

one

YOU KNOW HOW IT GOES. You're a kid — somewhere in that middle-age after the last time you cried from a bee sting but before you can go to jail as an adult — a kid who's smiley and gentle with other people and who's regarded by older folks as a *nice boy* if only he could take the world a little more seriously and live up to his potential. You're a kid who's friendly and kind, and you make sacrifices for a younger sibling who perhaps needs special care, or an aging relative whose brain is like quicksand sucking a lifetime of memories into a sinkhole. That's how it goes, but you cruise through it all and don't mind much, because those are the cards they dealt you. You're as open-hearted and sweet-natured as some of those church ladies at bake sales, because that's the easiest way to be in a small town in the deep south.

Then things happen, and I know you know this because nearly all kids go through the same obstacle course of *I can't believe this is happening to me* mixed up with assaults that nearly break the body and scald what's left of the sugar in you into something gooey and hateful. People get hurt; people die. You're on a mission you know is absolutely necessary involving the younger sibling who needs special care and all around you the enemy is hiding.

When you come out of it all, when you come home, the bake sale ladies don't look the same any more. It's like your brain is totally rewired. For sure your soft parts have twisted into something like ropey ligaments, and you can feel them tightening around your heart. Look at someone with narrowing eyes and a crooked smile, I feel it's

easy to hate them. Talk to someone who's spouting out pretty words, I don't trust them.

My brother wakes me up at night - *stop grinding your teeth*. The dentist told me I should wear a mouth guard so my front teeth don't flatten out and look like cheap dentures. Maybe I will. Night is when I'm most angry, but I barely remember.

That's me, now. I wish it weren't so.

This was me a few months ago — just under the white space:

My zoo-headed younger brother pulled his five-finger discount about fifty-seven times before it finally got him into serious trouble. You'd think his luck wouldn't run that good over the years, but the truth is in the small town of Ogamesh, Georgia, where we lived, most everybody knew him and seemed to have a soft spot in their heart for him, even when he was stumbling out of Crews' Groceries with a handful of Snickers bars that every other decent soul had to pay for. Whenever I lost sight of him in a store, he'd grab something, even if it was totally useless to him, like a box of wing nuts or a jar of silver polish. They'd say – and I'd overhear them say it – “that's the Elmont boy. The slow one. He don't mean no harm.” Harmon Crews, the owner of the store, spoke like that more times than I can remember, as I was shoveling out change to pay for the stolen candy bars or else returning the totally useless wing nuts. He also strongly advised me to put him on a leash like a dog whenever we came to the store, but then he'd wink at me.

My brother was born Aubrey Elmont, but everyone called him Tick. Some think it's *Tic* without the “k,” because Tick's eyes can be twitchy and he tends to speak in small explosions, but that's not it. The name came from our Mom, who called him *Deertick*, probably because he was a cute chubby baby who might grow into a bloodsucking pest, and it shortened from there. Evidently, something went wrong at his birth, I never learned just what, and Tick popped out as blue as a popsicle and a few pickles short of a barrel. Technically, they tell me, he wasn't mentally retarded, just a bit off his nut and with a temperament more

rambunctious than a ferret. I'd seen it hundreds of times, and the truth is it wore me to a frazzle because it was *me* that was mostly responsible for him getting through the day without causing a major disturbance or accidentally killing himself or somebody else. He could just plain exhaust me. On a good day, Tick was a typical pain-in-the-ass thirteen year old younger brother who happened to be a kleptomaniac. On a bad day, he was a complete mangle of hysterical guffawing and sobbing, shin-kicking and cursing, and stealing some of my favorite clothes, which were all too big for him, or pilfering my arrowheads, which was worse.

Aunt Zee kept reminding me, “you're your brother's keeper,” which to me was like a doctor saying “you've got a brain tumor, but isn't life just a long disease anyway?”

Actually, I had to put up with both of them. We'd been living at Aunt Zee's house since our Mom died, which was ten years ago, and I guess Zee had hung on to most of her marbles back then, when she was seventy, because I remember she actually cooked for us and changed Tick's soiled pants and whatnot, but something happened to her brain after that, and one day about a year ago I remember she could not for the life of her know if it was Tick or me who came out of the kitchen with a plate of cookies and muscadine jam for her while she watched some useless soap opera on TV.

“Why, thank you, Tick!”

I thought she'd gone blind. “I'm Woody.”

“I believe, for a moment there, you looked like Tick.”

“No, ma'am. Woody. Woodrow.”

I remember thinking, what all's happened to her head, I look like Tick as much as a possum resembles a snake, she can't be getting soft *yet*. But she was losing it all right, and we've been putting up with her foggy mind ever since, doing chores and errands for her.

To be accurate, we have some help. Down our street a few houses is Tychander Williams, a black girl who just graduated from high school, and she comes by a couple of times a day to do cleaning and cooking, and to drive into town to Crews' to get groceries or go to the bank to take money out of Zee's account or deposit her pension checks. She's

friendly enough and we do have some fun, but it irritates me that she seems to favor Tick because of his shortcomings and starts to play ball with him outside while I'm cleaning up dinner dishes, being ignored. Still, we do need her for driving around since I don't have my license yet, and I make sure she gets paid the right amount everyday. I turned sixteen in August and *should* go get my license, but the lines at the Georgia DMV are pretty long up in Macon and I just haven't gotten around to it yet.

It's good having Tychander come and go. She's the only other one here with a teaspoon of brains, and I enjoy every chance I can get to talk to someone in the house who actually makes *sense*.

So I have to get to the story about where Tick's raw dumb luck with shoplifting stupid useless stuff finally ran out, and what happened afterwards that basically completely messed up my life, which seemed to be going along fairly smoothly till then.

It was October last year and I came back from school on the bus with Tick to find Aunt Zee and Tychander on the front porch in the middle of some brouhaha while Zee was snipping hydrangeas and sticking them in a vase. She'd been talking about having a dinner party for some friends, but you never knew if she really meant it or not, her brain was so squishy.

Well, evidently she meant it, because she was lashing out at Ty.

"No, not *paper* doilies, *lace* doilies!"

"Can't find no lace doilies in Ogamesh," said Ty.

"A dinner party needs lace doilies, and my old ones got moth holes in 'em, and paper won't do and if y'all were raised right you'd know it."

Tick and I were headed inside the house for our usual snack of sweet tea and cookies or leftover hushpuppies or whatever else wasn't nailed down, but Zee whipped out a shout, *Tick Elmont!*, which had the same effect as a hand grabbing him by the collar. He stopped quick.

"Ma'am?"

"Tick, you know who's invited to my party?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, specifically, I'm asking the *governor* and his wife, that's who."

"The governor, wow. *That's* good."

Tick missed the huge wink Zee tossed at him.

"I'm just messin' with you, son," she said.

Tick chewed on this for a second before hooting out a laugh, proving he saw some humor in it. I sure didn't – I was hungry and thirsty – and Zee's kidding about inviting the governor didn't seem to have a point.

"Not likely the governor would come way down here for *nothin'*," she added. "But proper folks are invited all the same, and we gotta have fine lace doilies, so I'm asking Tychander to take forty dollars and go buy a set of six, and you boys can help her. That mall should have them."

"What color you want, Miz Morton?" Ty asked her.

"Only come in white. If they come in something else, avoid 'em. Now off with y'all, all three."

We weren't off just then, because we hadn't raided the fridge yet, and also I needed time to figure out a way to wriggle out of this whole thing, because I'd made other plans. I'd talked to my friend Natalie Starke at school and we'd made a date to go look at some guy's old Honda motorcycle sitting in his yard and priced right, at three hundred dollars. It looked just about my size, though I'd have to repaint the tank and the fenders because he'd spray-painted them a disgusting orange. Well, the problem was that Tick would *kill* to go to any mall, and my guess was it would be the one near Macon that has all the lah-de-dah shops in them, which is perfect if you're looking for lace doilies. When it came to shopping trips, Ty said many times *I can't manage that boy, much as I like him*, and she meant it because of his kleptomania. So, like it or not, I'd have to go.

Zee hollered for Tick to come back out onto the porch again, so I had some time alone to wrack my brains and try to come up with something. Just announcing that I had other plans wouldn't amount to a peehole in Georgia clay, because it was traditional in our house that I *always* had other plans and they were never too important to change. Well, I came up with nothing and ended up being foiled as usual, so I had to call Natalie to change our date for seeing the orange

bike up close.

When I got back out to the porch, Zee was having a whispering session with Tick, which I didn't understand, but soon enough it broke up and we all hopped in Zee's car and headed for Macon. Ty and I, up front, discussed the party and theorized whether or not Zee would actually pull it off. She'd talked about having supper parties before, but her thoughts just flew away with the wind and went poof. Still, Ty figured, if she's sending us off for the afternoon to shop for doilies, she might be serious about it.

Zoo-head was in back picking his nose and blowing at my hair, which was usual for him. I thought, the kid's thirteen and he *can't keep acting seven forever*, but I was probably wrong. In point of fact, our doctor and the school psychologist said the same thing, that he was only *mildly disabled*, but the main thing was that his brain was wired differently from most people's and he was *emotionally challenged*. He could actually do much of the schoolwork other kids his age could do, even though it took him quite a bit longer. He also kept getting distracted or losing interest or having one of his weird-out moments where he'd just stare out the window at birds perching in our big live oak tree in the yard. He could sit and stare, like in a trance, for hours on end. Now he was blowing at my hair and picking his nose and I kept swatting at him, *knock it off*.

In time he did, just as we were arriving at the mall.

"Now you stick right with me," I said to him as we got out.

"I'm good at that."

"You get the worst Indian wrist burn *ever* if you don't." Well, he winced at this, because I'd given him those before. The problem was, he was into a growth spurt now and getting pretty strong, and though I had a few inches on him in height I was more on the skinny side and if we ever started fighting or wrestling like we meant it, I'm not sure I could take him. He had thick shoulders and strong arms and more leverage than I did, *plus*, he tended to fight dirty.

"Maybe not the worst Indian wrist burn ever, but a bad one just the same," I warned, easing up a bit.

"Do as Woody says, I ain't watching you," Ty chipped in.

He grunted, and we strolled into the mall's main entrance.

And into our crazy future.

Ty kept kidding about finding the "doily store," like they had such things, but soon we found a big place that sold all kinds of gifts from kitchen stuff to clothes to jewelry, and sure enough they had a stash of formal dining things like placemats and napkins and white doilies that *looked* like lace and maybe were polyester or something, but we figured Zee would settle for them since they had a nice pattern to them and cost only about four bucks each. So Ty and I grabbed six of them, and after a brief discussion I grabbed two more as extras in case her guest list expanded. Now here's where things get a little hazy. I was *certain* Tick was in our aisle, or at worst in the one next to us looking at table setting things like glasses and such, but when I called out for him he didn't answer. As it happened, this store had a lot of shoppers in it, and tall shelves to boot, so it was hard to see very far.

