



A fictional memoir -
except when it isn't.
From a cell in
Bridgeton Prison,
Timothy DiAngelo
looks back upon a
curious life.

BACKSTRAW

By Tom Ball

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BACKSTRAW

A NOVEL BY

TOM BALL

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TWO

DREAMLAND



In matters both social and intellectual, it could be said that Clarion was decidedly behind the national curve. Although this was the 1960s, most of the adults in our town still listened to big band music, the films that came to the Rialto were usually about ten years old and young people wore clothes that were so far out of fashion they were almost back in fashion again. Girls were encouraged to marry young and stay in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant. People of color were patronized and treated like children or domestic pets.

Elsewhere in the nation society had progressed beyond such things, but in Clarion we still had city-sponsored minstrel shows, featuring white professionals in blackface, crooning "*Mammy*." And then there was the notorious Dr. Beaconbush's Dreamland Circus, a seedy carnival that magically appeared on the outskirts of town every spring, complete with antiquated striptease acts and a side-show full of genuine human freaks.

For three years I'd begged my aunt and uncle to let me go to Dr. Beaconbush's Dreamland Circus, but they wouldn't let me –

they claimed I was too young for such entertainment. But this year I was bound and determined to go, permission or not. So it was with immense delight that I spotted the poster outside the Faulkner Building that told us Dr. Beaconbush and company were coming in late May – just two weeks hence. They would be setting up the carnival a mile into the Woods, just north of town.

I had read a little about Dr. Beaconbush's carnival the year before in the Gazette, our local newspaper. It seemed that some of Clarion's more conservative citizenry had been up in arms that year, attempting to keep the carnival away from town. According to the article, the rides were dangerous, the games were rigged and the sideshow was appalling. Of course this fired up my friends and me exponentially.

Some of the uproar was apparently over a bizarre hypnotist named Chief Pantugal, who had the appearance of a wild man of Borneo and who "hypnotized" chickens and roosters before biting their heads off – acts which were deemed cruel by both the church and the citizens groups.

But the real wrath of the good citizens was aimed in equal measure at the freak show and the hoochie coochie girls. Evidently there were several genuine freaks in the show, and although the hoochie coochie show was off limits to children, it was reported to go much further than community standards ought to allow.

Dr. Beaconbush's Dreamland Circus was considered wide open – the kind of carnival that, as long as it stayed outside the city limits, could play as raunchy as it wanted and the games could take the marks for anything they could get. In retrospect I'm sure such conditions could never have existed without the tacit approval of the local authorities, and probably only after substantial payoffs from Dr. Beaconbush.

But none of this concerned me at the time – I only wanted to see it all for myself. I swore a solemn blood oath that I was going, no matter what, and I was hoping perhaps to convince Jolene Gates to come along with me. I had elaborate adolescent plans for her inside the Tunnel Of Love, most of which involved scandalous hand-holding activity. But Jolene was paying no attention to me whatso-

ever, and given that my romantic intentions were being thwarted by her indifference, I reverted to Plan B and convinced Riley that it was essential that we attend.

Marilee McCullers wanted to come too but Riley and I were somewhat averse to bringing her along with us – after all, we figured, what if we got lucky and managed to sneak into the kootch show? But then Marilee told us she was curious too about the kootch show, and she also promised not to scream or barf at the freaks. And then, as if to clinch the deal, she offered to pay our one-dollar admissions. Case closed. But on Tuesday, four days before we were due to sneak away to the carnival, an event befell the town that was to have ramifications for some time to come.

*

It started out like any spring school day. My aunt shooed me off towards Diaper with a paper bag lunch and I sauntered away in a daydream. Clouds like steel wool filled the sky.

Upon arriving I noticed Riley, Marilee, Langston and Rosie Iwekogu all huddled in a corner of the playground, talking. Riley was gesticulating wildly and Marilee seemed very concerned about something. Jimmy Wells, ordinarily in the heart of things, was nowhere to be seen.

"What's up?" I said, tossing my notebook onto the tarmac. "Please tell me some good news, like Mank choked on a chicken bone?"

Riley said, "We've got a sub today, some skinny wimp named Marshall. Fuckhead Mank ain't here – he went off to help some other teachers look for Becky Sue."

"Becky Sue? Becky Sue Wells?"

"Know any other Becky Sues?" Marilee said. "She's gone. My dad told me not to talk to any strangers."

Riley looked up and said, "Becky Sue wasn't in her bed this morning. She wandered off last night and nobody can find her."

"Well, where's Jimmy?" I asked. "He'll know where she went, won't he? Don't they share a room?"

"Jimmy's out searching for her, too," said Langston. "Their whole family's looking – neighbors and cops, too – she might just be out walking around, but how far can a no-brain retard get?"

Marilee shot him a frosty look, then said, "Rosie saw all the cops outside Jimmy's house."

I looked at Rosie Iwekogu. He shrugged and said, "Yeah, man."

"What'd you see?"

"Couple cop cars, and some neighbors. Some ol' lady from 'cross the street say Mrs. Wells goes to wake up Jimmy for school, and he's sleeping in there, but Becky Sue's long *gone*." He whistled breezily to signify the wind.

This was strange – how could Becky Sue Wells leave the house without waking anyone? And although Langston had worded it insensitively, he did have a point: how far could she get? Especially considering she needed a walker?

Just then the bell rang and we all trudged off to class, taught that day by a wiry, polite substitute named Mr. Marshall. We were to hear no further news of Becky Sue for a while.

*

Over the next several days the community mobilized in a search. The local Oddfellows Club and dozens of volunteers slogged through the marshes and woods around town – even Uncle Rocco helped. Police used bloodhounds, and took canoes out onto the Racaugwa River. Investigators scoured phone records and combed nearby houses and apartments for clues. Residents took to the streets to put up missing-person posters that Evelyn had designed. The First Baptist Church held a candlelight vigil.

The Sliupas Fish Market and Bobby's Family Restaurant both donated food and coffee for the searchers and the Fire Department hoisted an enormous American flag. Even Frenchy and Lord Grizzly from the Faulkner Building understood the problem and were keeping their intoxicated eyes open. But ultimately it was for naught – Becky Sue Wells had seemingly dropped off the planet.

But by Saturday I wasn't thinking of Becky Sue. In my adolescent single-mindedness, the most important thing that day was sneaking off to the carnival. It was Memorial Day weekend, and I told Auntie Nell I was going over to Marilee's for the day and staying for supper. Marilee told her parents she was going over to a girlfriend's house. Riley didn't have to tell his parents anything – he was on a long leash.

The three of us were to meet at noon out in front of the Hotel Weatherford. It was a sizzling day, windy, but thankfully too early in the season to be terribly humid. The sun hung in the sky like a ball of copper. Marilee was already there when I arrived, looking smug in a girl's Dodgers cap, P-F Flyers and her sky blue dress. Predictably, Riley was twenty minutes late. Just then Langston Tennent happened to be traipsing by and promptly invited himself to come along, so the four of us took off at a brisk clip towards the Woods. As usual, Riley took the lead.

"Whattaya think the freaks'll be like?" he asked no one in particular.

"They'll be like, totally *gross*!" answered Marilee, laughing, the freckles on her face tightening into a crinkly brown ball.

Lang Tennent grabbed a handful of leaves from a hedge and began to chew on them thoughtfully. "They're probably all fakes, anyway," he said.

