

8 mins, *a piece I wrote about my Daddy after he asked*

6 1/2 pages

People I Know

After noon, and the sun is shining like morning of a new day, following a March thunderstorm. The pine needles are tipped with glassy rain droplets, and water ticks from the twin liveoaks to the rain-tamped dirt in front of my daddy's old farmhouse. Our 300-acre homeplace is located in southeast Georgia, eight miles north of the Georgia-Florida line, off Highway 129.

Under the dripping oaks, I help my daddy into his bent-up green pickup and place his metal walker in back. Then I go around to the driver's side, get in, start the truck, and judder down the sumpy track behind the house. Past the collapsing scuppernong arbor with its fountains of living tendrils and vines, over the cattleguard that was rigged two years ago to keep Daddy independent as long as possible. That was back when he could still see to drive, so that he could check on his cows without having to open the gate, so that he could check on the family cemetery where he's getting ready to move to when he dies.

Now, when I'm home, when I'm not writing, I take him. He's tried to make me promise to help him die at home--"I want to just walk off in the riverswamp when my time comes." I said what I always say, what he used to say when I would beg him to take me to town--"We'll see."

But I will help him die in the riverswamp. Though the truth is, he's going to have to make an appointment with me when he figures he is dying; he's going to have to leave a message on my answering machine and postpone his last breath till I get there.

I drive on, past the family cemetery with its glittering white headstones, then west across the rough ground of the open pasture toward the strand of trees along the branch. Spanish moss hangs like gray fox pelts from the blackgums, maples and oaks. A shady cool dell where violets grow.

"Got to hit it just right," Daddy says about the branch ford where brown water runs over scalloped white sand.

He has memorized every spot on the place, every dip and turn, and talks about the wild mustard mixed with rye grass seeds he got hoodooed into buying for pure last year. I say I like the patch of delicate yellow flowers beyond the branch. "Huh!" he says.

"Look what an Indigo snake!" I stop for a great black grosgrain ribbon of snake to ravel through the grass toward the riverswamp on our left.

"Old gopher snake," Daddy says, squinting through the sun-hazed windshield. His filmy green eyes under the green cap bill are my future eyes.

"You know, Daddy," I say, "sometimes I believe you can see."

"I see some," he says. "That the cows yonder?" He points up ahead, at the mapped-out gray plait of drowned trees where beavers have dammed up Jim Creek on its way through the woods to the river.

"No sir," I say. "They about back there on the river, don't you imagine?" I speak in his tongue when I'm with him--I don't want him to know I can speak proper, standard English. I don't want him to know that my visits are now duties. That I've outgrown this place, that I've outgrown him.

"Cows could of busted through that old fence and be on Walter's side." (Walter is a cousin, whose land adjoins ours on the south end of the property; the north fence marks the landline of another Staten cousin). Daddy sits high, a blocky figure shrunk from five-ten to about five-five. "Fenceline needs walking, next chance Seward gets." He's talking about my husband.

"I can walk it," I say.

"Yeah, but you gotta tote in that roll of bobwire and ole comealong to stretch the wire tight..." He is preaching in monotone, just as ~~the~~^{his} pickup engine is revving in monotone, so fast that I have to keep one foot on the brake pedal--thanks to the tinkering of the preacher. "...big old bucket of wirecutters," he adds, "and staples and hammer." He tones down, as if recalling that I can't help being born a girl. "Seward'll get to it," he says, "first chance he gets."

I drive on into the riverswamp where the cattle have grazed the bull and wire grass to stubble beneath the gallberries, myrtles and cat-claw briars. There are tall seed pines, hickories and white oaks with acorns big as walnuts. Cow tracks cut into the winding paths of white sand.

"Old bull's how come em to be busting through the fences here lately," he says. "Doing his derndest to get over there to Walter's heifers."

Always the way: Daddy blames his new bull for leading the other cows astray, but you can tell how proud he is of the bull for producing so many spring calves. And for misbehaving.

He jacks one leathern arm in the open window. He has cataracts, both eyes. He won't go to a doctor; I can't make him. I figure it's just as well.

