

Madewell Brown

A Novel by

RICK COLLIGNON

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To all the men who played

South Cairo

Of all of them, Obie Poole was the only one who ever came back. At least that was what he would tell Rachael. But she had heard so many stories come from Obie's mouth over the years that, even after he was dead, she was never quite sure what was the truth or what was a tangle of lies.

"By the summer of 1954," he would tell her, his voice harsh from tobacco, his bald head nodding up and down, "we was all done in. By then Syville didn't have no legs left to speak of. His knee bones had been broke so many times that they'd been ground to jelly. And his ankles, well, they'd got so swelled up that they looked like ankles on an old, fat lady. And some of them others, like Slip Marcelle and Ollie Swan, they weren't much better. Their lungs so bad from all the dust they'd swallowed on those back roads that even the short run to first base would double them up with a hard fit of coughing.

"I tell you something," Obie would go on, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands together. "To this day, I don't know how it all fell apart on us. It seems like all those boys just drifted away until I was the only one left standing. I didn't have much to choose from, so I did the only thing I could. I took up clown ball. Yes sir, that's what I did. For five long, sorry years I stormed from one damn town to another. By then the coloreds had all moved on and left us behind. All that was stuck in their heads anyway was that Jackie Robinson. So the only ones who come out to watch us play the football was white folks. They'd come out with their umbrellas and their sodie pops, dragging their little children along so they could have one last look-see. And there'd we be, grown men taking the game to a place it never ought to go.

"I tell you a thing, girl," Obie would say, looking off at the river, his eyes half closed. "Where a man ends his life can make him think that nothing that come before it was a damn bit better."

When Rachael was a young girl, she'd sit with Obie on his front porch and listen to his talk. He would sit in a wicker chair leaning back against the wall of his house, gazing out at the wide stretch of flat grass and cattails that ran all the way to the river's edge. As he went on, he would fan away the bugs and the heat from his face. And all the while, Rachael would fidget along the porch railing.

Even back then, she was aware that the things the old man said had a way of changing. Sometimes would be just the little things that changed, like names popping up where they hadn't been before or dates moving years forward or backward. But at other times, it would be a thing so big that Rachael would think there must be storms blowing around the old man's head. And all it would take to get things going was just one little breeze.

"Did I tell you," Obie said one day, "that a rumor come to me?" He was hunched forward in his chair, a little more excited than usual. His hands were hanging down between his legs, his fingers twitching.

It had rained earlier that afternoon. The air was hot and muggy and water still dripped from the eaves. Sweat was running down both sides of the old man's face and his shirt was undone so that you could see his hollowed-out chest. Rachael realized that, once again, Obie hadn't bothered to mention where he had heard this rumor or who had told it. She wondered how a man who never went anywhere and who never had one visitor managed to hear so many things.

"What I heard," Obie went on, rocking his body back and forth slightly, "was that those Pittman

boys, James Lee and Earl, got themselves drunk and killed by a slow-moving freight train up north. Now, it don't surprise me none that such a thing might happen to Earl. There never was one bit of sense in that head of his. In fact, he probably thought that standing on those tracks was a fine place to watch a train go by. But James Lee, now, he wasn't like that. He was a cautious man and always took the time to look out for his little brother."

Rachael was sitting up on the porch railing with her back to Obie. She was swinging her legs back and forth slowly and staring out past the swamp grass at the river. It was early evening and the surface of the water was flat and still. Not far from the shore, there were some white trash boys in a rowboat. They were fishing for carp up close to the riverbank.

"That's not right," she said softly.

"What's not right?" Obie asked, scratching at a mess of mosquito welts on his arm.

"What you just said. You told me that James Lee and Earl got themselves killed playing ball in a lightning storm. You said that it happened in South Texas, down in dirt country."

Obie dropped his arm and stared straight ahead. He stayed quiet for a moment, his head shaking slightly like it was a strain to hold it up. Then he let out a loud grunt. "I never told you no such thing," he said. "I recall a white boy who once got struck, but that didn't have nothing to do with the Pittman boys."

"Well," Rachael said, "I remember even if you don't." She was swinging her legs a little higher now. "You told me that Earl got himself blown fifty feet in the air like God yanked him up by his scalp. You said that when he hit the ground his shoes were dripping hot rubber and his hair was on fire." Rachael watched the rowboat drift into the low-hanging branches of a sycamore tree. She couldn't hear the sound of one boy yelling at the other. It made her want to laugh and yell out at them for being so dumb.

"You know something?" Obie said. He leaned forward and spat out a stream of tobacco juice. "You just like your damn granddaddy, you know that? Think you know so much. And if you going to talk to me, turn yourself around. I don't want to be talking to your skinny backside."

Rachael swung her legs up and swiveled around on the railing so that she was facing the old man. He was hunched forward, his knotted-up hands hanging loose between his thighs. He was looking up at her, his eyes wet and bloodshot. From out in the flat grass and the cattails came the deep-throated sounds of bullfrogs and the clatter of a million crickets.

For a few seconds, they just stared at each other. Then Obie shook his head slowly. "You just a little girl," he said. "What you doing talking to me this way?"

"I'm not so little anymore," Rachael said. She put her hands down flat on the railing and began to swing her legs again. "I'm eleven years old now and you didn't even know that."

Sweat was beaded up on Obie's forehead and there were damp stains spreading beneath his arms. The air between them stank of unwashed clothes, and the odor of food gone bad was drifting out the open door to the house. Not for the first time, she wondered what this old man did when she wasn't around for him to tell his lies to.

"Eleven years old," Obie said harshly. "Eleven years old ain't nothing. Eleven years old ain't spit." He put his hands on his knees and scooted himself closer to her. "If you're not careful," he went on, "you going to end up just like your granddaddy. I was there when he walked off. He never said a damn word to nobody. He just walked off that field of play and was gone like a little bit of smoke. Syville, he told us not to worry none, that old Madewell Brown would come sauntering back in his own good time. But you know what? He never did. He got himself lost somewhere and wasn't no better than the

rest of us.” Obie moved back in his chair and turned his face away.

