

Bigotry, ignorance, death, and hope. This is the story of a man whose last moments of hatred are broken by a simple gesture of caring. His name is Walter Robinson, and he's not a happy man. He sits on his stoop and carves soapstone statues with a bowie knife, ruminating on his disgust and wallowing in his fabricated isolation. Will anyone reach him before he dies?

Hot, stinking fumes lingered in the thick August air like the filth of their origination in the streets. A molten orange sun was sinking behind the cracked brick-front apartments, rippling with disappointment that her heat kept the people indoors where they could not enjoy the golden haze she was weaving for them. At the last moment, her gaze fell on the one person still in the street, and she flared with hope, but he spat at her, and she dropped behind that part of the world in the search of a friendlier place.

He sat atop the concrete stoop of his apartment building, pushed against the curved brick railing and bent over his work. Wet brown eyes tightened with focus and drew his face into leathery crags like parched earth. Thick, wrinkled hands moved a bowie knife deftly across a small white figure. Behind him, the door opened, and he stiffened. A mother hurried down the stairs, holding a tattered dress nervously above her ankles with one hand and carrying what he knew was a baby in the other. When she was past, he sighed inaudibly and returned to his work, the tension draining from his limbs.

“S’atta cow?”

Thick fingers slipped. Red droplets fell and baked into the concrete as they landed. Streetlamps flickered on. Wet brown eyes slid to the side.

It was a girl, lanky and awkward. She wore a baggy pair of faded denim overalls over a hideously pink shirt, and her matted hair was held in two tiny puffs by mis-matched hairbands. Her eyebrows were raised high, and her green eyes shone with interest. Several teeth were missing from her grin.

“What’re y’doin’ inna heat, huh? Stinks out here. Well mister? ‘S’atta cow? Needs’a be fatter if’s’a cow.”

He raised the knife toward her. It flared in the fluorescent light of the street lamps. Blood dripped from the point. But the girl’s eyes were still focused on the little figurine.

“Arms need ta be shorter,” he said, “if yer a li’l girl. Aye kin help wi’that.”

She smiled and opened her mouth to speak, but she was cut off by her mother’s shriek.

“Dallas! Dallas honey what are you doing? Is that blood? Did he hurt you baby? Help! Police! Someone, help!”

The man’s thin lips curled into a sneer. No cops ever came to this part of town. No one ever came to this part of town; they knew better. They weren’t welcome. Even the sun was unwelcome. The woman sprinted up the stoop and grabbed the girl’s thin wrist and dragged her out into the street, ignoring her wails.

“I *told* you not ta talk to that man,” said the woman, shaking the girl and setting both her and the infant in her arm to crying. “That man’s a *bad* man, you hear me Dallas? A bad man. You don’t talk to him, you hear me? He done bad things, girl, bad things. You can tell just by *lookin’!* You stop fightin’ me now, you

hear? We got to see your Daddy! You know what happens if we're late! Come on now! Hush there, Charlie, you just hush now..."

Their voices faded away down the street, and the man resumed his work. This was not the first time the girl had tried to talk to him, but he hoped it would be the last: her mother became more hysterical with each attempt she made. It would only be a matter of time before they left. He had seen it before.

Families came and went. Not him. He stayed.

He turned the figurine over to examine it and cursed. Smears of blood covered the fine details of the face. Growling, he heaved himself to his feet and trundled inside, throwing the thin wooden door aside with a satisfying bang. The noise echoed up the dirty linoleum stairway and faded away. *Tryin' ta find a way out*, he thought, *just like all of 'em*. He grasped his tarnished doorknob forcefully with his injured hand and winced as pain shot up his arm—it felt good. He went in.

As he stood in the doorway and surveyed the room, he sucked his injured finger. The floor was covered in caked layers of dirt and dust. An old couch leaned crookedly against one wall, with a frayed afghan thrown over it. The bed was on the opposite wall, its white sheets worn yellow with use and tucked neatly under the mattress; it didn't have a pillow. An exposed toilet stood in the far corner looking like a stained, sorrowful sentry. On the tiered coffee tables in the middle of the room were the gathered the brothers and sisters of the figurine in his hand.

Everything was as he had left it. He moved past the couch, wiped his finger on the afghan, and knelt before the toilet. His knees popped. Gently, almost tenderly, he lifted the toilet seat and dunked the figurine into the water. Then he lifted it out, turned it over, and dunked it in again. He repeated this

process many times. Finally he lifted it to his eyes and examined it closely. Light from the streetlamps attacked the room through the open windows. In that light the figurine was radiant. Some of the blood had come off, but it was still wedged into the finer features. He set aside the knife, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a glittering pair of tweezers. With his tongue sticking out he set to work in the valleys of his creation.

