Family, Faith, and the Modern South: The *lowercase heroes* of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Grisham

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Being listed in an author's acknowledgements may provoke a mixed reaction. Consider Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. Below the title of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," arguably one of the most controversial stories in Southern fiction, Flannery O'Connor wrote "For Sally and Robert Fitzgerald." However flattered the Fitzgeralds may have been, they may as easily have wondered what they had done to offend Miss O'Connor.

Unlike the writer of a mere short story, the writer of a thesis must dedicate his work to certain people or risk the perception that he sees himself as a literary orphan, springing from no one and beholden to none. The title of this thesis belies that view, announcing as it does my debt to William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and John Grisham. I am also indebted to others and wish to thank them for their invaluable help.

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PART ONE

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND ORGANIZATION

If the faces of great Southern writers were carved into Georgia's Stone Mountain, in company with the likenesses of Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and "Stonewall" Jackson, students of Southern literature would make persuasive cases for their favorites. I would stake the claim for William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and John Grisham to be immortalized in Stone Mountain's granite. Along with numerous other novelists and short-story writers, I have been influenced by these three writers. The works of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Grisham bring to life a kind of forlorn and overlooked protagonist, someone I have dubbed the *lowercase hero*. While the term may seem generic, I have not encountered its use in literary criticism, and I maintain that the recognition of such a benighted protagonist is essential to a fuller understanding of Southern literature and of these writers. Searching through the works of these three writers for this humble individual and analyzing his make-up have made the lowercase hero more pronounced in my own body of work.

Faulkner, O'Connor, and Grisham are American authors, but a more precise description is that they are *Southern-American*. The rich atmosphere from which they have drawn inspiration is still mother's milk in the Deep South; not to feel that

atmosphere is all but impossible. The characters of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Grisham live in a specific landscape defined by distinctive, elemental facets: an insistence on remembering regional and family history, especially racial history; an obsession with religion, more specifically Christianity; and a struggle to maintain a nostalgic Southernness despite the inroads of modern life. These facets are distinctive and elemental in the sense that readers of literature in virtually every other region of the world recognize them as endemic to the American South. Faulkner is most closely identified with depicting Southern racial history, O'Connor with portraying Southern religion, and Grisham with revealing the changed and ever-changing face of the New South.

Like the region this heroic, lowercase character inhabits, he has a history of loss, a loss with which he has not made peace. As if such a burden were not enough, this hero bears an unwieldy, constantly shifting baggage of family history, spiritual underpinnings, and beaten-down sense of self. To be sure, Faulkner, O'Connor, and Grisham are far from the only writers—and far from the only *Southerners*—to employ a hero who is not cut from outsized, Homeric fabric, but I see these writers as the chief influences on my fiction, and I identify several common threads among certain of their works and three of my short stories, especially in our protagonists. Using the lowercase hero as a template, I examine a few fictional characters of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Grisham, as well as the influence of these writers on my own work, with particular scrutiny of family history, religion, and cultural changes in modern Southern life.

This study of the lowercase hero consists of two parts. Part One is an analytical

section. In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I discuss the lowercase hero in two works by each of the three Southern writers. From Faulkner, I focus on two short stories, "Dry September" and "Barn Burning"; from O'Connor, the comic novel *Wise Blood* and the short story "The Artificial Nigger"; and from Grisham, two novels, *The Client* and *The Painted House*. In Chapter Five, I identify specific ways that these particular works of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Grisham have influenced three of my short stories, "Alien Alibi," "Head Coach," and "Something in the Blood." Chapter Six is my conclusion of the analytical section. Part Two of the thesis is creative and contains the three short stories to which I refer in the previous section.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BAGGAGE OF THE SOUTHERN *lowercase hero* IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S FICTION

In regard to the region's obsession with history, many Southerners view the War Between the States—*aka* the Civil War, the Late Unpleasantness, the War of Northern Aggression—as a kind of regional rite of passage, separating *us* (Rebels, Southerners, the defeated) from *them* (Yankees, Northerners, the victors), in ways too painful and numerous (we think) for *them* to comprehend. Southerners, more than other Americans, seem unable to leave behind their unhappy, if sometimes oversold, past. Like the dying Gaul, we know what it is to lose, and often we have a strong sense of tragedy. C. Vann Woodward makes much of the fact that, before America's experience with Vietnam, the South was the only region of the country that had known loss in war. The loss, he goes on to say, was punishing in the extreme for the South since it was fought on native soil and for an ignoble cause, the institution of slavery (Woodward 27). In "The Regional Writer," O'Connor relates Walker Percy's cryptic answer to why the South had so many good writers: "Because we lost the War." She adds by way of interpretation that the South went into the twentieth century with an ingrained understanding of mankind's finite capabilities (59). By O'Connor's logic, such an understanding is essential for producing

writers.

Arguably, the Southerner's penchant for following seemingly lost causes stems from the long-ago War Between the States. One could make a case that the subject matter of much country music, with its Southern roots, is part of this history-of-failure pattern: the songwriter's emphasis on failed loves; the inadequacies of the singer/lover, often caused by dependence on alcohol or a perceived unworthiness at the core of the individual; and the virtues of deliberate ignorance, exhibited by a determination to be not only a "red-neck," but audaciously proud of it.

The non-Southerner, however, may view continued, obsessive identification with nineteenth-century ancestors not as charming behavior, but as bizarre. Some of the fiction of William Faulkner, native-born Mississippian though he was, betrays a sideways, disapproving glance at many Southern customs and beliefs of the first half of the twentieth-century. Perhaps characteristically, he even expresses a kind of disinterest in the South. "I'm inclined to think," he writes, "that my material, the South, is not very important to me. I just happen to know it, and dont [sic] have time in one life to learn another one and write at the same time" (Kartiganer vii). Despite Faulkner's ambivalence toward the South, his readers are fortunate that he was driven to explore the South's history, in particular its racial and family history, for he brought to his analysis the wisdom and experience of an insider with the harsh, unforgiving eye of an outsider.

In Faulkner's "Barn Burning," a ten-year-old boy, Colonel Sartoris Snopes, called *Sarty*, turns against his barn-burning father, Abner, and alerts the man's next arson victims, the de Spain family, resulting in the boy's flight into the woods. The reader is led

to believe the father will die, leading to unimaginable hardship for the boy's mother, brother, sisters, and aunt. We infer that Sarty will most likely never see his family members again. Despite his father's sadistic nature, the boy feels a wrenching love for him. "*Father. My Father* . . . . He was brave!" the boy thinks after he betrays the man (24). Earlier, Faulkner reveals the truth about Abner Snopes, that he spent "those four years in the woods hiding from all men, blue or gray, with his strings of horses (captured horses, he called them)" (7). Snopes is at war with everyone, it would seem, but he also is "at odds with the very notion of social order" (Bertonneau 2). At Sarty's young age, he cannot articulate the morality that leads him to abandon his family and attempt to save the property of a man to whom he owes no allegiance.

Two elements of "Barn Burning" resonate with me as a writer. First is the knife-edge dilemma that confronts the young protagonist. Sarty is forced to choose—or he *believes* he must choose—between continuing to endure a violence-filled life or acting boldly to save what is left of his family. Sarty loves his father, but his "sense of rightness demands that he oppose him" (Flora 2). The boy realizes the utter inability of anyone else in the family to intervene against the father's twisted obsession. Before the opening scene in the store with the judge and the accuser, Sarty has likely had only his father as a role model. Harris, the accuser, presents another way to live one's life: with decency (Bertonneau 2). When, at the end of the trial, Harris refuses to force Sarty to testify against (i.e., to lie for) his father, the reader intuits the rightness of that decision. The de Spain plantation home presents Sarty with another way for a family to live: in peace and order. Until Sarty stands in front of the de Spain plantation, he has likely not sensed a

feeling of peacefulness. The de Spain manor is "as big as a courthouse" and emits a "spell of . . . peace and dignity" ("Barn" 10). The boy hopes that his father will feel the aura that surrounds the house and be changed, but Abner remains untouched.

Later, the reader races through the woods with Sarty, devoutly believing in the righteousness of the boy's actions as he warns the wealthy white landowner of the threat to his property. Sarty's dangerous decision to betray his father will, we hope, somehow earn the boy a better future. Is it not true that life rewards the virtuous? Not, it would seem, in the fictional world of William Faulkner. Unjust and perverse though it may be, Abner and his older son are the only Snopes males who survive to reappear in Faulkner's fiction. The future history of the Snopes family, as seen in *The Hamlet*, one of Faulkner's later novels, omits any mention of young Sartoris. The boy disappears, according to John T. Matthews, because his desire to change his father's ways is, at its core, ineffectual (174).

A second significant element of "Barn Burning" is the undercurrent of racial tension. Race, as in much of Faulkner's fiction, is at the heart of his characters' rage. Abner Snopes says of Major de Spain's house: "Pretty and white, ain't it? That's sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain't white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it" (12). From internal clues, the reader realizes the story takes place in the late nineteenth century or very early twentieth, a time when land ownership all across the South had undergone tectonic shifts because of the war and Reconstruction. Even if Abner Snopes had been as pure as a saint, market forces in his region were still against him and his kind.

Similar forces prevailed in post-war, black-belt Georgia, where arson was a favored method of lower-class dissent among both races, illustrating "class tensions between the propertied and the propertyless" (Smith 546). Next door in Alabama, which arguably suffered as much as Mississippi had after the Civil War, tenant farmers and their families were in danger of starving. Historian Wayne Flynt's analysis of Alabama census patterns in the decades after the Civil War shows that the lives of half of the tenant farmers in 1880 had not improved since 1860 (74). "For most of these," Flynt writes, "the American Dream of landownership and a better life had been reversed during the intervening two decades. They had descended the ladder of success . . ." (75).

Conditions in Alabama at this time reveal another similarity to Faulkner's Mississippi: whites held themselves to be superior to blacks; moreover, whites *needed* to feel superior. "No matter how low their economic conditions or squalid their lives," Flynt determines, "they believed that any white person was better than any black" (*Poor* 70). To this end, Abner Snopes is more intent on proving himself than on providing for his family. Again, to use Faulkner's opening scene in "Barn Burning," the reader views a makeshift trial in a general store in which a Justice of the Peace orders Snopes, a suspected barn burner, to take his wagon and "get out of this country before dark" (5). "Faulkner's poor," says Joseph M. Flora, "are held accountable for their moral failures" (1). Later, Snopes strikes Sarty on the side of his head for the boy's perceived betrayal. Now that he has his son's attention, Abner coolly explains the meaning of the morning's trial. "Don't you know all they wanted was a chance to get at me because they knew I had them beat?" (8) The father does not reveal in what ways he has defeated "them" or

even what the battle was about, but one understands the man's need to feel important. Snopes is white; ergo, he is one of the chosen. In this sense, his "white" status allows him to remain deluded, rationalizing his supposed victories of mindless violence as evidence of dignity rather than pathetic and tortured degradation. Sarty, the story's lowercase hero, is the only character who undergoes change—turning from an obedient boy who is frightened of his father into the son who boldly betrays that father.

In "Dry September," Faulkner illustrates what might happen when a Mississippi mob believes the rumor that a black man has raped a local white woman. Faulkner's trenchant themes run through the story like fault lines: the Southern white man's visceral need to feel superior to a black man and to wield power over him; the utter powerlessness of those at the bottom of the social and economic strata; the marginalization of a native Mississippian who speaks up, however timidly, for the rights of a black man; and the primal desire of a man to protect women who are of his own "kind." Even here, however, with this seemingly rational, albeit bigoted, male impetus, Faulkner includes the ironic coda that shows the leader of the white mob abusing his own wife.

Locating a hero in "Dry September," much less a lowercase hero, is not an easy task. Is the hero Will Mayes, the doomed black man? Is the hero Hawkshaw, the ineffectual barber? Both men, in the hierarchical society of the small Mississippi town, are most certainly *lowercase*. If we utilize the requirement for a hero that he must undergo a change in character—that events of the story must have their effect on his once-impregnable sense of self—then Hawkshaw is our man, and not Mayes. Hawkshaw begins as a crusader, speaking out for the innocent black man. He endures being called a

"niggerlover." He suffers physically for his brave decision to support the black man, receiving a cut on his mouth from the manacled hands of the man he strives to protect. For a moment, though, when the barber strikes back at Will Mayes, he joins the mob. "Mild," Faulkner terms the barber's tone of voice (170). "Stubborn," he calls the man (170). Hawkshaw's mildness and stubbornness are eroded, however, by the mob's pell-mell rush toward lynching. The barber realizes he can do nothing to stop the men. He leaves their ranks and limps back home. Having watched human beings morph into a mob, a mindless, killing machine, the barber is, indeed, a changed man. He has become a genuine lowercase hero.

And what is the reader to make of Will Mayes? He is, at story's end, not the hero but the victim. Poor Mayes never needed to undergo a reversal of belief: he knew from the start what demons the white men of his town could be. "What is it, captains . . . I ain't done nothing," he says (177), but his denial is useless.

After one settles upon a hero, who, then, is the story's villain? The major? The town? All white people? Or even, perhaps, Miss Minnie Cooper, the alleged victim of the alleged rape? Anne Goodwyn Jones, in discussing "Faulkner, Sexual Cultures, and the Romance of Resistance," wonders if Minnie Cooper started the rumor herself (44). The barber, she points out, is the first person to raise questions about Miss Cooper's honesty by mentioning her age ("about forty") and her widely believed sexual innocence (44). Hawkshaw, Jones says, realizes the Southern white male's assumption about black men, that they are lascivious in regard to "sexless white women," and he attempts to undercut the belief by offering his own equally sexist theory that Miss Minnie Cooper's

acknowledged spinsterhood creates her sexual hysteria (45). The men in the barbershop do not agree with his ideas. Instead, Hawkshaw's current customer dismisses the barber's failure to believe the accusation of a white woman with the tainting words, "Then you are a hell of a white man" ("Dry" 170).

After this episode, the reader is left to wonder what kind of existence Hawkshaw will lead. Will he be able to continue living in this town? Will he be able to continue making a living in the barbershop? Or, ironically enough, will the men who lynched Will Mayes get satisfaction from sitting in Hawkshaw's barber chair, watching him acquiesce to their demands, receiving a perverse pleasure in having the barber lather and shave their faces and throats? No one, it would seem, should fear that razor, for Hawkshaw has already proved his inability to carry out murder.

These two stories, "Dry September" and "Barn Burning," demonstrate Faulkner's recurring concern with race and history—with America's greatest sin, slavery, and her greatest schism, the Civil War. Again and again, the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons. Abner Snopes, through his iconoclastic acts of arson, turns his son into a traitor against his own blood. Major McClendon, through his monomaniacal urge to be judge and jury, sets up the situation in which the mild-mannered barber will become a traitor to his own race. Faulkner, in his defense, takes no pleasure in pointing out to us our faults, but he does not flinch from the task.

CHAPTER III

THEOLOGICAL BAGGAGE OF THE SOUTHERN *lowercase hero* IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FICTION

Almost all religion in the South is a healthy-seeming branch or a misshapen twig of the Christian faith. Steeples dot the skyline like pickets on a fence, and faith is as ubiquitous as kudzu. Even amidst such widespread religiosity, however, a Southerner's applications of religion can be surprising and creative. With Scripture that counsels a meek acceptance of one's place in life, many believers justify the second-class stature of blacks. Using a few Old Testament verses and even fewer ones from the New Testament, many Christians endorse the ostracism and hatred of gays. Many Christian men in the South, black and white alike, relegate women to a curiously elevated but simultaneously unequal position, based on a few remarks by Paul in his letters to churches of the first century AD. Ironically, congregations full of Southern women accede to this treatment. Christ and the Christian God are called upon to win souls and football games, often at the same gathering. Just as fervently, Christ and the Christian God are entreated to win elections. Nothing, it would seem, is beyond the purview of the Southerner's appeal for divine help.

Flannery O'Connor, a Georgia native and a devout Catholic, lays bare the religious obsessions of the region, though not necessarily in ways that flatter the Maker or His creations. As if heeding Christ's call to care for the lost, O'Connor faithfully

depicts lower-class characters and their feeling of disconnectedness from the rest of society. At the same time that she demonstrates the failure of any societal network to care for these characters, she plumbs the depths of their ability—to paraphrase Paul the Apostle, in chapter two, verse twelve, of his letter to the Philippians—to "work out their own salvation with fear and trembling."

In her essay, "In the Protestant South," O'Connor names several things that have given the South a recognizable identity, and one is "a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured" (209). "We live now in an age," O'Connor said in 1960, "which doubts both fact and value, which is swept this way and that by momentary convictions. Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to achieve one from a felt balance inside himself" ("Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" 49). For O'Connor, the balance lay in belief in God and immersion in the Catholic Church.

Catholic themes, or at the very least, *Christian* themes, are evident in her story "The Artificial Nigger." An old man loses his grandson, literally and then figuratively. When reunited, the two bond over a deep, though humorous, mystery. Stanley Edgar Hyman states that this particular story was "Miss O'Connor's own favorite, and it makes impressive claims to be considered her best story" (16). He views the climax of the story in Christian terms: Old Mr. Head temporarily denies knowing his grandson Nelson, just as Peter denied Christ; and their reconciliation comes like an act of grace when they see a plaster statue of a Negro eating watermelon, an "artificial Nigger," and share a moment of awe (Hyman 16).

The old man and the young boy may well be in a dead heat for the title of hero in this story. There is no question that both are lowercase in stature, being poor and powerless, but each one may qualify for hero status since each undergoes great change. Each is wiser at the end than at the beginning: Nelson because he now realizes he does not know everything; Old Mr. Head because he now knows the worth of his grandson. Like the prodigal son of the parable, Nelson has returned in remorse to the relative he had spurned. Like the father in the parable, Old Mr. Head has welcomed the boy to his bosom.

On the first page of the story, O'Connor achieves a strong atmosphere of foreshadowing. Mr. Head considers himself to have "that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young" ("Artificial Nigger" 99). The reader may begin to suspect, even here, that Mr. Head will prove to be anything but a suitable guide for his young grandson. Sure enough, it is precisely his certainty of his own wisdom that brings about his failure. Before he gets out of bed on the morning of the trip to the city, he "feels entirely confident that he could carry out the moral mission of the coming day" (100). But what is that moral mission? To escort Nelson safely to and from the great city of Atlanta or to prove to the boy that the old man knows more than he—that Nelson can, in fact, be wrong? Perhaps, in Mr. Head's own words, it is for Nelson "to see everything there is to see in a city so that he would be content to stay at home for the rest of his life" (101).

The two disagree constantly over—it may be argued—matters of faith: whether this will be Nelson's first trip to Atlanta or his second, since he was born in that city

eleven or twelve years earlier, but left when he was six months old; and whether Nelson will "know a nigger if I see one," since Negroes do not live in their county, and thus Nelson has not seen one since he was a baby, if he ever saw one before he left Atlanta, which Mr. Head doubts (102). Once the boy boards the train, he begins to feel chinks in his know-it-all armor. "He realized the old man would be his only support in the strange place they were approaching. He would be entirely alone in the world if he were ever lost from his grandfather" (108).

