself was alive too. The light got bright and then dim and then bright again. Sometimes parts of the tree would become brighter than others, and then they’d change again.

“What is it, Elvin?”

“I ain’t telling.” I could hear the smile in his voice.

“C’mon, Elvin, what is it?”

“Well, what you see?”

“I see a tree, living and breathing and full of light.”

“Then that’s what it is.”

I heard Elvin get up and come stand next to me. The back of his hand wiped a tear from my cheek. I felt something inside me light up like that tree.

* 

The next morning, a bright Saturday morning, I came out to find Elvin sitting on a lawn chair looking out across the cotton fields. A pail of water sitting at his feet.

He must’ve heard me come up, and he turned around. He said to me, “When I found you on the river that day, you had your hair in rows. You wild, and I don’t see you
putting those things in unless somebody sat you down and did it themselves. How about you tell me about whoever it was sat you down while I put you some new ones in.”

“How you know how to do rows?” I said, ignoring his question.

“I got me a little girl.” He looked away, toward the pines that ran along the levee.

I lost my breath for a second.

“Where she at?”

His eyes were still lost in the trees. “In Sardis with her momma. Been over there near on half a year.”

I wondered if that was why he never took me to town. Didn’t want folks bothering him, asking questions.

“What happened?”

“Hm. The way I see it, you owe me, girl. I’m not telling nary another story until you start telling me some. I told you all those old time stories while you were laying there because I knew you needing to hear some talking. Now you don’t need stories, you just want ‘em.”

I sat down on the dirt cross-legged in front Elvin’s chair, thinking about Elvin’s little girl and his woman. Or ex-woman. He set to work. He brushed back hard, pulling all my tangles out. My head jerked back every time he forced the brush through.

“You rough,” I said.

“Gotta be that way, you know that. I’m about done, anyways. Almost ready to start braiding, and it’s time for you to start talking, Miss Maybelle.”

Elvin forced the brush through a few more times, my head jerking back less and less after every stroke, and then it stopped.
I started talking.

“It was my auntee. My momma’s sister. She did it a week or so before the storm. She said I was always sitting around not doing nothing, just watching people walk by with my hair going every which way all wild, so might as well. Before that, my grandmomma liked to do it.”

“What happened to her?” He reached down to that pail of water and ran some through my hair and parted a section.

“She passed three months before the storm.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

I didn’t say nothing.

“What about your momma, your daddy?”

“My momma dead, and my daddy… I ain’t seen him since I was a little girl.”

“How you feel about your daddy not being around?” I felt Elvin splitting the parted section into three and then braiding them together.

“Part of me is angry, but another part of me knows that wherever he’s been, wherever he is now, he’s hurting inside.”

“And your auntee, where she at?”

“Don’t know. And I’d be fine if I didn’t ever see her again. Even if she is all I got left.” I told Elvin about how ever since I’d moved in, my auntee’s man been creeping around me. About how I’d catch him opening up my door in the middle of the night. The sound of that wobbly old knob turning, the creak of the door opening real slow, then the light from the hallway peeking into the dark of my room with the shape of my auntee’s man cut out of it. How I’d act like I was ‘sleep, but he started doing it more and more.
After the first time I heard him pull his thing out and start messing with it, breathing all hot and heavy, I went to talk with my auntee the next day. She wasn’t trying to hear it. Said I was jealous, that I wanted her man.

Elvin parted another section.

“I didn’t have nowhere else to go, so I had to stay. But I did stash a big old knife in between the bed and the wall. One night he came into my room and closed the door behind him. He stood there with his back against the wall for a few minutes, breathing heavy, and then I heard him pull down his zipper. That was when I reached over and grabbed that knife, quick-like, and sat up in the bed. I showed that big old knife to him in the moonlight, and he zipped his pants right on back up. ‘Crazy bitch,’ he told me, and then he went right on back out the door. Next day my auntee was talking all about how her man said I was studying him. I didn’t care no more either way, ‘long as he didn’t come in that room. And then a few weeks later the storm came.

“A neighbor said he had room in his car, said he was going up I-55. I didn’t even know where that went, and I didn’t care. I didn’t say nothing to my auntee, didn’t get none of my stuff. Didn’t get no money. Just up and left.”

“Fifty-five don’t take you directly to that place on the river I found you at.” He stopped working on my rows.

I didn’t turn around. Just kept looking at the trees, and I told him about how after being in that car for so long, waiting in traffic, sometimes stopping altogether, but getting further and further away from New Orleans every time we moved, I got real itchy. I needed to go, I started feeling suffocated. Finally I got to where I couldn’t take anymore and told Big Earl to pull over. He drove into a big gas station and stopped. I told him I
had to get out, that I couldn’t breathe inside the car anymore. I lied and told him I knew some folks round there and I got out, went into the station. I’d never been outside New Orleans, and I didn’t know where I was, besides that I was somewhere in Mississippi.

Right when I walked in I saw a big map of the state, and I went over to it. I asked somebody working there where I was and they pointed to it, and over to the left, the east, I saw a blue line running down. Read that it was the river, and I set out to get there.

Maybe it was because the river was something I knew, and right then I felt like I didn’t know anything, like the further I got from New Orleans, the less real everything became.

I thought I’d be able to figure things out once I was at the river.

Elvin started back on my rows. “Go on,” he said.

And I told him how I went back outside and Big Earl was gone, like I thought he would be. I asked folks if they were going east, but everybody was going north, away from the storm. I ate a chicken sandwich and put my head down, sitting right there in a booth. I woke up the next morning to folks on TV talking about how New Orleans was full of water. I knew some of the places they showed, some of them I didn’t, but while I watched it felt like my heart was being squeezed real tight and it got to where I could hardly breathe. I ran out to get some air, and outside there was this shiny gray Cadillac with tinted windows parked in front with its engine on. Right when I came out, the driver’s window slid down and the man inside, glittering with gold, said, “You coming from the storm?”

I didn’t want to talk, I just wanted to go to the river. My hands were on my knees while I tried to get my breath.

He asked me again, and I nodded my head.
“Need a ride?”

I didn’t even say nothing, just went around and got in his car.

Should’ve known better, but I wasn’t really thinking at the time. Cadillac is the name, he told me, I told him mine. I told him I needed to get to the river, and he said that’s the way he was heading anyway. We left, drove through the country. Country like what’s around here, I told Elvin.

Cadillac asked me all about how I got up there, where my family was, all that. All I could think of was those pictures of water covering New Orleans, of folks waving for help on the tops of houses.

Elvin started working on my rows again. “Go on,” he said.

I told him I stayed with Cadillac for a few days, in motels, and that he was pretty nice. Didn’t try anything or nothing. But one afternoon he was talking about how pretty he thought I was, and I started feeling like things were moving in a direction I didn’t want to go. He was saying things in a different way, and one afternoon in the car he put his hand on my leg and I pushed it away. I looked out the window at the fields, the pines, whatever we were passing, and as he went on he started about all the things he could buy me. The car felt smaller and smaller as we went down the road, and Cadillac seemed bigger and bigger, taking up more space and sucking in more air, until I got itchy and I knew we were close to the river so I asked him to take me. He said we were plenty close but he’d like to take me up to his place further north, where I could stay until New Orleans was dry. I told him I was OK, that I just wanted to go to the river. And I just wanted to go there now. After that he stopped talking so much, and I could tell something was wrong with him.
I was relieved when I saw the levee come up behind some cotton fields. He pulled onto a little dirt road that ran through the fields, climbed the levee, and rode along the levee road for a second then stopped. The river, big and brown, was right there, and it made me feel a tiny bit better. I opened the door and he opened his too. We both got out and he came around to my side, the one facing the river.

I told him thanks, and he asked me again to go North with him. Again I told him no. That’s when he turned to face me and said I reminded him of someone, of a feeling, he had a long time ago. He ran the back of his hand across my cheek, and I turned away. I watched a drop of sweat run down his forehead, alongside his nose down to his mouth.

I didn’t know what to say. I noticed his hands were shaking, and I backed away a little. Told him I was sorry, but I wasn’t her. I wasn’t that feeling.

His fist hit me in the face, and I fell down.

He cursed and said that it wasn’t supposed to happen that way, that I was just supposed to come with him. He bent down and grabbed my wrist, and I bit his hand. With his other, he punched me again and I was laid out on the tall grass of the levee. I got up and stumbled toward the river but I didn’t know why. I guess I just saw that big open space and decided to move toward it. Either way, Cadillac got hold of me and after I don’t know how many more punches I blacked out. I woke up enough to get down to the river, and then I was out again.

Next thing I knew he was carrying me off.

“Did you see the man again?” Elvin asked. He’d stopped working on my rows again.

“No.”
“I think we should go to the police, Maybelle.”

I just wanted to just keep things the way they were. “Nah, Elvin. I want to forget,” I said.

* 

Then spring was coming on, just like that, and I didn’t hardly notice it all passing. Elvin went to Sardis to visit his daughter most Sundays, but he always came back. I worked on the garden during the day. When Elvin wasn’t working we just sat outside the trailer and talked, or went fishing or hunting for squirrels. Or we went to the levee and looked at the river. I liked to talk with Elvin about the river’s different moods, and how the river would swallow the sky and then gave the sky back just a little different from what it was.

