

## The Sisters of Contradiction

“They’re books,” Sybil says to the boy.

Axl stands beside an oxblood sofa and stares up at the bookcases that rise from floor to ceiling on either side of a massive stone fireplace. He doesn’t speak. Rarely will he ever. He does most of his speaking at home and to his mother, but even that is a rarity. His mother, instead, will talk out loud the way people do when alone or with a family pet at their heels; never expecting a reply but grateful for the company and affection just the same.

“Do you read books?” the old woman continues, standing now beside Axl.

A nod.

“Good. I was a teacher of English and literature for nearly half a century. Are you in school?”

Another nod.

“Grade?”

“Fifth.” It is barely a whisper and is aimed at the spines of the books, upward where he continues his gaze at the volumes like so many bricks in a wall. He feels small, as he does when made to shoot free throws on the basketball court in gym class. Coach Palmer requires him to stand at the line and shoot until he makes three baskets. It is impossible, he tells himself each time. As impossible as it must be to read all of these books. He thinks it must be every book ever written there on those shelves. How could there possibly be more? How many more words could the English language hold?

In gym class, his peers would look on, some jeering, others with bowels heaving and pitching in worry for their own turns at the line. The books climb up and up to the height, and then some, of that basketball hoop. A hopeless cause, the futility of which makes him queasy. Unease always does.

She lowers herself onto the sofa with just the slightest protest from her bones so that she is nearly the same height as Axl and, as if sensing his reluctance to speak, fills the void: “I’ve read every one of those.” She’s made all of her free throws, this ancient woman. “I remember them, too, even back to my childhood. They’ll say I can’t – the doctors, Sissy – that there’s no way to recall so many titles so far back. But I can.” She shrugs and Axl looks at her, notes a hint of personal satisfaction, maybe smugness, on her face. It is confidence, and it will be a long time until Axl possesses the quality himself.

“This one,” She leans over and takes a green, clothbound book from the heavily nicked and varnished coffee table, “was given to me by my husband just before he left for the war. Emily Brönte. Have you read Brönte?”

Axl shakes his head. Her feet barely touch the floor and this amuses him. A scent comes off of her, one of old wood and mothballs that he will always, from now on, associate with age. It is a vastly different aroma than the medicinal mint and sweat smell of Coach Palmer.

“Such lovely writing. He died in the war, my husband. Nineteen forty-three. We’d been married only eight months then.” She hasn’t mentioned her husband in decades and isn’t sure why she does today, but there is something about this boy and his silence that makes her want to share. As a teacher long ago, the children were so unruly that it was all she could do to keep order enough to teach a lesson in grammar. But this boy is different,

and when she mentions her husband's death, the look in his watery blue eyes is one of surprise and then, what? Compassion? He touches her on the shoulder and she feels calm and comfortable with her memories.

Axl feels once-removed from death. His mother works at a cancer clinic and talks about her patients, mostly about those who made it – those who survived into the next year, the next season – but also about those who don't. "You just can't stop the loss with cancer," she'll say. He's never known anyone himself who died and he wishes his mother wouldn't speak so casually of death. Hearing Sybil talk about her husband's, even though so far in the past, rattles him the way the subject always does, but not as much as what she says next.

"I'll tell you one other thing, I was glad when he did." She says it, not to Axl, but to the book, to Emily Brönte. But then she turns to him and, in a near whisper, says, "I never did like him and I think he hated me. He hit me once." Her mottled hand goes to the side of her face where it trembles against papery, translucent skin. "Right here. He hurt me, young man, and we were to be married. His father said so, and so did mine. And so we were. And then he died."

Axl doesn't know where she's looking now, not at him, not at the book or at the shelves, but in a middle distance. Into the past, Axl is sure.

"And I was relieved and, when the serious man in the beautiful, ornamented uniform stood at my doorstep and told me, I smiled. Only for a moment because I knew what was expected of me, but I think he saw it. His eyes widened for just an instant and then he handed me the card and patted the back of my hand." She places the cloth-bound book back on the table, in the exact dustless spot and turned the same way, from where

she'd taken it, as though it were a marker on a gravesite. "I remember all of that. Tell the doctors that I remember every ounce of hatred and relief still."

Axl thinks of Coach Palmer and tries to want him dead. He can't do it. He's never wished anyone ill before yet is suddenly struck with the revelation, as all humans are at some point in their lives, that life and death might rest in his hands. He does not want the power for either. He tries to picture Sybil dead, but can't. He's never seen a dead person and, instead, pictures her without any bones, simply collapsing where she sits on the sofa, her body curled up on itself like a deflated balloon. That is the extent of Axl's understanding of death: a person whose air has left her.

