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JANICE DAUGHARTY

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Sluing on the curve between shoulders of curled brown grass, a green pickup nabs the cold fire of the evening light. Junior stands tall and hangs out his thumb, reflexively cocking his hip. The block-headed driver lifts one finger but whips on past, so Junior squats again on the edge of the road, paring his nails with his pocketknife. Listening for the scolding pitch of the engine to sink to a somber roar, he hears the truck slow, and turns to see it circle the gravel highway, idling back.

"Heading for Florida, I bet," says the man whose thick blonde arm is crooked in the window. He's chewing on a toothpick while he sizes Junior up.

"Yessir," says Junior, shining his lapped teeth. He pockets his knife, a certified Old Timer, and picks up his brown duffel with black vinyl trim.

"Hop in." The man nods toward the other side of the truck.

"Yessir!" Junior bounces on his toes around the truck, hoists his duffel and deposits it in the back, gets in the cab and slams the door twice to show he's both eager and trusty.

The man, driving sure with one tattooed hand—"love" lettered across his gorged fingers—turns again on a ramp where a black-water branch augers through the gum woods and tools south. Still chewing on the toothpick, still sizing Junior up.

"Where you from, boy?" he says in a tight, sizing voice.

"You mean here lately?"

The man looks square at him, his green eyes squeezing light.

"I was borned up yonder in Forsythe County."

"Don't say."

"You know where Forsythe is?"

"Heared of it." Staring ahead, the man gouges his sound teeth with the pick. "Hear tell they don't take no crap off'n niggers. That right?"

"Yessir," says Junior, getting comfortable against the door with its smashed window. "Yessir, that's the place. Why, one time the Klu Klux Klan got holt of a poor ole..."

"How come you off to Florida?"

"Sir?"

"How come you going to Florida? What's there ain't in Georgia?"
“Wellsir, I hear tell they’s all kinds of goings on and…”
“How old’re you boy?” The man’s sizing Junior again, this time good.
“Twenty-two, next birthday, May 4th.”
“You don’t look it.”
“Nosir, that’s cause I’m little built, but like my mama, bless her soul,
always said, ain’t how tall a man stands, but how a man stands tall.”
The man laughs, toothpick teetering between mere slips of lips.
Junior laughs with him, charmed by the afternotes of laughter
playing in his pulpwood neck.
“Hey!” says the man, reaching over and cuffing Junior’s knee, “you
ain’t simple are you?”
“Sir?”
“Simple—you know, touched.” The man lets go of the steering wheel
and circles his block head with the finger tattooed “L”.
“I ain’t shore, sir, but my mama used to say…”
“Say, you looking for work, I can shore put you on. Put you up too;
been looking for a boy like you.”
Junior sits up and springs back, forcing a laced work boot over his
knee. “Well, I be dogged! The good Lord shore looks after his own,
don’t he? Course, like I say, I was heading for Florida.”
“Well, you here; just crossed the Florida line out of Jennings. Me and
the old lady lives just across the woods apiece. That’s Little River there.”
Junior gazes out, shining his teeth, at the creek-width black river. On
each side brown broomsage marshes smear low, cold and sterile into
stretches of tall green pines. “That your land?”
“Mine while I’m living on it.”
“Shore your old lady won’t mind waiting on me?”
The man laughs, same low in the throat half-laugh.
As the truck veers right along a dun dirt road, Junior shifts again and
stares out at the sandy fields. Dull broomsage tinges even the scrub oaks
tawny. Backlit by the westward arc of the sun, in periodic spurts of stone
gray, stands of shaggy-headed cypress break the brown lull. And occa­sional teal bunches of bladed bear grass.
“You shore got a fine place here,” Junior says, spying up ahead what
looks like an old hunting lodge—a rectangular house with a swayed
chimney and a runner of soot down the vertical inset-outset boards.
The man pulls through a tangle of bare bushy plum trees and stops
before a pile of charred cans and blasted glass. A red cur dog slinks
happily from beneath the caved board doorsteps. The man gets out
and, standing, appears stockier and taller than Junior first thought, beer
belly sagging over his brown belt. He presses his palms against each side
of his chest, like some exercise. “Get on out and get your stuff,” he says,
keeping to the bramble-lined path with a tripping gait toward the warped door.

