

Three strangers share an abandoned mansion over a single tumultuous summer: Three different voices relate the same series of events that occur, offering three contrasting versions of what actually happened. There is, of course, only one truth.

THE AWFUL GRACE OF LITTLEFARM

By Chris Kassel

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A novel by Chris Kassel

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I. Donald Grimes

My decision to return home to Mound City was hardly inevitable—don't think that for a minute. Nor, by a long shot, was it my only option. By then I'd found considerable success in an industry where I could have gone anywhere in the country and found a job—probably the first position I applied for, too. And no doubt at a higher salary than I'd been earning, which was already respectable and more than Dad ever made, I promise you. I was barely forty and at the peak of my managerial skills, and the only reason I had remained working for the Haase family in Calvert so long was because I liked them personally. That and the obvious fact that they needed me—I'm not one to cut and run where I'm needed. They were simple people, now into their eighties, and had long since lost whatever business edge they once had, if they'd ever had any at all, which I doubt. They were beyond a point where they could do much hands-on micromanaging and left me to run the business as I thought best.

Not that there's ever been a need to micromanage me, of course. I'd made them plenty of money over the past twenty years. I saw it as my duty. I'd been born with a knack for dealing with the public—more than they had, for sure—and my looks were an admitted asset in most of my encounters with both customers and subordinates.

That's not meant to sound like bragging, mind you—I'm going to try and be as honest here as I can be. I've always been considered 'a looker'—even my sisters will admit that. At forty, I carry the same 160 lbs. as I did in my senior year at Mound City High School, and as an adult, nature seems to have taken the exaggerated weirdness of my dad's face—his sharp, oversized nose and pointed, dog-snout chin—and my mother's pasty Midwestern-girl blandness, and combined them to make my own 'look' both rugged and gentle. I have a handsome face: At least, that's what my sisters and other girls I've known have told me. Not that I am ungrateful for my parents' quirks; I studied them closely while growing up and made a pact to remain vigilant with my own attitudes and to extinguish any traces of quirks should they

pop up, the same way you'd take Round-Up to weeds growing around your storefront.

No, my decision to return to Mound City was not one of necessity, and I hope I've made that clear. It was (in part) to repair a family rift, and where better to do that than within the family home? After all, it was standing empty. It was that, but it was also because I'd simply earned the break. I'd been grinding my keister off for John and Mildred Haase for half my lifetime now—sometimes sixty hours a week without complaint, never taking a sick day and only a couple of vacations during which I still phoned in a dozen times a week to find out how things were going.

Why? Because that's who I am. That's how I am hardwired.

That's not how I was raised, of course. Dad used to develop migraines if he had to put in more than half a dozen hours in a work-week, and any money my parents had was the result of my mother's work ethic, which was in her DNA: She was a Blank. The Blanks—I always thought it was funny that Mom's maiden name was 'Blank', because her expression was generally pretty blank—had been prosperous farmers in the first part of the twentieth century, and at one time, they owned half of Calhoun County.

As I have heard the story, as told by the few remaining Mound City people who remember or record such things, back in the 1940s, the most prosperous Blank—my great uncle Alva—had enlisted in the Air Force to help liberate Eastern Europe. Something he saw overseas re-focused him, and as soon as he returned from the war, he quit farming, sold off his acres and used the proceeds of the sale to build a sprawling mansion out on Littlefarm Road a few miles beyond Mound City limits.

Uncle Alva was a legend throughout the county—not just because of his crazy house, which should have been listed in a national oddball directory for the floor plan alone, where there are tiny rooms with multiple doors and halls and staircases that lead into solid walls—but also for his ultimate fate, which was intimately connected to the nasty history of Littlefarm Road itself.

Actually, the house has the makings of a tourist attraction, since there are plenty of sicko creeps in love with the macabre, but as far as I know, it's an angle that nobody has ever thought to pursue.

