

Hood Ornament

by Carinda Swann

1 Buck Stopped

Francis pulls in the last of his Winston and thumps it out the window. As he leaves, the neon orange blinks out its guilty verdict in his rearview mirror, ‘vacancy,’ ‘vacancy,’ ‘vacancy.’ And without a to-do, it disappears graciously like a high-class woman who’s had too much to drink. He feels bad about leaving his midnight find without a goodbye. But hell, she was sleeping like a baby. Pretty girl.

The wipers barely keep the road visible. The second he sees it, he hits it. The Bronco spins a halved circle and stops. Its remaining headlight spots the huge animal on his side. The magnificent antlers turn to Francis in slow motion, black eyes begging. Without looking, he reaches behind him for the Remington. This never gets easy. The single shot pierces the downpour no more than the high-pitched scream of a woman. The buck goes limp. Francis squats and counts. Sixteen points. Damn. He’d never even seen one. No way he can handle gutting him alone in this god-awful mess of a night. Francis jacks his long bones upright and peers back down at the wasted hulk; there is that rack though. Without a bone saw to get through the skull cap, he’d have to take the whole head. The neck’s as big around as a bushel basket. A skinning drop point isn’t meant for this, but at least it’s razor-sharp. The hide and sinew are tough as a combat boot, and the going’s slow as molasses. Thick blood thinned by rain spreads across the Blues Highway like a red satin bedsheet. After nearly an hour of slicing through what feels like a tractor tire, the knife rakes bone. He is spent. Would’ve taken even longer without the rain washing the blood away. Thank God splitting apart the vertebrae will be a breeze. With a

few well-placed blows, the small hatchet sets the massive head free. In a flash, he knows exactly what to do with his booty. Coyotes will take care of the rest. Soaked to the marrow, he stacks his spine back up and musters enough strength to sling the bloody beauty into the spotless rear of his Bronco.

Sucking in a chestful of soggy Mississippi air, Francis U-turns into a black hole.

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Emmy Lou's pure tone lifts all things. The new CD player sounds damn good. But still, he had hung on to the factory-installed cassette player. For his old stuff. Five feet from the front door, Francis slides to a crunchy halt on the loose gravel. In one sleek motion, he slips out of Scarlet and his suit jacket. He leans his 75 lean inches on her front fender and plops a snake-skin booted foot on a chunk of concrete that keeps folks from driving on in. He digs out a Winston. A warm gust blows his wavy auburn hair appropriately out of place. He lights up. Francis knows he's good at looking the part. A magazine ad of a man.

In three plus decades, Francis has never once predicted what Taylor will do. His response to the new hood ornament may be positive but more likely will piss him off—like Scarlet had for some reason. Maybe because that car is Francis's one wild hair. And gets lots of attention. A twangy tragedy in the jukebox whines out through the screen door as Buzzy squeaks it open and spits a brown streak. He spots it. "Holy fucking shit, Frankie!" He lurches forward. "Where the hell'd you get that dude? Hey, Taylor!" Buzzy screams to the door. "You and the boys get out here, Taylor!"

Francis floats out a couple of smoke rings. About to slip behind the Mile-A-Way, the dying sun gives Scarlet's new hood ornament the glow of a royal crown, each of its points a gold

dagger reigning grandly atop the custom chrome mount. And sure enough, within seconds, Taylor's whole predictable clan struts out, cocks pressed forward. Slugs in blue jeans. Francis loves predictable people. After all, he sucks in a deep drag, they make lawyers rich.

Buzzy touches each point on the antlers. "Can you believe this, boys? It's a sixteen!"

"Scarlet got a fuck from a sixteen-point buck." Freddy cracks himself up. The clan laughs too, like always, even when nothing's funny. If it weren't for Taylor, their collective vocabulary wouldn't exceed a hundred words, the lion's share cuss words. Francis tries on occasion to get Taylor to lose his losers. But like a preacher, he needs worshippers to give him worth. So Francis dumbs down to size. Well, not totally down.

"What's all the goddamn commotion out here?" Taylor's width spreads from jamb to jamb. Since first grade, every person in the room has been drawn to Taylor. Francis's daddy had that 'thing.' But for entirely other reasons: Brawn v Brains. "Goddamn, Frankie, that sum-bitch musta had does lined up for miles. Fuck, his rack is still oozing testosterone." Taylor shoots Francis the crooked smile of sorts that can mean trouble. When something else is the center of attention, things can go sideways. "Damn thing must be close to a 195." Taylor whistles.

"Yeah, but got some major abnormalities that'd take it down a good bit. An old injury on his right rear quarter, here, so the left antler's fucked up in a couple of minor places."

"But still. Not too goddamn shabby for your first buck, Frankie Boy."

"Yeah, pretty damn close to as good as my first fuck." The clan guffaws. "Got him over at the edge of the Delta. Woods right next to Tandy's land. Sat for hours. 'Bout to give up when I saw him. Pretty far away for that old Remington of Daddy's. Just got lucky, I reckon."

