

The Other Possibility

If I told you the story the conventional way, I probably wouldn't get very far. I'm going to start off with one of the last parts, and make my way back to the beginning.

Clay Askew put a gun to his head while sitting on a hot Tennessee road, surrounded by sunlight and trees.

Now, of course, I've got to tell you how he got here, now I've got you listening. But you're not going to like it.

Clay Askew got to the middle of this tiny portion of road by foot. Well, brown loafer really, and he stumbled most of the way. He didn't think any strangers would be coming out this back way because, one, it's just so far out from where most folks do their driving. And, two, the night before had rained and stormed so bad the floods caught up to the porches of the houses back behind the second curve. So nobody would be thinking of heading out in that ugly mess unless they were thinking of catching some crawdads flooded out into the waters.

But the bend Clay walked on was high ground, and he stuck to the treeline. He recognized the place because up ahead there was a bridge made of rusted tin, and a tire swing lay on it, rope snapped from last night's storm. He stuck to the treeline and the shade where the trees kept quiet, and of course back roads never follow a shoulder but only ditches, so he stumbled. He'd catch himself on the branches, which slowed him down, and he was going pretty slow already.

I wouldn't blame him for being slow, though, it's hard enough to face places like that. No, I'd say we just leave him alone for the time being, and let him go at his own pace, and think about what got him out here in the back roads in the first place.

What got him here was that night seven months ago, which makes me wonder how long it takes some things to affect some people. Sometimes things just *sit* a pressure on the brain, and you

just *ache* to relieve them. Sometimes they steal up on you and hit you all at once. Sometimes they rot away at your insides til everything that used to hold your soul together collapses from the weight. That can be the slowest, and the most painful of all. Maybe Clay's been rotting away inside for the past seven months, and now he's just done.

That day seven months ago, Clay went to school with the boys, and they studied their English with Mrs. Crosby who smoked while she graded papers and passed second-hand cancer to the boys at the front of the class. And they failed their chemistry test with Mr. Polk, and they ate lunch together and argued about Coach Caliparri's betrayal to Kentucky. Charles Alsten advocated for at least taking down the name from the Caliparri Grill, but then Charles was always the nice one. David Vaughn of course demanded he be burned in effigy at the next championship game (he hadn't lost faith in the Memphis Tigers, which just goes to show, doesn't it?). Hanes Matthews carried on a conversation with himself about the Lady Vols, but no one listened because who watches girls' basketball anyway? And Clay sat and smiled and sculpted his mashed potatoes into a volcano and carried the gravy to the summit with his spoon.

But then, he was always a bit absent-minded. So David caught his attention by spreading his arms wide and grinning. "What are we doing tonight?"

What they decided to do that night wasn't really that exciting. Not if you're expecting a shoot-'em-up rodeo kind of action. Which maybe you are since you've already been introduced to the gun. But this isn't that type of story. So that night – all those months before the gun part happened, you remember – Clay sat in Charles' kitchen, comparing opinions with David about that night's game. Memphis had lost their first game against Tennessee, of all teams, so of course David's voice kept getting louder. Clay paid attention to the drops of beer on David's chin instead of listening, but anybody would zone out when David gets going. Charles cleared the sink of the dishes

(I've already mentioned how nice he is) and objected to David in between washings. Shutting the dishwasher, Charles said, "Wes took Bethany to the Cotton Carnival."

Clay cleared his throat before he responded – he raised his glass to his lips and decided not to speak.

Twitching into his own seat at the bar, Charles asked Clay and David, "You want a refill? Lemme get you a Jack D. and Coke."

"Just sit still," David said. "Calm *down*, Charles. You need to get yourself to college. Work some of that nervous energy off. Maybe even get yourself a girlfriend."

Clay stared at his beer. He looked into it, swirled it like a wine glass, and left it on the ground beside him.

I told you it wasn't a very exciting night.

David finished his beer. "We should go get Hanes. I bet he's up for something."

"He's still grounded," Clay said.

David got up and opened the bar, searching through the drinks. He raised a bottle of Southern Comfort, grinning.

"Come on, that's not even heavy stuff." Charles told Clay, "Hey, reach behind you and pull that Scotch out. My dad got it in Scotland – it's one of 68 bottles made in the world. Damn strong shit."

Clay chuckled as he brought out the bottle. "You cuss like a third grader."

