

HOW DEEP IS BLOOD

by

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A Thesis
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Director: Alan Cheuse, Professor
Department of English

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DEDICATION

For Nada.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As much as a writer creates, he poaches. Thank you for the easy hunting. You know who you are.

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ABSTRACT

HOW DEEP IS BLOOD

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Set along the Ohio River in the mid-1930's, this short novel concerns itself with Clay Bell and his family as they lose their mother, their father, and ultimately the family farm to acts of God and human folly.

CHAPTER ONE

Clay Bell was born in 1925 on a farm on the Ohio River with an older brother named Bill, and that farm had six cows, a mule named General Bucket, and a shepherd mutt they called Rebel that had bitten everyone but Clay's mother, because as his father said, That dog loves your mother and your mother loves that dog.

One night Clay's father sat through supper pulling on his bottle and beating his hand against his leg in time with Jimmie Rodgers on the radio. When Clay's mother stood to pull something off the stove his father cried hallelujah and pinched her ripe behind. She turned on him with a hiss and Clay thought she would've shoved a knife through his chest if she'd had one in hand. After dinner Clay's father washed and put on his best shirt. Clay's mother sat under the lamp by the radio with her Testament on her lap.

John, I will not beg you to stay, she said.

If you begged me, Darling, I don't think I'd know who you were.

Clay's father wore grease in his hair and Clay caught the whiff of Aqua Velva on his neck. His father winked a green eye at his sons where they lay on the floor waiting for Scripture time to be over so they could listen to the radio.

A father's place is beside his boys. You remember what lay behind you, John Bell.

I'm in the mood for plunder, Darling.

A man that plunders loses sight to all that he lays waste.

Just storing up riches, Darling.

Clay's father winked at them again and the spark of his grin and the light of his eyes shot through Clay and it was all he could do to not laugh aloud. His father had told his boys that he had electricity in his fingers. He had felt it all day and there were some things that could not be denied.

Before supper he had pulled them aside.

When the good Lord sends you a sign you must act on it, he told them, or He will certainly revoke His blessings. Now boys, I know that each of you has at least one special quarter. What I'm asking is that you lend that quarter to me for the evening, for the purposes that the Lord has set for this electricity, and I will bring you back each a dollar.

Abundance, father? Clay said.

That is exactly what this tingling in my fingers means. Abundance. We cannot deny the Lord now.

Clay and Bill both knew that their father didn't believe in God. John had been raised in a Catholic orphanage run by Irish brothers who taught him to fight and all the good it'd done is make him turn on them. Nothing but hardscrabble and blarney, is what he said of it. But the boys gave him their quarters, anyway, and he swore them both to secrecy. We look after each other, he said. Brothers always take care of brothers, and don't you worry about your old man.

After their father left their mother said no more about it, opening her Testament and reading aloud from James that true religion looks after widows and orphans, and don't let the world pollute you. Clay found it hard to pay attention. He had hoped for the Book of Jonah because there was a chase and a shipwreck and a sea serpent and international intrigue. Jonah went to the limits of the world, how could anyone not want to read that over and over again? Promising as it was, though, he thought the whole thing broke down near the end, and figured that was why such a great adventure story would find itself stuck in the Bible.

Clay asked Bill to pray for their father when he went out on Saturday nights. When Clay still slept in a crib, Bill had woken in the night and come to his parents in their bed saying that he had heard the Lord call to him. John said, I know what the boy heard, laughed and rolled back over, but Darling held the bedcovers about her, touched her son's arm and cheek and told him to go back to his bed, and if you ever hear it again say to Him, I'm listening. You're always listening William, and I will listen for you. After that Bill was bound for the seminary.

Pray for him, Bill, Clay said. The Lord will hear it from you.

Don't waste your breath, their mother said. If your father wins it eggs him on and if he loses he takes it as a dare. Any prayer other than Thy will be done is a waste of breath.

When their mother finished reading, Bill led them all in the Rosary. Afterwards they listened to the Carter family on the radio.

John Bell returned some time after midnight. Too drunk to fit his key in the lock, he shook the door in its frame. Hollering out, John beat on the house, and by the time he put his hand in his fedora and punched out a window, Rebel had found him. Clay and Bill ran from the bed they shared in the back of the house and spilled out onto the porch. Rebel had clamped on John's arm and dragged him into the yard. Every time John beat his fists against Rebel, the dog bit his wrists. He tried to get behind the dog and grab at his body but Rebel turned and sunk his teeth in his legs. John toppled over and Rebel worried at the side of his head. Clay's father crawled a bloody trail underneath the porch screaming blue murder.

Darling stood at the top of the porch dressed in her nightgown and called to Rebel. The dog growled into the crawlspace where John hid aiming his kicks at Rebel's muzzle.

John, it can't be that bad.

I'm going to kill that dog, Darling!

She looked down at the floorboards of the porch and said, You will harm not one hair on my dog.

That dog bit my ear off!

That is just the Lord taking back what you don't ever use anyway.

I swear to God, Darling, I come out of here I will kill that dog.

Clay's mother beat on the porch with her foot.

Now you listen to me, John Bell. You remember this and don't forget it. At some point in time you will have me cook your meals and you will lay down next to me in sleep. What happens to you after that is totally in your hands.

Clay and Bill stared at the porch floor waiting on their father laying in the dark beneath the house. Rebel grew quiet and their mother crossed her arms and waited. John's boots scraped the ground beneath the porch and then his voice slipped up through the cracks.

I'm bleeding really bad, Darling.

You broke my window.

Rebel ruined my best shirt.

Clay's mother shook her head.

See your father, boys. He drinks and he gambles and what does he bring back for us? Bill, draw some hot water in a pan and get some towels. Clay, go get your father from under the house.

What about Rebel, mother?

Oh, Clay, Rebel's already bit you. What's there to worry about when you already know what the worst of it can be?

Rebel came up on the porch and sat at Darling's side. Clay helped John crawl from under the porch and get to his feet. His father's clothes were torn and his skin was slick with blood and sweat. John put his hat on his head, squaring his shoulders and facing his wife standing above him on the porch.

Darling, you and that dog are something straight out of hell.

John, you married me and bought me this dog.

And what good has it done me?

Two sons and once saved your car from being stolen in the night.

I think you've traded me in for that dog.

If I have then I've come out ahead.

John gave Clay's shoulder a squeeze. Looking up at his father Clay knew that the old ease and comfort had come over the old man. He pushed the hat back on his head and grinned like Clark Gable.

Not tonight you haven't, Darling.

From where I'm standing it looks like I have.

Then get me inside and clean me up and we'll see.

Clay's mother leaned over the railing, her face set against John's smile. She gave him the same look Rebel had given Clay just before the dog had bit him. John Bell, she said, but that's all that came out. She's fighting the old man's charm, Clay said to himself. He watched something pass between their eyes then his mother straightened up and one hand dropped to Rebel's head and pulled on his ear.

Bring your father inside, Clay.

When his mother passed through the door and all he could hear was the crickets and the wind pulling at the leaves on the tree, Clay pulled on his father's hand.

Abundance, father?

His father bent down, grinning. What do you feel in your hands, Clay, my boy? In your gut?

Like mother and Rebel ain't done with you yet.

That's fear, son. Don't let it confuse you.

He looked at his hands. I don't feel nothing, then.

Work on it. You're a Bell, Clay, more so than your brother. It's in your blood.

What about mother?

Oh, it's her turn on the plate, if you know what I mean, and he laid his hands on Clay's shoulders. They were heavy and smelled of lamp oil, molasses and smoke. Clay, let me clue you. There ain't a woman, your mother included, who is immune to abundance.

John sat on a chair in the middle of the room in his underclothes smoking a Fatima. His torn shirt and pants were soaking in the sink and Darling washed his arms and legs where Rebel had broken the skin. The boys stood round the table where their father's wallet rested in a pile of change and they looked from the old man, who sat like a wounded king on his throne, to the wallet that lay in the coil of his belt like the engorged heart of a vanquished enemy. Once Bill asked just how his father had made out, but Darling slapped at him with the wet towel. Clay knew it was all show by how she refused to look his father in the eye or even discuss the wallet. She was careful with John's body, her hands lingering, and wherever she stepped one hand never broke contact. While she dabbed at the blood on his neck John pulled her on his lap for a kiss. She pushed him away saying she'd rather swim in the Mill Creek than taste cheap booze. But lies made her lips curl and every male Bell knew it. Clay stood beside his father like a sunbather, figuring the old man's charm was a talent that one first had to have inside them like a

seed. Proximity and practice would raise it out of him like a tree. Clay's skin felt warm from its own inner fire and he thought that a good sign.

That night he could hear his parents through the walls and whatever they were playing at his father sounded like he was winning.

That old electricity is still with him, Clay said.

His father had come in before turning out the lights and said, I never forget my investors, and handed out one-dollar bills.

Clay and Bill lay in the bed holding their bills above their faces in the dark.

We should tithe these dollars, Bill said, but that idea dissolved into the noise from the other room. Is that mother?

I don't recognize her, Clay said. Maybe she's drinking?

Mother would sooner die than let it touch her lips, Bill said. How much candy do you think we could buy? How many trips to the movies are we talking here?

Clay turned his bill in his hands, feeling the paper with his fingertips.

You're talking beans, he said. He liked the sound of being an investor. Just think what the old man could turn that dollar into if he'd let him. A fella's got to think of the future in this country.

Do you think Rebel'll get sick from biting father? Clay said.

Dumb dog, maybe now that he's bit all of us he'll be over it.

He ain't bit mother.

He loves mother.

Clay was still rubbing his dollar between his fingers in hope of activating what his father said was in his blood. No, that dog ain't so dumb, he thought. He done got a taste of something nice and once that happens what's the sense in giving it up? Clay turned to the wall and listened to what he figured were the sounds of abundance. Ride it like you stole it, his father had told him. That's the way to live.

That summer was lean, but John Bell worked at the railroad during the day and on the farm in the evenings. At night they listened to Roosevelt on the radio tell them not to be afraid. The old man said fear was for people who slow down. Darling Bell went to the doctor and took to holding her Rosary tighter.

Whenever Clay's parents went to town they put Bill in charge, telling him, Take care of your younger brother and don't let anyone in the house. Don't worry, his mother told him. Rebel will do all the work. Bill found a chain in the barn and wrapped one end of it round his hand and rattled the other end against the floor, telling Clay to sit down and stay put if he knew what was good for him. Clay asked if he could play with his toy soldiers and Bill pondered the question with a long, solemn face before saying that he could. He called that his preaching face, the one he would use for dispensations. Clay thought that Bill, for the most part, dispensed very well.

When Clay was ten years old and Bill was thirteen, their parents took the truck to town. They had left cold chicken in the refrigerator for dinner and a pie was cooling on the windowsill. Clay had wanted to listen to the radio but Bill had not decided in Clay's favor. He gave his younger brother a cold chicken sandwich and told him to sit in the

chair and if he thought Clay had earned it he could have a piece of pie. When Clay protested who was Bill to determine who deserved what, Bill dispensed for him a whack on the arm with the chain better than any old nun could ever give.

Holding his arm against his body, Clay said, You might make a fine priest and a better nun, but you're not much of a brother.

Priests and nuns are brothers to no men, Bill said. A man must begin somewhere to be the man he's meant to be.

Clay looked over Bill's shoulder and watched a pair of small hands rise over the sill and take off with the pie. He pointed towards the window.

Are you being a priest or a man when you let someone steal your pie?

Out in the field three kids and four adults with baskets and bags between them were pulling tomatoes off the vine and carrots and potatoes out of the ground. Bill and Clay ran across the yard calling for Rebel. The dog was shut in the barn, hurling itself against the closed door and barking like a motor running on iron nails.

A small boy held the pie tin in one hand and out of the other hand ate a great lump of baked apple and cinnamon. Bill banged the chain against the ground.

What the hell are you folks doing?

Go inside, kid, one of the adults said. He wore a felt hat that had lost its band.

Those are our vegetables.

Go on. Git!

Hey kid, that's our pie, Clay said.

The boy fell back among the other children and they all put their hands in the tin and lifted chunks of pie to their mouths. Their faces and hair had the look of an old broom, and they had eyes like the duck with the crooked beak that had once chased Clay round the yard. That duck was mean as spit and good for nothing but biting and shitting. At first Clay shied back from their looks, watching them force his dessert into their mouths. Then he recalled how he had run from that duck crying out till his father came and kicked it full in the belly.

That's my pie you're stealing!

Clay threw a clod of dirt at the kids and the kids bent down quick and threw clods back. The adults followed suit, the women pulling onions still covered in soil from their baskets and the men hurling potatoes and curses. They rushed forward and Clay and Bill retreated to the edge of the field. The women wiped their hands on their aprons and the men waved the boys off with their arms and returned to filling their bags. The little boy buried his face in what was left of the pie then tossed the tin away.

Clay's father had told him it was just a goddamn duck, can't do nothing but shit, why are you crying, and he remembered that as he tried to keep from tearing up over the pie. He had a feeling in his chest like newspaper burning and he was angry enough to pull his own arms off.

We should get Rebel, Clay said.

Bill gave it his long face.

Rebel will teach them, Bill.

Bill dropped the chain to the ground.

No, he said. I know what we're going to do.

When their baskets and bags were just about full, the adults straightened up and stretched their backs calling to the children where they played in the pen sitting atop the cows. The man with the felt hat took it off his head to wipe the sweat from his brow and that is when he heard the clicks. Turning about, he raised his arms above his head crying, Sweet Jesus in Heaven! Don't shoot!

Against his chest Bill held the stock of the shotgun with both hands, balancing the business end across Clay's shoulders. Head down, covering his ears, Clay couldn't see or hear what was unfolding. The barrel weighed heavy on his back and Bill held it as steady as he could. Clay knew them folks had to be jumping in their pants. He wanted to see that falling-down look on their faces when Bill and him kicked them in their bellies. Especially the face of that crud thief little boy who had eaten his pie, Clay's pie, goddamn it.

When Clay turned his body to see what was happening, the shotgun slid off his shoulders, one barrel firing wide and knocking Bill to the ground. The adults had dropped their baskets and bags and were pulling the children through the rails of the cow pen. Rebel beat against the barn door and someone was crying, Jesus, God in Heaven! Clay watched the man's felt hat roll across the ground. Bill's cursing crashed through Clay's daze and by the time the two of them had the shotgun up between them, the adults and children were spread out across the field sprinting for the line of trees. The sky had fallen a blue curtain against the horizon. One woman, far ahead, lifted her skirts, dirty calves flashing in a pair of men's boots.

By the time John and Darling had returned Bill and Clay had cleaned the shotgun, gathered up and washed the vegetables. Darling held Bill's face in her hands and told him she had expected better of him. John pulled the bottle from the cabinet and said, Should've emptied the other barrel on that failure of a dog. Bill said nothing but Clay said, The sonsofbitches took our pie, and though Darling scolded him, John said, It must've felt good to hold that shotgun. Like Douglas Fairbanks, Clay said.