Ty told me, *he's sprung loose on you*, and I had to agree.

We popped out of the tableware section and into a more open area and that's when I spotted his scruffy blond head bobbing along past some displays of leather handbags headed for the door, with his hands jammed into his pockets. Ty and I made a beeline for him and as we did we passed a young couple at a jewelry counter who seemed suddenly distressed by something that was missing. Well, we paused long enough to see they had several rings out on the glass display case, rings that were glittering with diamonds and emeralds and other stones, and the clerk was saying *well I know we had six of them out*.

"I'm not goin' after him," Ty told me.

"Okay, *I'll* do it, you can buy the doilies and I'll see you outside."

That's when the distress at the jewelry counter started to pick up steam. I hustled out of there and into the main mall.

One thing about Tick, he truly deeply *hates* being chased, unless he's sure it's a game. Even if you're taking baby steps toward him, he'll start to freak out and make a run for it. But if you're totally casual about approaching him with a normal everyday kind of walk, and saying things like *hey Tick, you should check out the cool doilies we just bought*, then he's clueless that you're going to grab him by

the collar of his dirty tee shirt and handle him like a crazed pit bull. So far I was lucky. He caught sight of me as he ducked behind a cart selling stuffed animal toys, then poked his head out again and gave me a goofy grin, the kind of lopsided smile that was all too familiar to me because it was saying *I did it again*.

Now I'd come to realize about Tick's *I did it again* wasn't gloating or pride, it was a mix of astonishment and embarrassment, because he truly seemed to be on another mental planet when he stole. It would be fascinating to get inside his head during those times, but impossible too.

I smiled back to assure him I wasn't going to kill him, and that's when this big burly security guard appeared from nowhere right behind him, a dumb-looking white guy who looked like he just escaped from the Marines.

Tick had never stolen from a mall before, and it's a different experience from a little neighborhood shop in Ogamesh. This guy was not kindly old Harmon Crews at the grocery store or Mrs. Coulter at the gift shop, this guy was the law of the land and Tick was so amazed he didn't even budge.

Piecing it together later at the police station, when Tick wasn't snuffling or whimpering, it seemed he actually had a *reason* for stealing the ring, unlike almost all the other times. He'd gotten the totally wacko idea that Aunt Zee's party was actually for her *birthday* and he needed to swipe her a present. Well, this was October and Zee's birthday is in May sometime – I forget the exact date until it's a few days before it and she reminds me – and Tick should've known this. In fact, he has an uncanny knack for remembering details like birthdays or the time you almost cut your finger off with lawn mower, and it bothered me he could pluck such an idea out of nowhere and make such a mess of things because of it. The other hugely irritating part of this escapade is that he snatched a piece of jewelry costing nine hundred and seventy-five dollars for the "birthday present," and because of that the overweight sourfaced policewoman looked at all of us with daggers

for eyes.

We were in this back room with not much in it – a table where she sat, and a bench for the three of us. She started in on Tick, but it didn't last long.

"That wasn't a pack of gum you stole, son."

"No ma'am. It's a ring for my aunt."

Her eyes grew wide at him.

"I'm *saying*, this is a serious crime."

He nodded at her. "Ma'am, I sometimes don't know what I'm doing."

"It's true!" I blurted out. "He doesn't. You see –"

"Hold on!" She put her hand up to stop me and looked back to Tick. "Aubrey Elmont, do you have a kind of disability?"

"Yes, ma'am. What they say is, my mind's not right half the time."

Well, I'd never heard him speak it as such, and I was kind of proud of him.

He added, "They don't got a name for it."

"Is it okay if I talk to your brother and Miz Williams?"

"Sure."

Well, Ty and I both jabbered out all the truth that we had at our fingertips, me particularly because I was so anxious, and soon enough the cop knew that Aubrey Elmont was disabled since birth and had a long history of taking things from stores and not being consistent about how wrong it was. They also learned that our legal guardian, our great aunt Zelda Morton of Ogamesh, had her bright spots from time to time but was aging fast and sometimes didn't know lunch from supper, so she was our guardian more in a legal way than actual. Tychander, as much as me, was the responsible adult for us, though not on any piece of paper.

It was a good thing I did most of the talking because any chance she could get, Ty launched in with her disgusted whine voice, as in *that boy ain't never hurt anyone, why you pickin' on him so?* and *I ain't nobody to tell you how to do your business, but you got that boy's life in your hands, just so's you know. You can treat him right, or you can just throw him away.*

two

The cop might have been impressed by our loyalty, but it didn't show in any way that counted.

"Now son," said the cop, "whether you understand this fully or not, we're gonna have to charge you with a crime, which is called a felony, and arraign you and then have a hearing. And it would be appropriate for all of you to come, along with Miz Morton, if she's able."

Tick hung his head low and shook it. "No jail." The tears had dried on his cheek and left muddy streaks.

"Son, you're not going to jail. But you can't be loose as a tomcat in the world taking anything you want just 'cause it's pretty or someone's got a birthday. If you were a few years older, you *would* go to jail 'cause it's larceny and a serious crime, and it's also unethical. You understand about that word 'unethical?'"

Tick shook his head.

"His mind just doesn't work that way," I suggested to her.

"Well, he's old enough so he should catch up on it. Now let's get to the paperwork."

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS I have with friends is that I don't have very many of them. I'm not much interested in sports, especially football, so after school I tend to get on the bus with Tick and go home, leaving the other kids behind. Some days I send Tick home alone and ask or bribe somebody on the bus to keep an eye on him, so I can walk back to town with some of the guys or hook up with Natalie. But more often than not I'm on the bus with him, with my face pressed to the glass looking at lawns and gardens in front of houses. The other kids *understand* that I have to care for my brother, but they don't do much to compensate for it, like coming over to the house or inviting both of us to go somewhere and do something. They tend to like Tick because he can be funny, but they usually give him plenty of room because they know he can explode at any time, or just act like a pain in the ass.

A couple of my good friends either died or went away. Jake Culpepper hanged himself in his barn when he was twelve, and no one could figure out why, since he was so good-natured and popular. Jupiter Strange is a black kid who lived in a trailer with his Mom and sister next to Jameson's cotton fields, and he was my age and a lot of fun, but he went joyriding in a neighbor's truck when he was thirteen and the sheriff took him for a wise guy and threw the book at him. Meaning, in this area, he got shipped off to juvenile detention for a year or so, and then to St. Anselm's Home for Troubled Youth. Jupiter Strange was his real given name, though you'd have to ask his Mom why she bestowed it on him.

It seemed pretty obvious to me, and just about everyone else in Ogamesh, that the court would do the same thing to Tick – shoot him directly off to St. Anselm’s. I’d been there once to visit Jupiter, hitching a ride with Mrs. Strange, and it seemed a decent enough place with lots of lawns spreading out among the buildings, and a big shady grove of pecan trees next to a pond that was loaded with bullfrogs. Jupiter said he liked it there just as much as his trailer, but he missed his friends (like me). It was about twenty miles away, so making a visit took some planning.

After Jake and Jupiter were gone, my collection of friends basically shrank down to Natalie Starke. It could be awkward and challenging getting to like her, for several reasons. First, as people around here would say, she was a “damn Yankee,” having recently moved here from Ohio with her mother and new stepfather, a rich professor named Dr. Hawkins who decided to retire. I had nothing in particular against Yankees, but her accent and her manner sometimes made it hard to communicate. Second, she was too educated for her own good, I thought. She could talk circles around me, and always kept me off balance with her philosophical view of things and her endless questions that had no easy answers. She liked to drink after school, which made it worse, since liquor loosened her tongue. Third, she was probably the richest kid in Ogamesh and everyone knew it. The family had bought an old cotton farm a mile or so out of town and they’d added so much on to the original house it started to look like a mansion, as if they were trying to show us all up. Fourth, she wasn’t exactly the best looking girl in my grade, and though it didn’t matter much to me what she looked like, I got teased now and then just for hanging out with her sometimes. Natalie was built like a fence post, straight and thin, she had bony shoulders and elbows, and the most noticeable part of her face were her thick black eyebrows that were trying to grow together over her nose.

One thing that will never change, from the beginning of civilization to the end: kids will always pick on other kids because of their *looks*. I swear, I never could figure it.

On the plus side of things with Natalie: if you don’t count Tick,

she was the only friend I ever had who actually seemed interested in me and wanted to know what was on my mind. Another big plus was that she was the fastest girl runner on our track team because she had those long scrawny legs that could leap out about half a mile in front of her and never get tired. Lastly and best of all, she had her license and *owned her own car*, an old Buick that her stepfather snapped up for her at some auction.

But she could be tricky, as you’ll see.

About a week before Tick’s hearing, I finally got a chance to get Natalie to pick me up so we could go over to take a look at the orange Honda. When she pulled up in front of the house, I left Tick swinging on the old tire hanging from the live oak in our back yard and ignored his annoying, singsongy *Woody’s got a girlfriend*. Ty was coming over any minute to help with Zee, so Tick would be all right.

I hopped in the car and we were off, down our street three blocks, then left onto Route 12, the main drag through town. Natalie was an exceptionally careful and slow driver, which was too bad since the Buick had a very strong small block engine under the hood, a three-fifty.

“So, you should *know*,” she started in, “that you’ve got a lot of friends in this town.”

News to me. “I do?”

“People tend to like your brother, and don’t be surprised that a bunch of them show up at the hearing. But they also know how hard it is for you. They’re *behind* you.”

It didn’t feel quite right that she seemed to know so much about what other people thought of me. Also, I caught a potent whiff of whiskey, so maybe she was stretching the truth.

“They also know you have to deal with your aunt.”

“Well, I don’t pay much attention.”

“They say you’re long-suffering, the patience of Job, things like that.”

I hadn’t thought about it that way, and this surprised me.

“You’re very handsome, you know.”

Hadn’t thought about that either, not in any concentrated way.

“How you talk,” I said, rathering she wouldn’t. She was getting tricky on me. “Especially since you’ve had a nip or two.”

“Well, Woody, I think it’s *healthy* to exchange personal views like that, just so we understand each other better, even if you’re shy about it.”

“I’m not shy, and I think we understand each other *fine* without talking about looks.”

“I think you’ll look cool on that motorcycle, even if it’s utterly impractical. Have you got the money yet?”

“Look, it’s *not* impractical, I’m going to put saddle bags on it so I can help do errands and maybe go to school with it next year, and no, I’ve only got about two hundred so far.”

We rumbled over the railroad tracks headed for the other side of town. I was eager to get to the guy’s house, but Nat barely drove the speed limit. A huge log carrier, fully loaded, was passing us with a loud roar.

“Might be the best thing for Tick,” she said when the truck pulled in front of us and it quieted down.

“What might be.”

“St. Anselm’s. They’ve got people who can give him the right kind of therapies and treatments.”

