

*Jonny*

Chapter 1:

*Jonny:* If one could find the point of incision, one could motor. But Jonny was not one, he was two, and the incision point seemed never coming. Ten years with the Mallers. Every day he sought the way out, but every path before him only painted him further in. It's like God chose to start speaking to Jonny as soon as his options became moot. He could see the future. He really could. It's just that the future is no good, and what's worse, it doesn't stop. No end date in sight, not for Jonny. All he knows is something changes in a few years. After that, things never feel human again. He talks to Marge. He talks to Johnboy. He talks to Rachel. They look at him crooked. He talks to little Wanda. She looks at him with indifference. He doesn't talk to Pa, because he knows that the next time he does, Grandpa will die. He doesn't want to know that, but he does. Now, Grandpa is not Jonny's Grandpa. He's the old man's Grandpa and was here when Jonny came in and never said a word against it. They fish often and stare out into the green river, and though the old man often and regularly talks to Jonny, Jonny doesn't say a word back. Grandpa never asks why, not one to pry.

*Johnboy:* It was important to remember that Johnboy wasn't named after Jonny. It was to Johnboy, anyway, because if he forgot about that, then he'd forget that there'd been a whole life before Jonny. Rachel says it's stupid to say that because six years isn't a "whole life." But that's stupid because when you're a kid, one day is a whole life, and so even though he was only six years old before their big trip across three states with red dust filling up the cracks in their skin and the sagging in their lungs, that probably makes a thousand lifetimes before Jonny. God, sometimes when Johnboy says Jonny's name in his head, it makes him so mad. It makes him want to gnash on something, to tear out a piece of a whole thing and spit it on the floor. But he learned quick not to gnash on Jonny. He'd tried to protest, to say, "No! You're not my daddy and this ain't my life!" Johnboy must've been seven or eight, long enough

after the move to shake off the shock. Long enough to realize he'd been stolen. His whole family stolen. But when he spoke up, an unholy glint came over Jonny's eyes. *The mists of God*. That's how Johnboy sees it. Like how he imagines it will be when it's his time to pass. All black, with the mists of God dissembling his awful form, abolishing each sin with each little piece. Johnboy tried not to care and once bit at Jonny's arm. Jonny stopped him by the throat, squeezed just hard enough to set something wrong forever. By the time a doctor saw to it, they said the fracture had grown too far in to do anything about. Johnboy would wheeze his mournful days away making sure Ma and Grandpa were fed and nicely tended too. The others, well. Rachel was a wraith plain in the day. She was as good to him as the wind. Wanda was too young to tell. Would Jonny's seed bare his likeness?

*Marge:* If you think you can fuck the devil without knowing what you're doing, you're lying to yourself. But when the devil grabs your hips, you'll understand that knowing what you're doing and being in control are not the same. Which brings up the issue of apologies. Do I owe them? My children? My father? I owe them my life but do I owe them for my mistakes? Can a mother do more than give life, if all other courses surely lead to pain? And if all we abhor is death, then is the mother guilty for making it's fodder? The devil came to me as a woman and holds me now as a man. In his own way, I don't think Jonny knows that he is the devil. I think if you asked him the same questions, he may say that he knows the devil himself, that the devil speaks to him as much as he speaks to me. But that's the rub. That's the God in the devil. In his own way, I think Jonny thinks he cares for us and that he doesn't want to care. That by caring he is forsaking his dreams of skin and sweat. But don't you see? That's why he can keep us, keep us for when he *is* ready to be the devil. God knows what the devil needs and when he needs it. God makes sure we are there. I see them. Jonny and Pa. Rachel behind them. Forest gunk grows off that girl. I love her.

