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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA at ASHEVILLE

THE WOLVES OF DROWNING CREEK

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN CANDIDACY
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BY
GREY JONES

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The Final Project

THE WOLVES OF DROWNNG CREEK

by

GREY JONES

is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Signature

<Thesis Advisor's Name>

Project Advisor

<Thesis Advisor's Home Department>

Signature

<Instructor's Name>

MLA 680 Instructor

Signature

MLA Graduate Council

Date: _____

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

In the South, family is everything. I have always been fascinated by my family's history, both the fact and the fiction. In rural areas, oral tradition is vital to the knowledge one has of one's ancestry. I was fortunate that my great uncle was a passionate amateur genealogist, for along with the tales he passed on, he possessed documentation. It was through this great uncle that I discovered ancestors who sailed with the Argyle Colony from Scotland to the Cape Fear region of North Carolina, eventually settling in what would become Robeson County. It was through him that I discovered our Danish, Dutch, French and English family ties. It was also through him that I discovered that our first direct paternal ancestor was from none of these populations. Rather, the man who began this ancestral line in America was African. Hidden within our white European cultural identity was a history of racial "passing." It is my intention that this history be a crucial theme in the final and complete version of my project.

Robeson County, North Carolina has always been racially diverse. It was home to Scuffletown, where a settlement of multiracial citizens was created in the eighteenth century. It is home to the Lumbee Indians and is widely influenced by their presence. Yet, the history and culture of Robeson County is little known outside of its borders. I found that the land where I was born, the land where for centuries my family has lived and died, called out to me. *Write*, it demanded. *Write*.

My artistic influences for my novel include Toni Morrison, who touches upon the narrative of passing in several of her works, including *Song of Solomon*. Another influence, Alice Walker, writes of the disenfranchised in the South, a theme that recurs in my own

writing. Dorothy Allison's portrayal of abuse, especially in the short story "River of Names," allowed me to write of the violence within my own family history. Novels such as Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Tim McLaurin's *Keeper of the Moon* captivated me with tales of the danger and the magic of living in rural, isolated communities.

The films of my youth inspired my writing as well. Memories of *Old Yeller*, the pathos and the joy, still resonate within me. It is not only a sense of nostalgia, but a sense of the values ingrained in the characters, values that were also ingrained in me. Similarly, the film *Where the Lilies Bloom* not only connects me to my family's history of tenant farming, but reminds me of the importance of honesty and forgiveness, family and home.

Robeson County has been largely ignored in literature. There are exceptions, but they are few. The writer Jill McCorkle has been influenced by the region. Josephine Humphreys, in her beautifully crafted novel *Nowhere Else on Earth*, has captured the legend of the Lumbee Indian folk hero, Henry Berry Lowrie. Nineteenth century poet John Charles McNeill wrote of growing up along the Lumber River, which winds from his native Scotland County through neighboring Robeson. Despite these exemplary works, I felt that there was still a place for my own interpretation, one that would capture the grit of working class values and the struggles of racial acceptance.

As a gay man, I was drawn to these struggles. I felt a relationship to my African American and multiracial ancestors that went beyond genetics. I could understand the pain of feeling marginalized, the pain of feeling that my country deemed my love unacceptable and the pain of feeling that I was not recognized as a whole and valuable member of American society. I was driven with a need to give my ancestors the voice that they were denied in life.

I believed that through the mighty pen, I could lift the veil. In celebrating them, I could settle their restless spirits, and my own.

Out of this drive was born *The Wolves of Drowning Creek*, a novel in progress informed by my family's nearly three hundred year history in rural Robeson County, North Carolina, and the legacy of a hard scrabble existence farming the land. It is a first person narration by a man looking back upon his childhood memories, and discovering there the secrets that shaped his adulthood.

Each character is crafted from the history of Robeson County and its people, from the river and the soil, and from the beauty and ugliness that created the past. Many of the characters are based upon members of my family. For instance, Danny Boy McClelland, the patriarch and hardworking tobacco farmer, is based in part on my late grandfather and great-grandfather. Clarence Day, Danny Boy's "right hand man," is a composite character. He is partially based on a man who for many years worked on my family's farm. He also represents those unknown African American family members who were lost to me due to the racial "passing" of my ancestors. My narrator, Hotshot McClelland, is informed by the childhood memories of both myself and my mother. Hotshot is also the moniker given to me in boyhood by my grandfather.

The Lumber River, once known as Drowning Creek, becomes another character in my work. Its 133 miles of black water represent the flow of time and the flow of blood. The history of the region is tied to the river, as are its people. For those of us who have stood beneath the moss draped cypress trees and seen cast within its waters our own reflections, the Lumber River is family.

Red Wolves are said to have once roamed the swamps which are dotted along the river's course. By the early 1800s, they were reportedly hunted to extinction in the region. The symbol of the wolf recurs throughout my project, not only in the literal image, but in the names of certain characters. The Scottish surname McClelland, for example, translates as the son of the follower of the wolf. Likewise, the names of the characters Rafe and Maccon bear the meaning of wolf. This, I feel, is an apt symbol. My characters are fierce, loyal and protective. Through the dangers associated with racism and classism, they have also been at risk of extinction.

The use of certain elements of local dialect was a conscious decision. My initial vision for *The Wolves of Drowning Creek* was a first person narration by an eleven year old protagonist. This vision called for regional dialect throughout the novel. However, the richness of the language was lost in this manner. The story became muddled behind the voice. I therefore revised the work, creating an adult narrator looking back upon his childhood, using dialect only within the confines of the dialogue.

I wished for our Robeson County colloquialisms, our "ain't" and "young'un" and our "mommuck" and "juvember," to sing with realism. I strove for an authentic voice, one that celebrated this region of the South, and its Scots-Irish Gaelic, African American and Native American traditions. I was aware that writing in any form of dialect could be controversial. Yet I knew that my project was a love letter to Robeson County. I love our language, its lyricism and its originality. In celebrating my once voiceless ancestors, I was compelled to make their voices genuine. Otherwise, I felt, I would not be writing the truth and beauty of people and place.

My project is not only about people and place, however. It is also about time. I chose the late 1950s, an era before the Civil Rights Movement, so that I could address segregation, institutionalized racism, classism and the familial sacrifices that were made in order to survive such discrimination. I had to be brave in order to write from a point in time before the advent of politically correct language and accepted ideologies of equality. This was another potentially controversial decision, and one I feel strongly was faithful to my vision.

Another crucial reason for choosing to position my characters in the past, was that I did not want the modern world to encroach upon their personalities. I wished to highlight a time when a young boy respected the wisdom of his elders and idolized the heroism of the Lone Ranger. I wished to reclaim a time before a cultural shift to a youth focused society and a rapid burst of technology made these attributes seem antiquated. I also wished to capture an era in the rural South when one's word, one's reputation for honesty, held real honor. In many cases, it was all one had. Being taught to stand for something, to make moral and ethical decisions, was an important part of one's upbringing. Because my characters are relatively poor, and thus lack material advantages, these intangible virtues are all the more important to them.

Ultimately, the novel, when complete, will address my family's multiracial heritage, will question the validity of a fixed racial meaning, will transcend the literary stereotype of the Tragic Mulatto and will be a statement of inclusivity. In its present form, my hope is that my readers will recognize that it was written from my heart, that it is an act of love. It is about my family and the great human family. It is, after all, a story of the South, and in the South, family is everything.

THE WOLVES OF DROWNING CREEK

GREY JONES

These words are true if only because my memories tell me they are true. They form the remembrances of my childhood, as clear to me as water, as clear to me as my granddaddy's voice, deep and tinged at the edges with whiskey and smoke. I will never hear that voice again in this life, but it resonates within me, stirring the beating of wings behind my ribs, a murmuration of starlings.

My mama's laughter, once she'd let go of her pain, the honest work of the men and women in the tobacco fields, the lushness of my grandma's hair, are all gone now, turned to sepia. I pine for long ago days when I was at home in the world, a feeling which eludes me in the present.

I close my eyes. I open my heart to those beating wings. I remember.

Part I

Nineteen fifty-seven was a year of changes and revelations for many. Jackie Robinson retired from baseball in January. President Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957 in September. In Robeson County, North Carolina, the year brought news of Abe Baxley's retirement from the Farmer's Cooperative Exchange, and the birth of John and Beulah Taylor's ninth child in a decade. In May of that year, my mama and I also received news that would change the course of our lives.

It was sweltering, a still and early hot spell. The crops were withering and the birds had taken silently to the deep woods. Mama had opened every window in the house, hoping to catch any passing breeze. I was sitting on the floor in our front room, playing with tin soldiers that had once belonged to my daddy, when I heard a car drive up outside. Mama came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. She'd been rolling out biscuits she'd made with the last bit of flour we had in the house. Small clots of dough clung to her hands, hid under her fingernails. She was at the door before the first knock.

"Why you here?" she asked Deputy Darryl Hardy through the screen.

I knew who he was on sight. Everybody knew everybody in Fairmont. Deputy Hardy had gone to high school with my mama before joining law enforcement. He was a snub-nosed man, wide-browed and fat as a tick. I was only nine years old, yet I felt even then that he was to be avoided. My family had taught me a distrust of men with badges.

"Hey there, Mrs. Dooley," he said, taking off his deputy's hat.

I felt trouble coming. I could often feel when something was going to happen, bad or good. A subtle shift in the air, an itching in the bones.

"It's Miss McClelland, Darryl. You know that," Mama said, matter of fact.

"Oh yeah, that's right, ain't it, Alma?" he said, looking over at me. "Ol' Archie never did marry you proper, did he?"

The deputy smiled wickedly, a pig-like expression on his round face. I stood up and gave him my fiercest look. It was a steely grimace I'd learned from watching my Granddaddy McClelland, who everybody, even me, called Danny Boy.

Kind, loving, ethical, but tough as nails, Danny Boy was everything I believed a man should aspire to be. My perceptions were biased in that regard. I knew that each of us carried the potential for viciousness, an untamed wolf lurking behind domesticated facades. I acknowledged it in everyone else, but somehow, not in Danny Boy. Never in him. He was my only counterpoint in my small world of cold and volatile men. I would not go on a scavenger hunt, seeking the foul to balance the fair. I needed a hero.