I nodded slightly, but inside of me it was a huge nod. I’d secretly gotten to the point where I could imagine carrying on my life at Zee’s without the constant shadow of my crazy brother. In a way, I was glad he got caught, but I didn’t want him thrown into juvenile detention, which I’d heard was a snakepit, but rather straight off to St. Anselm’s, which was more of a residential treatment place.

“You think?” she prodded.

“I’d miss him. But it would be okay.”

“What would you do?”

“What would I do?”

She tsked at me and tried a new approach.

“Woody. If Tick weren’t with you, what kinds of things would you do? Perhaps this is like asking, what do you *want* to do? Now, and in your future?”

The odd thing is, I’d been more focused on Tick’s ideas about life than my own. I haven’t gotten into this yet, but he was nutso about being a champion surfer, and more specifically, a champion surfer in Malibu, California. He’d five-fingered a surfing magazine at the News and Gifts Shop and kept it right under his pillow. There were photos of people surfing at some competition in Malibu, and he kept telling me *that’s where I wanna be and that’s what I wanna do*. He’d never done it, of course. He was great on his skateboard, I have to admit, until a truck ran over it on our street and squished it, so I guess he had the coordination to be a surfer, and he was a decent swimmer to boot. But I tried to warn him you can’t make a living surfing, you can only do it when you’re young. Naturally he shot back at me, “Well, I *am* young.” The problem was, we lived four hours from the nearest waves and about two thousand miles or more from California, so it was just a fantasy for him. Even if I had a car, I was not driving him to California.

“Your *future*,” she said again. “Do you want one?”

“C’mon.”

“Use it or lose it. Plan it or can it.”

She was sermonizing, but I was still thinking how zoo-heady it was for Tick to be obsessing about surfing, when there were so many opportunities for fun here in Georgia. Every adult I know, practically, and tons of kids too, go hunting and fishing. Hunting is all about wild boar and deer, and fishing for crappies in the lakes or catfish in a pond can keep your mind unoccupied for hours. In school, football and basketball and baseball are the most popular, and kids also get into their cars and trucks and motorcycles. So why surfing?

“Just a thought,” Nat said, and I snapped back to attention.

“I’m not sure yet.”

“What gives you pleasure, Woody?”

“Well.” And it hung there for a few seconds. “I like going to look at a cool motorcycle with you. In other words, what we’re doing right *now*. In fact —”

“Now, my dear boy, is a very short time.”

“My soon-to-be future is that motorcycle and you just drove by it.”

To hurry things along, we turned around and got back to the guy's house. He came out to meet us and he showed me everything about the bike that was both good and bad. The main problem was that one of the cylinders had below-average compression and might need a ring job, so that's why the bike was going cheap. I didn't care that much, because I figured I could work on it after school at Winkler's Garage, where I was a part-time employee doing simple things like changing oil and rotating tires. The guy lent me his helmet, I went for a spin down the highway and came back *knowing* this was my bike. It fit me great, and with 450 ccs it had plenty of juice in it, in spite of the bad cylinder.

Of course, I didn't have the money yet, and I told him so. Well, being a regular guy trying to sell something, he said he'd have to unload it to the first three hundred dollars that came along.

Nat was right about the hearing. I swear half of Ogamesh showed up at the courthouse in Macon, and most dressed up for it, too, with coats and ties and long dresses. Nat and her family came, along with Harmon Crews, both of the Winkler brothers, and a bunch of teachers and parents from the school. Aunt Zee didn't come; she said she was feeling kind of pokey, and wasn't sure what all kind of a mess Tick had gotten himself into anyway, so the proceedings wouldn't make much sense to her. Since Tychander had to drive us all up, Zee had her friend John Dandridge come to the house to help her out for the day.

The policewoman, the one who'd hauled us into that little room, proceeded to lay out her case about the theft of the ring, and the judge listened carefully and nodded a lot while he looked at Tick, and then at me. He was a juvenile court judge, and therefore a specialist in a case like this, but for all his experience he seemed very sad about what he was hearing. He was also a thin man with a bald head, and reminded me of a Sunday school teacher I had once who was gentle and friendly.

When the policewoman finished her story, which included her understanding that the young boy was developmentally disabled, the judge announced that he wanted to meet with the family "in cham-

bers," and also asked if other qualified witnesses were present, like schoolteachers or doctors. I turned around and saw a bunch of people leap to their feet, but eventually the judge sifted through them all and settled on the school psychologist and Tick's teacher, Miss Sproul. They followed Tick, me, Tychander, the policewoman, and the judge into his back office.

Sad as he was in the courtroom, he got downright depressed when we were all together in his office and he started asking about our family. I did most of the talking in this regard, explaining that great aunt Zelda Morton became our legal guardian after my mother's death when I was six and Tick was three, but that she'd probably had a few mild strokes because it was *she* who now needed attending, not us. The strokes must have been mild, because from one day to the next we didn't see much change in her.

He asked about our Mom, Martha Elmont, and I was forced to tell the truth that she'd taken her own life, with pills, for reasons that she never shared with us, not that I could remember much since I was just six. We were staying with Aunt Zee anyway back then, for a lengthy visit while Mom was "sick."

"And your father?"

I remember Mom saying *he's moved away and I don't know where*, and that was the end of it.

"I don't know, sir. He left about three years before Mom died. Before Tick was born, in fact. So I've been told."

"It's so sad, so sad," he said, shaking his head, and I thought he might burst into tears.

The policewoman reminded him that a felony had been committed and that the matter was before him.

"And no one's contested the facts of the case," she threw in.

The judge turned to Tick to take in a long look, knowing my brother's future was in his hands. Now I have to say, in preparation for his day in court, Ty and I had worked pretty hard on him to trim his hair, clean him up and dress him right since he'd be disinclined to do any of this himself. Ty was the chief barber, trimming his hair at the collar and raising it over his ears, then using the electric clippers to shave the

back and sides of his neck. I got out his only white shirt with buttons and ironed it on the kitchen counter, and did the same with a pair of gray wool trousers that I figured might still fit him. It's obvious that if we ever went to church his clothes would be more up to date, but Zee gave up on church a few years ago so we all stopped going. Ty and I helped wash his face and, for the first time ever, I decided to let him use my deodorant.

The pants were too short but still fit around the waist. The white shirt was too snug at the throat, so we left the top button open and I tied his only necktie so it pulled the collars together, more or less. All in all, he looked spanking clean and as innocent as circumstances would allow.

"Is there anyone here," the judge began, "who can say with certainty that this boy had a clear understanding of the consequences of his act?"

All I could hear was my own head pounding. I was actually pretty nervous about all of this and my heart rate was up.

"Son?" said the judge to him. "Just give me the best answer you can. Why on *earth* did you steal that ring?"

Well, Tick's mouth twisted into that impish grin he sometimes makes, and he came out with this:

"Woody says I'm a klepto."

Somebody chuckled – I think it was the school shrink, Dr. Tinkerman.

"But why the ring?" the judge went on. "Why not – a toy?"

"Don't take no toys," Ty chipped in. "He takes *stupid* things, like boxes of screws and such."

"I'd like the boy to respond."

Tick fired up for his answer. "It was a present for Zee. She wanted something nice for her birthday. She just has bracelets, no rings. It just sat there on the glass. She told me, get me something nice. I don't have no money. I have three dollars in my magazine box. Under my bed. Zee's good to me, I wanted to get her something pretty. But after I took it, my mind told me, you didn't really take it, you just dreamed it. That's what happens sometimes. I take things, and I don't believe

I actually did it. Until I feel it in my pocket."

The judge was hanging on every word, it seems. He was leaning forward on his desk trying to focus on Tick's face.

"When you feel it in your pocket, what do you tell yourself?"

Tick screwed his face up into a grimace.

"Uh oh."

The judge sat back and put his hands behind his head.

"I'm not sending this child to juvenile detention."

Well, nobody dared react with a hoot or a holler, but you could hear a lot of exhaling. I felt my shoulders relax and drop down about four inches.

"I invite your thoughts and recommendations. St. Anselm's, anyone?"

After brief discussion with Dr. Tinkerman and Miss Sproul, there was no question how this would all end up, because St. Anselm's seemed like the perfect place.

"St. Anselm's it is. Son, you'll be remanded there for a period of between twelve and eighteen months, depending on your progress. You'll start the first of the year, and I will strongly recommend that you receive the best treatment for your disability."

"Okay, judge," said Tick.

"It's a good place where people can visit you, and they say the food's not so bad."

"Okay. I'll go."

three

THROUGH THE SPRING, Aunt Zee's physical problems started to catch up with the general slippages of her mind. Mostly it was in her lower back and hip, and I thought maybe she'd cracked one of her hip bones the way elderly people sometimes do, but no, she said it was the mugginess in the air that was tightening her joints and keeping her bent over. In any event, while she used to be able to stagger around on her own with only an occasional helping hand, now she needed one of those walkers to help her up off the couch and get to the kitchen or the bathroom. If mugginess were to blame, then it seemed to tighten up her voice, too; instead of asking for help the way she usually did, now she just barked it out. *Woody! Tick!*

That's right, Tick was gone to St. Anselm's but Zee couldn't wrap her brain around it. In a way, I became both myself and my brother, especially when she needed help, which was more often than I'd like.

Tick!

If she called his name out, it was me showing up in the doorway.

"What can I get you?"

"Where's Tick?"

I'd explain, again, that he was off to St. Anselm's for a visit and wasn't due back just yet, and I was cheered that she seemed to recall it. But then she'd be alarmed that he was gone for so long, just like he'd packed up and moved out.

"Is it the food?" she'd ask. "Tychander cooks a good meal."

Ty and I, and sometimes Natalie, did some house rearranging

to try to smooth things out for Zee. The big change was shifting her bedroom from the upstairs into the spare room downstairs, which overlooks the front porch. It happened that she had *tons* of stuff up there in boxes and old knitting bags that she wanted close by in her new room, but I didn't dare go through any of it because so much of it seemed personal, like old letters and such. We just brought it all down and stashed it around the room as neatly as we could. The letters, I assumed, were mostly from Uncle Carl Morton, probably when he was off to war in the Pacific and he and Zee were freshly married. Carl was my mother's mother's brother, but I never met him beyond seeing his pictures in the hallway and on Zee's dresser upstairs, because he died before Tick and I were born. As did our grandparents.

Other changes upstairs had to do with our bedroom, since Tick was no longer in it. I shoveled most of his stuff into the closet, or into a stack in the corner of the room next to his desk. He had tons of magazines about skateboards and motorcycles, guns and ammo and surfing, and just as many comic books, mostly superhero stuff. A bunch of them he piled into his trunk to take with him to St. Anselm's, but most of them he left behind for me to deal with. I didn't touch the posters and magazine covers he'd taped to the wall over his bed; they were generally surfing pictures and the word "Malibu" made with huge cut-out letters in a kind of rainbow over all the photos. It seemed all the guys and the girls in the pictures were blond, like him.

