

WHERE'S FAR AWAY?

It's fall in Escambia County, the northmost west county in the Panhandle, right up next to the Alabama line. Last week down in Panama City, my older sister Loretta got arrested for meth—she was living with a parolee— and, Daddy, in response, sold his cattle, including the two longhorns he kept as pets, and disappeared into the night. This isn't our first family disaster. Two years ago my younger sister LaShonna was killed mid-afternoon driving home on Route 4 near the Blackwater River. A bee stung her, and she went off the highway into an oak tree. We think that's what happened, because her face was swelled up, but the police said she'd been drinking.

Daddy worried over us three girls, but less about me, because I have a job in county road works, keeping track of men and machines—where they are, who's driving, where they supposed to go, and for how long. My office is in Pensacola. I don't much like the city because of the air force and the navy all over everywhere. "American is always at war," Daddy said. "You got to remember the fear of a nation."

After Daddy left, Tom Markham called me, and, a few days later, I drive the forty miles up there, near to the Perdido River. The house isn't much for speaking of. It's the first place you come to half a mile out of Walnut Hill, a clapboard nothing with peeling paint. The roof doesn't leak, though, and the windows are mostly tight.

Daddy's truck isn't there, or the cattle, either, and most of his stuff is gone—guitar and clothes and boots and some pictures. The fridge has mold in the plastic containers and a few limp vegetables. . I don't know to do except clean up for when he comes back.

On my way back to Pensacola, I stop up to the Markham place on the hill and thank Tom for calling. "I liked your Daddy," he says, "and I trusted him. He kept his promises."

"He didn't make too many," I say.

"Martha and I, we'll keep an eye out down there. I'm sorry the longhorns are gone. I'd have bought them and rented the pasture."

“When the time comes,” I say, “we don’t always know what we need to.”

“If I can help,” Tom says, “call me.”

Things go on for some days, work and such, and one night I’m cooking dinner, waiting on Cale to get home, thinking helter-skelter about paying our rent money, and where Daddy ran off to, and whether Loretta’s still in jail. Grits is cooking and a ham steak and leeks. Past eight, Cale comes in skunky-drunk. I’m eating already, and his food is across the table. He sits down like nothing and says, “I jus’ threw a cinder block through the window of Jasper Trumbull’s truck.”

I look up and see his fiery red eyes. “He owe you money again?”

“An’ he knows I knows he has it.”

“We got enough trouble without you bein’ on’ry,” I say. “You bet on Tampa again?”

“Bet agains’”

“Caleb, we’re not sufferin’. We got two cars, a tin boat, and food on the table.”

“Mine be cold,” he says.

“You din’t call. Was you over at Pelegrin’s, seeing Miss Big Tits?”

“Seven guys was in there because of her.”

“She oughta be in a magazine.”

“One time she was, but, when you get old, you gotta work extra.”

I eat and wash down my grits with iced tea. “I’m thinkin’ of taking a break from you, Cale,” I say. “I’m going to go to the country and live at Daddy’s.”

He looks at me as if he’s got hearing loss. “An’ do what?”

“Commute back. It’s a little more than thirty minutes. People do that.”

Cale pokes at his chicken. “I hear yo Daddy went to Mobile. You gotta hope he don’ waste your inheritance in them casinos.”

“What inheritance? Anyway, he’s his own man. He wouldn’t go to Mobile.”

“You cain’t leave,” Cale says. “I won’ allow it.”

“Change comes fast,” I say, “an’ you don’ vote.”

Daddy kept cattle and farmed vegetables was respected because he paid what he owed and didn’t raise his voice. What he knew was less than some and more than others. We had some fence, but the longhorns had none around them, because Daddy fed them salt treats by his hand. He named them Tom and Martha for the Markhams on the hill, though the Markhams never knew.

When we girls were growing up, Mama was a mystery woman, so quiet you barely knew she could talk. She gibbered about nothing and scurried about in the garden, watering and weeding, and fetched feed for the chickens, and cleaned the house. Sometimes she prayed out loud for a miracle to come, though she never specified what the miracle might be. She knew we three girls were in jeopardy and thought nothing could save us, so she spent more time with whatever self she saw over there in the trees by the river.

One night a storm howled with lightning and heavy rain, and nobody in a right mind would’ve ventured out, but Mama did. In the morning, trees were thrown about, and the Perdido River was running every which way through the farm, and Mama was gone. That happened when I was ten, Loretta twelve, and LaShonna seven.

We thought Daddy’d go back into himself more, but instead he decided then everything was up to him. He dug a new well, cut posts from scrub and built a fence around the garden, and cut down the kudzu that ran wild over everywhere.