“You go on now,” he said, his voice tired and hushed. “You take your damn sass and get away from here. I got no time for the likes of you.”

Rachael pushed off the railing and jumped down. “I got to get home anyway,” she said.

“Yeah,” Obie said, without looking at her. “Sure you do”.

Rachael walked over to the edge of the porch. She stood there for a moment and then looked back at the old man. “I remember,” she said, and she said the words in a singsong voice, her hands on her hips. “I remember you once told me that Sully Greene run off to Mexico with a sweet, brown-skinned woman.” Her eyes were half closed and her head was moving from side to side. It made Obie think of little girls playing games of skip rope.

“You told me,” she went on, “that Sully Greene went off to live in a place where there wasn’t no snow or hardship. You said it was a place where you could walk down the street without shame. Then last week you told me different. You told me he got both his legs cut up by some white men down in Louisiana for looking wrong at a white woman. You said they dumped poor Sully in a drainage ditch. His legs bleeding so bad that the water turned milky with blood.”

“I never did,” Obie said quickly. The corners of his mouth were stained brown from tobacco juice and a thin stream of saliva ran down his chin. “And you ain’t got no home neither. You just a damn charity case.”

Rachael took the steps down off the porch, her skinny hips moving. “I don’t have a granddaddy,” she said, without so much as a glance back. “I don’t care what you say. I never had a granddaddy and don’t believe a word you say. You just a crazy old man telling me lies.”

“I said go on now,” Obie said, waving an arm. “You get on away from here.”

Obie Poole had come back to South Cairo on a bitter winter day in 1959, thirty-seven years after he’d left. He came back on the north-south railway train that let him out on an open wood platform not far from the river.

“Obie Poole’s come back,” he muttered, his breath hanging in the air. “Obie Poole’s done come home.” He put his suitcase down beside him and looked around at where he’d once been a boy. At where they’d all once been boys.

A wet snow was falling and the air was gray and cold. A few yards away from where he stood, the river was flowing heavy and full and quiet. Already, the raw damp that rose from the surface had begun to settle deep in his hips. The joints in his ankles and wrists felt stiff and swelled up. He hunched his shoulders away from the weather and let his eyes rest down the shoreline.

He remembered that there’d been a string of houses that had stretched for a mile or so along the riverbank, but all there was now was one caved-in place after another. Most had slid off their stone foundations and were flattened out like a giant hand had pressed down on them. Thin, scrawny saplings grew out of the gaping windows and the roofs were stripped down to bare wood. The few places that had withstood the years were boarded up, the yards trashed out and weeded high.

Wondering what had happened here, Obie glanced across the river at Cairo. A run of tidy houses that hadn’t been there before sat high up on the riverbank, their yards spaced with gray oaks. And where the Cairo Slaughterhouse should have been was a long run of rubble that spread all the way down to the water.

Sweet Jesus, Obie thought. Where’d that damn train leave me anyway?

It was snowing harder now and though it wasn't much past midday, light was fading fast. Cold water was dribbling down the back of Obie's neck and his feet were numb and aching. The road that led away into South Cairo was a mess of black mud. Each side was strung with high grass and water was rising in the ruts. About a half mile off, a small garage sat in a hollow of trees. He remembered buying hard candy and packets of chew tobacco there as a boy. A faded cola sign hung over the front door, smoke was snaking out of the stovepipe. The sight of it calmed Obie down a little bit and made him realize that he'd been standing out in this cold long enough.

As he made his way through the slush along the side of the road, a couple of pickup trucks swung around the trees and headed toward him. The first one sped up as it passed by, sending up a splatter of mud that splashed cold against his trouser leg. The other downshifted hard with a grinding of gears and pulled up beside him.

Two white boys were inside the cab. The driver was drinking from a soiled paper cup and staring out at him through the open window with a little grin on his face. The other one was slumped up against the passenger door.

"Hey, old man," the driver said. He leaned forward and switched off the engine. "What the hell you doing out in the cold wet?" He was a tall, skinny boy, his hair long over his ears. A few black hairs were growing on his chin and his skin was smooth and flushed. He was grinning wide now, like he'd been waiting his whole life for the day Obie Poole finally came home.

"I ain't doing nothing," Obie said, moving his eyes away. "I'm just walking down this road."

"You always go walking with a suitcase?"

"Well, I just come home," Obie said. "On that north-south train. I been off playing ball for a time and I just come home." He hefted his suitcase a little as if to walk away, but he stayed standing where he was.

The boy in the passenger seat twisted his head. He took one look at Obie and let out a low moan. "C'mon, Lee," he said, the words slurred. "I got to get home."

"Ain't you a little old to be playing ball?" Lee asked, taking a sip out of his paper cup. The boy beside him moaned again and then laid his head back against the door frame. "I thought baseball was for little boys." Down the road, two men were standing outside the old garage. They stood there for a while looking, then turned and went back inside.

"Hey, old man," Lee said again, and now his voice, too, was slurred and thick. His hand was resting on the edge of the open window and what was in the cup was spilling out onto the road.

The day was growing bitter cold. A flat, gray sky hung low over the trees and snow was beginning to build up on the grass. There wasn't a breath of air. The only sound was the ticking of the truck engine as it cooled.

Obie glanced over at the pickup. The driver had stopped grinning and was staring off at the river. His eyes were dull and empty, as if whatever had once been in there had taken off and left. Obie felt a surge of fatigue go through him. He thought that this boy looked like every other white boy he'd ever seen in his life.

"I played ball for thirty-seven years," Obie said softly. "And I just come home for a little peace of mind. I don't want no trouble with no one."