Elvin had even taught me how to drive his truck, and sometimes I drove us down the dirt roads running through the cotton fields. I liked watching the dust flying in the rear view.

One evening, the river looking like silver, melted silver, I told Elvin about the day when I was in ninth grade and we went on a field trip to the aquarium, right there on this same river. I told him about the sharks and the white alligators I saw. About this catfish as big as I was. And how when we got out we had a picnic in this park on the river, right outside the aquarium. It was real sunny and nice outside. I hadn’t been on the river since Momma took me once or twice as a really little girl.

I told him how I was sitting there on the grass by myself and this big ole ship come up around that big turn in the river, outta nowhere. I mean this ship was the biggest
thing I ever seen. Like the whole Sixth Ward was floating down the river. I told him I
jumped up and dropped my sandwich on the ground, ran over to the railing and leaned
over. That big old thing was moving slow, slow up the river to where I was able to have a
real good look at it. I saw these tiny little men, waving, and I waved back at ‘em. Then it
passed and showed its hind side. On it it said, ‘Morning Light,’ and underneath that,
‘Monrovia, Liberia.’ It was one of the most beautiful things I ever saw. And with that
pretty name. My neighbor Mr. McGee took me over to the river a bunch of times after
that, after I told him about how much I enjoyed the river and seeing that ship, but for
some reason I never seen a ship that pretty again. I saw big ones like that, but never again
one from that place with the pretty name. I told Elvin how ever since I always wondered
what that was, where that was, Monrovia, Liberia. I asked him if he knew.

“Africa. A whole bunch of freed slaves went back over there long time ago and
made a country. I remember them telling us in school.”

“That ship I was looking at in New Orleans was from Africa? And from a country
made by slaves been freed?”

“Yeah, Maybelle.”

I looked out at the river. I couldn’t hardly believe it. “That’s a miracle, Elvin.”

“Yeah, Little One, it is.” He stared at me, smiling all gentle and kind.

He leaned over to kiss me. It was the first time he tried, even though I was waiting
that whole time. I turned my face and pushed him away, laughed and jumped to my feet. I
ran down the levee, away from the river and into the woods. Grass and then pine needles
under my feet. It was darker underneath the trees, the floor was gray. I hid behind a tree,
and I heard the thump, thump of Elvin’s steps stop. Crickets, and an owl, were the only sound.

“Maybelle,” he called.

I giggled and covered my mouth; my heart pounded in my chest. The crickets went louder, closer.

“I’mma get you, Little One,” Elvin said.

I laughed again, and I heard and felt the stomp of Elvin’s feet on the earth, and I darted out from behind the tree. I felt his big old hand wrap around my arm and the blood pushing hard in my arm inside his hold. I was out of breath, and he put me against a tree. I felt the pine bark printed against my back. My laughter died away. I grabbed Elvin’s face and pulled it to mine, and I felt my dress float up to the treetops.

*

July, just a few weeks ago, was when things changed real quick. I’d been sleeping in Elvin’s bed since that day on the levee when I told him about that African ship. Things were nice. Quiet and nice.

I was working in the garden one evening, wearing Elvin’s dirt-covered overalls, when I heard a car coming from on down the highway. I didn’t think anything of it and just kept digging out room for some dahlias. Next time I looked up, though, I saw a gray Cadillac with a gold hood ornament passing by. It was going fast, but a few seconds after I looked up it slammed on the brakes. I got up and ran into the woods. After a while I stopped and turned around, and I saw that Cadillac hadn’t moved. I heard his engine run,
and I imagined him on the other side of that glass, trying to find me there inside the trees. While I watched him, I knew something had ended.

He moved on, but I knew he’d be back.

*  

That night me and Elvin were in bed facing the ceiling. My head rested on his arm. I’d told him about seeing Cadillac. He told me everything would be okay. Along with that, he loaded up his shotgun and put it right there on the floor beside the bed.

I didn’t want to think about things changing again. To get my mind off of it, I reminded Elvin that he told me he’d finish the story about his great granddaddy and great-great granddaddy. Later, he said back in the hospital.

He asked me where he left off.

“Great granddaddy Elvin was walking back to his house after getting his shoes laughed at in the store, and his momma’s and daddy’s voices was ringing in his head. His momma was saying nice things about clouds, the other voice, his daddy’s, was saying angry things, things about beating things back that get in your way.”

“Damn, you was listening,” he said. “Right. So he walked back to his house. When he got in my great grandmamma Ida asked, ‘You get the job, Elvin?’ ‘Naw,’ he answered. Then Ida asked, ‘You walk all the way back in your white shoes?’ He looked down at his feet, saw those white shoes all covered in dust. ‘Reckon I did,’ he answered on his way back to the bedroom. He grabbed the bat from under the bed, and walked out the back door. ‘Elvin?’ he heard Ida say after he closed it, but he kept on. The sun was
steady dropping, and the trees and earth and sky were red, and the butterflies must have
been sleeping, because he didn’t notice none this time. But then again he wasn’t
looking.”

I said, “His daddy’s voice was all loud in his head, to where he couldn’t hardly
even hear his momma’s.”

“I don’t reckon he was hearing his momma at all by this point, Little One.”

Elvin told me that Back Then Elvin had heard that Hopkins, the fat man who
laughed at him in the store, and his friends played poker every weekend night, and Back
Then Elvin had also heard that a lot of money was traded. He had a mind to take his and
Ida’s family up North. I imagined that his head was still full of dead butterflies, but now
they made him angry, not sad.

Hopkins lived on the edge of town near some swampland that hadn’t been cut
down. To get to Hopkins’ house without being noticed, Elvin had to cut through part of
the swamp. He was planning on waiting there in the swamp for somebody to come
outside so he could take his money, hopefully enough money, after selling the pig too, to
buy a ticket up to Chicago for every one his and Ida’s people.

I didn’t like the plan. Elvin wasn’t made for all that. Along with that, he’d
forgotten to change his shoes.

Elvin had a burlap bag with two holes in it to throw over his head when the time
came. While he waited, he kept in mind something he heard his father telling a friend
once.
“Got damnit them white folks sure is funny. You can always tell how they feeling by just looking at ’em ‘cause they either red or blue or green or ghost white depending on whether they mad or sick or sad or happy. Got damn they sure is funny…”

Elvin thought he understood. He began thinking while waiting in the swamp, about how a blue man must be slow and have slumped shoulders which means he ain’t got no money, and a red man must be really loud and angry and so he, just like a blue man, ain’t got no money neither, or maybe a red man is loud because he’s just won, and then there’s a green man, who must be happy and proud and tall, showing that he does have money. Or maybe a green man is just sick. Sometimes his daddy confused him. Finally, Elvin thought a man who’s white, like sheet-white, just lost his house and everything else. He’s a ghost, with nary an expression on his face.

Elvin stopped thinking about colors, and waited in the dark for hours for any man to come out from Hopkins’ house. He’d see what the man was like when the time came. As he waited, he heard glasses clanging, jokes being told, and he oftentimes heard laughter just like the laughter he heard at Hopkins’ store when they were laughing at him. He tried to ignore all this. Mostly, Elvin just tried to listen to the swamp. The hum of frogs and crickets running together with the beat of his heart, rising and passing, rising and passing. I knew all about this, about how sometimes it all got inside you and you got to be the same as them… and this was when Elvin started hearing his momma again…

“Cloud to cloud Lil’ Elvin, cloud to cloud…”

Rising and passing, rising and passing, until he nearly fell asleep right there in the black swamp, and that’s when I knew for sure things were gonna go bad. I knew you couldn’t hurt nobody with frogs and crickets and clouds living inside you.
The crash of a slammed door brought Elvin back.

“What color was the man, Elvin?” I said.

Elvin, the Elvin lying there beside me in bed in the dark, told me that the man leaving the house, from what Back Then Elvin could figure, was green, but not sick green, because, as his grandmomma said when she’d tell him the story, he had the smile of an alligator on his face. He was money green. Vicious and bucked up, like nothing couldn’t handle him. Like I’d suspected, things didn’t sound good. Elvin put that burlap bag on his head and came out the swamp. He had trouble breathing through the burlap and his white shoes that weren’t white no more were heavy with mud. My heart sank as Now Elvin’s words became the bat in Back Then Elvin’s hand, and that bat made from those sad, sad words suddenly felt like it weighed ten tons. Near paralyzed and breathless, Elvin went up behind the man, who was standing there trying to go to the bathroom beside Hopkins’ house. Elvin drug the ten-ton bat behind him, getting closer and closer to the man until he was so close he could smell whiskey even through the rough burlap, and he pulled the bat up but didn’t really pull the bat up, because it was like it was fixed to the ground, and he tried again but it wouldn’t, just wouldn’t, because by now it was one hundred tons instead of just ten, until Elvin’s legs turned into raw biscuit dough and the bat flew out of his hands and landed right at the feet of the money green alligator man.