Out back, among overgrown stubbles of wintering beggarweeds and more brown broomsage and brush, another big red cur trails the length of a clothesline that sings with the fevered grating of metal on wire and the constant husky peal of the dog's barking.

Junior stoops and pats the free cur, now wangling around his legs. "Old lady's she-dog," the man says, stopping at the door to wait. "My he-dog back yonder."

"Had a old aunt could make pork and beans just like this, ma'am." Junior sits sunken in a cowhide chair with a broken rocker, so that the table top strikes his narrow bowed chest.

Behind the lodge, the chained dog barks in a magnified voice that denotes his size and miserable condition.

Sitting across from Junior, the woman, middle-aged and chesty as the man, thumps ashes from her cigarette into a Melmac plate with a wheat design. Elbows propped on the table, she flips the cigarette before her fine white face, gone to fat. She studies Junior while slugging beer from a can, then walls her dark dwarfed eyes at the man, who is pushing beans to his spoon with a folded slice of white bread.

He eats fast, both arms braced on the table edge, his blonde eyebrows jutted from a quick rise of brow. He has emptied two cans of beer and is going on the third with long spells of not breathing while guzzling.

In the kitchen part of the elled room, a squat heater stoked with fat litard wood toasts Junior's back while his front freezes. The broad fireplace centered on the wall of the longer front room is a cold sooty cave of toppled bricks and mortar, with balled paper and crumpled foil, tin cans and bottles. Not using such a faulty fireplace, thinks Junior, says something for the careful nature of these good people.

But he has never seen so many clothes, clothes piled end to end of the long front room which serves as a sort of combination living and dining room. Most of the pants and shirts and dresses have been tumble from folds, webby with cobwebs and hollowed with rat nests. Odd shoes, as if somebody has walked out of them or maybe kicked too high, lay scattered about. On the south end of the room, next to the square table, a gallon pickle jug stands open-mouthed to catch the rain beneath a mushy spot in the wainscotted ceiling. On the north end, where one of the bedrooms is partitioned off by rose print curtains, a broomstick is tacked catercorner with a hanging of men's leisure suits, waffle knits faded gray from black, the type of flare-legged pants worn in
the seventies. There is a stale fried smell about the lodge and something ammoniac which Junior can’t quite place and feels guilty and ungrateful for even trying to place.

"Hey, listen, y’all," Junior says. "What kind of manners is this, huh?"

The man looks up, chewing on hold; the woman’s walling eyes stick on Junior, cigarette drooping before her dull gaze.

"I mean," says Junior, "here I am bout to take up with y’all, ain’t even introduced myself." He stands, sliding the chair back, and still the table top strikes only at his waist.

Out back, the dog barks, yoop, yoop, yoop, chain singing along the clothesline.

"Name’s Ray Harris Melton." Junior sticks out his smallish freckled hand to the man, who looks at it and goes back to eating. "But y’all can just call me Junior. Guess how come." He tee-hees and stares down at his short bowed legs. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma’am.” He sits and tries to take on the same solemn face of the woman now blaring her eyes like oil dripped on water.

“You really outdone yourself this time, Kurl,” she says.

Kurl eyes her and drags the blackened pan of beans closer to his plate. “Shut up, bitch.”

“Shit I will!"

Eating with his LOVE fingers clutching the spoon, the man swings his other fist up and over, like a mechanical arm, and smashes the cigarette into her face. She dips back, the chair skids slightly, and a red burn mars one plump white cheek like blood on linen.

"Y’all excuse me," says Junior, pushes back and starts for the front door, picking up his duffel.

The dog barks, yoop, yoop, yoop, whimpering between yoops.

"Get on back here, boy," the man hollers. "Ain’t nobody dismissed you from mess."

Bedded down on a ruptured cotton mattress, in a nest of old clothes, Junior decides he’ll count to one hundred, listening for the man and the woman, whose name he is yet to learn, to start snoring—listening to the dog baying nothing outside the window—then he’ll head out. But when he gets to fifty he finds he’s having trouble remembering if he’s counted forty-seven and has to back up, and when he gets to fifty again he hears somebody tipping through the dark house, between the yooping of the dog and the singing clothesline, and stopping at the rose curtain partition. His heart pitches in his chest like he’s on the downward plunge of a ferris wheel.
"That you, bub?" he calls—it would help to know a name. *Kurl* somehow doesn't cut it.