Cale and I live in a rented duplex out east of the city, and it’s not much to move my possessions to the farm. We argue about who takes the Corolla and who gets the Mercury. Cale’s going to live with his brother in Navarre, so he needs the Corolla to show himself not to be a worthless black man—I get that—but I need it for the mileage on my commute. So we toss up a coin.

When I win, he whines and won't help me pack. He doesn't care I'm going, except for my paycheck, and I don't mind he'll be in the rearview mirror. Neither of us ever tried too hard to have kids. After work, I did the cooking and cleaning and laundry on weekends, and Cale didn't do nothin'. We folk haven't been slaves since the War, but I get the idea I been one more recent than that.

So on a Saturday, I load up the Mercury with my possessions instead of the Corolla because it holds more. It's a warm day, light clouds, not much breeze. The highway is easy, not much traffic. I turn off the expressway onto highway 45, and in Cantonment get gas, a padlock, and some seeds for a garden I want to lay in. From there, it's twenty-five miles of two-lane to 99A and Walnut Hill.

Descending the farm road, I see Martha Markham is at her mailbox, so I stop and tell her I'm staying a while.

"We've seen lights down there at night," she says. "We thought you were already there."

"Maybe Daddy's come back."

"No truck," Martha says. "No other car, either."

"Could be Mama's ghost," I say.

I drive on to the house, turn in, and see tire tracks in the mud that go around back.

The front door's never had a lock, so I leave that on the step, along with the seeds, and go inside. The living room looks the same, except there's a jacket I've never seen before on the sofa—too small for Loretta—and in the fridge is a pizza box with half a pizza in it. Also, in the bedroom the sheets are in a twist. My guess is kids had a party here, but I don't see any bottles or beer cans, no trash or undies lying around. And nothing's been destroyed.

I unload my stuff and drive back to Pensacola, thinking my last load will be in the Corolla, and what's been going on at Daddy's, and should I call the police. But the sheriff out there isn't going to help a black woman out nowhere in the county. My fallback is to wait and see, which is how I have to confront a lot of problems.

The Corolla isn't at home, and Cale doesn't answer his phone, either. He's stole it is what I think, so

I've got no choice but to toss the rest of my clothes and the pots and the blender into the Mercury.

The padlock's only fits on the inside of the front door, but it will keep out intruders. The back door has a key under a rock nearby. I make the bed up fresh, wipe down the counters and windowsills, and set the pizza box and jacket out on the front stoop. By evening I'm sitting on the back steps looking at the colors in the sky.

Already I sense more's going on than I know about, but I can't tell if it's something in the woods over by the river, or in the way the cattle have beaten down the meadow, or in the air all around. Is it a good something or a bad something? Daddy taught us to pray when help was needed, but I never saw it made a difference. At the same time I'm glad to be here, I'm also afraid. No praying will change that.

My guess is the parties happen on weekends, and it's Saturday night. B, thinking about it, who would come here to party? More like, it's a desperate person who needs a place to stay. I don't want that, either. Whoever felt it was easy to trespass can see my lights on in the house and the Mercury parked in the yard.

The air gets so dark I can barely see, and the trees are black scallops with the sky over. Then a whip-poor-will calls. The bird gets a reply from farther away, and the frogs and cicadas start in. Pretty soon the air is solid sounds, and skeeters come up crazy, so I go in.

I eat greens and a piece of cold chicken. Daddy has no TV, but books are all over everywhere, even on his workbench where he tinkered fixing things—the chain saw, a stovepipe that needed beveling, a tree-trimmer that didn't work right—all the time listening to music.

During dinner, two cars come by on the road, and neither one slows down.

I worked the week and carried boxes all today, so, at ten o'clock, I get into bed. I think of Mama and Daddy sleeping in this bed together, and I wonder how they made children with each other, how Mama gave permission—whether she did—which leads me to imagining where they are now, *at this moment*, each of them. I'm hoping Daddy took the money from the cattle and went to find Mama, but I'm

not good at imagining, so I close my eyes and drift.

In the morning a mist rises from the river. I put water on for coffee and unlock the padlock on the door. The pizza box is gone and the jacket, too., and a car's parked in the drive beside the Mercury—a maroon Subaru station wagon with fogged-up windows. It has dents and rust and a busted headlight, so I'm not so much afraid. In bare feet, I go out across the prickly grass and look in the window that's cracked open.