My desk was between the two beds, and I cleared off one end of it where he kept his pocketknife, buffalo head nickel, useless tube of anchovy paste that he stole, and hand-squeezer exercise thingy he used to strengthen his grip. I put all these things in his desk drawer. So I had my desk back all to myself, and also the view out the window to the live oak dripping with Spanish moss and the tire swing hanging still from the lower branch. It was a nice long, easy spring, and most days I left the window open so I could catch a whiff of whatever was growing in our neighbor's garden beyond the tree while I tackled my homework. In the summer, with the wind from the east, you'd practically drown in the aroma of their gardenias.

I *liked* those smells, I liked flowers, and I wondered if maybe my

future might have something to do with plants or nurseries. Or maybe forestry, because I liked being in the woods and understanding trees. Natalie had a point; it was time to think about what I wanted to be.

With Tick gone and Zee downstairs, it was amazingly quiet in the room, and I grew to adapt to it. Before the changes, I'd have to deal with Tick's raspy night-breathing and hollering in his sleep, and also the sounds from Zee's bedroom next to us, her snoring and the trumpet-like farts that she fired off when she was stirring in the early hours of the morning. She kept her closet door open, which was right through the wall, and I swear it acted like a loudspeaker.

But now she was safely and quietly downstairs, and spending more and more time in bed. Tychander's hours and duties expanded, so that she was in and out of the house all the time, helping Zee into the bathroom or toting in lunch on a tray. Cream cheese and olive sandwiches and sweet tea were the usual.

A couple of times Ty drove me to St. Anselm's to visit Tick, otherwise it was Natalie in the old Buick, going *ever so slowly* and I swear I was tempted to wrench the steering wheel from her hands and leap over to do my own driving at a sensible pace. I was usually impatient to get there and see how he was being treated, but you could only go during visiting hours on Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons. Either way, I didn't think the staff did much to gussy up their behavior during visiting hours, since I heard plenty of loud, stern voices from the staff chastising the kids for one thing or another, just as you'd expect on a normal day. Also, the place looked raggedy here and there, with some of the buildings in need of paint, and they didn't go out of their way to pretty it up just for visitors. In a way, it was comforting, because St. Anselm's wasn't trying to make a big show of being something it wasn't. It was a fairly strict halfway house kind of place, designed to straighten out kids who had some major kink in their lives or their behavior, and it wasn't any summer camp, for sure.

Nat and I would take turns using my baseball glove to play catch with Tick out on the main lawn, and sometimes Jupiter Strange would join us. They both lived in Magnolia House, in a big open dormitory with about twenty beds on the second floor, all with the same Navy

blue wool blankets. Each kid got a dresser and a small table, and they stashed their trunks under the bed. It was all neat and clean, with a military feeling to it, but there was a strong odor of mildew and dirty socks which made it homier than you'd expect, and comforting.

I got a kick out of hooking up with Jupiter again. He was the same, big old goofy guy with a huge smile that showed which teeth were missing, but he'd lost some weight in the last year or so and looked much more athletic than before. One time, I think it was late April, he and I scooted off away from Nat and Tick, who were playing ball, and moseyed down to one of the ponds jammed with bullfrogs. I remember he said,

"I'm tryin' to teach the scamp some morals."

Which naturally led to a discussion of how teachable my brother was, but Jupe (as I called him) was sure he was making some progress. Tick had swiped one of Jupe's baseball cards, as it happened.

"Sometimes," I said, "he doesn't know what he's doing."

"Uh *uh*, he knows just fine. He just keeps testing. I told him, do that again I'll rip your arm out of its socket. That got his attention – he straightened right up."

"No, Jupe, he *pretends* to get the message –"

"You shoulda tried that, threatening to rip his arm out."

"I gave him Indian wrist burns –"

"No *no no*, worse, it has to be worse. And you gotta stick your eyes into him like you want to kill him, that's how to educate him. Fact is, he wouldn't be here if your Aunt Zee hadn't told him it was her birthday and she wanted something nice."

Well, I still couldn't see Zee lying to him on purpose, just to get a free present – not in her condition. Also, Jupiter was in one of his know-it-all moods, which added a grain of salt.

"She's just as zoo-brained as he is," I said.

We looked around the pond and the pine trees on the other side. At some point when you're visiting St. Anselm's, it dawns on you. There are no fences. If you hated being here, you could scoot off just like walking out your front door. It happened sometimes, they said, but then you'd get caught and be shuffled right off to juvenile detention

without so much as a how-do-you-do.

“Tick and I,” said Jupe, “we’re *tight* now. He’s always lookin’ to me for the next lesson. ‘S like he never got no morals, so I am imparting my wisdom to him.”

Well, if I believed him, I would’ve been ashamed of myself, since it had always been *my* job to show Tick what was right and what was wrong. I knew well enough, you don’t have to spout it off all the time, you just need to behave a certain way and it’ll be noticed. I’d behaved more or less the same way all my life, and often as not Tick was right at my side to catch onto it. When he did catch on, it was gratifying, and when he didn’t – like with shoplifting – I blamed it on his troubles at birth. So I didn’t think Jupe was barking up the right tree, wanting to impart his wisdom to a kid whose brain-wiring was a spaghetti tangle of short circuits. Also, I believed Indian wrist burns were a better teaching tool than dismembering Tick’s arm, which on the face of it was a ridiculous threat and easy enough to see through.

I found out Jupiter’s time at St. Anselm’s would be up in July, if all went well in how he managed himself. He said he liked it there fine enough. The school part of it was as good as any school back in Ogamesh, he thought, and he believed the food tasted about the same as it would from his mother in the trailer, though they tended to serve too much macaroni and cheese and greasy burgers to suit his taste. As a rule, he told me, he and Tick would go through the cafeteria line together and Jupe would command him to stay away from the fatty stuff.

“It’s training,” he said, as we walked back from the pond. “If he’s going surfing, he can’t lard up like a farm hog.”

“Jupe, he’s not going surfing.”

“That’s his dream. You don’t deny a dream.”

I let it go at that. If they wanted to have some fantasy about surfing, so be it.

On a Friday in June, right after we’d gotten out of school for the year, I finally broke down and agreed to go on a “date” with Natalie.

It had several conditions which, if I were the girl, I might back away from, but she stuck right to her guns. First, I told her I couldn’t spend any money because I was *this* close to piling up three hundred dollars for the Honda, which no one had bought yet and was now stashed inside the guy’s garage. Second, it had to be in the afternoon instead of night, and here’s where I shoveled it on a bit, explaining to her that Ty didn’t normally work past seven at night and someone had to hang around to help Zee, namely yours truly. That’s true except for the fact that Ty will come along to the house *anytime* day or night, as long as she gets her usual hourly wage, and I know Aunt Zee is always good for it because of the terrific pension she has, and an annuity, too. But you have to give Ty a day’s notice, as a rule, just to be polite, and I hadn’t bothered working on it. In any event, Nat said fine, she’d treat me to a couple of shooters of whiskey and an early supper picnic over on the banks of the river by Jameson’s cotton field so I could be back by seven.

Now I need to say, I liked Nat as a *friend* up to this point, and only a friend, and I knew she had ratcheted up her interest in me a little past that, so it was going to be tricky to keep it simple. For the life of me, I can’t figure out her problem. I didn’t have a tenth of her brain or a millionth of her money or a zillionth of her car, and I wasn’t a star athlete. All those things mean a lot to most all the girls in this town. She’d said I was handsome, which maybe I was on a good cloudy day around dusk to a half-blind fool, but I’d come to sense that girls didn’t care so much for handsomeness as long as the guy had a good car and some cash for a fun evening out. Also, after a couple of hours working at Winkler’s Garage changing tires or oil, it was almost impossible to get all the grime off me and I wasn’t much to look at, especially the knuckles and under the fingernails. The other problem she raised was the shooters of whiskey. She knew I’d take a small sip and that would be it, leaving the rest for herself, just as she wanted. Basically what she had planned for herself was philosophy and some food by the river and a hell of a buzz.

There’s a nice grassy spot between the cotton field and the river, and Nat spread out a big blanket. Next to it she arranged the cooler

and a picnic hamper, and then patted the blanket for me to come sit by her, though I was distracted by the river and the antics of some water bugs playing in a little eddy. After I obeyed her, she took out the bottle of whiskey, two short glasses, and some ice. I pinched my thumb and forefinger together, indicating I wanted just a tiny bit, and of course she said *good, all the more for me*.

Well, she slugged the first one down while I accidentally spilled mine behind my back, careful to aim for the grass instead of the blanket. *Freakin' idiot* I muttered to myself, then took a sip of the half-thimbleful that was left. She topped her glass off again while I put my hand up to say, *couldn't touch another drop*. Call me a total country idiot, but I'd much rather have a Dr. Pepper on a hot June afternoon rather than beer or liquor. What she *did* have in the hamper that excited me was crawfish salad, which she'd made from scratch because she knew it was one of my favorite things, along with some bread to make sandwiches. And some cold andouille sausage. I was ready for it any time, but she felt compelled to talk first.

"*Friendship*," she said like it was important, "requires a certain intimacy. If it's to be a *good* friendship."

"Intimacy?" I knew the word, of course, but I needed more direction with it.

"Trusting the friend," she explained, "with your innermost thoughts and feelings."

"I've done that, haven't I?"

She was slugging her whiskey again and she almost gagged on it she started laughing so hard. But she got it down.

"You *do* entertain me, Woodrow."

"Well, I *listen* to you," I rejoindered, believing that listening was as intimate as talking, in a way.

"I don't want to pry or psychoanalyze, but sometimes I just can't figure you. I mean, at home, do you ever talk about serious things, share things, with Aunt Zee?"

Now it was my turn to laugh.

"I believe she's about as intimate as a wild boar."

She shook her head in dismay.

"And as congenial, too," I added. I started sucking on a whiskey-flavored ice cube.

"Well, I guess your aunt is not your friend."

"Not so much. But I'm intimate with my brother. We talk about all kinds of things."

"Can you talk to me the same way? Or do I sit here staring at your skull wondering what's going on in all that moosh."

Nat could get kind of snippy when she was drinking, but the fact is I didn't really mind because there could be some wit to it and she'd make me laugh.

"Try it," she went on. "Talk to me like Tick. I just transformed, I'm Tick."

"Hi Tick. You smell like booze."

"Gee, Woody, booze makes me feel better, 'specially when I get sad thinking about how we got no parents, only Aunt Zee, and she ain't no real parent."

She did this goofy retarded voice that didn't sound much like Tick, but I got the idea. His voice sounded more jittery and sharp, and actually kind of musical sometimes.

"Well, that's our lot. We make the best of it."

