

## Early

**We had decided** to drive through the night, and my eyelids were getting heavier than a pound of bacon. I saw taillights of two cars off in the distance. Shelly, curled up next to me in the passenger seat, swatted at some demon haunting her dreams. I turned back to the road I almost ran into the rear end of a semi. I hit the brakes and Shelly's body slapped against her seatbelt.

"Jesus," she said, blinking herself awake.

"Sorry. He pulled out in front of me."

She looked out into the dark and empty interstate and knew I was full of shit.

"I thought the taillights on the rig were cars up the road."

"Pull over. I'll drive for a while," she said.

I didn't argue. The convenience store coffee I'd chugged over an hour before had lost all its effect and the miles were adding up like a bad debt. I just wanted to shut my eyes and fade away, so I pulled over to the shoulder of the road and got out. The night wind blew against my face, and it almost woke me up. Crickets and other night creatures chirped and whirred in the grass as I walked around the car. I looked up; twinkling pinholes and milky clouds of dust filled the night sky. A thumbnail moon sliced into the darkness. I wished I could float up toward those distant lights, but I had miles to go and an obligation to honor. I climbed into the passenger seat, strapped in, and closed my eyes. The hum of the road put me to sleep before Shelly found a radio station she liked.

The rising sun peeled my eyelids open. That's the hazard of driving east overnight. I glanced over and Shelly was sitting up on the wheel, looking like she'd aged ninety years while I slept. She tapped her cigarette ash into the rushing air of her open window. She looked over at me and pointed with her chin.

"We're fifteen miles out."

"Too close and too far."

She nodded and checked the rearview mirror.

I wished I would've woken up in the middle of that nowhere town. I had too much time to think about things, and in the end, not enough time to figure any of them out.

I looked around for something to wash the sleep out of my mouth and found an old bottle of Mountain Dew under the seat. I took a swig and swished it around my mouth. The warm and flat soda attacked the scum on my teeth like an acid wash. I rolled down my window and spit it out, leaving a wet streak down the side of the car. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. "Give me a smoke," I said to Shelly.

"Breakfast of champions," she said and tossed the pack into my lap.

I nodded and pulled out a Camel. The landscape was familiar: tall pine trees lined the highway, wire fences with black and orange *No Trespassing* signs, billboards for adult stores or personal injury lawyers, abandoned farm houses. It all fit into my memory of home. We passed a white cross nailed to a tree. Small colorful flowers adorned it and reflective letters spelled out Becky: someone's daughter, mother, wife, whose car had run off the road and into the pine trees.

During my senior year, not five years before, I was too drunk to drive home and called my ex. Tina came and picked me up and we never made it home that night. Something dashed across the road

and she tried to avoid it. That's all I remember, but the police said the pickup rolled five times, and when it finally stopped upside-down in a ditch, Tina was pinned underneath.

I was still in the hospital when they held the funeral, but I wouldn't have gone if I could have. Her dad stopped by my room before he buried his daughter and told me point blank, "It should've been you."

He wasn't the only one that felt that way.

The curves in the road began to feel familiar and I knew we were only a few miles out. The trees gave way to fields dotted with livestock and clapboard homes, and the town's water tower, tagged with graffiti, came into view. We pulled into Early, Alabama and nothing had changed since I'd left. Parked in front of Spark's Feed and Seed were the same old pickups, the Tastee-Freeze still had a gravel parking lot, and the Baptist church on Perkins Avenue still posted messages to every passerby on its roadside sign: DON'T GIVE IN TO EVILUTION.

"Turn right here." I pointed at the volunteer fire department. Outside the building, two men rolled out fire hoses in the parking lot. They looked like half dozen straw-colored snakes with their brass couplings glinting weakly in the morning sun. "Go down a block and take a left."

Shelly nodded and tossed her cigarette out the window.

We pulled into the driveway of my aunt's house and parked behind her modified van. She was my only kin still in town. I got out of the car and stretched, took the last drag from my smoke and dropped it onto the pavement and ground it under my heel.

I nodded toward the house and we walked up the wheelchair ramp that ran from the driveway to the front door. Halfway up, the front door opened and Aunt Betty rolled out, dressed in her housecoat, a cigarette dangling from her lips.