I drive on, quiet, soaking up the hum of locusts and birdsong in the roky damp along the shaded curves of the old tram road: at the end / is the burned-out oak where I imagine Daddy dying. Split-tipped smut grass risps under the straddle of the truck. Now and then a brittle branch knocks. Crushed dogfennel, ferny-green and dill. The light of the open pasture, between the woods and the river, shines through the green curtain of sweetgums. And then the rectangle of pasture, like a mowed lawn / kissed by lemony sun; and then the Alapaha River, an inky channel rushing between walls of lacy white limestone with ferns and purling crystal springs. Banks lined with gnarled tupelos, pristine birches, and towering bald cypresses with tiny white flowers embroidered on flat green bristles.

"That a buzzard?" Daddy asks.

"No sir, it's a crow." Can he see? I wonder.

"You see ery sign of the cows?" He can't see. They are all around--muscular russet cows with straight backs and spring-slick hides that look hairless.

One lows, then another. A chain of lonesome lowing. "Oh, I see em," he says and laughs satisfied. Then scowls and whistles under his breath the way he does when he tries to walk. Or remember.

"Let's tow em on back up to the house in case the fence is down," he says.

I drive the truck toward the north end of the river pasture, where Jim Branch dumps through a root-bound gorge into the river. Sun like embers cast upon the black water, and waterlights spiraling up the scaly pine trunks. The mended wire fence is overgrown with gallberry and myrtle bushes, behind the creek ditch, and in the foreground are resin-glazed catfaces of the timber Daddy turpented when he was a boy.

Maybe he won't have to die and I won't have to help him die; after all, he's lived through The Depression and World War II, active combat. Of course, he will die; we all have to die. But maybe he'll change his mind and say suddenly, I've made up my mind to go to a hospital like everybody else, and get hooked up to an IV and ease on out of this old world on dope. The modern way.

"Daddy," I say, "I read about the most wonderful new nursing home in Valdosta. People remain perfectly independent..."

"Sign yourself up then," he says and crooks his arm in the window again.

I drive on back through the riverswamp, with the cows scuttling behind and the spring calves capering and Daddy yodeling, "Come on, boys!" out the window. There is a warm-ripe smell of cattle and the cool green of camphor. Decaying leaves add spice, that and the floral nectar of budding foxgrapes. Back through the wooded-in, long pasture where corn used to grow. It seems still divided by the fence down the middle, which has long been gone.

Daddy's truck tire tracks have crisscrossed gopher holes big as his head and mounds of talcumy sand dredged from the heart of the earth. The tracks tell that Daddy has been sneaking out for drives when nobody's around. He can't see; he will never confess.

"Old persimmons is taking over the pasture," he says, then "Come on, boys!" out the window again.

He guesses right: the purplish-green persimmon trees are bushing up from the spreading mat of Centipede grass. Years ago, my mother planted Centipede in the family cemetery--modern alternative to old-fashioned hoeing around the graves. Daddy fussed, said the Centipede would take over the Bermuda and ruin his pasture.

I coast down the shade-dappled slope to the branch, wheels plashing wings of tannin-tinted water. Up the other side, to the deep sunny pasture behind the house. I veer south along the fenceline and up the hill this side of the family cemetery. Headstones date back to the early 1800's. In place of flowers are stories and truths for each of those temperamental, passionate Statens: guardians of their habits, vanities and ghosts. The joint headstone of my great and great-great grandmothers faces the rising sun from the southwest corner of the cemetery fence. Daddy tells the story often about his gritty grandmother Pinkie having one of the hired men hitch up the buggy for her and her boys to go on long visits to her cantankerous mother's house in the flatwoods near the Okefenokee Swamp. Don't ask when I'll be back, she would say to Sam the First, her husband, when she got a bait of his railing and philandering. So when Pinkie's mother died, it came as no surprise to her three sons that she

erected a double headstone with the names of the two women who knew and tolerated each other best.

I stop the truck and the sleek russet cows bunch and low, surrounding us. Daddy's head is still hung out the window in the slant of guttering sun.

"We're at the cemetery," I say.

"I see," he says and pulls his head in.

"You want to get out?"

He takes off his cap and runs his right hand over his bald crown--it is fringed with flossy white hair. He puts the cap on again, just so. "I believe I'll wait till later," he says, "if it's all the same to you."