

I climb on up into the school bus, and Miss Hilda throws her shoulders into yanking the handle that shuts the door. I swear, she tries to slap me on the ass every time I'm last in, which is usual for me. It's hot as the devil's temper in the bus, but the ride home is still the best part of my day.

Miss Hilda's got her eyes in the mirror, watching the herd, but she gives me a nod and a side smile as I pass. As usual, the seat next to Nisha is open, so I sit with her. It's not peculiar for her to end up sitting alone, even when the bus is jam packed, because the Black girls all think she's high yella trying to rise, while the White girls all think she's Black, and it's not peculiar for me to sit with her, as everybody just thinks I'm trash.

Walking back, it's all noise and body odor, just like any classroom might be, plus diesel exhaust from the buses lined up next to us. I sit down and put my hands on my thighs, and the back of my left hand brushes soft against her skirt.

As soon as Miss Hilda cranks the engine, Nisha, still facing forward, glances over and starts talking, just under the noise of the engine. "Did your daddy tell you about his walk down to the river last night?"

"He came back wet and angry as a catfish on a hook. He said he had to go in to untangle a line, and then there was no fish in the traps."

She smiles as big as you please, teeth white as a brand-new stove. "Did he say anything about Daisy?"

"Didn't have much of a chance. Mom and I both keep our distance when he's in a mood."

"Well," she says, "my daddy's down in New Orleans, and without him around, Daisy does whatever she wants. When she saw your daddy walking past our house, she went after him. She didn't even bark. She just tore off after him and chased him all the way down the boat ramp and into the river."

“All the way into the water?”

She nods and turns a little toward me, still mostly facing forward. “I watched the whole thing, and I don’t think he ever even checked his traps.”

Before going on, she pulls her right hand up to her face and wipes the corners of her mouth, like she does, then tosses out her quick little smile, cute as a button on a Sunday dress. “When he came out, he just stomped back and forth along the river, looking down the road after Daisy.”

She shudders quick and lowers her voice a bit. “Daisy’s lazy most of the time, but sometimes she looks at me with eyes as dead as a snake’s.” Fast as a blink, she glances over, and our gaze catches. “Sometimes I think Daisy’s wondering what it would be like to go after me.”

Miss Hilda whips us into a turn, and we bounce out onto the pitch road in front of the school. When the bus settles, Nisha’s eyes light up and she smiles again.

She knows how I feel about my daddy, but she eyes me anyway, just to make sure I’m not bothered, then goes back to her story. “When Daisy got after him, your daddy ran screaming and throwing everything he had at her. Men were right there at the landing, lined up fishing. They started laughing and slapping their legs.”

“He ran straight down the ramp and right into the river, yelling and splashing. Daisy stopped at the bank for a drink, then trotted back home.” She reaches up and wipes sweat off her brow. “He didn’t say anything to y’all about Daisy?”

“He didn’t say a thing about Daisy. And I mean, if he had told us about her coming after him, he sure would’ve told it different.”

We stop talking as the bus thins out and quiets down, but we’re the last two stops, so when Miss Hilda drops Billy Johnson up where the road goes from pitch to dirt, it’s just us for a good slow minute.

“He didn’t mention Daisy at all?”

“When he got home he was wet and sat out on the porch ’til dinner was set. There wasn’t fish to eat, and that’s when he told us about the line coming loose. Nobody said nothing else after that.”

I ask her, quiet, “You really think Daisy might get after you?”

Nisha frowns and looks out the window, and my eyes follow hers.

Out here by the river, everything is different from town. The houses spread out and it’s peaceful in between. Where the people work the land, everything grows green, and where the land is left, the forest grows so thick it stays dark and cool underneath, even in the bright heat of day. You can walk ten steps in from the road and nobody would ever even know you’re there.

I’m slipping into my dream of walking into those woods and not coming out when Miss Hilda takes the bus out of gear and coasts to a stop in front of my house. Nisha smiles her goodbye smile, and on the way out, Miss Hilda says, “See you bright and early.” She closes the door and waits for me to cross in front of the bus.

Soon as I step around the front, I see what I didn’t see driving up. The wheels are back on the ‘57 Apache and it’s off the blocks. He’s standing on the front bumper leaning way in over the engine, the hood propped open with a shovel. I could walk right to him and offer to help, but he pretends not to notice me and I pretend not to notice him, and I head around the back of the truck and up onto the porch.

I close the screen door quiet, but Momma hears me and calls me into the kitchen. She’s at the stove, mashing up boiled potatoes. “He told me to fix dinner real early today, so you be ready when he’s ready.”

I walk up to her and she looks away from me, and I know what that means.

“Best you wait in your room. He’ll be something if he can’t get the truck running.”