The boy suddenly shook his head hard. "Whew," he breathed out. "We sure had us a time, didn't we Billy?" He pushed back in his seat and looked over at Obie.

"I heard what you said, old man," he said. He leaned his head out the window and the snow that fell

fell on his hair. “You one of those colored ballplayers, aren’t you? My daddy told me he’d seen the likes of you once. Up near Harrisford. Way back before I was born. He said you all played the game as good as any white man. Maybe it was you he saw play.”

“Maybe,” Obie muttered, but he couldn’t recall playing so much as an inning up in Harrisford.

The boy’s eyes stayed steady on Obie like there was something more he wanted to ask. But then he grinned and pulled back inside the cab. “Hey, old man,” he said, “you ever see that nigger up in Milwaukee play ball? Hot damn. I’d like to see something like him. I tell you, that nigger had himself some kind of a year.”

“Yes sir,” Obie said, nodding slowly. “He surely did. But I never did see that boy play. He come along after my time.” He looked down at his feet. They were wet and seeping water. He wondered if he would spend the rest of his life out here talking to this white boy.

“Yeah,” Lee said. “I guess some of us don’t have no luck except the kind we don’t want.” He shifted his body and dug a crumpled dollar bill out of his pocket. “Here,” he said. “You go on and take this. Don’t say nobody never gave you nothing.”

Obie stared at the bill hanging between the boy’s fingers. Well, lookee here, he thought. A dollar bill for Obie. He took it from the boy and balled it up in his hand. “I thank you,” he said.

“Yeah,” the boy said. “Well, it’s nothing much.” He switched on the engine and shoved the truck into gear. “I just stopped to pass some time,” he said, without a look at Obie. “I didn’t stop to give you no trouble.” He wiped a fist at the moisture on the inside of the windshield. Then he let the truck roll forward slowly.

“It’s going to snow all night, old man,” he said. “You better find yourself someplace warm or you’ll catch your death.”

Obie stood in the falling snow and watched the truck drive across the bridge and disappear among the trees of Cairo. He let the wadded-up dollar bill drop from his hand to the wet mud. And then he hefted his suitcase and, once again, began his slow walk back home.

A few months after Obie returned, he bought an abandoned house that sat up from the river on the outskirts of South Cairo. It was a small, rundown old place, but he didn’t see the need for more than what it was. He didn’t mind that the wood floors in the three rooms were warped or that the supports beneath the porch had rotted out. Or even that the stretch of ground that ran all the way to the river’s edge wasn’t much more than swamp full of bugs and snakes. That house was the only thing that Obie had ever owned in his life, and he felt as if he was finally in a place where he belonged.

After settling in, he began to ask around about what might have happened to folks he’d known from years before. What he found out was that thirty-seven years is a long time in a place like South Cairo. No one seemed to remember who he or any of those other people he asked about were.

For a while, those he’d stop on the streets or hacking weeds in their yards would listen to him kindly. But when his talk drifted to baseball, as it always did, a thin look of impatience would cross their faces. They’d shake their heads and give him a smile that meant nothing at all.

“You and that colored ball,” they would say. “Open those eyes of yours, Obie Poole. There’s black men playing in the World Series now.” And then they’d go back to what they were doing, leaving Obie to wander off. And as he made his way home, he knew that they all thought he was just another crazy man who had fallen into their midst. That there wasn’t a soul on earth who could have done all the things he claimed to have done.

The only one who bothered to help him out at all was the crippled lady who owned Peter's Grocery. Lydola Peterson told him that she recalled hearing about a bunch of boys once taking to the road to play ball. But for the life of her, she couldn't remember who those boys had been or who their families were or even where she'd heard such things. What she did remember, though, was that back in 1936 two events had occurred that had forever changed South Cairo.

"The Cairo Slaughterhouse burned down," she told him, packing his bag with canned soup and tobacco. "It burned down one cold winter morning and left every last family in South Cairo out of work and owed money they never was going to get. I was newly married at the time this happened." She ticked out some air and shook her head. "The flames were so big it looked like the river was on fire."

Lydola was years younger than Obie, but her hair was bone white and sparse, her spine so twisted it kept her half bent over. Her skin was discolored, and one foot was clubbed and hidden away in a thick leather shoe. There was never anybody in the store but Lydola. What became of her husband, she never did say. She told Obie that the boiler in the slaughterhouse basement had blown and in no time at all the flames had eaten up the paper-thin walls to the roof. She said it happened so fast that there was nothing to be done but stand back and watch.

"There was a white man got himself burned up," she went on. "I don't remember his name, but no one cared about him anyway. He was a poor, dim-witted soul who wasn't much use to anybody. All they found of him was some charred bones."

She leaned back against the counter and twisted her head around to look up at Obie. "Rain and sleep was falling that morning," she said. "But even so, you could feel the heat come washing across the river. And the sounds those poor animals made. Cows and lamed horses and old hogs screaming like crazy women. And if that wasn't bad enough, a few months later the floods came."

In the spring of that same year, she told him, the river rose ten feet over its banks and flooded nearly all of South Cairo. Whole houses were dragged away by the current, and those that weren't were left bloated with mud and water and a white mold that got deep into your lungs and sickened whoever breathed it. River rats swarmed everywhere, and coils of water moccasins hung from tree limbs. It took two months for the water to finally get back to where it belonged, and by then most everyone who lived near the river was gone.

"I don't know who you asking about, Obie Poole," she said. "Most likely they all gone after so long. But what I do know is you might want to think about keeping your stories to yourself. This place has had enough bad times. It don't need to be reminded of lost souls that might have lived here or even that Negro ball you always talking about. You go home and sit on that porch of yours and let the sun warm your bones. Find yourself a little peace, Obie Poole."