Right then I thought about that night so many years ago, that night when Wil’s gun shook heavy and useless in my hand right before Momma was killed. I always wondered if there was something wrong with me, and now I wondered the same about Back Then Elvin. Me and Back Then Elvin, maybe we’re not made for this place, this
place where you’re supposed to be hard, and guns and bats are supposed to stay steady and hard in your hand so you can beat the world back…

“The man laughed and whistled for the folks inside the house and yanked that burlap bag off Elvin’s face. When them white folks come out the man told ‘em the story. Once the laughter died down between Hopkins, the man, and all their friends, they threw Elvin in the back of Hopkins’ truck, the first truck in the county. So Hopkins smacked Elvin on the back of the head and said, ‘We gonna take us a little ride into the country. What you think about that, White Shoes?’ Everybody laughed again. Seems Hopkins had told ‘em the story. Elvin wasn’t saying nothing. He rode in the bed of the truck along with five or six of Hopkins’ friends, who were all drunk, ugly, and mean…”

Elvin told me the sun was waking up while all that truck- and man-loudness went out bothering the quiet woods. A few miles later, the truck came to a stop, raising dust like the dust I kicked up when I drove Now Elvin’s truck, and the men hopped out, and they made Elvin follow. They led him away from the truck, and left him to stand there while the loud men grabbed crowbars and bats from inside the cab. Elvin noticed that one of the men had his bat, and he saw that while in that man’s hands the bat didn’t seem to weigh one hundred tons. The men made a circle around Elvin.

While standing there looking at Elvin, Hopkins said all the things that white men back then, according to Now Elvin, said every time, like, “We try so damn hard… and you people just don’t wanna learn…”

Elvin just wanted to get it over with, and I wanted to know where these men came from. And if they had mommas.
And I wanted to know who, out there, was watching all of this. There had to be someone. Or something.

Hopkins got him first with a bat square in the stomach, then the alligator man came second with a crowbar on Elvin’s thigh. The crowbar hit sharper, making Elvin cry out, and another man hit him with a bat on the forearm and Elvin heard a crunch, and then a bat on the upper arm and a crowbar on the shin until everything was the same and he didn’t know which was which and who was who anymore. He covered up his head with his hands until he glanced up just one time and he could swear he saw not people, but slobbering pigs and dogs with bats and crowbars gone out their minds but maybe not quite all the way, because along with that Elvin saw, and he wouldn’t ever forget this, that every now and then the pigs and dogs would be starting to bring their bats and crowbars down on his head and then they’d stop and Elvin would wonder why.

Finally, the men were tired.

“As the roar of the truck faded into the distance,” Elvin said, “Elvin laid all broken across that soil. His blistered feet felt like they were on fire, so with as little moving as possible he slipped them swamp sludge-covered white shoes off his feet. He then looked up and saw that the truck had kicked up what seemed to him to have been millions upon millions of cotton bolls into that bright early morning sky. While the cotton fell down on his face, Ida and the littlin’s, and his mother and the memory of his father all came into his head. *I got me things*, he thought.”

Elvin hesitated.

“What happened then?”
“My grandmomma says that Great Granddaddy Elvin just laid there for a good while thinking that one thought. About him having things. After while he stuffed a whole bunch of them cotton bolls in his shoes. His feet were really hurting, you see, and he figured the cotton would soften things up. But then again I think my grandmomma made that part up, because if you remember they were tight on his feet as it was. How’s he gonna fit cotton in there. Anyway, he put them shoes on, cotton or no cotton, pulled himself up all wobbly, and limped his way back to Ida and his family.

“Crazy thing was, Little One, Great Granddaddy Elvin got that job even though all that happened. Hopkins knew he wouldn’t try nothing else. But think about how that must have been working there all that time after that. What that must have felt like going in there every day, working there every day for the rest of his life like he did.”

I looked at Elvin, but I could barely see in the dark. I said, “Elvin, I’m wondering something.”

“Yeah?”

“Why you think them white folks ain’t drop them crowbars and bats down on Great Granddaddy Elvin’s head?”

He said he didn’t know, then asked me what I thought.

I told him I thought they must’ve remembered for a second that they was people, not pigs and dogs.

“Hm. I understand. But let me tell you something, Maybelle. Sometimes I wonder if Great Granddaddy Elvin should’ve had a little more pig or dog in him. If so, maybe that bat wouldn’t of been so heavy.”
A week later, Cadillac broke into the trailer in the middle of the night. Elvin jumped up, grabbed his shotgun and cocked it, but Cadillac was in the room a lot quicker than I would’ve thought with all that weight, and he somehow grabbed the barrel of the Elvin’s gun. Cadillac pushed Elvin against the wall and the whole trailer shook. Elvin’s gun let off a shot that blew through the ceiling and lit up the room, and Cadillac and Elvin fought, guns waving around in the air and I jumped on Cadillac’s back and beat his head with my fists but I could feel, through him, Elvin wearing down and Cadillac bearing on him, and I heard the shotgun rattle on the floor and I felt Cadillac’s pistol pop, pop, pop and heard Elvin hit the floor. I screamed and beat away on Cadillac’s back, and I felt the wall bang hard, hard against my back two three times with Cadillac on the other side of me until I slid down to the floor. I could feel Elvin’s leg warm on my leg but it wouldn’t be warm for long. I stopped screaming and everything went real quiet except for my heavy breathing, and there feeling Elvin beside me I couldn’t think of anything but what would happen to all the love I had inside me, all the love that I wanted and needed to give.
I stay on Highway 1. That’s where I know I’ll find her, close to the river. Stray bolls of cotton sprawl out on the road, sometimes drifting into the open windows and whirling all wild around me. There aren’t many houses, but I stop when it looks like somebody’s there. Among the few who are, nobody’s seen Maybelle. Or a gray Cadillac with a gold hood ornament.

I pull into Greenville around nine in the morning, and it takes no time to find a tire shop right off the highway. It even has a diner across the street. By the time I finish my ham, eggs, and grits, and down my coffee, I’ve seen them pull the blue Continental out to the front with a shiny new front left tire. When the lady comes with my check, I show her the picture of Maybelle and say she might’ve passed through after the storm. She also might’ve been with a flashy man in a gray Cadillac. She takes it, looks at it closely. A glimmer of hope. “Naw, baby, I ain’t seen her,” she says. I try some other folks in the diner with no luck. I go get the car and pay. I have a little over three hundred dollars left.

I grab a sixer to help my headache from not drinking last night, and I drive all around Greenville. I hit gas stations, restaurants, and liquor stores, always flashing the picture and mentioning the storm and adding that the girl might’ve been with a man in a Cadillac. Nobody’s seen her, they tell me, and nobody remembers the gray Cadillac with a gold hood ornament. “It’s been a year,” many of them tell me.
The sun falls, and I search the Greenville night. I go from nightclub to nightclub, and I move through the laughing, smoking, and dancing bodies; I hand over the photograph of Doc’s girl and drink and do my “Back during the storm... all them New Orleans folks coming through... it’s my buddy’s little girl... she might’ve been in a gray Cadillac with a fella with gold shining all around,” and I watch the heads shake and get the photo back, and “Sorry, man,” another nightclub, Teddy Pendergrass sings about Another Love TKO, more beer, and Doc’s little girl turns, as she’s been turning ever since I left New Orleans, more and more into Maybelle, into that name, into a person in my mind, a lost person who somehow needs me, me, “Sorry,” and I’m realizing how restless I’m getting, another beer, legs going rubbery, leaning over the spilled liquor-slicked bar at yet another nightclub, “Sorry, baby,” another beer, the little girl, Maybelle, burrowing into me, Earth, Wind, and Fire, making me itch and yearn, the thump of the music, the giving of the photograph, the giving back, the gray Cadillac, the shimmering gold, the girl, the storm, the Maybelle, the one more and my forehead hits the bar.

“Say, man,” a man says behind me, and I’m back. Gap Band talking about “Keep running....”

“Say,” the man says again, leaning in closer. I start to turn around but the man tells me not to.

“Yeah,” I growl.

“I hear you looking for Cadillac.”

“Huh?”

“You’re looking for some girl, and you think a dude in a Cadillac took her.”

“Yeah, man. That’s right.”
“Listen. Dude’s name is Cadillac. Nobody know where he live, or if he even have one place he live, but he runs around up further north. Cleveland, Clarksdale, Memphis even. But watch out. He dangerous. I’m telling you because I don’t like the motherfucker. That’s all.”

The voice stops. I spin around and nearly fall onto the floor. The man’s gone, disappeared into the crowd. I stumble my way through the bar and go outside.

Just a few steps out the bar and a fist comes flying out of nowhere and hits me in the temple. Hurts like a bitch. I hold my head and look around for something to punch but I don’t see anybody, then I catch a fist to the kidney and I’m pissed. Fuck, I shouldn’t’ve got so drunk. Punch to the stomach, and I’m on my knees. Foot to the back of the head and I’m out.

I come to with my cheek pressed against pavement, a pair of brand new white Nikes shining a foot or two from my face. Whitest damn things I ever seen. My whole body hurts. I can’t tell one hurt from the other, but at least all this hurt tells me I’m on to something.