That night, before turning the radio on, their mother read from the family Bible and said a prayer for those for whom hunger had driven common sense and decency from their hearts and minds. She said hunger is a rage of its own that twists a person into knots that sometimes cannot be undone, and asked the Holy Mother, especially, to preserve her family from such a fate. She led Clay and Bill in a recitation of the Rosary while their father shined his shoes. The rosary fumbled through Clay's fingers and he moved his lips without hearing the words. Save us from the fires of Hell, he said, but in his mind he was still standing on the better side of the shotgun and that seemed a greater source of power to him than any string of beads.

He watched his father stick one hand inside a shoe, hold it up, and with the other hand run a rag with a smudge of polish on it over the leather. Occasionally his father looked up and one at a time held each member of his family in his eyes measuring them with a flat look that grew darker and darker, as the shoes, catching more and more of the light, began to appear like fallen patches of starry night. The old man never prayed, instead he polished his shoes or whittled or read the newspaper, and when the beads were

put away and the radio switched on, he pulled down the bottle of corn liquor and drew out a shot.

That evening, after prayer and before the Carter family or Jimmy Rodgers came on the radio, their father pulled down three glasses and the bottle and called his boys to the table.

John, what are you doing?

You've had your time with them, Darling. Now, I'm having mine.

They are too young for that.

Well, today they have come of age.

He banged the glasses on the table and told Clay and Bill to sit. From under the lamp their mother stared at their father standing at the table with the bottle in his hand. Caught in the net of each other will's cast across the room, over top the heads of their boys, neither shuddered nor blinked, and for several moments the room only darkened at the edges of the lamplight. Then something seemed to be decided between the two of them, their father pulling the plug from the bottle and their mother hefting the Bible from her lap and leaving the room.

Sit down, their father said.

He poured out a little of the liquor in each glass and took a chair himself. The room filled with a thick, cloying odor and Clay looked across at Bill who was watching his father. Earlier in the day, holding that chain, Bill had seemed taller, and taller still pushing the shells into the shotgun, but now the table had risen against him and his thin

arms and slight shoulders could only bow before it. Clay's own feet dangled beneath the chair and he figured it didn't take much to be a little boy, not much at all.

The darkness had passed from their father's face, and what remained was a high firm look. Settled as bricks, Clay thought.

Sit up straight, with your hands on the table, their father said. Shoulders back. That's how a man sits at the table.

He lifted his glass and pointed at the amount of liquor in it.

That's what's called a finger, and he placed his index finger alongside to demonstrate.

At his father's indication, Clay lifted his glass. When all three were up and they were facing one another, their father said, You boys looked after each other. I'm proud of you.

All three of them belted back their drinks, and Bill was the first to cry out, shaking his head. Clay almost coughed it all back up and his eyes exploded in water, his nose running, but if Bill could keep it down so would he. It tastes like General Bucket's hoof, Bill said. Kicks like it too, the old man said. Bill called it a real Hallelujah and Clay wanted to sing but the only song that came to mind was Row, Row, Row Your Boat, but that hardly seemed up to the occasion.

Later in bed, while his parents argued through the wall, Clay watched the shadows play out on the ceiling, and when he heard Rebel's running pant pass the window, a piece of him followed along.

Father's in it, now.

When it comes to the hooch, Father's always in it, Bill said from under the blanket beside Clay.

She's really not happy, though.

The old man understands these things. I don't expect a woman to.

Bill, you figure we should've shared with those people?

They knew what they were doing was wrong. Why the hell you think they tricked Rebel into the barn?

Mother said hungry people are desperate people. Sometimes they can't help themselves.

They could've asked couldn't they? Instead they threw rocks at us? I figure that's when they became sonsofbitches and got what was coming to them.

They were sonsofbitches, weren't they? Especially that kid who took the pie.

Especially him. So was that dude with the hat. Well, he don't have no hat no more.

Still, maybe we should've just put Rebel on them.

Yeah, but you didn't see the looks on their faces.

I tried to.

Yeah, I know you tried to and it almost cost us.

It's just that they were sonsofbitches.

Sonsofbitches don't deserve as much as they think they do. When I become a priest that's going to be one of my sermons.

That's a good one. I think the old man'd go to hear that one.

He might approve, but I don't think he'd even go to hear that one.

Not even from you?

Not even from me. He's been let down. That's what mother says.

Down from what?

It's not like that, Clay. It's that he's been disappointed.

Oh, like Rebel done let us down?

Just like Rebel did to us. But you know how mother still loves Rebel despite all that? Father doesn't have that sort of feeling in him.

Don't mean he don't appreciate the good things, Bill. He knew what a thing it was we did today.

Yeah, you're right there. It did feel good watching them run didn't it? We did that, and that counts for a lot.

Counts for everything, Clay thought. What a person does, what's in their hands, that's what Father said. Bill kicked his feet out from under the blanket and turned his back to Clay. Through the walls the bedsprings squeaked and someone drew water from the kitchen tap. Clay rolled on his side and went over the day and night one more time in his head. Those people had made him feel like nothing, called him as such, but Bill and him had shown them. Tonight he learned how to sit at the table with real men. The old man gave him his first drink, and then broke out the cards and showed him how to play Pitch and how to roll a cigarette. It felt like Christmas. His father smoked the cigarette that Clay had rolled and grinned around it like Clark Gable. He'd done a fine job, his

father had said, and that was good enough. Clay guessed Bill was right. A fella's got to start somewhere being the man he's meant to be.

Clay fell asleep and through the night he heard the ragged pant and hot cough of Rebel chasing something for hours in the dark, and in the morning Clay wondered if it had been a real or distant thing, that question that had gnawed at Rebel and wouldn't give him peace.

CHAPTER TWO

In the fall Darling Bell went to the hospital without a pain in her and came back with a great piece of her womanhood cut from her body. Grandma Florence came to live with them, bringing a suitcase and a rocking chair, and took residence in the boy's room. The boy's moved into the pantry and Clay set his toy soldiers up on the shelf with the canned beans and tomatoes. Rebel held the yard.

Clay noticed that his father was afraid to touch Mother and each night during the Rosary his face grew darker and the bottle came out sooner, until it was on the table most every night before supper. Darling never said a word, but once, after the table had been cleared and the rosaries were in their hands, John, still seated at the table behind his bottle made a noise like Rebel's bark. Darling responded quick and sharp, a spear cast across the room, You call on yours and I'll call on mine and we'll see who benefits what in the end. Clay could see that it had cost her much, but why and how he could not understand. He also saw that his father noticed it as well. The old man draws into himself, Clay thought, like a man taking a punch he can't answer.

Grandma Florence said very little, rocking in her chair and smoking from a corncob pipe she had fashioned herself. Once, though, while Clay was in the barn, playing in the hay, he overheard Grandma Florence tell Father that he had been given a

man's piece and needed to take it on as a man. After that, he quit drinking and going out on Saturday nights.

Clay knew that something had changed. Once he had seen through the sleeve of his mother's dress a long, red scar down her side, and another time in the morning while Grandma Florence helped Mother dress, he glimpsed through the crack in the door and in the bedroom mirror the full of it, how she bore a wound in the front of her like an angel's amputated wing. He could not speak of what he saw but spent the rest of the day in the barn, sitting atop General Bucket, feeling as if he had swallowed something too large for his body.

Bill took to reading during Scripture time as well as leading the Rosary, and even John, from the table, joined in quietly under his breath, counting off with his fingers. Darling said, William, I do love the sound of your voice. William, you will make a fine priest. Bill told Clay that if Mother chose to call him William it was hers to do as she had named him after all, but to Clay he was Bill and he'd best not forget it. Clay said, Don't you worry, Father William is something I will never call you.

After Rosary Clay sat at the table with his father and learned to play two-handed Pitch. Bill said he had no taste for it, but for Clay, sitting at the table beside the old man made him aware of the hair on his arms. His father kept a tight hand, arranging his cards in a busy manner. He told Clay that it keeps the sharks from guessing how he arranges his suits and how much trump he has. When Clay wavered over his bid, John would watch him through his cigarette smoke then say across the table, No guts, no glory, but in a soft manner that told Clay his old man comprehended his hesitation, understood that it was

something a man had to learn his own path through, and did not fault him for it. For Clay it was like having his father's hand on his shoulder. The cards on the old wood table, the ashtray and the hand-rolled cigarettes, and the old man seated like nobility amongst it all.

Grandma Florence kept a pistol in her apron and that November she shot a coyote that stood at the edge of the field. Clay and Bill were cleaning out the barn when they heard Rebel's bark. His hackles were up and he was padding slowly across the field to meet the coyote when Grandma Florence shot it in the flank. The coyote squealed and took off into the trees. Rebel would've pursued if she hadn't called him back. Clay raised his pitchfork and looked to Bill then back at Grandma Florence.

How long you had that in your apron? Clay said.

Long enough to still be here.

Rebel could of taken him, Bill said.

Coyotes lure a dog out until the whole pack gets him. Rebel's family.

That's not what Father'd say.

Boys and dogs are brothers, Grandma Florence said.

Rebel's a sonofabitch, Clay said.

All older brothers are sonsofbitches.

Clay looked across at Bill and said, Thank God I ain't an older brother.

Snow fell after Thanksgiving and in December when the river froze Clay and Bill spent most of their time in skates. Christmas Eve, John carried a saw across the field to the line of trees, and Clay and Bill chose a small fir that they proceeded to cut down and drag back to the house. Rebel bounded through the snow like a fish jumping waves and

even their father had to laugh. Grandma Florence and Mother made popcorn and threaded it into long strands. The boys unpacked the wood and glass ornaments from the cellar and hung them on the tree and laced the limbs with the strands of popcorn. Clay and Bill argued, then they drew high card for it, and John lifted Clay in his arms so he could top the tree with the angel. Christmas carols played on the radio and everyone drank homemade eggnog and the room filled with smoke from Grandma Florence's pipe. Clay said, Father are you going to special-up your nog? but John didn't respond and Darling said, Clay, why don't you roll your father a cigarette.

Before bed Bill and Clay stepped out and watched the splash of stars across the night sky. Their clothes smelled of smoke and they belched eggnog, but the cold air hit their faces and they felt giddy, like a high current running through them from their hearts to their fingers, making Clay want to flap his arms and laugh. He made snowballs and pitched them across the yard, Rebel chasing after, crunching through the snow and snapping. Bill showed Clay the constellations, the Big Dipper, Orion's Belt, the Dog Star and told him that when great people died they put them up in the sky so's never to be forgotten.

Just who was this Orion? Clay said.

Hell, I don't know, Bill said. But his dog must've been something special because he's up there, too.

They watched their breath together, staring into the black like standing on the edge of time.

After the New Year, Darling grew weaker and John took her to the hospital where she stayed for a period. He told the boys their mother was having her tonsils taken out. Grandma Florence cooked their meals and the four of them ate at the table in silence. Bill told Clay, I think Father wishes Grandma Florence'd sleep in the barn with Rebel. Clay said, Maybe we should tell him about the pistol she keeps in her apron. I figure he knows, Bill said, that's what's keeping her in the house.

Clay watched his father come home from the railroad and spend his evenings in the barn with the cows and General Bucket. Rebel and him kept a vigil that Clay could not fathom, but he had played enough Pitch with his father to tell that the old man was holding his hand close to his chest. His father moved from one project to the next the same way he shifts his cards. Bill said it was because he had quit drinking and now he needed to keep the Devil out of his hands. Clay told him, You've said too many Rosaries.

Clay believed his father was guarding his trump. He had a big hand to play and very little on his side and he was holding to it like a man, and Bill would never understand that, not being as much a Bell as Clay and his father.

Darling came home in February, slower and thinner, and Rebel whined in the yard and lowered his head at her approach and leaned against her leg. She sat in her chair during the day and in the evening asked Bill to say the Rosary. Grandma Florence rocked, and Bill's and Clay's voices droned and John's fingers tapped on the tabletop first one finger, then two, and so on as the decade progressed. Darling shut her eyes and dropped her beads in her lap. A few Hail Mary's later when Bill stuttered, Clay looked up

and their father drew his chair back and stood at the table. Darling face was an ocean in repose, and after a moment she opened her eyes.

What's wrong, William?

You looked like a person headed somewhere. I saw the light shine through you.

That's just the light you see in yourself, William. I'm still here.

Bill turned back to the Rosary but had lost the count.

I didn't see nothing, Clay said. Flat and gray like old drawer liner.

John put on his coat and headed for the barn. Grandma Florence never stopped rocking.

An early thaw came that Spring and Darling wrapped a blanket round her and spent her days sitting in a chair beneath a tree. Rebel laid his head in her lap and growled at everyone's approach. Darling gained a little weight and color back but soon enough her appetite disappeared and she ate almost nothing. Still, Grandma Florence fixed her a plate every day and every day argued with Bill, as the eldest, to bring it to her. Bill did not care to face Rebel, and Clay said that he would do it as he figured he owed Bill one for the sonsofbitches last summer.

John had told Clay while playing cards that a man had to be ready to call a sonofabitch's bluff.

What if you're wrong? Clay said, rolling a cigarette and passing it over.

Now's not the time to be timid, John said, striking a match. You can always regret it later, if you're of the type.

Clay figured there was no bigger sonofabitch than Rebel.

Rebel growled at Clay as he approached. When he got close enough, Clay held the plate away from Rebel and stuck his free forearm under the dog's nose. Rebel stiffened. Leaning forward, Rebel sniffed the arm then gave Clay what his mother called a dog's look, which seemed to mean any time Rebel looked at a person with a will to say something profound.

Grandma Florence wants you to eat, Clay said to his mother.

Put the plate on my lap. Why does your brother look like the General kicked him?

It wasn't the General. It was Grandma Florence.

She does have all the manner and tact of a mule.

Bill's not really scared of her. He just doesn't want to upset you by fighting with Rebel.

And you do?

Rebel's all bluff.

Darling reached out and took hold of Clay's hand.

William will be leaving for the seminary soon, she said. What about you?

I'm not going to the seminary. I'd rather roll cigarettes and play cards.

You think they don't do that in the seminary?

I'm sure they do, but there's other things I'd like a taste of that I figure they don't approve of.

You think your father's the heads side of a coin. Is that what makes a hero?

The old man has charm.

He does at that, Darling said.

His mother ran her fingers down his cheek and her eyes became soft and deep. Clay wanted to pull away but instead said, You sit around like someone waiting on something.

I'm getting ready, Clay.

Don't you think you should eat then?

Darling dropped her hand down to Rebel's head, tugged at his ear and looked off across the field.

Sitting in pain doesn't make sense, Clay said.

Someone must think it's necessary, she said, lifting the plate from her lap and handing it back to Clay. Take this away.

Clay carried the plate back into the house and set it on the sideboard. Bill stood at the window and Grandma Florence filled her pipe, rocking. Clay pulled the fork off the plate and threw it in the sink and turned.