Now, take from this what you will, but since I was a child I've been told that from the neck up, I'm a physical ringer for Uncle Alva. The only photo I've seen of him shows a scowling little shrimp leaning up against a hitching post outside the post office. As it happens, that post still exists and I've taken a tape measure to it and I wouldn't have placed Uncle Alva at much more than 5'2. Me, I topped out at 5'10 ½, and I am by far the tallest person in my family. Dad was only 5'8, and Mom barely hit five feet. My sister Mary is 5'2, and overweight by seventy pounds—she looks like a bowling ball. My other sister Dale is slim like me, though not nearly as tall: 5'9. She's gangly and wears her hair ridiculously short hair, like a man—she looks like a pin to match the bowling ball. No, I am the tallest person in my family by far and personally, I don't see the slightest resemblance between me and Crazy Uncle Alva, and for that, I thank God.

But there is one thing I can tell you about Alva Blank, and in fact, am here to tell you: Despite his tiny size and his agricultural background and despite the name of the road where he built the house and despite the crap that the local losers have been spreading about him and my family for generations, Uncle Alva was not 'The Little Farmer'. Old gossips may sniff at the truth, and the modern kids raised on Freddy Krueger movies may think that urban legend is more fun than facts, but thanks to my profession I tend to be a little worldlier than them and I use my wits to problem solve—along with my looks, that makes me an effective manager. I did a little basic research and quickly concluded that the violence that happened along Littlefarm Road back in the 1940s was none of my great uncle's doing, and that any involvement he might have had would have been strictly peripheral.

And guess what! If the time is ever right, I may reveal to the world the actual identity of real killer, but in the meantime—if nothing else—I am happy to have cleared up any horse-pucky rumors about Uncle Alva.

So, as I said, my intention in moving back to Mound City was to mend family bridges, and as soon as I had made my decision (and while I was still bleeding out my security deposit in the apartment in Calvert), I sent emails to both Mary and Dale and informed them that I was moving back into our family's home and invited them both to come live with me.

Although at the time Dale was married and living in Tennessee, I assumed that she'd consider her immediate family—Mary and I—more important than some silly job with the Lutheran Council school system, especially if it meant re-establishing a sibling bond that we hadn't had shared since I was six and she was twelve, babysitting me while mom went to work and Dad was on the hammock with a migraine. No chance, though: She wrote back asking me if I was off my medications and, in my opinion, she was unnecessarily terse for a born-again Christian. She told me that she knew why I'd lost my job in Calvert and asked me to leave her alone.

Mary and I were only a year apart, and much closer friends than Dale and I had ever been, so although her response was equally blunt, I could recognize in it more confusion than anger. I'm good at reading folks that way, which is why I have been able to find success as a 'people person.' Mary reminded me that the family house had been sold right before Mom and Dad moved in with Dale and her husband in Knoxville.

I replied by reminding *her* that Mom and Dad had passed away and had nothing to do with it.

"I'm not talking about our old house on Leland, Mary. I wouldn't go back to live in that flea-infested pile of bad memories for all the gold in Fort Knox. I'm talking about our real home, the one where we used to play when we were children. I'm talking about Uncle Alva's place. I want you and Dale to come live with me at Littlefarm."

2.

Everybody in Mound City knows about Littlefarm Road—a glorified, rarely-used tractor path that rambled off the two-lane Old

II. Jennifer Bagby

Coming to Mound City was hardly inevitable and I wasn't looking for an escape hatch, so don't you dare try to suggest otherwise. At the time I was working through some personal issues, true—but who isn't? You probably have a rat's nest of them yourself. Anyway, my legal issues were nothing more than a misunderstanding and they were totally unrelated to my reasons for stopping by Mound City's miniature cop shop on that frosty morning in January.

No, at the time I was in full creative mode, and that's a marvelous place to be. I was fleshing the idea I had for my first full-length book. On the surface, it would be an account of how I solved a decades-old Mound City mystery, but naturally, I had no intention of simply writing another dispassionate true-crime book. I wanted a New Journalism Chronical of the Sensuous; mystical, psychical, intellectual impulses and soulful cravings that buoyed me along the way.

