

Sudden Money

It is all happening so fast it feels slow, runny as the midday heat in the alley, and for a fact Knot can see the sun beaming down from the top of the world. A block of blue, and the short blocky man with a warped boogery face at the other end of the alley, hugging a brown papersack and running Knot's way. Coming to rob him maybe of his play-cousin Lee's bicycle. Panting like a dog to the strumming of haywire on the front wheel spokes.

No brakes and Knot has to drag his hurt foot over the hot cobblestones to stop, eyes on the man likewise stopping before the green dumpster midway the alley between Patterson and Ashley street. Shucking off what looks like one of Aunt Sister's stockings from his head. Yes, a stocking. Black face, stung lips, teeth white as his eyes. Running again, a big man, big as Winston Riley, back home, making straight for Knot but keeping close to the rear walls of the street-front stores.

Knot starts to drop the bicycle and run the other way, back toward Patterson Street where he had been cruising, cool and easy, but he can tell the man isn't after him by the way he kind of slinks along the wall, slow now, cool and easy, with his left hand in the pocket of his brown jeans and his right arm encircling the stuffed brown papersack with the top neatly folded. He looks scared, maybe

afraid of Knot because Knot is so ugly--buck teeth, ball head, skinny as a tobacco-stick scarecrow.

Sudden sirens along Patterson Street, all around, like peepers before a rain, and the man loops around on the cobblestones and heads back the way he came, running hard, and the papersack slips from his arm and skidders to the no-color wall on the left side of the alley.

"Hey, mister," says Knot, "you drop yo sack." He just says it because he should say it, to be polite like his rich pretend-kin he's been visiting all summer, but doesn't yell it out and anyway the man knows and the man is turning the corner onto Ashley Street, gone, and Knot is glad he's gone.

Still straddled the bicycle, Knots walks over to the spot where the sack landed--top still folded down. The kind of sack Aunt Sister carries her groceries in from Harveys downtown all the way over to Troupe Street.

Sirens blaring now to the machine-like clicking of haywire on the spokes. "I ain't into this," Knot mumbles, "I ain't into this." And Knot is pedaling fast up the alley, good foot bare and nail-jabbed foot in a white sock, then north along Ashley Street, past the stalled cars with horns beeping and shoppers dodging his bike. One block away from the screaming of sirens that makes his gums itch.

So hot, and he would like to be on the east side of town, where he belongs, in the shady quiet of row houses whose front yards spill children onto the gravel street. But at the next intersection, he steers the bicycle west, rather than east, and pedals along the sidewalk toward Patterson Street where not ten minutes before, which seems more like an hour, he had been minding his own business:

cruising over spilled cola steeping on hot concrete and exploding pigeons the color of courtyard statues.

"I ain't into this," he says to a stout blue-haired woman weighted down with shopping bags. She is scurrying toward a parked car the color of her hair, trying to unlock it while gazing off across the street at the train of black and white police cars with lights flashing and sirens wailing. People gathered around the door of the bank--FIRST NATIONAL BANK, according to the sign on the white stone frieze atop the building at the corner of Patterson and Hill.

One more turn down the alley and Knot is braking with his socked foot, stopping next to the papersack and scooping it up, packing it into the bicycle basket, then pedaling again, up the alley again, onto the sidewalk running parallel to Ashley Street, turning east this time and flying away from the sirens and car horns with pigeons the color of courtyard statues.

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He should look, he should look in the sack, but he is afraid he will find money, afraid he will not find money. Looks like old magazines, the squared-off corners of the sack do. "How you?" he says to the brittle old black man seated on the store-front bench, corner of Troupe and Ann. Hieing south, toward Aunt Sister's house. He knows that the man was a bank robber, that what is in the sack has to be money. He doesn't have to look, can't wait to look. Instead he looks behind, pedaling regular and sure, south along Troupe Street, and his looking behind causes the bicycle to veer left where three black children are playing with a litter of black puppies. The happy kind, regardless of their station in life.

A tiny girl stands with a puppy hugged up to her bowed belly, hard tail switching at her stubby brown legs.

"Go on, Knot," says her brother, an eight year old with square hair. "This our dogs."

"What I want with no old dogs?" Knot pedals straight up the street to prove he can drive this bicycle right.

"What I want with no old dogs?" he repeats to himself and laughs. Then cries. What he wants is to stay at Aunt Sister's house. He doesn't really belong to Marge, so why can't he belong to her sister?

An old auntie is sitting on one of the row house porches, fanning with a hand fan. Her stockings are rolled at her parted knees. High floors, up and down the street, so high that a boy can play underneath and hear the grownups walking around and talking inside--somebody older over him to protect him from the po-lice, mad dogs and himself. Big square houses with peeling paint and metal gliders on spacey front porches where people sit in the sunshine after supper. Scraggly crepe myrtle trees with frilly cerise flowers that decorate the order of things that Knot can't name. Just summer on Troupe Street.

Again he checks behind him, for the black and white cars downtown, stretching the distance between them and him and the street opening up ahead, and checks too for anybody who might happen to be listening--he has to keep talking to himself so that the words won't bank in his overloaded head.

"I ain't ask for no money, don't want no money. What business a lil ole knot like me got with money?" All lies ticking off through his teeth to the tempo of the haywire on the wheel spokes.

He can see Marge's celery and rust car parked in front of Aunt Sister's roomy old house, waiting to take him back to the one-room shack in the quarters of Cornerville, twenty-five miles east of Valdosta. Where Marge has to live till she gets cured of drinking and cussing. All of Knot's rich pretend-kin are on the front porch: Aunt Sister sitting in one of the high-back rockers, taking the hem on Cousin Judy Beth's white baptism dress; the old granddaddy in the next rocker with his puffed pinkish lips and white hair; Lee on the end of the porch, watching for Knot and his bicycle around the twine trellis of nooning purple morning glory. Marge, rawboned and tall, is standing on a baluster of the doorsteps in her walked-down black shoes and the black-and-navy striped dress that looks all-black, which she always wears to town. Won't wear color, Marge won't.

