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Avoyelles
A Novel

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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The name “Avoyelles” derives from the Avoyel tribe of Native Americans, a friendly people who met and traded with the French Canadians settling in central Louisiana early in the eighteenth century. When Louisiana became a state in 1812, the parish (county) that included the area was given the name.

One:
Planting

Jules Plauche counted the places he hurt. One through Five.

He closed the fingers of his right hand around the old Ford's armrest until the ache in his joints overwhelmed the others. *Six*. Let go, relief as the burn subsided. Then, again.

The Baton Rouge train station sat hard by the levee, a fine river mist swimming under its hooded lights. At four a.m. the single track was long empty, River Road deserted but for a few parked cars. Nothing to hear but the vast onrushing river. So much water. Coming from nowhere. Going nowhere. Far downstream, a tug sounded its solitary horn, magnifying the Mississippi's hissing rumble. Cool air ran across his face. How long since I've felt that?

Guidry's shoes crunched the gravel. The door opened and he threw the duffel onto the back seat. The Ford growled to life. One through Five. The armrest.

"Sorry we had to leave so early," Guidry said. "Long day for me. Simmesport, then Marksville."

"That USO lady was happy you showed up," Jules said. "She talked too much."

"Glad she called," Guidry said. "I was hoping I'd meet you."

The car was a creaky '36 or '37 coupe, its flathead six a monotonous cross between rattle and purr. Guidry pulled onto River Road and made his way north through downtown and the refineries. An hour ago One through Five were impossibly distant behind the soft swell of three codeines. Now they wanted attention, the armrest his only

defense.

Jules was fixed with a sudden blind anger. Stupid! Why didn't I think about the drive up? Two hours? Two and a half?

Guidry laughed.

"Must seem like we're strangers," he said. "Not to me. Feel like I know you already."

"I just met you."

"Know your family," he said with a sigh. "It was me came and told your mama and papa when it all happened. You and Etienne? I been coming see them ever since."

"What did they say?"

They were climbing onto the bridge, the enormous black ribbon of the river stretching below. The rank chemical aura of the Esso refinery filled the car.

"Well," Guidry said. "They was pretty broken up—'course they would be, something like that. I talked about Etienne winning that medal—"

"No, what did they say about me?"

Guidry took his time.

"Well, not much as I recall. Nobody knew nothing, other than the accident and Etienne—and you being in the hospital over there. This was just a day or two after. Your mama asked, I remember that. Your condition and such."

"My father?"

"Him? Let's see," he said, shifting in his seat. "Wanted to know about the accident, who was driving, especially. The Silver Star. Whole time I was there, we never

sat down. Nobody ever thought of it.”

The oily refinery stench made him breathe through his mouth. He could taste it on his tongue. Panic rose up and he gripped the armrest with one hand, his cane with the other. This is crazy. What am I doing? Of all the places I could go.

On the downramp, they hit a pothole and pain shot up his spine. One through Five reminded him why he was in this car and on this road.

“Why you keep coming back?” he asked.

“People get news like that, don’t know what to do,” Guidry said. “They was planning this funeral for Etienne, expecting his body to be sent home from Italy. I had to tell ’em. I called San Antonio long distance every week to find out how you were.”

“They never told me,” Jules said. “At the hospital.”

“We all thought, well, brain damage, you know? Your mama wrote you over and over, but never got an answer.”

In the ward at Brooke, the white porcelain nightstand. As he leaves, he opens the drawer and takes out the stack of unopened letters. He reads the return address on the envelopes, then dumps them in the wire wastebasket as he pushes through the swinging doors.

Brain damage.

West of the river the darkness was deep and perfect, highbeams tunneling a semicircle on the asphalt. The amber glow of the gauges threw Guidry into a ghostly relief. Thin face, deep-set eyes, droopy jowls. Weatherbeaten hands with uncut nails gripping the wheel. Weariness seeped through his threadbare suit. Even his hat seemed

exhausted.

Jules shook his head. Up early every morning. Doing his duty. He rapped his cane against the gearshift.

“Dead soldiers,” he said.

“What?”

“Simmesport and Marksville – you going to tell people their sons been killed?”

Jules said.

Guidry shrugged.

“No, not today,” he said. His voice stumbled, like no one had ever asked him before. “Today it’s just checking in, see how people doing. Like your folks.”

Something cloudy and hot gathered inside Jules.

“Thing about your job though,” he said, “is you always see people on the worst day of their lives.”

They both looked out the windshield. Jules reached for his cane again, rapping against the gearshift. He’s off-guard. He doesn’t like explaining. This should be interesting.

“Never thought about it quite like that,” Guidry said.

“Must wear on you, knocking on strangers’ doors with that kind of news. ‘Sorry, your boy’s not coming back.’”

“Well, I—”

Jules reveled in the awkwardness. For a full minute there was only the sound of the engine. Then Guidry inhaled sharply.

“Me, I got no kids,” he said, his voice iron-edged and low. “My wife’s passed, years back. Ain’t no burden on me, carrying this news. Burden’s on them I tell. Wouldn’t matter if there was, way I see it. Those people, they suffering. And they my responsibility, even if it’s just a little while. Your mama and papa—they good people.”

The thing inside dissolved into shame. What the fuck am I talking about? His face blazed and he turned to the window to cool off. Jules sat up straight, One through Five more insistent.

“I guess I was just, I was thinking of their faces, you know, when you tell them. Someone dies, there’s a look your face gets.” He flexed his fingers, feeling each joint contract and relax. “You see that, over and over.”

“You too,” Guidry said. “I know.”

The Ford rounded a gentle curve. Jules said nothing.

“Driving around, I got plenty of time to think. Too much, maybe. I pull up and I know what’s coming. Before-and-after from right here. I always want to look away. But that’s what I’m there for. A witness, you know? Be strong ’cos they so weak right then.”

“Weak,” Jules said.

“They cry, and I want to cry right with ’em. ‘Why was it my boy got killed? He din’t deserve it.’ And I say I don’t know but the country is grateful for their sacrifice. That’d make me feel worse, I heard it. Ain’t about the country right then. But Red Cross, Army, that’s what they tell me to say, so I say it.”

“They tell you to keep coming back?” Jules said.

“Needs doing,” Guidry said.

Jules stared at Guidry's profile in the half-light. The breeze pushed the starchy smell of his new fatigues into his nose.

"Been a long time since I've been in uniform," he said. "Six months in the hospital, seems I never got out of pajamas and a bathrobe."

"You look good," Guidry said.

"It's still dark."

Night air whistled through the window. Jules' hand began brushing the front of his shirt. With each stroke, he felt the outline of the bottle in his pocket, heard the tinkle of pills against the glass.

"This one time, at Anzio, I was dug deep a foxhole," he said. "Safe, I thought. Safe! Isn't that funny? I was off the boat, what, three days? An hour before dawn the Krauts start shelling us from the hills. My buddy Noodles and I stand up, but before we can get out a bullet gets him right under the chin – takes his head off so it's up against his back looking the other way. His neck pouring like a fountain. A foot away."

He held his hand out, but in the dash lights he couldn't see anything.

"What'd you do?" Guidry said.

"Got on my feet and started shooting," Jules said. "Stopped thinking about him after awhile."

"God damn," Guidry said softly.

The night before, some colonel talks about it. Tomorrow we attack, and some of you are going to get hurt. You will see things you don't want to see. You can't dwell on it. You have a job, and that job is more important than anything else. Move on, forget it. A

job to do, he thinks. That doesn't seem so bad.

One through Five exploded as the Ford went over a grade crossing. He shut his eyes and grunted, squeezing the armrest and pushing his breath out between gritted teeth.

“Whoa, sorry,” Guidry said. “That leg?”

Jules felt his pocket for the bottle.

“I need to take something for the pain,” he said. “Is there someplace we can stop for water?”

“Not this time of the morning. Krotz Springs is up ahead about ten minutes or so—there’s a Skelly station might be open early.”

“Shit,” Jules said. His mind raced. Ten minutes? What if the store wasn’t open? His mouth was dust-dry—no way to choke them down.

“Didn’t realize it was so bad,” Guidry said.

Jules shook his head and squeezed harder on the armrest.

“There was this doctor at Brooke we called Fisheye,” he said, “’cause he wore big thick glasses. Old guy, in a dirty white coat. Didn’t shave much. Said he didn’t believe in painkillers.”

“A doctor don’t believe that?” Guidry said.

“He told us, number your pain—name your pain. You don’t need codeine or morphine—you need a distraction. He made me say it out loud: Head, Left Shoulder, Right Shoulder, Back, Leg. One, Two, Three, Four, Five. Throb, Twinge, Twinge, Stab, Ache.”

“What was that supposed to do?”

“It didn’t help.”

Now it was everything. One through Five, all shouting. Crushing the armrest was useless. He reached for the bottle.

“Look, I need—”

“That’s what I’m talking about! They send you to the hospital and this happens? Sacrifice. God damn. You so young and all. What—twenty-one?”

“Just.”

“Alarm clock goes off some mornings and I curse this job. Look at you and feel bad for complainin’.”

“Oh, please,” Jules said. The Cs seemed to make one final stand, One through Five receded just enough to loosen his grip on the armrest. A matter of time. Where was Krotz Springs? “You live in Baton Rouge?”

“Almost thirty years,” Guidry said. “Grew up in Avoyelles—Cottonport. Came down to work at Esso before the first war.”

“Thinking about moving there too.”

“Really? What you gonna do?”

“I don’t know,” Jules said with a shrug. “Get a job at Esso, like you.”

Guidry turned his head.

“Five, you said five, right? Your head and your leg—”

“Compound fracture – this leg’s half an inch shorter. Both my shoulders, dislocated. Cracked vertebra in my back. They put a steel plate in my head.”

“Man, that must have been one hell of an accident.”

“It wasn’t an accident.”

“Really?”

“The Germans laid that mine on purpose. Put it right where Etienne would drive over it. Him? Me? That’s exactly what they wanted to happen.”

Krotz Springs appeared along the highway, low dark buildings and small houses. A roadside billboard advertising Bunny Bread was the brightest thing in town.

Panic rose. Tension clenched his gut as he searched for any sign of light. Guidry slowed at the Skelly station.

“Pull in,” Jules said.

“It’s dark,” Guidry said. “Nobody there.”

“Maybe there’s a spigot.”

“Ain’t no spigot.”

“Just drive around.”

Guidry circled to the back.

“Look there. You see?” The car stopped, illuminating a faucet on the wall outside the bathrooms.

Jules got out and limped over. The handle had been removed. He tried to reach in and turn the stub, tearing a fingernail in the process.

“Goddamnit!” He kicked the wall and tried the bathroom doors. Locked tight.

“No use,” Guidry said. “Get in—we’ll be there soon.”

Jules spun around and faced the car, the bright lights catching the muscles of his face as they twitched among anger, fear and frustration. He slouched back in.

In a few seconds the town was gone.

“Sorry,” Guidry said. “My fault dragging you out here so early. You gonna be all right?”

I’ll have to chew them. Get them down somehow. The bitter taste, lingering sharp and unforgiving in his mouth for an hour after. He measured One through Five carefully, weighed them against the taste. Soon.

The armrest again.

“Yeah,” Jules said. “Let’s just keep going.”

Guidry turned north and crossed over some railroad tracks.

“So you don’t like farm work, huh?”

“You didn’t either,” Jules said. He concentrated on the darkness outside, trying to find any detail. “What’s the date? Today’s date?”

Guidry thought a moment.

“April eighth, 1945. Saturday.”

“People in Bienville are waking up right now,” Jules said. “You know what they’re talking about?”

“What?”

“Planting cotton. Because on April eighth, that’s what you do. Every April eighth of my life that’s what I did. And the seventh. And the ninth.”

“Planting. Right.”

“I want to live in a place where you can wake up on April eighth and do something else. Choose.”

Guidry took off his hat and set it between them on the seat. He showed Jules his left hand.

“See this?” His middle finger was missing down to the second joint. “Lost it at Esso. Got caught in some machinery. Happens all the time down there.”

“So?” Jules said.

“What I’m sayin’ is Esso ain’t much different from the farm.” He nodded toward Jules. “Hard labor. Takes a strong back.”

“Maybe I’ll work in an office.”

“There is that.”

Christ, I should’ve stayed in Baton Rouge. Got a hotel or something. Looked for a job. The pain crept higher. He tried to relax.

“I joined up because I didn’t want to spend my life sweating in the fields,” Jules said. “Now look at me. That kind of worked out, don’t you think?”

Guidry was silent for a moment. Then he looked at Jules.

“Hey, you know what? I just thought of this. I bet it’s been fifty, sixty times I come up this road to bring bad news. Always bad news. But today, I’m bringing you—first soldier I’ve brought home alive. You realize that?”

“Uh-huh,” Jules said.

“Good news,” Guidry said. “Today I got good news.”

“Mind if we listen to the radio?”

Guidry turned the knob, and in a few seconds the scratchy voice of an announcer came on, reading the latest war news.

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The headlights raked across a sign:

Now Entering Avoyelles Parish

Jules sat up sharply, grunting with the angry response from One through Five. An iron band squeezed his chest, followed quickly by the sensation of choking. He gripped the armrest, hacking against the constriction. *Six. Seven.*

The sign receded. Avoyelles is out there. Right outside the window. God, this is really happening.

“Home,” he said, surprised at his own voice.

“Won’t be long now,” Guidry said. “You getting excited?”

“How long before the sun comes up?” Jules said.

Guidry looked at his wristwatch, shook his head and chuckled.

“Too dark to see my own watch. Idn’t that funny? What, fifteen-twenty minutes?”

Jules turned back to the window. Shapes in the roadside darkness, then for long stretches, nothing.

In Italy’s darkness, he measures the silence with ragged breaths until the first explosion shatters the day. Dank mud carries the creeping cold. The sudden faint taste of blood in his mouth.

Pain brought him back to the car. He shook his head and let go of the armrest. Over. Over now. Different battle. He rubbed his knuckles.

In the moonless void, tall oaks loomed mossy branches over Highway 107. Curtains of mist hung across the road—could they be nets? Maybe we'll get caught up. The car plowed through imperturbably. Damp air pushed peppery earthiness through the window into his head, where scenes long forgotten stirred and shook off their restraints.

They know I'm coming. They're waiting for me.

War was certainty. Kill or be killed. Your weapons against the enemy's. No weapons now. No defense against what they're thinking behind your back.

His mouth tasted like a desert trash dump. Again he weighed the pain against the acrid crunch of the pills. The taste wouldn't be so bad. The roadside ditch three feet away, full of water. I drank worse in Italy. He touched the bottle and exhaled.

The radio played some bright tune Jules didn't recognize. Guidry turned down the volume.

"Got a confession to make," he said.

"Forget it," Jules said. "Whatever it is." One through Five were separating, competing. He tilted his head side to side and pushed his shoulders back, seeking release in his spine.

"USO didn't call me. I knew you was coming. Talked to Brooke two days ago."

"So?"

"I called Mary Ann's store yesterday, told her to tell your mama and papa you'd be coming in to Baton Rouge and I'd bring you home this morning."

"I forgot," Jules said. "I'm your good news."

"I think they planning something special."

A sunny June day. Ten years old, and with chores finished he walks barefoot into the pasture and sits under a broad live oak. In the adjacent fields the foot-high cotton is a deep green carpet. He loves the rustle of the wind through their leaves. He leans back and closes his eyes and the day seems ready to whisper its secrets to him, when he hears the faint groan of an animal in distress.

He runs to the back corner of the pasture, where a newborn calf lays abandoned by its mother. He kneels over it, and the calf twists its head up and looks right at him. The eyes transfix him and he looks into them, unable to move. He watches until the calf's head drops and breaks the spell, then runs back to the house to get Papa.

By the time they get back the calf is dead. He and Papa and Etienne just stare at it, and he wonders what you do with a dead calf in a pasture. When he looks, Papa's face is dark with rage. Their eyes meet and Papa slaps his face.

Papa motions to Etienne and the two of them walk back to the barn to get the mule and wagon, leaving him and his bright red cheek alone in the susurrant afternoon.

“They got something planned, all right.” Papa’s scowl, Mama’s disappointment. Who came home and who didn’t.

“I never knew your brother,” Guidry said. “Must of been a great guy.”

“Old Man,” Jules said. “That’s what I called him. All he wanted was to be Papa.”

“So he liked the farm.”

“He was the farm,” Jules said.

“How about him blowing up all those Germans and winning that medal? Were you there too?”

“You think they put us together so we could look out for each other when the shooting started?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I blew up a lot of Germans too. I just didn’t get the medal.”

“Of course,” Guidry said. “Still, running right up into them guns and all—I mean, what a story!”

“Oh yeah, Etienne’s a hero. Everybody knows that.”

Guidry cleared his throat.

“You must have lots of stories of your own—like that thing at Anzio.”

The Ford passed a farmhouse with squares of warm yellow light behind curtains.

“None of them turned out that good.”

“Anyway,” Guidry said. “Gone before his time.”

“Gone,” Jules said. “That night in the bar? First time I’d ever seen him drink. He got shit-faced. We both did. Then we got in that jeep.”

More houses along the road showed their lights.

“Didn’t want to tell your mama and papa ’bout that Silver Star, you know?”

Guidry said. “Just seemed like too much, that one day.” He exhaled from deep inside.

“But I did. Had to.”

Jules snorted.

“It was too much for him too.”

“How so?”

“Too much. For one day. I don’t know.” He reached for the bottle.

A swamp rabbit darted across the road, almost under the wheels. Guidry hit the brakes hard and swerved right, the passenger-side tire plunging into the ditch.

Jules screamed and grabbed the wheel, twisting it back to the left as the tire popped out of the ditch and the car humped up to a stop.

“Fuck!”

He yanked again and again at the wheel as Guidry stared wide-eyed, his hands upraised. The Ford’s engine hissed and growled, a cloud of steam and dust rising in the headlights. Jules jumped out of the car and ran toward the front. Without his cane he fell into the roadside dust after only a few steps. Sobbing, he rolled over onto the dew-soaked grass, tried to get up, and fell back down. He began pulling himself forward on his belly, inching his way along as he wailed.