Epiphany for both the old man and the boy comes in front of the plaster statue of the Negro eating a watermelon, like some icon of a saint gone horribly awry, but serving the same purpose as a religious image—to bind together those who are true believers. At the end of the story, Mr. Head's change in character is that he has perceived his own unworthiness. "He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair" (123). For the boy, the change in character occurs in the manner his grandfather had wished. "I'm glad I've went once," he says of Atlanta, "but I'll never go back again" (123). Alice Walker sees in O'Connor's work "the impact of supernatural grace on human beings who don't have a chance of spiritual growth without it" (Walker 53).

O'Connor's work was often lumped into a category she termed "the grotesque," a genre which she defined and explained in her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." Readers of the grotesque, she cautioned, will ask the writer "why he has chosen to bring such maimed souls alive" and why, in particular, Southern writers seemed bent on "writing about freaks." O'Connor responded that "it is because we are

still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological" (43-44).

O'Connor's central characters are poor folk from rural communities (Coles 5). At one point in her literary career, a man sent her a message to "quit writing about poor folks. I see poor folks every day and get mighty tired of them, and when I read, I don't want to see any more of them" (Coles 103). Hazel Motes, the protagonist of *Wise Blood*, is one of the poorest, in terms of worldly goods, at least, of her fictional creatures, voluntarily choosing poverty as Christ did.

At the beginning of the story, however, Motes will have nothing to do with Christ. "Do you think I believe in Jesus?" he asks a stranger on the train. "Well I wouldn't even if He existed. Even if He was on this train" (13). Materialism becomes his new god. "Nobody with a good car," he declares, "needs to be justified" (64). Over and over, to anyone who will hear him, and to some who won't, he declares his disinterest in Jesus. Both his listeners and the reader may begin to wonder why he doth protest so much. We soon see. Hazel Motes cannot escape from Jesus. He was descended from preachers, and his denial of Christ, like Saint Peter's, is only temporary. "He knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going to be a preacher. Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild, ragged figure . . ." (16)

In her introduction to the tenth-year anniversary reprinting of *Wise Blood*, O'Connor claimed that for herself, "for the author, Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to [get rid of the ragged figure]" (8). When Motes returns to his roots by coming

back to Jesus, he blinds himself with lye. The reason for this action is not stated outright, though it comes after the loss of Motes's car and his vision of a sky that seems alive with "a burning mercy, a purging peace" (Wood 169). The impetus for self-mutilation may rest, like many of the rationales for O'Connor's characters, in the words of Christ: "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (KJV Matt. 5:29). Even Motes's name evokes another of Christ's rebukes: "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in the brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (Matt. 7:3). Motes further punishes himself by putting small rocks and broken glass in the bottoms of his shoes. Eventually he wraps three strands of barbed wire around his chest.

Thus, O'Connor's lowercase hero is brought full circle, back to the centeredness in Christ he knew from his birth, in the tiny town of Eastrod, Tennessee, (population, 25, and with the likely reference to *rood,* a cross). On his way back to his spiritual roots, he joins the Army, which "sent him halfway around the world and forgot him" (17), so that he comes at last to O'Connor's version of Gomorrah, the city of Taulkinham, where he starts out evangelizing for the Church Without Christ until he is overwhelmed by the need to blind himself in order to more fully see. At the end, he dies, broken but absolved, in the bosom of Abraham.

Perhaps, as has been claimed, Jesus is the "real hero of O'Connor's fiction" (Wood 159). If so, He is the ultimate lowercase hero, being meek, mild, and poor. One may even quote selectively from verses three and seven of Isaiah 53 (KJV) to claim that

Mr. Head, Nelson, and Hazel Motes stand alongside Christ as those who are "despised and rejected of men . . . acquainted with grief . . . oppressed . . . afflicted . . ."

Flannery O'Connor's characters have enduring appeal, in part because most readers, lowercase characters themselves, are able to identify with them. When Mr. Head believes he has lost his grandson to the mysterious streets of Atlanta, readers anguish with him, recalling similar losses. As Nelson comes to grips with his own puniness in comparison to the universe represented by Atlanta, readers recollect personal comeuppances of like magnitude. With his extreme behavior, Hazel Motes is, arguably, the most difficult character with whom a reader must try to identify. Even Hazel, however, may strike a chord of sympathy in his intentional subordination to his beloved. A character can hardly be more humble, more *lowercase*, than one who is completely devoted—*blindly* devoted—to the thing he loves.

CHAPTER IV

THE *lowercase hero* IN JOHN GRISHAM'S FICTION OF THE MODERN SOUTH

Much of a Southerner's energy may be spent in trying to preserve and justify the way things are done "down here." History, religion, and social status are never far from the mind of any Southern writer, because, more than in most other places, perhaps, these topics form the warp and woof and weight of our social fabric. A Southerner is defined by who he is, what he believes in, and whether he is "true" to his heritage. To fly or not to fly the Confederate flag is a question that can still sear a Southerner's conscience and start a riot.

The works of Faulkner and O'Connor illustrate relics of history and heritage that the South has lost, however arguable the merits of those relics. In the same way, the work of John Grisham is useful for revealing those keepsakes of history and heritage which modern Southerners have retained. Faulkner and O'Connor are revered, in part, for their focus on pervasive, universally-recognized elements of the Southern psyche, such as our obsession with history and faith. Grisham, the undisputed sales-chart-topper among the three writers, is one of the few authors about whose books it can be said, "all of them have been bestsellers" (National Book Foundation 4). Perhaps one reason for his fame is

that he recognizes and exploits the burgeoning market for stories about contemporary Southern life.

During the time period when the Old South drew its power from the institution of enforced slavery, the region had few cultural traditions in common with the rest of the country. Plantation life was diametrically different from life in factory villages or in large cities where whites and blacks could move freely from one place to another. The region was shaped by slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Industrialization, the Great Depression, and the New Deal, but today the Southern states are being remolded by de-Industrialization, by the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s, and by the homogenization of American society as a whole.

A guide to this new way of living in the South is *Southern Living* magazine, produced in Birmingham, Alabama. With its brightly-colored photographs of cheerful movers and shakers entertaining in their lovely homes or vacationing in Southern tourist attractions, the monthly magazine provides a record of this ever-unfolding and culturally diverse region. William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor might recognize the climate of their hometowns, but perhaps little else. Commercialization is turning many Southern cities into clones of Anywhere, USA. For her own part, Flannery O'Connor firmly resisted any erosion of the old ways of her region. As she wrote in 1957:

> The anguish that most of us have observed for some time now has been caused not by the fact that the South is alienated from the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country, that we are being forced out not only of our many sins but of our few virtues. This may be unholy anguish but it is anguish

nevertheless. (Wood 58)

Though Grisham's stories have no overt connections to the Old South of the Civil War or of Reconstruction, as did many of the works of Faulkner and O'Connor, and despite his claim that most of his novels "could be set anywhere" (Pringle 5), his protagonists are authentic lowercase, Southern heroes in the vein of Faulkner and O'Connor. The heroes of Grisham's first three novels provide ample proof. Jake Brigance, Grisham's first fictional hero, in *A Time to Kill*, is a small-town lawyer who must take on the race-hatred of the white population in his hometown in order to defend his client. Mitch McDeere of *The Firm* is a fresh-from-the-trailer-park, young lawyer, entrapped by the Mafiosi-style tactics of his Memphis employers. Darby Shaw of *Pelican Brief* is a beautiful and brilliant but decidedly unaristocratic young woman from New Orleans who draws down the wrath of a behemoth corporation. Grisham's lowercase heroes form the backbone of the New South.

In previous books, Grisham had started with a plot and developed his characters later (Pringle 5). With *The Client*, however, critics agree that he has focused chiefly on character (Pringle 75). David Gernert, Grisham's editor at Doubleday since *The Firm*, calls Grisham's decision to concentrate on character in *The Client* both wise and daring (Bearden 3). In writing about *A Painted House* for *The New York Times Book Review*, Christopher Dickey claims that Grisham paid similar attention to the people he created for this novel. These two novels, perhaps more than his other books, turn the spotlight on genuinely vulnerable, lowercase heroes. The protagonists are, in fact, mere boys. It is

hard to imagine a protagonist who is less powerful—less *uppercase*—than a child.

In both *The Client* and *The Painted House,* John Grisham trades on well-known perceptions of life in the South, old and new. That he does so with close attention to actual detail is a testament to his too-often ignored strengths as a writer. In *The Client*, Grisham's full-blown, warts-and-all presentation of the New South, he brings to vivid life a lower-middle-class white family in Memphis, right down to the dimensions of the trailer where they live (12' x 60') and the amount of rent they pay ($280 a month). When Grisham's protagonist, the eponymous eleven-year-old boy named Mark Sway, is not being foul-mouthed to members of the New Orleans mob, he is unfailingly, *Southern-ly* polite. "I'm sorry you want to die and all," he tells the lawyer who is bent on committing suicide and killing Mark in the process, "but I have to take care of my mother" (31).

Grisham's *The Client* offers not one, but two, unlikely heroes. Reggie Love is a lawyer who battles her problems with alcohol, prosecutors, and the New Orleans mob to aid a helpless but defiant, young boy. Again, class structure creates seemingly insurmountable hurdles for those on the bottom. Many reviewers believe that the character of the young protagonist, Mark Sway, is the chief factor in the quick popularity of this, Grisham's fourth novel (Pringle 75). Mark is the son of a single mother, and his family lives in a trailer park. Though poor and often neglected, Mark has qualities that readers admire: "He thinks about caring for his mother, teaching his brother the things little brothers need to know, and being a good son" (Pringle 75). With this book, Grisham veered from his previous format by putting lowercase heroes front and center. In each of the earlier books, lawyers were the protagonists. In *The Client*, we see an adolescent boy

and a recovering alcoholic take on the mob.

In similar, lowercase fashion, the poor, but hard-working, farm family of *The Painted House* spends its last summer on the farm before heading to the city for a better life. An influential online publication geared toward helping independent bookstores select their list of books heralds *A Painted House* as a "moving portrait of one boy's journey from innocence to experience" (Booksense.com). That boy, Luke Chandler, is seven years old when the story opens in September 1952, and he aspires to nothing more than to listen to the radio when his beloved St. Louis Cardinals are playing. Luke's father and grandfather speak in whispers of the possibility of a good crop, seemingly afraid to jinx good fortune by saying the words too loud. Grisham delineates the class structure of the small community in which the Chandlers live, a place where upward movement is nearly impossible. He knows this terrain intimately. He was born in Jonesboro, Arkansas, not far from the little town of Black Oak, where the fictional Luke and his family live. Grisham's father was a construction worker, moving his family wherever the jobs were (Ferranti 2). The Chandler family's milieu was not a stretch for Grisham the writer to imagine.

Even within the lowest classes, however, there is classism, prejudice, and abuse. Events in Grisham's story take place a little more than twenty years after the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, a collection of essays which, among other things, bemoaned the looming industrialization of the South. In Luke Chandler's Black Oak, Arkansas, industrialization has already taken place. "Modern America was slowly invading Arkansas," the narrator says after he watches a televised baseball game for the first time

(325). Kathleen, Luke's mother, feels great relief to learn that their farmland may flood, because her time on the farm will then be short. According to Luke, her face bears a "curious look of contentment" (354). When the Chandler family leaves town, his outlook is low-key: "We were not in the mood for a grand send-off. Our leaving was due to frustration and crop failure. We weren't exactly anxious for the town to know we were fleeing North" (462). Young Luke is a prototype of a New South hero, torn between his love for farm life and the old ways and his desire to experience the best the twentieth century has to offer.

The Los Angeles Times characterized three of Grisham's books in this way: In *The Firm*, *The Pelican Brief*, and *The Client*, "a character knows something he/she shouldn't" and in each of these books, the villains are "corrupt lawyers and cruel hit men" (Pringle 22). Young Mark Sway would seem to be an unworthy hero to stand against such foes, a genuine David in the shadow of Mafia Goliaths. The boy's very innocence, however, gives him an advantage: he doesn't know enough to be truly afraid, and so he perseveres. He is, after all, saving not only himself. The lives of his brother and his mother depend on Mark's ingenuity and grit.

Grisham's characters reveal a willingness at times to turn a blind eye toward the law (Pringle 23). Mark Sway follows this pattern and gives the trait the twist of youthful exuberance, as when he cleverly dupes a juvenile detention matron into thinking he is ill so that she sends him to the hospital, a place he knows like the back of his hand. Mark believes escape from the hospital will be far easier than from the juvenile center. Once free, he is able to meet with Reggie Love, and, together, they foil both the mob and the

interfering police.

In general, Grisham's work reveals a lack of faith in the legal system; his characters often must go it alone in their quest for justice. In *A Time to Kill*, for instance, he affirms the power of one lone man, Carl Lee, the father of a rape victim, to keenly divide issues of morality, ethics, and legality (Pringle 36). Luke Chandler, the boy living in an unpainted house, also achieves the status of a lowercase hero, though, one may argue, on a smaller scale than Carl Lee. Luke keeps secrets that he feels he must not divulge, the worst of which is that he saw one man kill another. He demonstrates deep love for his brother Ricky, who serves as a soldier in Korea. When Luke learns that Ricky's girlfriend is pregnant, he is the first in the family to write the news to his brother, deciding at his young age that his brother needs to know. Just as Faulkner's Sarty receives no help from a school guidance counselor to unravel the knotty problems of his dysfunctional home, Mark Sway determines without any outside help that he should intervene to keep the stranger in the shiny, black Lincoln from killing himself. This is the decision that puts him and his family in jeopardy. Young Mark, true lowercase hero that he is, must, on his own, determine right from wrong. Grisham understands and exploits to full advantage the appealing nature of the lowercase hero.

CHAPTER V

DIRECT INFLUENCES OF THE *lowercase heroes* OF THESE THREE WRITERS UPON MY OWN SHORT FICTION

The bones of my short story "Something in the Blood" were already in place, when I happened to re-read "Barn Burning." I was struck by similarities between parts of the stories: the young, male protagonists; the cruel, sadistic fathers; and the bleakness of each boy's future. In each story, the boy is brought to a place where he believes he must be the one to save his family from destruction. Both boys, Faulkner's Colonel Sartoris Snopes and my own Calhoun James, perform the rescues, but only by severing, violently and inexorably, all ties to their fathers.

"The famous violence of William Faulkner," wrote Allen Tate in a lengthy obituary, "is a violence of character, not of action . . ." (99). Sarty, though he is only ten years old, *chooses* to use violence to resolve his family's recurring dilemma. One may argue that the sheriff, enforcing the law, or Major de Spain, protecting his home and barn, may be the first to pull a trigger, but the boy performs the initial act of violence in ripping himself from the family: "You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you," Abner Snopes tells his son (8). When Sarty betrays his father, he may be, in his own way, trying to *save* his father from a life of violence.

Flannery O'Connor weighed in on the uses of violence in fiction: "With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially . . ." ("On Her Own Work" 113). In her stories, she claimed in the same essay, "most violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (112). Seamless, necessary violence is not easy to achieve in fiction; a reader may perceive that cruelty or outrage on the page is overwrought and merely plot-driven. Studying O'Connor's and Faulkner's uses of violence has aided me in deciding when violence is necessary in my own fiction.

"Something in the Blood," though sharing similarities to "Barn Burning," was not patterned after Faulkner's story, for my idea came from an article printed a few years ago in *The Montgomery Advertiser* ("Girl hit" A 4). In taking a short story idea from a newspaper, I unwittingly followed the lead of Flannery O'Connor. Her source for "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" was most likely an article in the *Atlanta Constitution* of November 6, 1952, in which a criminal is identified as "The Misfit" (J. O. Tate 67). In the article from the Montgomery newspaper, a police report revealed that a sixteen-year-old girl had hidden her father's liquor as an April Fool's Day prank. When she would not tell her father where she had stashed his alcohol, he struck her. The alarmed mother called the police, but, once they arrived, she refused to press charges against the father. The last line of the article read, "The girl's injuries were minor." Mentally, I took issue with that statement. After many months and much toil, I arrived at "Something in the Blood," suggested, but not dictated, by the brief news story.

Don H. Doyle termed barn burning as a "prepolitical form of individual retribution, motivated by class enmity and desire for revenge, to be sure, but with no political aim of redistributing power" (29). By burning his landlord's barn, Abner Snopes did his own small part to rectify class inequality—or at least to assuage his feelings of inferiority when he departed his landlord's large, elegantly furnished home and returned to a rented cabin that wasn't "fitten for hawgs" ("Barn" 9).

In the view of John T. Matthews, "class resentment drives the plot" of "Barn Burning." Matthews's analysis of "Wash," another story by Faulkner—that "pure white rage combusts into apocalyptic violence"—could also be applied to "Barn Burning," with the actions of Abner Snopes; throughout Faulkner are many other instances of "redneck resentment" (170). My story "Something in the Blood" tends this way, exploding in violence at the end. The perpetrator is Calhoun, a seven-year-old white boy, inarticulate as most heroes go, but viscerally aware that he must be the rescuer of his loved ones.

As in "Barn Burning," the villain and the recipient of the boy's violence are one and the same: the father. Calhoun's father is employed as a barber, and the family almost, but not entirely, fits Wayne Flynt's definition of Alabama's "poor white trash" in the years between 1865-1930, who were

> a small residue of people who may be distinguished not only from middle and upper class whites but from impoverished poor whites as well. Refusing to pursue whatever meager opportunities came their way, they were satisfied with a subsistence existence consisting of a bit of corn and whiskey, freedom to hunt and fish whenever they chose, the most casual kind of living arrangements with the opposite sex, little effort at child rearing, and no institutional involvement in churches, political parties, farmers' organizations, or schools. (*Poor* ix)

Calhoun's mother's family has claim to an impressive, though uninhabitable mansion and a lengthy list of overachieving ancestors, but times have gotten hard. In her case, the gene pool has become shallow. As the story opens, the James family is comparable to many of Faulkner's lowercase characters in their seeming determination to self-destruct. Drew James, the father, would object to such a pejorative label as "poor white trash"; like Abner Snopes, he considers himself an uncommon man.

When "Barn Burning" appeared in print in 1939, Matthews observes, "it had become clear that tenancy would be replaced by wage labor and that mechanization would finally prevail in Southern agriculture" (173). Nine years earlier, twelve white, male Southerners had published *I'll Take My Stand*, their collection of essays in praise of the old values over new ones. Agrarianism, they said, was superior to industrialization, religious faith was superior to the gods of materialism, and humanity trumped cold science (Dunbar 14). At this dawning of the twenty-first century, the various gods of society may still be in conflict, still spoiling for dominance, but a few early winners are discernible: mega-corporations, the military-industrial complex, and the distraction from reality provided by the media's focus on celebrity.