Danny Boy had told me to never feel shame about being born out of wedlock. It had never been a secret that my parents' marriage was common law. My grandma, Jimmie Dare McClelland, said there was no law to it, only common. Danny Boy felt that Mama had simply followed tradition. I was not the first bastard born to the family. Truthfully, I was thankful that my last name was McClelland, and not Dooley, like my daddy's.

"Why you here?" Mama asked again, not letting the deputy into the house.

"I got some official news, Alma. You might want to send the young'un on back to his room."

I didn't have a room of my own to which to be sent. We were renting a shotgun house about a mile from town. It was small, with peeling white paint. The ceilings were low, the rooms cramped, but the front porch was expansive, with a view of a persimmon tree and acres of wilting corn.

The house was our third in the span of a year. My daddy was a gambler by profession and a thief by hobby, activities rarely conducive to the paying of rent. When he was absent, which was most of the time, I slept on a cot in Mama's room. When he returned home, usually drunk and penniless, he rolled my bed out to the kitchen.

"Hotshot, go on outside for a spell, baby," Mama said, wringing her hands.

The name on my birth certificate read Jasper Archibald McClelland. Hotshot was the crib name Danny Boy had given to me on the day I was born. Viewing the clenched fists and screaming maw of my infant self, he'd been convinced that I would mature into a strong and willful man. A man with enough brains to be able to leave Robeson County, but with enough heart to stay. Like the old timers who refused to call the Lumber River anything other than Drowning Creek, Hotshot was the only name to which I would answer.

"Hotshot! I done told you to go on outside, now!" Mama said.

I could see that she was nervous, so I made my way to the door. I gave the deputy another hateful glance, holding his gaze in a final act of defiance, before accepting my banishment.

"Lord, he's Danny Boy all over again. Up one side and down the other," I heard Mama tell him. I liked that.

I made my way outside and plowed through Mr. Norment's cornfield. Mr. Norment lived down the rutted dirt road from us. He also owned our house. I could tell that he, like all of the others who had ever rented to Archie Dooley, was contemplating eviction.

He had already visited twice to complain about the noise. The noise came from Mama's screams, brought on by my daddy's short lived, but frequent physical attacks upon her. I knew Mr. Norment was aware of it, but people in the country usually turned a blind eye to what happened between married couples, even if they were only common law married. Because of this code of silence, Danny Boy was unaware that Mama was being battered. My own silence was sworn in the depths of a dark closet years before. Hiding us from Daddy, she'd whispered in hot, rapid breaths that tickled the inside of my ear, that I must never tell. Never tell.

The first incident that I could recall of my daddy abusing my mama was when I was no more than three years old. I remembered the warped kitchen floor and the pine paneling. It was hot, and he was sweating. He was holding me in one arm and knocking her to the ground with the other. The violence was chimeric, neither push nor punch, but a combination of movements. Afterward, he stood above her, yelling, *You will obey me!* It was, for a moment, as if she and I were both children. Love was sometimes just prettied-up hate.

I shook off the memory and zigzagged through the rows of corn. It was misty with heat and condensation, and I still had that itching in my bones. I knew that Deputy Hardy had nothing good to say to my mama. I was certain that my daddy was in the drunk tank again, or that he had started another fist fight he was always bound to lose. Whatever it was, it usually meant that Mama would have to scrounge up the little money we had, in order to bail my daddy out of jail.

I picked an ear of unripe corn off of one of the stalks, peeled the husk and the silk and found a little green worm munching away on Mr. Norment's profits. I watched it for a while. I began to feel jealous of the creature. I thought that a life of simple eating and shitting seemed enviable, in contrast to the constant worry that a violent and irresponsible father caused.

"Hotshot?" Mama called from the porch. "Baby, come on back in now!"

I came out of the cornfield and ran up the three steps to the porch. Mama was alone. She had a look about her I'd never seen, stricken and relieved at the same time. I looked up at her face, at her soft black hair and hard black eyes. She reached in her apron pocket for her cigarettes and lit one up. Camels, just like Danny Boy smoked.

"Your daddy's dead, baby," she said. "He was playing cards and got himself shot in the head. They don't know who did it."

She looked at me closely while she blew smoke through her nose. She reminded me of a dragon in a storybook, only beautiful. People in Fairmont had always said that Mama looked like Ava Gardner, raven haired and cat eyed. Her beauty had won her the title of Fairmont's May Queen when she was sixteen years old. Her photograph, in which she held white roses and wore a banner across her breast, appeared in *The Robesonian*. That was before she ran away with my daddy.

"Did you hear me, baby?" She tossed her cigarette down and used her foot to put it out.

I didn't know how she expected me to react. I couldn't say what it was I was feeling, but it most certainly wasn't sadness. All of my thoughts were directed to the possibilities of what my daddy's death meant for us.

"I heard you, Mama."

"Well? You alright?" She cupped my face in her hands. Affection didn't always come naturally to Mama, so that was her way of giving a hug.

I nodded. "What do we do now?"

"Go on inside and pack up, I reckon," she said. "See about getting us a ride to Teardrop."

I knew I ought to feel badly that my daddy was dead, but in my heart I was flying high with thoughts of going to Teardrop. It was the farm where Mama had grown up, and the only place in the world where I knew we'd be safe. Danny Boy said it was called Teardrop because good crop or bad, he cried over it every year. It was a place where the Holy Bible and the Farmer's Almanac sat side by side. Which one was more important depended on the weather. Danny Boy raised cows and pigs and grew peanuts, cotton, soybeans and corn. What wasn't eaten was ground up and fed to the animals, including the three draft horses, two Buckskins, two mules and a Pinto. But it was the yearly crop of tobacco that kept the farm going. That, and hard work.

Beside Danny Boy in every endeavor was Clarence Day, his right hand man, and his best friend since they were boys. This, despite protestations from certain members of the white community, who were dumbfounded that Danny Boy thought a black man his equal. *To hell with them all*, Danny Boy would say.

Clarence was a talented woodcarver, and made the best moonshine in Robeson County, perhaps in North Carolina, according to Danny Boy. He kept his still deep in the woods, its heat and coils producing a brew to rival ambrosia.

Clarence and his wife, Vashti, had two daughters, Ruth and Naomi, who had grown up with Mama. Mama loved them like sisters, especially Naomi. She told me one of her bitterest memories was going to Fairmont High and seeing Rosenwald, the black high school, through her classroom window. She told me how she'd felt sick with guilt knowing that Ruth and Naomi were over there, getting her hand me down books and hand-me-down supplies, separated from her by the rusted ties of the railroad tracks.

"It wasn't fair, baby," she'd say to me. "If you only knew how unfair it really was. I'll tell you one day. Tell you the whole of it."

Both of the Day daughters went up North, first Ruth, then Naomi. Mama missed them terribly. Ruth was married to a doctor in New York, and Naomi landed a good paying job tending children for a wealthy white couple. Mama received the hand-me-downs then. No money, a child to raise, a dead man who never married her, and now we were moving again.

"What all should I pack?" I asked.

"Clothes. Just get your clothes. Ain't nothing else here that's ours to take."

While we were packing up, we heard a car horn outside. We didn't receive many visitors out there, so I thought it must be Deputy Hardy with more bad news. Mama opened the door, and for the first time since hearing that my daddy was dead, she began to cry.

"Danny Boy," she whispered, before she dropped to the floor.

I ran to the door. Danny Boy was hopping out of his old Chevy truck, leaping up our three steps to the porch and taking Mama in his arms like she was a little baby again.

"Hush now," he said. "This ain't the end of you, girl. You're a McClelland, damnit!"

Mama broke like water over rocks. I'd never seen her open herself up to a display of such pain. Years of subjugation and denial came pouring out of her.

"It'll be alright, Alma," said Grandma Jimmie, coming up the steps.

I hadn't noticed her, her approach was so quiet. When Mama saw her, she pulled away from Danny Boy and stood. She acted as if she'd never broken down at all.

"How'd y'all know?" Mama asked, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands.

"Well, it's all over town, ain't it?" said Grandma Jimmie. "I can't say I'm one bit surprised."

She pulled a handkerchief out of her purse, walked over to Mama and tried to wipe her face. Mama snatched the handkerchief out of Grandma Jimmie's hand.

"I got it," she said.

"Come on over here, Hotshot!" said Danny Boy, spreading his arms wide.

I ran into my granddaddy's embrace. He smelled of cigarettes and hair tonic. He felt like home. Grandma Jimmie came over, patted me on my head and told me that everything would be fine.

"This child's filthy, Alma," Grandma Jimmie said, rubbing her fingers together.

"When's the last time he had him a good bath?"

"Lord have mercy!" Mama yelled. "Ain't this just like you? A man laying dead and you come in here with sword drawn."

"I just asked you a simple question."

"It ain't never a simple question with you."

"I just wondered if the boy's been bathed, that's all. His hair's dirty."

"It's ninety degrees outside and he's been playing in the cornfield," Mama said. "He's a boy. They get dirty."

"But when did he last have him a bath, Alma?" Grandma Jimmie asked.

"Yesterday, Mama! Satisfied? That answer your damn question?"

"Don't you cuss at me, trash mouth! I ain't one of your fast tail friends you can talk to any old way, Alma Jean McClelland!"

Mama told me to gather the remainder of my belongings. I went into her bedroom, but the argument between my mama and grandma continued.

"Alright, damnit, that's enough!" Danny Boy said as I returned to the front room. "I ain't listening to this shit no more! Both of you shut your damn traps!"

"Don't cuss, Daniel McClelland, Jr.," Grandma Jimmie said.

"Shitfire, woman, you are pushing me today. I mean what I say. Not another damn word. I ain't having my wife and my daughter fighting like yard dogs. Now, I'm taking these things on out to the truck, and then we're heading home. Period!"

"But, Danny Boy." Grandma Jimmie said, putting her hand on his arm.

He shook her hand off. "No, Jimmie. She's been through enough today. Pick your damn battles, woman!"

Grandma Jimmie brushed past him, lips pursed and eyes wild. She marched outside and got into the truck. She crossed her arms and stared straight ahead. Danny Boy picked up Mama's things and walked through the door. I followed behind him, all of my clothes, the little I had, in a knapsack. Mama brought up the rear.