Across the road, a light came on inside.

“Jules! Jules!” Guidry bent over and walked alongside. “Just stop, old buddy. Just stop. You OK. Everything’s OK. Come on now.”

The porch light came on. The door opened and a man stepped out. His wife stood in the doorway, pulling her robe tight to her neck.

“Y’all had an accident?” the man said.

“No,” Guidry said. “We almost hit a rabbit. We all right.”

Jules dragged himself along the road.

“He don’t look right to me,” the man said.

Guidry put his arm firmly on Jules shoulder.

“Stop, now. Come on. It’s all over.” Jules put his head on his arms, and lay there

gasping.

The man stared at Jules. “He hurt?”

“No he’s just kinda, you know, jumpy. Soldier home from the war. See? He’s in his uniform.”

The woman brushed away a strand of graying hair.

“You want to bring him inside?” she said.

“Thank you ma’am, but we got to get him to Bienville. Home to his folks. Come on, son. Let’s get up.” Guidry put his hand under Jules’ arm and lifted. The man came over and took his other arm.

“Ow! Ow! The shoulders! Don’t pull.” He got to his feet.

“Christ A’mighty, Jules!”

He pushed their hands away and grunted.

“You fucking asshole! Are you fucking crazy driving like that?” Jules said.

“Watch your language,” the man said. “My wife.”

“You worried ’bout that little feller?” Guidry laughed. “We didn’t hit him. No harm done.”

Jules limped back toward the car and sat on the bumper. He sniffled, then blew snot from his nose. Guidry turned off the car and a riot of crickets rose up around them. The headlights pointed forward.

“I need some water,” Jules said, looking at the man. “Could I have some water?”

The man nodded, then looked back at his wife, still in the doorway. She disappeared into the house.

“Get me my cane,” he told Guidry. “I’ll walk from here.”

“C’mon now!” Guidry said. “It’s ten miles. You won’t make ten yards on that bad wheel.”

“The fuck I can’t.” Jules looked at the man. “Sorry.” He stood up, then sat back down again. The woman walked out to the road and handed the glass to her husband, who gave it to Jules. He reached into his pocket, popped two pills into his mouth and drained the glass.

Guidry retrieved the cane.

“We’ll get back on the road now,” he said. “Woo! So much excitement so early in the morning.”

Jules propped himself up. He stopped panting. The Cs were inside. Nothing else to do. He handed the glass back to the man.

“Thank you,” he said, and looked at the woman, who had returned to the porch. “Obliged, ma’am.” She nodded. Jules looked at the two of them. “I’m sorry, about, you know, all that.”

The man shook his hand.

“Welcome home.”

Guidry started up the car again as Jules situated himself.

“Here,” he said. “Wash them pills down with this.”

He produced a hip flask from his coat. Jules clapped him on the shoulder

“You son of a bitch! You had this the whole time?”

The whiskey burned agreeably. He swallowed and coughed.

“Thought it mighta been too early before,” Guidry said. “Now, well, shit.”

“Too early,” Jules said, handing the flask back. “It’s too damn late.”

The car started forward. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. The air through the open window was cooler on his arms and chest, and Jules realized his uniform was damp from the ground.

“Dirty,” he said.

“Man’s been away long as you have, don’t matter much what he looks like,” Guidry said. “Your folks be happy to see you just the same.”

His stomach warmed with the drink. The codeine clock ticked.

“God damn,” he said. “I’ve made such a mess.” He kept brushing off his shirt.

“Back there, you know, it was a reflex, me and that rabbit,” Guidry said.

Jules leaned against the window, drinking in the air. A grayness appeared on the horizon.

“Battle fatigue,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Battle fatigue. That’s what they call what I just did.”

“Fatigue?” Guidry said.

“Something happens I’m not expecting—and I think I’m back out there.” He shook his head. “Can you believe that name? Like you just got tired and need some rest.”

“Does it go away?”

“If you ask the Army, it’s nothing serious.”

“But,” Guidry said.

“It doesn’t matter.” Jules shuddered, searched for signs of the codeine.

“Bless your heart.”

Jules jostled the bottle to hear its clinking. Two more would be even better.

The gray took on color now. The stars flickered and receded, the morning abandoning its blackness to take on deep browns and greens and reds. Rusty lines of barbed wire appeared between fence posts, and tall windbreaks of oaks and cottonwood defined the edges of fresh-tilled fields that reached back into the ebbing night.

The dark shapes now were barns and sheds and houses rough-worn with the slow passage of time, backlit against the pinkish hues of dawn. Cows stood untroubled in roadside pastures, the gentle up-and-down of mouths their only movement.

A part of him seemed to move outside, to join the land and the wet spicy air. In the farmhouses, mothers and fathers and drowsy children smelled coffee and frying sausages. The aromas, the sounds carried on the sticky morning and embraced him with memory. One way or the other, he was home. Faintly, he felt the welcome tendrils of codeine seep into his neck and shoulders. He smiled. Like the night itself, One through Five were disappearing into a gathering dawn of numbness.

Jules giggled.

“What are they gonna do to me, huh?” he said.

“Who?” said Guidry.

“Papa and Mama, what can they do to me now, hasn’t already been done?” The giggling came stronger.

“What are you on about?”

“I’m a goddamn wreck,” Jules said, slapping his forehead. “Can’t get any worse than this, right?”

They came around a wide curve, and the town of Bienville was all around them. A row of weathered wooden buildings on the right that housed Bordelon’s market, the pharmacy, the feed store and the blacksmith. Even in the early morning light, there was the high water mark running straight across at four-and-a-half-feet, where the Mississippi’s flood waters had crested in 1927.

On the left was the block-long three-story cotton gin, easily the town’s largest structure. Just past the gin, The Ford shuddered to a stop where Highway 107 met Highway 1181—Bienville’s only intersection. On the four corners were Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Mary Ann’s Store, the post office and Nolan’s Bar.

Guidry eased the car forward, past Mary Ann’s on the right and toward the cemetery.

“Stop,” Jules said. “Stop here.”

Guidry pulled the car over.

“You want to get out here?” The house was fifty yards away across the cemetery’s expanse, its windows glinting gold and white in the rising sun. “I was thinking I could come in with you, just say hi to your folks.”

“What is it, seven?” Jules said. “Too early for a visit.”

Guidry smiled unconvincingly.

“Yeah, okay. Your day, right? Family, being together. Don’t need me to tell the good news, ’cos you it.”

“Stretch my legs a bit. Do me good, don’t you think?” Jules got out and reached behind the seat for the duffel. He put the bag down on the cemetery’s sidewalk. Reaching to his pocket, he got two more pills. He hobbled on his cane to Guidry’s window.

“You mind if I take another hit from your flask?” The pills cluttered his voice.

“You hurting that bad?”

Jules looked squarely at him.

“Would it matter if I wasn’t?”

Guidry looked at the road ahead, and held out the flask.

Jules drank again and reached for Guidry’s hand.

“Thanks for the lift.”

“Good luck,” Guidry said.

The Ford pulled away, past the cemetery and the house and around the curve toward Simmesport. The whiskey settled in, and One through Five were a memory. Two fresh Cs could only improve the morning.

He picked up the duffel and slung it over his right shoulder. Pain staggered him instantly, and he let go.

“Shit!”

He kicked the bag, glaring. A car passed, slowed down, and sped on. Jules didn’t look. He grabbed the handle and dragged it a few feet, grunting with a new pain in his neck.

What is that, fucking *Eight*?

He stepped forward with the cane, reached back and dragged again. It became a

dance. Step-pull-grunt. Step-pull-grunt.

The morning glistened with dew. The house inched closer, and everything was where he remembered. The barn, its red paint long overtaken by patches of bare gray wood. The low chicken house opening into the barnyard. The fields beyond, harrowed and rich with the season.

After almost ten minutes Jules stood at the gate, where a row of musky cedars separated the yard from the road. The house was battleship-gray with a rust-splotched corrugated tin roof, its clapboard siding bearing the flood's watermark. Up the five front steps and to the right was the porch, with dew-stained rockers apparently unmoved since he'd left. To the left of the door was the bay window of the bedroom he and Etienne had shared.

Step-pull-grunt.

He dropped the bag at the bottom of the steps. The new codeine and whiskey chose that moment to announce themselves. He staggered back a step.

The farm! Isn't this wonderful? Sleep. I need to sleep.

He was staring up at the house, at the front windows with their old chintz curtains pulled shut. There was no sound but the crickets, no smell but the fields.

This is war, soldier. You've got job to do. Move forward.

He grabbed the railing and wrenched himself up the steps to the porch. Panting, he stood by the front door with its oval glass. In the window hung the service flag his mother had made—a white rectangle rimmed with red. There were two stars, one blue and the other gold. The blue was him. The gold, Etienne.

A pang of something flashed and disappeared into the drug.

He swayed and watched the flag. The Cs were a quilt of numb. Nothing is the best feeling of all. I should remember that.

A voice came from inside, footsteps thumping.

Should I knock, or should I walk in?

He stood at attention. Reviewing the troops—and I'm the troops. Walk in and present arms. He reached, but the knob seemed to be moving away from him. He focused his eyes and reached again.

Footsteps were louder now and the shape came closer, silhouetted against the opposite window. It's Mama. Hey! A luxuriant undemanding emptiness sat where One through Five had been.

The knob, though. What the hell? He leaned forward but felt his weight going backward, his center of gravity drifting out into space. He made a last grab and tried to catch himself, but it was too late.

The chilly air rushed past. I wonder if this is going to hurt. Mama's face manifested in the glass, eyes urgent with joy.

"Hello." He picked up speed. The door flew open.

"Oh! *Ma chere!*"

"Shit!" No pain as the porch broke his fall. How about that? The wet cold seeped through the seat of his pants to his skin and he pushed at the boards, his palms slipping.

She knelt and her arms were around his neck.

"Jules! Oh, *mon fils!*" his nose tickled with her hair, the smells of cooking filling his head in. She kissed his face, her tears warm.

"Oh! Oh!" she said.

He hugged back. I've been looking forward to this. Haven't I? How could I not?

The porch is so wet.

Mama tried to help him up, but she slipped and fell. She cried and said his name again and again. The dew reached his back.

“I’m here, Mama” he said into her neck, shuddering at the sour whiskey he breathed back in.

“Over!” She clapped her hands and sat up. “The War is over!”

He broke the embrace and tried to unblur her image.

“Over? Hitler surrendered?” he said. God, why didn’t the radio say? Why didn’t Guidry?

Her face knitted with confusion.

“What? No. I mean, you’re home!”

He shook his head. What?

“Oh. Well, you know what we said in Italy, Mama? We said to hell with Hitler! Ha! That’s what we said.”

He rolled over and pushed himself erect. Everything moved in odd directions. Carefully, he leaned down and picked up his cane.

“Hey, that didn’t hurt a bit,” he said, patting his trousers. “Just a little cold on the rear end.”

She swiped at his clothes.

“Jules, are you all right?”

Wasn’t I supposed to be standing at attention? Jules sputtered with laughter and tapped his cane on the boards.

“Can’t you tell?”

He held her at arms-length. Slight but solid, wearing a flour-sack apron and a threadbare blue dress he remembered from before. Dark hair in a bun, eyes smiling in a face creased with weariness. Henriette.

“Your eyes,” she said. “You seem so unsteady.”

The updraft weakened and his insides cramped. She wiped her hands on her apron. Could she smell the booze?

“Still working on this cane,” he said. “And I’ve been up all night, so I’m kind of bleary.”

The sun broke through some clouds on the horizon and they were washed in light. Jules shivered as the air played on his damp uniform. Why is she looking at me like that?

Mama grabbed his arm.

“Of course. What are we standing out here for? You must be exhausted.” She kissed his cheek. “There’s hot coffee inside.” The screen door creaked. “Careful on the jamb,” she said.

She tugged him through the door and sat him on the couch. Her voice overflowed with words, and she worried at putting some stray hairs back into her the bun. The couch springs complained. Mama nestled herself under his arm like a schoolgirl.

That thing about Hitler was so stupid. In front of Mama? Don’t do that again!

“Such a long trip,” she said. “No wonder you’re exhausted.”

“Left San Antonio yesterday on the train. Guidry picked me up in Baton Rouge at four o’clock. Feels like forever.”

“I’ll get you some coffee,” she said.

Jules’ eyes wandered the room. Fireplace, couch and two chairs with faded Victorian upholstery. Linoleum worn down in paths. Next to Papa’s chair, the Crosley radio, wood gleaming with polish.

Before Italy, he watches him listening to the war news. Papa sits in the chair and leans forward, eyes fixed on the dial as if he can see the war through the numbers.

The hook rug held golden squares of sunlight. On the right, a pair of bookcases offered the family bible, yellow issues of *National Geographic* and red-leather editions of Kipling and Whitman and Mark Twain.

In the foxhole, he goes over every inch of the house. Smells and sounds and shapes. Counting the books, the boards in the wainscoting.

Organized. In place. But something nagged. Something was missing. Above the bookcases Papa had hung a big map of Europe. That’s not it. Why can’t I remember? Then he did remember. Not something missing. Something here. In the daydream the house was always empty.

Mama returned and handed him a cup.

“I dreamed about this day,” Jules said. “So many times.” As he raised the cup to his mouth, the aroma chased away the fatigue and filled his mind with memories. The smells. I never remembered the smells.

“Ah. That’s good, Mama.”

“I’m making *cochon*,” Mama said. “Uncle Fulgence is doing his dirty rice.”

“Really? Oh, I can’t wait.”

This is going great, isn't it? Much better than I expected.

Reunion, Mama was saying. Happy day. All together.

"All together!" Jules said, raising his cane and leaning from side to side. He leaned too far and fell over onto Mama's shoulder. She laughed nervously and pushed him upright.

No. Wrong. You're acting drunk. Calm down. The numbness lost its delight and became a fog obstructing his thoughts. Fight it. Pretend it's not there.

On the map, red and blue pins marked where he and Etienne had been. The star on the service flag. A man reduced to a color. Red and blue. Gold star. Silver Star.

Mama took his arm again like she was afraid he'd disappear. He twisted toward her and patted her hand, and felt a twinge deep inside his back. Grunting, he turned back.

"*Pauvre bete!*" Mama said. "Where does it hurt?"

"My big toe feels just fine. Everything else, hard to say."

"Why would they let you out before you were well?" Her face swirled with emotion. It was almost fun to watch.

"This *is* well. For now, anyway. Go home and heal up, they told me."

Her hand was on his head, softly stroking.

"Is it bad? The pain?"

Jules reached into his pocket and rattled the pills against the glass.

"Codeine. The only thing that works. For awhile, anyway."

"You have to take pills every day?"

"Sometimes more than once."

“They make you fall down like that?” she said, pulling her hand away. “How does that help?”

Jules battled the fog.

“You don’t understand, Mama. I’m in pain all the time. A lot of pain.”

“The doctors couldn’t help?”

Fisheye.

“Yeah, they gave me a big bottle of codeine.”

Mama stared out the window, into the morning sun. Her chin quivered.

“No, no, Mama, I’m sorry,” he said. “Don’t cry. Please.” He took her hand.

“Look, I’m OK. Most days I’m fine. But the trip, sitting so long. That bumpy car of Guidry’s. I think I took more than I should. That’s why I fell.”

Her eyes were wet, unsure.

“But you’re in pain.”

“I’m gonna get better—that’s why I’m here, right?” He fixed the brightest smile he could manage. “I’m really sorry. No more falling, I promise.”

She returned the smile and he relaxed.

“Let’s make a new rule,” she said. “Today, nobody has to they they’re sorry.”

“Done,” he said.

She sighed.

“We didn’t know what to expect,” she said.

“I didn’t either,” Jules said. “No, that’s not true. I knew *exactly* what to expect—but now I’m not so sure.” He touched her face—something he’d never done before. “Isn’t

that funny, Mama? Everything's the same but everything's different."

"A lot has happened," she said.

So many things. A thousand B-29s racing toward the sunrise. The wet chill of Italy. The whistle and thump of bullets. The awful beauty of shells exploding at night. The smoking ruin of men's bodies. The look on Etienne's face as he got drunk. The drone of a priest's faraway voice giving him Last Rites. The sparkle of the metal plunger as a nurse dosed him with morphine.

She was waiting. She wanted an explanation. A roadmap. A package he could give her like Christmas, filled with answers he didn't have words for to questions she was afraid to ask. The pills—what did they explain? Tell her something!

A truck passed the house, the singing tires and clattering engine rising, holding and fading until nothing remained. Birds chirped in the cedars.

"Mr. Guidry," she said. "Was he in a hurry?"

"Simmesport and Marksville," Jules said. "Long day for him."

She leaned forward and straightened the books on the coffee table.

"He's been so helpful, all this time. Calling the hospital. Telling us how you were doing."

"He told me."

"I guess you never got any of our letters," she said. Her voice wavered with reproach. "It must have been hard for you to write."

"I thought I wasn't supposed to say I'm sorry today."

She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her dress and smiled.

“Right,” she said. “Two years I’ve been thinking what I’d say. Now I can’t remember.”

He rubbed his face with the heels of his palms.

“Me either. Just tired.”

The foxhole fantasy always ended in his quiet room, a soft bed, a warm blanket, a door that shut, an endless blank expanse of time ahead. He looked to his left. Right there, that door, that room was waiting.

“I think I’ll—”

She picked up the coffee cup.

“Wait. I’ve got more coffee, eggs and *coush-coush* in the kitchen,” she said.

“Come help me with the *cochon* and tell me about your trip. Then you can go see your Papa out in the fields.”

April eighth. Planting.

“Sure, Mama.” Jules reached for his cane and followed her.

The kitchen smells made him think of when he’d last eaten. A USO ham sandwich. He passed through the door into the dining room and the fog seemed to lift, just enough. Nothing wrong or out of place. One through Five under control. Even his walk, punctuated by the cane’s dry knock, was graceful and effortless.

Christ, they bottled this place up the day I left and uncorked it this morning.