Not much later I'm in my room half studying the *1957 Chevrolet Truck Operator's Manual* and half dreaming about stealing the truck and driving somewhere nobody around here ever heard of. I'm drifting deeper into that story, out on some four-lane highway somewhere, when the Chevy's motor coughs and dies a few times, then cranks and holds. He whoops and my mind jumps straight into the kitchen, where I know Momma's feeling some relief.

* * *

Dinner is greens boiled with a pig knuckle, cornbread, mashed potatoes, and Momma's red-eye gravy. He should be contented with the truck, but he's digging in and looking down like he's the only person at the table. There's not a word until I, a damn fool, ask after the traps. I should've chewed my food and left my head down just like him, but I thought if I gave him a path, he might puff out about getting the truck running and maybe laugh and talk about how much easier it'll be to get down to the river with the truck running. I should have known to leave it alone, but I didn't.

Momma stops moving, and I sense that it's coming on, but he just stares at me, chewing. Then he smiles, yellow like an old milk jug gone brittle in the sun, and nods at my plate.

"You got fish on your plate?"

"No, sir."

He taps his plate with the knife he's been using on the knuckle. "I got fish on my plate?"

"No, sir."

He scrapes up and eats the last of his potatoes, then wipes his mouth on his sleeve. “Hadn’t checked the river today, but the Chevy’s running strong, and we’re driving down soon as we’re done here.”

“The clutch is good? It always smells like something’s burning if you don’t do it just right.”

He smiles again, his you’re-an-idiot smile. “Then I’ll do it just right, won’t I?”

He waits for me to respond, just staring at me. He’s got his fork in one hand and his knife in the other, holding them over his plate. It’s silent, and Momma hasn’t moved. She might be holding her breath, and it’s so still I might be holding mine, but then I look up into his eyes and nod.

He shrugs and turns back to what’s left of the pig knuckle. “Besides, I greased the clutch with fatback and glued over the crack in the snap plate.”

I regret it even before I say it, but I say it anyway. “You glued it with Elmer’s?”

His face pinches up like I’ve pained him. He takes a deep drag on his smoke and stubs it out in a puddle of gravy. He looks square at me and speaks slow, with a flat calm. “You can’t tape a clutch, boy.”

Momma’s said when he talks slow it’s like a spring valve on a pressure cooker letting off steam so it won’t blow up and take somebody’s head off, so when I think to ask why Elmer’s is better than tape, I think better of it and instead hunker down over my greens and cornbread.

After dinner, he tells us his plan while Momma starts cleaning up. It’s nonsense, of course, and I know Momma’s afraid I might say something to try and stop him, but I don’t. I hear her fear in her breath and see it in how she keeps the left side of her face turned away from me. In truth, I don’t want him to change his mind.

After Momma finishes her work, she comes and sits with me on the couch, and we watch him through the curtains as he smokes, pinching off the filters and lighting one from the butt of the other. He drinks a full glass of his piss-colored shine. We don't say anything, and I'm sure Momma is praying he'll drink himself down and all this will go away, so I say a prayer to balance against hers. May the shine give him courage. May the fatback not catch fire. May the truck make it down to the river. May Nisha and Momma be safe. Amen.

* * *

Dust rolls up behind the truck as we speed toward the river. The steering wheel rattles and the shadows of electrical wires snake back and forth across the road, racing ahead of us. With both door windows rolled down and the back window long ago busted out, I might as well be flying. Every tree in the forest is rushing past me, pushing my hair back with hard, hot wind.

He drops the Chevy into fourth, and it sounds like a lawnmower chewing up a bicycle chain until it catches, then it sounds more like it ought to. Smiling a hateful joy, he reaches up and slaps the dash, then rests his wrist on the shifter. He's wearing Momma's yellow sunglasses, and his face glows golden. It doesn't matter one whit to me that he's set on cowardly retribution, because my intent is righteous and I'm no coward.

Now we're moving so fast the utility line shadows are bobcats, jumping from pole to pole alongside us, just trying to keep up. The road ahead is a dried-up cut of dirt through the forest, and I can't see nothing behind us but the dust we're kicking up. The engine sounds a rumbling growl.

We're getting close to Nisha's, and he drops the truck into neutral. Except for the rattle of the steering wheel, the world goes quiet as we coast slower and slower. The trees step back on my side of the road and show Nisha's house, and there's Daisy asleep on the front porch and there's Nisha, too, sitting, reading a book.

They notice us at the same time. In a blink, Nisha's face lights up, and in another blink, Daisy's off the porch on a dead run right at us, teeth bared in a killer's smile. We coast by slow, like he planned, and Daisy chases behind us just like he said she would. Nisha waves and I wave back, and then we're past her house.