The women are laughing, hooting, and Aunt Sister play-spanks the seat of Judy Beth's flare-tailed dress. She scoots forward with her bony shoulders slumped and arms limp alongside, play-mad, and stomps through the front screen door, slamming it.

Knot swerves the bike onto the sloped dirt drive, north of the house, and coasts on toward the backyard.

"What you got in the basket?" calls Lee.

"Books," says Knot, passing the chimney with mortar sifting like hour-glass sand from between the red bricks. "Bunch of old books." Say books, Knot has found out, and nobody will look inside a box or bag.

"That boy do love his books," says Marge and hums a laugh. She tells everybody that, and though she doesn't read herself, she is proud he does read, proud of this lil ole knot, as she calls him, who somebody fished out of a trash can twelve years ago and took to her to raise. "Get yo stuff, Knot," she yells, "we gotta go."

"A nail job Knot in the foot yesterday," says Lee, who figures Marge might care for a change.

Knot is in the back yard, at the back stoop, standing straddled the bicycle. The uneven boards of the hip-roofed house used to be painted either green or red; you can't tell which because the paint is scaling, blending, and the effect is a rich tapestry. The fact that Knot is long-gone, hiding out from the po-lice with his stolen money, makes no difference to his family out front. They are still mouthing at him as if he is right there with them. Get Aunt Sister and Marge together and they'll talk. "What all them sireens about?" yells Aunt Sister.

"Ain't seen no sireens." Knot wipes his eyes on the sleeves of his brown striped shirt, then lifts the papersack from the basket and lets the bicycle drop on its side. Wheels spinning and haywire clicking on the spokes.

Up the tall wood doorsteps, past the daisywheel of yellow cats eating oatmeal from a bowl and through the door to the sunny yellow kitchen. Toasted bread smells--one more thing Knot loves about city living, about being at his rich pretend-kin's house. Money buys the smell of toast and money buys color. He will buy Marge a toaster and some color for her shack.

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He is still holding the sack of money, or maybe books--now that he has said it he wonders and wouldn't be surprised or even disappointed if it were books. He stands on the curb next to the old car that reeks of mildew and burnt motor oil. Aunt Sister and Marge are loading papersacks of Lee's hand-me-down clothes into the trunk. "Be enough clothes to start him back to school," says Aunt Sister and rubs his head hard. "Put a brick on that head, Marge, if he keep growing."

Mourning doves purl, locusts hum. Way-off rumble and toot of a freight train Knot has seen with his own two eyes. The three black children with the black puppies linger along the street. A slow car passes. Their mother steps to the edge of her wide front porch with her hands on her hips. "Git off that hardroad fore a car run over you."

"You gone nuss them books all the way home, or put em back here?" Marge asks Knot. She has one hand on the raised trunk with a long brown finger hooked through her key ring. Bunch of keys. Though only one serves a purpose. She slams the trunk, hugs and hums over Aunt Sister, Granddaddy and Judy Beth, then goes around to her side of the car.

"Kiss em all bye, Knot," she says.

He hugs the books and kisses Aunt Sister and Judy Beth on the cheeks as they pass along the curb before him. "You behave yourself," says Aunt Sister. "I'm gone miss yo ugly mug," says Judy Beth. "That boy be a fool bout them books," hums Marge over the car roof.

Knot is truly ugly, and he likes Judy Beth--maybe loves her--because unlike everybody else she never pretends that he's easy to look at.

The old granddaddy pokes over with his cane and slaps Knot on the shoulder. He wears a suit of gray twill workclothes, starched and ironed. His skin is the gray of his clothes. "You be back here fore you know it. Mind Marge, you hear?"

Yessir." Knot likes him too--no, loves him--wishes he were his real granddaddy.

Lee is inside, outside, somewhere. The fact that he doesn't come to say good-bye says how sorry he is to see Knot go. All summer they have quarreled over the bicycle, drove Aunt Sister crazy, but now that Knot is leaving, Lee is sorry to see him go. May be crying right this very minute. Knot grins, shining his great white teeth.

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Knot is almost safe, almost free, perched on the front seat with only his eyes moving. But Marge has to run by the drugstore downtown to get her blood pressure medicine. Knot cannot believe that he is downtown again, traveling along Patterson Street again. Light traffic slow-motoring along all four lanes of the one-way street and not a cop in sight.

It has to be books in the sack. Old magazines, probably.

Marge is changing lanes, merging left, turning the celery and rust car onto West Hill, pulling up and backing into the corner parking space with the bank on the northwest corner behind them.

"You coming in with me?" she says. "Too hot out here in the car."

"I'll just sit here."

"You ain't sick?" She feels his forehead with the backside of her hand.

"You just sad," she says. "Hating to leave everybody, right?"

"Right."

"Cause they rich, right?" She hums a laugh because she doubts that. "Well, read you one of them books while I'm gone." She opens the door, checks for traffic, lumbers out and around the rear of the car.

He watches her pass through the glass side door of Bel-Lile Drugs next to the stairs that lead up to the closed doctor's office where Marge used to take Knot when he had the earache, and where there were two waiting rooms--one for blacks and one for whites. Long time ago, and now he goes to school with the whites who treat him okay because he is clean and honest, makes good grades, and never says po-lice, siren, loot or cop.

Now he can look in the sack; he has to look. Is afraid to look. He stays stiff, unblinking, as he unfolds the brown paper cuffs, peeps inside.

He looks up and blows. "Ain't books," he says and bites back a grin.

Stacks of dirty-green hundred-dollar bills with bands marked "1000" in red print.

He blows at his forehead again. Folds the top of the sack down, grips it tighter. Stares straight ahead. He wonders how much money he has. Starts to get out and leave the sack with the loot on the dead doctor's stairs. Waves of high tight happiness and terror pass over him like hot and cold water.