It’s still night, but I have no idea how long I’ve been here on the sidewalk.

“This your car, man?” somebody says high above me. I peel my face from the sidewalk and see the two legs attached to the shoes, the lower half of a gigantic man in a blue plush track suit. Beside him I see my keys dangling from the front passenger door of the Continental. I don’t remember crawling to my car, but I guess I did.

“Yeeeah, man,” I slur. I press my face back to the warm grit of the pavement and close my eyes back. Right behind my eyes hurts really bad. I hear the door squeal open. I feel the sound in my eyeballs, and then I hear the shuffle of the big man’s feet right by
my ear. The door squeals back closed, and I hear the back passenger side door open. It
doesn’t squeal, but opens pretty cleanly. I feel gigantic hands on my body and feel myself
being lifted up and dragged into the back seat of the Continental. I try to help, to do my
part, squirming my body like a worm across the soft, blue seat until my head hits the
other side.

I prop myself up, it’s tough. I say, “The keys… man. I’mma… I gotta go up
north.”

“No you ain’t, man. Lay your ass right on back down and tomorrow go on
wherever it is you going.”

“C’mon, man. I…” I slip down onto the back floorboard, crushing beaucoup
styrofoam coffee cups. I look up at the man.

“This ain’t all I am,” I say.

“I know, man,” he says. “I know.”

I climb onto the back seat, bend my knees and pull my feet in. I hear the front
door lock, the back.

He says, “Listen, you promise you gonna wait until tomorrow to get going?”

I think about it, think about the last time I drove drunk. “Yeah,” I tell him.

“Cool.”

I hear the jangle of my keys falling next to me on the seat. The back door closes.

“Thanks, man,” I whisper.

*
Birds chirp out there somewhere in the Greenville morning. Among my injuries, the side of my head hurts the worst. I open my eyes and the first thing I see is the Destroyer’s bat, and I realize I’m going to need something else if it’s going to be like all this.

I sit up and get out the car, stretch and groan under the heavy gray sky. I open the door and get behind the wheel. I know none of the pawn shops’ll sell a convicted felon a gun, so I drive to a pay phone, pull the crumpled papers out my pocket, and find the one I need. I punch the number in and wait through a few rings.

“Tyrone, this is Antoine.”

By late afternoon, I’ve already been to Rolling Fork and passed back through Greenville. I drive up Highway 1, among the bursting cotton fields, with a loaded .22 revolver in the glove compartment, 137 dollars less in my pocket, and another stomach full of fried catfish. I won’t fire the gun on nobody, I tell myself. It’ll just be there, in case.

I ain’t going back to prison.

* *

North of Greenville, I look into the big gray above, and I see something strange. So strange I pull the car over to make sure I’m seeing it right. The gray still lies heavy over the flat Deltaland surrounding me, but further north there’s a break in all the grayness, long and narrow. It looks like somebody’s run a knife through the clouds, and that tear reveals a fierce blue behind the gray. The bluest blue I’ve ever seen. I stand there on the
side of the road as the cicadas buzz, and I try to fit the scene into my head. I take it in,
pour it into myself, that little scrap of blue.

While I get back in the car, I notice a white Caprice sitting on the shoulder a
hundred yards or so behind me. A dude in sunglasses sits behind the wheel, staring ahead
and not moving. I close the door and hit the gas, and in the rearview, through the dust I
kicked up, I see the Caprice pull out onto the highway.

I cruise at about sixty, and the Caprice stays with me, close. Ten or so minutes in
he passes me, and the guy in sunglasses turns and looks at me without expression. He
veers back into the lane, and he punches it.
Chapter 19- Maybelle

My stomach hurts, bad, and I grind my face into the sand. I drank too much river.

It was a hot night, my dress is damp with sweat. To cool off I get into the water. The sand sucks me in, takes my feet. The water’s a little cool today. Elvin told me how the river starts up in a place where it’s almost always cold and that’s why the river is sometimes cool when it gets here. Because of where it came from. He also told me that up where the river starts, you can walk across it. But I knew that was a fairy tale.

My stomach makes me double over and hold it. I stare down at the brown water. Clouds of mud come up from my feet at the river’s bottom. I watch them rise.

I take the pocketknife and lighter from my pockets and toss them onto shore. I pull my left leg out the sand, take a step. Then my right. Soon enough my whole body’s in the water, and I spread out my arms and legs and just let myself float.

I look up into a blue sky, try to think about nothing. I feel better, can almost forget my stomach.

I feel myself pulled by the current, so I swim back to the bank.

I grab Little Bear’s BB gun, put his knife and lighter in my pocket, and walk away from the river, into the woods. As I’m walking a sharp stab in my stomach makes me stop. I fall, my knees dig into the earth. I drop the BB gun, and I hold myself up with my hands. Look straight down. Heaving.
I reach down and claw into the dirt and bring a handful up to my mouth, not really knowing why, maybe thinking it’ll help my stomach. But it’s more like my body just tells me to.

Like it would when I was a little girl.

I chew on the dirt’s graininess, feel its tiny pebbles stir around. I swallow the earth down, and right when I do that I think of Daddy. I think of how sometimes he’d eat dirt with me, and I wonder where he is, what he’s doing. And whether he’s okay. Then I get the feeling that something’s wrong, but I don’t know what. I wonder if he’s like me, and he feels all his people are gone. I wonder if he feels alone.

I feel the soft, cool dirt push through my body, and then I feel it settle in my stomach. It seems to help. I eat beaucoup handfuls more, and I can feel myself filling.

I pull another handful up to my mouth but the pain comes back.

I need water. Good water.

I push myself up, holding my stomach, and walk toward the highway.

I cross the levee and see Highway 1 in the distance, on the other side of some cotton fields. I walk toward the road, the dirt between the stalks is dry and crumbly.

I meet up with the highway, and I follow beside in the dirt along the stalks. A car comes from behind me. I duck into the fields and see it’s not a Cadillac. I think to try and stop them, but decide to just wait until I find a town. The car passes. A while later a pickup truck comes from up ahead. The man and woman inside slow down, stare at me and at the BB gun, and move on.

The sun is right above me. I’m tired. I turn off the highway, and I lay my body down inside the rows.
I open my eyes and see the sun has moved on. I get up and join the highway.

I hear the airy sound of a far off car coming up from the direction I’d left. It sounds more like just the idea of a car, like somebody, somewhere out there past all the cotton fields, was thinking of a car and that thought was making the sound I was hearing. Then it leaves me. It doesn’t return until I can not only hear the car but feel the car under my feet, and that person’s thought has turned into my hearing and feeling and seeing, and what I see when the thought-up car finally bursts into my seeing, feeling world is a dusty, gray Cadillac, and what I think is, Oh Lord Jesus.

The Cadillac pulls over to the side of the highway, and the door swings open, showing a hand crowded with shiny rings. The hand pulls back into the shadows, and an alligator boot creeps out.

I run into the nearby cotton field with the little bit of strength I have left. I hear the car door slam behind me, and I rush through the rows, the stalks grabbing and ripping my dress, my skin, slowing me down. I hear the stalks shake and snap not far behind, and I feel the earth quake with Cadillac’s heavy footfalls. My arms and legs sting from the clawing stalks, and sweat streams into the cuts. I look behind me, and it seems like everything, everything, is bending and cracking and giving in; I stop, turn around and pump the BB gun, level it out and shoot for Cadillac’s head. It bounces off his cheek, but he holds the side of his face and slows down for a second, and I get back to running and I grab Little Bear’s knife out my pocket, swing out the blade… and the cotton stalks and the earth beneath them, the heavy gray blanket of sky above and even the sun it hides, everything is sucked into the big empty of Cadillac, until they’re no longer themselves but now are him… a big, flooding ocean of nothing that bust its banks, its humongous
wave growing bigger and bigger with everything it eats up, and me smaller and smaller, until finally the wave crashes down, and I spin around and shove the knife into Cadillac’s huge stomach, and his hands clinch around my shoulders and I stick him again and feel hot blood on my hand and I don’t mind and I think how maybe sometimes you just need to be someone else, and then Cadillac’s giant fist punches my stomach and I’m coughing, down on my hands and knees in the dirt, coughing and puking up river water and mud.
Chapter 20- Antoine

I pass some Indian mounds rising out the cotton fields on the right side of the highway. Covered in trees except for the tops, they’re the tallest thing as far as I can see.

Winterville Mounds, the sign says. I remember Daddy telling me how a lot of these mounds worked. How they made the mound out of dirt mixed up from all around the lands of that tribe and bury the chief in there. Next chief that died, they did the same thing with him, but on top of the last one. On and on, chief stacked up on chief, with all that mixed-up earth from all their lands.

I think about those mounds, and about all that earth and time and memory mixed up in there.

* *

Early on when I was in prison, I dreamed a man. This man just showed up one night and then wouldn’t leave my sleeping head for seven years. He came damn near every night. See, in there I tried real hard to keep to myself, to my thoughts of Desha, or I’d run back over the accident in my head, over and over and over again. I never said anything to anybody, and I always kept in a corner during yard time. I was strung up tight.