We roll into the parking area at the river landing and he hits the brakes. The truck ignores him. He's pumping the brake pedal as fast and hard as he can, and just as I'm starting to imagine us coasting right into the river, the brakes catch and we slide to a stop. The dust cloud passes us on both sides as a wave hits us from straight behind and blows in through the back window hole, coating us, the dash, and the inside of the windshield in red dust.

He fights the clutch until the Chevy pops into first, and he pulls us in a wide circle. "Clutch still can't catch reverse, even with the fatback."

We sit and wait for the dust to settle, and soon enough Daisy's rump appears. She's already halfway back home, walking up the middle of the road. He starts us forward, slides into second, and pretty soon we're closing ground on Daisy, but as we pick up speed the growl comes up in the engine and Daisy hears us. She moves to the side of the road and then takes a quick step into the trees when he steers toward her.

He tears a track through Nisha's yard, looping around to go back after Daisy. Nisha and I catch eyes through the truck's spit of dirt and chewed-up grass, and all I can see in her is puzzlement. I lean toward the window and hold that connection between us as long as I can, trying to push out to her that I know he's dangerous and I know Daisy's dangerous, and I'm here to protect her from both of them.

We bounce back onto the road, headed toward Daisy through the river of dust we've stirred up. He's not even looking ahead. He's locked on the tops of the pines, keeping us on the road by staying in the middle of the open space between the trees.

I'm squinting ahead trying to find Daisy and he's looking up, trying not to kill us, and we come flying out into the open ground at the river. He stomps the brakes with both feet and never even touches the clutch. As we skid and slide sideways, the truck, still in gear, groans, pushes against itself, and stalls. We settle with the back tires just above the river bank and the hood pointed straight back at the road.

He tries to crank the truck, but we're still in gear, and she jumps forward a few feet, then stalls. He takes a deep breath, puts both hands on the steering wheel, and stares straight ahead. The dust is settling, but it's still too thick to see all the way up the road to Nisha's. I taste it, the dust. It's all in my nose and throat. Even if I was fool enough to say something, I couldn't.

It's not just the dust, though. The smell of the pines is in the air, which takes me into my head, into that peaceful aloneness of the deep forest. The smell of the river is peaceful, too. It brings an even greater peace, like dirt from a fresh plowed field that's somehow breathing out into the wind. There's also the sharp smell of hot brake pads, along with engine exhaust that tastes like moonshine mixed with cigarette ash, and the burnt Coke bottle smell of the clutch going bad. And there's a peculiar smell, too. A smell that doesn't belong. It's out of place, but still familiar.

Bacon. The fatback. That damn fool.

He's taken off Momma's glasses, or maybe they fell off when we spun around. He's staring straight ahead, smiling like a fool. The area around his eyes is the only part of him not covered in dust. I follow the trail of his eyes and right there in front of the truck stands Daisy, tail wagging, sniffing at the air. She smells the bacon, too.

He moves slow and careful. Without taking his eyes off Daisy, he puts the truck in neutral and pumps the choke twice. He cranks the truck and the engine comes back alive, purring quiet. God, the Chevy, and his dumb, evil luck all want us to have one more chance to

run down Daisy. I lock eyes with Daisy, and her tail goes up. She may see in my eyes what I see in my father's eyes. Mortal intent.

He shifts in the seat, slow and careful, and gets himself in position, his right hand on the gear shift, his left foot pressing the clutch to the floor, and his right foot waiting just above the gas pedal.

He sucks in a deep breath, holds it just a second, then everything starts moving. His right hand pops us into first, and at the same time his left foot lifts the clutch pedal as his right foot steps on the gas. The truck powers forward, throwing rocks into the river. Just as fast, Daisy takes off on a sprint for home, up the middle of the road.

By the time we're away from the river and back on the road behind Daisy, he's got us in second, and not two breaths later we're in third, gaining on her. The steering wheel is jerking back and forth and rattling like a jackhammer, and smoke is coming out of the vents on both sides of the dashboard.

We get up toward Nisha's house, but Daisy's in a panic and doesn't turn in. She just keeps on straight. Nisha and her momma are in the front yard, Nisha holding on tight. The next few seconds happen real slow.

I'm looking right at Nisha when her eyes let go of Daisy, drift back, and latch on to me. While that's happening, Nisha's momma leans into it and yells something, but I can't hear her because somebody turned up the jackhammer and somebody else dropped a wrench into the gearbox. Daisy hears her, though, and she cuts like a chased rabbit back toward the house. He's in Daisy's mind, and he jerks the steering wheel and cuts just as fast as she does. We're swerving to the left into their yard and we're almost on top of Daisy, or maybe we are on top of her, when the jackhammer suddenly stops and the front of the truck on his side drops and digs in. The back of the truck rises like it's coming over the front, and at the same

time, my side spins up all the way until I'm right above him. And I swear on all the things Momma believes in, Nisha and I keep our eyes locked this whole time.