Suddenly, the driver's door swings wide, and Marge is getting into the car with a white cup of fountain soda in one hand and a white sack of rattly pills in the other.

"Here," she says and hands him the cup. "Perk you up."

"Thank you," he says.

"Say somebody rob the bank this afternoon, get 50,000 dollar."

He is sipping the fizzy cold cola and has to bite down on the cup lip to keep from gurking. Sinks his buck teeth into the Styrofoam leaving horseshoe impressions he can see with the tip of his tongue.

Almost out of town, juddering south past the ABC Liquor Store on his right and checking Marge's long brown hands on the steering wheel to see if they will turn the wheel right. Then over the railroad overpass, from which point he can almost see Aunt Sister's fine house and can see her church with the fancy white steeple and cross.

He will buy a house like that, he might even buy a church like that, but knows he probably never will--even with all this money--when Marge stops at the Dixie Station and has to count out her dollars and dimes for gas and he cannot so much as hand her one of the hundred-dollar bills from the sack for fear of getting caught.

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Knot dozes with his left hand on the papersack of worthless money between his cot and the unpainted wall and window of Marge's shack in the quarters.

Marge, in the next bed, is snoring--sounds like a small engine sputtering--and next door, in the shack on the right, Winston Riley is beating up his wife Boots. Children scream, flesh splats, a chair overturns, Boots yelps. In a minute, she will be over here. In a minute, Marge will be doctoring her battered head while preaching to her about leaving Winston.

A door slams. Knot sits up, swings his feet over the edge of the cot and waits for Boots, waits for the heat to let up. Dim light through the screened window facing the woods--starlight thick with the ringing of katydids and the hulled whine of mosquitoes. Rooty smell of hogs in the pen out back, or maybe it's the rotting potatoes in the bag by the front door. Ask Marge why she doesn't clean up the combination kitchen-livingroom-bedroom and she'll tell you quick she gets enough of cleaning other people's houses. Besides, she adds, my own dirt, me and mine, don't bother me. Knot feels good when she says the part about "me and mine," because then and only then does he feel he belongs. She's never even hugged him. He slaps a mosquito on his arm and scratches the itch till it smarts. Marge has quit snoring, is waiting too.

Feet bound on the porch floor, shaking the entire shack and rattling the windows. Bap bap bap on the door. Ragged breathing, mewling. A baby stifles crying.

Marge moans, stands, pulls the cord on the overhead light. White light showers down on her broomed peroxidized hair. She is almost forty, but looks younger because she is skinny, all legs in her man's white T-shirt (Knot cannot remember which man, only that once upon a time there was a man), except for her belly, which is bloated and tight from what the doctor calls liver trouble.

Long bare feet in motion, Marge lumbers over to the front left corner and picks up her old rabbit-eared shotgun, then goes to the vertical-board door and flips the metal latch. Boots with her antennae braids and wild eyes, and a baby on one hip, shoves past Marge and into the room. Three guinea children are grafted to her legs. Boots's nose is leaking blood to her blue cotton smock trimmed in red rick-rack; her broad flat nose looks flatter, spattered. Rotten potatoes scatter and roll across the filthy wide floorboards and out the door where Marge is standing with her shotgun pointed barrel-up to the night sky. She breeches the shotgun and fires. A flashette of orange, then smoke curling back into the room with Marge. "Come on over here, Winston," she yells in her braying night voice. "I'm waiting on you." Much cussing. Then quiet outside as she slams the door and sets the latch in its hook.

Inside, the children are sniffing, whining, drying up. And Boots has one forearm pressed over her nose, blood leaking over and around it and drip drip drip on the floorboards.

Marge ambles over to the corner and leans the shotgun against the unceiled wall, then picks up a white washrag from the table by the door and tosses it to Boots.

"He oughta break your neck for you staying with him."

"I got younguns to feed," Boots says, burbling blood. Then presses the rag to her nose.

Marge takes the baby from Boots. He wraps his thin, sore-crusted legs about her waist and rests his curly head on her bosom, sucking his thumb. "You babies climb on up there in my bed," she says to the other children, who are variously wandering, gnawing on fingers and staring fix-eyed at their mother. "Boots, you sit here." Marge points to one of the chrome-legged chairs at the dinette table by the door. "Let Doc Marge see to that nose," she adds in a kinder tone.

Boots sits, tilting her horsy face up and holding the towel under her chin to catch the drooling blood. "Yeah, look like he break it this time," Marge says to her. Then to Knot, "Here, buddy, come take this baby."

Knot crawls across his cot in his underwear, goes over and takes the baby. Wet diaper settling on his left arm. The baby cuddles close as Knot pats his warm brown back. There is a living wreath of night beetles and moths around the light.

"Hold still now," Marge says to Boots and stands straddle-legged before her knees, sighting the nose-bone alignment with the precise center of the wide bridge between Boot's inky eyes. Marge yanks hard, Boots grunts. Marge holds the nose between both hands like a caught bird, then steps away. Sighting again.

"I ain't taking it no more," says Boots and sprawls in the chair.

"Yeah, you will," brays Marge. "You gone take it till the undertaker take you."

"You a hateful old thing," says Boots, dobbing blood from her precious fixed nose.

"How come I ain't beat black and blue and you are."

The baby is limp, heavier asleep in Knot's arms; he lays the leggy boy on his wallowed-out cot and lies down beside him. Bony knees and elbows in his back as he turns facing the black window and the papersack of money. He listens to the two women talking low and the children in the next bed breathing shallow, regular. All but one who is snoring: bad adenoids, according to Marge, who would know, because she used to work for a baby doctor in Valdosta before she got fired for drinking on the job. Then, she lived in the house with the old granddaddy and Aunt Sister and was welcome as the flowers in May, they said, as long as she didn't drink and raise sand. It has been at least six months since she pitched her last drunk, but the fact that she stays on in the quarters of Cornerville means she could very well pitch another drunk at anytime.