One time a guy kept bothering me during grub and I stuck a fork in his throat. His blood flowed on across that fork and down my arm like the river and I looked the man dead in the eye and didn’t feel a damn thing for him. It was just like all the sudden my
fork was there in that neck with blood running all hot down my arm, and I felt nothing. I got another year tacked onto my sentence, but not too many folks messed with me after that. But no matter how much I tried to ignore everything around me, I couldn’t shake my memories of Desha, or of the accident, and I couldn’t shake that dreamed-up man. He’d visit me and then leave, and then he’d come back the next night or a night or two later, to where his story stretched over seven whole years. Real slow-like.

The first night I dreamed him the man was in what I guessed was his own backyard. Seems he moved out there because he was sad. Or at least that’s how he looked. He took with him a La-Z-Boy, a small rug, a camping stove, a giant duffel bag filled with all the canned food in the house, and fuel. He then set all these things down, close to the brick wall at the end of his backyard. He stepped away, looked at it all, and then turned around to look at the house. I didn’t know what it was the man saw as he looked back, but I somehow felt it. It felt cold and sad, and from then on I felt what that man felt. The dreamed man turned the back of the La-Z-Boy to the house, sat down, and fixed his eyes on the brick wall until he fell asleep.

When the man woke up, he found that he’d somehow fallen or sunken out of the chair while he was sleeping. He got up, but right then he noticed that it felt kind of strange—standing upright, that is. I felt this with him, and over the course of the dream the line between me and the dreamed man got all hazy. The dreamed man grabbed the matches, lit the stove, and fixed and ate some tomato soup. He then washed the pot out with the garden hose, glanced back at the house, and sat back down in the La-Z-Boy. Once again, he fell asleep and woke up later on the bare ground, next to his chair.
The dreamed man’s life went on like this for a good while, and all this alone went on for months and months of dreams. In the meantime, the dreamed man got lazy. He’d look at his house, study on it and turn around, and then sit in the chair and look at the wall, fall asleep, wake up on the ground, fix his soup, beans, or ravioli, eat, wash out his bowl, and get on back to his chair before doing everything all over again. That’s it. His back got all stooped and he got to where he started creeping around like some night creature. Long beard, dirty clothes. The spot on the ground where he always woke up after falling out his chair had molded to his body, until you could see a sleeping-man-sized hole there in the ground.

One night the man stuck his hand in his bag and there wasn’t any food left in there. Right then, the dreamed man began digging. For what, I didn’t know, but then again he didn’t seem to know either. He dug and dug, until after a month or two of nothing but digging I started thinking of him as the underground man. Every time I dreamed him he was digging. Deeper and deeper, for days, weeks, months, years, I didn’t have any idea, until the underground man’s big, wooly beard was dragging along the tunnel floor and his hands were all covered in dirt and blood. I was really with this guy, it even got to where I could feel his scratching and clawing and I woke up with my hands all hot and sore. I had to get up and go to the cell’s little sink, run some water over them.

The underground man was looking for something, but he didn’t know what. That was something I could understand. It was dark there in the heart of the earth, but the underground man was guided by some light you couldn’t see. The underground man’s digging went in waves. Sometimes he was feeling it, thinking that he might be close, and he dug like crazy, clawing and scraping like his life depended on it, but then other times
he dug all slow like he’d lost hope. Then after digging through the heart of the earth for what was three or so years to me but seemed like hundreds, even thousands of years for the underground man, the digging stopped. He found something.

The underground man found, within the earth’s heart, a little crystal that shimmered and glowed with light, like a piece broken off a star he thought. The light was faint, to where as he stared at it the light looked like it might go out just like that. But it didn’t.

The underground man kneeled down and cupped the light—he thought of it as light, not as a crystal holding light—in his hand.

The light clenched in his hand, the underground man climbed back up to the surface. He was feeling somehow better, like he was doing something, going toward something, but I couldn’t really feel that with him at the time. He tore through the earth, and it wasn’t long until he made it up to the light of day. The sun nearly blinded him right then and there, but he shielded his eyes to find nothing but sand. His house was gone, nobody was out, there was nothing. The underground man’s hair had matted, and his beard, his whole body, were all covered in dirt. Only his eyes broke through… bright white. So the underground man started walking, at first uneasy, but then more and more upright, toward the horizon. Serious. With that little piece of light clutched in his hand.

The underground man, even though he wasn’t underground any more, kept on showing up in my dreams. And the underground man was showing up in some crazy places. One night he was pushing on through snowy mountains, another he was swimming through a big, churning sea, and another night he was hacking his way through the jungle with a machete. One time I even found the underground man sitting, covered
in thick dirt but underneath naked as a jaybird, and watching the world pass through the window of a packed Greyhound bus, the other folks on the bus acting like everything’s normal.

By this time I’d been out of prison for six or seven months and drinking myself to death over on Dauphine to where sometimes I was scratching all over for the ants crawling underneath my skin, talking to ghosts in the dead of night, and when it got to its worst point, puking up blood. Still, the underground man was rambling through my dreams, and one night I passed out next to the toilet on the bathroom tiles, and I dreamed of the underground man one last time.

I saw a dark swamp. Water lilies, and cypress trees hanging with moss. Alligator eyes poking out the water. From this swamp, the underground man rose out the water. He waded through, onto the bank, and walked up onto land underneath the cypress and oak. Cicadas humming. And with that little piece of light still tucked in his dirty hand.

So the underground man walked. He passed water moccasins, black bears, and other swamp creatures. The swamp seemed to go on and on, but the underground man continued. He ran into a group of silent Indians under a cypress tree, and they nodded as the underground man passed. Then he came up on a clearing in the swamp. Sitting in the middle was a small hut made out of reeds. The underground man went up to the hut, stood in front its door, and raised his fist.

And right then, with the underground man’s fist hanging there, is when I woke up with my face pressed against the bathroom tiles to heavy knocking on my front door.

When I finally got up and made it over to the door and opened it, it was Doc I found standing there.
The underground man never visited my dreams again.
Chapter 21- Maybelle

Cadillac has taken me to a little house tucked away in the pines; no one else is around. I’m naked, standing on a patch of bare dirt. The pines soar into the night sky, I can’t hardly see the tops of them. Cadillac clinches one hand around my arm and in the other he holds a hose. The water from the hose is warm on my body. Cadillac’s shirt is off, and I see that his stomach is bandaged up. Pink shows through the white.

I did that.

“Why don’t you just let me care for you, Maybelle? Not run away?”

He sprays me down, like the way folks would wash their dogs back in the Sixth Ward. Put their thumb over the end of the hose to make it spray harder. The dogs would run away from the water, but I don’t. I ain’t a dog. I watch dirty water pour down my body and pool up in the dirt beneath me.

He tries to hand me a bar of soap, but I just stand there. So he tries to put the soap on me. Then I am like one of those wet Sixth Ward dogs running away from the person washing them. I get out of his hold but right then he catches me and drags me back, his hand, with all them rings, digging into my arm. And that hand stays there digging while the other puts that soap all over my wet body. Then he sprays and scrubs, sprays and scrubs. Rough. I try to squirm away but can’t. Just like a dog back in the Sixth Ward.

I look up. The trees stretch taller and taller and taller into the sky.

*
It’s late, and everything’s blue. I can’t sleep. Cadillac locked me in a room with one 
window, painted shut. Nothing in here but a bed, and that’s where I lay, staring at the 
ceiling. I smell smoke.

    I look to my side and there’s Momma, staring at the ceiling too. A cigarette hangs 
out her mouth.

    She’s wearing a white shirt and jeans, just like that last night I saw her. But 
there’s no blood. That makes me happy.

    “Momma, you hurt?”

    She takes the cigarette out her mouth, turns to me. “Nah, baby. That’s all over 
with.”

    My whole body goes warm.

    “Momma…”

    “What, baby?”

    She reaches over and gently runs her hand over my head, just like she would 
when I was little, back in the Sixth Ward.

    “Momma, I’m sorry I didn’t shoot Silent Man.”

    She squeezes me tight, I realize I’m just as big as her. “Baby, listen,” she says. 
“Baby, I’m so glad you didn’t.”

    “Why, Momma? You’d be living if I had.”

    “Because we, all the dirty folks in the world… all us, we need you to stay clean, 
Maybelle, to stay good, at least as much as you can. Because you see, we’re like old light 
bulbs all covered up in dust and dirt. Only tiny little pieces of light peeking out every 
now and then before getting covered up again. You, baby, you nothing but light. The
world can’t lose people like you. Because if the world lose y’all, everything gonna go
dark, baby.”

“But Momma. You wrong. There’s so much light in you.”

“Aw, baby. You was always telling me things like that. The light you was seeing
was just reflecting up off of you.”

She kisses me on the forehead.

“Momma,” I said. “Today I stabbed a man with a knife.”

She takes a drag from her cigarette. Inhales and lets out smoke. “It’s okay, Baby
Maybelle. It’s okay. Like I said, the world can’t lose people like you. So if nobody else is
around to help, light-people might need to get a little dirty their own selves.”