The tiptoer eases in and sits on the foot of the mattress, grunting and patting the bed and then Junior’s foot. "Yeah, boy, it’s me," the man says in a whipped voice. "Woman trouble."

Junior sucks in and steel his foot against the handcuff of fingers now latched around his ankle.

The dog out back lets out a fresh batch of barking, which vibrates the house, then settles into whimpering.

"You ever had troubles like that?" The man waits. "Say?"

"Nosir, can’t say as..."

"Well, you lucky."

"Yessir."

The grip lets go and the paw-like hand pats his foot. "Yeah, you lucky."

"Yessir?" Junior doesn't mean it as a question, doesn't know what it might set off.

"Well, see, it’s like this." The man yawns like a sleepy father telling a bedtime story. "Me and the old lady, we ain’t got much going between us. Have to play these games, you know?"

Another question?

The man goes on in a voice more secretive than tired now. "See, since the war... It kind of messed me up."

"What war was that, sir?"

"Huh?" the man’s voice arcs the dark, then levels again into buddy whispers. "What difference do it make?" He ambles out, creaking through the house back to bed.

Again Junior waits, again concentrating on the count up to one hundred while the dog barks and howls and the clothesline sings, then slips up and feels till he finds his duffel and trails the carpet of clothes to the front door. He grabs the knob, which turns freely but fails to open the rattly door.

"Piss in the jug in the living room if you can’t hold it," the man calls from the bedroom off the kitchen, farting like a duck call.

"Yessir," Junior says, and fingers the cold padlock above the knob.

The next morning, when Junior parts the rose curtain partition, swinging his duffel like a soldier on furlough, the woman is perched on a stool next to the hot ticking wood heater, drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette. The dog is still barking, now only a refrain, like a broken record or loud static breathing.
Junior, grinning, looks around the low room, bare save for hillocks of clothes.

“He ain’t here,” she says, sucking on the cigarette and squinting.

“Ain’t he?”

“I done said he ain’t,” she says and swigs from the cracked white mug. “Pot’s over there.” She nods toward the greasy white range, a mosaic of crazed red sauce, dribbled egg, and corn meal sprinkles. Mice pellets like scattered grains of rice, and husks of dead roaches like pork rinds.

“Reckon I will have me a cup fore I set off,” he says.

She mumbles something in a crusty voice.

“Ma’am?” he says, squeezing past her rounded hunched back, to the old kerosene range that fumes the house with a rank oily odor and brings to mind Junior’s mama routinely trimming the old lamp wicks.

“I say,” the woman says, “you ain’t going nowhere.”

His scalp feels like it’s being zapped with electricity. He takes a cup from the pan of ropy dishwater and rinses it under the sulphur trickle of the spigot, then pours from the thin aluminum pot. While he drinks the black liquid, so thick it braids, he looks out the window at the woods and frosty fields, at the bumpy blanket over cold-seared sage. “Is this a farm or what?”

“What.”

“I say, is this a farm or what?”

“You’re shorenuf dumb, ain’t you?”

Bothersome as he feels trying to make talk, he feels more bothersome not talking, and just slightly more curious than anxious to be gone. “Y’all mighty skittish around here.”

“How come you say that?”

“Them padlocks on the doors.”

“Kurl’s ascared I might take off; even shut down my flea market.”

Junior laughs and waits for her to laugh. She takes another toke of smoke.

He changes the subject. “That must be some kind of mean dog out yonder to keep him tied up like that.”

“Kurl’s he-dog, ain’t no meaner’n most. He gets loose before time, Kurl’s gone knock him in the head.”

Junior laughs and waits for her to laugh. She takes another toke of smoke.

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Junior laughs and waits for her to laugh. She takes another toke of smoke.
“You ain’t the first; you won’t be the last.” She draws in smoke, blows it out, disgusted.

“Yessum,” he says, going out, “be that as it may, I’m shore sorry, and I’m beholden for the supper and all…”

“You ain’t going nowheres, not till he’s had a bait.”

“A bait?”

“Enough.”