For the most part, Obie didn't much care what people said about him or what they thought. He had a lifetime packed away in his skull and if no one was interested in what was in there, then that was their own bad luck. He'd lived his whole life moving about in crowds, and he was done with all that.

He spent his time fixing up his house and driving out the wasps and snakes that had taken to nesting in the walls. He kept the swamp grass cleared back to keep down the bugs and cut paths through it so as to have a place to walk.

In the late afternoons, he'd rest out on his porch. He'd chew his tobacco and gaze off at the river that never stopped flowing, thinking that the years passing him by weren't all that much different from one of those ball games where not one damn thing would happen. The comfort in those games

had nothing to do with the score but was in the quiet wait for what might come. Then Obie would wonder what Syville or Madewell or any of those other boys would say about a thing like that.

“I guess it don’t matter what you’d say,” he muttered. “You all gone anyway.” He leaned forward and let loose a thick stream of tobacco juice. “I got myself a nice slow game going here. And it ain’t ever going to end.”

Obie would think like that right up to the moment Rachael Parish came strutting her way into his life.

Obie had been back in South Cairo for twenty-eight years when he and Rachael met. The day she came messing up his life was no different from any other. As usual, he’d gotten up early and made himself a pot of coffee and two slices of toast. And then he had gone outside to take a look at the morning.

The air was cool and still. The grass was folded over with damp. A thin haze hung over the river and above it the sky was beginning to swell with light. The sad moan of a mourning dove came from the trees down by the river, and from far off came the dull barking of a tied-up dog.

For a while, Obie stood there sipping his coffee, wondering what he should do with this day. A deep ache was eating at his hips, and the bones in his ankles felt thin and brittle. He put his cup down on the railing and leaned forward a little bit to ease the pain. Then, with a quick hard jerk of his hand, he sent his toast flying off into the grass.

“I don’t need to do nothing if I don’t want to,” he mumbled. He limped back inside the house to wait for the sun to burn away the damp.

By the time Obie made his way back outside, the sun was high and the air was full of dry heat. The summer rains had ended a few weeks before and the cattails were burnt and browned out. He dragged his chair into the shade beneath the eave of the house and sat down. He leaned his head back against the wall and folded his hands across his stomach. A flock of small swamp birds was flitting about just past the porch. Obie watched them hop from one cattail to another until, like every other day, his eyes closed and he dozed off.

He didn’t know how long he’d been asleep when he became aware of something making its way through the weeds near his house. At first he thought it might be mule deer walking down to the water for a drink. Or maybe that pack of dogs he’d seen now and again roaming the riverbank for washed-up garbage or dead fish. Whatever it was, he thought, it was making one hell of a noise. He cracked open his eyes and when he turned his head, he caught sight of a little boy and two girls making their way through the tall grass at the edge of his house.

They were walking in a line and carrying sticks to keep the snakes at bay. The boy was last. He was short and stocky, and every so often he’d glance edgewise at the house like he knew they were where they shouldn’t be. The girl in front of him was built similarly and looked close enough to be his big sister. A line of belly fat was hanging over the top rim of her shorts and a sour look was on her face. But Obie only gave those two a quick glance. It was the girl leading the way who caught his eye.

She was mouthing out a song and swinging her stick at the grass like she was holding a ball bat. She was a skinny girl, taller than the other two, and she moved almost like a boy somehow—slow and easy and still too young to know how good she was. Obie sat in the shade on his porch and listened to her sing in a high, reedy voice.

“I know a boy who’s as sweet as pie,” she sang, and slash went her stick at the grass.

“I know a boy who can make me cry.

I know a boy who'll make me bad.

I know a boy who'll make me sad.

Jump high, sweet girl, and don't come down.

The rope gonna catch you and knock you down," and here she beat at the weeds like she was trying to kill them.

Obie let out a grunt and roused himself. "Hey," he yelled out. He leaned forward and slapped his hand down hard on his thigh. "Who you think you are? You go on now and get out of here."

The fat little girl gave a jump. She turned around like she'd been shot at and went running. But the boy stopped dead in his tracks and then edged back a foot or two.

"That's right," Obie said to him, nodding his head. "You go on home. And don't come back here no more." Then he turned his eyes to the girl in front.

She was standing with her face turned away from him, one hip cocked out. At first he wondered if she were deaf. She was swinging her stick like she hadn't heard a word he'd said, and even though she'd stopped her singing, her upper body was moving from side to side as if the song was still going in her head. It struck him that not only had she heard every word he'd said but she didn't give a good damn one way or the other about it.

"Go on now," he said to her, flapping his hand. "You trespassing on my property."

"This isn't your property," the girl said, as quick as that.

"Well, it sure as hell ain't yours," Obie said, his voice raised.

"We walking the path down to the river," she said, without so much as a glance at him.

"I don't give a damn where you going," Obie said. He'd known this girl just one short minute and here they were, having an argument. "You want a path to walk on, go somewhere else and make your own." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the boy take a step forward.

"You going the wrong way, boy," Obie yelled at him. It occurred to him that things were getting a little out of hand. If he wasn't careful he might end up with a bunch of worthless kids running all over his property. He made to rise out of his chair. "Now you get your fat butt out of here before I do something."

"Rachael," the boy called out, his voice high and pinched, "I'll meet you back home." And he began to move backward, around the corner of the house.

"We're going down to the river," Rachael said, as if the boy hadn't spoken to her. She was standing still now, pointing her stick off toward the river as if that, too, belonged to her.

"Goddamn it, girl," Obie said, shaking his head. "I don't care where you going. You just go some other damn way." In all this time, she hadn't bothered once to look over at him. She was wearing a pair of raggedy shorts and her T-shirt was pressed tight and flat against her chest. She'd done her hair in tight braids, and each one was wound with a little bit of dirty ribbon. She didn't look any different from any other little girl he'd seen wandering the streets of South Cairo.