We walked over to the truck. The sun was still bright and high, and the air was motionless. Danny Boy's old dog, Ugly Joe, was in the back, wagging his tail and panting in the heat. Danny Boy gave him a pat after putting Mama's things in the truckbed. He turned and pulled Mama to him, held her tightly.

"Jimmie's always been a honey dipped knife," I heard him tell her. "She's sweet, but she can gut you from groin to gullet before she knows she's made the first cut. Be patient with her, Alma Jean. She loves you. She just always wanted you to have more than you wanted for yourself, I reckon."

"No, Danny Boy. She wanted me to have what she always wanted for herself. There's a difference."

Mama climbed up in the truck next to Grandma Jimmie. I got in last. I sat on Mama's lap with my head hanging out of the window. Other than the wind in my face, the first breeze I'd felt all day, it was a silent trip to Teardrop.

A couple of weeks after Mama and I moved to Teardrop, Danny Boy took me to Raleigh to see the Lone Ranger. The real, honest to God Lone Ranger! I nearly pissed my pants, I was so excited. The Lone Ranger, like my granddaddy, represented an ideal. I wanted to ride the mighty Silver across field and forest, through bog and swamp, righting wrongs and bringing justice with a bullet. My dreams were dreamt in kindness, but bled through with violence. Such is the way of country boys.

For me, the Lone Ranger was the epitome of the triumph of good versus bad, captured on celluloid. I knew from experience that villains were real. Even my daddy couldn't be trusted to fight the good fight. In my nine year old worldview, there were enemies and allies, with nothing in between. I became adept at identifying those who hid sharpened tooth behind sweet smile.

Danny Boy arranged the whole trip to Raleigh with Brother, who was just that, his younger brother Lester. When Danny Boy was a child, he had been unable to pronounce Lester's name properly. He simply called him brother, instead. So Lester was known to everyone as Brother from that time on. The name renamed, a time honored tradition of the region and her people.

Those who knew him said that Brother was never much good at farming. While Danny Boy worked Teardrop, Brother concentrated on getting an education. It seemed that he, unlike the rest of the family, desired to distance himself from his rural roots. It was something I never understood. I was at peace only in the wet and the wild. There are times, even now, when I feel a tugging, an ache of absence, and I wonder if it is the river and woods calling to me. Part of me drifts in the currents, part of me lies curled and dreaming in the soil. The blood of my ancestors is there, in the streambeds, in the veins of oak leaves. I can't help but think that those woodlands and waterways are within me, too, like a genetic code.

Brother was eventually accepted into business school in Raleigh, where he met and married the daughter of a comfortably set and influential banker. He was welcomed into their family, became a banker in kind, yet, somehow, he never seemed to believe that he truly belonged. Or perhaps he didn't believe that they felt he truly belonged. This, according to Danny Boy, was why Brother tried so hard. He acquired the speech and manner of city folk, leaving little trace of the farm boy he'd once been. Every time I saw him, he bore the dark circles and sallow cheeks of a haunted man.

The day Danny Boy took me to see the Lone Ranger, we met Brother at the State Fairgrounds. The Lone Ranger was to sign autographs and answer questions in Dorton Arena, home of horse shows and Jaycee events. Tonto wasn't there that day, which caused in

me a sense of abandonment, a feeling that I, more often than not, received less than the whole of a thing. Danny Boy said it was damn typical that the Indian man was left out.

The other downside was that Brother brought his grandson, Leroy. Leroy was a year older than me. Though related by blood, I felt no connection to him. He was a city boy, which excluded him from membership in my tribe. I'd only seen Leroy a handful of times in my life, but that was enough to know he was a crybaby. He was always whining and carrying on, something that I felt would never happen if he'd grown up in Fairmont. Despite my dislike of my cousin, I vowed to make the best of the day. I was going to see the Lone Ranger!

"Come on," I said to Leroy when the Lone Ranger came out to greet the crowd. "Let's go get in line."

It seemed that we stood in that line forever. Leroy whined that it was too hot inside the arena. He whined that the hotdogs weren't as good as the ones that his mama made for him at home. I held my tongue, which was difficult, until finally we were standing face to face with the man we'd come to see. The Lone Ranger signed some photographs that Danny Boy and Brother had bought for us when we'd first arrived, and then he gave each of us our own silver bullet, just like the ones he used. I wanted to give the Lone Ranger something for his trouble, so I pulled out the wallet Grandma Jimmie had given me the Christmas before, and fished out a four leaf clover I kept there for luck.

"Here you go, Lone Ranger," I told him.

He smiled. Genuinely.

"No, son," he said. "I got all the luck I need. You hold onto that."

I thought he was the finest man I'd ever met, next to Danny Boy and Clarence.

After we received our autographs and silver bullets, we showed them to Danny Boy and Brother. Leroy acted as if these things I prized were worthless. He rolled his eyes and said "Golly" and "Neato," sarcasm dripping with each syllable. I was relieved when he walked away with his granddaddy to get another hotdog. Danny Boy seemed relieved to be rid of Brother, too.

"You know these bullets aren't real silver," Leroy said when he returned from the hotdog stand. He had ketchup on his chin.

"The hell!" I said.

"They're just tin or something," he said. "That man's not even the real Lone Ranger. He's only an actor. They pay him to dress up and come to places like this."

I stepped up to Leroy. I stood toe to toe with him, bent my tanned face into his freckled one. I could smell hotdog and onions.

"You best to shut your damn mouth!" I told him, my fists clenched.

The ketchup on his chin was red as blood.

"Why do you talk like that?" Leroy asked, stepping backwards.

"Like what?" I said, pushing up against him again.

Leroy looked scared when he said, "Like you're a hick. Don't they teach you proper English at your school?"

"We are who we are," I said, parroting Danny Boy. "And we're damn proud of it."

I wanted nothing more than to put a real, Robeson County style whooping on my cousin, but Danny Boy shot me a look that said, *It ain't worth it, boy*. Instead, I simply aimed at his fancy shoes and spit right between them. I'd bet that to this day, no grass will grow in that spot.

That night, when Danny Boy and I returned to Teardrop, he told me we were getting up early the next morning. He said that he and Clarence had decided to teach me how to farm. I'd start out feeding the animals and mucking the stalls, then I'd learn how to work tobacco.

"You could be a hander, first off," he said. "Work with Vashti. She'll show you right."

I liked the thought of working with Vashti. She had kind eyes and hair like a black cloud that she kept braided and tucked under a kerchief during working hours. She had the darkest skin, smooth and dewy as a plum, though she was past fifty. Her hands were as weathered and strong as a man's. I found her beautiful.

"If you're good, we might put you out in the rows," Danny Boy said. "Make you a cropper. But you'll have to prove your salt for that."

I was grateful that he thought I had it in me to be a farmer, a nurturer of life like himself. He didn't even have to wake me the next morning. I was sitting at the kitchen table waiting on him when he came to get me. I wanted to prove my salt.

Danny Boy and Clarence began to teach me all the things I needed to know. The first time I mucked a stall, I felt proud, a sense of accomplishment that had, until then, remained unclaimed. When I was finished raking up all the shit and straw, I knew I'd done something important. Living things depended on me. I supplied them with a fresh, warm bed, with fresh food and water, and with love, something that had always come easier to me with animals than with people.

It was also my responsibility to lead the two mules out of their stalls and into the fields every working morning. They pulled and fought me, but I managed to get them there. More importantly, I got them there on time. Danny Boy told me to be careful around mules. He stressed the unpredictable power of their kicks. He still held the imprint of a hoof on his chest, a scar he'd acquired at seventeen when he'd become careless with a mule.

"That mule's name was Lickety-Split," he said, "because he worked faster than any mule we'd ever had. He pulled a buggy for me when I was sparking your grandma, too. Every time I tried to give Jimmie a kiss when we was riding in that buggy, that damn animal would up and break wind!"

We both laughed. "Yeah, funny ain't it? But I thought me and old Lickety-Split had us a understanding. I got cocky about it. Started showboating and forgot the rules. See, boy, animals ain't reasonable creatures. They's animals, for God sake."

"But you love your animals," I said.

"Course I do. But I forgot to respect him. I forgot he had wild in him, like all animals. Got right behind him like I was special or something. He kicked me so hard, I flew back and hit the damn barn wall behind me. Now I got a hoof print on my chest to remind me to follow Nature's laws. Man's laws can be a bunch of bullshit, but Nature's laws is tried and true."

Getting the mules back in at the end of the work day was a different story. I'd climb up on one's back and grab the reins of the other. I had to hold on for dear life, those mules were so eager to get back to their stalls, stalls I'd mucked myself. They couldn't wait to get their bits out and go back to being mules rather than farm tools.

It wasn't only animals I learned about. Danny Boy and Clarence gave me lessons in crops. When to plant, when to harvest, when to get down and pray. The first time I held an

Owen's Automatic Transplanter, I felt as if I'd been born with it in my hand. They showed me where the water and the little plant went, and how to put it in the soil and pull the lever. It was as natural to me as breathing.

I was learning from Vashti, too, just as Danny Boy had said I would. She didn't take any shit, and laziness wasn't something she tolerated. But she was patient with me and taught me the proper ways of doing things. Sometimes, when I'd done really well at being her hander, I'd catch her looking at me like I'd seen Mama doing when I'd made her proud. I began to think of Vashti and Clarence as kin, and I felt lucky to have them. The half-orphan suddenly had a growing family.

One evening, after we'd completed all of our work and were getting ready to head inside to supper, Danny Boy and Clarence showed me how they studied the soil. They gathered it up and crumbled it in their hands, sifted it and looked at it hard in the fading light. It was black and loamy and smelled alive.

"You got to look for the signs, too," Clarence said. "You ain't just looking at the dirt. You got to look for what you can't see. You got to feel it in your bones and your guts. Down your arms and up your legs."

They sniffed at it, and then they both tasted it. I was still unsure as to what they were looking for, or tasting for, but I picked up some earth and licked it off of my grubby fingers, my dirt laden nails. I liked having a bit of Teardrop in my belly. It made me feel as if I were carrying home with me everywhere I went.