Why do you send us out there when you know she won't eat?

Because it's necessary, Grandma Florence said.

That's what she said. I don't see much what necessary has to do with it.

Then you're right where you're supposed to be.

She lit the pipe with a match and puffed a blue cloud. Clay looked to Bill but his brother shook his head. They'd once cooked gunpowder on the stove and when some of it blew in the pan, filling the kitchen with black smoke, Grandma Florence had never risen from her chair, but only ceased rocking till they called out that they were okay. She said as much as she chose to and Clay knew there wasn't much use in asking for more.

That evening Clay stole one of his father's cigarettes and smoked it behind the barn. When Bill and Rebel came round the corner and caught him, Clay said, I got no use for sonsofbitches.

Find me a sonofabitch and I'll ask him if he cares.

I don't like it round here. Everybody's acting like they're passing shovels but no one wants to be the first person to start digging.

Bill sat down on the woodpile next to Clay.

I've took to asking for help, he said. I don't know why.

How's that working for you?

How's not asking working for you?

About as good as anything else, far as I can see.

Now you sound like Father.

Hardly, or haven't you been watching him say the Rosary every night?

Bill shook his head.

Just because I don't play cards with you and him doesn't mean I can't see when someone's bluffing. He moves his lips like a man keeping his side of a bargain, waiting on the other guy to deliver. I don't know what's coming, Clay. But I figure there's a better way to greet it than being angry.

What are you leaving me with when you head off for the seminary?

Bill stood and kicked his shoes against the woodpile, said, I don't know much, and walked off.

Clay felt sick and dizzy from the cigarette but figured that was a man's bit, the part he's to get over. Seemed like there would be more and more of that. After Bill left Rebel continued to watch him. General Bucket hawed in the barn, shaking his ears and the cows shuffled in their stalls. A vague restlessness gnawed at Clay and he wanted to play cards. He wanted to slap down some trump and take the hand, throw back a glass and refill it. He couldn't remember the last time his father had brought down the bottle and wondered if he kept any more corn liquor around the house. Clay missed the taste of Christmas.

With the spring rain Bill caught pneumonia and Clay moved into his old bed with Grandma Florence. She wore flannel to bed like a lumberjack and didn't care for how Clay squirmed in the night, and he slept as far to one side as he could, afraid her gown would scratch the flesh off him. He told Bill that Grandma Florence didn't smoke in bed the way they thought, but she smells like a goat and snores like a bear, and it surprised him that anyone in the house got any sleep at all. And one morning he rolled over and she was laying mouth open on the pillow and her breath was bad enough to melt nails.

John dragged the radio into the pantry, setting it close enough for Bill to turn it on and off.

Grandma Florence said, Your mother has a tree to sit under and contemplate her days, you can have the radio.

Bill thought that meant he was going to die. He told Clay he could have his pocketknife and his baseball cards but to bury him with his rosary.

Aren't you going to ask forgiveness for all those times you hit me with that chain, Bill?

I have.

Not to me you haven't?

I talked to the only one who matters.

Well, it seems to me that if you ain't going to ask it of the person you done it to, then you ain't been reading close enough of the family Bible.

The problem with you, Clay, is the only power out there you believe in is taller people.

You're damn right, and when I can whip taller people I won't believe in them either.

Clay did not believe that Bill was going to die, but he admired his grit. For a fella who thought his end had come, the worst he did was shiver. He did not whine and beg like villains on the radio, and Clay figured that counted for a great deal.

Darling moved a chair into the pantry doorway and sat and watched Bill sleep. She seemed to take strength from attending to Bill, and Clay wondered how he might go about getting sick after Bill recovered to keep her spirits up.

One morning Bill stood in the kitchen and said that they could take the radio back, that he had listened to enough serial Westerns and the news from Europe, and all that he wanted now was to go outside. He was fine, though, to have the sleeping arrangements stay the way they were. He never knew just how nice sleep could be with Clay not kicking him all through the night. John slapped the table with his hand and Darling

hugged Bill and even Grandma Florence laughed once around her pipe. Clay didn't wait to move his things back into the pantry.

Throughout Lent, John and Darling talked of Bill entering seminary school after the summer. With Bill able to eat again at the table they spoke of it again.

Last harvest for you, John said. No more cows and cow patties.

I sure won't miss that, Bill said.

Go ahead and leave me with all the work, Clay said.

Bill will have grander harvests, Darling said. The type you don't care for, Clay.

Grandma Florence said, No sense in spending money you don't have yet.

That's because you aren't a Bell, Florence, John said, winking at Clay and Bill. No heart to gamble on other people's dimes. You'd think it a sin to look forward to the future.

Just before Easter, Darling Bell passed away while drinking a glass of water. John and Bill had taken the truck into town and Grandma Florence was napping in her room. Darling had been cutting bread in the kitchen and drew from the faucet. Clay sat at the table rolling cigarettes for his father, holding one in his mouth and saying, Look mother, James Cagney. She said, I admit, I do like the smell of tobacco, before falling to the floor. Rebel, in the yard, bayed and bayed as if the heart had been torn out of him.

John Bell acted like he finally knew the other man's hand. He attended the funeral mass wearing a black suit and he occupied the front pew with his boys on either side of him. He entered church with a hat on his head and left with it on and during communion refused to move from his pew, and only Bill stood to receive at the communion rail. He

was closest to the aisle and Clay didn't bother to ask his father to let him by. Clay did not understand the necessity of his mother lying in a puddle of water on the kitchen floor, and he began to wonder the need for a thin slip of bread. His mother had been cutting bread.

Family and neighbors came round the house and set up the sawhorses and the tables and filled them with food. They loaded the refrigerator with roast chicken and cold cuts and when John Bell and his sons returned from the cemetery the house felt like Christmas morning. Bill's and Clay's palms were dirty from when they had thrown down a handful of sod on their mother's casket, and Bill told Clay not to wash off his hands, We won't play Pilate with our mother. We've buried her and best we feel it and get through. Clay had no intention now or ever again to use water from the same tap that had finished off his mother. Clay sat under the tree with his shirt pulled out, the chair turned toward the cow pen and the barn where General Bucket stood in the doorway. When family members offered him anything to eat or drink he turned them down. He felt broken at the shoulders and wished the earth to swallow him whole.

John came up behind him and put his hand on his shoulder.

You can let this break you or make you, Clay.

Clay shook his head, trying to fight back the tears.

Son, it's best to play a bad hand like you're holding nothing but trump.

I feel kicked in the guts, Father.

Well, I understand you there.

Where's abundance in this?

Your mother would've said it was all of a piece.

I don't know what that means.

John scratched his head and said, I don't know either, Clay. Your mother had more faith in sonsofbitches than I do. I figure we make our own abundance, and it comes easier when you feel your luck running.

I don't feel lucky.

That's when you outbluff the sonsofbitches.

Clay watched his father the rest of the day talk with relatives and neighbors. He shook hands and laughed loud, and moved from room to room, and showed the barn off to cousins from Cincinnati. When no one was near and John seemed to sag, Clay saw how he took a deep breath and thrust his chin out and pushed himself in another direction. Throughout the day, Clay threw back his shoulders and stretched his neck taller, and found that it allowed the empty feeling inside him to slide down and away.

When the last neighbors and family had left, Grandma Florence packed a pipe and rocked. John sat at the table with Bill and Clay a long time without speaking. The rocker cricked against the floor. John's hands on the tabletop were short-fingered and knobby. Clay looked at the dirt still on his own hands. After a while John went to the cupboard and pulled down the bottle of corn liquor and three glasses and poured out a finger in each.

He held his own glass and pushed the other two forward.

Bill pulled his shoulders back and placed his hands on the table.

I made Mother a promise, he said.

Clay looked from his father to Bill. John's eyes seemed to go a little blind. Clay didn't think the dead had a right to expectations. Clay took up his glass, raised it and stretched his neck. John and Clay drank and John finished off Bill's glass.

Grandma Florence turned on the radio. John washed the glasses out and put the bottle away, walked into his room and closed the door behind him. Clay looked to his older brother and when Bill looked back he turned away. He felt a stab of guilt when he saw Darling's chair shoved under the table, but then what's the use when it's nothing now but an empty chair?

That night Bill moved the family Bible into the pantry, setting it on the shelf next to the beans his mother had canned the summer before. He said his Rosary lying in bed. The beads were wrapped round his hands the same as they had been wrapped round Darling's.

Clay listened to Bill whisper his prayers and felt the grit still on his fingers. He squeezed them again and again and wondered, Where does it all go when the tips of your fingers go numb? He felt inside like a broken bank, but the taste of the liquor was still in his mouth and that seemed a good enough deposit as any. Good enough for a bad hand. Good enough for waiting.

The house settled and stars shone through the clear night. Clay listened for the sound of Rebel running past the window, but the dog had not been seen for a few days. Grandma Florence said it was no surprise to her. When a dog's ready it goes off. Only a dog would die over a broken heart.

CHAPTER THREE

The first warm evening of the year Clay won a pitch tournament at the church. Father Mike told John that the card table was hardly the place for a boy, but John told him you got one of my sons; I'll thank you to leave the other one be. The priest conceded but said he'd throw them both out if he caught Clay drinking or smoking. Clay told himself patience was the best trump of all and that the first smoke after would be sweetest. John fell out after the first round and drank beer from the sidelines. Clay had a lucky Indian head nickel he rubbed smooth with his fingers. Halfway through the tournament he dropped it in the poor box beneath the statue of the Holy Mother and touched her plaster toe. It never hurts to hedge your bets.

Mitchell Phelps made a deal of it. He was a redheaded Methodist with too many teeth in his head and for a long time after Clay always thought of Methodists as the people in most need of a good dentist. The pride of Rome, you are! Phelps said. Thank God my kids are growing up Methodist. The closest the Phelps family came to any Christian service was bingo night at St. Rose's Catholic Church. When the evening started off with Father Mike leading the Lord's Prayer Mitchell Phelps made a point of not bowing his head, because as he said, he called no man father and wouldn't hear a prayer from any man who expected otherwise. What's wrong, Phelps, afraid he'll turn out to be your old man and you'll have to convert? John called out. When Clay took the last

trick of the evening Mitchell Phelps started griping even before final game was tallied. But it was a room full of Catholics, and as much as they hated losing to an eleven-year old, they hated even more losing to a loudmouth Methodist storekeeper known for selling cheap nails and wormy seed. Father Mike paid up but not without telling Clay, Don't lose what part of your mother is left in you, son.

In the lot behind the church under the flood marks, Clay smoked and watched the river flow. Lights winked on the Kentucky side like fireflies. They carried his heart across the water. Last Fourth of July the whole family had come right here to watch the fireworks shoot off over the water. The sky had bloomed like a field of neon flowers. Bill blew on a harmonica and showed Clay how to play the Star-Spangled Banner. John did his bacon, beans and limousines impersonation of Will Rogers then he and Darling took to dancing. That was long ago, though, and now the sky was starless, sheltering a vast nothing. And Clay had a pocketful of money. A man with winnings needs nothing. John found him and gave him a sip from his flask, saying, You need to treat yourself to more than a Fatima.

The next day they went into Cincinnati. With Clay's winnings they bought a brand-new cap that looked like several different pieces of cloth sewn together. Clay liked its style. A little bit here, a little bit there, all of it makes a whole, he said. The cap was a little big on him but John said, This way you can grow into it. Clay liked to wear it in front of the mirror. When he pushed it back on his head it made his face look young and open. Askew was a better look, it cast his face in shadow. What money was left over Clay slipped in an envelope and put underneath his mattress.

That June Bill went on mission to Adams County. He packed his bag in the pantry and set it by the door. The evening before he left, Grandma Florence fried pork chops in a pan with potatoes and onions and they ate corn on the cob rolled over a stick of butter. She reminded Bill they had family out near Blue Creek and how they were related. John wore a clean white shirt tucked into his pants and had combed his hair. He sat at table with his hands hanging at his sides as though they had dropped a baby from a bridge.

You can't say I didn't hold up my end, John said.

Grandma Florence stabbed the pork chops onto everyone's plate and scooped the potatoes and onions after. John's words were drowned in a rustle of napkins and utensils.

The only running water they got out there is the river, Clay said.

I'm sure they got faucets as much as they got wells, Bill said.

Well, flush the toilet a few times before you leave, it'll be the last time you hear the sound of it till August.

I ain't so big I can't use an outhouse.

That's good, because you'll be doing all your business outside. Take along these corncobs; you're going to need them.

I kept my promise to your mother, no one can say I didn't do that, John said.

Say goodbye to the Powell Crosley. You can't pick nothing up because of the mountains.

I'm sure there are crystal radios out there. I'll be listening to the same Reds games as you. Might even pick up a few others you can't.

No one cares about Pittsburgh.

Grandma Florence said, Don't come back married.

I held up my end, John said. I did what I said I'd do.

Bill and Clay gnawed on their corncobs and Grandma Florence laid a knife to her pork chop and trimmed the fat. John blinked and then fixed the napkin inside his shirt and smoothed it out. He speared potatoes with a fork and looked at it for a moment then put it in his mouth. Then he ate as the rest of them, and after, they listened to the radio, and John shined his shoes at the table. When his shoes were polished and rested on newspaper on the floor, John smoked a cigarette and once sat on his hands. It was the first night since Darling had died that he didn't drink and there was sweat on his forehead and his cheeks were flushed. He watched his boys all evening and once stood up, but then sat down and smoked another cigarette.

In bed, Clay pulled his shirt up over his belly and watched the ceiling. Bill said the rosary. When he was done and had kissed the crucifix and bunched the beads on the shelf and turned out the light, Clay closed his eyes a long time waiting on Bill to settle on the mattress.

I don't think I'll be able to get to sleep without hearing you say your prayers, Clay said.

You could always say a few for yourself.

Clay rubbed his belly then pulled the shirt down.

You should go away more often, we never eat so good.

Food helps a body accept the inevitable. That's why we ate like kings after mother passed.

Clay didn't care if he ever ate again, then.

He lay very still listening to the sound of Bill's breathing. He waited for him to move or to say something. And then he couldn't hear him at all and thought that Bill had fallen asleep. Clay heard the creak of floorboards and then someone in the kitchen opened a cabinet. He listened to that for a long time and then there was all of the night and fields outside the house laid up around them. Trains, and beyond, the river, and after that the blue hills and forests. Bill rolled his face to the wall and Clay gave up and closed his eyes.