“You a lucky boy, Frankie. Always were.” Taylor grunts. With slow purpose, he fingers all fourteen crotches. “Lucky indeed.” Francis sees a volatile Taylor forming. Will it be the clever one? The macabre? The mean? Whatever. Sure to be a car crash you can’t stop looking at. The clan notices Taylor’s mood change and begins their slink back inside. “Fuck, Frankie, you got that drop-dead gorgeous woman. Plus two of the prettiest little girls this side of heaven. And you, my boy, you ain’t a bad ambulance-chaser yourself. A lucky man, I’d say.” Taylor polishes off his beer, crunches the can into a ball and overhands it to the other side of the tin roof. And quick as lightning, his funk flips one-eighty. He grunts, laughs, and throws a thick, hard arm up around Francis’s shoulder. “Come on, ole buddy, this calls for a celebration!” They walk into a wall of smoke. Waylon Jennings rambles on.

“Shots around, Jake!” Taylor booms. “We toastin’ Scarlet’s new hood ornament.” The crowd hoots out its approval with gusto.

Billy John blurts out of the blue, “Frankie, do you know another one of Taylor’s houses burnt down while you was out of town last week?”

Francis joins the game. “Aw, Taylor. Did you lose all your precious belongings again?” Laughs all around. Although Taylor has never owned up to it, not even to Francis, it’s common knowledge he builds or buys a house within a thirty-or-so-mile radius, moves in or rents it, burns it down, and collects the insurance. He’s admired for miles around.

Taylor puts on his dead serious look, “Hell man, I cain’t for the life of me figure how it happened. This time I built a goddamn brick house thinking I wouldn’t be caught homeless again.” Laughter grows. “Y’all sum-bitches are a goddamn heartless bunch o’ yellow-bellied

sapsuckers!” Francis can’t figure out for love nor money how Taylor continues to get away with it. But he’s the one who told him about keeping the deeds in the names of trusted friends to avoid detection by the index bureau. Just had no idea Taylor had so many trusted friends. “Well, I’ll be. Look what the cats dragged in, ya’ll! Snap, where the hell ya been?” Francis hears the excitement in Taylor’s voice. It doesn’t take much in this podunk town. “Come on over here, Snap! Lemme buy ya sump’um wet. And Frankie here needs his fancy boots shined.” A now happy Taylor yells. “Jake, get Snap a shot o’ bourbon on the double!”

“You know I don’t do no snake boots, Mister JimBob?” Snap grins from ear to ear.

Snap hadn’t shined shoes in decades, just comes in playing the part, so Taylor’ll buy his booze. Old as the hills, but can put away enough booze to kill a horse. Must be well over ninety. Sure couldn’t tell it to look at him. His mama said Snap was shining shoes as a grown man when she was a girl no bigger than a minute. Snap’s the only Black that comes in the Mile-a-Way. They aren’t fans of country or 70s rock and roll. Strictly funk, R&B with some jazz thrown in. They got their own joints. No doubt way more fun. Delta juke joints sure as hell are, but around here everybody stays in their lanes. For the most part. The Mis’sippi Mud gets some black business.

“Snap, d’you see Frankie’s new hood ornament out there?” Taylor hands Snap another shot. He gets Snap drunk as a hoot owl and telling stories. Made-up crap. Maybe a hair of truth.

“Yessir, Mister JimBob, I seen it. It sure is fine. Mister Francis, you laid that bugger low, man I mean, low.” Snap downs his shot. He always perks up the night. “That buck, you know he comes to more’n most humans do in the end, ain’t he, Mister Francis?” All snap to attention hoping some Snap wit and wisdom is coming. “Most folks they just live their lives and make a

half dozen or so younguns, and then they die and go on home. But that buck. He goan live on forever. And he ain't complaining none either, his fine horns sittin' there all perked up cause they get to spend everlasting life on top of Scarlet." Snap's bubbly laugh spreads through the crowd like fire in a hay barn.

Taylor chimes in. "You ever shot a deer, Snap?"

"Nosir. Mister JimBob, ain't never shot no deer. Don't know why. Ain't got it in me, I reckon. Just tryin' to keep things alive. Sides, ain't got no gun even if I wanted to."

"Hell Snap, I'll loan you a gun. You and me'll go hunting sometime, and you can get yourself one of them fine hood ornaments."

"Well, I 'preciate that, Mister JimBob, but I ain't got no hood to put no hood ornament on cause I ain't got no car." Snap laughs along with the entire bar crew and kills his drink. Taylor slams another double in front of him. It'll be a short night for Snap.

"Well, Snap, it don't matter. You got other talents. Like tellin' stories. Another round, Jake!" Taylor yells, "Snap, tell us about the time your old lady bathed in the tub of Clorox so you could see what it was like to lay with a white woman."

Francis has heard this one a few times. A total crock, but still makes him squirm. One of Taylor's all-time favorites. And the drunker Snap is the funnier the story. This is Francis's chance to break free. But then going back to solitary in that beige cell without the blindness of inebriation is an unbearable thought. God, he misses home. As hard as he's tried these past two months to keep from thinking about it, it's become nearly impossible to keep Jean Ann from

constantly turning his thoughts into amorous ramblings. A sudden burst of cackles brings him back to the Clorox story. Thank God the end is near.