With time, I learned to see the signs in the dirt, to read the thirsts of roots and the hungers of leaves. I learned to watch for things in the sky, as well, like flat clouds riding low,

the Witch Weed airplane and messages written in the moon. I learned to ride bareback and drive a tractor as well as a grown man. I was settling into life at Teardrop just fine.

Mama was settling in, too. It took no time before she had picked up the life she'd had before she'd met my daddy. When word was out that she was a free woman, half the men in three counties had their noses open. Teardrop was overrun with suitors.

Mama was stuck on one fellow in particular, William Leggett, called Red due to his Merthiolate colored hair. He owned a soda shop in Fayetteville, Leggett's Sundaes and Sundries, popular hangout of the local young and wholesome. He didn't have much imagination, but as a handsome and successful business owner, he was considered a catch. Personally, I thought him too pasty to be handsome, his skin as pale as milk and ashes. Grandma Jimmie, however, thought he'd hung the moon. She acted as if it were she he was courting, fawning over him at every opportunity. Danny Boy thought he was a wet firecracker.

"Ain't you happy Alma found her such a good man?" Grandma Jimmie asked him one night after Mama left to go out with Red. The three of us were sitting in the front room, Danny Boy smoking, Grandma Jimmie knitting and me playing war with my tin soldiers on the floor.

"Well, I tell you," he said. "If I'd knowed when he was drawing breath that Archie Dooley was putting his hands on my girl, I'd have shot him my damn self. Either way, she's free of him now, and I just think she ought to enjoy it a spell before she goes and ties herself to another man."

That was the first I'd heard of Danny Boy knowing that my daddy had abused my mama. The secrets had escaped the grave. I was glad Danny Boy knew. Daddy or not, Archie Dooley needed to be remembered for what he really was.

"She'll never do no better, all things considered," said Grandma Jimmie.

"Well, she's a price above rubies, if you ask me," said Danny Boy. "And I ain't saying she should hold out for somebody better than Red. I'm saying she should enjoy her life even if she ain't got no man."

"Oh, what do you know about these things?" said Grandma Jimmie. "Where's the joy in being alone?"

"There's something to be said for it." With that, he got up and walked out.

Late that night, as I was lying in bed in my room toying with a juvember Clarence had made for me, Mama knocked at my door. It was the first time I'd ever had a room of my own. When Danny Boy had built the new house for himself and Grandma Jimmie back in the 20s, he'd put in three bedrooms, thinking they'd have at least two children. But when Grandma Jimmie gave birth to Mama, something was twisted inside her. The bleeding had nearly killed her. She was unable to carry to full term again. In a time and place of women staying home to raise families, the tragedy of miscarriages haunted her, and sometimes, I see now, made her question her worth.

"Can I come in, baby?" Mama called through the door.

"Yeah, Mama," I said, putting the slingshot on the bedside table.

She came into my room still dressed from her night out and smelling like the sweet perfume that Red had given her. I didn't like it. She didn't smell like Mama anymore.

"Were you asleep, baby?"

"No, I'm up."

She paced around, wanting a cigarette, I thought. She'd quit recently because Red had asked her to. It worried me that a man could already bend her will in such a way. She sat down on my bed, and I sat up beside her, waiting.

"Hotshot?" she finally said. "You like Red, don't you?"

"He ain't bad. Could be worse."

"Well, that's good, baby. Because Red wants to marry me."

The way Red had been courting Mama was serious, not like most of her beaux who were just catting around, as Danny Boy would say. Red was the last of his line, a man without family ties. Both of his parents had passed, and his only sister had died in a car crash when she and Red were in high school. He was a lone wolf in search of a pack.

"What'll you tell him?" I asked.

"Well, that depends on you. Do you want me to say yes? If you don't want me to marry him, I won't."

I surprised myself with what I asked next. "Do you love him, Mama?"

"I like him. I really do. He's got a lot going for him. But your daddy done killed love for me. I can't give that much to no man again."

"What you thinking about marrying Red for, then?" I asked.

"Well, he's good to me. Gentle. And this is the first damn time since I was sixteen that your grandma's been proud of me."

We sat quietly for a moment.

"I probably shouldn't have told you that," she said. "It ain't fair to pit you between me and your grandma, us living here and all."

"It's alright."

"I hate myself for it sometimes, but I still want to please that woman," she said. "I can't help myself. I pray to God you won't never feel like that about me."

Her hands were twitching in her lap. She laid back across the bed and stared up at the ceiling. I took her face in my hands, her own signature caress, and felt tears on her cheeks. It frightened me, how raw she was.

"I spent part of my life trying to be what she wanted me to be, and the other part running from her when I failed," she said. "Now I'm right back here where I started."

"Don't cry, Mama," I said.

"Be your own man, Hotshot. Don't spend your life trying to be what somebody else wants. Promise me."

I promised and reached for her hand. She grabbed mine so hard it hurt.

"Don't worry so much about what Grandma Jimmie thinks," I said. "If you think there's a chance you might be happy with Red, then tell him yes."

"Really? You reckon I should?" she asked.

"You should do what makes you happy," I said. I meant every word.

"Well, I think he could make me happy. I think maybe he already does."

"Then marry him." I knew I'd rather see her married to Red than see her contending every day with Grandma Jimmie. It was breaking her.

"I will. Damnit, I will. I'll marry Red!" she said, jumping up from my bed. "Oh, thank you, baby. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"But Mama?" I said.

"Yeah, baby?"

"I ain't going with you. I'm staying here at Teardrop."

I didn't know those words would start up such a storm. Mama said she wouldn't marry Red if I refused to live with them. I begged her to marry him, but I wasn't budging from Teardrop. After weeks of Mama trying to get me to go with her, Red trying to get her to go with him, and Danny Boy trying to get everyone to calm down and shut the Hell up, Grandma Jimmie decided it was time to set Mama straight. She came looking for her in my room, where Mama had been camped out since the storm broke.

"Alma Jean," she said. "Newlyweds need some time alone. Y'all need to get to know each other as man and wife. Get used to the idea and all."

"But I want my child with me," Mama said, pulling me to her.

"Hotshot'll be fine. If he wants to come be with y'all later on, he can. But for now, honey, you need to go on and be a wife, and a wife only. That man's wanting to marry you."

"But, Mama..."

"Alma Jean McClelland!" Grandma Jimmie said, losing her patience. "Do you think men like Red Leggett come along every day? You think there's another fine one out there itching to take on a woman who never got married, but who's burdened with a son going on ten years old? Don't be no fool, girl! Don't mommuck this up before it's even started!"

Mama tried to cover my ears. It was as if she'd been hit in the gut. She looked at me, her mouth gaping. Her pain was for me, but also for the old shame of unwed pregnancy, a wound that Grandma Jimmie often rubbed with salt. Grandma Jimmie's words didn't hurt me, but it took me a long time to forgive her for the pain they caused to Mama. I couldn't protect my mama from my grandma, any more than I'd been able to protect her from my daddy. I wouldn't, however, keep silent about Grandma Jimmie's abuse, as I'd done with Archie

Dooley's. I told Danny boy about the exchange. I don't know, even now, what he said to Grandma Jimmie, but she didn't utter a word to anyone for three whole days.

After that, I just couldn't put Mama through any more hurt. I couldn't protect her, but I could get her out of the line of fire. I went looking for her late one afternoon, Ugly Joe following at my heels. The sunset had left streaks of gold and pink across the sky. I found her out in one of the pastures, sneaking a cigarette under a large Water Oak. The cicadas were singing in the boughs, as if in response to the smoke signals her exhalations sent up into the leaves.

"Don't you tell nobody about this. I'm supposed to have quit," she said, holding up the Camel.

"I won't tattle on you. I ain't no snitch," I said.

That garnered a crooked smile from her. She threw her cigarette in the dirt and gave me her full attention.

"Why you come out her looking for me?" she asked. "Your grandma didn't send you, did she?"

"No," I said. Mama looked disappointed. "I came out here because I got something important to say to you."

"What's that, baby? You can tell me anything."

"I ain't been trying to make you sore or hurt your feelings or nothing," I said, standing up as tall and as straight as I could. "I want you to marry Red. I really do. And I'll go live with y'all, too, if that's what's holding you back."

"Why you been fighting me so hard about going?" she asked, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Because I like it here, Mama. I'm tired of moving."

"I know. I know," she said.

"And I was just trying to be my own man. Like I promised you."

She cocked her head and squinted her eyes. Then she laid her palm across her forehead, as if she were checking for a fever.

"Lord have mercy," she said. "Don't tell me I done become my mama."

She kneeled down in front of me, fat tears falling from her eyes.

"Hotshot," she said. "I was so young when I had you, I reckon we sorta had to grow up together. But right now, I think you done passed me. Lord, I wish I was as strong as you."

Mama wiped her eyes and pulled herself together. She looked me up and down, and smiled at me. It was the first genuine smile I'd seen from her in weeks, toothy and broad.

"You should do what makes you happy," she said, nodding her head. "Ain't that what you told me? That's all a mama should ask of her child, and that's all I'll ever ask of you."

That winter, Mama took that advice and did what we all knew would make her happy. She married Red. She was lovelier on that day than I'd ever seen her, with her new green and white gingham suit and hair as glossy and black as a starling's wing. Grandma Jimmie cried and cried. Relieved, I thought. Relieved that her dreams for Mama had not been dashed.

After a quick wedding at the courthouse, we all went back to Teardrop for homemade cake with chocolate icing. Grandma Jimmie had put lots of vanilla extract in that cake. She'd bought it from the Watkins man when he'd made his rounds. I ate so much, I was warned I'd get *the sugar*. Danny Boy and Clarence and Vashti opened up a Mason jar full of moonshine, and for once, Grandma Jimmie was too happy to complain. When the sweets were gone, we

went outside to Red's Cadillac. It was already loaded up. Red had bought Mama a brand new set of luggage, the first she'd ever owned.

"I'm proud of you, little man," Mama said, taking my face in her hands. Then she pulled me close and gave me a big hug. A real one.

Red shot me a wink and a smile while he helped her into the car. When Mama was comfortably seated, Red leaned down and whispered to me, "I promise you, I will give anything, or sacrifice anything, to make your mama happy." I believed him.