She gets up and slouches off, shifting heavy foot to foot. Neither young nor old, but snagged in the shift between.

And as it turns out, she was right.

Before Junior gets to the highway, Kurl’s truck comes cruising up the bright sand road. Junior steps to the crackling weeds, and Kurl swerves toward him, smiling that mocking smile.

“Well, looks like I’ve took on one industrious fella.” He reaches out, playing the door like a piano. “Here I hire on a fella to help out around the place, and what do he do? Sleep past sunup.”

“Yessir,” says Junior, scratching his ear, “that dog of your’n…”

“Kept you up, huh? Get in and let’s get started.”

But when they get to the house, Kurl rears back in a straight chair beside the glowing wood heater and starts telling war stories: stories about which buddy got his brains “blowed out” and which tank got “blowed up” and not a clue as to which war.

The wind picks up around noon with the staked dog’s howling, and Kurl starts drinking beer, burping and guzzling, ordering the woman to get him another before he’s finished the can in his hand. She’s changed into a matching purple sweater and tight pants with legs that flare around gold-heeled mules. Kurl’s face gets red, his green eyes glaze over, and Junior, perched at ready on the other side of the heater, decides once again to wait till Kurl passes out then make his getaway.

But after a couple more beers, Kurl comes alive and nothing will do him but to go riding and drinking, to take the dogs for an outing. His and hers.

The woman doesn’t look too happy about it, but she loads up the styrofoam ice chest, a snowy white, the only white on the place since the frost vanished. Then she struggles on back of the truck, anchoring the leash of the she-dog to a concrete block near the cab, with just enough play in the rope for the cur to lift her valentine face. Kurl, cussing his tail-switching dog every breath, stakes his red cur to another concrete block near the tailgate. Both dogs rake their claws on the metal bed and lunge for one another, with the woman, who now has a name—“Goddamnit, Hulda, mind that bitch!”—weaving between in her gold mules that show dingy leathern heels.
Junior waits in the cab of the truck, watching them in the rearview mirror sporting furry dice, the kind you win at the fair. They swing in the wind through the broken right window.

Finally, Hulda hops over the tailgate, hitting the frozen dirt, and says she's not going if Kurl's aiming to cut up. Kurl, walking toward the front, wrings her arm back and grits his teeth and shoves her in next to Junior, gets in and slams the door.

He smacks the steering wheel with his fist, swearing, and gets out again and reaches over the roiling, snarling dogs and takes three beers out of the ice chest. When he gets to the window, he tosses one in and Hulda catches it. "Give that'n to Junior yonder," he says, gets in and hands her another and pops the tab on his own can.

"You know," says Junior, trying to get out of drinking the cold beer freezing his hands, while at the same time hoping to salve all bad feelings in the truck, "I ain't never had one of these."

"Budweiser?" says the man.

"Beer," says Junior, enjoying the sudden quiet.

Kurl seems to be driving the same dun stretch of dirt road, back and to and turning around under the same dead live oak, with branches like deer antlers imprinted on the cold blue sky. But finally Junior deduces that the same dun color simply carries on to connecting roads because an old barn with logs and dobbing crumbling to dust happens up out of an abyss of woods. He settles back, sipping his beer, charmed by the starburst of the broken window, the sameness of fanning pines, and occasional cold cleared fields, some set out in weed-size saplings, then broomsage and more broomsage, spreading a blanched brownness across the oak-studded landscape that makes him feel crosseyed.

Now and again, the dogs act up, the he-dog rearing toward the she-dog, and Hulda knuckles the back glass and hollers for them to knock it off. Then she sits back, splaying her rounded purple knees and sucks on the top of the beer can. She burps and says "Scuse me," beating her soft chest where her downset breasts have drooped to her belly. Her arm against Junior's is soft and warm, compared to the hard cold door with the busted-out window.

Kurl's moods switch from hateful to happy, depending on the frequency of beer cans being slued out the window into lacy-topped dogfennels beyond the routed ditches. The more he drinks, the more his complexion deepens to a smart radish red. His speech is slurred, and when he catches on that he's drunk, he grows morose and sullen, darting his narrow green eyes at Hulda and Junior as if it's their fault.

Hulda's mad because Kurl won't stop for her to pee, and he's
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damned and determined to make her hold it since she didn’t want to go at the last rest stop.