He liked to work from the bottom up. First he scratched at the thin line of the mouth, taking care to move the tweezers in the direction of the fur. When he was halfway across he resisted the impulse to move straight to the nose. When it was done he ran a thick finger over it and blew on it: it looked right.

Two pairs of heavy footsteps hurried up the stoop and into the building. A sharp knock rattled his door. He ignored it and moved onto the nose as the footsteps moved up into the building.

The nostrils came first. With clever strokes he pulled the tiny brown clots, bit by bit, from the creature's face. Every motion removed a bit more. Several times he dipped it back in the water and reexamined it. Each time there was less blood. When he plucked the last bit from the first nostril he moved on to the second and repeated the process.

Outside, the train of the sun's gown had vanished behind the broken roofs. Heat lingered in its wake. Sallow lights were blinking into existence behind sallow curtains along the street like withering blossoms. One or two brash young stars did their best to shine through the humidity, but even their fierce light was little more than apathetic flicker by the time it filtered through to the eyes of the people behind their curtains. Somewhere far away, in the nicer part of the city, a siren wailed.

He had no curtains. He needed the light. The last brown fleck was prodded from the second nostril, and he had to rest. He set the figurine on the toilet tank, where it glowed against the sickening colors of the street beyond. For a moment, the lines of his face softened.

Then he frowned. 'Fatter'? Was she suggesting that it was fat in the first place? He grabbed it, picked up his knife, and trimmed a bit off the belly. As the blade moved in his hand for the final time, he caught sight of the empty, blood-stained eyes staring up at him.

With a cry he dropped the figurine into the toilet and scrambled backwards. The room swam before his eyes and his breathing came in short, shallow gasps. Clutching at his chest with one hand and covering his eyes with the other he sought to escape the dark labyrinth of memories that had eclipsed the light of his familiar apartment. Everywhere he went he was met with the eyes of his friends, the eyes of his brothers and sisters stained red with blood that should not be there, and they too were empty, staring up at him as if imploring him to give them life.

In his agony the *drum-drum-drum* of his heartbeat was the marching of police in the streets, bodies slamming against riot shields, and even gunshots. No matter where he turned he met the empty, bloodied eyes of his friends. Somewhere a man was screaming...screaming...

He realized the scream sounded like his, realized it *was* his. Like the doctor had told him he tried to focus on the drumming. By wrapping his mind around it—as a potter takes clay in his hands—he was able to shape it, purpose it. Marching police transformed into Bo Diddly and Jerry Lee Lewis.

Thrumming mobs became jostling crowds. And, with an extra effort, the wails of suffering became the wails of electric guitars.

“We’ll meet again,” a voice reminded him, “another place, another time...”

He opened his eyes. But the drumming continued.

He was back in his room. The drumming was someone banging on the door again. This time they were calling his name. He ignored it, choosing instead to chase the bold, nagging concern that darted above his thoughts like a yellow butterfly above the flowers. Then, with remembrance like a jolt, he threw himself at the toilet. His heavy hand, clumsy with its unfamiliar work, groped for the figurine. But he only succeeded in bumping it down the thin, rusted plumbing, where even two of his fingers could not fit. He cursed softly.

“We know you’re in there! We heard your scream from upstairs! Open up! This is the *police!*”

He froze. For the first time, the door had his attention. He couldn’t go back. If they took him back he would—no. He would never go back, not after what happened. (His toothless gums tingled with memory.) He would rather die here with his arm in the john. His watery eyes jumped from the door to his windows. But they were barred. Panic swelled inside him. Who would look after his brothers and sisters?

“He ain’t there officer.” It was the gangly girl’s voice.

“What do you mean?”

“Where’d he go?”

“Where’s your mother?”

Two men’s voices. Gruff. Calloused.

“Momma’s waitin’ for me, she sen’ me ahead ta tell you he gotta gun—big silver one—but then jus’ as I come t’ the stairs I hear a scream an’ he comes tearin’ outta the house thattaway wavin’ at knife an’ howlin’!”

“Howling?”

“We didn’t hear any howling.”

“Well he *lookt*’it, din he? You gonna git him or let him go on an’ terr’rr’rize the whole city or you gonna get after ‘im?”

There was an awkward pause, followed by the shuffling of feet. They descended the concrete steps and clicked away into the darkness.

“Mister!” came the girl’s voice when they had faded. “Mister you in’ere?”