They drove off, waving out of the windows, to start their new life together in Fayetteville. I knew I'd miss her terribly, and it nearly broke my heart to see her go, but I remained at Teardrop. It was my home.

Part II

"Daniel McClelland, Jr.! Would you kindly quit driving down the middle of the road and pick one side or the other," Grandma Jimmie said.

We'd just started the fifteen mile drive from Fairmont to Lumberton, and already Grandma Jimmie was in a mood. I knew she was anxious or angry when she used a person's full name.

"Why come?" Danny Boy said. "I pay taxes for both damn sides."

I knew what was coming next. If there was one thing I'd learned after two years of living at Teardrop, it was that Grandma Jimmie hated profanity. In her words, it was *trashy sounding*. She prided herself on her ladylike manners and Christian ways. It made people in Fairmont wonder why she'd ever agreed to marry a hard drinking, backwoods farmer like Danny Boy. But I knew that deep down Grandma Jimmie had a weakness for the fine but feral nature common to the McClelland men.

"Don't cuss in front of the young'un," Grandma Jimmie said, nodding toward me.

"Shitfire, woman!" Danny Boy hollered. "He's gone hear them words from somewhere. Leastways with me he'll know how to use them proper."

I turned to look out the back window of the truck in an attempt to hide my smile from Grandma Jimmie, though she had long been aware that profanity was nothing new to me. I tapped the glass at Ugly Joe, who was riding in the bed of the truck. I'd wanted to ride back there, too, but Grandma Jimmie had pressed my clothes that morning. She made me sit up front so they wouldn't get wrinkled. I waved at Clarence, who was following us to

Lumberton in his truck. He waved back at me, and we grinned at each other like possums. He knew what a trial Grandma Jimmie could be, bless her heart.

I faced the front again, contemplating how other tobacco crops on Chicken Foot Road were coming along compared to ours. "They'll be putting in later than us," I said, pointing at the Walter's land, or at the acreage the Butlers worked. Fairmont could feel like one big tobacco field.

"Quit fanning around, Jasper McClelland! You'll look thrown away by the time we get there," Grandma Jimmie said.

"Let the boy alone, Jimmie," Danny Boy said. "You know what your problem is? You try to get above your raising. Y'all grew up in town, I give you that. But y'all didn't have a pot to piss in. Poor as Tom's turkey, every damn one of you. But y'all still tried to act like you was something you wasn't."

"My family was poor, Daniel McClelland, Jr., but we weren't rednecks and trash like some," said Grandma Jimmie.

"There's a difference between country and redneck, Jimmie. And you know, all things considered," Danny Boy said with a quick look in the rearview mirror, "that the McClellands couldn't rightly be called no damn rednecks."

Grandma Jimmie shot him a look that would've burned fire itself. She was mad. Really mad.

"I've just about had enough of the cussing!" she yelled. "It's bad enough you do it at all. But cussing in front of your grandson? It's so..."

"So what, Jimmie? Trashy?" Danny Boy interrupted. "Well, I reckon you married up with trash then. Hell, woman, you didn't have to ride with us today. But let's face some facts

here. The only reason you wanted to come on this particular trip was to see how fine Brother's living."

I'd been trying to forget the reason we were driving to Lumberton. We were meeting Brother and my less than welcome cousin, Leroy. He was going to be putting in tobacco with us, a time of brutal labor and bountiful harvest. Brother had written to Danny Boy that he thought it would do Leroy good to get out of Raleigh for a while. He'd inferred that there were problems in the home. I didn't know what those problems were, but at the time, I believed that even Leroy's parents wished to be rid of him.

"Well, that hell bitch he married won't even set foot in this part of the state," Danny Boy went on. "I reckon that's how you act when you ain't trash. But you, Jimmie? You married a farmer. A simple farmer. You want a city life? You want fancy talk and fancy things? That important to you? Well, go 'head on then!"

"Daniel McClelland, Jr.!" Grandma Jimmie just about screamed.

She was fuming now. She wrung her hands and bit at her lip, actions which usually meant she'd reached the boiling point. She grabbed her handbag and pulled out a handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes. I thought these were tears of anger, not sadness, so what she did next shocked me. She reached over and touched Danny Boy's arm, tenderly.

"Don't you ever, ever think I wanted any other life than the one I have with you, Danny Boy," she said softly. "I got what I wanted."

Danny Boy brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed her rough, red knuckles. Grandma Jimmie blushed.

"Damn right you did," he said, beginning to laugh. "And as I recollect, you chased me mighty hard to get it, too!"

"Lord, have mercy on your soul! Why do I bother with you, Daniel McClelland, Jr.?" she moaned, pulling her hand away.

"Because you love my sorry ass, that's why!" Danny Boy said.

He laughed, a deep, guttural laugh that became contagious. By the time we crossed the Lumberton city limits, we were all doubled over. But my grandma, sensing a moment of fun gone too long, had to remind us of the reason for the trip. Grandma Jimmie wasn't happy if she had nothing to worry over.

"Now, you'll try to be kind to Leroy while he's staying with us? Promise me, Hotshot," she said.

"I can't promise miracles," I said back.

"Don't sass me," she said. "Just try to be welcoming to the poor child."

Poor child wasn't something that came to mind when I thought of Leroy. He and his folks lived in Raleigh in a large brick house, larger than any I'd ever been inside. It had all the modern amenities. He knew nothing of poor. Heading to Lumberton, I was thinking of all of the ways in which I could torture him over the summer. He was going to be on my territory this time. I thought about how I could put pine straw in his bed so he'd get chiggers, or how I could put nettles, what we called itch weed, in his underwear.

While I was still daydreaming about Leroy scratching until he drew blood, Danny Boy turned the truck onto the little dirt road that led to the Old Girl's Place, where we were meeting Brother and Leroy. The Old Girl's Place was the cabin where Danny Boy's great-great grandma, Molly McClelland, had lived and died. It sat in the woods, along the Lumber River. She'd run a liquor business out of that cabin, supporting herself and her son, Benjamin.

I always had a strong affinity for Benjamin, though he'd died before even Danny Boy was born. Molly McClelland never married. Benjamin was a bastard like me.

When we rounded the last curve and caught sight of the cabin, we saw that Brother and Leroy had gotten there ahead of us. We'd left Fairmont right after eating breakfast, so they must have left Raleigh long before sunrise.

"Whose car is that?" asked Grandma Jimmie, pointing at the Packard parked beside Brother's Bel Air.

"Damn if it don't look like Furney Malloy's," said Danny Boy. "He must be wanting to buy this place again."

"I know he's worrisome, but try to keep aholt of your temper," Grandma Jimmie said.

"Shitfire. He's got that damned Dead Aim Jackson driving him around," Danny Boy said.

Sure enough, Dillon "Dead Aim" Jackson was sitting behind the wheel of Furney's car. He was a local man who'd won every shooting contest in the county. People swore he'd never missed a shot. He lived back in the swamps with his wrung out wife and at least six children. He was illiterate, so it was said, not from lack of opportunity, but from an inability to learn. *At least the boy's got a talent with guns*, locals would say, shaking their heads sadly.

"I don't want these sons of bitches on my property!" Danny Boy said through clenched teeth.

While Danny Boy was parking the truck, Furney, Brother and Leroy walked over from the cabin. Furney was smiling and waving. He was always smiling, but his eyes stayed cold as barbed wire. He was the preacher at the Pentecostal church in Ashpole. He was barrel chested and squat and had thick gray hair all along the sides of his head, but none on top.

He'd always reminded me of a pigeon, strutting around and cooing to anyone who would listen.

We came from *Lord have mercies* and *Hallelujahs*. We came from Bible beaters and *bless my souls*. We came from tent revivals and rolling with the holy. Still, no one at Teardrop attended Furney's church. But when I was very young, perhaps four, Mama and Daddy and I had attended regularly due to Daddy's short lived but fervent desire for soul cleansing. Though Mama had been raised Baptist, a much more somber affair than the hoots and hollers that emanated from Furney's fundamentalist flock, she had acquiesced to my daddy about religion, as she had in nearly all things.

We had attended every Sunday, but my daddy insisted we go even when he began to travel again, looking for gambling and quick cash. We only had the one car, so Mama and I had to arrange rides to church. Usually it was one of the older women of the parish who volunteered for the duty. Seeing to the eternal salvation of the poor, and proselytizing to the fallen and the backsliders, was their full-time job.

One night, a local widow named Dicey Wilson took us to services. She came to the little rental house we were living in at the time, pulled her car onto the rutted, dirt driveway, and beeped the horn. Mama and I rushed out. We always seemed to be in a hurry for someone else.

Dicey Wilson waxed poetic about the Bible the entire way, which in a small community is a fairly short distance, as everything is all bunched together. I recall my mama's *Yes, ma'ams* and *No ma'ams*, but little else. It was a Sunday like any other.

Once we'd arrived, Dicey Wilson led us to her regular pew, and began to merrily comment on the turnout. Mama and I, as usual, kept silent. We were always a world unto

ourselves. In fact, it seems to me that for the first years of my life, all of my memories were shared memories, my mama and I locked within one another, speaking and thinking as one.

When Furney took to the podium, you would have thought that Dicey Wilson was seeing Elvis Presley. There was an excitement, a concert-like feel in the air. She began tapping her hand to the rhythm of the choir against the back of the other pew. Then her legs began bouncing up and down, as if she were having a slight tremor.

“Lord, Alma,” she said to Mama. “I’m feeling the spirit in me today. It’s all in my legs. Yes, Lord, in my legs!”

Mama, who usually just nodded and said her *Yes, ma’ams*, said, “In your legs, Mrs. Wilson? Really? In your legs?”

People joined in, clapping and yelling that Dicey Wilson had the spirit in her. God, they said, was talking through her. Mama’s eyes were ablaze with a fear I’d only seen when my daddy was in a violent mood. My Baptist born mama never could get used to the people who claimed to speak in tongues. To her, it seemed like voodoo. Or just plain fakery.

Mama put her hand on my shoulder, and tried to slip us out of the pew, and down the aisle to safety. Suddenly, Dicey Wilson came spinning toward us, bible in hand. She was like a cyclone. She was on us before we could react. Her bible connected with my temple with such force, that I was thrown out of Mama’s grasp, and hurled to the floor. Just as abruptly, the spirit left Dicey Wilson. No more trilling, no more battle cries, no more spinning. Only breathless fear, her expression rivaling Mama’s.