That was sure to be a manuscript that would make Benoit Pérez sit up and take notice. To hear him tell it, he's the only person on the planet who can write like that.

In January, I was still tip-toeing; I hadn't yet found my stride. I was guessing that cold cases must be a thorn in the paw of small town cops—they don't have a shit ton else to think about, and it must be like having a mosquito in your room on a hot summer night; you can douse yourself in Off and wrap a terrycloth robe around your head, but as long as that mosquito is still in the room, you won't sleep.

Not that Chief Lemer's case-solving inadequacies were my problem, but I knew my project wouldn't make it out of the starting chute without his cooperation. I wasn't sure how eager he'd be to have a cute schoolmarm on summer break breeze into town and teach him how to do his job. Hell, I teach for a living and I can assure you, very few of those little twerps appreciate what I'm offering them.

In consequence, I approached my initial meeting with Lemer like a maestro orchestrating a score. Online, I found a photo of him handing out 'Do The Right Thing!' awards to kids wearing bicycle helmets; he was hoary, obese and at least sixty years old. Therefore, my first line

of offense was dressing to please Grandpa Flatfoot. That's an art form unto itself; you dress one way to unfurl the mainsail in a horny eleventh grader and quite another to awaken the dragon inside conservative, churchgoing older dudes. I chose a knee-length mauve skirt that clung to my derriere in the right places and moderated my makeup to accentuate my best features—my lips and my violet-colored eyes. Attractiveness is currency—I think we're all adult enough to admit that—and if nature has graced you with your own private stash, you're ridiculous if you don't spend it, albeit wisely. 'If you got it, flaunt it' is the way the pigs in Ruttleville used to phrase it, but as bacon proves, every once in a while, pigs get it right.

So, the idea for the book came to me late last year, right after my uncle's funeral. Prior to that, I hadn't thought of Aunt Diane or late Uncle Danny much over the years. Danny was my dad's youngest brother, and a bit of an embarrassment, like that one rogue brother of Jimmy Carter who used to shotgun beer on national TV. Danny Bagby was a factory rat who worked the line at a transmission plant in central Michigan while Dad was a college professor. Not that Eastern Gateway Community College is U of M, but our side of the family tends to be made of cerebral, well-read people, while Danny's branch deals with more bookies than books. I think Mom kept in regular touch with Aunt Diane when I was a girl—mostly over the phone since Mound City was a hundred miles to the north—but I remember that there was some common ground since they both had daughters born in the same year, and we were their only children.

The sister-in-law commiseration evaporated when my cousin Kelly vanished, and I think Mom became terrified of Aunt Diane and her unfathomable predicament, like when lightning strikes one person and jumps to anyone standing nearby. Kelly's disappearance affected Mom profoundly, and although she never brought it up, the take-away was obvious: Not only could young girls vanish into thin air, her niece actually had done it. It shook her to the marrow, and she never got over the fear that I might end up disappearing too.

I think it's why she asked me to go with her to Uncle Danny's funeral—Aunt Diane and Uncle Danny had showed up when Dad died, and Mom figured that a reciprocal appearance was the right thing

to do. And yet, she was scared to go alone, in case the sizzle of missing-daughter lightning lingered. She begged me not to mention Kelly's name, but I thought the eggshells we'd been walking on for twenty years had probably composted by now and that it would be rude not to at least make a cursory mention of my missing cousin.

Kelly was, after all, part of the Bagby circle of reality. Besides, I'd crushed a few Mike's Hard Lemonades before the funeral and I was overloaded and ready for bear. After the service, out of earshot of Mom, I took Aunt Diane aside and asked if there had ever been any word from Kelly. It turned out that she was more than ready to vent; I smelled a little booze on her breath too.

"Of course there's been no word, Jenny—Kelly's gone forever. Somebody took her and wouldn't let go. We always suspected that boy Don Grimes knew more than he was letting on."

"Who?" I asked.

