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Going to Jackson

By

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She 's been told that it might actually happen this time. She's been told that before.

Velda Crandell's last living son Willis is driving her old white Ford Falcon, taking her to Jackson, and it seems a waste of gas and time. It's a fine day, a working day, Tuesday, May 6, 2003, and Willis has taken off from his job at BellSouth where he works repairing phone lines in and around Sylvester, home of all the Crandells, what's left of them.

On a hill across a choppy green pasture, east of the Interstate, magnolias on tall trees each side of a little white church are beginning to unfold their white petals, showing blood-red hearts.

The trees top-out even with the steeple, perfect balance, perfect picture. A place where good people gather on Sunday. Used to Velda bought into that, but now she knows that people are not good and fire-ants fester in the hidden dips of the pasture and magnolias fall to the ground and turn brown after only a couple of days. She has tried not to show her family that bitter side of

herself, her brooding they mistake for calm. The only way to make sense of life is to expect

nothing, keep it simple, milk each day for its pleasures, even if it's just food or drink. Proof

looms up before her as a billboard sign replaces the church picture with the message "Magnolia

Plantation, fresh orange juice, 2 miles, exit 89."

Handwritten notes and symbols in the bottom right corner, including a large blue arrow pointing right, several blue circles, and some illegible handwritten text.

To counter that dread feeling of somebody stepping on her grave before Donald Jacobs can be executed, she speaks to Willis. "Seems like a waste, don't it?"

"What's that, Mama?" Willis is a big man—he has high blood. How come his face is red and bloated. Him not even fifty yet and he looks like he's sixty.

"Us going to Jackson again." In the side mirror, Velda can see her Linda's faded red car. Sun glaring on the windshield prevents Velda from seeing her daughter's face. Following Linda's car are the other cars belonging to various members of the Crandell clan, about a dozen heading north up I-75 for Jackson. Again.

"This time he's gonna fry," says Willis. He flips the sun visor from above the windshield to his window where the sun is beginning to shine in his eyes. In the west, fields of red cattle graze seeding brown winter rye.

"That was last time he was s'posed to get the chair." Velda needs to set the record straight for her own ordering of mind—thirty-one years is a long time to be doing the same thing over and again. She's lost track of the number of appeals, the lawyers' tricks that led up to the appeals, how many times Donald Jacobs has been sentenced to death, then walked. The latest appeal by Jacob's lawyer is one she will never forget because of its rock-bottom reaching, their desperation, which gives her the most hope. A minister's prayer at the opening of Jacob's last trial was not recorded, Jacob's lawyer says, so he argues that it was impossible for the defense to challenge it. DONALD JACOBS WAS 19 WHEN CRIME COMMITTED (MENTION APPEALS. FIGURE EVERYBODY'S AGES PROTESTORS: VALDA WOULD LIKE TO TELL THEM THAT THIS IS NOT ABOUT PUNISHMENT BUT ABOUT RIDDING THE EARTH OF JACOBS AND HIS KIND. KEEP HIM FROM GETTING OUT AND DOING IT AGAIN.

Most children they knew feared television-bred spooks, teachers, their parents and the law. The Crandells feared the Jacobs. Donald Jacobs was their Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny wrapped up in one. He could bring joy and he could bring sorrow. If he got executed this go round, May 6, 2003, at 7 PM, their whole family would celebrate and the Crandells, what was left of them, could have peace, though they couldn't imagine it. They couldn't imagine what they would be happy and sad about after Donald Jacobs died. FLASH BACK TO REUNION—ATMOSPHERE-PALE CLOUDS AND WIND HERDING PALE CLOUDS ACROSS THE UNDERLIT SKY—STORY GOING ON THE DAY ISACS IS TO DIE THAT EVENING. ALDAY BOY WAITING ALL DAY, CHECKING WATCH. GET INTO ATMOSPHERE/ SETTING—GRANDMOTHER ALMOST 80 NOW—WHO IS MAIN CHARACTER—31 YEARS HAVE PASSED—COULD HAVE 2 OR 3 CHILDREN, WIFE OF ONE OF THE DEAD SISTERIN LAWKILLED , OTHER INLAWS—MURDER HAPPENED IN 1973