I don’t recall who drove us home, but I don’t think it was Dicey Wilson. I do recall, however, that this incident prompted the first time my mama ever stood up to my daddy. She

would not be taking me back to that circus, she told him. She would not risk the life of her only son, even to worship God's.

Luckily, at Teardrop, I wasn't forced to go to church. While Grandma Jimmie went to the Baptist church in Fairmont, Danny Boy didn't go at all. He said his church was in the fields, in the woods and down by the river. I tended to agree, so I stayed home with him on Sundays. He said that preachers like Furney weren't dedicated to worship, but to acquiring. Furney only came around when there was something to be bought for his parish. Danny Boy said he wouldn't stop until he and his church owned the whole damn county. And here he was, on McClelland land.

Brother had been pressuring Danny Boy to sell the Old Girl's Place for years. He claimed there was no point in holding onto the past. But their daddy, Big Dan, had known that Danny Boy would be the son who stayed in Robeson County and took over Teardrop. When he died, he'd left all the land to his eldest. Any selling was strictly up to him.

When we got out of the truck, Danny Boy lit a cigarette. He didn't smoke in the truck when Grandma Jimmie rode with us, one of the many small and subtle kindnesses he performed for her. He inhaled deeply and ran his free hand through his smut black hair, exhaling into the summer air. He was tanned the color of tobacco from years of farming it. He looked like an older version of Johnny Cash, as I'd seen in the photographs on the covers of his albums, the ones that Mama played when she and Red came back to visit. I was as towheaded as Danny Boy was dark. I thought my hair color would prove a hindrance in becoming the kind of man he was. I never thought a man was really a man if he wasn't dark featured.

"Danny Boy! How are you on this fine day?" Brother asked.

"Fair to middling, Brother, fair to middling," Danny Boy said. Turning to the preacher he asked, "Why you here Furney?"

"I'm just looking out for the Lord's interest," the Right Reverend Furney Malloy said.

Grandma Jimmie walked up then, all smiles. Grandma Jimmie, attempting to impress her successful brother-in-law, had her hair pulled back in a tight bun and was wearing her Sunday go to meeting hat and dress. She even had on a little lipstick. She tried to make us look civilized, rather than the wild things we were. She couldn't help herself.

"Furney, you remember my wife," Danny Boy said, eyeing the preacher as if he were a rattlesnake. "And I'm sure both you men remember Clarence. Brother, he came out to see you special today, since he ain't seen you in such a long time. We all used to be tight as ticks, if you recall."

Clarence walked over from where he'd parked his truck. Ugly Joe jumped out of Danny Boy's truckbed and ran to him. He loved him nearly as much as he loved Danny Boy.

"How y'all doing today?" asked Clarence.

Both men greeted Grandma Jimmie, but said nothing to Clarence. They acted as if they'd been told to say howdy do to Ugly Joe. That infuriated me. Even Grandma Jimmie stopped short and scowled. She believed that black and white were equal in God's eyes, and should likewise be equal in Man's. I saw Danny Boy give Brother a shameful look, a look reserved for a traitor. Clarence took it all in stride, too proud to react to foolishness.

We all stood quietly. I studied Brother and Leroy, their pricey, store bought clothes looking out a place with a crumbling old cabin on a dirt road for backdrop. Danny Boy stared hard at his brother. There was something like pity in that stare. Furney kept a smile plastered on his face, but his eyes were dead as ever. Finally, Leroy broke the quiet.

"What is that?" he asked, with a finger pointed at Ugly Joe.

"What you mean, what is that?" Danny Boy asked. "That's Ugly Joe."

"Why do you call him that?" Leroy asked.

"Well, because he's ugly as homemade sin, and his hair has so many colors in it, it's like the coat that Joseph wore," said Danny Boy.

Leroy didn't respond, so Grandma Jimmie piped in with, "Joseph and his coat of many colors. From the Bible, honey."

"I'm aware of the story," Leroy said with a curled up lip. "What kind of dog is he?"

"A Sooner," I said.

"A Sooner?"

"Yeah, a Sooner. Because he'd sooner shit on you than anything else."

"Jasper McClelland!" yelled Grandma Jimmie. "Act like you have some home training! I ought to take a keen switch to you, being so ugly to your cousin!"

A keen switch, my ass, I thought. If Grandma Jimmie meant to whoop you, her weapon of choice was a flyswatter. She packed fire in that thing. Many was the time that she chased me around Teardrop, usually due to my lack of manners, swatting the backs of my thighs, leaving waffled welts to tell the tale.

She went to Leroy and said, "Don't mind him, honey. Give it time and y'all will get along just fine. Now, come on over here to the truck and we'll load up your things."

"He can be a pill," Brother said as Grandma Jimmie led Leroy away. He called out to Leroy's back, "You remember this time! I liked that boy I used to be on Teardrop!" Then he turned to Danny Boy and said, quietly, "A Hell of a lot better than I like this city man I am now."

"I ain't studying that young'un," said Danny Boy. He seemed unmoved by Brother's words. "I reckon he'll work if he wants to eat."

Furney Malloy suddenly shot up between Danny Boy and Brother, saying, "Now about this land, Danny Boy. There's money to be made in it. The church could hold its revivals out here. I could baptize the wicked right in the river. Why, when I saw Brother over at Pate's Esso getting gas this morning, and he told me he was meeting y'all here, I just knew the Lord had called me to offer to take this place off your hands."

Danny Boy looked at the preacher in the same manner in which he looked at his shoe after stepping in shit. "Clarence? What you say we take Hotshot down yonder to the river a spell?" he said.

"Sounds fine to me," said Clarence. He turned to Brother and Furney and made a gesture, like tipping a hat. "Gentleman," he said with a grin. They looked as if they'd been slapped.

The three of us, and Ugly Joe, walked toward the water. Danny Boy turned to look back over his shoulder at the two men we'd left behind. "Furney, I want you off my damn land! I ain't selling! Not now! Not never! I know who my family was and I know who they still is. Brother? You might want to take some time to reflect on that."

Brother turned beet red, but Furney Malloy, unfazed, sang out, "I'd like to see you in church sometime, Danny Boy!"

"I tell you what, Furney. I'll come to your funeral. That suit you, you damn vulture?" Danny Boy yelled.

It suited me just fine. I followed behind Danny Boy and Clarence, Ugly Joe behind me, and we walked down to the riverbank. We sat on some cypress stumps. Clarence took out his

pocket knife and started whittling on a piece of dry wood he'd found. Ugly Joe spotted a pair of Wood Ducks and chased them, feathers falling with the echo of his barks. Drifts of moldering oak leaves, remnants of the previous winter, had collected at the shoreline, filling the air with a scent that reminded me of tea.

As he always did when he was near the river, Danny Boy skipped rocks across the water. It was something he'd done with his daddy when Big Dan was still living. Danny Boy could make one rock skip more than five times without it sinking. I picked up a couple of flat ones lying at my feet and joined him, even though I knew I couldn't get mine to skip more than three.

I'd always loved this spot. Danny Boy often told me that throughout the history of our family, the river's bounty had kept us alive, supplying us with fish and fowl during times of hardship. In the spirit of pleasure, not poverty, I often took part in laying catfish lines across the river, from bank to bank. There were many moonlit summer evenings when we would gather along the sandy shores and haul in fat, egg laden fish. I watched, fascinated, as Danny Boy deftly carved away the guts. The resulting filets were then fried on an iron skillet stationed above the heat of a wood fire. The roe was stirred into hush puppy batter, giving the cornmeal a tenderness, a richness that still lingers on the palate, if only in a country boy's memories.

"Look at her, Hotshot. She's over a hundred miles of history," Danny Boy said, waving his hand toward the Lumber River. "My history. Clarence's history. Your history. Listen to what she has to say. That's our names you hear in her current. Taste her. Smell her. That's our sweat in her brine. Generations of our family have sat under these same cypress for hundreds of years. This river's in our veins, boy."

There was awe in his voice, reverence in his words. I pitied those who didn't understand the power of place. How sad, I thought, to be one of those displaced persons with no ties to tradition and lore, history and hearth. Even now, I see these poor creatures, drifting, unmoored, attaching themselves to trends and agendas, to ever changing identities, never knowing the meaning and magic of home. Our land was mythical, if only because it held our legends, our truths, our blood. It was more than water and soil, more than tales told and tales heard. It was the South beheld.

"That's right, what your granddaddy says," Clarence said. "Everything you need to know? Right in this here river. You got to flow like the water. You come against something that won't let you pass? You go over it, under it, around it. Somebody dam you up? You make a lake out yourself. Rise and spread 'til you bust right on through. No matter how much things try to get in your way, you just keep flowing right on."

"That's damn fine talk, Clarence. Damn fine," said Danny Boy.

"Y'all remind me of Socrates," I told them.

"Who?" Danny Boy asked.

"A Greek man that's been dead a right long time," I said. "Remember when I took that Chicken Snake to school and hid it in my desk and it got loose and Mrs. Rozier made me stay after every day for a whole week?"

Both men nodded. They remembered because we'd laughed about it for days. Grandma Jimmie hadn't laughed, though. She thought that taking snakes to school was nearly as trashy as cussing.

"Well, she made me sit in front of her and read about this Socrates man. Seems he thought that real knowing came from looking at the world around you," I said.

"How you like that, Danny Boy? Old dead Greek man knowed what we been knowing before we knowed it," Clarence said.

"I reckon we're just a couple of backwoods Socrates then. Yeah, I like that. I like that a Hell of a lot," said Danny Boy.

I was filled with pride, believing that I had given something valuable to the two men who gave me so much. I vowed to remember to thank Mrs. Rozier, my fourth grade teacher, so earnest in her desire to turn a feral boy into a learned man.

"Next time we come out here, I'll tell the tale of Molly McClelland. The whole damn tale," Danny Boy said, winking at Clarence." But I reckon right now we better get on back to your grandma and the new farmhand. What y'all say?"

"I'll ride in the back with Ugly Joe," I said.