He told himself that when the morning came he would see Bill off, but when the birds woke him and he heard Bill dressing, Clay pretended to be asleep until a horn honked in the drive, and then he jumped to the window. Grandma Florence walked Bill out to a car. Father Mike climbed out and tipped his hat to Grandma Florence and lifted Bill's suitcase into the trunk. Bill faced Grandma Florence and she put her chicken-foot fingers on either side of his face the way a bird holds to a twig it intended for lining its nest. She bent forward and kissed Bill's forehead and Clay thought such an act would've killed her but she stood erect and stepped back, holding her arms across her chest. The car threw up gravel as it pulled out on the road, passing alongside the green new field of cornstalks, and when Clay checked he saw that the rosary was gone and only canned beans were left on the pantry shelf. The house had become suddenly very empty and Clay felt very afraid and he wanted to speak out to it so he could face it and dispel it and not be alone before it. He sat on the mattress soaked in bright sunlight and when Grandma Florence entered the house he reached for his new hat and pulled it down over his head.

In the June afternoons when Grandma Florence was resting and John was still at the railroad, Clay joined some of the public school boys gathered in the woods down by the river. He smoked cigarettes and cut the cards and took to rolling his sleeves up to his elbows so no one suspected him of packing aces. One of the Phelps boys brought a bottle of home brew and passed it amongst them, but John had told Clay that the better card players save it till after so they avoid making bad decisions, or become emotional and get drawn into fights that end a game before it's won. When Clay pulled in the big pot he'd say, Now I'm ready for a kiss off that thing.

The older boys generally had more to lose, whether that meant money or things. Cigarettes and shotgun shells were the usual fare, occasionally a baseball card or ring, but one time the Phelps boys had come down to the last of their money and they dropped a knife with a carved-wood handle in the pot.

Peter Phelps had cut wedges from an apple with it all afternoon. Phelps was a redhead like his father. All the Phelps kids were redheads with faces full of freckles. It was as if someone had lined them all up and shot them in the face with a freckle gun. Every summer the Phelps kids burned and had to stand in the shade wearing cream on their skin. Because of their red hair and the white cream the kids called them Cherry Danish.

Clay figured that knife would fit his hand perfectly and asked to hold it for a moment. He would look good with a knife like that. A guy with a knife like that wouldn't go by just any name, but would have to be called something special. You call a guy with

a knife like that Hollywood. No one would call a carrot top like Peter Phelps Hollywood.

A carrot top like Peter Phelps would be lucky to be called for dinner.

Peter Phelps said, I don't let potlickers touch my things.

What do you want for it? Clay said.

It ain't for sale.

What would you trade for it?

There ain't nothing a potlicker has that I would want. This knife came off a German officer in the Great War.

Who told you that?

My father. He took it off a German officer in the Argonne Forest who was playing dead. The old man could tell he was trying to bluff him and when the Hun made to cut him, my father wrestled it out of his hands and took him captive. No one can bluff an old shark like my father.

Sounds more like the German was dead and your father robbed the body. You go to hell for picking over the dead.

It's called spoils of war. My father pulled in a prisoner and anything that belonged to that prisoner is the rightful property of the man that brought him in. That German cried like a baby when my old man took this knife off of him. He said it'd been in his family for years and he was ashamed to have lost it to an American.

Is there lettering on that blade?

Course there is. Says Sheffield.

That sounds American to me. What would a German be doing with an American knife?

He could have a knife with American on it.

Sure, but no Hun officer's going to have an American knife for an heirloom. Hell, that's just an old penny knife, Clay said. That didn't come off no German.

Are you calling my father a liar?

When was your old man born?

What's that got to do with it?

When was he born?

1903.

I thought so, Clay said.

Clay dealt out the next hand and Peter Phelps sat across from him letting the cards pile up in front of him. The other boys gathered up their cards, happy now that the game had started up. After a moment Peter Phelps' face flushed and he stood up, raising his fists.

Stand up, you little sonofabitch!

Clay ignored him and sorted his cards. He said, I'm just asking questions. There ain't no need to get sore at me.

You got something to say, you little sonofabitch, say it.

There ain't nothing to say. You said your old man got that knife in the war and I asked you when he was born. You playing cards or what?

You're getting at something so get at it.

You playing or what?

You got something to say, say it.

Pick up your cards and play.

Stand up, you motherless sonofabitch!

The other boys dropped their hands and watched. Peter Phelps' younger brother Michael reached back behind him. Clay slowly looked up from his cards and over at Peter and then Michael. He pulled one card out and shifted it to the other side of his hand.

Is that how you Phelps do it? Gang up on a guy? How about showing us if you're as big a shark as your old man? We play for all of it. No one goes home till the other's flat busted.

Peter Phelps' nostrils flared then he seemed to notice the other boys looking at him. His eyes moved in his head. The other boys waited and one of them said, What's it going to be Phelps?

Come one, Phelps, put up or shut up.

Scared Phelps? All talk, hunh?

Maybe he just plays cards as bad as his old man plays Pitch, Clay said.

All right, all right. Somebody deal. Just you and me, and I'm going to send you home without your pants.

The other boys threw in their cards and Michael Phelps brought his hands in front of him. One of the other boys shuffled and Peter Phelps cut. Clay gathered his hand and rested back. He could read it all in the way Peter Phelps held his cards. A good hand, a bad hand, the bluff, the ploy. The carrot top had a face like hot glass and his cards danced

on it like bugs. Peter Phelps bid small but he raised high and fast. John Bell had told Clay a hothead just can't help himself. He wants to win big and swift so he plays like a puppy learning to walk.

Clay gave away the first few hands and then the cards dropped his way and the pile in front of him began to grow. A few hands later and Peter Phelps lost the bottle of home brew. Clay told Peter that's too bad, and passed the bottle amongst the other boys. A pile of nickels and dimes and a pack of Fatima cigarettes sat in front of Clay. Peter had run through his money and his brother's and all that was left were a few pennies, a rabbit's foot, and the knife.

Clay lit one of the cigarettes.

What kind of luck does a sorry-looking foot like that promise? I think it might be broken.

You made your point, Peter Phelps said.

You said you'd send me home without my pants.

I'm flat busted.

No you're not.

Well, I'm done, Peter Phelps said.

Then you're a welcher, the dealer said. A welcher and a coward.

What the hell are you getting at? There ain't nothing left, Phelps said.

Flat busted means flat busted, one of the boys said.

You going to make me play it all? Peter Phelps said.

You can't call it now just because things ain't going your way, Phelps.

We expect you to see a thing through.

Peter Phelps looked round him at the flat faces of the other boys. Each of them looked him in the eye and he started to say something and gave up. His brother wouldn't look at him, just picked at his nails. Clay blew smoke and grinned round the cigarette. He pushed everything in.

Come on, Phelps. For all you know, you might shoot the moon.

You're still a motherless sonofabitch, Peter Phelps said.

He threw all he had left on the pot, the knife sitting on top. The cards went round. They looked at their hands and made their discards. The dealer made another pass. Clay felt like he was standing on the edge of the world. There are only a handful of people left, he told himself, and they are gathered right here. I could go home with everything or nothing and still I'd be the richest man there ever was. Because it's not about things. It's about this right here, having the will and power to risk everything.

Clay didn't look at his cards, just laid them over so all could see. Peter Phelps eyes turned to sour milk and he folded his hand and tossed it away. Clay pulled the knife off the top of the pile and held it in his hand. There was a little left in the bottle of home brew and he put it to his lips and drank.

We can play for your pants, now, he said.

Peter Phelps eyes swelled up and Michael Phelps looked like he found something in his hand.

You little sonofabitch!

Clay made a sound with his mouth and the bottle and said, At least my father's not a liar, Danish.

When Peter Phelps lunged at him Clay bounced the bottle off his head and rolled backwards. Michael leaped up and Clay ran for the trees. Crashing through the branches something cut his cheek. The ground dropped down and he found himself running along the river's edge. He gripped the knife in his hand and darted along, feet splashing through the water. The road was high up at the top of an embankment. He slipped in mud and fell on his face. Someone thrashed through the undergrowth behind him. Clay pulled himself up the embankment by an exposed root. He tried to climb higher but Peter Phelps jumped up, grabbed his foot and pulled him down. Clay swung out and caught Peter on the chin. Michael rushed up and both Phelps boys were on top of Clay beating and kicking him. Clay fumbled with the knife blade but dropped it, and he curled up, covering his face. One of the Phelps boys wore thick boots with fresh treads that kicked dents in his body.

They ripped his clothes and tried to de-pants him and Peter Phelps called him a motherless sonofabitch and a dirty potlicker and threatened to cut him. He took the knife and stabbed holes in Clay's new hat and tossed it in the river. They pulled the shoes off his feet and threw them far, trying to skip them across the water like they were flat stones.

They laughed at Clay and called his mother names, their voices bouncing between the trees. He lay a long time with his face pressed in the mud till he couldn't hear them anymore, and then there was only the water lapping at the banks and a knocking coming from the Kentucky side of the river and he felt that the blue sky was stretching far and

wide over him and there was no sense in not looking at it. A family of ducks paddled in the waters below him. They had funny plump bodies and their feet pedaled underneath them. A motor droned and far out the barges sat low in the river where he could see the current rush by. Branches floating in the current outpaced the barges. The mud was cool on his cheeks and his sides hurt. He'd cut his lip on his teeth and the side of his face was starting to puff up.

He pulled his socks off and wet them in the river and washed his face and wiped his nose. He picked mud from the buttons on his shirt. Making his way slowly back up to the road he stopped at the camp. The bottle lay in the undergrowth but everything else was gone. He didn't care about that. He pitched, and whether he won or lost, he had held the world in his hand. He was sorry to have lost the knife, though. He should've tossed the knife in the river. He should've shoved it in Peter Phelps' belly and thrown him in the river. But he should've sunk the knife; that would've made everything worthwhile.

The farm was a few miles away and when the pavement became too hot or hard for walking he stepped in the grass. Clay told himself it was okay; anyone can come back from this. If he couldn't come back from this he wasn't an American. He kept his chin up and smoothed his hair and when cars passed by he waved because only beaten people hide their faces, they don't wave like it's a Sunday morning.

Clay met Grandma Florence not far from the house. She walked across the field and met him halfway. He tried to look her in the eye but couldn't and hung his head. She made a clicking noise in the back of her throat. Like a cobra, he thought, trying to mesmerize me before she strikes.

Where's your shoes?

They're in the river.

And your hat?

In the river, as well.

Good, you looked like a caddy in that hat. How's your face?

Hurts.

How's your pride?

Nothing wrong with my pride.

Clay stared at her apron, where it sagged in the middle. With her hands Grandma Florence shaded her eyes.

Are you going to tell me what happened?

No ma'am.

If nothing worth talking about happened then quit looking like someone stole your Christmas.

My feet hurt is all.

You look like you're bound to cry.

Well, I'm not gonna.

You'd just rather mope?

I got nothing to be pitied about.

Don't worry, Grandma Florence said. No one pities you.

Clay put his face in his hands.

Aren't you even going to ask me who did it?

She stood like a tent spike driven into the ground. She measured the question like she was judging the value of a purchase.

Who did it?

Peter and Michael Phelps, because their father is a liar.

Is that what you told them?

Well, he is.

Of course he is. Everyone knows that, except maybe his children. How do you think they feel, hearing about it from you?

They called me motherless.

You're only motherless when you toss your dignity away.

Grandma Florence turned and walked back to the house. Clay lay down in the field and covered his face with his arm. He'd rather live out here in the field. It was an old house and he didn't want to sleep under its roof any longer. The place was cold in the winter and shook during storms. He was surprised it didn't fall in on top of them when they slept. Should be burned to the ground and the land sown with salt. What kind of man calls himself a man yet still settles for a dump like that?

He fell asleep and when he woke it was dark and he was stiff. The heat had broken and the cool of the evening blown in. His head held a hum that if he listened long enough he thought he might here a voice calling to him. The early stars were just visible and Clay didn't like being alone in the field underneath them. He got to his feet and hobbled into the house.

A plate of food sat on the table with a pitcher of water and a glass. He pulled out a chair and poured water and drank it down. He poured another glass and drank that down. A third glass didn't quench his thirst, but he was hungry and he sat down, picked up a fork and dug in. Grandma Florence was at her rocker by the radio. She worked at a corn cob with a knife, hollowing out a bowl and poking a hole for a stem. Clay chewed slowly and listened to the knife gnaw at the cob. He stared across the kitchen at the sink until he cleared his plate. Then he washed his plate in the sink and wiped the water from his hands. Just an old kitchen, he told himself. Nothing you can do with an old kitchen.

He stripped down and took a shower. Standing beneath the spray of water, he wet his hair and let the stream beat against his back. Mud dribbled down his sides. He washed his arms and legs, moving tenderly round the bruises along his chest. He washed his feet. Standing under the jets he took a long drink. The water was hot and he remembered that they drink boiling water in hell. Now how does an idea like that come to a fella's mind?

He turned off the water and stepped out on the mat and dried himself. Wiping the steam from the mirror, he probed the cut on his lip and his cheek where it puffed up against his eye. He held his chin up, stretched his neck and breathed. He didn't look bad. He lifted his arm and made a muscle. He turned profile. No, he didn't look bad at all. Just like Ole Braddock himself. He stood in good company, now, though Braddock wouldn't have been caught the way he had. He'd know better now. Everything came to him clearly. All he needed was to see how the game was played. It may mean losing big a few times, but that's how it's done. You only learn big when you lose big. Just like James J.

Braddock; that's how he shot to the top. Sometimes you have to fall just as far down before you can go just as high. Clay knew it all. Braddock, now there's a real man.

I can take this, Clay told himself. If I can't take this then I'm beaten. Then I'm good for nothing.

Clay lay in the pantry with a pillow behind his back, shuffling a deck of cards. The mattress felt big without Bill in it and Clay had yet learned to sleep in the middle of all that space. Just thinking of it made him shift his body and the pillow over. What the hell was he waiting on? Bill wasn't coming back. Bill'd rather think of everybody than his family. He doesn't even see his family as any different from everybody else. It seems you have to break something inside yourself to be like that, or not have something in the first place. Can a person even have enough of a grip to bother with everyone like that? Bill's let it all go to his head.

Clay liked being in the middle of the mattress. He stretched his limbs then rolled from one side of the bed to the other, touching the walls as he came to them. This was his room now. His shelves, his bed, his pillows. Without Bill laying up against him Clay figured he might even grow a few extra inches.

Well, if Bill decides at the end of the summer he wants to come home, we just might have to reconsider the sleeping arrangements. If Bill is going to treat everybody like everybody, I can treat Bill like everybody, too. This is my room and ain't nobody taking it from me without a fight. This room ain't shoes or a hat, but it's just as important. Bill'll have another thing coming to him if he thinks otherwise. Just like them Phelps boys got something coming to them.

Clay rested the deck of cards on his bare chest and lay quietly as the wind came in through the window and brushed his skin. He shut his eyes and listened to his own breathing and felt the rise and fall of his chest. The deck of cards crested and dipped like a raft on the waves. His mind drifted like sails filled with wind, pulling him far and away with many a strange and familiar passenger who held out before him bright hopes like white sand beaches drenched in sun, even while he knew he lay in his room on his bed, alone and cold, surrounded by canned food and powdered milk. He felt at sea in the middle of the mattress and needed the side of the bed and the nearness of the wall to tell him where he was.

