

OLD SOL

The pale yellow bathrobe fell away just above the knee, exposing an Alabama roadmap of raised blue veins. She tapped the newspaper with the eraser of her pencil. Tap, tap, tap, then to her lips. Three taps, mouth, repeatedly as she peered over the top of her glasses searching for the next letter.

I stood two feet away but knew she wouldn't acknowledge me before her next sip of coffee. Finally, she laid the pencil on the crossword and reached for the cup. Yesterday's Ruthless Red lipstick aligned perfectly with the stain on the cup rim, both in color and placement. When she felt my presence she pushed her glasses up her nose and focused her owl-eyes on me. The bloated pupils made me feel miniscule.

"What?" She asked. "It's Sunday," as if I weren't allowed to participate.

I tucked my splayed left foot behind the other. "I'm hungry."

"So eat." She turned her attention to the puzzle. "I've got to whip the devil's ass afore I do anything else. Can't let old Sol get the better of me." Though her piercing cackle defied any religious affiliation it did stir the pile of cousins and neighbor kids sleeping in the living room floor. The fact that I'd wandered in from my very own bedroom should have awakened some level of privilege, but Terri occupied that pile. Terri, not a cousin, at least in any biological sense.

The mound of blankets and bodies came to life like a nest of snakes suddenly exposed to sunlight; maybe less intimidating - maybe not, depending, I suppose, on your perspective. There were less than a dozen today; extended family, kids from town, folks from down at the edge of the suburbs. We had horses. We also had goats, sheep, pigs, rabbits, a boatload of floppy-eared hounds and 20 acres of running room.

"The more the merrier," Mama said when folks with some connection to the real world dropped their kids off Friday evening. It happened every summer as long as I could remember. I reckon Mama charged for this service but I never saw any money change hands.

Mama took another sip of lukewarm coffee and penciled in a few letters. "Go get your brothers up and y'all feed the animals." That got the snake-pit really squirming.

"I'll help." "No, me." "I get to feed the goats." "Can we ride horses?" You'd think somebody had come in the living room with a fully-charged cattle prod the way everyone instantly went from somnambulistic repose to bouncing around Mama. I just wanted breakfast. Not happening. I stomped off toward my brothers' room.

My twin brothers shared a room. I had my own but it was tiny and had been added to the side of the house by some one-legged transient carpenter my dad befriended a few years back. It took the guy about four months to build it. He had to knock off by noon every day to go to the liquor store, not usually making it back until dark. Daddy ran him off before he installed any heat or AC, but it was mine. My stereo record player and all my albums and books fit in there. That and a sagging twin mattress was all I needed.

My little brothers were none too happy about getting up. Kurt grumbled toward the bathroom. Heath threw a football at my face and pulled the covers over his head.

"Mom said," I warned, but he and I both knew it to be an empty threat. I know what folks say about twins but these two had nothing in common but a birthday. Kurt was a nerd, like me if I'd been a zombie. Heath was a jock, complete with muscles, dexterity and an attitude that made me mostly want to smother him in his sleep.

Back at the front of the house all the blankets and sleeping bags were piled in the corner. Everybody milled around like they were waiting for me to open the escape hatch. Still no breakfast. No surprise, I knew the drill. I take everyone outside, keep 'em occupied, *then* Mama will eventually make breakfast.

"Let's go." We piled out into the blue-white morning, gulping lung-fulls of the petroleum-laden air wafting over from the chemical plants across the river. One of the smaller boys, a new town-kid named Jesse or Jesus or something, stood on tiptoes trying to reach the leather strap hanging from a big iron bell bolted to a corner fencepost by the feedlot.

"Don't! Mama will be on your butt like chickens on a June bug!" I warned. There weren't many rules around our place but one that you better not break: *kids do not ring the bell*. Any kid that rang it could expect their butt would be set afire by Mama's switch. The loud iron bell had only one purpose. You could go anywhere you wanted; our place, the neighbors pasture, down in the swamp to look for baby gators, even the old abandoned house down the road that I told all the girls was haunted by the ghost of a slave who had been killed by his master when he tried to keep the guy from raping the ghost slave's daughter. No matter where you were when Mama rang that bell you better come running. The sound traveled over a mile. If it rang – come home.

Even before I hollered at that kid, Jesus or whatever, Kurt grabbed his hand pulling him back. I reckon the panicked look on Kurt had got through to the kid. He didn't even look at that bell again.

Most of these kids just ran wild, chasing the goats, wrestling in the hay barn. A few would help Kurt and I feed the animals. I saw Terri pick up a metal bucket and walk toward the stables. She liked to help feed the horses. Usually I tried to pawn that off on my brothers. The

rabbits and goats were a lot less work, but today I followed her, grabbing another bucket on my way.