The tall cupboard held its menagerie of plates, cups and saucers. The old photograph of his grandfather hung next to it. A single bare light bulb suspended on a thin wire lit the time-glossed tabletop with its stains, pockmarks and dents. Papa’s coffee

cup and plate were still at the head of the table. Mama picked them up.

His left foot and cane miscalculated and banged into a chair, pushing it into the table and rattling the sugar bowl and salt shaker.

“Damn it!”

Jules bent over to rub his shin but stumbled when his back failed to cooperate. He grabbed on to a chair back and held himself there, half-stooped. Mama set the dishes down and caught his arm.

“Be careful,” she said. “Lots of places you can stumble. Don’t get hurt.”

“Too late for that,” Jules said to the linoleum. He pushed himself upright. “Used to be I got in trouble for running through here. Now I hurt myself walking.”

She picked the dishes up again.

“Let’s get something straight,” she said. “That language might be all right in the Army but it is not in this house. I don’t want to hear it, all right?”

“That’s going to take some getting used to—darn it.”

“Why don’t you just sit down here?”

Jules limped forward.

“Haven’t seen the kitchen yet. And the yard and the barn. And the fields. The Army teaches you to keep moving forward, no matter what. That, and how to curse.”

“That chair sure stopped you in your tracks.”

The tiny kitchen was hot and dominated by a big wood-burning stove on the left and an old top-motor refrigerator on the right. In the center of the room was a small work table white-dusted with flour from the morning’s baking.

“You want eggs?” Mama said.

Jules eyed three sausage links in the cast iron skillet.

“Sausage,” he said. “*Coush-coush* and some coffee.”

“Go sit at the table and I’ll make it for you,” Mama said.

“I’ll just stand here.”

A pan of corn bread was on the counter. He pulled off a big chunk with his fingers and dropped it into a bowl. Mama handed him the pitcher of milk from the refrigerator, and he put some in a pan on the stove. While the milk warmed up, he poured a cup of coffee.

“No sugar,” Mama said.

“Rationed?”

“Well, if ‘rationed’ means we haven’t seen any in a year, then yes. There’s some syrup on the dining room table if you want to use that.”

“In boot camp they told us to drink black coffee because where we were going you wouldn’t see cream and sugar. They were right.”

He poured the hot milk onto the corn bread and put a few drops of syrup on top. He speared a sausage from the skillet and followed it with a spoonful of *coush-coush*.

“Mmm, no *coush-coush* either. And don’t even ask about hospital food.” He ate quickly as Mama watched.

“Slow down, you’ll make yourself sick.”

Jules laughed.

“How many times you tell me that, Mama, eh? A thousand? This is so good.”

“I’ll be right back,” she said, and went out the screen door to the porch. He listened as she rooted around for a moment, then:

“Jules! The screen door.”

He stepped over and pushed it open. She squeezed past him holding a suckling pig on a tray. Jules swallowed the last of the sausage as the pig’s back brushed against his uniform. It was the size of a small child, fifteen or twenty pounds, pinkish flesh smooth and supple and marred only by smeared blood from the slit in its throat. Its eyes were closed and its face held an almost peaceful expression. Had all the other *cochons* looked like that? Mama put it in the sink. The heat from the oven was stronger, more oppressive.

“Beautiful, huh?” Mama said.

Something ugly shifted inside. He stared at the carcass, the previous moment’s ease overwhelmed by a rising horror. From its open mouth he could almost hear its panicked squeals at being snatched away from the others, feel the sudden naked certainty that whatever was holding it suspended was intent on its death.

Water gushed from the spout and rinsed the blood from the carcass. She took the sponge and began scrubbing the skin

“Your uncle dropped it off just before you got here. He didn’t have time to dress it.”

I’m still numb. Still numb. Feel nothing. Nothing. The cells in his body agitated, rebelled at the thing Mama was about to do.

“I think I’ll go—”

“Jules, can you hand me the big bowl over there? For the gizzards.”

He gave her the bowl and slurped his coffee. Sweat dampened his forehead. The sausage and the *coush-coush* churned in his belly.

“Mama—”

“You want some more coffee, *chere*?”

She took the pig, dripping from the sink, onto the work table and patted it dry. She got the meat cleaver from the drawer, its massive gray blade glinting dully in the light.

“Nice big *cochon*.” She smiled. “You think about this in Italy? The *cochon-de-lait* from back home? I remember you would eat so much that you got pig grease on the back of your head. You remember that?”

He wheezed out a breath and leaned backward against the counter.

Thunk.

She slammed the cleaver into the pig’s chest, breaking through the ribcage. Tiny rivulets of blood leaked onto the table. Picking up a butcher knife she sliced the belly from the neck to between its hind legs. She reached in with both hands and began breaking the rib bones to open up the chest cavity. Lungs, heart, kidneys, intestines slid onto the table.

“Hand me that bowl, sweetheart,” she said, pointing to a large piece of crockery on the counter. “For the gizzards.”

He saw a dull intensity in her eyes, as if this animal had been no more alive than an ear of corn needing to be shucked. No meaning, no consequence. He tried to look away, and failed.

She was bloody to her forearms. With the gizzards in the bowl, she rolled the pig over onto its belly and picked up the cleaver again.

Thunk.

The severed head rolled to one side, and when it stopped the shut eyes pointed directly at Jules.

“Your Uncle Fulgence promised to make some head cheese with this,” she said. Her voice was light, lilting. “Been a long time for that too, huh?”

Jules vomited without thinking. His eyes tight, he leaned over the sink tasting a hard acid pungence laced with sausage and coffee. Not the Cs, right? They would be gone by now, wouldn’t they? The smell kept his eyes shut and he worked the pump handle until it was gone. He gripped the counter, willing the kinks in his stomach to release.

“Oh no. What did I tell you?” Mama said, still at work. “You see what happens when you eat too fast?” She opened a drawer and handed him a towel. He put his head under the pump and felt the rushing water cool his face. Drying off, he opened his eyes and saw Mama’s bloody handprint on the towel—and nearly retched again.

“Are you all right?” she said.

“That’s the second time you asked me that since I got here,” Jules said. The ceiling was the only place he could look. “I need to sit down—my back is getting stiff.”

“Go in the dining room while I get this thing in the oven,” Mama said. “Tell me what you and Mr. Guidry talked about.”

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“Feeling better?” Mama called from the kitchen. Waves from the hot oven wafted through the door, carrying the first hints of the *cochon*’s aroma.

Jules sipped on a glass of water and leaned his face into his hands.

“Fine. You were right. Ate too fast.”

Water gurgled in the sink.

Is my puke still in there? Can she smell it?

His stomach rumbled, but the idea of food was still queasy.

What do I do now? I am such a fuck-up. She thinks I’m crazy now—I can’t stand the sight of blood? The taste of bile lingered, and a headache was building a wall to keep out the codeine. One through Five, at least, were still quiet.

“Almost done,” Mama said. “Just need to put these gizzards in the icebox.”

Gizzards. A nice word for guts. Casualties. Injuries. So much hiding inside words.

She came in and put her arm on his shoulder. He studied the floorboards and her brown shoes, scuffed and creased with age. Her left lace was untied, the two ends hanging loose.

“Your stomach still upset?” she said.

Shake it off. Right now. Start over. He took a deep breath and smiled.

“A little bit,” he said. “Not much.” He took her hand, now clean and smelling of borax soap. “Your *cough-cough* is so good I just couldn’t stop.”

She sat down next to him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t realize what was happening to you.”

“The good news,” Jules said, “is I’ve got plenty of room for *cochon* later.”

Drops from the pump spigot in the kitchen intensified the quiet. Jules watched the untied shoe, saw one of the laces was trapped underneath. She might trip.

“Must be a shock after so long,” Mama said. “I mean, being here again.”

“Being anywhere,” Jules said. “You spend so much time on battlefields, you start thinking the whole world is one.”

“I tried to imagine it, all the time,” she said. “I would lay awake and think about what the two of you were going through. All those horrible things. How afraid you must have been. I kept pushing myself—make it worse, I thought. Make it much worse.”

Out in the pasture, a cow moored. Was it upset or happy?

“Why would you do that, Mama?”

“Because when you and Etienne came home, I wanted to be able to talk to you. I wanted you to know that I understood. So you wouldn’t have to tell stories, to explain. But I never got close.”

The emptiness in his belly and the headache now seemed to connect and subdue the queasiness. Maybe I could eat something.

“How do you know? Did you talk to someone else who came back?”

She looked past him at the cupboard, her eyes wandering among the plates and cups.

“Every night, I kept going deeper and deeper,” she said. “We saw the newsreels, listened to the radio. But I knew it wasn’t enough. The pictures were black and white. For

you it was all the colors. I wanted to see that too. I would think, Jules and Etienne are running and bombs are exploding and guns are shooting at them. Men are falling and bleeding and crying out in the smoke and fire. I would make myself imagine their faces, all sooty and bloody and twisted up with pain, and I would think, why can't I just let them die? Why do I make them suffer?"

Jules' throat tightened and his face blossomed with heat. He spoke in a near-whisper.

"Sounds pretty close to me."

"But never the two of you. I made up all those people getting killed, but I always saw you and Etienne getting through. Running and running until you got to the other side. Surviving and fighting another day. It went on like this for months. Then Mr. Guidry came over that day and told us. A car accident! You weren't even fighting. You were in a car!" She pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed her eyes.

"Jeep," Jules said. "We were in a jeep."

Her eyes met his.

"All those nights I couldn't sleep. It was for nothing. I didn't understand at all. Etienne was dead and you—we didn't know what was happening with you."

"No, Mama, you did understand," he said. "Except for one thing. We were running, all right. Not toward something. Away. Because all that death is chasing you. Never stops. It found us in that jeep."

"Jules, I'm so ashamed," she said suddenly. She knelt and rested her head on his knee. He stiffened and crossed his arms.

“What?”

“We never went to the hospital to see you. It was all my fault.”

She sobbed, and he reached for her shoulders.

“Mama, look at me. What are you talking about? There was nothing you could have done there.”

She stared at the floor.

“I didn’t want to face you,” she said. “There were so many questions—what happened, why did it happen, what did you say, what did Etienne say. You were the only one who could answer—your Papa was determined to find out. I imagined you so broken in that hospital with your Papa standing over you asking. The look on your face. I couldn’t do it.”

Jules got to his feet and held her as she cried. The hunger was jagged now, yanking at the headache. Shouldn’t I be angry?

“Hey. Didn’t we agree nobody has to say they’re sorry?”

She sat back down in her chair.

“This is different.”

“You know what I spent *my* time thinking about?” he said. “This house. You imagined the war—I tried to build this house in my mind. Every chair and table and book and board. I think maybe we wanted the same thing for this day.”

They hugged, but there was something she hadn’t yet said.

“Jules, I told Papa I wanted a headstone for Etienne—talked him into it. In those first weeks, he was so angry and upset—neither one of us knew what to do. I thought if

he concentrated on the headstone it would distract him.”

“Mama, let’s not talk about it anymore, okay?”

“No, it’s just, I knew if we spent the money then there wouldn’t be anything left to—but after we did I couldn’t stop thinking about you all the way in San Antonio, with no family around—and I thought, what have I done?”

The *cochon* crackled in the oven and the smell swirled around them.

Maybe I haven’t fucked up so bad.

“I’m hungry all over again,” he said. “Would you make me another bowl of *coush-coush*.”

“Of course. Can you smell the *cochon*?”

“Sure can.”

She was back in the kitchen and he heard the clinking of a spoon in the bowl.

“When you’re done,” she said, “you should go out and see your Papa.”

There was the slight sizzle of the milk in the pan. Then she was back.

“I didn’t know how much syrup you wanted on it.” She put the jar in front of him.

“The Moellers still getting all the sugar?” he said, stirring the bowl until the cornbread had soaked up the milk.

“Every month the truck comes by,” she said. “The war seems to run on honey—the government can’t get enough.”

“Bees eating better than we do,” Jules said “How’s Adele?”

“Didn’t she send you any letters?”

Jules tried to hide his embarrassment.

“I guess I just wasn’t very good with the letters.”

He took a big spoonful of *coush-coush*.

“Adele is fine, I guess,” Mama said. What was that tone in her voice, he wondered.

“Is she coming this afternoon?”

“I don’t know,” Mama said. “I don’t think so.”

Jules finished the *coush-coush* and drained the bowl.

“That’s better,” he said, winking at her. “I didn’t eat too fast this time.” The taste, sweet and warm, felt better than the whiskey ever did. “I guess I’ll see her at some point.”

“I’m sure she’ll be around,” Mama said. “She always is.”

He glanced down at her shoes again.

“Time for me to get out to the fields,” he said. “Hey, wish I had a nickel for every time I said that.”

He got up, balanced on his cane, then went down on one knee. As she watched, he took her shoelace, pulled it tight, and tied a neat bow.

“That’s better.”

From the back porch there was the heart of the farm—barnyard and chicken coop in the foreground, the flat expanse of the barn holding the sunrise like flypaper. Long shadows pointed the way to the fields. Jules set his cane gingerly on the rough wooden step and eased himself onto the grass. Dewdrops climbed his boots and fatigues as he stepped into the grass. The tip of the cane sunk into the wet ground and came up dotted with mud.

A mountain meadow, lush with flowers. The company moves through, and with each rustling step he watches the colors trample underfoot. The dew fastens a perfect yellow blossom to the toe of his boot. As they march it catches the morning sun, glimmering, disappearing and reappearing in perfect rhythm.

A hundred yards away, Papa moved steadily toward the back fence, the seed sack slung high on his shoulder. His white shirt and straw hat were beacons against the red-brown soil. Jules always hated planting worse than picking. Planting was stooping. Picking you could at least stand up. He tried not leaning on the cane so much, keeping it from burying itself. But he was unsteady, clumsy without it. The Cs and *coush-coush* were a fine warmth now, coursing lazily through body. Just right. He doesn't see me. I should sneak up on him.

The rooster crowed as Jules passed through the gate. Warning me, or telling me to hurry? The bare earth here was lumpy and sticky, grabbing at the cane and making a

muddy mess on his boots. The first few steps ignited his frustration, then the smell of the soil connected with something deep inside.

At the opposite end of the barnyard the gate was next to the pump and the cattle trough at the corner of the barn. Jules kept his eye on Papa, still with his back turned as he bent toward the ground. The field was harrowed and plowed in meticulous rows, and his eyes followed them back and forth, back and forth. Straight and regular, were they always like that? He heard a rustle in the windbreak and a moment later a chilly breeze passed over, raising goosebumps on his neck and arms. The gust carried the sound of his father's whistling back to him. What was the song? He tried to pick it out, but there was only a tuneless wandering string of discordant sharps and flats. Of course! Always nonsense. Every Sunday he stands up in church and sings like it's Judgment Day. But out here it's nothing.

He was close now, twenty feet or so. He placed the cane carefully between the rows to keep from disturbing the soil. The moment enfolded him, awash with emotion. He hobbled forward, whistling his own inharmonious melody as loud as he could.

The straw hat turned to reveal a round weathered face darkened by the sun. Tufts of graying red hair stuck out, and the hat was perched on two oversized ears. For a moment the face looked puzzled, then the eyes got wide and the face softened into recognition.

"Jules! Hey!" Papa dropped the seed sack and hurried, his hat flying off. Jules couldn't take his eyes off the face. What's this? He felt his father's embrace, tight and strange. Has this ever happened before? *At the station in Alexandria, catching the train to*

boot camp, he says goodbye and shakes Papa's hand. He feels the hand pushing him toward the steps of the car.

“Ah. *Mon fils. Mon fils.* Sorry I wasn't there at the door!” He gestured at the rows. “Trying to get a little work done before this afternoon.”

Dampness from the porch lingered on the back of his uniform. At least I'm fully upright. Papa smelled of sweat and dirt with just a hint of after-shave. Jules leaned in. One through Five, the bloody *cochon*, Guidry and his questions, everything retreated.

“Papa,” Jules said. “I made it back.”

The nodding pushed Papa's chin into Jules shoulder. Papa heaved out a great breath and pulled a red bandana from his pocket.

“You made it,” Papa said, wiping his eyes. “You did.” The low sun struck his face, light making tiny shadows of his wrinkles. The rows seemed to converge in the distance. “How are you? Are you all right?”

Again with the question.

“Papa, you haven't changed a bit. I'm so glad.” He tapped the cane on the ground like a vaudeville dancer. “I think I left ‘all right’ back there somewhere. But I'm here, Papa.” His voice trembled. “Really here.”

“Look at you,” Papa said, sniffing. “So tall.”

“I was flat on my back for three months.”

Papa patted the back of his neck with the bandana.

“Were you?”

“Traction for awhile, then the thing with my head and trying to fix this leg,” Jules said. “But we don’t have to—”

“When we didn’t hear from you we thought—something terrible.”

Jules shifted his weight. Another gust swept around them and he watched the oak branches sway.

“Your letters, they really helped.” Jules said. “I guess I didn’t feel much like writing.”

Something strange passed over Papa’s face.

“I wanted to come and visit,” Papa said. “I really did. Mama and I, we talked about it.”

“No, that wouldn’t have worked. I was in a big ward, sixteen guys. No place to visit.” Green walls and the smell of antiseptic. “I wouldn’t have been very good company anyway.”

“We prayed for you. The whole town did. We made a novena every month. Said the rosary.”

“That must have done the trick,” Jules said, patting him on the back. “’Cause look, they sent me home.”

“I guess what I mean is there wasn’t money. For me to go.”

“It doesn’t matter, Papa. It’s all right.”

“Mama—we both—we wanted a headstone. For Etienne. It cost almost two hundred dollars. We didn’t realize—”

“How did it turn out?” Jules said. Papa stared at him, blinking. “The headstone, I mean. Is it nice?”

“I think so,” Papa said. “It’s next to Grandpa A.C. I’m sorry. I really am.”

Jules put his arm on Papa’s shoulder.

“You know what Mama told me inside? Today nobody has to say they’re sorry about anything. Will you take me to see it later?”

“We can all go.”

Jules brushed at his cheek with a sleeve.

“I’d like that,” he said. “You would have hated the food at Brooke anyway. Mystery meat and green beans out of a big tin can.” He looked at the gray seed sack.