“Yessir, took my woman a long time to get her color back. And Lord, I was sure a happy man when she did. She was sure one ugly white lady! And I was just a old piece of nothing till she got black again. Oooo eeee Lord, she was so ugly, my poor old partner,” Snap pulls a dirty rag out and holds it stretched tight from his crotch to his sternum, “just dropped down his head, limp as a dirty dish rag.” He lets the rag drop down between his legs. The crowd roars. Snap downs another. Local myth has it that there wasn’t a fly that ventured anywhere near Snap that had survived the ‘snap’ of his shoe shining rag.

“Snap!” Francis slaps him on the back. “Don’t you reckon you oughta get on back home to your woman? She’ll be waiting for her handsome devil. Come on, I’ll give you a ride in Scarlet with her fancy new crown.”

“That reminds me. Frankie, did you see that article in the *Clarion Ledger* Sunday on aphrodisiacs?” Oh God, Taylor’s not ready to stop.

Straight man Billy John pipes up. “What’d it say, Taylor?”

“Hell man, I was shocked as shit when I read this article. All these hot shot scientists have found out the best aphrodisiac you can get—you will not believe your ears—is just plain old ordinary shoe polish.” All eyes lock on Taylor like kids about to hear a ghost story.

“What’s a aphrodisiac, Taylor?” Buzzy yells down the bar. Somebody explains to him while the rest laugh at him, even the ones who also have no idea what it is. “That’s crazy, Taylor. You supposed to polish your dick?” Buzzy’s getting rambunctious too.

Taylor shoots a hard look at his little brother. “Fuck no. Just shut the hell up and listen, Buzzy.” He turns back to his audience. “I kid you not, folks. They say shoe polish is some kind o’ good if you happen to be one of those unlucky bastards in dire need of some heavy starch.”

Taylor hands Snap another drink. “Snap, you know what a aphrodisiac is?”

“Nosir, I heard that word, but don’t recall what it was.”

“Well, Snap, my boy,” Taylor moves in close to share the brotherly secret. “That is the medicine us menfolk need when we get old and cain’t lay down with our women no more, if you get my drift, Snap.” Taylor grabs his own plump crotch with a jerk.

“Sure ‘nough? Ain’t no way! That’s the Lord’s business, ain’t it?”

“Well, he’s the one give these highfalutin scientists their big brains. And those sum-bitches say it’ll make you straight as a arrow. I mean, make your partner snap to attention and salute. Make him so hard a bobcat cain’t scratch ‘im!”

“Now, how’s it goan do that, Mister JimBob?”

“Hell, man, how do I know? I ain’t no scientist. But it’s true, Snap. I got the article right in my truck if you want to see it.”

“I seen that article, Taylor,” Billy John lends an assist. “And I moan try it for damn sure when I get old and lax. Fact is, I moan start saving fucking shoe polish tomorrow case they stop making it.”

“Smart thinking, Billy John. The article says there’s only a few brands make it with the magic ingredient.” Taylor pulls on his five-o’clock stubble that looks like a five-day one. “Let’s see now, I’m trying to remember what ingredient was the magic one. A big fancy word. What you got in your box, Snap?” He scrambles through Snap’s ancient shoe-shine box.

Francis slaps Taylor's back. "Taylor, come on." He wishes Taylor wouldn't pull this crap on the old man. Francis has no idea what he's up to, but it can't be good.

When Taylor jumps up, his bar stool slams the floor. "God almighty, here it is!" Taylor holds a big bottle high in the air that looks like it was rolled up a century ago by the first disc plow. "Snap, my boy, this is your lucky day! This is it! This here has got the very ingredient they said makes the magic happen. Ni-tro-ben-zene. Hot damn! That's the one them scientists say will make him look to the Lord, make him stand up and sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner' and keep him going full tilt till he's plumb rubbed raw!" The crowd howls.

Francis leans in. "Taylor, for God's sake, stop it."

Taylor ignores him. "I'm telling you right now, when I get too old to keep the ladies smiling, I moan slug me down a whole bottle of this stuff so quick it'll make your head spin. And then mine'll be the happiest old ladies in the state of Mis'sippi." As strong as he is, Taylor struggles to get the cap off. He flicks it across the room and takes a long, ceremonious whiff. "Oooooo eeeee. Smells good too."

Francis tries again. "Taylor, you sure that article said you need to drink a whole bottle? I bet a sniff or two'll do the trick."

Taylor holds up the bottle like a trophy and lays a wicked eye on each of his clan.. "The article said the more you drink, the better she feels, so drink your polish 'fore all your meals." The crowd roars. Emboldened by the whooping and hollering of the entire Mile-a-Way crew, not to mention the significant amount of bourbon, Snap jerks the bottle from Taylor, turns it up and drinks the entire contents without stopping. Fucking A. Francis is in shock. It happened so fast. For an encore, Snap allows the last black drop to fall from above onto his tongue. He too has a

flair for drama. The place goes into riotous applause, punched with ear-piercing two-finger whistles. If the truth be told, Francis is pretty sure Snap comes in here as much for the audience as for the drink. In spite of himself, Francis can't keep from wondering how much money you could make off a comedy duo like Snap and Taylor. Back before civil rights and all.

“Oooooo-eeeeee, Snap, my boy! You gonna be doing some kind of hopping tonight! Drinks around! And bring Snap here a tequila chaser. The good stuff. With a wedge of lime and salt!”