"Want to help?" I loved her skin. "We can brush them while they eat. They like that," I said. She had so many freckles. Not just a few on her cheeks, but on her shoulders and her elbows, her legs and feet. Once I even saw the back of her neck when she bent over and her hair fell forward. Yep, freckles. I loved them. They seemed like some kind of confectionery coating. I wanted to find out if they had a smell or taste.

We were friends, went to the same school and all. I'd pretty much known her all my life but that summer was different somehow. We'd made it through elementary school and the next year we'd have to both ride the bus to another town 8 miles away for Junior High. Our lives were in flux, leaving our younger siblings behind.

One weekend that Spring, just before school ended, we were in the garden digging out the last of the potatoes. We kneeled down, up to our elbows in black dirt, and I got close enough to smell her. She smelled organic in a sweaty summer-drizzle kind of way. Her skin glistened and those little chocolate freckle drops almost seemed like they danced with her every move. I don't know what I was thinking when I leaned in toward her. Was I going to put my cheek against her shoulder or lick her arm? Who knows? She noticed me and after a flutter of confusion she smiled and stared right into my eyes. I cleared my throat and went back to digging potatoes. Ever since then, though, she hangs around me more, or I hang around her more. Hard to say. Anyway, when she's here we stand closer and help each other with stuff.

Last week when she was here, we were feeding the horses and we both dipped our buckets in the grain bin at the same time. When our heads touched we just let it happen. The

smell of her mixed with the oats made me almost dizzy. When we stood up Heath was right behind us.

"Avery and Spot sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love..." I hit him in the chest with a bucket full of oats. Hard. Knocked him down. I thought I'd killed him but he caught his breath and wailed. He ran in the house hollering for Mama. I didn't know what to do at first, then I followed.

"He tried to kill me." He was overplaying something fierce.

"He made fun of Terri. You're supposed to treat girls with respect," I countered. "Dad said so." Mama raised her brow. "He called her Spot," I said. I hated when he did that and he'd done it a lot lately.

Mama wrapped her hand over her nose and mouth. I think she didn't want us to know how angry she was. She took a minute. "You boys need to get along," she said, "and, Heath, leave them alone. Find someone your own size to pick on. Y'all git." She waved us away. It wasn't very satisfying. He didn't get in any trouble. I guess, though, I didn't either looking back.

After the chores Mama had a pile of sausage and biscuits ready. We ate and then we could play outside as long as we *stayed* outside. Boundaries were ambiguous. I found Terri or she found me. Who knows? It's not like we were hiding from each other.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "Heath can be a butt hole."

She giggled. "That's nothing compared to what I get at school."

"What? Why?"

"How about 'leper' or 'speckled trout'? Kids are just mean. I'm used to it."

"But your freckles... they're cool. They're really pretty!"

She looked crooked at me. "You're weird." Then she looked down at the back of her hand. "But, thanks."

We sat there a minute. She looked at her hands some more. So did I. Then I looked at her hair hoping it would part enough to see the back of her neck again. When it didn't I reached up and moved it. She tightened up, not quite a flinch, then just kept staring at her hands in her lap.

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"I know where there is a tree we can climb pretty easy." I wanted to be alone with her but I wasn't sure why or how.

"Okay."

"It's in the Rollins' pasture behind our field."

"Okay, cool."

"It's a pretty long walk," I said.

She stood. "Let's go."

The grass in that section of the pasture was almost knee-high. It swished against our legs. As soon as we were out of sight of the house she walked closer until the back of her hand bumped against mine. I held it and ran my thumb across the back of it near her wrist. She held

our hands up. We both looked at them and chuckled. "Do you know what this means?" She asked. I'm sure I appeared confused. "When you wake up tomorrow you'll be covered in freckles."

"Cool!" I said, "as long as they're yours."

She put her head on my shoulder and I slipped my arm around her waist. It was really hard to walk in the tall grass like that but we did it anyway.

The tree was one of those spreading oaks like you see in groves but this one stood alone in the pasture. Actually it didn't really stand. It had leaned over and grown back to the ground and then made another attempt at height, failing once more before finally breaking contact with the ground, giving the illusion of a giant wooden sea serpent slithering through this ocean of clover. Near the outer end you could straddle the diminishing trunk like a horse with your feet barely touching the ground. We did, facing each other.

We both had that sheen of clean prepubescent sweat from walking through the field. My heart square-danced in my rib cage. I'm guessing we both knew where we were headed, just didn't know how to get there. So we talked – about, stuff. Finally, I ran my hand down her arm, staring at the place where I touched.

"What did you expect?" She asked.

"I don't know."

"They don't rub off."