Once, around four o’clock, according to Junior’s digital divers’ watch, Hulda lays into Kurl and snuggles, and Junior figures maybe she’s afraid that Kurl might think she’s been leaning too close to him. And he feels cold with her soft warm arm gone. Normally, Junior wouldn’t think such thoughts at all, but the beer—his fourth now—puts abnormal thoughts in his head. About the woman, about Kurl and the woman, and even himself and the woman, Lord help! He’s about decided to quit drinking, but Kurl keeps stopping the truck to pee and staggering back, passing out beers, while storming at the dogs—the he-dog has dragged his concrete block till he can rear up and touch front paws with the she-dog. When she lets him, that is. Hulda happens to be dozing during all subsequent rest stops.

By his sixth beer, Junior leans closer to Hulda, leaving the cold peened door. At first, he just wants to get warm, but as the evening unravels, he finds, bogging in her soft flesh, that he likes the stale deodorant smell of her, the way her thighs rise above his on the seat. Something commanding about that. He longs to touch the picked purple knit on the leg he’s claimed. The other leg belongs to Kurl. And what is between them.

“Pile out,” Kurl says, stops and piles out himself and folds Hulda over on his panned seat, Junior with her.

She looks back mean and slides out under the steering wheel, and Junior gets out on the busted window side, trying to zip his royal blue corduroy Future Farmers of America jacket with his name and club chapter stitched in gold on the back. But the thingamajigger that starts the zipper won’t hook, and while he works on it, he listens to the dogs’ claws on the metal bed of the truck, their festering misery, and feels he’s always heard them, that barking has always been in his head. Something to ground himself to while fiddling with the zipper, swaying and dying to pee.

The deep pine woods, underbrushed with tytys and myrtle bushes, gallberries and palmettoes, seem a good place to hide and do his business, and he starts to wobble off, but the carved ditch between him and relief seems to grab his right foot and jerk him in, ankle deep in slushy black mud. He sits down on the dun dirt that he could swear links road to road around the world, which he can barely recall—Florida changes the rest of the world somehow, at least changes Georgia, which is really all he knows—and proceeds to rake away the black gummy mud from his boot, then his hand, then the legs of his faded dungarees. He almost lets his bladder go—it would be so easy—but Kurl is unloading
his dog, yelling at Hulda to keep her bitch tied till he says to let her go. Junior can hear Hulda’s heeled mules scuffing among the clawing and scratching on metal and thinks that one thing to be said about drinking is it sure separates sounds. But then you don’t give a damn.

He really loves Hulda now. He is sure. He feels sure also that she is his to take away from Kurl; she is waiting for him to take charge and change her life. He gets up, holding to the side of the truck, all the way to the tailgate—a pretty good distance, drunk—and can feel the wind whipping from the he-dog pouncing off the tailgate. The hard packed dirt quakes as the dog’s big square paws make contact, two at a time. Kurl is cursing and hooting at Hulda to hold her dog, her skidding and muttering coarse nothings because curses won’t form, then plopping on the concrete block and seizing her dog by the collar, the smaller red dog licking her drooped face, stained red with cold.

“Y’all got ery notion what’s coming up?” Kurl shouts, scrunch-faced and sawing on the he-dog’s leash, while the big dog prances, shredding the sheet of dirt with his claws.

Junior means to say “I ain’t” but belches instead, swaying to and fro from the tailgate, while now and then the big red cur switches his legs with his hard tail.

“Bring the she-dog on out now,” Kurl hollers to Hulda, who now appears to be dozing while She-dog winds the rope around her and the block.

Coming to, she untangles the leash and slouches to the tailgate behind She-dog, who hits the dirt hard and yanks free.

While Kurl curses She-dog and Hulda, chasing down the open road after both gamboling red curs, Junior offers up a hand to his new love, staggering across the tailgate. She waves him off and starts to hop down, but he reaches up and grabs her around both legs and sprawls back with her on top and astride. He pees on himself. Warmth spreading front to front of him and the woman.

She heaves up, gazing in his brown speckled eyes. “That’s what you get for messing with me, fool.” Then she slaps him across his numb face and struggles to her feet, weaving off toward the ditch and mumbling. “Kurl’s fault; he oughta let me go when I told him.”