Clay climbed awake and pulled on a shirt and rolled toward the wall. The house settled about him. He set the deck of cards on the shelf beside the toy soldiers and canned beans. He felt beneath the mattress for the envelope with his money. Pulling the sheet up to his chin he thought if he had his hat he could wear that to sleep and not lose any heat out of his head.

He wondered if Bill was having any trouble sleeping.

CHAPTER FOUR

Clay put his old hat on again and took to wearing Bill's leftover shoes with newspaper stuffed down the front. Before Bill had left for the mission John had declared one evening after supper that Bill needed new shoes and that they would go into Cincinnati that weekend to buy them. The seams and soles of Bill's shoes were fine, the tread unworn, and even the laces still had their tips, but that Saturday John and Bill climbed into the truck, leaving Clay behind, and drove into town. They bought Bill's shoes and walked around Fountain Square to break them in and enjoyed ice cream in a parlor where the employees wore white paper hats, then caught a Reds game.

Clay stayed at home and climbed into a tree and refused to come down for lunch or supper. He was a bigger Reds fan than Bill and if anyone deserved to see a double-header more than he, Clay hadn't met him yet.

Nothing wrong with Bill's shoes, they got more miles yet to go, he said.

Grandma Florence stood beneath the tree and said, If this is how you choose to act when your father tries to show someone that he cares about them, I'd just as soon you stay up there forever. Rest assured your brother never climbed a tree when your father took you to the pitch tournaments.

Ain't Bill renouncing worldly things? I thought priests took vows of poverty and chastity and obedience.

That's Franciscans, and you know your brother don't look good in brown.

Some time after midnight Bill pulled the truck in the drive. John snored in the bed of the truck reeking of ballpark beer. With Clay's help, they carried their father into the house. Bill said that father had started drinking once the Reds started winning, and then after took him to a card game on the other side of the river where he won a roll of bills, and only left after Bill raised a fuss about having to be at church the next morning.

Truth be told, Bill said, I hated to leave. It was exciting, but he was running his mouth and those briars looked to cut him. Then on the way back he stopped on the bridge to throw up into the river and that's when I took the wheel. These new shoes are good for driving, I'll say that for them.

Clay hated Bill's old shoes. They gave him blisters at first, till he learned how to walk in them, and he said it looked like he was some sort of big-footed clown and that he ought to be at the circus taking a pie in the face and falling out of a car with twenty other big-footed clowns. Grandma Florence said that boys who lose their shoes don't deserve pie, not now, nor never.

At the breakfast table, the morning after Clay's run-in with the Phelps boys, John looked at Clay's putted face and said, Looks like you lost at something.

Actually, I won.

Did you come home with less than what you went out with?

Yessir.

That's called losing. The lumps on your head weren't part of the kitty, were they?

No, sir.

That's called losing twice.

John was not happy, though, about the shoes and the hat. They strip you down, like that once, he said, and they'll think they can do it again. Shoes aren't cheap. That goddamn, Sheffield penny knife. I was there when Mitchell Phelps won that off an old Kentucky horseboy who just didn't know when to stop.

Grandma Florence held the sizzling skillet between Clay and John where they sat at the table. They had to lean back to avoid being splashed with hot grease.

There ain't no bigger fool around than Mitchell Phelps, unless it's the man that chases after him. The only thing a fool has to offer is his foolishness, she said, then slipped the eggs and bacon out of the skillet and onto their plates.

This ain't West Virginia, Florence. There ain't no reason to settle a thing with blood.

Grandma Florence dropped the skillet on the stove and looked at John with eyes like burning ice.

If it ain't worth spilling blood over what's the use in bothering with it?

Well, it is worth bothering with, Florence, and I can just as well settle a thing with conviction and grace as I can with blood.

More fools damned by conviction than anyone can imagine, and every one of them figured they had grace on their side.

Grandma Florence took up her coffee cup and stepped outside. John forked eggs into his mouth. He ate the eggs and bacon then ran toast through the smear of yolk on his plate.

We'll go catch a ballgame this weekend, John said.

What about my shoes?

Wearing Bill's old ones will be good for you. We'll get new ones in town.

Ain't you going to get the Phelps to get me new ones?

A man needs to have brains enough to know how to win, when to quit and where not to enter. You saying you played a man's game and now you don't want to pay a man's price?

All I'm saying is a man's got a right not to be called motherless.

All week Clay wore Bill's shoes with double socks to avoid blisters. He cleaned out the barn and milked the cows. General Bucket pulled a plow and they cleared a field, while Grandma Florence walked behind with seed, planting rows of corn and cabbage. Per John's orders, Clay dug postholes and fenced a pen at the side of the barn.

In the mornings Grandma Florence tossed feed to the chickens and talked to the big red rooster she called Old Dick. Old Dick was fine enough to be a fighting cock, she said, and could keep all the other leghorns in line if he had a mind to. He struts like the sultan amongst his harem. Old Dick would mount every hen and fight every rooster, and, had he been in Jerusalem that time, he'd've been the one to call St. Peter a liar. Grandma Florence got a kick out of Old Dick, most especially because there was no use in trying to stop what's in a body's nature. She told Clay, You only try to change them when you got skin in the game, but all it affords you is heartache.

In the afternoons after the heat had broken, Clay went down to the river to watch the barges and shoot at squirrels. Father Mike kept a rowboat tied up behind the church

that he allowed the kids to use on condition they stopped in the sanctuary to light a candle and ask the Virgin for safe passage across water, and gave notice at the rectory. Warm light lanced through the stained glass and hung the dust like mites in a web. At the far end of the pews the altar huddled as a stone in a cave, and behind it the tabernacle, secret and implacable.

Playing cards in the undercroft was one thing, but being where the Owner of the house can see you was another. Clay crept slowly past the pews and approached the votaries. The flickering light on the smooth, white porcelain face of the Holy Mother made Clay hot under the arms and he spent in front of the statue what he thought was the requisite amount of time for saying a prayer. He didn't care much for himself but figured he should say something for Bill's sake, but for the life of him nothing came to mind. He didn't feel bad for it, though, as he figured Bill knew what to say for himself, if anyone did.

Clay rowed along the shoreline where it was easy to work against the current. He liked to inspect the banks for debris and flotsam, and thought he might find his shoes or hat, though if he did he figured he'd just as soon let them lie. Once he spied the Phelps boys and others making camp on the slopes, but he rowed on till he was out in the river above them and had only the barges for company.

He found a spot where it was quiet and pulled in the oars.

After baiting a hook from a can of worms collected after the last big rain brought them out, Clay cast his line then rested the pole against the side of the boat. Bill's shoes slipped off Clay's feet and he dipped his toes over the sides then lay back in the boat.

Chips of sun floated on the water like orange peels. It was easy to feel that there had never been such a thing as a city anywhere.

Once he glimpsed a steeple on a hill rising over the trees and it seemed a right thing, like eggs in the morning or Grandma Florence chewing on her corn cob pipe.

He pulled in two smallmouth bass and dropped them in the bucket he'd brought with him. When a cicada buzzed him he slapped it down, where it lay in the bottom of the boat making a sound like a broken fan. Picking it up, Clay shoved the hook through its body lengthwise and cast it out in the current and snagged a yellow bullhead. He was careful not to catch his hands on the spines when he withdrew the hook. The catfish went in the bucket of water with the two bass.

After that he drew his line in and let the boat drift. He smoked. He'd caught three fish and had a place to doze and a hat to cover his eyes. Clay toasted in the sun. Easy to feel complete and formed when you've done all you've set out to do. Floating on lazy water with nowhere to be and everywhere to go.

When he opened his eyes St. Rose's was in view, the flood markers dark scars on the back of the building, like measuring off a growing boy on the kitchen doorframe. He put on Bill's shoes and rowed in.

The bucket of fish banged against Clay's leg as he walked along the road home. He caught a ride from a neighbor who looked in his bucket and whistled.

What kind of bait were you using? the neighbor said.

Worms for the bass, but I pulled that bullhead in with a cicada.

Grasshoppers are good bait, too, the neighbor said, but crickets are best. Caught a ton of shad with crickets. September's a fine time to be out on the river.

St. Christopher stood on the dashboard peeling in the sun. Clay stuck his arm out the window and let the wind push against his hand. He wondered if it was the catch or the time of year that made a man favor one form of bait over another. Does a fish really know what's on his plate for dinner? About as much voodoo as lighting candles before a statue.

Grandma Florence sat in a chair under a tree when the neighbor dropped Clay off. Clay liked to bring the fish home fresh, twisting in river water. Grandma Florence reached into the bucket and held up one of the bass, its eyes wide and mouth gaping.

Reminds me of my dead husband, Herbert. Flaps his gums as much and makes just as much sense.

She pointed the fish at Clay.

Looks like Peter Phelps to me, he said.

Holding it by the tail she whacked the fish against the tree.

Clay fished out the other bass and said, Hello, Michael Phelps, passed it to Grandma Florence who said, Go find your brother, and bashed it against the tree.

She had to smack it twice before it was dead.

I never knew Michael had it in him, she said and Clay laughed the way a little boy does at the beach, skin smooth from water and red from wind, the sun tangled in his hair.

Grandma Florence sent Clay to the barn and he came back with a hammer. She came out of her chair and knelt on the ground and laid the bullhead on a tree root. Clay

squatted in close and she showed him how to hold the catfish down with one hand without cutting himself on the spines. Clay knew as much but he liked how, just that once, her voice softened and he heard his mother speaking through her own mother, or had it always been his grandmother communicating through her daughter to him all this time, and a feeling of hot water rushed through his chest. The bullhead throbbed under his hand and the hard shell of its head held a fierce and gruesome visage. Clay grasped the hammer in his other hand and pounded the fish in the head.

Grandma Florence looked into his face and her eyes, brown with green flecks, what she called her nut-eyes, burned with a grin. That's how you handle Mitchell Phelps.

She wrapped the catfish in newspaper and set it in the icebox. While she cleaned the two bass Clay pulled up a handful of small potatoes from the garden. He washed the dirt and skin from them, and in the sink, smooth and white, they looked like bare knuckles. By the time John got home the fish and potatoes were fried up and laying on the table with cornbread. Clay and his father dug in and Grandma Florence cracked a boiled egg at both ends and rolled it along the surface of her plate with the palm of her hand. She peeled the shell and sprinkled the bared egg with salt.

This is a fine fish, Clay. And these are fine potatoes. John pulled fish bones from his mouth with his fingers. I bet you wrestled these fish from the mouths of alligators, crocodiles, and sea serpents.

No sir. Just pulled them straight off the trident of the King of the River People, Clay said.

The goddamn King of the River People! Hear that Florence? I dare say that blood was spilled in the procurement of this fine catch.

Hell, I almost drowned! The River King had me under and was trying to choke me with his beard of seaweed and bottom scum.

How did you survive, boy?

I stuck him in the ass with his own trident! Clay thrust up his fork.

Like this? and John lifted his own fork.

No sir, like this. Clay twisted his fork in the air. You really gotta dig it in there.

John followed suit till Grandma Florence shook her head at the two of them.

Boys and their butt jokes, Grandma Florence said.

Come on, Grandma Florence, even the King of England himself would laugh at a good butt joke.

If he couldn't, wouldn't be no sense in following him into battle, John said. Who the hell would want to die for a fool that couldn't laugh at a good joke?

It ain't what the other fella laughs at that draws a man but what he promises, Grandma Florence said. There's a man out there now just waiting to be promised something so he can show the world how much of a fool he is.

Nothing fools a woman like Grandma Florence, Clay said. She lives on cornbread and boiled eggs to keep her mind sharp.

It's 'biled', Clay. You're forgetting your Grandmother is from south of the river. They bile their eggs down there.

Nothing wrong with boiled aggs and cornbread, Grandma Florence said. I raised six children and killed a husband with aggs.

Aggs?

Yes, aggs.

You ever eat aggs before, Clay?

No, sir.

There ain't nothing wrong with how I say aggs!

Aggs? Don't think I ever ate an egg, before . Where do they come from?

Aggs is what you call alligator eggs, Clay said.

Lord amighty, alligators are lizards, boy. Are you saying your Grandmother eats lizards?

By her own testimony, she lives on nothing but cornbread and lizards. You can tell by how her eyes have gone all itty-bitty.

Good Lord, boy, you are right. I bet eyes like that could see in the dark.

The smaller, the farther.

Then I think your grandmother can see forever.

I hope you both choke on fish bones, Grandma Florence said.

She buttered cornbread and shoved it in her mouth then wiped the crumbs from her lips. Clay's mouth ran on about how that cicada had buzzed him and he'd swatted it down and something in its broken crankshaft rattle had told him to spit it on a hook and tossed it in, and how him and Grandma Florence had called the two smallmouths Peter and Michael Phelps, and how after he'd pounded the bullhead with the hammer she'd

called it Mitchell Phelps, and maybe that's how you handle those durn Phelps, with a hammer to the head, ain't nothing, as easy as beating a fish against a tree. John nodded at that, a noise like something scraping his lungs lurching from his mouth. Long since he'd grown quiet, his leg had begun to bounce and his gaze had fallen to the empty side of the table.

After dinner John stepped down to the barn to inspect the pen. Grandma Florence washed the plates in the sink and Clay stood beside her with a towel to dry. John returned and smoked at the table with the bottle at his elbow. Clay talked about going to the ballgame on Saturday and getting new shoes. He hoped for something sturdy, something he could crack shins with. He had his pitch winnings, so he could afford some really good ones, maybe fine leather boots, something with hobnails. See how them Phelps boys like having them up their ass. The Reds would show the Pirates, they'd sink their boat for sure. Grandma Florence had soapsuds on her elbows and she must've touched her face, as there were suds on her cheek. The only light on was in the kitchen and John sat at the table at the edge of the light drinking. Clay would check to see if Saturday was a double-header. Boy, he could taste those hotdogs. And Graeter's ice cream! In the semi-light John became a heavy thing, the darkness of the back of the house growing thicker and danker through the force of John's shadow, cast against the light of the kitchen and rebounding, curling back again like the smoke from his cigarette gathered in clouds above the table. His moroseness grew sudden, forbidding all inspection, and still Clay blathered on. It came on him like that sometimes, a mood he was powerless before and to which he could only succumb. A heavy odor of alcohol seeped across the kitchen.

Would you like to see Mitchell Phelps? Clay said. I'll show you where I laid the hammer to him. I'm telling you, that's the only way to deal with those Phelps.

He made to step away from the sink but Grandma Florence held his arm. She pressed the last dish into his hand and wiped the suds from her cheek. The only sound from the table was the twitch of a lighter and the glug of liquor in a glass. Then John barked that harsh laugh again. Grandma Florence turned Clay back to the sink and dish, and he looked up at her eyes peering forth like nail heads buried in old, spongy wood, the final thing holding a falling structure together, immobile, consigned and inescapable, and involuntarily felt a need to escape.