Killer storms in the mid-west and parts of the south, war just over in Iraq; now all the TV news could do was mull over hwat was, show what-was. The burned body of a boy about Kenny Crandell's own age he had seen so many times that he sometimes felt as if he were the burned boy wrapped in gauze with only his eyes showing like mirrors reflecting somebody else's eyes, somebody on hold, waiting for fate to make up its mind to go ahead and be done with him or give him another chance. Jacob's eyes or the eyes of any of the six family memers, take your pick, of Kenny's family now, mere names on lined up tombstones at the graveyard down the road from where the Crandell clan lives, near the white shored-up church where they hold their family reunions each year under the picnic shelter, under the oaks, close enough to see the six graves with K-mart flowers and not a sprig of grass after 31 years and holding.

Velda had been working in the school lunchroom the day it happened and she can still see the huge stew pot she was scouring in the tub-size sink when she heard *She can smell the sour lemony dish detergent in the government gallon jug that she'd had such trouble lifting with her wrenched right arm. Maybe she'd broken a bone when she had stuck her hand through the wire fence to pet one of the cows. No money and no time for doctors—the arm would have to heal on its own. It seemed that everything in the lunchroom was oversized and required lifting, straining with. Over the years, ^{that fun-house face,} that lemony smell and the strain of lifting have lingered with her imaginings of how it happened, a good deal of which she knows from facts of the case. The rest she's filled in, filled in and worn out the images, the words, the actions. She's not sure anymore of what is fact and what is her own conjuring.*

May 14, 1973: the two Jacobs, Donald and Ronald, their buddies Inman and Wilson had escaped from a Maryland Prison. The car they had stolen ran out of gas just a ways up the dirt road from the house where Velda and her husband Ned and their two youngest children lived. The other sons and their wives lived in trailers on the homeplace, working the farm with Ned and Velda.

Willis and Linda were still in school. He was fourteen then and she was just eight, her daddy's pet baby, as he called her.

The faceless four in the stolen stalled car that morning had gotten out, stumping around, smoking stolen cigarettes, swigging whiskey and peeing like dogs on the car tires. The sheriff had told that last bit of information on the witness stand as if it explained something vital about their characters, and for Velda it had.

She used to put filthy words in their mouth, imagining what had been said. But over the years the words, like their faces, had gotten too jarring on her sanity.

She can see ~~the~~ her face reflected on the pot, its ~~fun-house~~ silly egg-shaped or end shape like looking in a fun-house mirror. The broadened bridge of her nose, and the nose itself, exaggerated as if to reveal her greatest flaws. Things all turned around.

Donald Jacobs, the ring leader, the meanest, the boldest, suddenly recalled passing an old house down the road. Maybe some gas in one of the tractors under the shelter he remembered seeing south of the house.

“Don’t look like people’d own nothing,” said his brother, “but can’t never tell.”

“Ain’t nothing more despiteful than a dad-bummed bunch of church-going farmers,”

Donald had said, according to Ronald, who later turned State’s evidence to save his own hide (he served twelve years and was turned out to start over again because he’d had a bad life, meaning a tough upbringing).

If only they’d gone to the shelter and siphoned the gas from the tractor and left... But that was just one more of Velda’s what-ifs in the middle of the night. It did no good, it changed nothing.

At the lane leading up to the old unpainted farmhouse, set back off the dirt road, one of them had opened the mailbox and left it open. That’s what the mail carrier told. (Velda never left her mailbox open.) And told that she must have come by, dropping off their light bill and a few sale circulars, a Penny’s catalogue with a woman in a short green linen dress on front. That very time the escaped cons had been inside, slinging pots and pans and dumping dresser drawers and overturning chairs and mattresses. Looking for money. They ate some of the biscuits Velda had baked that morning, the sidemeat she had fried. Both Velda had left covered on the kitchen table for Ned and the boys and Mary to eat when they came in from hoeing the tobacco in back field. Mary, always dieting, would have to eat biscuits or starve. It seemed that Velda was always cooking, if not for her own family, for the 500 or so students at the school in Sylvester, ten miles away.