“How’s the planting going?”

Papa smiled.

“Slow, you know? Three weeks in. Don’t know, I feel like I’m not getting anywhere. Thought I could catch up before everything started up.”

“Raymond and Uncle Teeny?”

“They do what they can. I couldn’t have got last year’s crop in without them. But they got their own hands full.” The bandana came out again. “Empty. The town, I mean.”

Jules stepped into the next row and limped toward the seed sack.

“Come on, then. What was it you used to tell me? ‘Time’s a-wasting.’”

He bent down and picked up the sack, grunting as he slung it over his shoulder.

The bottle made a friendly clink. The sun was higher now, the air balmy and sweet.

“No. Jules.” Papa said, reaching for the sack.

Jules pulled it away mischievously.

“Ha! You think I don’t remember how? Two seeds every six inches.”

“You complained all day long. Etienne and I could hear you all the way to the back fence.”

Jules laughed again, louder this time.

“I used to think planting cotton was the worst job in the world—and picking cotton was the second-worst. Then I joined the Army.”

He reached into the sack, pulled out a handful of seed and began dropping them, two by two.

“Wait,” Papa said.

When they were facing each other, Papa embraced him again and it seemed like he was melting into his father’s arms.

“You should go back in the house,” Papa said. “Rest up for this afternoon.” He eased the sack from Jules’ shoulder and put it on his own.

Jules took off his uniform cap, turned it upside down and reached into the sack.

“You’re right, Papa. I’m tired. Had a long trip. But you know what? It’s April eighth. And on April eighth we plant.” He filled the cap with seed. “So how about let’s see if you can plant faster than a man with a cane?”

The wind, warmer now, ruffled their clothes as it blew toward the back fence. Papa reached up to hold the straw hat to his head.

“Oh yeah?” Papa said. “You’re on.”

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No more. Please God, no more. One through Five were angry, ferocious. Pain cascaded between his shoulders and toes. His teeth clenched to stop the groan when he straightened up.

Papa was in the next row, facing Jules but just slightly ahead. Perspiration stung his eyes.

He's watching. What's it been, fifteen minutes? Twenty? You used to do this all day. But I can't stop until he stops. That's the bargain.

He dropped two more seeds, and couldn't stop the escaping groan. He leaned backward to unkink his muscles.

"Come on, that's enough for now," Papa said gently. "You're hurting."

"You're slowing down to stay even with me," Jules said. "I thought we were having a race. Let's keep going."

"Well then, *I'm* hurting. How about that?" Papa put his hands on the small of his back and stretched. "Enough for today. Let's go get cleaned up."

The wind cooled his face but did nothing to ease the ache.

"I think I lost," Jules said.

"Come on."

As they walked toward the barn, Papa put his hand under Jules' arm. One through Five saw their chance and doubled down. Even the *coush-coush* had disappeared. His

stomach was sick and empty, a trace of bile at the back of his throat. The bottle sang in his pocket with each step. Relief. They would walk right by the pump. Go ahead, he would tell Papa. I need to take something for the pain.

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“What?” Papa said.

“Your hand. It kind of throws me off balance. It’s easier if I just lean on the cane.”

“Oh,” Papa said. “I’m—”

“Don’t say it.” Jules gave a weak grin. He touched the bottle. When I’m alone. “Not today.”

“Meet you inside.”

“What are you going to do?” Jules said.

Papa held up the sack.

“Put up the seed in the barn and start getting things set up for later.”

“I can help.”

They were in the barnyard now, the hens clucking around them. The cane sunk deeper into the ground, slowing their pace. Papa kept a half-step behind, his hand close to Jules’ arm.

“I’m holding you back again,” Jules said.

“You’ve been home two hours,” Papa said. “Day before yesterday you were in the hospital.”

“Tomorrow I’ll be better. I can do more.” He winced, tried to cover it with a chuckle. “But Papa, you gotta let me have my own sack.”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday. Church.”

“Right,” Jules said. What am I going to do about *that*? “Monday then.”

Papa sighed.

“*Mon fils*, you need to take care of yourself now you’re home. Let me worry about planting and the chores. You don’t want to hurt yourself worse.”

Jules stopped, and Papa continued through the double doors into the darkness of the barn. He yanked his cane out of the muck and turned toward the back door.

“About time,” Mama said. “Leave those dirty boots outside.”

The kitchen was filled with the spicy scent of roasting pork. He brought his cane to the sink and ran water over the ferrule, wiping it clean with a flour-sack towel.

“How was your Papa?”

“Fine. I tried my hand at planting—Papa thought I’d forgot.”

Mama slapped his arm lightly.

“I’ll bet. You want some more coffee?”

“Just need to lay down, I think. My back didn’t like it in the field as much as I did.”

She took his face in her hands.

“You don’t belong in the field. Not now. You’re back. That’s the only thing that matters.”

“Papa said we could all go see the headstone later.”

She went out to the larder and came back with four mason jars of green beans. One wouldn't open, and she handed it to Jules, who twisted with all his strength until the lid gave a *pop*.

"They buried him in Italy. Did you know?" she said.

"I did. I mean, they bury everybody there. Too many to bring back. *In country*, that's what they call it."

She drained the beans in a colander and put them in a big cast-iron pot.

"I got so angry. Yelled at Mr. Guidry when he told us."

"Not much anybody can do, once the Army makes up its mind. I learned that much."

"We had a nice service. Father Gautreau gave the eulogy. Papa made a cross out of wood. We put it there, but it just wasn't right. Not enough."

"I know," Jules said.

"After the service, everyone came back to the house. Oh, it was so cold that day! The wind blowing and a front coming through. We were all bunched up around the fire, and I kept the stove going all day. There was so much food, people brought. Gumbo, fried chicken, pies—all his favorites.

"A feast," Jules said. "Etienne would have liked that."

"Just like today," Mama said. "But now a celebration."

"I'll be up in plenty of time."

She kissed his cheek.

He closed the bedroom door. A glass of water sat on the bedside table.

A south Louisiana spring fades like a beautiful sunset and is gone. From the moment winter gives way it runs, taunting you with soft temperate days where sprouting earth and dappled sunlight harmonize in the weightless midday air. Very soon these days will evaporate into monotonous swelter and lightning-spiked storms. Knowing makes you desperate to savor each detail, and the ache over each day's passing comes long before nightfall. In the tropic depths of August, your clothes cling with sweat and you wonder if a season so delightful and full of promise could ever have happened at all.

A canopy of deep saturated blue hung like a parasol over this day, with herds of cotton-boll clouds drifting toward the southeast. In the back yard, the under the shade of two massive live oaks, Papa, Uncle Fulgence and cousin Raymond were laughing and setting up a long table made from planks and sawhorses. At the far corner by the barnyard, a large black pot sat on an iron ring above a fire. Next to it, wood-chunk embers glowed red in the bottom of a barbecue pit made from a split oil drum. The scent of turned earth and the lazy buzz of locusts beneath the sound of children at play made the Saturday seem like a Sunday. The long afternoon and next day stretched out before them.

"I can smell that *cochon* all the way out here," Fulgence said, wiping his hands on his overalls. His ruddy face was sun-cracked and lined, bright blue eyes accustomed to smiling. Like his brother, he was thin and wiry and walked with the slight stoop formed by years of picking cotton by hand. "'Fonse, get me another beer."

Alphonse reached into the rust-spotted galvanized washtub next to the tree. It was covered with burlap sacks and filled with ice and beer—whose rarity indicated the day’s importance.

“Teeny, you got to work for this one,” Alphonse said, holding the dripping beer can. “Time to start cooking.” Fulgence was known for making the best dirty rice in town.

“Raymond,” Fulgence said, sitting down in a rocker pulled off the porch. “Go inside and get the stuff.”

Alphonse handed Raymond the beer.

“Hey!” Fulgence said. “Mine!”

“He’s earning his—you want one? They right over there.”

Fulgence got up with an exaggerated grunt.

“You tough, ’Fonse. Everybody says. See what happens next time you at my house.” He reached into the washtub. “Is the guest of honor still in bed?”

“Sound asleep,” Alphonse said. “He was pretty wore out.”

“He got a cane now? That’s what Lena told me.”

“Teeny, he’s hurt bad. All over, he’s hurt.”

“What do you think?”

“We didn’t talk to the doctors much,” Alphonse said. “See how much better he gonna get, you know? I guess they did all they could do.”

Raymond came out of the house carrying a platter of chicken parts and a tray with ground beef, celery, onions, green bellpeppers, chicken livers and rice. Fulgence put the vegetables in with a little lard to brown. He stirred the pot.

“They all coming back like that, you think?”

“The ones that come back,” Alphonse said, putting the chicken on the grate. The air sizzled with hearty smells.

“’Fonse, you know I didn’t—”

“I was out there planting,” Alphonse said. “Trying to get a couple hours in. Seeing him out there, still in his uniform. Walking on that cane. I don’t know.”

“Must have been nice, right?”

“We talked about planting. And right there, right then, he wanted to help. Grabbed some seeds and put them in his cap and wanted to race me up the row. Used to play that with him and Etienne when they were boys.”

Steam coming out of the pot carried the sharp smell of the bellpeppers. Fulgence dropped in the beef and the livers.

“Get the stock pot,” Fulgence said to Raymond, who went back inside. They stood there, concentrating on the food.

“I’d call that pretty amazing, his condition,” Fulgence said. “Guess it’s like riding a bike. Once you learn, right?”

“It caught me up. Out there one minute wondering how I’m gonna get the crop in the ground, then, cane and all, he wants to plant.”

Fulgence sipped his beer.

“Your prayers been answered, ’Fonse.”

“I thought so. I watched him, stayed with him. But after a few minutes I saw he was hurting.” Alphonse faced his brother. “Teeny, he kept going. He didn’t want to stop.”

“Army made a man out of him, that’s sure,” Fulgence said.

“No, listen. Just that minute I was thinking, I won’t have to work so hard. But I saw his face, and it made me, I don’t know, I knew he would never. And I felt tired. Tired like I never been.”

“Come on, ’Fonse. It’s his first day.”

“You had the right idea, Teeny. With Raymond, getting that exemption so he could stay help you.”

“He would’ve gone, just like Etienne and Jules. Wanted to go.”

“Etienne told me he joined up and I thought, that’s right. We all got to do our part. Jules and I would make do. And if Jules went, well, then they’d come back, and Etienne could—”

“None of it matters now.”

Alphonse looked off toward the windbreak.

“I watched him, Teeny,” he said quietly. “And I couldn’t help myself. All those rosaries Etta and I said. All the novenas we made to keep them safe. And this—*this*—is what God gives me? Some damn car wreck in Italy? One gone, one who can’t walk?” He made the sign of the cross. “What does He want from me?”

“God didn’t do this,” Fulgence said. He poured in the chicken stock and then the rice, stirring gently until the mixture bubbled. “It’s Hitler you oughtta be mad at.” He put the lid on the pot, then poured water on the fire until it was nearly out. “Half an hour and she’s ready.”

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In the heat of the kitchen, Lena folded her arms and watched as Henriette bustled from stove to sink to fridge.

“Etta, slow down, *chere*,” she said. “Looks like you’re ’bout to keel over.”

“In a minute,” Henriette said. “Almost done.” Moving to the sink, her elbow knocked over a mason jar that shattered on the floor.

“*Mon Dieu!* “What’s wrong with me today?” She bent over. “Can’t think about what I’m doing.”

“Stay there,” Lena said. “Don’t step on it. I’ll get the broom.”

Lena squeezed past the stove toward the door. Her stout big-bosomed figure was a contrast to Henriette’s, her skin a shade darker and hair raven-black.

“Don’t know,” Lena said, sweeping shards into the dustpan. “Not as though this is a big day or anything.”

“Oh, stop.” Henriette smiled.

“Relax,” Lena said. “I’ll take care of this.”

“Too much to do—both of us,” she said, picking the topmost potato from a pile on the table. In her practiced hands, brown curlicues of peel seemed to fly off the white flesh. Across the table, Lena picked up a knife and went at the pile herself.

“You gonna make yourself sick with all this, you know. Having everyone over on two days’ notice. Not like Jules is going anywhere.”

“He needs to feel at home,” Henriette said. “See the family, be amongst ’em. Know the war is over.”

“And eat too much,” Lena said.

“We could all use a little of that.”

“Well, nobody’s gonna accuse you of holding back,” Lena laughed. “Haven’t had *cochon* and barbecue chicken in forever. Maybe the war *is* over.”

“Smells like before the war, doesn’t it? Before Etienne left we had a *cochon*, you remember?”

There was a knock at the front door.

“I’ll go,” Lena said, and when she came back a young woman was with her, carrying a large heavy-looking can.

“Look who’s here,” Lena said.

“Adele.” Henriette looked her up and down, her face impassive. “What a nice surprise. Would you like some coffee? I think there’s some left on the stove.” She and Lena shared a look.

“Morning, Miz Plauche,” Adele said brightly. She was girlish and beautiful, blonde hair in a ponytail. Her plaid workshirt was tied in front, revealing a triangle of skin above her jeans. “No thank you. My Papa just asked me to bring this over.” She set the can on the table. Henriette looked inside and seemed puzzled.

“Sugar?”

“We’re so glad Jules came back. We heard about today and Papa said it wouldn’t be a feast without real sweet tea.”

Lena wet her finger and dunked it into the can.

“Mmmm. That’s the real thing all right.”

“Your bees,” Henriette said. “Don’t you need this? The government wants that honey.”

“The bees get all they need.”

“But there’s too much—we don’t need half this much to make tea.”

Adele flashed a smile.

“Well then,” she said, “there’s enough for Jules’ coffee in the morning. He used to like his coffee real strong—does he still?”

“He does at that,” Henriette said. She looked directly at the knot in Adele’s shirt.

“Syrup just isn’t right—though that’s all we have, with the war and all.”

“Is Jules out back? I’d like to say hello.”

Lena shook her head and Henriette went back to peeling potatoes.

“No sweetheart, he’s very tired after his trip. He’s asleep right now. But please, come back this afternoon and eat with us. Your Papa too, be sure to tell him.”

“That’ll be great,” Adele said. “Not sure about Papa, but I’ll be here.” She sniffed the air. “Oh, it smells heavenly. Miz Plauche, how is Jules? Is he better now?”

“He’s much better than he was, but he’s still hurt,” Henriette said, concentrating on a particularly long corkscrew of peel. “He walks with a cane, bless his heart. Hard to move around. But he’s on the mend.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Adele said. “Papa and I, we were really wondering.”

Henriette wiped her hands on her apron.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “Sweet tea on a day like today. Miz Lena and I were just saying it feels like the war is over.”

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” Adele said. “See you later.” She turned to leave. Henriette picked up another potato, then set it down again.

“Adele?” she said.

“Yes ma’am?”

“Your Papa has no idea you’re here, does he?”

“I’ll be back soon,” came her voice from the living room. The front door shut gently.

For a moment, Henriette and Lena were quiet. Lena picked up the can.

“Jesus Mary and Joseph,” she said. “There must be four or five pounds.”

“We can’t keep it,” Henriette said. “It’s wrong.”

“Of course we can keep it. Doesn’t matter who brought it.” Lena cocked her head toward the front door. “Did you see how she dressed?”

“She’s after Jules. And in his condition.” She cut the potatoes into chunks and threw them into a big pot of water. “We have to give it back. I’ll run over to Henry Moeller’s when I get these on the stove.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Henry’s angry enough with Adele as it is. And besides,” Lena said with a sly smile, “it’s not for you. It’s for Jules.”

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The curtains ruffled, and the scent of greening cedars crossed Jules' face. He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling. One through Five? Quiet. Not bad. Back a little stiff. Hope that lasts when I get up. One C was just enough. Big afternoon.

He swallowed and almost gagged at the taste in his mouth. Guidry's dead whiskey. Wooly-tongued, he drained the water glass, lay back and considered the ceiling. White plaster webbed with cracks, dividing and branching and running into the work of real spiders at the corners.

Nothing has to happen. Nobody's watching. The closed door was a barrier. Secure and tight against—what? He tried to remember the last time he was alone and nothing had to happen. San Antonio? A warehouse of broken bodies counting the seconds until the next dose. Combat, boot camp? Even in the foxhole, the Krauts would keep you company. Was it all the way back here, before he joined up?

A tiny round table. The corner, his back against the wall. Trattoria Anna. Montecatini-Terme. The room seethes with liquor-drenched voices and olive-drab fatigues. He watches the door and waits, alone.

His stomach rumbled with the smell of the *cochon*. The aroma seemed to pass right through his skin. He heard voices out in the back yard—cousins, aunts and uncles. Maybe Uncle Teeny had his rig out there and was cooking up a big black pot of dirty rice. Waiting for me. I'm the one.

The covers had come off and his feet were chilly. He turned his head to the left. Etienne's bed, with its matching chenille spread. Made up so neat, ready for him to return at any moment. The gray quilt folded and waiting at the foot.

“There’s a cold monster, and he lives under the house,” he had whispered to Etienne one frosty night. What was I? Six, seven? “He hides in the barn all day and when it’s dark he goes under the house and makes the floor cold.”

“He does?” Etienne said. Jules pulled the covers tighter, rubbing his feet together.

“He waits for you to step on the floor and he grabs your foot and fills it with cold.”

“Put some socks on then.”

“I’ve already got three pairs.”

He pulled the covers over his head.

“Come on,” Etienne said. “I got an idea.”

Etienne picked up the gray quilt and held it over his head. He motioned for Jules to do the same with his quilt.

“Come on,” he whispered. “Quiet, don’t wake them up.”

In the living room, Papa had banked the fire and the embers still glowed. They sat on the rug with their feet close to the hearth, the upraised quilts catching the heat like a sail.

“We’re scaring the monster,” Jules said, wiggling his toes. “I think he’s going back to the barn.”

They stayed until they were sweating. Etienne signaled and they hurried back to bed, wrapping up in the hot quilts and laughing themselves to sleep.

So many nights after that.

He touched his cheek and remembered Mama’s hands. Her kiss landing soft on

the rock of his exhaustion. Cotton seeds in his cap, oblong and brown with dark flecks. The toes of Papa's workboots as he bent down in the fields, leather scraped away. The rows, marching horizonward in their geometric precision. As he cried something emptied, released.