Then the truck twists too far and Nisha's gone, and I'm watching the yard spin past, over my head. The grass turns while it's flying above me, pulls away some distance, spins around to my side of the truck, and suddenly pushes in fast and smashes the truck so hard the windshield shatters.

I come to my senses belly down in the grass. I can tell I've been out, but I can't tell how long. I smell gas, and Nisha's screaming my name. I push up onto my hands and knees and look around. The Chevy is smashed all to hell, lying on its side across the driveway. He's half through the windshield with a broke off piece of the steering wheel sticking out of his gut and blood spurting out of his neck.

Nisha's momma takes a knee next to him and presses her hand onto his neck. Keeping her hand on him, she turns and studies me for a second, then looks past me to Nisha.

"Nisha," she yells, nodding toward me, "stop hollering and check on him."

Her eyes come back to me. "Don't let him move. Check him for injuries and tell me what you see."

Then Nisha's there next to me. She kneels and puts her hand on my back.

"Are you OK?"

I lift one hand to reach out to her, but fall forward and catch myself against her body. She lifts my shoulders and helps me straighten out so that we're both on our knees, facing each other.

"Are you OK?"

I nod.

She hugs me tight and whispers, "Thank you, Jesus."

I lean toward the truck and she resists, but then I feel her nod yes against my chest. Her hug loosens, and she stands, stoops, and wraps her arms around me. As she helps me to my feet, Nisha's momma yells, "Lay that boy down before you hurt him."

Nisha asks me again, her words soft on my neck, "Are you sure you're OK?"

I breathe her in. She smells as clean and natural as pine straw. I let that breath go and pull in another, and it's like I'm holding her safe inside my chest.

I lean toward the truck again, and as she repositions herself to help me walk, she says, "Momma, he's coming over there. It's better I help him than not."

As we move closer, it's clear how bad he's hurt. Nisha's momma is still holding his neck. She's stopped the blood coming out of his neck, but it's pooled all over the driveway, and every time he breathes, a dark fluid flows out around the metal sticking out of his gut. He wouldn't much like Nisha's momma's hands on him, but I can't see any chance he'd have without her.

"Nisha, you run inside and call for an ambulance. Listen up. You call five-three-eight thirty-two seventy-four. Tell them you're my daughter, give them the address, and tell them I said they need to hurry because he's bleeding out. When you come back out, bring two clean towels."

Nisha nods, then asks, "Can you tell me the number again?"

"Listen closely and focus," her momma says, calm and slow. She says the number again and Nisha repeats it right, then runs toward the house. Halfway there she turns and runs back.

"I'm sorry, Momma, I forgot the number."

I kneel next to him and say, "Show me how to hold it, and I'll spell you."

Nisha's mom bites her lip and looks at me with eyes just like Nisha's. She looks up to the door, then back down at her hands.

I say, "It's best you talk to them, anyway."

She nods, then breathes in deep before she starts talking. "OK. This is a puncture wound. All you can do is keep enough pressure on the wound."

She keeps one hand on his neck and presses on my forearm with the other. "That's how much pressure," she says. She takes my hand and positions it just above his neck, then pulls her hand away from the wound and pushes my hand down at the same time. She presses my hand against the wound to show me again how hard to push.

"Now, I'll be back quickly. All you have to do is keep the pressure on." She looks at me calm, like she's taking a measure. "Are you sure you can do this?" I nod, and after a short pause, she stands and takes off for the house.

Nisha kneels down next to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. We don't say a word. We both just watch him breathe in and out, slow. Then even slower than his chest is moving, my hand goes soft on his neck and lifts off the wound, not even an inch. Nisha and I catch eyes like we do, and I feel his blood push out against my palm, again and again.

I know what I'm doing and she knows it too, and we can't neither of us say it, ever to anybody. She looks so calm now. Her hand slides down from my shoulder to my elbow, then to my wrist, then to the back of my hand. She holds my hand for a breath, then presses down gentle, back onto the wound. We kneel there like that, my hand stopping the blood and her hand stopping me, until her momma gets back and takes over.

I sit in the grass a ways away from him to wait for the ambulance, and Nisha sits right next to me. She wipes her hands in the grass and I think to do the same, but then I think better and wipe his blood on my jeans.

I wish we could put an end to all of this. I'd pull an inner tube from one of the wrecked tires, and we'd leave before the ambulance even gets here. We wouldn't go straight to the river. We'd walk holding hands through the woods behind Nisha's house all the way

back to White Creek. We'd put in there, where White Creek runs slow and cool, and let the water wash away this dust and blood. We'd float out onto the Tallahatchie before anyone noticed, then right past the river landing where the old men would be packing up their fishing gear in the last light of the day, and by morning we'd be through the Little Yazoo River and out on the Mississippi, just two specks nobody would ever even notice.