"Don Grimes," she spat. "A dishwasher punk at the restaurant where she waitressed. I never fell for that silly letter he claims she wrote him even if the police did; it didn't halfway look like Kelly's handwriting. Not that she was much for writing letters anyway—there's that too. But the damn police never followed up. Why would they? As far as they were concerned, Kelly was a tramp and the boy was a Blank on his mother's side, and that clan used to own half of Calhoun County."

In the days following the funeral, I began to think about Kelly Bagby a lot. We were first cousins, but we'd hardly been friends. Since we lived a hundred miles apart, I'd only seen her a few times in my life, and her mother was right—she wasn't one to correspond. Besides, even though we were virtually the exact same age, I think we both understood how little we had in common. For my part, though, I was totally in awe of her: Kelly was sophisticated in a street way—the only girl I knew back then who had a pierced nose. I'm sure she thought of me as stuck-up in an intellectual way like my dad was. And believe me, intellects are more attracted to gutter types than the other way around. The last time I saw her was at some bizarre family reunion at Addison Oaks Park when we were seventeen; I was still a virgin while she'd already had two abortions. That impressed me; at

least, it may have shone a spotlight on how sheltered my life had been until then. I couldn't wait to become an adult, although what I should have been doing—what most seventeen-year-olds should be doing—was trying to enjoy the last wisps of childhood.

I will state for the record that the decision to get off my kiester and actually write a book about Kelly had as much to do with my personal situation as it did with Uncle Danny's funeral. At the time, I was embroiled in my fling with Benoit Pérez, the author short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize in 2012 and the holder of an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Universidad Nacional de Dominican Republic. So before I go further, let me take you for a brief stroll down that memory lane:

I was Benny's biggest fan before I became his lover; I'd read all three of his books—two collections of short fiction and the phenomenal 'Deluged'—the metaphysical finalist for the 2015 National Book Award. In the review I wrote of it on my blog, I referred to it as 'psychoanalyzing the earth'. I like that description, don't you? Read it—you'll see. I finally met him at a book signing in Columbus last April, and our attraction was instantaneous and mutual, although at the time, he thought of me as more of a groupie than a serious artist in her own right. Not that he couldn't make a case for it—I really hadn't done much formal writing since I was the assistant co-editor of *The Denison Stater* in college, although my blog has a pretty respectable hit count, especially when I get graphic. I'd learned plenty about composition from reading Benny, and I began to emulate his patterns in my own sporadic blog entries; his mental action, his organizing structures and expressive excellence.

But let's be honest—a random online journal of artsy reviews and war stories about teaching at a suburban high school is not the stuff that Pulitzers are made of, and I knew that if Benny Pérez was going to learn some respect, it would only be through a longer, analytical and more cohesive work built around a single theme.

Prior to Uncle Danny dying, my weeks of soul-searching had come up empty, and then, remarkably—and totally out of the blue—I found my device in a small visitation room at Hoffman Funeral home in Warren. By the end of January, I was prepared to attempt my own 'Deluged', using my cousin Kelly's disappearance as a leitmotif.

III. Graciela Ursuline Zuniga de Arroyo

I am Graciela Ursuline Zuniga de Arroyo. Many years ago, my mother came here to the United States to work. She wanted to make enough money to buy land and build a little house and maybe send the rest to her drunken father in Oaxaca. Instead she ended up giving everything she made to her husband who spent it not on land but on cars and cocaine and fancy clothing and boxes of condoms, one thousand per box.

My mother's husband was called Don Descomunal. She told me that he was my natural father, but I did not believe her. My mother's work sometimes made her pregnant and she had so many abortions by the Cytotec pills that she lost count. These were not her husband's children. She told me that Don Descomunal allowed me to live instead of die because I was his own child, but this cannot be true. Look at me. Whoever he was, my father was *güero* and Don Descomunal was dark-skinned Triqui, like my mother.