Outside, two boys played tag under his window.

"You're it!" one said.

"Shhh!" said the other. "Mama said to be quiet up here. He's still asleep."

Their feet shuffled in the grass as they ran toward the back yard.

It was time.

He stood up, feeling the stiffness in his limbs and the tears rusting on his face.

The mirror on the dresser caught his face. I think I might like that face. The floor felt comfortable under his socks. One pair only. April eighth.

Mama had come in and picked up his fatigues. The bottle? There, on the dresser.

She had taken it out carefully, trying not to make a sound. Emotion welled again.

He took out a plaid work shirt and overalls and laid them on the bed. In the closet he found an old pair of workboots. He dressed, trying to remember if the clothes belonged to him or to Etienne.

Jules ignored his overloaded belly and reached for more *cochon*. The carcass was nearly picked clean, shards of meat swimming in glistening fat among the bones. With the head gone, it seemed more like dinner and less like a casualty. It was boiling away on the stove now, on its way to becoming head cheese. So full. But just a little more.

“Boy, you sure brought that appetite home,” Uncle Fulgence said. “If I grab for it, you gonna growl at me?”

“Grrrrr, just try me,” Jules said, giving a dog-like snap in his uncle’s direction. He picked up a chunk, moved it to his mouth, then put it down. “No more. I can’t eat another bite. Help me out, Uncle Teeny.”

The long table was a battlefield of empty plates, cups, pitchers and napkins. Platters lay happily depleted among the tablecloth stains.

“I drank so much of that sweet tea I’m gonna float,” Raymond said. “But I’m still workin’.”

Jules wiped his hands.

“You sure you’ve had enough?” Mama said. “There’s plenty.”

“I know I’m home,” he said. “Cause nobody ever asked me that in the hospital.”

The yard buzzed with smells and voices. Birds called in the oaks, and the shadow of the barn crept over the chicken coop toward the yard. Jules sat the head of the table, a gaggle of cousins, aunts and uncles stretching out in a line. Like the rows in the field. Nice and regular. He shifted his weight, realized he’d forgotten One through Five. They

were muted somehow, enjoying the day too. He raised his arms to stretch, felt the twinge, stretched outward. Since the accident, time had just been the slow-moving space between pills. Now it was moving too fast.

“What you think, ’Fonse?” Fulgence said. “You feel like getting back out in those fields right now?”

“I’m too full of your dirty rice,” Papa said. “They can wait till after church, huh?”

“We supposed to get some rain next week.”

Papa sighed.

“We need it,” he said. “But I still got ten acres to go.”

Mama stroked Papa’s arm.

“I’ll be out there too,” Mama said. “It’ll go twice as fast.”

“That’s why we marry ’em, right ’Fonse?” Fulgence said. He put his arm around Lena and squeezed. “They make the *cochon*, and when they done they turn into field hands.” She pushed away and elbowed his ribs.

“You’ll be lucky to get *coush-coush*, mister big shot,” Lena said. “I married you so I—”

“Three times as fast,” Jules said.

“There’s pecan pie,” Mama said. “Who’s ready?”

Groans and laughter erupted around the table, everyone leaning back and rubbing their bellies. Mama and Lena got up.

“Got your civvies on again,” Fulgence said. “You must be happy being out of that uniform, eh?”

“He hasn’t changed a bit,” Papa said, smiling in Jules’ direction.

“It’s the clothes haven’t changed,” Jules said. “I found these right where I left them in ’43.”

“Hey Jules, I got an idea.” Raymond wiped his mouth with a sleeve. “We can plant after supper. This week. You and me.”

“Be quiet, boy,” Fulgence said.

“No, really. Listen. You carry the lantern and I’ll drop the seed. Wouldn’t that help, Uncle ’Fonse? I bet we could plant a couple acres before bedtime, couldn’t we Jules?”

I could do that. No bending over, and I could balance on the cane. It would be dark. Papa would be inside, not watching.

Papa let out a small laugh and shook his head.

“We’ll manage.”

“It’s worth a try, isn’t it Papa?” Jules said. “You could relax and listen to the radio.”

“Raymond’s got his own work to do,” Papa said.

Raymond leaned in, his face bright with anticipation.

“Not at night. We finish up by supper, just like you Uncle ’Fonse. This would be after, right Papa?”

Mama and Lena returned from the kitchen and set three pies on the table. Mama handed the first slice, a massive nut-brown triangle, to Jules. Before he could pick up his fork, she produced a bowl of whipped cream and ladled a big dollop on top.

“Welcome back, Jules,” someone called from the back, and everyone clapped. Jules looked at the pie to hide his embarrassment, cut off a chunk and raised it to the crowd. So sweet. Slices were passed around and talk was silenced again, except for the plate-clinking sounds of satisfaction. Papa put his elbows on the table and rested his head in his hands. His piece of pie sat untouched.

“Don’t you like it?” Mama said. Papa shook his head.

“We always made a good team, didn’t we Jules?” Raymond said, putting down his plate. “Always getting’ things done.”

“Like stealing altar wine,” Lena said. “And cigarettes from Mary Ann’s.”

“No, Mama, I mean we were good in the fields.”

“Etienne was good in the fields,” Papa said, almost in a whisper. His face lightened.

“Boy, what are you going on about?” Fulgence said. “This is s’posed to be a party—brother, you gonna eat that pie or just look at it?”

Papa looked at Jules, then at Fulgence. He picked up his fork and dug in, a spot of whipped cream sticking to his nose.

“I remember, Uncle ’Fonse,” Raymond said. “Watching you three from across the road. Etienne, he was on fire come harvest time.”

“Used to pay the boys a quarter every hundred pounds,” Papa said.

“We earned more in the morning, when the cotton was wet,” Jules said. Fulgence and Raymond chuckled.

“I see him sometimes, out there,” Papa said. “Something will move in the corner of my eye and I’ll look up.”

Mama touched his shoulder.

“He was a fine boy,” Lena said. “Fine man too.”

Papa leaned back, the speck of white still there.

“I remember, when he was ten or eleven, he found this calf out in the pasture. Half dead. Abandoned by its mother. You remember that, Jules?”

Jules said nothing.

Papa leaned forward, took a deep breath.

“Jules and I were in the barn and Etienne came running in to get us. He grabbed a pail of milk and a ladle and we got out there and he started spooning that milk into that calf’s mouth. Teeny, she was so thirsty! He fed her that whole pail. But it wasn’t enough. There was something wrong with it, I think. She died after while.”

“I remember,” Fulgence said.

Why does my hand hurt? He looked down and saw them strangling the chair arms. *Six*. Where is the bottle?

The cousins had finished again and were running and playing tag. Jules watched as a starling landed at the end of the table and began picking at someone’s half-empty plate. Jules watched his eyes. Hungry. Keeps one eye on the food and one eye on us, ready to fly.

“I can see it like it was yesterday,” Papa said. “The three of us loading her on the wagon, and Etienne crying.”

“Yeah,” Jules said. The starling hopped closer, pecking at a pile of dirty rice. Behind it, another bird joined in.

“He loved the Army,” Mama said. “He was always writing letters. He said he’d made so many friends, how he wanted to bring them back here and show them the farm.”

“I love the picture of him in his uniform,” Lena said. “Just a little hint of a mustache. So grown up.”

“Y’all fought together?” Raymond said. “Beat up on them Nazis?”

“No,” Jules said. “I only saw him that once.”

“Too bad,” Raymond said. “So you weren’t there when he saved all those men?”

Mud. In the shape of my face.

I need a C. Two. But One through Five were good. Still. The starlings flew back into the oak, returning in a few seconds to continue.

“I was about twenty miles away. A place called Monte Venere.”

“Was there fighting going on there too?” Fulgence asked.

The muscles below his shoulder blades cramped and spasmed, sending a ring of pain around his ribcage. He straightened up in the chair, rotated his shoulders back to ease the tightness. The whipped cream still stuck to Papa’s nose, and it made Jules want to reach over and wipe it off.

“Of course there was, Papa,” Raymond said. “That was the battle for the Gothic Line. It was on the radio. The Fifth Army showed ’em who’s boss, right Jules?”

“Yeah, we showed ’em.”

“Good news on the radio this afternoon, Jules—did you hear?” Raymond said.
“They say we sunk a big Jap aircraft carrier by Okinawa.”

Jules shifted in his chair. The pain was moving into his lower back, the way it always did when he sat. Raymond went on:

“Some big new attack in Italy too. The Po river. Was that anywhere near you and Etienne?”

“We got ’em on the run—Hitler and Tojo both.” Fulgence said. “Won’t be long now.”

Mama and Lena began carrying the dishes into the house. The barn’s shadow deepened like a rising purple tide overtaking the afternoon. Papa squinted his eyes and wiped the whipped cream from his face.

“Ha!” Jules said. “You finally got it, Papa.” He punched his father’s arm, just a little harder than he intended. “I like the way you eat pie.”

Papa grabbed his napkin. He looked around at Jules, Raymond and Fulgence.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. Jules wiped up a bit of cream from his plate and put it on his own nose.

“Like father, like son,” he said.

Raymond grabbed the last beer in the tub and opened it with a foamy hiss. He gulped several big swallows.

“You want some of this?” he asked Jules. “They all gone now.”

Jules remembered Guidry and his whiskey from that morning and shook his head.

“You go on.”

Raymond's eyes were shiny as buttons.

"It's funny, isn't it? How it's all gonna be over soon. They say Hitler's hiding in some bunker."

"All the boys comin' home," Fulgence said. "Ain't that a pretty thought."

"All the boys," Papa said.

"And me still here," Raymond said. "I never left."

Fulgence put his arm around Raymond.

"I couldn't have made it without you, son," he said. "Uncle 'Fonse neither. Don't you forget that."

"I didn't ask, you know," Raymond said to Jules. "I wanted to go, just like you and Etienne. I didn't want no exemption."

Fulgence spoke softly.

"I couldn't let you go," he said. "Your mama and me, we talked about it. How I couldn't plant and harvest with you gone. You know all this."

"Uncle 'Fonse, he managed," Raymond said.

"With you and me helping, he sure did," Fulgence said. "Weren't you just talking about planting by lantern-light?"

"I listened every day, Jules. Gabriel Heatter and Robert Trout and all the rest. I followed all the news about Italy. I would think about it, like I was there with you and Etienne. Fighting those damn Krauts."

"Enough," Fulgence said.

“You think you didn’t do your part?” Papa said. “Where did you think all those crops were going? Jules came home this morning wearing his uniform—might have cotton in it that you picked. We all did what we had to do. Sacrificed.” He stopped, leaning his head toward his shoulder until his neck cracked into place. “We all did.”

“But it was an adventure, wasn’t it Jules? Didn’t you love it?”

He runs to the sound of the screaming. Steve Monfort. Money. Legs blown off. What am I supposed to do, he thinks. A medic. Call for a medic. Money shakes, his whole body. He cradles him, whispering. Medic. The word won’t form. Blood cascades. Their eyes meet. Find my boots, Money says. Boots. Blood stops. He lets go, lays Money down so gently. Shoulders his rifle and walks. Yards away, stumbles on a boot and sees the foot still inside. Medic! Medic!

“Raymond,” he said. “Do I look like I’ve had an adventure? Do I look like I loved it?”

Raymond’s face fell.

“Well,” he said, “I guess not.”

“The pot needs washing out,” Fulgence said, pointing to the pump next to the barn. “That’ll be your adventure.”

Raymond downed the last of his beer. He hoisted the cast-iron pot and carried it toward the barnyard.

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Jules ushered Raymond through the gate and got some brushes from the barn. The air was cooling, and Jules' skin tingled. Raymond pumped water into the pot.

"I didn't mean nothing," Raymond said. "My Papa going on like that—I hate it when he does. I wanted to talk about something else."

"I had no idea," Jules said.

"Doesn't matter."

"No, I mean nobody told me. About you not going. I'm glad you didn't."

Raymond scrubbed hard.

"He didn't ask me," he said. "He wrote to that congressman and didn't ask me. He told me after it'd all been settled."

"I wish Papa had written somebody," Jules said.

Raymond let the brush fall into the trough.

"You killed you some Krauts—all the way up Italy. Sicily and Anzio and Cassino. You were there. It happened to you. Nothing happened to me."

Jules helped Raymond set the pot down.

"Montecatini-Terme," he said. "When Etienne died. I was right there. We weren't just killing Krauts. The Krauts were killing us."

"You don't understand," Raymond said. "I wish I could tell you what it was like."

"There was nothing heroic about it. Cassino, it was on top of this mountain and we kept attacking uphill and getting slaughtered. *Slaughtered*. Like when you kill the *cochon* and slice it open. Times a thousand. They told us it was a monastery, that it was

sacred, we couldn't bomb it because the monks were there. The Germans were camped out on top, right next to them. Five times, we attacked, got nowhere."

"I heard about it," Raymond said, "on the radio."

"One day we're ordered off the mountain. We get marched back a mile or so into these woods and told to dig in. We waited a day and a night."

"Did they attack?" Raymond said.

"They never attacked. Ever. They just waited for us to get up out of our foxholes."

Raymond worked the handle of the pump and rinsed his hands.

"So the next morning we hear this rumble that felt like it came from the center of the earth. It got louder and louder until these bombers started coming over—waves of them. All morning they passed over, dropping bombs on the top of that mountain."

"Something like that you don't forget," Raymond said.

"Except after a few minutes, a cloud of dust rolled over our position, and all this crap started falling from the sky. They hadn't sent us back far enough. The whole company got up out of those foxholes and hauled ass in the opposite direction—choking and dodging bricks and rocks and everything else. Stupid."

"But you took Cassino, right? You chased the Germans out of there."

"Oh, we chased them somewhere. The next day they marched us back up that mountain. Nobody left. We got to the top and the monastery—this place that had been there for five, six hundred years—was a pile of nothing. A couple of monks and some people from the town that had gone there to hide. Dead bodies all over."

"Dead Krauts. The best kind." Raymond pantomimed shooting a rifle.

“Fifty thousand men, dead or wounded in Cassino—not counting the monks and the people in the town. Fifty thousand—that’s how many people live in Baton Rouge. And you know what they told us afterward? They said it had ‘no military significance.’ I remember standing there, where the town had been, looking up at that mountain and waiting for something to happen.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I wanted God to laugh or to cry, one or the other. But all I heard was the lieutenant ordering us to fall in and move out.”

Raymond picked up the pot.

“I wish I had another beer,” he said.

“Jules! Adele is here,” Mama’s voice called from the kitchen. Jules looked back from the shadows toward the back door, where the sun highlighted the shape of a woman, hand raised to shield her eyes.

“Oh, shit,” Raymond said. The hand began to wave.

“Adele?” Jules said. He turned to Raymond, putting down the pot. “You got this?” he said.

“Go on,” Raymond said in a dull monotone.

Jules wiped his hands on his pants, grabbed his cane and loped toward the porch.

Sunday morning, 1942. The day already hot and sticky. Mama and Papa gone to church without him. My head, my stomach, coming down with something. The back door opens and light footsteps get closer. A tiny knock.

“You there?” Her voice is low, breathy. The window’s light catches, freezes her in his eyes. She laughs and suddenly he can’t stop himself.

“Hurry up! They’ll be back soon!”

She stands by the bed, kicks off her shoes and unbuttons her plaid workshirt. He’s already hard, the covers rising in a lump. She’s naked and he pulls back the blanket, revealing himself. She gets in beside him and he covers their bodies up again.

Voices on the porch, and Papa is opening the front door. Laughing, she jumps out the window, clothes and shoes in her hand.

“Finally!” Adele said, hugging his neck. “I thought I’d never get away.”

“That’s what I was going to say,” Jules said. “You want some food?”

Mama passed between them with an awkward step, putting a pie back in the larder. “And sweet tea,” she said. “Thank you so much for the sugar, *chere*.”

“Shhh. It’s a secret,” Adele said. “Some of our bees might be buzzing around here.”

There had been a training film. *Why We Fight*. German and Japanese movies edited to show how bad Hitler and Tojo were. Afterward, Money had shown Jules a picture of his girlfriend.

“This is why I fight,” Money had said. “How about you?”

Jules had thought about Adele. Why didn’t I bring a picture of her? Why don’t I think about her?

“Me too,” he had said.

She kissed him, hard.

“Did you miss me?” she said.

“I did,” Jules said. “I really did.”

Mama coughed and looked away.

“So why didn’t you write? I wrote you all the time.”

“He didn’t write me or his Papa either,” Mama said.

“But you got my picture, right?” Adele said. “I had it taken special.”

Jules shook his head.

“It got lost along the way somewhere,” he said. “There’s still *cochon*, and if we look hard enough, some dirty rice.”

“I was saving some in the oven,” Mama said. “I guess I’ll get it.”

Adele put his arm through hers and stood close. Her breast was soft and yielding breast against his elbow.

“I’m so glad you’re home,” she whispered.

“I forgot,” he said.

“Forgot what? Forgot about me?”

What this feels like. Skin on skin. Not put on, like the whores. Real. He took a deep breath, which reached right down to his crotch.

“We need to go somewhere,” he said.

“Funny you should say that,” Adele said.

Mama came out the screen door, carrying a heaping plate.

“Go sit at the table,” she said. “I’ll bring you some tea.”

Adele squeezed his hand.

Someplace out by the windbreak, nobody will see.

“We’re going to take a walk,” Jules said.

“That smells wonderful, Miz Plauche,” Adele said. “But I’m not real hungry just now.”

“A walk?” Mama said. “Where?”

After a moment’s panic, Jules answered.

“Over to the cemetery. I want Adele to see Etienne’s marker.”

“Papa and I will go with you,” she said, putting the plate down on the larder.

“No, we can all go tomorrow. I just want to see it for a minute. We won’t be long.”

Adele let go and crossed her arms.

“When we come back, I’ll have that *cochon* if it’s still there,” she said.

Mama wiped her hands on her apron.

“Maybe I’ll just go along,” she said. “Show you where it is.”