"I don't think so," said Riley. "My brother Clark went last year, and he said they're all real. He said the private kootch show is real too, but it's adults only, after dark. With freaks in it, too!"

"We gotta see that," I said. "Think we can sneak in?"

"Maybe," said Riley. "And Clark also told me they have real unborn babies in, like, chemical jars!"

"That's actually true," I said, proud of my note of authority. "I read about that in the newspaper. They've got unborn Siamese twins, too. Real ones! They're supposed to be educational, but the carnies all call them 'pickled punks.'"

Marilee made a disgusted face and then we were all laughing out loud like Canada geese.

It took half an hour to walk from town into the Woods. Along the way we happened across several other groups of kids headed in the same direction, and groups of grownups, too – seemed like everybody wanted to check out the carnival.

The place could be heard from a quarter mile away – aside from the crowd noise and the mechanical squeaks from the various rides, the carnival also had a PA system blasting music, and a tape loop that repeated the same ten seconds of demonic laughter over and over again. Soon we could see the outlines of several colorful rides: a ferris wheel, a small roller coaster, and others with names like Gravitron, Zipper, and Centrifugi.

Tents of various colors and shapes had sprouted up, and temporary plywood structures had been slapped together to form a small city of fun. A roll of red plastic fencing surrounded the five or six acres of the Woods, and garishly painted arrows all pointed the way to the entrance. Off to the side was a banner proclaiming *Texas Proud Dairy Day*, where two men in Houston Oilers uniforms milked a fiberglass cow. Above the admissions gate was a giant sign, *Dr. Beaconbush's Dreamland Circus*.

Langston coughed up his admission and then, true to her word, Marilee paid for herself, Riley and me. We passed through the turnstile and looked around expectantly. There seemed to be action everywhere: games, rides, squealing kids, half-drunk military guys, families, teenagers and the smell of carnival food.

"Hey, let's get something to eat!" Langston yelled, so we all sprinted over to the food area for fried burritos, churros and sno-kones. We figured this would hold us over for an hour or so.

The first ride we spied up close was the Hurricane, a steel and wooden roller coaster. Although it was understandably smaller than the permanent ones at a real amusement park, it was the largest and most dominating ride in sight. The four of us piled in and soared around the Woods for all of about two minutes. Riley attempted to stand up during the ride but gravity and inertia knocked him back down into his seat – a good thing since a 2x4 could have easily sheared off his head.

After the Hurricane we tried the Gravitron, an enormous spinning wheel with a metal fence around the perimeter. Kids stood against the fence, then the wheel began to rotate, pushing everyone back into the fence with centrifugal force. After a while the floor hydraulically dropped away. Langston sported an interesting green hue when we got off the Gravitron but the rest of us enjoyed it immensely.

The ferris wheel looked relatively tame after the Gravitron, so we passed. But then we came upon a ride called the Tilt-A-Whirl. "This is a total barf ride," Riley yelled excitedly and it did look like fine amusement, but the line for it extended a hundred yards and none of us had the patience for a half hour wait, so instead we rode on the bumper cars. The operator was a pleasant enough college kid who let us go a second time for free.

At that point Langston announced that he wanted to try his luck on some prizes so we migrated over to the games area. Here was the usual variety of carny stuff: skee-ball, a shooting gallery, pinball and the dime toss. The darts game was impossible to win – the darts were dull and the balloons were under-inflated – but we watched for a while anyway. I thought I saw Mr. Mank out of the corner of my eye but when I looked again, he was gone.

Standing behind us in the games area, a couple of skinny Marines were jabbering excitedly. "What time's the adults-only show start?" one asked.

"Sundown," said the other, "out in the back and way beyond the meadow, up the hill."

"Think it'll be like last year?"

"Who knows? Jefferson says they got something really twisted this year and the cops have been paid off."

Jefferson, I thought to myself. Mr. Mank's first name was Jefferson...

Langston interrupted my train of thought. "Jesus," he said, "could they shut that thing up, *please*?" Ever since arriving we'd heard an annoying tape recording of hideous cackling, and now, from the games area, we could finally see where it was coming

from: outside the Fun House a wooden clown rocked back and forth, spewing with Homeric laughter.

"Oh, that'll be too cool," Marilee cried, so we ran across a meadow, leapt up some stairs two-at-a-time and piled into the Fun House, quarters in hand. At the top of the stairs, a long, twisting hardwood slide dumped out into a mirror maze. Farther along was a large rotating barrel called the Human Laundry. Every few feet on the walkway a blast of hot air would shoot up from the floor, making girls scream when their dresses flew over their heads. There was also an object called a Centrifugi, which resembled a giant record player – kids would try to ride on it only to be thrown off. The floor bounced in places, usually in front of distortion mirrors, and there was an entire diagonally-tilted room to play in.

"What's inside that one?" Marilee yelled. She had spotted another tent we had somehow missed – an oversize green and white tent with several hand-painted signs out in front.

WONDERLAND MUSEUM – TEN IN ONE, proclaimed the largest sign in red paint. *Two Headed Pig, Tap Dancing Chicken, Celestina the Bearded Lady, Arnie the Penguin Boy, Pulu the Human Blockhead, Zip and Pip, Hibachi the Raisin Boy, World's Biggest Rat, Giant Kentucky Redwood Bat, and The World's Fattest Man - Six Girls to Hug Him, and a Boxcar to Lug Him!*

Our eyes lit up. A ticket to this tent was a whopping fifty-five cents, but I would have gladly spent my life savings. We paid our admissions and scurried inside.

About forty other people were in there, milling around and gawking at the various displays. The Two Headed Pig was in fact a legitimate two-headed pig except it was deceased and stuffed. The Tap Dancing Chicken was just a regular chicken with tiny pieces of scotch tape on its feet so it would shake itself to get rid of the tape.

The World's Biggest Rat was revolting and massive – it sat in a wet, wooden stall with a bit of cyclone fencing around it. The thing weighed seventy-five pounds and we all agreed it probably really *was* the world's biggest rat. Of course years later in high school biology I would learn we were actually looking at a South American Capybara, and not even a particularly large one at that.

The Giant Kentucky Redwood Bat was just a sixty-ounce baseball bat made out of redwood by the Louisville Slugger Company. All of us chuckled at this except Langston, who became irate until Marilee told him to cork his beak.

The human freaks, though, were all quite real. The couple known as Zip and Pip were indeed genuine pinheads – or, as they would say in today's more enlightened world, people who suffered from a cephalic dysfunction that made their heads abnormally small.

Hibachi the Raisin Boy was a black man of about sixty who was normal looking except that his skin was extraordinarily baggy and loose. A thin, bald headed white guy informed us that Hibachi was from Africa and had been kidnapped by a tribe of cannibal headhunters and put into a stew pot where he was simmered for a few weeks, which evidently accounted for his skin. Hibachi looked bored and at one point I heard him ask somebody for a Racing Form.

Just then, over in the corner of the tent I happened to spy Mank again, huddling surreptitiously with a group of men. "Hey, Riles," I whispered, pointing, "get a load of the *real* freak show." Riley cursed under his breath.

Next we came upon the area where the World's Fattest Man was supposed to be, but he wasn't there. A sexy female dwarf with a Zsa Zsa Gabor accent came out instead, dressed in a tight one-piece leopard-skin bathing suit. She apologized and told us that the fat man could not appear because he was taking a nap.