Snap flashes his impressive teeth, still the originals. Taylor stands beside the swaying Snap and holds his drink high. “I propose a toast to Mister Snap Riley! He may have the oldest partner in town, but tonight it's gonna be the leanest, meanest, singingest, not to mention the rock-hardest, partner in the state of Mississippi!” Riotous roars erupt like Ole Miss just scored a touchdown in the last minute of a tied game with State. Or vice versa. Snap stops grinning long enough to down his tequila. Taylor's performance, one of the best in recent history, is over, and soon the joint is back to a normal level of unintelligible grunts and snorts.

“I b'lieve I hear my mama calling me out back.” Snap says that every time he has to take a leak. He walks a zig-zagged line to the back screen door and disappears. Francis orders a Jameson 18-year reserve Jake stashes away for him and contemplates Taylor's uncanny way of getting anybody, not just an old alcoholic with a good bit of ham in him, to do exactly what he wants. Freddy and the cat come to mind. And the cross burning. Taylor had been this way since they started school. Before probably. Francis takes his sweet time making every drop of his Jameson count. Buzzy is getting even more wound up.

Taylor takes notice. “Buzzy, get the hell over here.” Buzzy spits brown into a sawed-off beer can, slugs down the rest of his Bud on his way over to his brother.

Taylor clamps a fist onto Buzzy’s shoulder. “What the fuck number was that?”

“Jake, what number was that?” Buzzy yells.

“Four.”

“A’ight, that’s it for you tonight.” Taylor means business. Buzzy nods.

Francis can’t remember when this started exactly, a year or two ago. Buzzy had become quite the binge drinker and would get out of control swinging between his angels and demons. Taylor could hardly handle him. Strong little dude, maybe even stronger than his big brother. So Taylor implemented the plan. Jake’s to write the number with a Sharpie on every beer Buzzy orders. Been working well. Buzzy doesn’t care about much. Just his brother and his truck. Happy as a clam. Seems kids with mental disabilities are like that. At least the ones Francis has come across, albeit not too many.

Francis checks his watch and moseys out to check on Snap. Curled up on the bench. Out like a light. Poor old drunk. Francis touches his shoulder. Snap moans. Francis heads back in and nudges Taylor. “Snap’s out. Better get him home.”

“Buzzy! Get over here.” Taylor’s mood has soured. “Get Snap and take him home.” Taylor points with his head to the back door. Buzzy ambles out. Francis throws a fifty on the bar and digs out a cigarette for the drive. With Snap slung over his shoulder like a bag of bones, Buzzy walks back through. Taylor watches the two leave with a curious look. Could be sorrow. Could be nothing. “Ya know, Frankie, old Snap just don’t last like he used to.”

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A piece of a Jean Ann dream lingers, but Francis can't access it. Like every single morning. He nukes a cup of water and throws in a heaping spoon of Sanka. God awful shit. He is not going another week without buying a damn coffee pot of some kind. Sunday had crawled by like a snail. He couldn't make himself do a damn thing but watch football. This abysmal apartment sucks the blood out of you. He scrounges around for something edible in the fridge. No eggs. Cole slaw fermented. Milk sour. Some iffy beans. Two-day-old Mr. Quick chicken. At least it's crispy and salty, edible enough. He leans over the sink and gnaws to the bone like a drunken medieval lord. He can hardly believe his fortune when he finds a half container of butter pecan in the freezer. Grabbing a spoon, he heads to the porch for the morning paper nesting in its usual hydrangea, busy morphing from summer blue to deep magenta. Nothing like fried chicken and ice cream for breakfast. Francis sinks deep into the lumpy couch the landlord so generously left. God only knows what's taken place on it. He shudders at the idea. First things first. He spoons a chunk of ice cream from the side with the most pecans, polishes the rest off in under a minute and flips to the obits. The type barely readable. Gotta get some of those old people glasses soon.

Greenwood Leflore 'Snap' Riley (October 15, 1896 - October 9, 1993) passed away peacefully at his home Saturday night. He is survived by his wife of 67 years, Lyhallia Lorraine 'Lyla' Hunt Riley, three sons, and a daughter who lives in New York. He leaves twelve grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren, and two great-great-grandchildren. Mr. Riley's widow says he had been certain he would live to see the turn of two centuries. All are welcome at Southern Funeral Home in Lexington at 6 p.m. on October 12 and 13 for visitation. The service will be held at the First Missionary Baptist Church, Durant, Mississippi, at 3 p.m., October 15. Flowers can be delivered to the church.

2 Deep Wrinkle

Ruby follows Juan outside. He opens the back passenger door with the usual tongue-in-cheek flare that includes a bow at the waist. “Thanks, Juan.” She smiles and waves. “How’d you get here so fast? Where’s Jack?”

“Took him in real early.” He pulls the long limo into the chaos of city traffic.

“One of his sleepless nights, I guess.” If there was any amount of money Ruby could pay to not go to work today, she would find a way to pay it. But. She’s determined to get things wrapped up so she can be fully present for her mama. For now, she must push her daddy out of her mind. She really can’t afford a meltdown if she plans to catch that pre-dawn flight in the morning. At least she had convinced Jack to get Clements to take a Sunday meeting so she could leave right away. Mason Clements is one of the most arrogant of their clients, and that is saying a lot. A typical nouveau riche wannabe powerbroker with no class. He doesn’t even seem to know his worth is a drop in the bucket compared to their other clients. Well, at least he’s good-looking.