He ignored her, trying again to dig the figurine from its lodging. But he only succeeded in depositing a layer of rust beneath his fingernails. Grinding his teeth, he renewed his efforts, and he was just beginning to consider uprooting the toilet when a creak shattered his attention. The door opened.

“Mister? You—hahahahahahahahaha!” she double over, wrapping her thin arms around her middle and shaking with laughter. The sound was so strange to him that he could only manage to stay where he was. She tried several times to finish her question, but every time she looked up she burst into fresh peals of laughter. Her voice was raucous, percussive, but it was sincere. Finally she managed it:

“Whatchoo doin’ inna doobowl?”

He scowled at her.

“You stuck? Hand’s been’ere a long time.”

Grunting, he withdrew his sopping arm. His dirty green jacket was wet past the elbow, but he made no attempt to remove it. He stood, walked right up to the girl with her hands on her hips, and slammed the door in her face.

“Hey!” came the muffled protest. “I jus’ saved you! Them cops’s gonna lock you up, but I saved you! Momma tol’ them how you waved that knife at me and screamed at them til they said they’d check it out. They say you gotta lotta people ‘round here been sayin’ bad stuff ‘bout you but that you ain’t made no real danger yet. Then you had to go an’ pick a fight with Momma.” There was a soft thud from her side of the door, then a sliding sound down it and another thud on the floor.

“Why’d you have to pick a fight with Momma, huh? She never takes no guff from nobody, leastways people like you. I tell her you don’t mean nuthin’ by it. I tell her I seen you nights on the roof talkin’ to the sky—thas why I know I kin talk to you: if you can talk to the sky I know you kin talk ta me. But she don’t back down from nobody, least-of-all to me and not even to Daddy, and now he’s inna other parta town all by hisself with only all his sisters ta keep’im comp’ny. Momma doesn’t like his sisters, says they done bad things, says you can see it in ‘em same as you. But I been thinkin’ there might be sumthin’ wrong with me, like I might be sick... ‘cause I cain’t see it in ‘em like Momma. I see they smiles an’ they pretty clothes and they’re always nice ta me even when they don’t haveta be. One time, one of ‘em gave me a ribbon and I wore it around on my chest like a little piece of the sun til we got home and Momma stopped yellin’ about Daddy and realized what I had, she took it off me an’ threw it in tha trash an’ threw it inna trash and called it filth, and I went into my bedroom and cried and cried til I gave myse’f a case a the hiccougs and couldn’t cry no more...

“Can I see ‘em again? Please? I know you got stars in there. I seen you talkin’ to ‘em in the sky and askin’ ‘em to come back to you, I seen ‘em shinin’ in yer windows like they shine inna sky, and I seen ‘em jus’ now...an’ I thought maybe, because I jus’ saved you, maybe I might get to see ‘em again up close?”

“Ain’t stars, girl. Soapstone. You seen me carvin’ ‘em ev’ry day.”

“Those lights shinin’ in yer window ain’t soapstone Mister, I know they ain’t! I seen ‘em!”

“You seen soapstone girl. Now get on outta here before you make me mad.”

For a moment it sounded like she was shuffling her feet on the linoleum. But when she choked and failed to stifle the ensuing sob he realized she was crying. He rested his head on the door and sighed inaudibly.

“I kn-knew it...” she sobbed, “I kn-knew I was s-s-sick! I cain’t see like o-o-other p- people, and I ain’t never g-g-gonna get to s-... *hic* to s- *hic*see the- *hic* stars...”

He stood there with his head resting against the door and scrounged around in his store of threats and insults for dealing with crying, hiccoughing children. Normally a glare was enough to frighten even the bravest of children, but here was one who not only refused to be scared away, but refused to go away at all. He trembled with a combination of fear and frustration. Timid footsteps came down the stairs, and he froze.

He could not go back there again.

“Dallas?” said the woman’s voice he recognized as his upstairs neighbor’s. He knew without looking that she was wearing her usual stained bath robe and slippers. “Dallas, is that you? You shouldn’t be here alone. The police—“

“Momma’s upstairs getting her things. We’re going to see Daddy.”

“You shouldn’t be down here alone.”

“Momma’s coming. She said I’d be in trouble if I talk to anyone.”

“Are you sure? I could sit with you if you—”

“Momma said not to talk to anyone either. Sorry.”

“Okay, well I’ll be watching from my window, just in case, okay? You watch out. That bum finally pissed off the wrong people—cops are after him. Good riddance, I say. He’s been nothing but trouble since he got here. If he didn’t always walk around with that knife I’d...I’d...rrrggh...”

Her timid footsteps moved back up the stairs. The girl continued whimpering.

“If I let you see ‘em will you quitcher racket?”