Langston yelled, "Why can't we see him sleeping? He's still fat when he's asleep, isn't he?" but the dwarf lady shook her head no.

A greasy looking patron ogled at the dwarf lady and said, "Well, what about *you*, baby? I wouldn't mind seeing *you* asleep next to me. You gonna be part of tonight's private show?"

Two or three other men snorted meanly and one made a wolf whistle. The dwarf lady frowned and spit on the ground. "Hey, pal, I got a tweezers – go find your cock!"

The greasy man reddened with anger and looked like he was about to say something back, but then we were all swept along towards Celestina the Bearded Lady. Celestina was real – she pulled

her whiskers to prove they weren't fake. She had a girlish giggle, spoke Italian and looked about forty. Riley thought she would be a nice looking woman if she shaved, but Langston figured if she shaved, she would probably have to get a real job instead of getting paid just to sit in a chair and pull on her whiskers.

Arnie the Penguin Boy was in the next stall and he was not an attractive sight. Arnie was basically a torso and head with hands and feet directly attached – no legs or arms at all. He wore a striped diaper and could waddle and talk in a high-pitched voice, but he wasn't particularly friendly. A couple of the younger kids in the crowd burst into tears at the sight of Arnie the Penguin Boy.

Then out from behind the curtain popped a guy who called himself Pulu the Human Blockhead. He was a massive, lumbering, dimwitted looking man in his fifties, his face all hard, boxy angles. Not outwardly a freak at all, he was nevertheless in possession of some curious talents.

Once a sufficient crowd had gathered, Pulu smashed a 100-watt light bulb with his head and ate the glass, licking his chops with apparent pleasure. Then he extinguished a burning cigar by snuffing it out on his tongue. Meanwhile the skinny, bald headed white guy told us how Pulu came from the Ural Mountains and had been raised by a band of wild goats, and was therefore completely impervious to pain.

Riley caught my eye and pointed to the barker's hand, so I took a better look and noticed he had no fingers on his right hand – only a thumb.

At that moment Pulu proceeded to drive a five-inch nail into his nasal passage with a hammer, with no evident damage. After he pulled out the nail he did it again with a screwdriver, and then finally with a running power drill.

By the time we left the Wonderland Museum, Langston was hungry again so we stopped and shared a couple of french fried onion blossoms. Something fat and white caught the corner of my eye – it was Mank in his white silk suit, rapidly approaching our table. He coughed twice, looked Riley in the eye and said, "So, I see some of my students are enjoying their Saturday off from school?"

Riley almost choked and none of the rest of us said a word. Mank went on. "Birdwell?" he said, still looking at Riley, "I've been searching for you and your loser buddies. The carnival got a call at four o'clock this afternoon from the Clarion Police. Your father has been in a motorcycle accident."

Riley's eyes grew larger and he swallowed a chunk of fried onion. "Is he OK?"

"He's in the hospital with a broken collarbone, a few busted ribs and some internal injuries. I was instructed to tell you to either go home or go to the hospital. Your mother and brother are already there."

Riley looked around at the rest of us. "What time is it?"

Mank took a peek at his gold pocket watch. "6:40."

Langston shrugged at Riley. "I'll go back to town with you if you want. I'd better be heading on home, anyway."

I didn't really want to go just yet – I still wanted to try to sneak in and see what the private show was about, but I halfheartedly offered to accompany Riley too. He said, "Naw, you guys hang out. I'll see you tomorrow." He and Lang got up from the plastic table, waved goodbye and took off running toward the gate. Mr. Mank frowned and watched them go, then tromped away.

Marilee looked up at me and said, "Maybe we should have gone with them?"

I sat for a moment and pondered this development. With Riley and Langston along, the boys had outnumbered Marilee – but now it was just the two of us and the entire dynamic had changed. It would have been awkward enough for a twelve-year-old boy to try to weasel into the private girlie show, but the prospect of sneaking into it with a *girl* was somehow even more unnerving.

As if reading my mind, she gave a small, bemused smile and said, "Don't worry, I still want to see whatever's up there on the hill. It'll be dark in half an hour – what do you want to do till then?"

Lacking alternatives, we decided to stand under the Tilt-A-Whirl to see if anybody's money fell out while they were upside down, but this proved fruitless. As darkness approached we determined it was time to start sneaking up the hill.

In back of the Hurricane ride was a meadow at the base of a rise, and up at the top, if you squinted hard enough, you could barely see the outline of a black tent. We figured this was probably where the kootch show would take place, so we took a circuitous route through a section of twisted oak trees and approached the tent from the eastern side.

Sneaking up the hill was fairly easy in the growing darkness, but actually getting inside the tent would be another challenge altogether. It took fully twenty minutes of painstaking exploration to locate an exploitable seam between an area of the tent's floor and wall. We slid inside and laid upon our bellies, discretely attempting to peek in.

Thirty or forty surly looking men milled around smoking, sipping from flasks, mumbling, encircling a small pen that was bounded by yellow plastic fencing. We could really only see them from about the chest up – children were not permitted and as a secondary precaution, several bales of hay stood partially blocking our view.

The skinny, bald headed guy – the man we had seen earlier, the man with no fingers on his right hand – stood alone off to the left side, shouting something over a hand-held megaphone. Just then a tall man wearing a clown suit and face paint rushed over to us and blew a huge cloud of smoke in our faces, then ran away howling with laughter. The smoke, whatever it was, made me spin and gave me an instant splitting headache. Since that time I've become familiar with the scent of many smokable drugs; this was not marijuana, hashish or opium. It had a sharp, acrid, medicinal scent – most likely DMT or PCP or some other nasty chemical.

Off to the right, just inside the tent, I caught a quick glimpse of Mr. Mank standing with two or three Mexican men. Mank was embroiled in an argument with the Hungarian dwarf girl in the leopard skin bathing suit. Her cheeks were contorted and florid with anger over something. All of a sudden she jumped and slapped Mr. Mank across the face, whereupon Mank made a fist and ferociously punched her, full force, in the stomach, doubling her over in pain.

I tried to whisper something like, "Holy shit!" to Marilee, but my mouth wasn't functioning properly. Finally I mumbled, "You see that?"

She nodded. Her face was pale, and her eyes were watery and red from the smoke.

Now the bald man with the fingerless hand was shoving Arnie the Penguin Boy, who waddled into the tent wearing his striped diapers. Arnie glanced around at the crowd in befuddlement, evidently confused by all the chaos. A couple of sailors yelled obscenities at him and then several other dwarfs also appeared – ones we hadn't seen before, including a girl in a pink dress, and a black man. We lost sight of them when they went behind the hay bales.

Pulu the Human Blockhead sat on a stool, naked except for a jockstrap, his hairy chest and back glistening with sweat. An acne-ridden teenage carny was there too, and Zip the pinhead came parading through, smiling idiotically from a saddle on the back of a Shetland pony. Crazy calliope music blasted from a speaker system, obscuring whatever it was that the fingerless man was saying over the megaphone.

Now the crowd began to holler loudly and smirk. From our hidden vantage point we could not see what was occurring, but whatever it was, it was causing quite a reaction. A few voices muttered things like, "There oughtta be a law," and, "There *is* a law," but most of the voices were raucous and filled with a sickening laughter that made me retaste the fried onion blossom I had eaten an hour earlier.