That makes me feel better. I hear an owl outside and turn to the window. When I
turn back, Momma’s gone. Smoke heavy with moonlight still in the air.

I pull the cover off the pillow, and I wrap my hand up. I hop out of bed, walk over
and bust out the painted-shut window. I climb up, hear the bed springs groan in the next
room, and my feet hit the ground. I run into the trees.

I’m breathing hard, I can’t tell the difference between the thumping of my feet
and my heart. The flashlight behind me ain’t hit me yet, I don’t think. Maybe the
woods’ve ate me up. Took me in.

It’s windy out, the pines swish and sway high above. An owl hoots, and
Cadillac’s light, chopped up by the trees, flashes in and out around me. I trip, turn my
ankle. It stings, but I push myself up.
He’s close, close, I can hear him breathing. I feel more than see the light steady on me and know I’m done. The hand grips my arm, and it hurts. I feel my feet leave the ground, as he throws me over his shoulder.

Everything’s upside down, unsteady. The tall shaking pines hold up a ceiling made of earth. The flashlight’s beam points up and runs across that heavy, heavy ceiling and all its hanging weight.
Night’s on, and a woman stands at the side of the highway. She doesn’t look like much more than a curvy woman-shaped shadow with the deep blue cottonfields behind her. Her thumb’s not out. I ease off the pedal, the Continental slows.

When I get closer and the light grabs her, I see she’s a white girl in her early twenties, thin, in a faded yellow shirt and worn out jean shorts. I pull aside her. She leans in through the passenger window, rests her elbows. She doesn’t say anything, just smiles. A nice smile, even though her eyes somehow stay sad while she’s doing the smiling.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey,” she says back.

I look around at the cotton fields, my eyelids feeling heavy. I didn’t get any sleep last night, just lay there in the back seat looking at the roof. I figure listening to somebody jaw away might keep me good and awake. “I’m going up toward Rosedale. Hop in if you like,” I tell her.

She opens the door and gets in, slams it shut. I notice she’s wearing weights strapped around her ankles.

“You ain’t got any bags or nothing?” I ask her.

“Naw.”

We set off. I tell her my name, and I ask her hers. Pauletta, she tells me.

I pull Maybelle’s picture out the back of the sun visor, show it to her. “You seen this girl?”
“Naw,” she says. “But I ain’t from around here.”

She looks out the open window. Her long brown hair whips around in the warm wind, her skin glows light green as the dark fields fly past behind her. I realize how pretty she is.

“Where you from?” I ask her.

“Over there in Arkansas.”

“So where you headed?”

“Corinth, up by the Tennessee line,” she says, her hair whipping around all wild.

As I flick on the headlights, I ask her what it is she does. Is doing.

“Being all things,” she says.

We both look ahead. Don’t talk for a good while. I try to make something out of what she said, but don’t have much luck. A possum scurries across the highway, left to right. I glance over at Pauletta’s perfectly-formed glowing green legs, back to the road.

Eight fucking years since I’ve been with a woman. Eight.

“What’re those ankle weights for?” I say.

She reaches in her pocket, pulls out a pack of Marlboro Reds and beats out a cigarette. Punches in the Continental’s lighter and it actually works. Her face goes bright orange, brighter, then green again. She puts the lighter back.

“You know. To be better, do better,” she says.

Insects fly by in front of the lights, flash like fire then disappear into the dark.

“And to stay on the ground,” she adds, laughing. She takes another drag from her cigarette.
She turns to me, stares for a good minute. She puts her free hand on my knee, then on up my thigh. Blood rushes and the steering wheel feels like jello in my hands, I don’t say no. The hand goes on up…

I lose control of the car, swerve off the road. The Continental crosses the ditch, bottoms out, and then tears through cotton stalks before skidding to a stop.

Everything is quiet, and dust is everywhere. It all happened so damn fast. I look over at Pauletta, and she’s laughing her ass off, choking, talking about how she swallowed her cigarette, and laughing some more.

She pulls her T-shirt off, showing small but well-shaped breasts. She reaches down and unbuttons her jean shorts, so hell, I claw open my pants and unzip, tear them off and throw them in the back. She’s bare ass naked by now, she even unvelcroed her ankle weights… and through all that dust she’s still glowing green and I hop over to her side and she strips off my wifebeater and there I am, in there, after eight years, and it’s okay, more than okay, and it feels like we’re rising up to the roof and I hit my head, her arms wrapped around my back tight, tight. I look at her while I’m pushing in and out, feeling good, and she’s looking up at the roof and smiling and damn, she’s so green and beautiful and glowing, and we’re there in that cotton field, there, fucking, choking on dust.
Chapter 23- Maybelle

The closet door opens and light bursts in, Cadillac yanks me out. The light outside says it’s late afternoon. My stomach feels a little better after food’s gone in it and water out a faucet too.

He sits me in front a mirror. Laid out on the table there’s rouge, mascara and blush, lipstick and powder. I recognize the things from watching Maw-Maw get ready for church. I never liked them. Always seemed like at least a part of Maw-Maw always got buried underneath.

Cadillac grabs the red lipstick.

“Listen. You think you’re too good for me. That’s alright, though. I’m gonna make some money out of you, and we’re gonna start tonight with a friend of mine. So from now on, you’re gonna wear this shit,” he says.

I don’t say nothing. Just sit there. He sighs real big and puts the lipstick up to my mouth. I jerk away, but he gets behind me and swallows my head up in his thick arms. I beat on his legs with my fists, but it’s like he doesn’t even notice. I suck my lips in, and he rams his fingers into my mouth and pries it open. His fat fingers taste like smoke and metal. He pinches my top lip, jerks it out, and drives the lipstick across. Does the same to the bottom one. I rub it off with the back of my hand, and he slaps me hard, hard. In the mirror, I see bright red smeared all over my mouth and my cheek. Cadillac’s hand, hanging there still and ready, is red too.

I stare at myself in the quiet. I look like a sad clown.
Chapter 24- Antoine

The sun’s out, and Pauletta’s gone. I spring up from the back seat, lean over and open the glove box. The .22 is still there.

I look up and down the highway, scan the fields. Nothing.

I get out and relieve myself, notice the sun’s already past its height. Damn. I was tired as hell. I zip up, hurry back to the car and hop behind the wheel. I turn the key and not a damn thing happens. I realize I left the one working headlight on.

I pull out the map, but it doesn’t mean much. I just know I’m good and north of Greenville, on past the Winterville Indian Mounds. These towns pass by so quick you blink and they’re done with. I might’ve passed Lamont or Benoit, but I wouldn’t know.

I wait for a while out on the highway. Nobody passes, so I start walking North. The only sound is the gravel crunching under my feet. It’s hot out, and soon I’m sweating buckets. I watch Highway 1 extend to the horizon, and I wonder about Maybelle. Wonder where she is and how she’s doing. If she wants to see her daddy and if she even wants to be found.

As I think about this, a pickup truck appears in the distance. Once it’s closer, I flag it down and tell the driver I need a jump. He tells me to hop in, and we head to the Continental. After pushing the car out the fields and catching a jump, I head north.

A ways on, I see a white Caprice coming the other way. It slows as it comes up on me, and I see that sure enough it’s the same guy in sunglasses eyeing me as he rolls by.
Alright, that’s it. I lean over and open the glove box, pull out the pistol. I sit back up and stuff the gun into my pants. I slow the Continental up and turn the wheel left. When I wheel up to the opposite shoulder I clunk it into reverse with another clunk and then a real mean screech I turn the car around. I punch it, and it takes a second to move, but it does. The gap between us gets smaller.

He speeds up, and I try to stay with him. The cotton fields on both sides of the highway are a blur.

The tires hum, and I feel the warm air rush onto my face. I don’t really know what I’m doing. I just stay on his tail. Close.

After a while, a sign comes up saying Greenville’s 8 miles away. This guy’s pulling me too far south.

I punch the gas and yell over to the man to pull over, I wanna talk to him. He just looks at me, and in the corner of my eye I notice a car coming the other way fast. I punch it and I’ll be damn if the Continental doesn’t come to life and move out, and I pull in front of him, get a little space, and stomp on the brakes.

Loud squeals and the smell of burned rubber, and then dead quiet. Smoke everywhere. I jump out the car, pull the gun out my waistband and point it at the guy. He didn’t see it coming.

“Get the hell out the car, man!” I holler at him. He opens the door, gets out and puts his hands up. This can’t be Cadillac. He’s wearing a black wife beater and faded out jeans. No jewelry. Not to mention he ain’t driving a Cadillac.

“You work for Cadillac?”

He says nothing.
I hear another car coming from way on down south, turn around and can barely even see it. It shimmers in the heat.

I turn back and shoot the Caprice’s driver side tires out. Point the gun back at him. He stands there with his hands up.

“Where’s Cadillac?”

He looks out across the cotton fields, toward the river. I hear the car in the distance growing closer. Slow, slow I drop the gun, and he drops his hands. Runs into the fields.