CHAPTER FIVE

John chomped at the bit all evening and an hour before midnight he packed a bottle, combed grease through his hair, and wore his brown Stetson and jacket out the door. I'm hunting down my luck, he said. Clay watched him at the truck split a wad of bills between his wallet and his boot. In the morning his bed wasn't slept in.

Clay sat at the window watching the dew burn off the grass after having checked the yard and the cornfield for John's truck. Grandma Florence made fried eggs and bacon, despite the callow ungratefulness of the night before, but Clay only bothered with coffee. He refused to talk, but when she told him she didn't care if he ate or not, but that he acknowledge the opportunity, he said, Do you think he's hurt somewhere?

More likely your father is working against his nature.

What does that mean?

That means he's not done till bigger things than him are done with him.

He's never broken a promise before.

Monday promises, Grandma Florence said and began to clear off the table

Well, I'm not waiting around for him.

Better you shouldn't.

I can hunt my own luck, too.

Even a doomed man can change his own fate by wearing bones. Not without breakfast, though.

I'm going to feast at the ballgame and find myself a Pirates fan to throw up on.

Well, that won't be a very sportsmanlike thing to do if the Reds are winning.

Make sure you throw up on a sonofabitch.

Don't worry, Clay said. This is Pittsburgh we're talking about.

Clay took to walking and hitched a ride into town from a couple of fellas headed across the river for the horse races. They dropped him off in the city and he bought a pair of shoes from a store just off Fountain Square. Grandma Florence had given Clay a bag to bring home Bill's shoes in. Don't chuck them in the river, she told him. He joined a group of kids and won a dollar total pitching pennies against the fountain. One boy with a lazy eye told Clay it was called the Genius of Water.

What the hell's so smart about water? Clay said.

I don't know, ask your old man.

I don't have an old man.

Oh yeah? Who paid for those new shoes?

I did.

You an orphan?

I got a brother who takes care of me. He let me wear his shoes into town so I can get me a pair. He's sitting at home right now in bare feet.

Lazy Eye lifted his hat and squinted at Clay.

Ain't you got a mother?

Course I got a mother. My mother's prettier than Carole Lombard.

Ain't nobody's mother prettier than Carole Lombard.

You calling me a liar?

Lazy Eye spat on the pavement.

I'm saying a fella with new shoes oughtn't shoot his mouth off.

The boy grabbed Clay by the shoulders and the rest of the gang scuffed his shoes and together they ran across the square and hopped a streetcar headed towards the river. The conductor hollered at them for not paying the fare and at the next stop they bailed, sprinted across traffic, and crashing downhill, stopped at the water's edge. They skipped stones across the river and watched the crowds enter Crosley Field.

Look at all that red. You'd think it was a gathering of the Communist Party, Lazy Eye said. Once I threw a rock at the cathedral windows.

You go to hell for knocking out stained glass, Clay said.

I know it, but it ain't no sin to knock out the lights of the stadium.

Hell, if you could get a rock up that high the Reds might make you pitcher.

One of the boys said, We should hop a train for Florida.

Why stop at Florida?

The ocean, dummy.

I mean, why not California? We could go where they make movies.

Clay rolled a cigarette, lit up and blew rings. We should go to Mexico. They got bullfights. And Mexican girls.

I heard the further south you go the prettier they get.

Brazilian girls are the best. Ever see a picture of Carmen Miranda? Or her sister?

Yeah, but what does that say about Canadian girls?

Dogs, all of them. Who do you think pulls those Eskimo sleds?

Some of the boys wanted sodas and Clay said he was thirsty for something with a little more guts to it. Lazy Eye knew a place, If you got the shoes for it. They took the Roebling Bridge over the river, stopping halfway across to spit over the side. It was quiet on the other side of the river, and to Clay it seemed odd that briars should live in houses and speak English much like people do in Ohio. In a neighborhood of row houses they leaned against the trees and Lazy Eye pointed out a corner store.

Nothing but Germans live here. But the good kind, not the type you get in Europe. A mick runs the store though, and there's a game in the back. Sometimes it goes all night. It's over now.

How can you tell? Clay said.

See the pennant in the window? When the game's on he moves it to the other pane. My old man likes to come down here and take money off the briars. Once he smoked out a priest. Told him he felt bad, beating out a priest and all. You know what that priest said? Don't worry about it. The collar comes off when the cards are dealt. Lazy Eye shook his head. You never can tell with the church.

I know a fella going to be a priest wouldn't ever say that, Clay said.

Lazy Eye looked Clay up and down and tugged on his cap. Like I said. You never can tell with the church.

In an alley behind the store they found a man sleeping behind the garbage cans. He was shoeless, laying face down in his shirtsleeves. His pockets had been turned out but he cradled a bottle to his head like a child's teddy bear.

They push them out through the door there and sometimes they don't make it out of the alley. Lazy Eye said.

He kicked the man's feet and the drunk clutched the bottle tighter.

Sometimes they wake up when you're rolling them.

What time does the ballgame start? Clay said.

Who's got money for the ballgame?

Lazy Eye and the other kids gathered in front of Clay. He was aware of how very new his shoes were and he let the bag with Bill's shoes swing a bit at his side.

I thought you were thirsty? Lazy Eye said. His lip twisted and he turned his head, laying a finger to one nostril and blowing. I don't think you have a mother that looks like Carole Lombard.

Course I do. You can tell by how good-looking I am.

Clay told himself, If ever I got to cross the Bridge of Sighs, I'm going to do it with my head up.

With the same hard grit and grunt he stepped over the man on the pavement and reached for the bottle. Just a rummy in the gutter, he said. The man rose up, making a sound like water gurgling in a drain. Hair stuck out in clumps held together by grease. The Stetson and the jacket were gone and the front of John's shirt was filthy from rolling in the alley. Clay cried out and was smashing the shoe bag in John's face before he knew

what he was doing. John's head rolled and he fell backward, dragging Clay forward still holding to the bottle. The kids behind him yelled, Hit that rummy! and the closeness of the alley fell in on him. Chunks of filth were caked on John's chin and his furnace breath burned Clay's face. John's eyes were near to focusing. Clay pulled back but John wouldn't release the bottle. The shoe bag crashed into John's face over and over, till Clay felt his father's nose crunch beneath Bill's shoes. Blood squirted like squeezing a berry. John's hand released its grip and both bottle and Clay were free. Lazy Eye caught hold of Clay as he fell back. The back door of the store opened and a man with a red face yelled. The kids ran from the alley and crossed the street, making for the river and the bridge. Several blocks away they stopped running, looking behind them and holding their sides. Now they could strut. The sidewalk fell far away, step by step, bringing them closer to the water's edge. Clay's head was full of a bastard thunder that pounded just behind his eyes, and his legs bounced like they were made of rubber.

At the river some of the boys were still laughing, coming up to clap Clay on the back. The entire way to the river Lazy Eye had walked at his side telling a story none of which Clay heard. The ruin of his father's face pressed heavy on his mind, replaying the walnut crunch of John's nose and the blood burst across his cheeks. Thinking of it made Clay's head drum. His father was drunk in a goddamn alley. Pockets turned out and lost everything. Messed all over himself. A man's dignity isn't something to be pissed down the front of your pants. Even if he'd been cheated and beaten, he'd still had the way he stood up to redeem himself, but the old man hadn't even left himself that.

From across the river the crowd from the ballpark could be heard, the announcer was calling something, the radio reverberated like a bugle calling far afield, a revival, a gathering of souls, and Clay couldn't help but say, Why aren't I at the ballgame with my old man?

I thought you just had a brother, Lazy Eye said.

Clay looked Lazy Eye full in the face, watching how the one eye met Clay's gaze while the other, just beneath a half-shut lid, slipped like a fish back up the street where they'd just come.

How the hell do you look out of a marble like that?

Lazy Eye's face and neck flushed red and the other boys grew very quiet and shifted on their feet. They were cheering in the ballpark.

I have a mother, Clay said, his grip tightening on the shoe bag and bottle. Take back what you said about my mother.

Sure, your mother's a saint. Your mother's prettier than Carole Lombard.

Clay measured the words like stones he'd throw in the river. From the corner of his eye he could see the other boys waiting. One wiped his nose. Clay raised his chin, and pulled the plug on the bottle and drank. He imagined the old man had saved his last for this smooth Kentucky bourbon. Now it belonged to Clay. For a moment he almost cried. Another pull on the bottle made him cough and his eyes watered. Some of the boys laughed and Clay gifted the bottle over. Lazy Eye took a drink and passed it round. When it came back to Clay he pushed the plug in and they carried the bottle across the river with them.

Clay spent the rest of the day in Cincinnati. The group of them stole fruit from the outdoor stalls at markets and in between games they yelled names at the Pirates fans. Clay flashed money at a fat German who ran a sausage wagon and after everyone's hotdogs had been prepared, they tipped the wagon over and ran off without paying. A policeman chased them for several blocks. A little blonde boy, the one who'd wiped his nose, fell in the street and the cop nabbed him. The cop frog-marched the boy off, the boy reaching down for his fallen hotdog but the cop stepped on it. Weeping and crying out in a language none of them had been able to understand, the boy reached a hand back to Clay, looking at him with a face like soup boiling in a pot. What the hell does he want me to do? Clay said. Lazy Eye, whose name was Eugene and had two older sisters and an old man who was a butcher, said, Don't worry about him. Just a hunky kid from the west side. They camped under the bridge and threw empty bottles and rocks at the ducks. Clay and Eugene finished off the bourbon as the barges floated by and their voices, made strange and large by the water, comforted Clay in a manner reminiscent of how Bill and he used to talk in the pantry at night. In the slap and swish of the water against the rocks, Clay heard Bill's whispering recitation of the rosary. There was a familiar intensity in the restlessness of the water, like the manner in which Bill prayed. Why had Clay never noticed this before? That same urgency carried the barges and boats passed the boys, and Clay wondered, when all things get to where they are supposed to go, is it the same power again that sends everything forth, or is it some dissatisfaction in the destination that forces everything to make an escape?

One day I'm going to work on a boat, Clay said. Take it all the way to the Mississippi, all the way to New Orleans and the Gulf.

I'm going to ship out on a freighter on the Great Lakes, Eugene said. They go from Chicago all the way to Europe. From the center of one continent to the capitals of another. Though my old man says Europe's soon to go to the dogs.

I want to hop from island to island, and have a little brown girl waiting for me on every one. I'd lie around in the sun and drink rum and laugh at you guys stuck up here freezing in the snow.

Wouldn't you come home?

I wouldn't ever want to come back.

Not even to see your mother? Or your brother?

The bourbon was gone and Clay stuck his finger in the bottle and upended it to let what dregs there were to come forward, then he pulled his finger out and sucked on it. Finishing off the bottle, Eugene and he had laughed for a time and now he felt sad. He told himself this is just a little drunk. If you feel this way you have to be just a little drunk. To be drunk is to feel like you own the world and to wonder if it was ever worth it.

Why'd that hunky boy have to look at me like that?

Just a hunky, Eugene said.

What'd he expect me to do?

Who knows what hunkies want. They don't even know how to use a fork, just knives and spoons. What can you do with a people like that?

I ain't ever going to look at anybody like that, Clay said and pitched the bottle in the river.

That evening when Clay made it home, John's truck was parked in the yard. Clay was sober and tired from walking, and he tossed the shoe bag into the pantry. Grandma Florence made a grilled cheese sandwich and sat at the table while Clay ate the sandwich with both hands. She had salted and peppered the cheese and Clay said it tasted like it should be washed down with beer. She poured him a small glass. The door to John's bedroom was shut and Clay looked at the table while he ate.

What's a hunky? Clay said.

It's a piece of something, like a brick of gold, or a slab of cheese.

When Clay finished the sandwich he wiped the crumbs from his fingers and drank the beer.

That was good, Clay said. When did you get to be so fancy?

I was thinking of you, Grandma Florence said.

Across the table, in the soft light, her face was warm as oatmeal, and in his chest his heart fluttered like a bird. For a moment, both of their arms rested on the table and they were one in body and mind, inviolate and vulnerable, united against that which they did not speak of. Then her head moved and he couldn't see her eyes for the reflection of the lamp in her glasses, and soon enough she stood from the table and took the plate and glass and washed them in the sink. With Grandma Florence's back turned Clay held his tongue, confused and weak, defenseless before the darkened door to John's room, yet he

clamped down hard on the feeling with a spasm of gut and sphincter that kept the tears from squeezing from his eyes. Goddamn it, he told himself, I ain't a slab of cheese.

In the pantry he undressed for bed and noticed the spatter of blood on the shoe bag. He pulled Bill's shoes out and took the bag into the kitchen, stuck it under the faucet, and scrubbed the stain with a brush. He squeezed the water from the bag and hung it to dry. Laying his head on the pillow, shutting his eyes, he told himself, It ain't a farm if something ain't bleeding somewhere.

CHAPTER SIX

The next morning Clay had woke early and watched a spider weave a web on the underside of one of the pantry shelves. He'd never before watched a spider spin a thread, two legs among many, rubbing together the way a greedy bastard rubs his hands. He'd squashed roaches and junebugs and batted cicadas out of the air, but spiders weren't critters; they were creatures of supernature, they were bankers and creditors, they ought to be wearing top hats and smoking cigars. Clay may be godless but he weren't stupid. When the spiders move in it's over.

John emerged late that morning with raccoon eyes, walked straight to the kitchen sink and filled a pitcher of water. Sitting at the table he poured glass after glass, drinking till the wool blanket had left his mouth. His hands shook some for a long time after, but the gray plaster cast of his cheeks went away and he didn't complain any when he noticed Clay standing in the doorway. Clay shifted a little and daylight fell across the table and John's face.

You get your chores done? John said.

Yessir.

Clay watched John fill another glass and drink it down.

This isn't a barn.

Clay let the screen door close behind him but didn't step into the kitchen.

I guess if I drink another glass I might short-circuit myself. John set the glass loudly on the table but a moment later poured another glass. Where do you think the fusebox is on a human being?

John lit a cigarette and rested his elbows on the table. He wore a white undershirt, and the whole of him looked like ten years had been lived into him before he'd been set back on the shelf inside a tin of coffee that had grown fungus. It reminded Clay of pictures of prisoners at Alcatraz he had seen once, Inmates of Alcatraz, the caption said. That's what he is, an inmate. He is inmate and he's making us all inmate.

Who did that to your face?

John picked tobacco from his tongue.

Sometimes abundance has an underbelly, and if you aren't quick enough she sets down on you.

Clay thought of that a moment and stepped over to the sink and washed his hands. John watching him made Clay's shoulders tingle.

Where's your grandmother?

Church.

John gave that a beat of thought then said, Come here.

Clay pulled the towel from the rack and wiped his hand and rearranged the towel on the rack before coming over. He sat across the table and John nodded towards his cigarettes. Clay lit one with John's matches and they shared the ashtray between them. John pulled another bit of tobacco from his tongue, his eyes measuring Clay.