Inching forward, Marilee and I crept along the hay-strewn ground to try and get a better look. Suddenly we heard a *crack* from above and a large, square bale of hay crashed down onto our backs, striking us directly. It must have weighed over thirty pounds. Momentarily stunned, I stared blankly at the crowd while the fingerless man muttered over the megaphone, "Looks like we've got company."

Then another voice said, "They're only kids." The clown then came running over and blew more pungent smoke – an impossibly huge amount of it – directly into our faces. Dark people were cack-

ling, men were cursing. Someone yelled, "Fuck 'em, look what the *freaks* are doing!"

The crowd's attention turned momentarily back to the pen, and mine turned to Marilee. She had been rendered inert by the hay bale and the smoke – she lay on the ground with her eyes open but not seeing. The bale had been heavy and had hit us square. Marilee's Dodger cap had been knocked off her head and sat in the dirt a couple of yards away.

The noise grew louder. The entire scene became surreal – I found myself disoriented, spinning. Bolts of light came through, coiling around inside my head, pushing at my temples like a vice. The bale had knocked the wind out of me and all the junk food we had eaten did not help, but mostly it was the unsettling peculiarity and ferocity of the situation that was turning my stomach. And the smoke – *what was in that smoke?* I attempted to swallow and found I could not. The small blond hairs on my arms bristled up like quills. I tried to shut my eyes but my eyelids wouldn't close. Abruptly I realized that I was stifling the urge to be sick.

The crowd was stirred up now, animalistic, seething at whatever they were witnessing. My breath was coming in quick and shallow gulps. A sickly, sweet smell permeated the tent. There seemed to be a simultaneous relaxation and tightening of the air, as though we were wrapped in a wet, silky membrane. The ground appeared to quiver underneath us, and there were noises. Darkness. Steam. The crowd of men. Groaning. Crying. Guttural sounds. Shrieks of laughter and pain. Voices: "They didn't see anything." "Just like animals do it." "Get 'em the fuck outta here!" "*Saturday night in freaktown!*"

Next thing I knew I was up and running, sprinting as fast as my body could carry me, Marilee beside me, the two of us tripping on rocks, slipping on gopher holes, oblivious to our direction, only that we wanted, *needed* to get away from the place. I don't think we slowed down until we were all the way out of the Woods and well into the edges of Clarion, whereupon we laid down on a stretch of lawn by a curb, our chests heaving, our bodies howling.

A house on the corner had a garden hose so I ran over and turned it on. Both of us doused our heads and hands with the water, out of breath, greedily rehydrating in the warm evening air.

Up on our feet again, our pace slowed as we regained our equilibrium and made our way into the relative civilization of town. "That was too goddamn weird," I muttered, but Marilee did not reply – although the both of us were befuddled, neither of us seemed to want to talk about whatever we thought we had seen. With no more than a few shallow words between us, I walked Marilee to her house in Birch Knolls, then made my way back to the apartment. Fortunately Auntie Nell and Uncle Rocco were out to a movie when I let myself inside and curled up into a fetal position on the couch.

*

That night I slept poorly. I tossed and turned and kept replaying the day's events, trying in vain to straighten out the images. The longer I denied the perceptions that flickered behind my closed eyelids, the more terrible the dreams became – hateful dreams in which I had morphed into Arnie the Penguin Boy while Mank and Pulu were driving screwdrivers into my skull. The teenaged carnies were fiercely mocking, and Marilee was riding a miniature cow to a standing ovation from the freaks.

I awoke in a pool of cold sweat and quickly announced to my aunt that I was ill. I couldn't tell her what had really happened – I was not even sure myself – but doubtlessly part of my symptoms could be chalked up to the consumption of pounds of junk food. And I now also know that a major portion of my sickness was probably psychosomatic.

On Sunday I wandered around the apartment in a dreamlike state, troubled because I couldn't even admit that I had *been* to the carnival, let alone try to explain what had happened there. Instead I had to blame it all on a spoiled batch of Lupe's enchiladas I had supposedly eaten at Marilee's. But even that was a perilous explanation, and not wanting Auntie Nell to call Mrs. McCullers for con-

firmation, I was unable to play it up for sympathy. Instead I suffered mostly in silence.

The next day was Monday, Memorial Day, and I felt somewhat better. If it had been a regular Monday I might have attempted to claim lingering sickness in order to get out of going to school, but since it was a holiday, I couldn't see spending yet another afternoon in the apartment with my aunt and uncle. So after sleeping in late, at about noon I shook off the residual creepy feelings and ambled downtown to the Faulkner Building. It was a scorcher of a day, as only Texas can be. Frenchy and Lord Grizzly said hello, and Frenchy quietly gave me a handful of Fritos. The three of us sat there together on the floor while I read them stories from a week-old newspaper.

Eventually I took off wandering downtown. I hit the library, the hobby shop, the thrift store and the record shop, and finally headed over to the park. Marilee, Langston and Riley were playing tetherball there but they were all strangely quiet and subdued. It was peculiar that kids could be so calm in their play. No one wanted to talk about the carnival nor about Riley's dad nor about Becky Sue Wells, and yet there was really little else on anyone's minds.

I tried to ask Riley about his father but he just shrugged and said, "He'll live." Before long it began to get darker, so the four of us strolled off towards our respective homes and the dreaded isolation of family. At that time we all lived east of Diaper so we cut across the schoolyard.

Langston saw it first. It looked almost like a mountainous, dark-red and white laundry bag on the playground, propped up against the back wall.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

Riley grinned. "Maybe somebody threw away something cool?" So we took off running towards the object. It wasn't until we were within a few feet that we could tell what it was.

Sprawled on his back in the center of a giant pool of blood, the man had seeping wounds over most of his body, from his face to his knees. One whole section of his belly was simply missing, and uni-

identifiable innards – pale, gleaming, yellowish – spilled out of gaping ribs in his abdomen.

Half of the man's head was hamburger, and pushed against the wall at an unnatural angle. Small perforations in his remaining cheek obscured his identity, but the bulky body and the choice of white clothing made it obvious who it was. I remember thinking that it would be absolutely impossible for one human being to produce this much blood. It was everywhere – covering his half of a face, soaking through his jacket, puddling around his body in huge dark pools that varied in their states of congealment.

A bloody child-size Dodger cap stuck halfway out of his jacket pocket – was that the one Marilee had left at the carnival? One of the man's eyes was missing and the other was half open, dull and opaque. His right hand was swollen like something out of a cartoon. A beige-yellow piece of sponge laid on the ground next to what was left of his head – a piece of his brain.

"Holy *shit*!" exclaimed Riley, "that's fucking *Mank*, isn't it?"

I nodded, my mouth too dry to speak. Beads of sweat began to rise on my scalp and I suddenly became aware of the smells of urine, blood and feces.

Langston took off running. "I'm getting the cops!" he yelled.

At the sound of his Keds clip-clopping away, I found myself looking at Marilee. As gruesome as the sight was before us, she did not scream, faint or cry – she simply stared at what was left of Mr. Mank in abject wonder, as though studying the body for a science project. This was not the reaction one might expect from a twelve-year-old girl, but then, our teacher with his guts and brains blown out wasn't the only weird sight we'd seen lately.

"What the fuck happened?" I finally wondered aloud.

"Shotgun, I bet," Riley said. "Be careful – don't step on his brains."

I wanted to get a better look but somehow I couldn't bring myself to move in any closer – like a yo-yo on a string, I was repelled yet at the same time strangely attracted. I had never seen a dead body before, especially one in disintegrating pieces.