"Don't you miss 'em, Woody? Our daddy ran off, didn't he? Why'd he do that? Didn't he love us or nothin'?"

"Husbands do that, and so do wives. Now drink up, Tick, and quit whining in that phony voice, I'm hungry."

"Y'never give me a good night kiss, Woody."

Oh Lordy, how she got tricky.

"I've *never* kissed a brother and I never will, I just swat you on the bum and that's it, and I'd do the same to Natalie Starke next time I see her."

That more or less killed the game, which didn't satisfy her, I don't think. She finally got into the hamper and assembled some crawfish salad sandwiches as best she could and drank some more whiskey. As things unfolded, I could see I was going to drive us home.

The truth is, Tick never whined about not having parents, but we hadn't skipped over the issue either, because he was interested. Our

father was a man named Milton Clayne, according to Aunt Zee, and he was a lumberman who lived and worked in our area for a few years before moving on. He and our mother never got married, so the town had plenty to talk about, particularly if you consider that Tick and I came three years apart, which was plenty of time for him to pop the question or for our mother to go find someone else who would. It's always been the truth to me that our mother loved Milton, in spite of his waffling on the subject of marriage, and it was all but a gunshot to her head when he finally left town, before Tick was born, to seek his fortune elsewhere. Whether he was upright and honest or a total scoundrel is a mystery to me. It doesn't matter, because I don't remember him at all, and there are no pictures.

I'd told all this to Nat before. But she couldn't seem to get it out of her head that I must have *cared* in some way for this guy and therefore had to confront the business of his running off and deal with it. She was digging for anger, but there wasn't any. Most of my teenage years, I was too busy trying to manage my brother and my addle-brained aunt to get angry at some guy I'd never known.

Still, it was irritating that he'd bailed on us when we sure could've used a father around the house.

With some fathers I've run into, you get the impression their kid is only alive because of *him*. That's true in a factual way, of course, but it's the sort of swollen-up pride that has nothing behind it. I swear Tick and I would've popped onto this earth one way or another, in some different shape, no matter who made us. That's how I felt.

When I drove us back along the access road past Jameson's cotton fields, Nat tried to describe for me what all she'd been building up to, but she was so full of whiskey it came out in a series of gurgles and confusion. As I recall —

"I *think* — no intimacy ever with an adult. A parent. So *you* can't be intimate. No hugs gotten. No hugs to. *Give*. Woody. Strong like tree. Won't — *bend*."

"Will hug *Nat*," I mimicked.

"Will?" Here eyes flashed wide with hope, or something similar.

"Will. Won't kiss, though. *Friend*."

She chewed on the word *friend* like gum and then seemed to want to spit it out.

The problem with Nat being so drunk was that I had to drive the Buick to her house, which is about two miles from Aunt Zee's, and then hoof it on home, or maybe hitch. I wasn't that crazy about walking along Route 12, what with all the logging trucks and semis and whatnot, and hitching was always a little sketchy because likely as not you'd get some crazy redneck who'd be drunker than Natalie, as opposed to someone you knew. Normally I didn't mind rednecks, because I was pretty close to being one myself and I could speak their language, but the ones most likely to pick you up would be drunk, and the first thing out of their mouths would be *you got an older sister?* I swear I've heard that a dozen times, always from guys who look tough but who are lonely inside.

So I told Nat when we pulled in her long driveway, "Looks like I gotta walk home."

"S good for you." And a burp, followed by a giggle.

"I could take your car."

She didn't even hesitate. "Yeah, take it. You can pick me up tomorrow."

"Your parents won't mind?"

She shook her head and seemed to gulp for another burp. "They don't mind. *Anything*."

I knew that in advance, of course. Her parents struck me as kind of detached from her, and very relaxed about rules. "Well, if they do, you can tell them I thought the Buick might be burning oil and I offered to run it into Winkler's to have them check it out."

"They won't ask."

We got out by a stand of spruce where we wouldn't be seen from the house, and I gave her a big hug, just as I promised, as well as a little swat on the bum afterward. She was too loopy to try to kiss me, which was a break, so after the intimacies I watched her start to stagger back to her house, and then I hopped in the Buick and drove back to Aunt Zee's.

It happened that it became extremely important to have Nat's car sitting in our driveway, right below my window.

I've told you I'm not a religious person, but I have a pretty strong streak of faith – in *something*, whatever it is that strings things together in the right way when you don't even know it. I connected the strings like this: Nat wants to take me on a picnic date, so she picks me up in her car. She wants to get a buzz, so she drinks and then gets too clobbered to drive home. I drive her to her house, and she takes pity on me for having to walk two miles, so she lends me the Buick. Suddenly, I have wheels I didn't expect.

I can say this *now*, looking back on it all. But at the time, that very night and the following day, there was so much going on that I wasn't exactly concentrating on how things got strung together.

It started when I popped into the house where Zee was sitting with her tray-table, eating chocolate cake and watching TV, and Ty was in the kitchen working on the dinner dishes. Zee didn't look up so I walked right by her to go help Ty, and maybe leak a little information about the picnic I'd just had. It didn't take long – she noticed my “new car,” and I gave her an account of the afternoon's activities and Nat's yen for whiskey and the resulting problems with transportation. Ty allowed as how she was sure that rich girl had designs on me, which I knew to be true and wouldn't deny. It was flattering, in a way, but I shrugged it off. Otherwise, while Ty washed and I dried, her brow was crinkled and she looked worried more than usual, so I asked her about it.

“She called me Percy. Swear, if I look half as ugly as old Percy used to look, they better amputate me at the neck and protect me from the rest of my life.”

Well, it gave me a start, since Percy was the maid Zee and Uncle Carl kept many years ago, and, judging by a photo I'd seen of her, Ty had a point.

“Might be a resemblance,” I chanced, and Ty swatted at me.

“I'm sayin', Woody, if her mind's goin' so fast she thinks I'm Percy, I ain't the one to be workin' here.”

Later at night when I was in bed, I gave that problem a lot of

thought. I'd just gotten out of school for the year and didn't have much in the way of plans, but the plans I had didn't include trying to be a professional nurse for Aunt Zee.

It kept me up a bit. That, plus the usual dead quiet in the room with Tick gone and the wind not blowing. But in time I did fall off to sleep, just for awhile.

What woke me up was a far off noise you don't hear too often in Ogamesh. When my head cleared enough to make sense of it, I realized there was a blaring of sirens far, far off in the distance, the kind that fire engines use. And when I drew a breath, it was tinged with the smell of smoke.

four

“ARE YOU WOODY?”

Those are the first words I heard Saturday morning, and the way the guy spoke them I wondered even then if they'd haunt me for the rest of my life. Things can happen that make you question who you really are, right down to your name, as I'll get to later. At the time, it was about nine in the morning and I'd woken up late – because of my general restlessness and the sirens the night before – and heard voices downstairs. Zee's voice, shrieky and defiant, and a man's voice I hadn't heard before. Fearing an intruder, I threw on a pair of shorts, grabbed my hunting knife and rumbled down the staircase two steps at a time with my heart pounding. I was too much in a sleep haze to understand I'd be no match for most intruders, even with the knife, but it was instinctual to grab a weapon.

When I landed in the hallway I saw the man was a sheriff or a deputy and that Zee, leaning on her walker, was too confused to be of much use to him.

“Are you Woody?”

“Yes sir.”

Zee seemed revolted to look at me.

“You come down here like a half-naked jaybird! Get some clothes on you!”

“You can put the knife down, boy.”

“Yes sir.”

“And get dressed, we got company!”

“S'all right, ma'am, he's decent enough.”

It was a short debate because to avoid further wrangling I dashed upstairs, put the knife back, and grabbed a tee shirt. Zee has always been opposed to casualness of dress in the house, raised as she was to respect modesty, and her end-all limit was shorts and a tee shirt. When I got back downstairs, she'd settled herself into a chair by her card table.

This time, more awake, I got a good look at the sheriff's deputy. He was dressed to the nines with his gun and nightstick and handcuffs dangling from his belt, but he had a puffy, friendly face. I judged him to be about forty, based on the crow's feet wrinkles next to his eyes and some gray in his hair by the temples – otherwise blond, and cut short like a military haircut. The name tag said “Rawlins.” In spite of his genial face, he was solid muscle head to toe and he did a fine job looking somber and serious.

It crossed my mind that having Natalie's Buick in the driveway was the cause of the visit.

“Son, I need to ask you some questions, if you don't mind.”

“No sir, I don't.”

I didn't steal it. My friend lent it to me. Ask her.

“There was a fire last night at St. Anselm's, where your brother is.”

“Yes sir.” Boy, did my stomach do a flip flop. “Was it bad?”

“The fire destroyed Magnolia House, which was his dormitory, and partly destroyed a service building next to it. We had a fatality. And we have two missing. One of the missing is your brother.”

“Who's he talking about?” Zee cried out, but I ignored her just then because my mind was racing with a zillion questions and images.

“I don't understand,” I believe I said.

“Well, the fire started in the basement and spread very fast. Children on the second floor mostly jumped out windows or took the back staircase. The one fatality seemed to be up on the third floor in an attic room that's off-limits to the students and here's my question to you, because I know you visited there several times.”

“Attic room.” I didn't know any attic room.

“Did Tick ever go up there? Did he ever talk about that room?”

“No sir, not that I remember.”

“Well, did he ever talk about running away?”

“No sir, absolutely not.” Tick actually seemed to like the place.

“Well, son, the fire was so severe that if he got caught up on the third floor it may take some time to get to the bottom of things. Sad to say. The whole building’s just rubble right now.”

He shook his head, seeming genuinely sorrowful. But I couldn’t imagine Tick getting stuck in a fire. He was too wily to get trapped, and he’d jump from the third floor if he had to.

“Y’all sure he’s missing?”

“We’re sure. We checked hospitals –“

“He could’ve run to a neighbor’s house or something. For *help*. If Tick jumped out a window to escape a fire, and twisted his ankle or something, that’s just the kind of thing he’d do. He’s a little disabled, in the head, and he wouldn’t wait for an ambulance ‘cause he wouldn’t necessarily expect one to come.”

“Well son, there was help at the *school* and their staff. Wouldn’t he know that?”

“I’m *saying*, officer, Tick’s head doesn’t work logically, for the most part.” It always saves time if people can figure that out sooner rather than later. Rawlins seemed a little slow to take it in.

“Well, we’ll double check, but I ‘spect our department’s done a thorough job, checking with neighbors.”

I added, feeling too dumb to think of anything else, “If I were Tick, I might do just that, I might just run off to a neighbor’s.” All I could think of was getting myself into the Buick and racing over to the school.

“Okay, that’s helpful, I’ll call that in.”

“Be right back,” I said, and raced back upstairs to put on my socks and sneakers and get my wallet. When I came back down, Rawlins was sitting at the card table with Zee, patting the back of her hand.

“We’ll do our best, ma’am.”