I run after him. The car whooshes by behind me, honks. I’m slowed by my bruised body, fall behind. I holler at Sunglasses to stop, stop now, and I think about firing into the air, but I only have four bullets left and don’t know what’s to come.

He makes it into the thick woods at the end of the stalks. Under the trees, he goes in and out of shadow.

I enter the forest, leaving the stalks behind, and everything darkens. He’s deep in there now, and he’s gaining ground. He knows I wouldn’t be able to get a clear shot off even if I wanted. I run and run, the first time I’ve run in years, and my heart thumps like mad.

I stop, bend over and rest my hands on my knees. Suck in breath and look at the dirt underneath my feet. My heart thumps like mad.

I lay down right there in the forest, on my back. I stare up into the pine branches. They criss-cross each other, make a thick web in between me and the sky, and in the heart of that web a lightning bug flashes on and off, on and off.

I feel the blood beat heavy inside me. Strong. Stubborn.
The Continental rolls into Rosedale early evening. When the town comes out of the cottonlands, it’s like it was dreamed up. After all that cotton and nothing else, all the sudden it’s there.

I slow down. I pass small houses with small yards and then store fronts, nearly all of them empty. Highway 1 has turned into Main Street, without my knowing. The people I see seem to be half-sleeping. Maybe they’re the ones dreaming the town, and themselves, up. There’s not much movement. Anywhere. Those who walk the sidewalks, walk along them slow. And those who sit or recline on benches, steps, or curbs could’ve been there for decades. Guarding the dream, maybe.

A gas station comes up on my left. The sign outside has a big star on it, and it reads, sure enough, STAR. I pull in, even though I see no cars at the pumps or parked in front. I drive up to the front door, and see it closed at 7, about fifteen minutes ago. A sign on the door has a picture of a smiling man in a blue jumpsuit. Underneath the photo:

R.I.P. ELVIN RAY

SUNRISE: SEPTEMBER 9, 1973

SUNSET: AUGUST 5, 2006

Looked like a nice fella.

I pull into another station just a few blocks down and find it open, go in. I give the photo to the girl behind the counter, and I tell her the situation. She seems fully awake,
thankfully. I wait while shriveled, tired-looking hot dogs revolve lazily in a glass case to my right. They smell rubbery. “Naw, sorry,” she says. I tell her thanks and buy two hot dogs.

Across the street there’s another station, the Doublequick. I drive over, stuffing a hot dog down on the way. The second one I finish in the parking lot, then go on in. The same answer. I’m about to open the door out when I notice two old beer-nursing sitters talking and laughing right outside on the curb. I double back and grab a sixteen oncer from the fridge, pay, and sit down next to them, a man and a woman.

“What’s happening, Luzana,” the man says and smiles toothlessly. His smile reminds me of Doc, and I smile back. The man wears overalls and a white T-shirt. A baseball cap leans on top of his unruly head of hair. The cap’s stained with oil, dirt, and what appears to be blood, and reads WORLD’S BEST GRANDPA.

I hand him the photograph. “I’m looking for her. Name’s Maybelle. She’s my buddy’s little girl.”

World’s Best Grandpa nods, grunts, and hands the photo to the woman next to him. She wears a faded, flowery dress, and I guess she’s the man’s wife. In unison, World’s Best Grandpa and I take drinks from our brown-bagged beers. He says to the woman, “That her?”

The woman’s eyes have gone real big.

He repeats, more loudly, “That her, woman?”

“Lord Jesus,” she says. “Wull, I’ll be.”

“Woman. What that mean, Lord Jesus? Speak!”
“Oh, shut your mouth, Otis. Don’t make me turn you out in front of this nice fella here.” Otis shuts his mouth and takes a drink, grunts. She turns from Maybelle to me.

“Listen. Me and Otis was coming back from Clarksdale yesterday when we saw her on Highway 1. We slowed down when we came up on her and saw she carried a BB gun. Maybe we should’ve stopped, but I guess we didn’t know what to think at the time, really. It was crazy seeing her like she was: real dirty, and carrying that gun.”

“Where you see her?”

She looks at Otis. At the same time they say, “Other side of Gunnison.”

I get up and grab the map from the front seat of the Continental. I unfold it and the state of Mississippi floats down and covers the bottle tops, cigarette butts, and patches of oil of the Doublequik parking lot. I find us and point there. Rosedale. Otis pulls his glasses out of the chest pocket of his overalls, puts them on, and peers down.

He points at Gunnison, just a little ways up Highway 1. I take a drink. Otis then points at a little highway, numbered 444. “Look here. Fo-foty-fo. That’s where we cut off 61 and get on 1.”

The woman says, “That’s where we saw her. Between fo-foty-fo and Gunnison.”

Otis and the woman look at each other. “Reckon mid-way,” they say together. I eye that stretch of Highway 1 on the map. All I see is that map-white that means Mississippi without people. Just ghost houses and rusted-out tractors.

I fold the map back up. “Say, Otis, and…”

“Francie Mae.”

“Thank you much, hear.” I shake their hands.
“No problem, baby. Good luck,” Francie Mae says, and I throw my empty beer in the trash can and walk to the pay phone on the corner. As I put the change in I watch a cop car wheel by real slow. I punch in the number. The car rolls by, the cop eyes me for a second and moves on.

The phone rings a good six times before it picks up, and there’s a long pause.

“Hello?” a woman says.

“Uh… yeah… is Doc there?”

“Who?”

“Charles Freeman?”

“Who’s speaking?”

“My name’s Antoine Joubert, and I’m a friend of Charles’s.”

“This is Nurse Angie. I met you the other day.”

“What’s going on?”

She didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “He’s not doing well, Mr. Joubert. If you want to see him I think you should get over here soon as you can.”

I watch moths fly around a streetlight half a block down. I can’t hardly speak, know I’ll start crying if I do.

“Alright then” is all I can get out. I hang up the phone. I got to move.

* 

I roll up 1, hoping that with this busted headlight I don’t run into any cops. I need to remember to get a new light.
As I go I look on both sides of the highway, into the cotton fields as far as I can see in the moonlight. After a little while I reach Gunnison, pull into the one gas station and ask if anybody’s seen Maybelle. Nobody has. And they don’t sell headlights.

I keep moving, and a ways on I come up on the sign for 444. I pull over just before the turn off and get out. Straight ahead runs on North to Clarksdale. To my left, in the distance, stands the levee. Behind that’s the river, and still on further, Arkansas, and Desha’s daddy.

And to my right, 444 runs straight and true through the fields, littered with loose cotton, before disappearing. There’s a trailer on the corner, and I try it, but no one’s home. Inside a little dog barks. On the other side of 444 from the trailer is an old cemetery. The faded tombstones lean. Some toward each other, others maybe toward the place they came from.

I get back in the Continental and pull out the map. There’s a little town called Duncan at the junction of 444 and 61, less than ten miles on.

I drive past the cotton, now a deep blue, and find Duncan sleeping. I could swear I hear the town all at once breathing, in and out, in and out. I drive quiet and slow through the sleepers, down the town’s handful of two- or three-block-long streets. No BB gun-toting women, from what I can tell. And no Cadillacs, gray or otherwise.

I leave Duncan, return to 444. Back to 1 and the river. I stop at the crossroads and get out, the graveyard to my right. The gravestones stand silent and blue as the crickets sing, so loud I feel it in my skin. In the sky to the north, a cluster of stars fall. In the earth below, the ants work through their tunnels. I know.
I get back in the car and take a right, north. The Continental builds speed. The windows, as always, are down, and the thick warm wind washes in. The song of the crickets and frogs rises and falls inside me, and the ants rumble beneath. The river runs to my left. More stars burn, and I punch the gas.
Chapter 25- Maybelle

Cadillac’s dark windows can’t keep out the sound of the night things.
   His eyes still on the road, he says, “I’m gonna sit there and wait. You better be nice. Try to run off, I’ll kill you. Just like I did your man.”

   Something’s happening, and I feel the world shaking. The night things want to take it back. I close my eyes and see it, see them covering the cotton fields, the road, the Cadillac.

   Swallowing it all up.
Chapter 26- Antoine

The Continental barrels up 1. I fly through tiny Rena Lara, another blue town of sleepers. A police car’s parked outside the post office, but it sleeps too. It blurs past.

A pair of headlights appear up ahead, far off. I slow down.

The lights grow bigger.

The river flows, right there beside me. I swear I hear it.

And there it is. Gold hood ornament. Tinted windows.

Gray Cadillac. I go on for a while, wait until the red dots in my rear view go small. Turn off the light and pull over. I open the glove box and pull out the .22, make sure one last time that it’s loaded. The cylinder’s got four left, like I already knew. I click it back, stuff the pistol in my waistband.

I spin the wheel and turn around. The Continental screeches. I can barely see the red lights in the distance, but I can see them. I press down the accelerator.

A ways on, the tiny red dots go right, then disappear into black. I slow, pull onto a little cutoff, and tuck the car underneath an oak. I turn off the engine, stop, and breathe. Reach back and grab the bat. Breathe. I slip the keys underneath the floor mat, get out, and close the door as quiet as I can.