"You go on now," he said to her, his voice calmer. "Before I find out who your mama is and have a talk with her."

"I don't have a mama," Rachael said. She lowered her stick and took a swing at a clump of thistles. "She run off when I was little and stuck me in the South Cairo Home."

Obie let out a grunt. "Well, that don't surprise me none. If you was my little girl, I'd run off and leave you, too."

At that moment, the sun dipped below the trees along the far side of the river. A shadow ran across the swamp grass, pushing a little wind ahead of it. ~~Obie shut his eyes and leaned back so that the breeze cooled the heat on his neck.~~ “My,” he said softly. “Don’t that feel nice.” He moved his head back and forth slowly and pulled his shirt away from his skin. Then he let out a long breath and opened his eyes.

The girl was still there, but now she was turned around facing him. For a moment, Obie just sat in his chair and stared at her, his mouth half open.

“Hey,” he breathed out. “I know you.” In that second, he could have sworn that instead of a skinny little girl, Madewell Brown was standing not twenty feet away. There he was, his long arms dangling his mouth wide and easy. He was gazing just off to one side, as if he could see something no one else could. And he was holding himself the way Obie remembered—a little on his toes like anything might happen.

“Madewell,” Obie whispered harshly, “where’d you come from?” Then something shifted in the air and what he’d seen was gone. Where Madewell Brown had been was that girl standing in the swamp grass. Obie pushed out of his chair and went over to the railing.

“What’s your name, girl?” he asked.

Rachael didn’t answer. She could see that the old man was leaning so far over the railing that he might topple over and break his neck. She thought that he was just another old man who didn’t have anything better to do than mess with people. She looked away and started tapping her stick on the ground.

“My name’s Rachael Parish,” she said finally, her voice singsonging again. “That’s what my mam named me. Not something dumb like Madewell.”

Obie could see how high her forehead was and how the slant of her eyes gave her almost a sleepy look. Again he shook his head. “You got your granddaddy written all over you. Come here so I can get a good look at you.”

“Ha,” she spat out, taking a step back. Already she knew enough about men to keep her distance. Even from one this old. “You a crazy old man living way out here by yourself. I don’t have a granddaddy. I never had a granddaddy.”

“You sure as hell had a couple of them once,” Obie said. All of a sudden, he saw Madewell and Syville and James Lee and all the rest of them as boys. If they hadn’t been playing ball, they’d been running every which way over beaten-down paths through the flat grass. They’d all grown up here along the river. And then, like it was some kind of grand plan, the whole bunch of them had left South Cairo together. Now he wondered if all the while he’d been sitting here getting old, that plan hadn’t been moving along without his noticing. How else could he explain this girl wandering into his life from nowhere?

“You think it’s an accident you here?” he asked her. “Well, it ain’t. So let me just tell you a thing or two. I played ball with a man named Madewell Brown my whole damn life and never did I see the likes of him. You put a ball in that man’s hand and he’d turn bats into kindling and buckle a man’s knees so bad he looked the fool.” Obie leaned closer, spit bunched at the corners of his mouth. “He once threw a ball so damn hard that it tore through the webbing of Syville’s glove and broke the home plate umpire’s arm at the wrist. I played ball with him my whole life. Yes sir, I surely did.”

It was getting dark and swarms of mosquitoes were clouding the air. Rachael could feel them lighting on the backs of her arms and legs. She let her stick drop, leaned over and brushed her hands along her legs. The old man was still talking, but he was staring off at the river like he’d forgotten she

was even there.

I'm not ever going to come back here, she thought. Then she spoke the words out loud. As she walked away, the old man called out at her.

"You full of that Madewell Brown, little girl," he said. "You be back. I know you be back."

Two days later, Rachael went back to see Obie Poole. And this time, she went alone.

He was sitting in the same exact place as before, fanning his face with a piece of cardboard, his legs stretched out and crossed. Rachael wondered if he was living every day out on this rickety old porch. She watched him lean to one side and spit. Then he settled back in his chair.

"I knew you'd be back," he said.

Off to one side of the old man, the door to the house hung wide open. Inside, Rachael could see a square of daylight coming in through a small window in the far wall. It made it seem as though there wasn't anything in there except shadows. Just then the old man shifted in his chair and drew his legs up. The scraping sound of his shoes startled her.

Obie let out a laugh and shook his head. "Where's that sassy little girl who was here before?" he said.

For a moment, the two of them looked at each other. Rachael was wearing clothes that were too big for her. Baggy pants and a soiled shirt that fell far below her waist. Hand-me-downs, Obie thought. Hand-me-downs from that South Cairo Home. Her hair was undone now and she looked somehow smaller and older than she had a few days before.

"Hey," he said, "where's that girlfriend of yours? And that boy. The fat boy."

Rachael shrugged her shoulders. "They're back home," she said. "They didn't like it here."

"I bet they didn't," Obie said, nodding. He wiped his mouth clean with the back of his arm and laid his head back against the wall. "So what?" he said. "You just come out here to get a good look at me?"

Rachael took a step forward. "My mama ain't ever going to come back for me," she said, the words rushing out of her mouth. "She's no better than her own mama was."

Obie let out a grunt. "Well," he said, "you ain't alone in that," and then he moved his eyes past her. Dark, heavy clouds were building up far west of the river. He thought that later it would rain and the two of them might still be out here tossing words at each other. When he looked back at her, he could see that she had edged a little closer.

"I know what you come for," he said. He let his hands rest still on his legs and waited for her to say it.

Rachael was so close to the porch now that she could have reached out and touched it. The old man was gazing down at her, his jaw moving back and forth. His hands were laid out flat, the knuckle joints swollen and raw. She let her fingers rest on the edge of the porch deck and peered through the slats.

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me about my grandfather."

One

The day Rufino Trujillo was to die of a bad heart, he was standing before the window in his kitchen, drinking his morning cup of coffee.