"You think it was murder? Or suicide?"

Riley shrugged. "I don't see a gun around."

Still oddly silent, Marilee took my hand and walked the two of us across the playground to the street where we sat without speaking and waited for the police to arrive. Sitting on a bus bench and leaning her head back against a low wall, she never took her eyes off the street in front of us. In what might have been a metaphor for the way she lived her life, Marilee McCullers never looked back. And none of us shed a tear for Mr. Jefferson Davis Mank.

*

Clarion seemed to be going berserk, careening at the edges of sanity. First Becky Sue and now Mank. For the next week or two, cops were everywhere and big-city TV reporters waded through town interviewing anyone and everyone who would talk.

Police interrogated the four of us kids three times, both together and separately, but there really wasn't much for us to tell – we had found the body, but we had seen no one nor heard anything. We had not touched the body nor had we stepped in the blood. The conclusion was that Mr. Mank had been shot late on Saturday night after the carnival, and had ripened in the scorching sun until Monday afternoon when we happened to walk by.

Riley was correct – the weapon had been a twelve-gauge shotgun with double-aught buck. Pieces of Mr. Mank were scattered several feet in every direction. Someone had wanted to make sure there could be no question of survival.

This was 1963 – long before the days of forensic testing, microscopic evidence and other scientific advances in criminology. There seemed to be no overt clues, and a legion of possible suspects. In fact the police were hard pressed to find anyone at all, child or adult, who found the man agreeable. School was closed on Tuesday so that detectives – men with dark suits and tennis-ball haircuts – could look around for clues and take measurements and photographs, but aside from that, progress on the case would be relatively slow.

On Wednesday Mr. Marshall, the substitute teacher, was back. With only three weeks to go until graduation, Mr. Marshall would take Mank's place for the duration. I have little recollection of anything absorbed or learned from him during my last few weeks at Clarion Diaper.

*

"...But it didn't work out that way," Riley was saying. "The warrant was to search for a shotgun, but they couldn't find one. They did find a bunch of pills, though. Bennies. So they took him to jail for those."

I had walked into the middle of a conversation between Riley and Langston Tennent. Riley's father had been arrested.

Langston asked, "Why'd they want his shotgun?"

"The old man thinks they're looking at him for Mank's murder," Riley said, "but the whole thing's bogus because he was in the hospital that day 'cause of his motorcycle crash, and the cops know it. They're just pissed off because Mank was their buddy."

Riley's father would ultimately be cleared and released, but the Clarion Police were leaving no stone unturned.

*

"Biff! Pow!"

Saturday morning cartoons a few weeks later. Uncle Rocco opened the morning Gazette, sat upright and blurted, "Hey, they *got* somebody!" He looked around excitedly. "Hey, Nellie, they got somebody for the murders! Did you hear about this?"

Auntie Nell hollered from the kitchen, "Huh? Whatcha talkin' about?"

"They got somebody for kidnapping that poor little girl, and for killing Timmy's teacher!"

My aunt stopped wiping the dishes and hopped into the living room. I turned down the TV, eager to hear what my uncle had to say.

"Listen to this!" he said, reading. "Handyman arrested in abduction and murders. Clarion police announced last night that a suspect has been arrested in the fatal shooting of teacher Jefferson D. Mank and in the disappearance (and presumed homicide) of ten-year-old Becky Sue Wells, both of Clarion. Taken into custody yesterday was Leonardo Martinez-Loy, 27, a Mexican national living in Mount Holyoke, in Pembroke County.

"Information on the investigation and arrest are being withheld at this time but police spokesman Lt. Johnny Ray Granderson said full details would be released shortly. 'We're happy to have a man in custody,' said Granderson, 'and we're convinced we have the right man.' According to an unnamed source, Martinez-Loy was working at the Wells home, repairing the roof, when young Becky Sue disappeared last month. Martinez-Loy has several prior arrests and convictions for narcotics and vice violations, according to public records. His connection to the victim Mank is unknown at this time."

Auntie Nell frowned. "How strange," she said.

Uncle Rocco looked up at her. "Why strange?"

"I don't know... Don't it seem strange to you that a hired roofer would make off with a little girl and then gun down a teacher?"

"Not *that* strange. Probably a Mexican pervert."

"Even so," Auntie Nell said thoughtfully, "why would he kill the teacher?"

Uncle Rocco sniffed at nothing, then said, "To shut him up, maybe? I don't know, but I guess we'll find out."

All across Clarion people were saying the same thing.

*

Thirty-one consecutive days of 100 degree-plus weather. Early one humid evening, Marilee and I sat on the hand-carved doublewide swing in Evelyn's oak tree and talked. Somehow the conversation came around to the carnival – it was the first time either of us had spoken about it.

She surprised me with an observation I had overlooked. "Do you remember the dwarf ladies?"

"Sure," I said, "there was the one that Mank slugged, the one with the leopard-skin bathing suit."

"No, I mean the other one – the one in the pink dress."

"Sorta. What about her?" By now I was pushing Marilee in the swing.

"That dress looked familiar to me. It looked like something Becky Sue wore."

I shook my head in disagreement. "That other dwarf lady was *not* Becky Sue Wells – hell, those dwarf ladies had bigger boobs than Jolene's mom."

Marilee giggled. "I know it wasn't Becky Sue – those guys would be nuts to bring out Becky Sue, considering half the men in the audience knew she'd disappeared, and knew what she looked like. I'm just saying the *dress* looked familiar."

I didn't want to think about the ramifications. "It was just a pink dress," I said, pushing her harder in the swing and trying not to shudder.

"I wouldn't be surprised if those people had something to do with this whole thing," she said.

Frustrated and slightly sickened, and not wanting to discuss it any further, I pushed the swing as hard as I could. "You're going to *Mars*!" I yelled happily as she began to careen in the swing.

What happened next took only a split second but in my memory it unfolds as if in slow motion: the chains on the swing became twisted, and Marilee twirled so that her body was backwards at the peak of her arc. In an attempt to straighten out, she reached away, scooping the air and trying to right herself until, in an instant, she lost her balance and came out of the swing. Nearly horizontal, her body fell the eight or so feet to the ground. She managed to stick her left leg out so that it hit first – but it glanced off a large boulder and with a sickening crack that sounded like a pencil breaking, her lower leg snapped like a wishbone, the rest of her body driving it into the ground at an awkwardly crumpled angle.

Marilee screamed like a banshee while I stood there dumbfounded. She was wearing her usual knee-length sky blue dress, so her lower leg was clearly visible – the broken bone bulged tightly against the skin until finally her skin burst open like the crust of a chicken pie, and with a disgusting sploosh of a sound, an angry piece of jagged bone popped through, along with a stream of dark, pumping blood.

My stomach rose in my throat – rancid, acid-like bile, threatening to spew. Greasy sweat shone on Marilee's face and her eyes looked heated, almost poached. Her face turned ashen. After another piercing scream she looked down at her leg and slipped into a merciful unconsciousness, whereupon it was my turn to bellow.

"*FUCK!*" I yelled as loudly as I could, desperately looking around, "Help! Somebody *help* us! There's been an accident! *Her leg is busted! Help!*"

But all the nearby houses were dark and evidently no one was within earshot. Blinded by heated tears I lifted her small, broken body and began to run, carrying her in the general direction of Clarion Hospital and screaming at the top of my lungs.