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Sybil and Sissy have lived together for as long as anyone can recall in a house once owned by Glen Wilson's family. When his father, Herbert, fell on hard times, a result of being swindled by Silas Hamilton, Herbert had sold the house and its dozen acres to the two school teachers. They'd considered Herbert's ongoing maintenance as part of the deal, never hesitating to call at the first drip from a leaky faucet, whenever a drain became clogged or an electrical outlet burned out to leave a smell of copper in the air. Herbert had changed fuses, mended fences, shingled the roof and floored the attic. They treated the house as though it were a rental and Herbert the landlord. Herbert could never say no, it was endemic of his family's downfall.

And Glen, for reasons he can't explain, has picked up where his father left off. Has literally picked up the phone where Herbert left off, as he did this morning before fully waking to hear Sissy on the other end, "Disposal's shot. Come on out," before abruptly hanging up.

He calls them The Sisters of Contradiction, as they are never happier than when proclaiming someone else, or each other, wrong on a subject. “Try this coffee cake,” Sybil would say. “Oh, I don’t care for coffee cake,” Sissy would respond. “Since when? Coffee cake is your favorite.” “Why, I’ve never liked coffee cake. Too sweet for me.” “You’ve got a tusk of a sweet tooth, dear.” “Sweets upset my ulcer.” “Well I’ve never heard of such a thing.” “I’ll take some, I love coffee cake,” Glen would say. “Since when? You’ve never cared for coffee.” “I drink a pot by myself every morning.” “Decaf?” “Decaf? What? Hell no, not decaf.” “Oh my, it makes you angry. Caffeine causes rage, you be careful with all that coffee.” “Can I have some cake?” “No, she’ll eat it later,” Sybil would say.

They’re still alive at their age, Glen is sure, because each expects the other to die first and neither is giving up the satisfaction to the other of not doing so.

“Got to go,” Glen said, sighing heavily as he hung up the phone.

“Where are you running off to? Are you keeping a younger woman someplace?” said Helen, Glen’s on-again-off-again, every-other-day, live-in girlfriend. She is thirty years his junior.

He looked at her like she’d just farted. Glen isn’t one for sarcasm, not that he disapproves, he just doesn’t recognize it immediately every time it’s laid in front of him and Helen is apt to forget this. “No,” he said. “Going up to see The Sisters.”

“What is it this time?”

“Garbage disposal.”

“Good grief. Did you tell them about the reset button?”

“Of course I did. ‘Oh my, that sounds complicated,’ Sissy said. It’s right there on the bottom of the damn disposal, like I’ve told them, but they’d never find it. And hell, if one of them did, the other would argue it wasn’t. Helpless is what they are. For two women who’ve lived so long, it’s a wonder what they can’t do for themselves. Called me out last month because the microwave wasn’t working. That ain’t even attached to the house I don’t own. Know what it was?”

Glen had come back to Helen’s house that day stomping and cussing The Sisters, and it had continued through the next day. Helen knew exactly what had happened to that microwave, but she let Glen have this moment anyway.

“One of them put a can of baked beans in there,” he continued. “An entire can. Wasn’t even opened is the damn thing. Shot sparks out and burned the damn machine up. Course, they argued the whole time I was there over who’d done it. Didn’t matter any, blame wasn’t gonna fix it. I left them arguing in the kitchen and I went down to the Sears and bought a new one. Shit.

“Well, I’ll take the boy. Maybe if I have a ten year old show them how to reset it they’ll be shamed into remembering.”

“Think they’d admit it if they did?”

“Nope.”

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The lawn slopes gently for thirty yards and then drastically down towards the lake, the highway and Oconee National Forest on the other side. Everything, it seems, Glen’s whole world, is below that house. He’d always thought so as a child, anyway, running with his dog Joe, a black Labrador with a white muzzle and clipped left ear, or swinging

from the rope his father had hung from an oak that shaded the entire house. He'd look down the expanse of lawn like a king, a boy king surveying his domain. Nothing, he thought then, could ruin such a view. And nothing has. The only thing that's changed, other than a few more red brick buildings and a lakefront development in plain sight when the trees grow bare in the winter, is that Glen has been removed from the scene. He'd pulled from his yard as a little boy to live in a trailer park off Highway 44 just before the interstate ramp. His only views then became a Georgia Power & Light water pumping station and the glint of sun off cars screaming by on the interstate.