especially during summer. It got so bad at times that Velda had to wrap his bull-sized testicles in gauze, a job she loved because it always led to more. Big and tough-talking as he was, Ned could be tender with her. Sometimes he tried to make her jealous—women were always after the Crandell men. But Velda was never jealous, she was proud of the handsome man she had married, proud of the sons she had given him. Besides, she said often to Ned, who but me would be fool enough to take on this job of farmwife, nursemaid and cook?

The boys, and Mary now, just stood wondering, listening.

Suddenly the racket inside stopped. The chirring of crickets sounded louder. The hen softly clucking and her biddies peeping were calming familiar sounds, like the mineral smell of the packed gray dirt of the yard, the clean smell of oakmoss draping the branches of the big liveoak.

“Maybe Willis come home from school,” said Albert. Then he shouted, “Willis, that you?”

Trying to make light of the situation, Mary’s husband Benny laughed. “Wouldn’t be Willis, not and us hoeing tobacco today. Scared he might have to help.”

Nobody else laughed. They didn’t even look at him and Benny’s eyes remained fixed on the narrow unpainted back porch and the open kitchen door. The porch floor was tracked with sand and he knew his mother always swept the front and back porches before heading out to work.

“Bout some younguns, skipped school to get into some mischief” Mary said. The men were creeping toward the doorsteps leading up to the porch and she followed.

“You best come on out,” Ned shouted. He hoped it was school younguns. He knew it wasn’t.

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They all stopped, listening. Nothing. No sound inside the house. All was so quiet they could hear the clock ticking from the living room beyond the kitchen.

The oldest boy, Robbie, headed back to the truck and took a crowbar from the bed, then returned to where the others were standing. "Mary," he said, lifting the bar in a tight grip, "you get on back in the truck, hear?"

Mary turned and walked back to the truck, leaning on the front bumper with her arms crossed. Her hips looked wider spread against the bumper. She could see the Crandell men on the porch now, walking toward the open door of the kitchen. The rattle of the locusts in the oaks grew louder, deafening in the quiet. The chickens under the porch now began clucking louder and the biddies gathered around the hen.

"Who's there?" Ned in the doorway shouted.

A loud explosion blew him back into the boys and Albert following and they all scattered, leaping off the edges of the porch in all directions. Their faces set in expressions of fear and surprise. Too soon for sorrow over their slumped father and brother in the doorway.

Another explosion, an orange flashette, and Albert went down at the west corner of the porch.

More shots and now Mary could see the man with what looked like Ned's deer rifle standing in the doorway. Benny dropped facedown on the humped roots of the liveoak, Robbie lunged for

Mary shocked stiff on the truck bumper. His right hand raked her left leg as he fell like somebody tripped, facedown too, eyes open and staring at his brother crumpled but crawling around the roots of the old oak. The next shot got him in the spine, ricocheting to the scabby trunk of the oak and chunks of bark rained down on Benny's body.

Mary suddenly roused from her stupor and ran around to the rear of the pickup, screaming for help. Just help, "help!"

"Go get her," Donald Jacobs on the porch shouted inside. He was holding the shotgun out before him.

Mary started running, crying, toward the mailbox and the dirt road. Running with all her strength and seeing the dirt streaming under her feet. The strange line of shoe tracks she couldn't take her eyes off of.

Halfway up the lane, two of the men tackled her from behind. The Jacobs' buddies, Inman and ---. They smelled of whiskey and unwashed armpits, a swampy odor. Somebody was laughing, she was crying.

"Bring her on back," Donald called from the porch. "Have us a little fun, what y'all say?" (Velda used to spice up what they said during those ventures into her imagination, but she'd never been exposed to such and figured she had it all wrong, that it was worse and she couldn't go there because she'd never been and then she wished she'd made something special for Mary's lunch. Steamed okra and tomatoes wouldn't have taken all that long.)