“Why was he there?” she asked. “*This* is his home!”

The deputy’s radio blared at him, and he grabbed it and chatted for a minute or so, explaining where he was and then *yes, I’ll tell them*. When he finished, he stood up and looked me close in the eye.

“Well, the other family’s been notified, so I can tell you the other missing boy is Jupiter Strange. They hung out a lot together, so I’m told.”

My head was in a spin, wondering so many things.

“Yes sir, that’s true. They got to be friends.”

More questions in my head and nasty images of the fire raging up to the third floor I didn’t even know existed at Magnolia House. Jupiter and Tick missing.

“He was due for release next month, so it makes no sense, does it?” he asked me.

“What makes no sense?”

“That they’d run off.”

“No *sir*, don’t make any sense, not a bit.”

“Still,” he said, “word is, Jupiter’s not as sensible as some.”

“No *sir*, if they’d run off, Tick would come right here for sure, or go to a neighbor’s house like I said, if he were injured. That’s as far as he’d run off.”

“Well, it’s a sad business, in any case.” He took a card out of his shirt pocket and gave it to me. “You call us if you get any information.”

“Yes sir.”

“And we’ll do the same.”

He turned to go, but paused for a second to look back at me.

“He’s been a good boy mostly, hasn’t he?”

“Yes sir, he has. Mostly.”

“If you had a hand in raising him, I guess he has.”

Well, that perked my ears up. It’s not often a stranger makes a compliment like that, when he can’t know much about you.

After Rawlins left, I needed to sit with Zee for a few minutes. She had milky blue eyes that usually liked to look off into the distance, but now they were darting all over the place, and it was clear to me she needed some talking to to try to settle her down. I told her what was as close to the truth as I could imagine it, knowing Tick and Jupiter. *A bad fire happened last night at St. Anselm’s, where they’ve been living for a bit, and it looks like they got out okay but they’ve been slow to report back in and let everyone know they’re okay. They might be off having a picnic or visiting friends.* She nodded as if she understood and her eyes stopped jumping around.

I could almost believe it myself.

As soon as Ty arrived at the door and I blurted out the headlines, I blasted off toward St. Anselm's in the Buick. I didn't even call Nat to tell her. The Buick was a three-speed automatic, which sounds wimpy, but as I've said it had a Chevy three-fifty V-8 engine in it and a halfway decent carburetor so it had plenty of pep and torque between fifty-five and seventy. Unfortunately, the car smelled of whiskey, and sure enough I twisted around and saw the mostly empty bottle in the back seat leaking into a pile of trash. The cap wasn't twisted on right. I opened the windows all the way to try to air it out.

It's like she *lived* in this car. Sipping whiskey and enjoying the sights while driving under the speed limit.

To get to St. Anselm's you have to duck off Route 12 and go south, through a stretch of pecan groves, followed by cotton fields and some ramshackle villages that aren't really towns but just collections of trailers and old sharecropper's shacks, with their tin roofs and sagging front porches. No one ever paints these shacks, as if there's some law against it because they look prettier all gray and weathered. Or else, paint's too expensive. Black folks sit out on the porch in their rocking chairs or on top of a barrel, watching everything that goes by (it's the *world* that goes by, I thought – and you're missing it). Sometimes there will be chickens scratching in the dust in the front yard. It was hot this morning, and even though I was steaming along at a good clip I could hear the cicadas and crickets buzzing in the sun.

Black folks don't miss a trick. That's been my experience.

What happened was, I didn't stop at St. Anselm's. I drove right to it and slowly past it, but I didn't stop to get out and poke around. There were still fire trucks there with their lights flashing, and a bunch of firemen crawling through the rubble that was still smoldering and steaming, and police cars, and a van that said "medical examiner," and tourists and rubberneckers. I didn't stop mostly because what I saw was enough, but also because the smell was disgusting. It wasn't just woodsmoke, it was burning plastic and something with an awful sweetness to it that turned my stomach.

Darned if I know where all the kids were. It's a safe bet some of them got banged up jumping out of Magnolia House, breaking their

legs in the fall and whatnot, and for sure all their belongings got burnt to a crisp, so my guess is they were hauled off to hospitals or to other places that could care for them.

After I moseyed past all the emergency vehicles, I found a dirt road going into the pine woods – well-traveled enough so it was possible somebody lived down there. Sure enough, the woods opened up into hayfields and some small gardens, with trailers and shacks spotted here and there. A couple of the driveways had sheriff's cruisers in them, so I figure Rawlins had called in my theory to the department – that Tick might hustle himself off to a neighbor's, nonsensical as it might be to do that.

Where Jupe had landed was anybody's guess. But he was even wilier than Tick, in spite of his moral pronouncements, and I just couldn't imagine that he'd let a fire get the better of him. Also, he was strong and athletic instead of blobby the way he used to be, so it was easy to see him busting through doors and windows and leaping off the roof to save himself.

The dirt road looped around to the right and into the woods again, and eventually popped right back out onto the same paved road. I recognized it, and turned left to head a mile or so into the little village where I knew they had a general store.

St. Anselm's was fairly strict as a home for troubled youth, but it was liberal enough to bus kids into the village once a week, with staff members close by their sides, to buy snacks or batteries or new socks or whatever. Mostly, the kids came to this store because it had a little bit of everything, including a big drum of hot water on the porch for boiling peanuts, so I decided to stop there and see if I could get my ear close to the ground.

Well, though it was mid-morning on a Saturday, you wouldn't know it. The place was empty of people except for a raggedy-looking family of a mother and her toddlers leaving the store as I walked in. An old black guy was tending the counter, and we nodded to each other, but I chose not to start up a conversation with him. He was so old and frail looking, I thought if he nodded more than once the effort might stagger him to the floor and kill him. So I just looked through

the glass at a display of toy cars and trucks and a box of hard candy until he asked if he could help me.

Well, I had money and I was a bit hungry by now, but I had to debate if I wanted something I could eat fast or slow, to take in the car or enjoy on the front porch where they had some chairs – and *yes*, there was someone sitting out there by the drum of hot water but I forget who.

I decided on a slow food. “Believe I’ll have a bowl of peanuts.”

In the South, that means boiled peanuts because roasted peanuts come in a sack.

“Lorraine will serve you up outside.”

I gave him the money and went back to the porch where Lorraine was sitting by the drum. She must’ve been his wife, or possibly even his *mother* she was so stringy and wrinkled with age, and it took her some doing to get the lid off the drum and scoop out a fair serving of peanuts for me. I thanked her and sat in the chair closest to her, watching cars go by and peeling off the soft shells to get to the gooshy nuts inside. I love boiled peanuts once in a while, especially if they’re not overcooked and all the flavor’s gone.

She watched me eat and said, “Smells like a storm coming.” The voice was raspy with age, and her eyes crinkled as she sniffed. Now, lots of older people can smell a storm ten miles off, but so far it was just hot and sticky, the way Georgia often is in the summer months, and not a cloud in the sky. So I believed her nosebuds were hallucinating. Still, she had one of those old-people’s faces that looked like it was storing wisdom in every crease.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“Passing through?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am, on my way to Waycross,” I concocted on the spot. “Taking the scenic route.”

“Fur piece,” she said, and she was right, it was another hundred miles easily.

“Mm hm. I’m in no rush.”

Well, we were trading looks, and she seemed quite interested in me and started yapping.

“Big fire here last night. At the juvenile home.”

“Hm. Didn’t know.”

“Killed a colored boy. Nothin’ left of him ‘cept teeth, they say.”

Some real old-timer blacks still say *colored*, and it always throws me.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Musta been a doozie.”

Doozie was a disrespectful choice of speech, but she glided right over it.

“Word is, it got *set*.”

“Ma’am?”

“*Set*. That’s the talk. Bad as you can be, doin’ that, big house full of boys. There’s one comes in here, shifty. They say he’s missing and run off.”

“Good peanuts,” I said, not wanting to seem too fascinated. “They lookin’ for him?”

She laughed pretty hard at this till I thought she might bust a seam somewhere. “Wouldn’t *you*?”

“What’s he look like? I’ll keep my eye out.”

“Halfway to Mississippi by now.”

“What’s he look like anyway?”

“Colored. Tall boy, built strong. Sheriff knows his name, I sure don’t.”

“Okay, I’ll keep my eye out. You’re right, it’s terrible –“

“Always has this puppy white boy by his side.”

“Puppy?”

“Looks like a puppy, acts like one too. Head ain’t right.”

“Oh.”

“Say he’s missing too.”

“Mighta got burned up. They’d never find ‘em. Just teeth, as you say, and what with all the piles of rubble – ”

“Bet they ran off. Why else would you buy a map?”

“Ma’am?”

“I’m *sayin’*, last time they come in here, they bought a map of the whole *U.S.* Boys like them don’t care about maps ‘less you’re gonna travel.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I know ‘cause I sold it to ‘em.”

“Spect you’re right,” I said. “Good peanuts, ma’am, but I believe I need to be moving on now.”

She asked me to keep my eye out while I drove, and I promised I would, I’d watch out for both of them. Some days it’s best not to make promises like that, the ones you don’t intend to keep, because when you least expect it they turn on their heads and end up keeping *you*.

Every now and again people get a piece of mail, like a card or a letter, that has a stamp on it that never got cancelled or postmarked. This is nothing so special – I’ve had it happen several times, especially around Christmas, and Zee’s always asked for me to get out the clothes iron, fill it with water, and steam off the stamp so she can use it again and save a few cents. I don’t know how the post office works with all its machines and whatnot, but from what I’ve seen in the world it’s easy enough to make mistakes in business, so I figure the post office is no exception when they deliver a card or letter that they never postmarked.

Okay, it’s nothing special unless it’s that particular Saturday morning in June, and the postcard is a picture of the very general store I’d just come home from.

But I’m going to have to back up, because of a bunch of things happening at the house upon my return that made me clench my fists and prepare for battle. As I fleshed it out later with Ty’s help, our front yard was invaded by reporters and photographers from different newspapers who’d somehow gotten Tick’s name and tracked him down here. There was a Macon paper, an Atlanta paper, and even one from Americus, which is not so close as you’d think. Zee was inside certain the world was ending, Ty was on the porch fending off the attack as best she could, and what had fired up the newspaper guys more than ever was that Viola Strange, Jupe’s mom, had come for a visit and had her face pressed up against the screen door, inside looking out, shouting *he was a good boy! A good boy!* as the flashbulbs popped.

And Jupe’s baby sister Saturna was at her side, holding back tears.

That’s about when I arrived in the Buick, seeing so much chaos in the yard that I parked a few houses down on the street, then eased myself gently along the sidewalk toward the commotion. Ty caught a look at me and was about to blab my name, but I hushed her with my finger over my lips and stood just far enough away so I wasn’t noticed. I didn’t want to talk to any of those people. As if the saints had figured it out, right away a sheriff’s cruiser swung down our street with its lights going, screeched to a halt in the middle of the street, and out popped two deputies who started yelling at the newspaper people, strongly encouraging them to get lost. One of them was Rawlins, and sure enough he spied me, and after the men had done their job to restore order to our front yard, he eased on down the sidewalk toward me, wanting a chat.