Knot lulls himself to sleep with thoughts of moving in with Aunt Sister and her family and how to use the money without getting caught.

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When he wakes the next morning, everybody is gone, his bed is wet, and sunlight is streaming through the single east window around a cardboard patch, a blank square in the five-pane window stencil on the wide floorboards. Smells of blood and urine, like orange Kool-aid and ammonia.

Beyond the wall at the head of Knot's bed, Boots is fussing with the children--back to normal. Winston has gone to work in the pulpwoods, and for two or three days they will get along, then BOOM! all over again.

But life is good now: dogs bark, children play, women hang out their wash, and Knot has finally come up with a way to use the money.

Wearing the same brown shorts and brown-striped shirt he wore yesterday, same white sock on his injured foot, he limps to the door, out the door, with one of the stiff bundles of hundred-dollar bills in his left pocket, plus chiming coins from Marge's change jar for postage.

It is about ten o'clock and already the sun is heating up the quarters, shining through rags of moss in the oaks. Flocked shadows on the packed gray dirt that hatches broken glass and trash like fleas. Locusts hum and bandy-legged children scamp yard to yard of the unpainted, close-set cabins. Old women on porches rock and swat flies and wait.

Knot takes the gravel horseshoe road along the west curve where the yellow buses will soon circle the school grounds. The softball field on his right is grown up in red bitter weeds, looks like tilled clay. Hands in his pockets, he limps along, past the giant oak that divides the road at the side entrance to the schoolyard. A checkmark breezeway hooks the old portwine brick building to the new red brick building that still smells of wet cement.

At the end of the road, he turns left along the sidewalk, passing the row of white people's white houses, where Marge works now but won't have to work after tomorrow. He doesn't cross Highway 94 to

the other side till he gets to the red brick, flat-topped courthouse, directly across from the red-brick, flat-topped post office.

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Just as he'd expected, on Friday evening when Marge gets home from work, she is scooting in her black shoes with the walked-down heels and saying "Hoo-oo-oo!" Hum-laughing. Around the rear of the parked car, across the yard, and onto the porch, calling "Knot, Knot...hoo-oo-oo!" Through the open door with the white envelope Knot sent yesterday loved-up to her flattened breasts.

It is sunset in the quarters and the orange light slanting through the west woods outshines the trash fires. Smells of smoke and supper cooking as if from the same pot. So hot that the heat seems textured of the locuts' hum. Pickups come and go, delivering the men home from work. They wander cock-sure through the knots of merry children and dogs. The old women on the porches wait for tomorrow, when it will start all over again. That kind of evening.

"Honey, you ain't gone believe what's in here." Marge speaks secretive and low. She dances in a circle with the envelope in the air. Shuffling her big feet to an imaginary beat. "Hoo-oo-oo!" An old-timey dance shuffle that used to embarrass Knot, but now with only the two of them around makes him proud. He feels like Santa Claus.

How many times has he daydreamed about finding money, giving Marge money to make up for her sacrifices: all those cold nights when he'd be sick and she would get bundled up like a witch in her black coat and headscarf and go out to find wood to feed to the hungry black heater.

"What is it, Marge? What?"

"Money, baby, that what."

"Where you get it, Marge?" he says. "How much?"

"Five hunderd dollars, baby. Five hunderd dollars!" She takes the five bills from the envelope and kisses one and then the other. Then fans them at him. Has forgotten the first part of his question.

She dips up and down like a carnival duck, then holds her knees. "We in the money, honey," she says. "Gone get you some new shoes, gone get me a lady-like hairdo--gone get it ironed, baby." Her broomed hair stands out, looks gnawed or singed, for a fact. "Gone get us a TV, baby. Gone get us some new tires on that old jalopy out there."

"And a bicycle," says Knot.

"And a bicycle," she shouts, then shushes herself.

He doubts that five-hundred dollars will buy all that, figures he'll have to mail more to her--if all goes well.

She grabs him, waltzing, humming, around the walk-space of the small room being daily reduced by junk. Suddenly she stuffs the bills into the bosom of her brown blouse and says, "Now you stay here. Mama Marge gone go get us something fitting for supper--ain't gone eat no beans tonight, baby," and she is out the door, shuffling toward the old celery and rust car. Gets in, coaxes it into starting, and is gone.

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She doesn't come back and she doesn't come back, and it grows dark, darker. Knot had been expecting that too.

And expecting that next door all hell would break loose when Winston got home and found Boots and the babies gone. Hell is breaking glass and wood.

Knot latches the door, turns off the light, and sits on his cot with his socked, throbbing foot atop the money bag, and listens to Winston slam about the house, cussing and threatening to cut out Boots's liver when he finds her.

Knot smiles.

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He stops smiling when he wakes during the night to Marge pawing at the front door and calling him. Her braying night voice now slurred.

He pulls the cord on the overhead light, unlatches the door, and she wobbles in with her turtle-lidded eyes at half-mast. She starts to cry as he leads her to her bed, helps her lie down, and takes off her shoes with the walked-down heels. The second toe of her right foot overlaps the big toe. The paler soles of her feet are grained like wood, smell like scorched ironing.

"I forget you, baby, didn't I?"

Knot nods.

"I spend all my money and forget you."

"All of it?"

Right arm bent at the elbow, she rocks her hand side to side.

"Give it away, throw it away--I ain't have it nomore."

To stop her blubbery crying, he starts to tell her not to worry, there is more money. He starts to show her how much more. Is already walking around the spindled iron foot of her bed, but stops. Knows

he'll never give her more money, can't give her money. Looks around at the colorless gloom of the shack, at the dingy light showering down on Marge's few dark dresses and coat hanging from the broomstick rod in the right corner. Even the bloody rag with Boots's blood on it, in the middle of the floor, looks like a dead rose. If he gives Marge money, she will never be welcome as the flowers in May at Aunt Sister's house.