Mason started out so well-behaved, Ruby thought perhaps Jack had told him her father died. He was pleased the ‘big boss’ was in attendance. Performing for Jack with a glance thrown to Ruby now and then, Mason explains in detail the deal he has on the table that is worth twenty to thirty million, and the tax structure will determine the better deal to make. Mr. State the

Obvious. Ruby was not at all sure why Jack decided to be present for this drop-in-the-bucket deal. Maybe he just couldn't bear to ask another partner to cover it. On the surface, it appears to be a very straightforward deal, keyword 'surface.' Mason's pleasant mood comes to an end when Jack tells him Ruby will be unavailable for at least two weeks, and that meanwhile he'll be assigned another advisor.

"What the hell, Weissman?" Jack doesn't respond. Mason jerks his look to Ruby. "Two weeks! What, you'll be in the Outback or something with no phones?"

"No. I'll be in Mississippi for my father's funeral."

"Well, I guess that's the outback of this country." He laughs. "Mississippi? Wow. I've never met anyone from there. How did you get away? Oh wait. A man, right?" Mason grins.

She'll have to let that go for now. "Not that exciting, Mason. I bought a plane ticket."

"But you don't have an accent. You don't sound Southern at all. What's that about? By the way, do those people down there really sound like the actors in movies about the South? Is the racism as bad as they pretend?"

Ruby resists the urge to take him down a notch or two. "How is it you've lived in New York City this long and not met a single Southerner? There's even the Annual Mississippi Picnic in Central Park attended by thousands of Manhattan residents, almost all originally from Mississippi. Actually, it's in the block right across from your place on Central Park West."

He goes into the usual Southern drawl that so many seem to think is required when you meet a Southerner. "So sorry I missed out on that. Coulda eaten some fried chicken and watermelon with you all." He smiles, proud of his mimicked accent. Makes Ruby want to punch him out. She searches through her notes to hide her grimace. She can never understand why

people making fun of Southerners don't get that it's not 'you all.' It's a damn contraction, y'all! Her quick look at Jack shows a subtle change of expression in him. Thank the Lord the idiot in the room senses he should move on. Mason shoots her a smile. "So. Back to work, Ruby. Let's schedule a call every other day. I think that's reasonable. Early morning or late day is best for me. Which works for you?"

"My priority these two weeks, Mason, is personal. As Jack said, there are others here available to advise you."

"Damn, Weissman, you just let these girls order you around like this." He tries to make it sound like a joke.

Jack stands. Ruby knows that casual pose well. He is royally pissed. "I apologize, but I have another meeting." He walks out without even a handshake. Ruby's cue to do whatever she wants.

In an effort to cover his shock, Mason jokes. "Was it something I said?"

"Yes." Ruby gathers her file and walks out. She can't resist a look back through the glass wall at his puzzled stare. She smiles and waves.

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Ruby hadn't watched the weather and is stunned when she spins out of the revolving door onto Park Avenue, curbs already piled with mocha coffee slushies. The first snow of the year, a sloppy wet one. Nothing pretty about snow in Manhattan, unless it's a monster that sweeps through like a white tsunami, bringing the towering city to its knees where it happily surrenders, a magical place wrapped in the warmth of snow blankets. The moment the sun comes up, thousands pour out of steel and glass structures into the soft white. There's so much blinding light on white

covering all things normally dingy that sunglasses are a must-have even when the sun is timid. Parents pull kids on toboggans up and down Fifth and Park and Madison. And every other avenue. The intrepid head for Central Park and make their way up the made-made mountains with 8-foot summits. Snowmen lean on light posts, trash cans become giant vanilla cones. Uncommitted store managers shovel their front walks while they people-watch. The biggest miracle of all though. The silence. The only time in Manhattan when you don't hear sirens 24/7, and the only time you notice you heard them before; no brakes squeaking, no bus hydraulics blowing, no cars honking. Just quiet. Broken only by sound waves of squealing laughter making its way to millions of muffed ears. Even those trapped inside stop and listen, those in hospital beds hear, short order cooks flipping eggs hear, those in offices with joyless bosses, even those in the midst of dying can hear the sound of happy. But. It's a mere two to three hour dream before the removal machines wreak their life-saving havoc. Nevertheless, those few glorious hours are filled with a month of joy.

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Descending to baggage claim, Ruby smiles up at an uninterrupted sky of home, a taut blue canvas with not a cloud to mar its surface, flat and opaque, as solid as a David Hockney. The sun paints crisp shadows with flat ribbons of translucent wash that wrap around and tie together all things three-dimensional. No fuzzy-edged smog shadows here. The pilot had said it was 78 degrees in Jackson—Hallelujah! She starts stripping down. On the plane, she had stuffed the bulky coat into the canvas bag brought for that purpose. Now the sweater, the hat, the scarf go in. The salted ankle boots and socks go in. She wiggles her free-at-last, free-at-last toes into her favorite sandals. When she comes home, even after nearly two decades of living in New York, it

takes Ruby all of five seconds to shed her New-York-woman garb under which lies in secret just a Mississippi girl. In under five minutes, she has shed not just the weight of some water-resistant fabric and down fill, the restrictive tights, the itch of wool, but the weight of hundreds of skyscrapers atop a granite island covered in concrete and macadam trodden by millions made up of those who are lost and those who have found.