The oak tree, too, is gone, pushed over by a tornado in 1971. Glen and his father were called out to dismantle it and haul it away. In its place now is a grove of crape myrtle and dogwoods surrounding the stump, and a fountain that attracts songbirds and finches to the many slender feeders Sybil has hung like Christmas ornaments there.

Glen stands in the grass just off the back porch and looks back down toward the highway and a glimmer of the lake through the trees full with springtime. He wonders about the Sisters, wonders how much more life they have in them and what will become of this place once they're gone. Seems like people are dropping off all around him these days, or threatening to anyway. He gets the feeling the ground beneath his feet is toxic, as though thrumming with spent chemicals or radiation, a minor earthquake of illness being spread throughout the community and leeches from soil and water. He knows it isn't any nearby industrial plant or manufacturing from the next county over, though. Glen knows that it is nothing more than age that infects the very air he breathes. But maybe what worries Glen the most is that he is joining the ranks of the infirm. He feels it in his knees and knuckles, and thinks of it every morning as he stands quietly waiting for that first

piss to come at last. He thinks he sees it when Helen looks at him sometimes, and he wonders why it is she sticks around.

“She’s broken,” Sissy says. He’d let his vision wander to the feeders when a sparrow caught his eye and hadn’t heard the screen door slam or Sissy sidle up beside him. He jumps at her voice and wonders how long she’s been here with him.

“She ain’t broken, Sissy, I told you it’s just the reset button needed pressing. Something jammed it up and it shut itself off.”

“Not the disposal, you ninny. I’m talking about Sybil.”

“Sybil?”

“Dementia. Doctor told me yesterday.”

“Ah, Jesus. Poor girl.” Whole fucking world’s losing its mind, he thinks. “How far along?”

“Too far. And she doesn’t know yet, he suggested I tell her.”

“When are you planning to do that?”

“I’m not. You are.”

The sparrow has gotten into a row with another and the two go fussing off together, chattering and swooping into the nearby pines.

“Me? Look, Sissy, I’ll plane your front door so it doesn’t stick, and I’ll wire you up a new fan in the downstairs john. Hell, I’ll even drive out here to punch that reset button on the disposal when you need it, but no way am I going to break the news to that old woman that she’s going to forget her own name.”

“Well,” she starts, but pauses and Glen assumes it’s for effect. “You’ll have to.” And with that, she turns to walk back to the house.



“Now hold on, Sissy.” He begins to follow her. “Why should I? And why can’t you?”

She stops and turns on him so quickly that he nearly runs the frail woman over. “Because she won’t believe me,” she says.

Glen sees, behind the thick glasses, sunlight reflect on a tear just before it brims over her purple, lower eyelid, so paper-thin he wonders that it could stop any light at all. Her chin trembles and Glen feels weak, having never seen either of the stalwart Sisters so vulnerable.

“She won’t,” Sissy continues, refusing to make eye contact and, instead, watching a goldfinch dart from fountain to feeder. “And she never will if I say it first.”

Glen knows it’s true and it angers him. He is angry that these two old women are too stubborn to get along for as long as it takes to eat a meal, and that they can’t trust each other enough to know when they need one another. They’re family, for Christ’s sake, and in her moment of need Sybil is more alone than she’s ever been.

He asks Sissy who her doctor is.

“Dr. Frierson. But he won’t talk to you, doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“Gene’ll talk to me, we went to school together. I’ve got his outboard spread out in a thousand parts in my workshop for an overhaul.”

“I wasn’t aware you went to medical school, Glen.”

“You know I’m talking about grade school, Sissy. You were our math teacher, for Christ’s sake.”

“And I trust you’ll do better with Dr. Frierson’s boat motor than you did with your formulas?”

“Can’t do any worse. Let me talk to Gene and get the lay of the land, and then I’ll come back up and talk to Sybil.” He breathes deep at the thought of facing Sybil with the news. He’d much rather tell her she needs the house rewired or a sewer line replaced.

“She taught us English, you know.”

“And how were your marks in her class?”

Glen grins at his teacher and old friend. “About the same.”

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On the drive back down to the lake, Glen alternately stares out at the road and over at Axl, who stares ahead at the road. I should let him drive, Glen thinks, and laughs at the thought of the boy’s ten-year-old frame straining to reach the pedals and maneuver the wheel with no power steering. Axl doesn’t notice any laughing. Glen gets fidgety when he drives, he wants to *be* where he’s going, he doesn’t want to have to get there. His mind wanders and he’s been known to become distracted by the mess in his glove box or in trying to figure out where an exposed wire from the underneath side of his dashboard begins and ends. He’s veered off the road into the shoulder before, stuck in the mud there a dozen times, and into oncoming traffic where a blaring horn brought him back to the task at hand and back, thankfully, on his side of the double yellow lines.