You got new shoes?

Yessir.

Let me see them.

Clay stood and stepped away from the table.

They fit nice?

Yessir, Clay said and sat back down.

Sunlight and dust and smoke mingled in the air and John squinted down the cigarette in his mouth at Clay. The boy began to think wild and untrained things, till he noticed his foot bouncing, a sure tell any blind man could see, and held himself still. Clay rested his hands on the table before him and looked at them.

Ash dropped from John's cigarette onto the table and he brushed it away with his hand. Reaching over he pulled Clay's hand in his. Clay flinched, half stood, John glancing at his face and looking back, turning the boy's hand in his, squeezing the palm, rubbing it with his fingers. Callouses, John said. He closed Clay's hand into a fist and held it inside his own and pushed against it. Clay moved back a bit, but John didn't release the hand, but gestured with his chin and Clay pushed back. John applied pressure and Clay met it, leaning into John's hand with all his body.

After a bit he released Clay's hand.

You're getting to be a man, John said.

Clay nodded and sat back down, and the two of them smoked in silence. Their cigarettes tapped into the ashtray, like fingers dipping in a communal bowl and coming back to their lips pursed to invoke a prayer or receive a blessing. It was all just waiting for Clay and what Clay thought it was for John was biding time till the man's moment

had come. Blue and gold touched the other side of the window and stretched far beyond the farm, the city, the river, and was no more reliable than the space that was stretched and between Clay and maintained by his father.

John ground out his cigarette and rubbed his face with both hands, expiring stale breath and yawning loudly, stretching his arms out like a jailbreak and pulling new life into him. He reached into his pocket and set something in the square of daylight on the table. It was Peter Phelps' knife, and resting so close to Clay's hands it appeared small and mundane yet possessed of subtle power.

Clay felt small crabs snapping at his guts.

Well, it ain't going to stab you of itself, John said.

Clay picked the knife up and held it in his hands, unsure, it feeling like a stolen thing and as if the whole Phelps clan was going to come through the windows at any time. He felt a need to put it down and a will to hide it somewhere.

I thought you came home with nothing?

I brought home the truck, didn't I?

What about your hat and jacket?

When they play you out, you still need to bring home a piece of your dignity. That knife wasn't mine to gamble. Believe you me, Mitchell Phelps played for it like a mother trying to save her baby.

What about your hat and jacket?

What about it, John said and that seemed the end of it, though Clay went the rest of the day with little crabs clipping at his guts. After Grandma Florence came home and

prepared dinner and John told Clay to show Florence what you got, Clay laying the knife on the table, the three of them gathering round, Grandma Florence said, It's just a penny knife, wasn't worth a pair of shoes and a new hat, no matter how ugly that hat was.

Somebody thought it worth a beating and that made it worth getting back, John said, catching Clay's eye and winking.

Only a fool suffers a beating for something so cheap.

Florence, everything in the world is laying on that table.

John Bell, ain't nothing so important could fit on that table.

Family pride. Dignity.

Why not just pitch yourself, the boy, and the whole farm into the river if you're going to talk that way. That's where it's headed when folks start claiming honor.

It's worth two hats, a pair of shoes, one jacket and a beating! Clay said. He looked at John's face and added, Two beatings! and felt it in his guts worse than before, could hear the squish of his father's nose again and see the pop of blood. Guilt was a bilious bread clogging his throat.

Even more nonsense it wasn't worth as much as, Grandma Florence said.

Besides, it wasn't for that I got a beating, Clay said. They beat me because they're sonsofbitches. But it's sure worth beating back for.

Grandma Florence looked down at Clay, her shriveled face like an old potato left growing in the bin. She gazed at him with eyes like tree bark.

You going to be sick? she said.

No ma'am, Clay said.

John laughed and said, The boy's feeling Bell pride, Florence, that's what it looks like.

Yet Grandma Florence didn't respond. She had as much regard for Bell pride as she took serious the fierceness of puppies. Drawing her mouth shut, she turned away to finish dinner. Clay pocketed the knife and John winking a raccoon eye down at him again, Clay seeing once more the pathetic figure passed out in the alley, clutching a bottle and taking a bag of shoes in the face from his own son, the same son he gambled everything for the knife sitting heavy in his son's pocket, winning that and losing his own clothes after, but never relinquishing the very thing that brought him to such a low state. A simple thing to have surrendered. John must've called Mitchell Phelps ahead of time, demanded this showdown and the redheaded Methodist sonofabitch came. The same son who had broken his father's face and that same father calling him a man and giving him his dignity and love in the form of this knife.

Clay was going to either throw up or cry. A father grants more manhood than he knows, he thought, and this is how it feels. We take more than we're allowed and must forget of it by the time of our own granting. Or is it from that remainder that a man gives to his own son. Is this undeserved grace from my father just the unlawful legacy Adam took from God? Is this the real reason Abraham couldn't stab Isaac, because he knew just what a fraud he himself was?

But as he thought it he knew he had missed the mark. My old man ain't a fraud. I beat an innocent man and after that what am I worth?

It was a quiet dinner, but for the sound of John eating with his mouth open and breathing between every bite due to the state of his nose. Clay put down dinner without tasting it, watching his father's efforts and feeling the knife through his pants pocket. Grandma Florence said nothing and afterward left the dishes for the two Bell's to clean.

That summer John took to gambling, telling Clay he had plans for that pen Clay had built and plans for the two of them afterwards, but he refused to tell of it, just laid a hand on Clay's shoulder and winked at him. John was like a dog cut free and told Clay as much. Something about being free enough to lose it all, John said and Clay could only nod his head. There's manhood in it, Clay said and thought straight afterwards, That's not it. Godhood's more like it, playing toss with the spheres. Once Clay handed out a little of his pitch money, saying he'd like to invest in a winner. At first John turned Clay down, till Clay said he understood the risk and John agreed but took only a dollar and made no promises but that he used it in a hand and if that hand proved a winner then Clay would get his cut. Clay asked to come along, To see how it's done, he said, but John refused.

You took Bill that time.

You're brother was big enough to drive the truck back, that's what I needed him for.

But Clay suspected the old man was hoping Bill would get a taste for the cards deep enough to make him reconsider his mission. But ain't nothing can overpower the pull of Mother Church on the unsuspecting Catholic.

During the months of June and July Bill sent letters once a week addressed to Grandma Florence detailing his efforts out in Adams County. He said he'd dug a

drainage ditch and built a few sheds, and once a whole group of men had got together to raise a barn. Just like the Amish, Bill wrote, but with better style in clothing. They were doing real work during the day, preaching and visiting and helping the farmers, and in the evening the folks sat around on their porches playing guitars and dulcimers and blowing on jugs.

Once, Bill wrote, they had gone far off the road to visit with a fella that a few men down at the feed store said always appreciated some Scripture, even if it come from a potlicker. Of course it had all been a practical joke. Soon as they found this fella's shack and called out to it, because Father Mike says never knock on a door this far out, just halloo and wait for an answer, a shotgun pointed its way through the window and aimed itself on them. Father Mike started some smooth banter and soon enough had that fella outside his house, sitting on a stump and swapping stories. Turns out Father Mike's from Adams County, and somehow related to that guy, they figured it out by tracing their way back up the family tree, like watching an acorn fall from the top of the tree and on its way down bounce off every branch, but only in reverse. There was a funny smell in the air around that shack, and don't tell anyone, but Father Mike started talking moonshine recipes. That old hillbilly never moved without his shotgun, but he sure took enough of a liking to Father Mark to quit pointing it at the two of them.

Grandma Florence would read the letters to Clay in the evenings after supper. When Bill wrote back that Father Mike and he had taken a few days and gone upriver in a boat, stopping off at the little towns to preach a little and help out before moving on to the next, Clay said, Since when did the Church have a navy?

Bill wrote that he was making a difference and that it felt good to give of himself expecting nothing in return. He felt like a rich man. A man who has emptied himself in this fashion has expanded. So many things weighs a fella down, crushes him, until he hasn't room enough inside himself for others, just more and more things. A man can't turn the other cheek when he's too busy looking after his things. But there's a fearlessness to being able to turn the other cheek. It says, I got more important things going on in my life than to bother with sonsofbitches.

Clay couldn't believe this was the same boy who'd leveled a shotgun on a gang of garden thieves, and after that wasn't interested in knowing what Bill was up to.

Grandma Florence folded the letters away and kept them in a keepsake box on her dresser. Clay looked inside it once when the house was empty. He found a man's ring, locks of hair he suspected were from Grandma Florence's children when they were babies, and Bill's letters. No gold nor jewels, nothing to spell out a life. Just how precious could this box be? Even the ring looked to be made of pig iron.

John came home late one evening, woke Clay in the pantry and handed him five dollars saying, I always look after my investors. Clay didn't sleep the rest of the night working out in his mind just how he would spend it, or imagining what his father could bring home if Clay just let it ride. I could go to the movies on this or if I trust the old man he could plant these beans in the ground and raise ourselves a beanstalk. Then we could go to Hollywood and watch them make the movies. I'd have to be faithless to not let this go straight to the top.

John won enough to buy five hogs he planned to fatten up in the pen Clay had built and sell for a profit at the end of the month. They were big to begin with and when they moved off into the pen with their fuzzy ears bouncing on their heads and their snouts twitching in the ground he clapped, John clapped Clay on the back and squeezed his shoulder saying, Don't get too attached by naming these fellas. They're going to be ham and bacon soon enough.

The cows and General Bucket became Clay's sole responsibility and John took over the care of the hogs. Clay watched from outside the pen as John walked among them, checked their ears and hooves and teeth and slapped their rumps. They sure are rooters, he called to his father and John tripped amongst them calling back, Digging up the money, boy.

Moments as that, Clay watching his father in the pen, he liked to carve his name in the railing of the pen with the Sheffield penny knife. The knife fit his hand, as he knew it would, and he kept it in his pocket wherever he went. It served him well fishing when he needed to cut a line or dig out a hook or clean a fish. Once the Phelps boys spied him from the banks when he was out in the boat and he raised the knife and asked if they were missing anything. They skipped rocks at him and he floated on by. He figured they might try to waylay him on his way home so he tightened the laces of his shoes and walked with the knife open in one hand. He wasn't going to be stripped down by a gang of redheaded Methodists ever again.

In the evenings after supper he liked to sit out by the pen and watch the hogs with his father. They whittled together, watching the sun go down, and John told him tales of the card table.

In August John started to lose. In the morning when Clay expected something for his investment John reeked of liquor and cigarettes, running out the door late for work. Clay knew those were the breaks. A man who expects otherwise should get out of the game. John accepted very little from Clay and at some point refused all money. He grew surly and distant and when Clay told his father that he understood the risk, John told him enough, he wanted to hear no more of it.

Scene: Develop Clay and John with the hogs.

The two of them growing closer.

The idea of the hogs as a means of success and profit worth all that will be lost.

Scene: Broaden the next encounter with the Phelps boys.

Takes place at the church festival or July 4th.

Highlight Clay's growth into a wilier, more violent person.

He is far from the kid who dropped the shotgun, far from who Bill is.

Scene: Stretch out John's losses at gambling and trouble with the railroad.

John has to be brought in from the city.

Clay refuses to condemn his father.

Go in-depth with the feud between Mitchell Phelps and John.

John wins a bit before losing, lives high on the hog, rubs it in.

John is a sonofabitch, but Clay won't see it.

John's cause is righteous, as Phelps was all along a liar.

“The sins of the sons will be dealt with by the fathers.”

What to do with Grandma Florence: Keep her distant, observing?

Perhaps she makes an attempt to divert Clay's devotion?

John has no relatives but Darling does, Florence suggests bring Clay to them.

Bill: he returns from the mission, but is not interested in him.

Bill is more mature, more concerned about Clay.

Confronts John as to his gambling and drinking.

Bill and Clay fetch John home from a flophouse.

Bill is ashamed of John for Darling's sake.

Clay defends John and disowns his mother, disowns Bill.

Break is made with Bill all around, but for Grandma Florence.

She gives up on trying to change Clay at this point.

She stays to “See a thing through. That's family's call. To see a thing through.”

Bill leaves for the seminary.

The only good thing about the end of summer, Grandma Florence said, is September crickets. They spend an entire month saying goodbye. And the only thing that don't know summer is over is September mornings. They try real hard to keep the heat going but you can just feel the last of the fire and the October chill waiting behind it. Sad.

Grandma Florence dug out her pipe with an old nail and blew through it. She repacked it and set a match to it. Puffing blue clouds till it was lit, she muttered, The only thing sadder yet is your father.

Clay had nothing to say to Grandma Florence as there weren't any point in telling her anything. She said she had her part to play so she can play it, as long as she don't interfere in mine.

John disappeared days at a time, coming back with empty pockets and rumpled clothes and once a busted face that only made Clay feel worse for having once done that to his father himself. On days he worked he made up for it by putting in longer days and volunteering shifts that meant Clay didn't see him days or evenings for whole weeks at a time.

In John's absence, Clay took to tending the hogs. He saw them as a reserve fund, calling them his money in the boot. Clay began to sleep in late, though that really amounted to laying in the pantry staring at the ceiling, watching the spiders do their work. He counted webs under the shelves and studied the humped backs of the spiders, like Arabs stooped beneath the weight of all their possessions contained in one bag on

their backs. Goddamn spiders would carry off the house if Grandma Florence's will didn't hold it down.

On days when he sat out with the pigs, watching them root in the pen he saw again his father at the Grand Hotel beating on that piano and singing. The way that woman laughed at him as though her mouth were a separate thing that she put on and took off like turning on a radio and finding a song. The bartender demanding dollars from Bill and him for glasses he says the old man had broken, and sheets he said the old man had stained. As if John Bell would ever have congress with a woman that looked and smelled like bruised fruit. Like he was some man adrift. And Bill paying up without thought of it, without considering the impossibility of such a thing, without feeling an ounce of the slander to one's name and honor. Bill had been ready to fight Clay there in front of strangers for the money to ransom their own father when they should've burned the hotel to the ground rather than suffer the disgrace. Honor thy father! Clay had told Bill on the ride home, and Bill finally showing his true colors, finally baring his chest before hiding it all behind pillow voices, smug expressions and a priestly collar. We just share a mother, Clay. I have but one I call Father, my Father in Heaven.

Clay took a whetstone out to the pen and spent his late mornings sharpening the penny knife and working over in his mind how he would've scalped Indians, redheaded Indians, a hundred years ago, defending the farm and holding them off till the last moment, a whole tribe of them screaming and dancing and bearing fire, surrounding his farmhouse, the windows and doors barricaded, Clay shooting at them through crosshair shutters, coming down to the last bullet and would he beg them on his knees to spare his

life or would he spend it on himself, thus securing his reputation not in what he was able to prevent his enemies from doing, but in what he ultimately denied them in the end. But it never coming down to that, as a horn blows here would come John Bell from behind, returning to his son and his hogs, bringing with him bold slaughter, Clay rushing from the homestead to battle his way through the last of the red sons of bitches and meeting his father on the field. Clay hands his father the keys to the house and points to the safety of the hogs and John Bell saying where is my other son, my firstborn, and Clay responding, He is gone, I have stayed, I have always been here.