"Poor lil ole Knot," Marge says and places her forearm over her eyes so that her whiskey breath smells stronger, her triangular lips look greedier. "First I chunk you in the trash, then I take off and spend my money on liquor and men."

"Marge," he says and goes to the head of her bed again, "you ain't chunk me in no trash. You the one take me to raise when somebody else fish me out and bring me to you."

Arm still over her eyes, she says low, "Ain't how it was. I had you, didn't want you. That the truth." She moves her arm, smeary brown eyes full on him.

"Why you act like I ain't yours then?" He kneels on the floor beside her. "Why you make up that story bout me belonging to somebody else? Say how sorry my real mama be."

"You know me..." She moans, cries, chugs crying, then, "Know me like my ownself, and know I ain't never want to be tied down to nobody. Be easier, better, to make you think you don't belong to me." She rolls over, facing away from him, sobbing. Bony back shaking under her sorry brown shirt. "At first, I don't tell you you mine cause I don't want you to know I stoop so low. Then, I don't want you to know for the same reason I chunk you in the trash in the first place." Her hot hoarse voice goes suddenly cold: "Now go on. Go on

and stay up yonder with Sister and them. I ain't have no claim on you."

"You just sorry for yourself, Marge." He is the one crying now. "You just looking for a excuse to get drunk and stay drunk."

For a fact, she always blows up at him when she is drunk, and for a fact, the next day all is forgiven and forgotten, but this time is different.

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When the train of yellow school buses begins circling the quarters, after school starts, the children and the bus drivers see red tricycles and blue bicycles, rainbows of clothes on the lines, and vari-colored plastic flowers in pots on the shack porches. All except one. But that's okay.

It's okay and even better than okay, as far as Knot is concerned. Two months and Marge hasn't had a drink--not even a beer! And soon Knot will be with his new family on Troupe Street, in Valdosta. And if there is any money left over--barring more unforeseen needs popping up in the quarters--he will take the sack of money back to the alley. He will borrow his true-cousin Lee's bicycle and take the money back and leave it there. Though, for a fact, he is tempted to buy himself a new bicycle first. But he won't cave in. He won't be even tempted to cave in and spend the money on himself because he won't need to. He will be rich then.

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Something Safe, Something Free

A soft owl in the liveoak swoops low over the lane. A pickup slows, turns left off the highway. Yellow lights blinker on the white mailbox, on rags of Spanish moss where katydids stash their summer shrieks. A tired country song loads the dusk, textured of winter's nothingness hum. Sounds borrowed from yesterday, on loan from tomorrow.

First of March, and cold. So cold that the white frame house at the end of the lane looks shrunken. Dark house, dark windows, the one over the porch known for framing a pretty woman making supper-- Before Winter, Before Divorce. A tin equipment shed, south of the house, with its dwindling family of baby farm tractor and daddy DB. All backlit by a butchered sun bleeding into the pinesline and spilling forth on the open fields of toasted weeds.

The floor creaks in the kitchen reeking of bad bananas, stronger before the flush of light on white tiles with foot prints left by the pedestal oak table--Gail wanted it--, on the heavy Ben Franklin stove with its cold soot smell--Gail couldn't move it.

Willie slaps the stack of mail on top of the stove, eyeing the envelope on top with its return address of IRS. Reminder that his \$300 monthly installment is past due on an old debt (investment credit tax entanglement even Willie's lawyer can't explain), the whole of which, including penalties and interest, will be paid off if Willie can keep on working another forty-six years. He can guess what the rest of the mail amounts to: lawyer bills, doctor bills, utility bills, checking overdrafts and bank notes beyond due-- debtors' threats and bankers' condemnations. Though Willie now hates Gail, his ex, as much as he ever loved her, he thinks she was smart to get out--Before Bankruptcy, Before Defeat. Finding herself was what she called getting a job in Valdosta, then gradually making her move from the house in Swannoochee County to an apartment in Valdosta. But finding a hunk was more like it, Willie has decided, because she was married again in less than a month after the divorce papers were signed. A bank examiner, five years younger, with a BMW.

Willie props one work boot on the corner of the stove, next to the mail, and begins unlatching the leather strings from the hooks. Taking off his boots at the door, a habit carried over from his married days, which he sort of understands now that he has to mop the white tiles himself. When he thinks about it, when he has time. Another thing, his beer gut has gotten so round and tight he has trouble bending. Unlatching his second boot, he pays grateful attention to the stub of his right thumb working the laces, the tip of which got pinched off while he was binding his DB to the lowboy with a chain. His thumb buried before his body that he often thinks

of as dead too. No longer even that thrill of loving women after dark.

His white socks are stained, as if his cold feet have rusted in his leaden boots. Walking now, he stares down at his socks to keep from staring up at the vee-ceiled walls, minus pictures of his six-year-old twins, and marches straight into the boiling void of the disfurnished living room with its high ceiling and boarded-up fireplace. Eyes on the chute of kitchen light glaring on the pale pine floor, and ears tuned to the thrumming vibrations of the refrigerator--Gail got a new one--and on into the little yellow bedroom that used to belong to his little blonde girls, that used to belong to him as a boy, following the blinking red light to the answering machine on the floor. A new machine in the old house, a new light that doesn't lend to his lonesomeness, to his guilt for gambling away the family homeplace to feed money into his dying construction business. He taps the MESSAGES bar on the machine and listens:

"Bossman, hey! It's me, Bear (laugh). New tractor come in right after you leave the job thi'sevening. Old Man's itching to run it, but I say 'Huh uh, Bossman get to drive it first.' Call me at the house, soon as you get in."

"Mr. Hogan, this is Wynell. Just touching base with you. Got a few loose ends needs tying up before I can finish your 94 tax returns. Thanks."