Heaven is being able to walk fifty feet, pick up your suitcase and hang-up bag, and walk another fifty to your rental car. This time it's a brand-new red Mustang convertible. Not easy to find something like this without calling far in advance. Got lucky. On the Interstate, Ruby picks up speed, encouraging the warm air to whip at her face and hair. She lets loose an ear-piercing whoop of pure joy. This may in fact be the best part of coming home. Driving a car. Driving in Manhattan is more provoking than a false positive on a Pap smear. Every couple of months, she rents a car and drives north to the foothills of the Catskills just to see the sky not interrupted by skyscrapers in the city and enormous trees in the Hudson Valley. Plus, the terrain in that part of New York is similar to Mississippi's. Nothing's flat like the Delta, though, except the ocean and North Dakota. That part of New York feels almost like home. The little towns too. Crumbling but still with warm light calling out from windows.

At Canton, Ruby gets off I-55 and onto 51, the highway she had traveled many a teen-aged mile. Most of them with Leo in her brother's 'borrowed' car. A steady wind brushes the tops of the pines. Their long needles sway in rhythmic motion back and forth, back and forth, painting the sky. Ruby smiles at the sky. That's the way the wind behaves here. It can never decide which way it wants to blow.

When Ruby was a girl, Durant's downtown bustled. It even had a movie house that had one screen and a different movie starting every Friday. Blacks had to sit in the balcony, but at least they got to be there. As a kid, she thought nothing of it. Since then, the four or five stoplights have diminished to one which is installed upside down. When she came home a few years ago and found the Durant Hotel had been demolished and replaced by a Mister Quick, she cried. That was somehow the turning point in Ruby's mind. Not that she had any attachment to the hotel. Blacks didn't go in there, except for the ones who worked there. But still. She had lived in a town with a huge four-story brick hotel that had an elevator. And a black elevator man who wore a fancy uniform and white gloves.

Ruby can no longer keep the reality of her daddy from entering her stream-of-consciousness. She digs through the bag of CDs and flicks in her favorite. Leontyne Price sends her powerful voice out above the whisper of white pines, above the wind, above all. Ruby finally cries.

Ah, no, land of my fathers,
Not you alone are the cause
Of all my sorrow.
I cry for a hopeless tomorrow
Out of my sad and broken heart.

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"Buzzy. Put Taylor on the phone." Francis slurps down the dregs of his tepid coffee.

"Frankie, fuck. He'll kill me if I wake 'im up this early."

"Wake him the hell up, Buzzy." Silence. "Now, Buzzy!"

“Okay, okay. Taylor!” Buzzy hollers. “Taylor! Get up. Frankie’s in some kind of trouble and needs you!”

Little shit. Thinks everybody needs his big brother. Francis paces as he listens to scuffling and grunting on the other end.

“What the fuck, Frankie.” Taylor farts. “Somebody better be fuckin’ dead.”

“Somebody is, Taylor. Your buddy Snap.”

There’s only a fraction of a pause. “Well, hell. That’s sad, ain’t it? He was the last of the Mohicans. One of the few who still knew his place. But fuck Frankie, it ain’t a reason to wake me up.” Taylor slams down the phone for impact.

Damn fool. Francis drops into his daddy’s giant office chair and spins to face the wall behind him. The ridiculously large portrait glares back. Francis hasn’t been able to remove it. Seems so wrong. Plus, it doesn’t hurt for folks to be reminded of who his daddy was. No telling how many jams his daddy had gotten people out of. And himself. Still held the rep of being one of the most upstanding lawyers in the state. What would he do in this damn situation? If Snap weren’t a very old man, and black, and known as a drunk, this would automatically require a full toxicology report that would show if the shoe polish killed him. He doesn’t have long to decide whether to report it. Taylor is an ever-morphing puzzle. Just as Francis thinks he gets him, Taylor surprises him. But he does know Taylor didn’t kill the old codger on purpose.

Taylor was always the alpha dog at school, but the first deeply ugly whiff Francis got of the ‘Taylor’ who wasn’t tending to Buzzy, they were about 12 or 13 and had sneaked away from school during lunch. He and Freddy followed Taylor out to the junkyard and over the chain-link fence. The three sat around on jagged pieces of rusty cars, smoking cigarettes and cussing,

watching the mangy cats get up the guts to beg. ‘Now I want you boys to take a look at them cats. They seem tame enough, don’t they, Risen Head?’ Taylor had dubbed Freddy that in second grade because Freddy had a perpetual boil on top of his head he covered with a fishing hat. ‘But they ain’t. No sir. These bastards are wild as bobcats. As a matter of fact, I bet you five bucks you cain’t even catch one of those suckers. Course ain’t no way Pillsbury Doughboy Frankie can get one.’ Freddy fell for the bait, hook, line, and sinker, and scrambled around in the dirt and garbage till he caught one. He slammed a foot on the tail. The cat screamed bloody murder. ‘What you want me to do with him, JimBob?’ Taylor was already headed to a gas can leaning on the falling-down shed. ‘He’s a miserable old cat, ain’t he? Starving. Mangey. Eaten up by fleas. Worthless as tits on a bull. I say we put him out of his misery. What do you say, Risen Head?’ He plopped the gas down next to Freddy’s excuse for a shoe. It took him a minute to figure out what Taylor wanted. But then without a second thought, Freddy doused the cat with gas until he looked like a 2x4 on sticks. Taylor handed him a pack of matches. He lit one, watched until it burnt his finger, and dropped it on the cat. An instant fireball, it ran around screeching like a queen in heat. When it looked like a burnt rack of baby backs, the cat lay down in front of an entranced Taylor and smoldered on out. Freddy swelled with pride. Taylor split his sides. Francis puked.