Matthews, viewing Faulkner's stories and characters through the lens of proletarianism, contends that the boy Sarty "finds himself suspended between orders, the old founded on blood, the new uncertainly based on the commodification of all relations" (174). Matthews further contends that Abner sees his own dilemma as a man forced to work for the de Spains of the world as merely a drawback of his class (172). Today, in the early years of the twenty-first century, Faulkner's story is more than sixty years old,

and class inequality still rules. Lower-class whites seem to be as conscious of the economic divide as Abner Snopes was when Faulkner wrote the hapless man's story.

Young Sarty, the lowercase hero of "Barn Burning," suffers a dreadful emotional conflict: he must choose between blind, filial devotion and his youthful sense of what is right. My protagonist in "Something in the Blood" weighs his father in the balance and concludes the man's soul is past redemption. In order to rescue his sister from what Calhoun sees as certain death, the boy must kill his father. In Sarty's day, bureaucratic organizations did not exist to ensure the safety of rural children. Calhoun and his sister certainly live in a more enlightened, civic-minded, and bureaucracy-enabled age, yet the boy feels no hope that anyone or any organization can come to his aid. He alone must kill the wolf that is, quite literally, at the door.

Calhoun's father views his son as something of a freak because the boy was born with only a thumb and three fingers on his left hand. In outlining the story, when I determined the boy must become the salvation of his family, I realized that committing murder would both magnify and diminish his innate innocence. Only a disfigurement of some kind would have the *gravitas* to balance the essentially evil nature of his deed—providing, in economic terms, a *compensation*, and in a religious sense, a *dispensation*.

Young as he is, Mark Sway in Grisham's *The Client* is concerned with protecting his family—his mother and his younger brother. Mark's father, whom he calls "my ex-father," skipped out on the family to everyone else's relief. Grisham puts Mark squarely in the horns of a dilemma: according to the law, Mark must tell the truth about his conversation with Jerome Clifford, a lawyer who gave Mark critical information before

shooting himself to avoid certain death at the hands of the mob; Mark believes, however, that telling the truth will put his mother and brother in danger from the mob. Just as the young Sarty must choose between the law and his family, represented by his father, Mark is torn by conflicting desires.

In both stories, a boy's conscience becomes a battlefield. Sarty feels he must alert the law before his father commits his next crime, and Mark feels he cannot tell the law the truth about another man's crime. In my story "Something in The Blood," the young protagonist agonizes over a similar decision: if he does nothing, his sister will continue to suffer abuse at the hands of her father; yet, if he acts decisively, he will *become* his father.

In my contemporary short story "Alien Alibi," a young woman named Estelle, half-black, half-white, grows up traumatized by a childhood incident: she watched as her mother murdered her father and then killed herself. No one knows that Estelle has dealt with the horror of that event by hallucinating that she was kidnapped and, thus, mentally escaping the memory. Naïve, vulnerable, and shunned by other townspeople—truly a lowercase heroine—she is seduced by a spoiled, young white man who exploits her provocative beauty to enrage his society-obsessed mother. In the South, race matters, even half a century after Faulkner.

As narrator, Estelle presents her story, but she is unaware how unreliable her version is. The reader may become aware fairly soon that Estelle was horribly undone by her childhood trauma. Only very late in the story does Estelle realize that her brother has dealt with the family horror in a diametrically different way, with maturity, pragmatism,

and—at times—a loyalty to his sister that brings him great pain: Estelle is the story's narrator, but Clayton comes very close to being the hero.

In Faulkner's South, at least in "Dry September," lynching was the way to combat miscegenation and uphold the Southern way of life. In my story, Estelle's mother-in-law attempts another kind of demise for a man who is the product of miscegenation: she spreads the rumor that he is gay. Estelle has much in common with the wife of John McLendon, the leader of the lynch mob in Faulkner's "Dry September." In each story, men attempt to protect women, but neither Mrs. McLendon nor Estelle is safe from the man she marries. McLendon's faithful wife, who does not merit a name of her own in this story, waits up for her husband until midnight, only to be rewarded with cold words and rough hands. Estelle, desperate to be loved, falls for the ultra-white scion of a higher social class, Trey Ramsay, only to learn that he seduced and married her chiefly to enrage his "nigger-hating mama."

In any culture, perhaps, but especially one with a large population of religious fundamentalists, few things seem as freakish, as grotesque, as the children of a mixed marriage. In "Alien Alibi," Estelle and Clayton Waters, sister and brother, are viewed as grotesque by other members of the community, but not entirely because of their racial heritage: they are set apart by their uncommon beauty, by the circumstances of their orphanhood, and by Clayton's mythic loyalty to his emotionally disturbed sister. In Estelle's and Clayton's community, the people who have the means and the mission to help these orphans are the church. The only role that institution plays in the story, however, is to serve as the setting for Sybil's funeral and as the place where Clayton is

arrested, under the painting of Jesus who is "suffering the little children."

Similarly skewed uses of religious elements appear in my short story "Head Coach." Sonny Maddox was a football standout at the University of Alabama. Now, at fifty-six, the widowed owner of an auto repair shop in his hometown, he encounters a problem that is difficult to repair: his orphaned, teenage granddaughter is well on her way to becoming a *mean* girl, beyond the reach of his or anyone's help. His sister, Lela, urges him to bring the girl to church: "A close relationship with Jesus Christ is what that girl needs," Lela says, "and you know it." Her words ring hollow to Sonny, so accustomed is he to the close relationship he had with his college football coach, Paul "Bear" Bryant. The former player, after almost forty years, still communes with the old coach, though entirely in his head. The Man's sage advice and earthy wisdom continue to play in Sonny's mind, as if on an endless loop, and he turns to sports analogies to heal the young girl's psyche.

In Alabama, substituting Bear Bryant for Christ is not a great stretch. Sonny Maddox has lost his son and wife and comes close to losing his granddaughter, but a kind of religious force—his relationship with his former coach—"saves" him and the girl. As in any significant loss, especially in fiction, that which is gone must be replaced by something equally valuable, though inexpressibly hard-won. In Sonny's case, the deaths of his wife, his son and daughter-in-law, and his "head coach," are counter-weighted by the gift of his granddaughter's redemption.

Without consciously being aware of a literary source as I wrote the story, I must nevertheless have had Flannery O'Connor in mind. Years ago, I had read and agreed with

her description of the lop-sided way in which Southerners view Christ. I would not be exaggerating to say that O'Connor's words haunted me with their accuracy: ". . . while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" ("Grotesque" 44). We have seen that Hazel Motes, O'Connor's freakish ex-soldier of *Wise Blood*, suffers from a series of feverish hauntings by Jesus, whom he saw "moving from tree to tree in the back of his mind" (16).

Hazel Motes's own family tree was likely one of those that Jesus was hiding behind. Given Hazel's grandfather's occupation, escaping his religious upbringing must have been impossible: "His grandfather had been a circuit preacher, a waspish old man who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger" (15). To say that an image of Jesus as a wasp's stinger does not fit in with the usual New Testament picture of the meek and mild Christ is an understatement.

Estelle, the narrator of "Alien Alibi" might not perceive of herself as a religious person, yet the feelings she has for Reevah, the alien being, are certainly spiritual ones. In Reevah's presence, Estelle experiences awe, mystery, adoration, and intense comfort. Unlike O'Connor's Hazel Motes, who wavers in his faith, Estelle is unfailingly true to her savior. For Estelle, however, the savior is not Christ, but Reevah, an imaginary alien who has rescued her at various times in her life.

Though Estelle is not an ordinary worshipper, and Reevah is not the usual deity, at least in the way that Flannery O'Connor might view such things, the young woman is still part of the Southern community of faith. She is like a soprano who sits confidently in her place in the choir, though oblivious that she and the other singers are not on the same

page. Reevah, a god created by the worshipper, resembles the golden calf worshipped by the Hebrew children. For her own part, Estelle never says God's name, though others in the story do, whether in the nursery worker's throwaway "God bless you" to Estelle, or in Trey's shouted "Goddammit" to the arresting sheriff, or in Clayton's whispered "My God!" when he sees Sybil's mutilated body. Clayton does not attend church, but he has memorized old hymns and loves to sing along with Estelle when they ride together. Trey diligently attends church, but not for doctrinally-approved motives. He especially loved taking his new bride, Estelle, to church to sit alongside his mama. Estelle always thought she saw pride in Trey's eyes, but now she sees it was spite. When Clayton is arrested by the sheriff, the members of the church do not rush to embrace Estelle, not even the woman with whom Estelle worked in the children's nursery, as if, somehow, Clayton's murderous ways have rubbed off on his sister and might be contagious.

Jesus, like many things religious, is honored more in the breach than in the observance. His name is invoked more often to inflict guilt and shame than to ennoble or inspire. My story "Head Coach" has elements that mock traditional religion as it is practiced in the South, where success on the playing field is worshipped as much as, if not more than, saintliness. If a successful athlete was also lucky enough to play for a revered coach, his star rises even higher, especially in his own hometown. Sonny Maddox, the protagonist in my story, would never admit it to his family or customers, but his beloved coach has supplanted Jesus in guiding his actions. Far from being motivated by the popular slogan, WWJD—What Would Jesus Do—Sonny constantly wonders WWCD—What Would Coach Do?

John Grisham's fiction has helped to make the South intriguing and worth visiting—at least vicariously—to the rest of the country, arguably to the rest of the world. The humorist Dave Barry made the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that the Federal Aviation Administration must have enacted a rule requiring all airline passengers to carry a Grisham novel as they board (Pringle 6). Though Grisham is read, perhaps, for the page-turning suspense of his thrillers and not for his insights about life, he, nevertheless, has managed to make a statement about society's misperceptions of people who live in trailer parks.

> Through Mark Sway's characterization, Grisham may be commenting on goodness in our society. He may be suggesting that the innocence of childhood is purer than that of any adult or social institution. . . . One can conclude from Mark's characterization that Grisham sees more to admire among that much-maligned group, so-called trailer park trash, than he finds among the country's more well-to-do citizens. (Pringle 80)

In *The Painted House* and *The Client*, Grisham's lowercase heroes, Luke Chandler and Mark Sway, reveal heroic qualities in spite of their isolation and low place in society. The same may be said for Hawkshaw and Sarty, the lowercase heroes of William Faulkner, and for Flannery O'Connor's Hazel Motes, Mr. Head, and Nelson.

Reading Grisham has caused me to make my own fiction more aggressively and more consciously *Southern*. Sonny Maddox, the protagonist of "Head Coach," is not merely a former football player, but a man who played for the incomparable Bear Bryant. Calhoun in "Something in the Blood" is not merely an innocent, vulnerable child embroiled in a horrible family situation, but he is a child who lives in central Alabama in

a house trailer surrounded by mimosa trees. Estelle of "Alien Alibi" is not just a pretty girl, but an extraordinarily beautiful, mixed-race girl who is married to a white man with a Negro-hating, status-obsessed mother.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The twelve writers of the 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* were fearful of the future. Their beloved Southland stood helpless before the approaching "juggernaut of Northern progress," as Ralph C. Wood termed the age to come (57). In danger of annihilation were such virtues of their culture as

> the elaborate code of manners shared by both high and low strata of Southern society; the importance of blood kinship and familial ties; the lasting reverence for locality fostered by rural life; the tragic sense of history engendered by defeat in the Civil War; the narrative gift for telling stories rather than generating ideas; the deep supernaturalist faith common to blacks and whites alike. (Wood 58)

For the lowercase heroes of the South, villains come in many guises, even masked as progress.

As in many stories involving lowercase heroes, the villains may be decidedly *uppercase*. In *The Client*, Grisham pits a young boy and a down-on-her-luck lawyer against the powerful forces of organized crime. In Faulkner's "Dry September," the Negro, Will Mayes, has no hope of escaping from John McLendon, the heroic commander of troops at the French front, just as Hawkshaw, the meek barber, has no

hope of saving the Negro. From a Southerner's perspective, the antagonist of "The Artificial Nigger" could not be more daunting: the physically and morally challenging universe, as represented by the city of Atlanta. My short stories that I discuss here also utilize uppercase villains. "Alien Alibi" about Estelle and Clayton, two mixed-race orphans in the fictitious, small Southern town of Magnolia Falls, draws its villains from that very landscape; they were big fish, though in a small pond. Estelle's husband, Trey, was a high-school jock; his father was a successful, respected businessman; his mother reigned over matters of local society. "Something in the Blood" deals with the inescapable villainy of biological inheritance. "Head Coach" concerns the loss of a personal belief system in the face of the tragedies of life. Thus, in a more modern sense, my stories reveal a twentieth-century focus on family history—Faulkner's forte—and faith—O'Connor's strong suit. The tension between elements of past and current Southern culture is a nod to the influence of John Grisham.

Like Faulkner, O'Connor, and Grisham, I have been shaped by the South, my place of birth and upbringing. I share their preoccupation with the impact of history, faith, and changing Southern traditions, but I see also in their work a concern for the ordinary people of society, men, women, and children who are overlooked to the point of becoming virtually invisible. These three writers have shaped my own creative work by their attitudes toward primal forces in everyday life in the South and the effects of these forces on lowercase heroes.

Here, then, are my creative responses to life in the modern South. I arrange the stories in regard to the protagonists, allowing age to proceed before beauty and youth.

The narrator of the first story "Head Coach" is Sonny Maddox, a fifty-six-year-old auto mechanic, who may seem to be more fully aware of himself than my other protagonists, but he considers his identity to be alarmingly amorphous. "Each morning I re-invent myself," he says. "Without a strong cup of coffee and the newspaper to hold onto, I might just decide to go back to bed or take off in my truck and never look back. Of course, there's Joni. She keeps me from doing either one." Estelle Waters, heroine of "Alien Alibi," suspects that she is not fully in control of her own emotions, but she has no idea how different she is from other people in her small hometown until she confides a secret to the sheriff's secretary. Calhoun James, seven-year-old hero of "Something in the Blood," may be the most outrageous character of all, for he takes his future—and that of his mother and sisters—into his own little hands and steps out with boldness to set the world aright.

My stories, as I have said, were influenced by Faulkner, O'Connor, and Grisham. I alone, however, am responsible for their eventual forms. It is every writer's hope that her creations will find welcome havens. To my mentors I give a fond thank-you, and of my readers I ask only an open mind.

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Head Coach

In between the Durango's re-alignment and the Skylark's lube job, I hang up the lug wrench and glance into the waiting room. Most days, I don't pay a lot of attention to the wall, but I always know it's there. I can sense it. The rear wall's covered with photos and newspaper clippings, some black and white, some color. Customers love the wall. It makes them feel as if they're talking to The Man, looking him in the eye. Now that football season's here again, people drive up to fifty miles to see the wall. And once they do, they become my best friends. Some of them will decide they want Sonny Maddox to give them an oil change. "Madd *Ox*," they used to yell from the stands. "Madd *Ox*!"

One of my old teammates runs a Lexus dealership in Hoover. One sells TV ads for a station in Huntsville. I've done pretty good with an auto repair shop west of Montgomery.

> *"Awards, mementoes, photographs," the Bear told us. "Save 'em. Use 'em. Hang 'em up or put 'em in a trophy case. Someday you'll be proud you got 'em. You'll make good use of 'em."*

The wall, what customers call the "Bear Wall," brings in more people than newsprint advertising does. That's Alabama for you. It's been thirty years since my

college days, but the wall—and what it reminds people of—is my claim to fame around here. I'd be the first to tell you, playing for the Bear isn't a big deal with everybody. There's Auburn fans. There's Mac, my employee, busy changing the left rear tire on a Town Car. Mac grew up in Florida. On the eighth day, Mac says, God created FSU. Here, in the heart of Dixie, we know better.

The newspaper picture of me after my last Iron Bowl draws my eye. I didn't win the game, but I helped.

> *"Centers are damn important, Maddox," the Bear said. "You do your job, the quarterback can do his. You step on his foot, you drop the ball, you fail to block some sonofabitch, quarterback might as well stay home. Understand?"*

"Yes, sir," I said, and there's my sweat-streaked face next to the Bear, front page of *The Birmingham News*. I'm grinning like I threw the game-winning pass, but The Man looks like he's concentrating on something past the photographer's shoulder. I didn't notice then, but I do now. I never saw him smile.

I take my eyes off the pictures and reach for the Skylark work order hanging next to the office door. If I keep staring at the team photos, or the drawing of Coach standing on the mountaintop like Moses, holding the Ten Commandments of Football in X's and O's, or the shot of me all by myself in my uniform, then Mac will see me.

"Cryin' shame," he'll say. "Grown man livin' in the past."

That's the way it is. Folks who know you don't put you on a pedestal. I pop open the Skylark's hood and wonder what it was like for the Bear. Did he get respect at home? Did his children jump every time he spoke, the way we did?

"Sonny!" a voice calls out, and I wheel around. It's my sister, Lela, standing at the office door, holding the phone. Lela's also my secretary, so I hurry over. She's got a pleased expression on her face, and I think maybe it's the used car dealer on Highway 14, the new owner, saying, "Yeah, Sonny, I want you to handle the maintenance on my cars." Sure as hell hope so. I'm fifty-six, and I still feel the adrenalin spike over a new account.

"The junior high," Lela says, handing off the phone with a smile so big her glasses slip down her nose. She puts her hands on her wide hips. "Assistant principal," she adds.

I clear my throat, shifting gears from the car dealership on Highway 14 to my granddaughter's school. If Lela wasn't smiling, I'd worry something's wrong.

"Hello."

"Mr. Maddox?"

The voice is a young man's, low and friendly, but he's not from around here. I can tell that by the way he says *Mister*, instead of *Mis-tuh*.

"Yes."

"This is John Thomas, Mr. Maddox. It's about Joni. She's been suspended for three days. You need to come down and meet with me, sir, before you take her home."

I stand there a few seconds. I'm still holding the Skylark work order in my left hand. "Can you tell me what this is about?"

Lela hasn't moved from the door. She wants to know as much as I do what kind of trouble Joni is in, but not for the same reason.

"I'd rather not say over the phone, Mr. Maddox. Is it possible for you to come in

to talk? Won't take long."

I glance at Mac. He's bent down beside the Town Car, taking off the lug nuts. The Skylark can wait a while.

"Sure. Be right there."

I give the phone back to Lela and walk to the sink that stands against the rear wall. The Gunk container is dirtier than my hands, so I run hot water over it, pump Gunk into my palms, and rub hard with a scrub brush. Lela is waiting. I can tell John Thomas already put the phone down on his end, because the phone in Lela's hand starts to beep.

"Well?" she says.

"I got to pick Joni up. She doesn't feel good."

"Why would the assistant principal call to tell you that? When kids are sick, the secretary calls."

I scrub at my fingernails. Grease is stubborn, like some people.

"What that girl needs," Lela says, "is a spanking and a come-to-Jesus meeting."

Lela lowers her voice—I guess because Mac is a Methodist, not a Baptist like her, and she doesn't want to let out any trade secrets. Her glasses inch down her nose again.

"You're her granddad," she says. "You should be totin' her to church every chance you get. Without a mama, without a grandmama, it's the only way that girl will grow up decent. Girls' Auxiliary . . . Sunday school . . . young people's choir." She shakes a finger at me. "Fill up her time so she can't get in trouble. You had football, for goodness' sake." She lowers her voice to a whisper and leans closer. "What Joni needs, Sonny, is to take Jesus as her personal savior. And you know it."