“Papa told me it was right next to Grandpa A.C. I know where it is.”

“I don’t—”

“Mama. It’s all right. We’re just taking a walk. Trying to let all this food settle. Okay?”

They stepped onto the grass, Mama still wringing her hands in the apron.

The pasture between the house and the cemetery was long and narrow, a massive live oak at its center.

“I love this tree,” Jules said. “I used to hide under it when I was supposed to be working.”

“Your mother suspects something,” Adele said lightly.

“I thought we might walk along the windbreak,” Jules said, putting his arm around her. “I missed you.”

“A lot has happened since you left,” she said. “Big changes.”

“We talking about you or me?”

He glanced back toward the house. Mama stood in the yard, watching.

“Damn,” he said. “This town is so backward.” He waved at Mama. “We better go see Etienne anyway.”

The sun was almost to the treetops now. Pinks and yellows tinted the clouds, and there was just a hint of a chill. They crossed through the ankle-high grass and opened the gate on the other side.

“What was it like over there?” Adele said. “Was it horrible?”

Jules stumbled for a moment, until his cane found the walkway.

“It’s funny,” he said. “I’ve been trying to answer that question all day. I don’t think I’m succeeding.”

“I wonder if they really want to know,” Adele said. “I’m not sure anyone in this town wants to hear what the outside world is like.”

Jules laughed.

“Well, my family was never very good at talking. Cotton, the weather and church. After that we ran out of things to say.”

The headstones were orderly rows of white marble, spotted with mildew and bearing the names and dates worn away with age.

“Civil War soldiers right here,” Jules said.

“You haven’t answered the question,” she said. “What was it like?”

He hadn’t considered the question before. What was it *like*?

“When we almost got caught that time, before I joined up, that would have been my first time,” he said. “We never got the chance.”

“We got the chance right now, soon as Mama stops looking.”

“In boot camp we would get these weekend passes to Baltimore,” he said. “My buddy Gus, he knew this place. The Spot. It was, you know, a bar that had women.”

“A whorehouse,” Adele said.

“Gus found out I had never, you know, and he took me there. There was this girl. My age, maybe a little older. Her name was Mary. She was small, with a round face and big eyes and brown hair. There was a bruise on her cheek that had almost healed. She had tried to cover it with some make up.”

“Jules, you don’t have to tell me about all the women you slept with.”

“No, listen,” he said. “We laid down and, the way she held me, talked to me, it was perfect. Right. When it was over, we just lay there. She was stroking my chest. I didn’t know what was supposed to happen next. I was crying, just from being happy, you know? She used the sheet to dry my face. That was nice, she said. Then she pushed back the covers and started to get up, but I took her arm and pulled her back. She looked at me,

and suddenly it was like I could see the faces of all the other men she'd been with, and what it had done to her. It made me so cold and scared. Then she was gone."

"That's what the war was like? A whorehouse in Baltimore?"

"Maybe it's good," he said. "That the whole thing was so far away from here."

She was walking ahead of him now. He watched her, in her Sunday dress, looking at the graves as if she had no connection to them. As if the act of dying was something distant and unreal.

"We watched all the newsreels," Adele said. "You couldn't see too well what was happening."

"Let's just say it was horrible and leave it at that." He caught up to her. "Now tell me what you've been doing. I kind of thought you'd be married by now."

They held hands again. The setting sun was behind them, the shadows blending into dusk.

"Oh, I came pretty close," she said, slapping him gently on the shoulder. "While you were in those whorehouses I got tired of waiting for you."

"Adele, I—"

"Shut up," she said. "It doesn't matter." She kissed him.

"What happened?"

"Well, first of all, bird-dog Raymond didn't waste any time after you left," she said.

"Raymond?"

“Felt like he had the whole female population to himself. But me, I was his first choice.”

“He asked you to marry him?”

“Three or four times. He said we could move into his bedroom at Teeny and Lena’s. And what, wait for Teeny to pass so he could take over? Jesus.”

“But you almost did, you said.”

“No. Hell no. It was somebody else.”

They reached Etienne’s marker. A bright polished slab of gray marble with neat serif letters. *Beloved Son and Brother* was inscribed along the bottom, with a symbol representing the Silver Star.

“Nice of them to include me in the *beloved*,” Jules said.

“It was so cold out here that day,” Adele said. “Windy. Everyone kept one eye on Father Gautreau and one eye on the clouds.”

“Papa made some kind of wood cross,” Jules said.

“It was nice. He shaped it and painted it white and put Etienne’s name on it in black letters.”

Jules used his cane to tap on the headstone.

“They spent all their money on this,” he said. The loud throaty laughter of men drifted over from the yard. “Now all this food today. I never thought much about it before. How much things cost.”

“Jules, when are we going to get out of here?” Adele said.

Jules chuckled and looked back at the house.

“Mama’s lost interest,” he said. “We’ll go in a minute.”

“No. Away. Out of this town. Baton Rouge. New Orleans. Somewhere.”

“San Antonio?” Jules said. “I spent some time there.”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Some better kind of life.”

“I just got here,” he said. “This morning.”

“I ran away,” she said. “Over the winter. Raymond was pestering me, and my papa was making noises like I should start taking his proposals serious.”

“Raymond’s okay, I guess.”

“Raymond’s a dirt farmer. Fifty years from now he’ll be a dirt farmer. And he’ll still be expecting some woman to cook and clean and take care of his kids. It just won’t be me.”

“So you ran away?”

“I was in Marksville at the bank, and I saw this man in a suit.” She looked at Jules, embarrassed. “I hadn’t heard from you in two years and, anyway—”

Jules put his hand on her back and stroked.

“I told you, so you tell me.”

“I liked the way he looked, that suit and all, so I asked him why he wasn’t in the army. He told me he had this sugar diabetes thing and the army wouldn’t take him. I thought it was funny, all the sugar we get for the bees, and we started talking. He was a cotton buyer for the government, lived in Alexandria.”

“He asked you to marry him?” Jules said.

Adele laughed.

“It wasn’t like that. I would take the Keller Bus to Marksville once a week. He’d drive over and I’d meet him at a hotel.”

“That’s pretty grown up,” Jules said.

“Once he took me to the Blue Moon in Bunkie,” she said. “We saw Cab Calloway, how about that?”

“Sounds like a nice guy,” Jules said.

“What was I going to do? I was twenty-one, not married, living with my papa, and my only option was to marry some farmer? Not me.”

“But it didn’t work out.”

“It worked out fine, until someone saw us and told my Papa. Oh, Jules, he was *scandalized*.” She started laughing. “We had this big fight. So you know what he did? He wrote to the Sisters of Mercy convent in Shreveport and told them I was coming to be a nun. ‘I’m *ordering* you to go,’ he said.” Her laughter pitched a little higher. “Order! Can you believe it?”

“I do believe it,” Jules said. “That isn’t the way Bienville women behave.”

No wonder Mama was paying such close attention.

“Anyway, I packed my bag and got on the bus again. I called him from Marksville and told him I wanted us to be together. That we could get married. That’s when things got complicated.”

“He wasn’t interested?”

“He had a wife back in Alec.” She kicked at the sidewalk. “I should have known.”

“I’m sorry.”

“The hard part was crawling back to Papa and begging him to take me back in. I had no place to go.”

“The convent?” Jules said.

“That took a couple of days,” she said. “I promised to be a good girl, to go back to church and everything. I had to let him slap me around until he got tired of hitting me. I been biding my time ever since. Now you’re here.”

“The unforgivable sin,” Jules said. “I committed it too.”

“Really? What was yours?”

“I wasn’t my brother.”

They walked to a gravel path and made their way out the back of the cemetery. The delicious anticipation amplified in the crunch of their steps.

“This is going to work out fine,” Adele said. “So many places we can go.”

It was almost dark now. Someone from back at the house called Jules’ name. The voice and the deepening dusk deflated the moment. He stopped.

“I rode this train from San Antonio to Baton Rouge,” he said. “Took me all day yesterday, till late last night. If you had been there, told me this story, I don’t know what I’d’ve done. Coming back here seemed like the worst possible option. But now, I don’t know. I hurt all the time, and I can’t get around without this cane.”

“There’s nothing for either one of us here.” Even in the dim light, he could see her anger.

This morning with Guidry. Wasn't I talking about Baton Rouge and a job at one of the plants? Shit, I couldn't get a few seeds in the ground without Cs and a nap. What do I know? Farming and dodging bullets? I can't even do those anymore.

"I just got of the hospital. I can't think about this right now."

He waited for her to say something. The seconds dragged by.

"But you can think about screwing me out there under the trees," she said.

"That's different," he said. "This is where we left it."

"Damn it, Jules, my Papa is shoving me out the door. There's talk everywhere. I can't stay here."

The voice, more urgent now, called his name again. He saw them taking down the tables in the yellow light from the porch.

"Can't we just see each other? Go out on a date or something?" he said.

He looked around, but Adele was halfway to the street.

*October 12, 1944
Montecatini-Terme, Italy*

Jules sat with his back to the wall and waited.

Trattoria Anna's shabby buff-plastered dining room was noisy with GIs drinking themselves forgetful. Circling like ravens were worn-out whores with thick unruly hair, smudged blouses and scuffed flats. The air was hot and thick with smoke and tomato sauce, but all he could smell was the fresh cotton of his new uniform. It made the sick rumble in his gut worse.

"Whattaya think?" Etienne would shove the medal in Jules' face.

"Great. Happy for you."

"Number two. Right under the Medal of Honor."

"I know."

"What about you?"

He clenched his fists and shook himself back to the noise and the uniform smell. The collar chafed. He pulled at it, trying to position his neck so it wouldn't touch.

He'd shed the old one that morning, dropping everything but his boots in a huge reeking pile that looked like dead soldiers without the bodies. In the showers he'd rubbed his skin raw with soap and stinging water until they'd yelled at him to get out. You're not getting any cleaner, the sergeant said.

Now he smelled fresh but he missed the Stink. No grime, no sweat, no rot—none of the things that told you where you were and reminded you of the job and that and you

were doing it. Now these new clothes had to learn to Stink. Was it like this the last time?

When was that?

Stop thinking. Hot chow, showers, booze and women and what you want is the Stink? He reached for the glass of chianti, paused, then grabbed the bottle instead. The wine was rough and sweet in his throat, and he leaned back in its warmth. His stomach was undecided at first, then settled back to its dull ache.

Jules rubbed at his pants legs, trying to work off their sheen. Fuck, I look like a Replacement.

He hated their untouched uniforms getting off the transports, the mountains and mud and booming guns so close. They were so clean, staring and clenching their rifles and hesitating when you asked their name. You didn't want to look at their faces, to see them realize what awaited.

Someone crashed into the table and spilled chianti everywhere.

“What the fuck!” He jumped to his feet.

“Frenchy! How's it hangin'?” Cutter Ransom, from his unit. Cheeks and eyes glowing with drink, a whore with her arms round his waist. A stab went through Jules' belly, and his face flushed hot.

“We're goin' dancing! You comin'?”

“I have-a girlfriend-a you,” the whore singsonged, trying and failing to sound seductive.

He shook his head, took his napkin and wiped at the puddle on the table.

“Later. My brother—” He looked up, but Cutter and the woman had moved away.

Jules sat down and reached for the bottle.

“Are you drunk?” Etienne was asking.

“You think I’m scared and you’re not.”

“You haven’t really *stood out*, you know?”

“But you have, right? Always. Me, I’m just your shadow.”

“I never said that.”

“Papa did, Mama did, fuck, even the nuns did.”

“And what’s getting drunk gonna solve? Papa and me, we never touch—”

“Hell with Papa and you!”

The shout turned some heads.

I’m talking to myself now. Great.

Everyone seemed to be crowding around the door. The smoke made it hard to see.

A fight? The brass? He felt the wall at his back and tensed, waiting for someone to yell *ten-hut!* and the room to lurch to attention—whores and all.

A round of applause erupted.

All eyes were on whoever had walked in. The voices seemed to unify in a happy murmur.

The fuck is going on? Who gets applause in a dump like this?

No. His bellyache multiplied. *Oh my fucking God.*

The crowd parted and revealed Etienne. Jules stood up, eyes blazing.

He was taller and thinner than Jules remembered—a polished razor-sharp straight line. New uniform spotless and perfectly creased. Bright Silver Star like a beacon on his left breast pocket.

He was horrified to find himself standing at attention, on his tiptoes. He sat down hard. The son-of-a-bitch—even his fucking cap looks like it’s been pressed.

Etienne took a couple of steps into the room. Men were shaking his hand, clapping him on the back. They tried to steer him toward the bar, but he shook his head.

Jules crossed his arms tight over his chest. They were all there now, repeating old words like a rosary of accusations.

“Etienne picked twice as much as you did,” Papa said.

“Can’t you see how you’re letting Papa and Mama down?” Etienne said.

“Etienne got straight As again,” Mama said.

“Papa said we should call you ‘Useless.’” Etienne was laughing.

Even Avoyelles, the land itself, seemed to mock him now with its endless snow-white cotton and drowsy sun-soaked afternoons. Come back, it said. Belong.

Jules gritted his teeth. You think I can’t take it. Come on.

Gusts of laughter erupted. The son-of-a-bitch was enjoying this. Jules’ corner table felt tiny and remote. He kept waiting for the celebration to fade, but it didn’t. Even the whores were starting to move in.

He chuckled. No sale there. Nothing but Sunday Mass and a cold shower. Look at me, you bastard. I’m right here.

But there was something odd. Etienne's face couldn't hold on to its expression. It kept changing, see-sawing. As the men—they must be from his unit—stood around admiring, he smiled, but the smile would immediately dissolve into something hollow, distant. Then the smile would come back again. Water pouring through a leaky bucket.

Jules stifled a laugh.

Oh, that's good. Makes it almost worth sitting here. Our big war hero. Down from the mountain with the Stink all over him. I love it.

Jules gulped from the bottle.

Let's drink to the Stink, big brother. Finally we got something in common.

Etienne pushed his way out of the crowd and stepped further into the room. The men started to follow him, but he waved them off.

He jumped to his feet.

"Etienne! Over here!"

Etienne's head swung around for a moment, trying to pinpoint the sound. They made eye contact, and his empty expression vanished.

"Hey! *T-Jules!*"

He flinched. *Little Jules*. That didn't take long.

Jules forced a pleasant look as Etienne came around the table and hugged Jules hard. He stiffened—no one had touched him in a very long time. Etienne released him and held his shoulders. Jules looked at the medal.

"We're here! I can't believe we're here, huh? Can you?"

Won't be long now. He stared at the Silver Star.

A snuffle.

He looked up into Etienne's face and saw red-rimmed eyes and tears tracking toward his chin.

What the hell?

"Hey, hey. Just relax, okay?" He led Etienne toward the other chair and helped him sit. Etienne sniffled again and wiped his nose on the sleeve of his immaculate uniform.

"I'm all right. Just—good to see you is all, huh?"

"Me too, me too. Let's have a drink."

Etienne smiled.

"I thought this would be like home," he said, looking around the dining room. "But it's still Italy."

Across the room a waiter dropped a tray and shattering glass stopped the noise for as moment. Jules tried to recover his anger.

"Standing at attention out there on the soccer field and Clark calls your name—I almost fainted," he said with a harsh laugh.

Etienne's face drained again, just for a moment. Jules poured wine, but Etienne didn't reach for his.

"You look okay—lost some weight." Etienne said.

"Yeah, they don't serve much *coush-coush* and *cochon* on the line," Jules said, looking at the untouched glass. There was the anger. "But I'm still in one piece. How about you—shit, what am I saying?"

“Can you believe we both ended up here now? Where you been, huh?” He picked up the menu.

“Been? On the fucking line for six weeks getting my ass shot at. The hell you think I been?”

Wrong. Too much.

Etienne’s shoulders slumped. He studied the menu then heaved a deep breath.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said, putting down the menu. “I guess I meant where was your unit.”

All right. That’s better. Wait, *of course* that’s what he meant.

“Are you mad or something?”

Fuck. Two minutes and I’m already blowing it.

“No, no, ’course not,” Jules said. He looked at the medal again. “Guess I’m just jumpy, you know—first day off the line.” He laughed and tugged at his sleeve. “Maybe it’s this uniform—too new.”

“Yeah, this thing too,” said Etienne. “I been taking pictures all afternoon.”

“Livergnano, until yesterday. Cold up there. I hate this country.”

“Brown, muddy and freezing, huh?” said Etienne. “We were bogged down on Delle Forniche. What’s that, ten-twelve miles away from you?”

“I know where you were. I heard the story while Clark pinned that medal on you, remember?”

Damn it! Again! He watched Etienne’s face fall, the tiny muscles in his forehead twitching.

“Jules—”

“Ahh, the fuck is wrong with me? That didn’t come out right. I’m just not used to talking to anybody anymore.” He motioned to the waiter. “More wine here! We’re celebrating!”

“No, none for me.”

“I thought that’s what you’d say. Forget it. You’re not going to be Old Man tonight. We’re gonna get drunk like soldiers.”

“Old Man. No one called me that in a long time.” Etienne’s face softened, became less pleading.

“No one’s called me *T-Jules* either,” Jules said. He poured the wine and swung his glass out in an arc. “But hey, we’re here and the war ain’t. Let’s drink to that.”

Etienne picked up his glass and clinked it with Jules’.

“Family,” he said. “You and me.”

“Yeah, right. Drink up!”

Etienne drained his glass, put it on the table, and coughed.

“Wow,” he said. “That’s pretty good, huh?”

“Two years in the army and he’s having his first drink. Why they call you Old Man again?”

Etienne shook his head.

“Don’t, okay?”

“Right, right. Promise. Here, have another one.”

Both glasses hit the table, empty.

“All this time, I wondered how you were.”

“I’m either lucky or unlucky,” Jules said. “Can’t tell which. You should be all bandaged up.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Etienne laughed nervously. “Mostly just cold.”

“Come on. Sprinting up that mountain? Nothing?”

Etienne shook his head.

“A year ago I’d’ve told you God was looking out for me.” He regarded his empty glass. “Now—” He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms.

Fuck, you were right about the Stink.