I was born in an urgent care clinic in Willard, California, and Don Descomunal paid extra money to the doctor so that immigration was not called. It is certainly my misfortune to be born into such a family. From my very first breath I was *carne para los gallotes*.

My mother was mentally slow and she suffered from syndromes. I do not believe Don Descomunal was even a real husband. Don Descomunal was not his name anyway. It means 'Mr. Hot Shit'. His real name was Sergio Zuniga.

My mother allowed him to take advantage of her as she had been taken advantage of all her life, beginning with her worthless drunken father. When she was thirteen years old and Don Descomunal was nineteen, he drove up to her in his red Camaro. He was cocky and charming and she wanted love. That was her mistake. Don Descomunal promised to marry her and build her a home. He took her to the United States to work in a factory, but it was not factory work she found. Don Descomunal was a *chulo* who made her have sex with many men every day, in brothels, in sheds near the cabins where the workers kept their tools, in barns, in camps in the woods, in caves

made out of reeds at the edge of fields. My mother told me that when there were beds to be had there were bugs in them and that many of these men were drunk and some would use scissors to cut open their condoms. I used to vomit inside those camps, but not because I had things in my stomach, but because they were grotesque.

Don Descomunal allowed me to be born instead of aborted because he was afraid that my mother might one day go to Sanctuary for Families and he needed me to keep as a hostage and stay with him in the red Camaro when my mother was with her dates. I sat in the rear seat of the car while he kept lookout for police or anyone who might try to rob her. It was also because she was his ATM machine and he was afraid she might run away.

But she would not have run away. My mother's *sindroma* made her happy most of the time and when she told me of what she endured, I saw horror where she did not. She was always cheerful and she looked much younger than she was, so maybe I have that same *sindroma* in my own blood also. This gave her more value as a *zorrita* than as a farm worker, but her happy mood was tiresome. It was a false feeling due to her condition and that is a condition I do not have in my blood. It was many years before I became cheerful.

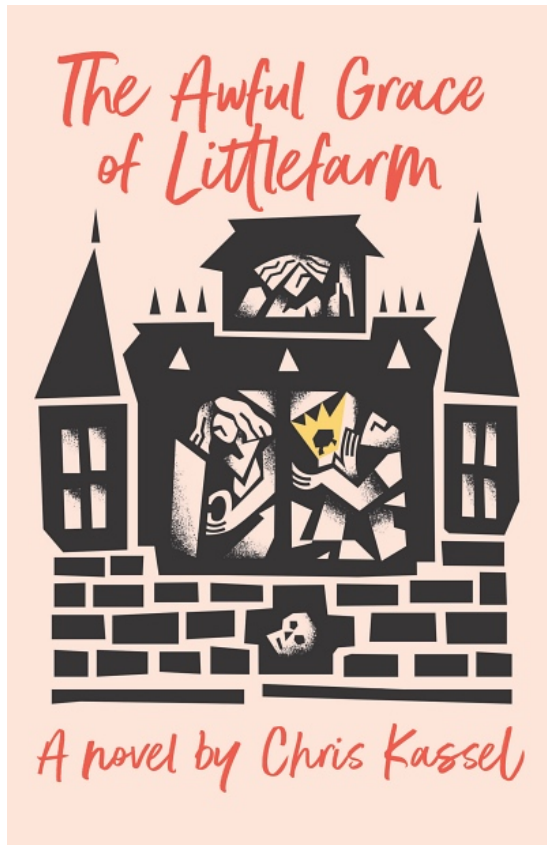
My mother lived her own desperate life. She was a stunted person with a blank mind. I was very ashamed of her and I was not sorrowful when she died and moved on to a different life.

Now I am now going to tell you the story of what happened to me in my own amazing life, and I will do so by relating those memories I choose to hold within me:

The world tried to gut my soul, and the world failed.

2.

After I was allowed my birth, I traveled with Don Descomunal and my mother to many places in the United States. These were not nice times except as I watched scenery change from desert to meadow to forest to blueberry fields. I remember always driving slow so as not to attract police and always looking for places to stay. I remember not



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