All I know is that beeping phone will drive me crazy.

On the way to the junior high, I turn off the truck's air conditioner and lower the windows. The day is cool and clear. I used to tell Sharon that October is one of two reasons to live in Alabama. The other one's April. She never minded the heat the way I do. She never did two-a-days in August.

When I drive, I try to stay focused. Bad stuff happens when you do more than one thing at a time, so I don't worry about Joni till I stop for a traffic light. I'm stuck behind an oil-burning S-10, and I raise the windows halfway. I can't say I'm surprised Joni's in trouble. We live in the same house, but I don't know the child. I never know what she's thinking. Lela, though, I can read her mind before she opens her mouth. Woman never made a mistake in her life—Monday morning quarterback telling me how to raise my granddaughter. Her children might not ever get in trouble, but they're about as interesting as a Ford Focus. Her husband may be a deacon, but she has him so cowed he's got to ask permission to lift the toilet seat.

The light changes. The S-10 takes off, leaving a stinky contrail. The *Sonny Maddox Auto Repair* signs on the side of my truck keep me from flipping him a bird, so I close my windows and turn up the air. Why's it so hard for some folks to take care of their vehicles? I shake my head. Damn fool had time to pimp up the S-10's plate. Most car and truck plates, including mine, say *Stars Fell on Alabama*. You want to change the state's official license plate, you got to locate somebody selling a piece of blue tape exactly the right size and color with *Heart of Dixie* printed on it. Lot of trouble just to say what we all know anyway.

I run a hand through what's left of my hair, push my glasses back on my nose so I don't look like my sister, and catch my face in the rear-view mirror. I look like what I am, a tall, beefy, nearsighted geezer with a hawk's bill of a nose and grease under his fingernails who has no business raising a granddaughter by himself. What do I know about fifteen-year-old girls? Hell of a lot less than I did when I was a fifteen-year-old boy.

I turn off the road into the junior high parking lot and find a visitor's parking space near the front door. At least junior high kids don't have licenses, or this lot would be jam-packed. Then again, that'd be more cars for me to work on. School buses fill the parking lot across the road. I'm glad I don't do maintenance on cheese wagons. Not in this county. Worn-out, rattle-trap school buses are why I bring Joni to school every morning, and why Lela picks her up in the afternoon. I let Lela off early so she can do that, but I've never been sure riding on a school bus is worse for Joni than spending time with Lela. I wonder if the Lexus dealer keeps any relatives on his payroll.

I sign in at the main office and peek into classrooms as I walk to the assistant principal's office. Science charts and world maps and posters about verbs. No pictures of George Washington or Paul Revere or even the current president on the walls, not like when I was in school. Times change. I think about what one of Alabama's coaches discovered when he went recruiting in rural Alabama. This was after the Bear died. This new coach would step inside some poor family's house and every time, he said, he'd see the same three pictures on a wall. There'd be a drawing of Jesus, Sunday-school style with long hair and blue eyes. There'd be a picture of FDR with his pipe between his

teeth. And, always, there'd be a photo of the Bear wearing his hound's-tooth-check hat.

The saviors of the South. Whose pictures are hanging up in poor folks' houses now, do you suppose? Lela would be happy if the Ten Commandments hung on every wall in the state. When she's not telling me that the Ten Commandments are the solution, she's telling me what the problems are. "When they took prayer out of schools," she says, just for starters, "they let everything else in."

The hall outside the assistant principal's office has two empty chairs next to the door, and I take a seat. On the other side of the hall is a row of desks, and two boys are sitting as far away as they can get from the office door, doing homework or pretending to, or maybe listing their sins for the assistant principal. One boy looks like he should be in fourth grade instead of junior high, but the other boy is bigger than me, with feet and hands the rest of his body might catch up to by the time he graduates. The fact he's waiting outside this office puts graduation in doubt. I leaf through a magazine that's on the chair next to me, a copy of *Coach and Athletic Director*. The address label shows it belongs to John Thomas. A coach, too?

I can hear Thomas's voice through the door. Hollow-core, I figure, no insulation. Sound comes straight through. That's what we get in a county with the lowest school-tax in the state. Cheap doors, old school buses, and assistant principals doubling as coaches.

"So, tell me something," Thomas says, "what do you think is going to happen if you don't apologize to Miss Burton?"

"I don't know," a kid's voice says, a boy—could be twelve or thirteen.

"Think about it, Matt," Thomas says. "You called her a name, in front of the other

kids in class. You dissed her. How can she let you come back unless you apologize? She's got her pride, man. Everybody's got pride. Have you got pride, Matt? Do you?"

"I don't know."

I don't hear anybody talking for half a minute, and I can imagine the kid sweating through that silence, wondering what The Man is going to say next. If it'd been me, forty years ago, I'd be peeing my pants.

"Matt," Thomas says, "here's what I know. I see Miss Burton's side. She can't let you walk in like nothing happened. You can't go back to her class unless you apologize. And if you don't go to class, you can't play football. How do you feel about that?"

Silence, then, "I don't know."

I close the magazine and throw it on the empty chair. The two kids glance at me.

Can't this Matt-kid say anything but *I don't know*? Then I hear him crying, and Thomas speaks.

"Do you care about staying on the team, Matt?"

I hear a mumble that sounds like *yeah*.

"What else you got besides football, Matt? You got anything else?"

There's a mumble that sounds like *no*.

"So what do you want to do, Matt?"

I lean toward the door, straining to hear.

"I want to play football, Coach, but she hurt my pride. What about *my* pride?"

"You gotta choose between your selfish pride and pride in playing football, Matt. Apologize or quit the team."

Damn! This guy sounds like the Bear.

"Pride?" The Bear's voice was dangerously soft. "What have you got to be proud of, Maddox?"

"Uh . . ." I was dog-tired, but I racked my brain. "Being on the team, sir?" He didn't answer, and I dug deeper. "Being a winner."

I held my breath. He squinted. The squint was as close to a smile as I ever saw on his face.

"Yep. Being on the team and being a winner. There is nothing else worth being proud about. Nothing. You got it?"

"Yes, sir."

I lean my head against the wall. Aside from football, what've I got to be proud about? Work? Family? I swallow hard. Will Joni finish high school? Will I live that long?

Chair legs scrape against the floor in Thomas's office. I hear a deep sigh.

"It's up to you, Matt. Am I gonna see you at practice?"

"Yes, sir. I'll be there."

"You can go out this door, Matt—usually nobody but the secretary's out there. Takes you straight back to class. Here, wipe your nose."

"Thanks, Coach." He clears his throat, and his last word is barely audible. "Bye."

A minute later the door beside me opens, and a black man, maybe in his late thirties, pokes out his head and gives the hall a once-over that takes in me and the two boys doing their assignment. They look up, pencils hanging in mid-air, till he nods, and they go back to their work.

"Mr. Maddox?" he says.

I stand and reach out my hand. He's a little shorter than me. He doesn't turn a lug wrench all day or wrestle with steel-belted whitewalls, but his handshake is strong.

"Come on in," he says.

His office is filled with bookshelves and filing cabinets. The chair in front of his desk looks too small, but I fold myself into it and wait for him to talk. He pushes a piece of paper across the desk, and I take it.

"Your granddaughter's math teacher intercepted this note," he says, "as Joni was passing it to another girl in class. I made Joni sign her full name at the bottom, once she admitted it was hers."

First thing I notice is Joni's signature, with the high, fancy loops to her capital letters and the way she writes her last name as if it's two words, same as I do, without connecting the second "d" to the "o"—so it looks like *Madd ox*. Next thing I notice is the actual words, words like *stupid*, *bitch*, *slutty*, and *retarded*. Other words I skip over, not believing Joni knows them. Last thing I catch is that Joni wrote the words about a girl named Brittany. I finish reading and look up at Thomas.

"Brittany's a new student here," he says. "She didn't grow up with these girls, and they tend to exclude her."

I thump the sheet of paper with the back of my hand. "It's a mean letter."

He nods. "She also hit Brittany and pulled her hair. That's why I gave Joni a three-day suspension."

He rares back in his chair and points a finger at me.

"I didn't know till I saw Joni's signature that you were Sonny Maddox," he says. "Her records just have next of kin as H. L. Maddox. Took me a minute to realize you were old *Madd Ox*."

He grins, and I do, too. After Joni's letter, I'm glad to have something to smile about.

"I played for The Man, too," Thomas says, "late seventies, early eighties."

I raise my eyebrows. *John Thomas*, I say to myself. *John Thomas*. "Running back," I say. "You were one of the Bear's last players. Helped him set the record."

Thomas grins, and I can see the two of us sitting here for the next half hour, swapping stories about The Man, naming players, re-playing games—till his secretary knocks on the door or Lela calls to see where I am. I don't want to hear about Joni's problem or tell the Skylark owner he's got an oil leak. I want to know if Thomas ever put his hand into Namath's palm print at Denny Chimes. Did he ever run the steps at Denny Stadium for missing practice? Could I take Thomas if I needed to? If I wanted to?

I make a fist around Joni's letter. I want Thomas to understand something, uncertain why it is suddenly so important or why I feel I can be honest with this stranger but unwilling to trust my own sister. I lean forward across the desk.

"I don't know what happened with Joni," I say. "I couldn't bring myself to be tough with her, the way I was with my son. She was a little girl, three when her parents died. So Sharon and I spoiled her. Grandmothers are gonna do that anyway, but I shouldn't have. I should've disciplined her. When Sharon passed away a couple of years ago, I should've . . ."

Thomas treats me the way he did the kid named Matt—he waits for me to talk. I take my time, as if he's an old friend, or the son of an old friend. I clear my throat.

"Every morning, I re-invent myself," I say. "If I didn't have a strong cup of coffee and the newspaper to hold onto, I might just decide to go back to bed or take off in my truck and never look back. But—there's Joni. She keeps me from doing either one."

I must remind Thomas of the kid named Matt, because he stays quiet. How many parents or grandparents has he brought into his office so they can make fools of themselves? Or maybe I'm just out of practice. I sure don't do much talking around Lela. I clear my throat, but he hasn't moved a muscle, like he thinks I have something else to say, more guts to spill like the kid named Matt. Do I?

"Being near The Man," I say, "was like being close to an open flame. It's been thirty years, but I can still feel the heat. I wanted to be like that." My voice trails off.

Thomas raps his knuckles on the desk, and I notice his championship ring. I wear mine on Sundays when it won't get smeared with grease. His dark eyes narrow, and I picture him on the football field ragging Matt to see what he's made of. Does Thomas have kids of his own, I wonder. Do they give him a hard time?

"Every damn day," he says, "I wake up wanting that same thing—to feel the heat." He sits back. "You know why the Bear finally allowed blacks on the team?" he asks, and I must look startled, because he laughs. "That was something else about The Man—he wasn't perfect. I'd love to say he saw the light about integration and put blacks on the team because it was the right thing to do. But, plain and simple, he wanted to win. Told us so. He saw blacks playing on northern teams, saw them winning games, and

couldn't stand the idea of another coach beating him. Especially if that other coach had black players."

I bristle, not sure why. Talking about blacks and whites doesn't come easy to me. Maybe I bristle because Thomas said The Man wasn't perfect.

"Main thing is," Thomas goes on, "you gotta win, Sonny. You gotta do whatever it takes. It's not too late to turn Joni around."

He steps to the door, opens it and motions for someone to come forward. It's Joni. She's wearing a low-cut top that I could swear she didn't have on when I dropped her off this morning, and more eye make-up than I remember. The make-up is streaked, and her long blonde hair is loose, no longer in the ponytail, so she looks eighteen, not fifteen. Thank the Lord she has her mama's little nose, and not the Maddox hawk's bill. Thomas waits for her to enter and points to the empty chair. She sits without looking at me.

"Joni," Thomas says, "your grandfather is going to take you home. You can come back to school on Friday, but I want you to apologize to Brittany."

Joni bites her bottom lip and starts to cry. She wears a ring that was her mama's, and she turns it with her thumb, nervous. She looks small and scared. I want to tell her to stop crying, but this is Coach Thomas's office. I glance at him. Her tears have not made a dint in his hard expression.

"I'm sorry, Coach," Joni says. "I didn't mean to hurt her feelings, but . . ." She wipes her cheek. "I've been under a lot of stress lately with school and everything, and nobody here likes me. I just wrote those things to get people to like me."

"How about Brittany?" Coach Thomas asks. "Does Brittany like you now?"

Joni's eyes flash. "She—she's just a . . . she called me a bitch. That's the only reason I called her one. To pay her back."

"If some other player slugs you," the Bear asked, "or kicks you when you're down, what do you do?"

"Pay 'em back," I said. Sports writers didn't call me "Madd Ox" for nothing.

"Wrong answer, Maddox. You don't do anything except play harder. Got it?"

I nodded.

"Know why?"

I shook my head.

"Because nine times out of ten, the referee will see the second hit and penalize you. But the main reason is because when you put on a Crimson Tide uniform, when you stand on that field and represent the University of Alabama, you will do no wrong. Our fans want winners, not whiners." He glanced around. "The only important thing is getting back up and playing your guts out till the clock stops. You boys got that?"

"Joni," I say, with a hard voice, not my granddaddy voice, but the one I use on Mac when he's goofing off too much or Lela when she nags too hard. The same voice I used on my own son. Joni turns her round, blue eyes on me, her daddy's eyes, and I suck in my breath. Lela wants me to make Joni talk to Jesus. I'd a whole lot rather take her to meet the Bear. "Joni, what you did was wrong. It was mean. You're gonna have to tell

Brittany you're sorry, and you will be punished."

I have never hit Joni, but she looks at me as if I slapped her across the face. I get to my feet, and as I turn I see the wall behind me, the one facing the desk, and the two photos hanging side by side. In one, the Bear poses next to a much younger John Thomas. The other shows the Bear walking off the field after his last game.

I shake Coach Thomas's hand. "Come by my shop," I say. "See my trophy wall."

"Sure thing, Sonny." He motions to Joni who is already heading to the door. "And let me know how I can help."

Joni and I go out to the car, and she still hasn't said a word. I'm trying to imagine myself in her shoes, forty years ago. My lip wouldn't be sulled out like hers, and I would've thanked my dad for coming to pick me up, and I would have been quaking in those shoes, too. Scared to death.

Lord, Lord, I ask myself. What have I wrought?

Joni goes around to the driver's side and takes hold of the door handle, but I beat her to it and put my hand over hers. "Whoa, little miss," I say. "No driving for you. You've lost that privilege for a while."

She smiles at me, like her old self. In the principal's office, her face was full of rain, but now she's pure sunshine. She opens her wallet, pulls out her driver's permit, and waves it under my nose.

"But Granddad," she says. "Come on. I got my permit."

I shake my head and walk her around to the other side of the car. "Yeah, but what you don't have is my permission. That, you gotta earn."

I open her door. The kid named Matt's probably not watching, but some boy is bound to be looking out a window. He should learn to open the door for a girl.

Lunchtime traffic is still heavy, so I don't talk. I wait till I'm stopped at the light on East Hartwell and figure what to say. The white F-150 in front of me is one of my regulars. He waves in his rear-view mirror, and I wave back. Even if I didn't recognize him, I'd know the truck—the decal of Calvin pissing on a Chevy, the red and white *Roll Tide* bumper sticker, the license plate with *Heart of Dixie* taped across the top.

Get over it, I want to tell the guy. Ford ain't necessarily better than Chevy—neither one's as well-built as a Toyota—and Bama can't win a championship every year, and it's been a century and a half since the Civil War. *Get over it.*

I turn to Joni. "How come you had a fight?" I ask. "Boys fight, not girls."

Joni wheels toward me. "Brittany called me a bitch."

"Why'd she do that? Did you act like a bitch?"

Her face contorts, and I'm afraid she's going to cry again, so I turn back to the traffic light, wishing I had steel glints in my eyeballs. The white F-150 revs his motor like he's in a hurry to get back to work. I rev mine. I promised the Skylark by three. I talk through clenched teeth.

"You're a Maddox. I expect more of you. You can think what you want, but you better act like a Maddox. A Maddox plays hard, Joni, but a real Maddox has got class. You need to be a person others can look up to, you hear?" I make sure she's looking at me. "I can't imagine your grandmother using the words in that note. Or your mother, either."

Her face crumples.

Her grandmother, I said. Her mother.

The Bear made a commercial, made lots of them, but this one stood out from the rest. He was leaning against a goalpost, praising the phone company. The camera was about ready to stop rolling, you could tell. He'd said everything on the script, but he cocked his head and squinted those steely eyes at the camera one more time.

"Call your mama," the Bear said. "I wish I could call mine."

Joni grew up without women in her life—pretty much. I don't count Lela.

"Stop crying," I say, but Joni keeps crying.

Sharon would know what to do, what to say. She'd make this look as easy as breathing.

The light changes, and I zoom off behind the white Ford. I take my eyes from traffic a second to glance at Joni. She's snuffling into her hands. Wail-sob-wail-sob—the way kids do when they can't stop crying, like they can't find the switch to turn it off. I put one hand on her shoulder and pull my gaze back to the road. Damn! The F-150's taillights are blood-red, and close. The driver's slowed way down to turn right. No signal. My brakes screech. My truck swerves all over the lane. We're going to hit. There's nothing I can do.

"Grandpa!" Joni shouts. She grips the dashboard.

We stop just short, and the idiot never even notices.

"Bastard!" I yell out the window. "Nearly got your license plate shoved up your

ass!"

I pound on the horn and flip him a bird. He must think I'm being friendly. He waves and finishes the turn.

I lean back, shaking my head. I look over to Joni. She's pale, but she's okay. I put my hand on her knee and catch her eye. Exhaling, I ease off the brake and start up again, relaxing my grip on the wheel.

The road winds past a row of fast-food places, and I pull into a Dairy Queen drive-through.

"Your usual?" I ask, and Joni nods.

When the order's ready, I park off to the side, and we eat like always, without talking much. Halfway through my cheeseburger, I look at her. She's got hot dog chili smeared from her cheeks to her chin. I laugh out loud and hand her a napkin.

"You still make a mess," I say. "Just like when you were little."

She laughs, though it comes out like a sob, and she wipes her mouth. I finish my cheeseburger, ball up the wrapper, and am reaching for the key when Joni speaks. Her voice is quiet, and I have to strain to hear, like I used to in the middle of the night when I thought I heard her crying.

"Grandpa . . . what was my daddy like? Was he . . . like you said, a real Maddox?"

The question surprises me.

"Hell, yes, girl. Your daddy was the damndest man I ever knew. He was . . ."

I squint through the window. An image of Joe rises up before me, the November

night he broke his collarbone in a football game, his junior year. I watched from the stands, holding Sharon's hand so tight it's a wonder her bones didn't break, too. When the coaches set him on his feet, Joe gave his mama and me a thumbs-up sign. Then he crumpled onto the field.

"He was . . ."

Joni sniffles.

"Yep," I say. "He was a Maddox, and you are, too. You just need a pep talk every now and then to remind you. Good God-almighty! So do I."