*Rachel:* Grandpasmelled like death, but I never minded. Death was half the smells of the forest, after all. Fallen leaves melting into dirt. A nutritious reminder that things will pass and those things include you

and me. Grandpa was a nice man, besides, and everyone save Wanda knew his time would be on him soon. He held my hand and we walked with Jonny and Johnboy. The two looked more like father and son every day. Jonny's love is like a vine, keeping Johnboy's stalk close. I'm lucky that I broke when you left. There's nothing for Jonny to grab onto in me. I thought by now that you'd be back, but now I understand that even in our thoughts there is rot and decay, that we twist shapes and people and hold onto them much longer than we should. I suppose if you were well and truly dead I'd smell it. But I don't. I smell sweat, rum, and tobacco. Dirt and earth. Hard hands that tossed me in the air and brought me back down. With your leaving I felt myself flung back up once more, knowing I'd fly too high and no one would catch me. I slammed hard into the earth. Bugs and moss grow through my corpsemind. Jonny and Johnboy were laughing together for the first time. Grandpa mumbled to himself then screamed as loud as his old longues could squeeze out. He stopped short and asked Jonny a question. Can I *please* go inside now. Dark came over Jonny's face. Ok, he said.

Outside the window the father and the brother dig in the rain. The father and the brother carry a big box and drop it in the hole. The sister and the mother come outside underneath a black blob. The people speak. Rain pours harder. The brother puts the dirt back in. The father stopped him and held up a shiny thing. The brother pushes and the father hits his face. The brother falls in the hole. The mother and the sister yells so loud that Wanda cries. The father speaks to the mother and the sister and they stop. He drops the string into the hole. The brother's hand comes out of the hole and the father lifts him out. He slapped the brother's back and handed him the shiny thing. The brother looked at it and hung it from the tree. In that moment, sadness arrives in Wanda's heart with weary confidence. They had dug the hole on the hill outside her window world. Now there is a shiny thing dangling from the tree and that made Wanda so sad that she cries harder and harder. The mother comes in to hold her, but it was already done. For the rest of her life, Wanda would wonder when that shiny thing would come to life, and why that would ever be a good thing.



## Chapter 2:

*Jonny:* What Jonny always knew that other people didn't is that a loose grip held long leaves more a mark than a tight grip held short. He watched his baby girl. All Wanda liked to do since Grandpadiel was stare out at the bell hung above the grave. Few times, Jonny considered going and cutting it off, but in a way he liked that the baby had something to look at. An obsession of its own. Jonny thought people worried too much over babes. They'd grow. Look at Johnboy. He broke into manhood with each day. If by that time Jonny is his father bye and bye then that will be the end of it all, and Jonny can watch the thing play out in his dreams. His nature had softened. The family he stole by blood rite had molded him into a good man. The only way out was back, and Jonny couldn't go back. He found Marge in the kitchen and kissed her neck. She put a hand on his arm. It was cold. The change was coming soon. Another year or soon. Jonny's hair pricked up with gross excitement.

*Johnboy:* Most nights Johnboy can't sleep. The sometimes never-setting sun cast about the sky a porcelain lid of cerulean that would surely light the ocean up with envy. Johnboy had never seen the ocean, but he can't imagine it could be all that. This was his silent ocean. He wakes up and slips into Wanda's room. As much as he hates to admit it, she's a beautiful baby girl. Sometimes she wakes up when he comes in, but she never yells or whines. Johnboy takes her on his knee and together they watch the old birch tree where Grandpawas buried. Jonny insisted that they tie a string around his finger and attach it to an old bell he kept in his truck. That way, if Grandpawoke up he could just shake his finger and the bell would ring and then what? They'd come running out and dig him up? Jonny couldn't get that last part out of his head. Grandpawas colder than cold when they got him in the casket. He was dead. But Jonny insisted and even though a whole patch of wildflowers had grown around the grave, he still wouldn't let Johnboy cut it down.

*Wanda:* Jonny is the kind of man who lingers on you after he's done. You squirm in those odd moments of lucidity after whatever pleasure you've learnt to derive from such senseless pumping wears off, but Jonny won't move till he's ready. The bell rings above Pa's grave and Jonny gets off. The bell pisses me off. I don't care where Jonny picked up whatever backwoods gods that told him to rig the damn thing. I hate that Grandpawon't stop ringing it. If he had something he wanted to say to me, he should've said it before he let himself go and die. He didn't do nothing when Boris never came back and it was only Jonny in his place and before they knew it they were walking four states over. We were the same, me and him. Only difference was Grandpaloved Jonny first. I put up enough of a fight to feel ok with myself now.