"I've been cussing since I was three – it's an Alsten tradition. Our first words are cuss words."

"No," David said. "Your first words are 'Yes, ma'am,' and 'No, sir.'"

Clay brought the Scotch up to the bar, and the three poured out drinks.

"So did you hear me before? About Bethany Adams? How she and Wes are together?"

“Yeah, I heard you.” Clay stared at his Scotch.

“Okay.” Charles poured another drink. “I wasn’t sure if you heard me.”

“Whatever.” Clay shot back the whiskey and poured a second.

Heaven knows what was going on in his mind. People’s thoughts are people’s thoughts, and that’s all there is to it. Now we can guess, and we all know every good Baptist wife knows how to guess. But every good Baptist husband knows people just aren’t always right.

I *can* tell you that when Clay raised that third glass to his lips, his eyes rested on Charles, and I can also tell you a little something about the last time Clay and Charles spoke about Bethany Adams. Maybe you’ll find these things important and maybe you won’t.

It was last fall, a little over a year ago from October, and Clay was out at night playing basketball. Next door, Charles was studying for that first Mr. Polk exam. Some generation of the Askews and Alstens have lived next door to each other since before even I can remember, and I’ve been around a long time. But just because they’re neighbors never did give Clay free license to go traipsing his big feet through Charles’ Mama’s flowers. So when Clay missed and the ball bounced over into the Alstens’ garden, he made his way through the flowers, swearing softly to himself.

He heard Charles laugh, “Clay, you better get off Mama’s impatiens before she sees you.”

Clay waved up at Charles’ window and looked down at his feet. Crumpled flowers stuck to his loafers. He laughed and waved again, turning back to his house.

“Wait, I’ll come down and keep you company.”

Clay waited in his driveway, twirling the basketball in his hands.

“You’re gonna ruin those loafers that way, playing in them like you do.” Charles pulled down a sweatshirt as he entered the dim backyard. He stood in the driveway, smiling.

“You know how it is. Take a break from homework. It’s stuffy inside anyway because Dad has the heat up so high.”

Charles laughed and put his arms out. “Hit me.”

Even as Clay passed the ball, Charles was moving, catching the ball and spinning to the goal. He made a perfect jumper. Lord, that boy could move. “Now *that* is how you do it.”

“And *that* is why Coach Peters starts you.” Clay picked up the ball and dribbled lightly to himself. “I guess Bethany broke up with me.” He turned and shot. When the ball swept past the net and dropped behind the goal into the dark, he laughed.

“When did this happen?”

Clay looked away down the backyard, where the lights couldn’t reach. They stood without speaking, and Clay heard Charles jog over beyond the goal to search out the ball. He came back, placed the ball on the ground, and sat on it.

“I got you. Now tell me.” Charles smiled.

“You know last week. When she was talking about her dress for Cotillion. I said something. I don’t know. The dress seems really expensive or something like that.”

“Yeah. Those things are damn expensive.”

“For a short guy, you sure do cuss a lot.”

“It’s that thing – what is it? The Napoleon syndrome. Whatever – so you’re fixing to say something really stupid about her dress.”

Clay grinned. “It was pretty stupid. I told her she doesn’t need to spend that much money on something that doesn’t make her look pretty anyway. I mean, you know what they look like. Hell. That’s what they look like.”

“Like somebody took a cupcake and covered it in one of those old Baptist lady haircuts.”

“So then I told her she already looks pretty.”

“Nice. Very smooth.”

“But she didn’t like that. She knew I was just covering up.”

“It’s pretty obvious.”

“So we got into it, and it drug out, and we broke up.”

“Well, I’m not going to say good riddance, or I told you so, because she’s Bethany Adams, and our Mamas are friends. But still. Good riddance.”

And maybe it was good riddance – some things are and some things aren’t. But it doesn’t really matter whether Charles was right or wrong, does it?

So I don’t know what was going on in Clay’s head that night, as he pounded down twelve shots of Jack Daniels, and I don’t know what was going on in Clay’s head the Monday after that night – after it all happened. But every good Baptist husband who sneaks in late at night after a beer with the boys knows that a Baptist wife is gonna guess right sometime.

That Monday, the day David and Hanes got expelled, David was called to the headmaster’s office and stayed for over an hour. When he came out, he slammed the door behind him. Hanes’ interview didn’t last so long. He met David and Clay outside.