"Jerry!" she said and coughed. "I knew I could count on you."

I leaned down and gave her a hug. I turned toward Shelly and said, "This is my girl, Shelly."

Aunt Betty eyed her up and down. "I don't know what lies this boy has told, but from the looks of you, I know you can do a might better than Jerry Stump."

Shelly looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

"Thanks, Aunt Betty. Nice to know you got my back," I said.

"Shut up and give your old aunt another hug."

I leaned over and wrapped my arms around her neck. I smelled bourbon mixed with coffee and stale cigarette smoke. She patted me on the back. "You're a good boy. I don't care what nobody says."

I straightened up and turned back to Shelly. She crossed her arms against her chest and I could tell she was doing her best not to laugh.

"Y'all come on in," Aunt Betty said. I helped her turn her wheelchair around and pushed Aunt her across the threshold of the front door.

Yellowed knotty pine paneling lined the walls and pictures of my folks and the rest of the family formed a border around the room at eye level. I spotted one of me and Tina dressed up for prom. I wore an awful rental tux and she was all pretty with a pink posy in her hair. Above the pictures, shelves displayed all matter of knickknacks. Aunt Betty wheeled herself into the spot where her Laz-y-Boy used to sit. She looked up at us and fastened her oxygen tube under her nose.

"Jerry, be a dear and turn that valve for me." She pointed to the green canister sitting under the side table.

"Sure thing," I said and gave the knob a half twist.

The canister started hissing and she took a deep breath and coughed. "Damn. I don't know which I like better, smoking or the rush from that little guy when I turn him on." She shook her head. "It reminds me of how I felt when I was running from the law and aiming for the state line."

I smiled at Shelly. "Aunt Betty has had a full life."

She nodded. "I see where you get it," she said and punched me in the arm. "Your daddy's sister?"

Aunt Betty laughed. "I like this one."

The call from my aunt had come two weeks prior. She'd gotten papers telling her the bank was foreclosing on her house, the house she'd owned for forty years. I told her I'd be down as soon as I could and we'd straighten things out with the bank.

"You got those papers they sent you?" I asked her.

Her smile dropped and she closed her eyes and took another deep draw through her nose, sucking in the oxygen as if she was getting ready to drown. She nodded toward the kitchen table. "They're over there." She looked at Shelly. "Never trust a bastard in a suit."

I picked up the papers and got lost in the words two sentences in. I waded through the *heretofores* and *henceforths* and did my best to make sense of it all. Aunt Betty had taken out an equity loan a couple of years ago when she had to install the ramp, widen the doorways, and update the bathroom after she was confined to a wheelchair. She'd been driving home from a bake sale at the VFW and had pulled up at the railroad crossing on Perkins Avenue. She didn't see who had slammed into the back of her car, but whoever it was pushed her into the minivan in front of her and that van ended up on the tracks just before the train came. The accident crushed Aunt Betty's knees and she hasn't walked since. The drunk who

crashed into her put his car in reverse and drove away from the mess. The state troopers pulled him over a county over outside a convenience store. He'd stopped in for another pint of George Dickel. That's when I should have come back, but the dark shadows of Early loomed too large in my soul.

"Do you understand any of that nonsense?" Aunt Betty asked.

"The best I can make out is the Sherriff's Office is going to make sure you're out of here the day after tomorrow," I said. The image of a deputy standing on Aunt Betty's porch with a clipboard and fake politeness made me want to throw something against the wall, maybe smash a picture.

"Bastard bankers."

I nodded in agreement. There's so much I wanted to say, but none of it would've made a damn bit of difference.

"Do you mind if I take a look?" Shelly asked.

Aunt Betty shook her head. "Don't make no difference to me."

Shelly took the stack of papers and sat down on the couch. "I worked for a lawyer one summer just out of high school. It paid well, but not well enough for what he wanted out of the deal. Anyway, I read enough of those files to be able to cut through most of the verbiage they put in to justify their fees."

"Go to it then, girl." Aunt Betty adjusted the oxygen tube under her nose and gave me a wink.