"Leaving me to the city boy, huh? I reckon I'll make it. But Hotshot? You'll have to get along with him as best you can. You hear?" Danny Boy said.

"Like I told Grandma Jimmie, I can't promise. But I'll damn sure try," I told him.

"Good enough," he said. "Come on men, it's time to go. We're putting in Monday morning. We need all the rest we can get."

I looked out at the Lumber River. I strained my ears as hard as I could, but I still couldn't hear our names. It just sounded like water, deep and dark. I hoped that one day I'd know how to listen. And what to listen for.

"Come on, Ugly Joe!" I yelled. He ran up and we followed Danny Boy and Clarence to the cabin. By the time we got there, Brother and the preacher man were long gone. Grandma Jimmie and Leroy were waiting in the truck. I hopped in the back, along with Ugly Joe, and Danny Boy started her up. We straddled that middle line all the way home to Fairmont.

Putting in tobacco, our harvesting time, was about six weeks of hard work. We rose with stars still in the sky and stumbled around in the near dark. Everyone except my cousin Leroy, that is, who stayed in bed until it was time to eat breakfast. Food was the only thing he seemed to like about farm life.

Those of us who did muster the strength to climb out of bed had to take turns getting into the bathroom. It was first come first serve for the men, but we always let Grandma Jimmie go ahead of us. Indoor plumbing had been installed at Teardrop only a few years before I began living there. Danny Boy hadn't had much choice but to get it. After his hindquarters were bitten by a Black Widow Spider that had made her home in the outhouse, no one would use it. When Danny Boy was bitten, Grandma Jimmie had made him one of her famous potato poultices to draw out the poison. Danny Boy had stayed drunk on Clarence's moonshine until the sickness passed. Doctors never darkened the door at Teardrop.

Grandma Jimmie served a big breakfast at five o'clock every morning while we were putting in. We started our day with flour bread and blackstrap molasses, bacon and eggs raised right there on Teardrop. Grandma Jimmie's hair still swung loose and free that early in the morning. It was her finest feature. Her hair was thick and wavy, if a bit faded, and hung down to her knees. When he thought that no one was looking, Danny Boy liked to run his fingers through it.

She was a big boned woman, my Grandma Jimmie. She was tall and broad through the hips. *Sturdy, not purdy* was how she described herself. When he was feeling in a soft mood,

Danny Boy would tell her she was both. But Grandma Jimmie claimed that it was my mama who had all the looks in the family.

As soon as Leroy heard plates and pots rattling about, he jumped out of bed and ran to the table. He was pudgy, and though a year older, he was a good two inches shorter than me. I was long and lean like Danny Boy. But Leroy looked just like his mama's side of the family, at least from what I could tell from the picture he kept of her in the room we shared. She looked pale and freckled, just like Leroy, and as wide as a barn door. There was no sign of McClelland in the boy.

Leroy had troubles with working tobacco from day one. He cooked like a ham in the bright sun. The first week, he'd stood in the fields, panting and swaying, while the rest of us ran around like scalded dogs. It came as no surprise when one exceptionally hot morning, he'd passed out, what we at Teardrop called *getting monkeyed*.

"Boy's got a monkey on his back," Clarence had yelled when Leroy went face down in the rows. The first time I'd heard someone say the phrase, I thought there were flying monkeys in the field, like the ones in the Wizard of Oz.

Though Leroy was worthless as a farmhand, I found that I was softening to him as a cousin. My resentment toward him had lessened when he'd failed to arm himself. I could not fight a battle against someone who refused to defend against attack. Something in him had faded since we'd seen the Lone Ranger together. Something in him had curled up, waiting to die. I backed off. I tolerated him, for the most part, but had yet to accept him as part of Teardrop.

One Saturday, when we didn't have to be in the fields, I decided to go fishing at the pond behind Clarence's house. Clarence lived across the east field, in a house that had

belonged to his people for many generations. We walked back and forth to one another's homes every day. Leroy followed behind me as I made my way through rows of tobacco. He was like Ugly Joe following along behind Danny Boy and Clarence. When we were close enough to see the water, I took off running.

"Eat my dust!" I yelled. But he kept coming.

I couldn't understand his desire to be in my company. I'd done terrible things to him since he'd come to Teardrop. I'd put itch weed in his underwear, just as I told myself I would. I'd even convinced him to eat chicken shit by telling him it was candy that I'd dropped on the ground. And still he'd never tattled on me. I had to respect him for that, at least.

About ten feet away from the water I lost my footing, and fell on a sheet of tin left over from an old barn roof. My knee was sliced deeply, enough so that I felt tears spring to my eyes. It hurt, but I would be damned if I'd cry in front of Leroy. McClelland men didn't cry.

"You alright, Hotshot?" Leroy said, trying to catch his breath.

"I'm fine," I said, but I was ready to start howling. My Grandma Jimmie's voice echoed in my head, warning me of lockjaw.

"You can cry if you want to. I won't tell."

I held my knee and sat on the damp bank of the pond, rocking back and forth.

"I'll tell you something secret, and then you'll have something on me, too. Then you'll know I won't tell," he said.

"I ain't about to cry! Do whatever the hell you want!"

"My mom and dad didn't come when Grandpa dropped me off. You know why?"

"I don't give a shit," I said. The pain in my knee made patience an impossibility.

"They're getting a divorce. When I go home, it'll only be my mom there. I'll see my dad on the weekends mostly."

That pulled me out of myself. People in Fairmont didn't get divorces. They might chase one another with shotguns or call each other names usually reserved for the devil, but they didn't get divorces. Perhaps things were even more different in the city than I'd first believed.

"There was a lot of fighting at home. Yelling and stuff. Mom says this is for the best, the divorce and all. But I still can't believe Dad won't be living with us anymore," Leroy said. He began to cry.

I didn't know how to react. I wasn't used to boys crying out in the open. But I felt as if I had to do something. It pained me to see him hurting, like seeing a dog suffering after being hit by a car. It jarred me. I reached over and patted his back.

"It ain't so bad," I said, feeling a bit choked up myself. "Least he ain't dead like mine."

I tried to blame it on the pain in my knee, but I found myself crying along with Leroy. I cried not for the death of my daddy, but for the death of possibility. I cried for the man he could have been, to me, to Mama, to himself, if he'd known tenderness. Leroy and I never told a soul. On Monday, I kept an eye on him as he worked in the rows. I couldn't have my cousin getting monkeyed again.

We were out in the fields by six o'clock every morning. It was already hotter than hell by then. Even though I was still young, I was usually a cropper. That meant that I was out in

the rows picking the tobacco leaves. Usually only adults were made croppers, but I'd proved my salt, and Danny Boy made me one anyway. Leroy became one by default.

By the time we started picking, we'd already topped the tobacco, which meant we'd broken off the long stalks with the flower heads. We had to weed the suckers, as well. Danny Boy said they were parasites. They grew out of some of the leaves. They smelled awful, and were the stickiest things that God had ever created. We pulled the tobacco worms off whenever we found them. They were green and angry and big as a man's finger.

When we started the picking process, we began with the bottom leaves, which we called the sand lugs. They were sticky, but not nearly as sticky as the suckers. They became covered in soil as they grew. My hands would be caked in tar and sand by the time we'd done the lugs. They were poor grade tobacco, but there was still money to made in them. The best tobacco was from the middle of the plant. Those leaves brought in the biggest price at market. We'd throw the leaves in the slide, and when it was full it was dragged to the barn and emptied for the handers and the stringer.

The two handers sat on either side of the stringer. Their job was to gather and give the leaves to her, first one hander, then the other. The stringer strung the leaves together into bunches. The handers changed every season, but our stringer was the best in Fairmont, Vashti. You had to pay special attention and keep up if you were her handers, or else she would get angry, something to be avoided at all costs. She was a stickler for making sure that every leaf faced the same direction. And she was fast! Faster than every other stringer in Robeson County.

When she'd strung the leaves and laid the bundles over a stick, she'd yell *Full!* Then the hangers ran up and grabbed that stick with all the tobacco hanging off of it, took it into

the barn and hung it inside. Sticks were hung from the top of the barn first, and then lower as more tobacco was strung.

Around nine o'clock, we all took a break. Danny Boy drove Leroy, Clarence and me to Pate's Esso Station to buy Nabs and Nehis. We'd haul the snacks back to Teardrop and everyone would feast before we had to get back to work. These breaks only lasted about twenty minutes, but they were the best twenty minutes of the day. Nothing tasted as good as a Nehi Orange and a pack of Nabs when your bones were weary and your back was aching.

Clarence ate quickly, then always pulled out his knife and a bit of wood. He'd sit next to Vashti and whittle. Danny Boy usually leaned up against the barn and smoked, watching Clarence make a bird or a snake or a wolf out of an ordinary piece of wood.

"Why you always whittling, Clarence?" I asked him during one of our breaks.

"Always whittled, Hotshot. My daddy, his daddy, we all whittled. My great-great granddaddy, Rafe Day, was said to be a right fine woodcarver, but his brother Maccon was said to be the best there was. He carved all kinds of things. Jewelry boxes, walking sticks, you name it. He liked to use cypress. He played the piano, too. Played at a saloon over by the river. Yeah, boy, he did it all. But he got burnt up in a fire. That was way back in 1808."

Vashti cleared her throat, letting Clarence know she thought he was talking too much. Vashti honored silence. She only used words when she felt they were necessary. Since living at Teardrop, I'd grown into a big talker, like Danny Boy and Clarence. Grandma Jimmie said my mouth was like a spigot with a broken turn off valve. It always amazed me how much Vashti could say without speaking a word.

"Oh, yeah. Whittling. You was asking me about whittling," Clarence said. "Well, I reckon it's just family tradition. Folks always said two things about us Days. They said, *Them*

Bright Days -- we got called the Bright Days on account of us being light skinned -- they said, *Them Bright Days knows this part of the state better than anybody, even the Indians.*

And they said we could whittle like nobody else in the county."

"Will you teach me sometime?" I said.

"It'd be mighty fitting for you to know how, son. It sure would."

Vashti nodded her head. She gave me a smile, and then it was time to head back into the fields.