Screaming, biting, kicking, Mary was dragged back toward the house, up the doorsteps to the porch and over her father-in-law's great body. He was a kind man for so large a man but he could be tough when he had to. ^{large strong spread} His hands were out as if he'd been trying to shield off the bullet with them.

Court records: Donald Jacobs and his gang took turns raping Mary Crandell on the carefully-madeup bed in the main bedroom of the house.

Maybe Mary thought at that point that they would just rape her and let her go, or take her with them as a hostage. But they dragged her out to the Crandell truck ^(to back) DRESSED IN WHAT and drove her to the tobacco field and there they raped her again, then shot her running down the

long heat-shimmering rows of the clean hoed and withering tobacco watered only with Crandell sweat.

###Linda's red car eases up in the left lane of I75, then pulls in front of Willis and Velda in the outside lane. Immediately she switches on her right blinker to signal that she is about to exit.

"Bathroom stop," says willis.

"Or them boys of hers needing to eat again." Velda laughs.

Linda swerves into the exit ramp and motors up the crescent drive to the front of the rest stop (describe briefly). Opens the door and gets out, heading for the breezeway of the new ^{low} red brick building with ladies and men's restroom each side. She has on white pants and a blue shirt and ^{brown} sandals slapping at her heels.

Willis parks to the right of her car, and the other cars and pickups behind begin filling the empty parking slots. Sitting with their engines idling.

✓ Three of the ^{other} women get out and walk toward the building, talking to each other.

Velda watches them all, her family, her kin. Going in, coming out, getting into their automobiles. When Linda comes back, she takes the lead onto I75.

Velda is proud of her only daughter doing that, driving like that. It's a little thing, a silly thing maybe, but she is proud of Linda for going on into the restroom without waiting for the aunts to walk with her—she never clutches at a pocketbook or crosses her arms over her chest; she is tough like the Crandell men—well, all except for Willis. And Velda is proud of her taking off from work and keeping her teenage boys out of school. She's proud that Linda works, a paralegal, at that, which sounds like she makes more money than she does. Out of all the family, Linda seems least affected by the quits and starts of the Jacobs' appeals and attorney squabbles. Out of all of them, she has managed to keep up her

life, work, home, children, without living for the death of Donald Jacobs, the last of the four murderers remaining.

The two buddies of the Jacobs boys had died in prison. One in a knife fight, the other of cancer.

"I wonder if she remembers," says Willis, keeping pace with Linda's red car, and rearranging his heavy body to accommodate the sagged bucket seat.

"She remembers." I this Valda that he has meant does Linda remember the way to Jackson while Velda herself had been thinking about the massacre.

(first part of first draft—some children feared.) MUCH INSIGHT, STAY WITH STORY, 2 MORE SCENES, PRISON AND THEN CELEBRATION AT DENNY'S ONLY MENTIONED TO SHOW THAT'S WHAT THEY HAVE PLANNED TO DO EACH TIME THEY GO BUT END UP GOING TO DENNY'S AND NOT EVEN DISCUSSING WHAT THEY SHOULD BE CELEBRATING THAT THEY AREN'T

AT THE PRISON—NEED INFO, MENTION WEATHER, ATMOSPHERE, RAIN, STORMS IN ALABAMA, PRISON MOVIE, DEAD MAN WALKING. ABOUT CELEBRITY, FAME

All except for Linda, the ~~the~~ Crandells had let pity replace pride. People, strangers and neighbors, were always trying to give them money to make up for their guilt and gladness that the Jacobs and their buddies had run out of gas in front of the Crandell place instead of their own houses.

✓ The Crandell^s were famous in Georgia, especially—the most pitied. Grades were given to the Velda's children and grandchildren in school; most teachers gave the Crandell children A's. None would give less than a B. They were shunned, the children were, for the same reason—pity. Or maybe they were shunned because their luckless taint might rub off. Next time the Jacobs gang might pay them and their families a visit. Regardless, the succeeding crops of Crandells had ceased to earn their way in the world as in the old days.