

THE CROSS OF CHOICE

The dogs are running a coon over on Flack Hill , and I can hear that Greyhound down shifting outside of Barlow , going into that long slow curve. My mama coughs loudly in that smelly back room where she is dying, her whole mind and body lost in meth dreams of sharp blades and raging fires. My daddy sits on the front porch and drinks half gallons of Kessler's four year old whiskey and chases it with Busch Light. He thinks he will apply for a job at that box factory in Coletown next week is what he says. This time last month he was going to get a job at the Lowe's in Clugg City, but that fell through when his cousin Delbert John , who was a night time manager, got busted for stealing lumber. It is always something with daddy- a pulled muscle in his back or a broken finger or a dead battery in that old Ford 150. He ain't fooling nobody. He is just going to sit there in that aluminum lawn chair on the front porch, making up stories for everybody who stops by, telling them about his twenty six points against Beaver Dam in 1971 or that lottery ticket he lost which would have made him a millionaire. He will not move , right there in that aluminum chair until he shits out his liver . Nobody has to tell me that. You don't have to be a prophet to see it happening right in front of you big as the sky.

Just like mama ain't going to detox and get a job at that new Speedway out on highway 60. Just like I ain't going to be the valedictorian at the Hendricks County Consolidated High School, never mind that IQ score they talked so much about when I was in the eighth grade. What with me and Skyte already cooking a little on the weekends over at Bobby Dell's barn. This whole family and everybody we know is just a

big train wreck waiting to happen while Old Papaw sits in his big house upon top of the hill and builds them little white crosses out of rough pine, planting them all over these hills and into the bottom land for every drunk driver who missed a curve and hit a tree at eighty mile per hour, or for every dead girlfriend whose Bubba boyfriend woke up out of moonshine dreams and beat her to death with a frying pan because in his shattered mind, she was the angel of death come to steal his soul. Papaw is a sweet old man and I still visit him once a week. He prays over me and holds my hand and says he sees “the goodness in my heart.” He is still living back in those days when he and my grandmother had eight kids they took to church every week and had hayrides and revivals and the kind of things old people talk about down at the Kindred Store around that pot bellied stove. He don’t have any idea about what happens off that hill, and I do not mean to be the one who tells him. Old Papaw still gets some people together on Saturday nights up there in raggedy ass church he built in 1951 , and they speak in tongues and handle a bunch of rattlesnakes and copperheads, winding them around their arms and handing them around like candy cane. Then old Gladys Spatz or Ren Barker will go into the “rapture” and fall down in the saw dust, talking in the “language of the saints” is what Old Papaw calls it.

From where I am sitting, it is just one fever or another all up and down this whole fucked up family, meth fever or whiskey fever or Jesus fever, driving everybody hard like slaves before a whip.

It is near midnight when I get up from my bed and look at the old clock on the mantle. Mama has died off into that kind of slobbery stupor which passes for sleep, where she twitches and moans out loud-telling somebody I never heard of, Eddie or

Wilbur, not to do those things which are abominations in God's eye. So you can tell that even in her crystal dreams , she can still conjure that sweet little dark haired girl I see in old pictures, Naomi Sue Reese, a little Holiness girl who memorized two hundred scripture verses the year she was thirteen and won a Bible.

Daddy has stumbled from the porch in to that long green couch where he has passed out in front of the t.v. full of zombies eating people's brains. I get me beer from the refrigerator and walk out into the back yard. Dinko, the beagle , comes over licks my hand and then goes back over to that dirty old green rug under the back porch. I can see a light across the creek where Anse Folger is waking up to coffee before he drives off to Floydville to work a twelve hour shift at the chicken processing plant . Mary Alice Folger says that he always smells like chicken shit, but she cashes every pay check he brings home. She tells everyone that she has stopped sleeping with him except on weekends when she makes him soak for half an hour in lavender bubble bath before she will let him touch her . When he leaves in that old Ford Escort at 2:30, Billy Redmond sneaks over from the truck stop where he is the assistant manager and keeps Mary Alice company. She says they just play cards and gossip, but I don't think anybody buys that. Mary Alice was wilder than six coyotes before she married Anse, and I don't think she is transformed. It don't matter anyway. Anse is forty-one years old. Mary Alice is twenty two, and Billy Redmond is twenty four and has that dark Cherokee hair that women talk about all the time. He says he is on disability from the Marines. Probably, he just made it up. Most of the things people tell me are lies, but I don't mind. If it is a claptrap of lies which makes your life worth getting through, held together by spit and hope and chemicals, I guess that is what you will use. I guess I would lie my ownself rather than