I laughed. She closed her eyes. I figured it out from there. When our lips touched we were puckered up like grandmothers. I'd seen movies, passionate powerful kisses in spaghetti

Westerns and Technicolor love stories from Hollywood, but I didn't want to frighten her in broad open daylight. But when she laced her arms around my neck I slipped my fingers in her tangled hair to pull our faces closer. She leaned in so I would feel her heart thump against my chest. We wallowed lips together like we'd seen on the big screen, her taste the most glorious, tantalizing dessert. It could've been one minute or twenty when we had to separate, both panting, having forgotten to breathe. I leaned back on a branch to make more room in my shorts and she lay against me, the weight of her head warming my shoulder.

"Are we in love now?" She asked.

I was confused by her question because my being had surrendered back when I observed the lovely sprinkles on her neck. Still, a true answer eluded me. "I think this is where we start."

She snuggled against me, her breath on my ear warmed me from the inside. I turned to her and kissed her between the eyes. She brought her mouth to mine. This time we remembered to breathe so we wouldn't have to stop. The ecstasy formed a beautiful ache in my abdomen. Her breath on my lips, salt sweet and heavy, filled my head with a dizzy foam. Our shirts became damp and adhered to our flat, youthful stomachs.

In the distance I heard church bells. This was supposed to happen. I'd read about it in books. Her hushed moan was a question as she pulled away. "Don't we have to go back?" She asked.

"Why?"

"The bell, it's calling."

I took her by the waist, holding her snugly. "It's probably someone playing with it," I assured her, preferring brutal dismemberment to releasing this heady moment. "If it rings again we'll go back." Our thrill ride on the stationary oak resumed. At some point I do remember a ringing on the periphery of consciousness that I effectively disassociated with through a series of grunts and sighs.

We'd given our lips a break to let me nuzzle her neck while her fingers dug into my back. I heard a growl from the pasture and spied Mama stomping across the field, cleaving the weeds from her path with a five-foot buggy whip. She burned with vicious anger .

"Damn you, Avery! Don't tell me you didn't hear the bell." She acted like she didn't notice what we were doing but some of that dense layer of anger had to be related. "And you, Miss Terri! I know you heard it too, and what's all this?" She screamed, flagging the whip. She was almost upon us.

I looked at Terri, pale and trembling with tears forming in the corners of her eyes. Putting my lips to her ear I inhaled one last whiff of perfect desire and whispered, "Run, my love, like a gazelle." Corny, I know, but she took it to her adrenaline inflamed heart and darted away. Mama started toward her, then I did the only thing I knew. I laughed. Mama glared at me, raising the whip. I faked left, darted right, then jumped past her within inches. She swung but only grazed me with the handle of the whip. No real discomfort. I zigzagged through the weeds allowing Terri a huge lead. Mama charged toward me with purpose, the latigo tongue of her instrument of justice licked the back of my calves, marking me with red welts. It should have stung like being branded. It didn't. I continued my maniacal laugh. "Is that all you've got?" I taunted. She lashed my legs twice more. "You need to start exercising," I hollered, continuing my disjointed course

through the field. She was bellowing incoherently now, lashing crazily as I guffawed. Terri had gained a good 50 yards of us. She looked back in horror but I waved her on.

I laughed so hard I could barely stand but I continued stumbling forward. Mama swung wildly now, nothing but mindless rage. The tip of the whip ripped across my bicep and a line of crimson trickled down my arm. I raised it in a mark of victory, licked it off and spit it toward Mama. She screamed incoherently and charged in my general direction, cutting at the air, the whip singing, sometime making contact, usually not. I danced the perimeter of her radius exposing various patches of my skin to her assault while still taunting.

She raised the whip above her like a medieval battle ax and lunged, bringing it down across my cheek. The lunge was too powerful for her to keep her footing. She collapsed to the ground, rolling into the fetal position. Sobs racked her. I knew I'd passed some devastating point in our familial dynamic. I panicked and rushed to her side. The deep growl emanating from her when she realized I stood over her was an unearthly inhuman sound. It terrified me.

"Mama? Are you okay? Get up." She clutched her legs tighter. When I offered my hand to help she looked up at me. Her lack of recognition bordered on fear.

"Mama? I'm sorry," I said, not even thinking about the several red lines where blood oozed from my arms and legs. I kneeled beside her for several minutes before helping her get her footing. We leaned on each other as we trudged the final yards back to the house. All of the friends and cousins stood around the bell, silent and subdued. The sight of blood on me and the walleied skittishness in Mama caused them to back away from us, opening a path to the house. Later we all sat on the front porch waiting for various parents to pick up the kids who didn't ride their bikes home. Terri tentatively touched my various welts and lash marks. I grinned at her.

"Don't worry they don't rub off." I hoped she'd giggle or at least smile but she looked at me like her heart was bleeding.

The next weekend only a couple of cousins came, and the next weekend, and the next. After about a month most returned, but not Terri. She never came back. We did manage to squeeze in a few more make out sessions behind the administration building during school lunch breaks that fall, but it was never the same. There was a tentativeness to our touches like maybe back on that day something did rub off, and we couldn't put it back.