Shelly dropped her head and looked like she was studying ancient hieroglyphics or something. I sat down at the table across from my aunt. She'd always been a tough woman, but she was looking like she might blow away in a strong wind. When my uncle died, back ten years or so, she didn't even take a day off from work at the feed store. We tried to get her to stay home, but she wouldn't hear of it. "I can't sit still," she'd said. So she stayed there hauling eighty-pound sacks like she'd always done. Folks came by

to pay their condolences and ended up buying more than they needed or wanted. By the time she got home she was so spent the pain of her loss didn't stand a chance against her fatigue and she fell asleep on the couch before supper. Mama stayed with her that night, though she didn't do much more than pull a blanket over her sister-in-law and watch TV.

The next morning, Aunt Betty was up early and had breakfast cooked before Mama could edge her way into the kitchen. That's just the way she'd always been. Never needed help from anyone. So when she called me, I knew it was something bigger than her. So big, that even she recognized the peril.

In my dream, someone is pounding on the inside of a coffin. I can see the lid shudder and the spray of pink posies draped over it slides off. I want to open it, thinking how I'd feel if I found myself in such a situation, but my legs are knee-deep in mud and I can't move. I reach out, but it's too far away. The pounding gets louder and louder. My eyes popped open and I realized someone was at the front door. I rolled off the couch and answered it. I saw the hat and the shadow of a Sheriff's Deputy before I turned the knob.

I opened the door and thought, *What a wonderful way to begin the day.*

"Is this the residence of Elizabeth Davis?" he asked, holding a clipboard.

"I thought we had until the day after tomorrow."

"This is just a courtesy call to make sure Mrs. Davis is aware of the foreclosure proceedings and that she must vacate the premises by the 19th of the month."

"She knows."

The deputy stood there for a moment, as though he was trying to decide something. He took off his sunglasses and gave me his best south Alabama cop stare. "Jerry?"

"Yeah." My eyes darted to the nametag above his right breast pocket and I saw the name Liberto. I looked back at his face. He was an older and fatter version of the Gino Liberto I knew from high school. He had been Tina's boyfriend at the time of the wreck, and the last time I'd seen him was after Tina's funeral. He'd stopped by the hospital and told me a few things that I'll ever forget. One of them was he thought I ought to leave town. Gino was a big fella then, football player and all, and after years on the cop diet of donuts, burgers, and spending all his time in his cruiser, he'd filled out a bit more.

"Didn't think I'd see you again."

"I hadn't planned on it myself."

"Mrs. Davis your kin?"

I nod. "Only one still left in Early."

He stared at me and his jaw started working as if he was grinding a piece of gristle with his molars. I could see the emptiness in his eyes that he blamed me for, and it seemed Gino the man and Gino the Sheriff's Deputy were struggling with one another. "I guess I don't have a choice but to wait until tomorrow to be rid of you again."

He looked down at his clipboard, scribbled something on a form, and handed it to me. "Make sure she gets this."

"Okay."



He turned and walked down the wheelchair ramp to the driveway, pausing after he passed the van. He took a notepad out and jotted down my license tag number. He looked back at me, put his sunglasses on, and got in his cruiser. The tires of the cruiser squealed as he pulled away.

Shelly walked up behind me and rested her chin on my shoulder as I watched the car turn at the end of the block.

"Who was that?"

"An old friend," I said and handed her the form Gino had left as we walked back inside.

She read it over and plopped down on the couch. "There's no way."

"You think I don't know that?"

"Don't be an asshole."

"I need time to think."

"You need \$42,181.56."

"Oh, is that all? Where's my checkbook?"

I walked to the back porch and lit up a cigarette. I was spitting mad and started pulling at the weeds creeping up between the pavers. I knew there was nothing I could do and that made everything worse.

"You shouldn't yell at that girl; she ain't done nothing." I turned and saw Aunt Betty sitting in her chair in the corner of the patio with an unlit cigarette in her hand. "And don't even think about yelling at me. Don't let this chair fool you. I'll take you to task."

I knew she was right, but the helpless feeling that swept over me had me all bound up. It was like being behind a glass wall, able to see what you want or need, but no way to reach out and get it. I took the last drag off my cigarette and tossed it into the yard.

"You're going to pick that up. Right?"