“What was she like?” Glen says.

Axl looks at him from the passenger seat and blinks. He won’t answer, Glen knows, not to his liking anyway. He never does, but it doesn’t stop Glen from asking a question or commenting on something he finds interesting or curious. Glen will talk no matter who is in the passenger seat of his old Ford truck, or if there is no one there at all. Axl shrugs.

“Did y’all talk? Was she nice? What did you talk about?” Something behind the seat rattles, a discarded beer can or a bag of wrenches. “Axl?”

“Books,” he finally says, and it is a whisper barely heard over the rattling. Glen might not have heard the answer at all if he hadn’t been leaning over so far into the middle of the bench seat the way he does when he drives.

“You talked about books? Well, that’s something. Hey, Axl, did Miss Sybil seem ... confused? Or maybe lost? Hm? You know, disoriented?”

Axl, his attention already back at the windshield and the oncoming road, again turns to Glen, blinks and shakes his head “no.”

“Books?”

Axl nods at this, his eyes locked on the horizon.

“People began coming over right away,” Sybil had told Axl. “Milledgeville wasn’t a large town then and it still isn’t. Word spread quickly that my husband had been killed and women began showing up immediately with casseroles and desserts. It was a wonder to me that they had time to put on their Sunday dresses, make up, nylons *and* cook a dish in such a short time. But I’ve learned that women expect the worst and are as prepared for death and illness as a volunteer fireman is for a brushfire in summertime. They came from all over and told me how sorry they were, told me how very sad I must be. They were insistent on my being sad, so I looked at the ground and nodded and made a pass at my cheek with an old handkerchief I’d found in the pocket of my skirt. My parents were there, and his, of course, and they sobbed and bellowed enough for all of us.

I tried to keep my distance and walked from room to room, searching out the one with the smallest population.

“There was an office he’d kept just off the den in the back of the house, it was part of the screened porch that had been completely closed in at some point, and it was there that I found refuge. I sat at his desk and looked around at his things – the leather desk pad, cracked and worn; a matching blotter; pens and pencils, and a brand-new Remington typewriter; photos of his mother and grandparents, and one of a dog he’d had as a boy though not a single one of me; books and ledgers and a bayonet that his grandfather had brought home from Europe after his war. I tried to feel something for the man I’d married, the man who’d just died on some small Pacific island all alone and scared most likely. But I just couldn’t. Instead, I thought about ripping those walls out and putting the screened porch back the way it should be, and maybe have a hammock in that corner instead of a dark, knotty-pine cube that smelled of cigar smoke and whiskey.”

It was in that office that Sissy had found Sybil. She’d been wandering around and looking for a bathroom when she happened into the dark room that she thought, for a moment, was empty. Thought, in fact, that it might be a bathroom. The women introduced themselves and Sissy explained that she’d come over from Greensboro with a friend. “The niece of a cousin ... or somebody, I don’t know,” she’d said. She was a school teacher, as was Sybil, and was asked to sit and talk. Sissy tried to be compassionate, but it was obvious that empathy did not come natural to her and Sybil was thankful that it wasn’t a characteristic she felt compelled to chase at that moment.

They talked of teaching and those they may have mutually known in the profession, though Greensboro and Milledgeville, while only forty miles apart, seemed a

world away from each other. Sybil looked absently through the drawers of the desk and found a half-finished bottle of bourbon and the two women traded sips, smoked Sissy's cigarettes and laughed, sometimes uproariously, though they tried to stifle it out of respect for the guests and their casseroles. Sybil opened up and told Sissy how she'd been treated, how she hadn't wanted to be married in the first place, not to that man. "Well, good," Sissy had said. "I'm glad it worked out for you, Sybil."

The truth was that Sybil came to idolize Sissy for a time, starting with the way she slugged that whiskey the first day and didn't ask if it was okay if she smoked a cigarette in Sybil's home. It's why Sybil took her own slug and her own first puffs right there at her husband's wake. It's why she accepted the invitation of a visit to Greensboro the next month for lunch and "whatever." The whatever turned out to be helping Sissy move a chicken coop from one corner of her yard to the other so the birds would have fresh ground and new bugs to peck at. She and Sissy laughed that whole afternoon, filthy from mud and chicken shit, the knees of her borrowed overalls thin and brown. They ended their visit in the early evening sitting on the front porch, drinking beer from a can and gossiping about Sissy's neighbors.