“I’m here, Chief. Sorry I’m late. Becky’s hormones are driving me out of my ever-loving mind.” Sheila has daily blowouts with her wild teen. Francis doesn’t speak, doesn’t turn around. “How was the weekend?” She waits. “You alive over there, Chief?”

“Just the usual, Sheila. I gotta be the only lawyer on Earth who hates the weekends.” He twirls around. “You see the obits this morning?”

“Not yet. ‘Bout to have coffee and read ‘em. Who died? Want some?”

“Yeah. Bring me two. Extra sugar. Old Snap Riley. Soon as Howell & Heggie opens up, send a card to his woman Lyla. You remember, we won a case for their oldest son a few years back. Easiest 30 Gs I’ve made. Get one of those real big ones with lots of colorful flowers and glittery crap on it. You know. The usual.” Francis throws her the paper.

He yells to the hallway. “Sheila, tell Joan to come take a letter. I’ve got a ten o’clock with Tandy.” Bastard. Sheila marches down the hall in a huff. She hates this ‘social’ part of the job. But how hard can buying a card be? Of course, some social things are way more involved. If she weren’t so good, he might fire her butt. But. Can’t deny her skill and speed. Good-looking to boot. But the asset that really saves her is attitude, an appealing mix of gruff and refined with sense enough to know when each is appropriate and how far to go. Hard to find in a secretary.

In high school, Sheila was sugar-sweet, one of the few who didn’t ridicule him nonstop. The best was the day the seniors went out to get their pictures taken for the annual. Taylor and Sheila were elected Mister and Miss Durant High, naturally. And Francis, to his complete shock, was voted most likely to succeed. Taylor ragged him nearly constantly on picture day, just as he had since they were six. The summer before their junior year, Francis shot straight up, stretched out to a 6-foot-3-inch handsome man-boy. No one seemed to notice any change. They couldn’t get the short, fat Francis out of their damn thick skulls. Taylor continued, ‘Yeah, Frankie’s gonna succeed all right. He’s gonna hold the record for jacking off more than any white man in the history of the South.’ That’s when Sheila turned everybody into mutes. She looked straight at Taylor with a sugary-sweet smile. ‘Well, at least he won’t hold the record for shortest dick.’ It

was truly a wonder Taylor didn't knock her block off right then and there. That was the first bawdy thing Francis had heard Sheila say. She has said no less than several million since.

“Knock, knock. Coffee delivery.”

“You're a lifesaver, Joan.” She doesn't have Sheila's flair, so Francis keeps her in the back. She's not friendly with the clients. Hardly even cordial. Sheila can handle all that. Joan makes up for it in other ways. She keeps her damn mouth shut. And smart as a whip. “Have a nice weekend?”

“Yes, sir. Nice enough, thanks. You?” Joan flips open her steno pad and sits. It's hard not to be distracted by the olive skin of her neck and shoulders next to the black of her classic scooped-necked dress.

“Great as usual,” he lies. She has a kind of natural elegance that most women only dream of, the sort of woman who shouldn't have to work, who you'd like to take to a fine restaurant, clip a strand of pearls around her slim neck, and make slow love to for uninterrupted days. Unlike Sheila, who you'd just like to fuck the daylights out of real quick. But the wise partners in the Jackson firm adhered to what they called the Hamburger Law. ‘Never ever get your meat where you get your bread.’ “This'll be short and sweet. Tandy's insurance company still hasn't forked over the moolah. ‘Dear Mister Lovitt, The judgement in the referenced case has become final. Unless I receive your company's certified check in the amount of five hundred... whatever thousand—look it up—for damages plus two hundred thousand whatever for lost stud fees—quote the horse language that's in the settlement—by the close of business Friday, October whatever, we will be forced to take appropriate steps immediately thereafter to collect the judgement. Your failure to respond by paying this agreement in full on its due date will constitute

an act of bad faith against your insured exposing your company to further liability.' Sounds like hell. Fix it up, Joan, in that way you make me sound smart, and get it out this morning, pronto. Should've sent it last week. You'd think if Tandy was gonna stoop this low, he would've at least had that fool Dewberry shoot one of the really valuable ponies."

"You mean you think it wasn't an accident, Mister Brennan?"

"Just a hunch. Got absolutely nothing to base it on. And I really shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, right?"

Joan doesn't catch his joke or chooses to ignore it. He can never tell which with her. "I just find it so hard to believe anyone would kill one of those beautiful horses on purpose." Joan pauses. "It does seem strange though Dewberry would be deer hunting that close to the stable."

