

Next Year

The wind is still and the night quiet except for the occasional distant string of firecrackers and the soft pops that follow the brief sky-rocket illuminations over town three miles away. Early today I drove the length of Mississippi and crossed the river at Memphis and then drove through the Arkansas rice country to get here, the town where I grew up. Every little delta town had a fireworks tent and a full parking lot. It's still early, but at midnight I expect the new year will enter with shock and awe. Lately, I've been trying to learn the stars as I sit on the deck of the sailboat where I live, almost 500 miles from here, on the Mississippi gulf coast. Tonight, they glow rock hard through the bare tree limbs, rock hard like the frost settling underfoot. I pick out the Big Dipper, Orion's belt, and the North Star, the limit of my celestial knowledge at the moment. It looks to be a new moon, so the sky will remain dark tonight.

I've stayed away from the house about as long as I can stand. Surely, by now, even Candace will be satisfied and will let me come in and continue my punishment in the warmth. I turn and walk back across the field to my mom's house, where I find my two youngest children, Carrie and Tyler, have pulled in. They drove up from Texas. My wife drove over yesterday from Tennessee, just outside of Memphis, with our oldest daughter and her husband and my two baby grandchildren, twins, whom I'd never met. My mom is bubbling like a spring. She gets lonely living in this big old house ever since my dad died, she tells us. She loves it when we all mix in here together, every bedroom full, sleeping on top of each other on fold out couches and pallets on the floor. Eating and talking and staying up all night, chasing little Grace and Briana all over the house,

the television blaring whether anyone is watching or not—that's my mom's idea of heaven. Part of it is she's glad for the company, glad to spend time with her grandchildren and great grandchildren. But more than that, I think she holds out a false hope for Janey and me.

I hadn't planned to come, and I didn't think any of them really wanted me to come, but my ex-wife, Janey, had insisted.

"Think about your momma," she said, when she called. "Don't you want to know your grandkids?"

"We're too young to be having grandkids," I said. "At least you are."

"Well you've got them and you need to let them know who you are. It's not too late to start patching things up."

"It's not?"

"It's too late with me," she said. "You destroyed me. Every time I look in the mirror I see shit. Nothing will ever change the way you made me look at myself, but you've still got a chance with the others, maybe."

I had earned that. I own it. After my affairs became public knowledge, Janey stopped eating, stopped caring. My kids made it clear that they blamed me and didn't want anything to do with me. Candace, my oldest, was planning her own wedding, to which I was not invited. "You're not going to bring *her*," she told me. There wasn't any *her*, at the time. There had been three *hers* altogether, though the woman I eventually got caught with broke things off with me pretty much as soon as we were discovered. She wanted to reconcile with her husband, and as far as I know, they're still together. But Candace wanted blood. I knew that I needed to suffer for a long time before I could

earn any forgiveness. And I have suffered, and I'm trying to become a better person. I try not to look at women and imagine the possibilities. I read a lot and I go to church. I've said I'm sorry in every way I can think of, but some days it seems that nothing will ever be enough.

Carrie, my other daughter, was more forgiving, I think, after the initial shock wore off. She still told me I needed to go away for a while, send my regrets for the wedding, and make sure Janey and I didn't cross paths at Carrie's graduation. Tyler, my son hadn't really spoken to me since the whole thing blew up. I know he was angry over what I did to his mother, but then, he had been angry about everything, it seems, my fault or not, since he had become a teenager. I sold our restaurant and used the money to set Janey up with a high-end consignment shop. I kept enough to buy a sandwich shop and moved down to the coast, where I live on a little sailboat docked in a marina. I haven't had the courage to take it out of the slip yet.

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We eat "Christmas dinner" for supper on New Year's Eve. My mom goes all out with the cooking: ham, sweet potatoes, green beans, dinner rolls, pecan pie, all on the china she pulls down from the cabinet once a year. It never occurs to me that it should seem strange, the fact that my ex-wife is spending the holidays with her ex-mother-in-law, but Janey was the daughter my mother never had. Mom, rightfully, took her side during the divorce. Clearly, Janey belongs to the family more than I do. I'm the white elephant in the room, so I sit and listen, speak only when spoken to, do my best to play

the part of penitent. They mostly talk about Candace's babies, Tyler's fall semester spent in Italy, Carrie's job, and Janey's new condo and furniture.