We sat on the curb, and as tensed up and itching for a fight as I was, I started to tremble when he got into his report.

“Woody, we found a boy who told us a fair amount about last night. I can’t name him, so I’ll just call him the witness. He lived in Magnolia House with the others. He tells us everything was fine and normal at the last bed count, which was around ten-thirty, but along around eleven-thirty he says Jupiter and your brother quietly roused themselves up and got dressed. Well, the witness was curious, because it happens that from time to time some of the boys sneaked in a late night game of cards up in the third floor attic room. It was *poker*, playing for pennies in the dark with flashlights. Of all the things they could do on the sly, they pick poker. Anyway, one of the regulars, he said, was Jupiter, and as often as not Tick would join him. Another one of the regulars is a twelve-year old named Henry Jones, and he’s the one that died in the fire. Now the witness says that Jupiter *insisted* there would be no game tonight, that he was just goin’ down the hall for a pee, along with Tick, but it didn’t sit right ‘cause the boys got all dressed. Henry Jones got up, got dressed, and followed them.”

“Maybe they were just going for a walk outside,” I suggested. It was a pretty starlit night last night.”

Rawlins was shaking his head. “Son, we now know the fire started

in the basement, which was full of old paint cans, kerosene and paint thinner and such – a regular bomb ready to go off. We can't tell yet if it was an accident or not – it could've been a boy down there smoking who got reckless. But what we're thinking now is, since the fire started a little after twelve, either those three boys were in the attic playing poker, or else they were up to something else and we sure as hell want to find them and talk to them. Henry, the victim – we suspect he was in the attic room, maybe waiting for the other two, and the witness tells us the door up there gets so sticky in the humidity it's damn near unopenable from the inside without making a racket. But the building's such a wreck now it's hard to know for sure *where* he was. He got caught somewhere, that's for dead certain. Poor kid."

"Tick's never cared much for fire," I told Rawlins. "Jupiter's the same way – some kids love playing with fire, but I've never seen that kind of thing with them." This was true. They didn't care about playing with fire any more than I did; they'd rather catch frogs or newts or in Jupe's case, borrow a car for a joyride.

"Woody, if they survived it and run off, we gotta find them."

"Jupiter and Tick do stupid things sometimes – that's why they were there – but they'd never do something as evil as arson, burn a building down and kill an innocent kid. Count on it, Mr. Rawlins, I'd swear to it."

"Okay son, I hear you."

"They're not built that way."

"Well, I know you're the man of the house these days, so I'm telling all this to just you, and you can pass it on to your aunt as you see fit. We'll sift that rubble for days, right down to shoelaces if we have to. But if they're alive and you ever have any contact with them, you gotta tell us directly."

That was about the sum of it. He appreciated my point of view, and I appreciated his telling the story, but it horrified me all the same.

If those three boys were playing cards up there and a fire started, Jupe would make *sure* they all got out safe. He wouldn't leave young Henry Jones all to himself to die in that room.

The reporters were gone now, but there was still plenty of fuss

and fury to deal with inside the house, with Viola and Saturna near hysterical, with Ty trying to keep Zee under control, and now with the added surprise of Nat and her mother and stepfather pulling up in front of the house in their big car, unloading a whole party full of food. Casseroles, a chocolate cake, cookies for Zee.

I'd met her mom a couple of times, and the professor once, but you'd think they'd known me all my life, the way they hugged me and said how sorry they were and how we all had to hope and pray for the best. Nat wrapped me in the gentlest hug, and I could see from her red eyes she'd probably been crying. I invited them all inside, and I'm not going to be able to describe it well because it was an unholy racket of cheery Starke and Hawkins family and miserable everybody else, with Viola mostly in charge of the noise.

I escaped the confusion by going outside again to fetch the mail as an excuse. It usually showed up in the mailbox around eleven, and we were into the lunch hour by now.

That's when I found the postcard I mentioned earlier, unpost-marked. On one side was the photo of the general store. On the other was my name and address and a two word message.

Mal. Boo.

The writing was in pencil, but it sure wasn't Tick's handwriting, which looks loopy and carefully considered. All of the writing was in clunky block letters.

My head started to spin.

Now our mail, like everyone else's, tends to be in a certain order the way it's placed in the mailbox. The first class mail tends to be on top, and the trash mail underneath in its own stack, like the circulars from the grocery store and whatnot. Well, I almost dropped the postcard because it was on the very bottom, under the circulars, rather than with the letters on top. It didn't make sense that it got separated like that. Unless of course someone like Jupe or Tick stuck it in there much earlier in the day, or even last night, when no one was paying attention.

Mal. Boo. I knew just fine what it meant, considering it was Jupe who wrote it, and he couldn't spell to save his life.

five

I WAS WORKING ON A PLAN, but things got so rushed the plan half-planned itself, without my knowledge of it, and it made things complicated.

For example, as they were leaving, Dr. Hawkins saw Nat's Buick down the street.

"Natalie should probably drive her car back," he told me.

"Well sir, she could, but the car's low on oil and *burning* oil from what all I can tell, so it wouldn't be good for the engine."

"Burning oil? Is that serious?"

"Well, yes it usually is, it could be valves but it's frequently a problem in the cylinders, meaning the piston rings."

"Oh dear."

"I know this 'cause a motorcycle I want to buy might have the same problem. Plus, I work some days at Winkler's."

Nat had come out with her Mom and stood beside him.

"But the one way to tell," I kept up at him, "is for me to get it to the shop and run a compression check on all eight cylinders. Now, I've worked on three-fifties before, and –"

"Three-fifties?"

"That's the displacement of this engine, in cubic inches. It's a Chevy small block and a very fine high-compression engine, so it should be running right, else it could seize on you."

Nat was giving me quite a look.

"I don't know cars very well," he admitted, which I could tell.

"Yes sir, that's okay. *I* know a few things, and I can run it over to Winkler's and do some diagnostics."

Nat was squinting at me, like: what am I trying to pull?

"Fine, though I'd think you'd want to be with your family at a time like this."

True, I should, but the plan was leaping ahead of me and I had to stay with it.

"I just want to make sure Natalie has her car in good working order."

It seemed to satisfy him. Before they got in their big car, Nat took me aside by the wrist and asked *what's going on here?*

I don't know yet I whispered back to her.

In time, Viola and Saturna evacuated our house to go back to their trailer, but only after we'd exchanged a number of sentiments that we're pretty squirrely because no one knew at all if the boys were dead or alive. When they'd left, Ty assured me she'd stick with Zee while I took the old Buick down to Winkler's, which I did right away because they're open only till three on Saturdays.

Winkler's looks like the kind of shop where folks are amazed that anything ever gets fixed right, because of the mess. The front part is a big wooden building with four bays and half a dozen back rooms crammed with old car parts, and then there are five storage sheds out back for more car parts and longterm projects, like restoring old trucks and whatnot. I usually worked in the fourth bay, which had a lift for oil changes and replacing tires, with the help of Trey Winkler, who was one of the two brothers. Trey was the biggest player ever in the history of Ogamesh football, and for his size and probably his pink skin he was known in those days as Hawg. Plenty of people still called him that twenty years later, in spite of his gentle encouragement that they remember his given name, which he preferred. He was as friendly and slow-witted as they come, but a finicky mechanic who'd take twice as long on a job as normal, just to make sure he got everything right. He was even fussier as a teacher for me, and I could get pretty frustrated sometimes with him leaning over my shoulder while I worked. But it was obvious that he liked me and appreciated my intelligence and

good spelling, when it came to writing up a bill or a purchase order for new parts.

The other Winkler was Dave, Trey's older brother, who managed the office on those days when he was sober. He had problems with his liver and could be so irritable you wouldn't want to risk saying hi. Today, only Trey showed up, which made things simpler.

He's always quite a sight, and I swear I never get used to it – that enormous three hundred-and-something pound hulk squeezed into a muscle shirt, all soaked with grease, and orange hair sprouting all over his body, keeping company with a sea of freckles. He's married to a very attractive woman from Macon, and has two toddlers, so he's living proof that some women are very forgiving of a man's appearance in favor of his inner character. Trey was about the most sweet-natured guy I knew in Ogameh.

As soon as I pulled the Buick into the bay and hopped out of the car he stopped fiddling with the voltmeter under some car's hood, came over to me and proceeded to gush his distress about Tick, hoping the Lord would see to it either to admit him into heaven or find him alive somewhere, one.

I had to nip his sorrow in the bud.

"Trey, I believe he and Jupiter are safe and sound, and on the road, and I can't tell you why and you can't breathe a word of this to anybody. But that's why I'm here with Natalie's Buick, as I'll explain."

Sensing the conspiracy in my voice, he drew me deeper into the bay, out of sight from people walking by on the road.

"Tell it nice and slow, Woody."

Well, I started to, but my tongue got ahead of me. "I need this favor from you, and it's a big favor and I'm prepared to pay for it. The car's gonna need a ring job, but not really, because I'm gonna need it to find Tick. It's got almost no compression in the number five and seven cylinders, but not really, 'cause to take the engine down and do a ring job on two cylinders I figure could take three weeks or so, depending how busy y'all are, and that's the kind of time I need to go find him, while you keep the Buick in one of the sheds locked up tight, but in fact while I'm driving it."

That may not have been exactly how I said it, but that's how it struck him because he was more addled than I was, which is saying something. There were just two people I could trust to keep a secret like this, and Trey was one. Nat was the other, if she didn't get herself drunk. In time, Trey and I sorted it out. The idea was, he would write up a repair order for an engine overhaul, provide an estimate, and alert them it could take three weeks or so because Winkler's was so busy this time of year. Nat would be in on the secret, so she wouldn't pester him for a car that wasn't there; neither would her parents, because they were so liberal with her and it was her car, after all.

To a degree, Trey didn't like the plan, partly because I couldn't tell him where I was headed or for exactly how long. He could be big-brotherly with me sometimes, if he thought I was behaving in a misguided way. But the main reason he was twitchy about it had to do with the sheriff's department.

"If you take off," he said, "they'll know something's up. And they'll ask me, 'cause you're my employee. That's plain common sense."

"Yes it is, and you'll have an alibi for me that I haven't invented yet." Which was true, but I was already working on it.

"Better get to it," he said.

"You know a deputy named Rawlins?" I asked.

He thought for a bit, then nodded. "Went to school with him. Good man. And smart."

"How smart?"

"If the fox wants to get in the coop, it will."