He was still wearing his long underwear. They were stained around the crotch and hung loose and baggy on his scrawny frame. His head was bare, and his hair was flattened down from sleep. On his feet was a thick pair of woolen socks, and both heels stuck out through gaping holes. They were the only gift he had ever received from his wife, Reycita, who had long ago abandoned him and the village of Guadalupe.

Outside, a soft haze of heat and dust from yesterday's wind hung above the valley. It hadn't rained in weeks, and the lack of moisture had dried up Rufino's yard, leaving the ground hard and cracked and bare. It had been so dry that the leaves on the cottonwoods behind his shed were yellowed and brittle. Even so early in the morning, he could feel a warm draft brushing against the backs of his hands.

Rufino took a small sip of coffee and then rubbed the palm of his hand on the pane of glass. He bent his head stiffly and gazed across the yard at his shed. The door was half open, the bottom edge of it stuck in old mud. A flap of roofing paper hung loose off one eave.

"It's all your fault my life is like this," Rufino muttered. He drank a little more coffee, thinking that everyone he had ever cared about had left him. The only one who hadn't was a nigger he didn't even know, let alone like. Rufino's face was so close to the window now that the panes of glass had begun to fog. He rubbed it clean with his elbow and peered out at the shed again. A surge of anger went through him.

"I don't even remember your name no more," he spat out. But in truth, even after fifty years, Rufino could see each letter of the black man's name, Madewell Brown, burnt into the top of his canvas bag. He straightened up slowly and felt a dull ache start up in the middle of his back.

"Eee," he said. "If it isn't one thing." And then he let out a low, harsh moan as his heart seized in his chest. A gasp forced its way from his mouth, and his cup fell from his hand. He bent over quickly, his fingers digging into his thighs, his head lowered. He squeezed his eyes shut and willed the pain away until, finally, the cramp in his chest eased and his heart began to beat unevenly. Rufino stood up carefully and took a few steps to find his balance.

"Dios mío," he said, his voice only air. "That was a bad one." His heart had been playing tricks for some time now, but recently the sharp pains at the onset of each attack had become more severe. A sliver of pain passed through his arm and he took a few more steps to chase it away.

Rufino had always managed to keep distant from the thought of his own death. And now he wondered how at his age the idea of it could surprise him. He pulled a chair out from the table and sat down heavily. His heart was beating slower now, but his arms and legs felt weak, as though he had spent the morning walking through deep snow. He leaned back in his chair and slid his legs out straight. Across the room, his two Ladies of Guadalupe were hanging on the wall, one on each side of the stove.

"Eee," he said, his voice shaking. "You two should be ashamed of yourselves to let this happen."

They had once been covers to calendars that Rufino had picked up at the Guadalupe lumberyard. He had torn off the little pages of the months and then nailed the pictures of the Ladies on his kitchen

wall. He had done this so long ago that they were covered with grease and their edges were curled and rimmed with dirt.

At one time Rufino had thought that they might help him with his troubles. But living with two women who never had one good thing to offer hadn't made anything any better. It was as if they, too, had decided to ignore as much of Rufino's life as possible. The only reason he hadn't thrown them away was that, with his luck, their absence might make things even worse.

Rufino let out a slow, jagged breath of air. Again he looked out at his shed that sat in the shadows beneath the cottonwoods. The open door made it seem as if someone had just walked inside. He thought that if he were to die at this moment, the black man would be left in there all alone. The idea of such a thing made Rufino feel sad. The back of his throat grew tight and his eyes began to burn. A trickle of blood ran from one nostril. He wiped at it absently with the sleeve of his underwear.

"We deserved better than this," he said softly.

He stared out the window for a little while longer. Then he reached forward and pulled the telephone over to the edge of the table. He picked up the receiver and squinted at the numbers he'd written on the wall years before. When he could see them clearly, he dialed the number to his son's house.

Cipriano was about to wake up Genoveva when the telephone in the kitchen began to ring. At first he thought it was Tranquilino calling to tell him that he'd be late for work, that one of his daughters was sick or his wife wanted to have a talk or that some other small disaster had happened. Then Cipriano heard the harsh sound of his father's voice.

"Hijo," Rufino said, "it's me, Rufino." And in the pause that followed, Cipriano could picture the old man sitting alone in his kitchen. He'd still be wearing his long underwear, his forearms thin and white as bone.

"Hijo," Rufino went on, "I don't feel so good. Maybe if you're not too busy, you could make a little visit. There are some things I want to tell you." Then, without waiting for Cipriano to speak, the old man hung up the phone gently.

From the bedroom came the sound of Genoveva stirring. "Cipriano?" she called out. "What time is it?" He heard the noise of blankets being tossed. And then, her voice loud, "I don't believe it. Why didn't you wake me?"

A moment later, she came from the bedroom and stood staring at him from across the room. Her jeans were still unbuttoned and hung loose on her hips. Her hair was tangled and thrown back from her face.

"What did Tranquilino want?" she asked.

"It wasn't Tranquilino," Cipriano said.

"So who else would call you so early?"

"Rufino."

Genoveva grunted softly. Tucking in her shirt, she walked quickly into the kitchen. "You should have woken me up. You know I have to get Martin." Martin was her seven-year-old son. He had spent the night with his grandmother and was, at that moment, waiting for his mother to take him to his cousin's house.

Genoveva grabbed her purse and car keys off the counter. Then she stood still and looked at Cipriano. "What did he want?" she asked.

Cipriano shrugged. "He says he's not feeling so good. He said he wants to talk to me."

"Your father's been sick all his life," she said. "Why does he want to talk about it now?"

"I don't know," he said. The last person Cipriano wanted to talk about so early in the morning was his father.

Genoveva shook her head and crossed the room. She rose up on her toes and put her lips against the side of Cipriano's mouth. "Go see him," she said. "If only for a little while."