After supper and cleaning up, we move into the den. We'll open presents later, I suppose, but for right now I'm glad for the safety of the television and the distraction of cute babies. I stand by the French doors that open onto the back deck and watch my family reflected in the glass. Janey and my mom are on their hands and knees, cooing baby talk and giggling like they never had babies of their own. Janey looks good, now. She's cut her hair and colored it, covering up the gray, and she's been in a tanning booth. After our troubles started, she wasted down to a weight she hadn't seen since high school. Since then she'd gained a little back, but it just made her look healthy. I like the way her dress stretches tight in all the right places, and then I feel guilty for thinking it. My mom has been rejuvenated by becoming a great-grandmother. She began to shrink after my father died, and during the divorce I was afraid she would wither away to nothing, but now her eyes are sparkling and she looks like she will live another seventy-six years. Candace, my oldest daughter, is washed out with sleep deprivation that comes from having two babies. Candace's husband, Ben, is sitting beside her watching a football game on television. Carrie studies the cell phone in her hand. I haven't seen her lay the thing down since she got here. Even when people are talking all around her, she thumbs the screen and waits like Jesus himself might send her a text message. Tyler sits by the fireplace reading a book, doing his best to avoid contact with anyone.

I go into the kitchen and pour a cup of coffee my mom made earlier in the afternoon, then go in and sit on the hearth beside Tyler's chair.

"What are you reading?" I ask.

For just a second, he doesn't hide the annoyance in his face, but then he points the cover of the book at me.

"Dubliners. James Joyce. Any good?"

"I like it," he says. "It means more now that I've been to Dublin."

"So, how was your trip? Three months away and I don't even get a post card."

"I put a buttload of pictures on Facebook."

"Yeah, I'm still not on Facebook." I had thought about it, but I couldn't stand the thought of my children rejecting my friend requests.

Tyler halfway raises the book and waits for me to end the conversation.

"I've been reading a lot lately—that's all there is to do on the boat at night."

Travis sees I'm not going away any time soon and asks the obligatory, "What are you reading?"

"Travis McGee novels. There's a whole series. Ever read any?"

Tyler shakes his head. Why would he have? Growing up, he was always reading, always scribbling poems in a little memo pad he carried with him everywhere he went.

He asks the question I'm sure he's already regretting in his mind: "What are they about?"

"Travis McGee is a kind of salvage specialist. He finds things people have had taken away, things they can't get back through the legal system. Sometimes it's just normal stuff. Rare stamps, maybe. But sometimes it's weird things, like a person's reputation. They have to pay half of whatever it's worth if he gets it back."

Tyler nods at me, but clearly all his questions have been answered.

“He lives on a boat down in Florida, sort of like Jimmy Buffett, but different. Sort of like me.” I try a laugh, but Tyler’s not having any of it. His eyes glance longingly at his book.

“McGee earned medals in Viet Nam and played pro football before he blew out his knee.”

Candace snorts and says something; I catch the words “horny” and “boats.” She gets a laugh out of Carrie and Ben. I hadn’t thought she was listening.

“That’s not why I bought the boat,” I say. “There’s nothing romantic about the way I live.”

“I suppose it’s more tragic than romantic,” Janey says. Candace won’t even turn to look at me.

“Come watch the game, Pawpaw,” Ben calls over to me.

I turn and watch the game for a few minutes, annoyed at the name they’ve teaching Grace and Briana to use. It makes me sound like I’m seventy years old, instead of fifty-five.

“What’s the score?”

“Ole Miss is down by a touchdown,” Ben says.

I sit on the floor beside the couch and we watch the game until it’s over. Janey takes one of the twins for a bath. The television is on some sort of reality show, but no one’s really watching any longer. Ben and Carrie get out their I-phones and start hunting things down and showing each other. Whatever they’re looking at, they think it’s pretty funny.

