Teedub Leaves Home

Even before he got out of high school, Teedub told people he might as well be an orphan. Not for any attention, just to heave the truth out there. Trying on the old man's language, he'd say, "My daddy's of no-count." He didn't need him, not at all.

He was ten when his mama died. His daddy might should've gone and done the same thing, too, for all the effort he put into being a daddy. Teedub the teenager worked when he could and went to school because he had to, while the old man talked more to the tv than to him, until one day, Teedub started planning, and when he was ready, he pulled out the army duffle from the back of his closet, where he'd kept it hidden since buying it two months back, and stuffed it with clothes, an extra pair of work boots, a hat, a map, his notebook, walked into the back room where the tv was always on the money channel and announced his plans.

When he was done, his daddy said, "I guess you'll do whatever it is you want, so go on and do it."

"I'm not asking permission."

"I'd wish you luck if I believed in it."

"I'll be alright," Teedub said.

His daddy surprised him by getting up from his chair and following him to the front door where he stopped, but Teedub kept on, down the two gray concrete steps, and about halfway across the yard. He looked back. This felt familiar, standing in front of the pale slouching house

with its scrub of weeds and yellowing monkey grass, his daddy watching, hunched and a little faded behind the screen door. Teedub didn't want this picture to stick, but somehow he knew it would lodge in his head a long while, and whether that was good or bad, he didn't know.

"Well, then," his daddy said from behind the screen door.

"Yep."

This was the only house on the road, a stunted offshoot of State Route 32, a winding blacktop that snaked its way a mile and a half into downtown Ericksonville, and then beyond, out to the lake, the county line, the world.

Behind him, the door creaked shut, his daddy gone back into the house.

That was that.

Teedub started walking. There had been concrete in the driveway once but that had long since cracked and crumbled, with weeds sprouting up in dry wisps beneath his daddy's car, an old cop cruiser he bought at auction. The car and the house shared the same dingy white color, the same patched-together look of something close to a mistake, and, like the other cars he'd owned over the years, this one, too, had a silver rough-edged square of duct-tape on each side that covered the faded star of the county sheriff's shield.

His steps were already heavy. Here it was, damn near ninety degrees, the duffle bag strap digging into his shoulder, his back already damp. He looked at the car and back at the house where his daddy was probably shuffling back to stale tv room where he'd fall back into the tired chair to watch the money channel, those numbers and letters gliding across the bottom of the screen, as if the old man had money.

Teedub turned and walked back to the car, threw the duffle onto the passenger's seat, and walked around to the driver's side. Despite the scorching heat on the underside of his arms as he

lay across the front seat of the old cruiser working to pry off the panel beneath the steering column, he was grinning, nearly laughing. In the days before his mama died, his daddy had taught him this after he'd lost the key. The old man had said, "Don't forget this trick, but forget I'm the one who showed you, especially if it's your mama's doing the asking." And then, just like now, the engine rumbled when the wires touched and sparked, but now, it was his daddy, red-faced and hollering. But unlike his mama, who'd smacked open the screen door and come blazing out into the yard, his daddy stayed put behind the screen door.

Teedub put the car in reverse, and shot backwards into the street, but when he jerked it into gear, it lurched forward twice and stalled out. That was when his daddy finally pushed the door open and came down the steps. He was holding his pants up with one hand and shaking the other, fingers in a tight fist, at Teedub, who ignored the brief, stinging pity and maybe even a little sadness he suddenly felt for the old man standing there with a tattered ribbon of toilet paper followed, clinging to his left heel, the broken-down house behind him.

Teedub reached for the wires again and heard his daddy say, "You ain't smart enough to steal a goddamn car, how the hell you gonna make it on you your own, you—"

The engine rumbled alive, cutting him off. Teedub put it in gear and hit the gas.

Although he didn't want to look in the rear-view. Something told him not to, just keep on across town to the bus station. He knew the schedule, had the ticket, was ready to go. Be gone, don't look.

He looked anyway. And then he slowed at what he saw: the old man bent at the waist, one hand on a knee, the other pawing at the ground. Was he sick? Dying? Teedub stopped and turned around and when the fear of a heart attack had made him turn cold, he realized that the old man was prying a chunk of the crumbling asphalt from the end of the driveway. He stood up as

straight as he could manage, and hurled it at the car, the chunk landing well short. This pathetic moment filled Teedub's dreams and thoughts for years to come, drenched in different tones and emotions, and sometimes he tried to parse out what happened just then and what he may have learned, recognizing this to be what he called a corner moment.

So, what did he learn that day?

He learned that when you leave a place you know well, you can't hardly do it without looking around and trying to drink it in a little, to remember this and that in little sips. Like the netless basketball hoop outside of Sweetpea's Store a half mile closer to town. Used to be, he was all the time riding his bike through the woods to play on that goal, buy a Coke afterwards, and, then later, when he could drive, he bought cigarettes. Sweetpea wouldn't ever tell. Or the dull glint at the metal payphone at the Sing Gas Station in town where he and Wayne Snyder once called the cops to bust a party at Margaret Gibson's house because they hadn't been invited. Or the green dumpster behind the Family Mart on the far side of town where Carla Miller drank a six-pack of Coors Light with him and showed him what it was like to have someone else jerk him off. Or the bend in the road where John Rafferty careened into a tree, and then the cemetery along the straightaway a mile further where Rafferty's daddy wept at the graveside and then threw up. Or just the simple way sunlight through the dogwood trees might be a pretty thing to remember instead of an old man hunched at the roadside, worn out from the pathetic efforts of flinging county asphalt at his own stolen car, his son the thief at the wheel.

And even if it took a great hunk of time to realize it, Teedub would eventually learn what it felt like to do the wrong thing at the right time, but he wasn't studying that just yet. He was just like that stupid chicken trying to get to the other side. And maybe he was too young—or maybe like his daddy said, too stupid—to shine a light on the exact emotion, but something

shifted and swirled inside him when he caught the last red light on the other side of town where he was forced to think, and then work hard not to, because a half block from that light sat the bus station and beyond that, the sun-baked stretch of road curved around past the industrial park and then, finally, the interstate.

The ticket had been in his pocket a week. He'd known where he wanted to go and hadn't been worried about getting there because there'd be a driver, a busload of strangers. Perfect. But now he had his own car. A new choice hunkered on his shoulders.

His daddy wouldn't have trouble catching a ride out to the bus station to pick up his car. The old man might even do some yelling, wondering why in hell they'd sell a ticket to a kid driving a stolen car. Teedub smiled at this scene, but when the light turned green, he didn't move, and when the car behind him honked, he stepped on the gas and shot through the intersection and right on past the bus station. He rolled down the window and lit a cigarette, his hand barely shaking, and he said, "I wasn't looking for permission."