"Guess we'll never know. Some things are better that way, wouldn't you say?"

"Not sure you'll convince me on that one, Mister Brennan."

"I hate I've gotten so cynical over the years, Joan. I'm happy you're not. Has Sheila gone?"

"Yes. Said she should be back by ten or shortly after."

"Bring me Tandy's file. He'll be in at ten. I may need you for notes." From the get-go, Joan had insisted on calling him Mister Brennan, saying that 'Chief' was derogatory to Native Americans. He wasn't sure exactly what she meant, but didn't want details. Another damn thing to feel rotten about. And besides, he likes the sound of Mister Brennan.

Francis enjoys his meetings with Tandy about as much as he'd enjoy walking over burning coals. The man's made pots of money in the thoroughbred breeding business, got a trifecta of studs worth over a million each. Rumor has it one descended from Northern Dancer.

Tandy wheeled in here from Kentucky back in the early '80s when Delta farmers were practically giving their land away just to get out of debt, and before you could whistle Dixie, Tandy had bought his modest little three-thousand-acre edge of the Delta. A crying shame. Some of the richest farmland in the whole damn world for a half dozen or so horses to trample and shit on. Tandy repeats his creed ad nauseam. 'Horses'll fuck anywhere, even in Mississippi.' Asshole.

Joan lays the bulging manila folder on his desk. "Anything else?"

"No. Thank you, Joan. Close the door on your way out and hold my calls, please." Maybe he should give her a bigger raise this year, so she can buy some different clothes. It wasn't that Joan looked bad; in fact, she's quite attractive with the face and figure for those plain, straight dresses. If they just weren't all black. Hardly an appropriate choice for a business about suffering. The color of mourning makes people in pain feel hopeless, even the ones faking it. But he can't very well demand she buy colored clothes. He opens the file with a moan. Joan buzzes to say Tandy can't come in but is on the phone. Hallefuckinlujah! "Good morning, Mister Tandy, and what a sunny morning it is!"

"I got a goddamn bitch of a day on my hands, Brennan, and can't get over there. Where are we on this goddamn bullshit with Lovitt?"

"Sent a certified letter. Made it clear that if we don't have a check in full by the due date this Friday, we'll move immediately to the next steps."

"Goddammit, Brennan. You know that ain't how this shit works. Bunch o' goddamn penny pinchers that'd jerk the food right out their own baby's mouth. They're gonna drag their skinny asses on this thing long as they can, praying to the good Lord somebody'll shoot me."

“Well, I’m certain you’re right on that, Mister Tandy, as you usually are. Dragging it out’ll be good for your bank account though.”

“Goddammit, Brennan, I don’t have time for this bullshit. I got horses to breed. And one less stud to do it with, so I hope you know what the fuck you’re doing.”

He sounds tough, but Francis can practically hear his mind ticking away the dollars that might possibly roll in on this one. “Hang tight, Mister Tandy. We’ll see what the cat drags in and go from there. You won’t be sorry.”

“I better the fuck not be.”

Relieved he didn’t have to meet that ass, Francis slumps down into his chair, rubbing his temples. Jean Ann used to massage his head when he got these tension headaches. Whenever he could figure out a way, he would bring her back to the office after they had dinner out in Jackson, saying he’d forgotten something just so he could make love to her on his leather couch, long enough for all of him. Her pale pink-white skin shone like a beacon against the deep chocolate. Jean Ann had always been a little conservative about sex, but in spite of herself, she liked plenty of it. He settles back into the couch to relive those nights and loses track of time.

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At the buzz of the phone Francis jumps out of his reverie. “Lyla Riley’s on the phone, Chief.” He stands and straightens himself as if she’s there in person.

“Good morning, Miz Riley. This is Francis.”

“Morning, Mister Francis. Thank you for those flowers you sent over. They real pretty.”

“Well, I hope they’ll cheer things up a tiny bit. Mama always said a vase of colorful flowers on the table could brighten even the worst of days.”

“Your mama was right about that, Mister Francis. I believe she was right a lot of the time from the gossip I heard over the years.”

“Well, thank you for that, Miz Riley.” They had always loved her, even before civil rights. She was good to them. Plus, he had never once in his whole life heard his mama use the N-word. Or his daddy for that matter. He knew it was real for his mama and good business for his daddy. “I hope there’s something I can help you with in these hard times you’re facing.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, there is. When I spoke with my daughter yesterday, she thought I should give you a call. You did such a good job for my oldest, Trevor.”

“Well, I’m thrilled I could help with that. Are he and his family doing well?”

“Yes, all my kids are good. Yours?”

“Better than ever. Can I stop by and you tell me what’s on your mind? I find the phone so impersonal.”

“Lord, ain’t that the truth.”

“Is now convenient for you?”

“Yes, my life is pretty slow these days.”

“Wonderful. I’ll wrap a couple of things and see you in about fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you, Mister Francis. See ya shortly.” She hangs up.

Francis didn’t know she had a daughter. Just a bunch of boys. Maybe they want to sue the bar. The post-mortem doesn’t test for anything beyond ethanol and the typical drugs. And Snap must’ve had close to a fifth of bourbon in him. He twirls back around to look at his daddy. He can almost hear his daddy’s words: ‘When they give you lemons, Son, you know what the hell to do.’