I remember thinking it was a positive thing she was out cold – the jostling motion of being carried by a running, shouting young boy would have doubtlessly been excruciating. Out of breath after frantically carrying her a couple of blocks, I heard a siren and saw the blinking lights of an approaching ambulance.

"*Stop!*" I screamed, and the rest is a blur. Two paramedics put her on a stretcher and lifted her into the ambulance, while the driver hustled me into the front and transported us all to the ER. I remember crying on the ride there, more from guilt than from sadness. The driver was calm and quiet and kindly gave me paper towels to dry my eyes.

At the hospital they rushed Marilee into a room where I was not allowed. Her face was gray and chalky, like a cadaver. Then a heavy-set black nurse asked me a lot of questions, but right in the middle of them I was overcome with a wave of nausea. I ran into the bathroom and puked. I barfed the sandwich I had for lunch. I ral-

phed the meat loaf I had for last night's dinner. I tossed the M&Ms I ate in the first grade. I made Linda Blair look polite.

Eventually I came out of the bathroom to find Mrs. McCullers sitting on a hard, wooden bench, waiting for me and for news of Marilee. She was cordial and I was sick and sad, and scared to death that Marilee would never walk again and that it would be all my fault.

*

But she walked again. Three months and two surgeries later, Marilee and I, together with Langston Tennent, Riley Birdwell, Jolene Gates, Rosie Iwekogu, Jimmy Wells and forty other kids, all made the walk into Clarion Junior High. Marilee had spent most of the summer on crutches but by the time we entered Junior she only had a trace of a limp. Sadly for us both, it was a trace that would stay with her all her life.

I visited her several times while she was recuperating. Although I felt I deserved to be confronted, she never brought up the fact that it may have been my temper that caused her broken leg. Instead she repeatedly insisted that it was "just an accident." There were times it felt more like I was the suffering patient and she the consoler. But her logic never quite sunk in and the hint of her limp made feelings of guilt rise in my throat.

And I still couldn't shake all the memories. In my young mind, Marilee's accident was all mixed up with Mank's dead body and the carnival freaks – and the circus memories were the hardest to shake because I still wasn't sure just what we had actually seen. I had never told my aunt and uncle about the carnival and Marilee now seemed not to want to discuss it any further.

Plus, the Clarion Police Department did not exactly garner confidence. In our collective twelve-year-old wisdom we kids thought the local police were all either corrupt or incompetent a la Barney Fife. But Marilee was still convinced that the carnival may have had something to do with Becky Sue's disappearance, so she had written

a letter to the *State* Police suggesting they follow up by locating and checking out the good Dr. Beaconbush and company.

One day in late September, an impossible day when both the heat and humidity were in the high nineties, I was visiting her house when the phone rang. Her mother was at the store and Marilee was in the bathroom so I picked it up and a man said, "Miss McCullers, please?"

"It's for you," I yelled. "Some old geezer."

She ran in and grabbed the phone. The call lasted all of fifteen seconds. A state cop named Sgt. Tobias told her that they had received her letter, and that the carnival had been located on the outskirts of Amarillo. State Troopers had searched the encampment but no little girls were found other than a black horseback rider and a Hungarian dwarf. And no child-sized pink dress. He concluded by thanking her for her suggestion and telling her she was "a fine young citizen."

That was acceptable enough for me but I could still see dark clouds of doubt hovering above Marilee's head. Turning it all over for the thousandth time, she said, "How do you think Mank figured into all this?"

I sighed. I was tired of thinking about it. "Hell if I know," I said, "and by the way, how'd that cop get your phone number?"

"I dunno... I guess he looked it up in the phone book?"

"You signed your letter with your *real name*?" I asked, incredulously. "What if your mom had answered the phone just now – then she would've known you went to the carnival!"

"I know," Marilee said, looking down at the floor. "I thought of that, but I figured if I wrote an anonymous letter, the cops would never take me seriously. And I never thought they'd actually call me...."

"You're lucky!" I said, "Good thing your mom's not home."

Marilee nodded, and then changed the subject. She didn't mind discussing the Mank murder, the dead body, or even her own horribly broken leg, but she still didn't seem to want to talk much about the carnival.

And neither did I.

*

Come October it was a new season. Thanks largely to the heroics of Sandy Koufax, the Dodgers swept the hated Yankees in four straight games. Leonardo Martinez-Loy was given a preliminary hearing and bound over for trial, Uncle Rocco caught on with a plumbing contractor and all us kids were tossed together in the salad of Clarion Junior High. And as if by design, it turned out that none of my friends and I had any classes together that initial semester.

Clarion Junior was a different world completely, a world full of hundreds of new kids, new alliances, new teachers, new nemeses. I will admit that it was convenient, located only five blocks from our apartment, but it was large and fast and not a particularly friendly place. I became so busy trying to fit in and make sense of it that I hardly missed anyone at all – aside from Jolene Gates.

By early November the talk of the town had shifted from the weather to the Martinez-Loy trial, which was just beginning in neighboring Pemberton County. The Public Defender's office had successfully motioned for a change of venue, owing to the groundswell of opinion in friendly Clarion that Mr. Martinez-Loy would benefit by being promptly lynched from the nearest magnolia tree. Although I tried to keep pace with the proceedings, I found the newspaper accounts to be knotty, often opaque. Besides, at age thirteen I had different and more pressing concerns to dwell upon. Like breasts.

The older girls at Clarion Junior had them – real breasts too, not just Kleenex-stuffed bras like the girls in my grade. Every day at lunch I would find Riley so we could enthusiastically compare the day's breast sightings. Then, strolling aimlessly amongst hundreds of girls as they ate their lunches, he and I would tip one another off to any particularly interesting bust lines. This became an integral part of our education that, unlike algebra, has remained useful even to this day.

*

One day late in November I was sitting alone at lunch break and eating a slightly stale boloney sandwich when Marilee approached, out of breath. She looked colorless and ghostly.

"You all right?" I asked. "Are you sick?"

"I'm OK," she whispered. "I just got here." Looking around nervously, she went on, "I had to go to the dentist this morning. But you can't tell anybody what I'm going to tell you, Tim. You promise? Cross your heart?"

"Sure," I said, grinning. "I can keep a secret. What's up?"

"The President just got shot and killed in Dallas," she whispered. "None of the kids at school know yet. My mom and I heard it on the radio on the way over here. They made me promise not to tell anybody."

"The President?" I asked, dumbfounded. "Who'd want to kill the President?"

"Nobody knows yet, but somebody sure did," she whispered. "You'll see. They're about to make an announcement over the PA in fifth period."

She was right of course. At 12:30 that afternoon, November 22nd, as their car started down the Elm Street hill beneath the railroad overpass in Dealey Plaza, shots were fired and both President Kennedy and Governor Connally were hit. They were rushed to Parkland Memorial Hospital and the President was pronounced dead at one PM from wounds in the neck and head. Connally, wounded in the back, wrist, and thigh, recovered. At 2:38 PM our native son Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as the new President.

Word spread around the school like wildfire and half the kids knew what had happened even before the somber announcement was made over the PA. After the principal officially notified us, the school reconvened to the gym area where we all just sat around talking until the final bell rang and we were let out, as usual, at three PM. Many of the girls were in tears as were several teachers, both male and female. It was to be a dark day for Texas.