look life straight in the eye and tell the whole dismal truth , like my Mama and my Daddy and like Papaw in his own way. Better to juggle the lies and dance in the moonlight than open up your heart and feel that rancid rush of scalded truth wash over you like poison in the soul.

I walk over down a hunting trail behind the barn toward the family graveyard where Mamaw is moldering into dust. I sit beside her grave and recite sorrows, and I can glimpse that worn smile as she holds my hand , her lips moving in a silent prayer. I think as long as Mamaw was up on the hill, weaving her spells, everybody figured they could make it through the day and the week. Gone these ten years, I do not like to wonder what she would make of all of this, all these wasted motions and half baked lives going full bore toward self destruction . She talked to us a lot about heaven, and I think some of it must have taken a little here and there, but mostly, it failed because heaven was so far away, and hell was just next door in the next bottle or the next shake and bake you fixed, waiting for you with its arms wide open.

Behind me, I hear some bushes rattling, and I waited to see what other desperate human was wandering around at this God forsaken hour.

“Is that you, Jimmy?” Annetta Jo asked as she stumbled into the moonlight.

“I just been talking to her,” I said.

She was quiet, and then she sat down on one of those flat little tombstones the Baxters and Reynolds bought for all their dead babies.

“I think it is better she is gone from all of it,” she told me. “All this mess.”

Her hands moved vaguely , describing a circle which I took to mean all the fear and meanness . I nodded to her, but she was watching the grave, hoping like me that

Mamaw would pop on up there and start setting things right, which was not going to happen, of course.

Annetta Jo cried a little and I held her hand. She thought she was pregnant by one of the Dinsmore boys, Clete, I think it was. He was a foreman at the lumber yard, but he had started missing work lately because of a back injury. Annetta Jo was worried about him and her baby and the fact that the Dinsmore clan was running a small moonshine still back of the old man's farm. She worried that Clete would get back with his brothers and cousins and start drinking "shine" and lose his job and lose their future. That is what I thought when I read between the lines. A fifteen year old girl pregnant and flailing for hope was not something new for our end of the county. I did not know what to say.

"You are going to be all right, Sugar," I told her because what else are you going to say.

She kissed my hand and leaned over against my shoulder. I held her there, remembering when the two of us used to play for hours on that old trampoline her Daddy bought , out there next to those car shells and that gas stove with daises coming up out of the burners. She was going to be an elementary teacher, and I was going to be a college professor. All of those vast dreams now swept under the carpet of our daily routines.

"You better get back to bed, AJ," I told her. "Your mama be waking you up at six to take care of those children."

We stood up and she came into my arms. I kissed her once and she pulled back and looked me in the eyes . Then she kissed me. We hung there together for a long minute. She knew I loved her, had always loved her in two or three ways that had nothing to do with cousins. But I knew her life was way too slathered over with hard

circumstances now to need one more grimy layer. I sighed deeply, and she turned away and stumbled off through the grass and brush and was gone. I took the paths and trails back to my house. I fried up some sausage and scrambled some eggs and left them on a big platter in the refrigerator. I picked at a piece of sausage but finally folded it into a paper towel and threw it away. I knew that three or four people would wander in and eat the food. No one would wonder where it came from. Their lives just happened in ten minute slices Ten minutes was about all they could bear to think about at one time.