"Mr. Hogan, this is Bob West calling on Thursday afternoon from Caterpillar Corporation Credit Department, in Portland, Oregon. As you know, your account is now seriously in arrears. Give me a call

right away, at 503-625-2284, so that we can make arrangements with our South Georgia dealer to pick up your DB on Monday."

"Willie, listen. Patty and Brenda have decided to go with me and Allen to Orlando this weekend. Maybe we'll take them on to Disney. Hope you don't mind. They'll for sure be with you the next weekend. OK?"

"Bossman, hey! It's me, Bear (laugh). Guess you ain't coming in. See you on the job first thing in the morning. We gone make a killing out of this AID-A thing, good buddy, don't you worry."

Willie taps the STOP bar on the machine and listens to the tape risp with the drone of the refrigerator. His teeth ache from gritting them. It's almost as cold inside as outside the house: no insulation, more attic space than living space, costs too much to heat with gas for only one person who might not even come home. If he builds a fire in the wood stove, he has to stay sober and on guard in case the resin-cankered flue should ignite and burn down the fat-pine farm house.

Snapping the brads on his tan corduroy coat with the fleece collar, he creeps back to the kitchen, to the refrigerator with the red Magic Marker mural on the peened gold door--art, compliments of one of the twins--and searches among the ketchup and mayonnaise and pickle jars, and Gail's crusty-tipped mustard dispenser, for a beer. None. None in the truck either. He drank it all while riding the woods...just riding to be riding.

Finally, he settles for a saucer of congealed corned beef, the canned kind, and a glass of water, which he takes to the den to eat in the company of TV characters. He's not really hungry: all day

he's been snacking on chocolate milk and Snickers at Holiday Markets, lunching on hamburgers and chocolate shakes at Wendys, when he had to go into town for lawyer meetings and on errands for Bear. He plops into his brown vinyl recliner--his throne, as Gail used to call it, and he'd like to tell her it's a damned miserable one, swelting in summer and freezing in winter--and switches on the TV with the remote control. Only thing he controls now.

But he kind of likes this old chair too, because when the twins come and one has to sit on the floor to watch TV, while the other sits on his lap, they switch places as soon as he goes to the kitchen for a snack, and he pretends he can't tell the difference in the wispy girls with wispy hair giggling behind their hands.

He eats, drinks, dozes, alternately watching "20/20" and the ceiling with its water rings of flowers on white Celotex. He thinks about the leaky roof he could re-roof now that Bear is certified as an AID-A contractor and has offered to partner with him. But he knows he won't re-roof, that whoever the bank sells to will have to do it, and is shocked awake by the realization that the new owner of the 200-acre homeplace might bulldoze the house and oaks and set up a trailer park or plant pines. The thought makes him sweat cold, but at the same time relieves him of picturing another man sitting in this room, another man walking over Willie's birthright dirt where broken wedges of his grandmama's dishes wash up with every rain, another family in this house with its Hogan smell that Willie has never been able to describe or explain.

As an AID-A contractor, Bear, simply because he is black, apparently, will now move to the top of the bid list for State and Federal site-prep projects: land clearing, chopping, bedding and

planting pines. Is Bear including Willie because he's afraid of making decisions without the experience of his old boss? Because a white man has always lorded over him? Or is he including Willie out of loyalty? Maybe out of pity for Willie--two calls in one evening mean Bear expects Willie to kill himself--whose own business will be declared officially bankrupt next Monday. After fifteen years of building a business, and five more watching it fall, Willie sometimes thinks he'd be just as well off to go fishing as to start over again. But he has to work. He has child support payments. He can't imagine not working. He wouldn't know what to do if he woke up tomorrow and didn't have a job to go to, a rut that keeps him moving in the direction of the family graveyard, south side of the property.

Is the graveyard part of the land package?

Willie hadn't thought of that before, and for some reason, which seems totally unrelated, Willie considers the block of pasture, footstone end beyond the graveyard fence, where his daddy had plowed under the Hogan slave graves. Years ago. So many years Willie can't remember it--tries not to. So many years ago he should feel no blame; he doesn't really except when he drives over that spot on his way to clean the graveyard. And then blame seems diminished by the dwindling-down of inherited blame--Daddy did it. Just nigger graves, according to his daddy, and they never seemed important to Willie either, till now, and now they are mostly important because somebody might find out. What would, say, the NAACP do if they knew? And he suspects why suddenly, after so many years, the slave-grave plowing-under is on his mind: it has to do with the fact that Bear is black, and Willie is now at the mercy of a black man. That the spirits of

the slaves have come to inhabit the souls of working white men--the new minority, the new nigger.

Willie sinks into a skimming sleep, thinking or dreaming about himself working for his black buddy Bear, who used to work for him. He gets to drive Bear's new yellow tractor first, but it is stalled on a tree stump in the clearing of woods, and his lopped thumb is spouting cold blood like a courthouse fountain designated "Whites." Below, Bear is standing with his eyewhites and teeth shining in his damp-brown face, holding a sieve disguised as a bucket to catch Willie's blood, which rains through and runnels in the furrows of chopped dirt.

He wakes up to a time he doesn't know--just dark--and ratchets the footrest down on his recliner, and starts to get up, to go to bed, then toggles the TV remote control to OFF and hugs the cold armrest to keep from slipping through the seams of his dreams.

The next morning--Friday--Willie shows up for work drunk. Not staggery-drunk, but dumb-drunk, and closer to noon than morning. That's all right.

"That's all right, good buddy," Bear says. Not "Bossman," which tips the divining rod toward madness in Willie's head. Bear slaps Willie's left shoulder with his great bear hand, leaving a greasy paw print on his tan corduroy jacket.

When Willie had happened up, Bear, chopping the crib of cleared west woods on one of his raggedy-ass old tractors, had left the engine idling and hopped down and slogged twenty yards through the mud and stubble of scrub oak and pine roots to the dirt road.