Candace is more awake now, but she's focusing too hard on the television not to be ignoring me. I go over and sit on the floor beside her.

"I've started going to a church, Candace."

"And proud we are of you," she says. She props her forehead on her fist and glares at the television.

"One night they showed us a video. I brought a copy if anyone wants to see it."

She's not looking at me, but I know she's listening, so I go on. "It's all about the power of God, and how everything we need to know is revealed in the details of the creation."

My mom is listening, having heard the magic word "church." I know that my lack of religion has been a major disappointment in her life. I go on to tell Candace about the video, getting caught up in the relief of being listened to, remembering the night I saw it for the first time and then went back to the boat and truly looked at the stars.

"The guy on the video is a preacher named Louie Giglio, and he was talking about how great God is, and how he spoke the universe into being, how he breathes stars out of his mouth that are huge balls of fire. He uses a giant screen to show the size of the earth, then the larger planets in the solar system, then the Milky Way, which is our universe, and then all the other universes out there. Then he goes on to speak of how this star-breathing, universe creating God also knitted our human bodies together. The proof of God's existence, it turns out, is Laminin these little molecules that hold our cells together. Like glue. Without them, we would literally fall apart.

My mom is looking at me like she looked the time we took her and the kids to the Museum of Discovery in Little Rock to see the dinosaur skeletons. My mom really

believed that the earth was only about 5,000 years old, so the stories of dinosaurs roaming the earth millions of years ago was all an atheist plot. I'd overheard her whispering to my father, "They'll go to any length to deny the existence of God, won't they."

Candace is looking over to see what Ben has found on his phone, but Carrie is listening. She's looking at her phone but she's smiling.

"Here's the thing," I say. "The glue that holds us all together is in the shape of the cross. The molecules form the shape of the cross. You can look it up."

I look over at Ben and Candace, hopefully.

"Look it up, Carrie. L-A-M-I-N-I-N."

Carrie's thumb slides over her phone and she types in the letters.

"Here it is," she says, and shows my mom a three color slide of a wavy looking cross made out of little circles connected together. My mom stares at it and nods.

"I'm trying, Candace. That's all I'm saying."

"That's bullshit," Candace says, almost under her breath. She takes Ben's phone and starts looking for something.

The thing is, it's not. As hokey as it all sounds, it's the first time that God has ever seemed real to me. I want Candace to know that I'm being sincere, but all I can do is just stare at her.

"What is it going to take, baby?" I ask.

Candace jabs the screen of the phone so hard Ben winces.

My mom pats the floor beside her and tells me to "get down on the floor with your grandbaby."

I get down and crawl over to Briana, who is laying on her back and gumming a ring of plastic keys. For just a second, I'm overwhelmed by nostalgia. Looking at little Brianna I feel the muscle memory of three children and how much they've changed and how much I've lost sweep over me. Brianna makes a happy sound and I smile and look up, wanting everyone to see that I can make a baby happy, but the room is strangely quiet, and I feel more than see Candace rising off the couch.

"Get away from her," she screams.

I scoot back on my heels, hold my hands out like she's something dangerous.

"You don't get to do this," Candace says, softer now, but her voice is trembling. She crying. Her face looks broken. "You don't get to walk back into our lives and pretend you never fucked all those women. I don't know why Momma invited you. I don't know why Granmama lets you come back. I just know you're not touching my child."

I look around the room and find no sympathetic face. My mom looks like she's been slapped. Janey walks in with the baby wrapped in a towel. She looks from one to the other, puzzled. Carrie gets down on the floor and pulls the other baby to her, starts in on patty cake. Ben is watching the television like it can transport him through time. Tyler closes his book and gets up and walks into the kitchen.

"Candace. Baby," I say. "I don't blame you for hating me. I've done terrible things—"

"Just stop it," she says. "Just go away. It'll make everyone happier."