I went back upstairs and lay across the bed. Bobby Gilliland, my third cousin, was asleep on the floor, wrapped in a ratty blanket. Probably I would sleep until noon and then to find Skyte. We liked to loll around the river park in Barlow and shoot baskets. Me and Skyte would have been starters on the basketball team, but the coach wanted pee tests and he wanted you to sign a loyalty pledge to God and beauty and goodness, stuff I give up on when I was thirteen.

We flirted with girls who came down to play tennis, rich girls in new cars. They were girls who sat behind us in study hall and whispered behind their hands to each other. They knew that Skyte and me were bad trouble, just the kind of people their parents warned them about. Sometimes they came to us on the sly behind the Ag building we sold them a little meth or a few Oxy Contin to make the afternoon pass easier.

Their boyfriends would drive by and maybe stop to sort things out. Skyte and me looked at them while they talked. Then I would go into my pocket and start walking toward them, and they scatted away, talking back as they ran.

Somebody would call his daddy the lawyer or his daddy the doctor, and Wade, the deputy came out and parked behind my car.

“You boys causing trouble?”

“No, sir. Playing basketball.”

“You didn’t wave no gun?”

“You can search us, Wade,” Skyte said.

Then Wade would leave and we would come on back home and snort a little. .It was one of those spacey, wonderful highs where you felt big as God. Nobody could touch you.

I was thinking about this when I heard the screaming and the shots. My first thought was that was some melt head had tried to hurt Old Grandpappy, but then I could tell that the noise came from over near the trailer court.. It come to me clear then, Anse and Mary Alice and that mess. I pulled on my jeans and made it to the front door. Daddy was up floundering around, nearly drunk out of his mind. I got him back on the couch. Told him it was a car wreck, that I would go see and come to tell him. Mama even got herself out of bed and then fell. I heard her in there, making that sad noise, and I went in where she lay.

“You okay, Mama?” I asked her.

“It is that noise, them cops,” she moaned.

“No, it is okay. You get on back to bed. “

I told her the same thing I told Daddy that it was an accident, and I would go see about it. She was restless so I give her a sixteen ounce Falls City tall boy, and she was sucking on that when I got out of the house.

I ran down the paths and got on the main road and crossed over through an old half orchard, half field gone to weeds. The sheriff was already there. He must have been

close when somebody called. Maybe even staking somebody out near by. Mary Alice was out in the yard, screaming like some wild banshee.

“THEY ARE ALL DEAD! “ she yelled. “THEY ARE ALL DEAD.”

I leaned back against a tree and sat there thirty yards away. Some neighbors and the deputy were pushing each other. Probably Anse’s mom and uncle who lived down the road . What Mary Alice was saying was soaking through me now, all the way past the bone and into my skull. Anse was dead. Billy Redmond was dead. What I thought was that . Mary Alice was alive, but she would mostly be dead the rest of her life. Anse should never have married her. He was a good boy, a hard working boy who went to church and made good grades and she was a sweet, pretty girl, but flightly, never able to settle down. He was too old, and she was too young. I had heard the story a hundred times from my Mama and Daddy and uncles and cousins. That Mary Alice would “be the death of him” and now she was.

I pushed myself up and come through the bushes, but then I stopped. Nothing I could do now. Mary Alice’s mom and sister was already hustling down through gravel driveways, screaming, “Baby, baby. Are you okay?”

“No, she is not,” I told them quietly and stood there a full two minutes, but then I turned and went back to our house. I told Daddy it was some kids shooting off fire crackers. I got him his bottle and a cold 7-Up. He took a few sips and laid back down. I lied to Mama the same way. She would find out the truth tomorrow or the next day from somebody, but later was going to be okay. It was something she had heard before. It was everywhere and it wasn’t going away. Empty sad lives, empty sad deaths.

What was that poem we had to learn in the eighth grade.

“The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls.”

Everything is the same here . No past, no future.

Just the next moment and the next, hanging on the cross of choice.