In the backseat, folded into herself, is a white girl, nineteen or twenty years old. I whack hard on the driver's window, and the girl starts up and hits her head on the roof of the car. In a few seconds, she comes to her senses and opens the window. Right off she says, "I'm so sorry."

She waves skeeters away from her face. Her eyes are puffy. She isn't used to sleeping in her car in a strange yard.

"What you sorry for?" I ask.

"I didn't mean to bother anybody," she says.

"You are, though. What're you doing here?"

She works her body around, opens the door, and gets her feet out on the ground. She's thin and all angles and has long messy blond hair. She's wearing frayed jean shorts and a rumpled shirt that says CHARGERS on the front.

"People in town told me about an abandoned house, so I drove out. This was a few days ago. No one was here. I waited a couple of hours, and when no one showed up, I parked in back and went in."

"Goldilocks," I say.

The girl smiles a not-smile. "Last night, I cam back and saw the car parked here, but I didn't have anywhere else to go. The pizza box and my jacket were on the stoop, so I knew whoever was here was a good person."

"That ain' me," I say.

In the passenger seat, clothes spill out of a duffel bag. A toothbrush is on the dashboard, and in back groceries are tipped over, along with a bottle of wine.

“I shredded pork and barbecue sauce,” she says. “The pork should, by now, go in the fridge. And the chicken gizzards. They were cheap.”

“You ain’ got no cooler?”

The girl pauses. “I’ll clear out right away, but I left something in the house.”

“Like what?”

“All I need is three minutes,” she says.

I don’t know what to say and look off into the low clouds moving fast along the treetops. A loud noise could make it rain. Then I remember the coffee water’s on, and I turn toward the house.

She must take this as consent, because she follows me with her groceries.

“Does this concern the law?” I ask. “I mean, you break into somebody’s house and hide money or whatever?”

“I didn’t hide money. I hid myself.”

I stare at her. “You’re running away?”

“My boyfriend went ballistic and threatened to kill me. You ever had a boyfriend?”

“Until two days ago I had a husband.”

“Then you know.”

Inside, she goes straight to the fridge, sets her sacks on the floor, and puts in pork and gizzards, eggs, and milk. I can’t remember if there was ever a white girl in this house. When Daddy was here, Mr. Markham came in once or twice, but Mrs. Markham never. The girl puts vegetables and snacks back and the wine into her bag and stands up again.

She’s white, I see that, and I wonder what trick she’s up to. But the water’s hot, and I say, “You want coffee?”

“Coffee would be lovely,” she says.

The water makes two cups, and I spoon in instant and set the cups on the table. Now comes awkward. She sits opposite and cradles her cup like her hands are cold. Her eyes are tired, and her body slumps at the shoulders. She's been through worse than she can talk about.

"My boyfriend's in the navy," she says. "We've been here a few months. We're from far away."

"Where's far away?" I ask.

"Ohio. It's not as hot as Florida. Lake Erie isn't pretty compared to the ocean, but people think it is. You ever been anywhere?"

"Mobile, Panama City a few times, Tallahassee once."

"Before Ohio, we were in San Diego. He was mean, and I should've left him then. So this house is yours?"

"My Daddy's. I'm living here till he gets tired of bein' gone."

"Where'd he go?"

I come short of an answer, because there's more to the question than I can deal with. *Why did he leave? Is he happy. Does he remember me?* So I say, "He jus' sold his cattle and left."

The girl sips her coffee and looks around the room, which makes wonder what she sees. I look, too. Daddy has a sofa with a sheet thrown over it, a couple of wooden chairs he made, Mama's scarves in a wicker basket, books and sheet music here and there Daddy forgot to take with him. One door leads to the two bedrooms in back—she knows this, I guess—and the other to the back steps. But she can't see the past. Mama left, and after we girls moved out, Daddy made our one room, three in a bed, into storage for Mama's stuff. Otherwise, close by, is a horse calendar three months behind, and a picture of Mama Daddy must have forgotten—my mother sort of blurry against the faraway green trees.

"So what did you leave?" I ask the girl. "Where is it?"

"It isn't anything specific," she says. "I wanted to smell the air and feel the house again."

"What you talking about?"

"The softness in the room," the girl says, a little dreamy, "what it feels like to be safe for a few

days.”

“It’s the house it always was,” I say, “nothing different.”

“But look out the window,” the girl says.

I look and see the meadow out there, the barb-wire fence Daddy never fixed, and the lean-away shed. Honeysuckle blooms pink and white along the corral. Farther off are trees and the low clouds.

“It’s what’s been here forever,” I say.

“I guess for you,” the girl says.