The expression on Candace's face is a familiar one, and as I look at her now I see the tiny little girl whose face turned hard when I teased a little too long, or tried to joke off a mistake, or roughhoused when she was in a bad mood, or failed to

understand the significance of the dilemma du jour. Candace had a furious temper that scared me worse than Janey's silences or Tyler's indifference. The only worse thing I could imagine was Carrie being unwilling to forgive me.

I stand up, looking around for my coat. My mother grabs my pants leg and holds on.

"Just go out for a walk," she says. "He's not going away," she announces. "We'll open the presents when he gets back."

* * *

I start for my car but then realize I've left my keys inside with my overnight bag. It's not worth it to go in right now, so I decide to walk. I wonder how long it will take for everyone to go to sleep so I can get my things and drive away. I climb a barbed wire fence and walk across a field, then strike a gravel road and keep walking.

The first year after Candace was born, Janey had what we finally figured out was post-partum depression. I stayed with her during the day while Janey stayed in her room, sleeping or reading. All I knew was we were supposed to be quiet. I spent a lot of time sitting in an easy chair with Candace laying on an ottoman in front of me. I'd have the TV on with the sound muted, but I'd hover right over her with my hands ready to catch her should she roll off. I watched her learn to crawl in the grass of our back yard. I'd dangle my keys and drop them just out of her reach. At first she'd lean for them until she tumbled, but then she got the idea of using her legs to push her across the grass. I used to reach back into the back seat while I was driving and hold her hand, her tiny

fingers curled around my finger. It got easier with Carrie. We were able to afford day care and then they started school, and my favorite part of the day was when I'd go to pick them up and they'd come running across the school yard to tell me about their day. Janey came to work with me in the restaurant after Tyler was a year old. It was work we both liked doing. I cooked steaks and seafood and a few pasta dishes, and Janey worked as hostess and cashier. We were able to make it go even when the chain restaurants started building in town. We hired college kids as wait staff and then when our kids started getting older they came in and worked too. I don't know what happened with me and Janey. Maybe we were just too busy living and working and I forgot to pay attention. Maybe she became a co-worker instead of a wife. I never set out to meet other women. It just happened. One woman sold restaurant supplies, and she started making trips down from Memphis that weren't part of her route. Her life was in a mess back home and she was just so easy to talk to. Another woman I met walking my dog in the park. We'd stand and talk while our dogs ran together. I realized I was in trouble when I started driving past the park every day, hoping she would be there. Janey never knew about those women until later, when Jennifer, a woman I'd hired to wait tables, decided she wanted to go back to her husband. Jennifer wanted a clean slate, and so she not only told her husband, she told Janey too. Once we started talking it all came out. I came clean. But Jennifer is the one that hurt Janey the most. Knowing Jennifer, knowing she had been in the restaurant the whole time, knowing that Jennifer had shared more than space with her.

As I'm thinking, the sky in front of me begins to light and glow just above the horizon, and a few seconds later I hear the first faint pops and whistles of the New Year

fireworks. The stars are still glowing hard through the outlines of the bare tree limbs above me, and I feel the cold inside my jacket, next to the skin. I wonder if it's late enough to start walking back, but decide it's not. Everyone will still be awake, though I don't think they'll be celebrating the New Year after what just happened.

I wonder how long it takes to be forgiven, but I have no reference. No one has ever hurt me as bad as what I did to them. I think that maybe another year will make a difference. Maybe by this time next year I'll have served enough time away from my family, but something tells me that that's not going to happen.

The sound of the fireworks intensifies, and over in town they start the big show, with the big shots reverberating over the woods and pastures like the sounds of a not-so-distant battlefield.

I start to walk farther, when something heavy plops to the ground behind me. I turn and see something the size of a baseball, dark against the frosted ground. Other objects begin to fall all around me, plopping to the ground with muffled thuds. It sounds like the first heavy drops of rain at the beginning of a thunderstorm. Something soft brushes my cheek as it falls, and I bend down and lift it up. It's a bird, dead, with bright red wings against a dark body. They keep falling all around me, hundreds of them. Bird after bird, all dead, and I wish that I could show this wonderful sign to my family, but I know that it wouldn't make any difference at all.