After several days Clay wondered aloud if John was at that hotel, though it was understood without saying that Bill and he would never mention the Grand to Grandma Florence. She raised an eyebrow and told him, No, your father is not at the Grand. He's putting in extra time to pay off debts.

How did you know about the Grand?

Clay, there ain't nothing happens in God's world he don't know, and everybody else is a close second in finding out.

Clay just understood that to mean working extra shifts on the railroad, but one day while walking back from the river, passing through Tobit Wilson's fields, he saw a sheriff's car and deputy standing with a group of men outside Wilson's barn. Atop that barn a bare-chested man was laying shingle, hammer rising and falling, the thunks coming a second later. As Clay came up with a bucket of fish he could see the man on the roof sweating and pounding away and shuffling further along the top of the barn,

heedless of how far below him was the ground. The men on the ground wore straw hats and white shirts, shielding their hands against the sun.

Play him another round of cards and you might be able to win a paint job out of him, a man wearing a black belt with a green buckle said.

Tobit Wilson grimaced into the sun. No sir, I just might lose and end up having to paint his barn.

Painting another man's barn, a man said shaking his head. Your wife'd take it like cheating on her.

Only if I ended up painting the bedroom.

All of the men laughed at that.

Greenbuckle said, Damn fool just doesn't know when to stop.

Ee-go, the other man said.

All of them shook their heads.

Runs his mouth, Tobit Wilson said. That's what sunk it for him. If the damn fool just knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Who the hell's going to back down after that?

People won't stand for some things.

The man on the roof spilled his nails, little flashing bits skittering down the side of the barn and dropping off onto the yard like steel rain. Nimble as a monkey he hopped and caught a handful of nails before they struck the edge of the roof where it took a steep slide to the ground.

Don't think falling off the roof gets you out of anything, Tobit Wilson called up.

The man rose to his full height, shoulders back and head erect, nothing but chin and chest, and he balanced at the edge of the roof like a dancer, and spat over the side.

I'll cite you for spitting in public, John Bell, the sheriff's deputy hollered.

He won't be able to pay off like this much longer, Greenbuckle said. People want money.

I couldn't do that to Florence.

You're a good man, Tobit.

Mitchell Phelps won't rest for nothing less than payment in full, Greenbuckle said.

There one thing Phelps would take over all, the other man said.

The county won't take roofing for payment, the deputy said. When he talked he hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and hitched up his trousers.

I couldn't do it to Florence nor his boys. I'm a family man, aren't I?

You're good people, Tobit, don't you guilt over nothing.

Well, he does have one boy left at the house for whatever he's worth. I couldn't do it being a family man myself. I can't figure what pushes the fool?

Ee-go. Pure ee-go.

Boy, the deputy said.

The men turned down their faces and saw Clay, Tobit Wilson's face going gray and Greenbuckle sucking his lips against his teeth, looking at Clay like he were something in a glass jar crawling among twigs and leaves.

You belong here, boy? the deputy said.

I guess it's okay, Tobit Wilson said, shifting in place. He didn't seem to know where to look and Clay didn't care to help him.

You been fishing, Clay? Tobit Wilson finally said.

Clay looked from face to face and when he didn't answer Tobit Wilson cleared his throat and said a bit harsher, Go on home, Clay, your father's clearing up a little business.

Greenbuckle chewed on his lip and looked at Clay like he were something he had stepped in. The other men looked at Tobit Wilson and checked their watches. Clay spat in the dirt and hefted his bucket of fish.

You got a permit for all those fish? Greenbuckle said.

Fish belong to God and God gave the fish to man, Clay said.

You're wrong there, boy, the deputy said. I dare say the county stands in for God any old day. County owns the river and the fish in it. How many fish you got there, boy?

Don't think it hardly matters, Greenbuckle said. Boy don't have a permit.

I can cite you or you can relinquish the fish.

The men stood round Clay and he looked from face to face, most still as gravestones, Tobit Wilson pale and sickly, Greenbuckle sucking on his teeth, the deputy hitching up his pants like there were squirrels in his pockets.

Clay upended the bucket and the fish slapped wetly in the grass.

The bucket don't belong to the county, Clay said.

The men muttered amongst themselves and Greenbuckle raised his eyebrows as to say, What now, deputy? The sheriff's deputy smacked Clay face down among the pile of fish. John Bell banged shingles on the roof in the blinding sun.

I'm just a family man, Tobit Wilson said.

Go on home, boy, the deputy said, and tell your Grandmother if she won't come pay your father's fine, I'll come for you for poaching fish. Git on.

Clay stood and brushed himself off. He took up his bucket and pole and walked away. Tobit Wilson was still going on, I'm a family man, and someone saying, You're good people, Tobit, no one blames you.

When Clay came home Grandma Florence was in the chair under the tree fluttering the top of her dress in the heat.

Weren't they biting?

No, but the sheriff's department is fixing to have a fish fry. You knew he was in jail but you weren't going to get him out?

You're father was determined to get where he is, who am I to deprive the man of his will?

Clay took the last of his pitch money and hiked his way to the sheriff's department. The office had all the seriousness of a bank and the cluelessness of the post office, but he was able to pay John's fines and got them to promise not to tell his father who had done so. I can give him this, Clay thought, who the hell am I to not give him his pride?

John's time in jail meant he missed the county fair where he had hoped to cash in on his hogs. After that, his nights were longer and costlier and Mitchell Phelps began to ride up on the farm like Sherman bearing down on Atlanta.

They had watched John gamble and drink and pay out, and only the union kept him from losing his job at the railroad. Once a week Mitchell Phelps rode across the fields sitting high on his horse like an English lord inspecting his estate. Every time, he came out wearing John's brown Stetson on his head and the jacket over his shoulders. John never made mention of it, but each time he grew harder inside like belly muscles constricting before a blow.

The first time Clay saw the Stetson on Mitchell Phelps' head he couldn't believe his eyes. He stood out on the porch as Phelps rode up and begged John to pull that redfaced Methodist bastard off his horse and whip him to an inch of his life.

He wears it like a stolen flag, Clay said.

It ain't important.

Clay's face twisted like a turtle's with a need to itch its own butt.

Where's the honor in letting that bastard flaunt the clothes he took off our backs?
Your back!

John turned on Clay quickly and poked him in the chest.

No one took anything off my back that I didn't make part of the deal. Phelps is a sonofabitch but he ain't a cheating bastard. Now, if you can't pay up like a man without running your mouth, then you ain't the son I raised you to be. Go in the house and stay off my porch!

First Mitchell Phelps came for General Bucket, leading him off with a brand-new bridle, across the fields and down the street for all the world to see John Bell's mule come the rightful property of a Methodist sonofabitch. Then he came for the cows, one at a time, till all six were lowing in Mitchell Phelps barn, and his redheaded kids were pouring Clay's milk on their morning cereal. Clay didn't mind losing the cows, his chores grew drastically less and less, but he did not like the thought of Peter Phelps drinking what Clay figured was his milk, whether he milked the cows or not. He told himself they had been lost fair and square and handed over with dignity, but still, it had been him that had reached under them all those years, his face pressed up against their hot sides. It had been him that led them out of the barn in the morning and brought them in at night. What hurt the most was losing General Bucket, though. The General would look at him as he milked the cows with an expression of what now. It was easy to talk to the General as he always shook his ears at the right time and held you with eyes that had seen it all.

Mitchell Phelps came like clockwork and John went out to meet him, Phelps always saying, John, it's time. And John holding himself erect and leading out one animal at a time, nothing more passing between the two of them but the exchange and Phelps turning his horse and John spinning on his heel, each man breaking for their own corner. After the General was taken away and the first cow followed a week later, Clay asked to be able to follow John out to meet Mitchell Phelps. How can I be a man about it if you won't try me? he said.

When Phelps came for the second cow, Clay for the first time asking his father why they hadn't ever named the cows, John answering, Who the hell name's cows, and

Clay understanding as cows weren't any good to talk to, Mitchell Phelps wore a grim smirk on his approach.

John, it's time, he said, tossing a rope to John and resting back in the saddle.

John passed the rope to Clay who went into the barn and looped it over a cow and brought it out. Taking the end of the rope from Clay, Phelps looked the boy over before leaning back with the end of the rope wrapped round one leather glove that covered his hand. There was a design threaded into the top of the gloves, making them seem like dainty things, but Clay resisted saying anything. That would be a Methodist thing to say, not for a Bell. Mitchell Phelps had cheeks speckled like strawberry bread, a face that couldn't hide its cards, Clay thought, and looking back at his father holding himself straight and impervious as a telegraph pole, eyes as lines cast across the field back in the direction Phelps had come from and where he would return to, neither man truly looking at the other nor ever meeting each other's eyes, Clay thought again, how the hell does the old man keep losing to this sonofabitch? Like great jungle beasts that do battle every night, slaying and dying and rising again in the morning to hunt for one another, each day reenacting a struggle born out of the energies that fashioned the universe and squeezed the hearts of men into their masculine, crystalline densities.

You know how to end this John, Mitchell Phelps said.

John yanked his head back as if he had been struck and he looked up at Mitchell Phelps a long moment before spitting on the ground.

Clay, you got that old penny knife on you. The one this liar said he took off a German.

Clay pulled the knife from his pocket and held it up.

Hand it here so I can stab the sonofabitch with it.

Mitchell Phelps looked down at Clay and Clay looked at Phelps's boots. Clay didn't bother looking at his father, as he understood where things sat, and a cow is just a cow, and if he could live without the General then he could live without a herd of dumb cows. Cows weren't anybody's dignity nor family name, but blood had been spilled for this knife and that made it far more valuable than milk.

Boy, listen to your father, now, Mitchell Phelps said. This has gone beyond you. You've done enough harm now.

You owe me for a pair of shoes, Clay said. Or I can take it out on these boots.

Mitchell Phelps hissed at him and pulled back on the reins like he was warding off the Evil Eye.

John Bell, it was a curse on you and yours when Darling passed on. That she should see what you've done with this boy.

I suggest you ride off now, and if you ever mention my wife's name or talk to my boy again, I'll kill you where I find you.

Mitchell Phelps sneered at them and rode off. Clay watched him pass across the field long after John had pivoted on his heel and walked back to the house. Rider and horse dwindled the farther afield they went, becoming harmless figures beside the cow, two tails swishing dumb as sheets and one rider rolling along sitting over top them. What did Mitchell Phelps know about what Clay had done? Clay figured he hadn't done near enough to pay back his father for what John kept going through for him. The farm felt a

bigger place with one less cow on it, but a land sowed with principle nonetheless. Clay figured he could live here till Hell of high water.

Grandma Florence told them, You can't eat principle and honor won't fill your cup, nor keep the lights on.

September came with the evening creak of crickets and during the day, the sun was warm and aged as golden bread in an oven. October followed and the trees turned the color of a funeral arrangement.

Clay heard the truck pull in the yard and listened for the sound of the doors opening. After a bit he rose to the window and in the gray light saw his father sitting in the cab. A little firefly of light throbbed behind the windshield and the window came down, smoke rolling out. When John left the truck and crossed the yard, entering the barn and minutes later driving the hogs into the pen, Clay knew that Mitchell Phelps was coming for the hogs.

He pulled on his pants and a shirt, and the shoes he had gotten in Cincinnati that Saturday of the Pirates game. He shoved the penny knife in his pocket and ran into his father's bedroom, and after banged through the screen door.

The hogs milled in the pen, ears bouncing on some as they walked.

In the darkened barn, he didn't see John, only smelled what remained of the General and the cows, lingering like a memory of who he had been and how he had lived once, the thickness of the odor pulling on a type of muscle memory that wasn't so much in his limbs but in his temperament. Bill and he looking at stars in the sky, Rebel pacing outside his window, the tactile feel of rosary beads between his fingers and his mother

reading the Book of Jonah. All gone, he told himself. Only lies come back to haunt and real bravery is having the courage to face forward. Assailed, he ran in circles. The penny knife was nothing and everything and he'd struck on the one trump to play, to redeem everything and put an end to it all. Clay called out for his father. An edge of light appeared and he glimpsed the silverfish flicker of a form escaping the barn and he followed.

He came out on the pen but John was nowhere to be seen. The hogs gathered at one end under the railing near the trough and Clay came up on them, the shotgun, not as heavy as it had once seemed, in his arms. A set of hog eyes laughed at him as he drew a bead. He pulled back on the trigger and the boom seemed to stun the hog more than anything, then it fell on its side and the rest of them squealed in all directions.

John came running round the corner of the barn with a bucket of hog feed.

What in God's name are you doing!

We pay our debts! Nothing says in what manner he collects!

Clay fired the other barrel, buckshot spraying a hog's leg, making it jump behind the others and sending them to the far side of the pen.

Before Clay could reload with the shells in his pockets, John yanked the rifle from his hands and knocked him down. He glared at Clay with red, stunned eyes.

How many is he owed? He can just as well drag them off.

That is none of your concern.

It's all my concern. Your name is my name.

John wavered over this. He reeked and the misery was plain on his face that Mitchell Phelps was due every last one of them.

One last trump, father. Clay was on his knees holding a shell up to John. Why make it so easy for the sonofabitch?

You're happy to win this way?

We are right and there ain't anyone who can deny it.

Clay and John shoot the rest of the hogs.

They burn the pen and Clay tosses in the penny knife.

Mitchell Phelps and his boys come to claim them, drag the bodies off.

After this John becomes a pariah.

The weakest character portrayed in all I think is John. His character is the mystery, his charm, his pull and perversion of Clay.

Grandma Florence died in November in her sleep. She didn't wake to make breakfast and it wasn't till the next day that Clay remembered that he hadn't seen her and knocked on her door. She lay in bed with her mouth open and without her glasses, prone in the dessication of death she appeared a shriveled husk, a museum piece of paper mache and cobwebs. Her funeral was held at St. Rose's and Bill returned to serve the mass, but he stayed with his mother's relatives in the city and afterwards returned to the seminary. He saw his father and Clay sitting in the front pew, but neither came to the rail to receive, and only met up with each other at the graveside. Each had tossed in a handful of dirt on

her casket and stood before the others with their soiled hands held out at their sides to avoid touching their dress clothes. John told Bill he looked well fed. Bill said the life suited him. Clay bent down to throw in another handful.

In January of 1937 the river rose and swallowed the Bell farm, forcing John and Clay to move into the city. By then they were in arrears on the farm and the insurance collected allowed them to pay their debts and make a clean break. The water swept away the house and the barn and the remains of the pen, and raised up old dog bones and carried them away downriver.

BIOGRAPHY

Todd Covalcine is from Cincinnati, Ohio.