Grinning and swatting his leg with his cap, resetting it on that burst of hair. Willie's age, but young-looking in his cropped denim jacket and faded jeans with a blue grease rag flagging from his hip pocket. That lean boyish body that makes his hands and feet look huge. Like a photograph taken at an odd angle.

Standing on the dirt road now, facing Willie, his brown eyes shift toward the new D8 pointed north up the track-scored road, which Willie refuses to look at because he's already got a good slanted view of the tractor while driving around it with the two left wheels of his pickup sliding into the muddy ditch along the east strip of virgin pinewoods.

Such unmasked pride in a man, any man, has always made Willie want to dampen it. Such overweening happiness makes him want to say something sad, even if only about the weather, how cold it is, how it might rain and shut down Bear's whole chicken-shit operation. He can't afford to. Stands stiff in the dry cold wind. But Bear has never given Willie any reason to suspect he's anything but happy and humble and loyal as an old coon dog. Which is easy when you're not in business for yourself. This business will break him.

"They done put the steering pedals on the floor," says Bear. "You believe that?" He laughs. "You can run it though, Buddy, I knows you can?"

Willie scrunches deeper into his coat with the fleece collar turned up on his short bull neck and starts toward the crawler tractor with the spanking yellow paint that makes his eyes ache. Bear's daddy is kicking around a fierce smoky fire, not ten yards from the west ditch. The toothless old man with his collapsed face doesn't even look up at Willie, and it's just as well, and Willie

would appreciate it if Bear would quit tromping behind him, playing dumb and running off at the mouth--tomorrow, they'll have to work on some AID-A bids--acting as if nothing in the hell was wrong and everything was right. Right for him, sure! He is the one getting all the breaks now. He is "Bossman" now.

"Get on up there," says Bear, "and see can't you show out for them boys pushing that cypress swamp." He nods at the island of trees, north of the rectangular clearing.

Willie heaves himself onto the left tractor track and into the seat that smells of new vinyl. What shit, making such a big deal over a damned D8! Willie owns one...has owned two.

"Where's the ether?" he says.

"Try it," says Bear. "Don't need no ether. It'll fire."

"Like shit!" says Willie, turning the key in the switch under the seat to engage the 24-volt system, then pressing the starter on the crescent dash. "These old D8s ain't never crunk without...", he says, and the exhaust pipe on the hood puffs smoke rings to the blue sky, the engine pings, screams, sings and sends the words back to his brain as just a thought.

Both feet set on the steering pedals, Willie shifts gears from first, to second, to third, maneuvering straight ahead, down the straight dirt road, broad blade cuffing the rooty wind whisking off the swamp where two other tractors are pushing up hundred-year-old cypresses like dog fennels. Another thing that galls Willie, makes him crazy: the EPA will be on their asses for clearing that swamp--wetlands, they call it. Well, that's Bear's problem, not Willie's.

"Get it, boys!" Willie yells to the men who worked for him yesterday, but will work with him today. Shit!

Willie starts to mash the left steering pedal to turn off at the sumpy road cut through palmettoes and gallberries, but lifts the toe of his boot and keeps crawling into the cold March wind. It's as if the snarling DB has struck a cord in his head he can live with. A steady motion he can keep pace with. Don't stop, don't turn, don't think. And where the road vees out into woods up ahead, he can still go on crawling and never have to speed up or slow down, never have to worry or come up with some new magic trick tomorrow to keep the world turning. But the feeling doesn't hold.

His stomach growls. Today he won't eat, today he'll just drink, keep that padded-against-impact feeling, that filmy view of the blown glass sky with green pines set against the blue like a reflection on a lake. Clear brown water, like melted copper, sluicing through sandy ditches on both sides of the road. The dirt below, streaming past, keeping its distance. Willie's not taking any shit off anybody today. No phone calls today, no mail. Let Bear buck the system--permits, motor fuel taxes, insurance. Shit. Let Bear pay that old man back there for chunking litard knots on a fire; Willie's been doing it for twenty-odd years.

Water on his face that must be tears. No rain, no sign of rain. Good working weather. His nose runs; he wipes it on his coat sleeve, driving, driving into the wind blast. His eyes sting.

"Shit, Gail," he says to himself. "Whoever heard of letting two little younguns decide between Daddy and Disney World?"

The only reason he gyres the tractor around, heading south down the track-cobbled road, is to go back for his pickup to go after the twins, to get his beer. But whatever sobers him--maybe the wind beating at the back of his head, maybe thoughts of Allen the Hunk

having to provide for his girls, maybe the white bee soupers like stacked boxes on a sunny patch of greening grass--causes him to take the right turn at the muddy road cut through palmettoes and gallberries, where he will work out the day with the two men who used to worked for him.

After an achingly empty Sunday, even doped with beer, come Monday evening, Willie stands at the kitchen window with his 30-30 rifle by his side and watches the yellow tractor-trailer rig wheel up the lane and snort to a stop under the oaks. Two men get out of the truck, one like a Sumu wrestler with a red face, carrying a clip board; and the other tall and thin with a trim black beard and office-pale skin. They gaze at the still house with its leaf-littered porch. Same soggy brown leaves raining down from the liveoaks and snuffing lit patches of sand where the flocked shade permits no grass. No wind today, and it is warm, so warm that Willie has taken off all his clothes. Not to celebrate the end of winter, not to mourn the start of spring, but to insure that he doesn't go out yet. Naked, he won't go out. If he looks down, he will see his belly ballooning over an apron of black hair, his slack penis, used only for pissing now.

The man with the clipboard says something to the other one, and they stroll around the south side of the house, toward the tin equipment shed and the scabby-yellow D8 dug in like a locust shedding its skin.