The week after the Kennedy assassination Leonardo Martinez-Loy was convicted of abducting Becky Sue Wells, but acquitted of her murder and of the murder of Mr. Mank. With no body, the DA had been unable to prove that Becky Sue had, in fact, even been murdered, and apparently there was not enough evidence to connect Martinez-Loy with Mank.

The only surprising thing that came out at the trial was testimony by Loretta Gates and others that Mr. Mank had been supplementing his teaching salary by dealing heroin, although it was never suggested he did so to any children.

Witnesses at the trial also agreed that Martinez-Loy was an addict, thief, pimp and drug dealer himself, with a long police record, but there was no further evidence to place him anywhere near Mank on the day of the murder. And Martinez-Loy did not own, nor have access to, a shotgun.

As young as I was, I had not particularly followed the trial. Lang Tennent, who still proclaimed that he wanted to be a lawyer someday, told anyone who would listen that the evidence was strictly circumstantial. Becky Sue's fingerprints had been found in Martinez-Loy's car, but considering that he had been working for the Wells's this was not deemed particularly damning.

Still, the citizenry of Clarion was angered by the jury's verdict. Most people in town had made up their minds that Martinez-Loy was guilty of murder, but Evelyn Pendarvis, for one, thought the man might genuinely be innocent, and Auntie Nell was convinced of it. In an example of Texas's indeterminate sentencing structure, Martinez-Loy was given three to twelve years in state prison. On TV his public defender promised to appeal, "All the way to the Supreme Court, if necessary."

*

Once, in the midst of all this, I asked Uncle Rocco why we even lived in Clarion. I was frustrated with the place and wanted to get out. "Why don't we just move?" I had said. "This place pretty much sucks!"

"If it was up to me, Tim, we'd be living in San Antonio. Your aunt likes it here, though. There are people here that she's close to," he shrugged.

*

Considering the year we'd all had – Becky Sue, the Carnival, Mr. Mank, the Kennedy assassination, Marilee's leg, the Martinez-Loy trial – it was with much relief that we turned the page on 1963 and welcomed the new year with great expectations. Surely 1964 would be a return to normalcy. It almost was, at least for a while.

January went by without incident and February started much the same. Early in the month we changed grades from the B7 to A7 and now my friends and I had all our classes together again. Most everybody looked and acted just the same but Jolene had changed during those six months.

At thirteen she was, well... just older. Her face had become less bony somehow, her hair shinier and longer in the fashion of the day. Her lips seemed fuller and her body was maturing – I could barely keep my eyes off her. And oddly enough, she began opening up a bit to me: just little things like a good morning smile or a wistful glance that left me baffled about her intentions.

One Sunday I chanced to be goofing around with Frenchy and Lord Grizzly downtown near the Faulkner Building when Jolene and her mother happened by. To my surprise and delight we struck up a conversation and Loretta Gates said, "Tim? The Beatles are going to be on Ed Sullivan tonight – would you like to come watch them on our TV?"

I couldn't have cared less about the Beatles but I was ecstatic at the proposition and immediately accepted. The evening progressed innocently enough – I was far more interested in Jolene than the Fab Four, but she spent the evening cooing over Paul McCartney.

Meanwhile in art class at school, Miss Faust had assigned us all the task of designing and illustrating a valentine, to be given on the 14th to someone "of the opposite sex who is important in your life." Naturally enough I had my cupid sights set on Jolene and so I pro-

ceeded to contrive and execute what I thought would be the Mother of All Valentines: a large and lacily painted red heart-shaped valentine, with profusely detailed pen and ink work (inspired by Evelyn) and what I hoped would be a poignant love poem written in ornate calligraphy.

Struggling for hours to find the right words, I finally composed a poem, most of which I can no longer recall but which I was sure would convey my undying affection and be quite impossible for her to resist. The only lines I can pull from my memory are, "We'll rise up upon the wings of a dream / and slide down upon a moonbeam."

OK, so I wasn't Emily Dickenson. Eager for a female reaction I read the lines to my aunt, who said, "That's purty writin', Timmy, but it's wasted on that Jolene. Lord in heaven, you'd think she hung the moon or somethin'."

I *did* think she hung the moon. I finished my valentine with two days to spare and tucked it away in my locker at school, then decided to pay an unscheduled visit to her home. The world was about to change.

Jolene's mother was out on a date and before I knew what was happening, Jolene and I locked ourselves in her room and started sampling some of her mom's vodka. In a flash we were high. Jolene made a production out of removing her chewing gun before we began kissing and touching one another in ways that completely belied her assertion that we were merely friends. We told one another in Pig Latin that we loved each other and would stay together always, no matter what. Of course it went no further than that – we were, after all, just kids – but it was nevertheless the most provocative thing that had happened yet in my young life, and I now remember that moment with considerable fondness.

The following day was Valentine's Day. As I prepared for what I thought would be the presentation of my valentine – evidence of my eternal loyalty and devotion – Jolene came to school with a sour face. Taking me aside in art class, she was regretful about the previous night and announced that nothing like that would ever happen between us again. And then, right in front of me as if purposely intended to humiliate me, she presented the valentine she'd made to

an older boy named Jacques Rousseau, a hugely popular fifteen-year-old who wore his oily hair in a tall jellyroll and rode around town on a Honda 50.

I was crushed. I peered around the art room in disgust and was on the verge of tossing my masterpiece valentine into the dumpster when Marilee appeared from out of nowhere and squealed, "Oh, Tim, that's gorgeous! God, I wish I could paint and draw like that!"

Ordinarily I would have been flattered, but I was inconsolable. "You like it?" I asked her somewhat cruelly. "Well you can *have* it!" And I stomped out of the room, dark clouds swirling above my head.

*

April Fool's Day. All the kids in school played practical jokes upon one another – mostly innocent things like 'kick me' signs, whoopee cushions or fake puke. I was generally indifferent to it. Celebrations like Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving made sense and I eagerly anticipated them, principally because they involved food – but April Fool's was just another date on the calendar. That is, until April first of 1964.

At lunchtime I had eaten my ten-cent grilled cheese sandwich and was killing the rest of the period goofing off with Riley, Jimmy, Rosie and Marilee, when suddenly *BOOM!* The loudest and most frightening explosion I had ever heard – a sharp, violent detonation that shook the rafters of Clarion Junior. One of the windows in the Science Building blew out and a few girls began to scream and run.

But the blast had not happened at the school. Those of us who were on the playground could tell that the source of it was a couple of blocks to the east.

Instinctively we looked through the east-facing fence, only to see an oddly handsome black cloud waft up into the blue sky. Several more small explosions followed and dogs began to bark and howl. A siren went off. The explosions looked close – all too close – to where I lived.

I then had a sudden premonition and, without any real explanation or realization of why, I leaped the chain-link fence like a gymnast and sprinted toward the apartment, sick bile forming in my guts. NO! I thought, NO, NO, NO, *NO!* But somehow I knew.

*

After the last stragglers had left the funeral, Auntie Nell sat outside and rocked in a chair in the communal backyard. "C'mere for a moment, son, and rock a spell with your auntie, will ya?"

So I did.

"Timmy?" she sighed. "I feel like I been pulled through a knot-hole. I'm afraid I don't have a clue what I'm gonna do next."

"I could get a paper route?" I offered.

She grinned slyly. "Maybe you could, but somehow I doubt that'd stretch real far. I s'pose I could get a job at the supermarket and there's a few people I could ask for help..."