I squeeze the steering wheel. So much for me obeying the Ten Commandments.

Joni puts her hand on my wrist. "Grandpa, back there, when you yelled at that driver . . . I guess I must have the Maddox temper, too, 'cause—"

"Listen, sugar, I shouldn't have done that. Hope that fellow didn't hear me. Sorry you had to—"

She squeezes my arm. "Grandpa, it's okay. Anybody would've done the same thing. Stupid driver. He's supposed to signal. What I meant was, I lost my temper with Brittany, and I'm sorry about that. She called me a bitch 'cause . . . 'cause I said her mother is fat."

I nod. Joni's blue eyes bore into mine, like she wants me to understand. I'm not sure I do. Sharon would, but Sharon's not here, so I concentrate. Brittany's mother is fat, I say to myself. This must be the important part. Brittany's mother is—

Joni's mother is . . .

"Call your mama," the Bear said. "I wish I could call mine."

I put my hand over Joni's. "Is she?" I ask, trying not to smile. "Fat?"

"Yeah," Joni says. "*Real* fat."

"Fat as your Aunt Lela?"

"No way!" Joni grins. "But she's pretty big. And she wears short shorts. To Friday night football games."

We both bust out laughing. We giggle for a long stretch, two fifteen-year-olds laughing at a joke. After a minute, I start the engine and head home. I make the turn into our street and stop in the driveway. Sharon's car sits in the carport, her license plate number one digit ahead of mine. I haven't wanted to sell her old car, but maybe I should do just that—get a new one for Joni, maybe let her pick it out, or at least the color. *Stars Fell on Alabama*, Sharon's plate reads. A tiny red heart down at the bottom has the words *Heart of Dixie* in the middle, a concession that's not big enough for some folks.

Get over it, I say to myself. War, death, lost football games. Don't matter.

"The only important thing," The Man said, "is getting back up and playing your guts out till the clock stops."

"I got an idea," I say. "Might be fun. You leave your books and go stand over there by the forsythia." I point to the bush Sharon planted at the side of the yard when we moved into this house. Right now the leaves on the long spires are brown, but come spring the flowers are so yellow they make your eyes hurt.

"Don't you have to be back at work?" Joni asks, but she opens her door.

"Nah. Mac and Lela can handle it."

Mac will even get the Skylark done on time. What do I pay him for? I open the

car door without bothering to shut it. "Back in a sec. Gotta get something."

I bound up the steps, unlock the door and rush inside. I know right where that something is. It's dusty, and I haven't picked it up since Joe died, but I still know the right grip. Damned thing's not even twelve inches long, but I wouldn't have been me without it.

Joni's standing in front of the browned-out forsythia, and I squint, remembering the yellow flowers. My fingers shake, but I grip the ball tight the way Coach said.

"One thing your daddy could do," I say, "was catch a football. Can you?"

I let it go, a high, arcing spiral, and she runs toward the ball, catching it as easy as breathing.

"Great catch!" I yell, and she beams, tossing it back to me.

Her throw hits the grass at the bottom of the steps, but we can work on that.

"God's the only one does things right the first time," the Bear said. "Rest of us got to practice."

I raise the ball again.

"Joni!" I call out. "Go long, girl! Go long!"

Alien Alibi

I used to think I'd be happy to get out of Magnolia Falls—to be *anywhere* but here, where I've lived my whole nineteen years—but I was wrong.

Being kidnapped by aliens only made things worse. A lot worse.

The night I got kidnapped, June 13th, 1998—the night Sybil got killed—even started out with aliens, but not *real* ones. My brother Clayton took me to the old Capri Theatre in Montgomery to see both versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I'd never been to a theatre spelled like that. The first *Body Snatchers* movie was as old as Sybil, forty-some-odd, and the second one was celebrating its twentieth anniversary. My brother and I grew up watching scary movies, but since Magnolia Falls hasn't got a traffic light, much less a theater, Clayton had to drive forty-five minutes into Montgomery, not that he minded. He's been behind a wheel since he was eleven, when his feet barely hit the gas pedal.

It was after the second movie, when the lights came on, I felt like an alien myself. Even the girl selling popcorn was dressed better than me. Course—if I *had* left the house in real nice clothes, with my husband away at National Guard camp—my mother-in-law

would have figured I was going on a date instead of out with my brother. Sybil and I got off on the wrong foot from the start last December when Trey brought me home. I could tell from the look on her face, a black daughter-in-law was *not* what she wanted for Christmas, not even a light-skinned girl like me.

To tell the truth, if I'd been dressed up, I'd have made Clayton feel out of place. I knew he'd be wearing jeans and a tee-shirt. As we came through the lobby, I got a look at us in a mirror. People *were* staring at us, no denying that, but Clayton draws stares no matter what he's got on. He's tall and lean, with arm and shoulder muscles that come from changing tires and toting engine parts and hooking up cars and trucks with a tow chain. And Clayton has our mama's good looks. Mama's been dead fourteen years, but folks in Magnolia Falls still remember Valerie Waters and her purpley-blue eyes—like the passion flower, they say, and Clayton looks just like her. You don't often see blue eyes staring out of a black face.

People say I've got Mama's eyes, too. I worry that's not *all* I got from her.

So, there I was in jeans and a cotton blouse, with rich folks all around us, looking like fashion models. They headed off to their Cadillacs and Lincolns, and Clayton and I climbed inside his twelve-year-old Silverado.

We rode without saying anything, just old songs playing on the radio. We went past the college strung with street lights like a city inside a city and then past the country club with spotlights so bright a stranger could take it for the Governor's mansion. The moon was shining off to my right, and I watched her slip in and out of clouds.

When we got on the two-lane leading home, the moon was gone. The only light

was the truck's headlamps. All the cotton fields on the side of the road gave me the shivers—the short, round plants looked like the pod people in the movies we saw—so I pulled my feet up on the seat and wrapped my arms around my knees. Clayton was working on one of his Marlboros which I've told him are gonna be his death, but does that stop him? "Nobody's gonna miss me," he says. "Not even you, Estelle."

"Which movie did you like better?" I asked.

Cigarette smoke swirled around his head, and he cut his eyes toward me. *Yesterday* was playing on the radio, turned down low as a lullaby.

"The old one," he said. "You?"

I hugged my knees, remembering how the second movie ended. No matter how many times I've seen it, which is a bunch, the ending gives me the creeps.

"The second one."

He nodded, but he already knew what I was gonna say. We know everything about each other by now, Clayton and me.

"Maybe we can do something else this week," he said, stubbing out his cigarette in the ashtray. "Before Trey gets back."

"Yeah."

I knew what he meant. Trey and Clayton haven't ever got along. Trey won't even let Clayton work on his car, a red Mustang his daddy bought him last year, before the old man died. "Rather let strangers do it," Trey says, when what he means is *white people*. The car's needed hail damage repair for a couple months now, but Trey drove it on to guard camp so a shop outside the base could fix it instead of his own brother-in-law, who

is the best mechanic around even though he's a black man. I asked Trey why, and he just said, "Can't use the damn car for two weeks, anyway."

I was thinking about Trey's daddy and wondering if he would have liked me when Clayton stubbed out his cigarette and said something I didn't hear.

"What?"

"I said, *how you doing, Estelle*?" Clayton asked. "How's everything?"

"Fine," I said, glad to see the big neon sign for Wade's Garage and Body Shop just ahead. Clayton works for Wade and lives in the apartment above the garage.

"Good to hear," he said, but I knew he wasn't through. Sometimes Clayton thinks he's my daddy *and* my mama rolled into one, the way he worries about me.

"Trey get off okay today?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. He left after lunch. Prob'ly got to Fort Benning around three o'clock."

"Are you gonna be all right in that house with just you and Sybil?"

"Sybil doesn't bother me."

"She doesn't, huh? Old lady must be losing her touch."

I let out a sigh. "Clayton, I wish you'd find some nice girl and get married, so you'd stop worrying about me."

"Think that would solve all your problems?" He laughed. "Sure wouldn't solve mine."

He slowed down, pulled up beside my car and turned off the engine. Three other cars were in the lot, a Chevy and two Fords that Clayton and Wade were working on.

"Thanks," I said, opening the truck door. The inside light came on, and I squinted

at Clayton. "Hope I get home safe—considering all those *pod people* are out there in the dark, just waiting for me."

"If you're scared, I'll follow you, Estelle. It wasn't real, you know, just a movie."

I shook my head and got into my car. The engine started right up, which was good. It's been trying to give me trouble lately.

Clayton put his hand on the door, and I let the window down.

"Pop the hood," he said. "Motor don't sound right."

"I'm tired, Clayton. It'll be fine."

He shook his head. "You should listen to me once in a while, Estelle. I don't want you to break down somewhere, is all."

"I know." I gave his hand a squeeze. "But it's already twelve-fifteen, Clayton. Sybil's gonna have the sheriff out looking for me, if I don't get on home."

"She's sure got you running scared," he said with a grin. "Damn that woman!"

He leaned closer. His eyes lit up, and a dimple dented his left cheek. I had to grin back. It 's not Clayton's fault he's good-looking like Mama. I'd never tell him or anybody, but he's even better-looking than Trey.

"Why you let Sybil boss you around?" he asked. "She ain't your mama."

"Nobody's my mama, Clayton." I reached up and pecked him on the cheek. "Nobody but you."

He nodded, but he cocked his head at the engine, like he was listening to something I couldn't hear.

"See you," I said, putting the car in reverse. "It was fun tonight."

As I pulled onto the road, I saw Clayton in the rearview mirror, still cocking his head. Not ten minutes later I wished I'd paid attention to him. The engine sputtered, and I barely had time to get it onto the shoulder. I turned the key again, but there was a screeching noise, like a cat when you step on its tail. I nearly wet my pants.

"Well, damn," I said, hitting the steering wheel.

The car died right in front of Lamar Thomas's farm. Rows of cotton plants spread out as far as I could see on both sides of the road. It wasn't far to Sybil's, and I didn't mind a little walk, but those movies spooked me. I turned the key once more. This time it didn't even screech.

I stuffed the keys in my jeans pocket and opened the car door. "Whatever you don't want to do," Clayton always told me when I was a kid, "do it fast and get it over with." I locked the car and took off toward Sybil's. Trey and I lived there, too, but it wasn't *our* house, and Sybil let me know it every day of the world.

I whistled under my breath, trying not to think about body snatchers. The moon was gone, but the stars were bright, and there were billions of them. I saw airplanes, too. I've never been in a plane, but I made myself think about what was likely going on in one of them—stewardesses and pilots and passengers who were asleep, maybe, or reading, or looking out the window or even using the bathroom. Was it true what Clayton told me once about airplane toilets, how you just flush all that stuff out into space? I couldn't bring myself to do that. I'd just hold it till we landed.

Not a single car passed me, which was probably a good thing. If anybody had slowed down, I'd have dived into a cotton plant. Wasn't long before I was running down

the driveway. The house was just ahead, and the place was dark as a graveyard, with the shadow of the old magnolia tree off to one side like a great, big mouth about to eat it up, shingles and siding and bricks. The front door was wide open.

I stopped at the tree to catch my breath and wrapped my fingers around a branch. Sybil had all the other trees pruned, but for some reason she let this one go, and the branches hung down to the ground. My hand was right next to a white bloom as big as a pig's head, and the sweetness near knocked me over. I may have stood there for ten minutes, not moving, just breathing that magnolia. Whenever things close in, this tree's my favorite place in the world. One day last winter I dragged a wrought-iron bench from Sybil's garage and pulled it up next to the trunk. From outside the tree, you can't see the bench, but from inside you can see everything.

I glanced at the house one last time, through the open door as black as an old negative, and I lifted the branch and stepped under the tree. That's where the aliens found me. That's where they dropped me off three days later. And that's the first place Clayton looked for me.

"Estelle," he whispered. "Get up. You're freezing."

He was right. I opened my eyes. I felt colder than I ever remember. "Huh?"

"Gonna take you inside, Estelle. What you doing out here? Why didn't you go on in the house? You should have called me to come fix your car."

He pulled me to my feet. I was shivering and half asleep, but I could tell the stars

seemed to be in the same place they were when I left earth three days before, and Clayton was wearing the same blue tee-shirt he'd wore to the movies—and the front door to Sybil's house was standing wide open. A light was on inside.

I dragged my feet. "I don't want to go in, Clayton. Don't make me."

I don't think he heard me. I can't swear I said it out loud. We walked to the porch and up the four steps and into the house. Clayton was the first one inside.

"My God!" he said. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph!"

After a minute, Clayton walked into the kitchen and picked up the phone. Seemed like no time before I heard the sheriff's siren, wailing like a homesick train, but I hadn't taken one step off that doorway. The only move I made was to lean down and pick up my cat rubbing against my leg.

When you see blood in a movie, it isn't the same as in real life. Real blood, at least when it's been on the floor or on a dress for three days, looks black, not red. And dead bodies look different in real life, too. When somebody dies in a movie, it's kinda fun to watch their chest. You can see a lot of so-called *dead* people breathe. I took one look at Sybil. She wasn't gonna breathe again—not ever.

"Hi, Estelle," the sheriff said, and I looked over my shoulder.

Sheriff Scoggins was standing on the top step of the porch. The smell of his pipe tobacco wrapped around me easy as an old housecoat.

"Why don't you sit out here?" he said, coming up and taking my arm.

I've known the sheriff since I was five years old, and I let him lead me to the swing. There was a quilt folded up on a chair, and he put it around me. The cat slipped

under the quilt, too. "There you go," the sheriff said, smoothing down my hair.

He walked on in the house, and he and Clayton started talking. They must not have thought I could hear, but that end of the porch was dark and quiet, just like under the magnolia tree. I wished I was still under that tree. I wished I was still on the spaceship.

GG, my cat, began purring. She put her paws on the quilt and pressed them up and down, like I've seen her do a hundred times, like a kitten at its mama's breast. One day last winter, somebody stopped on the road in front of Sybil's and dropped GG off. She was maybe four weeks old, and I guess she hadn't got enough nursing time. Sybil despises a cat, so GG had to sleep in the garage. I rubbed the fur behind her ears.

"You can stay where you want, now," I whispered. "You little gray ghost, you."

I heard the sheriff ask Clayton if he touched anything in the house, but he said only the phone. The deputy drove up, tires screaming, and ran inside the house. He didn't notice me on the porch, and I wondered how he earned his deputy pay, considering he couldn't see. When the coroner drove up, he at least saw me there on the swing. Coroners must be more used to dead people than deputies are.

I'm worried about Estelle, I heard Clayton say.

Yeah, the sheriff said. *Must be bringing back memories.*

What you think happened here, sheriff? Clayton asked.

I put in a call to Trey's guard unit, the sheriff said. *Spoke to his Commanding Officer. He'll tell him about his mother. Hell of a thing for a boy to hear.*

Clayton was quiet for a bit.

No way Estelle can stay here tonight, he finally said. *I'll take her to my place.*

Maybe later, the sheriff said. *Right now, you take your little sister into town. I want her to talk to Bettie. Bettie'll ask her questions, find out what she saw. If I tried to ask Estelle questions here in this house, poor girl couldn't concentrate.*

That's how Clayton and the cat and I ended up at the county jail. Bettie Owen met us at the door and wrapped her soft, fat arms around me.

"There, there," she said. "Let's go in my office, honey." She jerked her head at the room next door. "Clayton, you go see Officer Hamm. He's expecting you."

Clayton gave me a kiss on the top of the head, and I followed Bettie. She sat down at her desk and motioned for me to take the other chair. Last time I sat in that chair, I was five years old, and my feet didn't hit the floor. Clayton was sitting next to me then, and his *barely* did.

Near as I could see, nothing was changed in Bettie's office, except maybe the calendar. She hadn't changed. She still wore bright-red fingernail polish, and her hair looked the way it always did, short and gray with smoothed-out waves—*helmet-head,* I called it, beauty-shopped once a week, like most women past fifty. She has smoker's lines around her mouth and circles under her eyes. I guess she's seen everything on this job, but nothing seems to faze her. She put her fingers on the keyboard.

"So," she said. "Tell me what happened, Estelle."

GG settled down under the quilt, pawing at the hem of my blouse, and I rubbed her little head.

"Tell you what?" I asked.

"You know, honey. What happened tonight? What did you see?"

"You mean it?" I never thought anybody would be interested. Nobody asked me about my trip the first time.

"Sure. That's why you're here, honey."

I took a deep breath. "I was sitting under the big magnolia tree in the front yard, the one with the branches that hang down to the ground, and—"

"No, no." Bettie's hands flew off the keyboard, and she waved them at me. "You have to start at the beginning. What time did you get to the house? When did you see the body? Who or what did you see at the murder scene?"

"The body?" I said. "Murder?" I stopped rubbing GG.

Bettie smiled, and the lines around her mouth disappeared. "It's okay, honey. Just talk. We'll go back and get the other stuff later."

"Like I said, I was lying under the big magnolia—"

She shook her head, pointing to the monitor. "*Sitting*. A minute ago, you said you were sitting."

I gritted my teeth and looked down at my shoes. She had asked me what I saw, dammit, and I was gonna tell her.

"I was *under* the tree," I said, "when all of a sudden, I saw a bright light, brighter than car headlights. There was a kind of swooshing noise for a few seconds, and then it got real quiet, no birds chirping or frogs croaking. I stood up and walked to the edge of the tree where the branches touched my face, and I saw this copper-colored . . . *ship* land on the grass. It was maybe twenty feet away and as big as a—a motor home, you know?"

I glanced up to see if Bettie was getting all this. Her fingers hung in the air above

the keyboard. She was staring at me.

"In the middle of the ship," I went on, looking at the calendar on the wall behind her, "there was a door, round like the moon. I didn't see it open, but it must have, because a light spilled out, dark as grape Kool-Aid. I heard voices, and they were calling to me, whispering. *Estelle*, they said. *Estelle*. I didn't want to leave the tree. I wrapped my fingers around a branch, but they were calling my name, just like before. I stepped out from the tree, and I don't know how they did it, but—" I glanced at Bettie. "The voices grew *louder*," I said, "but they were still *whispering*, you know?"

Bettie nodded.

"Then I was walking up the stairs and into the ship, and a gray shadowy . . . *thing* took hold of my hand and pulled me along. *She's still waiting for you*, the creature said. *She's waited a long time.* I moved like I was floating, but I don't remember walking. It was like the floor moved under me."

"Like those horizontal escalators they have in airports," Bettie said.

"I never been to an airport." I squinted at her. "After a few minutes, the creature let go my hand, and I *saw* her. She *was* waiting for me, just like the last time. *Estelle*, she said, and I felt her arms wrap around me."

Right then GG let out a wail and bit me on the hand. I looked down. I was pulling her fur. I let go and rubbed her head.

"This creature." Bettie's voice was so soft I leaned forward. "What—what was it?"

"*She*." I said. "She. Her name is Reevah. When Reevah put her arms around me,

the ship took off. I felt it lift up and leave the earth, but I wasn't worried. Even last time I didn't worry because her voice was in my ear. *What is it*, she asked. *Tell me, Estelle. Tell me*. And she patted me on the back like she was burping a baby, and she said, *There, there*. And I told her everything, everything I saw that night."