Junior scrabbling up, hears the feet of the dogs thundering back and Kurl cursing. Junior wants to follow and tell Hulda that it was him and not her who had peed. But he makes it no farther than getting up on all fours, just in time to be joined by the twitchy he-dog and she-dog.

“OK, Hulda, y’all, get set.” Kurl announces and laughs wildly. “Here they go!”

Kurl lets go of He-dog’s rope and the cur frolics off and back, cutting
the dirt around Junior and She-dog, now lapping his face; He-dog sniffs her under the tail curiously, then leaps on Junior’s back from the rear and begins hunching.

“Sonofabitch!” bellers Kurl, his red face like a lit Santa Claus’s. “Get yo ass over there, boy.”

Junior, whose head is whirling like a flying jenny, tries to scramble up and the dog scrambles with him, still clutching him around the waist and hunching.

“Not you, idjit!” Kurl is clearly speaking to Junior now; he kicks him in the right shin to make sure he knows it. “What ails you, dog?”

Hulda wobbles out of the ditch with blackened toes, her wet purple stretch pants twisted on her broad flat buttocks. One gold heeled mule gone. “You sonofabitch! You held off too long; She-dog’s done out of heat.”

The big red cur releases Junior, sniffs She-dog, and lopes to a pine tree, hikes his leg and pees.

“Shit and hellfire!” says Kurl, sorely disappointed. “I been looking forward to this.” He circles the road, scuffing over the gouged dirt and comes back to the tailgate with his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his low-riding khakis. “OK, let’s load’em up. Y’all ain’t cold?”

“I shore am,” Junior says, on his feet now and happy he can finally speak. No more beer.

But already Kurl is passing them out from the now battered white ice chest, impressed with dirty paw prints, and whistling for the red curs. He-dog comes galloping from the darkening woods and hops into the bed of the truck and sits panting. His tongue hangs out like a slip of raw liver.

Hulda gets her dog back in, leaving the rope to trail anywhere it will and She-dog free to gnaw and lick He-dog, who just sits and gazes dumbly out, his carved square face a facsimile of Kurl’s.

All three in the truck now, Hulda sits in the center and holds her beer between her legs, rubbing her fine white hands and blowing into them like she’s starting a fire. “Turn on the heater, Kurl.”

“It’s on; that air hole yonder’s what’s freezing us to death.”

Junior worries that something’s wrong with him because he isn’t cold, even with the wind smacking the right side of his face. At least his teeth hurt; otherwise, he’s fairly numb. But in a few minutes, when the peed patch on his dungarees cools, he thinks he might freeze to death. He yearns to cuddle up to Hulda and her rounded purple thighs.

The dogs are shaking the whole truck, dashing about like butter in a churn, and every so often, Kurl cranks down his window and beats on the cab. “Set down back there, idjits!”
Junior's hand holding the beer can matches the cold patch on his thighs, but the rest of him is peculiarly warm.

With the birth of the violet-bordered dusk, the wind dies, and Junior is certain they are traveling the same long straight dun road—he even recognizes the old crumbling log-and-dobbing barn he's seen earlier—except that the road is now bumpy as a railroad track. He decides that if this is Florida, it is nothing but sand-soaked farms and certainly dull. No Disney World and water-shirred beaches, like on TV.

All of a sudden, the bouncing motion lifts from the back of the truck, and the truck itself *boo-boops*, rising up and over on a hump, and one of the dogs lets out a series of keen yelps. Junior looks back through the glass, his nose in Hulda's frizzy dark hair, and spots He-dog sitting by himself.

Kurl brakes and says, "Damn it to hell, Hulda, if your she-dog ain't bailed out under the wheel."

Then Junior sees the dog, broadside and twitching in the left ditch where she's rolled.

Hulda screams, piercing the peace of the cab, and Junior opens the door and jumps out, crouching, then dashes toward She-dog, crumpled and blood-scored across her stocky chest. Her mouth trickles foamy blood, her twitching legs dwindle like stuck scissors.

Junior starts back to the truck and sees Hulda and Kurl standing in front, him boxing her about the shoulders and her slapping and kicking, him holding her off by bunching her purple sweater like a bra then punching her fine white face till it turns violet as the border of sky.