The life insurance totaled \$300 for cremation only. The garage was gone but the apartment was still habitable, if barely. Amazingly the Studebaker had survived – it had been parked on the street that afternoon.

Auntie Nell's predictions had finally come true: Uncle Rocco's cigar smoking and antique dynamite had been a tragic and fatal mix.

*

Predictably my aunt slid into a depression following Uncle Rocco's death. Some days she wouldn't get out of bed until after noon and she began to drink cheap wine almost from the time she arose. If money was scarce before, it was almost nonexistent now.

But for the exceptional graces of both Evelyn Pendarvis and the McCullers family, we may not have survived the transition. Even though she, too, was dirt-poor, Evelyn cared for me like a grandmother. On numerous occasions I ate dinner at her place and stayed over to sleep in the library at Oak Haven. And Marilee's

mother packed an extra baloney sandwich almost every day into her daughter's brown paper sack.

But after a month or so my aunt began to pull herself out of her black hole. She soon found a job at the local Food 4 Less and her paycheck – augmented by a bit of creative shoplifting – saw us through for a while, if only by a hair's breadth.

One day in May I came home from school and my aunt immediately broke out a package of Van de Camp's chocolate chip cookies – my favorites. "Wanna snack, kiddo?"

Then she let me have a cheeseburger for dinner and watch whatever I wanted on TV, without even asking me about my homework. I should've known she had something up her sleeve.

Just before bedtime she came out to the couch where I slept and said, "I'd like to talk to you for a second."

By then the red flags were going off in my brain but she was smiling and in a positive mood, so I knew it wouldn't be terrible news.

"Timmy? Have you ever wanted to see California?" she asked innocently enough.

I was puzzled and didn't know how to play it. "Sure, I guess so..."

My aunt shifted her weight in her chair and said, "You know, there just ain't much left for us out here in Texas. Your uncle's gone and there's no good jobs around, and lord knows our apartment is a wreck. And, not that I'm lookin' right now, but the menfolk around this place are ugly enough to make an onion cry."

She went on. "I've been thinkin' maybe what we need is a bit of a fresh start, Timmy. Maybe out by the ocean, where it's cool in the summer and mild in the winter. You could even learn how to ride one of them surfin' boards. How would somethin' like that suit you?"

I wasn't sure. This would require serious thought. "I dunno..."

"Well you just think about it for a while, willya?" she said, smiling. "Just let it roll around your brain for a spell, OK?"

"OK."

That night I dreamt about Sandra Dee, Dodger games and flirting with girls in bikinis. By the time I woke up I was smiling somewhat at my aunt's suggestion.

*

A week or so later I was over at Evelyn's for my art lesson. After a few minutes of small talk she proceeded to slide several giant oil paintings out from a closet in her library.

"Take a look at these, Tim," she said. "These were painted by my late husband."

They were seascapes, and beautifully rendered. Her husband had successfully captured the power and very essence of the surf – the crashing waves, silvery foam, the sunsets. Spray glistened as though lit from behind by fireflies.

"Do you like them?"

"Yeah!" They were really very impressive.

"They're all of the Pacific Ocean." She tilted her head back, as if in new appreciation. "God," she sighed, "I'd sure love to see that for myself someday, wouldn't you?"

All of the sudden it was clear. "My aunt's been talking to you, hasn't she?"

She laughed. "Actually, it's me that's been talking to your aunt," she said with an affectionate smile. "I have an old friend from Louisiana, a younger woman named Benedetta, who's found your aunt a job out in California if she wants it."

"Where in California?"

"Santa Monica. It's right on the beach."

"What kind of job?"

"Working at Douglas Aircraft. The pay is good. Benedetta works there too, so she could show Nellie the ropes. And best of all, Benedetta and her husband own a duplex and the other half of it will be up for rent soon, so you'd have a place to live with reasonable rent and a delightful landlady."

I pondered this for a moment. "What's my aunt think about the idea?"

"She loves the idea, but she says she won't go if you don't want to. She's waiting on you to make up your mind."

"She is?"

"And in any case, she doesn't want to pull you out of school in the middle of the semester. So if you *did* go, it wouldn't be until summer vacation."

This news took a few minutes to settle.

She added, "You know, it's very cool out there near the ocean in the summer...."

Still staring at the seascape but with my mind racing, I asked her, "What do *you* think we should do?"

She sighed and sat down heavily on the couch. "You know I would miss you like the devil if you left, Tim. Both of you. I truly and honestly would. I'd love to watch you grow all the way up, but I think it might be better for you to go out there for now."

She paused for a moment, and then continued. "You could always come back here when you're older, if you wanted to. But I'm pretty sure your aunt could use a new beginning right now, and I bet you'd love it there. And in case you haven't noticed, Clarion doesn't really have a lot going for it."

I promised her I would sleep on it.

*

It was a given, really, that we had to go – my aunt knew it and I knew it. And it did seem like California might be a grand adventure so finally we gave notice to the landlord and began to make our plans.

Riley was jealous – he said the beaches in California were full of Playboy bunnies with tits popping out of their bikinis. Being only thirteen I admitted ignorance at the term 'Playboy bunny,' whereupon Riley showed me his older brother's copy of the latest edition of the magazine that was to become my best friend throughout my teenage years.

*

So finally school let out for the summer. For most kids it would be a day of rejoicing – three whole months of playing and swimming and sleeping in late! For me there was jubilation as usual, only it was tempered by a sense of anticipation. In two weeks we were scheduled to move to California and I still wasn't sure whether we had made the right decision.

My aunt and I spent the next several days sifting through the flotsam and jetsam of our Texas lives, packing belongings into boxes and selling or giving away what we could not carry in the Studebaker. Over the years I had painted or drawn literally stacks of artwork that we could not fit in the car. There were two or three pieces that my aunt said she simply could not live without, but the rest of them would have to go. Finally Evelyn volunteered to hold onto them for me, saying it was, "Just for safe keeping, Tim. That way they'll be here for you when you come back."

I wasn't sure if I was ever coming back but I was nonetheless pleased that they would find a good home. Marilee wanted the first thing I had drawn – the charcoal and chalk drawing of the gnarled oak trees that had been displayed at the Diaper Art Show back when we were little – so I gave that one to her.

On our last day in Clarion I found myself feeling downhearted. I exchanged addresses with Langston, Jimmy Wells, Marilee, Riley and Jolene, and everyone promised to write. Before she went home to dinner that night, Marilee produced an old photograph from her purse and made me take it – it was the one she had shot with a box camera when we were seven years old: Riley, Jimmy, Langston and me, shirtless and attempting to make muscles at Marilee's pool. Not knowing if I would ever see any of them again, the picture made me feel dispirited and melancholy.

*

Sounds carry in east Texas. Although trains no longer ran through Clarion proper, there were tracks a few miles outside of town and on clear nights that June I would lie awake and listen to the freights wailing across the landscape. Their mournful cry made me envision

a funeral train. Bundled up there in the dark, I could see my Uncle Rocco and Sissy Deana, my mother and father and Becky Sue and Mr. Mank and President Kennedy all being whisked away to some unknown netherworld by a grinning crew of nefarious, black-shrouded conductors and carnies.

The imagined smell of burning coal would get mixed up with my nightmares until I awoke wringing wet, heart racing, my mind thick with apprehension. The final night in that empty apartment in Clarion is mixed up in my memory with sweats and the plaintive sounds of the 3:10 AM westbound Texas and Pacific.



A fictional memoir -
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