"What . . . what did you tell her?"

Bettie was leaning way across her desk. Her red fingernails reached out like I had something she wanted real bad. I must have give her a sharp look—I don't remember—but she sucked in her breath.

"I told Reevah," I said. "That's enough. I don't want to tell *you*. I don't want to tell anybody."

"And you don't have to, Estelle," a voice said, and I wheeled around.

The door was open, and I saw Thurman Dowling. He's Sybil and Trey's lawyer, but I couldn't figure out why he was talking to me, much less taking my side against Bettie. Bettie wondered, too.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"My client—my client's wife—is being interrogated. Her lawyer needs to be present." Thurman put his hand on the lapel of his expensive-looking blue suit and stared down his long nose at her. It's always been a mystery to me how eyeglasses stayed put on Thurman's skinny nose.

"There's no interrogation, Thurman. Estelle is here as a possible witness to a crime. The sheriff wants me to get her statement, is all."

"Precisely." He lowered his head another inch or two but the glasses stayed put.

"And that is why I should be present. He looked at me for the first time. "Estelle, I strongly advise you not to say anything further."

Thurman wasn't really my lawyer, but I did like he said. I didn't want to tell Bettie anything else. My head hurt. The door opened again, and it was Trey. A state trooper came in with him.

"Estelle," he said, and I ran to him. He felt so good, so big and strong—as strong as Reevah, but not soft like her. He looked handsome in his army fatigues. I think I first fell in love with Trey when he was wearing a uniform, even with his pretty blond hair in a crew cut.

"I'm sorry about your mama," I whispered. "It's terrible, I know."

He didn't say anything, just held me tight. I wished I'd had a bath and clean clothes. Being in a spaceship for three days hadn't done much for my looks, I was sure of it. Trey pulled away. His green eyes were filled with tears, and his lips trembled. He looked at Bettie and then at Thurman.

"Do they have any idea who done it?"

Bettie and Thurman looked at each other. I spoke first.

"There was a prison detail on the road in front of the house this morning, picking up trash. One of them could have escaped, Trey, and come back to the house."

He closed his eyes. "Has—uh—anybody seen Mama yet? Seen her body, I mean?"

Thurman and Bettie still weren't talking. I bit my lip.

"Do you think she suffered?" he asked.

"Uh—I don't think so, Trey," I said. "She probably didn't know what—"

I couldn't finish. I didn't want to say *what hit her*, but something *had* hit Sybil, over and over and over.

The state trooper opened the door. "I'll bring in your duffel bag, Trey."

"Thank you, sir," Trey said, as the trooper left. "He brought me home. Said I shouldn't drive after . . . you know. I told him my car's at the shop, anyway."

"That shop hasn't fixed your car by now?" I asked. "Ain't they had it long enough?"

"They promised it in three or four days. I only dropped it off today, Estelle, soon as I got to Columbus." He glanced at his watch. "I mean *yesterday*. It's after midnight."

"But *today* is the—" I looked at the calendar on the wall. Somebody—Bettie, I guess—had put a big red X across all the days from one through thirteen. The fourteenth was spanking-clean, just plain black numbers inside the white square. Where had I been for three days?

"Today is *what*, Estelle?" Bettie leaned toward me, over her desk.

"It's . . . it's—"

Thurman took me by the arm. "Bettie," he said. "We're through here. Have the sheriff call me if he needs anything else."

As we went out, I caught Bettie's eye. She didn't think we were through.

Trey and I couldn't go home. Home was a crime scene. We stayed in a hotel. Big

as Trey is, he cried himself to sleep. About the middle of the night, I woke up and forgot for a minute where I was, till I heard Trey snoring. I'm ashamed to say that was the first time Clayton came to my mind. How long, I wondered, had he waited for me at the jail?

The next morning I called to tell the sheriff about the prison detail, and he said he would write that down, but I don't believe he did. He already had his mind made up.

Sybil's funeral turned out real nice. The preacher didn't know her very well, because he talked about a sweet, old lady, the kind with laps little kids like to climb up in. After the burial, we all came back to the church for dinner. One thing folks in Magnolia Falls know how to do is feed a funeral. When we got there, Trey gave me a frown, looking just like his mama, and told me I had runs in my stockings, so I stood close to the wall, in front of a picture of Jesus sitting with the little children.

Across the room, a long line of people was filing past Trey and his Aunt Margaret, hugging their necks and kissing their cheeks, before wandering over to the table to fix up a plate with potato salad and fried chicken and peach cobbler. Susie, the nursery worker I help on Sunday nights, waved at me from the buffet table and said "God bless you, Estelle," but she finished fixing her plate and went to sit down near some other folks.

Clayton was there, looking handsome in a navy-blue suit. He's never owned a suit, so I figured it belonged to Wade, his boss. Wade came, too. Maybe it was Wade's suit, and he wanted to keep an eye on it. He knew Trey's family from when old Mr. Ramsay would take his cars in to be fixed. He and Clayton stood with me for a while, keeping me company. It was a small church, so nobody could pretend we wasn't there,

but I still felt like an outsider. I'd be glad when this part of the funeral was over, so I could go back to being Trey's wife. Where would we live, I wondered?

"Let's go outside," Clayton said.

I shook my head. "We shouldn't leave. It'll seem disrespectful."

"Come on," he said. "Nobody'll miss us. I need a cigarette, but I don't wanna smoke in front of Jesus here."

And I'd thought he took no notice of Jesus hanging on the wall. We grinned at each other, but my grin faded fast. Over Clayton's shoulder, I saw Sheriff Scoggins standing at the door between two of his deputies. Little by little the room grew quiet, and the sheriff stepped into the room. He and his deputies walked straight to Clayton.

"Clayton Waters," the sheriff said, "you're under arrest for the murder of Sybil Ramsay."

"No!" I leaped away from the wall. "Sheriff, you can't be serious."

Sheriff Scoggins gave a nod to one of his deputies, and the man grabbed me by the shoulders. While the other deputy put handcuffs on Clayton, I heard the sheriff talk about the right to remain silent, with my brother standing there looking at me like I should do something—scream or kick the deputy in the ass—anything. I didn't move.

Clayton and the deputy walked out, and I felt the room draw up, like somebody tightened a belt. Folks crowded around the sheriff.

"I thought that boy done it all along," Trey's Aunt Margaret said. "What made you come to your senses, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Scoggins paid her no attention. He pulled Trey off to one side and put one

arm around Trey's shoulder. They were standing a little apart from everybody, but like I said, it was a small church, and we heard the sheriff, clear as church bells.

"Sorry to interrupt the funeral, son, but I was afraid Clayton might be a flight risk." The sheriff lowered his voice. "A deputy found a bloody tire iron in the bed of Clayton's pickup. Blood matched your mother's. Till I found out, I didn't believe he was guilty, though folks been telling me for a couple days that he had motive to kill your mother. A couple of women told me she went to the beauty shop last week and told somebody Clayton was, um, *gay*." The sheriff chewed on his lip a minute. "Word got out all around town, even got back to him, and he flew into a rage."

Trey's face was red, and his fists were balled up. I hadn't moved to help Clayton, but now I ran to Trey and took his hand. He pushed me away, and that's when I saw what damage was done. In Trey's eyes, it was the same as if *I'd* killed Sybil.

Trey wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't look at me. That night in the motel room, he slept on the floor. The next morning, I packed my clothes and went to ask Wade if I could stay in Clayton's place.

"Sure," he said.

Wade was bending over the engine of an old Chevrolet, holding a wrench, but he didn't look too interested in fixing that car. He seemed as broke up as me over Clayton being in jail.

"He asked about you," Wade said. "He looks fine."

"You've been to see him?" I asked. "I didn't know we could."

The phone rang, and Wade answered it. After a minute, he handed it to me. It was

the sheriff. Clayton was in the hospital, asking for me. The other men in his cell had beaten him up. I gave Wade the phone, unable to speak. He listened to the sheriff.

"I'll take you to see him," Wade said when he hung up. On the way in to town, wiping at his cheeks with an old rag, he told me the other prisoners had heard that Clayton was gay. That's why they ganged up on him.

"Clayton was calling for you," Wade said. "Sheriff thinks he wants to confess."

When we got to the hospital, Trey drove up right behind us. He opened the car door for me. "The sheriff called," he said. "Clayton wants to tell me something."

My heart sank. Was this the only way my husband was going to speak to me—because my brother would confess to killing his mother? I gave Wade a weak smile and told him to go on back to work. I'd let him know how Clayton was doing.

There was no guard at Clayton's door. Was he so bad off they didn't worry about escape? There was no nurse or doctor in sight, not even when I opened the door to his room. Was he in such dreadful shape they didn't check on him—or was it because nobody cared if he died? He was lying in bed, one leg in traction, one arm in a sling and a bandage across his cheek. I ran to him and squeezed his hand. Behind me, I heard Trey close the door. Clayton opened his eyes and studied my face like I was a hard question.

"Estelle," he said, "did you ever tell Trey you were kidnapped by aliens?"

"What?" I glanced at Trey, shaking my head as if Clayton was talking out of his head. "You're not making sense. Just rest."

He tried to sit up but fell back down. "I heard you the other night," he said, "when you were talking to Bettie. I was in the next room. The officer left, so I stood close to the

wall and heard everything you said—about the spaceship and the gray alien named Reevah. You said she came for you once before."

Trey started laughing, and Clayton finally looked at him.

"It's funny how you can know somebody a long time, Trey, even live in the same house, but there's always something you can learn about them. I never knew about Estelle's spaceship. She must have believed in that spaceship since she was five years old. She was sitting under the kitchen table one day. She liked to play there where nobody could see her, hiding under the tablecloth. She saw our mother shoot our father and then turn the gun on herself."

I put my hands over my ears, but I could still hear him.

"You know, Trey, I always wondered," Clayton said, "how she managed to live with that picture in her head. Now I know. She made up another picture she liked better."

"But I *was* kidnapped," I yelled. "Both times."

Clayton's purpley-blue eyes filled with tears. "Estelle, there never was a creature named Reevah. Maybe you heard Daddy calling Mama's name, begging her not to shoot him. *Valerie*, he must have said, over and over. *Valerie*. In your mind, *Valerie* became *Reevah*. I don't know. I wasn't there, but I do know you never went up in a spaceship, not when you were five, and not the other night when Sybil got killed."

"No!" I screamed. "No! You're wrong. Reevah *is* real. She *is*. I was kidnapped. I was gone for three days."

Clayton lifted his head from the pillow. "The only alien creature you saw was somebody coming out of the house holding a tire iron. The only place you went was

inside the house, where you turned on the light and saw Sybil's body."

I closed my eyes. With my hands over my ears, I could barely hear him.

"When you were under the tree that night, Estelle, didn't you see somebody come out of the house? Somebody you knew?"

Trey was laughing louder now. "You're both crazier than I thought," he said. "The crazy Waters kids."

"You think so?" Clayton asked. "We're not as crazy as you, Trey. Estelle saw our mother kill our father and then turn the gun on herself, but *you*—you actually killed your mother—and I can prove it."

"I have an alibi," Trey said. "I was three hours away, and my car was in the shop. How the hell could I have murdered my mama?"

"The sheriff owed me a favor, Trey. I told him I wouldn't sue the jail for letting me get beat up, if he checked out an idea of mine. I had him call the shop in Columbus. I knew they wrote down the Mustang's mileage when you left the car with them on the afternoon of the thirteenth. It's standard procedure. When they closed that night, your car was still in the parking lot, next to all the other cars they were working on."

Trey folded his arms and narrowed his eyes at Clayton. I looked from my brother to my husband, not knowing what to think.

"Your car was locked," Clayton said, "and they never realized what you had done, but this morning I asked the sheriff to call and find out what the mileage was today. They were real surprised. The Mustang's got three hundred extra miles on it since you dropped it off on the thirteenth. That's the round-trip distance from here to Columbus, you know?

You had the extra key in your pocket, and you walked from the base to the body shop after they closed and got into your car. You drove home and murdered your mama, then drove back, parked the car and walked to the base. Ain't that right, Trey?"

"You're fools!" Trey whispered. "The whole town knows you're crazy. *Those crazy Waters kids*, everybody always said." He looked at me. "And you're the craziest, Estelle. You really thought I loved you, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "You do love me, Trey, and I love you."

He laughed. He took a step toward me and wrapped the fingers of one hand around my throat. I couldn't breathe.

"You were just my way out, Estelle, my way to get rid of Mama. She made Daddy's life miserable, but I wasn't gonna let her ruin mine." He grinned, turning my face this way and that, tightening his grip. "You got under her skin. I liked that. And you *are* beautiful. All my buddies are jealous as hell that I get to sleep with you every night. But Mama said I married beneath myself. When I went into the house the other night with Clayton's tire iron, I was gonna kill you, too, but I couldn't find you. You didn't know that, did you? Mama was right. I *did* marry beneath myself."

I clawed at Trey's hands, but he was too strong. I tried to scream, but no sound came out. Clayton pushed up from the bed, but even he couldn't move broken bones.

"Help!" he yelled, but it sounded like a whisper.

"Nobody's gonna hear you, Clayton," Trey said. "Once I'm done with Estelle, I'll work on you, and I won't half-finish the job, you can count on that. Maybe the sheriff will think somebody came over from the jail and decided to kill both of you niggers." He

laughed, again, but the sound came from far away. I struggled for breath. "I didn't know Mama was gonna spread that story about you," Trey went on, "but she was just being herself—and anyway, it gave you a reason to kill her, didn't it?"

I tried to scream. If Trey's hands squeezed the breath from my throat one instant longer, I would die. I turned my face toward my husband and stared into his hard, dark eyes. And then I lowered my chin, writhing my neck until I was out of his grasp, and I bit his hand, hard.

"Goddammit!" Trey said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the door open an inch.

The door flew open, and Sheriff Scoggins burst into the room. Trey let go of my throat, and I breathed in the sweet smell of pipe tobacco. The sheriff and a deputy wrestled Trey to the ground, but he was still calling me names, terrible names, so a doctor came in and gave him a shot. It took two deputies to hold Trey down.

When they took Trey away, the sheriff stood at the side of the bed for a minute, looking at us. I sat in the chair next to Clayton and clung to his hand.

"You gonna be okay?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes, sir," Clayton said, too tired to open his eyes. "We're gonna be fine."

The sheriff gave me a pat on the head, and I felt five years old again.

"We'll do what we can for both of you," he said and shut the door as he left.

I watched Clayton breathe, like he was somebody who had just pretended to die in a movie. I was mighty glad his chest was moving up and down.

"Clayton?" I said. He opened one eye. "What Sybil said about you—is it true?"

He opened both eyes. "What if it is?"

I shrugged. "I guess there's worse things. You could be one of those pod people."

Clayton winked at me—as much as anybody can wink who's got a bandage over his nose and across one cheekbone. Maybe he *would* recover, after all. Maybe I would, too. I loved my brother. He was all I had in the world.

But I still missed Reevah. There was a hole in my chest like the night sky when the moon goes down. More than anything, I wanted to climb up into Reevah's lap and lean my head against her soft, silver fur.

"There, there, Estelle," Reevah would growl. "There, there."

But Reevah was gone, and I was here, in this hospital room, in Magnolia Falls. Nobody's asked me yet—I guess nobody cares—but if somebody, if Bettie, maybe, while I'm sitting in the chair in front of her desk, with my feet barely touching the floor, if Bettie ever said to me, "Estelle, what's the very worst thing about being kidnapped by aliens?" I know what I'd say. She might even type up my answer.

The worst thing? They have to bring you back . . . I don't know why . . . but they do.

Something in the Blood

Calhoun sat on the bottom step of the porch, holding his wrists together, ready for handcuffs. With his hands like that, wrist to wrist and thumb touching thumb, the difference between the left hand and the right was plain to see. The porch bulb was burned out, but the flashing red strobe on the ambulance gave some light. He flexed his left hand. The three, short fingers and the nub of a thumb had always been with him—as much *Calhoun* as his normal right hand—but he understood, in a way that did not require words, why other children, most grownups, and even his own father winced and looked away. Children usually looked again. In the winter, he wore gloves outside, but now, in spite of today's snow, spring was here. Only when he thrust his hand into a pocket would his defect be hidden.

Calhoun wiggled his thumbs. The left wrist was different, too, smaller and narrower. He figured his left hand would slip out of handcuffs. Now that he thought about it, he knew his right hand would be too small for handcuffs. Maybe deputies carried kid-sized handcuffs. Maybe they would use rope.

He looked past his hands to the sidewalk. The men who came in the ambulance had not wiped up the blood, and Calhoun counted three red splotches where the body

landed on the snow-covered concrete. Snow had started falling only this afternoon just after the school bus dropped him off. A thick layer of white still covered everything. Frosted like that, like a birthday cake, the trailer looked pretty, almost like a real house.

Only this afternoon.

He remembered blood this afternoon, too—on the porch. Seeing the blood, Marie had started to cry. Maybe the blood had made her do what she did. Or maybe because today was April Fool's. Did Marie cause all of this, or did Calhoun? He rubbed his forehead with his good hand. He was getting a headache.

"April Fool!" they'd yelled at him. "April Fool!"

The bus rattled over the pot-holes, bouncing the children up and down. The older ones braced their feet against the floor. The smaller, younger ones stayed alive the best they could, weighing down their laps with heavy book bags. The day was colder than usual for the first day of April in Alabama, and the children wore thick, kapok-filled coats.

On one of the seats near the rear door, Calhoun pushed his face against the windowpane and strained to catch a glimpse of his house as the bus approached his long, dirt driveway. His *trailer*, he reminded himself. Justin, the chunky third-grader sitting in the aisle seat beside him, corrected Calhoun each time he talked about his family's house. "I live in a house," Justin would say. "You live in a trailer. You live next *door* to a house. You live next door to a *nigger*."

Calhoun thought of his trailer as a house, but Justin was too big to argue with. The bus slowed to a stop, and his family's trailer came into view. Beside it was the big, white house that nobody lived in now because it was old and run-down but which had belonged to the Lamberts, his mother's family, forever, or at least "since the war," everyone said, though Calhoun had no idea which war, or even much of an idea what war was.

A quarter mile down the road from the old Lambert place was the neat red-brick house where Wilma lived. One afternoon last fall, Wilma was opening her mailbox when the bus drove by, and she waved to Calhoun who was sitting by a window. He waved back.

Justin's mouth had fallen open. "You live next door to a *nigger*?"

Then, Calhoun had no ready answer, but years later he would know that Wilma Giles had come with the family property, with the Lambert family name, that Wilma's people had lived and worked alongside his own people for four generations, since the harvest season old man Tucker Lambert had no money for his black tenant farmer, Tom Giles. Tom Giles did not complain or talk of moving his family somewhere else or even ask for interest on the money owed him. Instead, he asked for the land he lived on.