I offered him five dollars a day for storing the Buick in the far back shed, the only one with no windows in it, but here again he got confused. If you're not really *storing* it, why pay for it? I told him we both had to pretend in an almost real way that the car was back there being worked on, and therefore it should cost something, especially to keep the shed locked up tight away from prying eyes. Trey said whatever the amount should be, he'd just dock it from my pay when I got back.

I told him I'd bring the car by on Monday for the ring job, and he still didn't get it because he was shaking his head as I drove off.

I tried to imagine being Deputy Rawlins and having his job right now. Rawlins struck me as more than smart, he was more-than-average eager to uncover the truth of the fire and the fates of Jupiter Strange and Tick Elmont. The witness-kid he found at St. Anselm's gave him plenty of information to heighten his belief in two totally opposite things: that Tick and Jupiter died in the fire, and that Tick and Jupiter had something to do with starting it and were now on the lam.

It was challenging for me to wrestle with the problem of keeping my secrets from him. I had his phone number in my wallet, and I could call anytime and inform him *well, they bought a road map of the United States last week and then sent me a misspelled, unpost-marked postcard saying Malibu, which might be their destination.* But it didn't seem as much like information as sheer guesswork, and I wasn't likely to sweeten the pot and tell Rawlins that Tick had been obsessed with surfing at Malibu before he could count to seven. It was still pure guesswork.

Zee was napping when I got home from Winkler's. I went straight up to our room, tore off all the surfing pictures and posters and the letters that spelled out Malibu, and stored it all as best I could in our closet, behind the rest of Tick's junk.

Then I sat down on my bed with my hands over my ears to try to *think.*

My first thought was, *this would be a great time to have a parent.*

I'm just sixteen; I don't know enough. Damn it, why do good men leave good women? Worse, when they're pregnant and have a three year-old.

The thoughts started piling up, and I tried to keep them orderly.

Tick has no money, and never has. Jupiter must have money. They wouldn't be hitchhiking, a big lanky black kid with missing teeth and a sawed-off white scamp traveling together. It looks too weird, they'd get reported.

They'd take a bus. Jupe wouldn't risk stealing a car.

Unless somebody lent him a car, or gave them a ride.

The nearest bus station would be ten miles or more from St. Anselm's, most likely in Nortonton, to the south. Ogamesh didn't have

buses; the nearest to us was Hartwell, kind of northerly. But if someone on the outside gave them a ride, they could end up at almost any bus station in Georgia.

They didn't start the fire. But they were there in the dormitory at bed check, and according to the witness kid they were up and dressed at eleven-thirty. The fire started after midnight.

They didn't start the fire, but it was too much of a coincidence that the fire started soon after they were up and about, ready to go somewhere. There could be a connection, of some sort.

Did they mail the postcard two or three days before that? Or did they plop it into our mailbox sometime really early Saturday morning?

It's twenty miles from St. Anselm's to Ogamesh. That's about six or seven hours walking – it would take too long, and they'd be spotted on the road, what with all the fire engines and lawmen. If they stuck the postcard in our mailbox, they had a car.

Which told me, yes, they'd been planning this for awhile, like buying the road map. Jupe had set it up with a buddy on the outside.

But all these ideas started to buffalo me, because they were tricky and the questions had no answers. The *other* ideas were simpler and fewer and didn't buffalo me at all:

They'd planned to run off to California, and they'd mailed the postcard a few days earlier and the post office didn't postmark it.

And they got caught in the fire somehow, in some way that really trapped them, and they died.

Zee kept napping, and while she snoozed I kept planning and coming up with a scheme that seemed least likely to fail. I did this by getting out of the house, hopping on my bike, and cruising the streets of our neighborhood. Past Ty's house, John Dandridge's house – the older man and friend of Zee's who watched her while Ty and Tick and I were at the hearing – past all the houses till the road turned to red Georgia dirt and led out into open farmland of peanuts, soybeans, and farther along, Jameson's cotton fields and the Strange residence, with just a glint of their old trailer peeking through pine trees. I like

farmland because you can actually see things and get a sense of the sky. Hot and greasy weather all day, but changing, with the air thickening. Off to the southwest, it looked dark and grim. I remember Lorraine, the old woman at the general store, warning that she smelled a storm on its way.

An open sky helps you plan because you get a sense of how *big* a plan can become. A storm coming also helps temper your enthusiasm for the plan, because it warns you how fast things can change for the worse.

Sometimes Tick would come out here on his bicycle and just sit. He'd do it by riding into the peanuts or cotton, then he'd dump his bike and squat in the bushes so no one could see him (like me, who'd be trying to fetch him).

I chose to be him for a second, ducking into the cotton field and sitting.

When I was around, he was hard to shake. When I wasn't around, Tick could be as happy as a hermit. If Jupe said, let's go to Malibu, Tick wouldn't be able to contain his glee and it might be three or four days later, somewhere in Oklahoma or Texas, before he might ask about his older brother or his Aunt Zee. The kid had a singular focus like no one I knew, though it got heavily relieved now and then by distraction or daydreaming.

Jupe had told me in so many words at St. Anselm's, Tick was in training for surfing. When he'd said that, I should've jumped on him to get his true meaning and judge how much he was kidding, if at all. Jupiter Strange will drop little bombshells like that without batting an eye or cracking a smile, and there was no way to gather the truth of it.

Why would he run off with just a month to go?

I got my head back into planning as I hopped on my bike again and continued riding, turning left on an old county farm road that would dump me out on the back edge of the Starke/Hawkins estate, some two miles west. The sky looked nasty through the tops of the trees.

Summer here in the south is sun in the morning, thunderstorms in the afternoon. Not every day, but most, and you have to adjust to it if you're not from here. Some of the storms can be bone-trembling

in their behavior, and the best way to keep yourself safe is watch the sky and listen to what kind of thunder you hear. Zee, when her head was right, had summer thunder figured into three types, and she'd announce it to us. The least was the Boomer, or "just a Boomer," which boomed and then faded. Most storms had Boomers, with lightning of course, and there could be high winds and downpours, but generally they weren't so bad.

Next were the Rumlbers, which came in groups and sometimes exploded. You'd probably get some hail with these, and plenty of wind with trees coming down.

The worst were the Rollers. I'd experienced them maybe four or five times that I can remember, and they send you scurrying for the basement because the thunder never stops, it's like a huge freight train roaring along with more freight trains right behind it, and the sky gets *white* in front of the dark bruised sky, an enormous boiling blast of noise and hail and often tornadoes. The air feels weird and full of electricity, and your hairs stick up on your neck and arms and you just *pray* it goes away fast, but as I recall it hangs right over you and keeps on rolling and dumping oceans of rain on you, with lightning.

What I sensed about the storm brewing to the southwest: somebody's in for the Rollers. But it looked like it would stay south of Ogamesh by a good ten miles or more, and miss us.

I rode on to Natalie's place, through the woods. In those last ten minutes or so, I did the best of my planning.

I found her out behind her barn sitting in the grass and writing a letter to me, which she promptly crushed into a ball, saying she could tell me now in person. I said, *it can wait, let's go for a walk*, which we did – along the fenceline of the horse pasture and farther along into the old pecan groves, then out into open hayfields.

Riding over, what I'd struggled with was, *how much can I lie to her?* If I lied just a little, I'd probably get caught in some small mistake. If I totally lied, I might get away with it but I'd lose an ally back here in Ogamesh while I was on the road, and the fact is I needed Nat to

keep her eyes and ears open. But mostly, I determined I couldn't lie at all because of how it would make me feel.

So I swore her to secrecy as best I could, and then spoke to her of the necessity of what I was doing.

"There's a nasty storm to the south of us, and it creates challenges that have to be faced," I told her, feeling momentarily poetic. "Right now, *I am in the middle of a storm of necessity*, and there are no choices but to fight right through it."

I need the car for a couple of weeks, maybe three. There's nothing wrong with the engine.

She was nodding, letting her jaw drop down a bit.

I need to find Jupiter and Tick, warn them they're being hunted, and fetch them back.

She kept nodding, not speaking.

I need to believe they're alive. I could be wrong, but I doubt it.

She was nodding and biting her lip at all these necessities.

I need to create a diversion, so I can get a good long head start on this man Rawlins, who's seriously determined to get to the bottom of things.

The Rollers opened up, far to the south. Some town down there was going to get clobbered – it might have been right near St. Anselm's. While I was staring off at the storm across her hayfields, she blind-sided me and laid a kiss on my cheek.

"Hey Nat, c'mon."

"You are a poser, Mr. Elmont. Can't figure you."

She was tarting up her voice with a phony southern drawl.

"Anyway," she continued, "I wanted to kiss you – before you race off to parts unknown. As if you can tell me where you're going."

"I can't. As they say, the less you know, the less you can blab."

"I'm not a blabber."

"No, but whiskey is, I've seen it firsthand."

Well, she reared back to take a swat at my face but I dodged her just in time. It wasn't going to be much of a slap, but I've never been partial to pain, no matter how slight. Having missed me, she gave me a shove.

"That's unfair."

Well, I bit my lip to consider it, and she might have been right. It was a weakness she had, good old southern bourbon, and I don't like picking too much on other people's failings.

"I apologize," I said. "I mean it."

"If you take my car, you keep my trust."

That seemed fair, but I still clamped down on mentioning my destination. Rawlins could come swooping down on her at any time and she'd have to fess up what she knew. But she couldn't confess what she didn't know.

Still, she pressed me on the details of the trip, in a motherly kind of way. Where to stay? I told her I had some old camping stuff in the basement, including a pup tent with just a couple of holes in it, and some cooking gear. Money? I had two hundred and eighty dollars in a shoe box under my bed, and ten dollars in my wallet. It was all going for the Honda, but the bike would have to wait. Driver's license? I'd have to be very law-abiding and not get stopped. First Aid kit? I didn't have one, so she said she'd throw some stuff together from her house.

She offered me extra money, too, but I declined. I didn't need to be more in her debt.

Man, the Rollers roared away! Just like kettledrums pounding away in an orchestra. St. Anselm's was down there somewhere and Magnolia House, what was left of it.

Anyone who happened to be asleep all weekend got plenty of news in the papers on Monday about the fire and then the storm, with photos of Henry Jones and Tick and Jupiter plastered on the front pages – *one boy dead, two missing*. The pictures seemed to be taken at St. Anselm's, probably when they were signed in, on account of all the faces looking glum and ashamed. The papers said the storm dumped hail and six inches of rain in the area, along with what they thought was a tornado because of the damage, though nobody saw it. I gathered it didn't hit St. Anselm's directly, but close enough to make a mess of things including, as the sheriff was quoted as saying, *stroodling*

the fire rubble around like jackstraws. The rain unleashed a flood of thick Georgia mud that oozed into the basement of Magnolia House and swamped it full.

It makes our job almost impossible, said the fire chief. *Looking for remains.*

I skimmed down a bit till I found the sheriff again saying *if they're alive, they are people of interest and we want to find them.*

Then,

We just don't know.