I stay close to the cotton fields, away from the highway. I approach a clearing and crouch down inside the stalks. A small white house sits underneath two oaks, at the end of a short dirt driveway running from Highway 1. Light seeps through a small break in a window’s curtains. A pickup, along with the Cadillac, is parked outside. I wait and listen.
My left hand grips the bat tight. With my right, I pull the .22 from my waistband. I come out the stalks and creep across the clearing. I crouch next to the pickup and study the Cadillac. It’s gotta be the one.

The frogs and crickets rage.

I get up and sneak around to the side of the house. Crouch down and look in the windows, but heavy curtains cover them completely.

I hear a slap, and the sound of feet shuffling inside. I go back around the house and step all quiet up to the porch. Hear a television murmuring inside. The planks creak, and I stop. Grip the bat and the .22 tight. One more step, not creaking, and I peek into the front room through a break in the curtains.

A big man sits in a recliner, sleeping. There doesn’t seem to be anybody else in there. The changing light of the television covers the man, makes him what it is: blue, white, yellow, black, blue again, white. Gold chains hang around his neck and gold rings wrap around his fingers. On the table next to him stands a half-empty fifth of Johnnie Walker.

Just like in Tyrone’s story, the man doesn’t look like nothing but shadow and shimmering gold.

Staying close to the wall, I take two steps over to the front door. I make no sound. I try the handle real slow, just in case. No surprise, it doesn’t turn. Breathe.

I step back and face the door. Mop sweat from my brow with the back of my pistol hand, sling it onto the porch floor. Click off the safety, pull the hammer back.
I kick the door in, and the man wakes up. He looks at me, and then at the closed door of the bedroom to my right. I turn as well, and my gun follows. In that lapse, the man pulls out his gun and fires. The bullet grazes my cheek and ear, causing a sharp, stinging pain, and the gray man pulls the trigger again, but only clicks come. I swing the .22 over to him and walk to the left, away from the bedroom door. Hot blood streams down the side of my face.

“He’s got a gun pointed at me,” the man says to the door. He doesn’t seem nervous, more like he’s just giving information.

I don’t hear anything from the bedroom, and I stay the gun on the man, sitting a yard or so from where I stand in the far side of the small room. I watch the bedroom doorknob slowly turn.

Desha, be here now.

The door pulls back and a small, naked woman appears. Maybelle. She tries to cover herself. Her eyes are wild and dark with mascara which streaks down her cheeks. Still, in those eyes I can see that thousands-year-old girl from the photograph. Down in there, I can still see a light burning hard. Red lipstick’s smeared across her lips, and the barrel of a shotgun is pointed at her head.

“Drop the gun,” the man with the shotgun says. His head appears in the crack in the door. He’s big. Comes up damn near the header.

“What you here for?” the sitting man says, my gun still fixed on him.

“I came for the girl.”

He laughs and says, “For that thing?”

“Yeah.” The gun’s steady in my hand. I’ve gone cold, I’m ready to shed blood.
He pours himself a drink, spills a bit. He’s drunk, that’s good. A McDonald’s commercial comes on and he turns yellow, red. “Nobody even knows who she is or where she comes from. If she died tonight nobody’d even know,” he says.

“I’d know,” I say.

The man looks over at Maybelle, takes a drink, and turns to me. “You wanna drink?”

“Nah.”

“So. How about a thousand dollars, and you can walk off with her right now.”

“I ain’t got it. Anyway, that girl ain’t for sale.” The man laughs again.

“Drop the gun,” shotgun man repeats.

I stand there for a second, breathe in and out, and I release the gun. The .22 drops to the wooden floor.

“And the bat, too,” he says.

I grip it tighter. I look at Maybelle, see her eyes widen.

She raises her leg and kicks the door back hard, right into the man’s nose, while pushing the barrel up. The shotgun fires into the ceiling, and she’s free. I pop Cadillac in the head with my bat and hurry over to shotgun man as Maybelle runs out the open front door. I yell out about the car up the road and the keys under the floor mat. Just drive away, I tell her, just drive away. I throw all my weight into the door, feel it bump hard against the man on the other side before giving. The man rushes me with his nose all bloodied, swings the shotgun my way. I grab the barrel, and me and the man are all tangled up.
I hear Maybelle’s footfalls on the grass outside grow quieter, and then I don’t hear them at all. I smile.

I catch a big, heavy fist to the jaw.
Chapter 27- Maybelle

I hear a shotgun blast as I get in the car, and I freeze. I sit and listen but hear nothing else coming from the house. I reach down and grab the keys from under the mat.

I put the key in but can’t think of anything but if that man’s okay. I turn it, and the engine starts up. But I sit there and think about that man, that man who I swear I’ve seen somewhere before, and who didn’t seem to care if he lived or died there in that house as long as he got me out. I turn the key back.

I find a garbage bag full of clothes in the back seat and rummage through. I pull out some blue pants and a wifebeater. Just like that man wore. Both are way big, but I put them on and hop out. I walk along the cotton, holding the pants up with my hand, and I stop at the end of the field. The house is all quiet.

After a few minutes, the front door opens and I see Cadillac’s friend come out onto the porch. I know it’s him from how big he is. My heart sinks, things don’t look good. He looks up and down the highway and then goes back in. He comes out dragging the man who saved me. Drags him over to the back of the truck and opens it up. He lifts him up and lays him out on the back of the truck. Like a sack of potatoes.

Cadillac’s friend closes the back and hops in the front. I run back to the car and start it up. In the distance, I see the truck pull out and the red lights go away from me on Highway 1. The car clanks into gear, rocks a little, and I push the gas. I keep the lights off, and I pull onto 1, keeping my distance. I pass Rena Lara, and a few miles past, I see the tiny red lights turn right. I slow down and I see the truck go up on to the levee road,
turn onto a dirt road running through the cotton, and stop further down, under two trees. I get out, run through the fields and watch from behind a tree near the bottom of the levee. In the bright moonlight I can see Cadillac’s friend open the back of his truck and pull out the man. He flops to the ground like a dead catfish.

Cadillac’s friend drags him over to the other side of the levee. He comes back up, dusts his hands off, and hops in the truck. Reverses back to the off ramp, drives down to 1, and takes a left. He doesn’t see the car in the trees. Once he’s gone, I run up the levee, over to where the man’s truck had been. Dust is everywhere, left behind.

In between the levee and the river are thick, thick woods. And stuck in between the woods and the levee is some kind of garbage dump. But not just garbage. Along with that, there’s all kinds of things people just don’t want anymore. Piled-up black, white, and gray trash bags, most of them busted open and spilling out what was in them, along with rusty stoves, old tires, and broke furniture. There’s even an old, rusted out car. A skinny, sad-looking dog sniffs at something at the bottom of the pile.

It’s the man who saved me, belly up with his eyes closed. I run down to him, and the dog runs off.

“Hey… hey,” I say, and I shake him real good.

Nothing.

I find a place on his face that isn’t all full of blood or swollen up, and slap it. Still, nothing. I put my ear next to his mouth and can feel weak breaths pushing through. That’s something. I pull up his shirt, look over his body, heave him over and look at the other side. He’s got bruises all over, but there’s no big blood like they’re be from a shotgun blast. Just regular blood, like from everything else. I run and get the car.
The sky’s starting to light a bit as I pull up, get out. I walk down and grab under his arms and try to drag him up the levee. He tries to help me, digging his heels into the dirt. Groaning. Every few heaves, I gotta stop and pull up my, his, pants. We make it up the levee, and I lift him up just enough to where he can do the rest, crawling in and lying across the back seat. He tucks his legs in, and I close the door.

I prop my hands on my knees and catch my breath. I look out toward the river, but I can’t see it behind the trees. I walk around, open the door, and get behind the wheel. I drive down the levee and stop at Highway 1.
Chapter 28- Antoine

I feel the car stop. Everything hurts, my left eye’s swollen shut, and I smell like trash.

But here I am. I stare at the ceiling, the seat vibrates underneath me.

“Your daddy’s sick, Maybelle.”

She doesn’t say anything. Seems unsurprised that I knew her name, her daddy.

I prop myself up on my elbow. “My name’s Antoine, I’m a good friend of his. He sent me up here to find you, to make sure you’re okay.”

She sits there, staring ahead at the fields across the highway.

“Maybelle. He wants to talk to you.”

“He’s dying,” she says, like she already knew.

“Yeah,” I say.

Maybelle looks left. Then right. A little further down the road a sign says 1 South. The cotton, and the highway, are pink in the rising sun.

I can’t hold myself up any longer, and I lay back down. Breathe.

I get a strange feeling, kind of like the one I had on the way back from Manchac so many years ago in this very car. The feeling that folks, folks who care about me, are laying hands—but not three, or ten or twenty even, more like hundreds of hands—all over my body. They don’t grip tight. The hands just lay there gently, all of them, and I feel warm. Close to the world.

I reach my hand up and rest it on Maybelle’s shoulder.
VITA

Woodlief Thomas is from Little Rock, Arkansas.