On that day last fall when Wilma waved to him from her mail box, Calhoun did not know why he, in fact, lived next door to a nigger, so he clutched his book bag tight and slid past Justin's knees. Now, on the first day of April, two weeks into spring, he did the same.

"See you," he said.

"Not if I see you first," Justin said with a laugh and a punch that hit Calhoun

between his shoulder blades.

The blow hurt, but Calhoun gave Justin a nod and headed to the front of the bus. A first-grader, Calhoun had not advanced to cursive writing or to chapter books, but he understood that Justin enjoyed hurting people. Justin was one of the reasons Calhoun was glad for winter and grateful for the glove on his left hand.

"You only got nine," Justin told him once. "You can't even count on your fingers." He told his joke again for the rest of the bus.

The first morning he rode this bus, seven months ago, another boy, a stocky sixth-grader named Austin, stuck out his leg and made Calhoun fall. The driver was watching his rearview mirror and wrote the boy up, which gave him bus suspension for a day. Austin promised Calhoun a licking. So far, the licking had not come, but Calhoun did not forget, and he moved slowly down the aisle, keeping his eyes on Austin's outsized, basketball-player shoes. He reached the bus door, ran down the steps, and jumped to the ground. A cold wind whipped his jacket open, and he held his book bag in front of him.

"Hey, Retard," Justin yelled. "Look! Your house is on fire!"

Calhoun wheeled around, his heart pounding. The house was not on fire! Behind him, the bus erupted in laughter. He turned and saw faces at each window.

"You retard!" Justin yelled. "April Fool!"

"April Fool!" other voices chorused, and the bus rumbled away.

Calhoun shifted his book bag to his shoulder and headed home.

The day school had let out for Christmas, Calhoun told Justin his mother was expecting a baby, and Austin overheard. "Your folks been makin' bacon, huh?" Austin

said, and everybody laughed, Justin loudest of all. Calhoun laughed, too, but he did not know why. When he got home, he told his sister Marie what Austin said. She was three years older than Calhoun, but she could not see why it was funny, either. In the boy's mind, the unfathomable joke about his parents making bacon mingled with his crashing to the bus floor seven months before—both times the other students on the bus had laughed at Calhoun—and his anger at Austin began to grow, hurt accreting upon hurt, until he ran outside and threw rocks at the skeletal mimosa beside the porch.

Today, his day to be an April Fool, he kicked at the rocks in the driveway and waved at something brushing his cheek. Snow? He peered at the sky. Snow was falling, thin but steady. He glanced back to yell "Snow!" to Justin, but the bus was out of sight. He shifted his book bag again and squinted at the trailer. If he could see Mama on the front porch swing, then the baby wasn't coming today. The swing was empty. He took off running. For the past two weeks, Mama's feet were swollen from the baby, and she had not gone to work. Calhoun's bus always got home first, before Marie's, and he liked having Mama to himself, waiting for him on the porch swing. She ran a machine at the factory, sewing football jerseys. Most days of the week—and in this Calhoun knew his family was different from the families of his classmates—it was his mother who brought home the bigger paycheck. His daddy worked sometimes, in a barber shop on Main Street, but only when it was too cold or wet to hunt and fish. For the past two weeks, though, Mama had stayed at home, and Daddy had gone to work.

"I swear," Mama said last night while supper was in the oven, while the washing machine filled with water, and she poured in detergent. "I'm as big as this pile of laundry.

I feel like I'm twelve months pregnant."

"Well, maybe you'll be famous," Daddy said from the couch, where he worked at three activities: reloading shotgun shells, changing television channels with the remote control, and taking swigs from the glass on the coffee table. "You can go on TV. Make us some money. Help pay the doctor bills and the hospital."

Mama was making a joke. Calhoun understood that: babies took nine months; kittens took only a few weeks; elephants, Marie said, took two years. Calhoun didn't think his daddy was joking. His mama stooped over the hamper, pulled out a sheet and fed it into the washing machine. His daddy raised the glass to his lips and turned up the TV. Calhoun glanced at Marie across the table.

"Nine minus two is seven," Marie whispered, pointing to Calhoun's homework paper. "Look at number three."

He studied problem number three and counted off the answer on his fingers. Marie was right. She was always right. She was older, smarter, better. Even if nobody else thought so, Calhoun did, so he erased the number "6" and wrote "7" neatly and quietly. Today, when Mrs. Bailey checked homework, Calhoun had gotten all the answers correct, because Marie helped him.

The dirt driveway ended, and Calhoun ran across the patchy, brown grass to the porch. He took the steps two at a time and squinted through the glass on the door. Maybe it was too cold for Mama to sit on the swing. The inside was dark. When he pressed his face against the glass, all he saw was the snow falling harder behind him, like a drizzling rain. He knocked, but nobody came to the door. Where was his mama? If Mama went to

the hospital, the plan was for Wilma to come stay with him and Marie. Where was Wilma?

He wheeled around, angry no one was home, worried about his mama and the baby, wishing for this once that Marie's bus got home before his. He did not see the blue laundry hamper and stumbled over it, falling to the rough, plank floor of the porch. His left hand landed next to a dark red splotch of something, and he poked it with his nub of a thumb. Blood? He jerked back and wiped his thumb on his jeans. Whose blood?

Calhoun sat up and stared down at the laundry hamper, the kittens' hamper. Marie had fixed it up with old towels two weeks before when their cat Claudette had six baby kittens under Marie's bed. It was the night snow fell, the first day of spring, the first time Calhoun remembered snow. Not much snow stuck to the ground, not enough to build a snowman, but enough to cover the roads and cancel school, to give him and Marie time to watch Claudette take care of her blind, hairless babies. At night, the hamper sat in a corner in the kitchen. In the daytime, mama cat and kittens stayed in the hamper on the porch. Calhoun peered into the bottom of the hamper. More dark splotches.

"Mama!" he called out and jumped up, beating on the window, ready to break it with a rock. Where was his mama? Where was his cat, her kittens? His bicycle stood at the other end of the porch, beside the swing, and he ran to it, dragging it back, tripping over the heavy chain he sometimes used to keep anyone from stealing the bike while he was in school. Lifting the bicycle, he aimed the front wheel at the window. He was inches from shattering the glass when he heard a car engine and turned around.

"Calhoun James," a voice said. "Don't you even think about breaking that

window, you hear me?"

Wilma! He dropped the bicycle and ran to the edge of the porch. The drop was five feet there, and his mama always fussed at him not to jump from that end, but he leaped off now and rolled to a stop. Snow was sticking to the ground, and Calhoun wiped his face.

"Wilma!" he yelled, jumping up and running to wrap his arms around her skinny waist.

She had on her fuzzy, white sweater, the one her daughter Georgia knitted with yarn she called angel's hair, and Calhoun buried his face in it.

"Everything's okay, honey," Wilma said, patting his head. "Nothing to worry about. Your mama had her baby, and everybody's all right. Your daddy says you have got a beautiful baby sister. He's coming home with pictures. Let's go up here and wait for Marie."

She led Calhoun up the concrete sidewalk to the porch, up the steps to the swing, talking all the while, her voice calming him as much as her fingers in his hair. "You have a good day at school? We didn't know it was gonna snow, did we? What a day to get born. Snow on the first of April. You got a baby sister on April Fool. What you think about that?"

He nodded. Wilma's brown eyes crinkled when she smiled, and her black skin was smooth and shiny, like the bottom of his mama's cast iron skillet.

"Listen here," she said. "I have something to tell you, and I want you to be a big boy, all right?"

"Mama?" Calhoun said, his mind catapulting ahead, certain of the worst, but Wilma shook her head and looked stern.

"I told you, your mama's fine," she said. "The baby's fine. Now listen. It's your kittens."

The blood, he thought. The blood.

"I came up here a while ago," Wilma said. "I was going to wait here for you and Marie to come home, fix you some supper, and leave it here for your daddy and you and Marie to have, but I found the hamper on its side and . . ."

She put her hand on Calhoun's cheek.

"I saw an ol' tomcat," she went on. "He was carrying off the last of the kittens in his mouth. I caught up with him, but he'd already killed them all. They were lying in the woods there," she said, pointing to a stand of pines and underbrush where Calhoun and Marie played and built forts and Indian villages. "I buried the little things and put a rock over the place where he couldn't get to them again."

She closed her eyes, and Calhoun tugged on her sweater until she opened them again. Six minus six was zero.

"Where's Claudette?" he asked. "Did he kill her, too?"

"Oh, no, Calhoun. Your cat is fine. I found her in the house. I figure she got stuck inside when your mama and daddy ran off in a hurry to the hospital. She wasn't out here to watch the kittens, and that's how the tomcat got to them. I took her to my house and gave her some food and a clean bed. She'll be fine in a day or two, and then I'll bring her home. By then, maybe she won't smell her kittens around here."

Calhoun's face crumpled. He fell against Wilma's white sweater.

"Why?" he asked. "Why'd the cat kill 'em?"

Wilma shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Just some old tomcat. Might not even be the daddy cat. They do that sometimes. Something in their blood, I think, makes them turn, makes them want to kill. Nobody knows why."

He felt her back straighten. She pulled him from her the way Claudette pulled kittens from her breast when she was through nursing. Wilma held him at arms' length and stared at him.

"Now you be a big boy, you hear? Marie's coming home any minute, and you got a baby sister coming home. Probably tomorrow. I'm going to unlock your door and turn up the heater so you two can eat a snack and get your homework done. Get your clothes out for tomorrow. Help your daddy that way, you hear? It'll make him easier to live with. I'll be back later on to check on y'all and bring some supper. Okay?"

Calhoun sniffled once, stopped crying and nodded. Wilma unlocked the front door and made sure the heater was set for the right temperature. A few minutes later, Marie burst in the house, and Wilma told her what she'd told Calhoun. Even about the kittens. Marie's eyes watered, but she didn't cry like Calhoun. She nodded and put her arms around Calhoun.

"It's something in the blood," he told her. "Wilma said the old toms can't help it."

Scattering instructions, Wilma poured glasses of milk, set out a plate of graham crackers, and left with a last reminder as she closed the door.

"Do your homework now, you hear? No TV."

Marie sat at the table with Calhoun. She pulled out her three-ring binder and her social studies book, and he opened his arithmetic book. Calhoun was glad Marie was smart. She was smarter than his teacher. She made him understand subtraction when Mrs. Bailey was tearing her hair out.

"Calhoun," Mrs. Bailey would say, "I am tearing my hair out over you. Why can't you understand simple subtraction?"

When Calhoun thought about it, subtraction was not all that simple. Marie helped him with homework, but even she did not know everything inside his head. He could tell Marie almost anything—he told her what Austin said about making bacon—but he could not bring himself to tell her that he worried about the things that were subtracted, the minus things. Mrs. Bailey would not understand. He did not think Marie would, either. Say, he had an arithmetic problem about puppies, and the book had a picture of four puppies running around the legs of a smiling, brown-haired boy. The boy gives one puppy to his grandmother, one to his neighbor, and one to his teacher. How many puppies does he have left? Calhoun did not have a grandmother, so he puzzled over that little puppy and where it would go. Wilma, his neighbor, would take good care of her puppy, but would Mrs. Bailey? She did not like children—why would she like a puppy?

Third-grader Justin told Calhoun he had better learn how to add and subtract. "If you can't do crappy, first-grade math, you'll flunk lawn division for sure."

Calhoun puzzled over lawn division. Would the teacher make you divide up lawns? How were you supposed to do that? And why?

Marie closed the rings on her binder with a loud clamp that made Calhoun jump.

The rings were sharp. He'd seen them cut holes in paper, and once Marie caught her finger in one. She cried out, and when she saw blood, she shrieked.

"Fool!" his daddy yelled.

His mama ran cold water in the sink and pulled her over to let the water wash the blood away till she could see the cut. "Ain't nothing," Mama said, wiping Marie's face. "Just a little bite, is all. Here, let me put a Band-Aid on it." Marie was fine in no time, but Calhoun stayed away from binders. He liked loose-leaf paper or tear-out notebooks.

"Did you get tricked today?" Marie asked. "Anybody April Fool you?"

He shook his head, studying the last problem. His mind would not go in a straight line, but kept wandering to the kittens that should be in the blue hamper in the corner of the kitchen. Marie always let him play with them once he finished his homework.

"You did get tricked," Marie said. "I can see by your face. What happened?"

He told her.

She shrugged. "Justin's the retard, not you. Anybody would turn around to see if their house is on fire. You need to sit somewhere else on the bus."

"I miss the kittens," he said. "I hate that tomcat. I wish I could—"

"Me, too, but that ain't getting our homework done before Daddy comes home. What you got left?"

He turned the book toward her. She read the problem, her left eye twitching across the page, and Calhoun saw again why Daddy claimed she looked like Tripp—Uncle Tripp, his daddy's brother. Tripp had never been normal in the head, just like Calhoun's left hand had never been normal. Marie's eyes didn't move together. The left

one always leaped ahead. That was the only way she and Tripp were alike—something was wrong with their eyes—but Marie was smart. She helped Calhoun with his arithmetic.

"Here," she said, putting his book to one side and taking the last graham cracker from the plate, a long, unbroken one.

Graham crackers reminded Calhoun of his mama. The lines that ran down the cracker looked as if she made them on her sewing machine.

"How many cookies do I have?" Marie asked.

"One," he said.

She broke the cracker at the center line. "Now how many?"

"Two," he said.

She broke each cookie again

"Now?"

"Four. What are you doing?"

"Look, Calhoun. Here's Mama," she said, pulling one cookie away from the others. "Here's you," she went on, pulling the next and then the others, one at a time. "Here's me, and here's baby Olivia. Four cookies, right?" He nodded, and Marie put the cookies back together, one by one. "One plus one is two, two plus one is three, and three plus one is . . ."

"Four," he said. "But you left out Daddy."

Marie stared at him. "Calhoun, graham crackers don't come in fives, just fours. Now, finish up."

When he closed his arithmetic book, Marie was gone. He found her in the baby's room, the little room off their parents' bedroom, big enough for a bed and a dresser and a diaper pail.

"Look," she said, her eyes shining. The left one twitched with excitement.

She lifted the top of the diaper pail. Inside were two bottles of Jack Daniel. She replaced the lid and looked at Calhoun. He shook his head. Two from two is zero.

"Daddy's gonna get mad."

"Maybe he's so excited about the baby he'll forget about his whiskey."

"I don't think so."

"It's April Fool. Maybe he'll think it's funny."

"Ain't nothing funny about hiding Daddy's whiskey."

Outside a truck door opened, and they froze, eyes locked on each other. Calhoun took off the lid to the diaper pail. "You oughta put them back."

She shook her head and put the lid back down, hard. "Come on," she said, taking his hand, his bad hand. "Let's go see the baby's picture."

They heard footsteps on the porch, and Marie ran to unlock the door, tripping over her shoes to get there in time. If Drew James had to jangle keys to get into his "*Own house*," they heard him say as the door opened, then he wondered "*Why in God's name he bothered to have children*?" Calhoun took in his father's scent—aftershave, hair spray, cigarettes, and cigarette smoke. The boy's eyes followed his father's every motion, the way his long fingers pulled a pack of cigarettes from the shirt pocket embroidered with the name *Drew James*, the way he half-closed one eye to let the smoke curl up the side of

his face, the easy slump of his shoulders as he leaned against the counter and looked at the two of them, a cigarette teetering between his lips. Bursting into the house as his daddy did with a clatter of feet and words and the glare of his dark eyes always quieted Calhoun, made him turn from a careless schoolboy into a watchful, old man.

"What purpose do you serve," Drew James said to neither one in particular, "if you can't jump up to let your daddy into his *own house*?"

Marie stayed where she was, at the door, biting her lower lip, her bad eye twitching back and forth. Calhoun stood at the kitchen table, very still, like someone waiting out a storm, wishing Marie could hear his thoughts—*don't twitch your eye, Marie, don't twitch your eye*—but even if she heard, she could no more keep her eye still than he could pull a normal left hand from a glove. He gripped the edge of the table the way he had held onto a floating log when his daddy threw him in the creek before he learned how to swim—to teach him to swim, his daddy said, because *"That's what the world will do to you, Calhoun, throw you in before you're ready."* And Calhoun had learned to swim. He didn't like to swim, but he knew how. Throw him in a creek, a river, the ocean, he'd make it to shore.

Their father closed the door and dropped his keys onto the counter.

"Pictures?" Calhoun and Marie asked at the same time. "You got pictures?"

On his own, even knowing how much they wanted to see their baby sister or their mother, to make sure she was all right, the man might never have taken the pictures from his pocket. He was probably prepared to wait all night for them to ask, but once they did, he flung an envelope on the table, and Calhoun and Marie grabbed it up, hungry, the way

children in some other house would snatch at a bag of hamburgers.

"She looks just like her mama," Drew said, balancing his cigarette on the edge of the spoon rest. He opened a cabinet and took down a glass.

Later, Calhoun could not believe he had forgotten the whiskey bottles, so eager was he to know his mama was all right. The first picture showed her smiling down at a red-faced, wailing baby. He didn't see any resemblance to the beautiful Nell Lambert, with her shining, blue eyes, and her wide smile, and her blonde hair falling to her shoulder. His new sister didn't even look like a human baby. She reminded him of the newborn kittens, ugly and hairless. He brought the picture closer to his face. The baby had a red spot on one eyelid, a rash or a bruise. But Mama looked fine, just like Wilma said.

"She's pretty," Marie said, drawing out the word the way girls did when they saw babies. "You still gonna name her Olivia?"

Their daddy shrugged. He opened the refrigerator and dropped ice cubes into the glass. When he pulled on the door to the cabinet that held his whiskey bottles, Calhoun remembered. He held his breath and looked at Marie, but she was still staring at the baby's picture.

"Where the hell's my whiskey?"

He wheeled around. The bottles were in the cabinet when he left the house. He had no doubt what happened, but he wanted the guilty child to tell him. His hand came up, and both children stepped back, dropping the pictures on the table.

"Answer me. Which one of you little shits moved my whiskey?"

Marie opened her mouth. Calhoun watched her try to speak. He wanted to rush to the diaper pail and run back with it unopened like a Christmas gift, but he gripped the table's edge.

Drew slammed his hand on the counter. "Answer me."

"It was me," Calhoun said, glancing at Marie. "A joke. April—"

"Uh . . ." Marie said, her eye twitching, just the one eye, and she never looked more like Uncle Tripp than with that eye moving ahead of the other.

Drew's hand flew out, catching her across the face, and Marie's head whipped from side to side. He had never hit her on the face. Her lip began to bleed, and Calhoun flinched. If Daddy had believed his lie, that would be Calhoun's blood. Drew picked her up by her left arm above her elbow, lifting her from the floor.

"Where is it?" he asked. "Go get it now."

He dropped her, and Marie landed on her feet. She stumbled from the room. Later, Calhoun thought he ran after her to help bring the diaper pail into the kitchen, but what he did was to stay at the table and wait for her to come back. What he did was to look at his daddy. What flashed through his mind was one other time that he saw his father's face and felt as if he saw a stranger. He was in the barbershop on Main Street waiting for his daddy to get off work and watching him lather up a man for a shave. In the big mirror that covered one wall of the shop, Calhoun could stare at his daddy all he wanted, without being asked, "What are you looking at, boy?"