Walking toward them, Junior stops, listening to their curses carry over the still cold patch of wind-combed sage. A concentrated cold without the wind. He scans the sky, listening for coots in a cypress slough, situated in the middle of the field, then reaches in the back of the truck and opens the ice chest and gets himself another beer. "Y'all beat all," he says.

At home, they keep drinking, Kurl and Hulda and Junior, who started drinking not to hurt their feelings and now drinks to keep from sobering up. Besides, he figures if they get drunk enough, he can eventually slip off. But he gets drunk first, and the next morning wakes in their bed with his head on Hulda's flattened breast, which looks scribbled with ink, miniature trees. Kurl is sprawled naked on the other side with one hairy leg flung over the edge.

After vomiting off the rotted back porch till his eyes bulge, Junior washes up at the watershelf, wets his heavy brown hair and slicks it back before the hanging square mirror that picks up the frosted woods in its
denuding patch of silver. Though it's cold out, frosty pure and bright, Junior sweats under his plaid flannel shirt and dreads the heat of the kitchen. He starts to leave, around the back, and the devil with his duffel. But he goes on into the kitchen.

Again, Hulda is perched on the stool, smoking and sipping coffee. She twirls around with her back to him as he steps inside and closes the door easy, shy as a new lover.

He goes over to the stove and pours full the cup he used yesterday. "Say, you don't happen to have a church around here, do you?" Thinking maybe he will go to church and after all it is Sunday, and what better excuse to finally get away.

"Take your pick," she says, "Sardis, Wright's Chapel, Jennings Primitive Baptist."

"You don't say! Why, my own mama was Primitive Baptist. She'd have everlast one of us boys—me, I got seven brothers—setting in the churchhouse, come Sunday." He laughs hoarsely. "That woman, one day she picked a truck up off'n me—changing a flat—and the next day tried to shoot me down out of a tree."

Hulda turns to him, her face a fine marble of red and blue bruises. "Shut up, you fool."

He gurks. "I just thought..."

"Don't think."

Suddenly he feels sorry for her, can feel her suffering, the pain through her blood-streaked eyewhites. His stomach churns looking at her pulpy lips. "I best be moseying on then."

He turns around, facing the smeary window that looks out on the frosted trash pile where a flock of robins flit and peck. "Go yonder through the woods," she says, "not up the road."

"Yessum." He goes to the door and picks up his duffel. "Why don't you come go with me? To church, I mean. It being Sunday and all, you know."

"You fool."

"Don't say that, lady," he says, dropping his duffel and wagging his head. "'He who calls his brother a fool is in danger of hell fire.'"

"You ain't hardly my brother, are you now?"

"No'um, but that ain't what it means."

"What do it mean then?"

"Means we all one another's brothers and sisters." He watches her face, her pitiable face, and feels not so much pity as compassion, suffering-with.

"That a fact?" she hisses. "You fuck your sister?"

"Don't talk like that; you a pretty woman when you ain't talking nasty."
“Pretty don’t count when you’re going through the change.”
“Didn’t mean pretty that way.”
“What you think, I’m a lady?”
“Yessum, I expect you could be.”
“Then Kurl out yonder could be a gentlemen, right?”
“I spect so.”
“You are a fool.”
“Yessum, I spect I’m that too.”
“What’s ailing you, boy?”
“Same thing’s ailing us all, sin.”
“Sin.” She snorts. “You believe in that?”
“So the good book says.”
“You ever read it, or was it your mama told you that?”
“Both. I reckon even if’n you couldn’t read, you could see it all around you—ugly in the bad we do, beauty in the good. Them robins yonder pecking for worms.”
“They hungry, fool.”
“They pretty though, ain’t they?”
She doesn’t answer, but he knows she thinks so too by the way her eyes set on the thawing woods. “He’s been like that since the war,” she mumbles.
“What war was that?”
“Do it make a difference?”
“I was just wondering.”
“Don’t wonder.”
He lifts his duffel again and goes out, closing the door softly. He thinks he hears her crying but then decides it’s only the fan-tailed hawk working the fruitless fields of broomsage. Picking his way along the defrosting path of gallberries and myrtles, around one of the cypress sloughs, he makes it to the highway, stands and hangs out his thumb, Georgia bound.