Immediately the sobbing stopped. It was replaced by stifled whimpering. “Yes...”

“Will you git?”

“*hic* Yes...”

“You promise?”

“Yes...”

He opened the door. She was sitting against it with her knees pulled up to her chin, and when it opened she fell backward across the threshold. He stepped backward like he'd been burned, but she instinctively threw her hand across her face.

"Git up, girl, I ain't gonna touch ya. But don't you come in, neither. I could—hey!"

Before his slow bones could react, she had skirted past him and was sitting on the couch, staring with wide-eyed wonderment at the figurines on the tiered coffee tables. The fluorescent street lights lit up the tear stains on her cheeks like rivers of moonlight and made her smile seem nearly blinding against her blotched face. He stomped over to her and put his hands on his hips, but she paid no attention to him.

"Git!" he hissed. "Ya promised!"

"I ain't seen 'em all yet. You said I could see 'em an' I aim to see 'em. Wooooowww! What is that?"

"Ostritch. Now git! I cain't have you in here or there'll be trouble!"

"S'already trouble," she said. "What's this one?"

"Girl if you don't git gone this instant I'm gonna git real mad!"

"I ain't scared of you," she said. "I ain't scared of no one who makes stars. You cain't be bad and make stars. 'S'just no way."

He stood there for a while, glaring at her and shaking and knowing that he had no way of getting rid of her without attracting unwanted attention. He sighed audibly. "Don't I scare you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Cause you the make these," she said, spreading her arms wide as if she could somehow take in the brightness of the white statues glittering on their ring-stained mountain.

Deflated, he slumped towards the door. "I'm goin' to tha stoop."

"Don't!" she cried in a fierce whisper. "Ol' Lady Herschel's watchin' her winda! She'll see you'n calla cops!"

Even more deflated, he slumped back to the toilet, dropped to his knees with a wince, and shoved his hand in.

She almost had another fit of the giggles, but her curiosity overcame it. "What are you doin' inna doobowl, anyhow?"

"Figurine," he said.

Her eyes went wide. "You get 'em from *there*?"

"Dropped it in while I'as washin' it...the one I'as workin' on t'day 'fore you startled me."

"Don't you have a sink?"

"First floor don't have 'em—too old."

"Let me try."

She was beside him, pushing him out of the way. Pulling his hand away from hers like it was a poisonous serpent, he backed away and watched intently as she easily and unflinchingly snatched the glistening white figuring from the water.

"Why's it got red eyes?" she said, turning it over curiously.

"Spilled blood on it."

She blushed in realization and started to dip it into the water. He shouted at her to stop, and she dropped it back in. Quickly she fished it out again and handed it to him, wiping her hand on her overalls and staring at her feet. "Can you fix it?"

"Course I can," he said. "Now git."

“Can I watch?”

“Girl, where’s your Momma? Ain’t she gonna be worried ‘bout you?”

“She don’ mind.”

“How kin she not mind? She’s the one set the cops on me!”

“She won’ mind, I said. Just let me watch you finish. I needa make sure you kin fix it.”

He started to object, but then he caught sight of the faint purple bruises on her wrist.

“Come with me, then.”

Taking up his knife and tweezers, he set out into the hall and up the stairs. He had to take them each one at a time, and halfway up each flight he had to rest. She followed eagerly, her bright eyes lit with enthusiasm. She knew where they were going, and she was patient through his toil. Halfway up the last flight he had to stop again. They were so close now that her heart ached, but she sat beside him on the stair and looked at the figurine in his hands. He was picking out the last bits of red from one eye.

“Ain’t been up here in weeks. Too weak.”

“You sick too?”

He started to chuckle, but it quickly became a ragged hack. "S'pose I am. Tell you what, girl—"

"Dallas," she said. "My name's Dallas."

He was tweezing with measured practice at the last eye. Only a few red flecks remained. "If anything ever happens to me," he said between rattling breaths, "you take care of the brothers and the sisters, you hear?"

"I will."

The figurine glimmered in the fluorescent light as he turned it over again and again in his hands, examining the flow of the mane, the hooves, the gentle shimmer of the textured coat, and the long, single horn in the middle of its' forehead. At last he was satisfied. Holding it at arm's length, he scrutinized it. Then he handed it to her.

"For you, girl."

"Dallas."

"Right...Dallas..."

"You can...call me...call...me..."

She smiled. "All us kids jus' call you the Lightmaker."

He smiled too.

From the street, the loud, bright blip of a police siren pulled the slumbering street from its dreams. The next morning the skies sobbed, and the sun did not show her face for shame at the events she had missed while she was away looking for friendlier places.