"I will," he told her. She smiled and ran her hand down the side of his face.

"Go see him before you go to work. Then you won't think about him all day." She dropped down from her toes and took a step back. "Promise me," she said.

"I will," Cipriano said again. For a few seconds neither of them spoke. Then Genoveva hissed out a breath of air.

"I better go," she said. "I am so late." She walked past him, pulled open the door and went down the steps. When she reached her car, she looked back. "I'll see you later?"

"Yes," Cipriano said. "I told Martin we'd go fishing."

She smiled, gave him a quick wave and climbed in her car. She drove down the hill too fast and at the bottom hung a right onto the highway. But long before she was out of sight, Cipriano had moved his eyes away and was looking out at the day.

From where he stood, he could see nearly all of the village. He could see the roof of the church just to the north, and a half mile below that was the lumberyard and Felix's Café and Tito's bar. He could see how the highway cut through the middle of the valley and then wound its way up into the foothills. On the far side of the village, the mountains were shrouded in a haze of heat and dust, and at their base, still in shadows, thick lines of cottonwoods ran along the creeks and the ditches.

In those trees, he thought, close to where the ditch breaks away from the creek, is my father's house.

Cipriano pulled his truck off the gravel road and took the rutted drive that led to Rufino's house. He parked next to his father's pickup and sat looking at the house.

It had been a few months since he'd last stopped by and, as far as he could tell, not much had changed. The place looked as rundown as ever. Part of the roof had blown off years ago and had been patched with tar and sheets of rusted metal. The heavy plaster on the walls was badly cracked and had pulled away from the door and window frames. And now, with the lack of rain, Rufino's yard was hard-packed dirt with a few spindly weeds. Just looking at the place made Cipriano tired.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement at the kitchen window. When he turned his head, he saw his father peering out at him through the glass.

"Hello, Rufino," Cipriano said softly. "Cómo está, viejo?" He let out a long breath, swung open the truck door and went to see what it was his father wanted.

Rufino met his son at the door. "I didn't expect to see you so soon," he said, touching Cipriano's arm. "Come in, hijo. Come in for a little while." The old man went over to a narrow bed that was pushed up against one wall and sat down. He folded his hands in his lap. My son is here, he thought. My son has come to see me.

The ceiling light was off, and coming in from so much sun, Cipriano thought that the room was dark and shadowed. He left the door open and went over to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down. "I

can't stay long," he said. "I just came to see how you're feeling."

Rufino waved a hand. "I'm fine, hijo," he said. "Some-times I get these little pains, but they don't mean nothing."

Cipriano stared at the old man. Over the phone, he had caught the sound of something weak and frail in his father's voice. But now, as his eyes adjusted to the light, he could see that Rufino looked different than the last time he'd seen him. He was a small, wiry man who had never seemed happy in his life. A man who had chosen to grow old by himself.

Cipriano had been raised a mile away by his Tia Lupita. He could still remember the few times his aunt had brought him over to visit his father. Each time, before he got out of the car, she would smile and hug him.

"Don't worry, Cipriano," she would say to calm his un-ease. "It's just for a little while. And when we get back home, hijo, we'll make some sopapillas together. And warm milk with honey." Then she would drive away slowly, leaving Cipriano alone with a father who wished to have little to do with him.

Cipriano stretched out his legs and glanced around the room. Dirty dishes and empty cans were stacked by the sink, and the stovetop was caked with grease and dirt that had dripped from the ceiling. There seemed to be more water stains on the wall than before, and a fine layer of grit was on the linoleum floor. Even with the door open, the place smelled stale and filthy. The old man was sitting on the edge of the bed, his long underwear pulled up high above his ankles.

"Why are you still sleeping in your kitchen?" Cipriano asked.

Rufino shifted his feet on the floor and laid his hands flat on the surface of the bed. "It doesn't matter where I sleep," he said. "Besides, I like sleeping in my kitchen."

Six months before, Rufino had suddenly lost the ability to fall asleep. He would lie awake for hours staring up at the ceiling, often not dozing off until almost dawn. To make things worse, he began to hear noises that he had never heard before. He told himself that it was only the planks creaking beneath the linoleum or the heavy vigas above his bed shifting, but each sound would startle him so badly that he began to think of his bedroom as a place where anything might happen and none of it would be good.

Finally he moved his bed into the kitchen, where the only noise was of wood burning in the stove, where he was near the two Ladies and his canned milk and the small crucifix he had hidden as a boy deep inside a crack in the plastered wall, and where he could gaze out the window at the night sky. But he had told none of this to Cipriano. He had, instead, complained to his son that in the dead of winter his bedroom was too cold, that at his age he didn't need the bother of so many rooms.

"Rufino," Cipriano said, "are you all right?" His father's lips were moving, as if he were talking to himself. His eyes were damp and bloodshot, and there was a smear of blood on one side of his face that Cipriano hadn't noticed before. A vague feeling of unease went through him. Suddenly he wanted to be out of this house, away from this old man.

"Yes," Rufino said. "I'm fine. I'm just a little tired."

"Then I better get out of here," Cipriano said, drawing up his feet. "I've got Tranquilino waiting for me."

"You go," Rufino told him, raising a hand. "Don't worry about me." As his son stood, Rufino noticed the flecks of gray in his hair and the fine lines that had begun to branch from the corners of his eyes. He wondered where all the years had gone for him to have a son this old.

“I’m glad,” Rufino mumbled, “that you came to see me.”

“It was nothing,” Cipriano said. The old man was sitting hunched over now, his collarbones jutting sharply up out of his long underwear. Sunlight filtered through the window and lay across his lap. “Hey,” Cipriano said, “what was it you wanted to tell me?”