Jules’ neck unwound and the wine seemed to find its way to where it was needed. He nodded and leaned forward.

“First day at Anzio,” Jules said. “We must’ve got three miles inland. Not a shot. We dig in and all night we don’t hear a thing. I’m thinking, hey we scared them off. The Krauts don’t even want to fight. Daylight comes and shit starts raining down on us. Lost my best friend from boot right in the foxhole. They shot his head off.”

Etienne studied the wall behind Jules, his face empty and flat. Jules felt the memory of that morning lay frigid and still inside him. He tried, as he had many times before this night, to muster some kind of grief or sorrow or even disgust. It was there, somewhere. But it had no way out.

“Shit, let’s talk about something else.”

“Can you believe the harvest was so late this year? Without Raymond and Uncle Fulgence, I’ll bet Papa would still be out picking cotton, huh?”

“Right, right. Good crop this year?”

“Very good, Papa says.” He looked at Jules quizzically. “Don’t you get their letters too?”

“I don’t know. Fucking V-mail,” Jules said, thinking about the stack of unopened envelopes in his bag. “Good harvest, that’s—”

For a moment there was only the noise of the crowd. A fresh bottle arrived and this time Etienne poured.

“Yeah. Good,” Etienne said. They drank again, and when Etienne chuckled Jules knew he was getting drunk.

“You feeling okay?”

“Yeah. Oh yeah.”

There seemed to be nothing else to say. Jules’ eyes wandered around the room.

“Hey,” Etienne said. “You remember when Father Gautreau caught you and Raymond drinking the altar wine?”

“You mean the day I shamed the whole Plauché family for six generations? Mama said we’d never be able to show our faces in church again.” He paused, rubbed his rear end. “Papa wore out his belt.”

“You were a bad altar boy,” Etienne laughed. “So bad.”

“And you were so fucking good.”

Etienne laughed harder, more hysterical.

“I’m really glad you’re enjoying this,” Jules said. “Cause I’m not.”

“No, no, you’re right,” Etienne said, trying to catch his breath. “It’s just that—” he erupted with laughter again.”

“What?” Jules giggled. “Just what?”

“You remember how the wine kept disappearing after that? How Father Gautreau would draw a line on the bottle?”

“And how he would never let us be alone in the sacristy? Yeah, I remember.”

“It was me!” Etienne was shaking with laughter. “During the Mass, while you were up there on the altar, I’d get up and say I had to go to the bathroom, then sneak back there.”

“You drank the wine?”

“No, I didn’t like the taste of it. I just poured it down the sink.”

“You asshole!”

“I’d go back to the pew and wait for Mass to be over. Father Gautreau would check his line and see that more was missing. Oh, how he would glare at you and Raymond! But he couldn’t prove a thing!”

“Son of a bitch! You got me and Raymond kicked out!” Despite his anger, Jules was laughing too. “But why? Why did you do it?”

“Old Man,” Etienne said, with one last guffaw. “I hated you calling me that. The other kids.” His eyes twinkled. “You didn’t think I could think up a thing like that, did you? I knew that no one would ever suspect me.” He pointed at Jules. “But I knew they would suspect you.”

“Shit, you were right,” Jules said. “Old Man. I don’t know, you always had what I didn’t.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You knew how to talk to Papa. What he wanted.”

“You knew too. It just wasn’t what *you* wanted.”

Jules said nothing.

“You ever think about going home?” Etienne said. Jules came back to his face. No trace of laughter now.

“Sure, I think about it,” Jules said. “And a lot of other places where people don’t shoot at me.”

“I mean, what you do when you get there, huh? What you say? What they say to you?”

“I don’t know what they’ll say to me, but for you I’m sure it’ll look a lot like what happened when you walked in here.”

“No, forget me.”

“Well, I guess I’ll just shake everybody’s hand and – ahh, what’s the use? Look, I won’t get back.”

“You won’t? Where’ll you go?”

“Go? Nowhere. You, me, all of us – matter of time. Everybody I know’s dead or wounded.” He pointed back at Etienne and chuckled. “Except you.”

Nodding, Etienne folded his hands on the table and started at them.

“You think *you’re* making it back?” Jules said. “Man, that trip up the mountain fixed you but good.”

A flush, not from the wine, reddened Etienne’s cheeks again. His chin began to wobble.

“Jesus, not again. Hey, I didn’t mean—”

Etienne’s head dropped onto his hands, making Jules grab at the bouncing bottle and glasses before they spilled. His shoulders heaved with sobs, and even with the noise GIs were looking over to see what was wrong. Shame jolted Jules’ body. He crouched down and put his arm around Etienne’s neck. The feeling of skin on skin was still strange, disorienting.

“Etienne, it’s all right. Shhhhh, it’s okay. Shhhhh.”

The keening continued, and the room got quiet. A small crowd gathered.

“What the fuck did you say to him?” a soldier asked.

“Yeah, who the fuck are you anyway?” another man said.

“He’s my brother,” Jules said. The quiet was frightening. “It’s all right, just leave him alone. He’ll be okay.”

Etienne’s wailing was now the only sound. Even the clinking of the plates and glasses had stopped. Everyone was looking.

“Frenchy, can I help?” a man in the crowd said.

“No!” Jules snapped. He looked around, but all the faces were unfamiliar. “Who called me Frenchy? I said I can handle this.”

“Not you. *Him*. You okay, Frenchy?”

The men edged closer, as if they were attracted to the crying.

“Yeah, you okay?”

Holy shit. They call him Frenchy too.

Now the crying started inside him. A hot fountain pushing up and tightening his chest and throat. His eyes burned, and he felt himself letting go.

No. No. *No.*

He wiped his eyes harshly. The new-uniform smell again.

“We’re okay,” Jules said to the crowd. “Just give us some air.” He leaned in close, spoke into Etienne’s ear.

“Come on now. Come on.” His voice sounded ragged and unsure.

Slowly, Etienne sat up. He sniffled, then grabbed his napkin, blew his nose and covered his face.

“You better now?”

Etienne nodded, blew again.

“In a minute, huh?” he said from behind the napkin. His voice dropped to a whisper. “Are they still back there?”

“It’s okay, Frenchy. You earned it,” said one of the men. He put his hand on Etienne’s shoulder. He recoiled and did not look around.

“Please. It’s all right,” Jules said, waving them off. “Private conversation. Really.”

Slowly, the noise began building again.

Two Frenchys from Bienville. Just look at us now.

“I swear to God, I never did that before,” said Etienne, his eyes darting. “Never.”

“No, I’m sure,” Jules said. “But it’s all over.”

Etienne at last looked behind him. The men had gone back to their celebration. He turned to Jules.

“Nobody understands. All this—it just keeps *happening*.”

“You did something great.”

“No. It’s a lie. All a lie.”

“Knocking out those guns on Delle Forniche?”

“It wasn’t like that, huh?”

Jules snickered.

“Yeah—Clark and the army made a mistake. That’s a first.”

Etienne let out a sigh. His shoulders vibrated with a chill.

“I’m telling you. I have to tell you. It wasn’t like that.”

Jules swallowed another glass of wine.

“No? What was it like?”

“Suicide.” Etienne paused, as if he were repeating the word to himself. “That’s what it was.”

“What?” Jules said. “What are you talking about?”

“Two days, dug in and curled up like a ball. They had the high ground. Picking us off. Playing with us. No reinforcements. We couldn’t even retreat.”

Etienne’s head lolled to one side as he stared vacantly at the floor.

“It was muddy and even the blankets were soaked. The Germans, they would spray fire around our foxholes and mud would splatter all over us. We kept digging in deeper.”

“I’ve done that,” Jules said.

“The second night I couldn’t feel my feet and I was shaking. We all were. They shot up a flare and hit us with the guns again. And this big blob of mud hit the blanket right over my knee. I looked at it in the light of the flare and it was in the shape of a face—nose, chin, head. With the flare swinging back and forth the face looked like it was moving.”

“Wow,” said Jules. “So then it went dark again?”

“No, Jules, listen! It was *my* face! I looked and I looked and I knew it was me. It was talking to me. Telling me.”

“The fuck are you saying? Mud told you *what?*”

“It told me it was time to die. I got up and ran. I didn’t know where. I thought the guns would just get me.”

“Jesus.”

“I remember I was yelling and the bullets—why didn’t they see me? I ran a long time and then I was right up under the guns. They were shooting and shooting over my head and I threw all the grenades I had to make them stop.”

Etienne’s arms were hugging his shoulders now. His head had dropped so far that Jules could only see his red Plauché hair.

“It got quiet. I stood there—just stood there, it was all black around me—and at first I thought I was dead. But I started shivering with the cold and I knew I wasn’t. I didn’t know what else to do, so I came back down and I found this wounded guy on the way and picked him up.”

They looked at each other.

“I just wanted to get in my foxhole and put the blanket back on. I thought when daylight came I could see the face again and it would tell me what to do.”

“Did you,” said Jules, “did you *tell* anyone about this?”

“I came back and they were already pulling out. Jules, they were so happy to see me! I thought they would shoot me for deserting. But they laughed, and shook my hand. I didn’t get it at first. I didn’t even have time to get the blanket. We made it back to camp all this started. That was ten days ago. Today Clark gave me the medal.”

“I still don’t get it,” Jules said. “What part of all that is a lie?”

“*No!*” Etienne hissed. “Don’t you see? I couldn’t take it. I ran away!”

Jules roared with laughter.

“Oh! I know I promised, but you are such an Old Man!”

“Shut up, Jules.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Etienne. Get a grip. You saved everyone in your unit—not to mention the guy you carried. Who gives a fuck about some mud face or what you were thinking? You got a Silver Star and you’re what—worried that you weren’t *brave* enough? Look around you!”

“That’s not all.”

Etienne grabbed the bottle and drank.

“They’re sending me home.”

“Fuck me!” Jules felt the sickness in his gut again. “You gotta be kidding!”

“They’re promoting me. They want me for some War Bond drive. Personal appearances. Movie theatres and stuff. Then they’re sending me back to Avoyelles. Clark says the war is over for me.”

The dining room suddenly got distant, like Jules was looking at it through the wrong end of binoculars. Etienne’s mouth was moving, but all the sounds were muffled. It seemed like in the distance he could hear mortars and eighty-eights. He reached down by his side for his rifle, and not finding it there, started patting his pants and shirt pockets looking for his battle knife. They’re coming. Get down. Get down!

“Jules. Jules.” Etienne reached across the table and shook his arm.

His eyes snapped back into focus.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

You bastard. You fucking lucky bastard.

He reached his hand across the table and shook Etienne’s with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. “I mean, I’m fine, sergeant.” Jules saluted weakly. Another bottle had shown up.

“Don’t do that,” Etienne said. “It’s not official. And anyway, I can’t go.”

“The fuck you can’t. You smile and get on the plane and go.”

“They’ll know, huh? All those people, they’ll take one look and see.”

Etienne's face suddenly had that naked Replacement stare, and Jules fought the urge to smack it away. His voice was low and ominous.

“God damn you, don't even *try* to make going home into some kind of fucking tragedy. You're afraid of looking like a coward in front of people clapping? Try going back up that mountain and looking like a coward there. When I see my fucking mud face you can bet I'll run too. But I guarantee I won't save anybody.”

He looked at his brother with contempt.

“And on that day, you'll be showing off your medal to Papa and telling war stories.”

“You think I wanted all this, huh? To go back home and be a hero? I wanted to die.”

“But you didn't,” Jules said, his contempt lingering. “You even managed to turn suicide into some fucking triumph. Now *this*”—he pointed at the medal—“is your penance. Mine is staying put.”

“That's not right. How can that be right?”

“Right and wrong,” Jules said harshly. “You want to make it right? Give me the medal and I'll go. See what the fucking mud has to say about that.”

Etienne shook his head.

“I'm sorry, Jules. I really am. Don't be angry.”

Jules waved dismissively.

“Forget it. You know me—always wanting a short cut.”

“No, I mean about us. I wish it'd been different is all, huh?”

The bottle was empty again.

“But the war’s almost over,” Etienne said, brightening. “And when you get home, we’ll all be waiting for you.”

God help me. That sounds like a threat.

“Well, I guess there isn’t much either one of us can do,” he said. “The army’s made up its mind.”

“Fuck,” said Etienne for the first time. “Fuck.”

“I’m glad you said that,” Jules said. “’Cause that’s exactly what I was going to say. We agree. We’re both Frenchys, we’re both drunk, and we’re both fucked.”

“Let’s agree on something else,” said Etienne. “No more fighting.”

Jules raised his glass, and Etienne followed.

“From now on,” Jules said, “us Frenchys will only drink.”

**Two:
Tending**

A hawk dropped through the heavy air, catching Alphonse's attention. It sank below the carpet of cotton plants, appearing an instant later with a baby rabbit in its talons. Leaves and branches shuddered as the rest of the family scrambled into new hiding places. He watched as the hawk rose, the baby squirming for a few seconds before going limp.

"Merci, Mister Hawk."

Rabbits were a nuisance, feasting on the plants and getting into the vegetable garden. In other summers he liked walking the rows with Jules and Etienne, hitting the plants with poles and driving the rabbits out of their nests.

"Once upon a time," he said as the bird soared into the distance. Now the hawks were his only defense.

He took off his hat, mopped his brow and dried the band. Crickets were frantic in the heat. The end of his land, where Backstep Road separated his fields from Fulgence's, held three one-acre patches planted with corn, sugar cane and hay grass. The corn and hay fed the animals, the sugarcane was carted outside of town to Moreau and his giant cast-iron kettle, and boiled into syrup. A rutted path separated the patches from the cotton, stretching toward the barn in an unbroken emerald-green expanse, hip-high and shadowless in the flat noonday sun. Just right for early August.

At the wagon Alphonse drank from the bucket and convinced old Ben to pull forward toward the last of the unpicked corn. The air refused to stir and he stood

breathing in the humidity, creases in his forehead rising and falling. He scanned the fields again, as if expecting to see someone, but he was alone. Three white clouds to the east were mushrooming into thunderheads. He pushed the air out of his lungs, picked up the bushel basket and waded in to the stalks.

* * *

Jules searched his body for pain. Head, nothing. Shoulders, nothing. Back, a little stiff. Leg, just a twinge. One through Five, present and accounted for. You're hurting, the Cs in the bottle told him. Bad. You need to take something.

"It's one p.m. in New Orleans. Here are this hour's headlines," the radio announcer said. "The Potsdam conference is now concluded. President Truman, Premier Stalin and Prime Minister Attlee issue a declaration calling for the Japanese to surrender unconditionally or face what Truman calls 'total destruction.'"

Jules sat in Papa's chair, a glass of sweet tea sweating on the side table.

A couple of Cs. That'll kill the pain. He searched again. I feel pretty good. I'm not hurting. Three, that's how many you need, the Cs said. Just right. But I'm not hurting. Three Cs and I'm in this chair all afternoon. Like yesterday. What've I got, fifty left? What am I going to do? Gotta save them, only when I really need them. No, said the Cs, you'll go to the doctor in Marksville, or have Guidry take you to Baton Rouge. Get some more, get all you need. You're hurting. The war. Something for the pain.

“The Russian Army defeats Japanese forces in Manchuria, another major defeat for the Empire of Japan. In Brussels, Vichy prime minister Laval surrenders to Allied authorities and is sent back to Paris for trial.”

He twisted his shoulders back and forth and a sting shot through his back. Ah, there it is. The Cs were satisfied. See? Three is perfect. Last you ’til tonight. He pushed himself up, pulled erect against the stiffness in his legs, and walked toward the bedroom with only a trace of a limp. The cane leaned unused against the dresser. He opened the drawer and pulled out the big brown bottle with the comforting label. Shaking three pills into his hands, he popped them into his mouth and threw his head back. The Cs purred. Something to look forward to, they said.

“More than one million men are now in the Pacific preparing for the invasion of the island of Japan,” the announcer said. “Estimates are that as many as two million Japanese soldiers are dug in across the southern half of the island, in much the same way as they were on Okinawa and Iwo Jima.”

“Consider yourselves already dead,” the lieutenant says. “Forget about what you left behind. Figure you’re not coming back, so if you do think how happy you’ll be.” He laughs with the others. Dead on the inside, he thinks, dead on the outside.

Jules finished the tea, savoring the sweetness on his tongue. God, it’s hot today. He stretched his arms and legs, settling back into the chair. I can see why Papa loves this thing.

An orchestra struck up a happy theme. *House Party*. This’ll be nice until the Cs kick in. He sank deeper in the chair.

Mama's footsteps thumped purposefully through the dining room door. He turned his face to the window as she came in. He heard her pause for a moment in the doorway, then cross toward the front door. She was going at the furniture with a rag and feather duster, her dress stained with dark shapes of sweat.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. "Not well enough to get dressed?" She picked up a couch pillow and punched it until the dust flew.

"Today we have one of our favorite segments, Kids Say the Darndest Things," the host said.

"Terrible," Jules said. "I hurt all over."

Another pillow thudded in her hands.

"Then why don't you go and see the doctor?" she said. "You haven't been since you got back. Isn't there some sort of follow-up the Army has?" She swiped the feather duster on the end-table lamp.

"I'm not in the Army anymore. I was discharged. Honorably. No more orders." That's telling her, said the pills.

"So you don't know why you're feeling so terrible."

"I like this show," he said. "I'm trying to listen."

She picked up a book from the coffee table and let it drop with a bang.

"Really? What's it about?"

"This guy talks to kids," he said.

"You drew a picture of God?" the host said. "But nobody knows what God looks like."

“They do now,” the boy said. The audience laughed.

“I don’t listen much during the day,” Mama said. “I’m too busy.” She grabbed the arm of a chair and dragged it across the floor. “When I finish in here I’m going out to help your Papa pick corn. Looks like it’ll storm.”

Her back was still toward him—she worked the duster along the bookcase.

“Mama, I wish I could help. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Eggs need collecting. Pigs need feeding. The blades of the harrow need sharpening. You could do that sitting down.”

I could. I could actually do that. Maybe I can get up. Show them. A warm glow ignited at the base of his neck and spread to his shoulders. Don’t bother, the pills countered. Too late now. Feel that? The harrow can wait. I’ll get up early tomorrow and be at work in the barn before Papa finishes breakfast. Sure you will, said the Cs. But now. Now.