His daddy was a handsome man. Even Mrs. Bailey said so one day at recess when Calhoun overheard her talking to the other first-grade teacher. "A man's man," Mrs.

Bailey had said, whatever that meant. Calhoun had no idea. Drew James was dark-haired and swarthy-complexioned, with a nose that sloped perfectly over a dark, trim mustache, and full lips that smiled at something the soapy-faced man in the chair had said. His daddy's dark eyes, when they weren't looking at Calhoun or Marie, could seem friendly.

Now, in the kitchen, those eyes were angry. Marie hurried back with the pail outstretched and sat it on the table next to Calhoun's hands. Drew pulled off the lid and took out the bottles.

"Think you're smart," he said. "Real smart."

He poured a shot into the glass that was half-filled with ice cubes and Coca-Cola and brought it to his lips, closing his eyes. The first time Calhoun heard *shot* for whiskey, he thought of the shots he got at the clinic, the long needle, the quick pain. His daddy did not use a needle, and the whiskey did not seem painful. The opposite happened, in fact. His daddy relaxed. With lots of shots, he went to sleep.

Drew sat the glass on the table and filled it with another shot.

"You piece of shit," he said to Marie. "Come here."

Marie stood, rooted to the kitchen floor, so he jerked her arm and dragged her to the pantry. He shoved her inside and hooked a chair under the doorknob.

"Don't you let her out, either," he said with a glance at Calhoun. "I'm going back to town, pick up my paycheck. Maybe I'll let her out when I get home. Least my whiskey will be safe. Serve you both right if I get snowed in and can't come home tonight."

He stomped out of the trailer, and his boots click-clacked on the porch. The truck engine started up.

"Marie," Calhoun whispered. "You okay?"

He heard her sniffling, but she said nothing.

"Marie, talk to me. You okay?"

Finally she sobbed, a low "Uh-huh."

He jiggled the chair under the doorknob, but Marie screamed.

"No! He'll hit you. He said not to let me out."

They would have stayed like that until their daddy returned, whispering, Calhoun sliding graham crackers atop napkins under the door so Marie would not starve, Calhoun looking out the window every so often to let her know the snow was still falling—if Wilma had not called. Calhoun answered the phone. Wilma asked to speak to Marie, but Calhoun said she was in the bathroom. A few minutes later, Wilma was looking in the window and rapping her knuckles on the glass. Calhoun rushed to unlock the door.

"Where's Marie?" Wilma demanded, and his eyes betrayed him. She ran to the pantry, pulled the chair away, and opened the door.

"He told me not to let her out," Calhoun said.

"Mama," a voice from the door said, and Calhoun turned. Georgia, Wilma's grown daughter, had come with her. The tall woman moved so fast Calhoun jumped back. She flew to her mama's side. "What's that man done now? Damn him."

"Nobody should do nothing," said Marie. She sat on the floor, holding her head. "He told me to stay here."

Wilma lifted Marie's hand from her face. The girl's lips were flecked with blood.

"Calhoun," Wilma said, looking for the boy, finding him beside the table,

gripping the edge with his good hand. "Go to the bathroom, son, and get me a washcloth."

He ran off and found a stack of clean washcloths right away. A white one lay on top, but it had stains. For Georgia's sake, not Marie's, so Georgia would not think his mama could not clean a washcloth, Calhoun dug through the pile of towels until he found a blue one with no stains and dashed back to the kitchen. Rounding the corner from the hall, he caught sight of the three of them, Marie, Wilma, and Georgia, and he felt suddenly separate, different because he was male, like his father who had hit Marie, like the tomcat that had killed the kittens, and the boy hung back, watchful, outcast.

Georgia, tall and big-boned, lived in town where she learned how to dye her black hair a bright shade of red, and she stood in her white dress beside her small, slight-figured mother. With one hand Wilma wiped Marie's face with a paper towel, and with the other she stroked the girl's hair. Marie looked past Georgia's shoulder into Calhoun's face. Marie's eyes were still, with none of the twitching that made their daddy start talking about his brother and how Marie was stupider than dirt. Calhoun held his breath, stood without moving, and listened.

"Mama, come on home," Georgia said. "I don't want to be here when that man comes back. We ain't safe here."

"What about these children? They live here."

"Come on," Georgia said, tugging on her mother's arm, but Wilma kept smoothing the paper towel over Marie's cheeks. "We'll do something about that when we get home."

"What's she gonna do?"

"Stay in this pantry till her daddy gets home, I reckon."

"No, I mean Nell. What's she gonna do? She's bringing that baby home tomorrow."

"Maybe she'll leave him, Mama. Maybe she'll sell this land. She'd make a sight of money. Sell it to somebody building a country club. Enough land here for a golf course. And if they don't wait too long, they could save the old Lambert place, use it for the main house. Not fit to live in now, but it used to be pretty. Or maybe somebody'll snatch up this land for a big housing development."

"Nobody wants a house way out here, Georgia. Not this far out of town."

"You wait. Town's coming this way, Mama. Then what you gonna do? Don't you waste time worrying about Miss Nell Lambert. What's *my mama* gonna do with her poor little house, her patch of land? You think anybody gonna pay a black woman a good price for a little spit of land?"

"Time that comes, I'll let you worry about it."

"That's what I mean. I'm worried now."

"Look here, Georgia. Nell's the last one, and I knew a sight of 'em. Her mama. When your daddy died and you children were little, her mama was good to me. As for her daddy—course he wasn't worth much. He's the one let the house fall down around 'em, but I knew Nell's granddaddy, these children's great-granddaddy. Now, he was a Lambert, I'll tell you. The last real Lambert."

"Ha!" Georgia spat out the word. "Let Nell Lambert deal with these children,

Mama. She went and had 'em. Marrying that man was like marrying her own father, you ask me." Georgia tugged on her mama's arm again. "Come on, Mama. I'm getting nervous. He'll be back any minute. We need to go home, call the sheriff. Let him do something."

Wilma got to her feet, and Calhoun came forward as if out of a trance, the washcloth in his hand. Wilma took it as if he had brought it in time to do some good, and she patted him on the head. She wet the washcloth at the sink and pressed it to Marie's lips.

"Calhoun," she said, "everything's gonna be okay. Your mama's coming home tomorrow."

He nodded. Georgia pulled Wilma to her feet and closer to the door, but Wilma saw the envelope on the table. She picked it up and looked at the pictures.

"Mama," Georgia said, "you ain't got time to do this."

"Look," Wilma said, "little Olivia. She's so pretty."

"Huh!" Georgia spat out the word. "Nothing pretty about a new baby. All wrinkled like a prune, and look at that red spot on her eyelid. What's that? Birthmark?"

"It's where the angels kissed her," Wilma said, leafing through the stack of pictures. "Look here, Marie," she went on, taking the pictures to the girl in the pantry. "Olivia looks just like your mama, don't you think? I'll call y'all in a little while, see how you're doing. Marie," she added, putting the envelope into the girl's hand. "Don't you worry."

Marie gazed back, her left eye twitching.

Georgia shut the door, and Calhoun heard the car engine start up. The taillights moved down the driveway and disappeared.

Just before dark their daddy came home. The snow was still falling.

"Snow in April," he said. "Don't happen too often."

He made no move to open the pantry. Once Calhoun started to ask him about letting Marie out, but Drew stopped him before he said two words. Drew sat at the table eating the casserole Wilma had brought, and Calhoun sat on the floor next to the pantry, stretching the fingers of his good hand under the door, touching Marie's hand. Since Wilma left, Marie had not spoken. The boy was staring at the ceiling, so he was first to see the red light that made whirling circles on the kitchen walls. A car door slammed, and he looked at his dad.

Drew got to his feet so fast his chair fell over. "Did you—"

He hurried to the pantry door, jerked the chair from the doorknob and pulled Marie out. She clutched the envelope of photographs and blinked at the sudden brightness.

"Go to your room," he said, and she ran. "You," he said to Calhoun, and the boy leaped up. "Sit at the table. Do your homework."

Footsteps pounded across the porch, and someone knocked on the door.

"Mr. James?" a voice called out. "Deputy Griggs here, sir."

Drew opened the door.

"What's wrong?"

A man stood on the porch. The porch bulb had burned out weeks before, so the

only light came from the kitchen and the pulsing red light from the deputy's car. Calhoun saw the gun on the man's belt before he noticed the brown uniform, the hat like the cowboy hat Calhoun got from Santa last Christmas. The man peered past Drew into the kitchen and glanced at Calhoun sitting at the kitchen table, his pencil poised above an open book. Over the man's shoulder, in the light coming from the car, Calhoun saw that snow was still falling, red snow fluttering silently down.

"Well," the man said. "Heard there might be a problem with a child?"

The man's voice ended in a question, and Drew glanced from the man to Calhoun and back again, his handsome, friendly face a certain sign that nobody in the house was having problems. The deputy shook his head.

"A girl," he said. "Something about a girl . . . in trouble."

Calhoun saw his daddy make a fist and, just as quickly, so fast Calhoun doubted the man saw the fist, Drew thrust his hand into his pants pocket. He cleared his throat.

"Where'd you hear something like that?"

The man shook his head again. "Can't say, sir. Is there a girl in the house? Ten years old?"

Calhoun dropped his pencil, and both men looked his way.

"Son," Drew said, with a jerk of his thumb, "go get your sister. She's asleep in her bedroom. Go on, now."

The boy obeyed. Marie would not come right away, but stopped in the bathroom to wet her face, wipe her eyes, and look at herself in the mirror. A long minute later, Calhoun came back, leading Marie by the hand. The deputy stepped into the house past

Drew—into *his own house*, Calhoun knew his daddy was thinking.

"How are you?" the man asked Marie.

Marie looked at her father.

"She's fine," Drew said, putting his hand on Marie's shoulder.

Marie's eye twitched from side to side. There were more words. The deputy asked Marie questions, Drew answered for her, and Calhoun, hardly able to breathe, listened to the snow fall. A deputy wearing a gun on his belt was here at his house, and later there would be hell to pay. Today was the first of April, and snow was falling in Alabama. Today was April Fool, but his house was not on fire. Tomorrow his mama and his baby sister were coming home, his beautiful mama and his hairless baby sister with the red spot on her eyelid. Claudette's kittens were buried in the woods, under the falling snow. More minutes went by, more talking, but Calhoun concentrated on the sound of the snow hitting the ground. He had never known anything so soft, so hard to hear, and he closed his eyes to listen past the voices in the kitchen. The last time snow had fallen, the night the kittens were born, he slept through it all.

The door closed, and Calhoun opened his eyes. The deputy was gone. A few seconds later, the deputy's car started, and Calhoun heard it head away, down the driveway. When they could hear nothing at all, not even the sound of snow falling, Drew knelt down beside Marie, gripping her arm.

"Did you call the damn sheriff?"

She took a step backward, unable to speak. Disgust, rage, loathing—these ran across Drew's face, and Calhoun, hardly aware what disgust, rage, and loathing meant,

knew each expression from long exposure. Drew bit his lip and turned his hard gaze to Calhoun.

"Me, neither," Calhoun said. Once he began to talk, words spilled out like water from a broken dam. "It must have been Wilma. She called us. She wanted to speak to Marie, and then she came down and found Marie in the pantry. Georgia was with her."

"Damn interfering niggers," Drew said. "Why do I got to live next door to niggers, I want to know?"

Calhoun looked at Marie. Drew still gripped her arm, and she stood with her eyes closed, waiting for the blow. With her eyes closed, Calhoun thought, she doesn't look like Tripp at all.

"Damn you!" Drew said, snatching Marie to her feet. He pulled her to the stove where his cigarette lay on the spoon rest, a ribbon of smoke curling up to the ceiling. With one smooth motion, Drew picked up the cigarette and held it to Marie's arm, above the elbow. The girl screamed, her body dancing, jerking, writhing—every cell running miles away from her father—but Calhoun stood quietly, his feet rooted to the floor.

Drew let go of Marie, and she fell, quivering in pain, her screams filling the trailer.

"Just like my brother," Drew said, wheeling away from her. "Stupider'n dirt."

He forgot the chair he had knocked over when the deputy appeared at the door, and he fell to the floor, cursing. Still cursing, he pulled himself up and slapped at his pants legs. Calhoun, his ears ringing with screams and curses, could not take his eyes from Drew's face, the handsome, manly face, nor his thoughts from the memory of his

father shaving the man in the barbershop, and Calhoun's own face in the mirror, a mirror-image of his father.

"What are you looking at?" his daddy said, pulling back his hand as if to hit Calhoun.

The boy glanced away and moved to lift his sister and take her to the bathroom. Cold water for a burn, he remembered. Not butter. Mrs. Bailey said once not to put butter on a burn, but cold water. He wrapped a wet, cold washcloth around Marie's burn, the first cloth on the stack, the stained one he came across earlier, and he made Marie lie down. He pulled covers up around her neck and sat with her till she closed her eyes. Would Marie grow up to marry her own father, like his mother did? What did Georgia mean, anyway? How can someone marry her own father? None of it made sense.

In the kitchen, Calhoun watched his daddy pile up another plateful of casserole and put it in the microwave. He took the bottle of whiskey from the cabinet and made himself a drink, half Coke, half Jack.

"You going back to see Mama tonight?" Calhoun asked.

"Maybe. You want to go with me?"

"No, sir. I got homework to do. I'll see the baby when they come home tomorrow."

"Good boy. Do your homework. Gotta have one smart one in the family."

The microwave dinged, and Drew pulled a fork from a drawer and sat on the couch. The television came on, the noise constant but low. Calhoun stared at the arithmetic page. Seven smiling, black-and-white cows stared back at him. A farmer with

seven cows was giving three cows to his brother. How many cows did the farmer have left? He read the problem again, suddenly very tired, but as suddenly sure of what had to be done, what he alone had to do. Exhaustion settled over him, like snow on the trailer roof, and he wanted to put his head down and go to sleep. He had a few minutes, no more. Calhoun pushed away from the table. Slowly he moved to the door, opened it and stepped onto the porch, cold now and completely awake. He closed the door behind him. In the dark, the bicycle lock was not easy to open, but he held his breath and felt his way.

A short time later, he let himself back inside. The cows were still in the arithmetic book, waiting, with a patience that was almost holy, to be divided up, and he reached for his pencil. Drew brought his plate to the counter and washed his hands. He poured another drink. Calhoun took the car keys from the table and held them out to his father.

"You take care, Daddy," he said.

The keys were in his right hand, clenched so tight that Drew had to peel the fingers back one by one to get to the keys. The boy turned his gaze back to his homework. Drew reached for the doorknob, keys in one hand and his whiskey glass in the other.

"Y'all be good," he said, and he was out the door.

Calhoun picked up his pencil and wrote down *four cows* for problem number three. From the porch came Drew's shout.

"Damnitall—"

Calhoun heard a jumble of noise, and then a thud and silence, quiet and still as snow falling.

He put down his pencil and walked to the telephone to dial Wilma's number.

It was nine o'clock, past his bedtime, and Calhoun sat on the bottom porch step, holding his wrists together. Whatever happened, whatever the deputy did to him, he was ready.

He wanted to see his baby sister, though, to watch her grow hair like the kittens had, to change from an ugly, wrinkled, red nothing into a pretty girl like Marie. He wanted to find the old tomcat someday and pay it back. He wanted Mrs. Bailey to see his arithmetic homework. Subtraction was easy once you stopped worrying about the cows.

The ambulance door closed, and he glanced up. The driver and the deputy stood talking to each other, and Calhoun heard the deputy say "County General." His eyes fell to the brick sidewalk in front of him. With the red light from the ambulance whirling around and around, Calhoun saw the dark drops of blood on the snow where Daddy's head had hit the sidewalk. Behind him, he heard the trailer door open. Wilma and Marie came down the steps past him and stopped next to the ambulance. Marie carried a book bag on each shoulder. Wilma carried a plastic bag. Clothes, he figured, toothbrushes.

"Come on, Calhoun," Marie said, tugging on Wilma's hand. "We're going."

Wilma raised her eyebrows. "Coming, boy?"

Calhoun looked at the deputy, but he was listening to the ambulance driver. Neither man seemed to be in a hurry—there wasn't any need to hurry; the man in the ambulance was dead—nor did the two men seem interested in him, the boy on the porch steps, the boy who had brought all these people together on this cold, April night, and

that surprised him. When the deputy had arrived an hour earlier, before the ambulance drove up with its siren screaming and its red light flashing, Calhoun was waiting at the foot of the porch steps, sitting in the snow beside his father's body. The deputy was not the same one who came into the house that afternoon, and he seemed very curious about everything. He pressed his fingers against Calhoun's daddy's neck. He took a little notebook from his shirt pocket and wrote something down. Wilma came to the door to check on Calhoun, and the deputy ran up the steps to question her. He took photographs of the body on the sidewalk, of the footprints in the snow, of the thick, metal chain wrapped around the rail at the top of the porch steps. He talked on his phone to the sheriff. He asked Calhoun many questions.

"How long ago did this happen?"

Calhoun thought for a second. "About ten minutes before you got here, maybe fifteen. I called my neighbor, and she called the sheriff."

"Do you think your father was drinking?"

"Oh, yes, sir. He finished off nearly two bottles of whiskey tonight—by himself."

The deputy knelt down beside him and cocked his head to one side. "Where is your mother?"

"At the hospital with my new sister."

The deputy pointed to the top of the porch steps.

"How come that chain is wrapped around the porch rail?"

Calhoun looked from the chain to the broken body on the sidewalk below and back to the deputy. In the same way he had known to wrap the chain around the railing,

in the same way the boy on the bus had known that sticking his foot into the aisle would make someone trip and fall, Calhoun knew what to say, but he doubted the deputy would believe him. Calhoun was no good at lying.

"Daddy puts it there at night," he said, "to trip the niggers who live down the road if they try to break in."

The deputy rubbed his chin. "Damn!" he said, shaking his head. "Hoisted on his own petard, wasn't he?"

Calhoun froze. Was *petard* another word for *retard*? How did the deputy know everyone called Calhoun a retard? And why *did* Calhoun leave the chain on the porch railing? He meant to move it, to put it back on his bicycle, but once he saw Daddy at the bottom of the steps, he did nothing but sit beside the body. His head throbbed. Maybe he *wanted* to tell someone what he did.

Now, with Marie and Wilma calling to him, Calhoun held his wrists together and waited for the deputy to arrest him. The ambulance door slammed. The driver started the engine and headed out of the driveway. The deputy turned to Wilma. He touched the tip of his hat as he spoke.

"Sheriff said he'd be mighty grateful if you took the children home with you tonight, ma'am. He's going by the hospital to inform Mrs. James about her husband."

Wilma nodded, and the deputy walked to his car. He turned on his headlights and motioned for them to go ahead of him.

"Calhoun," Wilma called out, her voice louder. Her eyes focused on him. "We need you, son."

He stood up. When he took a step, he was careful not to touch the dark drops of his daddy's blood.