Again Rufino felt a dull ache start up in the middle of his back. His heart began to beat a little faster. He turned his head and looked out the window. Across the yard the branches of the cottonwood were draped over the roof of his shed.

I should have burned that place down, he thought. Maybe then I could have had some peace. He let out a low grunt. “You don’t care about this,” he said to Cipriano in a hard rush of anger. “Go home to your Genoveva. Or Lupita. Lupita with her sweet ways.”

At the harshness in his father’s voice, Cipriano pulled his head back as if slapped. He had seen the old man like this before and every time it came as a surprise. One moment they would be talking and the next, for no reason it seemed, a meanness would fill Rufino’s eyes.

“What are you talking about, Rufino?” Cipriano said. Saliva was knotted at the corners of the old man’s mouth and his eyes moved about the room like he was looking for someone.

“I’ll tell you what I’m talking about,” Rufino said. “I’m talking about the pendejo nigger and you don’t even know that.” And then, as though a storm had passed, the old man fell quiet. His heart began to slow and there was the taste of blood in the back of his throat. He took in a deep breath.

“Go to work, Cipriano,” he said. “I don’t need to talk about this.”

“Talk about what, old man?”

Rufino raised his eyes and looked at his son. Although he could only vaguely remember his wife, he could see that Cipriano held himself like Reycita had—the way he stood over by the door, gazing back at him no matter how uneasy he felt. He wondered how, after all these years, he could still carry both Reycita and the black man. It was as if they had never left, he thought, as if they had given him some kind of a curse. He sat up a little straighter on the bed.

“Sit down, Cipriano,” Rufino said, nodding. “Sit down, hijo. I will tell you what happened to me once.”

Perdido mesa rose out of the valley a few miles west of the village. It was a rocky, dry stretch of land scarred deep with arroyos. The few trees that grew there were twisted and gnarled, their branches thick and knotted. Even the sagebrush was stunted and windblown, and the grass was thin and as pale as dust. It was an empty place fit only for coyotes and rabbits, a place few people ever went.

“I want you to keep away from that mesa,” Rufino’s father had once told him. He was a big man with large, rough hands and a stooped back. He hauled wood out of the mountains and kept a few head of cows. Although he loved his family, he believed that if he was hard on them, nothing would ever go wrong in their lives.

“There are snakes nesting in the rocks,” he went on to his son. “And the Indians buried their dead along the top of the ridge. The only one foolish enough to go there is Pablo Quintana, and I don’t have to tell you about him. It’s not a place for boys. It’s too far away and if something were to happen, no one would ever know.” He laid a heavy hand on his son’s shoulder and shook him.

“You listen to me, Rufino,” he said, “and we won’t have no trouble. When you hunt your rabbits, hunt them somewhere else.”

“I will, Papa,” Rufino said. “I won’t ever go to that mesa.”

“It was all Nemecio’s fault,” Rufino now said to his own son.

“Nemecio?” Cipriano said. He was sitting at the kitchen table, leaning forward, his forearms on his knees. “Qué Nemecio?”

“Nemecio,” Rufino said impatiently. “Nemecio Archuleta. You know him. He picks up the garbage on the road.”

“Oh, sí,” Cipriano said, leaning back. “Now I know who you mean.” Nemecio Archuleta was a drunk. When not at Tito’s bar, he could be seen walking the edge of the highway looking for beer cans and whatever else he could find. He lived alone in a trashed-out trailer not far from Rufino’s house. As far as Cipriano knew, the only harm Nemecio ever did was to himself.

“Well, maybe you know how he is now,” Rufino went on, “but back then he wasn’t like that. Back then he was always in a hurry and if he got something in his head, he wouldn’t let it go.” A sudden chill ran through the old man. He pulled the blanket from the bed and laid it over his legs. He folded his hands back in his lap. He could see how swollen his knuckles were and that his skin was dry and gray and old.

“After all this time,” he said, without looking up, “I can still remember.”

“Venga, Rufino,” Nemecio said, his voice pitched high and sharp. The two of them were standing beside the ditch in the shade of the cottonwoods. Rufino’s mother was in the house, cooking with his little sister, Lupita. Out in the field, his father was irrigating the alfalfa.

“Venga,” Nemecio said again, his hands and feet moving about. He was a small boy. The top of his head rose just above Rufino’s shoulder. “You know what I think?” he rushed on. “I think those Indians didn’t bury people in holes. I think they put them up in tree branches. And if they did that, then the trees will be full of bones and teeth. And there will be gold and silver on the ground. Eee, I would like to see that.” He reached out and pulled Rufino by the arm.

“Venga, Rufino,” he said. “Venga. No one will ever know.”

“I swear to you that’s how it began,” Rufino said to his son. “With Nemecio and his talk. And so we went, the two of us. We went to Perdido mesa. And we didn’t find what we thought, either. What we found was something else.”

By early evening, the wind that had blown all day had stilled. The air was hot and dry and tasted of dust. Dirt and sweat streaked the faces of the boys, and the backs of their necks were burnt raw from the sun. A burlap bag hung from Rufino’s waist. In it were the carcasses of five rabbits. As he threaded his way through the sage, the bag chafed against his thigh, leaving a damp stain of blood on his trousers. Every so often, he would glance up at the sun. And when he did, he’d think that they would never get home before dark, that if they didn’t, his father would beat him until he wept.

“Hurry, Nemecio,” Rufino called out, glancing back over his shoulder. Nemecio was lagging far behind, his feet kicking dirt and small stones. “Nemecio,” Rufino yelled again. “Hurry, jodido, or I’ll leave you.”

“Eee, I’m coming,” Nemecio mumbled. He took a few hurried steps and then, just as quickly, slowed again to a walk. All he had found on this day were a few chipped arrowheads and a pile of rusted cans. Nowhere had he found gold, and the only bones and teeth he’d come across were those of some small animal. He kicked at a rock and sent it flying.

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