She couldn't tell you when the idolization stopped – and would never admit that it ever was – but at some point the two women became equals. At some point they became inseparable and that was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Sissy understood Sybil and never brought up her husband again after that first day. Eventually, they bought the house they live in now and taught in the same school. No one in the area ever remembered that Sybil was once married, the two old women were considered spinsters, sisters and, by some, lovers, though that bridge had never been broached.

“We’ve been each other’s only family for all these years,” she’d told Axl, who had been busy trying to count the books in the bookshelf beginning with the bottom row and moving upwards, the number of each volume repeated in a sing-song fashion in his head, until he was interrupted by some aspect of Sybil’s story: “ ... bayonet ... whiskey ... cigarettes ... ‘Well, good ...’”

“They’ll say I can’t remember that day, too, but I haven’t forgotten it yet. Sissy was the storm in all that calm. I remember. I remember it all.”

Glen drives for a time along the dirt road that will take them back to the paved highway and from there to the docks where he rents boats and sells fishing tackle and cheap beer to the visiting anglers, and where Axl will sit on the back of a houseboat with his line in the water, staring at the plastic red bobber as though it might wink at him at any moment.

“You know what The Sisters used before they had me install that damn disposal?”

The question doesn’t need an answer, Glen is talking to himself. He drives with his wrists draped over the steering wheel and squints into the sunlight skimming off the truck’s dusty hood. Axl shakes his head “no” anyway.

“Pigs.”

Axl swivels his head around quickly at this. Glen appreciates the reaction, so much more than he normally gets from the boy.

“Pigs,” he continues as though Axl has asked him to elaborate. Perhaps he’s heard, in his mind, Axl ask him to tell him more. “They had a sty of half a dozen hogs

and they'd just toss their food scraps and what all else in there for them to eat. Now they need an in-sink disposal and probably tried to shove a T-bone down there."

Glen knows this wasn't the problem. What he'd found in that disposal was a scarf. An entire crocheted scarf of pale green wool, one of those that is more decorative than warm, shoved down the drain. It was the one he'd seen Sybil wearing this past winter, the one Sissy had made her for Christmas. T-bone? The Sisters barely eat enough to keep themselves alive anymore and probably haven't eaten steak in thirty years. The scarf didn't make sense, though, until Sissy told him about Sybil's condition. And then he knew, too, who it was that had put the can of beans in the microwave. She's a danger, Glen thinks. A damn shame.

The two sit in silence for a while with the sound of wind rushing in the windows and a rattling from behind and beneath them drowning out most thought. The movement of the truck on the dirt road carries Glen away to other problems to be tended to, other projects half-completed.

"What happened to them?"

At first Glen thinks the question has been carried in on the wind until he remembers someone else is in the truck. When the full realization hits him that it's Axl who has volunteered a question, he nearly swerves into a fencepost. "To who, son?"

"The pigs."

"Ate 'em. Had a butcher come out to slaughter and dress them. Packed them in a freezer the size of a station wagon and ate off of them for years. When they'd made it through the ham, bacon, sausage and feet, I bought that freezer away from them. It's where you get your ice cream down at the docks."

Axl's reverie in the passing landscape is disturbed and he turns from the window to Glen. He pictures ice cream, Popsicles and drinking ice rendered from hogs' fat. He wonders what the slaughter of pigs might look like, what it sounds and smells like. He has never thought so much about death until this day and now it seems to be everywhere. It was in that room of books and is in the cab of the truck, it clings to him like grease so that it can't be wiped away. In the irrational connectivity of a child's mind, he associates Sybil and her house with death and suddenly, so suddenly he doesn't realize it is happening until too late, he becomes sick to his stomach.

"You alright?" Glen says. "Boy? You're looking a little green, are these hills getting to you?"

Axl has no intention of answering. Nothing in this moment could get him to open his mouth. But then he can't control it and he wretches. Instinct points him to the window, but his window is up and the passing landscape goes from green and blue to the pulpy yellow of the orange juice he'd hurriedly swallowed before leaving home this morning.

And this time Glen does swerve into a fencepost. He doesn't care, doesn't seem to notice so much, it isn't the first post he's ever hit. He walks around to the passenger side, opens the door and gently lifts Axl from his seat, placing him in the soft grass of the pasture that backs up to the Catholic church. It is the church's fence on which Glen's truck has come to rest.

"It's okay, son, it'll be alright, you just got a little carsick is all. I'll clean it up and we'll get you home."



Axl lies back with the tall grass tickling his ears and the smell of hay and manure in his nose, and looks up at the sky. While Glen smears the window with an oily rag from the back of his truck, Axl picks out clouds in the shape of books and pigs and basketballs, and watches them all float by.