“You got done fast,” David said.

“What’s there to fight about, David? We did it, didn’t we?” Clay crossed his arms. He lowered his eyes from David’s raised brows.

“We? You’re right, *we*. Okay, Clay, you go back in there and say that to Mr. Haguewood. *We*.”

“David.” Hanes walked down the steps towards the parking lot, where his parents waited. Without turning, he called back, “Come on, David. I’m dead tired.”

The bell rang inside the building, and Clay opened the door to go back in to class.

The funeral was a couple days later. When it came time for Clay’s reading, he had to push through the crowd of black bodies. They made way at his touch, until he appeared in front of the grave. The silence gathered into all the cracks between all those black people and it settled down in

there like a mortar. Glancing up, he locked eyes with David, who stared awhile at Clay before pulling Hanes' arm and breaking out through the crowd. Behind David, the crowd kept their line of exit open and Hanes soon followed.

While Clay stood in front of the grave, not speaking, Bethany reached over and took his hand. She leaned against him and took his reading. And there Bethany Adams read Clay's reading aloud to that silent black crowd. She rubbed his knuckles and when it was over, she led him back between the people and sat him down on an empty chair. She kept his hand there in her lap the rest of the service.

Clay graduated in May, about a month after the funeral, in the Second Presbyterian Church. He graduated there because his school was a religious school for boys and had been around for a long long time – since before the Great War, they tell me. He was allowed to walk even though everybody knew he was there the night it all happened. But it wasn't proven, and his parents demanded that he participate in graduation. So the headmaster had to let Clay walk in the long blue line of robes between the pews of the church, and he graduated. And everybody had turned and watched him walk by. The line was alphabetical, and Clay's last name was Askew. So everybody watched him sit down, and everybody watched him rise to accept his diploma where Charles Alsten would have walked, sat, and risen to accept his diploma. And I suppose that maybe this was just about harder than not being allowed to walk at all.

So I hope you understand me when I say it's not the happy ending you were hoping for – Clay deciding not to use that gun. He never would have done it; you should know that by now. No, he dropped the gun and it slid down into the crick at the bottom of the ditch, and it sank into the mud where the water moccasins lay their babies. And he lay on the road in bright, burning sunlight, and sobs made him shake, and I reckon there was no relief there at all. Because when something like that happens - well...

The boys went driving that night seven months ago. They picked up Hanes from his house – Clay handed him the Scotch and Hanes set to drinking.

I can't say *why* they turned off on Stewart Road, God knows it *is* just an old back road with no signs on it. But they kept driving, and they came around the first bend where the crick runs under the road. There's an old sheet of ridged tin that Lloyd Camp put down over the crick to let the tractors get from the road over to his cotton, and time had rusted it red and black like the road. And yonder the trees cut into the curves and hid the street back behind the second turn. There was a tire swing, too, hanging from one of those big oaks, over the tin bridge. And that's where Charles stopped.

He went down into the oaks, calling back at the car, "I'm just gonna go pee."

Hanes pulled himself between the driver and passenger seats, his legs kicking David, who complained loudly of being used and abused. Clay settled himself along the back seat, and he fell asleep to sounds of Hanes starting up the car.

The next morning, Clay made his slow way into his house; sunlight ricocheted off the appliances. His father grabbed him by the arm and sat him down at the kitchen table. "Look at your mother. Is this what you wanted to see when you came home? *God* son, what were you *thinking*? Do you *know* what the Alstens are going through right now? Can you just think what it's like for them?"

Sobbing, Clay's mother lay on her arms across her place at the table. In the sunlight, Clay's father's face burned to ash. The sun signed the edges of his cheeks, and Clay listened.

Hanes forgot that Charles was still outside in the woods. After turning back onto the road, he heard a thump and slammed on the brakes. Charles had come back to the road and passed out in front of the car. Now silent, the car sat heavily on Charles, and heat from the engine welded his chest to the metal. An ambulance sent Charles to the emergency room, but he bled to death on the operating table as the doctors grafted skin onto his stomach. The police impounded the car – but no

one noticed Clay. He lay there sleeping in the back seat, and the next morning he woke up hung over, head pounding, pushing himself out of the car into the sunlight.

And me, I was catching crawdads in the floods out by my house when I came across a boy in the road.