"What's going to happen after we've picked all the tobacco?" Leroy asked when we took our places in the rows. We were picking the middle leaves by that time. I started thinking about the day when the fields would be empty and the tobacco would all be hanging in the barn.

"Well," I said, "It'll be cured with kerosene burners for about a week. Then it'll get took out the barn, laid in the packhouse, unstrung and graded from trash to good to best. That's when Vashti'll fold a kind of bandana out of one leaf and use it to tie bunches of leaves together. Then the tobacco goes back on the sticks, ready for us to take it to market and auction it off. The trash'll get sold at a different market, but the good and the best'll get sold at Twin State Warehouse. There's a hotdog stand there with the greatest hotdogs in North Carolina. You'll like that Leroy."

I told Leroy about Reynolds and American Tobacco Company, our biggest buyers, about how we would receive a check the very day of auction, for all the tobacco we sold to

them. I regaled him with tales of the end of season celebration, an annual event at Teardrop. His eyes grew wide when I told him there would be food.

“Yeah, boy, we’ll have us a time! Grandma Jimmie'll get Danny Boy to haul out her big black cauldron and she'll cook a mess of chicken and pastry big enough to feed everybody. Clarence'll bring his new batch of moonshine special for the party. That end of season get together is the only time when Grandma Jimmie don't get all pissy with Danny Boy about drinking. Or cussing for that matter. Only the men'll be drinking Clarence's liquor, though. Except for Vashti.”

“Vashti drinks moonshine?” Leroy asked.

“Yep. Vashti might be proud and quiet, but she downs shine quicker than any man I know. And she smokes her a pipe while she does it.”

Leroy began to cross and uncross his legs and to hop from foot to foot. He was unable to hold his pee for more than ten minutes at a stretch. This had become evident early in the summer, when he would run from the fields holding tightly to the crotch of his pants. Despite this inevitably occurring, I went on with my story.

“Then Danny Boy'll gather us all around him so he might spin a yarn or two.”

Around campfires, fish fries and pig pickings, Danny Boy was known for reciting stories from his lifetime in Robeson County to those of us hungry for adventure. After the last bones were picked clean of flesh, he would partake of a few nips of Clarence’s brew, a clear concoction with the ability to lower eyelids to half-mast and loosen the tongues of born story tellers. He would then tell the best tales any of us had ever heard.

I told Leroy, both of us picking leaves and wiping sweat from our brows, of how Danny Boy had spoken of Christmastime in his youth. He and Brother and Clarence would

climb the great oaks dotted throughout the river's woods, fetching down thick clusters of mistletoe. These they would sell, hitching rides into town to peddle their hard won wares to local people. No one ever complained that they were being sold something that they could gather for free in the woods. Those boys and their harvest were as much a part of Christmas as Santa Claus.

"Danny Boy and Brother and Clarence used the profits to buy little presents at Pate's for their mamas," I said. "That was before Pate's was even a filling station. It was just a general store back then. Now don't you go running your mouth about this, because Danny Boy told me in private. But him and Brother had to buy for Clarence, because the original Mr. Pate that founded the store wouldn't sell to colored folks. But Danny Boy said they'd got the last laugh, because like it or not, Mr. Pate's goods ended up in the hands of a colored person. They'd made sure he knew it, too. Handed over the gift to Clarence right outside the store window. Made sure Old Man Pate got him a good view."

"I don't like the thought of people being mean to Clarence," said Leroy, still hopping from foot to foot.

"Me neither," I said.

I was going to continue, but Leroy said, "I can't hold it anymore. I like hearing about this stuff, but I really have to pee. Bad!"

"Why you always got to take a piss right in the middle of something, Leroy?"

"I can't help it," he said, and was off.

He ran out of the fields toward the house. I was alone in the rows. I began thinking of Danny Boy's other tales. When the moon and the moonshine were just right, Danny Boy would tell my favorite story, The Tale of the Bog Hag. The story changed depending on the

audience, Danny Boy being acutely aware of what his public desired. Sometimes she was a supernatural thing, wretched and deformed, a banshee whose screams could be heard through the woods, from deep within the bogs. Other times, she was said to have once been a beautiful woman. But she betrayed her ever-loving man with another, and was cursed to roam the swamps, keening at her own reflection in the stagnant pools, her face now as ugly as her cheating heart. One of the biggest shocks of my life came when Danny Boy told, during the end of season celebration the previous year, the truth about the Bog Hag's legend.

"There was a woman by the name of Mehitabel that lived right here in Fairmont over a hundred years ago," he'd started. "She was a good looking woman, so it's said. The kind men thought was little in the nice spots and big in the better ones."

"Watch where you're going with this story, Daniel McClelland, Jr.," Grandma Jimmie had said that night. We'd all laughed.

"Alright, now, alright," Danny Boy had said, "Mehitabel had dimpled cheeks and hair such a pale shade of red that it glowed pink in the light of dusk, dawn and daylight storms. She was right vain and uppity about her looks, too. It weren't her fault, mind you. People'd said she was so pretty so often, she thought it was the only valuable thing she had. Now there was a man by the name of Benjamin who took a shine to Mehitabel. He was a good man, Benjamin was. Honest and hardworking. He bought him a few acres of land right here in Fairmont, and he had him a little liquor business on the side. All he needed now was a pretty young bride to share his future. And he aimed to make Mehitabel that bride. So Benjamin started riding regular to see Mehitabel over by her daddy's farm at Sterling's Mill. His heart was pure, so he reckoned to court her with words from the Good Book."

"From the Good Book?" I'd said.

"Damn right, boy! I courted my Jimmie with Bible verses."

"Honest?" I'd asked.

"You best believe it," he'd said. "I learnt them special. That's the only way to court them churchgoing gals."

Grandma Jimmie's face had turned so red that we could all see it in the dark. She was happier that night than I'd ever known her to be.

"So Benjamin rode on over to see Mehitabel," Danny Boy had continued, "and seeing that golden red hair he says, *You ever seen rose gold? It ain't like regular gold. It's deeper and run through with pink. That's what your hair is. Rose gold.* Then he talks from the Bible and says, *We will make thee plaits of gold.* Well, y'all, that's all she wrote. When he held his hand out to her, she took it. He pulled her to him and whispered, *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for thy love is better than wine.* That's from the Bible, too."

"Yuck. Sounds mushy," I'd said.

"Yeah, maybe so. But it worked. Oh, she thought he was fine then. They got hitched right after that, and they pledged never to prove false to the other. But many years and many children later, Mehitabel didn't find the union so satisfying. Vain thing decided to take up with one of her old beaus, a fellow by the name of Hendricks. Now Hendricks was a poor man, but he got her hot."

"Daniel McClelland, Jr.! The child!" Grandma Jimmie had said.

"Alright Jimmie, alright," Danny Boy had said. "Well, this Hendricks was a pretty rough character. Up one side and down the other. No loyalty to nobody, not even his own wife and children sitting home by their lonesome. But Mehitabel didn't waste no time worrying herself on that. Her and Hendricks made a plan to run off together. Only hitch was,

they needed money. But Mehitabel knew how to take care of that, too. See, that land Benjamin bought proved fertile, and that liquor business proved gainful. Enough that he'd been able to save, oh, about five hundred dollars. Big bucks in them days. He kept it stowed away in a flour sack under the bed. Well, Mehitabel snatched that sack and stripped that sucker clean.

But when her and Hendricks rode off, that money was too tempting for him. Five hundred one way sounded sweeter than a split. So he made him a little detour down to the banks of Drowning Creek. He took every damn dime for himself and drowned Mehitabel in the river for good measure."

"Did he get caught, Danny Boy?" I'd said.

"Well, boy, if you'll let me tell the damn story. Yeah, he got caught. Sometimes the bad guy wins, but this weren't one of them times. Mehitabel's body washed up in a little cove a few days later. They found Hendricks drinking it up in a saloon down river. All the money was gone, Lord knows where. When they arrested him, he starts carrying on about women being spongy things because they wouldn't stay sunk. Just floated right on back up to the top.

His trial was a big deal around these parts, and when he was convicted, the whole county was happy. Everybody came out to see the son of bitch hang. But just about the time that noose tightened around his neck, he caught fire. Just a ball of flames hanging on a rope. Some people said that somebody must've doused Hendricks with turpentine and struck a match. But most agreed that Old Scratch himself climbed out the Lake of Fire and claimed his servant for eternal damnation. By the time they thought to put him out, there weren't nothing left of Hendricks at all."

"What about Benjamin? Was he tore up about what happened?" I'd said.

"Shitfire, boy! You telling this tale, or me? Shut your trap and listen," Danny Boy had said. "Now Benjamin felt mighty broken by Mehitabel's betraying him and all. But he tried damn hard to stay a good man. He went down to claim her body even though she'd wronged him. For the sake of their children, I reckon. He made his way to the undertaker, but when they led him to the room where she'd been laid out, the body weren't nowhere to be found. Just up and disappeared. That's about the time the howls started coming from the bogs."

"Howls from the bogs? The Bog Hag! You mean the Hag was a real person, Danny Boy?"

"Damn right. She was my great grandma, Mehitabel McClelland. She was married to the Old Girl's son, Benjamin. And that land he had? Well, boy, that was Teardrop," Danny Boy had said.

All of a sudden there was a hand on my shoulder, and I heard someone calling my name, distantly, through a fog.

"Hotshot? Hey Hotshot, are you alright? Hotshot?" Leroy said.

I blinked, not sure where I was, but I knew I was no longer sitting under the night sky listening to Danny Boy. I was standing in the bright light of day, in the middle of a tobacco row listening to Leroy. I must have been standing there, adrift, for quite a while, if Leroy had to come to check on me.

"Are you alright?" he said again.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm alright. Just thinking about the end of tobacco season last year," I said, shaking the stars and that distant night sky from my head.

"I saw you all the way from the house. You were staring off for a long time. I thought maybe you had a monkey on your back," he said.

"No, cousin," I said. "You know what, though? Our family's got a lot of history around here."

"If you say so."

"Yes sir, there ain't no telling what we'll find out about *this* year."

A sudden breeze snatched the words from my lips, carried them upward, across the fields, into the trees, where they caressed oak leaves and cypress needles. I waited, feeling the sweat cool against my skin, sensing the familiar itching in my bones. Something big was going to happen.