*Rachel:* I'm the only one who will go out to Pa's grave. Everyone else seems afraid of it. Sometime I sit amongst the wild flowers and blow up towards the bell to see if she could ring it. I never could and that means I'm not dead enough yet. Maybe if my tongue was moss and my lungs were bags of leaves. The bell was almost dead. It was going to fall one of these days. Actually, maybe not for another year. But it'll fall and what's funny is that I'll be the only one who will notice. I think that's why Johnboy hates the bell so much. Every day it doesn't ring is another day he gets closer to accepting this farce. I laugh at him and pity him, but I know my dead nest of bog muck and tender roots is just another way of giving up and that I gave up much sooner, when it was still sensible to give up—when a madman was dragging us across dirt roads. I tried to die, but I'm beginning to see now that my half death is punishment enough. Jonny leans out from the house holding little Wanda and calls me for dinner.

*Wanda:* Mother tried to feed her and she spat it back up. The brother laughed and she expected the father to slap him, but he did not. Expecting was new, but fully integrated now. She knew when and where things should be, so when the brother didn't hit the father, she spit at the both of them. The mother said something in her sweet voice. Why was she talking to them in the sweet voice? Wanda had expected the cold voice. Nothing was going expected. Wanda shit her pants and the dead girl picked her

up. They all laughed. Why were they laughing? She began to cry and they laughed harder. The dead girl rocked her and started to sing. The father cried when the dead girl sang. The mother took his hand.

### Chapter 3:

*Johnboy:* He had never hit anybody before, only tried to bite Jonny that one time. But he hits Rachel when she shows him the old bell rusting in the wildflowers, a vine was growing clean through the brass. He hits her so then she'll understand the extremity of what she's done and hopefully she won't ever bring up the bell or the grave or Grandpa again. It's just that, when he looks around he sees that all is fine. Two years Grandpa has been dead and now Johnboy even gets to go to school on some days when Jonny doesn't need him. Things are ok, by the looks of them. Maybe he hit Rachel because she wasn't showing him the bell to wake him up, she was just showing him as if it was another root in the dirt. If she wasn't going to be anything but a dead girl walking, then Johnboy was just going to go on as well.

*Rachel:* It wasn't on purpose, but now Johnboy knows how it feels when the family makes you out to be the dangerous one. It really wasn't on purpose. I knew my lip was bleeding and that my eye was twice its size, but the way I saw it was like when they'd pass dead trees on the side of the road on the long march up to this twisted house. No one cared that the trees were battered and bruised, so why would Jonny or Mama care about her cut lip and bruised eye? But they did and made a big show of screaming at Johnboy and I did feel bad for a moment but then I remembered that all I did was show him the bell from our Pa's grave and he hit me three times with a look on his face that I thought he might kill me. My insides lit on fire and all the dead gave way to agony and I screamed at Johnboy and something else inside me screamed at me for screaming at him. Why wasn't I yelling at Jonny?

*Jonny:* As he pulled Johnboy outside by the ear and tossed him onto the pile of wildflowers, Jonny got sick. The moment. The change. It had come and gone. Just then, when he was so busy teaching this boy not to hit a poor ghost of a sister, the moment went and the change wasn't that Jonny got to leave. The change was that his heart wouldn't let him leave now and in this moment of yelling he became a father



of a stolen family and whether he liked it or not he'd always have to care for these people. His sentence would have no cell. It would have a house.

*Marge:* You thought that I couldn't figure out a way to win but look at what I have found. The devil's soul is shackled by love and so we will weigh him down until he believes he is mortal along with all of us. Only then, as he lies cold in his coffin but realizes he cannot die, will he ring his bell. I will imagine that the children of Johnboy will hear him ringing his bell and talk about what he had created. The smart amongst them will think the ringing of the bell is the wind. Jonny will ring the bell and wish that the world knew his terrible deeds, but the world will never know of them. They will die with me and you will die with them as well. If something about that feels wrong to you, feel free to shake your hand and ring the bell.