On her face is a sadness I’ve never seen in a white person and have no reason to care about, except I know what she means—she has to go back out *there* and figure her life out, and here, for a few days, she didn’t.

Then she says, all cheerful. “You hungry? I have eggs and can fry up some.”

“Eggs sound good,” I say.

The rain holds off, but clouds are still low, and the next thing I know she’s helping me dig in the garden. It hasn’t been planted since Mama left. Hannah—that’s the girl’s name—is wiry and strong and digs faster and deeper than I do. We pitchfork and turn over and break up clods. In a half-hour we’re sweating like the devil, so I go in and make iced tea, and we sit on the back steps side by side on the second stone.

Hannah tells me more about her boyfriend, a football fan and about San Diego and about a dead child she had when she was seventeen and never told anyone about, even her mother. She was in Ohio then. And I find myself telling her about Cale and his drinking and Big Tits and stealing away the Corolla away from me, none of which I mean to tell anyone, leastways a stranger.

Then I ask, “You ever hear of Ferguson, Missouri?”

“You don’t give me much credit,” Hannah says. “But I know what you mean.”

I see plain as get-out she can’t know what I mean, because she has no trace of anything in her but

white. “How can you know what I mean?”

“I do,” she says.

Her answer is part of the trick she’s using, but, anyway, from somewhere in me comes a sensation I don’t expect: I forgive her. I forgive her for being wrong, for breaking into my Daddy’s house, and even for helping me in the garden I was going to do myself.

But I don’t say anything.

We chop the dirt fine, make furrows, and bend over with the seeds—beans, cantaloupe, squash, tomatoes, cucumbers. We get about halfway, when the mist comes in on the wind. We look up and feel our faces get wet. But the mist gets heavier, and the clouds open up. Hannah takes cover under the roof of the lean-away shed, while I stand out in the open. I don’t know why the wet feels good to me. I raise my face to it and close my eyes.

Then Hannah joins me and holds my two hands. She shrieks and laughs, and, for a few seconds, I think we’re going to spin around and dance. But a bolt of lightning flashes down close by, and thunder booms, so there’s no dance. We share what’s more like prayer. That’s the closest word. We embrace and don’t move. The rain isn’t ever going to stop, the storm isn’t going to end. Hannah steps away from me and smiles, and we get serious together about laughing.

When the storm meanders past, we go to the back door and shed our clothes. We go inside wearing almost nothing, puddling water on the floor. It’s the strangest thing—her body and mine so close and almost naked. Water drips off our elbows and our chins and from our hair.

I point to the bathroom. “Shower’s in there,” I say.

“I know,” she says and goes in.

Alone, I feel confused. I don’t get what’s happening or what I’m doing. I go into the kitchen, find the shredded pork, and dump it into a fry pan to warm up. I put the barbecue sauce into the microwave. I open the package of chips she bought and pour more iced tea.

While I wait, I look at Daddy’s house again. Yes, I have memories of Mama and Loretta and

LaShonna—the best ones, before I knew how they’d end up—Daddy and Mama. I get *that* part. But what I see is a new house that I live in, the same configuration of rooms, the past I can’t erase, but also the future I can’t know.

Hannah comes out wrapped in a towel. “You have anything I can put on?” she asks. “I didn’t bring in any clothes from the car.”

I turn off the pork stove, and we go into the bedroom. My clothes are in the sacks and boxes, but I find a pair of yellow shorts Hannah likes, a shirt with a bird on it, and some underwear.

“I’ll leave you mine,” she says.

“I made lunch,” I say, “and you can take the leftovers with you.”

“Thanks,” she says.

We help ourselves to the shredded pork and glob on barbecue sauce and share the chips in a bowl in the middle of the table.

“Thanks for providing the food,” I say.

“You provided the table.”

“Should we finish the garden?”

“The rain made it too wet.”

We finish eating, and while Hannah clears the plates, it’s my turn in the shower.

The hot water is sporadic, but I have enough, and I wash my hair, rinse it, and step out on the wet mat Hannah used. I drape a towel around me and, in the bedroom, put on fresh undies and one of the loose sundresses I’ve brought with me. Why I think I should make myself up fresh is a mystery I smile about.

I come out, and Hannah isn’t there. I look at the garden—she’s not there, either—and I open the front door. Her car’s gone.

She’s left me what she put into the fridge, as well as the vegetables and the bottle of wine, but no note.

The rain's moved off, and the air's heavy with smells of honeysuckle and wet. The garden is almost planted. I'm glad of that, and for the help, too. The trees along the river are in sunlight, though, as yet, the sun isn't here on my Daddy's house.