I turned to Aunt Betty and nodded. "So what are your plans? I think you already know there's not a whole lot I can do. And the Sherriff's going to come up in here and put you out in a couple of days. They don't give a shit that you're an old lady in a wheelchair who got screwed by the bank."

"Watch your language. And who are you calling old?"

I smiled, despite how I felt on the inside.

"Now give me a light." She held up her cigarette. "I rolled out here and forgot my damn lighter."

"Is your tank off? I don't want you shooting off like a roman candle."

She shrugged.

I reached over and shut the open valve. I cupped my hand around the lighter and struck the flint. A little flame popped up and she leaned in. Her lips puckered and cheeks hollowed as she inhaled. She leaned back and blew smoke into the sky.

"I should've known better. That bastard was just too happy when I signed those papers."

We sat there and looked out into the backyard. The bowl of the white pedestal birdbath that sat in the middle yard had turned black with rotting leaves and other debris. Nary a bird approached it. Somewhere a hound dog howled.

Shelly had all the papers spread out on the kitchen table. She was flustered. I walked over and rubbed her shoulders. "Sorry I was a dick earlier."

"You were an *asshole*."

"I said I was sorry."

Shelly sighed.

"I got to go pick up a few things. Want to come with?"

She looked at the papers. "That might be a good idea. I need to clear my head."

We got in the car and headed into town. After a few minutes, I pulled into the parking lot of the Piggly-Wiggly and drove around to the back where the dumpsters sat. The heavy odor of rot surrounded us.

"You always know how to impress a girl," Shelly said.

I nodded and smiled. "It's looking like Aunt Betty's going to need some of those." I pointed to the pile of empty cardboard boxes a grocery clerk was breaking down. I tapped the horn and the kid turned around. I waved him over. He wore a black apron, a red and white striped shirt, and a little paper hat at a jaunty angle.

"Can I help you?"

"Mind if we take some of those boxes off your hands?"

The kid rubbed his chin and then pulled out a box of Marlboros. He looked around to a big metal door, the rear exit to the grocery store, and lit up a cigarette. "I suppose," he said. "But'll it be two-bits a piece."

"You want me to pay you for something you're throwing away?"

"We actually recycle all cardboard. It all goes into that compactor there, gets bound up and then they send a truck around to pick them up. Piggly-Wiggly is very serious about the new green economy."

"You're shitting me. Right?"

"Wish I was." He took a drag off his cigarette and looked to the east. "They got one of those self-storage places down over on Bryant Road and they sell boxes for about a buck a piece. The way I see it, I'm cutting you a deal."

I looked over at Shelly. "You believe this kid?"

Her elbow rested on the door and she looked at me like I was the crazy one. She pulled her purse onto her lap, dug out a five-dollar bill, and handed it to me. "Stop bitching and get your aunt some boxes."

"I've got money. I just think this kid's scamming us."

Shelly just stared at me, holding the money out.

"Screw it." I took the bill and handed it to the kid. "There's enough for twenty boxes. Throw them in the trunk."

The kid ditched his cigarette, snatched the bill from my hand, and packed up the trunk. Just as I pulled away, I saw the backdoor to the store open. An old balding guy in black pants and a white short-sleeved shirt and a skinny-ass tie came out. I knew it was the kid's manager. He gave me a sharp look and started yelling at the kid, pointing this way and that. Shelly and I drove off; the smell of something rotten followed us around like a bad rumor.

We drove around town a bit. I showed Shelly the high school, the Quick-Stop I used to hang out at as a teenager, and the strip I used to drive up and down on Friday and Saturday nights. She didn't say

much; it was more for me than for her. I turned to head back to Aunt Betty's house when I spied a police cruiser in my rearview mirror. He came up on me real quick, but didn't turn on his lights. I kept driving, sat up straight, used my turn signals, and came to complete stops at stop signs.

Shelly noticed the difference and turned around in her seat.

"Looks like you got a friend."

"Yeah, that's my old buddy Gino."

He followed us all the way back to my aunt's house. I pulled into the driveway and half expected him to come give me some bullshit ticket, but as soon as the car was in the driveway, he accelerated away as if I'd been holding him up. I sat there for a minute and realized my heart was racing. I lit a cigarette and looked over at Shelly.