Puffy gray clouds rush over the open fields and the pecan grove, north of the shed. Crows, like blackened fruit, decorate the bony branches of the trees. As the men get closer, the crows strike up a chorus of strangled cawing and ricochet like shots from the trees to the fields. A warning either to Willie, or the men, or to the other wildlife that have been given dominion over the homeplace since Willie quit farming.

After much tinkering and spraying ether into the intake manifold, the two men get the tractor started--white smoke and that telltale hammering that used to make Willie shrink in his skin. Engine's about to blow. Their problem, as of this minute, their expense. Though Willie feels he's paid twice-over what a new engine would cost in interest and late fees. Only two more payments to go and the DB would have been his, junk or not.

Willie has been creeping from window to window to watch them start the tractor, then drive it alongside the vibrating house, and ends up at the kitchen window again to watch them load it onto the Caterpillar lowboy. He can hear himself breathing, short ragged gasps; the floor boards creak when he shifts on bare feet. A dank smell inside the house in which he will spend his last night. And it's just as well.

He has found a creased, playing-card sized photo of his girls--those blue eyes peering up from spun-glass bangs--and has taped it to the window over the sink to remind him that Gail is their mother, that they need their mother, that he shouldn't kill their mother. He searches for some trait in those duplicated faces to bear out the fact that he is their daddy and doesn't find it and doesn't care.

But neither do they look like Gail, who is as dark and stocky as Willie. The twins don't look like anybody except each other.

After the men have bound the tracks of the tractor with chains, they walk around to get into the truck, the driver with the black beard eyeing the kitchen window as if he can see Willie behind it with the rifle he's holding only because it gives him a feeling of power, a sense of control.

It's all right. It's all right if they take the tractor. It's all right if the IRS has levied his checking account. Only a couple of hundred dollars in it anyway, thanks to Bear. But it's not all right if Gail and the hunk move to Orlando and take his girls.

"You can still get them on the weekends," Gail had said on the phone that morning. (Ever since he got behind on his child support, she has been gradually dismissing the judge's orders of joint custody: A trade-off: I won't tell if you don't tell.)

How, he had asked her, do I get the girls on weekends? How can I drive five hours on Saturday to Orlando, Florida, and five hours back the same day? Then on Sunday he'd have to drive the girls home-- twenty hours on the road in his old pickup with its shuddering transmission. Go figure it! Her suggestion was that he rent a motel room in Orlando each weekend and visit with them there. On what? he'd asked her. My looks? You're just feeling sorry for yourself, she said, you've always felt sorry for yourself. You're a born loser. You're a redneck.

She was right about him feeling sorry for himself, but not about him having always felt sorry for himself. She may even have been right about him being a born loser. But if he was a redneck, she was

a redneck, meaning unenlightened and country, meaning red-necked from gazing down at a row of corn or beans grown to feed enlightened city people, who Willie can never quite figure, because they will damn you to hell for saying nigger, then turn right around and call you a redneck. And for what amounted to about ten seconds, telephone time, he longed to tell Gail that, and to tell her about all the AID-A bids he and Bear had worked up on Saturday, his starting-over, his big opportunity, about Bear being on the level, then suck her in through pity, in case his bragging hadn't worked, by telling her about the IRS, about the tractor that would be gone before sundown. He wanted to tell her that he feels castrated, that he thinks of himself as the new nigger. But what she said next blasted the framed words from his brain.

"I guess it's time I told you, Will, that Patty and Brenda don't belong to you."

He waited for her to say more, though he didn't want to hear more.

"Did you hear me, Will?"

He started to call her a liar, but instead hung up the phone, a loud slam to show her he could still be loud. Even knowing pitching a fit would no longer work. She no longer cared. If she would resort to such a lie--and he knew it was a lie--to get rid of him, she had to hate him. If she would deprive her own children of their real daddy, she had to believe Willie was worthless. He could get in his motor boat tonight and speed up the Alapaha River--out of banks, in the dark, drunk--and she wouldn't care if he broke his neck. He could hang out with his old buddies as many Saturday nights as he

pleased--not even take off every other Saturday to get in good with Gail--and she wouldn't care.

He waits till the thunder of the tractor-trailer rig turns to humming across the woods, then puts on his low-riding jeans and his boots and a camouflage tee-shirt that rides high on his hairy stomach. And at last, he goes out, slamming the screen door for effect, to situate himself in the old days when he was truly tough and truly loved and truly needed. So he had thought. He crosses the damp sandy dirt of the yard to his primer-gray pickup, swings in and drives up the lane and onto the highway. Heading north, but going nowhere, just driving along the tweed runner of gray gravel with its black satin borders of fresh asphalt and reddening hardwoods embroidered on the rise of carved ditches. Passing a tall sign--DRIVE SAFELY 55 MILES PER HOUR STATE LAW--across the west ditch with an orange flag on top. The kind of flag he'd been meaning to buy for the rear standard of his lowboy--state law--that was recently repossessed by the bank.

He u-turns in the road and heads back home, driving fast and stopping fast at the tin shed where the smell of burned diesel presses down under burrowing clouds, where the DB tracks have cubed the oily dirt. Under the shed, he pilfers among bins of bolts and tractor parts and five-gallon diesel cans, till he finds a coil of hemp rope hanging from a nail on one of the shed posts. He hooks it over his right arm and gets back into his truck, speeding up the lane again, up the highway again.

When he gets to the state sign where the orange square droops starchless in the rainy stillness, he parks his pickup on the shoulder of the road, gets out and straddles the ditch and fashions a lasso from the rope and spins it up and out, over and over, aiming for the orange flag. First, he hears the rain ticking on the red-winged maple leaves, then feels a drop on his right cheek, and then water seeping through his crewed black hair. A shower dances south along the highway, hissing like a thousand firecrackers set to blow. Just as the confetti of rain reaches him, anointing him in his sole act of thievery, the lasso loops over the flag. He yanks it down and marches toward his truck, lifting the orange square high like a banner in a one-man parade.