“So what are the names of the four seasons?”

“Salt, pepper, ketchup and mustard.” A little girl with a cute squeaky voice. More laughter.

Mama picked up his empty glass, wiped under it, banged it back down.

“A coaster,” she said. “That’s the least you can do.”

Jules shifted himself up.

“Why are you doing this to me, Mama? Don’t you think I want to help? I’m wounded, remember?”

She stood over him and began polishing the radio cabinet with short jabbing strokes.

“Wounded,” she said. “I’m sorry, I forgot. It must be so hard being wounded out there on the dance floor at the Blue Moon with Adele.” She reached down and switched the radio off, then kept polishing. “Drivel. Waste of time.”

“Oh, so I’m not supposed to have any fun now? You and Papa think I should just stay here and rot?”

She looked at him for the first time.

“I’ll tell you what’s rotting. The corn is rotting, because we can’t pick it fast enough. He’s tired, he’s not feeling well. And he’s working out there alone in this heat.”

He slouched down again. The codeine felt new, just right. Maybe you should switch the radio back on, the pills suggested

“Ask Raymond,” he said. “He’s probably not doing anything today.” Relaxing into the warmth now, he yawned and stretched his arms and legs again, relishing the easy flow of the drug down to his fingertips and toes. He opened his eyes to find her leaning toward him.

“What are you doing?” he said, pushing the chair backward with his feet.

“I hear you,” she said. “At night, when you’re sleeping. You have nightmares and I hear you moaning. Sometimes I stand in the door and watch you. You thrash the covers and sweat. I never can make out what you’re saying.”

The warmth pooled in his stomach and rolled itself into nausea.

“Italy,” he said. “It comes back to me.”

“Sure,” she said. “But I don’t know what to do. Should I wake you up? Hold you like I did when you were a boy?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe they’ll go away.” Maybe she’ll go away.

“I just stand there and watch. I wish I could go inside your head and pull out whatever is doing this to you. Strangle it, kill it.”

“Yeah. That’d be nice.”

“Except only you can do that.”

Tell her to be quiet, the Cs were saying. Tell her to leave us alone.

“Come on, Mama.”

“What do you think I should do? Just keep standing there watching?”

“You want me to tell you my nightmares? My God, that’d only make it worse.”

“You’re not the only one having nightmares,” she said. “Maybe I should tell you mine.”

“I already know them,” Jules said. “I’m disappointing you. You look at me all day long—like that one, right now. I can’t help it I came back this way.”

“You came back,” she said. “There’s no more war.”

“I didn’t have any choice,” he muttered. “I had no place else to go.”

Wait, the Cs said. What did you just say?

“Mama, I didn’t mean that.”

“This is what I’m talking about. You think I don’t understand? About you and Papa and Etienne? I was there.”

“I wanted to come back a hero,” he said. “Come home and show off all my medals, then take off and no one would ever see me again.” The pool spread out again, and the Cs resumed their place. “Now Etienne’s the hero and I’m stuck.”

“Look at yourself,” she said, “Is this behaving like a war hero?”

Don’t let her get away with that, the pills said.

“Will you just leave me alone Mama?” he said. “You and Papa are as bad as the Krauts.”

He closed his eyes and nestled back into the chair. That’s more like it, the Cs said.

He felt her standing there, looking at him. He wanted to open his eyes, but the Cs advised against it. Look at her and she wins. His cheeks bloomed red. He shut his eyes tighter, faced the wall. A gurgle deep in his bowels sounded like a waterfall.

“Well then,” she said at last, “Let’s you and I remember you said that. Maybe you can think about what it means.”

Too far, he thought. Not far enough, the Cs said. He opened his eyes. Another battle lost.

“Mama, I’m just not having a good day today. I’ll be better tomorrow.”

“Your bad days seem to end when you leave this house.” She swiped the feather duster at the floor lamp next to the radio. A huff of muggy wind blew through the window.

Change the subject, the Cs suggested.

“I’m just so tired. All those nightmares.”

“You fighting the Germans.”

“Sometimes,” he said. “Mostly I can’t tell.”

“Krauts,” she said. “Coming at you from every direction.”

“I didn’t mean you and Papa.”

Sure you did, the Cs said, layering on more numbness.

“The enemy,” she said.

What is she talking about? What enemy?

She walked into the bedroom and came back with the bottle. It rattled in her hand, the pills sounding lost inside its emptiness.

“Here’s your enemy. I should throw them down the privy. You want to fight something? Fight these.”

Do something! the pills screamed.

“Don’t you dare!” Jules stood up and grabbed at the bottle. It fell to the floor between them. “This is all I’ve got. What I’m hanging onto. You can’t understand, so don’t even try. I’ve got to do this my way, so stay out. Don’t go in my room anymore—don’t touch anything.”

She reached out and tugged at the sleeve of his dirty t-shirt.

“Your way. Like this?”

She pointed at the chair and the radio.

“Like this?”

The sky outside darkened. She picked up the duster and the rag and walked into the dining room.

“You sure got out of that chair without much trouble.”

He cradled the bottle, sat down and turned on the radio.

“Is there any more iced tea?” he asked her fading footsteps. The pills laughed.

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Alphonse knelt on the dead yellow stalks, reaching for ears on the ground.

“Too late,” he said. “Too late.”

He looked behind at the row he’d just finished.

“Can’t miss one.”

In the last days of winter when the cows and chickens were hungry, every ear would count. He pushed himself up and felt a bead of perspiration roll down his spine. A wild breeze rustled the stalks, the blazing sun darkening the bottoms of the thunderheads. When the corn was picked, the stalks would have to be gathered and bundled. He looked forward at the corn still on the stalk, and his shoulders sagged

“*Chere?* Are you in there?” Henriette’s voice.

“Right here.” He stepped out of the row. She had a pitcher and a glass.

“You want some tea? I made it nice and sweet.”

She poured and watched him drink.

“It’s getting ready to storm,” she said. She put the pitcher on the wagon, took a bushel basket and went into the row he’d just come from. He drained his glass and followed. For fifteen minutes, neither one spoke. One would come out and empty the basket into the wagon, then the other.

The sun disappeared and the breeze cooled. When the first rumble of thunder sounded in the distance they both stopped and came to the wagon. Ben stamped his feet nervously.

“Get up in the seat,” Henriette said. “I’ll lead Ben.”

“No, you get up there,” Alphonse said. “You been on your feet all day.”

“And you haven’t?”

Another peal of thunder.

“Let’s both sit,” she said, and pulled him up. Alphonse took the reins and turned Ben’s head. As soon as he saw the barn, Ben started moving. He strained to get the wagon going, then picked up speed. Lightning flashed toward the east.

“Looks like we’re in a race,” Alphonse said, smiling. He snapped the reins.

“Come on, hoss!”

The air was thick and damp as the wagon bumped along. Henriette shivered and Alphonse put his arm around her. A hundred yards from the barn a splattering of big cold drops arrived, driven almost horizontal by the wind. The sky was layered in gray and daylight shone from an odd angle.

“Here it comes!” Henriette said as the drops became a sheet. Alphonse whooped as Ben reached the barn doors and pulled the wagon inside. Henriette leaned into him and their laughter disappeared into the thrum of the tin roof.

“Made it!” Alphonse said, helping Henriette down from the wagon. Ben shook himself dry and all four cows lumbered in, mooing their anxiety. He found a clean rag on the workbench and they wiped their faces. Lightning cracked nearby and the exploding

thunder made them cringe. The rain settled into a steady mutter, puddles forming in the ruts by the door.

The corncrib was a small room defined by worn vertical barn boards with spaces in between. Alphonse opened its door and surprised a barn cat with a mouse in its mouth. It scampered away into the barn's dark recesses.

The crib was half-filled, and he took the loaded bushel basket from the wagon and threw the ears in with the rest. Henriette reached for the other basket.

"Why don't you go in the house?" he said. "I can finish here."

"I'll wait," she said. "It'll stop soon." She emptied her basket. "Almost done, right? Just a couple more rows?"

"The end keeps moving away," he said. He watched her step into the crib, and when she came back he took her in his arms. "You were a big help." She pressed her cheek against his damp overalls, then met his eyes. "*Je t'aime.*" They closed their eyes and lingered in their kiss. Without a word, they went back to unloading the corn.

"I was roasting like the *cochon* out there," he said after a few minutes. "The iced tea and that rain revived me."

"You should come in at lunch and take a nap," she said. "Sleep until it gets a little cooler."

"I know," he said. The pile of corn shifted in the crib, ears bumping against the wall. "I don't like being in the house right now."

"It's your house," she said.

"He doesn't understand," Alphonse said. "I didn't raise him just to *sit there.*"

“He takes those pills and he doesn’t care about anything.”

Alphonse’s face got red, and he threw ears into the basket harder.

“Excuses,” he said. “*I’ll be better tomorrow.*”

A couple of ears had fallen to the ground and one of the cows sauntered over and crunched one into her mouth.

“Jersey! Shoo!” Henriette said. “I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s already August,” he said. “In another month it’s harvest. We gotta get the hay in and bundle the corn sheaves before that. Doesn’t he *realize*?”

“He’s still hurt.”

“What’s hurt? He’s down at Nolan’s and the Blue Moon with Adele, or with Raymond, or both. Teeny’s all over me about it—he says Jules is a bad influence. What am I supposed to do? He’s too old for the belt.”

“Last year we got everything done with both the boys gone,” she said. “We’ll just have to do it again.”

“I don’t know where I found the energy,” Alphonse said. “Anymore I’m exhausted by lunch.”

“I’ll help you more,” she said. “I haven’t been able to—I thought, you know, if I paid more attention to Jules.”

“Good for nothing,” he said. “All he ever did was make trouble.”

“Alphonse! Enough.”

“I see what it’s doing to you,” he said. “I watch you cleaning and cooking and doing for him. You think he’ll notice—and when he doesn’t you work harder. Now you’re helping out in the fields? There aren’t enough hours.”

“He’ll get better,” she said. “In the meantime we’ll make do. I’ll make the time.”

“He is better,” he said. “He’s off the cane, and when he’s not drunk he seems fine. He’s lived his whole life here, how does he not know I need him?”

“*Chere*, I don’t know.”

“Etienne, you could depend on. I never had to ask. Ten years old, he wanted to stay home from school and help me. I remember him walking away with his books under his arm. His overalls a size too big. ‘I’ll be back right after school,’ he’d say.”

She stroked his arm gently.

“Don’t do this,” she said. “No more.”

Alphonse threw a bushel of corn into the crib, the ears thumping against the wall.

“It’s not just this year,” he said. “It’s all the years. This was supposed to be Etienne. When the war was over. How many times did we say it?”

“You said it,” she said. “Many times.”

“I used to be so sure. Etienne—”

“The Lord has been good to us,” Henriette said. “You have to trust in Him now.”

“We’d be out in the fields—the three of us. Etienne seemed so happy, and Jules looked like he couldn’t wait for the sun to go down so he could do something else. I’d watch Etienne and think I was so lucky. I have a son I can pass this on to, and Jules won’t mind because he wants something else. Perfect. God *has* blessed us, shown me the way.”

She wheeled around and clapped her hands.

“Betsy! Jersey! Rose! Gracie! Shoo! Shoo now!” The cows grunted their discontent as they shuffled to the far side of the barn. She stood facing them, hands on hips, the rain pattering overhead.

“But you know what I think now?” he said, louder. “The war was so big. So much death. So many lives. Jules and Etienne in that jeep. In that moment, *there*, I think God got distracted. He looked away, just for one second. They hit that mine, and He wasn’t watching. One was supposed to die, one wasn’t.”

“Shame on you, Alphonse Plauche,” she said without looking back. Thunder rolled, but quieter, more distant. “Wallowing in your own muck.”

“It’s God that’s ashamed,” he said. “He knows, but He can’t look me in the eye and tell me.”

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The radio was a pleasant hum. A soap opera or something. Jules sat low in the chair, his head lolled to one side, eyes closed. The house was empty and the codeine showed no signs of letting go. Best time, the Cs told him. When you’re not in pain. The world drew back and there was nothing to think about.

That light in the ward at Brooke. After the morphine. Long and narrow, with a grid sitting in front of the fluorescent tubes. Two white metallic rods – one on each end – terminating in small round raised white medallions. So beautiful, so pleasant to watch.

Time passed and the shadows crept along the ceiling. Just watch and listen to the unseen voices murmur, like the radio. God, what I wouldn't give for a shot of morphine now.

The wind whistled, rattling the sash. They were out there. A storm. Why was she so angry? I told her how bad I hurt. Not today. Not with a storm coming up. Tomorrow. I won't take any Cs tomorrow. Maybe you will, the Cs said. I'll get out there early and work all day. Show Papa he's wrong.

Etienne. Etienne would be out there, pain and all. He wouldn't have to prove anything to Papa. No tomorrow for Etienne.

Tomorrow. How long till they figure out about One through Five? The codeine waved off the questions. Doesn't matter. Not important. Just the feeling. Floating while sitting still. That's an accomplishment, right?

No tomorrow for Etienne. Jesus, where did that come from? And which Etienne? The one in Trattoria Anna? Yeah. That one would probably be out there too.

A woman cried on the radio. The wind picked up. To the right, out the window, the cotton and corn and hay were there, grasping and pulling at him. He shook his arm. Tending season, Papa called the summer. The crop takes care of itself, and we take care of everything else. Mending, sharpening, baling, getting the corn in. So many jobs you couldn't think of them all. If you start, the Cs said, it will never end.

In a night disconnected from time, he listens to distant gunfire and the low talk of men. The order is Attack At First Light and he sinks deeper into his hole. Right now, he thinks, while it's dark, I'm safe.

How could I have ever thought this would work? Back in the spring, when One through Five were killing me. They saw me, and made me stop. Get better, they said. But it's never good enough. I'm doing the best I can. Why can't they see that? See what they're doing to me?

Thunder reverberated and he opened his eyes. The storm was coming on fast. No working in the fields now. Not much I could have done. The mantle clock said it was past three. Raymond was coming by when he got finished and they would go to Nolan's. Adele would be there too. Maybe Mama and Papa wouldn't come back in before Raymond got there. That'd be great.

The codeine ebbed a bit and he flexed his arms and legs, hoping to squeeze just a little more effect. I should take a couple more, just to get me to Nolan's. The bottle was in his lap. We're right here, said the Cs. He looked at it and thought of taking it out of his duffel that first day. It seemed so big it would never be empty—it would renew like Jesus with the loaves and fishes. If he went to the doctor now, would they call Brooke? Would Brooke tell them about him stealing the bottle? Could he get the prescription? Just a piece of paper, the Cs said. Of course you'll get it. A new bottle. Think about how good that will feel.

The storm tossed the branches of the live oaks and filled the room with the sharp gun-metal smell of imminent rain. Thunder came closer. Another soap opera on the radio, baleful organ music. He considered getting up, standing at the sash and pulling it down. Maybe in a minute, the pills said. Not yet.

A light tapping on the front door glass startled him with an unpleasant shot of adrenaline. He looked around. The tapping continued. Who the hell could this be?

He set the bottle carefully on the table and pushed himself up, the stiffness in his joints melting into the Cs after a couple of steps.

Adele stood there smiling, the wind tossing her hair. The air sparked with lightning as the rain let loose.

“You want me to drown out here?” she said.

He stood aside and she stepped into his arms. She turned her face up to his and kissed him hard.

“Oooowee,” she said. “How long since you had a bath and a shave? You smelling pretty ripe, honey.”

“Honey,” he said. “That’s funny, coming from you.”

“We’ll throw some after-shave on you in a minute.” She wore a yellow cotton dress with white and green flowers. His hands moved up and down her back, feeling the contour of her underwear.

“I was having a dream about you,” he said.

“Where is everybody?” she said.

“Everybody is picking corn by the Backstep Road.” The rain drummed on the roof, splashing down in rivers onto the sodden ground. “At least until this started.”

“I made it just in time,” she said. “It was pretty bad today. Papa didn’t like the way I made his lunch. I couldn’t stand being in that house a minute longer.”

“He’s an asshole,” Jules said. “Don’t listen to him.”

“Easy for you to say,” she said. “No one’s trying to drive you out of *this* house—turn you into something you’re not.”

“You think?” he said. She was close, right up against him. The erection, right on schedule. Cs and all. No problem, said the Cs. Wonderful.

“Raymond’s coming by later,” he said. “Let’s all go to Nolan’s.”

“That’s later,” she whispered. “What about now?” He felt his stubble scrape against the softness of her face. Now? With the two of them coming in any time? Crazy. Wasn’t it? Not really, said the codeine. Her hand drifted around to his crotch and stayed there.

“We can’t,” he said. “The windbreak. If they catch us—”

“If they catch us, so what? I’m sick of the windbreak. We’re grown-ups, Jules. We can screw inside. Besides, we’re getting out of here anyway.”

Lightning struck close and he jumped. She pressed her hand harder against him, stroking deliberately up and down.

“No,” he said. But he knew it would happen. I can’t stop. Why would you want to stop? the Cs asked. He cupped her ass, anticipated the roundness of her nipples, the golden curls around her pussy, the way she squeezed as she guided him inside. He swallowed, the taste in his mouth ragged and foul. Should I kiss her like this? Then her tongue was in his mouth and she took him by the hand and led him into the bedroom.

The rain pounded harder. The curtains blew in and the wet wood of the sill was earthy in his nose. She fell back onto the bed, kicking off her sandals and flourishing the dress effortlessly over her head. He watched her, the pleading in her face, the unfolding

of her body. One more thing. One more thing. What is it? He turned and saw the door ajar. He shut it and threw the bolt, its dry click sounding like the cocking of a gun.

After awhile, the storm spent itself and the house quieted. Water fell off the roof in smaller and smaller drops then stopped, leaving only the heat and saturated air. Drawn by the sounds of passion, soft steps came into the living room and paused.

“Oh God!” Jules’ voice from inside. “Oh God!”

Mama’s hand reached for the knob, turned it, then let go.