"Has she got a chance?" I nodded towards Aunt Betty's house.

Shelly looked down and picked at her fingers. "She's upside down."

"That means she's screwed?"

"I think you knew that when you decided to get the boxes."

I had a good idea but was still wishing Shelly might find a way out of the mess. Not long after the wreck that killed Tina, I went into rehab. It was an in-patient place, one that sucked my parents' bank account dry. They never came to see me. I suppose they felt like they were already doing enough. Aunt Betty was the only one to visit, and when she did she brought news and Hershey bars. She was the one that told me my folks were splitting up. I guess the pressure in town was too much for them to handle and they started pointing fingers at one another and before long Mama moved out and Daddy put the house up

for sale. Mama headed for Louisiana to stay with family and Dad ended up just outside the Everglades. I haven't spoken to either of them in the last few years.

Aunt Betty was the one that picked me up from rehab when the checks started bouncing, which was about the same time the doctors thought I was well enough to leave. She brought me to her home and got me right. And she's the one who paid for my bus ticket out of town when I decided to move to Memphis.

"Yeah, I knew," I said to Shelly. "I was just hoping against hope."

"Where's she going to go?"

I shook my head. "I suppose we could call my Daddy and see if he could take her in, but I imagine she wouldn't be too happy down there on Alligator Alley. Besides, if she wanted his help she would've called him and not me."

"We don't have room," Shelly said.

"I know."

We hauled the boxes into the house and plopped them in the middle of the living room. Aunt Betty sat in her chair and watched.

"What's that smell? Something die?"

"We got the boxes from the grocery. Something may have been left in one of them," Shelly said.

"We can't take all the knickknacks," I said. "You know that, right?"

She nodded. "Just the pictures, then."

Each one we pulled down left a pale shadow where the wall has been protected from sunlight and cigarette smoke. Aunt Betty told us the story of every picture as we wrapped them up in newspaper. There were pictures of cousins, grandparents, me and my folks, her dead husband, and so many others. When I got to the prom picture, the room got quiet, except for the rustling of newspaper. I sat there and looked at the images of Tina and me for a minute.

"You can't keep blaming yourself, Jerry" Aunt Betty said. "Sometimes things just happen."

By the end of the night, all twenty boxes were filled and stacked by the front door. Aunt Betty surveyed the living room and looked up at Shelly and me. "What about the furniture?"

I looked at Shelly and then back to my aunt. "We'll take care of that tomorrow."

"I never thought I'd leave this house," she said.

Shelly walked over and squatted next to her wheelchair and took my aunt's hand in hers. "It'll be all right. You got me and Jerry to look after you."

Aunt Betty patted Shelly's hand and looked at me. "Whatever you do, don't let this one go." She smiled at Shelly and then forced a laugh. "If you do, I'll kick your sorry ass." She looked around like she'd misplaced something. "Someone give me a cigarette. All this sentimental crap is giving me heartburn."

"Come on," I said. "I'll roll you outside and we can smoke on the front porch."

I pushed her out onto the ramp in the front of the house, opened up the pack, and held it out to them. We all took a cigarette and lit up. A cloud of smoke hovered around us like a fog and kept the mosquitoes at bay. The air was heavy from the Gulf and I could tell the coming summer was going to be sweltering.

I hopped up on the railing and let my feet dangle. We sat in silence and listened to the sounds of the night. Mayflies swarmed around the streetlights and in the distance, I heard a siren. The neighbors' windows flickered with the bluish glow of televisions, and the sounds of a thousand channels floated through the air like voices from the Tower of Babel. Headlights flashed across us as a car turned down the street and we squinted against the glare. Its stereo thumped hip-hop and it rattled with each subsonic beat. Aunt Betty said, "When I'm gone, that's one thing I won't miss. I just don't know how that's supposed to be music. I'm old. I know, but it hits me in the wrong place." She took a drag from her cigarette and blew the smoke out into the night. The car turned at the end of the block and its noise gave way to crickets in the grass and frogs in the ditch. "Do you hear that?" she asked. "Now that's music." She took a deep breath and sighed; she pressed her hand against her chest, as though she was trying to keep something in.